

Museum of the Mountain Man

and the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade



Freedom

Adventure

Self-Reliance

At a time before the emigrants, the homesteaders, the gold rush, the cattle, the cowboys, the outlaws, the railroad and even towns, a group of young men in their 20s and 30s ventured to the far off, wild and unknown mountains to trap beaver. This was the true promise of the then young America – freedom, independence, self-reliance, adventure and a chance to become rich. But the mountains of the West were a dangerous place where every day could be the last. There were lots of ways to die.



Painting by David Wright

DAVID WRIGHT

The Rocky Mountain Fur Trade

In the early 1800s, the Rocky Mountains were one of the last untapped sources of beaver needed for high fashion beaver felt hats in eastern cities and Europe.

This was a wild and dangerous world more than a thousand miles from civilization as the people of the time knew it. In 1824, eleven men led by Jed Smith and employed by William Ashley found abundant beaver and friendly Shoshone natives in the Green River Valley of what is now Wyoming.



By leaving trappers year-round in the mountains, bringing a resupply caravan once each year to a rendezvous, and taking the furs back to St. Louis, the first economic boom in the West had found its footing. The opening of the American West and ultimately expansion of the United States across the continent to the west coast had begun.

In the process a new iconic and uniquely American figure, the Mountain Man, was born. And, through these men, the world was introduced to another iconic American figure, the Plains Indians and their rich buffalo culture. Adventure and a chance at wealth lured men to the fur trade.



Painting by Alfred Jacob Miller

At a time when a typical laborer in America earned less than a dollar a day, a mountain man could get \$5 for a single beaver pelt at rendezvous and each trapper carried 5 or 6 traps. A good day trapping could produce a month's worth of wages.



Mountain Men

The mountain men were the first non-natives to live year-round in the Rocky Mountains. St. Louis was the closest supply center, a 2-3 month trip each way. They mainly trapped in the fall, winter and spring when beaver fur is thickest, hunkering down for a couple months in “winter quarters” when the mountain lakes and rivers were frozen over. To survive in the mountains and living nomadic, they adopted a lot of the lifestyle of the native tribes including, food, clothes, lodging and even some of their culture. This created a unique mixed culture character. When they returned to civilization they were called “mountaineers,” but today we call them mountain men. They included American, British, Scottish, Irish, Spanish, Mexican, French, German, Canadian Metis, ex-slaves, mixed-blood, and even Delaware and Iroquois Indians from the east. Although coming from far different places, they shared the characteristic of being rugged and independent men.



