Chief Joseph Medicine Crow

Authors Up-close In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie

Joseph Medicine Crow, interviewed on the Crow Reservation in Montana on April 20, 2005.

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TEACHINGBOOKS: Your autobiography, *Counting Coup: Becoming a Crow Chief on the Reservation and Beyond* shares many of your Indian experiences with children and young adults. What are you hoping readers get from this book?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: I have taken it upon myself to teach our young people, not only the Indian people, but non-Indians of the Crow culture, the Crow way of life. It is a good way of life, and I want to keep on perpetuating that status. And that's why I'm interested in writing books for children all over the world.

I am 91 years old. I was born 37 years after the Crows were placed on this reservation in 1884 and required to become, to put it bluntly, "white men" overnight; we were subjected to a real cruel assimilation process. We were forbidden to practice our cultural ways, like dances, singing ceremonies, even our language. But my grandparents were persistent in carrying on our cultural ways. They were pre-reservation Indians who knew the days before the reservation was set up, before they were under the control of the United States government. They knew a life of complete freedom out here, traveling around, hunting, and so forth. And, they raised me as if the old way was going to come back.

My grandfather subjected me to a vigorous physical training program to prepare me to be a warrior: running, swimming, riding horseback, shooting bow and arrows, and all that. And to this day, I continue to live the Crow way — carrying on their beliefs, their values.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of the ways your grandfather raised you to be a Crow warrior?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: A warrior has got to be strong and healthy, so my grandfather, Yellow Tail, would get me up early in the morning and say, "There's snow outside. Now, you run out there, no clothes on, barefooted, and run around the house once." The next day, he'd say, "Now, do it twice." Then three, four times.

On the fifth day, he would point out a sage bush about a 100 yards away, and he would say, "You run over there and go around that sage bush and come back," barefooted, through deep snow. And then we'd do that four times every morning.

On top of that, he made a bow and arrows for me. I began by shooting at rabbits and prairie chickens. He also trained me to be a good horseman; he taught me to ride horses bareback, jump off of the horse and ride my horse across the Little Big Horn River.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Counting Coup*, you reveal stories about your education. What was school like for Indians when you were a child?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: When the United States government placed the Indian tribes on various reservations as wards of the government, one of the most effective ways of assimilating the tribes into mainstream society was through schooling. The idea was to educate the Indian children to become just like white children, learn the ABC's, three R's, and so forth. So, the government established a number of boarding schools. The most famous one was in Carlyle, Pennsylvania, the Carlyle Indian School. Then there was the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. And, there was one in Salem, Oregon, known as Chenawa Indian School. There were others all over the country.

The schools were all rough; more or less like military schools, and very strict with the Indian kids. If an Indian child was caught speaking in his own language, he was punished. And, they were not supposed to talk about Indian ways at all. The food was poor, and the dormitories were cold. A lot of kids died in these boarding schools. They were dangerous places for Indian people.

These schools were really industrial schools, where they taught boys how to become bricklayers, farmers, barbers, house painters and all kinds of trades. The girls were taught how to cook, wash clothes and all kinds of home economics training.

In 1920, the Crow Tribe and the United States government agreed to allow the Crow Indians to attend public school. In so doing, the tribe gave the state of Montana about 54,000 acres of land so the Crow kids could attend public schools, which we've done since 1922.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of your earliest memories of going to school?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: I started going to a Baptist school around the age of seven. Every morning, I rode to school by horse with my aunt, who was six years older than me. We rode five miles to the school, and it could be 20º–30º below 0º. And, boy, that was tough, I tell you.

I was in this little school for three years repeating the same grade, because I wasn't learning anything at all. One of my grandfathers, a man who adopted my mother, by the name of Wood Star, came to the school one day and said, "This place is no good. You're not learning anything. Come here, I'm going to take you to the public school in town." And, he took me to the public school, opened the door, and threw me in. I tried to run out, and he held onto the door. Finally, the teacher had him open the door; he could speak a little English, but not too much. The teacher told him to take me to the town doctor. The doctor gave me the okay, and so I was put in school. My first day in a public school was spent with a girl poking me in the back with a pin, but things improved from there.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Part of your education was learning the stories of your tribe. How did you become interested in the history and culture of other tribes as well?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: When I was a growing young boy, we had storytellers who told us all kinds war and hunting stories. They would talk about the Sioux, Cheyenne and Black Feet, the tribes in this area, and about inter-tribal warfare.

