

TIMES PAST
1890



U.S. soldiers bury Sioux Indians in a mass grave at the Battle of Wounded Knee. (The original photo was annotated by the photographer.)

Wounded Knee

The site of the bloody conflict 125 years ago between U.S. forces and the Lakota Sioux, the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota is today one of the poorest places in America. BY ROBERT K. ELDER

After the roar of the guns stopped and the smoke lifted, the snow was red.

Near Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, scores of Lakota Sioux Indians* lay dead—most of them unarmed women and children. Some estimates put the death toll near 300, others near 150. The U.S. soldiers who fired on them with large, mule-drawn cannons counted 25 among their own

dead. More on both sides would eventually succumb to their wounds.

"And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard," said survivor Nicholas Black Elk. "A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream."

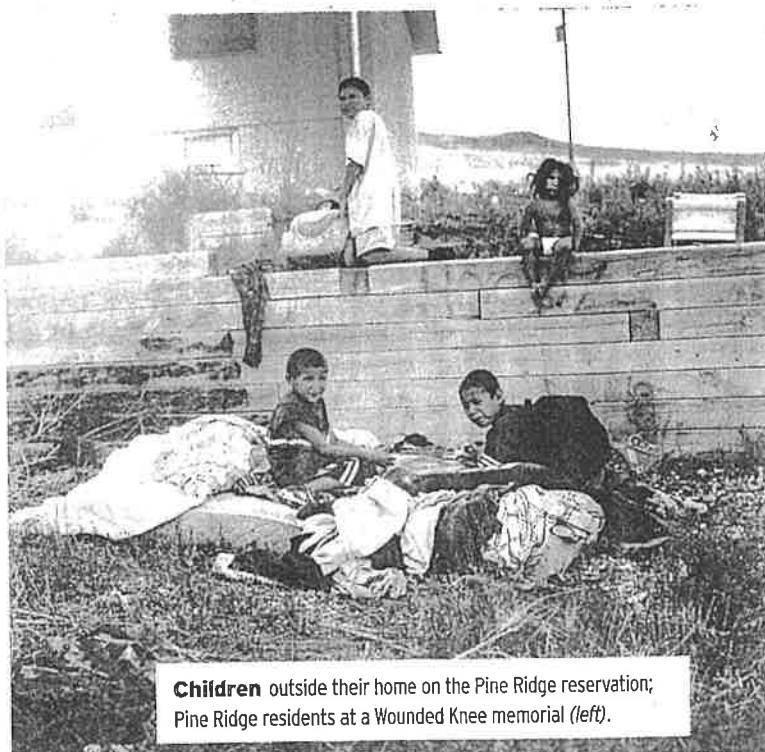
What happened at Wounded Knee 125 years ago, on Dec. 29, 1890, has been referred to as a tragedy, a battle, and—most widely—a massacre. To some, it marked the symbolic end of American

Indians' armed resistance against the U.S. government and cemented policies that contributed to the plight of many tribes today that struggle with poverty, unemployment, and other social ills (see "Pine Ridge Today," p. 20).

"It was a climax to what had happened to virtually all tribes in the West after all their land was taken from them through the treaty system," says Jerome A. Greene, author of *American Carnage: Wounded Knee, 1890*. "In their consciousness, it lingers even to this day. They live under the shadow of Wounded Knee,

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 Download two primary sources on Wounded Knee at upfrontmagazine.com



Children outside their home on the Pine Ridge reservation; Pine Ridge residents at a Wounded Knee memorial (left).

'Wounded Knee' lingers even to this day. . . It's an untreated sore.'

they really do. It's an untreated sore."

When Christopher Columbus landed in the present-day Bahamas in 1492, Native Americans—whom Columbus called "Indians" because he thought he'd landed in the East Indies—numbered between 2 million and 15 million (see *Timeline*, p. 20). Diseases brought from Europe, like measles and smallpox, devastated native populations who didn't have immunity, wiping out whole tribes. As Europeans pushed westward, white settlers and native tribes created alliances, fought, and sometimes negotiated fragile peace treaties. By the mid-1800s, many of the eastern tribes had been forcibly removed from their lands to reservations—parcels of land set aside for them by the U.S. government.

