

Controversial Custer called upon to promote his southeast Michigan roots and boost hometown tourism

By Crystal Bay Communications

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History "meet & greet" with General George Armstrong Custer, 19th century national hero and celebrity, on Saturday, September 13, 2008 at Michigan Travel Center in Monroe

Heritage tourism can be a boon for communities lucky enough to identify with a person or event of historical significance. Monroe resident Steve Alexander, the "foremost Custer living historian" as proclaimed by the United States Congress, agrees and hopes to direct tourists to the controversial General's hometown of Monroe, Michigan as he dons the persona of his alter ego and greets guests at the Michigan Travel Center in Monroe on September 13, 2008.

Alexander, who's been acknowledged by both the Michigan and Ohio Senates for his lifetime work and portrayal of America's most controversial military leader, will regale travel center guests with stories about Custer's historic exploits, talk up his Monroe and southeast Michigan roots and promote the upcoming Custer Celebration Event taking place in Monroe from October 3 to October 11, 2008.

"I portray General Custer, and this is what I can do to give back to my community," said Alexander, who has appeared as the General in over 20 television docudramas featured on the Discovery and History channels and A&E. He and his wife Sandy reside in the restored Bacon/Custer home.

Alexander believes an entire industry surrounding Custer exists in Monroe and southeast Michigan, and once tapped, could benefit the region's economy.

Custer, who attained 19th century celebrity and national hero stature due to the leadership and bravery he exhibited during the Civil War, moved to Monroe at age 10 to attend school. The youngest general in American history, the dashing Custer courted and wed Elizabeth Clift Bacon, daughter of a prominent Monroe judge, in what was dubbed Michigan's "wedding of the century."

Following the Civil War, Custer joined the frontier army of the American West. He remained in the national spotlight by publishing captivating articles about his adventurous life in the West. In between military assignments, George and Libbie returned home to Monroe where Custer's family had eventually settled as well.

Although Custer and his men were instrumental in forcing the retreat of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's forces resulting in Lee's subsequent surrender, Custer's success during the Civil War is overshadowed by his final battle on the banks of the Little Big Horn River in Montana, in what 's popularly called Custer's Last Stand.

His defeat at the Little Big Horn may have cost Custer his life, but it's given him everlasting fame. Even today, 132 years later, the debate rages on. Was Custer the reckless glory-seeking leader who sacrificed his family members and men for his own end, or a victim of a series of bad circumstances and military betrayal? The subject of numerous movies and books, Custer is the most written about figure from the Civil War aside from President Lincoln. Over 300,000 people visit the Little Big Horn National Park each year.

Alexander wants residents of Monroe County and southeast Michigan to not only capitalize on the enduring legacy of their most famous citizen, but to appreciate this complex character who played a pivotal role in two major eras of American history: the American Civil War and Reconstruction and Westward Expansion, rather than look upon him with disdain.

“General Custer started the tradition of standing for the National Anthem,” said Alexander. While at West Point at the onset of the Civil War, Custer encouraged students to stand for the Star Spangled Banner in response to the southern students exuberant renditions of Dixie.

While many portray Custer as a symbol of American aggression toward the Indians, “True-blooded Indians don’t have a problem with General Custer,” states Alexander. “They see him as a worthy opponent. If victory is to carry any significance, it has to be that the opponent is worthy. Someone of some credibility.”

Alexander was bestowed with the Crow Indian name Ika Dieux’ Daka by Tribal Historian Joe Medicine Crow. The name means Son of the Morning Star, a name previously held by only one man, George Armstrong Custer.

“We can’t change history,” said Alexander. “By knowing it, we can better understand why things happen - now and in the future.”

Bringing guests such as General Custer to Michigan Travel Centers help educate people about “our great state” and its history says Kirstin Borgstrom, Travel Michigan media spokesperson.

“A lot of people who stop don’t have a full understanding, or are not even aware of Custer’s ties to the area. They’re going to ask questions, and want to know ‘Why is he here?’”

Custer’s visit is not only geared toward out-of-state tourists, but Michigan residents as well.

“When we think of vacations we always want to leave. With the high price of gas, we’re encouraging Michigan residents to look around for things to do in their communities, “ said Borgstrom. “I don’t know of a person who has fully experienced all their hometown has to offer.”

General Custer will appear from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Monroe Travel Center, located on northbound I-75 between exits 9 and 11. For further information on General Custer’s hometown Monroe connections and the upcoming Custer Celebration Event, visit: <http://blogsmonroe.com/custer> or call: 734 241-0201.

The Monroe County Historical Society’s Custer Celebration Event Committee was formed to raise awareness of General George Armstrong Custer’s life, times and impact on Monroe County’s history.

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