

Wyoming History News

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WY LEGISLATOR LIZ BYRD'S QUEST...

by Leslie Waggener

Wyoming Equality Day was celebrated January 20. Perhaps you have wondered how Wyoming Equality Day originated? Cheyenne native and Wyoming state legislator Harriett Elizabeth "Liz" Byrd was the guiding individual behind it, although a "Wyoming Equality Day" was not her first intention. Byrd was the first black woman to serve in Wyoming's House beginning in 1980. A few years later, she was elected to Wyoming's Senate, and was the first black legislator to



As a black woman in largely white Cheyenne, Liz experienced her share of racism. Harriett Elizabeth Rhone, Cheyenne Central High School graduating picture, class of 1944, , left. Liz Byrd in the Wyoming State Legislature, right.

PHOTOS AND CAPTIONS COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN HERITAGE CENTER, HARRIETT ELIZABETH BYRD FAMILY PAPERS, 10443, BOX 10, FOLDER 23.

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serve there.

Byrd's parents, Robert "Buck" and Sudie Rhone, supplied her with an 'outsider/within' legacy as described by Evelyn Haskell in a 2006 *Annals of Wyoming* article about Liz Byrd. Haskell explains that the outsider/within perspective is that of an individual who is outside the dominant culture, and yet has access to and intimate knowledge of the workings of the dominant

culture. Buck Rhone's family had settled in Wyoming in the 1870s, and Buck was the first African American child born in Albany County. Liz was born in 1926 with deep family roots already established in Wyoming.

This is not to say that she didn't experience her share of racism. According to an interview with Byrd pasted into a scrapbook housed at the American

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Liz Byrd with Governor Mike Sullivan at the signing of the legislation establishing Martin Luther King Jr. Day / Wyoming Equality Day, March 1990.

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Heritage Center, as a high school student, she was refused service in a Cheyenne drugstore. Her white classmates threw the ice from their drinks over the counter and walked out. When she applied to the University of Wyoming in 1944, Liz was told that, because she was African American, she would not be allowed to live in campus housing. In the end, she attended West Virginia State Teachers College, a historically black college, graduating in 1949 with a degree in education.

During Liz's college

years, she married James Byrd and the couple made Cheyenne their home, Liz teaching school and Jim working in law enforcement. The couple was soon raising a family of three children, two sons and one daughter. Liz was happy teaching school and didn't originally have political ambitions.

Her brother, practicing attorney Robert C. Rhone Jr., preceded Liz into politics when he was elected in 1962 to the Colorado State House of Representatives. Tragically, he died on January 24, 1964, while still in office at the age of thirty-five from pulmonary edema. Their

father's, Buck Rhone's, political ambitions shifted to daughter Liz. Despite running a low-cost campaign, Liz was elected to the Wyoming House of Representatives in 1980.

In oral history interviews with Evelyn Haskell, Byrd described an atmosphere in the statehouse that was hostile to women, and to her in particular because she was a black woman. Of a total of ninety seats in both Wyoming's House and Senate, only fourteen were held by women. She found that some of her efforts to present and pass bills were hampered by the fact that a significant number of her female colleagues refused to support her bills; they were afraid of losing good committee assignments by supporting bills sponsored by Liz Byrd. Another complicating factor was Byrd often sponsored unpopular "special" legislation relating to human interests instead of those involving the state's economic interests.

Her most important bill of national prominence, and the one that presented her with the most difficulty, was ratification of a Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Wyoming. U.S. President Ronald Reagan signed a bill in 1983 that established Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a nationally observed holiday, although it was not

...TO HONOR MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

until 1986 that it was first observed.

The nine years she worked on the bill to mark a day in commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr., were marked by strife and animosity. Wyoming state newspapers were filled with letters pro and con from the public and from her fellow legislators. Even one of Liz's fellow teachers spoke out publicly against the bill. To finally gain passage of the bill, Byrd had to agree to add "Wyoming Equality Day" to the name, which became Martin Luther King Jr. / Wyoming Equality Day in 1990.

Liz Byrd went on to become the recipient of a number of awards and honors, one of the most notable is sharing the pages with Rosa Parks, Oprah Winfrey, and other African American women of accomplishment in the 1989 book, *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*.

This article is adapted from two original American Heritage Center blog posts. The first appeared in 2017, and the second was posted in 2019 with some additional photographs from Liz Byrd's papers at the AHC. Much of the text is credited to Evelyn Haskell's article, "Harriett Elizabeth 'Liz' Byrd: Wyoming Trail Blazer in Education and Politics," published in *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Winter 2006).



