



# Still At War

The future of the Little Bighorn Battlefield's artifacts and grounds remains uncertain as government and tribal officials work to untangle a web of historic problems

BY JIM GRANSBERY

It was past mid-afternoon, June 25, 1876, a hot summer day, as Maj. Marcus Reno led his 7th Cavalry battalion of 130 men in a mounted charge toward the southern edge of Sitting Bull's encampment along the banks of the Little Bighorn River.

Dust was everywhere as the landscape was churned with the hooves of hundreds of horses—a retreating Sans Arc band, young Indians playing mounted games, Reno's contingent of about 25 Arikara and Crow scouts moving to steal the enemies' herd and three companies of troopers that made up his battalion. The camp of Hunkpapa, Sitting Bull's clan of the Lakota Sioux, was obscured on Reno's right by the trees of a long loop in the river towards the west. ▶



This page: Artifacts are stored in the Little Bighorn Battlefield Museum's archives. Facing page: Little Bighorn Battlefield museum curator Sharon Small shows a flag standard that was a part of the pack train during the historic battle and stored in the museum's archives. | Photos by James Woodcock/Billings Gazette



This page, left: Small holds Custer's commission as an Army officer, signed by President Abraham Lincoln. Right: Small shows a pair of Custer's leather pants stored in the museum archives. Facing page: Hammond discusses the possibility of moving much of the archives to a more secure location. A temporary move of the archives is underway. | Photos by James Woodcock/Billings Gazette

The cavalry attack was moving "through an ever-thickening cloud of dust. Ahead of them the ghostlike figures of mounted warriors could only be perceived," writes historian Nathaniel Philbrick in *The Last Stand*. "...Reno peered into the swirling enigmatic haze and saw the makings of an ambush." Afraid of a trap and the unknown size of the host before him, Reno halted his men and formed a skirmish line.



The site of that skirmish line, just south of Crow Agency, is bisected by Interstate 90 which runs along the western extent of the historic field, a small portion of which is dedicated as the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument overseen by the National Park Service. The skirmish site is where the battle commenced and is one of two spots proposed in 1986 for a new visitor center.

That year, the Park Service drew up a general management plan for the 762 acres for which it is responsible—Last Stand Hill and the Reno-Benteen battle and siege area to the south—and proposed a development plan for the future. In 1995, the plan was updated. But, akin to Reno's charge, a dust-up of contending views about the battlefield—second only to Gettysburg in national fame—has stunted any progress.

Sensing critical needs, the Park Service last fall launched a series of public meetings to gauge sentiment for solving four severe inadequacies at the monument that are

all interrelated: the visitor center, roads and parking, museum space/artifact preservation and protection for the whole historic battlefield and Indian camp of nearly 12,000 acres.

Riding point on the issues, which have lingered for almost 30 years, is Kate Hammond, superintendent of the battlefield since 2009. The issues are "impacting our ability to tell the story of what happened here," Hampton says. "It is an amazing story that still resonates with the public."

Over the past decade, annual visitors have fluctuated between 300,000 and 420,000, figures that make the battlefield monument one of the most popular tourist attractions in Montana. The visitor center was built in 1952 when the battlefield attracted 100,000 people each year. "It is just way too small and grossly inadequate," Hammond says.

That frustrates Hammond, who holds a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in natural resource management, both from Yale University. Her goal now is to resolve the issues clouding an enhanced monument that holds multicultural significance for so many in Montana, across the country and around the world.

The 1986 proposal suggested tearing down the center and building it off the battlefield proper, but the Park Service has limited authority to do so and would need an appropriation from Congress, Hammond says. A proposed temporary expansion of the center in 2008 was dropped because of the impact on the landscape, and it



'The basement was never intended for storing this collection. There is no fire protection, no climate control, no access for disabled and no space for researchers.'

Kate Hammond, battlefield superintendent, on the inadequacies of the Little Bighorn facility

represented a retreat from the goal of moving off-site.

