

Wyoming History News

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WATER IN WYOMING THE WHEATLAND IRRIGATION DISTRICT - FIRST OF ITS KIND



Five men standing watching water flow through an irrigation pipe, estimated to be late 1920s, P71-69_4,
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WYOMING STATE ARCHIVES

by **Rick Robbins**

During the late 1870's the Wheatland Flats area in northern Laramie County (later Platte County) was a desolate place. Few people visited the area except for hunting. Lack of water courses caused people to avoid settling the area.

The settlement of Uva, approximately six miles northeast of the flats was the home of a few ranchers. Uva was established at the confluence of the Laramie and North Laramie rivers. It

later became a major shipping point for livestock when the railroad reached the area.

John Hunton had established a ranch at Bordeaux where Johnny Gordon, looking for irrigated land to settle, visited in 1876. Johnny toured the flats area and was greatly impressed by the possibility of developing agricultural activities there. Gordon later settled in the Uva area as a rancher.

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FAST FACTS

WHEATLAND IRRIGATION DISTRICT SYSTEM

Wyoming Development Company

- **1882**

SURVEY FOR THE WHEATLAND PROJECT

- **1883**

CONSTRUCTION BEGAN: TUNNEL FROM LARAMIE TO BLUE CREEK; INTAKE CANAL, CANALS 1 & 2 FROM SYBILLE TO THE FLATS (RES #1)

- **1887**

WYOMING DEVELOPMENT COMPANY DESIGNATED, SURVEYED NAMED "WHEATLAND"

- **1894 - 1897**

NEWSPAPERS ADVERTISED WHEATLAND "GOOD LAND, CHEAP HOMES, EASY TERMS"

- **1901**

RESERVOIR #2 COMPLETED

- **1930s**

DROUGHT YEARS - PLANS FOR RES#3

- **1946-1952**

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FROM THE PRESIDENT



Hello Friends,

I can't believe it is already April, where has the year gone? Aley Philp and Linda Fabian have been working with a group of stalwart volunteers on the 2025 Historical Society calendar. As mentioned in a previous newsletter, this year's theme relates to family history. The calendars should be available by early May. Thank you to those who submitted photos for use. We've come up with new historical tidbits for most of the calendar days. If you see some that are a little lengthy, they are probably mine. Being an archivist, I am all about the details. It's hard to leave any of them out. Sorry about that!

The Executive Committee will be holding its Spring meeting at 10:00 am on April 13th at Casper College and via Zoom. If you are interested in attending and have yet to receive meeting information, please reach out to Aley at executivedirector@wyshs.org.

Cheryl O'Brien and Aley will facilitate the meeting. Our aim is to be efficient and considerate of everyone's time, energy, and efforts. I look forward to seeing how the new approach works. In addition to committee and chapter reports, the Executive Committee will review a draft of revised Bylaws, including some major changes.

During the strategic planning meeting last year, it was joked that the Society has more committees than Chapters. I'm not sure if that's true, but it is close. The revised Bylaws propose consolidating committees with similar activities and creating sub-

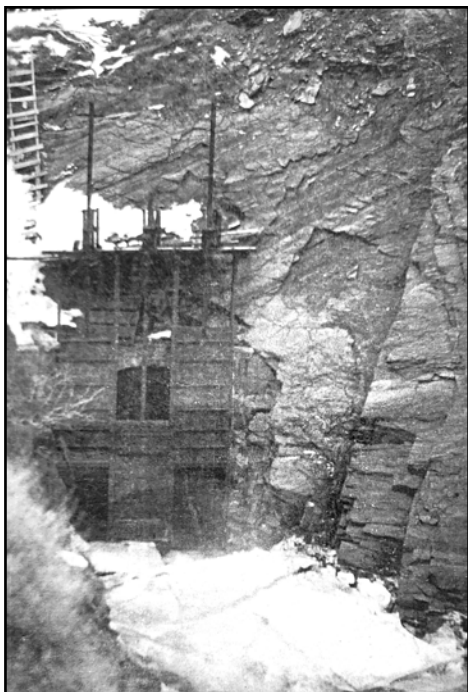
committees to ensure all the great work continues. Also, it is common practice for non-profit organizations to have a separate Policies and Procedures, which include some of the sections covered in Bylaws. It will be the first time the Executive Committee meets to discuss the recommendations, with a possible updated version discussion at the Summer/June meeting. After that the proposed bylaws will be published with the newsletter in preparation for a vote at the Annual Meeting in September.

