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# Honoring a Cultural Treasure

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*Joseph Medicine Crow*

# Honoring a cultural treasure

*In the fall, the wind blows cold along the Little Bighorn, sweeping through the dry grass along the river where the Crow have lived for generations.*

*This area plays a central role in the story of the Plains Indians and in the mythology and folklore of the settlement of the West. It is here that Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer lost the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Here myth and legend became intertwined with fact and history. And here, in this small portion of what was once hundreds of thousands of miles of “Crow Country,” you can literally touch a link to the 19th century.*



Joseph Medicine Crow '38 may be small in stature, but he is a giant in his knowledge of Native American traditions and culture. He is a walking encyclopedia of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Crow Nation. Now 96, his memory is as sharp as it is long. He is

the author of numerous articles as well as two books, *From the Heart of Crow Country: The Crow Indians' Own*

*Stories and Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond.* In 2000 he performed the opening song for the United Nations summit conference for spiritual and religious leaders. And in 2008 he was awarded the French Legion of Honor Chevalier medal and the Bronze Star.

When he stood in August to accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama, he was honored for his contributions as historian, author, anthropologist, veteran and the last living Plains Indian war chief. The nation's highest civilian award recognized a career that had its beginnings in Depression-era Linfield College.

The Indian Memorial at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument on the Crow Reservation in southeastern Montana was designed around the theme “Peace through Unity.” From a circular earthwork carved gently into the prairie, visitors can view the Seventh Cavalry obelisk through a “spirit gate” window. The living memorial honors not only those who fought and died, but also present and the future generations of Indian people.

Joseph Medicine Crow '38 displays some of his Linfield memorabilia along with some of the many awards and honors he has received throughout his life. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is second from the left.





Joseph Medicine Crow '38 sings a Crow honor song to President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama following the Medal of Freedom ceremony. Medicine Crow was among 16 individuals honored, including physicist Stephen Hawking, Sen. Edward Kennedy, former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and actor Sidney Poitier. The Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, is awarded for meritorious contributions to the security or national interest of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors. (Official White House photo by Pete Souza)

## On receiving the Medal of Freedom

The Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony wasn't Joseph Medicine Crow's first encounter with President Barack Obama. During the presidential campaign, Sen. Obama visited the Crow reservation and Medicine Crow told him then, "When you move into the White House, I'm going to come there and sing a power song."

In August, Medicine Crow did just that.

"He (Obama) put the medal on me, and I was quite pleased and quite honored," he said.

Dressed in his war bonnet and carrying a traditional drum, Medicine Crow had a 10-minute private audience with the president. The halls of the White House reverberated with the sounds of the drum and his voice as he sang Obama a Crow honor song.

Medicine Crow is one of the few living connections to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Custer and 260 soldiers attacked an encampment of an estimated 5,000 people including about 1,500 warriors. Medicine Crow's grandfather, White-Man-Runs-Him, was one of six Crow scouts who warned Custer to await reinforcements before attacking. Of those six scouts, Medicine Crow knew four and as a child listened to their memories of the battle and served as a translator for his grandfather when he was interviewed by reporters and others about the battle.

Medicine Crow began documenting the stories and has spent most of his life researching the battle and the history and traditions of the Crow and other Native American people. He is the first in his tribe to receive a master's degree and was working on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Southern California when he was drafted into World War II. During his Army service in Europe, he accomplished all four tasks required to become a tribal war chief: hand-to-hand combat with an enemy, including taking away his weapon; being the first of his group of warriors to touch an enemy; leading a war party into enemy territory; and capturing horses belonging to the enemy. The last was a difficult task, considering that horses were rarely used in World War II.

Medicine Crow has been tribal historian for the Crow Nation for more than 50 years and has written some of the most influential works about Indian history and culture.

"I tell people he is a cultural treasure," said Herman Viola, retired archivist with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. "When you shake hands with him, you are shaking hands with the 19th century. He has had direct contact with pre-reservation Indians and he seems to have a photographic memory. He has instant recall of

events that happened many years ago.”

Viola, who has known Medicine Crow for more than 30 years, is his adopted brother. Medicine Crow named him One Star, after one of his beloved grandfathers.

“Joe realized early on he needed to preserve and pass on this information and we were able to record some of these stories for the Smithsonian,” Viola said. “This Presidential Medal of Freedom is long overdue because there is really no one like him who can speak about the indigenous cultures.”

## Educational odyssey

Medicine Crow’s educational odyssey is closely tied to the Baptist Church of which he has been a lifelong member. He attended primary school on the Crow reservation but by the time he reached high school, racial tensions between the Crows and the white people were high. The Rev. W. A. Petzoldt, a Baptist missionary, sent a number of Crow students to Bacone Indian School in Oklahoma. There, Medicine Crow found a love for learning, completing high school and earning an associate’s degree at the junior college. After he returned home, the Rev. Petzoldt arranged to cover his tuition to Linfield College.

