

# *A Look Back at Wounded Knee*

FORREST W. SEYMOUR

SOME OF the fascination with Wounded Knee in recent years has arisen, unquestionably, out of the romance of the name itself. Stephen Vincent Benét once wrote a ballad which begins, 'I have fallen in love with American names,' the last stanza of which goes

I shall not rest quiet in Montparnasse,  
I shall not lie easy at Winchelsea.  
You may bury my body in Sussex grass,  
You may bury my tongue at Champmédy.  
I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass.  
Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.<sup>1</sup>

The historian Dee Brown wrote a widely publicized book in 1970 about the destruction of the Indian tribes throughout the West, using the last line of this poem as his title, although only a brief final chapter has anything to do with Wounded Knee itself.<sup>2</sup> Probably the popularity of this book contributed to the decision of the American Indian Movement, national activist Indian rights organization, to use this site for a dramatic protest demonstration early in 1973. Wounded Knee is a tiny village in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of South Dakota. The A I M group walked in and seized the village by force of arms, defying the elected reservation officials on the grounds that they were puppets of bureaucrats in the Indian Affairs

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<sup>1</sup>From the poem 'American Names.'

<sup>2</sup>Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the West* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

office at Washington. The town was promptly surrounded by federal marshals and television cameras, and a somewhat ludicrous siege continued for several weeks. The trial of some of the A I M group on federal charges is now in its fourth month.

The Dakota Indian federation originated in the Great Lakes region and the tribes were driven out into the northern Great Plains in the seventeenth century by the Ojibwas, who had obtained French firearms. The Ojibwas called the Dakotas Nadowessi, 'snake-like' or 'hated enemy.' The French fur traders added their own pluralization, Nadowessioux, and then dropped everything but the last syllable.<sup>3</sup> So in those days the Dakotas resented being called Sioux, but the name stuck and they have long since adopted it.

Once in the Great Plains, the western or Teton Dakotas took quickly to the wild horses that were emerging from the Spanish Southwest and learned to be expert horsemen, buffalo hunters, and fighters. Because they had to follow the great buffalo herds for food, clothing and shelter, they became thoroughly nomadic. By the first quarter of the nineteenth century their homeland had become the whole range from the Platte River in Nebraska through Wyoming and Dakota to Montana.

During the 1860s and 1870s, the Dakotas fought a rear-guard action trying to slow down the white man's conquest of this vast region and his destruction of the buffalo herds, but by 1880 they had been subdued and forced into reservations, usually set aside because the land was so arid and useless the whites did not want it.

The Sioux were given all of South Dakota west of the Missouri River by the Treaty of 1868.<sup>4</sup> Then gold was discovered in the Black Hills and 12,000 square miles were taken back by the United States government. In 1889 the government sharply

<sup>3</sup>A good background regarding the Sioux tribes is available in Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians*, South Dakota Historical Collections, II, 1904 (reprinted Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>An excellent summary of the treaties between the United States government and the Western Sioux is provided in Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 40-59.

reduced the Indian lands again, in order to give the railroads and white settlers what they wanted.

There were now about 20,000 Dakotas on these semiarid reservations. The life they knew had gone with the buffalo and their freedom of movement. They were forced to live on doles from the government. The idleness brought physical and moral deterioration and despair. And when the government supplies did not show up because of the indifference of Congress, or because bureaucracy bungled the shipments, or because grafters diverted them to sell elsewhere, then the Indians went hungry. And these things were happening all the time during the 1880s, so it is not surprising that the tribes throughout the West were swept up in a religious movement in 1890 that seemed to promise relief from the white man's domination and abuse. The new religion, which started in Nevada, involved, among other things, a ghost-dance during which participants would fall into a frenzy and visit their deceased relatives and friends, who would return, they were told, on a day of judgment not far off.<sup>5</sup>

This excitement, with its promise of deliverance, thrived among the unhappy Teton Dakotas, and a disturbed government decided that it had to put a stop to this apparent uprising. Military forces were moved into strategic areas and took charge of the Indian agencies. A number of leaders were marked for arrest, among them the famous Sitting Bull, who had traveled the country with 'Buffalo Bill' Cody's Wild West Show. When the Indian police went to arrest him, Sitting Bull was killed in the scuffle.<sup>6</sup> Several other leaders and their bands had fled dramatically to the top of a tiny table, or mesa, in the

<sup>5</sup>The most comprehensive study of this religious movement is James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, 14th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1892-93, Pt. II (Washington, 1896).

