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‘Visionary leader, irreplaceable friend’ Governor Emeritus Overton James dies at 90

CONTRIBUTED BY Tony Choate, Media Relations., Media Relations.

Overton James, who served as Governor of the Chickasaw Nation from 1963 to 1987, died Wednesday, September 16, 2015. He was the youngest man to serve as governor of the tribe.

Gov. James, whose Indian name was Itoahtubbi, was born July 21, 1925, in Bromide, Okla., to Rufus (Cub) James and Vinnie May Seely James, both enrolled Chickasaws. His daughter, Ranell; granddaughter, Dedra; niece, Dede; and friend, Dr. Tina who were at his side, said he was an example of strength and courage to the end.

Gov. James was the second of three children. He overcame a disadvantaged childhood to achieve success as a teacher, athlete, sales manager and governor of the Chickasaw Nation. At the beginning of the Great Depression, his mother took the children and moved from Bromide to nearby Wapanucka. His mother worked most days from daybreak to dark, cleaning houses and working odd jobs.

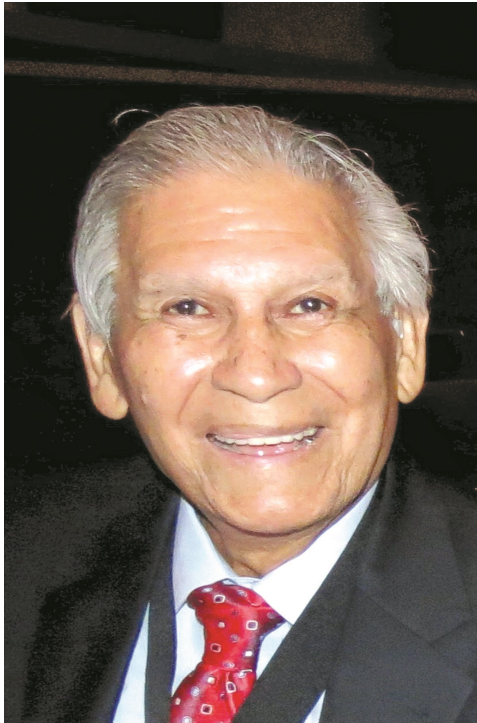
The family lived in a three- room house without electricity or plumbing. They didn’t starve, but often didn’t have enough to eat. Overton and his brother would sometimes hunt small game with their rifles to put meat on the table.

Nevertheless, Gov. James maintained a good sense of humor about his family’s struggles with poverty. During speeches later in life he often joked that his family was “so poor, even the poor people thought we were poor,” a remark that never failed to bring laughter from his audience.

After graduating from Wapanucka High School at age 16, the 6-foot-tall, 115-pound Overton James joined the U.S. Navy. His time in the military enabled him to travel to see more of the world and helped him understand the need to develop new skills to advance up the ranks.

Gov. James served in the U.S. Navy “Seabees” in the Southwest Pacific during World War II. He also served in the U.S. Navy Reserve and the U.S. Army Reserve from 1947-1957. Honorably discharged in 1946, he attended Southeastern State College in Durant, Okla., with funding from the G.I. Bill. He was a professional and semi-pro baseball player while attending Southeastern, where he also earned bachelor’s and master’s of teaching degrees.

In 1947, he married Evelyn June Richardson, who preceded him in death on May 2, 1996.

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A teacher and coach for 10 years, he taught at Ravia, Caddo and Shattuck, Oklahoma. After serving as sales manager for Compton’s Encyclopedia for five years, he embarked on his career with the Oklahoma Department of Education in 1965. In 1977, he resigned his position as State Director of Indian Education to become full-time Governor of the Chickasaw Nation.

Governor Bill Anoatubby served as Lt. Governor for Gov. James, and succeeded him as governor when the latter retired in 1987.

“Overton James served the Chickasaw people during a crucial turning point in our history as a nation,” Gov. Anoatubby said. “Appointed governor by President Kennedy in 1963, Overton James helped lead the Chickasaw people out from under the control of the federal government into a new era of self-governance.”

