



Sunset on South Pass. Photograph by Joe Ellis, courtesy Wyoming State Parks and Historic Sites.

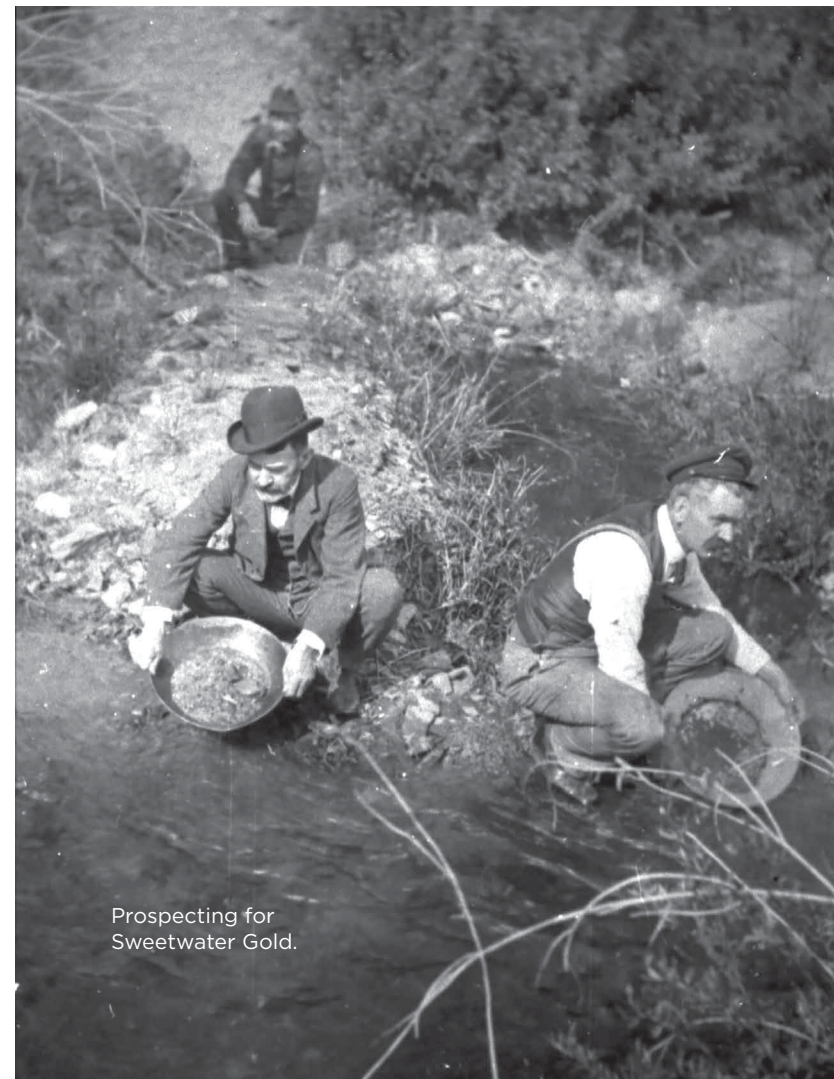
Gateway to a Continent

For thousands of years, South Pass served as a gateway for nomadic peoples to easily cross the Continental Divide. They followed the trails first laid out for them by the great game herds so critical to sustaining their hunter-gatherer existence. These groups found that they could use the pass as part of an annual seasonal cycle of migration from winter camps to areas occupied in the summer months. The pass presented these peoples with opportunity and uncertainty in equal portions.

During historic times, South Pass continued to stand for both promise and risk. Euro-American fur traders first introduced the notion of a transcontinental travel and trade route across the pass in the early 1800s. Later, explorers and scouts identified the potential importance of South Pass as the single most essential link in the establishment of a great transcontinental nation. Beginning in the 1840s, westward migration across the Great Plains began to crystallize in American minds the notion of Manifest Destiny.

