The Yellowstone Trail and America's 250th Birthday

by Alice Ridge

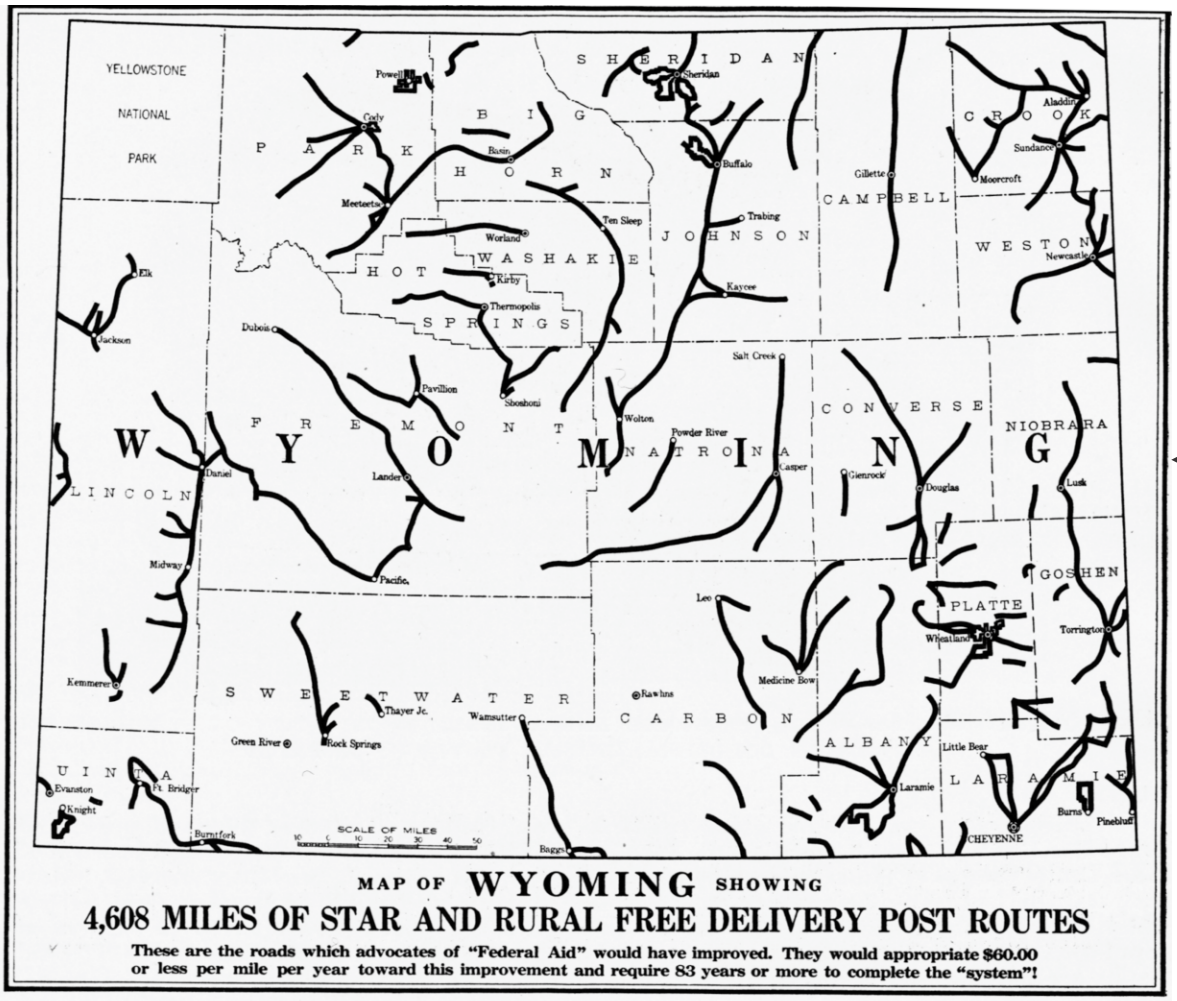
Several years ago John Ridge, founder of the modern Yellowstone Trail Association, leaned back in his desk chair after a long day of Trail mapping, and observed that "the Yellowstone Trail's breadth from coast to coast really reflects the story of the growth of America."

As the nation's 250th anniversary was approaching in 2026, John proceeded to map plans for museums along the Trail's route, to each display their area's special contribution to the growth of America along the Trail. Sadly, he died before he could move on that project. But it does raise the question: did an organized, privately supported auto route, by itself, reflect or help build America's story? Does the Yellowstone Trail still reflect the story of the growth of America?

The founders of the 1912 Yellowstone Trail Association (YTA) simply sought better roads, but as they slowly succeeded, the roads themselves helped open and broaden access and commerce across the country. The first step was improving that slough in South Dakota near Ipswich, home town of road advocate and Association founder Joe Parmley. Soon, people in Mobridge, 100 miles away, sought the help of the fledgling Association in acquiring a better road. And so it went. People sought construction addressing the immediate problem of the day which usually was a muddy road or no road at all for the rural West. Membership soared.

But first came the roads.
The upper west from Chicago was where roads were needed most.
Major duress was brought about by Trail Association members who pointed to the obvious advantages of a connecting road to make a route: access to the next county seat, to more towns for shopping, or to the nearest train station.

They challenged county boards to find funds in their road taxes to plan a straight road that would meet a similar, straight road in the next county. Getting a route as straight as possible across the nation to avoid "splendid lateral" diversions, was important to the Trail Association founders.

