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Great Plains Road Trip (P21A-2) Montana, Idaho and Wyoming

After finishing up with the Dakotas, my road trip continued through Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. I was growing somewhat concerned about the winter storm that was developing in the Rockies, but the weather forecast put me along its northern fringes for my first full day of sightseeing in Montana. However, it looked like it was going to target Wyoming shortly before I planned to tour that state. I was beginning to think I would have to once again postpone a planned visit to Yellowstone National Park.

My first sightseeing target in Montana was at the Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River. Built during the Great Depression, Fort Peck Dam is the highest of the six major dams along the Missouri River. The dam, which is nearly four miles long, created Fort Peck Lake, the fifth largest artificial reservoir in the country. Dredges pumped material from nearby borrow pits to the dam site in order to build the dam.

I first heard of Fort Peck Dam when I saw the movie “Northfork”, a quirky story about the town of Northfork, which was about to be inundated by the rising waters behind a new dam; the Evacuation Committee, whose job it was to ensure residents had moved out; and a group of angels seeking an “Unknown Angel” in the area. The beautifully shot movie was set several years after the completion of Fort Peck Dam, but Fort Peck Dam and old construction photos stood in for the dam in the movie.



Fort Peck Lake



Fort Peck Dam and Fort Peck Lake



Fort Peck Dam is about 250 feet tall and 4 miles long



The powerhouses at Fort Peck Dam



Below the dam near the powerhouses



Sleeping Buffalo Rock, left, was originally found near an outcropping of granite boulders that to some resembled a herd of sleeping buffalo. Petroglyphs carved into the rock defined horns, eyes, backbone and ribs. Medicine Rock, right, was found in the same area. Both were relocated to a shelter along the highway near Saco, Montana.

These carved rocks are still considered sacred to tribes in the region. Unfortunately, visitors have trashed them with food scraps and cigarette butts.

Montana is famous for numerous dinosaur finds, sharing Morrison Formation sediment deposits with several western states, including Utah. It was deposited during the late Jurassic period when numerous dinosaur species were abundant, including the allosaurus at the top of the food chain. Deposits from other periods are also present, making Montana a source for a wide variety of dinosaur finds.

The Montana Dinosaur Trail links a number of Montana's dinosaur-related sites. I targeted three of those sites on this trip, only to find that two were closed for the season. The third site was the Phillips County Museum in Malta, Montana, although this museum was more about the Native Americans and pioneers who lived in the area more recently than the dinosaurs.



I found Elvis in the museum. Elvis is the fossil of a brachylophosaurus canadensis found in the county.



These Crinoid fossils resemble sea lilies, but they were actually animals, not plants. They in fact are believed to be one of the earliest animals, appearing in the Ordovician Period almost 500 million years ago.

As I explored the Pacific Northwest when I lived in Seattle, I became interested in the Nez Perce, who are believed to have lived in the Columbia River Plateau region (inland Washington, northeast Oregon, western Idaho) for more than 11,500 years. The Lewis and Clark Expedition first encountered them in 1805, and the tribe proved to be generous and helpful with the expedition as it headed both west and east.

In the later 1800s, European Americans pressured them to settle on a reservation away from their fertile homeland. The tribe split in two, with one part accepting the agreement. About 750 others, led by Chief Joseph, fled in 1877 to seek a peaceful sanctuary. Their allies the Crows declined to help, so the Nez Perce tried to reach the camp in Canada of Sitting Bull, the chief of the Lakota who headed there instead of surrendering after his victory in the Battle of Little Bighorn (Custer's Last Stand).

The Nez Perce were pursued by more than 2,000 U.S. Army soldiers for almost 1,200 miles. There were 18 battles or other engagements along the way, with more than 100 dead on each side. Finally, on October 5, 1877, the Nez Perce were forced to surrender after the Battle of Bear Paw, just 40 miles from the Canadian border.

