

## Tribal Elder Feature:

# Tribal Elder A Leader And A Legendary Rebel

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**Editors' Note:** *Smoke Signals* presents this extended Elder Feature of Dean Mercier, over the years one of Grand Ronde's most colorful, influential and outspoken Elders. We have let Dean use his own language to tell about his life and beliefs, and while on one hand we caution our readers that when it comes to language, Dean has developed a style of his own, we also believe strongly that this language and these experiences are invaluable windows to our past. It has been almost a year in the works. Let us know what you think.

make a symphony out of everyday swear words and call out the "Bhagwan wannabees" on the Tribal Council at a moment's notice, a man with a 70-plus year history in town, and the battle scars to prove it.

Dean Mercier has been a tough guy his whole life.

Still, when cousin Jeff said that he needed to be in the company of Merciers that day, and among dozens of Merciers in town, he had chosen Dean's place, Dean's face melted. Not a lot. Just enough to see.

In the company of a Mercier.

This tradition of welcome is as old as Indians and you see it or hear it from one end of Grand Ronde to the other. It's a point of pride. It goes without saying.

"In the old days," said Jeff, in the middle of reminiscences, "your mom always had cinnamon apples cooling or something. I remember, but I was just a little guy, five or six years old, bringing dishes back and forth."

Dean remembered the family's radios and televisions in the same context. Velma (Hudson Mercier, Dean's mom) would cook for everybody when they came over to watch. "Mom. She loved to cook."

This day, Christina carried on the tradition with food and drink for all who enter. And Dean drove home the point that it's an insult to turn down an offering.

Then the conversation went to the radio in the house, back in the day. "The radio was one year younger than me," said Dean.

"1931," he said.

They talked about the Sparkle oil heater, Jeff saying how "Hube (Tribal Elder Hubert Mercier, Dean's uncle, who also had his place in a rocker in Dean's and Christina's living room) would keep the heat down, and Gram would ask Dean to turn the heat up," so Dean would ask, "Where's Hubert?" and somebody would say, "Outside," so Dean would say, "OK, I'll come over." With Hubert outside, Dean would come over, take the cover off and set the dial up, then put the

cover back on so the heat was up but on the outside, when Hube came back in, it still looked like it was set on "low."

"Gram and Hubert loved to watch wrestling," said Christina. "Remember when we used to try to trick them and say that wrestling was not on tonight, so we could watch a movie?"

Then Hubert would come over and ask why they weren't watching wrestling, and Christina would say that it's not on, and Hubert would say, "It's on on my TV."

And then, the story circled around to include Tribal member Toby McClary, also a Mercier and a *Smoke Signals* staffer, who had been over earlier in the day to take photographs for this story, and tape

It is a sometimes swashbuckling story of great successes and painful setbacks, of life fully lived in a world that Dean took on with a famous stubborn streak that once resulted in a dentist pulling the wrong tooth or Dean telling his dad to hold on to the headboard while he used brute force to pull a painful catheter out of his father's body — all set against the backdrop of Tribes being yanked back and forth by a federal government that looked on its legal obligations to Indians as matters of political expediency, in a rural outpost more or less on its own as a social entity.

He comes out of times when the whole village really did raise the children. "The Merciers were a big family," said Dean's daughter,

nine, 10, 11. I was doing chores when I was big enough to walk. The damn old chickens," he said. "I hated those chickens then, but they showed me responsibility."

He drove a truck when he was 10, he said, working for his dad, Harold Mercier, who always wore a red hat, and uncle Hubert, now 93, who were partners in the logging business.

When Dean Mercier was a child, he suffered with polio for a number of years, though it never crippled him in any physical way.

"A lot of people around that time had it," he said. "It took around four or five years getting over it."

But it opened the door to Dean's famous temper. "A county nurse took me in front of the class. She

was trying to take credit for helping me. I told her it was B.S. I almost got kicked out of that class. I never took bull shit from anyone."

Even his aunt Eula (Hudson Petite) got her marching orders one day when she was teaching a class Dean was in. "She thumped me on the head," he said.

Somebody was throwing spitballs at her, he said, but Dean wouldn't tell who did it, which is why he got thumped.

"I got mad and went home," he said. "Dad came in and I really hammed it up. He went and told Eula, 'You don't want to be thumping my boy like that.'"

Dean had a younger sister, Beverly Ann, with Down Syndrome. As a result, he said, he'd always had a compassionate streak. He felt protective — of his sister and others.

In his early years, the local grade school in concert with the Fairview State Hospital, decided it would be educational to take the kids to Fairview, to get to know some of the kids there.

Dean had become friends with a boy named, Willie, at Fairview. Willie had a disease that caused his head to grow out of proportion to his body. It was so large that he needed supports to hold it up.

Dean turned up at Fairview one time at a moment when Willie was crying from the teasing and bullying of others in the room.

"He was as intelligent as anybody



Photo by Toby McClary

### Outspoken —

▲ Tribal Elder and former Chairman Dean Mercier has a lot to say about the past, present and future of the Grand Ronde Tribe.

► The front of Dean's Running Bear dory with the logo created by Tribal Elder Allen George. Pictured on the boat is Dean's grandson Doug Colton.



Photo courtesy of Dean Mercier

the conversation for the Tribal record. His mom would drop in later. Joann Mercier along with her sister, Marion Mercier, "adopted" Dean as a father after their own father, Marion Mercier, passed on.

McClary was remembered for the time he got caught in the middle of a professional wrestling match, one that had exploded out into the audience. McClary, then 11 or 12, as Jeff remembered it, had gone for the popcorn but suddenly found himself between two wrestling giants about to pummel each other to within an inch of their sorry lives.

Dean's story is one of family in good times and bad. It is a story of community, in good times and bad.

Tribal member Jackie Whisler, a Tribal pre-school Native language specialist. "We had gatherings where we were together a lot, and no matter where you were or who was around, if an Elder told you to do something, you did it. Everybody took care of everybody's kids. It was understood. It was a way to feel really safe, too."

And it worked both ways.

"Dean took care of his parents until the day they died," said Christina.

"I never could have taken care of them without Chris," said Dean.

Dean Mercier remembered much of his childhood through his work. He was on the case since before he hit double digits. "We started working in the woods when we were

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