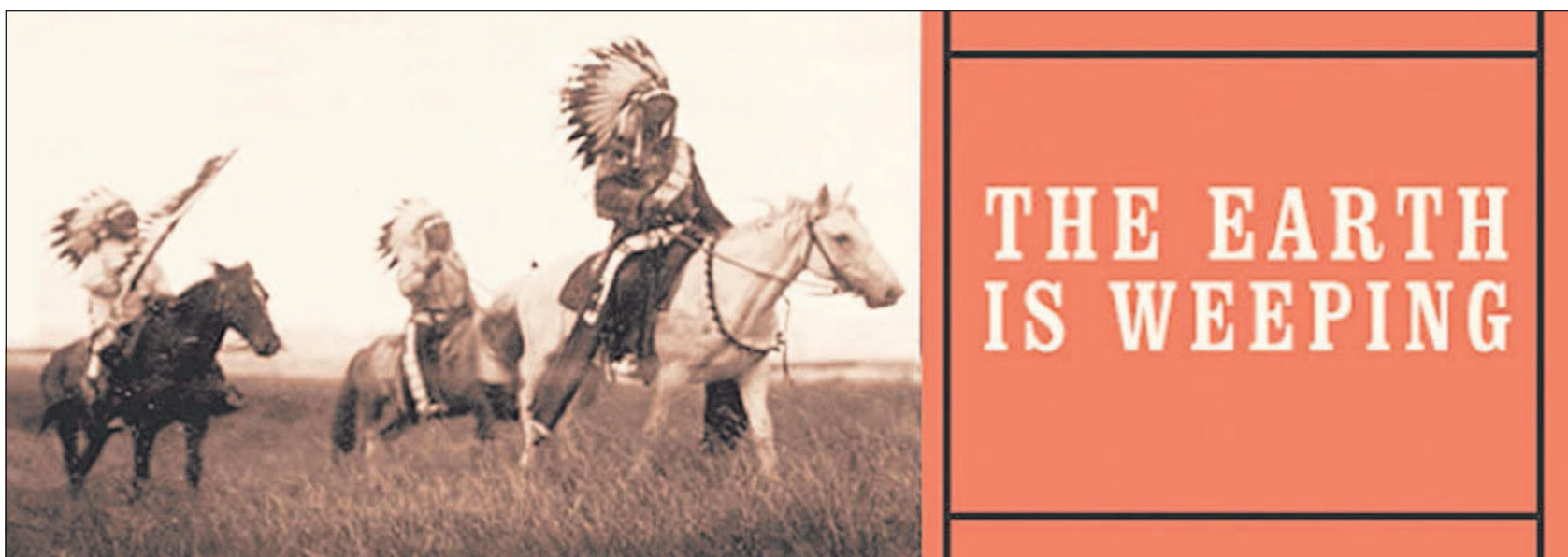


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“The Earth is Weeping” by Peter Cozzens is a fascinating and evenhanded history of the Indian Wars that marred the American West from 1862 to 1891. KNOPF

TRAGIC LEGACY

The Plains Indian Wars still haunt the West

By **MATT WINTERS**
 EO Media Group

Like hungry little mountain bluebirds on the first day of grasshopper season, we were jumping with joyous energy as our teacher soothed us into our seats. It was a day to cherish: Our “graduation” from third grade, marking a successful end to primary school for our brave band of 9-year-olds. No matter what else happened, we were told to bank this achievement, remembering it as we walked the long path ahead.

There ought to be grade-school reunions. It would be such an honor to travel back to Wyoming Indian Elementary School at the fast-approaching half-century mark of that bright spring day to embrace and laugh with my classmates of 1967. What tall tales we would trade about our adventures in the world! I hope fate has been good to us all — even to their big brothers who teased me as a stick-thin, pasty-faced kid with ear-flap hats. I would have teased me, too.

