Corporal Red Cloud and the Power of Memory

Paul Rykken
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PART 1: "He was a creative child, excellent in art and penmanship."[1]

On a crisp Saturday morning in October of 1990, I visited the old school for the first time since returning to Wisconsin. Originally built as Black River Falls High School in 1926, later to become the junior high, the vintage brick structure ultimately became Third Street Elementary in the late 1980s.[2] Upon entering the east doors of the building, I was immediately transported back to 1968 and my days as a young student. The suffusion of images and that unique smell of floor wax, polished hardwood, and aged mustiness rekindled memories long suppressed. Striding through the hallways in eerie silence, I imagined the chatter and bells of those early years and was struck by how small everything looked. Like so many places in my past, this one had become larger in my mind the further away I had moved in both time and distance. The cracker-box, depression-era gymnasium, the woefully small library, the classrooms where I first learned about history and literature, all seemed surprisingly small.



BRFHS in the late 1930s and early 40s.

As I worked my way up three flights of stairs, I was curious to see if it was still there, if "he" was still there. Sure enough, off in a small alcove and easy to miss, was the plaque dedicated to the fallen soldier of Black River fame, Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. The boyish and smoothly chiseled face of the young man was as I remembered it, although he was much younger than I ever realized.[3] Born in 1925, he was

of the same generation as my father, also a veteran of the Second World War. Had he not been tragically killed on that hillside in northern Korea in late 1950, Red Cloud might have lived well into the 21st Century. Like all who die at an unnaturally early age, however, Mitchell remains forever twenty-five years old. The lines from a Housman poem came to mind as I looked at the face of the youthful warrior:



Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honors out,
Runners who renown outran
And the name died before the man.[4]

Who was this "smart lad" and why has his image remained etched in my mind all these years? And for one who has spent his adult life grappling with the complex nature of history, what does his story have to say about the power of both individual and collective memory within our communities?

The essential facts of Red Cloud's life were recounted many times in local newspapers, and I grew up hearing the details. Born in July of 1925, the year after the U.S. Government first conferred citizenship on American Indian people, Red Cloud spent his early years on the family homestead near Hatfield, Wisconsin, a village ten miles from Black River Falls. His great-grandfather, the legendary Ho-Chunk warrior Chief Winneshiek, fled southern Wisconsin after the Blackhawk War in 1832, eventually leading a group of his people to the Black River Valley where descendants remain to this day. Young Mitchell's mother, Nellie, a Princess of the Ho-Chunk Nation, and his father, Mitchell, Sr., raised their sons to respect and honor the nation that, ironically enough, forced Mitchell's ancestors off their land on several occasions. Described by those who knew him as a well-read, engaging conversationalist,


Chief Winneshiek

Mitchell, Sr. fought with valor under the American flag in the Great War.[5] As a member of the Thunder Clan, immersed in the warrior traditions of the Ho-Chunk people, Mitchell, Jr. learned at an early age that a man who goes to war and dies for his nation lives forever.

As a young boy, Red Cloud learned to hunt and fish in the forests of Jackson County, attended one-room schoolhouses near his home, and lived the carefree and simple life of someone being raised during the Great Depression. Described by his teachers as a slender young man with fine features, a creative mind, and pleasant disposition, Mitchell entered high school in the fall of 1939, at roughly the same moment the German army marched into Poland (Schools of Yesterday in Jackson County, Wisconsin, 294). While America debated involvement in the second great European war, Red Cloud walked the hallways, sat in the classrooms, and played on the sports teams of Black River Falls High School in the hinterland of central Wisconsin. At age seventeen, responding to the traditions of his people and reacting to the tragedy of Pearl Harbor and the call to arms by Franklin Roosevelt, Red Cloud asked his father's permission to interrupt his schooling and join the Marine Corps. Like millions of other young men his age, he was soon caught in the sweep of a great and tragic adventure.

