

Campbell County History

Early Expeditions:

Information about the first European explorers and trappers to enter the Powder River Basin is very limited and confirmation on exact routes and locations will never be known. Some of the earliest expeditions believed to have been in the region include the Francois and Louis-Joseph Verendrye in 1743, Charles LaRaye in 1802, and Francois Antoine Laroque in 1805.

Wyoming historian T. A. Larson believes the first American trapper in Northeast Wyoming was John Colter during the winter of 1807-1808. He returned three years later with Alexander Henry and approximately thirty other trappers. Ezekiel Williams and Jean Baptiste Champlain and a party of twenty-one trappers worked the Belle Fourche River in 1911.

That same year saw Wilson Price Hunt and an expedition of men sent out by John Jacob Astor crossed the basin. The overland Astorians, as they became known, were headed for the Columbia River drainage and envisioned a series of fur trading posts stretching from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean.

The Powder River Basin was not prime trapping country, but was often traversed in order to get to the better streams to the west and also was used as a winter camp location by trappers. Robert Campbell and a party of Rocky Mountain Fur Company men spent the winter on Powder River in 1828.

Father DeSmet, a Jesuit priest, traveled through the basin in 1851 and made reference to the "Gourd Buttes," which are now known as the Pumpkin Buttes in Campbell County. A wealthy Irishman by the name of Sir George Gore and a large party of men and wagons entered the basin in 1855 on an extravagant hunting and fishing expedition.

Corps of Engineers and the Bozeman Trail:

The first government sponsored expeditions into the region were by the Corps of Topographical Engineers who were tasked with mapping and collecting scientific data about the West. A party led by Captain William F. Reynolds was sent out in 1859 to scout four possible wagon routes. In October of that year, a detachment of the Reynolds expedition led by J. Hudson Snowden explored the area of the Pumpkin Buttes and traveled some distance up the Belle Fourche. Snowden described the whole region as "barren and desolate, totally unfit for the uses of a civilized being – interesting to a geologist, and a splendid Indian country."

A discovery of gold in the new Montana Territory in May of 1863 set off a gold rush and precipitated a large amount of prospectors and settlers moving into the West. John Bozeman and John Jacobs scouted a route from Virginia City to the Oregon Trail that passed through the southwest corner of what is now Campbell County. This route became known as the Bozeman Trail and the first group of settlers moved up it in 1864.

The trail passed through territory occupied by the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho nations and raids were quite common. The trail became known as the Bloody Bozeman. In response, the U.S. government ordered the Army out to protect the travelers and punish the Indian tribes. In the fall of 1865, General Patrick Connor and 2,000 men were sent into the Powder River Basin. His column located and destroyed an Arapaho village at the Battle of Tongue River on August 28, 1865. This was the only battle due to an early winter and lack of supplies that ended the Connor Expedition (a.k.a. Powder River Expedition of 1865). This expedition was essentially the beginning of Red Cloud's War which took place between 1866 and 1868. Connor also built an outpost just west of the Pumpkin Buttes that became known as Fort Reno.



Etching of Fort Reno in 1866 - from Harpers Weekly

Sawyers Expedition of 1865:

Colonel James Sawyers led a wagon road building party into the area in August of 1865 that became known as Sawyers Expedition. This group of civilian contractors and their military escort traveled through much of Campbell County and had a series of skirmishes south of the area of Gillette.

The goal of the expedition was to provide a shorter, more direct route from the mouth of the Niobrara River to the goldfields of Virginia City, Montana. The expedition entered modern day Campbell County in the southeast and traveled northwest until rough terrain and lack of water near the Powder River forced them to turn around.

