

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

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This doctoral work looks at how different groups of people understand and feel about an historic event with the cultural landscape and their own cultural heritage. Heritage sites are locations to remember and commemorate the past. Looking at four historic battlefields in Montana as case studies, this two-year research project explores how the same cultural landscape with many layers of on-site interpretation can impact visitors' knowledge and feelings about historic events. The selected battlefields are Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (LIBI); Nez Perce National Historic Park- Bear Paw Battlefield; Nez Perce National Historic Park- Big Hole National Battlefield; and Rosebud Battlefield State Park. The awarded Jerry O'Neal Fellowship is for the LIBI portion of this project.

For this past summer, I did background research on the management history of LIBI, including the placement of individual markers of where battle participants had fallen, the name change of the park in 1991, the Indian Memorial, and the older mission statements of the park. The past management choices of the park have layered consequences for today's visitors. Monuments, memorials, individual marble and granite markers, trails, a national cemetery, and a visitor center dot the interpreted landscape. These tangible features signal to visitors where and what are important aspects of the historic battle to know.



Last Stand Hill marble markers at LIBI.



Wayside exhibit on recent archaeological excavations at LIBI.



The Indian Memorial during sunrise at LIBI.

Currently, the LIBI staff is updating its management plans for natural and cultural resources. It is an overwhelming challenge to maintain an 1876 cultural landscape that both protects and preserves the park's resources while providing access to and educational opportunities about them for visitors. Overall, the park staff is doing a commendable job given their financial limitations for such an iconic event in American history.

In addition to the historical research, I conducted participant observations as a tourist. I experienced a gamut of on-site interpretation opportunities provided at LIBI, including wayside exhibits, the visitor center, ranger talks, a bus tour, and the research library. The 134<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the battle was an emotionally powerful experience. I observed how different tribal and non-tribal groups remembered the past, from bringing homeland soil to place on markers for fallen ancestors to laying down wreaths and giving speeches at different memorials.



One of the commemoration events during the 134<sup>th</sup> anniversary at LIBI.

For the summer in 2011, I plan on administering questionnaires for park visitors and conducting interviews with individuals involved with on-site interpretation and commemoration practices. The gathered data will provide more in-depth information on why the four historic battles are culturally significant for different people; and participants' responses will provide more concrete data on how to maintain and improve visitors' knowledge and experiences at each historic battlefield.