

The Start of Something Ancient

By Matt Johnson

Five thousand years from now, the work Chuck Pettis did in Freeland last week may convince historians that the Vikings made it all the way to Whidbey Island.

Using some of the 20 tons of sandstone he brought in for the job, and the tractor landscaping skills of neighbor Albert Gabelein, Pettis put up the first new dolmen seen in the Americas in the last few thousand years. A huge, table-shaped stone structure topped with a large horizontal cap stone, the structure looks something like the houses in Fred Flintstone's home town of Bedrock.

It also looks just as hard to build. Pettis said he is glad to have Gabelein's help.

"He is just so focused," he said.

Anything but home for the upwardly mobile caveman, Pettis' dolmen is a center of spiritual energy on South Whidbey, he said. Standing about 7 feet high on his wooded property along Newman Road, the structure is a lesson in ancient architecture. Two cap rocks that weigh more than a ton apiece are supported by several slabs of rock set on their ends in the ground.

Built over the intersection of four "ley lines" - geomagnetic lines some believe to be a source of spiritual power - the dolmen is one of the more permanent types of human structure. Some examples in Europe date back to before 3,500 B.C. Dolmens built on the East Coast of the United States are thought to have been built by seafaring Europeans or Scandinavians.

Pettis, who is building the structure as part of his 500-year restoration of 72 acres of wetlands and woods on Newman Road, said standing under and within the dolmen stones allows a person to focus and meditate better than almost anywhere else. He said the spot promises to be a draw for anyone visiting the property who needs some time to think.

"I don't know anyone who is meditating enough," he said.

On Friday, the structure got the seal of approval from Salish tribe elder Grandmother Vi. Vi and nine other Salish women blessed the dolmen, even though it is not a structure associated with her culture. No matter. Pettis said she agreed the dolmen was a place of power, and did not quibble over the fact that it was constructed with a tractor instead of the ancient methods, which involved dozens of people, log rollers, pulleys and wood levers.

Though it is unique to this area of the country, Pettis' dolmen is not the focus of what he is doing in Freeland. He and his wife, Claudia, started work on the project

they call "Earth Sanctuary" early last year. Splitting his time between the island and Seattle, where he owns a brand consulting company called Brand Solutions, Pettis spends most of his free time mucking about in his woods.

This spring and summer, Pettis and a crew of landscapers and plant experts will plant 4,200 plants of 59 native species around the wetlands and ponds on the property to start it on its way to becoming an old-growth wetland woods and nature sanctuary. Part of the work this spring has required Pettis to cut a number of alder trees - trees that are being replaced with small conifers he expects to be on the property 500 years from now.

Landscapers also removed 18,000 square feet of non-native Himalayan blackberries to make more room for native plantings.

Designated as a "habitat of local significance" by Island County, the acreage is already a haven for birds, deer and other animals. Pettis said structures like his dolmen, a recently-completed stone labyrinth, and a stone circle that is currently under construction, will invite humans to stay for a few hours at a time to appreciate an ancient peat bog, ponds, trees and animals, and the power of nature.

Though the work is expensive - the rock slabs alone cost several thousand dollars - Pettis said it is worth it.

"I want to do something exemplary," he said.

And historic. Pettis said he expects his dolmen to stand at least as long as those built in ancient times, long enough for the world to forget exactly where and whom it came from.

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