

'Starting in June and July each year, we practiced every evening'

BASEBALL continued
from front page

Today he lives down Andy Riggs Road across the South Yamhill River from the field. The Andy Riggs of today's road was one of Grand Ronde's boys of summer, in the mid-to late-1930s.

"He used to be a heck of a ball player," says Tribal Elder Leon "Chip" Tom, who watched his great uncle play when he was just a child. "He could hit the ball a mile."

Later, Tom would become the youngest member, by far, of the Grand Ronde baseball team. "Starting in June and July each year, we practiced every evening," he recalls. "I remember the marine air: the fog would be rolling in off the coast."

At different times, Tribal members have seen the popularity of baseball in Grand Ronde as nothing more than the result of having "nothing else to do," whether for players or spectators, as Tribal Elder Russ Leno, 80, says.

But for the boys of summer from another time, the game brought the community — Tribal and non-Tribal — together, as Tribal member Doug Colton, 40, remembers.

Love of the game

Of one thing, though, there is no doubt — the players on the Grand Ronde teams and later on local Little League and high school teams really loved the game, Tribal Elder Ed Larsen Jr. recalls.

Larsen's father played every summer for decades. Later, Ed and his brothers, Michael and Ken (called Joe), also played.

"When Dad was teaching me," Ed says, "he took a bat and sawed off the handle because they didn't have kid's bats in those days."

"We played a lot of softball on the town team in the 1970s and 80s," he says, and remembers one glorious moment. "They were saying I'm too old to play at Tillamook, and I hit a home run," Larsen recalls.

Andy Riggs was born in 1880, so for some of the time in the 1930s he was playing while in his 50s. From the next generation of the Riggs family, his son, Moose (Rodger was his given name, born in 1917), continued the tradition.

"(Moose) tried to pitch sometimes, but he never did have any control," Tribal Elder Russ Leno remembers.

Moose was very strong, however, and much of his renown rested on his strength. "His dad used to tell us stories about him picking up railroad car wheels," says Tribal Elder Bill Simmons.

Moose, a tall man, "had huge hands and fingers," recalls his younger cousin, Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. "He used to tell us, sitting around, about how strong he was. We didn't believe him, but found out later that he could" do all these things.

Among the things Bobb was told that Moose could do was pick up a 50-gallon drum, full, and put it in the back of a truck.

"When my grandmother (Lena Bobb) would come in, Moose's whole demeanor would change," Bobb recalls. "With the boys, he'd be loud, boisterous, even foul, but as soon as she showed up, it was like flipping a switch. He'd become timid and real polite. He'd get real quiet. She'd always point her finger at him and



Photos courtesy of the Grand Ronde Cultural Resources Department

Leon "Chip" Tom steps up to the plate while playing for the Grand Ronde baseball team before World War II. Tom was in his teens when he started playing for the team. "Everything to me was kind of serious because I was playing with the big guys," he remembers.

say, 'You behave!' and he'd say, 'Yes, Auntie.'"

"He was the most good-natured person you'd ever see," says Tribal Elder Buzz Simmons. "He was so big and strong, his dad said it was lucky he was good-natured."

"Moose's brother, Floyd, was crippled somehow," Bobb says, "but we'd play catch with him in the parking lot behind where the Bonanza Antique Store is now."

The group of children was in grade school, and they'd throw baseballs to Floyd as hard as they could, and he'd catch them bare-handed.

Moose and Floyd were killed together in a car crash in 1971.

Bill and Buzz Simmons' uncle, Sylvester Simmons, also played for Grand Ronde.

Sylvester got beamed on the side of his head, says Buzz, and lost some vision in one eye. He came back batting on the other side of the plate.

"We all liked (Uncle) Sylvester because he always gave us kids money," Buzz says.

A photo hanging at Spirit Mountain Lodge shows a Grand Ronde team posing there before the covered grandstand, now long gone, on a day when the stands were well-sprinkled with fans.

Grand Ronde's heyday

Tom, 80, an athlete all his life, along with Wilmer (Bud) Leno, 87, who now lives in California, may be the last living Tribal members to have played on the team in Grand Ronde's heyday, before World War II.

Tom was in his teens, 15 or 16 as he remembers, and most of the rest of the guys were in their mid- to late 20s.

"Everything to me was kind of serious," Tom says, "because I was playing with the big guys."

Of Bud Leno's baseball days, Ed Larsen Jr. and others remember, "All the Leno brothers were good ball players."

Many remember different seasons of the pre-World War II Grand Ronde teams. They stretched at least back to the 1913 season. Photos in the Community Center, at Spirit Mountain Lodge and in Cultural Resources Department files show that much.

