

NEVER BEEN LOST

A Wyoming Travel Diary



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"I have never been lost, but I will admit to being confused for several weeks."

— Daniel Boone

WYOMING

The history of the Earth is written on her deep skin and those tomes are shuffled and cast and sent on long tours but slowly — very very very slowly. Mountains are pushed into the sky at rates imperceptible to the span of governments, but how high they rise. And then as they come up, they are taken down again by wind and by water. Time so long that water can tear down a mountain — as hands smooth door handles, as leather shod feet wear hollows in stone steps, rain water rounds out mountains, breaks them apart, cracks boulders, and smooths their remains oval and flat in riverbeds. One click, one touch, one caress at a time.

This is not my first foray into Wyoming geology — the volcanic effluvium bentonite is found in vast quantities here, sometimes nearly a dozen feet thick — it has the strange ability to absorb a dozen times its own volume of water and train loads of it are mined every day here and shipped around the world as kitty litter. I've been slowly importing Wyoming into my home in five pound bags for years.

Bentonite is ubiquitous and its uses range beyond keeping urban apartments smelling fresh — it also serves to help date features of the landscape — it's Cretaceous — so if a mountain pokes up through a field of it, the mountain is younger than 100,000,000 years old.

While humans have been in Wyoming for many thousands of years — leaving arrow heads and clovis points — Europeans have been there for a relatively short time. Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead act in 1862. Slowly people trickled in, followed by the railroads and with the railroads came a magnificent period of expansion — cattle, and sheep ranches and the people to run them but still, a hundred years later, there were still less than half a million people in the entire state.

“Did you hear they want to tax each cow?” asks the man sitting across from me in the Uptown Cafe on Greybull Avenue, near Wyoming's center, “because they make greenhouse gasses and help cause global warming.”

“We should exterminate all the cattle and let them go without steak in Washington D.C.,” replies a man with a heavy mustache sitting next to me. And this is the dance — ranchers in the West still produce the beef, unseen and anonymous and it arrives seemingly by magic in store shelves across the country. But in Wyoming the bond between people and animals is very real. Lives and fortunes here are tied to animals, and to the space — these vast, wide open places are utilized almost entirely for animals — the two

great debates here — water rights and grazing right have produced feuds and bloody battles since the very beginning.

In July of 1889 two homesteaders, Ella Watson and her husband James Averall, were kidnapped and hanged by Albert Bothwell, a local rancher who had been using their property to graze his cattle. Ella maintains the unenviable distinction of being the only woman ever executed in the state.



PHILADELPHIA TO LAS VEGAS, LAS VEGAS TO CODY

There are airports in Wyoming, lots of them actually, though no major ones. Theodore Francis Green State Airport in Rhode Island has nine times more traffic than Jackson Hole, Wyoming's largest airport which itself has ten times as much traffic as Yellowstone Regional Airport in Cody.

There are only 19 passengers on our plane which stops on the tarmac, we deplane by ladder, Trillian and I wave to the mountains like we're Kennedys: it's a novel experience. We walk to the terminal and are greeted by a baggage claim carousel about fifteen feet long. Through the window we can see an airport worker setting bags on it. The rental car agent tells us about a mountain lion darted that morning by animal control agents a few towns over. He has a photograph of it from a newspaper.

"Does that sort of thing happen often?" I ask.

"I've never heard of it before," he says.

It's sixty miles from Cody to Greybull, where we have a hotel room reserved, but first we stop at Walmart.











I'd never been in a Walmart before and from my sanctimonious arm chair in West Philadelphia I'd safely listed their ills — how they were destroying local retail, how they treated their workers like cattle, how they imported cheap products from China — but when faced with the enormous indoor expanse of the superstore in Cody I realized I wasn't evaluating the whole story. This wasn't a store — it was a city. You could buy a television, a fishing rod, a wedding ring, a lawn mower, a trampoline, a casket, goat's milk, salmon flavored cream cheese, and veggie burgers — yes gentle reader veggie burgers. A huge selection of veggie burgers even.

