

## NATIVE NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

# Sacred Fire Keeper Steve Vincent Faces Adversity

■ Spiritual couple in Falls City plan to continue despite a lack of understanding.

By Chris Mercier

Appropriately, modernity gives way to old-fashionedness on the drive to Steve and Cindy Vincent's house. Not even a mile outside of Falls City, the venerable paved road eventually turns to gravel and farther on up sits the Vincent sanctuary.

Now typically, one doesn't associate the words "fight" with "sanctuary," in fact a sanctuary is normally a place devoid of emotionally charged activity. But as the story goes and really my reason for coming here, the Vincents fought tooth and nail for the right to stay here and the first duty should be to understand why.

Surveying the place, I don't wonder what drew the Vincents here in August of 1994. Alluring, idyllic and boasting a fabulous vista of the western Willamette Valley from their mountainside, even what would normally be skittish animals feel at ease. Rabbits abound, peacocks lurk around the bushes, chickens maintain the futile pecking order and even a couple of horses roam the lawn. Structures dot the property from a barn to a small guesthouse to a chicken coop, everything basted in earthy crimson.

Steve belongs to the Winnemem Wintu Tribe of Northern California (near Shasta), and Cindy is part Choctaw and Cherokee and used to work in Grand Ronde for the Chemical Dependency Program. Locals will likely know them as a spiritual couple and visitors to their little haven can't ignore the aura of their home.

Whether one places faith in metaphysics or not, the legacy of the property is undeniable. Located uphill from the Luckiamute River, the area served as a passage for a Kalapuyan band of the same name that traveled frequently to the coast. The trail, Steve said, actually starts near Silver Creek Falls and is slightly detectable even in this day and age.

Not surprisingly, the Vincents felt a strong spiritual attraction to the place.

"Olelbes is here," claimed Steve.

Whether the chief Wintu spiritual entity or something else, they were not alone in these sentiments. The previous owners were also a couple, Blackfeet, and maintained a sweat lodge on the grounds. But they had no qualms selling the property to the Vincents, apparently because the woman had a dream shortly before Steve and Cindy arrived to peruse the place. A black bear appeared before her, spoke and revealed that another spiritually inclined couple would show up to take over stewardship of the land.

Steve and Cindy were ecstatic about buying the property and went to great lengths to ensure the spiritual legacy would be continued. They erected a sweat lodge, constructed a pair of teepees, and in an act that ultimately signifies their



**Fire Place** — Steve Vincent, a member of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe of Northern California, has been charged with keeping a sacred fire on his property in Falls City, Oregon. Vincent has suffered harassment from neighbors who don't understand his mission of keeping the fire.

Photos by Chris Mercier

dedication, Steve began a Wintu sacred fire.

The Wintu sacred fire is no ordinary fire and Steve will be the first to say. Selected as Fire Chief for the Wintus by Tribal doctor Flora Jones (who was seen in OPB's *In the Light of Reverence*), Steve does not take the practice lightly. Fire occupies a special niche in his life.

"All over the world," he said. "There are sacred fires...in Europe, Africa, Asia."

A sacred fire, he claimed, may be one of the most common spiritual practices around the globe. He has seen many of them, from Mexico to Greece, where he was invited among firetenders to oversee the sacred flame at Delphi in the Temple of Apollo.

"When you know one fire, you'll know them all," he said. "And they'll know you."

The Wintus already have a sacred fire, on the east side of Mt. Shasta. And it, like others, is a veritable beacon, bringing people from all over for a few days every summer. Building a new one is not taken lightly and Steve had to first ask permission from Jones before going ahead with his own. He still tends the Wintu fire every summer, meaning that this one near their home in no way takes away from his duties to his Tribe.

The fire now sits over looking the valley, safe in its wood-lined circle. Protective colors adorn the posts. On a clear day, even Mt. Hood is visible.

Grand Ronders are starting to take notice. Margo Mercier and Sharmon Neria visit the Vincents to sweat and say prayers. Steve estimates nearly 300 visitors have been up here already, many from other Tribes. For what the Vincents need, this place is perfection. One almost imagines the line "and they lived happily ever

after" to close this little fable.

Enter Murphy's Law.

In 1999, neighbors to the north and to the west filed property disputes and a whole host of troubles ensued. A survey had been done illustrating that their neighbor to the north's property in actuality stretched into the Vincents, the boundary being, of all places, smack dab in the middle of the sacred fire circle. Likewise, the western boundary brought more of the Vincent's property into question.

"Mysterious events" began to unfold following the dispute. Steve and Cindy found the carcasses of rabbits strewn around the boundary lines. One of their geese was killed. A peacock was poisoned and its feathers arranged in the form of a swastika behind their house. The brakes on their truck went out and one day Steve found the wires in his tractor crossed. A can of Red Dog beer, wrapped loosely in a bullet-riddled target, materialized in their mailbox.

Ultimately the timing of the dispute hit hardest, as the neighbors pursued the case after Cindy had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Both neighbors built firing ranges along the boundaries, and shot off day and night while Cindy began recovering from chemotherapy.

Steve recounts one day, when the neighbor to the north got a court order to come on to the Vincent's property and inspect the boundaries. Much to their shock, he walked right through the smoldering fire, ignoring their requests and muttered, "you'll get what land I decide to give you."

The onslaught stunned the couple. In danger of losing their property and facing financial dismay under the burden of legal fees Vincents needed serious help. And they got it, in the form of Lane,

Powell, Spears, & Lubersky, a Portland law firm.

Lee Nusich, who represented the Vincents, said the nature of the case attracted them, enough that, even though the dispute went on for a year, they basically took the case for free.

"When we saw what was entailed," Nusich explained. "We knew there was no way they could pay for it."

After LPSL got aboard, the tide turned and eventually the case was settled out of court.

"This was big victory," Nusich said. "And it feels good to know we saved a sacred site."

Nusich and company tasted the fruits of their labors soon thereafter. The Vincents honored them with a ceremony and a sweat. Over 100 people turned out for that event. Sharmon Neria crafted a stunning beaded certificate for the attorneys.

"Lane & Powell really deserve a pat on the back," said Cindy. "What they did was extraordinary."

Sharmon Neria thinks of the ordeal as a victory for all Native Americans.

"This was a travesty against, not just against them, but against all of us," she said. "We all need that spirituality...that which was ripped away from us years ago."

Nowadays, the Vincents have resumed the life they started. The flames are being stoked again.

"I'll keep the fire going as long as people want," said Steve.

Margo Mercier, who has been friends with the Vincents for nearly a decade, hopes the story opens some eyes.

"I would like our Tribal members to be aware of what other Tribes go through," she said. "And be aware of their rights as well."

"I'm anxious to get back up there." ■