

Green River Diary

Dan Evans

True accounts of my visits to the Green River valley of western Wyoming.

Family connections

My interest in Wyoming began in 1978 with the discovery that one of my great, great, great grandfathers left his mark – his name and a date – on an obscure rock along the Oregon Trail in 1845.

I've had a lifelong interest in history. As a child, I loved to listen to elderly family members and friends tell their accounts of historic events through which they lived. Even mundane things they experienced were fascinating to me. People often had to be coaxed to tell their stories. They tended to either minimize the significance of their experiences, or assumed that a young person could not possibly be interested. But I was. I was interested to the point of fascination. And hearing a story once was never enough, especially if the story teller had a way of expanding on the story each time he or she recited it.

I was fortunate to live among or near many members of both my father's and mother's families. I didn't lose my first grandparent until I was well-along in elementary school. My mother's parents lived well-into my adult years. Plus, many elderly aunts, uncles and more distant relatives were alive during my childhood. I'm sure they all had fascinating stories to tell, but most of those stories went with them to their graves.

My father's family didn't have much to say about their family history. Even today, finding genealogical information about my branch of the Evans is extremely difficult.

My mother's family, however, has a fairly rich tradition of conveying ancestral information. Or, perhaps, it just seems so because I was always popping up asking questions and encouraging them to meander through their memories for my benefit. The surname of my mother's father was McDowell. Her mother was a Bonney, which has proven to be a relatively easy name to research.

Before my own personal research efforts started, we knew from verbal traditions that the Bonneys had come west sometime in the 1800s during the migrations to Oregon and California. However, no details of that had been handed down. They were early pioneers in Oregon's Willamette Valley. We had a vague idea of the location of the original land claim. I was raised in Washington state, so as a child we often visited Bonney-related family in northwestern Oregon.

My grandfather Hershel McDowell was my favorite storyteller. He had a commanding presence. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, everyone listened. He could shut-down verbal chaos at family events at will. It was like he had a magic button he could push that sucked all the air out of a room, leaving him with the only breath and

voice remaining. Upon pushing that button, he could change the subject, inject an entirely unique message or start a new conversation. When he lost interest in the current topic being debated by others, he simply turned it off and changed the subject for them. He would then listen for awhile until he wanted to change the subject again. He was the default moderator for all family events and even many non-family events in his community. When Hershel had heard enough, it was time to move on.

And, you could count on grandpa's standard conversation buster. He would take a deep breath and speak using his sufficiently booming voice, with reminiscent eyes that suggested he was really somewhere else, "I'll never forget the time...."

It was magical. I watched time stop at gathering numbering from three to thirty, hundreds – perhaps thousands – of times. All conversation stopped in mid-phrase. All eyes turned to grandpa, waiting for him to tell some story that would lead them onto another topic. It never failed. And, I so wanted that ability.

I don't know much about the McDowell's beyond three generations, but Grandpa Hershal's own stories were adequate fodder to fill books.

My favorite story from grandpa recounted an incident with his father. Great grandfather Lee McDowell (who died before I was born) was raised with his brothers and sisters on a small farm near Cabool, MO. Pressing apples into cider is a McDowell tradition that lived on with my grandfather until a few years before his death. As a kid, I helped with the process many, many times on Hershal's small farm in southwestern Washington state. Nothing takes me back to those wonderful childhood memories like a fresh, cold glass of apple cider.

On an unknown date, on a warm dusty day near Cabool, several riders rode through the McDowell farm and asked to water their horses. Lee also offered the appreciative men some cider. From there, the riders continued on to the rail road to hold up yet another train. Grandpa Lee died long before I was born, but I would have given two right arms to have heard him tell, firsthand, about his meeting with Frank and Jesse James and their gang.

The Bonneys

My Wyoming adventures are associated with research I conducted on the Bonneys.

Prior to her marriage to Hershel McDowell, my grandmother's name was Ivy Merle Bonney. Her father was Ira Allison Bonney and his father was Truman Lawrence Bonney.

In the summer of 1978, I made a trip to visit my family near Vancouver, Washington. I had left home in 1971 right out of high school to attend a Bible college in San Francisco. I usually returned home at 12-24 months intervals to visit.

My '78 trip had a little more significance than usual. I learned that spring that I had a brain tumor that would have to come out within six months – or else. The “or else” part wasn't promising, so I scheduled a November date for surgery. I was given a zero chance or survival without the operation, and a 50% chance with it. I chose not to share my good news with all but a couple of close friends and employed the intervening months between June and November to visit as many people as possible. I knew that my visit to Washington could very well be my last.

During that visit, my grandmother Ivy showed me a book that had been written many years earlier by Donna Wojcik Montgomery. *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845* was the author's account of re-travelling parts of the original Oregon Trail starting in the 1930s. She described the state of the trail at that time, including memorials and locations through which the pioneers traveled during the famous westward migration. Many of the places she encountered were popularly known, but others she found through exploration and interviewing actual pioneers and their descendents.

The book was marked to an account relating to our family. As I read it, I became excited. The author wrote of an inscription she found on a rock in 1930s Wyoming that read “T. L. Bonney June 1845.” My grandmother said “That is probably one of our relatives.”

For the next few days, my desire to know more grew. My interest in history and my fascination with family stories came together. I could not believe that a thread of verbal knowledge about my relatives travelling the Oregon Trail, was now documented. True, it was just another thread. But in my thought process, two threads made a quilt.

When I returned home to California, I immediately made plans to drive to Wyoming and find “the rock.” To say that I was naïve and unprepared, would be a gross understatement. Wyoming is a big state, especially if you're trying to find just one medium sized boulder. The slim amount of information I had about it, came solely from a forty year old account of a woman finding this rock near “Holden Hill,” West of the Green River. The Grand Tetons are West of the Green River. Holden Hill appeared on none of the maps I acquired from the Bureau of Land Management and government survey agencies.

In the few weeks between my visit to Washington and Wyoming, I scoured history books in the public library. I visited a genealogical research library in San Francisco. I studied maps. I did everything I could to find more information. However, in that brief exercise, I found nothing more; no further clues about the rock's location, nor many other details about the Bonneys. I was not a trained researcher and I was just beginning to look for needles in haystacks in a pre-Internet era.

All I knew upon leaving for Wyoming, was that a rock bearing the names of travelers over a period of many years, at one time existed near a place called “Holden Hill”, a short distance West of the Green River along one of many tracks called the Oregon Trail. Oh, and I knew for certain that I had to go and look for it.

Bill Carr

My first trip to Wyoming occurred in August of 1978, just a few weeks after learning of the “Bonney rock.” Early on a Thursday morning, I loaded up my Fiat X/19 sports car with my sleeping bag, an Army cot, my camera and hiking boots and started driving from San Francisco to Wyoming. Except for a childhood trip to South Dakota with my parents, I had not ventured far from Washington, Oregon, California and Nevada. I had to be back at work in San Francisco on Monday morning. What was I thinking!

I drove for 18 hours non-stop. My destination was Big Piney, Wyoming, not because I knew it was a strategic place for my search, but because it looked large enough on the map to have a hotel and it was adjacent to the Green River. I arrived in the middle of the night finding the hotel office closed. So, I continued on for another two hours to Jackson Hole, pulled out my cot and slept alongside the road for about 3 hours.

