The 24th Annual Rhubarb Festival at Pine Grove got off to a rousing start on June 11, 2011. Planning for the affair had been months in the offing. As the weatherman had predicted, blue skies and sunshine got the day off to a good start. First comers at 7:30 found breakfast at the Fire Department with folks being told to “come back for all you can eat until the food runs out.” As usual, the fare included eggs, pancakes, rhubarb topping, sausage, coffee and tea. They were prepared for well over 800 meals.

Zoka’s Restaurant & Bar assisted in preparing food donated by Denver Nobel Sisko. Booths for over thirty clubs and organizations had been set up, and Kevin Wrenshall was testing out the sound system where five groups would provide music entertainment throughout the day. There would be sounds of Johnny Cash followed by a voice mindful of John Denver singing “Sunshine on My Shoulders” and “Rocky Mountain High.”

Bob McIlvaine, a resident of Pine Grove since 1987, took the microphone to announce all of the day’s activities. He also wanted to assure everyone that there was still plenty of food. There would be silent auction, a carnival for kids, a duck race on the South Platte and a parade through town where everyone would learn who would assume the throne for submitting the winning rhubarb recipe. McIlvaine encouraged folks to go across the street to the Library and the Pine Emporium to see two of the most treasured buildings from yesteryear. There would be opportunity to view other relics of the past including the old Methodist Church (now the Community Center), the two-room school house, and the cemetery located on the edge of town.

Charles Warren Dake founded Pine Grove in 1886 along the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad leading up to the silver mines in Leadville. Located at the juncture where Elk Creek flowed in from the north and converged with the North Fork of the South Platte, the town prospered and became a resort for tourists.
and fishermen. Hard times hit the area when silver lost its luster. By the 1920s, the woes that beset the community were compounded with the decline of the ice-cutting and logging industries. When the last train passed through town in 1937, Pine Grove seemed destined to become another of Colorado’s ghost towns.

The “lean years” lasted into the 1960s until Ginny and Warren Larsen moved to Pine Grove and inspired a transformation that is still in the works. Turning points in the history of a community often hinge upon actions taken without apparent motive or design. Such was the case in the spring of 1961, when the Larsons were driving through this quiet mountain hamlet. They fixed their eyes on an empty bank-like structure on the north side of the road. It took upon the appearance of a stage set for an old western movie. Over the door was a sign indicating that it had served at one time as the Post Office and the mercantile store owned and operated by the Dake family.

The Larsons proceeded to buy the old dilapidated building and converted it into the Pine Emporium, the first in a long series of developments which rekindled the fortunes of Pine Grove. The old two-room school house built in 1898 was restored by one of its erstwhile citizens, Richard Greene. The Prosser House, which housed railroad workers and tourists, was acquired by Fred and Jane Ahr who took measures to preserve its grandeur at the turn of the 20th century. An old bar across from the Pine Emporium became the town library, serving as the repository of records of a rich past that was in danger of being lost.

**The First Rhubarb Festival**

The Pine Elk Creek Improvement Association (PECIA) was formed in the late 1940s by citizens of Pine Grove anxious to address problems of mutual concern. Money to support undertakings came largely from membership dues, voluntary contributions and baked food sales. After three decades of operation, the board found that issues like fire protection, street improvements, and restoration of the old Methodist Church needed more support than could be derived from these sources.
As Cindy (Greene) Jorgenson recalls, the impetus for the Rhubarb Festival was a breakfast attended by several board members of the Association in the spring of 1987. Pancakes hot off the griddle were served with “a lovely sauce” made of rhubarb provided by Bob McIlvaine. He happened to mention that many communities back East had little festivals at the growing time of this vegetable often mistaken for fruit. By the time of its meeting on July 10th, the whole board was talking about rhubarb in connection with a day of fun and reflection upon the town’s storied past. As recorded in the minutes, Richard Greene called for a committee “to have a Pine Day or a Rhubarb Festival possibly next May.”

Everything came together and the big day was set eleven months later on the third Saturday of June. The fire station along the highway running through town became center stage for what would become a time-honored tradition. The first Rhubarb Festival started out with a breakfast featuring pancakes topped with McIlvaine’s special sauce. Across the road, the Pine Emporium and the library opened their doors for the seventy-five people who had just had their taste of rhubarb. Clubs and organizations set up booths nearby where they could recruit new members and sell food, crafts and various sundry items to raise funds that would go towards restoring the old Methodist Church. A horseshoe pit engaged the competitive juices of a good many in the crowd. Others vied to become featured in a parade for submitting the winning entry in the rhubarb contest.

The day went off without a hitch. The next edition of The High Timber Times was resolute in its call for making the festival an annual affair. In recent years it has been changed to the second Saturday in June to be more aligned with the prime season for rhubarb and better timed to avoid conflicts with other public events. The High Meadow Fire in 2000 reached the west edge of town before fire fighters were able to subdue the flames, resulting in the move of the event to September. Other than that one delay, folks from all over Colorado have converged upon Pine Grove each and every June for the taste and spectacle of rhubarb.