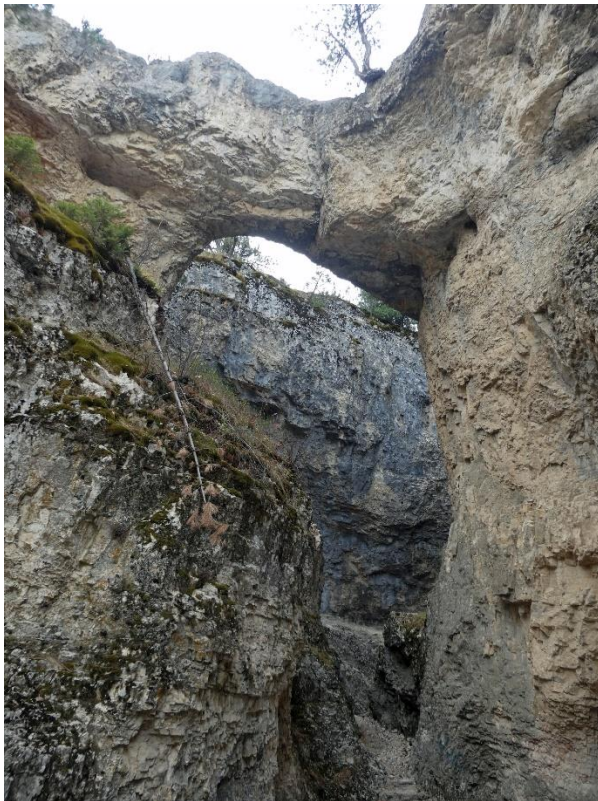
Nez Perce National Historical Park preserves 38 sites in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana that are associated with the Nez Perce. The Nez Perce National Historic Trail follows the route of the Nez Perce as they attempted to make their way to Canada.



I had been to most of the sites in Nez Perce National Historical Park, but this was my first visit to the Battle of Bear Paw site, south of Chinook, Montana. A trail leads through the battlefield.



Near the center of the picture is a marker that identifies the site where Chief Joseph surrendered to U.S. Army Col. Nelson Miles. After their surrender, the Nez Perce were originally sent to Kansas and then to Oklahoma. In 1885, they were resettled, this time on the Colville Reservation in eastern Washington.



Natural bridge in Mission Canyon, near Hays, Fort Belknap Reservation

One of my goals for visiting this part of Montana was to see Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, a badlands area carved by the Missouri River and its tributaries. The closest hotels were in Lewistown, about 50 miles to the south. It was snowing by the time I reached Lewistown, but the sun was coming out the next morning. I hit the road, heading north towards the Judith Landing area where a bridge crosses the Missouri River in the middle of the Breaks.



Hilger, Montana



Grain bins used for wheat near Winifred, Montana



The American Prairie Reserve is a private-public partnership that is acquiring ranches and other large tracts of land near the Missouri Breaks, with the goal of preserving more than 3 million acres focused on wildlife preservation, prairie ecosystem restoration and recreational opportunities. Several ranches in the area had these signs posted along the road because of numerous impacts this could have on ranching operations, especially for those ranches that lease public lands through the Bureau of Land Management.





The Missouri Breaks come into view



The Missouri River Valley is lined with the Breaks' badlands landscape.



The Missouri River passes through the Missouri Breaks



The Missouri River



A wind farm. It looked like it was going to be an iffy year for wind farms because of ongoing drought. Fortunately, rains came in late summer at just the right time, and now it looks like this wind farm will harvest a bumper crop.



Autumn along Highway 191 as I headed south a day after an early winter storm passed through the area

After spending a night in Livingston, Montana, where I watched weather conditions in Wyoming, I decided to head south through Idaho rather than through Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Falling snow and 20-degree temperatures would not have made for a great sightseeing visit. I found some stops in Montana and checked out a couple sites in Idaho that I dropped when I was there in June.



Clark's Lookout State Park is a small park near Dillon, Montana that preserves this small hill that William Clark climbed on August 13, 1805, during the Lewis and Clark Expedition. From this point, he took compass readings and sketched a map of the Beaverhead Valley.



Across the Clark Canyon Reservoir is a memorial to Camp Fortunate, now underwater, where the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped from August 17 to August 22, 1805.



This tourist photo stop is unparalleled.



Idaho's Massacre Rocks State Park was dropped from my Idaho visit in June as I ran out of time. This relatively narrow canyon along the Snake River left Oregon Trail emigrants vulnerable to Indian attacks.



