



MarkHitsTheRoad

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Wyoming (W23A)

I had planned on a summer trip to Wyoming for a visit to Yellowstone National Park. But when I saw that about a million people visited Yellowstone just in July, I figured I'd be better off visiting the park during the off-season. So instead, I planned a trip that hit sites in the state that I couldn't fit into last year's itinerary, that I had to skip last year, or that I learned about last year.

I spent the first few days of my time in Wyoming exploring museums, historic downtowns and other sites Laramie and Cheyenne. After that, I headed for a handful of outdoor destinations. On the way back home, I spent a couple days in Vernal, Utah so that I could make a return visit to Dinosaur National Monument and make some first-time visits to rock art sites near Rangely, Colorado that I only recently learned about.

A mostly interstate drive got me to Laramie, Wyoming by the middle of the afternoon on my second day. I didn't make any sightseeing stops along this drive, but I did get a picture of this pair of friendly beavers at a gas station in Beaver, Utah.



If you love beaver as the sign suggests, you'll find all sorts of beaver-inspired souvenirs here.

Once in Laramie, I headed for the Wyoming Territorial Prison State Historic Site on the west side of town. One of the oldest buildings in the state, it was a federal prison from 1872 to 1890, and then a state prison for the next 11 years, at which point it became an agricultural experiment station for the University of Wyoming. One of its more famous prisoners was Butch Cassidy, from 1894 to 1896.



The old prison now houses a museum. The picnic table is empty. Not surprising, as prisoner life was no picnic. Prisoners were not allowed to speak when inside, they worked 10 hours/day, and endured harsh punishments for even minor infractions.



Prison work included staffing a broom factory.



Laramie itself got its start as a Union Pacific railroad town, and is now a regional commercial center that caters primarily to locals, college students and area ranchers. Much of its downtown is part of a historical district.





Wyoming was the first state to grant women the vote, doing so even before it became a state. Seventy-year-old Louisa Swain, depicted here on a downtown Laramie plaza, is believed to be the first woman to have exercised her legal right to vote in a U.S. general election.

Laramie is home to the University of Wyoming, where I visited two campus museums – the University of Wyoming Anthropology Museum and the University of Wyoming Geological Museum.



The Anthropology Museum focused on early human life and culture, especially in what is now Wyoming, including Paleo-Indians, Archaic Indians and some of the more modern tribes. Among its exhibits was this one about the Colby Mammoth Kill Site, where Clovis Culture Paleo-Indians drove mammoths into a dead-end canyon in order to trap, kill and butcher them for food and supplies.

The campus's smallish Geological Museum put a lot more emphasis on Wyoming's fossil record than it did on geology, especially but not limited to dinosaurs. Much of Wyoming is covered by Morrison Formation rock, a rich source of Jurassic Age dinosaur fossils, although other Dinosaur Age and post-Dinosaur Age fossils can also be found in the state in abundance. So, dinosaur finds have been plentiful across the state, and there are a number of museums across Wyoming that feature dinosaur and other fossils.



A cast fossil of an early bird. Alas, it must not have caught the worm.



A stegosaurus fossil. This was a young adult, and was reasonably complete. One of the things it shows was that its plates along its spine were not actually part of the spine, which had once been believed, but rather were bony protrusions. The dots below its neck (left) were “gular armor”, part of a sheet of bony skin that helped protect the neck of the stegosaurus.



I came across the Matthew Shepard Memorial Bench while on campus. A gay student at the university, Shepard met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson at the Fireside Lounge, a local bar. Later, they offered to drive him home, but instead took him to a remote area on the east edge of Laramie, where they then robbed, pistol-whipped and tortured him, and then tied him to a split rail fence in near-freezing temperatures. He was in a coma when he was found the next day, and died in the hospital six days later. This gay bashing and the subsequent trial received a lot of national attention in the late 1990s. Twenty-five years later, people still leave tributes to Shepard at the memorial bench.

Laramie is only about 50 miles from Cheyenne, Wyoming's state capital, so I used Laramie as my base for a day trip to Cheyenne, where I started with a walk around the state capitol and then toured the nearby Wyoming State Museum.



The Wyoming State Capitol



The Wyoming State Museum had a nice exhibit on the state's fossil record, including dinosaurs such as this Cretaceous Period triceratops fossil skeleton.



Other exhibits covered Wyoming's mining and ranching industries, the transition from territory to state, daily life for early pioneers, and other topics.



