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**THE NATIONAL PARKS**  
**America's Best Idea**

**UNTOLD STORIES FROM  
AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

NATIONAL PARK SUPERINTENDENT GERARD BAKER

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## NATIONAL PARK SUPERINTENDENT GERARD BAKER

### *Born into Two Worlds*

On December 2, 1953, Gerard Baker was born on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, home to the Three Affiliated Tribes—the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (Sahnish) Indians. It is a tribal custom to give the children Indian names when they are still very young. Gerard was given the Hidatsa name Zaa-sha-shee-dish, “Yellow Wolf” (Shumaker 1).

I was brought up in the uplands of our reservation. . . . I am the first generation born, what I say, “on top of the dam.” Our beautiful Missouri River bottomland got flooded by the Corps of Engineers in the 1950s. They chased us all out. We had no choice. Either we signed the paper or we were condemned. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 1)

As the waters of the Missouri backed up, the river towns of Beaver Creek, Nishu, Charging Eagle, Lucky Mound, Shell Creek, Independence, and Elbowoods disappeared, submerged forever under Lake Sakakawea (Duncan 188).

Today, housing on the Fort Berthold Reservation consists of small ranch-style homes on barren lots. Alyce Spotted Bear, former chairman of the Three Affiliated Tribes, says the flooding of the bottomland was as devastating to her people as the smallpox epidemic of 1837. “When our homelands were flooded, about 86% of our tribal members were relocated for purposes of the construction of the Garrison Dam,” she said. “We lost our whole way of life.” The flooding of the farms and towns separated the people of the tribes, moving them onto upland sections of the reservation that are often two to four hours’ drive apart. Village life, as the tribes people knew it, was gone (Duncan 189; Spotted Bear).

Gerard lived with his parents, two brothers and a sister at the end of a dirt road, nine miles northwest of a little town called Mandaree, North Dakota. Their home was a small log house, without electricity in his earliest years, and consisted of four rooms: the kitchen, the living room, and two bedrooms—one for Gerard’s parents, the other for his sister.

What we’re missing was the boy’s room! So, our room was the living room. That means we slept on the floor; when someone came over we had to get up. I can remember bathing—like a lot of old homesteaders back then we bathed once a week, on Saturday. I don’t care if that living room was full of people; we still bathed! Little biddy guys in those old washtubs. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 2)

The Bakers were ranchers, using the 160 acres apportioned them by the government to full capacity.

When I grew up, it wasn’t a matter of watching TV; it wasn’t a matter of listening to the radio. . . . We were taught to work, as young kids. We had chickens. We had pigs. We had horses. We had cattle.

We had milk cows. We had everything a typical ranch farm would have for existence. Even though we got commodities from the government, we were one of the fortunate ones—I believe—in that we also had our farm animals; we had our dairy products and our vegetables to help us out. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 2)

What the Baker children did for entertainment, Gerard says, was “sit around and listen to the old people talk.” The old people—elders of the Hidatsa and Mandan tribes—were frequent visitors at the Baker home.

I can remember a lot of people coming over—John Yellow Wolf and Black Hawk, Black Bear and Little Owl. And these are some of the old fellows that really did see those early ceremonies, you know. I got to meet Mattie Grinnell. . . . She came from the small pox era. I met people who came from the Independence era, before we were dammed.

And I can remember hearing those stories. So, I had the opportunity and I had the privilege of knowing these people—not very well, ‘cause I was young. And as young kids back in those days, we were taught never to be heard; just to listen. You sit there and you listen. And, of course, our bedroom was the living room so we had no choice either! —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 3)

The elders told stories about hunting, warfare, ceremonies, and life. Through their stories, Gerard, his brothers, and his sister learned about their culture.

I can remember sitting there for hours, listening to these guys tell stories. . . . Of course I very much respected them, because they were the tribe. They were the real ones, as far as I’m concerned. They were the ones who’d experienced it . . . .

What made it special was that these old people coming to our house and talking were telling us who we were—not by telling us directly, but by talking to the other adults. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 3, 4, 5)

More than just learning about the past, Gerard learned the value of stories—hearing them, telling them, learning from them, and living them.

