

SUSIE YELLOWTAIL

(1903 – 1981)

Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail was born on January 27, 1903, near Pryor, to Walking Bear (a Crow) and Jane White Horse (a Sioux). She was raised on Pryor Creek and attended two local boarding schools, before being orphaned at the age of 12. She next attended a Baptist boarding school in Muskogee, Oklahoma, before enrolling at Northfield Seminary in Massachusetts. Susie completed her formal education by training at the Franklin County Memorial Hospital in Northfield and then practicing at Boston City Hospital.

Susie Walking Bear emerged from these years of study as the first American Indian graduate Registered Nurse, fully prepared to pursue her dream of dedicating her life to helping Native American peoples. She went to work immediately in private and school nursing in Oklahoma and in home nursing with the Chippewas in Minnesota; then she returned to the Crow 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, assessing health, social and education problems and recommending solutions. Because of her wisdom, insight and commitment, Susie Yellowtail was recognized nationally as a spokesperson for reservation Natives. In this role she was always incisive. “The Indians’ needs are many, but most urgent is the need for better education.”

This self-possessing, deeply religious woman – with twinkling eyes, a husky laugh and an irreverent wit – became an ambassador of good will for her people and a bearer of hope for them. But, beyond her public persona, her family of two daughters and one son, two adopted sons, numerous tribally adopted sons, as well as dozens of grandchildren and great-grandchildren always remained her first priority. A talented artist, Susie created exquisite traditional Crow beadwork, which she lavished on her family and friends, along with her hospitality, love and advice.

Susie Yellowtail’s formal accomplishments were many. She sat on the boards-of-directors for numerous Indian-related agencies and associations; for years she served on the Crow Tribal Education and Health Committees; she was appointed to the President’s Council on Indian Education and Nutrition; 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-Technical Education; she became a member of the President’s Special Council on Aging. One of Susie’s most cherished distinctions was granted in 1978, when the American Indian Nurses Association named her “Grandmother of American Indian Nurses.”

Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail was an extraordinary Native American leader. She embodied wisdom, vision, and the determination to accomplish her goals. Susie tailored her life 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 inform non-Indians of her heritage and her concerns. While engaged in a lifelong public service career, Susie never left her heritage or her family. She nourished – physically, educationally and spiritually – all those around her.

