

Tribe fought effort to close school

CHEMAWA continued
from page 11

at the school, but the heyday of Grand Ronde participation in the school was past.

The political history of Chemawa shows a school that during bad times and better times always resided in the Grand Ronde Tribe's ceded lands.

With a \$5,000 federal grant, the school, one of 100 such institutions across the country, was established in 1880 in Forest Grove. The first class included 14 boys and four girls; 17 from the Puyallup Reservation and one from the Nisqually in Washington.

The schools came into being to assimilate the conquered peoples by stripping their children of their identities, while at the same time protecting them from virulent racism in the European settler population.

"I have literally to carry this Indian-hating Northwest Coast on my back," wrote M.C. Wilkinson, a U.S. Army first lieutenant who first ran the school, as reported in the 1979 dedication program for the rebuilt Chemawa School.

At the same time, the school provided substandard food and health care that nonetheless often was better than what was available on the reservations.

In 1884, H.J. Minthorn, uncle to Herbert Hoover, who would become U.S. President, took over as superintendent. He bemoaned a lack of funding for the school that would follow it all through its history.

"Every department of the school is insufficiently equipped. The farmer has had no farm, the shoe shop is too small, and so is the carpentry shop. There are only two schoolrooms for 200 children, the dining room and the dormitories are crowded." The water supply was unreliable, drainage was inadequate and in other ways the Forest Grove site was unsuitable.

Later that year, the heart of the school burned to the ground.

It moved to its current site north of Salem the next year, when it became known as the Salem School and, soon, also as the Chemawa Indian School. The land was cleared and many structures were built by the students themselves.

Chemawa also was home to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Agency for Grand Ronde and Siletz Tribes in the 1920s and '30s.

Tribe fought effort to close school

Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act, was one of three laws enacted in the 1970s giving Indians control over their own educational system. It spawned both a federal effort to close the boarding schools and the Tribes' resistance to that effort.

The Grand Ronde Tribe played a prominent role in fighting the federal effort over the last 20-25 years, says Bob Tom.

The school has long played an important role for many students

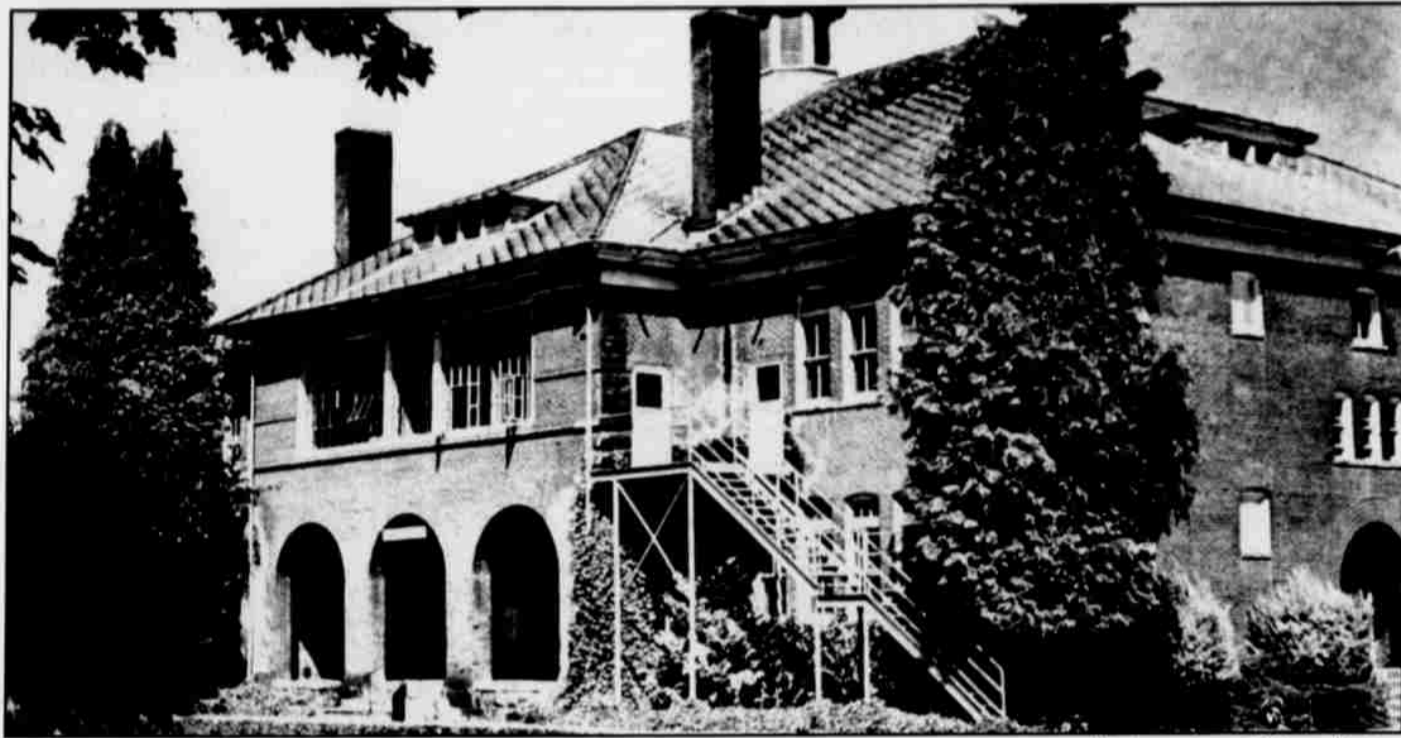


Photo courtesy of Kathryn Harrison

The School Building, the building where classes were held at Chemawa Indian School, is seen in this undated photo. The building no longer exists.

