American and Indian relations were extremely tense in the 18th and 19th centuries. The relationship between America and the Sioux was no different. The Sioux was not one tribe in and of itself, however. Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota were the divisions within the Sioux nation, and each of these divisions was made up of several bands (the band at Wounded Knee was Minniconjou Lakota). Many engagements and conflicts had taken place among different tribes and American settlers and the United States Army by 1890. Wounded Knee was not so much an engagement, however, as it was an avoidable tragedy.

It was the morning of December 29, 1890, and Chief Big Foot had only the day before surrendered his band, which included 120 men and 230 women and children, according to Dee Brown (1970, p. 441), although varying reports on the number of Big Foot’s band do exist. Big Foot and his band were asked to surrender their arms December 28, but refused to do so until the next day. Big Foot himself was dying of pneumonia and in no condition to resist. The Lakotas with Big Foot surrendered twenty-five of their guns, but the commanding officer of the soldiers did not think this was all they had and ordered a search of the camp. The soldiers began searching the camp and disarming the Sioux, and it was going as smoothly as could be expected until something happened. Mystery and controversy surround this next event, but it is clear that it triggered the massacre. As the soldiers were disarming the Sioux, a member of the Sioux resisted and an accidental shot was fired and heard by everyone nearby. Chaos and fighting ensued, stemming from this single shot. Many factors caused soldiers and officers in the United States Army to be wary of Native American tribe members. Chief among these factors was the Ghost Dance.

The Ghost Dance was a religion with elements combining both Christian and native American beliefs. It was founded by a Paiute Indian messiah named Wovoka, who had a vision during a solar eclipse in early 1889 in which God took the Indians into heaven, opened the earth to swallow up all the whites, then brought the Indians back into a pre-Columbian world. A circular dance was the major ritual of the religion, which was gaining popularity among the Plains tribes by the winter of 1890.

By mid-November of 1890 the Ghost Dance had become extremely prevalent in the Sioux reservations, so much so that it was nearly the only activity, according to Dee Brown (1970). According to Brown, “Kicking Bear [said] that if the Indians wore the sacred garments of the Messiah—Ghost Shirts painted with magic symbols—no harm could come to them. Not even the bullets of the Bluecoats’ guns could penetrate a Ghost Shirt”...
This was in response to Sitting Bull’s fear that soldiers would come among his people and fire their guns to stop the Ghost Dance, as they had done before. The Ghost Shirt itself was not part of Wovoka’s vision, but came from a vision that Black Elk, the Ogallala Sioux medicine man, had. A description of the Lakota Ghost Dance is found in Jensen, Paul, and Carter (2011):

In its basic form the ritual was a Paiute round dance, during which men and women formed a circle, held hands and side-stepped to the left. To this completely foreign dance form, the Lakotas added familiar elements from their own religious rituals: thus the Ghost Dance became a part of the Lakotas’ own evolving religion rather than a brief experiment with an exotic belief. In the center of the circle of dancers, the Lakotas place a sacred tree, or pole, festooned with offerings to God. A tree such as this had been part of the Sun Dance, the most sacred ceremony of the old Lakota religion, which had been banned by the Indian Bureau in the early 1880s. Dancers also looked toward the sun, another feature of the Sun Dance (pp. 6-7). The popularization and performance of the Ghost Dance caused many U.S. soldiers and citizens to be wary of Native Americans, especially with previous engagements and misunderstandings having taken place. This air of tension between Big Foot’s band and the soldiers of the 7th Cavalry was heightened because

the 7th was Custer’s old outfit, and the desire for revenge was strong for what had taken place on the Little Bighorn over a dozen years earlier. The Ghost Dance is one of the events and factors that led to the Massacre at Wounded Knee, although it may have caused the Sioux not to rise up in revolt because they believed that the White Man would be gone and they would have their land back without fighting.

In the aftermath of the event, approximately 200 of Big Foot’s band of Lakota and 29 soldiers were dead. Many more of the Lakota and soldiers were wounded. It is difficult to give an accurate count of Lakota who died because many of them went by more than one name. Accounts of the number of dead vary among reports from the time. The soldiers could have exercised more restraint because the first shot was accidental and reportedly did not hit anyone. As earlier explained, however, the soldiers were wary of Native Americans and on high alert for any suspicious activity, which might explain (but not excuse) their quick triggers.

In conclusion, even though the Massacre at Wounded Knee happened nearly 125 years ago, its ramifications are still felt today. One ramification of Wounded Knee that is still present is the mistreatment of minorities. Throughout its history, America has mistreated minorities on numerous occasions. Wounded Knee is one of many examples of this mistreatment. Another ramification of Wounded Knee (and Western expansion) is the fact that nearly all Native American tribes are forced to live on reservations. Most tribes were already living on reservations at the time of Wounded Knee, but these events perpetuated the practice of forcing tribes onto reservations. Many tribes had dwindled to near-extinction because of Western expansion. Western expansion, also known as Manifest Destiny, forced the Native American tribes to assimilate into American culture. In other words, the tribes were forced to live like the Americans and abandon the ways of life that they were accustomed to. A lesson to take from this is to be willing and eager to learn about other cultures and attempt to understand their customs and beliefs, which in turn will lead to better understanding among diverse groups of people. Another lesson is that we are all Americans and everyone should be treated equally.