Here in this place built of nothing but nothing — open space and hills here was a place with everything. I suddenly understood the other side of that coin. And I suppose it's not that different from homesteaders in 1880 riding three days into town four times a year for flour and sugar and feed.

The dichotomy of this system is that local stores suffer, go under, but you can drive fifty miles and get neckties and an eight pack of Morningstar Vegan Grillers.

In the parking lot next to us is a truck with a bumper sticker that reads

Welcome to Wyoming. Now take a wolf and go home.







Back home you tend to think “Of course they should keep wolves from being hunted to extinction. They’re majestic and — heck, the cull sick bison from the herd.” But in reality they far prefer healthy lambs to sick bison. So while in the city we think of shooting wolves from helicopters as unsporting — to a rancher whose livestock are being eviscerated it probably seems *expedient*.

THE HISTORIC GREYBULL HOTEL

Trillian found the Historic Greybull Hotel on the Internet and booked us a room. In fact, seeing the prices, she booked us a suite of rooms, two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a sitting room.

Part of the hotel had previously been a bank — the vault’s still there and every morning Lori and Myles, the owners, serve coffee and tea. Myles has one leg, he lost the other to diabetes, his prosthesis is festooned with airbrushed pirate ships. We take an immediate liking to him. I beg and Myles acquiesces — momentarily locking us up in the vault so that we can experience the total darkness, sipping our coffee like bags of contemplative, happy money.







GREYBULL



RIDERS ON THE STORM

Coming out of the hotel we're confronted with the most enormous supercell I've ever seen. Possibly because there's so much open space, but also possibly because it's just an enormous and very menacing cloud, stretching and broiling for several miles. I run, rather than walk, down the street to the rail road tracks where there's nothing between me and this wall of spinning catastrophe and start taking photos. Lightning bolts are few and far between and seem to be triggered by my putting down the camera and turning to Trillian and saying "well, I guess that's about it" – at which point the sky is torn apart in a net of electricity and a thunderclap loud enough to knock the hat off of a preacher.

All the while I'm taking photos I can hear someone behind me talking to Trill who sounds very knowledgeable about storm fronts, bits of conversation like "anvil" and "updraft" touch behind me. After perhaps ten minutes a police car screeches to a halt behind us and an officer says, very excitedly, "The hail's coming, you gotta get out of here," and then roars off.

I notice that the other person with Trill is the most spectacular cowboy I've ever seen with a hat you could camp under and a weathered face filled with quiet character.



I ask if I can take a photo of him before we're all pummeled to death by baseball sized hail. He's happy to do so. I suspect this happens all the time. "My name's Eddie," he says, and shakes my hand. "You have a great face," I tell him.

As we race to the safety of the car I say to Trillian that I'm very happy to have met a real cowboy and that I can't imagine a more spectacular photo than Eddie in front of that storm front. As I'm saying this, he tears past, hell bent for leather, on a neon green one speed bicycle.

Eddie rides into the sunset.

I miss the photo.









BONES OF THE EARTH

Wyoming is not subtle about her history — her diary is easily read and writ large — for sure there are gaps, but she is prolific.

I came from New Jersey whose flat landscape keeps its secrets — New Jersey is enigmatic the girl at the party who sits at the party and speaks to no one. Wyoming is a storyteller, effusive and brash. There are two things that help — rivers, which slice through rock opening the pages of her history books and the Highway Department which does the same thing; but with dynamite.

The state is like a layer cake of stone, telling the story of the formation of the Earth.

We drive through it and stop at the Greybull airplane graveyard where Bill Shumway takes us around to see the old planes. Inside a BI7 he shows us the cables that control the tail rudders. “Sometimes when the pilots would fall asleep,” he says, “we’d just grab ahold of these cables and pull — it makes the plane do a crazy dip and it sure would wake those pilots up fast!” He laughs. Bill’s not as spry as he used to be and carries an oxygen tank around with him now, but he lets us wriggle up to the cockpit on our own, between two giant tanks installed over the bomb bay doors which were used for dump-









ing retardant onto forest fires during it's second life. It's so strange to see all these air-planes parked in the middle of nowhere. It does feel like a graveyard, a forgotten one, in a place it shouldn't be.

