

"WAGONS HO!"

Casper, Wyoming's National Historic Trails Interpretive Center will share the stories of Native Americans and pioneers who experienced the West long ago.

By Jude Carino



Editor's Note: We put the spotlight on Casper, Wyoming's newest attraction as SRM members gear up to attend the 56th Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management February 1-7, 2003 in this historic city. The National Historic Trails Interpretive Center will help set the stage for the theme of the SRM meeting: "Rangelands - Diversity Through Time". Here is a brief overview of the West's storied past and how this unique Center came about:

The landscape in what is now Wyoming has been inhabited for more than ten thousand years. Throughout the millennia, groups of indigenous peoples and later, European emigrants have utilized the landscape. Approximately 9,600 years ago American Indians utilized the sand dune area on the north side of the North Platte River to corral, trap and butcher bison in a parabolic sand dune. The bison provided food, clothing, and sustenance for these native peoples. Their reliance on this food source was critical to their semi-nomadic lifestyle which lasted until the coming of the Euro-American emigrants in the 1800's.

Beginning in 1803, explorers, traders, trappers, mountain men, and missionaries gradually pieced together a pathway that would begin to carry emigrants west as the young United States looked toward the Pacific Coast with thoughts of expansion. This expansion would forever alter the culture of the peoples who had utilized the land for their way of life.

To the sounds of snapping harness and creaking wagon wheels, the pioneers in the vanguard of westward expansion moved out across the North American continent.

Between 1840 and 1870, more than 500,000 emigrants went west along the Great Platte River Road from departure points along the Missouri River. This corridor had been used for thousands of years by American Indians and in the mid-19th century became the transportation route for successive waves of European trappers, missionaries, soldiers, teamsters, stage coach drivers, Pony Express riders, and overland emigrants bound for opportunity in the Oregon Territory, the Great Basin, and the California gold fields.

Beginning in 1841 with the lure of free land and fertile valleys, families decided to risk everything and make a four to six month journey of almost 2,000 miles to realize their dream. They walked halfway across the conti-



nent with their wagons filled with supplies and personal goods. Between 1840 and 1870 nearly 80,000 people chose to go to the Oregon Territory.

Starting in 1846 another set of emigrants began a movement west. Their motivation was one of practicing their religion in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. This was a movement of an entire people, an entire religion, and an entire culture driven by religious fervor and determination.

From 1846 to 1869 approximately 70,000 people traveled this same corridor through Wyoming.

The discovery of gold in California in January of 1848 set the stage for the largest of the waves of emigrants moving west. Between 1849 and 1869 more than a quarter million people traveled along the same North Platte River corridor on their way to the gold fields of California.

Answering the call of growing commercial interests, new forms of transportation began to use this same corridor in the 1850's and 1860's. Freight wagon trains, stage coach, and mail services carried goods, passengers, and information to the new western settlements. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 diverted traffic from the North Platte River corridor to a route through southern Wyoming. With a transportation option that was quicker and safer, wagon train traffic along the Great Platte River Road slowed to a trickle and received limited use into the early 1900's.

A Cultural Center

The trails the Native Americans and emigrants utilized through the corridor described above have been called by a variety of names. During the last 20 years the United States Congress has designated these corridors as the Oregon, Mormon, California, and Pony Express National Historic Trails. They are now part of our nation's National Trail System.

Wyoming is fortunate to be one of the key states to have these trails. Because of the lack of urban sprawl and development Wyoming has some of the largest in-

tact segments of these trails as well as an intact landscape through which they pass. In order to celebrate and educate the public as to the story of our heritage a public/private partnership was developed to interpret these stories. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the National Historic Trails Center Foundation, and the City of Casper partnered to develop the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center. The building is built on a large sand dune bluff overlooking the city of Casper and the North Platte River valley. The 24,000 square foot facility will be dedicated on August 9, 2002.

The interpretive center is an exciting new attraction in Casper. It interprets the story of the emigrants traveling along the Oregon, Mormon, California and Pony Express trails in the 1800's.

The Center also interprets the Native American life ways of the area as well as the regional Bozeman and Bridger trails. First person narratives relate their experiences to the new "pioneers" who will interact with life-size, multi-media exhibits located throughout the galleries.

Visitors will be able to virtually experience crossing the North Platte River in a wagon. They will feel the

cold that trapped people who traveled too late and will also hear the sounds of those who came before us. Finally, visitors will learn where to go to visit the trail on their modern day travels through Wyoming.

The Center

will appeal to all age groups and feature a gift shop. Visitors will be charged a small fee which goes back into operating the facility. The Center will be open seven days a week from April through October and will be open five days a week from November through March.

Author Jude Carino is the BLM Manager of the new National Historic Trails Interpretive Center, 1501 North Poplar St., Casper, WY 82601.

