

AT STAKE IN THE FIGHT OVER A CASCADE LOCKS CASINO IS MORE THAN AN ENVIRONMENTAL OR SOCIOLOGICAL WAGER: IT'S THE FUTURES OF TWO TRIBES STRUGGLING FOR SURVIVAL.

BY CHRIS LYDGATE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BASIL CHILDERS



This image: Lewis Pitt Jr is one of the Warm Springs leaders spearheading the effort to build a Cascade Locks casino.

Opposite: Grand Ronde Chairwoman Cheryl Kennedy says the Warm Springs plan "would be devastating" to the fortunes of her tribe.

THE GAMBLE IN THE GORGE





As you look south from the West Hills of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, the desert unfolds from the horizon like a classic canvas of the Old West,

a panorama of parched earth and heart-stopping canyons. If you squint, you can almost see buckskin-clad hunters riding through this valley, their obsidian spearheads winking in the sun. But if you turn around and face the other way, the Hollywood backdrop dissolves in a kaleidoscope of misfortune.

The West Hills of Portland are home to the swankiest addresses in the city. The West Hills of Warm Springs are another story. In these hills, the streets are studded with debris—a dead car battery, the fractured spine of an office chair, a tricycle with a wheel torn off. An abandoned house, tattooed with graffiti, sits empty and forlorn, its windows vacant like a blind man's eyes. A crippled pickup sits on concrete blocks; mattresses litter a yard. A chill wind blows in from the east, rustling the twisted guts of a charred baby stroller. The tang of juniper mingles with wood smoke and the scent of desperation. Two men share a cigarette in a front yard where nothing grows. They stare at a visitor and do not smile.

It would not be fair to judge Warm Springs by this particular neighborhood, any more than it would be to judge Portland by the drifters camped in Old Town's doorways. Nonetheless, the West Hills symbolize both the poverty and the potential of Oregon's biggest Indian reservation—a legacy of 150 years of war, disease, starvation, racism and neglect.

Now, however, the tribes of Warm Springs are tantalizingly close to a deal that would transform their future—an opportunity to build a casino in Cascade Locks. A casino that could generate more than \$200 million a year—about seven times the tribe's current income.

The casino proposal has unleashed howls of outrage. Greens worry about the environmental impact. Church groups decry the social costs of gambling. Neighbors fret about the traffic. No one is exactly thrilled about the idea of plunking down a casino amid the breathtaking grandeur of the Columbia River Gorge.

In reality, the casino dispute is a struggle for money and power, for tradition and identity. It is about winning big—and losing everything.

But the most powerful players betting against the proposal are neither greens, nor Christians, nor neighbors. They are Indians—specifically the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, who own the Spirit Mountain casino 33 miles west of Salem.

Spirit Mountain is currently the closest major casino to Portland. A casino in Cascade Locks would change that—and the Grand Ronde are waging a concerted campaign to stop it.

On the surface, the story may appear to revolve around air pollution or wildlife habitat. But in reality, those are cardboard cutouts obscuring the deeper issues—issues that aren't often aired in public meetings or on editorial pages. This is a struggle for money and power, for tradition and identity. It is about winning big—and losing everything.

DIRECTIONS TO THE WARM SPRINGS RESERVATION from Portland: Drive east on SE Powell Blvd, past Kelly Butte, Powell Butte, Gresham and Boring. Follow U.S. 26 as it climbs through Sandy, Wemme, Zigzag and Rhododendron, up the shoulder of Mount Hood to Government Camp.

Grind down the far side of the mountain, wind along Ghost Creek Canyon and up through the climax at Blue Box Pass. Glide down the highway on its slow descent from the deep green pine of the Cascades to the juniper and sagebrush of the high desert.

The reservation is often described as remote—a masterpiece of understatement. As you head south on Simnasho Road, a limitless plateau stretches to the horizon, where the chipped tooth of Mount Jefferson gnaws at the sky. Every color has been dipped in dust, from the blood-red dirt to the yellow grass to the green lichen. The long, lonely road winds past tumbledown cabins and fences anchored by piles of rock—the ground here is so stony you can't drive a stake into it. Then suddenly the earth cracks open like it was split by a wedge, and you are surrounded by monumental buttes, spectacular bluffs, sculpted valleys and sleeping giants, desolate and awesome and heartrending all at once.

