

Spring 4-8-2020

## Unknown Ghosts: Reasons for the Crisis at Wounded Knee

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### Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Brijana M. (Spring 2020) "Unknown Ghosts: Reasons for the Crisis at Wounded Knee," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 9, Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol9/iss1/18>

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## UNKNOWN GHOSTS: REASONS FOR THE CRISIS AT WOUNDED KNEE

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By Brijana M. Sullivan

Dee Brown calls it a genocidal maneuver of “madness.”<sup>1</sup> Heather Cox Richardson dubs it an “appalling act of racist brutality—the outcome of roiling partisan politics.”<sup>2</sup> Ralph Andrist, author of *The Long Death*, labels it an operation carried out by a “mass of infuriated men intent only on butchery.”<sup>3</sup> Others claim that what happened was the result of “injustices of a corrupt reservation system.”<sup>4</sup> These views, characterizing the Indians as victims and the whites as “intruders...determined to destroy all that was Indian,” have vindicated Native responsibility at Wounded Knee as early as within hours after the horrific incident.<sup>5</sup> Although these claims of white racism are defended by many like Brown, a contrary view persists, maintaining that the

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<sup>1</sup> Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company Inc, 1991, 444.

<sup>2</sup> *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* book review, Publishers Weekly online: April 26, 2010, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-465-00921-3>.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Vizenor, "Genocide Tribunals," In *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survival*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2009, 147, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dgn41k.10>.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Jacoby, "Of Memory and Massacre: A Soldier's Firsthand Account of the 'Affair on Wounded Knee,'" *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 64, no. 2 (2003): 340, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.64.2.0333](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.64.2.0333).

<sup>5</sup> William Lee Adams, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Time Magazine online: August 17, 2011. □HYPERLINK  
"http://entertainment.time.com/2011/08/30/all-time-100-best-nonfiction-books/slide/bury-my-heart-at-wounded-knee-by-dee-brown/"http://entertainment.time.com/2011/08/30/all-time-100-best-nonfiction-books/slide/bury-my-heart-at-wounded-knee-by-dee-brown/.

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bloodbath at Wounded Knee was *not* intentional but was, rather, a horrific accident.

Supporters of this second view demonstrate that the incident at Wounded Knee was neither a battle nor a massacre, but was, instead, a culmination of desperation and panic resulting from an era entrenched in suspicion and uneasiness. This position, advocated by historians such as Robert Utley and Jerome Greene, is consistent with recent academic studies and maintains that the consequences of the increased fear within both Native and white communities produced one of the bloodiest conflicts of Native American history. In short, these studies agree that what happened was an indirect result of fear and mistrust instilled more than a century earlier.

The climatic event in 1890 can be traced back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to a time when the concept of a “reservation” was first used. According to historian Stuart Banner, a reservation originally referred to a parcel of land that a person wished to retain.<sup>6</sup> However, by the time Lewis and Clark blazed a trail from ocean to ocean and the Oregon Trail frenzy slackened, the definition of “reservation” had changed dramatically. In fact, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a “reservation” meant nothing more than a piece of “land the government had selected from its own land and reserved for the Indians’ use.”<sup>7</sup> That is, land originally occupied by Indians was ultimately purchased by the American Government and set aside for later generations of the same tribes. However, these later generations were not the only ones contending for the land.

The nomadic lifestyle of the Plains Indians had been disrupted by the rooted lifestyle of the white settler who replaced forests with

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart Banner, "Reservations," In *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005,229, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjf9vqr.10>.

<sup>7</sup> Banner, 230.

farmland, prairies with pastures, and campsites with cabin settlements. Thus, in order to foster a unified culture that would help prevent clashes between settlers and Natives, the government decided to create a navigable course toward assimilation for the Indians<sup>8</sup> Historian Alex Ruuska explains that assimilation began with the introduction of subsistence farming, since permanence was at the core of white culture. Subsistence farming was a lifestyle that did not allow for mobility of<sup>9</sup> An excellent example of how the government envisioned assimilation through subsistence farming is seen in the story of the Horn Clouds.

