A History of Wounded Knee, South Dakota

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Wounded Knee (Lakota language: Chankwe Opi) is a small town in Shannon County, South Dakota, United States. The population was 328 in the 2000 census. It is named for the Wounded Knee Creek, a tributary of the White River, which runs through the region.

Wounded Knee Creek rises in the southeastern corner of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation along the state line with Nebraska and flows northwest, past the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre and the towns of Wounded Knee and Manderson. It flows north-northwest across the reservation and joins the White River south of Badlands National Park. The bones and heart of the Sioux chief Crazy Horse were reputedly buried along this creek by his family following his assassination in 1877.

Wounded Knee was the site of two major incidents in the historical conflict between Native Americans and white Americans. The first was the Wounded Knee Massacre, the last major armed conflict between the Lakota Sioux and the United States, subsequently described as a massacre by General Nelson A. Miles in a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The second event, commonly known as the Wounded Knee Incident took place in February 1973 when the town was occupied by the American Indian Movement (AIM). They were protesting the reservation’s president, whom they accused of misuse of funds and of authority. The occupiers controlled the town for 71 days while the U.S. Marshals Service laid siege.

The events at small town Wounded Knee, South Dakota were unfortunately not isolated events, but a picture of what was happening to the Indians throughout the country at the same time. The Lakota people, who have stood most defiantly to the abuses they’ve suffered, have endured every condition imaginable over the last 500 years. The events at Wounded Knee have simply been a part of that struggle.

Wounded Knee Massacre

Prelude

The Sioux controlled the northern Plains, including the Black Hills, throughout most of the nineteenth century. A series of treaties with the U.S. Government were entered into by the Allied Lakota bands at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, in 1851 and 1868. The terms of the treaty of 1868 specified the area of the Great Sioux Reservation to be all of South Dakota west of the Missouri River and additional territory in adjoining states and was to be

"set apart for the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation" of the Lakota. Further, "No white person or persons shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy any portion of the territory, or without the consent of the Indians to pass through the same."
Although whites were to be excluded from the reservation, after the public discovery of gold in the 1870s, the conflict over control of the region sparked the last major Indian War on the Great Plains, the Black Hills War. Yielding to the demands of prospectors, in 1874 the U.S. government dispatched troops into the Black Hills under General George Armstrong Custer in order to establish army posts. During the 1875–1878 gold rush, thousands of miners went to the Black Hills; in 1880, the area was the most densely populated part of Dakota Territory. The Sioux responded to this intrusion militarily.

The government had offered to purchase the land from the Tribe, but considering it sacred, they refused to sell. In response, the government demanded that all Indians who left the reservation area (mainly to hunt buffalo) report to their agents; few complied. The U.S. Army did not keep miners off Sioux hunting grounds; yet, when ordered to take action against bands of Sioux hunting on the range, according to their treaty rights, the Army moved vigorously.

On June 25, 1876, after several indecisive encounters, General Custer found the main encampment of the Lakota and their allies at the Little Bighorn River in eastern Montana. Custer and his men — who were separated from their main body of troops — were all killed by the far more numerous Indians who had the tactical advantage. They were led in the field by Crazy Horse and inspired by Sitting Bull’s earlier vision of victory. This has come to be known as the "Battle of the Little Bighorn."

Outraged, the U.S. took control of the region from the Lakota in violation of the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868). In 1877, the year after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Congress passed legislation that opened the Black Hills to white occupation. Under the terms of the new treaty, the Sioux were forced to cede the Black Hills for a fraction of their value, and the area was opened to the gold miners.

By 1889, the situation on the reservations was getting desperate. In February 1890, the U.S. government unilaterally divided the Great Sioux Reservation into five smaller reservations. This was done to accommodate white homesteaders from the eastern part of the country, even though it broke the terms of the treaty. Once settled on the reduced reservations, tribes were separated into family units on 320-acre plots and forced to farm and raise livestock.

