

Indian Tribute Plan Sparks a New Battle At Little Bighorn

Native American Park Chief Seeks a Balanced Exhibit, Outraging Custer Buffs

By Brett Pulley

CROW AGENCY, MONT. - Last Stand Hill is a steep slope carpeted with buffalo grass, purple wildflowers and legends. This is where, on a blistering hot June afternoon in 1876, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry fell to Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. White marble markers designate where each of the 225 cavalrymen died.

Now, fresh battles are disturbing the cemetery-like calm here at Custer Battlefield National Monument. From her National Park Service office near the bank of the Little Bighorn River, Superintendent Barbara Booher is waging what some hope is her own last stand. Some Custer buffs are at war with her for leading a drive to place a \$2 million memorial near the large granite obelisk that honors Mr. Custer and his men.

The dispute? The new memorial would honor the fallen Indians.

'Heroes' and 'Hostile Indians'

"They were the enemy," says Jerry Russell, president of the 700-member Order of the Indian Wars. Another Custer buff, in the order's newsletter, asked: "What's next? A Shinto temple to the Japanese Air Force on the site of the Arizona? How about a posthumous Oscar to John Wilkes Booth at the Ford Theater for 'Outstanding Performance by an Actor'?"

Much of the ire is focused on Ms. Booher, the first Native American to over-see the 760-acre park and Custer monument. Ms. Booher, whose parents are from the Northern Ute and Cherokee Tribes, wants a more even-handed account in the tours and exhibits of what happened here.

"After all," she says, "Custer was only here for one afternoon. The Indians were here for years."

Throughout the park, which is visited by 250,000 tourists a year, the cavalrymen are referred to on historical markers and elsewhere as "fallen heroes" while the Cheyenne and Sioux are "hostile Indians." Ms. Booher plans to change that.

And instead of simply informing visitors how the "brave cavalrymen" were left mutilated, Ms. Booher wants guides and museum pamphlets to better explain that the Indians grew hostile because they were forcibly driven from their sacred homelands by gold-hungry miners and settlers.

The U.S. Senate is even considering changing the Park's name to the more neutral Little Bighorn National Monument. Supporters of the change have argued for years that most battlefields aren't named for people, especially losers.

That would be a highly controversial move, but controversy has always surrounded the celebrated battle here and the flamboyant cavalry leader. Since no cavalrymen survived, details have been pieced together from accounts of surviving Indians and of cavalry troops who later discovered their comrades' bodies. Many early Indian accounts were lost through bad interpretation or dismissed as untrue. Myths and legends grew instead, leaving a forever-clouded account.

For his part, Mr. Custer has inspired hundreds of books and articles, more than a dozen movies and a television mini-series now in the works. Ronald Reagan even portrayed Custer once, in the 1940 movie "Santa Fe Trail"

But as history continues to romanticize Mr. Custer and his fallen troops, Native Americans have grown resentful that only a small, painted board honors the estimated 100 Indians who died here. Such sentiments sparked the movement to erect an Indian memorial.

Two years ago, Indian activist Russell Means led a band of Native Americans to the park, where they erected a flat metal Indian "monument" by pouring a concrete base atop the graves of the cavalry soldiers. Park administrators, to avoid a confrontation, stood by and watched. Weeks later, the makeshift monument was removed.

The incident incensed Custer loyalists. "Anyone else would have been arrested for that," says William Wells, a director of the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association, who angrily watched as the memorial was erected. His 3,000 member, nonprofit group, which has no Indian members, operates the park museum and bookstore in cooperation with the park service.

The group is one of three nationwide organizations, with a total membership of 4,600, dedicated to preserving the memory of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and to studying and upholding the legend and lore of their brash, golden-haired hero.

Some of those members are furious at Ms. Booher. "She's only in that position because she's a woman and an Indian," says Mr. Russell of the Order of the Indian Wars. "We won't rest until she's out."

"Now I know why my office has three windows," responds the soft-spoken, 49 year old superintendent. "So I can see what's coming next." She labels her detractors "a dangerous few."

Before her appointment in June 1989, Mr. Booher worked with the federal government in Anchorage, Alaska, including 10 years with the Federal Aviation Administration and 10 with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Her last eight years with the bureau were spent negotiating land allotment programs for Native Alaskans.

