

## From Little Big Horn to Wounded Knee



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by: [Philip Burnham](#) / Indian Country Today

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*Photo courtesy NMAI, Smithsonian Institution/photo by Union Pacific Railroad -- This ca. 1920 color postcard depicts Iron Hail or Dewey Beard, Minneconjou Lakota, survivor of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre.*

### The true legend of Dewey Beard

#### Part one

PINE RIDGE, S.D. - If you've seen the movie, you know Little Big Man was a doozy of a tall tale. No one this side of Hollywood could have hunted buffalo as a boy, hobnobbed with white men, fought Gen. George Armstrong Custer, taken Jesus as a savior, survived an Army massacre or two - and lived for a century.

Nobody except Dewey Beard, that is.

A Minneconjou Lakota, Beard was everything the movie's white hero, Jack Crabb, was cracked up to be. As a youngster he rode his pony up Medicine Tail Coulee and killed a trooper at Little Big Horn. In his 30s, he took two bullets at Wounded Knee and saw almost his entire family killed. In his late 90s, still scrapping for a fight, he was telling off Congress about the latest Washington land grab in Lakota country.

He was a Ghost dancer, a homesteader, a trick rider, a movie actor, a buckskin ambassador - and a Catholic convert. And there are still people in Lakota country who knew him.

One of them is Beard's great-granddaughter, Marie Fox Belly. She tells of a spry old man in moccasins, a childhood companion who seemed, to an impressionable young girl, like he just stepped out of another age.

"I sat on his lap and felt that scar in his leg where he was shot" at Wounded Knee, Fox Belly recalled, savoring a favorite childhood memory. "I could put my hand in where the muscle was torn away. I put my ear to his chest, and I could hear his heart beat. I could feel his breath on top of my head."

Fox Belly spoke of "Grandpa Beard" with something close to awe. As a girl, she watched and followed his every move. "I knew my grandfather. I talked to him. I trailed him. I sat by him. When I was smaller and growing up, I didn't quite have all my teeth, so he would chew my meat for me and set [the pieces] on the table beside my bowl.

"His hands were big hands, and I thought, 'Geez, this man held his child, a newborn baby, and he held weapons of war.' But he also shook hands in friendship." At 99, said Fox Belly, his hearing was as good as hers, and he had a full set of teeth. And he could ride a horse like a man half his age.

When he died in 1955, Time magazine said Beard was living in a "tar paper shack." Fox Belly, who visited him often, remembers that "shack" fondly. It was one room, spare and simple, with a kitchen on one side and a sleeping area on the other. That's the way most people lived on the reservation 50 years ago.

There was a reason Beard's death was written up in papers like The New York Times and The Washington Post. He was the last survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. And Beard, short for Hawk Beard, Fox Belly said, told a bundle of stories about the battle.

They were camped on the Little Big Horn with Crazy Horse that day in 1876. All of a sudden the soldiers

attacked the camp and killed a young boy. That made the Lakota and Cheyenne so mad they "went out and cleaned them up," Beard later told National Geographic. Almost 20 years old at the time, he jumped on the first horse he could find and rode to the sound of the guns.

There's a funny thing about that horse, said Leonard Little Finger, a family descendant from Oglala. Little Finger, whose grandfather was Beard's younger brother, listened avidly to Beard's stories as a teenager. Beard told him he had a battle horse outfitted with a mouth bridle that day, he began, warming to the story.

He jumped on the mount, and Beard's father "hit the horse in the butt, and the horse took off, and he's trying to sit on it and not fall off," Little Finger recounted. "An old lady with a cane is standing there looking at the noise, and the horse is going fast, and Beard hollers, 'Watch out, grandma, I can't stop the horse!'"

The horse hit the old woman, tossing her in the air, and she fell in the water. Then Beard rode across the river and into history.

By the time he got to the battlefield, the action was almost over. With time enough to shoot only one arrow, his aim was true, killing a blue-coated soldier armed with a six-shooter.

