

TRIBAL MEMBER NEWS

Tribal Elder Enselsun Gilbert Towner Walks On Acknowledged Tribal Leader Earned a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008

by Brent Merrill

Siletz Tribal Elder and Tribal leader Gilbert Towner peacefully joined Creator on February 21 at his home in Lapwai, Idaho. Towner, a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, was 79 years of age.

Towner, considered by many throughout the Northwest as a leader of Tribal Veterans and an expert in Tribal languages, was the descendant of a Tututni Rogue River War chief and a survivor of the Indian school system.

Gilbert's accomplishments in life were many and many of them never will be acknowledged properly by dominant culture categories and protocols. Gilbert was a lifelong participant in cultural activities throughout the country from childhood through Elder status.

He was a member of the Bow and Arrow Club of Portland, president of the Chief Joseph Warriors Committee at Lapwai, vice-president of the E-Peh-Tes Pow-Wow Committee at Lapwai, an officer of the National Indian Council on Aging and a local area representative of the National Indian Council on Aging.

Gilbert was very instrumental in the restoration of Tututni – the Tututni Tribal language – in the Coos Bay, Ore., area and he taught the Tututni language to individuals by private arrangement and student groups in Tribal language retreats in Agness each summer.

He was fluent in Tututni as a child and it was his first language until it was beaten from him with a leather strap at his English-only Indian boarding school in the 1930s. Gilbert, one of only three known fluent speakers at the time, began speaking the ancient language again as an adult and started teaching it at the turn of the century.

"The culture is our language," said Gilbert during his lifetime. "Without our language we have no culture."

Gilbert was especially happy when teaching the Tututni language to young people.

"It's a beautiful thing," he said during his lifetime. "They're like baby birds waiting to be fed more and more."

Gilbert was honored with a lifetime achievement award in 2008 from Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho.

Gilbert was recognized as a leader among his fellow Native American Veterans and his story inspired others to honor him at every pow-wow he attended.

He first saw combat action when he landed at Inchon as part of the 1st Marine Division in September 1950.

He spent five years in the Marines during the Korean Conflict – specifically Gilbert served the United States in the battle of the Chosin Reservoir during the Chinese Spring Offensive and earned three Purple Hearts for being injured during his actions of bravery in combat.

Gilbert, despite having been shot three times, rescued a fellow injured soldier by pulling him out of a foxhole and carrying him to safety. Gilbert managed



Photo by Brent Merrill

Siletz Tribal Elder Gilbert Towner Jr. during Grand Entry of the Tribe's 30th Anniversary Restoration Celebration in 2007.

to tie his belt around the man's hands and throw him over his shoulders. The two injured soldiers crawled to safety after Gilbert shot three of the enemy with his sidearm. Gilbert delivered the man to the aid station and then crawled back and finished out the night of April 23, 1951, in the same foxhole.

Gilbert was carried off the mountain the next morning, bleeding from wounds to the legs, arms and head that he had refused treatment for the night before when saving a fellow soldier whose name he did not know.

Gilbert stayed in the Marines until his discharge in 1958. He found he could not return to logging after his service to the country because of the wounds he suffered during the war.

Gilbert married three times upon returning to society and eventually found a career in government service at the U.S. Postal Service.

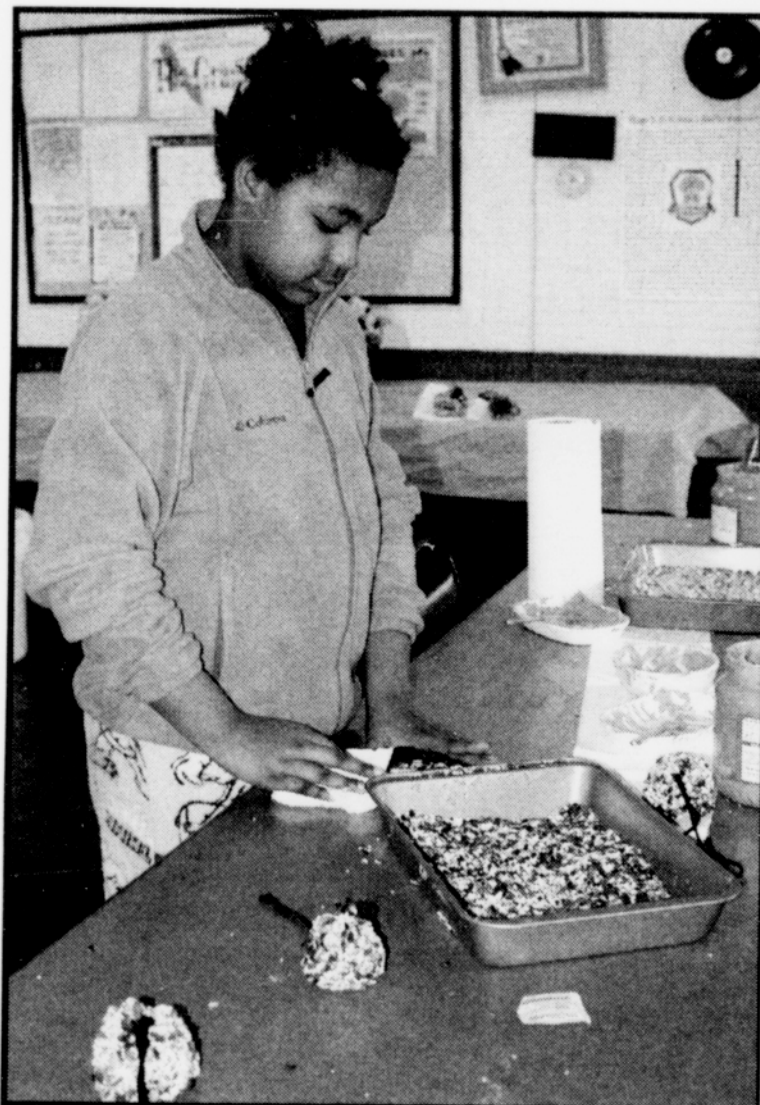
In the last years of his life, Gilbert was often honored at pow-wows – especially Veterans' pow-wows – as head man dancer. He always served the position proudly when asked, despite pain in his

legs from his war injuries that plagued him throughout his life.

Gilbert was born on the Siletz Reservation on December 12, 1929, to Leslie and Louise Towner and lived in Lapwai, Idaho, at the time of his passing.

Gilbert leaves behind four children, Louise Towner-Slure, Wilber Towner, Susan Lynn Towner and Thomas Elgin Towner, and five step-children from his third marriage.

According to tradition, Gilbert was honored with a Seven Drum service and a sunrise burial in Siletz.



Spring break in Siletz was filled with youth activities sponsored by several Tribal programs. Alexis Metcalf (left photo) makes a bird feeder out of pine cones, bird seed and peanut butter. Ebon Jackson (right photo) participated in the Pick Up a Butt activity and won the grand prize – a backpack full of goodies – for picking up the most cigarette butts.



Photos by Natasha Kavanaugh