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America's Best Idea

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA
UNTOLD STORIES DISCUSSION GUIDE

**MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL
MEMORIAL AND
NATIONAL PARK SUPERINTENDENT
GERARD BAKER**

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Mount Rushmore National Memorial and National Park Superintendent Gerard Baker

American Indians and the Black Hills

On June 25, 1876, more than fifteen hundred Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne Indians rode across the Little Bighorn River. In less than thirty minutes, General George Custer and his group of 208 soldiers from the 7th Cavalry had been annihilated; not a single man from the detachment survived. Among the Lakotas were Sitting Bull – the Hunkpapa chief and spiritual leader who did not fight – and the Oglala war chief, Crazy Horse, who most certainly did. “Ho-ka hey!” Crazy Horse, it is said, called to his warriors at the beginning of the battle. “It is a good day to fight! It is a good day to die! Strong hearts, brave hearts, to the front! Weak hearts and cowards to the rear!” (Frommer 2).

The Lakotas and Cheyennes fought that day for the right to keep their tribal lands, specifically the Black Hills: the all-important spiritual center of the Great Sioux Reservation, granted to the Lakotas in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Just months prior, the US government had offered the Lakota \$6 million for the land, having discovered gold there. When the Indians refused, the government threatened “sell or starve” legislation, cutting off all subsistence to the tribe if they refused to comply. Some tribal leaders eventually caved in. Those who did not – including Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse – chose to fight (Nabokov 209).

The Paha Sapa (“Black Hills” in Lakota) were – and still are – a sacred landscape for the Lakota. The Sioux were late-comers to the area, having arrived in the Hills at the end of the eighteenth century, migrating from the woodlands of Minnesota and driving out the Arikara, Kiowas, and Crows, who – in turn – had displaced earlier groups: the Shoshones, Poncas, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and others. For more than 13,000 years, American Indians have traveled through and hunted in the Hills. Archaeological evidence indicates that the area has been sacred land for centuries (Albers 14–15; Nabokov 207–208).

The Battle of Little Bighorn was a day of unmitigated victory for the Lakotas and Cheyennes and – as a Native woman told National Park Service Superintendent Gerard Baker – “we’ve been paying for it ever since.” Sensational and widely reported tales of the defeat of Custer and his men resulted in public outrage throughout white America. Thousands more cavalymen were dispatched to the area by General Phil Sheridan and, over the next year, the Lakota were relentlessly pursued. By the fall of 1877, all the Lakotas and the majority of Cheyennes were effectively under federal control, settled on reservations controlled by federal agents. The Black Hills had been lost to them forever (Baker; Albers 128–130).

Mount Rushmore National Memorial

The idea for carving a colossal monument in the Black Hills came from South Dakota state historian Doane Robinson. In late August 1924, he proposed the idea to sculptor Gutzon Borglum, hoping to entice him to carve heroes of the Old West – Redcloud, Custer, and others – on the Needles, eroded granite pillars just south of Mount Rushmore in what is now Custer State Park. The Needles, it turned out, were too soft to carve, and Borglum had different ideas about what figures should be memorialized. He was not interested in regional heroes, but men who epitomized the flowering of our nation – Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt (Larner 90-91).

Borglum took his work seriously; he considered himself to be “providing a formal rendering of the philosophy of our government into granite on a mountain peak” – a rendering that would last for all time: Borglum carved Washington’s nose one foot larger than scale to add another 100,000 years to the sculpture’s lifetime. The National Park Service and the Mount Rushmore Preservation Society are more conservative in their estimates, guaranteeing the integrity of the work for just 20,000 years (Larner 12; 125).

The initial dedication of the memorial was held in 1925, before funding or workers had been secured. Two years later, a second dedication was held on August 10, 1927, this one officiated by President Calvin Coolidge and including a ceremonial first blasting of Mount Rushmore – a rocky outcropping the Lakota had called “The Six Grandfathers,” named for the earth, the sky, and the four directions (Larner 241–244).

For many American Indians, the carvings on Mount Rushmore have come to epitomize the loss of their sacred lands and the injustices they’ve suffered under the US government. In the summer of 1970, members of AIM – the American Indian Movement – mounted a “siege” of the memorial, occupying the ledge above the presidents’ heads for nearly a month. Although such protests are not as common today, the Memorial can still be a focal point for Indian protest and contempt. At the same time, it is a monument to the best principals of our nation – democracy, freedom, enterprise – and each year millions of Americans are moved to tears when they visit (Larner 278–286; Albers 180).

Superintendent Gerard Baker

In 2004, Gerard Baker inherited this complicated situation when he was appointed the first American Indian superintendent of Mount Rushmore. A Mandan-Hidatsa, Gerard grew up on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota and was no stranger to controversy. He’d served as superintendent at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, arriving in the wake of the park’s name change (from Custer Battlefield to the more neutral Little Bighorn Battlefield) and bringing American Indian tribes with him – as participants in the annual battle commemoration ceremony, as seasonal rangers in the park’s interpretive program, and as visitors. Gerard left the battlefield in 1998 amidst death threats from detractors and praise from his NPS supervisors. He considers both a measure of his success in bringing the Indian story back to Little Bighorn (Larner 175–176; Baker).

