



Collection includes 123,000 historical archive items

Little Bighorn Battlefield artifacts headed for Arizona

Story By ED KEMMICK

Photos By James woodcock

Of The Gazette Staff

| **Posted: Tuesday, March 29, 2011 4:00 pm**

The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument's priceless archives and museum collection, which includes Lt. Col. George A. Custer's uniforms and Sitting Bull's arrows, will be temporarily relocated to a National Park Service center in Arizona.

Battlefield Superintendent Kate Hammond announced the widely anticipated move Tuesday, saying she hoped the move would be completed by the end of summer.

In a prepared statement, Hammond said monument officials "decided to move the Little Bighorn collection because of the potential for irreversible deterioration of items or catastrophic loss by fire or flood in its present, substandard location — the basement of the park's small and outdated visitor center."

The collection includes more than 123,000 historical archives and some 26,000 historic objects. About 30,000 Little Bighorn archival items are already at the Western Archaeological and Conservation Center in Tucson, Ariz., for conservation work, cataloging and conversion to digital format.

"This is great news for such a significant and irreplaceable collection," Hammond said in the release. "... This temporary relocation will keep the collection together and available for researchers, in the best possible place for its protection and conservation until it can come home to a new museum facility."

The move will not include museum pieces and photographs already on display in the battlefield visitor center, and Hammond said in an interview that even after the move, items from the collection will be rotated through the visitor center displays.

"For the average visitors, they will not notice any difference," Hammond said.

The national monument is the site of one of the most iconic battles in American history — the June 25, 1876, clash between Custer's 7th Cavalry and a coalition of Indian tribes, most of them Cheyenne and Sioux.

The museum pieces and archives, many of them directly related to the battle, are now stored in one small room and an even smaller vault in the basement of the 59-year-old visitor center. There is no fire suppression system in the storage area, which also lacks adequate climate controls and is at risk of being flooded by exposed ceiling-mounted water pipes.

The basement is not accessible to people with disabilities, and Hammond said it is too cramped for the proper preservation of objects and for conducting research. Nor do the rooms meet National Park Service or American Association of Museum storage standards, she said.

The prospect of moving the collection does not sit well with some people familiar with the site, including former battlefield Superintendent Jim Court. Over the weekend, Court sent an email alert to some battlefield enthusiasts, in advance of the anticipated announcement.

He urged people to fight any plans to move the collection out of state, and said: "We have offered to pay expenses to have it put in the new Big Horn County Museum and keep the collection close to the battlefield and in Montana."

Court said in an interview that “we” referred to the Custer Battlefield Preservation Commission and the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association, both of which he belongs to. He said the groups hadn’t officially made the offer, but he was confident that they would be willing to help keep the collection in Montana.

“If it goes to Tucson, it will never come back,” he said. “That’s the fear.”

Supporters of the new Big Horn County Museum are planning to break ground for the museum on Monday.

According to a Park Service fact sheet, the Western Archaeological and Conservation Center in Tucson is a state-of-the-art facility that already holds about 10 million archives and objects from 71 Western parks.

The same fact sheet said the Intermountain Regional Office of the Park Service in Denver has designated the Little Bighorn collection as the most at-risk collection in the region’s jurisdiction, which includes eight states and 91 parks.

Lee Noyes, who with his wife, Michele, edits the Battlefield Dispatch, the quarterly newsletter of the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association, said the Park Service seems to be making the best of a bad situation.

Noyes, who said he was speaking only for himself, not the association, said allowing the collection to remain where it is, subject to fire, flood or theft, “is an accident waiting to happen.”

“I’ve got to give Kate Hammond a lot of credit for finally taking bull by the horns after 25 years of failure,” Noyes said.

That was in reference to the general management plan for the battlefield, drawn up in 1986, which envisioned building a new visitor center and museum collections storage facility in a greatly expanded park. But efforts to do so have been delayed by “financial, political and legal setbacks,” as the Park Service said in its fact sheet.

In a brochure outlining management issues confronting the park, released last week, the Park Service said that under a best-case scenario, “a new visitor center is at least 5-10 years away.”

Hammond said she and the Park Service are committed to continuing negotiations with the Crow Tribe, which owns most of the land around the park, and with the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, which owns or controls 3,500 acres around the 765-acre national monument. The expansion is needed because the management plan calls for building the new visitor center and museum on the valley floor, where the battle began, rather than near the summit of Last Stand Hill, where it ended.

John Wessels, director of the Intermountain Region for the Park Service, said, “A renewed collaboration with our partners to give these invaluable objects and archives a proper new home would enhance enormously how we tell the story and the lessons of the Little Bighorn.”

Hammond said the Park Service has been consulting with the tribes associated with the battle about any items in the collection that may be subject to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Those talks will continue regardless of where the collection is located, she said, and will also deal with any special storage or visitation requirements associated with the objects.

Steve Brady, chairman of the Northern Cheyenne Cultural Commission, said the commission is opposed to sending Cheyenne artifacts, particularly sacred items, out of state.

“There are family members with direct ties to some of the sacred objects,” he said.

The move, which will cost an estimated \$220,000, will not affect the 5,100-volume White Swan Memorial Library in the Stone House near the existing visitor center. Hammond said the library is the first stop for most people researching or looking for more information about the battle.

Sharon Small, curator of the battlefield museum, has been in a temporary position funded year to year and she will be out of a job on Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year, Hammond said. No other employees at the battlefield will be affected by the relocation.

Contact Ed Kemmick at ekemmick@billingsgazette.com or 657-1293.