Although his tuition was paid, Medicine Crow worked for his room and board. He washed pots and pans for the dining room and worked as a janitor in Pioneer Hall. Times were tough in the Depression. During his second year, Medicine Crow lived off campus with several others, including his life-long friend, the late Jereld R. Nicholson ’39, for whom the Linfield library is named.

“We were so poor at the time, we rented a room and slept in one bed,” Medicine Crow said. “Five of us shared a little apartment house and we all chipped in and bought a big bunch of bananas. Jerry didn’t have any money, so I bought his share.”

Medicine Crow remained in touch with Nicholson. He saw him at Medicine Crow’s induction into the Army in 1942. Fifty years later, Nicholson drove to Missoula to watch his friend receive an honorary degree from the University of Montana.

“He came and visited me in Missoula and when he was leaving, he handed me some cash – probably \$400 or \$500 – and said, ‘Here, have



Markers have been placed at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument at sites where Indian scouts and warriors from the Crow, Arikara, Cheyenne, Sioux and Arapaho tribes fell during the battle June 25 and 26, 1876.



Joseph Medicine Crow, in traditional Crow clothing, studying in Northrup Library.

## Becoming a Crow warrior

In the Crow tradition, Joseph Medicine Crow spent many of his early years with his maternal grandparents, Yellowtail and Elizabeth Yellowtail.

“When I was born in 1913, the intertribal war days were over by 30 years,” he said. “However, my grandfather kept training me and teaching me to be a good Crow Indian warrior probably because that’s all he knew.”

Yellowtail taught his grandson how to run, swim, ride, read tracks and listen – how to be a good warrior and a good soldier in the Crow tradition. All of those skills were put to use during World War II. Medicine Crow completed the four major battlefield deeds to become a Crow war chief, including capturing the enemy’s horses.

The last requirement was the most daunting. Horses were not typically used during World War II. However, Medicine Crow’s unit came upon German SS officers who were retreating on horseback. After they camped, Medicine Crow sneaked into the barn and stampeded all 50 head.

“I am probably the only war chief left, joining the ranks of Sitting Bull, Geronimo, Black Hawk and all the brave warriors of the past protecting their lands and their way of life,” he said.



International Week 1938 featured Joseph Medicine Crow '38, Julia Blanchard '39, Esther Brick '38, Paul Louie '42, Margaret Ryan '38 and Charles Manning. Medicine Crow was active in athletics and music and was a member of Tau Delta Sigma fraternity at Linfield and USC. He began his singing career at Bacone and continued at Linfield under the guidance of Mrs. Macnab, his voice teacher and pianist, who arranged concerts for him around the area. He performed Crow songs, religious and cowboy songs, and other popular music. "Holy City" and "How Great Thou Art" are still two of his favorite hymns.

something to eat.' We were so poor in school, then Jerry became a millionaire."

The professors Medicine Crow remembers are a Who's Who of Linfield – President Elam J. Anderson, Paul J. Orr, James A. Macnab, Henry W. Lever, Harold Elkinton, and Harry and Irene Dillin.

Accounting and genetics proved especially vexing.

"Linfield has real high standards," he said. "They take in only high school graduates who are really smart kids. They were high-class students and the competition was fierce. And here I was an Indian kid from the reservation."

Accounting was particularly tough because he was placed in an advanced accounting course, despite the fact that he had never had accounting before. In spite of his protests, Medicine Crow was told he had to take it.

"He (the registrar) said it would come in handy some day," he said. "I had a hard time. Everyone else had already had a year of it, and they took right off and I just couldn't make it. I told Professor Elkinton I was going to quit school. I was going to go home."

But Elkinton intervened, saying he would help him all he could. He secured a tutor for Medicine Crow, who eventually passed the class with a C.

"I did find out later that accounting sure did come in handy," he said with a laugh. "I also had trouble with genetics, but Professor Macnab was really patient and helped me get through. All my other courses, I made As."

During Medicine Crow's senior year, an essay-writing contest was announced with a first-place prize of \$25. A keen competitor, Medicine Crow entered the contest.

"I won it," he laughed. "And that set the stage for my writing career. I had a lot of interesting experiences at Linfield and I received a real well-balanced education there."

