



Burial of the Dead

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**“THE SAVAGE DANCE OF DEATH:”
THE OMAHA NEWSPAPERS’ COVERAGE OF THE GHOST
DANCE 1890-1891**

**by
Hugh Reilly**

Twenty-two years had passed since the 1868 Treaty at Fort Laramie established the Great Sioux Reservation. It was a desperate time for the Sioux. Historian Robert M. Utley described it in his book, *The Lance and the Shield*:

... The reservations had destroyed the very foundations of the Indian way of life. The customs, values and institutions of war and the hunt –overwhelmingly the central concerns of the people in the old days –withered into nostalgic memory. The government warred on spiritual beliefs and practices, on the office of chief, and on the tribe itself, which provided the political setting and kinship ties that held the people together in meaningful relationship. For the loss, the government offered only unsatisfying substitutes: plows, work oxen, log houses, schools, and Christian churches, together with an alien, repugnant ideal of what people should strive to be. That the Sioux could not help giving up the old, that they could not help sampling or even embracing some of the new, that the ordeal fractured them into "progressive" and "non-progressive" only deepened the malaise. By 1890 all the Lakota tribes verged perilously on cultural breakdown.¹

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The Sioux were ripe for the coming of the latest Indian messiah, Wovoka, and his message of a return to the old ways. Wovoka was a Paiute, living in Nevada close to Lake Tahoe. On New Year's Day in 1889 there was a solar eclipse in Nevada. The Paiutes called it "the day the sun died." According to historian Rex Allen Smith, on that same day, Wovoka had a vision that he was taken to heaven. He was told the old world was to be destroyed and replaced by a fresh one. The dead would live again and everyone would be young and happy. The buffalo would return and the white man would disappear. All the Indians had to do was to perform the dance of the souls departed -- the ghost dance.²

Wovoka's vision was peaceful, but as it radiated out to other Indians it was imbued with the flavor of individual tribes. The Sioux added a strain of militarism. Smith stated, "...the Sioux read more hostility to the whites into the prophet's words than did the other tribes. When the Sioux thought they had heard Wovoka speaking of knocking the soldiers 'into nothingness,' other tribes heard him to say that he would send soldiers against any tribe that 'misbehaved.' And whereas the Sioux believed he had come to earth for the Indians alone and would destroy any Indian who 'tried to be on the white's side,' others understood that he had come for all of God's children and that 'all whites and Indians are brothers...they are going to be all one people.' However, all of the tribes that adopted the Ghost Dance religion agreed that their domination by the whites was soon to end and that a beautiful new world was coming in which everyone would live forever..."³

Adding volatility to the mix was the Sioux leader Sitting Bull, who had returned with his people to the United States from Canada in July of 1881. Life on the reservation did not suit him and he longed for the old ways. Among his own people, he became a symbol of resistance and a hindrance to the plans of men such as James McLaughlin, agent at Standing Rock Reservation. Elements of the frontier press alternately feared and despised him.

It is likely that the Ghost Dance would have spread on the Sioux reservations anyway, but Sitting Bull's support lent a potent symbol to the cause of the new religion. For a people who had seen their way of life unalterably changed, requiring adjustment to strange new customs and

rhythms, the lure of a return to the old ways that the Ghost Dance promised was hard to resist. There were no reliable figures regarding the number of converts to the new religion across the Sioux reservations, but it is thought that perhaps one-third of the Sioux were involved in the dance at some time. The largest group of dancers, perhaps 3,500 people, was located in a section of the Bad Lands northwest of the Pine Ridge Agency that came to be known as the Stronghold.⁴

The new religion, which drew heavily from Christian tenets and beliefs, resulted in increasing numbers of Indians professing a belief in the Christian God. In addition, Wovoka told the Indians to farm and send all of their children to school. These were all things that should have been desirable to the white man. In fact, one of the primary duties of an Indian agent was to replace native religious beliefs with Christian dogma. It would seem that the new Indian religion was doing just that. However, Standing Rock agent James McLaughlin called it an "absurd craze" and described the dance as "demoralizing, indecent and disgusting." He found no reason to change his opinion when he finally witnessed a dance a month after submitting his original assessment.⁵

Historian Elmo Scott Watson states that although the Ghost Dance was called variously an "uprising," an "outbreak" and a "war," it was "none of these -- except in the columns of the contemporary press." He quotes Dr. Valentine T. McGillicuddy, former Indian Agent at Pine Ridge, as telling General L. W. Colby, commander of Nebraska's mobilized state troops, on January 21, 1891, that no citizen of either Nebraska or Dakota has been killed or molested and that no property had been destroyed off the reservation. Watson adds that when it seemed likely that the Sioux would again "take the warpath, the journalistic practices of a quarter of a century earlier were repeated. Unverified rumors were presented as 'reports from reliable sources' or 'eye-witness accounts;' idle gossip became fact; and once more a large number of the nation's newspapers indulged in a field day of exaggeration, distortion and plain faking."⁶

The Omaha *World-Herald* took an early editorial stance on the new Indian religion when it commented on the Ghost Dance in a story headlined, "Let Them Alone," it declared that:

...The United States takes this matter very stupidly--it always takes everything connected with the Indians stupidly. Troops have been sent to the agencies most affected by this belief, and all the ministers are preaching fiercely against this new Jesus and endeavoring to break up the "Jesus dance." All this is but a part of the general impression which this government and the people in it have always cherished, that the Indian has no right to any ideas of his own, or indeed to any nationality of his own.

