

Battlefield Profiles

A Conversation with Mike Donahue

By Joe Creaden

Veteran National Park Service Seasonal Ranger Mike Donahue is a friendly and familiar face to all CBHMA members who make the yearly trek to the Little Big Horn Battlefield. Mike has served as an historical interpreter at the Battlefield for the last 20 summers.

Mike has published numerous articles and artworks on the Battle of the Little Big Horn and also serves on the editorial board of *Greasy Grass*. His unique book *Drawing Battle Lines: The Map Testimony of Custer's Last Fight* won the CBHMA G. Joseph Sills Award in 2009. That year he was also the co-recipient of the LBHA John M. Carroll Award for the best Little Big Horn book.

Mike is chairman of the Temple College Art Department, a position that he has held since 1979. The native Texan received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in History and Art and Master of Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees from Stephen F. Austin State University.

Just before Christmas, Mike was gracious enough to take time from his busy schedule to be interviewed by the *The Battlefield Dispatch*.

Joe Creaden: *How did you become interested in the Battle of the Little Big Horn?*

Mike Donahue: My first exposure to the Battle was the 1958 Walt Disney movie *Tonka*. As a child I really did not know much about Custer or the Little Big Horn. Being from Texas, I was always interested more in the Alamo and that epic last stand. I had a high school history teacher who was infatuated with the battle, brought that passion to the classroom and shared his excitement for the story with his students.

I was very interested with the story of the Crow scouts and when a senior, I read a book by Dee Brown called *Showdown at Little Big Horn*. I was fascinated by the way he told the story. Brown is a great storyteller but I found out in later years that he was not a very good historian. The book did turn me on to the story and definitely made me want to read more books on the Battle. Shortly after that I read *The Custer Myth* by Col. W.A. Graham and I was hooked. I have been studying the Battle ever since and my interest has never waned.

JC: *What inspired you to become a ranger at the Battlefield?*

MD: I never had thought about working in Montana or at the Battlefield until I read a *National Geographic* article in 1986 about the archaeological digs. What they were finding there was really exciting, plus it was changing the story. Since I had summers off from school, I thought that it would be wonderful to participate in some archaeological digs and learn more about the Battle. I was able to participate in a dig later on and it was fascinating. Over the twenty years I have worked at the Battlefield I am always amazed at how many people come up to me and say they remember the *National Geographic* article about the digs and that's how they became interested.

JC: *Please take us back to your first summer at the Battlefield. What were your impressions?*

MD: I remember calling Neil Mangum (I did not have a clue as to who he was). He told me that he had no summer job opportunities except for a volunteer position paid a whopping \$7.00 per day! I figured that if I wanted to learn more about the Battle, I should take it.

When I arrived there, I was surrounded by people who knew a great deal about the Battle. The knowledge of some of the staff just overwhelmed me. At that time there was one individual who did not know anything about the Battle and this person dropped out after the first week. Neil asked me if I would like to accept a position for \$7.00 per hour and I started as an interpreter for the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association.

I remember that the learning curve was great because Neil had us do *nine* different interpretive talks. This was very tough. You spent a great deal of time reading and preparing the different talks on a daily basis. It was overwhelming but it forced you to learn the subject—certainly not for the faint of heart!

JC: You have now spent twenty summers at the Battlefield. What were some of the most memorable events you have witnessed?

MD: It has been 20 summers and I think the record is held by Cliff Nelson, who spent 24 or 25 summers at the Battlefield as a National Park Ranger or interpreter before his unfortunate death. One memory that jumps right out is being asked to speak on the soldiers at the Little Big Horn in front of the large crowd gathered at the 125th Anniversary of the Battle. Of course, the completion of the Indian Memorial was another major event. I watched that develop for over a decade and it finally happened.

Also, I was one of the few people who were there when Russell Means held his protest and was digging into the mass grave in 1988. I happened to have my camera handy, so I was able to snap a lot of pictures and they have become history now. Maybe someday we can publish those photos as most of the Association members were away from the Battlefield when this happened.

Another high point for me was Neil Mangum asking me to help with the research for the roadside interpretive panels several years ago. I realized that this project was going to mold and shape interpretation for perhaps decades. It was an honor to participate in that undertaking.

JC: You do many wonderful presentations on the Battle at the Visitor Center. My personal favorite is your talk on how the lives of Corporal George Brown, Dr. George Lord, Black Elk and Wooden Leg intersect on that fateful day of June 25, 1876. How did you come up with this novel approach?

MD: That is one of my favorite talks. When you do talks for twenty years, you can get tired of telling the same story. Although you can't leave them out of the story, many people want to make it the George Custer, Crazy Horse or the Sitting Bull story. When we see all the names on the Memorials (whether it's the names on the Indian Memorial or the Monument for the soldiers), you realize that we sometimes forget the other people that are an important part of the story.

