

ROSEBUD AND WOLF MOUNTAINS BATTLEFIELDS UNDER SIEGE

A Case Study in Threats to the Spirit of Place

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Abstract. This paper discusses the deeply seated spirit of battlefields and places of conflict, the need to recognize various cultural perspectives at such places, and the grave threats posed to sites of high cultural value by global energy development. Using Montana's Rosebud and Wolf Mountains Battlefields, two pristine but threatened sites, and pending United States National Historic Landmarks, as case studies, the authors will address the complex challenges and strategies for preserving such places.

No sites embody a more conflicted spirit of place than battlefields, where heroic sacrifice and tragic human failures resonate across time. The spirit of conflicted places has layered meaning, reflecting different significance for people of divergent cultural perspectives. Thus, when a site represents the experience of several culture groups, seeking to preserve the spirit is a nuanced assignment. To truly preserve the spirit of such places, it is important to consult people from all sides of the story, and to seek broad understanding and definition of the values of place. And ultimately, in seeking consensus, there must also be a true willingness to save, rather than develop, the cultural landscape.

1. Territorial Conflict on the Northern Plains

Eastern Montana falls within a geographic region known as the Northern Plains, a large grasslands environment that until the late 1800s was home to vast herds of buffalo and native equestrian cultures. This was the last region to be homesteaded and settled by EuroAmericans within the contiguous United States, and the last major campaign by the U.S. Army against Native American tribal nations was waged here, as Lakota and Cheyenne people resisted the loss of their homelands. A series of battles unfolded here, during 1876-1877, capturing the attention of the world and altering the course of human history in the region and our nation, forever.

It is known as the Great Sioux War, but was a campaign by the United States government against many First Nations native to the plains, particularly the Cheyenne and the Sioux. The conflict had its roots in Westward Expansion and the motive to throw the doors open to mining, railroading and agricultural settlement of the American West. Stretching across some 25 years, the campaign to vanquish the Plains tribes came to a head in 1876-77, unfolding in a series of battles and an offensive centered in southeastern Montana. (See *Figure 1*).

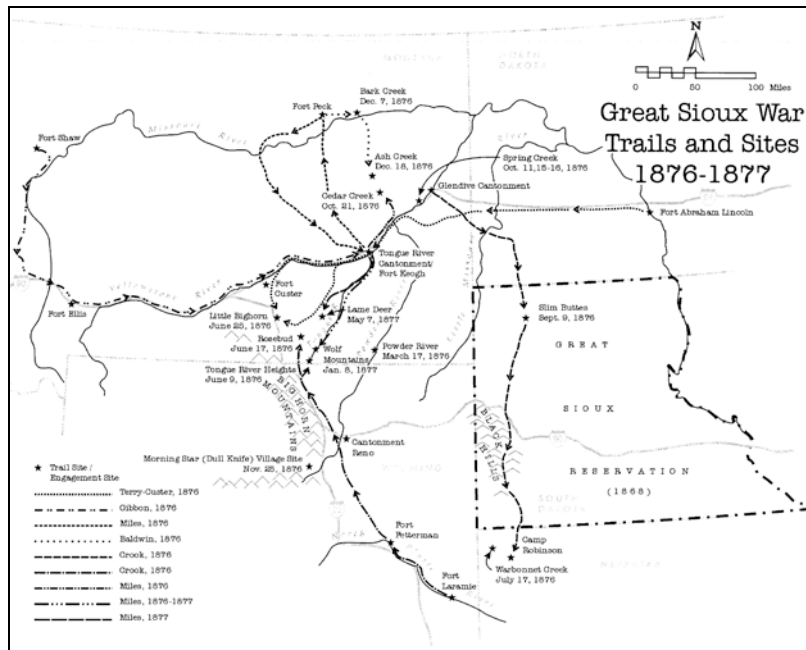


Figure 1. Map of Great Sioux War Trail and Sites.

