

Obama remembers Crow chairman



Crow Tribal Chairman Carl Venne is seen in this undated photo. Venne, who sought to improve the lives of residents on the Crow Indian Reservation, has died of natural causes. He was 62 years old. (AP Photo/The Billings Gazette, James Woodcock)

By The Associated Press
Monday, February 16, 2009 11:11 PM MST

HARDIN, Mont. -- The Crow Tribe is functioning under interim leadership following the death of Chairman Carl Venne, remembered by President Obama on Monday as a leader who engaged in a "fervent quest for a better life for his people."

Venne, 62, was found dead at his sister's home early Sunday. He apparently died in his sleep, the Bighorn County Sheriff's Department said. An autopsy was planned.

"I was honored to have worked with Chairman Venne, a strong tribal leader, who implored us to uphold treaties and honor Native ancestors," Obama said in a statement released by the White House.

Venne greeted Obama last summer during a campaign stop in Crow Agency. The Crow adopted Obama as a member of the Black Eagle family. Last month, Obama watched Venne lead Crow horsemen during the inaugural parade in Washington, D.C.

The tribe of about 11,000 members is under the leadership of Cedric Black Eagle, who rose from vice chairman to interim chairman. An election to fill the chairmanship will take place this spring, Crow spokesman Ben Cloud said.

Venne was remembered as a leader who worked for the betterment of his people by pressing for economic development on the Crow Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana, and by seeking improvements in areas such as health care. The Montana Legislature, which received the State of Indian Nations address from Venne in 2003 and 2007, briefly fell silent on Monday in recognition

of his life.

"Carl leaves behind an entire nation strengthened by his hard work and his dedication to all Crow people," Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., said in a statement.

Venne was a counselor at Little Big Horn Community College when he successfully ran for the chairmanship in 2002 to complete the term held by Clifford Birdinground, who resigned. Venne was re-elected in 2004 and 2008.

He was a former chairman of the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council, representing 10 tribes in Montana and Wyoming, and had led the Council of Large Land-based Tribes, representing tribes in Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming.

Projects he wanted to advance included the proposed construction of a plant that would convert coal to liquid fuel, tapping the Crow reservation's coal reserves. Work to develop the plant was a joint effort by the tribe and Australian-American Energy Co.

Venne was a Vietnam veteran and had expressed pride in American Indians serving in the military. When he returned from military service in southeast Asia he took a taxi from Billings Logan International Airport to a highway, then hitchhiked the rest of the way home.

Throughout his chairmanship, he supported programs against methamphetamine use and encouraged a healthful way of life on the reservation. He was instrumental in the U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee's selection of Crow Agency as the place for a 2007 hearing on Indian health care.

Although he advocated clean living, Venne was charged with driving under the influence of alcohol after a car crashed in October. He pleaded not guilty and was scheduled for a change-of-plea hearing on Feb. 6, but did not show up for it. Big Horn County Justice Court staff said attorneys were unable to contact Venne to tell him to appear. He was scheduled for a trial in May.

Venne is survived by his wife, Edwina, and daughters Mallory and Zena. A son, Carl Venne Jr., died in 2002.

Funeral arrangements were pending at Bullis Mortuary in Hardin.