

A Song for the Horse Nation

HORSES IN NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES

DECLINE & REVIVAL 1875–PRESENT

Wild West Shows

Mounted Parades

Horse Gear from the Plateau peoples

Crow Fair Parade

Lakota Parade Regalia

Native American Horse Breeds

The Ride to Wounded Knee

As the Indian Wars came to an end, American Indians struggled to settle and preserve the small territories that the U.S. government called reservations. Horses, which had become so central to our culture, were largely forbidden. The big herds were destroyed.

The government tried to sever our bonds to each other, to the land, even to the horse. These policies cost us dearly, but they did not succeed. Our tribes survive. We hold on to our reservation lands. Among many of our people horses still hold a prominent place in our world.

He means too much to us, our 'holy dog'; the spirit that binds us could not be fully broken. The Horse Nation is our ally, now and forever.

—Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota), NMAI, 2009

The Ride to Wounded Knee

On December 29, 1890, the Seventh Cavalry massacred Miniconjou Lakota leader Big Foot and 150 of his people at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. In the days leading up to the massacre, Big Foot and his followers rode 300 miles, hoping to find refuge at the Pine Ridge Reservation.

In 1986 two Lakota elders—Curtis Kills Ree and Birgil Kills Straight—established the Sitanka Wokiksuye (Big Foot Memorial Ride), tracing Big Foot's route to Wounded Knee. The journey was the beginning of a long-awaited healing process.

In 1992 the event was revived under the name Oomaka Tokatakiya (Future Generations Ride). While it still pays homage to Big Foot and his followers, today's ride is meant to foster leadership qualities in youth. During the two-week, 300-mile journey, riders experience some of the hardships their ancestors endured, as a physical, spiritual, and intellectual remembrance.

As individuals and as a nation we have been spiritually crippled, because, after the massacre at Wounded Knee, our ancestors had never gone through the process, the ritual that is usually accorded to... people who... lose a loved one. And until... that takes place, they are in a period of mourning.

—Birgil Kills Straight (Lakota)



The Centennial Ride to Wounded Knee, December 29, 1990. Photograph by James Cook.

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