Indians mark shoot-out with FBI By Chris Summers BBC News website

Thirty years ago this weekend two FBI agents were shot dead at the height of months of unrest on an Indian reservation in South Dakota. On Sunday supporters of the man convicted of being the shooter, Leonard Peltier, will hold a rally to focus on his "unjust imprisonment".

Pine Ridge reservation

The reservation is home to the Oglala Sioux tribe, made up of around 17,000 people.

The tribe took part in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, when they defeated General Custer

They were forced onto the reservation in the late 19th Century after suffering a series of military reverses at the hand of US troops

Unemployment on the reservation stands at 83%

The reservation measures two million acres but does not include the sacred Black Hills, or Paha Sapa

On the morning of 26 June 1975 two FBI agents, Jack Coler and Ron Williams, drove onto a property on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota.

By the end of the day the two agents were dead, along with a member of the American Indian Movement (Aim), which considered the so-called Jumping Bull property a stronghold.

The shoot-out followed months of tension and violence on the reservation between Aim activists and the tribal government, supported by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and FBI.

Aim members referred to this period as the "Reign of Terror" and claim that Indian traditionalists and activists were persecuted by tribal police and FBI officers.

Pine Ridge is home to the Oglala Sioux tribe, one of several Sioux (or Lakota) bands who defeated General Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876.

That victory was the Lakota's high water mark. They were later forced to give up their sacred Black Hills, or Paha Sapa, and were shunted onto reservations, with the Oglala ending up at Pine Ridge.

With their traditional way of life - hunting buffalo across the prairies - having come to an end the tribe became, like so many other Indians, dependent on welfare handouts.

In the early 1970s the Aim appeared on the scene, preaching Native American pride and seeking compensation from the US government.

In 1973 Aim members were involved in an armed stand-off at Wounded Knee, site of an infamous massacre of Indians by US soldiers.

The tension continued and ended in the events of 26 June 1975 when the two agents came looking for a young Aim activist called Jimmy Eagle, who was wanted for the theft of a pair of cowboy boots.

There are conflicting accounts of what triggered the shooting.

Aim supporters say they were firing in self-defence and were trying to protect women and children on the site.

'Shot in cold blood'

The FBI for their part claim the agents were fired upon and they also claim the pair were eventually executed in cold blood.

Leonard Peltier, a long-time Aim supporter, was eventually convicted of the murders and remains in Leavensworth jail in Kansas.

He has always maintained his innocence and his supporters continue to maintain that he was the victim of a miscarriage of justice.

It's a time for healing and prayers to remember those warriors who lost their freedom and their lives during the Reign of Terror on Pine Ridge

Robert Ouiver Jr

Lakota Students' Alliance

On Sunday his supporters, and members of the Lakota Students' Alliance, will travel to the Jumping Bull site for a rally and prayer ceremony.

"Leonard Peltier needs to be set free," says Rosalyn Jumping Bull, a member of the Oglala Commemoration Committee.

Robert Quiver Jr, co-founder of the Lakota Students' Alliance, said: "It's a time for healing and prayers to remember those warriors who lost their freedom and their lives during the Reign of Terror on Pine Ridge.

"Hopefully the healing emphasis will prevent another bloody civil war from happening again on the sacred land of the Lakota Nation."

But Ed Woods, who founded the No Parole Peltier Association five years ago, says: "There is so much folklore around the Peltier myth.

"What is clear is that he was guilty and was correctly convicted and is serving the sentence he deserves."

Mr Woods, who was himself an FBI agent for 30 years, told the BBC News website: "Whether or not the Aim have any valid claims, it still comes down to a case of cold-blooded murder."

But Mr Woods, whose own great-grandfather was a full-blooded Indian, said: "The Indian reservations are among the poorest places in the US. There is rampant poverty, unemployment, child abuse and alcoholism.

"It's sad and personally I would like to see some of the money we send overseas being spent on the reservations."

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