NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS INTERPRETIVE CENTER

SONORAN INSTITUTE

Shaping the Future of the West

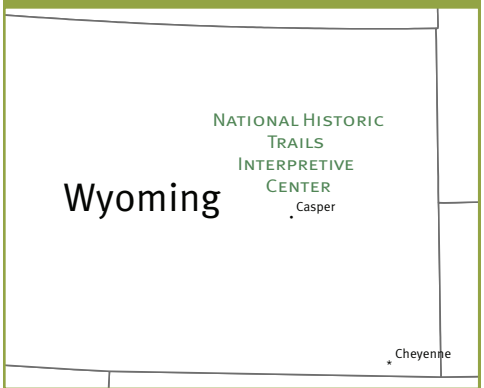
The National Landscape Conservation System includes 27 million acres of our most spectacular public lands, gathered together to conserve the essential fabric of the American spirit.

Historic Wells Fargo & Company six-horse stagecoach on display at the Interpretive Center

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Wyoming

Opened in 2002 and located in Casper, Wyoming, on a grassy hill overlooking the North Platte River, the Interpretive Center sits at the nexus of the historically famous Oregon, California and Mormon Pioneer trails and the route of the Pony Express.



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A Nation's Character Forged by Trails

All roads may once have led to Rome, but in the mid-1800s on the North American continent, all trails seemed to lead to a stretch of the North Platte River in the wilds of what would become Wyoming.

The Oregon Trail, the California Trail, the Mormon Pioneer Trail, even the Pony Express route all traveled along the river to the location of present-day Casper, Wyoming. From 1830 to 1870, nearly half a million people ventured west down the trails in a vast migration that would transform the United States. Today, the story of those trails and the perseverance it took to cross them is told in the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper, established through an innovative public-private partnership that comes with a tale of determination all its own.

The Interpretive Center, which gets about 25,000 visitors a year, opened its doors in 2002 as one of the premier cultural museums in the region. Built on a grassy hill overlooking the North Platte River, its exhibit halls include multi-media and interactive displays that bring to life the history of the American West: not just the pioneers, but also the Native Americans who were present before they arrived.

A local nonprofit foundation, the Bureau of Land Management and the city of Casper worked together over many years to get the center built. "This facility never would have happened without the partnership," says Mike Abel, director of the Interpretive Center. "No one entity had the ability to make it happen on their own."

The trails center supports the four historic trails that are part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The system was created to gather the most treasured BLM-administered lands and properties into one collection and manage them in a way that would conserve the essence of America's spirit.

"The story we're telling is bigger than this building. There are so many great sites just a drive from this center."

- Mike Abel,
Interpretive Center director

For many visitors the center serves as an informational gateway to exploring part of that fabric, the historic trails themselves. More than 340 miles of those trails can still be found in Wyoming on public lands under the BLM's stewardship. Other landmarks, such as Independence Rock, where hundreds of settlers carved their names or short messages to record their passage, are on state lands accessible to the public.

"The story we're telling is bigger than this building," says Abel. "There are so many great sites just a drive from this center. By coming here you can start to get a picture of what it was really like to be an immigrant on those trails, why they were so important and what people were trying to do. Then you can broaden your experience by going out to a trail site and learning more about this history."

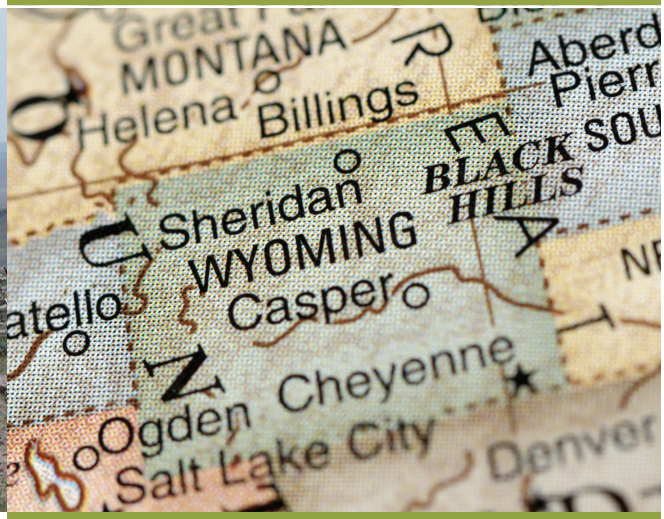
Pulling Together to Preserve History

For other visitors, especially families with young children, a visit to the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center alone provides an enriching and complete experience. The facility's seven different exhibit halls include a chance to simulate a river crossing in a covered wagon, feel what it was like to ride in a stagecoach and even push a handcart down a trail as did thousands of Mormon settlers.