The archeology section focused on early Native American settlement, hunting practices and creative efforts, such as pottery and rock art.

Pictured in glass is the Great Turtle Petroglyph, which had been illegally cut out of sandstone at Castle Gardens Petroglyph Site, stolen, and eventually turned over to the museum. Castle Gardens is home to a number these round, shield-style petroglyphs. The petroglyphs had originally been brightly painted, probably as in the picture above the petroglyph, but the paint faded over the centuries.



Downtown Cheyenne retains a lot of its historic character, with buildings like the Plains Hotel (top, established in 1911, and in its heyday it hosted celebrities and presidents) and the Atlas Theatre (bottom, built as the Atlas Building in 1887 and converted to a theatre in 1908).

Cheyenne claims to be the Magic City of the Plains, the Rodeo Capital of the United States, and the Railroad Capital of the United States. I can't speak to the magic or rodeo aspects of Cheyenne, but the city was founded as a stop along the Union Pacific railroad, and what was the Union Pacific Depot today is home to the Railroad Depot Museum, which focuses on the railroad history of Cheyenne. It also hosts a large model railroad.



Cheyenne's old Union Pacific Depot, the largest of the railroad's depots west of the Missouri River, is now home to the Railroad Depot Museum. It is no longer in use as a passenger depot. Amtrak passengers now have to use a depot located a few miles outside of town.



Part of the model railroad on display in the museum



Much less interesting was the Nelson Museum of the West. Although the artifacts on display were often interesting, it felt more like just someone's collections on display than an informative museum.

I took a local highway rather than I-80 back to Laramie.



Granite Springs Reservoir at Curt Gowdy State Park. If the name is familiar, you may recall that Curt Gowdy was a long-time TV sportscaster for both NBC and ABC. He was also a top University of Wyoming athlete in his youth.



A rest area where the highway I was on meets I-80 features this tribute to Abraham Lincoln. Sections of the highway here are part of the old Lincoln Highway. And at 8,640 feet elevation, this is the highest point along the Lincoln Highway.



The next day, I headed north to Casper. Along the way, I stopped at a turnout to look at Como Bluff. Geologically speaking, Como Bluff has Sundance, Morrison and Cloverly Formations exposed, making it rich with late Jurassic Period dinosaur fossils, as well as fossils representing early mammals. Numerous dinosaur quarries had been established here over the years, and Como Bluff was the site of several major finds, many displayed in museums back east.

It was a bit disappointing as a stop, though, as a roadside sign was about all there was on this important paleontology site. As the bluff is mostly on private land, we generally can't even visit the quarry sites.



But you can see the Dinosaur Fossil Cabin, constructed with almost 5,800 dinosaur fossil pieces that weighed more than 50 tons. Its Jurassic Period fossils earned it the nickname “the oldest building in the world”, although it actually was built in 1933 as a Lincoln Highway attraction. It’s closed now and prepped for relocation.

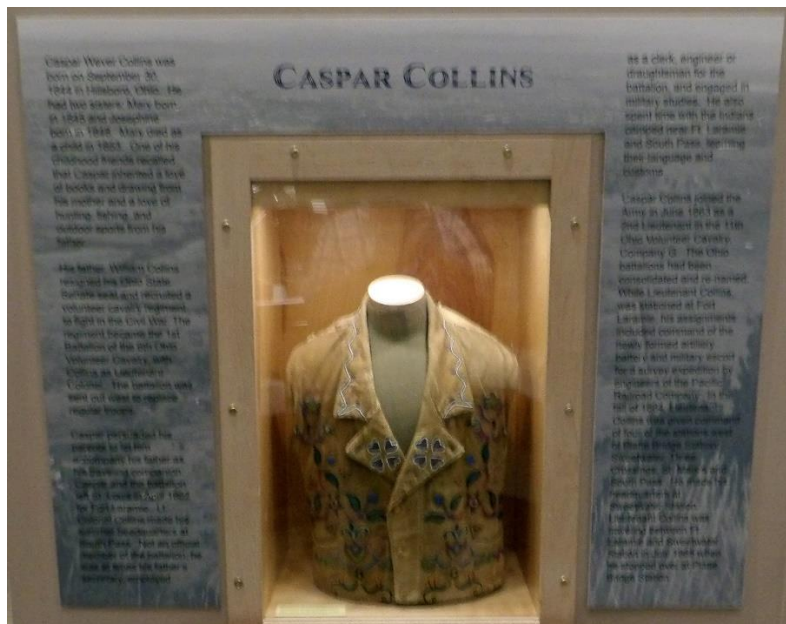
I checked out the Medicine Bow Museum in the nearby town of Medicine Bow. It had little to say about the area dinosaur finds, instead focusing on the small town and its early settlers.



