

Trail to the Little Bighorn

Thursday, June 21, 2018



Photo by Nathan Satran

A sign marks a campsite set by Lt. Col George Armstrong Custer on June 22, 1876. Three days later, he and his Seventh Cavalry would be wiped out by the combined forces of the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

As the summer travel season kicks into full swing and the anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn Battle approaches, Visit Southeast Montana tourism announces a new opportunity in the region.

The Trail to the Little Bighorn, a series of 19 roadside signs, centers around the Rosebud and Forsyth, Montana, areas, and gives travelers a closer look at the U.S. military's activities leading up to and immediately following the renowned Battle of Little Bighorn.

Each sign includes a title and narrative about the Seventh Cavalry's tasks and movements prior to its resounding defeat.

The grassroots project sprang from community conversations about what draws tourists to the region, with "Custer's Last Stand" being a predominant attraction. The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument near Crow Agency typically draws about 300,000 visitors per year, making it the third-most visited park in the state, behind Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks.

The Trail to the Little Bighorn helps tell the story and will enrich the visitor's experience as they stand on the rolling prairies, imagining what the Seventh Cavalrymen felt like as they marched for days under the hot sun and over difficult terrain toward an uncertain rendezvous point.

Spearheaded by retired educators, Ellis Parry and Forsyth Mayor Dennis Kopitzke, the project was funded by a variety of sources including Visit Southeast Montana; Community Foundation of Northern Rosebud County; Forsyth Area Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture; Rosebud County Pioneer Museum; and, Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development.

Forsyth Mayor, Dennis Kopitzke sees the Trail to the Little Bighorn as an opportunity to diversify.

"We have the Yellowstone River – it's a big draw – and hunting in the area, plus events like the Fourth of July fireworks and fair later in the month," he said, "but this is a great way to get people off the interstate and into our small towns any time of the year."

The 19 roadside markers stretch from Miles City to Custer and south toward Lame Deer and Hardin. All are placed on public land or at approved pull-outs. Stopping at all 19 markers, plus the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, will take visitors a full day or more.

"A traveler's time on the ground directly relates to his or her economic impact to that community," said John Brewer, Executive Director of Visit Southeast Montana (SEMT) and CEO of the Billings Chamber of Commerce, which manages Visit SEMT. "History buffs are incredibly well-educated and diligent in their travel – this Trail will certainly draw that crowd."

The 2016 Montana Destination Brand Research Study identified target markets for state tourism, including a niche market of history buffs. It is these folks who will take the time to follow this Trail, noted Ellis Parry. He, along with fellow retiree Mayor Kopitzke, were the forces behind the project including digging post holes and installing the signs themselves.

Visit Southeast Montana, one of the state's tourism regions, strives to increase visitation by increasing awareness of the region, showcasing cultural heritage, developing memorable experiences and educating residents about the economic benefits of tourism.

To learn more about Southeast Montana, contact Brenda Maas, marketing manager for Visit Southeast Montana at brenda@southeastmontana.com, office: (406) 294-5270 or mobile: (406) 690-6307.

Trail to the Little Bighorn maps will be available at local businesses in Forsyth and Rosebud, plus Visitor Information Centers in Wibaux, Hardin, Broadus and Billings. See www.southeastmontana.com/history for a downloadable version.

For more information about the Trail to Little Bighorn, the signs or locations, contact Forsyth Mayor Dennis Kopitzke at (406) 346-2521.