Where we’re born and the lives we lead result from endless cross-rippling decisions and interactions. Since parts of my family began arriving in the West in 1847, our connections with tribal people perhaps run deeper than average. But my early life on the Wind River Indian Reservation all comes down to one man, Great-great-grandpa Ed Alton. He left the U.S. Army Infantry to set up a horse ranch and saloon on the reservation’s boundary in 1878, his red brick house a 10-minute bike ride from my boyhood home.

Alton served as first sergeant in Capt. Arthur MacArthur’s Company, 36th Infantry Regiment, from 1866 to 1869. His spurs are a paperweight in my office. I’ve often wondered what that experience was like and whether he played any interesting or violent part in the Plains Indian Wars. That curiosity prompted reading historian Peter Cozzens’ illuminating 2016 “The Earth is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West.”

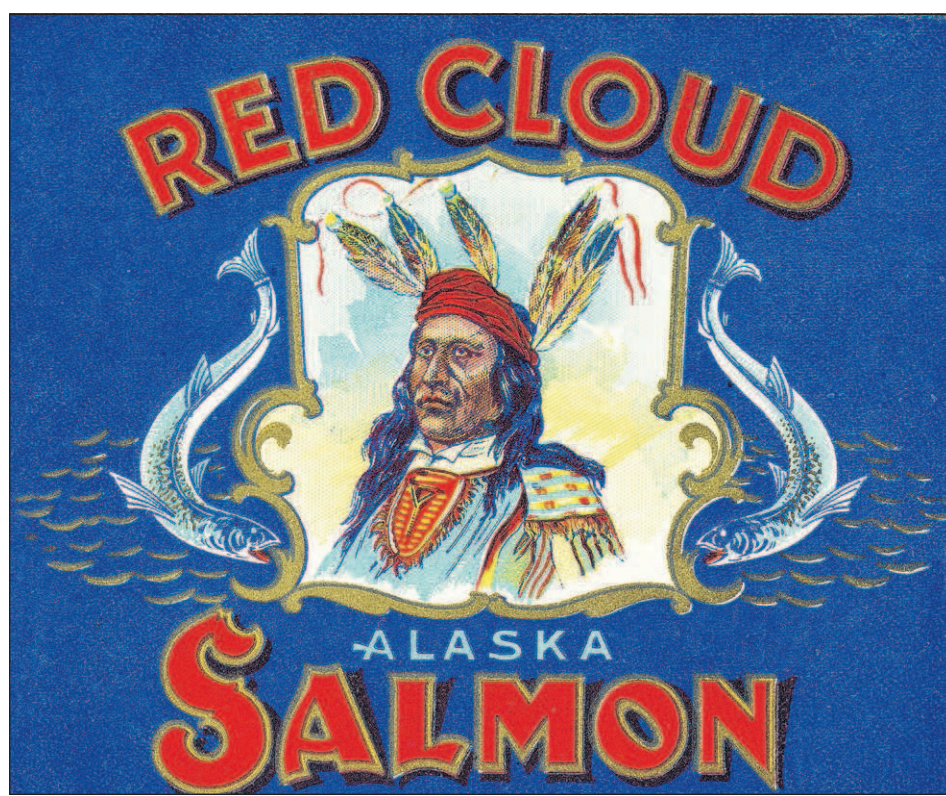
Mom sternly discouraged us from playing “Cowboys and Indians.” We could be a sheriff’s posse and train robbers, but she emphatically believed it was in bad taste to even pretend to re-fight old conflicts with our Shoshoni and Northern Arapaho neighbors. We had good reason to tread softly. Our family history has many intersections with America’s Indian wars, including John Winter’s military service in 1675-76, defending Massachusetts Bay Colony during an uprising by Narragansett Indians and allies. In 1758, at the height of the French and Indian War, another ancestor was killed by Indians in western Virginia, his widow and children held captive until 1764. The 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in eastern Colorado was partly stoked by the murder of my cousin Nathan Ward Hungate and his wife and young daughters, perhaps by a wrathful war party of Cheyennes and Northern Arapahos.

