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For Sacred Indian Site, New Neighbors Are Far From Welcome

By JIM ROBBINS

STURGIS, S.D., Aug. 2 — Robert Simpson pieces together a living, building ranch fences and riding saddle broncs at rodeos. When things get tough, he says, he makes a trip from his home in Montana to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where he can practice the traditional ways of his tribe, the Northern Cheyenne, with four days of fasting and praying on a bed of buffalo robes and sage atop Bear Butte.

“Spirits come and hear your prayers,” Mr. Simpson said. “You can regroup from everyday life, and get your marbles together. It’s peaceful.”

But Bear Butte, which dozens of tribes hold as one of the most sacred sites in North America, is getting a new neighbor: a giant biker bar and campground are under construction about two and a half miles away. They are scheduled to open this weekend, in time for the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, one of the country’s largest biker events, which officially starts Monday.

The potential for rock music, roaring motorcycles and thousands of people drinking near the striking volcanic Bear Butte formation has brought American Indians from around the country to an encampment on the treeless plains near here. They plan to march into downtown Sturgis on Friday to demonstrate their concerns to the bikers already gathering for the rally.

Organizers said that about 2,000 Indians and their supporters were expected to take part. Nearby Pine Ridge Indian Reservation was the site of the Wounded Knee standoff in 1973, and some participants are veterans of that protest. Some religious groups, including the Mennonite Central Committee at Pine Ridge, have also become involved.

“We need integrity in our ceremonies here, and it requires a certain amount of quiet,” said Alex White Plume, president of the Oglala Sioux tribe at Pine Ridge, as he stood at the hot, windy encampment at the base of the butte about five miles from here. A small buffalo herd still roams the land.

Mr. White Plume estimated that as many as 8,000 Indians from 30 tribes around the country travel to Bear Butte, which the Sioux and others call Mato Paha, to fast and pray each year. Bear Butte, which rises 1,100 feet, is in a state park with an interpretative center that describes the central role the butte played in the lives of the Plains Indians for centuries.

Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Black Elk and other widely known leaders sought visions here, and the trees are still covered with bright prayer cloths and other offerings of modern-day seekers. The Sioux call it an emergence site, where their prophet Sweet Medicine brought forth the cultural traditions of their people. Tribal traditionalists say many people are finding their way back to the old ways, which is healing the drug

and alcohol addictions that have plagued tribes.

Mr. White Plume said tribal leaders wanted to preserve a five-mile buffer around Bear Butte. Over the years, tribes have spent more than \$1 million to buy about two and a half square miles of land near the butte, but they have not been able to raise enough money to protect the rest.

Down the road from the encampment, Jay Allen, who owns the Broken Spoke Saloon here in town, is racing to finish the new bar. Mr. Allen said that the Indians' concerns were overblown and that the bar and campground would be good neighbors.

"We're very responsible about how we run our operation," he said, as a table saw whined behind him in a parking lot filled with antique Harley Davidsons and construction equipment. "We've got a flawless reputation."

Mr. Allen estimated the cost of his 22,000-square-foot, three-story bar and adjacent campground at \$3.5 million. The bar will allow motorcyclists to ride through it, and it will feature a regular "Best Breast" contest. A separate rock music amphitheater, he said, will face away from the mountain to reduce noise.

"I know for a fact that this isn't a disruption," Mr. Allen said.

"I come out here all of the time for sunsets, and to me this is sacred ground. Look at that mountain," he said, gesturing toward the butte. "No one has anything like it."

The disagreement over the new businesses is one of the largest controversies here in many years. There have been numerous public meetings, and seven lawsuits have contested the beer and liquor licenses granted to Mr. Allen and other campground owners. The Meade County commissioners who approved the permits have refused to comment because of the lawsuits.

Laura Gehner, a spokeswoman for Gary Lippold, a local businessman who puts on a five-night concert called Rock'n the Rally, said that Mr. Lippold had taken measures to reduce the noise but that the proposed buffer was impractical.

"The Native Americans are asking for far more than is feasible," Ms. Gehner said. "A five-mile buffer would extend into Sturgis."

Tim Coulter, director of the Indian Law Resource Center in Helena, Mont., said the new development, as well as two nearby campgrounds with bars, would violate a declaration on the rights of indigenous people that the United Nations is expected to pass next month.

"This declaration says that Indian people need to be able to control development or their culture and traditions and even their existence as a distinct people are likely to be destroyed," said Mr. Coulter, who helped write the United Nations document and has joined the encampment at Bear Butte. "The document says the world is watching and considers this a crucial matter."

Opposition to the new development has brought support from non-Indians as well. In addition to the Mennonites' involvement, the Association of Christian Churches of South Dakota backed a march last month.

“Because we suppressed their ability to pray their way, and because of the terrible history churches have with Indian people, we want to work with them to protect these last few places,” said Carl Meyer, who works for the Mennonite Central Committee on the Pine Ridge reservation.

Some bikers have also sided with the Indians.

“If they wanted to put a bar in the Vatican it would be the same thing,” said Kenneth G. Robinson, who rode out from Sturgis with another biker to show his support.

The Indian encampment, which was set up on July 1, has been a mix of modern and the old ways. A low-power FM station called MATO carries speeches by Indian leaders, while wireless Internet enables laptops amidst teepees and traditional staffs with eagle feathers fluttering in the breeze.

Mr. Simpson said he hoped the protest would force a change.

“I want my kids to be able to go up there and fast and pray and not have Aerosmith playing in the background,” he said.

Mr. Allen, the bar owner, said he had planned to build a statue of an 80-foot-high praying Indian on his property as a nod to his neighbors, but has since given up the idea.

“Everyone loved it,” he said, “but the Native Americans.”