



Amazing Montanans—Biography

Robert Yellowtail, 1889 - 1988

The year that Robert Yellowtail was born could be 1889 or 1887. Robert was born near Lodge Grass, Montana and had only four short years to be a child with his family. At the young age of four years old, Robert was taken to the Crow Agency Boarding School. “He was not allowed to practice his own religion, speak his own language, or live with members of his tribe. The only thing the whites could not take away from him there he said, were his thoughts.” (MT Magazine of Western History, Vol. 39, 1981 #3, Constance J. Poten) After finishing grade school there he transferred to Sherman Boarding School in Riverside, California. He was able to complete a Law Degree from the University of Chicago through correspondence classes.

“I studied the law because I was disgusted with the way Indian Affairs was being administered in Washington. I said to myself, ‘I’m going to make this my life’s work, graduate in law, and defend the Indians’”. (MT Magazine of Western History, Vol. 39, 1981 #3, Constance J. Poten) When Montana Senator Thomas Walsh introduced a bill to open the Crow Reservation to homesteading, Robert Yellowtail was called home by Chief Plenty Coups to assist as an



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*Robert Yellowtail -1907,
photographer unidentified.
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interpreter and lawyer. The battle to open up Crow lands continued in the courts for seven years. In 1917, Robert Yellowtail gave his final four-hour argument. Yellowtail’s efforts paid off and the courts decided in favor of the Crow and their lands were safe for the moment.

Yellowtail’s leadership qualities were recognized in 1934, and he was appointed the first Indian superintendent of his own tribe. During his years in this position he did many remarkable things. He encouraged preserving Crow culture and language and began the Crow Fair once again. After eleven years as superintendent, Yellowtail resigned and became Chairman of the Crow Tribe. Robert continued to defend his Tribe’s right to manage their own land and resources and self-govern.

Robert Yellowtail survived boarding school and learned how to live on “two worlds”, the Crow world and American society. He used his education to benefit the Crow people, but he never forgot the importance of what it meant to be a Crow Indian. His life is best remembered by another tribal member, “Robert Yellowtail has everything to do with everything on the Crow Reservation.”