

Elder Feature

93rd Birthday Party Brings Tribal Elder To Town

By Ron Karten

When Tribal Elder Elsie Cummings, of Tacoma, turned 93 recently, her grandson, Randy Dugger, invited her and his mom, Dolores Dugger, to the casino for a little celebration. Dugger is a Tribal member and Director of Guest Services for the Spirit Mountain Casino.

"It was real nice," Cummings said. "We had champagne."

To set the stage correctly, Cummings is no shrinking-with-age violet. She is still quite active. She loves to dance and at our meeting was anticipating meeting a new Mr. Right.

Here's how the discussion went:

"She would go dancing every night if she could," said daughter Dolores Dugger. "She's looking for a boyfriend."

"Oh, I am not," said Cummings. "Well, just somebody I could go out for dinner with or dancing." Then she added, "I've been taken for sixty or seventy."

She also is a devoted Seattle Mariners fan. And not just a passive fan. "They got rid of all their good players," she said during the interview. "I turned them off the last two times I watched them."

She also is a fan of Northwood antique dishes and what she calls 'Little Mudmen.' These are Chinese figures made out of mud. She is so attracted to Asian arts and antiques that she wonders if somewhere in a past life, she was Asian.

"We go antiquing once a month," said Dugger, who lives nearby her still independent mom.

She does watercolor painting and crocheting, too. She loves flowers. She worked for awhile at a cannery and also at a bulb ranch. She studies history.

THE FAMILY STORIES

Looking back, Cummings' grandmother was Sarah Hudson. The Hudsons, Cummings said, were big in Friday Harbor. (The Mitchell Bay Band of Indians lived there.) "We had buggies with the fringe on top," she said.

Sarah Hudson was Kalapooia, according to her grandson, Randy Dugger, and met William Jones, a Lummi, at the Chemawa Indian School in Salem. They had many children. Later, she divorced Jones and married his brother, according to Dugger, and then died while still young after a battle with tuberculosis.

"I remember her but I wish I had a picture of her," said Cummings.

In 1954, when the Grand Ronde Tribes were terminated by the federal government, she remembered looking without luck for the records of her grandmother.

The Grand Ronde Tribal Cultural Resources Department, repository of the Tribe's photographs and artifacts, has as yet no record of Sarah Hudson.

Following Hudson's death, said Randy Dugger, "there was some sort of family disagreement over her estate that sent everybody in different directions. So, I think that she didn't see her relatives a lot." Not, at least, until Restoration.

She grew up on McNeil Island and in Roy, Washington. "Her father worked for the U.S. government, so

they lived in white communities," said Dugger.

Hudson's children included Cummings' mother, Grace Jones, and an uncle, Bill Jones.

Cummings recalled that her mom attended the Chemawa Indian School in Salem.

During her early life, Cummings lived on McNeil Island. When Cummings was very little, she said, "My father took us away from my mother. Kidnapped us." She recalled two separate incidents.

"He took us and put us into the Cushman Indian School (in Tacoma). Elsie was less than five years old at the time. She was separated from her brother at the school, she said, and "I



Tribal Elder Elsie Cummings

would cry when I went to bed."

Her daughter recalled, "She had nightmares for years. When somebody would knock at the door, she'd run into the clothes closet and hide. She was afraid (her father) was coming back."

Cummings said that her brother broke a leg at the school, and that every chance the siblings got, they would meet secretly "around the corner and love each other."

A few years later, her father took the children again. This time, he dropped them with a family on McNeil Island.

The feds ran a prison on the island at the time, and by then, Cummings was six or seven. She remembered an attempted prison break "through the orchards and down to the beach."

"The sirens went off and us kids saw the body from the beach," she said. The prisoner had drowned in his attempted escape.

Later, in her early teen years, Cummings and her brother shared the pitching for a local baseball team. "There were not enough boys," she said, explaining her participation.

Dolores Dugger recalled that her mom used to take lunch in old lard buckets, and from time to time, she showed up to school with a bucket full of lard.

Cummings recalled few meaningful Indian experiences in her early life. "I don't think I knew any (Indians)," said

Cummings. Well, excepting her aunt Marguerite Horsfall (known as 'Babe'), who belonged to the Steilacoom Tribe.

Cummings married first in 1927 at the age of 15 to Cecil Webber. Webber was Dolores Dugger's father. Cummings left him in 1931, though the family stayed in contact over the years. In 1935, she married Frank Goodwin, whose grandfather was the first County Commissioner of Pierce County in Washington.

Goodwin is the grandfather that Randy Dugger remembers best. "My father was in college... I spent a lot of time at Grandma's house when mom needed to work and dad needed time to study."

"I got to do a lot of stuff with my

her daughter recalled.

Charlie — who managed a lumber mill in Roy, Washington for Weyerhaeuser after he lost his hearing and left the medical field — was a straightforward kind of guy. The second time he came to see Cummings, he said, "I'm comin' a courtin'." And twenty three years later, when he was dying, he said, "We had a pretty good 23 years together, didn't we?"

"I wish I had told him that it was the best 23 years of my life," said Cummings.

RESTORATION IN THE LIFE OF ONE FAMILY

Since Restoration, Cummings has joined family at Grand Ronde powwows and other events.

It also provided the impetus for Cummings to search for her family roots.

"She used to talk about her Indian background," said Randy Dugger, "but she didn't have a lot of detailed information. We knew we were part Indian and we knew a little about the Lummi side of the family."

"In the late 1950s, she was looking for her Indian heritage," said Dugger. "I remember when I was nine, we had some conversations about establishing relations with the Grand Ronde Tribe."

Cummings knew that possibilities were afoot.

"But there weren't any records available," said Randy Dugger. "We had lost touch with the Jones family. It had gone its own way."

"We didn't reconnect with any of them until the late 1980s. Through a series of coincidences, we got a hold of Tom Jones (Cummings' first cousin), who was working for the Tribe at that time."

"We had scattered records of her enrolled at Chemawa, and in BIA records, but the challenge was to connect all of the dots. The BIA office in Bellevue was not an easy trip. You had to drive to the office and ask to see the files."

"When she finally got a hold of Tom, he was able to give her copies of a lot of records that she was missing. That was truly a big moment for her. When we went on that search, it was something that my brother initiated, an attempt to help her fill in some gaps that she really wanted to know but hadn't been able to do on her own."

Tom Jones's funeral was the first time that Cummings got to meet a lot of the members of the Jones family. "My grandmother had photos that they didn't have. There was a lot of sharing and reconnecting at that time."

"I hope she conveyed how proud she is to have reconnected," said Randy Dugger. "The financial help has meant a lot in her quality of life. She's been very grateful and very proud."

Today, thanks to the Tribe, she said, her life is much easier. She recently had successful cataract surgery and is looking forward to life at 100 and beyond.

She attributed her longevity to God, but her daughter asked her the question in another way. "What do you attribute your long life to?" she said, and then finished the question to the reporter: "other than being spoiled rotten by husbands who adored her." ■