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# RECONSIDERING NATIONAL PARK INTERPRETATION OF THE GREAT PLAINS AND TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST

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## RECONSIDERING NATIONAL PARK INTERPRETATION OF THE GREAT PLAINS AND TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST

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**ABSTRACT**—The National Park Service has generally interpreted its sites in the Great Plains in terms of a Eurocentric narrative of westward expansion. Though some sites are changing (e.g., Little Bighorn), others are not (e.g., Scotts Bluff). Even those sites that have changed still retain important elements of traditional narratives, which often date to the 1930s or to the Mission 66 period (1956–66). The newest sites, such as Washita Battlefield, tell newer stories that resonate well with today’s visitors. These provide a model for revising older sites. Giving greater attention to causes and consequences, aiming for a richer mix of disciplinary perspectives, including a wider range of historic and prehistoric peoples, and providing more balance in cases of war or cultural conflict will all improve interpretation. Exploring multiple meanings of resources such as wilderness will bring the National Park Service’s practices closer to modern academic literatures. Engaging both controversial histories and modern controversies over policy constitutes good pedagogy and should also be part of updated interpretative programs.

**Key Words:** westward expansion, interpretation, national parks

### INTRODUCTION

Though rarely recognized as such, the national parks constitute one of the largest programs of adult education in the United States. At these sites, visitors who may have slept through history class rediscover the human stories of the past.

The National Park Service (NPS) tells those stories at national parks, national battlefields, national historic sites, and other park units. Traditionally the park service has told these stories with an authoritative narrative product that it develops through the procedures of a hierarchical administrative agency. Only the ephemeral ranger talk has had the space to move outside a single narrative, with each ranger having the discretion to tell the story in somewhat different ways (Fine 1988; cf. Handler and Gable 1997 outside the NPS).

Many of those stories are inherently political at both the national and local levels. They address foundational stories of the nation, its people, and their government. Gen. George A. Custer at Little Bighorn has potent mythical value to many people. Nicodemus National Historic Site interprets a living community, which includes descendants of past residents. National historic sites such as Fort Laramie or Fort Scott may include descendants of

soldiers in the current community. Former landowners at Big Bend may still live in the region.

Sometimes the National Park Service navigates these political battlefields well, and sometimes not. Political mandates, including establishment acts and park service policy manuals, also guide interpretation in particular directions. Expert staff are not without blinders that reflect their own values, social environment, and disciplinary training (Pahre 2011b). They also face severe budget constraints. Once built, visitor centers, exhibits, signs, pamphlets and brochures, audiocassettes, and other interpretive material remain unchanged for long periods. Even when staff revamps the old interpretation, many legacy objects carry over as interpreters take incremental approaches to changing their stories. Moreover, the decentralized nature of the National Park Service means that park administration has the discretion to just leave things the way they are, for decades.

The cumulative effect of such processes has given us an interpretation of the trans-Mississippi West that focuses on “westward expansion.” Across many sites, European Americans move across the Plains, interact with Native Americans in war and peace, conquer a wilderness, and build a nation. Units whose interpretation program began in the 1930s, including Scotts Bluff, Fort

Laramie, and Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, continue that narrative in a very obvious way.

Non-Anglo stories are made to fit that story. African American buffalo soldiers assimilate to the army's story, while blacks at Nicodemus become part of the homesteading movement. Minority groups that fit less well into those narratives tend to be overlooked, such as Mexicans and Mexican Americans at Fort Davis or Fort Larned. Fresh approaches tend to appear only at new sites that lack legacy effects, such as Washita Battlefield and Sand Creek Massacre.

Yet even the new units face potential pitfalls reflecting wider currents of American thought. The National Park Service continues to present humans as generally separate from nature, a "dualist" conception that has attracted considerable criticism in the literature on wilderness (Callicott and Baird 1998).

In addition, the site-specific nature of most park interpretation tends to neglect whatever happens off site: the broader economic and political forces that produced westward expansion, the long-term consequences for the United States and its neighbors, and the human toll for Native Americans. The park service could make interpretation better by thinking about larger causes and consequences, by making more complex the relationships between people and nature, and by opening up the stories about different groups of people and how they interacted with one another.

### THE STUDY AREA

To explore the pitfalls of past interpretation and the promise of alternative approaches, this article examines the national park units from the Mississippi River to the Rockies (see Fig. 1). This study area captures the Great Plains and the mythological West of the nineteenth century, with its settlers, ranchers, soldiers, and Indians (Utley 1979).

This study area includes a group of "threshold" parks on the front range of the mountains, from Guadalupe Mountains National Park in Texas to Glacier National Park in Montana. These parks are important because the region's wilderness interpretation is clustered where the High Plains meet the foothills. The study area also includes a few sites not traditionally associated with westward expansion, such as two Civil War battlefields in the Ozarks—both fought along an early route to the West. Jefferson National Expansion Memorial on the Mississippi River in St. Louis seeks to provide an overview of westward expansion more generally.

As Figure 1 shows, most sites in the study area lie near the western trails, near the Black Hills, or they preserve battlefields of the Indian Wars. These evoke the "Wild West" that still carries important symbolism for many Americans. This gives the stories at those sites political weight that occasionally erupts into overt conflict over interpretation.

### THE HISTORY OF HISTORY IN THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

The first national parks and monuments preserved monumental scenery, generally in uninhabited "wilderness." Because inhabited landscapes were mostly absent from the parks, interpretation focused on geology, wildlife, and other natural history. This interpretation began outside official management by pioneers such as Enos Mills in Rocky Mountain National Park, John Muir and the Sierra Club in Yosemite, and the unsung stagecoach drivers of Yellowstone.

There were few historic sites in the park system until the 1930s, when new sites were added as part of the wider New Deal expansion of government. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration worked to make Americans feel good about themselves during both the Great Depression and World War II, giving interpretation a strongly patriotic flavor. This continued through the Mission 66 period (1956–66), when many visitor centers and other facilities were built. That infrastructure continues to shape interpretation today.

The breakdown of social consensus in the 1960s posed a challenge to the moderately conservative National Park Service. Civil rights, feminism, Latino/a activism, the American Indian Movement, and gay liberation brought the country a growing concern with diversity that lay outside traditional park service concerns. Since then, interpretation has worked in a political environmental characterized both by New Left concerns and a political backlash on the Right.

### Custer Battlefield National Monument

In the national parks, this social turmoil washed up against existing infrastructure, visitor centers, and exhibits. Custer Battlefield National Monument had long celebrated George A. Custer and his men, memorializing their sacrifices and largely ignoring the Indian victors of the battle. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, park service staff, members of Congress, and even some Custer buffs had begun to talk about this bias, discussing ways to tell



Figure 1. National park units in the study area.





Figure 2. The Indian memorial at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

the Native side of the story. As often happens, a lack of funding kept these ideas from fruition.

American Indian Movement activist Russell Means then forced the issue over several years, disrupting the centennial ceremonies in 1976 and installing his own memorial plaque in 1988. That “desecration” forced Congress to pay attention. In 1992, it passed legislation changing the site’s name to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. It also provided funds for an Indian memorial (Fig. 2) to be placed on Last Stand Hill (Linenthal 1993; Greene 2008).

### Pea Ridge National Military Park

Little Bighorn has unusually high symbolic value in the American West. More typical is Pea Ridge National Military Park in Arkansas, whose interpretation dated to a Mission 66 program in 1963. The Trail of Tears, which follows the Telegraph Road along which the battle was fought, was not interpreted for decades. A \$25,000 donation from Wal-Mart (headquartered in nearby Bentonville) allowed the National Park Service to install new wayside exhibits in 2006. After receiving more funds from park service sources, management was able to revamp the visitor center exhibits in 2010 (Pahre 2012). Among other changes, it now features more visibly the role of the First and Second Cherokee Mounted Rifles (Fig. 3).

Many other sites resemble Pea Ridge in depending on visitor centers, wayside exhibits, historic resource studies, and other physical and intellectual infrastructure dating to the 1960s. This characterizes Wilson’s Creek National Battlefield, not far from Pea Ridge. It has not obtained funding for new programs and it continues the kind of outdated interpretation previously found at Pea Ridge. Differences between sites such as Pea Ridge and



Figure 3. Second Cherokee Mounted Rifles at Pea Ridge National Military Park.

Wilson’s Creek often reflect superintendents with different interests or skills working within a decentralized national park system. The local political environment also matters, since Pea Ridge is close to both Wal-Mart and the Cherokee Nation, and each contributed to the new interpretation in its own way.

Without a superintendent who decides to update interpretation, sites often reflect approaches to substance and pedagogy from the early 1960s or before. As David L. Larsen (2011:37) notes, many historic sites have strong traditions about what they are “supposed” to say. Civil War battlefield interpreters have long believed that they should focus on the location of units on the landscape and the tactical movement of troops during the battle. This “chess game” approach to battles neglects larger historical context and impact (Sutton 2001), and is also found in accounts of the frontier army (Smith 1998).

In the Great Plains, the preserved forts share an interest in the daily lives of soldiers. National historic sites at Fort Davis, Fort Laramie, Fort Larned, and Fort Scott have all restored the original buildings as funds allowed. Rooms display original, replica, and off-site period furnishings (Fig. 4). Visitors see how the smithy worked, how the stables were organized, what the enlisted men’s barracks and mess halls looked like, how officers’ quarters appeared, and so on. Despite the presence of stacked rifles, the occasional cannon, and the sound of bugles over the public address systems, the forts convey a sense of historic domesticity rather than impressing the military functions upon visitors (Sellars 2011a, 2011b). Displaying differences between officers and enlisted men is an interesting approach that reflects some newer scholarship on class distinction in the frontier army (e.g., Adams 2009).

