

## TRIBAL PROGRAM NEWS

### Siletz Tribal Restoration – A 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

#### Part V – “Yesterday and Today: Stories of a Warrior Spirit”

by Brent Merrill

Tyee John, the War Chief of the Rogue River and Klamath Tribes, stood with his hands bound and his heart sick with dread. It was the summer of 1856 and Tyee John, or Tecumtum as he was known to his people, wanted to keep fighting the white settlers, but he knew the women and children in his band could not survive if they did not surrender.

Despite the loyalty of 35 men at his side, John knew he had to bring his people down out of their Native lands and agree to be relocated or they would die.

The discovery of gold and land rich with valuable natural resources like game, water and timber led to the attempted extermination of all Indians in southern Oregon and northern California.

Tyee John's people, their villages burned, began their move to the newly established Coast Reservation in the winter of 1856 and the movement continued for the next two years. The 592 Natives in his band at the time of the forced relocation were barefoot and used torn blankets to cover themselves while they walked away from their ancestral lands forever. Many people died from starvation and many more died upon reaching the mountain rivers of Siletz.

The grief of the people as they were forced to leave their lands made for quite the display of emotion. Even U.S. Army officers in charge of the relocation were affected by the plight of the Tribal people.

“It almost makes me shed tears to listen to them wailing as they totter along,” said Captain Edward Ord.

One year later, in 1857, Tyee John reported to the federal government representative that he wanted to take his people home.

“For my own part, my heart is sick,” said Tyee John. “Many of my people have died since they came here; many are still dying. There will be none left of us. We have no game; we are sick at heart; we are sad when we look upon the graves of our families. I will consent to live here one year more; after that I must go home. My people are dying off. I am unable to go to war, but I want to go home to my country.”

Chief Tyee John never did make the return trip to his traditional home. The revered leader was arrested and taken to California's Alcatraz Prison in 1858 when he was preparing to return to his ancestral lands in the Rogue River region. He died on the Grand Ronde Reservation in 1864.

Another of the Warrior Chiefs of the Rogue River people was Chief John. He also was known for his resis-



Ed Ben attends Tribal Information Day at the state Capitol in Salem on May 18, 2007. (photo by Brent Merrill)

tance to the onslaught of the dominant culture. Chief John avoided being taken to the Coast Reservation until 1858, two years after the mass exodus of the majority of the Rogue River Tribes.

Chief John had been kept under close watch until it was decided he also would be relocated to Alcatraz. After a failed attempt to leap from the steamship, Chief John was incarcerated at the island prison known for its dangerous residents.

Chief John later received a pardon and returned to the Siletz Reservation, where he lived out his days even posing for historical pictures taken in Portland in 1880.

Today, the fighting spirit lives on in the modern day Tribal members. Siletz Tribal Elder and former Tribal Council member Ed Ben is a proud Native American who served his people as a leader at the most crucial point in their history – just prior to Tribal Restoration and just after the Tribe put the pieces back together again.

“I served on Tribal Council from before our Restoration until 1980,” said Ben. “Prior to Restoration, serving on Tribal Council was strictly on a volunteer basis. There were no travel ex-

penses, if you went to Washington, D.C., or anywhere else to represent the Tribe you paid your own way. I, like others on the council, had a full-time job. I used my vacation time for years to attend Tribal meetings.”

Ben said he used to get off of work and stop in Philomath to eat before going to meetings that lasted past midnight most times.

“Before we had any resources, it took a big toll on the families,” said Ben. “The families – the wives and the husbands – had to give up the same thing as the council people.”

When President Jimmy Carter signed the Restoration Act in 1977 and the people began putting a government in place, Ed Ben said he knew they were making history, again.

“It was like catching lightning in a jug,” said Ben of the two-year period of time the Tribe had to establish a Tribal Constitution and short- and long-term Reservation Plans. He said the members of the Tribe met in the Siletz Grange Hall and went through the Constitution line by line with Tribal Attorney Charles Wilkinson.

The political climate in the late 1960s and 1970s for Native Americans in this country was much different than it is in the modern day with proud Tribal leaders having the opportunity to represent Tribes that have begun to turn their poverty into prosperity in the modern economy of the United States. This is much different than the days of Tribal leaders washing cars and organizing bake sales just to raise gas money for parades and traditional gatherings like pow-wows and annual rites.

When Tribal leaders asked for the return of Government Hill, which was now within the city limits of Siletz, they were criticized by some locals, supported by others.

Government Hill was the former headquarters of the area's Indian Agency and also holds the nine-acre Tribal cemetery. Today, it is the center of Tribal activity, housing the Tribe's cultural program and Elder activity area

complete with a meeting area and kitchen. The area holds the Tribe's pow-wow grounds and is the future home of the planned museum and cultural item storage areas.

The Tribe also asked for 3,600 acres of nearby Bureau of Land Management acreage east of the current city of Siletz as part of the Reservation Plan submitted to Congress. The Reservation Plan Committee included state of Oregon Attorney General at the time Jim Redden, representatives of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, federal agencies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Oregon Legislature and Tribal leader Arthur Bensell.

Bensell, the former mayor of Siletz who spent 20 years building a career as an administrator at Indian BIA schools before owning the local country store, said land was the most important thing that could help the newly restored Tribe build a future for the generations to come.

Arthur Bensell, Ed Ben, Joe Lane and other Tribal leaders felt that a Reservation land base was the only chance the Tribe had to look seven generations into the future. They felt it was their only chance to have a permanent and sovereign existence.

“A Reservation is central to our purpose,” said Bensell during the Restoration movement. “We will need a land base from which to provide services.”

Ed Ben is also a proud veteran who not only served in war, but spent a career as a prison guard for 30 years in Salem upon his return from active duty. Today, he serves his people and his fellow veterans by carrying a flag as a member of the Tribe's traveling Color Guard.

“There is pride in how I feel about the Tribe and what the flag represents,” said Ben. “I'm proud to be a Siletz Indian and because of that flag we are able to be recognized as Siletz Indians.”

He explained that his pride is inherent. He is the son of Siletz Chief and Tribal leader Archie Ben.

“During termination, my family still danced and attended pow-wows,” said Ben. “(Today) I take great pride in being able to walk with those other Tribes and carry the Siletz Tribal flag.”

Ben said ensuring a better life for the future leaders of the Tribe was the driving force behind the Restoration effort.

“I think our young people ought to know that the people who took on the task of getting the Tribe Restored had a goal of creating opportunities to develop our young people and give them an opportunity to be responsible for their own lives.”