

# Wilbur Ternyik

## A LIFE BUILT ON SAND

**N**OT MANY PEOPLE, regardless of their achievements, live to see themselves memorialized by a life-size bronze sculpture. But that's what's happening to Florence resident Wilbur Ternyik, one of the Oregon Coast's best-known residents and a key figure in developing a nationally acclaimed plan to protect the coast's natural resources while keeping it a good place to live.

The sculpture, which depicts the 79-year-old former Florence mayor and port commissioner wearing his trademark fringed buckskin jacket and wielding the tomahawk he used as a gavel to preside over public meetings, is to be dedicated next year. The dedication is in conjunction with the bicentennial commemoration of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery and the time they spent near the mouth of the Columbia River. The site of the ceremonies has yet to be decided.

The tie-in with the Lewis and Clark bicentennial events is fitting because Ternyik, who was born in Astoria and grew up on Oregon's North Coast, is a direct descendent of Coboway. He was the Clatsop Indian chief whose people helped the Lewis and Clark party through a cold, wet winter.

The impetus for the sculpture, being created by internationally known Oregon artist Lorenzo Ghiglieri, comes from the Bridges Foundation. This non-profit philanthropic organization is headed by Kathy Bridges of Turner. Bridges worked with Ternyik more than a quarter-century ago when they were both involved in a



fledgling organization of coastal public officials. Mark Hatfield, former Oregon governor and U.S. senator, has also joined with the foundation in paying homage to Ternyik.

"What Wilbur did for all of us is almost incomprehensible in terms of time and effort he has spent," Bridges says. "We owe him a tribute—a lasting memory—that his efforts will not be forgotten."

The blunt-speaking coastal leader says he is honored by the tribute.

"But I'm more embarrassed than anything," Ternyik says. "I have such a high respect for Senator Hatfield and Kathy that I couldn't turn it down."

He acknowledges that he has had an "interesting" life. He may be most remembered for the time during the early 1970s when he was instrumental in forming the 30-member Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission (OCCDC). He was appointed by former Governor Tom McCall to develop land-use management standards for the Oregon Coast aimed at striking a balance between natural resource conservation and development. The commission created a

coastal management plan regarded as one of the best in the nation.

"God broke the mold when he made Wilbur," says Jim Ross, who served as OCCDC's only executive director and later as director of the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development, the state's land-use management agency.

And that may be so. For Ternyik, once referred to in a newspaper headline as a "creature of the coast," is a complex and curious individual who has always been close to the land and the plants and animals that live there. He evolved as a kind of political workaholic, immersing himself in the work of unpaid boards and commissions, attending countless meetings, and logging thousands of miles to testify on behalf of coastal constituents before legislative panels in Salem and Washington, D.C.

He served 29 years on the Port of Siuslaw Commission and 16 years on the Florence City Council, six of those years as mayor. During his time in public life he established a reputation as someone who got things done.

STORY BY LARRY BACON

PHOTO COURTESY EUGENE REGISTER-GUARD



Ternyik and his wife Joyce reared five children on the Oregon Coast, and Ternyik says making the coast a better place for his kids was part of the motivation for the public work he did.

He came to Florence in 1946 and started his own sand dunes stabilization business, Wave Beach Grass Nursery, in 1953 after working several years for the federal Soil Conservation Service. Over the years, he developed an international reputation as an expert not only in dunes stabilization and erosion control, but also in the delineation and restoration of wetlands and marshes.

He did pioneering work on federal wetlands research projects in the Columbia River and often received visitors from around the world to consult with him on sand dunes stabilization techniques. He turned down opportunities to work abroad in countries ranging from South Africa to Tasmania.

Nearly an octogenarian, Ternyik still remains active in his business, now mostly wetlands work. He acknowledged he planted a lot of beach grass, a plant not in favor with many environmentalists because of its proliferation, degradation of wildlife habitat, and part in trapping beach sand and building a "sea wall" along most of Oregon's beaches.

But someday that sea wall may save lives and property when an inevitable tsunami hits the Oregon Coast, Ternyik says. He adds that building the sea wall also altered offshore winds to scour the sand east of the foredune down to the water table and created thousands of acres of valuable wetlands.

Though he has worked hard to protect the coast's natural resources, Ternyik has made a living working for developers. He worries that land-use standards are being relaxed to allow too much development on the coast in places it shouldn't. So he is choosy about whom he will work for.

"If a guy wants to violate the law and destroy important wetlands, I won't work for him. Period!" he says.

Ternyik has a soft side to him.

It shows in the way he cares for animals. For years, he and Joyce worked as volunteer caregivers for injured birds, deer, and other wildlife brought to them by state game officers. As a child growing up in Warrenton, he remembers bringing home muskrats and getting in trouble

for liberating carrots from a neighbor's garden to feed them.

He used to enjoy trapping and hunting, but there came a time when he couldn't bring himself to kill game anymore.

He was wounded as a marine on Okinawa during World War II, and took refuge from enemy fire behind a dead Japanese soldier's body. The soldier's helmet had fallen off, and in the webbing Ternyik saw a folded Japanese flag and pictures of the soldier and his family. Ternyik took the flag and photos.

But the images and the thought of how a family much like his suffered the loss of the young soldier haunted Ternyik over the years, and finally moved him decades later to find the soldier's family and return the flag and the one picture he could still find.

"Perhaps someday I will meet this young man in the afterworld," Ternyik wrote to the family, some of whom later visited him in Florence. "If so, I hope we become friends." ■

For more than 32 years Larry Bacon covered stories on the Oregon Coast for the Eugene, Oregon *Register-Guard*. He is now retired and spending time enjoying the place he worked so long.

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