

## Grand Ronde Hosts Traditional Name-Giving Ceremony

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attendance, led some of the songs.

The ceremony could have taken place at the Warm Springs Reservation, where traditions such as the name-giving ceremony have been honored unbroken for centuries, but We-la-lik said that his father, Tribal Elder Merle Holmes, had insisted that the ceremony take place here in Grand Ronde.

When he was deciding whether to have the naming ceremony, Taaw-lee-winch told him, "Make his name official." When he was deciding whether to hold the ceremony in Grand Ronde, delegations from other Tribes told Holmes, "Let us know and we'll come."

Merle Holmes has for 12 years been part of the Medicine Society, a group that continues to honor these traditions. The group also leads and participates in funerals, first fishing and hunting successes and other traditional milestones.

"I know it was very important for him to bring it here," said We-la-lik.

"I attend so much stuff at Warm Springs and at Yakama," said the Elder Holmes. "At Warm Springs, if they have a young man or woman going away to war, they have a ceremony. When they come back, they have a ceremony. We don't have them here ... but I wanted to see if the people here were interested enough. I thought I'd bring an aspect here to see if people were interested."

By one count, 160-180 people were interested. They filled the Community Center cafeteria to overflowing for this event. It started before noon on the last Saturday in February, and continued until nearly midnight.

As the ceremony got underway, community member Laverne Hosford congratulated Holmes and said, "I hope you've started something."

"I like to see this sort of stuff because it's traditional and there isn't much of it going on anymore," said Mel Holmes, nephew to Elder Merle Holmes and cousin to We-La-Lik. "It's a good learning experience for me like for a lot of Grand Ronde members. When you have a community involved," he added, "there's a higher probability that others will learn."

Elders from the Warm Springs, Umatilla and Yakama Tribes performed songs and told stories in the beginning. A cafeteria-style meal followed with traditional meats and fishes, berries, roots, salads and fruits. Adults stood in long lines that snaked around the tables and chairs while young children ran around with their own traditions of celebration.



**Shared Laughter** — Tribal member James Holmes received his traditional name, We-la-lik, during the first naming ceremony in countless years in Grand Ronde. Behind him is Warm Springs Medicine Man, Taaw-lee-winch, formerly known as Larry Dick, who performed the ceremony.

Following the meal, the tables were put away and chairs consigned to an outside circle while many set up for the presentation of gifts.

"Watch how things are laid out on a trail," said Taaw-lee-winch.

Blankets and quilts were laid out on the floor first. They covered the entire area where all the gifts eventually were placed. Many place settings went down next, followed by large salad-style bowls that eventually were filled with home-canned salmon, berries, and cereals. Cans of coffee accompanied each place setting, then salmon jerky, followed by towels and wash cloths, socks, straw mats, skins, shawls, bottled water, then fruit.

"My dear relatives," said Taaw-lee-winch. "Witness the beginning of a name-giving."

The process continued with many speaking about the family, the ceremony and the future. It involved loading We-la-lik with blankets

— they were spread out over his outstretched arms — so that others of the family's choosing would come up to him, honor his newly given name, and receive a gift from the family.

Taaw-lee-winch gave the instructions: first to say the new name: We-la-lik, and then say your own name; take a gift from We-la-lik (a blanket, for example), and then give a gift.

The traditional met the modern in other ways.

Yakama Elder Julian Pinkham whose grandchildren are Grand Ronde Tribal members, told a touching Indian family story. The home-smoked jerky and canned salmon sat alongside of cans of Folgers coffee.

But for Elder Merle Holmes, the name-giv-

ing was an addition to modern life, not a contest between the two. "Most of us today have nicknames and this has no effect on our payroll signature or anything else. It's something above and beyond."

We-la-lik, 36, who works in Bellevue, Washington as a Provider Relations Representative for PacifiCare, the insurance company, called the community support, "Overwhelming. It's a great day, today."

We-la-lik has taken part in Medicine Society events at the Warm Springs Reservation, so this was the third or fourth time he had seen such an event.

"I think I'll still walk the same after it's over, but there is some spiritual fulfillment in doing this," he said. "I feel like I've taken part in something meaningful."

His brother, David, an actor and set builder in Los Angeles, was unable to attend because he was involved in a play set to open the day after the naming, but if he wanted a naming ceremony, too, said his father, "We'd put together a giveaway for him."

The giveaway is the key to all this, according to Merle. "In the old times when things were really hard, when they had those giveaways, they gave away everything they had. That was how important this was."

Among the giveaways, the Holmeses saved the best for the Tribe's oldest, Elder Nora Kimsey, 95. The Circle of Life Pendleton blanket had a message on a sewed in piece that read: "In honor of all Tribal Elders, the wisdomkeepers who are charged with handing down teachings and spiritual direction so the children better understand their responsibility to the universe and the creator."

Another "highest honor" blanket, this one produced in a limited edition, went to Wasco Band Chief Nelson Wallulatam.

For memories, none topped the moment when We-la-lik — his arms outstretched like a scarecrow, the blankets being piled on — sank under the weight.

"It got pretty warm in there," he said later.

And for tenderness, there was a beautiful moment when the naming was over. Merle Holmes' good heart is none too healthy, and he had been working tirelessly on this project for three months.

"I think he can finally relax," said We-la-lik.

After a whole afternoon spent on the naming part of the ceremony, as much time and effort went into a night of Medicine dances. Without cameras or reporters, the evening was left to the sacred. ■



**Wasco Chief Nelson Wallulatam**



**Tribal Elder Merle Holmes**

Photo by Brent Merrill

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