They would teach us how to live through stories and how to work through stories, how to set goals and challenges. . . . And they would [teach] us through stories: through Coyote stories; through discipline-type stories; through ceremonial-type stories and on and on and on. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 4)

Gerard had the benefit of learning about his culture from the elders of his tribes, including his father, Paige Baker, Sr., one of the Mandan leaders. Dying of lung cancer, Paige Sr. taped a message for his son.

Now everything is lost. We don’t believe in the white man’s way and we don’t believe in the Indian way. So what the hell are we? We’re not anybody. . . . You’re going to run into trouble; you’re going to look for something. You’ll wish you had a god or something more powerful than you are to pray

to and then hang on to, which you're not going to have if you don't practice it now and learn about it. But if you learn about it, then when the time comes that you need that help, you'll know you've got it. Hang on to things like that." —Paige Baker, Sr. (Duncan 191).

Gerard took his father's advice. Having married and finished college, which he attended on a basketball scholarship, Gerard became more and more interested in traditional native practices and beliefs. He went out alone on spirit quests, in the remote buttes of the North Dakota Badlands. In a coulee, singing Hidatsa songs, a woman's voice sang with him. Birds spoke to him in his dreams. His life, as author Dayton Duncan writes, became a synthesis of the white man's way and the Indian way (Shumaker 8–9; Duncan 192).

### *The National Park Service*

When Gerard was still a young boy, his father met a ranger at the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, not far from the Baker ranch.

I remember my dad came back and he was all excited. He was telling my mom and us, too, about this guy—he wore a uniform; he had this hat that was flat. And what impressed me [was] that he took care of the earth; he took care of the trees; he took care of the badlands; he took care of the buffalo; he took care of the Little Missouri River. And I was so impressed with that. I remember hearing it as a kid and saying, "Wow! Who is this guy?" I mean, he sounded like [he] was 10, 12, 15 feet tall. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 9)

"The best thing about it," Gerard remembered, "was that he was a cowboy."

Paige Baker, Sr., arranged to have the man come to the family's ranch, hoping he'd be able to break a troublesome horse they'd had in their corral for months. The kids awaited his arrival with great anticipation, especially Gerard.

I was so excited. . . . I imagined somebody coming all decked-out, with a uniform on and a great big hat, getting out of this great big four-wheel drive pickup—you know, fifteen feet tall.

I had a couple of disappointments that day. One of them was that, when he came over the hill, he was the Average Joe. He didn't have his uniform on. It was his day off, of course.

My second disappointment was when he said he could ride this horse. It's the first time I ever saw a park ranger get thrown over about a 12-foot-high fence. This thing bucked him off so damn high— And he laid there for a while. And I was looking at him, thinking, "Hmm . . . That's a park ranger." —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 9–10)

Despite first impressions, Gerard eventually came to work for the National Park Service, beginning as a seasonal ranger in Theodore Roosevelt National Park (Duncan 181; Shumaker 12).

They sent me *all* this government paperwork. You have to have this kind of uniform—you have to have a hat, a hat band, and a uniform, your belt buckle, your belt. Everything was Park Service, of course: gray and green and cordovan.

I looked at the application and I'm thinking, "I don't need all this stuff! I don't need a hatband. Oh, I'll get the hat, yeah, but I don't need a hatband. I don't need a Park Service belt; I've got a belt with a great big Indian beaded buckle. I've got my own boots."

And so the first day of work I showed up with that stuff on. And I wasn't the only one; luckily there were other people that didn't understand either. We came dressed like a bunch of crazy guys!  
—Gerard Baker (Shumaker 12)

Gerard's first job as a seasonal was maintenance—cleaning toilets, picking up trash, and mowing lawns. He remembers being on his hands and knees, cleaning in the campground bathrooms, when a supervisor would come in to inspect his work. It seemed to Gerard that they were especially hard on him, because he was an Indian.

I would get mad at that. I'd get really mad at that. I didn't say anything, of course; I was taught from birth to be respectful of elders. . . . But it put a goal in my mind. The goal was this: *That I would be the one to do this*, one of these days. I would be the inspector. I would be a park superintendent by the time I was 40 years of age. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 12)

Slowly, Gerard began to learn about the National Park Service—its rules, its history, its mission.

What attracted me—when I got into it and learned it—was the 1916 Organic Act, because the philosophy is so close to Indian philosophy: The protection of resources for future generations; the education of our people; and on and on and on. Everything that the 1916 Organic Act says, we Indians, from the early, early days of creation, that's our philosophy as well. And so it fit. I adapted to it really well.

