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James C. Schaap
Dordt College

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Wasicu at Chankpe Opi: A White Man at Wounded Knee

James Schaap

“In the late fall or muddy spring or cold mid-winter
—like that December day in 1890—
it’s likely you’ll stand very much alone at Wounded Knee.”

Think of it as a tawny ocean stopped in time, a vast landscape of grass, here and there mustache-like strips of trees darkening creek beds or running along the ridges like an old headdress unfurled in wind. Today, the place where the Wounded Knee Massacre took place looks remarkably similar to what it did in early winter of 1890, a featureless, shallow valley in a seemingly unending field of prairie grass that, on a gray day, weaves itself almost inconspicuously into the cloudy sky at its reaches.

On December 28, 1890, four Hotchkiss guns—the Sioux called them the guns that fire in the morning and kill the next day—stood on a small, whitecap hill amid this arid ocean, all four aimed down into the camp of a Minneconjou chief named Sitanka, or Big Foot. There, three hundred men, women, and children were camped, hoping to reach Pine Ridge Agency the next day.

More than a century later, it is almost impossible to stand on that small hill and look down into the valley of Wounded Knee Creek and imagine what the place must have looked like so full of people.

But try. Today, a single battered billboard offers the only available outline of the story, the word “battle” crossed out and “massacre” scribbled in roughly above it. Otherwise, there is little to mark the spot. But try to imagine what this yawning, empty space must have looked like, a couple hundred Lakota just beneath the promontory where we’re standing, their worn and ripped tipis thrown up quickly, campfires floating thin plumes of smoke. These folks have been hungry for days—and tired, having just marched hundreds of miles south towards Chief Red Cloud at the Pine Ridge Agency, where they thought they’d be safe.

But there’s more, far more. Across the ravine west—maybe a half mile away on another hill sits is a sprawling encampment of several hundred troops under the command of Colonel James W. Forsyth, the largest military encampment since the Civil War. The scene is remarkable. Doubtless, that many people assembled at this remote spot on the Dakota prairie has not happened frequently, if ever, since. If it’s difficult for you to imagine, just picture a campground of nearly a thousand people in tents, then cut down all the trees.

Big Foot’s people were dancers, Ghost Dancers, strong believers in a frenetic, mystic ceremony, a hobgoblin of Christianity, mysticism, Native ritual, and sheer desperation. If they would dance, they thought Christ would return because he’d heard their prayers and felt their suffering. When he’d come for them, he’d bring with him the old ones (hence, the Ghost Dance). And the buffalo would return. Once again the people could take up their beloved way of life. If they would dance, a cloud of dust from the new heaven and the new earth would swallow the *wasicu*, all of them. If they would dance, their hunger would be satiated, desperation comforted.

The Ghost Dance, a ritual of what Ian Frazier calls “the first American religion,” is only one of many causes which led to the massacre at Wounded Knee, but for people of faith it merits a closer look.

There was no dancing here on the night before the massacre, December 28, 1890, but

for almost a year “the Messiah craze” had spread throughout the newly sectioned reservations, as unstoppable as a prairie fire. A committee of Sioux holy men had returned from Nevada, where they’d met Wovoka, the Paiute who’d seen the original vision. They returned as disciples of a new religion.

Wovoka designed the ritual from his own visions. Erect a sapling in the middle of an open area, like the one in front of us now—the tree, a familiar symbol from rituals like the Sun Dance, then banned by reservation agents. Purge yourselves—enter sweat lodges, prostrate yourself before *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Mysterious. Show your humility—often warriors would cut out pieces of their own flesh and lay them at the base of that sapling to bear witness of their selflessness.

Then dance—women and men together, something rare in Sioux religious tradition. Dance around that sapling totem, dance and dance and dance and don’t stop until you fall from physical exhaustion and spiritual plenitude. Dance until the mind numbs and the spirit emerges. Dance into frenzy. Dance into ecstasy.

Now look back down into the valley, and imagine three hundred men and women being slain by the spirit, most of them writhing in fine dust. Such mass frenzy made *wasicu* of every denomination or political persuasion shudder. To them, the Ghost Dance seemed madness on a cosmic scale—hence, “the Messiah craze.”

The exultation of the Ghost Dance was the vision given to those who fell in frenzy. When they would recover their senses, each of them would reveal what he or she had seen, a collective vision: life would be good, rich, abundant, everything the coming of the *wasicu* had ended. Jesus Christ, rejected by his own, had heard the voice of the people’s suffering and would bring them joy.

