Community Treasures of Rock Springs

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The Community Treasures of Rock Springs PowerPoint presentation was prepared as part of Community Treasures, a program to help Green River and Rock Springs residents identify and protect places of special importance to the heritage of their communities. The project was carried out by the University of Wyoming’s American Studies program, in cooperation with the Green River Historic Preservation Commission, the Sweetwater County Historical Museum and the Rock Springs Historical Museum, with funding from the National Park Service. This is a pdf copy of a presentation designed to be used for meetings, conferences and workshops, to help both residents and visitors better understand the buildings and places that give Rock Springs its special character. The presentation tells the story of the community, from its founding in 1868 until the present, by focusing on the physical evidence—the historic buildings, structures and places that remain. The PowerPoint for this presentation is available from the Sweetwater County Historical Museum or the University of Wyoming American Studies department. For further questions or comments with regards to this presentation, please contact Mary Humstone, Research Scientist, American Studies Program, Cooper House, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071; or humstone@uwyo.edu.
The City of Rock Springs began as a humble coal camp in the 1860s, but unlike most of its neighbors, Rock Springs not only survived but flourished, becoming the center for industry and commerce in southwestern Wyoming. Although coal is no longer king in Rock Springs, the legacy of the early coal mining lives on in the crooked streets, underground tunnels, houses of workers and managers and most importantly the many nationalities that make Rock Springs Wyoming’s most diverse city.
Permanent settlement in Rock Springs began in 1862, when Ben Holladay built a “home” station for his Overland Stage Company at the springs. Archibald and Duncan Blair established a trading post nearby, and Duncan became the station agent for Holladay’s line. The great coal deposits that catapulted Rock Springs into prominence were first developed by the Blair brothers at prospects near Blairtown, one and one-half miles southwest of Rock Springs. Blairtown still survives as a neighborhood in Rock Springs,
Blairtown – 1218 W 1st (Abby Van Vlerah)

and some of the early dugouts where settlers and miners lived can still be seen behind more modern houses.
The Union Pacific Railroad built through the region in 1868 and established a camp known as Rock Spring (the “s” was added later). Coal attracted the Union Pacific to Rock Springs, and it didn’t take the company long to take over most existing coal lands and operating mines, and form its own coal department, the Union Pacific Coal Company. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the Union Pacific Coal Company opened Mine Nos. 1 through 10.
Traces of Mine No 4, Veterans’ Park (Mary Humstone 2005)

Traces of Mine No 4 can still be seen on the hillside above Veterans’ Park
Because the town grew up around the mines, the paths that miners traveled to and from work and to conduct their daily business became the streets. Folklore holds that the streets of Rock Springs were “laid out by a drunken miner on a dying horse.” The twisted town layout reflects the philosophy of the coal industry upon which the town was founded. The earliest mines in Rock Springs were operated by private developers who had little interest in developing a town -- coal camps were intended to last only until the coal was exhausted or the needs of the Union Pacific changed. Although all of the towns along the transcontinental railroad line in Wyoming were established about the same time, starting in 1867, Rock Springs is the only one that was not built solely to serve the railroad, and which was not initially laid out in a grid pattern along the tracks.
The 1870 census for Rock Springs reports 32 buildings, mostly houses. Commercial development was limited to three “liquor retailing stores,” a blacksmith shop and a telegraph office. But soon after, the first permanent buildings in what would become downtown Rock Springs were constructed. In 1874, the Wyoming Board of Immigration described Rock Springs in a pamphlet: “The town contains several good stores, a church, schoolhouse and numerous residences. Nearly all the buildings are of stone, and are built in a neat, substantial manner.”
One of the earliest surviving commercial buildings in Rock Springs is the Stockgrowers’ Mercantile Company, built of cut sandstone in the 1870s. Advertisements claimed that here customers could buy anything from a “needle to an anchor.” The original sandstone façade was covered in white glazed brick when the store was remodeled in the 1920s.
During this period, the workforce was transitory—in fact, none of the residents listed in the 1870 census were still there by 1880. Many miners continued to live in dugouts along Bitter Creek, and others lived in hastily constructed wood-frame company housing—remember, Rock Springs was not supposed to last!
Chinese quarters, 1900 (American Heritage Center); drawing from *Historical Images of Sweetwater County*.

