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Carbon County, Wyoming

[Lori Van Pelt](#)

Carbon County, Wyo., in the south-central part of the state, stretches north about 95 miles from the southern border, and, in a not-quite-oblong shape, roughly 83 miles east to west. In those 7,896 square miles, the county contains rich natural resources, gorgeous mountains, scenic vistas and precious rivers and streams. Indians and, later, trappers and mountain men appreciated the rugged beauty and recognized the potential economic value of this place.

Archeologists generally agree there were people living and hunting on the high plains of the West by 12,000 years ago. By the time of early contact with whites, what's now Carbon County was crossed regularly by Ute, Shoshone, Crow, Arapaho, Cheyenne and Lakota (Sioux) tribes. Trappers working in the Sierra Madres in the early 1830s held a rendezvous at the base of the mountains in the upper **North Platte River** Valley. This meeting place became known as the **Grand Encampment**.

In 1841, a two-day fight occurred between trappers and Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians at trapper Henry Fraeb's camp by the Little Snake River. Fraeb was killed, as were most of the trappers' horses and, according to some sources, as many as one hundred Indians. The now-abandoned town of Battle in the Sierra Madres earned its name from this bloody conflict. Trapper **Jim Baker** gained a reputation as an Indian fighter from his actions during the battle.

By the 1860s, more emigrants were heading west through the area, often traveling by stagecoach or wagon on the Overland Trail across what's now southern **Wyoming**. Indian hostility gave rise to a number of attacks on the stage, and in 1862, Fort Halleck was built at the foot of Elk Mountain to serve as a base for soldiers protecting settlers journeying along the trail from such encounters. The fort was named for General Henry W. Halleck, who rose to the rank of General-in-Chief of the Armies of the United States during the Civil War and later was Army chief of staff. It closed in 1866.

In 1867, General John A. Rawlins, chief of staff of the United States Army and a civil engineer, surveyed land with Grenville M. Dodge, chief engineer of the **Union Pacific Railroad**. Rawlins Spring, later known as Rawlins, was named for General Rawlins and selected as a division point for the railroad.

Fort Fred Steele, named for a Mexican War and Civil War veteran, was established in June 1868 to protect the advancing transcontinental railroad where it crossed the North Platte River. The fort's first commanding officer, Colonel Richard I. Dodge, sent soldiers to stand guard for woodcutters working on Elk Mountain and in the Grand **Encampment** Valley while they made railroad ties and cut lumber for the new fort. Thomas Beausoleil, later known as Tom Sun, worked with Boney Earnest and others who became known as the "French Crew." In 1868, Sun floated the first log ties from the mountains down the North Platte River to supply the Union Pacific Railroad. French Creek earned its name from this group of tie-hacks. Fort Steele closed in 1886.

Towns sprang up as the tracks moved west. Among them was Carbon, Wyoming's first **coal** town, founded in 1868 and named for the rich reserves mined there. During the town's heyday — the late 1860s through the 1880s — seven nearby coal mines fed the locomotives traversing the country. Carbon, located about nine miles east-southeast of present-day Hanna, Wyo., lasted until 1902, unlike many railroad towns, which did not survive much longer than it took to lay tracks.

Benton, an end-of-the tracks town on an akali flat a few miles west of Fort Steele, was named for the powerful Missouri Senator Thomas Hart

Benton. It was created in 1868 as the railroad advanced west and was known during its three-month life as a place where a murder supposedly occurred each day. There were 25 saloons and five dance houses, as well as the Big Tent, a saloon and gambling place that came from Julesburg, Colo. and moved with the advancing railroad.

Later that year, Carbon County, which, like the town, earned its name from coal, became one of the original five counties of Wyoming Territory. It was created on Dec. 16, 1868 by the Eighth Dakota Territorial Legislature Assembly. Like the other four first counties, Carbon stretched north across the entire territory, from Colorado to the Montana line. In succeeding decades, Sheridan, Johnson, and Natrona Counties were carved out of Carbon County's original extent.

