

Cheyenne peace chief Lawrence Homer Hart dies at 89

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue



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Cheyenne peace chief and Mennonite pastor Lawrence Homer Hart died on March 6 at age 89.

Hart, who was raised by his paternal grandparents Corn Stalk and Chief Peak Hart near Hammon, Oklahoma, converted to Christianity at age 17. He attended Bethel College, a Mennonite school in North Newton, Kansas, for two years before leaving in 1955 to realize his dream of flying fighter jets in the US Navy and Marines. He later became the first American Indian to become a US military jet pilot and instructor.

When his grandfather died in 1958, Hart was asked to succeed him as peace chief. He returned to Oklahoma and began studying to become a Mennonite pastor. (He would eventually lead Koinonia Mennonite Church outside Clinton, Oklahoma, from 1963 to 2021.) But it wasn't until 1968 that the former warrior would truly understand the power of peace.

According to Anabaptist World magazine, that year, Hart and his wife, Betty, had agreed to participate in a reenactment to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the US Army's massacre of Cheyenne people near the Washita River. Unbeknownst to the Cheyenne participants, the descendants of George Custer's Seventh Cavalry were also in attendance, and they stormed the re-created Cheyenne village with swords and gunfire.

Yet, at the end of the event, the elders decided to gift the commander of the cavalry reenactors with a traditional Cheyenne blanket. Hart was deeply moved when the man then spontaneously removed the Seventh Cavalry's crest and gave it to the Cheyenne, promising that their people would never hear the cavalry's battle songs again.

As a peace activist, Hart worked to combine Cheyenne and Mennonite peace traditions. For instance, when Hart discovered that the remains of 25,000 Indigenous people were being stored on shelves at museums, he and his wife enlisted the help of Mennonite Central Committee to create Return to the Earth. The program aims to identify the remains and give them a proper burial.

In 1992, the National Indian Education Association named Hart Indian Elder of the Year. In 1997, he was recognized as a distinguished honorary citizen by the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes for his work in the preservation of the Cheyenne language.