

Madonna Thunderhawk: Wounded Knee

(Originally edited by Andrew Lutsky and edited for the classroom by Cari Ladd. The longer interview is available at:

http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_thunderhawk.php)

When we went into Wounded Knee we had no idea what was gonna happen or how long we were gonna be there. But once the firefights started we realized that we were under siege, that we were probably gonna be stuck there. So we were trying to get as many local people out as we could because we didn't know what was gonna happen. But we knew that there was a military presence-- the Bureau of Indian Affairs police were bringing them in from all over the country-- and also the U.S. Marshals. So, uh, we knew there was ... there was gonna be a siege.

A delegation from Pine Ridge Reservation, and they represented the Oglala Civil Rights Organization and also the traditional people, had requested that we come to Pine Ridge Reservation, to several different communities across the Reservation that wanted us to come so they could tell us what was going on. Um, the tribal government at that time, from what we heard from the people, was very corrupt. They were using federal funding that was supposed to go out to the outlying districts for programs, social programs and what have you, uh, was being used for other purposes. There was a lot of corruption going on.

So we headed out and when we were going to Pine Ridge we just kept picking up more people. More cars were joining in, and pretty soon we had a caravan probably a mile long. So we got to Pine Ridge and we were going real slow. And different people would jump off and go into the store and get snacks and things.

So I noticed that there was a lot of activity behind the, uh, the BIA building. We were moving slow enough where I could see back there; I saw some military vehicles behind in this fenced-in area that the Bureau used. And I didn't realize it at the time what I was looking at, but I saw what they were was Armored Personnel Carriers. And then I glanced up at the Bureau, BIA building, and they had sandbag gun positions on the roof. So later on we found out that they did that because they heard we were coming. We didn't know. We had no idea, no clue.

When we turned north to go to Wounded Knee it started getting dark. So as we turned north and I looked back, you could see this long line of headlights coming from Pine Ridge and turning north behind us. We had a caravan of cars probably three or four miles long by then.

So as we were going into Wounded Knee we could hear gunfire. And, um, because we had so many children with us and elders, um, I got real concerned right away. When you're in a caravan like that you can't just stop, you gotta keep moving, you know, could cause a pile up. So we kept moving, but we were waiting for, waiting for word. And some runners came up the highway and they were telling us to, you know, slow down and pull over and hit the ditch. So that's what we did. And we just slowly pulled over and stopped, and everybody got in the ditch. And you could hear the ... by that time it was a firefight. You could hear rounds going off. And then pretty soon it stopped. So we all got in our cars again, and they said, "Okay, pull into Wounded Knee and take cover cause we don't know what's going on, if they went back for reinforcements or what. But take cover." So that's what we did.

Uh, I believe it was an Indian police, BIA police car, that started firing at us, shooting at us. So, uh, this one young woman that was with us, she was in the back seat ... all we had was a single-shot twenty-two. So she just rolled the window down and she just fired back, out of the

back window. And then we just headed down ... we couldn't go back and head toward Wounded Knee. So we had to just keep going the other direction. And then we came over the hill and there was a U.S. Marshal road-block.

So they busted us and ended up taking us to Rapid City, where we were processed. And we were held there for a couple days. And then I got word to my parents, so they came and they, uh, got me out. And I said, "Well," I said, "I'm gonna have to go back in to Wounded Knee." 'Cause my son was there.

And one of the guys that came into Rapid from Wounded Knee had a list of, of, uh, ammunition that they needed. So he gave me that list. So I just got money from different people, and I just went down the street and saw some Indian guys, and I just told them what we needed, and so they went. And in those days you could just go in any gun shop and buy ammo. I mean they were for hunting rifles, you know, so it wasn't that big of a deal in those days. So then we got this big, you know, backpack full of ammo, and then my folks took us back down to Porcupine and got out. We went to a family there that was using their home as a central gathering place for anybody that wanted to go in. And if you were gonna go in, you had to take in supplies. So that's what we did that night. We walked back in.

And that was myself and three other young women that, you know, I traveled with. So we made it early in the morning before it got light, we got to Wounded Knee. And we met with the leadership there and told them, "Here's what's on the outside. Here's what's going on. And, um, this, you know, this looks like it's gonna be a siege, you know, for- for awhile. Um, here's what we probably need to do. And they're stockpiling out there and people can bring this stuff in, uh, but there's also a lot ... uh, I don't know who's on the perimeter now, but it looks like the Feds are gonna start setting up so we better get as much stuff in here as we can, you know, before they shut it down."

And, um, every day more people were coming in, walking in, you know, sneaking in, whatever. 'Cause it was just, there was just getting to be too many people. So it was just mostly logistics right away, we were caught up in organizing and making sure people got fed and, you know, people were warm and they could sleep. And then we set up a medic station right away because, you know, people were getting minor things happening. Minor gunshots, stuff like that. So it was organizing and work, you know. It wasn't just standing around.

And the negotiations happened, and pretty soon they let down the road blocks, they let all the news media in, and people got to come in. And then they shut them down again, everybody had to leave, you know.

So ... as the firefights got more intense we realized that we had to have medics go out to the bunkers and be out there in case someone got shot or got hurt, rather than trying to haul them in. 'Cause then they'd really be, you know, opening fire on them. So that's what we did. So there was four of us women that were the medics. Every time a firefight started we just headed out. We had to crawl out there, you know, to ... we divided up which bunkers we were gonna cover.

At the time, because things were happening so fast, I just wanted to keep my son safe. Uh, but there was so many of us, you know. And in a society where you're constantly, uh, persecuted anyway ... I mean, our people are used to trauma. Nobody-- nobody flipped out and freaked out, you know. It was just something you have to handle, something you have to deal with. And I think a lot of indigenous people around the world have that same feeling. I mean, why

would a small country like Vietnam, you know, win their land from the greatest military might on this planet? The United States gave up and went home. Why? Indigenous population, you know. You're fighting for your land and your identity, you know, and you don't know what you can do when your back is against the wall.