The Indian is not an idolater. He is distinctly religious. His ideas concerning the unknown are far from contemptible, yet they have never been respected and they are not respected now....⁷

Although the first news stories, concerned mostly with the religious aspects of the Ghost Dance, mentioned fears of a general Indian uprising, there had been no overt panic among the frontier citizens. That all began to change by mid-November of 1890. According to a wire story in the *World-Herald*, settlers in North Dakota were abandoning their ranches and farms because they felt unprotected and vulnerable to Indian attack. Reports circulated that the Indians were armed with "Custer's rifles, which had never been found," and that local hardware men had sold out all their ammunition to the Indians.⁸

Historian Elmo Scott Watson wrote that these settlers worked themselves into such a panic that they abandoned their ranches. Sometimes even whole villages were deserted. These people fled into railroad cities with "vivid stories of murder, scalping and desolation that had no foundation whatever in fact." Watson adds that "Apparently the degree of alarm was in reverse ratio to the nearness of the 'theater of war.' Country weeklies took the 'danger' much more calmly than did their daily brethren in the more distant big cities."⁹

On November 18, 1890, troop trains left Omaha bound for the Sioux reservations. With the soldiers were several newspaper correspondents, including some from the Omaha newspapers. Charles H. Cressey

represented the *Bee*, and Carl Smith initially represented the *World-Herald*. They would become much more than mere reporters:

...Smith and Cressey proved to be not only reporters of, but catalysts for the events that followed their arrival. The *Omaha Bee* was a gossipy tabloid, strewn with stories about sex, violence, crime and intrigue. In his first report, wired when he was en-route from Cody, Nebraska, Cressey wrote about the Sioux who had been traveling with the Wild West show. His story hinted of dark and diabolic conversations and of their furtive glances out the windows and gestures toward the familiar landscapes that they had last seen three years previously. He interpreted these actions as a prelude to an Indian plot to attack the train at Valentine. There confederates of the returning Sioux would join those on the train and thus begin the rumored revolution. This report was typical of the ones that Cressey would later file. He depended on imagination, rumor, and hearsay to keep his stories exciting. Whether by assignment or disposition, Cressey's stories about Pine Ridge seethed with impending violence and conflict. His sensational accounts spread to newspapers around the nation and, amazingly, he became a prime source of information about the Pine Ridge troubles....¹⁰

The *World-Herald's* Smith developed an early antagonistic relationship with Dr. Daniel F. Royer, the newly appointed agent at the Pine Ridge Agency. Smith was unusually blunt in his reporting. He opined that since the presence of the troops was a major boon to the local economy, the locals would invent "cock and bull" stories just to keep them there.¹¹

In headlines that screamed "Fears of an Ambush" and "A Squaw's Warning," the *Bee* continued to report on the trouble that always seemed to be just on the verge of erupting into a full-scale Indian war. One headline even read "False Rumors of A Real Battle."¹²

Cressey, the *Bee*'s primary correspondent, delighted in painting a graphic picture of the situation in South Dakota. He made the most mundane event seem sinister. For example, he predicted that the Indians would "make a charge and stampede the beef herd" at the next beef rationing. Of course, he did not explain that this had been standard practice for years and was simply a pale reenactment of the traditional buffalo hunt. Instead of admitting that nothing new was happening, he sent back stories headlined, "The Redskins are Dancing—the Much Dreaded Ghost Dance" and "Crazed Red Men Continue to Look for Promised Messiah." ¹³

In stark contrast to the excited prose of the *Bee*, the *World-Herald* had a more measured approach to the events in the Dakotas. In an editorial headlined "No Need For War," the paper cautioned its readers not to get too caught up in all the melodrama:

Patriotism has not died in the piping times of peace. On the contrary, if one is to judge by present signs, it has grown. From every town in Nebraska come the courageous cries of young men, pining to die on the altar of their country. They wish to arm themselves and rush upon an Indian reservation, in spite of the fact that treaties signed by the always trusting Indian, specifically agreed that soldiers should not again set foot upon those reservations. But then why should young men concern themselves with matters of moral responsibility when the government does not do so? But what has the government to do with moral responsibility anyway -- especially where the Indian is concerned.

