

Custer's Legacy Lost?

by Tyler Baldwin

A desperate battle is being fought in the tiny town of Garryowen, Montana, 134 years after another more celebrated battle – the Battle of the Little Big Horn – was waged on the same spot.

Chris Kortlander, the owner of Garryowen, is fighting to keep the Elizabeth Custer Manuscript Archive intact and on the Battlefield. The collection contains thousands of letters, notes, handwritten book galleys and drafts, memorabilia, and personal papers. In her will, Elizabeth Custer stated that she desired her personal property and anything that could be considered a souvenir belonging to her late husband, to be kept in a "Public Museum or Memorial, which may be erected on the battlefield of the Little Bighorn in Montana."

Kortlander says a collection of this national historical significance deserves a place of its own. His concern is the Custer Battlefield Museum in Garryowen is not adequate to properly catalog, research, display, preserve and maintain the massive 5,000-piece Elizabeth Custer Manuscript Archive for future generations to study and to enjoy.

He's embarked on an exhaustive search for funding to keep the dream alive. "It's not for lack of trying," Kortlander says. "I've done everything conceivable to raise awareness and the capital needed to build a facility to house the Custer Manuscript Archive. "I've had to reassess my personal financial situation to keep this project viable."

"This museum and research facility would not only preserve the Custer archive, it would be an attraction of great interest to the hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit the Battlefield, the Crow Indian Reservation, and the State of Montana every year. The entire area would prosper from it."

In addition," he adds, "scholars and students would have an incredible opportunity to work toward their master's or doctorate degrees in the area of women's studies. This collection emphasizes the most important woman in the west and her amazing literary contribution. After all, each of her four books are still in print today."

Kortlander knows something about bringing additional tourist dollars to the area. He has spent the last 15 years turning Garryowen into a thriving tourist destination, literally from the ground up. When he purchased the land in 1993, the only structures on the seven-acre historic parcel were an old house and a run-down post office.



From those inauspicious beginnings, Garryowen has risen like a phoenix from the ashes. Today it is the site of the Custer Battlefield Museum, an upscale office complex, a 4,000-square-foot residence, a bed and breakfast/artist's guest quarters, a United States post office, a Subway sandwich restaurant, a gas station and convenience store. It is also the location of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the impressive Peace Memorial which surrounds it.



"I am now focusing on selling Garryowen, along with the Elizabeth Custer Manuscript Archive, to a corporation or philanthropist that will keep it all together and at this location," says Kortlander. "I've taken the project as far as I can. Now the torch is available to be passed onto someone with greater resources."

Kortlander's wish is to sell the Garryowen complex to someone who shares his vision for the Custer Museum & Library, adding that he'd be willing to stay on and help the new owner develop the project.

Located just three miles from the Little Bighorn National Monument, which attracts up to 400,000 visitors to the area annually, Garryowen's I-90 location sits directly along the route followed by tourists traveling to and from Yellowstone Park, the Black Hills of South Dakota, and Mt. Rushmore. "More than four million cars pass by here every year," adds Kortlander. "What better place to build the Custer Museum and Library?"

Originally founded in 1895 as a water stop for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, Garryowen was the drop-off point for mail, supplies, and troops bound for Fort Custer, and is located outside present-day Hardin, about 18 miles to the north. The town of Garryowen, such as it was, gradually faded away until Kortlander purchased it and turned it into the busy tourist stop it is today. As the only town located within the boundaries of the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Garryowen also has the distinction of being the spot where the first shots of the Battle were fired.

"This was Sitting Bull's camp," explains Kortlander. "Before Custer met his destiny three miles down river, some of his men initiated a fight with Sitting Bull's men at this end of the huge Indian encampment. We've recovered many artifacts from that first clash with the Indians here in Garryowen. It's an incredible historic location."

Garryowen certainly has a lot going for it, and Kortlander is dedicated to making the town even more important to historians, scholars, researchers, tourists, and local residents.

"This is an ambitious vision, and I'm determined to see it come true. The Custer legacy is also Montana's legacy. We can't lose this important piece of history, and I'm hoping to find a philanthropic individual or organization to financially sponsor this opportunity."

For more information on the Town of Garryowen and The Elizabeth Custer Museum & Library, please visit www.town4sale.com.