To work their ever-expanding coal mines, and to keep local miners from successfully organizing for higher pay, the Union Pacific brought in Chinese workers, and built houses for them in a separate enclave near Mine No. 4, quickly labeled Chinatown. By 1880, there were about 40 of these houses, and Chinese workers represented at least 50% of the total workforce in the Union Pacific mines.
That old song “I Owe My Soul to the Company Store” could have been written by a resident of Rock Springs in the late 1880s. After taking control of the coal mines, the Union Pacific expanded their control over all aspects of the town, including the water, the labor force, housing, utilities and shipping as well as the company store. The formal town-site of Rock Springs, with lots, blocks, and streets, was eventually platted in 1881.
It was during this time, on September 2, 1885, that the Chinese Massacre occurred in Rock Springs. The 400 or so Chinese laborers who were brought to Rock Springs were treated differently from other workers at the coal mines. They lived in a segregated enclave and were paid differently, thus arousing suspicion among other workers. A growing anti-Chinese sentiment helped to turn a fight in one mine into a mob action that resulted in the death of 28 Chinese, and the burning of Chinatown.
Camp Pilot Butte, 1887, showing Chinese miners’ cabins in foreground (American Heritage Center)

The massacre prompted the United States Army to intervene, and under the pretext of protecting the United States Mail, the Army built Camp Pilot Butte and occupied Rock Springs until 1898.
Site of Chinatown, today (Mary Humstone 2005)

Today, nothing remains to indicate the site of Chinatown and the Chinese massacre; houses and parking lots have covered what is now an archeological site.
Between 1880 and 1900, Rock Springs' population skyrocketed from 763 to over 4,000 residents. Commercial development occurred on both South Front Street (now called South Main Street), and North Front Street, creating an unusual downtown area straddling the tracks. Although most of the buildings dating from this period have either been demolished or covered over, a few remain to give a sense of Rock Springs at the turn of the last century.
Possibly Rock Springs’ oldest wood-frame building, the Fountain Club, was constructed on South Front Street in the 1880s. The building was a typical design for its time, two stories, with large plate glass windows and a recessed, storefront entrance on the first floor. It was originally covered in clapboard siding, which was later covered with pressed-metal patterned to look like brick.
The Fountain Club is one of several buildings in Rock Springs with a pressed tin cornice, an example of the readymade building components that were manufactured in the East and shipped by railroad throughout the country, creating a standard look for commercial buildings nationwide.
Also typical of the times was the multipurpose use of the Fountain Club. The first floor housed a saloon, and the second floor was used at various times as a brothel, a dance hall, for civic meetings, for a church and even for a school. The rector of the Episcopal Church, which met in the Fountain Club for awhile, said their services took place “with spirits above, and spirits below.” By 1890, more substantial stone buildings such as the old Rock Springs National Bank (shown here next to the Fountain Club) were being built along South and North Front Streets.
The first home of the Rock Springs National Bank was down the street at 440 South Main, and it too exemplifies the excellent stone work of the early Rock Springs masons. After the Chinese Massacre, the Union Pacific stopped importing workers from China, and instead turned to Europe, recruiting miners from Finland, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia to join the British and Scots already working in Rock Springs. These workers brought with them traditional skills, which sometimes earned them a job outside the mine, such as building stone bridges for the Union Pacific railroad, or stone stores and homes for wealthy merchants. Much of the stonework that we see in Rock Springs today was constructed by European stone masons.
Although the south side of the tracks was more built up, North Front Street also had its share of commercial buildings by 1900. One of the few remaining from this era is this wood-frame structure that was originally a “saloon and bottleworks” (Novotny, 191). In 1903, 40% of Rock Springs’ businesses were saloons, all located in the area around the railroad tracks. The proximity to Camp Pilot Butte helped establish the north side as a prosperous commercial and entertainment district.
Chicago Meat Market, I.O.O.F. since 1912, 515 N Front St. (Sweetwater County Museum; Mary Humstone 2005)

Although built in 1909, this building exhibits the typical Italianate commercial design of the late 1800s. Like the Fountain Club, this is a frame, false-front structure (now covered with stucco), with unusually elaborate cast iron cornice and window hoods. The first floor originally housed the Chicago Meat Market, and the Odd Fellows have occupied the second floor since 1912.
A sure sign that Rock Springs had matured from a mining camp to a real town was the construction (in 1889) of the city's first opera house on the prominent corner of North Front and J Streets. The original building burned down, and was replaced by this two-story cut-stone structure in 1893 (NR p 18). In 1911 the United Mine Workers Union took over the old Edgar Opera House, and renamed it the “Labor Temple.”
Rock Springs was finally incorporated as a town in 1888, more than 20 years after its founding. Soon after, the citizens voted to build a city hall, and engaged Martin Kern, one of Salt Lake City’s most prolific architects. The city hall is significant as the first major construction project in Rock Springs that was not financed by the Union Pacific. Instead, it was paid for with sales of liquor licenses – which might explain the large number of licensed saloons in the town.
Kern chose the imposing Richardsonian Romanesque style, used for courthouses, libraries, train stations and other civic buildings in the East. The gray sandstone was quarried just outside the city, rough cut to give it a massive effect, and laid up by the same masons who built the State Penitentiary in Rawlins. The gables, towers, and rounded arches are all typical of the Richardsonian Romanesque style.
Clock tower, City Hall (Mary Humstone 2005)

