Nels Monson is Trailman of the Year

To show appreciation for the work that Trailmen do, your officers of the Yellowstone Trail Association decided to establish a Trailman of the Year award. Nels Monson of South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is Trailman of the Year for 2004. The award was made at a meeting of the South Milwaukee Historical Society. The presentation read, in part:

“Those bright yellow signs around town reminding us that we are now on the Yellowstone Trail are there largely through the hard work of Nels Monson, Trailman for the new Yellowstone Trail Association. Because of this accomplishment and many others, the Yellowstone Trail Association wishes to honor Nels.”

In 1915, when the Yellowstone Trail came to Wisconsin, the Trailman was to keep the Trail repaired, to report local route changes to the Trail Association, to help travelers in trouble and to gather members.

Today a Trailman is expected only to inform his community and to generate enthusiasm about marking that historic route.

When he became a Trailman a year ago for the new Yellowstone Trail Association, Nels said: “I will do what I can to see if I can get up some interest in the Trail in this neck of the woods.” Nels has done a spectacular job of doing just that. He has marked the Trail through South Milwaukee and Cudahy, given presentations about the Trail to several civic groups and written articles about the Trail.

Because Nels is tenacious, curious, dogged, informed, and fearless, the Yellowstone Trail Association presents him with the honor of Trailman of the Year - 2004.

Just previous to this award, Nels’ fascinating history book about his hometown came out. Images of America series (Arcadia Press) features a town in the U.S. with each issue. The books are written by local historians. This is the second book in the Images of America series written by a Yellowstone Trail Association member. Doris Whithorn’s Paradise Valley, the area around the Trail from Livingston, Montana, to the north entrance of the Yellowstone Park, appeared in 2001.©

Travel Along the Trail

I love to drive on road trips! I first got the “old road” bug when I took a solo road trip on Route 66 in the summer of 2002, from Chicago to Santa Monica. In American Road magazine I read the articles on “The Yellowstone Trail” by Alice & John Ridge, and it’s all history from there.

I began exploring the Yellowstone Trail (YT) on another solo road trip last summer. I started in Seattle and headed east to Yellowstone National Park. It was so much fun going to every little town listed on the original map, going into every museum and visitor center I could find, and meeting the nicest people.

Here are just some of the highlights of my trip:

Washington: At the Snoqualmie Pass visitor center, a very nice lady ranger directed me right to the YT and I saw my first YT signs. Then I found that the “43-mile drivable section” from Yakima to Ellensburg had incredible scenery and wildflowers. The Audubon Society had put up over 130 bluebird boxes along the fence and I saw many of the critters using them. The folks at Yakima visitor’s center were very helpful and drew me a map to the Grandview Pavement. They sent me on my way with fresh local cherries and apple juice from Selah. The “Grandview Pavement” in Sunnyside is now only a “shrine” of what’s left of the original 1915 stamped pavement, but it is nicely put together with a huge YT sign on it, surrounded by fields of hops. In Zillah, I loved the Tea Pot Dome Gas Station. The East Benton County historical museum in Kennewick had tons of information on the YT, including back issues of the YT Association newsletters.

Idaho: In Coeur d’Alene, I followed the very scenic YT above the beautiful Coeur d’Alene Lake; next was the old historic Cataldo Mission. I headed east to Yellowstone National Park.

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YT Guides – Will they Be?

Your officers are working with a South Dakota publisher to make plans to develop state or regional mile-by-mile guides for the Yellowstone Trail. The present proposal is to have 8.5 x 11 newprint booklets with detailed maps of the Trail, driving instructions, bits of Trail history, lists of related sights and events and, of course, ads. The intent is to have the ads cover the costs so that the guides will be available free to the traveling public. Send us your ideas. And we will need members to help inventory historic and Trail-related sights. Volunteers?
Montana: I loved the town of Three Forks and the visitor center was in an old caboose. The nice lady there told me right where to find the beginning of the “12-mile section” of the YT. It was paved to the town of Willow Creek, and then it was a dirt road from there. It was a gorgeous drive with tall, yellow flowers along the roadside and in the middle of the road. The road became very narrow in some places, so I was glad no one came the other way. The only other traveler was a cow (she thought I was herding her!). The Yellowstone Gateway Museum in Livingston was where I first found YT souvenirs and, of course, bought a lot. They were very helpful at the Museum and very familiar with the old road and gave me plenty of helpful info. From there I drove to Gardiner, and then explored Yellowstone N.P. for a week.

