

## Thu., July 20: Encountering Legends

Viewing my surroundings on the atlas and map changed my trajectory today from the written itinerary. Just north of town I picked up I-25, thinking wistfully I could just turn south, drive a few days, and be in my beloved Albuquerque. Ten miles along I hopped off. After driving down a back road along a large fenced pasture, I turned left and 150 years back in time. Stopped in the narrow dirt side road that I needed to take was a heavy duty pickup truck with a long trailer, from which actual cowboys in actual cowboy hats were unloading actual horses already saddled, presumably to round up the actual cows loitering nearby in the pasture. One noticed me, checked his horse's position, and then gestured me past. We exchanged respectful nods smilelessly the way real men do.

Up the hill past an incongruous, circular astronomical observatory was a circular parking lot. Arriving yet again before a Visitor Center was open, I parked by it and walked to panels in front of a re-creation of a stockade wall. Remember what I said about Western military forts not having one of those? Fort Phil Kearny was by far the biggest exception.

Rewind a bit to yesterday's story of the Bozeman Trail, built through Native American land in violation of treaties after gold was discovered in Montana. Instead of locking up Jim Bozeman and blockading the trail as it was required to do by treaty, the U.S. Army instead chose to build forts and escort the trespassers, sparking Red Cloud's War. Fort Kearny was the linchpin.

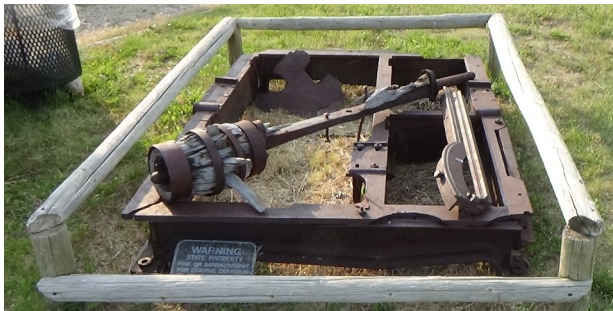
Its designer and commander, Col. Henry Carrington, was a lawyer by training who mostly rode a desk during the Civil War. This may explain why he felt a fort had to have walls. Or maybe he'd just seen too many Westerns.

The fort's footprint is now a state historic site, and the grounds were open. First I tried to use the machine there to pay the park fee, but it apparently had not had its coffee and refused to get out of bed. So I walked through the gate and explored the wall, with sharpened points except for every fifth log, which was cut flat to create squarish



rifle holes. I couldn't resist stepping up on the rampart—the raised platform the soldiers would have patrolled—to sight the cutouts of NA observers atop the nearest ridge. (Even with the photo at full size, they appear as tiny dots, but the real deal would have been noticeable when in motion.)

The scale revealed on turning around is astonishing, six American football fields long by five wide. Rail fences mark where the wall stood, orange flags identifying the corners, though the farthest could not be seen downslope. Originally eight feet high, the palisade



was a half-mile long. The wood came from a stand of pines four miles away, which required escorting wagons and woodcutters up to and along the crest of the ridge to prevent ambushes. To my surprise, the wood was cut using two *steam* sawmills trekked here by wagon. The frame of one now sits on a platform in front of the fort, showing signs of repeated repairs.

Trails led past signs marking the spots where all the standard assortment of fort buildings were, their corners marked in some cases with white plastic posts within rectangles mowed from the surrounding prairie grass. I took the first trail to the left, and by the time I reached the northeast corner of the fort, the horse trailer, its occupants, and the cows had all disappeared.

A short ways down the eastern track was the site of the musicians' quarters. Musicians kept up morale by entertaining the troops, and fifers, buglers and drummers might

convey orders on the march or during battle. (Their instruments played high or low enough to be heard over the sound of gunfire.) The rest picked up rifles and fought like any other soldiers. The sign for the quarters mentioned that the musicians at Kearny suffered a high casualty rate. One, a native German named Adolph Metzger, was killed in a battle we'll visit in a bit, fighting to his last. "Because of his bravery, he was passed over when warriors performed mutilations on all other remains, and they covered his body with a buffalo robe for comfortable passage into the afterlife," the sign said.

Most of the forts visited on this trip had panels mentioning overlooked members of their official staffs: the laundresses. Where their home/workplaces once stood, the marker here told their story. The vast majority were single women who hired on for tough work that required making soap, hauling water, and manually cleaning the heavy clothing of an average of 25 men. Many ended up marrying enlisted men and continued working, while some bagged an officer and graduated to a more genteel lifestyle. However, an obscure distinction in army regulations took away some of the latter's protections. As mentioned regarding Calamity Jane, wives of soldiers were considered "camp followers" subject to military discipline and regulations. Contrary to the stereotype attached to that name, they were *not* prostitutes, or at least weren't supposed to be. But laundresses were considered civilian employees of the Army. If the husband of a camp follower died, the woman only had 24 hours to remove herself from the fort. Married laundresses received 60 days' grace to either leave or remarry, as many did. Left unanswered by the sign was why they had to leave at all, since they arrived unmarried. One assumes sexism played a role, the same sexism that spun lurid stories about these young, single women living at a military installation.

