

# A STAIN ON OUR HISTORY

by Christian Holub

Evans helped found Northwestern. His name is everywhere. He may also be responsible for one of the bloodiest atrocities ever committed on American soil.

READ

None

Buffalo, she said.

The Cheyenne woman thought it was a herd of buffalo approaching.

What else could it possibly be?

Not soldiers, surely, not when her tribe was camped so close to an American outpost, not when a peace flag was flying above their lodges. But interpreter John Smith knew better. Looking out from his lodge on the morning of Nov. 29, 1864, on the shores of Colorado's Sand Creek, he could tell that the approaching mass was, in fact, a company of soldiers. And they were firing.

The years leading up to that day had seen relations between American frontiersmen and the native tribes in the Colorado Territory steadily deteriorate. As more and more settlers poured into the territory seeking gold reserves in the Rocky Mountains, the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of the region found themselves continually signing treaties and watching as their reserved areas of land dwindled away into almost nothing.

Soon enough, this led to armed conflict. Groups of militaristic Cheyenne braves known as the Dog Soldiers refused to accede to treaties they deemed unfair. They continued to hunt buffalo where they wanted and fought white settlers who got in their way. Ranches were burned; scalpings abounded. While the American Civil War was raging across the country, a smaller Indian War broke out in Colorado.

John Evans, who was governor of the Colorado Territory from 1862-65, recognized that not all the area's Natives were intent on war with whites. Shortly after the war broke out, he issued a proclamation inviting all friendly Natives to gather at designated American military outposts, where they would be safe from soldiers. In response, groups of Cheyenne (led by chiefs Black Kettle and White Antelope) and Arapaho (led by Left Hand) slowly accumulated at the American outpost of Fort Lyon. There they turned in

their weapons, traded buffalo skins and demonstrated their desire for peace before making camp on the banks of the nearby Sand Creek.

Some of the Americans at Fort Lyon were on friendly terms with the local tribes. Smith, who had a Native American wife and son, was one of them. He was dispatched to the Sand Creek encampment on Nov. 26 by the Fort Lyon commander to check on the Native Americans, taking the time to trade and visit with his family. Three days later, the Cheyenne woman burst into Smith's lodge with her frantic warnings of buffalo.

Smith soon found out the approaching horde was, in fact, 700 American soldiers under the command of Col. John Chivington. According to historian Stan Hoig in his 1961 account *The Sand Creek Massacre*, the soldiers had already driven off the Natives' herd of cattle and were now firing into the camp from armed positions. Smith and his comrades approached the soldiers and tried to reason with them but were fired at until they withdrew into their lodge.

Black Kettle raised an American flag above his tent as a sign of peace, as he had been counseled to do by American officers in such a scenario, but the continued assault forced him to flee. White Antelope, described by Hoig as "one of the bravest and greatest of the Cheyenne warriors," also refused to fight. In an attempt to demonstrate his people's peaceful intent, White Antelope stood in the middle of the creek with his arms folded across his chest. There he was fatally shot, and it was there that soldiers came after the battle to scalp him and cut off his ears, nose and testicles—the last to make into a tobacco pouch, according to Hoig.

Most Natives who tried to flee were chased down, though some, including Black Kettle, managed to escape.

A majority of historical accounts pin the death toll near 130 Natives, about 100 of whom were women and children. In his congressional testimony from March 15, 1865, Smith described the carnage: "I saw the bodies of those lying there cut all to pieces, worse mutilated than any I ever saw before; the women cut all to pieces. With knives, scalped; their brains knocked out; children two or three months old; all ages lying there, from sucking infants up to warriors."

Although Chivington initially described the massacre as a glorious battle, it quickly became the subject of a congressional investigation. Evans was not in Colorado at the time of the massacre, but the congressional committee still found him culpable enough to demand his resignation as governor.

One organization that did not punish Evans for Sand Creek, though, was the Methodist college he had helped found on Chicago's North Shore. Having been one of the founders of Northwestern University, he remained president of its Board of Trustees for years afterward.



An artist's depiction of the Sand Creek Massacre. The Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes were caught off-guard by the attack. Photo courtesy of Northwestern Archives

**Caption**

## “A uniquely cruel act”

Gary Fine remembers how their jaws dropped when he told his audience about Evans.

In 2004 Fine was named John Evans Professor of Sociology for his work on political reputation and collective memory. Northwestern, like many schools, sets aside money for senior faculty whose research the University deems significant. Many schools name these professorships after important figures in the University’s history, so it’s no surprise that some Northwestern professorships are named after one of the University’s founders.