Plus, I liked the job. I liked being outside and not sitting behind a desk. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 12)

With his impressive size—Gerard stands 6'5" and weighs 230 lbs—skill with weapons, and college degrees in criminology and sociology, he was soon promoted to law enforcement and began running patrols. Out on patrol, he would frequently watch the park's interpretive programs, put on by rangers for park visitors. He soon recognized that something was missing: what Gerard calls "the Indian element" (Duncan 181; Shumaker 13).

They weren't talking about Indians! It wasn't their fault; it was just what they were programmed to do, I think. But it was almost like this land started when Theodore Roosevelt came in! And I was thinking, "There's more to it than that! There's the Indian story. We've lived here for centuries, since the beginning of time." —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 14)

Gerard volunteered to lead programs about Native Americans in the park. The response of visitors—their excitement and interest in what he was saying—got him hooked on interpretation. "I started remembering everything I was told when I was young, to put more programs on," he said. "That's what got me going in my work" (Shumaker 14).

*Knife River Indian Villages and Fort Union*

Gerard's first permanent job with the Park Service was at Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, just north of Stanton, ND. The largest of the three former villages, "Big Hidatsa," is where Lewis and Clark lived with the Mandan and Hidatsa peoples on their journey across the continent in the early nineteenth century. Beginning a pattern that would be repeated throughout his career, Gerard used his post at Knife River to learn more about his own heritage, both experientially and through historic texts. He combed the journals of Lewis and Clark, read current histories of the journey, and, in 1979, built a half-size replica of a traditional Hidatsa earth lodge at Knife River (Duncan 181; Shumaker 14).

I've always been fired up about history, but that [job] gave me the opportunity to start tanning hides more, to tan buffalo hides, to build earth lodges. . . . I got to take more sweats. I got to really get involved. I mean, *really* get involved. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 16)

It was at Knife River that Gerard also acquired a reputation as someone who wouldn't necessarily play by NPS rules, especially when it came to Native Americans. When archaeologists dug up the remains of a double burial, a female and child, and sent them to a University of North Dakota forensics lab to be studied, Gerard took matters into his own hands.

I didn't play the game. I didn't go to my supervisor who would go to the next supervisor and up the line, up the chain of command of the government, because I knew what was not gonna happen. I knew that they wouldn't care about us. So, rather than do that, I went straight to my tribal chairman, who went straight to the National Park Service in Washington, DC. In two days' time, we had those burials back. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 16–17)

Shortly thereafter, Baker was transferred to a new post: historian at Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site.

Again, it was really interesting, because I kind of followed my family. My family, of course, was at Knife River, made up of Mandan and Hidatsa, primarily. The Arikara joined us at Fisher Village. From there, we went up river to Fort Union. . . . That's where we got our Baker name.

So, when I got there, it was exciting for me, because I again got to be in the same place that my grandfathers were, and my people were. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 17)

Gerard increased his technical knowledge of historic Native lifeways, learning to skin animals and tan their hides. He researched the fur trade on the upper Missouri from 1828 to 1867 and the tribes—Asiniboine, Crow, Cree, Ojibway, Blackfeet, Hidatsa, and others—who traded buffalo robes and other furs for non-native goods. He read diaries of traders and anthropologists' studies and collected oral histories from aging tribal members; he made traditional clothing and built teepees and sweat lodges. In the summer he dressed in buckskin, educating visitors about Indians

at the Fort. In the winter, he traveled to nearby schools to speak with students (Shumaker 18; Duncan 191).

*North Unit, Theodore Roosevelt National Park*

By the time Gerard was in his late 20s, he'd worked his way up the NPS ladder, returning to Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Park, North Unit, as district ranger. There, in the Badlands of North Dakota, Gerard was entrusted with management and supervisory responsibilities—and blessed with a job he loved (Duncan 180-181).

