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Freight and Stage Road from Rawlins to Red Lodge, Montana

FIRST SEGMENT OF TRAIL—RAWLINS TO LANDER
Trek No. 26 of the Historical Trail Treks

Compiled by Jane Houston

Sponsored by the Wyoming State Historical Society, the Wyoming State Archives and Historical Department, the Carbon County Chapter and the Fremont County Chapter, this Trek was under the direction of Henry Jensen, president of the Wyoming State Historical Society.

SATURDAY, JULY 12, 1975
7:30 p.m. the Carbon County Chapter was the host in Jeffrey Center for those trekkers leaving from Rawlins. Following a delightful get-together, the group saw slides of pictures taken by Professor John Jack of Harvard University in the Big Horn National Forest in 1900, and pictures taken of the same sites seventy-five years later by the Big Horn Forest Committee. In Lander the Fremont County Chapter entertained trekkers at the Fremont County Pioneer Museum.

SUNDAY, JULY 13, 1975
Trekkers boarded busses in Casper and Lander at 6:30 a.m. and in Rawlins at 7:30. The three busses met in Lamont.

THE RAWLINS - LANDER (FORT WASHAKIE) STAGE ROAD

by

Jeanne Lambertsen

Not long after the birth of Rawlins the need for north-south transportation became very evident. A number of stage and freight lines resulted. Among them was a stage line to Saratoga which headed south out of town, went around the point of Sheep Mountain and then headed for Saratoga. This route did not require any bridges across the Platte. It was owned by the Rendle Brothers, I. J. and Tom, and used Concord coaches and beautifully matched white horses. Another stage line went to Dillon during the copper boom, a third past Hogback Lake and south to Sulphur, and Baggs
and then to Meeker, Colorado. It was known as the White River Stage Line. North out of town was the Casper road which went down the Brown's Canyon Hill, across Separation Flats and through Sand Draw. The other road which headed north was the Lander-Fort Washakie road which, of course, took a more westerly course.

The stage itself was a mountain wagon, at least in later years when Billy Collins was a driver. It was boarded at the corner of Fifth and Cedar Streets where the Rankins had their livery stable. The road went up Fifth Street past the Court House where for many years there was a scaffold standing. It had been built to hang a cowboy by the name of Ben Carter, convicted of murder while riding in the Sweetwater country. The road then proceeded past the cemetery at the corner of Fifth and Maple. There were two stages each day, one leaving Rawlins for Fort Washakie and one returning. It took the stages thirty-six hours to complete the trip traveling both day and night. This was quite a contrast to the eight or ten days required by the freighters whose string teams moved at the weary pace of two or three miles an hour with many stops for feed and water.

Travelers on this road would meet many freight outfits with twelve to sixteen horses controlled by a "jerk line," pulling three or four wagons. Then there were the stages, ranchers with their supply wagons, buggies belonging to local residents, detachments of cavalry, Indians and often livestock being driven to town. Supplies were shipped from the government warehouse in Rawlins to the Arapahoes and Shoshonis on the reservation in the Lander area.

It was customary for the Indians to come to Rawlins to pick up their allotments from the government and they would set up camp near the slaughter house which was on Sugar Creek east of town. There they would be given all the parts of the slaughtered animals that could not be sold and they made good use of all these discarded parts. Many of the local citizens found it advisable to keep their dogs indoors while the Indians were in town to prevent the family pet from winding up in an Indian stewpot.

Two miles north of Rawlins were the mines which produced "Rawlins Red" paint pigment. These mines were worked as recently as the '20s when H. Larsen was mining there. Union Pacific railroad cars and section houses were painted "Rawlins Red," as was the Brooklyn Bridge.

Seven miles from town is the Smith Ranch which was called Seven Mile Meadows in the early days. It was a handy place for freighters to stop and allow their horses to graze. These men had to take advantage of every watering place and of each meadow for grazing. The next watering places were Nine Mile Spring and the Fish Pond.

The first stage stop was Bell Springs located about fourteen
miles north of Rawlins. Some of the stage tenders there were Pete Taggart, Tom Tagner, Black Mike Sheehan, and Mr. and Mrs. Hays, who were there in 1883. Pete Taggart was quite a walker. He would walk from Bell Springs to Rawlins and back. He kept the stage road in shape by throwing rocks out of the road and doing minor repairs along the trail to town.

