

Wyoming History News

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MATHEW CAMPFIELD: BARBER, CORONER, AND PIONEER SURVIVOR



Mathew Campfield froze his feet in a Kansas blizzard in 1868. Later they were amputated, and he spent the rest of his life on wooden ones. Casper College Western History Center.

by Tom Rea

Mathew Campfield, African American Union Army veteran, worked as a barber and was elected coroner of Natrona County in the early 1890s. He had served in Arkansas in the Civil War in a regiment of the U.S. Colored

Infantry. Later, in Kansas, he froze both feet and ever afterward walked on wooden ones.

His service entitled him to an Army pension, and thanks to the pension files at the National Archives, we now know a great deal about his life.

But people's memories of him were already fading here in Casper by 1936. That year, the Casper Tribune-Herald ran a story about a pair of human leg bones that had turned up when laborers were working to reconstruct Old Fort Caspar, as the paper called it. Locals were convinced these were Matt's bones. That turned out not to be the case. The confusion, however, drew a letter that has become another principal source for what we know about Campfield and his wife, Fannie Davis Campfield.

But a story that lasted in Casper's Black community — separate from these other sources — shows the kind of courage the Campfields needed to survive. In the back of his shop Matt had a bathtub where a dusty shepherd,

say, could get a bath after his haircut. Baths cost 50 cents.

A cowboy named George Mitchell stole the bathtub and took it out to Alcova, 30 miles from town, and set it in hot springs near the edge of the North Platte River. Instead of going to the police, or going directly after the cowboy, Campfield used a quieter tactic. Every time a customer came to the shop looking for a bath after that, he made a mark on the wall. These marks would have become well known around town. Casper only had about 500 people in the early 1890s.

Mitchell later returned the tub and started a lumber business. By then there were 70 marks on the barbershop wall. When Campfield needed lumber—perhaps for a cabin or sheds on his homestead claim, west of town—he went to Mitchell's lumberyard, and demanded and got \$35 worth of lumber in exchange for the business Mitchell had stolen from him by stealing the tub. . . .

The Campfields' remarkable story shows a lot about the Wyoming of territorial and early statehood times, about race, about bureaucracy and especially about how past people and events get remembered, mis-remembered and, occasionally, memorialized in the end.

You can read the rest of the story on WyoHistory.org:
www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/mathew-campfield-barber-coroner-and-pioneer-survivor

**YOU'RE
INVITED**

**WHS
Quarterly
Executive
Committee
Meeting**

**SATURDAY
JAN. 13TH**

**AT 10^{AM}
Via Zoom**

Please call or email Aley,
307.322.3014,
executivedirector@wyshs.org
if you would like to attend
and she will send
you the link.



FROM THE PRESIDENT

Hello Friends,

I hope you all have enjoyed the holiday season. It is a special time of the year. Even though I am not a New Year's resolution type of gal, the changing of the year usually causes me to circle back and try to finish up things or start projects that I have been putting off.

I would like to congratulate Pat Edean, our AARP sponsored office staff on her new job. Pat has really helped the Society, especially during the transition, and will be missed. The next Historical Society Executive Committee meeting will be held online on January 13th at 10:00 am. In addition to the committee reports, time will be set aside to go through the proposed draft of the Society's bylaws. The meetings are open to the membership. If you are interested in attending and have not received a Zoom meeting invitation from Aley, please feel free to reach out to her at executivedirector@wyshs.org or (307) 322-3014.

I'm hoping to continue with focusing meetings with the Chapters, probably in February. The Chapter members and representatives will have an opportunity to talk about activities, challenges and accomplishments. This supports improved communication between the Chapters and with Aley, the Executive Director, and me.

I attended the Historical Foundation meeting in December

and am happy to report it was quite a successful fall fundraising non-event. Thank you all for your generosity



and support of the Historical Society. You all are what make the Society important and great.