THE BIG HORNS

We drive up the Big Horn mountains. It's twenty miles of winding road from Chimney Rock at the bottom to the summit through wide passes, a road that often doubles back on itself, bare patches, waterfalls, and dense forests. The easiest way across a mountain is usually decided over hundreds of years by direct democracy — long before road builders arrive on the scene with asphalt and graders, bison have picked out the easiest pathway and worn it into trails.

Thrust skyward some 70,000,000 years ago during the Laramide orogeny, the same event that created the Rocky Mountains.

Along the way up the mountains we see patches of trees turned grey and killed by pine beetle infestation. In Wyoming mountain pine beetles along with the Douglas fir beetle have reached epidemic proportions due to warmer than usual winters which have failed

to kill them off. Vast stretches of grey trees stand amidst those still green. In 2008 US Forest Service officials announced that every single mature lodgepole pine tree in the state of Colorado would be killed by pine beetles before the year 2013.

Although it was warm when we left Greybull and we're wearing short sleeved shirts, it's very cold at the top. We get out of the car at the point where the road curves down both in front and behind us feeling like we've accomplished something, though all we did was sit in a car. While standing by the side of the road we notice a moose step out of the forest. I've never seen a moose before. It's huge, as tall as I am with hyper articulated lips and a newly forming set of antlers. She grazes slowly, occasionally looking up at us, but always deciding that whatever she's eating is more important. We stand absolutely still. She eats her way across the field until she is no more than 20 feet from us. Rags of fur are falling from her sides, she looks unkempt, disheveled and I can see this more clearly as she gets closer. Her sheer size is intimidating and I decide that this is about as close as I want to be to a moose. Luckily the moose agrees. She looks up a final time and lopes off back into the forest. We're left with the tingling of a rare and wonderful encounter, the umbrella of the sky, the open space, the lack of any trace of human existence but this thin slice of road and what we brought with us.

It begins to snow.



















GETTING AROUND

We're sitting downstairs in the Cafe with Myles and I'm lamenting that I missed a photo of the cowboy riding the bicycle. Things like that just don't come round again.

"Sure they do," says Myles, "that's Eddie. He lives two blocks from here, he owns a store over there — it's a ministry and a button store and. He sells books too. In fact, if you stick around long enough, he's bound to stop in here. He always does — almost every day."

Buoyed by the thought that there are second chances, Trillian and I strike out for Eddie's store and find it easily enough, right where Myles said it would be. Eddie's hard at work sorting buttons, and he invites us in. Half of the store is devoted to his ministry and the other half to a wide range of things, from turquoise jewelry, to knives, to used books. One thing that catches my eye is a wall of photos of Eddie with Jet Li, with Willie Nelson, with lariats, six shooters, dressed as a cowboy, dressed as an Indian. It turns out Eddie's had a long career in the cinema. He captivates us with stories of Alamo Village, the movie set built in 1960 for the John Wayne film which has since been used over and over. Eddie's been there twice, once for Lonesome Dove, and then again in 1997 for the martial arts film Once Upon A Time in China and America where he played an Indian chief.





There's a newspaper article taped to the wall about Eddie donating bicycles to school children. I get a travelers pang — whatever the opposite of homesickness is — that these people will go on leading their lives and I may never see them again, never know what's happening, miss their daily wisdom.



I take a few photos of Eddie out front. He gives me a 1927 copy of the *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* by Eleanor Pruitt, a 1914 collection of letters by a Wyoming homesteader filled with raw wit and joy. Over the next few days I devour it often stopping to read passages out loud to Trill. Pruitt's observations of her surroundings are inspired. Lamenting a neighbor's isolation Pruitt writes: "All the help she had was a girl she just knew didn't have sense enough to pound sand into a rat hole."