The parking lot and tour route never anticipated motor homes and buses. In the midst of tourist season, traffic is tight and "the tour road is too narrow and is structurally failing," the superintendent says.

In the 1986 document, a new tour road was proposed. It would run from a new visitor center at the Reno skirmish site along his retreat route back across the river and up the hill where he set up a defensive perimeter. The new road would have joined the current tour road that parallels Lt. Col. George A. Custer's route that led his five companies north in a maneuver to trap the Indians. This narrow pavement now connects the visitor center to the Reno-Benteen site. The traffic congestion during the

summer presents safety problems and causes some visitors to leave in frustration, Hammond says. She has put on hold an approved expansion of the parking lot and tour road paving – using federal stimulus funds – until all other alternatives are determined.

A "nationally significant" collection of 119,000 objects related to the 1876 battle are stored in the basement of the visitor center. Another 50,000 items are stored in a Park Service facility in Tucson, Arizona. "The basement was never intended for storing this collection. There is no fire protection, no climate control, no access for disabled and no space for researchers," Hammond says. The irreplaceable collection includes historic photos, weapons, sketches, clothing and Indian artifacts, including Custer's▶



## Pine Butte Guest Ranch

*on the Rocky Mountain Front*

Relaxation. Recreation. Exhilaration. Conservation.

*Experience the Magic*



www.pinebutteguestranch.com  
351 South Fork Road  
Choteau, MT 59422  
406.466.2158

uniforms and Sitting Bulls arrows.

The 1986 proposal would have provided a new curatorial facility with the new visitor center. Expanding the current visitor center would have added museum space. During recent public meetings, attended by 175 people, the issue garnering the greatest consensus was preservation of the "priceless museum collection and the need to safeguard it," Hammond says. "They would prefer that it stay here, but, even if temporarily, it should be stored elsewhere. It must be properly protected."

In late March, officials announced a plan to temporarily move the archives and collection to the Western Archaeological and Convention Center in Tucson, Arizona. The Arizona facility is already home to about 30,000 archival items related to the Little Bighorn battle. "This is great news for such a significant and irreplaceable collection," Hammond said at the time of the announcement. "This temporary relocation will keep the collection together and available for researchers, in the best possible place for its protection and conservation until it can come home to a new museum facility."

The collection is but a small portion of what exists in the arid hills southeast of Hardin.

The encampment of Lakota and Cheyenne is not part of the national monument or accessible to the public. It stretched for two miles along the west side of the Little Bighorn—1,000 tepees for about 8,000 people. There has never been a systematic archaeological survey of the area, which is all on the Crow Indian Reservation.

"That needs to be done," says John Doerner, the battlefield's chief historian. "There still is a time capsule there." Artifacts from the camp would provide a better perspective of the tribes that engaged Custer that fateful day. "It was a last stand for them, too," Doerner notes, as the tribes were forced onto reservations or into exile in Canada shortly after the battle.

The major obstacle to an expanded monument is land.

The park covers 762 acres in two portions. Yet the battlefield and camp encompass nearly 12,000 acres. This land has multiple owners and uses. The 1986 proposal called for an expansion of 11,800 acres protected through Park Service ownership, easements and acquisitions with

lease-back options. A nonprofit group acquired 3,300 acres and offered to donate the parcel to the Park Service, which says it cannot legally accept the land. The Crow tribe has opposed taking any more of its reservation out of its control.

In the early 1980s, Hardin attorney Harold Stanton, then-battlefield superintendent Jim Court and Danetta Falls Down, then vice chair of the Crow Tribe, formed the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee. The battlefield's name was changed in 1991.

In 1982, with the encouragement of the Secretary of the Interior, the group began raising money to buy land and garner conservation easements. The sole goal was to preserve the landscape from development and present it to the Park Service, to which Donald Hodel, undersecretary of Interior at the time, said, "You buy it, we'll take it," according to Court.

The impetus for the preservation effort was that a tribal landowner intended to build a house in Medicine Tail Coulee. "That started the whole thing," Stanton recalls. The land was appraised at \$100 an acre, which Court and Stanton thought too low. Not wanting to be seen as "stealing" land, they agreed to pay \$600 an acre. That generated more willing sellers.

