

Oglala Sioux unite for rights

Gary Phillips
Special to Variation

Editor's note: Gary Phillips, Carolina Union President for 1973-1974, spent a part of spring vacation this semester at Wounded Knee, amidst the confrontation between the Oglala Sioux and the federal government.

Here is his eyewitness account of the conversations and events experienced during his brief stay within the Indian encampment.

Dawn, and my second day at Wounded Knee. A tall white steeple rises into the morning sky from the frame church beside me, symbolizing many things. I remember thinking, the Indians don't need tall white steeples, their gods would laugh at them.

Warming my hands over the barrel fire, it was hard to believe that I was really there. It was hard to believe that I had just the day before stepped out of a tiny Piper Cub some 35 miles away after flying with an Apache friend. It was hard to believe the armed and hostile federal marshalls who roughed us up and searched us before allowing us to walk into Wounded Knee...

Indian Demands

The first thing you notice entering the Pine Ridge, South Dakota reservation is a garish road sign saying "Wounded Knee Massacre National Historic Site. Trading Post. Authentic Arts and Crafts. See the Mass Burial Grave and Indian Museum." Soon after we hit the roadblocks, spending several hours convincing the federal marshalls to let us in and finally having to leave the car and walk into the reservation.

During the two or three mile walk, David, who is one of the few living full-blooded Apaches, and I discussed the Indian's demands. Provoked by conditions on the Pine Ridge reservations, the Oglala Sioux had put forward three demands:

That a full-scale investigation be made by the Senate into the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

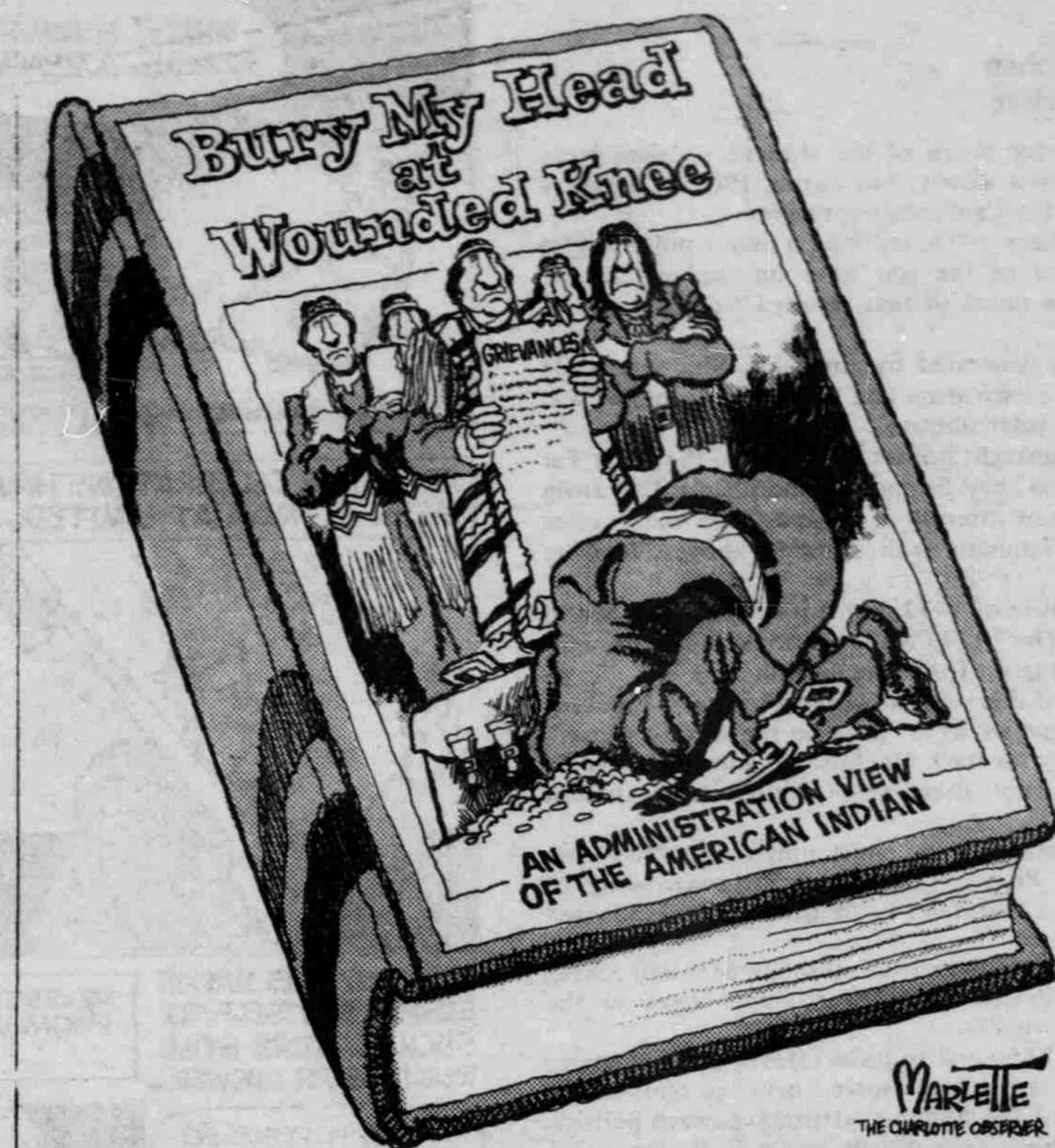
That an investigation be conducted of treaties broken by the United States. That the present governmental system in Pine Ridge (run completely by the BIA) be abolished and Indians be allowed to elect their own officials and set up their government.

