

Five notes make magic for flutists

Posted: Tuesday, October 15, 2013

By Leslie Shaw Hi-Desert Star



By Leslie Shaw Hi-Desert Star

Five notes make magic for flutists
John Stillwell, a Yucca Valley flute maker, speaks about his craft in a Morongo Basin Historical Society lecture Wednesday evening at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum.

YUCCA VALLEY — Who made the first flute in North America? It wasn't a musician — it was a woodpecker. That was one of the flute facts shared at the Morongo Basin Historical Society's talk on Native American-style flutes last week at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum.

Yucca Valley resident John Stillwell, a maker of Native American-style flutes, discussed his craft and answered questions.

Local musician John Yonushonis joined Stillwell as a co-lecturer and the two performed flute music for the attendees.

Yonushonis spoke about his challenges with Parkinson's disease and demonstrated that although he cannot touch his thumb to his fingers sequentially on his right hand without tremors, he is nevertheless able to play the flute well. "After reading about how some Parkinson's patients can't walk, but can dance, I decided to take up an instrument," he said.

Woodpeckers may have been the first flute makers, Stillwell told the audience. By poking holes in sticks, they may have given early Native American musicians the idea.

Native American flutes are almost always in a five-note scale, Stillwell said. All the notes sound good together in such a scale, making the flute an easy instrument with which to improvise.

When wooden flutes are made of soft woods, the sound is softer and "mushy." When made from hard woods, the flutes have a brighter, crisper sound. "I use harder woods for higher-keyed flutes and softer for the lower keys," Stillwell explained.

Stillwell passed many of his creations around the room. He explained you can only call a flute Native American if it was actually made by a Native American; otherwise, the flute should be called Native American style.