

Tribal Elder Don Simmons, at 60, is a Physical Wond

Simmons continued from front page

"They're wild, you know," he said, scooping up a kitten. "I take them in.

I don't like to hear them out there. They cry they're sickly a lot of times. I had to crawl in the black berry bushes to get this guy," he said, petting the kitten.

"As youngsters," continued Simmons, "We were very active. We just went out. We didn't care about the weather, we didn't care about clothes - we were just rambunctious. Only when it was extreme cold did we stay in. And then we just had to get out."

Don's younger brother Leroy Simmons, who is a manager at Spirit Mountain Casino, recalls that Don was always out in the woods fishing. "He'd go to Agency Creek or Fawn Creek and come back with a knapsack full of fish -50 or 60 trout," said Leroy.

Because he spent so much time as a child outdoors, Don tells me, he developed a deeply ingrained love for the Grand Ronde region.

"I loved it here. I loved the woods. Back then there wasn't any roads through there. That's where I spent most of my time as a kid. It was sort of a coping mechanism," Simmons said. "It was almost like you had to get out of the house to get away from my dad, it was crazy. When he went on a drunk, he went for a month. You didn't want to look in that room he was in, or even smell in there. He'd break every window in the house. It was awful. If it wasn't for my grandfather, we'd had no place to go. He saved us.

My grandfather took us to school, to church, gave us money...one time; he took us to a Portland Beavers game on Vaughn street. It was always good to be in his house, because it was normal. You ate three meals a day. If you was rowdy, you got spanked. Not very often, but you did. I always have good memories of growing up in Grand Ronde. Fond memories. Except the drinking, of course," Simmons said.

Don's grandfather, William Edmund

Simmons, and his grandmother, Suzette Norwest, had a house right by Spirit Mountain they built in 1909. Suzy and his granddad were married their entire lives. When Don's grandfather died, he gave the land to Don's father, who sold it for drinking money. His grandfather also owned land across the river and by Cospers Creek, but it was the same thing. First the land was logged and then sold.

"It was sad because my grandfather loved those places and wanted his grandkids to get them," Don said. "But in the end we never got nothing."

To make ends meet, the Simmons' would often pick hops or prunes or whatever was being harvested at the time.

"They didn't have Hispanics back then, so it was mostly us Native Ameri-

Things like kerosene, for their lamps, and butter, for cooking. "Things you had to have," Don said.

Don's mother did a lot of cooking. "As scarce as the food got, we was raised on good home cooking. We ate a lot of natural foods, whatever was in season. And we always had deer to eat," Simmons said.

Don would go hunting with the old-timers. It was a big event because the deer meat meant a lot to them.

"Those old guys would always shoot a deer, dress it and eat its liver. And not a word was said. It was given to you and you just took it and ate it, because they all did. It wasn't for hunger, it was a ritual," he said. "Those old-timers, they taught me more than my dad," he said.

In 1959, when he was 17, Don joined the Marines. He was in for four years to the day. "It was good for me," Don said.

After he got out of the Marines, Don said, he began to drink more and more.

Don spent most of his time drifting around the West coast, doing jobs as a roofer and getting by however he could. He was married twice and divorced twice. Alcohol was a constant setback.

"I drank for damn near thirty years," Don said. "It was rough."

Don went to jail several times over the years. He was almost on the border of going to the big house down in California.

"As crazy as it seems, I almost wanted to be locked up...to clear my head," he said. "You can't clear your head if all you're doing is drinking."

Eventually he wound up on Seattle's Skid Road, living in cheap hotel rooms, or his car if he had one. He worked in part-time labor pools for money, and hung out in seedy bars. He drank the cheapest wine he could find.

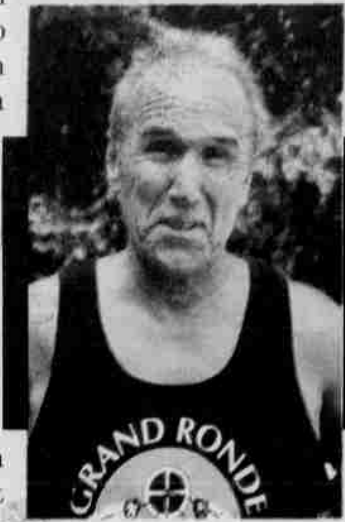
"Nothing ever lasted," Don said. "I'd get a good job, but somehow I'd blow it. It was always such a letdown, so I would just drink more," he said.

"One day," Don said.

"I was laying up under a bridge in Seattle, drunk. I was drinking Thunderbird, that's what I was down to. I had three quarters of a bottle...I looked up and saw the Space Needle. I said 'I can't do this anymore,' I poured out the Thunderbird and went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. That was the last time I drank. Three quarters of a Thunderbird, I poured out. It was April 5, 1988. I call it my AA birthday."

This time, Don did all the right things. He went to AA meetings, got a sponsor and began to recover.

He sobered up and felt better than he had felt in his entire life. His whole life changed. He was happier. His health started to improve. Now, he doesn't drink, doesn't smoke and looks forward to each day. "I'm healthier now than in any other time in my



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~ Tribal Elder Don Simmons

cans who did the pickin'. We stayed in cabins. Actually, it was pretty nice. On your time off, you could play cards, or there were boxing matches, or you could just hang around. But it was hard work. Tough on the hands. If you didn't have gloves, which we didn't, it would turn your hands this sort of nicotine brown color," he said. "Hops grow high up on a vine and are kind of soft and fluffy. You put them in these big bags and try to keep the leaves out. We would work all day, till it was too dark to work. We didn't make a hell of a lot, but it was okay."

Other times he and siblings would collect bottles to make money.

"We'd take a sack and walk these roads all around here and pick up bottles. None of the roads were paved back then. We'd trade them in at Speck's. It's still there, but it's called Seaway now."

They would give the money they earned to their mother, and she'd buy things they needed.



Photo courtesy of Janet Simmons

Simmons Family 1949:— The Simmons' children in Grand Ronde, 1949. Left to right are: Donald, Claudia, William, Sampson, Leroy (being held), and Walter.