One of the earliest from the Tribal community to play was Wilson Bobb Sr., grandfather to Tribal Council member and Elder Steve Bobb Sr. In fact, there's a photograph in Spirit

Mountain Lodge that shows both of Bobb's grandfathers, Wilson and Lewis Riggs Sr., sitting side by side. Influenza took Riggs in the 1920s.

"He worked in the woods all his life," Bobb says of his paternal grandfather, Wilson, who was barely 5 feet tall. "He worked in the early logging camps. He was really strong and athletic, always pretty jovial, always laughing, but an extremely dedicated and hard worker. I had to get up at 5:30 every morning whether there was work for me to do or not."

Even into his late 60s, Wilson still was athletic, Steve recalls. "He could jump up and touch his toes to his outstretched hands," he says.

Later photos indicate the town/Tribal team was still going in the 1940s, before the war, at least.

"All the towns and Tribes had ball teams in those days," remembers Tribal Elder Ivan "Casey" Langley.

Often enough, a player would finish his baseball days by the time he married, so some children of players

don't remember the glory days.

"He never played in my memory," says Tribal Elder Joyce Ham of her father, Joe Dowd, born 1903, who played within the 10 or so years before he married Ila Hudson around 1930. "That time was all done before he got married."

Her uncle Irving Dowd also played, she says, "but I guess I didn't pay any attention to it."

Likewise with Tribal Elder Teddy LaChance, whose father, Joe (Rock) LaChance, played for years. Rock later lost an arm in a logging accident.

"That was back before my time," says Teddy, who did not play ball. "I don't even remember if I went to any games."

Teddy's younger brother, Mel LaChance, however, was a big ball player overseas in the Army. His catcher's mitt is in a glass cabinet at Spirit Mountain Lodge. The legend says that his father, Rock, caught for the Grand Ronde team in the 1920s.

"He was our neighbor," Tribal Elder Norma Lee remembers about Rock. "If you needed help in any way, he was ready to help you. Very, very nice personality."

'Best damn hitter we had'

Grand Ronde's boys of summer also included personalities like Ed Larsen Sr., born 1910, a first baseman for the Grand Ronde team in the 1930s and '40s up until the war.

"The best damn hitter we had was Ed Larsen's dad," says Tribal Elder Dean Mercier, who never played but went to games when he was a child. "Ed hit it clear across the railroad tracks near to Rock Creek. I remember it would start out straight," and he showed it with his flattened hand moving across the horizon, "and then it would go up. He was big and fat so he couldn't run, but he didn't have to as far as he hit it."

"He was a left-hander," says Bill Simmons, who remembers watching Larsen play in Dallas. "He was

a long-ball hitter. He had a good, smooth swing."

One of the things that Ed Larsen Jr. remembers about his dad: "He was a little mouthy." And about that day in Dallas, he says, the Grand Ronde team was facing a left-handed pitcher.

"The pitcher was pointing at my dad and he said, 'I've got a dead Indian buried at the mound here,' and the old man told him, 'You better duck when you throw that ball because there's going to be a dead Swede lying on top of him.'"

"What I remember," said Bill's younger brother, Tribal Elder Buzz Simmons, "(Ed Larsen Sr.) was a real friendly fellow, and he always wore those striped bib overalls."

Casey Langley remembers a game when a bunch of guys in a car drove around in tight circles on the field, and almost clipped Chip Tom. Everybody took off after the car, and when they got it stopped, Casey said, "Old Ed Larsen went over and beat the heck out of them."

Bill also remembers the time that Joe Isaac, born 1899 and himself a ball player for Grand Ronde, saved old Ed Larsen's life. As he told it, a bunch of strike-anywhere matches lit up in Ed's pocket, a pocket that also held shotgun shells. Isaac put the fire out.

Tribal Elder Margaret Provost remembers Isaac as "always active in the community. He was always the grave digger here, whenever there was a funeral."

"At 50, he could outrun us kids," Bill Simmons says.

"He was always around in an emergency," he adds. "He almost delivered my little sister (Tribal Elder Deborah Simmons)."

Casey Langley remembers one game in particular. "I remember going down there and sitting right behind the catcher. They had chicken wire in those days. Somebody hit a foul ball and that sucker came right through and hit me in the head."



Baseball all over Indian country

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The baseball experience sprang up independently all over Indian Country.

Tribal Elder Hank Simmons played catcher and left field with Sheridan and Willamina teams back in the 1930s. Tribal members Mike Voutrin, Roy Langley and Elmer Logan all played at Sheridan off and on.

In the 1950s, Tribal Elder Leonette Gallagher lived in Yakima where her parents were Tribal members. Her father, Leonard Vivette, born 1913, played on the team there, the Yakamans, she said. And the Vivette family, including seven children, traveled to every game.