When Tom Tagner was the tender at Bell Springs he cached his money in a hideaway. Tom had absolutely no faith in banks. After his death various people searched for the cache. One man went so far as to get on Tagner’s horse and, giving the horse his head, hoped it would go to the cache from habit but no one was ever successful in finding the money.

After leaving Bell Springs we dropped down into the Great Divide Basin, covering an area approximately seventy-five by twenty-five miles where there is no drainage to either the Pacific or Atlantic Oceans. Any moisture finding its way to this locality flows into lakes which lie within the Basin.

At the foot of Willow Hill a very straight road runs northwest from the present highway. This is the first piece of road that was surveyed within Carbon County. The surveyor was the late J. W. Wisda.

At approximately the spot where this road branches off from the highway there was once a road house and post office. It was built by a woman named McLaughlin and was called Lorey (Law ray’), being named for her daughter. The building was a very nice two-story log structure and both Kleber Hadsell, rancher, and Billy Collins, stage driver, said it was a fine place to eat or to rent a room for the night. For some reason it did not enjoy prosperity and lasted for only a very short time. Kleber said the “poet laureate of Separation Flats” offered this jingle to the memory of the place:

There was an old woman who lived at Lorey
She built a post office and thought it would pay.
She fed a tramp and cancelled a stamp
And that was the business for the day.

The log building was eventually moved to Rawlins and is a residence at 816 7th Street. It was stuccoed years ago.

The next stop was Separation Station, one of the last built on this route. According to Mr. Hadsell, “Separation” refers to the fact that this area was used for the roundup crews to gather and separate the cattle according to owners. There was room here to stable seventy-five head of horses and the only reason I can imagine for such accommodations would be that there were many cavalry outfits along this road. This station was built by the Hays family in 1897 who operated it for several years. The charge for a meal here was thirty-five cents.

Next was the Bull Springs Station. This was a road ranch owned and operated by Mr. and Mrs. A. M. House. This was the
most desolate setting imaginable. Mrs. House transplanted wild roses and tea vines around the house and the place took on a homey and attractive appearance.

Mrs. John Hirsch, daughter of the Houses, tells that the stages did not tarry long at the ranch. As they pulled into the yard the driver would throw the lines to the stock tender who was supposed to change the horses quickly. By the time the driver was washed and finished with his meal the stage was ready for the next lap of the journey. The prices at Bull Springs were fifty cents for a bed, fifty cents for a meal.

Mrs. House kept blankets to lend to greenhorn travelers who came unprepared for the rigors of Wyoming weather. The blankets would be returned by the next stage driver headed in the opposite direction. She also made it a practice to place lighted lamps in both the north and south windows of the house so that travelers along the road could be reassured by this comforting signal as they approached the ranch.

From here the road went past Iron Springs and Iron Springs Flat, another rest area for the freighters, then on to Lost Soldier Station.

At 8.6 miles past Lamont we stopped across the stream from the Lost Soldier Station and heard the following paper.

HOW LOST SOLDIER STATION GOT ITS NAME

by

Ruth Beebe

Dr. Thomas Magee wrote the following version of how Lost Soldier got its name to Colonel C. G. Coutant on May 21, 1893:

Dear Sir:

Tom Sun tells us that in 1880, William Daley and others selected a route from Rawlins to Lander. They were accompanied by some soldiers as guards, one of whom wandered away from the camp on what is now Lost Soldier Creek, and losing himself, wandered east to Tom Sun's ranch. The latch string was out but the soldier removed two panes of glass and unbuttoned the single sash and entered the cabin. He found victuals to supply his hunger and a place to sleep. From this came the name of Lost Soldier. Tom Sun says a man that hasn't got sense enough to go into a man's house by the door when it is left open would get lost anywhere!

Another version—I don't know how authentic—is that two soldiers got lost in that country and froze to death. Their bodies were buried near the station.

From Lamont to a point four miles past Lost Soldier Station we traveled in the Great Divide Basin which is not drained by any of the river systems. The Continental Divide splits south of Rawlins and does not come together again until in the area of the Oregon Buttes. At the edge of the Basin on a clear day the Oregon Buttes
can be seen in the distance, and beyond them and to the right, the Wind River Mountains. The haze was such that the trekkers were not treated to this view.