During the honorary lecture Fine gave at his investiture ceremony, he decided to mention the connection between Evans and the Sand Creek Massacre. His audience was flabbergasted.

“No one knew,” Fine says. “This was the amazing thing—there were people from the Northwestern administration at my talk whose jaws dropped open when I explained Evans’ relationship to Sand Creek.”

Months earlier, Fine had received an email from the Weinberg Dean’s Office informing him of the professorship, which included a \$5,000 research fund. Fine said he was honored to receive the nomination but curious about the man whose name seems to adorn so many institutions at Northwestern: apartment complexes, the Alumni Center, professorships and—of course—the town of Evanston itself. He took his curiosity to Google and quickly discovered that Evans’ history, like that of America itself, has a dark secret. Fine was horrified to find that Evans was tied to the one of the single bloodiest massacres of Native Americans in history.

“It was a uniquely cruel act,” Fine says of Sand Creek. “To read about it is to read about the kind of genocide that one rarely finds in American history.”

Recognizing the depravity of the Sand Creek Massacre is easy. Determining the extent of Evans’ involvement in it, meanwhile, is much harder.

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Raymond G. Carey writes about  
Chivington, Sig. G.  
Reviewed by Tom Ferr

Review of Sand Creek

Film about Sand Creek  
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Massacre RM Her

John Evans never seemed to be able to stay in the same place for long. Born March 9, 1814 in Waynesville, Ohio, Evans was trained as a doctor and became famous for his efforts to build a hospital for the insane in Indiana. He moved to Chicago in 1845 and joined the faculty of Rush Medical College, where he helped grow the student body and raise medical education standards. Though born a Quaker, he became a Methodist in 1841, which led to an 1850 meeting with other prominent Chicago leaders to plan the creation of a Methodist university in Chicago. After its charter, Evans heavily donated both money and property to the school that became Northwestern. For his contributions he was voted the first president of Northwestern's board of trustees, and the town that sprang up around it was named in his honor.

Evans was successful in Chicago, but eventually he sought greater challenges. On March 26, 1862, he accepted President Abraham Lincoln's nomination as governor of the fledgling Colorado Territory.

Shortly after arriving in Denver, Evans was informed that he was in charge of dealings with the area's Native Americans. According to Harry E. Kelsey Jr.'s 1969 biography of Evans, *Frontier Capitalist*, there was no separate Superintendent of Indian Affairs. That was simply another one of the governor's duties, even though Kelsey notes that the two positions "were not really compatible," since one of them is supposed to protect citizens and one is supposed to serve the Natives. Evans' tenure saw the two groups in direct conflict.

As Colorado's Indian War escalated, it became clear which group Evans prioritized. Though he reached out to peaceful Natives, he spurned attempts by chiefs Black Kettle and White Antelope to sign a lasting peace, distrusting their motives. On Aug. 11, 1864, three months before Sand Creek and barely six weeks after first announcing his overture to peaceful Natives, Evans ordered local Colorado militias to "punish and exterminate these murdering horse-stealing Indians."

Despite this edict, there exists no "smoking gun" piece of evidence proving that Evans directly ordered the Sand Creek Massacre. In fact, Evans was not even in Colorado when the massacre took place. He was in Washington, D.C., arguing for Colorado statehood, and Kelsey argues that Evans' accountability for Sand Creek was exaggerated by political opponents who wanted to crush the statehood campaign. Evans himself published an item-by-item refutation of the claims that he was responsible for the massacre.

Chivington, who was Evans' good friend and fellow Methodist, repeatedly testified that Evans had no knowledge of the massacre beforehand.

But the congressional investigation into Sand Creek still found Evans culpable. They released a scathing report criticizing Evans and condemning Chivington. In response, President Andrew Johnson asked for Evans' resignation on Aug. 1, 1865.

It's worth noting that, in addition to Evans's obvious control over Colorado's overall Native American policy, it's likely he benefitted financially from the Sand Creek Massacre. He was a railroad developer going back to his Chicago days, and he was heavily involved in the construction of the Denver Pacific railroad. Kelsey notes that "it's impossible to tell how much profit Evans and his associates realized from the Denver Pacific venture," but that "he would not have done so unless there was a chance to make a considerable profit...he was too good a businessman to do otherwise."

The breaking of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes at Sand Creek inarguably opened up the Colorado countryside to railroad construction, and Kelsey notes that though the railroad project had been suspended during the Indian hostilities, it was never far from Evans' mind.