Astute observers will note that each of the four faces of the clock in the tower tells a different time. When someone finally got around to investigating the problem, they found that there were no clockworks – the hands are nailed into position!
Wyoming State Miners Hospital (historic photos from American Heritage Center; top photo dated 1906; 2005 photo: Mary Humstone)

At the time of Wyoming statehood in 1890, most of the state’s population lived along the Union Pacific railroad. Each of the major towns along the Union Pacific line had been awarded a state institution: the capitol in Cheyenne, the University in Laramie, the prison in Rawlins and the state mental hospital in Evanston. Upon entering the Union, Wyoming received a federal land grant to build a hospital for miners, and Rock Springs was chosen as the location. The Wyoming State Miners Hospital was built high on a hill at the south end of C Street in 1892. It burned down in 1897, but was rebuilt and reopened the following year. The old hospital building was extensively remodeled around 1960. When a new hospital was built in the 1970s, this building was adaptively reused for Sweetwater County offices.
In keeping with a nationwide trend in the late 1800s, Rock Springs also built a nurses’ school. Nurses lived and took classes in this dormitory, and worked at the hospital.
The nurses’ school operated until 1941, when the University of Wyoming nursing school took over the job of training the state’s nurses – although the building continued to serve as a nurses’ dormitory for many years. The stately American Four-square-style building at 700 C St. now houses the County Attorney’s Office.
By 1900, the south side of the tracks, where blocks were laid out in an orderly fashion in contrast to the north side, had emerged as the preferred area to live. Railroad and coal company officials as well as merchants and cattle and sheep ranchers built substantial homes on B and C Streets.
Most of these early Rock Springs homes were based on the designs found in popular architectural pattern books, newspapers, or magazines. Within 20 years of its founding as a coal camp, Rock Springs had caught up with the rest of the nation in the latest building styles. While houses in Rock Springs tend to be smaller and less ostentatious than their eastern counterparts, elements of popular Victorian styles, such as Eastlake, are evident, even on modest dwellings.
Eastlake-style houses exhibit all the different shapes of wood moldings that were being produced in mills around the country, and shipped to places like Rock Springs by rail. This house on B Street is an excellent representative of this popular style.
Queen Anne house (plate from *Shoppell’s Modern Houses*, 1900)

The Queen Anne style features an irregular floor plan, with towers, turrets and other projections. Houses often combine stone, brick, wood clapboards and different shaped wood shingles in colorful patterns and textures, along with carved, turned and applied wood ornament.
While the large, Queen-Anne style homes such as those built by cattle barons in Cheyenne and prominent businessmen in Laramie are not found in Rock Springs, small-scale examples of this popular late 19th century style can be seen on B and C Streets.
Dugouts along Bitter Creek: “a conglomeration of dwellings” (American Heritage Center)

On the other end of the spectrum, many miners and their families had to make do with dugouts along Bitter Creek, as shown in this photograph. One newly arrived bride asked her husband why there were so many chimney pipes coming out of the ground, not knowing that below one of them was her new home. The infamous Calamity Jane lived in a dugout on M Street in the 1880s and 90s.
In the 1890s, workers’ housing was developed either by private entrepreneurs or the Union Pacific. The Union Pacific tended to develop residential areas adjacent to their mines, such as the district around Mine #4 *(NR, 50)*. The Union Pacific districts are laid out in a grid, in marked contrast to the earliest Rock Springs streets, and those developed by private entrepreneurs. The basic form of these late 19th century Union Pacific coal miners’ houses on 10th Street remains the same, while individual houses have been modified with porches, shutters, and new siding.
Union Pacific housing, c. 1910 (American Heritage Center); houses on 10th St and Clark St. (Mary Humstone 2005)

Also near the No. 4 Mine, the Union Pacific built 2-story duplexes, many of which can still be seen on 9th and 10th Streets.
More examples of workers housing (Mary Humstone 2005)

Most newly arrived immigrants lived in dugouts until they could afford a house. Aside from Chinatown, there were no ethnically delineated neighborhoods in Rock Springs; rather Rock Springs evolved as a city of many neighborhoods, each with an ethnic mix. Varied types of early 20th century workers’ housing, such as are pictured here, are scattered throughout Rock Springs' neighborhoods.
Shotgun houses, Rock Springs (Mary Humstone, 1998, 2005)

