



# WYOMING TRAILS NEWSLETTER

## WYOMING CHAPTER OF THE

### OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

President: Tom Rea • Vice President: Julia Stuble  
Secretary: JoAnn Ryan • Treasurer: Fern Linton • Newsletter: David Mead

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## Summer 2019 Trail Treks

Sponsored by the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center

The National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper has planned five treks along historic trails this summer. All are open to the public. All depart from the NHTIC parking lot at 8 a.m. on Saturdays, except for the trek that leaves from the parking lot of Scotts Bluff National Monument at 9 a.m. July 27—most people will want to drive to Nebraska the night before. High-clearance vehicles are recommended; plan to carpool if possible. For more information, contact Jason Vlcán at the Trails Center at (307) 261-7783, [Jason\\_Vlcán@blm.gov](mailto:Jason_Vlcán@blm.gov).

### June 22 - Fort Laramie area to Guernsey and Glendo - North Side of Trail

During this trail trek, we will focus on the pioneer trails located along the north side of the North Platte River from the Fort Laramie area all the way to Alder Clump located near Glendo. Sites will include several pioneer graves, OCTA markers, pioneer trails and swales, and landmarks.

Meet in the parking lot of the NHTIC at 8 a.m.

### July 13 – Douglas/Glenrock area to Casper

Leaving from the NHTIC, participants will travel to the Douglas/Glenrock area and work our way back to Casper hitting several historic pioneer sites. These will include several pioneer graves, pony express stations, OCTA markers, pioneer trails and swales.

Meet in the parking lot of the NHTIC at 8 a.m.



*Scotts Bluff National Monument. National Park Service photo.*

### July 27 - Scotts Bluff National Monument Trek – Spirited Pioneers

Leaving the parking lot of Scotts Bluff National Monument at 9 a.m., trekkers will traverse through Robidoux Pass and eventually end up at the Old Iron Bridge near Fort Laramie. Sites will include pioneer graves, OCTA markers, sections of pioneer trails and swales, landmarks, and special historical presentations.

Meet in the parking lot of Scotts Bluff NM at 9 a.m.

### August 31 – Douglas/McKinstry Ridge area

For this special trail trek, we will travel to the Old Pioneer Cemetery near Douglas, WY and end up at a very special place located along the pioneer trails near the Glenrock area. We will visit several pioneer trail swales, graves and OCTA markers.

Meet in the parking lot of the NHTIC at 8 a.m.

## Trails Center treks, continued...

### September 28 - Emigrant Gap Hike/Walk/ Family Fun

This will be a truly unique trail trek and we encourage those who enjoy hiking, walking, and spending time with family to participate in this opportunity! During this trail trek, we will park our vehicles and walk the pioneer trails for approximately 3-4 miles. Known as Emigrant Gap, this section is located just west of Casper. Enjoy the beauty, history and company of others during this experience!

Meet in the parking lot of the NHTIC at 8 a.m.



*Emigrant Gap. WyoHistory.org photo.*

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### BLM acquires battlefield property near Casper

Thanks to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and The Conservation Fund, a historic stretch of the Oregon/California/Mormon trail just west of Casper has now been permanently protected. The property may include the remains of 20 soldiers killed in July 1865 by Cheyenne and Sioux warriors, who had mounted an attack on the fort at nearby Platte Bridge Station partly in retaliation for the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado the previous winter.

The 646-acre parcel includes a mile and a half of riverfront along a loop of the North Platte. Access is open to the public from Wyoming 257, the new bypass highway west of Casper. The river at this point supposedly boasts the most trout per mile of any stream in Wyoming; BLM announcements praise the fishing and recreation opportunities and the likely tourist revenue to the community that will result from the acquisition.

The land is immediately south of a Wyoming state section familiar to local trail buffs as it includes the so-called false graveyard of stones memorializing the soldiers under the command of Sgt. Amos Custard who were killed in the 1865 fight.

The new parcel, for many decades part of the Rimrock Ranch, was purchased by The Conservation Fund with funds from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and transferred last fall to the BLM, which now manages it. The trail runs southwest to northeast across the northern end of the new parcel.

Custard and his men in a few army wagons were approaching Platte Bridge station along this stretch of trail on the day the tribes began their attack. Lt. Caspar Collins volunteered to lead a small detachment from the fort to protect the incoming party three or more miles away. But the tribal numbers—in the thousands—were far too great. Collins, several of the soldiers with him and all but three of Custard's command were killed. Indian casualties were light.