"The connection made sense given his railroad background," says Andrew Johnson (no relation to the 17th president), the Executive Director of Chicago's American Indian Center (AIC). "But whether it was implicit or explicit, there was a desire to get rid of Natives."

## Recognition and reaction

After learning about Evans's connection to Sand Creek in 2004, Fine continued to discuss it in his lectures over the years but hesitated to lead any kind of larger action.

"I thought if this was going to be serious it shouldn't come from a professor—it should come from the students," Fine says.

The opportunity for student-led efforts to recognize the massacre came in 2012, when Adam Mendel (WCAS '13) became interested in the topic after coming across Evans's name in a history textbook. Working with Northwestern's branch of the Native American and Indigenous Student Association (NAISA) and other interested students, Mendel helped draft a petition demanding that the University recognize Evans's connection to Sand Creek and take steps to atone for it. The petition also asked that a memorial be built to the memory of Sand Creek, that a Native American Studies program be created at Northwestern and that the school create a scholarship fund for Cheyenne and Arapaho students.

Northwestern's first response to the petition was to assemble a committee of historians to ascertain the exact nature of Evans' connection both to Sand Creek and Northwestern. The John Evans Study Committee, comprising history professors both inside and outside Northwestern, was given a deadline of June 1, 2014 to release a report of its findings, but it held an open forum in October to discuss its progress with the larger Northwestern community.

It did not go well.

Members of the local Native American community came to the forum—more than the committee expected—and they brought questions that the committee had not prepared for. The result was a tense atmosphere.

Forrest Bruce, current co-president of NAISA and a SESP sophomore of Ojibwe descent, was visibly uncomfortable when asked to describe the open forum. He discussed one instance in particular in which a Native American man stood up to ask a question of the committee and was yelled at to sit back down.

"It was kind of a hostile environment, I guess," Bruce says.

Fine believed the trouble at the open forum came from the clear disconnect between the committee's approach to its investigation and the emotional investment some community members had in it.

"There was a certain insensitivity to the concerns of the Native people in the audience," Fine says. "The people at the front were not prepared for strong emotional concerns. They thought it was going to be a talk among academics about history, but instead it was a discussion about collective trauma that the committee was not prepared to discuss."

From the outset, committee members said their investigation would focus primarily on historical documents (finance reports and records) that illustrated the connection between Evans's Colorado activities and the funds he donated to Northwestern. This concerned members of the Native community, who felt that this approach would skew away from Native perspectives on history.

"They said they were only looking at finance reports and news reports, but who was writing those reports?" Johnson says. "Our people have always relied on oral tradition."

These problems were not lost on Northwestern's upper administration after the tense open forum. Administrators decided to assemble their Native American Outreach and Inclusion Task Force earlier than planned. According to Dr. Patricia Telles-Irvin, the



vice president of student affairs and one of the co-chairs of the task force, the body was originally going to be formed after the study committee released its June 1 report. It would make recommendations to the University about how to move forward. Instead, the forum made clear that there are independent problems to work on in the meantime.

“I think what’s been brought to our attention is that we need to look at ways in which we can increase the number of Native Americans who apply to this university,” Telles-Irvin says. “I don’t know what the report will say, so depending on those results we will move forward with our recommendations. But no matter what happens with that report, we’re still committed to seeing what we can do to increase the number of Native Americans at Northwestern.”

“On Aug. 11, 1864, three months before Sand Creek, Evans ordered local Colorado militias to ‘punish and exterminate these murdering horse-stealing Indians.’”

## An invisible minority

Although the task force formed shortly after October’s open forum, it wasn’t announced until April 21. Telles-Irvin attributed the delay to the time it took to find representatives from the Cheyenne and Arapaho communities willing and available to be members of the task force. With that goal now reached and the task force officially announced, Bruce—who is a member of the task force, along with fellow NAISA co-president and Weinberg junior Heather Menefee—wondered why it took so long to raise the issue at Northwestern.

“I have no idea how it didn’t come up before,” he says. “I guess no one bothered looking that deep into it. It’s a hard thing to think about, that your university is related to something that atrocious. It’s pretty disturbing.”

European Americans have long had trouble acknowledging their long, dark past with this continent’s natives. Instead of dwelling on this historical violence, they willfully overlook it. Many Americans recognize that Native tribes once dominated North America and that they no longer do, without thinking about what the transition entailed. This, more than anything, may explain why Evans’ (and by extension, Northwestern’s) connection to Sand Creek went undiscussed for so long.