It was really fantastic. My backyard was 42,000 acres of wilderness. In the wintertime I had 40-some horses to take care of. Summertime, we had eight or nine that we rode all the time. I chased buffalo; fixed fence; ran law enforcement. I was the EMT. I did everything there. I was the typical old kind of ranger . . . I could be patrolling one day, talking to a civic group that afternoon, and doing an EMT run that night, or arresting somebody that night. And I did that for nine years. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 18)

At the North Unit, Gerard learned about natural resource management—taking care of the bison, the grasslands, and the various ecosystems within the Badlands. He continued to work to bring Native American perspectives into the park's interpretive programs and to bring more Indians into the park as employees (Shumaker 18, 20).

Near the end of his stint in the park, Gerard achieved success at what before had only been a dream.

The highlight of my career there at the North Unit was finding the conical-shaped lodges my grandfather talked about. . . . I was there nine years, and in my ninth year, I found 'em. It took me all that time to find them because there's so much thick brush in there. . . . To me, that was just a thrill.

I actually got to lie inside them. It took me a long time. I looked at them and I was really scared, from a spiritual sense, or maybe hesitant. But I finally got up the courage to crawl inside and lay down. And just the thought that maybe that was the one my grandfather had laid in, maybe that was the last time somebody was in there was my grandfather—that was thrilling to me. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 20)

After nine years at Theodore Roosevelt, Gerard was stuck, finding it difficult to advance within the closed system of the Park Service. He was offered a job working as an assistant ranger for the National Forest Service—the equivalent of an assistant superintendent job in the Park Service—in the Dakota Prairie Grasslands. Later, he transferred to the Beartooth Mountains near Red Lodge, Montana (Shumaker 22).

But Gerard just wasn't a Forest Service kind of guy.

The Forest Service obviously is a multi-use organization, whereas we're a conservation organization. The multi-use was that we had oil wells going; I was helping out with the pastures, grazing rights;

and I would see the miles and miles and miles of roads being put in there by the Forest Service. And it didn't go well with me, because of my Park Service background.

So I did that, but I wanted to get back into the Park Service really bad. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 22)

### *Superintendent by 40—Little Bighorn Battlefield*

In late 1993, Gerard returned to the Park Service fold. Just three months shy of his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was appointed superintendent of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, an extremely controversial post for a Native American, given the history of the site.

In 1972, American Indian Movement (AIM) protestors had come to the site—then known as Custer Battlefield. The demonstrators installed a homemade plaque honoring the native combatants and Russell Means, a leader in the movement, called for the creation of a permanent monument. In 1976, at the centennial celebration of the battle, the activists returned, this time with several hundred supporters. Means mounted the platform and, commandeering the microphone, again issued demands for a Native memorial (Turner 6).

Despite pressure from Custer buffs and other partisan groups, by the mid-1980s the official NPS interpretation at the site had been changed from a simple account of the battle to the story of a clash between cultures. Indians became a visible component of the battlefield's staff, as well, and, in 1989, Barbara Booher was named the first Native American and first female superintendent at the site (Turner 6–7).

During her three-and-a-half-year stint at the battlefield, Booher made few friends. She established close relations with the neighboring Crows and Cheyennes, and with the Lakotas and Arapahos, inviting them to take part in the annual commemorations of the battle. During her tenure legislation was introduced proposing a change to the site's name, from Custer Battlefield to the more neutral Little Bighorn Battlefield. The bill, sponsored by Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, also called for the installation of a monument to Native Americans at the site. In 1991 the bill passed unanimously in both the House and Senate and was signed into law by President Bush (Turner 7).

Into this situation stepped Gerard, with his long braids and unabashedly pro-Indian attitude. He heard from Custer buffs and other critics on a weekly basis, beginning with his first day on the job.

I remember [my staff was] having a little party for me downstairs, having cake and coffee. And my secretary came downstairs and said, "Superintendent, you've got a call."

Oh, ho, ho! I was so excited! . . . Because I had made it before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday I was so proud of myself. I had always wanted to pick up that telephone and say, "Superintendent Baker." . . . I ran up to my desk. I couldn't wait! I said, "Superintendent Baker."

The guy on the other end of the phone said, "I understand that you're nothing but a dirty, stupid Indian that got that job because you're nothing more than a red man. And you have no education; that you grew up in poverty, you grew up in filth." Then he started talking about my parents. And that was my first call, as superintendent. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 23–24)

Despite these obstacles, Gerard set about his work in the park, bringing his characteristic energy for problem solving and enthusiasm for creative change. He began with the interpretation program.

