

Wyoming Community Profile

By Mark Court

Upton

Prior to the first settlement of the “White Man”, the area around Upton was considered home to the Cheyenne, Crow and Lakota Sioux people as this region provided adequate shelter from the elements, plenty of timber for fires and an abundant supply of food. With the westward migration, this area would soon be inhabited by homesteaders, ranchers, railroaders and miners.

The first settlement of Upton was known as Irontown, which was named after Iron Creek as settlement sprang up along the east side of the creek in the late 1880’s. Many believe that Irontown became a settlement as a supply town and resting place for cowboys, ranchers as well as the newly arrived homesteader. Since Iron Creek is usually dry, a water supply became an issue for its residents so they often depended on holes and reservoirs. One of the early settlers to the town recalled that “the water was brackish and metallic tasting; its only selling point being that it was wet”.

By 1889, the town re-established as a railroad siding along the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad and the name was changed to Merino. In 1890, the population would swell to nearly 400 residents and on September 25, Merino was granted its first post office. The Johnson County War and the Wyoming Stock Growers Association seriously affected this area in 1890. The dirty deeds that were committed during this confrontation were directed by the large cattle ranchers against the small homesteaders and shepherders. Shortly after the turn of the century, this area would be dominated by some of the largest sheep operations in America.

In 1892, the wife of Merino Section Chief, John Nolan was known for her hospitality by providing meals for the train work gangs that came through. There was one evening in particular where she took in a man who was very tired and very hungry so she fed him and provided him a place to sleep for the night. Later that night, U.S. Marshall Joe LaFors also arrived at the Nolan residence. Mrs. Nolan too would provide the Marshall food and the same bed as the other man. It just so happened that the Marshall was trying to track down the man that was next to him. Because neither man wanted to embarrass Mrs. Nolan, they made an agreement that Marshall LaFors would give the other man a one hour head start in the morning.

By 1902, because of confusion with the town of Merino in northeast Colorado the town’s name was changed for the last time to Upton after John Upton, who was a member of the James Stuart mining expedition of 1864. In 1905, it was the railroad that would begin to promote the area and homesteaders would steadily arrive here for years to come.

By 1907, Upton would be home to numerous businesses including a barber shop, pool hall, grocery, livery, drug store, hotel, newspaper, Methodist Church and the Red Onion Saloon. The name “Red Onion” was a common name for a saloon in the late 19th century especially in towns that catered to railway men. The term “Red Onion” acquired a secondary meaning as it was a combined hotel, bar, saloon and brothel. By 1909, the town would have electricity and telephone services. It would also elect its first town government.

In the 1930’s, the highway between Upton and Moorcroft was built and businesses would move from their location along the railroad tracks to the highway. By 1950, the population would reach 951 people. The railroad is still a huge part of today’s local economy in Upton as is the school district and ranching. Some residents will even commute to work in the coal mines 75 miles away just so they can keep their roots planted in Upton.

Upton is accessible year round. From Moorcroft travel east and from Newcastle, travel west on U.S. Highway 16. From Sundance take Wyoming Highway 116 south. As you come into town you will see a sign stating “**Upton WYO, The Best Town on Earth**”. At first glance of the town you may say, “**Why would anybody claim this to be the Best Town on Earth**”? But as you explore the town and get to know its residence you will soon come to understand why.

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