

Annie Dodge Wauneka (1910-1997)

Annie Dodge Wauneka, a member of the Navajo Tribal Council in Window Rock, Arizona, from 1951 to 1978, advocated for improved lifestyle, disease prevention, and access to medical knowledge in the Navajo Indian Reservation, later renamed the Navajo Nation. Wauneka served as chair of the Health and Welfare Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council and as a member of the US Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Indian Health. Wauneka advocated for initiatives aimed at promoting education, preventing tuberculosis, and reducing the infant mortality rate. In 1963, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Wauneka's initiatives to educate mothers about child health and increase hospital births reduced infant mortality rates in the Navajo Indian Reservation during the twentieth century.

Annie Dodge Wauneka was born on 11 April 1910 to mother Kee'hanabah, also called Mary Shirley Begaye, and father Henry Chee Dodge near what later was called Sawmill, Arizona. The Sawmill settlement was one of several included on the Navajo Indian Reservation, which stretched across the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. Wauneka was raised in the Sonsola Buttes settlement in the state of New Mexico. According to historian Marion Gridley, Wauneka's father followed Navajo tradition and simultaneously married two women who were sisters. Several years later, he married a third woman, Kee'hanabah, a relative of his wives' and Wauneka's biological mother. During her childhood, Wauneka lived in a household with three siblings, two brothers and one sister. In 1939, at the age of twenty-eight, Wauneka learned that Kee'hanabah was her biological mother and that she was not the daughter of one of her father's first two wives.

Both Navajo traditions and more general US customs shaped Wauneka's childhood. In contrast to many families on the reservation who were poor, Wauneka's father was wealthy. He built a large house instead of a smaller, traditional Navajo house called the hogan. Like many other wealthy Navajo men, he owned and operated a ranch. In contrast to her three siblings, Wauneka's father did not send her away to a boarding school at a young age. Instead, from the age of five, Wauneka began caring for the family's sheep and goats by taking them to the pasture and watching over them as they grazed. During her childhood, Wauneka father was a leader in the Navajo community. Speaking both English and Navajo, Wauneka's father worked as a liaison between the Navajo community and US government officials. Wauneka's neighbors viewed him as a leading authority and often visited her house to seek council from him. As Wauneka lived at home instead of attending a boarding school, she observed her father's interactions with the Navajo community.

In 1918, at eight years old, Wauneka began attending a government-run school, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Boarding School, located in Fort Defiance, Arizona. According to historian Gridley, many Navajo children did not attend school because few schools existed on the Navajo reservation and government-operated schools were far from home. However, Wauneka's father, who was not formally educated, said that children needed to be educated and sent Wauneka's siblings to private Catholic schools and Wauneka to a government school.

While at the school in Fort Defiance, Wauneka was one of many students and teachers to become sick during the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic. Although she recovered, many of her fellow classmates died. Shortly after, while Wauneka was in the fourth grade, an infectious disease of the eyelids, trachoma, began spreading through the school in Fort Defiance. Wauneka and other uninfected students were transferred to St. Michaels Catholic Mission School in St. Michaels, Arizona. There, Wauneka was baptized and converted to Catholicism. When the trachoma epidemic ended over a year later, Wauneka returned to the school in Fort Defiance. According to historian Gridley, both the Spanish influenza pandemic and the trachoma epidemic influenced Wauneka's

later interest in improving the health of the Navajo people.

After finishing the fifth grade, Wauneka transferred from the government school in Fort Defiance to the Albuquerque Indian School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At the same time, her father became chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council. As chairman, he advocated for more Navajo children to attend school, as many individuals in the community were not formally educated. In response to her father's support of education for the betterment of the community, Wauneka began to focus on her studies, soon completing two grades in a single year. She returned to her father's ranch in 1928, after completing eleventh grade.

In October 1929, Wauneka married George Wauneka, whom she had met at the Albuquerque Indian School. A Navajo medicine man officiated Wauneka's wedding. Shortly after Wauneka's wedding, her father sent her and her husband to manage another family-owned ranch in Tanner Springs, Arizona. At the ranch, Wauneka cared for livestock, sold cattle, and cooked for the cattle herders. Wauneka and her husband had nine children between 1931 and 1950, one of whom died at a young age. According to historian Carolyn Niethammer, Wauneka had difficulties with several of her pregnancies due to the lack of adequate medical resources in the Navajo Reservation. It was customary for women to give birth at home without the assistance of physicians.

During the 1930s, while continuing her work on the Tanner Springs ranch and raising her children, Wauneka became involved in Navajo tribe politics as an assistant for her father. She traveled with her father throughout the Navajo Indian Reservation and helped him translate what had been discussed in meetings. The council governing the Klagetoh region of the Navajo reservation elected Wauneka as a member of the Grazing Committee, responsible for settling disputes over land distribution and regulating livestock care practices, such as vaccinations and branding. Several years later, Wauneka was elected secretary of the Klagetoh chapter.