...They stand with their faces to the setting sun, thinking of all this till oblivion falls upon their overwrought senses. That is, they are afflicted with a contagious hysteria. So were many of the early Christians. So were the British Druids. So were the Crusaders. So were the followers of Mahomet. So has been many a holy monk in his cell. So were the pioneer Methodists, the civilizers of the great central west. And yet, no arms were

brought to bear on them. No retributions were prepared in the shape of a Hotchkiss gun or otherwise....¹⁴

While the *World-Herald* headlines announced "Still No Fighting" and "The Situation Improving,"¹⁵ the *Bee's* headlines during the same few days screamed "Fanatical Ghost Dancers Threaten Anyone Who Interferes" and "Their Orgies Wilder Than Ever."¹⁶ It was hard to believe that the two newspapers were covering the same event.

The *Bee* seemed to relish the idea that it was driving public opinion in the ghost dance business. It took credit for a flood of "Appeals for Aid and Arms," citing an exclusive story it had run in its morning paper. "Since the publication in the *Bee* exclusively this morning of the proposed plot of the supposed friendly Indians to murder all of General [John Rutter] Brooke's forces a panic seems to have seized the settlers living near the Pine Ridge agency. All day long telegrams have come pouring into Governor Thayer's office appealing for aid and arms."¹⁷ Of course the plot was non-existent, and the expected massacre never occurred, but that did not seem to matter to the *Bee* or its correspondent.

Even as the end of November 1890 rolled around, the *World-Herald* continued to downplay the threat of trouble at Pine Ridge. In an editorial, it referred to General Nelson A. Miles' claim that the frontier troubles were more of a "correspondents' than an Indian scare." The paper replied that Miles was mistaken that some correspondents, and particularly the correspondent from the *World-Herald*, have claimed almost from the first that the alarm was unjustified. It added that everyone except Agent Royer now admitted that it had all been a "tempest in a teapot."

The feud between Smith and Royer continued through the latter half of November 1890. Royer threatened to expel Smith several times and each time he did, Smith responded with a personal attack in the pages of the *World-Herald*. Smith stated, "you would not put a man who never saw a cow at the head of a big cattle company. Yet the Indian department goes even further than that and selects men who never saw an Indian to run Indian agencies."¹⁸ In a later article, Smith stated that Royer's lack of experience and nerve was responsible for the Indian scare. He referred to Royer's threats to expel him and said that his bosses at the paper had

told him to "hold his ground." Smith called Royer "manifestly unfit for the job"¹⁹

Historian Elmo Scott Watson described Smith as a "brash youngster with journalistic shortcomings." According to Watson, in addition to criticizing Royer, Smith also "made himself *persona non grata* with the military."²⁰ This latest attack proved to be too much for Agent Royer and the *World-Herald* was forced to recall Smith. The paper replaced him with two familiar names, Thomas H. Tibbles, who also served as a correspondent for the Chicago *Express*, and his wife Suzette La Flesche, also known as Bright Eyes. She was one of the first female war correspondents to be officially employed by any American newspaper and was certainly America's first female, Native American war correspondent.

Bright Eye's reporting on the action is a little-known, but truly remarkable, occurrence. It may not have been an attempt to provide balance and accuracy, but simply a cynical ploy to create reader's interest due to the novelty of an Indian woman reporting on an Indian "War." Nevertheless, her reporting did provide a unique perspective missing from the coverage of earlier Indian Wars.

Typical of her writings was an article that attempted to explain the "Messiah scare." Headlined, "What Bright Eyes Thinks," her article attempted to give the *World-Herald's* readers a glimpse of the ghost dance from an Indian perspective:

...Picture to yourself the effect were you to have lived your life thus far with all its dissatisfactions, unsatisfied aspirations and weariness, without having heard of the life of Christ, and someone were to come suddenly before you, someone in whom you had perfect faith and trust, and were to tell you for the first time the story of the Bible in all its simplicity, and of a deliverer who would satisfy all your needs and aspirations. Would you not feel tempted to believe because of your need? And if you have lived all your lives in the environment which the highest known to the world has brought around you, a civilization based on the idea of the Messiah, can you not realize what that story

would seem when told to a human being for the first time, even though the human being were only an Indian who had lived all his life without the blessings of your civilization....

...I have no doubt that the excitement in the belief of the Messiah's coming added to the excitement of the religious dances. Many knowing of no other way by which they could do homage to the coming deliverer, wrought the Sioux up to such a pitch that a newly arrived agent in his alarm would call for help....The best thing for the agent to have done, and what I believe an experienced agent would have done, would have been to have gone among the peace abiding element of the Indian community and interested the leading men whose opinion had weight with the others to cooperate with him in persuading the Indians to drop the dancing of their own accord for the time being....²¹

In contrast, the *Bee's* correspondent painted an insulting picture of "cigar sign models" who sat all day in the same spot "absolutely motionless." Cressey added that if one speaks to the Indians, all you receive in return is a "grunt and a foolish look." He described the reservation as a place which must be monotonous in normal circumstances. He stated, "Without the trimmings and spirit given it by reflections from the ghost dance and the military, life on Indian reservations must be dull enough to cause the half-animated, long-haired, blanket-swathed musk bags that make up nine-tenths of the inhabitants, swim their teepee in tears and then go blind."²²

In response to some of the sensational stories printed in the eastern papers, the *World-Herald's* Tibbles stated that there was "not a word of truth in them. There has been no fight and no bloodshed. A part of the hostiles have come in."²³ Tibbles added that he thought all of the hostiles except sixty lodges would come in right away and there would be no war. "Everything looks favorable and there cannot possibly be any damage inflicted upon settlers in the Black Hills by roving bands of Indians, as there is now a cordon of troops between the hostiles and the ranchmen.

