

This Day in History... December 29, 1890

Wounded Knee Massacre

On December 29, 1890, one of the last major American Indian battles occurred at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota. The Wounded Knee Massacre saw the deaths of over 200 Lakota men, women, and children.

The last part of the 19th century saw much unrest in the West as Native Americans were pushed off their traditional homelands to make room for settlers. Even reservation lands were not protected.

In late 1890, Lakota Sioux Native Americans in South Dakota began following a medicine man named Wovoka, who led a spiritual movement called the Ghost Dance. Followers of this movement believed the dance would bring forth the spirits of the dead to fight on their behalf. They believed this would lead the white settlers to leave and bring about peace, prosperity, and unity among the tribes. Many people in the

nation's capital worried this was the beginning of a movement against American authority.

In December of 1890, Spotted Elk, a chief of Lakota Sioux, was leading a group of about 350 men, women, and children to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation after the death of Sitting Bull at the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. On December 28, a detachment of the US 7th Cavalry Regiment rounded up the group and escorted them about five miles to Wounded Knee Creek to make camp. The detachment was joined by the rest of the regiment making about 500 soldiers. The next morning, the troops tried to disarm the Lakota.



Sitting Bull was killed just two weeks before the battle. Authorities were attempting to arrest him out of fears he would join the Ghost Dance movement.

Initially, the troops' plan was to simply disarm the Lakota Sioux. The process was tense, but the Native Americans agreed to give up their weapons. At one point, a soldier ordered a deaf man named Black Coyote to give up his rifle. According to some accounts, Black Coyote was reluctant to turn over his gun because he had paid a lot for it. Other accounts say he couldn't understand the order, so the soldier attempted to take the gun. In the ensuing struggle, the gun went off. US troops thought they were being attacked and fired on the crowd and chased down any who tried to escape, including women and children. By the time the shooting ended, between 200 and 350 Lakota were killed or wounded, along with about 64 Army casualties.

Initially Colonel James Forsyth, commander of the 7th Cavalry, was relieved of command. However, he was later exonerated and promoted to major general. Additionally, 20 of his men received the Medal of Honor for their actions at Wounded Knee.

In 1903, a monument was built at the site of Wounded Knee Massacre. It reads, "This monument is erected by surviving relatives and other Ogallala and Cheyenne River Sioux Indians in memory of the Chief Big Foot Massacre December 29, 1890. Col. Forsyth in command of US troops. Big Foot was a great chief of the Sioux Indians. He often said, 'I will stand in peace till my last day comes.' He did many good and brave deeds for the white man and the red man. Many innocent women and children who knew no wrong died here."

In 1990, Congress passed a resolution declaring the government's "deep regret" for the actions of its soldiers on December 29, 1890. The Wounded Knee Battlefield was declared a National Historic Landmark by the US Department of the Interior. In recent years,

Native American groups have condemned the 20 Medals of Honor, calling them "Medals of Dishonor" and have called on Congress to rescind them. In 2021, the South Dakota Senate unanimously called on Congress to investigate the medals.



From the famed Legends of the West Sheet



South Dakota centennial stamp pictures a sod house built by many of the state's early white settlers.



Frederic Remington's The Smoke Signal depicts Plains Indians sending a smoke signal.



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