

■ Lakota Accounts of the Massacre at Wounded Knee

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Authors: Turning Hawk, Captain Sword, Spotted Horse, and American Horse

Genre: report; memoir

Summary Overview

The massacre at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, which took place on December 29, 1890, is as infamous as it is iconic. The image of United States troops opening fire on a peaceful camp, mostly made up of women and children, is seared into the American conscience. It marked the end of the Sioux Wars, which had dragged on for over twenty years. But in a larger sense, it was also a symbolic end to the armed resistance of American Indian peoples to the forced reservation life. Though the American press lauded it as a victorious battle—revenge for the death of General George Custer at the Little Bighorn—American Indian peoples, not surprisingly, viewed these same events from a very different perspective.

These accounts, some by Lakotas who were actually present at the massacre, were taken down while the memories were still fresh—within forty-five days of the events taking place. They are remarkable not only because of the diversity of backgrounds of the Indian informants, but also because they present a uniformly horrific perspective on the actions of the United States Army.

Defining Moment

Various bands of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Sioux were at war with the United States almost unceasingly from 1862 through 1890. From the Dakota War in Minnesota to the Wounded Knee Massacre, the bands of Sioux fought against the confiscation of their lands by the United States and the changes to their traditional lifeways that went along with it. As semi-nomadic peoples, the Lakotas, Dakotas, and Nakotas had well-established annual circuits that followed the buffalo herds across the Northern Plains. By the time of Wounded Knee, most of that lifestyle was gone. The Lakotas had been forced to sign the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868), confining them to the Great Sioux Reservation, which was later broken up in the Black Hills gold rush. Further, Hunkpapa Lakota spiritual leader Sitting Bull had ended his sojourn into Canada in 1881 and settled on the Standing Rock Agency in 1883.

However, the arrival in the fall of 1890 of the Ghost Dance, an intertribal religious movement that promised an end to the Native peoples' troubles, reignited

the fears of white Indian agents, such as James McLaughlin, that another uprising was imminent. Sitting Bull's approval of the Ghost Dance led to his death on December 15, 1890, at the hands of tribal police. Upon Sitting Bull's death, about 350 Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakotas, of whom some 230 were women and children, left the reservation under the leadership of Spotted Elk (aka Big Foot); eventually they were forced by the US Seventh Cavalry to surrender and make camp on Wounded Knee Creek in southwestern South Dakota. On the morning of December 29, soldiers rode into the camp to disarm the men. Stories vary about what happened to spark the massacre (in the testimony, Spotted Horse claims that the Lakotas fired first, killing one of the soldiers), but, in any event, the surrounding army opened fire with their rifles and four artillery pieces. Estimates of the Lakota losses range from 128 to nearly 300 total dead, most of them women, children, and infants. Twenty-five to thirty-five of the roughly five hundred soldiers present were killed.

The Wounded Knee Massacre is considered a turning point in the history of the relationship between American Indians and the US government. It marked the end of armed resistance by the Sioux and is thought of as a symbolic end to most armed resistance by American Indian peoples across the nation. Reservation life, the breakup of tribal lands into individual parcels (with the larger portion of remaining land sold to white settlers), and the forced assimilation of Indian peoples were to be the fate of most tribal nations.

The testimony of Turning Hawk, Captain Sword, Spotted Horse, and American Horse stands as a rebuttal to the US interpretation of the events of the “battle.” Though not all of them agreed with Big Foot’s exodus from the reservation, they are all clear on the brutality of what occurred, as old men, adolescents, women, and children were all killed, seemingly indiscriminately.

Author Biography

In the aftermath of the Wounded Knee Massacre, four Lakotas—Turning Hawk, Captain Sword, Spotted Horse, and American Horse—traveled to Washington, DC, in order to testify to the events for the commissioner of Indian Affairs. Of the four who testified, American Horse was the best known, as he had been an Oglala Lakota leader for some years. He had worked as a scout for the United States Army and had opposed the resistance to Anglo-American expansionism. He favored peace with the United States at any cost and assimilation to Anglo-American culture through Indian education at boarding schools, like Captain Richard Henry Pratt’s Carlisle Indian Industrial School. It is clear in the testimony that, although none of the four Lakotas was in favor of the armed resistance advocated by leaders like Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, they were all appalled by the carnage at Wounded Knee.



Historical Document

Lakota Accounts of the Massacre at Wounded Knee

TURNING HAWK, Pine Ridge (Mr. Cook, interpreter).