Writing for professional interpreters, Larsen (2011) argues that better practice requires that we rethink such interpretative offerings and ask, “What will be meaningful



Figure 4. Infirmary at Fort Larned.

to audiences in the time they have to spend?" That rethinking lies at the heart of this paper. Giving greater attention to causes and consequences, developing a richer conception of the historic players, and providing a more complex understanding of human relationships with nature provide major themes for rethinking interpretation.

#### INTRODUCING THE NARRATIVE OF THE WEST: JEFFERSON NATIONAL EXPANSION MEMORIAL

To understand the overall National Park Service narrative, we must begin in St. Louis, France's inland outpost in Louisiana Territory, the base for the Lewis and Clark expedition, the fur trade, and expansion up the Missouri. The Gateway Arch symbolizes its role in expansion, a triumphal arch in the Roman tradition. The arch is the best-known part of Jefferson Expansion National Memorial, founded in 1935 as part of an ideology of expansion and nation building. Like Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota, it is an artificial national park unit, an unhistorical object masquerading as a historic site.

A subcommittee of the National Parks Advisory Board developed the vision for the site, concluding in 1937 that it should "signify the realization on the part of the nation, in its early youth, that it was destined to occupy an important position in the family of nations, and that . . . it was justified in trying to arrange its estate according to [a] conception of its ultimate maturity" (cited in Rothman 1998:156). This patriotism would help raise American spirits in the middle of the Great Depression and, not incidentally, provide construction jobs. It retained its latter purpose from the depression era into the 1960s, when its building projects were drawn into the Mission 66 program of park improvements and a national agenda of urban renewal.



Figure 5. The Old Courthouse.

Meanwhile, in 1943 a "temporary" exhibit was opened in the Old Courthouse (Fig. 5). This emphasizes the building's history and architectural significance along with St. Louis history (Brown 1984: Chapter 8, "1968-1980"). Because the *Dred Scott* case began here, and slave auctions sometimes occurred out front, it now emphasizes slavery and the African American experience.



Some kind of museum was always planned for the main site on the river, but there were many ideas: a museum of the fur trade, of architecture, natural history, westward expansion, science and progress, an aquarium or planetarium. Eero Saarinen, the architect of the Gateway Arch, wanted one museum on the history of the West and a second on the architecture of old St. Louis (Bellavia 1996:109). They were thinking big—park service director George Hartzog said that “[i]t is entirely probable that we will be creating the outstanding memorial of the 20th century” (cited in Brown 1984:7).

In 1968 the idea was to focus “on the land; how it was acquired; the men who mastered it; and the significance and meaning of westward expansion to our nation and our people” (JNEMA 1968:10). But plans changed again at meetings in 1971 and 1972. The new idea was to tell the story of the West through different groups of people (trappers and traders, soldiers, settlers, cattlemen, miners, and Indians), interpreting both typical individuals and specific major figures such as Custer or Jefferson (Brown 1984; see also Utley 1979). Construction began in 1974, and the museum opened in August 1976.

The legacies of these various plans are still evident in the museum today. Lines of interpretation radiate out from the entrance at the center of a semicircle. Each line is built around a type of person such as mountain men, soldiers, or Indians; in addition, a tipi and Indian pony stand in the center of the layout. As the visitor walks forward she moves through time, with decades marked on the ceiling. The back wall displays large modern photographs of sites that Lewis and Clark visited. Linking Jefferson’s purchase of Louisiana and the Indian Wars of the 1880s, the site brings together the key threads of American identity, the American Revolution, Oregon Trail, Civil War, and manifest destiny, carrying the story of exploration forward to the moon (Fig. 6).

The museum is Anglocentric in vision, not only because Congress mandated a focus on westward expansion. African Americans appear as buffalo soldiers, instruments of expansion. Buffalo soldier Sgt. Robert Banks comes to life as an animatronic figure telling of his life (Fig. 7); his presence underlines the essential unity of the frontier army. American Indians, including an animatronic Chief Red Cloud, appear as chiefs who covet the medals given them as friends of the president (Fig. 8). The Spanish Empire, Mexican Americans, and the Southwest are absent, as are the Russians on the West Coast, conflicts with Canada and the United Kingdom over boundaries, or Chinese and Japanese immigration to the West in the 19th century.



Figure 6. Stagecoach to the stars.



Figure 7. Sergeant Robert Banks.



Figure 8. Chiefs and medals at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

The park brochure acknowledges Jefferson National Expansion Memorial's tradition of Anglocentrism and its earlier failure to interpret American Indians and African Americans, as well as Spanish, French, Russian, Asian, and other explorers. It claims that "[t]oday the park pays tribute to the multicultural aspect of the peopling of America," but beyond the buffalo soldiers the new arrivals are pretty hard to find.

Nowhere does the museum detail the cost of expansion for Native peoples. Nor does it consider the political consequences of expansion, a launching pad for American colonialism in the Pacific, a major war with Japan, and ongoing controversies over its global role today. Only in glorifying exploration does it carry the story forward, with a large photo of the moon and another of an astronaut standing on the moon. Perhaps most glaringly, the museum does not explain the causes of westward expansion. Its main explanation is that the motives for going west were as varied as the people who did it.

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial extends to the city's historic waterfront, with some statues and signs interpreting the role of St. Louis in inland navigation. The Old Cathedral of St. Louis King is an active church partnered with the expansion memorial. The church's interpretation of the site—which is not official park service interpretation—states that the Old Cathedral “stands in the center of the memorial as a reminder of the expansion of faith throughout the west” (Basilica of Saint Louis 2011). This clearly resonates with the expansion memorial's own themes.

To unify the interpretation found at these several sites, the National Park Service uses the overarching theme of “dreams”—dreams of expansion, power, and wealth; dreams of great engineering works; dreams of freedom for Dred Scott; and whatever dreams the visitor brings.

The gift shop, of all places, develops the dream theme for each group. In front of the DVDs, the gift shop tell us, “On this spot, a filmmaker dreamed of capturing the worker's dedication on a monumental job”; above the books on American Indians, “Native people dreamed of peace with the exchange of gifts”; and above the books on white settlers, “Frontier lawmen dreamed to enforce peace in the American West.” The gift shop also asks, “What do you dream?” and offers answers such as, “I want to build a strong community” and “I want to drive across America.” The park service does not include more provocative dreams such as “I dream of reparations for slavery” or “I dream that the white man will leave the Americas.” More realistically, adding text from Martin Luther King's “I have a dream”

speech might provide counterpoint from within the modern American canon.

Of course, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial's legal mandate limits the park service somewhat. That history begins with Roosevelt's charge to the U.S. Territorial Expansion Memorial Committee to develop plans for a memorial “to Thomas Jefferson, the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark Expedition and other important movements in the achievements connected therewith in the Mississippi Valley or elsewhere in the United States” (cited in Rothman 1998:155).

Though its mandate probably explains why it is more triumphalist than other western national park units, Jefferson is not particularly unusual. Like many historic sites, it was shaped in the 1930s and 1950s, with key decisions made in 1971 and 1972—before the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s really began to change park interpretation. Those cultural changes helped cause Americans to think more critically about their country's history, yet that critical thinking is not reflected in the accounts at Jefferson.

#### INTERPRETING WESTWARD EXPANSION AT HOMESTEAD NATIONAL MONUMENT OF AMERICA

The National Park Service misses a big opportunity at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, where it could have taken a broad view on the largest of scales. In contrast, the new visitor center and revamped interpretation at Homestead National Monument of America take a significant step toward examining some of the larger consequences of expansion. Congress gave this national monument a broader mandate in 1976 amendments to its establishment act, quoted in the visitor center:

The purpose of Homestead National Monument of America is to: Interpret the history of the country resulting in and from the Homestead Act . . . [and] Commemorate the people whose lives were forever altered by the Homestead Act and settlement of the West.

By including “the people whose lives were forever altered,” the legislation invites the park service to consider consequences.

The visitor center's 25-minute film (Dunkerly 2009) always returns to the consequences of homesteading. From the opening sequence it juxtaposes the European



American transformation of the land and the Native societies who had lived there. By using many off-camera voices instead of a single narrator, the film contrasts statements such as “The French sold the land to the United States government” and “We never put our land up for sale” or “Their dreams were to see a community spring from the ground up” and “We’ve been on this land from time immemorial.” Those many voices also provide a wide range of perspectives that no single, authoritative narrator could provide.

The film then tells of European American settlement and the resulting clashes with the Native peoples who were forced onto reservations. It notes that many of these reservations were themselves homesteaded by the allotment of the Dawes Act, opening them to non-Indian settlers. It tells of the settlers’ hardships, successes, and failures, concluding with the impact of the homesteading movement. Smiling white families hold photos of their homesteading ancestors and say, “It was all worth it.” Stoic Native peoples tell of the destruction of their cultures and the struggles to keep families and societies together. The film invites a conversation.