I want to provide a quick update on the 250th Anniversary Task Force work. The Governor has approved the anniversary's theme. It is "Wyoming 250: A Declaration of Imagination." The legislature has also appropriated \$2 million to support the anniversary work. This will include grants for local projects and activities. The Wyoming Tourism Office and Wyoming State Parks and Cultural Resources Department will be working on a website soon.

Lastly, I want to encourage you all to consider helping with the regional or state History Day contests. It is one of the Society's projects and is a great opportunity to work with youth and teachers interested in history. The State History Day contest this year will be held on April 29th at the University of Wyoming. This year's theme is "Turning Points in History."

Cindy

WHS President



Headgates for the Wheatland Irrigation District, approximately 1912. LARAMIE PEAK MUSEUM, WHEATLAND, WY

In 1881 Gordon, visiting his friend Judge Joseph Carey at Careyhurst on the Platte River near Douglas, mentioned that the flats area might make an excellent irrigated settlement. The Judge was impressed and interested and promised to study the possibilities. A survey of the area was made, and a plan was drawn up in the winter

of 1882-1883. On August 10, 1883, a corporation was formed called the Wyoming Development Company. The plan was to irrigate the Wheatland Flats from the Laramie River to the southwest.

Financing for the project was obtained mostly from England and construction of the two canals from the Laramie River began. A 3,300 ft. diversion tunnel from the Laramie River to the Blue Grass Creek was also planned. Water would come from the Laramie River and Sybille Creek drainages. Initially, 58,000 acres of land was to be irrigated.

Storage reservoirs were needed to ensure adequate water throughout the later months (July and August) of the growing season, so two reservoirs were planned. Reservoir #1 (The Little Reservoir) and later Reservoir #2 on the Laramie Plains.

The tunnel mentioned earlier would prove to be a monumental task drilling an 8ft. diameter tunnel through solid rock. Crews excavated 3 feet of rock per shift for the entire 3,300 ft. tunnel.

Initially, land sold for \$15-\$35 per acre and the land came with water rights. J.R. Mason, and later his son were "immigration agents" for the Development Company and brought many families to the area from eastern states to promote the project and sell them land.

In 1894 the townsite of Wheatland was laid out. The Development Company built an office at the corner of 9th and Gilchrist streets. The building survives today (though it has been moved) and has been used for a variety of businesses over the years.

The Wyoming Development Company faced

Continued on Page 4

THE STATE OF WYOMING

opened for settlement on June 20, 1908

10,000 Acres of Irrigable Land

Under the Cary Act at 50 cents per acre as an addition to the now

= Famous Wheatland Colony =

These lands are now watered by the same infallible water system that is making Wheatland famous

The Wheatland Industrial Co.

will sell water for these lands at \$25 to \$35 per acre, according to location and quality of the land.

For further information write to

Wheatland Industrial Co., Wheatland, Wyoming

J. R. Mason, General Immigration Agent.



The Wheatland Exhibit at the Dry Farming Congress, 1908, photo by Joseph Elam Stimson, Neg 2456.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WYOMING STATE ARCHIVES, STIMSON COLLECTION

many problems during its early years. Financing continued to be a problem as sales of farm tracts were slow at the beginning.

During the drought years of the 1930's, additional water storage was deemed

necessary. Plans were drawn to build a third reservoir on the Laramie Plains called Reservoir #3.

Emergency relief money was used to begin the project and when that money was exhausted, WPA

funds were allocated to complete the reservoir.

In the early 1940's, the various organizations that ran the project merged into what became the Wheatland Irrigation District. Through the acquisition of more land (and thus, water rights) the district has maintained and improved the ability to provide life-giving water to numerous farmers and ranchers in the Wheatland area. It remains as the largest privately owned irrigation system in the United States and is a major contributor to the economy and culture of Wheatland and the Platte County area.