I'm not sure what it means, but I'm sure that it's funny.

We spend the evening clowning around with Myles in the hotel. He shows us the basement which, during the 1920's, was a famous speakeasy. He tells us the secret way they smuggled alcohol into it. We marvel at it's clever simplicity and run around through the empty hotel like kids, pretending we're all in an episode of *Scooby Doo*.

THERMOPOLIS

The next day Trillian and I drive off to Thermopolis, a few hours south. Billed as the world's largest mineral hot springs, Thermopolis is a water park in a very unlikely place.

Geothermal heat sends mineral rich water bubbling to the surface from a number of holes. Purchased from the Shoshone and Arapaho in the late 1800's, Thermopolis has been something of the Atlantic City of Wyoming ever since.

“My grandparents came here on their honeymoon in 1937,” says Trillian.

The minerals in the water turn her wedding ring black almost instantly.

We spend the day racing up and down water slides, basking in pools, both indoor and out, the water temperature is something like “nice hot bath”. After a few hours we tire and go for a walk. I climb the tallest hill, a sharp, thousand foot lope, and find a book hidden under a cairn of rocks at the summit, signed by dozens of travelers who attempt to describe the wonder they see — all of Thermopolis and miles around splayed out before them.



After hours of water slides and lazy splashing we dry off and go for a walk. We follow pipes up the hill to the source of the spring — water bubbling from a pit into a clear pool, smelling potently of sulphur. Long green tendrils of vegetation wave in the current. We stand there a moment and move on. The area is comprised of a series of tall hills and open grassland. I set off to climb the tallest hill. From the top is a view of Thermopolis and the land for miles around. Under a large cairn of rocks I find a notebook signed by dozens of people who had also climbed to the top. I write my own words and sit in silence feeling the wind wrap serenely around me.



From the top of the hill I can see American bison scattered across the fields. A sign below tells us they're dangerous but not how dangerous. Should we be screaming and running away waving our arms because we see one on the horizon? Or should we not walk up to them and kick them? The sign is disconcerting and frustrating in its brevity. (Later we get endless amusement searching for "Bison Attack" on YouTube and watching tourists perform acts of great stupidity, mostly at Yellowstone.)

11-6-08 3:33pm
Cold Windy day. Good day for a
walk. Where are the 4 Fences Posts?

11-8-08 - What a different view we have
now that all the leaves are gone - not any more,
just different! It is a nice, cool, cloudy day - and
no wind! About the fence posts... I never
really understood what they were doing up here anyway.
So... guess they weren't needed anymore.... Barb