Though the themes are found most fully in the film, similar ideas are also evident in the exhibits of the new visitor center. The center includes panels asking “Whose Land Was It?” and explaining how the Dawes Act turned into a form of land grab, whatever its (debated) intentions may have been. The center recognizes American Indian responses to the homesteaders that varied by time and place. A panel entitled “Vanishing Land, Vanishing Hopes” explains that “[r]eactions were as complex and varied as the American Indians themselves. Some looked for new opportunities. Many hoped to adapt. Others fought to hold onto their traditional ways of life.”

Older approaches to these subjects persist in other places. In spring 2012, the education center included a large mural placing the homestead movement in a wider context of exploration from the Vikings to outer space, not unlike the view at Jefferson. This triumphalism does not admit of differing views. Neither do the banners hanging outside the visitor center that celebrate the descendants of homesteaders such as Whoopi Goldberg, Jewel Kilcher, Tom Osborne, or Lawrence Welk—even Wa gi ma wub, a Bois Forte Ojibwe chief who ceded his people’s lands before being granted a homestead on those same lands under Minnesota law.

While the film and the revamped exhibits are open about the consequences of expansion, Homestead struggles to explain the causes of homesteading in both the film and the visitor center exhibits. The main brochure’s

explanation of expansion is as good as any at the site: “George Washington’s words in 1784 were prophetic: ‘The spirit for emigration is great.’” It is not at all clear from the interpretation why this was true.

The visitor center, brochure, and website all provide some legislative background to the 1862 Homestead Act, noting previous acts and explaining that the 1862 act could pass only after southern politicians had left the U.S. Congress. Locating the act within the Civil War also provides one of the few senses of a wider context for the homesteading movement in relation to other historical forces and events.

The interpretation provides a greater sense of what individual settlers wanted. A panel entitled “A Promise of Paradise” notes that

Homesteading meant many things to many people. For factory workers it offered escape from crowded cities. For those who had been enslaved it represented freedom. For single women it was a path to autonomy and economic independence. For immigrants it promised a new life.

That recognizes the diversity of homesteader motives but only hints at the political economy of westward expansion. The story of immigration and the homesteaders, too, receives more hints than explanation.

Interestingly, the other homesteading national park unit, Nicodemus National Historic Site, has a stronger sense of causes because it focuses on only one small community. It commemorates the first group of African American homesteaders after the Civil War, a group who left Kentucky in the face of growing repression as Reconstruction came to a close. Interpretation there explains clearly the causes of their emigration, and connects it to the context of Reconstruction. However, it struggles to explain the lasting consequences of these events as the town has declined since the Great Depression.

Seen in comparison to Nicodemus, Homestead has an incomplete notion of causes and context. Still, its attention to consequences gives it a much richer interpretation of expansion than Jefferson or Nicodemus. It has taken a mandate focused on homesteading to talk more widely about settlers and Natives, successes and failures, costs and benefits, and to begin to explore legacies both good and bad. As a result, it tells a wider range of stories than those found at Jefferson, whose more encompassing subject would have allowed it to do even more.

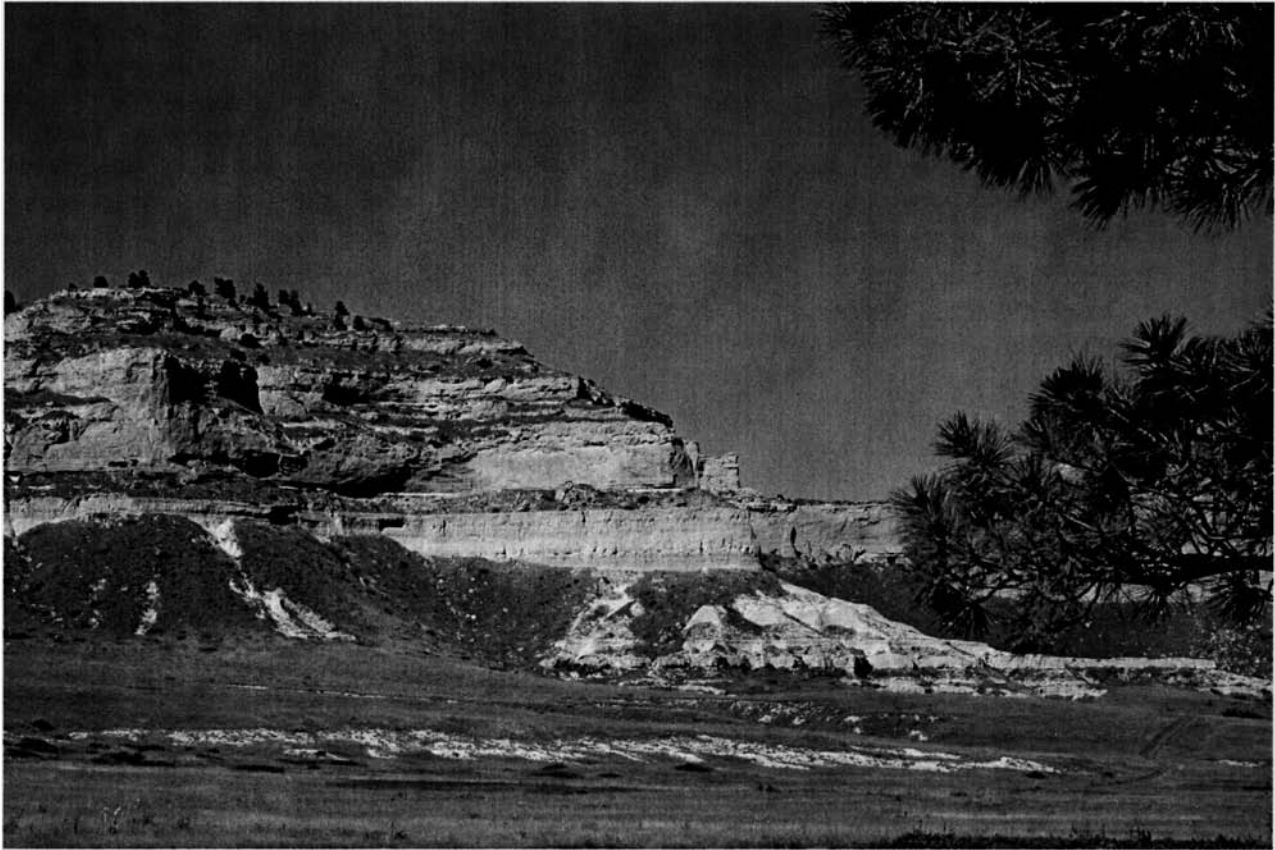


Figure 9. Scotts Bluff from the visitor center.

### INTERPRETING WESTWARD EXPANSION UNDER NARROWER MANDATES

While Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and Homestead National Monument have broad mandates, other sites in the Great Plains manage only a piece of the larger mosaic. At these other sites, National Park Service interpretation generally focuses on the site at hand and on the historical period of the site's greatest importance. This narrow focus tends to push historical context even farther into the background. A focus on the site often downplays the site's ultimate consequences. As at Jefferson, non-Anglos are assimilated to Anglo narratives of expansion, and one does not often see dissenting views like those at Homestead.

#### Scotts Bluff National Monument

These tendencies are evident at Scotts Bluff National Monument, among other sites (Fig. 9). President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Scotts Bluff National Monument in 1919 to commemorate this landmark on

the Oregon Trail and the emigrants who passed this way, as well as to preserve the geology and other scientific resources of the monument. The visitor center has a narrow, traditional focus on the emigrant story and on the art of William Henry Jackson, reflected in a small book that serves as an in-depth guide to the motivated visitor (Knudson n.d.).

The monument's main brochure (Scotts Bluff National Monument 2009) is more modern. While emphasizing emigrants and geology, its view of the resource includes historic peoples, though not prehistoric ones. The brochure gives the "Indian" name of this formation, Me-a-pa-te. It does not specify that this is the Lakota name (nor give its meaning, "hill that is hard to go around"). After this, the park service gives its attention to the European American movements through the area—explorers and trappers, emigrants to Oregon, the California gold rush, the Pony Express, and the Mormon Pioneer Trail. Aside from the gold rush, the monument does not explain these movements but simply assumes westward expansion. Like Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, it also does not examine the consequences.

The brochure features three images, a wagon train crossing the prairie, a Pony Express rider, and a scene of Plains Indians hunting bison around emigrant wagons. Two smaller images show Mormon handcarts on the fur traders meeting Indians, and Mormon handcarts on the Mormon Pioneer Trail. While showing a good mix of the peoples for whom this site was important, it is striking that Indians appear only when interacting with European Americans in wagon trains or as fur traders. Interpretation also tends to homogenize settlers, for example, mentioning only briefly how Mormon migration differed from others.

### **Fort Laramie National Historic Site**

Nearby Fort Laramie National Historic Site (2007) tells a similarly incomplete story. Its brochure begins with this account:

As America expanded westward, this outpost in the Wyoming wilderness played a crucial role in the transformation of the West, first as fur-trading center, then as military garrison. For over five decades, it was a landmark and way station for the cavalcade of trappers, traders, missionaries, emigrants, Pony Express riders, and miners wending their way west. It was also an important staging point for the U.S. Army in its dealings with the plains tribes displaced by migration and settlement.

Like Scotts Bluff, it does not explain why westward expansion occurred nor why it displaced Plains tribes, but simply takes these things as given. Natives exist only in reference to European Americans. The violence of the period is hidden by describing army "dealings" with the tribes.

