

American Indian Biographies

Wilma Pearl Mankiller

Born: November 18, 1945, Tahlequah, Oklahoma

Tribal Affiliation: Cherokee

Significance: After taking part in the Indian civil rights movement of the 1960's and later working to improve conditions among rural Indian communities, Mankiller gained national respect in the 1980's when she became the first woman to head a major Native American tribe.

Wilma Pearl Mankiller was born in 1945 in the W. W. Hastings Indian Hospital in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Her father, Charley Mankiller, a full-blooded Cherokee, married her mother, Clara Irene Sitton, of Dutch-Irish descent, in 1937. Wilma was the sixth of their eleven children. The family lived on Mankiller Flats in Adair County, northeastern Oklahoma. Mankiller Flats was an allotment of 160 acres that had been given to John Mankiller, Charley's father, in 1907, when Oklahoma became a state. The name "Mankiller" was the Cherokee military title of Wilma's great-great-grandfather, Mankiller of Tellico, in the eighteenth century. Tellico, in eastern Tennessee, was part of the original Cherokee Nation. The Mankillers and most other Cherokee were forcibly moved to the Indian Territory, later the state of Oklahoma, on the infamous Trail of Tears in 1838 and 1839.

The first eleven years of Wilma's life were spent on Mankiller Flats and in traditional Cherokee culture. In 1956, however, the Mankiller family moved to San Francisco, California, as part of a government relocation plan to move American Indians to large cities and into mainstream American life. Life in San Francisco was a culture shock, especially for the Mankiller children, but they soon adjusted to their new life. On November 13, 1963, Wilma Mankiller was married to Hugo Olaya, a member of a wealthy Ecuadorian family, who was then a student in San Francisco. Two daughters, Felicia and Gina, were born to the couple before differences in lifestyles led to a divorce in 1975. During the years of her first marriage, Mankiller earned a degree from San Francisco State College.

Mankiller's Cherokee background was revived, and her activist work was initiated, in 1969, when a group of American Indians occupied Alcatraz Island, in San Francisco Bay, to gain support for American Indian rights. Wilma and many others in her family participated in that occupation. Charley Mankiller, who had become a longshoreman and a union organizer in California, died in 1971. His body was returned to his native Adair County, Oklahoma, for burial. That burial seemed to be a signal for the Mankillers to return, one by one, to Oklahoma. Wilma returned after her divorce in 1975. Only two older brothers remained in California. In Oklahoma, Mankiller was able to emulate Nancy Ward, an eighteenth century Cherokee woman who had also lived in both the Indian and mainstream American worlds. Mankiller was able to combine the best of Cherokee tradition with the best of European-American civilization.

Mankiller had begun her work to improve American Indian life before she left

California. In 1974, with Bill Wahpapah, she cofounded the American Indian Community School in Oakland. Her return to Oklahoma in 1975, however, marked the beginning of her full-time service to the Cherokee Nation. The Cherokee Nation, with 55,000 acres of northeastern Oklahoma and a population of about 67,000 people, ranks second only to the Navajo in size among American Indian tribes in the United States. When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the traditional tribal government of the Cherokee was dissolved. This created a unique political organization, neither a reservation nor an autonomous government, with unique political and social problems. Mankiller now began directing her energy toward solving those problems.

Mankiller's first regular job with the Cherokee Nation began in 1977, when she was hired as an economic-stimulus coordinator. Her job was to guide as many people as possible toward university training in such fields as environmental science and health, and then to integrate them back into their communities. Mankiller soon became frustrated with the slow-moving male-dominated bureaucracy of the Cherokee Nation.

Before Europeans came to North America, Cherokee women had occupied leadership roles in tribal affairs. The title of Beloved Woman was given to those who performed extraordinary service. The first Europeans to contact the Cherokee accused them of having a "petticoat government." After this contact, the influence of Cherokee women began to decrease. A significant development in 1971 helped to open the way for a return to more female participation in Cherokee affairs. A revision of the tribal constitution provided that, for the first time since Oklahoma statehood in 1907, the principal chief would be elected by the people of the tribe rather than be appointed by the president of the United States. An entirely new constitution in 1976 solidified that change and provided for the election of a new fifteen-member tribal council.

