

hoping to learn what preservation at a historical park was all about. It was not what I expected.

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I arrived at the entrance to the park just after opening time on a mild mid-January day and encountered a grim, tense park official with a high-powered rifle and holstered pistol—the fort was locked down! Guarding the closed entrance gate, he informed me that the **American Indian Movement** (<http://www.aimovement.org/>) (AIM) had threatened to burn down Fort Laramie. Alarmed by their threat, the superintendent had closed the fort for the day as federal law-enforcement officers rushed to the park from duty stations in the general area. He alerted the Wyoming Highway Patrol and the Service's regional office in Omaha, and ordered that park rangers fire no shots unless in a life-threatening situation. I recall that, aside from my presence in an official capacity, the only visitor allowed in the fort that day was a lone German tourist.

One of the Service's primary westward expansion parks, Fort Laramie dates from the 1830s and 1840s, when many promoted America's conquest of the West as the nation's "Manifest Destiny," ordained by Providence. The fort is located along the Laramie River, near where it joins a much larger river, the North Platte—waters that flow through parts of a vast area known as the Northern Plains: high, open grasslands stretching from about northeastern Colorado and northwestern Kansas all the way into Canada.

And here I was, just out of graduate school, intent on a quiet scholarly career—when suddenly I found myself out on the Northern Plains, threatened by an Indian attack. It seemed strange that a high-profile, activist organization like AIM had targeted this isolated historic military post. I spent the day with distracted park staff, taking a close look at the fort's historic buildings, parade ground and other features, while warily surveying the surrounding area, where serious trouble could suddenly appear.

Provoked by the long history of federal policies destructive of Indian rights, AIM had made its threat by phone the night before. The park's defensive response was not without justification, as AIM had recently participated in the **Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island** (http://siouxme.com/lodge/alcatraz_np.html) in San Francisco Bay. In the late summer of 1972, it had joined a coalition of Indian groups in an auto-caravan along The Trail of Broken Treaties, from the West Coast to Washington, D.C. There, only two months before threatening Fort Laramie, AIM led the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters.

Earlier, it had confronted the National Park Service itself, demonstrating at **Mount Rushmore National Memorial** (<http://www.nps.gov/moru>) in South Dakota's Black Hills, where it viewed the memorial's fame gigantic, sculpted presidential heads as symbols of pernicious government policies, past and present. The government's violation of agreements made at Fort Laramie in the late 1860s constituted a primary motive behind AIM's protests.

Reasons why I might have had even greater concern for personal safety that first day at the fort became evident only six weeks later. On February 27, AIM occupied the poverty stricken and strife-torn Sioux village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Reservation at the site where the U. S. Army massacred probably more than 250 Indians in late 1890. AIM's takeover, again motivated in part by historic events at Fort Laramie, resulted in an angry standoff with federal officials that drew worldwide attention and lasted ten weeks. Ending in early May 1973, the occupation left tribal factions on the reservation bitterly divided. But at Fort Laramie, AIM had chosen not to attack, and the fort survived; AIM would threaten the fort once more in 1975, again a threat not carried out. AIM's Red Power strategies reflected the activism of the times, and its protests sought to focus attention on the plight of thousands of Indians around the country. Yet the loosely organized movement did not represent all Native groups, and its threats toward Fort Laramie received little public notice. Nevertheless, AIM's focus on the fort as a site of protest effectively put to test the National Park Service's willingness to adapt to changing times—to address historical questions at the park arising from darker, more inclusive perspectives on the United States' occupation of the West by then voiced in scholarly and popular arenas around the country.

Points of Reference

But what was it about Fort Laramie's history that would, more than 80 years after the army abandoned the place, ignite the level of hostility evident in AIM's threats? Knowing only the general outlines of the fort's history, or that of the Northern Plains, I arrived at Fort Laramie in early 1973, nearly 140 years after mountain men established a fur-trading post in the vicinity in 1834. Subsequent owners rebuilt the post closer to the Laramie River. It developed into an important center where the Lakota Sioux (largest and most powerful of the Northern Plains Indians), along with the Northern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho, among other free-roaming tribes, came to barter furs and buffalo hides for trade goods. Trade and social interaction with the Native groups, including intermarriage, continued after the U.S. Army bought the post in 1849 as a means of protecting national interests in the area.

Already, Fort Laramie had become an important way-station along the Oregon and California trails, and the Mormon Trail to Utah—routes traveled each year by thousands of emigrants. Their presence antagonized the Indians, resulting in occasional attacks on overland travelers. The army quickly began replacing the old post with a new and much larger facility, steadily expanding it through the decades. Following alternating periods of peace and conflict with the tribes, and after the railroad lines bypassed the fort and eliminated most traffic along the overland trails, the army abandoned Fort Laramie in 1890 as part of a general reduction of its western forces.