The county holds more incorporated towns — 10 — within its boundaries than any other county in Wyoming. In addition to Rawlins, still the county seat, they include Baggs, Dixon, Elk Mountain, Encampment, Hanna, Medicine Bow, Riverside, Sinclair and **Saratoga**.



Encampment, Wyo., about 1903, with the copper smelter in the foreground and the ore-bearing aerial tramway rising to the right. Courtesy Wyoming Tales and Trails.

In 1873, mountain man Jim Baker built the first permanent log structure in Wyoming in the Little Snake River Valley on the Wyoming-Colorado border. The cabin stands today on the grounds of the Little Snake River Museum in Savery, Wyo.

Early day Indians, who enjoyed the hot springs rising in and along the North Platte River and the plentiful opportunities for hunting near present-day Saratoga, declared that area neutral ground. However, Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshone, Crow, Arapaho, and Ute tribes fought in the regions surrounding this territory. When a smallpox epidemic hit in the 1870s, the endemic Indians, desperately seeking a cure for the disease, rigged a tall pole with a rope to dunk the ill in the healing waters, alternating between the hot springs and the cold river. This "treatment" often proved fatal.

Throughout the 1870s, hunting was prized. Sportsmen came from as far away as England and Scotland to pursue elk, deer, bighorn sheep, bear and buffalo. Major Thomas Thornburgh, who became the commanding officer at Fort Steele in 1878, led a number of hunting expeditions into the Sierra Madres. Inventor Thomas Edison visited the area on a hunting and fishing trip that same year, and is often but incorrectly credited with having conceived the idea for the incandescent light bulb there. On a later trip with a group including Webb Hayes, the son of President Rutherford B. Hayes, Thornburgh was said to have caught fifty-two fish in thirty minutes. Thornburgh was killed on Sept. 29, 1879, when troops from Fort Steele, sent to the White River Agency in Colorado to assist agent Nathan Meeker, fought with the Utes, embittered about Meeker's treatment of them.

In the 1880s, sheep and cattle ranches sprang up throughout the county. Some of these concerns were begun by men who first visited on hunting trips. A Canadian, Richard Savage, who came to the area to work as a government trapper in 1868, brought the first black-faced sheep to the area. He operated the Savage Sheep Company, raising a large herd of the imported stock near Saratoga. Savage is also credited with being the first man to experiment with crossing buffalo and cattle. Many sheep ranchers ran their herds on the ranges of the Red Desert and the Great Divide Basin, and Rawlins, Wyo., became well-known for its sheep production. A blacksmith in Rawlins, James Candlish, is

credited with making the first sheep wagon.

Englishman Henry Seton-Karr, later a member of Parliament, organized the Sand Creek Land and Cattle Company, Limited, in 1883, purchasing the ranches and water rights of Frank and Boney Earnest along with 2,800 head of cattle and 50 horses. An additional 2,000 head of cattle were purchased in Utah that summer and shipped to Rawlins on the train, then trailed to the ranch. The ranch, which continues to operate today under different ownership, became known as the Pick Ranch, named for the pick and bar brand of Frank Earnest.

The Pick was one of many ranches located near present-day Saratoga. The town, first known as Warm Springs, was renamed Saratoga in 1884 by Fenimore Chatterton, who remembered drinking mineral water in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., as a child. Chatterton worked as a clerk and bookkeeper for J. W. Hugus, the post trader at Fort Steele, and in 1903-1905, served as Governor of Wyoming.

Also in the late 1870s and 1880s, criminal activity and justice became great concerns of residents. In 1878, deputies Robert Widdowfield and Tip Vincent were murdered near Elk Mountain, while tracking "Big Nose" George Parrott and "Dutch Charley" Burris, after the outlaws attempted to rob a train near Medicine Bow. Both were captured separately. En route to Rawlins to stand trial, Burris was lynched by miners at Carbon in 1879. Parrot was lynched in downtown Rawlins in 1881, after attempting to escape from jail.