A strange thing happened then, Little Finger said. Before the firing stopped, Beard saw a soldier cowering on the ground surrounded by a group of laughing women. A man rode up with his son draped over his horse, singing a death song. When he saw the group, he stopped, jumped off his mount, pulled his pistol out, and walked up to the soldier and shot him dead.

"That's the story I know," Little Finger said.

A Lakota language and culture teacher at Loneman School in Oglala, Little Finger has some bittersweet memories of his grandfather. He recalled the time Beard invited him along to visit the Little Big Horn battlefield when they were at a pow wow in nearby Wyoming. But his father told him he had to stay and dance. "There's things in your life you regret," Little Finger said wistfully. "In my life, that was one of them."

Beard left the battle with some souvenirs, including an Army-issue bugle one of his nephews later used as a toy.

But the Custer victory had been in vain. As Beard himself would say later: "They got the Black Hills anyway, so what's the difference?"

After the battle, the Army set out to punish the victors. Some, under Crazy Horse, signed the famous surrender ledger and went in to the agencies. Others, under Sitting Bull, refused. Dewey Beard proudly counted himself among the latter.

Iron Hail (Wasu Maza), as he came to be known, was going into exile. It would take Custer's 7th Cavalry another 14 years to catch up with him.

*(Continued in part two)*

## Surviving Wounded Knee

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Photo courtesy NMAI, Smithsonian Institution/photo by Union Pacific Railroad -- This ca. 1920 color postcard depicts Iron Hail or Dewey Beard, Minneconjou Lakota, survivor of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre.

### The true legend of Dewey Beard

#### Part two

OGLALA, S.D. - *Dewey Beard was the last survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn: a warrior, rancher, actor and respected elder. His eventful life, which spanned a century, is still remembered by friends and family.*

The more Leonard Little Finger read the letter, the less it made sense. His grandfather, Joseph, had written to his brother, Dewey Beard, that they needed to record their experiences of the "battle" of Wounded Knee.

That stumped Little Finger, a teacher of Lakota history and culture at nearby Loneman School.

"Battle?" he said, looking a little perplexed over his kitchen table in Oglala. "Wait a minute. I know it as a massacre" - what is practically an article of faith on the Pine Ridge Reservation. "But the more I began to look at it, it was, from their perspective, a battle for their life."

As Beard's grandnephew, Little Finger has thought a lot about what happened that day on Wounded Knee Creek. Years of studying - and being - Lakota hadn't prepared him for Joseph's words. "It opened my eyes. I finally got to understand what he really meant: They fought to survive." And their fight wouldn't end any time soon.

How Dewey Beard got to Wounded Knee in the first place is a story in itself.

Soon after the Little Big Horn, Beard followed Sitting Bull's band into exile. They walked across the "medicine line" into Canada and, a few years later, trudged a good part of the way back, with promises from the U.S. Army that they could live in peace.

Beard and his family put away their war paint. They lived in cabins and hauled hay along the Cheyenne River. His brother Joseph studied English in school. They even went to the white man's church, said great-granddaughter Marie Fox Belly.

But crop failure and ration cuts came. Desperate, the Lakota joined the dancers in the summer of 1890. Beard danced too, though suspicious of the claim that the painted shirts would stop the bullets of the wasicun.

"The Ghost Dance was a dance of life," affirmed Fox Belly, recalling the enthusiasm of the troubled time. That fall, Beard's wife bore him a child, a son named Wet Feet who would not survive the winter.

Chief Big Foot's band of about 300 men, women and children - Beard's family among them - hurried south to Pine Ridge after Sitting Bull was killed. They averted a skirmish before camping under military escort at Wounded Knee. That night his father, Horn Cloud, had a premonition, Fox Belly said - he told the family it would be better to die together than apart.

The next morning, Dec. 29, Wounded Knee Creek ran red.

A shot from an Indian gun was answered by a volley of Army rifle and cannon fire. "The soldiers' shots sounded like firecrackers and hail in a storm," Beard said later.