Rock Springs has many examples of the shotgun house, which is one room wide and three or four rooms deep, with no hall. Its name derives from the fact that there is a straight shot through the house, from front door to back.
Miners also lived in the many boarding houses scattered throughout the city. The Hodge House, shown here in a turn-of-the-century photo and today, was built next to the livery stable and feed store, and probably served as a boarding house.
The Union Pacific Railroad also had a presence in Rock Springs, although not nearly as great as that of the mining company. The railroad built its own set of houses for workers and officials, such as this set of three gable-front houses on Paulson Street, now almost entirely obscured by trees.
Rock Springs continued to expand during the first two decades of the 20th century. In addition to the Union Pacific, new coal companies began operation, adding to the number of workers employed in the area. New businesses sprung up in the downtown to serve the growing population. A large majority of Rock Springs’ historic buildings date from this period of growth before the Great Depression.
Outside of Rock Springs, coal camps such as Superior, Reliance, Winton and Dines grew into towns in their own right. Many residents have fond memories of growing up in these small, tightly knit communities. To them, Rock Springs was the big city, and they recall the excitement of coming into town once a week for shopping and entertainment.
Rock Springs UP Depot, 1900 (American Heritage Center); Rawlins UP Depot; Laramie UP Depot (Mary Humstone, 2005, 1998)

The Union Pacific Railroad started the 20th century off with a new brick depot, completed in 1900. The style of the depot reflects a popular trend for small depots, started by H.H. Richardson in the 1880s, with a wide, flaring eave supported by wooden brackets providing shelter for passengers and cargo. Plans for the depot came from the Office of the Chief Engineer of the Union Pacific in Omaha, and were similar to, but not exactly like, the plans for other small depots along the Union Pacific line.
In addition to being a business and social center for the area, Rock Springs was also the shipping center for goods going north to Pinedale and Jackson. The 1917 Union Pacific freight station just east of the depot reflects the growing importance of Rock Springs as a transportation hub.
An important development in architecture and construction during this period was the establishment of local brick plants. Once bricks were available locally and no longer had to be shipped from Salt Lake City, brick construction replaced stone or wood as the norm for downtown buildings. The decorative possibilities of brick are well illustrated on the upper floor of the Union Mercantile, which opened as an alternative to the Union Pacific Company Store, and operated in this location on K Street until 1978.
Right down the block on the corner of North Front and K Streets is a similar early 20th century commercial building that has not changed much since it opened its doors as Heitz Hardware in 1923. Many residents of Rock Springs and nearby towns remember eating ice cream and watching the comings and goings on North Front Street, when this building housed Parker Brothers Drugs.
Dominating the downtown skyline is another building exhibiting the use of popular 20th century materials, the First National Bank, designed in 1919 by Walter J Cooper of Salt Lake City and Daniel Spani [pron. Spain-ee] of Rock Springs. Spani became Sweetwater County’s first and only architect when he arrived in Rock Springs in 1911, a distinction he retained until the 1930s.

With its 3-part division into base, office block and cornice, its large, Chicago-style windows, glazed terra cotta walls and applied, sculptural ornament, the bank building recalls the office buildings of Chicago School architect Louis Sullivan.
With the growth of industry in the 1920s, and the huge amount of goods being manufactured in the United States, retailing went from selling things people needed, to selling things people wanted. Just as industrial designers were redesigning everything from toasters to vacuum cleaners to give them a modern look and make the older models seem obsolete, so too retailers had to find ways to make their buildings stand out from the crowd, and attract customers to their stores. During this time a number of older wood and stone buildings in Rock Springs were given makeovers and emerged as gleaming new emblems of the Roaring 20s. The former Stockgrowers’ Mercantile was covered with shiny, glazed terra cotta bricks, and given new, larger windows on both the main and upper floors, as well as an imposing, Neo-classical style entry.