About mid-morning, I drove back to Big Piney, checked into the hotel and then walked across the road to the diner for something to eat. Over breakfast, I asked the waitress if she knew any old timers in town who might be able to answer some questions I had about the area. She mentioned a man named Bill Carr and directed me to the street on which he lived.

After breakfast and a shower, I drove the unpaved streets of Big Piney and found the log cabin the waitress had mentioned. It stood out, as it is the only log cabin in town. I stepped to the front door, which was open, and could see through a screen door, an old man sitting in a rocking chair, apparently asleep. I wondered if I should even knock, but I did and a lady came to the door. Though she was herself elderly, she appeared considerably younger than the man in the chair. In a whisper she asked if she could help me.

I told her that someone else in town had suggested I meet and talk to Mr. Carr because I had some questions about the area. She started to explain that her husband was asleep and that I might consider returning another time. In my head I was thinking “but this is the only time I have.” The old gentleman interrupted our chat, calling out, “who is it?” His wife told him that a stranger was asking about the area and he instructed her to let me in.

Though I didn’t know it at the time, crossing that threshold started a new chapter of my life. The interior of Bill’s house had the typical touch of a woman and was decorated in no real unique fashion...except that Bill was in it.

Once you were inside, you couldn’t tell that it was a log cabin. It had been finished with sheet rock and plaster many years prior and was painted and commonly furnished...except for Bill and his chair.

The floor had rugs and the home was well lit with modern facilities and appliances...except that Bill's chair and it's occupant looked like they had probably been positioned in that same spot for fifty years.

Bill Carr was seated in a large, old wooden rocking chair in front of a stone fireplace. He looked to be in his 80s. He was dressed in a western, snap-front shirt with the collar buttoned and a cowboy string tie properly cinched around his neck. He wore western style slacks of the style that my heroes, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, would have worn to a party or dance in the 30s. His well-used cowboy boots sat next him and a cane hung from the arm of his chair.

I didn't know it yet, but I was about to meet a legend. A man who could have filled a library with his personal accounts and stories, had someone been interested enough to interview him and write them. I had stumbled onto something very special. My sensitivity for elderly people, my love for their experiences, my years of practice at asking the right questions and being patient for the clarity that was sometimes missing from their memories, was about to pay off.

Mrs. Carr directed me to a chair near Bills'. I introduced myself. I told them both that I was simply a young man with a passion for history, on a very scant trail of information about my ancestors.

At first, Bill suggested he probably didn't know anything that would be of help to me. I learned that his wife was herself an author and Mormon genealogist who had written some accounts of the area. Sadly, she had not bothered to document much of Bill's life, which I soon learned was filled with exciting tales and daring exploits.

I discovered in this and subsequent visits to Wyoming, an initial suspicion among its residents. When you start asking people over the age of fifty about their area, they wonder what you're after. The land is home to oil reserves and most range land has active wells pumping out crude. More than a few people have been ripped off over the decades by swindling crooks and con artists.

The more I spoke of my love for history, what little I knew about my ancestors and their trip to Oregon, the more Bill sensed my genuineness. He began to ask his own questions to test my metal. He began to open up about his life and to tell stories that reflected a lifetime rich with history and significance, if only locally to the people of Wyoming. I ate it up and he could tell I was seriously interested in every word he uttered.



I learned that Bill, pictured here when he was still a young man, had been born in 1895 in South Pass, Wyoming. He was a cowboy during much of his life. He also served in the

Army during World War I, fighting at Flanders and the Battle of Aragon Woods. He settled in Big Piney after his discharge. He got married in 1928, continued with ranch work until 1932, then opened a gas station. In 1942, he took the job of Sublette County Under-Sheriff and brand inspector. He told many fascinating stories of lawlessness, range wars and lynchings in the area.

The visit hit a major milestone when Bill paused for a moment in the middle of his story-telling and instructed me to hand him his boots. His wife looked a little concerned and asked him if he needed help. He said, “no, this here feller will help me.”

I handed Bill his boots and he slowly and painfully pulled them on. I helped him stand up and after a few moments that he needed to get his feet under him, he very slowly with baby steps, started leading me to the back door. All the while, his wife hovered and ran ahead, asking him where he was going and what he needed. Bill just ignored her.

We stopped near the door and he retrieved a huge key ring from a drawer. We’ve lost the original meaning of “key ring.” Today it represents a remote control for your car’s alarm system to which is attached a dozen or more small keys and perhaps a tiny stuffed animal and a plastic souvenir from Disneyland. Bill’s key ring was a heavy and rusty iron ring about 5 inches in diameter with a couple of large skeleton keys.

We continued out the back door toward a separate, small outbuilding no more than 8 feet square. It, too, was built of logs. It had two small windows with iron bars over them and a heavy plank door. As we approached, Bill paused in his stride and said “you know, very few of my relatives have even been in here and no one in town knows it’s back here.” When he said that and looked at me I received two overwhelming impressions: In just over an hour, Bill had found something in me that created trust and, something behind that door was about to change me life. Bill added that he hadn’t been out to the building in a long time himself.

The door to the small, log outbuilding had a clasp and a rusty iron padlock hanging from it the likes of which you see on pirate treasure chests and Wells Fargo strong boxes in old movies. Bill inserted one of the skeleton keys, unlocked the door and led the way in.

I followed and instantly found myself in a mini-museum, or so I thought. A large roll top desk monopolized the room. Bill took a seat at a wooden swivel chair. The walls were covered with very old photographs and memorabilia, such as riding spurs and a lariat. The photos were of men on horseback, hunting expeditions and other long ago town events.

A hat tree had an old felt cowboy hat on it, along with a belt and empty holster for a six shooter. There was a tall wooden filing cabinet and shelves with more items of the sort you would find in a really excellent museum. One shelf had several different lawman badges; some inscribed “Sheriff,” others “Deputy.” A couple of old wanted posters were on the wall. I thought to myself, “what a neat little museum of stuff Bill has found over the years.”

Then Bill said “This was my office when I was Under-Sheriff. It’s been closed up for years, but I come out once in awhile to check on things and make sure no critters have taken it over.” My stomach did a couple of u-turns and my I could hear my heart beating in my ears. I looked around again, this time with greater heed to what I was seeing and experiencing.

With just two steps through a doorway, I had been transported nearly seventy years back in history. This was not simply a collection of preserved trinkets, a tourist stop or someone’s hobby.

Bill pointed out a picture of Big Piney’s first police car, with Bill and his deputies standing around it. There were pictures of other new cars purchased through the years. Most of the pictures in Bill’s office were of horse-mounted posses and deputies. The badges were all Bills. The wanted posters were authentic. The spurs, hat, holster – it was all Bill’s from his days as the lawman of Big Piney, Wyoming.

I was so in awe of where I was and what I was seeing, that I couldn’t speak. I just nodded at the things Bill pointed at. I could have spent hours in that office, exploring and studying everything in it. What did that big filing cabinet hold, I wondered. The Marshall’s 1929 annual budget? More wanted posters? A bill of sale for the town’s first police car? His report to the county attorney of the town lynching a horse thief before Bill could intervene?

The unspoken concerns of Bill’s wife about his ability to get around were substantiated quickly. We had only been in the marshal’s office for a few minutes when Bill said he was tired and needed to return to the house. He inched his way back out, I reluctantly followed and the giant padlock once again entombed the proof of a life I had only begun to understand.

