

Ellen Moves Camp—Hero of Wounded Knee

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Ellen Moves Camp, known along with Gladys Bissonnette as the “Grandmas of the American Indian Movement (AIM),” passed April 5 at the age of 77 on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Moves Camp and Bissonnette played key roles before, during and after the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, which moved the Indigenous struggle into the view of the whole world.



Photo: Anne Pearse Hocker

The struggles of Indigenous people globally are illustrated in the story of Ellen Moves Camp and Wounded Knee.

The Lakota Nation’s title to most of South Dakota and parts of Montana and Nebraska, including the Black Hills (Paha Sapa), was recognized in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. George Armstrong Custer took miners to the Black Hills to find gold and the U.S. broke the treaty and stole 34 million acres of land, leaving the Lakota divided among separate reservations. Over time that land base was further eroded as the Oglala Lakota were forced to lease their land to ranchers for pennies.

In the 1970s, the federal government moved Oglala families into cluster housing to reduce spending on utilities, freeing more land to be leased by cattle ranchers. Meanwhile over 100 Indians had been murdered in racist white towns surrounding Pine Ridge.

Unemployment was at 90 percent. Traditional families and activists were attacked by the Bureau of Indian Affairs-installed reservation government of Dick Wilson and his paramilitary GOONs (Guardians of the Oglala Nation), armed by the FBI. Wilson signed over some 200,000 acres of land to the U.S. for a bombing range.

Underlying these events, the U.S. had secret plans to turn the Paha Sapa into a “National Sacrifice Zone.” The continent’s richest deposits of weapons-grade uranium lie under the bombing range. Uranium and coal were to be mined, over 188,000 acres destroyed, and incredibly toxic smog and debris would have poisoned the region and destroyed countless square miles of waterways and ponds.

Energy companies signed up to create dozens of coal-fired plants to surround the Black Hills and build a “nuclear energy park” of 25 reactors. Test drilling began on a huge scale. Leaking uranium poisoned the aquifer, the only source of drinking water.

Resistance at Wounded Knee

On the basis of estimates of half a billion dollars in uranium revenue, the U.S. was determined to eliminate AIM and traditional opposition. But the strength of resistance at Wounded Knee forced the Interior Department to retreat from some of its plans.

In 1973 traditional elders with the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) called AIM to Pine Ridge to protect the people from the GOONs. Denied access to the BIA building at Pine Ridge by federal marshals, AIM held a meeting at Calico with 600 supporters where 1,500 grievances against the BIA and Wilson

were taken in a two-day meeting. Then traditional elders Ellen Moves Camp and Gladys Bissonnette stood and challenged the men to take action.

AIM warrior Dennis Banks said of that meeting: “The decision to take Wounded Knee came when Ellen Moves Camp pointed at us and said, ‘What are you men going to do about it?’ If the women hadn’t done that we’d still be meeting at Calico.”

Clyde Bellecourt recalled Bissonnette asking AIM, “Haven’t you heard enough? Go back to Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Los Angeles or Portland. We are going to stand here and be warriors.” He said that he “was stunned by that confrontation with an elderly woman, wrinkles all over her face.”

Wounded Knee was chosen for the takeover protest as it was still held by the Lakota community. The village is the site of the 1890 historic massacre of Big Foot’s band of 300 Lakota Sioux women, men and children as they were peacefully moving to the Pine Ridge Reservation to avoid starvation. Instead, they were viciously murdered by the U.S. Army Seventh Cavalry in the snow. The world had heard of Wounded Knee through Dee Brown’s book, “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.”

Some 200 Native people went to Wounded Knee on Feb. 27, 1973, to hold an early morning press conference. The government attacked. The press conference was never held. And the big business media did not report the total government deployment of 17 armored personnel carriers, 130,000 rounds of M-16 ammunition, 41,000 rounds of M-40 high explosives for grenade launchers, helicopters and other aircraft. An army assault unit in Colorado was put on 24-hour alert.

The standoff held the attention of the world. Support committees formed to help educate non-Native people about the conditions of the Indigenous on the reservations, and the significance of Native

American Indian culture, language and the land in the fight against genocide.

During the 71-day struggle against the U.S. military assault of the National Guard and armed FBI agents, Moves Camp served as negotiator for the protesters with the Justice Department. As Banks recalls: “Once the strength was reawakened with the Oglalas, they became the principal negotiators—especially the women. Because it was their future. From there, AIM took a backseat. The further we stepped back, the further the Oglalas stepped forward.”

Moves Camp was from Wanblee and had lost family members in the 1898 massacre. During the military assault in 1973, her nephew Buddy Lamont was one of two Indians killed. On the occasion of the 1998 commemoration of the struggle, Ellen Moves Camp said it’s “just a matter of time before another Wounded Knee and ... a violent confrontation with the U.S. government.”

On the loss of Ellen Moves Camp, Native political prisoner Leonard Peltier said: “Those of us who really knew her will dearly miss her as she was a big inspiration to all of us. She loved and fought for her People and the Nation without ever once that I know of complaining or asking for something for her personal use.”

Ellen Moves Camp stands as an inspiration to Indigenous people in struggle everywhere.

Sources include articles by Ian Record, Lakota Student Alliance; Jon Lurie’s article on the 25th anniversary of Wounded Knee for the Pulse of the Twin Cities; and the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

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