Young Red Cloud sailed for Pearl Harbor in May of 1942 and his first tour of duty was in the South Pacific as a member of Carlson's Raiders.[6] While on Guadalcanal, he contracted malaria, lost nearly 80 pounds, and was sent back to the states for recuperation (Banner Journal, November 28, 1951). Though offered a medical discharge Red Cloud refused and, in a sincerely patriotic act, returned to the South Pacific in 1944 where he was directly involved in arduous military engagements on Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands. At the conclusion of the war, he was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps. It was December of 1945, and the twenty-one-year-old Red Cloud had witnessed the horrors of war in a personal way. We can assume that he returned home with thankfulness for his survival and a sense of pride for his record of service. Mitchell's martial story does not end there, however, and in 1948, he made the fateful decision to re-enlist in the military, this time with United States Army.[7] It would have been difficult for Mitchell to imagine the complexities of the emerging and atomic-laden Cold War tensions between erstwhile allies, the United States and the Soviet Union. Nor could he have known that he would once again be called upon to risk his life in Eastern Asia. When North Korea invaded the South in June of 1950, the newly emerging United Nations Organization, at the urging of the US Government, intervened on the side of the South. Once again, the young warrior from Wisconsin, along with millions of other young men and women, found himself at the front line of a global struggle.[8]

While not terribly unique in the experience of many soldiers during this conflict, the last moments of Corporal Red Cloud's life, the more widely known portion of his epic tale, were certainly heroic. On a frosty November day in 1950, Corporal Red Cloud of Company E, 19th Infantry Regiment, was guarding

"Hill #123" just outside Chonghyon, North Korea. In a heart-stopping moment, he detected the approach of Chinese Communist troops less than one hundred feet away and began firing. Checking their assault amid ferocious gunfire, Red Cloud bought enough time for his Company to evacuate the wounded and reorganize. In the last minutes of his life, though mortally wounded, he held himself up by wrapping one arm around a tree, continually firing at the approaching enemy. For his "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty," President Truman posthumously awarded Mitchell the Medal of Honor in March of 1951, making him the eighth serviceman to be so honored in the context of the Korean Conflict at that point.[9] In April, Mitchell's mother Nellie Red Cloud and his brother, Merlin, traveled to Washington D.C. where Omar Bradley presented them with the Medal at a Pentagon ceremony.



With a mixture of pride and sadness, Nellie Red Cloud receives the Medal of Honor from General Bradley. Photo Credit: Franklin Fisher

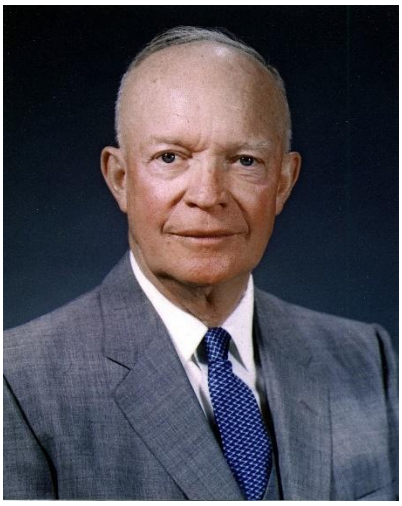
PART 2: "A son, a brother, a comrade, and a friend has returned."[10]

Exploring the world of the past on two levels, historians attempt to reconstruct past events, while also interpreting the public memory of those events. Bridging the two levels, particularly considering the nature of oft-competing memories, is a complex task, at best. The story of Corporal Red Cloud does not end with his death and the conferring of the Medal of Honor. The communities in which he lived began constructing the public memory of Red Cloud almost immediately. On the 20th of April in 1951, tabbed by local officials as "Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud Day," the Veterans of Foreign Wars of Jackson County held a special Commemoration Program to honor the fallen soldier (Banner Journal, November 26, 1975). Dignitaries from the local community gathered to pay homage to Red Cloud, thus beginning a process that continues into the present period. Over the years, memories of Red Cloud have lived on in a variety of tributes, most recently and notably with the naming of the USNS Red Cloud, a cargo ship christened in August of 1999.[11]

