

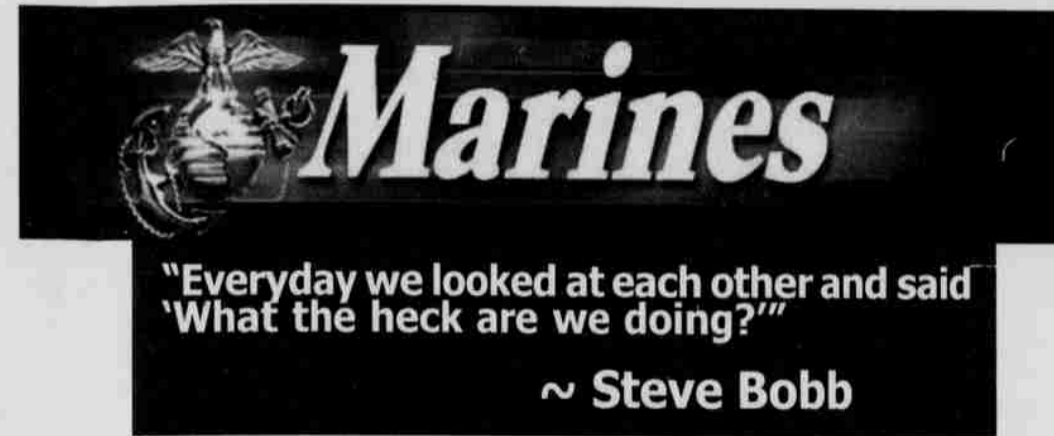
Tribal Member Completes Walk From Table Rock for Honor



▲ Television Interview — Marine Veteran Steve Bobb being interviewed by a Medford TV station reporter for the evening news. Several media outlets in southern Oregon covered the walk's opening ceremony.



Reunited — Medford newspaper reporter and columnist Paul Fattig contacted Steve Bobb just days before the walk from Table Rock to write an advance story. After discussing the fact they had both been in the Marine Corps at the same time they discovered that they had actually been in boot camp together. The old friends shared stories of their experiences and introduced their wives to each other.



Photos by Peta Tinda



Family — Tribal member Steve Bobb finishes the journey from Table Rock hand in hand with three of his grandchildren. Bobb carried the Marine Corps flag with the Grand Ronde Color Guard from the elementary school to the Tribal Governance Center.

Continued from front page — Bobb was ready.

Was Merrill not? No, he too was quite ready, though with a twinge of butterflies. He'd never done anything like this before and the inclement weather offered little encouragement. Merrill took a breath, and glanced around probably not hoping to put the rain jackets into use this early, but knowing he had to. Merrill had his own dedication to make, to the city of his upbringing, the lively, lovely old place we call Eugene. University of Oregon cap, U of O sweatshirt, it didn't take much to figure out whom he rooted for come Civil War week.

"Stop wearing your hood," joked Leno. "Makes you look like a wuss." And then they were off. Cameras clicked away, capturing every first step. Photographers vied for better positions, often getting in each other's way.

Looking out the back of the van, Bobb and Merrill eventually became two specks as we headed north, Salem-bound.

Now I'll make a confession. I wasn't quite sure if they'd make it. When you look at the path before them and take into account nearly 270 miles to traverse, the Table Rock walk looks like a real challenge, more the sort of thing you read of some Dutch adventurer doing in National Geographic. But Bobb and Merrill were living illustrations that day of calm determination. Who knows how much money they would make from their various pledges? Were it only a peso they still would have walked. They were that intent on following

through.

Watching them quickly trek the first mile with only the occasional wince, the prospect of 20 miles a day for two weeks really seemed not only entirely possible, but highly probable.

It wouldn't be easy. The phone calls affirmed that. Merrill experienced some back problems just days into the walk. His feet were also blistered, as his new shoes were not yet broken in. He quickly switched to his old pair. Even Bobb's calloused feet weren't blister-proof. Exhaustion would not relent.

"I felt like crying the first day," Merrill told me over the phone.

The human body remains a living tribute to adaptation and flexibility. The two soon found a rhythm and those 20-mile days piled up one after the other. Yet in their zone they literally took the miles in stride. Within two days, the weather cleared.

The duo kept up and people noticed. Other publications got wind of the endeavor and soon the Public Information Office had a steady stream of callers, all asking the same questions and wanting the same press release. Seven Feathers Casino near Roseburg even graciously put them up for the night. KVAL News in Eugene ran a short piece on them during the nightly news. Tribal Elder Violet Zimbrick called me. Evidently some friends of hers in Palm Springs had read of the endeavor... in The Los Angeles Times.

For those not too familiar with the topography of Oregon, from



Journey's End — Nearly 100 people showed up the Grand Ronde Elementary School to finish the Walk from Table Rock with Steve Bobb. The walk encompassed 265 miles (including 140 miles of I-5) and 14 days. The first 10 days were highlighted by great weather, but the rain finally came on Day 11. Day 13 brought snow just to give Bobb a taste of everything along the way.