Once I helped Bill back into his chair by the hearth, we chatted a few more minutes then he informed me it was time for another nap. He parked his boots in front of his foot stool and was sound asleep by the time I got to the front door. Before he fell asleep, he instructed me to come back again, as did his wife.

When I left their cabin that morning, I had a new friend and Bill seemed to appreciate meeting my acquaintance. He had entrusted me with the knowledge of something that few others knew about. His wife confirmed that to me on the front porch as I left. He never asked, but I know he understood that I would not reveal his secret to anyone local who might wish to relieve him of his treasure.

Bill’s wife explained to me as I left that she had married him late in his life. She was a widow with grown children when she met and married Bill. He had no children of his own. She also told me that none of her children had ever been allowed to visit Bill’s office. She asked me to return soon, because Bill wouldn’t be around much longer.

I never saw Bill Carr again. When I returned a year later, he was gone and the house was vacant. I didn't even bother to inquire around town about him. I really didn't want to know what became of his office. Whoever had the task of packing it up, no doubt assumed it was a nice collection of old "stuff," or perhaps authentic looking replicas.

I now label things that have special significance to me so that my children and grandchildren will at least know what it once meant as they toss it in the landfill or sell it for a quarter at a garage sale after I'm gone.

Julius Luoma

During my visit with Bill Carr on my August '78 trip to Big Piney, he referred me to another old timer. My visit with Bill had been more exciting for me than a life of Christmases, but it had not led me to any clues pertinent to my purpose for being there. Bill had little knowledge of the Oregon Trail or its travelers, even though he had encountered many of them. The trail remained an alternative route to the West, especially dust bowl immigrants, into the 1920s.

Bill and his wife suggested I drive south out of Big Piney to the little town of LaBarge. There I might find Julius Luoma, another area old timer who they felt might have better information about the Oregon Trail.

When I left the Carrs', I drove south to LaBarge, then south another few miles to the upper end of Fontenelle Reservoir on the Green River. I was told to look for an old, retired café near the road, and the house behind it where Julius supposedly lived.

I drove my little, bright yellow Fiat sports car into the driveway, passed the old café and found yet another log cabin. I don't want to convey the impression that there are a lot of log cabins in that part of Wyoming. In fact, during several trips and back-roads explorations, I've only seen a few. Standing in the yard behind a gate, was a very tall, thin man leaning on a cane and looking not too pleased to see a visitor.

I stepped out and asked if he might be Mr. Luoma. He agreed that he might be and asked why I wanted to know. When I mentioned that Bill Carr had recommended I speak to him, his face changed – dramatically. He asked how I knew Bill and how Bill was doing. I explained my visit earlier that morning and gave Julius a brief recap of the purpose of my trip. When Julius learned that I had spent a couple of hours in Bill's home, it apparently signaled that I had been pre-screened. I now understand that the old timers back there won't send a stranger on to meet their peers if they don't trust you. I had Bill's stamp of approval and that's all that Julius needed to let me remain on his property...for a few more minutes anyway.

Julius and I continued to stand on either side of his yard fence for about a half hour, discussing my interest in the Oregon Trail and my ancestors' travels on it in 1845. He was keenly interested in my mission and he was able to tell me where to find Holden Hill.

In fact, Holden Hill was just two or three miles down the road and West of the Luoma ranch.

In that half hour, Julius told me he had homesteaded his ranch in 1912, arriving there alone on horseback as a fifteen year old kid from Idaho.

Julius gave me some very vague directions for finding a road that would take me part way back into the hills and informed that I would find some ruts back there from the covered wagons of the Oregon and California Trail immigrants. He said he recalled seeing some inscriptions on rocks back there when he had ridden the area as a cowboy many years before. I thanked him and drove away, after he asked me to come back and tell him how my exploring turned out. I learned later why he was so interested in my reporting on the trip.

I found the road that Julius described. It went from asphalt, to gravel to dirt to nothing. It took me right through the barnyard of one ranch and across a field or two. My fancy little sports car wasn't equipped for off-roading. Any tuft of dirt over 4 inches high threatened to high-center the car. I eventually arrived at a point that somewhat resembled the turn-off to Holden Hill that Julius described. It was obvious that my car would prefer to wait for me while I hiked off over the sage brush. I packed up my camera and started my trek and inside of 5 minutes, a thunder storm blew in from the Tetons. I knew that it could last for a minute or a day and that I was prepared for neither eventuality. More importantly, I could imagine all that dirt I'd just driven over, becoming mud and leaving me stranded out there for days. Finally, I had to be back at work half way across the country in 36 hours. My heart sank, but as I walked back to the car I had the assurance that I at least had dropped myself into the right region and found willing people who were interested in sharing their knowledge.

I was too proud and feeling a little humiliated by my naivete, so I didn't stop by Julius Luoma's place on my way back to Big Piney.

Although I was disappointed about my failure to find the Bonney Rock, I was inspired. I had been introduced to some wonderful people. I knew more about the country and its ruggedness. And, the living history that Bill Carr and Julius Luoma represented and gave me a taste of, was equally exciting. I wanted nothing more than to return, spend more time with these two gentlemen and find the rock. I knew that, if I survived my brain surgery in three months, I would return with more time and be better prepared.

All the way home to California on the '78 trip, I plotted how I could achieve my dream, all the while knowing that I might not be alive inside of three months. So, though one part of me wanted to immediately trade my Fiat for a more appropriate exploring vehicle, I decided to wait. I spent the remaining part of September and October preparing for my operation. I gave my power of attorney to one of my friends in case I didn't make it and someone needed to close out the remnants of my life here on earth.

I was admitted to the Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Redwood City, California on November 1, 1978, the night before my brain surgery. I was put in a double room with a man who had broken his back in a bulldozer accident. He was in a full body cast and in a great deal of pain.

That evening I heard my roommate ask a nurse why I was there. When told, the reaction of him and his family surprised me. I was glad I only had a few hours left so that their fear on my behalf wouldn't rub off on me. He stopped complaining about his own circumstances and his family whispered their emotions about being next to a guy who might be dead the next day.

But, this story isn't about my health problems. So, I'll wrap up this chapter quickly and get back to the Green River.

I survived the brain surgery and the experience was only semi-horrible. I awoke a couple of days after the eleven hour operation in a single room that was totally dark. The nurses wore slippers and everyone on the floor crept about like panthers. There were no paging speakers or elevator bells on the floor. Lighting was subdued everywhere. For a couple of weeks, I remained in near total darkness.

As soon as I was able to communicate, I called one of my friends who knew where I was. My doctor had already notified them of my status. When one of them offered to come and visit, I asked him to do me a favor on the way. "Bring me some French fries, and some brochures for pickups from dealerships," I asked. I spent much of my time in the hospital studying those vehicles and developing a plan.

I went home just before Thanksgiving and was able to drive again after Christmas. The day after New Years, 1979, a friend went with me to look at pickups. I traded my Fiat in on a new Ford Courier pickup. My plans to return to Wyoming then jumped into high gear. I had no negative effects from the surgery except for a balance problem, that gradually went away over the next year or two.

1979 trip

I spent the time between January and June, 1979, intensely preparing to return to Wyoming. I purchased a shell for the bed of my new pickup, installed a floor and built a bed. I bought more maps of the area around La Barge, WY. I read every book on the area I could find. I also did more research on the Bonneys and found many threads of information that also cemented my genealogical interest in the Bonneys, which I have pursued ever since.