To help support the Sioux during the period of transition, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), was delegated the responsibility of supplementing the Sioux economy with food distributions and hiring white farmers as teachers for the people. The farming plan failed to take into account the difficulty Sioux farmers would have in trying to cultivate crops in the semi-arid region of South Dakota. By the end of the 1890 growing season, a time of intense heat and low rainfall, it was clear that the land was unable to produce substantial agricultural yields. Unfortunately, this was also the time when the government’s patience with supporting the Indians ran out, resulting in rations to the Sioux being cut in half. With the bison virtually eradicated from the plains a few years earlier, the Sioux had few options available to escape starvation.
Ghost Dance

A Paiute mystic by the name of Wovoka gained a reputation as a powerful shaman early in adulthood and was known as a gifted young leader. He often presided over circle dances, while preaching a message of universal love. At about the age of 30, he began to weave together various cultural strains into the Ghost Dance religion. The beliefs were incorporated from those of a number of Native visionaries seeking relief from the hardships that accompanied the spreading white civilization, as well as from his earlier immersion into Christianity.

Wovoka reported a vision he experienced during a solar eclipse on January 1, 1889, in which he had stood before God in Heaven, and had seen many of his ancestors engaged in their favorite pastimes. God showed him a beautiful land filled with wild game, and instructed him to return home to tell his people that they must love each other, cease fighting, and live in peace with the whites. Wovoka was instructed in a set of life rules which would re-unite the people with their deceased family and friends.

He was then given the formula for the proper conduct of the Ghost Dance—a form of circle dance practiced for centuries by many native tribes—and was commanded to bring it back to his people. Wilson preached that if this five-day dance was performed in the proper intervals, the performers would secure their happiness and hasten the reunion of the living and deceased. Wovoka was convinced that if every Indian in the West danced the new dance to “hasten the event,” all evil in the world would be swept away leaving a renewed Earth abundant with food, love, and faith. Quickly accepted by the Nevada Paiute, the new religion was termed “Dance In A Circle.”

The practice swept throughout much of the American West, reportedly prevalent as far east as the Missouri River, north to the Canadian border, west to the Sierra Nevada, and south to northern Texas. Many tribes sent members to investigate the self-proclaimed prophet. Many left as believers and returned to their homelands preaching his message. Some practitioners of the dance saw Wovoka as a new Messiah, and government Indian agents in some areas began to see the movement as a potential threat.

As it spread from its original source, the various tribes synthesized selected aspects of the ritual with their own beliefs, creating changes in both the society that integrated it and the ritual itself. Because the first white contact with the practice came by way of the Sioux, their expression "Spirit Dance" was adopted as a descriptive title for all such practices. This was subsequently translated as "Ghost Dance."

Although Ghost Dancing was a spiritual ceremony, its fervor and the rapid rise of its popularity provoked fear among the federal officials. Afraid the philosophy behind the dancing was a sign of an uprising, many agents outlawed it.

The Dance took on a more militant character among the Sioux who were suffering under the disastrous government policies and broken treaties. They believed that by performing the Ghost Dance, they could take on a "Ghost Shirt" capable of repelling the white man's bullets. Their
ultimate objective was what they believed would result from the Dance’s practice; the disappearance of the white man from their lands.

**Big Foot**

On December 15, 1890, an event occurred that set off a chain reaction ending in the massacre at Wounded Knee. Chief Sitting Bull was killed at his cabin on the Standing Rock Reservation by Indian police who were trying to arrest him on government orders. Sitting Bull was one of the Lakota’s tribal leaders, and after his death, refugees from his tribe fled in fear. They joined Sitting Bull's half brother, Big Foot, at a reservation at Cheyenne River.

Unaware that Big Foot had renounced the Ghost Dance, General Nelson Miles ordered him to move his people to a nearby fort. On December 28, Big Foot, who had been suffering from pneumonia, became seriously ill. His tribe then set off to seek shelter with Chief Red Cloud at the Pine Ridge reservation. Big Foot’s band was intercepted by Major Samuel Whitside and his battalion of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment and were escorted five miles westward to Wounded Knee Creek. There, Colonel James W. Forsyth arrived to take command and ordered his guards to place four Hotchkiss guns in position around the camp. The soldiers numbered around 500—the Indians, 350; all but 120 were women and children.

