



Monte Holm was synonymous with Moses Lake

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This story appeared in the Columbia Basin Herald on May 4, 2006, after Monte Holm passed away.

It is presented again to provide a better image of the Moses Lake icon.

- Bill Stevenson,

managing editor

MOSES LAKE - Monrad "Monte" Holm never had a bad day in his life. That's what he told anybody who asked him how he was doing.

The Moses Lake businessman/Great Depression-era hobo/sheepherder/scrap metal tycoon/rail line owner/former Moses Lake city councilman/House of Poverty museum owner/mural subject died May 3, 2004.

Holm's daughter, Karen Rimple, said he passed away peacefully. A ceremony, dedicating the mural which depicts Holm at various stages in his lifetime, was held later in the month.

He was survived by his wife of nearly 67 years, Ruth. He is survived by his daughter Karen and her husband Wayne Rimple; two grandsons and their wives, Larry and wife Rika and Steven and wife Carmen; and five great-grandsons.

Ruth passed away April 2, 2010, at the age of 101.

Holm spent his youth in Clarkston, the son of a Lutheran minister. His mother died when he was about 6, and he went to live with an aunt for about nine months until her death. He left his home with his father and stepmother when he was 13.

During his six years as a hobo during the Great Depression, Holm traveled all over the United States on trains, working off and on as a shepherd in Montana during that time.

"When you're in a bread line, you're outdoors most of the time," Holm remembered in an interview with the Columbia Basin Herald a month prior to his death. "Oh, it was cold. My poor frozen feet. I would get up, get something to eat and get back in line, and stand outdoors with those frozen feet. I decided when I stood in that breadline, 'If I can ever afford it, I'm going to be good to people.'"

At age 19, he walked into Everett with 10 cents and got started in the junk business. Monte kept the dime and he gave it to his grandson Steve Rimple, who still carries with him today.

Holm came to Moses lake from Everett in the 1950s, a move which resulted from a medical recommendation he leave the dampness of the area, which was impacting his lungs. He founded Moses Lake Iron and Metal in the 1950s, which he sold to Norman Estoos in 1979, and Moses Lake Steel in the 1970s, which is managed today by Wayne and Karen Rimple.

He also founded the House of Poverty Museum, where he would meet and greet all comers until very shortly before his death, always giving them Werther's Original candies, hobo coins and/or chocolate Symphony bars.

The museum showcased many antiques, including those he came across in his lifetime as well as in the scrap metal business, such as the sheep wagon he used while tending sheep in Montana, and a bell that had been on the U.S.S. Rasher, a highly decorated World War II Navy submarine, which had been considered lost by its crewmen. Holm returned the bell to the surviving members of the Rasher in 2005.

Visitors to the museum could also tour Holm's train cars, which, according to his autobiography, were purchased to make good a promise he made to those who kicked him off their trains while he was a hobo that one day he would own his own railroad. Holm was one of the few remaining registered owners of a private rail line, and his collection included a presidential dining car used by President Woodrow Wilson and later President Harry S. Truman, the last steam engine operated in Alaska and several cabooses.

Holm met many noted figures of history in his lifetime, some famous and some infamous. He watched Charles Lindbergh exhibiting his plane and later ate dinner with the pilot, who stayed the night at the Holm home in Rapelje, Mont., in the fall of 1922, five years before Lindbergh became famous for flying over the Atlantic Ocean. During his time as a hobo, he ate at a Chicago soup kitchen managed by Al Capone.

In 1964, he ran for a position on the Moses Lake City Council. His campaign card showed a picture of Holm's backside as he bent over in his garden. The back of the card said, "Vote for 'Real' Experience," and noted Monte's accomplishments:

* Hobo and sheepherder from age 13 to 19 years, which is wonderful experience to learn the value of a dollar

* Started in the junk business with 10 cents, at age 19, and have made a success out of things people throw away

* I have a lot at stake in Moses Lake and want the opportunity to work for the betterment of our city

* I am the past president of nothing - but have the distinction of being the first Honorary Member of Theta Chi Fraternity since its origin in 1919, at Washington State University on Nov. 10, 1963. For an ex hobo and sheepherder, this is indeed an honor.

Holm won the election in a landslide and served six years on the council.

In 1999, Holm's autobiography, "Once a Hobo ... The Autobiography of Monte Holm," was published.

In 2005, muralist Patricia Jensen presented Holm with an oil painting version of her intended mural, which spurred a local movement to see the mural created and hung on the side of the Moses Lake Post Office. The mural was hung the day before he died.