The 250th (Semiquincentennial) Anniversary Task Force met in December. As president of the Historical Society, I was appointed by the governor to represent the Society. This is an honor and will be quite valuable as we have an opportunity to support all of our communities around Wyoming. The task force created the following seven sub-committees to accomplish its goals and mission: Timeline/Scheduling; Community Outreach; 250th Events at the Capitol; K-12 Curriculum; Marketing; Fundraising / Grants/ Legislative Appropriation; and Theme. I volunteered to serve on the Community Outreach sub-committee as the Society has great local outreach contacts. I will keep you updated as the work progresses.

Thanks again for all your help and support.

Cindy

WHS President

SAVE THE DATE!

2024
STATE TREK:
June 20 - 23, 2024
hosted by
**Hot Springs County
Historical Society,
Thermopolis**

**REGISTRATION
COMING SOON!**

2024
ANNUAL MEETING:
September 6-8, 2024
hosted by
**Weston County
Historical Society,
Newcastle**

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WHF DONATION DRIVE A SUCCESS

The most recent donation drive initiated by the Wyoming Historical Foundation has so far been a success. Over \$25,000 has been raised in the past several months. Donations were earmarked from donors for their chosen project: Foundation, Society, the Homsher Grant, History Day programs, and WyoHistory.org.

Following is a list of our donors, without whom our society could not continue to operate and continue our vision ensuring that Wyoming's past remains accessible to present and future generations.

Thank you to all who have donated.

WyoHistory.org

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WYOMING
HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

BUILDING AN EMPIRE

by Robert Galbreath for WyoHistory.org

Roughly ten miles northeast of Torrington, Wyo., and a mile over the state line in Nebraska, lies the cemetery for the abandoned Sheep Creek Presbyterian Church. The cemetery served the community of Empire, Wyoming, founded in 1908 by African American families who came from Nebraska to build a racially self-sufficient, politically autonomous community in the Equality State. Empire lasted less than two decades, however it disappeared from the landscape by the mid-1920s.

Empire's story opens with the social upheaval that followed the American Civil War. The war left the South in ruins, and the post-war Reconstruction Era was marred by poverty and racial upheaval. Many African Americans fled these conditions to seek new opportunities on the western plains recently opened to settlement by the federal Homestead Act of 1862 and related state and federal land laws.

Empire was founded in 1908 by

Charles Speese and his new bride, Rosetta. Three of Charles' brothers, John, Joseph and Radfor, and their families formed the nucleus of the new settlement.

The Speeses were joined by two branches of the Taylor family headed by Otis and Baseman. In 1911 Russell Taylor, an ordained Presbyterian minister, arrived in Empire with his wife, ten children and mother-in-law, and quickly became the community's leader.

The Speeses and Taylors had come from Nebraska. Charles Speese's parents Susan and Moses were originally born into slavery in North Carolina and moved to Nebraska in the 1870s at the height of the Exoduster movement. By 1908, the Speese family had managed to accumulate a considerable estate. According to the Torrington Telegram of May 14, 1908, the Speese brothers had inherited \$10,000 from their uncle, Josiah Webb.

The brothers pooled the inheritance with proceeds from the sale of their land in Nebraska and purchased



The hamlet of Empire, Wyo. shows on this fragment of a 1915 railroad map of Wyoming, Wyoming Places

hundreds of acres near Torrington. By 1912, Empire had grown into a full-service farming community with its own school, post office and Presbyterian church.

The town sat above the well-watered North Platte River Valley on arid tableland that was not irrigated. Farmers in Empire, therefore, had to depend on dryland farming techniques. The Torrington Telegram reported on October 12, 1911 that Joseph Speese, with his knowledge of dryland farming methods, "raised more Irish potatoes than many of the farmers under irrigation."

Potatoes were prominent in Empire, but Joseph Speese grew a wide variety of crops. The Torrington Telegram, on September 19, 1912, noted he won first-place prizes at the county fair for sweet corn, popcorn, potatoes, millet, cucumbers, muskmelon and field peas. Apparently, he had turned his corner of the Wyoming desert into a garden.