Paintings by Alfred Jacob Miller

Plains Indians

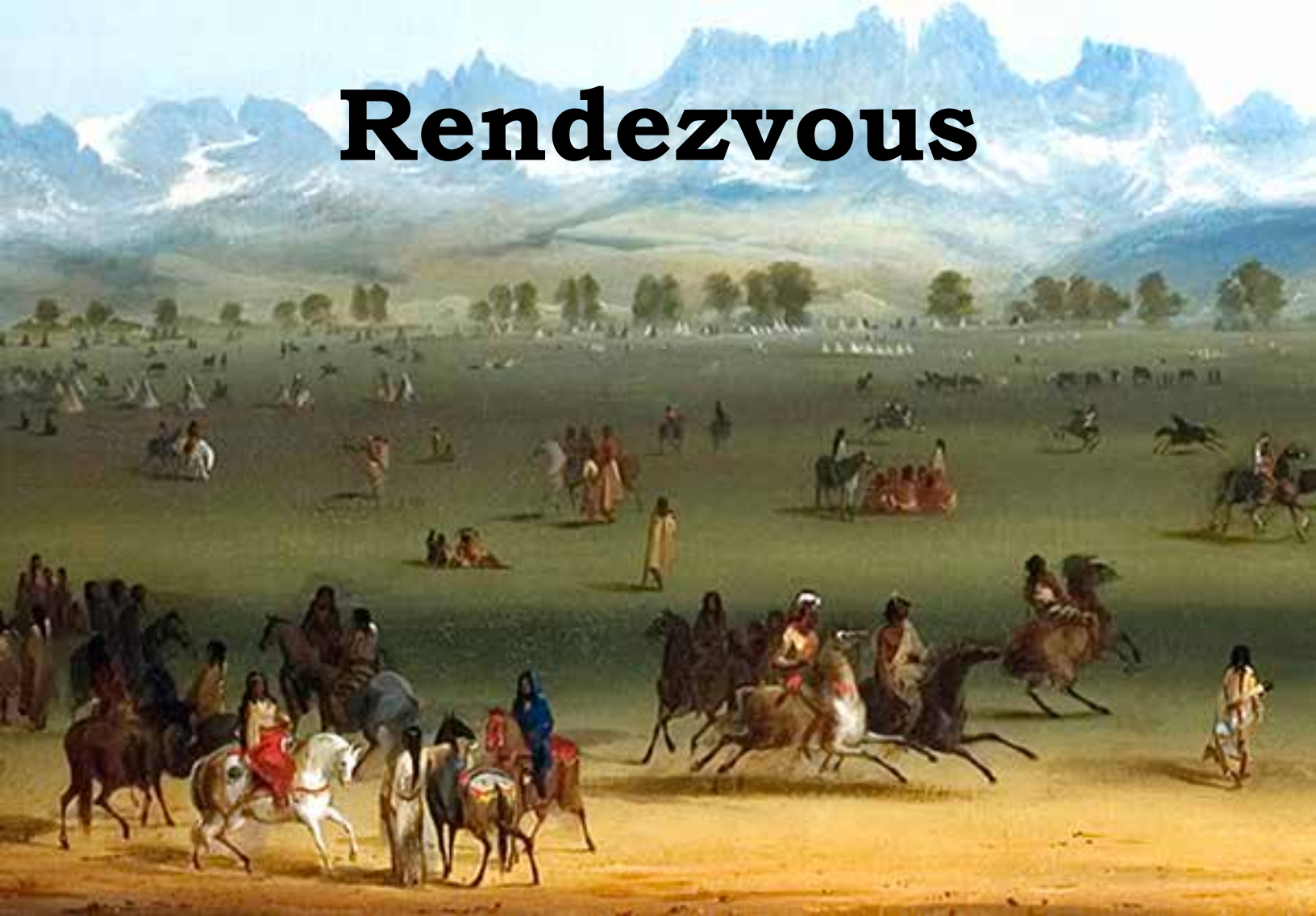
A few hundred mountain men entered an environment dominated by hundreds of thousands of Indians living in many dozens of tribes across the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, Columbia Plateau, Great Basin Southwest and the Pacific Coast.

Acquiring horses from the Spanish and guns from the British in the 1700s, many tribes developed a new culture based primarily on the massive buffalo herds of the Great Plains. They are now referred to collectively as Plains Indians. This was a thriving, resource-rich, warrior culture by the early 1800s and most tribes were eager to trade for European goods brought by the mountain men.

Relationships with various tribes were complex. Mountain men adopted much of the native lifestyle, traded, married and lived with friendly tribes including Shoshone, Bannock, Flathead, Ute, Nez Perce, Crow, Mandan and Hidatsa. Relationships with others like the Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapahoe and Pawnee were generally friendly, but soured at times. Conflict, though rare, most often occurred with the Arikara, Comanche, and the Blackfoot affiliated tribes. Natives desired the trade goods brought by the mountain men. This was a relative peaceful time between the natives and newcomers. They each had a use for and benefited from the other. The Rocky Mountain fur trade story can't be told without the story of the Plains Indians and the natural world they commanded.



Rendezvous



Paintings by Alfred Jacob Miller

In the summer of 1824, Jed Smith, Thomas Fitzpatrick, William Sublette and eight companions trapped a fortune in beaver in the Green River Valley. Knowing they were on to something big, Fitzpatrick was tasked with taking the summer catch back to St. Louis telling the boss, William Ashley, they badly needed supplies, but the rest stayed in the mountains to continue to trap. That first rendezvous in 1825 lasted only one day to exchange supplies and furs. Ashley neglected to bring alcohol, but that mistakes would never be made again.