In March of 1955, in a defining moment in the memorializing of Red Cloud, a burial service was held at the Decorah Cemetery located at the Ho Chunk Mission outside of Black River Falls (Banner Journal, January 13, 1982). Red Cloud's family had requested the return of his body from its original burial place in Korea. In a unique confluence of US military honors, ancient Ho-Chunk traditions, and the trappings of a Christian funeral, final honors were conferred on Red Cloud and he was laid to rest alongside his father.[12] Mitchell Whiterabbit, pastor of the mission church, eloquently spoke for the community: "A son, a brother, a comrade, and a friend has returned . . No more will he be called upon to leave us, for he has come back to rest in peace . . . Because Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. belongs to that select few of valiant men, we today are gathered here to render unto him the tribute which he rightfully earned on the field of battle" (Whiterabbit, Sermon Text). Whiterabbit also shared a telegram that he received from President Eisenhower regarding the occasion of Mitchell's burial: "I join with those who unite in tribute to the memory of Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. His heroism has reflected lasting honor on the community which he loved and the country for which he gave his life" (Banner Journal, January 13, 1982). In a quintessential moment, amidst the whispering pines of a peaceful, lonely cemetery, the complex layers of the emerging Red Cloud memory were momentarily joined.



Pictured here with his wife Camille, Mitchell Whiterabbit, World War II veteran, served as UCC Pastor at the Mission from 1947-1969.



Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States

One layer of Red Cloud's place in the public's memory is of the young man of humble background who answered the call to service and died valiantly under the American flag. This is the most palpable aspect of his memory. Historian David Blight of Yale University once remarked that history must first be imagined before it can be understood.[13] As young boys coming of age in the 1960s, playing by the river and hiking through the woods around our small community, we imagined a valiant firefight on some remote hill in a far-off land long before we grasped the chaotic nature of the proxy conflicts of the Cold War. Red Cloud was a hero to us simply because of his bravery. Commingling with this salient layer of public memory was the fact that Red Cloud left the confines of our small world and, through several twists of fate, became connected to people and events that seemed so distant from us. Veterans in

any war remind us that there are moments in life when average people become part of grander schemes. The Red Cloud story involves two monumental conflicts and several larger-than-life personalities, including Franklin Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur, Omar Bradley, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower. National characters such as these play a subtle, but important, role in the public memory of a small city.



Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. 1925-1950

Beneath that surface layer of appeal, however, the Red Cloud memory becomes richer and more diverse. It is quite possible, for example, that in a community of dual cultures, the memory of Red Cloud's gallantry has come to mean different things to diverse groups. Though no one will ever fully understand the motivations that framed his decision to enlist in the Marine Corps in 1941, it seems plausible that Red Cloud was fulfilling the warrior tradition of the Thunder Clan as much as he was fighting under the flag of the United States. The ironies embedded in his cultural context, though in no way depreciating his patriotism, certainly make his story even more compelling. Red Cloud, who proudly wore the uniform of the American military, and who died saving the lives of his comrades, looked up to familial role models who had endured harsh and contradictory treatment from the US Government. His great-grandfather had survived multiple removals, and the US Government had neglected to grant his father full citizenship even though he nobly fought under the American flag during World War I. Given such complicated irony, what do young Ho-Chunk children see when they rise to honor their fallen hero? Or, when proud and now hobbling veterans of long-ago wars rise to commemorate Red Cloud, what do they see? What messages does his memory send? The answers to such questions are multi-layered, wrapped in many hues and colors, and vary according to who is doing the remembering. Furthermore, the various layers provided by this collective memory are valuable in a community that struggles to find common ground on issues of race. And while he certainly did not set out to become a reservoir of interpretive memory, or ask to be a symbol of race relations, Corporal Red Cloud

unwittingly assumes both positions. His intensely proud face looks back at us across time as we try to imagine what he might have been like as an aging old man. What great deeds would he have accomplished? What difficulties would he have encountered? His story reminds us of the fragility of life, the sadness and gallantry of war, and the complexity of memory. As always, it is left to the living to ponder the meaning of these things.



Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. is buried next to his father in Decorah Cemetery at the Indian Mission seven miles east of Black River Falls. As is customary, his marker faces east in honor of the rising Sun (Relayed to me in a conversation with Eli Youngthunder, Ho-Chunk Nation tribal member).

Explanatory Notes

[1] This description comes from Walter Blencoe, one of Mitchell's teachers at the Clay School in Hatfield during the 1930s. Blencoe taught at the one-room school from 1938-1942 and had nine students, including Mitchell, Randal, and Merlin Red Cloud.

