

# Walking On: TRIBAL ELDER'S STORIES

## The Life and Times of Myrtle May Porter-Kowing (1925-2000)

The following is a brief glimpse of Myrtle's family history. This writing started in March of 2000 when family members decided to document those details about Myrtle and her family that would otherwise slip away with the years. Major sources of this information, memories and inspiration were Myrtle and her children: sons Frank (Gene) Jr., Brad and Terry; and daughters Judy and Nancy. Reliving and documenting these memories provided many wonderful family moments.

**THE GIRL FROM HARMONY ROAD.** Myrtle May Porter was born on May 26, 1925 in a rented farmhouse on Harmony Road, halfway between the church and Buell, Oregon.

Myrtle was the fifth of ten children born to Stephen Daniel Porter Sr. and Cecil Rose Russell-Porter. Cecil was originally from Tiller, Oregon and attended Chemawa Indian School in Salem. Stephen and Cecil originally met at the Norwest's house in Grand Ronde. Cecil was the daughter of Riley Sherman Russell and Roselia Quintal. Roselia listed her Tribe as Klamath Indian.

Myrtle's older siblings included: Stephen Daniel Jr., George (who only lived one day), Oscar, Agnes, Etta, Iva, Birl, Celia and Margie.

**THE EARLY YEARS.** When Myrtle was 4½ years old her family lived in Dallas, Oregon. During her first grade at school they lived in Grand Ronde. Myrtle remembers her nickname was "Bubbits."

After moving to Willamina, Myrtle and a Petite boy got into trouble by pulling up some newly planted fir trees along a road. Over fifty years later, at a Tribal Council meeting, retired school teacher Eula Petite would relate this same story to Myrtle's son Brad. Eula was the mother of the Petite boy, both children's teacher, and the one who applied some discipline for the tree pulling.

**MEETING FRANK.** Myrtle's family moved north of Sheridan when she was 16. It was there that she met Frank Eugene Kowing, a good looking 18 year old friend of her brother Oscar. Frank and Oscar had met at the Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Nehalem, Oregon. Frank was from Toppenish, Washington. He paid some attention to Myrtle and after awhile they took more interest in each other.

**THOMPSON'S MILL.** Myrtle's family and Frank then moved to Thompson's Lumber Mill in the upper Gopher Valley where her dad worked. She and Frank got jobs at the mill. Myrtle and her dad worked on the "Green Chain" pulling, sorting and stacking the green lumber, and Frank was running a saw and driving truck.

At 17, Myrtle moved to Vancouver Heights to do live-in child care for a family there. Frank had moved to nearby Washougal, Washington, to stay with his parents. Frank now worked at the Paper Mill in nearby Camus. Myrtle remembers that her and Frank use to meet and sneak kisses.

**GOT MARRIED.** Myrtle and Frank then moved back to Gopher Valley to live with her parents. Myrtle turned 18. Myrtle and Frank went to his parents to get their consent for them to marry. They had to hike out to the road through the snow to catch a ride to Sheridan, then to Washougal, and then hitchhiked back to Sheridan.

Just before the wedding Frank acquired a mill shack at Thompson's Mill for them to live in. Myrtle and Frank were married in a simple ceremony at the Methodist Church Rectory in Sheridan, Oregon on June 15, 1943.

**STARTING THE FAMILY.** Frank Jr. (Gene) was born in 1944. Frank Sr. joined the Navy and served in WWII in the Pacific. Myrtle said the war years were lonely times for her. Frank did not talk much about the war afterwards.

Myrtle, Frank and Gene moved back to Thompson's Mill, and lived there one year. Then they moved to Rock Creek where Judy was born in 1947. This rented Rock Creek shack had a kitchen, one bedroom and a front room. They moved back to Thompson's Mill and were living there when Brad was born in 1948.

**DUPEE VALLEY.** Then they built a house up Dupee Valley and were living there when Terry was born in 1949. The Dupee place had two big bedrooms, a kitchen, living room and was the first place they had electricity and running water.

**BALLSTON, OREGON.** Myrtle and Frank traded the Dupee place for one partially built in Ballston. Myrtle and Frank taught 4H classes. Family members participated in church and bible schools. On Friday nights, Frank and "Myrt" would load up the kids and go into Sheridan for hamburg-

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** What a pleasure it was as I read the history of Tribal Elder Myrtle Kowing who recently passed on. What a loving family, I thought, to have kept such a detailed history of their mother's life — a history crafted with love and caring.

With so much information provided by the family it became clear that some editing would have to happen for this to appear here in our Tribal newspaper. Let me first sincerely apologize to the family for only being able to run a fraction of what you provided us. I'm truly sorry for the edits and hope you will understand how hard it was for me to do — easily one of the most difficult assignments of my career so far. How do you edit someone's life story?

For those who are interested, we have the full account provided by the family on record here at the Tribe's Public Information office. Let me also encourage other families to do this same type of history. Do it now before it is too late and before the memories fade.



Myrtle Kowing on Mother's Day 2000.



