

INTRODUCTION

I am ninety-two years of age now and I was brought up by my grandparents, Yellowtail and his wife Lizzie Yellowtail. Together they raised three sons, two daughters, and many grandchildren in their home just south of Lodge Grass, Montana. The Lodge Grass Valley is called the “Valley of the Chiefs” because of the many great war-chiefs who lived there in the early reservation years.

At the time when I was born in 1913 it was only about thirty years after the Crows were moved to this part of the reservation—reservation life actually started in 1884. My grandparents were pre-reservation Indians who lived before the reservation was set up. They would go camping, hunting, and the men went on the war path. They were always on the move; they were nomads who enjoyed the free life in a beautiful country.

In 1884, the Secretary of Interior issued the so-called “Secretary’s Order” to ‘detritalize’ the Indian people and make them into white men as soon as possible—a unilateral cultural assimilation process. One of the first things they wanted to do was establish a school, a boarding school. The boarding school was set up about 1890 at Crow Agency with a boy’s dormitory, girl’s dormitory, the dining room, classrooms, and other facilities. The Crow children were required to be taken to that boarding school and left there, including very young kids, five, six, seven years old.

The Indian agent would send out his Indian policemen to collect the children—he had a force of Indian policemen. They were ruthless because they had to try to please the agent and, of course, they got paid, so they were his men, his Gestapo. Every once in a while they would go out throughout the country and look for kids age five and take them away from their parents and bring them to the boarding school. And there they would become like slaves; they were mistreated and some were even killed there. The girls had to cook, bake, and do the personal laundry for all of the B.I.A. employees in the area, not just the people at the school. The boarding school was a mean place. The children were forbidden to speak their Native language; if they would speak in the Crow language they had to chew a strong soap—it had a terrible taste. The kids also couldn’t play any Indian games—they were forbidden to follow anything to do with the Native cultural ways. If they violated any of these rules they were not allowed to visit with their parents on the weekends or to go home for family visits. The school cut off their long hair—they gave the boys a complete “G.I.” hair cut and threw away their braids. The girls had their hair bobbed short.

A lot of children died mysteriously. My grandfather, Chief Medicine Crow, raised a little Nez Perce baby boy. Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce camped near here on the Crow Reservation when the army was after them. In the night time the Crow would take food into the Nez Perce camp. Quite a few Nez Perce left their babies with the Crow.



