Annie Dodge Wauneka (1910-1997) [1]

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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 [2] 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
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.


Sources