### **Theodore Roosevelt National Park**

This pattern of nonexplanation also appears in sites not connected with emigration or the military. Theodore Roosevelt National Park tells of Theodore Roosevelt heading west to escape personal loss, but it doesn't put Roosevelt's decision in a wider context: "He was looking for a taste of Wild West adventure. But something about the badlands made a deeper impression" (sign titled "Dude on the Frontier," Painted Canyon). The park does not explore the question why the West had spiritual meaning for easterners.

Like Theodore Roosevelt, most homesteaders in the Dakotas failed. And yet they kept coming. What

economic, political, and social forces were so strong to drive European Americans westward on a mission unlikely to succeed? This implies, of course, a major ethical question: why displace Native peoples, kill bison herds, transform all the rivers, and engage in many other destructive activities in a project that was doomed in its own economic terms?

The National Park Service misses important educational opportunities when it ignores these larger questions. Thinking about causes and consequences places individual people, events, and processes within a larger context. Contexts help learners make sense of new information and motivate learners by answering the question, "Why is this important?" (Tilden 1957; Larsen 2011). Such questions suggest themselves at Theodore Roosevelt National Park's interpretation of Custer's 1874 Black Hills expedition that did not even pass through the park (Fig. 10).

The park service has recently come to understand that failing to examine larger social forces has weakened interpretation at its Civil War sites. As Robert Sutton (2001:xvi) has noted, "People should expect to visit a Civil War battlefield and come away with an understanding of not only who shot whom, how, and where, but why they were shooting at one another in the first place." Civil War sites have made considerable progress in this direction over the last decade, and the sites of westward expansion should take a cue from them. History makes more sense with causes and consequences.

### **IMAGES OF WILDERNESS AT GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK**

The story of western expansion rests on an image of civilization subduing nature (see Sale 1990; Nash 2001). This story implies subduing the people who lived in that "wild" nature, while appropriating the wildlife, rivers, land, and other resources for one's own use. At Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, for example, the park service explains that Native Americans lived in harmony with the natural resources until homesteaders replaced the native prairie ecosystem with grasses for cattle and other livestock. As a result, the park service and its partners must now "reconstruct" the original prairie ecosystem at Fox Creek and other locations, though apparently without returning Native peoples to the site.

This idea rests on notions of wilderness that are more problematic than generally recognized. According to Mark David Spence's (1999) seminal analysis, eighteenth-century European Americans imagined "wilderness" as a

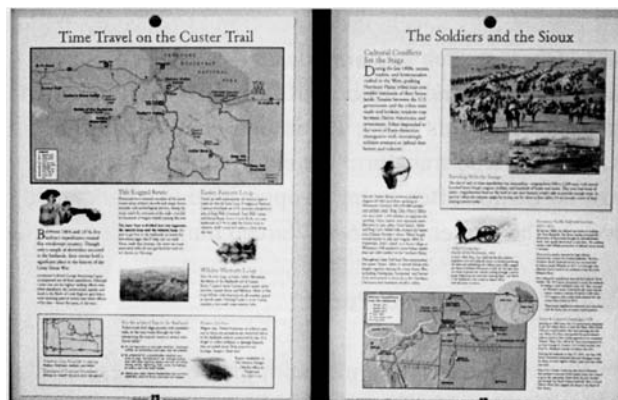


Figure 10. Custer's story at Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

place with both wild animals and “wild” Indians, that is, as an inhabited place. By the end of the next century, they had reimagined wilderness as *uninhabited*, with Indians removed to reservations that were not wilderness. Wilderness itself was similarly reserved, in national parks and then, after 1964, in designated wilderness areas (see also Catton 1997).

All three of these notions—inhabited, uninhabited, and legally designated—are found in park service interpretation. Indeed, all three are found in Guadalupe Mountains National Park, where the plains of Texas meet the Rockies. Established in 1972, and thus after the Wilderness Act, Guadalupe Mountains National Park emphasizes the Permian geology of the region and the wilderness character of the park. In sites such as the Frijole Ranch museum, the Mescalero Apaches appear as inhabitants of this natural wilderness. These people can trammel a wilderness without civilizing it, almost like a form of wildlife. When European Americans wanted to bring civilization here, in the form of transportation corridors and ranches, a “clash of cultures” ensued. The whites exterminated the Apaches in the wilderness—the park service even uses the word “genocide”—and removed them to reservations. Thus, the inhabited wilderness became an uninhabited wilderness.

The main visitor center picks up this story of Guadalupe Mountains National Park as a natural, uninhabited wilderness (Fig. 11). The high country remains as it was before humans because the mountains were too rugged, with too little water, for European American settlement. This natural wilderness, with intact ecosystems across several life zones, is presented as a key reason why the park was established. To see the park and its wilderness, the park service tells the visitor to hike.

On most of the trails, the hiker will encounter the legal definition of wilderness on a sign near each of the

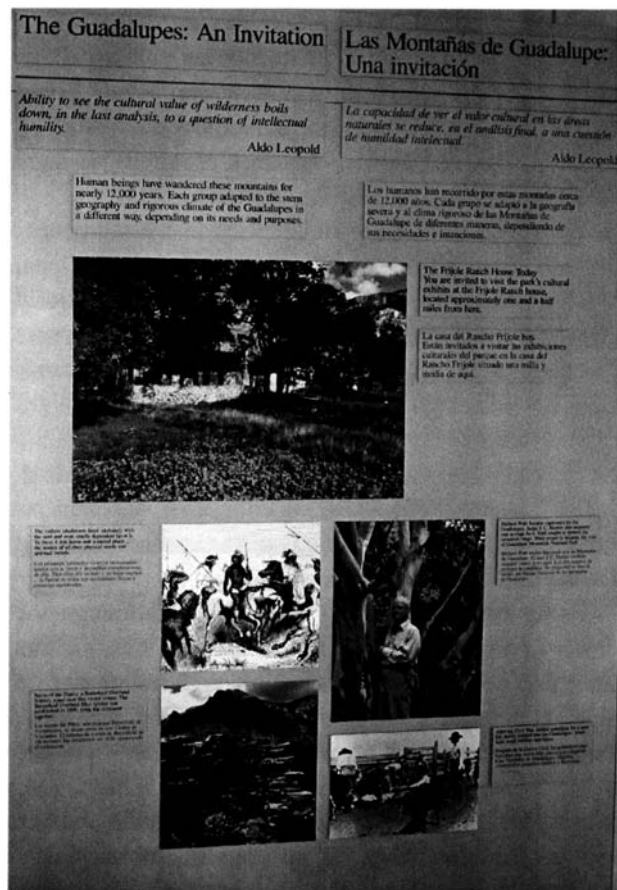


Figure 11. An invitation to the Guadalupe Mountains.

boundaries of the Guadalupe Mountains Wilderness Area. It explains the Wilderness Act of 1964 and encourages hikers to tread lightly in this place. The main brochure (“Guadalupe Mountains National Park” 2010) provides more detail:

Wilderness is meant to protect forever the land’s natural conditions, opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, and scientific, educational, and historical values. In wilderness people can sense being a part of the whole community of life on Earth. Preserving wilderness shows restraint and humility and benefits generations that follow us.

Without recognizing it, then, Guadalupe Mountains interprets three kinds of “wilderness”—the inhabited wilderness, the natural and uninhabited wilderness, and the legal wilderness.

There are obvious contradictions among the three conceptions here. Is wilderness inhabited or not? Must



nature be fenced off to be wilderness, or is fencing an unnatural limitation of it? If an untrammelled place is set aside for recreation, is it still untrammelled? Could we imagine a legally bounded wilderness dominated by natural processes in which Apaches or Anglo ranchers somehow lived off the land's resources?

Those questions are commonplace in the wilderness literature (see Callicott and Baird 1998), but the National Park Service treats all three as individually and collectively unproblematic. Juxtaposing these definitions of wilderness against one another would enrich the visitor's understanding of the wilderness theme and the park. Multiple levels of understanding are central to park policy on interpretation and good professional practice (Tilden 1957; Moscardo et al. 2007; Larsen 2011). Thinking critically about concepts is also good pedagogy, especially in an experiential setting (Dewey 1997) such as a national park.

Using better pedagogy would also challenge the viewer to connect these stories to her own life. Visitors can reflect on their own relationship with nature and on popular ideas such as "sustainability." They can think about the human costs of subduing the people who lived in that "wilderness." Visitors from different backgrounds can also reflect on their relationships with one another, both in terms of history and in terms of how our use of natural resources affects our relations with other people.

### **COWBOYS AND INDIANS**

The contradictory notions of wilderness at Guadalupe Mountains carry over to the National Park Service's treatment of humans on the western landscape. American Indians were part of the original wilderness for a very long time, but they vanish from the parks without explanation. In contrast, ranchers worked these lands for a few decades after the Indian wilderness. Often the ranchers sold out to the federal government directly or to the state government, who then donated the land to the federal government. The park service often preserved these ranch buildings and obtained oral histories and other documentation from their previous owners, making interpretation easier. If the ranchers still live in the community, they often retain an active interest in the parks, its resources, and stories (Pahre 2011b).

#### **Theodore Roosevelt National Park**

Ranchers assimilate easily to the human-nature dualism described in the previous section. They convert arid land to productive ranchland, just as settlers subdue wil-

derness, miners develop resources, and businesses build infrastructure such as railroads and stagecoach lines. At his namesake park, Theodore Roosevelt's ranching years fit easily into this story. He is one of many European Americans who transform the environment, overcoming adversities and often living in opposition to a harsh land, even as the winter of 1886–87 forced him to give up.

