



## Little Bighorn Battlefield Update - Fall 2013

By Denice Swanke, Superintendent



Towards the end of the Federal Government shutdown in October I passed the one year mark here at Little Bighorn Battlefield. What a treat (Halloween pun intended) it has been to work with the great staff and stakeholders at this amazing place! The experience has been both humbling and challenging.

The most significant accomplishment this year has been the installation of permanent engraved interpretive panels at the Indian Memorial. The temporary aluminum plaques installed when the Memorial was dedicated ten years ago have been removed. This fall text developed by the Advisory Committee and Tribal Representatives has been engraved on the beautiful granites.

What a spectacular tribute honoring those who fought here to defend their ways of life! We are working with Tribal Representatives to develop an event in June to commemorate completion of the Indian Memorial. We hope you will be able to join us.

The park is considering how most quickly and effectively to return all items in its museum collection from temporary storage in Arizona. You should expect to hear more on this subject throughout 2014. We anticipate funding (soon) that will allow us to plan for their return. Although the planning process can't begin until we receive these funds, we are thinking about a range of options which could include:

- off-site construction of a new facility in conjunction with a proposed Montana Department of Transportation “Battlefield” rest area potentially located north of the park across Highway 212
- replacement of one or more exhibit cases in the existing museum to showcase items as they return from being conserved at the Western Archeological and Conservation Center (WACC) in Arizona
- retro-fits to the current administrative building to create a temporary storage facility in the park implemented *after* compliance with all applicable environmental and other required assessments as well as public and stakeholder input

Additional information about the status of the collection is provided in this update by the Resource Management Division.

A Facebook page is one “fun” project set up this year. Park employees provide photos and occasional text updates. It’s a great way to keep track of what’s going on here on a regular basis. Our Facebook page reached over 30,000 people daily during the 137th Anniversary events. The site includes a photo gallery of the Indian Memorial engravings completed this fall.

Thank you for your continued support!

*Denice Swanke*

## **Interpretation Division Chief: Ken Woody**

The Interpretive Division had a very successful season in 2013. Two new wayside panels titled “Here We Remember the Fallen” were finalized and delivered. They will be placed at two entrances to Custer National Cemetery and will match the wayside panels along the Tour Road. These panels will be set in the near future once compliance is finalized.

Interpretive talks this summer included the 40 minute “Battle Talk” and an hour long “Monument Walk” ending at Last Stand Hill. The new orientation film shown throughout the day continues to be a favorite.

Six seasonal Interpretive Rangers were hired this summer: Steve Adelson from Seattle, Washington;

Rachel Vegors, Jackson, Tennessee; Mike Donahue, Temple, Texas (his 24th year as a summer seasonal!), Frances Takes Enemy, Fort Smith, Montana; Josh Little Owl, Crow Agency, Montana and Karl Mattlage, Sheridan Wyoming.

One Teacher Ranger Teacher, Sarah Oppelt, Apple Valley, Minnesota, was hired this year. The eight week Teacher Ranger Teacher program allows the teacher to experience and sample different divisions within a National Park. Afterward the teacher relates his/her experiences to their students for one week to allow children to gain an appreciation of and interest in our National Parks. Sarah spent most of her summer working with the park’s resource management division. Her husband, Patrick Santelli, was our seasonal law enforcement officer.

The 137th Anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn occurred during the week and visitation was slightly less than it would have been on the weekend. Main events and speakers included delegations of the Arikara of North Dakota, the Lakota Sioux of South Dakota and Northern Cheyenne of Montana. The park again served a meal at noon on June 25 to about 700 visitors.

In 2013, the contract for the park's tour bus concession was transferred from the Little Big Horn College to the Crow Tribe. Tours employed 11 tribal members from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

## **Maintenance Division Chief: René Laya**

2013 was another challenging year for the Maintenance Division. We were unable to irrigate the cemetery and most of the grounds during the spring and early summer due to a broken pump seal. The result was a very brown landscape and many visitor complaints. Once the pump was repaired the lawns recovered for the fall season. Regional project funds were used to contract for a new pump installed in November.

