

Ethnography of Cultural Heritage: Interpretation and Commemoration Practices at Bear Paw, Big Hole, Little Bighorn, and Rosebud Battlefields

Helen Keremedjiev, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Anthropology, University of Montana



Various flags placed at the Indian Memorial during the 135th anniversary at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, June 2011

Building upon two years of fieldwork, this continuing doctoral research examines the varied ways on-site interpretation practices contribute to the perception of four historic battlefields as significant landscapes. The case studies are Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (LIBI); Nez Perce National Historical Park- Bear Paw Battlefield; Nez Perce National Historical Park- Big Hole National Battlefield; and Rosebud Battlefield State Park. The awarded Jerry O'Neal Fellowship funds only research conducted at LIBI. This 2011 summary focuses on LIBI.

During the summer of 2011, I continued conducting participant observations as a park visitor, focusing on the official anniversary programs. Based on a participant group's place-based cultural heritage, each group selects a specific on-site memorial or monument for the location of its anniversary program. This practice leads to two results. First, it contributes to ongoing place-based conflict heritages of different social groups. Second, despite continuing conflicts at LIBI, all groups strive to make the historic battlefield relevant and meaningful for all people.

I also conducted some semi-structured interviews with volunteering park personnel. Their responses have shown that they have a very strong commitment to the preservation and conservation of LIBI.

During the upcoming summer months, I will administer on-site questionnaires for park visitors. I will also conduct more semi-structured interviews with park personnel. These data will complement previously acquired information, including historical research and other participant observations from the four battlefields. The gathered data will provide more in-depth information on why these four historic battlefields are culturally significant places in our contemporary society.