

On Sacred Grounds: The Indian Wars on the Northern Plains

A 2025 BGES Indian Wars Field University Program:

With Neil Mangum

September 9-13, 2025; from Billings, MT

The ideology of Manifest Destiny empowered the unrestricted movement of white settlers across America, encouraging them to exploit and benefit from the vast resources of the wild western territories. These lands for generations had formed the spiritual and cultural heart of Native American life. As settlers pushed westward along key migration routes, the U.S. government responded with increasingly harsh and repressive policies toward Native peoples.

While most people associate the Indian Wars of the northern plains with the infamous Battle of the Little Bighorn and General Custer, this tour reveals a far more complex and compelling narrative. At the heart of the conflict between 1866 and 1877 lies Red Cloud's War—a broader struggle for control, survival, and sovereignty.

Join us as we visit the lesser-known battlefields and landmarks that define this chapter of American history. Your guide is Neil Mangum, a true national treasure: retired National Park Service regional historian, former superintendent of the Little Bighorn Battlefield, and esteemed author of the definitive account of the Battle of the Rosebud. Through his insight, you'll gain a deeper understanding of this pivotal and often overlooked era in our nation's past.

Tuesday, September 9, 2025

We will have an informal meeting at 6 p.m. in the front lobby so that you may pick up your name tags and maps, and meet with your host and guide, Neil Mangum, before breaking for dinner on your own.

Wednesday, September 10, 2025

While the majority of our tour centers on the Red Cloud War, we cannot overlook a major battlefield right in our backyard. This morning's first stop is the Canyon Creek battlefield, located just outside Billings. Though part of the Nez Perce War, this engagement offers a powerful glimpse into the relentless and tragic pursuit of the Nez Perce.

From there, we shift our focus to the Bozeman Trail, a bloody and difficult passage for settlers pushing westward. We have four sites to visit, starting with the location of the Hayfield fight. True to its name, this was a fierce Native attack on government contractors harvesting hay to feed the horses of both soldiers and settlers. In the harsh

environment of the frontier, even something as simple as forage could mean the difference between survival and starvation.

Next, we will introduce you to Gen. Patrick Connor, who commanded about 2,500 troops along the Bozeman Trail. They built Fort Connor, and we will study his August 1865 campaign against Black Bear and the Northern Arapaho along the Tongue River. That assault precipitated a prolonged engagement, as Black Bear and his warriors retaliated in a determined running battle. Properly provoked after the Connor fight, the Arapaho fell on a surveying party and soldiers harassing them for approximately two weeks. Known as the Sawyer fight, it is typical of the encounters between the Native tribes and U.S. forces.

As we continue toward Sheridan, we will stop at a historic campsite to discuss the legendary Indian fighter Gen. George Crook.

Lunch will be provided, and dinner is on your own. You will be at your Sheridan hotel for the next three nights.

Thursday, September 11, 2025

Having introduced General Crook, today we turn our attention to his operations against the Cheyenne at Red Fork, a tributary of the Powder River. Army doctrine at the time recognized that Native warriors fought most effectively away from their encampments, but were understandably constrained when forced to defend their women and children. As a result, military expeditions often aimed to attack and defeat Indians in and around their camps. In this case, the Cheyenne had settled in for the winter along the eastern slopes of the Bighorn Mountains.

We will also be introduced to Gen. Ranald Slidell Mackenzie, who led the 4th US Cavalry against the Cheyenne during this campaign.

Our day begins at the Jim Gatchell Memorial Museum in Buffalo. Originally the site of a trading post around 1900, the museum now houses an impressive collection of artifacts acquired by Gatchell—ranging from Native American cultural items to objects from frontier traders.

We will then take a brief tour of the Dull Knife Battlefield, the site of a November 1876 engagement. Please note this is private property with limited access, so our visit will be carefully managed in accordance with the owners' restrictions.

We will continue with a visit to the Hoofprints of the Past Museum, followed by a stop at the ruins of historic Fort Reno. On our return to Sheridan, we will conclude the day with a visit to the Templeton Battlefield, located along the historic Bozeman Trail.

Lunch is included, and dinner is on your own.