Mr. Commissioner, my purpose to-day is to tell you what I know of the condition of affairs at the agency where I live. A certain falsehood came to our agency from the west which had the effect of a fire upon the Indians, and when this certain fire came upon our people those who had farsightedness and could see into the matter made up their minds to stand up against it and fight it. The reason we took this hostile attitude to this fire was because we believed that you yourself would not be in favor of this particular mischief-making thing; but just as we expected, the people in authority did not like this thing and we were quietly told that we must give up or have nothing to do with this certain movement. Though this is the advice from our good friends in the east, there were, of course, many silly young men who were longing to become identified with the movement, although they knew that there was nothing absolutely bad, nor did they know there was anything absolutely good, in connection with the movement.

In the course of time we heard that the soldiers were moving toward the scene of trouble. After awhile some of the soldiers finally reached our place and we heard that a number of them also reached our friends at Rosebud. Of course, when a large body of soldiers is moving toward a certain direction they inspire a more or less amount of awe, and it is natural that the women and children who see this large moving mass are made afraid of it and be put in a condition to make them run away. At first we thought the Pine Ridge and Rosebud were the only two agencies where soldiers were sent, but finally we heard that the other agencies fared likewise. We heard and saw that about half our friends at Rosebud agency, from fear at seeing the soldiers, began the move of running away from their agency toward ours (Pine Ridge), and when they had gotten inside of our reservation they there learned that right ahead of them at our agency was another large crowd of soldiers, and while the soldiers were there, there was constantly a great deal of false rumor flying back and forth. The special rumor I have in mind is the threat that the soldiers had come there to disarm the Indians entirely and to take away all their horses from them. That was the oft-repeated story.

So constantly repeated was this story that our friends from Rosebud, instead of going to Pine Ridge, the place of their destination, veered off and went to some other direction toward the "Bad Lands." We did not know definitely how many, but understood there were 300 lodges of them, about 1,700 peo-

ple. Eagle Pipe, Turning Bear, High Hawk, Short Bull, Lance, No Flesh, Pine Bird, Crow Dog, Two Strike, and White Horse were the leaders.

Well, the people after veering off in this way, many of them who believe in peace and order at our agency, were very anxious that some influence should be brought upon these people. In addition to our love of peace we remembered that many of these people were related to us by blood. So we sent out peace commissioners to the people who were thus running away from their agency.

I understood at the time that they were simply going away from fear because of so many soldiers. So constant was the word of these good men from Pine Ridge agency that finally they succeeded in getting away half of the party from Rosebud, from the place where they took refuge, and finally were brought to the agency at Pine Ridge. Young-Man-Afraid-of-his-Horses, Little Wound, Fast Thunder, Louis Shangreau, John Grass, Jack Red Cloud, and myself were some of these peace-makers.

The remnant of the party from Rosebud not taken to the agency finally reached the wilds of the Bad Lands. Seeing that we had succeeded so well, once more we sent to the same party in the Bad Lands and succeeded in bringing these very Indians out of the depths of the Bad Lands and were being brought toward the agency. When we were about a day's journey from our agency we heard that a certain party of Indians (Big Foot's band) from the Cheyenne River agency was coming toward Pine Ridge in flight.

CAPTAIN SWORD.

Those who actually went off of the Cheyenne River agency probably number 303, and there were a few from the Standing Rock reserve with them, but as to their number I do not know. There were a number of Ogalallas, old men and several school boys, coming back with that very same party, and one of the very seriously wounded boys was a member of the Ogalalla boarding school at Pine Ridge agency. He was not on the warpath, but was simply returning home to his agency and to his school after a summer visit to relatives on the Cheyenne river.

TURNING HAWK.

When we heard that these people were coming toward our agency we also heard this. These people were coming toward Pine Ridge agency, and when they were almost on the agency they were met by the soldiers and surrounded and finally taken to the Wounded Knee creek, and there at a given time their guns were demanded. When they had delivered them up, the men were separated from their families, from the tipis, and taken to a certain spot. When the guns were thus taken and the men thus separated, there was a crazy man, a

young man of very bad influence and in fact a nobody, among that bunch of Indians fired his gun, and of course the firing of a gun must have been the breaking of a military rule of some sort, because immediately the soldiers returned fire and indiscriminate killing followed.

SPOTTED HORSE.

