Community Treasures of Green River

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The Community Treasures of Green River

A Project of the Green River Historic Preservation Commission and the University of Wyoming American Studies Program
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The Community Treasures of Green River 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 Green River 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.
Castle Rock, Green River (photo Randy Wagner)

The City of Green River takes its name from the river which flows through the center of town, and its identity from the impressive rock formations that tower above it. Dubbed by a 1920s booster as “Nature’s Art Shop,” the unusual formations have attracted the attention of travelers for generations, serving as landmarks for emigrants on the Overland Trail, passengers on the Union Pacific Railroad and automobile tourists on the Lincoln Highway. An 1877 article in *Leslie’s Magazine* reads, “The buttes around Green River are wonderful in size, shape, color, and variety; there are towers, castles, and cathedrals, bulbous knobs and excrescences, colossal mushrooms, ‘giant’s club and giant’s teapots,’ forts, temples, tombs, and shapes of things unknown, possibly beneath; all carved out of rich red and brown and cream-colored limestone, strata upon strata of varying color.
The Green River Palisades were immortalized in paintings such as this one by Thomas Moran in 1881. Local residents have named all the different formations, and refer to them with pride and fondness. Some talk about climbing Castle Rock at various stages of their lives, as kids playing, on dates in high school, and later with their own families. Others simply like to admire them, especially the colors at sunrise and sunset.
Major John Wesley Powell first put Green River on the map, with his expeditions down the Green and Colorado Rivers in 1869 and 1871. Unloading his boats from rail cars and embarking from the newly established town, Powell navigated unknown waters to explore the last unmapped region in the country. It was on these expeditions that Powell developed his scientific approach to land use, which had a profound and lasting influence on public policy. As Wallace Stegner said of Powell, “He would be a prime mover in the establishment of the federal government as the sponsor of science for the public welfare…[He] would preach conservation of an already partly gutted continent and planning for the development of what remained….By the end of his career, he would know the west as few men did, and understand its problems better than any.” (Stegner, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian)
Expedition Island today (Mary Humstone 2005)

Today, Powell’s legacy is celebrated at Expedition Island, a place for community recreation and events, with nature trails, a community recreation center and a whitewater park.
Powell may have put Green River on the map, but it was the railroad that kept Green River on the map.

The power of the railroad to make or break towns is evident in the history of Green River. Bryan, twelve miles beyond Green River, originally usurped Green River’s position as provider of services to the Union Pacific.

H.M. Hook, James Moore and Samuel Field were the astute businessmen who obtained land on the Green River before the Union Pacific Railroad Act of 1867, which gave the Union Pacific huge tracts of land on either side of the railroad right-of-way. The Union Pacific retaliated, building through Green River and laying out a new town 12 miles west at Bryan on the Black's Fork River. Thus Green River shrank from 2,000 to a mere 101 souls and, if it were not for the interference of Mother Nature, would have dwindled into obscurity.
Photos of Green River and Bryan today (Mary Humstone, 2005)

During the summer of 1872 the Black's Fork dried up and the Union Pacific was forced to move the switching point back to Green River, saving the town and paving the way for continued growth and development – and relegating Bryan to the status of ghost town.
Union Pacific roundhouse and machine shops (Sweetwater County Museum)

The company built a 15-stall roundhouse, and machine and repair shops in the newly-revitalized town, and when the Oregon Short Line railroad to the Pacific Northwest was established in 1884, Green River became an important division point on the railroad.
Green River depot (W.H. Jackson photo, Union Pacific Railroad Collection, courtesy Sweetwater County Museum)

—although it would be another 25 years before this lowly section house was replaced with a real train depot.
Green River’s longevity was assured when it beat out South Pass as county seat of Sweetwater County in 1875. South Pass didn’t concede easily; in fact, its leaders refused to relinquish the county records, and officials from Green River had to travel to South Pass in order to take possession of them. The handsome brick courthouse built in 1876 served the county for 90 years, before being demolished in 1966.
Green River became one of the regular eating stations for passengers on the transcontinental railroad. During a 20-minute stop, passengers could disembark, get a bite to eat at one of the restaurants lining Railroad Avenue, and admire Western curiosities such as caged bears and mountain lions, and displays of fossils and petrified wood.
Green River, 1884 (Sweetwater County Museum)

