



*Benjamin Reifel*

## *Dakota Images*

Benjamin Reifel, the first American Indian to represent South Dakota in Congress, was born 19 September 1906 in a log cabin near Parmelee to Lucy Burning Breast, a Brulé Sioux, and William Reifel, a German-American. After receiving his high-school equivalency certificate at the age of nineteen, Reifel left the Rosebud Indian Reservation to enroll at South Dakota State College, where he became student-body president before graduating with a degree in agricultural economics in 1932. He then served as boys' advisor at the Episcopal Hare Indian School in Mission until becoming a farm extension agent in July of 1933.

In 1935, Reifel became an Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) field agent, educating tribal members about the IRA and assisting them in forming tribal governments. During World War II, he served in Europe as an army lieutenant colonel. He returned to work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1946 as its first district tribal officer for the northern plains and was later appointed superintendent of the Fort Berthold reservation in North Dakota. In 1954, two years after receiving his Ph.D. in public administration from Harvard, he became the first American Indian superintendent of the Pine Ridge reservation and, in 1955, area director of the Aberdeen office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In 1960, South Dakotans elected Reifel, a Republican, to the United States House of Representatives, where he remained for a decade. A persuasive speaker, he served on the House Appropriations Committee, helping to prevent the closure of Ellsworth Air Force Base, bring the Earth Resources Observation System (EROS) center to South Dakota, obtain funding for health and education facilities on state reservations, and establish the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities.

After voluntarily ending his political career in 1970, he served as a consultant to the National Park Service, a member of the National Capital Planning Commission, president of the American Indian National Bank, and interim commissioner of Indian affairs. Reifel, who continually sought to improve the lives of American Indians and to promote intercultural understanding, died on 2 January 1990 in Sioux Falls.

by JOAN ANDERSON

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