KARL COMPTON

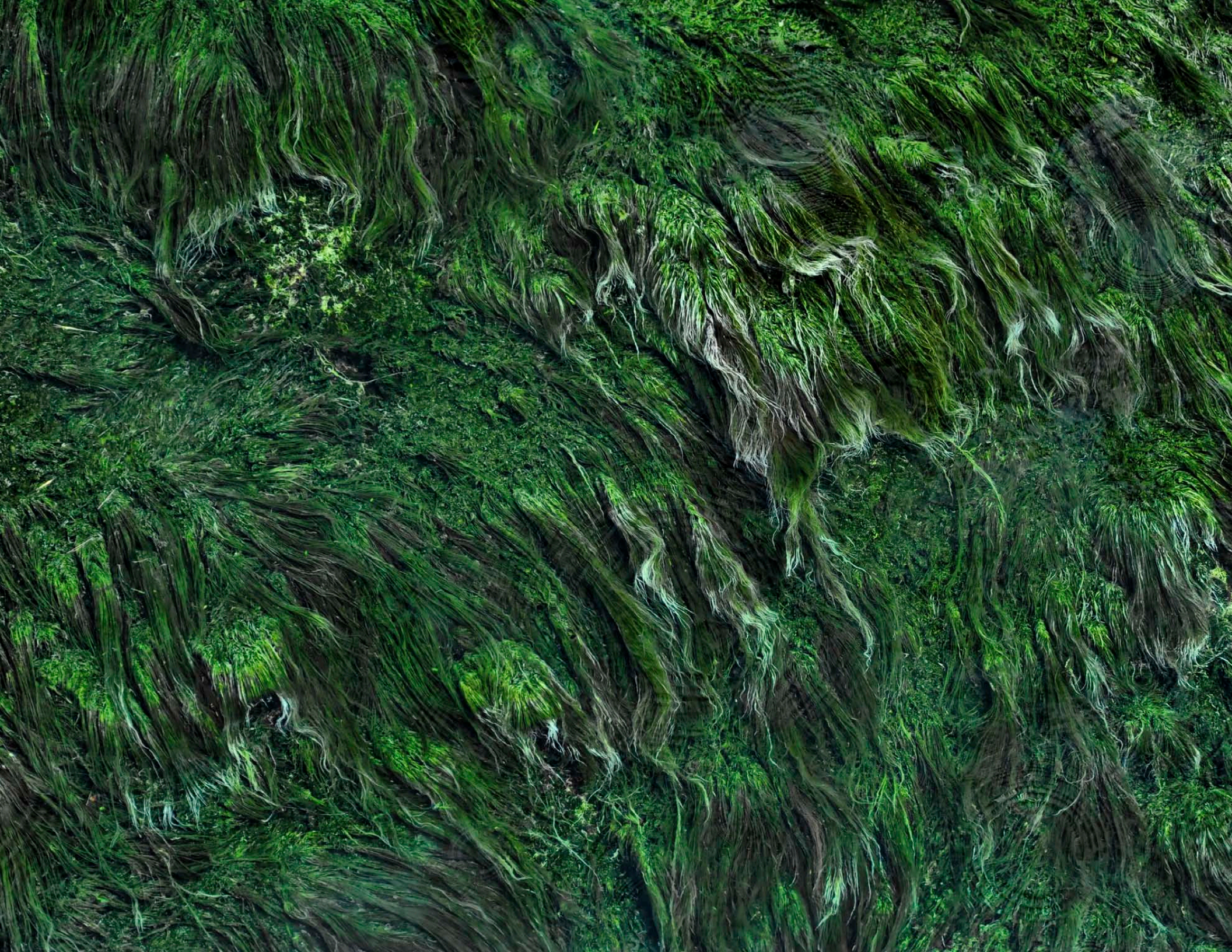
11-11-08 Armistice Day - glorious location to
reflect on the freedom we have. On this Nov
day - weather is fabulous! Sunny, red rocks,
green grass, blue sky - Nature is like a box of
crayons! Rebecca + Marc, Helena MT
(+ Grover the choco-lab)

11/15/08 - A beautiful day w/ beautiful
views up here. Last bit of mild weather for
these two folks from Hoback, Wyo. Thinking
of a good friend Mameel Fee, who is no longer
with us - but his spirit will live on Forever.
Wyoming Rocks!!! Peace out - Jenny + Ryan
P.S. Washakie knew the place to hang.

11/15/08 - What a beautiful place. I brought
my boys up here. My 2 year old will
never remember but we have photos.
Amy, Missouri

11/16/08

I came to visit my parents for the
weekend and this is where we came
on my final day. Joy
Joy, Denver, CO
previously of Holland, MI



A rectangular white sign with a red border is mounted on a wooden post. The sign has the word "WARNING" in large red capital letters at the top, and "BUFFALO ARE DANGEROUS" in smaller red capital letters below it. The sign is secured with two screws. In the background, there is a grassy field with some shrubs and a large, rounded hill under a cloudy sky. A wooden fence rail is visible in the foreground.

WARNING

BUFFALO ARE DANGEROUS





FAMILY ARCHAEOLOGY

Where I come from it's difficult to get lost because everything is numbered. 22nd street is ten blocks west of 12th street, and so on.

