

## **Indian History: Victim of Victimhood...**

“A people without history is like wind on the buffalo grass.”

Those words are attributed, by different writers, to Amos Bad Heart Bull and to Crazy Horse. Whichever the author, the words hold great truth and wisdom.

But history itself becomes victim to the syndrome of victimhood when it is twisted to fit the agendas of academics, advocates, and writers.

Take for example the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. There is no question that it was an unspeakable and unprovoked rampage resulting in the death of over 220 of chief Big Foot's band, many of them very old men and women, as well as children, and even infants. It is a dishonor to the history of American fighting forces, and a shameful blot on the history of this country.

Nevertheless, the Wounded Knee story is sometimes twisted to support victimhood. For example, although we might like to believe the scenario, put forth by some, of US Cavalry troops disarming the Indians, herding them into a ravine, and slaughtering them, it is not accurate.

We should look at that history in a more factual and realistic frame, and we will discover much to take great pride in; not enough to ease our horror and anger, but enough to somewhat assuage our victimhood.

First of all, even though Big Foot's band was weakened by their long trek with little food and in the dead of winter, and he himself was dying of pneumonia, they didn't go quietly; they were Dakota and it would not be the Dakota way.

It is a fact that some people in Big Foot's camp did have rifles that they refused to surrender, trying instead to conceal them and keep them. These were people who needed guns to hunt, because their treaty-guaranteed rations were inadequate in quantity, often capriciously withheld from them, and were sometimes even inedible. Furthermore, the majority of Big Foot's people were Ghost Dancers who believed in their Messiah's promise that the white man would disappear, and most likely some warriors even felt that they should be ready to help disappear them.

And the Sioux were not people who would be herded anywhere. When the gunfire started they put up a good fight. Of the 23 soldiers killed in the action that day, it is usually said by victimhood apologists that it was the Cavalry's own crossfire that killed them. But it is as likely as not that many of the troops died of deadly fire from the Sioux, and hand-to-hand combat, with women and boys engaged in the desperate fighting alongside the men.

The heroics of Iron Hail, Dewey Beard as he later named himself, is a story of indomitable courage, and fearsome rage at seeing his family blown apart by Hotchkiss cannon fire. According to his own account and that of other survivors, he was badly wounded, but took the rifle from the hands of his dying brother and from a concealed bend in the ravine, “dueled with the Hotchkiss,” as one historian put it. The brave-but-hopeless battle he and other leaders have described is something to make us proud -- as fighters rather than victims.

Other stories put forth, telling of cavalymen throwing infants in the air and catching them on the point of their bayonets, are also unfounded. Cavalymen with their carbines were not equipped with bayonets, and by the time of the Wounded Knee massacre, swords were largely ceremonial and were seldom carried into battle.

A column by one Indian journalist relating an account of a cavalry officer leaning down from his mount and with his rifle lifting the dress of an Indian woman to look at her private parts, then sneering and continuing his butchery, is pure fiction. The account is attributed to Dr. Charles Eastman, a Dakota physician, who the story says got it from the victim herself before she died in the makeshift hospital in the Episcopal Church at Pine Ridge village. But I could find no such dramatic account in Eastman's writings on Wounded Knee.

But even though the facts may belie many or most of these exaggerations, it does not absolve the US Army from their needless and wanton slaughter of old men, women and children, most of which occurred after any resistance had ceased. Nor does it absolve the colonial overseers – the patronage-appointed Indian agents, whose treachery and cowardice fomented the disaster. The accounts of reporters, doctors, and even the Army's own reports condemn the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry's actions that day. Embellishment is not needed to exaggerate the accounts of their brutality, or to enhance our own victimhood.

My generation on the Pine Ridge reservation may have been the last to know the some of the old men who took part as youthful warriors in the fight at Little Big Horn, and survivors like Dewey Beard, old Joe Horn Cloud, and others who fought at Wounded Knee. These proud old men, still warriors to their dying days, would not admit to victimhood because they never admitted defeat. They told their stories with pride, albeit with a certain sadness.

Lessons we could learn from history would help us today in our quest for true self determination and self government. Understanding what happened in the transition from the traditional to the modern models of government helps us understand the problems we see today in tribal self-government. We must learn and pass on the real histories, not those spun to fit contemporary purposes.

A better understanding of the leadership situation of the Oglala Lakota and other Sioux tribes leading up to the Indian Reorganization Act, for another example, might cause the people of those tribes to give the IRA constitutional model of government a better chance to prove itself. From the time the IRA government was adopted by the Oglalas, the Oglala Sioux Tribe has been politically torn apart because of the inability of some to accept the IRA.

We need a true and factual history - taking into account oral histories from time immemorial, not one that is constantly twisted to fit agendas. Perhaps what would help is a national Native American Historical Society. Not an elite cadre of academic favorites that comprised the Indian Historical Society in the 1960s and 70s, nor an arbiter of historical fact. We need an organization for Indian scholars, degreed or not, to do research and write true history; and, indeed, to debate it and hone its accuracy and truth.

The bright new era heralded by the National Museum of the American Indian might support the concept of a Native American Historical Society.

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