



Elders Chair: Leroy Fairbanks Enjoys Life Showing Cattle and Horses

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Interview and photograph by Patsy Gordon

After being together for over thirty years, Leroy Fairbanks and his partner in life, Mary decided to make it a done deal and tie the knot. In July of just last year, they got married. Leroy and Mary had no biological children together, but, from previous marriages, they have 6 children, each having three of their own. Mary had two girls and one boy, Leroy had two boys and one girl. Their children have blessed them with a total of 15 grand children, and 3 great grand children.

Together they raised Erica, an adopted daughter, who today is 21 years old and has a little boy of her own named Angelo. When I entered the ranch house, I could hear 15 month old Angelo, screaming and wailing from a nearby bedroom, rebelling against his nap time, while Grandma Mary was trying to get him to sleep. Leroy says Angelo started his 'terrible twos' early, and then he told me about how Angelo's new puppy chases him up on a chair and refuses to let him down.

Born to Sam Fairbanks and Isabelle Angeline Fairbanks on July 30, 1925, Leroy was one of seven children, and was born at his parents home in Cass Lake. He was also raised and attended school through the 11th grade there, although he did spend summers with his grandparents at Winnie Dam. He had 3 brothers and 4 sisters, all of whom are now deceased, with the exception of one sister who lives in Cass Lake.

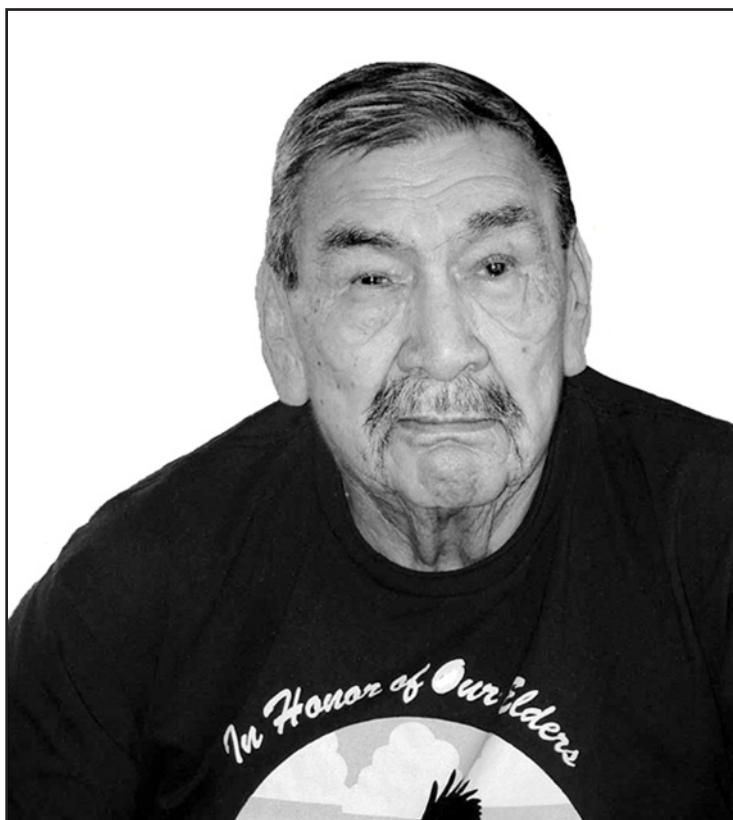
Growing Up

Some of Leroy's fondest memories of growing up is when the family got their first radio when he was about 15 or 16 years old. He also remembers the family home finally being equipped with electricity around this time too. Before that, him and his family used kerosene lamps for light, a wood stove and an air tight heater in their living room for heat. He recalls having to haul the wood and water in to the house. He said, "It would get so cold in the house in the winter time, that the water bucket would freeze up." The family had no indoor plumbing, so they made use of an outside toilet.

Playing a trick on Leroy and his friends while they were playing outside, a neighbor told them that if they dug a hole in the ground straight down, they would reach China! So thinking that the family garden would be a good spot to start digging since the soil

there was soft to begin with they dug about 2 to 3 feet down before deciding that this was going to be some pretty hard work and gave up. Leroy said, "We decided since we couldn't speak Chinese anyway, there was no use going there".

After successfully building a box kite out of butcher paper, old fish poles and borrowed clothes line, he and his friends thought they would see if the kite was sturdy enough to hold up a cat. So, they caught the cat and tied him in to the kite and



sent him into the air. The boys thought, “Hmmm, let’s try flying a kid in there!” But before they could send him up into the air, Leroy said, “His mother caught us anyway!”

Leroy also enjoyed sports and being athletic as a young boy. He recalled being on the baseball and football team as a high school student.

During the time of raising his horses and cattle and teaching Erica the trade, (which you shall read about later) Leroy went back to school and graduated from college at 60 years old! He started at the Metro Community College in Minneapolis and finished up at Bemidji State University where he received his degree. He then went to work at the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig School and started a dance group there, where he taught traditional dance.

Active Duty

During Leroy’s senior year in high school in 1942, he joined the Navy, where after completing boot camp he was sent to the North Atlantic. His most memorable memory of his stint there was having his convoy duty ship torpedoed. Following that tour, he was shipped off to the Pacific where he remained for four years.

After completing his tour of duty and he returned home, Leroy went back to school to complete his education. He received his general education degree at the Boys Vocational/Trade High School in Minneapolis.

