

# Tribe's first attorney revisits Grand Ronde

■ Many things have changed since his last visit.

By Brent Merrill

**W**hen Attorney Donald Wharton first heard of the Grand Ronde Tribe in the late 1970s, there was no Tribe.

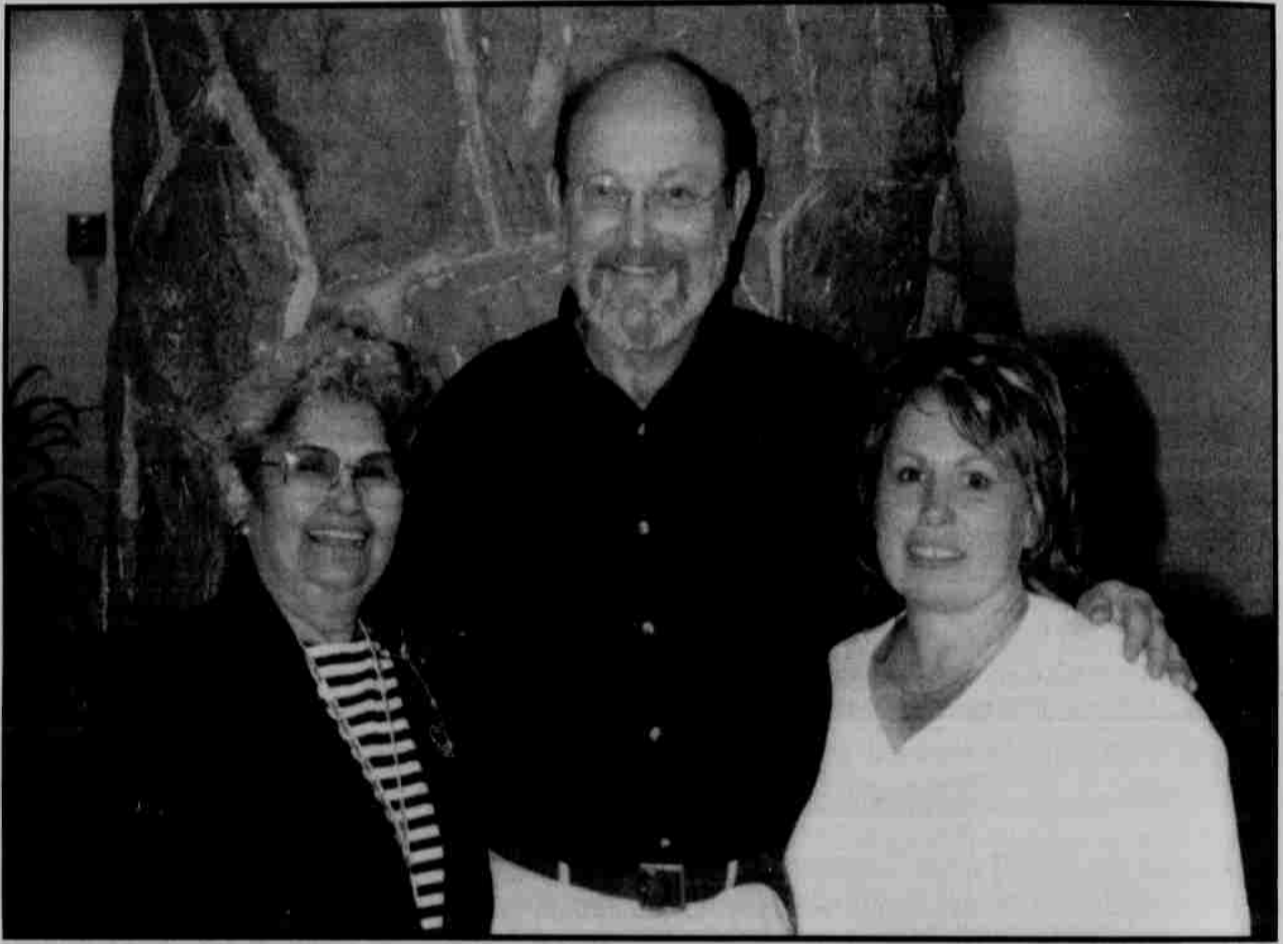
Federal Recognition of the Grand Ronde Tribe didn't come until years after Wharton first met with Tribal members Dean Mercier, Marvin Kimsey, Margaret Provost, Merle Holmes, Merle Leno, Jackie Colton (Whisler), Eula Petite, Candy Robertson and Kathryn Harrison among others.

Wharton remembers meeting at the Grand Ronde Elementary School because the only thing the Tribe had left was a little green building (now it's yellow) at the cemetery. He remembers watching a hat passed around the room so coffee could be purchased for the next meeting.