One of Kearny's laundresses was the formerly enslaved Susan Fitzgerald, who got here a year after the Civil War ended, 1866. She earned \$5 per month per officer whose laundry she did, \$2 per month per soldier, and smaller amounts for mending. Also left unanswered was whether this was the same amount white laundresses got. Making a conservative estimate that this added up to around \$70 a month, that equates to about \$15,000 a year today, plus room and board.

I wandered by every building site, which took considerable time and some backtracking, before arriving at a gate blocking the lower half of the fort, where three horses were grazing. Though understanding, I was briefly disappointed until deciding to read the sign on the gate. It merely asked one to make sure it was closed behind you. I did so gleefully, rewrapping a chain on the gate around the adjacent post, and inserting a link over a point and into a notch in a flat plate on the gate to hold it in place.

## Northwest Passage

I was eager to see a clever point of the fort's design. Forts, castles, and walled cities often suffered a critical weakness: lack of water. You could only store up so much, and resupply by rainfall was obviously iffy. An endless line of formidable fortifications dating back millennia have fallen for lack of food and water. Carrington, the designer/commandant, solved this by running the southern and western walls to the edge of Little Piney Creek, letting the creek form that corner. Having reached that point on my trek, I took this shot uphill to give you a sense of the scale. Compare the ridge in the previous photo. The modern stockade wall is the line just below the white spot the trail leads to (which is a building, the VC, I believe). The fence at left marks the western wall line.



On the way back, I stopped to chat with one of the fort's current residents. She had wandered across to the left edge of the trail as I returned. I asked permission to approach, and she offering no objection, went over and gave her shoulder a rub despite our just having become acquainted.

My nearing the now-open VC revealed the man in charge was seating himself on a bench by the entrance, to enjoy the pleasant morning. He was to prove the first genuine





character of the trip, discounting myself. My-ish age, with a scrabbly salt-and-pepper beard, his first words to me formed a question about my Sony Handycam. He didn't know what it was. Hiding my disbelief, I gave him a tour of its features, answering subsequent questions about taking both videos and stills, the zoom, how to use the viewfinder (showing off the ability to turn it 90 degrees, which he especially liked), and how to get the shots out of the camera (an attached USB cable). He said he was impressed, explaining that he was a musician, and had bought a lot of equipment he couldn't figure out how to use. I offered the suggestion my wise friend Tom Herbert oft repeats: "YouTube." He had tried that, he said, and usually within five minutes the presenter was over his head. I said, if nothing else, "You're not going to break it. Just start playing with it and you'll figure it out." I think I failed to persuade him.

We went inside, where I explained my failure to arouse the parking machine. He said this was a common experience and took my \$6. He then motioned me to join him at a scale model of the fort, but I indicated the need to hit the bathroom first. "You're of the age and gender to understand," I said, to which he agreed.

The model was effective, but I didn't know how to politely tell him I really didn't need his standard spiel about the fort. At least when I interjected with the facts he was about to tell me that I already knew, he didn't insist on repeating them anyway. He questioned the consensus among the historians I've read that the army lost Red Cloud's War, and I decided not to get into it with him. As told at Laramie, the government was forced to shut down the Bozeman Trail and withdraw from its related forts, including this one. Given that the goal of war is, theoretically, to achieve some strategic goal, I'd call that a Native victory.<sup>1</sup> (I say



---

<sup>1</sup> It's fair to note that the first transcontinental railroad was approaching the Montana gold fields, so the trail was losing its importance to the government.

“theoretically” because I think the real cause of war is the human drive for more social power, along with a large-enough subset of us who enjoy the violence and/or adventure.) He expressed near insistence that I be at one of two related battle sites when he would be there to give a tour; I said, wistfully, “I’ll be long gone.”

I was rescued by the arrival of a middle-aged woman, which freed me to glance over the other exhibits before splitting. He said to her, “Now, you’re not here by yourself, are you?” Because, of course, a woman could not possibly be interested in military history, I suppose. She was, she said, letting just a hint of umbrage at his sexism squeak out. Meanwhile, I resisted my paternalistic urge to jump to her defense. Trying to deflect at least some of his attention while she regrouped, I took advantage of her saying something about the altitude effects to mention Los Alamos.

He lit up and said, “Tell me about Los Alamos,” adding he’d always wanted to go. Along with the standard fact about it being a nuclear design lab, I pointed out the project to map the entire human genome started there, that for many years the world’s fastest computer was there (to simulate bomb tests, since actual tests are forbidden by treaty), and many other sciences are practiced there. He surmised the education rate was high, and I said at one time we had the highest percentage of Ph.Ds of any county in the country. He laughed at my tale of a traffic sign on a street adjacent the headquarters building. There are several crosswalks in a row, with a traffic sign displaying a pedestrian figure and the words, “Multiple Xings.” Somebody had inserted a word to make it read “Multiple Nerd Xings.” I was told it had been there for years. I hope it still is.