I picked a week in June to return to Wyoming. I was still naïve about exactly where it might be and what it would take to get to it. Given Julius' verbal directions, and the fact that I assumed that I had gone within few hundred yards of the spot before my previous

trek was rained out, I expected my search for the rock to take perhaps two or three days. On the map, the area looked fairly easy to traverse.

I planned a week-long trip, which would include a three day canoe trip down a stretch of the Green River. I recruited a California friend to go with me. I bought a 17 foot canoe, and more camping equipment. Everything was packed the afternoon before departure when my travelling companion called to say he had broken his foot that day.

I wasn't sure what to do. My vacation schedule at the bank wasn't very flexible, so I could not just cancel the trip and return to work. I also did not want to put off the trip for another year. However, I was concerned about travelling alone, off-road and I was even more concerned about handling a 17 foot canoe solo down a medium grade white water river. I decided to go as planned.

Another 18 hour drive got me to the Green River. I camped that night in my truck and drove to Julius Luoma's ranch the next morning..

When I pulled in, Julius didn't recognize the truck with the big red canoe on top of it. He was standing in his back yard just as he had been the first time I met him, wearing that same dubious, wary of strangers expression. But when I stepped out of my truck, he was shocked to see it was me. "I didn't expect to see you again," he said as he shook my hand.

I explained my failure a year before as well as my new level of seriousness about finding the rock. Julius was impressed and very interested. The summer before, I had won his confidence and trust. Now, with the obvious preparations I had undertaken, my commitment was very clear and you could see him literally becoming excited about my mission.

We discussed possible approaches using my maps. Julius spoke of things he had seen in the mountains west of the river many years before when he herded cattle and hunted game on horseback. He had seen inscriptions on rocks, but wasn't sure where exactly they might be. He had ridden along old wagon ruts on the actual Oregon Trail. He actually led some wagon trails through that area.

In the mid-1800s, pioneers joined large wagon trains in Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri under the leadership of a guide who would take them all the way to California or Oregon. The trail continued to be used into the 1930s, but by then, the groups were smaller. Instead of forming a large company under a guide for the entire trip, they passed through different regions of the country with local guides, being handed off from one to another frequently. Julius told of being one of those guides between Rock Springs, Wyoming and the Idaho and Utah borders.

We also discussed my canoe trip and agreed that I would put-in (canoe lingo for where you launch) in the foothills of the Tetons and proceed downstream to Julius' ranch

(estimated to take 3 days). We would arrange then for his wife or a neighbor to drive me back to my starting point to get my truck.

Julius was happy to have me unload my canoe and unnecessary gear for the drive into the mountains. He watched me as I unloaded my canoe. He studied my truck. Just as I was about ready, he said, "I'm not sure that little truck is going to get you back there." For a moment I was devastated. I still had no real idea of the ruggedness of the land I was about to encounter, but I had assumed that Julius' references to an old freight road and some trail lines on the map, would permit me access with my truck.

Julius stood leaning on his cane, looking at my truck and rubbing his chin. Then he turned slightly and looked at his own old truck parked behind the house. He looked back at my truck, then toward his own again. Then he looked at me and said "I think we better take my truck," and then he turned away and started inching toward the back door of his house.

I was once again shocked. "WE." There had been no discussion about Julius going with me. From everything I had seen in my two visits, Julius was about dead and totally unable to travel. And, I don't really think he anticipated coming with me in my truck. However, he now had a grasp of my intentions and commitment. And, all the talk about where I was going got into his blood and he wanted to see the Bonney Rock for himself.

I tried to talk Julius out of his new plan, but that was impossible. It was obvious that I could either stay behind or watch him go alone. I wondered if he could still drive and if his old beat up truck still ran. Julius opened the screen door and yelled to his wife, "this feller and I will be gone for awhile." She didn't respond and never came out to inquire or try to dissuade him, which relieved me a little.

Discovering the Bonney Rock

Julius' truck was a massive, old four-wheel drive Dodge Power Wagon. Traditionally, one of the biggest, meanest pickup trucks ever built. It was probably 15 years old and stood a couple of feet off the ground. I was wondering how on earth he was going to climb up into it. He opened his door and, using the crook of his cane, reached in and pulled out the entire left skirt, strap and stirrup from a saddle. It was bolted to the floor of his truck and tumbled out dangling like it was hanging from his favorite cow pony. Mustering all of the little bit of strength he had left, and in an obvious great deal of pain from his severe arthritis, he swung himself into his truck. He then hooked the stirrup with his cane and pulled it back inside the truck and closed the door. I was amazed.

I gathered up my maps and camera and got in his truck and we started out. It was apparent that, though he didn't drive often anymore, he still could. Once he got behind the wheel, his eyes lit up and he was happier than he'd probably been in months.

Julius and I headed south on the main road, past the reservoir and down the dirt ranch road I had traveled the previous summer. I felt good that I had at least taken the right route, even if I hadn't made it far. When we arrived at exactly the spot where I had parked my Fiat and started to walk in, Julius turned off the trail and started driving North.

However, I soon learned why Julius was concerned about my truck. After driving across the prairie for about a half mile, we found the old freight road, which was deeply scoured by erosion and old wagon ruts. We crawled along in 4 wheel drive and granny low, over deep ruts and narrow cuts in the rock. We climbed this road up until it crested on top of a high butte overlooking the Green River, the reservoir and Julius' ranch could be seen below. He was pleased to be up there again after so many years.

On the butte, Julius pointed out historical markers on concrete posts, marked by an organization of Oregon Trail pioneer descendents in the 50s. The posts supposedly marked a stretch of the original Oregon Trail. Julius laughed and told me he had guided that survey team there and let them think it was the Oregon Trail. They had actually marked an old freight road used by the Mormons and early ranchers before the newer road was cut along the river. He didn't want the survey team to find and mark the real Oregon Trail because he was afraid it would attract people who would overrun it and mess it up. Julius told me, "I'll show you the real trail."

We drove over the side of the butte and followed the freight road, steeply and narrowly down the other side into a hidden valley. At the bottom, we left the freight road and traveled across country toward the opposite side of that valley. As we approached the bluffs, crawling along in the truck, Julius stared at the hills. They were too far away to see any details, but at one point he stopped and pointed at some high outcroppings several hundred feet away and said, "you might try over there first."

We were separated from our destination by a fairly deep gully. "That's the real trail," said Julius pointing to the gully that was alongside the truck. I took my camera and crossed the gully. So many wagons had made that trip, that the trail had worn down very deep. I



stood on the real Oregon trail, not believing what I was seeing. After I got over that first surprise, I crossed and continued walking toward the rocks that Julius had pointed at.

As I approached the rocks, which were huge boulders and rock outcroppings from a cliff, I started to see painted inscriptions and carvings. At the top of the first large rock I stepped toward, was a clear inscription made with wagon axle grease, "T. L. Bonney June 1845." The picture here is of Truman L. Bonney and his wife Tennessee in his senior years in Oregon.

I was stunned. It was as big and bold as it could be. The brief mention of it in a fifty year old book was true. And, Julius, from memories spanning at least fifty years, had taken me right to it. I turned to Julius, who was still sitting in the truck and yelled “This is it. It’s here.”