Medford to Eugene the route runs rather hilly mountainous, with some notably steep inclines. Eugene rests at the bottom of the Willamette Valley, and there the path becomes undulating at worst. In theory, the last five days from Eugene to Grand Ronde should have been the smoothest stretch and likely would have been, had not March 4 brought a rash of bad weather that worsened into snow the final two days. The Willamette hasn't seen snowflakes this late in the season for many, many moons and it all kind of resurrects that higher authority debate again.

Justin Phillips said he drove by the pair as they ascended Butler Hill, two lone figures without an ounce of flesh exposed to the chill - the only thing identifying them were Bobb's two flags, perhaps a little worn, but unmistakable nonetheless. I myself passed them near Valley Junction on March 8, under virtually identical circumstances, though the duo had doubled, as

Tribal members Jeff Mercier and Travis Stewart had joined the last leg of the journey.

News floated around of a reception for the two upon arrival, though who would show up and when it would happen was anybody's guess. More people joined the march at Grand Ronde Elementary and as the last 1,000 feet wound down a crowd of roughly one hundred fellow trekkers had formed, among them Tribal members, Veteran's and even children. Drummers ducked in near the cemetery, giving the procession a dramatic flair. The snow clearly deterred nobody.

Now everyone in the Smoke Signals office can testify that neither Steve Bobb nor Brent Merrill had planned anything extravagant for their re-arrival. A smiling crowd of onlookers greeted them at the Tribal Governance Center. The lobby was packed with neatly lined chairs and a table decked with cold cuts and savory breads waited.

Bobb and Merrill exchanged hugs and handshakes with almost every soul present, their weathered faces grinning tiredly from ear to ear.

Travis Benoist introduced Bobb and Merrill through yet another ceremony. Tribal Elder Marce Norwest spoke admirably of the two as everyone gathered in the lobby, talking of how the Veteran population diminishes every day and how this walk may be the turning point for the Grand Ronde Veteran's Memorial. Tribal Council Vice-chair Reyn Leno took the podium to announce that Bobb and Merrill needed rest, which is why Council was putting the two up for a night at Spirit Mountain Lodge, all expenses paid.

"I truly believe in this," said Leno. "Many years from now people can look at our memorial and think of Steve and Brent."

Cultural Specialist June Olson discussed the history of the Trail of Tears, noting that more than one walk was made, and from place

other than the Rogue River Valley. Tribes with little relation were all forcibly relocated to the Grand Ronde Indian Reservation back in the 1850's.

"Some had to walk from the Columbia River," she said. "They were forced together even though they didn't speak the same language. It was a harsh walk ...to a place they didn't know."

Both Bobb and Merrill acknowledged that though they too struggled at times with the walk, in hindsight it wasn't all that bad. "Originally we just wanted to get a little exercise and raise a little money," said Bobb. "I never expected this."

He said that beckoning to the surprise congregation before him.

"You know everyday we looked at each other," he admitted. "We said 'What the heck are we doing?'"

"I was just looking for an excuse not to shave for two weeks," said Merrill through newly acquired whiskers. "Actually, I was not so

sure I'd make it a couple of times. But when walking with a guy like Steve...well, he's pretty inspirational."

The two of them were pretty inspirational overall, talking not about themselves but of others. They talked about the Veterans' Memorial for which they'd just raised a large sum of cash. It will be beautiful.

We didn't need to be reminded that this was a walk for honor, to acknowledge sacrifices made in the distant past and near past, all for greater freedoms today. They walked to honor their families, to honor Veterans, and for the Tribe in general.

A tearful Merrill made a dedication to three individuals, a trio of

men who've affected him dearly: Mike Larsen, Merle Holmes and his uncle Tom Bean.

"Most of all, I did this for you Uncle Tom," said Merrill.

The crowd burst into applause, and people lined up to shake hands again. Norwest brought out two Pendleton blankets for the walkers and while smiles abounded and handshakes lingered, Bobb and Merrill glowed. They just shined, ragged and rugged, tired beyond belief and bearing looks on their leathery, weathered faces that were immensely hard to pinpoint.

Come to think of it, those looks were pretty obvious: Satisfaction - pure, untainted, and well-earned satisfaction. There is no mistaking that. ■



WELCOME HOME — Children from the Grand Ronde Tribal Before and After Care showed their support for the walkers by making banners welcoming them home, and walking with them on the last leg of the journey. The banners were written both in English and the Tribal language, Chinuk.



Volunteers — Steve Bobb and his wife Connie (center) are greeted by volunteer drivers David Nelson and Bob Watson (left). Nelson and Watson were part of a group of volunteer drivers (including Bobb's brother Buddy White and his wife Anna, Gary Reibach and his wife Marlie and Norris Merrill) that maintained a support vehicle throughout the walk.