

Willamette Heritage Center exhibit looks at role of tribal women

By Barbara Curtin

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As far back as anyone remembers, women have been leaders among the native people now known as the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

Women sustained their families and even gave birth along the Trail of Tears that forced Western Oregon tribes onto the reservation at Grand Ronde. Women crafted baskets for tourists as a cottage industry early in the last century. Women pushed for revival of the Chinuk Wawa language and for restoration of tribal status in modern times.

These and other chapters come to life in "Grand Ronde Women – Our Story," the new exhibit at the Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill. It's the third show in the center's "Year of the Woman" series, which celebrates the centennial of women's suffrage in Oregon. The show opened Friday and runs through May 28.

The museum's director, Peter Booth, said visitors likely will be surprised to learn the extent of women's leadership in tribal life.

"In Western society, women were only recently accepted into leadership roles," he said. "Women always had an important place within tribal society, as exemplified by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde."

Visitors will see precious artifacts such as a Kalapuya "burden basket" that is at least 150 years old. Other exhibits are modern re-creations, such as a cedar-bark skirt, hat and shawl based on traditional women's wear.

Three imposing quilts commemorate the lives of loved ones who have passed on. A photo gallery captures the confidence of women leaders in recent decades.

David Lewis, the tribes' Cultural Resources Department manager, was helping install the exhibit last week. Pressed to pick a single item that touched him, Lewis chose a thin, faded-blue wool shawl.



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The "Grand Ronde Women - Our Story" exhibit is at the Willamette Heritage Center.

If you go

What: "Grand Ronde Women – Our Story"

Where: Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill, 1313 Mill St. SE

When: Through May 28, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays except some holidays

Cost: \$6, \$5 ages 55 and older, \$4 students, \$3 ages 6 to 17 and free ages younger than 6 and Willamette Heritage Center and Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde members and for everyone on Tuesdays

Special events: Chinuk Wawa language presentation and class, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. April 24, in the heritage center church; free. Grand Ronde basket-weaving demonstration, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. May 12; free. Grand Ronde dance demonstration and presentation, 1 to 2 p.m. May 19; \$2 to \$5

More information: (503) 585-7012 or <http://www.willametteheritage.org>

Jane McKay, 17 at the time, carried it and a basket on the 263-mile journey that moved unrelated tribes to the Grand Ronde reservation in 1856, Lewis explained.

ONLINE

For a photo gallery and video, see this story at StatesmanJournal.com

“The Trail of Tears shawl is pretty amazing,” he said. “To think that it would survive 175 years, and we’d have it with us, an artifact of the trail of so much pain and loss.”

Stephanie Wood, a young tribal member, was delivering supplies for a basket-weaving display. She comes from a family of basket weavers, she said, with baskets and lore passed from one generation to the next.

“When a weaver weaves a basket, they are telling the story and putting their blood, sweat and tears into it,” said Wood, a master’s student in cultural anthropology, folklore and museum studies at University of Oregon.

“It’s real powerful. You can feel the strength in the baskets when you hold them.”

This exhibit, like previous ones curated by the tribes, has a dual purpose. After it closes at the Willamette Heritage Center, it will provide elements for the tribal museum planned to open in 2013.

Lewis also is curating a new permanent exhibit for the 1841 Parsonage at the Willamette Heritage Center. It’s part of an effort to use the historical homes on site to tell broader stories about Willamette Valley history. He also is working with the Oregon Coast Aquarium, which wants to display portions of last year’s canoe exhibit at Willamette Heritage Center.

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