

RAYMOND FRANCIS GRAY (1900–1961)

“INDOMITABLE ADVOCATE OF METIS RIGHTS”

No group has contributed more to Montana’s mosaic of ethnic diversity than the Métis. A people of mixed European and Indian blood, their unique heritage has thrived in Montana since 1870. Among their most influential leaders was Raymond Francis Gray, Montana’s first Métis attorney.

From French, Mohawk, Cree, and Ojibwa (Chippewa) roots, Raymond was born in Choteau, Montana, in 1900 to Cecilia Guardipe and James Robert Gray. By the mid-1920s, he was living in Helena, where he found employment as a taxi driver, highway construction subcontractor, smelter worker, and truck driver. In 1927 he married Rosie Armstrong; they would have four children.

During the Depression, Raymond emerged as a statewide Métis leader and was elected president of the Montana Organization of Landless (nonreservation) Indians. For the government’s Federal Writers’ Project he researched and wrote the definitive work, *History of the Landless Cree Indians of Montana* (1941). The plight of the state’s landless Indians so impressed Gray that he determined to obtain a law degree as a means of benefiting nonwhite minorities.

With the assistance and encouragement of some of the most prominent members of Helena’s legal community, a resolute Raymond worked days and read law at night. In 1946 he passed the Montana bar exam and became a member of the Montana Bar Association— the first Métis attorney in the state’s history.

Shortly thereafter Raymond and Rosie moved to Ronan, where he opened a law office on the Flathead Indian Reservation, and Rosie became his secretary/advisor. In 1956 the couple relocated to Missoula, where Raymond developed a thriving practice, primarily assisting nonwhites entangled in the judicial system. Gray established a solid reputation as a perceptive, respected courtroom attorney whose knowledge of Indian law proved indispensable to his many clients.

A strong family man and a lifelong sports fan, Raymond bowled wherever he lived. His selfless contributions to the Montana Salvation Army and his encouragement of

all nonwhites who wished to improve themselves became legendary. Upon his premature death in 1961, a eulogizer noted:

“Lawyers were his professional brothers, but Indians were particularly his people.” The continuing battle of Montana’s landless Indians for official recognition and for a reservation serves as a living monument to Gray’s commitment.

Raymond Francis Gray established precedents for all non-white Montanans and particularly for Montana Métis. Moreover, all Montanans have benefited from his determination, his kindness, his love of the law, and his devotion to Montana’s ethnic groups.