The dispatches are highly colored and sensational in the extreme. If trouble occurs, it will be outside of the hills in the Bad Lands."²⁴ Tibbles was absolutely correct. There was no possible danger for area settlers. The Indians were completely surrounded by thousands of troops. And the trouble, when it finally did occur, happened in the unpopulated Badlands.

On December 10, 1890, under pressure from agent McLaughlin, General Miles ordered General Thomas Ruger to "secure the person of Sitting Bull using any practical means."²⁵ Shortly before 6:00 a.m. on December 15, Indian policemen arrived at Sitting Bull's cabin to arrest him. According to historian Robert M. Utley, Sitting Bull initially agreed to go peacefully, but as he was leaving his cabin a crowd began to gather. They jostled the policemen and shouted at them to release Sitting Bull, who began to struggle with his captors. Catch-the-Bear, one of Sitting Bull's followers, shot Bull Head, one of the policemen. As he fell, Bull Head fired a shot into Sitting Bull's chest, and Red Tomahawk, another policeman, fired a shot into the back of the unarmed Sitting Bull's skull, killing him instantly. A fierce, brutal battle then erupted and when it was all over Sitting Bull, his young son Crow Foot, and six other tribesmen lay dead. In addition, four policemen were dead and three were wounded, two of them mortally.²⁶

Both the *Bee* and the *World-Herald* carried the same wire story on the death of Sitting Bull in their December 16, 1890 editions. The article did not include many details except to report that Sitting Bull and several other Indians had been killed when Indian policemen sent to arrest the chief became embroiled in a struggle with his followers.²⁷ The *Bee* included a brief summary of Sitting Bull's life stating that he had "probably done as much 'injun devilment' in his time as any savage since Tecumseh."²⁸

In contrast, in an editorial published just a day after the news of Sitting Bull's death was printed in its paper, the *World-Herald* called for someone to accept responsibility for the chief's death:

Somebody is responsible for the death of Sitting Bull and the other Indians killed at the same time. The killing was only part

of the unwarranted severity and oppression that the United States is now inflicting on the Indians.

Somebody is responsible. Not those, merely, who did the killing. Nor those merely who ordered the military to the scene of the so-called trouble. Nor those merely who misjudged the danger and called for troops. Nor even those who annually cheat, rob and despoil the miserable red men through Indian rings. Not one of these alone, but altogether, forming as they do, our so-called "system" are responsible for the unhappy death of Sitting Bull....

There seems to be no end to the blunders, crimes and atrocities into which the government is led in the treatment of the Indians.

It is time for a change.²⁹

The *Bee's* Cressey stated that the news of Sitting Bull's death had, "thus far produced no excitement whatever among the Indians here, though none can tell what they are thinking about." He added, "...The fact is, however, that Bull was considered during the last years of his life a little better than the average coffee cooler, a term synonymous with a vagabond. At least such is the estimation in which he was held by very many, if not all, the friendlies here."³⁰ However, a contradictory story in the *Bee* two days later was headlined, "The Warriors of the Dead Chief Bound to Have Blood."³¹ The *Bee* couldn't seem to make up its mind if Sitting Bull was to be feared or ridiculed.

The *World-Herald* credited Bright Eyes with remaining calm instead of reacting with "rage" at the degradation of her "race." It stated "...the racial placidity of Bright Eyes comes to her protection even in this fevered hour. From her height she sweeps a calm eye over all the puerile tumult and wonders what the Great Father thinks of this petty show of church and state, of masquerading civilization and undisguised savagery in which a nation is slowly going down and out."³²

Despite the flowery praise, Tibbles, in his book *Buckskin and Blanket Days*, said the *World-Herald* and the *Chicago Express* were not always satisfied with their reporting:

...Our newspapers had grown indignant with us for not turning in anything interesting about this "great Indian war" all around us. Other dailies had whole columns of thrilling stuff, but our readers, finding no exciting "news from the front," flung down their papers in disgust. Because we absolutely refused to manufacture tales about a "war" which simply did not exist, we soon were sharply ordered home as complete failures. Only a personal appeal to the various powers from General Miles...made it possible for us to stay on at Pine Ridge, where we so greatly wanted to stay until we could see the whole problem solved -- thinking that we might help somehow to bring about a peaceful solution.³³