#### **Big Bend National Park**

Ranchers apparently met with greater success at Big Bend. The Sam Nail Ranch, Rio Grande Village, Dugout Wells, and Castolon all interpret the simple idea that when Anglo ranchers dig wells or build irrigation works, the desert can be made to bloom. American Indian survival strategies on the same landscape apparently do not warrant discussion. Nor, apparently, does the precarious nature of the Anglo solution—after only a few decades, the Great Depression made ranching sufficiently unprofitable that many residents willingly sold out.

Though it lies on the border, Big Bend tends to downplay Spanish-Mexican and Mexican-American stories. The brochure available at the Castolon center tells the story of the U.S. Cavalry and Anglo storekeepers at the site (Big Bend National Park 1997), not the Spanish and Mexican peoples who had lived there for centuries. The visitor center emphasizes Anglo-American history there instead. Its eight panels of history cover 1901–61, thereby excluding both Spaniards and Indians while including Anglo ranchers. The panels do mention "raids" by Natives and the later "subjugation" of the Natives. The center also displays a few Indian artifacts, including a large grinding stone, accompanied by some interpretation of Native uses of plants for medicines.

The sign for the nearby La Harmonia Store mentions that life on the border was "chaotic" during the Mexican Revolution (1910–ca. 1921), when Howard Perry and Wayne Cartledge of nearby Terlingua opened the store here. Perry and Cartledge catered to farmers and ranchers on both sides of the border, and they named their store in hope for good Mexican-American relations. The sign manages to fit the Mexican Revolution into the narrative of two Anglo shopkeepers.

Elsewhere in Big Bend, American Indians make only a brief appearance. Prehistoric use of Hot Spring is evident, alongside Anglo settlement. Rock art at the site is less visible than the historic ranch, but receives significant attention. The Persimmons Gap Visitor Center interprets the nearby Comanche Trail, mostly through temporary exhibits (in January 2010).



Figure 12. The death of Mni Akuwin.

The major development center at Chisos Basin misses a major opportunity to tell historic stories of Native lives. The mountains' elevation, shelter from the sun, and springfed wetlands and streams make the Chisos Basin a natural center for visitors, as it was for the Mescalero Apaches. Yet the Chisos Basin visitor center emphasizes the wildlife of this region, instead of discussing Mescalero use of the water and wildlife. Because the wildlife story is told elsewhere in the park, the lack of Native stories here is difficult to justify.

#### Fort Laramie and Scotts Bluff

At other sites, the National Park Service includes Natives by fitting them into the Anglo story. At Fort Laramie, the Sioux and Cheyenne peoples first appear as participants in the fur trade. They make sporadic appearances elsewhere at the site, but interpretation remains sharply focused on European Americans. For example, the summer 2010 issue of the *Prairie Sun* newspaper for the three "Wyo-Braska" national park sites (Agate Fossil Beds, Fort Laramie, and Scotts Bluff) describes Fort Laramie as having rangers in reproduction historic clothing to represent fur traders, emigrants, laundresses, soldiers, and officers' wives. Though the fort had a significant Indian community, they are not part of the reenactment—perhaps to avoid having non-Indians playing Indian roles. However, the death and funeral of Mni Akuwin, daughter of Sinte Gleska (Spotted Tail), appears on a sign as a token of U.S.-Indian reconciliation (Fig. 12).

Such interpretation reflects a long-standing tradition at both Fort Laramie and Scotts Bluff as it was developed by Merrill Mattes. Mattes served for several decades as regional historian at both park units, and he was closely involved in developing the initial interpretation at both sites. For Mattes, there were three important phases of Fort Laramie history—the fur trade, the migrations, and the military. He believed it inappropriate to give Native history or prehistory "equal time" because the "physical remains at the post are entirely of the military period" (Mattes 1980:113–14). This judgment overlooks the fact that the local Indians were the reason why Fort Laramie was built in the first place. Something of Mattes's attitudes toward the subject can be inferred from his following observation about the site (Mattes 1980:140): "Because Fort Laramie is blessed with an unspoiled environment in all directions, one can look out of Elizabeth Collins' window and feel the atmosphere of a make-do home in the Indian-infested wilderness." Mattes's juxtaposition of an "unspoiled environment" and "Indian-infested" wilderness shaped the stories at Fort Laramie and Scotts Bluff. The role of Mattes at both sites is a good example of how the decentralized nature of the National Park Service shapes interpretation and allows older models to persist for decades.

#### Fort Larned and Fort Scott

Analogous stories are evident at Fort Larned and Fort Scott, though the interpretation has been significantly modernized at both. Natives appear throughout the sto-

ries but usually in terms of their interaction with U.S. soldiers and settlers. Their precontact histories, or the effects of expansion on their subsequent cultures, do not get much attention compared to the daily lives of soldiers stationed at the forts. The visitor center at Fort Larned has one large panel with several signs and glass exhibit cases that tell of Plains Indian culture, and the contact period makes up part of the film.

Fort Scott also emphasizes the daily lives of soldiers in the restored buildings of the forts. In the visitor center museum, the fort's role on the "permanent Indian frontier" receives treatment along with the Mexican-American War, Bleeding Kansas, and the Civil War. In its breadth of historical coverage, Fort Scott gives a richer sense of context than most frontier forts and analyzes more fully the causes and consequences of the events in which it played a role. Its discussion of causes and consequences rests on the links between the fort's important periods: American victory over Mexico opened the frontier and led to Bleeding Kansas, which contributed to the Civil War. Interpreting several significant periods at the site, instead of just one, provides a straightforward way to make the stories richer.

### **Guadalupe Mountains**

In other cases, the National Park Service tells stories of both settlers and Indians with very different kinds of narratives. At Frijole Ranch in Guadalupe Mountains National Park, a brochure tells visitors that "[e]arly settlement in the trans-Pecos area was restricted by limited water and timber, poor transportation routes, and conflicts with Apaches." One might as easily say that Apache settlement of the trans-Pecos was limited by the sudden arrival of European Americans who promptly seized the limited water and timber in order to improve transportation routes. The brochure also states that "the scarcity of resources in the desert limited the number of settlers and presented a constant challenge to those few who came." One wonders what the Apaches were doing there.

### **Badlands National Park**

We see a similar story across the Plains at Badlands National Park. It explains how settlers tried to homestead the White River Valley but failed because conditions were too harsh. Modern ranchers require thousands of acres, not 160-acre homesteads. Of course, Natives had successfully lived here before the ranchers arrived, using different survival strategies that the park service does not

discuss. The park service also does not make the obvious connection that this land, too harsh for white homesteaders, now makes up the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. A different agency in the federal government now expects this land to provide a living for the people of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

### **Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve**

At other sites the park service does explore the survival strategies of Native Americans, often describing them as living in harmony with a challenging natural environment. As the brochure at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve (2008) puts it,

American Indians knew well the value of the prairie and of human harmony with nature. Tribes of Kansas, Osage, Wichita, and Pawnee made this region their home and hunting grounds. Millions of bison roamed the plains, providing food, shelter, and ceremonial life for the tribes.

This text lays the foundation for a comparison with Euro-American strategies on the same land, as part of a wider natural history of the place.

### **Carlsbad Caverns National Park**

Visitors who explore the surface of Carlsbad Caverns National Park will also see such stories about Native peoples. Along the entrance drive, visitors can take a short walk to Indian Rock Shelter, an archeological site with evidence of many cultural groups, from prehistory through the Mescalero Apache. The trail highlights the plants of the Chihuahuan Desert and how the Indians used them, while the park interprets a grinding pit and Native food preparation at the rock shelter itself. A little farther up the road the Walnut Canyon overlook interprets watering holes and their importance for both wildlife and the peoples who hunted it. The interpretation continues at the natural entrance of the caverns, where a sign explains that American Indians explored some distance into the cave and that many different material objects have been found nearby.

### **Wind Cave National Park**

Even without the distraction of ranchers, the park service often fails to emphasize important non-Anglo

stories associated with its sites. For example, Wind Cave National Park is one of the country's oldest national parks. Protecting the landscape above the cave turned out to be critical—it was large enough to serve as a wildlife refuge. Many species, notably bison and wapiti (elk), found a home here when they were near extinction everywhere else. Prairie dogs are still welcome, though persecuted outside park boundaries. Black-footed ferrets, once extinct in the wild, have been reintroduced here to prey on the prairie dogs. Park service interpretation fully exploits the park's natural diversity, where eastern tallgrass prairie meets western shortgrass prairie.

Yet Wind Cave is the origin site for the Lakota, and the cave is sacred to many tribes. As a result, the park could have a much more developed Native story. The park service mentions the origin story but does little else with it.

### Mount Rushmore National Memorial

Some of those issues appear at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Interpretation of Native issues is present, but somewhat thin, in the visitor center and on the trails. However, the park newsletter (*Granite Journal*) of winter 2009–10 shows a picture of then-superintendent Gerard Baker (Mandan-Hidatsa). His welcome message begins, "Greetings and welcome to the sacred *Paha Sapa* and Mount Rushmore National Memorial, the Shrine of Democracy" (Mount Rushmore National Memorial 2009–10). Remarkably, Superintendent Baker puts the Lakota name of the Black Hills before the name of his park unit. He continues,

The faces on this mountain remind some of the founding fathers and the birth of this nation. For others these faces remind them of cultural injustices and the loss of land and heritage. The Black Hills, or *Paha Sapa*, are considered sacred by many cultures in American and Indian Tribes alike.