"Dad played when we traveled to Siletz. That was the big game," Leonette said.

Tribal member Justin Martin, Leon "Chip" Tom's grandson and today a lobbyist for the Tribe, grew up in Salem, 13 years before the Tribe was restored. He found his way to the baseball diamond, too.

Drafted out of high school by the California Angels, he played four seasons, from 1988 to 1992 — one in Bend and three in Davenport, Iowa — as a pro.

"All I did was pitch once I became a professional," he says. "Once every fifth day as a starter, once every couple days as a reliever."

"You got to meet people from around the world, really. It taught me how to get along with a lot of different people."

But those days are long gone for Martin, who doesn't even pick up a baseball anymore. "Now," he says, "I'm all about government relations."

"Joe Isaac came over to see if I was OK."

"(Isaac) helped my dad (Paul Lafferty) put food on the table," Norma Lee remembers. Lafferty played on a team with Wilson Bobb Sr., Andy Riggs, Louis Vivette, Al Norwest, Clint (Pete) and Abe Tom, Cevis and Jerri Tipton, Carl Logsdon, Lewis Riggs, Phillip Warren, Frankie Smith, Dean Kelley and Harry Jones.

When his playing years were over, Isaac turned to umpiring, and as Russell Leno remembers, "He was pretty strict."

In the Depression and for a time after, the team passed the hat through the stands, Casey Langley remembers. "If they got enough, they would take the money and buy equipment with what they got."

War interrupted possible careers

Tribal Elder and Tribal Vice Chairman Reyn Leno's father, Orville Leno, born 1919, played third base in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Orville's brother, Wilmer (Bud) Leno, played second. Toward the end of his career, Orville traveled to Seattle to try out for the minor leagues.

"Then the war came," says Reyn. "Dad joined up and never played baseball again."

Over the years, the team played against inmates and guards at Oregon State Penitentiary.

The Grand Ronde baseball team, in an undated photo, sits before the grandstand that used to be where Willamina Middle School now stands. The team included Adam McPherson, Shaw Simmons, Alpheus Norwest and Irvie Tom.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, Grand Ronde teams used to play softball on the front part of the cemetery before there were graves.

It was in the 1980s, Tribal Elder and Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. says, and the Grand Ronde team members were mainly in their 30s, or put another way, in their prime.

"We were going to play Siletz one Sunday," Bobb says. "All these Siletz members, they were older with big beer bellies. We thought we were going to crush them."

Then they came up to bat.

"I was on third base. Puder Butler was on short-stop," Bobb says. "Every one of them hit the ball so hard that it went over the power lines, across the road, and into the field where Grand Meadows is now. We thought we were never going to get up to bat."

"Every one of them killed the ball. They just crushed us. We had to put some of the little guys over there in the field to retrieve all the balls."

This was also the Grand Ronde team, roughly, that played softball against inmates and guards at the Federal Corrections facility in Sheridan.

Though there is no baseball field at the Tribe today, the Tribe is in possession of a \$500,000 federal grant to be used for recreation facilities.

"What we're trying to do," said Tribal member and Executive Officer Chris Leno, "is wait for the federal economic stimulus, to potentially tap some of that to develop more of a recreational complex than just a baseball field." ■

"The runner looked at my dad and walked off."

For many years, the big rivalry for Grand Ronde and for many other Tribes, Elders say, was the game against Siletz.

"Dad used to laugh," says Reyn Leno. "Every time they played Siletz, they'd end up in a fight after the game. After the fight, everybody was fine until the next time."

Youth start a dynasty

In the early 1980s, all those decades of Grand Ronde baseball spawned a Grand Ronde dynasty in the local Little League.

Tribal members Doug and Mike Colton, Jimmer Bruckner, Greg Leno, Lenny Logan, Steve Bobb Jr., Billy Bobb and Cory Bobb joined a bunch of non-Tribal boys to build a winning record first in Grand Ronde and later at Willamina High School.

"Our (high school) baseball coach called us the Grand Ronde Indians," says Tribal member Doug Colton, "because it was basically all our guys from Little League on the team. That was really cool."

"We were the team to beat in the 1980s," says Steve Bobb Sr., father to Steve Jr., Billy and Cory.

He and Dean Mercier also told about three years at the Warm Springs Tribe's annual All-Indian Little League baseball tournament held back in the days when big Doug Colton was coach. Dean is grandfather to the younger Doug, Mike and Jimmer.

The first year, the Grand Ronde team came in third. The next year, second.

"The third year (in 1981) we won the tournament and they never invited us back," Dean says.

In the end, says Chip Tom, "We won our share and we lost our share." ■