

Innovative Concepts of Cultural Resource Management

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Washita Battlefield National Historic Site was created on November 12, 1996, to interpret the attack of Lieutenant Colonel George Custer and the 7th Cavalry on the sleeping Cheyenne village of Chief Black Kettle in 1868. The attack was waged as reprisal for raids by the tribes on Kansas settlements. Between 50 and 100 men, women, and children were killed during the attack and another 52 women and children were taken as prisoners and held until the following summer. Twenty-three soldiers lost their lives that day at the battle. Washita was established not only to interpret Custer's rise to fame as an Indian fighter, or to talk about the end of a way of life for native peoples, but as a place of consecration and reflection. Cultural resource management plays an important role in all of that.

From the beginning, we were committed at Washita to telling the story from multiple perspectives and being balanced in every way possible. In developing the park's interpretive media, we made every effort to talk about the Southern Plains Indians Wars and the bloody atrocities that were being committed by both the American military and the Plains tribes that led up to the Washita attack. We made extra efforts to engage the Native Americans that are affiliated with this site in the park's development as directed by the park's legislation. This paper focuses primarily on these efforts to gain a tribal perspective and some of the approaches we used to do that. Those were not the only efforts we made to engage the public. But they probably led to the most innovation.

Washita—which is located in western Oklahoma about halfway between Oklahoma City and Amarillo, Texas—was designated as a national historic landmark in 1965 and national park status had been discussed even earlier. With the election of Congressman Frank Lucas who grew up within a few miles of the historic site, the park was established in 1996. The Oklahoma Historical Society worked closely with a few of the elders of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes on Washita's establishment and a Cheyenne elder testified before Congress supporting the park. The legislation for the park was drafted to include the participation of the tribes in the park's development and educational programs. The legislation states that one of the purposes of the

park is to:

Establish the site of the Battle of the Washita as a national historic site and provide opportunities for American Indian groups including the Cheyenne–Arapaho Tribe to be involved in the formulation of plans and educational programs for the national historic site.

And so we were asked from a legislative perspective to be innovative in our management of the park.

When I arrived at Washita I came with the intention of gaining substantive, consistent involvement by the tribes in developing the park. I wanted our Native American partners to be at the table helping to make plans and decisions, not at the receiving end of a draft document that we expected them to approve. We had some successes and we made some mistakes.

One of our initial actions was to begin a *Washita Symposium*, which was a two-day event that allowed a variety of speakers to do presentations on different perspectives of the Washita. This included Indian and non-Indian speakers, as well as costumed interpretation, field trips, and performing arts presentations. Each of the three symposia have built upon each other. For this year's symposium (after I left, I might add), the park did an excellent job working with the local arts council to get a grant for the event and creating the theme, "Through the Eyes of History." Craig

Moore, the park's education technician, was able to bring in a large local Cheyenne population involving a variety of ages and experiences.

We were able to use the original symposium in 1997 as the basis for an ethnographic study for the park. We began with oral histories of the Cheyenne people, followed up with literature searches, and then researched affiliations of the other tribes and the local non-Indian population. Our original intent was to have the Cheyenne tribe perform their own ethnographic work; although we were not able to carry this out, our Cheyenne partners were appreciative of the efforts that we made to do this. The ethnography has preserved and allowed the park to interpret the many connections of the Cheyenne and other people to the site and has given the staff the personal stories that make the attack come alive for visitors.

Because we had such difficulty in engaging the tribe on a consistent basis, we felt like we needed a person to help us to make sure that park issues were being taken seriously within the tribe and that tribal issues were being addressed within the park. The tribe had assigned the tribal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinator to work with the park, but when NAGPRA coordinators changed several times within a three-year period—thus also changing our contact person—we tried to find a better way of collaborating. Gordon Yellowman, who was our main contact during most of my time at Washita, and a great person to work with, devised the idea of a cultural liaison position for the tribe who would work with the park. In fiscal year 2001 we received a Challenge Cost Share grant to fund half of the position. The tribe agreed to fund the other half of the salary and benefits. We jointly hired a tribal employee for one year. His main objective was to develop consultation guidelines that were realistic for all parties, affordable for everyone involved, allowed the tribe to tell the park staff how they wanted to collaborate, and to give the park staff the important information they needed to develop the park and educate the public. The position, dedicated to

forming a strong bond between the two entities, gained unparalleled good will for both the park and the tribes. The park will be able to fully fund the position beginning this year due to a base increase to the park budget.

We were also heavily involved in a project called the Cheyenne Heritage Trail. The tribe had been very clear on their belief that the park's staff needed to educate the public about the Cheyenne tribe's living culture as well as the event in 1868. They also strongly believed, as did the park staff, that some of Washita's stories needed to be told with a tribal voice. In addition, we felt that it was important to interpret the Washita in context rather than as an isolated event.

