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Keeping Belgrade's History Alive

Man wants to celebrate one of city's infamous denizens with mural

BY DENNIS GAUB • FOR THE BELGRADE NEWS

When Ennis native Keith Mainwaring reached young adulthood in the late 1950s, his job on a ranch led to a chance conversation that connected him with a colorful slice of Belgrade history.

"I was working with this old rancher, and he said, 'Keith, did you ever hear of the Belgrade Bull? He was a heckuva bull — he bucked off everybody who tried to ride him,'" Mainwaring recalled in an interview earlier this month.

That talk occurred "about 1957 or 1959," and by 1960, Mainwaring moved to Belgrade where he has lived since. It took until 1965 for the congenial retired carpenter, now 80, to flesh out details of a story from the late 19th century stretching into the early years of the 20th century that captured the imagination of the Gallatin Valley and which got state and even national attention.

The Belgrade Bull's saga made a lasting impression on Mainwaring, and it inspired him to head a drive to get the likeness of a Holstein bull — same as the original — placed on a large outdoor mural. The Belgrade Community Coalition and Mainwaring have teamed up on a project, the goal of which is to place the mural on the wall of a downtown Belgrade building, giving visitors to the city an unusual perspective on its past.

Mainwaring has known that chapter of local history for about 60 years.

"The story I heard, in Ron Iverson's book is that they put up a \$25 prize to anybody who could stay on the bull until he stopped bucking." The informal rules of the time called for a "fair ride," and bull riders used a saddle but on a couple occasions, those trying to ride the Belgrade Bull had an unfair edge.

One rider used a double rig — two saddles — and in another instance, the bull's blindfold, temporarily



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Keith Mainwaring holds a photograph of the Belgrade Bull, the subject of a mural he wants painted on the side of Montana Camp on Main Street. The Belgrade Bull is a famous in rodeo lore for being unrideable.

placed on the animal so a rider could mount him, wasn't removed and the bull lunged ahead, hit a post with his head and was momentarily dazed.

Local historian Ronald J. Iverson self-published his book, "The Princess of the Prairie — A History of Belgrade, Montana" in 1965. Twenty-nine pages of the 147-page volume are devoted to tales of the Belgrade Bull, nicknamed Andrew Jackson Corbett. The bull's owners took his last name from James J. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, the famed boxer who won the world heavyweight title in 1892 when he knocked out John L. Sullivan in 21 rounds in New Orleans.

Although Mainwaring first read about Corbett in a copy of the book that his father-in-law bought and

gave him years ago, he didn't think about the bull until last December during a post-Christmas stroll.

"Last winter, we were downtown, and the girls from the Belgrade coalition put a bunch of beautiful ornaments in trees. My wife and I were impressed. We saw the wall of the west side of the Montana Camp. We thought, what if we could do something to spruce that up? What if we did a mural of the Belgrade Bull on that wall?"

Mainwaring then used his local business network to initiate the project. He knows Lou Moro through Belgrade's Habitat for Humanity organization, which

Moro heads, and Moro's wife, Debi, owns Montana Camp. Mainwaring chatted with Lou Moro, who suggested he call Debi and share the idea with her. "Of course, she was all for it," Mainwaring said.

"When I talked to Debi, I had no idea what I was getting into," but he got direction when told he should ask the Belgrade Community Coalition to become involved.

"They jumped on board. I can't emphasize enough how important that was. Without them, the project might not have taken off," Mainwaring said.

"They treat me like I'm their favorite uncle," he said with a chuckle.

BCC spokesperson Kali Vergeront, a certified public accountant and the organization's treasurer, said local artist Wendy Marquis has agreed to assist on the project. "We're getting a pretty good discount from Wendy. She's giving us her time and talents for way less than they're worth."

Marquis will paint the bull on canvas, then give the painting to SCS Wraps, a Bozeman firm that specializes in imaging projects used outdoors. "They'll make a high-quality photo image, put it on vinyl and then on a piece of metal. That will be installed" on the Montana camp wall, according to Vergeront.

Marquis said someone from the BCC contacted her a couple months ago to pitch the idea of painting the mural, and Mainwaring came to her Main Street studio a couple times with the same proposal.

"I guess they contacted me because I'm the most obvious artist," said Mar-



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Keith Mainwaring stands in front of the west wall of Montana Camp where he hopes a mural of the Belgrade Bull will appear.

quis, who's had her studio for four years and worked from space in the nearby Spotted Horse coffee shop for two years before that.

"It's community and its nostalgia for something really cool about the history of Belgrade. I'm all about nostalgia," she said.

Marquis said she shares the BCC's goal of growing business on Main Street and giving it more personality.

It was her idea to place an image of the bull on a 10-foot-by-20-foot metal sheet that will be attached to the Montana Camp wall. This project, however, will be a departure from what she did in the past. The New Hampshire transplant

was in the business of painting murals on walls before she came to Montana, and once here, she did murals for Eagle Mount, the Belgrade Community Library and a model home.

"I'm not presently doing murals. My 59-year-old neck didn't want to do walls anymore," she said.

Instead, she'll paint the bull on a canvas, which will be photographed. Next, the image will be reproduced on a giant decal and then installed on the metal backing, and that will be installed on the wall.

Mainwaring said the mural, ideally six feet high and no less than five feet, will be based on a picture of a Holstein

bull someone from BCC found online; no actual photo of Corbett is known to exist. The animal "just connects with you" and seems to issue a challenge that Mainwaring interprets as "Wanna go for a ride, fella?"

Mainwaring moved to Belgrade in 1960 when the town was still known as one of the premier wheat-shipping locations in the Northwest. He hopes the mural will include the red grain elevator that once stood in town, a landmark for people of his generation who often used it when giving directions to visitors to the community.

Vergeront says the coalition hopes to raise \$4,000 to cover project costs, "and if we raise more, we'd be glad to have it."

She said the mural ties into the coalition's mission of creating a stronger sense of community. "We have (other) projects in the works to make Belgrade less of a bedroom community and give it more of a sense of identity." She described a life-size image of Corbett on the side of a Main Street building as "a neat thing" because the bull was well-known and traveled around the United States during its life.

The Belgrade City Council unanimously approved the project during its May 7 meeting. Meeting minutes said the mural would be fastened to the Montana Camp wall with a banner reading "Belgrade Bull," and a nearby kiosk will provide a short story about Corbett.

The BCC hopes to raise sufficient funds to proceed with the project by late summer 2019 and to have the mural in place by the fall of 2019. Vergeront said her group realizes that time Marquis spends on the mural represents possible lost opportunities to pursue business through her art studio.