Then, I went to school at Bacone College, a Baptist boarding school in Oklahoma that had grade school through college-level classes. Unlike the boarding schools I described, Bacone College was purely academic. So it was real nice; they weren't mean to us and it was a good school. There, I met so many people — students from about 34 different tribes, and it was the first

time I'd seen Navajos, Hopi and the tribes from Oklahoma. That made me so interested in other tribes that even to this day, I study other tribes.

I transferred to Linfield College, a non-Indian, Baptist-sponsored college in Oregon, where I received my bachelor's degree. Then, I majored in anthropology at the University of Southern California (USC), and I continued to study a lot of tribal histories and cultures. I received my masters in anthropology and archeology in 1939. I continued two more years on a doctorate degree, and I was on my way home to finish my dissertation when I was drafted into the military. So, I received an honorary doctorate degree from USC — 63 years after I received my master's degree. I have three honorary doctorate degrees: from University of Montana, USC and Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Counting Coup*, you tell stories of Indian games.

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: I used to like to play a game in the spring mud where we'd get willow branches that were four or five feet long and kind of slender. We'd put a handful of mud on the tip of the stick and snap it. That chunk of mud would go real fast. We started having two teams with four, five, six kids on each side, and we'd start throwing mud at each other.

We'd also play with our bows and arrows. We had arrows with a blunt point. We'd shoot one into the sky and it would go way up and come down, and we would run up and grab it. If you missed, it would sometimes hit you in the head.

Then, of course, we had another game that was interesting. We call it "Shinny, Shinny, Shin." It was played something like hockey, but on the ground, and we had a ball about the size of a softball made out of buckskin with the hair of antelope, making it kind of bouncy. Then, we'd have sticks with a crooked tip so you could hit it. We would end up hitting each other on the shins, so they call it "Shinny Game." Sometimes, the boys would play on one side and girls on one side.

The girls would also play a game with a ball about the size of a volleyball, made out of buckskin with the hair of antelope. One girl would stand and bounce the ball on the ground, then kick it up, and bounce it again, and keep doing that. The girl who kicked the ball consecutively the most times — maybe 100 or 200 — times was the winner.

Editor's Note: The "Shinny Game" is known today as field hockey.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You fought in Europe in World War II from 1943 to 1947, and when you returned, your tribal council awarded you with the status of Crow War Chief. What is the traditional process for becoming a chief, and how did you come to be named one from fighting overseas?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: In the old inter-tribal days, before the reservations were set up, Crow Indian warriors had to complete four battlefield deeds to become a chief. One deed was to touch a fallen enemy warrior and return to camp safely. So, for instance, if two tribal war parties were out in the field and someone was knocked off his horse — either killed or wounded — the first warrior who went over and touched that fallen enemy and came back got a war deed later on. That war deed was very dangerous because the comrades of that fallen warrior would use that man as bait, so to speak. They were right there with their guns or bow and arrows all ready, waiting for some warrior from the other side to come. And oftentimes, they'd kill him right there.

A second battlefield deed was to have personal contact with an enemy warrior and take his weapon away from him, whether it was a knife, tomahawk, pistol or whatever. Taking a weapon away caused dangerous contact as well.

The third deed was to sneak into a well-guarded enemy camp, capture a good horse belonging to the enemy and bring it back. That was another dangerous thing to do, because these tribes would watch their horses all night. And the good horses, buffalo horses or hunting horses, were usually tied right in front of the owner's lodge, with maybe a small corral built around it out of logs. Sometimes they'd tie a rope around the horse's neck leading into the owner's lodge with a rope tied to his arm. During the night, he would check.

But if a Crow warrior were brave and cunning enough to slip into that enemy camp and take one of those horses or one near the lodge, and bring it back, they would get a war deed. And sometimes, bringing 20–40 head of loose horses near the camp would earn war deeds, too.

After a warrior had become experienced and had committed a number of brave deeds, the old retired chiefs, called the council of warriors, or the Chieftains, would select him to go lead a war party as the commander; for this you could also get a war deed if you did not lose any men. He was known as the pipe carrier, leading the war party into enemy country, bringing back horses and the other trophies. This deed was dangerous, too, because if the group was discovered and pursued, the commander stayed to the back — between his men and the enemy. If he had to stop and fight the enemy and give his men a chance to get away, often he was killed.

If a Crow Indian succeeded in committing these four things, not only once, but several times, then he became a chief. More outstanding war deeds meant a higher status war chief.