Crushing the Indians

They had plenty of reasons to be angry. “The object of the whites was to crush the Indians down to nothing. I will not take the [treaty] paper with me. It is all lies,” Oglala Chief Red Cloud said in Washington, D.C. in 1869 near the end of negotiations with President Ulysses Grant.

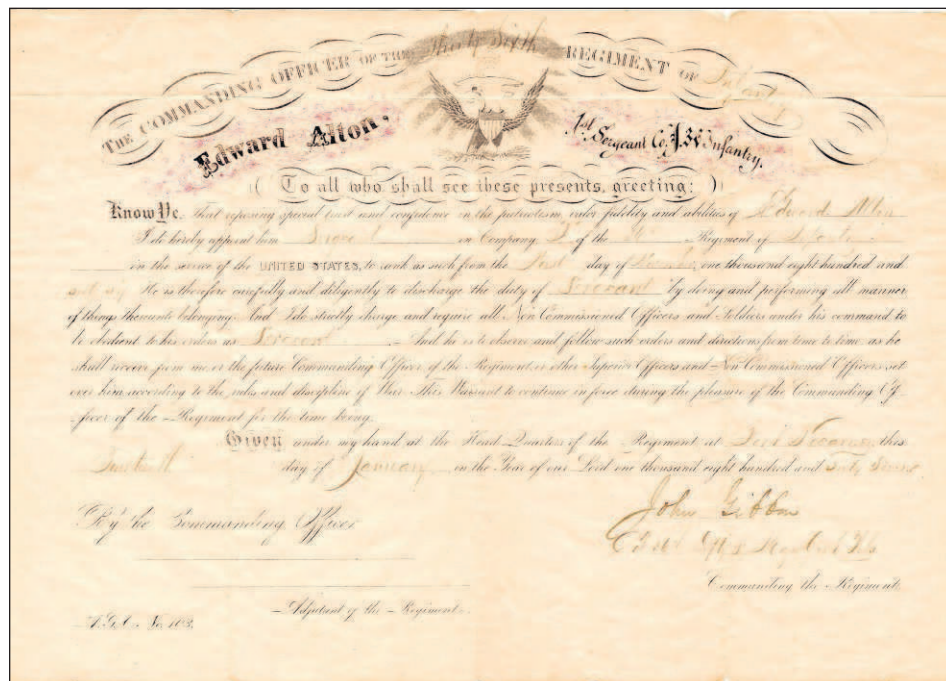
“Believing the Great Father had cheated them yet again, that night in their hotel several of the Oglalas and Brulés contemplated suicide,” Cozzens wrote.

Red Cloud eventually cajoled most of his tribe, along with many Northern Cheyennes and Northern Arapahos, to settle near



MATT WINTERS COLLECTION

Even though he was embroiled in the Indian Wars, Chief Red Cloud was something of a peacemaker and a cultural icon — enough so that his name and image were used for Alaska salmon canned for an Ohio grocery store in about 1900.



MATT WINTERS COLLECTION

An appointment to first sergeant in 1866 led to three years “policing unruly frontier mining towns, patrolling the railroad and offering protection to emigrants heading down the Oregon Trail.”

Fort Laramie in the forlorn hope of a lasting peace. Other Oglalas and Lakotas, led by Crazy Horse, had no interest in accommodation: “they intended to live the traditional nomadic life or perish in the attempt.”

Naive Eastern sympathy for the plight of American Indians led some 19th century cynics to refer to Indians as “Lo” — a sarcastic play on the line “Lo! the Poor Indian!” in Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Man.” However, despite his title’s hint at a sob story, Cozzens’ book is a masterpiece of objectivity and thorough research. Award-winning author of 16 volumes on the Civil War and its echoes in the West, Cozzens uses unfamiliar original sources to describe horrors and heroism on an enormous scale — an American Iliad.