These annual summer meetings would happen every July for 16 years and most became a huge party lasting more than a month. At the height in 1832, at Pierre's Hole in what is now Teton Valley, Idaho and 1833, on the Green River near what is now Pinedale, Wyoming, rendezvous were attended by several hundred mountain men and several thousand Indians. It was a time to catch up with old friends and blow off some steam from a long winter in the far reaches of the mountains.



Rendezvous on the Green



Painting by Alfred Jacob Miller

Six of the sixteen rendezvous took place on the Green River near modern day Pinedale, Wyoming.

- **1833** was one of the largest with camps spread over ten miles along the Green River. The most noted event was the rabid wolf that visited multiple camps over multiple nights biting several men resulting in at least two deaths. This was also the first rendezvous attended by a tourist, Sir William Drummond Stewart of Scotland.
- **1835** was attended by missionary and doctor Marcus Whitman. During rendezvous he removed the metal arrow point from Jim Bridger's back from a battle three years earlier with the Blackfoot. This was also the year of the famous duel between Kit Carson and the bully Frenchman Shunar.
- **1836** was noted by the arrival of the missionary wives Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spaulding, the first white women to cross the Continental Divide.
- **1837** was the year William Drummond Stewart brought along artist Alfred Jacob Miller. His artwork is the only visual records made of the rendezvous and mountain men of the era.
- **1839** was attended by American traders, missionaries and a contingent from the Hudson's Bay Company. Evidently fewer beaver were brought in.
- **1840** was the last rendezvous and is noted for the first Catholic mass held west of the Continental Divide officiated by Father DeSmet.



Painting by William Henry Jackson



Photo by Fred Pflughoft

The Museum of the Mountain Man

The mission of the Museum of the Mountain Man is to preserve and interpret the history of the Rocky Mountain fur trade era. It is dedicated to telling the real story of the traders, trappers and natives that were part of the Rocky Mountain fur trade during the rendezvous era of the 1820s and 1830s.

The Museum is located in Pinedale, Wyoming, at the heart of rendezvous country in the upper Green River Valley. The 15,000 square foot museum is operated by Sublette County Historical Society, a private non-profit foundation. It is open every day from 9 am to 5 pm from May through October, and by appointment November through April. More than 10,000 visitors are welcomed each year from all 50 states and 30 countries. It is operated by the Sublette County Historical Society, a 501(c)3 private non-profit foundation.





Feature Exhibits



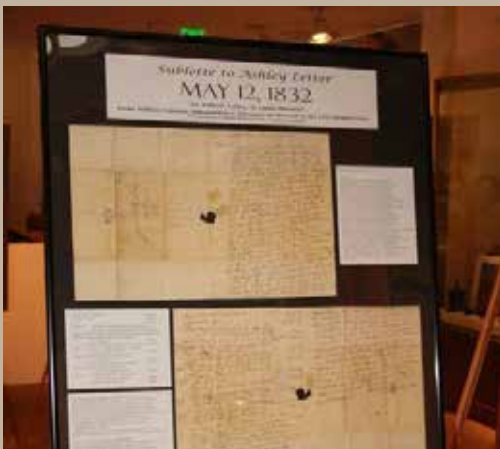
Buffalo Hide Tipi – A 20 feet diameter, the largest buffalo hide tipi on public display constructed of 20 brain-tanned and sinew-stitched buffalo hides in the cover and an additional 10 hides for the liner. It is an exact replica, made by Michael Bad Hand, of an original 1876 tipi in the collection of the Smithsonian that is too fragile to display. The original was taken at the Battle of Slim Buttes from Sioux Chief American Horse.