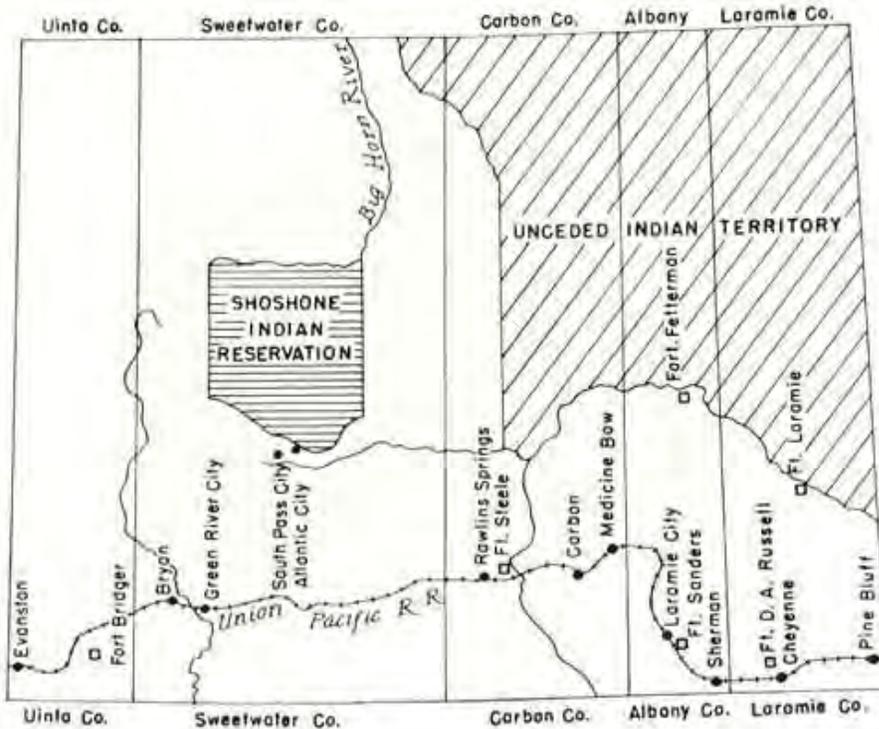
After they turned, the Sawyers party was harassed and attacked several times. Nat Hedges of the Hedges Brother trading firm was killed by a party of Sioux and Cheyenne on August 13th and the group dug in near the headwaters of Bonepile Creek (southwest of Gillette) the next day. Hedges was buried at this time. They were again attacked the evening of the 14th and the following day at their camp on Bonepile Creek before holding a peace council that ended the hostilities for a time. However, something went wrong during a trade and Anthony Nelson and

John Rouse were killed. Nelson's body was the only one recovered and he was buried alongside Hedges.

On August 16th, the Sawyers party traveled back to Caballo Creek and stayed there until August 19th. They again dug rifle pits, but there was never really any conflict other than a little harassment from Indian scouts. Eventually the group moved southwest to Pumpkin Buttes where they continued on to Virginia City. Sawyers traveled the road again in 1866, but the road was never really utilized as a viable route.

Indian Territory:

The army eventually gave up their efforts to fortify the Boseman Trail and the Powder River Basin formally became "Indian Territory" with the signing of the "Treaty with the Sioux and Arapaho, 1868," also known as the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. From this time on, the country north of the North Platte River and east of the summits of the Big Horn Mountains would be considered Indian Territory.



Map of Wyoming, 1870 from Larson's *History of Wyoming* page 96

Great Sioux War of 1876:

Under pressure from miners and settlers, the United States Government eventually decided that the Native Americans needed to give up the lands in Northeast Wyoming. Without consulting any of the tribes, the U.S. issued a proclamation on January 31, 1876 stating that all the Indians must return to their various agencies or be subject to military action. Three armies were sent into the region during the summer of 1876 including one led by George Custer. That fall, a

government peace commission visited the Sioux and obtained the marks of some of the chiefs on a document officially ceding the Black Hills and the lands west of them.

The major battles of 1876 primarily took place west and north of where Campbell County would later be organized. The closest battle was just across the county and state line near the site of present-day Moorhead, Montana in March of 1867. General Crook sent out a column of troops from Fort Fetterman under the command of Colonel Joseph J. Reynolds to find and punish the tribes not complying with the order to return to their agencies.

The expedition left the fort on March 1st and headed in a northwest direction along the path of the old Bozeman Trail and made it to the site of old Fort Reno by the 5th. Reynolds and his men continued north to the Tongue River and scouted that area for some time. Finding no villages, they decided to turn east and head toward the Powder River. Spotting two Indians, the Colonel's scouts were able to follow their trail and eventually found a village along the Powder River that they believed was the village of Crazy Horse. It was later discovered that the village was not that of Crazy Horse but mostly a group of Cheyenne with some visiting Sioux.

Reynolds attacked on the Morning of March 17th. The soldiers had the element of surprise and despite a series of tactical blunders, were able to run off the warriors and destroy the village. Soon thereafter, the Indian warriors regrouped and harassed Reynolds and his men into a hasty retreat during which the bodies of four soldiers were left behind. Reynolds also failed to properly guard the captured ponies and 550 of them were re-captured by the Indians during the night.

