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CUSTER STATE PARK: AN AREA STUDY

By

CRAIG L. MORGAN

A thesis submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree Master of Science, Major in  
Geography, South Dakota  
State University

1987

CUSTER STATE PARK: AN AREA STUDY

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Science, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

~~Thesis Advisor~~

Date /

~~Head, Geography Dept.~~

Date /

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CLM



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Region versus Area

Geography is the study of humans and their relationship with the environment. It is an unusual science in that it encompasses virtually every other scientific discipline. As a result, geography touches upon almost every aspect of how humankind interacts with the environment.

Geography can be divided into two parts- regional and systematic. Regional geography focuses on regions and areas. A region can be defined as a homogeneous unit determined by two or more selective criteria. An area differs from a region in that its structure is normally based on one set of criteria only. Because of the complexity involved with multiple criteria, boundaries of regions are often difficult to delimit. Areas, however, are limited by prescribed physical or cultural boundaries arbitrarily drawn. Often these areas are political (functional) regions. Therefore, most regions also have area (Harvey 1969, pp. 350-3).

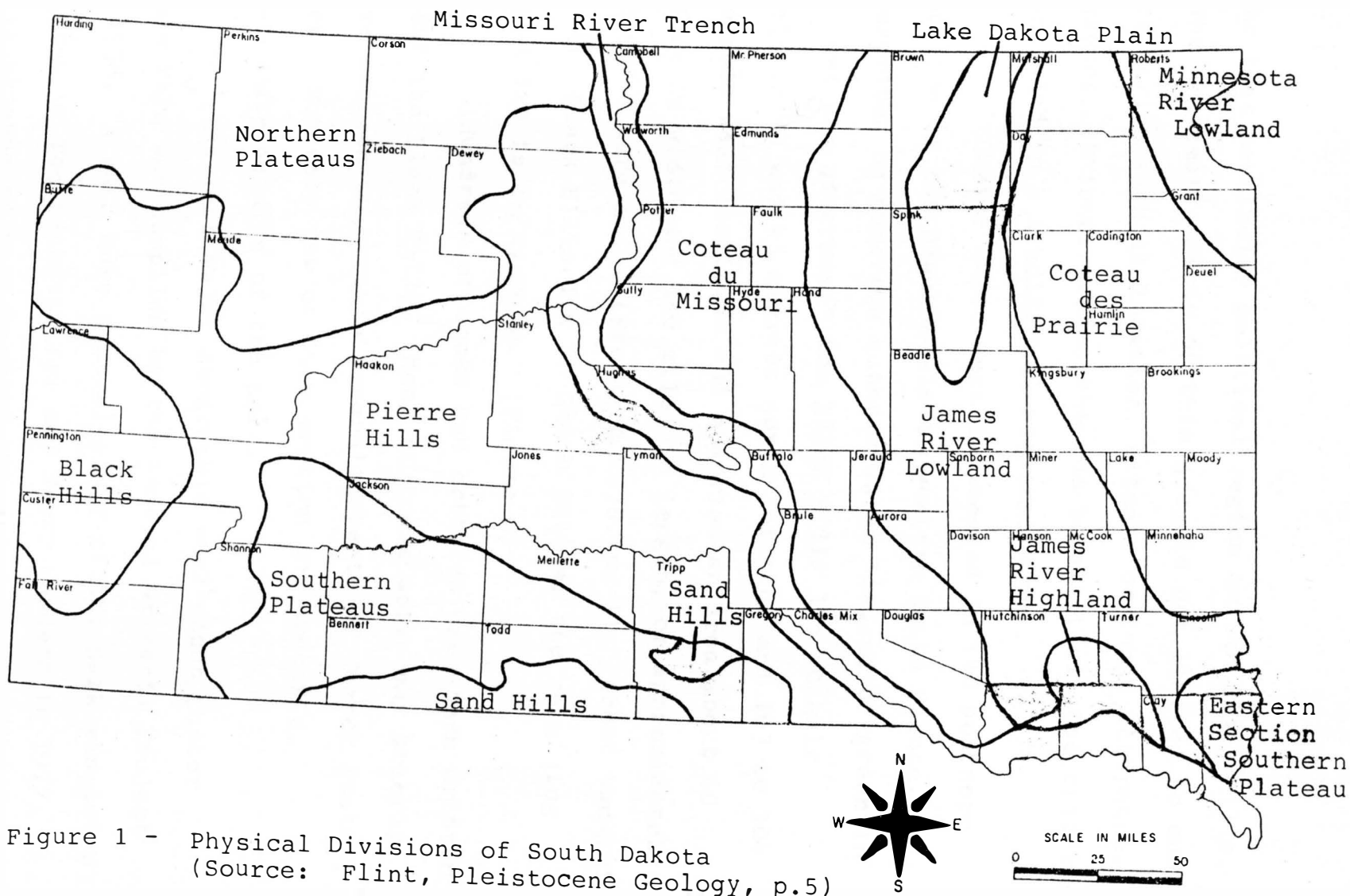
A regional geographer studies the relationship

between humankind and the various phenomena that comprise the physical and cultural environments found within certain boundaries. The geographer studies this relationship through the use of select criteria. The physical aspects of a study area are examined by considering the area's location, geologic history, terrain, weather and climate, soils, vegetation, animal life and water. The investigator looks at the area's cultural environment by examining such standards as agriculture, mining, industry, recreation, transportation, power and utilities and cities and towns. The geographer then integrates all of these criteria into a study of the specific geographic area (Hogan 1976).

The Department of Geography at South Dakota State University has adopted as a major goal of its graduate program the completion of a series of master's theses on the geography of South Dakota. The state of South Dakota is made up of 13 physiographic divisions (Westin 1978). One of these 13 divisions is the Black Hills. This thesis examines one small area within the Black Hills subregion, namely Custer State Park. (Figure 1)

#### THE STUDY AREA

This thesis is a systematic geographic analysis of Custer State Park. Because Custer State Park has definite geopolitical boundaries, this study is limited



to that particular political region in the Black Hills. The systematic study of this area is not limited to one criterion such as location, climate or human occupancy. Rather, it incorporates the sum total of all the criteria included in a traditional regional study.

Custer State Park is located in the southern portion of the Black Hills of western South Dakota. Described by numerous authors as an "island of green in a vast sea of grass," the Black Hills lie roughly between 43 and 45 degrees north latitude and 103 to 104 degrees west longitude and comprise an area about 60 miles in width and 100 miles in length, or approximately 20,600 square miles (Froiland 1978, p. 1). About two-thirds of the Black Hills lie in South Dakota; the remaining one-third is in Wyoming. (Figure 2)

Hundreds of books and articles have been written about the Black Hills. Many of these works may briefly give mention to certain general aspects of Custer State Park. But very few of them mention any specific, up-to-date details of the park.

The last major geographic work about Custer State Park was compiled by the Federal Writer's Project in 1938. A much more general study of the park was later written by Tom Baskett, Jr. and Jerry Sanders in 1977. It is because of this lack of current information about

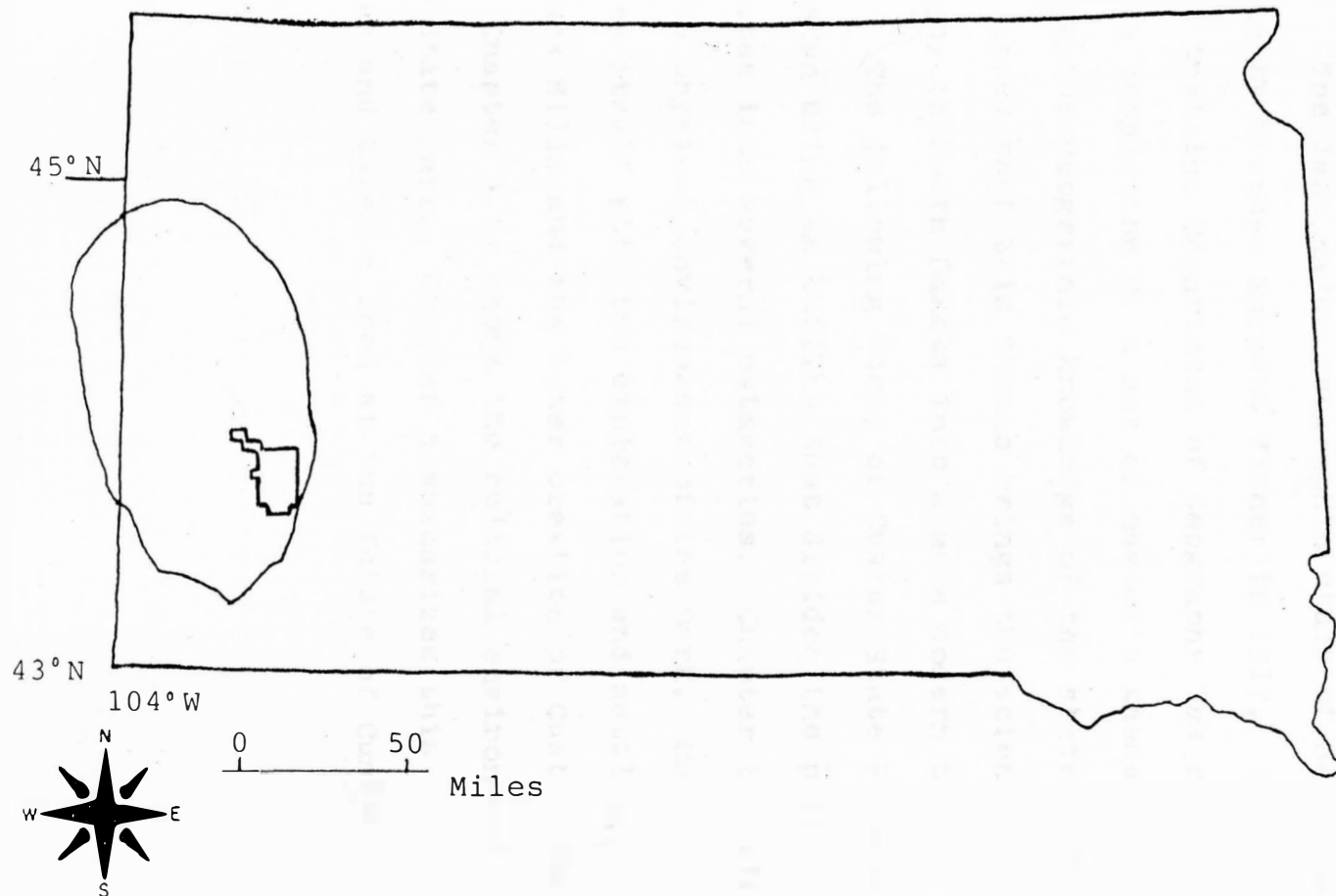


Figure 2 - Black Hills Location  
within South Dakota  
(Source: State Maps On File, p. 6.01)

Custer State Park that the author chose the park as a thesis topic.

The last major geographic study of South Dakota was done by Stephen Sargent Visher in 1917. It is because of this that the Department of Geography has set as a goal the completion of a set of master's theses updating the geographic knowledge of the state. The author hopes that this thesis brings the science of geography in South Dakota into a more modern time frame.

The following study of Custer State Park was undertaken using an outline that divides the park's attributes into several categories. Chapter 2 deals with the physical environment of the park. Chapter 3 concerns itself with the exploration and settlement of the Black Hills and the later creation of Custer State Park. Chapter 4 is about the cultural environment of Custer State Park. Chapter 5 summarizes this study's findings and takes a look at the future of Custer State Park.



Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, Explanations in Geography.  
(London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1969), pp. 350-3.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Patrick Hogan, Geography of South Dakota.  
South Dakota State University, Brookings, South Dakota,  
1976. (Mimeographed.)

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Westin and Douglas D. Malo, Soils of  
South Dakota. South Dakota State Agricultural Experiment  
Station Bulletin No. 656. Brookings, South Dakota:  
Agricultural Station, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Sven G. Froiland, Natural History of the Black  
Hills. (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: The Center For Western  
Studies, Augustana College, 1978), p. 1.

## CHAPTER II

### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

#### INTRODUCTION

Custer State Park in the Black Hills of South Dakota is one of the most charming areas in all the galaxy of the world's picturesque places. It is supreme in its makeup, in its beauty and in its accessibility. Here one may at every turn walk hand in hand with the Creator and marvel at the magnificence of His works.

Cleophas Cisney O'Harra<sup>1</sup>

A systematic geographical study of an area generally begins with the examination of the physical environment. The key elements of an area's physical environment are location, geologic history, terrain, climate and wather, flora, fauna, water and minerals.

#### LOCATION

Custer State Park is located in the Black Hills of western South Dakota. In order to look at how the park terrain came to be, one must look at the geologic development of the Black Hills of which the park is a part.

## GEOLOGIC HISTORY

The formation of the Black Hills is estimated to have begun as far back as the Precambrian Era, some 3.5 billion years (Spencer 1969, p. 115). North America, as a continent, was a much different place at that time. The land mass that would eventually become North America was an area that was subjected to a continuous interchange of the invasion of seas and the upthrust of small islands. The forces of erosion would begin to wear away at these small land masses as soon as they appeared above the surface of the water. The materials which were eroded were carried along by ancient streams and deposited out across the surrounding seas. The result of this continuous laying down of deposit upon deposit would be the future Great Plains (Raymo 1983, pp. 30-1).

The continuous exchange of upthrusting land masses and invading bodies of water continued over a period of time of several hundred million years. The small part of North America that would eventually become the future Black Hills was covered by numerous seas. Each of these intervening seas laid down several layers of material until at least 20 distinct levels appeared. As new layers of material were deposited, older layers of sediment were slowly compressed into different types of sedimentary rock. The shells of dead sea animals were converted into limestone out of which water would later

carve out the caves of the modern Black Hills (Strahlers 1983, p. 293).