By the time the “Pacific Tourist” railroad travelers’ guide was published in 1884, Green River was a lively town of “nearly 500 persons… now one of the best kept hostelries on the road.”
Travelers who disembarked from the train in 1884 would have seen the Green River Brewery on West Railroad Street. Opened by a German immigrant in 1872, it was the first brewery in the territory of Wyoming. Beer seemed to be more important than education at that time, since the brewery preceded Green River’s first school by a year.
Beer wagons outside Sweetwater County Courthouse (Sweetwater County Museum)

The brewery supplied beer to the railroad towns and to the mining towns near South Pass, hauling barrels of it at a time in horse-drawn wagons. When word got out that a beer wagon had overturned on the rutted road, people would come from miles around to help themselves to the beer.
Spinner House (historic photo: Sweetwater County Museum; 2005 photo: Jake Courtney)

This Italianate-style brick house was built by Karl Spinner, also a German immigrant and a sheep rancher, who bought the Brewery in 1880. When Spinner moved to Salt Lake City 11 years later, he sold everything – the house, brewery and sheep business—to his brewmaster Hugo Gaensslen [pron. gen-slen], who went on to become a prominent businessman and politician, serving as mayor for 13 years.
Samuel Sloan, Italian villa, 1870 (*Sloan's Homestead Architecture*, 1870); Spinner House (Sweetwater County Museum)

The Spinner house is a modest adaptation of villas built in cities and country estates throughout the United States starting in the 1850s, as part of a renewed interest in the palaces of the Italian Renaissance.
The rest of Railroad Avenue at this time was hardly reminiscent of a Renaissance city, but it was a booming commercial street, with grocery stores and a meat market, saloons and billiard halls, restaurants, drug stores and an opera house. Most of these commercial buildings were either wood frame with false fronts, or built of adobe brick and stone. Very few of these buildings survive today, and those that do have been covered over with modern materials and are no longer recognizable.
Young Grocery Store (now Ponderosa Bar), 41 E. RR Ave, 1872 (Mary Humstone, 2005)

Under the façade of the Ponderosa bar on Railroad Avenue is an adobe brick structure built for the Young Grocery store in 1872. From here a traveler could catch a ride on the daily Colorado-Wyoming stagecoach to the gold fields of South Pass City, Atlantic City or Miners Delight.
The Ward House, better known as the old Wyoming Saloon, is one of the few recognizable structures from early Green River. Built in 1872 of local adobe brick, it was a lively spot in town, with a saloon and restaurant on the first floor, and a dance hall above. The second story arch is still faintly visible under the paint.
Former Wyoming Saloon (originally Ward House), 65 RR Ave (1872), flanked by old Family Groceries (on left) and old Crisman Drug (now Embassy Bar) on right (1870) (Mary Humstone 2005)

The building on the left side was originally the Family Grocery Store (now R&J Ceramics), and on the right was Chrisman Drug (now the Embassy Bar).
The Union Pacific Saloon, now the Green Gander Bar, is another adobe brick structure dating from the 1870s, with the distinction of being the oldest operating bar in town. It was well known for its fine wines, liquors and cigars.
Like most railroad towns, Green River grew up with commercial and residential development on both sides of the railroad tracks. The Union Pacific maintenance yards were located on the south side, and as this 1898 photograph shows, there was a small commercial area and several scattered homes across the tracks from the depot. All of these buildings were demolished in a 1920s track widening project.
Union Pacific section worker house, 356 Railroad Ave, 1904 (Mary Humstone, 2005)

These small, gable-roofed homes were built for railroad workers close to the tracks, where they could be easily found by the dispatcher. Four of these 1904 homes remain in the 300 block of Railroad Avenue.
At the same time, up the hill from the tracks, members of Green River’s business community were building homes in the popular Eastlake, Stick and Queen Anne styles. Most of these early Green River homes were modeled on designs found in architectural pattern books, newspapers, or magazines. Within 20 years of its founding as a railroad town, Green River had caught up with the rest of the nation in the latest building styles.
Edward Morris House, 6 West 2nd North, 1888 (Mary Humstone, 2005)