The expedition returned to Fort Fetterman on March 26th with thin horses and weary soldiers. General Crook was not pleased with the campaign and quickly brought Reynolds and other officers up for court-martial. The attack on the Powder River village signaled the beginning of the Sioux War of 1876, but ultimately had much less impact in the war than the later battles at Rosebud, Little Bighorn, Slim Buttes, and Dull Knife Village.

Today, a [monument marks the Powder River battlefield](#), about four miles north of Moorhead, Montana. It has four plaques that honor the soldiers killed in action during the battle. The monument was erected and dedicated by Campbell County Post No. 42 of the American Legion in 1934.

Early Ranching and Settlement:

The area encompassing Gillette became part of Crook County by law in 1875 although it wasn't organized until 1885. Most of the area was still sparsely populated. The federal census of 1880 showed the unorganized county had only 239 residents. Most were over near Sundance and the Black Hills. It was not long after 1880 that the slow trickle of settlers began to increase into the area. Ranchers and homesteaders began to grab up as much cheap land as they could. Crook County was later divided in two with the southern part becoming Weston County in 1890.

The high plains of the Wyoming Territory became an attractive source of grazing land for the cattle industry beginning in the late 1860s. The overpopulation of the Southern Plains and the

building of the Transcontinental Railroad through Wyoming in 1867-1868 were two major factors in opening this area to cattle grazing.

The Powder River Country opened up to the great herds by 1877 with the elimination of the “Indian threat.” Hundreds of thousands of cattle were moved into the area from all directions. Many large herds moved up the Texas Trail through Kansas, Nebraska, and Southeast Wyoming. These large herds were operated by huge cattle companies including the Standard Cattle Company, the North American Cattle Company, the Powder River Cattle Company, and the Western Union Beef Company. The ranches of these companies were often known by their brands such as the 101 and Half Circle L.



New Year's Gathering of the Western Union Beef Company - 1894
Horse Creek Ranch – Northern Campbell County
CCRM Collection (2001.101.0037)

Pictured in the back row from left to right are: J. D. Collins, Charles Luckuck, G. L. Platte, A. N. Cantley, Walt Monnett, W. D. Rooney, J. C. Gupton, Lora Reed, and Mrs. Sallie Wilson. In the front row are W. P. Ricketts, J. G. Johnson, George Hurlburt, Jim Smith, and John Osborne.

The large cattle companies used open range management practices where their herds would roam the entire region and then would be rounded up in the spring. This practice soon ended due to a series of events including overcrowding, market decline, and drought. The final straw was the Blizzard of 1886-1887. Without food, water, or shelter, these herds were decimated. Some estimates place the losses in Crook County at 45 percent. The *Laramie Weekly Sentinel* stated that the 101 Ranch lost 11,090 head of cattle out of a herd of 12,000 and could only report 8,000 out of another herd of 30,000.



"Cattle in a Blizzard"

From *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 27, 1886

Drawing by Charles Graham from a sketch by Henry Worrall

No matter the actual losses, this blizzard was devastating to the cattle industry in this area. Many large operations closed or were sold to others. Ranchers changed to more managed practices including clearing meadows and growing hay crops for winter forage, fencing lands for better livestock management, and even shipping herds to winter feeding locations out of state. These changes eventually created smaller owner-operated ranches that are more familiar in this region today.

