

OGLALA

Life On The Reservation

by Alfred L. Leavitt

During the depression years, I lived among the Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge reservation, Shannon County, South Dakota. Born in 1928, I left the reservation during Christmas vacation, 1940. In 1986, I returned for a brief, weeklong visit.

My childhood memories are of a painful transition period for the Oglala. After only one generation on the reservation, they retained many features of their prior tribal life. Their life during the thirties had little resemblance to their modern life half a century later.

Three of my grade school years were in Indian day schools. A feature of these schools was frequent (almost weekly) sessions with local Oglala elders discussing Oglala history, beliefs, customs, and life during their tribal days. As an adult, I've spent many hours comparing their accounts with "official" reports and newspaper stories. There are many discrepancies. My memories given here are based on first person, word of mouth accounts, told by Oglala who were many times present when the events took place.



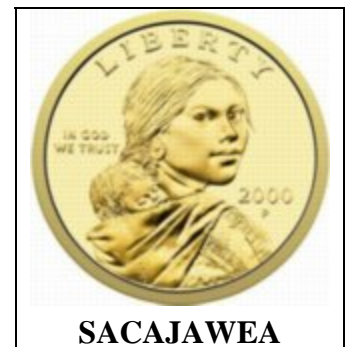
SIoux NATION

The Sioux nation was divided into three parts. The Santee in Minnesota, the Yankton in eastern South Dakota, and the much larger Teton Sioux in the high, short grass prairie between the Missouri river and the continental divide. Both the Santee and the Yankton were in tall grass prairie country. They lived in small, nearly permanent villages and grew much of their food. They were forced onto reservations before and during the Civil War. The Tetons (five to seven separate tribes) were horse indians - totally nomadic hunters and gatherers. The Oglala were one of the Teton Sioux tribes. They gave the cavalry more than thirty years combat experience and were the last to submit to reservation life. Some were coming in from the Stronghold as late as 1895.

HORSE INDIANS

The horse Indian culture only lasted about two hundred years. Horses and white men came to the high, short grass prairie about the same time in the early 1600's. The white men were French fur traders. There was considerable interaction between the indians and the white men. Sacajawea was an example. Lewis and Clark's Indian guide was the wife of a French fur trader.

With the white fur traders were many Roman Catholic priests. At that time France was a firmly and thoroughly Roman Catholic nation. In France, very little took place without approval of, and participation by the Catholic Church. For example, in 1685 Joliet and Marquette were the first white men to travel the full length of the Mississippi river. They were both Roman Catholic priests. I make this point because many of the things I remember make sense if I assume a long, active interplay between the Oglala and the Roman Catholic church.



The horse Indian culture wasn't "Stone Age". As in all examples that I know, Stone Age culture ceased to exist immediately after first contact with the white man. Fur traders had plenty of firewater (rotgut whiskey), but they also had pots, pans, needles, knives, arrow heads, and axes. Except for stone "peace" pipes, I cannot remember seeing a stone artifact. This may be different now. Modern flint knappers have developed a thriving industry.

Pipes were a special case. There was a market for these pipes at the tourist traps in Rapid City and Hot Springs. It helped sales if the pipe showed some use. This may explain their use among the Oglala.

During their tribal life, the Oglala lived in small, family-sized bands. These bands were independent, but they weren't isolated. They were strictly nomadic, hunter-gatherers. Bands would travel together, and would meet as a tribe for "Sun Dances" and major hunts. But each band was a separate cultural unit, free to go its own way any time it chose.

Custer's last stand is an example of the horse indian's extreme mobility. Before the battle, the indians were camped along about three miles of the Little Bighorn river. Later estimates of their number vary widely (two to fifteen thousand). Even with the lowest estimates, this would have been a huge camp. With the indians there would have been several thousand horses and as many dogs.

The battle occurred during the late morning and afternoon hours. Scouts from other military units arrived early the next morning. They found no indians. In a few evening and nighttime hours they had packed everything they owned, rounded up their horses and disappeared.

The Oglala tribe had leaders. White men called them chiefs. But this was a white man's term. Leader is a better word and there were dozens of them. Crazy Horse was their warrior. Red Cloud was their politician. Sitting Bull was their wise man, their teacher. White men called him a medicine man, but again, this was a white man's term. Among the Oglala, these positions of honor weren't hereditary. In other tribes, they were. For example, young Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, the "After today, I will fight no more forever" man, became Chief only after the death of his father, Old Chief Joseph. The Nez Perce culture was more advanced than that of the Oglala nomads.