This house on West Second North Street, with its decorative wooden truss in the gable end and bay window with multi-colored panes, is a good example of the Eastlake style, popularized by eastern architects such as George and Charles Palliser and R. W. Shoppell. The house was built by Edward Morris, son of Esther Morris of South Pass City, who is well known for her role in making Wyoming Territory the first in the country to give women the right to vote and hold political office, and as the country’s first female Justice of the Peace.
Morris House, house on Railroad Ave, (Mary Humstone, 2005); plate from R.W. Shoppell, *Houses, Cottages and Villas*, 1880

The Eastlake style was based on comfort rather than a particularly impressive exterior appearance, and is recognizable by its flat surfaces and applied wood ornamentation – what one observer described as “queer windows of ‘bull’s-eye’ glass, turned spindles, fringes and frills around porch pillars, an effusion of sunflowers and rosettes, and myriad jigsaw curlicues dripping from the eaves.” These details can be found on several houses in Green River.
By the last quarter of the 19th century, a wide variety of wood moldings and other building components were being produced in mills and factories around the country. Those in Green River who could afford it, could order almost anything they might need from a catalog and have it shipped to them by the railroad. The result was houses that looked almost the same, whether they were in Green River, Wyoming, or Green Bay, Wisconsin.
Casa de Oracion Church (former St John’s Episcopal Church), 1892 (Mary Humstone, 2005)

During this early period, Green River residents built a number of beautiful churches, only one of which, the former St. John’s Episcopal Church, remains today. With the exception of the enclosed entry and side steps, the 1885 Carpenter-Gothic-style church looks much the same as it did more than 100 years ago.
Thanks to the railroad, Green River continued to grow over the next several decades, and reached a population of 1000 by 1900. Railroad Avenue was largely built up by this time, and a new civic core began to develop on Center Street north of the tracks.
Joining the county courthouse on North Center Street was the Carnegie Library, built with the help of a $20,000 Carnegie grant in 1906. Like many Carnegie libraries across the country, the Green River library was built in the Neo-classical Revival style which gave it an aura of importance and respectability.
Influenced by the architecture of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, architects began to favor 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 a symmetrical façade with a central entrance, columns, pediments and sculptural relief, and updated them for modern buildings.
Carnegie Library c. 1910 (Sweetwater County Museum) and 2005 (Mary Humstone 2005)

With its raised main floor above a rusticated base, formal entry with Ionic columns supporting a decorated pediment, and its detailed cornice and corner treatments, the Carnegie Library is an excellent example of early 20th century Neo-classical architecture. In the 1980s, when a new county library was built, the Carnegie Library was remodeled to house the offices of the county judge – a great example of adaptive use of a historic building!
Green River’s third schoolhouse, 1891 (American Heritage Center, Sweetwater County Museum); Masonic Temple (since 1926) (Mary Humstone 2005)

Just down the street, on Flaming Gorge Way, Green River’s third schoolhouse was completed in 1891. The original building, which was topped with a bell tower, combined elements of the Italianate and the Stick styles, with bracketed eaves, a central gable and ornamental stick-work. Most of these ornamental features, as well as the bell tower, were removed or covered over sometime after the building was converted to a Masonic Temple in 1926. In addition to its three large classrooms for grades 1 – 9, the school housed the county library until 1906. It was eventually extended through grade 12, and served as the high school until the Lincoln School opened in 1922.
In 1909, the Green River Commercial Club, deploring the fact that this important rail center was operating out of an old section house, petitioned the Union Pacific for a new depot. Calling the delay in building a new station “a serious draw back to the growth of our city,” the petitioners stated, “For more than twenty years the railroad officials have been cognizant of the wretched accommodations afford the traveling public at Green River; and while elaborate and costly plans have been prepared for a station, Green River has been deprived of any depot accommodations better than a small section house erected many years ago. We have a commodious Courthouse, a handsome Carnegie Library, a newly constructed Union Pacific Club House, and the promise of a Federal Post Office building to cost $100,000. If the Union Pacific will at an early date construct a suitable railroad station it will be a substantial proof that they are interested in the improvement of Green River, and be highly appreciated by its citizens.”
Union Pacific Depot, 1910 (Sweetwater County Museum)

What they got was worth waiting for: a magnificent, Neo-classical style brick building, the second largest depot in the state, which was quickly dubbed “one of the finest stations between Omaha and Ogden.” A newspaper reporter raved, “The citizens of Green River have never viewed a more beautiful sight in the history of the town, than that witnessed on last Monday evening, October 24, when the new depot building was lighted for the first time.”

