

# *DNA Confirms Sitting Bull Was South Dakota Man's Great-Grandfather*

Ernie LaPointe, the great-grandson of the leader Tatanka Iyotake, said he hoped the DNA confirmation would bolster his campaign to move the chief's remains.

**By Maria Cramer**

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For years, Ernie LaPointe, a writer and Vietnam veteran, claimed that he was the great-grandson of Sitting Bull, the Hunkpapa Lakota leader famous for resisting the federal government's efforts to seize the Great Plains.

He has had his mother's oral history verified by Smithsonian researchers, and a lock of hair and wool leggings belonging to Sitting Bull, whose birth name was Tatanka Iyotake, returned to the family.

But Mr. LaPointe, 73, said that he had never felt he had enough evidence linking him to Sitting Bull to help him achieve his ultimate goal: moving the chief's remains from a burial site in South Dakota, in an area he says has been desecrated, to a final resting place worthy of his great-grandfather's legacy.

This week, his effort to overcome opposition to the exhumation may have received help from an unlikely source: Danish researchers.

Researchers at the University of Copenhagen said on Wednesday that DNA evidence confirmed that Mr. LaPointe, who lives in Lead, S.D., is the direct descendant of Sitting Bull. The discovery was made by testing a one-inch piece of Sitting Bull's hair through a new sequencing method that, the scientists said, made it possible for the first time to confirm kinship using "ancient DNA" from small, old and damaged samples.

“The method can handle what previous methods couldn’t handle,” said Eske Willerslev, one of the lead authors of the study, which was published in *Science Advances* on Wednesday. “It can work on very, very tiny amounts of DNA, and it can go back further generations.”

The research opens the possibilities, he said, for people to learn whether they are the direct descendants of kings like Henry V, who died centuries ago, or of famous historical figures like the outlaw Jesse James. It could also help solve cold cases that might have earlier seemed hopeless because the physical evidence had deteriorated, Dr. Willerslev said. It could even help solve cases that are centuries old, he said.

Dr. Willerslev said it was possible, for example, that the methodology could help solve one of England’s most confounding cold cases: the fate of the two young nephews of Richard III, who was accused of ordering them killed so he could assume the throne in 1483. The boys disappeared that year.

Nearly 200 years later, skeletal remains of two people were found in the Tower of London, but they were never identified. Dr. Willerslev said the methodology used on Sitting Bull’s hair could be used on those remains, assuming relatives of Richard III were alive and could be tracked down.

Mr. LaPointe said that for him the DNA confirmation might bolster his campaign to exhume and rebury the leader’s remains.

“We’re going to put him somewhere else,” he said on Thursday. “Where he will be respected.”

Mr. LaPointe said his mother told him and his three sisters who their great-grandfather was when they were children. In 2007, that oral history was verified by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, which concluded that Mr. LaPointe and his sisters were the only living relatives of Sitting Bull. The same year, the museum returned to the family a lock of hair and wool leggings that an Army doctor had taken from Sitting Bull’s body after he was fatally shot by tribal police in 1890.

Sitting Bull was the leader of the Hunkpapa Lakota. For years, he fought the U.S. Army as the federal government encroached on tribal lands. One of his most famous battles was against Gen. George Armstrong Custer’s troops, who were defeated in 1876 in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Sitting Bull surrendered to the U.S. government in 1881 and was allowed to live in the Standing Rock Reservation.

He later toured briefly with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, but an agent in charge of the reservation feared he was planning another resistance campaign and moved to arrest him in 1890. Sitting Bull was shot during the botched arrest and buried at Fort Yates in North Dakota.

Whether his remains are still there has been disputed.

The town of Mobridge, S.D., said on its website that in 1953, a group of businessmen along with a descendant of both Sitting Bull and one of the Native American officers who arrested the chief moved his remains to the southern portion of the Standing Rock Reservation, overlooking the Missouri River.

Mr. LaPointe said he believed his great-grandfather's remains lie there.

Over the decades, the site has been neglected, Mr. LaPointe said. And whenever he went to visit, Mr. LaPointe said, the area reeked of urine and was littered with broken beer bottles and used condoms.

"People went up there to party," Mr. LaPointe said.

Mr. LaPointe said he planned to petition the state to let him exhume the remains at Standing Rock so that the bones could be tested for DNA to confirm they were Sitting Bull's.

Jon Eagle, the tribal historic preservation officer of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, said removing Sitting Bull's remains would be a great affront.

"We protect them — we don't dig them up and move them," he said. "That really violates our spiritual beliefs."

Mr. LaPointe said he was undeterred by those concerns. He said that he did not know where Sitting Bull's remains would eventually be interred, but if he was allowed to have them exhumed, they would not stay in Mobridge.

"We're not putting him back in that hole again," he said. "They can say whatever they want."