(National Park Service 2002, 74)

The military strove to vanquish the native people of the region, while the tribes remained dedicated to their homelands. The viewpoints of General Crook, a U.S. Army general who led efforts against the plains tribes, and Wooden Leg, one of the Cheyenne tribal warriors who defended their territory, offer a historical perspective and a sharp contrast between those on either side of the fight:

“I believe it is wrong for a government as great and powerful as ours not to protect the frontier people from savages. I do not see why a man who has the courage to come out here and open the way for civilization in his own country is not equally entitled to the protection of this government as anybody else. The army should be strong enough, certainly, to protect their people throughout their whole domain.” (Crook 1876)

“The treaty allowed us to hunt here as we might wish, so long as we did not make war upon the whites. We were not making war upon them. I had not seen any white man for many months. We were not looking for them. We were trying to stay away from all white people, and we wanted them to stay away from us . . . Lots of buffalo were feeding on the grass at the upper Tongue and Powder rivers, on all of their branches and on the other lands in this whole region. Lots of elk, deer and antelope could be found almost anywhere the hunter might go to seek them. Lots of colts were being born in our horse herds this spring. We were rich, contented, at peace with the whites so far as we knew. Why should soldiers come out to seek for us and fight us?” (Wooden Leg 1931, 159 –160)

2. The Rosebud and Wolf Mountains Battlefields

The military campaign of 1876-77 began with an attack on a Cheyenne village led by Major Reynolds in March of 1876. The conflict expanded with the Battle of Rosebud Creek and continued until a final battle on the Tongue River, known as the Battle of the Wolf Mountains, on January 8, 1877. Over these months, the Army pursued Sioux and Cheyenne warriors and villagers throughout the region for more than 400 miles.

It has been recognized for almost 130 years that this trail and the battlegrounds along it are among the most important historic places in

the United States. Yet only some of the places along the trail enjoy protection. The most famous of these, the Little Bighorn Battlefield, has been a national monument since January 29, 1879, and is one of the most prominent historical sites in the lexicon of the American West. Elsewhere along the trail, recognition has been quietly building.

A study by the National Park Service and Western History Association (2002) under a *Clash of Cultures* theme identified a number of sites along the Great Sioux Wars trail deserving of far greater recognition and protection than is currently in place.



Figure 2. “The Gap” at Rosebud Battlefield.
(Jenks 2007)

The Rosebud Battlefield, 50 miles from the Little Bighorn, is a Montana state park purchased in 1978, to protect its inherent cultural and historic values. One drainage to the east, the Wolf Mountains Battlefield is located on a family-owned ranch and holds tremendous integrity of its landscape values. The family and local community have provided great stewardship for this place over the past century.

Due to their remote locations, these battlefields are exceptionally well preserved, unlike battlefields in more populated localities. As the former superintendent of the Little Bighorn Battlefield, Neil Mangum noted, “Rosebud Battlefield is not a park of picnic tables and playgrounds. Few structures disturb the nearly pristine landscape ... The site looks remarkably similar today to how it did more than a century ago, when Brigadier General George Crook’s command was met in battle by Sioux and Cheyenne warriors.” (Mangum 2004)

The Clash of Cultures study recommended National Historic Landmark designation for all three battlefields, and two of them – Rosebud and Wolf Mountains – have pending approval for this high honor.

3. Cultural Preservation in an Energy Basin

The river valleys of southeastern Montana are located within what is known as the Powder River Basin, a region rich in energy reserves – oil, gas and coal. Just to the south, in the state of Wyoming, the basin has been extensively mined for all of these commodities and the processes are highly destructive. Strip mines for coal, coalbed methane [CBM] wells and pipelines, energy railroads and oil wells are common throughout the Powder River Basin, and in Wyoming this has industrialized the landscape. The setting in Wyoming contrasts dramatically with the almost pristine countryside that remains north of the state border in Montana. However, this is changing as pressure for new energy reserves has led the federal government to open southeastern Montana to energy development.

