

Vine Deloria Jr., Champion of Indian Rights, Dies at 72

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

DENVER, Nov. 14 — Vine Deloria Jr., a Standing Rock Sioux who burst into the American consciousness in 1969 with his book "Custer Died for Your Sins" and later amplified his message through 20 more books about the Native American experience, died on Sunday, a family friend said.

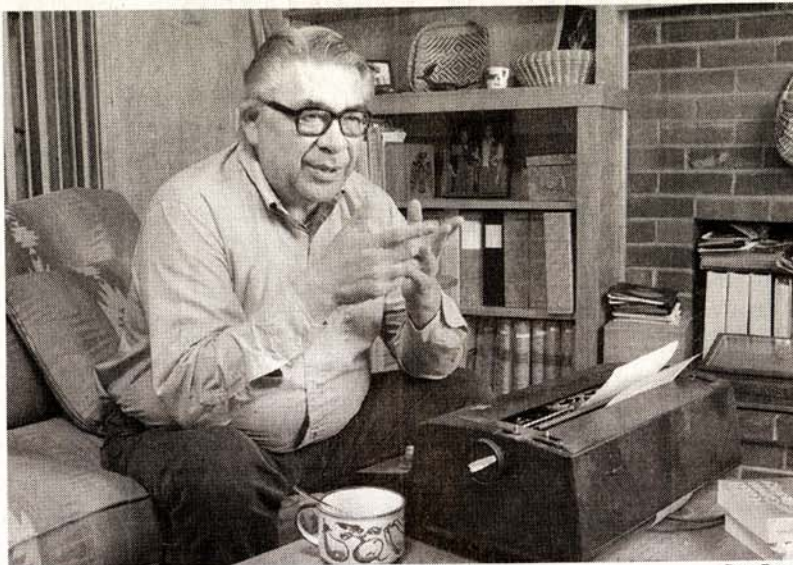
He was 72 and lived in Golden, just west of Denver, and had recently been hospitalized with an aortic aneurysm.

Mr. Deloria, who was trained as both a seminarian and a lawyer, steadfastly worked to demythologize how white Americans thought of American Indians. The myths, he often said — whether as romantic symbols of life in harmony with nature or as political bludgeons in fostering guilt — were both shallow. The truth, he said, was a mix, and only in understanding that mix, he argued, could either side ever fully heal.

And while his Custer book, with its incendiary title, was categorized at the time as an angry young man's anthem, Mr. Deloria's real weapon, critics and admirers said, was his scathing, sardonic humor, which he was able to use on both sides of the Indian-white divide. He once called the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were defeated by a combined force of Sioux and Northern Cheyenne in 1876 in the Montana territory, "a sensitivity-training session."

"We have brought the white man a long way in 500 years," he wrote in an Op-Ed article in *The New York Times* in 1976. "From a childish search for mythical cities of gold and fountains of youth to the simple recognition that lands are essential for human existence."

In "We Talk, You Listen: New



Gary Payne

Vine Deloria Jr., an impassioned writer, at his Colorado home in 1996.

Tribes, *New Turf*" (1970), Mr. Deloria argued that technology and corporate values were destroying American life, and urged a return to the tribal standards of Indian culture as a window to salvation.

In "God is Red" (1973), he took that position of deliverance-through-Indian-ways further, arguing that American Indian spiritual traditions, far from being dated, were in fact more in tune with the needs of the modern world than Christianity, which Mr. Deloria said fostered imperialism and disregard for the planet's ecology.

But Mr. Deloria often said he was writing for Indian audiences most of all, hoping, he said, to instill belief in a culture had been shattered by history, and by deliberate government policy.

"If you mark down the great figures of the American West in recent times, he belongs there because of his role in reshaping Indian country,"

said Charles F. Wilkinson, a professor of law at the University of Colorado and a longtime friend. "I think in the last 100 years, he's been the most important person in Indian affairs, period."

Vine Deloria Jr. was born in the depths of the Great Depression, on March 26, 1933, in one of the poorest parts of the nation, then or now, in the town of Martin, S.D., near the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Indian Reservation, the son of a Indian Episcopalian clergyman. The family name, according to the *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, was derived from the name of a French fur trapper called Des Lauriers, who was taken into the tribe around 1800.

He was educated initially in reservation schools, and after a stint in the Marines in the 1950's, received a degree in general science from Iowa State University.

But religion and spirituality at the

border of Indian and white ways was a running theme in the Deloria family — an ancestor, the encyclopedia entry says, was one of the earliest Sioux converts to Christianity, in the 1860's — and Mr. Deloria eventually followed his father's path and received a master's degree in theology in 1963 from the Lutheran School of Theology in Illinois.

From there, from 1964 to 1967, he worked for the National Conference of American Indians, where even before the book that made him famous, he became a leading spokesman for Indians in Washington as the group's leader. He often testified before Congress at time when the ferment of ideas and social movements in civil rights and ethnic identity were in full boil.

He took a law degree at the University of Colorado in 1970, and later, in 1990, joined its faculty, teaching history until his retirement in 2000.

His first book, "Custer Died For Your Sins," made him a national symbol. The book was not a history, but rather a personal, passionate statement. The *New York Times* reviewer John Leonard said it was Mr. Deloria's emergence as a real person through the book's pages that was the ultimate power of its argument.

"We have fashioned a style for accommodating our guilt, for eating statistics," Mr. Leonard wrote. "We haven't yet been able, and hopefully never will be, to posture successfully in front of a real person."

Mr. Deloria's other books included "Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties" (1974) and "The Metaphysics of Modern Existence" (1979).

Mr. Deloria is survived by his wife Barbara, of Golden; three children Philip, Daniel and Jeanne; a brother; a sister; and seven grandchildren.