

EAST OREGONIAN

THURSDAY, JUNE 3, 2021

145th Year, No. 98

WINNER OF THE 2020 ONPA GENERAL EXCELLENCE AWARD

\$1.50



Robert Sutton/Contributed Photo

Kermit Belles

Hermiston man died in classified attack in WW II

Kermit Belles perished on HMS Rohna, a transport ship the Germans sunk

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Kermit Belles' parents never knew how he died.

The Hermiston man, serving his country during World War II, died in one of the worst naval calamities in United States history. But the sinking of the HMS Rohna was classified, and so details of its demise didn't become public knowledge until the 1990s.

Instead, the Hermiston Herald reported on Jan. 6, 1944, that Mr. and Mrs. Claude Bellles had received the following telegram:

"The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son, Pvt. Kermit A. Belles, has been reported missing in action since November 26 in the North African area. If further details or other information are received you will be promptly notified."

Further details were not forthcoming.

Robert Sutton said over time, the family decided he must have been killed in the sinking of the USS Liscome Bay, which a Japanese submarine torpedoed in the Pacific the same week. Sutton's mother, Gloria Belles, was Kermit Belles' younger sister. She died in April 2000 — just six months before Congress officially acknowledged the sinking of the Rohna for the first time.

"It was pretty devastating to her to lose her big brother," Sutton said, noting she was just 12 when he died.

She didn't talk about it much, he said. It was too painful.

After his mother's death, Sutton discovered Belles was not on the Liscome Bay, but on the Rohna, a

See Belles, Page A8



Walters Photographers/Contributed Photo

A pair of tribal members pose in traditional regalia in 2015 at Kanine Ridge above Buckaroo Creek near the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The Umatilla tribes for more than 30 years have worked to regain its land after federal actions reduced the size of its reservation.

Leading the way

Umatilla tribes have been 'aggressive' in reacquisition of lands split up by treaty

By WIL PHINNEY
Columbia Insight

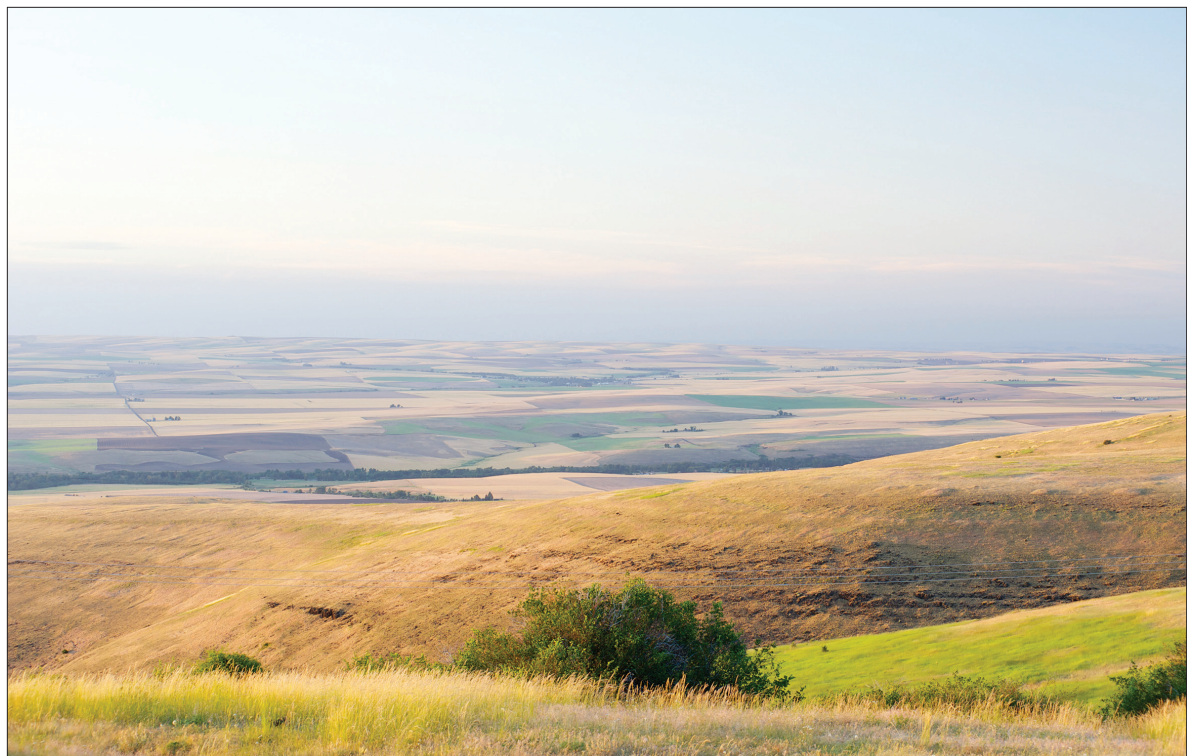
PENDLETON — Thirty-two years ago, when the Umatilla tribes realized non-Indians owned more property on the 172,000-acre reservation than the combined total for tribal government and tribal allottees, it embarked on a 50-year plan to buy back its land.