In 1886, the Territorial Legislature appropriated \$75,000 for the building of a state penitentiary in Rawlins. The cornerstone was laid in 1888, when the funds were approved, but construction did not begin until several years later.

Cattle rustling was common during the latter part of the 19th century. Some ranchers, frustrated at least in part by the lack of court convictions for such thieves, took the law into their own hands. On July 20, 1889, **Ellen Watson**, later nicknamed "**Cattle Kate**," and **James Averell** were hanged near the Sweetwater River, strung up by six prominent citizens including former government scout Tom Sun. Watson was the only woman ever hanged in Wyoming. Sun and the others, Albert Bothwell, John Durbin, Robert Conner, R.M. Galbraith and Ernest McLean, did not deny their involvement in the hangings. A grand jury was called but the witnesses scheduled to testify disappeared under mysterious circumstances. No one was indicted for the deaths of Watson and Averell.

That same year, 1889, the town of Hanna, Wyo., was founded. Coal was depleted at Carbon, and the Union Pacific constructed the Carbon Cut-Off, diverting trains from the main line to nearby Hanna. Cleveland, Ohio Industrialist and Republican political operative Marcus Hanna, for whom the town is named, predicted that coal located in south central Wyoming could "supply the nation for a century."

By 1892, production from the mines made Carbon County the second highest coal-producing county in Wyoming. Mines were dangerous places to work and tragedy struck later when two mining accidents in the Hanna mines in the early 1900s killed a total of 229 men. Twenty-seven bodies remain entombed in the mines.

In 1893, Dr. **John Osborne** of Rawlins was inaugurated as Wyoming's governor. That same year, **Lillian Heath**, longtime assistant to Rawlins physician Thomas Maghee, became Wyoming's first female physician. She opened her practice in Rawlins and continued for 15 years, maintaining her interest in medicine until her death at age 96.

Also in 1893, Frederick Wolf, a German, built the three-story **Hotel Wolf** in Saratoga. The hotel served as a stop for those journeying by stage from Walcott, Wyo. on the Union Pacific line, south and up the North Platte River to Encampment. Travelers were refreshed by many amenities including a sample room with fine liquors and cigars and an elegantly decorated second floor ladies' parlor where women enjoyed daily teas and pastries.

Train robbers **Butch Cassidy** and his Wild Bunch visited Baggs and vicinity often during the 1890s and early 1900s. They even once sought the services of the local doctor there.

By the late 1890s, copper mining was beginning in the Encampment area. An adept promoter, Willis George Emerson, helped swell the boom. Predictions that the tiny town would become "the Pittsburgh of the West" were overblown, but in October 1901, the Ferris-Haggerty Mining Company contracted with Emerson to construct an aerial tramway to transport copper ore from the mine to the smelter in town. The finished sixteen-and-a-half mile tramway, the longest in the world, was built at a cost of \$365,000. Ultimately, 23 million pounds of copper were produced, making the state a leader in production, but a series of fires and a drastic 35 percent drop in market price quelled enthusiasm for mining. By 1908, the copper boom was over.

In 1901, the state prison in Rawlins, constructed of sandstone quarried locally, began housing prisoners. Male prisoners, formerly incarcerated in the Wyoming Territorial Prison in Laramie, Wyo., arrived by train. Women convicts began arriving in 1902, serving their sentences in a separate ward. The pen in Rawlins has been a mainstay of the community's economy since.

Writer **Owen Wister**, who had often visited the area, published "The Virginian," considered the first western novel, in 1902. Wister set parts of the book in the town of Medicine Bow. In 1911, August Grimm built The Virginian Hotel there to cater to travelers who came by rail and on the road that later became Highway 30/287, a section of the Lincoln Highway.