He watched, helpless, as his own mother sang her Death Song, her side ripped open by a bullet. He tried in vain to revive his brother William, felled by a gunshot wound to the chest. All they could do was shake hands before he died.

Beard fled down the ravine toward the creek, picking up discarded guns and firing back at the soldiers. Bleeding profusely from his own wounds, he was saved when Joseph, the only member of his family to survive unscathed, rode up on horseback and rescued him.

The toll was ghastly: Beard lost his mother, father, two brothers, wife and infant son in the massacre. Wounded in the back and left leg, his bloody clothes frozen to his skin, he hobbled to Pine Ridge and was treated by an Indian doctor with a dose of "bear medicine." Years later, Wasu Maza, as he was known in Lakota, didn't hide his feelings about that day when asked by a white reporter: "They murdered us."

When the survivors and descendants tried to obtain compensation for damages, the government refused, and refused (1938), and refused again (1990).

"I think more than bitterness, he mourned deeply for his parents," said Fox Belly, whose own grandson is named Wasu Maza. Even so, Beard told her mother, Celane Not Help Him, never to let her boys enlist in the Army, reminding her that "it's them that killed your grandparents."

But the massacre - or battle - wasn't over yet. The history books would make sure that Beard's family, the Horn Clouds, who had lived in a cabin and sent a son off to school, would be called "hostiles," said Little Finger. And the Ghost Dancers, a peaceful group, would be tarred by officials as members of a "messianic craze." Once it's written down, said the Lakota teacher with a shrug of his shoulders, "it becomes true."

But there was another lesson, too, Little Finger said.

The day before Wounded Knee, Beard had walked up to an Army cannon and shoved his arm down the barrel, daring the soldiers to act. But his leader chose to fly the white flag instead. "Big Foot was a treaty signer," explained Little Finger, "and Beard wasn't. Big Foot didn't want to violate the pipe."

For that, Little Finger said, he paid a very heavy price. All his followers did. "Wounded Knee has many, many different connotations, but one of them is that if I say it, I keep my word. That's what Lakota is."

Today, the monument at Wounded Knee facing the mass grave is officially credited to Joseph Horn Cloud. But Fox Belly, a former president of the Wounded Knee Survivors Association, said "they all did it," selling horses and other possessions to raise money for the stone memorial.

After Wounded Knee, Dewey Beard enrolled at Pine Ridge, but as far from the agency as possible. He settled near Kyle with other Minneconjou, saddled now with a fierce and abiding mistrust of the government.

Behind him lay a trail of fighting. But his battle to survive had just begun. Though already in his 30s, Beard had nearly the traditional "three score and ten" years still ahead of him.

*(Continued in part three)*

## **A man born free**

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### **The true legend of Dewey Beard**

#### **Part three**

STURGIS, S.D. - *Dewey Beard was the last survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn; a warrior, rancher, actor and respected elder. His eventful life, which spanned a century, is still remembered by friends and family.*

Corliss Besselievre can never forget the day she and her husband were given Beard's regalia.

It was the afternoon of his funeral. Under a stack of odds and ends, Dewey Beard's widow, Alice, had hidden a bear claw necklace owned by his grandfather, a beaded deerskin shirt and leggings, an eagle feather fan, a medal from the St. Louis World's Fair and more.

"That just about floored us," said Besselievre: "We had no idea" the family, acting on Beard's own wish, would bestow such a treasure. She and her husband, Paul, had toured the Midwest with the Beards during the last years of Dewey Beard's life, promoting South Dakota tourism and honoring the survivor of the Little Big Horn. A fast - and deep - friendship ensued.

But it was many years before they would know what to do with their gift.

Long before he ever met the Besselievres, Dewey Beard had made a home for himself on Pine Ridge. He ran a large herd of horses and cattle on several allotted sections near the Badlands, where he and Alice raised his children and made peace with the reservation. He was even baptized a Catholic, adopting the name "Dewey" from Admiral George Dewey, the Spanish-American War hero he met on a trip back East.