This man shot an officer in the army; the first shot killed this officer. I was a voluntary scout at that encounter and I saw exactly what was done, and that was what I noticed; that the first shot killed an officer. As soon as this shot was fired the Indians immediately began drawing their knives, and they were exhorted from all sides to desist, but this was not obeyed. Consequently the firing began immediately on the part of the soldiers.

TURNING HAWK.

All the men who were in a bunch were killed right there, and those who escaped that first fire got into the ravine, and as they went along up the ravine for a long distance they were pursued on both sides by the soldiers and shot down, as the dead bodies showed afterwards. The women were standing off at a different place from where the men were stationed, and when the firing began, those of the men who escaped the first onslaught went in one direction up the ravine, and then the women, who were bunched together at another place, went entirely in a different direction through an open field, and the women fared the same fate as the men who went up the deep ravine.

AMERICAN HORSE.

The men were separated, as has already been said, from the women, and they were surrounded by the soldiers. Then came next the village of the Indians and that was entirely surrounded by the soldiers also. When the firing began, of course the people who were standing immediately around the young man who fired the first shot were killed right together, and then they turned their guns, Hotchkiss guns, etc., upon the women who were in the lodges standing there under a flag of truce, and of course as soon as they were fired upon they fled, the men fleeing in one direction and the women running in two different directions. So that there were three general directions in which they took flight.

There was a woman with an infant in her arms who was killed as she almost touched the flag of truce, and the women and children of course were strewn all along the circular village until they were dispatched. Right near the flag of truce a mother was shot down with her infant; the child not knowing that its mother was dead was still nursing, and that especially was a very sad sight. The women as they were fleeing with their babes were killed together, shot right through, and the women who were very heavy with child were also

killed. All the Indians fled in these three directions, and after most all of them had been killed a cry was made that all those who were not killed wounded should come forth and they would be safe. Little boys who were not wounded came out of their places of refuge, and as soon as they came in sight a number of soldiers surrounded them and butchered them there.

Of course we all feel very sad about this affair. I stood very loyal to the government all through those troublesome days, and believing so much in the government and being so loyal to it, my disappointment was very strong, and I have come to Washington with a very great blame on my heart. Of course it would have been all right if only the men were killed; we would feel almost grateful for it. But the fact of the killing of the women, and more especially the killing of the young boys and girls who are to go to make up the future strength of the Indian people, is the saddest part of the whole affair and we feel it very sorely.

I was not there at the time before the burial of the bodies, but I did go there with some of the police and the Indian doctor and a great many of the people, men from the agency, and we went through the battlefield and saw where the bodies were from the track of the blood.

TURNING HAWK.

I had just reached the point where I said that the women were killed. We heard, besides the killing of the men, of the onslaught also made upon the women and children, and they were treated as roughly and indiscriminately as the men and boys were.

Of course this affair brought a great deal of distress upon all the people, but especially upon the minds of those who stood loyal to the government and who did all that they were able to do in the matter of bringing about peace. They especially have suffered much distress and are very much hurt at heart. These peace-makers continued on in their good work, but there were a great many fickle young men who were ready to be moved by the change in the events there, and consequently, in spite of the great fire that was brought upon all, they were ready to assume any hostile attitude. These young men got themselves in readiness and went in the direction of the scene of battle so they might be of service there. They got there and finally exchanged shots with the soldiers. This party of young men was made up from Rosebud, Ogalalla (Pine Ridge), and members of any other agencies that happened to be there at the time. While this was going on in the neighborhood of Wounded Knee—the Indians and soldiers exchanging shots—the agency, our home, was also fired into by the Indians. Matters went on in this strain until the evening came on, and then the Indians went off down by White Clay creek. When the agency was fired upon by the Indians from the hillside, of

course the shots were returned by the Indian police who were guarding the agency buildings.

Although fighting seemed to have been in the air, yet those who believed in peace were still constant at their work. Young-Man-Afraid-of-his-Horses, who had been on a visit to some other agency in the north or northwest, returned, and immediately went out to the people living about White Clay creek, on the border of the Bad Lands, and brought his people out. He succeeded in obtaining the consent of the people to come out of their place of refuge and return to the agency. Thus the remaining portion of the Indians who started from Rosebud were brought back into the agency. Mr. Commissioner, during the days of the great whirlwind out there, those good men tried to hold up a counteracting power, and that was "Peace." We have now come to realize that peace has prevailed and won the day. While we were engaged in bringing about peace our property was left behind, of course, and most of us have lost everything, even down to the matter of guns with which to kill ducks, rabbits, etc, shotguns, and guns of that order. When Young-Man-Afraid brought the people in and their guns were asked for, both men who were called hostile and men who stood loyal to the government delivered up their guns.