She was from Vancouver, Canada, taking the same kind of trip I was. The volunteer apologized for the fact out-of-staters like us had to pay more; in-staters paid \$4. He asserted this as unfair. She had no problem with it and explained why to him: In-staters have already partially paid for it through taxes. He seemed to accede.

## Northwest Passage

The closest of the two nearby battle sites of Red Cloud's War is just on the other side of Long Trail Ridge, the one in the center of this photo. Its story is yet another shrouded in myth-making, first by two women who wrote immediately afterward, each trying to exonerate her respective husband from criticism. What we know for sure is that Red Cloud amassed more than 2,000 people some distance to the north, and had been



harassing anyone who came out of the fort or along the Trail—successfully, winning most of the skirmishes. On Friday, December 21, 1866, a woodcutting party came under attack, per usual.

Capt. William Fetterman either insisted, or was ordered, to personally lead a force to its relief. His men, forced to walk because NAs had stolen so many horses, were soon joined by a couple-dozen cavalry on horseback and a few civilians. They apparently spotted some warriors loitering on Long Trail Ridge. Myth holds that Fetterman, despite seasoning during the Civil War, disobeyed a direct order from Carrington not to go beyond the ridge and thus out of sight of the fort. What seems more likely is that the cavalry unit's leader, known to be undisciplined, charged after the warriors and Fetterman felt duty bound to support him.

The soldiers either picked up the Bozeman Trail running along a spur of the ridge in pursuit of the warriors, or first dropped down to a creek below it before scaling the rise. There's a good reason we don't know for sure. When the cavalymen reached the narrow end of the spur, hundreds of warriors arose on both sides. All 80 men from the fort eventually were killed. The men they were following were decoys, one of whom was a young Crazy Horse.

I was reading signs by a monument to them when a Wyoming-plated pickup pulled up and disgorged what appeared to be a man in his 30s and his father and grandfather. We exchanged greetings, and grandpa said something about how pretty it was. I told them I was from Back East, and many people there did not understand how beautiful the western lands could be. They nodded appreciation.

Taking polite leave of them, I noted the sign warning of snakes and headed down the trail. A short way in another sign pointed to a long depression, hard to see due to the

overgrowth, paralleling the trail. This, it said, was one of the few remaining stretches of the Bozeman Trail. It didn't explicitly say I couldn't go stand in it... so I did.

The remaining signs along the walking trail told the story of the Fetterman Fight from both perspectives, inviting the visitor to imagine they were there during the battle. Recall Corporal Adolph Metzger from the sign about musicians? A sign said he, "like you, will die today." It added the details that "after running out of ammunition, he will fight to the end, using his bugle as a club," and that he "will leave behind a wife and daughter."

Though forewarned it was a two-mile hike, I continued the whole way along the undulating ridge to a collection of boulders where it peters out. Here a few soldier bodies were found. On either side the ridge drops away sharply from a relatively flat top.

Presuming the warriors were far enough down the slope, and it was covered with piles of dead prairie grass and/or snow (it being December), it was not hard to imagine heads suddenly popping out of nowhere—and the stomach-fear the view would raise.



*View over the edge of the spur*

At that point the fight turned into a running rout. Now taking the Native perspective, as did the trail signs, I followed the soldiers back the way I came. They tried to take a stand at one rise, but soon broke again for the rear. Arrows were flying from both sides of the ridge, some hitting other warriors.



## Northwest Passage



Along the way, the horse of one of the decoys, Big Nose, stumbled, and he was wounded, either by soldiers or by friendly fire.

Regardless, his comrades put him in a depression, perhaps an intermittent water course, where a lonely tree now stands. I am sorry to say I had to dishonor him by peeing on

the tree. In combo with the low spot it was the only semi-discreet place for such on the exposed ridge line, surrounded by valleys and distant heights covered only with prairie grass. Don't worry: I took the picture first.

Shortly afterward I passed over another rise into a *deja vu*. I now realized the monument was where Fetterman's soldiers, joined by what few men of the advance party got back, made their last stand. A similar sight greets one at the Battle of the Big Horn, with its monument to Custer and the 7th. Both were a lonely places to die.



The fort heard the firing and sent a relief column, which showed up far too late. But the warriors withdrew before them. Nearly 50 bodies were in a rough circle on that knoll. All were naked and mutilated, perhaps in revenge for a massacre in Colorado not long before.<sup>2</sup>

Along that final stretch, a snake slithered off the trail. I couldn't see his head in time to determine if he was poisonous, but given he was skedaddling, I didn't much care. Running into a younger couple headed down the trail, I told them I had scared off the snakes for them, eliciting a grin and joking thanks from the guy.

Having gotten my exercise by a 4+-mile hike with altitude gain, yet again driving myself up a hill, I got into the car already tired and drew heavily on my bota bottle.<sup>3</sup> I would have taken it with me had I realized how far I would go.

