

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument Superintendent Update, April 2008

Darrell J. Cook

Our western meadowlarks are back and have officially announced their annual arrival at the battlefield with their beautiful majestic call that is so peaceful here on the plains of Montana. While Spring has officially made its arrival in Big Horn Country with temperatures ranging in the 50s and 60s already, we still have an occasional snow squall or mixture of rain and sleet pass through the Little Bighorn Valley, reminding us how unpredictable the weather can be here in Montana. Here is another update on Little Bighorn Battlefield that I hope will be both informative, and of continued interest to everyone:

132nd Anniversary Observance – As you know, June 25-26, 2008 marks the official 132nd Anniversary observance of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and this is the date that the National Park Service-Little Big Horn Battlefield (NPS-LIBI) honors each year despite other organizations or groups that celebrate during Little Bighorn Days in Hardin. Again, I want to emphasize that our role again this year is largely supportive. We are here primarily as host to the public and all the various support groups including Friends of the Little Bighorn (Friends), Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association (CBHMA) and Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow/Arikara Scout organizations.

I have again authorized that all entrance fees be waived June 25-26, 2008 in honor of the 132nd Anniversary Observance.

Battlefield Spring Hours Change – Effective April 1, 2008, the national monument and Custer National Cemetery began spring hours of operation, closing at 6:00 PM daily through May 25. The visitor center and Custer Battlefield trails will be open from 8:00 AM until 6:00 PM. The battlefield tour road to Reno-Benteen Battlefield will also close at 5:30 PM. Standard entrance fees are \$10.00 per private vehicle or \$5.00 per pedestrian if hiking or arriving on a motorcycle or bicycle. Holders of an interagency Annual Pass (\$80.00), Senior Pass (\$10.00 one-time fee for U.S. Citizens 62 years and older) and Golden Access (Free for Handicapped U.S. citizens) enter free of charge.

Visitation – Chief Ranger Michael Stops reports that in 2007 we had 293,295 visitors, a decrease of 2.61% compared to 2006. Our Year-To-Date visitation as of February 2008 was 5494 visitors, an 11.81% decrease from the same period in 2007. The decrease is largely attributed to continued record high fuel prices throughout the U.S., a trend that is expected to continue.

Visitor Center Expansion – We are in the final stage of National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) compliance for the visitor center expansion project. We received the last consultation letter from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and comments from the new Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) and are now waiting for the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) to be signed in the next few days. Once the FONSI is approved and signed by the NPS Intermountain Regional Director, we will post the information

on the Planning, Environmental and Public Comment (PEPC) website where it will be available for public viewing. We also met with CTA [*architects*] of Billings last month to review the plans before proceeding on to 100% design plans.

Interpretive Division – Ken Woody, Chief of Interpretation, announced the implementation this year of a new NPS wide program called “Teacher-Ranger-Teacher.” A qualified school teacher will be hired as a seasonal ranger-interpreter to present not only interpretive programs but also assist other divisions throughout the day with a schedule that exposes the teacher to the interdisciplinary jobs available in the NPS. In the fall, the teacher returns to teaching and during NPS Week will be required to wear his/her NPS uniform at school and share this work experience with his/her students. The program is designed to interest children in learning about our National Parks. Ken will also hire two additional rangers this year beyond our normal staffing of five seasonal rangers under the NPS Centennial Initiative Program.

[Approved FONSI and news release have been posted on the CBHMA web site. Comments by ACHP and THPO were not available at the time of posting but will be requested when released to the public.]

Friends of The Little Bighorn Battlefield – I met with the Board of Friends of Little Bighorn Battlefield on February 25, 2008. We discussed future projects for Friends to assist us at the battlefield and I’m excited to report that Friends is stepping up to the next level with its donations and project assistance. It’s still too soon to state what those projects are but, needless to say, I’m impressed with their generous offers. I encourage all of you to review their long list of successful projects that have assisted the NPS at LIBI at <http://friendslittlebighorn.com/pointclickgive.htm>. This website also includes membership information.

This year, because June 25 falls on a Wednesday, Friends volunteers will interpret along the battlefield trails on Friday, June 27 and Saturday, June 28. If you are interested in assisting Friends and the NPS in sharing the story of the battle with our visitors, please contact Friends Board member Mike Semenock at (425) 334-9719. I very much appreciate these volunteers who continue to travel to Montana each year at their own expense to help.

The NPS is excited to announce that Friends of the Little Bighorn Battlefield will hold a very special fundraiser at the battlefield on Friday June 27 at 7:00 PM. Author and former NPS Historian Jerome Greene will discuss the history of the administration of the battlefield based on his newest book titled *Stricken Field: The Little Bighorn Battlefield since 1876*. His presentation will take place outdoors with the panorama of the battlefield as his backdrop. The evening will focus on Mr. Greene’s work; he will be the only presenter. Afterwards attendees will have plenty of time to ask questions directly to and to visit with Mr. Greene. The event will continue with a walk up to Last Stand Hill. All proceeds from this event will help the Friends help us. Please visit the Friends’ website (<http://friendslittlebighorn.com/2008friendsbattlefielddenvents.htm>) for information or call Friends Board member Kay Hunsaker at (909) 628-3544.

On Saturday, June 28, 2008, Friends will hold their annual membership meeting and feast behind the administration building starting at 6:00 PM. This event is limited to Friends membership and volunteers only and is a great social opportunity to meet and renew friendships between the Battlefield and members of Friends. This year the Battlefield is hosting a very special event after the Friends meeting and feast. This event may be a once in a lifetime opportunity to explore a portion of the battlefield story that very few ever see.