Custard and his men were buried within a day or two of the attack in one or two burial trenches; the gravestones on the nearby state section are for memorial purposes only and do not stand above any bodies, therefore. In the 1920s, Casper oilman and trails buff Robert Ellison brought two octogenarian veterans of the fight to Casper from Kansas, but they were unable to locate the precise site of the graves. (Ellison named the fight the Battle of Red Buttes, a title which has stuck despite the fact that the Red Buttes themselves, long an important landmark on the historic trails, are not visible from the battle's location.)

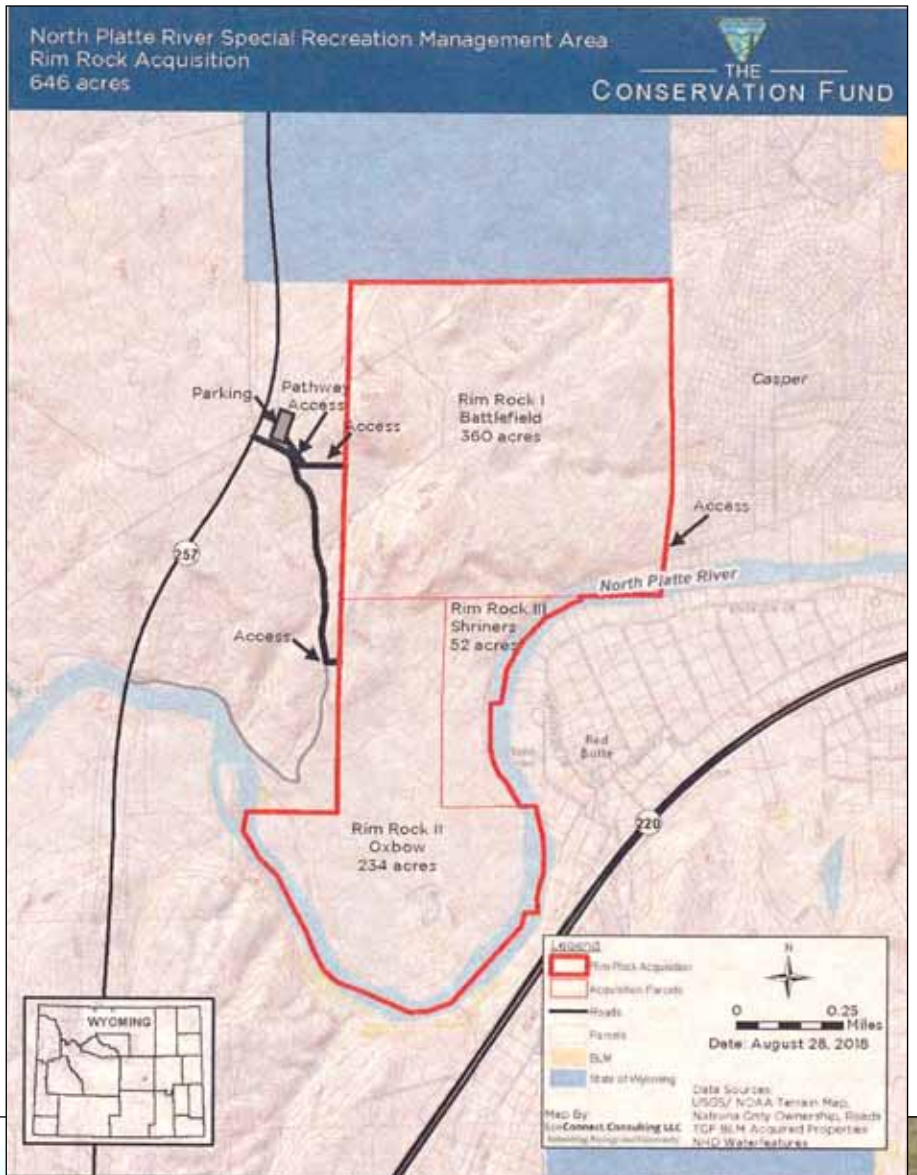
Other efforts in the 1960s and '70s together with much more systematic searches over the last decade have proven inconclusive. Locals have high hopes the bones will still be found, especially now, as opportunities for preservation, curation and interpretation on the newly federal property will be much better than they would have been otherwise.

- Tom Rea



Above: Casper oilman Robert Ellison, at left, with two veterans of the 11 Kansas regiment who survived the Red Buttes Battle, 1927. BYU libraries photo.

Below: Gravestones memorializing Sgt. Amos Custard and the other soldiers who died in the Red Buttes Battle are on state land immediately north of the property recently acquired by the BLM. Tom Rea photo.



