

THE STORY OF VERN ASHLEY (briefly)

A 99-year-old Republican in the Crow Creek Dakota Reservation in South Dakota seems exempt from the bitter social and political struggles of the 21st century. His own life, however, is a story of rising from a bitter social and political history, building upon opportunities offered to serve his family and his people.

Vern Ashley was born as Tasunke Hinto, a Dakota name translating as His Grey Horse. It was 1916, during what Western cultures have called The Great War. But Tasunke Hinto grew up remembering that his great grandfather, Elder Hawk (also known as Stands Against the Wind), was among 38 Dakota warriors hung at Mankato, MN, on the day after Christmas in 1862, and his grandfather, Sinkpe (tr. Muskrat), was among thousands of prisoners of the U.S. Army following the great Dakota War that led to those executions.

When the U.S. Indian Agency failed to deliver promised food for the starving community in the reservation to which they'd been assigned below the Minnesota River near Mankato, a few young Dakota men attacked a couple farm settlers to steal their food, prompting a massive response by the U.S. Cavalry and the governor of the new state of Minnesota. Following the hanging of 38 (including some proven later to have been innocent of rebellion) in the largest mass execution in U.S. history – as well as one more the following day – Gov. Alexander Ramsey ordered all Dakota people forcefully exiled from Minnesota.

Sinkpe and his wife, Wowicakusa Win (Woman Who Feeds), were among the about 1,600 Dakota – mostly women and children – required to walk more than 250 miles, with violent, often murderous harassment en route, from the reservation to be

cramped into a small, unfinished, unsanitary encampment, with minimal supplies and rations, along the river below Fort Snelling. That early military post had been established by the USA to oversee the movement West through “Indian territory” in the name of “Manifest Destiny.”

The following spring, the 1,300 who survived the harsh winter were loaded into barges and shipped down the Mississippi River to St. Louis, then up the Missouri River to a barren area in Dakota Territory near the mouths of Crow Creek and Wolf Creek, with hundreds dying en route. Their new “home” was declared by the U.S. to be the Crow Creek Dakota Reservation. That’s where, a half century later, Tasunke Hinto was born, later to receive Christian (Episcopal) baptism as Vern Ashley, renamed – as his parents had been – as part of the assimilation process imposed as a state/church collaboration; but it was acknowledged by his family as “suggested because we would be living with white people and we needed names easier to pronounce.”

Ashley became a U.S. Army veteran in World War II and recalls that POW’s then had good barracks with comfortable, if confined, facilities, whereas the Dakota War POW’s, after the cruel encampment and voyage, “were dumped on hard ground, on an island in Wolf Creek.” He was born with limited medical assistance and grew up there in extreme poverty – for example, replacing worn out shoe soles with cardboard or scrounged leather pieces. There was no furnace, bathroom, available medical services or schools until the 20th century. He had a rifle but bullets were hard to get and, in any case, Indians were not allowed to hunt for wild game.

By the 1920s, the reservation had a one-room elementary school that Vern attended but there was no high school, so he was sent by

his father to the Flandreau Indian School, more than 150 miles away (depending on travel horseback). There, a half day of academic study was matched with a half day learning carpentry.

Graduating in the middle of the Great Depression in 1935, he returned to the reservation but joined the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1937, later returning to work in the hospital at Fort Thompson, which had become a proud, self-sustained community at Crow Creek. When World War II began, he was drafted, along with his two brothers, and spent four years in the Army Air Corps – drawing upon his hospital experience to help with medical service. Much of his income, after high school, went to support his aging parents.

Returning to Crow Creek in 1946, at age 30, he was informed that he'd been selected as a tribal leader, and served for eight years. Encouraged to seek higher education during this time, he used the GI Bill to attend Dakota Wesleyan University, majoring in business, earning a four-year degree in three years. His fellow students there, he recalls, were all younger and “never made me feel I was an Indian.”

As tribal leader, including when he was in college, he had to go to Washington annually to testify to Congress. In 1954, overriding his advice, the Federal Government built the Fort Randall Dam on the Missouri River that flooded Fort Thompson, forcing relocation of most of the tribe and flooding the fields and forest that comprised its primary food supply. His requests for greater reparations were denied and the government failed to help the community fully rebuild at a new location.

Even the tribal office and Indian Agency had to be moved. First exploring neighboring Chamberlain, they encountered viciously

racist resistance, then moved the offices, instead, to Pierre, the South Dakota capital.

Vern took a Federal job in 1955, serving at the Standing Rock Reservation, which straddles the border between South and North Dakota. He wrote rehabilitation programs for land that had been taken from the tribe. After 10 years, he was called by the Governor of South Dakota to become the state's Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

During the post-war era, Vern was married and supported a family of seven children, all of whom earned college degrees – four master's degrees – and entered professional careers. At 99, he looks back with greatest pride on the achievements of his children and grandchildren – yet with sorrow at the pain still experienced by the people of Crow Creek who have been unable to access the opportunities he experienced.

Having built self-sufficiency for his family, teaching and modeling it for neighbors, Vern has been honored repeatedly, including an honorary doctoral degree, but remains depressed with the struggles his people experience with governing social and political structures and customs that have been assimilated from the dominant culture and government in the USA. Crow Creek remains the nation's poorest reservation.