The preservation committee raised \$6 million, spent \$5 million on land purchases and has about \$1 million in the bank. It pays \$11,000 in property taxes to Big Horn County each year. About half the land bought was from tribal owners, half from non-Indians, Court says.

While plans for a new visitor center and museum seem to have been stalled for decades, a top official of the Crow tribe in late April expressed a willingness to work with the Park Service on a new facility that could be located on land owned by the preservation committee. The discussions are focused on a 240-acre parcel near Interstate 90, southwest of the existing visitor center. The official, tribal chairman Cedric Black Eagle, said in mid-April that he hoped a new museum could include a wing for Crow artifacts. In the past, tribal members have questioned the legality of land purchases by the

preservation committee.

Hammond is working to develop a list of project priorities for the monument. The 1986 proposals estimated construction costs at \$22.3 million. The 2010 price was estimated at \$50 million. That does not include any land acquisition costs. If or when any of the

battlefield projects can get funding is unclear, Hammond and others say.

The future development of the battlefield thus remains clouded by the dust of uncertainty and conflicting viewpoints. Just like that hot afternoon 135 years ago. ■

Jim Gransbery is the retired agricultural/political reporter at the *Billings Gazette*.

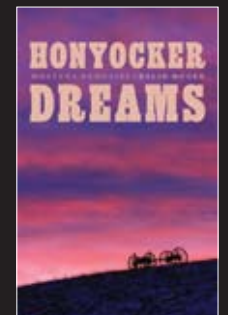
## Great Reads

from the University of Nebraska Press



Beautifully illustrated and narrated in the tradition of the Salish and Kootenai Tribes of western Montana, this account of conservation as the legacy of one generation to the next is about being good to the land that has been good to us.

Also available in a 2-book & DVD set!



"A compelling story and a deeply satisfying read. . . . an introspective glimpse at adventures both large and small, a consuming quest for a sense of place and belonging, and on a large scale, life's mystery and tragedy."

—BEEF TORREY,  
coeditor of *Jim Harrison*

\*For complete descriptions and to order, visit us online!

UNIVERSITY OF  
**NEBRASKA** PRESS  
www.nebraskapress.unl.edu • 800-848-6224

## NEW WEST MAKES MEDICARE SIMPLE.



Sometimes all we need is a little sage advice. New West provides straightforward information, exceptional customer service, and tools like **MyNewWest** to help you control your health. With your choice of plans, New West connects you to good health care in a simplified way.

- Low Premiums, No Deductible
- Virtually No Paperwork
- Co-pays
- Preventive Care
- Extensive Provider Network
- Prescription Drug Coverage
- Montana-Based, Not-For-Profit
- Provider Sponsored
- Enhanced Plan with Dental, Vision and Prescription Coverage in the "Gap"



Ask about our out-of-network coverage • [www.newwesthealth.com](http://www.newwesthealth.com)

New West Medicare Advantage Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) plans are offered by New West Health Services, a health plan with a Medicare Contract. Anyone entitled to Medicare Part A and enrolled in Medicare Part B can apply. Enrollees must continue to pay their Medicare Part B monthly premium. Cost sharing and the monthly plan premium apply. You must live in the service area to enroll. The benefit information provided here is a brief summary, not a comprehensive description.

H2701\_NW#360A-04-11

### Monte Dolack



Monte Dolack, *Saint Mary Meadow*, 2010

### MONTE DOLACK GALLERY

Paintings, Prints  
Fine Art Posters

139 West Front Street  
Missoula • Montana  
800.825.7613  
[www.dolack.com](http://www.dolack.com)

### GLACIER NATIONAL PARK FUND

Help us  
preserve the  
trails in Glacier  
National Park



P.O. Box 2749 Columbia Falls, MT 59912  
406-892-3250 • [www.glacienationalparkfund.org](http://www.glacienationalparkfund.org)