

## The Ghost Dance – A Promise of Fulfillment

(From <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-ghostdance/> - edited for classroom use)



*Ghost Dance of the Sioux, Illustrated in London News, 1891*

The Ghost Dance (Natdia) was a spiritual movement that came about in the late 1880s when conditions were bad on Indian reservations and Native Americans needed something to give them hope. This movement found its origin in a Paiute

Indian named Wovoka, who announced that he was the messiah come to earth to prepare the Indians for their salvation. Central to the Natdia religion was the dance itself – dancing in a circular pattern continuously – which induced a state of religious ecstasy.

The movement began with a dream by Wovoka (named Jack Wilson in English), a Northern Paiute, during the solar eclipse on January 1, 1889. He claimed that, in his dream, he was taken into the spirit world and saw all Native Americans being taken up into the sky and the Earth opening up to swallow all Whites and to revert back to its natural state. The Native Americans, along with their ancestors, were put back upon the earth to live in peace. He also claimed that he was shown that, by dancing the round- dance continuously, the dream would become a reality and the participants would enjoy the new Earth.

Wovoka told his followers to remain peaceful and keep the reason for the dance secret from the Whites. Wovoka's message spread quickly to other Native American peoples and soon many of them were fully dedicated to the movement. Representatives from tribes all over the nation came to Nevada to meet with Wovoka and learn to dance the Ghost Dance and to sing Ghost Dance songs.

The dance as told by Wovoka went something like this: "When you get home you must begin a dance and continue for five days. Dance for four successive nights, and on the last night continue dancing until the morning of the fifth day when all must bathe in the river and then return to their homes. You must all do this in the same way. ...I want you to dance every six weeks. Make a feast at the dance and have food that everybody may eat."

## Questions

1. Who first brought the "Ghost Dance" to the Paiute and other Plains Amerindian tribes?

2. Why was the message so appealing to so many of the Great Plains Amerindians?

Because so many of them had died, their lifestyles were almost completely eliminated, and they were without hope... at least until this.

3. What were faithful Amerindians promised would happen if they followed the Natdia ("Ghost Dance" religion)?

4. Why was it called the "Ghost Dance"? (Keep in mind that "ghost" is another word for "spirit" – it doesn't have to mean horror movie stuff.)

5. Singing together, living peacefully, and believing that paradise is coming soon and the bad people will go somewhere far below – does Natdia remind you of another popular religion at all? Explain.

The Natdia, it was claimed, would bring about the renewal of the native society and decline in the influence of the Whites.

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agents grew disturbed when they became aware that so many Indians were coming together and participating in a new and unknown event.

In early October 1890, Kicking Bear, a Minneconjou Sioux Indian, visited Sitting Bull at Standing Rock telling him of his visit to Wovoka. They told him of the great number of other Indians who were there as well, referring to Wovoka as the Christ.

And they told him of the prophecy that the next spring when the grass was high, the earth would be covered with new soil and bury all the white men. The new soil would be covered with sweetgrass, running water and trees and the great herds of buffalo and wild horses would return. All Indians who danced the Ghost Dance would be taken up into the air and suspended there while the new earth was being laid down. Then they would be returned to the earth along with the ghosts of their ancestors.

When the dance spread to the Lakota (Sioux), the BIA agents became alarmed. They claimed that the Lakota developed a militaristic approach to the dance and began making “ghost shirts” they thought would protect them from bullets. They also spoke openly about why they were dancing. The BIA agent in charge of the Lakota eventually sent the tribal police to arrest Sitting Bull, a leader respected among the Lakota, to force him to stop the dance. In the struggle that followed, Sitting Bull was killed along with a number of policemen.

Following the killing of Sitting Bull, the United States sent the Seventh Cavalry to “disarm the Lakota and take control.” During the events that followed, now known as the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890, 457 U.S. soldiers opened fire upon the Sioux killing more than 200 of them. The Ghost Dance reached its peak just before the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890.

When it became apparent that ghost shirts did not protect from bullets and the expected resurrection did not happen, most former believers quit the Ghost Dance. Wovoka, disturbed by the death threats and disappointed with the many reinterpretations of his vision, gave up his public speaking. However, he remained well-respected among his followers and continued his religious activities. He traveled and received visitors until the end of his life in 1932. There are still members of the religious movement today.

## Questions

6. What message did Kicking Bear bring to Sitting Bull (who'd been at Little Bighorn when Custer was killed in 1876) in October 1890?

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7. How did the Natdia (“Ghost Dance”) religion change when it spread to the Lakota Sioux?

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8. What were “ghost shirts”? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. Why did the Ghost Dance religion make the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) so nervous?

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10. How/why was Sitting Bull killed? \_\_\_\_\_

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11. How did the reaction of the U.S. to the Ghost Dance lead to the Wounded Knee Massacre?