<sup>6</sup>Two sharply opposed points of view regarding the character of Sitting Bull are provided by the Indian agent at Standing Rock reservation at this time and by a later pro-Indian writer. See James McLaughlin, *My Friend the Indian* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1910) and Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957).

heart of the South Dakota Bad Lands, defying the troops to get them down.<sup>7</sup>

One unobtrusive little band of Minneconjous, about 300 persons under a chief called Big Foot, was being pinched between army units on the Cheyenne, and decided to cross the Bad Lands to the Pine Ridge agency, 100 miles away, to join their more powerful cousins, the Oglalas. They disappeared in the hinterland for several days, during which Chief Big Foot fell ill with pneumonia. Army scouts came upon the band near Wounded Knee Creek, where Big Foot surrendered rather meekly and was told to camp for the night. The cavalry commander put the chief in an army tent and had him attended by the company surgeon, but Big Foot was bleeding badly from the nose and mouth, and not much could be done for him.<sup>8</sup>

During the night more cavalry troops arrived from Pine Ridge, a dozen miles away, to help with the disarming of the Minneconjous. The next morning the 100 or more adult Indian males were ordered into a council circle, and Colonel James W. Forsyth told them he wanted their guns.

To the Sioux warrior his gun was almost part of his body. For more than a generation it had kept him and his family alive in the struggle for food, or when white or Indian enemies rode down on his village in surprise attacks.

Because very few guns appeared voluntarily, Forsyth ordered a search of the whole camp, which produced complaining among the women in their tepees and got the young warriors doubly angry. But it also produced a small pile of arms. Finally the soldiers began pulling the blankets off individual Indians to get at concealed weapons. In the end, most of the men had given up their guns and all but a half dozen sullen young war-

<sup>7</sup>Probably the best contemporary view of what went on at the Stronghold, as this table was called, is given in James P. Boyd, *Recent Indian Wars* (Philadelphia: Publishers Union, 1891).

<sup>8</sup>A most scholarly treatment of this whole episode is provided in Utley, *Last Days*, although Robinson's much earlier *History of the Dakota* is invaluable.

riors had been searched when one gun went off accidentally.<sup>9</sup>

The surrounding circle of soldiers had of course been told to be ready for anything, and they had their guns levelled directly at the Indian council while most of the search was going on. Many of them were jumpy new recruits. When the gun being jerked from one of the Indians went off into the air, the tense young warriors threw off their blankets and exposed the last half dozen Winchesters.<sup>10</sup> Someone shouted 'Look out! Look out!' Another voice called 'Fire, men, fire!' and the scene exploded in what the Indians later called 'the crash' as a hundred cavalry rifles fired.<sup>11</sup>

In seconds the whole area was an inferno of gunsmoke and dust. The surrounding soldiers, firing toward their center, were cutting down almost as many of their own comrades as Indians. The warriors who survived the first volley—perhaps three or four dozen—seized up any weapons they could reach to defend themselves or struggled hand-to-hand with soldiers trying to reload their Springfields.

In the Indian encampment nearby, some of the women swept up their children and tried to run for the ravine bordering their camp, to get below the level of gunfire. Others just huddled in their tepees. The cavalry officers had posted four Hotchkiss guns, firing explosive shells, atop a nearby hill, and these now unlimbered on everything Indian in sight. In a few minutes the Indian camp was a shambles of bare tepee poles, burning debris, and bodies. Several score of dead women and children were found over a half-mile course in the ravine, where they were shot as they ran.

