

Finding my Roots on Crooked Creek

By Russell F. Sherwin, copyright 2009

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Note by Russ: I don't figure into this history directly. Dad left Crooked Creek around 1920 and moved to the North-fork of the Shoshone River, 25 miles west of Cody. His wife, Mildred, died of TB and Dad married my mother, Nina, a few years later. I didn't come along until 1937, long after the events in Dad's journal transpired.

One hundred years ago in May of 1909, my grandfather, George Fleming Sherwin, Sr., arrived in Wyoming to start a new life. Originally they planned to share a homestead near Powell with Charlie Barnett, George Sr.'s brother in law. When it quickly became evident that one 80 acre homestead would barely support one family, let alone two, they split off and moved to Crooked Creek about 50 miles northeast where they bought 80 acres of land. That fall he built a log cabin for himself, his wife, Hallie, and their four children, George Jr., Wylie, Jim and Lissie. Wylie was my father. He was 13 then. In the 1950s, Dad wrote an extensive account of his early life there. I have those journals, four of them, about 5 x 8 inches, handwritten, and this spring I undertook to type them into Microsoft Word and make a reproducible book out of them. In the process I discovered a lot I didn't know about my Dad.



Russ in front of the remains of the Sherwin place

I grew up near Cody, Wyoming. When Donna and I arrived in Cody last spring, our intent was recreational. We visited Yellowstone, visited friends and high school classmates who still live there, spent time at the Buffalo

Bill Museum, at the state parks nearby, and looked at real estate, viewing Cody as a possible place to settle down, having spent the past 7 years "homeless" living on a boat. But the idea of searching for Grandpa's old cabin began to grow on me, and so we started doing some research.

Wyoming highway 37 leads north off of Alt 14 just east of Lovell, Wyoming and winds up into the Big-horn Canyon National Recreation Area. At the junction of these two roads is a large visitor's center where you can pick up information about the canyon and the historic sites. It's also a research and archive center. The staff here, headed by manager Chris Finley, researches and documents historic sites and restores those deemed historically important. Highway 37 continues about 15 miles into Montana and dead-ends at the old Carolyn Lockhart ranch. The NRA also includes the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, and the entrance to all of this is where Crooked Creek crosses highway 37. There is a fee-pay kiosk and a small ranger station that backs onto Crooked Creek.

Dad's journals are quite specific about the location of the cabin. It was near the mouth of Crooked Creek, about 3 miles south of the Montana state line. Crooked Creek empties into the Bighorn River just north of Horseshoe Bend and flows north into Montana. The Bighorn River is a flowing river and a deep gorge like a miniature Grand Canyon surrounded by vast, sparsely populated land. Now, because of the Yellowtail Dam about 40 miles north, Bighorn Lake has formed at Horseshoe Bend, and has a boat launching ramp and a campground.

In early July, we made a day trip to Bighorn Canyon, and we found Crooked Creek, and knew we were in the general area where the cabin might have been, but were more interested in the recreational aspects. Then, a few weeks later, armed with more information and a higher degree of interest in finding the place, we came back, parked the trailer in the campground and went searching.



The campground at Horseshoe Bend

We started at the ranger station. The ranger there had recently moved from Ohio and knew nothing whatever of the history of the land. He suggested that we start by asking some of the ranchers nearby and pointed out a gravel road that began at the ranger station and went south then west from there toward some ranch-looking buildings several miles distant. The wrong road, as it turned out.

The first place we stopped was a dead end and nobody seemed to be around. We backtracked, found Crooked Creek road and proceeded 3 or 4 miles to a place called Crooked Creek Equestrian Center. We drove in, the place seemed like it was in operation, but again, there was nobody around, although the barn doors were open and a couple of vehicles were parked on the grounds. Another dead end, we figured, so we continued west until we came to a junction. We could continue straight or make a right angle turn north. We stopped in the



The former Raymond Post Office where Barbara and Terrie live now

middle of the road to ponder this and consult our sketchy maps and information, and noticed a fellow sitting on the porch of an old log cabin just on our left. He came over to the fence and asked if we were lost. We said no, we just didn't know where we were going. We introduced ourselves; his name was Terrie Noble. We explained we were on a quest to find my grandfather's cabin, and he said we needed to talk to his wife, Barbara Bell, who knew a lot about the area and had ancestors who had lived here. Terrie was in an ebullient, friendly mood, and he told us where to park the truck and invited us in to meet Barbara. Barbara was initially less than enthusiastic about the prospect, but as we described our mission, she warmed up and told us that the cabin they lived in was part of the old Raymond Post Office.



