Wounded Knee Press Coverage in Omaha

A Nebraska Newspaper Comparison and Analysis

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Cressey, Charles H. *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 30, 1890, to January 3, 1891.

“Bright Eyes” Susette La Flesche Tibbles and Thomas H. Tibbles. *Omaha World-Herald*, December 30, 1890, to January 4, 1891.

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The Battle of Wounded Knee occurred December 29, 1890, on the Pine Ridge Reservation located on the border of South Dakota and Nebraska, and today is widely known as the Wounded Knee Massacre as 150-300 Lakota people were killed by United States Seventh Cavalry, who lost 25 men total. Two weeks prior, Chief Sitting Bull had been shot and killed by the Indian Police, so tensions were high leading to the massacre. The way the media covered the events at Wounded Knee had a profound impact on public opinion relating to Indigenous peoples and United States military intervention. By looking at the press coverage in the aftermath, from December 30 to January 4, community sentiment can be better understood and put into context.

Nebraska journalists were at the battle as it was happening: Charles H. (C.H.) Cressey of the *Omaha Daily Bee*, and Thomas Tibbles and Bright Eyes (Susette La Flesche Tibbles) of the *Omaha World-Herald*. Their accounts of the battle and aftermath line up, but their methods of engagement with the Lakota people and the federal agents differed, as well as their perspective in their newswriting based in their own interests. The reporters all had first-hand accounts of the conflict and aftermath, but they heavily relied on the information given to them by unnamed scouts to gain the full picture.

Cressey was with the army as the massacre happened and is said to have grabbed guns from dead or wounded soldiers and joined in the ranks as a volunteer.[[1]](#footnote-2) Because of the proximity to and participation in the massacre, his account is more likely to justify his own actions and villainize the Native Americans. Cressey’s brothers were all union soldiers in the Civil War, and later became clergy,[[2]](#footnote-3) likely influencing Cressey’s worldview to be pro-military and pro-assimilation. Fear was his main reaction to the events. He kept warning that there could be another attack any time, increasing paranoia in the readers. His coverage mainly focuses on the tactics, successes, and tragedies of the military, and the ferocity and slaughter of the Indians.

On the other hand, Tibbles and Bright Eyes provided more balanced coverage of the events. Tibbles tended to write from the military conflict perspective, while Bright Eyes wrote from her perspective as a Native American, and what she saw as she aided with treatment of the wounded. Tibbles and Bright Eyes had a history of Native American activism, especially with their association with the Omaha Nation and involvement in the Trial of Standing Bear a decade before. After the trial, couple traveled the United States with Standing Bear to advocate for Native rights. Their coverage is more likely to favor the Lakota in the conflict, but largely it did not, and they even advocated for General Miles to gain more control after the conflict, thinking it would help stop a larger conflict from happening.[[3]](#footnote-4) Their work together shows a more fair, balanced representation of the conflict by showing both sides of people involved. They also did more research into the context of the situation in order to identify possible causes of the battle.

The language used varied greatly between the writers. Cressey consistently used “reds,” “devils,” “hostiles,” “squaws,” “savages,” and overall negative and derogatory descriptors for the Lakota, and positive descriptors like courageous, brave, gallant, and handsome to describe the soldiers. Tibbles consistently referred to the Lakota as Indians, and the soldiers as their titles of soldiers, generals, and the cavalry, using objective labels and far less emotionally charged language. Bright Eyes refers to “the white people,” and uses emotional language as she describes what was happening in the hospital after the conflict. She describes the graphic physical condition of the women and children there and describes the fear these people have for what happened, and what will happen next for their people.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The day after the conflict, December 30, 1890, *The Bee* published the article by Cressey titled “A Bloody Battle” which separated the article with the subtitles summarizing: “Ordered to give up their arms; Sent to search the teepees; Pouring bullets into the ranks; It was a frightful rush; Fired a hundred shots; Pouring shots into the gulleys.” Followed by a list of army men killed and wounded. If a reader were skimming a newspaper, these would be the only part of the article they would likely read, and the wording favors the soldiers and paints the natives as defiant and the army as defending themselves against the “red assailants.” The same day, along with a list of soldiers killed and wounded, Tibbles wrote in the World-Herald, “It was a war of extermination now with the troopers. […] Down into the creek and up over the bare hills they were followed by artillery and musket fire, and for several minutes the engagement went on until not a live Indian was in sight.”[[5]](#footnote-6) This paints a different picture; perhaps the army’s motives started in defense but devolved into anger and revenge following, hoping to eradicate the defiant Native Americans.

