

When Tacoma's totem pole welcomed a president - News Tribune, The (Tacoma, WA) - May 23, 2013 - page 3

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Unlike some bigger cities, Tacoma isn't so jaded - or hyperpolitical - that it's afraid to treat a visit by a president of the United States as a big deal.

Partly, of course, because they're relatively rare. Starting in 1880 with Rutherford Hayes, only 14 incumbent presidents have come to town. The most recent was Bill Clinton in 1996.

And partly because, being relatively poor, we know they come to Tacoma for our love and not our money. (Take that Medina!)

In that context, it is easier to see why the visit by President Teddy Roosevelt on May 22, 1903, was important enough that the city would want to install what it claimed was the world's largest **totem pole**.

Yeah, I'm back to the Tacoma **totem pole** again. On Sunday, I asked the city Landmarks Commission to stop taking itself - and its pending decision on what to do now with that pole - so seriously.

Rather than analyze the troubled pole as some sacred tribal artifact, which the members seem to acknowledge it is not, they need to view it as a quirky piece of city history.

Rather than lay it to rest in some city park as some Alaskan tribes might have done with authentic poles that had begun to deteriorate, they need to figure a way to preserve it and display it, inside or out.

Rather than hold meetings of ad hoc subcommittees in secret - at least without required public notice - they need to have a very open (and legal) process that doesn't start with a "consensus" reached by that subcommittee, but instead is open to all options.

And frankly, rather than become the first landmarks commission in city history to delist a protected landmark, rather than being an entity that doesn't just allow the item's demolition by neglect but presides over it - the current commissioners should champion the treasures under their protection.

That's a better way to celebrate Historic Preservation Month, as declared by the City Council on Tuesday.

The Tacoma **totem pole** was commissioned by local businessmen as an act of civic boosterism. While triggered by competition with Seattle (you know, our pole is bigger than your pole), the timing was set by Roosevelt's visit.

"The President They Adored - Washington State Welcomes President Roosevelt in 1903" by Michele Bryant and Tacoma "Good Life Northwest" blogger Candace Brown captures the

excitement that Roosevelt engendered and the legitimacy his presence gave the region.

"All of Tacoma waited for the president's train that afternoon of May 22, 1903, with citizens crowded into all possible vantage points, ' . . . above the housetops, or dipping from every window,' according to the Daily Ledger," they wrote. The agenda included a speech in Wright Park, a ceremony to lay the cornerstone of the Masonic Temple and a carriage ride to the Tacoma Hotel, where he would spend the night after a massive banquet.

"The **totem pole** captivated Roosevelt with its distinctive carvings and enormous size," Brown and Bryant wrote. "As the carriage passed by, he raised his arm, pointing at the pole's features from top to bottom and seemed to honor it by removing his hat."

Over the years, the pole was loved by generations of Tacomans. That it is now out of mind is partly due to the fact that it is out of site, hidden in Fireman's Park, where few dare tread. It was even placed with its unpainted side facing into the city, appearing at a quick glance to be nothing but a utility pole.

Part of the beauty of historic preservation, however, is that we don't require buildings and artifacts to appeal to current tastes only. We understand that what is hip now might be considered distasteful later and hip again later still.

It will cost more to take the thing down, check it for lead paint and invasives, truck it to the woods, fence it to protect it from both adventurers and vandals and put up interpretive markers to mitigate the loss of the once-protected artifact.

And since surplus property laws may require it be put up for sale anyway, the best path is the simple one - keep it around for a few generations more.

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Peter Callaghan explains why the ad hoc committee tasked with researching options for the Tacoma **totem pole** could be violating public meetings law. <http://bit.ly/LandmarksOPMA>.

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