

A TRIP BACK IN TIME

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A few years ago we made a two day trip to Encampment, Wyoming. This is the state in which I was born and grew up. The drive was lovely from the moment we left Denver. We passed lush grassy meadows, green corn fields, yellow patches of cut grain, and fragrant alfalfa fields all blended into a colorful mosaic of patchwork panorama.

Just past the state line we paused to view the wind farm that generates power. Huge three-bladed windmills turned slowly on their very tall towers looking like something from outer space that came to earth.

Our drive over the beautiful Snowy Range road was nothing less than spectacular. It has the most lakes close to the road of any range I have ever visited. The wild flowers grew in wild profusion, a medley of reds, whites, yellows, purples and reds. We stopped frequently to walk a bit and examine some of the varieties.

By noon, we reached our final destination and stopped for lunch at the Bear Trap Inn, the only restaurant left in the valley. The food was cheap and good.

About 100 years ago, Encampment was in the midst of its heyday. In 1896 outcrops of copper were discovered near Bridger Peak. A fellow named Emerson who was a novelist, lawyer, promoter, and politician formed the North American Copper Company. He erected a 16 1/2 mile aerial tramway to bring the ore to the smelter erected on the banks of the Encampment River. 340 huge towers supported the ore buckets as gravity brought them down from the mountain mines. Shack towns at the mine sites such as Battle, Dillon, Copperton and Rudefaha scared the slopes near timber line. By 1901 more than 260 companies operated in the valley. The bubble burst in 1906 when the market price of copper plummeted and mining costs could no longer be met. Speculators dumped their holdings and the smelter was dismantled and shipped to South America.

Encampment now is largely a bedroom community having only one grocery store, one motel, one restaurant, and many small houses and it does have its own fire station with one engine. Its chief drawing card is the Grand Encampment Museum occupying several blocks at one end of the town. After seeing it, I think that it is one of the finest small museums in the country. A brick building that was the office for a doctor houses the indoor display of old items such as dolls, dishes, shoes, clothing, tools of miners, Indian artifacts, and seismograph equipment used by a unit of the Air Force housed in that town during the second World War to test for atomic explosions around the world. Numerous picture albums, large hanging picture display cases, and newspapers from Copperton, Dillon and Encampment proclaimed the riches of the area and gave a wonderful glimpse into the history of the valley. Snowshoes worn by horses were about the most

unique items on display along with a folding bathtub. Encased in an oak cupboard, one pulled on the front of the cabinet and a spring loaded full-sized bathtub appeared. Then a mirror, towel hangers, and hot and cold faucets were exposed. The water came from tanks concealed behind the cabinet's back.

A high school student acted as our guide for the rest of the trip through the museum. We saw a two story outhouse that would accommodate deep snow in winter. A miners cabin had stacks of bunk beds, a cook and heat stove and a cupboard for supplies. A well-built cabin for forest service supervisors had an opening in the roof and a ladder inside to allow entry in the winter. It was stocked with food supplies, wood, bedding, lamps, and furniture so it could be used all year around. A school house used by a rancher with nine children had been moved to the museum. Inside were desks, books, slates, stove, all typical of the pre-1930 era. The rancher was a teacher and so taught his own school. Other neighbors sent their children as well. One building housed a grocery and retail store well equipped. There was a post office, bar and saloon. A modern structure displayed many buggies, carts, and early cars. An observation tower used to detect fires in the mountains was on display as well as part of the old aerial tramway and several ore buckets. There was no fee to see the museum, only donations were asked.

We stayed in the town's only motel and drove to Saratoga to dine at the historic Wolf Inn that evening. Built as a stage stop in 1893 and recently restored, it is a beautiful example of turn of the century wealth and luxury.

We returned to Denver via the Cache la Poudre River highway and found that the slide area remains closed so we detoured to reach Fort Collins coming out at Vern's store and restaurant.

For anyone wanting a wonderful glimpse into history I highly recommend this trip back into time.