

An Indian Memorial for the Little Bighorn

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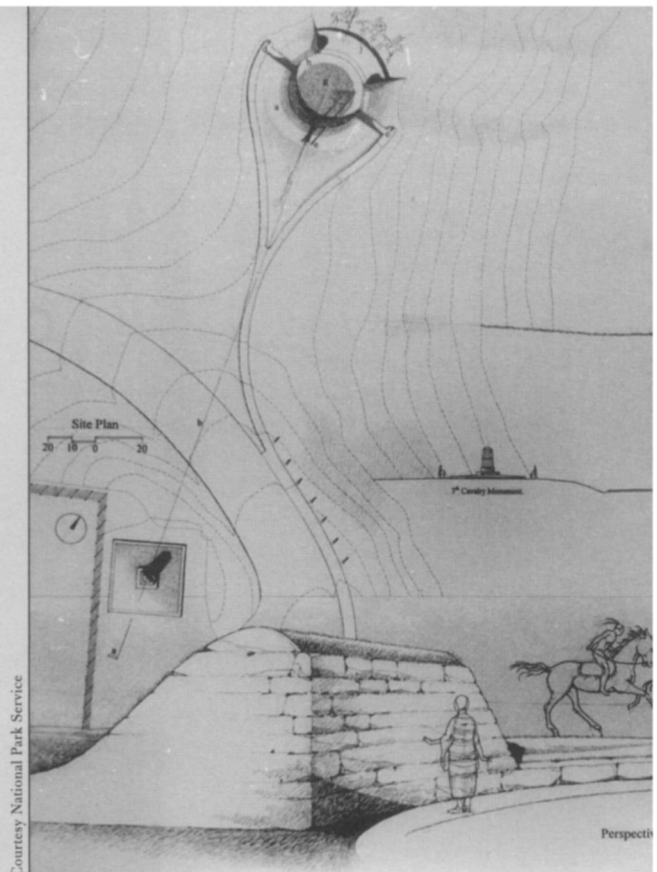
by Charles E. Rankin

In February 1997, a seven-member jury drawn from a special Department of the Interior advisory committee chose the design for an Indian memorial at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in southeastern Montana. The committee's work came after more than two years' worth of deliberations and more than five years after the necessary legislation received congressional approval. Now may come the hardest part of all—funding the project and seeing it through to completion. As part of an effort to raise the money necessary to build the memorial—actual cost is yet to be determined—a traveling exhibit consisting of 126 of the best design proposals will circulate for public viewing. The Montana Historical Society will support this effort by bringing the exhibit to the Montana State Capitol in Helena this summer.

Despite the hurdles yet to be cleared, it would appear that finally the high, treeless hills that overlook the Little Bighorn River and the battlefield that witnessed George Armstrong Custer's legendary defeat more than 120 years ago will have a memorial to the people who actually won the battle.

The winning entry is by Philadelphia designer John R. Collins and his wife Alison J. Towers. Collins, a thirty-three-year-old landscape architect who has never visited the Little Bighorn battlefield, told the Philadelphia *Enquirer* that he is intrigued with designing memorials and was attracted by the prizes offered for this competition. The design, judged best from among 550 entries, is relatively low-key and simple, characteristics that had much to do with its selection. Indeed, as Collins told the Billings *Gazette*, he wanted to make "large gestures" and deliberately left some features ambiguous. Other entries, some much more elaborate, depicted a variety of forms, including medicine lodges, eagles, peace pipes, and buffalo horns. One entry suggested a "voluntary destruction of the monstrous symbol of white domination that is Mount Rushmore" in South Dakota, and then hauling the debris to the Little Bighorn and there using it to build the new Indian memorial.

By contrast, the winning design takes shape around an open, circular plaza, which serves as a "gathering place." Around this is an earthen berm simulating an elemental landform in keeping with ancient earthworks found in North America. It will offer openings for entryways and support a broad platform on its north side. Atop the platform are to be three large-scale silhouette figures of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors mounted on galloping horses. The figures, Collins