Within a year of settling in eastern Wyoming, the residents of Empire made a successful bid to the county school board to build their own school. Clearly, Empire residents valued education highly; several had advanced degrees. Russell Taylor possessed a divinity degree from Bellevue College in



Moses Speese and his wife, Susan, came to Nebraska from North Carolina in the 1870s, part of the Exoduster movement, and are shown here in 1888 on their Custer County homestead. Decades later, four Speese brothers—possibly the two young men in the back row and the two boys in front—came to Wyoming with their families beginning in 1908. Northeast of Torrington, they founded the African-American community of Empire. Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society.

Omaha, Neb. John Speese earned a law degree at Wesleyan University in Salina, Kansas—a “remarkable” achievement for a “colored man” of his time, the Torrington Telegram would note in his February 1914 obituary.

In the early 20th century, education in Wyoming was legally segregated. The state’s school code stipulated that if a school district contained more than fifteen non-white students, the district could build separate educational facilities for them.

The settlers in Empire found a voice to fight back against racism through the leadership of Russell Taylor. Taylor was active in his role as an educator and spiritual leader, and advocated for his people both at local political events and at state and national conferences of the Presbyterian Church.



Charles and Rosetta Speese on their wedding day, Thanksgiving, 1907. Together with Charles’ three brothers, they founded Empire in 1908. From Sod House Memories.

Taylor taught at Empire’s public school, and worked to maintain control over his students’ education. In 1914, for example, he appeared at a Goshen County school board meeting to protest the board’s hiring of a white teacher who lacked qualifications to teach at the Empire school. Taylor wrote in the Goshen County Journal on December 3, 1914, that due to the white teacher’s lack of a certificate, “she has been unable to

properly control the school or do the work therein.” Taylor remained in charge of the school at least until 1916 when he was listed as Empire’s sole teacher in the Goshen County Journal on November 2 of that year.

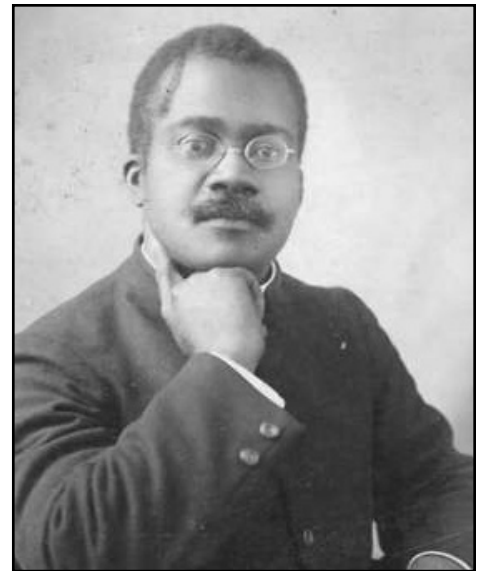
He also wrote numerous editorials to the state and local press. In an era when speaking out against the status quo of white dominance was dangerous for African Americans, Taylor refused to have his voice silenced. He always affixed his name to his letters, unlike many letter writers who encouraged racism.

On December 19, 1918, Taylor wrote a particularly impassioned protest against the lynching of Joel Woodson, an African American man, by a white mob of more than five hundred in Green River, Wyo.

“It is believed that if Woodson could have told his story,” Taylor wrote, “the state whose motto is equal rights before the law would not have been again disgraced by another terrible lynching. Five hundred men would not be guilty of murder as they now are, though the law seems to take no cognizance of the fact.”

According to the 1910 federal census, there were 36 African Americans living in Empire that year, all members of the various branches of the Speese and Taylor families. In 1911, after Russell Taylor arrived with his wife, ten children, and his mother-in-law, the African American population rose to 49. However, the 1920 federal census showed only 23 African Americans living in Empire. By 1930, there were only four African Americans living in all of Goshen County out of a population of more than 11,000. By the late 1920s, Empire had vanished.