These four decades of army activity at Fort Laramie and across the Northern Plains proved fateful for the Native tribes, with two major treaties, two wars, and the decisive loss of a way of life.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 sought to reduce armed conflict between Indians and whites, offering annuities as well as curbs on white encroachment in return for Indian guarantees to let whites travel along the trails to points farther west. It also sought to rein in inter-tribal territorial feuding by keeping the tribes more-or-less separated, with each to occupy a designated area—a precursor to reservations. But many Indians and whites deemed the treaty unsatisfactory. And rank-and-file tribal resistance to terms that their leaders had agreed to undercut the treaty, as did continuing clashes between the military and Indians.

In late November 1864, along Sand Creek in eastern Colorado Territory, U.S. volunteer troops massacred as many as 165 Cheyenne and Arapaho men, women, and children, heightening Indian resentment of whites all across the plains. Tension reached a danger point along the Bozeman Trail, which crossed through tribal hunting grounds northwest of Fort Laramie in the Powder River country and connected the Oregon Trail to gold fields in today's southwestern Montana. In 1866, the steady flow of whites along the Bozeman Trail, protected by three newly erected military posts, helped precipitate Red Cloud's War, named after the great Sioux leader. Unable to defeat the Indians, the army ultimately pulled back and negotiated the all-important Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868—a source of antagonism even today.

Meeting with Indians at Fort Laramie, government negotiators led by William Tecumseh Sherman (soon to be named Commanding General of the United States Army) agreed to abandon the Bozeman Trail and the new forts, leaving the Powder River country of Wyoming and Montana as Indian hunting territory. Of special consequence, the treaty established the Great Sioux Reservation covering all of present-day South Dakota lying west of the Missouri River, and including the Black Hills plus a small part of North Dakota. Yet the "non-treaty" Indians under such leaders as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse rejected the treaty, determined to protect their life-ways and opposed to restrictions on hunting areas and to living on reservations—a portent of more warfare.

Encroachment persisted, as towns and villages developed along new railroad lines across the plains. White intrusion on to Indian lands (particularly in search of gold in the Black Hills) and the non-treaty Indians' continued resistance triggered another conflict: the Great Sioux War, beginning early in 1876. Mainly fierce, intermittent pitched battles (the defeat of Custer's Seventh Cavalry along the Little Bighorn River being the most well-known), the war lasted into 1877. At the end, and in contradiction to terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the Sioux lost the Black Hills through manipulative pressure by top-level

military and political leaders, backed up by the U.S. Congress.

Facing starvation, the Indians had begun to withdraw to reservation lands, although some escaped to Canada with Sitting Bull, only to return by the early 1880s. Once free to follow the vast herds of buffalo across the open plains, the tribes became increasingly dependent on annuities, food, and supplies from government agencies established at reservations. By the early 1880s white market-hunters were obliterating the buffalo herds, and within the next decade the Indians lost much more of their reservation lands, which came under white control.

Of all the losses Northern Plains Indians endured, the taking of the Black Hills in violation of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, the massive destruction of buffalo herds, and the slaughter at Wounded Knee, remain among the most bitterly remembered.

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Before leaving Denver for my assignment at Fort Laramie, I learned that in 1890 the army had left about 60 standing buildings to be sold at public auction. With the military providing a measure of security, the fertile and relatively temperate North Platte Valley (known today as Wyoming's banana belt) had attracted farmers and ranchers, who acquired a number of the old buildings and put them to use. All or parts of other structures were dismantled and carried away by the army or by nearby farmers and ranchers. When the State of Wyoming purchased the fort in 1937 and donated it to the National Park Service the following year, only about a dozen partially intact historic structures remained, some badly deteriorated.

Support for the fort's preservation came from politicians and devoted citizens, including area residents, some of whom had personal memories of the army era. The Daughters of the American Revolution gave their support; and the overall intent was clear: to preserve old Fort Laramie as a patriotic tribute to the army, the overland trails, and the settlement of the West.

Even though preservation work on the structures was sporadic through World War II and the postwar era, by the early 1960s Fort Laramie National Historic Site had begun receiving large numbers of visitors curious about the history of the westward movement—up to nearly 158,000 in 1972, just before my project began there. The old fort had become a noteworthy tourist destination, boosting local business, job opportunities and community pride—benefits common to areas near national parks. (The annual number of visits would decline sharply with the gasoline crisis the following year, never again to rise as high as in 1972.)