Routes that have since become equal parts history and mythology, converged along the upper Sweetwater River as they approached the pass, and then just as quickly splayed apart along the waters of Pacific Creek on the far side of the Great Divide. The Oregon Trail, Mormon Trail, California Trail, and Pony Express Trail all memorialized South Pass in their canons for the singular importance it represented for those headed both west and east.

Except for a few military personnel unfortunate enough to draw duty guarding telegraph stations in the isolated area, even during the height of the Westward migration, the area was just as eagerly forsaken as it was anxiously attained. For the peoples that had coexisted with the harsh environment of the area for millennia, the pass now came to represent uncertainty more than opportunity.



Prospecting for Sweetwater Gold.



Left: Flumes supplied water to placer (surface) mines in the area. Below: Workers at the Federal Mill at the Carissa. Image courtesy Wyoming State Archives, Dept. of State Parks and Cultural Resources.



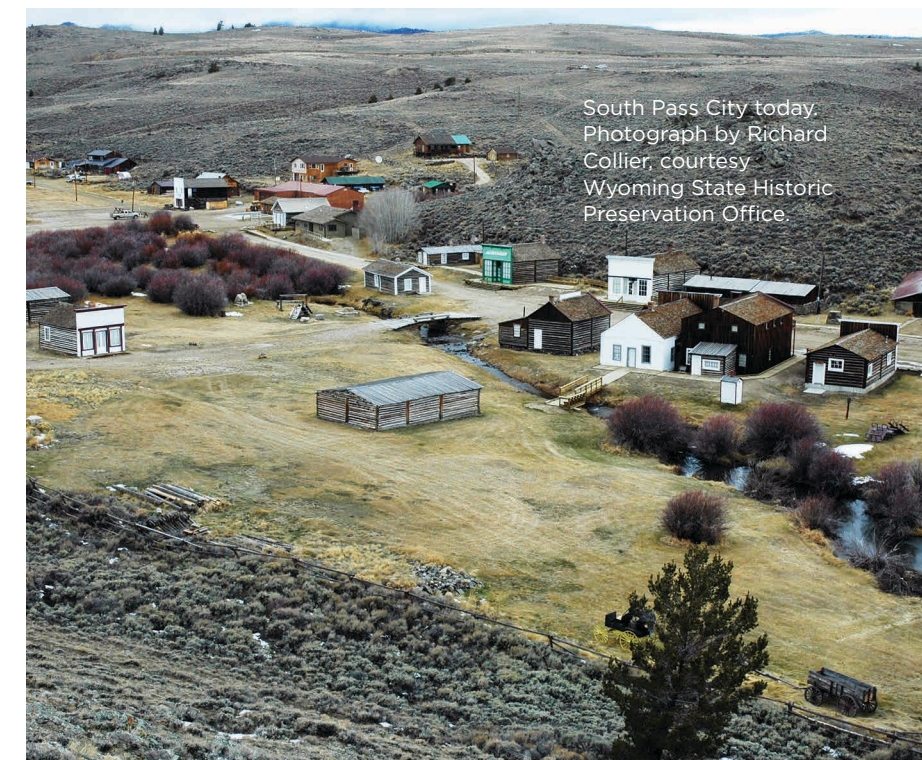
Gold on the Sweetwater

The Army's Department of the Platte encouraged its soldiers to prospect for valuable minerals during their down time. After all, mining was one of the few productive pursuits available to men far from the distractions associated with more civilized environs. Rumors of 'Sweetwater Gold' had circulated since the covered wagon days of the mid-1840s, but no one had yet determined to risk all in search of the fabled Mother Lode. The soldiers of the Ohio Infantry and the 1st Nevada Cavalry wrote history when they located gold bearing quartz ledges along Rock Creek and Willow Creek in the mid-1860s. They reported their finds to their headquarters at Fort Bridger. As before, opportunity and uncertainty bedeviled men's minds.

