NINETEEN

Wounded Knee

There was no hope on earth, and God seemed to have forgotten us. Some said they saw the Son of God; others did not see Him. If He had come, He would do some great things as He had done before. We doubted it because we had seen neither Him nor His works. The people did not know; they did not care. They snatched at the hope. They screamed like crazy men to Him for mercy. They caught at the promise they heard He had made.
The white men were frightened and called for soldiers. We had begged for life, and the white men thought we wanted theirs. We heard that soldiers were coming. We did not fear. We hoped that we could tell them our troubles and get help. A white man said the soldiers meant to kill us. We did not believe it, but some were frightened and ran away to the Badlands.

—Red Cloud

Had it not been for the sustaining force of the Ghost Dance religion, the Sioux in their grief and anger over the assassination of Sitting Bull might have risen up against the guns of the soldiers. So prevalent was their belief that the white men would soon disappear and that with the next greening of the grass their dead relatives and friends would return, they made no retaliations. By the hundreds, however, the leaderless Hunkpapas fled from Standing Rock, seeking refuge in one of the Ghost Dance camps or with the last of the great chiefs, Red Cloud, at Pine Ridge. In the Moon When the Deer Shed Their Horns (December 17) about a hundred of these fleeing Hunkpapas reached Big Foot’s Minneconjou camp near Cherry Creek. That same day the War Department issued orders for the arrest and imprisonment of Big Foot. He was on the list of “fomenters of disturbances.”

As soon as Big Foot learned that Sitting Bull had been killed he started his people toward Pine Ridge, hoping that Red Cloud could protect them from the soldiers. En route, he fell ill of pneumonia, and when hemorrhaging began, he had to travel in a wagon. On December 28, as they neared Porcupine Creek, the Minneconjous sighted four troops of cavalry approaching. Big Foot immediately ordered a white flag run up over his wagon. About two o’clock in the afternoon he raised up from his blankets to
greet Major Samuel Whitside, Seventh U.S. Cavalry. Big Foot's blankets were stained with blood from his lungs, and as he talked in a hoarse whisper with Whitside, red drops fell from his nose and froze in the bitter cold.

Whitside told Big Foot that he had orders to take him to a cavalry camp on Wounded Knee Creek. The Minneconjou chief replied that he was going in that direction; he was taking his people to Pine Ridge for safety.

Turning to his half-breed scout, John Shangreun, Major Whitside ordered him to begin disarming Big Foot's band.

"Look here, Major," Shangreun replied, "if you do that, there is liable to be a fight here; and if there is, you will kill all those women and children and the men will get away from you."

Whitside insisted that his orders were to capture Big Foot's Indians and disarm and disarm and dismount them.

"We better take them to camp and then take their horses from them and their guns," Shangreun declared.

"All right," Whitside agreed. "You tell Big Foot to move down to camp at Wounded Knee."

The major glanced at the ailing chief, and then gave an order for his Army ambulance to be brought forward. The ambulance would be warmer and would give Big Foot an easier ride than the jolting springless wagon. After the chief was transferred to the ambulance, Whitside formed a column for the march to Wounded Knee Creek. Two troops of cavalry took the lead, the ambulance and wagons following, the Indians herded into a compact group behind them, with the other two cavalry troops and a battery of two Howitzers guns bringing up the rear.

Twilight was falling when the column crawled over the last rise in the land and began descending the slope toward Charlkpe Opi Wakpala, the creek called Wounded Knee. The wintry dusk and the tiny crystals of ice dancing in the dying light added a supernatural quality to the somber landscape. Somewhere along this frozen stream the heart of Crazy Horse lay in a secret place, and the Ghost Dancers believed that his disembodied spirit was waiting impatiently for the new earth that would surely come with the first green grass of spring.