The situation is exacerbated by a scenario whereby the surface land can be owned separately from the minerals that lie beneath it. The term “split-estate” is used to represent this situation, and results in conflict between those who are concerned with preservation of the land and the landscape, and those who pursue development of the minerals below. It is an often-complex challenge, wherein the minerals may be federally-, state- or privately-owned and can then be leased for development. The lessees, in turn, may, and usually do, sell those leases several times over the course of their term.

At some point, if it becomes feasible to actually develop and mine those leased minerals, the tension between surface use and occupancy and subsurface development comes to the forefront.

There is much agreement at all levels that the battlefields of southeastern Montana should be preserved. In pursuit of this goal, a growing partnership has formed that includes such national entities as the National Park Service and American Battlefield Protection program, as well as the state of Montana, and the sovereign Indian nations and historic and cultural organizations of the region.

As dialog is opened between traditional tribal historians, land managing agencies and land owners, the effort to find common ground and preserve these battlefields has also strengthened.

Such advocacy has arrived none too soon, as energy pressures are building around the world. In 2004, the first CBM gas field was

drilled in southeast Montana, and sadly, the federal government permitted the drilling of 178 wells on and around the Tongue River Heights Fight site, one of the secondary skirmishes in the Great Sioux Wars campaign. The land-managing agency failed to consider the national implications of degradation of this site, as well as tribal cultural and environmental impacts. Such impacts to historic sites in the region have sparked new alliances and strategies to see that the battlefields and other sites related to this history are preserved.

4. Spirits of Place Threatened

Beneath the Rosebud Battlefield lie coal and gas reserves that are owned separately from the surface lands. Rancher Elmer “Slim” Kobold, who operated a cattle ranch on the core lands of the battlefield prior to its becoming a state park, understood the inherent value of preserving the battlefield. “When mining companies found a rich coal seam under Kobold’s property in the early 1970s, he began an intense letter-writing campaign and teamed up with [Montana’s Fish, Wildlife & Parks department] to get Rosebud Battlefield designated in the National Register of Historic Places. A few years later, with constant urging by the tough old cowboy, the Montana legislature agreed to preserve the site, appropriating money ... to acquire a large portion of the battlefield.” (Peterson 2004)

The battlefield was protected, it seemed, from development. However, the state did not acquire the minerals under the land. With 80% of the subsurface minerals retained by the Kobold family, and some 20% either federally-owned or owned by the Crow Indian nation, mineral development under the battlefield is a very imminent threat. Currently, all of the mineral rights are under active lease. In January 2008, Pinnacle Oil & Gas filed their intent to drill for coalbed methane gas beneath the Rosebud Battlefield. Negotiations are currently ongoing to enable the state to acquire and retire these leases.

Meanwhile, a new railroad to haul coal from Wyoming through Montana has been approved for the Tongue River Valley. As currently planned, it will cut through the heart of the Wolf Mountains Battlefield and coal trains over a mile long will be rolling through the battlefield within a few years time.

Urgency to protect these sites is expressed by a growing audience, and by officials at the highest levels of government, from Montana’s governor and congressional leaders to tribal councils. Citing the “imminent threat by coal bed methane development” to “the physical and cultural integrity of the waters of the Rosebud Creek, the Rosebud

Battlefield, the Tongue River and the Battle of Wolf Mountain,” tribal councils for the Northern Cheyenne, Rosebud Sioux, Upper and Lower Sioux Communities all passed resolutions to support the effort and designation of the Rosebud Battlefield State Park (including the Rosebud Spring) and the Battle of Wolf Mountain as national historic landmarks.” (Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council 2005; Rosebud Sioux 2006; Lower Sioux Community Council 2006; Upper Sioux Community Council 2006)

5. Honoring the Spirit of Place

We are the answer to the prayers of the people who fought on this battlefield. (William Walks Along, Northern Cheyenne Tribal Vice-President at the first Rosebud Commemoration, July 17 2006)

The Rosebud and Wolf Mountains encounters offer dynamic perspectives on spirit of place. Battlefields hold powerful and faceted meaning for different cultural groups and audiences. In our experience the differences can be profound, and they are often informed by sharply contrasting secular and spiritual values.

