



What a hoot

Burton man helped launch, revitalize Woodsy Owl

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By Elizabeth Lowe

elowe@theburtonnews.com • 810.766.6281

BURTON - For children of the 1970s, Woodsy Owl's "Give a hoot, don't pollute" song is as much a cultural symbol as "The Brady Bunch" or "Schoolhouse Rock."

Thanks to a Burton man, Woodsy's history has escaped being lost in the government shuffle.

Dave Kimber, now 59, became a link in Woodsy's unraveled history when he recorded "The Ballad of Woodsy Owl" in 1971. The song set the tone for his career as a sixth-grade teacher at Flint's Neithercut Elementary School and a creator of educational music.

"Woodsy really geared my music toward kids," said Kimber.

When the cartoon owl was created, Kimber was a 20-something California native jamming with his band, Maggie, in his mom's Los Angeles garage. The band had just cinched a deal with MGM Records when Kimber was recruited by family friend Marion Bartoo to tweak the lyrics and arrange a tune, along with partner Bob Pelli.

Kimber doesn't take credit for the "Give a hoot" message.

He originally believed Bartoo coined the phrase, but he recently found that the slogan was created by forest ranger Chuck Williams. After three years in Pasadena as the "Lassie" show technical adviser, he was wowed by the media's ability to spread the Forest Service's anti-litter message, said Williams, now 72, in a phone interview from his home in Albuquerque, N.M.

Since foresters didn't want to dilute the fire prevention aim of forest icon Smokey Bear, Williams brainstormed Woodsy with Forest Service official Glenn Kovar and Harold Bell of Western Publishing, producer of Lassie and Smokey Bear comic books.

Williams credits his mother's phrase, "Don't you give a hoot?" for inspiring the Woodsy motto, which was first used in 1970 during a locally aired announcement.

When Williams transferred to Washington, D.C., the campaign torch was passed to Betty Conrad Hite, the Forest Service's national media director.

Hite, now 76, was thrilled with the finished Woodsy ballad featured in Kimber's live performance at the Hollywood Bowl as well as the campaign's national debut in the 1973 Rose Parade. The public service spot became a favorite with TV and radio stations nationwide, even earning 60 seconds of airtime during the Super Bowl.

As a role model, Kimber wasn't quite saintly.



QUICK TAKE

Learn more

- Hear "The Ballad of Woodsy Owl" (the "Give a hoot" song) at www.mlive.com/flintjournal (by the picture of Woodsy) or at www.mlive.com/flintjournal/extra. You can also learn about Dave Kimber's educational music projects at www.musicthatteaches.com.

After driving six kids back from a Girl Scout jamboree, he inadvertently flicked a candy wrapper out the window, to the girls' horror.

"It was like, 'Woodsy is a litterbug?'" he said.

Kimber met his wife, Pam, a Burton native, at a California music store, where he gave away Woodsy freebies to promote the campaign. After marrying in 1979, the couple moved to Australia, where Pam worked as a teacher and Dave became music director at a TV station. They settled in Burton 10 years later, where they live with their children, Allison, 13, and Simon, 6.

Woodsy's success inspired three more educational music CDs, and last year, Kimber was voted Michigan Social Studies Teacher of the Year by the Michigan Council for Social Studies.

But he always wondered what happened to Woodsy.

The campaign lost momentum when it was shuffled from the Forest Service to a string of other government agencies, and the message was replaced. It's now bouncing back after being taken over by the U.S. Conservation Education Program.

There's no TV comeback planned for the little owl. With such heavyweight issues as hunger, AIDS and domestic violence vying for the public's attention, Woodsy can't compete for airtime, said Iris Velez, the CEP's national symbols program manager.

But preschoolers are once again embracing the environment, thanks to a recently developed partnership with select Head Start programs.

And Woodsy's original slogan is now back, Kimber recently learned.

After a department survey in 2002, CEP brought back "Give a hoot" in partnership with the "Lend a hand" message.

Since the government isn't dedicating funds to the program, Velez credits passion for keeping Woodsy flying.

"Woodsy is so embedded in people's values that they cry when they talk about him," said Velez. "They are committed to keeping Woodsy alive because they truly believe in what they're doing."

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