

## The Witness Trees

When I was a kid, we rarely heard about Native American communities. Maybe, sure, how Columbus encountered them when he quote-unquote discovered America. But otherwise, Indigenous history seems to stop about 150 years ago in classrooms, museums and the public consciousness. So, you know, we didn't learn the names of the tribes that lived around our homes and I had no idea where the reservations were. And it wasn't just my generation. One of my children's friends told me they believed all Native Americans had died off. But lately, the American public has been learning that's far from the case. In the news, we're hearing a lot from Indigenous communities, whether it's protests at [Standing Rock](#), or new revelations of Indian [boarding school graveyards](#), or how tribes are fighting back against high rates of [missing and murdered people](#), or their involvement in all sorts of [wildlife](#) and environmental causes. As a reporter covering tribal issues in Wyoming, I found it interesting that a lot of the most active and vocal voices have come from tribes in the American West. And when you sit down with the movers and shakers, you hear that what's motivating them is a desire to heal a history that feels very recent, very raw – the Plains Indian Wars, a series of brutal battles in the mid and late 1800's. In school, I didn't learn much about these wars at all. If I did, it was about isolated battles like what the history books called “Custer's Last Stand” and maybe Wounded Knee. But actually, most of them can be traced back to one horrific massacre:

Sand Creek.

**Overlooking the Sand Creek Massacre site in eastern  
Colorado.**

Credit: Ana Castro



This season of the Modern West, we're going to do things a little differently. We're going to set aside the history books and instead focus on hearing this story and its long term repercussions from the survivors themselves and directly from their descendents. For me, this season feels like the culmination of years of research. In my mid-20's, I lived outside Flagstaff, Arizona in a canvas geodesic dome with a 75-mile view of the Painted Desert out my door. The border of the Navajo reservation was only a few miles away and my neighbors, Gary and Theresa, lived a traditional lifestyle in a five-sided hogan. Sometimes I substitute taught at a nearby Navajo boarding school. But mostly I was a preschool teacher in town where about half my students were either Navajo or Hopi. So were some of my co-workers. My friend Diana invited me to attend ceremonies on Third Mesa where she grew up. Even after I moved back to Colorado, we stayed penpals.

And those experiences, those relationships, got me thinking and reading. I realized there were huge gaps in my knowledge of the history of the American West. Years later, I got a job covering the Wind River Reservation for Wyoming Public Radio and started hearing that story in greater detail. One of the first stories I reported on was the end of the Bighorn Adjudication case, the longest running lawsuit in U.S. history in which the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone tribes fought for their water rights. Another was a U.S. Supreme Court case to prove that the city of Riverton was inside reservation boundaries. One thing I noticed right away when covering these stories was that people always linked present day events to the past. Those literal battles with the federal government for sovereignty, they've never ended, I kept hearing. It's all still history in the making.

But that perspective usually got edited out of my reporting, not enough room, too complicated. So this season I'm going to keep all that in. I'm going to reach out to my colleagues and friends from Wind River and across the West and trace a throughline from the Plains Indian Wars to life in Indigenous communities today.

But one thing I've learned over the years is that, as a white woman, I've got to be extra careful to not make any assumptions about what I think I know. As Americans, we all think we know this era in history. We've seen it played out a million times in old western movies. Believe me, I know how hard it can be to let go of our most basic myths, especially in the American West. But this season, I'm inviting you, the listener, to set aside what you think you know and listen to the voices of Indigenous history keepers themselves, and experience the battlefields and their aftermath from their point of view.

Today, we'll start the story at the beginning, on the high prairie of what is now eastern Colorado, on land that was set aside for the Cheyenne and Arapaho by treaty, on the banks of Big Sandy Creek. Ever since I learned about the Sand Creek Massacre, I've wanted to make a pilgrimage to see the site. It feels like as a Westerner, it's my responsibility, like visiting a holocaust memorial if you're German. So my photographer Ana Castro and I made the journey.

To get there, we drove due east of the city of Denver. It was a long drive, towns getting smaller and smaller as we went, until we were almost to Kansas. It's a cold, bright day in early January. January 6th actually, the one year anniversary since the insurrection on the United States capitol.

That feels significant. It also happens to be only a few weeks after the anniversary of the massacre.



**The last town you pass when driving to the Sand Creek Massacre Historic Site is named after the colonel who committed the massacre.**

Credit: Ana Castro

The last town we drive through is called Chivington, named after Col. John Chivington, the man who ordered and committed the massacre of over 200 Arapaho and Cheyenne people just a few miles away from here. Chivington is really just a ghost town now. There's a newish looking church with a playground. We stop and photograph an old store front with sun streaming through the roof beams, a shattered TV inside, a child's shoe.



**The town of Chivington has turned into a ghost town.**

Credit: Ana Castro

Then, we continue down the road. Soon, our Google map tells us we've arrived. We climb out of the car and feel it instantly. The pure quiet of this place.

Why?