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## The Wounded Knee Massacre

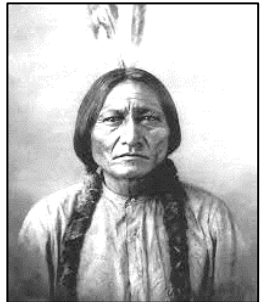
(From <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/sd-woundedknee/> - edited for classroom use)

The Wounded Knee Massacre, a regrettable and tragic clash of arms occurring on December 29, 1890, was the last significant engagement between Native Americans and soldiers on the North American Continent, ending nearly four centuries of warfare between westward-bound Americans and the indigenous peoples.

The event was precipitated by individual indiscretion and was not organized premeditation, and although the majority of the participants on both sides had not intended to use their arms, the tense and confusing situation ended tragically. After the haze of gun smoke that hung over the battlefield was cleared, some of the facts have been obscured; but, the action more resembles a massacre than a battle. Today, it serves as an example of national guilt for the mistreatment of the Indians.

The arrival of troops on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, to quiet the Ghost Dance disorders of 1890, provided the climate for the massacre. After Indian police killed Chief Sitting Bull while trying to arrest him on December 15th on the Standing Rock Reservation, his Hunkpapa band of the Lakota tribe grew agitated and troop reinforcements arrived.

When 200 of the Indians fled southward to the Cheyenne River, military officials feared a Hunkpapa-Miniconjou coalition. A detachment from the 7th Cavalry was sent to arrest Chief Big Foot of the Miniconjou. U.S. forces included several Hotchkiss guns. These looked like small cannons but fired large shells rapidly, like an early version of “machine guns.” The soldiers carefully surrounded the camp, poised for battle although none of the Natives showed any interest in fighting or behaved as if they intended to resist.



⇐ *Sitting Bull*

Troops began disarming the Indians the next day. It was not a wise decision. Guns were both cherished possessions and essential to their ability to hunt and feed themselves. The warriors did not comply readily with the request to yield their weapons, so a detachment of troops went through the teepees and uncovered about 40 rifles. Tension mounted, for the soldiers had upset the teepees and disturbed the women and children; and the officers feared the Indians were still concealing firearms.

## Questions

12. What does it mean to say that Wounded Knee was precipitated (“caused”) by “individual indiscretion” and not “organized premeditation”? (Feel free to look up some of these words.)

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13. Sitting Bull was a widely respected and well-known leader even before Little Bighorn. How did his death affect the rest of his tribe?

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14. Why did U.S. troops feel the need to take away all of the Amerindians’ guns?

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15. Why were the men in camp so upset about losing their guns if they weren’t planning on fighting with the soldiers?

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Meanwhile, the militant medicine man, Yellow Bird, had circulated among the men urging resistance and reminding them that their “ghost shirts” made them invulnerable. When the troops attempted to search the warriors, the rifle of a man named Black Coyote, considered by many members of his tribe to be crazy, apparently discharged accidentally when he resisted. Yellow Bird gave a signal for retaliation, and several warriors leveled their rifles at the troops and may have even fired them. The soldiers, reacting to what they deemed to be treachery, sent a volley into the Indian ranks. In a brief but frightful struggle, the combatants ferociously wielded rifle, knife, revolver, and war club.

Soon the Hotchkiss guns opened fire from the hill, indiscriminately mowing down some of the women and children, who had gathered to watch the proceedings. Within minutes, the field was littered with Indian dead and wounded; teepees were burning; and survivors were scrambling in a panic to the shelter of nearby ravines, pursued by the soldiers and raked with fire from the Hotchkiss guns. The bodies of men, women, and children were found scattered for a distance of two miles from the scene of the first encounter. Because of the frenzy of the struggle and the density of the participants, coupled with poor visibility from gun smoke, many innocents met death. In the confusion, both soldiers and Indians undoubtedly took the lives of some of their own groups.

Of the 230 Indian women and children and 120 men at the camp, 153 were counted dead and 44 wounded; but, many of the wounded probably escaped and relatives quickly removed a large number of the dead. Army casualties were 25 dead and 39 wounded. The total casualties were probably the highest in Plains Indian warfare except for the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Following the massacre, the soldiers left the wounded Native Americans to die in a three-day blizzard that followed and later hired civilians to remove the bodies and bury them in a mass grave. Afterward, the soldiers lined up and had their picture taken beside the mass grave. Twenty medals of honor were later given to honor the U.S. soldiers who participated in the massacre.

The Wounded Knee massacre effectively ended Native American resistance to white authority across the Great Plains. Those who remained realized that they’d have to conform to white men’s ways if they hoped to survive. In 1903, a monument was erected at the site of the mass grave by surviving relatives to honor the many innocent women and children who were killed in the massacre. The site was designated as a National Historic Site on December 21, 1965.

## Questions

16. There are several versions of how the violence began. According to this account, what caused the first shot to be fired?

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17. What did Yellow Bird contribute to the outbreak of violence?

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18. How could conflict over one rifle lead to the massacre of hundreds of women, children, and others? (The answer isn’t spelled out in the text – you’ll have to make some reasonable inferences.)

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19. Approximately how many people were killed at Wounded Knee (on all sides)?

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20. What was the impact of the Wounded Knee Massacre on remaining Amerindian resistance?

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