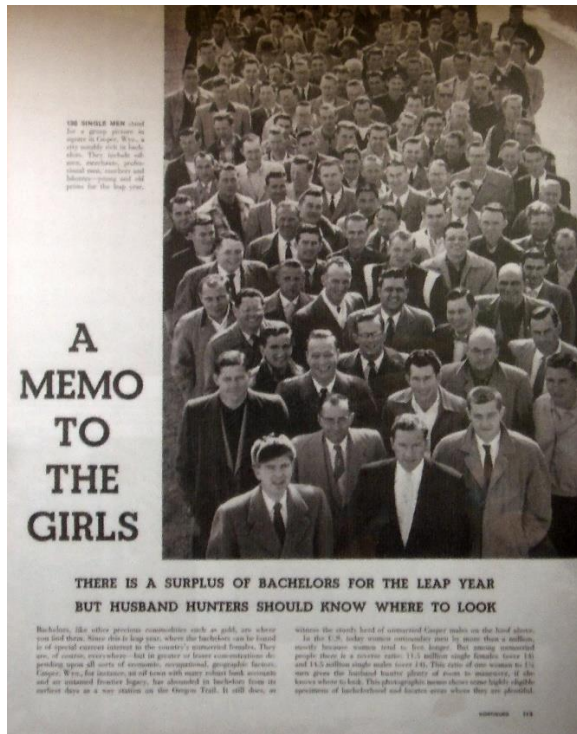
This electric washing machine with a built-in wringer on display in the Medicine Bow Museum probably put a smile on some young housewife’s face back in the day.



I visited some sites in Casper, Wyoming last year, but didn't have time to tour the Fort Caspar Museum, home to some exhibits on the fort and the early days of Casper, as well as a partial reconstruction of the fort. The fort protected emigrants traveling along the Oregon Trail. It also was the site of a toll bridge for emigrants looking to cross the North Platte River. It was named for Army officer Caspar Collins, who was killed in the nearby Battle of Platte Bridge Station. The town of Casper was then named after the fort, with a minor spelling change.



A display on Caspar Collins in the fort's museum.



Also on display in the museum was this 1953 Life magazine article for husband-hungry women (left). The article suggested that those women should go where the men are, and Casper, Wyoming had a huge surplus of single men. The article reported that a military base, ranch work and oil industry work all contributed to that surplus. But I couldn't help but wonder if a 1940 Casper travel brochure that also was on display (right) may have contributed to this overabundance of single men in the city.



The next morning, I left Casper, heading north to Buffalo and then west for a pretty drive across the Big Horn Mountains towards the town of Worland and then north to Greybull.



Just east of Worland, I made a return stop at the site of the Colby Mammoth Kill Site. About 11,000 years ago, Clovis Culture people herded mammoths into a dead-end wash a number of times, and slaughtered them for food, bones and skins. The site provides some of the earliest evidence of human activity in Wyoming, and it is one of the largest known Clovis mammoth kill sites in North America.



The Washakie Museum in nearby Worland has a very good display on regional dinosaur and archaeological finds, including this exhibit on the Colby Mammoth Kill Site, complete with actual mammoth fossils from the site.



The Washakie Museum also had a nice exhibit on early settlement in the region, including this display of cowboy culture artifacts.



Just remember... When you're hiking alone, grizzly bears are your friends!

No, not really. Lots of idiot tourists have been getting themselves into trouble this summer when they've tried to pose for selfies and TikTok videos with wildlife in nearby Yellowstone. Keep a safe distance from wildlife. Unless they're stuffed like this one.

I headed for Greybull because I was rained out of a visit to a nearby dinosaur tracksite when I was passing through the area last year. The rain had stopped, but with slick bentonite clay in the dirt, the wet road was impassable.

Red Gulch Dinosaur Tracksite is home to rare Middle Jurassic (160-180 million years old) dinosaur tracks and trackways, one of just a few such sites worldwide. It is the largest dinosaur tracksite in Wyoming, with about 125 trackways and more than 1,100 individual tracks currently visible – many more are believed to still be buried nearby. As is often the case, the species of dinosaurs that made these tracks are not known.