Mount Rushmore did not look this way before Baker's appointment. An entrepreneurial superintendent, especially one such as Baker with wide support in the National Park Service, can make significant differences to interpretation.

### Devils Tower National Monument

Much more than Mount Rushmore, Devils Tower National Monument suggests what revised interpretation at Wind Cave and other sites might look like. The Devils

Tower brochure (Devils Tower National Monument n.d.) emphasizes the geology of the tower, but it begins with Indian legends and offers extensive interpretation of Native perspectives of the site. A flyer titled "Current Issues" (Devils Tower National Monument 2001) describes debates over the name of the tower and of the national monument. Many Natives believe that using the name "Devils" to refer to a sacred site is offensive. Natives also maintain that the tower should not be climbed, though it represents a world-class recreational rock-climbing destination for other people.

These issues are also found on interpretive signs around the visitor center and on the trail that goes around Devils Tower. Another flyer titled "American Indians and the Tower" (2005) discusses the question of names, the debate over climbing, and interprets religious objects such as prayer cloths for a non-Native audience. That flyer also introduces relevant legislation such as the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and the 1996 Executive Order No. 13007, which reinforces land managers' duty to accommodate American Indian ceremonial use on federally managed sacred sites.

Wind Cave could do likewise. It could interpret debates over the ownership of the Black Hills, which fell into U.S. hands as a result of Custer's machinations, a gold rush, and federal unwillingness to honor treaties at the cost of forcing newly arrived European Americans off the land. Big Bend, Fort Davis, Fort Laramie, Scotts Bluff, and other sites could also adjust the balance of their interpretation, giving less attention to a few decades of ranching history and more attention to centuries of historic Natives and millennia of prehistoric peoples. Those Native people receive significant attention in the parks of the Southwest, where they often make up part of the legislative mandate for parks, but they could appear in the Great Plains as well.

It is important to remember that the park service inventories all the natural, historical, and cultural resources in its park units, and almost every park of any size has some archeological sites in it. The park service could educate its visitors on the Native history of almost every site. Like Natives, ranchers are often not mentioned in establishment legislation as a justification for the park. The same discretion the park service uses to tell ranchers' stories could be used to Natives' stories.

### WARFARE AND THE "CLASH OF CULTURES"

The National Park Service's interpretive treatment of ranchers and Indians in the Great Plains is asymmetric,



giving more attention to ranchers than to Natives, despite the short length of the ranching period and the smaller number of people it included. In contrast, when it comes to the conflict between Anglo and Native cultures, the park service prefers a kind of symmetry: conflict reflects differences between both sides, not aggression by either. The park services explains these wars as a “clash of cultures” or “collision of cultures.” This term is odd in part because the basic struggle was more accurately a “clash of political economy” or “material culture”—a rapidly industrializing, capitalist market economy confronted peoples who were mostly hunter-foragers, a conflict in which the European Americans could support many times more people on the same acreage as the Natives could. That land productivity and access to better military technology and organizational forms account for the outcome of the wars.

Focusing on a clash or collision implies a kind of symmetry and perhaps moral equivalence. That too seems odd, in that Native Americans were not trying to bring their culture to Europe in the way that European Americans were bringing theirs to the Americas. Clearly, in the process of action and reaction that produced wars, the United States provided the initial action in each case, even if variation in Native reactions produced different end results in different times and places. Whether that is a moral issue depends on one’s criteria, a question familiar from Thucydides’ (1934) *Melian Dialogue* and many subsequent texts.

### Fort Laramie National Historic Site

The “clash of cultures” trope often yields strange-sounding interpretation. For example, Fort Laramie describes the relationship between emigration and conflict in a way that seems to attribute blame to the Cheyenne and Lakota: “Early relations between Indians and whites were peaceful enough, but as immigration increased, young warriors began to harass wagon trains, leading to calls for protection [of white settlers from Indians by U.S. soldiers]” (Fort Laramie National Historic Site 2007). In response, the park service brochure tells us, the army bought the fur trading post in 1849 and made it a military post. “Indian troubles” escalated in the 1850s and 1860s, and finally Fort Laramie became the staging area for Indian campaigns after the Civil War.

In the same brochure, the park service provides a somewhat different account of soldier-Indian relations. It notes that the fort served as a social and economic center for about 7,000 Sioux (Lakota) in the 1830s and 1840s.

For reasons unspecified, the original trade relationship “gradually deteriorated into one of dependency, resentment, and finally, hostility.” The process here is not explained but clearly refers to the “Laramie Loafers,” who depended on treaty payments and rations for survival after having ceded land to the United States. The brochure also describes the two treaties of Fort Laramie (1851 and 1868); the Fetterman, Hayfield, and Wagon Box fights in Red Cloud’s War of 1866–68; and American violations of latter treaty in the Black Hills in 1874.

The theme also encourages the park service to provide an overly simplistic notion of culture clash on the frontier. For the Blackfoot, Ojibwe, and a few others, British Canada complicated the clash with the United States. In the South and especially in the Southwest, interaction with Spanish Mexico played an important role in North American history. Spanish-Mexican relations with the Comanche and other tribes also shaped U.S. expansion. Defining the collision in terms of several European cultures and many Native cultures would be more accurate, and would move interpretation away from its current dichotomization.

The park service could also explore the diversity of the Anglo side in much more detail. The New Western history has called attention to questions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class on the frontier (Smith 1998; Adams 2009). These issues are already evident in the buffalo soldiers and in the “officers’ wives cookbooks” available in gift shops in the forts. Little Bighorn now mentions Indian scouts that worked for Custer, and memorializes their dead. The park service consistently points out that the buffalo soldiers were black troopers led by white officers, but it does not explore whether the pattern extends to, say, Mexican enlistees. The frontier forts all interpret the difference between the officers’ quarters and the barracks of the enlisted men (of all races and ethnicities), but they do not yet connect this to questions of class in the Gilded Age.

### Fort Larned and Fort Davis National Historic Sites

Mexico also tends to be overlooked even where relevant. Despite the significant Mexican trade on the Santa Fe Trail, the museum at Fort Larned does not mention Mexicans in the permanent exhibits, although some rangers’ programs do.

Fort Davis also does not tell of the region’s Spanish and Mexican history. Nor does it tell of those Mexican residents who provided food and other services from just

outside the fort's grounds. The focus on officers' wives also tends to overlook the enlisted men who found Mexican laundresses as partners (Pahre 2011a).

Other immigrants, such as Chinese railroad workers, were also part of the cultural mix in the American West, but they tend to be slighted at most park service sites. I have never found Asian immigrants mentioned at a park service site in the Great Plains. Non-park service sites sometimes tell of them, such as the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis.

Women's efforts to build a home life on the frontier give Fort Davis and Fort Larned, like Fort Laramie, a major interest in displaying Victorian furnishings (Sellars 2011a, 2011b), and their domestic life is recounted in several cookbooks available in the gift shop. Both African Americans and women are assimilated to the story of American soldiers at these forts.

In short, the "clash of cultures" narrative has trouble taking into account many aspects of Great Plains history. It does not easily structure stories that make sense of the Industrial Revolution, environmental constraints such as water, the role of women other than wives, Spanish-Mexican histories and peoples in parts of the Plains, Chinese immigrants, or the legacies of slavery and the Civil War for westward expansion. With buffalo soldiers it begins to explore the internal complexities of the frontier army, but there is more work to do. In addition, the "clash of cultures" theme studiously avoids some words that we might use, including colonialism, imperialism, racism and genocide. It reflects views tied up with particular notions of human relations with nature, described in previous sections.

#### A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE: AT WASHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site is an example of how to rethink park interpretation in the Plains. Washita preserves the site where Custer's Seventh Cavalry launched a dawn attack on the village of Black Kettle, leader of the Southern Cheyenne peace party and survivor of the Sand Creek Massacre. Twenty cavalrymen and 58 village residents, including Black Kettle, died in this clash. Custer's men also took many women and children prisoner and shot more than 800 of the Indians' horses while torching the material objects of the village.

Various local groups and the state of Oklahoma had commemorated the site since 1868 with metal and granite markers. After agreement with the state in 1996, the site became a national park unit of 320 acres (Greene 2004).



Figure 13. Washita Battlefield's Cultural Heritage Center.

The visitor center and all interpretation are new, though the site has retained those old markers that were still in place in 1996.

The National Park Service built the visitor center away from the sacred ground of the site, a model also being followed at Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site. At the actual massacre site, visitors find a walking trail skirting the landscape that the tribe identifies as sacred. Unless they have read the park's general management plan, visitors will think they have been to the very site of the massacre. Visitors are guided by book or audiocassette so there are no signs to intrude on the natural scene here.

A short drive takes the visitor to the Cultural Heritage Center (Fig. 13), designed to respect both Cheyenne and Anglo connections to this land. Its top floor is oriented toward the Cheyenne directions of northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest, and houses the main visitor center. The bottom floor is oriented east-west, the direction of European movement. It houses National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service offices and is built into the hillside to evoke the sod and dugout houses of the European American settlers. The colors of the building match the red dirt and tan sandstone of the region.

Visitors enter on a sidewalk that meanders like the Washita River itself, passing an angled wall that reflects the geometry of military maneuvers, while a curved wall on the right represents movements of the Native peoples. Once inside, people enter a gallery with a raftered ceiling that has a churchlike feel. That evokes a western tradition of sacred buildings while emphasizing that the Washita grounds are sacred to the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples; the rafters also quote the tradition of great lodges throughout the national park system. The gallery floor is



Figure 14. Morning at Washita.

decorated with a black diamond pattern, the symbol for Black Kettle. Many design elements such as windows come in fours, the sacred number of the Cheyenne.