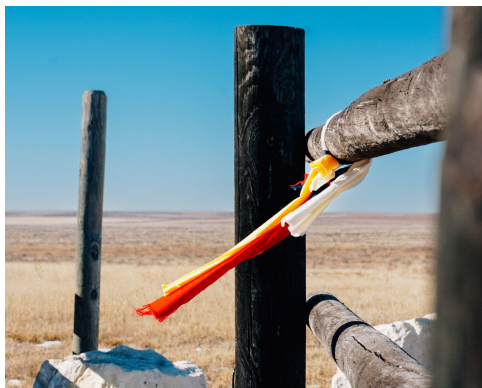
Why would a regiment of Colorado volunteer soldiers come all this way to attack a peaceful village of mostly elderly and women and children? We start walking up the path, trying to understand. We passed cottonwood trees that were alive during the massacre. Witness trees, descendants call them, and consider them very special.



Credit: Ana Castro

When we reach an overlook, there's some binoculars to look through down onto the massacre site. There's also a map. I narrated what I read, a bit sniffly because of the cold wind.

“So I'm now looking down at the creek. And I can see that War Bonnet's camp was off kind of farthest up the creek. Then White Antelope, Lone Bear, and then Black Kettle, Left Hand. There's arrows pointing at how they came in. And they would have come right around. Left Hand would have been the first camp that they came to, that they would have started firing into. It's just painful to look down at that curve of this creek and imagine those camps that had set up camp here in, from a place of trust. They were told they were safe here. They were supposed to be safe. It's a peaceful place, miles in every direction of cottonwoods, tall grass prairie, birds, coyotes.”



**Ribbons tied to a memorial for the massacre victims along the trail at the historic site.**

Credit: Ana Castro

We read a plaque that attempts to describe the politics at play just before the attack. All this land was supposed to be protected from the encroachment of settlers, part of the Fort Lyon Reservation. But it wasn't clear who was in charge. Colorado assigned one Indian agent to interact with the tribes on the government's behalf, the feds assigned another.

Again, I narrated, "The Treaty of Fort Wise promised government assistance teaching Cheyenne and Arapaho to farm. No instructors were ever sent though."

Then, in 1858, gold was discovered in Colorado. And the two tribes' hopes for a place to permanently call their own were dashed. That's what Ben Ridgely tells me when I meet up with him at the Wind River Casino. Ben's the tribal historic preservation officer for the Northern Arapaho tribe. He was the chairman of his tribe too. Plus, he's related to Little Raven, one of the only peace chiefs that survived Sand Creek. Ben is an older guy but styley, always sporting a pair of shades and wearing a down puffy covered in shimmery diamond designs. He's also been a drummer in a local rock band since the 60's. Ben says his tribe had always loved Sand Creek and the wide open plains around it, full of wild game and medicines and everything they needed.

"We camped all along that area in the winter," Ben says. "Because in the summer, we were out in the mountains gathering our food and whatever we needed for the winter. We'd go out to Estes Park, all that area out here. Then we even camped in the area of Denver and Cherry Creek."

He says before the arrival of settlers, the Arapaho enjoyed the bounty of the mountains and plains; after they arrived though, it quickly dwindled. Trade routes had long brought news from

tribes on the coasts and since the arrival of Europeans in the 1500's, they'd been watching their neighbors endure war and violence.

“And in the meantime, there were treaties that were developed to try to protect our people, both tribes. But then, more and more encroachment came from the settlers and then the gold rush. Pikes Peak brought more and more people into the area. And that started to bring in more and more skirmishes over land, even buffalo, wild game, because we are dependent on that for people for their livelihoods to survive on,” Ben says.

The settlers didn't know or care where the reservation boundaries even were. And the U.S. army was too busy dealing with the Civil War to worry about defending it. So Ben says the Plains tribes started defending it themselves. Especially after Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear was gunned down under these orders from Col. Chivington: “Kill Cheyennes whenever and wherever they're found.”

And Lean Bear was shot wearing a medal of peace he'd just received from President Lincoln. After that, the tribes attacked settlers dozens of times and Coloradoans started panicking.

Historian Ari Kelman wrote one of the defining books on the Sand Creek Massacre called *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over The Memory Of Sand Creek*. I chat with him over Zoom, a scholarly gentleman with a neatly trimmed beard. Ari says the state's governor John Evans was one ambitious dude.



“Personally, he would like to be a figure of some national political standing. He doesn't just want to be significant locally or territorially,” Ari says. “And so he's looking for ways to advance himself in the eyes of the National Republican Party. And the way that he identifies is to move Colorado as quickly as possible from territorial status to statehood. And Evans understands that transition as being one that's going to hinge to a very significant extent on his ability to – I'm going to use the language of the day – to pacify Indian peoples, Native peoples.”

But Ben says the two tribes trusted that the government wanted peace as much as they did. “And so the governor came in at that time, Evans, and he met with our chiefs. In September of this year that Sand Creek happened, there happened to be chiefs there along with some of the cavalymen and they talked about us flying a flag there, a truce to keep the peace.”

In his memoir *Life of George Bent Written from His Letters*, the Cheyenne warrior and leader recalls meetings with the army too, and hears them with his own ears reassure his people that if they just cooperated, they'd come to no harm. George was the son of William Bent, a frontier trader who married Owl Woman, George's mom. His dad served as a mediator for the tribes. Plus, the family were friends with Black Kettle, one of the most passionate of the Cheyenne peace chiefs.



