Wounded Knee: Tragedy of the Plains Indians

Wounded Knee was the final incident in the Indian Wars that took place during the two decades following the Civil War. During the brief battle on December 29th, 1890, near Pine Ridge, South Dakota at least 250 Indians and 25 U.S. soldiers died. Although some historians believe the actual number of Indians killed was closer to 300.

The story of Wounded Knee begins with the revival of Native American mysticism. Around 1870, in Nevada, a Paiute Indian named Tavibo preached the Ghost Dance Religion. Tavibo declared he had a vision of Jesus Christ's Second Coming, and he prepared Indians for this event by teaching them to do good works and to engage in a ritual dance. With this dance, he claimed his people would be reunited with their ancestors in the spirit world.

After Tavibo, another Paiute, known as Wovoka, revived the Ghost Dance. He, too, foresaw the coming of the Messiah—Christ’s Second Coming—and urged a special dance. Wovoka’s prophecies foretold of the dawning of a new age, in which whites would vanish, leaving Indians to live in a land of abundance, spiritual renewal and immortal life. Wovoka assured followers of the Ghost Dance that the time was nearing when Indians would reclaim their land, and the buffalo would multiply and once again be plentiful throughout the West.

Wovoka’s Ghost Dance movement spread throughout much of the West, especially among the recently defeated Indians of the Great Plains, including the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Sioux, and Lakota. As the Ghost Religion expanded, some believers created special shirts, decorated with Indian symbols to wear during the ceremony. Many believed that these Ghost Shirts would protect them from the bullets of white men’s guns.

As they learned more and about this new Indian religion about which they actually understood very little, whites became nervous. The U.S. army feared an Indian uprising, and ordered the arrest of Indian leaders.

Pursued by the military, many Sioux tried to flee to a reservation in South Dakota. Ironically, the U.S. forces included units of the 7th Cavalry, George Armstrong Custer’s old regiment that the Sioux had once defeated at the Battle of Little Big Horn. The army captured a band of Sioux Indians and its well-known leader, Big Foot, who ran up a white flag and surrendered because he was suffering from pneumonia. The U.S. cavalry then escorted this Indian party of 120 men and 230 women and children to a camp at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota.

The next morning, December 29th, 1890, the military instructed the Indians to give up their weapons. However, a deaf Indian did not follow the orders, and fired his gun by mistake. The army soldiers opened fire with large guns that could 50 rounds in a minute, and other advanced weapons. The shooting lasted about ten minutes. When the melee finally ended, close to 250 Sioux including Big Foot lay dead, and another 50 were wounded. Army losses came to at least 25 killed and 40 wounded.

The Army took the dead Indians’ bodies from the snow and buried them in mass graves. General Nelson Miles, who commanded military forces in the area, wanted a court martial for James W. Forsyth, the officer in charge of the troops at Wounded Knee. Miles described what happened as a “cruel and unjustifiable massacre.” However, instead, U.S. forces received 22 Congressional Medals of Honor for their actions at Wounded Knee.
While serving as the editor and publisher of the Aberdeen, South Dakota Saturday Pioneer, L. Frank Baum, the author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, [yes, the loveable children’s book that was made into the loveable movie] wrote an editorial following the death of Sitting Bull. “The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent,” he wrote, “and the best safety of the frontier settlers will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians.”

On January 15th, 1891, the 4,000 remaining Ghost dancers finally surrendered to General Miles. Armed Indian resistance in the West had ended.

“Wounded Knee happened yesterday. For Lakota people, Wounded Knee is today. Wounded Knee represents all the frustrations of those years and years and years on the reservation. Even though it happened in 1890, it’s fresh in Lakota peoples’ minds and in their hearts. That tragedy, that destruction, that devastating thing that happened to them, it exists today. It exists in our hearts and our minds, the way we think when we see about, when we talk about Indian-White relations, that’s the first thing that comes to mind. We’ll never forget Wounded Knee.”

-- Rick Williams, Lakota Historian

Questions (Answer in ink on a separate sheet of paper.)

1. In your homework 19-5 you read about other incidents and battles in the Indian Wars that took place following the Civil War. Based on your reading for homework 19-5, briefly describe two major events in the Indian Wars that occurred prior to Wounded Knee.

2. Why was the Ghost Dance popular among Native Americans? What did they believe would happen if they engaged in this religious ritual?

3. Who was Wovoka? What did he foresee in his prophecies? How did he contribute to the popularity of the Ghost Dance?

4. What happened at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota on the morning of December 29th, 1890?

5. What were Ghost Shirts?

6. Why is it ironic that the 7th Cavalry, George Armstrong Custer’s old regiment lead the final massacre that ended Indian dominance on the Great Plains? **HINT:** Think back to what you read about Custer’s Last Stand in HW 19-5.

7. L. Frank Baum wrote The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. You may not have read the book, but I am sure you have seen the movie version. Think of the movie. Think of how kind and sweet it is. Now look at his full quote above. What is your response to Mr. Baum’s quote?

8. Read the final quote from historian Rick Williams who is a Lakota Indian, himself. Why do you think Wounded Knee causes him to feel such raw and powerful emotions over 100 years after the actual massacre? Why do you think he says that Wounded Knee “exists today”? What does that mean?