

## Tribal Elder Feature:

# Tribal Elder A Leader And A Legendary Rebel

DEAN continued  
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the races, and was remembered for having gone out once in such terrible weather that a photo of him cresting a wave reportedly ended up in *Field and Stream* magazine.

## The Rebel

At the time of the races, Dean was friendly with the father of a man who later in life would police the forests where Dean and his crew worked. Despite run-ins with Dean, whom he only knew as Running Bear, Skip Bailey called Dean a friend.

Dean continued to use the name, *Running Bear*, for himself when he went into the cedar business.

"I never knew his name was Dean for years," said Bailey, who recently retired as a Federal Law Enforcement Officer at the Hebo office for the U.S. Forest Service. "I met him at the Dory races, and fishing. My dad knew him before I did. I kind of met him through my dad and fishing... I was a teenager then."

"Word of mouth" at the Forest Service brought Bailey into contact with Running Bear. "All of a sudden, somebody's been removing firewood or whatever it might be. All of a sudden, there's a lot of cedar bolts or debris from cutting cedar, remnants along the roadside.

"It looks like Running Bear's been there," was the refrain that Bailey recently remembered.

"Back then, there were quite a few doing it, but he was definitely one of the ones you'd hear quite a bit about."

"I got blamed for all the cedar stolen in the state of Oregon," said Dean.

"He was known to go to a tavern now and then, known to brag a bit about how expensive it was for him to get it out," said Bailey. "You had to read between the lines a little there."

"With him and I, that was pretty much it. By the time I got into law enforcement, he was getting out. In passing, he told me one of the old tricks: they weren't allowed to fall cedar snags to make bolts. They had to be on the ground before we could issue a permit (for them to take the wood).

"It was an old Indian trick, if that's the term: they would load nice standing cedar with dynamite. They'd wait for a big windstorm and then tip those over (by detonating the dynamite), and then they were on the ground. Supposedly, nobody was wise enough to figure that out. Then, they could legally buy it because it was on the ground. That (trick) stands out the most in my memory."

"When he got out of it, the law enforcement started getting strong. It was probably a good thing he got out when he did. In those days,

they'd charge triple stumpage, three times the market value; now it's a felony and you go to jail.

"Then, it was more of a pain in the butt. Now, it's a serious thing because you can't get old growth cedar. It's really rare."

Also among tales from the far side of the law came those about Dean's hunting style.

"We used to go camping in Burns," said grandson Mike Colton, (Whisler's son) "and hunting's why we went."

"He'd go with the spotlight." (It is illegal to use a spotlight for hunting deer.) "Last time I went hunting with him, Dad said, 'Don't go spotlighting with grandpa.' Right after (Dad's) headlights were out of sight, Dean said, 'Ready?' and we were off."

Not all Tribal members look askance at extra-legal hunting. "You don't mess with an Indian's food," said one.

Even Dean's daughter, Jackie, got in on it. "It was a big deal to go out spotlighting with him. It was an adventure. It was something that was a given because we had always done it."

And a story circulates about a friend of Dean's, one time Tribal Council member Fremond Bean, now deceased, who is said to have shot a deer from his open kitchen door (also likely illegal) when guests in the house said they were getting hungry. He cleaned the deer on the spot, cut steaks and dropped them into flour, and within the hour, everybody was eating pan-fried steaks.

It was a different world, then, said Dean. "Until I started with Restoration, I didn't know I was different. It was all just people."