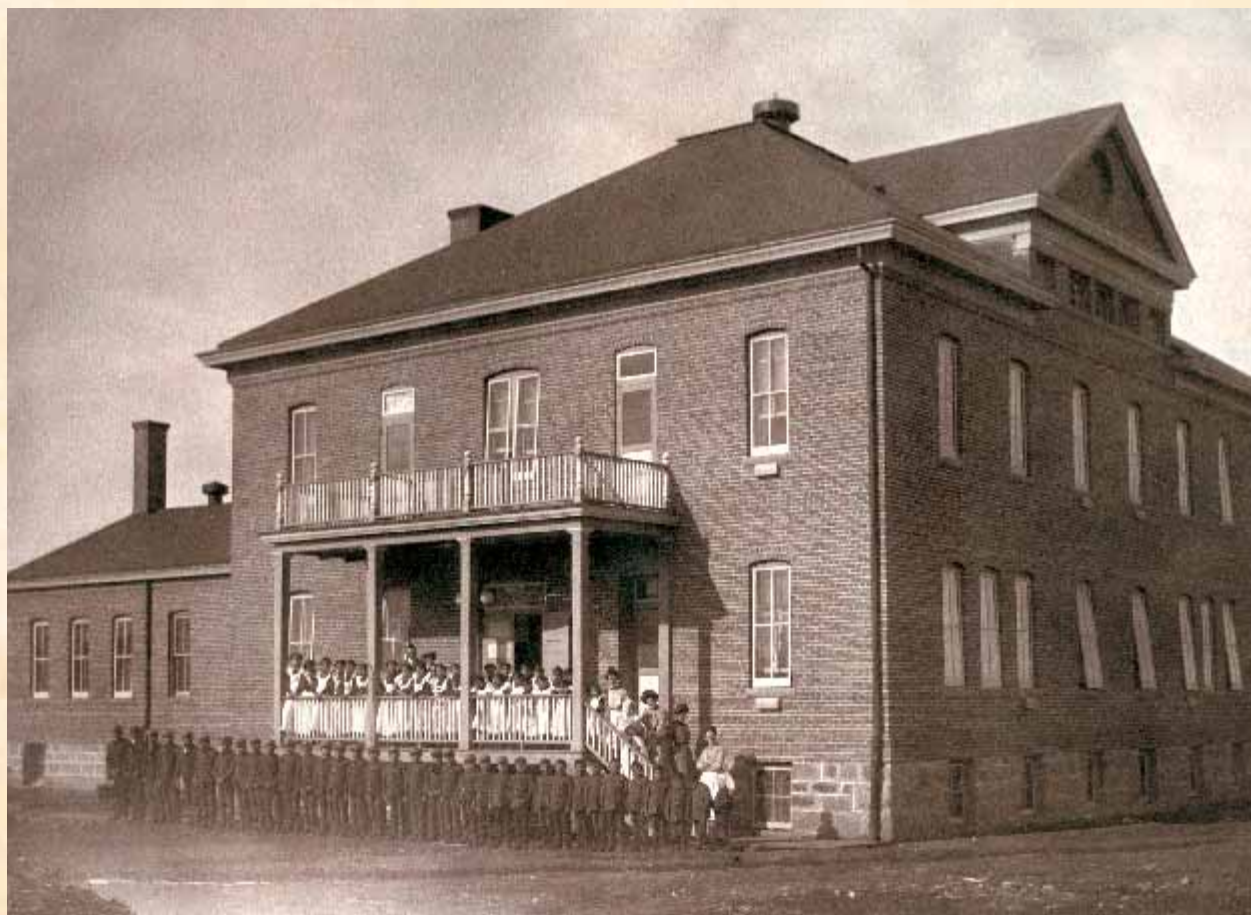
Chief Joseph



Nez Perce child

The parents said, “When this thing is over, if we survive we will come back for them.” But many of the Nez Perce parents never returned. So Chief Medicine Crow raised the Nez Perce baby as part of his family. The boy later had to go to the government boarding school. He was mistreated and he died there. No one knows exactly what happened. I think he was punished so hard that he died; this same thing happened to many other children.

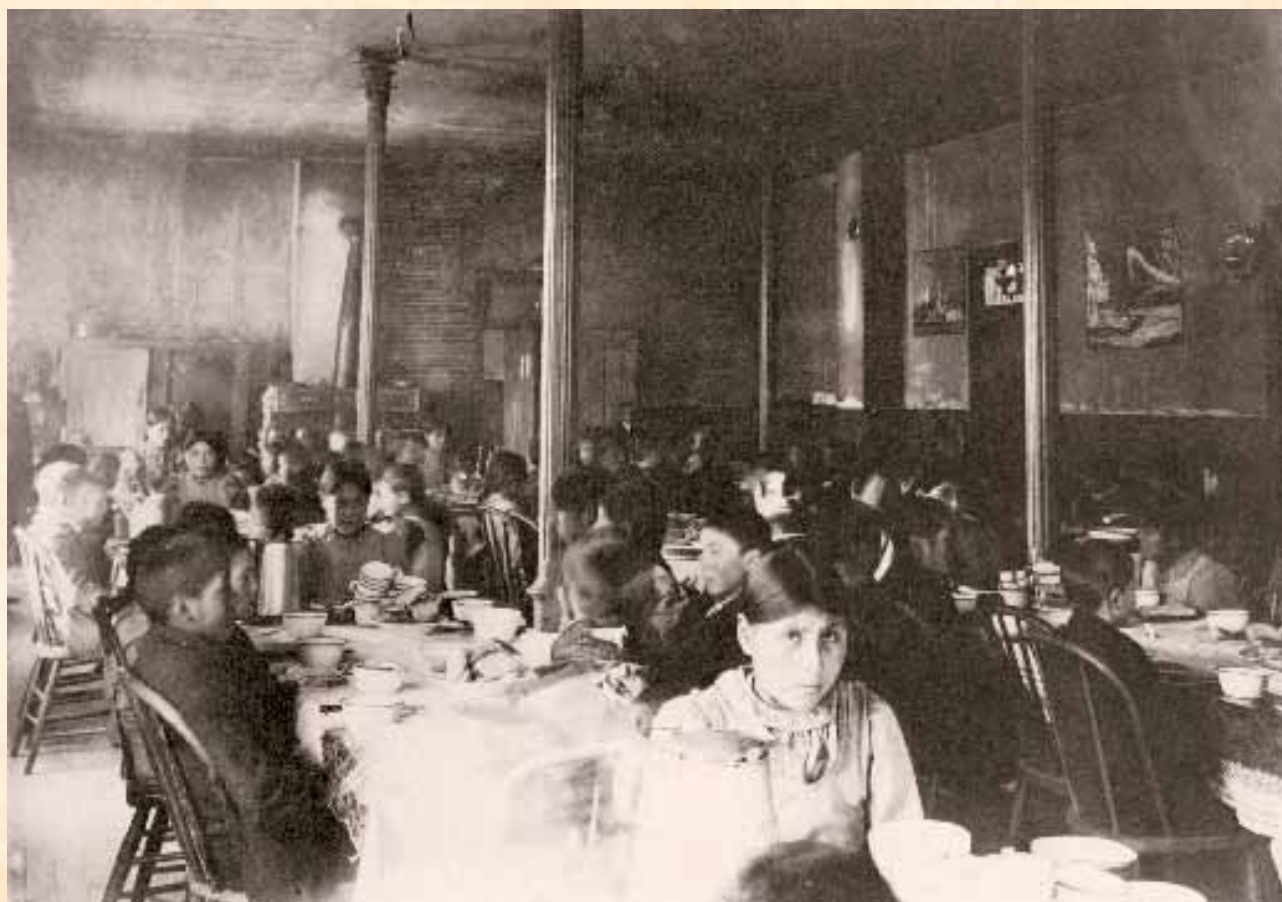
When Bob Yellowtail was just five years old, his little old grandmother, her name was Bear Stays by the Side of the Water, took her grandson, her little tipi, and her horses and went to the Wolf Mountains where they hid all summer. But the police found out about it—probably somebody told them. When they found out that he and his grandma were out in the Wolf Mountains they went out there, looked for them, and found them. His dad, Yellowtail, followed the police so when they found Yellowtail’s mother and his son he rode up and was right there with them. When they took the little boy away from his grandmother they were rough, putting the little boy over the back of the saddle to travel the thirty-five miles back to Crow Agency. So his father said, “Look he’s just a baby. I’ll take him to the boarding school tomorrow.” The Indian police de-



