

HISTORY MAKER

SYLVESTER CLARK LONG, AKA BUFFALO CHILD LONG LANCE

Born: Dec. 1, 1890, Winston, N.C.

Died: March 19, 1931, California

Known for: A journalist, activist for First Nation's rights, author and film star of

triracial heritage who, for a time, successfully presented himself as a full-blooded Native American in order to escape restrictions imposed by Jim Crow laws

In a time when opportunities were extremely limited for Blacks in America, Sylvester Long took an unconventional path to success and international fame in multiple fields.

Born to formerly enslaved parents in Jim Crow-era Winston, he embellished his personal history to emphasize his Native American heritage (his mother was Croatan, now attached to the Lumbees) gaining access to education unavailable to Blacks at the time.

The middle of Joe and Sallie (Lindsey) Long's five children, he grew up on Brookstown Avenue in Winston's West End, where his father was janitor at the grade school.

At 14 he ran away to join a "Wild West show" where his slick jet-black hair, high cheekbones, and copper-toned complexion landed him a part as a Cherokee. Actual Cherokee elders in the cast taught him some of the language and many of the tribal stories.

At 19, he lied about his age and applied to the Carlisle, Pa., Indian Residential School as a Cherokee since the Lumbee were not a federally recognized tribe. He excelled on the track and debate teams. Fellow classmate and future Olympian Jim Thorpe would be a lifelong friend. While in Carlisle, he changed his last name to Long Lance.

He won an appointment to West Point but intentionally failed the entrance exam, worried the scrutiny of being the



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Because of the multiple tribes reflected in the attire of Sylvester Long, aka Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, in this photo, skepticism grew regarding his stories of his heritage.

first Native appointee would uncover his misrepresentation of his heritage and his age. He joined the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in 1916 to fight in World War I, where he was wounded in action.

Settling in Alberta after the war, he wrote for newspapers covering legal

and moral challenges faced by the First Nations in western Canada.

A local Blackfoot tribe adopted him and gave him the name Buffalo Child, which he used the rest of his life.

He wrote an "autobiography" of his life as a member of the Blood tribe in Montana. Nearly entirely fabricated, it was captivating and became an international best-seller in 1928, which set him up as a darling of the New York socialite scene and put him in high demand as a lecturer on Native American issues.

In 1930, he was cast as the lead in Paramount Picture's film "The Silent Enemy," which increased his cache in society and landed him a sports-shoe endorsement deal. It also caused his Black ancestry to be discovered, which ended nearly all professional and social opportunities.

"By defying the confines and limitations of racial categories, Long Lance carved his own 'ethnic space' to assert control over his environment and circumstances," wrote Melinda Micco, PhD and professor emerita of ethnic studies at Mills College.

As his carefully crafted persona began to unravel, Long Lance met a tragic end, killed by a gunshot to the head. His death was ruled a suicide.

"When my time comes," he had written long before, "I shall meet it, as I have met things in my life – like an adventure."