Visitors learn the history of Washita in a film drawing on both oral traditions and western histories. Interviews with historians and modern Cheyenne leaders move the story along, as do actors and reenactments. The content is factually neutral but leaves the visitor with the clear message that this was a “massacre,” not a “battle.” Outside the film, a large mural of the opening moments of the clash tells the same story (Fig. 14).

The visitor center also tells of the events surrounding Washita. One panel states, “Ultimately, the conflict centered on a struggle between a smaller group of people well adapted to living in harmony with the land and a larger group of people seeking to cultivate and mine the land for economic and personal benefit.” This acknowledges the asymmetry of action discussed above. Another panel, “Expansion on the Great Plains,” states that, after the Civil War,

waves of people spilled out into the Great Plains, transforming the landscape as they went. Seeking fresh opportunities in the west, new arrivals procured free land through the Homestead Act of 1862, built a transcontinental railroad by

1869, and linked the coasts together with strands of telegraph wire. As the frontier disappeared, the free-roaming Plains Indians faced their greatest challenge for survival.

The text is sympathetic to the Indians’ plight in the face of this juggernaut. Another panel acknowledges the asymmetry of the conflict: “Americans of European descent provoked the clash by streaming into the domain of native peoples.”

Unlike Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and some other sites discussed here, Washita notes the controversies of the day. Some figures in the United States praised Custer’s actions, while “others believed that Black Kettle’s village had been struck unjustly.” The National Park Service quotes several critics, including Thomas Murphy, then the superintendent of Indian affairs, who believed “that the innocent parties have been made to suffer for the crimes of others.”

The site also continues the story forward in time, discussing some of Washita’s consequences. One panel tells the visitor that

We are still living with the legacies of that conflict—the legacies of western expansion. In the decades since the Washita attack, for example,



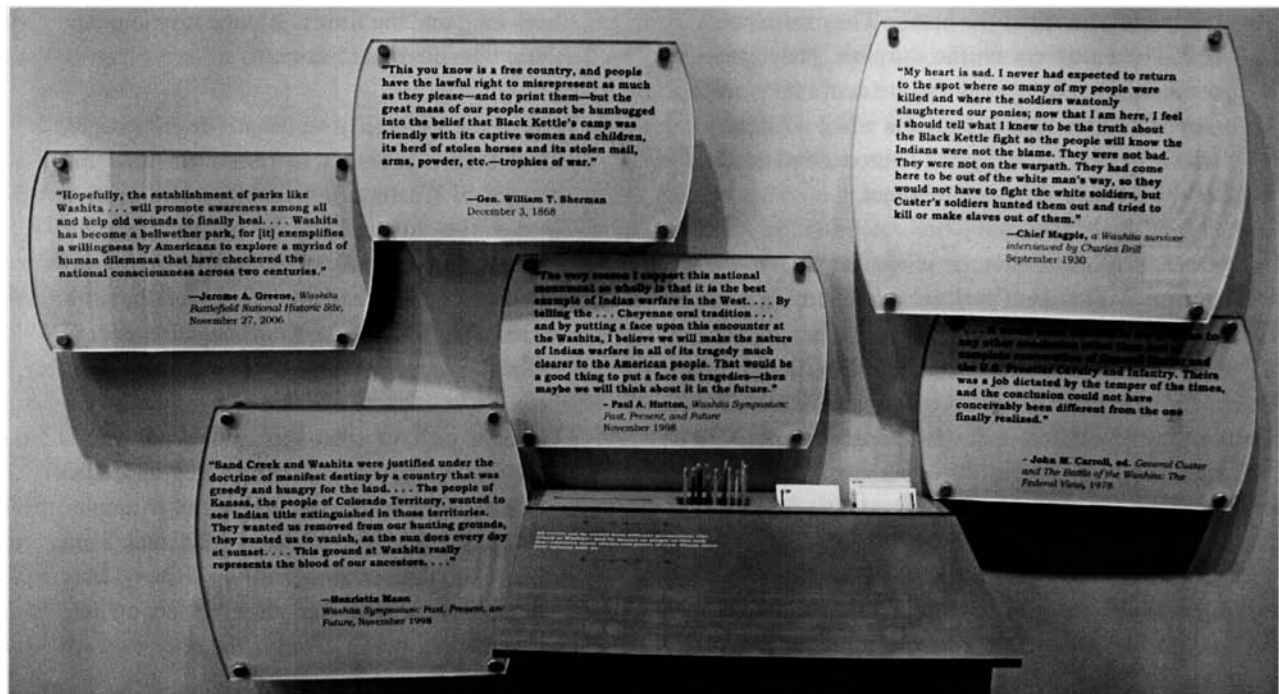


Figure 15. Talking back at Washita.

the resilient Cheyenne and Arapaho people have had to overcome the loss of their land and years of oppression to retain their distinctive cultural identities.

Another panel tells of the modern tribes, unified as the federally recognized Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. It explains that the former reservation, consisting of eight counties in western Oklahoma, is now called a Tribal Service Area, and the tribal government is headed by a governor. Photos of modern American Indians include former Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne), the Black Kettle Interagency Fire Crew in action, and veterans “proud of their military service.”

In addition to avoiding the weaknesses we have seen elsewhere, Washita follows a different pedagogy than most park service sites. As visitors leave the exhibits, they confront a half-dozen quotations mounted on the wall (Fig. 15). These present different interpretations of the events, both then and now, Native and European American, government and otherwise. Gen. William T. Sherman defended the military’s actions at Washita, saying that “the great mass of our people cannot be humbugged into the belief that Black Kettle’s camp was friendly with its captive women and children, its herd of

stolen horses and its stolen mail, arms, powder, etc.—trophies of war.” John M. Carroll sided with Sherman in 1978, writing that

it would seem difficult for me to come to any other conclusion other than one of complete exoneration of General Custer and the U.S. Frontier Cavalry and Infantry. Theirs was a job dictated by the temper of the times, and the conclusion could not have conceivably been different from the one finally realized.

In contrast, Native historian Henrietta Mann notes that “[t]he people of Kansas, the people of Colorado Territory, wanted to see Indian title extinguished in those territories. They wanted us removed from our hunting grounds, they wanted us to vanish, as the sun does every day at sunset.” She echoes Washita survivor Chief Magpie, who wrote in 1930 that

My heart is sad. I had never expected to return to the spot where so many of my people were killed and where the soldiers wantonly slaughtered our ponies; now that I am here, I feel that I should tell what I knew to be the truth about the Black Kettle fight so that the people will know



the Indians were not the blame. They were not bad. They were not on the warpath. They had come here to be out of the white man's way, so they would not have to fight the white soldiers, but Custer's soldiers hunted them out and tried to kill or make slaves out of them.

The presence of such diverse views on this museum wall confirm the words of park service historian Jerome A. Greene on that same wall: "Washita has become a bellwether park, for [it] exemplifies a willingness by Americans to explore a myriad of human dilemmas that have checkered the national consciousness across two centuries." By providing multiple perspectives, the park service invites the visitor to think about these events and reach her own opinion about them.

Next to that wall, the park service encourages visitors to talk back—to the park service, to the voices on the wall, and to one another. People can fill out a comment card, and the park posts these comments in a display case. Among those posted in January 2012 (all with original punctuation and grammar, and with state of residence if noted):

For years I was told I was a descendant of Philip Sheridan. Before I learned of the Washita slaughter I was actually proud of that heritage—since learning of the massacre, I am *ashamed*—how I wish it was just a family folklore tale—The impact of the massacre is overwhelming & deeply saddening as I look into the photographed eyes of the helpless women I want to sob. (Oklahoma)

Until the Native people of this land are respected & honored as valuable equals, in Peace and War, we cannot be the America we and our forefathers dreamed. I am Choctaw, Scot, Italian, Creek and an American.

This illustrates just one of the horrors of our history. *If* we credit it to "temper of the times" then we never have to apologize or *remember*. But remember we must and teach each generation *and* every Native History must *never ever* be forgotten. (Minnesota)

Ne-a'eše! Thank you for including Cheyenne language in the museum. I hope this language

lives long into the future. It's one way to honor those who died. (Oklahoma)

All of us, especially white-privileged people, must take a moment to reflect on how the reasons of Washita Battlefield are still present in our lives today. Let's search our souls for modern day misunderstandings, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination, and let's *change* that negative energy without ourselves. (Utah)

I cannot explain what this makes me feel—only that this is *our* America. It's shrouded in these secret atrocities, and secret triumphs. Our America. I can only be glad that I am lucky enough to be aware of this history. May we learn from it all and each be accountable for achieving peace. That is the only way we can survive.

It still amazes me, that Americans are still uncomfortable with individuals whose beliefs are different from the masses. The question still remains, have we learned anything from history?

These comments, like the others in the display case, are all sympathetic to the Cheyenne. None sided with Custer, though the closest comment came from a visitor from Florida:

Being here has persuaded me on understanding of the conflict that existed during the mid 1800s in this area. It has brought to light what the price of progress can be. It is always a balance—where one gains, another loses. Thank you for the education and presentation of the important land and its history.