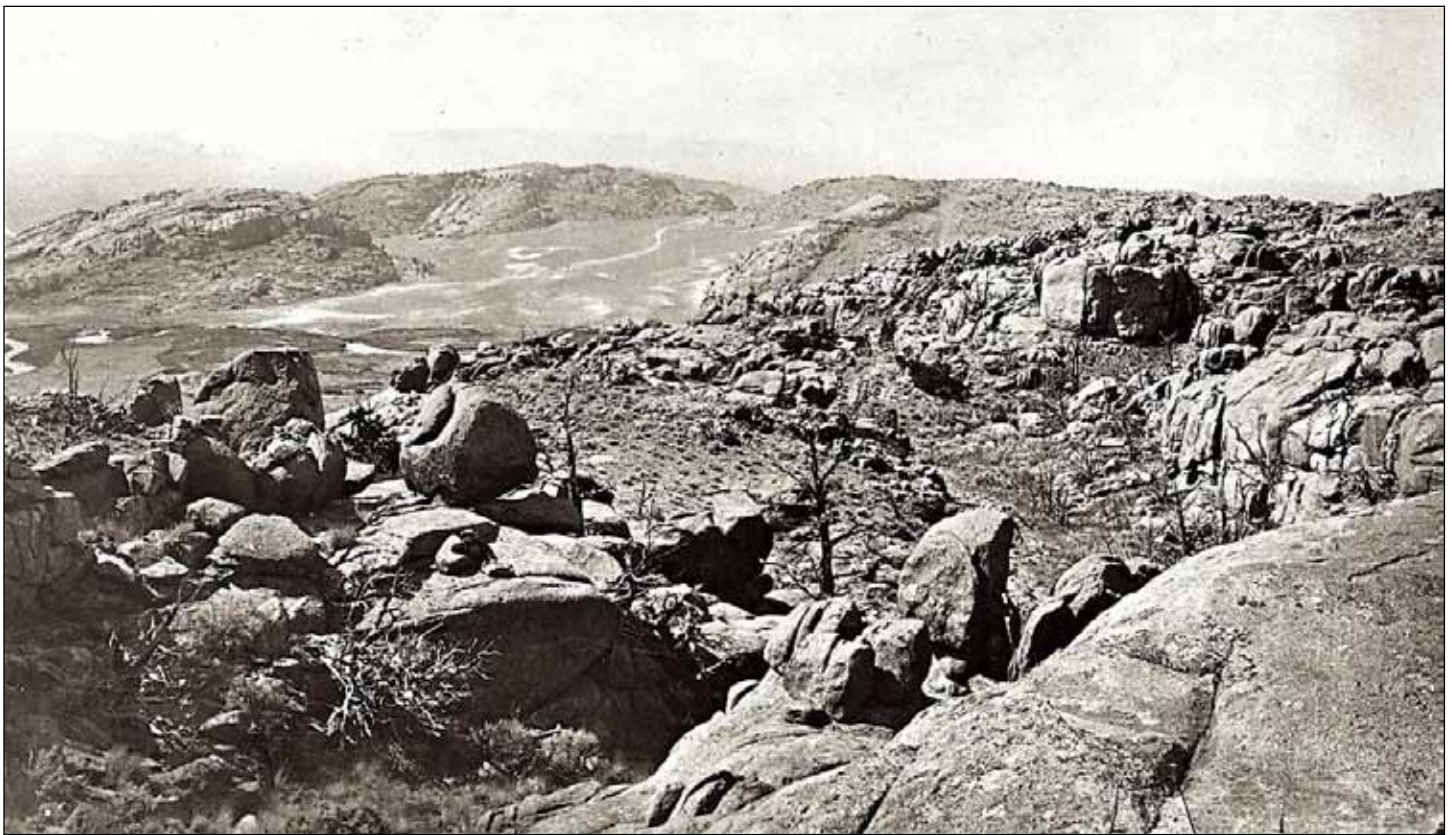
## Then and now along the Sweetwater

In early May 2019 OCTAns Randy Brown, Bill Hill, Al Fraser and Jason Vlcan visited Three Crossings on the Oregon Trail near the Sweetwater north of Jeffrey City, Wyo. Brown is preservation officer for Wyoming OCTA, Hill is the author of *The Oregon Trail: Yesterday and Today* and many other books on the historic trails, Fraser is a Casper trails enthusiast and Vlcan is on the staff of the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper.

