

## Our People Have Their Heroes Too

Heroes come in all kinds of packages. In fact, many heroes are not even recognized - least of all during their own lifetimes. But with the recently observed Native American Day, I thought I would share a few of mine - some that you may have heard of, and other lesser-known aborigines of North America. This is not by any stretch of the imagination, a comprehensive list. It would be like trying to list your favorite white people.

The great Olympian Jim Thorpe never set foot on the Pine Ridge Reservation (in South Dakota.) He was not a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, or anything close (he was Potawatomi and Sac and Fox from Oklahoma). Yet the athletic teams of Pine Ridge High School are named for the Native American who is widely recognized as the greatest American athlete of the twentieth century, and a role model for all Native American youth.

This is despite the fact that he was shamelessly exploited by his school (Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania), a school which was purportedly established to facilitate Native American assimilation into the wider population. His Olympic medals were taken away from him because he had played semi-pro baseball to help put him through school, and he was eventually obliged to take whatever autograph tours or secondary roles in B movies he could find just to get by. Alcoholism - the Native American scourge - got him in the end.

Billy Mills (Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge) won the gold medal in the 10,000-meter race at the Olympics in Tokyo in 1964. He was not ranked as a contender (even by track and field reporters), and when he came from behind to win, they had to scramble even to find out his name. The foundation he created to benefit Native American children is called, appropriately, Running Strong. You can contact him through his foundation, and watch the 1983 film on Netflix (Running Brave w/ Robby Benson in the lead role). He is still the only American to win a gold medal in this event. Jim Thorpe was one of Mills' own heroes: "To me he is still the greatest athlete who has ever lived."

Contemporary Natives also include SuAnne Big Crow whose meteoric rise as a high school basketball player and hard-working scholar, was cut short in a tragic car accident on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1992. That year she had led her team (the Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes) to the state championship, and was regarded as the best girls' basketball player in the state. A recreation center now bears her name in Pine Ridge Village.

Then there are musicians (Buddy Red Bow, Keith Bear, Sequoia Crosswhite ), and filmmakers (award-winning Chris Eyres and Sherman Alexie), artists (Don Montileaux, Paul Goble, Kevin Pourier), and Kevin Locke, preeminent player of the Native American flute, traditional storyteller, dancer and cultural ambassador. In fact, this last phrase could describe the activities of all of the above Natives.

The idea behind the ongoing Crazy Horse Mountain carving in the Black Hills of South Dakota came from Henry Standing Bear, who was chatting with one of the workers on the nearby Mount Rushmore carving. He ventured that this carving was going to be a magnificent thing, when finished, but there was nothing in the Black Hills which indicated that this region had once been home to hundreds of Indian Tribes, and that the land had in fact been stolen from its original inhabitants. He felt that there should be some recognition in this sacred land that “our people have their heroes too”. The other participant of this conversation was Korczak Ziolkowski, who would go on to begin the Crazy Horse Memorial just about 17 miles from Mount Rushmore.

For every person I have mentioned here, there are hundreds more working to preserve their culture and build connections between peoples. It is appropriate that we recognize them, and learn about their cultures - which, as Americans - are our culture as well.

#### A (very) Short List of Traditional Native heroes

Black Elk (Oglala Lakota)  
Chief Joseph (Nez Perce)  
Red Cloud (Oglala Lakota)  
American Horse (Oglala Lakota)  
Sitting Bull (Hunkpapa Lakota)  
Sheheke (Mandan)  
Geronimo (Comanche)  
Cochise (Apache)  
Quanah Parker (Apache)  
Sequoia (Cherokee)  
Inkpaduta (Dakota Sioux)