

Elder Feature

Fierce, Proud Man Is A Local Legend

Hubert Mercier continued

Indians. One schoolboy sneaked upstairs to Herman's office and took a peak in the teacher's diary. It read, plain and simple, "I am teaching little savages." Not to be outdone, Hubert and the gang waited until the following Monday to confront Herman on the matter.

"We said to him next Monday 'How's it like to be back with the little savages?' " Hubert remembered. "We tied him up and clubbed him. He tried to quit, but he'd signed a one-year contract."

That year was obviously a tense one.

At that time, the value of an education, particularly an elementary one, meant little and Hubert along with his siblings quit school around the age of 12 or 13. Arthur insisted the boys work, and when the family moved to Taft, they all took up logging, clearing up the coastal forest for an enormous government project called Highway 101. Hubert toiled mainly cutting the logs and moving the material with horses. Horses, he explained, everything was done with horses.

They next set him to driving mules, an experience he cared little for. After a violent episode with Harold, the cause of which is long forgotten, Hubert packed up a batch of clean clothes and headed back to Grand Ronde. At the age of 14, he was already setting out on his own. The walk back took two days.

But Grand Ronde was, in those days, a logging haven, and mills abounded left and right, meaning moderate wages for willing hands. The earlier half of the century not known for astute labor practices, even a 14 year old could find work in what was long considered a man's job.

"As long as you did a man's work," he explained. "They didn't care how old you were. I never did go home."

The \$1.98 he made working nine-hour days was pretty sweet, but more prosperous ventures lay elsewhere. After Harold returned to the area, the two brothers realized the potential in peeling chittum. After visiting Hebo to acquire permits, the Mercier brothers scoured the forests gathering the much-coveted bark that commanded three cents per pound. As two strong men, they had little problem peeling up to 300 pounds per day.

"It was tough," Hubert said, wincing. "But I could carry up to 150 pounds in my pack."

And the \$9 per day was more than quadruple the mill wages, making chittum the most lucrative market around. But chittum, unlike logging, wasn't an ongoing business, and as the two brothers exhausted their option, they eventually returned to the mill. Hubert spent more than a few years at Murphy's mill, the site of a handful of colorful stories, some of them reminders of the difficulties of being Indian in a time and place where prejudice wasn't all that un-

acceptable.

One worker by the name of George had an obvious dislike of Indians and took the liberty of harassing Hubert the morning after some wine drinking.

"I told Harold (Hubert's brother) 'I'm in no mood to be sassed around,'" he said. "I went to the pond to push logs. I knew he didn't like Indians."

The day was a memorably hot one and after Hubert sat down in the shade to cool off, George confronted him, evidently thinking the Indian wasn't working. George made the mistake of cussing at him.

"I took off my glove and made a fist. I said 'George, ain't no living son-of-a-bitch alive that talks to me like that,'" Hubert told me. "George said 'what you gonna do about it?'"

Hubert grinned at me and pointed to the lower left end of his jaw.

"Heh-heh. I hit him right there and down he went," he said. "He got up and I hit him in the same place. He never got up that time. I lifted him up that high when I hit him," Hubert said, laughing and holding his hands apart about a foot to show the distance.

"Murphy came over and said 'What the hell's the matter here?'"

"I said 'Ain't nothing the matter now.'"

Evidently Hubert went and sat down and Murphy made the same mistake George did. He started swearing at the already irritated Hubert, who angrily leapt up and told Murphy to back off.

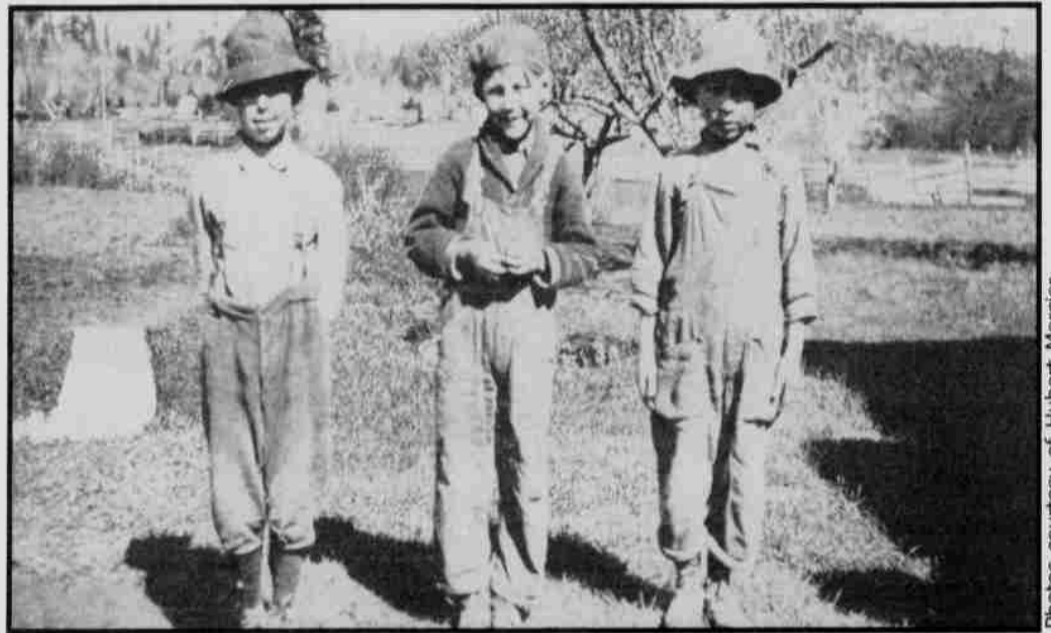
Hubert had broken his hand with the two punches and George (who lost four teeth) never harassed him again. In fact, George never spoke with him again.

