

30th Restoration commemorative issue

Congressman recalls Tribal Restoration effort

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Les AuCoin was Oregon's 1st District Congressman between 1975 and 1993, and sponsored the Restoration bills of both the Siletz and Grand Ronde Tribes in the U.S. House of Representatives.

After 1973's Restoration of the Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin, the Siletz and Grand Ronde restorations occurred in 1977 and 1983, respectively. (The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians was restored in December 1982.)

AuCoin, who now lives in Bozeman, Mont., was interviewed via telephone on Sept. 10, 2008, about the Grand Ronde Restoration effort. Below is an excerpt of that interview.

Q: You were the congressman during the restoration of the Grand Ronde and Siletz Tribes. Could you talk about the political climate in Oregon in the late 1970s, early '80s regarding restoration of Tribes that were terminated?

A: Hostile

Q: In what way?

A: The restoration proposals came not too many years after the very controversial Belloni and Boldt decisions. This allocated superior fishing rights to the Columbia River Tribes. Though the hostility of the nonIndian community was not monolithic, there was a substantial backlash against the Tribes stemming from those decisions, and it spilled over into the efforts that I undertook along with Sen. (Mark) Hatfield. In restoring the Tribal status of both the Siletz and the Grand Ronde, I think that the argument went something like this:

- One, the Tribal members are American and should be treated like any other American and not have "special rights";

- Two, the argument was that inherent in getting a reservation or getting a restoration it might somehow enhance their ability to assert successfully in court in ways that no one could comprehend or know, but feared, superior hunting and fishing rights.

Together those arguments had a lot of influence, and it made it difficult to do the right thing because those arguments were so easy to demagogue.

Q: Elizabeth Furse said that you actually spilled a lot of political blood on the Siletz Restoration.

A: I did, I did. My first term I introduced the legislation, but it hadn't moved yet and my political opponent made exactly those arguments against my proposals for the Siletz; mainly that I was giving superior hunting and fishing rights to the Tribe, even though they didn't claim that they wanted superior hunting and fishing rights. I can remember billboards all over the district put up by my opponent that said, "More Fish, Less AuCoin." It got really nasty. I even had mail from people that had been lifelong friends and sportsmen that were just outrageously opposed to the Tribe's restoration. I just had to talk to them. Anyone who reads Native American history knows about the wars ... the most god-awful thing to happen to Native Americans was the

so-called mainstreaming policy that took place in the 1950s and became yet another of the tragedies that the U.S. government inflicted on the American Indians throughout their history.

Q: What effect did your experience working on the Siletz Restoration have when the Grand Ronde Tribe approached you about its potential Restoration?

A: Well, I did not know that much about the Grand Ronde and my first impression was that the Confederated Tribes might be an organization of convenience rather than a qualified confederation. Therefore, I was probably somewhat suspicious, but that went away with a little bit of research.

The next thing that I said to myself, and I will be honest about this, was, "Oh, great. Now that I have been beaten around like a piñata over the Siletz, I get to do it again with the Grand Ronde." However, that was fleeting and all too human I am afraid.

My memory went back years earlier when I took a Winnebago throughout the streets and went to the smallest of towns; it was a traveling office. We had caseworkers and folks, and we would stop at predetermined times and people would be there to greet and would have questions about Social Security or any other problems they would have with the government, and talk to me and my staff.

I remembered going to this wide spot in the road that they called Grand Ronde and meeting people and looking at the abject poverty. When this proposal came along, I saw it as an opportunity to do something, to overcome that economically bleak picture for the Grand Ronde people.

Q: What was the biggest legislative hurdle from your perspective regarding the Grand Ronde Restoration? Was it Tribal members eliciting community support?

A: Yes. The Tribe came to me and Elizabeth (Furse) was consulting with them at the time. I remember Kathryn Harrison and others; I do not think that Mark Mercier was with them at that time. He became chair later. I certainly remember Kathryn and the delegation that came back with Elizabeth. Moreover, they talked to me about what they wanted to do. They seemed to be unmindful of the strenuous efforts that the Siletz had gone through to get the statements of community support, which were important for Congress. It showed that they had the support from a broader community.

