

# THE AMERINDIANS' LAST STAND

What happened to the Amerindians as white people spread across the plains and mountains of the American West? This chapter aims to answer that question.

When the cowboys and homesteaders arrived on the Great Plains, Amerindian peoples like the Sioux had been roaming across them for hundreds of years. The Sioux lived by hunting the buffalo. In the early part of the nineteenth century an estimated twelve million of these gentle, heavy animals wandered the Great Plains. They moved about in herds. Sometimes these herds were so big that they stretched as far as the eye could see. The buffalo provided the Sioux with everything that they needed—food, clothing, tools, homes.

In the 1840s wagon trains heading for Oregon and California began to cross the Great Plains. The Amerindians usually let them pass without trouble. Then railroads began to push across the grasslands. The railroads carried white people who stayed on the prairies and began to plough them.

At first the Amerindians tried to drive the newcomers away from their hunting grounds. But soon they saw that this was impossible. So they made treaties with the government in Washington, giving up large pieces of their land for white farmers to settle upon. In 1851 the Pawnee people signed away an area that today forms most of the state of Nebraska. In 1858 the Sioux gave up an area almost as big in South Dakota. In the 1860s the Comanche and the Kiowa gave up lands in Kansas, Colorado and Texas. In return for such agreements the government promised to leave the Amerindians in peace on the lands that remained theirs.

The Fort Laramie treaty of 1868 was typical of these agreements. So was what happened to it. In this treaty the government declared that large areas between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains belonged to the Sioux. It gave a solemn promise that the lands would remain Sioux property “as long as the grass should grow and the water flow.”

Fine and moving words. Six years later, however, American soldiers found gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The Black Hills were sacred to the Sioux and when the government tried to buy them, the Sioux refused to sell. “One does not sell the Earth upon which the people walk,” said a chief named Crazy Horse. But the American government ignored the Sioux’s refusal. It broke the Fort Laramie treaty and allowed prospectors and miners to enter the Black Hills. In the winter of 1875 thousands of white men poured into the area.

By this time the Amerindian peoples of the Great Plains were facing another serious problem. The buffalo was beginning to disappear. More and more of the land that the big animals needed to graze upon was being taken by ranchers and farmers. Worse still, white hunters were shooting down the buffalo in thousands. They killed them for their hides or for sport and left their flesh to rot. In just two years between 1872 and 1874 the hunters almost completely destroyed the great herds. A visitor to the Plains in 1873 described what he saw there. “Where there were myriads [vast numbers] of buffalo the year before, there were now myriads of corpses.”

The Amerindians could not understand this behavior. “Has the white man become a child that he should recklessly kill and not eat?” asked a Kiowa chief. But the American army encouraged the slaughter. General Sheridan, the officer who commanded the army in the West, saw the extermination of the buffalo as a way to end Amerindian resistance to the occupation of their land. “These men [the buffalo hunters] have done more in the last two years to settle the Indian question than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years,” he wrote. “Send them powder and lead and for the sake of lasting peace let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.”

As more settlers claimed homesteads in the West the American government needed more land for them. To obtain this it decided to force the Amerindians to give up their wandering way of life. It sent soldiers to





*Custer's Last Stand.*

drive the Amerindians onto "reservations." These reservations were areas of land that were usually so dry or rocky that the government thought white settlers were never likely to want them.

The Amerindians fought back. One of their best known leaders was Sitting Bull of the Sioux. "We lived in our country in the way our fathers and our fathers' fathers lived before us and we sought trouble with no men," he said later. "But the soldiers came into our country and fired upon us and we fought back. Is it so bad to fight in defense of one's country and loved ones?"

The Amerindians were outnumbered and outgunned. But they inflicted some surprising defeats on the American soldiers. They won their best known victory at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in June 1876. On a hill beside the Little Big Horn River 3,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors led by Crazy Horse surrounded and killed all 225 men of a company of United States cavalry. The dead included the cavalrymen's commander, General

George Armstrong Custer. For this reason the battle is sometimes called "Custer's Last Stand."

The Battle of the Little Big Horn was also the last stand for the Amerindians. The American government and people were angry at the defeat of their soldiers. They felt that they had been humiliated. More soldiers were sent west to hunt down Custer's killers. The Sioux were too weak to fight back. With the buffalo gone, more of their people were dying every day of starvation and disease. The Sioux surrendered and the soldiers marched them away to the reservations.

Other Amerindians were no more fortunate than the Sioux. By 1890 most of the American West, from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, was occupied by cattle ranchers, farmers, or miners. The Amerindians had nothing left except the reservations.

The United States government said that it would help and protect the reservation Amerindians. It





*Ghost Dancers.*

promised them food, materials to build homes, tools to cultivate the land. But the promises were often broken. There was great suffering on the reservations. Epidemic diseases swept through them, killing their people.

In 1890 a religious prophet told the Sioux to dance a special dance called the Ghost Dance. He told them that if they did so a great miracle would take place. Their dead warriors would come back to life, the buffalo would return and all the white men would be swept away by a great flood.

The Ghost Dance movement was peaceful. But the Dancers' beliefs worried the government. So did the fact that some of them waved rifles above their heads as they danced. It ordered the army to arrest the movement's leaders.