Sedimentary material would continue to be deposited over the floors of ancient seas until the end of the Cretaceous Period, some 70 million years ago. At this time, the seas which had covered the center of the North American continent retreated for the last time. It was also at this time that the first of three major uplifts of land would begin the formation of the Black Hills. This uplift of land would be a forerunner of the future Laramide Revolution which later would create the Rocky Mountains.

As the first Black Hills uplift slowly pushed upward, heat and pressure built up until older levels of sedimentary rock were converted to metamorphic rock. This first uplifting of land did not thrust up in one major block but rather in a series of small uneven ones. Because of this, large cracks and holes were caused to be formed between layers of metamorphic rock. Magma later flowed into these empty spaces and slowly hardened. The central core of the present-day Black Hills, of which Mt. Rushmore and Harney Peak are a part, is made up of this solidified magma. The Needles and Cathedral Spires formations of Custer State Park were formed by this same process (Froiland 1978, pp. 23-5).

In Rock, Time and Landforms, Jerome Wyckoff defines the Black Hills uplift as a classic example of a batholithic dome. A batholithic dome is formed when a large body of intrusive igneous rock, known as a pluton, gathers and hardens under layers of older sedimentary rock. Batholithic domes cover an area of exposure greater than 65 square miles and are usually composed of coarse-grained granitic rock (Wyckoff 1966, pp. 148-9).

The Black Hills were formed during three distinct major uplifts of land that occurred over a period of some 70 million years. The first uplift took place over a period of about 30 million years and may have reached a height of about 11,000 feet. The second uplift began during the Miocene Epoch, about 25 million years ago, and lasted for about five million years. The third and final uplift happened during the Pleistocene Epoch, approximately one million years ago. It has been estimated that the forces of erosion may have washed away anywhere from 5000 to 7000 feet of material during these three uplifts. The end result of this is today's Black Hills (Raymo 1983, p. 30).

As the Black Hills dome pushed upward, its central core region rose to the area's greatest heights. This has been compared by some to a fist being pushed up

into a cake. As this huge fist forced the center to rise, its oldest layers were pushed up the highest. Today if one were to travel from the outside edge of the Black Hills to its interior, the layers of deposit would get progressively older as you went inward. The youngest Black Hills formations lie around its perimeter and the oldest, some over two billion years old, are in the central core. A prime example of these formations can be found within Custer State Park (Froiland 1978, pp. 23-5).

#### TERRAIN

The Black Hills are made up of five geologic subdivisions. These are the central core, the limestone plateau, the Red valley, the hogback ridge and several attendant laccolithic mountains. Custer State Park lies across several of these geologic subdivisions. (Figure 3) The central core area of the Black Hills is approximately 50 miles long and 20 miles wide. It is composed of several peaks, known collectively as the Harney Range, which extend in height from 5000 to 7200 feet in height. The peaks lie in a northeast to southwest pattern. The central core is the most rugged area of the Black Hills consisting of highly eroded pinnacles, knobs and park-like meadows. The soils here are thin and coarse because of the slow breakdown of quartz and large granite cystals.

The oldest rocks in the Black Hills, some up

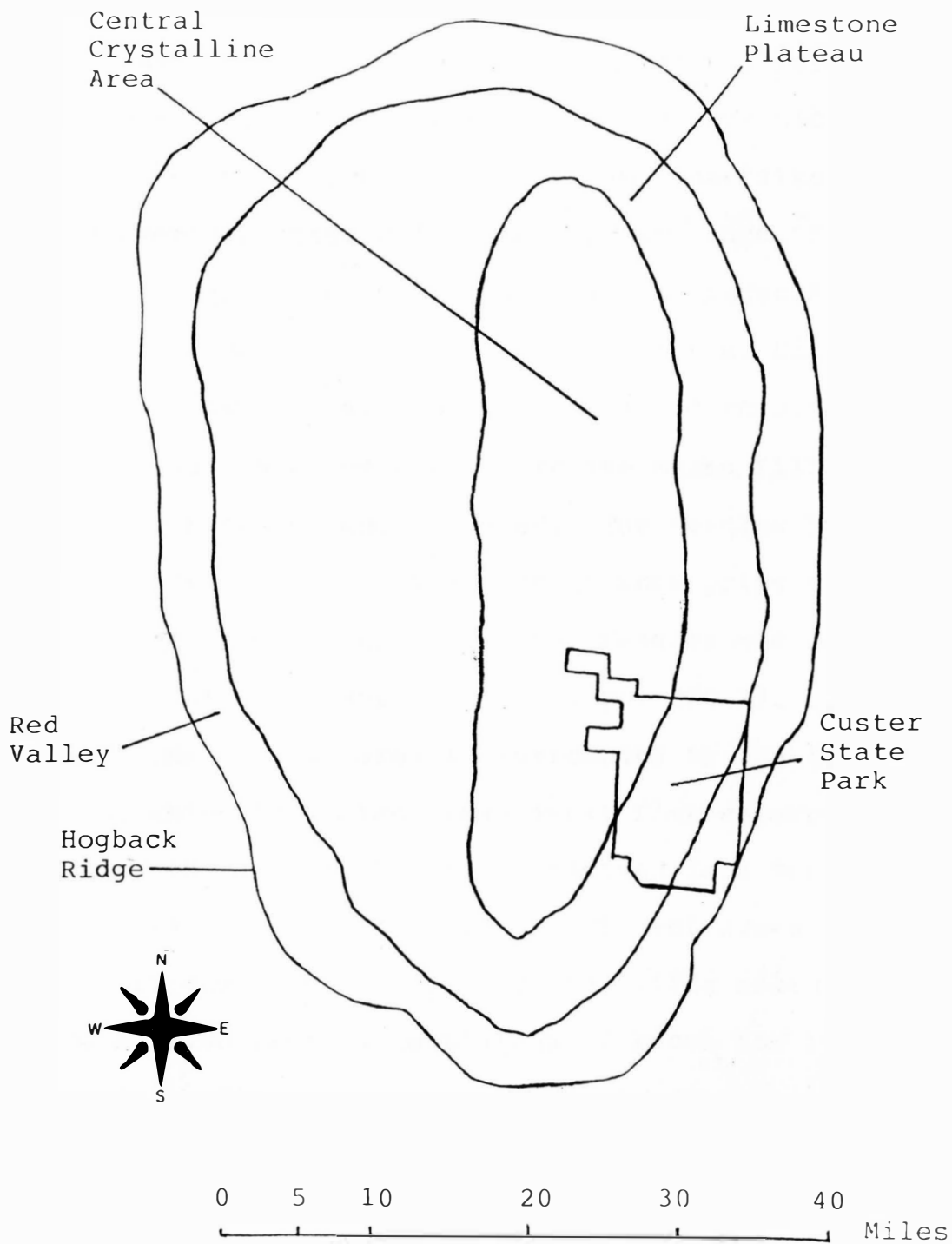


Figure 3 - Custer State Park Location within the Black Hills

to 2.4 billion years old, are located in this area. Two basic classes of rock comprise these ancient formations. One type exposed here is Precambrian metamorphic in nature. These are schists, slates and quartzites that were converted, under great heat and pressure, from shales and sandstones. A second type is igneous and is the chief topographic feature of the central Black Hills. This is composed chiefly of pegmatite and rhyolite granites that resulted when intrusive magma filled empty subterranean spaces and hardened. The Needles Highway of Custer State Park passes through some prime examples of this hardened magma, namely the Needles and Cathedral Spires formations (Thornbury 1969, pp. 220-1). (Figure 4)


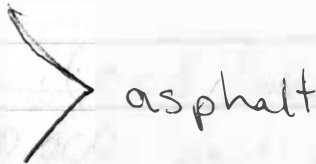
The central area is surrounded by the limestone plateau, which is a high, relatively flat escarpment. The chief characteristic of the plateau is a series of high cliffs which are as much as 800 feet above the valleys of the central core. These cliffs reach a maximum height of 7100 feet. The plateau is known for its fertile soil and its blanket of spruce and pine trees. A large portion of the limestone plateau is contained in Custer State Park (Thornbury 1969, pp. 220-1).

The Red valley forms a "race-track" of red colored rock and soil which encircles the Black Hills. The valley lies outside the slope of the limestone plateau and

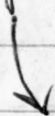


## Intro

Info about park (73,000 acres, wildlife, camping, lake.)

1. parking lots
2. Roads
3. Camping areas 
4. Buildings  asphalt
  - game lodge = Horse Camp
  - Coolidge general store
  - Legion Lake
  - entrance stations
  - Sylvan Lake
  - Blue Bell
  - Park office
5. Smaller buildings
  - Restrooms = Center (3)      Horse Camp (2)  
                                 Sylvan (3)  
                                 Stoelade (2)  
                                 Coolidge (2)  
                                 Legion (2)  
                                 Random (5)
  - employee housing
    - \* 5 cabins
    - \* 5 dorms
  - rental stations (2)
6. effect of landmarks
  - Harney Peak
  - mt. Coolidge
  - Needles

\$30,000 per acre (not lakes)  
lake property = \$60,000 per acre



www.vc-dakotaproperties.com - Janice Gruber

www.murdock-supersecur.com (pre-engineered  
buildings)

Custer State Park. info

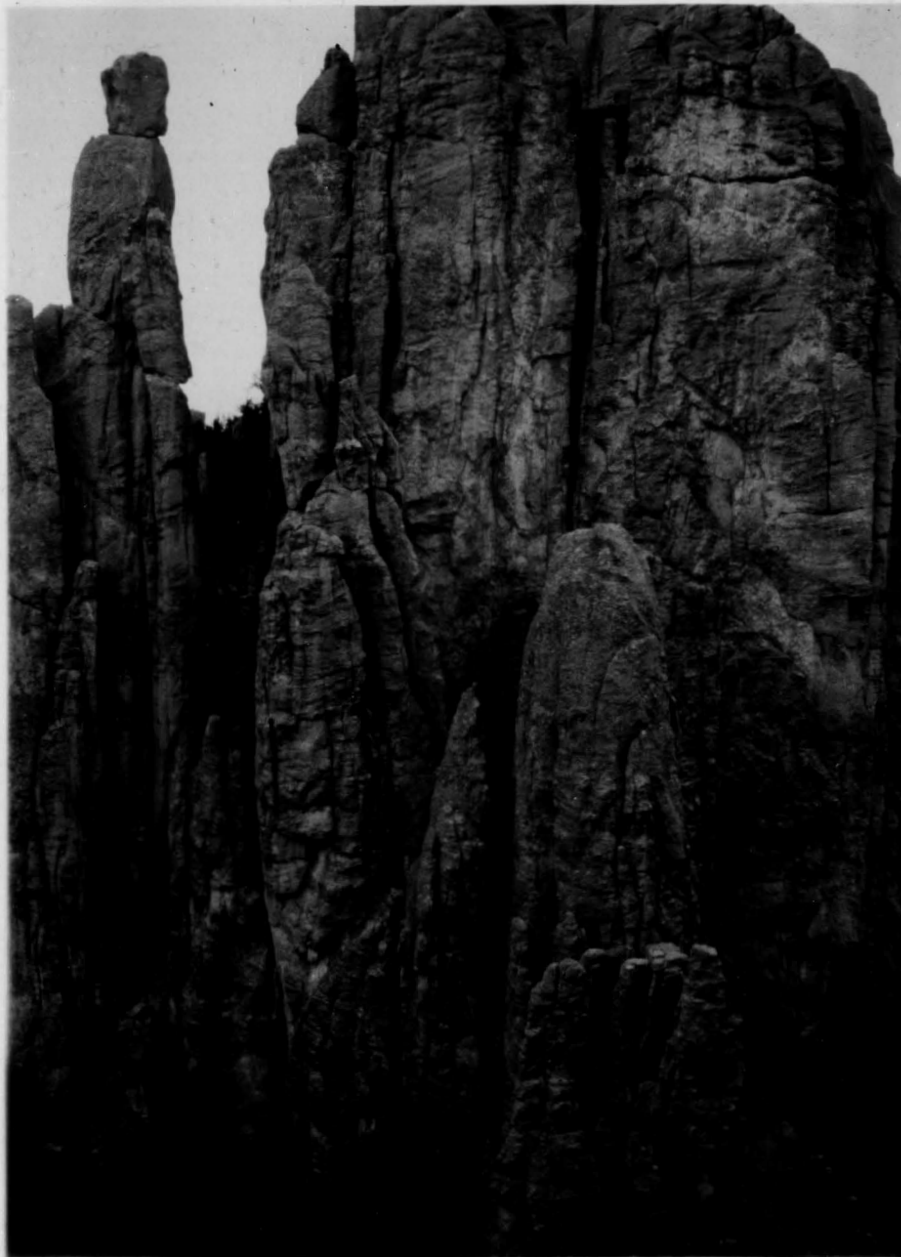


Figure 4 - Needles Formation  
(Photo credit: Custer State Park)

averages two miles in width. The Red valley is devoid of trees, in contrast to other areas of the Black Hills. Since the Black Hills Gold Rush, the Red valley has proven to be an ideal location to build railroads, highways, cities and towns (Thornbury 1969, pp. 220-1).

The hogback ridge forms the outer rim of the Black Hills. The outer slope of the hogback gently blends into the surrounding plains, whereas, the inner slope lies about 500 feet above the Red valley. Conglomerate, shale and limestone are present on the ridge as is petrified wood (Thornbury 1969, pp. 220-1).

In the northern Black Hills there are a number of mountains which were formed by intrusions of igneous rock. These peaks, known as laccoliths, were formed during the Tertiary Period, ranging from about 63 million to one million years ago. These small domal structures were formed independently of the greater Black Hills. Some examples of these laccolith mountains include Bear Butte, Deveil's Tower and Terry Peak (Thornbury 1969, pp. 220-1).