The 2-story, colonnaded, center section of the depot housed passenger services, including a large waiting room, separate waiting rooms for men and women, ticket offices and check and baggage rooms, with offices above. Baggage and freight facilities extended to the east, and a dining room occupied the western wing. With the completion of the new depot, many Union Pacific employees were moved to Green River from Ogden, Utah. A local reporter was happy to report that they “all were agreeably surprised at our progressive little city.”
The railroad dining room, which operated from 1910 until World War II, was described as being very elegant and luxurious, with “white linen table clothes, napkins, fine silver and superb food, combined with metropolitan atmosphere and excellent service” (Reynolds, February 15, 1978). The room was the preferred setting in town for special events, such as the annual luncheons and banquets of the Women’s Club, Community Club and other civic groups. After the dining room closed, this space was dedicated for the use of the Union Pacific Old Timers’ Clubs.
Unfortunately, many of the other Union Pacific buildings that played an important role in Green River’s history, have been demolished, including the 1886 Union Pacific Hotel, which was moved across the street when the new depot was built; the 1909 Union Pacific Clubhouse, built for lodging, dining and recreation for railroad workers; and the 1918 Union Pacific Social Hall, later used as the Union Pacific Old Timers Club.
In 1911, the United States Government purchased land in Green River for construction of the city’s first federal building, but citizens of Green River would have to wait another 21 years and put up with much political maneuvering before the building was built. The city eventually benefited from an early public works program, the Elliott Act of 1926, which authorized the construction of two public buildings in every state—although another 6 years went by before the building was actually completed.
Green River Post Office, 1932; Carnegie Library, 1906; Rock Springs Post Office, 1911 (Mary Humstone 2005)

The delay in construction is evident in the architecture of the building. While basically Neo-classical-revival in style, with an imposing columned portico and formal door surround, the post office lacks the sculptural ornamentation of earlier structures such as the Carnegie Library, or the post office in Rock Springs. Known as “Stripped Classicism” this style can be found on many public buildings constructed during the New Deal era.
Sweetwater Brewery, 1901 (Sweetwater County Museum), with Chicago Waterworks, 1869 (Mary Humstone, c. 1990)

A major addition to Railroad Avenue was the new Sweetwater Brewery, constructed in 1900 to replace the old Green River Brewery. Owner Hugo Gaensslen designed the native sandstone structure in what is known as the High Victorian Gothic style, to resemble the old Waterworks in his former home, Chicago, and to recall castles along the Rhine River in Germany where he grew up. At the same time he remodeled the old 3-story, frame brewhouse to match.
Sweetwater Brewery, 1900 (American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, 1903 photo; Mary Humstone, 2005)

Sweetwater beer enjoyed a nationwide reputation, winning prizes at several expositions – but this fame and fortune came to an abrupt halt with the passage of the 1919 Volstead Act outlawing the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The non-alcoholic “near beer” the company produced was not a success, and the business closed upon Gaensslen’s death in 1931. A portion of the 1900 brewery building remains and is used as a bar today. Interesting architectural features include the castle-like crenellations and miniature towers, carved scrollwork surrounding a keg on the western façade and the inscription “Erected 1900” surrounded by scrollwork on the south façade.
Green River Mercantile c. 1920 and 2005 (historic photo: Sweetwater County Museum; 2005 photo: Mary Humstone)

Green River’s commercial district expanded during this time, as well. Large department stores such as the Green River Mercantile offered products ranging from clothes and fabrics, housewares and groceries, to grain and buggies. The Mercantile was even a showroom for Ford automobiles in the early 1900s, and performed undertaking and embalming services from 1922 to the mid 1930s.
Former Crocker Jewelry store, 29 E Railroad Ave, 1906 (Mary Humstone 2005)

Pressed tin cornices and other architectural features, such as are seen on the old Crocker Jewelry store built in 1906, were popular, inexpensive and easy ways to dress up a commercial building. Cornices, doorways and even entire storefronts of cast iron or tin could be ordered from a catalog and shipped on the railroad.
First National Bank, 131 E RR Ave, 1919 (Mary Humstone 2005)

