



REMEMBERING A GREAT TRIBAL CHAIR AND A GOOD FRIEND

BY DENNIS J. WHITTLESEY

The Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe of Indians of Canyonville, Oregon is mourning the recent death of its long-time Chair Sue Shaffer, who died at the age of 94, leaving a legacy of achievement that will be hard for anyone in Indian Country to equal.

I had the great fortune of working with her long before the Tribe opened the first casino in the State, and it is safe to say that working with her changed my life and was always a pleasure. Her energy and ability to move into uncharted waters with confidence was unique.

Sue was a leader in getting Congress to formally recognize The Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe of Indians in December 1982. She was tribal chairwoman from 1983 until 2010, and for all of that time was its public face.

After gaining recognition, the Tribe was essentially penniless, but Sue saw Indian Bingo as an economic opportunity. With that, she worked tirelessly to persuade the federal government to loan the Tribe money for a bingo hall in Canyonville.

After Congress enacted the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act on October 17, 1988, she was interested in pursuing Indian Gaming but was faced with a provision in the Oregon Constitution prohibiting the operation of a “casino.” It was universally assumed in the state that the Oregon tribes would never be able to participate in what was quickly becoming a very profitable undertaking for tribes with casinos. With her ever-present energy, she insisted that there had to be a way for an Oregon tribe to secure a Class III Gaming Compact with the state and pressed her team (including this writer) to figure out a way to secure gaming.

Working with Sue, we discovered that while a “casino” was illegal, the Constitution provided that every bar in the state could have up to five slot machines. So, in discussions



Sue Shaffer
Former Tribal Chairman,
Cow Creek Band of the
Umpqua Tribe of Indians

with the Governor’s Compact Team, we pointed this out and asked the question: “When does the machine count make it a casino – 10 machines. 15 machines: 20 machines?” Of course, there was no answer, so we proposed to limit Class III gaming to 15 percent of the Bingo Hall’s gaming floor which the Governor accepted in 1992. The Cow Creek Gaming Hall was born and, although a legal challenge was expected, it never came. As they say, the rest is history.

The gaming facility was expanded into a full casino in 1994, and the Seven Feathers Casino Resort is now a 298-room hotel and casino. The tribe has used its gaming revenue to purchase other businesses, expanding scope of

employment opportunity for tribal members and other local residents. The Tribe is prosperous and funds numerous programs benefiting both the tribal and non-tribal community.

At every step of the way, Sue demonstrated amazing judgement and vision. We ran into people who knew her everywhere we went, including Washington, D.C. She was friends with the Congressional Delegation and Senators throughout her life. She was kind, generous and uniformly polite to everyone.

Among the tributes expressed upon the news of her death, Oregon Senator U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley described her as “a passionate and effective leader,” adding “Oregon families have lost an extraordinary champion. I loved her from the first time I heard her deliver a fiery call to action at a political event. Sue was known for her straight-forward style, her honesty and integrity.”

There were so many accolades that it would be impossible to list them here. But one that is worth sharing came from member of my family, who said, “I am so glad to have known Sue.” I suspect that everyone with whom she interacted feels that way. ❁