Despite its colossal scale, the reservation covers but a tiny fraction of the ancestral land of the Warm Springs and Wasco Indians, who once roamed an immense territory stretching from the Cascades east to Willow Creek, and from the Columbia River



south to the 44th Parallel. Starting in the 1840s, waves of white settlers lurched across the Oregon Trail on their way to the lush Willamette Valley, bringing with them civilization and smallpox. In 1855, the Indians were strong-armed into signing a treaty with the U.S. government ceding approximately 10 million acres. In return, they were recognized as a sovereign nation and packed off to a reservation of 650,000 acres—deliberately chosen to be as far away from the white settlements as possible. Later, they were joined by a band of Paiute, who originally hailed from the Great Basin and spoke a completely different language.

Today, the three tribes inhabit a strange and contradictory world. (Tribal membership totals 4,365, of whom about 3,700 live on the reservation.) Technically, the reservation is a sovereign nation. The tribes have their own languages, laws, courts, jail and even their own driver's licenses. Their long isolation has helped to preserve their identity, but consigned them to the outermost fringes of American society.

The economic outlook at Warm Springs hovers somewhere between stark and grim. Unemployment fluctuates between 40 and 60 percent. More than a quarter of all families live in poverty. Annual income is \$9,136 per capita, less than half that of Portland. Fewer than 5 percent of tribal members hold bachelor's degrees. The reservation suffers an acute housing shortage—trailers and mobile homes make up 12 percent of its stock. There is no high school or middle school; tribal kids have to take a 30-minute bus ride each way to Madras. There is no supermarket, no hospital, no bank.

According to a study conducted last year by researchers at OHSU, life expectancy at Warm Springs stands at 46 years—below that of Bangladesh.

Like most poor rural communities, Warm Springs struggles with alcoholism and drug abuse, particularly methamphetamine addiction, which grinds cultural traditions into dust. Last year

an accused meth addict got so angry in tribal court that he picked up a table and tried to throw it at the Chief Justice—despite the fact that he was related to her.

LEWIS PITT JR HAS LIVED HERE MOST OF HIS LIFE. Tall, stout, 57 years old, with long black hair pulled into a ponytail, he speaks in the distinctive cadence of Indian country—soft consonants, flat vowels. He grew up in a two-room house without plumbing. His dad worked at a white-owned mill on the reservation and hated it so much he made his son promise never to work there.

When Pitt was a boy, the family used to pile into the car every August and drive up to Celilo Falls—a spiritual and economic hub that since time immemorial had attracted Indians from all across the Pacific Northwest. Pitt can remember watching his father build a “hobo scaffold” over the churning water and dip a long-necked net into the foam to catch chinook salmon. He remembers the hot sand burning the soles of his feet and the smell of the fish and the roar of the rapids and the way the men hollered whenever they landed a big one. Celilo was one of the most productive fisheries on the planet; with luck, you could catch enough to feed a family for a whole year. “It was a heck of a deal,” Pitt says.

Pitt can still remember the day in 1957 when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers opened—or rather, closed—the Dalles Dam. The massive concrete plug sent a billion watts crackling through the grid, but even as it generated power for the flourishing cities

of the Northwest, it drained power from the Indians—by flooding Celilo. Six hours after the dam went into operation, the Columbia River buried the falls beneath a hundred feet of water.

A gamble that paid off: The gaming floor at Spirit Mountain has generated an estimated \$500 million for the Grand Ronde over the last 10 years.

For the Warm Springs Indians, the drowning of Celilo was profoundly traumatic, according to local rancher and former Washington state senator George Rohrbacher, who is writing a book about the event. "Imagine being a Catholic and watching the Vatican being bulldozed off the face of the earth," he says. "It breaks your heart. It just breaks your fucking heart."

The event was so devastating that when Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, he chose as his narrator a Warm Springs Indian who lost his mind over the psychic turmoil.

Pitt graduated from Madras High in 1966 and went to Portland State University to study business and psychology. He was a rotten student—too busy drinking to go to class. He dropped out and worked for a roofing company. Bummed around the West Coast for a couple years. Got into some tangles with the law. Drank some more.

Then his father died in a house fire, and Pitt had to go back to Warm Springs. "It was 4 degrees when we put my dad in the ground," he remembers. He got drunk and watched the sun come up over the Mutton Mountains. Did it again the next night. And the next. Until finally one night he got so disgusted with himself he vowed to quit on the spot. That was 28 years ago, and he hasn't taken a drink since.