Jim Bridger's Rifle – After the rendezvous era some mountain men stayed in the mountains. Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez founded Fort Bridger which became a major stop and re-supply station on the Oregon and California Trail. In 1853, Vasquez commission a percussion cap rifle for his friend Bridger. Almost 170 years later that rifle is on display at the Museum of the Mountain Man. Bridger was the youngest of the Ashley men in 1822, but the "old" man by the end of the rendezvous in 1840. He is believed to have attend 15 of the 16 rendezvous. The .40 caliber rifle, made by William Ogden of Owego, New York, is 49.5 inches and weighs 11 lbs. An eagle inlay on the stock is inscribed "J. Bridger 1853".



Sheephorn Bow – The museum displays the oldest known sheephorn bow, found in a cave in the Gros Ventre Mountains prior to 1959. At over 300 years old, it was likely constructed by the Shoshone Sheepeater Indians. It is made from the flat back curl of two bighorn sheep horns, soaked, straightened, band together and backed with sinew. When constructed it was the most advanced bow technology, probably taking months to build and sought after by every Plains Indian. Modern replicas have been shown to pull 80 pounds while only 36 inch length. In 1837, Alfred Jacob Miller witnessed one in use and recorded that it could drive an arrow clear through a buffalo.



Original Fur Trade Letters – MMM has several original hand-written documents from the 1820s and 1830s. These include business correspondence, personal letters, and financial notes. These remarkable documents give insight and convey emotions that are not as readily available from the transcribed words in history books.

Beaver Hat - Mountain men would catch, skin, scrape and dry beaver pelts that were transported to St. Louis and most eventually went to Europe to hat factories.

Red River Cart – It is a common misconception that wagons were used by the supply caravan to bring goods to rendezvous from St. Louis. This was done one year, 1830, but then never again, suggesting they were not effective. Wagons in the mountains with no roads are very heavy and cumbersome. Supply caravans predominately used light weight two wheel carts and mules. Two wheel carts were common in St. Louis and had been used effectively further north on the Red River. They were often called Red River carts. The ones brought to the mountains were also called charrettes. The carts were light weight, easy to maneuver, and could even float for short distances crossing rivers. The model at the Museum of the Mountain Man is an authentic reproduction on loan from the American Mountain Men. It is unique in that there is no metal. The box, wheels and even axle are built of wood. Instead of a metal tire the wheels are covered in buffalo hide.

Arikara Battle War Shirt – In 2018, the Museum of the Mountain Man was made aware of an almost 200-year-old Indian war shirt in the Welkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, Germany that appears to show the Arkiara War, a battle in 1823 when William Ashley and his trappers had a skirmish with the Arikara Indians while trying to take supplies up the Missouri River. Drawings on the shirt likely represents the exploits of a Sioux warrior during the battle. An authentic reproduction of this incredibly rare native account of the battle was made by Michael Bad Hand and is on display at the Museum of the Mountain Man.

Alfred Jacob Miller and Art of the Fur Trade – Alfred Jacob Miller is the only artist to attend a rendezvous, so original images of the era are very rare. Miller images are used extensively in museum displays to interpret the history. The displays are also complimented by artwork from dozens of contemporary and historic artists including John Clymer, David Wright, Karl Bodmer, Charles Russell and Frederick Remington. In partnership with the Ricketts Art Foundation and Buffalo Bill Center of the West, MMM helped develop the website AlfredJacobMiller.com to showcase and interpret more than 600 paintings and sketches of Alfred Jacob Miller.





Photo by Dave Bell

The American Mountain Men

The American Mountain Men (AMM) is an association of individuals dedicated to the preservation of the traditions and ways of our nation's greatest, most daring explorers and pioneers, the Mountain Men. The brotherhood looks to keep alive the skills of the freest men our great nation ever birthed, to preserve their abilities, and emulate their way of life as historically accurately as possible.

The nationwide organization is a strong partner with the Museum of the Mountain Man. For twenty years, members have volunteered their time to provide living history demonstrations during Green River Rendezvous and Living History Days each year to help bring the history alive. Their hands-on experience with the daily lives of the original trappers is invaluable in understanding that lifestyle, much of which was never recorded or only hinted at. They don't just research the history, they live it.