At the time Gov. James was inaugurated in October 1963, he had no staff, a tiny budget, few tribal assets and a salary of \$3,000 a year.

He served as appointed governor until 1971, when he became the first Governor of the Chickasaw Nation elected by the Chickasaw people since Oklahoma statehood in 1907.

When he retired in 1987, the Nation had approximately 250 employees, expenditures of almost \$11 million, nationally recognized stature, and great potential for continued growth.

“As the first elected Governor of the Chickasaw Nation since Oklahoma statehood, he helped blaze the trail for the success we enjoy today,” Gov. Anoatubby said. “His leadership was vital to the birth of a political and cultural resurgence which is continuing to transform the Chickasaw Nation.

“While this is a time of sadness for everyone in the Chickasaw Nation as we mourn the loss of a visionary leader and irreplaceable friend, we should also take time to celebrate the great things he accomplished for the Chickasaw people.”

Gov. James was the first Chickasaw inducted into the tribe’s Hall of Fame. He helped lead the Seeley Chapel movement, a grassroots movement of Chickasaw people who fought to regain the right to once again elect their own leaders and reestablish their status as a sovereign nation.

When he first became governor, the tribe had no other employees and offered no programs or services and the post was primarily an honorary position.

By this time, the federal Indian policy of terminating tribes had been shelved by John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier in favor of assisting tribes to better themselves economically. The U.S. Congress agreed and made federal funding available to tribes to develop a variety of programs and services for tribal citizens.

While most of the funding was initially targeted to Indian reservations, Gov. James worked to bring more funding to Chickasaws and other tribes in Oklahoma. As a leader of the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes, he testified before Congressional committees that non-reservation tribes, like the Chickasaws, had just as many needs. In time, with the help of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Carl Albert and other members of the Oklahoma delegation, he helped alleviate the funding imbalance.

As governor, he lobbied the Indian Health Service (IHS) and House Speaker Albert for better health care. In 1968, IHS opened a clinic in Tishomingo, Okla., the first health care facility in the Chickasaw Nation. Gov. James was also instrumental in persuading the federal government to establish an Indian Housing Authority in Oklahoma.

After the passage of the Indian Self-Determination Act in 1975, Gov. James was able to obtain enough funding from the federal government to make substantial changes in the economic and social conditions of the Chickasaws.

He was instrumental in the 1972 purchase of what was then known as the Artesian Motor Lodge in Sulphur. Renamed the Chickasaw Motor Inn, it was the first tribal business owned and operated by the tribe. With appropriate renovations and a new business plan, the motor inn quickly became a profit-making venture for the Chickasaw Nation, earning approximately

\$100,000 for the tribe in its first year of operation.

Gov. Anoatubby said that while revenues varied some through the years, the motor inn proved to be a very good long-term investment.

The Chickasaw Motor Inn also served as tribal headquarters until the official Chickasaw Nation headquarters building in Ada was opened in 1977. When the Chickasaw Nation purchased the Motor Inn there were only 25 tribal employees. Today the Chickasaw Nation employs nearly 14,000 people nationwide.

During Gov. James' tenure as elected governor, the number of tribal employees grew from about 30 to more than 200 and tribal revenues increased from \$750,000 in 1975 to approximately \$11 million when he retired.

During his administration, the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations began work with Cherokee colleagues to pursue legal rights to the Arkansas riverbed - rights which extended to revenues derived from oil and gas development of those lands. That struggle culminated in a U.S. Supreme Court victory in 1970 and - after three more decades of negotiation - a Congressionally approved trust settlement.

The resounding "I bring you greetings from the great unconquered and unconquerable Chickasaw Nation" was Gov. James' standard greeting at speeches and gatherings. The quote became a traditional greeting, continued to the present day.

Gov. James combined service to his own tribe with service to all Indian people.

He served five terms as president of the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes. He also served as president of the Choctaw-Chickasaw Confederation, chairman of the State Indian Affairs Commission and trustee of the National Indian Athletic Hall of Fame.

He was also a member of the Indian Education Subcommittee of the National Council on Indian Opportunity, and a member of the National Congress of American Indians.

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