

All of Life from the Castles at Slim Buttes

On a single visit to Lemmon, South Dakota, you can see the whole world. Seriously.

You want joy? Once a summer they put a tent up in Lemmon—a beer tent—for a town festival. A whole lot of people celebrate with a whole lot of beer, so many people and so much beer the town sells souvenir t-shirts with “I got bent in the tent,” across your chest.

You can buy that t-shirt any time of year, too. It’ll stop traffic. Even if people don’t ask, they’ll wonder. “I got bent in the tent.”

There’s more. Right downtown, an entire city block is petrified wood sculpted into shapes so strange they’ll make you believe you spent far too much time in that tent, even in January.

Sometime mid-Depression, Ole S. Quammen hired thirty or forty working stiffs to scour the land 25 miles around, where trees of a long-ago forest had turned into stone. Haul that petrified stuff to town, he told them, and we’ll shape it into waterfalls, and pyramids.

It’s a Twilight Zone of petrification. Lemmon’s got joy, but it’s also got *strange*.

And hate. Up the road at a place called Slim Buttes, a cavalry attack turned into a rout when 150 troops came up on some Lakotas Washington called “hostile,” even though they wanted only to get on with a life they’d always led.

Just a few months had passed since Little Big Horn. Captain Mills had his men out scouting for food when they attacked.

The cavalry wasn't interested in peace. Some Sioux escaped the surprise by running up by taking refuge in a gully. Twenty troops volunteered to go get them. You can imagine what happened. When it was over, Mills' troops cleaned out the Lakota larder and had their first big meal in weeks.

Compared to the battle at Little Big Horn, Slim Buttes was little more than bloody and ugly. Those Lakota who made it out alive went hungry.

Today Slim Buttes--people call them "The Castles"--are just as gorgeous as they were in 1876. Great alabaster cliffs rise like a fleet of winged ships from the Dakota prairie where "deer and the antelope play." Wildflowers splash among the grasses. Tall clouds sail in tribute over the buttes.

You're up in the far northwest corner of South Dakota, where there are no crowds.

If you know the stories, the silence all around makes the whole world an empty theater.

Thirty years before the battle, right here, Crazy Horse spent a night or two amid the castles with a lovely woman who was a wife to someone else--let's call it a camping trip. When her husband showed up, Crazy Horse looked up the barrel of a rifle and took a bullet in his face that left him with a permanent snarl. The woman he'd loved out here departed with her husband.

Crazy Horse, the man astride a mountain in the Black Hills--*that* Crazy Horse--lost face here because among the Lakota there was nothing noble about stealing another man's wife. He had to earn honor back—which he did at Little Big Horn.

Likely as not, you'll be alone amid Slim Buttes' wonderful castles. You can sit and watch and listen out there all by your lonesome. I stopped by on a worshipful Sunday morning. Place was dead quiet. I hiked around, found a

stocking cap someone left behind—camo outside, orange fleece inside. Nice. I took it home, a souvenir because I didn't get a t-shirt. I didn't get bent in the tent. Not really. Still got the camo cap, in fact.

It was good to be there amid the Castles. I swear, just outside of Lemmon, South Dakota, amid all that petrified wood, if you know the stories and get yourself up high enough amid the castles, those magnificent buttes, you can see most all of the world right there, all around. Right there, I'm saying—right there.