At Three Crossings the trail crossed the river three times, and for a stretch was only wide enough to let a single wagon pass between a rock wall on the right and

the river on the left. An alternative was the Deep Sand Route, which detoured to the south of the crossings for eight miles or so, but for about half that distance forced animals to pull wagons through deep, exhausting sand.

When pioneer photographer William Henry Jackson, traveling with the U.S. government's Hayden Survey, passed Three Crossings in the summer of 1870, he climbed the rocks to the north of the trail and the river and took several photos. In this one, looking south, the viewer can see the Deep Sand Route as what Randy calls a "squiggly white line" in the distance (see Jackson's photo below).



Randy continues:

“Although the Deep Sand Route skirts the canyon on the south side, it stays on the south side of the river, goes through that gap and rejoins the main trail west of the 5th crossing, seven or eight miles on. Bill and I wondered beforehand if the standing dead near the center of Jackson’s photo would still be there, and sure enough it is.” Randy, Bill and Jason scrambled up the same rocks and took a new photo to confirm (see Randy’s photo on following page).

Randy adds:

“We found a solitary 18-inch rock lying all alone on the spot where the photo was taken. We thought Jackson might have put it there to memorialize the spot.” Jackson by this time needed about one mule load’s worth of equipment to take a photograph. “What a struggle he must have had lugging the camera equipment up there,” Randy adds. “No pack mule could have done it.” Find out much more about Jackson and, thanks to Randy, about Three Crossings and dozens of other Oregon Trail sites in Wyoming at [www.wyohistory.org](http://www.wyohistory.org).



## **Congress Reauthorizes Land and Water Conservation Fund**

Congress and the president in recent months made permanent a longtime source of federal funds, used recently by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to acquire a historic trails site west of Casper.

The federal Land and Water Conservation Fund was set up in 1964 to help protect parks and natural areas, using royalties and fees from oil and gas development in federal waters offshore. That law was good for 25 years; Congress reauthorized it for a second 25 years and finally for a brief, three-year term. Congress allowed the fund to lapse Sept. 30 last year, putting its future in jeopardy.

But the new Congress, which took office in January 2019, has permanently authorized the fund; no longer will there be periodic reauthorization fights. The move was part of a larger package of public-lands legislation that had been in the works for years and finally passed with heavily bipartisan support. The vote was 92-8 in the Senate in January and 363-62 in the

House in February. President Trump signed the bill in early March. Wyoming senators Mike Enzi and John Barrasso voted for the bill; Rep. Liz Cheney opposed it as she opposes increasing the amount of land under federal management.

In the past the law allowed the collection of around \$900 million per year, about half of which flowed to states for land and water conservation projects while the rest was often siphoned off to support other parts of the federal budget. About \$35 million came to Wyoming over the years, Wyoming Public Media reported this spring. The money was used for parks, public pools, boat ramps, golf course improvements and trails.

The LWCF funds that allowed the BLM to acquire a piece of the Rimrock Ranch west of Casper, which includes an extremely historic stretch of the Oregon/California/Mormon Trail, flowed through The Conservation Fund, a Denver-based private nonprofit.

- Tom Rea



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To receive your newsletter via e-mail, please send an e-mail to Pat Cywinski at: [cywinski.pd@gmail.com](mailto:cywinski.pd@gmail.com)

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## **Join OCTA now!**

### **No better time than the present!**

#### **Membership benefits include:**

- Overland Journal, OCTA's quarterly magazine which contains articles and book reviews concerning historic trails.
- *News from the Plains*, OCTA's quarterly newsletter, which contains information about the activities of OCTA national, OCTA chapters, and OCTA members.
- Wyoming OCTA's quarterly newsletter, with info on upcoming and recent treks, trails accounts of pioneers and much more.
- Time Travelers, a program in which OCTA participates that allows OCTA members to receive a variety of special benefits, such as free admission or gift shop discounts when they visit Time Travelers affiliates. There are 185 museums and historic sites in 45 states that participate in the program.
- When you join OCTA, you will receive free access to Paper Trail, the website based on a searchable index of 19th Century westward American migration documents. ([www.paper-trail.org](http://www.paper-trail.org)).

Memberships start at \$50/year for individuals. Dues include membership in both national and state organizations.

For more information, go to the membership page on OCTA's website, <http://www.octa-trails.org/preserve/octa-membership>, or contact Pat Cywinski, [cyswinski.pd@gmail.com](mailto:cyswinski.pd@gmail.com), Membership Chair, or Tom Rea, [trea@tribesp.com](mailto:trea@tribesp.com), 307-237-6605, President, Wyoming OCTA.

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