<sup>9</sup>An illuminating and exhaustive source of information about this whole incident, from both the Indian and white point of view, is the Eli S. Ricker collection of interviews in the Nebraska State Historical Society at Lincoln. Ricker was an editor and county judge in northwest Nebraska who devoted several years in his later life to interviewing soldiers, Indians, cowboys, and others about frontier incidents, and thus accumulated a vast library of verbatim accounts of the Wounded Knee affair from participants while memories were still relatively fresh.

<sup>10</sup>Richard C. Stirk testified that there could not have been more than five or six guns remaining in the possession of the Indians. Tablet No. 8, Ricker Collection.

<sup>11</sup>John Shangreau, Philip Wells, Richard C. Stirk, and Joseph Horn Cloud interviews, Ricker Collection.

In early afternoon when the Hotchkiss guns had wiped out the last pockets of resistance along the ravine, cavalry troops ranged up and down the creek bottom and along the road to Pine Ridge, routing out the hidden and running down many of those who had escaped. Before dark Colonel Forsyth had loaded up his own dead and wounded, and the wounded Indian women and children who could easily be found on the battlefield, and started off down the frozen, rutted road to the agency. It was after midnight when the last of this sorry train reached Pine Ridge. The army had lost a cavalry captain, six non-commissioned officers, and eighteen privates. Thirty-seven soldiers had been wounded. Three of the dead soldiers were found amid the wreckage of the shell-raked tepee village. Of the fifty-one wounded Indians unloaded at the Episcopal mission in Pine Ridge, several died within the next day or two.

Of course the explosion of gunfire and cannon across the cold prairie had been heard plainly at Pine Ridge, and the Indian encampment there was not long in learning what had happened. A whole new rebellion now began. Terrified and angered by what seemed to the Teton Sioux a wanton massacre of their people, the Indian camps around the agency boiled out onto the prairie and raced for safety into the hills and Bad Lands to the north. Now there were some 4,000 Sioux at large again, a quarter of them armed warriors. But, wisely, the overwhelming federal military forces—nearly half of all the infantry and cavalry of the United States Army—simply maintained a tight ring around the Indian ferment until the leaders could be calmed down and coaxed by emissaries of the government into coming back. There was some fighting meanwhile, but on January 15, 1891, two and a half weeks after the Wounded Knee tragedy, the whole company of Dakotas, hungry and exhausted and now hopeless, returned to the agency and symbolically acknowledged that the struggle to deal on equal terms with their white adversary was ended.

The day after Wounded Knee, the winter's first blizzard

came slashing across the prairie and made travel almost impossible. The storm lasted through a second day, and it was not until late afternoon on January 1 that the freight-hauler, Paddy Starr, and a work crew went out with a contract to bury the bodies at the battle site. A detail of soldiers and a large group of Indians searching for relatives went along.<sup>12</sup>

The following morning the workmen dug a long trench on top of the hill where the Hotchkiss guns had stood. Then with wagons they went around the territory gathering up frozen bodies and hauling them to the mass grave. Starr was paid two dollars a body. William Peano, a member of the crew, counted the bodies as they were thrown in. He listed twenty-four old men whom he considered noncombatants, six boys less than eight years old, seven babies still in their cradleboards, seven old women, and 102 able-bodied boys and girls, men and women, from the age of about ten upward. This made 146 corpses.<sup>13</sup> Chief Big Foot and his wife were among them, soldiers having shot both as the fighting began. The bodies were three deep in the long grave when the workmen finally started piling dirt back in. The work crew had stripped the dead of ghost-shirts and other souvenirs.<sup>14</sup>

The affair at Wounded Knee was stupid and unnecessary. It was rooted partly in contempt for the worth and potential of a primitive people, partly in bumbling military organization and management. But it was not at all out of the pattern of our treatment of American Indians over the previous half century.<sup>15</sup>

The vast majority of Indians at Wounded Knee neither intended nor anticipated a fight. In any event, the general slaughter of helpless persons was inexcusable. It is inscribed

<sup>12</sup>Charles A. Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1916), p. 111. Eastman, a full-blooded Santee Sioux, was the agency physician. See also William Peano and Paddy Starr interviews, Ricker Collection.