Like many children of the '60s, Pitt is a bit of a rebel—but he is also now one of the tribe's leaders. He has worked for the tribe on timber, hydroelectric projects, recreation, burial sites and the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial. He served on the Columbia Gorge



ity—have not been so lucky. Like any consumer business, casinos depend on a steady flow of customers. Confined to reservations far from major cities, most Indian casinos turn only a modest profit. The Burns Paiute, a tribe relegated to a remote corner of eastern Oregon, run a casino that, at the end of last year, actually was *losing* money.

IGRA also created a confusing thicket of regulations that provided a niche for power brokers such as Jack Abramoff, the disgraced Washington superlobbyist who admitted milking millions of dollars from his Indian clients by surreptitiously working

'Imagine being a Catholic and watching the Vatican being bulldozed off the face of the earth. It breaks your heart. It just breaks your fucking heart.'

Commission and is currently the tribe's director of government affairs and planning—an advocate, an ambassador and a go-to guy rolled into one.

For many years, Pitt and other Warm Springs leaders searched for ways to pull the tribe out of poverty. They bought a lumber mill. They built a resort around the Kah-Nee-Ta hot springs. They built a dam, a museum, a shopping mall. Some of these ventures were profitable, but none of them provided enough momentum. And then one day, they heard about the Cabazon decision.

WHEN HISTORIANS OF THE FUTURE sit down to write the story of the American Indians, they will identify 1987 as a pivotal turning point. That's when the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, an obscure California tribe with fewer than 50 members, won a landmark Supreme Court decision recognizing their right to operate a casino on their reservation. A year later, Congress passed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), which spelled out the procedure for tribes to set up casinos—and the gold rush was on.

The passage of IGRA unleashed a gambling frenzy as tribes scrambled to cash in on the casino craze. Some hit the jackpot; the Mashantucket Pequot of Connecticut, for example, operate Foxwoods, the world's biggest casino. Others—in fact, the major-

against them so as to delay approval of their casinos—thereby prolonging his contract.

Like it or not, Indian gaming is now a major industry. Today there are 247 Indian casinos across the country; together they raked in revenues of \$19.5 billion in 2004, according to the National Indian Gaming Commission.

The Warm Springs were leery of the casino boom at first. "We didn't jump at that right away," tribal elder Rudy Clements said last year over a bowl of chowder at Kah-Nee-Ta, the tribe's rustic desert resort. "But finally it got to the point that we had to find something that would earn us some money, and gaming was the most viable option." In 1996, the tribe opened the Indian Head Casino at Kah-Nee-Ta.

Given its isolated location more than two hours from Portland and three from Salem, Indian Head was neither destined nor designed to be a Trump Taj Mahal. Sequestered deep in a desert canyon, it is a modest operation with 300 slot machines that generates a steady if unremarkable stream of revenue, earning profits of \$2.5 million for the Warm Springs tribes last year.

Despite the income from Indian Head, however, the tribe has teetered on the brink

Paradise lost: Fishing for chinook salmon at Celilo Falls prior to its inundation by the Dalles Dam in 1957

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY (ORHI59376)

of crisis. Its \$26 million budget is currently facing a deficit of \$4.7 million. Timber revenues have collapsed from \$24 million to \$3.3 million over the last decade. Meanwhile, the reservation has been battered by rampant unemployment, chronic health problems and the meth epidemic.

Reluctantly, the elders decided to follow Willie Sutton's dictum and go where the money is—closer to Portland.

The Warm Springs couldn't physically relocate the reservation, of course, but they could do something almost as good. Although the idea behind IGRA was to restrict tribal casinos to the reservations, it also allows tribes to put casinos on "trust land"—that is, on land outside a reservation that a tribe has placed in trust, a cumbersome legal procedure that requires approval from the secretary of the Interior.

It just so happened that the Warm Springs owned 40 acres of

the local Indians were pushed onto the Warm Springs reservation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers carved out a navigation channel that allowed sternwheelers and other river traffic to ply the river. The channel was inundated in 1937 by the Bonneville Dam, but Cascade Locks persevered as a lumber town until the 1980s—when the recession and the spotted owl turned the mills into museums.