The First National Bank, built in 1919, is one of several brick buildings in the Neo-classical style, matching the Union Pacific Depot. With its banking room trimmed with Italian marble and second floor offices, this was a fitting addition to the growing community.
McCourt House, 217 North 1st West, 1911 (Mary Humstone 2005)

The north side of town continued to fill in with houses built in the latest styles. The house built by Sheriff McCourt in 1911, and later used as a parish house for St. John’s Episcopal Church, shows the transition between the late Victorian-era styles and the more sedate Colonial Revival. Its irregular layout, gables, porches, bay window and leaded glass are reminiscent of the Queen Anne style, while the regularly spaced columns hint at Colonial Revival.
More typical of the 1910s are these front-gabled, 1 1/2-story houses, with front porches supported by turned posts, and little decoration except for some leaded glass windows. Several such houses can be found on East 2nd North St.
In 1908, Sears Roebuck and Company began offering ready-to-assemble homes for sale in their catalog, complete with all fixtures and mechanical systems. Between 1908 and 1940, the company offered approximately 450 designs, from simple summer cottages to mansion, in a wide variety of styles.
House on North 2nd East (Mary Humstone 2005; Page from Sears Catalog (Houses by Mail))

Many of Green River’s early 20th century houses are similar to designs found in the old Sears catalogs.
T. S. Taliaferro House, Virginia Circle, 1918 (Mary Humstone 2005)

This Colonial Revival-style home was built by T. S. Taliaferro in 1918 as the centerpiece of Virginia Circle, Green River’s answer to Wardell Court in Rock Springs – an enclave for Union Pacific officials. This house was later used as a maternity hospital.
353 Virginia Circle (Mary Humstone, 2005)

Two sets of matching 6-room cottages flank the larger, central home, completing the cul-de-sac.
Irvine House, 274 E 2nd N, 1911 (Mary Humstone 2005)

In 1907, J. E. Irvine built the Irvine Concrete Block plant on the north bank of the Green River, and advertised that he was “prepared to make any style of block you may wish.” In 1911 he built this house to prove his point. The house is built of at least three different types of blocks, with the main walls finished in an unusual block cast to look like cobblestone – even the porch posts are made of concrete blocks! The Irvine House is an excellent example of the Bungalow style, a very popular early 20th century house style that originated in California and quickly spread throughout the United States.
Bungalows were considered a true American design, and featured simple, clean lines, flat surfaces, and natural materials with little or no applied ornamentation. A Bungalow is generally 1 or 1½ stories, with a low, sloping roof and wide overhangs, which gives it a cozy rather than impressive appearance, and a wide front porch that connects the house with its surroundings.
258 Center St; 260 N 2\textsuperscript{nd} East (Mary Humstone 2005)

Variations of Bungalows can be seen throughout Green River, indicative of the city’s growth in the first few decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.
Craftsman Cottage, 357 E 3rd North (Mary Humstone 2005)

The Craftsman Cottage was especially popular as an inexpensive but comfortable home. The offset front gabled porch and exposed rafter tails are indications of this cottage type, modeled after designs by Greene and Greene in Pasadena, California.
Houses on E Flaming Gorge Way (Blaire Creech 2005)

These railroad workers’ houses on Flaming Gorge Way are a simple variation of the standard Craftsman Cottage.
Most residents say that Green River did not have the racial and ethnic segregation common in most cities, but traditionally the south side of the tracks was where newly arrived immigrants lived, especially railroad workers. One resident recalls, “The south side kids had a lot more fun!” All the children who lived on the south side had to cross the tracks to get to school. Rather than be late to school, kids would sometimes crawl underneath the stopped freight trains, much to the distress of parents and teachers.
South side businesses (Mary Humstone 2005)

The south side commercial district included hotels, stores and other businesses. A major widening of the tracks in the 1920s wiped out much of the old south side commercial district and resulted in 21 sets of double tracks dividing the community. The remaining commercial strip along the tracks was primarily a “red light” district until the 1960s, contrasting with the quiet residential neighborhood right behind it.
Green River’s role as a transportation center continued into the automobile age. Whereas in 1900 only 8,000 Americans owned private automobiles, by 1910, the number had shot up to 468,000. On December 13, 1913, a string of bonfires, nearly 450 miles long, lighted the Lincoln Highway route across southern Wyoming, heralding the opening of the first transcontinental highway. Suddenly places like Green River were on the itinerary for automobile tourists, as well as railroad passengers.
Early Lincoln Highway in town (Sweetwater County Museum)