Setting the Stage: The Buildings

With the events of my first day at the fort still fresh in my mind, I spent a couple of weeks concentrating on my assignment and drafting a report. Back at the Denver office I soon submitted the document, then took on projects in other parks as assigned. Yet, in addition to the possibility of an attack by AIM, there was something else at Fort Laramie that I particularly remembered (beyond the antelope stew and elk-meat lasagna served at special staff lunches)—something that I would come to recognize as a telling clue as to how much the Park Service was willing to confront difficult historical questions.

My report primarily dealt with physical preservation and maintenance of the fort's historic buildings and its immediate surroundings, with only brief comments on park interpretation of the fort's history. But especially piquing my curiosity was the park's treatment of the dozen or so historic structures that it displayed and interpreted to the public. Fronting the fort's large, centrally located parade ground, these buildings had been fully restored and refurnished—and curiously, to their appearances in different decades of army occupancy, with every decade represented from the late 1840s through the 1880s.

The park took tremendous pride in its restored buildings. And during my tour the first day, I learned that the intent had been for each structure to be restored and refurnished to reflect its period of maximum importance (its so-called Golden Age). This created more anachronism than I felt comfortable with, as

restorations completed (or planned) by January 1973 comprised a kind of mix-and-match assemblage: a stone magazine for safekeeping of weapons and ammunition had been restored to its 1850 to 1862 appearance, the captain's quarters returned to its 1872 appearance, the bakery to 1876, the enlisted men's cavalry barracks to 1876 (even though the old building has a front veranda that was not built until 1883), the post trader's store also to 1876 (although some parts of it date from the 1840s, 50s, and 80s), the post surgeon's quarters to 1880, and the lieutenant colonel's quarters to 1887-1888.

Most puzzling of the various restored structures was the fort's "Old Bedlam," once the quarters of rowdy bachelor officers, also the oldest military building in the state and an iconic structure to many Wyomingites. Near collapse when taken over by the National Park Service, this two-storey frame and adobe structure built in 1849 had been restored mainly to the late 1860s, then refurnished to different decades and different army uses. The north half of Old Bedlam was refurnished as mid-1850s bachelor officers' quarters, and the south half to 1863-1864, when it served as post headquarters and commanding officer's quarters -- altogether a juxtaposition of several dates in one structure.

As intended, the park's restoration projects covered all relevant decades and included historic furnishings suitable for officers of several different ranks, and for enlisted men.

Park Service interest in extensive historic restoration of the fort reflected ambitions of the Service's hierarchy, from Washington and the regional office in Omaha down to park leadership (in addition to the enthusiasm of local residents). During World War II and the early post-war era, only minimal funds were available, and work on Fort Laramie's buildings mostly involved basic stabilization and repairs necessary for public use and safety. Restoration got under way in earnest in the 1950s; and a substantial private donation along with Mission 66, a special Service-wide funding program for post-war park development backed by President Eisenhower, boosted the first full rehabilitation—the lieutenant colonel's quarters, its refurnishing completed and the building dedicated with great fanfare in 1961. By then, Mission 66 had paved the way toward completion of the fort's historic restoration, aided by private donations for refurnishing. Collectively, the restored and refurnished buildings became the park's dominant interpretive feature.

Bureaucratic Genetics

The interpretive schemes at Fort Laramie have roots in National Park Service history and culture. By mid-century, from the directorate in Washington down to park superintendents and their staffs, the Golden Age approach had caught on, inspired by the widely popular restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia, funded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and viewed by many as an exemplar of the highest and best in historic preservation. The interest in interpretive restorations of historic sites had become embedded in National Park Service bureaucratic genetics, its DNA—to be gratified when sufficient funds became available, as they were by the mid-1950s, or when some member of Congress needed a boost in local political support. Despite some naysayers and official Park Service policies that ran counter to restorations, the Service considered seeking Rockefeller funds for restoring Fort Laramie, but apparently decided this would prove futile.

Meanwhile, during the middle decades of the century, the Service was given responsibility for about 20 westward expansion parks: in addition to Fort Laramie, such places as Fort Union Trading Post in western North Dakota, and Golden Spike in Utah, site of the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. Following closely on the heels of Mission 66, the national bicentennial celebration brought additional funding—and a number of the new parks made tempting candidates for large-scale interpretive restoration, as had happened at Fort Laramie. Or, as an even more ambitious alternative, they were candidates for total reconstruction.

