

*Legacy of Wounded Knee
uprising lives in Indigenous
resistance 50 years on*

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Pierre, February 28 (RHC)-- As many Native Americans marked the 50th anniversary this week of the militant occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, participants in the 1973 uprising and other activists linked the deadly revolt to modern-day Indigenous resistance, from Standing Rock to the #LandBack movement.

On February 27, 1973 around 300 Oglala Lakota and members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), seething from centuries of injustices ranging from genocide to leniency for whites who committed crimes against Indians, occupied the hamlet of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation for more than two months. The uprising occurred during a period of increased Native American militancy and the rise of AIM, which first drew international attention in 1969 with the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay.

"The Native people of this land after Wounded Knee, they had like a surge of new pride in being Native people," Dwain Camp, an 85-year-old Ponca elder who took part in the 1973 revolt, told The Associated Press. "Anything that goes on, anything we do, even today with the #LandBack issue, all of that is just a continuation."

Camp said the occupation drove previously "unimaginable" changes, including the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. "After we left Wounded Knee, it became paramount that protecting Mother Earth was our foremost issue," he explained. "Since that period of time, we've learned that we've got to teach our kids our true history." Camp said the spirit of Wounded Knee lives on in Indigenous resistance today.

"We're not the subjugated and disenfranchised people that we were," he said. "Wounded Knee was an important beginning of that. And because we're a resilient people, it's something we take a lot of pride in." Some of the participants in the 1973 uprising had been raised by grandparents who remembered or even survived the 1890 massacre of more than 200 Lakota men, women, and children by U.S. troops at Wounded Knee.

"That's how close we are to our history," Madonna Thunder Hawk, an 83-year-old elder in the Oohenumpa band of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe who was a frontline participant in the 1973 occupation, told Indian Country Today. "So anything that goes on, anything we do, even today with the #LandBack issue, all of that is just a continuation. It's nothing new."

Nick Tilsen, an Oglala Lakota who played a prominent role in the 2016-17 protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota and who founded the NDN Collective, told Indian Country Today that "for me, it's important to acknowledge the generation before us—to acknowledge their risk."

"It's important for us to honor them," said Tilsen, whose parents met at the Wounded Knee occupation. "It's important for us to thank them."

Akim Reinhardt, an associate professor of history at Towson State University in Baltimore, told Indian Country Today that the AIM protests "helped establish a sense of the permanence of Red Power in much the way that Black Power had for African-Americans, a permanent legacy." "It was the cultural legacy that racism isn't okay and people don't need to be quiet and accept it anymore," he added. "That it's okay to be proud of who you are."

The occupation began on the night of February 27, 1973, when a group of warriors led by Oklahoma AIM leader Carter Camp, Ponca, moved into the small town of Wounded Knee. They took over the trading post and established a base of operations along with AIM leaders Russell Means, Oglala Lakota; Dennis Banks, Ojibwe; and Clyde Bellecourt, White Earth Nation.

Within days, hundreds of activists had joined them for what became a 71-day standoff with the U.S. government and other law enforcement.

On March 16, U.S. Marshal Lloyd Grimm was shot and paralyzed from the waist down. Two Indians were subsequently killed during the standoff. Frank Clearwater, a 47-year-old Cherokee from North Carolina, was shot in the head while resting in an occupied church on April 17 and died a week later. The day after Clearwater's death, Lawrence "Buddy" Lamont, a local Lakota and Vietnam War veteran, was shot through the heart by a sniper during a shootout. He was 31 years old.

Black activist Ray Robinson, who had been working with the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, went missing during the standoff. In 2014, the FBI confirmed that Robinson died at Wounded Knee, but his body was never recovered.

AIM remains active today. Its members have participated in the fights against the Dakota Access, Keystone XL, and Line 3 pipelines, as well as in the effort to free Leonard Peltier, a former AIM leader who has been imprisoned for over 45 years after a dubious conviction for murdering two FBI agents during a separate 1975 shootout on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Kevin McKiernan, then a rookie reporter for NPR who was smuggled into Wounded Knee after the Nixon administration banned journalists from covering the standoff, said in an interview with NPR that the #LandBack movement—spearheaded in the U.S. by NDN Collective—is a leading example of the occupation's legacy.

"And I think that there is a collective or a movement like that on every reservation with every tribe," McKiernan said. "They're going to get back, to buy back, to get donated—just do it by inches." "That's what's going on in every inch of Indian country today," he added.

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