Old Syke's Cabin

Raymond was a place Dad mentioned several times in his journal. She knew of several other cabins and would take us to one if we wanted.

Sure we wanted! She hopped in the pickup and took off on the gravel fork to the right. Up over hill and down through dale in a cloud of dust, we arrived at the fish hatchery. We opened the gate, drove through into open rangeland and down a bumpy dirt track about a half mile to an old cabin, still in remarkably good shape. I knew right off this was not Grandpa's cabin, but it was interesting nonetheless. As we found out later that day, it was Old

Syke's cabin. Sykes was a good friend of Dad's although they were separated in age by about 50 years, and a colorful character who occupies about 40 pages in Dad's journal. The cabin was exactly as described in Dad's journal, right down to the bed attached to the wall in one corner, still there, and the nails he had driven around the tops of the walls to hang his hides on. This cabin is one that is being considered for restoration by Chris Finley and his crew.

Barbara suggested we go back to the Equestrian Center and talk to Lou Kennedy who runs the place and would know more about the early history. Lou's companion is Doug Butler, who works for Chris Finley at the Bighorn Visitor's Center! It's beginning to be a small world indeed!

Lou and Doug were now home, and invited us in. Another lovely log home, typical of rural Wyoming. Most of the land around there is owned by the Tillets, who are original settlers of the area. We did not have time to visit the Tillets, whose descendents still live there, but Lou called and got permission to cross into their land to visit some cabins she knew the whereabouts of. Again, back into the pickup following Lou and Doug in their Bronco, back out toward the Fish Hatchery, only this time we turned off on a narrow dirt road that quickly turned into a path, testing the limits of our 2-wheel drive truck, over a small hill, around a corner and there we parked. We applied liberal quantities of mosquito repellant and hiked about a quarter mile southeast, on the alert for rattlesnakes. There in a grove of cottonwoods

were the remnants of Grandpa's cabin, root cellar and barn. I knew it was the right place, because my brother, Ted, who was born there, had been back in 1985 and had taken several pictures of it. At that time, the structures were all still standing.

The house was about 16-feet by 20-feet, about the size of a large master bedroom in today's houses. It had a plank floor, but no running water. Heat was by wood stove. Six people lived here, farmed the 80 acres and raised a few cattle for a hardscrabble existence.

Interestingly enough, although we had driven an 8 mile circuitous route to get here, we ended up about a quarter mile behind the ranger station out on the highway where we started. The grove of cottonwood trees that we observed when we stood behind the ranger station with Crooked Creek at our feet is where the place is.

Below is a Google Earth® view of the area around the Sherwin cabins. This view is approximately 6 miles square.





The remains of the root cellar behind the house

The land the structures are on is owned by Marion Tillet who was married to Royce Tillet. Lloyd Tillet and Royce bought and split the land and are both now deceased. One of Royce's sons is Rob, and he is the one who gave us permission to visit. Each of Royce's kids own a piece of the land.

It's tempting to call this the Sherwin homestead when referring to it, but it wasn't actually a homestead. Grandpa Sherwin had used his one-time homestead right in

Oklahoma before moving here. He bought

these 80 acres from Roy Huntington in 1909.

In 1915, Dad married Roy's son Cecil's daughter, Mildred. For a time, he and Mildred and their first daughter, Virginia lived in the cabin with the grandparents, a blanket separating the two sleeping areas. By then, George Jr. was in the Service, Lissie was teaching school in Lovell, and young Jim was working at a nearby ranch, so they were down to only 5 people. After Virginia was born, Dad and Grandpa built another cabin a few hundred yards down Crooked Creek from this place, where Dad and Mildred had two more of their four children, Ted, and Clifford.