While Tibbles and Bright Eyes were searching for a peaceful solution, the final, tragic, players had entered the stage. A mixed band of Sioux Indians under Minneconjou chief Big Foot had fled the Cheyenne River reservation. Frightened that the killing of Sitting Bull might be the first action in an all out war, Big Foot headed for the safety of Pine Ridge hoping that Red Cloud could protect his people. It was feared that Big Foot was heading to the Bad Lands to join the hostiles. Major Samuel Whitside, with four troops of the Seventh Cavalry, was ordered to capture him.³⁴ The *World-Herald* reported that Big Foot had "eluded the troops and joined the hostiles,"³⁵ and the *Bee* reported that "Slippery Big Foot" had deceived the soldiers and slipped away.³⁶

Elmo Scott Watson relates that the correspondents hanging around Pine Ridge thought that the military would have no trouble rounding up Big Foot, so the majority decided to stay where they were, believing that the expected surrender of Kicking Bear, a leader of the ghost dance, would be a much bigger story. Only William Fitch Kelley of the *Nebraska State Journal*, Charles W. Allen of the *Chadron Democrat*, and Cressey of the *Bee* accompanied Whitside's troops.³⁷ Undecided on the

importance of the story, Tibbles of the *World-Herald* waited two hours before grabbing a horse and following.³⁸

Near Wounded Knee Creek, Big Foot, and his band of 120 men and 230 women and children, were intercepted by Whitside commanding Custer's old Seventh Cavalry. It was December 28, 1890. Later that night Whitside's superior, Colonel James W. Forsyth, assumed command and told Whitside that the Indians were to be disarmed and shipped to a military prison in Omaha, Nebraska.³⁹

Big Foot had developed pneumonia on the flight through the Bad Lands and was now so weak he could barely sit up. Despite his illness, a council was called and Forsyth told the assembled warriors they would be asked to give up their guns. Fearful of being unarmed and vulnerable, Big Foot decided to give up his broken and useless guns and keep the good guns handy. The following day when the Indians turned over their guns the soldiers collected an assortment of broken and outdated weapons. Forsyth and Whitside knew there were more guns, so they ordered a search of the camp to gather up all the remaining weapons. It was a delicate process because it could easily lead to a violent reaction. As a precaution, only officers were allowed to enter teepees and search the women.⁴⁰

Despite all of these prudent efforts, the tension began to increase palpably. Yellow Bird, a Minneconjou medicine man, started to dance and chant and he threw handfuls of dirt into the air. He called upon the young men to have brave hearts and told them their ghost shirts would protect them from the soldier's bullets. The soldiers began to search the men for weapons and one young man leapt to his feet angrily holding aloft his gun and saying he had paid good money for it and would not give it up. Some Indian witnesses said he was named Black Coyote and others said it was a man named Hosi Yanka which means "deaf." Two soldiers came behind the young man and tried to seize his weapon. In the scuffle it went off. At that point several young warriors threw off their blankets and fired a brief volley into the soldier's ranks. Lieutenant James Mann remembered thinking "The pity of it! What can they be thinking of?" Almost simultaneously the soldier's lines erupted with fire. Big Foot was one of the first to die.⁴¹

The soldiers had surrounded the camp. As they fired at the Indians some of their bullets carried through the crowd and hit their fellows on the opposite side of the camps. Many of the Indians who had survived the initial fury slipped away into a nearby ravine and sought protection from the lethal fighting. It proved to be a deadly mistake. Now that the Indians had separated from the soldiers, the Hotchkiss guns on the ridge began to rake the camp with a withering fire. As more and more Indians sought the refuge of the ravine, the deadly artillery turned its attention there and began to rain shells on the crowded mass of Indians. Men, women and children were slaughtered in its close confines. Only a few survived the murderous barrage. Some survivors were hunted down and killed miles from the camp. The exact number of Indian dead is not known, but it is certain that at least 170 were killed, most of them women and children.⁴² There were also casualties among the soldiers, 25 killed and 39 wounded, most caused by friendly fire.⁴³

Thomas H. Tibbles had decided there would be no trouble and he had left the camp in the morning to get his dispatches to the telegraph office at Pine Ridge. He had not gone far when he heard a single shot, quickly followed by several more. By the time he returned, most of the fighting was over and he was witness only to the rounding up of the few survivors. However, he was able to interview participants shortly after the event.⁴⁴ The *Bee's* Cressey was present when the gunfire erupted. Historian Watson stated that "...the part Cressey played in the fight is not known. It is probable that he saw at least part of the fighting, but it is doubtful that he had any such valorous role as he later claimed."⁴⁵

The *Bee* was the first to carry a story on the battle at Wounded Knee. It rushed a brief account that made it into the evening edition of the paper the same day the battle occurred. The story headlined "A Bloody Battle," and "Many Red Devils Bite the Dust" covered only the basic fact that a battle had occurred and there had been heavy casualties.⁴⁶

The *Bee* carried a report from Cressey in the following day's edition. With headlines that trumpeted "Ghastly Work of Treacherous Reds" and "Capt. [George] Wallace Tomahawked to Death." After briefly describing the soldier's search of the Indians for weapons, the *Bee* stated:

...About a dozen of the warriors had been searched when , like a flash, all the rest of them jerked guns from under their blankets and began pouring bullets into the ranks of the soldiers who, a few moments before, had moved up within gun length. Those Indians who had no guns rushed on the soldiers with tomahawk in one hand and scalping knife in the other....

