

Pipestone

National Monument
Minnesota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Mission 66

Following World War II, Americans began visiting national parks in unprecedented numbers. A need soon arose to address growing visitor demands and better protect park resources. From 1956 - 1966, the Mission 66 program transformed national parks across the country, including Pipestone. The program's legacy, however, remains controversial.



What Is Mission 66?



Between 1940 and 1955, annual visitation to national parks jumped from 17 million to 56 million with affordable cars, expanding road systems, and a growing economy encouraging more travel. The parks were not prepared for this boom and by the mid-1950s were deteriorating.

National Park Service (NPS) Director Conrad Wirth aimed to address this with a ten-year plan to update park facilities, expand visitor services, and revitalize the image of the NPS by its 50th

anniversary in 1966. This "Mission 66" proposal, approved by President Eisenhower and Congress, marked one of the largest federal funding efforts under a single program in the twentieth century.

How Did Mission 66 Impact Pipestone National Monument?

Pipestone National Monument's visitation increased tenfold between 1945 and 1955, making it well-suited to be one of the earliest Mission 66 projects. Pipestone received the program's core elements: a visitor center, two staff residences, an improved entrance road and parking area, and enhanced trail system.

These new amenities used modern construction materials and were built near the park's most significant resources — the quarries. Much of the construction was complete by 1958 — a testament to the agency's readiness to act. The cultural center at the back of the building was added in 1972 as an extension of the Mission 66 idea.

Benefits to Visitors and the Local Economy

At Pipestone, the visitor center offered direct access to the quarries and new trail system. The center also provided new museum exhibits, a diorama, a theater, and featured items made by local Indigenous pipestone carvers and artisans.

Visitation continued growing as more people visited the area and stayed longer, spending money and boosting the local economy. Travelers were excited about the improved services and expressed an increased appreciation for the NPS. Pipestone went from underfunded and understaffed to becoming a regional destination almost overnight.



Over 2,000 people attended the visitor center's dedication ceremony on July 26, 1958. Here, NPS Director Conrad Wirth cuts the ribbon with government officials and local leaders.

Key Features of Visitor Centers:

- Horizontal planes; long and low profile
- Absence of applied ornamentation
- Flat roofs with projecting flat terraces
- An effort to use plainness to blend into the landscape



Architectural Marvel or a Marred Landscape?

Pipestone's Mission 66 transformation met mixed reviews. While some saw it as a success, others felt the changes diminished the sanctity of the site and strayed from the purpose of the monument's designation. The visitor center stands atop the very quarries the park is meant to protect, the new road cut across remnant tallgrass prairie, and the exhibits failed to discuss the sacred nature or spiritual traditions of the site, instead focusing on European trade and exploration.

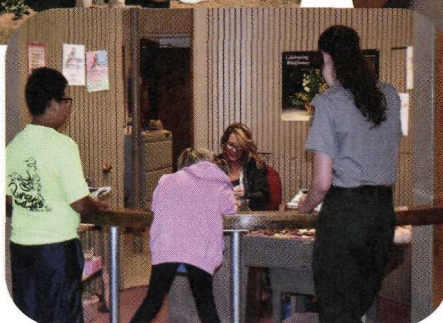
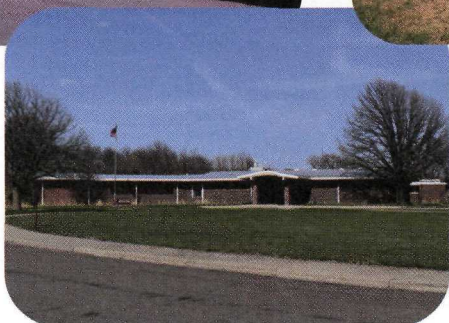
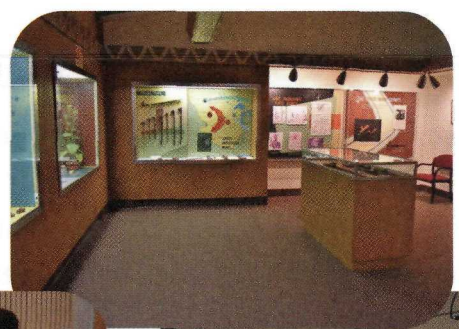
Mission 66 was an important part of the monument's history, but its structures failed to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. The park worked with the 23 affiliated tribal nations to replace the original 1958 museum exhibits in 2020 with more inclusive perspectives of the site's significance and sacredness. The park continues to consult tribal nations in an effort to protect Pipestone's spiritual landscape.

Mission 66 across the National Park Service

Mission 66 provided modernized services to Americans seeking recreational opportunities in a post-war nation. Despite its achievements, Mission 66 was not and is not universally lauded. For those who valued wild frontiers, the contemporary buildings detracted from the natural landscape. For Indigenous and minority communities, the program did little to consult their opinions and concerns.

The NPS continues to evolve and must strike a balance between preservation and visitation. Today, parks work hard to encourage visitors to be good stewards of these special places while restoration efforts promote more sustainable visitation. Indigenous and minority groups add their voices to the conversation as park employees and partners work to strengthen these relationships. Though Mission 66 is unlikely to ever be replicated, this plan defined the national parks as we see them today and provided valuable lessons for the future.

Pipestone: Past and Present



Pipestone National Monument Visitor Center

Cultural demonstrators teach while carving

1958 (above) and 2020 (below) museum exhibits