The extra time I'd spent led to a happy accident I'd resisted. I returned to Wagon Box Road and followed it northwest. Yet again, the little brown signs I was pursuing petered out when I got to the small town, Story, in the area where the woodcutters from the fort

---

2 For more details about the battle, see: <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/new-perspectives-fetterman-fight>

3 A modern take on the Iberian wine flask, a kidney-shaped plastic bottle encased in red cloth with a strap. When walking it rides comfortably between the shoulder blades; when driving it hangs off the Sage's passenger seat headrest, where it takes up no storage space.

used to go. This was especially problematic because MapQuest and OpenStreetMap did not list my destination. Eventually I found my way there past a rural residential neighborhood. I parked next to a pickup I thought was that of the guys I spoke with at Fetterman, who left while I was starting my hike.

No, it was the volunteer from the VC, John. I didn't really want his talk, but I got it anyway, and I'm glad I did. He was unusually good—accurate to what I'd read, but adding interesting details, with a lively delivery.

The August after the Fetterman Fight, Red Cloud and his followers decided to try a much larger raid on the woodcutters than they had before, effectively a full-force assault. The cutters' military escort had taken some of the wagon boxes off their wheeled bases and used them to build a corral for the horses. A low rail now stands where the corral of wagon boxes is believed to have been, with a re-created box of one-inch pine, about 10 feet long, less than three high, and maybe four wide. The cutters set up a lumber operation roughly a mile away, and used the wagon bases to transport logs back to the camp by the corral. An infantry company guarding the loggers on Friday, Aug. 2, was split in three, with one group guarding the cutters, one the convoy of logs, and one the corral.



*John at the corral site*



## Northwest Passage

John and I stood just outside the corral opening in the rail on the southwest side, and he pointed directly south to a line of trees. Two pickets were stationed there, he said, several hundred feet away. They spotted Natives approaching early in the morning and began sprinting for the corral.

One of them still had his horse, and the other man told him to let it go. Why they didn't mount it, I'm not sure. They made it here, barely. In another head-scratcher, the woodcutters and their escorts headed for the fort, miles away, instead. Warriors were overtaking them when part of the escort attacked their rear.



*View from the corral toward the picket site, at the trees between the truck and sign*

A few woodcutters were killed, and some hid in the woods, but the rest got to the corral. Soon all were sheltering here, including 54 soldiers, encircled by 800 or far more warriors. The defenders grabbed what they could from the intact wagons to fill in the gaps between wagon boxes, including grain bags. They also poked holes in the box walls to shoot through.

During the first mounted charge, from the direction the two pickets had taken, the defenders realized the army tents just south of the corral blocked their view. During a lull, a picket ran out to yank them down. As the defenders fended off multiple attacks, they began to run out of water. Another man sprinted to the supply wagons for water barrels, but they were all shot through; he used coffee pots to get what he could.

## Northwest Passage



On a hill to the east, John said, elders, women and children gathered to watch the fight, along with more warriors in reserve. “Just like Bull Run,” I laughed, and he concurred. The first major land battle of the Civil War was the First Battle of Bull Run, or Manassas, in Northern Virginia. People from Washington, including

families, came to picnic and watch what they assumed would be a U.S. victory and thus the *last* battle of the Civil War. The Confederates won, creating a panicked flight back to town.

For unknown reasons, the warriors kept attacking in groups from different directions instead of laying down concentrated fire in a massed assault. Meanwhile the soldiers had a distinct advantage in firepower. The typical gun of the day, used by those warriors who had them and the Fetterman Fight soldiers, had to be loaded from the open end of the barrel: Bite open a paper cartridge

containing gunpowder and bullet, pour the powder in, pack it down with a ramrod stuck down the barrel, drop in the bullet and ram it down. The fastest users could fire maybe four times a minute. Weeks earlier, a shipment of a new type of rifle had arrived at the fort. It could be loaded from the back, allowing four or five times as many shots per minute per man than the warriors could manage. And most of the warriors only had bows and arrows or hand weapons.



*View from corral to northwest, the direction of one major Native assault*

One soldier wrote, “The whole plain was alive with Indians shooting at us, and the tops of the (wagon) boxes were ripped and literally torn to slivers by their bullets... (and) soon the whole plain in front of us was strewn with dead and dying Indians and ponies. It was a horrible sight!”

He added, “The Indians were amazed at the rapidity and continuity of our fire. They did not know we had been equipped with breech-loaders and supposed that after firing the first shot they could ride us down before we could reload.”<sup>4</sup>

The soldiers had a large supply of ammo, but by mid-afternoon they were running low. Just as the warrior reserves seemed ready to enter the fray, a cannon shell landed on the eastern hill. A 100-man relief force had arrived with the fort’s howitzer.<sup>5</sup> All of the warriors retreated, none having gotten closer than five feet of the corral. Miraculously, only three of the bluecoats were killed inside, including a lieutenant, and two wounded. There is nothing close to consensus on warrior casualties; I would lean toward hundreds of dead and wounded.