A rumor circulating among the Lakota during that evening said that all Indians were to be deported to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) which had the reputation for living conditions far worse than any prison. The Lakota became fearful that the rumor was true. The interpreter was not fluent in the peculiar dialect of Hohwoju used by Big Foot's people, and he mistranslated the Indians' speeches making them appear more belligerent than they actually were. Eyewitness accounts also claimed that the soldiers had been drinking and celebrating the capture of Big Foot.

**Battle**

On the morning of December 29, Big Foot, who was by this time extremely sick, sat with his warriors. The soldiers had orders to escort them to the railroad for transport to Omaha, Nebraska, and were ordered to disarm them before proceeding. The Lakota were ordered to surrender their weapons, but only a few were recovered. Tension mounted when a medicine man, Yellow Bird, began to perform the Ghost Dance.

Shooting broke out near the end of the disarmament, and accounts differ regarding who fired first and why. One account states that a scuffle broke out between a soldier trying to disarm a deaf Indian, Black Coyote. He had not heard the order to turn in his gun and assumed he was being charged with theft. Another account reports that the mistaken gestures of the medicine man—throwing dust into the air—were misunderstood as a signal to attack.

Soon volley after volley were being fired into the camp. As the Indians scattered the cannons began to be shot, shredding tipis. Many of the men, women and children ran for cover in a ravine next to the camp only to be cut down in a withering cross fire.
By the end of fighting, which lasted less than an hour, approximately 300 Sioux lay dead, Big Foot among them. It is said by some that around 150 Lakota fled the chaos, of which many likely died from exposure. According to General Nelson Miles, the official reports listed the number killed at 90 warriors and approximately 200 women and children.

In comparison, army casualties numbered 25 dead and 39 wounded. Forsyth was later charged with the killing of innocents but was exonerated.

In a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs from General Nelson A. Miles, dated March 13, 1917, he states:

"The action of the Commanding Officer, in my judgment at the time, and I so reported, was most reprehensible. The disposition of his troops was such that in firing upon the warriors they fired directly towards their own lines and also into the camp of the women and children, and I have regarded the whole affair as most unjustifiable and worthy of the severest condemnation.

In my opinion, the least the Government can do is to make a suitable recompense to the survivors who are still living for the great injustice that was done them and the serious loss of their relatives and property—and I earnestly recommend that this may be favorably considered by the Department and by Congress and a suitable appropriation be made."⁴

**Aftermath**

The military hired civilians to bury the dead Lakota after an intervening snowstorm had abated. Arriving at the battleground, the burial party found the deceased frozen in contorted positions by the freezing weather. They were gathered up and placed in a common grave. It was reported that four infants were found still alive, wrapped in their deceased mothers' shawls. There is some discrepancy as to actual Lakota's deaths, but it is generally accepted as approximately 300, the majority women and children.

Colonel Forsyth was immediately denounced by General Nelson Miles and relieved of command. An exhaustive Army Court of Inquiry convened by Miles criticized Forsyth for his tactical dispositions but otherwise exonerated him of responsibility. The Court of Inquiry, however—while it did include several cases of personal testimony pointing toward misconduct—was considered flawed. It was not conducted as a formal court-martial, and without the legal boundaries of that format, several of the witnesses minimized their comments and statements to protect themselves or peers. Ultimately the Secretary of War concurred and reinstated Forsyth to command of the 7th. Nevertheless, Miles ignored the results of the Court of Inquiry and continued to criticize Forsyth, whom he believed had deliberately disobeyed orders. The concept of Wounded Knee as a deliberate massacre rather than a tragedy caused by poor decisions stems from Miles.

The American public's reaction to the battle was at the time generally favorable. Twenty Medals of Honor were awarded for the action. A decade later when these were reviewed, Miles saw that they were retained. Currently, Native Americans are urgently seeking the recall of what they refer to as "Medals of Dis-Honor."
Historically, the Wounded Knee massacre is generally considered to be the end of the Indian Wars, the collective multi-century series of conflicts between colonial and U.S. forces and American Indian peoples. It was also responsible for the subsequent severe decline in the Ghost Dance movement.