The American Mountain Men have also partnered with the Museum of the Mountain Man for exhibits in the Museum with period artifacts and authentic reproductions for display. These include a full-sized charrette, camp display, rendezvous diorama, beaver pelts & packs, beaver press, guns, hand-forged traps, clothes, and many other items that are swapped out periodically to tell new stories. Members also support the *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* as researchers and authors, help research and answer visitor questions, and are available for demonstrations on-site or at other locations.





Photo by Dave Bell



Photo by Dave Bell



Photo by Dave Bell

Keeping History Alive Celebrating Rendezvous today



Photo by Dave Bell

Starting more than 85 years ago, the citizens of Sublette County have held an annual rendezvous celebration called Green River Rendezvous. Now held in Pinedale, Wyoming the second full weekend in July, there are four days of activities for several thousand visitors who temporarily double the town's population.

The Museum is dedicated to telling the real story of the mountain men and Plains Indians with more than 35 academic and living history demonstrations over four days. Thanks to generous sponsors, all programs are free to the public with something for all ages.

A couple dozen American Mountain Men set up a rendezvous camp and put on living history programs on the daily lives of the historic mountain men with significant insight from having lived the lifestyle.

Academic programs and tours centered around articles in the *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* present the leading-edge research of the era.

Plains Indian historian Bad Hand gives great insight into the lives of the natives whose world the trappers came into. Lapita & Dan Frewin provide hands-on craft programs for children of all ages.

The weekend at the museum is rounded out with social events including the Western Art & Wine Auction, mountain man movie night, and AMM campfire tall tales.

The weekend is anchored by the Green River Rendezvous



Pageant on Sunday afternoon. The large outdoor performance includes more than 100 volunteer participants, horses, wagons and lots of action developed over generations depicting the story of the historic rendezvous.

Other community events include three nights of rodeo, a community parade, traders row, street dance, Wind River Indian dancers, and lots of vendors.



Green River Rendezvous

Always the 2nd full weekend in
July in Pinedale, Wyoming







Living History Days

For over twenty years the Museum of the Mountain Man and the American Mountain Men have partnered to put on Living History Days for three days during the second week in May. It was developed to show the pre-1840 mountain man lifestyle and history to school children.

About 1000, mostly 4th grade, students come to the Museum. Each class attends over two hours of interactive and hands-on stations including fire making, black powder guns, trade goods, mountain man camp, tipi living, hand talk (sign language), beaver trapping, hide scraping, blacksmithing and tomahawk throwing.

Thanks to generous sponsors, the programs are all free to the students and public. Over 20 years, more than 15,000 students have been through the program, and it is so popular school return rate is over 95%.





Making History Fun!

Nearby Fur Trade Era Historic Sites

Located in the heart of historic fur trade country, visitors to the Museum of the Mountain Man are only a few miles from important fur trade historic sites including:

Trapper's Point – An interpretive site overlooking the Green River rendezvous grounds where six of the 16 historic rendezvous were held. The rendezvous grounds are a designated National Historic Landmark, one of only 20 in the state of Wyoming. The high vantage point allows a view up and down ten miles of the Green River where visitors can see the ground where thousands of trappers and Indians met each July. Walk in the footsteps of legends such as Jim Bridger, William Sublette, Jed Smith, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Robert Campbell and Kit Carson. The site also overlooks the full length of the Continental Divide and Wind River Range, and two other National Register of Historic Place sites: the 100-year-old Green River Drift cattle driveway, and a 6000-year-old antelope kill site along the Path of the Pronghorn.

Rendezvous Park - A six-acre park located on the original rendezvous grounds between Green River and Horse Creek, now located within the town of Daniel, Wyoming. This was the site of the rendezvous reenactment in 1936 which continues to this day as the annual Green River Rendezvous. A rock monument placed in 1936 celebrates the 100th anniversary of Eliza Spaulding and Narcissa Whitman attending the 1836 rendezvous is still located on the site along with a later interpretive sign of the historic rendezvous.