CRAZY HORSE



NEZ PERCE

RESERVATION SIZE

In the treaty of 1868, the Sioux were given sole use in perpetuity (while grass grows and water flows) of everything "west of the Missouri and north of the Platte". This included large portions of six of our large western states. Immediately, white men came with railroads, cattle, barbed wire and hide hunters. This quickly eliminated the environment required for the horse Indian, hunter gatherer life-style.

Eight years later, at the time of Custer's last stand, the Oglala reservation had been reduced to include most of western South Dakota, including all of the Black Hills, and much of western Nebraska. The agency was at Fort Robinson, near Crawford, Nebraska.

Fourteen years later, at the time of the Wounded Knee massacre, the Oglala had the Pine Ridge reservation in Shannon County, South Dakota. This included about 4000 square miles - 80 miles east to west and 50 miles north to south. Shannon County is a polite term for South Dakota badlands. With few exceptions, ranching is the only valid use for the area. My estimate is the land could support a population of about 500 people.

About 11,500 Oglala live there - nearly the same population as Paris, Tennessee, near where I currently reside. Estimates of the total size of the Oglala tribe range from 22,000 to 25,000, but most refuse to put up with reservation life.

During the 1930's there were no paved roads and only a few miles of graded gravel roads. Nearly all the roads were nothing more than a pair of wagon wheel ruts. There were no trains, no buses, and only a few cars. We all had horses and wagons.

DOG SOLDIERS

The military used indians as scouts, interpreters, messengers, and all other chores that involved contact with the tribe. These indians were recruited from less desirable members of the tribe - thieves, cowards, liars, and other cast outs. They were organized in separate military units - barely tolerated by regular troopers and detested by the tribe. They were called "dog soldiers".



Captain Charles William Taylor poses with Philip Wells and his Native American Oglala Sioux and Cheyenne scouts in formation on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. They wear uniforms with fur hat and hold rifles. A tepee camp shows in background. 1891

After Custer's last stand some of the Oglala returned to Fort Robinson to be with Red Cloud. Some went with Sitting Bull to Canada. But most went with Crazy Horse in a last attempt to live the traditional tribal life. We don't read of cavalry victories during the ensuing wild, fifteen month chase after Crazy Horse. Custer's last stand was in June, 1876.

In September, 1877, Crazy Horse brought his part of the tribe to Fort Robinson to negotiate a better deal for the Oglala. Official reports say that dog soldiers were sent to arrest Crazy Horse, but he resisted arrest and they were forced to shoot him in self-defense. No Oglala ever bought that story. Dog soldiers, acting under orders, executed Crazy Horse.

Sitting Bull returned from Canada in 1881. During the '80s, both he and Red Cloud went to Washington DC in attempts to negotiate better conditions for the Oglala. During the '80s, Sitting Bull was a star attraction in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, touring all the states and Europe. There was a private audience with Queen Victoria. Sitting Bull became a well-known character.



RED CLOUD
1897

In the first week of December, 1890, during a very cold South Dakota winter, Sitting Bull was on the Standing Rock reservation, leading the Sioux, mostly Oglala, in another attempt to negotiate better conditions. Again, dog soldiers were sent to bring him in. They came to Sitting Bull's tent before dawn. When they left, Sitting Bull, his son and six (maybe seven) other indians were dead. Official reports say the indians fired first and the dog soldiers barely managed to escape. Again, no Oglala ever bought that story. Dog soldiers, acting under orders, executed Sitting Bull.

Newspaper reporters were just as snoopy, just as anxious for a good story then as they are now. Three weeks later, 29 December, the military gave it to them with the Wounded Knee massacre. Reporters did their thing. The resulting bad publicity forced the military to turn the agency over to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).



SITTING BULL
1885

The BIA was established in 1832 to handle Indian affairs within the organized states. The military had authority in the territories. South Dakota became a state in 1889 so the BIA was only accepting its responsibility.

When it came to ignorance and sheer stupidity, the BIA was a match for the military in every respect. One of their first official acts was to organize the dog soldiers as tribal police.

One result was that forty years later, among my Indian buddies and myself, lack of respect for law and lawmen was total. They were to be avoided, and eluded, but otherwise ignored completely. This attitude was part of our grade school education. Unfortunately, for me much of this education remains intact.

