

Civic Engagement with the Community at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, located in western Oklahoma, was created on November 12, 1996, to interpret the attack of Lt. Col. George Custer and the 7th Cavalry on Black Kettle's sleeping Cheyenne village in 1868. The word "Battlefield" as part of the name for the park may be debatable, because the park interprets an unprovoked attack on one of the greatest peace chiefs of the Cheyenne tribe. The Cheyenne people have certainly never agreed with the park's nomenclature, and it became a strong point of contention when we began the discussions, negotiations, and collaboration to develop the story of this important time of American history. John Cook, who at the time of the park's creation was the director of the National Park Service (NPS) Intermountain Region, dubbed Washita "a site of shame" and declared that we must be assertive about interpreting as well as learning from Washita's history.

It is easy to tell the story of Washita in a one-sided fashion. In developing the park's interpretive media, we made every effort to tell a balanced story of the Southern Plains Indian Wars and of the bloody atrocities that were being committed by both the American military and the Plains tribes that led up to the Washita attack. We did, however, make every effort as the National Park Service to engage the Native Americans that are affiliated with this site in the park's development. And so I speak in this article primarily from the tribal perspective.

Washita 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 one 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 establishing 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." So in this case, meaningful civic dialogue is both legislated and the right thing to do.

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



Figure 1. Native American Heritage Group from Norman, Oklahoma, on the site of Black Kettle's camp, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. *Photo by Lawrence Hart.*

the table helping to make plans and decisions, not at the receiving end of a draft document that we expect them to approve. We had some successes and we made some mistakes. I'd like to share some of both of those with you.

I'll start with mistakes. One of the biggest problems that plagued the process was finding the right person to talk to. The political turnover within the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribe made it very difficult to get strong consistent involvement. By executive order we must deal with tribes on a government-to-government basis. We were asked very early in the process to also work with the religious leadership of the tribe and in fact were asked to pay a visit to the sacred arrow keeper, an important spiritual leader. We did so, but then received some backlash by those in the tribe that thought that it was improper for a religious leader to work on this type of process. Other

religious factions were also unhappy that they had not been consulted. We returned to the government-to-government relationship as our main consultation relationship, although a representative of the sacred arrow keeper did attend many of our meetings. The park's contact with elders and other leadership positions in the tribe has improved recently with the hiring of an education technician, Craig Moore, whose relationship with tribal elders has been strong for many years.

The successes that we achieved through this dialogue brought the park beyond telling a basic interpretive story to relating a way of life. I'll talk about two of these successes here.

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 Gordon Yellowman as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinator to work with the park, but when the tribe changed NAGPRA coordinators several times within a three-year period, thus changing our contact person, we tried to find a better way of collaborating. Yellowman devised the idea of a cultural liaison position for the tribe who would work with the park. In Fiscal Year 2001 we received an NPS challenge cost share grant to fund half of the position. The tribe agreed to fund the other half of the salary and benefits. We worked together to create a cooperative agreement and a simple position description. We jointly hired Michael Whitecloud for one year as a tribal employee. His main objective was to develop a consultation guideline that is realistic for all parties and affordable for everyone involved, allows the tribe to tell the park staff how they would like to collaborate, and gives the park staff

the important information they need 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 hopes to fully fund the position beginning in Fiscal Year 2003.

The second success story is a project that we call the Cheyenne Heritage Trail. The tribe has been very clear on their belief that Washita needs to educate the public about the Cheyenne tribe's living culture as well as the event in 1868. They also strongly believe, as does the park staff, that some of Washita's stories need to be told with a tribal voice. In addition, we felt that it was important to interpret the Washita attack in context rather than as an isolated event.

We were very fortunate to have 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



Figure 2. Ranger Steve Black giving a tour of Washita to a history group from Bethel College, Kansas. Photo by Lawrence Hart.

also the executive director of the Cheyenne Cultural Center, a non-profit corporation he founded 24 years ago. He also serves on the national review committee of NAG-PRA.

Hart created the concept of developing a Cheyenne Heritage Trail. We worked with him on the concept for the trail, which would take 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 established 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 their site and to the overall concept of the trail. Washita 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 the 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 is 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 can narrate the history of the culture as the coach travels between the sites. The 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



Figure 3. Connie Yellowman, director of Fort Reno Visitor Center, giving a program at Fort Reno cemetery. Fort Reno is the first stop on the Cheyenne Heritage Trail. *Photo by Lawrence Hart.*

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 with 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 Ser-

vice. 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 about the best interests of educating the public about Native American heritage. This is particularly advantageous to NPS as we strive to develop a new national park site at Washita and look for creative ways to enhance partnerships and interpretive techniques.

The trail has 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 is giving impetus to structural restoration and rehabilitation at four of the historic sites. It is also assisting with protecting the cultural heritage of the area and educating the public about the rich Native American occupation here.

Site presentations and interpretation have been enriched and enhanced through the research done on behalf of the trail and through the continuity of the interpretation from site to site. Participants on the tour have called the tour a “classroom on wheels.”

This partnership is unprecedented in Oklahoma. The work that has been 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.

However, do we always take on the hard issues? Not always. Michael Whitecloud asked me soon after the September 11 tragedy how I thought it compared with the Washita. I was practically insulted and responded rather tersely that I didn’t think it was

fair to compare them, that they were totally different events. And then I started thinking. At Washita, approximately 1% of the Cheyenne people were killed. On September 11, less than 0.001% of the American population lost their lives. We need to help people make connections, and to relate historic events to contemporary events. Our interpretation needs to be compelling and it needs to be provocative.

Alexa Roberts, superintendent of Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, points out that it is not the amount of consultation that we do with tribes but the degree of honesty that we have going into the discussions. True collaboration involves revealing all of the relevant information without a hidden agenda.

The National Park System Advisory Board’s report *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* calls on the National Park Service to connect native and ancestral people to the parks. I believe that this can be done through honest and meaningful collaboration and civic dialogue with these important partners.

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