

## An Old West Diptych

## Guide to Highways & Roads

### Primary Highway

Take I-70 West to Colorado; Colorado comes with Kansas; continue north on I-25 to Wyoming, which comes with Colorado and Kansas; continue north on I-25 to Montana which comes with Wyoming, Colorado, and Kansas.

*Free Icewater at Wall Drug.*

Take I-80 West to Wyoming; Wyoming comes with Nebraska and Iowa.

*Free Coffee and Donut for Vietnam War Vets at Wall Drug.*

Take I-90 West to South Dakota; South Dakota comes with Nebraska; continue west to Wyoming, which now comes with South Dakota; continue northwest to Montana which comes with Wyoming, South Dakota and Nebraska.

*Giant Tyrannosaurus Rex ! Only at Wall Drug.*

### Secondary Highway

Do not pass unless you have sightline (1200 feet at 70 mph), and nerve.

Be vigilant.

According to the National Highway Safety Board, 77% of all traffic fatalities occur on two-lane highways.

Outside of Broadus, Montana, at the top of a hill, a car had head-on'ed a truck. The car was now a black metal skeleton. The truck was still burning. The surrounding ground was scorched.

Do not over corp-wreckt.

The Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTD) stipulates on two-lane highways where both lanes are free to pass, the broken yellow line in the center

should have a width of four to six inches.

In South Dakota, the Fatality Marker Program emplaces signs just off the road from points where traffic fatalities occur. The sign is diamond-shaped. On the top half is a red X surrounded by the words, "Marks The Spot." On the bottom is a message THINK! or WHY DIE?


Outside Spearfish, South Dakota, a woman was on the side of a road; her calf and thigh were at an odd angle. A pick up truck was on its roof 20 feet or so before her. It was a windless day and she wasn't moving.

Memorials are not allowed on Interstate Highways.

It once nearly happened to me but, instead, happened behind me.

The American Legion erects white crosses at the site of traffic fatalities on secondary highways in Montana.

On two lane highways, drive with reverence.

 Light Duty, Paved

There are two routes from Hyattville, WY to National Forest Road (N.F.) 24, which leads to the West Tensleep Lake trailhead in the Bighorn National Forest. One route is Hyattville Road, an improved dirt road, that will carry you across private and BLM land into the National Forest. The other route takes you over paved roads that link with US Highway 16, which carries you into the mountains of the National Forest and to N.F. 24.

If your vehicle is low clearance, take the paved roads. From Hyattville, go west on 31 which starts near Alkali Road. If you took Alkali Road, it would lead you to dinosaur tracks, snakes, and acres and acres of Wyoming Big Sagebrush and Saltbush fans.

A few miles outside of Hyattville you will pass the Mercer Angus Ranch. The Mercer Angus Ranch boasts of their bulls, "They summer at 8000 feet to take advantage of natural selection." Perhaps, later on, before crossing Powder Pass on US 16, you may see natural selection at work: bulls nearly a ton, all meat and muscle, pawing at the earth, snorting, lowering their horns. They are ready to charge each other in order to naturally select.

When you reach the West Ditch, a narrow irrigation trough in the valley of the Nowood River, head south on Nowood Road. Just over the anticline from the ditch is the Bonanza Oil Field, an oil deposit first discovered in 1887 when naturally refined crude came seeping from the ground.

Continue on Nowood Road until you reach the town of Tensleep. Tensleep's name is derived from its location--it was "ten sleeps," 11 days of travel, from an Indian camp on the Platte River near present day Casper and "ten sleeps" from another camp near Bridger, MT.

Just outside Tensleep is the site of the Sand Creek Raid. When sheep herds began to incur on "open" range that ranchers held as their own, "deadlines" were promulgated--lines that, if crossed, put sheep and their herders in danger of mortal consequence. In 1909, sheep herders had brought 2500 head of sheep from Worland to Tensleep, thereby crossing a deadline. Some local cowboys raided the camp and killed three shepherders along with a number of sheep.

At Tensleep; take US 16 north.

