

## **Unsung Heroes: George Lavatta, Remembrance of a little big man**

Recent news of the passing of George P. Lavatta did not likely come as a shock to many. What may have been a greater surprise to most of those who knew George was that he was still alive until so recently. Mr Lavatta, a Shoshone-Bannock gentlemen from Fort Hall, was 97 years old when he died in a Portland nursing home last month.

To many Indian people, the mention of George Lavatta brings smiles and wonderful memories of the National Congress of American Indians and his special association with the organization. For more years than anyone now can remember, Mr Lavatta served as the self-appointed sergeant at arms at all conventions and other important gatherings of the organization.

Minutes before the start of general assembly sessions, George's loud, husky voice could be heard announcing the start of the proceedings as he harangued the hallway crowds to move inside and take their seats. In late afternoon and evening sessions, his rounds might include the hotel's bars, reminding the conventioners that their tribes sent them as delegates to take care of important business, not to waste their time guzzling booze.

Many will remember the important NCAI conference in Kansas City in 1970, when George met head-on with a tough and arrogant squad of White House Secret Service agents. Vice President Spiro Agnew was scheduled to address the general assembly, and there was much excitement. Only people with proper identification were allowed to enter the general assembly, and everyone had to be seated in preparation for the Vice President's grand entry. No one was allowed to stand. Although there was much excitement, people spoke in hushed tones and, for an NCAI conference, the large room was strangely quiet.

George Lavatta entered late, apparently having made one last round of the lobby and bars. He surveyed the room, then spied several large, grim-faced men in business suits, standing in the rear and scanning the crowd from side to side. George made straight way to two of the men, and in his loud voice boomed out, "No standing, go sit down." One of his tribesmen quickly took George by the arm and led him to a seat, explaining that those were Secret Service agents, there to guard the Vice President. The crowd roared with laughter, and the agents had great difficulty maintaining their serious foreboding mien.

George P. Lavatta, you see, was 74 years old at the time, and stood all of five feet two inches tall. Though his legs were bowed with age, he walked straight up and head back, peering through thick glasses. If he hadn't been dissuaded by a friendly hand, it would have been interesting to see if the tough agents could have backed down the little man whose lifelong dedication it was to maintain order and decorum for NCAI.

The National Congress was everything to him. NCAI was his life. Back in 1944, he and several other Indian men traveled throughout Indian country from tribe to tribe selling the idea for a national, intertribal organization. Others in that group included D'Arcy McNickle of the Flatheads, Charles Heacock of the Rosebud Sioux, Archie Finney of Nez Perce, and Mr Lavatta's fellow tribesman from Fort Hall, Frank Parker. They traveled for many weeks by train, car and team and wagon.

The National Congress of American Indians was formed in November of 1944, and up to the time of his retirement to the nursing home in the early 1980s, George Lavatta attended every NCAI convention. No one paid his transportation or expenses. To him, that was part of his dues and responsibility to his beloved organization. Because of leaders like him, NCAI will soon be celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

NCAI leadership over the years is a roster of modern Indian history's great chiefs, statesmen and scholars. From the beginning, women were well represented in NCAI leadership, including its first executive secretary, Ruth Muskrat Bronson from Cherokee, and its greatest executive director of all time, Helen L. Peterson, Oglala Sioux. And NCAI produced some great thinkers and authors.

But after all is said about the statesmanship, dignity, scholarship and eloquence of the organization's leadership over the years, perhaps the best picture that exemplifies the greatness and endurance of NCAI is that of its Indian spirit, small but mighty, that stands up to the big man from Washington. That spirit lives on in NCAI in the memory of the late George P. Lavatta, the Shoshone-Bannock gentleman from the Fort Hall Indian Reservation.

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Charles E. Trimble is an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. He is President of Red Willow Institute in Omaha, Nebraska.