On a cold December day in 1890 a group of 350 Sioux, 120 men and 230 women and children, left their reservation. Led by a chief named Big Foot, they set off to join another group nearby for safety. But a party of soldiers stopped them on the way and marched them to an army post at Wounded Knee Creek.

### **The Ghost Dancers' Song**

Father, have pity on us  
 We are crying for thirst  
 All is gone!  
 We have nothing to eat  
 Father, we are poor.  
 We are very poor.  
 The buffalo are gone.  
 They are all gone.  
 Take pity on us, Father,  
 We are dancing as you wished  
 Because you commanded us.  
 We dance hard, we dance long –  
 Have pity,  
 Father, help us  
 You are close by in the dark  
 Hear us and help us.  
 Take away the white men  
 Send back the buffalo  
 We are poor and weak  
 We can do nothing alone  
 Help us to be what we once were –  
 Happy hunters of buffalo.





*The frozen body of Big Foot at Wounded Knee.*

Next morning the soldiers ordered the Sioux to give up their guns. One young warrior refused. A shot rang out, followed by many more. The soldiers began shooting down the Sioux women and children as well as the men. Within minutes most of the Sioux were dead or badly wounded. Many of the wounded who crawled away died later in a blizzard that swept over the camp.

At the time Americans called what happened at Wounded Knee a battle. Other people since have called it a massacre. But whatever the events at Wounded Knee are called, one thing is certain. For the Sioux they marked the end of all hope of a return to their old way of life.

But the Sioux, like other Amerindians, survived. In 1924 Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act. This recognized Amerindians as full citizens of the United States and gave them the right to vote. In 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act encouraged them to set up their own councils to run the affairs of their reservations.

In spite of such improvements, Amerindians remained far behind most other Americans in health, wealth, and education. Look at some facts from the 1980s. The unemployment rate among Amerindians was 39 percent, more than five times the figure for the population as a whole. Almost 25 percent of Amerindian families were living on incomes too low to buy the food, clothing, and housing they needed to keep in good health. Diseases like diabetes, pneumonia, influenza, and alcohol addiction were killing twice as many Amerindians as other Americans.

In the 1970s Amerindians from all over the United States joined together to try to improve their position. They formed the American Indian Movement and in 1972 thousands of them traveled to Washington to take part in a protest march that they called the "Trail of Broken Treaties." The next year a group armed with rifles occupied the small South Dakota village that now stands on the site of the Battle of Wounded Knee. They stayed there for seventy-one days. Their aim was to draw attention to their demand for the return of lands unjustly taken away from their ancestors.





*Amerindian militants at Wounded Knee.*

Other Amerindians sued the United States government in court for breaking the old treaties. The Sioux, for example, demanded the return of the Black Hills. The courts decided in their favor and awarded them \$122.5 million in compensation for the loss of their land. Many Sioux did not want to accept the money, however. They continued to demand the return of the sacred land itself.

When he was a very old man, a survivor of the Battle of Wounded Knee named Black Elk said goodbye to the old way of life of his people with these words:

“I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.”

Amerindians today have different dreams. But they have not forgotten the old ones. Let the college-educated great-grandson of a famous Apache warrior have the last word:

“My generation spent all their time learning the white man’s ways. We mastered them but we lost a lot of our Indian heritage. Now we are trying to regain what we lost.”



## The story of Sitting Bull

In the year 1831 a baby boy was born in a tepee village on the Dakota grasslands. His parents were Sioux and they named him Sitting Bull.

Sitting Bull grew up to be a respected leader of his people. He did not take part in the fighting at the 1876 Battle of the Little Big Horn. But after the battle he defended the actions of his people:

“We were camped there awaiting the will of the Great Spirit, praying to the Great Spirit to save us from the hands of our enemies, now near and coming to complete our extermination. My men destroyed them in a very short time. Now they accuse me of slaying them. Yet what did I do? Nothing. We did not go out of our country to kill them. They came to kill us and got killed themselves. The Great Spirit so ordered it.”

After their victory at the Little Big Horn the Amerindians were pursued by the army. In 1877 Sitting Bull led some of his followers to safety across the border in Canada, but in 1881 he returned to the United States. His clothes were in rags and he looked old and defeated. But as he handed over his rifle to the American soldiers he told them proudly, “I wish it to be remembered that I was the last man of my tribe to surrender my rifle.”

Sitting Bull continued to fight for the rights of his people in other ways. He criticized the American government for neglecting and cheating the Amerindians on the reservations. “It is your doing that we are here,” he told a group of visiting Congressmen. “You sent us here and told us to live as you do.” He told them that if the government wanted the Amerindians to become like white men then it must supply them with tools, animals and wagons “because that is the way white people make a living.”

In 1885 the famous showman Buffalo Bill Cody offered Sitting Bull a job. He wanted the old leader to become one of the attractions of his traveling Wild West Show. The reservation authorities were glad to be rid of Sitting Bull and



*Sitting Bull.*

quickly gave him permission to go. The following year Cody again asked Sitting Bull to join him, this time on a tour of Europe. Sitting Bull refused. “I am needed here,” he told Cody. “There is more talk of taking our lands.”

When the Ghost Dance movement began the government accused Sitting Bull of being its leader. In December 1890, it sent armed policemen to arrest him. As Sitting Bull stepped out of the door of his cabin on the reservation one of the policemen shot him dead. The killer was a Sioux, one of Sitting Bull’s own people.