The first Lincoln Highway route through Green River crossed the railroad tracks at Elizabeth Street (now North First East). Automobiles were often stopped for long waits while trains were passing or being switched. Travelers then had to cross the Green River on old wagon bridge and continue west on the Overland Trail road, up Telephone Canyon to Peru Hill. This was reported to be one of the worst stretches on the Lincoln Highway in the state.
Tomahawk Hotel, 1919 (Dr. W. J. Hawk and Thomas Welsh) (historic photo: Sweetwater County Museum; 2005 photo: Mary Humstone)

With the advent of the Lincoln Highway, entrepreneurs turned their attention to tourists and traveling salesmen, who were using the new route instead of traveling by train. In 1919, two enterprising businessmen, Thomas Welsh and Dr. W. J. Hawk, built this impressive hotel facing the highway, on an important corner where the Lincoln Highway turned south to cross the railroad tracks. This was the beginning of a switch from the railroad to the highway, and one of the first highway-related buildings to be built in Green River.

In addition to the hotel lobby, the first floor of the building included six separate storefronts.
Paterson’s Cottages (Sweetwater County Museum); Lincoln Highway Motels (Blaire Creech 2005)

The Lincoln Highway brought an influx of people, and motor courts and service stations sprung up to serve the travelers. But most people just knew Green River as a place to pass through – and that’s still true today.
Sweetwater Auto Company, 1919 (Mary Humstone 2005); Lincoln Highway Garage, 1915 (Sweetwater County Museum)

By 1930 the area between North 2nd East and North 1st West on Flaming Gorge Way was solidly commercial, with the Tomahawk Hotel, the Sweetwater Auto Company, restaurants, and filling stations. This garage built in 1919 replaced the original 1915 Lincoln Highway garage. Its shape and construction are typical of garages found all along the Lincoln Highway in the first few decades of the 20th century.
Gas station, Flaming Gorge Way (Mary Humstone 2005)

In 1922, the Wyoming State Highway Department built a new highway bridge across the river west of town. The Lincoln Highway was then routed west, right through town, past Tollgate Rock to the new bridge, spurring some new development on the west end of town, such as this combination Art Deco – Spanish Revival-style gas station.
By the mid 1930s, oil companies were adopting standard designs for their service stations, creating a modern and easily recognizable image. These “oblong boxes,” sleek buildings sheathed in porcelain-enamedel metal panels, became the standard for companies such as Texaco, Gulf and Chevron. This is one of the first examples of companies imposing a single design on all of their buildings, making the building a brand for the business - something we take for granted today with the proliferation of golden arches, sombreros, dinosaurs and other emblems of corporate America.
Another marketing innovation of the early 20th century was the self-service grocery store, patented by a Memphis businessman in 1917 under the name Piggly Wiggly. The new store design transformed the traditional single, long counter manned by a clerk to a circuitous one-way route up and down several aisles, which the customer navigated on his own, terminating at the check-out counter. The Green River Mercantile built a Piggly Wiggly next to their department store, on Flaming Gorge Way, in 1924.
Old Lincoln High School, 1922 (Sweetwater County Museum)