At the cavalry tent camp on Wounded Knee Creek, the Indians were halted and carefully counted. There were 120 men and 250 women and children. Because of the gathering darkness, Major Whitside decided to wait until morning before disarming his prisoners. He assigned them a camping area immediately to the south of the military camp, issued them rations, and as there was a shortage of tepee covers he furnished them with several tents. Whitside ordered a stove placed in Big Foot's tent and sent a regimental surgeon to administer to the sick chief. To make certain that none of his prisoners escaped, the major stationed two troops of
From

Where White Men Fear to Tread

Rusll Means with Marvin J. Wolf

IN EARLY FEBRUARY 1972, eighty U.S. marshals of the parapolicital Special Operations Group, armed with automatic weapons and backed by armored personnel carriers and helicopters, surrounded the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) agency in Pine Ridge and arrested all ninety-three people approved by [BIA] president Dick Wilson could enter. Sevrr Young Bear, Edgar Bear Runner, Pedro Bissonnette, Vem Long, and I met with the marshal in charge, Wayne Colburn. We explained that we were representing a citizens' organization, and that I was from AIM [American Indian Movement] as an arbitrator who had been asked to intercede on AIM's behalf. Colburn said his mission was to protect the BIA from AIM or from any assault, since there were a "lot of important records" inside that the BIA didn't want destroyed, as others had been in Washington. We explained that his men were intimidating people who had important personal business to conduct in the agency, but Colburn didn't want to hear it. He said, "If you guys try to get tough, we'll just shut you down. We'll take care of you."

While we were seeking justice from the white man's law, Gladys Bissonnette, Ellen Moves Camp, Agnes Lament, and many other upstanding Pine Ridge women demonstrated outside the BIA building. They demanded that Wilson be impeached and that the marshals, who had no jurisdiction on Pine Ridge, leave at once. The women were ignored. Once again, all the gates of officialdom were slammed in our faces.

The next day Wilson, the supreme Ogilva authority on the reservation, was not there in the traditional community. Most of those people boycotted all BIA-sponsored events. They understood that whoever engineered the most violence in the extended family in the reservation's eight electoral districts would win the election and the title, but the support of the white man only. To the traditional, the real power on Pine Ridge—the supreme spiritual leaders and therefore the moral authori-
ties—lay with our eight traditional chiefs and holy men, all born in the last century. They embodied our culture and our aspiration to sovereignty. Frenk Foox Crow, Charlie Red Cloud, Pete Catches, Matthew King, Wes.sel Bear, and the others were the legitimate heirs to leadership of the only nation that had ever forced the United States to beg for peace—the Lakota under Red Cloud's leadership.

For the first time in living memory, seven of those elderly leaders—the other was too ill to travel—gathered at a log-cabin retreat on the northwest shore of Pine Ridge Village, to hear the complaints of their people. I spent two days and two nights at Calico listening to the litany of horror: Women and girls had been raped by guards, men pried, whole families beaten by Wilson's police, money and valuables exorted at gunpoint, and homes torched by night raiders. Tribal officials had ignored all official complaints. I went back to Rapid City and reported to everyone at the Mother Bear Calico Center, what I had seen and heard on Pine Ridge. We had a meeting of all members in the basement of that halfway house. Then the leaders held a second meeting. After hours of discussion, we couldn't come to any satisfactory agreement. Most of the AIM people at Mother Butler had been away from home since October and wanted to return to their homes. Finally, Dennis and three or four catechists of people who were heading to Anoka and then to Oklahoma agreed to attend another meeting in Calico before making up their minds.

On the afternoon of February 27, twenty-one AIM members, including some of the most capable in our organization, drove down to Calico in six cars. We joined about thirty thousand Ogilva Lakota, mostly older women, who were packed into the meeting hall. One person after another got up to give testimony about the loss of civil rights under Wilson's dictatorship. After hours of that, the chief went downstairs to deliberate. When they returned, they had agreed that something had to be done quickly, but had decided what it should be. They asked to talk to AIM members in private.

We all went across the highway to Holy Rosary Catholic Church. More than 160 churches were on the Pine Ridge Reservation, but that parish owned eighteen square miles of our land, more than any of the others. The pastor, Father Paul Svennset, perhaps afraid that Wilson's mostly Christian gone wouldn't like it, refused our request to help feed the people gathered in the community center. He did, however, let us meet in the church basement.

