



Little Bighorn Battlefield eyes possible move of museum collection, archives

By ED KEMMICK Of The Gazette Staff | Posted: Thursday, March 10, 2011 12:15 am

LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT — In two cramped rooms in the basement of the visitor center at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, treasures are everywhere.

In drawers and filing cabinets, on shelves and in display cases, there are nearly 120,000 priceless artifacts, documents and books.

There is a large parchment commission, dated 1861 and signed by President Abraham Lincoln, appointing George A. Custer a second lieutenant in the Army's second regiment of cavalry. There is a 7th Cavalry silk guidon, carried off by the victors at the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, and recovered a few months later at the Battle of Slim Buttes.

There are guns and knives, boots and canteens, buttons, belt buckles, spurs and ribbons, original photographs, shell casings, military records, hundreds of rare books and Native American accoutrements and sacred items. There is even Custer's "U.S. Army suspensory bandage," more commonly known today as an athletic supporter.

In "Stricken Field: The Little Bighorn Since 1876," the historian Jerome Greene called the battlefield's collection "perhaps the single most important repository of historic objects, art and documentary materials relating to the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Indian Wars of the trans-Mississippi West."

Unfortunately, the storage space is as inadequate as the collection is important. There is no fire protection system, no special climate control, exposed plumbing, far too little space and no access for people with disabilities.

As a result, the National Park Service is considering moving the collection, at least temporarily, to another location, possibly out of state.

It might seem like the most logical solution would be to expand the existing museum and collection space, or to build a new visitor center. But as battlefield Superintendent Kate Hammond says, "If there were an easy solution, it would have been done."

Hammond said problems with the collection have been apparent at least since 1986, when a general management plan for the battlefield identified four critical issues: the condition of the collection, the need for a new visitor center, the need to expand park boundaries, and crumbling roads and inadequate parking.

The plan called for building a new visitor center in the Little Bighorn Valley, where the battle began, and demolishing the existing building on Last Stand Hill. But a new center, with a new museum and collection storage, can't be built unless the park boundaries are expanded from 765 acres to more than 11,000. Dealing with roads and parking also hinges on doing something about the visitor center first.

The Crow Tribe has resisted efforts to enlarge the park, and political controversy scuttled plans to expand the existing visitor center in 2008. Because the intertwined issues in the management plan have proved intractable, nothing substantial has changed at the battlefield since the plan was drawn up.

"It's not OK to live another 25 years like this," Hammond said. "Things are getting worse."

Still, the prospect of moving the collection is troubling to some people.

Jim Court of Billings, who was the battlefield superintendent from 1978 to 1986, said it seems important from the perspective of Montana's heritage to keep the collection in state, if not necessarily at the battlefield. He also said it might be difficult for historians and other scholars to do their research so far away from the battlefield they are studying.

"Once you move it two states away, it just goes away," he said. "It might as well be in the Smithsonian or somewhere."

Margot Liberty, an anthropologist who co-wrote "Cheyenne Memories" with tribal historian John Stands in Timber, said she fears that if the collection goes out of state, it might not come back.

"If this is going to be temporary anyway, why not make it temporary in Billings?" she said.

Under Hammond's guidance, the National Park Service opened a "public engagement" process last fall, during which Hammond met with 14 of the 17 Indian tribes associated with the battlefield, and with historians, representatives of Montana's congressional delegation and board members representing associations and groups with an interest in the site.

In December, public meetings were held in Billings, Hardin and Golden, Colo., followed by two "webinars" that drew interest from people all over the world. The purpose of all the meetings was to gather comment on the four big issues laid out in the management plan.

A lot of people focused on the museum collection during the public and private meetings, Hammond said, and most people "expressed significant concerns" about it. The consensus was that "the most important thing is to protect the collection," she said. At the same time, she added, everybody wants to keep the collection together, and "it is everybody's desire to have it ultimately housed here."

Hammond said no specific options have been formally proposed by the National Park Service. She did mention several ideas that came up during the public engagement process, suggested by people attending the meetings or by Park Service personnel.

The suggestions included relocating the collection to nearby Park Service sites, including Yellowstone National Park or the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Deer Lodge. But neither of those sites has the room to house the Little Bighorn collection, Hammond said.

Another idea was storing the collection in the district office of the Bureau of Land Management in Billings, but Hammond said that facility is equipped to handle archaeological materials, not archival documents. One long-term suggestion was to build a joint museum and collection facility with the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, either at the battlefield or the recreation area.

Still another idea is to temporarily move the collection to the Western Archaeological and Conservation Center in Tucson, Ariz., which is a repository for National Park Service materials from throughout the mountain region.

Hammond said the center in Tucson already is holding 30,000 archival items from the Little Bighorn. The materials, which include photographs and 7th Cavalry muster rolls and other records, were sent there for conversion to digital files so that portions of the archives can eventually be accessed on the Internet. The battlefield is digitizing some of its own materials, including the Elizabeth Bacon Custer newspaper collection, but the large-format items had to be sent to Tucson for scanning.

Hammond insisted that a decision on the collection will probably have to be made in the next several months. For now, the Park Service's only official opinion is that the collection should ultimately be housed at the battlefield in an expanded visitor center and museum, she said.

Whatever happens to the collection, Hammond said, arrangements would be made to continue rotating artifacts from the collection through the displays in the visitor center museum.

Jerome Greene, the historian who wrote "Stricken Fields," said he attended the Park Service's public meeting in Colorado and he understands the need to move the collection out of the basement of the visitor center, which was built 60 years ago. But he would like to see the collection returned to at least the general vicinity of the battlefield as soon as possible.

He said the battlefield is unlike any other Park Service site in the country because there are "just so many people with a captivating interest in the park." People doing research on the battlefield site want access to books, records and other materials on-site as well, he said.

Liberty, the anthropologist whose book with John Stands In Timber added important new details to the account of the battle, echoed Greene's remarks, calling the battlefield "the most emotional museum collection in the country."

And not only the living might object to the loss of the collection, she said. "I can't imagine that Libbie Custer would be doing anything but turning over in her grave over the prospect of moving the collections," she said.

In fact, the wishes of Custer's widow are being taken into consideration. Gary Moore, an attorney in the solicitor's office of the Interior Department in Billings, said he has been asked to look into whether relocating the collection would comply with the department's rules and regulations, and whether it would conflict with any provisions of Libbie Custer's will.

Moore said he has to look at the conditions attached to other donated items as well, because "there might be similar restrictions on other gifts."

Some of the materials in the collection are Native American artifacts, including some sacred items, so moving them might be involve other difficulties. Hammond said there have been no discussions with the tribes on specific items yet because the Park Service hasn't decided what it is going to do with the collection.

Greene said moving the museum collection out of state might prompt people to demand action on the other problems confronting the battlefield.

"It might bring some attention to addressing the real big issue, which is the visitor center," he said. "If that happens, maybe something positive can come of this."

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