Liz Byrd in her Cheyenne classroom, ca. 1965.

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This remote part-time position offers up to 80 hours a month at \$25 an hour.

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PHIL ROBERTS FACULTY FELLOWSHIP ANNOUNCED



Dr. Phil Roberts, left, with "Wyoming Almanac," his book on Wyoming's history is now in its eighth edition.

Dr. Roberts's significant contribution to Wyoming's historical record, the Wyoming Almanac, a "700-page labor of love" was co-written with his brothers David and Steven. First published in 1989, it has become an indispensable resource for all who are interested in Wyoming's heritage. Keeping up with the times, the Almanac is also available online with regular contributions from Dr. Roberts at wyomingalmanac.com.

COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

The University of Wyoming (UW) is celebrating its history by establishing a new faculty fellowship named after Professor Emeritus and Wyoming's preeminent historian, **Dr. Phil Roberts**. This fellowship aims to enable future historians to focus on teaching and presenting Wyoming's rich Western past, much like Roberts did. Jeffrey Means, current chair of UW's Department of History, expressed excitement about the fellowship, which was made possible by an anonymous donation matched by the state of Wyoming.

"The endowment for the history department not only will continue to educate our students about the interesting history of our state, but it also will inspire them and others to explore resources and write articles and books about our history," Roberts says.

Roberts joined a distinguished group of historians at UW and played a crucial role in preserving Wyoming's history,

ensuring that stories from the past are accessible to everyone. "There is no one more deserving of this recognition than Phil Roberts. We also are thrilled that the state of Wyoming could partner with this donor through its 2024 appropriation of state matching funds," says John Stark, president and CEO of the UW Foundation.

The Phil Roberts Faculty Fellowship will support further study of Wyoming history, providing \$250,000 over six years, with an annual interest of \$10,000 to \$12,000 funding a faculty member's research, travel, and community engagements. This fellowship aims to keep Wyoming's history alive, promoting deeper understanding within broader historical contexts. Even in retirement, Roberts continues to write and advocate for Wyoming history, demonstrating his enduring commitment to the field.

"This fellowship is a fitting tribute to the life's work of Roberts."

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING NEWS

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends:

Winter looms but the days grow longer as we continue into 2025. The long nights and cold temperatures make for ideal reading time. Recently, I picked up "Public Waters: Lessons from Wyoming for the American West" by Anne MacKinnon. It tells the story of how water is used, allocated and often depleted, under a system of rights in one state in the American West. It is an enlightening read. In 2022, "Public Waters" earned the 1st place prize in the Publications: Non-fiction category of our awards program. For 2025, the awards committee named the non-fiction award in honor of Jeremy Johnston. Jeremy was a longtime member of the Park County Historical Society. For many years, he volunteered his time to various Society committees, both statewide boards and numerous special projects. Sadly, Jeremy passed away in June 2024 but left a legacy of commitment to the preservation of Wyoming history. Jeremy's breadth of knowledge, dedication to the history of Wyoming and wonderful sense of humor are greatly missed. We feel this recognition is well earned and honors his legacy in a small but worthwhile way.

For 2025, the awards committee added two new categories, one for podcasts and another for memoirs. In addition, more awards were added in the activities and fine arts categories. Find the updated 2025 awards manual on our website: wyshs.org/programs/awards-program

155 years ago, on February 17, 1870, Esther Hobart Morris was appointed the first female Justice of the Peace in the United States. By March 1870, the first women to serve on a grand jury in the U.S. were seated in Laramie and Martha Symons Boies Atkinson was the first female bailiff in the U.S.

135 years ago, on February 27, 1890, the Laramie Daily Boomerang reported 300 people living in the coal-mining town of Dana, Wyo., of whom 250 were African American.

"The town of Dana, Wyo., has largely been forgotten in the history of the West, gone from living memory and barely

mentioned in accounts of Wyoming's boom-and-bust coal mining towns. In the few short years, the Dana mine was active, its Black miners inadvertently played a major role in bringing widespread attention to the issue of fair labor practices through their demand for equity and honesty in their work and pay." Read the rest of Brie Blas's article about Dana, WY on WyoHistory.org.

100 years ago, on February 25, 1925, the Wyoming Legislature passed a law prohibiting harsh, cruel, or abusive treatment of mentally ill patients and inmates. This was due in large part to the efforts of Edward T. Payton, a Wyoming reporter, editor, and tireless advocate for the mentally ill. "During his lifetime, he published two Wyoming newspapers, promoted newspapers in Colorado and Wyoming, wrote many articles and two booklets on mental illness and hospital conditions, all while dogged by recurring bouts of mental illness of his own." Learn more about E.T. Payton on WyoHistory.org.