In 1979, after working for two years as an economic-stimulus coordinator, Wilma Mankiller was made a program-development specialist and grant writer. Her immediate success in this position, especially in writing grant proposals, brought her to the attention of the tribal council and Principal Chief Ross Swimmer. This phase of Mankiller's work was soon interrupted by tragedy. On November 9, 1979, she was seriously injured in a head-on collision on a country road. The driver of the other car was Sherry Morris, a white woman who was a very close friend of Mankiller. Morris was killed. In her autobiography, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (1993), Mankiller gives an extremely moving account of that tragedy.

Within a year of the accident, Mankiller was afflicted with a rare form of muscular dystrophy. These back-to-back experiences caused her to reach more deeply into her Cherokee background and led to a change in her philosophy of life. In 1981, although still undergoing physical therapy, Mankiller was able to return to her work with the Cherokee Nation, and she did so with her old energy. In that year, she helped to establish the Cherokee Nation Community Development Department and became its first director.

The next step in Mankiller's career came in 1983, when Chief Ross Swimmer asked her to join his reelection ticket as his deputy chief. This request, by which Chief

Swimmer recognized Mankiller's potential, was very unusual because Swimmer was a conservative Republican and Wilma Mankiller was a liberal Democrat. After first declining, Mankiller accepted the offer as a way to help her people. One of Mankiller's opponents for deputy chief was Agnes Cowan, the first woman to serve on the tribal council. Mankiller was surprised when gender became an immediate issue in the campaign. The hostility toward Mankiller ranged from having her automobile tires slashed to death threats. She fought that negative campaigning by conducting a very positive and cheerful campaign based primarily on her past service to the Cherokee people. The victory for the Swimmer-Mankiller ticket meant that, on August 14, 1983, Mankiller became the first female deputy chief in Cherokee history.

In 1984, Deputy Chief Mankiller participated in a momentous meeting--a reunion between the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee from North Carolina. The Eastern Band had descended from those who escaped the Trail of Tears by hiding in the mountains. This meeting, the first full tribal council since 1838, was held at Red Clay in Tennessee, the last capital of the original Cherokee Nation.

A major career surprise for Mankiller came in 1985, when President Ronald Reagan nominated Chief Swimmer as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs. This meant that, on December 14, 1985, Mankiller was inaugurated as the first woman principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. Chief Mankiller immediately declared that economic growth would be the primary goal of her administration. She described her guiding theory as bubble-up economics, in which the people would plan and implement projects that would benefit the tribe in future years, even though the present generation might not benefit. Until the next scheduled election in 1987, however, Mankiller had to govern without a mandate from the people. She faced strong opposition that limited her real power.

In October of 1986, while considering whether to run for a full term, Mankiller married Charlie Soap, a full-blooded Cherokee whom she had first met in 1977. It was Soap who persuaded her to run in 1987, and she won in a runoff election. Because the Cherokee had now returned to the strong female leadership of their past, Mankiller described her election as a step forward and a step backward at the same time. Although Chief Mankiller's first full term was successful in terms of economic progress, her level of personal involvement was influenced by a resurgence of kidney disease, from which she had suffered for many years. This difficulty led to a kidney transplant in June, 1990. The donor was Wilma's older brother Don.

The early years of Principal Chief Wilma P. Mankiller produced many significant results, both tangible and intangible. The most important of the former is a tribal Department of Commerce, which was created soon after Mankiller's 1987 victory. This department coordinates the business enterprises of the tribe and tries to balance tribal income with the needs of tribal members, creating jobs and producing a profit. The intangible results include a renewed spirit of independence for all Cherokee and a renewed confidence that Cherokee women can once again influence the destiny of the tribe.

In 1990, Chief Mankiller signed a historic self-governance agreement that authorized the Cherokee Nation to administer federal funds that previously had been

administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington. The same year saw a revitalizing of tribal courts and tribal police as well as the establishment of a Cherokee Nation tax commission. The most outstanding proof of Chief Mankiller's impact on the Cherokee Nation was her reelection victory in 1991, one year after her kidney transplant, with more than 82 percent of the votes. The same election put six women on the fifteen-member tribal council.

Bibliography

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