

FOLLOWING THE RUTS

South Pass City experienced its gold rush after the bulk of westward emigration had taken place, although wagons continued to trickle over the nearby geographic South Pass until 1912. South Pass was largely abandoned as a transportation corridor after the completion of the Union Pacific portion of the Trans-Continental Railroad in 1869. Freight wagons and stage coaches continued to utilize the tracks of the earlier emigrants. Later, automobiles too, followed the routes of those who first crossed “Uncle Sam’s Backbone” over South Pass. The modern, paved highway over the Pass was completed after World War Two.

The geographic pass, and what little remains are visible of the Oregon-California-Mormon-Pony Express Trails, are best viewed from the well-signed pull-out a few miles south of the Sweetwater River. Interpretive panels explain the history and geography of the Pass.

A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY

Businessmen arrived to fill the needs of the prospectors, and South Pass City soon developed a Main Street a half-mile long filled with general stores, butcher shops, restaurants, clothiers, hotels; even a jeweler and a furrier.

Visitors stayed at one of the seven hotels and could seek an evening’s entertainment at several saloons and “sporting houses”, all supplied with liquid refreshment by two local brewers and a wholesale liquor dealer.

Miners could leave their horses at one of the four livery stables and hire any of several blacksmiths to shoe the animal, sharpen his mining tools or mend his wagon. A miner lucky enough to strike pay dirt could deposit his gold at the local bank or ship it to the Denver Mint via Wells Fargo.

A gun could be purchased or repaired at the gun shop and be used at the shooting gallery. Troublemakers were held in a stout jail, while a school saw to the educational needs of the town’s children. Doctors and lawyers hung out shingles to advertise their services to the new community. Ranchers and farmers soon settled on nearby lands. Lumber mills dotted the local streams as the demand for mining timber and construction materials swelled.

WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE

Wyoming’s First Territorial Legislature saw South Pass City saloonkeeper and mine owner, William Bright, introduce a bill to guarantee women’s voting rights. When this bill passed and the governor signed it in December 1869, Wyoming became the first territory or state to allow women the right to vote and hold office.

In February 1870, the county commissioners appointed Esther Morris as justice of the peace, making her the nation’s first female judge. Even though her selection was controversial in South Pass City, she was an effective judge and tried twenty-six cases. Esther Morris represents the important and unique role that women played in frontier towns.

FRIENDS OF SOUTHPASS

The Friends of South Pass are a 501c(3) non-profit organization dedicated to assisting in the preservation of South Pass City Historic Site and improving visitors’ experiences at the Site.

Proceeds from the Smith-Sherlock Company Store and their South Pass City Endowment help ensure the future and public access to one of the West’s most faithfully preserved historic mining towns.

Send donations & membership inquiries to:
Friends of South Pass
P.O. Box 1118
Lander, WY 82520

GOLD

Many Trail emigrants were traveling to California in search of gold, which had been discovered at Sutter’s Mill in 1848. Thousands hoped to strike it rich, but only a few succeeded. By the 1860s, gold and silver discoveries in Colorado, Nevada, Idaho, and Montana resulted in hundreds of new boom towns. When the Carissa Mine began producing gold in 1867, a rush to the South Pass area resulted in South Pass City’s founding. The boom continued in 1868 and Atlantic and Hamilton cities were quickly erected. The area’s population soared to approximately two thousand. Dozens of hard rock mines and hundreds of placer claims were worked.

BOOMS AND BUSTS

All booms must end. In 1872, a bust hit the Sweetwater Mines. Most miners became discouraged about the absence of large gold deposits and the lack of outside capital to sufficiently develop properties. By 1875, less than 100 people remained in the area. Even the nearby military post of Camp Stambaugh closed in 1878.

Some of the discouraged miners and businessmen moved to nearby settlements and played important roles in founding towns like Lander, Pinedale, and Thermopolis. However, a few persistent miners remained and helped start the Sweetwater Mines’ future gold booms. Mining rushes based on the work of these hardy prospectors resulted in the construction of a hydraulic mining operation by a French company, a copper mine on Willow Creek, an iron ore pit mine, and a highly profitable gold dredge on Rock Creek. South Pass City’s population bounced from a handful of residents to as many as 500 through these repeated booms and busts.

Today, dedicated prospectors continue to pan for gold, sometime re-working old diggings, other times looking for as-yet undiscovered lodes of rich ore. The luster of, and lust for, gold never dulls.

WYOMING STATE PARKS, HISTORIC SITES & TRAILS

South Pass City Historic Site



South Pass City is one of the most authentic and complete historic sites in the country. Today you can see the 30 historic log, frame and stone buildings that remain on 39 acres of land.