From the Great Divide Basin we entered the drainage of Crook’s Creek, named for General George Crook, a renowned figure in the mountain region during the Indian Wars of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Crook’s Creek drains into the Sweetwater and eventually into the Gulf of Mexico. Henry Jensen pointed out Green Mountain as we cruised along, and told us that at the edge of the timber, an Indian pole tepee or wikiup which had been known to local residents for seventy-five years, was discovered by B.L.M. personnel. In order to save it from vandals, they asked the Archaeological Department at the University of Wyoming to dismantle and store it. This structure has been carefully marked, and is now stored at the Museum of the Plains Indian at Cody. It may be returned to this area when suitable housing is available. It is thought that these structures were temporary shelters used by small war parties or hunters in inclement weather since they could be set up quickly where poles were plentiful. They were remarkably weatherproof, even in a blizzard.

There is another structure peculiar to Wyoming called an Indian rock alignment. One of these lies on a flat topped hill above Crook’s Creek. This particular alignment is over a hundred feet in length and appears to be an arrow although some of the stones have been disturbed by a seismograph rig.

The three busses stopped at the Harris Station to hear the following paper.

HARRIS ROAD RANCH, CROOK’S GAP STATION AND BURN'T RANCH STATION

by

Jean Lambertsen

From Lost Soldier the road turns to a more northerly direction again and passes Crook’s Creek Station. Pete Taggart was tender at the Crook’s Creek Station. He took up a homestead north of the station that is now known as Taggart Meadows.

The next stop was a road ranch. This was a popular stopping place owned and operated by Ed and Violet Harris. Their daughter Florence was telegraph operator and it was here that she met Johnny Kirk, stage driver, who later became her husband. These two built up a fine ranch on land that all the old timers had avoided, saying it was “poison” land.

In 1900 this ranch was run by Frank Sparrowhawk. He was quite a colorful character, attiring himself in clothing identical to that worn by Buffalo Bill Cody. He even had the shoulder-length wavy hair to complete the image. One day a company of black
cavalrymen stopped at the ranch. One of the men who seemed to want to give the appearance of being a tough customer ordered coffee and stipulated loudly that he wanted it “black as night, hot as hell and stirred with a pistol.” Sparrowhawk didn’t blink an eye. He calmly filled the cup, whipped out his six shooter, stirred the coffee with it and asked quietly, “Do you want some smoke in it?”

About two miles farther along the road we would pass the Della Fisher ranch or the Crook’s Gap Stage Station. Della Fisher and her partner John Brown raised very fine cattle here. Later Con Sheehan owned the place. A saloon was operated here in early days.

Burnt Ranch Station was located where Burnt Gulch comes into Crook’s Creek. Gib Stevens was telegrapher here. The telegraph line connected all stations with the exception of Bull Springs which was not one of the original stations. Ab Collins, father of the stage driver Billy Collins, was stage tender after Stevens. Both of these men were good fiddlers and they always played for the dances which were held along the Sweetwater.

The next stop was Rongis, site of a post office as well as a stage stop and road house. Here, one of the busses, being considerably heavier than the old-time stage coaches or freight wagons, mired down in the sand. When it became apparent that help would be needed to extricate the bus, the trekkers spread out their lunches and consumed them at Rongis rather than at the scheduled stop at the Sweetwater Crossing. Preceding lunch, Henry Jensen presented a short history of Rongis, a town founded by Ely and Johnny Signor. When Ely applied for a post office under his own last name but was refused, he spelled his name backwards, applied again, and the application for Rongis was accepted.

The actual stage station was about a mile up the Sweetwater River from Rongis. The town consisted of a blacksmith shop, livery stable, bar, hotel and commissary.

Jeanne Lambertsen related a story about Ely Signor, who was entertaining, on one occasion, some straight-laced callers. His daughter came running out of the house screaming, “Daddy, Daddy, the whiskey’s boiling over.”

One of the Oregon Trail’s three crossings of the Sweetwater was near Rongis. About a mile from the town, Indians attacked a group of pioneers who were traveling the Trail. Piles of rocks still mark the graves of those who were killed in the encounter.

Rongis was abandoned about 1916 or 1917 and sage-covered foundations and dumps are all that remain.