On a related note, sprinkler heads continued to be replaced with new, more modern, correctly sized ones. And, for the first time in recent history, all irrigation control valves are now working properly!

Headstone replacement occurred in all Sections of the National Cemetery. The Resource Management Division worked with Maintenance to research and close a multi-year backlog of headstones that were either not ordered or not properly ordered. These stones have been installed as they arrive. New granite Section markers were placed prior to the Memorial Day weekend.

There were significant office space and break room improvements in the Maintenance Shop. Park staff walled off the break room from the open shop bay and reconfigured it. This is now a climate-controlled, snake and rodent free area for our hardworking Maintenance staff. New energy efficient windows were installed, cabinets and counters updated and a computer work station established so that maintenance employees are able to enter their time and attendance online as required.

Exterior painting of the Visitor Center will be completed as soon as weather permits next spring.

## **Cultural and Natural Resources Division Chief: Chris Ziegler**

The new Resource Management division has had a very productive formative year. As the first anniversary of the program comes to a close we find ourselves at a much better staffing level. Our ranks have stabilized and currently comprise a Division chief, museum specialist, archeologist/ compliance coordinator, two biological technicians and a temporary geophysical scientist.

Over the summer the division also benefitted greatly from a cultural resources diversity intern, a jointly funded position from the National Park Service (NPS) Washington, DC office, a Teacher Ranger Teacher provided by the Interpretive Division and a seasonal museum technician.

This team has made significant accomplishments in the research, preservation and interpretation of the park's myriad resources.

A major project initiated this year was the systematic study and mapping of all of the soldier markers across the Battlefield. To accomplish this objective, we reached out to the NPS Historic American Landscape (HALS) team in Washington, DC.

This team worked closely with park staff not only to map all Battlefield markers and memorials but also those historic markers associated with the conflict in the Little Bighorn Valley. Spatially recorded were

288 headstones and markers. In addition to recording physical condition, the team examined photo documentation and transcribed all wording. The data was saved in a spreadsheet that will be attached to the new map points created by the HALS team. Eventually a new interpretive product can be developed for these markers.

Custer National Cemetery is another crucial resource that has received a great deal of attention this year. A collaborative effort between HALS and Resource Management to correct and update our data files will create a more accurate and complete record of all interments within this hallowed ground.

A key component will be the first finding aid map of all burials. In addition we have initiated a joint study, the **Historic Preservation Training Center**, to create a detailed condition assessment of all monuments and memorials in the park. Many of these historic structures are exhibiting significant breakage and weathering and thus require preservation efforts.

The division is also working closely with maintenance staff to improve the condition of the turf and health of the perimeter trees to enhance the solemn and peaceful landscape that visitors expect of such a place. This has involved soil and water testing, tree health evaluation and infrastructure work to provide better irrigation coverage while minimizing water impacts to historic headstones.

Documentation being drafted to manage the park includes a new National Register Nomination, Cultural Landscape Report and Environmental History Report. The Environmental Assessment for a new Fire Management Plan was completed with a Finding of No Significant Impact. This assessment will thus allow our Fire Management Plan to move forward this winter.

Ties with the affiliated tribes have been strengthened through improved communication and the developing partnership with Little Bighorn College. Thanks to the efforts of Museum Specialist Sharon Small, we have returned several items to lineal descendants under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. We are finalizing a Programmatic Agreement with the Crow Tribe that will streamline the compliance process for projects.

Other initiatives have included a partnership with Rosebud Battlefield State Park. We have assisted that park by providing recommendations for treating damage caused by wild fire this summer.

We also plan to assist a Light Detection and Ranging project that will enable Rosebud to quantify its resources more effectively. (LIDAR is a remote sensing method that uses light in the form of a pulsed laser to measure ranges to the Earth.) Data collected will determine vegetation density, locate historic markers and monitor soil erosion and other landscape changes.

The division has also continued its critical efforts to return the 150,000 piece curatorial collection displaced since the 2011 water damage to the Visitor Center.

Ongoing curatorial work at the WACC involves cataloging, condition assessments (necessary so that conservation work can begin), development of finding aids and photographic documentation. We hope that some items will be viewable online in 2014.

Denise