"We used to have doctors, a pharmacy, a movie theater, a dance hall," says city administrator Bob Willoughby, driving his Toyota down Wanapa Street, where the hardware store doubles as a liquor outlet. "All that is gone now. There's nothing to support our economy. There are no jobs here."

The proposed site lies in an industrial park on the edge of town, sandwiched between a railway line, a wood-pellet factory and a rock quarry. This is reclaimed land, created out of dredging spoils, overgrown with yellowed grass and decorated with scruffy stands

The Warm Springs want to turn an undistinguished scrap of Cascade Locks into a gambling mecca—a casino with 1,800 slot machines, a 250-room hotel and parking for 3,700 cars.

trust land on a pristine mountainside a couple miles east of Hood River. So in 1998, the tribe unveiled a proposal to close Indian Head and build a casino in the Gorge.

Local residents went ballistic. Overnight, the town was plastered with signs declaring "NO CASINO." *Oregonian* columnist Steve Duin fumed at the tribe's willingness to "pollute the gorge" with a "chip-flipping, piña colada-swilling, RV-parading, paradise-paving casino."

Just as the outrage was peaking, the tribe upped the ante. If you don't want a casino in Hood River, they said, let us put one in Cascade Locks.

S **TUBBORNL**Y CLINGING TO THE SKIRTS OF THE GORGE, the city of Cascade Locks is 40 miles from Portland, a straight shot down Interstate 84. It owes its existence to a bygone quirk of geography. In the 19th century, this section of the Columbia was studded with daunting rapids that made river travel perilous (and lent their name to the Cascade Mountains). Pioneers had to portage their boats around the whitewater—which eventually gave rise to a frontier settlement known as Whiskey Flats. After

of oak. As the weak sun boils mist off the mountains, a necklace of geese beat their wings against the chill winter wind.

The Warm Springs want to turn this undistinguished scrap of turf into an economic behemoth—a gambling mecca nearly the size of four football fields, with 1,800 slot machines, a 250-room hotel and parking for 3,700 cars.

If the tribe's projections are accurate, the casino would provide 1,742 jobs in this little town. It would draw up to 3 million visitors a year. It would pour \$300 million into the local economy. Most important of all, from the tribe's point of view, it would generate profits of more than \$200 million per year—all because this site is just 45 minutes from Portland.

Cascade Locks is nowhere near the reservation, of course, and the proposed site is *not* on tribal trust land, but thanks to a strange kink in the law, that's not a fatal objection. IGRA includes a clause (some call it a loophole) that allows tribes to buy regular old land, take it into trust and *then* build a casino—so long as the governor and the secretary of the Interior both sign off.

When the Warm Springs first revealed their plans for Cascade Locks, casino opponents cried foul. Hood River, they said, had been a ruse; the tribe had been planning to build at Cascade Locks all along. The steep grade at Hood River prompted jibes about a "spectacular bluff." But by proposing a site so close to Portland, the tribe also threatened to compete with Spirit Mountain—a threat the Grand Ronde could not afford to ignore.

I **F THERE IS A SINGLE WORD** that defines the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, it is *termination*.

The tribes originally comprised 26 separate bands that thrived in the Willamette Valley. In the 1850s, decimated by smallpox, they were rounded up and marched onto a reservation in the Grand Ronde Valley a few miles east of Willamina.

"The Indians made the valley ring with the same funereal chant that they made over their dead," wrote homesteader Mary

Huntley, who witnessed the upheaval. "It was something terrific, that last howling that

continued on page 104



Turf war: The proposed site of a Cascade Locks casino

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM OLIVER

The Gamble in the Gorge

continued from page 74

the Indians ever made in the Umpqua. It rang out in the crisp morning air that sad day. The march was terrible to them, leaving the homes that had been theirs through all time.”

The Indians were consigned to Grand Ronde on the assumption that they would wither and die there. Somehow, they hung on until 1954, when Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay, declaring that Indian sovereignty had proven a dismal failure, pursued a new experiment—a policy called termination. The idea was to break up the reservations and assimilate the Indian tribes into mainstream American society.

As a former governor of Oregon, McKay first turned his attention to his home state (some historians believe he wanted to turn over the Indians’ timberlands to lumber barons) and introduced legislation terminating all of Oregon’s tribes west of the Cascades: the Klamath, the Siletz, the Cow Creek, the Coquille, the Coos, the Lower Umpqua, the Siuslaw—and the Grand Ronde.