Above: Indian students gardening; Below: Crow boarding school at Pryor, Montana



Chief Medicine Crow (1848-1922) with wife Medicine Mountain Sheep (1855-1947), grandparents of Joe Medicine Crow



Willow Creek Boarding School mess hall, 1907



Tom Torlino, Navajo from Arizona, on arrival at the Indian Training School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

cided to let the father bring him in, so the next morning they took the little boy to the boarding school at Crow Agency and left him there. Many families can tell similar stories.

Over time, however, the parochial schools moved in. The first one was set up by the Catholics over at St. Xavier. Then in 1904 the Baptist people were asked to come and start a church and school. President Grant asked the denominations to help assimilate the Indians and the churches actively tried to convert the Indians away from their traditional ceremonials. Then almost every Christian denomination opened churches and schools on the reservation. The church schools taught the kids how to read and write; at the government schools the education didn't go past the sixth grade—they just stopped there and repeated the sixth grade, so even when they finished government boarding school the children could barely read and write. And, at the church schools they didn't mistreat the children like they did at the government boarding schools. So families sent their children to the church schools instead of the government boarding school. By about 1922 the government boarding school at Crow Agency closed because all of the children were sent by their families to the church schools. The government thought that if the Indians became Christians then they would turn away from their Crow traditions, and,



Baking bread at the Willow Creek Boarding School, c. 1907

of course, some Indians did turn away from the traditions; but most Indians embraced Christianity without abandoning their own cultural traditions. There was no problem in the Indian way; everyone had a little different way to pray—we had our own way—but everyone was praying to the same, one God. A man can be a good Catholic and a good Sun Dance man. Tom Yellowtail went to Reverend Petzolt's Baptist Boarding School, which was close to Lodge Grass. Tom was a good Baptist, but the next week he was a sun dancer—there was no problem.

The "Secretary's Order" of 1884 also prohibited the Indians from practicing all activities related to their culture, including singing, dancing, and all traditional ceremonials. The reservation police had the power to enforce this Order to prevent any traditional singing and dancing. The Crow people were afraid to even put on their Native costumes; they were told to wear overalls, white man's outfits—told to start becoming white men. Our people were forced to become farmers and give up their traditions. For fifty years there was a strict period of cultural transition. However, the government could not take away the intangible things; the Crow people still had their values, their traditional religion, and their philosophy—they kept them. During this time they had to go hide and perform some of their rituals—many



Tom Torlino after transformation at Carlisle, 1885



Laundry at the Crow Boarding School, Pryor, Montana



Waiting for rations, c. 1905



Crow Police, c. 1905-1911

families tried to keep their spiritual traditions alive in the secrecy of their homes. And, all of the clan rules were kept intact, right up to this day, which is a good thing because those are important rules to follow. So we survived with our values and most of our ceremonials—the tribal culture was kept alive.

