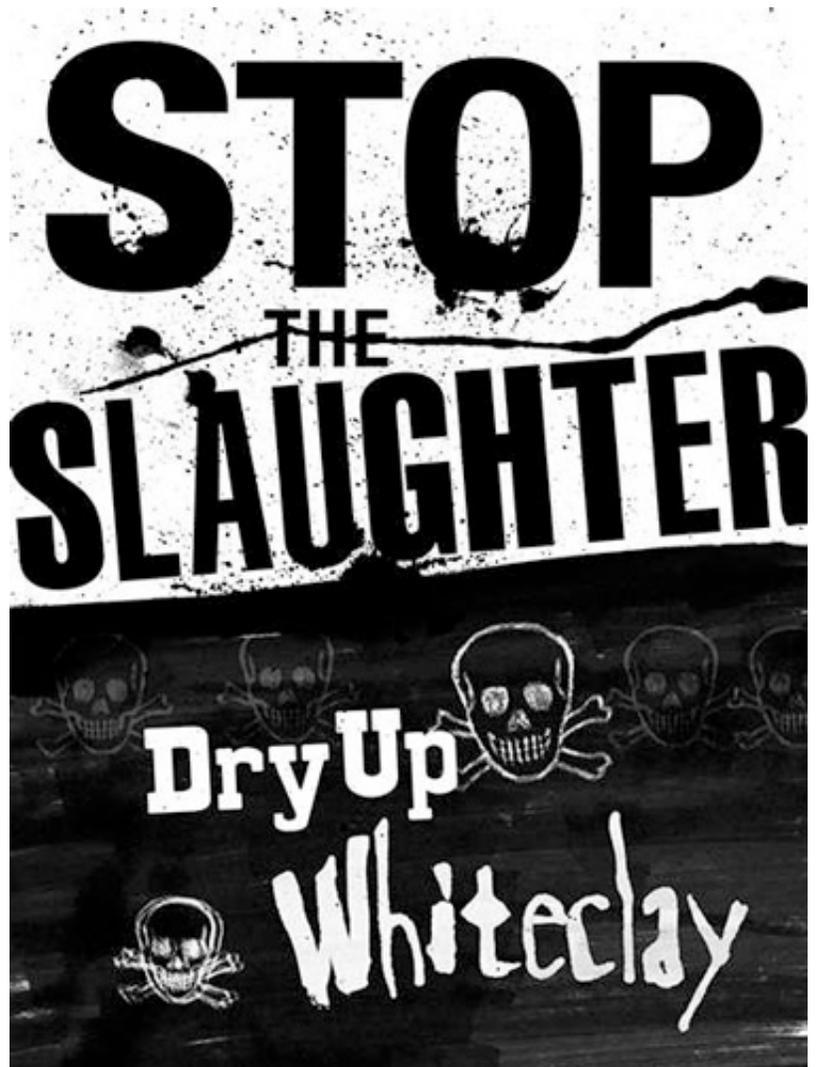


# 'KILLING FIELD' STILL TROUBLES LAKOTA

PROTESTS DON'T STOP  
LIQUOR, WOE FROM  
FLOWING

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WHITECLAY, Neb. - Not so long ago they marched here, held war lances high against the blue South Dakota sky, toed their way across the Nebraska line on their way to battle. They were confronting the enemy, these Lakota, an enemy that in the two centuries since the white man's invasion has probably done them more damage than his guns and disease combined.

Spurred on by the unsolved murders of two of their own, they took out their grief and anger on the most obvious target - booze - and its most obvious source: this town just on the other side of the state line from Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

The reservation is dry, but Whiteclay makes up for that. The seedy stores lining its single paved street sell \$4 million worth of beer and malt liquor each year to the reservation's roughly 18,000 Oglala Lakota residents. Lakota people can walk the 2 miles to Whiteclay from the town of Pine Ridge or drive the narrow, hilly roads from the reservation's interior to buy beer here. Some of them drink too much of it, and, too often, they die.

They get hit by cars walking home. Or pass out and freeze to death. Drunken drivers get in accidents and kill themselves or others. Those who make it home often die slower deaths, of cirrhosis or neglect. Or they get in fights and kill one another. Pick a lousy way to go and trace it back to booze. Then trace the booze to Whiteclay.

"Whiteclay is a killing field," said Tom Poor Bear, whose brother, Wally Black Elk, and cousin, Ronald Hard Heart, were killed in 1999 after an evening of drinking in Whiteclay. Poor Bear helped lead the demonstrators who vowed after the killings to shut Whiteclay down. They set up a circle of tepees on the South Dakota side of the state line, called it Camp Justice and swore to march from the camp to Whiteclay every week until the killers were caught and the flow of beer stopped.

Today, the killers are still at large. The fierce winter winds have long since shredded the tepees' white canvas coverings, and the poles lean lonely in the weedy field. The inhabitants of Camp Justice are no longer purposeful demonstrators but bleary-eyed vagrants who spend their days drinking in Whiteclay and their nights collapsed around the wood stove that is all that remains of the camp. And in Whiteclay itself, not one thing has changed.