#### CLIMATE AND WEATHER

The climate of South Dakota is classified as continental because of its central location within North America. Because of this, the state is subjected to cold winters and hot summers. The climate of the

Black Hills, or rather microclimate, differs from the rest of South Dakota because of its higher elevations.

The Black Hills, like the rest of South Dakota, receives its weather masses from several locations depending upon the time of year. In winter, air masses may come either from Canada, a continental polar air source, or the northern Pacific Ocean, a marine polar air source. In summer, air masses flow north from the Gulf of Mexico, a marine tropical air source (Hunt 1967, p. 65).

On almost any given day of the year, the weather in the Black Hills is slightly different depending on elevation. This situation is certainly not unique to the Black Hills because it occurs in all mountain terrains. But it makes for an interesting local climatic condition.

The Black Hills are famous for thunderstorms which seem to appear out of nowhere and which seem to disappear just as fast. Thunder from these storms often can be heard for great distances on the surrounding plains. Because of this, Indian tribes such as the Sioux used to be afraid to enter the Black Hills. They thought that thunder gods lived in the Black Hills and that this made them a sacred ground.

Snowfall within the Black Hills tends to differ a lot because of the Harney Range. The central core peaks

tend to confine the heaviest snowfalls to the northern Black Hills. This fact has encouraged the development of winter sports as a very prosperous enterprise in the northern Black Hills.

Custer State Park features an outstanding cross-section of Black Hills topography ranging from mountain terrain to prairies. Elevations range from about 3700 feet at French Creek in the park's eastern section to over 6800 feet in the Cathedral Spires area of the park's northwestern arm. This tends to cause a variety of temperature rates and precipitation amounts throughout the park. Temperatures in the park during the summer average around 65 degrees Fahrenheit; during the winter the average is around 22 degrees. During the summer, days in the park are usually warm and nights are cool; winters are surprisingly mild for northern climates. Precipitation can vary from 24 inches annually in the Sylvan Lake area to 17 inches in the park's southeast part. It is not uncommon for temperatures to be from five to 10 degrees cooler at Sylvan Lake Lodge than at the State Game Lodge which is about 30 miles away and 3500 feet lower in elevation (Black Hills Area Resources Study 1966, p. 4).

#### FLORA

The Black Hills contain a unique collection of

flora. Located near the geographic center of the United States, the Black Hills is an unusual crossroads for a wide variety of plants. Plants from several areas of North America have found their way to the Black Hills to create a diverse and overlapping biological pattern. A good example of this is trees.

The Black Hills is estimated to contain at least 43 varieties of trees. Paper birch, white spruce and other types of coniferous trees are present from Canada. Deciduous trees, such as bur oak, green ash and elm have migrated to the Black Hills from the eastern United States. Ponderosa and lodgepole pines have moved eastward from the Rocky Mountains to dominate the slopes of the Black Hills (Rabkins 1981, pp. 46-7).

The pine tree, of which there are about 210 varieties, is the most predominant tree in the Black Hills. Of these, the ponderosa pine is the most abundant, covering more than 80 percent of the area. The ponderosa is one of the most widely distributed trees in North America, ranging from Alaska to Newfoundland. This tree is hardy and fast growing and is one of the most important timber trees in the United States. The ponderosa can grow as tall as 230 feet and live to be as old as 600 years (Elias 1980, pp. 41-3).

Two other types of pine tree which are fairly

prevalent are the lodgepole and the limber. These, like the ponderosa, are harvested quite heavily and play a very important part of the overall Black Hills economy. All three varieties are located in Custer State Park. The sale of timber from these trees helps to supplement the park's operating budget (Elias 1980, pp. 41-3).

One other conifer, the white spruce, is a major timber tree in the Black Hills. Usually found only in Canada, this second most common conifer in the Black Hills has found a foothold. This tree is very popular for use as Christmas trees and for landscaping of homes and businesses. This makes it one of the more important trees in the Black Hills (Rabkins 1981, p. 47).

The vast majority of trees in the Black Hills are broadleaf in nature. Most of these are of little use for harvesting purposes; however, they play a very important role in the lives of Black Hills birds and animals. Two broadleaves which are cut for timber, furniture and other uses are the black walnut and the bur oak. Other broadleaves which are present are the quaking aspen, green ash, paper birch, boxelder, eastern cottonwood, plains cottonwood, flowering dogwood, American elm, and the peachleaf willow. Most if not all of these trees are found within Custer State Park (Elias 1980, pp. 469-70 passim. 785-6).



Custer State Park also contains a wide variety of ferns, mosses, lichens, grasses, shrubs and flowering plants. There are 17 varieties of berries and fruit present-these include the American plum, gooseberry, raspberry and grapes. It has been estimated that there are over 1000 species of ferns and flowering plants in the Black Hills. Of these, it is estimated that between 600 and 700 appear in Custer State Park. The park's rangelands, which cover about 30 percent of the park, are dominated by grasses such as big and little bluestem and western wheatgrass and other plants such as the western larkspur, the prairie coneflower and the pasque flower, which is South Dakota's state flower (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

#### FAUNA

The Black Hills contain a very interesting and diverse collection of fauna. There are seven large mammals present, as well as several smaller ones. Sixteen kinds of reptiles reside in the Black Hills-these include nine varieties of snakes, two turtles, two toads and two frogs. There are also 200 types of birds, both native and seasonal visitors, which reside in the Black Hills. Custer State Park has most, if not all, of these species of birds and animals living within its boundaries (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

Custer State Park's most popular animals are its large mammals. These are the buffalo, or bison, pronghorn antelope, mountain goat, bighorn sheep, elk, or wapiti, white-tailed deer and mule deer.

Of the large mammals present in Custer State Park, the most popular with visitors is the buffalo. Buffalo herds once grazed across North America from Canada to Texas and from the Rocky Mountains to the Potomac River. It is estimated that at one time, more than 60 million of these huge beasts roamed the prairies. Today only small remnants of these once vast herds remain. There are buffalo, either publicly or privately owned, residing in all 50 states. Of these, the largest public owned herd lives in Custer State Park. (Figure 5)

Buffalo were reintroduced into the area of Custer State Park in 1914. At that time, the state of South Dakota bought a few calves from a rancher who had managed to preserve a small herd. The buffalo that now reside in Custer State Park are descendants of these first calves.

Custer State Park maintains a buffalo herd of around 900 during the fall and winter months. In the spring, this number swells to around 1400 with the arrival of new calves. In November of each year, the park holds an auction to reduce the size of its herd.

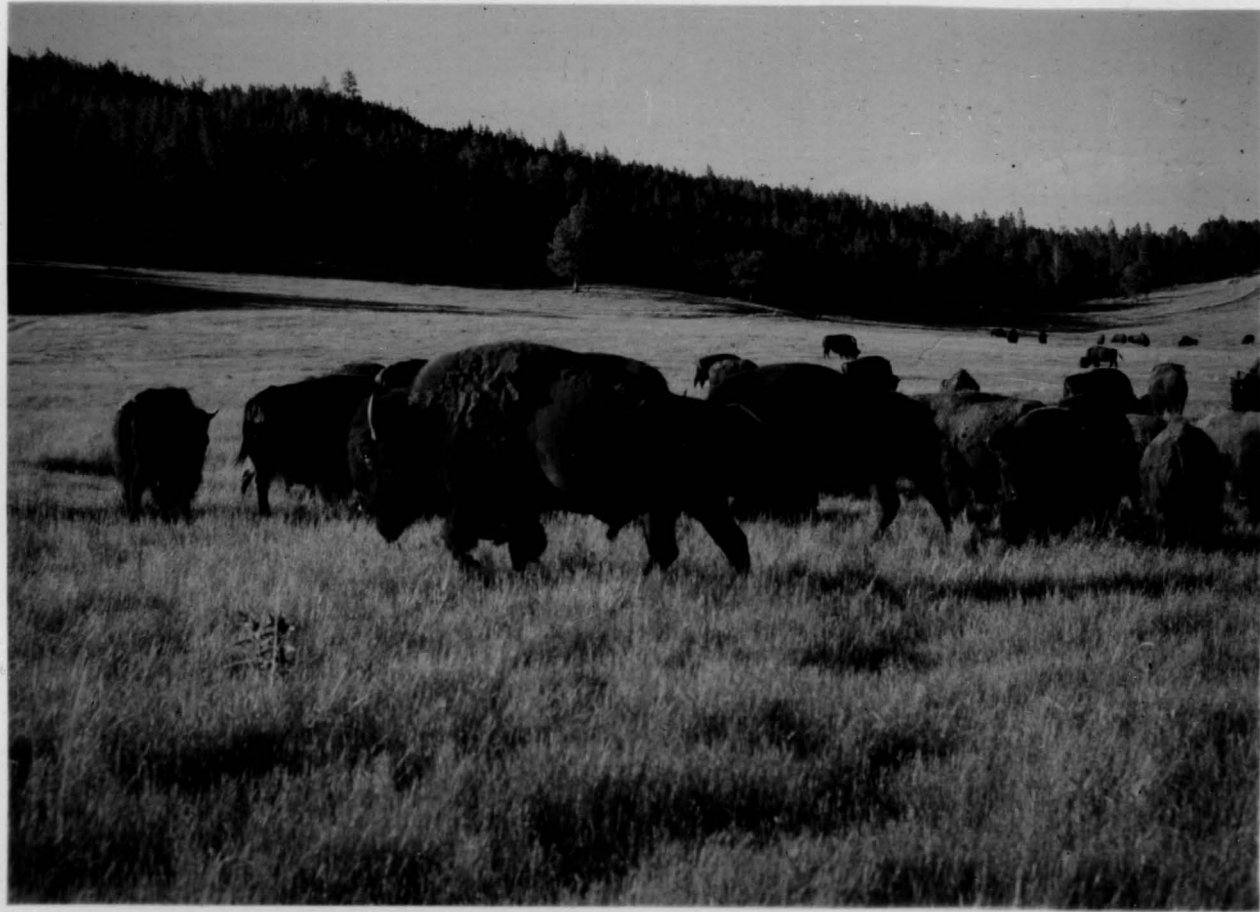


Figure 5 - Buffalo within Custer State Park  
(Photo credit: Custer State Park)

This is done because it has been estimated that the optimum number of animals which the park's pasture lands will support during the winter months is around 900. Those buffalo that are sold are bought by restaurateurs, private ranches, zoos, other parks, or people looking for pets. Money raised at this auction goes to support the park (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

One other of Custer State Park's large mammals, the pronghorn antelope, shares the same grasslands that the buffalo inhabit. The swiftest mammal in North America, the pronghorn antelope can reach speeds of up to 40 miles per hour in great strides of up to 20 feet (Reader's Digest 1982, pp. 66-9).

Three of Custer State Park's large mammals are members of the deer family. One type, the white-tailed deer, gets its name because of a white tail which it uses as a signal flag. The white-tailed deer is the most abundant hoofed mammal in North America.

A cousin of the white-tailed deer, the mule deer, or mule-eared deer, is a less abundant, shyer member of the deer family. Mule deer get their name because their ears resemble those of a mule. The mule deer tends to dislike human activity and, therefore, likes to reside in remote clearings at higher elevations within Custer State Park (Reader's Digest 1982, pp. 66-9).

The third member of the deer family which is present in Custer State Park is the elk, or wapiti, as it was known by the Indians. The elk is the second largest member of the deer family; only the moose is larger. It is a very shy and elusive animal. Because of this, elk prefer to stay on high, rocky ridges during the day. Elk descend to lower meadows to graze in the late afternoon and evening (Reader's Digest 1982, pp. 66-9).

Two other large mammals which reside in Custer State Park tend to be as shy and elusive as the elk. The first, the bighorn sheep, prefer rugged, wooded mountain slopes. The male bighorn is from five to six feet tall and has large horns which grow in a circular pattern. The hooves of the bighorn sheep have a special structure which enable it to climb and jump over uneven and slippery ground. In Custer State Park, bighorn sheep can be found in the Galena Creek area of the park's southwest corner and in French Creek Canyon (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

The other large mammal that is as elusive as the bighorn sheep is the mountain goat. The mountain goat has white fur, black horns and hooves and a bearded chin. Their hooves, which are like the bighorn sheep, allow them to scale slopes and cliffs at a very fast pace. The mountain goat was introduced into Custer State Park in

1924. They reside today in an established herd among the Needles area of the park's northwest corner (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

One other animal, not native to the Black Hills, is the second most popular attraction in Custer State Park. This is the wild burro. Burros were first used to carry visitors from Sylvan Lake Lodge to the top of Harney Peak during the 1890's. Members of this original herd either escaped or were turned loose into the area that would later become Custer State Park. Burros present in the park today are descendants of these first animals. The burros of Custer State Park make their "living" as panhandlers. Known to park visitors as the "begging" burros, these friendly animals stop vehicles along the Iron Mountain Road in the park's northeast corner. They accept almost any handout and seem to enjoy having their picture taken by park visitors (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

The animals mentioned above are, by no means, the only residents of Custer State Park. Other park animals include the coyote, skunk, black-tail prairie dog, white-tailed jackrabbit and the 13-line ground squirrel.

One other type of Custer State Park animal, birds, is very popular with park visitors. The park has

year-round residents such as the bluejay, hairy woodpecker, black-billed magpie and the sharp-tailed grouse. Summer visitors include the dark-eyed junco, white-winged junco, western tanager, mountain bluebird, and the western meadowlark. Water fowl, such as the Canada goose, grebes, and coots, use Custer State Park as a nesting area. Turkeys, which were introduced into the park in 1948, can be found in many parts of Custer State Park (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

Several lakes and streams in Custer State Park and the Black Hills are home to a variety of fish. The most popular types with park visitors are members of the trout family: rainbow, brook, and brown. The park's lakes and streams are restocked with new fish several times each summer. Visitors with a South Dakota fishing license may take their share of these delicious park residents (Custer State Park Brochure 1986).