I came up [to the park] without my uniform on and listened to their programs. I was appalled. One young ranger was talking about the the military and how they were heroes. And then he started talking about the Indian women coming and [mutilating the bodies of the fallen cavalrymen]. He gave so much detail and was so vivid!

I started looking around and seeing white people looking at me *really mean*. I'm not exaggerating. I thought, "What am I doing here?" I could just feel—especially after the program was over—I could just feel [their anger toward me] . . . And I was thinking, "Man! I've got some work to do here."  
—Gerard Baker (Shumaker 25)

Gerard revamped the interpretative program, hiring Indian interpreters to provide a more balanced message for park visitors.

The importance of saving historical places is just that, for the history of that place . . . the good and bad history of that place. Coming in as an American Indian to the Little Bighorn Battlefield signified a change in direction of interpretation. It signified that the National Park Service . . . was starting to open up, as far as telling all the stories—not just the good stories, but all the stories. —Gerard Baker (Burns 6, 7).

He encouraged Siouxs, Arapahoes, Crows and others to tell their stories in the park in their own way, the way they'd learned from their elders—a way that was not always understood or appreciated by park visitors and NPS officials.

Indian people don't talk like white people, bottom line. We tell stories the way we tell stories. We tell stories with our heart, with our spirit, with our mind, and with our ancestors in the background. We don't tell stories academically. And that's what my people were doing. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 25)

With a more balanced interpretive program in place, Gerard set about his next task at Little Bighorn: bringing Natives into the park as visitors and guests. "We were missing Indian interpreters; we were missing Indian crowds," Gerard remembers. "And so, I decided to utilize the anniversary of the battle to invite the tribes back in" (Shumaker 28).

In the months leading up to the battle's 118<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Gerard called a meeting of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho peoples. He explained how important their participation would be to the event and how he needed their help getting others to understand the entire story of what happened that day.

When he'd finished, Gerard asked for questions

This little old Indian man sitting back in the corner raised his hand. I said, "Yes, sir." He stood up—and he was absolutely sincere—and he looked at me and he said, "I can't come back there." I

said, “Why not?” He said, “As soon as I walk into that,” he said, “you’re going to arrest me, because it was my grandfather that killed George Custer.” That’s what he said.

Well, I found out that *everybody’s* grandfather killed George Custer. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 28)

The tribes did come back to Little Bighorn that first anniversary under Gerard’s supervision. Critics were concerned that the event would be a fiasco; that the native peoples would gloat about their victory on the battlefield that day. The reality was just the opposite. As the elders moved around the site, the men were solemn and the women cried.

When they got through crying, there was a bench and they would sit there. So I’d come and I’d sit with them. . . . And I found a way to ask them why they cried. And they would say, “Even though we know we won this battle, this is where our culture stopped. This is where we lost our young people.” What they [meant] was, “This is where they changed our lives. Here. As soon as we beat George Custer and the Seventh Cav, we’ve been paying for it ever since.” —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 29)

With persistence, Gerard was able to bring groups of Indians and whites together at the monument more frequently and in greater numbers. It all came together in one massive communal “feed,” as Gerard calls it.

Everybody kept warning me, “Oh, God. Don’t bring ‘em all together! There’s gonna be controversy; there’s gonna be fights; there may be gunshots!”

. . . And I knew that I had accomplished something when I stood in my window, we had a buffalo feed, and here were people sitting on the ground around the Little Bighorn—battlefield over here, national cemetery over there—side-by-side: white, red, white, red. Indians, whites—all sitting side-by-side, laughing and eating their buffalo.

And to see that out my window was just—there’s no words. There’s no words to describe that—to see them laughing and eating together. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 32–33)

### *Lewis and Clark*

Gerard’s detractors continued to hound him, calling his home with death threats and trying to arrange late night meetings for one-on-one fist fights. Gerard was at Little Bighorn for four and a half years before he’d had enough and began to look for a change. He applied for and got a job at Chickasaw National Recreation Area in Oklahoma, “back into a natural environment.” It was there that he received one of the most important phone calls of his life (Shumaker 32–33).

I got a call from the regional director, Midwest Region . . . . And [he] said, “You know, we’re getting pretty close to the Lewis and Clark bicentennial. We’re looking for somebody to help us organize it—to be the first superintendent of the Lewis and Clark Trail and the bicentennial. Because of your interest—we know what you’ve done; we know you’ve studied it; we know you’re a Mandan-Hidatsa—would you be interested?”

