

Indigenous Presence: Deep History to 2021

Thousands of archeological sites in the Black Hills document the Indigenous presence in the region extending back at least 12,000 years. Indigenous oral traditions reach even deeper into the past. A creation story, for example, places the origins of the Lakota people at *Wasun Nija* (Wind Cave) sometime in the deep past. Over many millennia, members of several Native tribes came into and through the Black Hills. This included the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota tribes of the *Oceti Sakowin* (“People of the Seven Council Fires,” often called the “Great Sioux Nation”), as well as Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, Arikaras, and Mandans.

Some members of these tribes may have passed through, stopping briefly on the way to hunt or trade. Others stayed longer after trekking to the area for extended sessions of individual prayer or healing. Still others stayed for weeks or months, holding elaborate ceremonies, camping seasonally, or assembling for large meetings. These activities lent structure and rhythm to early life on the Northern Plains, and for this reason, the landscape itself is imbued with deep meaning and ancient, dynamic connections to place, people, and community.

Like the rest of the Indigenous world, the early Black Hills and the prairies that surround them were complex and contested places. Life on the High Plains was challenging. Tribes faced a volatile, unforgiving climate. They sought access to natural resources like water, wood, stone, and game. They adapted and responded when violence and new diseases threatened their populations or new goods, tools, and technologies brought innovations to their lives.

The Black Hills also constituted, as the ethno-archeologist Linea Sundstrom writes, “a complex sacred geography” in which various Native groups held deep cultural, spiritual, and ceremonial ties to locations throughout the region.¹⁴³ For all these reasons, Native tribes moved into and out of the Black Hills many times over untold generations, making and remaking the social and cultural landscape.

Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, other tribes as well as the steady trickle of non-Native fur traders and military personnel recognized Lakotas as the primary occupants of the Black Hills region. The government of the United States recognized the Black Hills as territories of the *Oceti Sakowin* by federal treaties in 1851 and 1868. Well-documented violations of these agreements opened the Black Hills to non-Native settlement in 1877. In 1889, the federal government further divided the remaining portions of West River, creating the rough boundaries of the Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Lower Brule, and Cheyenne River Reservations as we know them today. The high number of Lakota people

¹⁴³ Linea Sundstrom, “The Sacred Black Hills: An Ethnohistorical Review,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 17, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 1997): 206.

who live on and around these reservations, combined with the deep cultural and legal connections that tie Lakotas to this area, bolster Lakota rootedness in the Black Hills region.

Native knowledge of the landscape corroborates the archaeological evidence establishing the enduring presence of Native people in what is now Rapid City. A map by Amos Bad Heart Bull, a Lakota man, captured an Indigenous perspective on the Black Hills region around the turn of the 20th century. He noted that Rapid Creek had long been utilized for winter camps. There, the trees and bluffs offered respite from intense prairie winds. In separate accounts, both Bad Heart Bull and the venerated Oglala Holy Man Nicholas Black Elk connected Rapid Creek, or *Mnilusa*, and the valley it created through the eastern Hills to a Lakota spiritual story.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, Rapid Creek was a vital artery that brought water from the central hills to the eastern prairies. It was a locus of Indigenous activity, as evidenced by hundreds of tool grooves and other stone markings in the area that demonstrate Indigenous presence along the creek as much as 2,000 years ago. The same stone outcropping, known today as “Founders Rock,” that became the site of Rapid City’s establishment had been a well-known camping space for Indigenous peoples for generations.

Due to government regulations, Native peoples had a limited presence in Rapid City for the first 25 years of the city’s existence. Rapid City had been founded as “Hay Camp” in 1876. Just months before, the US government had ordered all Native peoples in the region to report to their assigned reservation. (Indeed, it was Native leaders’ resistance to this declaration, and the US Army’s efforts to enforce it, that brought about the violence at the Greasy Grass, or the “Battle of the Little Bighorn,” and related skirmishes that summer.) Following that event and other, smaller skirmishes, the specter of Native attack persisted in Rapid City for years. In 1876, for example, most of Rapid City’s residents fled to Pierre on a report of Native presence in the area. Well after any violence had subsided, the federal government enforced strict regulations aimed at confining Native peoples to reservations. Until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924, Native peoples were required to secure a pass from their agency superintendent before leaving their reservation.¹⁴⁵

Around 1900, a handful of Native families were living in Rapid City. Most had relocated from area reservations to live near children forcibly enrolled at the Rapid City Indian School built on the western outskirts of town in 1898. (See the essay on the Rapid City Indian School Lands for further details.) These families assembled semi-permanent camps along Rapid Creek, which extended at different times roughly from the Roosevelt Park area in the east all the way to the boarding school campus at Sioux San in the west.