Julius couldn’t believe it either. It took him about a half hour to get out of his truck and hobble over to the rock, a distance I had covered in about 3 minutes, but he came. He had to see it for himself. We spent the next hour or more stumbling around those rocks looking at dozens of inscriptions; names and dates left by pioneers and Army cavalry soldiers. Truman Bonney’s inscription was the earliest dated inscription. Some were marked in axle grease, others carved. Some were very elaborate with carvings equal to fine tombstones. Soldiers inscribed their names, rank and company numbers. Some pioneers wrote their home towns. The most recent inscriptions were in the 1930s.

I marked the spot on my map, triangulating with my compass and landmarks on the surrounding hills. We further explored the trail until it disappeared into the rocks as it climbed out of the little hidden valley. From that high vantage point you could see the wagon ruts traced in the prairie down through a canyon and toward the spot where they had crossed the Green River. The crossing had been buried by the reservoir created when the dam had been built.

We drove out, retracing our route over the mountain, across the butte and back to the prairie and road on the other side. I felt good, not only in having found and photographed the rock, but in Julius’ pleasure with our trip. He naturally should have been complaining and crippled from the taxing journey, but instead he seemed too happy to worry about pain and exhaustion.

I also felt very good about the fact that the site of the inscriptions was apparently little known or visited. There were no signs of other vehicle tracks, garbage or recent inscriptions. Many of the famous Oregon Trail places visited by the public have been defaced over the years and must be fenced off from contact. The inscriptions on the Bonney Rock and the rocks around it, were far from public access and knowledge.

When we returned to Julius’ ranch, his wife made lunch for us. We sat in their kitchen, eating lunch and Julius bragging about how he had pinpointed the rock from a vague memory going back many, many years. We were all proud of the accomplishment.

Julius spoke of his early days on the Green. His experiences as a trapper, guide, hunter, cowboy and ranch owner. His past was as colorful as Bill Carrs’. There were endless stories of bandits, Indian encounters, range wars, manhunts, posses and shootouts. Julius and his neighbors had the fortune of oil being discovered on their lands. They earned small royalties that served as retirement income. Walking around Julius’ place was like the Hollywood set for a pioneer film. The log buildings, beaver traps and its location on the banks of the Green River were a step back in time. And, with Julius there to narrate and guide you, it was all the more life-like.

Julius was born in Rock Springs, Wyoming, up in the Rocky Mountains. His father had been a miner. Julius left home as a kid around 1912 and headed northwest, hunting and trapping along the way. He reached the Green River in late Fall and had the sense of a born and bred mountain man to know he needed to settle in for the winter. He located a place on the West bank of the Green, dug a hole in the ground and made a roof of tree branches and dirt. He spent the winter in that hole, hunting and trapping. In the spring, he hauled his beaver hides to the nearest trading post by pack horse. He then went to Evanston and filed a homestead claim for the land he had occupied all winter.

After lunch, Julius showed me around his place. As with Bill Carr, my interest and respect gained me access into Julius' memories and treasures. His house was one of about 4 buildings that were constructed of logs. The hole in which he spent his first winter, was now his cellar with a wood door over the top. He took me into a shed where all of his old beaver traps, skinning boards and other tools of the trade were still stacked or hanging on the walls, along with a lingering assortment of skins. That building was the first house Julius built. Two other log buildings served as storage for ranch equipment and supplies.

We entered one of his buildings and Julius poked his head out the door to make sure no one was watching. The fact that we were in an isolated place with no one else around for miles seemed to escape him. He then hobbled over to a pile of stuff on the floor and used his cane to peel back some tarps and old burlap bags.

Julius was nearly as immobile as Bill Carr. They both crept along at the rate of about 1 yard per minute. Nevertheless, Julius enduring a great deal of pain, knelt by a large rock on the floor and told me (neither of these guys ever asked me to do anything; I was always instructed) to turn the rock over. It was large, heavy and fairly flat, but I managed to accomplish the task. What I saw was intriguing. Without any interpretation by my guide, I was clearly looking at the impression of the shell of a tortoise, about 24 inches in diameter. The feet and neck were also partially visible, but the rock was broken off at those points.

Julius explained that in the 1950's the state had come through and paved the road going by his place. (It is currently the main highway cutting across the Western edge of Wyoming.) They had to widen it and blasted through a lot of rock at the base of the hills. After each day of work, Julius would go out and explore because he knew from his own experience on his property, that the entire valley was rich in fossils. One afternoon, he found the tortoise rock in a pile of blast material. He brought it home and hid it in his storage building for nearly 30 years. He said his own kids didn't know about it.

Canoeing the Green

The same afternoon on which we had found the Bonney Rock, I reloaded my canoe and equipment back onto my truck. It was anticipated that I would see Julius again in about 3

days when I landed my canoe on the banks of the Green River that ran through his ranch. But, the trip was about to turn seriously unscripted.

June, as I learned the hard way, is a bit unpredictable in Wyoming. The Rocky and Grand Teton Mountains are unpredictable at anytime, but the transition from Spring to Summer, as it turned out, made it just a tad bit early to be tackling the Green River by canoe, especially solo. Still, no one I talked to, including Julius, thought it was a bad idea and the weather to that point had been clear and warm.

From Julius' ranch, I drove north about 60 miles to a small campground on the river just as it emerges from the foothills of the Tetons. The books I had studied about travelling the river, suggested this was about the highest, accessible spot on the river where a canoe could make a go of it. I spent the night in my truck in the campground. Early the next morning, I received permission from a nearby ranch on the river to leave my truck there and launch my canoe from their property.

I loaded the canoe with about three hundred pounds of equipment, food and water. The river was flowing pretty high and fast, and from the moment I pushed off, I was moving at a good rate of speed, though there were few rapids or obstacles for the first hour or so.

A seventeen foot canoe is capable of carrying nearly a half ton of cargo, and is generally best handled by two people, one in the bow and one in the stern. I had canoed quite a bit in rented canoes on lakes over the years, and I had studied and practiced important stern paddling techniques for controlling a canoe, both with a bow man and without. My experience and practice paid off and I had little problem remaining in control.

Even with the fast water and the unknowns behind every bend in the river, I was able to thoroughly enjoy the trip for about two hours. Most of my work was just to steer, allowing the river to provide the propulsion.

Canoes offer a unique advantage for wildlife viewing. Since you are low in the water and making little noise, animals and fish that would normally be scared off by people on foot, or in vehicles or powerboats, are more relaxed. In the first few miles of my trip on the Green, I floated within fifty yards of Antelope. Eagles soared overhead; Elk and deer appeared in the marshes.

The river marshes later became a bad thing, because they offered me few places to land and walk about. And, at the speed the river was moving, without knowing about dry land well in advance, I had little chance of hitting it. So, I was confined to my canoe seat for several miles at a time.

At one point, the river lay flat and wide before me for about a quarter of a mile. I began to hear what sounded like a water fall or rapids, but I saw nothing to support that impression. As it grew louder, I assumed I was approaching the confluence of a small stream entering the river. Nothing to be concerned about. I continued to enjoy the view and the wildlife.

However, the sound continued to grow louder and I began to be concerned. I still could not see anything threatening, but neither could I see evidence of another stream. And, I knew from my map studies, that nothing larger than small creeks joined the river anywhere along my route. After a few more moments, I saw a fine mist over the river ahead of me. The canoe began to move faster and the sound grew louder. And, then, my visual perspective changed and it appeared that at a point just a few yards ahead of me, the river was lower than the section I was floating on. I then knew I was approaching a dam.

