

Wheatland's Fond Farewell to Local Citizen John Birkbeck Bunker:
A Fitting Memorial, the Wyoming Room at the Platte County Library

By: Anthony Joseph Sacco, Sr. © November 2008.

PINE BLUFFS - When John Birkbeck Bunker passed away on May 25, 2005, little did he know that his name would shortly be linked forever to the Platte County Library on 9th Street in Wheatland, by a seemingly unconnected string of fortuitous events.

John was the eldest son of former Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and Harriet Allen Butler, of Yonkers, N.Y. His father, a prominent Democrat, served both Republican and Democrat Administrations as an Ambassador to Argentina, Rome, India, The Organization of American States (OAS), and South Vietnam until his death in 1984. Hawkish on that war, while in Vietnam he strongly supported the war efforts of both Presidents Johnson and Nixon.

John's mother, a bright, articulate woman from a wealthy family, saw her role in the traditional way; providing personal support for her husband, and taking part in the social life that figures prominently as an ambassador's duties. For her, that included ensuring that the children were well brought up, developed a strong sense of right and wrong, and enjoyed a stable home life. And this was the first of the fortuitous events mentioned above, because John and his two siblings, Ellen and Sam, benefited greatly from their mother's tutelage during their parents' 44-year marriage. Harriet died in 1964.

The second fortuitous event was Ellsworth Bunker's deep seated belief in public service fostered during his four years at Yale, and later passed on to his three children.

Born in Manhattan, John spent his early years there, where he attended local private schools. Later, after the family moved to Dummerston, Vermont, near Brattleboro, his parents sent him to the Putney School, a private, college-preparatory high school not far from Vermont's border with New Hampshire. Later, as his father and grandfather had before him, his college years were *also* spent at Yale.

The third fortuitous event was Wyoming's gain – of the Bunker family. John's son, John C. Bunker, was the first to arrive. Part owner and General Manager of Brown Company, which sells New Holland farm equipment in Wheatland, John told me, "I came out here in 1983 and bought a 6000-acre ranch. My father was partners with me in that. Later he decided to retire here. In

fact, if you look at his Yale yearbook, it [the caption under his photo] says his ambition was to 'move west and cattle ranch.'"

The fourth event was John's acceptance of a position on the Board of Directors of the First State Bank in Wheatland. Retired as President of C&H Sugar, California's and Hawaii's sugar company, he was asked to serve, and he did not refuse a chance to become a part of his adopted community. He filled that post with distinction until his death after a short bout with stomach cancer. "Dad fought cancers [of various kinds] in other parts of his body on and off over the years," young John said. "He was diagnosed with stomach cancer in December 2004, and died a few months later."

Enter Bruce A. Hellbaum, First State Bank's President and Chief Operating Officer, with the fifth fortuitous event. "It was a long-standing bank policy to do something special for a Board member after his or her death," Bruce told me in an interview at the Platte County Library. "John had been an avid reader, so I approached Julie Henion, the Library's Director, with an idea; a circa 1900 Wyoming ranch house reading room, containing western literature and art, rustic furnishings, and a place for local residents to hold meetings or just to work quietly. (See photo). With her help, we flexed out the concept."

"When Bruce came in, we'd been wondering what to do with some space which used to be the alcove at the Library's old front entrance," Julie explained. "We wanted to do something different with it. Bruce's idea was exciting."

The next event was a gathering of people who could make it happen; DaMarr Raben, a local artist and interior designer, and Blayn Tamlin, maintenance supervisor with Platte County. "The bank set our budget," DaMarr, who did the design and decorating, said. "It was a generous but also realistic \$10,000 - \$11,000."

Together these two talented people came up with a concept for the room's entrance (See photo), and an interior design for the 28' x 13' space. "Our idea featured two French doors that can be closed for meetings, for laptop use, or just reading and research," DaMarr said. "On each side of those doors are two decorative panels that I painted," she elaborated proudly, "The subject is Wyoming's State flower - Indian Paintbrush. The panels are canvas painted and applied to sheet rock, and antiqued to remind of turn of the Century architecture."

Meanwhile, Blaine recalled seeing an old oak table and several chairs in a storage room in the Courthouse, which appeared to date back to 1910-1915. "The County Clerk and Commissioners were all in on it," he chuckled. "With their

permission, I negotiated that table and several chairs from over there, in exchange for a few chairs the Library had on hand.”

It took several months to put the project together. “We used all local resources,” Julie Henion said. “We didn’t have to go out of town for anything. Or anyone.”

First, an acoustic tile ceiling was installed, with track lighting on each end designed by DaMarr Raben. Then the block walls were coated and textured, creating the effect of a leather finish, merging modern function with early 20th Century style. Crown molding was then added. Next, bookcases with adjustable shelving were built on both north and south walls, allowing plenty of room for expansion. Finally, additional furniture was introduced.

“The Library already had several barrister bookcases,” Julie said. “and also a beautiful hat rack with mirror, which had been around for ages. They fit the look we were striving for, so we moved them in.”

What about the leather couch and two comfortable overstuffed chairs, which add so much character to the room? Another fortuitous event. DaMarr Raben explained: “They’re reproduction pieces from the 1800s. A client of mine, local developer and collector, David S. Cronk, was downsizing his home. He wanted to dispose of them. I was able to acquire all three pieces.”

Some other very interesting artifacts adorn the Wyoming Room. These include a framed, undated but very early reproduction of a map of Wyoming, Colorado and Utah, a Charles Russell (1864-1926) print – *The Broken Rope*; a historic photograph, entitled *Winter-Absaroke* - donated in October 1985 by W. R. Jones, William K. Vines, and Raymond B. Hunkins, of the local law firm of Jones, Jones, Vines & Hunkins, a bronze sculpture of an Indian on horseback, entitled *The Scout*, by James Allard, and another, *Cowboy on bronc*, presented in memory of Rachael Ann Fish.

But the crowning item – a piece of artwork that dominates the room and brings everything together - is an original oil painting on Masonite, by Wyoming’s noted landscape artist, Conrad Schwierring. Donated to the Library by Ed Foreman in April 1967, the painting portrays the famous twin peaks of the Grand Tetons towering above the Snake River, with trees in the foreground. Schwierring’s work completes the theme originated and carried out by Hellbaum, Henion, Raben, and Tamlin, and is part of a fitting tribute to John B. Bunker, who adopted the Cowboy State as his home in his later years, and served it well until his death.

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