The barn

Nothing remains of this cabin, and I suspect it was destroyed when highway 37 was put in. Dad makes mention of the "red cliffs" just to the east, which are still evident.

We spent the next couple of days enjoying the fabulous campground there at Horseshoe Bend, visiting some of the restored and to-be-restored sites like the Snell-Ewing Ranch, the Lockhart Ranch, Barry's Landing, Devil Canyon, Chain Canyon and visualizing what it might have been like to live here 100 years

ago. I'm sure at various points we walked in the footprints of my father. Probably my dad stood, more than once, on the knoll overlooking Horseshoe Bend about 50 feet behind our trailer.



An expanded view of the area around the Sherwin place. This picture is about 1 mile across. Google Earth.

On the way out, we dropped off a copy of Dad's journal with Chris Finley at the Visitor's Center and talked at length with him about his restoration and archival efforts. He had accumulated stories of the early days that dovetailed almost perfectly with Dad's accounts; for example, Old Sykes.

Once back in Cody, my appetite for further research was whetted. I went to the Annex of the Park County Courthouse, walked up to the counter and asked if, by any chance, they had a copy of Wylie Sherwin's marriage license from 1915. Park County was formed in 1914. The young woman clerk told me to follow her around behind the wall separating the public area from the work area, and there were shelves of journals. She went all the way down to number 1, pulled it off the shelf, opened it and there was Dad's marriage license! Not only that, but there was a handwritten note from George and

RECORD

STATEMENT OF APPLICANT FOR A MARRIAGE LICENSE

THE STATE OF WYOMING, }
COUNTY OF PARK. } ss. I, Wylie S. Sherwin, an applicant for a marriage license, being first duly sworn, upon my oath according to law, do hereby declare, publish and make known that my full and true name is Wylie S. Sherwin that my place of residence is at Raymond in the County of Big Horn, in the State of Wyoming, that I am over the age of twenty-one years; that the full and true name of my intended wife is Mildred Huntington that her place of residence is at Ray in the County of Big Horn in the State of Wyoming, and that she is over the age of twenty-one years.

I further declare that there are no legal impediments to our entering into the marriage contract according to the laws of the said State or States of our residence or of this State.

To all of the aforesaid statements I do solemnly swear, so help me God.

Sworn to before me and subscribed in my presence, this 6 day of July, A. D. 1915.

Wylie S. Sherwin (SEAL.)
George T. Sherwin
Clerk

CORROBORATIVE STATEMENT

THE STATE OF WYOMING, }
COUNTY OF PARK. } ss. I, A. Owens, of the County of Park in the State of Wyoming, being first duly sworn upon my oath according to law, do hereby testify, declare and bear witness that the aforesaid Wylie S. Sherwin, an applicant for a marriage license, is a resident of Raymond in the County of Big Horn in the State of Wyoming and is over the age of 20 years. That the name of his intended wife is Mildred Huntington and that her place of residence is Ray in the County of Big Horn in the State of Wyoming and that she is over the age of 20 years.

I further declare and testify that there are no legal impediments to the aforesaid persons entering into the marriage contract, according to the laws of the said State or States of their residence or of this State. I further testify that I am competent to make this statement.

To all of the aforesaid statements I do solemnly swear, so help me God.

Sworn to before me and subscribed in my presence, this 6 day of July, A. D. 1915.

Art L. Owens (SEAL.)
George T. Sherwin
Clerk

Hallie Sherwin giving permission for their underage son, Wylie, to wed! For 50 cents she made me copies of both.

Above: The marriage license application and (right) the note from George and Hallie Sherwin. Note that in the application Wylie's name is misspelled 'Wiley' where it says "...my full and true name is..." Probably the clerk did that, as it is in different handwriting. Also, there are three spelling errors in the note: 'whome', 'concent' and 'Marage'.

The address is given as Raymond, Wyoming, which was the post office where Terrie and Barb now live.

Raymond Wyo
July 5, 1915
To whom it may concern.