I was in the center of the river, probably 40 feet or more from either bank. I tried to back paddle, but that was fruitless. My mind raced back to the books I had read. All of the river trip accounts that I had read, were later in the Summer. And, then I recalled mention of an irrigation dam that others had been forced to portage around. It wasn't a large dam, just enough to divert water to some canals for ranch irrigation.

I was only about 20 yards from the dam when I understood what I was coming to and concluded that there was no possibility of changing my mind or altering course to avoid it. My best hope was that the water would be just skimming over the top of the dam and that I would be stopped from plunging over the top. So, I steered directly toward it.

When I got within a few yards of the spillway, I could see that the water was flowing high over the top of the dam. I knew that I was not going to even touch the dam, let alone be stopped by it. So, my only alternative I was to move over the dam as fast as possible and hope for the best. I paddled hard.

When I got within a few feet of the dam, I could see that the water was only about 3-4 feet lower on the other side. I sailed over. The length of the canoe became an advantage, as the front end of it hit the lower part of the river just as I was clearing the upper part in the stern. Fortunately, my gear and I were very well balanced and we didn't tip. The bow settled in and the stern dropped cleanly onto the lower part of the river. I and my cargo remained dry.

I looked back at the dam. I had approached it in exactly the right spot. At other points, there was ragged concrete and other debris that would have trapped me. I continued down the river, breathing again and thankful.

It was a great day for only a few minutes longer. From the river, you could look up and see the Grand Tetons towering close by to the West. It was an impressive sight, as were the thick dark clouds that came racing in over my head in a matter of minutes. I thought, "Well, it's Summer time. We can handle a five minute thunder storm, a little rain, maybe some lightning."

The clouds were breezing across the sky like video tape or movie film that's been sped up to compress a long period time for quick viewing. It was terribly impressive and I didn't

think much about it. And, I was distracted by one of the most exciting wildlife encounters I've ever had.

The river had a habit of alternately narrowing and widening. The surrounding forest, marshlands and sage brush were beautiful. Unfortunately, I was taking no pictures. I was too busy steering the canoe and trying to stay dry and out of trouble. At times I would encounter bends in the river that permitted me to skirt an edge that was less current-driven, allowing me to relax. Such was the case at a point just upstream of the ruins of a fort built by Jim Bowie that I had hoped to stop and visit. I was drifting rather slowly around the edge of a river bend when I heard the brush move just ahead of me.

I wasn't concerned about negative wildlife encounters because I was separated from them by the river, so I hoped I might see a bear or a deer relatively close. I slowly drifted within about two feet of the bush that I had seen and heard rustle. I sat very still with my paddle across the gunnels of the canoe. I figured if it was a bear and it got brave, I could at least whack it across the nose and paddle out of harm's way. As I passed by the bush, a cow moose stuck her head out over the river bank and looked at me drift under her nose, not more than 18-24 inches away, as she calmly chewed her cud. I definitely could have bopped her on the nose, but I just smiled and looked back as she calmly watched me drift by. Then, she went back to plucking leaves from the brush.

Within a minute of my moose encounter, a very cold wind hit me from behind. The river had now turned east. It had also narrowed and become faster, making it unsafe to attempt a landing near Bowie's fort. Seconds later, it started getting dark and then snow began to fall. The temperature probably dropped twenty degrees in a matter of minutes. It was mid-morning now. I was dressed in light hiking boots, jeans and a hooded sweatshirt.

I still was thinking in terms of a short storm that would be impressive for a minute then blow over. But, the wind continued to blow. It was snowing horizontally and piling up inside my canoe. I then encountered a series of low grade rapids that required all of my attention. Controlling the seventeen foot canoe in the wind, rapids and sharp bends of the river became quite challenging. The snow in the canoe and on the banks was not melting, indicating that the temperature had dropped significantly. I was getting wet and cold, the canoe was getting heavier and I had no immediate options.

It became as dark as dusk. The white snow helped illuminate the banks and the rapids and ripples of the river, making it seem almost like a moonlit night. Then, ahead of me on the left side, I saw what looked like a solid chunk of soil in the middle of the river. The river was narrow enough that I was able to steer toward it. I hit the bank, the canoe turned just enough for me to jump out of the stern and I landed on soft, but above water ground. I had the canoe's stern rope in my hand and I was able to drag enough of the canoe onto the bank to keep it from floating away. I grabbed a short folding stool and a plastic poncho from the canoe. I planted the stool in the mud and huddled under the poncho, while I held onto the stern rope. And, there I sat for about an hour.

Once in awhile, I would peek out from under the poncho. Snow was piling up around me. It got nearly as dark as night. I was very cold. My feet were wet and freezing. The poncho created a slight thermal boundary around my head that gave me enough comfort to think clearly and assess my situation. I was concerned that the storm would send a surge of river downstream that would soon cover my little mud pile. I knew I needed to make an escape under controlled conditions before that happened and before hypothermia set in. After about an hour, I decided I had no choice but to re-engage the current and look for another place to take out where I could hopefully make a campsite free of Grizzlies. Oh, I guess I didn't mention that that stretch of the river is known for its Grizzly population.

At one point, the winds calmed a little. The snow, started falling almost vertically, instead of horizontally. I peeked out and surveyed the river and the condition of my craft. The canoe was full of snow and heavy. I came out from under my poncho, stowed the stool and scooped out as much snow as I could stand with bear hands. I warmed my hands in the river, which was a little warmer than the snow and pushed off, continuing down the river into the next set of rapids.

I continued on for perhaps another two miles. At one point the river went through a small canyon which helped shield me from the wind. However, the water was right up against the canyon walls, providing no place to land. Eventually, the river opened up again and slowed down. I was going through marsh lands again, which were too wet and boggy to make landing possible. When the river would slow, I would scoop more snow from the canoe and off my head and shoulders. I was cold to the bone. I would have to abandon the river one way or another soon, or I'd lose control of the canoe.

Then, down the river a distance, I saw a bridge. As I got closer, I recognized it as the one crossing the river near Daniel. Not really a town, just a post office and general store about a mile from the river. But returning to wide open water, also meant that I was exposed again to high winds.

As I neared the bridge, I looked extra hard for egress opportunities and found none. However, the sky was also lightening up and the snow was starting to taper off. I sailed under the bridge quickly. Ahead of me downstream, I spotted a large gravel bar in the center of the river. The river split around the bar. When you raft, canoe or kayak rivers, you learn quickly that when a river splits, only one of the channels will be suitable for navigation and there are bound to be hazards if you choose the wrong channel. I chose the wrong channel.

As with the dam, once you commit to a route in fast water, you have to make the best of it. As I approached the channel on my right, I saw that it narrowed down to about 20 feet and there was a tree partly submerged across the entire mouth of the channel. It was far too high to sail over and when I hit it, my canoe turned and broadsided. The river jammed me against the log. I expected disaster, but the canoe was not filling with water. The current was right up against the left side of the hull, within a inch or two of the gunnels,

and the log was on the other side. The river was managing to flow under and around me, for a moment anyway.