In May 1951, Wauneka ran for and won a position on the Navajo Tribal Council, a governing body for the Navajo Indian Reservation. According to historian Niethammer, Wauneka's prior experience attending meetings with her father caused Wauneka to be outspoken and clear about her opinions in tribal council meetings. Wauneka was the second woman to hold a council member position and served as a member for almost thirty years. While on the council, Wauneka advocated for employment of more Navajo individuals on the reservation, the establishment of more reservation hospitals, and the general betterment of conditions for the Navajo.

As a Tribal Council member, Wauneka noted how large the health disparities were between the Navajos and other groups in Arizona. Some members of the Navajo community believed that disharmony with nature caused disease. Instead of hospitals, they visited traditional medicine men for treatment. Although Wauneka followed Navajo traditions, she saw a need to increase the community's trust in hospitals and physicians. The incidence of illnesses such as tuberculosis, gastrointestinal diseases, and pneumonia were higher on the reservation than the national average in the 1900s. Another problem she noted on the reservation was the lack of adequate hospitals and of doctors to staff existing hospitals. Many individuals were unwilling to leave the reservation to seek treatment. Wauneka connected the lack of adequate resources on the reservation to high incidences of disease.

In 1953, in response to widespread cases of tuberculosis-related deaths among the Navajo people, the Navajo Tribal Council appointed Wauneka chair of the newly created Health and Welfare section of the Community Services Committee. The section later became a committee of its own, called the Health and Welfare Committee. Because the Navajo reservation did not have many hospitals, patients with tuberculosis were sent to nearby government hospitals. However, many patients left before their treatment was completed due to distrust of hospitals, lack of knowledge about how hospitals worked, and belief in Navajo traditional healing ceremonies. Those patients who left hospitals early continued to spread tuberculosis through the reservation. Wauneka began working alongside physicians and taking classes to learn more about tuberculosis.

Taking those classes led Wauneka to earn a degree in public health at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, during the 1950s. Wauneka then began visiting hospitals and parts of the Navajo reservation to educate tuberculosis patients about the disease and the importance of treatment. She noted that it was difficult to explain illness and how to prevent disease, as there was no Navajo

word for germ. Wauneka visited the homes of individuals diagnosed with tuberculosis and urged them to go to hospitals for treatment. She answered their questions and explained to their families the importance of treatment. In addition, Wauneka urged the Navajo medicine men to educate sick individuals who visited them about the benefits of treatment.

In 1954, the Navajo community reelected Wauneka as a member of the Tribal Council. She continued her efforts to improve healthcare resources on the Navajo reservation by focusing on disease prevention. Wauneka educated mothers about child health practices, including how childhood infections like lice and skin disease are transmitted, and how if children drink more milk, they develop stronger bones. She also advocated for better living conditions to prevent diseases. According to historian Niethammer, Wauneka's respectful demeanor when talking to individuals in the Navajo community helped individuals to be more receptive to the information she was sharing.

In 1956, the US Surgeon General appointed Wauneka to the Advisory Committee on Indian Health, which worked in conjunction with the federal Indian Health Services program, headquartered in Rockville, Maryland. As a member of the advisory committee, Wauneka met periodically with the director of the federal Indian Health Services and discussed needed actions on the reservation.

Wauneka also argued that if Navajos prevented disease, they would lower the high infant mortality rates on the Navajo reservation and improve child health. Infant mortality rates on reservations were higher than rates for the non-reservation US population during the mid 1900s. According to researcher David Crockett, the many women giving birth at home on the reservation led to higher mortality rate. Newly born infants were susceptible to illnesses such as pneumonia or gastritis if homes were unclean or if they were not sufficiently heated. In addition, many mothers were unaware of indicators of illness and or of how to prevent disease such as pneumonia or dysentery. Wauneka advocated for the Navajo Tribal Council to purchase clothing and blankets that women could receive for free if they delivered at a hospital or brought their infant in for a checkup within two weeks of giving birth. Wauneka also established a Better Baby contest at the annual Navajo Tribal Fair in Window Rock, Arizona. As part of the contest, physicians judged infants primarily on their health and offered medical advice to mothers if they noticed any health problems. In the 1960s, the Navajo infant death rate decreased by twenty-five percent.

Wauneka continued to serve as a member of the Navajo Tribal Council until 1978. In addition to preventative disease practices, she focused on curbing alcoholism, improving rural water systems, and increasing access to education during her time with the tribal council. On 6 December 1963, Lyndon Johnson presented the US Presidential Medal of Freedom to Wauneka for her service to the Navajo people. In 1973, the University of New Mexico granted Wauneka an honorary doctorate degree in humanities.

After 1978, Wauneka participated in charity work, traveled to political meetings, and was appointed as a health ambassador for the Navajo people. She continued to support the improvement of health standards on the reservation until the 1980s. In 1996, the University of Arizona granted Wauneka an honorary law degree. During that time, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and moved to a nursing home by her family

On 10 November 1997, Wauneka died in a nursing home in Toyey, Arizona.

Sources

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