In our last episode we saw the Plains tribes fighting back against the U.S. soldiers and settlers encroaching on their lands in the months after the Sand Creek massacre. They showed the U.S. government that they weren’t going to lay down and roll over. At Julesburg, Platt Bridge, the Fetterman Battle, they came out the clear victors. And so, for a few years, they kept back the influx of settlers across the Great Plains. The U.S. government willingly signed the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 that made it illegal for settlers to step foot onto Plains Indian lands…including the Black Hills of South Dakota.

But then, only six years later, Colonel George Custer confirmed there was gold in the Black Hills and settlers started pouring in. The U.S. army did little to hold back the tide. In fact, in 1876, they made a three pronged advance on the Plains tribes. Col. John Gibbon came in from the west, Custer from the east and General George Crook from the north. Their goal? To herd the tribes
onto the reservation and force them to sell the Black Hills. Crazy Horse vowed he’d attack them if they crossed the Tongue River. “We did not ask you white men to come here. The Great Spirit gave us this country as a home. You had yours. We did not interfere with you. We do not want your civilization!” he says. General Crook didn’t heed the warning. He crossed the river.

Hoo boy, would he come to regret that.

**The Battle of Rosebud Creek**

Maybe General Crook felt overly safe because he crossed with the help of Shoshone and Crow scouts. The Crows were particularly motivated to help the government since the Lakota were hunting and camping on land promised to them. On Rosebud Creek in southern Montana, they stopped to rest after a very long march. That’s when Crazy Horse and Chief Hump charged in with a one-thousand-strong war party.

The Battle of Rosebud Creek went on for six hours straight…a much longer, bloodier battle than Fetterman or Platt Bridge. Minneconjou Lakota Historian Donovin Sprague – you’ll remember we met him last episode – he says the Cheyenne call it The Battle where the Sister Saved Her Brother based on a real rescue of a Cheyenne warrior by his courageous sister.

On our tour, we saw a sculpture of it at the Little Bighorn historic site.
“Brother faced certain death on the battlefield and over the hill came a warrior in the finest regalia. This woman, it was Sister and she swept down there into all the firing and he jumped on the side of her horse like that. And you can see his arm is shown with a carbine rifle. And then over where the reins are, you see his eyes. He's peeking out and she's sitting on the horse with her finest regalia with the horse stretched out and they're going to safety and she rescued him.
They got over the hill where the warriors were to safety and they said there was a lot of high five going on,” Donovin says.

Donovin says women were often involved in fighting, helping to find and remove the dead and care for the wounded. After the fighting was over, General Crook swore he’d won the battle because his troops were the last on the battlefield. But actually, Donovin says, he limped back to Sheridan, Wyoming a short distance away and wasn’t able to motivate his troops for the Battle of the Little Bighorn just a few days later. Instead, Donovin says, Crook decided to relax. “They went back to Sheridan because they were low on ammo and I guess they couldn’t wait to fish. Heard the fishing wasn't bad,” Donovin says.

It was Sundance season – one of the most important ceremonies for all the Plains tribes, a ritual of renewal for the earth. The famous Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull wasn’t able to fight in the Rosebud battle because he’d made a heavy sacrifice at the ceremony, Donovin told me as we toured the visitor center. “He cut 100 pieces of flesh at the Sundance and so he was very weak at the Rosebud. He wasn’t even here, he was convalescing, and his role was not a warrior at all, he was with the women and children to get safety. He's a medicine man,” Donovin says.

He went without food or water for two days. Finally, he collapsed and experienced an intense vision. “He’d seen soldiers falling upside down into the camp. He predicted a great Lakota-Cheyenne victory. So when Rosebud happened, they thought, Well, this must be it. And he said, Nope. The bigger one is coming,” Donovin says.
As they fell, Sitting Bull said he saw the soldiers’ hats falling off and they tumbled down like grasshoppers. And his vision was correct. An even bigger battle WAS coming. Not far away, only eight days later, on June 25th, as many as 10–thousand Lakotas, Cheyenne and Arapaho were camped together on the Greasy Grass River — now known as the Little Bighorn.

