

► COMMUNITY CURRENTS

“Monroe has a story to tell about a small-town youth who went on to become an international sensation during his lifetime and a legend thereafter. It’s all right here. We just need to capitalize on it.”

Museum would tell entire Custer story

BY STEVE ALEXANDER

Monroe, situated in the southeast corner of the Great Lakes State, recently became a unit of the National Park Service and truly is a gateway to history.

We now have a chance to expand that significantly through Monroe’s connections to George Armstrong Custer. All that remains is to know if we are willing to tell his story to the world or keep it our secret?



STEVE ALEXANDER

Unfortunately, Custer often is relegated to a single day in Montana known as “Custer’s Last Stand.” Each year more than 300,000

people visit that battlefield to learn less than sits in our own museum downtown. We have so much more than Montana. This includes an exemplary Civil War collection and personal items of his time here in Monroe.

Although born in New Rumley, Ohio, Custer’s home of choice was here. His legend and story continue to reverberate with each new generation.

Custer wrote: “In years long numbered with the past, when I was verging upon manhood, my every thought was ambitious — not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great. I desired to link my name with acts and men, and in such a manner as to be a mark of honor — not only to the present, but to future generations.”

Those future generations now traveling across Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma and South Dakota pass through counties, forests and towns named for him. Villages, townships and cities in Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Wisconsin all pay tribute in name.

Louise Barnett, author of the bestselling book “Touched by



The statue at N. Monroe St. and W. Elm Ave. honors Gen. George Armstrong Custer’s service during the Civil War.

Fire: The Life, Death, and Mythic Afterlife of George Armstrong Custer,” has exclaimed that “certainly the equestrian statue of Custer in his hometown of Monroe, Michigan, would be the most prominent.”

Research for the book brought her to Monroe, as our library alone has more than 25,000 pieces relating to Gen. Custer. Indeed all paths in this fascinating story eventually lead to and from Monroe.

We are fortunate while other towns grasp for recognition as dubious as “Home of the Nerf Ball.” Other towns would have to erect something to draw tourism; here it already exists in the architecture of our town, the shoe house where he bought his boots, the downtown and the countryside he knew.

Along with a wonderful collection of artifacts (touted as the largest collection of Custeriana in the world), we have an archive of materials and periodicals that any future Custer author worth his or her salt could not resist.

And if you think the definitive book has been written, think again. On average, 12 books a year appear in print on the life and times of Gen. Custer.

The story includes the fascinating romance between Gen. Custer and his bride, Elizabeth (Libbie) Bacon. We don’t have to reconstruct her birthplace as it already exists here, as does the church where they were married.

Custer’s distinctions abound. He was the youngest major general in our military’s history. He became the most photographed man of the 19th century (yes, images won’t have to be located; they already exist in our museum’s archive.) He captured the first Confederate battle flag of the Civil War. He was one of our country’s first aeronauts and became the boy general of the Union Army, sporting a unique uniform (a replica is in our museum).

In more than 60 successful cavalry charges he had 11 horses shot from under him and his most successful charge hap-

pened at Gettysburg (which is depicted in the statue at W. Elm Ave. and N. Monroe St.)

Appomattox Court House, a smaller town than Monroe, sees more than a quarter million visitors each year. It was there that Custer received the flag of surrender from Gen. Robert E. Lee. Union Gen. Phil H. Sheridan gave Libbie the table on which the terms of surrender were penned, attaching a note that said “... there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your very gallant husband.”

A replica of the table is in our museum.

He was asked by President Andrew Johnson to accompany him on a national tour as his personal bodyguard and he went head-to-head on the government’s Indian policy with his commander-in-chief, President Ulysses S. Grant.

Visiting the Centennial Exhibit in Philadelphia, he marveled at the world’s largest man-made

machine, the Corliss Engine, and was amazed at the new invention created by his friend, Alexander Graham Bell.

In New York City he dined at Delmonico’s with John Jacob Astor, James Gordon Bennett and P.T. Barnum; viewed works of art by Albert Bierstadt and Vinnie Reams, and sat in theater boxes to watch performances by Lawrence Barrett and Edwin Booth. He broke trails in the west with Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill Cody and served as an American diplomat when the Grand Duke of Russia toured the United States.

Custer has an international following along with half a million Civil War enthusiasts seeking to know more about him.

Monroe has a story to tell about a small-town youth who went on to become an international sensation during his lifetime and a legend thereafter. It’s all right here. We just need to capitalize on it. Partnering with the National Park Service will get the word out.

With a little effort we can capture tourist dollars, going further than any other place could in telling the true story of George Armstrong Custer, the rest of the story no one else can tell and no one else will ever tell if we don’t do it.

The plan as proposed by the Monroe County Historical Society and host of supporters takes into account the resources that currently exist, the working relationship we have already established and cultivated with the National Park Service and the assets that can be utilized to make this all happen.

What remains is the question: Should our museum become the “Custer National Museum?” I can think of no reason why it should not.

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Steve Alexander is a Custer expert, re-enactor and author who lives in Elizabeth Bacon Custer’s childhood home.

