

UNSUNG HEROES: Helen L. Peterson, Oglala Lakota

My life in Indian politics – the National Congress of American Indians particularly, has been blessed with many true leaders; not the self-promoting or authoritarian kind, but thoughtful, tough, persuasive and persistent. Not the kind that seek or need the limelight, but leaders who carry the light that people follow. To them I owe much for a life of exciting good works.

A majority of these leaders I speak of have been women. Although not in numbers, the NCAI leadership on the executive side has been in the hands of women for a majority of the years of its existence. As for the Presidency of the organization, it was only in 1977, in the organization's 33rd year, that the first woman was elected – Veronica Murdock, Mohave, of Arizona.

The belated honor of women in the NCAI presidency may be attributed to the fact that most of those elected were political heads of tribes, and women – mostly for reasons of tradition or culture, had yet to win their place in those offices.

But in the national, supratribal political arena such as NCAI, women assumed leadership early on. In fact, the very first NCAI Executive Secretary was Ruth Muskrat Bronson, Cherokee. From her apartment kitchen in Georgetown, we are told, she nurtured the organization through its infancy in very difficult times.

I have many other women among my heroes in NCAI's glorious history: Marie Potts, Maidu, who went from Sacramento to Washington by bus to help the fledgling organization as a volunteer, and to represent the small tribes of California. Lucy Covington, Colville, who fought and defeated the self-styled liquidationists in her own tribal council to save her tribe from imminent termination. Georgiana Robinson, Osage, who attended every NCAI convention up until her death and seldom saw the light of day, let alone the limelight, during the conventions. She had dedicated herself to the NCAI Credentials Committee, which she saw as the most important body of the organization. Her days and nights were in the smoke-filled meeting room making the committee work efficiently.

The list is long and lustrous of the women who did so much to make NCAI the organization that will go down in history as the greatest. These are only a few of the heroes that so enriched my life when I served as Director of the organization. But my greatest hero, and the organization's greatest Executive Director, was Helen L. Peterson, Lakota and Cheyenne, who ably served in the darkest era in modern times for the American Indian tribes. Her tenure, often tenuous in an atmosphere of intense internal political discord, was through the infamous era of termination.

Her main foes were in the Congressional committees led by members, mainly from western states, who were hell bent on destroying the tribes in order to “make the Indian a true American.” This meant ending the special relationship between the Federal government and the tribes, and dissolving the structure for tribes to exercise their sovereignty and right to self-government.

Virtually drafted into the position, Helen had much to learn about Indian affairs, but she had excellent teachers and mentors including attorney John Cragun and the courageous federal official, Bob Bennett of the Oneidas. She tells of these men and others helping her prepare for

the hearings, working late into the night, going over and over the questions that would likely be asked in the next day's Committee session. She told of going to bed, her head swirling with facts and data about Indian Country that she had never heard before.

In the hearings she faced bullying on one hand, and condescension on the other. For this "little lady" – a divorced mother with her young son, stood in the path of termination.

With the organization barely able to pay its rent and her meager salary, she had to rely on all she could muster in creativity and diplomacy. She could not afford legal and other specialists to be at her side to help.

But she was indeed a creative diplomat, and her style was shown in her dealings with Congressman Wayne Aspinall (D-CO), who could not be considered then as a friend of the tribes. Helen learned that Aspinall took great pride in his abilities as a Chairman, so she invited him to visit NCAI and talk to visiting tribal leaders about legislative leadership. He was flattered and agreed to talk with them. He got to know the tribal leaders in a very special, personal way, and a new attitude reflected his new understanding.

She saw the tribes as the nations they were and worked to promote their confidence in themselves and their sovereignty. The NCAI conventions she saw as a gathering of nations, and she took cues from the national party conventions to stress the importance of each individual tribe, and the criticality of the their delegations in setting forth the national Indian consensus.

She had a special interest in encouraging young people to get into tribal and intertribal affairs, and did much to develop an entire generation of leaders among them. Although I do not claim a mantle of leadership, I am proud to consider myself among her political progeny.

When I graduated from college in the mid 1950s, I had decided to leave Indian country behind me and get out into the mainstream world. In my senior year, I was interviewed by Director of the John Hay Whitney Fellowship and was asked what I hoped to do with my education. I answered that I planned to leave the reservation and remove myself from the roles of the unemployed. That didn't have the ring of potential leadership in human rights, and I was passed over. But it showed my attitude through my years in the army and my employment in the private sector in my post-military years.

In 1968 in Denver, near where I was employed with an aerospace firm, I attended a pow-wow put on by the White Buffalo Council, an urban Indian organization to which Helen belonged. She invited me and my wife to come to her house for coffee after the pow-wow, which we did. We drove home to Boulder at daylight the next morning. We had talked the entire night about Indian affairs. We were engrossed in her telling, and we hadn't realized that it was already the next day.

On the way home, I told my wife that I wanted to get into Indian affairs; that's where I belonged. I wanted to do some good. Helen had brought me back to Indian Country, and prepared me for a role in the fight to protect tribal sovereignty, and I am forever thankful to her.

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