Again, that is more sympathetic to Custer and the military than any other comment on display. Unlike the others it recognizes a positive value—progress—while acknowledging its price. Washita has opened up a conversation.

The pedagogy here opens up the site to visitors in a way that a single park service interpretation could not. The National Park Service would never connect Washita to homophobia, to the shame of Sheridan's descendants, or to Americans of Choctaw-Scot-Italian-Creek heritage. In an ever-changing way, Washita's visitors can do that,

and engage in conversations with one another—even if, like me, they were the only visitors in the building.

### CONCLUSIONS: RECONSIDERING PARK INTERPRETATION

Our understanding of National Park Service interpretation today stands in a position not unlike our understanding of park service wildlife management before the 1964 Leopold Report. The public seems to think that all is well, but there are internal and external critics whose concerns have not yet jelled into coherent suggestions for a better approach.

Here I have argued that too many National Park Service sites retain images of western history that reflect concerns of the 1930s and 1950s. Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, Scotts Bluff, Theodore Roosevelt, and most of the forts represent particularly outdated notions of western expansion. Badlands, Big Bend, and Guadalupe Mountains national parks, and many other national park units, are hardly triumphalist. Still, their conceptions of humans and nature, the differences in how they treat Natives and Anglo settlers, the assimilation of non-Anglo Americans to the Anglo experience, and their presentation of the “clash of cultures” raise more subtle difficulties. Even modern interpretation projects at Homestead and Tallgrass Prairie continue some problematic notions. Some park units in the Great Plains have attracted political action resulting in changed interpretive programs, such as Devils Tower, Little Bighorn, and even Mount Rushmore. New units such as Washita Battlefield and Sand Creek Massacre (in progress) better reflect modern historiography.

The National Park Service has historically preferred to present “facts” in a neutral way, using a single, authoritative voice. As teachers know, active learning strategies yield better educational outcomes. The park service helps its visitors be better learners by encouraging them to engage the material intellectually and, when possible, to actively discuss it with one another. Devils Tower provides one example. It interprets the controversies at the site, inviting visitors to think about the issues and make up their own minds. Washita Battlefield lets visitors talk back, leaving comment cards that will be posted for future visitors to read. Guadalupe Mountains could follow these examples by interpreting the different notions of “wilderness” in the park. Visitors could reflect on what wilderness means to each of us, and talk back to future visitors (cf. Stewart 2012).

That pedagogical point suggests some new directions for interpreting westward expansion. First, the National Park Service could open interpretation to a broader range of disciplines, allowing them to give visitors multiple perspectives of events. Military historians such as Robert Utley and Jerome Greene have long dominated park service interpretation of the West. An ethnographer studying Native Americans, an economic historian, or a demographer would likely approach the historic sites of western expansion very differently—less in terms of tactical military movements and more in terms of larger-scale historical processes.

Second, greater consultation with affiliated Native peoples would also broaden the perspectives at each site, as it has for many museums (Kawasaki 1999). Far too often, the park service has treated “consultation” as sending people a copy of the draft environmental impact statement. It is not surprising that many tribes have not responded. However, many parks and tribes are now building ongoing relationships to the benefit of both. Pea Ridge National Military Park (Arkansas) provides a surprising example, where consultation with the Cherokee Nation improved the stories of Cherokee units at the battle and supported greater interpretation of the Trail of Tears that runs through the park (Pahre 2012).

Third, the park service could make an effort to ensure that both sides of any conflict or cultural contact situation receive equal attention. Civil War battlefields give equal attention to the Union and the Confederacy. Unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise, western military sites should give equal attention to the United States and its opponents. Little Bighorn has come a long way from its days as Custer National Battlefield, but the Seventh Cavalry still dominates the site.

It is less commonly recognized that symmetry should also define the stories at places of contact as well as places of conflict. Fort Davis, Fort Laramie, Fort Larned, Fort Scott, Scotts Bluff, and the several national historic trails across the Plains should give the European American and Native American stories roughly equal weight. The stories of the Butterfield Stage at Pea Ridge or Guadalupe Mountains could provide similar balance about the peoples through whose land the stage traveled. The film at Homestead provides a good example on which to build.

As it opens up the interpretation, the park service should balance stories, and not just balance people. Natives have stories that go beyond their interaction with whites, African Americans in the West are not merely part of the U.S. Army, and Mexican Americans are more

than ranch hands for white farmers. Something as simple as interpreting Mexican wagon traders of the Santa Fe Trail at Fort Larned would add stories of both international trade and ethnic diversity to the site, while also helping visitors see how North America as a whole has shaped U.S. history.

Thinking in terms of more balanced stories will also point toward the internal complexity of each group. Neither European Americans nor American Indians were monolithic groups, nor were any of the groups within them. Apaches were not Comanches, and Mescalero Apaches were not Warm Springs Apaches. Women in Fort Scott experienced the Plains differently than men did, whether those men were soldiers or civilians. The frontier army included black and white, native-born and foreign, who might be German, Irish, or Mexican, among many others nationalities. A Chinese laundryman in a town along the Union Pacific railroad had a different experience than a Mexican washerwoman in Fort Davis. Pea Ridge hints at such complexities in various places, mentioning tensions between German immigrants and native-born Union soldiers, the Cherokee Civil War, and differences of opinion among white Americans on the Trail of Tears. Big Bend has begun to distinguish the Mescalero Apaches and the Comanches more systematically. Homestead has started to distinguish native-born and immigrant homesteaders. Continuing to increase the variety of voices on both sides will help interpretation connect with more visitors.

When the park service does not highlight such internal complexity, or does not give equal weight to both sides of a conflict or contact situation, it may reflect the sources available. The park service generally prefers written sources to oral histories. This preference often has the effect of highlighting the stories of literate European Americans over other peoples. Except at the "archeological parks," the park service does not generally exploit the rich archeological resources of the parks. Scotts Bluff has over 60 archeological sites in a small space, none interpreted, perhaps out of fear of vandalism or plunder. That oversight neglects the long human history of the site in favor of the brief settler history. Many park units protect physical objects such as forts, and interpret durable material culture—again, often privileging European American stories. Adding tipis to the buildings at Fort Laramie, for example, would give a much better sense of what the site looked like historically, since a Native community lived there year-round.

Especially at historic sites, many of these suggestions entail opening up each site's stories beyond the one

purpose of the park. The park service already does this by interpreting ranchers and settlers at non-ranching, non-settler sites. It can do the same with non-European American stories while still serving the establishment legislation of each unit. The general park service mandate to conserve all resources at the sites it manages for present and future generations would provide sufficient justification to tell more stories rather than fewer.

Even on a narrow reading of establishment legislation, the National Park Service could do a better job placing each site in a broader context, connecting it to larger stories about causes and consequences. At battle sites, the park service could tell visitors the causes of the war. At sites that are part of westward expansion, it could explain the causes of that movement, its effects on Native peoples, on U.S. relations with Mexico, and the environmental consequences for the land. At sites that include a designated wilderness area, it could go beyond the Wilderness Act of 1964 in interpretation. What is the meaning of wilderness to modern people, and how does that reflect a criticism of industrial society? How would preindustrial peoples, both indigenous and European, imagine "wilderness" differently? The park service could also explain why wilderness designations are often controversial, and why even some supporters of wild nature have developed a critique of designated wilderness areas.

Some of these suggestions might prove to be controversial among visitors, or within the park service itself. Like many museums, the park service often hesitates to provoke its visitors for fear of alienating them. As Nason (1999:33) notes, "visitors enjoy what best matches their expectations; if museums disagree with and do not seek to fulfill those expectation, then visitors will not be attracted to the exhibitions."

My final suggestion is that the park service embrace those controversies. Teaching all sides of a controversy is good pedagogy, engaging people as active learners and motivating them to understand the site so they can make up their own minds. Devils Tower has successfully presented the controversies surrounding it while maintaining a stance of neutrality. Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site does likewise, interpreting the national controversies over slavery in terms of dinner disagreements between Grant and his father-in-law. According to Superintendent John C. Scott at Pea Ridge, the changed interpretation at Pea Ridge has received only favorable comments despite being very critical of U.S. policy in the Trail of Tears (Scott pers. comm.). Visitor reactions to Washita on the comment board suggest that the park service worries too much—many visitors appreciate being challenged.

Embracing controversy, and even deconstructing one's own founder, has been successful at the Buffalo Bill Historic Center (Winchester 2009; Pahre 2011b). Certainly the park service could take small steps toward greater controversy, soliciting feedback in many forms rather than fear a backlash that may not occur.

Many of the National Park Service historic sites were established in the 1930s and are therefore approaching their centennials. For most of them, that period will be the most significant for the landscape, certainly much longer than a brief battle. The park service has already occupied many forts longer than the U.S. military did. This too raises interesting questions of interpretation, for we cannot pretend that the park service has not also shaped the landscape and the people who live there. Dealing with this fact raises interesting questions in itself and only makes it more important to think through how these sites present the natural and human histories of their landscapes.

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#### NEW MAP: THE TOP 50 ECOTOURISM SITES IN THE GREAT PLAINS

The Center for Great Plains Studies has announced the publication of an ecotourism map. During spring and summer of 2012, the Center conducted a two-phase survey of 51 naturalists from nine states. The sites receiving the most nominations in the second phase were named as the top 50 sites, which were then separated into three groups. The map will be distributed at visitors centers throughout the Great Plains. For more information, see the ad on page 180 or the web site: [www.unl.edu/plains](http://www.unl.edu/plains).