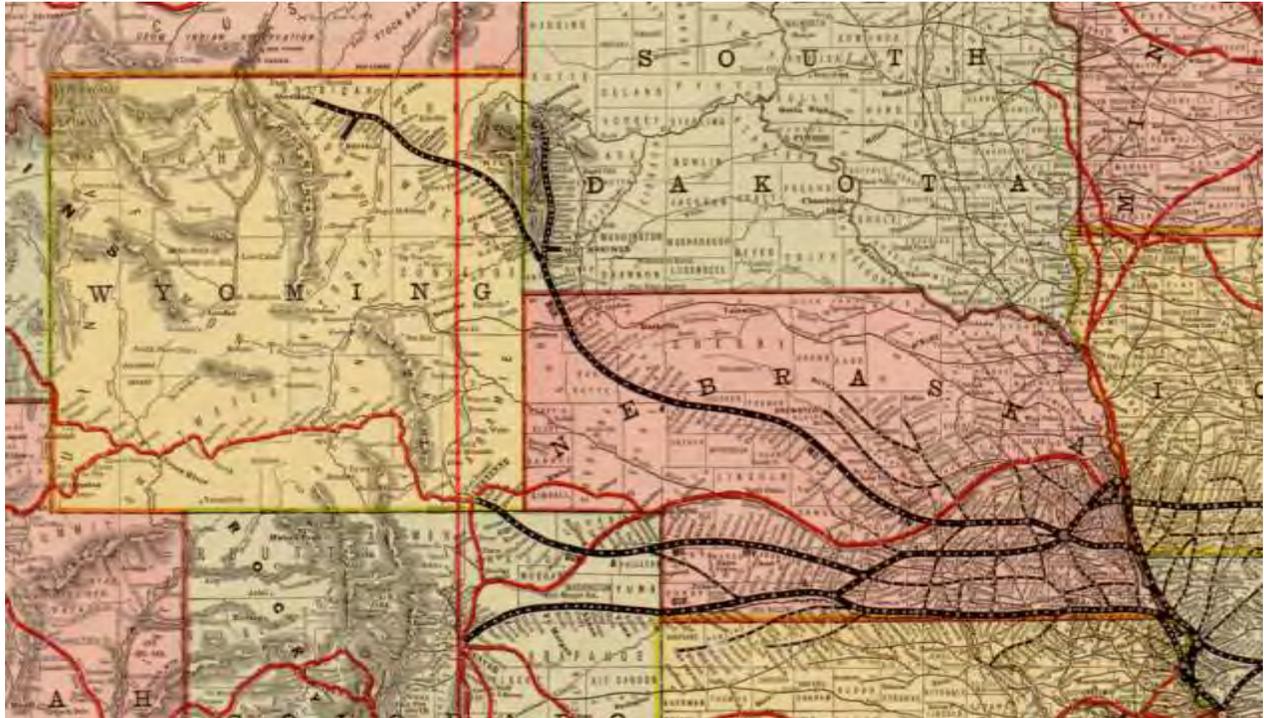
The Railroad Arrives:

Prior to the 1890s, ranchers had to trail their cattle herds hundreds of miles to reach railheads for shipment to market. By 1886, the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley Railroad had reached Smithwick, South Dakota and the Wyoming Central Railway had reached Douglas, Wyoming. Both were subsidiaries of the Chicago and North Western Railroad. Despite this railroad growth, the large beef herds of Northeast Wyoming and Southeast Montana were still long distances from shipping points.

This would all change with the creation of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad (B&MR) in 1888. A subsidiary of Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy (CB&Q), this company was formed to build a rail line from Crawford, Nebraska, to Billings, Montana. The Burlington reached Newcastle, Wyoming, in November 1890, Gillette in August 1891, and Sheridan in November

1892. All along the route were small communities, shipping points, and section houses including Rozet, Minturn, Sparta, Oriva, Felix, and Croton.

Visit the [Gillette History](#) page for more information on the railroad's arrival and the early history of the city.



Detail of an 1892 Burlington Route Map

Homesteading:

The arrival of the Burlington in 1891 opened up Northeast Wyoming to the arrival of settlers and homesteaders. Emigrant cars brought families and their possessions to Gillette and from there they spread out across Crook and Weston Counties.

Farmers, ranchers, and their families began to occupy as much land as they could to begin their lives and businesses on the high plains. The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed each citizen (the age of 21 or head of household) to file for as many as 160 acres of "unappropriated public lands." Later acts expanded the number of acres and the types of land that could be filed for.

Small communities began to pop up all over the area. In the north there was Bertha, Rockypoint, Recluse, Weston, Spotted Horse, Adon, Morse, Wildcat, Lonepine, Echeta, Oriva, and Rozet. The south had communities named Savageton, Wright, Cklarkelen, Cactus, Teckla, Hilight, Hidivide, Lawver, Maysdorf, Piney, and Dillinger among others.