The Horn Clouds, a Miniconjou Sioux family, had returned to the Dakota region from Canada in the 1880's and had come to terms with "an unavoidable truth: the old way of life was over."<sup>10</sup> Realizing this truth allowed them to put aside the traditional nomadic lifestyle and settle permanently. In fact, it was not long before their property soon morphed into a large and thriving ranch on which they raised cattle and horses.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, most Sioux were not like the Horn Clouds and rejected assimilation entirely.

The Native rejection of assimilation took on many forms in addition to intense disinterest in an agrarian lifestyle. For example, Paiute and Lakota Sioux attacks on railroad stations and livestock were not uncommon occurrences in the West during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, the federal government, determined to keep

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Palmer and Robert Rundstrom, "GIS, Internal Colonialism, and the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 5 (2013): 1144, [www.jstor.org/stable/23485658](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23485658).

<sup>9</sup> Alex Ruuska, "Ghost Dancing and the Iron Horse: Surviving through Tradition and Technology," In *Technology and Culture* 52, no. 3, 2011, 585. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23020646>. Ruuska, 585.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Burnham, *Song of Dewey Beard: Last Survivor of the Little Bighorn*, 58, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d9nmz7.11>.

<sup>11</sup> Burnham, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Ruuska, 586.

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the Natives from interfering with the land of the whites and vice versa, debated three potential solutions to quell conflict between the Indians and white settlers.

The first option required police action along the vast expanse of Indian country in the West. A second would compel the government to completely terminate white emigration.<sup>13</sup> As these first two courses of action were neither feasible nor practical, a third option involving the use of reservations was adopted.

The system of reservations began when Natives and whites, who both desired to avoid territorial disputes, began furiously signing numerous land agreements and treaties. Simply put, these agreements promised that each would stay off the other's land. Unfortunately, it was not long before the failure of both sides to keep their promises caused reservations to become sites of contention and struggle, particularly during the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps the most infamous struggle emerged with the establishment of the Great Sioux Reservation in the Dakota territory—the birthplace of the Sioux people and the land of their ancestral ghosts.<sup>14</sup>

Before the ink dried on the initial agreement, the area was inadvertently downsized by Sioux signatures penned in confidence that the federal promises of compensation in the form of cows, horses, plows, or schools would be fulfilled.<sup>15</sup> By 1889, the government's failure to deliver full recompense soon left many, including the Horn Clouds, with the worst scenario imaginable: a starving population in the midst of a merciless winter. In fact, according to historian Greene, one local newspaper reported that “cattle that reached Pine Ridge were, ‘better

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<sup>13</sup> Banner, 231.

<sup>14</sup> *The Lakota Emergence Story*,

<https://www.nps.gov/wica/learn/historyculture/the-lakota-emergence-story.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Burnham, 59.

subjects for the taxidermist than the butcher.”<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, desperation soon set in.

As is common in spans of desperation and starvation, religion presented itself as an appealing cure from the societal wretchedness permeating the Indian community, and revival was imminent. In the mid-1800s, fear that white expansion would only bring death inspired a Paiute prophet from Fish Lake, Nevada, to have a vision and preach a doctrine of ritual dancing that would return the Indians to their old way of life.<sup>17</sup> Less than 20 years later, the entrancing messages delivered by self-proclaimed Paiute prophet Wovoka caused the dance of deliverance to the old way of life to spread throughout the Great Basin tribes. By 1890, this pan-Indian movement known as the “Ghost Dance” was popularized at Pine Ridge, the Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota.

In an interview conducted in 1891 with the *Los Angeles Herald*, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Morgan stated that he believed the dance originated in response to Congress’ reductions of “appropriations for the Sioux and other tribes” as well as crop failure.<sup>18</sup> However, modern historian, L.G. Moses, records that the motivations to start dancing comprised a much longer list: “Broken treaties, land encroachment, depletion of game, and assimilationist programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs had demoralized the tribes to such an extent that they awaited deliverance from their depression and sorrow.”<sup>19</sup> Regardless of its impetus, former chief historian of the National Park Service Robert

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<sup>16</sup> Jerome Greene, *American Carnage: Wounded Knee, 1890*, 56, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Ruuska, 579.

<sup>18</sup> *Los Angeles Herald 06 Jan. 1891*, In *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress, <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84025968/1891-01-06/ed-1/seq-1/>> Los Angeles herald (pdf).

