While Native tribes had lived in the Pacific Northwest for several millennia, by the mid-19th century pressure from settlers arriving over the Oregon Trail led to unbearable friction. In 1856, the federal government removed more than 20 Indian bands from their homelands and relocated them to 69,000 acres on the Grand Ronde Reservation on the Oregon coast. Although many Natives, despite their semi-nomadic traditions, became homesteaders, the Government later declared that their lands could not be used for farming or tree-growing. As a result, many sold their land for as little as US$1.10 per acre and moved away. By 1901, the Grand Ronde Reservation had dwindled to 440 acres.

The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which decreased federal control of Indian affairs and increased Indian self-govern ment and responsibility, allowed the tribe to purchase land for subsistence and farming sites, raising tribal acreage to 977 by 1936. However, eighteen years later a new federal law terminated the mantle of federal protection for the tribe. The Grande Ronde increasingly became a landless people in their own land—in 1975 their territory had been reduced to a 5-acre cemetery plot. In 1983 Congress reinstated federal recognition and today (according to The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon) the reservation owns 10,300 acres.

The tribe’s flag resulted from a contest held after the Grande Ronde regained federal recognition; the winner received US$50. Although the seal appears prominently on tribal publications and letterheads, the flag has not yet been adopted by tribal council resolution.
A black-and-white seal, centered on a white field, combines historic, geographic, and spiritual aspects of the Grand Ronde Confederated Tribes. A unifying black outer ring encircles the main image of the seal. The multiple compass points immediately inside the ring allude to the 23 different bands and tribes, drawn from all over the Oregon Country, that form the Confederation. The five main tribes—Umpqua, Molalla, Rogue River, Kalapuya, Shasta—are honored by the five white-and-black eagle feathers hanging below the outer ring.

Inside the compass points is a wider black ring with “THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES” above and “OF GRAND RONDE” below, in white. In the center of the seal, according to the tribes, “is Spirit Mountain where our people went on their Vision Quests, or to seek their Tomanawis, or ‘spirit’”. The mountain holds deep symbolic and spiritual significance for a people emerging from a difficult 150-year odyssey during which their fate often hung in precarious balance. The Grand Ronde have named their new casino “Spirit Mountain”.

[Thanks to Jackie Whisler, Administrative Assistant at Grand Ronde tribal headquarters.]