Stockgrowers’ Mercantile (Sweetwater County Museum; Mary Humstone 2005)
New Studio Photo, S Front St (Mary Humstone 2005)

The building housing the New Studio Photography store on South Front was created from two wooden, false front buildings, which were joined with a brick façade. The canted entrances with large display windows, and the decorative brick and terra cotta accents, are typical of early 20th century commercial design.
The early 20th century also witnessed a new retail phenomenon – the chain store. The nation’s second Golden Rule store, which later became J.C. Penney, opened in Rock Springs in 1903, and moved into this building on North Front Street in 1929.
543-45 North Front (Mary Humstone 2005)

In the next block to the east, the F. W. Woolworth company rehabilitated two adjacent buildings in the 1930s, to create this building, the store’s home for almost 40 years. Woolworth’s stores were easily recognizable by their red signs with gold lettering.
Another chain store, the J. J. Newberry Company, occupied the first story of the Rex Hotel building. This infiltration of national chains into downtowns, and later outlying shopping malls, spelled the end of most of the small businesses that used to fill the downtown buildings.
The high hopes and expectations of the local population in this period before the Great Depression are reflected in the public, educational, and institutional buildings they constructed, many of which have survived to the present. The Federal Post Office, built in 1911, is one of many nationwide designed by James Knox Taylor, the supervising architect of the U.S. Treasury Department in Washington, DC from 1897 to 1912.
Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893 (Mary Humstone collection)

Influenced by the architecture of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Taylor announced a “return to the classic style of architecture” for government buildings.
The Neo-classical revival style used elements of classical Greek and Roman architecture, such as rounded arches, formal door surrounds, pilasters and columns, and cornices, and updated them for modern buildings. With its large, rounded windows, formal entry and smooth brick walls, the Rock Springs post office is an excellent example of early 20th century Neo-classical architecture.
Masonic Temple (Mary Humstone 2005)

The Neoclassical Revival style was favored for all types of public buildings from small towns to major cities. The three-story Masonic Temple constructed in 1913, also illustrates the Neoclassical style, with its Greek, temple front entrance and brick pilasters. Although the entire building is built of brick, the first floor has a horizontal emphasis suggesting stonework, while the upper two stories emphasize the vertical. Upstairs, the ballroom floor is supported by railroad boxcar springs, and actually bounces to the rhythm of the dancers.
Another civic building erected during this period in the Neoclassical style is the 1908 Carnegie Library. In the 1970s, the library and the Church of the Latter Day Saints were both encased in an aluminum and glass wrapper and joined across Blair Street to create the Library and Community Fine Arts Center.
By 1910, at least 50% of the workers in Rock Springs were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. While ethnic enclaves did not exist in the city, ethnic groups maintained their identity in a number of ways, from dances and musical events to churches and ethnic societies. These societies were originally formed to provide health care and death benefits to workers and their families, but gradually expanded into social organizations. The Slovenski Dom (or Slovenian National Home), built in 1913, is representative of the halls that were built throughout the United States to accommodate the activities of the fraternal organizations, and to help maintain a cultural identity.
Ethnic bands at Slovenski Dom (Sweetwater County Museum)

The Rock Springs’ Slovenski Dom was used for meetings of Italian and Croatian as well as Slovenian lodges, and was also the site of dances and the Grape Festival, held annually from 1922 to 1988. It provided a venue for the preservation and promotion of ethnic musical and dance traditions. Although no longer used for meetings and dances, the Dom is an important symbol of Rock Springs’ diverse ethnic roots.
Elks Lodge, 1924 (Mary Humstone 2005)

The most imposing of all Rock Springs’ fraternal buildings is the Elks Lodge, one of the masterpieces of Rock Springs architect Daniel D. Spani, The Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks was formed in New York City in 1868, and lodges were soon after organized in cities across the country. Like the ethnic lodges, the Elks were originally a welfare organization that evolved into a social organization.
Rock Springs Elks Lodge; Villa Borghese, Rome, Italy, 1613 (Mary Humstone 2005 and personal collection)

Members of the Elks tended to be among the more prosperous people in town and the building they built in 1924, based on Italian Renaissance models, reflected their prominence in the community. Like palazzos of the Italian Renaissance, the building is raised up on a base of rusticated masonry (in this case brick), and features segmental and pedimented window hoods, rounded arches and sculptural appliqués.
Union Pacific Old Timers Association Clubhouse, 1929 (Mary Humstone 2005)

The Union Pacific got into the action too, with the construction of the Union Pacific Old Timers Club, a recreational and social center for Union Pacific Coal Company employees, designed by company architect James Libby. The 1929 center is now used for community recreation.
Churches were also an important part of life in Rock Springs—places to cement ethnic as well as religious traditions. Our Lady of Sorrows Parish was founded by Irish immigrants in 1884, and grew rapidly as immigrants from Italy, Austria and Poland moved to Rock Springs to work in the coal mines. The current church was built in 1931, when the congregation had outgrown the small wooden church they built in 1888. The Boston firm of Maginnis and Walsh designed the church in the Romanesque Revival style. With terra cotta trim, clay roof tiles and interior marble from Italy, and stained glass windows from Germany, the building itself is as international as the congregation it houses.
In 1910, the Slavic people broke off from Our Lady of Sorrows Parish and established a church of their own, Saints Cyril and Methodius, on the north side of the tracks. They acquired land and laid the cornerstone for a new church in 1912, but were forced to worship in the basement for the next 14 years until adequate funds were raised to complete the church. The parishioners spoke several Slavic languages, and on the 25th anniversary of the parish, masses were said, in Slovak, Slovenian and Croatian.
Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, 1925 (Mary Humstone 2005)