...Their first volley was almost as one man, so that they must have fired a hundred shots before the soldiers fired one. But how they were slaughtered after their first volley.

The troops were at a great disadvantage fearing the shooting of their own companions. The Indian men, women and children then ran to the south the battery firing on them rapidly. Soon the mounted troops were after them, shooting them down on every side. To the south many took refuge in a ravine, from which it was difficult to dislodge them. It is estimated that the soldiers killed and wounded about fifty. Just now it is impossible to state the exact number of dead Indians....

...To say that it was a most daring feat, 120 Indians attacking 500 cavalry, expresses the situation but faintly. It could only have been insanity which prompted such resistance. The members of the Seventh cavalry have once more shown themselves to be heroes in deeds of daring. Single handed conflicts were seen all over the field. In the first rush of the Indians those of them who had no guns attacked the troopers with knives, clubs and tomahawks.⁴⁷

The *World-Herald* took a different approach in its coverage of the conflict at Wounded Knee. Its first story on the battle was headlined "All Murdered in a Mass," with subheads such as "Big Foot and His Followers Shot Without Regard to Sex" and "Men Women and Children Said to Have Been Shot Wherever Found." The *World-Herald* reported the same

basic facts as the *Bee*, but treated the event as a massacre and not a battle. It reported:

...Nearly all the bucks were killed off. There are only a handful left. Whether Big Foot survived is not reported, particulars at this hour being meager.

The Indians scouts who have come in say that but few of Big Foot's band are left....

...It is said that when the Major [James W. Forsyth] took them they were coming into the agency and endeavoring to elude the troops so that their surrender might be made to appear voluntary. They were half starved, the reports of quantities of jerked beef stored in the Bad Lands being a fiction of the half breeds and squaw men.⁴⁸

In an editorial, the *World-Herald* called Wounded Knee a "Crime Against Civilization" and outlined its anger and regret over the causes of the conflict:

The first blood has been shed in this absurd and criminal war upon the Indians. A large number of Indians are dead, a few officers and soldiers—and for what reason? What is the principle for which they are fighting? What sentiment dignifies and raises it from the low estate of murder to that of war?

It is proper now to cast a reflective eye back over the last few weeks. A body of half starved Indians indulged in a religious ecstasy which made them forget for a time the cold in their teepees and their empty cupboard. A foolish and apprehensive agent grew as hysterical as the Indians, and begged for help. The help came in the shape of troops. Meanwhile, the Indians, fearful of being killed, ran away to the Bad Lands, and the settlers, fearful of being killed, ran for the cities. The settlers

were not asked to return. They were extended sympathy. But the Indians were immediately termed "hostiles," and the government resolved to bring them back, if need be, at the point of a bayonet...

It is not the injustice of slaughtering the Indians alone that the *World-Herald* laments. It is asking the soldiers of this country to die on a field on which there can be no honor except that created by their own bravery—a field unbeautiful by a cause for which any man would care to die. It is a crime, this war, and the soldiers and the Indians alike are the victims....⁴⁹



Gathering of the Dead, Wounded Knee South Dakota
Photo courtesy Denver Public Library/Historical Photo Collection

Calling it "A Deadly Triangle," the *Bee* predicted that Wounded Knee was just the first of many battles and that "further desperate fighting will occur there seems no doubt." The paper stated that 156 Indians had "bit the dust" among them 40 "squaws." It claimed the "squaws were not killed with particular intent, notwithstanding that they had been running around with scalping knives trying to stab the soldiers. They were killed principally by reason of being so mixed with squads of bucks that made dashes to the ravines and were mowed down by the battery."⁵⁰ In fact, there would be no more "battles" and the vast majority of the casualties of this one were women and children.

Giving the other side of the story, Bright Eyes told of wounded Indian mothers with their babies and the agonies endured bravely by the injured in a story headlined "Horrors of War,"

...There was a woman sitting on the floor with a wounded baby on her lap and four or five children around her, all her grandchildren. Their father and mother were killed. There was a young woman shot through both thighs and her wrist broken.

Mr. Tibbles had to get a pair of pliers to get her rings off. There was a little boy with his throat apparently shot to pieces.

...They were all hungry and when we fed this little boy we found he could swallow. We gave him some gruel and he grabbed with both his little hands a dipper of water. When I saw him yesterday afternoon, he looked worse than the day before, and when they feed him now, the food and water come out of the side of his neck....

