



This photo of the cemetery building was taken in the early 1980s. When Wharton first came to Grand Ronde, it was the only Tribal structure in the community.

Photo courtesy of Cultural Resources

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~ Don Wharton

was clear to me that the Grand Rondes had the benefit of terrific leadership. And, they have had the benefit of that leadership throughout the years. Not just those people I met, but the people who followed them and the people who are in office now. You have the benefit of having a terrific leadership there. That is a blessing. Not every Tribe has it. Not all Tribes have it at all times. You have been able to enjoy not only terrific leadership, but also terrific leadership over a period of years. That's not only something to be thankful for, but it is something to be very conscience about in terms of what it holds for the future. Because it is easy to be led astray by those who will not give you the same kind of leadership that the folks you have had at Grand Ronde will give you. It can lead to very tough times, very difficult times for a Tribe in terms of creating internal strife.”

People around here got excited about your visit. How does that make you feel to know that you are an important person to the community?

“Well, I don't know about being an important person,” replied Wharton. “It is nice to have made connections with people in the work that you do. It's nice to know that people remember you from the days when you worked together and the work that you did together. There is a certain kind of bond that comes out of people who share struggles. You have to recall that this was a time when the Grand Ronde people supported what they did with bake sales and trying to sell beads and crafts.”

And passing the hat.

“And passing the hat,” agreed Wharton. “There was a real sense of mission. A real sense of struggle and commitment among the people who were there. These are people who showed up because they believed in who they were and what they were doing. There was no other incentive. These were people that showed up because they wanted their grandmother's medicine to be paid for. These were not people who were looking for casinos or any of the stuff that you have now. That was not part of the vision. These people had very simple needs. And the foundation of all of that was to remove the insult that the United States had put upon them about not being a Tribe anymore. Not being one of the Indian Nations amongst the great circle of Indian Nations. That was first and foremost. But, they also wanted what they deserved and that was to have the restoration of those services for their young, for their elderly, for the people who didn't have adequate housing. They felt they deserved that and they wanted that back and that was their mission. It was very modest in that sense, but it was a deep and enduring commitment. When you share that with someone it creates a kind of bond that you are in together. I really appreciated that part of coming there and meeting with the people of the Grand Ronde and knowing that there was a time when we shared that struggle and that commitment and that work. And it is all the sweeter that it turned out so grandly successful. But, it also would be sweet just the same if there were nothing more than those programs that they had wanted

at the time.”

Because that would be a victory.

“Absolutely,” agreed Wharton. “Restoration of itself was a victory. Having the land base — the timber was a terrific bonus. It didn't have to happen. It was important that it happened. The Grand Ronde people deserved to have it happen, but it wasn't essential to the initial vision and goals that the people were thinking about. So, it was a terrific bonus. They deserved it. They needed to have it, but they could have survived without it. The gaming was beyond anybody's vision or dreams. In the early days — I mean. Those dreams and visions evolved over time.”

What do you think is the most important thing for our people to remember about the transition that has gone on over the 17 years just from your perspective? What do you think people should consider important?

“I think it is always important for people to remember their own story,” said Wharton. “To understand their own history and to recognize the contributions made by the people in their community who went before them. There is a temptation to think that history begins at the point that we become involved and we forget or we simply are not aware of all the contributions that were made by the people who came before us to bring us to where we are today. So, it is important for people to remember their own story, to hear their own story — sometimes they don't hear their own story. It is important for people to know who those people were that kept the flame alive when there was little reward for doing so. These are the people who didn't end up being the elected leadership of the Tribe and didn't lead the Tribe into gaming or other things. You know, I think about people like Dean Mercier — I mean he was there, he was committed and he added a lot of grit to those meetings. He is not the kind of guy who goes back to D.C. and testifies before Congress although he certainly could have. And he is not the guy who sits down and negotiates with the bankers over what the debt service rate will be on a gaming enterprise. But, he is an integral part of the community that held together the belief that the Tribe existed and had a right to exist and ought to be restored. That contribution, by itself, is a really important piece of understanding that all of the Grand Ronde people are part of doing what happened here. And, not just a few or some of those with the greatest recognition, although their contribution was terrific, but it is these other folks who are part of that story and people need to know that story — children need to know that story. Adults need to know that story. The folks who showed up lately need to know that story. They need to understand how people got to where they are today. Because if they don't understand that, then they won't know how to make very important decisions in the future about where the Grand Ronde people ought to go and what they ought to do with the resources they have.

“In 1979, when I drove up to that elementary school to

meet with these people who had no idea who I was, nor me them, and we talked about what are your dreams for restoration and how can I help you?” remembered Wharton. “Dean Mercier was sitting there in that room. He had other things he could have been doing. He was in that room and it made a difference that he was in that room.”

Not a lot of people know that information.

“There are others too,” said Wharton of the people he met in Grand Ronde twenty years ago. “Mrs. (Eula) Petite, who didn't outlive this process, she was there too. And, there are the people who provided so much support in context to what was going on, like Candy Robertson. There was never a meeting, there was never a gathering, there was never anything going on that she wasn't behind the scenes making sure that the food was there, that the lights were on, that the heat was on. Candy Robertson is the kind of person who even though she's not up on the podium speaking, you couldn't be there without her. It couldn't happen, it wouldn't happen without her.”

I appreciate that perspective. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you think is important?

“I guess what I'm sitting here thinking about is what that little green house in that cemetery looked like and what it looks like now,” said Wharton.

Now it's a little bigger.

“Well, it's not just bigger,” said Wharton. “It is bigger and it has new siding on it and it has an awning and it is next to a very impressive pavilion. The people — they want that. They want that as a way of dealing with the passing of their people with dignity. But, you know there was something really elegant about that little green shed in the middle of that field. And, the fact that there were people sitting there collecting money to try and figure out how to pay the phone bill. It's sort of like that building, to me, sort of represents the same thing that Abe Lincoln's cabin represents to a lot of people. You know that this is the symbol of humble beginnings that led to very great things. And, now they are storing a lawn mower there. I'm not saying you shouldn't store the lawn mower there, but there is something about, for me, looking at that building and saying this is for me where it began. But, that little green building is a symbol for me of where Grand Ronde's Restoration really began and where it came from.

“There is one other thing and it has to do with the courage,” said Wharton. “The raw, gut courage. In addition to the commitment and the showing up and the putting their own money in the teapot and the bake sales and the rest of it. When it came time to do things that, for them, were very difficult to do, they did it anyway. People now take that for granted. Like Jackie Colton (Whisler) going to the radio station and talking on the radio about Restoration. That seems a simple thing, but for her, it was a raw act of courage to do that. Merle Holmes and Marvin Kimsey traveling to Washington D.C. and staying in the American Friends House and going and visiting people on the Hill. This was not something that came naturally to them. That's not the place where they were comfortable, but they knew it needed to be done. They put themselves out there in that way and did things that were not comfortable for them and that they didn't want necessarily to do. It had to be done and they stepped up and they did it. Those were acts of valor because doing grand things that people are in awe of has nothing to do with courage. Courage has to do with overcoming those things that you have no natural inclination to want to do or even a fear of doing. That's what these folks did. They stepped up and they did that. That is an awesome thing to see when people do what seems like not such great things, but you know in your heart that this takes a great deal of grit and commitment to do these things.”

It's not just about the money either.

“It has nothing to do with money,” said Wharton.

It's not even the benefits and all the things — it's about the community. It's about the sense of family. It's not about the money. It's about the sacrifices that people made and the ideal they had.

“More than anything else, it's about righting a terrible wrong.”