



Battlefield Profiles

By Joe Creaden

Mike Koury: 46 Years on the Little Big Horn

At the 2009 CBHMA Annual Meeting, Mike Koury casually mentioned during a talk that he had visited Little Bighorn Battlefield 45 straight years. I then realized that we must hear of Mike's experiences and recollections that span more than four decades.

Originally from Tyler, Texas, Mike is the proud parent of two children, Krista and Gordon. He and his wife Dee reside in Johnstown, Colorado. After leaving the Air Force, Mike started Old Army Press, which has published 158 titles on American Western military history, 56 on Little Big Horn. He has printed the works of such renowned authors as Robert M. Utley, Fairfax Downey and John S. Gray. A member of the CBHMA since 1968, Mike is the Chairman of the Order of Indian Wars.

Mike graciously consented to be interviewed during our 2010 Annual Meeting, which was his 46th consecutive year at the Battlefield. In the following, you will learn how Mike and Dee started the Old Army Press, how Mike was introduced to CBHMA. It is a fascinating insider's view of CBHMA history. A subsequent issue will share his feelings on the future of our organization.

Enjoy this treasure chest of reminiscences from one of the earliest members of CBHMA!

Old Army Press

I became interested in American Western military history at age ten when I read ***Indian-Fighting Army*** by Fairfax Downey. That was it for me. I was hooked!

In the early 60s, I was a first lieutenant stationed at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana where Dee was teaching school. We had no idea of going into publishing but we purchased the [Dr. Charles] Kuhlman Collection. This turned out to be a life changer for us. The collection became the basis of Old Army Press.

The collection included 14 boxes of letters from all the great authors: Brininstool, Dustin, Graham and Kuhlman. There was a manuscript about supposed Little Big Horn survivor Frank

Battlefield Profiles Fall 2010 (website)

Finkel. I never believed the story but Dr. Kuhlman did. We presented a pamphlet on this subject that would cost about 200 dollars to print. Two friends lent me the money putting up 100 dollars each.

I was transferred to SAC Headquarters in Omaha. Dee was not working yet, so I suggested that she take the Finkel manuscript to local printers to see if we could get a bid. She met someone who seemed very interested in the manuscript and that I would enjoy working with. His name was David Schafer, the owner of Citizen Printing Company. We printed 500 copies of the Finkel story and that was the start of Old Army Press.

David liked doing books. We became partners and good friends. We did mostly reprints. Business steadily started to pick up. I decided to resign my Air Force commission to devote my energy to Old Army Press as co-owner. Next we moved to Fort Collins, Colorado and I eventually took over Old Army Press. Dee took some jobs as an accountant and I worked as a salesman for Citizen Printing Company. This allowed me freedom to build Old Army Press.

Introduction to CBHMA

One of the few people who appreciated the Kuhlman Papers was a friend named John Popovich. John introduced me to [artist] Ken Ralston; both of these friends were early members of CBHMA. I had first visited the Battlefield in 1964; in 1968 I became a member of CBHMA after being recommended by John.

In those days you did not just send in money and say that you were joining. You had to have a member recommend you into the group. There were only 28 members and most of them lived locally near the Battlefield, people like Ken Roahen, George Osten, Stella Foote and Judge Ben Harwood. I might have been the first member that did not live locally. I told the group that if I was accepted by CBHMA, I would take it very seriously and would not miss a meeting.

I owe all of this to John Popovich, just a great person. In the early years starting in 1967 I would drive to John's home and stay with him. Then we would pick up Ken Ralston so we could attend the CBHMA meetings together. We would meet at the Cattlemen's Club with other members, have breakfast and then go out to the Custer Battlefield.

CBHMA's Early Role at the Battlefield

CBHMA practically ran the Battlefield when I first joined. We actually had a hand in making policy. We would observe ranger talks, make suggestions on how they could be improved and fund worthwhile projects. The Battlefield was really not a controversial place in the 60s and the superintendents were usually veterans of the NPS [National Park Service] nearing retirement. The Chief Historian at the Battlefield was actually a CBHMA Board member—so we exerted a great deal of influence at the park. CBHMA was the official “cooperating association” of the National Park.

There was reason for cooperating association—selling books at the Battlefield. If the NPS sold books, the money could *not* be allocated to the Battlefield; it would go to the [Federal Government] General Fund. So no matter how successful you were at selling books, you had to appeal to Congress for a budget and then go to the NPS internally to request money for the Battlefield. By CBHMA's selling books the money could be given to the NPS at the Battlefield—circumventing the red tape. In reality, we were violating NPS rules in regard to a cooperating association. At our little end of the earth this arrangement worked just fine, but

things were about to change.