Friday, September 12, 2025

This will be another exciting day as we work toward Fort Phil Kearny. We begin with a visit to the Crazy Woman Creek Battlefield, a site rich with frontier history. From there, we make our way to Fort Phil Kearny, one of three forts established along the Bozeman Trail to protect travelers and trade moving through the region.

After exploring the fort and its museum, we will break for lunch, then dive deeper into the story behind the fort's construction in late 1866.

Our first afternoon walk takes us to the site of the Fetterman Battlefield. Here, an ambush orchestrated by Native American forces resulted in the greatest loss of U.S. soldiers west of the Mississippi River until the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Ironically, this tragic event stemmed from a typical military operation. When word reached the fort that wood train workers were being harassed, soldiers were sent out to protect them. However, they advanced too far, outpacing their support. The supposed attack was actually a decoy—the real objective was the destruction of the relief force. The commander's poor judgment left his men dangerously exposed and led to devastating consequences.

Next, we visit the site of the Wagon Box Fight, another harrowing yet remarkable encounter. In August 1867, some 32 soldiers and civilians were deployed from the fort in two camps—one to protect the woodcutters, and the other to protect the base camp. This time, the outcome was very different. Equipped with the new Springfield breech-loading rifles and reinforced by artillery, the defenders repelled the attack. Facing superior firepower, the Native forces withdrew.

These stories remind us just how perilous life was along the Bozeman Trail. And yet, in less than a year, the Treaty of Fort Laramie rendered the trail—and the forts that protected it—obsolete, and the area slipped into oblivion.

Lunch is provided. Again, dinner is on your own.

Saturday, September 13, 2025

We head back to Billings and the end of our program, but today is perhaps the best day of the week. On board by 0815, we are headed to the Rosebud Battlefield. Sprawling, open, and remarkably untouched, this site offers a vivid sense of place and history. While walking the full battlefield would cover 8 or 9 miles, Neil has selected a focused 40-minute route out to Buffalo Jump. We will tie in the remainder of the fight, pointing out key sites in our drive around the field.

The Rosebud often is overshadowed in the broader story of Little Bighorn, yet it was a pivotal moment in its own right. Here, Civil War-era Gen. George Crook and his 1,300 troops clashed with an equally matched force under Crazy Horse. The result: a strategic Native victory that prevented Crook from joining the converging U.S. forces at the Little Bighorn.

From there, we will continue on to enjoy lunch at the Custer Battlefield Trading Post.

There are some places that America cannot fully define because they, instead, help define America—Lexington Green, Chalmette, Gettysburg, and Greasy Grass Ridge above the Bighorn River are such places. These are places to visit again and again, and on this journey, we have the opportunity to explore the latter.

We then return to the Little Bighorn to follow the attack of Custer and his men, tracing the unfolding of the battle as they are steadily forced from one position to the next with grim precision. A soldier falls here, another there—two or three on the ridge, six more across the swale—until the final group is pressed back to a low rise they will never leave alive. If you have never visited this battlefield, prepare to be moved by its stark, haunting beauty.

We return to Billings and our hotel for the final evening together before parting ways.

Please note: Your hotel stay for the evening of the 13th is NOT INCLUDED. Should you wish to remain in Billings that night, you'll need to make your own reservation at a rate of \$129 plus tax.

Sunday, September 14, 2025

Depart at your leisure. If you are driving, there are certainly many other neat and unique places to visit as you head home. Safe travels.

About the Faculty

Neil Mangum, one of the nation's premier historians, is an expert on frontier life. Not surprisingly, his favorite baseball team is the Cleveland Indians. A retired National Park Service official, he served as superintendent of the Little Bighorn National Battlefield as it transitioned from Custer National Battlefield. The popular Mangum limits himself to three or four tours each year, and BGES is fortunate to enjoy his favor. He enjoys the clientele and the small folksy nature of the group that is usually well prepared. Neil is author of *The Battle of the Rosebud: Prelude to the Little Bighorn*. He has a following, and most people on this trip will have traveled with him before, which makes this event even nicer.

Hotel Information

Your registration fee includes the hotel. The headquarters hotel will be the Fairfield Inn: 2026 Overland Ave., Billings, Montana 59102. You will have a prepaid room on September 9. They will honor a rate of \$129 plus tax if you want to arrive on the 8th or stay the night of the 13th. Please note you will have to call the hotel at 406-652-5330 and let them know you are with the BGES group.