The stories and people of Wyoming's past are fascinating, worthy of research, and represent a wide range of perspectives. Since 1953, the Wyoming Historical Society has promulgated Wyoming's history through scholarly articles within the Annals of Wyoming, special projects like WyoHistory.org, our awards program and our annual trek.

Perhaps, you know of someone who in 2024 led a great tour of South Pass City, or wrote an article about the Wyoming State Hospital or created a new pamphlet about one of Wyoming's coal mining towns? As a member, we encourage you to submit a nomination for an award from the Wyoming Historical Society. We look forward to learning about all the great work completed in 2024 to promote and share Wyoming history.

Sincerely,

Jessica Flock



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Jessica Flock, PRESIDENT
jessicaflock.wyo@gmail.com

Lucas Keeler, 1ST VICE PRESIDENT
HankMasonAndTheBear@outlook.com

Beki Speas, 2ND VICE PRESIDENT / NE REP
beki232@gmail.com

Heidi McCullough, TREASURER
heidih2022@yahoo.com

Nancy Tabb, SECRETARY
nancypabb@gmail.com

Dean King, NW REP
goldcreekcanyon@gmail.com

Deb Davidson, SE REP
tree1953@yahoo.com

SW REP - UNFILLED

Bud Alley, OUT OF STATE REP
alleybud@gmail.com

Executive Director & Editor
Aley Philp, 307.322.3014

Correspondence, membership issues, and questions should be sent, preferably via email to:

executivedirector@wyshs.org
or addressed to:

Wyoming Historical Society
Aley Philp, Executive Director
PO Box 247
Wheatland, WY 82201

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Ann Chambers Noble, PRESIDENT
anoble1227@aol.com

Rick Robbins, VICE PRESIDENT
rarob@wyomingwisp.com

Alena Wagner, TREASURER
alena.wagner@yahoo.com

Linda Fabian, SECRETARY
lindafabianwy@gmail.com

Brian Beauvais
bbeauvais@parkcounty.us

Lucas Fralick
lcfra1ick42@gmail.com

NOTE: WHS Members names appear in **bold** in the newsletter.

CAPITOL BUILDING NATIONAL LANDMARK



Watercolor painting of the north view of the Wyoming State Capitol Building from www.wyomingcapitolsquare.com.

The Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office was thrilled to announce the U.S. Department of the Interior has officially approved the updated documentation for the Wyoming State Capitol Building and Grounds National Historic Landmark designation.

"The restoration of the 'People's House' ensured Wyoming's future generations are exposed to the rich history contained in the Capitol," Governor Gordon said. "This honor reflects the pride Wyoming's people have for our history and the collaborative work that went into preserving it."

WyoHistory.org, a project of the Wyoming Historical Society, has been instrumental in the research, writing, and completion of the new interactive stations (kiosks) in the Capitol as part of the restoration. The kiosks are small stands with a digital interface allowing for on-site research of the Capitol's many

historical features. They are set to be unveiled Spring 2025.

The Wyoming State Capitol Building and Grounds was originally designated on May 4, 1987 under the Historic Sites Act of 1935, which allows the Secretary of the Interior to identify and honor locations that capture the American experience. The updated designation, approved on September 2, 2024, affirms the site's exceptional value to Wyoming residents and all Americans. Thirty-five capitol buildings in the U.S. have been designated National Historic Landmarks, including twenty current state capitols and fifteen former ones, such as older, colonial, tribal, and territorial capitols.

"The recognition of the Wyoming State Capitol Building as a National Historic Landmark is a testament to our rich heritage and a reminder of the importance of safeguarding our history for future generations," said

Wyoming State Historic Preservation Officer Deputy Brian Beadles. "Our dedication to preserving the historic sites of Wyoming honors the stories and values they embody."

The National Park Service conducted extensive studies and involved the community. The National Park System Advisory Board provided recommendations, ensuring that the criteria for National Historic Landmarks were carefully applied.

