

Elder Spotlight: Orville Leno

The work in the woods: Remembering the timber era

By Brent Merrill

Grand Ronde tribal Elder Orville Leno spent most of his years in the woods as a logger. He saw some of the world while in the military and remembers his days of growing up in Grand Ronde fondly.

His memories of playing baseball in his youth are shared with excitement and enthusiasm.

Baseball was the only game that mattered. Everybody in the community — Indian and non-Indian — came to play. Respect was earned and life-long legends were born.

Leno remembers playing kids from Siletz on a regular basis. He said the two teams would play, then fight, then makeup and play again.

"Like Siletz," said Leno. "We used to go down there and we would give them a go, and man they were hostile. We had to play ball and then we knew we were in for a fight — that's all there was to it. They were all good guys though."

"The next time we came there it was all a big joke, you know," said Leno. "Or they would come here."

"They would want to know who was pitching that day and we would tell them Moose (Andy "Moose" Riggs). Then, we would let Moose warm up and scare the hell out of them. Moose was wild."

Leno said the boys from Siletz were intimidated by Riggs' shear size and pitching velocity. Riggs threw wild and many times wasn't even close to the plate. Many players were ducking rather than swinging the bat.

"I never did bat against him, but I didn't have to. Even to play with him you could tell how scary he was. But, we had a lot of fun — you would just be playing around with him and he was just so big and powerful. Of course, he didn't even know it."

After leaving school following the 11th grade, Leno made a name for himself as a logger. Then, he went into the service. He still keeps in touch with some of his service buddies from New York, New Jersey, Texas and Michigan.

"Some of the guys that I was in the service with, there is not many of us left," said Leno, "they still write every Christmas. They still keep track. Every once in a while they send pictures. When I was in the service I used to tell them I lived in a teepee. Yeah, I used to kid them a lot just because I was the only Indian. They all respected that though. Some of the guys and I were together two and a half years. You get to know each other. I joined up with them when we were in Savannah, Georgia. I took infantry training in Arkansas."

"They (the Army) wanted me to be a Teletype operator," said Leno. "I was doing communications for different outfits. Wherever they needed communications they'd set us up. We went from Casablanca clear up to Rome."

"I got to see a lot of it (the world)," said Leno. "A lot of it I didn't like, but it's like I said — we were survivors."

Leno survived many battles and earned several commendations and honor medals. Leno took part in the Anglo Landing near the time of the Normandy Landing.

"I think I've got six or seven battle stars," he said. "Some of them were good and others were just not what you want to see."

He said the pictures of war have stayed in his mind, but it is not something he chooses to talk about often.

"It (the war) was not very good," said Leno. "I didn't mind. The hard part was the killing of somebody that you didn't even know for no (apparent) reason. In war nobody gains anything — you both lose. No matter if you win — you lose. You lose ground. You lose people. No matter which side you're on."

Leno said he has tried to forget some things.

"Oh, I think about them (memories of war), but I try not to," said Leno. "When Reyn (Orville's son and current Tribal Council member) went to Vietnam and came back I decided it was a good time for us to get rid of that (shared memories of battle). We talked and I

explained that we don't have to talk about this experience — yours or mine. We don't want to, so we don't."

His memories of growing up in the woods and spending most of his life as a logger in the Northwest are more pleasant. Leno said it was tough work, at times nearly impossible, but he learned and he has no regrets.

For the first 80 years of the twentieth century, logging was the only way of life for most of the men in Grand Ronde. Growing up in Grand Ronde meant logging was what your grandfather did for a living — and your father and uncles and brothers and cousins. Everybody worked in the woods or depended on someone who did.

Leno remembers the days when his father logged with a team of horses and saw the first motorized saws come in to use.

He also remembers when he got started in the business.

"There were so many good loggers around here that I had to go someplace else to get myself situated," remembered Leno of his beginning into logging and that of his contemporaries.

"I went down around the other side of Tillamook to that burn," said Leno. "That (working the Tillamook Burn) was the big thing then. I was down there for 12 years. It is steep ground, rough rock bluffs. A lot of places they used ropes to get back and forth, like mountain climbers. Everybody was young in those days and we didn't care."

The veteran loggers put the rookie timberjacks through a traditional routine of hazing while teaching them the art of logging.

Just like in baseball, the veterans wanted to see how much the young rookies could do.

"A little harder," they would say to Leno. "If you can stand 'er."

The memory made him smile.

"Or they would make fun of you," said Leno. "They thought it was fun."

Leno said the veterans made him a better logger by prodding him to do better.

"They (loggers in Grand Ronde) were noted for being the best loggers," said Leno. "I went down and worked on the Redwoods for a little bit. I found out I didn't want that. That was too big of timber. I tried climbing around on top of those logs, hell they were bigger than this ceiling (10 feet or more across)."

The fact that his inherited profession was by far the most dangerous career possible at that time hardly

fazed him.

"Well, we didn't look at it like it was dangerous," said Leno. "More or less you wanted to get it done so there was a lot of pride in your work," said Leno. "Bigger, faster, quicker. The harder you worked, the better you were and then finally you could get a name and go any place and go to work."

Leno remembered being asked to take on more of a workload than others did because he was younger.

"They would give you something extra to do if you were good at your job," said Leno.

Each logger had a job to do and they did it for the most part without asking questions. They were a team — the yarder, whistle punk, the riggers and the chokersetters.

He learned from the hard core loggers of the past. They didn't stop for bad weather and they didn't slow down for the new guys.

"No. It wasn't fun for me," said Leno. "But, it was helping. Sometimes it was ever so cold. The weather didn't matter. You went to work everyday."

He remembers logging in the deep snow and laying behind logs to get shelter.

"Weather had nothing to do with whether you went to work," said Leno. "Storm. Wind blowing. You would lay down behind logs until the rigging got back to you. That wind would blow 60 and 70 miles an hour. We couldn't even wear our tin hats. We just put a little skull cap on. We made just our living. Never got rich. I don't think anybody had the intent of getting rich. I went to work first in Murphy's Mill. I went to work for 52 cents an hour. It was the wage."

He said the whole lifestyle of working in the woods is dying out.

"Well, for this logging business it is," said Leno. "We were just about lucky enough to get through it and that is when it shut down. There used to be 10 or 12 mills right here."

Leno said he has seen a lot in his years and is proud of the Tribe and all the things that have come to members since Restoration. He said he is glad tribal youth will have an opportunity to succeed right after high school when their trust funds mature.

Leno wishes young people could have known the woods like he did, but now an education should come first.

"Find out what you want to do for yourself," said Leno. "I'm not saying that logging wasn't the thing. It was in our time."

Times have changed.



Orville Leno (pictured here with members of his family) is one of six children born to David and Emma Leno (Tom). He married Ramona McKnight November 20, 1947. Ramona passed away in 1994. Pictured, sitting: daughters Barbara Steere and Darlene Aaron. Standing, from left: Margaret Peters, sister; Merle Leno, brother; Orville; Russ Leno, brother; Marty Leno, son; Lonnie Leno, son; and Reyn Leno, son.

Photo by Tracy Dugan