



Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance



Icy air hung over the banded buttes and winter-ravaged grasses. The past summer's drought left stunted vegetation and creeks clogged with sparse clumps of ice. A large band of people approached - mainly women and children, a scattering of elders, some in poor health. Perhaps as many as 350 members of the Minneconjou band of the Lakota were slowly making their way from their home near the Cheyenne River to the north to the relative safety of Pine Ridge agency, the designated land for the Oglala, another Lakota band. After twelve days of difficult, frigid travel, they approached the winding path of Wounded Knee Creek. They were nearly out of food and grossly under-dressed for the December weather. It was December 29, 1890.

A Leader Nearing His End

Chief Bigfoot, a Minneconjou, was leading his band to join Chief Red Cloud, an Oglala. The two bands were closely related and the lines between most of the bands of the Lakota were blurred in South Dakota. Gravely ill with pneumonia and unable to walk, Bigfoot was in his mid to late fifties in 1890. Also known as Spotted Elk, Bigfoot attended the council of tribes at Fort Laramie in 1868 and was described as a diplomat and a friend to the whites. However, as the frenzy of the Ghost Dance religion swept through American Indian camps, Bigfoot's band quickly became participants in this belief that dancing to exhaustion would produce a personal vision for a world without whites. Dancers also wore "Ghost Shirts" decorated with symbols to make them impervious to bullets. Bigfoot's band earned a reputation as a potentially dangerous, violent group due to the efforts of a medicine man called Yellow Bird, a fanatic Ghost Dance devotee. Settlers became frightened and wrote letters to the military, asking for help. Bigfoot's band was targeted for removal to another location. Chief Bigfoot gradually became aware that he was no longer trusted and attempted to negotiate. His efforts failed. On December 17, Bigfoot began moving his band east, then south. He was sick and knew he was dying. His goal was safety for his people.

The Irony of Survival

Ironically, the military detachment involved in the events at Wounded Knee was the Seventh Cavalry, formerly George Armstrong Custer's command that had met their fate at Greasy Grass, also known as the Little Bighorn of Montana. Major Samuel Whitside had a reputation of being reasonably fair and tolerant of Indian people and had been sent out specifically to find Bigfoot, disarm the band, and bring them to Pine Ridge Agency. Whitside had been told, inaccurately, that Bigfoot was "wily" and "very bad." Anxiety ran high with the men of the Seventh in late December, remembering the fate of their comrades in Montana. Scout Little Bat was later quoted as saying, "We are liable to catch it today." Armed with rifles and hotchkiss guns which fired rapid, multiple rounds, the Seventh Cavalry was prepared for a fight. Made up of new recruits, many of the soldiers had just learned how to ride a horse, much less prepare for combat. As the haggard band of Lakota approached the military camp at Wounded Knee, Whitside rode ahead and saw that Bigfoot was gravely ill and acknowledged that he had been misinformed. Bigfoot surrendered to Whitside. A calm surface masked underlying fear and mistrust on both sides.

A Tragedy of Errors

Bigfoot's band was aware that this was the same group of soldiers who had been at Little Bighorn. They had heard that the Seventh Cavalry might be seeking revenge. Most of the soldiers were recently out from the East and familiar only with dime novels of the "treacherous red people." Accounts vary. Most agree that Yellow Bird played a role in the start of the events - it may have been simply a cloud of dust thought to be gunfire; it may have been the firing of a hidden weapon. Regardless, a crack rang out through the camp of soldiers and American Indians. A tragedy ensued that continues to haunt American history.

Differing Perspectives

The writing of any history - and particularly the history of the American Indian - in such a way that its true realities are transmitted without distortion is an almost impossible challenge. Words on a page can hold the elements of history, but not how it felt to be there. The colors, the sounds, the smells - they are all gone. It was not common for American Indian statements to be recorded except by the white world. Additionally, the military perspective is shrouded in accusations and blame between officers. Many denounced the events of Wounded Knee as a criminal act while others supported the awards of medals of honor to surviving soldiers.

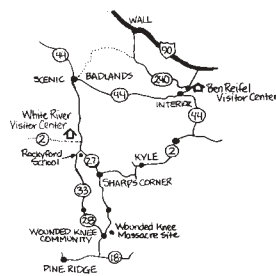
American Indian Perspective: *"I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream."* - Black Elk

Soldier's Perspective: Prior to the events, Colonel Forsyth instructed, *"Disarm the Indians. Take every precaution to prevent their escape. If they choose to fight, destroy them."* As the bullets flew, Forsyth shouted, *"For God's sake, stop shooting them."*

On April 12, 1920, Lt. General Nelson A. Miles (retired) said in his testimony before the Commission on Indian Affairs: *"The action of the officer was more reprehensible . . . and I have regarded the whole affair as most unjustifiable and worthy of the severest condemnation."*

However, the most damning words came from the media. If there is a true villain of Wounded Knee, it is the media who sensationalized the story. Many historians theorize that without the general call for "more Indian blood" in many print forms that there might not have been a massacre at Wounded Knee. Once this blood that had been "hollered for" was shed, the American Indians formerly called "treacherous" and "murderous" were now "innocent victims." The soldiers formerly depicted as heroic defenders of the frontier were now guilty of "slaughter without provocation." Politics also came into play: Both Republican and Democratic papers resurrected the ghost of George Armstrong Custer and joined in promoting the false notion that the Seventh Cavalry had somehow participated to avenge Custer's fall.

Your Journey to Wounded Knee



Wounded Knee Creek still wends its way through badlands and prairie. The winter winds still whips the grasses flat and bring a hunkered-down appearance to everything in its path. And people are still trying to find their way to Wounded Knee.

A meeting with U.S. government and Tribal government officials in the early 1990s resulted in the decision that it was most appropriate and fitting for Wounded Knee to be managed and developed as a place of remembrance by the Lakota people, not by the federal government. The people of Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River Reservations hold the story close to their hearts and always in their memories. Until they decide how they choose to tell the story, the site will remain undeveloped and indistinguishable from its surroundings. As you travel BIA Route 27 toward Wounded Knee, you are making your own way to this place of sadness and loss.

Epilogue

The exact death count of Wounded Knee is not known. At least 200 Minneconjou died, bodies scattered for over a mile from the campsite. They were shot down as they tried to escape. Their bodies were thrown in a mass grave. Additionally, 30 soldiers died, mostly from "friendly fire."

Although over a century has passed, neither the accusations nor the evidence has changed. Wounded Knee has become a confrontation of Good and Evil, rather than a complex misunderstanding and series of errors. We should not try to understand what happened there because, frequently, with understanding comes acceptance. Instead, we should remember and not repeat the biases of the past. *Iglastan* ("It is finished")