

Long Bell Diner opens

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

With a list of possible names proposed for the new restaurant at the Tribal convenience store along Highway 18, the Grand Ronde Food and Fuel Co. Board of Directors decided upon a name that has a historic connection, says Grand Ronde Station Manager Opal Hale.

"Thus Long Bell Diner was the determined name," Hale says.

The Long Bell name comes from a pond that once served as a collection site for logs at the south end of Grand Ronde.

Timber companies brought harvested logs down from the forest. Logs were de-limbed and branded, much like cattle, to identify their owners. While floating in the pond, logs were separated, graded and eventually removed, placed aboard waiting trains or log trucks and shipped to sawmills for processing.

Over the years, many timber companies, including the Long-Bell Lumber Co., harvested timber here, and with top-notch food, these companies "competed to hire the best loggers," according to Grand Ronde Tribal Elder Leon "Chip" Tom, a 45-year veteran of the local timber industry. He recalls that timber companies valued their cooks almost as much as their loggers.

"If you wanted good men in your camp to keep working and moving logs, you'd better pay attention and get somebody there who can put the food out," Tom said.

Much the same message is going out today for the new Long Bell Diner.

"We've got all quality items," says Hale, but not a million items. "You can't do quality if you have a million items on the menu."

Top among the offerings is Corvallis-based Allann Brothers coffee and espresso. "All our employees are going through four hours of barista training provided without charge by Allann Brothers," she says. The new coffee equipment also has been provided free by Allann Brothers.

In addition, Hale is pitching hamburgers that are a third-pound "after cooking." Pronto Pups are made with hand-dipped Hebrew National hotdogs.

The only holdover from the former Mek Mek Haws, which closed



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Bobby Yates, a supervisor at Grand Ronde Station, makes a breakfast burrito at the Long Bell Diner, the new restaurant at the station, on Friday, Jan. 11. In the background also cooking is Opal Hale, Grand Ronde Station manager, and Steven Cox, a cook at the restaurant.



Danielle Bradford, a Grand Ronde Station employee, adds mustard to a vegetarian burger at the Long Bell Diner on Friday, Jan. 11.

in May 2012, is biscuits with sausage pepper gravy.

Breakfast burritos, croissant egg sandwiches and full-sized breakfasts are being served "as you like it."

"We're making our own fry sauce with a Long Bell Diner secret recipe," says Hale.

The diner serves an "upscale vegetarian burger for vegetarians, and it is really a good burger," Hale says. Also for the health-minded, garden salads are available.

"Look for our own house chili con carne, loaded with meat, served daily. We'll have a different soup every day. On Tuesdays, baked potato and bacon cheddar are the soup du jour. On Wednesdays, it is cream of broccoli and cheddar soup. Fridays is clam chowder day. Every day is chili con carne day."

Every day is also chili cheese fries and beer-battered onion rings day.

And while strawberry shortcake with homemade whipped cream is the only dessert, says Hale, "It is unbelievable."

On Friday, Jan. 11, the Long Bell staff invited Tribal Council members and Finance Officer Julio Martinez to sample the new menu.

"They're going to be our guinea pigs," says Hale with a laugh.

The diner will add 11 employees to the station's existing staff, half

of them Tribal members or descendants. A new computer setup allows all convenience store purchases, including gas, to be rung up at any cash register.

Drive-through signage continues to come in from Salem Sign, the company where Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. used to work and where his son, Billy Bobb, now works.

Bobb Sr.'s logger sculpture that used to stand in Willamina has been brought back to decorate the new diner.

In addition, the diner has been decorated with 1950s tables and bar stools that go up and down, Hale says.

The diner's logo was created by Tribal Graphic Design Specialist George Valdez.

Remodeling costs "came in right about at budget," Hale adds.

Specials are being posted on the Grand Ronde Station Facebook page.

Remnants of Long Bell Pond still exist today about a mile west of Spirit Mountain Casino south of Highway 18. Earthen berms that contained the pond are now overgrown with brush and weeds, however.

"We wanted a name that reflects the area," says Bobb Sr.

And since Jan. 14 at the Long Bell Diner, all those memories have come back in the form of great food, great community and a thriving business for the Tribe.

The Long Bell Diner is open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. ■



Tribal Finance Officer Julio Martinez, right, was the Long Bell Diner's first customer so the staff had him sign the first dollar bill that the restaurant made from his order on Friday, Jan. 11. The dollar bill will be framed and displayed in the restaurant.