I remember reading different accounts of the Battle and there was something interesting in Black Elk's account. It seems that he had found this soldier's watch and it became

important to him. I was reading years later that George C. Brown had purchased a watch before the battle and how it was missing. It was that common physical link that led me to tie these two individuals together in an interesting, creative storytelling way. Of course, Wooden Leg is interesting because of the eloquent in the way he told the story. The story of Dr. Lord is sad because he was the only doctor with Custer and he had his hands full.

In 30 minutes you can only tell so many stories and it took a lot of work to refine the story into an art form tying it together in an interesting way. I think it is important because it does bring the individual human stories to the forefront at Little Big Horn. As human beings, we can relate to a 13-year old kid, a doctor who is doing the best he can, a young warrior who has been partying all night or to George Brown, a young guy who had been a candy maker trying to put up a heck of a fight until he has to run into Deep Ravine to survive. I have actually seen some people break down and cry during that talk. In a way that is a weird compliment because it does mean that you are actually connecting and your story is moving people.

I always wrap up the story with Black Elk because of his quote on the Museum: “*WOWASAKE KIN SLOLYAPO WOWAHWALA HE E*” (“KNOW THE POWER THAT IS PEACE”). It is an important message that we all need to remember even today.

JC: Have you ever thought of putting that talk in print and publishing it?

MD: It’s funny you say that because I always have thought it would make a great movie screen-play. I would love someone to take the story and tell it through the eyes of a soldier or a young Black Elk. Another idea I have is to tell the story of an Irishman who is suffering from his culture being ripped apart by Great Britain, flees to America, joins the cavalry and winds up on the other side of the spectrum basically doing the same thing to the Indians. I think that it would be a powerful story. Maybe someday that will happen.

JC: Living and working at the Battlefield for 20 summers have provided some great research opportunities. Can you tell us how your theories on the Battle have evolved and changed over time?

MD: The one thing that is really important as a researcher and a ranger is to keep an open mind. I have seen my own interpretation of the story change numerous times over the last two decades. I can remember being convinced of the fatalist theory of the story—that Custer was quickly surrounded on the hill by Indians and everything fell apart. We all have learned over the years that every time there is an archaeological dig or that a new map is discovered, when new testimony (soldier or Indian) appears, our ideas on the story change.

If you are open-minded, the story is always going to be kinetic especially if we take the time to weed through new information and evidence. The thing that most interests me today is that Custer (I believe) was probably on the offensive almost to the very end. We know because of the Indian accounts and more recent archaeological findings that he went further north than we thought in the early years. The more I’ve researched this, the more I find that there is proof for that. I think we will eventually find remains of soldiers in Deep Ravine, which will show that perhaps there were isolated soldiers who may have been among the last to die. Custer did have his Last Stand on the hill—but there were other men that died after Custer.

There is one thing that I do *not* want to do. As I watch scholars and authors write books, they get defensive, they want to defend their theories. I think you need to be objective. I will be willing to alter my story if the evidence warrants it; and you should not be ashamed of doing that especially if there is new information.

*JC: Your award winning book **Drawing Battle Lines** is a unique and important collection of original maps pertinent to the Battle of the Little Big Horn. What was a greater influence on you to do a book of maps, your background as a historical interpreter or your interest in visual images as an artist?*

MD: I think I was just the right person to do that type of book. In college I took a good geology course and started looking at maps. I learned to read contour maps at that time. As an art professor one of my jobs is to learn to read lines and the basic thing about maps is that they are lines. There are a lot of ways to look at maps and it is easy to see why people don't have a visual understanding of maps the way an artist can.

Having lived at the Battlefield for all those years, I became intimate with the landscape and that made it easier for me to understand what all those lines were, whether it was the river or Deep Ravine or Medicine Tail Coulee or Weir Point. I think that my intimacy with the landscape, my knowledge of the story plus being an artist able to read visual lines was like a perfect storm of skill and luck that allowed me to see some things that perhaps other people have overlooked. Some of my friends who are scholars on the Battle have told me that I have a tendency to see things on the maps that others do not see. This is where my artistic background helps me.

Of course, it is important to look at everything with an open mind. I think that the book is an important resource (whether you agree with my analysis or not) due to the fact that I was able to put the maps out for researchers and for the public to look at.

JC: What were the difficulties in compiling this rare collection of maps? Have you uncovered any new significant maps since the book was published?

MD: It was a tough job. I realized pretty quickly why authors will redraw the maps so they do not have to pay usage fees. Once I was involved, it was a labor of love and there was no turning back so I tried not to pull back on any expenses. It cost me almost over \$2000 in usage fees and for photo reproductions; so it was an expensive book to write but I did not write the book to make a lot of money. I wrote it because I thought that it would become an important research tool.

