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EARTH CIRCLES



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Internationally Renowned Medicine Man John "Rolling Thunder" Pope Crosses Over

by Herbert P. Weiss

Family and friends of John "Rolling Thunder" Pope were saddened to learn of his death on January 23, 1997, at his home in Carlin, Nevada. The eighty-year-old Rolling Thunder was an internationally recognized traditional Cherokee medicine man, master herbalist, and Native American leader who touched and influenced the lives of many people.

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Rolling Thunder traveled across the nation and to foreign lands, teaching Native American history and spiritual traditions to countless people at numerous seminars, conferences, and gatherings. His message was simple but profound, urging the audience to return to the old ways, to abolish war and pollution, and to respect Mother Earth—the life source of all beings.

John "Rolling Thunder" Pope was born on September 10, 1916, in Stamps, Arkansas. As a young teenager, he lived in the Kiamichi Mountains of eastern Oklahoma, where tribal elders recognized his special abilities and gave him private instruction and training in order to prepare him to become a medicine man. At the age of fifteen, he built a cabin in the forest and lived alone for several years. It was during this period of solitude that he learned how to communicate with plants and animals.

During the Great Depression, Rolling Thunder went through a period of extreme hardship, battling alcoholism, nearly starving to death, and living the life of a hobo riding trains across the nation. Eventually, after returning to the reservation and to the traditional ways of his people, he not only turned his life around but also renewed his formal quest to become a medicine man. He eventually became a master herbalist who

understood the uses of hundreds of herbs. In addition to his training in herbal medicines, he continued to learn spiritual lessons and truths from many great Native spiritual leaders, including Frank Fools Crow, Mad Bear Anderson, Aminitus Sepuoia, and David Monongye.

For thirty-five years, Rolling Thunder practiced his medicine work in relative obscurity, while he continued making his living as a brakeman for the Southern Pacific railroad. During those years, he married Spotted Fawn, now deceased, and together they raised a family of six children. Gradually, as his reputation as a healer grew, more and more people began to seek him out for his healing abilities and for his spiritual advice and counsel.

During the early 1970s, Rolling Thunder was invited to the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, so that scientists there could observe his miraculous healing abilities. His work at the foundation was described in Doug Boyd's book *Rolling Thunder*, which was first published in 1974. This book, which reported that Rolling Thunder was able to cure disease and heal wounds, to transport objects through the air, and to bring rain to areas hit by drought, became a runaway success. In addition to being reprinted twelve times in English, the book has been published in German and Japanese. Other accounts of Rolling Thunder's healing work have been published in several other popular books, including *Beyond Biofeedback* by Elmer and Alyce Green (Delacorte Press, 1977) and *Realms of Healing* by Stanley Krippner (Celestial Arts, 1976).

In the early 1970s, Rolling Thunder became a national celebrity after serving as spiritual advisor and script consultant for

the motion pictures *Billy Jack* and *The Trial of Billy Jack*. In the fall of 1975, he joined Bob Dylan's "Rolling Thunder Revue" which toured the country with many of the nation's foremost folk-rock performers, including Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan.

In the late 1970s, Rolling Thunder founded a Native American community named Meta Tante, which was located on 260 acres of desert land in northeastern Nevada. He created the camp as an experiment in cooperative living and as a place to teach traditional Native American lifestyle and culture. Using traditional farming techniques, the community grew cabbages, Jerusalem artichokes, burdock, and other traditional crops on land that others had said couldn't grow anything. Although the community later went through hard times and disbanded, it helped plant the seeds of Native spirituality in the hearts of many people who visited the site.

As a result of his early experiences as a young Native American facing racial discrimination in a small Texas town, Rolling Thunder was a lifelong activist for Native American rights. He traveled to Wounded Knee, South Dakota, to participate in the 1973 standoff between the U.S. government and Lakota traditionalists. Over the years, he has been active in efforts to secure the freedom of Leonard Peltier. Even after he was confined to a wheel chair, during the last years of his life, Rolling Thunder continued to actively support Native American causes, working to stop the destruction of pinyon nut trees and the use of Indian lands as atomic waste dumps and storage sites.

Rolling Thunder is survived by his widow, Carmen Sunrising Pope; by four of his six children: Buffalo Horse, Mala Spotted Eagle, Bundy Morning Star Whittaker, and Patricia Mocking Bird Arce; and by numerous grandchildren.

His widow Carmen has requested that memorial gifts may be made in Rolling Thunder's name to the **Western Shoshone Defense Project**, General Delivery, Crescent City, NV 89821; or the **Leonard Peltier Defense Committee**, P.O. Box 583, Lawrence, Kansas 66044.

Editor's note: Cassette tapes of Rolling Thunder speaking may be ordered for \$12 each from his widow: Carmen Sunrising Pope, Box 699, Carlin, NV 89822. A video tape, *Returning to Right Relationship with Rolling Thunder & Running Wolf*, featuring several interviews with Rolling Thunder is available for a \$25 donation from: Gadohi Usquanigodi Native American Spiritual Center, P.O. Box 1810, Rachos de Taos, New Mexico 87557; (505) 751-1081.

Herbet P. Weiss is a Rhode-Island-based writer covering medicine, health care, and alternative therapies. Weiss may be contacted at: P.O. Box 2314, Providence, Rhode Island 02906; (401) 724-6441.



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