We here by, give our consent to the Marage of our son Wylie Sherwin to Miss Mildred Huntington

Geo. T. Sherwin
Hallie M. Sherwin



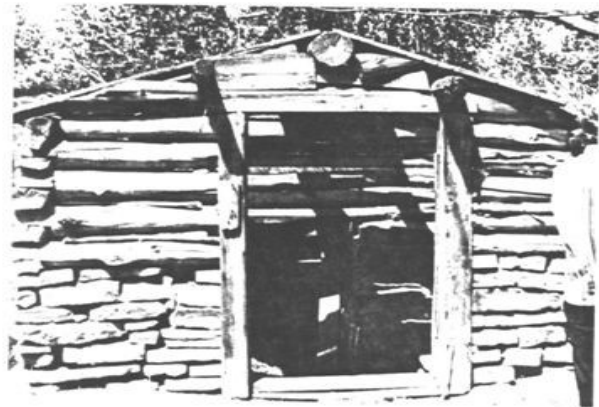
Remains of the Sherwin ranch house on Crooked Creek, 1917

On this page are some photos that Ted took in 1985 when he visited the Sherwin homesite.



Site of the one-room log cabin (above) where Ted was born in 1917.

Entrance to the cellar (below) at the Sherwin ranch house, Crooked Creek, 1985.



This is the way they looked in 1985. The house was still in pretty good shape, considering.

Unfortunately, not much remains today, though you can still find the three structures. I suppose they will be torn down eventually. They are in too bad shape to restore, and the Sherwins didn't make that much of an impact historically on this part of the country, since they only lived there for about 10 years and it was a very small holding.

I went on to visit the Homesteader Museum in Powell, and across the street at the Water District I found the documents of Charlie Barnett's homestead grant. We drove out southwest of Powell to where it had been. Of course, it has long since been sold and resold, divided, developed, fenced, roads put in, etc., so the actual site of the homestead is not discoverable. But we were within a half mile, I would say, and the lay of the land is as Dad described it when arriving there as a lad of 13, with George Jr., his older brother.



Betty, Nina and Helen at the old Sherwin ranch-house on Crooked Creek, summer, 1985



Helen and Harold view the log barn on the Sherwin ranch on Crooked Creek.