On 16, you will pass a historical marker above Leigh Creek. In 1884, one Lord Leigh, was vacationing in the Bighorns and died after a tumble off a cliff in Leigh Canyon. At the bottom of Leigh Canyon is Leigh Creek.

Further up 16 is the site of a CCC camp. CCC workers built roads, constructed fire watch towers, and opened up the public land for the public. You can take very deep, very rich breaths when you're on public land. Where are the CCC workers now?

Proceed northeast on 16 until you reach the mixed grass prairie of Deer Haven Lodge. Turn left. You are now on N.F. 24.

 Light Duty, Gravel

The gravel road N.F. 24 to the West Tensleep Lake trailhead is built on a structural terrace. The near and far side of the road is eolian mixed with scattered deposits of residuum, alluvium, and slopewash. Bedrock and glaciated bedrock lie before you. The road is composed of crushed conglomerate sandstone, shale siltstone, bentonite, flint, quartzite, Precambrian gneiss and glacial moraine debris.

Bighorn Bighorn Bighorn dolomite  
Bighorn dolomite  
on the gravel road to the West Tensleep Lake trailhead.

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Light Duty, Dirt

*Why You Should Not Take Hyattville Road to N.F.24*

1. When traveling at the break of day, the glare of the sun allows you to see only a narrow band of road visible four degrees above the dashboard.
2. Your low-clearance vehicle is exposed to the rock of gravity and shearing force.
3. The cows you wait for are indifferent to your difficulties, as you are to theirs.
4. Cobbled surface and deep ruts.
5. The strain on your McPherson struts.
6. Each mile of progress driving is one more mile to walk back. It is very hot at summernoon in the high desert, walking for miles, searching for winches.
7. Look down to your right at a few hundred feet of exposure; do not look straight ahead lest the sun blind you.
8. Steep grades lead to overheating. The heat you blow through the cab to cool the engine mixes with the hot air rushing in through your open window. You are thermal in heavy socks.
9. Your need for expiation.
10. The soft, silty red sand that your low clearance vehicle can clog up with, or sink into, or slide out from.
11. The admission price of an SUV.
12. The relentlessness of caution; the pang of prolonged squinting.
13. Fuel pipe, wheel bearing, slip joint, oil pan, brake pad,

Steering knuckle, flexplate, axleshaft, air bag, are going bad.

14. Improved road, compared to what?

-----4WD-----  
----- Unimproved

Off State Highway 103 in Clear Creek County, Colorado, a four wheel drive road climbs to a half-mile of the peak of Squaw Mountain. If you do not have a high clearance vehicle, you can hike the four wheel drive road.

I was on vacation from a medical test. My blood was being sampled back at the public health facility in Jefferson City, Missouri. I decided to hike to the top of Squaw Mountain. For no good reason I thought, "so much depends upon this hike."

When I reached the peak, I cut some dried sausage for a sandwich, gave a hunk to my dog, ate, and started down. After hiking awhile, I realized I had forgotten my knife. So I turned around.

When I finally reached my car three hours later, I was wept by pathos, and in my head was a poem. The mountain composed me. This is the poem the mountain composed me to compose:

### The Ascent of the Law

Say you're not Phoebus Apollo,  
don't exhale the truth,  
master your will or  
know how far you'll drop  
from the next misstep; instead  
you're aging, panting, bone-tired,  
re-climbing the last eight hundred feet  
to a summit you just left--  
you forgot your knife  
opened there on the craggy peak.  
You meant to cut a piece  
of jerky for yourself and dog,  
best friend, who climbed, more nimbly,  
with you; you stared at the blade,  
then at the dog, as if you might slit

his throat to placate a god who  
demands such sacrifices; instead  
you got up, whistled, and began  
the descent knowing by heart  
three passes to cross before  
reaching home: Juniper Ridge, Eagle's  
Aerie, Cloudland, and maybe it's the altitude,  
but like elegiac music, strings that play on  
the gut, all the pain you've ever caused  
anyone returns to you and the ego  
that orchestrates such acts  
congeals within you--something spoiled  
that needs to be cut out. But you can't  
because you forgot your knife  
on the summit. So you call your dog,  
turn around,  
and start to climb again.