In Memoriam



Lorna Jean Whisler, passed away on Friday, March 1, 2024.

Born on March 7, 1936, at the family home in Rozet, Campbell County, Wyoming, Lorna grew up on the family farm that was homesteaded by her grandparents, Riley and Vida (Duvall) Whisler, seven miles north of Rozet, Wyoming.

She attended 1st grade in Rozet; grades 2nd – 7th in a one-room county school named the Whisler School; 8th grade in Rozet and grades 9-12 at the Campbell County High School where she graduated in May of 1954. She started her long career as a civilian working for the Bureau of Navy Personnel in Arlington, Virginia.

It was her love of history that drove her to begin researching the origins of her paternal and maternal grandparents who homesteaded in the Gillette area in 1913 and 1912. During her research, she spent countless hours in courthouse basements libraries, and cemeteries across the United States and Canada. Over the years as she traveled collecting names, photos, and places they lived, she unknowingly was creating source material for books she would later compile.

Beginning as a child with being dropped off at the George Amos Memorial Library on Saturday mornings for story-hour and at the Fiesta Movie Theater in the afternoon when the family made its weekly trip to town and until her passing, Lorna has been an ardent reader and fan of movies. Her favorites were historical fiction and all movies (especially western, historical and musical).

After the age of 80, Lorna wrote and published three books: **Pleasant Valley Cemetery, aka Little Iowa Cemetery, 100th Anniversary of (2017)**; **The Heptner Sisters, Wyoming School Teachers (2019)**; and **Rozet, Campbell County, Wyoming, and its Homestead Families (1880-1949) (2022)**.

Heard Along the Historic Trail:

Your Place for Chapter News

The University of Wyoming's Art Museum welcomed South Dakota artist Leland Bryan for a conversation about his work and a public workshop. Bryan's mural, *Landback*, is a featured centerpiece in The New West Exhibit.

nnn

The Buffalo Bill Center of the West with Cody Cultural Club presented "Rock Art of the Big Horn Basin" on March 14.

The Big Horn Basin holds one of the richest complexes of petroglyphs (carved images) and pictographs (painted images) in the Americas. Produced by a broad diversity of peoples, these expressions reflect distinct ways of understanding and engaging both water and rock features, as well as other people, over the course of thousands of years.

Plains Indian Museum Curator, Dr. Gordon Ambrosino, provided an overview of the Big Horn Basin's rock art, and outlined forthcoming plans for exhibitions, research, and community engagement relating to the images in the Big Horn Basin.

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The Natrona County Historical Society's Becky Steensland presented the Wilson Family History on March 22. The Wyoming Office of Tourism presented its Annual Historic Presentation on March 10th at Harold Jarrard Park in Kaycee, WY. The program on the 1834 Portuguese Fort Site Archeology. It was presented by Dr. Cody Newton.

nnn

Kylie McCormick had a busy month across the state presenting the "History of the Wyoming Flag" in Lander on March 14, then down to Laramie to present at the Wyoming Territorial Prison's Horse Barn Theater "Fifty-one Years of Freedom: Wyoming's Suffrage Story from 1869-1920."

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The Weston County Historical Society presented "They Pass Here: Cemeteries of the Black Hills" on March 24. Over a period of nearly seven years, Hugh and Linda O'Gara of Hill City located and researched more than thirty cemeteries and lone graves in the Black Hills, relics from the 1870s gold rush camps, and a piece of the region's history.



The Dubois Museum hosted Bruce Blevins and his "Mapping Yellowstone" talk on March 27.

Bruce spoke on the Early Historical Mapping of Yellowstone National Park and the early published and unpublished cartography of what would become Yellowstone National Park. Information from private and government expeditions made up early mapping with verbal information provided by Native Americans and fur trappers. A variety of historic maps were illustrated and discussed in the slide show presentation.

nnn

The Hot Springs County Historical Society enjoyed author Scott Werblow and his entertaining and informative presentation on "Wyoming Warden in the Making."