“The great underlying principle of the Ghost Dance doctrine,” says James Mooney in his rich study written already in 1896, “is that the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease, and misery.” It was that simple and that compelling, a vision of heaven. For me as a white man, a Christian, it is not pleasant to admit that in the summer of 1890, the sheer desperation of Native people, fueled by poverty, malnutrition, and the near death of their culture, created a tragically false religion that played a significant role in what we’ve come to call, simply, Wounded Knee.

Throughout the West, the whole First Nation danced. What was peculiar to the Sioux, however, was this solitary tenet: those who wore the ghost shirt or ghost dress—the prescribed apparel of the faith—could assume themselves impervious to bluecoat bullets. Dancers could not die. They were holy.

It would be dead wrong to assume that that belief or any other created by the Messiah craze was the single cause for the horror that happened here in December 1890. Others are far more prominent: the disappearance of the buffalo, the unceasing trek of white settlers onto traditional Lakota land, a long history of broken treaties, distrust on every side, the searing memory of “Custer’s Last Stand,” and, perhaps most of all, the inability of two peoples to understand each other. When you look down on the shallow valley of the Wounded Knee, bear in mind that what happened here is the confluence of many motives, some of them even well-meaning, but all of them, finally, tragic.

Here we are. Look around. If you stand on this promontory in the summer, the heat can be oppressive; but on a good day you might be surrounded by a couple dozen tourists. That’s all. Wounded Knee doesn’t exactly border the Black Hills, and it’s not on the way to Yellowstone. It’s not on the way to anything, really. Right now you’re in the heart of fly-over America, many millions of Americans never coming closer to this shallow valley than, say, Chicago. Any time of year, the twisted vapor trails of jets on their way to LAX or LaGuardia float like ribbons in the genial sky.

In the late fall or muddy spring or cold mid-winter—like that December day in 1890—it's likely you'll stand very much alone at Wounded Knee. Cars and trucks navigate the reservation roads that cross almost directly at the point of battle, but for most of the year a visit here is unlike a visit to any other North American historic battlefield.

Gettysburg National Military Park offers an aging but impressive Cyclorama, a remarkable circular painting, 356 feet by 26 feet, that puts visitors at the heart of the battle. Little Big Horn's visitor's center sells helpful interpretive audio tapes to use as you tour several miles of battlefield from the air-conditioned comfort of your mini-van. But if you want to know what you can about Wounded Knee, the only storyteller there, all year round, is the wind.

Just imagine the encampment before you, and keep in mind the despair, the poverty, and the hopelessness of the dancers. "To live was now no more than to endure/The purposeless indignity of breath," says John G. Neihardt in *The Twilight of the Sioux*. Millions of buffalo once roamed here, the staple of existence for thousands of nomadic Native people, the soul of their culture and faith. By 1890, they were gone.

In North Dakota's horrible winter of 1896, while thousands of cattle died in the monstrous cold, it is reported that only one bison perished. Once the buffalo ruled here. In all the openness all around you, the Great Plains stretching out almost forever in every direction, try to imagine what it must have been like to stand on this promontory and look over herds so large you could see the mass ripple as they shifted slightly when detecting human scent, almost like watching wind on water. That's what's gone. To the Sioux, the hunt was a not only manhood's proving ground, but a celebration for the family, often opened and closed with prayer. Few 19th century *wasicu* could understand that the disappearance of the buffalo seemed, to many Plains Indians, almost the death of god. I don't believe I still can, try as I might.

But if I stand here on the promontory at Wounded Knee and remind all that is white within me of grinding poverty, the exhaustive dissolution of a way of life, and the seeming death of god, I can, perhaps, begin to understand the frantic hope inspired by the Ghost Dance.

Today, right behind you, you'll see a fenced-in enclosure where a granite monument, nine feet tall, lists the names of a few of those killed here. "Chief Big Foot," it says, and then lists "Mr. Shading Bear, Long Bull, White American, Black Coyote, Ghost Horse, Living Bear, Afraid of Bear, Young Afraid of Bear, Yellow Robe, Wounded Hand, Red Eagle," and just a few more. Estimates vary on the number of dead buried where you're standing, but most think 150 or so frozen bodies were dumped into the mass grave beneath the cordon of cement. No ceremony—Native or white. Just a dump.

On the other side of the stone there's an inscription, still visible seventy years after the marker was placed where you're standing.

This monument is erected by surviving relatives and other Ogallala and Cheyenne River Sioux Indians in Memory of the Chief Big Foot Massacre.

