

The Wounded Knee Massacre: The Forgotten History of the Native American Gun Confiscation

The Battle at Wounded Knee is a significant battle in American history, as it put an end to the Indian Wars and is marked as the last official defeat of the Native Americans. But what's not taught in history lessons is that Wounded Knee was one of the first federally backed gun confiscations in the history of the United States, and it ended in the massacre of nearly 300 unarmed people.

During the late 19th century, American Indians were allowed to purchase and carry firearms, just as white men were. The colonial gun laws did not bar Native Americans from possessing firearms, yet that natural right was violated by government forces at Wounded Knee. And once the guns were confiscated, the battle ensued.

When we look at the issues surrounding gun confiscation, Wounded Knee gives us an example of the devastation that an unarmed people can experience at the hands of their own government. This battle serves as a reminder to fight against gun confiscation and the gun control legislation that can lead to it.

Leading Up to Wounded Knee

At the beginning of the 19th century, it's estimated that 600,000 American Indians lived on the land that is now the United States. By the end of the century, the people diminished to less than 150,000.

Throughout the 1800s, these nomadic tribes were pushed from the open plains and forests into "Indian Territories," places determined by the U.S. government. It started during the Creek Indian War (1813-1815), when American soldiers, led by Andrew Jackson, won nearly 20 million acres of land from the defeated Creek Indians.

Unlike George Washington, who believed in "civilizing" the Native Americans, Jackson favored an "Indian Removal," and when president in 1830, he signed the Indian Removal Act, which was the first of many U.S. legislations that did not grant the Native Americans the same rights as colonial European-Americans. Davy Crockett was the only delegate from Tennessee to vote against the act.

The Plains Indians, who lived in the plains between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, weren't as impacted by the U.S. government until later in the century, as U.S. expansion pushed into the "Wild West." As people moved passed the Mississippi and into the Frontier, conflicts again arose between the Indians and Americans.

In an attempt at peace in 1851, the first Fort Laramie Treaty was signed, which granted the

Plain Indians about 150 million acres of land for their own use as the Great Sioux Reservation. Then, 13 years later, the size was greatly reduced to about 60 million acres in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which recreated the Great Sioux Reservation boundaries and proclaimed all of South Dakota west of the Missouri river, including the Black Hills, solely for the Sioux Nation.

As part of the treaty, no unauthorized non-Indian was to come into the reservation and the Sioux were allowed to hunt in unceded Indian territory beyond the reservation that stretched into North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado. If any non-Indian wanted to settle on this unceded land, they could only do it with the permission of the Sioux.

That was until 1874, when gold was discovered in South Dakota's Black Hills. The treaties that were signed between the Native Americans and the U.S. government were ignored as gold rushers invaded Indian Territory and issues arose, such as the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

As time went on, the American Indians continued to be pushed into smaller territories and their lives began to diminish. In 1889, the U.S. government issued the Dawes Act, which took the Black Hills from the Indians, broke up the Great Sioux Reservation into five separate reservations, and took nine million acres and opened it up for public purchase by non-Indians for homesteading and settlements.

The Native Americans were squeezed into these smaller territories and didn't have enough game to support them. The bison that had been a staple to their way of life were gone. Their ancestral lands that sustained them were no longer theirs. The resistance was over. They were no longer free people, living amongst themselves, but "Redskins" confined by the "white man" in reservations they had been forced to, many against their will.

With all of the Sioux Nation inhabiting less than nine million acres, divided up throughout South Dakota, the Indians were encouraged by the U.S. government to develop small farms. But they were faced with poor, arid soil and a bad growing season, which led to a severely limited food supply in the year following the Dawes Act. A miscalculation in the census complicated matters even more when the population on the reservation was undercounted, leading to less supplies sent from the U.S. government.

The situation was beyond bleak and the Sioux people were starving. That winter, an influenza epidemic broke out and caused a disproportionate number of Sioux children to die. And then in the summer of 1890, a drought hit, destroying yet another season of crops and the people of Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation were in dire condition.

