

Stone in Haynes tells story of first road for automobiles

By LAUREN DONOVAN Bismarck Tribune Monday, September 13, 2010

HAYNES — History is sometimes subtle. Fieldstone rubble marks where a house once stood, or wind whistles through a schoolhouse boarded up when the children disappeared.

In Haynes, history not only stands oddly upright, it's painted in garish curb-stop yellow.

This strange obelisk evokes a “What in the heck is that?” reaction, standing so casually as it does under a grove of cottonwood trees smack dab in the center of the mostly empty town. On close inspection, the thick oil paint swabbed on decades ago looks like a living thing, perhaps a lichen of a color never before seen in nature.

Haynes, for those who've not been there, is a tiny dot on the North Dakota map. It's located about seven miles east of Hettinger and enough south to make it kissing kin to South Dakota.

The obelisk marks a time when humble Haynes had bragging rights. It was where the nation's first cross-country trail for automobiles entered the state on its torturous journey from coast to coast.

The trail dates back to about 1912, or so, when “Flivvers,” or “Tin Lizzies” were newfangled contraptions, frightening horses and women and causing suspender-wearing, plow-share iconoclasts to swear they'd never have one.

The Yellowstone Trail, entering at Haynes and exiting North Dakota west of Marmarth, was conceived by South Dakota businessmen to provide an east-west route to the coasts and especially to the fabled geyser country of Yellowstone National Park, established in 1872.

Chapters of the Yellowstone Trail Association were formed by forward-thinking town and country boosters who wanted to welcome these new auto tourists. They held work days, building the trail along public section lines. They cleared rocks and trees, graded a surface and put in culverts to drain rain and snow.

The old trail maps show sharp 90-degree corners, marked by signs, yellow bands on utility poles, or stone monuments like the one in Haynes. Those sharp corners have long since gentled into the curves on Highway 12 through the area.

Hettinger area historian Francie Berg says she knows of only two other stone monuments along the Yellowstone Trail's 103-mile course in North Dakota.

Both are in Hettinger; one on the corner of Main Street near the Chamber of Commerce office, where a gasoline filling station once was, and another further west in Hettinger near the C&N Cafe. Neither is yellow anymore, she said.

She said the old-timers told of taking teams of horses and wagons out to the buttes in search of rounded pieces of sandstone that had dislodged from horizontal formations.

Stood upright, daubed with yellow paint back then, these three stone monuments have endured nearly 100 years now.

The Dakota Buttes Museum in Hettinger has an exhibit that tells the trail's story and its members plan to place interpretive signs at the stone monuments. "More and more people are following the trail. We want to help them find the monuments," Berg said.

State Historical Society reference specialist Greg Wusk grew up near the trail, in nearby Lemmon, S.D., and says folks around "grew up knowing about it."

He wrote a college paper on a Yellowstone Trail bridge across the Missouri River at Mobridge, S.D., that proved to be much too low after the Oahe Dam was built.

"It was really the first named highway across the United States," Wusk said. "From Chicago west, it was very well known."

Wusk suspects other old trail markers ended up in farmers' yards, were vandalized, or were moved off section lines in later years when people no longer knew their significance.

Federal Highway Act(s) of 1916 and 1921, a system for numbering highways dating to 1925 and the Depression all contributed to the end of the Yellowstone Trail and the association, which folded in 1930.

It is somewhat ironic that the muddy ruts of the Yellowstone Trail, winding through prairies, across creeks and streams, were perfect terrain for the gas-guzzling, 4x4 SUV with hydraulic suspension and six-ply tires that might pull up to those old monuments today.

For those who have trouble even imagining that first, long-ago road, an odd looking obelisk in Haynes still stands to tell the story.

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