[2] Third Street Elementary was torn down in 2015 as part of a major referendum in the Black River Falls School District, replaced by Red Creek Elementary, located on the corner of Forrest Street and County A. Interestingly, during the naming process for the new school, "Red Cloud Elementary" was under consideration as a possible name.

[3] The "Mitchell Plaque" was an undertaking of the Student Council in 1954 and placed on the third floor of Black River Falls High School to honor the Medal of Honor Winner who graduated from BRFHS. In the fall of 2018, after the demolition of Third Street Elementary, the plaque was "returned" to the High School and is part of a Shared History Wall, pictured here, a display near the entrance of the building. The Wall is part of the ongoing work being done through the Falls History Project.



[4] Written in 1896 as part of an anthology of poems known as "A Shropshire Lad," A.E. Housman's poem, "To an Athlete Dying Young," explores the theme of dying youth and romanticizes the early death of an athlete.

[5] Mitchell Red Cloud, Sr. was one of more than 17,000 American Indian men that served in World War I. For an interesting exploration of that topic, I would suggest reading a thesis by Diane Camurat that can be accessed here. Red Cloud was disappointed when he was turned down for enlistment during the Second World War due to his age. An intriguing character in his own right, he was well known in the Black River area for his regular contributions to the local newspaper. During the 1930s he served with the Resettlement Administration, one of a myriad of New Deal agencies impacting the American landscape. He also briefly served as a military guard at the White House during the war years. He died in 1946 at the age of 50.

[6] Carlson's Raiders played a significant role in the Pacific Theater during the war. For further information on the history of the Raiders, consult this information from the National World War II Museum.

[7] It is interesting to note that Mitchell completed his high school education while serving in the US Army. The Black River Falls School Board, at the behest of the Army, granted Mitchell a high school diploma in January of 1950, several months before he was killed.

[8] One of Mitchell's contemporaries from the class of 1943, Arnold Olson, was among those who served in both World War II and the Korean Conflict. "Arnie" was a bright student with a hopeful future. He entered the Naval Air Corps soon after graduation and was relieved of active duty in 1947. He received his bachelor's degree in 1950 from the University of Wisconsin in biological chemistry. While working towards another degree, he was called back into service as the Korean War was starting. In 1951 he was sent to Korea where his plane was shot down and he was marched to a camp at Chang Song, North Korea and died of malnutrition on October 25, 1951. He was listed as missing in action in July of 1951 and his death was finally confirmed by a fellow squadron member in 1953. His remains were brought back to Black River Falls for a memorial service on April 30, 1955, one month after Mitchell's funeral.

[9]Of the 6.8 million men that served in the Korean Conflict, 55,000 were killed and, of that number, 131 eventually were granted the Medal of Honor. Corporal Red Cloud is one of only five American Indians so honored in the 20th Century. For further history concerning the Medal of Honor, consult this site from the United States Army.

[10]This is a line from the sermon that Mitchell Whiterabbit preached at Mitchell's burial service. Whiterabbit had fought in the Second World War and offered a thoughtful and well-crafted sermon in which he placed Mitchell's life and service in the broader context of sacrificial love. Whiterabbit had been raised in the United Church of Christ, and his story provides valuable insight into the origins of the Mission outside of Black River Falls. For further history on the Christian missionary presence at the Mission, visit the following site.

[11] The USNS Red Cloud was commissioned in 1999 (picture below). Background information can be found here. Among many places named in his honor, Camp Red Cloud, located in Uijongbu, South Korea was named for Mitchell, along with an artillery range at Fort Benning, Georgia. Camp Red Cloud, originally known as Fort Jackson, was named for the fallen war hero in 1957 and closed in 2018 as part of the Army's delayed relocation plan. Details on the closure can be found here. Red Cloud's name also graces a public park in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and the VFW post in Black River Falls which is named for Mitchell and Olaf Thompson, an Oak Ridge area veteran who was killed in France during World War I. The American Legion post in Adams, Wisconsin is also named for Red Cloud. Beyond these memorials, it should be noted that Mitchell was inducted in the American Indian Hall of Fame in 1983.



