Susie Yellowtail

Susie Yellowtail (1903-1981)

Susie Yellowtail was born on January 27, 1903, near Pryor, in Osage County, Oklahoma, near White Barn (in present-day Osage County). She was raised by her mother, Ellen Yellowtail, on the Indian reservations, and then attended Kay County School near Kay, Oklahoma, before enrolling at the Northfield Seminary in Northfield, Minnesota. Susie completed her formal education by training at the Frontier County Memorial Hospital in Northfield and then practicing at Boston City Hospital.

Susie Yellowtail emerged from these years of study as the first American Indian graduate of the University of Minnesota. She prepared to pursue her dream of dedicating herself to helping Native American peoples. She went to work as a nurse in various local hospitals and nursing homes in Oklahoma, and in 1924, returned to the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana. Here, in 1929, she married Tom Yellowtail, a Crow religious leader and the source of spiritual strength for Susie throughout her life.

Mrs. Yellowtail applied her nursing skills extensively on the Crow Reservation, eventually taking a position with the Indian Health Service. Later, under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service, Susie traveled to reservations throughout America, focusing health, social, and education problems and recommending solutions. Because of her wisdom, ingenuity, and compassion, Susie Yellowtail was recognized nationally as a spokesman for reservation Natives. In this role she was always mindful: “The Indian needs are many, but most urgent is the need for better education.”

This self-sacrificing, deeply religious woman—with twinkling eyes, a husky laugh, and an irreverent wisdom—became an ambassador of good will for her people and a bearer of hope for them. But beyond her public persona, her family of four daughters and one son, two adopted sons, numerous tribal adopted sons, as well as dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, always remained her first priority. A devoted wife, Susie created a tradition of Crow headwork that she shared with her family and friends, along with her philosophy, love, and advice. Susie Yellowtail's formal accomplishments are many. She sat on the boards of directors of numerous Native American organizations for years; she served on the Crow Tribal Education and Health Commission; she was appointed to the President's Council on Indian Education and Affairs; she was a member of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Council on Indian Health; she was a director of the Montana Advisory Council on Vocational Education; she became a member of the President's Special Council on Aging. One of Susie's most cherished distinctions was granted in 1972, when the American Indian Nurses Association named her “Grandmother of American Indian Nurses.”

Susie Yellowtail was an extraordinary Native American leader. She embodied wisdom, vision, and the determination to accomplish her goals. She achieved her life's mission: to serve as a bridge between Native American peoples and non-Indians. For this reason, she never abandoned her Native American religion or her Crow dress; she served to integrate non-Indians into her heritage and her concerns. While engaged in a lifelong public-service career, Susie never lost her heritage or her family. She nourished—physically, educationally, and spiritually—all those around her.