

## John Zipprich

### Searching for a Great Oregon Carver — John Zipprich Found!

By Jim Spitzer

My wife Susan and I spend a lot of time on the road during the fair weather season - over 70 days this summer. We explore nature, small towns, and beautiful country. I am always on the lookout for inspiring woodworking and fine carving. I stumbled across a 'gold mine' early on our last trip; and I learned that while much of the carving work of this craftsman and artist is original, he has also reproduced many historically important works, and sculpted disappearing works!

At Government Camp, Oregon, on the flanks of Mount Hood, is a wonderful Visitor Center that honors fire lookouts, contemporary recreational activities, Oregon Trail settlers taking the Barlow Road (the last overland section of the Oregon Trail), and Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers who built the iconic and historic Timberline Lodge high on the mountain during the Great Depression.

Above the stairway in the Visitor Center lobby is a large (about 3 x 6 feet), almost 30-year-old, scenic relief carving depicting recreation on the mountain: hikers, naturalists, skiers, and mountain bikers. Its title is "Elevated Conscienceness." The label names the artist: John Zipprich. Being a relatively new carver, I did not recognize the name. I enjoyed the carving and we moved on to camp at nearby Trillium Lake.



Government Camp Sign



Note: All photos are by Jim Spitzer unless otherwise noted



## John Zipprich

The next week we were in Tygh Valley, east of Mt. Hood. A day trip took us to the lovely little community of Maupin, a river runners' mecca on the edge of cliffs overlooking the Deschutes River. While walking about the town we noticed the library in a brand new City Hall building. As lovers of books we walked in and my eyes were immediately drawn to two large scenic relief carvings (each about 3 x 6 feet) on each side of the entry.

The friendly librarian sitting at her desk, under a carving of a salmon created by her husband, told us that Maupin had commissioned these pieces for this new building. A local log home builder had donated the wood.

The first carving celebrates the railroad running through the canyon below Maupin (that connects communities along the Deschutes River to the mighty Columbia River to the North), rafters running white-water rapids, basalt columns on the rocky river bank, and a fly fishermen. The second carving celebrates the high desert above Maupin, with farmers harvesting wheat, ranchers grazing their herds on the rich rolling hills of loess deposited by winds after the last ice age, and sweeping views of the Cascades and Mt. Hood in the distance.

The librarian told me the name of the artist. I thought, "What was the name of the artist who carved the large relief at Government Camp?"

Sure enough, the same artist, John Zipprich! And the librarian knew he lived in Pine Grove, about a 15-mile drive toward Mt. Hood!



Maupin, OR Library signs



## John Zipprich

The next day, we drove a sparsely traveled byway to the tiny community of Pine Grove in search of John Zipprich. The Post Office, a last tavern, and a last general store were shuttered long ago. A few homes were spread out over a mile or so along the road. Who to ask? At the far end of town we finally saw a person at a heavy equipment repair shop. We asked for help finding Mr. Zipprich. Bingo! Mr. Zipprich lives about a half mile back. We pull into his driveway, and he walks toward us with a friendly Black Labrador named Teeko who was carrying an automobile tire in his mouth. After a '30 second elevator pitch' describing why we were here, he welcomes us. We spend over an hour in animated conversation with John, concluding with a farewell tasting of his 'high-octane' rhubarb wine.

Born in Los Gatos, CA, John grew up with a pocket knife in hand, always whittling. He recalled whittling the miles away in the back seat of the car during a long road trip to visit Midwestern relatives. A Cub Scout leader once took away his knife for making a cut (on wood) toward his body! In 1960, when John was in second grade, his family moved to Tualatin, OR, where his father became mayor. In 1967, the family moved to Welches, OR, at the western foot of Mt. Hood. During his teenage years John often skied on Mt Hood and was always being inspired by the craftsmanship, woodwork, and carvings at the iconic Timberline Lodge. His whittling advanced to several other styles of carving including this scenic relief carved when he was 19 years old.