**The Battle of Little Bighorn**

That day, teenagers watched over the humongous herd of ponies on the ridge above. One of them was 13-year old Black Elk. Near the end of his life, he remembered that day in his classic memoir *Black Elk Speaks*. “Several of us boys watched our horses together until the sun was straight above and it was getting very hot. Then we thought we would go swimming, and my cousin said he would stay with our horses till we got back. When I was greasing myself, I did not feel well; I felt queer. It seemed that something terrible was going to happen. But I went with the boys anyway. Many people were in the water now and many of the women were out west of the village digging turnips. We had been in the water quite a while when my cousin came down there with the horses to give them a drink, for it was very hot now. Just then we hear the crier shouting in the Hunkpapa camp, which was not very far from us, ‘The chargers are coming! They are charging! The chargers are coming!’...Everybody was running now to catch the horses....Then another great cry went up out in the dust: ‘Crazy Horse is coming! Crazy Horse is coming!’ Off toward the west and north they were yelling ‘Hoka hey!’ like a big wind roaring and making the tremolo; and you could hear eagle bone whistles screaming,” he wrote.
Donovin takes me down to the river where his band, the Minneconjous, were camped that day on the Greasy Grass River. It was right next to the place where the boys went swimming. Donovin says Custer had no idea what he was getting into. “Custer hurries to the north, they're getting away and he wants to get up on the other end. And the village is just way bigger than what they expect,” he says.

Lakota Historian Donovin Sprague on the Little Bighorn River where his tribe was camped the day of the battle.

Credit: Melodie Edwards
Donovin says Custer and his men were seriously outnumbered. All told, he had about 700 soldiers and Crow and Shoshone scouts. But they were facing down over 3-thousand warriors. Chief Hump’s son helped lead the battle. When his father died in battle with the Shoshones several years earlier, his son took up the mantle and earned the name Chief Hump, just like Donovin earned it himself generations later. Chief Hump recalled how, after the army attacked, the Minneconjou warriors gathered themselves together to drive back Reno’s men. But things didn’t go so smoothly for him getting into the battle.

Donovin says Crazy Horse and Chief Hump used a unique military strategy that they’d learned hunting bison. They knocked the soldiers off their horses into the river to separate them. “And what happened was they scattered them and the horses were scattered. Some were dismounted, and now they’ve lost their horses. And everybody's, it's like chaos. And so coming up the ridge, these soldiers were kneeled down, shooting and Hump’s on his horse,” he says.

But this strategy is also risky. It puts you up close to the enemy. Here’s Chief Hump’s account, “The first dash the Indians made, my horse was shot from up under me. And I was wounded. I was shot right about the knee. And the ball came out the hip. I fell and lay right there.”

Driving up into the historic site, Donovin points out a low spot on the ridge, a saddle where Crazy Horse and Hump could run back and forth between the camps and the battle. “And that horse rides out and jumped in the air and threwed him off. And when they landed, it partially pinned Hump. Crazy Horse and Little Crow and others made a corridor around Hump to protect him because it's right in the heat of the battle here,” Donovin says. “The rest of the Indians kept
on on horseback, and I did not get in the final fight,” says Chief Hump. So by now, most of the U.S. soldiers were knocked off their horses and fighting on foot. One group of soldiers tried to flee toward the river.

A view from the saddle where Crazy Horse and Chief Hump raced back and forth between the battle and their camp.

Credit: Melodie Edwards

Now Donovin and I drive along the sagebrush ridge where all the fighting took place, views of the river down below. It’s late afternoon and the autumn cottonwoods are lit up gold. “And they
went down into this deep ravine and that is further over. Steep. Some said it was just a last
desperate run on foot and they went off down into a deep ravine and they were gonna take cover
there and leave the people on Last Stand Hill. Well, they got down there and that's full of
Indians. That's full of some of the younger ones, teenagers. They're holding horses, they've got
water. So they went into another trap.