<sup>19</sup> L. G. Moses, ““The Father Tells Me So!” Wovoka: The Ghost Dance Prophet,” *American Indian Quarterly* 9, no. 3, (1985): 335. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1183834>.

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Utley ascertained that the object of the Dance was to restore “the old savage life and its dominant values.”<sup>20</sup>

According to ethnomusicologist Judith Vander, dances took place during four successive nights, once every six weeks and its variations were contingent on the region in which it was propagated.<sup>21</sup> That is, dances in the Great Basin tended to revolve around growth, nature, and the celebration new life, whereas, for tribes like the Sious on the Plains, dances focused “on a way of life: games, gambling, hunting buffalo, bow and arrows, and tepees, all harking back to the old nomadic Plains life...”<sup>22</sup> As the craving for cultural return to the good old days was strongest in the Great Plains, it was in this latter region where perversion of Wovoka’s prophecies materialized. Participants in Wovoka's Ghost Dance were promised a return to the old way of living—the hunting of the bison on the wide plains—as well as the reunification of the living with the dead. Journalist Philip Burnham wrote, “It’s no surprise that many Lakota chose to dance...The old ways were doomed, the new ones unproven. The dance was the only thing left that recalled the world of their elders.”<sup>23</sup>

A Ghost Dance was typically preceded by a twenty-four hour fast followed by a traditional sweat bath. Preparation continued as men and women dawned “ghost” shirts or dresses painted red with eagles, sun circles, and thunderbirds. Metal and products produced by whites were prohibited.<sup>24</sup> The basic methodology of the dance is as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> Utley, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Vander, "The Creative Power and Style of Ghost Dance Songs," In *Music of the First Nations: Tradition and Innovation in Native North America*, edited by Tara Browner, 113, University of Illinois Press, 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xcmmt.10>.

<sup>22</sup> Vander, 117.

<sup>23</sup> Burnham, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Burnham, 62.

“The dancers would lock hands in a circle around [a] tree, shuffling in the dirt, moving right to left. As they danced and sang, they sought a vision of their relatives in the other world. They used no drums. The dancing was ecstatic and lasted four days and nights, many dancers dropping to the ground when the spirit— or sheer exhaustion— overcame them. The falling were dragged along by the others until they couldn’t go on, and most would faint away, later to rise and recount their visions. When they finished one dance, they would get up and start again.”<sup>25</sup>

For the faction of Dancers who wanted peace, the Ghost Dance was nothing more than a religious appeal for new life. However, for some, it represented much more. Although Wovoka’s doctrine advocated non-violence, some, including the Sioux, did not share this sentiment. In fact, embittered by the land agreements and demoralized by the ration cuts, this faction harbored intense hatred toward the white man in a shared mindset that Utley asserted was “indeed explosive.”<sup>26</sup> For these Indians, the Dance symbolized their resistance to assimilation and condoned their propensity to use Wovoka’s doctrine as justification to declare holy war on the white settlers.<sup>27</sup>

For many whites, the prospect of a holy war emerging from the Ghost Dance was improbable. In fact, settlers near Dance sites tended to harbor more curiosity for it rather than fear. However, in early winter, as reports of violence were perpetuated throughout the region near Pine Ridge, many began to reevaluate the potential danger implicated by the Dance.

On December 7, 1890, as Greene records, a “foraging group of young warriors from the Ghost Dance camp on White River exchanged gunfire with ranchers...along the Cheyenne River west of Pine Ridge

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<sup>25</sup> Burnham, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Utley, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Utley, 72.

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Reservation.” Following this episode, nearby settlers started to abandon their homes.<sup>28</sup> Other potential danger was implicated by the weakness of the Indian Bureau which, as historian Jeffery Ostler writes, “probably encouraged resistance by increasing the likelihood for its assertion.”<sup>29</sup> Whether or not this was true, it was not long before Congress decided that military intervention on reservations was necessary if peaceful assimilation was to be attained.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, multiple factors complicated the decisions of Congress to send in the army, not the least of which was a report made by Special Agent Lea who reported in November of 1890 that the Indians planned to go “on a big hunt as soon as grass [came] next spring, and that [meant] warpath.”<sup>31</sup> Other complications included the exaggerated reports made by newspapers describing the likelihood of a violent uprising and “terrifying the local populace into believing their property and lives were at stake.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Congress received reports such as one made by John Reynolds, who assumed command of Pine Ridge in October of 1890, and called for ““a sufficient force of troops’ be sent” due to information that the Indians were trading horses for weapons.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, despite fears such as those articulated by one Bureau employee, Agent McLaughlin, that military intervention “would only

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<sup>28</sup> Greene, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Ostler, 242.

