

Excerpts from
Reflections: A Pictorial History of Carbon County
1890-1990
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[Carbon County 1990, 3] In July 1868 a tract of 97,890 square miles became the Territory of Wyoming. It consisted of greasewood flats and lush mountains meadows, badlands and mountains, dry washes and sparkling streams fed by icy springs and mountain lakes, a land of deserts and sand dunes, endless stretches of sagebrush, aspen groves and quiet pine forests. The northwest corner of the Territory contained a fabulous collection of geysers, hot springs and boiling mud pots, petrified trees and a mountain of volcanic glass. This area was set aside as the first National Park - Yellowstone.

The first census taken in this Territory recorded 8,104 hardy pioneers, while the number of the big game animals was estimated in the hundreds of thousands.

This same year saw the coming of the Union Pacific Railroad. Now the population started to explode as towns sprang up along the rails. Gamblers, thieves, gunmen and prostitutes flocked to the “end-of-track” towns. Rawlins was one of those towns. Tough, rowdy and lawless, Rawlins consisted of fifteen to twenty buildings, including ten saloons. There were buildings built of logs, dugouts and even tents. One sturdy stone building still stands on south Front Street.

There were plenty of bar-room brawls, knifings and shootings. When the cowboys came to town, they would entertain themselves at the saloons and then start shooting. Luckily most of the shots made holes in the sky, but it was advisable to stay inside until the cowboys went back to their ranches.

Rawlins was designated as the county seat of Carbon County, one of four counties in Wyoming at the time. It covered an area of 86 miles wide and 276 miles long—from the Colorado to the Montana border. The first Sheriff was I.C. Miller. He also served as Mayor of Rawlins—both offices being held by him before he had citizenship papers! He said the hardest job he had as Sheriff was bringing a criminal to Rawlins for trial. The man had been apprehended in the very northern most part of the County Seat [sic]. They were shackled together and came by stagecoach, wagon and horse back on that miserable trip.

Although Rawlins has always been known as a railroad town, it was a center for stockmen, freighters and stage lines, too. The Rawlins-Lander stage line and the Casper [Carbon County 1990, 4] stage line went north, and the White River line went south to Meeker, Colorado. These roads were used widely by ranchers, townspeople and soldiers, since troops moved through this area frequently.

Concord coaches, pulled by six beautifully matched white horses, made the trip to Saratoga, while a similar coach made a daily trip to Baggs. At that time the road to Saratoga was on the west side of the river, because there was no bridge until 1908 when one was constructed at Fort Steele.

Most of Rawlins was on the south side of the tracks. A two room log building held the Court house, school; community room and jail.

Mr. Kirk taught school in one of the rooms which was separated by a thin partition from the jail where the inmates were chained to the floor.

The Union Pacific built a depot, a hotel and restaurant and several other buildings including a large roundhouse which was designated as a place of refuge in case of Indian raids. One Indian raid did occur while laying the tracks through what is known as “the cut”. While the workmen were in town for lunch a band of Indians ran off all of the horses and mules belonging to the work gang. Not one animal was ever recovered.

Sometimes the vigilantes took over. Several men were hanged in 1888 when the townspeople felt justice should be immediate. Earlier, in 1881, the infamous murderer, George Parrott, also known as Big Nose George, was sent on his way to glory via the noose when he tried to kill his jailer. Following that hanging, Dr. Maghee, Dr. Osborne, and Dr. Lillian Heath Nelson claimed the body and performed an autopsy. They removed the skullcap to see if they could find any clue to Parrot's criminal behavior. Dr. Osborne removed some skin from Parrot's body, tanned the skin, and had shoes made from it. Dr. Lillian Heath, who was the first woman doctor west of the Mississippi, had the skullcap of Big Nose George on her desk for many years. When she made house calls at night she always carried a gun. Such was the reputation of the town.

There was a lighter side to Rawlins though. Dancing, parties, dinners, theatrical performances and social clubs were very popular. Picnics at Fort Steele were held regularly in the summer. The picnickers usually went by train. Fort Steele had something Rawlins could not boast—lots of trees and the Platte River.

[Carbon County 1990, 5] Although end-of-track towns were notably tough as nails, nothing could compare with Benton. Born in 1868, as were Rawlins and Carbon, it was the worst town of its time. Two miles west of Fort Steele, in the sand and greasewood, lies the ghost of Benton, a wicked town if there ever was one. Shacks and tents were hastily thrown up on the bare and windswept site. It was said that murders were commonplace. The fact that there was a sizeable cemetery on a rise north of town would seem to verify that claim since Benton existed for only three lawless months.

When Benton got too rough to suit the residents of Percy, the first railroad section east of Fort Steele, a posse was formed, and the men went by wagon or horseback, armed with anything that could be considered a weapon. The idea was to remove Benton from the face of the earth. News of their plan got to Benton before the posse did and

many of the inhabitants had fled. They made it easy for the vigilantes to set fire to the places of business that were the worst offenders. One establishment that had a particularly bad reputation escaped, by some chance, and the owner of the saloon warned that he would kill anyone who tried to burn his place. Two men from Percy couldn't resist that challenge. They went to Benton, approached the saloon and were met by the owner who came out the door shooting. He killed one of the men, but the other one shot and killed him in retaliation. The nephew of the survivor told me, "That accounts for two graves of the Benton cemetery."

