

Christmas tree lot wouldn't be the same without Benny

By Kathryn Reed

Choosing the perfect Christmas tree is important. Sometimes it takes the right person to find the right tree.

For many people, Benny Kunibe is that person.

Kunibe, who turned 93 this month, is the man behind the Optimist's annual Christmas tree lot near El Dorado Beach.



Benny Kunibe

"People will come to the tree lot and only want to talk to Benny to get the best tree," said Terry Powers, a fellow Optimist.

The tree lot has been an institution in South Lake Tahoe since 1963. The club had to find some way to raise money after taking a huge financial loss with a car race that was supposed to raise money but instead created a deficit of thousands of dollars and required lawyers to get out of the mess.

The lot was first at the old Nevada Lumber Company, where CVS at the Y is. Only local trees were sold. Many came from the Wrights Lake area. At the time it was the only tree lot in town.

The Optimist has sold trees up and down Highway 50, including

in Nevada, and inside the Fremont Center when it was a dance hall. The lot has been in its current location since the early 1990s.

Although there are other places to buy trees on the South Shore that are less expensive, the Optimist lot is the only one to give money back to the community.

“This is the only big money maker we have. It’s how we give money to the kids,” Kunibe said.

The Optimist Club is all about raising money for various youth groups in the area. At the club’s meeting on Nov. 17 there is discussion about a request from the Pop Warner Cheer group needing money. (It’s mostly men in attendance upstairs at Steamers.) They talk about how at times there are as many young girls cheering on the sidelines as there are boys playing football. The cheerleaders are getting their money.

It’s a business meeting with levity. Kunibe has what looks like a Clorox bottle turned into a decorated pig where fines are paid into the back end. He is getting people to put in money for infractions that aren’t entirely evident to the uninitiated.

“The guys keep me young,” Kunibe said.

But the guys wonder what they would do without their senior most member – in terms of age and membership.

“Benny remembers all the supplies we need,” Powers said.

This means shopping after the holidays for deals on things like tree stands that will be used the following year. It means knowing how many hot dogs or packets of hot cocoa to have for various events.

Kunibe has had an interesting life, though not always easy. During World War II he was placed in an internment camp in Colorado. In 1955, he moved to Lake Tahoe from Sacramento.

He started off working at George's Basque restaurant. He worked for a time at the old Lampson Store. Kunibe lived behind the store in a 600-square-foot house with his wife and four kids.

When Fritz Wenck joined Optimist in 1970, Kunibe was still sprinting around the bases for the club's softball team.

Baseball is very much a love of Kunibe's to this day. He's wearing a San Francisco Giants hat and lights up when questioned about this year's team.

"They made history," he says of the World Series champs. Still, though, it's Willie Mays who he has a soft spot for.

When Kunibe isn't doing something for the Optimist Club he can be found fishing on Fallen Leaf or Topaz lakes.

"Age doesn't mean a thing. I don't sit around," Kunibe said.

He definitely won't be sitting much for the next few weeks as the Optimist Club sells Christmas trees. The lot opened Friday. It is open weekdays noon-8pm and weekends 10am-8pm. Snow can change the hours up a bit.

"Benny enjoys life and he wants to make sure everyone else does," Powers said.