

UNSUNG HEROES: Al Trimble; Obituary Delayed

It's been twenty two years this November since the passing of Albert William "Al" Trimble. His death in 1982, at the age of 54, was little noted in the newspaper that, at the time, covered much of Sioux territory, the Lakota Times. There was no obituary, merely a terse and cursory announcement of his death.

I have always suspected that this had to do with the 1975 Oglala Sioux tribal election in which Trimble defeated Richard "Dick" Wilson for the office of President. The Lakota Times was a strong supporter of Wilson, and although that election was several years before the Times began publishing, it was apparently the cause for the posthumous snub. Yet Trimble is viewed by many Oglalas as one of the tribe's greatest governmental leaders. This column serves as his obituary, long delayed.

He was born in Interior, SD, in 1928, and was raised in Wanblee village on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He spent most of his school years on the reservation, but graduated from Haskell Institute in 1946. He served in the U.S. Army in the immediate post-WWII period.

Rising from clerical ranks, Trimble held several high level positions in the BIA during a twenty year career. He served as Superintendent of the Pine Ridge Reservation in the months leading up to AIM's Wounded Knee occupation in 1973. His efforts to stop the abuses of the OST President, Dick Wilson, led Wilson to press the Bureau for his removal. The BIA conceded, and he was transferred to that agency's offices in Albuquerque. There, in virtual exile, he decided to retire early from Federal service and run on a reform ticket for the presidency of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

In 1975, in a campaign marked by violent attacks on him and his family, Trimble won the election by a decisive margin, and set out on a campaign of healing and reform. First, measures had to be taken to change the tribal governance from a virtual dictatorship to one responsive and accountable to the electorate.

Under the new Indian Self-Determination Act, his first action was to secure tribal control of the reservation police, and curb abuses on their part. This action also served to disband the hated goon squads.

He decentralized the tribal government, giving the districts more autonomy and resources, and pushed the Council into an annual round-robin schedule of meeting in each of the districts. To help build their confidence, he secured funds to build district meeting centers throughout the reservation. The tribal seat at Pine Ridge he saw as a colonial outpost and he sought to move political control from Pine Ridge to the districts. He envisioned a new tribal capital in the geographic center of the reservation. This, he felt, would also move the economic center inward for greater benefit to all tribal members, not just around Pine Ridge. The new capital would be called Piya Wiconi, meaning "New Beginning" in the Lakota language.

But, sapped of strength by the strenuous schedule and a congenital heart condition, he had little energy to mount his re-election campaign, and lost his bid for a second term. However, the reforms he put in place were etched into the hearts of the people, and to this day they are loath to surrender them.

He lived to see the first building constructed on the high grassy hill where he envisioned Piya Wiconi would be located. The tribal college, Oglala Lakota College, would be headquartered in

the modern structure that crowned the prairie horizon there. That institution keeps alive his dream of a new capital.

Although in his final months he served as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, the greatest honor to him personally was the Presidency of his tribe, and his greatest achievement was the reforms he instituted in tribal government there.

At the memorial dinner ending the customary year of mourning, Suzan Harjo summed up his life in a written tribute: "We have lost a great leader as well as a great healer."

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