It took me about half a second before I said, “You bet I would be.” —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 33)

Gerard spearheaded a nationwide commemoration of Lewis and Clark's journey. His vision for the event was clear. First, the bicentennial would be *commemorated*, not celebrated, reflecting the Native view that there were negative repercussions from the encounter. Secondly, the commemoration would be from a Native perspective. "I want to be able to look at this bicentennial not from the ship of Lewis and Clark," Gerard told NPS officials in Washington. "I want us all to be in the villages when those guys came around the bend" (Shumaker 34).

The result was the National Park Service's "Corps of Discovery II: 200 Years to the Future"—a traveling exhibit that opened at Monticello on January 14, 2003, and closed September 24, 2006, at the St. Louis Riverfront. The heart of Corps II was a tractor trailer carrying the exhibit to visitors across the country, stopping at the places Lewis and Clark had stopped two hundred years earlier ("Corps").

Critical to the exhibit's success would be the participation of Native groups across the country. Gerard again went to the tribes, telling them what the exhibit and related publicity could mean to them, now and in the future.

I did about a 45-minute dissertation which I thought was the best ever in the whole world. And, again, this lady raised her hand in the middle of everybody. I said, "Yes, ma'am." I expected her to say, "Oh, this is great."

She got up and said, "I don't trust you." She said, "You're nothing but a government bureaucrat in braids." It took me a second. Then I looked at her and I said, "You know what, ma'am?" I said, "You're absolutely right. I am a bureaucrat in braids and I'm very proud of that fact.

"So I'm gonna put it in government lingo: You have two alternatives. You have a preferred alternative and you have another alternative. The other alternative is you're gonna stick your head in the sand and not do a thing for the Lewis and Clark bicentennial; let all these people go by. And when they're gone, then you stick your head back out of the sand and keep doing what you're doing.

"But here's the preferred alternative, to put it in government lingo. The preferred alternative is to educate people as to who we are today and who we were yesterday and who we are tomorrow, as Indian people. They need to know that we're still alive; they need to know that we still have our culture; they need to know the good and the bad about us." —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 35–36)

All the tribes Gerard contacted—more than 68 from coast to coast—listened to what he had to say and joined the effort. The result was the "Tent of Many Voices," a performance tent complementing the exhibit. The Tent of Many Voices offered a space for live demonstrations, lectures, cultural presentations, and audio-visual exhibits. It was the place where Indians could present themselves—their histories, their cultures, and their hopes for the future—to the public (Shumaker 34).

It was, first and foremost, an American Indian story, I believe, anyway. I got it all together; we got it on the road— And that's when I had my heart problems. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 36)

Gerard underwent quintuple by-pass surgery. He knew that if he kept working on the exhibit, and kept his stress level high, he would "probably end up dead pretty early." Instead, he did what he

could to get the exhibit ready and then, once it was on the road, handed it to someone else. Shortly thereafter, his boss offered him the superintendency of Mount Rushmore (Shumaker 36).

#### *Mount Rushmore*

This time, it took Gerard longer than half a second to decide whether or not to accept the Park Service's offer.

There were two places in my career that I told my family and relatives that I would never work. One of them was Little Bighorn and the other was Mount Rushmore. And I've been superintendent at both of them now.

Coming here—it was very challenging just to accept the job, because growing up I understood what [Mount Rushmore] meant. And for us, for Indian people, it doesn't mean "Success of America." It means the desecration of the sacred Black Hills; it means the losing of the Black Hills to the United States government, to white people that came in and shoved everybody out of here and put us on a reservation. So it meant a lot of negative things. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 37)

Gerard thought about the offer for four days. He consulted with his family and the elders of his tribe. He decided that, if they told him not to take the post, he wouldn't.

It was just the opposite. I'm the first American Indian here as superintendent and the people back home were saying, "Man, what an opportunity to educate people. And what a time period to educate people."

So, I took the job. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 37)

True to form, Gerard began making changes at Mount Rushmore, bringing the Indian perspective to the interpretive program and bringing more Natives into the park—as visitors and employees.

