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Lillian Palmer

### **Where the White Horse Went Down sign goes up at Earl Gus Park**

The “Where the White Horse Went Down” sign, a decades-old landmark describing a local historical event, has a new life and a new home thanks to the efforts of a couple Billings residents who are passionate about preserving local history.

Dave Wanzenried, who is spearheading the reclamation project at Coulson Boothill Cemetery, partnered with another Billings history buff and parks enthusiast Bruce W. Larsen, to refurbish and erect a final resting place for the sign that once called Boothill home.

The sign is now located along the walking path in Earl Gus Park, east of MetraPark on Bench Boulevard in the Billings Heights; a more historically accurate spot according to Larsen, closer to where the event depicted on the sign happened.

The sign, which describes the historical significance behind the name “Sacrifice Cliff,” was originally fabricated and erected at Boothill Cemetery in 1991, as part of a legislative initiative to represent historic Native American events and sites.

Montana historian Ellen Baumler and decorated WWII veteran Dr. Barney Old Coyote Jr.-Chip Kalishtahchia wrote the copy for the sign.

“They were just full of history, both very interesting people,” Larsen said. “That was their purpose in life, to dole out history.”

Not dissimilar to Larsen and Wanzenried, who continually exert their efforts in preserving it. There the sign stood for over thirty years, until Wanzenried found it laying on the ground in August; dilapidated and deserted.

“It’s remarkable. It pays tribute in a correct way now,” Wanzenried said. “I’m just a guy that found someone that knew how to do all of this, just like I did over at Canyon Creek and like I’m doing over at the (Coulson) Cemetery.”

The sign was taken to storage until Larsen began the long, meticulous process of restoring it on April 3. Now, many coats of paint and painstaking hours later, the “Where the White Horse Went Down” sign is up again.

First, Larsen built a specially designed easel to hold the sign while he worked. Before repainting the sign was the arduous task of filling in the many cracks from aging. Fill, sand, repeat, went the process, said Larson.

“The job to repair those cracks to prepare for paint required delicate care. Attempting to seal any cracks in the letters is difficult and time-consuming,” Larsen said. “I’ve made a lot of redwood signs and all hand routed. I have a technique to paint them which is unique — I use a hypodermic syringe with polyurethane paint, and that’s how I did this.”

Every task of repairing the sign was tedious, said Larsen, but worth it to him.

The Montana Department of Transportation even offered to make a new sign for them, out of laminated plastic, a much more durable material.

“And outlast wood signs by a very wide margin,” Larsen said. “But we really like this sign. You can tell it’s an old sign. I didn’t want to make it new, I just wanted to keep it, restore it, because it has significance.”

Larsen chose the new location for the sign at Earl Gus Park, because according to Crow Tribe oral history, the Crow Tribe Historic Preservation Officer and the sign itself, the act of self-sacrifice took place near the First Interstate Arena at MetraPark, about a half mile from the cemetery. The cliff referenced in the story was extensively excavated when the arena was constructed, Larsen said.

The cost of materials used to construct the shelter for the sign was made through donations collected by the Friends of Boothill Cemetery, through the Billings Community Foundation, and was constructed by Larsen. Time, labor and materials for the sign itself were donated by Larsen.