With her jet-black hair pinned in a neat bun, beaded turquoise earrings and warm brown eyes, Cheryl Kennedy, the Grand Ronde’s chairwoman, radiates motherly charisma. She was 6 years old when the tribe was terminated. “I didn’t exactly understand it, but we were no longer considered Indians,” she says. “Our identity was destroyed.”

Terminated Indians each got a lump sum from the federal government for their share of their tribe’s assets. Members of some tribes received thousands of dollars. The Grand Ronde—whose numbers had dwindled to 950—each got a check for \$29.40.

When Kennedy talks about termination, her voice cracks with emotion. “One day you’re Indian, then you’re no longer an Indian,” she says. “Everything was taken.”

Stripped of their reservation, their status and their very identity, the Grand Ronde became refugees in their own country. Some melted into the local community; others sought asylum on distant reservations—Kennedy’s family, for example, moved to Warm Springs. The only scrap of land the tribe managed to hold onto was its graveyard, located near the entrance to the old reservation. Every year the tribe—or what was left of it—held annual meetings in the caretaker’s shed. “All we had left was the cemetery,” says Kennedy. “The cemetery

and the strength of our ancestors.”

But the Grand Ronde refused to march quietly into oblivion. For 30 years, a die-hard group waged an uphill campaign to regain the tribe’s federal status. In 1983, with support from the Warm Springs, the Grand Ronde finally won federal recognition. Congress ultimately restored to the tribe 9,800 acres of its original reservation in the Grand Ronde Valley and granted it a nearby parcel of trust land off Rte 18 to build a casino. With no other options on the table, and with little collateral to offer the bank, the tribe decided to take a chance. “It was like gambling with the future of your people,” says Kennedy. “What do you do if it doesn’t work?”

The tribe called their casino Spirit Mountain, after the sacred peak that overlooks the reservation. Walk around the gaming floor of Spirit Mountain—open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year—and it’s clear the gamble paid off. The massive hall is a carousel of light and sound, the



Farewell:
Warm Springs
drummers sing
to the spirit of
Rudy Clements.

stale aroma of cigarette smoke and the clatter of thousands of tiny hopes crashing against the iron law of probability. The casino offers 1,500 slot machines, plus poker, blackjack and craps. Coruscating fountains of fiber-optic cable surround a brand new Corvette—it could be yours for a nickel. On a drizzly Thursday afternoon, the parking lot is jammed with cars, trucks, RVs and buses from retirement homes.

The tribe is tight-lipped about revenues, but at a conservative estimate, Spirit Mountain has generated \$500 million in profit over the last 10 years—and the prosperity is on display as soon as you drive into the reservation. The elegant Governance Center glows with warm hues and fir ceilings. Down the street, the tribe’s library is friendly and bright, offering an impressive array of Indian-themed children’s books with titles like *First Strawberries* and *Death of the Iron Horse*. The grade-school classrooms are gaily decorated with inscriptions in Chinook Wawa, a tribal creole that evolved from the original 26

languages. A brand-new Health & Wellness Center offers dental care, eye care and chemical dependency treatment. The tribe has built housing for its elders and offers free health care for all its members. Tribal enrollment is now 5,200.

The tribe has spread the wealth beyond its members. The majority of the 1,500 workers on the casino’s payroll come from nearby towns like Willamina and Sheridan—an economic boon for a depressed region that was once the domain of chain saws and choke-setters. Approximately 6 percent of its profits are channeled into the Spirit Mountain Community Fund, a foundation that makes grants to organizations as diverse as Doernbecher Children’s Hospital and Sisters of the Road Café.

“All you see, all the growth, was the result of that decision” to build the casino, says Kennedy. “Everything was the result of the gaming dollars.”

But casinos are vulnerable to competition, and a casino in Cascade Locks would carve a big chunk out of Spirit Mountain’s business—as much as 25-40 percent, according to the Grand Ronde.

“It would be devastating,” says Kennedy.

Having clawed their way back from the brink of extinction, the leaders of the Grand Ronde will not stand by idly and watch their winnings disappear. They are on a mission to rebuild their tribe and their reservation from scratch. Without the proceeds from their casino, their plans are nothing but pipe dreams. “We have to protect the future of our people,” Kennedy announced last year in *Smoke Signals*, the tribe’s newspaper.

As details of the Warm Springs plan slowly came into focus, the Grand Ronde reached the unpleasant conclusion that they had to fight back.