Fever and Frenzy

Thousands of gold seekers, and those who promised to attend to their every desire, swarmed the entire region in the summer of 1868. Three towns sprung up from the wilderness almost overnight; Hamilton City (later Miners Delight), Atlantic City, and South Pass City. Claims, like the Cariso (later, Carissa) were staked by the hundreds, mine shafts pocked the once-virgin rock, and no stone seemed left unturned as the first snowflakes signaled a close to the inaugural season of the Sweetwater Mines. Miners fled the area as winter intruded, just as their tribal predecessors had for centuries before. Some left with pockets and saddlebags heavier than they arrived; however, most knew that they would not be returning.

Over the ensuing years, hangers-on continued in the area by the handfuls, even into the dozens, as local gold mining experienced miniature booms and busts. The Carissa alone experienced three revivals during the 20th century. Residents took up timber cutting, ranching, and freighting to make ends meet. Even today, the descendants of the rush to the Sweetwater Mines call the area their home. Echoes, and evidence, of Wyoming's great gold rush endure.



South Pass City today. Photograph by Richard Collier, courtesy Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office.

Gilded Legacy

As early as the gold rush, major transportation corridors, most notably the Union Pacific Railroad, began to circumvent the formerly essential route across South Pass in favor of faster, more direct routes. Automobiles began to replace horse and wagon in the early 20th century, and the first good routes, such as the Lincoln Highway, also bypassed the area. As a result, South Pass City and the Sweetwater Mines remained relatively isolated until the boom in automobile tourism, as well as a local iron ore boom following World War II.

After the war, the pace of travel quickened and the impact on the area deepened. Tourists and residents alike began to view the remains of the abandoned buildings and mine sites as a source of relics and souvenirs of the Old West. Individuals and government agencies worked to arrest the wanton exploitation and resource destruction.

Coordination for preservation and study began in the late 1960s, when the Sweetwater Mines were observing their centennial. The best preserved of the former gold camps, South Pass City, was gifted to the State of Wyoming by a group of concerned citizens. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) took a more active role in the administration of the remains of the Miners Delight town site located on Federal lands. In largely privately-owned Atlantic City,

Archaeological investigations at the Morris Cabin location at South Pass City State Historic Site. Photograph by Danny Walker, courtesy Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist.



The Carissa Mine and Mill today. Photograph by Richard Collier, courtesy Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office

residents formed a historical society aimed at preserving a century of gold mining heritage.

Present and Future

South Pass City led the way in preservation and interpretation of the Sweetwater Mines. Knowledge of the town site expanded, in part, due to archaeological work. Building stabilization efforts included subsurface excavations which helped to document new findings and affirm oral tradition. Thousands of hours of work by the Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist contributed to one of the most complete and authentic visitor experiences of frontier town life. Today, nearly the entire town historic site is restored, exhibited, and open to visitors.

In 2003, the State of Wyoming purchased the Carissa Mine site. Research and preservation began immediately. Proof of its long-standing habitation, archaeological surveys of the surface of the property revealed prehistoric stone tools in close proximity to near-new mining equipment. Hazard mitigation and historic restoration efforts in the Mill building culminated with the opening of an active gold milling interpretive facility in 2013. As a new era dawns at the Carissa, work continues all across the Sweetwater Mines to investigate, document, and preserve the entire continuum of Wyoming's cultural legacy.



For information about Wyoming
Archaeology Awareness Month activities:
[wyoshpo.state.wy.us/
aamonth](http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/aamonth)

Sponsors: Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office; U.S. Bureau of Land Management; Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist; Wyoming State Parks, Historic Sites, and Trails; Wyoming Army National Guard; U.S. Forest Service; National Park Service; Western Area Power Administration; U.S. Bureau of Reclamation; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Wyoming Department of Transportation; High Plains Macrobotanical Services; SWCA Environmental Consultants; Western Archaeological Services; ASM Affiliates; Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc.; TRC Environmental Corporation; Cardno ENTRIX; HDR Environmental, Operations and Construction, Inc.; Kyak Marook Heritage Research; USU Archeological Services, Inc.; University of Wyoming Department of Anthropology; Wyoming Association of Professional Archaeologists; Wyoming Archaeological Society.

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Sweetwater Gold Mining District

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