

Beloved horsewoman rides to the sky

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Contributed photo Etta Conner gives a Pendleton blanket to Dwight Eisenhower during one of the president's visits to the Northwest.





Etta Conner poses wearing her Indian regalia as a young women.



Etta Conner

Among mourners saying goodbye to Etta Conner on Monday was a horse in full regalia.

The riderless bay stood silently at Olney Cemetery as Conner's body was interred. Family and friends said reluctant goodbyes to the beloved Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation elder.

Conner, who died Friday, May 20 at 82, was buried near her parents, three brothers and a sister.

Those who knew the mother of nine say she lived up to her Indian name, Wyassus, which means "dance." The big-hearted woman had an omnipresent smile and seemed to have fingers and toes in a multitude of community activities. Though she battled stomach cancer in her final months, the longtime Happy Canyon volunteer took part in the 2015 Happy Canyon Night Show.

As a young woman, she raced around the Pendleton Round-Up oval in the competition for Indian women.

"She was a good horsewoman," said Cayuse Chief Jesse Jones, who is a cousin of Conner.

"She was someone who looked up to her big brothers," said Conner's daughter, Camilla El Shoura. "She wanted to be like them. She wanted to ride like them."

Conner's nephew, Brian Conner, held the riderless horse, Hero, in place during the interment. Hero belongs to Conner's niece, Bobbie Conner, who stood nearby. Later, Conner said the tribute honored her aunt's prowess as a horsewoman and spoke to the void she left behind.

"It's recognition of the missing," Conner said. "It's not just the loss of my aunt, but to all the women on horseback who have gone before."

Riding horses was only one of Conner's passions through the years. The high-energy Conner also excelled in baton twirling as a majorette at Pendleton High School.

"She was one of the best of the best," said Bobbie. "After high school, she went to Sheridan, Wyoming, and competed in the Miss Indian America Pageant. Her talent was baton."

Conner twirled her way to first runner-up wearing a headband, fringed skirt, beaded vest and moccasins.

A black-and-white photo at the Pendleton Post Office shows Conner presenting a Pendleton blanket to then-President Dwight Eisenhower during a stop in Pendleton.

As a student at University of Portland, she competed in downhill and slalom skiing with Ski-ente club. She graduated with a degree in administration of justice and worked at the PSU School of Social Work. Because of the federal Indian Relocation Act, she moved to several large cities for employment. In Colorado Springs, Colorado, she worked as a secretary for a Jewish auction house; in Albuquerque, she worked odd jobs; and in Los Angeles, she was employed by an athletic club.

Eventually, after two divorces, she made her way back to Pendleton in the '80s where she raised her nine children and worked for a time with the Tribes' Children & Family Services. El Shoura said her mother encouraged each child to find their own way. El Shoura, who is now Muslim, received no pushback from her mother, who was an elder with the Tutuilla Presbyterian Church.

Conner camped each year at the teepee village at Round-Up and also at the Wallowa Tamkaliks celebration, which her brother Taz founded. Last year at Tamkaliks, Conner was named as the oldest rider at age 81.

“She had an ornery horse, but it didn’t faze her,” El Shoura said. “She handled it like she always does.”

After the interment on Monday, El Shoura, Conner, Jones and about 80 other family members made their way into the longhouse in Mission for the traditional greeting of the family. They slowly made their way past non-family members who encircled the large room, stopping for hugs and handshakes.

One person at the gathering, Jennifer Karson Engum, a cultural anthropologist for the CTUIR who had listened to oral history from Conner, said the elder knew how to mesh her Indian traditions with modern American culture. Engum said she often ran into Conner at the Roundup Athletic Club after the woman had finished water aerobics. Conner, she said, would take earthy-smelling dried root used in sweat lodges into the RAC sauna.

“She was living her identity wherever she went,” Engum said.

El Shoura said she will miss sharing sushi and movie nights with her mom. She and her husband are adopting Sully, Conner’s Jack Russell terrier. She and the rest of the family can’t quite wrap their minds around the fact that they’ll never see one of Conner’s warm smiles again.

“It’s hard to let her go,” said El Shoura. “We wanted to keep her around forever.”

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