"The kids love the covered wagon in the Oregon Trail exhibit, which has hydraulics under it and really gives you the feeling of what it was like to cross a river. That was one of the most dangerous things the immigrants had to face," says Mary Kalbfleisch, a retired teacher who has been volunteering at the center since it opened. "Another thing they like a lot is the handcart in the Mormon exhibit. Walking behind it, you get a little sense of how hard it must have been to make that journey."

Another exhibit, "The Way of the People," lets guests hear the perspective of Native Americans in their own voices. "The U.S. Looks West" traces the routes of the missionaries, explorers and mountain men who first explored the lands and discovered the trails the settlers would later follow.

For Casper, the center is both a chance to promote its role as a historic crossroads and an important economic asset. "We're proud of our heritage," says City Manager Tom Forslund. "We get a lot of people who come through Casper on their way to Yellowstone, but before this they usually didn't stop for much more than gas. We thought this might get them to spend a little more time in Casper."



Aaron McCreight, CEO of the Casper Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, believes it has made the city more of a destination. The links that provide information on history and the Trails Interpretive Center are among the most popular on the Visitors Bureau website, he says, and his own experience shows the center is making travel itineraries globally. "I can't tell you how many groups I've gone up the hill to welcome to town," McCreight says, "from Italy and Japan, from all over the world."

Yet the trails center's story begins locally, with the determination of one woman.

Vision and Determination

Edna Kennell believes it was 1986 when she saw a story in the *Casper Star-Tribune* about the possibility that a center interpreting the nation's western pioneer trails might be built — in Omaha, Nebraska.

That didn't sit right with Kennell, who believed the history of the Casper area, where the trails crossed the North Platte before branching off in different directions, made it the better choice. Kennell organized a local trails committee to promote the idea of building an interpretive center in Casper.

But nothing happened quickly or easily. "They worked for 15 years on this project," says Holly Turner, executive director of the National Historic Trails Center Foundation, which the committee became. "There was a group of people here who loved the history of the area and the trails, and it was their drive that made this happen. They wouldn't give up."

The effort took a huge step forward in 1992 when the BLM committed to providing $5 million of the estimated $10 million cost of the center.

NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS INTERPRETIVE CENTER AT A GLANCE:

- Located in Casper, Wyoming.
- Attracts about 25,000 visitors annually.
- Includes seven exhibit halls covering the history of western settlement.
- Features a 100-seat theater.
- Provides directions to accessible historic trails segments around Wyoming.
- Features a regular schedule of speakers, historic re-enactments and other special events.

BLM site:
www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/NHTIC.html

Casper Visitors Bureau site:
http://www.casperwyoming.info/mustseetrails.php

National Landscape Conservation System:
www.blm.gov/nlcs

The city of Casper also signed on, agreeing to make 10 acres of land available for the building. In 1994, city residents expressed their support for the trails center by voting in favor of a one percent sales tax that included money to construct exhibits.

The foundation, the city and the BLM formed a partnership that continues to this day. It took further action at both the state and federal levels to fully fund the center's construction, but that private-public partnership was what moved the idea from dream to reality.

Many of those involved say Kennell's resolve brought it all together, but she believes the credit deserves to be shared. "The BLM, private citizens, elected officials, they all had a hand in it," she says. "It was a 'we' that did this, not an 'I.'"

Today the BLM manages and maintains the Interpretive Center and provides the professional staff. The foundation raises money for exhibits, and plans and maintains them in collaboration with the BLM. Although the city of Casper remains a partner, its involvement in the center's day-to-day operation has receded.

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> - Holly Turner, executive director of the National Historic Trails Center Foundation

Still, the community's continuing commitment to the center is expressed many ways, including the long hours logged by the 50 or so volunteers who greet guests, serve as docents and staff the admissions desk and bookstore. "They make all the difference in the world," says Abel. "We couldn't do the things we do without them."

As many as 4,000 schoolchildren visit the center annually, and guiding those tours and others gives the volunteers a critical role in the center's educational mission. Herman R. Wolter, a Casper native who's volunteered at the center since the beginning, also finds particular satisfaction in serving as a docent in the "U.S. Looks West" exhibit, which captures the story of westward expansion from 1804 on. "There's a map that lights all these trails," he says, "and you can really see how they helped open up the West. You can see the country expanding from coast to coast."

The significance of the larger story told by the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center helps to explain the dedication of all the partners who've made it a success. In the end, the history explored at the center isn't just about the pioneers who traveled down often dangerous paths to make a new life, it's about the national character forged along those trails.

"It's us," says Abel. "It's who we are." ■ ■ ■

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