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church had an equally diverse congregation, consisting of not only Greeks but also Russians, Serbians, Montenegrins, Slavs, Bulgarians, Romanians and Dalmatians. The church started in 1923, when it was estimated there were 300 Greeks in Rock Springs, and 200 in Superior, a mining camp to the east. The building was dedicated in 1925.
North Front Street (Sweetwater County Museum)

The introduction of the automobile, and its growing popularity in the early 20th century, had a profound impact on cities of all sizes. Drivers of these new-fangled machines had to navigate narrow Main Streets designed for pedestrians and horses and buggies. As automobiles became larger and more numerous, parking space suddenly became an important amenity.
Western Auto transit building, B St (Mary Humstone 2005)

The automobile brought new types of buildings to the Rock Springs landscape. Auto dealerships, gas stations and garages opened up to serve the new owners of the “horseless carriages.”
With the advent of the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway, which ran right through the center of Rock Springs, entrepreneurs turned their attention to tourists and traveling salesmen who were using the new route instead of traveling by train. The Park Hotel opened in 1914, catering to “commercial men and automobile tourists.” Designed by local architect Daniel Spani, the Park offered the latest amenities including running hot and cold water in every room. Though no longer operating as a hotel, the Park still looks much the same as it did when it welcomed guests arriving in Model Ts.
Plaza Hotel, 430 S Main; Rex Hotel, 411 N. Front (Mary Humstone 2005)

Other hotels opened in downtown during this time, including the Rex on North Front Street and the Plaza (formerly Yellowstone) on South Front. These early 20th century entrepreneurs did not anticipate the eventual relocation of overnight lodging to the outskirts of town. Although the Park Hotel continued as the “hub of western Wyoming” well into the 1950s, most downtown hotels could not survive the competition from the new motor courts.
Motor courts c. 1930 (Sweetwater County Museum); Motel signs, Pilot Butte Avenue (Mary Humstone 2005)

As automobile tourism increased, travelers found it easier and more convenient to stay right on the highway, where there was ample free parking, rather than trying to negotiate the narrow, crooked and crowded city streets. Motor courts and motels sprouted up on the outskirts of town, on the route of the Lincoln Highway, and later US Hwy 30.
Rock Springs coal sign (Sweetwater County Museum; Mary Humstone 2004)

In 1929, the Wyoming Coal Operators installed a neon-lit archway over the Lincoln Highway where it crossed the tracks at C Street. The “Home of Rock Springs Coal” welcome sign was a landmark on the route for many years, until the road was widened and it had to be removed. In the 1990s it was restored and replaced, and its bright neon once again proclaims Rock Springs’ coal heritage.
By 1910, American house styles had changed from the fanciful, elaborate Victorian-era styles to simpler, more modern designs with balanced proportions and minimal decoration. Early 20th century styles such as the Bungalow, Craftsman Cottage, Prairie style and American Four Square, as well as the more traditional Colonial Revival, all featured simple, clean lines, flat surfaces, and natural materials with little or no applied ornamentation. These houses generally have low-pitched roofs and wide overhangs which give them a comforting rather than impressive appearance, and large porches that connect the house with its surroundings. The Taliaferro [pronounced tahl-e-ver] House is an example of the type of house built by prosperous ranchers and businessmen who developed property on the south side of town. From its perch on Cedar St, the Taliaferro House looks down on all of central Rock Springs.
The house was built in 1912 by an Italian stonemason, of sandstone quarried south of Rock Springs. The style is American Foursquare, a box-like shape, with two floors of 4 rooms each, topped with a hipped roof, which flares slightly at the corners. The original owner, a banker, supposedly built it as a way to keep his wife in Wyoming (it didn’t work!). Thomas Taliaferro bought the house in 1914, and it has remained in the same family ever since. The house is furnished with family heirlooms from famous Virginia estates such as Woodlawn Plantation and Stratford, the home of the Lee family.
“The Castle” (Sweetwater County Museum; Mary Humstone 2005)