By the time I returned to the San Francisco Bay Area in California, I had driven 5,200 miles (miles really add up when you get as lost as I do!), and I had shot 25 rolls of slide film. I’m presenting my first slide show on the YT at a local library in May.

Next summer I’ll start my trip in Gardiner, Montana, and head north to Livingston, and then I’ll see how far east along the YT I can get in 25 days.

Thanks for all everyone does to promote this wonderful old road! 

Dianne Hunt lives in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.

She enjoys traveling old historic roads around the United States and is an amateur photographer. Working as a 10-month employee at a local high school, she enjoys her summers off to travel. She is passionate about all things Americana and tacky, including historical byways, funky architecture, off-beat museums, dilapidated barns, road food and gift shops.

A Trail Landmark Destroyed

The Olde Saloon in tiny Curtiss, WI, burned down March 2 due to a grease fire in the kitchen. Built in 1889, it began life as a hotel. It passed through the hands of several owners before the hotel closed, but the saloon remained. Yellowstone Trail Association member Les Bowen bought the place in 1982 and added a restaurant to the saloon because he “wanted a place for someone to get a cup of coffee.”

Faithful readers may recall that Arrow issue #5 contained a picture of Les who created a large highway sign advertising Curtiss and bearing the legend “On the Yellowstone Trail.”

The Saloon saw the Trail arrive in Curtiss in 1915 and survive road numbering until 1930. When Les was a kid he trudged to school along the Trail, never thinking that someday he would own this centerpiece of Curtiss. The Olde Saloon was a stopping place on the 100 mile antique car “Sociability Run” made along the Trail in 2000. Drivers all raved about the huge hamburgers served.

While Les owned the place he created a unique ambiance by filling it with antiques. Indeed, one could wander around looking at the items and pictures and forget to eat. The antiques alone drew many and its reputation as a “landmark” grew with its age. The next owner kept the antiques and the same historic area. Unfortunately, everything was lost.

Editor’s note: Remember when we wrote with sadness of the death of Trailman Jim Mowbray? Well, his son, Mark, has written a fine memorial to him and his Yellowstone Garage. The History of the Yellowstone Garage 1920-1966 chronicles the life of a garage, a man, and a town situated on the Trail in North Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Mark recounted for us the effort required to write this slim book and the ultimate satisfaction with the product, encouraging other YT writers.
Everywhere, it was tough finding roads usable enough to string together to form a national highway. But just west of Mobridge, South Dakota, there were a couple of major problems: how do you reliably get across the Missouri River and then, just across the river, how could the Yellowstone Trail Association (YTA) chart a route across the Standing Rock Indian Reservation? Success for most trail associations lay in cajoling county boards into improving extant roads or building new ones that a trail association could call its “own” and advertise that route. But what do you do when your transcontinental trail is stopped dead by another “nation” and a major river?

The river problem had to wait. A ferry had been operated since 1907 by the Jacobson family, but floods, ice and low water made the trip risky. And, of course, if you were young and foolish, and trusted railroad timetables, you could drive on the ties on the railroad bridge with your fingers crossed.

The first problem, though, was getting a road through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Corson County that was usable by autos. One 1913 approach was to follow the 66 foot rights-of-way between surveyed sections that federal regulations preserved for roads here as elsewhere in the Northwest. That would mean a 115 mile route made difficult because the contours of the land and the river didn’t follow section lines. The other choice was an 87 mile diagonal road that followed the contours, but land ownership complicated that choice. And nineteen miles of that 87 just west of the Missouri River were extremely difficult to build on: soft clay, gumbo, and large hills with 12% grades.