**Wounded Knee Incident, 1973**

The Wounded Knee incident began February 27, 1973 when the town of Wounded Knee was seized by followers of the American Indian Movement (AIM). The occupiers controlled the town for 71 days while the U.S. Marshals Service laid siege.

**American Indian Movement**

The American Indian Movement was created in 1968, rising from the concerns of Native Americans in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt, both Chippewa from Minnesota were founding members, soon joined by Russell Means, an Oglala Sioux. Means became known as an outspoken leader of the organization.

AIM was created in part because of the concern that American Indians did not receive proper representation in political organizations, or the means of proper legal representation. The group originally focused on improving Indian lives in the urban environment.

From the beginning, AIM used dramatic means to bring attention to injustices. The *Trail of Broken Treaties* in 1972 consisted of 900 people traveling from the west coast to Washington, D.C, stopping at reservations along the way. It ended with the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building from November 2nd to the 8th. Negotiations with the government resulted in an agreement that included a pledge to deal with economic, social, and educational grievances of Native Americans.

Incidents in Nebraska and South Dakota in which AIM intervened on behalf of local Native Americans resulted in government buildings being taken over and in one case being burned to the ground. Because of this, the government began to view AIM as a militant group, an urban "Red Power" movement, increasing surveillance of its activities.

The Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge Reservation requested the assistance of AIM in early 1973 as they opposed tribal president Richard Wilson, elected the previous year. Wilson was suspected of mishandling tribal funds, misusing authority, and disregarding rules of the tribal council. The Sioux Tribal Council unsuccessfully filed impeachment proceedings against him in February 1973. Anticipating problems, the U.S. Department of Justice sent 50 U.S. Marshals to the Reservation on February 25th to be available in the case of a civil disturbance.

**Background**

What became known as the Wounded Knee Incident of 1973 erupted for many reasons but was mainly due to the opposition of the reservation’s president, Richard "Dick" Wilson. Opponents of Wilson accused him of:
• "Mishandling tribal funds"
• Abuse of his authority; AIM cites the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights alleging that Wilson’s election had been "permeated with fraud"
• Using "brute force" for political means such as his private army the GOON’s (Guardians of the Oglala Nation) that AIM labeled as Wilson’s "official terrorist 'goon squad'"

His opponents also unsuccessfully attempted to impeach him in 1973. In fact, over 150 civil rights complaints had been issued against the reservation government in the years prior to the incident. AIM claims they chose Wounded Knee because of its historical significance. They considered the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre "a prime example of the treatment of Indians since the European invasion."

OSCRO (the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization) was an organization on the Pine Ridge Reservation that attempted to change the poor civil conditions. A meeting was held on February 26, 1973 "to openly discuss their grievances concerning the tribal government." Another meeting was held the next day, February 27 and AIM was summoned "for some assistance," by OSCRO to produce "results."

Dennis Banks states that it was "the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization which called upon [AIM], and we responded." Between 200 and 300 AIM members entered the town on February 26. An official, reliable count of AIM members entering or occupying the town was never recorded and would have been difficult to achieve, but AIM claims that approximately 300 members of their organization entered the village while the government estimates 200.

**Occupation**

On February 27 the AIM and Oglala Sioux (those who opposed Wilson) seized the town of Wounded Knee; the U.S. military and government began their siege of Wounded Knee the same day. It is disputed whether the government forces cordoned the town before, as AIM claims, or after the takeover. According to former South Dakota Senator James Abourezk,[6] "on 25 February 1973 the U.S. Department of Justice sent out 50 U.S. Marshals to the Pine Ridge Reservation to be available in the case of a civil disturbance." AIM, on the other hand, argues that their organization came to the town for an open meeting and "within hours police had set up roadblocks, cordoned off the area and began arresting people leaving town… the people prepared to defend themselves against the government’s aggressions." Regardless, by the morning of February 28, both sides were firmly entrenched.

Both AIM and government documents show that the two sides traded fire during most of the occupation.