Custer State Park did not always possess the large amounts of wildlife which is present today. Most of the park's animal life, except for a few deer, were killed off during the first years of Black Hills exploration and settlement. During the early days of the park's existence, decisions were made to restock most of the wildlife which was native to the area. The only animals not reintroduced to the park were large

predators, such as the wolf and the grizzly bear, which might be dangerous to park visitors. Park officials acquired a variety of animals during the 1920's to restock the park's native animals life. The result is the wide variety of animal life which is present in Custer State Park today (Baskett, Jr. and Sanders 1977, pp. 15-25).

#### WATER

The Black Hills, as stated earlier, is often said to be a classic example of a large sedimentary, batholithic dome. Like all sedimentary domal structures, the streams which carried away the first layers of strata left an attending hogback ridge and inner valley. As later strata layers were removed from the dome's center, a core of much older igneous and metamorphic rock was left exposed.

Large domes, like the Black Hills, tend to have radial drainage patterns. Streams radiate outward in a circular pattern from an erosion resistant highland. These streams carve out valleys from weak belts of sediment that disperse outward from the central core. As these streams reach a dome's lowlands, they carve water gaps through the surrounding hogback ridge.

A radial drainage pattern is what occurred in the Black Hills. Streams, such as Rapid or Spearfish creeks, drain the central Black Hills and continue to



carve out deep valleys to the Red valley and the hogback ridge. These streams have cut several openings through the hogback ridge and then continue to flow eastward to join the Belle Fourche and Cheyenne rivers (Wyckoff 1966, pp. 149-51).

Custer State Park has three streams which cross it in a generally west to east pattern. Grace Coolidge Creek flows through the northern part of the park, French Creek runs through the central portion, and Lame Johnny Creek drains the park's southern section.

The Black Hills does not contain any natural bodies of water. All of the lakes and reservoirs which are in or near the Black Hills are the result of the damming of Black Hills streams.

Custer State Park contains four reservoirs of varying size. The largest, Stockade Lake, is located near the western border of the park. Legion Lake, the park's second largest, is located a few miles to the east. The park's third largest reservoir, Sylvan Lake, is located in the park's northwest corner. Center Lake, the park's smallest, is located in the northern portion of the park (Custer State Park Brochure 1986). (Figure 6)

#### MINERALS

The Black Hills are one of the most heavily mineralized areas in the United States. Minerals such

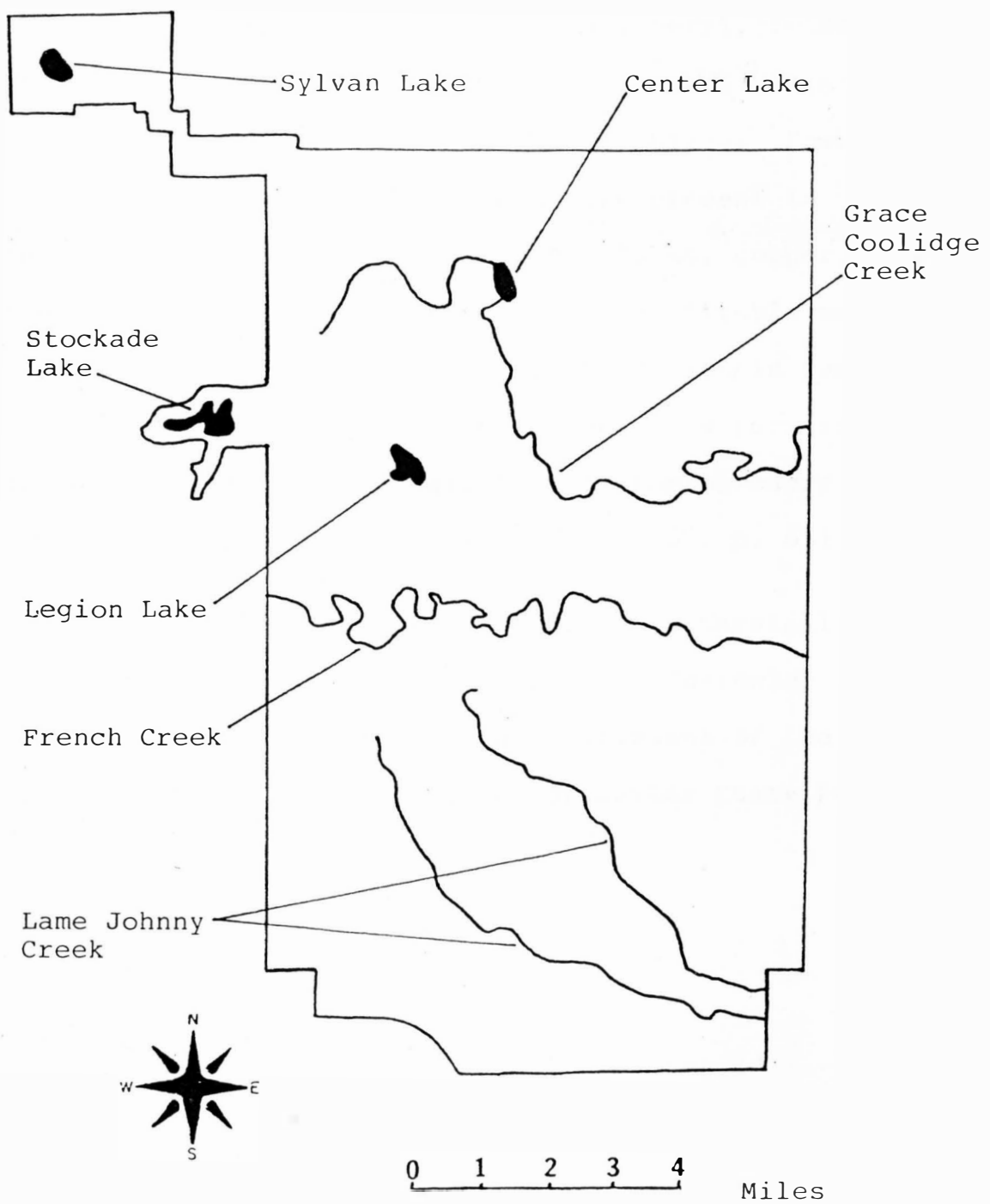


Figure 6 - Streams & Lakes within  
Custer State Park  
(Source: Baskett, Jr. & Sanders  
An Introduction to Custer State Park, Map)

as quartz, mica, tourmaline, lithium, beryl, feldspar, manganese and bentonite are present, as well as precious stones like emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. Precious metals such as silver and uranium are present in relatively profitable amounts, as well as, copper, lead, tin and iron. The Black Hills' most profitable metal is gold. Most of these minerals are found within Custer State Park. Since 1919, however, when the park was created, it has been illegal to look for or carry any of these minerals out of the park (Hunt 1967, p. 65).

This chapter has dealt with the physical environment of Custer State Park. The following chapter tells about the exploration and settlement of the Black Hills and the eventual creation of Custer State Park.

### Endnotes

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 220-1.

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<sup>18</sup> Elias, The Complete Trees of North America-A Field Guide and Natural History, pp. 41-3.

<sup>19</sup> Rabkin and Rabkin, Nature in the West-A Handbook of Habitats, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Elias, The Complete Trees of North America-A Field Guide and Natural History, pp. 469-70 passim, 785-6.

<sup>21</sup> South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Custer State Park, 1986 Brochure.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1986 Brochure.

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<sup>24</sup> Reader's Digest, North American Wildlife. (Pleasantville, New York: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 1982), pp. 66-9.

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## CHAPTER III

### HUMAN OCCUPANCE

#### INTRODUCTION

The word occupance refers to a situation in which a given geographic area has been explored, "conquered," and settled. This almost inevitable series of steps occurred numerous times as the American Frontier moved westward from the Thirteen Colonies. The Black Hills was an exception to this settlement process. For a variety of reasons, the western frontier skirted the Black Hills. It wasn't until after the Civil War that white Americans developed a firm interest in the area.

From the time that human beings first sighted the Black Hills until the time they were settled, a period of several thousand years probably passed. The Black Hills have been "civilized", according to white standards, only since the 1870's. Before this, no one lived in the Black Hills on a full-time basis. This means that for most of the time that humans were aware of the Black Hills, no one lived there. Therefore, the term "human occupance" has a short-term application in reference to the Black Hills.

### INDIAN OCCUPANCE

The Lakota Sioux called the Black Hills Paha Sapa, or Hills that are Black. This is because from a distance, the Black Hills' ponderosa pine give them a black appearance. Later, a white visitor described the area as a "forested island in a grassland sea". Another called it a "vest-pocket edition of the Rockies" (Schell 1975, p. 7).

Archeological evidence exists in the form of cave drawings that suggest visitors first came to the Black Hills anywhere from 8000 to 10,000 years ago. (Froiland 1978, pp. 1-3). The Black Hills have long been a place of legends and traditions. Because of this, they were avoided except for specific activities such as hunting or ceremonial activities.

A variety of tribes claimed control of the Black Hills over the years. This is because a process was in effect in which stronger tribes pushed weaker ones out of their lands. The Arikara, or Ree, controlled the Black Hills from 1250 to about 1400 A.D. During the early 1700's, the Algonquin Indians began to push the Dakota, or Sioux, tribes from their lands in Minnesota. The Sioux would eventually work their way westward and claim the Black Hills for their own. This would take place about the time of the American Revolution (Schell 1975, pp. 16-8).



The Sioux, like earlier tribes before them, did not actually live in the Black Hills. They believed that the Black Hills was a place to which dead warriors went before going to the "Happy Hunting Ground." They also thought that thunder gods lived in the area because of the loud noise which could be heard emanating from Black Hills storms. Only certain leaders of the Sioux tribe could enter the Black Hills, that being warriors, chiefs, and medicine men. These select men would enter the area to worship gods, hunt for game, or cut trees for lodge poles (Froiland 1978, pp. 1-3).

#### EUROPEAN EXPLORATION

The Black Hills have been known to white explorers since about the 18th Century. For several reasons, though, this was one of the last regions in the American West to be settled. For many decades after the United States was founded, the American Frontier remained several hundred miles east of the Black Hills. With the opening of Oregon and California to settlement, the frontier moved to the West Coast. Trails, such as the Bozeman and the Oregon, carried settlers near the Black Hills. But the Black Hills and most of the upper Great Plains remained unsettled because the area was thought to be a vast desert (Williams 1952, p. 2).

The first Europeans that are thought to have seen

the Black Hills are the de la Verendrye brothers. On March 30, 1743, they left a lead plate buried on a hill above the present Ft. Pierre, South Dakota. They laid claim to the area for France. On their way to Ft. Pierre, the de la Verendryes may have passed near or through the Black Hills (Williams 1952, p. 2).

Several countries claimed the Black Hills and the upper Great Plains as their own. The area changed hands between Spain and France on numerous occasions. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the United States gained control of a large, unsettled block of land which included the Black Hills.

A wide variety of American frontiersmen either heard of or may have passed through the Black Hills. In 1804, Lewis and Clark heard stories about "Black Mountains" as they passed through the future South Dakota. In 1811, the Wilson Price Hunt party could have traversed the Black Hills on their way to Oregon. John C. Fremont may have skirted the Black Hills in 1838 as did John J. Audobon in 1843 and Father DeSmet in 1848 (Vexler 1979, pp. 1-2). The first of several U.S. military expeditions explored the fringes of the Black Hills in 1855. Similar expeditions passed by the Black Hills' eastern edge in 1857 and again in 1859 (Bulletin Number 14 April, 1900, p. 14).

### WHITE-INDIAN RELATIONS

In 1861, the United States Congress created the Dakota Territory. But few noticed as the nation's attention was soon drawn eastward with the start of the Civil War. After the war's end, interests switched to the completion of a transcontinental railroad. Numerous local Dakota land speculators and gold hungry miners wanted the Black Hills opened up for settlement. In 1865 and again in 1873, the Dakota Legislative Assembly sent requests to Congress to send geologic and scientific expeditions to the Black Hills. These requests fell on deaf ears (Gerber January, 1973, pp. 4-23).

During the 1860's, several incidents occurred which caused tensions to arise between the Sioux and the U.S. Cavalry. In the Powder River country of Montana, Red Cloud started to harass wagon trains on the Bozeman Trail. Several years earlier, a series of forts had been built along the Bozeman Trail to protect wagon trains. Red Cloud objected to these forts because of their location in prime hunting ground. After several skirmishes took place between Sioux warriors and the U.S. Cavalry, negotiators were finally able to work out a viable treaty. In this treaty, the Treaty of Ft. Laramie of 1868, the U.S. Government agreed to abandon their Bozeman Trail forts and the trail itself. In return, Red Cloud agreed to go to a new reservation. Red Cloud also promised to

leave rail lines alone; in return the Sioux were to receive annuities, education and agricultural training (Parker 1966, pp. 3-5).

The 1868 Treaty of Ft. Laramie gave to the Sioux legal and moral control of all the land west of the Missouri River in South Dakota. It stated that whites could not enter the Black Hills without the Sioux's permission. The treaty stated that the U.S. Cavalry was to enforce this rule by escorting any trespassers out of the Black Hills. The cavalry was not always successful in doing this because rumors of gold being found in the Black Hills continued to make the rounds of western frontier towns (Parker 1966, pp. 3-5).