**Northern Cheyenne warrior George Bent was the son of the frontier trader William Bent. He chronicled his life story in letters later in his later years.**

Credit: Ana Castro

“50 or 60 Cheyennes from our camp went in with Black Kettle and the other chiefs to have a talk with the new commandant,” George wrote. “Anthony met them in my father's old stone fort, which was now a part of Fort Lyon....What he told them convinced the Cheyenne more than ever that peace was sure to be made, sooner or later.”

But Ben Ridgely says, Governor Evans and Col. Chivington, they weren't meeting with the leaders in good faith. In fact, their real plan was to wipe out all Indigenous people who stood in their way.

“He knew we were peaceful people but all that time, Evans had brought in some volunteers to train them and their intent was to go down to fight our people. Because at that time they put a law into effect: killing all Indians was legal. Because they were causing all this trouble for the settlers,” Ben says.

During a year of independent study in college, Ben studied the story of Sand Creek. In his research, he found that the newspapers fanned the flames of hatred.

“It's amazing how the Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News talked about Natives. They called us savages. It was really, really harsh. They didn't think we were people.”

And because of this, tensions in Colorado kept escalating. The tribes tried their best to cooperate. When the army asked them to turn themselves into Fort Lyon in the summer of 1864, they went.

“Repeatedly, they find themselves dealing with federal officials and territorial officials who ignore treaties, and who over and over again side with settlers, in part because of the – what we would call – the racism of the day. White supremacy,” says Ari. “There is an understanding that removing tribal peoples from Colorado territory can be equated with progress.”

So yeah, the climate was filled with overt racism but also, George Bent says, just plain negligence.

“Chivington began gathering his troops about November 20,” George wrote. “Most of his force was made up of the Third Colorado Cavalry...who were not real soldiers at all. This regiment had been hastily recruited from among the worst class of frontier whites—toughs, gamblers, and ‘bad men’ from Denver and the mining camps, rough miners, ‘bull whackers’ and so on. The men were not disciplined at all, their officers had been selected by the vote of the men and had no real control over the men. The men were not even in uniform, and they were alike only in one thing: they were all eager to kill Indians.”

Ari says on paper it didn’t seem like Col. John Chivington would have the makings of a war criminal. For one thing, he was a Methodist minister who preached strongly against slavery.

“One of his many nicknames is the Fighting Parson. He is a very, very large man, stands well over six feet tall, weighs over 200 pounds. He has an extraordinary presence, has a booming

voice. And so he seems like good officer material. He serves early in the Civil War with distinction,” Ari says.

But like Governor Evans, Chivington had big aspirations. He also wanted to get into politics. And when the Cheyenne and Arapaho turned themselves in at Fort Lyon, he saw an opportunity.

“Chivington does everything he can to make sure that there will be a fight. He doesn't want to lose an opportunity to secure his reputation and potentially his standing in Colorado territory and beyond,” Ari says.

Two other military leaders tried to stop Chivington's attack. Captain Silas Soule and Lt. Joseph Cramer weren't normally opposed to warring with Native Americans, but still they both implored Chivington to see that these villages were filled with peaceful people, families, old folks. But Chivington ignored them. He marched on.

“What ensues is an unimaginably horrific slaughter. I don't want to get into great detail because it's....” At this point in our interview, Ari pauses. “In many ways, it's not my story to tell. But I'll simply say that somewhere between 175 and 250, or even maybe 275 people are killed over the course of a very long and bloody day. The overwhelming majority of those who are killed are either women or children or elderly men.”

Ari recognizes that, as a non-Native, the story of the massacre belongs to the Arapaho and Cheyenne. And that's what I came here for. At the Wind River Casino in Riverton, Wyoming,

Ben takes me to a small museum off the hotel lobby. It's where a deer hide painting shows the massacre story as it was passed down by survivors. It hangs behind glass and fills the wall when you walk in. Ben's father, Eugene Ridgely Senior, painted the story on the hide after consulting with Cheyenne and Arapaho elders.



**Ben Ridgely stands in front of the deer hide painting that his father Eugene Ridgely Sr. created of the Sand Creek Massacre.**

Credit: Ana Castro

“[My dad] said he was going to do a hide, and that's why he did this story, for the future of our people, what had happened that day,” Ben says.

I saw this deer hide replicated often in my research, in the brochure and at the historic site visitor center. Ben says museums everywhere would love to get their hands on it – it's worth over a million dollars – but instead it lives here on the reservation. Paintings like this were a traditional method of recording history, sometimes called winter counts because artists created them during winter months when people had more time to sit and recall the events of the last year. When you look closely at this one, you see in vivid colors what happened that day, November 29, 1864.

“And just before dawn, they surrounded the camps and Black Kettle is pictured here,” Ben says, pointing at the hide.

“He's got the American flag and then a white flag underneath,” I say.

“Which was called the flag of truce. When he had that and then they lined up the cannons, shot cannons and started firing.”



**Northern Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle stands under his  
truce flag.**

Credit: Ana Castro

George Bent was one of the few Cheyenne warriors in camp that morning. He saw his friend Black Kettle rush out to meet the soldiers.