who still live in bad home and worse community situations, and for those who do not have the opportunity to get an education where they live.

With the help of Oregon legislators like Sen. Mark Hatfield, Chemawa survived.

At the end of 1979, rather than closing the facility, groundbreaking began for new school facilities on the property.

Louis King served as superintendent from 1995-2001 and was Facilities manager there for the five previous years.

"During the time that I was superintendent," says King, "it was not heavily attended by Grand Ronde Tribal members. There was a local school here (in Grand Ronde/Willamina) that met the needs."

With ever fewer students at the school, the Grand Ronde Tribe nevertheless stood by the facility. In 1990, the Tribe's residential alcohol and drug abuse center, Nanitch Sahallie, in Keizer was serving Chemawa students, says Kathleen Tom, Grand Ronde Tribal Council secretary.

King remembers that the school erected billboards on its land by Interstate 5 in 1995 and '96.

The billboard signs were intended to generate funds for Chemawa students, says King. "The funds went directly to students. Some had family deaths, and the money went to send them home for funerals. Many came and they really didn't have clothing. It was used 100 percent to support student needs. It provided job opportunities on campus. For some kids, they got no support from home, so we felt like it was a win-win because we could keep facilities open for kids that we weren't able to do with existing staff.

"I always thought it was interesting that when that property became jointly owned by Grand Ronde and Siletz, to Grand Ronde's credit, it continued to give the money back to the school for the students."

But it was always more than money that Grand Ronde provided.

In 2005, Grand Ronde managed a nearly \$47,000 grant in cooperation with the Siletz Tribe to study the idea of bringing the Chemawa Indian Health Service facility into the two nearby Tribes' compacts as a way to improve health services throughout the area.

The Grand Ronde Tribe also got involved in smaller, more individual ways.

"During my administration," says King, "we would always send out personal invitations to the Tribes to participate in Chemawa powwows and graduations, and Grand Ronde always participated."

In the mid-1990s, Tribal Council Secretary Kathleen Tom served a term on the Chemawa School Board.

Appointed by Tribal Council, Tom joined the board with instructions to develop land on the west side of the railroad tracks on the site of the old Chemawa school.

"When I got there," says Kathleen Tom, "the new school dormitories had leaks all over and mold, and no money from the BIA to fix things. The kids were living in deplorable conditions. The project was meant to help the school fill the shortfalls."

"The Tribe put thousands of dollars into an environmental study assessing all of the school buildings," says Tom. "We wanted to clean it up and develop one section (of the old campus) to help offset the costs."

"We were pushing for a light industrial mix of businesses where kids could learn a skill, intern at a business and maybe not have to go home in the summer, when home was not the best place to be."

That the plan fell apart amid differences with other Oregon Tribes did not diminish the Grand Ronde Tribe's continuing support for the school.

"We made the casino available for Chemawa prom nights," says Kathleen Tom, "and we have been supportive of all their functions, including personal requests from individual students

"We have advocated on behalf of students with the Indian Health Service," she says.

Grand Ronde students still attend

Today, many Elders still talk about Chemawa graduations, when they would come to graduation as alumni, and then they would get up and sing the Chemawa song. And then alumni would have a dinner and dance.

"I can remember," says Bob Tom, "when they used to dress up in formals. It was a highlight of their year."

Today, only a handful of Grand Ronde Tribal members either work or study at Chemawa. In recent years, Tribal Elders Claudia Leno and Ellen Fischer worked at the school. Tribal member Rhonda Fraser and Natalie Jackson still do.

Nakoosa Moreland is one Tribal member who has found a high school home in Chemawa, but the state's current financial crisis has others thinking about an education at Chemawa, too.

Willamina ninth-grader and Tribal member Cody Haller, 15, says: "Willamina is a good school and stuff, but they don't seem to have enough money to teach us what we should know."

On the other hand, Haller says, she wants to go to Chemawa "because there's other Natives there. I think there would be a good opportunity there to learn about my Tribe and others, too. I want to learn how other Tribes do stuff, and where other kids came from and their background."

Moreland says she has learned a lot: How Indians from different reservations see the world differently, and how urban Indians take a slower approach to the world than reservation kids. And the education today, of course, has changed drastically from those early days.

"There are many different cultures here," Moreland wrote. "Area codes get well known around here, too. Haha. Probably the most area codes I'll ever learn." ■