THE GRAND RONDE’S strategists pursued a two-pronged attack. First, they targeted the Achilles heel of the Cascade Locks plan—the fact that the casino would not be located on the Warm Springs reservation or even on trust land. For the Warm Springs to buy land at Cascade Locks, take it into trust and then build a casino, they argued, trivialized the notion of Indian sovereignty.

Worse, they said, if the Warm Springs moved into Cascade Locks, there was nothing to prevent other tribes from plopping down casinos anywhere they wanted. The result would be chaos—and make Oregon look like a third-rate Nevada.

Unfortunately, this argument dances

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM OLIVER

around the awkward fact that *most* of Oregon's tribal casinos, including Spirit Mountain, are not located on reservations, but on trust land.

Nonetheless, the domino theory has some merit. Despite many inconsistencies, the current arrangement—in which every tribe puts its casino on the reservation, or as close to it as practicable—has generally kept peace among the Indian tribes. The Cascade Locks project would radically alter that balance.

“If you let the Warm Springs tribes go to Cascade Locks, pretty soon the Coquille will want to be in Eugene, the Siletz will want to be in Salem, and the Grand Ronde will want to be in Portland,” says Chip Lazenby, who served as legal counsel during the Kitzhaber administration. “And how will you say no?”

The second part of the Grand Ronde strategy was to try to beat the Warm Springs at their own game by pushing for a casino in the ultimate location—Portland. The Grand Ronde offered to finance a major-league baseball stadium in return for a casino inside the city limits. Governor Kulongoski said no. Then they offered to build the city a big hotel near the convention center. Kulongoski nixed that one too. With each proposal, the Grand Ronde were boxing the governor in. Every time he rejected them, he was implicitly supporting the principle that tribal casinos should remain where they were.

Then in April 2005 came a stunning announcement. After years of negotiation, Kulongoski finally bestowed his blessing and inked a deal with the Warm Springs granting them permission for a casino at Cascade Locks—in return for a 17 percent cut of the revenue, most of it dedicated toward college scholarships.

“This compact will benefit the people of the Warm Springs tribe, the community of Cascade Locks and the people of Oregon,” Kulongoski gushed in a prepared statement. “Everyone will reap the advantages of new jobs, increased access to education, enhancement of the Gorge environment and economic development.”

At Grand Ronde, reactions ranged from shock to outrage. The tribe hired top political consultant Dan Lavey and poured \$350,000 into a campaign to derail the casino. Lavey recruited allies such as the Oregon Restaurant Association and the Oregon Toxics Alliance and unleashed brutal TV ads attacking Kulongoski (and by implication, the Warm Springs) for “trashing the Gorge.”

These bare-knuckle tactics infuriated

the Warm Springs. “They’re obviously livid that any other tribe would attempt to interfere,” says Len Bergstein, the tribe’s Portland-based public affairs consultant. “It’s a question of greed. The Grand Ronde don’t want to lose the market share they’ve come to enjoy over the years.”

Warm Springs Chairman Ron Suppah fired off a letter to Grand Ronde Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy in which he characterized the campaign as “inaccurate,” “offensive” and “insulting.”

“The bottom line is money,” Warm Springs elder Rudy Clements said in an interview late last year. “They’re trying to stop us from biting into their market.”

The feud is particularly awkward because of the strong connections between the two tribes. After all, Chairwoman Kennedy did live on the Warm Springs reservation for several years. Bergstein, the Warm Springs consultant, previously worked for the Grand Ronde. Lavey, the Grand Ronde consultant, previously worked for the Warm Springs.

More than anything else, feelings on the Warm Springs reservation are bitter because the tribes endorsed the Grand Ronde’s effort to win federal restoration back in the ’80s.

“We helped them regain their status,” Clements said. “We fought for them because they’re part of the Indian nation.”

Another elder put it even more bluntly. “To me,” he said, “it’s a stab in the back.”

WITH THE GOVERNOR’S APPROVAL in place, the casino battle has shifted to the federal level. The Warm Springs are currently conducting environmental studies in order to gain approval from Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton to take the land at Cascade Locks into trust. Then Secretary Norton will decide whether to approve the compact between the tribe and the governor. Court challenges along the way could potentially mire the project in years of litigation.

