Benson Bubblers

At the turn of the twentieth century, logging magnate Simon Benson was reportedly tired of his loggers drinking alcohol to excess while in Portland. To quench their thirst, he decided to install a number of continuously running water fountains. Benson donated $10,000 to the city for what would become known as Benson Bubblers; a city ordinance in 1912 provided for twenty fountains.

The Benson Bubblers were constructed from bronze and originally cost $500 to cast. The first fountain was installed at Southwest Washington and 5th Avenue in June 1912. Within a year, all of the fountains had been constructed and installed. The water was—and still is—piped from the Bull Run reservoir.

The Benson Bubblers fell into disrepair after a number of years, and the city reduced some of the four-bowl fountains to two bowls. In 1958, restoration efforts of the fountains were championed by Portland longshoreman Francis Murnane, who opposed what he called the “emasculation” of the fountains. Journalist and writer Stewart Holbrook joined Murnane in celebrating the Benson Bubblers as part of Portland’s heritage. In response, the city refurbished sixteen of the fountains and recast four others.

In 1965, Portland offered a replica of a Benson Bubbler to its sister city of Sapporo, Japan.

Written by Zeb Larson

Further Reading:

City of Portland, Oregon, Water Bureau. "The Benson Bubbler Legacy." www.portlandonline.com/water/index.cfm?&c=49111.

Portland State University Alumni Association. "The History of Simon Benson and His House." www.pdx.edu/alumni/history-simon-benson-and-his-house.

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