

Fates of Grand Ronde Tribe, Chemawa Indian School span 100 years

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In the 20th century, the Grand Ronde Tribe's history is punctuated by 1954's Termination and 1983's Restoration, but the boarding school experience runs throughout.

Harry Jones, a member of the Tribe, met his future wife, Ella Flemming, at Chemawa Indian School, the boarding school in Salem, just after the turn of the century. That was also where, in 1910, he graduated first in his class.

Nakoosa Moreland, Senior Miss of Grand Ronde Royalty and former Junior Miss, carries on the century-old relationship today.

"This is my first year here at Chemawa," she wrote from Facebook, a sure sign of how much times have changed. She describes the friends she's made from other Tribes.

"I plan on staying here throughout high school," she says.

Life at Chemawa, as at all Indian boarding schools, was not always so accommodating to students.

Jones succeeded in an institution that eight years earlier, as reported in "Standing Tall, The Lifeway of Kathryn Jones Harrison," had received the following instructions from the federal Indian Affairs Commissioner. It was dated Jan. 11, 1902:

"The wearing of long hair by the male population ... is not in keeping with the advancement they are making ... in civilization ... You are to induce your male Indians to cut their hair, and both sexes to stop painting. With some of the Indians, this will be an easy matter; with others, it will require considerable tact and perseverance ... A non-compliance with this order may be made a reason for discharge or for

withholding rations and supplies ... and if they become obstreperous about the matter, a short confinement in the guard-house at hard labor with shorn locks should furnish a cure

"Indian dances and so-called Indian feasts should be prohibited. In many cases these dances and feasts are simply subterfuges to cover degrading acts and to disguise immoral purposes. You are directed to use your best efforts in the suppression of these evils."

Even at 18, Jones saw clearly into the future. In his valedictory speech, also reported in Harrison's biography, he said:

"As the Indian was brought to bay, he looked around and saw the white man everywhere. He has submitted to the inevitable, and is now beginning to know that ... the white man's God ... intends that all men should be brothers. Instead of looking on the white man as an enemy, we turn to you for help. Will you be our brother?"

From then until the present day, the Grand Ronde Tribe and Tribal members have played many roles in shaping the Chemawa Indian School community.

Jones's daughter, current Tribal Elder and longtime Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison, said that her father did not like the school much and did not want any of his children to go there.

It was an Indian military school then, said Harrison, and her father felt that the authorities were "so mean and rigid." The military period lasted into the 1930s.

By the late 1930s, however, when three of Jones's six children had attended, the military orientation was ending, and, in the years following, would begin to value Indian customs. Like many who went to school there in the years after, Harrison found Chemawa much to her liking.

"For me," she said, "it was a lifesaver - taking me from foster homes to a place I belonged. And that seemed to be the feeling of many others who went there." She attended Chemawa beginning in 1939 and graduated in 1942.

The 1942 Chemawa yearbook, "The Chief," had the following entry: "Kathryn Jones - 'Jonsey,' Alaskan-Rogue river, Siletz, Oregon. (inaccurate BIA description, said Harrison; should be Molalla for Tribal affiliation and not Siletz as a home designation); Vocation: Home economics. Activities: House council 41-42, YWCA 41-42, Reporter 42, School cheerleader 41-42, Junior play, Senior play, Annual staff, Girls quintette 40-41, Glee club 40-41-42, Home room president 42. Motto: 'A quitter never wins and a winner never quits.' "

Tribal Elder Dorothy Greene had a similarly positive experience. She attended starting in 1936 and graduated in 1940.

The 1942 yearbook had a "telegram" from Greene (nee LaBonte) in the "Class Prophecy" section: "Taking my all-girl orchestra to Hawaii Stop I am really getting 'Brown' " - Dorothy LaBonte.

"It was very good because I learned to cook there," said Greene, "and how to sew, and home economics where we built things."

For some, like Greene, the Indian school looked better than neighborhood life in Grand Ronde at the time.

Greene attended at the recommendation of her grandmother, former Tribal Elder Caroline LaBonte Jeffries.

"Things were too wild (at home), I guess," said Greene.

For others, like Tribal Elder Leon "Chip" Tom, hometown life was more appealing. He also attended Chemawa in the late '30s and early '40s. "I don't believe I made it a year," he says. "I didn't want to be away from home."

