

## Russian Jack, Ken Kendall



The man sculpted in bronze known as Russian Jack is surprisingly not Russian or named Jack but instead swagger Barrett Crumen who spent over 50 years of his life walking the North Island particularly between the Wairarapa and Manawatu picking up occasional work in trade for food and other goods whenever he could. He became a familiar figure on our local roadsides expressing the true swagger culture that became a common lifestyle choice in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. For doing so Masterton artist Ken Kendall was commissioned to create the statue as a gift to the community from the Masterton Licensing Trust.

When the statue was gifted to the Masterton community by the Masterton Licensing Trust to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1997 the idea of a 'swagger' holding iconic value was controversial – were they “free spirited” or “Freeloaders” as suggested by Gareth Winter as a way of describing the town’s feelings towards swaggers at the time. There was controversy regarding whether a 'swagger' should be recognised in such a way as some believed swaggers were simply freeloaders living off whatever they could scavenge off others. Many thought a sculpture of the town’s founder would be more appropriate. Some thought the sculpture looked more like the artist Ken Kendall than Barrett Crumen. However from stories we know Barrett was not like that at all, he was often described as being the last of the real swaggers and farmers he visited said he was “extremely honest; never taking anything without working for it.” He seems to be a deserving figure worthy of being sculptured as not only was he a valued icon spending most of his days walking through Wairarapa, everyone got to know him. Not only is he commemorated locally in the form of a sculpture but he also has a special corner dedicated to him and teaching the public swagger history at the Tunui museum. This reinforces how much of a public figure he was, he made an impact on the community in a positive way and obviously very deserving of the sculpture.

The statue is not only a piece of Wairarapa’s history but the whole of New Zealand’s. It holds great historical value as swaggers were common sights for a good hundred years across the country. They walked the roads we drive on today. They carried with them whatever possessions they owned, they were men who wanted to be free or travelled in search of seasonal work, all ages, sizes and races but of all the swaggers there hasn’t been any

documented or commemorated in the way Barnett Crumen was. Barrett is described as always carrying a strong walking stick and two huge sugar bags stuffed with blankets, towels, clothing, food and tins of dripping which he used to cure illness and of course his most prized possession being his pipe. Swaggers are a thing of the past nowadays. It's very unlikely to hear of someone advertising themselves as a 'swagger'. The era of free living that has ended but "Russian jack" will continue to stand reminding us of our country's history. The iconic values and historical values overlap I think they are just as important as each other. The iconic values prove that 'swaggers' are worthy of being remembered and commemorated as they are a valuable part of New Zealand's history.