The tribes were promised security, land, and annual payments in a system of forced assimilation aimed at converting them into farmers as well as, in many cases, Christians. But food and supplies pledged to the tribes often arrived late or not at all, and the U.S. broke treaties, for example taking land after gold discoveries in California and South Dakota's Black Hills.

Tensions between the Sioux tribes



Area of map

and the U.S. government reached a boiling point in 1862, when the Sioux attacked and killed hundreds of settlers in what's known as the Dakota War or the Sioux Uprising. In its aftermath, the tribe was expelled from Minnesota—and a \$25 bounty was offered for the scalp of any Sioux found within state borders.

Sitting Bull vs. Custer

Meanwhile, on the Montana Plains, a leader had risen: Sitting Bull. In 1876, the revered Lakota who had resisted the U.S. government the longest and with the most success defeated and killed General George Custer and his regiment in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana.

But on Dec. 15, 1890, Sitting Bull was shot and killed by police sent to arrest him for his alleged support of the Ghost

Dance—a new Native American religion. U.S. officials feared the religion because it prophesied that Indian ancestors would return to earth to reclaim their homelands. Though government officials said Sitting Bull's death was an arrest gone awry, many Lakota saw it as an assassination to avenge the killing of General Custer.

In the aftermath of the killing, some of Sitting Bull's followers joined Chief Spotted Elk, who called a secret meeting on the Pine Ridge Reservation to plan the tribe's next moves. Suspicious of their motives, the U.S. government sent in the 7th Cavalry to disarm the group.

What happened next isn't entirely clear. By some accounts, a Lakota's gun fired, providing the spark that turned into a flame, as soldiers fired into the crowd.

"The guns poured in 2-pound explosive shells at the rate of nearly 50 per minute, mowing down everything alive," wrote one historian. A firefight ensued between the soldiers and the remaining warriors as thick smoke erupted from the guns. A Lakota named Bertha Kills Close to Lodge, who was then 17, remembered "smoke so severe" that she could barely see.

When Black Elk, a Lakota Sioux leader, rode into the melee to help, he saw the bodies of "men and women and chil-

*The Lakota are part of a large confederation of tribes called the Sioux, a name rejected by some Native Americans but officially recognized by the U.S. government.

dren . . . heaped and scattered all over.”

A general reported that “a large number of women and children who tried to escape by running and scattering over the prairie were hunted down and killed.” One historian wrote that so many women and children were killed far from the center of the action that the scene looked “as though blind rage had been at work.”

On the site of Wounded Knee, 147 Lakota were buried in a mass grave. Many Lakota viewed the violence as further revenge for the defeat of General Custer—and a final blow in a series of bloody conflicts with Native Americans.

“They wanted to eradicate us from the earth,” says Myron Pourier, 45, a great-great-grandson of Black Elk.

Wounded Knee, which solidified the reservation system, still looms large for Native Americans. Today, there are 566 federally recognized American Indian tribes in the U.S., including Alaska Natives, and about 310 federally recognized Indian reservations, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. After much

struggle for rights and recognition, the tribes are considered sovereign nations but are bound by some federal, state, and local laws.

Poverty & Casinos

But because many reservations are isolated enclaves far from economic opportunity, nearly 30 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in poverty. Pine Ridge, the site of Wounded Knee, is one of the nation’s poorest places, with an average life expectancy of 50, compared with 78 for the rest of the U.S.

Disputes with the U.S. government over resources, land, and treaties persist. In 1973, followers of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the Pine Ridge reservation. The armed siege was a protest against unfulfilled treaty promises and what the group saw as corrupt tribal leadership. (AIM and federal authorities negotiated an end to the standoff after 71 days.) And ownership of the Black Hills in South Dakota, an area promised to Sioux tribes in 1868 but later seized by the U.S.

government, is still disputed. In a 1980 case, the Supreme Court declared that the Sioux deserved “just compensation,” including interest. But tribes refused the \$102 million offered for the land, which they say is sacred and not for sale.

