

Dakota Images

Cecil Clyde (“C. C.”) Gideon, Black Hills tourism pioneer, was born in Hennepin County, Minnesota, on 9 September 1879, the son of Charles and Rachel Gideon. When he was seven years old, the family moved to Oregon, but young Gideon returned to Minnesota with his mother four years later. The family faced severe economic hardships, and Gideon’s formal education ended with the eighth grade. After several years of supporting himself as a laborer, he married Elma Mary Stubbs in 1899, and the couple had four children. Gideon became an accomplished carpenter and eventually took up contracting. His work building homes for wealthy clients near Lake Minnetonka attracted attention from Minneapolis architects Phelps Wyman and A. R. Van Dyck, designers of the State Game Lodge in Custer State Park, who recommended Gideon as the project’s construction manager in 1918.

Gideon moved his family to the Black Hills, where he supervised convict laborers for the State Game Lodge construction. The lodge opened in 1921 but burned shortly thereafter. Gideon oversaw its reconstruction and expansion, which was completed in 1922, then stayed on for more than two decades—first as hired manager and then as lessee of the tourist facility he had built. He gained a reputation as a capable Black Hills guide and developed a firm friendship with Senator Peter Norbeck, who wielded considerable influence in the development of Black Hills tourism.

Gideon worked closely with Norbeck on several of the senator’s key projects, including the Needles Highway in the 1920s and Iron Mountain Road in the 1930s. His most notable contribution in realizing Norbeck’s vision for these scenic routes was the innovative 1932 engineering solution to extreme elevation changes on Iron Mountain Road—the famous wooden spiral, or “pigtail” bridges. Gideon served as host for President Calvin Coolidge’s 1927 Black Hills vacation and supervised the twelve-day construction of the Coolidge Inn to house the president’s entourage. In later years, he designed and built “Valhalla,” Norbeck’s summer home, as well as a studio for sculptor Gutzon Borglum at Mount Rushmore. He served briefly as Custer State Park’s official superintendent and often worked on park improvements in an unofficial capacity.

C. C. Gideon died on 5 October 1958 and was buried in Rapid City.

—Stephen S. Witte



Cecil C. ("C. C.") Gideon