<sup>30</sup> Ostler, 241.

<sup>31</sup> Rani-Henrik Andersson, "Wanáǵi Wachípi Kǵ," In *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 199, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dgn575.7>.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Herbert Cressey, *Sting of the Bee: A Day-By-Day Account of Wounded Knee and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890-1891 as recorded in the Omaha Bee*, introduction and notes by Samuel L. Russell, Carlisle, PA: Russell Martial Research, 2016, introduction xx.

<sup>33</sup> Ostler, 226.

lead to bloodshed,” Congress—that is, *not* the army officials in Washington, D.C.—opted to send in the armed forces.<sup>34</sup>

At first, as Greene points out, the army was ordered to “to remove designated Indian leaders that the federal government believed [were] instrumental in promoting the [Ghost Dance] movement.”<sup>35</sup> This meant that potential targets included men such as Hump of the Cheyenne and Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapas. Unfortunately, despite Congress’s best intentions, it soon became evident that military intervention would not always produce its desired result of firm, yet peaceful, intervention. Indeed, it was not long before Agent McLaughlin’s fears were realized.

Since the beginning of the Ghost Dance crisis, no significant bloodletting occurred until December 15, 1890, during the capture of Sitting Bull at his cabin 40 miles southwest of Pine Ridge Agency.<sup>36</sup> Initially, Sitting Bull agreed to go peacefully with the Indian police, but his arrest was interrupted with the shouts of his 14-year-old son who, as Greene disclosed, “began chiding his father for permitting himself to be carried away in such a manner, calling him a ‘fool’ and ‘crazy.’”<sup>37</sup> This outburst led to a brief skirmish which ended in deaths on both sides, including that of Sitting Bull.

The deaths at Sitting Bull’s cabin increased tensions and the potential for more violence. Not long after the altercation near Grand River, nearly 400 of Sitting Bull’s followers were reported to have fled the agency. Agent McLaughlin, fearing potential escalation if the Indians joined forces with either Kicking Bear and Short Bull in the Stronghold or the Miniconjous along Cheyenne River, quickly sent out emissaries to persuade the fugitives to return to the agency.<sup>38</sup> Although most of the Miniconjou returned to their homes, a few sought refuge with Big Foot, a

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<sup>34</sup> Andersson, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Greene, 167.

<sup>36</sup> Greene, 188.

<sup>37</sup> Greene, 181.

<sup>38</sup> Utley, 169.

Miniconjou Sioux chief, on Cheyenne River.<sup>39</sup> Because he was harboring Sitting Bull's people, who were well-known Ghost Dancers, it was not long before Big Foot, like Sitting Bull, would become a target for Indian police.<sup>40</sup>

The rumors that implicated Big Foot as a threat were not true. In fact, some, like Colonel Sumner, believed Big Foot was "the best instrument for keeping the peace" in the days following Sitting Bull's death.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, due to various instances of miscommunication within the army as well as the understanding that Big Foot was harboring Standing Rock fugitives whom the army believed to be hostile, it was not long before Colonel Sumner was given orders to intercept the chief and take him, along with his people, to the agency at Camp Cheyenne.<sup>42</sup> There, he would be arrested.

Although Big Foot had agreed to travel with Sumner to Camp Cheyenne, his people were not so willing. In fact, a few days after the chief's agreement, Colonel Sumner received a report that Big Foot was being taken by his band on to Pine Ridge Agency against his will.<sup>43</sup> In Greene's opinion, the Miniconjou reasoning for doing this had to do with the military's advancement up the Cheyenne River and a "report that the Standing Rock Indians at Bennett been disarmed."<sup>44</sup> Though not hostile in intent, this spontaneous Miniconjou movement proved to have disastrous results.