Then in 1949, Leroy was called back to active duty and was sent off to fight in the Korean war. This is when he decided to make a career out of the armed forces. He served for 25 and a half years where he learned the electrician trade and served as an electrician with the Navy.

When the Viet Nam war started he was sent to serve on the U.S.S. Midway and was assigned to the Special Weapons Unit. Out of his 25 years, Leroy spent 3 years in Viet Nam, 1 year in Icor, North Viet Nam (non-combatant duty) and 2 years down in the Delta. He also served in the Mekong Delta and a place called the Perfume River where he recalls meeting a man in a helicopter ride named Tom Lussier, Jr. from Red Lake. It’s a small world, isn’t it? He also

later learned that while he was serving in Can Tho, Cambodia, a cousin by the name of David Cronin was there at the same time, but never did get to see him while in Cambodia. In addition, after World War II ended, Leroy served in Subic Bay, Phillipine Islands, and in Okinawa, Japan.

Finally, Leroy thought he was going home! Much to his dismay and surprise, the Navy had other plans for him, sending him off to China. Leroy said, “At least, I got the chance to see North China.” He finally retired from the Navy in July of 1972.

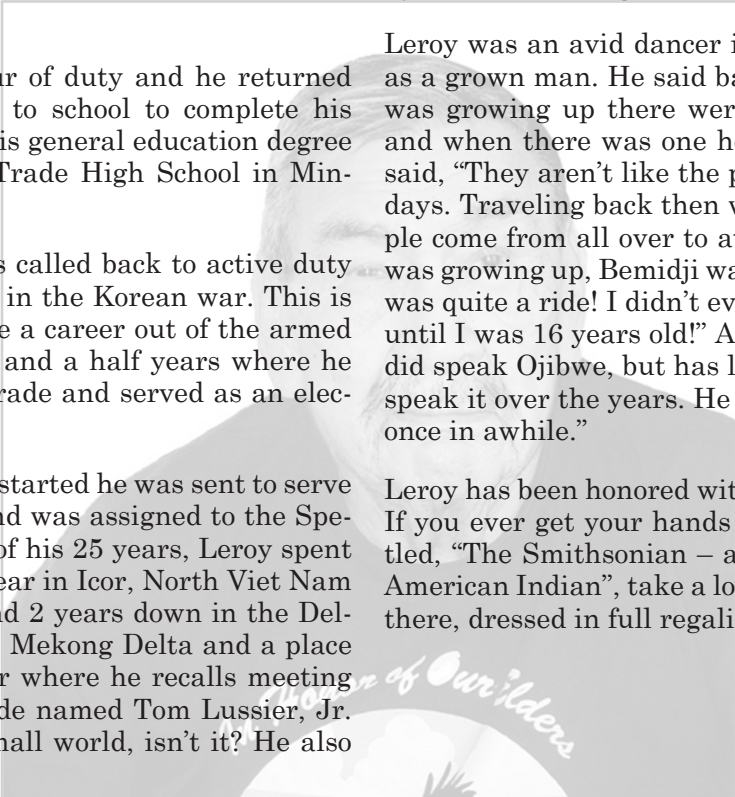
Now, a Ships Reunion is being planned for this summer in Seattle, Washington. Leroy plans on attending, he says he’s already been to several reunions that were held on the East Coast.

Traditional Activities

Harvesting wild rice and maple sugar, picking berries, wasn’t just tradition for Leroy and his family, it was part of their livelihood. He says he would pick pine cones for a few pennies to buy groceries and put food on the table. His mother made and sold wreaths and did beadwork, which also was a way for the family to make a living.

Leroy was an avid dancer in his younger years and as a grown man. He said back in the years when he was growing up there weren’t many pow-wows, and when there was one held, they were small. He said, “They aren’t like the pow-wows they have now days. Traveling back then wasn’t so easy. Now, people come from all over to attend pow-wows. When I was growing up, Bemidji was a big trip for me, which was quite a ride! I didn’t even get as far as Brainerd until I was 16 years old!” At one time, Leroy said he did speak Ojibwe, but has lost much of his ability to speak it over the years. He says, “It still comes back once in awhile.”

Leroy has been honored with 3 feathers in his roach. If you ever get your hands on a copy of the book titled, “The Smithsonian – A Chronicle of the Native American Indian”, take a look. You will find Leroy in there, dressed in full regalia.



Raising and Showing Horses and Cattle

Many of you that know Leroy and his family also know that they take a mighty big interest in raising horses. They own 30 acres of land on "Tower Hill" between Walker and Cass Lake. Leroy originally started out raising cattle, ending up with 56 head of Scotch Highlanders. They also were one of the first families around to own Silver Highland cattle.

Leroy's daughter, Erica was one of the very first young people to show cattle, taking three national championships in Denver, Colorado. Just last year in September they attended a Scotch Highland show at St. Croix in Wisconsin where they took the "Herdsman Award" for the year!

Yet even as a little girl, and with Leroy and Mary's encouragement and guidance, Erica became interested in showing horses at horse shows and rodeos, which has become her passion. She loves to ride her horses "riding barrels" in the shows. They travel all over the U.S. to take part in the events, pulling a trailer and taking their stock with them.

Sitting on the top of Leroy's hutch in his living room are many, many different trophies they have won from participating in the shows. Leroy said they also have over 400 ribbons they have won also in their collection of awards and memorabilia.

"We're starting in again" said Leroy. "We've got this little guy now (Angelo) we're gonna' get him started!" I'd be willing to bet he's gonna' make one mighty fine cowboy too! ■