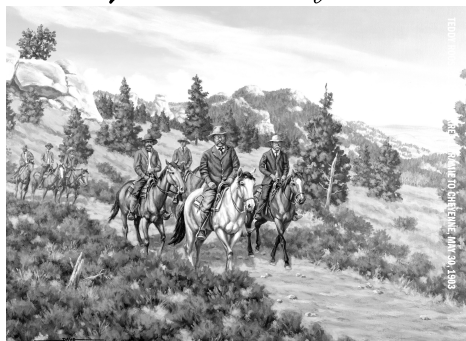
In their letter of support to the National Park Service, former Wyoming Senate President, **Senator Ogden Driskill**, and former Wyoming Speaker of the House, **Representative Albert Sommers**, wrote, "It is our great privilege, as the presiding officers of the Wyoming Legislature, to lend our voices in full support of the update to the Wyoming Capitol's designation as a National Historic Landmark. The restored Capitol and Wyoming's role in women's suffrage is a source of pride for the people of Wyoming and that is why we wholeheartedly endorse its updated designation to continue its proud history as a National Historic Landmark."

National Historic Landmarks are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, making them eligible for the safeguards and benefits provided by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and other federal laws protecting historic properties.

Wyoming State Parks and Cultural Resources' Deputy Director **Sara Sheen** expressed gratitude to the nation's community members involved in the process. "Your insights have enhanced the recognition of this irreplaceable site," she said. "This designation serves as a reminder to foster an appreciation for the past while building a future rooted in Wyoming's heritage."

Heard Along the Historic Trail:

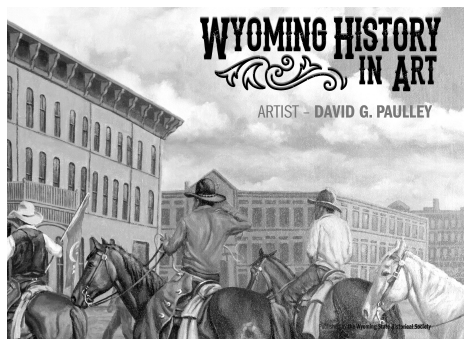
Your Place for Chapter and Member News



Fourteen original Paulley paintings will soon be on display in the Wyoming State Capitol Building. The **American Heritage Center** announced the Wyoming State Legislature requested the loan and use of artwork for several of the legislative offices in the Capitol Building. A copy of *Wyoming History in Art* book was also provided to the Legislative Service Office.

Wyoming History in Art is a culmination of many WHS members, including **Lucille Dumbrill, Rick Ewig, Dr.**

Mike Jording, Linda Fabian, Judy Musgrave, Dr. Paul Flesher, John Waggener, and the late Dr. Jeremy M. Johnston. If you would like a print of one of Paulley's works, and / or a copy of *Wyoming History in Art*, please reach out to the WHS Main Office at info@wyshs.org.



Hot Springs County Historical Society hosted their Chili Feed at the Senior Center on January 11th. Programs included a showing of *Celebration of the 100 Years*



through Wind River Canyon and Thermopolis, Small Town, Big Story.

Nancy Tabb with the Johnson County Library hosted three Local History Talks in January. They were on Early Kaycee, Early Buffalo, and Evening of Precious Memories of Johnson County.

Albany County Historical Society hosted Barbara Bogart for her presentation on "Oral History: From Memory to History," where she discussed her thirty-years of experience as an oral historian.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

At Large:

Joseph Esparza - MONTANA
David Nicolarsen - SHERIDAN
Dr. Becky & Jim Prior - CODY
Bill Schrage - LARAMIE
Jerrold Speas - JOHNSTON, IA
John Stoll - FARRAGUT, TN
Philip Wold - SHERIDAN

Campbell:
Nancy Speas

Fremont:

Kevin Cadogan
Charles Peart

Johnson:

Larry & Cheryl Gerard
Linda Lawrence

Laramie:

John Capron
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Natrona:

Marion Miller
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Platte:

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UPCOMING EVENTS

FEBRUARY

7: Local History Talks with **Nancy Tabb** - Owen Wister Out West
3:00 pm in the Johnson County Library Fraley Room, Buffalo, WY

10: Johnson County Historical Society 6:30 pm at the Library
Richard Kendall explains who the Buffalo Streets are named for.

13: Cody Culture Club "Lock, Stock & Local"
5:30 pm at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, WY

13: Wyoming State Archives Speaker Series
Leslie Waggener of the American Heritage Center on the Second KKK in Wyoming
7:00 pm, online - contact sara.davis@wyo.gov for more information.

21: Local History Talks with **Nancy Tabb** - Dr. Frackleton, Sagebrush Dentist
3:00 pm in the Johnson County Library Twing Room, Buffalo, WY

2025 WHS ANNUAL TREK: June 19-22, 2025
hosted by Converse County Historical Society - Douglas

2025 WHS ANNUAL MEETING: Sept. 11-14, 2025
hosted by Ft. Bridger Historical Association