The most prominent of these Native villages was known as the Osh Kosh Camp, or simply, “Indian camp,” which originated in the 1920s or 1930s. The main camp was located on the banks of Rapid Creek underneath tall cottonwood trees on what is now the greenway just south of Omaha Street and between Osh Kosh Street and Founders Park Drive. Most

¹⁴⁴ Sundstrom, “The Sacred Black Hills,” 187–92.

¹⁴⁵ Ross P. Korsgaard, “A History of Rapid City, South Dakota, During the Territorial Days,” *South Dakota History*, vol. 38 (1976): 523.

families established their homes in tents, boxcars, or other temporary housing, which they set up near the creek because it was near to the Warren Lamb Lumber company, an industrial business that owned the land upon which the camp was located. The company employed Native people and in a few cases provided small homes to its employees. According to Cecelia Montgomery, a Lakota woman who grew up in the Osh Kosh Camp, most Lakota families “camped because they couldn’t afford to rent anywhere; [the company] paid them very little wages. They were living in tents and some people bought shacks and moved them down there; it was a regular little reservation. They had outdoor toilets and everybody had to use the same water hydrant.”¹⁴⁶

Despite these conditions, Native families built a community at Osh Kosh. Over time, working-class non-Native families also built homes along the creek, making these spaces a cultural crossroads where residents of different backgrounds met and intermingled in the decades before the 1972 flood. James Emery, a Lakota, described how the Native community’s emotional attachment to this area persisted after the 1972 flood destroyed most of the camps and homes along Rapid Creek. “As far as the Indian was concerned, most of these places, that was home-sweet-home to him. That was the only place he knew. He loved it there. There was home life there...that was home-sweet home.”¹⁴⁷

Another Native community spent the summers on the property of Sitting Bull Crystal Caverns on Highway 16 just south of Rapid City. In 1927, a prominent businessman named Alex Duhamel partnered with the Oglala Holy Man Nicholas Black Elk. Together, they organized the “Duhamel Sioux Indian Pageant,” a cultural performance for locals and tourists. The first of these performances took place inside a dance hall in the Baken Park plaza before they moved to the Sitting Bull Cave property, where Lakota families lived in small, private camps set in the trees a short distance away from the performance area. For several years in the early 1930s, the pageant also held performances outside the Duhamel Store on Sixth Street downtown.

More Native families came to Rapid City in the 1940s and 1950s, spurred along both by the post-war economic boom and federal relocation programs. Although the Rapid City Native community remained predominantly Lakota and comprised of tribal members from reservations in South Dakota, more and more members of other tribes moved to the area.

During this period, Rapid City faced an economic and housing boom related to the creation and expansion of Ellsworth Air Force Base and the growth of the local tourism industry. In 1954, the city of Rapid City empowered and funded a mayoral committee to move the Osh Kosh Camp from the downtown creek bed to a plot of land north of the city limits that came to be known as the Sioux Addition. Some Native families moved elsewhere in Rapid City, to the burgeoning neighborhoods in Robbinsdale and South Canyon, for

¹⁴⁶ Cecelia Montgomery, quoted in *Honor the Grandmothers: Dakota Women Tell Their Stories*, ed. Sarah Penman (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), 77–112.

¹⁴⁷ James Emery, oral history interview, July 11, 1972, South Dakota Oral History Center, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/channels/sdoralhistory/78842793>.

example, but most remained at the Sioux Addition. For several years after the creation of the Sioux Addition, the structures there were comprised of tents and lean-tos arranged along a worn prairie floor.

Between 1954 and 1969, the Sioux Addition Civic Association lobbied local and federal officials to expand the development to accommodate the growing community. In 1969, a second neighborhood, known as Lakota Homes, was added next to the Sioux Addition. Today, the rows of ranch-style homes that line the streets in these neighborhoods reflect these developments.

As Rapid City expanded and enveloped these areas over the next several decades, the Native community remained consolidated in the North Side neighborhoods. The Black Hills Flood of 1972 contributed to this consolidation. After the flood and ensuing recovery eliminated what remained of Native camps and older homes along the creek, many displaced Native families settled in these North Rapid neighborhoods.

