



# On the Road to Preservation

Wyoming's Comprehensive Statewide Historic Preservation Plan

**2007-2015**

ARTS. PARKS. HIST**ORY**.

Wyoming State Parks & Cultural Resources



Tolar Site, Sweetwater County.

## Foreword

### Touching the Past in Wyoming

Michael Cassity, Ph.D.

Wyoming is a very special place. Its spectacular scenic beauty and phenomenal wildlife are recognized and envied around the nation and world. But Wyoming's history is also instantly recognizable and valued in faraway places, for Wyoming's landscape is very much a historic landscape. The marks of Wyoming's past can still be found throughout the state along the roads and railroads, on the prairies and in the mountains, in the busy cities and in the quiet towns, on the farms and ranches, and in the business districts. The Oregon–California Trail ruts that stretch across the state, the various fur trade rendezvous sites, the abandoned homesteader cabins, the marks on the land left by ranchers and dry farmers, the numerous sites associated with Wyoming's coal mines, sacred places of Native American pride and tragedy, and the historic neighborhoods and businesses of Wyoming's towns all bear silent testimony to the building of Wyoming. But they also tell the story of the creation of the nation, for Wyoming's historic landscape is very much a national landscape. Made popular for millions of people by movies and literature, Wyoming's history provides the core of a nationally recognizable Western culture—some of it accurate and some of it romanticized, sanitized, or simplified beyond recognition. Either way, the relics of Wyoming's past dot the same historic landscape that includes sites from some of the earliest native occupants of North America, Thomas Jefferson's expansion of the nation, western migration, women and the right to vote, the Homestead Act, the transcontinental railroad, the creation of reservations for Native Americans, the Lincoln Highway, World War II relocation of Americans of Japanese ancestry, the Cold War's missiles, and so much more.

While those vestiges of the past are often so familiar they are second nature to many people who live in Wyoming and see them every day, they are also powerful and distinctive icons of American history. Sometimes as we drive across the state we see those icons and take them for granted—an architectural masterpiece downtown, a stone circle overlooking a vast panorama, a stage station tucked into the side of a hill, a depot by an abandoned railroad bed, a set of trail ruts around the bend, an ancient bison kill near a modern interstate highway, a country school far from the flow of traffic, a lonely shepherd's monument high on an outcropping, a railroad roundhouse, a rock art panel, a cabin or a barn from a ranch or farm—the list is endless. These physical remnants of the past are important; they are the heart of Wyoming history just as much as pages in a textbook, pictures in a biography, or records in an archive. The main difference is that these are real tangible objects right there in front of us, exactly where they were left by earlier generations.

They were made by people who stood at the same spot on the ground where we stand. And what those people left can sometimes be touched. When we touch them, we touch the past. And when we touch them and stop to think about them and what they can tell us about our history and prehistory, we realize that Wyomingites live in the midst of this profoundly historic landscape. It is, quite literally, all around us. The remnants of the past are everywhere in Wyoming and sometimes they seem as if they've always been there and always will be.

It's not as simple as that, however. These sites and artifacts each carry the story of an individual's or a community's life and activities, and each is different, just as the people who left them were different from their neighbors and different from those who came before them and after them. But put together they tell much of the story of how Wyoming came to be what it is today. These are the historic resources—the buildings, sites, structures, and objects—that represent human activity in what is now Wyoming. Some people value them just because they are old, and there is something to be said for that. But there are other important reasons for studying and protecting these resources. They are, after all, resources; resources that we can use as we build Wyoming for tomorrow. They are resources that are, moreover, vital to the state's identity, vital to understanding the issues and opportunities facing Wyoming today, and vital to the inspiration we want and need as we go about living in the modern world where traditions and priorities are often cast aside in favor of something easier, something more mechanized, or something less personally meaningful.

Consider, for example, the matter of Wyoming's identity. When Wyomingites travel to other parts of the country they often stand out, for better or worse, sometimes almost as if they were from another country. Wyomingites have a different identity; they often carry different frames of reference and different expectations than other people. Can you imagine Wyoming's identity without its history, and



Independence Rock State Historic Site, Natrona County.