They were all killed, some were never found. “One of those teenagers might have been Black
Elk,” Donovin says. “Soon the soldiers were all crowded into the river, and many Lakotas too
and I was in the water awhile. Men and horses were all mixed up and fighting in the water, and it
was like hail falling in the river. Then we were out of the river, and people were stripping dead
soldiers and putting the clothes on themselves. There was a soldier on the ground and he was still
kicking. A Lakota rode up and said to me: "Boy, get off and scalp him." I got off and started to
do it. He had short hair and my knife was not very sharp. He ground his teeth. Then I shot him in
the forehead and got his scalp,” Black Elk writes.

Black Elk didn’t draw out this scalping but killed the man quickly so he could finish the job
without torturing him. Donovin says most atrocities committed by Indigenous fighters were done
for symbolic purposes. “Custer’s ears were punched in with an awl. So the women did that. And
the women did most of the, if there's atrocities, the women did most of that,” he says.

“And why would the women do it?” I ask. “Because there was usually a loved one or a brother or
an uncle that had been hurt in the battle. But with Custer, see, the Southern Cheyenne told him at
the Battle of the Washington never to come in on their people and make a surprise attack like that
again. The punctures with the awl was to hear better in the afterlife. He didn't listen,” Donovin says.

An awl, if you’re not sure, is a sharp tool used to puncture leather. As to how Custer died, Donovin says no one knows exactly. “So Custer is basically up on this ridge here and after he waved his hat, he's on a site. And that's the big unknown. That's like, we don't know what's happened eventually,” he says.

Some say Custer may have even taken his own life. Others say it was Sitting Bull but Donovin says Sitting Bull was still recovering from the Sundance and was leading from the sidelines. In an interview with a reporter afterward, Sitting Bull refuted it. “They say I murdered Custer. But it was a lie. He was a fool who rode to his death,” he said in the interview.

So that was the end of Custer. Now it was only Major Reno, down at the south end, his company hiding in holes for two more days. Donovin drives down to that end of the battle site, to the area where Reno ends up cornered. The main battle itself took no time at all.

“The way the Indians described it was about as long as it took a white man to eat his lunch. So an hour, maybe?” Donovin says. “Really?” I say. “Yeah, 20 minutes. But this lingered for two days. This goes into the next day Sunday. And then all night, you know, it's almost like PTSD, all the powwows and chanting and they definitely thought they were history, Reno and them,” he says.
As we’re walking around the visitor center, Donovin tells me the horror of the battle hit Reno especially hard. He watched as his friend, the Crow scout, Bloody Knife, got shot right in front of him. “And they actually blew his brains out. He was shot and the brains flew over on Reno's face. And so he loses his senses, really. That's why when they're retreating and Reno’s telling his men, ‘mount up, dismount, mount up, dismount,’ so they're confused. What are we supposed to do? A lot of them said Reno’s orders didn't make sense,” Donovin says.

Crazy Horse later defended the brutality of the battle. “They say we massacred him, but he would have done the same to us had we not defended ourselves and fought to the last,” he said.

And because of Sand Creek, they knew how cruel the U.S. Army could be. Young Black Elk ventured out onto the battlefield where he saw dead horses laying on top of dead soldiers. “There were not many of our own dead there, because they had been picked up already; but many of our men were killed and wounded. They shot each other in the dust. I did not see Custer and I think nobody knew which one he was,” he says.

Black Elk was overwhelmed at seeing all those dead wasichus, or white people. “I could smell nothing but blood, and I got sick of it. So I went back home with some others. I was not sorry at all. I was a happy boy. Those wasichus had come to kill our mothers and fathers and us, and it was our country. When I was in the brush up there by the Hunkpapas, and the first soldiers were shooting, I knew this would happen. I thought that my people were relatives to the thunder beings of my vision, and that the soldiers were very foolish to do this,” he writes.
When you visit the historic site, most people mill about at Last Stand Hill where Custer’s body was found. It’s a fenced off area filled with white grave markers. “Custer was probably mortally wounded down there, and then brought up here to Last Stand,” says Donovin. “Now, are these markers, the white ones, those are just US soldiers?” I say. “Yeah, so that's another point. You know, it's like, the old days, they don't even give the Natives a marker, just to soldiers,” Donovin says.