LIBI Administrative History Published – Our Chief Historian has announced that University of Oklahoma Press has finally published the long awaited new administrative history of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, *Stricken Field: Little Bighorn Since 1876*, written by now retired NPS historian Jerome A. Greene under NPS contract. The primary purpose of such NPS administrative histories is to provide park managers and staff with a comprehensive, up-to-date reference and planning tool that is used to protect cultural and natural resources and to monitor and interpret park resources. Widespread publication and distribution by the University of Oklahoma Press aids the NPS by increasing public knowledge and understanding of LIBI and the many challenges that we face as stewards of this special place. *Stricken Field* was funded by the NPS-LIBI Fee Demonstration Program from proceeds from visitor entrance fees here.

Final Northern Cheyenne Marker Planned – Chief Historian John Doerner has been busy conducting historical research on Roman Nose, the seventh and final Northern Cheyenne warrior (per Wooden Leg and John Stands In Timber) killed in the battle. Roman Nose died during Reno's valley fight on the west side of the Little Bighorn River on what is now private land. For the time being, his red granite marker will be erected in 2008 at the Reno-Benteen Battlefield overlooking his actual casualty site across the Little Bighorn River, which has been lost to time. The marker will contain the following information:

**ONONEVOO XENEHE
ROMAN NOSE
FELL HERE
JUNE 25, 1876
WHILE DEFENDING THE
CHEYENNE WAY OF LIFE**

Curation – Museum Curator Sharon Small reports that the new Sitting Bull Exhibit is nearing completion. Daryl No Heart, a traditional Lakota artist, was commissioned to paint an authentic historical reproduction of a 19th century style buffalo hide painting, featuring colorful pictographs originally drawn by Sitting Bull while he was in confinement at Fort Randall. The pictographs depict historical battles that he had with various enemy Assiniboine, Flathead and Crow warriors. The colorful hide painting is the backdrop for the first museum exhibit at Little Bighorn Battlefield dedicated to the famous Lakota Spiritual and Political Leader.

Additional items planned for the exhibit include:

- bow and set of arrows owned by Sitting Bull when he surrendered at Fort Buford on July 20, 1881 that came into the possession of Blacksmith Henry B. Mechling, Company H, 7th Cavalry and later donated by the late Minnie Grace Carrie and family

- reproduction of Sitting Bull's Model 1866 Winchester Carbine that was presented to Major David Brotherton at his formal surrender at Fort Buford (the original is at the Smithsonian)
- several original items from photographer D.F. Barry that were found in Sitting Bull's cabin after he was killed (recently donated to Ernie LaPointe by Thomas M. Heski), including an eagle feather and hoop game owned by Sitting Bull's son Crow Foot
- numerous D.F. Barry photos enlarged to life-size
- Sitting Bull's top hat

Ranger Activities: Law Enforcement/EMS/FEE Operation – Chief Ranger Michael Stops reports that Ed Belmore has been hired as our new Protection (LE) Ranger. Ed and his wife are from Minnesota and will be assisting with law enforcement and entrance fee operations.

Battlefield Tour Road (Rehabilitate Route 10) – We are holding meetings here this month with NPS and Federal highway officials to finalize engineering specifications for the Battlefield Tour Road Project. We hope to have the final drawings completed this year. We then plan to move forward into the actual funding cycle for construction. I still do not have a firm date for this but will keep everyone posted.

Natural Resources – Melana Stichman, Biological Technician, and native of California, is now in her third year here working on natural resources related projects and has taken the lead on **Invasive Plants/Noxious Weeds**. Thirty-four acres of invasive plants and noxious weeds were treated, including field blindweed, Canada thistle, bull thistle, St. Johnswort, houndstongue, knapweed and whitetop. Melana and Mathew Brightwings chemically treated 30 acres with an approved pesticide and four acres were treated manually. We also received assistance from an Exotic Plant Management Team from Glacier National Park that treated an additional 11 acres for field blindweed along the tour road and Russian Olive along the Little Bighorn River.

Resource Management Plan (RMP) – Our RMP was recently updated with new baseline information added to the inventories. This plan describes several projects completed or that are in progress. LIBI now has two new maps that outline Resource Management Zones and a potential visitor trail system. The RMP may be accessed at <http://www.nps.gov/libi/parkmgmt/planning.htm>.

Quanset Hut Site Restoration – This important land restoration project closed September 2007 with the restoration of two acres formerly used for storage of maintenance equipment and supplies and as a staging area for construction projects. The site was restored as much as possible to its original topography and re-seeded with native varieties of grass from seed previously collected at the battlefield including bluebunch, wheatgrass, green needlegrass, blue grama and sideoats grama. The site will continue to be monitored as it returns back to natural prairie grassland.

Maintenance Operations – Facility Manager Lonnie Hergenrider reports that the staff is gearing up for another busy maintenance season here. A major project will include replacing 90 feet of the Entrenchment Trail concrete walkway originally installed in 1989 and 1990 that is damaged or cracked and a safety concern for visitors and staff. The remodeling of the seasonal apartment units including new siding and windows is now complete. An electric transformer unit

for the water pump house (near the Little Bighorn River) was replaced by Big Horn Electric, bringing the system back up to code.

Ken Woody IV, seasonal laborer in 2007, will be returning under the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) this season. Austin Dawes, seasonal laborer in 2007, may also return under the STEP program. The staff is gearing up for another season.

We would like to express our appreciation to Supt. Cook for his comprehensive and final Battlefield Update due to his retirement. Thank you, Mr. Cook, for your contributions!

*A condensed version of this report appeared in the Spring 2008 **Battlefield Dispatch**.*