Though the Wagon Box Fight was the last major battle of Red Cloud’s War, the harassment of fort workers and the Bozeman Trail continued until the government capitulated the next year, as noted back at the VC.

I thanked John, telling him I have given tours and handing him an AmRevNC business card, so he knew I spoke from experience when I said he had done a good job. As we parted ways, the group I passed on the Fetterman Trail pulled in. They announced they had seen no snakes, and to their grins I took credit for having scared them off. I am the St. Patrick of North-Central Wyoming.<sup>6</sup>

Now to an afterthought. Fort Kearny never came under direct attack. One could argue the stockade was the reason, but as far as I can find, no other fort in the West did, either. Granting that some wood was required for buildings and fires, I can’t help but question whether some of the deaths among the woodcutters and their protectors were due to a poor design decision by their commander.

Back through Story I went, picking up US 87 and then crossing to I-25 for a short distance through Sheridan. The Sage and I met US 14 a few miles shy of the Montana border. This was another scenic byway leading west into a pleasant surprise, after I made

---

4 Quoted from a detailed account of the battle at: <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/wagon-box-fight-1867>

5 A relatively low, squat cannon that sent shells a long distance in a high arc.

6 Legend holds that the reason Ireland has no snakes is that the first Christian missionary there, Patrick, scared them off. The truth is Ireland was too cold for snakes before it separated from larger landmasses, after which they had no way of getting there.

myself bypass another battle site that I knew was not marked in detail. The road passed along the wide-open Tongue River Valley before it curled and climbed a loose loop up the side of the Big Horn Mountains. On the way I passed a “Highway Closed” gate with flashers for use in winter, when this road is closed. After passing through the tight gap eaten away by the Little Tongue, we found ourselves in a stunning plateau of meadows dotted with scattered peaks, where I was surprised to find a welcome center. I chatted briefly with a friendly young worker, who suggested a museum I had unfortunately already passed back in Sheridan. He also said Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid spent some time in this area, which I can understand. It has the perfect outlaw hideout combination of being remote—still today—and gorgeous.

A few miles beyond I took Alt 14, and some 20 miles later made a right at an unpromising white gravel road going up and over a hill. My rugged little compact acted like it was just another Thursday as he chugged up and over. I stared with intense curiosity at a substantial observatory along the way, before pulling into a surprisingly busy loop parking lot. I sunscreened, grabbed my hiking hat and bota bottle, and debated boots vs. All-Stars, choosing the latter.

I walked past a gate across the road, and a pedestrian gate, toward a ranger standing by a hut. Hiking stick in hand, he was giving the lowdown on the site to a couple ahead of me. As they headed for the road I closed in. He appeared in face and slight accent to be Native American. He warned that my destination was “a mile-and-a-half walk in, and a mile-and-a-half walk back, with a 200-foot elevation gain.” He added I was headed to what NAs still consider a sacred space used for ceremonies, and that I was not to approach or take photos if someone was doing one. I said I understood and moved out.



After a short decline and relatively modest climb, you can see in the photo it became yet another challenge, my eyes downward. That was my choice, not only in making the climb, but in insisting on



doing it at pace, at an elevation of 9,500 feet. A woman with walking challenges of some sort was slowly making her way up aided by two hiking poles. The family of four in the picture were walking at their small dog's pace. I wanted the exercise, and was concerned about having enough time at my final stop of the day. Soon enough, I was rewarded by expansive views displaying undulating slopes of mixed grass and trees disappearing into what could have been clouds, but looked more like Canadian wildfire smoke.



My reward on the other side of the peak was an 80-foot wheel made of lines of rocks for its spokes, hub, and a few smaller circles around the hub: the Bighorn Medicine Wheel. Around it is a low post-and-wire fence with colorful ceremonial bandannas hanging off it. I was ambivalent about finding no ceremony in progress. I would have enjoyed witnessing one, but at least this way I got to take pictures. In addition to the usual national park warnings about not disturbing or taking anything, the ranger had added a unique one: At the request of tribal elders, walk around the wheel clockwise. I did so in meditation, though mindfully noticing the various tokens left in the small wheels: coins or small bills, tobacco, bits of cloth or rope. Back at the base, I took my second panorama vid.



I suppose at this point most travel writers would wax spiritual about the incredible energy they felt emanating from the circle, or sensing ghosts of the elders collected here. I felt nothing more than the joy of being close to history in a resplendent natural setting. Those writers would claim I'm just not "sensitive" to such things, but I will go with the psychological explanation that the mind creates the sensations we expect to experience in such places. And I perceive hubris in believing one is sensitive to things "ungifted" humans like me are not.