In 1934 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs removed the prohibitions in connection with a so-called “Indian Re-organization Act,” so from that time on the people could do their ceremonials. On the Shoshone Reservation they were Sun Dancing right away—I think they were hiding it and doing it all along. The Crow also started to resume many of our traditional ceremonials, but during the fifty year break when the Sun Dance was outlawed, the Crow lost their own form of the Sun Dance. In the 1930s some Crow men went to the Sun Dance on the Shoshone Reservation in Fort Washakie, where John Trehero was the Sun Dance chief. William Big Day was one of the Crow men who danced with Trehero down on the Shoshone Reservation. Then in 1941 William Big Day invited John Trehero to come to Pryor and lead a Shoshone Sun Dance on the Crow Reservation. That Sun Dance was a big success and was attended by Bob Yellowtail, the superintendent of the Crow Reservation.

The next summer was after the start of World War II and Bob Yellowtail was instrumental in asking John Trehero to come and lead a Sun Dance at Crow Agency for the service men. Because he was the tribal superintendent Yellowtail had workmen help put up a big Lodge. He contacted the various military installations where the Crow boys were stationed and asked for them to have a short vacation; many soldiers came to take part in the Sun Dance here at Crow Agency in 1942. I recall there were more than one hundred dancers. That Sun Dance was also a great success so the result was that the Crow have used the Shoshone Sun Dance ever since that time. After that John Trehero came every summer to lead a Sun Dance somewhere on the Crow Reservation. At first just the men danced, following the practice of the Shoshone tribe. Then one woman came into the Sun Dance Lodge and just fasted—she didn’t dance. Later on more Crow women came into the Lodge to fast. Finally the women started to dance just like the men. The Crows added women sun dancers, that is the main difference between the Crow and the Shoshone Sun Dance because only men dance in the Shoshone Sun Dance.

Tom Yellowtail considered John Trehero as a relative and, of course, John considered Tom in the same way. When old John came over to the Crow Reservation he would stay with us here—we used to live just half a mile up from Yellowtail’s house. Tom Yellowtail started sun dancing himself shortly after the big Sun Dance here—probably in about 1943. After he became a sun dancer he participated every year, sometimes here and sometimes he went to the Sun Dance with John at the Wind River Reservation. He was a very sincere sun dancer.

In about 1963 Trehero announced that he was going to retire, that his next Sun Dance would probably be his last one. He also an-



John Trehero, 1972



Crow sun dancers, 1941



Building a Crow Sun Dance
Lodge, 1940s

nounced that he was going to give his Sun Dance position to an eligible young man to carry on. Up to that point the Shoshone men as well as Crow sun dancers were always approaching John and asking him if he would give them his Sun Dance position; many men asked for that honor. But John always said, "I'll let you know when the time comes that my Medicine Fathers, the sacred protectors (I think they're the 'little people'), will tell me when and to whom to give the position." So, he announced that the time had come and that he was going to retire and turn the position of Sun Dance chief over to a good man who would take over and do a good job. Oh, all the dancers were quiet. Then John pointed at Tom Yellowtail and said, "I'm going to turn it over to him." It disappointed a lot of other men who wanted to be the Sun Dance chief.

Then the next year they had a Sun Dance up here on the Crow Reservation. That was when John officially turned the position over to Tom. Trehero himself didn't go into the dance but he kept telling Tom just what to do, when to do things, and so forth—he coached Tom along during that Sun Dance and, of course, he gave Tom all of the sacred Sun Dance objects, the medicine-fans and so forth. From that time forward Tom Yellowtail was the most important Sun Dance chief of the Crow tribe until his death in 1993 when he was ninety years of age.

The Shoshone people and the Crow people who have decided to become Sun Dance men would do so with a feeling and conviction that, after a time, they would acquire quite some power, the power to help people, the power to heal afflictions of the body, and to solve other problems. To me John Trehero, of all the Sun Dance men in Indian country, was the top man—the most powerful, the most authentic. I received a direct benefit of that power. In 1942 I was ready to leave for the war. Two days before I left I was given a little eagle plume that was dyed yellow that Trehero blessed and made into a medicine feather. So long as that little yellow eagle feather was in my helmet I was cool and collected and I knew just what to do. It kind of guided me on a safe road. Trehero's sacred medicine brought me safely through World War II; it allowed me to achieve success in my war deeds—that is my connection with John's power, I felt it. His sacred medicine also allowed many other Crow soldiers to achieve great war deeds.

