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Tracks Across Wyoming

Mary Humstone
University of Wyoming

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The Union Pacific Railroad had a powerful impact on the physical and cultural landscape of the Tracks Across Wyoming corridor, and little of its influence has been erased by later development.

By the late 1880s, 70% of Wyoming's population lived along the Union Pacific line. That's why the Territorial Legislature established Wyoming's major public institutions there — the State Capitol in Cheyenne, the University in Laramie, the Penitentiary in Rawlins, and the Asylum in Evanston.

Many clues to the colorful history of the Tracks Across Wyoming corridor are visible today, thanks to historic preservation efforts that are restoring depots, theaters, hotels, forts, prisons — even an entire company town. Local museums tell stories of the people who made their homes in the corridor as well as those who passed through. Walking and driving tours are available to guide visitors to nearby trail, railroad and Lincoln Highway sites. Explore this rich history in our communities and the spaces in between, and enjoy making your own Tracks Across Wyoming.

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TRAVELING THROUGH TIME

Exploring Tracks Across Wyoming is like traveling through time.

In Pine Bluffs, at the northern edge of Wyoming, anthropological excavations reveal traces of American Indian migration routes. Overlapping them are the trails of cattle drives from Texas in the late 1860s.

In far western Wyoming, pioneer trail camps share space with the original railroad grade. In the Continental Divide Basin between Rawlins and Rock Springs, the old road bed of the Lincoln Highway can be seen to the north of the interstate, and the tracks of the Union Pacific to the south. Just east of Rock Springs, an Overland Trail stage station overlooks both the railroad tracks and the highway.

Travellers’ needs are always the same: water, food, supplies, and shelter. The forts and stage stations of the mid-19th century gradually gave way to train depots and hotels, which were themselves replaced in the first half of the 20th century with filling stations, campgrounds, and motor courts. Today, chain motels and truck stops along the interstate serve the same function as the stage stops of more than a century ago.

Each form of transportation had its own timetable. Travellers on foot and in wagons took weeks to cross Wyoming, while trains could pass through in a day, and today’s automobiles whiz by in a matter of hours.

EMIGRANT TRAILS
- 2,300 miles
- 15 miles per day average speed
- 153 days (5 months) from Independence to Oregon

PONY EXPRESS
- 2,300 miles
- 220 miles per day average speed
- 10 days from St. Joseph to Sacramento

OVERLAND STAGE
- 2,300 miles
- 100 miles per day average speed
- 23 days (3 weeks) from St. Joseph to Sacramento

UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD
- 1,900 miles
- 325 miles per day average speed
- 7 days from Omaha to Sacramento

LINCOLN HIGHWAY
- 3,300 miles
- 100 miles per day average speed
- 33 days from New York to San Francisco

When you travel at high speed through southern Wyoming on the interstate, the landscape may look empty — but looks are deceiving. This route is lined with historic tracks.

The tracks were made by American Indians travelling on foot between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains, by covered wagons headed to Oregon, California, and Utah; by daring Pony Express riders and bouncing stagecoaches; by the steel rails of America’s first transcontinental railroad; and by automobile tires on the Lincoln Highway, U.S. 30 and today’s Interstate 80. Overhead the contrails of jets follow the route of the nation’s first cross-country air mail service.

All these tracks linked the east and west coasts, and opened up the country in between to settlement and commerce. They all ran right through southern Wyoming. The remnants are still visible — if you know where to look for them. These historic traces make for a rich history in this part of Wyoming. We invite you to make your own tracks across Wyoming exploring the layers of history that surround you.

The map below reveals a natural corridor through southern Wyoming’s high plains and mountains that has channeled the flow of goods, people and information across the continent for more than 10,000 years.