

Mercier served on Tribal Council 12 years before Restoration

MERCIER continued from front page

"I think his contributions to the Tribe are understated," Kennedy and many others said. "He was there before Restoration. People may not have always liked his approach, but he knew how to get the job done."

"Dean is one of the community icons whose strength and fearlessness helped make Grand Ronde what it is today," said Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. "We, as a Tribe, will never be able to say thank you enough to leaders such as Dean, for their deeds and contributions to our people. He leaves huge shoes to fill. He will be missed, but his presence and spirit will always be with us."

Dean was a leader, serving on Tribal Council for 12 years before Restoration and two after. He was on Tribal Council the first time the group went to Washington, D.C., and was Tribal Chairman at the time of 1983's Restoration.

"Dean made one of our first contacts with (Congressman) Les AuCoin," said Tribal Elder Margaret Provost.

"Marv (Tribal Elder Marvin Kimsey) and Margaret (Tribal Elder Margaret Provost) and Merle (former Tribal Elder Merle Holmes) get a lot of credit for what they did," said Tribal member Brent Merrill, "and they did a lot, but Dean was right there, so he needs to be remembered for all the work he did when the Tribe was being put together."

Among his many occupations, logging was his career.

"I started working in the woods when I was 9 or 10," he once said.

He worked with his father, former Tribal Elder Harold Mercier, and his uncle, Harold's brother, Hubert, and later worked for himself.

He also worked for local loggers like Roy Zimbrick of Willamina. He built roads through the woods for Zimbrick for three years.

"His real passion was building roads," Zimbrick said. "There was nobody any better than he was."

He also worked in Brookings as the logging industry changed.

In the late 1970s, Tribal member Lonnie Leno was setting chokers behind Dean. "He was the CAT skinner," said Leno. At that time, they were working out by Dallas.

"It was really, really hot, with lots of poison oak and bees all over," said Leno, "and he always used to bring me frozen water to drink during the day."

He was an excellent logger and ran a cedar stealing business that even amazed the police trying to catch him for a time.

Sioux Tribal Elder Jess Robertson worked on the cedar crew.

"I cut a lot of cedar with him," said Robertson. "He was the best cedar thief I ever knew. And he had more guts than a government mule. He could get caught red-handed and bluff his way through it. I really admired him."

Tribal Elders Gene and Butch LaBonte worked with Dean steal-



Recently walked on Tribal Elder Dean Mercier at Memorial Landing, a place he liked to go.

ing cedar.

"There were a lot of things that he showed me throughout my lifetime," said Gene LaBonte. "I rode with him. I fished with him. I partied with him. I worked for him, but we never did go to church together."

"It was a rite of passage working with him," said Tribal member and cousin Jeff Mercier. "Dean cast an enormous shadow."

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

He worked in a cannery, a plywood factory, buying and selling everything from potatoes to junk, cutting and selling firewood, picking hops and fishing.

He fished Celilo Falls before the dam.

He was a good hunter and a spotlihter.

Tribal member and grandson Mike Colton remembers his father, the elder Doug Colton, telling him and his brother, Tribal member Doug Colton, "Don't go spotlighting with grandpa."

"No, no, we won't," Mike remembers saying. "When his headlights were out of sight, Dean said, 'You ready?' and we said, 'Let's go!'"

Even Doug Sr., though, felt like one of the kids when Dean was around.

"I felt very privileged to have Dean in my life. He taught me an awful lot in my younger adult life. He was a pretty special person. Hunting, fishing, I killed my first deer with Dean. The kids and I grew up together learning to hunt because of Dean and his dad (Harold)."

"Dean and Hubert were the makers of men," said Mike.

He worked as a counselor for Indian children through Oregon State University.

He took pride in sticking up for the powerless, or those in need of a hand.

An early post-Restoration Tribal Council included, seated from left, Kathryn Harrison, Dean Mercier and Russ Leno, and standing, from left, Frank Harrison, Merle Leno, Darrell Mercier, Mark Mercier, Candy Robertson and Henry Petite.

Tears came to the eyes of Tribal Elder Marcella Norwest Selwyn when she heard the news of Mercier's passing on July 6 at the age of 81.

"When I first came to Grand Ronde in 1996 the first one I met was Dean Mercier," Selwyn recalls. "He had a big smile on his face and told me who he was. I told him my name and he asked about my brother, (former Tribal Elder Greg Norwest). He said he knew my father for years and remem-

bered me from when I was just a little bitty girl. He said, 'Every powwow time, I have a gathering here. Come over and have a few drinks with us.'" Selwyn doesn't drink, but she said, "I remember his big, huge smile. He was a kind man, a very kind man."

"When my son, Ryan, passed away," said Tribal member Denise Harvey, "I wanted his burial place to be under the apple tree (in the Tribal cemetery). It is an old apple tree with many roots and nobody wanted to disturb the roots to dig a grave. Ryan's body was never recovered. He was lost at sea. Dean said, 'You don't have to dig a grave? Just put a stone there? Fine, that's Ryan's spot.' And that's where his grave is today."

Dean drank with the best of them, but early on voted against serving alcohol at Spirit Mountain Casino.

"Every Tribe ought to have somebody like Dean," Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison once said.

Tribal Council member Val Sheker saw him as a power broker. She remembers visiting Mercier before she ran for Tribal Council the first time. "You had to stop at Dean's," she said.

Tribal Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor remembers her first meeting with Dean at the

end of the 25th Restoration Anniversary celebration.