At one end of the room sat our seven chiefs, men of immense dignity who had earned the respect of all traditional Ogilva. The others in the basement were Gladys Bissonnette, Pedro Bissonnette—a nephew by marriage—Ellen Moves Camp, Sevrr Young Bear, Edgar Bear Runner, Vem Long, Dennis Banks, and me. The two women spoke first. It was up to them to lead our nation and to protect the people. They went down the list of responsibilities which tradition reserved for our leaders. They asked, "Where are our men today? Where are our defenders? Why is it most women and older men who are left fighting? When will decisions be made?" Gladys and Ellen spoke movingly about how the Lakota used to be—proud and democratic. This people's will was always first. Then each of the men spoke, including me. Dennis had the last word. We all agreed. Things could not continue as they were. If we didn't stand up now for our treaty, we would never be able to do so. Our people were ready to die, if necessary, to end the abuse.

By then we all knew that the BIA's two-story red-brick building had been fortified with sandbagged bunkers and .50-caliber machine guns that could spew more than six bullets a second, each weighing more than half a pound. Bullets a body more than a mile away with enough velocity to tear off an arm, turn a torso into a mass of red jelly, or literally explode a head. That building, the seat of the BIA's power on Pine Ridge, represented Wilson's oppression. He couldn't have lasted an hour without BIA backing. We all thought the chiefs would ask us to demonstrate in front of the BIA building, and we were ready to do it—even though we knew the whites would be ready for us and would have liked nothing better than a chance to mow us down.

In my mind's eye, I still see the chiefs sitting in that basement. Their clothing was old and worn, their faces lined with a lifetime of struggle—but their eyes burned bright with righteous wisdom. Finally, Grandpa Foo's Crow, speaking for all of us, said, "Go to Wounded Knee. There, you will be protected." No one had to ask what he meant. It was suicidal to go to the BIA building. Wounded Knee would always remain the flaming symbol of the white man's murderous treachery and of our nation's stje grief. At Wounded Knee, on ground consecrated with the blood of our ancestors, we would make our stand. At Wounded Knee, as nowhere else, the spirits of Big Foot and his mar"
Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee
cavalry as sentinels around the Sioux tepees, and then posted his two Hotchkiss guns on top of a rise overlooking the camp. The barrels of these rifled guns, which could hurl explosive charges for more than two miles, were positioned to rake the length of the Indian lodges.
Later in the darkness of that December night the remainder of the Seventh Regiment marched in from the east and quietly surrounded north of Major Whitside's troops. Colonel James W. Forsyth, commanding Custer's former regiment, now took charge of operations. He informed Whitside that he had received orders to take Big Foot's band to the Union Pacific Railroad for shipment to a military prison in Omaha.
After placing two more Hotchkiss guns on the slope beside the others, Forsyth and his officers settled down for the evening with a keg of whiskey to celebrate the capture of Big Foot.
The chief lay in his tent, too ill to sleep, barely able to breathe. Even with their protective Ghost Shirts and their belief in the prophecies of the new Messiah, his people were fearful of the pony soldiers camping all around them. Fourteen years before, on the Little Bighorn, some of these warriors had helped defeat some of these soldier chiefs—Moylan, Varman, Wallace, Godfrey, Edgarby—and the Indians wondered if revenge could still be in their hearts.
"The following morning there was a bugle call," said Wasumaza, one of Big Foot's warriors who years afterward was to change his name to Dewey Beard. "Then

---

I saw the soldiers mounting their horses and surrounding us. It was announced that all men should come to the center for a talk and that after the talk they were to move on to Pine Ridge agency. Big Foot was brought out of his tepee and sat in front of his tent and the older men were gathered around him and sitting right near him in the center."