John Sayer, a Wounded Knee chronicler claims that:

"The equipment maintained by the military while in use during the siege included fifteen armored personal carriers, clothing, rifles, grenade launchers, flares, and 133,000 rounds of ammunition, for a total cost, including the use of maintenance personnel from the national guard of five states and pilot and planes for aerial photographs, of over half a million dollars".[7]
The statistics gathered by Record and Hocker largely concur:

"...barricades of paramilitary personnel armed with automatic weapons, snipers, helicopters, armored personnel carriers equipped with .50-caliber machine guns, and more than 130,000 rounds of ammunition".

The precise statistics of U.S. government force at Wounded Knee vary, but all accounts agree that it was certainly a significant military force including "federal marshals, FBI agents, and armored vehicles." One eyewitness and journalist chronicled, "sniper fire from…federal helicopters," "bullets dancing around in the dirt" and "sounds of shooting all over town" [from both sides].

AIM claims in its chronology of the occupation that "the government tried starving out the [occupants]" and that they, the occupiers, smuggled food and medical supplies in past roadblocks "set up by Dick Wilson and tacitly supported by the government."

In the course of the conflict, Frank Clearwater, a Wounded Knee occupier, was shot in the head while asleep on April 17 and died on April 25. Lawrence Lamont, also an occupier, received a fatal gunshot wound on April 26, and U.S. Marshal Lloyd Grimm was paralyzed from the waist down again by a gunshot wound.

Both sides reached an agreement on May 5 to disarm. By May 8 the siege had ended and the town was evacuated after 71 days of occupation; the government then took control of the village.

**Result**

The 71-day occupation, which was always tense and sometimes deadly, ultimately ended in the surrender of the protesters. To an uninvolved observer, this might have seemed like a defeat of the AIM and Oglala efforts. However, what it accomplished was a focused attention throughout the nation on the crippling problems Native Americans faced, not just on Pine Ridge, but across the country.

What began as a gesture of protest quickly escalated into the largest armed conflict on American soil since the Civil War. It is doubtful that the local participants had any idea that the event would have such an impact on the entire nation, many of whom watched the events every evening on the nightly news.

The protestors had issued a public ultimatum with a number of points, one of them being federal hearings on the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. Two years after the occupation, in 1975, the Indian Claims Commission (created in 1946) determined that Congress's 1877 actions (which reversed terms of the 1868 treaty) had been unconstitutional and amounted to an illegal seizure of Indian Lands. It is not known if this investigation was prompted by the occupation, but it is highly likely.
On July 23, 1980, in the case of *United States v. Sioux Nations of Indians*, 448 U.S. 371, the *Supreme Court of the United States* ruled that the *Black Hills* were illegally taken and that remuneration of the initial offering price plus interest — nearly $106 million — be paid.

**Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee**

In 1970 the novelist Dee Brown authored a book titled *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. It is a chronicle of the Native American situation throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, recording the sad stories of their displacement and slaughter.

The book moves from tribe to tribe of Native Americans, and outlines the relations of the tribes to the U.S. federal government during the years 1860-1890. It begins with the *Navajos*, the *Apaches*, and the other tribes of the American Southwest who were displaced as *California* and the surrounding states were settled.

Brown chronicles the changing and sometimes conflicting attitudes both of American authorities such as General Custer and Indian chiefs, particularly *Geronimo*, *Red Cloud*, *Sitting Bull*, and *Crazy Horse*, and their different attempts to save their peoples, by peace, war, or retreat.

The later part of the book focuses primarily on the Sioux and *Cheyenne* tribes of the plains, who were among the last to be moved onto reservations, under perhaps the most violent circumstances. It culminates with the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the murders of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, and the slaughter of Sioux prisoners at Wounded Knee.

*Bury my heart at Wounded Knee* is the final phrase of a twentieth-century poem titled "American Names" by Stephen Vincent Benet. (The poem was not actually about the Indian wars.) The full quotation, which appears at the beginning of Brown's book is

"I shall not be here / I shall rise and pass / Bury my heart at Wounded Knee."

**Notes**

6. ↑ James G. Abourezk was a U.S. Senator at the time of Wounded Knee. He was present at the conflict and even entered the AIM (and Wilson opposition) occupied town.
Abourezk is also a chronicler of the 1973 incident and has conducted hearings under the "authority of U.S. Senate Subcommittee of Indian Affairs"


**Additional Resources for Pine Ridge History and Culture**