The wheel's history is complicated. It dates back to at least the 1700s, based on archaeology and Native oral tradition, and probably much further, maybe 1,000 CE.<sup>7</sup> Its

---

<sup>7</sup> "Christian Era," a secular way of saying the more common "A.D." or "Anno Domini," Latin for "Year of Our Lord." Hence "B.C.," meaning "Before Christ," becomes "B.C.E.," or "Before the Christian Era." I prefer these designations both as a Buddhist and as someone who tries to write as inclusively as possible. None of my Christian friends seem to mind.

former use is unclear as well. The orientation of the spokes suggests astronomical alignments. Multiple tribes used ceremonial and hunting sites all over what now is called Medicine Mountain, of which this is one peak. Some of those date back to 7,000 BCE. Several nations have stories about the site.

Even the plans to preserve it ran into controversy, as Natives denounced the original idea for a parking area and VC next to the wheel. Today's Medicine Wheel/Medicine Mountain National Historic Landmark is part of a larger area in which the National Park Service and other government entities make conservation decisions jointly with a panel of Native national leaders. Placing the parking lot a mile and half away, and imposing the rules about ceremonies and the walking direction, are part of their compromises.

After taking my vid, I chose a longer path circling toward the pit toilets so I could check on a young woman who had been sitting nearby the entire time I was there. "You doin' alright?"

"Yes, I'm great, thanks."

I hit the outhouse and forced myself back downhill, much as I enjoyed being at the wheel. Exhibit panels told of several ancient trails crossing below the peak, noting with intriguing precision that 81 Native peoples still use the trail I was on to perform their ceremonies. I continued downward, happy with my shoe selection. Going up, the rocks pushed borderline painfully against the soles of my All Stars, making me think perhaps I should have opted for the boots. I'd even looked around to see what others were wearing, and most were in sneakers. On the way down after a couple miles, I decided on balance I'd made the best choice. Those steel toes in the boots are a heavy lift toward the end of hikes.

Throwing another wistful glance at the observatory, wishing I could visit, the Sage and I picked our way back down the road and onto the highway. After an hour of dropping gently off the plateau, I pulled into Cody, Wyo., the first planned stop on the itinerary due to where I had to be tomorrow (discussed in the Intro). Yes, *that* Cody: The town was founded and laid out by Buffalo Bill Cody. It's a small city in the middle of nowhere, but has one major draw: It is the closest substantial settlement along the eastern approach to Yellowstone National Park.

Or so I thought, but it turned out there was a second major draw. I had seen online that there was a Buffalo Bill Center of the West, but I was expecting something low rent and cheesy with little to offer a Western museum veteran, given its founding in 1917.



Man, was I wrong. The center is one of the rare attractions that not only lives up to its marketing hype, but surpasses it.

The building held five museums, plus a research library. A glass entranceway spread between stone walls under a soaring, peaked roof, behind a full-size statue of Buffalo Bill. Arriving around 4, I was concerned whether I could get through the two museums I wanted to see, and thus was relieved to see the center was open until 6. As it turned out, I would need every minute.

I'd left the camera in the car, and griped at myself as I went back through a drizzle to get it. Good thing I did. The Museum of the Plains Indians has a top-notch collection of well-preserved items. I had learned something new within minutes, from what at first glance I took to be painted rocks.



They were instead *painting bones* from around 1860. You probably know bones look sort

of like sponges in cross-section. It seems Native artisans would soak especially porous animal bones in pigment and use them as paintbrushes. Perhaps such were used to create the especially gorgeous examples of 19<sup>th</sup> Century bags known as “parfleches” on display. The colors were still as vibrant as anything at Target.



Around a corner was a display that may be the most effective I have come across at bringing an historical scene to life. Two sets of mannequins rode the carpeted plains. A woman on a horse pulled a “travois,” a trailer of sorts made of two poles dragged along the ground with a large leather pocket between them, on which goods were piled. Ahead of her was a man doing the same, and a child escorting a dog pulling a small travois, as canines did for the Natives long before Spanish horses escaped to the Plains in the 1600s. The jaw-dropping part was that all of their clothing and accouterments were *original*, dating I think to the 1850s-1880s. With a change of background in my imagination... the sound of the wind I'd captured in the two panoramas in my ears... the blowing dust I'd felt often enough in Albuquerque to easily conjure from memory... I was standing by a



## Northwest Passage

trail in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century watching a family ride by. They may not have been moving, but the moment was.

I'm leaving blank space on this page because I want you to see them together:



The collection brought stunner after stunner. A painted buffalo hide from around 1865. A buffalo scalp headdress complete with horns. A bear claw necklace. A buffalo-hide coat. For the martial artists like me, a collection of weapons: knife, war club, axe, spear. The placard for a bow and four arrows noted that the weapon could be more effective than the cheap trade guns sold to Natives: "From horseback, a hunter could shoot a dozen arrows in the time it took to reload a gun for a second shot." This further explains the different outcomes of the Fetterman and Wagon Box fights.