----- Trail

You start your trip on the interstate in order to reach the exact place you are now--  
a trailhead. *No motorized vehicles allowed.*

Stepping out of the car you increase your ventilation to accommodate the lower  
barometric pressure. You pull fewer oxygen molecules in with each breath so you  
breathe faster and harder. In the next few days, your body will adapt and you'll  
grow stronger. You'll be living off the sweet blood of increased hemoglobin.

You smell baked stone, Douglas Fir and Lodgepole Pine, grassy marsh and your  
own warm breath. Oh sun! It's the alpine air and tachycardia.

You read the signpost and check your map. The route you will take is in  
mapworld. In mapworld you have four directions and are equipped with a  
compass. Your mind draws the route by memorizing it.

You check your pocket for keys and your watch for time. You calculate the hours  
to your turnaround. Soon you'll need to grow more capillaries.

You hear birds and creek tumble, scamperings and your own feet on the ground.

You see green and blue and white and grey and brown and palettes and palettes of

shades.

You see the wealthy forms of Fibonacci and read the message of time and space scale. You feel the energy of the earth's uplift. You are ready to sharpen yourself on it.

You walk on the trail fueled by your own fuel and moved by your own will; just like that, you start to climb again.



## Getting There

I looked up from the ground and watched my son approach the red button on top of the climbing wall. Three minutes earlier, I had tried to reach the button but couldn't find a foothold to lift me there. Fifteen feet in the air, I tried to figure out where I was when Spearfish, South Dakota was spinning all around me: Fry Bread, scorching heat, chainsaw carving, snowcones, watercolors, beadwork, glassblown and New Age, motorcycles and burnt sage, Brulé--contemporary Native American music. I pushed off the wall and the high tension pulley slid me to the ground, on my ass. The pulley's tension wasn't set high enough for the 240 pound forty-one year old I was. The forty-one year old I had become. How in God's name did I get there? Out West, on my ass, watching my son rise above me. Then he reached the button, pressed it, and a victory siren wailed.

"You failed, but don't worry," he told me afterwards. "You did a good job."

Back at the hotel, I set the alarm for 5am. I'd go to the National Forest outside Spearfish and charge up Crow's Peak. That would redeem me--I could get to the top of Crow's Peak.

The next morning, I pressed and hustled, covering three and a half miles in just over an hour. Crow's Peak had gotten its name as a battle site. The Sioux called it, "Paha Karitukateyapi"--hill where Crows were killed. At the crown of the peak, pine and scree gave way to thick and surprisingly green scrub brush. The brush was scratching at my shins when I stopped in my tracks at the rattle of a rattler.

Two days earlier I had been at the battle site of Little Bighorn. Some of Custer's scouts at Little Bighorn were Crow. When Custer looked through his field glasses June 25, 1876, he couldn't see the big village the scouts saw. Captain Benteen, who Custer had sent beforehand to cover the southern bluffs, returned in the afternoon. Benteen came upon friendly Indians watching the battle. They watched from land that now abuts the Crow Reservation.

A hiking path winds among the coulees and bluffs, ravines and dry creeks at Little Bighorn where Custer and his men went hither and yon, two score or so finally settling on the hill marked by a monument and mass burial.

The Indians themselves were surprised--the men had danced all night and the women were digging turnips when the soldiers came. The first charge by the bluetroopers, led by Major Reno, was turned back quickly and soon all the Indians were free to concentrate on Custer's companies, some of which approached the Indian village. The warriors chased those companies away and then, through charges and stealth, scattered and ran down one part of Custer's command, then surrounded and killed the other part.

From the moment the bodies were discovered, Custer's movements between, roughly, 3:30pm and 6pm have been the subject of endless narration. Create a story that accounts for the denouement--the location of bodies, now small white epitaphs scattered like broken teeth across the landscape.

Between 3:30m and 6pm that day, each contingency grows a field of possibility: Custer made the ford; crossed the ford; never got near the ford. He waited for Benteen; he had no time to wait. He saw the big village through his field glasses and ignored it; he was myopic. His men were panicked; his men were

courageous. The rifles were inferior; the rifles were fine; the rifles overheated and the cartridges jammed. Custer was tactician; Custer was a blunderbuss; Custer was caught in fate's trap.