There are only half a million people in the state of Wyoming. In Philadelphia proper there are one and half million people, if you count the surrounding suburbs, there are more than five million people. My city is divided between four congressmen. The entire state of Wyoming's has but one, Cynthia Lumis, who must have more miles on her car than a Fuller Brush man.

As we drive east along US 14 we pass through towns with posted populations of 100, 50, and less.

Trillian's from Wyoming, she grew up here, and the spaces have secret meanings for her. We walk through fields along a culvert. I've got it in my head that I want to find an arrowhead and I walk with my neck at a 90' angle, examining every stone. We find plenty of evidence of people, a rusted buckle from a bridle, and loops of barbed wire. But no arrow heads.







The history of barbed wire is tied with the history of this place. In the late 1800's the development and production of large amounts of inexpensive yet effective cattle fencing set two powerful groups against one another — ranchers who owned plots of land and open range cattle owners who grazed their livestock on the vast expanse of public prairie. When ranchers began putting up fences, they cut off access to water and choice grazing lands. They also, not infrequently, fenced off large swaths of land that didn't belong to them. This began the Fence Cutting Wars and much murder, animosity and mayhem.

Through all of this the landscape endures.

It's a different world than I know and I'm fortunate that Trillian wants to show it to me, to explain these rocks, and these fences, and these people, to introduce me to one tiny place on the map that I never would have seen otherwise, to make it special for me. I wonder if we hadn't kicked this strand of wire out of the dirt if any human being would ever have seen it again. It's as rare and special as a diamond to me. We put it back and move on.

We're the only guests at the hotel and we spend some of the evening exploring, finding the laundry room, wandering down empty hallways, going out on the roof deck and looking down at the town.









In the morning Myles makes us breakfast and coffee in the lobby. He's experimenting with smoothies and milkshakes. We become his guinea pigs. As the sun comes up, the town starts to drift in. People sit and read the newspaper, they talk, they stop by because it's what you do. Empty spaces make people sociable.

I've been reading *Letters From a Woman Homesteader* — the book Eddie gave me. Elanore Pruitt came to Wyoming to get away from Denver where she was afraid her daughter would grow up “devoid of imagination” — she lives a day and a half from her nearest neighbor (the wonderfully named “Zebulon Pike”) and “town” with its molasses and flour and nails is a full five days ride. In all that space the arrival of a lonesome cowboy or a wagon on its way to somewhere is always occasion to a party. I contrast this with my own city life where there might be two hundred people who live on my street and nobody's particularly happy to see anyone else.

WIND RIVER

On the road between Shoshoni and Thermopolis, US Route 20 descends into Wind River Canyon, it's like being swallowed by the Earth. At its greatest depth the sides of the canyon rise up half a mile into the air above you. Over last 100 million years, the Owl Creek Mountains were pushed up from colliding plates and then cut open by the Wind River. The oldest visible stratigraphy is Precambrian, almost three billion years old and at the top, Triassic, formed a paltry 200 million years ago.

Like a not insignificant portion of Wyoming, Wind River Canyon is on an Indian reservation. The Wind River Reservation is home to the Shoshoni and Arapaho tribes and at one time included Thermopolis which was later sold to the U.S. Government to make the springs publicly accessible.

In many of the levels along the walls of the canyon can be found fossilized sea creatures — from 550 million year old trilobites in the Cambrian shale, to more familiar chambered nautilus' just a few million years old — Wyoming's spent a lot of time being the bottom of the ocean.

I've seen keys worn smooth by years of being inserted into the same lock, wearing an infinitissamle bit at a time, I know the process, and yet I cannot fathom these walls being created by sediment settling, granules of dust falling to the bottom of the ocean and lying there. And another granule, and another, over the ages. And then, after that mud becomes stone, and is pushed into the air:—the thought of water cutting through it. I cannot imagine turning a boulder into sand by touching it with a feather over and over, but I realize that it will happen, if tickled long enough.