Wharton, who works in Boulder, Colorado for the Native American Rights Fund, recently returned to Grand Ronde.

Executive Secretary Jackie Whisler led Wharton on a tour of the Tribe's facilities. Wharton said he was pleased with what he saw.

*Smoke Signals* spoke with Wharton about his return to Grand Ronde.



The Tribe's first Attorney Don Wharton visits with Tribal Council Chair Kathryn Harrison (left) and Executive Administrative Assistant (and tour guide) Jackie Whisler. They are pictured inside the 1-1/2 year old Tribal Governance Center — one of the many new buildings constructed since Wharton's last visit.

Photo by Kim Mueller

## Interview with DON WHARTON:

### What were some of the changes you noticed?

"There was very little compared to what you have now," said Wharton as the interview began. "It was quite dramatic to see the difference between the very modest beginnings of the people who were seeking restoration and what the Tribe has achieved over the years in relatively short time. I mean we're talking 17 years. That is less than a generation to work this complete transformation of the Tribe and its outlook."

### Have you had experience with other Tribes where maybe you could give some perspective on how long things take and are we on the right track?

"Well, I have perspective with other Tribes and other Tribes are not as fortunately situated as the Grand Rondes and so they don't have all the same opportunity that you have," said Wharton. "But, to the Grand Ronde's credit, what you have done is very effectively take advantage of the opportunities that you have."

### When you say situated do you mean area wise or business wise?

"The geography of where you are," said Wharton. "The fact that you do have a casino opportunity — a gaming opportunity — where you have a market where you can draw on. As I'm sure you are aware of, there are other Tribes with casinos that don't have that kind of market and can't make that kind of draw. I'm sure that you would agree that the success of your casino has given you a lot of opportunities that wouldn't otherwise necessarily be the case."

I think sometimes people focus a lot on our casino, when we try to look at it as just one of our enterprises. It has provided a lot of things and I think we are all really thankful for that. I just wonder if people focus on that too much or that they fail to see some of the other things that we have going on out here.

"People do over-focus on Indian gaming, because they are fascinated by it," said Wharton. "You are absolutely right to point out that for instance, you have your timber enterprise which was the foundation of your enterprise set in place at the time of Restoration and shortly thereafter to provide for your economic viability. The timber, while very good, and I'm sure you are all very grateful for it, couldn't provide you with the range of economic opportunities that you have with gaming. The hotel of course depends upon the gaming; it couldn't stand on its own. If you have other enterprises, then I'm not aware of them."

### There are several real estate ventures, a new office complex in Portland; we have interest in some commercial enterprises all throughout the state of Oregon.

"Where did the opportunity to make those investments come from?" asked Wharton rhetorically about casino profits. "But, what you have done is taken that resource — that opportunity from gaming and used it to your advantage," said Wharton. "My point is that the Grand Rondes have been very effective at using their opportunities to the greatest advantage to the benefit of their people. You (the Grand Ronde Tribe) take much more of the long-view of how things should be done, rather than having for instance, like some Tribes do, of having per capita distributions dominate how you prepare for the future."

### Every Tribe has that issue as an ongoing discussion. How could we draw a parallel to some of the other Tribes that have had those per capita payments and our Tribe that has been more focused on the long haul and focused on the Tribe in general?

"You can't," said Wharton in quiet, but emphatic voice. "Every Tribe has its own priorities for reasons that are endemic to that Tribe. To draw a kind of comparison to

the Grand Ronde and other Tribes isn't helpful because it invites the suggestion that somehow the Grand Rondes have done better than the other Tribes and are wiser than the other Tribes. What that doesn't take into account is that the Grand Rondes don't have to deal with the same things or make some of the same hard choices that some of the other Tribes have to make. Which, doesn't take away from the wisdom or the laudability of the choices that the Grand Ronde have made. They've been very good. You could have made different and less supportive choices for the future and you didn't, you made supportive choices for the future to your credit. But, that is not a comparison to what other Tribes' choices have been. Other Tribes have other things to deal with that Grand Ronde doesn't face."

### To read between the lines of what you are saying, our people should be thankful of what has happened.

"They should be real thankful, but they also should have a lot of self-confidence about who they are and what they have done," said Wharton. "They deserve not to be egotistic, but to be self confident about themselves. To congratulate themselves and say we have done well and we deserve to feel good about that."

### What about your personal perspective of what you witnessed before when the Tribe was just starting their struggle to gain independence and start some of these endeavors. Maybe you can tell me what you think the strengths were. Was it just the people we had in place or does it get back to what you were talking about — only geography and the fact that we had a lot of opportunities?

"I never said it was only geography," said Wharton. "I said geography was a terrific benefit. I want to emphasize that it is the people. From the very first time I met with representatives of the Grand Ronde Tribe in 1979, it