

Annie D. Wauneka, 87, Dies; Navajo Medical Crusader

By [Wolfgang Saxon](#) Nov. 16, 1997

Annie Dodge Wauneka, who broke custom and became the Navajo Nation's first female legislator and a health crusader, died on Monday at Flagstaff Medical Center in Arizona. She was 87 and lived in Klagetoh, in northeast Arizona.

The cause was Alzheimer's disease, said Ted Rushton, a spokesman in Window Rock, Ariz., the Navajo capital.

For many years starting in the 1950's, Mrs. Wauneka traveled to villages and clinics, covering the 24,000-square-mile territory of the Navajo to preach public health standards. She cut a striking figure, tall and always wearing traditional Navajo clothing, including a colorful shawl and silver jewelry.

Over the years, she urged the Navajo to adopt more modern dwellings, and she worked to improve the quality of water on the reservation. She also helped many people obtain medical attention after generations of reliance solely on tradition. She received much of the credit for defeating tuberculosis among the Navajo beginning in the 1950's and received national recognition for her role.

Albert A. Hale, president of the Navajo Nation, called her "our legendary mother" and "the most honored Navajo in our history." He directed all public offices to shut down for one day last week, except for emergency services.

Annie Dodge was born in Deer Springs, Ariz., and learned of public service from her father, Henry Chee Dodge, a chief and first president of the Navajo Nation's legislative Tribal Council. Its jurisdiction stretches over parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado. She became the first woman on the council in 1951, winning an election over two rival candidates. One of those was her husband, George L. Wauneka, with whom she ran a ranch owned by her father in Arizona.

Mrs. Wauneka was in the council for nearly 30 years, serving as the chairwoman of the health committee. Her concern with public health could be traced to her grade-school days, when the influenza pandemic at the end of World War I killed many Navajos. She escaped with a mild attack and, even as an 8-year-old, helped the overworked nurse at her school in Fort Defiance, Ariz.

Her formal education ended in the 11th grade, when she began tending to the needs of her tribe at the side of her father, who had become head of the Tribal Council and her political mentor. "From my childhood," she said later, "I have been aware of the problems of my tribe and have wanted to help make our people aware of them."

Among her frustrations were the objections of tribal medicine makers to new ways. She conceded that the medicine makers performed much good work among the people, especially in family matters. But she said: "The Navajo is caught in between. I must convince them to accept a mixture."

In 1963, Mrs. Wauneka and 30 diplomats, educators, musicians, authors and a former Supreme Court justice received the newly created Presidential Medal of Freedom for service to their country. President John F. Kennedy established the honor on July 4, 1963; after his assassination, the medals were presented by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Mrs. Wauneka's husband died in 1994. Her survivors include four daughters, Irma Bluehouse, Laurencita Cohoe, Georgia Ann Plummer and Sally S. Wauneka; five sons, Franklin, George L. Jr., Henry Chee, Norman and Timothy; a sister, Ann Shirley, and three brothers, Bernard, Sam and Walter Shirley.