In 1907, at the Saratoga Railroad Day Celebration and Fish Fry, fishermen caught 3,100 trout and served the fish to visitors. Rainbow and

brook trout were so plentiful in the North Platte River from the 1890s through the early 1900s that there were no legal limits on catch. Fishermen caught as many as 100 each day, and Saratoga's motto became "Where the Trout Leap In Main Street."

The Saratoga National Fish Hatchery opened in 1911. The hatchery, located four miles northeast of town, breeds trout and sends the stock to various locations throughout the country. Fishermen today still enjoy casting their lines into the North Platte River, a blue ribbon trout stream. Seminole Reservoir, on the North Platte River about 30 miles northeast of Rawlins also offers good fishing, and the Miracle Mile, a stretch of the river between Seminole and Pathfinder reservoirs, is prized by anglers.

In 1919, another train robber, **Bill Carlisle**, escaped from the Wyoming State Penitentiary, but was captured by Sheriff Ruble Rivera. Carlisle earned a reputation as a gentlemanly bandit during his 1916-1919 crime spree because he apologized to women and children while he stole their valuables. He earned parole in 1936 and credited a local priest, Reverend Gerard Schellinger, with helping him go straight.



Third Annual Fish Fry, Saratoga 1916. (c) Historical Reproductions by Perus.

Five miles east of Rawlins, in 1922-1923, the Producers and Refiners Corporation built Parco, an oil refinery and model company town. Spanish-style architecture distinguished the buildings. Famous aviatrix Amelia Earhart visited Parco in 1931 when she flew an experimental Autogiro, an open-cockpit aircraft with a free-spinning rotor, across the country. In 1934, the town was acquired by Sinclair Oil Company and renamed Sinclair.

Uranium was discovered in Carbon County in the 1950s. In 1960, underground and open-pit mines began producing ore. In-situ leaching began in 1961, the first such mining of uranium in the United States. By December 1965, Petrotonics operated a uranium mill in the Shirley Basin, one of five in the state. Shawano Development Corporation and Basin Engineering reported intermittent production in the Baggs-Poison Basin Area during the 1950s and 1960s. Uranium mill sites owned by Pathfinder Mines Corporation and Petrotonics Company in the Shirley Basin area have since been decommissioned. Medicine Bow, 40 miles south of the Shirley Basin mines, boomed and busted with these developments.

Consistently strong winds in the area resulted in Medicine Bow, Wyo., being chosen as the site for the world's largest wind turbine. The turbine, built in the 1980s by Hamilton Standard as part of a United States Department of Energy Bureau of Reclamation project, and a subsequent turbine built by Boeing, were later dismantled.



Rawlins, Wyo. in 1947, with the state penitentiary in the background. Courtesy Wyoming Times and Trails.

The modern-day Wyoming State Penitentiary opened just south of Rawlins in 1960. The prison includes the North Facility, which can hold 760 inmates, and the South Facility, opened in 2001 and used for maximum security. With 385 employees as of 2011, the prison is the largest employer in Rawlins.

According to employment statistics provided by the city of Rawlins, Carbon County School District No. 1 is the second-largest employer with 308; Sinclair Oil employs 295; Memorial Hospital of Carbon County, 220; Union Pacific Railroad, 155; Carbon County, 134; and the Bureau of Land Management, 115. In Saratoga, the United States Forest Service and Carbon County School District No. 2 are listed as the largest employers.

The sawmill located in Saratoga, formerly the community's largest employer with 100 employees, and in operation for many years, most recently by Louisiana-Pacific, closed in 2003 after long disputes over logging in the Medicine Bow National Forest.

A sawmill also operated in Encampment from 1950 to 1998. A Utah-based company, Thompson Logging, recently leased the sawmill from the

town and plans to use beetle-killed timber for studs and boards. The company expects to employ 15 people beginning in the spring of 2011.