Dec. 29, 1890.

Colonel Forsyth is in command of U. S. Troops. Big Foot was a great chief to 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.

As Harry W. Paige says in *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, this isn't the grammar, the syntax, or mechanics of an Oxford don. What it is, he says, is "writing that weeps."

But what exactly did happen on the morning of December 29, 1890?

With nothing to stop it, sound travels easily on a landscape this barren. So imagine the bleat of reveille cutting through the morning cold. It's eight o'clock, and the sun rises magnificently, albeit late, winter solstice just a few days behind. Many of the women, some of them singing, are packing for the 17-mile trip to Pine Ridge, where they anticipate meeting relatives and friends. Children play innocently around the ragged tipis and wagons, and for the first morning in many, most have eaten well.

By Indian messenger, Colonel Forsyte, the commanding officer, calls the men of Big Foot's band to come to parley directly southeast of us, at the spot where the chief's tent stands, maybe 300 yards down the hill. Spread around the entire encampment like a huge lariat, even beyond the dozens of Indian ponies just west of Big Foot's camp and the ravine behind it, 76 unmounted sentries, equally spaced, watch the movement. On the rise beyond the ravine and set against the horizon, a long line of mounted bluecoats wait menacingly, just in front of them, some several dozen of the cavalry's Indian scouts. From the vantage point of the soldiers, the field seems well in hand, the position geometrically arranged to prevent escape. There is no chaos, yet.

As they were commanded, something close to one hundred men—no one knows for sure—from Big Foot's band take their places in the council circle. Behind them, those lines of bluecoats move quickly to separate the men from their women and children.

The command is given to disarm. In the face of such untoward odds, the Sioux men are wary; not only does the positioning all around them seem ominous, but to a culture created on institutional violence—a boy becomes a man by proving himself in battle—giving up one's means to fight is giving up oneself. What's more, they'd been promised the day before that they could keep their arms until they arrived at Pine Ridge.

Troops are dispatched to search and seize what arms they can turn up in the encampment behind them. What happens is not pleasant. The women do not take kindly to their mistreatment, the sometimes brutal ways the bluecoats plunder their selves and their possessions. When the soldiers return, they have more guns, but also axes, knives, bows and arrows, tent stakes, even beadwork awls.

It is early winter, remember, but there is more than enough emotion in the air to ignite the landscape. Fear, prejudice, a history of deception, mutually defiant cultural values, and nothing less than hate lie beneath us here like so much kindling, waiting for the pop of a flame; the whole place is combustible. What exactly happened next may be debated forever, but the trajectory of events is no more debatable than the outcome.

Somewhere on the peripheries of the council circle stands a man variously described as half-crazed or desperate. He was, by all accounts, a man of faith, a medicine man, who considered it his duty to advise the men in council circle of their dignity and their calling. One account describes him this way: “. . . a grand figure. . . with green-colored face and a yellow nose, terrifying to behold. He wore with pride his floating crown of eagle feathers, while his costume was a wonder of wild adornments.” Some name this man Yellow Bird, while others claim Yellow Bird was nowhere near Big Foot's camp. Whatever his identity, his eccentric look and behavior calls upon the dignity of Lakota history and culture. What he espouses is at least something of the doctrine of the Ghost Dance. He tells the men not to fear. As Crazy Horse, by legend, once exhorted his men before Little Big Horn, this man reportedly cried and sang to his people, told them this was a good day to fight and a good day to die. He promises eternal life.

The sound produced in Native songs and chants begins in the front of the throat; for centuries, white musicians have been exhorted to sing from the diaphragm. The difference is startling. To white folks unaccustomed to the keening, me among them, the sound produced seems more like a shriek than a hymn. As you stand there, those Hotchkiss guns poised just beneath you, listen the medicine man's seemingly mad music and try to stop your fists from

tightening.

“The men are hiding guns,” an officer says.

It's December, still early in the morning, and the Sioux men are wrapped in blankets. A search follows. In a pile in the middle, almost seventy old rifles lie over each other like fallen branches.

Then, something happens—nobody knows exactly what. The bluecoats draw their rifles and swords. Rifle magazines click open and close; guns are brought into position to fire.

A single troop—who knows who?—tried to wrestle Black Coyote, one of the Sioux men. Some say he was deaf. At the same moment, the medicine man gets to his feet, picks up a handful of dust, and throws it at the soldiers, his shrieking exhortation continuing in the Sioux language. The soldier and Black Coyote wrestle for the possession of a rifle, while down the line another soldier begins struggling with another for a rifle wrapped in the blanket covering one of three young men standing close together. The medicine man keeps telling his people white bullets will not harm them.