So Donovin says, for years, the tribes came to the site without permission and erected their own markers, stacks of stones. “And so only like in the last ten years, the Park Service found out what those markers that we have are for. The different superintendents through the years would clean house, they'd come out here and they'd clean them and haul them off. And then they noticed them, they're back. And so we finally told them what they were there for. Now they leave them alone,” he says.

And recently the park service began putting up black markers to show where Indigenous warriors fell. But it’s clear that many visitors to this battlefield don’t understand its significance to the tribes.

Donovin tells him that in South Dakota, there are holidays that other states don’t recognize. “We have two working holidays, June 25 to celebrate Little Bighorn Day and December 29 for Wounded Knee Day. And you won't find no Natives working or tribal offices are closed. Those are big days for us. Big victory days. Yay!” says Donovin.
So while the U.S. has long thought of this battle as a low point in its history, it’s very much a moment to celebrate for the Plains tribes. But it had ramifications. This victory quickly led to a violent crackdown by the federal government.

**Retreating to Reservations**

The glory of winning the Battle of the Greasy Grass didn’t last long. Even after Sand Creek, the U.S. government was willing to stop at nothing. From 1872-74, two years after Custer’s defeat, the US army killed 5 point 4 million bison. And the killing continued until, by 1885, there were only 325 left. It radically changed the dynamic of the war.

*From 1872-74, two years after Custer’s defeat, the US army killed 5 point 4 million bison.*

Credit: Ana Castro
Donovin says one by one, the great Plains chiefs started turning themselves over. “Only less than a year later from the great victory are the surrenders. With those surrenders, less than a year later, it's like a wagon of settlers, a family could come across Wyoming here and never see a Lakota. And so they were removed from this area, even though the treaty had boundaries clear over here to the Fort Laramie,” he says.

Crazy Horse’s surrender didn’t go so smoothly. In 1877, when the soldiers were bringing him into Fort Robinson, he struggled and a soldier stabbed him with a bayonet and he died.

Four days before his death, he smoked a sacred pipe with Sitting Bull and shared a dream for the future of Indigenous people. “Upon suffering beyond suffering, the Red Nation shall rise again, and it shall be a blessing for a sick world. A world filled with broken promises, selfishness and separations. A world longing for light again,” said Crazy Horse.

Congress had passed the Homestead Act in 1862, giving 160 acres of government-surveyed land to any adult citizen. Lots of homesteaders figured, heck, Native Americans are nomadic…they don’t need all that land…everything out past the Mississippi is free for the taking. As the tribal leaders surrendered, band after band of Plains tribes had no choice but to retreat to reservations. “They were still very large, but they decreased with the Homestead Act. So they gave 160 acres to Native families and so when they gave that land, it was like, Okay, this area comprises Pine Ridge and there's all this extra land that was deemed surplus land and that was open for settlement. So then non-Indian family farmers, ranchers could come in, get their 160 acres, you
know. So anyway, after less than a year after Little Bighorn, that's where our people were, and Hump went to Canada,” says Donovin.

Hump went to Canada with Sitting Bull and over 5 thousand others. Sitting Bull was done with white people, especially since the massacre at Sand Creek on the Fort Lyon Reservation. “The whites provoked the war; their injustices, their indignities to our families, the cruel, unheard of and wholly unprovoked massacre at Fort Lyon…shook all the veins which bind and support me. I rose, tomahawk in hand, and I have done all the hurt to the whites that I could,” he said. Sitting Bull and the other leaders petitioned Queen Victoria for protection and a land reserve. The hope was to find bison still roaming there.

Chief Hump and his band stayed for several years but they couldn’t stick it out. “They left Canada because the buffalo were diminished there as well. The people were hungry, starving, and they were pleading with Sitting Bull to go back and he didn't want to, he was a holdout. And even though they had hardships, he wanted to stick it out. So he was real disgruntled about coming back. And then when he did come back, he was so influential, they felt that he had to go clear down to the southern part of the state not far from his reservation and kind of be acclimated at Fort Randall. And then he was brought onto his home reservation,” says Donovin.