...I have been thus particular in giving horrible details in the hope of rousing such an indignation that another such causeless war shall never again be allowed by the people of the United States.

Soldiers and Indians have lost their lives through the fault of somebody who goes scot free from all the consequences or blame....The Sioux firmly believe it has been brought about because their land was wanted. If the white people want their land and must have it, they can go about getting it some other way than by forcing it from them by starving them or provoking them to war and sacrificing the lives of innocent women and children, and through the suffering of the wives and children of officers and soldiers....⁵¹

While the *World-Herald* was trying to convince its readers that there should never be another Wounded Knee, the *Bee* was warning its readers that the "greatest battle in Indian history is almost at hand."⁵² Never one to shy away from self-congratulation, the *Bee* sought to bolster its opinions by quoting the Kearney *Hub* as stating that of the three war correspondents for Nebraska newspapers present at Pine Ridge, the best reports came from the *Bee*, with the *Lincoln Journal's* reports second and the "poorest reports of all" coming from the *World-Herald*.⁵³

Once the bodies had been counted and a little time had passed, the nation's newspapers began asking for answers to their question of who was to blame for the Wounded Knee tragedy. The *World-Herald* identified several villains, including Colonel James Forsyth. When General Miles relieved Forsyth from command, the paper headlined its story "He Will Answer Before a Court Martial for the Big Foot Butchery." The story, however, was not as accusatory as its headline. The *World-Herald* claimed that the Army's principal accusation against Forsyth was that he had placed his troops so that when the battle began they fired upon each other.⁵⁴ Despite General Miles' best efforts, Forsyth was found to have acted reasonably and was eventually restored to command.⁵⁵

Historian Smith stated that prior to Wounded Knee most of the nation's press had been 'hollering for blood.' He added:

...And there is substantial evidence indicating that without the newspaper's distortion of the facts and a continual agitation of

both whites and Indians, there would not have been a battle of Wounded Knee....But once it had obtained the blood it was "hollering for," much of the press had faced about and began working the other side of the street. Consequently, the Indians they had been calling "treacherous" and "murderous" were now "innocent victims," and soldiers they had been picturing as heroic defenders of the frontier were now murderers and were guilty of "slaughter without provocation." This was especially true of the Democratic newspapers [such as the *World-Herald*], for in Wounded Knee they saw a chance to brand the Republican administration with the guilt of a brutal bloodletting.⁵⁶

The *Bee* did not think the Indians were innocent victims. It was outraged by Forsyth's removal and felt sure he would be exonerated. It still expected a bloody climax to the troubles and featured headlines such as "Omens of Bloodshed" and "Terrified Settlers Desert Their Homes and Swarm into Town."⁵⁷ The paper also found time to run a brief story from the Philadelphia *Ledger* that praised Cressey's coverage of the ghost dance troubles and compared him to other "great" war correspondents.⁵⁸

While the *Bee* was accepting praise for its war coverage, the *World-Herald* was still looking for someone to blame:

Somebody is to blame that over thirty brave soldiers lie dead and forty more are suffering from their wounds, that over 300 Indians, men, women and children, lie dead under a winter sky with coyotes and dogs preying on their unburied bodies, and over 4,000 destitute people are fleeing from their homes in midwinter, fearing the same fate....

...Of course the Indian is always to blame. He neither writes nor owns a newspaper. His opinions are never consulted. He has been starved, robbed and lied to until he has no right to expect anything else and he should at once be put to death or

lamey submit to an unending succession of Royers that will be inflicted upon him whether he wants them or not.

Yet we are a Christian people, for murder, starvation and death is still the portion of the heathen as it was in the days of Pizzarro, Cortez and the noble Pilgrims of New England.⁵⁹

The fears of the *Bee* and the *World-Herald* were never realized. Within two weeks the "war" was over. On January 13, 1891, the Bee declared, "The End Almost In Sight,"⁶⁰ and on January 17, 1891 it announced, "The Indian War is Over."⁶¹ A "war" that had begun with panic over the pathetic attempt by the Indians to dance back the old days, and was fueled by wild stories from breathless correspondents, had ended with a whimper.

Historian Elmo Scott Watson stated that "Despite all their violations of news writing principles—rumor-mongering, exaggeration, distortion and faking—the corps of correspondents who covered the Ghost Dance troubles...are entitled to some recognition in the history of American journalism..."⁶² Author Oliver Knight was not as kind. He felt that Wounded Knee was not journalism's finest hour. He wrote, "With rumor, exaggeration, distortion and falsifying, despite some accurate reporting, the reporters at Pine Ridge signed an unfitting '30' [end of story] to newspaper coverage of the Western war."⁶³

In the last third of the nineteenth century, the Indians of the Plains had gone from being rulers of thousands of square miles of territory to paupers cooped up on parcels of barren land. Much had changed in the newspaper business as well. Improvements in technology and a settling of the frontier, meant that a story about the battle of Wounded Knee appeared in the evening edition of an Omaha paper on the same day that the event took place. In contrast, just 14 years earlier, it took 12 days for the news of Custer's death to reach the readers of Omaha's newspapers. However, not everything had changed. Indian stereotypes popular in 1868, found renewed popularity in 1890.