I'd never heard that warriors would build temporary tipi-shaped "war lodges" made of branches and bark or brush. These not only served as shelters, but hid fires at night from enemies, and could be used for storage. The museum has one, an original moved from where it was found in some woods. It also had a collection of the ration cards natives on reservations would bring to the agencies. Each had the family name and assigned number, and spots to list the counts of "Men," "Women," "Boys," and "Girls." I stood before these a bit, thinking about how the federal government had so clearly reduced

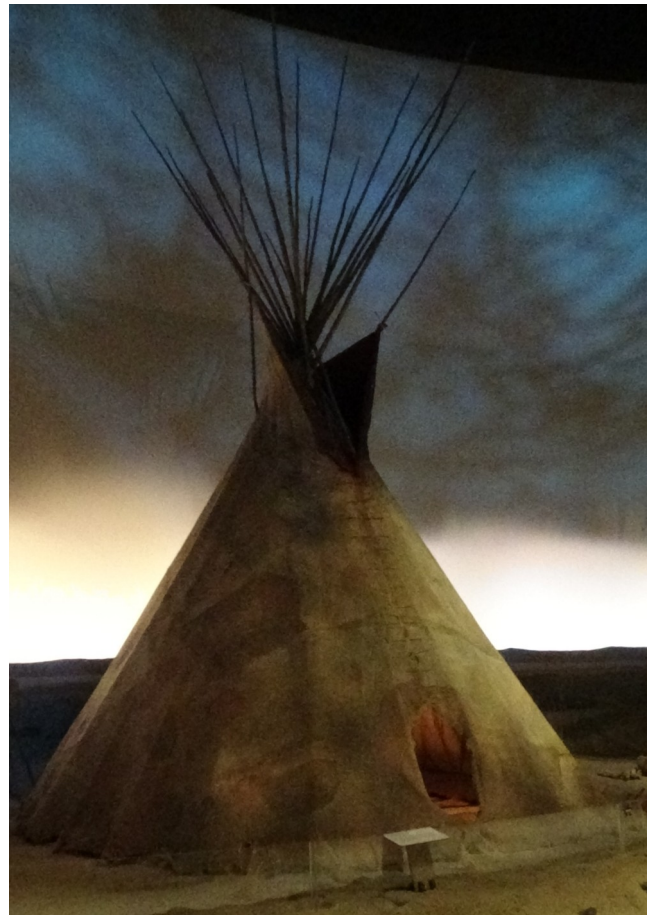
formerly self-sufficient people to wards of the state. Just as EAs did for centuries with formerly self-sufficient Africans.





But the biggest jaw-dropper, in impact and size, was a Nimiipu (Nez Perce) buffalo-hide tipi from around 1850. I'd never seen one, and for good reason. Its placard explained that the demise of the buffalo herds led NAs to switch to canvas, and the hides of most older tipis were repurposed as they wore out. Thus few still exist. This one was huge, probably twice my six-foot height where the frame timbers crossed. It was painted with red circles and handprints. I drifted back and forth in front of it, waiting out a man and two kids equally awestruck. This was in a two-story part of the museum designed to appear like a valley, with a warrior watching as a sentinel, a backdrop mimicking the sky.

One other item in that area caught my eye: The second Ghost Shirt I'd seen, accompanied by pictures of Lakota doing the dance.



With some reluctance I left that museum and walked through the central lobby of the Center to the next. I was not interested in the gun museum, having seen plenty, nor (given the time factor) the art museum, nor (ever) the natural history museum. But I definitely wanted to know more about Buffalo Bill. Which is how I got to see Amelia Earhart's flight jacket.

Yeah, I was just as confused as you are if you recognize her name.

Amelia Earhart was the most famous of the early women aviators, the first to cross the Atlantic by herself, in 1932. Five years later, trying to be the first woman to circle the world, she and her navigator disappeared over the Pacific. Despite clues pointing to her landing on a desolate island in the middle of the ocean, the details of her demise remain unproven.



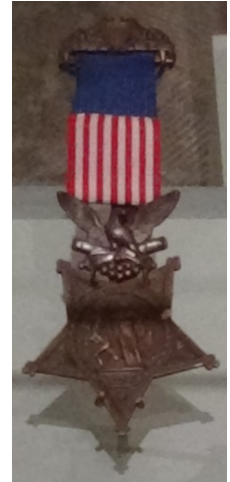
A poster board explained the tenuous connection to this museum. The Western “frontier” was declared “closed” by the U.S. Census Bureau after Wounded Knee killed the Ghost Dance movement along with all those people. (Why was this the job of the Census Bureau? I dunno.) Soon after, the new frontier of the air opened with the 1903 flight by the Wright Brothers. Earhart was a pioneer of that frontier. There’s your tenuous connection.

Earhart visited the Yellowstone area two years after her Atlantic adventure, and began having a vacation cabin built. She sent some items to her guide’s ranch for storage until the cabin was done, and then took off around the world, or so she thought. One of those items was the flight jacket she used in the Atlantic crossing, which now resides in the Center of the West.