[12] Mitchell was originally buried in a UN Cemetery in North Korea, and his family requested the return of his remains so that he could be buried in accordance with Ho-Chunk traditions. According to ethno-historian Nancy Lurie, adopted daughter of Mitchell Red Cloud, Sr. (and therefore, Red Cloud's sister), there was talk among members of the family that Mitchell's spirit had returned to the mission and requested the burial, that it was his strongest desire to be home among his people.

[13] Professor Blight's comments were part of a lecture given during a seminar in July of 2001 at Amherst College in Massachusetts attended by the author. We were exploring the Underground Railroad in American history, and more broadly the African American experience in relation to the Civil War. Blight is widely noted for his exploration of memory and the Civil War and his recently published, definitive biography of Frederick Douglass. His 1999 book, Race and Reunion, is an exploration of the complex nature of competing memories and inspired my research of the Red Cloud story.

Acknowledgements

The story of Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. has fascinated me for many years and, in many respects, inspired the creation of the Falls History Project in the early 21st Century. As history teachers, my colleague John Pellowski and I shared a conviction that students connect most deeply with the past when they encounter it close to home. Over countless conversations, that shared interest evolved into the Falls History Project, an ongoing effort to preserve, interpret, and share the rich history of the Black River Falls area. More than twenty-five years later, the Project continues to explore the people, places, and stories that have shaped our community, including the remarkable legacy of Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. Many of these projects and resources can be accessed through the Falls History Project website at Falls History Project. The story of Red Cloud remains one of the most important reminders that local history often connects us to larger themes of service, sacrifice, memory, and identity.

In pursuing information for this essay, I want to especially thank the following people for their willingness to be interviewed about Red Cloud.

Merlin Red Cloud, Jr., Mitchell's nephew who provided much information, including a wonderful picture of Mitchell and a copy of the Medal of Honor citation signed by President Truman, part of the display we developed at BRFHS.

Nancy Lurie, (1924-1917) an anthropologist and historian from Milwaukee who spent years studying the American Indians of Wisconsin, and particularly the Ho-Chunk people. Ms. Lurie was invaluable because she was an adopted member of the Red Cloud family and knew Mitchell, Sr. and Mitchell, Jr. very well.

Marianna Moe, a resident of Black River Falls who taught school here in the late 1930s and taught Mitchell as a student in Civics.

Basil Holder, a lifelong resident of Jackson County, knew the Red Cloud family and offered valuable insights concerning both Mitchell and his father, but particularly Mitchell's father.

Additional research for the project was completed in the History Room of the Black River Falls Public Library and I want to thank the director, Mary Woods, for her help. The following editions of the Banner Journal were consulted for details of the Red Cloud story:

April 4, 1951
November 28, 1951
December 20, 1964
November 26, 1975
January 13, 1982

Records related to Mitchell Red Cloud's school attendance in the Black River Falls area are limited. In Schools of Yesterday in Jackson County (published in 1997), a compilation of histories of the one-room schools in the county so prevalent until the 1950s, there is a reference to the Red Cloud family and its connection to the Clay School near Hatfield during the 1930s. With the help of Barb Prochaska in the District Office, I was able to locate Mitchell's record of attendance at the time of his withdrawal from the Black River Falls School in 1941. I was also able to find the school board meeting minutes from January of 1950 indicating that Mitchell had been granted a diploma from the BRF school district because of the completion of his education in the Army.

A copy of the Sermon given by Mitchell Whiterabbit at Red Cloud's burial service in 1955 proved to be an invaluable document for this research. Whiterabbit's unique status in the Ho-Chunk community and his eloquent use of language offer reflective insight into the memory of Red Cloud as interpreted in 1955.

Finally, I would like to also thank my daughter, Kate Rykken Schweitz, for her help in editing the original essay in 2002 as she was completing a Major in English at UW-Madison. She is currently teaching ELA at Central Heights Middle School in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Crafting the writing properly is always an arduous task and her insights proved invaluable.

Author Bio



Paul ST Rykken, MS, teaches First Nations History through UW-Green Bay's Early College programs and serves as a lecturer in the university's First Nations Studies Department. Following a 41-year career teaching high school in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin, he retired in 2020 and continues to share his passion for history through college instruction, local history initiatives, and public scholarship. He has coordinated the Falls History Project for more than 25 years and contributes regularly to Wisconsin First Nations.