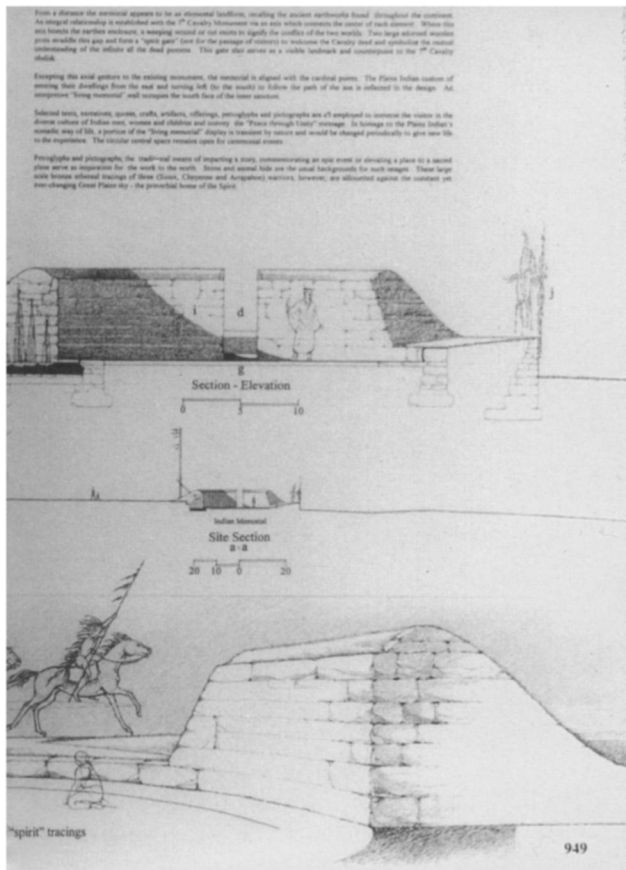


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told the *Enquirer*, are to be slightly ghostly, recalling the two-dimensional pictographs some Indian tribes employed to document their history. Behind them, Collins says, will be the constantly changing Montana sky, the proverbial home of the Spirit.

Those submitting entries to the competition were cautioned not to have the Indian memorial compete directly with the nearby monument to the Seventh Cavalry, but they were encouraged to relate the two memorials to each other. In the winning design an unseen axis connects the center of the Indian memorial with the center of the Seventh Cavalry monument. The axis is intended to cut through the earthen wall of the Indian memorial to represent a "weeping wound," which in turn symbolizes the conflict of the two worlds that clashed on the surrounding hills on June 25, 1876. In addition, two thirty-foot poles with fluttering pennants are to straddle the gap and form a spirit gate, not for the passage of modern-day visitors to the battlefield, but rather to welcome the cavalry dead and signify mutual understanding.

The memorial would be aligned with the cardinal points and constructed to accommodate the Plains Indian custom of entering a dwelling from the east and turning left (to the south) to follow the path of the sun.



In addition, an interpretive "living memorial" would occupy the interior south wall of the plaza. There, sacred texts, narratives, quotations, crafts, artifacts, offerings, petroglyphs, and pictographs would be displayed to immerse visitors in the diverse culture of Indian men, women, and children. To reflect the Plains Indians' nomadic way of life, a portion of the "living memorial" display would be transient in nature; that is, it would be changed periodically to provide new information and vary the visitor's experience. The circular central space would remain open for ceremonial events.

The Indian memorial is to be located seventy yards north and slightly downhill from the existing monument to the Seventh Cavalry, a granite obelisk atop Last Stand Hill where Custer perished with his immediate command. The Indian memorial site takes up about 2,100 square feet on the north side of the main road leading through the battlefield.

After more than a year of planning and advertising the competition, the seven-member jury met for more than a week in Billings in February to make its decision. Advisory committee chairman Leonard Bruguier told the Billings *Gazette* that the process evoked strong emotions. With the concerns of so many Indian groups to be considered, one could hardly expect anything less. The actual jury consisted of Arthur Amiotte, a Sioux artist and adjunct professor of Native studies and art at Brandon University; Paul Andrew Hutton, professor of history at the University of New Mexico; A. Gay Kingman, Lakota educator and director of public rela-

Schematic diagram shows the winning design by John Collins and Alison Towers for an Indian memorial at the Little Bighorn battlefield.

tions for the National Indian Gaming Association; Richard Pohl, a landscape architect at Montana State University, Bozeman; Crow artist Kevin Red Star; Carol Redcherries, chief justice for the Northern Cheyenne Appellate Court; and Northern Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes of AmerINDIAN Architecture in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The winning design, which received a \$30,000 cash prize, has not obtained final approval yet. That must come from Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who has taken the jury's recommendations under advisement. The jury also selected second and third place winners and awarded six honorable mentions. Second place and a \$15,000 cash prize went to Richard Alan Borkovetz of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Robert Lundgren of Philadelphia received third place and a \$5,000 award. The six honorable mentions went to: a Portland, Oregon, design team led by Herbe Fricke; Peter Kindel of Chicago, Illinois; John Buenz, also of Chicago; a University of Oregon design team led by John S. Reynolds; Mark L. Goodman of North Miami Beach, Florida; and Michael Stewart of Crow Agency, the only Montanan to win an award.

Those entering the competition had been asked to base their designs on the theme of "peace through unity," as identified by tribal elders Enos Poor Bear and Austin Two Moons.

The legislation that authorized the Indian memorial was passed in December 1991. Sponsored by former Representatives Pat Williams of Montana and Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, it was the same legislation that sanctioned changing the monument's name from Custer Battlefield to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. The National Park Foundation, formed in 1967 by Congress to raise private support for park projects, supplied the prize money for the design competition and will take the lead in fundraising for the memorial's construction.

Selection of winning and runner-up designs for the Indian memorial completes the first phase of a project many hope will bring greater recognition to all participants in the Battle of the Little Bighorn and broaden the National Park Service's interpretation of one of the nation's most notable historic sites. *M*

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