On to the main attraction. William Frederick Cody figures in many of the stories I’ve already told. His father moved the family from Iowa to Kansas during the “Bloody Kansas” fights between pro- and anti-slavery forces. His dad was stabbed while delivering an “anti” speech, in fact. Still a child, Cody began working for a freight company. At age 11, he killed a Native American attacking a cattle drive he was on along with our friend Wild Bill Hickok. He probably was a Pony Express rider, credited with outrunning warriors, recapturing horses from them, and foiling a robbery attempt by stuffing paper into his saddlebag. During the Civil War he was a scout for the U.S. He earned his moniker just after the war, by killing more than 4,000 buffalo to feed workers building the transcontinental railroad.

Cody took up scouting for the army again during the Indian Wars, as a civilian, winning a Medal of Honor. The same kind of cheap novels that made Hickok famous did so for Buffalo Bill. One of the authors convinced him to try his hand at acting in 1872, in a play about Western scouts. Cody got the bug, first acting in winter while continuing to scout in warmer months, and then creating a Wild West show in 1883. It continued for more than 30 years and toured the globe, making him arguably the most famous American in the world. His shows, held in outdoor arenas, featured trick riding, trick shooting, warriors, battle re-enactments, and later, international horsemen like Cossacks from Russia. The Center's website notes that he knew Mark Twain and presidents from Ulysses Grant to Woodrow Wilson. During one tour, he visited the graves of Hickok and Calamity Jane in Deadwood just like I did!



In what today we would call a “meta” experience, Buffalo Bill purposely wore clothing on the range in which he would later re-enact his exploits onstage, like the outfit in this photo. But according to his wife, Louisa, his skills failed him at home. As an exhibit quoted her to say, “He could ride anything with horsehair; he could tear a hole in a dollar flipped in the air and hit it again with a rifle bullet before it hit the ground; he was at home in the midst of danger, and there never had been an Indian who could beat him in a fight. But when it came to babies, I was the master.”

Cody called for better treatment of Natives, many of whom he employed in his show including, incredibly, Sitting Bull. “For honesty and virtue, I think the Indians are ahead of the whites,” an exhibit quotes. “Where is the white man who would not fight if everything were taken away from him? I’m dog-goned if I wouldn’t. They were here first, and have a better right to be here than we have.” His views on women were equally progressive. “If a woman [does] the same

work a man [does] and just as well, she should have the same pay. I pay the women in my show just as much as I do the men, to be sure I do the square thing.” That was in 1898, people.

Among a myriad of other business ventures Cody had, he spent the modern equivalent of \$3 million building a luxury hotel here in Cody in 1902. “The prices will be so high that the toughs and bums can’t hang around,” he said. He named it for his daughter Irma and kept an office there. The exhibit



about it included this roulette wheel from the bar. Like most of his businesses, though, it bled him dry. By the time of his death in Denver at 70, he had lost his fortune.

I caught a brief view of some Old West paintings in the library’s lobby downstairs, but it was 6 o’clock. As I left, exchanging nods with a security guard, people in dress-up clothes—Eastern and Western—were coming in for some sort of shindig. No doubt they would have invited me had they known I would be there.

A short distance down the road, I checked in at the Sunrise Motor Inn, another older but well-maintained single-story motor court. This cost me \$170 for effectively the same place I’d stayed in for as little as \$103 elsewhere. That’s not a complaint, just a comment on economics. Like I said, it was a small town in the middle of nowhere en route to two major tourist attractions. An older group of bikers, not the scary kind but dressing somewhat wannabe, were sitting under a gazebo of sorts in the middle of the parking lot. It crossed my mind to worry about them being noisy late, but given the age group, I needn’t have worried.

Sage and I backtracked up US 16, which took a right turn into the downtown we’d already passed through. There was no obvious veg-friendly higher-end restaurant on Google, so I parked and walked to the Irma Hotel. That’s right; it still exists. I stepped into the former bar room in which the roulette wheel had resided, now a restaurant, which seemed full. Sure enough, the hostess reported a 20-minute wait, which my stomach would not abide. I continued past the inviting veranda on the side and down the tourist-busy main drag, considered a non-chain Mexican restaurant, and landed at a seemingly family-run Thai place after several more blocks. It provided a passable veggie and tofu plate I washed down with a taro bubble tea while seated at the small counter in the front window.

The young American waitress of Thai extraction saw me working on the journal. “I love your diary,” she said sweetly. I explained what I was doing. “That’s *crazy*,” she said of my driving from North Carolina. It was endearing.

The day had brought one bummer: For the first time on the trip a headache had persisted, pushing through a first round of aspirin. This exception proved the new rules I’d enacted on Day 1 were working. But a second bummer was on the way.

As I made the long walk back to the car, I noticed something on the sign on the *side* of the Mexican restaurant that was not stated on the front: *New Mexican*. I almost stopped in my tracks. I considered eating a second meal, but I was sated. I haven’t had New Mexican food, a wonderful subgenre featuring red or green salsa slathered over everything, since leaving New Mexico. (It is the only state with an official state question: “Red or Green?”). I cursed the Fates and headed home.