## On the Tribal Council

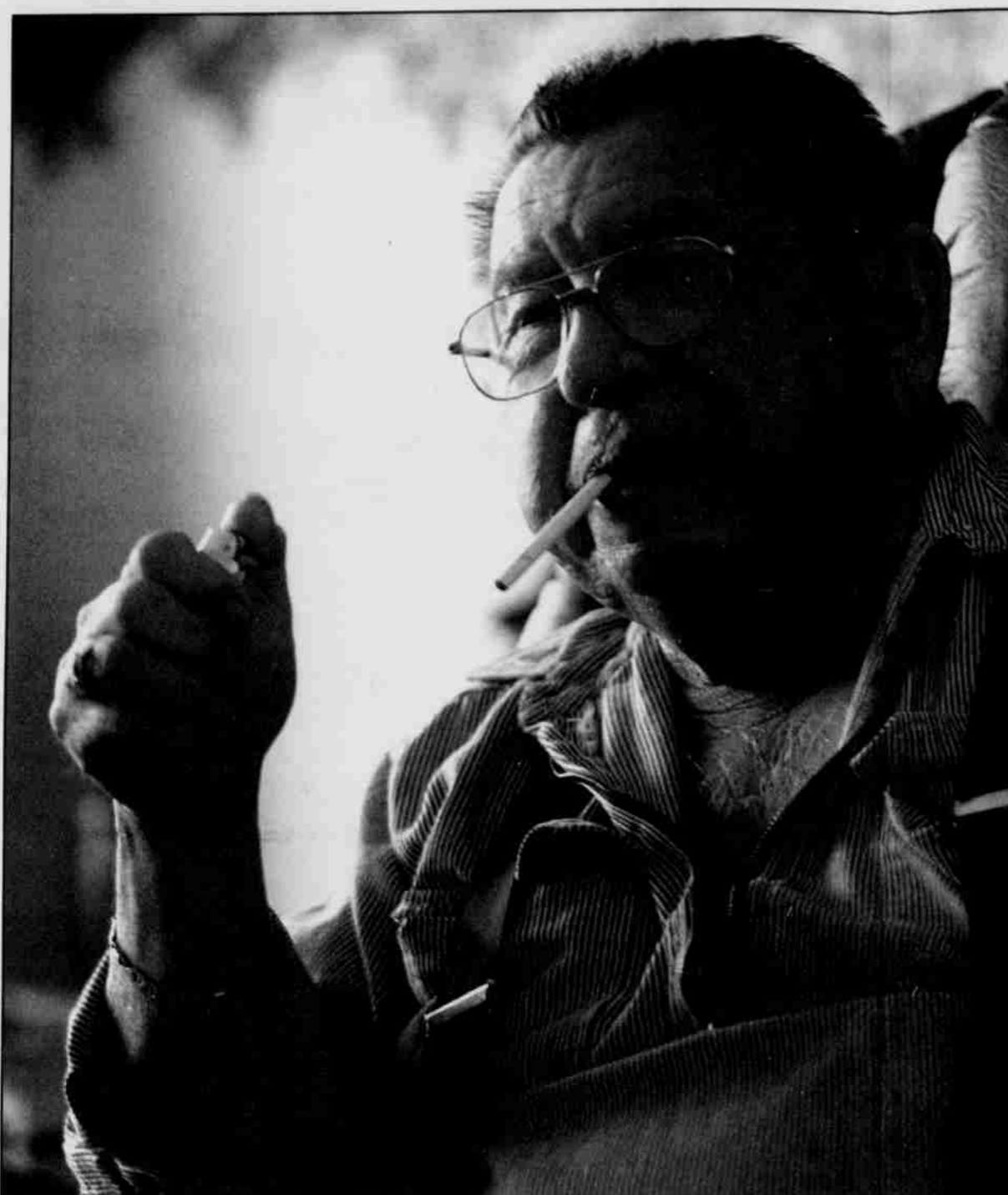
Running side by side with Mercier's sense of the way things ought to be was a temper that got him in trouble from time to time. Following a particularly virulent outburst at a General Council meeting, the Tribe required him to go to anger management classes if he was to continue to attend Tribal Council meetings.

"Oh yeah. I used to be a hot-headed son-of-a-bitch," he said. "I've really cooled down now."

Through a counselor at the Health Clinic, Mercier said he learned what was making him angry: "Bhagwans!" Dean often calls Tribal Council members, "Bhagwan wannabees" after the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a man running a so-called spiritual center in Wasco County until he was run out of the country.

He also learned "to look at both sides of the picture." While nobody is yet nominating him to head the United Nations, he said he values the lessons even as he continues to speak his mind.

Dean was part of Tribal Council



Photos by Toby McClary

Some of the many faces of Dean Mercier.

for 12 years before Restoration and was Tribal Chair at the time of Restoration.

He was around when the Tribal office was the 20'x24' railroad building. In 1985, his last year on the council, he was Vice Chair.

It was also a world where officialdom held a lot of the keys to a better future for Tribal members, the Tribe and the community, and some say it took a Dean Mercier to get things moving.

"I thought every Tribe should have a Dean Mercier," said Tribal Elder and former Chair Kathryn Harrison, who served on Tribal Council with Dean in the early to middle 1980s. "He was a real good watchdog. One specific thing I remember: when we first put our budget together and sent it to the bureau, a BIA guy came down to talk with us about the budget and when he finally got around to it, it was unacceptable. We would have to do it over."

"Dean spoke up and said, 'I'd like to know why.' It took a long time to put it together. He just wanted a good answer and why we couldn't

get the things we asked for.

"You know Dean's flowery language," she said. "Well, he put it pretty strongly. By gosh, we ended up having it."

On that subject, Dean said that Marvin Kimsey deserves credit. "Marvin (Kimsey) was good. To me, Marvin was Restoration."

So, when he starts in about those "Bhagwan wannabees," he's complaining about a job he's still passionate about.

"When we were living in Amity and the Tribe was involved in the Restoration meetings," said Whisler, "he called me. 'You need to get out here and work for your people,'" he said. "I went out from '76-'83 and worked for Tribal Restoration," she said. She was elected Secretary of the Tribal Council.

Having served on the Tribal Council when the only secret meetings were Executive Sessions, Dean, now on the outside, objects to the "behind closed doors" attitude says he in the modern day Tribal Council.

"When it comes to Tribal Fund



Photo by Marty George



Reunited—Grandson Mike Colton rekindles ties with Dean at Bruce Lattin's recent retirement party at Spirit Mountain Casino.

dollars, every member should have a say," he said. "I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but that's how I feel.