The unusual stone house across from the Taliaferro house illustrates the old saying, “Don’t get mad, get even!” A German stonecutter named Schlacter had hoped to get the commission to build the Taliaferro house. When he lost the bid, he got even by building his own stone mansion, complete with crenellated towers and an arcade of Romanesque arches. In the 1970s the towers were topped with wide, flat roofs that add a space age element to the already unusual structure.
Not far from these houses is Wardell Court, a housing development built in 1920 by the Union Pacific for its upper-level managers. While the Union Pacific had built company housing throughout the West, Wardell Court was its first development designed exclusively for high ranking officials. Nineteen houses were built around a grassy courtyard, creating a park-like atmosphere in keeping with the City Beautiful movement of the early 20th century. Designed by local Union Pacific Coal Company Assistant Chief Engineer James Libby, Wardell Court bears a striking resemblance to the 1929 design for Radburn, NJ, considered a model of garden-suburb housing (NR, 8.1).
7 Wardell Court (Abby Van Vlerah 2005)

#7 Wardell Court was a large boarding house and recreation center for coal company clerks. It was later used as housing for nurses studying at the Rock Springs General Hospital, and is now an apartment house.
Bunning Park (Mary Humstone 2005)

Wardell Court, with its trees and grassy lawns, was an anomaly in Rock Springs, which was famously devoid of any vegetation. But it triggered a city improvement and beautification movement that included controlling and re-routing Bitter Creek, which was moved to its present location in 1924. The original creek bed, where people were still living in dugouts as late as the 1920s, became Channel Drive and Bunning Park. Articles on how to plant and maintain street trees were published in the local paper, and the Union Pacific sponsored “most beautiful yard” contests for residents. Current residents, when discussing dramatic changes in the city, mention landscaping as something that totally changed the character of Rock Springs.
Bungalows, were a very popular early 20th century house style that originated in California and quickly spread throughout the United States. Considered a true American design, the Bungalow is generally 1 or 1 ½ stories, with a low, sloping roof and a wide front porch.
Boucvalt-Gras House, 616 Elias St (Mary Humstone 2005); A Bungalow Design from *Bungalows, Camps and Mountain Houses*, 1915

Many variations can be seen throughout Rock Springs, indicative of the city’s growth in the first few decades of the 20th century.
Bungalows and other styles of homes were offered by retailers such as Sears Roebuck and Company, starting in the early years of the 20th century. Houses complete with all fixtures were chosen from a catalog, delivered by the railroad and assembled by the homeowner or a hired carpenter. Many homes in Rock Springs such as this Bungalow on B Street closely resemble the houses illustrated in the Sears catalog.
The economy of Rock Springs has always been heavily dependent upon the Union Pacific Railroad and its coal mines, and for the first 100 years of its existence the economy rode the roller coaster of market demand for coal. Production plummeted in the first years of the Great Depression, and then began a steady rise with increased production for the war effort. Building in Rock Springs came to a near standstill in 1929, and only gradually recovered.
431 N Front St; former Manila Bar, Pilot Butte Ave. (Mary Humstone 2005)

When the economy began to recover, rebuilding started slowly. Older buildings were outfitted with new fronts, such as the black and white ceramic tile fronts added to the old Crystal Meat Market on North Front, and the old Manila Bar on Pilot Butte.
Tudor Revival (Mary Humstone 2005)

Popular house styles in the period between the world wars included miniature versions of historical styles such as Tudor Revival, modeled on an English country cottage. Its steeply pitched roof, uneven eaves, and small doorway give the effect of a storybook house.
Spanish mission revival style uses curved parapets, rounded arches, smooth, stuccoed walls and often tile roofs to recall the Spanish missions of New Mexico and California.
The Colonial Revival style was often the choice of wealthy businessmen because of its association with the elegant 18th and 19th century houses of New England. Colonial Revival houses, such as this one at 20 Wardell Court, are marked by simple, symmetrical facades, outside chimneys and classical elements such as pilasters and columned porches. As you walk up B or C Street from the railroad tracks, you can see the progression of house styles, starting with early Victorian era styles, and progressing to Bungalows and period revivals.
The 1941 WPA Guide to Wyoming described Rock Springs as “a city of large gray shaft houses and black smokestacks, spur tracks and crooked streets, fine homes and tiny shacks, modern business houses and old, tumble-down, false-front frame structures…Like many mining communities,” the authors observed, “Rock Springs is cosmopolitan, with a population including 47 nationalities. On winding K Street are French bakeries, Greek candy shops, a Chinese restaurant, a Jewish market.” (p245) Actually, 56 nationalities have been documented in Rock Springs, but unfortunately the culinary offerings are no longer as diverse as they were in the mid-20th century.
After WWII, the coal industry did not rebound but sank to a record low. The greatest blow to the coal industry at that time was the change from steam to diesel locomotives by the nation’s railroads and the shift to natural gas and oil for home heating. The Wyoming coal industry remained depressed until the late 1960s when the building of numerous power plants began both in and out of state requiring inexpensive, low sulfur coals like those found in Wyoming.