WOUNDED KNEE

This was the last battle of three centuries of Indian wars. Possibly the most thoroughly, and least accurately, reported of all. My sources are Oglala elders, "Official" reports, and newspaper accounts. These give me much freedom in my selection of "facts".

In the 1930's there were Oglala elders that had been on the reservation or with the tribe at the time of the massacre. None claimed presence at the massacre. According to them there were no survivors.

After the event several responsible military officers submitted reports. A feature common to these reports was that the writer was innocent, completely blameless, for the useless slaughter. There's considerable variation in their accounts of actual events.

Reporters gave the massacre wide coverage, much of it critical of the military. Their stories indicate they had as much difficulty with facts then as I have today.

Before the death of Sitting Bull, Buffalo Bill Cody was at the Standing Rock reservation as an active, possibly leading, participant in the negotiations between the military and his friends, Sitting Bull and the Oglala. This may explain some of the ensuing newspaper coverage.

After Sitting Bull's execution the Oglala were persuaded to go to the agency at Pine Ridge for rations. I don't know how many went. There may have been more than a thousand. Think on it. This was during a very cold, mid-December, South Dakota winter. These destitute people were expected to trek with their children and all their possessions across 150-200 miles of snow covered, short grass, high plains prairie. It boggles my imagination. I've never learned why it would have been so difficult to bring food to the people instead of forcing the people to go to the food.

The indians may (or may not) have had a military escort. Accounts differ.

When they reached the Cheyenne river, they joined Big Foot and his band of Cheyenne warriors. I don't know how many there were, Big Foot was very sick and rode on a horse-drawn travois.



WOUNDED KNEE BATTLEFIELD

View to the southeast from hill where Native American Lakota Sioux were buried after the Wounded Knee battle on December 29, South Dakota. Includes tepee poles marking location of Sioux camp, men loading frozen bodies into wagons, center, where the council circle was asked to surrender their arms; the army camp was located to the far left, and a photographer with his tripod camera shows in foreground.



BIG FOOT
c. 1825 - 1890

Next came an event told by the Oglala but not mentioned else where. When the Indians reached a point near Scenic, South Dakota they split into two groups. Everyone who could survive without agency rations took all the weapons and went as a group to the Stronghold, southwest of Scenic. The rest, all invalid, sick and starving followed Big Foot to the campground on Wounded Knee creek, 18-20 miles from the Pine Ridge agency.

Stronghold is the Oglala name. I forget their word but it always translated to Stronghold. White men called it Sheep mountain and that's the way it's shown on modern maps.

The Oglala elders insisted there were no usable Indian weapons at Wounded Knee. This makes sense to me because they all knew they'd be searched and all weapons confiscated before receiving agency rations.

In 1890 there were off-reservation, outlaw bands of Oglala in the badlands north of Pine Ridge. They were a pain for white ranchers, traders, and Black Hills miners. These bands were the reason for the large military force at the Pine Ridge agency.

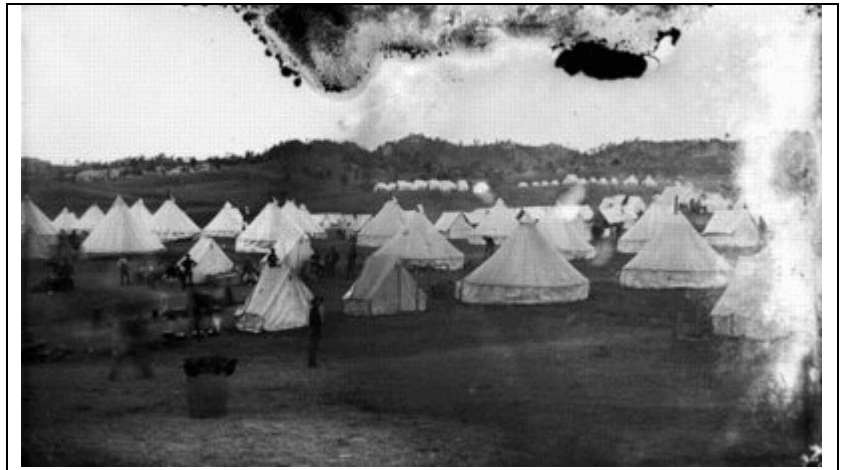


PINE RIDGE AGENCY

I have no coherent details of the actual battle. The number of casualties approaches 300. On a nearby hill there is a Catholic church and cemetery. In the cemetery there is a monument over a mass grave for 164 (168?) bodies. These do not include 24 (26?) troopers or the only Catholic priest in the area that day. And there must have been many wounded hiding along the creek who crawled away and died later.