Capitol Vista School,  
Laramie County.

without the particular history that it has? Probably not. The combination of geography and history goes far in shaping who Wyomingites are. Or consider the relevance of the past to modern issues. It's next to impossible to understand the weighty decisions facing Wyoming today without understanding how the state got to where it is. Whether we are talking about a boom-and-bust economy, the state's ethnic communities and their proud heritages and distinctive issues, the role and impact of the mineral industry, or the evolution of agriculture, one can approach these issues in modern Wyoming only at great peril without looking back on them in the past. Finally, is there anyone in Wyoming who has not at one time or another looked upon the past, or better, who has not touched the past, without being inspired to contemplate further the large questions of human existence? Without pausing to wonder about the course of history that has transformed society? Without connecting the past with values and ethics today? When we touch the past in Wyoming, we hold the keys to understanding who we are, where we are, and where we are going.

But just as these resources are themselves the products of human action, so too are they often threatened by human action, and parts of our past have already been lost. Look around. The landscape of Wyoming is changing before our eyes every day. Only with a conscious program to identify, inventory, evaluate, and protect the remaining relics of history can this part of Wyoming's heritage survive. If not protected, the sites will go away; and when they are gone, they are gone forever. Threats to the cultural resources of the state are often the same as in other states: neglect, natural forces, lack of awareness, indifference, and development pressures. The response to those threats, however, is not a simple matter of standing in the way of change; nobody wants that. What is necessary, though, is education and guidance about which resources are important and which are not, and then coming up with creative options to recognize the significant resources as the tremendous assets they actually are and to treat them appropriately. What is necessary is to help community leaders understand what historic preservation is and how it can help their own efforts. What is necessary is the cooperation of state government, tribal governments, federal agencies, private industry, local leaders, and the entire preservation community to find ways to identify, document, and protect Wyoming's valuable historic resources. What is necessary is a coherent vision of historic preservation in Wyoming.

This is where the Statewide Historic Preservation Plan becomes especially important. The Wyoming SHPO is the agency charged by both the federal and state government with developing a plan to articulate a program in which the state's archaeological and historic resources are managed responsibly. This plan guides the actions and sets the priorities for historic preservation activity in Wyoming for the next several years. Fundamental to this effort is the formulation of preservation goals and challenges facing the state

and the office. The goals are ambitious and the challenges daunting. Many agencies have historic preservation responsibilities—and opportunities—in Wyoming, and the effort falls broadly on all of them. SHPO has to exercise leadership in the state and help industry, communities, tribes, and other government agencies focus their energies and nurture effective systems for cooperation as they address the historic and prehistoric resources that need to be protected. The Statewide Historic Preservation Plan is where this process starts.

The preservation community of Wyoming is broad and diverse. SHPO solicited, and received, input from a large number of people and organizations across the state. Many people had suggestions for how the staff and programs of SHPO can be used to assure the greatest, most sensitive, most effective historic preservation effort. The result is a preservation plan that identifies fundamental challenges and defines specific goals. As with any such document, the resulting plan is the product of a huge amount of effort and intense discussion, and it represents a careful effort to balance precious resources and set critical priorities. This plan is a road map for how to proceed in the coming years. The work will be constant and the challenges many as we move down the road that has been identified in these pages.

It's also important to recognize that it is not just SHPO that will be moving down this road of historic preservation. We all will be traveling that road. SHPO will provide us the organizational framework and some of the resources. But, to my mind, the greatest value of this plan is that SHPO is charting the path and marking the milestones along the way so we can all travel in the same direction, toward the same goals, working together for the betterment of Wyoming and the most appropriate use of its fabulous historic resources. By following this road with SHPO, we can assure that future generations will have the same opportunity we have today to touch the past, respect it, and learn from it.



Historic Governors' Mansion, Cheyenne.

Michael Cassity is a member of the Wyoming Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places and a former president of both the Wyoming State Historical Society and the Wyoming Association of Professional Historians.