► OTHER VIEWPOINTS

Which Ike to like? Barefoot Kansas boy or world leader?

In World War II, he tamed America’s allies and conquered its adversaries.

As a conservative college president, he defended liberal professors caught in a virulent red scare.

As NATO commander, he projected strength without projecting force.

In the White House, he presided over the sort of peace and prosperity that today’s presidential candidates can’t plausibly promise.

Now, Dwight David Eisenhower, seldom the center of contention, is at the nexus of a controversy that raises vital questions about the character of capital memorials, the nature of historical remembrance and the relationship between a national figure’s origins and destiny.

All because the design for the Eisenhower Memorial in Washington, D.C., includes a statue of him as a barefoot boy from Kansas.

Nobody contests that Eisenhower rose from humble Abilene at a time when its unpaved streets retained a whiff of the Chisholm Trail cow drives. Eisenhower seldom thought of himself as a barefoot boy, perhaps because there actually was, in Ike’s time, a Republican known as the barefoot boy. He was Wendell Willkie, the GOP’s 1940 presidential nominee from Wall Street by way of Elwood, Ind.

Though the Eisenhowers spent White House nights in front of tray tables watching Westerns on television, the truth is that the president was shaped more by West Point than by the town that helped make Wild Bill Hickok famous. Even so, part of the Eisenhower elan was his irresistible mix of the common and the

“We celebrate (Eisenhower) because of what he did with that ordinary heritage, with the lessons of his humble parents and the childhood that was so typical.”

uncommon, so much so that Stephen E. Ambrose opened his two-volume Eisenhower biography this way in 1983:

“His heritage was ordinary, his parents were humble folk, his childhood was typical of thousands of other youngsters growing up around the turn of the century, and most of his career was humdrum and unrewarded. On the surface, everything about him appeared to be average.”

It is true that Eisenhower was like so many others of his time and place. But that’s ultimately why the barefoot-boy motif seems so discordant, so at odds with our notions of decorum in civic statuary.

Eisenhower was not at all like so many others, or any other American of his time or any other time. The reason we celebrate him nearly a century after he left West Point is not that he was unremarkable. We celebrate him because of what he did with that ordinary heritage, with the lessons of his humble parents and the childhood that was so typical.

David Eisenhower, a University of Pennsylvania historian and biographer, said the family is proud of his grandfather’s heartland roots. “There are 3,000 ways you can do an Eisenhower memorial,” he said of the controversy in a phone conversation the other afternoon. “Combining a military career of that stature and a two-term presidency is no easy task.”

But Eisenhower, his sister Anne (a professional designer), his sister Susan (an expert on Russian-American relations),

and his father John (the president’s son) are united in arguing that the memorial should reflect Eisenhower’s extraordinary record more than his ordinary roots.

Along with all his accomplishments, there was always more to Eisenhower than met the eye — especially the eyes of historians.

“Although Eisenhower, with his big grin, looked like a gregarious soul,” Michael Korda wrote in his 2007 biography, “this was in part a facade, or a protective mechanism, like a lot of things about him.”

After all, here was a man at the center of American and world politics in the center of the American Century — the personification first of our innocence and ingenuity and then of our power and prerogatives from World War II through the first third of the Cold War.

In Eisenhower’s time, and in part at his bidding, the United States moved from a peripheral to a principal role in big-power politics, even as it harnessed its industrial might to produce a consumer economy and confronted its past to reconcile its soaring ideals with its sordid racial reality.

Through it all, Eisenhower possessed an alluring self-confidence that his countrymen came to share, a carefree air that pervaded the nation at home even as tensions simmered abroad, a managerial mien that suited the times or, just as likely, shaped the times.

“He appeared to be performing less work than he did because he knew instinctively which matters required his at-

tention and which could be delegated to subordinates,” Jean Edward Smith wrote in a new biography to be published later this month. “His experience as supreme commander taught him to use experts without being intimidated by them. He structured matters so that he always had the last word. ... The lines of authority were clear, the national interest was broadly defined and there was no buck passing.”

For a long time — even in his own time — Eisenhower was the subject of ridicule. The consensus, especially among the opinion-makers who preferred the sometimes serious and sometimes sardonic Adlai Stevenson, who lost two elections to Eisenhower, was that the 34th president’s speech was plain, his vision uninspiring, his style unengaged, his personality lacking flash and finesse.

Stevenson was pate de foie gras to Eisenhower’s Salisbury steak with a side of mixed peas, corn and carrots — and in truth Swanson came out with the TV dinner, a special favorite of the Eisenhowers, the year he became president.

But for all that, Eisenhower now is regarded as a successful chief executive and his record is admired by his successors and historians alike. He helped to win World War II and helped to preserve the peace, and a career without peer deserves a memorial that matches the man and his achievements.

“We’re not speaking to ourselves right now,” Susan Eisenhower said. “We’re speaking to future generations. So we need to think about what Eisenhower meant to this country.”

He lived his past as a barefoot boy in Abilene, but with his signature American confidence, in both flip-flops and wingtips, he helped create the future we now tread.

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