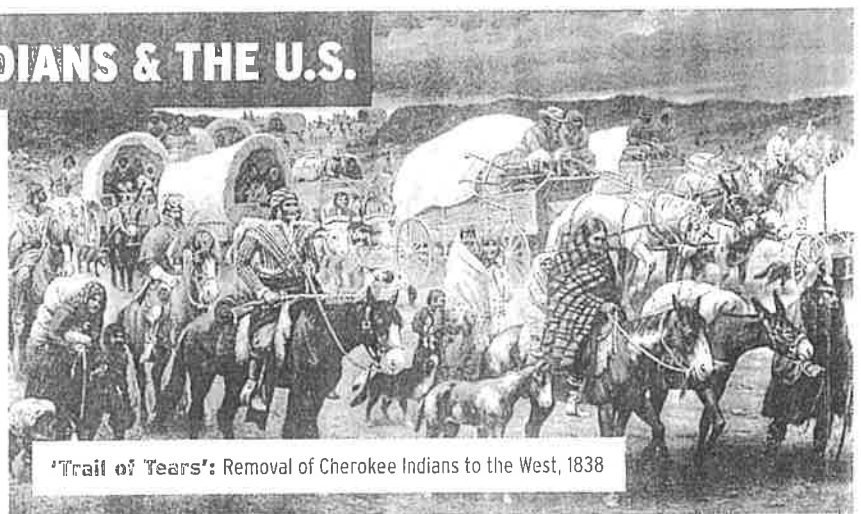
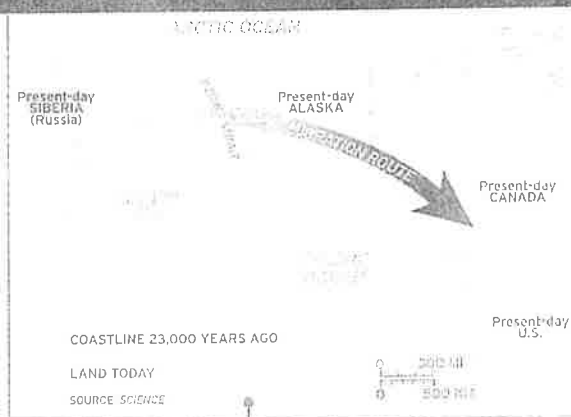
One of the few economic bright spots on Indian reservations has been casino gambling. In 1988, Congress legalized tribal casinos, and today it’s a \$28 billion industry that’s created thousands of jobs for tribe members. Some casinos, especially those near big cities, have made tribes very wealthy. But those in remote areas have failed to lift their people out of poverty, or, critics point out, to tackle deep-rooted problems like poor education, crime, and a scarcity of other kinds of jobs on or near reservations.

Culturally, many Native American tribes have undergone a revival since the 1960s, with efforts to bring back and preserve customs and languages, including Lakota.

The White House, which issued regrets on the 100th anniversary of Wounded

JIM MCMAHON (MAP); THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NEW YORK / THE GRANGER COLLECTION (INDIAN REMOVAL ACT)

Timeline AMERICAN INDIANS & THE U.S.



21,000-11,000 B.C. Early Migration

Waves of paleo-Indians cross the Bering Land Bridge from Siberia, eventually settling in the present-day U.S.

1492-1776 Colonization

After Columbus arrives in North America, millions of Native Americans are decimated by small pox and other diseases brought by Europeans.

1778 Treaties

The Continental Congress and the Delaware tribe of Ohio ally against the British. It’s the first of 389 treaties the U.S. makes with Indians over the next century.

1789 The Constitution

The U.S. Constitution states that Indian land may not be seized except in wars authorized by Congress. The pledge is repeatedly violated.

1830 Indian Removal Act

President Andrew Jackson signs a law allowing relocation treaties with Indians east of the Mississippi. Many tribes are forcibly moved west.

Pine Ridge Today

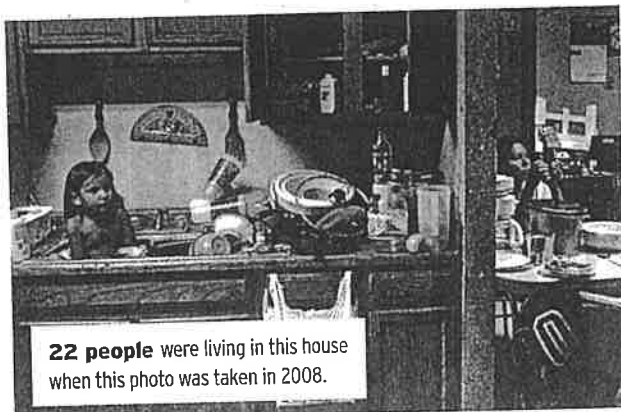
Poverty is an enduring legacy of Wounded Knee

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation near Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota is one of the most impoverished and bleakest places in the nation.

