

'I can't believe it has b

CASINO continued from front page

west when he passed away in May 2004 at the age of 70.

"When he (Holmes) came back he said we have to get in on this while the door is open," says Tribal Elder and former Tribal Council member Ed Larsen. "He said there is a window of opportunity and we have to take it."

"The Poarch Creek had a very good facility," says Tribal member and then-Spirit Mountain Development Corp. General Manager Bruce Thomas. "It was after the initial visit with them that council decided to take a closer look at gaming."

Jim Willis, the Tribe's general manager at the time, says discussions at the leadership level were whether there would be gaming in Grand Ronde ever. Willis, who now lives in southern Oregon near Table Rock, says the small contingent of Tribal Council members who visited Alabama came away with a different view of Tribal gaming.

"That visit changed a lot of people's minds," says Willis. "All they (Poarch Band of Creek Indians) had was high-stakes bingo and they had used that to build a good community. The folks from Grand Ronde saw what was possible and that had an effect on them."

Thomas says there were many economic development options on the table for Tribal leadership to consider. He said Tribal Council looked at all of them and in particular they looked at what other Tribes were doing.

"We had been looking at different proposals and considering different opportunities for economic development when the gaming proposal came up," says Thomas. "We realized it could be a home run. Originally, we had been looking at having a third party run the operation for us, but after considering our



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On Oct. 16, Spirit Mountain Casino will mark the 20th anniversary of its opening.

options in that regard we decided to do it ourselves."

Thomas was Spirit Mountain Casino's first general manager from opening through Feb. 8, 2000. He now works at Rolling Hills Casino in Corning, Calif.

Thomas says the development corporation — the Grand Ronde Tribe's economic development arm — worked with the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Tribe in Prior Lake, Minn., to establish Spirit Mountain Casino. The Shakopees own and operate Mystic Lake Casino southwest of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

"I think Bruce Thomas was a key player in that whole situation," says Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno. "I think not having to hire a management company to come in

and manage our casino for us added to our success. We weren't relying on somebody else to tell us how to run our casino. We, as a Tribe with Tribal members and others, were doing it on our own."

Larsen agrees that Thomas was one of the keys to Spirit Mountain Casino's early success.

"When we got going he took us to the top," says Larsen. "It was exciting."

Gaming compact signed

Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts, who was governor from 1991-95, signed a gaming compact with Grand Ronde in 1993 and the Tribal membership voted to pursue gaming in 1994.

Roberts was Oregon's 34th governor and the first woman to be

elected to the office. She was born in Corvallis and raised in Sheridan, where she graduated from Sheridan High School in 1955.

"She (Roberts) was open to the idea," says Larsen. "She came out to the powwow to sign the compact. It was quite an experience."

"The process was new in Oregon and it was relatively new nationally because the Indian Gaming Act was new to the country," says Roberts during a recent interview at Spirit Mountain. "We had no experience in Oregon with the kind of discussions and negotiations that went on in terms of size and the number of machines. All of the technical part of those negotiations we had never done that before."

"It literally was a whole new process for both the Tribal representatives and the state people who were doing the negotiations. We knew the process had to be fair to the Tribe. It had to be realistic. It had to be economical so that they could in fact make money at this process."

Roberts says negotiating the compact with Grand Ronde was at times "tedious" and time-consuming, but she said it was critical that it was done correctly.

"It set the pattern for every other Tribal negotiation that we did setting up the next set of gaming operations," says Roberts. "So this was the blueprint, if you will, for what we did with the rest of the state."

Roberts says growing up in Sheridan made working with Grand Ronde Tribal leadership interesting and important.

"I had a few Tribal members who actually went to school with me in Sheridan," says Roberts. "This felt like home for me out here and the fact that this was the first Tribe was very special for me that I got to do this one. It was a very positive experience. It was not confrontational and it was not just a legal



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The 1993-94 Tribal Council — from left, Kathryn Harrison, Leon Tom, Mark Mercier, Ed Larsen, Merle Holmes, Candy Robertson and Val Grout — stands on the future site of Spirit Mountain Casino.