

Down under doctorate

Thorsgard goes to Australia to continue his education

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Tribal member Eirik Thorsgard has two positions at the Tribe.

He is Cultural Protection coordinator and interim Tribal Historic Preservation officer.

Add to that now, Thorsgard, at 32, is also back at school.

For his doctoral thesis, he is studying Indian creation stories from the ceded lands of the Grand Ronde Tribe's ancestors.

He visited Adelaide, in southern Australia, in August to formally enroll at Flinders University. His arrangements made him the first non-resident doctoral candidate at the university. He will work on his thesis from Grand Ronde.

"I'm a test case," Thorsgard said.

His worldwide search turned up only two doctoral programs with staff experienced in supporting his indigenous archeology studies, Thorsgard said. At the University of California at Berkeley, they told him, "Good luck with that."

While in Adelaide, he solidified his professional relationship with the woman who has since become a mentor and adviser, Claire Smith, president of the World Archeological Congress. He had met her previously in Vancouver, British Columbia, at a Society for American Archeology conference.

And through Smith, Thorsgard also met Chris Wilson, another doctoral student in Adelaide, who also is an aboriginal from the Ngarrindjeri (pronounced net'-en-geri) Mob (a word used as Tribe is used in the United States). He stayed with Wilson and his two daughters when in the area.

Through Wilson, he traveled to Coorong where he met with the Ngarrindjeri Rupee (Tribal chief)



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Eirik Thorsgard, Tribal member and the Tribe's Cultural Protection coordinator, enrolled at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, during a visit in August. Behind him is the Australian Aboriginal flag that he brought back with him from his visit to the country.

and Elders. He was there for the Mob's first election of council in a history that goes back 50,000 years or more, though Mob Elders have been at the job of fighting for their culture against development in recent years.

Thorsgard also sat in with the Mob on meetings with federal and state governments about development on the nearby Murray River.

"Most live like we do on a reservation," said Thorsgard. "Really marginalized."

But he says that they are reclaiming their cultural heritage, and fighting for resources like water that continue to be drained away for nearby development. (See their video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGIsV-dSs40.)

Here in Grand Ronde, we may

hear more from the Ngarrindjeri because they currently are making an effort to sell their wine through the Grand Ronde and other aboriginal peoples.

"They're very interested in visiting," said Thorsgard.

All this, however, is but a sidelight of his doctoral effort, the tracking of creation stories throughout the ceded lands of the Grand Ronde Tribe.

The last year that a comprehensive study was attempted of these creation stories was in 1985, and while useful for Thorsgard, it was incomplete.

"They didn't understand us," Thorsgard said. "They don't even list Spirit Mountain."

The effort is more than academic.

"What I'm trying to establish," said Thorsgard, "is everything that the federal agencies will be required to protect. If it's not listed, it's not protected."

Part of the process is working with others — "making sure I'm writing it down in a way that makes sense for Tribal and other aborigi-

nal people."

There are dance circles on Sauvie Island. There are basalt mounds along the Columbia River. There are stories about Beacon Rock and Rooster Rock all mentioned in culture stories of the past, and certain to be documented.

Creation stories have not been found for Spirit Mountain or Mary's Peak, said Thorsgard, but "power" stories have been.

Anthropologists of the 1960s did not accept the Missoula Floods as fact, though traditional stories describing the floods had been uncovered 40 years earlier. Today, the fact of the floods is widely accepted in scientific literature.

Thorsgard has made an academic career of writing useful, practical stuff. For his master's degree at Oregon State University, his thesis proposed policy and procedures for Tribal site protection programs.

"It's always nice to do research that's entertaining," he said, "but it's useful to do work that is necessary. Our Tribe is fighting to maintain its culture and history every day. If we don't make it accessible to all Tribal members, it will disappear."

For many years, federal and state governments have taken culture out of the reach of aboriginals, he said, "so that Tribes have to ask for information. Increasingly, Tribes are taking these responsibilities on themselves," and finding that government agencies are coming to the Tribes to see how things should be done.

Thorsgard hopes to finish the four-year program in two. His thesis, expected to be some 80,000-100,000 words, already, in draft form, exceeds 33,000.

"I like to set really hard goals for myself," he said.

As examples, he said that in addition to his work for the Tribe, he also teaches "Introduction to Anthropology" part time at Western Oregon University, and helps raise four children, one with special needs.

"We sit in a unique position in the world," he said. "We have the responsibility to make or break our own destiny." ■

Farewell lunch



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Kris Olson admires a beaded medallion she received as a gift during her departure lunch at Wildwood Restaurant in Portland on Friday, Oct. 16. Olson is the outgoing Spirit Mountain Community Fund Board of Trustees chairwoman. Watching in the background are Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr., center, and Tribal Attorney Rob Greene.

Tribal Council Christmas Party set for Dec. 5

The annual Tribal Council Christmas Party will be held 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 5, in the Tribal gymnasium.

Between 11 and 11:45 a.m., children will visit with Santa Claus and parents and guardians are encouraged to bring their own camera to take photos.

The invocation and meal will be at noon, followed at 1 p.m. by children singing Christmas carols, door prizes and contest winners.

The Christmas Stocking Decorating Contest will have two categories — ages 5 to 12 and 13 to 99. People need to bring their own stocking already decorated and the deadline for entries is noon. There will be first-, second- and third-place prizes for each category and all judges' decisions will be final.

People are encouraged to bring a gift of socks, gloves or mittens for children and/or foster children.

For more information, call Bonnie Mercier at 503-879-2016. ■