In the mid-1990s, Cyprus Shoshone Coal Corporation, Arch Minerals of Wyoming and Rosebud Coal Sales Company were mining coal and conducting reclamation operations in Hanna. At that time, the Wyoming Department of Revenue logged production as 2.6 million tons per year from surface mines and more than 1.6 million tons of coal from underground mines in Carbon County. A huge drag line is still visible to those traveling on Highway 30/287.

Natural and mineral resources continue to be important economic factors in Carbon County. The Sinclair Oil refinery continues its operations today. Some coal production still occurs at Hanna. A coal-to-liquids project, expected to produce primarily gasoline, planned near Medicine Bow has received \$10 million from the state to pay for a road to the site. But the project is on hold, as of spring 2011, because of inadequate capital. The Environmental Working Group website lists Carbon County as one of the counties in the nation where the most natural gas wells were drilled from 1980 to 2008. Most of these 2,530 wells are located west of Rawlins, northwest of Baggs, and in the southwestern part of the county near the Carbon-Sweetwater county border. The developments have brought many jobs to the county and substantial revenues to county coffers. Environmentalists and sportsmen have decried this industrialization of a landscape capable of supporting great herds of pronghorn, deer, and elk.

In the early 21st century, commercial wind-power production started near Medicine Bow. PacifiCorp, which owns eight wind farms in the state, planned to begin operations of its Dunlap I farm near Medicine Bow in late 2010. The 111-megawatt facility consists of 74 turbines on 14,600 acres and cost \$260 million. The company also owns Foote Creek I, Seven Mile Hill I and Seven Mile Hill II farms in the county. Power Company of Wyoming plans to begin construction in 2012 of a 2,000-3,000 megawatt farm with 1,000 turbines on 98,500 acres south of Rawlins. As of 2011, production of commercial **wind power** is still new to Wyoming, and state and local governments are grappling with how to tax it fairly.

Sheep and cattle continue to be raised in the county, but are not the major economic factor they once were. At one time, Carbon County was home to 2 million sheep. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, in 2008, there were 83,000 head of cattle and 13,000 sheep in the county. Value of the cattle industry in the county was \$83.8 million, and the sheep industry was valued at \$1.7 million. Those values were dwarfed, however, by the county's natural gas production, which topped \$368 million in 2009.

Today, Carbon County, Wyo., continues to inspire residents and visitors with its intriguing mix of natural, historic and modern marvels. The region is also still prized by hunters, fishermen and others who enjoy outdoor activities including camping, hiking, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling.