The public debate will focus on thorny issues such as traffic, air quality and the casino’s impact on blue heron rookeries and bald eagle nests. There are also technical issues stemming from the fact that Congress has designated the Columbia Gorge a National Scenic Area.

Warm Springs leaders bristle at the suggestion that the Gorge is too precious for a casino. “What about those dams?” asks Pitt. “The power lines? The Wal-Marts, the clatter of the trains, the barges, the Interstate highway? You know, it seems like we’re

always last in line. And when our turn comes around, suddenly now they change the rules.”

Indeed, the Warm Springs view the casino as reparation for historical injustices—the Treaty of 1855, the loss of the Columbia, the drowning of Celilo.

Ultimately, however, the fate of the casino hangs not on moral arguments but on power and politics. Several key players have lined up behind the Warm Springs, including Kulongoski, Republican Congressman Greg Walden, unions and the communities of Cascade Locks and Hood River. Most support the proposal because of the jobs and the money it would generate.

Opponents include the Grand Ronde, environmentalists, John Kitzhaber, Democratic Congressman David Wu and the Oregon Family Council.

With the GOP in charge of both Congress and the White House, Republicans have more sway than Democrats, which means Walden has more clout than Wu. In addition, Walden sits on several subcommittees that oversee the Department of the Interior. “If he barks, Secretary Norton has got to jump,” says one insider.

On the other hand, the Abramoff scandal has radically altered the politics of tribal gaming. On a visit to Portland last year, Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) warned that he would crack down on abuses, and Representative Richard Pombo (R-Calif.) is circulating a bill that would make it much easier for neighboring tribes to veto competing casinos.

Suspiciously absent from the debate are Oregon’s two U.S. senators, who have so far managed to avoid taking a position. Nonetheless, the senators—particularly Republican Gordon Smith—may have the final word on the casino’s future. “The senator’s just watching the process and seeing how it goes,” says his communications director, Chris Matthews.

“It’s a big mess,” says another insider. “Everyone who’s not involved in it is trying to keep their head down.”

THERE IS NO SMALL IRONY in the fact that the Indians, long idealized by white America as Noble Savages living off the land, have found economic independence in a business shimmering with Vegas glitz. It also seems strangely karmic that tribes who were tricked out of their land through legal chicanery are now hiring K Street lobbyists to twist the white man’s law into pretzels.

Perhaps the most poignant paradox

of Indian gaming is that it has sparked rivalries among tribes that for generations had no reason to fight—because they had nothing worth fighting over.

The stakes at Cascade Locks are immense. For the Warm Springs, the casino could mean housing, a middle school, a high school, drug treatment, college scholarships, a community center, even a hospital. “All we’re trying to do is take care of ourselves,” said Rudy Clements, the Warm Springs elder, at an interview last year. “We’re not trying to hurt anybody. And it’s legal—it’s legal under federal law, it’s legal under state law. It’s free enterprise. What’s wrong with that?”

For the Grand Ronde, the showdown at Cascade Locks is not just about forestalling a potential competitor, but also about staving off other tribes and gaming interests that are hustling to build off-reservation casinos near Portland, casinos that would chisel away at Spirit Mountain’s profits and send the tribe back to economic oblivion. “Other tribes have retained their land,” says Chairwoman Cheryle Kennedy. “They have housing, economic development, all the things we didn’t have. We’re still trying to get pipes in the ground.”

Clements used to say he would retire when the casino opened its doors. That prediction turned out to be too optimistic. In December, at age 69, he died of complications from diabetes—another disease that is ravaging Warm Springs.

When they heard of Clements’ death, the leaders of Cascade Locks ordered the flag at City Hall to be flown at half-mast. A few days later, on a dreary rain-drenched morning, the town held a memorial service for Clements at a peaceful pavilion overlooking the Columbia, barely a mile downstream from the proposed casino site, 40 miles from Celilo. Lewis Pitt, who regarded Clements as a mentor, sat in the back and looked at his hands. Community leaders, including two past mayors of Cascade Locks, delivered eulogies before a packed house.

Finally, Clements’ niece Margie Tukta stepped to the podium and paid tribute to her uncle.

“We have to press forward with what Rudy would have wanted us to do,” she concluded, her voice quavering. “There’s so much at stake.”

Then a circle of musicians began to pound on a hefty drum, and the mourners asked the Creator to guide Clements’ spirit on its journey—and prayed that his final wish might be granted. ■