

# Corporal Red Cloud and the Power of Memory

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2002 (Revised in 2019)*

## **PART 1: “He was a creative child, excellent in art and penmanship.”<sup>1</sup>**

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 finally became Third Street Elementary in the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Upon entering the east doors of the building, I was immediately transported back to 1968 and my junior high school days. 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, it seemed



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 of history and literature, all seemed disappointingly small.

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 evidently much younger than I ever realized.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1924, Red Cloud would now be an old man, the same age as my father,

had he not been tragically killed on that hillside in northern Korea in late 1950. Like all who die at an unnaturally young age, however, Mitchell remains forever twenty-six 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 honours out,  
Runners who renown outran  
And the name died before the man.<sup>4</sup>*

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 trying to grasp the multifarious nature of history, what does his story have to say about the power of individual and collective memory that resides 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 1924, the year 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, Mitchell, Sr. fought with valor under the American flag in the Great War.<sup>5</sup> 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.



*Chief Winneshiek*

As a young boy, Red Cloud learned to hunt and fish in the forests of Jackson County, attended one-room school houses near his home, and lived the relatively carefree and simple life of someone being

raised in the pre-war years. 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, perhaps 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. 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 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 warrior 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 soldier from Wisconsin, along with millions of other young men and women, found himself at the front line of a global struggle.

While not terribly unique in the experience of many soldiers during this conflict, the final 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, 19<sup>th</sup> 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 100 feet away and began firing. Checking their assault in the midst of 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.



*Photo Credit: Franklin Fisher*

## **PART 2: “A son, a brother, a comrade, and a friend has returned.”<sup>8</sup>**

Exploring the world of the past on two levels, historians attempt to unveil previous events, while also interpreting the public memory of those events. Bridging the two levels, particularly in light of the nature of oft-competing memories, is a complicated 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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). Initially buried in South Korea, Red Cloud's family requested the return of his body from its original burial place. 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.



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 the memory. Historian David Blight of Yale University once remarked that history must first be imagined before it can be understood.<sup>11</sup> As young boys coming of age in the 1960s, playing by the river and hiking through the woods around our small town, 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 town.

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 different 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 all the 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.



Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr.  
1924-1950

## Explanatory Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation comes from Walter Blencoe, Clay School teacher who had young Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. as an elementary student.

<sup>2</sup> Third Street Elementary was torn down in 2015 as part of a major referendum in the Black River Falls School District. It was 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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 display near the entrance of the building. The Wall is part of the work being done through the Falls History Project under the direction of the author.

<sup>4</sup> Written in 1896 as part of a collection 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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 at <http://www.gwpda.org/comment/camurat1.html>. Red Cloud was greatly 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Of the 6.8 million men that served in the Korean Conflict, roughly 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 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For further history concerning the Medal of Honor, consult the following site: <https://www.defense.gov/Experience/honors-for-valor/>.

<sup>8</sup> 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. An impressive historical account can be found at the following site: [https://www.ucc.org/about-us\\_hidden-histories\\_american-indians-missions](https://www.ucc.org/about-us_hidden-histories_american-indians-missions).

<sup>9</sup> The USNS Red Cloud is an amazing ship. A short video with background can be accessed at: <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/429789/usns-red-cloud>. Among other things, Camp Red Cloud, located in Uijongbu, South Korea was named for Mitchell, as is 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 at <https://www.stripes.com/news/end-of-an-era-camp-red-cloud-is-finally-closing-for-real-this-time-1.553262>. Red Cloud’s name also graces a public park in LaCrosse, Wisconsin and also 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.

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<sup>10</sup> Mitchell had originally been 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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. is fascinating on multiple levels and inspired the Falls History Project, an initiative we started after the turn of the new century nearly twenty years ago. History colleague John Pellowski and I both had significant interest in more authentically connecting our students to local history, and our discussions, over time, resulted in the Project. The projects are available on-line at our website (fallshistoryproject.com). 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.

Nancy Lurie was an anthropologist and historian from Milwaukee who spent years studying the American Indians of Wisconsin, and particularly the Ho-Chunk people. It was my great fortune to interview Ms. Lurie on several occasions and her insights on this project proved 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, who knew the Red Cloud family and offered valuable insights concerning both Mitchell and his father, but particularly Mitchell's father.

Mary Woods, director of the Jackson County History Room at the Public Library. Mary has provided great support for many years regarding our local research. 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

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 tremendous insight into the memory of Red Cloud as interpreted in 1955.

Barb Prochaska, long-time secretary at the Administrative Offices of the district. Records related Red Cloud's school attendance in the Black River Falls area are limited. In Schools of Yesterday in Jackson County (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. Barb helped me locate Mitchell’s record of attendance at the time of his withdrawal from the Black River Falls School in 1941, and pointed me in the right direction with other research. After much digging, I was also able to locate 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.

Finally, many thanks to my daughter, Kate Rykken Schweitz for her editing help with the original essay in 2002. She was completing an English Major at UW-Madison at the time and her assistance in crafting the language proved invaluable.



*This is a portion of the “Shared History” display near the entrance of BRFHS. The photo and Medal of Honor citation were gifts from Merlin Red Cloud, nephew of Mitchell. The plaque to the right hung at Third Street School from 1954 until 2018.*