DeSmet Monument – Location of the first Catholic mass held west of the Continental Divide during the last rendezvous in 1840. The site overlooks the confluence of Horse Creek and Green River, the heart of the historic rendezvous. On the same ridge is the grave of Pinckney Sublette, one of the five Sublette brothers to come west for the fur trade.

Fort Bonneville Site – Location of the first permanent structure built in what is now Wyoming (1832) that figured prominently in the 1833 rendezvous. There are no remains today on the historic site, but an interpretive sign describes the activities at the fort both from written accounts and archaeological evidence.



Trappers Point



Green River Rendezvous Grounds



Rendezvous Park



Fort Bonneville Historic Site

Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal

The Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal is an annual peer-reviewed publication intended to further the knowledge and discussion of the rendezvous era and provide an avenue for researchers to showcase their work. The fur trade has been researched and documented for more than 100 years. However, the platform provided by the *Journal* has demonstrated there are new materials buried in archives and much of the previous research needs to be updated.

The *Journal* is the place for the leading edge research on the Rocky Mountain fur trade. Articles are intended for fur trade enthusiasts, but presented in a way that is welcoming to a general and new audience.

The *Journal* has also created a network of almost 100 of the leading historians in the fur trade assisting as authors, reviewers, and consultants. This collaboration and peer review helps ensure the new research is accurate and defended.

The open submission format provides for a wide variety of broad and niche subjects which have already included all the major fur companies, wide variety of mountain men, Hawaiians, Plains Indians, Iroquois, Delaware, tourist, missionaries, maps, geography, commerce, finance, law, regulation, rendezvous, art, music, horses, grizzly, bison, wildlife, rats, bees, guns, traps, shelters, wagons, rubber, whiskey, saddles, clothes, cache, boats, deaths, myths, smallpox, and new historical records.

Now in its 17th year, this annual publication is available free with membership in the Sublette County Historical Society, or for purchase in the Museum gift shop.



Author book signing



Sublette County Historical Society



The Sublette County Historical Society was founded in 1935. Their first event was a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the 1836 historic mountain man rendezvous. The purpose of the event was to raise money for the construction of a museum. By 1962 a formal prospectus and building design were completed for the **Museum of the Mountain Man**. Ground was broken on donated land in 1974 and the basement was built. Determined to never borrow money, the founders built portions of the building as they were able to raise money. By 1986 the building structure was complete. A final push completed fire suppression, lighting systems and displays in time for the grand opening in 1990 as a Wyoming Centennial project. In the following three decades over 300,000 people have visited the Museum. The basement floor of the museum features displays of other historical eras of the Green River Valley. (MMuseum.com)

Besides the main museum complex and mountain man history, the Sublette County Historical Society also owns and operates several historic sites: A six-acre **Rendezvous Park** adjacent to Daniel, Wyoming on the grounds of the original rendezvous; and **Trappers Point Overlook**, a ten-acre interpretive site overlooking the original rendezvous grounds and three separate National Register of Historic Places sites.

Another site is the **Sommers Homestead Living History Museum**, 15 minutes from Pinedale, which features seven restored settlement-era buildings including a two-story log homestead house, workshop, underground cellar, ice house, meat house, bunkhouse, barn, and an outhouse. It provides hands-on history for visitors (SommersHomestead.org).

The Historical Society also operates the **Lander Trail New Fork River Crossing Historical Park**, a 100-acre park where a cut-off of the Oregon/California trail crossed the New Fork River in the 1860s. It is a unique river crossing site where more than 50,000 emigrants crossed and most camped midway through their five-month journey to the west coast. (NewForkPark.org)

The Historical Society recently acquired the one-room **Emerson School** which was used from 1914-1959. It has been completely restored inside and will be used to interpret the rural ranch school experience of the settlement era in Wyoming. It is complete with old school desks, an outside hand water pump, small playground and outhouse.

Hands-On History



Sommers Homestead Living History Museum



Public field day doing archaeology at the Lander Trail
New Fork River Crossing Historical Park



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