

Blood on the snow at Wounded Knee Creek

By **Jim Cornelius**
News Editor

On December 29, 1890, the last, tragic act of the American Indian Wars played out on the frozen prairie of South Dakota, along a creek whose name lives on in infamy: Wounded Knee.

There, 125 years ago next week, some 200 Lakota Sioux men, women and children were gunned down in the snow in a scuffle that turned into a confused firefight, which became a massacre that stained the honor of the United States Army and ripped the heart out of the Lakota nation.



By 1890, the Lakota were a sad remnant of the people who had defied U.S. military might in one last, glorious summer of freedom in 1876. Led by Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Gall, they routed an army column under General George Crook along Rosebud Creek, then slaughtered General George Armstrong Custer and 220 men of his 7th Cavalry at the Greasy Grass, along the Little Big Horn River.

Their moment of triumph was short-lived. Scattered and hunted relentlessly, the bands led by Crazy Horse and others surrendered to the Americans. A year later, Crazy Horse was killed by a bayonet through the kidneys while resisting arrest. Sitting Bull had fled to Canada, where he found refuge for a few years before

he returned to U.S. territory to surrender in 1881. Now, in the hard winter of 1890, Sitting Bull, too, was dead — killed by Lakota police men sent to arrest him for fomenting unrest on the Standing Rock Agency in South Dakota.

Unrest and tension crackled in the cold Dakota air that winter. The Ghost Dance movement, started by a Paiute holy man named Wovoka, had swept the plains, offering desperate people a spiritual reed of hope to cling to. As with many revivalist movements, Wovoka's original vision was for a return to pure, old ways, which would bring about a great cleansing and return the world to its old form, before the coming of the white man had so severely disrupted the native lifeway.

Among the Lakota, the Ghost Dance took on a particularly millenarian, apocalyptic edge. That frightened the white settlers, the military and civilian Indian agents, who feared the Ghost Dance was fomenting militancy and presaged an uprising. A heightened alert and increased police and military presence, in turn frightened the Ghost Dancers.

Former Pine Ridge Agent Valentine McGillicuddy urged that the Ghost Dancers be left alone.

"The coming of the troops has frightened the Indians," he wrote. "If the Seventh-Day Adventists prepare the ascension robes for the Second Coming of the Savior,

the United States Army is not put in motion to prevent them. Why should not the Indians have the same privilege? If the troops remain, trouble is sure to come."

And come it did.



With Sitting Bull dead at the hands of police, members of his Hunkpapa band fled to join a group of Ghost Dancers led by Chief Spotted Elk (sometimes known as Big Foot). The 7th Cavalry intercepted about 350 Lakota at their camp along Wounded Knee Creek, and surrounded them with the intent of disarming them and returning them to assigned areas on the reservation.

The troopers arrayed themselves around the village and deployed several small Hotchkiss Mountain Guns, which fired explosive shells. Col. James W. Forsyth demanded that the Lakota lay down their weapons — and most complied, piling their rifles on blankets on the frozen ground. The atmosphere was rife with tension. The Lakota were frightened and angry, the troops of Custer's old command were keyed up.

It is not clear what exactly transpired to spark the slaughter. Most accounts agree that soldiers attempted to disarm a young warrior named Black Coyote, who refused to give up his rifle. He may have been deaf and did not understand what he was being ordered to

do. A scuffle ensued. At the same time, a Lakota shaman named Yellow Bird had begun chanting and dancing and threw a handful of dust in the air. A signal? No one knows. A shot rang out, possibly an accidental discharge during the scuffle with Black Coyote.

Warriors dived for their rifles. Soldiers opened fire. Indians fired upon soldiers. The firing became general. The Hotchkiss guns opened up.

Lakota began to flee, scattering and running for a ravine where they might find shelter — and a defensible position. It was at that point that what could have been characterized as a fight turned into a massacre. Soldiers shot the wounded, and pursued the fleeing Lakota and gunned them down without consideration of age or sex.

General Nelson Miles, in overall command of the Army in the Dakotas, censured Forsyth for deploying his command in a manner that left them susceptible to friendly fire — 29 soldiers and one Indian scout were killed; probably only a handful by the Lakota — and for completely losing control of his troops. Miles knew it was a massacre, but a court of inquiry would exonerate Forsyth. Twenty of his men would be awarded the Medal of Honor.


The Army's summary of casualties noted that 85 Lakota

warriors were killed or died of wounds, along with 68 "non-combatants," and 47 others, "age and sex unknown."

Charles Eastman, a Lakota doctor who had been educated in the East, trekked to the massacre site three days later, after a blizzard, to reclaim the dead:

"Fully three miles from the scene of the massacre we found the body of a woman completely covered with a blanket of snow, and from this point on we found them scattered along as they had been relentlessly hunted down and slaughtered, while fleeing for their lives. Some of our people discovered relatives or friends among the dead, and there was much wailing and mourning. When we reached the spot where the Indian camp had stood, among the fragments of burned tents and other belongings, we saw frozen bodies lying close together or piled one upon another. It took all my nerve to keep my composure in the face of this spectacle, and of the grief of my Indian companions, nearly everyone of whom was crying aloud or singing his death song."

The searchers found a baby girl who had miraculously survived not only the killing, but three days in deep winter conditions. Named Zinkala Nuni by Lakota survivors, she would be adopted by an Army officer.



Heads or Tails... You Lose

RUSSELL'S BODY SHOP
Loaner Cars
Deductible Assistance
Windshield Replacement
541-549-DENT
332 W. Barclay Dr., Sisters

Gordon's Last Touch
541-549-3008

Cleaning Specialists For...
Carpets • Upholstery
Windows
Snow Removal!

Accepting VISA & MasterCard!

Member of the Better Business Bureau
Serving Central Oregon Since 1980
Bonded & Insured



SISTERS COFFEE

Merry Christmas!
From the Durham Family and Sisters Coffee Company!

541-549-0527 • 273 W. Hood Ave.
Breakfast 6-11 | Lunch 11-2 daily
SistersCoffee.com

Merry Christmas
from our families to yours



P° PONDEROSA HEATING & COOLING
541.549.1605
www.ponderosahating.com

Now in Sisters

Surprisingly affordable

Inspiring fashion for women

faveur
ECLECTIC UNIQUE BOUTIQUE

714 NW Franklin Ave.
Bend OR 97703

150 W Cascade Ave.
Sisters OR 97759

Ring in 2016 with us!

Music, frivolity and fun!

Five-course wine paired dinner by Chef Jenna of the Terrebonne Depot
Music by CinderBlue
7 p.m. to midnight
\$125 per person
Includes gratuity, all paired wines and a champagne toast at midnight
Reservations required
21 and over



FAITH HOPE CHARITY VINEYARDS
541-526-5075
70450 NW Lower Valley Dr.
Terrebonne, Oregon
faithhopeandcharityevents.com