Several members of the Moses Lake community shared their thoughts and memories of Holm.

"I've been with Monte for a long, long time, and I thought he was a good boss and a great friend," said David Fazende, who helped Holm manage the museum and worked for him since 1969.

"Monte never had a bad day in his life. Monte was wonderful," said former Moses Lake Business Association Executive Director Sally Goodwin. "He was a real character. He learned so much in his life, and he passed it on. He was willing to share his life story with others."

Former Port of Moses Lake Commissioner Larry Peterson said he enjoyed stopping in and visiting Holm. He recalled Holm had wanted to drive his locomotive out to the airport and back during a celebration. The predominant railroad at the time was Milwaukee Railroad, and when Holm got in touch with them, the railroad told him no.

"Monte was great friends with Joshua Green, president of People's Bank, who was a major stockholder in the railroad," Peterson recalled. "Monte called his friend Joshua Green and before long had a call back from the railroad that it would be OK to do that."

"Monte was a pillar in the community and certainly will be missed," said Karen Wagner, who served as manager of the Moses Lake Chamber of Commerce for 27 years. "I'm not sure what Moses Lake is going to do without him."

"He was a genuine person that was a dream maker, not a dream breaker," Moses Lake businessman Bill Chambers said. "We can all be proud of his contribution to society."

Former Moses Lake Mayor Ron Covey said he knew Holm for almost 50 years.

"One of the nicest and most generous men I have ever met," Covey said. "I can remember going to the junkyard in the early 1950s with my dad. Monte would always acknowledge me with a smile and a 'Hello there, young man.' He'd shake my hand and usually had a piece of candy or a coin he would give me. I also remember him sharing many of his life stories with us. Each of those stories carried a message. Monte was a man you could look up to, a man to emulate and a man you could count on as a friend. This world would be a better place to live if we had more people like Monte Holm."

Dennis Clay worked with Holm for two and a half years to write his autobiography. One of the things Clay learned in writing the book was Holm's Sunday routine, listening to the song "The Dying Hobo," on his old Victrola, which referred to an old hobo catching the westbound train, which means a hobo has died.

"Moses Lake's favorite hobo has caught the westbound train," Clay said, noting he thinks of the book as both Holm's autobiography and a tribute to him. "He was well known in Canada and the United States. People would come to see him and make friends with him instantly. And then they would spread the word also, so their friends would come and visit when they were in this area of the United States."

Nick Tommer, owner of Moses Lake Iron and Metal, also knew the train story. He said Norman Estoos called him and told him Holm had caught it.

"It's the train that leads to the promised land," Tommer said. "Only the chosen ride this train. Only a very few get that opportunity and honor. Monte had been saved a special place on this train. See him waving and passing out candy to everyone, fulfilling his chosen role, a man of honor and integrity. His final salute: Be good to everyone, be honest and work hard."

Norman Estoos purchased Moses Lake Iron and Metal from Holm in 1979. He started working for Holm in 1959 when he was still in high school.

"After spending 47 years with the man, he more or less took the place of a father to me, when my father passed about 30 years ago," Estoos said. "He's going to be sorely missed."

Muralist Patricia Jensen pointed to a quote by J.C. Watts: "Character is doing the right thing when no one is watching."

"Monte was a good man," Jensen said. "His eyes saw a lot of suffering of people in the Depression era. Monte would change a person's whole day once meeting him. He never had a bad day in his life, and he made sure nobody else did either. He will be remembered for his kindness and compassion for all people. May we all take a little of Monte with us and share. The world will be a better place. Thank you, Monte."

Moses Lake real estate agent Susan Alsted shared an Easter tradition with Holm, who sent her an Easter lily each year after he presented her with one in Boyd's Plaza while she was a cashier and he would come in to trade. Alsted was concerned, thinking Holm was unable to afford such a flower because she observed the way he would count out his pennies to buy groceries, until she described Holm to her husband and he told her Holm would be able to afford the flower. Each Easter after that, Holm would send Alsted an Easter lily, always with a card signed "From an old hobo that can't really afford this Easter lily."

"He was so loved," Alsted said. "One man made such a huge difference in one town."

From his perspective as a son-in-law, Wayne Rimple said he couldn't have asked for a better father-in-law.

"I have been around him for 42 years. He's as close to me as my own father," Wayne Rimple said. "He's been honest and truthful with me as with all people, and I will miss him very much."

On more than one occasion, Holm would share his three secrets to success - being honest, working hard and being good to people.

"Most people fall down on item three something terrible," he would say.

We're confident Monte Holm never did.

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