While I was in the service in World War II, I was just another soldier, and didn't intentionally set out to fulfill the Crow Indian requirements to become a war chief. I just happened to complete all four. So when I came back, I went through a Crow tradition known as "telling of war deeds." A certain man is selected once in a while to get up at a big gathering and recite his war deeds for the benefit of young warriors, as part of their education. I hadn't really thought about it, but they asked me, "Did you capture enemy's warrior, an enemy's gun?" I said, "Well, yeah." "Did you ever lead a war party?" "Yeah." And so on through the four deeds. So they gave me the status of a Crow War Chief. I was probably the only Crow boy at the time who had completed those four things. Some had completed one, maybe two. But, that's how I became a bona fide Crow Indian War Chief.

Editor's Note: The term "counting coup" is derived from the French word "coup d'etat." For Plains Indian warriors, counting coup meant, literally, "to touch the enemy."

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share some skirmishes from your tour in Germany during World War II that earned your Indian war deeds, which led to you becoming a chief.

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: All right. In one encounter, I earned two war deeds simultaneously: 1) come into contact with an enemy warrior and 2) take his weapon away from him. We attacked a small town, and the commander assigned a corporal and me to take an alley to the back of the town and get behind the German soldiers who were guarding the main street. We went up there, and I noticed a gate. I ran up to the gate, and I was going to go around it when a German soldier was doing the same thing. We met each other and bumped heads. We bounced back, and I swung my rifle, and knocked his rifle out of his arms. He was standing there without a rifle, and all I had to do was pull the trigger, but I didn't do it. I put my rifle down and tore after him, and we had a big wrestling match. I finally got him down and choked him, but didn't kill him. For that they gave me two war deeds.

I earned another deed toward the end of the war when we were traveling a road along some low mountains. I ran into German soldiers on horseback, so I followed them. They left the road and went down to a ranch. I waited until my company arrived, and I told them what I'd seen. It was getting late in the evening, and I saw through my field glasses the Germans put their

horses out into a small pasture and go into a big farmhouse for the night. By that time, it was dark, so we went down there and surrounded that place. The idea was to attack early in the morning. So just before daybreak, I told the commanding officer, "If you give me five minutes, I'll go stampede those horses. Otherwise, when we attack, they might get on their horses and take off." He agreed to it, so five minutes before jump-off time, I went in there and got behind the horses and took off. After I went over the hill, I could hear firing going on. By then, it was daytime, and I checked the horses over, and there were about 50 head of horses. They were parade horses that belonged to SS officers. I told that to the council of old Indian men here at Lodge Grass, and they gave me a war deed for it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Upon your return from WWII, you not only were named a Crow War Chief, you also became the Crow tribal historian.

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: At a tribal council in 1947, I was designated as the Crow tribal historian, and since that time, I've been recording Crow history and teaching at Little Big Horn College, conducting research and lectures in Crow history there.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It has been said that meeting you is like shaking hands with the 19th Century. Is it true that you knew several of Custer's scouts when you were a child?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: Yes. In the spring of 1876, there was a campaign to capture, so to speak, the tribes who were still resisting living on the reservations, especially Sitting Bull's group, who were in Crow country then.

Some of the military units approached the Crows for help with their efforts. First, General Crook came from Nebraska; he sent some officers to the Crow people living around Livingston, Montana and asked for help. So, the Chief dispatched about 176 elite Crow warriors to go help Crook. They were under the leadership of two young chiefs, Chief Plenty Coups and Chief Medicine Crow — my grandfather.

Generals Gibbons and Custer also approached the Crows for help. Though many men had already been sent, more wanted to go. So 29 signed up and went to join Custer. Out of the 29, six of them were very young — only 16 to 18 years of age, and I knew five of them.

When I was a boy, the scouts were elderly men. Curley was the youngest — he was only 16 during the Battle of Little Big Horn. The oldest one was 23 at that time. His name was White Swan, and I didn't know him; he died in 1905. White Swan went along to kind of look after the boy, and he got wounded in the process. Some of the other scouts were Hairy Moccasin and Half Yellow Face. And there was also White Man Runs Him, my grandmother's brother.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are the origins of your names High Bird and Joseph Medicine Crow?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: I was born on October 27, 1913. At that time, a Sioux Indian was visiting and my grandfather, Yellow Tail, asked him to give me a name. The Sioux said, "As a young warrior, I came against a Crow Indian seven times in the winter. I was wounded, but I survived. Now I'm an old man, so I'm going to name this little boy 'Winter Man,' praying that he will be healthy, and live to a ripe old age." So my first given name is "Winter Man."

