

Christmas 1890

*There was no hope on earth,
and God seemed to have forgotten us.
Some said they saw the Son of God;
others did not see Him.*

—Red Cloud, Chief of the Oglala Sioux

Hearing of Sitting Bull's death, Dec. 15, 1890, Big Foot, chief of the Minneconjous, decided to bring what was left of his people—all 350, of which only 150 were men—to Pine Ridge for whatever protection Red Cloud could provide.

Big Foot and his people had been on the run since the United States War Department had listed him as one of the “fomenters of disturbances” and therefore targeted for arrest.

On Dec. 28, the refugees were intercepted by the Seventh Cavalry and brought to a military camp at Wounded Knee, from where they would be transported by rail to prison in Omaha, Nebraska.

This army unit was the successor of the same Seventh Cavalry, which, 14 years earlier, had been vanquished by Native American forces at the Little Bighorn.

Placing these Indians in the charge of the Seventh was questionable, and the captives worried, for good reason, whether revenge might be exacted upon them for the events at the Little Bighorn.

The next morning, the Seventh formed a perimeter around the Minneconjous and requested all arms be surrendered.

Not satisfied by the number of firearms yielded, Major Samuel Whiteside of the Seventh ordered his soldiers to conduct a search of the Minneconjous teepees.

Still not satisfied with the results, and perhaps seeking to elicit a desired effect, Whiteside informed the Indians they were to remove their blankets and submit to body searches.

Inevitably, fighting broke out between the Indians and soldiers.

Then the Seventh's artillery opened fire.

Dee Brown, author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, picks up the story:

“When the madness ended, Big Foot and more than half of his people were dead or seriously wounded; 153 were known dead, but many of the wounded crawled away to die afterward. One estimate placed the final total of dead at very nearly three hundred of the original 350 men, women, and children. The soldiers lost twenty-five dead and thirty-nine wounded most of them struck with their own bullets or shrapnel. . . .

“In the first seconds of violence, the firing of carbines was deafening, filling the air with powder smoke. Among the dying who lay sprawled on the frozen ground was Big Foot. Then there was a brief lull in the rattle of arms, with small groups of Indians and soldiers grappling at close quarters, using knives, clubs and pistols. As few of the Indians had arms, they soon had to flee, and then the big Hotchkiss guns on the hill opened up on them, firing almost a shell a second, raking the Indian camp, shredding the tepees with flying shrapnel, killing men, women, and children. . . .

“The wagonloads of wounded Sioux (four men and forty-seven women and children) reached Pine Ridge after dark. Because all available barracks were filled with soldiers, they were left lying in the open wagons in the bitter cold while an inept Army officer searched for shelter.

Finally the Episcopal mission was opened, the benches taken out, and hay scattered over the rough flooring.

“It was the fourth day after Christmas in the Year of Our Lord 1890. When the first torn and bleeding bodies were carried into the candlelit church, those who were conscious could see Christmas greenery hanging from the open rafters. Across the chancel front above the pulpit was strung a crudely lettered banner: PEACE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TO MEN.”