Economics provides one explanation for the community’s demise. America experienced a serious agricultural recession after



Russell Taylor at Bellevue College, Omaha, Neb., around 1896 when he won a divinity degree there. In 1911, Taylor and his large family arrived in Empire, where he quickly became a leader of the community. After his brother, Baseman, died in police custody, Russell Taylor filed a wrongful death suit in district court. Hastings College archives.

World War I when agricultural prices, inflated by the war, took a nosedive in 1919. A bad drought in Wyoming that year made things far worse. Many farmers in Wyoming were forced into foreclosure when the agricultural bubble burst. Banks failed in Wyoming throughout the 1920s.

Yet all of the county’s African American homesteaders had left by 1930. Isolation and racism had taken its toll on the black settlers who tried to make a new life in Empire. The people of Empire lacked an organized community or social safety net outside the confines of their little town. Fears of racism, harassment and death must have been constant in their lives.

Editors’ note: WyoHistory.org thanks Beth King and the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office for supporting past-intern Robert Galbreath’s work, including this article. For the full article, and additional information, please visit:

[WyoHistory.org/encyclopedia/making-home-empire-wyo](https://wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/making-home-empire-wyo)

WE NEED YOUR HELP

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 email addresses and phone numbers.

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



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

At Large

Susan Carlson
Peggy Chamberlain
Cathryn Denman
Mitch & Terri Geissinger
William Hand
Dalene Hodnett
Michael & Elaine Schroeder
Charles Smith
Lee Ann White

Institutional

Big Horn Audubon Society

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Dr. Christina McCann
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Park County

Mark Bruscano
Charles & LeeAnn Ruyle

Platte County

Randy & Shannon Durick
Brandin & Amy Miller

Heard Along the Historic Trail:

Your Place for Chapter News



The **American Heritage Center** is thrilled to announce that through a partnership with **Wyoming Humanities, Wyoming History Day (WHD)** has hired **Jackie Dorothy** of Thermopolis to work as an Outreach Assistant on an 18-month grant.

This award is made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) through supplemental funding to state councils to support National History Day activities. Jackie brings a wealth of knowledge, experience, and connections across the state. She will be working to recruit non-participating schools and teachers. She'll also work in a variety of ways with State WHD Coordinator Bryce Mittelstadt to create pathways to participation and classroom implementation for teachers and schools interested in WHD. The American Heritage Center and Wyoming Humanities are happy to welcome Jackie to the team and look forward to her efforts to help more students throughout Wyoming participate in National History Day.

•••

Rick Robbins, PCHS President, held a presentation on the past of Platte County "one horse towns" Nov. 28th.

Converse County Historical Society member **Lee Ann Siebken** had a book signing of her new book "Camp Douglas: Wyoming's World War II Prisoner of War Base Camp" on December 9th at the Wyoming Pioneer Museum in Douglas. Her book is now available for purchase at most book stores or from Wyoming based High Plains Press.

•••

Wyoming State Parks hosted its annual "First Day Hikes" at historic locations around the state including Fort Bridger, Fort Steele, Fort Phil Kearny, Medicine Lodge, Wyoming Territorial Prison, and South Pass State Historical sites.

•••

The **Hot Springs County Historical Society** partnered with the Hot Springs Pioneer Association to host their



annual joint Christmas Dinner. 85 people attended. The food was reportedly amazing and everyone had a wonderful time visiting with their friends old and new! There was Christmas carol singing, a fun raffle with great prizes, and **Ray Shaffer** encouraged members to share old time Christmas Stories! Pictured (below) is the membership sign-up table staffed by **R.L. "Rick" Hudson**, and **Carol Shaffer**.