It had now been over 20 years since the Sand Creek Massacre, over 20 years of defending their way of life, fighting for their religion, language, their very survival. And now, after all that, here they were on tiny reservations far from home. The spirit of the people, Donovin says it started to buckle, especially when the government went after their spiritual ceremonies.
“They banned the Sundance. So your winter counts are gone, your history is gone. And the women, they started the star quilt, they started quilling and doing more of the arts and kept themselves busy. But the man, that's when he turned to alcohol real heavy, because now his job was first of the month, beef issue, you go down and shoot that cow in a pen and that's your food. And they dress it out. And then he goes home, he's idle for the rest of the month. And I found that's when alcohol took over. And continues today,” says Donovin.

The Ghost Dance

But then…along came the Ghost Dance. It started with the Paiute in Nevada in the early 1870’s. A new dance ceremony that promised to bring back your dead loved ones. Tribes across the West had lost so many. Mothers, children, spiritual leaders…The sorrow felt incurable, immeasurable. But here was a glimmer of hope. Sitting Bull and Hump decided they should bring the dance to their people. “By December 15, 1890, him and Hump are the two, the son of Hump, are the two main Ghost dancers, they are practicing the Ghost Dance. The religion is spreading and the military are very fearful of this. They thought if you danced, you went on the warpath,” says Donovin.

But for the Ghost dancers, it wasn’t about violence at all. In fact, the spiritual guide named Wovoka traveled the country teaching Indigenous communities about it… and he said the dance would succeed if there was peaceful coexistence and a strong work ethic. “It was a religion, it
was based on Wovoka from the Paiute. Runners went out West to learn about that and as they brought this religion back, different tribes adapted it in different ways,” says Donovin.

Black Elk was now 27 years old and a spiritual leader in his own right. He’d lost many loved ones over the long years of fighting back white settlement. “I thought of my father and my brother and sister who had left us, and I could not keep the tears from running out of my eyes. I raised my face up to keep them back, but they came out just the same. I cried with my whole heart, and while I cried I thought of my people in despair. I thought of my vision, and how it was promised me that my people should have a place in this earth where they could be happy every day. I thought of them on the wrong road now, but maybe they could be brought back into the hoop again and to the good road,” said Black Elk.

When he was a little boy, Black Elk had a vision of the unity of the world, symbolized by a great hoop. “Everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round…The sky is round and I have heard the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars,” he writes.

**Black Elk said, “Everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round.”**

Credit: Ana Castro
With the Ghost Dance, he hoped to bring that vision to life. “Most of the people wailed and cried as they danced, holding hands in a circle; but some of them laughed with happiness. Now and then someone would fall down like dead, and others would go staggering around and panting before they would fall. While they were lying there like dead they were having visions, and we kept on dancing and singing and many were crying for the old way of living and that the old religion might be with them again,” said Black Elk.

While Black Elk danced, he experienced another vision; this time, the dancers wore special painted shirts to protect them from harm. After this, he went back to his tepee and mass produces lots of these shirts for all the dancers to wear. But Donovin says the Standing Rock Indian agent John McLaughlin interpreted all this Ghost Dance fervor, not as grieving, but as an imminent threat.

Then on December 15th, 1890, McLaughlin refused to hold back any longer. “He was going to stop the Ghost Dance there at his reservation and stop Sitting Bull. He sent Indian police out to do the work of the soldiers and make an arrest at Sitting Bull’s cabin, a highly volatile situation. And most of the Indian police were Sitting Bull’s own family.

They went to Sitting Bull’s cabin and Sitting Bull refused to let the tribal police in. “A knock on the door and then next, shots are exchanged. Sitting Bull is shot dead in his house. His son Crow Foot is shot dead there. Some Indian police were shot dead. And meanwhile outside on the south side on the Grand River, the Ghosts Dancers were all camped there in teepees. And they were
just appalled and shocked. Our leader lies there. They fled to Cheyenne River, over 100 miles
away, to Hump’s camp,” said Donovin.