“I looked toward the chief's lodge and saw that Black Kettle had a large American flag tied to the end of a long lodgepole and was standing in front of his lodge, holding the pole, with the flag fluttering in the gray light of the winter dawn,” George wrote. “I heard him call to the people not

to be afraid, that the soldiers would not hurt them; then the troops opened fire from two sides of the camps.”

“And at that time when they attacked, everybody was all sleeping,” Ben says. “There was hardly any warriors out there. They timed it. They must have had the scouts or whatever. Because they went out hunting.

“Which is why there's bison up here? Is this some of the warriors going out?” I ask, gesturing toward the top of the painting.

“Yeah, they knew then that over there were 2,000 to 3,000 warriors, and they knew about that other encampment, they didn't want to go there. They knew there were just old people, children, and a few warriors. That's why they attacked us.”

Ben says luring away the warriors by giving them permission to hunt was all part of Chivington's battle strategy. And that the colonel knew the Plains tribes rarely went to war in the winter. So the first thing the soldiers did was chase off the entire herd of ponies – 1,400 of them– so the people had no way to escape. Snow covered the prairie. Ben points at the painting, at some tiny figures on their knees facing soldiers with rifles, spots of bright red on them.

“And the bad thing about this picture here, it shows where people are running with their kids. Our dogs were there. There were kids that were begging the soldiers not to shoot them, on their

knees, telling them not to shoot them. And that was pretty brutal. They cut the baby from the women's bodies, cut body parts from off the men. And that battle went on all day," Ben says.

George Bent's friend Little Bear witnessed the atrocities first hand.

"I passed many women and children, dead and dying, lying in the creek bed," Little Bear said.

"The soldiers had not scalped them yet, as they were busy chasing those that were yet alive.

After the fight, I came back down the creek and saw these dead bodies all cut up, and even the wounded scalped and slashed. I saw one old woman wandering about; her whole scalp had been taken off and the blood was running down into her eyes so that she could not see where to go."

**The painting doesn't flinch from depicting the horror as it happened.**

Credit: Ana Castro



In the movies, it's always the Native Americans who scalp people. But actually, [the practice likely came over from Europe](#). And white people were more motivated to scalp Native people since the government paid a pretty penny for them. That day on the meanders of Sand Creek, the soldiers took as many scalps as they could, on Chivington's orders.



“Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians. Kill and scalp all, big and little; nits make lice.”

And they took much more. Soldiers cut off body parts for souvenirs, including genitals, men’s and women’s. Walking the trail at the massacre site, my photographer Ana remembered reading one story of a mother and her children.

“The letter said that she had been stabbed so many times there were just pieces of her falling off of her, like flopping when they try to lift her and she was just slowly dying,” Ana says. “And she kept asking for her children. And they never found one of her boys. They imagine that he got away because they never found him. But then, her little girl was saved and as soon as she heard that her little girl had been saved, the woman telling the story said that she smiled and then she passed away. So almost like she was holding out just to hear that her babies were okay.”

The peace chiefs couldn’t believe what was happening before their eyes. They’d promised their people they would be safe if they camped at Sand Creek, promised them they could trust the U.S. government. George Bent witnessed the reaction of one chief.

“White Antelope, when he saw the soldiers shooting into the lodges, made up his mind not to live any longer,” George recalled. “He had been telling the Cheyennes for months that the whites were good people and that peace was going to be made...and now he saw the soldiers shooting the people, and he did not wish to live any longer. He stood in front of his lodge with his arms folded across his breast, singing the death song:

*Nothing lives long*

*only the earth and the mountains*

At length the soldiers shot him and he fell dead in front of his lodge.”

A full two-thirds of the leadership of the Arapaho and Cheyenne were murdered at Sand Creek. One historian put it in perspective for me: imagine our president, vice president and two-thirds of our legislature killed in a single attack, the disruption and chaos it would cause to society.

Once the brutal assault was underway, Captain Soule and Lt. Cramer refused to participate. They marched their regiments across the creek and stood in formation, refusing to budge. Ben says, if they had joined the assault, “they would have probably wiped the whole camp out. To be honest and thoughtful about our people, we probably would all not have survived that day.”

In the deer hide painting, small figures with red gashes and missing limbs can be seen fleeing up the creek. They dug holes in the sand of the creek bank and hid, afraid to come out.

“After the soldiers had withdrawn about dark,” George wrote, “the chief [Black Kettle] went back down the creek to find the body of his wife, but he found her still alive, although wounded in many places. He took her on his back and carried her up the creek to where the rest of us were waiting. Her story was that after she had fallen and her husband had left her, soldiers rode up and shot her several times as she lay helpless on the sand. At the peace council in 1865 her story was told to the peace commissioners and they counted her wounds, nine in all, I believe.”

“We were superhumans to survive,” Ben says. “In the snow, we lived in a teepee, below zero. And we're proud people, we're here for a reason. And that reason is why we're here today, to be able to tell our stories for these people that lost their lives for us.”