John Zipprich and Black Lab "Teeko" welcomes us



Carved at 19 years old

## John Zipprich

John got a maintenance job at the Timberline Lodge starting with the restoration of furniture. Linny Adamson, the Timberline Lodge curator since 1979, discovered his carving talent and put it to work on creating signs and other wood projects. After 15 years John set off on his own as a woodworker and carving artisan. John moved to the more affordable eastern side of the mountain in 1992, where he has lived ever since. Over the years, he was awarded many contracts reproducing and repairing Timberline Lodge signage, structure, and carvings that had deteriorated in the harsh environment above timberline. For example, in 2009, he remade the iconic ram head corbels on either side of the main entrance to the Lodge and the 15 x 3 foot Thunderbird on the lintel above the entrance. One day restoration workers will find that under the new 700-pound lintel slab is the old weathered Thunderbird created by an unknown Depression era carver.

In 2020, John remade a life-size buffalo head corbel installed on an exterior wall.



Timberline Lodge entrance, Thunderbird and corbels above the stone entry doorway; Multnomah County Library archival photo



Original Timberline upper entrance with corbels; archival photo



Carving the new Thunderbird sign; photo via John Zipprich



Ram head corbels for the entrance; photo by John Zipprich



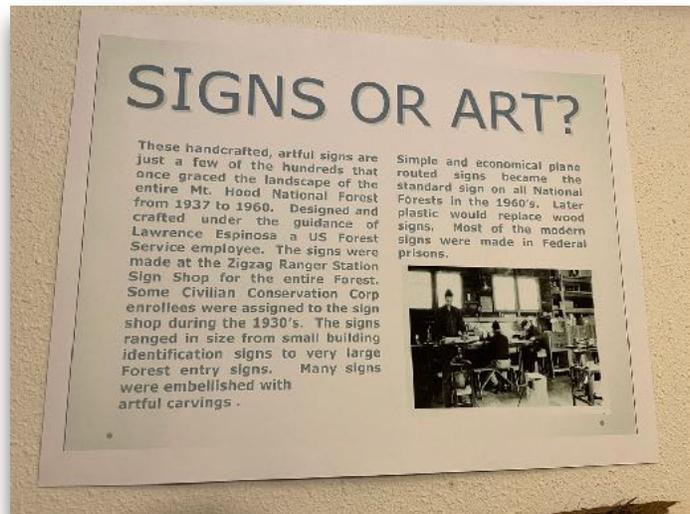
Buffalo head corbel; photo via John Zipprich

## John Zipprich

Such restoration projects on Timberline Lodge are being done continuously under the supervision of the curator. Timberline is Oregon's National Historic Landmark owned by the US Forest Service. They must be true to the originals created by WPA artisans in the 1930s. [Click here](#) for a summary of Timberline Lodge preservation efforts in a variety of crafts and arts. One exhibit at the Government Camp Visitor Center asks if carved signs are craft or art? Examples of signs as art are numerous; for example, in many name boards on yachts and in creatively carved town and shop signs in regions of the country such as New England. John's current commission is a sign for the Timberline Summit Pass.



Sample historic signs



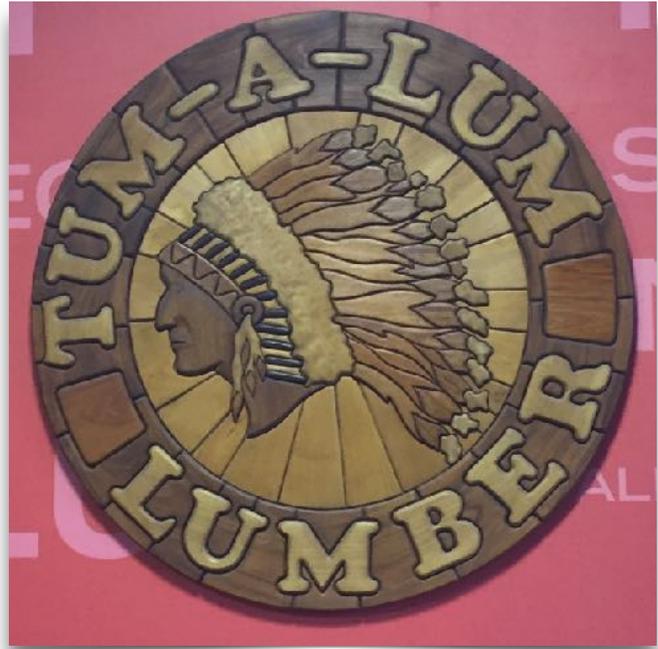
Text reads:

“These handcrafted, artful signs are just a few of the hundreds that once graced the landscape of the entire Mt. Hood National Forest from 1937 to 1960. Designed and crafted under the guidance of Lawrence Espinosa a US Forest Service employee. The signs were made at the Zigzag Ranger Station Sign Shop for the entire Forest. Some Civilian Conservation Corp enrollees were assigned to the sign shop during the 1930s. The signs ranged in size from small building identification signs to very large Forest entry signs. Many signs were embellished with artful carvings. Simple and economical plane routed signs became the standard sign on all National Forests in the 1960s. Later plastic would replace wood signs. Most of the modern signs were made in Federal prisons.”