I tried to carefully move the canoe or rock it. I was held tight. The entire canoe was vibrating. I realized that my cargo was helping to keep the hull from crushing. That, and the sturdy tubular aluminum frame with which Coleman nicely designed their canoe. I had purchased mine in the same year that Coleman had introduced it to the market. It was a novel design and I bought it knowing that it hadn't been reviewed or tested much. I was now testing it.

I was stuck in the channel. I decided that my only hope was to get out of the canoe. My own weight was helping to keep the canoe low enough in the water to bind us against the log. A layer of snow covered the portion of the tree trunk that was above the water line. Chances were that I would slip off and get wet, but there weren't any options. My feet were already numb, and I was already soaked anyway.

I gingerly eased myself out of the canoe and stepped onto the tree trunk, transferring my weight as quickly as possible from the canoe to the tree. I managed to kneel on the log without sliding off. The canoe was then bobbing a little lighter. Hand over hand, fighting the current and wind, I started dragging the canoe past me until the bow just cleared the submerged tree limb that was helping hold in place. When the current caught the freed bow, it turned quickly downstream. I rocked it up and down from the stern to walk it over the tree and just as the stern cleared the tree, I jumped in, took my seat and paddled hard to avoid running into the wall of the opposite bank.

I was now sliding quickly down the channel on the south side of the gravel bar in the middle of the river. Below me, all I could see was mud banks and more trees and marshes. It was now or nothing. So, I steered toward the gravel bar, paddled as hard as I could and beached the bow. I jumped out in knee deep water with the stern rope in my hands and collapsed onto solid, snow covered gravel. After I got my breath, I pulled the canoe onto the bar.

The sky had become lighter. The snow wasn't falling as hard, but the winds were picking up. I was on a gravel bar in the middle of the Green River. It looked like it had been dry for sometime, as there was some drift wood that looked like it had been high out of the water for a few weeks. I figured this was my last stand and flooding or not, this was far as I was capable of going. If I could even buy myself a few hours, get into some dry clothes and warm up, I'd be a little more able to handle what came next.

I dug out my pup tent, sleeping bag, some food, clothes and a one burner propane camp stove from my packs. The rest I stowed under the overturned canoe. I fought for about an hour to erect the tent in the wind, driving stakes and covering them with rocks, anchoring the tent with ropes to the canoe and a dead tree. I then dragged my supplies inside and zipped it up, not knowing if it could possibly stand in the fierce wind.

I got inside my tent, about 8 hours from when I first launched. In that 8 hours, I traveled 23 river miles, most of that just steering. That was a fast river and a fast trip, even given my hour on the mud bank in the blizzard, and probably a half hour spent getting dislodged from the log in the channel. Before I zipped the tent, I studied the area around me. I was about a half mile downstream from the bridge and the main road. A relatively short distance, but in this storm and in my condition, I had no way to get there. The river banks all around me were soft, boggy ground. Even if I could have made it back across the channel in the canoe, I would have a terrible time working myself back upstream through that marsh in my condition. I chose to stay in the tent until I could dry off, warm up and get some food and water in me.

I took off my wet clothes and boots, got into dry clothes and crawled into my sleeping bag at about 3:00 in the afternoon. The tent indicated it wanted to fly away and would gladly take me with it if it could. I set up the propane camp stove and put a tin cup of water on it. The steam slowly brought up the heat in the tent and I was warming up in dry clothes and my sleeping bag. I nibbled on food and I remained in that bag, in the tent for 36 hours.

I didn't sleep the first night. I was too concerned about the river surging and I hoped I would at least learn of it with water slowly entering the tent, rather than a wall of water erasing me from the landscape without warning. So, I lay there awake all night, waiting for either the tent to collapse or the river to carry me away. I was too tired and exhausted to do anything about it.

During that first night, totally enveloped in darkness, high winds and the river racing by me, a distant sound emerged from the darkness and continued to grow louder. At first it sounded like the wind. Then it sounded like a wall of water. I imagined a dam bursting upstream, except I knew of no dams significant enough to create such a threat. The sound became a dull roar, growing in intensity. I wondered if the storm had been much worse upstream and was creating a fast moving flood. It was coming fast. Inside of thirty seconds, it had gone from silence to overwhelming. If it was really a wall of water, at the sound level I was hearing now, I should already be downstream several hundred yards. And, then, as quickly as it came, it subsided. I was still dry. The tent was still valiantly standing.

The winds and cold continued all the next day. I was healthy, eating and resting. All I needed was sleep. I spent that day and the next night in my sleeping bag. When I awoke the next morning, the wind had stopped. I ate some food and started stowing gear. I went outside and checked the lay of the land, seeing it clearly for the first time. Having lost 36 hours due to the storm, and with many miles to go before I reached Julius' ranch, I decided it wise to try and abandon the river and get to a phone. Otherwise, if I stayed on the river, people would fear that I was lost or hurt somewhere and start searching.

As I prepared the canoe, stowed my gear and took down the tent, I once again heard the distant roar I'd heard the first night. The weather was clear and sunny. But, in about 30 seconds, an Air Force B-52 bomber flew right over my head at less than 1,000 feet. I

learned later that I was on the flight path for departures from an air base eastward. I laughed.

I launched the canoe from the gravel bar and quickly crossed the channel in a downstream drift. Upon reaching the bank, I put a long rope on the bow of the canoe and spent a half day lining the canoe back upstream to the bridge. There I beached it and hiked down the road about one mile to Daniel, from where I phoned Julius.

When Julius arrived, he drove me on to my put-in place to get my truck. We then both drove back to the bridge and I loaded up my canoe and equipment onto my truck. We said goodbye there by the river. I headed for home that afternoon, spending a night at a hotel in Evanston, Wyoming. It allowed me to take a shower and change into dry clothes, get a good meal and a night's sleep before the long drive home the next day.

My 23 mile canoe trip on the Green River only lasted a few hours, but the overall experience lasted about two days. Never again have I tested the stability of the weather in Wyoming. Julius said he couldn't remember a storm like that in June.

Mom sees the “rock”

My family was eager to hear of my hunt for the Bonney Rock. I told them the story of what happened and showed the pictures. My mother was especially interested. She shared my interest in family history and my search for the rock from day one. In the Spring of 1982, we began discussing the possibility of her joining me on another trip to the rock so that she could see it firsthand.

In the intervening years, I had done much more research on the Bonneys. Through historical accounts and genealogical research I learned about the Bonneys and those who made the trip in 1845. Two brothers, Truman and Jarius Bonney with their families, joined one of the earliest organized wagon trains. I am descended from Jarius, who was my great, great, great grandfather.

Talk in the East made Oregon's Willamette Valley seem promising for farming and making a new life, so that became their destination. Jarius was a cooper (wagon wheel builder) and his brother Truman was a tanner, trades that would help them along the way and upon reaching their destination. They departed Ohio and joined an Oregon-bound wagon company in Independence, Missouri in 1845. It was after they crossed the Green River in western Wyoming, that my great, great grandfather – Truman Lawrence Bonney – Jarius' ten year old son inscribed his name in the rock.

At Fort Hall, Idaho, the travelers met a famous mountain man by the name of Caleb Greenwood and his sons. Greenwood had discovered a route over the Sierra Nevada mountains in California that he was eager to make popular. He also had a relationship of sorts with Captain John Sutter, who was trying to hold Northern California for the U.S., against the forces of Mexico, to which California then belonged. Greenwood conveyed

promises by Sutter for land and support if pioneers would divert to California, instead of moving on to Oregon. Greenwood also told of dangers ahead on the trail to Oregon from the Snake and Cayuse Indians.