ARTS. PARKS. HISTORY.

Wyoming State Parks & Cultural Resources

South Pass City State Historic Site is administered by the Division of State Parks and Historic Sites, Wyoming Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. <http://wyoparks.state.wy.us/>

1. Visitor Parking

2. Restrooms for Historic Site day-use visitors

3. Visitor Center/ Dance Hall – This 1890 log structure has functioned as a theater, community center, and Sunday school during its lifetime. The building was donated to the people of Wyoming by Marie (McOmie) Sherlock-McManus and serves as an information area for visitors and exhibit space where displays change regularly. Entrance fees are collected here.

4. Administration Bldg. – This multi-purpose modern facility shelters artifacts under controlled conditions, houses research materials, and provides office space for employees. Authorized access only.

5. Tibbals Cabin - Barney Tibbals, Carissa Mine manager, lived in this cabin in the 1890s and, later, rented it to his employees. The front room dates to the 1880s, while the rear dug-out dates from the early gold rush of the late 1860s. The front room and dug-outs were later connected by the kitchen.

6. Carr Butcher Shop - During the early 1900s, William Carr operated a butcher shop here. Animals were killed and quartered in Slaughterhouse Gulch, about two miles south of town. The building was also used as a residence during its lifetime.

7. Carissa Saloon - Dating to around 1890, the Carissa takes its name from the area's richest mine on the hill above town. It enjoyed a sporadic existence as a saloon until quite recently. Saloons like the Carissa served many purposes in frontier towns. Next door are the remains of an even earlier establishment, the White Swan. It served as both a brothel and saloon.

8. Smith-Sherlock Co. Store - Built in 1896 of logs salvaged from the 1870 Episcopal Church, this building succeeded the earlier

Smith Store standing to the east. The Sherlock Family operated the business until 1948. Three generations served the town as entrepreneurs, postmasters/mistresses, and telephone operators. Today, the Friends of South Pass, a non-profit organization, operate the general store.

9. Gold Mining Interpretive Center - Records from the 1860s gold rush show that the first buildings on this lot were the New Orleans Saloon and the Elephant Store. About 1874, town constable Jim Smith, built this structure. It housed his mercantile business for 2 decades. Today, the structure exhibits the processes of gold mining in the Sweetwater Mines.

10. The Cave/ Fort Bourbon - The massive interior stone wall was built in 1868 to protect perishable food and liquor. Archaeologists found secretly buried gold inside a cast-iron pot. Folklore says that, when townspeople feared Indian attacks, women and children were locked inside while men went out to fight.

11. The John & Lida Sherlock House - This house was built in the late 1890s by the newlyweds and was later expanded by a series of additions and remodels. Interior exhibits include pieces donated by the Sherlock Family descendants, including a working woodstove in the kitchen. During the 2002 restoration, archaeologists uncovered evidence of previous gold rush-era buildings that had burned in the 1870s.

12. Uni-sex restroom

13. Stamp Mill - This huge machine crushed gold-bearing ore fed under the 1/2 ton stamps from chutes at the rear. A continuous flow of water help to keep down dust, as well as push the finely crushed sands, and gold, out from under the stamps and onto mercury-coated copper tables below the machine. This particular mill was likely last operated in the 1930s on Palmetto

Gulch east of South Pass City. The mill is the last of nearly 2 dozen that once operated in the Sweetwater Mines and was relocated to the Site to protect it from destruction.

14. Wolverine Mine Adit - This short tunnel, or adit, was driven in search of paying ore. Known as the Wolverine Mine, it never produced a paying quantity of gold and was soon abandoned, giving its name to the claim upon which the town below sits. This exhibit allows visitors to safely enter a mine tunnel and experience the dark, enclosed atmosphere of a mine. No other mine in the area should be considered safe to enter.

15. School - Citizens originally built this school near the present parking lot around 1911, but wet ground and flooding forced its relocation soon after to this location. Classes were held in the log building until 1946.

16. Cody Cabin - This small structure was built in the late 1890s. Archaeological work conducted during restoration indicates that a married couple lived in the building for a brief time. The building was owned by a "Mr. Cody" of nearby Boulder, WY until the 1970s. The interior is not yet exhibited.

17. Reniker Cabin - William Reniker, a Civil War veteran, lived in this cabin when not prospecting in the area. Not much is known of Reniker, but he was likely similar to many of the other single, male miners taking part in the rush of 1868. The cabin was donated to the people of Wyoming by Mrs. J.B. (Zoe) Lee of Rock Springs in the late 1970s.