After issuing hardtack for breakfast rations, Colonel Forsyth informed the Indians that they were now to be disarmed. "They called for guns and arms," White Lance said, "so all of us gave the guns and they were stacked up in the center." The soldier chiefs were not satisfied with the number of weapons surrendered and so they sent details of troopers to search the tepees. "They would go right into the tents and come out with bundles and tear them open," Dog Chief said. "They brought our axes, knives, and tent stakes and piled them near the guns." Still not satisfied, the soldier chiefs ordered the warriors to remove their blankets and submit to searches for weapons. The Indians' faces showed their anger, but only the medicine man, Yellow Bird, made any overt protest. He danced a few Ghost Dance steps, and chanted one of the holy songs, assuring the warriors that the soldiers' bullets could not penetrate their sacred garments. "The bullets will not go toward you," he chanted in Sioux. "The prairie is large and the bullets will not go toward you."

The troopers found only two rifles, one of them a new Winchester belonging to a young Minnesotan named Black Coyote. Black Coyote raised the Winchester above his head, shouting that he paid much money for the rifle and that it belonged to him. Some years afterward Dewey Beard recalled that Black Coyote was deaf. "If they had left him alone he was going to put his gun down where he should. They grabbed him and spun him in the east direction. He was still unconcerned even then. He hadn't his gun pointed at anyone. His intention was to put that gun down. They came on and grabbed the gun that he was going to put down. Right after they spun him around there was the report of a gun, was quite loud. I couldn't say that anybody was shot, but following that was a crash."
“It sounded much like the sound of tearing canvas, that was the crash,” Rough Feather said. Afraid-of-the-Enemy described it as a “lightning crash.”

Turning Hawk said that Black Coyote “was a crazy man, a young man of very bad influence and in fact a nobody.” He said that Black Coyote fired his gun and that “immediately the soldiers returned fire and indiscriminate killing followed.”

In the first seconds of violence, the firing of carbines was deafening, filling the air with powder smoke. Among the dying who lay sprawled on the frozen ground was Big Foot. Then there was a brief lull in the battle of arms, with small groups of Indians and soldiers grappling at close quarters, using knives, clubs, and pistols. As few of the Indians had arms, they soon had to flee, and then the big Hotchkiss guns on the hill opened up on them, firing almost a shell a second, raking the Indian camp, shredding the tepees with flying shrapnel, killing men, women, and children.

“We tried to run,” Louise Wessel Bear said, “but they shot us like we were a buffalo. I know there are some good white people, but the soldiers must be mean to shoot children and women. Indian soldiers would not do that to white children.”

“I was running away from the place and followed those who were running away,” said Hakitaawin, another of the young women. “My grandfather and grandmother and brother were killed as we crossed the ravine, and then I was shot on the right hip clear through and on my right wrist where I did not go any further as I was not able to walk, and after the soldier picked me up where a little girl came to me and crawled into the blanket.”

When the madness ended, Big Foot and more than half of his people were dead or seriously wounded; 155 were known dead, but many of the wounded crawled away to die afterward. One estimate placed the final total of dead at very nearly three hundred of the original 350 men, women, and children. The soldiers lost twenty-five dead and thirty-nine wounded, most of them struck by their own bullets or shrapnel.

After the wounded cavalrymen were started for the agency at Pine Ridge, a detail of soldiers went over the Wounded Knee battlefield, gathering up Indians who were still alive and loading them into wagons. As it was apparent by the end of the day that a blizzard was approaching, the dead Indians were left lying where they had fallen. (After the blizzard, when a burial party returned to Wounded Knee, they found the bodies, including Big Foot’s, frozen into grotesque shapes.)
The wagonloads of wounded Sioux (four men and forty-seven women and children) reached Pine Ridge after dark. Because all available barracks were filled with soldiers, they were left lying in the open wagons in the bitter cold while an inept Army officer searched for shelter. Finally the Episcopal mission was opened, the benches taken out, and hay scattered over the rough floorboards.

It was the fourth day after Christmas in the Year of Our Lord 1890. When the first torn and bleeding bodies were carried into the candlelit church, those who were conscious could see Christmas greenery hanging from the open rafters. Across the chancel front above the pulpit was strung a crudely lettered banner: PEACE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TO MEN.

THE EARTH ONLY ENDURES

The old men say the earth only endures. You spoke truly. You are right.

---

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 gully 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... the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

—Black Elk