The 1870's were a decade of great change for the Black Hills and the United States. In 1873, the country was in the middle of a recession. Many people around the United States were out of work including railroad crew and factory workers. As a result of the recession, crime increased, the number of bankruptcies skyrocketed and farm prices plummeted. To make matters worse, the country was experiencing a drought, grasshoppers were destroying any crops which did manage to grow and an epidemic of yellow fever was sweeping across the country. For several years speculators had wanted the Black Hills opened for exploitation. Factors at work

in 1873 made this sentiment even more widespread (Gerber January, 1973, pp. 6-7).

In 1874, General Philip Sheridan, commander of the military department of the Missouri, said that it was time to explore and map the Black Hills. He wanted to have compiled a fairly accurate topographic map of the area as well as a list drawn up of what natural resources were available. He also wanted to have some sites found where a fort could be built. And, as long as an expedition would be within the Black Hills, Sheridan wanted to see if gold really was present in the area. Sheridan wrote to General Alfred Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota, to tell him of his desire for a Black Hills expedition. General Terry sent orders to General **George** Custer to organize the expedition. The Treaty of Ft. Laramie contained no provision whereby the U.S. Cavalry could enter the Black Hills. The cavalry ignored this minor problem and the expedition went in anyway (Frost 1964, pp. 126-9).

General Custer and his expedition left Ft. Abraham Lincoln near the present Bismarck, North Dakota on July 2, 1874. The expedition reached the Black Hills two weeks later. Custer had the president's son, Captain Fred Grant, along as an observer. Captain William Ludlow was to gather scientific data and two prospectors were

to look for gold (Frost 1964, pp. 126-9).

Custer's expedition entered the Black Hills on their northwest side and slowly worked its way south. Within a few weeks, Custer had reached the southern Black Hills. A "permanent camp" was set up on French Creek, near the future site of Custer State Park. Custer set out to do such important things as climb Harney Peak. Meanwhile, the two prospectors looked for gold, and gold is what they found on August 11, 1874 (Frost 1964, pp. 126-9).

Custer sent scout Charlie Reynolds to Ft. Laramie with word of the expedition's gold find. Custer, meanwhile, headed northeast and returned to Ft. Abraham Lincoln on August 30th. Custer immediately sent a report to General Terry of the expedition's findings. But before Custer had even returned, overblown stories of his gold find were appearing in newspapers from Denver to Chicago. It is ironic that Custer, while trying to maintain secrecy about his gold find, sent Reynolds to Ft. Laramie to tell the entire country of the event. One must wonder what Custer's true motives were. Whatever they were, the end result of all the publicity was the start of the Black Hills Gold Rush (Van DeWater 1963, pp. 261-7).

After the signing of the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty,

public opinion was generally against the Sioux receiving legal title to the Black Hills. In 1874, after the country had been ravaged by economic and natural calamities, what little public sympathy there had been for the Sioux cause had all but disappeared. Thousands of out of work men wanted to go to the Black Hills for a new start.

#### SETTLEMENT

The first miners reached the Black Hills in August, 1874, only weeks after Custer had been there. The cavalry reacted very quickly and rounded these first groups up. But they were soon overwhelmed by sheer number. By late spring 1875, there were several thousand miners present in the southern Black Hills (Van DeWater 1963, pp. 261-7).

In the fall of 1875, a special government commission called for a meeting of the Sioux tribal council. Under the provisions of the Treaty of Ft. Laramie, three-fourths of the adult males had to vote yes to approve a proposal. The commission offered to buy the Black Hills from the Sioux for \$3 million, but they were turned down. Further efforts to convince the Sioux to sell failed. The council meeting soon broke up leaving the problem of the Black Hills Gold Rush unresolved (Gerber January, 1973, pp. 22-3).

As the winter of 1875 set in, the U.S. Government had all but given up any hope of possibly settling the Black Hills situation in a peaceful manner. The Sioux hated their reservation and they thought that they were being punished by the federal government because of shortages of food, bad crops and poor soils (Frost 1964, pp. 132-7).

With each passing day, the Sioux grew increasingly more angry over the white invasion of the Black Hills. The chances of an all-out Indian war escalated with the arrival of each new Black Hills miner. Sitting Bull had this to say about the matter:

We have been deceived by the white people. The Black Hills country was set aside for us by the Government. It was ours by solemn agreement, and we made the country our home. Our homes in the Black Hills were invaded when gold was discovered there. Now, the Indian must raise his arm to protect his women, his children, his home; and if the Government lets loose an army upon us to kill without mercy, we shall fight as brave men fight. We shall meet our enemies and honorably defeat them,<sup>20</sup> or we shall all of us die in disgrace.

Sitting Bull's comments did nothing to further the Sioux cause. If anything, he probably destroyed what little public support his people may have had among the white population. General George Custer, the man who started the Black Hills Gold Rush, read Sitting Bull's



statement and had this to say in reply:

I can't say I blame the poor savages; but apparently there is no stopping progress and civilization, undesirable though they may be to the romantic spirit.<sup>21</sup>

The winter of 1875-76 was a long and bitter season for anyone living on the northern Great Plains. Cold weather came early that year and long outstayed its welcome. The Sioux were especially hard hit by the bitter cold and deep snows and soon faced an acute food shortage. More rations were needed but government supply wagons couldn't reach the reservation. To supply more food, Indian agents on the reservation gave permission to hunters to leave in search of game.

About this same time, orders were sent to agents on the Great Sioux Reservation to round up all those Indians who were off the reservation. These orders stated that the U.S. Cavalry was to consolidate white occupation of the Black Hills. One way of doing this was to abolish "wild" Indians on unceded lands. The agents tried to comply with the orders and sent messengers off to warn missing bands that they had until January 31, 1876 to return to the reservation. After that date, they would be considered "hostile" and the cavalry would be sent out to bring them in. The leaders of these bands sent a message back saying that they would return to the reservation in the spring. January 31st came and went but

few Indians were able to comply with the order. With the coming of spring came the start of the cavalry's 1876 campaign (Van DeWater 1963, pp. 267-9).

The summer of 1876 saw the United States celebrating its centennial birthday. The largest ever gathering of Indian tribes in America took place in June. One result of this large meeting would be the most famous event of that summer, the demise of General George Custer and part of his Seventh Cavalry.

By the fall of 1876, the Sioux were defeated. In August, the U.S. Congress passed the Sioux appropriation bill which denied rations to the Sioux until they surrendered, relinquished control of the Black Hills and returned to their reservation. In September, 1876, another tribal council was convened to transfer control of the Black Hills. This time around, though, the Sioux had little choice in the matter. A new treaty was drawn up and Congress ratified it on February 28, 1877. President Grant signed the treaty into law on March 1st thus making the white occupation of the Black Hills legal (Van DeWater 1963, pp. 267-9).

With the passage of this law, the Black Hills was officially on its way to fully being settled. The Black Hills Gold Rush was probably an inevitable historic event. Some say it was all Custer's fault that the Sioux

lost the Black Hills. But Custer was only partly to blame. The real culprit for this event, the last gold rush in the lower 48 states, was the American lust for new territory which was repeated many times in American history (Gerber January, 1973, p. 23).

After the Black Hills Gold Rush ended, the rest of the United States virtually forgot about the area. During the rest of the 1870's and the later 1880's, the Black Hills went from a mining frontier to become a settled part of the Dakota Territory. In 1876, after the gold rush moved to the northern Black Hills because of new strikes, the southern part was left virtually deserted. Only a few hardy miners and ranchers were left in the area of the Black Hills which would later become Custer State Park. The situation improved slightly in the Black Hills in 1889 when South Dakota became the 40th state.

#### CREATION OF CUSTER STATE PARK

People and livelihoods other than mining made their way to the southern Black Hills during the 1880's and 1890's. In 1887, a Dr. H.B. Jennings of Hot Springs, South Dakota and Joseph Spencer, a Chicago promoter, scaled Harney Peak. While on their way back down, the two came up with the idea of building a lake near the base of the mountain. Spencer bought some land in a

canyon known as Sunday Gulch. He had a dam 75 feet high built between two large rocks thus damming up Springs and Sunday creeks. When the project was completed, one of the Black Hills' most beautiful reservoirs, Sylvan Lake, was created. Spencer also had the first Sylvan Lake Lodge built at this time. This lodge served the public until June 30, 1935 when it was destroyed by fire. A new lodge, which is much larger than the old one, was built in 1936 on higher ground which overlooks Sylvan Lake (Case 1953, p. 57).

In 1889, the state of South Dakota received title to certain pieces of land within the Black Hills. Among these were included sections 16 and 36 of each township which were school lands. It was soon found that it was almost impossible to administer these isolated tracts of land. South Dakota state officials finally managed to negotiate a deal with the federal government to trade these sections for other lands in one common block. On February 15, 1912, President Taft signed a proclamation making the land switch official. South Dakota gained title to a block of land of some 61,440 acres in central Custer County. The 1913 South Dakota State Legislature declared the block of land to be the Custer State Park Game Sanctuary. It authorized a fence to be built around the sanctuary and allocated

\$15,000 to buy game to stock the area. In 1920, South Dakota bought and traded more parcels of land to make the sanctuary even larger. (Sundstrom 1977, p.7).

In 1919, the South Dakota Legislature passed a law which converted this block of land from a state game sanctuary into Custer State Park. In 1920, the U.S. Congress combined 46,000 acres in the Harney Peak, Mt. Rushmore and Cathedral Spires area as a game sanctuary for state use. In 1921, the South Dakota Legislature incorporated these additional lands, which included the Sylvan Lake area, into Custer State Park. The park gained an additional 15,000 acres in 1925. This new addition enlarged Custer State Park to over 122,400 acres in size, making it one of the largest state parks in the country at that time. It stretched from the town of Keystone in the north to Wind Cave National Park in the south and included Harney Peak and Mt. Rushmore within its boundaries (Robinson 1925, p. 73). (Figure 7)

During the first decades of this century, a spirit of political reform known as the Progressive Movement was at work in the United States. This reform movement made its way to South Dakota in 1903. One of the Progressive Movement's best known leaders was Peter Norbeck. Norbeck, who was a state legislator, governor, and later U.S. Senator from South Dakota, is known as

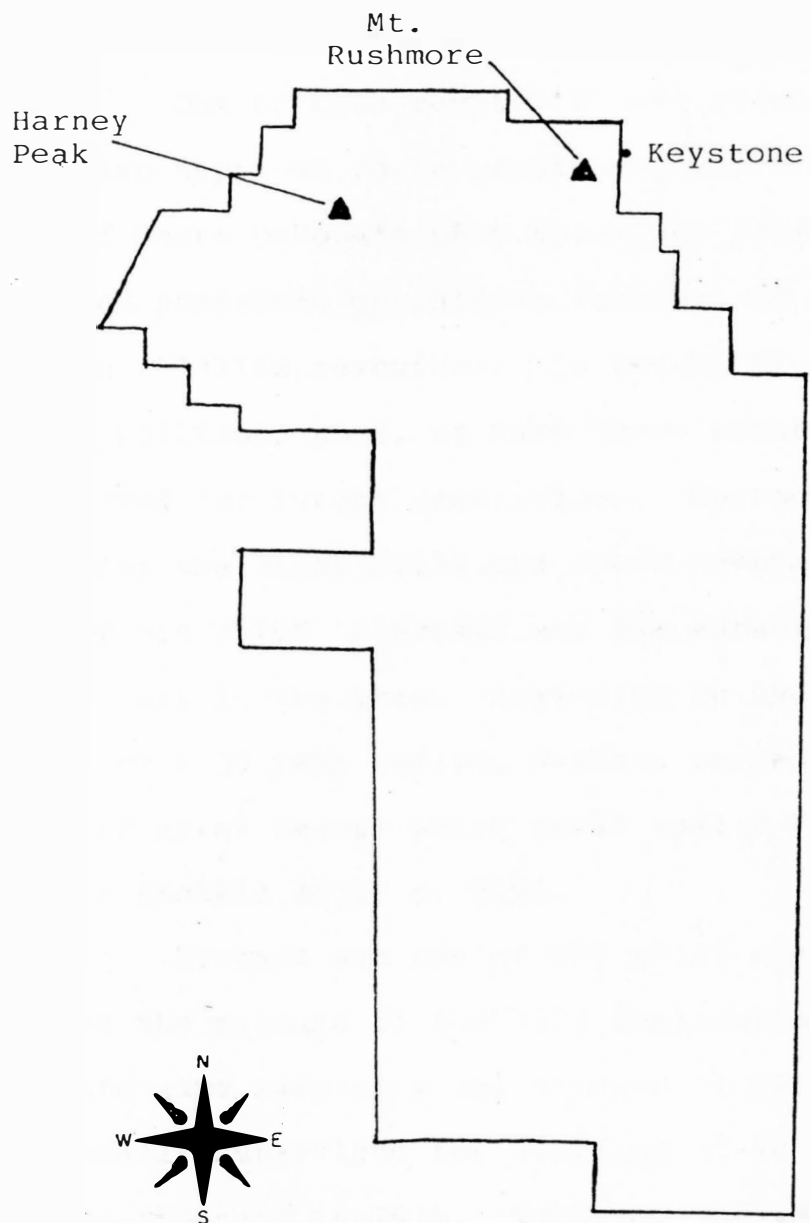


Figure 7 - Custer State Park At  
Its Largest Size  
(Source: Federal Writer's Project.  
Custer State Park, p.7)

the Father of Custer State Park (Robinson 1925, p. 73).

One of this country's best known conservationists, who also happened to be president, was Theodore Roosevelt. One of South Dakota's best known was Peter Norbeck. Norbeck possessed an intense interest in natural beauty and in wildlife resources. It became his hobby, and later political goal, to have these natural resources preserved for future generations. Norbeck had a great love for the Black Hills and spent several summers there. One of his chief interests was the establishment of a state park in the area. Beginning in 1905 and continuing for over a 30 year period, Norbeck worked to create a park of great beauty which could easily be reached by the public (Schell 1975, p. 269).