Also in the park is Register Rock, where several Oregon Trail emigrants etched their names into a large rock.



Seven-year-old J.J. Hansen etched images of a preacher (left) and an Indian (right) into this rock.

I could rejoin my original planned route in Wyoming by taking Hwy 30 east from I-15. At that exit a former state park, now the Indian Rocks Area of Critical Environmental Concern, had a petroglyphs site. A small, unsigned rock outcropping there features a number of petroglyphs, although I haven't found much information about them.





Autumn comes to southeastern Idaho

Fossil Butte National Monument in southwestern Wyoming preserves some of the sedimentary deposits of Eocene Epoch (34-56 million years ago) Fossil Lake. Layers of deposits resulted in an exceptionally well-preserved record of numerous species of fish, plants, animals, birds and insects, often in ways that showed which ones co-existed with each other.



Layers of ancient Fossil Lake deposits are especially visible in the beige layers near the top of the butte.



The beige lake deposits sit atop earlier, more colorful deposits.



The ancient inland sea that was responsible for depositing colorful layers of sedimentary rock in Utah did the same in Wyoming. But much of Utah was impacted by the uplift of the Colorado Plateau, which led to bending, breaking and deep canyon carving into the layers. This part of Wyoming was more geologically “calm”. Pockets of the colorful layers have been exposed in Wyoming, but in a much different way than in Utah. But, stay tuned. Who knows what the next 6 million years might bring?





Fossils of fish eating other fish. So, how does a fish eating another fish become a fossil? Sometimes a fish bites off more than it can chew, or at least tries to swallow something too big for it to swallow. Dinner gets stuck and blocks the gills of the dining fish, causing it to suffocate and sink to the bottom of the lake with dinner still in its mouth. It gets covered with sediment, and then some 50 million years later – Voila!





James Cash Penney opened his first store in Kemmerer, Wyoming. And then relocated to his second. This was his third one, which opened in 1904 after relocating from his second store. So, the company was founded in 1902, but this “mother store” to the JCPenney chain of department stores opened in 1904.



This is where he lived, about a block away. Today it houses a museum focused on Penney.



Sometimes you hit a spot that looks like the middle of nowhere only to find out that it was once a busy spot. The Muddy Creek Camp, once located here along Muddy Creek in southwest Wyoming, was a useful stopping point for those traveling west. Brigham Young stopped here with the first group of Mormon pioneers on July 9, 1847. The Overland Stage Line, Mormon Pioneer Trail, California Trail and Pony Express all passed by this site.

The road that passes this spot was originally the bed of the Transcontinental Railroad. The Golden Spike ceremony to celebrate the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad was scheduled to take place at Promontory Point, Utah on May 7, 1869. On May 6, the train carrying Union Pacific Vice President Thomas Durant was stopped just west of here at Piedmont, Wyoming because of railroad ties piled on the tracks. 300 angry workers greeted Mr. Durant and demanded \$200,000 in back pay.

Durant wired for the money and was able to pay the workers. His car was hooked to the next train, and the ceremony at Promontory Point took place three days late on May 10.



The ruins of a handful of buildings and the Piedmont Cemetery are about all that's left of Piedmont, now a ghost town. Piedmont died after the rail line was rerouted through a tunnel to avoid crossing a summit.



The remains of four charcoal kilns at Piedmont, three of which are in excellent condition



Fort Bridger was a trading post originally established by Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez as a fur trading post. Over time, it became a vital supply stop for Mormon, Oregon and California Trail wagon trains which passed through the site. It became an Army post in 1858, but was closed in 1890. A handful of original buildings survive, including the oldest schoolhouse in Wyoming (pictured).



Also at the site are these restored Lincoln Highway "Black and Orange Garage Camp Cabins". These cabins were common in the 1920s, forerunners to today's motels.



This wasn't a Utah trip, but I did make a few Utah photo stops as I headed for Las Vegas from my last Wyoming stop. Here's a view of the Sheep Creek area of Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area.



My last photo of the trip was at Wilson Arch, south of Moab, Utah. This was my first arch when I visited Utah for the first time back in 1991. This time, I got the picture with the afternoon sun, which makes Wilson Arch much more photogenic.