“That night will never be forgotten as long as any of us who went through it are alive,” George wrote. “It was bitter cold, the wind had a full sweep over the ground on which we lay, and in spite of everything that was done, no one could keep warm. All through the night the Indians kept hallooing to attract the attention of those who had escaped from the village to the open plain and were wandering about in the dark, lost and freezing. Many who had lost wives, husbands, children or friends went back down the creek and crept over the battleground among the naked and mutilated bodies of the dead. Few were found alive, for the soldiers had done their work thoroughly. But now and then during that endless night some man or woman would stagger in among us, carrying some wounded person on their back.”

Superhuman to carry those bodies through the night. Superhuman to carry those stories for generations. Ben says when they finally retreated, the soldiers paraded through the streets of Denver.

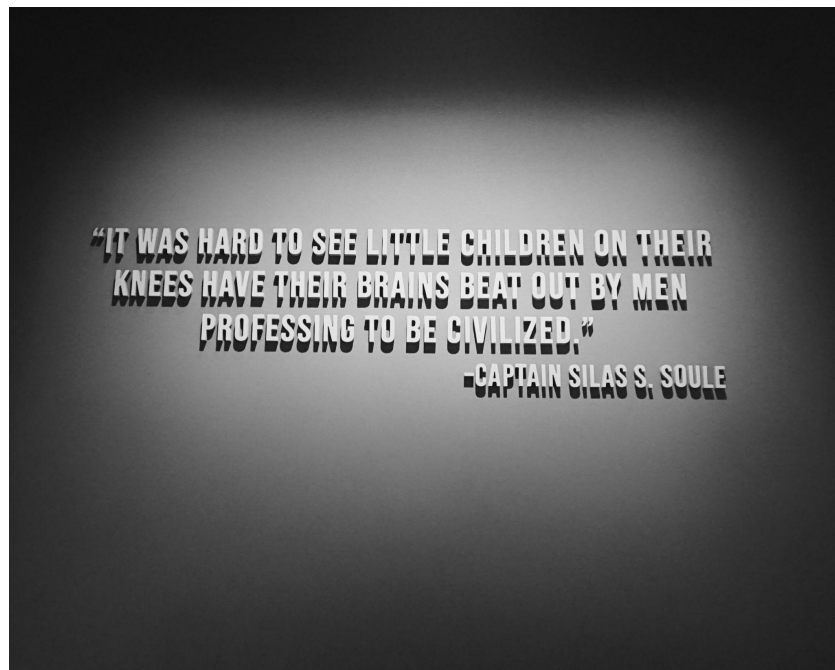
“It feels like one of the worst massacres in US history,” I say to Ben, looking at that deer hide.

“Yeah, it is, you know, like I mentioned to you, when they massacre 230 people and parade their body parts, and then don't tell the story truthfully. They were calling it a battle from the start.

“They only recently started calling it a massacre,” I say.

George Bent remembered those parades in his letters. “At Denver, the men were received as heroes and the town went wild over the victory over Black Kettle's hostiles. One evening at a Denver theater a band of these heroes stepped upon the stage during an intermission and exhibited fully a hundred Cheyenne scalps, mostly those of women and children, while the audience cheered and the orchestra rendered patriotic airs. A few of the men had still more ghastly souvenirs: tobacco bags made of pieces of skin cut from the bodies of dead Cheyenne women.”

Historian Ari Kelman says these parades were Chivington’s attempt at casting the massacre as a victory. But meanwhile, Captain Silas Soule started writing letters.



A History Colorado exhibit includes a quotation from Captain Soule’s letters.

Credit: Ana Castro

“Silas Soule is working behind the scenes sending his own letters to other leading figures in the United States military who in turn reach out to political leaders in Washington DC, making them aware of what really happened at Sand Creek,” Ari says. “John Chivington wants everyone to believe that Sand Creek was a glorious battle. Silas Soule counters that it was a massacre, little more than that, the dastardly and horrible deed it was, an embarrassment to the union. It was an embarrassment to the cause that Soule still believes in. So Soule’s letters ultimately lead to multiple federal investigations into what happened at Sand Creek, all of which describe it as a bad act, one of which calls it a massacre. And then Soule is murdered in the streets of Denver.”

Ari says it’s still unclear whether Soule’s murder was in retaliation for his role in bringing to light the so-called bad acts at Sand Creek. Other historians say he was gunned down by Chivington supporters. But either way, the investigations don’t lead to justice.

“Did it feel like Chivington was ever really punished or held to justice at all?” I ask Ben.

“No, there wasn’t,” Ben says. “When you go down to Sand Creek, you leave Eads, you’re heading out to the site, there’s a place, a little ghost town, called Chivington. Hardly, I don’t even think there’s anybody stays there. Maybe somebody does. I know Natives, they don’t really probably feel right about that town either.”

Neither Governor Evans or Col. Chivington ever faced charges of war crimes. After the attack, Chivington went on about his life, moved around the Midwest for a while, married a teenage relative, then came back to Colorado where he was still considered a hero. Governor Evans was

run out of office and never achieved his dream of national status. But the highest peak in Colorado is named after him. Ari says it's stuff like that that just proves that, "Chivington wins the memory fight, I guess is the way that you put it, for a very long period of time until quite recently, when there have been efforts to try and redress that problem."