And it was no wonder. Tom attended Willamina High School where he lettered in three sports and played on the town baseball team with Tribal members much older. However, he notes that his sister, Marcial, who passed on at age 21, succeeded at Chemawa.

She used to say, "You had a roof over your head and three meals and a pretty good education. She went the four years and graduated."

"I thought it was probably the nicest program that the government provided for the Tribal people in the Pacific Northwest," says Tom. "When I was there, we had Indians from all over the state. Educational, vocational, you could weld or plumb or paint, be a carpenter, work in the barber shop."

He did not like how hard they made him work. "When I did work," he said, "they had me shoveling coal. I emptied the cars that come in. Or manure," but adds, "You got exercise. You built your muscles up. It was a little bit dirty, but I thought it was a good program to make people understand that they had to work."

For many Elders, it was a benefit to attend Chemawa with family members and friends.

Greene recalls Grand Ronde Tribal members Dorothy McKnight Lawe, Minnie Menard, Leonard Vivette ("a wonderful athlete"), Pauline LaBonte and Loree Vivette as classmates.

Harrison jotted down a list of more than 20 Tribal members she remembers attending Chemawa, including Clifford Day, Verna Riggs Larsen, Clyde Sorenson, Biff Langley, Marge Lafferty McAbee, Norma Lafferty Lee, Lewis Riggs, Jo LaBonte, Chip Tom and his sister Marcial, Margie Menard, John McKinney, Ivey McKinney, Dorothy Jones Track, Harold Jones, Georgia Renfro, Russell Jeffers and Ira Jeffers.

In 1939, she remembers, former Tribal member Clifford Day was among Chemawa students recruited to act in the 1940 Spencer Tracy classic, "Northwest Passage."

"When they came back," says Harrison, "They were well-dressed and had Mohawks, like they had in the movie."

At the same time, the legacy of corporal punishment and sexual and emotional abuse at boarding schools generally were carried forward into new Indian families for generations. The practice of sending Indian children to work as domestics and yard workers in the homes of local families during

summer months kept children from their families -- too often abusive families in alcohol-, and later drug- and gang-fueled communities -- all through their youths.

This lack of family connections is frequently named in academic literature as a contributor to trauma in Indian communities that has stretched over generations. It left many without parenting examples for their own children, and only in recent years are groups like White Bison and The Boarding School Healing Project starting to address these issues.

Harrison, however, recalled living with "a wonderful family" during summers that wanted to adopt her, though she told them she did not want to leave her friends and the family she had created at Chemawa.

Former Tribal Elder Orville Leno, on the other hand, ran away from Chemawa three times, according to his son, Tribal Council Vice Chair Reyn Leno.

"Positive and negative can happen at the same time at the same location, and that's the way it was at the boarding schools," says Tribal Elder Bob Tom, who lived on the campus in the 1950s when his parents worked there.

The story was somewhat different for Bob Tom and others, like Herman Hudson Jr., both Tribal Elders today, who lived on campus with parents employed by the school. The children attended public school nearby in Salem, and yet joined in with the boarding school students in many social ways.

Children of Chemawa staff were not permitted to attend school at Chemawa to avoid favoritism.

Herman Hudson Jr., who lived on the campus from 1930-42, when he joined the Armed Forces, says, "I'd never had a flush toilet or electric lights until I moved to Chemawa."

He remembers the Chemawa basketball team with a laugh. "Every time they scored a basket, they had another jump ball," he says.

His father, Herman Hudson, a former Tribal Elder, worked at the school as a bus and truck driver. And the senior Hudson was not alone among Tribal members in helping shape the school as faculty and staff.

Former Tribal Elder Emanuel Hudson, Herman's cousin, served the school as Guidance Department head for a time, and of the school's dormitories for another period during the 1950s and '60s.

A 1956 "Chemawa American" newsletter reported, "Mr. E.B. Hudson made the presentation of certificates to boys who were selected as outstanding citizens in the boys' dormitories." Later in the same newsletter, the report Superintendent's Home Open to Employees on Sunday Afternoon, April 8, notes: "During the afternoon Miss Betty Langley, Miss Mayme Tedlock, *Mrs. Emanuel Hudson* (italics added), and Mrs. James MacDonald poured."