Between 3:30pm and 6pm that day, each possibility grows its own field: If Benteen had hurried toward the ridge; if Custer had not split his command; if he had followed General Terry's orders; if Reno had stayed in the timber; if the troops had Gatling guns; if the recruits weren't raw; if Custer hadn't slain all those women and children at Washita, and then left a company of his own men to be massacred; things could have ended differently.

Things could have ended differently if the Sioux and Cheyenne hadn't lived in a warrior society; if they didn't collect scalps as hide; if they held their alliances; if they were inured to whiskey; if Crazy Horse hadn't been betrayed; if they could have kept the Black Hills; if the Ghost Dance were miraculous. If all in the past were just, if we were all just now, things could end differently.

It ended with mass graves. It ended with the land under jurisdiction of the Department of Interior. It ended with a sign on the battle site trail warning, *This is rattlesnake country*.

Te-te-te-te...the rattler snapped me to the ground at my feet. The summit of Crow's Peak was a hundred yards away. I could retreat down the mountain or proceed to the top. Shortening my dog's leash and keeping him close, I moved forward--contingency and possibility moving with me.

I had a similar encounter with a rattler a week earlier in the high plains and canyonlands at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains in northeast Wyoming. We were driving out to see the Medicine Wheel, a stone monument near the top of

Medicine Peak.

As we neared the mountains, I noted a sign on the road *Red Gulch Dinosaur Tracks 5 miles*. The arrow pointed east toward a red dirt road, *A BLM Scenic Byway* the sign boasted.

"Dinosaur tracks boys?" I asked my two sons.

"Dinosaur tracks, yes daddy," they replied.

Thousands of tracks are preserved in coated-grain limestone. One hundred and sixty million years ago this desert was a sea and the bipedal dinosaurs were walking southwesterly from the shore. The rock that preserves their tracks is undulating and gray, about ten feet beneath and 30 yards from the parking lot. You walk down a boardwalk and then drop down into the "Ballroom," as the slab of limestone with the tracks is called. The tracks are from the mid-Jurassic age, although experts cannot positively identify the dinosaurs that laid them.

In the Ballroom, we ran our fingers over the indentations, trying to recover an image of the creatures that once walked there; we were trying to recover the sea that spread across the land that was now desert, baked red and terra-cotta, brown and sandstone.

The sun began to cook us on that rock slab, and we still had thirty miles of mountain driving to get to the Medicine Wheel, so it was time to go. As my oldest son, Eddie, and I were walking up the boardwalk, I heard te-te-te-te-te. My wife and youngest, Jude, were already under the canopy in the picnic area. "Get on me," I said as I grabbed Eddie underneath the arms and hoisted him on my shoulders. I knew it was unlikely and probably impossible for the rattler to strike us from underneath the boardwalk, but I did not want to take a chance.

When we reached the rest of the family, Jude said, "Daddy, I forgot my stick down there."

"Well forget it," I said. "We can find you a new one." But I thought about it. Jude's stick was cut from a backyard sapling in Missouri. He had walked with that stick for many many hikes. He had recently acquired a fear of the dark and I told him as I always told Eddie, "You have to face your fears. Carry a weapon if that makes it easier, but face them."

"All right, Jude. I'll get it," I said. With my hiking stick in hand, I moved in the direction of my fear.

Turns out I didn't get snakebit. Turns out his stick was underneath the picnic table the whole time.

Jude had the stick later on that day. He used it to poke at a snowfield; he used it to point out a large black ant scurrying along; he used it as a spear and jabbed his brother in the ribs. He had it in his hand as he climbed the path toward the Medicine Wheel.

The Wheel is a wide circle arranged in white stone; twenty-eight rock lines extend from the center. Although it was built well before the time of the Plains Indians' presence in Wyoming, it remained a sacred place long after its builders died.