"I'm proud of that darn casino," he said, "but I'm ashamed of some of the things that have gone on there since it was started.

"People sue their own Tribe, and for what reason?" he asked. "I think our money can be spent better than on hush money." He refers here to out-of-court settlements to which the Tribe has agreed. "Indian has to support Indian," he said. "The good with the bad. Not turn your back on each other."

On the question of Tribal membership, Dean opposed the current blood quantum regulations. "The way things are going, they're going to self-destruct," he said. "You have to change the Constitution and do away with blood quantum. It's going to do itself in. We're down to one-sixteenth now. Where are we going to go?"

On the other hand, he concluded: "I'm out of it for so long now, I don't know what the history of it is. See. I wouldn't want to speculate. You have to go to somebody who knows. I can't even hold my family together."

"The grandkids also used to 'cut wood for him for a dollar," said Mike. "We'd go deliver it and go to the store and spend it on soda and candy bars. That was the best thing on earth."

And the feeling was mutual.

## The Next Generations

"I know people that hate the ground I walk on," said Dean at one point in regard to his plain-spokenness, and at another, he seemed to explain himself when he

added that all he believes his talk is about is "common sense."

For Mike Colton, now 34 and an Assistant Manager of Slots at the Spirit Mountain Casino, "Grandpa was the kind of guy, either you love him or you hate him, and sometimes you love to hate him. He's the kind of guy who is what he is. He doesn't care if you like him or you don't like him. And I respect that.

"If I talked out of turn (around the kitchen table)," said Mike, "he told me to 'rest my lips.' I tell my children that now.

"My dad's that way, too. I didn't have a chance. I was going to be that way, too."

For more than a decade, Dean's grandsons, Mike and Doug Colton spent summers at their grandfather's house. "My mom would drop us off every day on her way to work," said Mike.

The time that the boys spent with their grandfather left plenty of memories.

"When we were real little (he meant 6-7-8 years old)," said Mike, "he'd race us to the fence. It'd take us a long time before he'd get up and do it, but when he did, he beat us. I laughed when he said he'd beat us. I said, 'there's no way,' but he's pretty quick with them little legs."

Dean and Christina were in Hawaii at the time of the funeral, a fact that drove a wedge through the family.

Some two years later, just recently, Mike Colton had a dream that told him it was time to talk to Dean again. He ran into Dean during Bruce Lattin's recent retirement party.

"I walked over and sat down," said Colton. "I asked him, 'How you doing?' He said, 'I'm still here. Put another X on the calendar.' He asked me how I was doing. I said,

There was a time when the Willamina High School baseball team fielded three of his grandchildren in starting infield positions: Mike behind the plate, Doug pitching and "Jimmer" Bruckner at first.

"That was a proud moment for Dean," said Christine.

"When I look at (Dean) now, he's little," said Whisler, "but when I was a child, he was much bigger. He was everything to me.

"I can remember if anything went wrong at home or at school, my dad would fix it."

In turn, trust was a big issue with Dean.

"He had to know that we were telling the truth," said Whisler, who recalled one high school afternoon at *Dairy Queen* when Dean unexpectedly dropped in. "Later, he asked if I had been at school that day." She explained that she got there right after school. "He checked with school, but after that he trusted me with everything."

Family relations soured at the beginning of 2002 at the death of Dean's first wife, Jerry, the mother of his three children—Harold Dean Mercier, Cheryl Ann Carl and Jackie Whisler—but until that time, Mike Colton said, "I'd bring him the first deer I killed every year."

The family was in bed when the 1997 fire came on in the middle of the night, all except Dean's mom, Velma, who was up saying her rosary at the time. "We all went out with nothing on," said Christine.

That 1931 radio went up in flames, as did Indian baskets, two pedal sewing machines, original photographs from the Trail of Tears. Velma had a silver dollar collection, and along with a silver pot in the kitchen, they melted in the heat.

"Except," said Dean, "there was a little metal box that held the rosary that wasn't even touched. (After the fire) it was like new."

Make no mistake, Tribal Elder Dean Mercier IS Grand Ronde. His colorful life just adds to his legend. When we take time to thank our Elders, don't forget "Running Bear." ■

"I'm still here. Put another X on the calendar." I said, "We have a lot of catching up to do. I told him I missed him. He told me he missed me, too."

"The tears were running down (Dean's) face," said Whisler.

The upshot was, "I owe him a ride in the mountains," said Colton. "I told him I'd give him one."

"He's got a tough exterior," said Colton, "but he's a soft guy."

Dean and Christina Mercier's house is about as centrally located in Grand Ronde as it gets without setting up shop right in the middle of the pow-wow grounds. In fact, for years until recently, Tribal pow-wows were accompanied like clockwork by the Dean and Christina Mercier pow-wow party in town. The place had long been a museum of life in Indian Country when fire took away many of the pictures, the artifacts, the memories of a Tribe's rebirth and the Tribal family central and essential to Grand Ronde.

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