Brian Blue Bird and Nathan Black Elk were among the marchers who tried to close Whiteclay's stores. Last week, they stood outside those same stores, sharing a tall can of Hurricane malt liquor and talking about the widespread ravages of the disease they share with too many others.

"Just today, I buried my sister-in-law. She was only 37, and she died of cirrhosis. She leaves five kids," Blue Bird said. He edged closer against the side of an abandoned building that offered inadequate protection against a bitter wind. "I'm a veteran," Blue Bird said. "I was in Grenada with the 101st Airborne, the Screaming Eagles. Now I'm a drunk." Black Elk hit him up for a cigarette. "Cousin, don't smoke," Blue Bird said gently.

"Directly or indirectly, alcohol affects everybody here," Cpl. John Mosseau, a police officer in Pine Ridge, said of the reservation. Take booze out of the equation, and 75 percent of his cases would disappear, he estimated. At night, Mosseau patrols the 2-mile stretch of road between the towns of Pine Ridge and Whiteclay. "Over 50 percent of all of the DUIs on the reservation" - the nation's second-largest, spanning 7,000 square miles - "come on that road," said Mosseau, recalling how, as a boy, he would climb the hill above the road at night and watch for the inevitable moment when two sets of car lights would collide.

Statistics compiled by the Indian Health Service show that alcohol-related deaths kill Indians at an age-adjusted rate of 638 percent higher than that of all other races, said Terry Blue-White Eyes, who heads Anpetu Luta Otipi, a substance-abuse program with facilities around the reservation. Blue-White Eyes has been at it for 15 years. Her annual budget for treating the reservation's worst health problem amounts to a quarter of the Whiteclay beer sales. "I got past my anger a long time ago," she said - then immediately contradicted herself. "No. I'm still angry. I'm angry that our people are in such a state of abject misery that drinking is all they have to look forward to."

Shannon County, which encompasses Pine Ridge, is routinely listed as the nation's poorest. Unemployment runs 85 percent on the reservation. Housing is substandard, and there isn't enough of it. Whether people are jobless and homeless because they're alcoholics or they drink because there's no work and they live in crummy homes is a chicken-and-egg problem that makes Blue-White Eye's head hurt. She took a deep breath and lit a braid of sweetgrass for the calming scent it released into her office in a mobile home off a dirt road in the center of the Pine Ridge reservation. Anpetu Luta Otipi is Lakota for "Living in a Red Day." "Red is the color of strength. It's the good road to walk," she said.

Using a combination of conventional treatments and Lakota traditions such as sweats and inipi (purification), the program has tilted at the daunting statistics. Blue-White Eyes sees slow progress.

Her own observations tell her that more people than ever are abstaining from drinking, a difficult stance to maintain when so many households contain drinkers. Some of the abstainers are reformed alcoholics; others never started. Social drinking - a beer or two while watching the game - is almost unheard of on Pine Ridge. "There's no in-between here," she said. "Either you drink till you're drunk or you white-knuckle it."



Willie Pours a Hole drinks till he's drunk. A regular in Whiteclay, he uses his knuckles, frequently, for fighting. Last year, he said, pointing to a scar on his face, he got shot by another patron in one of Whiteclay's stores. "The only cops in this town are your left" - he held up one fist - "and your right." He flailed with the other. As if to underscore his words, a car skidded to a stop nearby. A young woman got out and ran to a station wagon waiting at an intersection. She yanked another woman out of the second car, punched her and threw her down into the mud, then sprinted back to her own car.

"Nothing good ever happens here," Pours a Hole said. Then he asked for money for beer. Pours a Hole, too, was among the marchers against Whiteclay. When the marches on Whiteclay started, 1,000 people joined in. They posted "eviction" notices on the four liquor stores, set fire to one of them, threw rocks through the windows of another. The stores shut down for a few days but quickly reopened. Legally, there is little the Lakota can do. Their claim that Whiteclay originally was part of Pine Ridge - and so should revert to the reservation and become dry - went nowhere.

Even if the Nebraska Legislature were to pass a proposed law setting a 5-mile buffer zone against beer and liquor stores near Indian reservations, that law would not apply to existing stores. Shutting down the stores, owners say, wouldn't solve the problem; in fact, it would only cause people to drive farther to drink, thus putting more drunks on the road, a view shared by many people on the reservation.

"You'd have to be awfully cold-hearted not to see the problems with alcohol," said Stuart Kozal, who manages the Jumping Eagle store. "But getting rid of Whiteclay is not going to solve the problem." Although the first marches brought national publicity, fewer people marched each time, and the demonstrations became less frequent before stopping altogether this past fall.

"I feel I've failed them," Tom Poor Bear said of his dead brother and cousin. These days, Poor Bear drives frequently to the remains of Camp Justice, bringing food and firewood and words of encouragement to the men who stay there. When a reluctant spring finally takes hold at Pine Ridge, he will repair the tepees. And he's already working the phones, trying to organize a march for June 8. "We will shake our fist at the enemy. We will nip at his heels," he said. "We will turn our anger into something positive. We will open our eyes to this situation. And this time, we will not look away."