At Bacone, Medicine Crow had enjoyed success as a star pitcher for the baseball team and hoped to play under Coach Henry Lever at Linfield. He also went out for wrestling, under the guidance of Coach Wayne Harn. While helping wrestlers work on various holds, Harn accidentally fell on Medicine Crow, crushing his elbow and ending his pitching and wrestling days. They doctored his injured

*"When we stand side-by-side in the circle of no beginning and no ending, the first maker, creator of all things is in the center. He hears the words of supplication and blesses us with his infinite love, which is peace itself."*

— Joseph Medicine Crow  
United Nations summit conference for Spiritual and Religious Leaders 2000

arm and despite the pain, he began working out with the track team. He competed in javelin, but was never able again to throw the length he could before the injury. He also ran the mile, but said he could not compete with runners David Hooper '38 and Walter Young '38, '52. However, Medicine Crow lettered both years at Linfield and still has his letter.

## Learning guides life

Education has been a centerpiece of Medicine Crow's life. Plenty Coups, one of the last Crow chiefs, said that with education, you can become a white man's equal; without it you will be his victim.

"That to me was a personal challenge," Medicine Crow said. "I wanted to prove to people, not only to Indian people but people in general, that an Indian is capable of becoming a good college student. People said that Indians are just too dumb, they are not capable of getting a college education. I wanted to disprove that. And the secret to that is to study."

And study he did. After graduating from Linfield with a degree in sociology, he took 26 credits a term at USC in order to complete his master's degree in one year instead of two. He completed all the coursework for his Ph.D., and returned home to complete his dissertation but was drafted into the Army. Sixty-one years after he left school for the war, USC awarded him an honorary degree, one of three he has received.

Medicine Crow has maintained connections to the traditional Crow values and with the white man's way of life.

"There is a middle line that joins two worlds together," he said. "I walk that line and take the best from each and avoid the worst. I've lived a good, well-balanced way of life. I encourage my grandchildren and young Crow Indians to do the same and they will be happy."

Medicine Crow maintains his deep faith in the Christian religion, while retaining his spiritual ties with the Crow.

"I was trained as a sort of Indian medicine man, but at the same time I am a Christian," he said. He has served as a deacon and moderator and remains active in the Lodge Grass Baptist Church where his grandparents and his parents were members.

"I enjoy living in a bicultural way," he said. "It is interesting and challenging. Education was miserable the first few years, then it became enjoyable, a challenge and a dedication. To me, education is a way of life. I want to help people get a good education and lead them out of the world of ignorance."

Viola visits Medicine Crow regularly and often takes him on speaking engagements to tell the story of the Little Bighorn from the Plains Indian perspective and share Crow stories and legends, and reservation culture. He said Medicine Crow has been able to navigate between the white and Crow worlds because he has good instincts.

"Joe has had an impact on white people and Indians in so many ways," he added. "He proved that you can be educated and succeed in both the white and Indian worlds. Many didn't want their children to be educated because they were afraid that they would lose their values. They need role models like Joe." ■

— *Mardi Mileham*

### For more information on Joseph Medicine Crow, go to:

[www.custermuseum.org/](http://www.custermuseum.org/)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe\\_Medicine\\_Crow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Medicine_Crow)

[www.worldwisdom.com/public/authors/Joe-Medicine-Crow.aspx](http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/authors/Joe-Medicine-Crow.aspx)

*Counting Coup* available from the National Geographic Society

## A personal encounter

Time has slowed Joseph Medicine Crow, taken some of his hearing and dimmed his eyesight, but he hasn't lost his memory, his humor or his love of singing. When he isn't talking, he often hums softly, a rhythm that is relaxing and soothing. During our conversation, he broke into "How Great Thou Art." While sharing his experiences when he accepted the Medal of Freedom, he sang the honor song he sang for President Obama.

When we met at the Baptist Church in Lodge Grass, he brought along his Linfield letter and pennant. I presented copies of two photos of him as a student we found in the archives, along with a Linfield baseball hat and jacket.

He is a huge fan of Linfield and USC football. He is brimming with stories from every era of his life. He is friendly, charming, funny and smart. He is also awe-inspiring when you listen to him and realize the rich life he has led, his vast experience and the material he has preserved for the Crow Tribe.

We had lunch near the Little Bighorn Battlefield, at a restaurant where his grandson is a cook. He walked slowly with his walking stick and tucked his hand under my arm. As we entered, people greeted him, "Hi Joe," "Hi Mr. Crow." He waved and then led me directly to the bookshelves and picked up *White-Man-Runs-Him*, a book about his grandfather, one of Custer's Crow scouts. "You should read this," he told me. So I bought a copy.

Soon, a gentleman approached and asked if Medicine Crow would sign his book. There followed a series of people, both young and old, who drifted by the table to meet, talk and ask for his signature. He graciously signed their books, and they seemed genuinely in awe of him. So was I as he leaned over and continued telling stories.

I listened, I laughed and I felt privileged to sit next to a national treasure.

— *Mardi Mileham*