Campbell County, 1911:

Campbell County was created by law in 1911 out of the western halves of Crook and Weston Counties. Gillette resident and state legislator Harry J. Chassell (pictured at above) introduced the bill that created Campbell County which is named after both John A. Campbell, the first governor of the territory of Wyoming, and Robert Campbell who was with an early expedition to this part of Wyoming from 1825 to 1835 and one of the founders of Fort Laramie. An election was held and Gillette was chosen to be the county seat with a total of 381 votes. Rozet received 15 votes, and the small communities of Bertha and Morse each received one vote. Campbell County officially organized in 1913.

Campbell County held its first county-wide election on November 5, 1912. W.P Ricketts, Anthony M. Carey and C. A. Moyer were elected county commissioners. The following were the other county office holders:

Lewis G. Butler – sheriff
Lora H. Reed – treasurer
J. E. Brennan – assessor
Elwood Anderson – attorney
Alonzo M. Clark – clerk
W. R. Fox – surveyor
Josephine Anderson – superintendent of schools
Frank Stanford, Sr. - coroner

The first elected Campbell County Commissioners and all other county officers were sworn in on January 6, 1913. Meetings were held in the Gillette City Hall until the former Gillette school building was refurbished for use as the first Campbell County Courthouse.



Post-World War One Growth:

The years following World War One saw the most intense period of homesteading in Campbell County. The increase was due to heavy promotion by the CB&Q as well as the growth of the "dry farming" movement. The Stock Raising Act of 1916 also increased the number of acres that could be homesteaded. The population of Campbell County increased from approximately 2,600 at its formation to 5,233 people in 1920 and 6,720 residents in 1930.

Despite this growth, life in Campbell County was not easy at the time, especially for dry land farmers. A series of droughts and decreased market prices put many farmers out of business. Many homesteaders lost their land and were forced to move out of Campbell County. New applications dwindled and by the end of the 1920s, the size of homesteads in Wyoming had nearly doubled while the number of homesteads had decreased.

The Great Depression and the dust bowl years of the 1930s put even more farmers and ranchers out of business. The U.S. government even began buying back homesteads to return to grazing lands. In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act and two Executive Orders withdrew all remaining public lands from entry and ended the homesteading era. These rough years showed in the census figures as Campbell County's population decreased to 6,048 in 1940 and 4,839 in 1950.

Industry in Campbell County:

Agriculture has been the most consistent industry in Gillette for nearly all of its life. Cattle were important in the first decade and gradually sheep production rose as well. Many ranches raised both sheep and cattle. Farming has always been a difficult trade in the semi-arid region Gillette resides in, but many have grown grains and grasses used to feed their livestock. Wheat, barley, oats, hay, and corn have all been produced over the years.



T-7 Ranch Outfit on Donkey Creek - circa 1905

Early homesteaders utilized the potential of Campbell County's other major industry when they burnt surface coal deposits to heat their homes. Small coal mines were built around the area as early as 1909. These mines were all underground including one of the largest which was the Peerless Mine east of Gillette where Wyodak is today. It began operations somewhere around 1918 until it went out of business around 1925. This mine used the "room and pillar" method to remove coal.

The Wyodak operation was developed in 1924 and operated near the Peerless Mine in the same coal seam. But it was different because it was a surface coal mine that utilized horse-drawn devices called "fresnos" to remove the surface soil or overburden to reach the coal. Wyodak was the first surface coal mine in the world and the largest for many years. This mine continues to produce coal for a nearby power plant.



Wyodak, 1927

One of the first energy booms for Campbell County came in the late 1950's and 1960's. Oil explorations had been going on since the 1940's and the first commercial discovery was made in 1948. Major discoveries in Eastern Campbell County in 1956 really set off an oil boom in the area. This meant growth for Gillette, at least for the time being.

During the 1970's, the modern coal industry here really began to flourish. Major coal companies flocked to Campbell County to harvest the Powder River Basin's low sulfur coal. These companies wanted to capitalize on the economic benefit of having very large coal seams so close to the surface. Due to this increased production, railroad companies began adding more lines to ship the coal away thus entering a new age of railroad history in Gillette. Today coal remains a vital industry to Gillette's growth. In 2006, this area shipped a record 430 million tons of coal. The mines employ hundreds of workers and even more with the associated industries.

By the 1990's, a third major segment of the energy industry began to rear its head in Gillette, coal-bed methane. This gas which is trapped inside the pores of the coal is drilled for and extracted for use. Since 1998, Gillette has been the center of these operations in the region. Lately however, production has been down in Campbell County because wells are drying up and production is moving to the west and north.