## John Zipprich

While restoration work at the Lodge was important and challenging, this was not an opportunity for creating original works such as the large scenic reliefs that initiated our search for him, and which became his specialty. John also carved: Olympic skiers residing on a wall at Charlie's Mountain View, a classic Government Camp watering hole; the Tum-A-Lum Lumber Company's Indian head logo, a Gifford Pinchot National Forest sculpture commemorating an Native American Treaty, and numerous works in private collections.

Although he has been an excellent and prolific carver, other jobs have been required to pay the bills. For example, John worked a maintenance job at the beautiful Imperial River Company (an inn, pub, restaurant and river guide company) in Maupin which is the jumping off point for many white-water river rafting trips down the Deschutes. It also features one of John's large scenic relief carvings over the fireplace mantle in the lobby, a fly fisherman wearing cool sunglasses reeling in a large salmon.



Tum-A-Lum Lumber sign; photo from John Zipprich



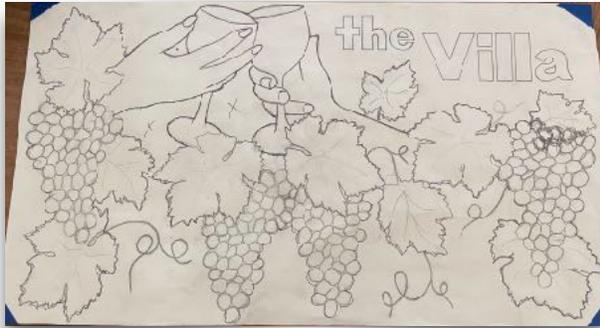
Carving over the Imperial River Company lobby fireplace

# John Zipprich

While we visited John, he had just finished a work that was far smaller than most of his carvings. It was for the entry to a luxury bed and breakfast in the wine country of Dundee, Oregon. This deep relief carving on Claro Walnut depicts wine glasses touching in a toast on a background of grapes. I've included photos of his original design and the back of the work showing splines that stabilize the piece as it expands and contracts over the seasons.



John with finished sign



Original design on paper



Back of sign showing expansion splines



Finished sign

# John Zipprich

In the opening paragraph I noted John's disappearing art. While at Timberline, John got to know members of the Schnee Vogeli Ski Club which has had a rich history since its formation during the outbreak of World War II. Through contacts with various club members, John competed in snow sculpture competitions in many places, including: Russia; Sapporo, Japan (a sister city of Portland); Finland; and elsewhere. He won first place at a Breckinridge, CO, event where competitors started with a 12-foot high, 25-ton block of snow! Disappearing carving!

As a young professional carver, John was inspired by Leroy Setziol. Although they never met, John started carving more abstract images such as a recent large piece shown rising up to his shoulders, and many other abstract pieces. However, John realizes that his own style is not that of Setziol.



Snow sculpture, photo by John Zipprich



Contemporary carving



More Setziol-inspired pieces; photo by John Zipprich

## John Zipprich

John's shop was originally a one-car detached garage that has had many windows added. It is a pleasant woodworking environment. He uses it year-round for the messy jobs of roughing out pieces with router and chainsaw.

However, hand tool work during cold weather months is done in the South facing sun room just off the main entry to his home.



Sun room and work room

Many of his carvings are of the Cascade Mountains; especially Mount Hood, Timberline Lodge, and Government Camp. Therefore it is fitting to conclude with a photograph of John sitting on a chair from the Magic Mile chairlift, the longest chairlift in existence when constructed above Mt. Hood's timberline in 1938.



John Zipprich

Timberline Carver of the Mountains!

For a PBS video interview, [click here](#)

For Timberline Lodge, [click here](#)