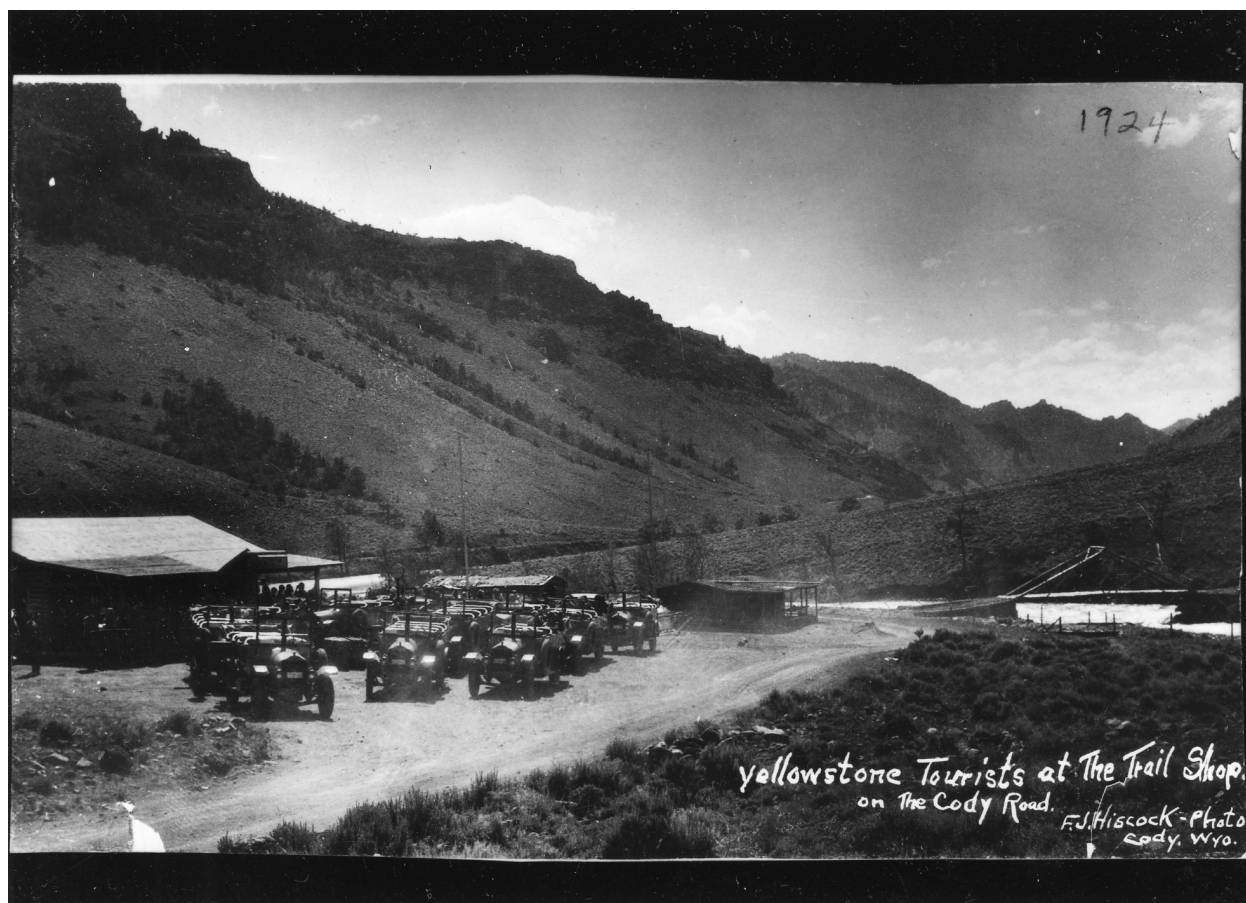
As Dad describes it, they were “...wild with excitement all the way from the train car. We had seen hundreds of prairie dogs and had killed our first Wyoming rattlesnake. We picked up two buffalo skulls and an old elk horn. But now as we finally came to a stop our spirits sagged just a little.

Of course we knew it was a new place. We knew there wasn't a house, sure we knew all of that, but we hadn't realized that there simply wasn't anything. We had come from a place where there were rivers and creeks and lots of trees. Yes, and people. But here there simply wasn't a thing except the ground we stood on. We had to take a shovel and rake and clear the ground of cactus before we could even set up a tent. We had dropped just below a bench before entering the claim and from here we couldn't see a single house or tent or a tree or even a fence post”.

From Wylie Sherwin's Journal, 1955.

Wylie's journal stops at the birth of his third child, Clifford in 1919. No mention is made of Betty, who was born in 1920 in Cody, and no mention is made of how, why or when he moved to the Northfork of the Shoshone and started the Trail Shop, though I happen to know he started building in 1921.

I visited the archival center of the Park County Courthouse and found some old photos of the Trail Shop, but nothing much else, and these photos are well known.



This would have been 3 years after Dad started the Trail Shop. You can see that in 1924 the road was indeed a trail, hence the name. In front are the old open touring busses that ran from the Cody rail depot to Yellowstone on multi-day tours.

My sincere thanks to Chris Finley, Terrie Noble, Barbara Bell, Lou Kennedy, Doug Butler, Jeanne Huntington, the Tillets, the staff at the Lovell Chronicle, the kind people at the Park County Courthouse, the Bighorn Canyon Visitors Center, the Homesteader Museum and the Powell Water District office for their kind assistance and interest in this project; and to my wife, Donna, who kept copious notes throughout the process without which many details would have been lost.

Special thanks to Beryl Churchill, my Cody High School classmate of 1955 who pointed me in the right direction for the discovery of much information. Beryl included Dad's account of arriving at the homestead in her Powell Centennial book, Home in the Valley, published fall, 2008. When I read that section of Dad's journal to Beryl, she said, "I just have to have that for the book."

The End

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