The day after the conflict, there was a large blizzard preventing travel and assessment of the battleground which held more information about the massacre. Cressey writes that there were nine wounded people who had taken shelter under a log during the storm, and a few babies who were swaddled up and lying next to their mothers’ corpses crying.[[6]](#footnote-7) He said it was a mystery how they could have survived under such conditions, which implies that they are stronger, and their survival could be interpreted as an effect of the Ghost Dance invincibility that people feared. Fear had been growing in the non-indigenous groups due to this new practice of the “Ghost Dance” which some believed to be resistance to colonization and would grant the dancers immunity to bullets. White Americans feared this would bring indigenous groups together to revolt against the reservation system and assimilation practices in the United States. Both publications mentioned this practice in their coverage. Cressey writes:

While the fight was hottest, there mingled with the roar of musketry the careless, joyous laughter of half a dozen little Indian children, who were not more than five or six yards from the scene of the savage conflict, and who paid no more attention to it than if it were so much conversation.

As a most striking illustration of how deeply rooted and founded in is the ghost dance faith, even the children of these fanatic Indians have become like them. One of them, a little thing who could just talk plainly, ran up to one of our interpreters, just after the firing ceased and, shaking a toy tomahawk at him, exclaimed: “The soldiers wouldn’t have killed my father (one of the braves) if they hadn’t been close enough to tough him with their guns, because he had a ghost shirt on and white man cannot kill one of us when we have a ghost shirt on, unless they can touch us with their guns.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

Using this illustration, Cressey presents the reader with the notion that indigenous children are so accustomed to violence they are desensitized to the battle happening in front of them. This implies that the whole band, tribe, or even all Native Americans are innately violent and dangerous and should be feared. Cressey continued to use the practice to strike fear into the readers by warning that an unnamed scout saw a group of Natives only eight miles away involved in a war dance and trying to provoke the Army.[[8]](#footnote-9) Bright Eyes’s mention of the ghost dance occurs in the makeshift hospital after the conflict: “One young girl, who had a ghost shirt on underneath her clothes, said, ‘They told me if I put this on the bullets would not go through, and I believed them. Now see where we are,’ and then she cried.”[[9]](#footnote-10) This shows the reader that wearing a ghost shirt does not make Indians invincible but may have acted as a safety blanket to keep children from being scared of the colonizers and military presence.

Bright Eyes gives more insight to the state of the reservation before and after the conflict. She illustrates the government and Indian Bureau’s “ugly spirit” by reporting excess medical supplies were not given to wounded Indians, and the useless material provisions given to them while their people were starving. She also notes that people living on the reservation had no way of making money outside of these provisions. The aspect that seems to bother Bright Eyes most is the government awareness of the problem, and the inaction in response. Hundreds of white women living near the reservation signed a petition to give the Sioux more rations, and then agent Gallagher advocated for them in the department and was ignored.[[10]](#footnote-11) Bright Eyes makes the connection between the government’s desire for the Black Hills and the tactics of starvation and violence to get it:

The conviction is slowly forcing itself into my mind that this war has been deliberately brought about. […] If the white people want their land and must have it, they can go about getting it in some other way than by forcing it from them by starving them or provoking them to war and sacrificing the lives of innocent women and children, and through the sufferings of the wives and children of officers and soldiers.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Bright Eyes’s viewpoint shifts from the conflict being an unfortunate “causeless war” to it being a deliberate action of the United States against Indigenous peoples. She finds more evidence to support this theory when a group of “friendly” Indians went to their deserted camps and saw clothes, food, and tents, showing they fled in terror because they’d believed that Big Foot’s band were killed after their surrender.[[12]](#footnote-13) Tibbles also writes of the neglect of the United States in his article “Disgraceful Incompetence,” and expresses similar disappointment in the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ management of resources and annuity payments that led to the inhumane living situations on the reservation, and the lack of response from Washington in requests to remedy it.[[13]](#footnote-14) Cressey did not mention conditions leading to the massacre in any of his writing, and chose to focus on nearby “hostiles” in the Cheyenne tribe, military movement, and burial costs and practices for the deceased “hostiles,” which went against their cultural burial practices burying them in an unmarked, communal gravesite.[[14]](#footnote-15) He then ends his writing, “There will probably be another big event in this vicinity within forty-eight and possibly twenty-four hours,”[[15]](#footnote-16) fostering community fear and panic for the days to come, while blatantly diffusing blame or responsibility from the military.

All writing contains some bias, but good journalism looks at all sides and reports all available viewpoints to let the reader make their own educated judgment or opinion. Objective reporting was even more important in an age where news was only accessible locally or regionally. Today, we can easily fact check the media, but this wasn’t possible or plausible for the average person to do in the 1890s. This happened right as we see widespread “Yellow Journalism,” which sensationalized the news like a tabloid would today, not caring much about objectivity, and that is exactly what we see coming from the *Omaha Daily Bee* in their coverage of the Wounded Knee Massacre. *The Omaha World-Herald* was much more balanced when comparing the two, but because of their activism the reader should also be looking for their bias. Cressey’s coverage and lack of context was a lot more entertaining to the average reader and confirmed already held prejudices of the readers, fueling their xenophobia, and allowing harmful legislation, practices and exploitation of native culture. It is important to study the information communities are receiving in order to accurately gauge popular opinion and the spread of ideas, especially when it came to Indian Affairs and the unofficial “end” of the Indian Wars in the United States.

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15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)