

# honoed



Photo by Justin Phillips

The respect was evidently mutual. Elmer took impeccable care of his horses and never abused them. Never needed a veterinarian, Rosie said, because Elmer knew some of the oldest and most effective traditional Indian remedies and rarely went beyond that realm. He never hunted without a horse, and yes, even fished on horse.

His thorough knowledge of horses, combined with the obvious rapport he had with the animals, attracted attention from outside the reservation. The Portland Mounted Police of old had him on the payroll at one point, training horses naturally. And scores of Warm Springs residents looked to none other than him for the same.

Daughter Janet Tom can remember one particularly epic day when a rodeo contractor offered Elmer five dollars for each and every bucking horse he would test out. Elmer calmly went through 30.

Warm Springs had no rodeo before he arrived. Elmer founded the Warm Springs Rodeo Association and it still goes.

Unfortunately, Elmer preceded the age of multi-million dollar rodeo. But that never stopped him from competing. Klamath Falls, Yakima, St. Paul and even the upper-echelon Pendleton Round-Up served as stopping points for the Elmer express.

"He knew and was known by everyone," said Kimsey. "And he knew every phase of rodeo."

He was, according to many, peerless in saddle bronc riding and bareback (calling it "only eight seconds of work"), and fearless in other events like racing. And nobody seemed to understand the entertainment value inherent in rodeo better than he. Perhaps that is why he would coolly tip his hat to the audience after an eight-second ride, and in the event he got bucked off, enchant them with some cartwheels or somersaults.

"Yeah he was a real hot dog," said Tribal Elder Leon "Chips" Tom, a nephew and good friend of Elmer's. "And he could do it all because he was an amazing athlete."

Elmer Tom's athleticism has evoked folklore. Earning accolades at Chemawa Indian Boarding School, his skill in baseball made for a career at one point, in a stint with Portland Beavers as a first baseman. Logging, "Chips" suspects, gave Elmer the stout build and bulging arms that many recall, and made him a superb hitter.

Son Lee Tom tells stories of his father's homerun antics, when after trotting the bases and approaching home plate, he would, in true Elmer Tom style, mesmerize onlookers with an elegant back flip.

Acrobatics were a pastime for any occasion evidently. Many people remember Elmer's antics during hops-gathering season, when he loved to entertain others by walking, in the manner of tightrope walkers, across the hop vine wires.

None of his children could outrun him, even when he was past 50 years of age. He was always on the ball. In his twilight even, his stout physique persisted.

"I can remember him one day in his 60's, watching

him work," said Rosie. "And his arms were still bulging...they were still so muscular."

His inclination for dramatics and proclivity to clowning around seem to suggest an immodest man. But like anyone who knew him could attest he was resolute, yet never austere, which is truly rare.

"He had us up early every morning," said Rosie. "He kept us in shape, made us jog, had us do a 100 of this a 100 of that."

The reasoning held that if they plumped up too much, the horses would suffer more. And the horses would suffer, because every child of Elmer Tom, like him would spend many a day on horseback.

"He made us work hard," she added. "When we were young he made us ride colts."

Such a regimen nowadays would probably embitter all but the most religious of kids, yet ask any of his progeny of their summers spent riding the range and getting up at sunrise every morning, and not an ounce of resentment escapes. Either they conceal their discontent and suppressed feelings ingeniously or they, like him have come to see the value of those long summers.

All of his children rode and almost all of them possessed the same talents for performing on horseback, enough at least to win major rodeo awards. Lee won the Western States Saddle Bronc Championship in 1974, in addition to making the national finals that year. Leeland made it to the Indian National Finals by the time he was 16 and for five years was the Western States Indian Rodeo Bareback Champion. Janet and Rosie have both been Rodeo Queens and have both been prized Barrel Racers.

Time has refused to dilute the gene pool. Of his countless grandchildren, Justin Tom made it to the Oregon High School State Finals all four years, winning the championship in 1997. ESPN rated him one of the top 10 high school rodeo performers in the country and last year Justin made a trip to the Indian National Finals in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has already been invited to this year's INF Rodeo in Billings, Montana.

Granddaughter Liana Tom is already showing exceptional promise.

Becoming a grandmaster of horses and establishing an elite rodeo gene pool might have taken up a lot of Elmer Tom's time, yet did not prevent him from learning other trades, most of them linked.

"He was a jack-of-all-trades, really," said Rosie.

He furthered his knowledge of rodeo, could cut the horns off of yearlong bulls and even knew how to perform castration. Most of his horseshoes he blacksmithed himself. And if there is such a thing as rodeo arts, then he was involved heavily.

