

Joseph Medicine Crow

“High Bird”

1913 – 2016

War Chief, Historian, and Mentor



Joseph Medicine Crow, ca. 2000, unidentified photographer, photo courtesy of the Medicine Crow Family

Joseph Medicine Crow was born in 1913 in Lodge Grass, Montana. A member of the Crow (Apsáalooke) tribe, he lived most of his life on the reservation. From an early age, he appreciated his place in Crow history as his ancestors raised him traditionally and told him stories of life before the reservation.

When he reached college age, Medicine Crow left the reservation to pursue his formal education goals. Determined to prove to detractors that Indians were intelligent and capable of succeeding in college, he became the first Crow male to receive a college degree and the first Crow to receive a Master's degree. Education became a way of life for Medicine Crow, a commitment that was evident to all who knew him. He began doctoral studies in the 1940s, but these were interrupted by World War II.

In 1943, Medicine Crow enlisted in the United States Army and served in Europe with the 103rd Infantry Division. Honoring Crow tradition, he went into battle wearing war paint beneath his uniform and a yellow eagle feather inside his helmet. During his military service, he fulfilled the four traditional acts required to become a war chief: touching a living enemy, taking an enemy's weapon, stealing an enemy's horse and leading a victorious war party. For the rest of his life, he was acknowledged as the last Crow war chief.

Upon his return home, Medicine Crow began a thirty-two-year career with the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a land appraiser. Simultaneously, he served as the Crow tribal historian and anthropologist. His exceptional recall of the stories he heard as a child made him an important link to Crow life before the reservations. In time, he became the foremost authority on Crow history and culture. He generously shared his knowledge within his tribe as well as with outsiders, including publishing several books.

Later in life, the accolades and honors arrived, including multiple honorary doctorates. For acts of heroism and bravery during World War II, he was awarded the U.S. Bronze Medal and the French Legion of Honor medal in 2008. The following year, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for reflecting the country's highest ideals during his life.

Medicine Crow died in 2016, passing to *“The Other Side Camp.”* One of his great legacies was how he lived his life. *“I have lived in two worlds: one is a traditional Crow Indian way,”* he said, *“and at the same time, I have lived like a modern American – I can mix the two, blend the two, get the best from each, and enjoy life living in both worlds.”* He encouraged Crow youths to do the same: to embrace their identity, to understand their ancestral heritage, and to see their stories as relevant. He was an inspiration, role model and mentor to those who knew him during his life and remains an inspiration to all Montanans today.