

# "I Have All My Children Now"

■ Tribal Elder Una Birchum meets her first son after 40 years.

By Ron Karten

At 15, Tribal member Una Riggs Birchum gave birth to the boy who became Lonnie Martinson. With the idea that she was too young to raise the child, Tribal Elder Lewis Leo Riggs and his wife, Doris, chose to send her to White Shield in Portland, a home for unwed mothers, where she gave birth, and where the boy was quickly adopted out to a farming family, the Martinsons of Mount Angel.

Birchum spoke on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in July in the living room of her home behind the state fairgrounds in Salem. "When I was about seven months along," she said, "Verna Larsen and my mom took me to a place in Portland to have the baby there. I stayed for the last three months of my pregnancy.

"I was up there and alone and scared and when he was born, they said, 'You have to find a place for the baby.' Within three days, my mom came and said, 'We have somebody.'"

"Grandma and Grandpa told her she had to do it," said Una's daughter, Tribal member Janelle Riggs, 32. Una's three other children learned that Lonnie existed when they were young, six give or take, said Janelle, but they didn't know anything about him.

"I knew from day one that I was adopted," said Lonnie Martinson, 41, also in that living room that day in July. He now has a wife of his own in Milwaukee. "I knew I had Indian blood, but not from where or when or anything."

In 1992, his adoptive father, Glenn Martinson, then retired,

years, Martinson said, so they jumped at the opportunity to take Lonnie in. It was a private adoption, arranged between the parties, and there is every reason to suppose that the Martinsons knew of and maybe even met Birchum's family at that time.

Still, Birchum and Martinson have no direct knowledge that the parents knew each other. "We haven't figured out if there was any relationship," said Martinson. This is just one of the secrets that has new interest for the family.

Shortly after the adoption, a co-worker of Birchum's mom came to Una and said, 'All I can say is that his name is Lonnie.'

"I just carried that with me," said Birchum, putting her hand on her chest.

"I thought he lived in Salem," she said, "but I never talked about it. I never mentioned it again."

"At times, she would light up candles and was not very happy," said Janelle Riggs. "She would say, 'There's something missing, today.' She would tell Dad, 'It's my son's birthday today.'"

As kids, Janelle, her sister, Tribal member Genene Guillory, 34, and older brother, Tribal member Ronnie Johnson, 39, used to say, 'Maybe we should look for him.' "We would go years and years on the computer at places like adoption.com, and without any information except that his name was Lonnie, they would guess: maybe this one's

mother's sixth child, and she had kept the others but didn't want him. Of course, as it turned out, he was the first child, and she grieved over losing him every day.

Misreading some of the papers, Martinson also thought he had come from a Tribe back east, but in fact, it was the Martinson family that came from back east.

After his father-in-law died last fall, "we were alone," said Banchero, "and we had time to talk. I said, 'Do you want to find your mom?' Amazingly, he was open to finding her."

"She twisted my arm to do a little checking into it," is how Martinson remembers it. "I finally gave in and let her do her computer magic."

"I started calling all the Riggsses in Salem," said Banchero. "I was leaving messages with everybody, asking, 'Are you related to...?' Nobody called back."

The obituary also mentioned Willamina as a place where Lewis Riggs had lived, "and I knew that was near Grand Ronde, so I called the cemetery in Grand Ronde. They said, 'He's not buried here, but he had the service here.'"

From there, Banchero went through the Tribe's website and found Tribal

member Leslie Riggs, who is related to Birchum, but did not know her very well.

"I was really sort of touched by the whole story," said Les Riggs, who works at the Tribe's Cultural Resources Department. "I didn't grow up with my father, so I kind of, wasn't given up for adoption or anything, but I felt like I kind of understood what that might be like. I thought it was a nice kind of story."

"Now that I had a cousin," said Banchero, "I knew I was really close. So, I said, 'Lonnie, are you sure you want to do this?'"



United — Tribal Elder Una Birchum with her son and Tribal member Lonnie Martinson.

Photo by Ron Karten



Photo courtesy of the Birchum family

Reunited — The Birchum family poses for a family photo outside of Legends Restaurant at Spirit Mountain Casino this year.

now passed on, ran across an obituary for Tribal Elder Lewis Leo Riggs Senior, and further down the article, he caught sight of Una Birchum's name. He clipped that article and sometime later, he gave it to Lonnie.

"I tucked it away, not thinking about it," said Lonnie, today an auto mechanic for Capitol Ford in Mollala.

"There's got to be a connection between my parents and his," said Birchum.

Lonnie's parents had been on a waiting list to adopt a child for 16

him.

"I knew he was here somewhere," said Birchum.

The information was more complete on Martinson's side. "They had copies of the adoption papers. They had the obituary of Lewis Riggs that said he was buried in Salem, and included the names of his children and other relatives."

Now, Lori Banchero, Martinson's cousin, a former nurse with an interest in family trees, had been asking Martinson about getting in touch with his Indian family for years. Somehow, he got the story that he was his birth

While Les was calling around to get Birchum's number and try to find out how she felt about the situation, Banchero got antsy, culled Birchum's address from directories at the Salem Public Library, and fired off a letter to her.

"You do not know me," the letter began, "but I do believe God has inspired me to seek you out to meet your son. This may sound crazy to you, I don't know...but Lonnie is looking for you, and I hope you are looking for him."

"Lori called my cell at work," said Martinson, and said, 'I found your mom.' I was like, 'ok, where?' She said, 'Salem,' and I said, 'Salem,' but I kind of lost the conversation after that."

The news gave his mom, Una Birchum, new life, said her daughter, Genene, 34. In an email to Banchero, Genene wrote, "Thank you sooo much for making my mom the most happiest women alive. U have no idea how happy she is. I have never seen her soo happy."

At the same time, the younger generation was not waiting for an answer to the letter. Within the day, Genene was in contact with Lonnie. "My brother, Ronnie, and I debated for an hour about who was going to call."

"I think I'm your sister," she said when she reached Martinson. And they talked for two hours.

"It all happened pretty fast, really," said Martinson. "I was not prepared."

But Birchum was. She had been celebrating his birthday for 40 years. "I finally have a person to go with that birthday," she said.

Their first Tribal event together was the Restoration celebration last November. "That Restoration pow-wow had more than one meaning to us," said Martinson.

"I always wanted my mom to find him," said Janelle.

"I see it like a miracle," said Birchum. "It's given me a whole different way of looking at the future. I have all my children, now." ■