During an executive trainee program with the bureau in 1989, she was assigned to a two week detail with the National Park Service in Denver. She impressed the park service regional director, Lorraine Mintzmeyer, who hired her for the job, but adds, "I hired her for her ability."

Ms. Booher is working with outside museum curators and historians to update and enhance the museum's exhibits. Sixteen of the exhibits focus on the cavalry and eight on the Indians; she would like to see that more balanced. This summer, for one of the battlefield tours, she hired a Native American guide who provided additional information on the life and customs of the Plains Indians.

She also has picked a fight with the museum association by asking it - unsuccessfully - to sell the controversial book "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," which is prone to the Indian perspective, at the park's bookstore.

There's not much Ms. Booher does that hasn't caught the watchful eye of one critic or another. She has been criticized, for instance, for hiring more Indians to work at the park. Recently, she received a congressional inquiry after a constituent complained, "she is letting weeds grow up there", on Last Stand Hill.

That is true, but the weeds have always grown wild because the park service maintains the hill in its natural state. "I haven't figured out who's fault the weeds were for the first 113 years," says Ms. Booher. "But this year, it's my fault."

The superintendent has her share of supporters. At the park service, supervisors laud her work. And Democratic Rep. Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, whose ancestors fought Mr. Custer in the battle, says that, "if these people who are out to get Barbara try to remove her, they're going to see another Indian uprising - right here in my office." He says Ms. Booher's leadership is needed to "bury the old-boy system" at the battle field.

Area Indian Tribes, even rival bands that hold long-standing grudges against one another, have joined to

support the Indian memorial and Ms. Booher. "We feel blessed to have Barbara," says Austin Two Moons, one of 10 members of a committee established by the National Park Service to help select a site and design for the proposed memorial.

The proposal for the memorial would place it 300 yards from the existing monument. A nationwide competition would be held to select a design. Legislation authorizing the memorial and its \$2 million cleared the House two weeks ago without dissent. But the proposed amendment to change the park's name to the Little Bighorn National Monument could trigger extensive debate and delay Senate passage.

Many Custer supporters, like Mr. Wells, say they wouldn't mind the Indian memorial if it were farther away from the cavalry monument and not publicly funded. But even Mr. Wells says all of the controversy is strangely appropriate for the publicity hungry George Armstrong Custer. "Custer will always attract people and cause arguments," says Mr. Wells. "With all the attention he still gets, George has got to be smiling in his grave."

-Courtesy of the Wall Street Journal



Giago Wants To Try National Paper Again

Lakota Times publisher Tim Giago wants to start a national network of Indian-owned newspapers using his own paper as a training center, Giago said in a Times story this week.

"The lessons we learned with our attempted expansion into Chippewa country a few years back have not been lost to us," Giago said.

"We went in undercapitalized and, in reality, under-prepared, but that is how one learns in this touchy field of business."

In 1987, Giago announced plans to open a Sioux Falls plant to print a chain of weekly newspapers for Indian reservations, along with plans to start a weekly on the Red Lake Chippewa Reservation near Bemidji, Minn. The printing plant was never built. The newspaper folded in 1988 after printing 48 issues.

This time, Giago hopes to be better prepared.

He will enroll in advanced business courses at Harvard while on a one-year Neiman Fellowship that begins this fall.

Native American Publishing, Inc., the parent corporation of the Lakota Times, will be restructured with an eye to national expansion next spring, the Times story said.

As a part of the plan, the stock options of the company will be changed in order to offer shares for sale to a limited number of private investors, the story said.

Standing members of the board of Native American Publishing are Giago, president, and Gerald Garcia, publisher of the Knoxville, Tenn., Journal, vice president. Garcia bought 39 percent of the stock in the Lakota Times several years ago.

Three vice presidents were elected to the board earlier this month. Margaret Clark-Price is associate editor of Native Peoples Magazine of Phoenix, Ariz. Jonathan Walker is financial consultant for that magazine.

Amanda War Bonnett is a manager at Lakota Times.

Two other managers at the Times, Rosemary Langerman and Theresa Thompson, were elected treasurer and secretary.

-Courtesy of the Sho-Ban News