But taking the job at Mount Rushmore was different.

It was very challenging to accept the job here, because growing up I understood what Mount Rushmore meant. And for us, for Indian people, it doesn’t mean “Success of America.” It means the desecration of the sacred Black Hills; it means the losing of the Black Hills to the United States government, to white people that came in and shoved everybody out of here and put us on a reservation. So it meant a lot of negative things.

– Gerard Baker

Gerard thought about the offer for four days. He consulted with his family and the elders of his tribe. He decided that, if they told him not to take the post, he wouldn’t.

It was just the opposite. I'm the first American Indian here as superintendent and the people back home were saying, "Man, what an opportunity to educate people. And what a time period to educate people." So, I took the job. —Gerard Baker

True to form, Gerard began making changes at Mount Rushmore, bringing the Indian perspective to the interpretive program and bringing more Natives into the park — as visitors and employees.

Coming here was a challenge in that Mount Rushmore's enabling legislation has us only tell the first centuries of America and these four presidents. And this is a challenge for me because I believe that we should go back before that time. I want to show what life was like before George Custer found gold in the Black Hills, before Borglum came in and started carving the sculptures here. —Gerard Baker

As at Little Bighorn, Gerard met with resistance to his changes — particularly given Mount Rushmore's prominent place as a symbol of American patriotism.

This is a very big challenge, especially after 9/11. When I first came here, I'd go out in the park and I would watch people. They would look at those four presidents and they'd get teary-eyed. This place draws emotion. And it should! But again, we were only telling half the story.

What we're doing now is we're telling *all* the story. But the challenge is: I don't want to make those four guys look bad, but I want to be real. How do you tell the real story? That's my challenge here.

Well, the way you tell it is: You tell it. —Gerard Baker

Baker began by erecting one teepee, simply to remind visitors of the ancient and ongoing presence of American Indians in the Hills.

I remember one day I went out there and there were like 20, 30 people gathered, and so I said, "What the heck, I'll just start talking about this." So I started and when I got through there were about 200 people there. And so that made me think, "Let's do something else. Let's start talking about this." —Gerard Baker

In 2008, the park opened its "Heritage Village," a place where Sioux interpreters, hired as seasonal rangers, interface directly with the public, educating visitors about Sioux culture and history and about their understanding of the Black Hills.

We have stories that are very hard to tell; we have stories that are very hard to listen to. Primarily the reactions have been very positive but there are always those few that condemn; they didn't want to hear about the American Indian plight, or they don't want to hear about the breaking of treaties. Because it happened a long time ago, it doesn't affect us today. And I believe it still affects us today. —Gerard Baker

The addition of Native voices in the interpretive program has imparted a more complex and complete understanding of the National Parks and the legacies they protect and has brought more Indian visitors to the park. The park now offers its popular audio tour not only in European languages, but also in Lakota. And Gerard has expanded his vision to embrace not

just Native stories and traditions, but the vast diversity of cultural traditions and stories that make up our national heritage.

It's not just a teepee here. We're promoting all cultures of America.... That's what this place is! For goodness sake, this is Mount Rushmore! It's America! – Gerard Baker

The new interpretive policy at Mount Rushmore encourages programs reflective of all cultures in America. The park sponsors a "Roots of American Music" series, with performances ranging from Rapid City's Faith Temple Choir to rockabilly-inspired Gail and the Tricksters to a German "oompah" band. And throughout the year, cultural groups like the Sons of Norway demonstrate traditional dancing and crafts. According to Gerard, encouraging this sort of resurgence is critical to our cultural survival.

We're losing who we are culturally. The Germans don't share their stories with their children anymore. The Irish don't share their stories; the Norwegians; everybody. We have all these cultures that come and make up America. But we're losing it really quickly. America's losing it. And in 200 years, if everybody looks the same, everybody speaks the same, we've failed as a human race.

And we're getting to that point. When people say to me, "Well, I don't know what I am. I'm Heinz 57," I tell them, "Well, pick one then! And concentrate on that."

– Gerard Baker

Pride in who we are, no matter what our backgrounds, is what Gerard believes Mount Rushmore is all about, and is the message he wants visitors to leave with.

What that does is it helps everybody understand, "Hey, I've got a culture, too. How come I don't know about my culture? It's about time I start learning about it! Because I'm proud of being Welsh; I'm proud of being British; I'm proud of—" whoever you are. This is what makes up America! Everybody's something different here. We're all different. We're human beings, is what that says.

And so what we want is to have people open their eyes when they come in here—especially young kids open their eyes. And maybe go back to the idea that we need to start sitting down at our tables again in the evenings—turning off the TV, turning off the computer—and start telling stories again. Maybe a kid asks, "Who were those four presidents on the hill?" And Mom and Dad have to answer that, right?

And just maybe it gets us talking again as human beings, as Americans.

– Gerard Baker

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