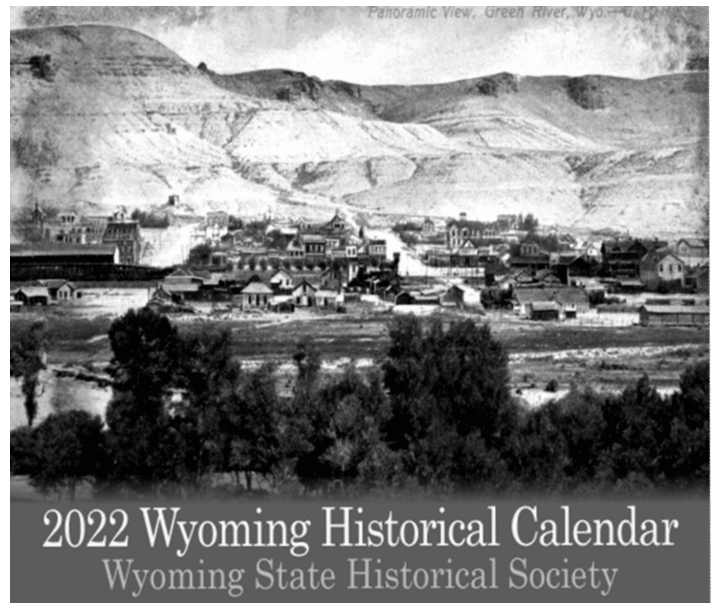
TIME MARCHES ON

CALL FOR HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE 2025 WHS CALENDAR

The Wyoming Historical Society is actively planning its 2025 Calendar. The 2025 Calendar theme is Wyoming families partaking in events and activities. The society is asking for historic photograph submissions to be featured in the calendar. The popular calendar features historical photographs from around the state creating an informative and picturesque view of Wyoming history.

It includes a snippet on each day noting “what happened and where.” The tidbits range from the serious to the unbelievable, but all newsworthy in their day!

Photographs from individuals, families, museums, newspapers, libraries, and other organizations are welcome to be submitted. Photographs must be at least 5 inches tall by 7 inches wide landscape format or be able to be cropped to that ratio. Photographs, either physical or a digital scan at 600 dpi, must be received by February 1, 2024.



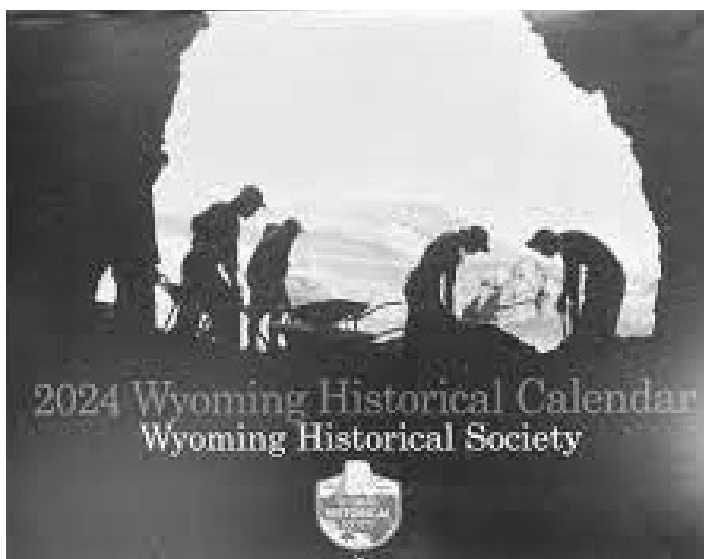
People, location, and, if possible, the activity, should be identified with submission. Original photographs will be returned.

Final photographs will be selected by the Wyoming Historical Society’s Calendar committee. Members of the committee are **Jeremy Johnston, Nancy Tabb, Linda Fabian, Cindy Brown, and Mike Jording**.

Pre-sales from the 2025 Calendar at last year’s prices are being taken now through March 15th, 2024. After that prices will increase, so get your orders in early!

If the New Year snuck up on you, some 2024 Calendars are still available for sale, but are going quick! If you would like to order or pre-order calendars, please email executivedirector@wyshs.org.