Resources

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Illustrations

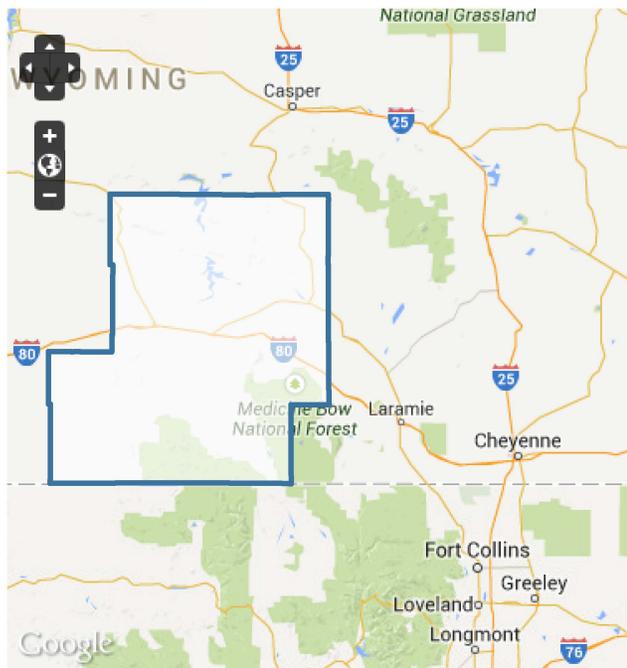
- The images of Encampment and Rawlins are from [Wyoming Tales and Trails](#), and used with thanks. The image of old Carbon is from the [Carbon County Visitors Council website](#), with thanks.
- The photo of Saratoga's third annual fish fry, 1910, was provided by former *Saratoga Sun* publisher Dick Perue, and used by permission. FMI: rperue@saratoga-wyo.com. He adds this note about the photo:
- The July 1910 issue of "*The Outing Magazine*" proclaims that Saratoga, Wyoming is "THE GREATEST TROUT-FISHING TOWN IN THE WORLD". The article written by C. E. Van Loan of Chicago was illustrated by photographs by the author and J. F. Stimson. The author had overheard two Wyoming men in Cheyenne discuss a big event held in Saratoga in September of 1909. One Wyoming man looked over at the other and said: "Quite a blowout they had over at Saratoga, wasn't it?" "Yes, indeedy!" said the other. "I hear they had about four thousand pounds of trout for the visitors. Took some of the boy two days to catch that mess." Those remarks prompted Van Loan to visit Saratoga the next summer and pen his article for the sport and travel magazine. In September of 1910 during "*Saratoga & Encampment Railway Days*" 3,928 Trout!, Fish!, Natives! Rainbow! Eastern Brook! Were served to over 2,000 visitors and residents during an event held on a large island in the middle of town, with the meal prepared and served by local businessmen and volunteers. Members of the fishing, cooking and serving committee pictured in this 1910 photograph are (from left): Gene Freeming, Bert Reynolds, John (Whitey) Miller, Earl Judd, _____ Peckham, Sam Monroe, Ed Haggarty, Duke Hanley, Clyde Lashbrook, Platt Hinman, Wilbur Hugus, Frank Cramer, Dave Wilcox and town marshal Chas. Taylor.--Photographer unknown. From Bob Martin/Dick Perue collection. © Historical Reproductions by Dick Perue, Saratoga, Wyo.

Like < 48

Key Dates

December 16, 1868

Dakota Territorial Legislature forms [Albany County](#) and [Carbon County](#) out of the western part of [Laramie County](#).



Carbon County quick facts

Land Area

7,964 square miles, 3rd largest in Wyoming

Land Ownership in Carbon County



The coal-mining town of Carbon on the Union Pacific Railroad contained about as many dugouts as houses. Courtesy wyomingcarboncounty.com

Owner	Acres	Percent
US government		
Forest Service	633,216	12.42
Fish & Wildlife	2,240	.04
Bureau of Land Mgmt.	2,047,872	40.18
Bureau of Reclamation	41,536	.81
Wyoming		
State Lands Comm.	337,951	6.63
State Recreation Comm.	165	.00
Game & Fish	24,750	.49
Local government / other	10,582	.21
Total public lands	3,098,311	60.79
Private lands	1,998,649	39.21
Surface Water	43,450	.85
Total Area	5,096,960	100

Carbon County Population

15,885 (2010 U.S. Census)

Incorporated Towns

Town	Population
Rawlins, (county seat)	9,259
Baggs	440
Dixon	97
Elk Mountain	191
Encampment	450
Hanna	841
Medicine Bow	284
Riverside	52
Saratoga	1,690
Sinclair	433

Unincorporated Communities

Community

Arlington
Savery
Walcott

Employment by sector

(2008 state figures)

Sector	Population
Agriculture	374
Mining	621
Construction	1,480
Retail	1,114
Transport / warehouse	629
Health care / social svcs	ND
Food & lodging	1,097
Finance / insurance / real estate	848
Fed, state, local gov't	2,150
Other sectors	3,401
Total	11,714

ND—not disclosed to avoid disclosure of confidential information, but estimates included in totals.

Sources: Wyoming Division of Economic Analysis Equality State Almanac, County Profiles, http://eodiv.state.wy.us/almanac/Page135_183.pdf; Wyoming DEA summary of decennial U. S. Census data, http://eodiv.state.wy.us/demog_data/cntycty_hist.htm; Wyoming DEA Employment, Income, and Gross Domestic Product Report,