Also, soon after joining the Denver office I became aware of a sizeable group of Park Service historians intensely dedicated to the study of the army and the Indians in the American West. Although some were based in Washington or in Park Service regional offices, many of them spent their careers moving among

westward expansion parks, where they often promoted cannon and rifle firing demonstrations, costumed interpretation and other forms of “living history”—an animated means of interpretation that reached its heyday in the Service by the early 1970s. Several also wrote western histories, producing well-received academic studies, mainly on military and Indian topics (a number of their books inform this commentary).

Frequently supporting historic building restoration or partial or complete reconstruction, these specialists on the military in the West evolved into a distinct subculture within the Service’s greater bureaucratic matrix. (Sometimes I thought of them as the Park Service “Custer Mafioso,” given their enduring interest in the story of the army’s crushing defeat at Little Bighorn, surely the most iconic episode in Western military history.) Indeed, they became a force to be reckoned with in historic preservation and interpretation of the army in the West—including the treatment of Fort Laramie’s historic structures.

I never belonged to the Western military group; yet some of its members became good friends, although we often took different policy stances, for instance on restoration, reconstruction, or living history. With a permanent Park Service position soon coming my way, and increasing professional travel along with a growing interest in historic preservation, I managed over time to visit almost all of the more than 390 parks under the Service’s care—large and small, scenic and natural, and historical, including virtually every one of the westward expansion parks. I gained a reasonable degree of knowledge about the different ways in which parks were packaged and presented to the public.

Among other matters, I came to question the need for many of the Service’s interpretive reconstructions, restorations and re-furnishings. A guide in period costume at Fort Laramie told me recently that about 90 percent of the pieces used in the refurnishing were never at the fort historically; instead they are only modern reproductions or carefully selected period antiques (of the times, but used elsewhere)—a situation frequently encountered at the Service’s more extensively manipulated historical parks. In truth, I often think of sites like these as expensive stage sets for costumed living-history interpretation, which, although pleasing to many, seem to me a distraction, more entertainment than education: lacking in depth and unlikely to provoke much visitor contemplation of the larger meaning of a place.

But in early 1973, at the very beginning of what I hoped would become a permanent career with the Park Service, I puzzled over the results of preservation at Fort Laramie, which had enthusiastic support from Service personnel far more experienced than I. New to the Service’s ways of preserving and interpreting historic sites, I assumed, more-or-less, that the buildings, restored and refurnished to their Golden Age, somehow represented the fort’s overall history and significance. This notion needed serious reconsideration.

Showcasing Victorian Army Life

With my wife’s family living for years in Cheyenne, Wyoming, about 100 miles south of Fort Laramie, she and I took the opportunity several times after my brief 1973 assignment to make the scenic drive up to the fort. Situated near the two rivers (where cottonwood and willow abound and Western meadowlarks—the unheralded Pavarotti of the Plains—mark territories with their clear, melodious notes), the fort’s parade ground and old buildings have long appealed to us. Yet we paid little attention to the details of the park’s interpretation. But recently, as I was preparing to write these comments about Fort Laramie, I was in the general area more than once, and each time took the opportunity to re-visit the fort and consider more closely than ever before the stories it tells—its various interpretive messages to the public. And even though I began writing this with a fascination for the place (which I still have), the closer I examined the park the more I questioned how the Service had treated the fort’s historic buildings and interpreted its history.

It was especially AIM’s threat that could not be ignored—its hostility toward this historic site, to the point that it would want to burn down Fort Laramie. In 1973, I had found its threat troubling; yet with a succession of short projects in Arkansas, Utah, California, and Virginia, followed by a transfer to the Service’s Santa Fe, New Mexico, office, I had other matters to tend to and did not fully come to grips with

what I had encountered at the fort. But writing today about those experiences has brought about a process of rethinking that touches on the issues of who has preserved this site and interpreted it to the public, and how?; and who has wanted to destroy it, and why?

It is important how historic buildings are treated. And in some ways it seems quite natural that the historic remains of Fort Laramie for which the Park Service is responsible—buildings where soldiers, some with their families, lived and worked during four decades—would have prompted the Service to place primary emphasis on military life at this western post. To many men and women, the fort became home for a number of years (even decades for some), providing protection and companionship in the face of isolation and hard, often dangerous work on the remote high plains.

The various officers' and enlisted men's quarters, the bakery, trading store and bar—even two guard houses and the ruins of a latrine—all tell the story of daily army life. And a tour of the fort brings one in repeated contact with rooms (eight of them in the lieutenant colonel's quarters alone, and approximately double that number in Old Bedlam) where army life is interpreted primarily through middle-class Victorian furnishings.