And according to tradition, one of my clan relatives bought it for his son, so I don't go by that name anymore. However, my clan uncles got together and gave me the name "High Bird," after a clansman of mine who was a prominent member of the tribe a long time ago.

And my enrollment name as a member of the tribe is "Joseph Medicine Crow," named after my grandfather Medicine Crow.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come to write your picture book, *Brave Wolf and the Thunderbird*?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: I was at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. The Smithsonian was taking it over, so I went up there and took an inventory of the Crow collection. The young man who took me around noticed some Crow Indian shields with designs featuring thunderbirds, and he wanted to know a thunderbird story. I quickly told one about a thunderbird, and we recorded it on tape. I then developed the tape into the book, *Brave Wolf and the Thunderbird*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your autobiographical book, *Counting Coup,* recounts stories from your life in a way that children can understand. What are you hoping students will learn from your book?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: Well, I want to show that I was brought up to live in a different world, but eventually I had to adopt a new way of life, a so-called white man's way to live as a modern American. In order to do that, I had to combine the values of two lifestyles, two worlds, so to speak, and I continue to go back and forth. I think I have succeeded in adopting a duel cultural system. It's interesting.

For instance, today I'm dressed for a tribal celebration, and I'll dance and sing. Tomorrow, I'll put on my suit and go lecture at a big conference some place or to go to some university and teach a course. I'm in a position where I enjoy two worlds.

I think more and more, people of the United States are going to come into contact with different ethnic groups. I think it's kind of a challenge to see how other people are still maintaining their ethnic ways. I think the more we understand each other, the more we can get along better.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You addressed the United Nations in 1999 with what has been called a "poetic speech about peace." How did you come to be there, and would you share some of what you said?

JOSEPH MEDICINE CROW: Several thousand spiritual leaders from throughout the world came together at the UN to give the statesmen and politicians moral support in finding peace.

I sang a Crow Indian song welcoming all the spiritual leaders throughout the world to America, the land of Indian people. And I said something like this, "When a white man makes peace, he writes it down on paper, but soon breaks it. But when an Indian makes peace, he does so in his heart and never breaks it. When we stand side by side in the circle of no beginning and no ending, the first maker, creator of all things, is in the center. He hears the words of supplication and blesses us with his infinite love, which is peace itself."

Books by Joseph Medicine Crow

- COUNTING COUP: BECOMING A CROW CHIEF ON THE RESERVATION AND BEYOND (written with Herman J. Viola), National Geographic Children's Books / a division of The National Geographic Society, 2005

- FROM THE HEART OF CROW COUNTRY: THE CROW INDIANS' OWN STORIES, University of Nebraska Press, 2000
- BRAVE WOLF AND THE THUNDERBIRD (illustrated by Linda R. Martin), Abbeville Kids / a division of Abbeville Publishing Group, 1998
- LAST WARRIOR, THE, Sunset Productions, 1995

Selected Books by Herman J. Viola

- COUNTING COUP: BECOMING A CROW CHIEF ON THE RESERVATION AND BEYOND (written with Joseph Medicine Crow), National Geographic Children's Books / a division of The National Geographic Society, 2005
- FACING THE LION: GROWING UP MAASAI ON THE AFRICAN SAVANNA (written with Joseph Lemasolai Lekuton), National Geographic Children's Books / a division of The National Geographic Society, 2003
- TRAIL TO WOUNDED KNEE: THE LAST STAND OF THE PLAINS INDIANS 1860–1890, The National Geographic Society, 2003
- LITTLE BIGHORN REMEMBERED: THE UNTOLD INDIAN STORY OF CUSTER'S LAST STAND, Crown Books, 1999
- IT IS A GOOD DAY TO DIE, Crown Books, 1998
- WARRIOR ARTISTS, The National Geographic Society, 1998
- NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS, Random House Children's Books, 1996
- BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL: AN AMERICAN WARRIOR, Random House, 1993
- AFTER COLUMBUS: THE SMITHSONIAN CHRONICLE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS, Crown Books, 1990
- DIPLOMATS IN BUCKSKINS: A HISTORY OF INDIAN DELEGATIONS IN WASHINGTON CITY, University of Oklahoma Press, 1981
- INDIAN LEGACY OF CHARLES BIRD KING, THE, The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976

Note: *Bibliographies created in June 2005.*