While neither paper was entirely accurate in its coverage of the events, the *World-Herald* generally refrained from making bold claims

and tended to downplay the reports of bloodshed and imminent disaster that were featured almost daily in the *Bee*. In contrast, the *Bee* gleefully reported on battles that had never taken place and once even went so far as to report specific casualties for a non-existent battle. The *Bee* also made frequent predictions of disaster and warned almost daily of a massive uprising that would engulf the west in a wave of blood and fire. It often assured its readers that within 24 or 48 hours a catastrophe was certain to occur. When disaster did not occur, it blithely ignored its earlier predictions and crowed that it was widely viewed as having the most accurate grasp of the "facts."

The *World-Herald*, on the other hand, went out of its way to provide balance to its coverage of the events. It actively sought out the Indian side of the story and presented a measured tone throughout its coverage. It even took the unprecedented step of employing an Omaha Indian as one of its correspondents, in hopes that she would provide a valuable insight into Sioux beliefs and practices.

It is not totally clear whether the *Bee* really understood the significance of Wounded Knee and the events that led up to it. It may have perceived that it was only a feeble attempt by the Indians to forestall the inevitable. However, if only for the sake of selling newspapers, it portrayed the events as a harbinger of a catastrophic assault on the white settlers and their cherished way of life. Its competitor, the *World-Herald*, recognized the true significance of the events and lamented the starvation, ignorance and greed that ultimately led to the suffering and slaughter of innocent men, women and children.

NOTES

1. Robert M. Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York, Henry Holt & Company Inc., 1993), 281.
2. Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of the Popping Trees: The Tragedy of Wounded Knee and the End of the Indian Wars*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 67-68.
3. Smith, *Moon of the Popping Trees*, 74.
4. Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 12
5. Jensen, Paul and Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee*, 6.

6. Elmo Scott Watson, "The Last Indian War, 1890-1891 -- A Study of Newspaper Jingoism," *Journalism Quarterly* 20 (September 1943), 205
7. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 8, 1890, 2.
8. *Ibid*, November 17, 1890, 1.
9. Watson, "Newspaper Jingoism," 206.
10. *Ibid*, 44.
11. *Ibid*, 47.
12. *Omaha Bee*, November 20, 1890, 1.
13. *Ibid*, November 21, 1890, 1.
14. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 23, 1890, 2.
15. *Ibid.*, 1.
16. *Omaha Bee*, November 22, 1890, 1.
17. *Ibid*, November 24, 1890, 7.
18. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 28, 1890, 1.
19. *Ibid*, December 1, 1890, 1.
20. Watson, "Newspaper Jingoism," 211.
21. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 7, 1890, 1
22. *Omaha Bee*, December 8, 1890, 3.
23. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 12, 1890, 1.
24. *Ibid*, December 13, 1890, 1.
25. Utley, *The Lance and The Shield*, 293.
26. *Ibid*, 300-303.
27. *Omaha Bee*, December 16, 1890, 1.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
29. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 17, 1890, 2.
30. *Omaha Bee*, December 17, 1890, 1.
31. *Ibid*, December 19, 1890, 1.
32. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 18, 1890, 1
33. Thomas H. Tibbles, *Buckskin and Blanket Days*, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1957), 305.
34. Watson, "Newspaper Jingoism," 212.
35. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 26, 1890, 1.
36. *Omaha Bee*, December 27, 1890, 5.
37. Watson, "Newspaper Jingoism," 213.
38. Tibbles, *Buckskin and Blanket Days*, 309.
39. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) 414-415.
40. Smith, *Moon of the Popping Trees*, 184-186.
41. *Ibid*, 188-190.
42. *Ibid*, 193-197.
43. Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 418.
44. Tibbles, *Buckskin and Blanket Days*, 311-312.

45. Watson, "Newspaper Jingoism," 214.
46. *Omaha Bee*, December 29, 1890, 1.
47. *Ibid*, December 30, 1890, 1.
48. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 30, 1890, 1.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
50. *Omaha Bee*, December 31, 1890, 1.
51. *Omaha World-Herald*, January 2, 1891, 1.
52. *Omaha Bee*, January 5, 1891, 1.
53. *Ibid*.
54. *Omaha World Herald*, January 5, 1891, 1.
55. Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees*, 202-203.
56. *Ibid*, 203
57. *Omaha Bee*, January 6, 1891, 1.
58. *Ibid*, January 7, 1891, 1.
59. *Omaha World-Herald*, January 4, 1891, 2.
60. *Omaha Bee*, January 13, 1891, 5.
61. *Ibid*, January 17, 1891, 1.
62. Watson, "Newspaper Jingoism," 219.
63. Oliver Knight, *Following the Indian Wars* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1960) 315