A 167-million-year-old theropod (three-toed, likely carnivorous) trackway featuring three tracks

The next day, I headed south to Rock Springs, making only one sightseeing stop along the way. A rather significant one – the rather remote Castle Gardens Petroglyph Site, about 50 miles east of Riverton and 25 miles south of Moneta, pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

A hiking trail through the site leads to a number of petroglyphs, many in the form of shields, a style unique to the site. It is believed they were carved and painted by Athabaskans migrating south, sometime between 1000AD and 1250AD. Athabaskans were ancestors of the Navajo and Apache.



Recall the Great Turtle Petroglyph, mentioned above, now displayed at the Wyoming State Museum after it was removed and stolen from Castle Gardens. Here is the place where it was removed from.



This panel features a number of Castle Gardens Shield-style petroglyphs.

Last year I checked out the White Mountain Petroglyph Site in the remote Red Desert area northeast of Rock Springs, Wyoming, and I found out about other sites back in that area. So, on this trip I spent two nights in Rock Springs so I could spend a day exploring the Red Desert area further.



Boar's Tusk is a 2.5-million-year-old volcano remnant that rises about 400 feet above the surrounding area.



Killpecker Dune Field is the largest “living” (i.e., shifting/moving) sand dune field in the United States. Its west end is protected wilderness. To the east, a section is open to Off Highway Vehicles and other play.



Crookston Ranch was one of a number of remote ranches established in the Red Desert area. It is believed that Butch Cassidy sometimes refreshed or replaced his horses here.



I tried finding a different rock art site six miles off the main road. Drive straight for a bit and then take a left, according to the instructions I had. But in seven miles, I found 8 left turns, none of which were marked for the rock art site, and most it turned out led to natural gas pump/collection stations in this oil and gas-rich region.

So, I thought I'd stop to check with these cows to see if they knew where the rock art site was. Alas, they only proved to be just one more source of natural gas.

I filled the rest of the day with a return visit and hike at the White Mountain Petroglyph Site.

Leaving Wyoming, I headed south to Vernal, Utah, for a couple nights, figuring I'd use whatever time I had left on my arrival day to visit nearby Dinosaur National Monument again, giving myself a full day to visit some rock art sites near Rangely, Colorado that I had recently learned about.

I've been to Dinosaur several times over the years, so a number of my sightseeing stops were repeats.



Clockwise from upper left: Decorated petroglyphs at Swelter Shelter, Turtle Rock formation, petroglyphs at Cub Creek Petroglyphs Site, Split Mountain

However, I also added a pair of new-to-me sites. The first was a petroglyph panel just outside the park's boundary on Chew Ranch. It's not marked on any of my park brochures, but I recently found out about the site, which is accessed on a dirt road leading into the ranch. The NO TRESPASSING sign probably discourages many, but if you get close enough to read the fine print, you'd find that you're allowed to drive to the site.

The second was a 1 ½ mile round-trip hike along a trail into a box (dead end) canyon that had once been fenced off to serve as a corral for hogs.



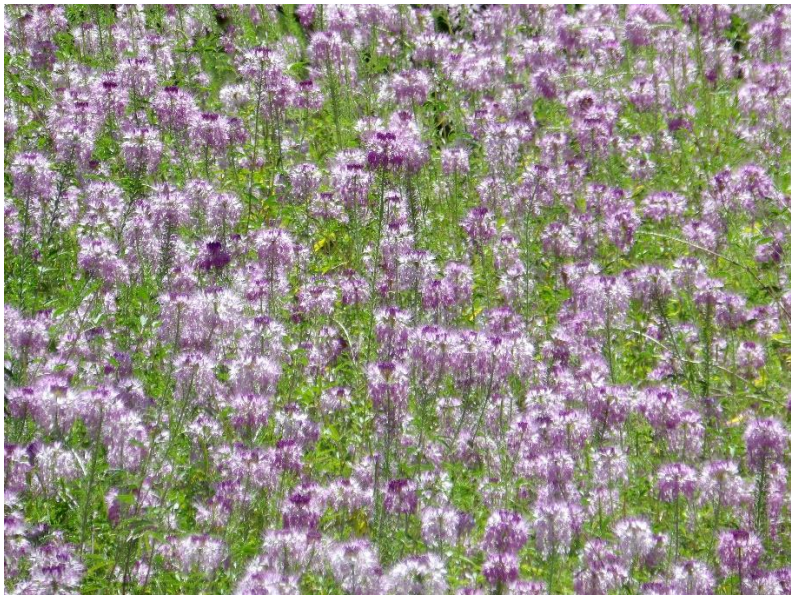
Both the humanoid and some of the animals have some interesting headgear on this portion of the Chew Ranch Rock Art panel.