If you have any questions, please contact the Wyoming Historical Society Executive Director Aley Philp at executivedirector@wyshs.org, or call the WHS office at 307.322.3014.



CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

JANUARY

6: "Family Day - Ice Age"

Explore how people survived and thrived during the Ice Age, despite some really tricky challenges. From glacial games and activities to fun arts and crafts, it's sure to be a cool event for the whole family!
Wyoming State Museum Classroom
2301 Central Ave, Barrett Building, Cheyenne
10:00 am - 2:00 pm, 307.777.8691

8: "From Gold Miner to Surgeon: The Letters of William Marshall"

presentation by Jennifer Romanoski & Sylvia Bruner
Johnson County Library
171 North Adams Ave, Buffalo
6:30 pm

11: "Firearms as Art"

presentation by Evan Green
Wyoming State Museum Classroom
2301 Central Ave, Barrett Building, Cheyenne
7:00 pm, 307.777.8691

FEBRUARY

3: "Family Day - Animal Athletes"

Wyoming State Museum Classroom
2301 Central Ave, Barrett Building, Cheyenne
10:00 am - 2:00 pm, 307.777.8691

5: "History of Johnson County Search & Rescue"

Johnson County Library
171 North Adams Ave, Buffalo
6:30 pm

MARCH

2: Tribal Talks

"Carrying Indigenous Wisdom into the Future" presented by Central Wyoming College's Tribal Education Coordinator Ivan Posey and CWC's Tribal Wisdom Society
Teton County Library Auditorium, Jackson, WY
6:00 pm; talk begins followed by Q&A

ONGOING EXHIBITS

"White Robe" Exhibit

Featuring 13 colorful paintings by Irish artist Brian Whelan that celebrate the life of the Rev. John Roberts and his historic 66-year ministry on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. ArtSpirit, the arts initiative of the Episcopal Church in Wyoming, commissioned the touring exhibit; it will travel to Europe after its stay at the University of Wyoming. Ends 2/24/24.
American Heritage Center - Centennial Complex
2111 Willet Drive - Laramie, WY 82071
307.766.4114

James Bama's "Portraits of the West"

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

"Who She Is"

This new display features Wyoming and National statistics on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), along with the red jingle dress worn in the opening of the documentary film "Who She Is."

Due to the content of the film, viewer discretion is advised.

Wyoming State Museum
2301 Central Ave, Barrett Building, Cheyenne

Indigenous daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives are disappearing at alarming rates across North America. "Who She Is" was released in 2022 and focuses on the lives of four Indigenous women from Wind River caught in the violence of the MMIW epidemic. A 20-minute version is playing in the Wyoming State Museum theater, courtesy of Caldera Productions.

All statistics in this display are from Wyoming's 2020 Statewide Report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous People.