Thanks to an aggressive Land Acquisition Program, today the tribes own 94,590 acres. Since 1990, the tribes have purchased 77,346 acres — 43,393 acres in fee status and 33,953 acres in trust status.

"After the 1855 Treaty, the tribes' homeland was reduced considerably," said Bill Tovey, director of the Confederated Tribes' Department of Economic and Community Development. "The tribe figured the federal government would not live up to or solve the problems they created, so we developed our plan to buy back our homeland."

About 24,000 acres of the 70,000 the tribes have purchased are within the tribes' ceded territory but lie outside the reservation. That includes Rainwater, an 11,000-acre wildlife reserve near Dayton, Washington. It's filled with mountain timber and is home to big game like deer and elk.

The Wanaket Wildlife Area preserve, about 2,700 acres some 60 miles north of the reservation near the Columbia River, is open for waterfowl hunting. The Wana-



Walters Photographers/Contributed Photo

A checkerboard of fields stretch toward the horizon as seen from Old Emigrant Hill Road in 2015. The Slater Act of 1885 and the General Allotment Act of 1887 resulted in reducing the Umatilla Indian Reservation to 172,000 acres — about a third of what the tribes secured from the federal government in 1855.

ket property also includes 190 acres near the Port of Umatilla zoned for industrial use.

Another seven off-reservation parcels range in size from 45 acres to 666 acres. On-reservation, the 5,000-acre Wheelhouse property purchased last year, which the tribes hope will become a popular area for hunting and gathering, includes steep, rocky ravines with some livestock grazing at the south

end of the reservation.

The tribes also purchased several parcels on all four corners of Exit 216 on Interstate 84 for economic development.

"We figured out that if we wanted sovereignty, we have to have ownership," said Tovey. "We had some regulatory authority, but better than regulatory is ownership."

It's a great story, but it's one that

started long before the 2020s or even before 1989 when the tribes' Land Acquisition Program started.

Creating the 'checkerboard'

In 1855, the Umatilla, Cayuse, and Walla Walla Indians — the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation —

See Tribes, Page A8

Wyden takes in local needs on mental health

COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated 'dire shortage' of mental health services

By BRYCE DOLE
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — A growing consensus among local officials that mental health services in the Umatilla County are in need of change sparked a recent meeting with Sen. Ron Wyden.

"As you listened to the speakers, you heard in their voices this tremendous compassion and desire to mobilize a fresh strategy," Wyden said. "And the big challenge is there haven't been the dollars."

The group that met with Wyden at the Umatilla County Courthouse Saturday, May 29, in Pendleton included county, city, law enforcement, education, mental health and tribal officials. They discussed student counseling, establishing a team of professionals to support law enforcement's response to mental health-related calls, helping American Indian and Hispanic residents, finding housing for those experiencing homelessness and the county's meager supply of mental health and addiction treatment facilities.

County Commissioner John Shafer, the county's liaison for mental health, came away from the meeting with a positive take.

"The passion that we saw in the

See Services, Page A8



Bryce Dole/East Oregonian

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, center, meets with local officials Saturday, May 29, 2021, from across Umatilla County at the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton to discuss mental health services.