The Ghost Dance

Perhaps it was these desolate circumstances that led to the spread of what is known as the Ghost Dance. Based on a vision experienced by a Sioux religious leader, the Ghost Dance was a spiritual ritual that was supposed to call the coming messiah, who would be an American Indian. This messiah would force the white man off of Indian lands, return the bison to the plains, and resurrect both their deceased and the life the Native Americans had once enjoyed.

Although this was not a war dance, it was feared by those who believed the Indians were savages. One such man was Daniel Royer, who arrived as the new agent on the Pine Ridge Reservation in October of 1890. He believed it to be a war dance and requested troops from President Benjamin Harrison on November 15th of that same year. His telegram read: "Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy. We need protection and we need it now."

Harrison granted the request and part of the 7th Cavalry arrived on November 20th, with orders to arrest several Sioux leaders. Commander James Forsyth led the troops.

On December 15th, the 7th Cavalry attempted to arrest Sitting Bull, the Sioux chief who annihilated Commander George Custer in the Battle of the Little Bighorn (he also toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and was a dear friend to Annie Oakley), because he didn't attempt to stop the Ghost Dance amongst his people. During the incident, Sitting Bull was shot and killed.

The Lakota at Pine Ridge began to get nervous and the tribe's leader, Big Foot, practiced the Ghost Dance and had caught the attention of the federal agents. After hearing of Sitting Bull's death, he and his tribe fled to the Badlands.

They were pursued by the 7th Cavalry for five days. But Big Foot had come down with pneumonia and they were peacefully intercepted at Wounded Knee Creek on December 28th.

December 29, 1890: The Wounded Knee Massacre

The next morning, Col. Forsyth demanded that the tribe surrender their firearms. Rifles were being turned over without issue until some of the Sioux men started a Ghost Dance and began throwing dirt into the air, as was customary to the dance.

Tensions among the soldiers increased.

A few moments later, a Sioux man named Black Coyote refused to give up his rifle. It's been reported that the Indian was deaf, had recently purchased the rifle, and was most likely unaware of why the soldier was demanding it. Regardless, the two began to skuffle and the gun discharged.

The 7th Cavalry, who was the reconstructed regiment of Custer, opened fire on the Lakota. Along with their own weapons, they used four Hotchkiss guns, a revolving barrel machine gun that could fire 68 rounds per minute, devastating the entire tribe, which had just peacefully handed over their weapons.

The Sioux men, women, and children scattered, and the Cavalry pursued them. Dead bodies were later found three miles from camp.

Once the firing ended, some two hours later, an estimated 300 Native Americans lay dead in the snow, at least half of them women and children. Those that didn't die immediately froze to death during the oncoming blizzard.

Nearly a week later, on January 3, 1891, the Cavalry escorted a burial party to the banks of the Wounded Knee River and they buried 146 Lakota Indians in a single mass grave. Other bodies were found in the surrounding areas, and the estimated body count is between 250 and 300 Sioux.

The 7th Cavalry lost 25 men.

After the Massacre

The Massacre at Wounded Knee brought an end to the Indian Wars. There was no more resistance. The Ghost Dancing stopped.

The Native Americans had been beaten. But the Cavalry's attack was recognized as butchery, with Forsyth's commanding officer, General Nelson Miles, calling it a "criminal military blunder and a horrible massacre of women and children."

However, President Harrison had an election around the corner and wasn't in a position to look bad. Miles' report was dismissed. Instead, the Cavalry men were made out as heroes against the Indian "savages." And in the Spring of 1891, the president awarded the first of 20 Medals of Honor to the soldiers who disarmed then slaughtered the Sioux at Wounded Knee.

It's been speculated that the 7th Cavalry, which again was regrouped after it was destroyed by Sitting Bull at Little Bighorn, was looking for a fight and deliberately sought revenge on the Native Americans.

Black Elk, one of the few Lakota survivors of the Wounded Knee Massacre, recalled in 1931: "I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw 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."