And John gave his power to Tom Yellowtail. Tom himself would fast on Vision Quests and, of course, he was also fasting when he was in the Sun Dance. In that way Tom also acquired a lot of power; he helped a lot of sick people around here. Tom Yellowtail did a great deal to help the Crow tribe and perpetuate the Crow Sun Dance religion. The book about Tom Yellowtail's life and the Crow Sun Dance is also important because it preserves the wisdom of the old-timers for future generations. Tom Yellowtail is a great man.



John Trehero, 1940s



Thomas Yellowtail, 1972



Thomas Yellowtail in Switzerland,
1953

In about 1984 Tom Yellowtail chose a successor to carry on the Sun Dance and then just last year that position of Sun Dance chief was passed to a younger man to carry on. They had a powerful Sun Dance last summer; a lot of people were blessed. It is getting so that there are several Sun Dances each summer—all over the reservation many different men are holding Sun Dances. I don't know exactly where all of the men get their authority—probably from different medicine bundles—but there is a resurgence in the Sun Dance and this is a good thing. The Sun Dance legacy of John Trehero and Tom Yellowtail is being carried on.



My grandparents raised me more like a boy way back in 1840s and 1850s. They kept that up, notwithstanding the fact that I had to go to boarding school and learn the white man's language. They taught me to be an old traditional Crow Indian—my grandfather even made little bows and arrows for me. My youth was shaped by these old-timers who had lived the traditional nomadic life. Tom Yellowtail was my youngest uncle; he was about ten years older than me, so I also owe a lot of my childhood training to my Uncle Tom. Tom Yellowtail was a great athlete and taught me about farming, hunting, and trapping. He went on to help re-establish several forms of traditional dancing on the Crow Reservation, including the Tail Feather Society.

Tom Yellowtail and some other young men helped revive traditional dancing at the Crow Fair in the 1940s. Then in 1952 or '53 we started the All-American Indian Days in Sheridan, WY. Sheridan is close to the Crow Reservation so the Crow tribe was instrumental in hosting and putting on this celebration. This was the largest powwow in the United States for more than twenty years and attracted Indian people from all over the country. As part of the powwow we had a pageant to honor a Miss Indian America, who traveled during the year to teach young Indian school children about traditional values. I was one of the main program arrangers and an announcer. Each night we asked different tribes to present some representation of their tribal culture. Up to that time many of the tribes had stopped dancing and singing, so the All-American Indian Days was instrumental in bringing back the powwow.

Then over the years other tribes followed the example of the All-American Indian Days and started their own powwows. First the Arapaho held their own powwow in Ethete, then the Piegiens held one each summer in Browning. Then attendance at the All-American Indian Days started dwindling because there was a powwow somewhere in Indian country almost every week during the summer, which was a good thing. When the powwow dancing came back there was a need for traditional costumes, so they revived the old handicrafts—the bead work, the quill work, that was almost forgotten. Some years ago they



stopped having this powwow in Sheridan, but it established the way that other tribes hold their powwows and pageants to honor their youth and teach them about their traditions.

The powwow is a vehicle that is keeping our children “Indian.” A lot of our Crow young people have long hair and they braid their hair nicely—not only the Crow but other tribes also. Of course they go to school, but during the Crow Fair you’ll see even the little kids all dressed up, dancing, parading on horses, going back to the old Indian ways and enjoying themselves. They learn about clan rules, they meet their clan relatives, they learn about their traditions. Then they put their Indian costumes away and they go to school. I’m glad to see that they are hanging on to the old ways. So there is a sort of renaissance of going back to the Indian traditional ways all over the country. The powwow is turning the Indian back to the blanket—which is a good thing.

I have lived in two worlds: one is a traditional Crow Indian way—I dance, sing, and go to ceremonies and all those things; and at the same time, I have lived like a modern American, going to several colleges, and I had good jobs. I can mix the two, blend the two, get the best from each, and enjoy life living in both worlds. When I want to give advice to these young Crow Indian boys and girls, I tell them “never forget the old tribal ways, this brings a good life—use them.” And I also tell them, “go to school, get a good education, and be able to compete in the white man’s world in finding jobs, following your profession. You can blend the two and enjoy a good bi-cultural way.” It is possible to live in both worlds. That is my advice to these young kids, and they are doing it now.

This project is going to help a lot of people, so I want to do my part with a Crow Indian prayer:

Great Spirit, today it is my pleasure to have talked about the life of Tom Yellowtail, particularly about his work in the Sun Dance Way. It is important to carry on Tom Yellowtail’s legacy of helping people through the Sun Dance Way, so I pray for Mike and his son here, these friends of ours from Indiana, that they may go home, get home safely, and complete their work. *Aho! Aho!*

Joe Medicine Crow
Lodge Grass, MT
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Introduction to Native Spirit: The Sun Dance Way
by Joe Medicine Crow

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