The Oglala Sioux at Pine Ridge are caught in an extreme bind. The BIA does not recognize that they own any land at all, but are "trustees" of reservation land, which means they are not eligible for any federal grants that help support the white ranchers in the area. In essence, they are forced to lease their land for as little as a dollar an acre to survive, in many cases losing welfare benefits by doing even that.

The tribal government is totally controlled by the BIA. Richard Wilson, the current tribal chairman is a prime example of what this system produces. On an \$18,000 annual salary, Wilson has \$12,000 cars, a mansion, and hundreds of acres of land purchased from Indians. He has been indicted for larceny, but the BIA kept him from going to trial. Wilson's first act after his becoming tribal chairman was to develop a "goon" squad to destroy political opposition. Six of the eight reservation districts have had open meetings and voted to demand Wilson's impeachment, but they have been ignored.

Conversations

As the old Catholic church being used as a stronghold came into view, several Indians ran up to tell us to take cover because the federal marshalls were firing



into the church, but the gunfire soon died down.

How can I describe the feeling at Wounded Knee? There was unity of a people who share a common bond, a love of their culture and pride in their lives. As Young Bear told me, "You are pushed and pushed and pushed until you have to do something physical or destroy yourself. I have committed everything I am to this." That was the general consensus at Wounded Knee, a total commitment.

Soon after arriving I began to talk to various people. There was a small communication problem because I was white, but I knew various people there, so I was fairly quickly accepted. One old lady told me she was beaten by Wilson's men because of speaking out in a tribal meeting against his policies. Aaron DeSeva, longtime fighter for Indian rights and editor of *The Shannon County Notes*, an Indian newspaper, told me his house had been firebombed by Wilson's men.

It was growing dark by then, and becoming bitter cold. The BIA decision was made that afternoon to cut off all electricity, fuel, and food supplies to Wounded Knee, and we spent a cold night. It began to snow about 11 o'clock, but people came in all night, and, by the morning, there were at least 300 Indians

and supporters in our camp. That night I met Russel Means, the AIM leader, and we talked.

By ten the next morning, the federal marshalls, frustrated by the Indians' stubbornness, had begun to fire haphazardly into the camp in an attempt to scare the Indians into leaving. It was frightening, and there was a lot of talk about a 2nd Wounded Knee Massacre, but the shots soon died down. By that time, there were a lot of determined people at Wounded Knee from all over the United States-Sioux, Apache, Navajo, Mohawk, Shoshone and others.

1890 Massacre

I sat down and talked to an old woman who remembered talking to her grandfather about the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. "they were doing a ghost dance," she told me, "and the whites came in and murdered them because they were angry about the whites dying at Little Big Horn. Even after the white men murdered them, they couldn't leave their bones at peace. They said "It would be great for tourists that a lot of Indians died here." So they built a trading post and a museum. They're making money off those people's bones. Now we are wondering if in 50 years they will put up a highway sign to say come and see the

ones who died in 1973."

Just then a tall gray-haired Indian man in full Iroquois Indian dress walked by, and I recognized him from a workshop on Indian awareness in Arizona. He was the editor of *Akwesasne Notes*, a well-known Indian newspaper. I asked him a couple of questions, but he had an urgent meeting with AIM leaders. He was really worried about something setting off the federal marshalls, and, as I understand it, did a lot to help avoid a real confrontation between Indians and BIA. He was well-respected by the people there.

There was a feeling in the air that something would happen that day. A group of Apache and Sioux built a sweat lodge to prepare for the battle they were sure was coming. There was a great deal of quiet at that time, and it seemed like a depression had taken over. Suddenly a small plane flew in, circled low, and dropped several packages. It turned out to be food supplies, which raised spirits a good deal.

I'll never forget that afternoon. Everyone suddenly figured out that there were a lot of Indians there from many different tribes, and everyone was excited. Songs were sung and dances danced; stories were swapped and cultures compared. There was still a tension, but many fine things were going on.

Ghost Bear

I recognized a face in the crowd around a campfire. It was Ghost Bear, known to the U.S. Census as Mike Boots, an old man, very wealthy by Indian standards, who lived in nearby Akwasasne, Canada. We had met while he was travelling with an Indian group that did a seminar in Chapel Hill. His tribe was lucky in that it was kind of isolated from white influence, so he knew a great deal about his own culture. He remembered me and was really glad to see me.

Ghost Bear is a small man with piercing brown eyes and grayish black hair. He is a gentle man, proud of his own heritage and sensitive to the problems of his people.

We sat down to talk. He was a little sad because he wasn't sure it was right for Indians to act this way. "I used to believe," he said, "that we could just ignore the white man and live our lives as Iroquois, but we can't. You can't ignore something when it is starving you, making you less than a man. All the white man wants to do is to control, to rule. An Indian is just a part of everything around him; that's the difference."

I had to leave that night to get back to Chapel Hill for classes, forced to take a cycle and go over fields so I wouldn't get arrested or shot at, Ghost Bear's words were very close to my mind for a long time.

"All the white man wants to to is rule and control. The Indian is a part of everything around him. He respects life. That's the difference."

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