Werblow presented his two books, *Son of a Poacher* and *Son of a Poacher II*, his autobiographical non-fiction books on his earliest memories of growing up on a remote Wyoming Ranch.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

At Large

Cheryl Darling

Levi Lozier

Bruce & Sunshine McWhorter

Lillian O'Callaghan

Brent Rogers

Bonnie Smith

Fremont County

Ann Clute

Faye Ann Rummel

Michael Heerschap

Charles & Karen Pearson

Laramie County

Howard Sellenrick

Wondering how you can get more involved with the

Wyoming Historical Society?

There are lots of volunteer opportunities at all levels, including getting outside now that good weather is on the horizon!

Annual State Historic Trek

June 20 to 23

Thermopolis, WY

Wyoming State Fair

August 13 to 17

Douglas, WY

Annual State Meeting

September 5-8

Newcastle, WY

Committee positions are opening for the 2025 Fiscal Year (Oct. 2024 - Sept. 2025) in the following areas:

Awards
Administrative
Executive Board
Legislative Advisory
Marketing
Membership
Oral History
WYSHS.org
WyoHistory.org

Please email info@wyshs.org or call 307.322.3014 to inform us of your interest in any of these opportunities.

As we are moving over to our new Membership Database, we want to make sure your contact information remains accurate.

To get the full benefit of the new membership database, we need your email addresses and phone numbers.

Please send them to info@wyshs.org or call us at 307.322.3014.



CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL

13 - Executive Board Committee Meeting

The Wyoming Historical Society's Executive Board will meet in Casper. If you would like to attend, either in person or by Zoom, please contact the central office at 307.322.3014 or info@wyshs.org.
10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

***Casper Community College
Casper, WY***

11 - The Murder of Allie Means and Early Gillette

"Allie Means Shot!" blared the front-page headline of The Gillette News. Understandably, the August 26, 1905 murder threw small town Gillette, Wyoming into "a great state of excitement." In his early twenties, Sam Allison "Allie" Means' murder sparked a chain of events impacting Wyoming for years to come. The cause of Means' murder?

A young woman.

Join us, as our very own Museum Assistant Justin Horn presents on the murder of Allie

Means and the early history of cow-town Gillette. This program is in partnership with the Wyoming State Archives and is part of their "Evening Speaker Series."

The program will be LIVE in Gillette and simultaneously broadcast to the State Archives in Cheyenne.

For more information call the museum at (307) 682-5723.

Rockpile Museum, Gillette, WY, 7:00 pm

16 - "Western History Through the Lens of Encampment Photographer Lora Webb Nichols."

Presented by Tim Nicklas and Nancy Anderson
***Albany County Historical Society Monthly Meeting
7:00 p.m. - wyoachs@gmail.com***

Please send events for this calendar list by the 15th of each month prior to info@wyshs.org.

18 - Curatorial Conversation with Robert Martinez and Hunter Old Elk

Welcome UWAM Guest Curator, Robert Martinez, and Hunter Old Elk, Assistant Curator of the Plains Indian Museum at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, for an in-depth conversation about UWAM's 50th Anniversary Show, The New West.

Robert Martinez, a Wyoming-born artist of diverse-heritage, collaborated with Art Museum curators to develop an exhibition that he says, "challenges the visitor to change their mindset and note whose perspective is missing. Whose story is not being told and why." Hunter Old Elk, a member of the Apsáalooke (Crow) and Yakama Nations, explores the complexities of historic and contemporary Plains Indian culture, with a special focus on the lives of Native women.

***University of Wyoming Art Museum,
2111 Willett Dr, Laramie, WY 82072***

4:00 pm to 6:00 pm

5:00 pm Reception

***6:00 pm Guest Curator Conversation
This event is free and open to the public.***

25 - John Lang and Connie Hall: Casper Ghost Signs

***Natrona County Historical Society Banquet
Contact bsteen@bresnan.net for more
information.***

ONGOING EXHIBITS

James Bama's "Portraits of the West" LAST CHANCE!

The exhibit James Bama's Photographs: Portraits of the West will run through April 10, 2024.
***American Heritage Center - Centennial Complex
2111 Willet Drive - Laramie, WY 82071
307.766.4114***



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