Controversy at the Battlefield

In the late 60s and early 70s things at the Battlefield started to change with the advent of the American Indian Movement [AIM]. Suddenly pressure and controversy began to arrive at the Custer Battlefield. The NPS started to look at the Battlefield operation closely and, in turn, look at us in a different way. They inquired on several issues: Why does CBHMA only have 25-30 members? Why do you have to be recommended to join? On paper you had to maintain a total separation: the Chief Historian was not permitted on the Board; it was illegal. These issues were all violations of NPS rules regarding cooperating associations. The atmosphere was changing and we *should* have seen it coming.

In 1967 CBHMA intended on funding the art work for the first park handbook written by Robert M. Utley, somewhere around \$10,000. We were hoping the artist would be Ken Ralston or at least a Western artist. The NPS brought in Leonard Baskin to illustrate the handbook and his work was certainly not to our taste. We informed the NPS that we would not be donating the \$10,000. The NPS reply was that we *would* be giving them the money and that CBHMA had no say in picking the artist. We were supported in this battle by Utley, who said he did not want an illustration of a dead, naked Custer in the handbook he had written. His support, in addition to the outrage generated by CBHMA, forced the first printing to appear with a blank page in place of the offensive illustration. This was the first time our Association really crossed the NPS.

In 1976 AIM was gaining widespread attention across the land. The NPS anticipated trouble with AIM on the upcoming 100th Anniversary of the Battle, so they scaled down some of the CBHMA activities that were planned, souring relations even further.

Relations became worse as the controversies intensified and a new superintendent, Barbara Booher, took over. Barbara, who is a very nice person, was opposed by CBHMA. Our original job was to be friends of the Battlefield but now we found ourselves defying the NPS. Supt. Booher was a Ute-Cherokee Indian and because of our opposition we were labeled as racists who were also anti-women. This was not the case. We just wanted the best person for the job. We should have started to realize that as far as the NPS was concerned, our only real job was to sell books. Unfortunately we did not see it. The NPS did not want to hear from us or heed any advice we had to offer.

A CBHMA book committee had been established consisting of six whites and one Indian, none of whom worked for the National Park. It would review any book suggested for sale at the Battlefield and would accept or reject it by majority vote. The NPS did reserve the right to refuse a book. Supt. Booher had recommended that Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* be approved for sale at the Museum. The committee voted 6-1 to reject the book due to historical inaccuracy. The NPS responded by abolishing the committee. The book was then sold at the Battlefield.

By emphasizing that the site was the Custer Battlefield, we were leading the Government into another problem: *the name of the Battlefield*. This issue had come to the forefront in the 70s and 80s with the advent of AIM. An independent committee was formed that came to the Battlefield. They were able to see the imbalances concerning the books being sold and the content of talks on the Battle, [which] were about the campaign of 1876, cavalry equipment, organization of Army

and the Battle of the Little Big Horn. There was absolutely nothing about American Indians. I recognized this imbalance but many of our members could not see it. The fact of the matter was that you had white men talking about the Battle to white audiences. American Indians were not visiting the Battlefield. Changes needed to be made so that the Indians who fought there would be represented to achieve some sort of equity.

The committee's findings were not surprising. They stated there was nothing on the Indians in the bookstore, there were not any Indian programs or virtually any mention of Indians in the Battle. The committee found that American Indians were not visiting the Battlefield. Changes needed to be made so that the Indians who fought there would be represented to achieve some sort of equity. It became apparent that the new stance of the NPS was that *they* would make all calls on policy. We were not to give advice on policy as this was a violation of NPS rules. Most of CBHMA's members at this time did not understand how deep the split was becoming between CBHMA and the NPS.

Changes at the Battlefield

All the controversy of the 70s and 80s put tremendous pressure on [Chief Historian] Neil Mangum and [Supt.] Jim Court to correct the imbalance. They worked hard to promote fair representation of park interpretive program and preservation management.

In 1991 the name of the Custer Battlefield National Monument was changed to the Little Big Horn National Monument. CBHMA had sent the President of our Board to campaign against the name change at the hearings in Billings. We were told that technically our job was not to oppose the NPS. Our job was to sell books. This was put in probably the clearest terms that had ever been explained. We were told that by opposing the name change we were violating everything that we were supposed to be doing. CBHMA would not have any input on NPS policy.

The final blow was when the NPS tried to enter into a secret partnership with Time-Warner entertainment group North Shield Ventures, which wanted to build a theme park in the vicinity of the Battlefield. Under the terms of the signed *Preliminary Operating Agreement*, North Shield Ventures would actually lease the Battlefield, develop all interpretive programs and all tours with input provided by the NPS. This move infuriated our membership and once again we were backed by Bob Utley, who believed that this was an abrogation of NPS duty by turning over responsibility to an entertainment group. I went on television and radio to oppose this move. The effort to build the park failed but the dispute with the NPS was intensified.

CBHMA was now viewed as a real problem by the NPS. In 1993 we received a letter from Regional Director Robert Baker telling us that we were no longer the cooperating association at the Park. CBHMA tried to reach an agreement but the situation was too far gone. CBHMA was replaced with the Southwest Parks and Monument Association.