And when you lose the memory fight, it's hard to keep carrying the burden, even if you are superhuman. Growing up, Ben saw his parents struggle with trauma. Both speakers of Arapaho, his father rose to become a prominent tribal leader and his mother—daughter of one of the tribe's spiritual elders—taught traditional arts and crafts. But they experienced abuse at Indian boarding schools. As an adult, Ben became an educator working for the Department of Education and chairman of the tribe himself. All the time, he and his family never forgot Sand Creek. They wanted to see it turned into a historic site.

"When the project started in 1998, I was co-chairman of the tribe," Ben says. "We talked about it with our council. And we started meetings in Denver that fall. And then we said, well, we're going to talk about how we're going to proceed in finding this site. So we did a site study that spring. Scientifically, and where elders go down and pray, and then we have an oral history of some of our tribal members to tell the history, stuff from what they heard, to kind of blend in their thoughts and understanding of how this massacre happened."

Colorado Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of the Cheyenne tribe also stepped up and eventually the National Park Service designated the site. It wasn't easy. Sometimes tribal oral histories disagreed with archaeology. But Ben says since then, the Methodist church has issued a

formal apology for the atrocities committed by one of their ministers and their congregation made a pilgrimage by charter buses to visit the site. One of the closest towns to the Sand Creek Massacre Site is Lamar, Colorado. For years, their school mascot was the Lamar Savages. Recently, the school changed that to the Lamar Thunder.

And each year except during the pandemic, the Northern Arapaho has hosted the Sand Creek Spiritual Healing Run, a 180 mile relay race from Sand Creek to Denver, retracing the path of Chivington's soldiers after the massacre. A few years back, Colorado Governor Hickenlooper met the school age runners and had something to say:



**Relay runners entering Denver after running from Sand Creek.**

Credit: Ana Castro

“Today, we gathered here to formally acknowledge what happened, the massacre at Sand Creek. We should not be afraid to criticize and condemn that which is inexcusable. So I'm here to offer something that has been too long in coming. So on behalf the state of Colorado, I want to apologize.”

After his apology, the crowd breaks out into applause.

So Ben recognizes that Colorado is making an attempt at reckoning with this history. This year, Ben, his brother Gail, and other tribal leaders collaborated with the state of Colorado's history museum to create an exhibit telling the story of Sand Creek from the perspective of the Arapaho and Cheyenne.

On our journey to Sand Creek, Ana and I stop at the museum. Outside the exhibit, teachers give a group of middle schoolers an introduction. How can they possibly prepare them for what they're about to learn? Historian Sam Bock tells me, this exhibit isn't like any other the History Colorado museum has ever created.

“This was the first time History Colorado created an exhibition that was told from the first person perspective of a tribal community,” Sam says.

He gives me a tour and I notice how people grow quieter and linger longer the further we wind through the exhibit.



“On opening day, it was really shoulder-to-shoulder capacity in here, and the room was pretty silent,” Sam says. “You know, I think a lot of people need time to process what they're learning. And especially, as we've said, given the relative newness of the story to a lot of people, I think we need a contemplation time. And in fact, for that reason, there's a corner of this exhibit, that's actually a pretty significant chunk of the floor space that's devoted to giving people a place to process. We've been calling it the contemplation room. And it's an area with no information, there's no artifacts. It's just photographs of the site that had been blown up really big to give you sort of a feeling that you're at the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, along with audio recordings of wind and birds and bugs and stuff from that site to really give them an air of calmness, of separation. Time to think, it's time to grieve.”

I see a replica of the deer hide Ben showed me. Toward the end you can put on headphones and hear survivor’s family members tell the stories of the massacre that have been passed down. And read copies of the letters that Capt. Soule and Lt. Cramer wrote, describing the horrors of that day in their own handwriting. It’s a balm to walk into the contemplation room.



**The History Colorado exhibit includes traditional artwork of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.**

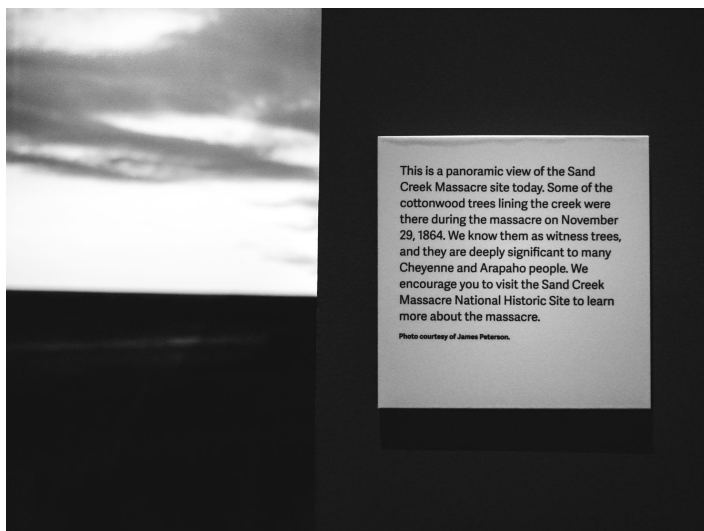
Credit: Ana Castro

The response to the exhibit has been overwhelmingly positive, Sam says. He thinks it came along at the right moment.

