

30th Restoration commemorative issue

Kimsey recalls the road to Restoration

By Chris Mercier

There I sat at the local Food Bank.

Elder Marvin Kimsey sat before me, leaning back in the chair, calmly flicking cigarette ashes into a coffee can.

He spoke of Restoration. No, not the act of Restoration, Bill 3885, and speaking before Congress. Not the recent celebration at Spirit Mountain Casino. No, none of that.

He spoke of those first Tribal Council meetings that were like pot-lucks and the occasional shouting match that unfurled in a tiny office at the cemetery. To him, Restoration signified a unique struggle that he and a handful of others worked toward long ago.

He talked about Lebanon, nearly 30 years ago. Margaret Provost convinced him and Merle Holmes to come to a meeting held by some Association of Urban Indians.

"God those meetings were awful. They fought, they bickered," he said. "Some of the people, they were Kalapuyan, some of them were Sioux. Some not even Indian at all."

But despite the arguing, those people had one thing in common; an idea in hindsight that meant everything, an idea that would put Grand Ronde on the map.

The year was 1972, and the Termination Act had occurred not even 20 years ago. The idea was Restoration. Nobody knew what that meant, how long such a task would take or even if the goal was at all possible. But the idea stuck and 30 years later, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

If it could have only been that simple.

"You know, we figured it would take two or three years, tops," said Kimsey.

Well, we all know how the road toward Restoration extended a little beyond that projection, as the Tribe never really became The Tribe in the eyes of the federal government until 1983, 11 years after Kimsey, Provost and Holmes first attended that fateful little meeting in Lebanon.

What we don't really know is just what had to be done to achieve Restoration. Paperwork; loads and loads of paperwork. And phone calls, and letters to be written, and surveys, and enrollment numbers, and fact-finding, and people finding, coalition building, you name it—this was grassroots politics.

Names abound—Les AuCoin, Elizabeth Furse, Mark Hatfield, Don Wharton and Dean Mercier. And, yes, most people have a general idea of what happened, what with the visits to Washington, D.C., and all. But only a select few know the whole story, one which really goes beyond the scope of a simple article in a bimonthly publication, and might be better suited for a detailed



Marvin Kimsey

account as a book. At least so said Kimsey.

"It is ... impossible, I mean impossible to tell you everything that went on in Restoration, and what entailed," Kimsey said, shaking his head. "It really is. You just had to be there."

"There were a lot of sacrifices made," he continued. "We weren't always a Tribe with a casino, or a Tribe with timber even."

To be exact, they were a small group of people, with lives, with jobs not really related to a potential Tribe. There was no steady source of funding, no grants and their pooled extra cash amounted to no more than \$37. Not surprisingly for the first few years, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde was an after-hours project; work away from work, unpaid for even Kimsey himself, often questionable.

"I can't say what drives a person to do it," he said. "I don't know who else would have done it, because there wasn't a whole lot of interest. Work 10- to 12-hour days for nothing. Who wants to do that?"

Well enough people wanted to do "that" to make the venture worthwhile. The first few acres of Tribal property were purchased, the cemetery no less, but coming at least with an office building. Things were cooking. Membership was estimated at more than 600 people, and there was a steady flow of volunteers to keep the ball rolling.

"A lot of people came and went," Kimsey said. "Some were really helpful for one or two months and then they left. And who can blame them? They had their livelihood, their jobs."

Kimsey called the period of 1975

to 1979 a time of "no gains whatsoever." But that time produced the core group of himself, Jackie Whisler, Merle Holmes and Margaret Provost, the four who were to be instrumental in getting the Tribe restored. And that time yielded some of the long-lasting alliances, such as with Elizabeth Furse and Don Wharton of Oregon Legal Services, and with a strong political friend in the form of Congressman Les AuCoin.

Two other key players of note would arrive on the scene, Dean Mercier and Kathryn Harrison. Kimsey and Whisler both can remember the long days and nights spent crowded in the cemetery office, with neither heat nor plumbing, one phone line and a donated typewriter between them. Their first computer was a Commodore 64, which only one person knew how to use. Paper towels substituted for coffee filters.

"Yeah, I can remember during the long winter days, watching Jackie and Kathryn sit at their desks, wearing their coats," chuckled Kimsey.

"Gosh, I can remember those days, too," Whisler said on another occasion. "I left a Coke sitting by my desk one night and when I came back the next morning, it had frozen."

"We lived Restoration," she said. Whisler entered the fray in 1977 while living in Amity. Her father, Dean Mercier, had become involved and phoned her one night, asking when she was going to come over and "start helping her people."

Mercier himself had become involved, somewhat inadvertently, after learning at a Christmas party one night that he had been elected

to Tribal Council.

"I figured if they thought enough of me to vote me in, I'd better start paying attention," Mercier said.

He, like others, had been recruited into the effort by Kimsey, of course. "Mister Restoration," Mercier called him.

Holmes, Kimsey and Mercier were in fact three of the first original Tribal chairmen. A Tribal Council did exist back then, with elections determined not by ballots, but merely by a show of hands at the General Council meetings.

"Back then nobody wanted to be on council," Whisler said. "I think if somebody was angry at somebody else, they would nominate them for council."

Perhaps nobody wanted to be on council because the positions were, like virtually every other one in those days, voluntary (read: unpaid). Council members had to be leaders, not politicians, an aspect not forgotten by the pre-Restoration group, especially Mercier.

"I never turned into a politician," Mercier said. "Though sometimes they tried to force me to. It was tough on the way to Restoration."

Indeed, Mercier's fiery personality didn't always serve his purpose too well. Whisler and her father both remember one of their early meetings with Les AuCoin, when the congressman was unusually tardy.

"He asked us if he was late," Mercier remembered. "I said, 'Oh, about two years late.'"

Whisler growled "Dad!" and gave him a sharp kick in the shin for the lack of diplomacy.

"I can remember AuCoin just looked at my dad and said, 'You're starting out wrong,'" Whisler said, laughing.

Nonetheless, a sense of levity pervaded many of those early meetings. Some even look back on the occasional fistfights that erupted within the confines of Tribal functions with nostalgia, because even an overheated argument that came to blows was a sure sign of clear and effective communication. Nobody doubted another's stance after a bloody nose and row on the floor.

"The meetings were fun back then," Whisler said. "They were informative."

Just what were they doing all those years? What did all those meetings, all those long office hours need? Kimsey presented a paper from his records, a questionnaire and on it written, among others things, "Congressional Criteria for Federal Recognition."

It read:

1. The Tribe has exercised ongoing governmental functions.
2. Tribal group consists of a community of Indians belonging to a formerly recognized Tribe.