As historian and theologian Edward T. Linenthal noted, “battle sites are civil space where Americans of various ideological persuasions come, not always reverently, to compete for the ownership of powerful national stories and to argue about the nature of heroism, the meaning of war, the efficacy of martial sacrifice, and the significance of preserving the patriotic landscape of the nation.” (Linenthal 1993, 1)

From a federal and state government perspective, the significance of battlefields such as Rosebud and Wolf Mountains is largely viewed in a secular manner – these places commemorate battles in the sweep of American Western history, they mark turning points in campaigns to control land and resources, and reflect patterns in cultural relations and national expansion. These battlefields are valued highly as military sites, providing places for military historians to study tactical maneuvers and strategies of engagement. They also are managed with a multiple use philosophy, giving recreation and education equal footing with commemorative and contemplative activities.

In meetings with tribal traditionalists, there was unanimous desire to engage meaningfully and be active participants in the protection of places of abiding significance. We often heard people express values relating to cultural identity, to the spiritual significance of battlefields and their importance as burial places. These deeply-held values are

not always shared, nor understood by non-native agency personnel with little background in the history of these places.



Figure 3. Drawing of Rosebud Battle by Joseph White Bull, Lakota.
(White Bull 1931)

In 2005, the Cheyenne came forward with information about this war, information they had held for over 100 years. The tribe had maintained a vow of silence regarding these events, until such time that it was safe for the people to discuss the oral history of what had transpired. That year, for the first time, Cheyenne and Sioux people held a commemoration ceremony at the Rosebud Battlefield, marking a return to the place culturally and signaling their strengthened commitment to seeing it preserved.

The next January, they held a small and meaningful ceremony at the Wolf Mountains Battlefield, again memorializing the events that had taken place there and the people who had fought there so long ago. In both places, the families who had preserved the land and given access for tribal commemorations were thanked and honored.

Two years later, in 2008, the effort to commemorate and protect these places goes on. Faced with imminent development, tribal leaders, preservationists, historians and conservationists have formed a broad coalition to draw attention to these fragile resources and build public support for their protection. Communities in the region are joining together to create alternative economic programs, centered around heritage development and historic preservation. This fall, a southeastern Montana partnership is staging a rolling workshop, to bus people through this historic region and awake the public to the

threats to the spirits of these places. Rather than accepting unbridled energy development, they will offer preservation and promotion of the cultural landscape as a viable economic option for sustaining communities in the region.

Each year, Cheyenne runners commemorate their historic return to the Tongue River and their home country. Runners along the 400-mile route pass a staff from one to the next, as they make the journey from Fort Robinson, Nebraska to Lame Deer, Montana. Regional heritage development efforts embrace this “Warrior Trail” and other concepts that will protect the landscape and the spirit of these places that are so important to our cultural identity.

Approval by the National Park Service’s Landmarks Committee to make the Rosebud Battlefield a national historic landmark “reinforced what Montanans and historians have long known,” Montana’s Governor Brian Schweitzer stated in January 2008, “Rosebud Battlefield is nationally significant in American history and culture.” (Schweitzer 2008)

In the end, it is an effort to preserve a common heritage and the identity of many unique cultures. The tribal chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux recently noted, “We believe that longterm protection of these areas is an important first step in preserving not only part of our own tribal heritage but that of other tribes as well.” (Murphy 2005)

As the respected Northern Cheyenne historian John Stands in Timber reflected, “They [the old Cheyenne] are gone now and much of what they knew has been lost. But I am glad I have saved a part of it for those who will come after us. It is important for them to remember some of the things that made the Cheyennes a great and strong people.” (Stands in Timber 1967)

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