

Around the Mall

SCENES AND SIGHTINGS FROM THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS AND BEYOND

December 14, 2009

Photograph Captures the Centennial Ride to Wounded Knee



Photographer James Cook battled harsh weather to capture this image of the ride to the site of the Wounded Knee massacre to commemorate the centennial. Photo courtesy of the American Indian Museum.

On December 29, 1990, photographer James Cook caught sight in the distance of the more than 350 horseback riders who were recreating the ride to Wounded Knee, South Dakota, as part of a centennial memorial of the massacre that occurred there in 1890. The riders were near the end of their 7-day, 300-mile journey. Cook and his assistant traveling by car hurried to meet up with the group for a closer view.

Recently, the National Museum of the American Indian acquired a print of the image that Cook eventually

captured that day. It is included in the exhibition, "A Song for the Horse Nation" that opened in November at the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City. The museum also has a print of the image in its permanent collection.

Since 1986, the descendants of those killed at Wounded Knee Creek have recreated the ride to the site. More than 350 men, women and children were to be escorted by US troops so they could be transported to Omaha, Nebraska, to be resettled on Indian reservations. When a medicine man and others failed to comply, a shoot-out ensued. In less than an hour, 150 Lakota and 25 soldiers were dead. A three-day blizzard followed the battle, freezing the dead bodies and killing the wounded.

The weather Cook experienced as he tried to document the ride mirrored the blizzard of 1890. Temperatures hovered around -54 degrees and harsh winds blew across the arid landscape. He learned early on to rewind the film slowly, or, stiffened by the cold, it would shatter. If he exhaled when his face was too close to the camera, his breath would freeze his face to the viewfinder.

But Cook and his assistant kept at it. "At one point, I hopped out and managed to get right in their path," he says. "So as they came across the hill, there was a fence line to help steer them to me. I was able to get several frames as they approached. They came down and just engulfed me as they rode on through."

After getting all the images he knew he would get, Cook, caught up in the intensity, joined the riders. "I couldn't resist just turning and running with them, gear as well," he says. "It was just part of the excitement." When he looked through the several hundred frames he had taken that day, one stood out. "There are just so many little elements in it," he says. "They're close enough to be recognizable. There was one rider off to the side that stopped to watch everyone come down over the hill. He was framed just right between others. There were no other frames that even came close."

Cook began photographing native peoples in the late 1980s because, as he says, the richness of the culture fascinated him. Cook is of European descent, but says he doesn't know much about his own cultural heritage. "I started realizing that the Native Americans had a lot going with their cultural roots and preserving their heritage," he says. "I admire that; I envy that."

To Cook, photographing Native Americans is about documenting a specific point in history. "It's all evolving, and I think it's important to document things as they are in our day and age," he says. The passage of time is evident in his "The Ride To Wounded Knee" image as well. "We got the headdresses and horses, but one of the riders is wearing a snowmobile outfit as well," he says.

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