In 1920 the city embarked on a school building project that lasted 17 years, only to be destroyed by fire 3 years after the final addition was completed. The Lincoln School housed high school students as well as elementary students from the west end of town. As someone wrote on this old postcard, it was “pretty nice.” Gradually additions were made to the building, including a large gymnasium completed in 1930.
A fire in 1940 destroyed all but the gym. The city acted quickly and a new Lincoln High School opened its doors to students in 1942. The new Lincoln School, constructed onto the old gymnasium, was designed in the Streamline Moderne style and is one of the best examples of this style in Wyoming.
Vertical piers contrast with the overall horizontal form of the building. The smooth finish of the brick, curved surfaces, use of glass block, ceramic tile and terra cotta, all are representative of Streamline Moderne architecture in the years following the great Depression. Lincoln served as Green River’s high school until 1979, and middle school from 1980 – 1998. The building is currently owned by the city of Green River and awaiting a new use.
When the Washington School was completed in 1925, elementary students moved there from the old school on Flaming Gorge Way – which was then converted to a Masonic Lodge.
During the Depression years building slowed down in Green River as in elsewhere across the country, and it didn’t really pick up until after World War II. Like many communities, Green River profited from the New Deal programs, including a Civilian Conservation Corps camp of 188 men that operated from 1938 to 1942. In addition to constructing “Camp Green River” itself, the crew constructed an ice skating pond, and made improvements to roads. Much of their work was outside of town, constructing trails, campgrounds, and other Forest Service facilities.
The City of Green River also contributed to recreational improvements for its citizens during the Depression. In 1930 the city floated a $25,000 bond issue to build an amusement hall and outdoor swimming pool near Expedition Island, at Evers Park. The new pavilion replaced an old, open-air dance hall, and residents fondly remember enjoying dancing, roller skating and other recreational activities in the pavilion over the past 70 years.
Another Depression-era improvement to the city was the construction of the pedestrian railroad overpass, which came about as a result of a federal directive, the Railroad Crossing Elimination Program. The overpass finally provided a safe pedestrian link between the north and south sides of town. Green River’s overpass is one of two remaining along the Union Pacific line in Wyoming and is a popular spot to watch trains and the sunset, as well as get from place to place.
Tudor Revival-style house, 215 W. Flaming Gorge Way (Mary Humstone 2005)

Popular house styles in the period between the world wars included miniature versions of historical styles such as Tudor Revival, based on the model of an English country cottage.
Cape Cod, W Flaming Gorge Way (Mary Humstone 2005); “The Stanford,” Sears, Roebuck & Co, 1931-33 (Houses by Mail)

The Cape Cod house, a one or 1 ½ story cottage with a gable roof, based roughly on New England colonial architecture, was also very popular during this period. Sears, Roebuck and Co. described its Cape Cod houses as having “lasting character” (Stanford, p103): a “credit to you, your family and every neighborhood.”
Cape Cod house, 378 North 1st East (Mary Humstone 2005); “The Malden” Sears and Roebuck, 1909 (Houses by Mail)

One and two-family Cape Cods replaced the craftsman cottage as the popular affordable home of from the 1930s through the 1950s.
Many houses now came with a personal garage, which started as a small, detached building that matched the house, and eventually became part of the house itself.
The 1941 Guide published by the Writers’ Program of the Works Progress Administration describes Green River as a town of 2,500, a Union Pacific division point, with “trim houses, lawns and gardens, and tree-lined streets.” This is quite a contrast to the descriptions given by some old-time residents who describe their first impressions of Green River as “barren” and “treeless.”
Tie hacks (Sweetwater County Museum)

The Guide also describes the “tie drives” which were an annual event in Green River from 1868 until 1941. Ties for building and maintaining the railroad were cut at the headwaters of the Green River, floated down the river each spring, and corralled in the town of Green River. It would take about 7 weeks for a crew of 75 tie hacks to drive 300,000 ties down the 50-mile stretch of river. As the Guide describes, “daring youngsters amuse themselves by walking up the bank a mile or so and riding the ties down the swollen stream.” - another local activity that pleased kids and terrified their parents! The cribs that were once part of the tie corral are still visible from the Green River Greenbelt.
World War II brought an increase in economic activity, especially for the railroad. Trains ran day and night, “every five minutes,” as one resident recalls, shipping men and materials to the West coast. As many as 100 trains a day were serviced in the Union Pacific Railroad yards. With the shortage of men, women joined the work force of Union Pacific Railroad as well as the coal mines.
Most of the growth after the War was south of the historic center of Green River. Sandwiched between the bluffs and the River, there were limits to where growth could occur – eventually the barrier of the river would have to be crossed. The town council began purchasing land on the south side of the river as early as 1927, and the city continued to expand in that direction.