Through it all, Iron Hail (Wasu Maza, as he was known in Lakota) never bothered to learn English. When he went to Washington to advocate reparations for Wounded Knee, he took an interpreter with him and signed his testimony with a thumbprint.

But language skills didn't keep him from appearing as a movie actor in the silent film era. In 1913, "Buffalo Bill" Cody came to Pine Ridge to film a re-enactment of the Wounded Knee massacre, casting actual survivors in the production. Because it would shed light on an event whitewashed by the military - and paid \$1.50 a day and hay for horses - Beard signed up, as did hundreds of others, and got some of the top billing among the Lakota.

Other Indian people criticized the project, saying it was sacrilegious to film at the actual site. Both praised and panned, the film disappeared into thin air under suspicious circumstances soon after it opened.

Beard worked the land as he had learned on Cheyenne River. And it was natural for a warrior who had ridden from the Niobrara to the Red River to make horses his business. Things were going fine until 1942, when the military came looking for him - again.

This time they had B-17 bombers. Beard's allotment had been condemned by the government to become part of an aerial gunnery range. He and his family were moved off the ranch with a month's notice.

A lot of the bucking horses were sold and shipped East, said Marie Fox Belly, Beard's great-granddaughter, and some of those left behind became moving targets for the airplanes.

Compensation, offered in small installments, wasn't enough for a down payment on other property. Run off the land they'd worked to develop, Dewey and Alice Beard moved to a shantytown in Rapid City.

In spite of fortune's turn, Beard found celebrity as a Custer survivor. He appeared on television and radio, and in several Hollywood movies. Still, he was unrepentant about the old days, telling the Rapid City Journal in 1948 that he had no remorse about Custer and that "I would like to kick the whites out of here."

Everyone has a favorite Beard story, even if those who knew him have dwindled in number. Mario Gonzalez, former attorney for the Oglala Sioux Tribe, recalled Beard - a relative on his mother's side - attending Pioneer Days in Kadoka in full regalia in 1955. Gonzalez was a young boy at the time.

"He was old and couldn't get his foot up to the stirrups. So my mother had me run out there with a chair and set it up for him. He got on his horse and he left, and that's the last time I saw him."

When he died later that year, Beard was still landless. It was a long journey for a man who called Crazy Horse his uncle, walked to Canada with Sitting Bull, survived Big Foot's disaster, and was a friend of such big shots as Gen. Nelson Miles and Buffalo Bill.

He died in the fall. Fox Belly saw them prepare the body for burial. They washed him with herbs and fixed his hair the traditional way. The casket was made of wood and covered with a velveteen gray cloth. The service was held at St. Stephen's Catholic Church, north of Kyle.

Robert Lee, a friend and longtime reporter for the Rapid City Journal, was given Beard's peace pipe at the giveaway afterward. "It was a very quiet ceremony, and they loaded the coffin on the back of a pickup to the open grave," Lee said. "As soon as that first shovel of dirt hit that coffin, the women started keening."

It was some years before the Besselievers decided what to do with Dewey Beard's treasure. They gave the items on loan to the Old Fort Meade Museum in Sturgis, where they are still proudly displayed. Even the bugle Beard picked up at Little Big Horn, the name of his brother - White Lance - scratched on the handle, is on view.

Fox Belly is thankful Beard's possessions are around at all. She would like Indian people to be able to see them, too. Crazy Horse Memorial would be the best place to display his effects, she thinks, since the famous warrior was Beard's uncle. "That's where I would like to see the bugle. That's where I would like to see the shirt."

Indian or non-Indian, those who remember Dewey Beard agree on one thing. Besselievre, echoing a common sentiment, called it a "privilege" to know him.

"He was tough, healthy," Fox Belly remembered with a sad smile. "I guess that's because my grandfather was born free."

His grave at St. Stephen's Cemetery is unmarked.