“We do a terrible job in our relationship with Native Americans and the terrible-ness is wide-ranging, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs mismanaging tribe funds to people

thinking of Native Americans as being from the past,” says Doug Medin, Northwestern psychology professor and a member of the task force. “Invisibility is a big issue.”

Lori Faber, community research project coordinator at the AIC, says even talking about the Sand Creek Massacre can shroud the fact that it was far from the only massacre of Native Americans.

“There were so many massacres. Villages were sleeping and were attacked,” Faber says. “A lot of people don’t know that history. We don’t get that in schools. Northwestern as an institution has a responsibility to share these stories.”

Medin’s research focuses on differences in how European Americans and Native Americans think about nature. He has worked with members of the Menominee tribe in Wisconsin since 1997 and with the AIC for about decade, and in that time he said he has become acutely aware of some of the problems plaguing the Native community, from disheartening college matriculation statistics to bullying provoked by cultural ignorance.

“It did not take the Evans issue for me to realize NU has not been overly concerned with their relationship with Native Americans,” Medin says. “Native Americans are one of the most underrepresented populations on this campus. But not only is there a considerable Native American population in Chicago, there are tribes close by, reservations in Wisconsin. There are relations to be developed there.”

Medin suggests that some of those relationships with the Native population in Chicago (about 5,000 as of the 2010 Census) could involve cooperation between Northwestern schools and Native organizations. Medill could partner with the Native American Journalist Association (NAJA), for example, or McCormick with the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. Medill Professor Loren Ghiglione, another member of the task force, wrote in an email from South Africa that he is attending NAJA’s annual National Native Media Conference in July. Ghiglione also says he is pursuing funding from Medill for an annual award to honor a Native American journalist.

“We’re hoping to expand perspective,” Faber says. “There are so many traditions that Native peoples share. Indigenous knowledge has so much to offer.”

## The way forward

Northwestern is not the first university to publicly confront skeletons from its past. In 2003, Brown University made headlines with its investigation into the Brown family’s

history with the slave trade. Telles-Irvin says that Brown has been brought up in the task force's discussions, and Fine has passionately insisted that Northwestern use Brown's efforts as a role model.

"Ruth Simmons, the Brown president who took the lead on that, was remembered as the best university president in the U.S., and I would like the same for our president," Fine says. "So far that hasn't happened, but we'll see."

Northwestern's Evans committee has already inspired a similar historical investigation at the University of Denver, a school that Evans also helped found. The University of Denver—then called the Colorado Seminary—was chartered a mere two weeks before the Sand Creek Massacre, and Associate Professor of Political Science Nancy Wadsworth says Northwestern's investigation into Evans and Sand Creek dovetailed nicely with the commemorative efforts already in place for her school's sesquicentennial.

"The founding of DU is infinitely linked to the historical events the two committees are studying," Wadsworth says. "Last year we learned that NU had started this investigation, and that got the ball rolling. I think a lot of people on campus had been thinking about Sand Creek and were interested in doing something about it."

Wadsworth says that her committee is releasing its report on Sept. 1, in time for the 150th anniversary of both the massacre and the school's founding.

The report from Northwestern's Evans Committee may be due June 1, but that will by no means be the end of the reconciliation process. Though Telles-Irvin says the task force is diligently looking at ways to increase Native American presence at Northwestern, some of the original petition's other demands, such as the creation of a Native American Studies program, may prove harder to fulfill right away, according to Provost Dan Linzer. Although Linzer has the final say in creating academic programs, he says there needs to be demonstrated interest first.

"I'm certainly open to dialogue about this, but I'm like the endpoint," Linzer says. "Most initiatives like this, like Asian American Studies, start as a program with a minor or a concentration, then maybe eventually become a major, and maybe eventually a department. Most of this is up to students and faculty. You don't want to dedicate time and money to a course if nobody's going to sign up for it."

Mendel, for one, is optimistic about the chances of a Native American Studies program, given his positive experience as a Latino Studies major.

“When people see ethnic studies they think it’s just a few people of that ethnicity or whatever taking it, but the point is to create an understanding of people,” Mendel says. I think actions around John Evans would create an interest in that study.”

Faber and Johnson are well aware that the struggle is far from over, and remain cautiously optimistic about Northwestern’s efforts.

“A naïve approach is even more insulting than none at all,” Johnson says. “We want to be taken seriously, and no, we’re not going away.”



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