One of those trades through which he quietly made history was silversmithing. He crafted spurs, and did hand engraving for bridles and burette. A number of Elmer's exquisite belt buckles are scattered throughout Oregon, Rosie said, but owners generally won't part with them. A masterpiece also exists — a saddle made almost entirely from silver dollars now rests in the home of some Warm Springs Chief descendant.

Leather working was a definite strength. And he also was reported to be a fine artist.

"He could pick up a crayon and draw a horse from memory," said Janet.

Include welding and auto mechanics in the list, with a story to boot.

"One night we were driving home in our Model-A," remembered Janet. "And the fan belt broke." Elmer asked Kristine for one of her nylons.

"He replaced the fan belt with twisted nylon," she said. "And we actually made it home."

Perhaps his greatest talent was just being a good father to his children and a fine friend to peers.

"His philosophy was 'Get along with everyone,'" said Rosie.

And that he did, apparently. Nobody has anything demeaning to say of him, no harbored resentment.

"He was very even-tempered and very well-mannered," she added. "And he never criticized in public."

"I never saw him curse, or cross," said Chips. "And I



Photo by Justin Phillips

**Winner** — Rodeo hand Cody Barney stands with roping partner Justin Tom after winning the Grand Ronde Tribe's first ever All-Indian Rodeo Championship. Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison presented Barney with the championship saddle in honor of rodeo legend Elmer Tom.

never even heard him say a bad word."

Not even the Termination Act of 1954 could destroy his eternal optimism. All setbacks were temporary, he seemed to believe, though this one in particular "hit him hard" in Janet's words. Though he took it in stride Elmer also never forgot to remind people of their roots.

"He knew and told us lots of old legends about Spirit Mountain," said Janet. "He told us never to be ashamed of our people."

"When he would tell us of Grand Ronde," she said. "He would call it 'God's Country.'"

Like a lot of old cowboys, Elmer seemed to struggle with modernity. But he never fought it and there seems to be a big difference, one that he knew. A Jesse Helms he wasn't.

"My father believed in homemade goods," said Janet. "He thought Pampers and microwaves were making women lazy."

"Dad thought people should know old ways," she continued. "But they should practice the new."

Elmer learned to practice the new, though arbitrarily. His vision failed in later years — one of the biggest challenges ever posed. But a new world opened to him, Janet says. He almost seemed to enjoy "looking" at everything in an entirely different manner.

"His senses became so keen," she said. "While I sat and watched him one day listening to a baseball game on TV. He was so intense and focused. I realized, my God, he knew exactly what was going on."

"It was like he wasn't blind at all." Chips speculates Elmer was one step away from greatness.

"If he had been educated he would have made his mark in the world," he said. "I honestly and sincerely believe he would have made history somehow."

National prominence should have been his in the rodeo ring, but for one problem.

"Why did he never go national?" repeated Kimsey. "I just don't think he knew how good he was."

"He was just a good all-around cowboy." ■

## country.

Points can be deducted for taking off too soon. Another horse rider, dubbed a hazer, chips in by keeping the steer running straight.

### ■ BULL RIDING

Eight seconds on a bucking bull, the bigger and wilder the better, don't use free hand. Any questions?

### ■ TEAM ROPING

As a team event, timing matters in this one. Two guys on horseback chase down a bull in this event. One, the header, tries to rope the horns or neck and turn the bull to the left. This done, the second rider, the heeler, attempts to rope both

hind legs. The run is done once the steer has been secured and the riders' horses face one another on opposite ends.

Points are lost if the heeler ropes too soon, or catches only one leg. Not easy.

### ■ CALF ROPING

A calf races out into the ring, rider gives him a head start. The rider then chases the calf down and ropes him, dismounting to tie the animal up. Three of the calf's limbs must be tied up using a "pigging string." Once tied, the rider throws up his arms and remounts his horse, slackening the rope. If the calf kicks free within six seconds, the run doesn't count. Penalties ensue for chasing too soon.

### ■ BREAKAWAY

An event for women and one based on men's calf roping. The calf is also given a head start. A ribbon is attached to the end of the rope, which in turn connects to the saddle horn. This rope the cowgirl uses to lasso the calf. The calf becomes officially caught once the rope breaks from the saddle horn.

Once again, failure to give the calf adequate time results in penalties.

### ■ BARREL RACING

Rodeo does not consist entirely of roping skills and brute strength. Horsemanship comes into play and barrel racing exemplifies that.

Three barrels are placed in a triangle shape out in the ring. The rider, typically astride an American Quarter Horse, races out and runs a cloverleaf pattern around the barrels, vying for the quickest time possible. Touch the barrels, no problem. Knock over the barrels, five-second penalty. First place can, and will, be decided by fractions of seconds in this event.

*One newspaper article clearly won't do justice to the rodeo saga. Get out there and see it for yourself. And by the way, John Wayne wasn't a cowboy. His real name was Marion Morrison, and he grew up in L.A. ■*