

‘I wanted to follow in my

ELDERS FEATURE continued from front page

“I always say that I am either extremely blessed or the luckiest guy on earth,” Bobb says. “To have been through what I have been through and still be here on this earth, I know I have a purpose.”

Currently, Bobb shares his artistic talent with the Tribe and community, as well as serves as chair of the Veterans Special Event Board. He also served two terms on Tribal Council from 2007 to 2013.

“I did two tours on Tribal Council,” he says. “I wanted to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps. He was a leader in the Grand Ronde community his entire life.”

On a recent day with the hint of spring in the air, Bobb sat down in his art studio and told his story. It hasn’t always been a pristine or pretty tale, but the gritty details are interwoven with humor.

Bobb’s eyes gleam as he shares some of the escapades from the days when he was growing up in Grand Ronde on his grandparent’s 240-acre farm located where the Tribe’s Natural Resources Department is now situated.

“Growing up, I thought everyone lived on 240 acres,” he says. “I would come into town and be like, ‘What the heck is this? These people are all squished together!’”

Growing up during the Termination era, he formed a lifelong bond with fellow Tribal Elder and past Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno. The two have gone through much together, from high school hijinks to service in Vietnam, to raising families and serving on Tribal Council.

Bobb jokes that while the two attended St. Michael’s Grade School, Leno was the altar boy while he “was most definitely not.”

“He’s right about that one,” Leno says, chuckling.

Bobb describes the discipline at St. Michael’s as harsh, so he did his best to still have fun. However, his class clowning became so prolific that at one point nuns stopped by his grandparent’s home to express “concern for his soul.”

That’s why he finds it ironic that he is now the “go to” Elder for invocations at Tribal events.

“Who would have ever thought that?” he says, smiling. “Reyn always tells me not to tell this story, but he jokes that he is going to stand as far away from me as possible when I lead invocations in case lightning strikes.”

The early years

Bobb was born on April 7, 1949, to Faye Riggs White and Wilson Bobb Jr. When he was two months old, his mother was killed in a car accident on Highway 18. He was almost made a ward of the state, but grandparents Wilson (Sr.) and Lena Bobb fought for two years to adopt their grandchild.

“Nowadays, grandparents raise their grandkids quite a bit,” Bobb



Courtesy photos

In this photo taken on the family farm in Grand Ronde in 1956, Tribal Elder Steve Bobb Sr., who was 7, is seen with his grandparents, who raised him, Wilson Bobb Sr., left, and Lena Bobb, second from left, his uncle and grandmother’s brother, Alpheus Norwest, second from right, and his aunt Edna Norwest.

says. “But in the late 1940s and early 1950s that was pretty uncommon.”

His grandfather was a no-nonsense man who believed in the value of hard work and had Bobb rise at 5 a.m. most days. Although waste and laziness were not tolerated, Bobb says that his grandparents gave him “everything he wanted” since they weren’t at an age where they could participate in activities with him.

“Everyone called me ‘the brat,’” he says. “My aunt, Verna Larsen, called me that until nearly the day that she died.”

He isn’t sure what age he met Leno, but the two remember each other “as far back as we could go.”

“Back then, Grand Ronde was a cocoon,” Bobb says. “All of us were pretty much related so every other house was a relative or family connection. It was very tight-knit and everyone looked out for one another.”

The Bobb’s farm was often home base for the boys to hang out and admire his model cars, which Bobb built and painted from the time he was very young.

“It was during the era of Termination and there was some name calling,” Leno says. “Kids in town would call us ‘The Bad Guys,’ so we changed the name to ‘The Good Guys,’ and had our own hand signals and cars, just like a gang. We all stuck together and it was quite an adventure.”

One of their adventures included “taking a break” during school days to sneak over to the pool hall in

Willamina.

“We knew as long as we made it back to school before the buses left, it would be fine,” Leno says. “Then, once we got older and better, we hit the era of playing for beers. Our wives, Liz and Connie, would definitely say that we were quite good pool players.”

Bobb and his wife were both in the Willamina High School Class of 1967, but he dropped out three months shy of graduation after he and his friends were suspended for tampering with a fire alarm. One of his friends went back, but he and another friend did not.

“My grandfather had a hard time understanding why I just wouldn’t straighten up,” he says. “He was well-educated, had a college degree and trained to be a CPA. He couldn’t figure out why I didn’t get it. ... It hasn’t affected anything I wanted to do in life, but I don’t know that you could do that today. You really can’t get away with stuff like that.”

Bobb got a job at the Willamina Brick Plant. Shortly afterward, he and Connie married.

Then, a series of poor life choices contributed to his decision to join the Marine Corps. Within a short period, he lost his job, got into trouble with the law and subsequently crashed his 1965 Corvette while “on the lam” in Montana.

“So I had no job, no car and Connie was definitely not happy,” he says. “Something needed to change.”

The U.S. involvement in Vietnam was escalating and Bobb wanted to

serve his country. When he went in for a physical before Marines boot camp, doctors found a lump on his ribs, which was subsequently removed. Forty days post-surgery, he was in a grueling boot camp in San Diego.

Six others from Grand Ronde joined that year, including Leno, because they considered themselves to be “bad.”

“Boy, what a mistake that was,” Bobb says. “Being a brat, always getting what I wanted, that ended when I joined the Marines. You really find out quickly that you are not a bad ass.”

By this time, he and Connie were expecting their first child.

“I had a wife who wouldn’t give up on me, who saw the good in me and a community that would not allow me to destroy myself. It really does take a village. Eventually, a light will go on,” he says.

Asked about that challenging time, Connie describes it as “a test for sure.”

“But when we were being raised, you are in it for the long haul,” she says. “I came from a divorced family and so it was very important to keep us together.”

The couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in December. They have three sons, Steve Jr., Billy and Cory, and 10 grandchildren ranging in age from 12 to 26.

“We will probably have some great-grandchildren before too long, but really, all grandchildren are great,” Bobb says.

Shortly after his first son was born, Bobb shipped out for Viet-