Author Bio

Jason Phinney is an MLS student in the School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University and is the current Graduate Assistant in the Center for Great Plains Studies. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Historic Preservation with a minor in Political Science from Southeast Missouri State University. His research interests are American History, especially the Civil War and Reconstruction Era.
Works Cited

Books

In this gripping tale, Jerome A. Greene—renowned specialist on the Indian wars—explores why the bloody engagement happened and demonstrates how it became a brutal massacre. Drawing on a wealth of sources, including previously unknown testimonies, Greene examines the events from both Native and non-Native perspectives, explaining the significance of treaties, white settlement, political disputes, and the Ghost Dance as influential factors in what eventually took place. He addresses controversial questions: Was the action premeditated? Was the Seventh Cavalry motivated by revenge after its humiliating defeat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn? Should soldiers have received Medals of Honor? He also recounts the futile efforts of Lakota survivors and their descendants to gain recognition for their terrible losses.

This new adaptation of Dee Brown’s multi-million copy bestseller, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, is filled with photographs and maps to bring alive the tragic saga of Native Americans for middle grade readers. Focusing on the Sioux Nation as representative of the entire Native American story, this meticulously researched account allows the great chiefs and warriors to speak for themselves about what happened to the Sioux from 1860 to the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890.

In *Voices of Wounded Knee*, William S. E. Coleman brings together for the first time all the available sources—Lakota, military, and civilian—on the massacre of 29 December 1890. He recreates the Ghost Dance in detail and shows how it related to the events leading up to the massacre. Using accounts of participants and observers, Coleman reconstructs the massacre moment by moment. He places contradictory accounts in direct juxtaposition, allowing the reader to decide who was telling the truth.

*Moon of Popping Trees*, by Rex Alan Smith. Published by University of Nebraska Press, 1981. ISBN: 9780803291201
The last significant clash of arms in the American Indian Wars took place on December 29, 1890, on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota. Of the 350 Teton Sioux Indians there, two-thirds were women and children. When the smoke cleared, 84 men and 62 women and children lay dead, their bodies scattered along a stretch of more than a mile where they had been trying to flee. Of some 500 soldiers and scouts, about 30 were dead—some, probably, from their own crossfire. Wounded Knee has excited contradictory accounts and heated emotions. To answer whether it was a battle or a
massacre, Rex Alan Smith goes further into the historical records and cultural traditions of the combatants than anyone has gone before. His work results in what Alvin Josephy Jr., editor of American Heritage, calls “the most definitive and unbiased” account of all, Moon of Popping Trees.


Neil Waldman presents the background events that led up to the final and unforgettable confrontation between two proud and disparate cultures. Waldman begins the story of Wounded Knee with the settling of North America by Europeans, the land that tribes of nomadic hunters had found centuries earlier, and where they had developed their own unique culture. When the settlers arrived and tried to tame the frontier wilderness of the west, a conflict began which would last for decades.

Websites

http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/knee.htm

Your ringside seat to history - from the Ancient World to the present. History through the eyes of those who lived it, presented by Ibis Communications, Inc. a digital publisher of educational programming.

http://www.bookrags.com/lessonplan/woundedknee/#gsc.tab=0

The “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee” lesson plan contains a variety of teaching materials that cater to all learning styles. Inside you’ll find 30 Daily Lessons, 20 Fun Activities, 180 Multiple Choice Questions, 60 Short Essay Questions, 20 Essay Questions, Quizzes/Homework Assignments, Tests, and more. The lesson and activities will help students gain an intimate understanding of the text, while the tests and quizzes will help you evaluate how well the students have grasped the material. [Includes a free sample but some material has a fee]

http://www.ushistory.org/us/40e.asp

The site, ushistory.org was launched on July 4, 1995, by the Independence Hall Association, to support its mission to educate the public about the Colonial and Revolutionary eras of our nation’s history, and of Philadelphia generally. The first project was a Virtual Tour of Philadelphia’s Historic District, “The Most Historic Mile in America.” Today, it has grown into a “Congress of Websites,” which is a combination of original content, websites of partner organizations, and advocacy support websites.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/

At the heart of this PBS project is a five-part television series that shows how Native peoples valiantly resisted expulsion from their lands and fought the extinction of their culture -- from the Wampanoags of New England in the 1600s who used their alliance with the English to weaken rival tribes, to the bold new leaders of the 1970s who harnessed the momentum of the civil rights movement to forge a pan-Indian identity. WE SHALL REMAIN represents an unprecedented collaboration between Native and non-Native filmmakers and involves Native advisors and scholars at all levels of the project.

http://www.woundedkneemuseum.org/

This is an interactive website about the narrative museum located in Wall, South Dakota. Visitors are able to learn about a large number of topics related to the massacre through text, pictures, graphics, a model of the site, and a special Remembrance Room.