Crows say the wheel was built by Scarface, a conceited warrior who fell into a fire and was disfigured by the flames. He hid in the mountains, built the Medicine Wheel, and remained a recluse for years until a girl and her mother wandered up the mountain. He fell in love and married the girl and came down from the mountain to rejoin society. Some say the 28 spokes represent the ribs in

a buffalo, or bones in human hands. Some say the wheel gives a blueprint for a teepee, or traces the seasons, or traps bad medicine. Create a story that accounts for the denouement--the Medicine Wheel. The geography is certain; the story is indeterminate.

The Bighorn Mountains run through all narratives. Stones are everywhere in all narratives. Indians are in all narratives. In this one, Jude is walking counterclockwise around the wheel, his stick striking the ground.

Two days later Jude, Eddie and I hiked to the top of another mountain in the Bighorns--Black Mountain. The boys had spent a month training in Missouri for this hike, walking up and down a toboggan hill. I was mad to make the hike and the boys seemed to have their own interest in getting to the top.

The trail to the top of Black Mountain crawls two miles and gains a couple thousand feet of elevation. The last mile includes a number of switchbacks until you reach stone steps that rise to the peak. A ranger station looks out from the top.

The boys were eager, serious, and ready for the hike. They moved brilliantly up the trail. Every 40 minutes we would hydrate, eat a bit, and move on. As we hiked, my intuition told me that they were above me, even though we were traveling together. Was it the altitude? Was it my aging? Was it their growth? It became apparent--what made them able to hike, their energy, their agency, was guiding them into their own lives. Each day, their narratives had a little less to do with mine. They were swerving from my orbit as I had to pay more and more of gravity's toll. Though the three of us were moving toward the same peak, I was descending, moving toward denouement; the action of their lives

was just now rising--they were growing into their own narratives. Their muscles were knotting. My days were unraveling.

As we climbed, their inscrutable wills were manifest in each step they took. When we made it to the top and, elated, slapped each other's hands, I noticed how long their legs had gotten, how strong their fingers were, how intent their eyes had become. It was as if it happened in the two miles we just had hiked.

We faced our fears together on the summit. Below the wraparound deck on the fire lookout was nothing but air and distant rock beneath our feet. We could see the Bighorns in a circle around us. We were so tall and could see so far. Holding hands, we walked cautiously around the deck. Three individuals tied momentarily together, we looked out in silence and awe, perched as we were on the crow's nest of the mountain.

When I reached the top of Crow's Peak, I had a similar panoramic view of the Black Hills and could see the landscape of three states from that vantage. I tried to look into the past and imagine the peak the day of the battle when the Crows were killed, wondering where the Sioux had attacked from, where the Crows died. But all I saw was the West.

At the summit is a sign with the peak's name and elevation. At the sign's base, a metal tube holds the peak register. I paged through the memo books filled with signatures and dates.

I thought of the names etched into the monument on Last Stand Hill; I considered the possible narratives that brought those men to the battlefield to die--their own trajectories tied to Custer, then to the Indians. I thought of the Sioux, Cheyenne and Crow on the battlefield--having been driven there according to the

dictates of greed, government, and the logic of their own sovereignty. I thought of all the offerings on the low fence around the Medicine Wheel--bits of cloth, beads, bones, rocks, photos, paper: small things carried up the trail and invested with the significance of narrative. "This is for my cousin...this is for my wife...this is for me...this is for my child..."

I found myself tangled in all these narratives. So easily deconstructed in any of them, easily exposed in the history that allowed for me to be where I was. Where was I? On the top of Crow's Peak. And I knew how I got there--I acted my way up Crow's Peak, the way I acted into the forty-one year old I was. My *will* got me there.

I put the pen in my hand. True, I was a name like any other name, subject to contingency and the politics of fate. I was subject to the same end as Custer and his soldiers, Sioux warriors, Crow scouts, dinosaurs, the builders, and petitioners, of the Medicine Wheel, my dog, sons, and any name on any summit register anywhere.

Nonetheless and with a kind of joy, I signed the book, then ran all the way down the mountain just because I could.



Yet I was glad to be where I was, sharing a mountaintop with signatures and snakes. The end of this narrative would be the denouement to my vacation out West. I signed the book and ran all the way down the mountain because I could.

; it was the way I got to be the forty-one year old I was.