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Statue honors Ute chief who was killed by early settlers

By Suzanne Dean

Publisher

MT. PLEASANT—The memory of Chief Sanpitch, the leader of Utes living in the Sanpete Valley at the time Mormon pioneers arrived, was honored last Saturday as a monument to him was unveiled near the entrance to Mt. Pleasant.

The theme of the ceremony was reconciliation. Sanpitch, who stood up for his right to remain on the land but also worked for peace between his people and the Mormons, ended up being murdered by some of the settlers in 1866.

The crowd that gathered for the unveiling included representatives of the Ute Tribe as well as residents of the valley, many of whom were undoubtedly descendants of Mormon colonizers.

“This is a special day because we’re all here together,” said Larry Cesspooch, a Ute, documentary film maker and spiritual leader in the Ute Tribe. “...My prayer is that all of us can stand together in humanity.”

Later in the ceremony, Cesspooch beat a drum while he prayed silently. He explained that as he beat the drum, he tried to focus on the spirit of Sanpitch, and the spirits of the ancestors of his people, who are buried in the Sanpete Valley.

Still later during the unveiling event, Cesspooch said, “We sit as one group of human beings. Regardless of the past,...we need to move forward together.”

Abe Kimball, a leader in the North Sanpete Art Council, the group that commissioned sculptor Brad Taggart, an art professor at Snow College, to create the monument, talked about the final days of Sanpitch’s life.



SUZANNE DEAN / MESSENGER PHOTO

Larry Cesspooch, Ute spiritual leader, touches a monument of Chief Sanpitch with a feather to bless it and ask the creator to protect it after the work was unveiled in Mt. Pleasant last Saturday.

At Brigham Young’s direction and in an attempt to bring the Utes to peace talks, several Native Americans, including Sanpitch, were jailed in Manti.

They escaped, but as they did, settlers shot and wounded Sanpitch. A month later, settlers spotted the chief in Birch Creek Canyon between Fountain Green and Moroni. They shot and killed him, and then shot at the canyon wall to intentionally trigger a rock slide. The chief’s body was buried under the rocks.

In the statue, Kimball said, Sanpitch appears to be pleading for his life but at the same time has his hand out as if still pleading for peace.

Taggart did extensive research on Chief Sanpitch and the 19th Century Utes before

sculpting the monument. He said a documentary on Sanpitch’s life titled “The Lost Tomahawk” and commissioned by the Mormon Pioneer National Heritage Area (MPNHA), ends with a statement about the chief being forgotten.

Taggart said when he watched the documentary, “I sort of smiled and felt privileged to make sure he’s remembered.”

“We’re very passionate about what we’ve accomplished,” Lisa Potter, another leader in the North Sanpete Art Council, said as she, Cesspooch, Kimball and Taggart cut a ribbon that was holding a shroud over the statue. Potter said she hoped the community, too, would be proud of the monument. Then Kimball and Taggart pulled the shroud



SUZANNE DEAN / MESSENGER PHOTO

Ute spiritual leader Larry Cesspooch, left, and Brad Taggart, the sculptor, stand beside a monument to Chief Sanpitch, which was unveiled in Mt. Pleasant last Saturday.

over the top of the statue.

Cesspooch lit a feather on fire (although wind blew the fire out). Then, in the tradition of Ute blessings, he walked around the statute touching it with the feather and praying that the monument would be protected from vandalism.

In comments after the ceremony, Kimball said art council representatives had met with the Ute Tribal Council in Salt Lake City and asked their permission to install the statue.

According to Kimball, their reaction was, “There’ve been lots of statues, but no one has ever come and asked us before.”

“We had to tell a story that’s not 100 percent positive,” Kimball said. “Where there has been depredation incidents, all we could do is tell the truth.”

The monument was funded by a \$30,000 grant from the MPNHA and a \$9,000 grant from the Utah Division of Museums and Arts.



SUZANNE DEAN / MESSENGER PHOTO

Abe Kimball of the North Sanpete Arts Council (back to camera) and Brad Taggart, the sculptor, unveil a monument to Chief Sanpitch, the leader of the Ute band that inhabited the Sanpete Valley at the time Mormon settlers arrived in the mid 1800s.