Norbeck was one of the chief motivating factors behind the passage of the 1913 legislation which created a state game sanctuary and stocked it with wildlife. He personally supervised the building of 40 miles of fence around the park in 1914. Norbeck, who was elected governor in 1916, kept the creation of a Black Hills state park as a pet project. In 1919, he got his wish. He also had a state park board created to supervise the development of Custer State Park. Norbeck served as chairman of this board and gave his personal attention to make the park one of the country's best (Schell 1975, p. 269).

The establishment of Custer State Park was only half of Peter Norbeck's goal; to make it accessible to the general public was the second part. Norbeck personally spent several days walking and horseback riding around the park laying out roads to previously inaccessible places of beauty. Norbeck and Scovel Johnson, a South Dakota state highway engineer, walked past granite cliffs and heavy forest to lay out the Needle's Highway. Johnson and his engineers had one idea in mind of how to build the road; Norbeck had another. Norbeck wanted his road built to preserve natural beauty and to obtain the best possible scenic views. This often contradicted with the engineer's commonly accepted principles and Johnson told Norbeck of this. When the engineers would object to Norbeck's requests with "Oh, Senator, that's impossible. You see . . .", Norbeck would reply with "Well run the road there anyway!" By 1922, the Needle's Highway was completed and Norbeck saw his first highway building project done. The highway that "couldn't be built" goes through granite tunnels and past beautiful granite upthrusts called "needles". It also passes by other granite structures known as the Cathedral Spires which are a registered national landmark. Frank Lloyd Wright, who was an admirer of Custer State Park and of the Needle's Highway, had this to say about the road and



the area: "The Needles is an endless supernatural world more spiritual than Earth but created out of it (Robinson 1925, p. 73).

In 1927, in an effort to focus national attention on South Dakota, Senator Norbeck and Governor Carl Gunderson sent an invitation to President Calvin Coolidge to spend his summer vacation in the Black Hills. Norbeck, who made daily trips to the White House during April to sell the Black Hills trip, eventually persuaded Coolidge to accept the offer. Coolidge's party would stay at the State Game Lodge in Custer State Park and his executive offices would be at the Rapid City High School. Before Coolidge made his way to the park, roads were paved from Rapid City to the park's eastern gate, streams were stocked with large and intentionally underfed trout, and an 18-hole golf course was constructed. In April, 1927, Coolidge did two memorable things while at Custer State Park: he dedicated Mt. Rushmore and announced that he would not run for re-election. In September, Coolidge returned to Washington with petrified wood, antlers and a stuffed trout mounted on a brass tablet with the inscription "Caught by Calvin Coolidge, Custer Park, S.D., July 20, 1927" (Casey 1949, pp. 92-103).

In 1929, Norbeck proposed the building of a road from Custer State Park to Mt. Rushmore. He wanted

to make it possible for tourists to see Mt. Rushmore from several vantage points. Norbeck walked and rode over proposed routes on Iron Mountain more than 20 times. Norbeck again wanted to preserve beauty and he again encountered stubborn engineers. The Iron Mountain Road was completed in 1932 along with three tunnels which frame Mt. Rushmore. The road also contains three pigtail bridges, numerous curves and switchbacks and several scenic lookout points. Norbeck had this to say after the road was finished: "If I had listened to the 'diploma boys', there would never have been no Needle's Highway or Iron Mountain Road". When someone asked Norbeck why only certain vehicles were allowed on these roads he roared, "This is not a commercial road, its scenic. You're not supposed to drive here at 60 miles an hour. To do the scenery half justice, people should drive 20 or under; to do it full justice, they should get out and walk" (Fite 1948, pp. 75-6).

Senator Peter Norbeck, who was of Norwegian descent, was a well-driller before he went into politics. He achieved national prominence, in part, because of his love of nature and his legislative work in conservation. He was the sole architect or co-sponsor in legislation which created the Grand Teton National Park, Badlands National Park, Mt. Rushmore, and the 1929 Migratory Bird

Act. Norbeck considered Custer State Park as his greatest achievement. He had this to say of all his efforts: "I would rather be remembered as an artist than as a United States Senator" (Fite 1948, p. 207).

The 1930's was, needless to say, a very bad time for South Dakota and the nation. But in a few ways, it was a decade which was very good for Custer State Park. The Civilian Conservation Corps, or C.C.C., had a camp within Custer State Park. The C.C.C. played a very important role in creating many of the features which are present within the park today. The corps constructed two of the four lakes in Custer State Park-Stockade and Center, the fire observation tower on Mt. Coolidge, the park museum (now the Peter Norbeck Visitor Center) and the now defunct park zoo. They also played a part in the construction of the second Sylvan Lake Lodge (Sundstrom 1977, p.7).

During the 1940's and 1950's, Custer State Park began to shrink in size as various tracts of land were converted to federal game reserves, forests, and parks. Custer State Park would eventually be reduced to about 73,000 acres, its current size. Today the park is the second largest state park in the contiguous United States; only California's Anza-Berrega Desert State Park is larger. (Figure 8)

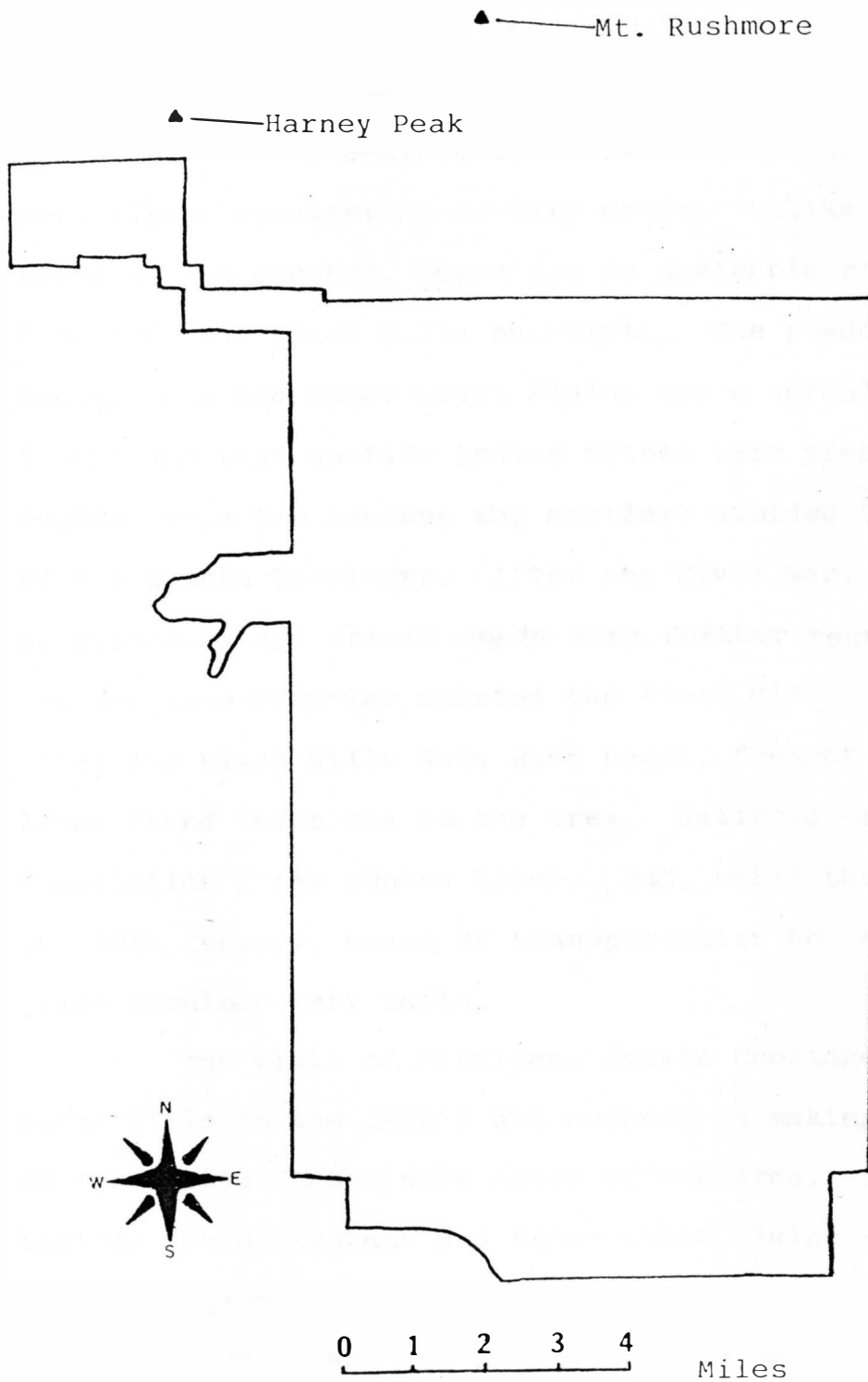


Figure 8 - Current Size of Custer State Park  
(Source: Baskett, Jr. & Sanders  
An Introduction to Custer State Park, Map)

During the first decades of Black Hills settlement, anyone who wanted to reach the Black Hills had to be very determined as means of transportation were either nonexistent or very crude. Unlike other parts of the country, there are no navigable rivers that flow near the Black Hills outskirts. The predominant theory that the upper Great Plains was a worthless desert and that hostile Indian tribes were present in the region, were two reasons why settlers avoided that portion of the Dakota Territory. After the Civil War, a lack of railroads and decent roads were further reasons why the American Frontier skirted the Black Hills. Shortly after the Black Hills Gold Rush began, freight and stage lines found their way to the area. Railroads reached the Black Hills a few months later. But, until the turn of the 20th Century, means of transportation to the Black Hills remained very basic.

The visit of President Calvin Coolidge to the Black Hills in the 1920's did succeed in making the rest of the United States more aware of the area. Before 1927, besides South Dakotans and other Great Plains residents, only a few Americans knew of the Black Hills. The few outside visitors who did manage to find their way to the Black Hills were, for the most part, the wealthy. A few came to try and recapture the spirit of the Black Hills

Gold Rush. A lot more came either to stay at exclusive resorts such as the Sylvan Lake Lodge or to soak in the therapeutic hot springs in the southern Black Hills.

After Coolidge's Black Hills visit, the area was opened up to the "common" folk. But this did little to increase the number of Black Hills visitors as international events such as the Great Depression and World War II soon recaptured the nation's attention. People still visited the Black Hills between 1929 and 1945 but it wasn't until the end of World War II that visitors had enough extra time and money to visit such areas. By this time the Black Hills' transportation network and its tourist accommodations had greatly improved (Arnold May, 1983, pp. 50-53).

After World War II, tourism gradually became the Black Hills top industry. Between 1945 and 1949, more than one million people visited the Black Hills. Between 1949 and 1954, that number had increased to over 1.3 million. From 1954 until today, tourism has remained the number one industry of the Black Hills. Today it is estimated that between 2.5 and three million people visit the Black Hills each year. A large percentage of these visitors find their way to Custer State Park (Business Research Bureau October, 1957, p. 65).

The next chapter deals with the cultural environment of Custer State Park and its special qualities which make it an entity unto itself.

Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup>Schell, History of South Dakota, pp. 16-8.

<sup>4</sup>Froiland, Natural History of the Black Hills, pp. 1-3.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Williams, The Black Hills-Mid-Continent Resort. (Southern Methodist University Press, 1952), p. 2.

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Vexler, Chronology and Documentary Handbook of the State of South Dakota. (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1979), pp. 1-2.

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<sup>10</sup>Watson Parker, Gold in the Black Hills. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 3-5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-5.

<sup>12</sup>Gerber, "The Custer Expedition of 1874-A New Look.", pp. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup>Lawrence A. Frost, The Custer Album-A Pictorial Biography of General George A. Custer. (Seattle, Washington: Superior Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 126-9.

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<sup>15</sup> Frost, The Custer Album-A Pictorial Biography of General George A. Custer, pp. 126-9.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic F. Van DeWater, Glory-Hunter:A Life of General Custer. (New York: Argosy-Antiquarian, Ltd., 1963), pp. 261-7.

<sup>17</sup> Van DeWater, Glory-Hunter:A Life of General Custer, pp. 261-7.

<sup>18</sup> Gerber, "The Custer Expedition of 1874-A New Look.", pp. 22-3.

<sup>19</sup> Frost, The Custer Album-A Pictorial Biography of General George A. Custer, pp. 132-7.

<sup>20</sup> D. A. Kinsley, Favor the Bold, Custer:The Indian Fighter. (New York: Holt, Rineholt and Winston, 1968), p. 160.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> Van DeWater, Glory-Hunter:A Life of General Custer, pp. 267-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 267-9.

<sup>24</sup> Gerber, "The Custer Expedition of 1874-A New Look.", p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> LeLand Case, Lee's Official Guidebook to the Black Hills and the Badlands. 2d ed., (Sturgis, South Dakota: The Black Hills and Badlands Association, 1953), p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Jessie Sundstrom, ed., Custer County History to 1976. (Rapid City, South Dakota: Rapid City Printing, 1977), p. 7.

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<sup>28</sup> Robinson, Doane Robinson's Encyclopedia of South Dakota, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Schell, History of South Dakota, p. 269.

<sup>30</sup> Schell, History of South Dakota, p. 269.

<sup>31</sup>Robinson, Doane Robinson's Encyclopedia of South Dakota, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup>Robert J. Casey, The Black Hills and Their Incredible Characters. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill, Inc., 1949), pp. 92-103.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>35</sup>Sundstrom, Custer County History to 1976, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup>David Arnold, "The Black Hills: Faces of Freedom." Trailer Life, May, 1983, pp. 50-53.