(Mary Humstone 2005)
The 1950s ushered in a period of great change for Green River. As the new diesel-powered locomotives began to replace the coal-powered steam locomotives, most of the nearby Rock Springs coal mines closed down. These modern trains required fewer trainmen and fewer shop men. According to Wyoming historian T.A. Larson, Green River in 1960 was the only city in Wyoming that could be called a “railroad town” and even its railroad activity was much reduced from the early post-war period. *(Larson, p. 563).*
In the 1960s, the Union Pacific tore down its roundhouse in Green River, although the machine and repair shops still remain.
Fortunately for Green River, a new industry emerged about this time. The presence of trona, or soda ash, in the area around Green River was recognized as early as 1895, but the technology needed to profitably mine the mineral was not developed until after World War II. In 1948, FMC opened its first trona mine in Sweetwater County, initiating what would become a multi-million dollar industry, and ensure the economic prosperity of Green River for years to come. Today, 90% of the United State’s production of trona comes from Sweetwater County.
El Rancho Addition, c. 1950 (Sweetwater County Museum)

The post-war El Rancho addition was dedicated to Green River’s veterans, with the streets named for soldiers who had died in World War 2. This subdivision was the first major subdivision in the south, and began a trend that continues today.
Like most post-war suburban developments, the El Rancho offered a limited number of house designs. Although each house has been customized by its owners over the years, the original, basic house designs can still be recognized.
Green River has had a long tradition of moving buildings, starting from the 1870s when houses were moved in from Bryan. The need for more housing after the war, coupled with the closing of the coal mines, precipitated the moving of houses from several coal camps into town. In Green River today, one can recognize the distinctive houses of the mines, such as these houses from Winton.
Logan St, Superior house (Mary Humstone 2005); Superior garden winner (Sweetwater County Museum)

and a house from Superior east of Rock Springs. Many of these houses were located in the newly developed subdivisions south of town, although mining camp houses can be found on the north side as well.
Interstate 80, during construction and today (Sweetwater County Museum, Mary Humstone 2005)

Interstate 80 was completed in 1969, resulting in a greater connection between Green River and Rock Springs. Green River residents began to abandon their downtown district in favor of malls and shopping centers being built on the west end of Rock Springs. With the construction of a new bridge and overpass, residents of south Green River can avoid downtown altogether, crossing the river east of town and getting right on the Interstate.
While the north side remains the civic center of Green River, almost all new construction is to the south, including the Green River campus of Western Wyoming Community College, schools, recreation centers, ball fields, parks and the senior center.

(Mary Humstone 2005)
Natural resources returned Wyoming to national prominence in the 1970s. When energy prices skyrocketed, oil and coal producers stood prepared to rake in the windfall. Anyone and anything associated with the industry stood to profit, making Wyoming the fastest growing state in the nation from 1970 – 1980. Green River’s population tripled during the 70s, from 4,196 in 1970 to 12,785 in 1980. Most of the new growth was accommodated in trailer parks south of town, which were eventually converted to permanent housing.
Several historic buildings in Green River were torn down in the 70s in the name of modernization and growth, including the Sweetwater County Courthouse, built in 1876, and the first school, which was said to have been moved from Bryan in 1872.
Sweetwater County Museum (former U.S. Post Office, 1932) (Mary Humstone 2005)

These demolitions, coupled with the Bicentennial in 1976, inspired some residents of Green River to begin to take steps to preserve the city’s remaining historic resources. The Green River Historic Preservation Commission, formed in 1990, has taken the lead in researching and telling the story of the city’s historic buildings. Examples of preservation projects in Green River include an 8-year, $500,000 rehabilitation of the 1932 post office to house the Sweetwater County Museum;
Washington Square (Mary Humstone 2005)

The 1925 Washington School, adaptively used for offices, a dance studio and an archery range;
Pavilion, Expedition Island (Mary Humstone 2005)

And the Pavilion at Expedition Island rehabilitated for continued community recreational use.
Expedition Island is now a park, with interpretive signs about Powell and his exploration, and a 6-mile greenbelt has been constructed along the river.
Whitewater Park (Mary Humstone 2005)

While the railroad, trona mines and nearby oil and gas wells still play a major role in Green River’s economy, the city is also becoming known for its recreational opportunities, including its new Whitewater Park on the Green River.
Street scene, Green River (Mary Humstone 2005)

Although Green River’s growth over the past 35 years has dwarfed the historic core of the city, much remains to tell the story of a rough, barren railroad town that was transformed into an oasis in the desert of southwestern Wyoming.
As residents will tell those who ask, the friendly, helpful people are what makes Green River a good place to live – but the green of the river and the ever-changing view of Castle Rock watching over the city might also have something to do with it.
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