One shot. Whose was it? Did it come from Black Coyote in the struggle? No one knows for sure. But in a moment all hell broke loose, and, for less than a half hour, what follows is a fierce and bloody battle waged hand-to-hand in a council circle soon choked by dust and smoke, and thick with bullets, most of them from army issue rifles, bullets that flew indiscriminately, killing many of the Sioux in the middle, as well as bluecoats on either side. That the cavalry could have avoided shooting each other at such close quarters seems impossible, despite claims to the contrary in military hearings conducted later.

An old woman who used to live down our street claims that out here on the prairie we get only about ten sweet days a year. Prairie cold locks life in its frigid jaws; the heat wilts anything that grows; and always, the wind blows. In the summer, it's capable of sand-blasting your face; in the winter, its bite is not only dangerous but deadly. But that morning, December 29, 1890, the wind stood still. When you look down now, from the promontory where the First and Second Artillery have been firing those Hotchkiss guns into the horror beneath them, imagine a cloud of dust and smoke so thick as to stop breath. In seconds, in the very middle of the fray, combatants cannot see each other, but blindness doesn't stop the killing. Seventeen miles away, at the Pine Ridge Agency, people claimed to hear the firing.

Just exactly who fired first might never be established, but there is no question whose rifles ended the massacre. With the first shots, hundreds of Lakota women and children run away into that ravine you see just beyond the fighting. With dozens of their own down in the middle of the madness, Forsythe's men are in no mood to take prisoners, so for several hours after the bloody combat that began in front of Big Foot's tent, scattered gunfire continues as far as three miles away, up and down the ravines that cut through the tawny prairie around the creek called Wounded Knee. What began in intolerable heat ended in cold-blooded murder.

If you'd like, perhaps you could walk down into those ravines, no more than a half mile from where we're standing. There are no markers anywhere, like the ones at Little Big Horn, no whited stones to mark the spots where people fell. But even in their absence, ghosts linger.

That afternoon, when the shooting ended, Army personnel loaded 39 of their wounded into wagons, along with their dead, 25. Fifty-one wounded Sioux were located, 47 of them women and children, some of whom—like six of the cavalry survivors—would soon succumb to their injuries. The Sioux dead were left on the field and in the ravines, but exactly how many had been killed will never be known. Native people consider 300 a fairly just estimate.

That night, a blizzard came in on the wind and laid a gossamer veil over the carnage—some say mercifully; some think the hand of white man's God was simply covering their sin.

Wounded Knee was the final military action in the Plains Indians Wars, the horrid, bloody conclusion of a cultural and religious confrontation that, from my vantage point, a white man at Wounded Knee, looks even today like something obscenely inevitable. Millions of white people—my own Dutch immigrant ancestors among them—went west for cheap land they assumed the Sioux didn't value. After all, where were the improvements, the tree lines, the fences, the buildings, the cut sod? Millions of white people—my own ancestors among them—thought our holy book to a pagan people was a generous gift for the millions of acres those people had once roamed in freedom. My own family included, we wanted to own what they wanted to honor.

But the Lakota people lost far more than those buried on the hill where we're standing. They lost what the cavalry and the government called "the battle"; they lost the war; they lost their way of life. "And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard," Black Elk says. "A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream."

There's more. You must have noticed—because you can't have missed what's right in front of us—what's been there the whole time we've been watching what happened. Be careful as you walk around on that promontory because a crumbling block foundation, scattered with crumpled beer cans and trash, marks the outline of what was once a Catholic church, right there where those Hotchkiss guns rained death on the council circle. It's crumbling, as things do that are not preserved.

The church that once stood here was destroyed in the 1973 Wounded Knee conflict, when, once more, violence occurred not far from where we're standing. Men and women who held radically different views of Native dignity squared off against each other in this very valley. That dispute brought in U. S. Marshalls and turned deadly, when armed *wasicu*, here, once again, dug in like the cavalry. For many, those government marshalls were here to defend tribal leaders some thought violent, despotic men who'd long ago sold their souls for fools' gold.

It isn't pretty—this crumbling shell. There's nothing to suggest that what once stood above ground here represented—even offered—the Prince of Peace.