The Bonneys and a few other families and individuals took Greenwood up on his promotion and left the Oregon Trail for California. The trek was extremely demanding. It took them across the barren Nevada desert. Getting over the Sierras required that wagons be disassembled a number of times and dragged over the rugged mountains. Nevertheless, they completed the trip early enough to avoid bad weather in the mountains.

One of the couples that accompanied the Bonneys to California, was Eugene and Mary Skinner. They later started the town of Eugene, Oregon.

Benjamin Franklin Bonney was a brother of Truman Lawrence and seven years old when the Bonneys made their trip West. In an interview with Benjamin, recorded during the depression, he mentioned finding gold in a creek during a rest stop in the Sierras. His father and uncle didn't take him seriously and the families continued on to Sutter's Fort. After George Marshall, a partner of Sutter, discovered gold in the area in 1849, which started the great California Gold Rush, the Bonney brothers returned to California to stake claims and try their hand at fortune, but by then it was too late and they returned to Oregon.

When the party arrived at Sutter's Fort, Sutter employed the Bonneys in the fort's wagon shop. They remained there for the winter, but continued with the Skinners to Oregon in the spring of 1846. The Skinners stopped in central Oregon and took a donation land claim on the Willamette River. The Bonneys continued north. Truman took a donation land claim near present day Woodburn, Oregon. Jarius secured employment by Dr. John McLoughlin, repairing his grist mill on a tributary of the Willamette River in present day Oregon City, Oregon. The following spring, Jarius selected acreage near present day Hubbard, Oregon for his homestead.

In 1845, another Bonney traveled the Oregon Trail. Wales Bonney was a distant cousin of Truman and Jarius. He, too, was on his way to the Willamette Valley, though he followed the more direct route rather than through California as his cousins had done. There is some evidence that Wales was accused of murdering another traveler and became reluctant to continue to his destination. So, he spent the winter in a cabin built by Samuel Barlow at the foot of Oregon's Mt. Hood and returned east the next spring (1846). He also carried a letter from Lansford Hastings, another explorer, encouraging emigrants to divert to California.

In Wyoming, Wales met an Oregon-bound wagon train. That evening he walked among the encamped wagons, reading the invitation from Hastings. Several accepted the offer, including the Reed and Donner families. The only problem, was that it was a little late in the season to consider a treacherous trip over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They, as is commonly known, met their fate when they were stranded in the mountains for much of

the winter. Forty in their party of eighty-seven, perished. Their accounts of their misadventure named Wales Bonney as the courier they encountered in Wyoming.

Armed with much more knowledge about the Bonneys and their experiences, another visit to the Bonney Rock appealed to me and I wanted Mom to see it, too.

In July, 1982, I drove my little truck with my canoe on top and pulling a small utility trailer from California to Salt Lake City. My mother, Shirley Evans, took the train from Vancouver, Washington and met me at Salt Lake. From there, we drove on to Wyoming. We spent a week travelling around Wyoming, camping all but one night.

The morning after we arrived in La Barge, we drove to Julius Luoma's ranch. By now, Julius and I were good friends, a relationship that had been cemented during my previous trips, but especially with our co-discovery of the rock. Julius had been nearly as happy to find it as I.

Mom enjoyed meeting Julius and he told her some of his stories. (She and my father returned a couple of years later and Mom interviewed Julius for a magazine article.) I left the canoe and utility trailer at the ranch, and I drove Mom in my Ford Courier pickup to see the rock. We found an alternative route through another ranch, avoiding the difficult freight road I and Julius had taken over the top of Holden Hill. The ranch route took us across pastures and fields to a trail that we then followed into the hills. With only a short detour off that trail, we were able to drive close to the rock.

Upon my return to the rock, I was happy to see that it still showed no signs of visitors. We spent that day and part of the next, climbing around the hills and gullies, hoping to find anything that might have fallen off a wagon or been left behind. We found nothing, but it was fun searching. We camped that night near the rock, with antelope and coyotes watching us from the buttes around that little valley.

We returned to Julius' ranch the next day. I loaded the canoe and trailer and we continued our week-long trek around Western Wyoming.

I drove Mom to the bridge over the Green River near Daniel, where I had spent 36 hours on a gravel bar during a blizzard in '78. It was pretty unconvincing. In August, the river looked like a small stream; about as wild as a kiddy ride at Disneyland. During that week, we drove many sections of the original Oregon trail. We canoed several lakes, fished and just explored. We crossed over the Rockies, stopping at Rock Springs where Bill Carr had been born.

At the end of our trip, I dropped Mom off at the train station in Salt Lake City and I continued home to California.

My last trip to the Bonney Rock

I got married in January of 1983. My constant story-telling about my adventures in Wyoming, and my research on the Bonneys, convinced my wife that another trip was in order so she could see it.

In late 1982, I had traded my little Courier pickup in on a full-sized Ford half-ton pickup. In August of 1984, we loaded the canoe on the truck, hooked up the tent trailer we purchased the previous year and left for Wyoming with my two young step daughters. We took two weeks to leisurely cross California, Nevada and Utah. I was anxious to see Julius again and to introduce him to my family.

When I pulled into the ranch, no one was there. But, within a few minutes, a lady drove in and I learned that she was Julius' granddaughter. She explained that Julius had died just two weeks earlier. His wife had moved away to be with family.

I was very disappointed. It was obvious at our first meeting that Julius was not good physically. But he had been there in subsequent years and I just figured he could last long enough for one final visit.

The family allowed us to park our trailer in Julius' yard. I was able to take my wife and kids around the ranch and see, from the outside, the buildings Julius had guided me through. We swam in the river from the bank of the ranch. And, we saw the rock.

Once again, I left the canoe behind on the ranch, along with our trailer, and we drove into the hills to see the Bonney Rock. This time, I could not cross the ranch that Mom and I had crossed a few years earlier. So, we went in across Holden Hill on the old freight road that Julius and I first taken.

I wasn't even sure my two-wheel drive pickup would make it, but with patience and caution, we did. The kids loved the hard trip, giggling and screaming in delight. We even videotaped the journey to show just how rough it was to disbelieving relatives later.

We reached the rock and recorded a videotape of me narrating a description of the rock and the trail adjacent to it. The rock and the Bonney inscription had survived unmolested for nearly 133 years when I first saw it. At that time, the inscription was very clear, even at a distance. But by 1984, the inscription was fading. It was still visible and we captured it on both film and video tape, but I have to wonder if it can still be seen today. There was also evidence on that last trip, that other visitors had been to the site. More recent inscriptions were on the rocks, along with beverage cans.

That was my last trip to see the Bonney Rock. I don't know if I will ever see it again. My parents saw it after that visit and were able to drive in across the ranch again. My mother also consulted with a fellow member of the Oregon-California Trails Association, and together they spoke to government officials about trying to preserve or limit access to the site. I don't know what has become of it.

Conclusion

I have many wonderful memories of my trips to Wyoming.

I would trade my right arm for the chance to spend a few weeks with Bill Carr and Julius Luoma. Two authentic pioneers – genuine wild-west personalities – shared a small slice of their lives with me. The stories they took to their deaths would be fodder for a dozen books. I never met anyone that captured my attention like those men did.