Hiking in Hog Canyon, whose walls provided most of the boundary for pioneer Josie Smith's hog corral. A nearly permanent creek runs through here, giving the canyon a more lush feel that you get from the rest of this high desert region.



The dead-end turnaround point in Hog Canyon



A patch of flowers along the Hog Canyon hike

Four of the five rock art sites I visited near Rangely, Colorado were off of a remote, unpaved highway that headed for several miles south out of town. Each stop required a minor bit of hiking to see the rock art.



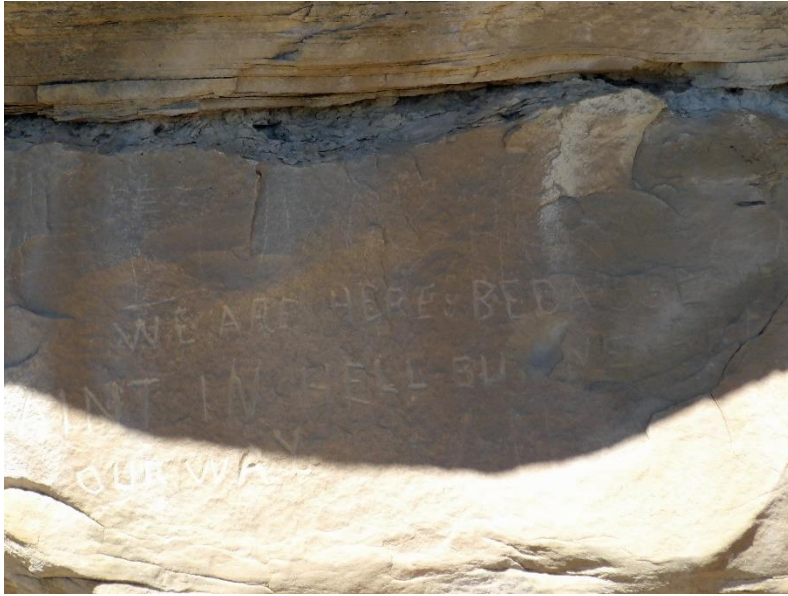
Petroglyph panels at the Shield (left) and Fremont Ridge (right) Interpretive Sites



The Crook's Brand Interpretive Site had some different rock art, including Historic Ute rock art.

"Historic" rock art is usually identified by the presence of horses, putting it in the historic era, as there were no horses in the region until the arrival of Spanish explorers and colonists. But here the rock art had a more modern feel to it as well.

This particular horse petroglyph also has a brand, the letter B. This was the brand of General George Crook. Crook served in the U.S. Civil War and the Indian Wars. He led the 1886 campaign that resulted in the defeat of Geronimo. A traditional Ute story tells of two young men who were able to sneak into Crook's camp in Wyoming and make off with a number of horses, one of which bore the Crook brand.



In the 1800s, a passing cowboy is believed to have left this inscription: “WE ARE HERE BECAUSE WE AINT IN HELL BUT WERE ON OUR WAY”. [sic]



Pacomio Chacon, a Basque sheepherder, was a more modern rock artist. He created number of these “cheesecake” petroglyph panels in the region. Unfortunately, vandals took issue with this panel and shot it up.



The Carrot Men Rock Art Site features a mix of Barrier Canyon Culture and Fremont Culture rock art. Some pictographs still stand out after 800-2000 years, although other pictographs and petroglyphs here have severely faded over time. Note the blue figures in the lower left. Blue is extremely rare in pictograph rock art in the region – in fact, I don't recall seeing blue used in pictographs before.



Even the red figures were decorated with blue, white and possibly green trim.



The Mellen Caves are three caves and an overhang that line a shallow canyon along the highway between Dinosaur and Rangely, Colorado. The caves once served as shelters used by Native Americans. The caves and overhang are decorated with rock art. Alas, the shallow canyon that separated me from the caves was too rugged for me to cross because of my feet situation.



But this is what 50x optical zoom is for. Here are some pictographs at the overhang, as seen from across the canyon with 50x optical zoom and a bit of Photoshop-based brightening to make them easier to see.

And that was pretty much the end of my sightseeing. I made a few minor stops on the two-day drive home.