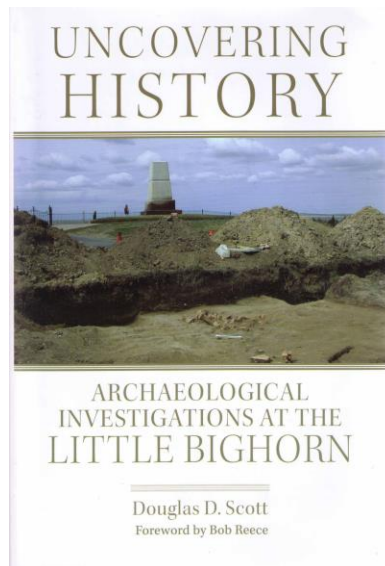


CBHMA Book Review

By Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Uncovering History: Archaeological Investigations at the Little Bighorn

By Douglas D. Scott

Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013 Pp. xviii, 245, contents, list of figures, foreword, preface, acknowledgements, references, index, hardcover, \$32.00

History is more than merely recounting facts. Rather it is like unraveling a mystery. As in any good mystery one must uncover clues that include physical evidence. This is especially true in the unfolding study of not only the Battle of the Little Big Horn but also of the career of George Armstrong Custer. One new book that demonstrates this axiom is the exemplary analysis of well-known retired National Park Service archaeologist Douglas D. Scott.

Almost from the beginning, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument was the site of archaeological interest. With booty taken from the dead soldiers by victorious warriors, there remained the ongoing mystery of what actually happened on that deadly ground. During the immediate years after the battle, burial and reburial parties attempted to find remains and police the field. Still many clues remained left behind.

The author first studies the site from a geological point of view. He notes that the area was long used by the native peoples of the Plains, especially as they acquired horses. Each group left its own archaeological footprint. After 1876 the area was primarily used for farming and ranching, which impacted the battlefield and its archaeological legacy.

After a brief but excellent overview of the battle, Scott explores the first attempt to collect relics by Philetus W. Norris, who visited Little Big Horn in 1877 to find and to bury the remains of his friend, scout

Charley Reynolds. His collection of artifacts, notes and map became a template for others who would survey and study the battlefield.

After administration of the Custer National Cemetery was assigned to the Army in 1879 there was very little analysis of battle relics. This changed dramatically in 1940 when the site was transferred to the National Park Service. Early superintendents and park historians such as Edward S. Luce and Don Rickey, Jr. began not only to collect but also record items discovered from the 1876 battle and opened the way for studying other sites, including those beyond the boundaries of the park. They also pioneered the use of metal detectors.

Amateur historians and as well as Park Service personnel would further these efforts by discovering warrior and soldier positions both inside and outside of the Custer Battlefield National Monument and by systematically plotting the data compiled by these discoveries.

Still it was not until a 1983 fire engulfed much of the Battlefield that archaeologists were able to explore the mysteries of the site in unprecedented detail. Scott, fellow archaeologist Richard A. Fox and a team of volunteers (including many CBHMA members) systematically charted and uncovered the debris just below the surface of Last Stand Hill and other portions of Custer's battlefield. The author relates his personal experiences and bureaucratic problems (such as compliance with the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act) during this initial investigation.

Not only did this and later digs generate interest from Custer and battle scholars but they also became news around the world. Systematic press releases and daily briefings posted at the Visitor Center were among the effective public relations response to the "media blitz [that] descended on the park." Statements on the type and quantity of artifacts located assisted interpreters in their efforts to inform the public. "The public," Scott notes, "was most interested in how—not if, but how—the archaeological study was changing history."

One area that most excited archaeologists was the effort to verify firing patterns and positions. Firearms identification methods such as comparative analysis of firing pin and other marks on expended cartridge cases enabled technicians "to discover evidence for the movement of individual firearms over the field of battle, verify cavalry positions, and define previously unknown fighting areas."

Another important discovery was that Lakota and Cheyenne warriors possessed more firearms (47 different types) and more Henry and other repeating rifles than previously realized, evidence that better explains the outcome of the Little Big Horn. Superior warrior firepower was thus a factor in the victory of the Indians as well as their superior numbers and soldier tactical errors.

Despite several soldier burials between 1876 and 1881, recent investigations have uncovered numerous human and other remains including the Horse Cemetery near Last Stand Hill. Scott's detailed outline and evaluation of all known recovered bones, skeletal fragments and nearly complete skeletons offer persuasive evidence of the poor health of Custer's troopers (which reflected their "harsh and rugged lifestyle") and a concrete picture of the cause of their deaths and widespread mutilations. The surveys clearly "discovered new information about their lifestyle that cannot be garnered from the historical record alone."

The author suggests that the location of the soldier remains also offers dramatic testimony as to possible troop movements.

Doug Scott has provided a remarkable overview of the archaeology that has emerged from the Little Big Horn. With a clear style and extensive documentation this synthesis is the most up to date, complete overview of what is both a valuable asset in discovering the truth about Custer's Last Stand and a model for conducting battlefield (conflict) archaeology on a global basis. Supporting the archaeological data with references to the historical record, he realizes that the archeological record of the battle "is not better than other sources. Rather, it should be viewed as another source of information to be compared with the others."

Nevertheless, the author's comprehensive survey provides ample evidence that the information revealed by the artifacts is "a very real part of the Battle of the Little Big Horn" and provides a more complete picture of "the most chaotic of human endeavors, a pitched battle." This legacy has thus clearly enhanced interpretative efforts and the visitor's experience at the park as well as enriched battle research.

Uncovering History should be a standard reference book for every student of the Little Big Horn.

*C. Lee Noyes contributed to this review in the Summer 2013 **Battlefield Dispatch**. We welcome constructive reader comments should be addressed to CLeeNoyes@aol.com.*