18. Esther Morris Museum - Esther Morris was the first woman in the nation to hold political office. She served successfully as a justice of the peace in South Pass City in 1870, trying about two dozen cases. This building is a 1976 reconstruction intended to honor her contribution to equal suffrage in Wyoming and the nation. The original structure on this lot was her son, Edwin Archibald Slack's, newspaper shop. Slack published the South Pass News until the shop burned in 1871. He then moved to work on papers in Laramie and Cheyenne. Slack's original Gordon Hand Press survived the fire and is displayed in the newspaper exhibit in the rear of the building.

19. Blacksmith Shop - This 1915 structure historically contained a coal-fired forge, anvil, and tools to make repairs on wagons and horse-drawn equipment. When automobiles became common, the smith acquired new skills and equipment to make repairs on cars passing on this, the main road between the Lander Valley and the Union Pacific Railroad to the south. The shop is built of logs salvaged from the 1868 Ticknor Store, formerly situated next to the Miners Exchange Saloon (#27).

20. Variety Theater - Constructed on the former location of an early store, this 1970s building hosts visitors on special occasions only, particularly Gold Rush Days; usually in mid-July.

21. Sherlock Garage - The Sherlock Family constructed this building in the 1920s to house one of their automobiles. It was constructed of logs salvaged from butcher, William Carr's, abandoned home, as well as Jim Smith's 1868 cabin, formerly located where the Administration Bldg. (#4) stands today.

22. Ice House - This small frame structure was likely constructed in the 1930s by the Sherlock Family for use as storage. The "Ice House" name came into common usage in the 1970s, after State ownership. It is used for storage today.

23. South Pass Hotel - Opened in 1868 as the Idaho House; this was the finest of several hotels in the camp. It was acquired in 1873 by Janet Sherlock, the widowed mother of five. Operating a hotel was considered a respectable business for a proper

woman of the time. The stage coach stop was at the front door; the post office was located here for a time. Notables like Robert Todd Lincoln and General Phil Sheridan stayed at the hotel. The Sherlock Family quarters are on the first floor and may also be accessed from the rear of the hotel.

24. Restaurant - As new ownership prepared the Carissa Mine for re-opening, Janet Sherlock Smith built the restaurant as an addition to her South Pass Hotel in 1899. The front room became the hotel's new lobby. The restaurant's dining room and kitchen occupied the rear of the building.

25. Exchange Saloon & Card Room - Erected in the boom of 1868, the structure initially served as a bank. Beginning in 1873, the building functioned as a saloon, continuing as such for many years. At first, the card room was a separate operation, but the rooms were connected by a passageway around 1890 so patrons could pursue the diverse pastimes here.

26. Livery Stable - This barn was built in the 1890s of logs salvaged from earlier structures. This part of town was the location of several stables which catered to miners, investors, and locals who wanted to rent or buy horses, wagons, or board their own animals. It was also the scene of clandestine activities; at least one gun and many more whiskey bottles were buried under the flooring and later uncovered by archaeological excavations.

27. Miners Exchange Saloon - John Swingle, a county commissioner, building contractor, saloon and stable owner, and undertaker, erected this log structure in 1869. Like the many others in town, this was a popular meeting place where gold could be exchanged for drinks. Later, the building was used as residence. A millenary operated by two "rough" women at one time may have disguised a bordello inside.

28. Sweetwater County Jail - In answer to the needs of the raucous boom town, the county built this jail in 1870. Folklore says that one man who could not bear incarceration in his tiny, frigid, dark cell committed suicide; others attempted escape but failed. No one was ever legally executed in South Pass City. Although the county offices were removed to Green River in 1873, the jail continued to see sporadic use. The 1880s saw the remodeling of the front room into a school room. The pink paint remains on the walls; the alphabet is still above the door.

29. Harry Libby House - Turmoil at the Carissa Mine resulted in Libby's loss of employee housing and the construction of this log home in 1899. After less than a year of residence, Libby moved his family from South Pass City. The building traded hands several times through the years and was once said to have housed an "isolation hospital" during a disease outbreak. The Friends of South Pass purchased the building and helped to restore its condition. Exhibits are planned for the future.

30. Rock House - The back room of this cabin was built around 1867 and, like many of its contemporaries, made extensive use of native stone rather than scarce timber. The family who lived here simply threw their trash out the front door. When a front room was later added, the dump became their floor. Later still, the windowless back room was said to have served as the mining town's first jail. Restored in the 1990s, the cabin is now used for storage.

