

The Quintessential West: Laramie, Wyoming

For a number of years and for reasons to be explained shortly, I had harbored a desire to visit Medicine Bow, Wyoming, a tiny town in the southeast corner of the state. The way one gets to Medicine Bow is first to fly to Denver, Colorado. At Denver you change to a small plane--some people call them grasshoppers-- which takes you to Laramie. From Laramie, Medicine Bow is about a fifty mile drive to the northwest. When Prof. John Rowland invited me to give a talk to the Computer Science Department of the University in Laramie, I jumped at the opportunity. "Come any time," he said.

This flexibility turned out to be crucial to the enterprise and he was probably aware of it: it is

Lar 2

not so easy to get to Laramie. On several separate occasions I tried to book a flight to Laramie, but the grasshoppers were full up. Around the first of March, seeing a long weekend in front of me, I decided to go by bus, an eight-hour trip from Salt Lake, east along Route 80. The bus started out at nine on a beautiful sunny warmish morning. We climbed through the Wasatch Range and its spectacular canyon scenery. This is near ^{the route} _^ that the Mormon pioneers took on their trek from the East. An hour and a half put us in Evanston, Wyoming at an altitude of 7,000 feet. One then enters a land of 360° vistas, of ranges, mesas, buttes, gulches, and of purple mountains at a distance. The mountains are plenty tall in themselves, but appear short because they rise from a relatively high table land. Here and there the highway is flanked by snow deflectors. This is an arrangement of slats, placed parallel to the road and about fifty feet from it. Experience shows that by creating a different wind pattern, the snow accumulates at these slats and is thus prevented from piling up in drifts along the highway. From the bus one sees some cattle occasionally, and at Evanston some oil pumps are visible, but essentially the road itself is the only evidence of civili-

Lar 3

zation. One is in the midst of an empty landscape and as one roars down the highway, making no sensible progress, it seems like a very good place indeed to think about Eternity.

After three hours we came to Little America, which is nothing more than the largest filling station in the world .(Sixty pumps, catering to a substantial truck traffic across the mountains.)We crossed the Green River, and if I had been driving my own car, I would have taken a side trip to Flaming Gorge National Park. Another hour put me in Rock Springs, Wyoming a town of about 6,000 people.

At Rock Springs, the bus stopped to allow the passengers to have lunch. I should point out that the bus trip from Salt Lake to Laramie is just one short leg of a coast to coast trip. The sign on the bus said "Washington, D.C.", and a fair number of passengers had got on in San Francisco and were heading for points east.

After lunch, we filed back on the bus, and then the driver addressed us through the P.A. system. "Folks, I've got some unpleasant news. The road ahead is blocked by severe snow outside Rawlins. I've got orders to turn around and go back to Salt Lake. "

Lar 4

Groans of frustration from the passengers. One lady had to appear in Court in Columbus, Ohio on Monday, etc. "Is there any indication of when the snow would let up?" "None."

I could have gotten out at Rock Springs, checked into a motel and waited a day or so until the blizzard (which we saw absolutely no sign of) let up. It would have taken me all of five minutes to walk through the vital portions of downtown Rock Springs, so I decided against it. (I later found out that Rock Springs had been given national publicity on T.V. on account of some Mafia-related killings that had recently occurred there. "I could see in his eye that he was going to draw. So I outdrew him.")

Back over the gulches and the mesas. Of course the scenery was brand new. It always is when one turns around and sees a road in reverse. By six o'clock I was back in Salt Lake, not having reached Medicine Bow, but in possession of a voucher entitling me to a refund on my ticket. In this way I saw southwest Wyoming as the guest of Greyhound Bus Lines, Inc.

On April 30th, I was free again and was able to get a flight into Laramie. Salt Lake was absolutely tropical; the leaves were fully developed and the

Lar 5

and the flowers were blooming. Laramie was still in winter. On the grasshopper I sat next to a talkative engineer from Seattle who made frequent business trips to the Cheyenne-Laramie area. He pumped me full of cheerfull stories how the currents of mountain air toss the grasshopper around; how when the visibility is low, the pilot simply flies a thousand feet above Route 25 going north and stopping at all the red lights. The University ? Oh yes. Its football rivals call it "Tundra Tech". The weather in Laramie? You know how you can tell when it's summer in Laramie? Summer is two consecutive days when the skiing is slightly mushy.

The Rowlands picked me up at the airport. (There is no taxi service from the airport. I bet your friendly travel agent forgot to tell you that.). They explained quite jovially the nature of my frustration two months before.

"Of course, when you called up and told us you'd been snowed out, we kept watch on it. The trouble was between Laramie and Rawlins. There was no new blizzard at all. But the winds were so severe that they whipped up the old snow into a blizzard. Driving on the road was absolutely impossible. We have a saying out here in Wyoming that the snow never melts; it just blows

Lar 6

around until it wears out. It was a good thing you didn't stop over in Rock Springs. The road was closed for two days.

What is there to do in Rock Springs? Not much, I guess. There's a pretty good Mexican restaurant there. You could have checked out the Mafia connection. Tell them you're from Rhode Island. That ought to have plugged you in. No, Rock Springs isn't exactly a tourist hot spot. There's a story we tell around these parts that when the Union Pacific Line came through here a hundred years ago, the public facilities were up for grabs. Cheyenne got the Capital, Laramie got the University, Rock Springs got the hospital and Evanston got the Looney Bin.

I'd say myself that the incubation period for cabin fever in Rock Springs was four hours. Maybe five."

The Rowlands fell in with my plan for a pilgrimage to Medicine Bow. We agreed to wait a day until my son Ernie had rendezvoused with us in Laramie. He was on his vacation.