A benefit of schooling at Chemawa, Bob Tom says, "was that Indians from different Tribes went to school with each other."

"At one time, you could look at Tribes in the Northwest and you would see Chemawa graduates on Tribal Councils, in top administrative positions. The leadership of Northwest Tribes were all coming out of Chemawa.

"Northwest Tribes got along much better than Tribes of other areas because of Chemawa. It was a positive benefit for the Tribes."

Long Tribal connection to Chemawa

The Grand Ronde Tribe's long and deeply held connections with Chemawa were more personal in the early years, though they have turned political as the Northwest Tribes have grown and prospered.

Bob Tom, like many others, remembers a lot of the personal joys.

"I was born at the hospital there. Both of my parents worked at the school." His father, former Tribal Elder Abraham Tom, worked on the farm and in construction. His mother, Aurilla Tom, was a baker for Chemawa, and baked for each meal, with a break in between.

"There was a real intermingling, kids and families," he says. "Really, the employees and their kids would go to school plays and sports functions. It was kind of a close-knit community."

Between dairy and pig farms (the pig farm was called "Pigville"), orchards and row crops, the school was almost self-sufficient, say Tribal members who lived there.

In the evenings, says Kathryn Harrison, they would let the students pick fruit from the orchards. As growing adolescents, she says, "We were always hungry. It wasn't like home where you could go into the kitchen and get something to eat."

But things changed as the years went by. Many Northwest Tribes, including Grand Ronde, found better schooling opportunities for their children in their own communities, and Chemawa began recruiting Navajos in Arizona and New Mexico, says Bob Tom.

The yearbook for 1959-60 showed a graduating class made up of students almost entirely from Arizona and New Mexico with one from Utah.

The school that had at one time served mostly Northwest Tribes changed to serve about 50 percent Northwest and 50 percent Navajo. Later, it served almost 100 percent Navajo, and later still, it changed again to a 50/50 mix of Navajo and Alaskan Natives, Tom says.

By the time Louis King (Oklahoma Seminole), now Spirit Mountain Community Fund's Program Coordinator, joined the staff at Chemawa in 1989, some 60 different Tribes were again represented at the school, but the heyday of Grand Ronde participation in the school was past.

The political history of Chemawa shows a school that during bad times and better times always resided in the Grand Ronde Tribe's ceded lands.

With a \$5,000 federal grant, the school, one of 100 such institutions across the country, was established in 1880 in Forest Grove. The first class included 14 boys and four girls; 17 from the Puyallup Reservation and one from the Nisqually in Washington.

The schools came into being to assimilate the conquered peoples by stripping their children of their identities, while at the same time protecting them from virulent racism in the European settler population.

"I have literally to carry this Indian-hating Northwest Coast on my back," wrote M.C. Wilkinson, a U.S. Army first lieutenant who first ran the school, as reported in the 1979 dedication program for the rebuilt Chemawa School.

At the same time, the school provided substandard food and health care that nonetheless often was better than what was available on the reservations.

In 1884, H.J. Minthorn, uncle to Herbert Hoover, who would become U.S. President, took over as superintendent. He bemoaned a lack of funding for the school that would follow it all through its history.

"Every department of the school is insufficiently equipped. The farmer has had no farm, the shoe shop is too small, and so is the carpentry shop. There are only two schoolrooms for 200 children, the dining room and the dormitories are crowded." The water supply was unreliable, drainage was inadequate and in other ways the Forest Grove site was unsuitable.

Later that year, the heart of the school burned to the ground.

It moved to its current site north of Salem the next year, when it became known as the Salem School and, soon, also as the Chemawa Indian School. The land was cleared and many structures were built by the students themselves.

Chemawa also was home to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Agency for Grand Ronde and Siletz Tribes in the 1920s and '30s.

Tribe fought effort to close school

Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act, was one of three laws enacted in the 1970s giving Indians control over their own educational system. It spawned both a federal effort to close the boarding schools and the Tribes' resistance to that effort.

The Grand Ronde Tribe played a prominent role in fighting the federal effort over the last 20-25 years, says Bob Tom.

The school has long played an important role for many students who still live in bad home and worse community situations, and for those who do not have the opportunity to get an education where they live.