The Archaeological digs and the Preservation Committee

The NPS did not support the archaeological digs in the mid-80s. Jim Court actually was in trouble for supporting them and the second dig was actually stopped when it was discovered that the Montana State Historical Preservation Office had not signed off on [the project as required by the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act]. Jim had brought in volunteers from all over the country and many had taken off time from their jobs to participate in the dig. Luckily Jim called in some favors. Senators and congressmen became involved and the dig was allowed to proceed.

It was receiving great attention by being covered by *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, and *National Geographic*. The NPS was not happy with the attention and they let Jim know it. The Denver Office told Jim that they did not want to read about him in the next magazine. Jim continued the digs but the issue damaged his standing with the NPS.

The NPS was also not in favor of Jim (who was a CBHMA member) starting the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee [CBPC]. This organization started to buy land that was significant to the Battle. This was necessary to prevent fast food restaurants and entertainment groups like North Shield Ventures from building near the Battlefield. Many CBHMA and LBHA members donated money and became lifetime members of the CBPC. We were issued cards permitting us to walk on these surrounding lands that were purchased. Jim worked incredibly hard on all this and he saved these important areas. The land was to be eventually turned over to the NPS. Bob Utley called Jim the most effective superintendent since Edward Luce. However, the NPS did not share this view. In reality, it did not want to manage more land or deal with the anger of the Crows over the land deals. The NPS wanted to transfer Jim to Fort Bent, Colorado but instead he retired and continued his efforts with CBPC.

CBHMA and the NPS

In the end our current arrangement is the best thing for everyone. *I believe* someone needs to tell the NPS when it does something wrong. The NPS is a Federal agency, not a sacred institution. Just like any other agency there are some real fine, dedicated people, some good managers and poor managers. We have seen them all at the Battlefield.

The NPS needs a respected group that will speak up when necessary. CBHMA has gained that respect due to members like the late Brian Pohanka among many others. Of all the Battlefield groups, our Association has some of the best and most rational people.

We need to fight the right battles but (more importantly) we want the *right* to fight them. Technically, we were not allowed to do that in our old role. Unfortunately we never read the fine print! The NPS was right all along and they were right to kick us off the Battlefield.

The Future of CBHMA

We are never going to be 3000 strong again. I think we will be doing well to maintain our current membership. Times are changing—the kids are interested in Star Wars and hi-tech gadgets. I don't think our future is in our kids. I think this particular interest in Western history can be developed later in life. An example of this is my grandson. He ought to be a Custer enthusiast but he is not interested. Right now he is interested in more modern hi-tech subjects. I don't see that "pitching" to the kids will be our salvation. I am not opposed to it—we do occasionally get younger people—but kids don't play cowboys and Indians any more.

The salvation of the organization will be people that write and get thousands of people to read about this subject. One of the greatest things to happen was Jim Donovan's book *A Terrible Glory* and Nathaniel Philbrick's *The Last Stand*. Thousands of adults will read these best sellers and some will want to find out more about the subject. Some will join organizations like ours. People read that one author says that Custer was killed at the [Medicine Tail Coulee] crossing; another says that he was killed on the [Last Stand] Hill; yet another says that there was no "Last Stand". These controversies hook people and when people pick up that *second* book on Custer, the enthusiast is developed. The more diverse the theories, the more fun it is.

We are destined to become primarily a group of retired adults. We have seen that with the “Westerners” organization. They have the time, the money and the desire. I read the e-mails on the “graying of the organizations” with great interest. The simple answer is that we can’t get the children. We don’t have the money needed to mount [such] a national campaign. We should aim at people just retired who suddenly have more time to read and to travel. Get them interested in the Battle of the Little Big Horn and they will come to Montana. If we get a small percentage of people who read Donovan or Philbrick, we can continue to have a healthy membership.

Visiting the Battlefield

Visiting the Battlefield is one of the highlights of my life, meeting great people. We have a lot of fun. We go to the Battlefield, travel to peripheral sights, re-fight the Battle and sometimes Custer wins!

I think CBHMA is a great organization and look forward to coming every year. I see people that I consider really good close friends once a year; it is a great time. Some of these people I have known for forty years!

My wife Dee has been really great. She is deeply into quilting so she is happy that I can pursue my interest without dragging her into it. She has always been very supportive and just terrific!

We would like to thank Mike Koury for granting this interview and sharing his recollections of many years on the Little Big Horn.

*In addition to his 1994 Symposium paper (“A Bit of CBHMA History”), please refer to Sandy Barnard, **Digging into Custer’s Last Stand**, Jerome A. Greene, **Stricken Field** and Robert M. Utley, **Custer and Me**.*

These opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the CBHMA or its Board of Directors.

*A condensed version of this interview appeared in the Fall 2010 **Battlefield Dispatch**.*