

# A leader of the people

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Vernon Ashley is shown here in summer 2015 with the stones his mother and grandmother used for pounding fruit and meat together to make wasna, or pemmican. On the wall in the background are photos of children and grandchildren in military uniform or graduation gowns. (Lance Nixon/Capital Journal)

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Save

Crow Creek chief and elder Vernon Ashley dead at age 99

The man who helped author the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe's constitution and bylaws, served the tribe during the era in which it lost its best lands for Missouri River flood control projects and later worked for three South Dakota governors has died at age 99.

Vernon Ashley – born Sinkpe, or Muskrat, to Wallace and Elizabeth Ashley nearly a century ago, in

January 1916 – died Tuesday.

He was a full blood who spoke and wrote the Dakotah dialect. He was a descendent of White Ghost, a leader in Crow Creek tribal history. White Ghost was related to two of his great-grandfathers; Sinkpe, or Muskrat, and Pahukudya, or Bowed Head. He was also a descendent of Elder Hawk, or Cetan Hunka, who was among the 38 Dakota warriors hanged at Mankato, Minnesota, on Dec. 26, 1862, after the Dakota uprising of that year.

Ashley was proud of his Dakota Indian heritage and was sought out by those who wanted to learn more about the tribe's old ways.

But he was also proud of having served America during World War II and of having acquired a college education on the G.I. Bill. He had a bulletin board in his house showing many of his children and grandchildren in military uniforms or graduation gowns.

Mary Ashley, a daughter, said her father always emphasized education because of what his grandfather had said.

“He told my father, ‘If we don’t get education, there will be a time when people are going to be sitting on the hill, crying.’”

Mary Ashley also described her father as an idealist who would stand up for what was right, whether it meant fighting the federal government’s taking of lands for flood control projects or battling an area hog confinement that he thought would be bad for the environment. She said he researched his topics and the underlining in his books showed the seriousness with which he approached the issues.

Other people, Indian and white, were lamenting the loss of Vernon Ashley on Wednesday, Veterans Day – a day that Vernon Ashley took seriously.

Marcella LeBeau, 96, a Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe member who served in the Army Nurse Corps in World War II, said Ashley loved his country and was always concerned about other soldiers who had served.

“He was always so interested in other veterans and how they’re getting along,” LeBeau said. LeBeau said Ashley’s commitment to his own people meant serving at a time when the tribe needed to write its own founding documents.

“It was unprecedented, what he did in writing their constitution and bylaws. He was a great leader among the Dakota people. He had lived through a lot of trauma, historical trauma, in his own family,” LeBeau said, referring to the events of 1862 and the execution of Elder Hawk. That affected Vernon Ashley deeply, she said.

“He was a very kind and gentle man, and I admired him for that because he could have been a very bitter man,” LeBeau said.

Poet and essayist Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who also has roots on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation, also remarked about Ashley’s attitude.

“He represented a lot of people in the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe who have survived genocide, basically, and who have not given in to vengeful, bitter thinking,” Cook-Lynn said. She added that she first remembered Vernon Ashley serving in tribal office at a time when Indian tribes on the Missouri River were dealing with the federal government’s plans to put in a series of dams on the Missouri River. Especially for the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, who had been forcibly relocated to Crow Creek after the 1862 war in Minnesota, that was a hard blow, Cook-Lynn said.

“Vernie Ashley was an important figure during that time. People were very, very opposed to the flooding of all that land,” Cook-Lynn said. “The people of Crow Creek were there from the war in Minnesota, people were pulling themselves together and going forward and then this disaster. It was a very, very difficult time for both of those tribes, Crow Creek and Brule.”

Karen Walker, a Madison, South Dakota, native who is now a research associate with the Missouri Botanical Gardens, said Vernon Ashley was one of the elders she interviewed with studying how native peoples used the plants found in the prairie. He talked about uses of chokecherries and provided context about “mouse beans” that had been stored by mice or perhaps voles. Dakota people would harvest those tiny caches of beans.

“There was a Lakota and Dakota song that was sung when the women would go to gather them,” Walker said. “And they would leave corn instead so they weren’t just robbing the animals of their food.”

Walker said Ashley was “a cultural treasure” because of what he knew about such traditions. And she said he witnessed the difficult time in which tribes had to leave the river bottoms and could no longer make use of some traditional plants that needed the Missouri River forests’ cottonwood canopy in which to thrive.

Executive Director Lyle Rustad of Minnesota-based Diversity Foundation Inc. said Vernon Ashley was especially important to Minnesota because he was a link to that war of 1862 that had forced so many Dakota people to relocate to what is now South Dakota.

“He had every right in the world to be bitter because of what happened in Minnesota, with his great-grandfather being hung as one of the 38,” Rustad said. “He eloquently expressed what they went through with no bitterness.”

Rustad noted that Vernon Ashley held to conservative political beliefs.

“He remained a Republican through thick and thin,” Rustad said, adding that Ashley remained critical of “reservation systems” and “welfare mentality.” Instead Ashley emphasized – and demonstrated – independence and a belief that people should take care of themselves.

To the end, Rustad said, Vernon Ashley remained seriously interested in developing an idea for a public/private prototype of “housing villages” that could include such amenities as greenhouses, solar, wind energy and geothermal heating to make life better for people.

And Vernon Ashley never forgot his Crow Creek roots, Rustad said.

“Vern’s story is really Crow Creek’s story, but it’s also the story of all the tribes on the Missouri River,” Rustad said.

“He lived a long and good life,” Cook-Lynn said. “I do think Vernie Ashley worked long and hard for the benefit of his people.”