Above: Frank (age 19) and Myrtle (age 17) in 1942 at Thompson's Mill.



Left: Frank and Myrtle's children pictured in 1960 at their new home in McMinnville. (L to R) Gene, Judy, Brad, Terry and their youngest Nancy.

ers. On Saturday nights they would get a sitter for the kids and go into McMinnville for some barn dancing.

It was in Ballston that the family got their first electric clothes dryer. They had an old crank clothes wringer washer. Hot water came from heating pipes in the wood burning stove.

They were the first family in Ballston to get a television. Frank bought it for \$149. Neighbors came over a lot to see wrestling matches on TV. Everyone enjoyed The Lone Ranger, and Frank's favorite was Gunsmoke.

Myrtle taught the kids to make ice cream out of snow, sugar, vanilla and evaporated milk. Homemade ice cream always seemed like a nice winter treat.

There was a garden at the side of the house. Mom canned tomatoes, green beans and pickles, and Dad made prune conserves. Seemed like Mom was always busy. She got up early summer mornings to take the kids to picking jobs in the beans and strawberries. This helped earn money for school clothes. Then she worked at home, cleaning cooking and canning till midnight some days.

Daughter Nancy joined the family in 1957. Originally the daughter of Myrtle's sister Celia, Nancy had been born prematurely with a heart defect. With a heavy burden of medical treatment for Nancy and some misfortunes of her husband, Celia let Myrtle and Frank care for Nancy, and eventually to adopt. The family then moved to McMinnville to be closer to Frank's Rex Mobile Home job.

**McMINNVILLE, OREGON.** Frank first got a job as a McMinnville City Policeman, then became a deputy with the Yamhill County Sheriff's office.

Judy remembers that our home was always open to family and others who had nowhere to go or no one waiting for them. Mom would grab another plate, and there was always room somewhere in that house to sit. And we never ran out of food, no matter how many extras we fed. "How did you do it, Mom?"

Frank was forced to retire from the Yamhill County Sheriff's office due to age, and died shortly thereafter. Nancy went south to Los Angeles, Terry moved to Seattle, Frank went to Washington D.C., Brad settled in Dallas, and Judy is still in Rose Valley were in the summer you can catch crawdads and swim in the creek.

**CANCER.** Myrtle was a heavy smoker for most of her life. She was eventually diagnosed with lung cancer, completed radiation treatment and achieved some remission. The year 2000 arrived and Myrtle's cancer returned.

**VALUES AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS.** Myrtle liked to meet with old friends, and she often dropped in to favorite restaurants to do so. She enjoyed reading and writing prose and poetry, a gift she had achieved some mastery in. When asked what the most important things to her were, Myrtle replied that her kids and their kids were among the most precious to her. She took pride in their achievements and worried about their problems. She

hoped for their future. She missed her departed husband Frank and would have given most anything to have him back. She prayed twice a day, morning and night for her family to be safe. She was not sure what was left of a person when they die, but was comforted to have faith in something beyond herself.

**CONFEDERATED TRIBES OF GRAND RONDE.** She liked the Tribe doing more to get education and resources for kids, and donating money to schools and health programs in surrounding communities and elsewhere.

**HOPES AND DREAMS.** As a girl, Myrtle always wanted to grow up and be a wife and mother. She had to quit school after the eighth grade to help with her younger brothers and sisters. She wanted to have at least three boys and three girls. She and Frank took in many foster children over the years and in this her dream of a large and extended family was realized.

She was pretty tired, but she looked forward to her 75th birthday on May 26, 2000. When asked what she wanted for her birthday she replied, "A few more months." And she wanted to see her kids and grandkids do well, be happy, and she hoped to live long enough for the birth of her first great-grandchild. Myrtle's first great-grandchild, Savannah, was born October 2, 2000, eighteen days before Myrtle passed away.

She passed away at 4:45 a.m. on October 20, 2000. She died in her sleep at her home after a long battle with cancer. Myrtle had been kissed "Good Night" by her son Brad (who has shouldered a large part of the daily and weekly care) at about 7 p.m. on Friday night, October 19, 2000, with words of love and "hope you sleep well and I'll be right here if you need me."

Everyone knew (including Myrtle, her kids and extended family) that every day could be the last; that time was very short and every moment was precious beyond description. Every greeting and parting was treated as a possible last and loving "hello/goodbye/I love you," and "I appreciate what you have done for me and with me." Her extended family provided comfort and support, especially in the last few weeks and days, above and beyond what words can express. When the going got tough, the family pulled together.

**THANK YOU FOR THE NEVER ENDING STORY.** The family would like to thank the many family and friends who devoted countless hours of time and energy. You sacrificed so much and helped make mother's life and last days a celebration of life. Myrtle and her family were (and are) the thankful recipients of your unselfish and steadfast comfort, support, and loving participation in this — our shared family experience.

This is a never-ending story, and the next chapter is in the making; all this from the girl from Harmony Road. May the memories and the story last as long as the wind blows and the grass grows.