But to me, these domestic spaces draw attention away from the military's purpose in maintaining a base of operations near the Laramie and North Platte rivers, how it went about achieving that purpose, and the resulting impacts on Indian life and culture. Instead, they focus the visitors' attention on the soldiers, their families, and domestic comforts at Fort Laramie. A little nostalgia may be all right, but it should not be the main course. But with restorations such as Old Bedlam and the captain's and lieutenant colonel's quarters, the National Park Service has transformed this once-abandoned fort into a showcase of domestic life at a Northern Plains military post.

Surely, though, beyond Park Service interpretation, it was the very existence of Fort Laramie that provoked AIM's anger: the old fort, preserved and proudly displayed by yet another arm of the United States government—a reminder of broken treaties and the Indians' disastrous loss of their traditional life-ways, tied closely to seasonal movement of the buffalo. But had AIM leaders actually shown up and bothered to take the ranger-led tour of the fort, they would have been even more irritated. As just one example, visitors who take the current tour that winds through the buildings, along the parade ground and past various interpretive signs will encounter comments about the army's installation of birdbaths and indoor plumbing in the 1880s, but no mention is made of the army's impact on Indian life-ways, on their tribal culture and independence. At the very least, AIM's threats signaled that not every American was pleased with Fort Laramie. But was the National Park Service paying attention?

Apparently not. In 1987, roughly 14 years after AIM's initial threat, the park completed its last, and one of its most ambitious, restoration and refurnishing efforts, affecting about half of the two-storey, 273-foot-long enlisted men's cavalry barracks. It is this structure that most symbolizes the military's final, determined drive to subdue the Indians—in current lingo, its “shock and awe” against Northern Plains tribes. The army built the barracks in 1873-1874 to accommodate a hundred or more additional cavalymen, thereby strengthening its mounted forces to strike the enemy: those Indians who refused to accept confinement on their reservation or abandonment of traditional hunting areas.

But what one sees today in the barracks, refurnished to its 1876 appearance, is mainly where the soldiers ate and slept. The south half of the barracks building is restored downstairs as a mess hall, kitchen, and related rooms—and upstairs as sleeping quarters (long dormitory bays) with about 50 reproduction nineteenth-century iron army bunks in precisely aligned rows that can be viewed through a clear Plexiglas barrier. At the foot of the bunks are wooden military footlockers, with overcoats and horse tack hanging on walls nearby, and rifles in “arms racks” close at hand. Except for historic army heating stoves, probably once used at the fort, all furnishings are modern reproductions. (The north half of the barracks building, where more cavalry troops were quartered, accommodates the park's library, museum collections, and other functions.)

The ultimate purpose of the 1870s cavalry barracks—to house reinforcements for the final suppression of Northern Plains Indians to make way for white occupation—is only implied. Instead, the interpretation features the furnishings, in addition to commentary (and even a song) about unappetizing meals fed to the soldiers. Overall, the messages conveyed by Fort Laramie's restored buildings, and most notably at the cavalry barracks, fall into the category of "American Innocence", in that they reveal no substantive connection with consequences of the army's military actions on the plains. National innocence is a conceit with which AIM and most other Indians likely have never agreed.

The Service has in fact provided a thorough presentation of this Western military post's domestic architecture and interiors. It was Mission 66 that swept aside notions of less costly alternatives for the most intact structures, such as structural stabilization, repairs, and repainting, which, along with interpretive signs, artifact exhibits, and historic photographs, could have told the story without fully restoring and refurnishing the buildings. Such an alternative could have led to a less expensive—and less definitive—preservation and interpretation commitment.

And that alternative might have allowed succeeding generations of park managers greater flexibility to reconsider, and perhaps to highlight the broader and more consequential historical themes than military life-ways. But as I see it now, the restoration projects have resulted in the park's primary theme of military life at the fort being locked in. And it is locked in even more by the enthusiasm of park staff and area residents for the restored buildings and the traditional romantic views of western history that the buildings represent.

But what was Fort Laramie's historical aftermath? What are its most enduring consequences—its significant legacies? Considering the park's interpretation much more closely than I did in earlier years, it is a mystery to me why daily army life should be presented as the primary aspect of the site's history. Routines of life at a Western fort seem limited in serious historical outcomes, certainly when compared with the enduring consequences of the military's field enterprises across the high plains. This suggests the need for the Park Service to print the disturbing facts as much if not more than it prints the romantic legend, with which the Service has long felt comfortable. Otherwise, where and how does the Indian story fit in? They suffered the worst consequences. And without their presence, the military would have had little need to build forts on the Northern Plains.

Tomorrow: What became of Plains Indian War history?

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