Coming here was a challenge in that [Mount Rushmore's] legislation has us only tell the first centuries of America and these four presidents. . . . And this is a challenge for me because . . . I believe that we shouldn't just tell the first hundred fifty years of America; we should go back before that time. . . . I want to show what life was like before George Custer found gold in the Black Hills, before Borglum came in and started carving the sculptures here. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 38, 39)

As at Little Bighorn, Gerard met with resistance to his changes—particularly given Mount Rushmore's prominent place as a symbol of American patriotism.

This is a very big challenge, especially after 9/11. . . . When I first came here, I'd go out in the park and I would watch people. They would look at those four presidents and they'd get teary-eyed. . . . This place draws emotion. And it should! But again, we were only telling half the story.

What we're doing now is we're telling *all* the story. But the challenge is: . . . How do you tell the real story?

Well, the way you tell it is: You tell it. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 39–40)

The addition of Native voices in the interpretive program has solicited overwhelmingly positive feedback from visitors, most of whom appreciate hearing a more complex story of the site. And at Mount Rushmore, Gerard has expanded his vision to embrace not just Native stories and traditions, but the vast diversity of cultural traditions and stories that make up our national heritage.

It's not just a teepee here. We're promoting all cultures of America . . . That's what this place is! For goodness sake, this is Mount Rushmore! It's America! —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 38)

The new interpretive policy at Mount Rushmore encourages programs reflective of all cultures in America. For example, the park now sponsors a “Roots of American Music” series, with performances ranging from the Faith Temple Choir to rockabilly-inspired Gail and the Tricksters to a German “oompah” band. According to Gerard, encouraging this sort of resurgence is critical to our cultural survival.

We're losing who we are culturally. The Germans don't share their stories with their children anymore. The Irish don't share their stories; the Norwegians; everybody. We have all these cultures that come and make up America. . . . But we're losing it really quickly. America's losing it. And in 200 years, if everybody looks the same, everybody speaks the same, we've failed as a human race.

And we're getting to that point. When people say to me, “Well, I don't know what I am. I'm Heinz 57,” I tell them, “Well, pick one then! And concentrate on that.” —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 41)

The key for Native Americans, he says, is a reclaiming of personal power, something that was stripped from them by the U.S. Government a century ago.

The concept of the “little red children and great white father” is true. I don't agree with it, but it's true. That's what happened. . . . They taught us how to be welfare recipients. The government taught us how to sit there and be beggars . . . . So, we have a lot to educate here, including our own people.

What we have to do, especially what I want to show the young Indian people of today, is we have to redefine our warrioriness—males and females. We have to redefine our warrioriness. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 41, 42)

One way Gerard sees for Indians to rediscover their heritage is to follow the path he took—the path of the National Parks.

Native people bring an understanding—even if they don't totally understand it themselves, they show it—of the connection to the environment; the belief that the spirits are still here. You have to understand these places we call National Parks, that are so unique to America, were sacred to us at one time. And they're still sacred to us.

[Being stewards of the parks] would give us pride I think. We have pride now—don't get me wrong, we have a lot of pride in being Indian. But we have a long way to go. The biggest thing that we

have to convince ourselves, and I'm hoping that's what I can show people with who I am and what I've done, is that nobody can stop us. Nobody can stop us. We're the only ones that can stop ourselves.  
—Gerard Baker (Shumaker 413–44)

Pride in ourselves—in who we are, no matter what our circumstances—is what Gerard believes Mount Rushmore is all about, and is the message he wants communicated to visitors.

What that does is it helps everybody understand, “Hey, I've got a culture, too. How come I don't know about my culture? By God, it's about time I start learning about it! Because I'm proud of being Welsh; I'm proud of being British; I'm proud of—whatever you are. This is what makes up America! It makes America. Everybody's something different here. . . . We're all different. We're human beings, is what that says.

And so what we want is to have people open their eyes when they come in here—especially young kids open their eyes. And maybe go back to the idea that we need to start sitting down at our tables again in the evenings—turning off the TV, turning off the computer—and start telling stories again, like I heard when I was a kid. Maybe we start doing that again . . . . Maybe a kid asks, “Who were those four presidents on the hill?” And Mom and Dad have to answer that, right?

And just maybe it gets us talking again as human beings, as Americans. —Gerard Baker (Shumaker 45)

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