This was a storm of villainy and nobility on all sides in the midst of no-mercy terrorism between and even within tribes. Whites circled and lunged and blundered through murderous Indian feuds and the tribes’ futile attempts at civil defense against encroaching settlers. Whites were by turns heartless aggressors, blameless victims, profiteers, and well-intentioned but often pathetically

ineffectual helpers.

“Grand plans descended into confusion and cross purposes, alliances and loyalties shifted momentarily, and soldiers and warriors and their families spent most of that quarter-century tired, hungry, discouraged, trying just to survive the next drought or winter... No wonder their earth wept,” reviewer William C. Davis wrote about this landmark account of what another writer calls “America’s actual longest and most tragic war.”

Hell on wheels

Neither Alton nor his Capt. MacArthur are mentioned in Cozzens’ book. MacArthur, Medal of Honor-winning father of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and the sergeant he described as “Faithful, true and diligent,” spent their three-year enlistment safeguarding the transcontinental railroad project. Starting at Fort Kearney, Nebraska Territory, “The regiment’s main duty would be to protect the Union Pacific as the iron road snaked westward,” according to historian Geoffrey Perret. “As the railroad advanced, so did the 36th Infantry. By the summer of

Writer’s Notebook

1867 MacArthur was in Wyoming Territory. His company was policing unruly frontier mining towns, patrolling the railroad and offering protection to emigrants heading down the Oregon Trail.”

This was depicted in AMC’s melodramatic TV series “Hell on Wheels,” but for actual facts I’ll have to someday see if the National Archives contains MacArthur’s dispatches.

Overall 36th Infantry commander Col. John Gibbon remained in that role long after railroad completion. He showed up a little too late to help or die with Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876, and botched an attack on Chief Joseph’s fleeing Nez Perce in 1877.

Gibbon and plenty of others in the Army empathized with the Indians, recognizing that they were resisting technologically advanced invaders in whatever ways they could. Others were poisonously racist. Gen. Phil Sheridan, for instance, “hanged warriors randomly during an Indian uprising in Oregon for the ‘salutary effect’ it would have on fellow tribesmen.” The West’s unbelievably large bison herds were slaughtered for quick profits and to starve Indians onto reservations. Cozzens cites one example of 4,373,730 bison hides shipped east from Fort Dodge, Kansas, in just one three-year period in the 1870s. The policy worked. The Indians starved, living out a nightmare of “apocalyptic dread. For the Plains Indian, extermination of the buffalo meant death — both physical and spiritual,” Cozzens wrote.

Bad times are still here

Essential reading for all Americans, “The Earth is Weeping” is a sad book, but one that inspires by revealing more of the truth about what Indians endured — regardless of whether some had it coming. Its lessons are a rebuttal to all who blame “whiny Indians” for opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline.

In a brilliant story last month, *The New York Times Magazine* told of how the Standing Rock protest was inspired by a tribal youth group’s anti-suicide efforts. (See tinyurl.com/NYT-Lakota-Youth.) It is loaded with echoes of the Indian Wars and is just the latest validation of William Faulkner’s most-famous quote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

“Suicide is so common on the reservation that Lakota youth don’t bother to say ‘committed suicide’ or ‘attempted suicide.’ They just say ‘attempted’ or ‘completed,’” reporter Saul Elbeain said. In the summer of 2015, 30 kids from the Cheyenne River Reservation attempted and eight completed.

Pine Ridge seems likely to become another defeat for the Lakota, other Indians and their supporters. Winning against an already-permitted corporate pipeline was always going to be a long shot and became a nearly impossible one on Election Day 2016. But good for them for trying.

As for my classmates in the Wyoming Indian Primary School Class of 1967, I wonder just how many are alive for my dreamed-about reunion. Nearly a decade ago I was told all the boys were dead. I pray that isn’t true. But if it is, may their grandchildren live and endure and find paths back to power and meaning.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal. He lives in Ilwaco.