The hotel is 5 miles from the airport. You will need transportation from the airport. Options are Red Lodge Tour and Taxi (406-425-3091); Ultra 406 Enterprises (406-690-9634), and Cody Shuttle Service (307-527-6789). Uber and Lyft are also options. There are 8 local restaurants adjacent or within a half mile walk of the hotel. Your registration fee also includes the hotel for September 9 (Fairfield Inn), 10, 11, and 12 (Comfort Inn Sheridan).

Transportation

Our servicing airport is Billings (BIL). It is an expensive air destination. The closest major airport is Denver (DIA), which is a full-day drive (more than 500 miles of high-speed, 80 mph interstate—stop in Chugwater and have some chili) from Billings.

Recommended Reading

You will be provided maps upon arrival. The following books are suggested to enhance your readiness for the program.

Bob Drury and Tom Clavin: [*The Heart of Everything That Is: The Untold Story of Red Cloud, An American Legend.*](#) New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013. ASIN: B00BSAZ614.

Charles River Editors: [*Red Cloud's War: The History and Legacy of the Only 19th Century War Won by the Native Americans against the United States.*](#) Create Space, 2018. ISBN: 978-1986673754.

General John Gibbon: [*The 1876 Yellowstone Expedition: Catastrophe at the Little Bighorn.*](#) Independently published, 2017. ISBN: 978-1973233572.

Jerome Greene: [*Morning Star Dawn: The Powder River Expedition and the Northern Cheyennes, 1876.*](#) Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. ISBN: 978-0806135489.

Paul Magid: [*The Gray Fox, George Crook and the Indian Wars.*](#) Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0806147062.

Neil C. Mangum: [*Battle of the Rosebud: Prelude to the Little Bighorn.*](#) New York, NY: Upton & Sons, 1987. ISBN: 978-0912783116.

Charles M. Robinson: [*Bad Hand, A Biography of General Ranald S. Mackenzie.*](#) Kerrville, TX: State House Press, 2005. ISBN: 978-1880510025.

Daniel Sharfstein: [*Thunder in the Mountains: Chief Joseph, Oliver Otis Howard, and the Nez Perce War.*](#) New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017.

General Alfred Terry: [*The Terry Diary: Battle of the Little Bighorn \(Expanded and Annotated\).*](#) Independently published, 2016. ISBN: 978-1519036452.

Registration Form

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Presented by Neil Mangum

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Participant Information

Name (s): _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Your registration includes four lunches, four nights lodging, maps, the academic program, support of a professional historian, tour director, and all admissions and transportation. We will also provide snacks, bottled water, and a limited selection of sodas.

Choose Your Registration Type (please check appropriate line)

_____ Current BGES member – \$1,600 per person (double occupancy)

_____ Current BGES member – \$1,900 (single occupancy)

_____ Non-BGES member – \$1,700 per person (double occupancy)

_____ Non-BGES member – \$1,995 per person (single occupancy)

_____ I am not currently a member but would like to join BGES and enjoy member pricing, or I am a member who is past-due to renew. Please accept my donation of \$_____ (minimum \$75 – tax deductible).

Payment Options

_____ I am enclosing a deposit of \$500 per person, plus any membership payment.

Total enclosed: \$_____.

I will pay the balance due before the event.

_____ Check enclosed

_____ Credit card (circle one) MC / VISA / AMEX / Discover

Amount to charge: \$ _____

Card number: _____

Expiration: _____

CVV: _____

Signature: _____

Submit Your Registration

Mail to: BGES Seminars, PO Box 1176, Chatham, VA 24531

Fax credit card registrations to: 434-432-0596

Or register online at: www.blueandgrayeducation.org.

How Did You Hear About Us? ·

_____ BGES website

_____ Internet search

_____ Social Media (circle): Facebook, Twitter / X, TikTok, Instagram

_____ Friend or Colleague

_____ Advertisement (circle): *Civil War Monitor*, *Civil War News*

_____ News article or press release

_____ Email newsletter

_____ Other _____