While these changes were underway throughout the middle decades of the 20th century, Native people became intimately entwined in the civic life of their neighborhoods and the city at large. The Winona Club, for example, was a Native women's club that had been founded in 1929. The group met in its members' North Side living rooms and kitchens and held craft sales and fundraisers at the St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and elsewhere over many decades. They used these funds to host lecturers, to help recovering patients at Sioux San, to make school lunches for disadvantaged children, and more. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Winona Club advocated for resources on behalf of the Rapid City Native community and raised funds and developed a detailed plan for a "Sioux Indian Cultural Center" that would have provided space for exhibits and cultural performances.¹⁴⁸ Some elements of this plan became part of the vision that led to the creation of the Journey Museum and Learning Center in the 1990s.

Other Native organizations reflected the broad history of Native activism in the face of ongoing and unresolved racial conflicts. Throughout Rapid City's history, persistent tensions between the Native and non-Native communities have shaped the social and political ecosystems in the community. The Black Hills Council of American Indians, for example, met often in church basements as it advocated on a variety of Native issues and opposed violations of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty up to and beyond the US Supreme Court Case *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians* in 1980. Rapid City, meanwhile, became a hotbed of activism for the American Indian Movement (AIM) and other groups in the years surrounding the 1973 occupation at Wounded Knee. In one telling example, the Mother Butler Center—which has been a community space that hosted everything from wakes and funerals to community action meetings over the last several decades—was the site of a tense, nearly-violent standoff between AIM activists and local law enforcement in early 1973.

Since the 1970s, Rapid City has continued to grow and expand as a hub of urban Indigenous life on the Northern Plains. Census reports place the number of permanent,

¹⁴⁸ Susan Braunstein, "Enriching the Culture: Winona Club," *Indian Country Today*, September 4, 1985.

Native residents at around 12 percent of Rapid City’s population. However, with residents of the surrounding reservations coming to shop, recreate, visit family, conduct business, and engage in a wide array of other personal and community activities, the Native population on any given day accounts for as much as a quarter of the people in the city.¹⁴⁹

Over the last few decades, community spaces like the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center have hosted annual events like the Lakota Nation Invitational and the *He Sapa Wacipi*, or Black Hills Powwow, (founded in 1976 and 1986 respectively).¹⁵⁰ Both of these events contribute significantly to the local economy each year. They also serve as a loci for community gatherings and cultural events and create opportunities for the reservation and urban Native communities to connect with one another and to strengthen the bonds between Native and non-Native people.

Native art and culture is also woven into Rapid City’s economy and institutional landscape. Although managed by non-Natives, downtown businesses like Prairie Edge and the Elks Theater sell Native-made goods and host events like the Native American Film Festival. For Native people whose families integrated Catholic or other Christian religious traditions, many local churches offer important community spaces where familial and cultural ties are solidified. Meanwhile, public cultural institutions like the Journey Museum and Learning Center, the Rapid City Public Library, and the Dahl Fine Arts center host frequent speakers, events, exhibits, and arts and crafts events related to Indigenous history and culture. In the center of the city in Halley Park, the First Nation Sculpture Garden honors the historical contributions of four prominent Native leaders. The Sioux San campus, meanwhile, continues to host *inipi* (sweat/purification) ceremonies.

Documentation

The stone outcroppings near “Founder’s Park,” 2019



¹⁴⁹ See Braunstein and Schantz, “Rapid City Police Department and the Native Community in Rapid City.”

¹⁵⁰ “[Press Release: October 29, 2019, Lakota Nation Invitational \(LNI\), Rapid City, SD,](#)”, accessed November 5, 2020; “Black Hills Powwow Co-Founder Randy Ross Dies at 63,” KEVN-Newscenter1, July 18, 2020.

Sign at Lakota Homes, 2019



Houses at Lakota Homes, 2019



The Mother Butler Center, 2019



Site of the Osh Kosh Camp, 2020



The Osh Kosh Camp in 1953, just prior to its destruction.
Rapid City Journal, March 1953



The Sioux Addition as it appeared in 1962.
New York Times, June 16, 1962



Marie Rogers and Emma Tibbets of the Winona Club arrange items for sale at the “Winona Club Bazaar” crafts sale at the St. Matthew’s Church in 1976.

Rapid City Journal, November 29, 1976