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



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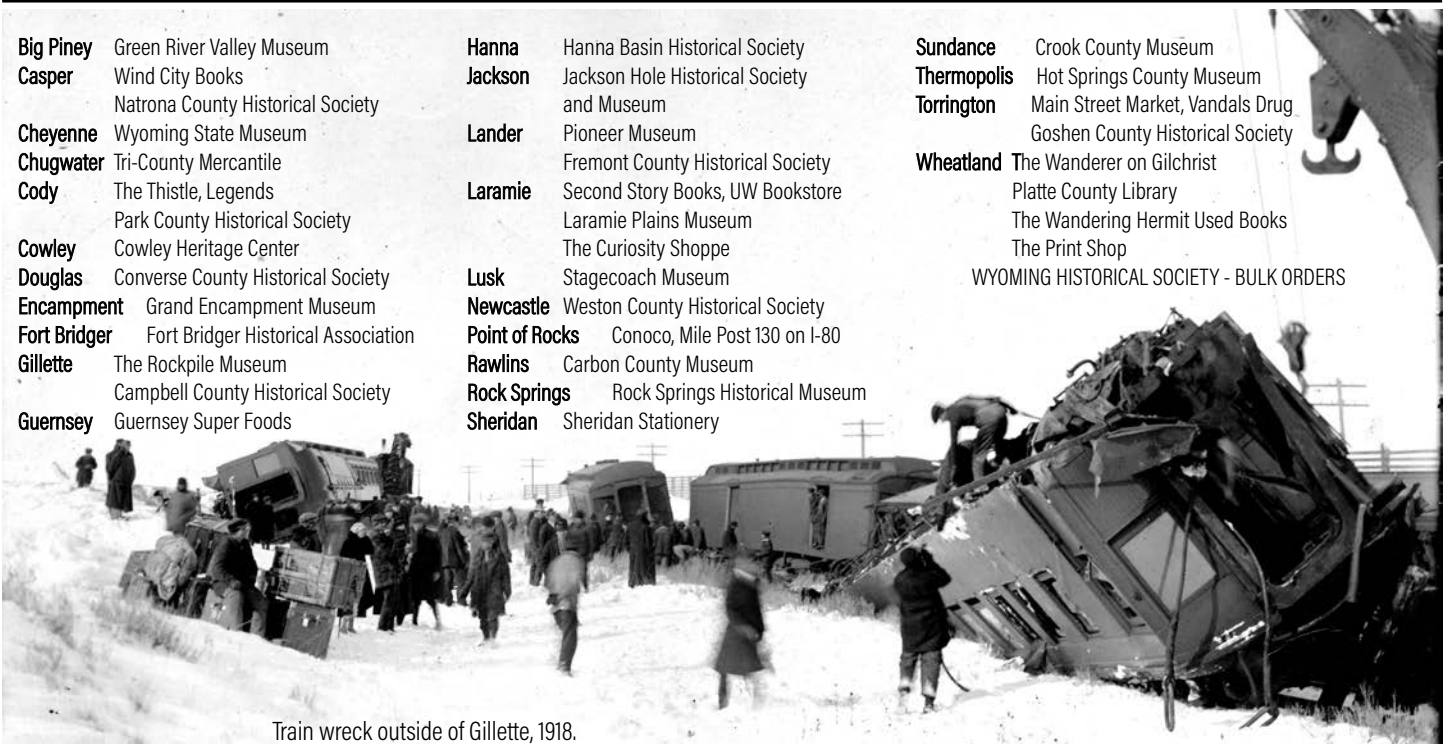
AVAILABLE NOW! 2024 CALENDAR OF WYOMING HISTORY

Big Piney Green River Valley Museum
Casper Wind City Books
 Natrona County Historical Society
Cheyenne Wyoming State Museum
Chugwater Tri-County Mercantile
Cody The Thistle, Legends
 Park County Historical Society
Cowley Cowley Heritage Center
Douglas Converse County Historical Society
Encampment Grand Encampment Museum
Fort Bridger Fort Bridger Historical Association
Gillette The Rockpile Museum
 Campbell County Historical Society
Guernsey Guernsey Super Foods

Hanna Hanna Basin Historical Society
Jackson Jackson Hole Historical Society
 and Museum
Lander Pioneer Museum
 Fremont County Historical Society
Laramie Second Story Books, UW Bookstore
 Laramie Plains Museum
 The Curiosity Shoppe
Lusk Stagecoach Museum
Newcastle Weston County Historical Society
Point of Rocks Conoco, Mile Post 130 on I-80
Rawlins Carbon County Museum
Rock Springs Rock Springs Historical Museum
Sheridan Sheridan Stationery

Sundance Crook County Museum
Thermopolis Hot Springs County Museum
Torrington Main Street Market, Vandals Drug
 Goshen County Historical Society
Wheatland The Wanderer on Gilchrist
 Platte County Library
 The Wandering Hermit Used Books
 The Print Shop

WYOMING HISTORICAL SOCIETY - BULK ORDERS



Train wreck outside of Gillette, 1918.