As the army was not far behind, scholar Rani-Henrik Andersson records that, "instead of trying to avoid them, [Big Foot] decided to meet them openly" and slowed his band long enough for the army to catch up

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<sup>39</sup> Greene, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Utley, 174.

<sup>41</sup> Utley, 181.

<sup>42</sup> Greene, 197.

<sup>43</sup> Utley, 185.

<sup>44</sup> Greene, 201.

to them.<sup>45</sup> Only a few days after their flight, Major Whitside overtook the little band near Wounded Knee creek on December 28, 1890. According to one soldier, “After a short conference Big-Foot surrendered his band, declared his heart was good, and that he loved the pale-faces.”<sup>46</sup> Clearly, the Miniconjou leader did not anticipate trouble.

The night of December 28<sup>th</sup> was frigid, and as darkness fell, the army set up tents for those Miniconjou who were short on tepees. However, as many of the Miniconjou remained suspicious of the army’s intentions, these tents were readily refused.<sup>47</sup> Big Foot and his wife, however, were more accepting of the army’s accommodations and welcomed Whitside’s offer to stay in their own private quarters. As Big Foot was suffering from a severe case of pneumonia, an assistant army surgeon, James D. Glennan, oversaw his treatment.<sup>48</sup>

Sometime later that evening, Colonel Forsyth arrived at the camp. Forsyth retained a carefree, even cheerful, attitude despite troublesome orders to disarm the Miniconjou and send them to the railroad for transportation to Omaha.<sup>49</sup> Charles Allen, a reporter who spent a good part of the evening with Forsyth, recorded how he was “unforgettably entertained with a graphic account of many incidents in [Forsyth’s] European tour...after the Civil War.”<sup>50</sup>

Disarmament began early the next morning and was announced by Philip Wells, a mixed-blood army interpreter.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, the

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<sup>45</sup> Andersson, 90.

<sup>46</sup> Samuel L Russell, "[Lieut. J. C. Gresham’s Account of Wounded Knee](https://armyatwoundedknee.com/2013/08/13/lieut-j-c-greshams-account-of-wounded-knee/),” *Army at Wounded Knee*, Carlisle, PA: Russell Martial Research, 2015-2016, <https://armyatwoundedknee.com/2013/08/13/lieut-j-c-greshams-account-of-wounded-knee/>.

<sup>47</sup> Greene, 214.

<sup>48</sup> Greene, 214.

<sup>49</sup> Utley, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Greene, 219.

<sup>51</sup> Burnham, 72.

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Indian warrior's initial refusal to give up their arms combined with the army's increasing anxiety—due to the rather loud and rattling presence of the medicine man Yellow Bird who was “scooping handfuls of earth and tossing them skyward like the Ghost Dancers” —gave rise to tensions that soon permeated the whole of the gathering.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, army Captains Varnum and Wallace, sensing the tension, told their men to “hit the ground” and fire from prone positions if shooting erupted.<sup>53</sup> Despite the strained atmosphere, the morning passed with little incident. However, as the sun rose higher in the sky, the medicine man grew more agitated, and it was not long before pandemonium hit the scene out of nowhere. Despite their orders, some white troops never had the chance to “hit the ground.”

As some recalled later, Yellow Bird threw a handful of dirt skyward and “[let loose] on a high- shrieking eagle-bone whistle,” sparking a commotion which caused Captain Varum to yell, “Look out...they’ve broken!”<sup>54</sup> The next second, a single gunshot was fired. Burnham suggests that this was possibly shot by Black Coyote, a deaf Lakota who had not heard the order from Big Foot to surrender.<sup>55</sup> Private Spotted Horse recalled that the first shot was fired by a gun that suddenly went off while it was wrestled over by a soldier and Yellow Bird Private Spotted Horse recalled<sup>56</sup> Regardless of where the first shot came from, the air was immediately full of bullets.

One reporter recorded that, “In a moment the whole front was a sheet of fire above which the smoke rolled, obscuring the central scene from view.”<sup>57</sup> A Civil War veteran nicknamed “Old Hickory” recounted, ““For ten or fifteen minutes it was as heavy fire as I have ever

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<sup>52</sup> Burnham, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Greene, 228.

<sup>54</sup> Greene, 228.

<sup>55</sup> Burnham, 73.

<sup>56</sup> Greene, 275.