There was a lot of issues at the time. In the urban areas it was police brutality, mainly because the Federal Indian policy at the time was relocation: Relocate the Indian people off the reservations, get them off the land, into the cities, you know, mainstream them into American society and then, you know, take care of the Indian problem. So that was that was how it started. Um, eventually word traveled to the reservations about what was going on in the urban areas with the American Indian Movement, so we started getting requests to come to different reservations all over the country, not in just Minnesota but in the Dakotas—wherever there was land-based tribes, we got calls to go.

And there was so many requests that it was ... you know, the American Indian Movement never sat down and said, "Well, where should we go next?" or, "What should we do?" It was wherever we were requested to go to help them with whatever their ... some communities were totally ignored, where funding and programs would be centered around the local agency rather than out in the outlying districts. So it just depended on what their issue was. And it was across the board: any social, land, resources, whatever. And I think that's why the Movement mushroomed the way it did and we were spread across the country, because, uh, that was what we did, was ... we listened to the people and helped them. We didn't have an agenda.

I think the federal government and other agencies, the state governments, the, you know, the tribal governments ... I believe they were so, uh, afraid of the American Indian Movement because we were a movement of our people. They couldn't isolate us as old or radicals. They tried to label us as gun-toting, uh, militants that were just out to make trouble. During the incident at Oglala the feds had a heyday with that, you know, saying the American Indian Movement did execution-style killings, which was all fabricated FBI propaganda. So they just used every tactic they could to make us, you know, villains and criminals. But they couldn't do that to us like they did with other movements around the country. You can't isolate a people when you're ... you have all ages. It's a social movement, it's not a group of people that you can isolate. And besides that, we had a land base. Our struggle's totally different than the rest of the country. So I believe that's why they had to vilify us and make everything criminal. But, again, we were a movement. We wanted the world to know we were still here, and we have a land base and our native society who could pick up the reins. We were just a movement. We just kicked the doors open.

It's hard for the rest of the society then and today to understand what it was for our people. It was a ... it was an awakening. Because we have that history of resistance like so many indigenous people around the world. We have the history of that, and it was a close history. When I was a little girl there were people walking in my community that were at the battle of Little Big Horn. That's how close it is to us. Plus we have a land base. So it was an awakening for our people. And, um, when you have a whole society of colonized people, there's gonna be an awakening one way or the other. And for us it was to maintain what he have-- we've lost so much-- especially our land base. That's our history ... that's who we are. To struggle for our land and our resources ... it's who we are. Nothin' new. We're a land-based people, right here in the Valley of the Beast.

By that time, because of the boarding school system, because of the relocation system, a lot of universities and colleges were opening their doors to native students. We had a whole group of

our society then that were emerging in the realms of education and, uh, tribal government, all that. So it was an opportunity. But we had to do that as a people, the rank and file ... that we've had enough, you know. We're capable of doing things on our own. We don't need you to ... the oppression was just ... enough, you know. And, uh, we had the support of our people. Like my mother said, uh, "You're doing what we should have done, our generation, but we didn't." And so they supported us one hundred percent, you know. Whatever we did, we had our families behind us, we had our people behind us. So, again, in Indian country it wasn't anything that was, "Oh, new!" and, "Oh, revolutionary!" or anything. It was a continuation of our struggle as a people.

The people in Wounded Knee ... we were under siege. So the negotiating team, the Oglala Civil Rights Organization, were meeting with the whoever, with the military, with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, with the White House. And it covered a whole, uh, area of issues from corruption to land rights. For example, they had a gunnery range on Pine Ridge that was taken during World War II and never returned. Those types of things.

So, um, it was the local organization that did the negotiating with the powers that be, the Feds, that decided that, okay, they reached an agreement and the occupation would end. But we also knew that they were going to make criminals out of all of us rather than having it be our standing on treaty rights, whatever. So when it ended it wasn't our decision as people that were trapped in Wounded Knee, the negotiating team made that decision. And that's the way it should have been because we were there to support their issues and provide a forum for the people to speak.

For indigenous people everywhere it validated, okay, our right to be who we are and maintain our land base. And the thing that came out of that, uh, whole struggle at that time, especially Wounded Knee, was that the treaties made by our people and the federal government are the law of the land, and they should be honored, which the federal government has yet to do. 'Cause before the confrontation treaty issues were just treated as something as, "Oh, that's a thing of the past," you know. And, um, with those kind of confrontation politics of the American Indian Movement we forced the federal government to look at the treaty issue. They were ratified by Congress, and you're trying to tell us they're a thing of the past?!? I don't think so. And we had to do drastic measures to get those issues out there. Otherwise today, thirty-some years later, we probably wouldn't even have a land base the way things were going. They were ready to terminate our status. Relocation program was one of the blatant attempts. And as a result of this confrontation the whole system, the federal policy, was changed from termination to self-determination. Federal policy, Indian policy, was changed. So nowadays self-determination is the key word in Indian politics. So yeah, it was worth it.

And I think it's important to remember because each generation of our people has an obligation to struggle to maintain what we have. As long as we have a land base, we are going to be under siege, whether it's by federal Indian policy, by local tribal governments, whatever. We need to know our history, and we didn't have that at one time. Someone else was writing our history for us, telling us. But it's no longer that way. So it's a cycle. When you're struggling to maintain what you have, it's important that each generation knows what the last generation did and learn from that. So when it's their turn, they can stand strong. They'll know what happened in the past through our own eyes, our own writing, our own telling.