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## CHAPTER IV

### CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

#### INTRODUCTION

The cultural environment of a given civilization or historical period refers to that which is not naturally occurring in nature. This is, of course, anything that is manmade. A people's cultural environment ranges from agricultural and manufacturing skills to social customs and ideas. Some areas of the world have cultural traditions which go back several thousands of years; others only go back a few hundred. The Black Hills of South Dakota are one of these latter areas.

This chapter deals with the cultural environment of Custer State Park. It can be divided into the following categories: tourism industry, tourism, transportation, recreational activities, resource management, park residents and mining.

#### TOURISM INDUSTRY

The Black Hills' largest industry is, without a doubt, tourism. This was not always the case. Many Black Hills residents, when referring to early Black Hills history, use the phrase "B.C." or "Before Custer".

It was after Custer's Black Hills visit that a gold rush began and mining soon grew to become the area's top industry. If one were to look at Black Hills history after the gold rush period, another "B.C." can be detected, this one being "Before Coolidge". After 1927, the Black Hills became nationally known and tourism grew into the area's number one industry.

Tourism plays a crucial part not only in the economy of the Black Hills but also in that of South Dakota's as well. In 1985 travelers, both state residents and non-residents, spent some \$460 million within the state. Tourism is South Dakota's second ranking industry and supports, directly or indirectly, one out of every 15 working South Dakotans. Ranked as the third largest industry in the United States, tourists in 1985 spent over \$194 billion across the country (STRATEGY '86, December, 1986).

The most popular tourism attraction in South Dakota and the Black Hills is Mt. Rushmore. It is possible that the number two Black Hills attraction is Custer State Park. In 1955, more than 750,000 people visited the park; in 1956 that number had increased to over 800,000. The number of park visitors gradually increased over the next several years until in 1969 the count exceeded one million. Over the next few years,

park visitation increased at a much greater pace until in 1977, Custer State Park had a record number of over 1.6 million visitors. Since then, the park has experienced a gradual drop in visitor numbers but the annual number is still around one million a year. In 1985, some 986,000 people visited the park; in 1986, this number had increased to over 1,025,000 (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

One fact that very few people know about Custer State Park is that it is almost economically self-sustaining and that it receives almost all of its revenue from the promotion and sale of its own resources. About 68 percent of the park's funding comes from three main sources: park entrance fees, camping permits, and concessions--such as lodges and restaurants. Another 12 percent comes from the annual buffalo auction and from big game permits which are issued. Timber sales account for an additional eight percent of Custer State Park's annual receipts. The park seldom has to ask the South Dakota Legislature or the Game, Fish and Parks Department for extra funding because of the fact that it can support itself economically (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

Most people, when they think of an area's industry, think of huge factories in an urban setting. Custer State

Park has neither factories nor large concentrations of people. But this does not mean that industry is not present. Park officials are able to generate revenues merely by selling resources available within the park.

Like many state parks, Custer State Park charges park visitors entrance fees and for camping permits to visit and stay in the park. These two sources of revenue are very important as they account for nearly 50 percent of the park's operating budget. In 1987, a daily park permit costs a visitor \$4, a five-day permit is \$6, and an annual permit which allows unlimited visitation is \$12. Anyone who stops in Custer State Park must purchase a visitor's permit. The only exception to this rule is any non-stop traffic which passes through the park on U.S. Highway 16A (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

Custer State Park has 10 campgrounds made up of the following types: primitive, semi-modern, and modern. A modern campground contains spaces for trailers, flush toilets, hot showers and laundry facilities; a primitive site has only pit toilets and trash cans present. Daily camping fees in the park are as follows: a primitive campsite is \$3 a day, a semi-modern is \$7, and the modern sites are \$8. Custer State Park's most popular primitive campground is in the French Creek Natural Area, which is

in the center of the park. A 12-mile hiking trail extends across this undeveloped corner of the park. No motorized vehicles are allowed in this area and campers must be careful not to pollute or damage the area's environment (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

Custer State Park's second largest source of revenue, about 21 percent, comes from concessions. Of the park's concessions, the lodges are the largest. There are four lodges in Custer State Park: Sylvan Lake Lodge, Legion Lake Lodge, Blue Bell Lodge and the State Game Lodge. (Figure 9) Each of the park's lodges has its own distinct atmosphere and offers a variety of things to do. Sylvan Lake Lodge is located in the park's mountainous northwest corner. Lodge guests at Sylvan Lake, as at all of the park's lodges, can stay in either a room or a cabin. For recreation, they can ride a horse, hike to Harney Peak, go swimming in Sylvan Lake or have a picnic. Sylvan Lake Lodge, like the rest of the park's lodges, also offers guests a gift shop and a dining room. Legion Lake Lodge offers park visitors swimming, fishing and paddle boating in nearby Legion Lake. (Figure 10) At the Blue Bell Lodge in the park's heavily forested interior, lodge guests can go for a hike, go horseback riding or take a jeep ride to see the park's buffalo. At the State Game Lodge, guests can visit the park's visitor center or



Figure 9 - State Game Lodge  
(Photo Credit: Custer State Park)



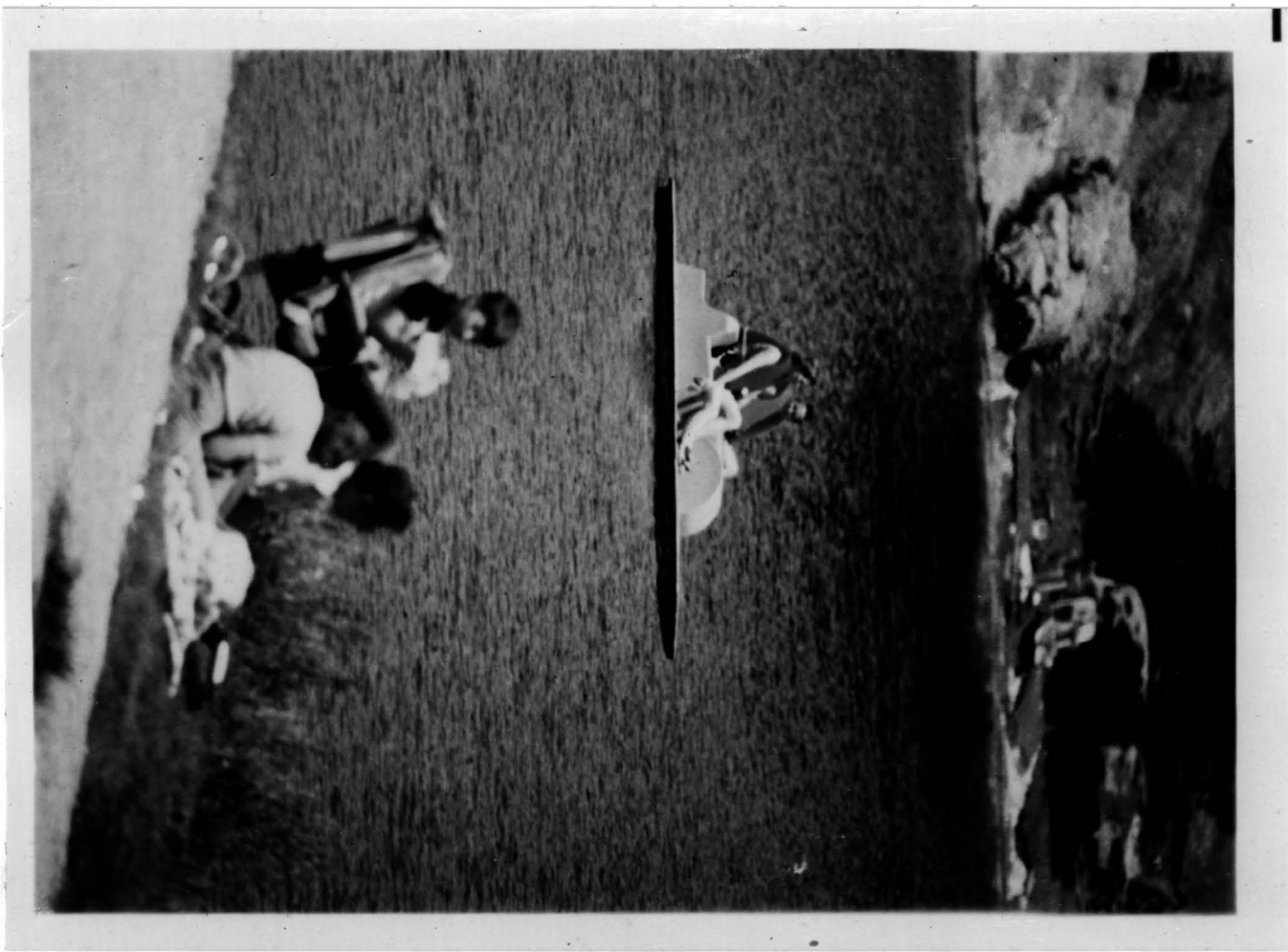


Figure 10 - Recreational Activities within  
Custer State Park  
(Photo Credit: Custer State Park)

take a jeep ride to see the buffalo herd (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

To operate a lodge in Custer State Park, all of which are owned by the state of South Dakota, an operator must submit a bid. In 1986, all of the park's lodge operators had their leases renewed for a 20-year period. Their leases stipulate that the operators must reinvest a certain percentage of their gross annual profits back into the lodges for upkeep and modernization purposes (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

Another area where Custer State Park gets revenue is from the sale of timber. The park is unique in this regard because most state parks do not harvest their own trees. Custer State Park, on the other hand, has a detailed timber-management plan where up to three million board-feet of timber is cut every year. (Figure 11) Park officials estimate that this plan will work on an indefinite basis. Custer State Park accepts bids for timber contracts from private contractors who own their own equipment. The park, which has 50 timber management areas and four full-time foresters, allows trees to be cut only between the months of October and May. No clearcutting is allowed and timber trails must be hidden from the park's main roads (Turbak September, 1984, p. 40).



Figure 11 - Timber Management within  
Custer State Park  
(Photo Credit: Custer State Park)

Custer State Park's timber management program is much more active than similar programs in many national parks. Park officials have several goals in mind under this program, including to provide good wildlife habitat, healthy watersheds, attractive forests and to provide income by selling timber. The park tries to maintain "travel-recreation zones" along its main roads and around tourist areas. These zones are stands of attractive older timber within a certain perimeter. The park's management program calls for the removal of dead and decaying trees. Hardwood trees such as birch and oak are encouraged to grow in certain parts of the park. This is done by removing dominant pine trees to allow room for the hardwoods to grow. Custer State Park officials keep tight reins on fires within the park. Because of this practice, tree growth within the park is much thicker now than it was 100 years ago. It also has been found that after an area's timber has been harvested, the amount of wildlife in that area increases immediately (Turbak September, 1984, p. 62).

Custer State Park's third largest source of income comes from the sale of the park's excess buffalo. The park's most popular attraction is its buffalo. During the summer, the buffalo can roam just about anywhere in the park. But in October, they are rounded up and

prepared for auction. New calves are branded, vaccinated against disease and are given blood tests. Also at this time, park officials determine which animals will be sold at the annual auction in November. Buyers come to Custer State Park from all around the United States to attend this auction. After it is over, the remaining buffalo are taken to the park's winter pastures and about \$250,000 will have been raised for the park's coffers (Turbak September, 1984, p. 62).

A major problem which used to arise during each buffalo roundup was old and cantankerous bulls. These old males hate to be herded, have short tempers and tend to be very destructive when forced into pens. An alternative method of dealing with these bulls was needed and one was found. The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department conducts a lottery in which 10 licenses are issued. The lottery winners, after paying a license fee of \$1800, are driven out to the park's winter pastures. Once there, park rangers show them which bulls is theirs to shoot. Any hunter who is lucky enough to receive one of these permits can never receive another one. The inception of these permits helped to reduce the problem of the old bulls plus it was another source of revenue for the park (Turbak September, 1984, pp. 62-3).

Buffalo are by no means the only big game animal

that has a hunting season in Custer State Park. Elk hunters vie for some 140 licenses, each with a \$200 license fee. There are 100 turkey licenses with a \$10 fee and 25 deer permits each costing \$40. Of all the park's hunting permits, however, the most popular is for the bighorn sheep. Hundreds of hunters compete for only three licenses, each of which has a fee of \$250. Custer State Park makes around \$60,000 from the issuance of these various permits (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

As mentioned previously, Custer State Park receives most, if not all, of its revenue from the sale and promotion of its **resources**. **Park officials are proud** of the **fact** that they seldom have to go before the South Dakota Legislature to ask for funding. Between 1959 and 1984, only **two** special appropriations of funds had to be issued. Monies generated through the park's resources are used for the day-to-day maintenance and operation of the park. But park officials seldom have enough extra funds to cover major **maintenance and capitol development** projects (Turbak September, 1984, p. 38). To remedy this situation, the state legislature, for fiscal years 1985 and 1986, gave two appropriations of \$550,000 and \$500,000 to the park. This money came from the state's general fund and tax dollars. Most of this money is earmarked

for large deferred maintenance projects such as sewer and water systems and the restoration of lodge and cabin facilities. The rest will go towards maintaining trails, comfort stations and shop facilities, the planting of trees at the State Game Lodge Campground and improvements at the park's airport (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

### TOURISM

Tourism plays a very important role in the overall economy of South Dakota. To ensure that tourism maintains its position, the South Dakota Office of Tourism conducts an aggressive advertising campaign. Part of this campaign involves the placing of ads in newspapers and magazines on a state, regional and national basis. Of those magazines and newspapers in which ads appear, 16 of them have combined circulations across the Great Plains and Midwest of over 20 million. Another part of the advertising effort involves the use of special interest magazines such as RV camping, automobile clubs and senior citizen groups. Other efforts go toward radio and television ads, trade and travel shows and information centers located along interstate highways. The Tourism Office also distributes over one million free publications such as the South Dakota Vacation Guide each year (South Dakota Task Force On Tourism, December, 1986).