Fort Steele was built to protect railroad construction workers from the Indians. Two saw mills were put up, and logs were hauled from Elk Mountain to furnish lumber for the buildings. There were four fine officers' quarters made of lumber and a commanding officer's quarters made of stone. All these buildings are gone now—victims of fires.

The troops were kept busy controlling Indian depredations as well as white renegades. A major event was 1879 when two companies, 28 wagons and an ambulance, all under the command of Major Thomas Thornburgh, left for the White River Agency in Colorado to quell an uprising there in which agent Nathaniel Meeker had been killed. Thornburgh and a number of soldiers under his command also lost their lives.

Later, a band of Indians stole a big bunch of horses and mules from the Fort. Their tracks headed north, and Sergeant O'Brian was in command of a troop sent to get the animals back. They finally caught up with them at springs which are located near Miller Sheep Company shearing pens on Coal Creek, many miles north of Fort Steele. They recovered every horse and mule, and O'Brian springs are named to honor the young Sergeant who was responsible. A stone corral was promptly erected at the Fort to discourage further raids. By 1886 there was no longer any need for military protection, and the Fort was abandoned.

[Carbon County 1990, 6] A big change in transportation was the arrival of the “horseless carriage”. Dr. John E. Osborne owned the first car built by a friend in the Navy Yards who had made one for himself and then a duplicate for Osborne. These two cars were dubbed “Champion Favorites” and they were the only two like it in the world. In 1902 Osborne and D.C. Kinnaman drove to Saratoga in this “one-lunger” and it took them four and a half hours. A trip to Denver would take three days.

Soon there were quite a few cars in town. Rawlins seemed to have come of age. No one worried about Indians anymore, and the police were calming down the rowdies, but the lawless element now decided that robbing banks and holding up trains was an easier way to make a living than doing an honest day’s work.

The Wild Bunch came through Rawlins once in a while. Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, the Tall Texan, Flat-Nose Curry and several others comprised the group. They tore out a bridge at Wilcox on June 3, 1899, forcing the train to stop. When the messenger in the baggage car refused to let them into the car, they proceeded to dynamite. They then blew open the safe with a blast of dynamite.

Three months later they robbed a train at Tipton. Unfortunately, the messenger on that train, Mr. Woodcock, was the same man who had been blasted half the length of the baggage car at Wilcox. When the outlaws promised him some more of the same, he unlocked the door without much argument.

Now that the Union Pacific was going to such great lengths to put a halt to these crimes, the train robbers decided to find some other criminal activity. Only Bill Carlisle, the lone bandit, tried another train robbery. He didn’t have much success and wound up in the penitentiary for quite a while.

In the early part of the century the streets and roads were very poor. After all, the roads had been made by wagons, and wagon tracks aren't exactly super highways. When you would drive to the country your progress would be halted—all too often—by a band of sheep. They never seemed to be in a hurry, so you waited! It seemed that every time the sheep saw a car approaching they decided to cross the road. Since quite a few streams had no bridges, you forded them. When it rained, and it rained a lot in those days, you had an 80-20 chance of being on a gumbo road without chains. I sincerely hope you never have to put chains on your car in a sea of gumbo. In town it was either dust or mud. There were no surfaced roads until the late twenties.

[Carbon County 1990, 7] City water was drawn from a well and tasted like epsom salts! Hauling water from Cherokee or Rawlins Springs provided a few men with a source of income and a welcome treat to residents. In 1925 the wonderful Sage Creek water was piped into town. That was one of the nicest things that ever happened to Rawlins. Ice was cut on the Platte at Fort Steele and shipped to town by railroad and stored in numerous ice houses.

A man by the name of Malachi Dillon discovered a vein of coal in what is known as Coal Bank Draw. He figured that a good outlet for his coal would be a light plant, a corrugated structure of two rooms. Now Rawlins had electric lights. Lights would be on for several hours after dark during the entire year and for two or three hours in the morning during the winter months. Frances Cook can remember when her father, Johnny Bangs, would take her by the Ferris Hotel. Johnny, who was the Town Marshall, would pull a large switch was attached to the telephone pole, and the lights would go on all over Rawlins. The light plant was situated on the west side of the railroad spur east of the main part of town.

Soon the population was taking to the air. In 1920 the first Transcontinental Air Mail stopped to refuel at Rawlins. Amelia Earhart

landed her autogyro at Parco (Sinclair) for gas. Barnstormers came through, and many local people took advantage of the opportunity to have their first thrilling ride in an airplane. Two local teenage girls went up with barnstormer Tommy Thompson who treated them to some aerobatics. He did a complete loop-the-loop in an open cockpit plane with two tandem seats and no seat belts. The government soon put a stop to that horseplay.

Somehow Rawlins seemed to be reluctant to relinquish its reputation. It had been known as a rough town, and it still had some that would tend to bolster that reputation. The Red Light District flourished on South Front Street, and all the bars, restaurants, drug stores and filling stations had two or more slot machines. One establishment even had an open casino complete with roulette, 21, craps and poker. No one was bothered in any of these places of business. The city set a certain amount that each place was to be fined, and as long as they showed up at the City Hall each month with their money the authorities looked the other way. This finally came to a halt. Either they changed the existing laws or they decided to enforce them.

[Carbon County 1990, 8] I could go on and on, but since they say that one picture is worth a thousand words why don't you just go ahead and turn the page and enjoy a trip through Carbon County's colorful past.