After a wrecker and a power wagon together freed the stuck bus, the Trek proceeded on to Hailey post office and Station. As we passed Meyersville, Jeanne Lambertsen told us that Black Mike Sheehan was the stage tender at Meyersville. There were some cowboys along the Sweetwater who were noted for their mild
behavior. In fact, some of them were members of an outlaw outfit—a real wild bunch. Black Mike had experienced their brawls time after time and he wasn't too happy when the shooting would start. Finally he cut a hole in the floor behind the counter and from that hole a greased board led to the cellar. When the boys would start whooping it up and things seemed to be getting too rough Mike would hit the board and vanish in a split second to the dark safety of the cellar.

Sheehan apparently decided to find a more peaceful climate because he moved to Bell Springs. There he had quite a reputation for his spotless white dish towels which were prominently displayed. The unsuspecting public did not know that when he actually used a towel he reached behind the stove and brought forth a badly stained and grimy towel that hung there.

We also passed the Ice Slough which was famous on the Oregon Trail for the fact that under the heavy mat of dead vegetation, ice could be found by the emigrants—even in July. Twelve miles past the Sweetwater Crossing we came to Hailey at the foot of Beaver Rim on Beaver Creek. Beaver Creek was named by the early mountain men and there are references to it by that name in the 1820s.

HAILEY POST OFFICE AND STAGE STATION ON BEAVER CREEK

by

Henry Jensen

This is the site of the Hailey Stage Station. The barn which you see is the one which was built soon after the establishment of the station and it is still in use.

The founder and first agent at Hailey was Ora Hailey who worked for the Northwestern Mail and Transportation Company and was a prominent citizen in early day Fremont County.

Mr. Hailey's name is also remembered in connection with Hailey's Pass in the Wind Rivers which he used in 1903 to escape, with his sheep, from pursuing cattlemen when they threatened violence. Mr. Hailey was a senator in the first Wyoming legislature.

It should be pointed out that the station sites that we have seen were a relatively late development in the route we have been traveling. The general route we have been following was established in the late '60s when the Union Pacific reached Rawlins. The booming mining camps in the South Pass area were demanding all manner of supplies, as were residents of the Lander Valley, the Big Horn Basin, and southern Montana.

The freighters, who generally traveled in groups for protection, went by the shortest feasible route to their destination. They had...
no stations and needed none. Most of the freighting was done with oxen and the freighters lived almost completely in the open, sleeping on the ground or in their wagons, and cooking over an open fire.

Early freighting operations were confined almost entirely to the spring, summer and fall since the mountain passes were blocked by snow in the winter. When the stage lines were started it was only logical that they follow the routes used by the freighters who had taken the shortest route consistent with the availability of water and forage.

After many pictures of the picturesque barn had been taken, the group boarded busses and started for the last stop of the day.

**DERBY STOP**

by

Henry Jensen

This is Derby. For the past several miles the road has followed Twin Creek which heads near Red Canyon south of Lander on the South Pass Highway. Derby was a stop on the stage road and, in all likelihood, for the freighters also when it came time to stop for the night.

The stone building which you see here, along with another which was destroyed when the new highway was constructed a few years ago, were built by the army to house soldiers stationed here to protect travelers from raiding parties of Indians in the '70s. According to the late James Moore, whose father was post sutler at Camp Brown, now Fort Washkaie, these contingents of soldiers were rotated every two weeks for several years when there was danger from Indians.

Derby Dome and Dallas Dome, northwest of here, were the sites of the earliest oil discoveries in Wyoming. The first producing oil well in Wyoming was drilled at Dallas Dome in 1884, with wells here soon after. Both fields are still producing oil.

It has been reported that General John C. Fremont visited oil springs which were in the area. This is the first reported visit by white men although it is almost certain that Fremont learned of the springs from some of his guides. The Indians had known and made medicinal use of the oil for many years.

Around 5:00 p.m. the three busses pulled into Lander and the trekkers spent an hour or so visiting the Fremont County Pioneer Museum. At 6:00 p.m. the Pythian Sisters served a delicious turkey dinner in the Lander Odd Fellows Hall. After dinner, trekkers who had come on the Casper and Rawlins busses reboarded their busses for the return trip and Trek 26 came to an end. It had been a delightful and informative day spent in some of Wyoming's finest weather.