

A non-vanishing people

by [Jennifer Graber](#)

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If you know about only one event in American Indian history, it's probably Custer's Last Stand at the Little Bighorn in 1876. Lakota and Cheyenne Indians repelled Custer's surprise attack, killing more than 250 American soldiers. If you know any other event, it's probably the massacre at Wounded Knee in late December 1890.

Eyewitnesses and historians have debated about what sparked the confrontation between Lakotas and the cavalry. We know that troops rounded up Lakota men in order to disarm them. Historian Jeffrey Ostler, who has pored over the documentary evidence, [put it this way](#): "While the men were being searched a shot was fired. An instant later, the Seventh Cavalry began firing." Some Lakota men reached for their guns, but many were killed within minutes. Lakota women and children scattered. Soldiers chased them and shot them.

While casualty numbers have been disputed, Ostler found that between 270 and 300 Lakotas died or were mortally wounded in the massacre. More than half of these casualties were women or children. Soldiers buried their bodies in a mass grave not far from the massacre site. With these two stories at the forefront of American historical memory, one could have the impression that Native Americans put up a good fight, but were eventually defeated, if not crushed, by U.S. forces.

The two most famous books that tell the Wounded Knee story confirm this impression. In 1970, novelist and historian Dee Brown published [Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West](#). (In 2007, HBO released a [cinematic version](#) of the book). Unlike most histories written at that time, Brown emphasized American offenses against Indians, including theft by unscrupulous officials, treaty breaking and unprovoked violence. Brown ends the book with a bloody recounting of the Wounded Knee massacre, a fitting end to a book arguing that "the culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed" between 1860 and 1890.

Consider also John Neihardt's [Black Elk Speaks](#), the life story of Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota holy man who witnessed parts of the attack. Published in the 1930s but increasingly popular since the 1960s and '70s, Neihardt's book also ends with Wounded Knee. Ostensibly in Black Elk's voice, the book concludes:

I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them 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. It was a beautiful dream . . . for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

Both books provide dramatic endings that emphasize the massacre's tragedy and injustice, an interpretation shared by Lakotas. But the books also characterize the massacre as the end of Indian life, an interpretation that says more about the Anglo-American authors than the Lakotas. For instance, when scholars studied the transcripts of Neihardt's interviews with Black Elk, they found that after recounting the events at Wounded Knee, Black Elk went on to mention getting married two years later. Indeed, Black Elk lived another 60 years as a husband, father, healer and, later, a Catholic catechist. These post-Wounded Knee experiences are absent from Neihardt's book.

Not only have Lakotas continued to marry, have children, and serve their community, they have advocated for their land and rights throughout the 20th century. For instance, in 1911 a Lakota man named Henry Standing Bear served in the new Society of American Indians, a pan-Indian civil rights group seeking better healthcare and education. Lakotas also took the lead in the National Congress of American Indians, which started in 1944 to bolster Indians' position in regard to the federal government. In the late 1960s, Lakotas played a crucial role in the American Indian Movement, which advocated civil rights and an honest recounting of Indian interactions with the United States.

To be sure, contemporary Lakota life differs from 1890. Most Lakotas did not welcome the changes demanded by permanent settlement on a reservation. Many Anglo-Americans, however, have assumed that Lakota life ended when the buffalo disappeared, when wooden houses replaced tipis and when shots were fired at Wounded Knee. They have interpreted the massacre as one more chapter in the story of Indians as "vanishing Americans." They have failed to see that the Lakotas were still there and still are.

If we recognize the Lakotas' cultural persistence and their ongoing struggle for rights, we can see the Wounded Knee massacre another way: it is not simply an injustice to be regretted. Rather, we can appreciate the strength of a community that persisted through such terror and consider how we might seek resolution with the victims' descendants.

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