

Indian lives her life so as not to be a burden

By ERIC JONES
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She's a full-blooded American Indian — with the emphasis on American.

In fact, tribal birth records indicate that Esther LaBonte, 87, is the oldest living full-blooded Grand Ronde Indian. But some of her most vivid memories come from the time of the World War II, long after she had left the Polk County reservation to settle in Douglas County.

During the war, Esther spent many a night watching planes fly over Glide. She never spotted any enemy aircraft — but she did pass along word that a German agent had entered Oregon.

She picked berries to buy Liberty Bonds.

Four of her daughters worked as welders in Portland and her oldest son, Bob, died in combat on a lonely island in the South Pacific.

Her favorite day of the year is Decoration Day.

"When Bob died, it really brought the war home to the people in Glide," she remembers, her failing eyes closed against the late afternoon sun as she relaxes in her bed at Springfield's McKenzie-Willamette Hospital.

Esther says the touch of flu that brought her to the hospital is almost gone and that she'll soon be returning to her small apartment on Main Street.

"I can still thread a needle in the sunlight," she says, a smile dimpling her face. "I read ...

mostly detective stories ... and watch wrestling on the television. I sit by my window and watch the people go by."

Life hasn't always been so easy for Esther Mary Jones LaBonte.

Her mother, a full-blooded Klikitat Indian, died in childbirth when Esther was 2 years old. Thereafter, Esther lived in a Catholic school on the Grand Ronde Reservation.

The Grand Ronde Tribe is a confederation of many Indian tribes. Terminated in 1954, the confederation is in the process of getting back its recognized status from the federal government, a status that tribal manager Marvin Kimsey says will lead to many benefits for members.

Esther encountered prejudice in her early days at the Indian school. But her recollections aren't tainted by the bitterness one might expect.

"Some of the white people didn't like Indians," she says simply. "This one German boy wrote a note about me and gave it to another Indian girl. I found out and knocked him right onto the teacher's desk," she nods, making a fist and putting it on her jutting jaw.

She received a \$200 settlement from the U.S. Government when she turned 18 and left the reservation, but the money didn't last long and she was soon hard at work, splitting timber and taking care of her mountainside property near Roseburg.