The federal government was mightily involved in Corson County/Reservation administration and, in this era, they had no great interest in road-building anywhere. Indians owned most of the land but did have the right to sell to anyone (1887’s Dawes Severalty Act). That opened the way for non-Indians to secure title to reservation lands. Federal aid was barely visible, $75,000 for the whole of the US post roads in 1912.

In early 1914, the YTA appointed member Rev. George Keniston to the task of raising $35,000 to buy the rights-of-way from land owners (whites, Indians, railroad companies) across the reservation and build seven or eight bridges. Soon he was in Washington, DC pushing members of the Public Lands Committee and the Indian Bureau for funds. In May 1914 several senators and congressmen placed $50,000 into the Indian Appropriation bill for the project. They actually got only $5000. We don’t know if the YTA ever raised their promised $35,000.

In July of 1916 The Morristown World (Corson County) reported that Joe Parmley of the YTA, county board members and surveyor, and the superintendent of the reservation were all out tramping on “unbeaten paths,” looking for a “permanent route” for the Yellowstone Trail. Indeed, 1916 maps show a new route, probably little improved dirt, still following section lines. Purchase of rights-of-way apparently was dropped in favor of following “free” section lines.

Parmley pushed for an auto bridge at Mobridge which was finally built in 1924. A major shift in the road location was made over a period of a few years, now with federal aid.

Parmley had also pushed for dams along the Missouri. In 1962 the dam forming Lake Oahe was complete and sections of the Trail, along with the railroad, were flooded out. The present alignment then developed and this route of the Trail was designated US 12 when the US route numbers were adopted.

Study the map to see the wandering route of the Trail over the years.
**New YTA Vice-President**

Arlene Schmuhl, Regional and Group Project Manager at the Oshkosh, Wisconsin, CVB is our new vice-president, replacing the unexpected relocation of Glenn Brill to non-Trail state South Carolina. Arlene has been part of the Yellowstone Trail Project in Wisconsin for years, assuming a pivotal role in the production of 65,000 YT tourist maps for the state. As vice-president she is organizing all newspaper addresses to send out news releases as appropriate. She is active in many civic and cultural organizations including the Winnebago County Historical Society Board, the Oshkosh Landmarks Commission, and the Oshkosh Arts Board.

**Check the web site**

Of course, it is still a building, but there are completed maps of the Trail through several of the 13 states. A new feature is a “mile-by-mile” list of all the towns on the Trail. This list will contain historic items and Trail artifacts of interest to travelers and will be added to regularly. You can help. What did Trail-era (1912-1930) tourists see in your area that today’s tourists would like to see? Let us know. www.yellowstonetrail.org

**Fremont (Wisconsin) Living History Day**

May 28, 2005. What a bash this promises to be! Civil War re-enactors, May Pole Dancers! And the centerpiece is the dedication of the old (1901) brick school cum town hall. The site was first surveyed in or before 1848, before Wisconsin was a state, and a log school was built soon after, reports YTA member Elsie Yohr. Descendants of the original surveyor will be there. Application has been made for the building to be on the state Register of Historic Places. And the Yellowstone Trail? It ran right past the front door 1915-1930. The building proudly wears a sign announcing that fact.

**New YT Brochure Available**

It is being printed while this is being written and is intended to tell people about the Trail and the YTA. Want some to hand out? Trailmen should have some. No cost. We need you to find new members. Just ask – but tell Tom the number you can use productively. Tom Barrett, Treasurer, Yellowstone Trail Association, 340 Division Street North, Stevens Point, WI 54481. E-mail is best: tbarrett@spacvb.com. Phone (800) 236-4636 ext.13

**YT in the News**

Did you know? The Fall/Winter 2004 issue of Rediscover MT has a nice article about the Yellowstone Trail. Dana Pulis raided the Western Heritage Center in Billings for pictures. If you live in Montana, take a look.