

Yellowstone Park Trail



A Hidden Travel Treasure

written by **Emily McCluhan** • photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center

TUCKED ALONG THE STRAIGHTAWAYS OF I-90, hidden between Miles City in the east and Lookout Pass in the west, is a visible piece of history that stretches back to 1912 and the burgeoning days of the automobile. Back at that time the federal government was focused on railroad transportation, but Joe Parmley of Ipswich, South Dakota, envisioned something completely different: Towns flourishing across the northern tier; Americans driving their new autos across connecting roads, not muddy wagon trails, and the birth of the touring public.

In 1912, Parmley gathered other grassroots visionaries from the surrounding counties and began to lay out a plan for what would become the Yellowstone Trail, America's first organized transcontinental highway.

Originally called the Twin Cities-Aberdeen-Yellowstone Park Trail Association, this group of forward-thinking individuals began with the notion of

developing good roads between communities in South Dakota. Very soon, however, the group's vision expanded to locating a suitable motor route to the increasingly popular Yellowstone National Park, and ultimately development of a

“Think of the hordes of tourists as coming from the densely populated, wealthy east, over the fertile plains of the Dakotas, entering this wonderland, the Yellowstone valley. Will tourists come in great numbers? Give them a road and you cannot stop them.”

The First Year Book of the Twin Cities-Aberdeen-Yellowstone Park Trail, 1914

northern tier roadway that crossed the continent connecting Boston, Mass. to Portland, Ore.

John and Alice Ridge, retired university professors and authors of “Introducing the Yellowstone Trail: A Good Road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound, 1912-1930,” have spent years researching the Yellowstone Trail. Together they have

traveled the Trail multiple times, each time digging deeper into the history of this forgotten road.

“The original members of the Association were grassroots citizens who wanted to attract tourists through autos.

They didn't actually build the roads,” explains John. “They helped lobby for better roads.”

The Yellowstone Trail Association, as it came to be known, established local and state chapters along the route to help forward it's mission of promoting better roads and touring by car. Members provided information to local communities on how to build roads, produced and

distributed Trail maps, placed markers along the Trail route, and generally promoted interstate tourism.

All roads lead to Montana

Because of Montana's proximity to Yellowstone National Park, many miles of the Trail would be constructed through the

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state, and Montanans quickly realized the potential economic impact the Trail would have on the state and in towns through which tourists would travel.

Glendive and Miles City fought for the Trail to pass through their towns as it crossed from South Dakota, but with two railroads servicing it, Miles City eventually won out, and even held the first annual Yellowstone Trail Association convention in 1913.

As enthusiasm for constructing the Trail swelled, communities along the route rallied its citizen's to help with the actual construction. Many towns held "Trail Days" during which local businesses would close and the townspeople would set aside time to enjoy socializing, picnicking and to participate in building or improving the road.

Local volunteers would then mark the Trail, usually with yellow colored rocks or by painting telegraph poles, rocks and buildings with the official Association symbol: A black arrow in a yellow circle. As the 1919 Route Folder (a tour book published by the Association) states, "You don't need a log book to travel this road—follow the marks."

Montana Splendor

Over the years the Ridges have spent more time exploring the Yellowstone Trail in Montana than anywhere else.

"There are lots of history buffs all over the state, and the Trail follows world-class scenery," Alice Ridge explains.

The scenic splendor of Montana was not lost on early travelers, either. A passage in the 1919 Route Folder reads "For eight hundred miles the Yellowstone Trail sweeps across [Montana.] And in that immense stretch there is not one foot of waste, no desert, no dangers. And a land like this can only be peopled with beings who have grasped its inspiration, and who in turn partake of its bigness. A people who meet you as you are, greet you, because it is you, treat you as your actions ask, recognize the man, even if disguised in flannel shirt, with grimy hands."

As the Trail winds from Baker through Miles City and into Billings, the first yearbook of the Association suggests: "When you get as far west as Billings, go slow. Take time for side trips. You are near

the most marvelous scenes nature has placed on earth. Do not hurry by without seeing some of them. Take time to make diversions and see some of the wonders of Wonderland."

Renaissance Trail

By 1930, state and federal governments had organized funding for roads and began numbering highways and the need and interest for trail associations was lost. The dirt roads and gravel paths were overrun by sleek, paved chutes across the country and automobile travel became a way of life, not a luxury.

Yet today, whether because of the tragedy of 9/11, the rising costs of air travel or a desire to slow down the hurried pace of life, Americans have rediscovered an infatuation for the old road.

Many sections of the Yellowstone Trail still exist and offer abundant opportunities to explore the way of life Parmley and his

fellow auto-enthusiasts enjoyed more than 80 years ago one simply needs to find them.

As the Ridges note in *Introducing the Yellowstone Trail*, "In the summer hundreds of cars now daily drive US 89 from Livingston south to the entrance of Yellowstone Park, probably without even noticing the remnants of the Yellowstone Trail across the Yellowstone River to the west."

For those daring enough to embark on the adventure, John Ridge offers some advice, "In some spots you kind of have to cheat a little, because the Trail will disappear or has moved closer to the current highways."

The Yellowstone Trail is now marked with a hodge-podge of Interstate, US, state and county highway numbers; however, John and Alice have been able to create useful maps through research in the towns along the Trail, any of which can be found in their book or by going online at www.yellowstonetrail.org.



map courtesy of the Western Heritage Center

How to get started on the trail

Do you think you can find the Yellowstone Trail, Montana's first organized highway? Here are some tips for Trail adventurers:

To locate the Trail, read the history and find maps in "Introducing the Yellowstone Trail: A Good Road from Puget Sound, 1912-1930" or log on to www.yellowstonetrail.org.

Adventurous travelers who want to experience driving along the old Trail can find passable sections of the road in several places: Between Ismay and Fallon; between Livingston and Gardiner close to Yankee Jim's toll road north of the entrance to Yellowstone National Park; between Three Forks and Butte; between

Hunter's Hotsprings and Billings; along the Camel's Hump near Superior, and on the Randolph Creek/Mullan Pass road over the Bitterroots. [Source: www.yellowstonetrail.org.]

Pack carefully and be prepared for the 87 miles between Baker and Miles City with no services. Chat with the people of Ismay, population 23, and revel in the romance that is automobile travel. As a member of the original Association expressed at a 1914 meeting, "A man traveling in an automobile will stop at every village and hamlet ... they will need supplies, they get acquainted with the people and they will always remember their trip."