The Battle of Wounded Knee

Now, with Sitting Bull murdered, the army really had something to be afraid of. They started
 rounding up all the tribes in the area, insisting they must come camp at Wounded Knee. Chief
Hump agreed to bring in his people. And chiefs Big Foot and Spotted Elk did too. Even though
there were only about 350 people there, the army brought in 500 soldiers and surrounded the
camp with four big rapid-fire guns. At dawn on December 29th, the soldiers started searching the
lodges to make sure everyone was unarmed. They collected a few dozen rifles. Then, at one
lodge, the Ghost Dancer Yellow Bird started taunting the soldiers. At that moment, they
demanded the gun of a deaf man, Black Coyote. But he couldn’t hear them and confusion
ensued.

Black Elk learned about what happened next…“He took the other man's gun, and then started to
take Yellow Bird's. But Yellow Bird would not let go. He wrestled with the officer, and while
they were wrestling, the gun went off and killed the officer....Then suddenly nobody knew what
was happening, except that the soldiers were all shooting and the wagon-guns began going off
right in among the people,” he said.

Instantly, the army started firing directly into the camp. Black Elk and his friends heard the
gunfire and donned their Ghost Dancing shirts and rode out into the attack. “We followed down
along the dry gulch and what we saw was terrible. Dead and wounded women and children and little babies were scattered all along where they had been trying to run away. The soldiers had followed along the gulch, as they ran away, and murdered them in there. Sometimes they were in heaps because they had huddled together, and some were scattered all along. Sometimes bunches of them had been killed and torn to pieces where the wagon guns hit them. I saw a little baby trying to suck its mother, but she was bloody and dead,” said Black Elk.

Historical photos show the dead in the snow, wearing Black Elk’s ghost dancing shirts. They hadn’t protected them after all. As the official archivist for his tribe, Donovin has seen the artifacts left behind by the horror of Wounded Knee. “The world doesn’t know about it, but there's a place called the a cold room. In the cold room at our archives at the tribe is temperature control, a big room, and it has all the Wounded Knee items that we've been able to find in the world at museums and Smithsonian. And you know, it's a sad place. It's full of like a beaded little kid’s vest with bullet holes all rattled and there's actual blood on the garments yet to this day. They bury them in a mass grave. You know, there's no ceremony, they just stuffed them in there,” says Donovin.

The mass grave at Wounded Knee
Over 300 people were murdered at Wounded Knee. Once again, just like at Sand Creek, they were mostly women, children and elders. Black Elk, on horseback with only a ceremonial bow and arrow, felt powerless to stop the kill. It was a good winter day when all this happened. The sun was shining. But after the soldiers marched away from their dirty work, a heavy snow began to fall. The wind came up in the night. There was a big blizzard, and it grew very cold. The snow drifted deep in the crooked gulch, and it was one long grave of butchered women and children and babies, who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away.

The few survivors of the massacre wandered out into the blizzard, Black Elk recalled. “It was dark now and late in the night we came to where they were camped without any tepees. They were just sitting by little fires and the snow was beginning to blow. We rode in among them and I heard my mother's voice. She was singing a death song for me because she felt sure I had died over there. She was so glad to see me that she cried and cried. I think nobody but the little children slept any that night. The snow blew and we had no tepees,” he said.

After that, Black Elk’s hope that the Ghost Dance could awaken their ancestors to rise up and fight off the whites, he saw that hope die on Wounded Knee Creek. “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. And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth -- you see me now a pitiful old
man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead,” he said.

But now, over a hundred and thirty years later, Donovin has his own vision of the future. “Black Elk, you know, he said the hoop of the nation was now broken, that Wounded Knee, the will of the people and the hoop is broken. And so since that day, I always grew up thinking well, hoops can be mended. And that's where I'm at. Most of my life is collecting the history and mending the hoop. The hoop dancer represents all that's good in life and your hoops are spinning. Everything's good. It's a good day, you're in sync and you've got your values, Lakota values: bravery, generosity, respect, wisdom. You've got the circle of life in there and spring, summer, fall, winter and four races and the good road of life. Bottom line is, a hoop can be mended,” Donovin says.
And Donovin isn’t alone in this work. Yes, Wounded Knee marked the end of the Plains Tribes’ armed fight to protect their way of life. But as we’ll see in upcoming episodes, the Plains Indian Wars continue in a totally new form after Wounded Knee.

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