Tour Of The Dake Family Home

After his time on stage, McIlvaine conducted a tour of a project that he and his wife, Patty, have undertaken and which is nearing completion. Attracted to Pine Grove for its “picturesque setting” nestled in the South Platte Valley, Bob was reminded of the landscape of his youth growing up on the Lazy River Ranch in Wyoming. The McIlvaines from the beginning appreciated the immediate access to Pike National Forest, nearby camping spots, trails for hiking and riding horseback, and the occasions when they reached down to pick up arrowheads embedded in the soil.
In search for a home, they picked the grand four-gabled house built by Charles Dake in 1886, which was for sale. The years had taken a toll on the place and would require considerable work to meet their particular needs and desires. All the while, they got active in community affairs with Patty focusing her efforts on the library, where today she still volunteers and serves on the board. For his part, Bob joined the volunteer fire department and assumed a leadership role on the Pine Elk Creek Improvement Association. The McIlvaines decided upon a renovation that would “recreate the place in the image of the town” when Charles and Nancy Dake presided as the first family. Once completed, it will stand as a testimony to a man who, to his last breath, gave Pine Grove the stamp of his best efforts.

Addressing the project of restoration, they determined the particulars of the Dake House before any additions were made to the place by subsequent owners. The McIlvaines believe the home was designed by Frank Edbrooke, the architect for the Tabor Opera House and the Brown Palace in Denver. Bob and Patty found pictures from the early days including a photo of the family seated on the front porch. The original house with two bedrooms and a bath was constructed on one level and had eleven-foot ceilings. According to Patty, it was “engineered so that the roof (was) supported by the exterior walls (so that) none of the interior walls (were) load bearing.”

A carpenter by trade in his first career, McIlvaine has been on line at the West Metro Fire Department since 1994. On off days, Bob dedicates long hours to this endeavor. Painstakingly, he has lifted the original trim and then put it back into place after sanding and refurbishing. He re-framed the exterior walls making way for new windows which are better able to keep out the cold when blizzards hit Pine Grove in the winter. He maintained the gables where he inserted new shingles with a pattern designed to showcase its grand appearance as of old. The weather-beaten roof gave way to a new one topped with cedar. The front porch, when completed, will have new wood and supports.
Turning to the interior, McIlvaine gutted the place, making it necessary for the family to move to a cabin nearby. He lowered the ceiling from eleven feet to nine feet, enabling him to build a staircase to a loft with two bedrooms, a bathroom and a dormer that opens up to a deck overlooking the South Platte Valley. On the main level, he retained the old fireplace and organized the space for a wide-open effect as he proceeded with a master bedroom, a living room, and a good-sized kitchen. A master craftsman at work, he installed new wiring and plumbing in preparation for new insulation and sheet rock. When completed, the place will have modern features but will retain its integrity true to the times.

Before heading back to the Rhubarb Festival, McIlvaine made a quick visit to give hay to his horse named Merrylegs, which pastures on land along Elk Creek. Bred half Quarter Horse, half Arabian, she lost her partner, Sparky, this past year. Bob had named them after horses that entered into Anna Sewell’s 1877 classic, Black Beauty. She would not get as much attention as usual on this day because Bob needed to return to the activity in town. The Rhubarb Bake-Off, won by fifteen-year-old Kiley Wing the previous year, was about to begin.

While the judges sampled rhubarb prepared by contestants in search of a moment of fame, Pastor Dennis Gilbert of the Pine Grove Community Church took pleasure watching the children at play at the carnival he and his wife had set up in their yard next to the fire station. Shortly after the strike of twelve, all eyes turned to Bob McIlvaine who took the stage to place a crown on the head of a certain Tom Bost for submitting the winning entry, “Frozen Yogurt Rhubarb Crisp.” Doctor Bost, it would be learned, happened to be a noted pulmonary surgeon from Lakewood whose wife, Irene Aguilar, was a member of the Colorado State Senate. His first royal act was to join the upcoming parade in a cart pulled by a handcrafted engine designed, built and painted by none other than the man who had just crowned him king. With the lettering of Co. & Southern on one side and Denver, South Park and Pacific on the other, the engine carried the banner of the two of the railroad lines that served Pine Grove in its early days.

Then, it was time for the duck race along the South Platte under the direction of Fred Ahr. In years of high run-off from the mountains, the event has had to be cancelled. But on June 11th of 2011, the water was relatively calm and conditions were ideal. Those entering the competition paid the entry fee for the ducks that were released in the river upstream. One winner donated his profits to the North Fork Fire Department, a gesture greatly appreciated by the whole community.

There was a bitter-sweet aspect to the day that could not be dismissed. Over the last year, the town had lost three stalwarts in the community who had been instrumental in making the Rhubarb Festival a tradition. In late June 2010, word was received that Warren Larson had passed away after a long illness only to be followed by news of the death of his wife, Ginny. Then in late February of 2011, Richard Greene, who had battled Multiple Sclerosis for much of his life, died of complications from his disability.

Lisa Jane Wrenshall

Rhubarb Day ended with a visit to the quiet cemetery on the hillside overlooking the town. The gate opened up to a sweep of grass mixed with wildflowers. One site is reserved for a young lady who passed away on September 20, 2003, at the age of forty-one. Words giving homage to her memory read: “Life is not measured by its length but by its depth.”

Fall was in the air that day when Jane and Fred Ahr responded to a knock on their door. There stood two state patrolmen informing them that their daughter, Lisa, had been killed in a car accident along I-70 in western Kansas. She was on her way back to Pine Grove to help her parents celebrate their wedding anniversary. Shocked to their very core, the Ahrs prepared a spot in the cemetery just to the east of their house. The nearly eight years since the tragedy have not been easy, but the Ahrs have taken measures to ease their pain. Each September, her biker friends gather at their home for dinner after which they stroll over to the cemetery to pay their respects to one who had figured so greatly in their lives.