<sup>57</sup> Greene, 229.

experienced.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, it was soon clear that two fronts were not distinguishable and the shooting was coming from all directions.

As smoke filled the air, it became harder to see. An artilleryman on the hill above the camp reported that firing from above was difficult because the troops below were intermingled and not “clear from amidst the Indians.”<sup>59</sup> Horn Cloud, the sixteen-year-old chief of the Miniconjous, reported that the scene was incredibly reckless because the army was shooting at each other.<sup>60</sup> Other reports were similar including that given by Lieutenant Preston who, a few days after the battle, recounted in a letter to his brother that, “It was clear that we had been killing each other.”<sup>61</sup>

As it became evident that women and children were among the dead, Forsythe yelled, “Quit shooting at them[!]”<sup>62</sup> As First Lieutenant John C. Gresham recalled, “‘Don’t hurt the squaws and children,’ was the general cry over the field.”<sup>63</sup> Later, one soldier who interviewed with the *Los Angeles Herald*, recalled that “It [was] impossible to say...in an Indian skirmish [when to] stop firing long enough to find out just what sort of Indian you are shooting at. Women and men look very much alike in their blanket costume, and the former are quite as fierce fighters as the men.”<sup>64</sup> The painful realization that the army had been shooting each other as well as innocent women and children stung more than the icy morning air.

As guns fell silent, one survivor, the interpreter Wells, came across a wounded warrior who pointed a closed fist and shot out his fingers—a deadly insult—toward the dead medicine man on the ground.

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<sup>58</sup> Greene, 273.

<sup>59</sup> Greene, 234.

<sup>60</sup> Greene, 273.

<sup>61</sup> Greene, 231.

<sup>62</sup> Greene, 241.

<sup>63</sup> Russel, Gresham’s Account.

<sup>64</sup> *Los Angeles Herald*.

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As Wells recalled, the warrior, “speaking as though to the dead man: ‘If I could be taken to you I would stab you!’”<sup>65</sup> He then proceeded to call the medicine man ‘our murderer.’ A similar account involving Big Foot’s brother, Frog, explained that the Miniconjou made a sign of “‘most bitter hatred and contempt’” over the body of Yellow Bird.<sup>66</sup> Both these actions suggested that the dead Ghost Dancer, who had a premonition for battle, contributed to the initiation of hostilities.

As the news of what happened spread across the country, the Department of Indian Affairs sent a letter to the Department of the Interior “giving the opinion that a relief fund should be furnished by Congress so as to enable the department to assist all Indians who require aid [that] winter, not only with food but also in the purchase of seeds and other articles required for planting...and to grant immediate assistance when required.”<sup>67</sup> This was not genocidal language. Those who knew the horror of what had happened were determined to expunge any potential replay of events.

In the end, although neither side was to blame, both parties at Wounded Knee were responsible. While racism and hatred for the other side was not the primary factor that spurred both to fight, it was undoubtedly harbored in the minds of many who were present. The incident at Wounded Knee was not a battle or a massacre but rather an accident veiled in misunderstanding and resulting in a flurry of panicked reactions on both sides. As few particulars of the crisis are known, the arguments made by scholars like Greene, Utley, and Burnham agree that it is impossible to determine where the true blame lies. In fact, it appears that most accounts only agree on two particulars: the unknown origin of the first shot and its horrible, yet avoidable, consequences.

On January 22, 1891, the *Washington Evening Star* printed a haunting summary of historian Walter Camp’s interpretation of the

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<sup>65</sup> Greene, 242.

<sup>66</sup> Greene, 274.

<sup>67</sup> *Los Angeles Herald*.

events at Wounded Knee. Camp's conclusion, a recollection of the Wests' tumultuous past of desperation, fear, and mistrust, suggested that other forms of ghosts had entered the scene long before those implicated in the Ghost Dances were recognized. As Camp claimed, although "it was the Indians who were doing the dancing it was really the whites who saw the ghosts."<sup>68</sup> Surely, this was the truth behind the era's horrific climax at Wounded Knee.



This photograph, taken by the Northwestern Photography Company (marked as public domain), depicts U.S. soldiers burying dead Lakota warriors in a common grave at Wounded Knee, South Dakota following the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1891.

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<sup>68</sup> Greene, 380.