A couple of maps have since shown up that I did not necessarily discover. For instance, Sandy Barnard discovered a new Walter Camp map and he has asked me to write a little blurb in the next ***Greasy Grass***. I wish that I had it in my book. It is not earth shattering as far as new information but it is a Walter Camp map with an interesting lineage. This past summer [Battlefield historian] John Doerner came upon a map made by an officer with Gibbon and I've tried to find out more about that map. Perhaps we will publish that if there is a third edition of ***Drawing Battle Lines*** and include some of the new maps.

I remember doing research and coming across maps wondering why they had never been out before. I believe that in ***Drawing Battle Lines*** there are 35 maps that were never seen by the general public.

JC: You are currently involved in the process of writing your interpretation of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. How far along are you with this project?

MD: It is coming along well. I am on Chapter 11 and I don't know how many chapters will be in it. I think that it is going to be different from any book on the Battle. I want it to be original, being a creative person. I think it will give the Little Big Horn a common sense perspective for the first time. It will explain why Custer did some of the things that he did, explore his mind set and compare Little Big Horn with his other Indian fights. It is taking me a great deal of time because of the original research involved.

I am also doing what I hope will be the cover painting, my version of Custer's Last Stand. It is very hard. I really can't write and paint at the same time. They are two different processes. I have actually been working on the painting for five months now and not doing any writing or research. I'm anxious to finish the painting and get back to the book. I wish there was a way to do both but I just can't. The book is probably a couple of years away. I do have someone who is editing my first few chapters and they are really helping me clean it up.

I was looking at a book on paintings the other day and my painting of Custer's Last Stand may be the first one done in a vertical format. I did that because I was thinking of that being a book cover. Almost every picture you see of the Battle is on a horizontal landscape. I am doing the actual portraits of a lot of the people who died on Last Stand Hill. It will be action packed. You will be right in the middle of it. In one way it will be from an Indian perspective in that you will be looking *up* at these soldiers fighting towards the end of the battle. I'm excited because it will be different from all the other paintings of the Last Stand. The painting develops a bit each day and I am anxious to see how it looks when it is finished.

JC: As an artist have you ever considered doing a series of paintings on the Battle?

MD: I have considered it but I do many different things artistically. When you do historical paintings, you are kind of put into a box. One thing that is difficult about historical paintings is that you are dealing with a limited audience. People tend to spend more time looking for inaccurate details and critiquing every single detail. I do that myself. The main thing is to capture the mood and the feel of what was happening. I like the freedom of doing some really off-beat things with art.

One thing I would like to do some day (and it may sound a little gory or strange) is paint the scene of what Last Stand Hill really looked like when the fighting was over. No one has ever depicted that. Doug Scott recently did a piece on the History Channel that tried to recreate what Lieut. Godfrey saw when he came up the hill. TV unfortunately had to show the soldiers with their pants on because they could not show nudity; you could not recreate the mutilation of the bodies. I don't know what the audience would be or who would publish a painting like that but it would be different.

One advantage I do have as a painter is that I have researched the Battle for 40 years and have lived at the Battlefield for 20 summers. The other painters were not able to do that.

JC: For our group, the CBHMA, the Battle of the Little Big Horn is such a compelling story. How can we generate more interest in history to future generations?

MD: There is timelessness to this story. We have in our group romantics who are sensitive to tragedy and death. A lot of people interested in Little Big Horn are also interested in the Alamo, the Titanic or JFK, so there is a common thread there.

This past week I saw the previews of the new movie *Avatar* by James Cameron, who produced the *Titanic* movie and obviously loves history. What I find fascinating is that the story line is amazingly historical—a society that is very sophisticated mechanically and greedy is going into another world against a more “technologically primitive” people who use bows, arrows and spears. These natives are sitting on top of a mineral that is going to be very expensive.

You can't help but flashback to the Campaign of 1876, to the fact that there was gold in the Black Hills, the military with sophistication and an attitude of superiority trying to displace a native people, who, by the way call themselves “The People,” which is exactly what the Indians called themselves. You have one of the soldiers falling in love with one of the natives and switching sides. So what you have is Little Big Horn mingled with *Dances with Wolves*. It is the most expensive movie ever made but the story sounds familiar. This is a story I tell every summer being shown on the big screen told in a different way, in a different form. Movies and film are a great way to generate interest in the subject, especially with young people.

Our generation grew up with television and movies that sparked our interest in historical subjects. The generations before us used books to get those kinds of stories and used their imaginations to fill in the gaps. We are dealing with a different generation that has grown up with new communications technology such as video games and computers. Those things can be used as an impetus to help younger people get interested in the story.

*Everyone at **The Battlefield Dispatch** would like to thank Mike for granting this interview and sharing his thoughts with us. A review of **Drawing Battle Lines** is also posted on the CBHMA website. A condensed version of this interview appeared in the Winter 2010 newsletter. Ed.*