“I don't think it's a surprise to anybody that in the wake of George Floyd's killing in 2020 that there's been a renewed interest in better understanding how our nation and state of race relations came to be. But of course, it spawned a lot of different efforts. Renaming Mount Evans is certainly a really high profile thing that is still very controversial,” he says.

Signs have been posted along the highways from Sand Creek into Wyoming, highlighting the Sand Creek Massacre Trail. And [a Civil War monument in front of the Colorado state capitol has been removed](#) with plans to replace it with a statue relating to Sand Creek. Just one of several efforts to make change.

Sam says, “This is a moment, it's a very special moment in time that happens periodically in American history where, we kind of hit a pause button, and we all ask ourselves collectively, what do we want to do differently in the future?”



**A plaque with a quote seen in the History**

**Colorado exhibit.**

Credit: Ana Castro

Ben agrees that this is a special moment in history and that's why he'd like to see more reparations for Sand Creek. The fact is, Governor Evans' vision of wiping out the Arapaho and Cheyenne from Colorado, it worked. So now Ben feels that some of those lands should be returned.

"So I'm publishing a book here in the next year," he tells me. "I want to keep continuing on to build more and more awareness in Colorado and go after our reparations that are owed to us by the federal government."

The Northern Arapaho are working with the city of Boulder to reclaim the land where Chivington once trained his soldiers. Mount Evans could be renamed Blue Sky Mountain after the Arapaho name for themselves. The state could give tribal members free tuition at Colorado colleges and universities. Offensive place names could be changed. More could be done to recognize what happened on Sand Creek.

Ben has visited the place over 80 times in his life.

"And what does it feel like to you when you go there?" I ask.

"It's beautiful, but when you get to the site, you feel sad," Ben says. "Then we pray and feel better after we pray. But it's always going to have that feeling for me, because we still got body parts, and we still got blood, it's still on the ground. And it's always going to be there. But as long as it's healable for our future, knowing what happened and respecting that to get over that

historical trauma. It's going be better for the future, for not only the general public, but for people to realize that it really happened: the most notorious atrocity in America.”



**Ben Ridgely in front of the Wind River Casino where the Sand Creek deer hide is housed.**

Credit: Ana Castro

ME: A warning...this episode contains descriptions of mutilation, war and violence against children and may not be appropriate for all audiences.

**BEAT**

**MUX**

ME: When I was a kid, we rarely heard about Native American communities. Maybe, sure, how Columbus encountered them when he quote-unquote discovered America. But otherwise, Indigenous history seems to stop about 150 years ago in classrooms, museums and the public

consciousness. So, you know, we didn't learn the names of the tribes that lived around our homes and I had no idea where the reservations were. And it wasn't just my generation. One of my children's friends told me they believed all Native Americans had gone extinct. But lately, the American public has been learning that's far from the case. In the news, we're hearing a lot from Indigenous communities...

NEWS MONTAGE: Boarding school graves, COVID precautions, Dakota Access pipeline, etc.

ME: As a reporter covering tribal issues in Wyoming, I found it interesting that a lot of the most active and vocal voices have come from tribes in the American West. And when you sit down with the movers and shakers, you hear that what's motivating them is a desire to heal a history that feels very recent, very raw...the Plains Indian Wars, a series of brutal battles in the mid and late 18-hundreds. In school, I didn't learn much about these wars at all. If I did, it was about isolated battles like what the history books called "Custer's Last Stand" and maybe Wounded Knee. But actually, most of them can be traced back to one horrific massacre

MUX END

BEAT

...Sand Creek.

ME: From Wyoming Public Media and PRX, this is the Modern West...exploring the evolving identity of the American West. I'm Melodie Edwards.

ME: This season of the Modern West, we're going to do things a little differently. We're going to set aside the history books and instead focus on hearing this story and its long term repercussions from the survivors themselves and directly from their descendents. For me, this season feels like the culmination of years of research. In my mid-20's, I lived outside Flagstaff, Arizona in a canvas geodesic dome with a 75 mile view of the Painted Desert out my door. The border of the Navajo reservation was only a few miles away and my neighbors, Gary and Theresa, lived a traditional lifestyle in a five-sided hogan. Sometimes I substitute taught at a nearby Navajo boarding school. But mostly I was a preschool teacher in town where about half my students were either Navajo or Hopi. So were some of my co-workers. My friend Diana invited me to attend ceremonies on Third Mesa where she grew up. Even after I moved back to Colorado, we stayed penpals. And those experiences, those relationships, got me thinking...and reading. I realized there were huge gaps in my knowledge of the history of the American West. Years later, I got a job covering the Wind River Reservation for Wyoming Public Radio and started hearing that story in greater detail. One of the first stories I reported on was the end of the Bighorn Adjudication case, the longest running lawsuit in U.S. history in which the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone tribes fought for their water rights. Another was a U.S. Supreme Court case to prove that the city of Riverton was inside reservation boundaries. One thing I noticed right away when covering these stories was that people always linked present day events to the past. Those literal battles with the federal government for sovereignty, they've never ended, I kept hearing. It's all still history in the making. But that perspective usually got edited out of my reporting, not enough room, too complicated. So this season I'm going to keep all that in. I'm going to reach out to my colleagues and friends from Wind River and across the West and trace a throughline from the Plains Indian Wars to life in Indigenous communities today.