"It's still appalling," says Heather Cox Richardson, a history professor at Boston College. The two South Dakota counties affected by the historical events at Wounded Knee "are still the poorest in America," she says.

According to True Sioux Hope Foundation, Pine Ridge has a 90 percent unemployment rate and a 70 percent high school dropout rate. Up to 40 percent of its residents* don't have running water. And suicide among 12- to 24-year-olds has become an epidemic, with more than 100 attempts this year, according to the federal Indian Health Service.

But Nick Tilsen of the nonprofit Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation in Pine Ridge says



22 people were living in this house when this photo was taken in 2008.

there's reason for optimism. Last spring, his organization partnered with the White House in its "Promise Zones" initiative to improve infrastructure, public safety, and educational and financial opportunities at Pine Ridge. Tilsen says local leaders have played a crucial role in the effort.

"The true answers of solving the poverty and the challenges that we're facing on Pine Ridge," he says, "they're going to come from the people here on Pine Ridge."

Knee, says it has no plans to mark the 125th anniversary this year—a disappointment for people like historian Greene.

"It's a time that the government should come out and apologize," he says. "Symbolically, it would mean a lot."

Other overtures have been made. In 2000, Kevin Gover of the Bureau of Indian

Affairs denounced atrocities against American Indians, including "the decimation of the mighty bison herds." He added that "we will never push aside the memory of unnecessary and violent death at places such as . . . Wounded Knee."

For Pourier, the Black Elk descendant, who lives on Pine Ridge today,

acknowledging that legacy is important.

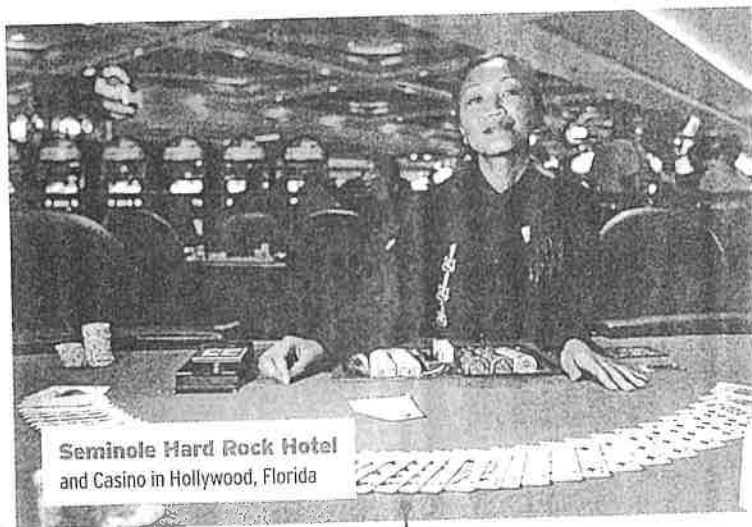
"The massacre at Wounded Knee did not silence us," he says. "It built us stronger to make sure it would never happen again." ♦

Robert K. Elder is a writer based in Chicago; additional reporting by Veronica Majerol.

*U.S. Census and tribal estimates put the population anywhere from 16,000 to 40,000.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt (in car) visiting the Black Feet tribe in Montana, 1934



Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Hollywood, Florida

1851

First Reservations

To make way for western migration of settlers, Congress authorizes the creation of Indian reservations. By the 1880s, about 60 have been created.

1890

Wounded Knee

1934

Indian "New Deal"

Congress gives tribes greater control over their land and internal affairs. Federal funds are allocated for education, land purchases, and tribal organization.

TODAY

About 3 million people of Native American or Alaskan descent live in the U.S. Though casinos generate billions in revenue, most of the people on the 310 federally recognized reservations in the U.S. face poverty and high unemployment.