

Taj Mahal for the Birds

White Salmon man crafts works of art that double as functional birdhouses

By Jeanie Senior

Saying that White Salmon resident Bob Boydston's hobby is building birdhouses is sort of like saying that Michelangelo was a ceiling painter—an understatement.

One of the birdhouses in Bob and Charlene Boydston's living room isn't even a house. It's a barn, surrounded by an expansive barnyard built to replicate the San Joaquin Valley farm in California where Bob grew up.

The barn itself has two small round entrances for finches—Bob says he builds most of his houses for the small, colorful birds—but the platform it sits on includes a water tower, a windmill whose blades actually turn, a stack of split wood next to a log with a crosscut saw in it and an ax stuck into a chunk of wood.

A wagon is piled with perfectly scaled bales of hay, one of them being lifted to the haymow via a pulley that also works. A plow sits on the other side of the barn, and inside a shed is a round sharpening stone that actually turns, an anvil and a blacksmith's forge with bellows.

Bob built it all, including the birdhouse. He whittled the tiny ax and the crosscut saw, anvil and forge, and fashioned a press to make the half-inch bales of hay.

"It took a little over 300 hours to do it," he says. "I'm pretty proud of it. It's got a lot of childhood memories in it."

Bob is not likely to leave it outside. He jokes that people have told him "there's no birds around here that warrant living



Bob Boydston's latest construction project is for a bird colony. Supported by a piece of driftwood, it features three birdhouses with connecting walkways and a spiral staircase leading to a lighthouse.

in something like that."

His most recent birdhouse, which took about 200 hours, is multilayered, supported by an intricate piece of driftwood he picked up along the Columbia River. It features a lighthouse,

two fairly conventional wood birdhouses and a round birdhouse with a cleverly painted roof that looks like stone. A spiral staircase links two levels of the structure and walkways.

"Everything is made from recycled

stuff that I pick up here and there,” says Bob, who has found a lot of material and inspiration at the Gorge Re-Build It Center, a Hood River store that sells used construction materials.

The round birdhouse, for example, incorporates PVC pipe and parts of a light fixture. He has converted a thick-and-thin wood slat blind into a bevy of building materials, from roofs to walkways to siding. He carved the spiral staircase out of a piece of wood.

“Those things come into my mind,” Bob says. “I don’t sit down and draw anything out or go by any plan.”

The work keeps his mind fresh.

“I have to be pretty alert, pretty much on the ball to take care of my wife,” he says.

Charlene, a former real estate broker, is confined to a power wheelchair. About seven years ago she suffered a massive heart attack, followed by a stroke and another heart attack, spending several months in the hospital.

The couple had moved from Redmond, Oregon, to Hermiston and were in the process of moving to Boardman when she fell ill.

After that, “we found a place and moved to be close to our youngest son, Kyle,” Bob says.

Their other two sons live in the Willamette Valley and in Alaska.

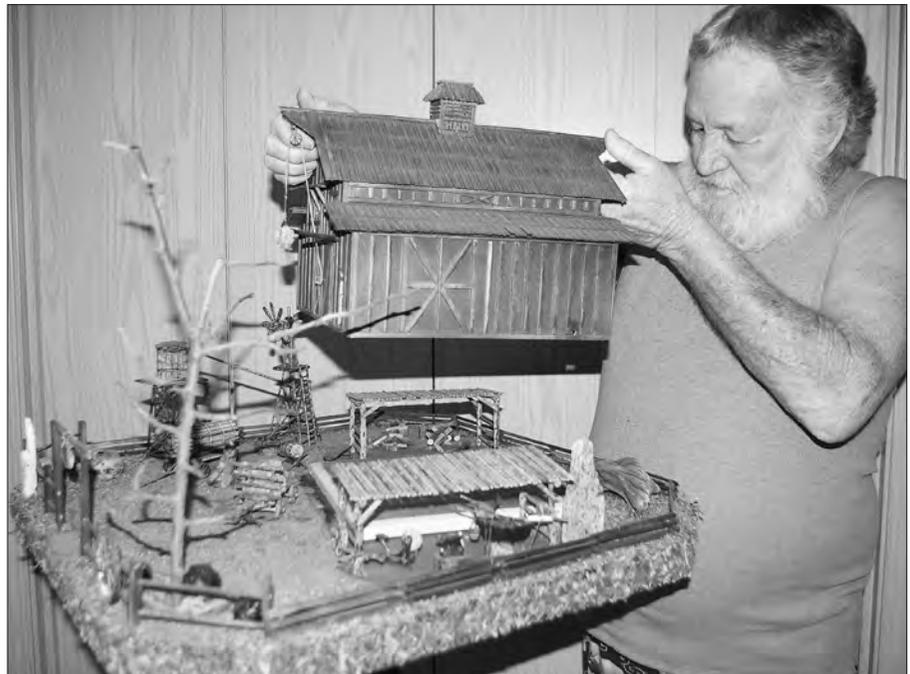
Bob, now retired, was a general contractor, doing construction jobs with his sons.

“We had heavy equipment and did the dirt work,” he says.

Before they moved to the Northwest, Bob and Charlene had a farm in the area of California where he grew up. He did heavy construction there, too.

“I’ve always been a dirt digger,” he says.

A daytime caregiver helps with Charlene so Bob is able to run errands and take the occasional break. In nice weather, when he is able to, Bob works on the birdhouses in his small workshop



This barn birdhouse lifts off for cleaning. The design re-creates a farmstead from Bob’s youth. Some of the fine detail shown below includes a crosscut saw, windmill and water tower.

next to their residence, where he also makes walking sticks.

Besides attracting birds, his elaborate birdhouses are designed so people can put them on their patio where they can be enjoyed.

Bob learned a lesson when he took several walking sticks and less-elaborate birdhouses to Riggleman’s Fruit Stand.

“They sold five birdhouses before I got back to the house,” he says.

Bob builds his birdhouses with a “key” that can be removed so the house can be lifted off its base and cleaned. Finches “like a clean house,” he says, and they claim a birdhouse as their own. He has had a pair return the following year to raise another family.

Building birdhouses is something that connects Bob to his youth, though his finely detailed homes of today are quite different from the ones of yesteryear.

“Oh gosh, I made birdhouses back when I was a kid,” he says. “I’d just grab some wood and throw it together to make just a simple, little kid birdhouse.” ■