Glossary

agency: Indian reservation

Hotchkiss gun: a large (42 mm) gun or canon

movement: a reference to the Ghost Dance, a religious movement that stirred hopes among Indian peoples and caused worries among white officials

Ogalalla: (or Oglala): one of the subgroups of the Lakota people

Document Analysis

During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, American Indians were divided in how they looked at the future. Some, such as Lakota leaders Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, had favored attempts to engage the US Army in an effort to maintain their traditional semi-nomadic way of life. Others, such as American Horse and, later in his life, Red Cloud, became known as “reservation chiefs,” who believed that resistance to American expansionism was pointless and reservation life and possibly assimilation into American society was the only future. In the aftermath of the Wounded Knee Massacre, the voices of the reservation chiefs were the only ones left to be heard by the government, and it would remain that way for at least until the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. As the commissioner of Indian Affairs gathered testimony on the massacre, it was the pro-assimilation Lakotas who were allowed to speak. But even so, the brutality of the massacre comes through clearly.

Biases are revealed by all of the Lakota witnesses. Turning Hawk describes the Ghost Dance movement that sparked the conflict as a “certain falsehood [that] came... from the west which had the effect of a fire upon the Indians.” The ensuing strife and death of Sitting Bull led Big Foot/Spotted Elk to leave the reservation with a few men and many women and children, eventually ending up camped out on Wounded Knee Creek. When the army came in to disarm the group, Spotted Horse states that it was one of the Lakotas who shot first, sparking the melee. American Horse agrees with him, but quickly points out that what ensued quickly became a massacre, stating, “Then they turned their guns, Hotchkiss guns, etc., upon the women who were in the lodges standing there under a flag of truce.”

Finally, both American Horse and Turning Hawk note that the events of that day had caused many who had been loyal to the US government to question their decision, with some taking up arms against not only the soldiers, but also the reservation officials and the Indian police who protected them. Eventually, the peace chiefs prevailed upon the belligerents, and

calm was eventually restored. This calm, however, was one of resignation by many Lakotas. The decades-long Sioux Wars were over, and most accepted the inevitability of reservation life. The four who testified to the commissioner of Indian Affairs were in favor of peace, but nevertheless were clearly horrified by the massacre and distressed at the loss of their own hunting rifles in its aftermath.

Essential Themes

The fact that conflict between American Indians and the US Army ended in a bloody massacre was not a surprise. Wounded Knee was not an isolated incident. Across Indian Country, from Prophetstown in Indiana to Sand Creek in Colorado to Camp Grant in Arizona, such massacres were all too common. Although groups, such as the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian and Other Dependent Peoples, were calling for a more humane way of forcing assimilation, the response afterward was typical. The commander of the US Army that day, James W. Forsyth, was initially discharged, but later exonerated of any wrongdoing and promoted, and some eighteen soldiers received Congressional Medals of Honor.

Within the Lakota Nation, the massacre brought about a less typical reaction. The ideological disagreement between the war chiefs and the reservation chiefs came to an end, as the reservation chiefs held sway. As Robert M. Utley demonstrates, American Horse himself became quite influential and was closely allied with the well-respected former war chief Red Cloud. In an interesting parallel, it was American Horse who replaced the deceased Sitting Bull as a headliner in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Roger Di Silvestro points out that the aftermath of Wounded Knee led many to farm on the reservation, become soldiers themselves, or attend schools such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, where they would be forced to abandon their religions, languages, and cultures in favor of assimilation into white culture.

Eighty-three years later, the American Indian Movement (AIM) held a protest at the massacre site on the

Pine Ridge Reservation. The reservation government had stood with the US government against the new Red Power movement, represented by AIM. After a seventy-one-day standoff, sporadic gunfire brought bloodshed, and again, Wounded Knee came to symbolize conflict between American Indians and the US government. However, the assimilation era had come to an end, and the move toward civil rights activism and cultural renewal for American Indian tribes was boosted by AIM's protests. Rather than symbolizing the end of resistance, during the 1970s, conflict at Wounded Knee signified the arrival of a new era for American Indians.

—Steven L. Damver, PhD

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