

Farewell to a chief

By Lance Nixon

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Drums, honor songs sung in Dakota and an eagle whistle celebrate Vernon Ashley's life

As flags across South Dakota flew at half-staff in his honor, friends and family celebrated the life of the late Vernon Ashley, a chief of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, on Tuesday at Trinity Episcopal Church in Pierre.

Ashley died Nov. 10 at age 99. Gov. Dennis Daugaard ordered the flags across South Dakota flown at half-staff Tuesday as a token of respect for Ashley, who was elected tribal chairman at Crow Creek in 1946 after serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II. Ashley had the lead role in writing the tribe's constitution and bylaws, and he also negotiated for the tribe as tribal lands in the rich Missouri River bottoms were being seized by the federal government for flood control projects.

Ashley's coffin was draped in an American flag and two Dakota war bonnets were on display to either side of it — one of them given to him this past July when he was made a chief of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe.

Honor song and an eagle whistle

Ashley — born Jan. 15, 1916, at the mouth of Wolf Creek, near the Crow Creek District — was honored with a song in the Dakota language during the church celebration, sung by Londer Seaboy. Vernon Ashley's given name, Sinkpe — muskrat — was one of the few words a non-Dakota speaker would recognize in the song.

Danny Seaboy, Londer's father, asked all the veterans to stand and be honored as well, and they did — quite a number of Native Americans, and several more who were not.

Mysteriously, some of those who attended the funeral reported hearing an eagle whistle while the veterans were being honored, Vernon Ashley's son, Joe Ashley said afterward. To his knowledge, Ashley said, there was no one present blowing on an eagle whistle, though such whistles made of eagle bone were traditionally used by some Plains Indian warrior societies.

Those attending included Crow Creek Tribal Council Member Fabian Howe, who said Vernon Ashley was "a born leader" who earned honor by the important work he did writing the tribe's constitution.

Vernon Ashley also worked for three South Dakota governors and later worked for the federal government.



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Reconciliation

Also attending was Lyle Rustad of the Minnesota-based Diversity Foundation Inc. He said the foundation has compiled multiple interviews with Vernon Ashley and plans to issue a book, a feature documentary or both that would lean heavily on Vernon Ashley's experience to help tell the story of the Dakota people who were driven out of Minnesota after the Dakota uprising of 1862. Vernon Ashley's family was among those exiles, who were forcibly relocated to the Crow Creek Reservation in central South Dakota starting in 1863.

Vernon Ashley was a descendent of a Dakota warrior named Elder Hawk who was among the 38 Dakota who were hanged in Mankato, Minnesota, on Dec. 26, 1862. But Vernon Ashley made a deliberate effort to show friendship to the people of Mankato, Rustad said.

"He was very big in reconciliation," Rustad said. "That was Vern's thing — he was willing to forgive."

Man of faith

Vernon Ashley recited the Lord's Prayer in Dakota and in English every night before he went to sleep, his son Joe Ashley told people at the funeral. Sometimes he asked his children to come and pray with him. On Tuesday, those attending Ashley's funeral sang several hymns in Ashley's first language, Dakota, as Vernon Ashley's daughter Mary Ashley provided accompaniment on the organ. Joe Ashley sang the doxology, first in Dakota, then in English.

Vernon Ashley was a lay reader for 40 years in the Episcopal Church.