There's no doubt troopers were killed in the battle, but I know of no reports of wounded troopers. It may be that the dead troopers were victims of friendly fire. The Catholic priest was killed while giving last rites to one of troopers.

Soon after the battle, the military returned agency administration to the BIA and left Pine Ridge. I know of no military actions against outlaw bands in the badlands and the Stronghold. They surrendered as individuals. Some held out until 1895.



View over camp of U. S. Army troops at the Native American Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, shows soldiers with round and rectangular walled tents. Photo taken in either 1890 or 1891

RESERVATION LIFE

There were never laws forcing the Oglala to live on the reservation. This is in contrast to the 1830's when the military forced Indians in the Southeast to migrate to Oklahoma over the Trail of Tears. When they reached their new homes in tall grass prairie land, they set up farms and resumed their prior lifestyle with few changes. But the Oglala were expected to give up their freedom and adopt a totally new culture. Seldom more than a long day's walk from reservation boundaries, these proud, fiercely independent hunter-gatherer nomads had to exist in this small area where there was nothing to hunt and little to gather. It wasn't easy.

Many chose to work off the reservation as ranch hands. They were expert horsemen and capable ranch hands. But from birth they were taught that to work for another man's wages was to be that man's slave. Again, this required a complete change of thinking and lifestyle.

For most, the only choice was to live on the reservation and accept government handouts or starve.

During the 1930's, fewer than one in six, maybe as few as one in ten lived in houses. Most lived in tents - not tepees - army surplus tents. They moved often. Frequently, I'd see a man on his horse followed by his squaw driving a team and wagon loaded with kids and everything the family owned. During the winters, most of the houses would be surrounded by tents. When I went back for a short visit in 1986, I didn't see a single tent. Everybody lived in houses with water and power.

ECONOMICS

On the reservation, the economic potential for the Oglala was zero. There were a few low level jobs at the agency and the hospital but there was no industry. The unemployment rate exceeded 85%.

Many of the Oglala drew "pratischer" money. I don't know what "pratischer" meant but I think it was associated with their loss of the Black Hills. The head of a family drew \$20/month plus \$5/month for each of his dependents. You can imagine the ingenious gyrations used by many to qualify as head of family.

Compare this with a subsistence farmer in Henry or Benton counties in Tennessee, where I now reside. He'd have a big garden, chickens for eggs and meat, cows for meat and milk, and hogs for lard and meat. If he, his wife and two kids could have a guaranteed, effortless \$35/month, they would of had a comfortable life. But the Oglala didn't have gardens, or pigs, or chickens or cows. \$35/month for a family of four meant near starvation. They were almost completely dependent on undependable, irregular agency handouts.

RELIGION

Roman Catholic was the dominant religion. Their Holy Rosary mission was four miles north of the Pine Ridge agency. At any time and any place one would meet a Sister, Father or Brother working with the people.

In Pine Ridge there were Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations. These were mainly white, civil-service, agency employees. These churches had little effect on reservation life.

There was the Peyote faith which I believe descended from the ghost dances of the 1880's. Peyote is a hallucinogen brewed from cabbage leaf cactus plants which grew profusely on the reservation. The Peyote religion functioned almost as a secret society. We could hear their all night powwows but we knew very little about them.



Native American Lakota Sioux women and children receive government rations from issue agents at the Pine Ridge Agency commissary, South Dakota. Rations include loaves of bread, sacks of flour, sugar and cornmeal, labeled with: "U. S. Indian...? Pine Ridge Agency, S. K. Bittenbender, Contractor...?" Agency buildings, water tower and windmill show in background. 1891



HOLY ROSARY MISSION

When I returned in 1986, there were numerous protestant churches all over the reservation. I don't know their effect on reservation life.

MEDICAL

The agency operated a small, first-rate hospital in Pine Ridge. They were good for setting bones and stitching wounds and they did their best to vaccinate everyone for every known malady. Typical of all rural America there was little pre-natal care and all babies were born at home. The Pine Ridge hospital was better than that available to most rural Americans during the 30's.