We were very fortunate to have in western Oklahoma a man by the name of Lawrence Hart living in the community. He is a Cheyenne, one of the traditional Cheyenne peace chiefs, and serves as one of the four principal chiefs. Hart is also the executive director of the Cheyenne Cultural Center, a non-profit corporation he founded 24 years ago. He has served on the National Review Committee of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

Hart created the concept of developing a Cheyenne Heritage Trail. We worked with him on this trail concept, which envisioned taking visitors throughout western Oklahoma to various sites that were historically important to the tribe. Over the course of two years we developed a partnership that included site managers from federal, state, tribal, and private partners and entities such as the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation and the Oklahoma Historical Society. The partners determined their purpose to be the protection of the cultural heritage of western Oklahoma and education of the public about the rich Native American occupation there. The goal was to do this through increased and more effective domestic and international visitation to the area, to help those visitors to experience the heritage of the Cheyenne tribe, and to learn about the Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache people.

The Cheyenne Heritage Trail was estab-

lished as the first Native American Cultural Route in the state of Oklahoma. The trail is a 420-mile route that passes through historic and cultural sites that are significant to the Cheyenne people and to other tribes that lived in the historic tribal lands of western Oklahoma. The trail includes twelve sites that interpret significant portions of the Cheyenne story. The trail gives visitors the opportunity to explore not only Native American culture, but also the idea of westward expansion, cultural conflict, and the Plains Indian Wars as a part of western history.

Visitors may travel the trail in their own vehicles using a brochure as a guide or they may participate in a bus tour provided by companies that purchase a guided program. Each venue along the route has different activities, some of which are interactive, all of which teach visitors about Cheyenne and Native American cultures. Each partner in the Cheyenne Heritage Trail is responsible for orienting visitors to its site and to the overall concept of the trail. Washita Battlefield National Historic Site is, of course, one of the stops on the trip.

Because a project like this had never been done in Oklahoma and because of Hart's relationships with state government, we were able to obtain the assistance of Oklahoma's Tourism Division. They planned and conducted debut tours with Oklahoma dignitaries and media. They retained a consultant to train the tour guides, and they developed the color brochure for the trail.

The Oklahoma Historical Society was an essential partner. They researched a historical chronology of the major events of the Cheyenne Indians in Oklahoma, which was provided for use in training the tour guides so that they could narrate the history of the culture as the coach travels between the sites. This information was also used to develop the brochure.

Hart worked with a state senator to pass legislation directing the Oklahoma Department of Transportation to mark the trail with signing. The signs have a trail logo that we developed by holding a Native American art contest.

Approximately 20,000 visitors per year see some or all of the Cheyenne Heritage Trail, and that number is increasing. Tour groups have included Native American elementary and secondary students, college students from other states, Native American cultural organizations, Elderhostel groups, and museum groups.

The park could never have accomplished alone what this partnership has achieved to interpret this era of American History. Because of that fact, the partnership was awarded the National Park Foundation's 2001 Park Partnership Award for Heritage Education, one of only four national awards given to recognize partnership efforts within the National Park Service. It also received the Oklahoma Redbud Award, which is the state's tourism award.

The benefits of this endeavor have been substantial. The partnership has created a high degree of cooperative spirit between local, state, federal, and tribal agencies in Oklahoma. Collaboration and contact between the partners has created a sense of ownership of the Cheyenne Heritage Trail and a feeling that all parties are concerned with the best interests of educating the public about Native American heritage. This was particularly advantageous to the National Park Service as we worked to develop a new national park site at Washita and looked for creative ways to enhance partnerships.

The trail facilitated an increase in tourism in this sparsely populated area of western Oklahoma, bringing tourist dollars and thus economic development to the communities located there. It gave impetus to structural restoration and rehabilitation at four of the historic sites. It has also assisted with protecting the cultural heritage of the area and educating the public about the rich Native American occupation here. This partnership is unprecedented in Oklahoma. The work that was accomplished on the Cheyenne Heritage Trail is making a difference in the education of visitors. It is a model of how national parks should be working with our partners and what can be accomplished.

And of course, I don't believe that cultural

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resource management can be separated from natural resource management, or at least without making less sense of either. This is particularly true in a cultural landscape when the resource you are preserving tells the story of a people in a particular place in time. The legislation for Washita directed park staff to return the area to its 1861 appearance. Much of the cultural work being done there will return the park to what we believe was the “native environment,” one untouched by Europeans. So what is the implication of thousands of people camping in a riparian area for several months with a large herd of horses grazing on the vegetation in the river bottom? What picture do we want to convey to park visitors? This and other complex questions are still being

addressed at Washita, just as they are at many other primarily “cultural” sites. Good planning, strong partnerships, and a strong base in science and information all lend themselves toward a final product of strong cultural resource management.

Innovative concepts and creative approaches are necessary to manage for the health of the park as well as for the best visitor experience that we can provide. After all, that’s what we’re here for and that’s what we have a responsibility to provide for this and future generations.

[Ed. note: The author was superintendent at Washita before moving to her current post.]