Therefore, I had to be fairly blunt with them. I had to put on a pretty stern countenance. I laid out very clearly what they had to do. Church groups, chambers of commerce, major organizations ... they had to do their homework. They had to tell their story locally. They had to gain political support on the ground and then come back. And once they did, I told them that we could go forward. That is what



Les AuCoin



Congressman Les AuCoin, right, presents Kathryn Harrison and Mark Mercier with a copy of the Grand Ronde Reservation Act in 1988.

it took with Siletz and that is what it took with other Tribal restorations around the country. That is what it would take in their case.

You may hear it from others, but Kathryn, who is a dear friend, told me she was rather shocked about my little political tutorial. They did their jobs fabulously well and they came back with ... an incredible amount of support that outdid the opposition.

Q: You said you were very blunt with the Grand Ronde representatives when they came to you seeking Restoration. Are there any memories or anecdotes that stand out in your mind concerning their effort?

A: Their efforts astonished me. They went to some of the most unlikely places to get, and won, endorsements. They had the support of Gordon McPherson, former state representative who was Republican minority leader when I was in the state Legislature as the Democratic House majority leader. One of my arch-enemies on the floor, we had a duel daily on the floor. All of the sudden I see his name up as an endorsee. I was thrilled. ... They came back with the most fertile list of church groups and mainstream business groups. It was remarkable. It was a more thorough job if anything than even the Siletz had done and I like to hope that it was due in part to the blunt way that I put it to them, because they sure kicked it into high gear and they really delivered.

Q: How important was it for them to have the Warm Springs on their side as well as Sen. Mark Hatfield?

A: Frankly, I do not think that the Warm Springs mattered so much. Having Hatfield supporting them was important because I needed to know ... well the last thing I needed was to fight the fight and get it over to the Senate and have it opposed or have it demagogued by the senior senator for the state. It would have doomed it, but the fact that it wasn't doomed on the Senate side made it pretty clear to me that if I could get it over there that it would become a bill and then it would become a law.

Q: Regarding your legislative legacy as a congressman, two of the early restorations that occurred nationally were in your district. When you look back on your congressional career, where does that stand as far as accomplishments?

A: The warmest spot in my heart is the memory of the economic difference Restoration and the establishment of reservations has done for the economic and social well-being of a people who were in dire need and had their lives changed in a very fundamental way.

When I lost my race for the Senate in

1992 and, therefore, ended my career, Mark Mercier, the Tribal chair of the Grand Ronde, wrote me this letter that just actually brought tears to my eyes. He said, "This morning I walked out across our land. Land that would not have been ours if it had not been for you, and I think about how far we have come and about how much further we will go, and will come because you believed in us. You took a chance and showed some courage." He thanked me and he said because of my efforts life would never be the same again and would be better for the Grand Ronde people. It really brought tears to my eyes it touched me so much.

It's not often that you can write a piece of legislation and actually see a community of people go from dirt poverty to a place where they are getting good jobs. In many cases incomes from the casino and that the Tribe is earning so much money that they are creating a foundation to help the broader community around them. It is phenomenal, and so I cannot compare it to very many other things. I am a congressman who got a lot done. However, the difference that my legislation made for the Grand Ronde and the Siletz is right up there with the most significant achievements in my memory book.

Q: For Tribal members, when the 50th Restoration comes around and they may read this, what do you think they really need to know about this Restoration on the part of the Grand Ronde? What do you think that they should never forget?

A: They should never forget that their Elders dared to dream, dared to believe that they could take on the forces of prejudice in their own community. They risked ridicule in the belief that they had the right to correct a historical wrong in creating an economic and social platform for their descendants to achieve things that they had never had and may not ever achieve themselves. That is what they should remember.

I think that as a nonIndian and as a congressman, my efforts should really be a footnote. I was not the one locally whose skin was a different color, a different pigmentation than the local community. I was not the one who ran into prejudice. I was not the one who challenged the status quo. It was the Tribal Elders. Therefore, my work should be seen as a footnote. ... Nevertheless, for the succeeding generations of Tribal members, I hope they will remember first and foremost the courage and tenacity and brilliance of the effort of their Elders to make life better for them.

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