

### Medicine Bow

May 2nd.

The grasshopper delivered Ernie on schedule and the next morning early we set out for Medicine Bow. Three minutes of driving through Laramie took us onto Route 30 going northwest. The range is fenced in parallel to the highway and behind the fence it seems to open up to infinity. On the left, about a half mile away, are the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad. John explained that Route 30 was once the main road west, from New York to San Francisco, and when Route 80, a superhighway, was put through, a number of little towns, Bosler, Rock River, Medicine Bow among them, suffered from the loss of the coast to coast highway trade.

We spotted many small bands of wild antelope on the range. We would pull up to observe them; they would give us a quick look and leap off nervously. This , millions of years ago, was dinosaur country. We saw what was touted to be "The Oldest House in the

Mb 2

World", made of odd bones from a nearby dinosaur graveyard. The freight on the Union Pacific proceeded at a prosperous clip. There was a steady succession of trains a hundred twenty cars long pulled by three diesel engines.

We spotted an eagle. This made my day; everything else would come as a bonus. I wished I were a bird-watcher and had a life list.

At length John called out

"There it is, ahead."

"Where?"

"About two miles ahead. Where the road and the track come together."

"You mean that little group of houses? That little world; that precious point set in the Euclidean Plane?"

"The very same."

The impression of Medicine Bow at the distance of one mile is that of a depot on the left side of the road and a hotel on the right. Arrived at the center of town, the impression is fairly close to that of Wister's, a hundred years ago: "One coal chute, one water tank, the station, one store, two eating houses, one billiard hall,..., and twelve others that for one reason or another I shall not name." With some research-- it doesn't take much-- this view can be amplified to include a bank, a

Mb 3

post office, a police station, a school, and many houses, not a few of them of the mobile variety, set in place, and fully landscaped.

Medicine Bow ('Medicine' = 'good'; 'Medicine Bow' = 'Good place to get branches to make bows') shows all the ups and downs of its career. It is now on a considerable upswing due to the reactivation of the nearby open pit coal mines. The population is around a thousand. Hard by the depot is a plaque commemorating Owen Wister and Medicine Bow as the Birthplace of the Western Novel. The Virginian Hotel across the street is in good shape physically. Downstairs is a bar and restaurant, and upstairs twenty rooms for guests; several of them, including an Owen Wister Suite (ask the cashier for the key to see it), have been refitted in the style of the 1880's.

We had planned to have lunch in the restaurant and I thought we could simply walk in. What could conceivably crowd a restaurant in a town of a thousand? John knew otherwise: "They come down out of the hills."

We had to wait for a table. The patronage was all local. We were the only tourists.

Sitting in the barrom of the Virginian Hotel and drinking a popular but vile product known as Coor's Beer,

Mb 4

it occurred to me that we were now at the spot where, in principle if not in actuality, the Virginian (the hero) facing Trampas (the villian) gets off his memorable line:

"When you call me that, smile",  
and it wasn't very hard to imagine his young bride-to-be, checked into a room upstairs, and biting her nails while her husband-to-be walks out of the hotel and down the dusty streets of Medicine Bow to face Trampas in a showdown. Would she be a widow before she was a bride?

We finished lunch and drove another twenty miles west on Route 30 to see the open pit coal miles at Hanna. The scoops are enormous. Hanna is the reverse of a ghost town, all bustle, construction, brand new housing and shopping centers as the result of the re-emergence of coal in the energy equation.

From Hanna, it is a very pretty trip to Elk Mountain where we would connect up with Route 80. This is sheep country and we were stopped for a full ten minutes while a herd of sheep crossed the road. At this time of year, they are brought up to higher altitudes. Many of the herders are Basque. John said he had never met any. "They lead a very lonesome life up in the hills."

To clue us in on local character, John told us

Mb 5

the story of how he once went hiking in the Elk Mountain country. It was after the deer hunting season had closed. He was in the Elk Mountain National Forest and he must have wandered a couple hundred feet onto private land. A man in a pickup truck drove up to him off a jeep road. The man carried a rifle and had a vicious German Shepherd..

Man: Hey fella, the public access road not good enough for you?

Dog: Grrrrrrrr.

Man: Quiet, Fritz.

Dog: Grrrrrrrrrr.

John: Sorry. Must have wandered a bit.

Man: This is my property, fella, get off'n it.

John: Sorry.

Dog: Grrrrrr.

Man: Quiet, Fritz. I don't need you yet.

John added that the man was touchy because he (the man) had probably just been hunting in the National Forest illegally.