With the help of Oregon legislators like Sen. Mark Hatfield, Chemawa survived.

At the end of 1979, rather than closing the facility, groundbreaking began for new school facilities on the property.

Louis King served as superintendent from 1995-2001 and was Facilities manager there for the five previous years.

"During the time that I was superintendent," says King, "it was not heavily attended by Grand Ronde Tribal members. There was a local school here (in Grand Ronde/Willamina) that met the needs."

With ever fewer students at the school, the Grand Ronde Tribe nevertheless stood by the facility. In 1990, the Tribe's residential alcohol and drug abuse center, Nanitch Sahallie, in Keizer was serving Chemawa students, says Kathleen Tom, Grand Ronde Tribal Council secretary.

King remembers that the school erected billboards on its land by Interstate 5 in 1995 and '96.

The billboard signs were intended to generate funds for Chemawa students, says King. "The funds went directly to students. Some had family deaths, and the money went to send them home for funerals. Many came and they really didn't have clothing. It was used 100 percent to support student

needs. It provided job opportunities on campus. For some kids, they got no support from home, so we felt like it was a win-win because we could keep facilities open for kids that we weren't able to do with existing staff.

"I always thought it was interesting that when that property became jointly owned by Grand Ronde and Siletz, to Grand Ronde's credit, it continued to give the money back to the school for the students."

But it was always more than money that Grand Ronde provided.

In 2005, Grand Ronde managed a nearly \$47,000 grant in cooperation with the Siletz Tribe to study the idea of bringing the Chemawa Indian Health Service facility into the two nearby Tribes' compacts as a way to improve health services throughout the area.

The Grand Ronde Tribe also got involved in smaller, more individual ways.

"During my administration," says King, "we would always send out personal invitations to the Tribes to participate in Chemawa powwows and graduations, and Grand Ronde always participated."

In the mid-1990s, Tribal Council Secretary Kathleen Tom served a term on the Chemawa School Board.

Appointed by Tribal Council, Tom joined the board with instructions to develop land on the west side of the railroad tracks on the site of the old Chemawa school.

"When I got there," says Kathleen Tom, "the new school dormitories had leaks all over and mold, and no money from the BIA to fix things. The kids were living in deplorable conditions. The project was meant to help the school fill the shortfalls.

"The Tribe put thousands of dollars into an environmental study assessing all of the school buildings," says Tom. "We wanted to clean it up and develop one section (of the old campus) to help offset the costs.

"We were pushing for a light industrial mix of businesses where kids could learn a skill, intern at a business and maybe not have to go home in the summer, when home was not the best place to be."

That the plan fell apart amid differences with other Oregon Tribes did not diminish the Grand Ronde Tribe's continuing support for the school.

"We made the casino available for Chemawa prom nights," says Kathleen Tom, "and we have been supportive of all their functions, including personal requests from individual students

"We have advocated on behalf of students with the Indian Health Service," she says.

Grand Ronde students still attend

Today, many Elders still talk about Chemawa graduations, when they would come to graduation as alumni, and then they would get up and sing the Chemawa song. And then alumni would have a dinner and dance.

"I can remember," says Bob Tom, "when they used to dress up in formals. It was a highlight of their year."

Today, only a handful of Grand Ronde Tribal members either work or study at Chemawa. In recent years, Tribal Elders Claudia Leno and Ellen Fischer worked at the school. Tribal member Rhonda Fraser and Natalie Jackson still do.

Nakoosa Moreland is one Tribal member who has found a high school home in Chemawa, but the state's current financial crisis has others thinking about an education at Chemawa, too.

Willamina ninth-grader and Tribal member Cody Haller, 15, says: "Willamina is a good school and stuff, but they don't seem to have enough money to teach us what we should know."

On the other hand, Haller says, she wants to go to Chemawa "because there's other Natives there. I think there would be a good opportunity there to learn about my Tribe and others, too. I want to learn how other Tribes do stuff, and where other kids came from and their background."

Moreland says she has learned a lot: How Indians from different reservations see the world differently, and how urban Indians take a slower approach to the world than reservation kids.

And the education today, of course, has changed drastically from those early days.

"There are many different cultures here," Moreland wrote. "Area codes get well known around here, too. Haha. Probably the most area codes I'll ever learn."