<sup>13</sup>William Peano interview, Ricker Collection.

<sup>14</sup>Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, pp. 878-79; James B. McGregor, *The Wounded Knee Massacre from the Viewpoint of the Survivors* (Rapid City: Fenwyn Press, 1972), p. 87.

<sup>15</sup>Both Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) and Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* offer major incidents representing these brutal policies.

on the Indian monument at the mass grave, 'Many innocent women and children who knew no wrong died here.' One can hardly argue with that.

There is no nice way to overrun a primitive culture within a handful of years and tear it out by the roots. There was no possible way of allowing the Indians to maintain 'their old way of life,' a fantasy that persists among the naive even today. The old way of life depended upon relatively minute populations on vast ranges of forest and prairie; upon endless roaming herds of buffalo and other game; upon isolation from the diseases and narcotics and corruption inherent in a highly developed civilization. The minute an advanced European stock began to surge westward across this continent, the Indian's way of life was done.

The early, bumbling federal bureaus of Indian affairs did the best they could. They sought ineptly to teach the conquered and segregated tribes something about agriculture for which they were unprepared and for which the land was largely unsuited. When the reservations were broken up and the land given to the Indians individually, it frequently fell into the hands of shrewd whites almost at once.

The education provided to successive generations of Indian youngsters was often of poor quality, as always in the ghettos. The government doles on which the Indian was forced to subsist humiliated and degraded him, increasing his susceptibility to bad habits and inferior performance. There was almost no industry in these areas of the West, and new skills were only haphazardly introduced into the learning process.

And yet the slow processes of integration have continued to work. It is a wonder that there is as high a proportion of bright, self-sacrificing young men and women at work today among their people in these reservations as there is. Most of them have taken their talents and their concern back to their own homeland, after work experience and education elsewhere in the nation or in the armed services.



I was born less than fifteen years after the massacre at Wounded Knee, in a state half of which—an area four and one-half times the size of Massachusetts—had briefly been acknowledged by the United States government as the legal home of the western Sioux or Dakota Indian nation. Yet I do not recall any serious recognition throughout my education in the public schools of South Dakota that these people existed so close by, that their history and ours had recently been fused, that they had numerous unfulfilled rights, or that there were desperate social and economic problems that demanded amelioration for humane reasons if no other. The generation of my youth in this part of the country took for granted the Indian's incarceration on the dry, next-to-worthless land as a natural and acceptable solution. White women in the towns where Indian schools had been established sputtered uneasily about the hazards, and as late as the 1950s there was a celebrated incident of resistance to burial of an Indian veteran of the Korean war in a 'white' cemetery.

Although prejudice persists in the West, great changes have taken place. Integration has moved faster in recent decades, like everything else, because of the mobility of populations, the advent of instant communications, and changed social attitudes. In the main the Sioux now belong to the twentieth century. Testimony to this are the dozens of yellow school buses scurrying around the reservation in early morning, the multitude of bright new farm trucks on the back roads, the single-family housing developments under construction—not to mention the smartly dressed school children and the common television aerials. The prejudices that hamper integration into American life are probably no different than those which handicap other minorities.

Fifty years ago I recall the children running to hide behind their wickiups at the first sound of an intruder. Last fall I had to stop in a narrow, dusty road because some of them were playing shinny and were disinclined to stop until the game was won or lost.

The Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 concluded the last gesture of rebellion by American Indians against the fate which had overtaken them. Eighty years later the A I M militants attempted, by their demonstration there, to revive that rebellion and focus the nation's attention on injustices that still remain. They got the nation's attention for a few weeks. But I suspect we will have to continue to rely on the slow processes of social evolution for any substantial change.

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