

## Grand Ronde Tribal Cemetery; Finding Our People



Photos by Justin Phillips



**Caretaker** — Tribal Elder Russ Leno cruises the Tribal cemetery in his handy lawnmower. Leno, who has been the cemetery's caretaker for many years, is being assisted by Tribal member Gene LaBonte to work on identifying lost gravesites and deteriorating headstones. The Tribe's Cultural Resources staff is assisting in the mapping of the cemetery and planning the future burial sites.

■ Tribal member Gene LaBonte begins important identification work with caretaker and Tribal Elder Russ Leno.

### By Justin Phillips

In our cemetery, you can hear the rain hitting the headstones, grass and roadway.

You can smell and almost taste the damp, cold air.

Quietness settles around you, you hear nothing.

You stand there alone.

This is how some of our people who have no formal identification must feel that are buried in the Tribal cemetery. Alone. Few people, if any, know they are there.

This is hopefully all about to change.

Tribal member Gene LaBonte has recently joined forces with Tribal Elder Russ Leno at the Tribal cemetery as his assistant.

LaBonte will be doing basic cemetery maintenance and helping out with funerals. Maybe more importantly, LaBonte will be working on mapping and marking of what might be gravesites with Tribal member June Olson, Cultural Resources Manager.

"We have found three new possible gravesites in the last few days," said LaBonte.

Cemetery staff and volunteers made themselves available during the month of May to document stories remembered about friends and relatives buried in the cemetery.

"I'm hoping this will work," said Leno.

According to Olson, the mapping work was brought about by a local disaster — a far-reaching disaster felt by the whole Tribe.

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"What happened is we had a fire in Harold and Velma Mercier's house," said Olson. "That is where the old cemetery record book was. There was nobody else that had a complete record set."

Olson said she is taking what record information they have gathered and is reconstructing it and updating the record book to include the more recent burials.

"We are also trying to grid out the new part of the cemetery so that it's like a regular cemetery," said Olson. "It's so we know how many people can be buried there."

Tribal members will be able to reserve a spot in the cemetery for themselves or their loved ones.

"It's so we know how full the cemetery will be and when we need to find another place," said Olson. "We are considering not doing a lot of burials in the old historic part anymore."

Olson said she hopes to restore some of the stones in the cemetery.

"Some of the headstones are in really bad shape," said Olson.

They hope to contract a company that specializes

in restoration work. Olson said they first have to contact the families and make sure the work is okay with them.

"It's a long, long process and basically geared at making sure we have space in our cemetery and an organized record book for our new burials and our new section. And at the same time, we

are preserving the historic section," said Olson. "We want Tribal members to contact us in regard to knowing of family members buried in the old section that don't have a headstone."

The staff wants to start marking those areas and making sure they have some sort of identification, even if it is just a cross.

"This is basically a preservation, restoration project," said Olson.

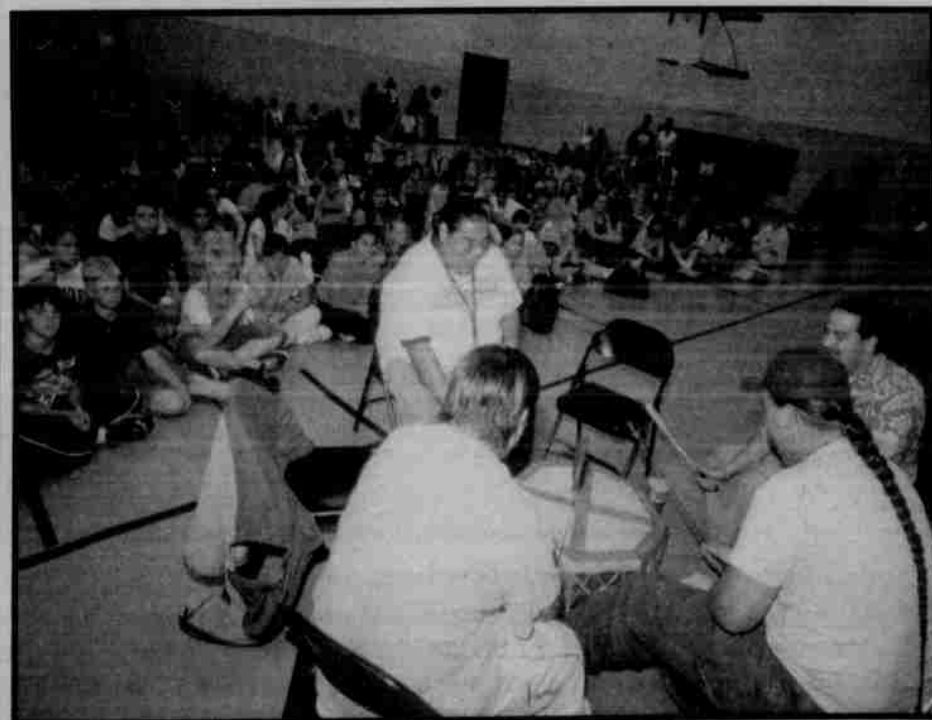
She wants LaBonte to learn all he can from Leno.

"Russ is our greatest resource," said Olson. "He's worked down there for so many years and has so much knowledge."

"I couldn't say how many years I've worked down here," said Leno. "A lot. Doing different jobs down here through the years."

The goal for this whole project is to have everything on record so they have it for future generations. For those of you with any information that may be of help, you are urged to call Russ Leno or Gene LaBonte at 503-879-5525 or to stop by the cemetery. Please help us find and identify our ancestors. Our people need recognition. ■

## Native American Day at Willamina Middle School



Grand Ronde Tribal staff members participated in this year's Native American Day at Willamina Middle School by drumming and speaking to youth.

Pictured here are members of the Eagle Beak drum group (left) and Tony Johnson (right) of the Tribe's Cultural Resources staff. Tribal member Angela Fasana also spoke to the group of young people.

Photos by Peta Tinda