ME: But one thing I've learned over the years is that, as a white woman, I've got to be extra careful to not make any assumptions about what I think I know. As Americans, we all think we know this era in history...we've seen it played out a million times in old western movies. Believe me, I know how hard it can be to let go of our most basic myths, especially in the American West. But this season, I'm inviting you, the listener, to set aside what you think you know and listen to the voices of Indigenous history keepers themselves, and experience the battlefields and their aftermath from their point of view. Today, we'll start the story at the beginning...on the high prairie of what is now eastern Colorado, on land that was set aside for the Cheyenne and Arapaho by treaty, on the banks of Sand Creek. Ever since I learned about the Sand Creek Massacre, I've wanted to make a pilgrimage to see the site. It feels like as a Westerner, it's my responsibility...like visiting a holocaust memorial if you're German. So my photographer Ana Castro and I made the journey. To get there, we drove due east of the city of Denver. It was a long drive, towns getting smaller and smaller as we went, until we were almost to Kansas.

AMBI: Turn right onto County Road West. Continue on County Road West for one and a half miles.

ME: It's a cold, bright day in early January...January 6th actually, the one year anniversary since the insurrection on the United States capitol. That feels significant. It also happens to be only a few weeks after the anniversary of the massacre. The last town we drive through is called Chivington, named after Col. John Chivington, the man who ordered and committed the massacre of over 200 Arapaho and Cheyenne people just a few miles away from here. Chivington is really just a ghost town now. There's a newish looking church with a playground.

We stop and photograph an old store front with sun streaming through the roof beams, a shattered TV inside...a child's shoe. Then, we continue down the road....

AMBI: You have arrived. Sand Creek Massacre Historic Site.

ME: We climb out of the car and feel it instantly. The pure quiet of this place. [ambi of birds & wind] Why? Why would a regiment of Colorado volunteer soldiers come all this way to attack a peaceful village of mostly elderly and women and children? We start walking up the path, trying to understand. We pass cottonwood trees that were alive during the massacre. Witness trees, descendants call them, and consider them very special. When we reach an overlook, there's some binoculars to look through down onto the massacre site. There's also a map.

ME: So I'm now looking down at the creek. And I can see that War Bonnet's camp was off kind of farthest up the creek. Then White Antelope, Lone Bear, and then Black Kettle, Left Hand. There's arrows pointing at how they came in. And they would have come right around. Left Hand would have been the first camp that they came to, that they would have started firing into.

ME: Just painful to look down at that curve of this creek imagine those camps that had set up camp here in, from a place of trust. They were told they were safe here. They were supposed to be safe. It's a peaceful place, miles in every direction of cottonwoods, tall grass prairie, birds, coyotes. [ambi ravens & birds]

ME: We read a plaque that attempts to describe the politics at play just before the attack. All this land was supposed to be protected from the encroachment of settlers, part of the Fort Lyon Reservation. But it wasn't clear who was in charge. Colorado assigned one Indian agent to interact with the tribes on the government's behalf...the feds assigned another.

ME: [reading fade in] The Treaty of Fort Wise promised government assistance teaching Cheyenne and Arapaho to farm. No instructors were ever sent though. Those Cheyenne and



Arapaho that did move to the reservation were dependent on government annuities to survive which were delivered once yearly. Buffalo rarely ventured close, leaving tribal members with little to eat. [fade out]

ME: Then, in 1858, gold was discovered in Colorado. And the two tribes' hopes for a place to permanently call their own were dashed. That's what Ben Ridgely tells me when I meet up with him at the Wind River Casino. Ben's the tribal historic preservation officer for the Northern Arapaho tribe. He was the chairman of his tribe too. Plus, he's related to Little Raven, one of the only peace chiefs that survived Sand Creek. Ben is an older guy but styley, always sporting a pair of shades and wearing a down puffy covered in shimmery diamond designs. He's also been a drummer in a local rock band since the 60's. Ben says his tribe had always loved Sand Creek and the wide open plains around it, full of wild game and medicines and everything they needed.

BEN: We camped all along that area in the winter. Because in the summer, we were out in the mountains gathering our food and whenever we need it for the winter. We'd go out to Estes Park, all that area out here. Then we even camped in the area of Denver.

ME: He says before the arrival of settlers, the Arapaho enjoyed the bounty of the mountains and plains...after they arrived though, it quickly dwindled. Trade routes had long brought news from tribes on the coasts and since the arrival of Europeans in the 1500's, they'd been watching their neighbors endure war and violence.

BEN: And in the meantime, there was treaties that were developed to try to protect our people, both tribes, but then, more and more encroachment came from the settlers. And then the gold rush. Pikes Peak brought more and more people into the area. And that started to bring in more and more skirmishes over land, even buffalo, wild game. Because we are dependent on that for people to their livelihoods to survive on.