Murphy's was to employ both Merciers for a while. Hubert learned more tricks of the trade, like rope splicing and sawing. Eventually the two brothers moved to the Astoria area where they would learn to become timber fallers, that particular segment of logging being difficult to break into. The pair would return to Murphy's.

While they had newfound reputations as timber fallers, their old one still preceded them. One day a new worker yelled and swore at the two, who calmly ignored him. This new worker went to Murphy, whose warning was simple. You got to talk decent to them, he explained to the new hire, else you'll get licked.

Hubert and Harold engaged in other ventures during their youth. For three winters they fished near Siletz, selling their salmon catch and learning just about every way to prepare the fish.

During the early 1950's he made some regular trips to Celilo Falls, before that famous site was drowned. And they made a handful of elk hunting trips to La Grande. Hubert in fact was a no-



Photos courtesy of Hubert Mercier

Days Gone By

— Tribal Elder Hubert Mercier (right) stayed still as a boy long enough for this picture with his brother Harold (left) and Buster Leno (center). After a colorful childhood in Grand Ronde, Hubert (right) began logging after dropping out of school in his early teens. "As long as you did a man's work, they didn't care how old you were," remembered Mercier of his early days of logging.



toriously good hunter. One story exists of a hunting trip deep in the Reservation. Hubert shot and gutted a deer in such a quick amount of time that he didn't realize the animal was still alive until it tried to stand up.

Hubert would go on to marry Martha Hudson at the age of 17, have children and take a shot at running his own sawmill. After divorce and a crooked partner, he gave up that business. After a second divorce, he likes to say, he gave up logging altogether.

If Hubert has made any contributions to Grand Ronde other than through sheer personality, it is through carpentry skills. At last count, more than 25 houses in the area are a direct result of his hard labor, including a number of those in view along Grand Ronde Road.

In 1954, Hubert and Harold made a trip to Mexico, his first and only venture outside of the country. He showed me a picture. In his wallet is a one-peso bill he kept from that trip, now nearly fifty years old, worn and faded.

More than five years ago Hubert cemented his legacy through the famed 'Boomer incident,' a story that produces a gleam in his eye and elicits raised eyebrows from listeners.

Hubert lives in the white house right across Grand Ronde Road from the Health & Wellness Center. Years ago he purchased the property rights to the gravel road that runs by his home, posting a sign that read 15 MPH for people who took that route.

A new neighbor on one of the back lots would routinely speed down the road. His kids would also leave their bikes in Hubert's yard or leaning against the house. Hubert confronted the man on his

speeding.

"I followed him home one day and told him 'the sign says 15 miles per hour. I'd appreciate it if you'd slow down a bit,'" Hubert told me, proudly recounting the story. "He stuck his finger under my nose and said 'I'll drive as fast as I want and there ain't a thing you can do about it!'"

"I said 'I'm sorry to hear you talk that way. I come to you decent, I talked to you decent'" he remembered. "I said 'You son of a bitch if that's the way you want it...' And I stuck my fist under his nose. I poked him in the shoulder and said 'one of us is going to learn something and I don't know which but one of us will.'"

Three mornings later that same neighbor came racing down the road, and Hubert was ready for him. As the man approached Hubert drove his truck across the road, setting up a roadblock. The neighbor glared, opened his door to get out, and jumped back in as Hubert got out of his pick-up and approached. Unfortunately for the neighbor, the driver's side window was down.

"I leaned in and punched him in the face," Hubert said, chuckling.

But the neighbor, also driving a pick-up, jumped the ditch in an attempt to escape. He didn't get very far and Hubert chased him and broadsided the pick-up with his front end.

An embarrassed neighbor promptly called the police, who showed up to take a defiant Hubert to jail. He laughs when telling the story, perhaps proud that an 87-year-old man is still so capable of standing up for himself. Not an ounce of regret pours from his eyes. At 92 years of age almost, you can tell Hubert doesn't regret much. ■