In Coventry, England, you can walk within the skull-like remains of a cathedral destroyed by Nazi bombs during World War II, a remarkable memento of Brit suffering during relentless air strikes. Coventry Cathedral is what much of Europe looked like after Hitler. That foundation is immense, its walls rise and fall jaggedly. But its perimeters are festooned with plaques and flowers and all kinds of memorials neatly commemorating suffering and heroism.

No walls still stand on the foundation half-buried in the crest of the hill where we're standing. No memorials—just graffiti—decorate what's there. No one keeps the place up, so what's left deteriorates in the abusive hands of changing prairie seasons. You can walk into that foundation, if you dare. The empty shell of the church that once looked over the field where hundreds died is nothing at all like the monument at Coventry.

And yet it is. It's just not sanitized. But then, nothing is at Wounded Knee. Today, there is very little to mark the spot, beyond the sign on the road and the old monument behind us. There is a circular visitors' center down the hill to the east; the pit toilets stand just outside. The center itself is black, and it's likely you've parked beside it before you walked up the hill to the burial monument. In the summer, the place is open. You can wander into its dark confines, where various displays will tell part of the story. But most of the year you'll find a padlock on the door, which means you're on your own at Wounded Knee. Now look down at the sign where the reservation roads cross, three hundred yards from where we're standing. In summer, you might see a car or two. Go ahead. Walk down. People there beneath a brush arbor—Sioux people—will be happy to sell you some keepsake from your visit.

I have one—a little cowhide drum, two inches across, decorated with beaded fringe and hand-painted on both sides—on one, the image of a red drum; on the other, the words “Wounded Knee” painted in above a single eagle feather, two dates, one on either side—“1890” and “1973.”

Cost me twenty dollars. I bought it from an angular man in a Western shirt who had three of them strung over his hand when he showed me his goods. His dark, expressionless face was pockmarked, his eyes blood-lit. I am sad to say he looked far too much like the caricature some of us hold of reservation people today.

“My wife makes them,” he told me slowly, handing me the one that now hangs on my wall. He pointed into an old Ford parked just ten feet away. I looked into the interior where she was sitting on the passenger’s side. She didn’t move, her head bowed as if she were asleep. Maybe it was my own sinful prejudice, but I couldn’t help think the worst.

I picked a crisp twenty out of my billfold and handed it to him. He took it and left. I suppose the next day he would return with the other two he’d shown me.

I don’t know that I can unpack the whole meaning of that single twenty-dollar transaction—what percentage of what I gave him may have come from pity, what percentage from blood guilt, what percentage from the very real desire to take some icon home to remember Wounded Knee. I honestly cannot interpret my own motives, in part because I don’t know that I want to look that closely into my own heart.

But I’m happy that little cowhide drum is here beside me as I write these words, not because it’s cute—it isn’t. I have no doubt that some enterprising *wasicu* could create a kiosk and churn out Wounded Knee kitsch far more marketable—refrigerator magnets, ball-point pens with pinto ponies that run up and down the shaft. But there’s something about the people who sold it to me that I can’t forget, just as surely as the tawny prairie landscape all around and the entire awful story that gives the valley its ghostly life. Mystery and the sadness are here in my little buckskin drum, a drum that really doesn’t sound.

Mostly, at Wounded Knee, there is silence. When you visit, you won’t read or hear many words at all. If you’re white and you want to understand, you’ll have to look deeply into your own heart, stare into your deepest values, listen to the songs you sing, examine the history your family has lived and the faith you celebrate.

Maybe it’s best to simply stand in awe at Wounded Knee and pray with your silence. That’s not easy. We’re not good at lamentations. White folks would much rather see Wounded Knee as a battle than a massacre, as we have, officially, for more than a century.

Look up. Somewhere in that vast azure dome a jet will be cutting a swath across the openness. Inside, three hundred people are sipping Cokes, reading Danielle Steele, watching a movie. Some are sleeping. Some are traveling home.

Do the math. Count them yourself—the thousands each day that only incidentally glance out from corner-less airplane windows as they pass over the spot where we’re standing. Then look around and see how alone you are up here on the hill with four silent Hotchkiss guns.

Maybe we’d all rather not know. We’d all rather fly over Wounded Knee.

Visit sometime. Leave the kids at home. Welcome the silence. Stand here for an hour until the keening, the death songs, rise from the ravines as they once did. Look out over nearly a thousands ghosts assembled in space so open it’s almost frightening.

Stand here alone for awhile, and I swear that what you’ll read in the flow of prairie grasses and hear in the spirit of the wind is that, really, despite the tracks of those jets in the skies above and the immensity of silence all around, once upon a time every last one of us was here.