

The Yellowstone Trail Association: NOW

The original YTA was formed in 1912 and worked formally to create the transcontinental highway from Boston to Seattle. By the early 1930s, the Depression and the aggressive efforts of state and federal governments to assume road building responsibility and route marking caused the Association to fade and, over the years, be forgotten.

Around 1999, a number of local historians, several retired university professors, and representatives of the tourism industry, individually and then collectively, began attempts to spread the word about the historical significance, the tourism potential, and the just plain fun that could be found in this old auto route. Those efforts slowly jelled into a modern YTA that is beginning to make its mark.

Our membership is diverse. There are Seniors with family memories related to the Trail and early auto travel, antique car aficionados who take Sociability Runs on the Trail just as members did in 1917, local historians finding a new aspect of their communities, modern travelers looking for an “authentic” experience, and tourism professionals with the same goals as the original founders: local economic development.

We extend an invitation to you to join with us.

Volunteers have mapped, in great detail, the route of the YT through its thirteen states. They have begun the marking of the Trail and promoting interpretive signs. Regularly they produce a newsletter/journal, the Arrow.

Most important, we all want to share information and experiences.

Today’s Yellowstone Trail Association has formally stated its purposes:

- 1) Public Education: to increase public knowledge of the Trail and its importance in both local and national history,
 - 2) Historical Research: to acquire information and stories about the Trail and its historical context,
 - 3) Historical Preservation: to promote the preservation of appropriate sections of the Yellowstone Trail and buildings or other artifacts along the Trail,
 - 4) Communication: to provide a medium of communication and support among its members, and
 - 5) Heritage Tourism: to assist heritage tourism agencies along the Trail to promote the Trail, and
 - 6) Related Events: to sponsor or support various events related to the history of the Trail to support the other purposes.
-

The Yellowstone Trail Association: THEN

On April 23, 1912, Joe Parmley of Ipswich, South Dakota, held a meeting that he had had in mind for years. He gathered influential men from five nearby counties to implement the first step in his long-range plan to get a transcontinental route built across the northern tier of states - 3700 miles, give or take. This group grew into a formal organization, the Yellowstone Trail Association, on October 9, 1912 at Lemmon, South Dakota.

Why was there a need for groups of private citizens to form to get roads built? Because neither state nor federal governments had any interest in building roads. The federal government was supporting railroads, not auto roads, and many states had constitutions that forbade "internal improvements." As a result, roads were mere wagon paths, and mud was everywhere. In the East, roads were better because of higher traffic and greater choice of route. But they, too, suffered. There were many trail associations but only three were transcontinental - National Old Trails Road (1912), Yellowstone Trail (1912) and Lincoln Highway (1913).

The Yellowstone Trail Association accomplished many forward-looking things. They did not actually build roads; they badgered county boards and state highway commissions to create one long, connected road through counties instead of supporting roads that "went nowhere." Long, connected roads were their passion. They sponsored Trail Days, (a day when all Trail towns would actually help the county build a road), set up travel bureaus, held races on the Trail for publicity, supplied the traveler with maps, weather conditions and lists of facilities in Trail towns.

The Association also encouraged towns to provide campgrounds for tourists.

The less obvious result of this transcontinental route was its "uniting" aspect. One Trail running the length of the country caused folk to feel connected and anxious to keep their part of the chain in shape. The Trail opened the vast, beautiful Northwest to the tourist, be he rich or poor.

Purposes of the original Yellowstone Trail Association First and foremost, they wanted to get a route built from "Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound." Second, they wanted to attract tourists to the Yellowstone National Park, thus benefitting member towns along the route. Third, they wanted to see road-building funded by state and federal governments.

The group was organized as follows:

Board of Directors which signed the papers of incorporation but let the national officers do the work. National Officers of the group were President, Vice-President, Secretary/Treasurer. The General Manager was a non-voting member. The national office moved from Ipswich to Aberdeen, SD, to Minneapolis. The Executive Committee was composed of the officers and one elected representative from each of the 13 states through which the Trail passed. This group ran the day-to-day needs of the group and voted on matters of import such as setting dues, approving major route choices, and the problem of whether or not to join the National Parks Highway. (They did not.)

Touring Bureaus.

Hotel lobbies or similar buildings were used by Trail personnel to hand out Trail brochures, maps and directions to the next Trail Touring Bureau, and so on. By this means, the Touring Bureaus ushered travelers to their destination.

Ad hoc committees existed to accomplish specific tasks such as getting a road built through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota, or getting a bridge over the Little Missouri River at Marmarth, North Dakota.

State offices existed to hold annual state conventions and to discuss state-Trail matters such as selecting the best roads for the Trail to run on. Joe Parmley did not approve of his organization lobbying state or federal officials. He felt it was a waste of money.

Local members. Leading citizens in the Chamber of Commerce or Commercial Club usually led the way, receiving Trail letters and responding to directives such as setting up Trail Days in their communities when so directed.

Trailmen. The local eyes and ears of the Association, they were usually in charge of events that the Chamber or Commercial Club wanted to happen. Local tourist camp sites were usually cared for by the Trailman. He also kept an eye on the upkeep of the Trail, and complained to county boards if the Trail was allowed to languish. He suggested better roads for the Trail to follow when they appeared, and the Executive Committee acted upon his suggestion.

Local Committees carried out the wishes of the National Office. For instance, the local Locating Committee went out on the Trail and located the most trafficked and logical route to the next town. Local committees also helped man the 17 information bureaus and the many sub-bureaus.

Dues: Dues varied over time and by size of town. In the early days dues were as follows:

Individual member = \$1.00. There were thousands of individual members.

Small town or business: \$25 . During the financial crisis of 1921, small garages had a hard time coming up with even \$5 for membership.

Medium sized towns: \$50-250

Large towns: Hard to say. Billings paid \$4000 once at a crucial point, but not annually.

Getting towns to pay their pledges was quite a drag for Hal Cooley, General Manager.

The Yellowstone Trail Association: Now

Purpose

The new Yellowstone Trail Association was formed in October, 2003 to: increase public knowledge about the Trail, to acquire information about the Trail and its historical context to preserve artifacts along the Trail, to provide a medium of communication and support among members, to promote heritage tourism and to sponsor Trail-related events.

The group is organized as follows:

A Board of Directors is responsible for the governance and policies of the organization.

An Executive Committee is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the Association.

The officers are: President, Vice-President, Communication Secretary and Treasurer. Other members of this Committee are selected from the Association membership by the Board.

Trailmen are named by the Board. They function as local leaders who lead in local efforts to celebrate the Trail with such events as "Trail Days."

Today, the Association resembles the original in structure and dependence upon local members for celebratory events to succeed. Marking the Trail is a contemporary task, just as it was in 1912. Trail Days, today, do not involve working on the road as they did 90 years ago. Instead, picnics, entertainment, and local Trail history celebrations are held.