A major portion of South Dakota's advertising campaign involves Black Hills tourism. Of this, Custer State Park constitutes a major focus. Officials of Custer State Park use several methods to promote the park's resources. A radio transmitter was installed near Mt. Rushmore to inform visitors of the park. The concessionaires of the park's four lodges and park officials do joint advertising in various publications. And over the years, a variety of motion picture and television companies have filmed scenes within the park. These include scenes from the original How The West Was Won, A Man Called Horse and an 1978 episode of the TV show "The Wild Kingdom entitled "Prairie Spring" (Custer State Park Employee Orientation, May, 1983).

Based on visitation record, Custer State Park receives visitors from all 50 states and several foreign countries. The vast majority of visitors to the park come from several areas within the central United States. The largest number come from the states which immediately surround South Dakota. These include North Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska and Wyoming. Other states with large numbers of visitors include California, Texas, Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan (Custer State Park Employee Orientation, May, 1983).

There are several types of people who visit the



Black Hills and Custer State Park. One kind is on his way out west to such points as Yellowstone National Park. They allow only a day or so to visit the main highlights of the Black Hills such as Spearfish's Passion Play, Deadwood, Mt. Rushmore and Custer State Park's buffalo herd. Another kind of traveler comes to stay for several days and uses a central locale, such as Custer State Park, as a base camp. They then fan out in several directions to see numerous attractions. North of the park are the Black Elk Wilderness Area, the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve, and Mt. Rushmore; to the west are Crazy Horse Mountain and Jewel Cave National Monument and to the south is Wind Cave National Park. Still others are either returning visitors or they are visiting on a recommendation from someone they know who was a past visitor.

The South Dakota Office of Tourism estimates that tourists spend an average of three days in South Dakota and that a family of four spends around \$89 per day. It is also estimated that for every tourist advertising dollar that is spent, 18 are returned to the state (STRATEGY '86, December, 1986). In December, 1986, the South Dakota Task Force on Tourism came out with a proposal, "A Travel Marketing Plan for South Dakota". A list of goals was drawn up on how to improve South Dakota's tourism industry. The year 1991, which is the 50th anniversary of Mt. Rushmore's

completion, was chosen as a target for the completion of these goals. This list consists of the following objectives:<sup>19</sup>

1. Increase tourism receipts by 20%
2. Create 4000 new jobs
3. Raise \$6.8 million in new tax revenues
4. Generate \$3.9 million in new fees
5. Stimulate \$170 million in new sales
6. Make South Dakota travel and tourism a \$1 billion industry

#### TRANSPORTATION

Custer State Park has, within its borders, some of the most unique and popular roads within the entire Black Hills. The park's major roads consist of U.S. Highway 16A (part of which is the Iron Mountain Road) and S.D. Highway 87 (part of which is the Needle's Highway). One other park road which is very popular with visitors is the Wildlife Loop Road. This road, which runs from the park's southwest corner to just east of the State Game Lodge, passes through grasslands. Park animals such as buffalo, antelope and prairie dogs can be seen along this drive (Custer State Park Employee Orientation, May, 1983).

#### RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Because Custer State Park is a park, recreation is one of its major reasons for existing. The park is in the business of catering to tourists. It offers a diverse

variety of wildlife, landforms, scenic beauty and recreational activities to please a wide variety of tastes. Within its facility, something is available to satisfy almost everyone's interests.

Park visitors may stay in modern lodges or rustic cabins and campgrounds ranging from modern to primitive. They can look for birds or shy large mammals, go swimming, get a fishing license or rent a boat. Visitors can also go on a hike, ride a horse or take a jeep ride to see the buffalo herd. The Black Hills Playhouse, which is located in the old base camp of the 1930's Civilian Conservation Corps, offers a variety of popular Broadway plays. And park visitors can tour the "Badger Hole", the cabin built by South Dakota's first poet laureate. Charles "Badger" Clark lived in this cabin, which is now owned by the park, from 1924 until his death in 1957 (Custer State Park Employee Orientation, May, 1983).

In 1979, Custer State Park's old museum was remodeled to become the Peter Norbeck Visitor's Center. The center offers displays about the park's history, wildlife, forests, and facilities. Visitors can also see several movies about the park's wildlife. Custer State Park also offers an interpretation program which entertains and educates park visitors. Based out of the visitor's center, park interpreters give lectures on a

variety of subjects, present slide shows and show movies at four amphitheaters located at the park's lodge campgrounds. Interpreters also conduct a living history program at the reconstructed Gordon Stockade, located near the park's western entrance. This program shows what everyday life was like for an 1874 party of gold miners who had illegally entered the Black Hills (Custer State Park Employee Orientation, May, 1983).

#### RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Custer State Park offers a wide diversity of natural features and contains a unique cross-section of Black Hills geology. Something else that is unique to Custer State Park is its resource management program. Most parks, both state and national, have a "hands off" treatment plan in regards to their plant and animal life. In Custer State Park, the official policy is just the opposite. Park officials maintain a strong multiple-use concept in order to effectively manage park resources for future generations. Custer State Park harvests its timber, suppresses wildfire, allows hunting seasons, contains a variety of lodges and concessions, sells its surplus buffalo at auction and encourages visitors to feed the "begging" burros. Because of this resource management plan, Custer State Park is often compared with national parks, many of which are smaller in size. Public

park managers from as far away as Africa have come to Custer State Park to observe its resource plan. Officials of Custer State Park believe that in order to effectively preserve an area's ecosystem in a vibrant and productive state, you have to have an active hands-on approach to resource management (Turbak September, 1984, p. 38).

### PARK RESIDENTS

As stated earlier, Custer State Park contains no large concentrations of people. The only people who do reside within the park, on a permanent basis, are some 30 full-time employees. During the summer months, about 70 seasonal employees also live in Custer State Park.

### MINING

Mining was for several decades the number one industry in the Black Hills. The Black Hills Gold Rush began in the Custer State Park area of the southern Black Hills while George Custer visited there. As in many gold rushes, the first gold was found by panning. This method was quickly replaced by rocker arms and sluice boxes which could process sediments on a much faster and larger basis. The third and final phase of most gold rushes involves deep shaft mining. In 1876, the gold rush moved to the northern Black Hills. Deep shaft mining quickly followed and found a permanent home there. Some mining, including deep shaft, was carried out in the area of Custer State

Park. But it was never done there on any large money-making basis. And since 1919, when Custer State Park became a park, it has been illegal to look for gold within the park's boundaries. As for the rest of the Black Hills, mining has been and will continue to be a very important industry.

This chapter has dealt with the cultural environment of Custer State Park. The next chapter summarizes the contents of previous chapters and takes a look at the future development of the park.

Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> South Dakota Office of Tourism, "South Dakota Governor's Conference on Tourism-STRATEGY '86." (December, 1986).
- <sup>2</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley, Custer State Park. 28 November 1986.
- <sup>3</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley.
- <sup>4</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley.
- <sup>5</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley.
- <sup>6</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley.
- <sup>7</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley.
- <sup>8</sup> Gary Turbak, "A Park That Pays Its Way". American Forests. September, 1984, p. 40.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 62-3.
- <sup>12</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley, Custer State Park. 28 November 1986.
- <sup>13</sup> Turbak, "A Park That Pays Its Way"., p. 38.
- <sup>14</sup> Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley, Custer State Park. 28 November 1986.
- <sup>15</sup> South Dakota Task Force On Tourism, "South Dakota-A Travel Marketing Plan For South Dakota". (December, 1986).
- <sup>16</sup> Employee Orientation, Custer State Park, May, 1983.
- <sup>17</sup> Employee Orientation, Custer State Park, May, 1983.
- <sup>18</sup> South Dakota Office of Tourism, "South Dakota Governor's Conference on Tourism-STRATEGY '86." (December, 1986).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., December, 1986.

- <sup>20</sup> Employee Orientation, Custer State Park, May, 1983.
- <sup>21</sup> Employee Orientation, Custer State Park, May, 1983.
- <sup>22</sup> Employee Orientation, Custer State Park, May, 1983.
- <sup>23</sup> Turbak, "A Park That Pays Its Way". p. 38.



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY

### FUTURE

Since the early 1980's, officials of Custer State Park have been working on a variety of ways to make the park more attractive and accessible to visitors. A good example of this is what was done to improve the Sylvan Lake area of the park. In the mid-1970's, an environmental study was conducted of Sylvan Lake and its immediate surroundings. The study disclosed that after 80 years of human activity, Sylvan Lake was in terrible shape. The lake had grown polluted from the sediment runoff of trails, parking lots, roads, and campgrounds. This sediment had accumulated to over two feet deep in places. Algae and aquatic plants were growing in the lake's shallows. And, the overall scenic beauty of the area had decreased over the years (Nelson "Sylvan Lake Restoration", pp. 22-4).

In 1976, a master plan was drawn up to restore the natural beauty of Sylvan Lake. Funding was set aside in the park's budget and also acquired from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a federal cost sharing program. The first phase of the plan was started in October, 1981

when Sylvan Lake was drained to expose the silt and let it dry. Dump trucks then hauled more than 24,00 cubic yards of sediment from the lake's bottom. The lake's shoreline was deepened and reshaped and a trail network around the lake was rebuilt. An area campground was reconstructed away from the lake's shoreline and further down the Needle's Highway. Parking lots were expanded and roads near the lake were rebuilt. Areas around the lake were revegetated to slow down the effects of future erosion. And trees were thinned out so that the lake could better be seen from the patio of the Sylvan Lake Lodge (Nelson "Sylvan Lake Restoration", pp. 22-4).

About the same time that renovation work was being carried on at Sylvan Lake, several other improvement projects were proceeding on schedule at other places in the park. New hiking trails were constructed to make remote areas of the park more accessible to visitors. New informational, directional and interpretative signs and maps were erected to better inform and educate park visitors on the area's ecology, history and geology. Several dangerous curves and intersections within the park were reconstructed to make them safer. At several campgrounds within the park, log comfort stations were built, trees and shrubs were planted and sod was laid by the Youth Forestry Camp, a local work camp for juvenile

offenders. In 1983, a new construction phase was started in which buildings would better blend in with existing buildings. An example of this is the convention facility which was built at the Blue Bell Lodge to better handle large conventions held at the resort. (Figure 12) Several other buildings throughout the park have been or will be rebuilt, remodeled or torn down. This is being done in an attempt to return to the building standards of the park's earliest days. Park officials would also like to see removed several private cabins which were built in the first decades of the park's history (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

The future development of Custer State Park appears to be assured because of its self-supporting nature through its unique resource management program. Several years back, a proposal was drawn up by the Division of Game, Fish and Parks as a facility development plan for South Dakota state parks. The plan has not yet been enacted as it is still in a development stage. One project in which Custer State Park is involved is progressing on schedule. A hiking trail is going to be constructed from Bear Butte State Park to Wind Cave National Park. Approximately 17 miles of this trail will cross through Custer State Park. As the needs of the traveling public continue to change, Custer State Park will develop more



Figure 12 - New Building Construction Phase  
at Custer State Park  
(Photo Credit: Custer State Park)

programs and improve its facilities to meet them. The park's concessionaires will probably build such things as swimming pools and tennis courts to stay abreast of the whims and desires of the traveling public (Custer State Park Questionnaire, 28 November 1986).

### CONCLUSION

Time is an entity that has different meanings depending on one's point of view. In 1989, Custer State Park will be 70 years old. In terms of human civilization this is a relatively small period; in terms of South Dakota history, 70 years is a major portion of the time that the area has been a state. In regard to time, many events have come together to make Custer State Park what it is today. The Black Hills have changed hands many times through a process of displacement, that is, a stronger people taking control of a weaker one's land. The Sioux gained control of the Black Hills about 1776 only to have it taken away from them by an inevitable gold rush. General George Custer, in exploring the Black Hills in 1874, probably signed his own death warrant. Peter Norbeck, through his endless dedication to the creation and continued improvement of Custer State Park, definitely earned the title "Father of Custer State Park". And, the 1927 visit of Calvin Coolidge to the park helped to bring tourism to the Black Hills by making the whole

country aware of the area.

Today Custer State Park is the second largest state park in the contiguous United States. The largest public owned buffalo herd in the country is located here. Custer State Park represents a unique cross section of Black Hills geology and contains topography ranging from mountains to prairies. Around one million people visit Custer State Park each year and the park is able to support itself through the sale and promotion of its own resources. But Custer State Park is much more than just statistics. The park has a way of touching a visitor's innermost thoughts and feelings. They often leave the park with new feelings in regard to nature, and more often than not, return to reexperience what the park has to offer.

During the summer of 1983, this author had the pleasure of working as a park interpreter in Custer State Park. This author has always had a love for the Black Hills. It was a long time dream to live and work, at least for a summer, in the Black Hills. During the spring of 1983, while doing research for this park job, this author grew to love and respect the Black Hills even more. At this same time, it became apparent how very few up-to-date books and articles existed which dealt with the park in any depth. Numerous works briefly mentioned

the same trite details about the park but most were badly outdated. It is because of this lack of current information about Custer State Park that this author chose it as a thesis topic. This researcher wanted a topic which would be of possible interest to the lay public. This author hopes this thesis will help to better inform the people of South Dakota about Custer State Park and the special qualities that it has to offer.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Wendy Nelson, "Sylvan Lake Restoration". South Dakota Conservation Digest. 51: pp. 22-4.

<sup>2</sup>Nelson, "Sylvan Lake Restoration". pp. 22-4.

<sup>3</sup>Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley, Custer State Park. 28 November 1986.

<sup>4</sup>Questionnaire sent to Craig Pugsley.



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