"He came over to me at the end of the evening. I'd heard all of the stories about him, so I was really nervous. There he was with his big white cowboy hat on. 'You the gal who organized all of this?' he growled. I was shaking in my boots as I said yes and I tried to steady myself for what I was sure was going to be a tongue lashing.

"Instead he reached out to me with his hand, I remember thinking what big, hard-working hands he had. 'You did a great job. I had a good time.' As he shook hands we started talking. I told him about my Auntie and Uncle who ran the Blarney Castle Tavern in Rose Lodge. His face lit up. 'I knew you looked familiar. Tell Tessie that Running Bear said hello.'"

"He was the first person who helped me understand what was involved with Restoration," said Tribal Council member and cousin Chris Mercier. "He always gave you a pretty frank answer. I felt he was pretty honest. He didn't sugarcoat anything."

"He's of that generation that weren't afraid to speak their mind," said Merrill.

Starting in the 1960s, Dean was passionate about the Dory Days boat races held at Pacific City. He named his dory Running Bear, which also was his nickname.

Tribal Elder Mike Larsen recalls a story from those days.

"He had asked me and (Tribal member) Carmen Mercier to join him on the Running Bear," said Larsen. "I was 17, and really proud that Dean asked me to join him. On the boat, that popular song, 'Running Bear,' was playing," Larsen recalled.

"Gov. Tom McCall's float had a little tipi on it, and the governor was wearing war paint on his face. He was trying to look like an Indian."

"On Dean's Dory, I was wearing a headdress and Carmen Mercier was wearing full regalia."

When the governor was awarded the trophy, possibly for best boat or originality, Dean went down to the



Recently walked on Tribal Elder Dean Mercier poses with the infamous 1931 Chevy that he was driving when an accident with a log truck caused him to almost lose his arm.

market and got some butcher paper, and he wrote on it "The Originals" and put that on his boat. He then wrote "The Imposters," with an arrow pointing to the McCall's float.

"He had a sense of humor that not everybody understood," said Tribal member Penny DeLoe.

"He always spoke loud and clear about how proud he was to be a Grand Ronde Indian," said Larsen.

"There was a time," said Doug Colton Sr., "when we took his dory out in Pacific City. Nobody in his right mind would have gone out in that weather, but Dean wanted to take it out and go around that rock. What a ride that was!"

When Restoration finally came, a newspaper asked Dean how it felt, recalled Mike's brother, Tribal

Elder Ed Larsen. "It just feels good to be Indian again," Dean told the reporter, with a well-tuned sense of irony.

"We were all kids together, born and raised here," said Tribal Elder Chip Tom. "He was a nice, friendly guy, a very good hustler for work. He liked to party. We all did. I knew his folks, too. They were good people. He was raised right."

"We used to party all together," said Tribal Elder Val Grout. "He was lots of fun, always willing to help. Dean was just Dean."

"He was a neat guy. Wilder than hell," said Roy Zimbrick. "He liked to have a good time, and he would do anything for anybody, anytime, day or night. If somebody was stuck in a ditch on Mt. Hebo, he'd be the first one to go up there and pull him out."

"Dean had three passions," said Zimbrick. "His grandkids. His fishing boat, Running Bear, and building roads."

Doug Colton Sr. remembers Dean's dedication to the kids.

"During the time when the Tribe was getting started," Colton said, "we had a Little League baseball team, and people got to know that the Tribe was there through that team. Dean was at almost every ball game there was. When we'd go to Warm Springs, he'd go. He was always there."

"He had his moments," Colton said. "He was opinionated, but he had everybody's good will in his heart."

On Dean's last day, more than 50 visitors came to say goodbye, said Joann Mercier.

"People kind of fell in place and did what they needed to do so Chris (Christina Mercier, Dean's wife)

didn't have to do anything."

Folks who had known Dean for 60 years - Roy Zimbrick, Tribal Elder Frank Bean, Doug Colton Sr. and LaVerne Bean - came in his last days.

"Some came in their walkers," said Joann.

"It was neat to be here with him and get to see those people who came," she said. Some, like Tribal Elder Donna Casey, came with her oxygen equipment. Some came with home-baked pies.

Seven Tribal Council members also came, she said.

"I served with Dean on the Tribal Council in the Restoration era," said Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg. "He became chairman of the Tribal Council and he was a very forceful person, but he had a good heart. If he was your friend, he was your friend."

"They destroyed the mold when he was born," said Jess Robertson. "They didn't make any more like him."

Christina recalled that Dean took care of his parents "until the day they died."

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

"My husband loved hard, fought hard and made up easy, (after some silent treatment that is)," said Christina. "but he rarely told me, 'No,' and he always had my back."



Recently walked on Tribal Elder Dean Mercier celebrates his 75th birthday at his Grand Ronde home on April 16, 2005. He was actually born on April 18, 1930. Mercier was a Tribal Council member through the 1980s.

"I've heard many stories about probably everyone in Grand Ronde. So when you look at me and wonder if I know about the time ... I probably do. LOL."

"If anyone was down and out and Dean liked them, he would open our home to them. It would give him more ears to fill with his many stories. He loved all the people that came to our celebrations. And was sometimes the last person to stop. No one could keep up with him."

"I miss him with every breath I take, every minute of the day. He will always be one more hero I keep safe in my heart along with my son."

"While everybody was here," said Jeff Mercier, "a monster bald eagle came and circled above."

"The day before Dean died," said Joann, "he was telling stories and calling people by the nicknames he had given them. The next morning, on the last day, he didn't have any more stories." ■