

## Twisting History...

In my historical and genealogical research I find myself in very interesting places. These recently have included the National Archives Regional office in Kansas City and the Indian Mission school archives at Marquette University in Milwaukee. In my search for information on my own Indian ancestry, I am finding much about other mixed-blood families on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

But I'm also finding facts about some history that has been skewed, twisted by a writer for whatever reasons. We twist history at our own peril, and that of our children; and we must have the courage to point out such misstatements, inaccuracies and fabrications, and condemn them.

Examples of this can be found in several columns of Lakota columnist Tim Giago, in his long-running editorial siege of the Indian mission boarding school he attended in the 1940s.

In one of his May 2006 national columns, Giago wrote the following:

“My grandmother Sophie was a teenage student at Holy Rosary Mission, a school about ten miles from Wounded Knee, on the day of the bloody massacre.

She recounted how the soldiers rode to the grounds of the mission school, visibly excited by their actions, and talking loudly about their wonderful victory. The Jesuit priests at the mission school made the children bring water and hay to feed the horses of the troopers.

Grandma Sophie said she could still see blood on the uniforms of the soldiers.

But of course no one told the Indian children at the school of the events of that day even though some of them had relatives that were among the slaughtered.”

In an earlier column he wrote:

“The Seventh Cavalry, Custer's old command, spread out across the Pine Ridge Reservation hunting for survivors. They rode into the playgrounds of the Holy Rosary Indian Mission near Pine Ridge village. Prodded by the Jesuit priests, the children were forced to water and feed their horses. My grandmother, Sophie Abeita, was one of those children. She later recalled that some of the soldiers, still bloody from the massacre, were laughing and joking about their ‘great victory.’”

Reports from people at the scene during the action – including several newspaper reporters – tell a different story. After the wanton slaughter had ceased, according to their reports, the troopers recovered the bodies of their dead and wounded (as well as wounded Dakotas), struck camp, packed the tents in wagons and returned, as a unit, directly to the agency in Pine Ridge. They did not “spread out across the reservation,” which would have been deadly, given the state of rage among the Oglala and Sicangu warriors who had already massed in the Badlands Stronghold and other places to fight back. What's more, spreading out over a hundred square miles of territory unfamiliar to them would have taken several days.

None of the troops returned to the agency by way of the mission, which would have taken them more than twenty miles out of their way, at night and in unfamiliar territory.

Troops of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry did go by the mission the day after the massacre, however, responding to a report that the school had been set afire by “hostiles.” As they approached they found that the smoke they viewed from a distance was not the mission but a small day school near there. The troops then went on to investigate gun shots coming from a few miles north of the school. There they were confronted by Lakota warriors and would have been wiped out except for the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers who rescued them.

All this left little or no time for feeding and watering the horses of a fairly large contingent of cavalry. Written accounts and maps of the troops' movements, including the stop at the mission, are available in various archives, and bear this out.

Giago says further, "But of course no one told the Indian children at the school of the events of that day even though some of them had relatives that were among the slaughtered." According to journals and reports in archives, the children were present when the priest and nuns were excitedly told by a Lakota man about the fighting. And it is highly unlikely that any of the children enrolled at the mission had relatives among the massacre victims. The mission children were Oglalas and the massacre victims were mostly Minneconjous from the Cheyenne River Reservation and Hunkpapas from the Standing Rock Reservation, both many miles from the Pine Ridge Reservation.

In the archives of the Catholic Indian missions, I viewed a very old journal notebook, and there I found a listing of all students who attended from the opening of the mission up to the early 1900s. The names were in alphabetical order, and the very first was that of Sophia Abeita, who is listed as having attended for one school year – 1888/89. If that is accurate, it would indicate that she was not even at the mission during the Wounded Knee massacre.

In the National Archives I found lists which the mission school and day schools were required to provide to the Indian agent on a quarterly basis, Sophia Abeita was on the report of December 1888. I found her name in no other lists.

In another barb at the mission in an earlier column (April 1996), Giago explained why he had mixed feelings about the fire that destroyed the old historic church at the school. Although he appreciated the church's resplendent Lakota interior decor, he wrote, it was tainted by its history:

"The red bricks used to construct the church and the buildings attached to it were made, under the supervision of the (Jesuit) brothers, by the Indian children attending the mission school. My grandmother Sophie Abeita was one of the students used as child labor to make those red bricks."

At the time the school was being built there were no students, and wouldn't be any until the school opened several months after its completion. And the same records show that Sophia Abeita was born in 1871, which would have made her 27 when the church was built in 1898 -- hardly a "child laborer," even if child labor was used (which records show was not the case).

These things are obviously written to hurt the mission school, which Giago might have reason to feel justified in doing. But in doing so, he is twisting history. Once a lie or inaccuracy is published in periodicals and books, it becomes history and the damage is done.

And the school, now the Red Cloud Indian School, is largely dependent on funds it can raise from the general public and from private foundations, and is hurt by these lies, and by exaggerated accounts of diabolical treatments of students in the past. Every year the school is filled to capacity with Indian students whose parents want them there. The parents and students would be hurt by the closing of the school, if that were to happen.

Whatever the intent of Giago's siege, then it is a serious affront to journalistic standards. The press is a most sacred trust, and should not be used for power, personal aggrandizement, or vengeance. And to twist history as a means of such mischief, makes it even more serious.

We will not learn from history unless we have a true history, not one that is twisted to satisfy the author's agenda.

It is natural for a youngster to trust everything Grandma says. But things that are historical should be checked out, and there are abundant sources for most historical events, especially the massacre at Wounded Knee.

In one of his earlier columns, Giago talked about his own meticulous checking to ensure accuracy in his writing, and recalled a favorite editorial mentor admonishing him, "If your mother tells you she loves you, check it out."

Grandmas, it seems, should be held to that standard, as should their grandsons.