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Sitting Bull's new Indian war

Plans for remains build controversy for tribal people

By Erin McClam

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STANDING ROCK INDIAN RESERVATION, S.D. — Drive from the town of Mobridge west across the Missouri River, clatter 4 miles down a winding path, and you find it — a modest monument on a lush green bluff.

This simplicity is striking because of the complex history of what lies beneath: The remains of Sitting Bull, the Sioux chief said to have foretold the defeat of Lt. Col. George Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876.

But it is more striking because of the state of extreme disrepair that befell the resting place of one of the best-known American Indians for half a century, until just two years ago.

It was shot and spat at, and worse. On the surrounding grounds bonfires burned and shattered beer bottles glittered. Someone tied a rope around the feather rising from the head of the bust, rigged it to a truck and broke it off.

The site is on what is called fee land, within the boundaries of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe but privately owned, and two years ago two men — one white, the other a Sioux — paid \$55,000 for it and began cleaning it up.

They have plans for a \$12 million monument complex they hope will honor Sitting Bull's memory with the dignity missing for so long, and let new generations learn about him.

But these plans have torn open a wound over who will control the great chief's legacy.

Killed in 1890

Some history: By 1868 there was relative peace between the Sioux and the U.S. government. The Second Treaty of Fort Laramie had secured for the Sioux a patch of land in southwest South Dakota.

Then gold was found in the Black Hills, whites rushed in, and the Sioux were ordered back to their reservations. Sitting Bull, having retreated into Montana, was said to have had a vision of a slaughter of soldiers.

Of soldiers falling like grasshoppers from the sky.

It was not long afterward, in 1876, that the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry was defeated at the Little Bighorn in Montana — also known as Custer's Last Stand, and, to some American Indians, as the Battle of the Greasy Grass.

The United States ultimately prevailed in the Indian Wars, but Sitting Bull became, and remains, an icon, a hero to his people. He was killed in a battle with Indian police and American soldiers on June 15, 1890.

There are pictures of Sitting Bull — instantly recognizable, the single feather rising from the parted hair, the look at once stern and at peace — hanging today in the home of Ernie LaPointe, in the Black Hills town of

On the Net

- Sitting Bull Monument Foundation: <http://www.sittingbullmonument.com/index.html>
- Smithsonian Repatriation Office: <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/repatriation/>

Lead.

A great-grandson of the chief, LaPointe has a craggy face and jet-black hair pulled back into a pony tail. And he is furious about the plans for a memorial complex atop his great-grandfather's grave. "They want to use our grandfather," he says, speaking for his three sisters, "as a tourist attraction."

So in February, he wrote to an assortment of Sioux tribes, including Standing Rock, which claims Sitting Bull. He called for a "final reburial" — in Montana.

"So that he may spend eternity," the letter went on, "at the sacred place where his vision had predicted the greatest victory for our people, the victory at the Battle of the Greasy Grass."

The two men who want to turn Sitting Bull's resting place into a memorial complex are Rhett Albers, an environmental consultant who is white, and Bryan Defender, who owns the sanitation system for the Standing Rock tribe and is enrolled there. They say people who come to the banks of the Missouri to see the site are confused — wondering: Well, where is the rest of it?

Their plan for the site would stream visitors through an "interpretive center," focused on the four Sioux ideals they say Sitting Bull represented: fortitude, generosity, bravery and wisdom.

Other features under consideration are a snack bar, offices and meeting rooms, a gift shop and a restaurant serving wild game and American Indian dishes. Defender, 35, said he and Albers have met with groups on the Standing Rock Reservation and received an overwhelmingly positive reaction to their plan. (The tribe's chairman did not respond to requests to be interviewed for this story.)

Albers said they hope someday to recoup their \$55,000, but have no plans to draw salaries from the tourist center.

"It's not about the money," says Albers, 45. "It's about the man. And the tribute."

This is not the first struggle over Sitting Bull's remains.

The Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, where the great chief lived his last years, straddles the Dakotas, and for the first half of the 20th century his remains lay at Fort Yates, N.D.

The grave was poorly marked. Weeds sprouted.

So in the early 1950s, a group of businessmen from Mobridge approached North Dakota authorities about having the remains moved south of the state line. North Dakota balked.

And that is how, in 1953, during a blizzard and in the middle of the night, a group from Mobridge, with a mortician in tow and with the blessing of the Standing Rock tribe, dug up the remains and secretly moved them into South Dakota.

Polish sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski contributed the granite bust that marks the remains today. (The sculptor also created a massive South Dakota memorial to Crazy Horse.) The bust is 6 feet tall and sits atop an 8-foot pedestal, yet still seems small set against magnificent natural surroundings.

For a time volunteers visited the bluff to mow the grass and clean up. But those efforts waned, said Larry Atkinson, publisher of the Mobridge Tribune. Into the vacuum stepped vandals, drunks, partying teenagers.

But LaPointe has the backing of Darrell Cook, superintendent of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, where there are already some memorials and markers recalling the battle. If LaPointe is successful in having the remains moved there, expect nothing like what Albers and Defender are trying to do in South Dakota.

"Sitting Bull, he was a humble man," Cook said. "I don't think building memorials and visitors centers and that type of stuff is appropriate."

The Smithsonian Institution, meanwhile, is researching Sitting Bull's living descendants and preparing a "repatriation report" for a lock of the chief's hair and a pair of his leggings it holds, which would be returned to them.

South Dakota authorities, in letters to LaPointe, have deferred to the Native American Graves Protection and

Repatriation Act, which says removal of human remains, even from private land enclosed by a reservation, requires the consent of the tribe.

No provable facts

Members of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe, which also claims descendants of Sitting Bull, have voted to leave the remains where they are.

It is difficult to nail down any aspect of the dispute as provable fact, particularly in a culture that for centuries has relied on a tradition of oral history.

It is not even possible to nail down as fact the presence of the actual bones of Sitting Bull on that Missouri River bluff.

One story that persists in North Dakota is that his remains are still buried at Fort Yates, that fakes were placed atop them, and that the fakes were taken to Mobridge in 1953.

Another story goes further, holding that Sitting Bull's remains are somewhere in Canada. According to that legend, the great chief himself ordered that fakes be planted at Fort Yates.

The story holds that he foresaw a bitter fight over his bones once he was gone.

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