Among the Oglala before WWII, tuberculosis was a rampant, fatal plague. There were few victims among the white people, so this may have been due to an inherited genetic trait. The agency maintained TB sanitariums in Rapid City and Hot Springs. Many Oglala were sent to them for treatment. I don't remember any coming back alive. During WWII new antibiotics such as penicillin eliminated the problem.

EDUCATION

There were three separate, independent school systems on the reservation. The Holy Rosary mission had an orphanage, grade school, and high school. Students were selected by the Fathers and boarded at the mission. A few of these select few went on to higher education at mission expense.

The state had schools for whites. There was a white high school in Pine Ridge and several small, one-room white grade schools in rural areas. The state policy was to set up a school if there were at least twelve students, and to maintain the school as long as there were at least eight students. Most of the teachers were young unmarried white women newly graduated after two years of normal school in Chadron, Nebraska. They usually lived at the school. Their salary was \$65/month for the nine months of the school year.

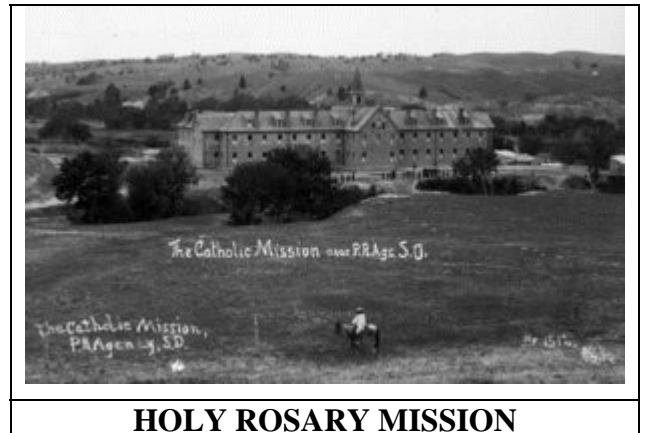
Normal schools were two-year colleges for training teachers.

The South Dakota system required each student to pass a standard, statewide test every six weeks. This ensured high standards for elementary education.

The largest of the systems was the Indian day schools maintained by the agency. These schools were everywhere on the reservation. Teachers, usually men, were civil service employees and usually lived at the schools with their families. Typically, there would be 15 to 25 students.

For three years we had no white neighbors. There was no way to justify a state school. I'm sure it was against agency policy, but my dad had many friends. My brother and I went to Indian day schools.

These schools were more than schools - they were active community centers. Teachers were the tribes main contact with the agency. Commodities were distributed at the schools. Every school day, local women would cook food provided by the agency so that each student could eat a good lunch. Often this would be their only meal of the day. This ensured good attendance.



HOLY ROSARY MISSION

Day school education was not sophisticated. Students had to speak English, learn to read and write, and do some arithmetic. There was heavy emphasis on Oglala history and traditions. There was the "boarding school" in Pine Ridge for the ones that wanted to go to high school. Attendance wasn't compulsory.

When I went back in 1986, all the schools had been consolidated and there was an extensive bus system for the students.

INTER-RACIAL MARRIAGE

On the reservation, economic potential for young Oglala men was nil. Many left, and while away would meet white women. Those that stayed were not good marriage material.

Young teenage Oglala girls were often delightfully attractive creatures. Their lifestyle - outdoor living, poor diet, and poor hygiene quickly robbed them of their beauty. Young white men working as ranch hands or jobs in towns off the reservation found it easy to meet these pretty young girls. The girls weren't stupid. A white man with a job was a far better choice than the Oglala that chose to stay on the reservation.



Lakota Sioux members of the St. Mary Society of the Holy Rosary Mission in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, display samples of their quilting in this 1938 photograph.

The result was a great deal of inter-racial marriage. During the 30's full-blooded Oglala were common. When I went back in 1986, I didn't meet a single one. The Oglala full-blood is now rare.

SPORTS

On the reservation team sports like baseball were rare - almost non-existent. Seldom enough players to set up a game and never enough equipment. As a grade-schooler, I never owned a baseball glove, and I can't remember having my hands on a football till after I left the reservation.

