

Fortunate Eagle part of unwritten history

Native American Movement leader has Lawrence ties

By Mark Hansen

Special to the Kansan

Adam Fortunate Eagle isn't listed in the indexes of history textbooks. If his name were there, it would lead readers to information about the Native-American occupation of Alcatraz Island. It would also lead to a picture of him driving a stake into Italy's soil, claiming it for Native Americans.

Not many know about his life, and even fewer know he attended what is now Haskell Indian Nations University from 1944 to 1948. Back then, it was Haskell Indian Institute. Fortunate Eagle revisited Lawrence in September as a featured speaker at the American Indian Leaders Conference, which took place at the University of Kansas and Haskell. It was the first time he'd been to Lawrence since the early 1970s.

At the conference, he wore deep indigo jeans and a vest embroidered with floral designs. His silver-gray pony tails dangled on each of his shoulders as he gave a historical summary of the lack of Native-American religious freedom in the United States.

Dan Wildcat, professor of humanities at Haskell, said Fortunate Eagle kept a low profile compared to other leaders of the American Indian Movement.

Karen Swisher, president of Haskell, said she hadn't realized Fortunate Eagle's importance until she heard him at the conference.

"There's always those significant people in the background," she said. "It happens to a lot of people who have played a significant role in contemporary history."

Fortunate Eagle said he didn't make a lot of speaking appearances.

"I'm not a conference Indian," he said.

Bay Area Watershed

Spanish explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala named Alcatraz Island in 1775.

The United States Department of Justice used Alcatraz as a military prison from 1868 to 1933. It was then a federal prison of notoriety from 1933 to 1963.

An 1868 treaty stated that unused government property could be made an Indian reservation. Fortunate Eagle found that the island fit the description, and helped write a proclamation stating Native-American right to the land.

Fortunate Eagle and other Bay area activists had a vision of the neglected island as a Native-American university and cultural center.

In November 1969, Fortunate Eagle was a supporter and labeled by the FBI as a "principal organizer" of an unarmed takeover of Alcatraz. In all, 5,600 Native Americans spent time on the island during the occupation.

Life on the island slowly grew chaotic, and federal marshals forced them off the island in June 1971, without the deed to the island or cultural center they had requested. Alcatraz has been a national recreation area since 1972.

The occupation became a watershed for Native-American rights and reservation protection.

Italy Reclaimed

Fortunate Eagle stepped off a plane in Rome and drove a spear into Italian soil on Sept. 24, 1992. In full Chippewa tribal dress, he claimed Italy — or just asked a question.

"I like to be acknowledged as the discoverer of Italy," he said. "It's all about making people think. Is it logical for somebody to stick a flag in a land with millions of people? A



Fortunate Eagle: attended Haskell from 1944 to 1948



Fortunate Eagle: sees Hollywood as a frontier for Native-American equality

European claimed Pike's Peak."

Fortunate Eagle's claim was based on the Right of Discovery Columbus invoked when he claimed Hispaniola. Fortunate Eagle's humorous spirit has the double edge of biting truth. How can a land that has been inhabited by generations of natives be discovered and claimed?

Fortunate Eagle said in contrast to Columbus' claim by force, his was one of peace. For his actions, he garnered media attention and a visit with the pope.

Lawrence Memories and History at Haskell

Fortunate Eagle, born Adam Nordwall, grew up on the Chippewa Reservation in Red Lake, Minn., before moving to Lawrence.

"There have been tremendous changes," he said. "There's more hustle-bustle. Old Lawrence was the Lawrence, it was Mass. Street. We'd go to the theater and the roller skating rink. Again, if we could afford it."

When Fortunate Eagle attended Haskell, it was a two-year institute. Today it is a four-year university.

He said he has good memories of Haskell: He met his wife at Haskell, which he refers to as the "love boat of the prairies."

Fortunate Eagle said the original school grounds extended to the Wakarusa River, providing farming land for the school. The land was later given to Baker University, and is now known as the Baker Wetlands. Fortunate Eagle called this a "government termination policy."

He was dismayed at the attempts to extend K-10 over Baker Wetlands' sacred grounds.

"Once you consecrate that ground (as sacred), it's that," he said.

Haskell students weren't allowed to conduct religious ceremonies when Fortunate Eagle attended.

"We didn't have sweat lodges," he said. "The authorities would not have allowed it. It would have been virtually unthinkable to do a sweat lodge at Haskell in 1945. We were required to go to church. I was baptized as an Episcopalian. What truth is that? I may have been baptized, but not in my mind."

Although he may have encountered some religious struggles at Haskell, Fortunate Eagle remembers good times on the Haskell track team. He was also a letterman on the

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Adam Fortunate Eagle

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football team.

Fortunate Eagle said there had been a hierarchy at Haskell that put whites above Native Americans, whose voices were stifled when Fortunate Eagle was a student.

"There was no such thing as activism in that day," he said. "The government exuded total control — we were wards of the government."

In 1945, Haskell only offered programs in secretarial arts. The curriculum was expanded when veteran Franklin Gritts came to Haskell in 1948 to teach commercial arts. Fortunate Eagle said Gritts arrival marked a turning point.

He learned skills that led to a job as a commercial artist at Center Studios in Kansas City, Mo.

Art has remained an integral part of Fortunate Eagle's life since his time at Haskell.

Fortunate Eagle is the Spiritual Leader of the Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers, a group based in Minnesota. He makes sculptures in alabaster and peace pipes and has received the governor's award for folk arts in New Mexico.

And his work is well-known.

"Janet Reno received a pipe," he said. "Gorbachev has two of them."

Fortunate Eagle wonders if he would have pursued more than art if he had been given the opportunity. Perhaps a degree in law or medicine.

Although veterans could go to college with help from the GI Bill, Native Americans had limited options in the 1940s.

But Fortunate Eagle has received his share of honors for the work he has done.



Adam Fortunate Eagle, Native American Movement leader, was featured on the cover of *Native Peoples* in Fall 1999. Contributed art

In 1989, the California University system granted Fortunate Eagle an honorary degree. This year he will be the second person to receive an honorary Ph.D. from the State University system of New York.

Next Frontiers

Among other things, Fortunate Eagle is now working on screenplays. He sees Hollywood as a frontier for Native-American equality and the eradication of Native-American stereotypes.

He has written the book *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!: The Indian Occupation of 1969-1971* and also *Heart of the Rock*, scheduled to be released this summer.

After the American Indian Leadership conference, Swisher said Fortunate Eagle was one of the sig-

More information

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nificant alumni of Haskell University.

"His time here was good for him. He has been very generous in giving back to Haskell with his time and energy," she said.

Fortunate Eagle may boast an array of accomplishments, but his compassion and his ability to enlighten illuminate his role as a leader.

"He's a very pleasant man; there's a twinkle in his eye all the time," Swisher said. "There's a wealth of information in that person."

— Edited by Jacob Roddy

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