Charles Eastman/Ohiyesa

Living in Two Worlds

By Julie Arndt

It was said of Dr. Charles Eastman late in his life that he was “equally at home in a war bonnet as he was in a starched collar.” Dr. Eastman was born into the Santee Sioux nation and would become the first Native American to be certified in western medicine but learned herbal medicine from the maternal grandmother who raised him.

Born in the Dakota Territory in 1858 to a pure Sioux father and a half-Sioux mother, he was raised in the traditional ways. He was on the path to becoming a great warrior, learning from his uncle who was already a great warrior. Then his father, presumed dead after the Dakota War of 1862 and away from his son for ten years, returned to his people, fully assimilated into the white man’s way of life, a successful homesteader and farmer in the Dakota Territory. He had abandoned his birth name and taken the Christian name Jacob Eastman after his wife’s father Seth Eastman, the Army officer who married her mother. Jacob had converted to Christianity and took the name of Jacob Eastman. He intended the same path for his son.

A happy childhood was followed by a conflicted youth when Jacob returned to take his son, now nearing manhood, to live with him in the white man’s world. The young Sioux who had been Ohiyesa began, at his father’s insistence, learning to live like a white man. Jacob insisted that he go to school, enrolling him at Flandreau Indian School in 1873. He adopted Christianity and took the name Charles Alexander Eastman. The young man was often ridiculed by classmates who were more fully assimilated into the culture he did not understand. He wore his hair long and dressed in buckskin and did not speak a word of English. He was deeply unhappy and missed the life he knew. He often thought about running away. He did not, believing that this would be cowardly.

Jacob Eastman was a great source of wisdom and strength for his son. His father firmly believed that Native people must learn the white man’s way of life or cease to exist. From his father, Charles learned about the “great teacher, Jesus.” He encouraged young Charles to find a path for his life, as he had when his uncle in the village taught him to hunt. “We have now entered upon this life and there is no going back.” So Ohiyesa, now known as Charles Eastman, threw himself into his studies. He excelled and began a journey that would lead him to Dartmouth and Boston University Medical School. Sought by both Harvard and Dartmouth, he was a stellar student with an active social life. He was “a model Indian,” completely conforming to social conventions of his day. He took the most challenging courses, excelled at sports, and had a busy social life. He went on to Boston University Medical School, graduating at the top of his class.

After graduation from medical school, the path his father spoke of took him to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, where he worked as an agency physician for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Indian Health Service on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He would later work at the Crow Creek Reservation, also in South Dakota. He wanted to work to make things better for his people and saw his reservation work as a step on the path toward his goal.

At Pine Ridge he was the only physician for 6000 people and was known as “the white doctor.” The young man who embraced the white man’s ways saw for the first time that his people lived in unsanitary conditions with woefully inadequate medical care. The Bureau of Indian Affairs turned a mostly deaf ear to his grievances, setting in place a contentious relationship that would remain contentious for the rest of his medical career. He made changes to sanitary conditions and improved the standard of medical care provided to the reservation.

Perhaps it was youthful idealism, but he was unaware of the realities of reservation life. He said, “I scarcely knew it at the time, but gradually learned afterward, that the Sioux had many grievances and causes for profound discontent…” By the end of the 1880s when he arrived at Pine Ridge, the tribe faced disease among their cattle and crop failures, epidemics of flu, whooping cough and measles, and were forced to surrender 11 million acres of tribal land. It was these grievances that in part led to the massacre at Wounded Knee, where at least forty Sioux were killed by U.S soldiers. Still, his experiences at Pine Ridge left his faith in the white man’s way of life deeply shaken.

At Pine Ridge, he met the woman who would become his wife. Indian welfare activist Elaine Goodale was serving as Superintendent of Indian Education for the Two Dakotas. She had first taught at Hampton Institute in Virginia, which then had about 100 Native American students, in addition to African Americans, and at an Indian day school in South Dakota. She had been appointed as the first Supervisor of Education for the newly divided Dakotas.

While both supported education for Native American children, their views on the subject were not the same. She supported expanding day schools on reservations for education, rather than sending Native American children away from their families to boarding schools. He supported boarding schools, and actually helped recruit students for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, favoring mainstream education for Native American children, based on his own education and career.

The Eastmans had six children together: five daughters and a son. The marriage prospered at first, but financial struggles and Eastman's absences on the lecture circuit put increasing strain on the couple. Some claim that these factors, along with his alleged infidelity, led to their separation in 1921 following the death of daughter Irene from flu in the 1918 epidemic.

Elaine encouraged him to write some of the stories from his youth, which were published in the late 1890s. He was a prolific writer, whose articles and stories were published in the most prestigious magazines of the time. In 1902, Eastman published a memoir, ***Indian Boyhood***, recounting the first fifteen years of his life. In the two decades that followed he wrote ten more books, most concerned with his Native American culture. He was one of the most prolific writers

and speakers on the Sioux and Indian affairs. Some of Eastman's books were translated into French, German, Czech and other European languages. They sold well and were often reprinted. Some of his collected works were published as ***The Essential Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa)*** in 2007. He was a sought after lecturer and was involved in national politics, lobbying congress for tribal benefits for the Santee Sioux between 1894 and 1897. He was no lawyer, not much of a bureaucrat but he was an educated Indian trusted by the tribe.

Eastman was “a Christian to the core,” and lived those beliefs, encouraging his people to improve their lives through learning. He saw Native youth deteriorating from alcohol and tobacco abuse, poor health, and lack of education, leading him to work with the newly formed YMCA to support Native American youth. He often faced opposition from tribal elders who had heard their share of promises from the white man: “…the white man does not seem to inherit any of the traits of his Father, nor does he follow the example of his brother, Christ.” Between 1894 and 1898, he established close to 40 Indian groups of the YMCA and founded leadership programs and outdoor youth camps.

His writing inspired Ernest Thompson Seton, who sought Eastman's advice in forming the Woodcraft Indians, a predecessor of the Boy Scouts. Seton and Eastman worked to establish the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp Fire Girls. With his fame as an author and lecturer, Eastman promoted both organizations, advising them on how to organize summer camps.

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt assigned Eastman to helping Sioux (Dakota, Nakota, Lakota) tribal members to choose English legal names to prevent individuals and families from losing allotted lands due to confusion. Eastman was one of the co-founders of the Society of American Indians (SAI), which pushed for freedom and self-determination for the American Indian.

In 1911, Eastman was chosen to represent the American Indian at the Universal Races Congress in London. His speeches and teachings emphasized the importance of seeking peace and living in harmony with nature. From 1923 to 1925, Eastman served as an appointed US Indian inspector under President Calvin Coolidge. The Coolidge administration (1923-1929) invited Eastman to the Committee of 100, a reform panel examining Indian affairs. The commission ordered an in-depth investigation into reservation life and served as the basis for the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's New Deal for the Indian, including the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, encouraging and supporting tribes to establish self-government according to constitutional models.

In 1928, Eastman purchased land on the shore of Lake Huron, near Desbarats, Ontario. For the remainder of his life, when he was not traveling and lecturing, he lived there in his primitive cabin in the nature that he loved so dearly. In his later years, he spent only the coldest winter months with his son in Detroit, Michigan with his only son Charles, Jr., also called Ohiyesa. On January 8, 1939 the senior Eastman died from a heart attack in Detroit at age eighty.