The high school at the Holy Rosary mission had a basketball team. They played in an off-reservation conference. In '37 or '38, I forget which year, the mission set up a game with the Harlem Globe Trotters. No one ever suggested the game was fixed or the officials were biased. I didn't see the game, but I was told the locals played a great game. The result was the Harlem Globe Trotters came out on the short end of the score.

This didn't make the national news, but on the reservation it was the greatest event since Custer's last stand. Now, whenever there's a state basketball tournament, a team from the reservation will be a top contender.



Native American Lakota Sioux men and boys wearing headdresses, breechcloths, and leggings, are gathered for a shooting contest, possibly at the Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota. The front row kneels, with rifles aimed at the target. 1891 July 4.

The sport we played every day was rodeo. These were horse indians. I've told my children that I can't remember learning to ride, but I can't remember learning to walk either. This was true for all my Indian friends. Most of us rode horses to school. Learning to rope calves was far more important than memorizing multiplication tables.

ALCOHOL

Modern reportage emphasizes the wide extent of alcohol addiction on the reservation today. During the 1930's, shortly after the end of prohibition, all alcohol was strictly forbidden on the reservation, Officially we were "dry as a bone". In actual fact, beer, wine and whiskey were freely available for anyone able to pay the price. Very few had the money to indulge. Alcohol wasn't a problem while I was on the reservation. This may be due to the complete absence of Protestant churches. Alcohol is seldom a problem until we have Protestants around to tell us how bad it really is.

I do remember the sign on the door of the saloon in Rushville, Nebraska.

- No Minors
- No Women
- No dogs
- No Indians

CONCLUSION

When I went back in 1986, I found that many of the Oglala were working as over-the- road truckers. This isn't strange. There are similarities between an Oglala driving an eighteen wheeler and an Oglala riding a horse during tribal days. First, they both tend to be a bit over-proud of themselves. Second, they are both very good at what they are doing. Third, they are both in complete control of their situation. And fourth, they are both nomads, not sure where they'll sleep tonight.

Alfred L. Leavitt



Alfred L. Leavitt

IMAGE CREDIT, LINKS & TIDBITS

Compiled and Arranged by Michael Leavitt

Pine Ridge Map - <http://www.airc.org/reservations/pineridge.html>

Sacajawea Coin - <http://www.factology.com/sacajawea.jpg>

Crazy Horse - <http://www.friendslittlebighorn.com/crazy-horse-photo.htm>

Nez Perce - <http://www.danielnpaul.com/Images2.html>

Red Cloud, 1897 - By David F. Barry - http://www.dlncoalition.org/dln_nation/chief_red_cloud.htm

Sitting Bull, 1885 - <http://www.nytimes.com/nytdstore/photos/personalities/NSAPPE24.html>

Wounded Knee Battlefield - <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10031403+X-31403>

Big Foot - http://www.dlncoalition.org/dln_nation/chief_bigfoot.htm

Rosary Mission Front View - <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10031451+X-31451>

Pine Ridge Agency - <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10031334+X-31334>

Pine Ridge Agency - <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10031334+X-31334>

Rations - <http://photoswest.org/cgi-bin/imager?10031335+X-31335>

Lakota Women - http://accad.osu.edu/~dkrug/367/online/ethnicarts4/r_resources/reading/Fienup.asp Courtesy of Buechel Memorial Lakota Museum, St. Francis, South Dakota.

July 4, 1991 - http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hawp:6:./temp/~ammem_Pff0:

O-ona-gazhee: 'refuge' (called "The Stronghold" in English; Cuny Table, in the badlands north of Pine Ridge, where the Ghost Dancers took refuge after the Wounded Knee Massacre) <http://www.blackelkspeaks.unl.edu/appendix3.html>

Harlem Globetrotters' Loss - <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com/articles/2002/12/20/sports/local/news03.txt>

Father Collins P. Jordan, known as C.P. Jordan, distinguished himself as a player, coach, and role model for the Indian students throughout the state.

As a player during the 1930's, Jordan played in four National Catholic high school tournaments held in Chicago. His St. Francis team finished third in 1937; the same year Jordan was named to the All-State team. St. Francis took runner-up honors another year.

Old-timers recall the St. Francis team beating the famed Harlem Globetrotters. C.P. stole the ball, put on a dribbling exhibition, drove through the defense and made the lay up allowing St. Francis to win by one point. Later, the legendary coach, Abe Saperstein, asked Jordan to organize a Lakota basketball team to travel with the Globetrotters.