We stop our car just after the canyon opens up into the Boysen reservoir and get out, looking out across the water and then spending some half an hour poking along the shale looking for fossils. We find none.

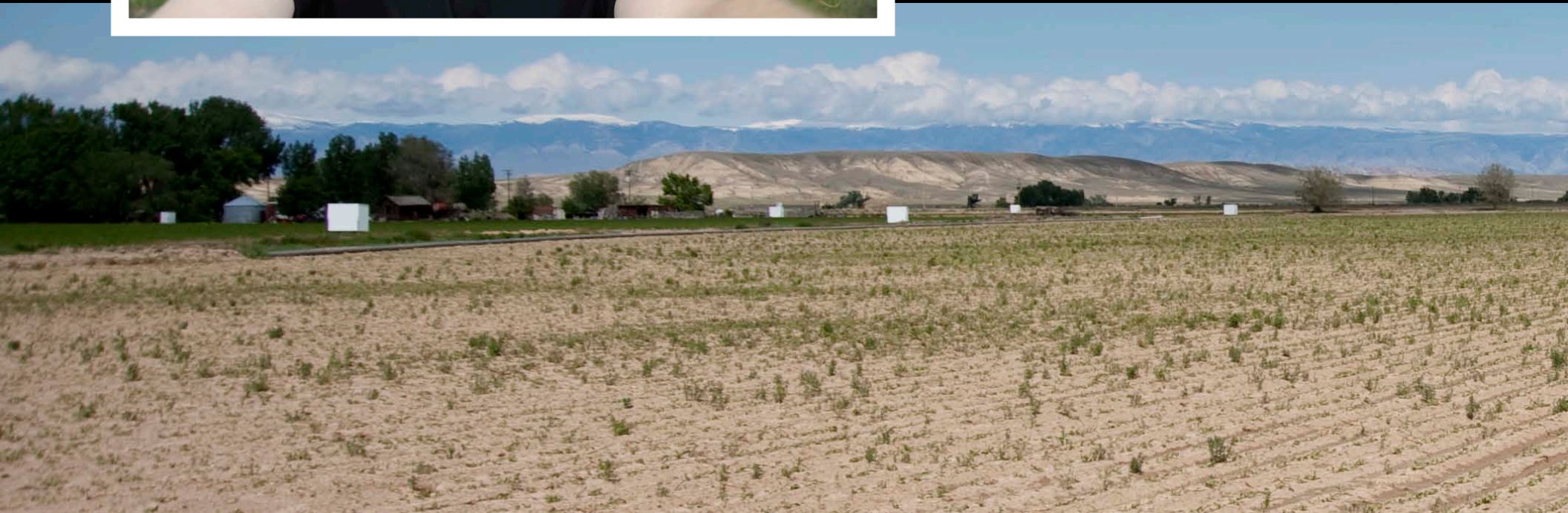


Sometimes we're pressed onto the land — the right place, the right time, the right layers of sediment will accumulate upon us and something remains of us to be cut out of a wall by a wandering stream millions of years later. But for the most of us, Trilobites and people alike, it is the opposite — the land presses itself onto us and wherever we go, we bear that impression — it affects the way we act and who we are.

The blue bowled skies and great distances and grass of Wyoming left themselves pressed like a flower in Trillian's memory and I'm grateful that she's brought me here to share the slightest echo with me. The people and the geography are part of that box of things I will carry with me now always.







HOME

The next morning we pack leisurely, & say goodbye to Myles. In the past week we've made good friends and it feels like we're losing an old school chum and the hotel has seemed as much like home as any place not home could possibly be. We have breakfast and drive the sixty miles back to Cody and return the car at the airport. The clerk at the Delta Airlines booth hands me my boarding pass. It's hand written.

Wyoming recedes behind us, grand and stoic, its people, animals, stones and grasses. So large and yet, at times, so small, but now, for me, unique and precious in all the world.

