

# The Last Historian?

By Tom Heski

NPS Historian John August Doerner retired on April 29, 2011. John served 21 years at Little Bighorn Battlefield. He also worked as an interpreter and program director prior to being selected as Historian at the Battlefield. John was second generation National Park Service, following in the footsteps of his father.

I have known John Doerner for almost 35 years and throughout his National Park Service career. He is an unassuming, humble man who doesn't take credit for his success. He speaks from the heart. Although others bask in the limelight, John has always worked to get the job done.

John is the most courageous person I have ever known. What we call pain is everyday living for him. If it wasn't for a previous life-changing injury forcing a Federal disability retirement, he would have become the longest serving Historian at the Battlefield. He didn't care for a move up the career ladder. He wanted to stay in order to protect the Battlefield and the resting places of the "Boys of '76" and the warriors who fought at Little Bighorn.

I rank John Doerner as one of the best historians, among the likes of Supt. Luce! John's knowledge of events that transpired at the Little Bighorn is beyond comprehension. He has forgotten more than most of us will ever know. He has worked for many superintendents and was highly depended on for his knowledge and expertise—often doing tasks not related to his official duties.

Anyone who has come into contact with John Doerner (including members of the CBHMA, Little Big Horn Associates and Friends of Little Bighorn Battlefield) were greeted with a professional, no-nonsense approach to events at Little Bighorn. His impromptu talks (told with passion and conviction) almost made you feel as if you were there. He made time for everyone especially during Anniversary week.

Above all, he was instrumental in researching and locating the sites of warriors who fell at Little Bighorn. He ordered the Warrior Markers and worked with the families of those Native Americans who fell. The historical record had to match oral family history and tradition before any marker was ordered.

I know—I saw the research!

John is the first historian that really had the confidence of the Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Arikara and Crow tribes, given the name "Earth Man." John is also a "Pipe Carrier." He was also honored last June by the Arikara and given a tribal headdress for the day. The Indians trust and respect him more than anyone at the Battlefield.

John Doerner is a first class historian and as a friend is one of the best. I wish him all the best and only hope that he can enjoy a richly deserved retirement. He will be missed by all who knew him as an historian and a person, especially by those true historians. As John has often said:

"It's all about the 'Boys of '76."

With all of the change at Little Bighorn Battlefield such as the relocation of its priceless artifacts is John Doerner "The Last Historian"?