CHIEF LITTLE OWL
On the Trail of the Whispering Giants

You can’t help but notice the towering wooden sculpture that stands as a proud sentinel at the entrance to downtown Bethany Beach. This is “Chief Little Owl”, a 24 foot statue that was hand-carved by sculptor Peter Toth and placed in honor of our indigenous Nanticoke Indian tribe. But, did you realize this statue stands as Delaware’s representative of Toth’s impressive body of work called the “Trail of the Whispering Giants”?

Chief Little Owl represents #22 of over 58 “Whispering Giants” carved by Peter Toth (rhymes with ‘oath’) over a span of 16 years, at least one in each state of our nation. Toth traveled throughout the US from 1972 through 1988, creating a statue wherever local officials would invite or allow him to carve. He and his wife supported themselves by doing odd jobs as they traveled the country. His ambitious project was a labor of love and tribute to the indigenous Native Americans of North America. He donated all of his labor, accepting only donations of the wooden logs from the local communities. He considered these “Whispering Giants” his gift to his adopted country.

Peter Toth is one of eleven children of a Hungarian immigrant family, who fled as refugees during the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, where people were persecuted. His family home and land were seized. After spending two years in various refugee camps, his family came to the U.S. and settled in Akron, Ohio.

Although he studied art briefly in college, he learned how to carve from his father. He uses only carving tools and a heavy mallet in his work.

Toth maintains that the giant statues are NOT totem poles, as not all Native Americans made totems. He insists they are his concepts of the Indians of the area where he places statues. He studied the native peoples of each state and visualized an Indian within the log he was given to carve. His reverent process was to intertwine the spirit of the Indian with the spirit of the tree.

This fascinating odyssey began in 1972 when Toth, then 24, was visiting California. He sculpted a 6-foot Indian head into a sandstone cliff at the Windanssea Beach near La Jolla. The process took several months. Statue #1 is sadly no longer visible, having suffered from vandalism and weather erosion. But, the mission to carve statues to honor the Native Americans was born there. Toth had developed a keen interest in North American native culture. Spiritually, he identified. He saw a parallel in the Indians’ plight with the Soviet violent injustices in his native Hungary. His empathy with the Trail of Tears led to his vision of the “Trail of the Whispering Giants”.

Originally, Toth had chosen Rehoboth Beach as the Delaware locale. But, agreement could not be reached regarding the placement of the statue. Toth requires that his statues be placed in highly visible sites as places of tribute, but also to minimize the danger of vandalism. Bethany Beach was chosen for the giant statue as its welcoming landmark.

Toth’s “Whispering Giant” is actually the third incarnation of this tribute to the Nanticoke. Carved from a giant poplar log donated by Jones Lumber of Snow Hill, MD, the original Toth statue was placed there on December 1, 1976. It was named for “Chief Little Owl”, Charles Cullen Clark, II, head of the Nanticoke Indian Association from 1928 until his death in 1971. The Indian head resembling the old chief, enfolded in the wings of a north-facing eagle, was meant to embody the spirit of the tribe. A 1992 restoration, called Little Owl leaning and it was determined that an internal termite infestation had irreparably destroyed the carving. The remains are now on display in the Nanticoke Indian Museum east of Millsboro.

In the summer of 1993, the town allocated funds and commissioned Dennis Beach, a power tool carver from Wapwallopen, PA to create the second Chief Little Owl to sit at the entrance to Garfield Parkway. This replica, made from white oak, was dedicated on May 4, 1994. Only six years later, storms and termites again took their toll. Advanced decay forced the removal of this incarnation in 2000.

Toth considers the “Whispering Giants” as his life’s work. He has expanded his project to include statues in Canada and Europe and has carved over 75 giants to date, all donated and in tribute to the indigenous people of those areas. The Smithsonian has recognized his sculptures as a significant body of work of artistic achievement. Toth has written a book entitled Indian Giver about his project.

It’s amazing how many beautiful and inspiring treasures we have here in Sussex County. Next time, you go to Bethany Beach, give a nod to the giant icon that watches over and welcomes locals and guests to the beach.

Author’s note: Hopefully, you will also go visit Ocean City’s giant oak statue by Toth that honors the Assateague tribe. He stands on S. 2nd Street, overlooking the Inlet. To view all of America’s Peter Toth statues, google “Trail of the Whispering Giants” and enjoy!

By Sandie Gerken

Author, Sandie Gerken lives in Dagsboro, DE. As a native Sussex Countian, local history is one of her passions. Retired now, she devotes her time to genealogy research (her greatest passion since 1978), watercolor painting, grandchildren, soccer for kids with disabilities, books, and things creative and historical. She recently authored the book Memories of the Clayton Theatre as a fundraiser to help the Clayton go digital. She is now exploring her writing skills with local history articles for High Tide News.