Coming of Age ceremony returning to Grand Ronde

By Ron Karten
Smoke Signals staff writer

As far as Tribal historians know, it has been more than 100 years since forerunners of the Grand Ronde Tribe have held a coming of age ceremony for girls in a Tribal community.

This year, Sept. 25-29, that will change.

According to information from Elders and the Tribal Land and Culture Department, Native girls at puberty historically were "secluded either in a private hut or by rush mats hung around her bed platform," fasted for five days and "spent her time being extremely still."

The information comes from six Tribal sources living in the late 1800s – including women and men from the Tualatin band of Kalapuya, northern Mollala, southern Mollala, the Chinook along the Columbia River and Rogue River Shasta, says June Olson, a Tribal Elder and former manager of the Tribe's now-defunct Cultural Resources Department.

Together, they provide a view of what the ceremony looked like in western Oregon.

The information came during interviews regarding language preservation, Olson says.

"The descriptions of the ceremony were very, very similar," she says, "so we can assume that the bands and Tribes we didn't have information from probably had similar ceremonies."

"We're taking the best of what we know," says Youth Prevention Specialist Lisa Leno, who joins many others in bringing this ceremony back to Grand Ronde. The ceremony will last five days.

Girls will spend the first two days quietly with their families, fasting, praying, learning family and Tribal histories, making necklaces and other jewelry, weaving and learning about their roles in the community.

"Basically, it's about the family's values," says Pearl Rife. "We're not trying to impose values on any family."

The next three days will find the girls and their families at the Tribal plankhouse for an encampment.

The first day of the encampment is one of song and dance.

Most of the ceremony will be for, by and about girls and women of the Tribe. Still, supporters of the effort (men among them) and guests also are invited.

The girls will spend the second day in isolation. They will get up before sunrise, search for their spirit, meditate, walk, pray all day and return to the encampment when the sun sets.

The spirit search is the equivalent of a vision quest for boys.

The last day is a community event where selected teachers for the girls describe to them what it means to be a Native woman.

Energy for the ceremony came from parents and Elders, says Leno. Among those leaders is Sarah Ross, who began looking into this history in 2010.

"I wanted to be sure this ceremony was in place for my daughter (Madison, 11) by the time she was ready," she says. "What I discovered was that many families who chose to participate in this tradition were sending their daughters to outside communities, but it was important to our family to have something here at home in Grand Ronde."

For the ceremony, all girls are invited with a focus on those right around their change of life days.

Speaking with cultural and spiritual leaders in the community, Ross says she realized, "We women had everything we needed to bring this ceremony home. At that point it was a matter of bringing together a group of women to be inspired to share in that vision."

In that regard, the group is "asking around the community for knowledge of this ceremony." It will "restore a sense of tradition, and bring healing back to families," Ross says.

"Traditionally women have always been the backbone of our community, but in recent times our voices have not been as readily heard," Ross says. "This ceremony is an awakening in the purest form, one that is awakening old ways as well as our own spirits.

"To have Elders and young ladies going through this process together and learning what it means to be a physically and spiritually strong, healthy Native woman is a powerful experience."

Also in on the initial planning are Dana Ainam, Cristina Lara, Barbara Gibbons, Amber Mercier, Kathy Cole, Kalene Contreras, Nicole Estrada, Kelly Nelson, Shannon Stanton, Tahnae Baker, Tiffany Mercier, Pearl Rife and April Campbell, as well as Elders Kathryn Harrison, June Olson and Dolores Parmenter.

For Harrison, the ceremony is about "strengthening self-esteem, getting in touch with their spirituality. As a giver of life, they have to take care of the body. Finding a place in the community and the Tribe is one of the things that will keep you going."

"It's about how to walk in life as a woman," says Parmenter, who joined the effort when organizers put out a call seeking the help of Tribal Elders. "It takes a whole village. That's sort of what the Indians did. Becoming a young Native American woman, it's a good idea to know your culture and have some advice to guide you through life as you go.

"Nowadays, we don't have any ceremonies for young people. This will help them on their way."

"I'm so grateful to be a part of this," says Tahnae Baker. "I realize I am a model for them to really let them have a sense of self. It's really hard during those years. You don't know where to go next, who to ask for help. They have to know that they are important."

"I have a young daughter, 6," said Amber Mercier, referring to Laila Holmes, and then to her participation in the ceremony, "so I'll have the knowledge to help her when she gets there."

"I think that one of the most important benefits of restoring this ceremony is the healing for all women," says Olson. "Ultimately, healing for the Tribal community. The ceremony sends out really strong symbols from every direction: to give girls a new sense of pride and self-confidence.

"The fact that this is being restored by the community empowers the message more."

Support for the effort also is coming from Land and Culture and Education departments, particularly Jan Reibach, Bobby Mercier, Travis Mercier, Eirik Thorsgard and Olson. In addition, says Leno, "we invite anybody with knowledge (of the subject) to step up and help."

An open meeting for further discussion will be held at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, July 18, at the Youth Education building. Fathers also are invited. Dinner will be served. ■

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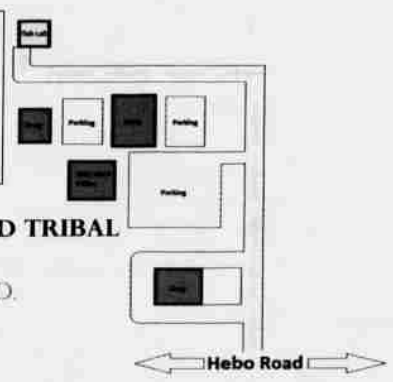

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Saturday, Aug. 17, 9 a.m. – Noon

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