The Union Pacific Coal Company pulled out of Rock Springs in 1953. The fact that Rock Springs survived proved that it was more than just a Union Pacific coal camp, but a city in its own right.
Although the Union Pacific closed its coal mining operation in and around Rock Springs, other industries gradually filled the void. The economic base shifted from coal to oil, natural gas and trona. By 1950, the era of the company town had ended, and most of the outlying camps were closed. Workers lived in town and commuted to their jobs, and services such as stores and schools became concentrated in urban areas. Rock Springs benefited from the demise of the many small towns that had once spread across Sweetwater County.
As outlying coal mines closed, the miners’ houses, and even their landscaping, were uprooted and sold. In 1957, one enterprising developer created an entire neighborhood, Belleview, from houses moved in from the Stansbury mine.
Stansbury and Belleview (Sweetwater County Museum; Jake Courtney 2005)

While owners have remodeled and personalized their houses over the years, the basic Stansbury models can still be identified, and can be found not only in Belleview, but throughout Rock Springs.
Moving houses has been a long tradition in Rock Springs, starting from the earliest settlement when houses and a depot were moved in from Blairtown. Houses from the mining camps have provided badly needed affordable housing during times of economic boom. This tradition of moving the company houses as soon as the mines closed explains why there are so few “ghost” towns around Rock Springs. Very little was left to remind us of the camps, such as Gunn, Winton, Dines and Stansbury – which is another reason why it’s important to recognize these structures in Rock Springs.
Map showing growth of Rock Springs from historic downtown (from community meeting, 4/05)

The development of outlying commercial areas such as the Plaza shopping center in the 1960s drew business away from downtown, and the completion of Interstate 80 brought more changes, diverting traffic (and business) out to the interchanges. Gas stations, motels and other services moved to the outskirts of town, and other businesses followed, especially to the north and the west.
In the early 1970s, as southwest Wyoming began to boom once again with the construction of the Jim Bridger Power Plant and development of oil, natural gas, trona and uranium resources, Rock Springs began a city beautification program. The city considered many of the historic buildings in and around the central business district to be “glaring eyesores” and “dangerous to inquisitive children.” A concerted campaign brought about the destruction of many buildings that had stood for nearly one hundred years, such as the Beckwith-Quinn Store, the Rialto Theater, and the Northside State Bank.
Subsidence problems contributed to the demise of downtown Rock Springs – after all, the city was built on top of mining tunnels. Funds from the Abandoned Mine Lands program helped fill in the tunnels, and also helped to restore the centerpiece of Rock Springs, the old city hall, and create the Rock Springs Museum.
The boom and bust periods of the past 35 years can be read in the buildings in Rock Springs. The new Recreation Center, one of several civic improvements financed in the height of the boom of the 1970s…
… the loss of local downtown businesses in the bust of the mid-1980s…. 
Veterans subdivision (Mary Humstone 2005)

and in 2005, booming again, with “Veterans Subdivision,” a 21st century version of Belleview, made up of houses moved in from Table Rock, a former oil and gas company town east of Rock Springs.
While many of Rock Springs’ historic buildings have been lost, recent preservation projects, such as the rehabilitation of this shotgun house for a Law Office, have preserved a sense of the city’s history while putting buildings back into productive use.
Union Pacific Depot (Mary Humstone 2005)

The city-owned train depot has been rehabilitated and is now rented for weddings and other special events;
Old U.S. Post Office, now used as boat shop (Mary Humstone 2005)

and the old post office is being adaptively used as a boat shop, ensuring its continued maintenance.
Trucks stranded in Rock Springs, 1949 (Sweetwater County Museum)

Current residents of Rock Springs see themselves as modern-day versions of the pioneers and miners who first settled this area. “You have to be tough to live here,” one resident remarked. “It’s a struggle to get anything here and we’re proud of what we’ve got.” Many families have been here for generations, and family and neighborhood ties run strong. In spite of the harsh climate and barren landscape, residents love their city. “It’s a caring and giving community; you stay here because of the people,” they say.
Residents are also proud of their diverse heritage, and continue to celebrate it with events such as “Taste of the World” and International Days.
The buildings, structures and places that remain from Rock Springs' past provide a tangible connection to its proud traditions of coal mining, small businesses, ethnic diversity and neighborhood and family ties. They give residents a feeling of home, trigger memories among old timers, and fascinate first-time visitors.
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