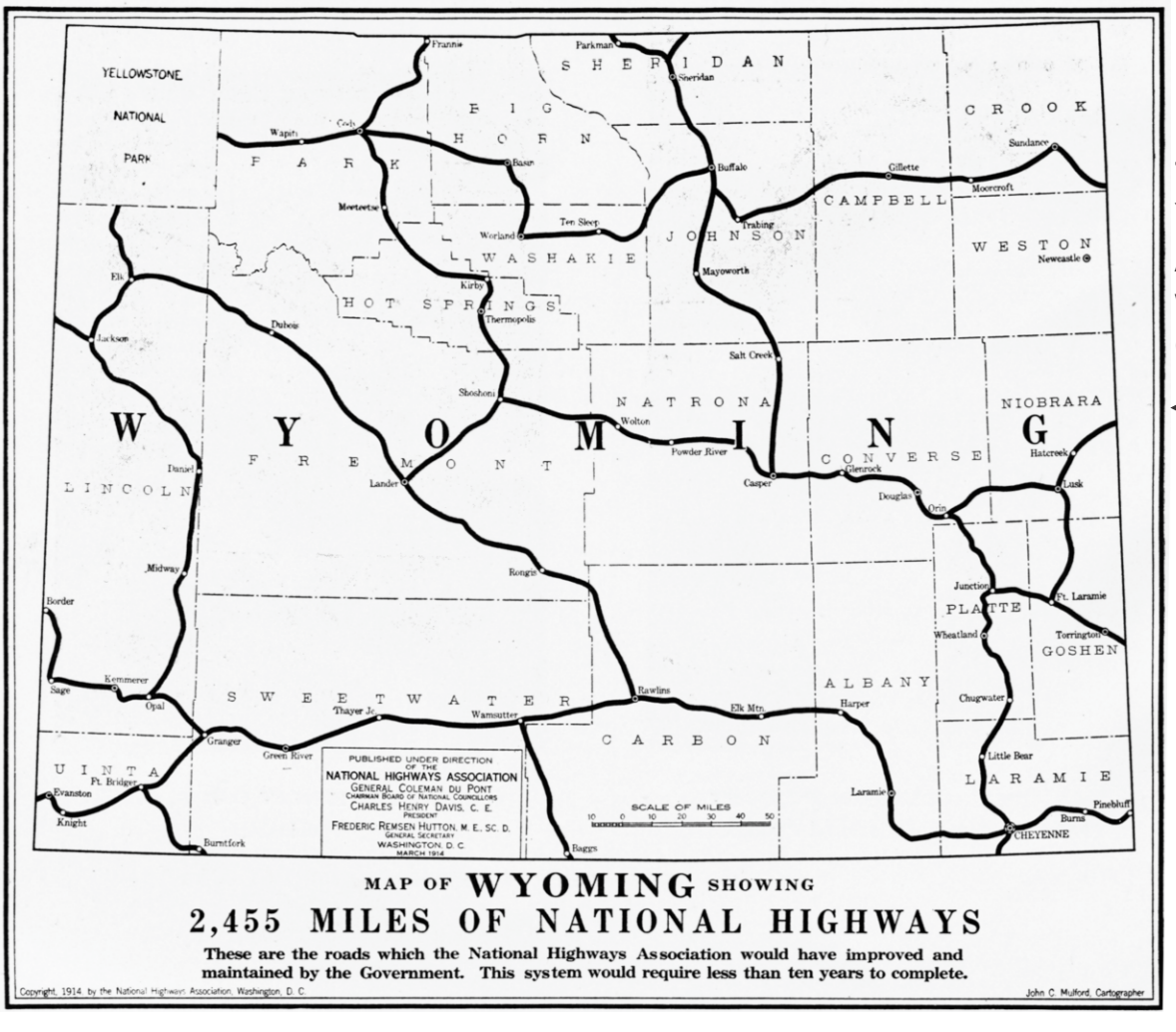


MAP OF **WYOMING** SHOWING

4,608 MILES OF STAR AND RURAL FREE DELIVERY POST ROUTES

These are the roads which advocates of "Federal Aid" would have improved. They would appropriate $60.00 or less per mile per year toward this improvement and require 83 years or more to complete the "system"!

Roads generally looked like this.



MAP OF **WYOMING** SHOWING

2,455 MILES OF NATIONAL HIGHWAYS

These are the roads which the National Highways Association would have improved and maintained by the Government. This system would require less than ten years to complete.

John C. Mulford, Cartographer

The Yellowstone Trail Association was trying to correct this with its' direct Trail.

To be clear, the YTA did not *build* roads with pick and shovel. It used *persuasion* with county boards and Commercial Clubs, predecessors of the Chambers of Commerce. The YTA had, simultaneously, to assure Chambers that their regional identity and visual connectedness would not be lost while also presenting to them the concept of "nationhood" and travel on their eventual 13-state northern route across the entire country.

The Association, while private, and charging dues to carry on activities, supported the idea of state aid for roads. The first state on the Trail to offer state aid for road-building was Massachusetts in 1893, followed by the other 12 states between 1903 and 1916. This period saw county boards in charge of roads and it was there where all the action was. It was to them that the YTA appealed. With state aid, local connectedness grew to state borders, but it still superseded a feeling of "nationalism." Some federal aid came in 1916 but that was mostly for RFD routes.

That was followed by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1921 which provided 50-50 matching funds to help states build roads in 11 rural western states. Although states appreciated that offer, finding money for any roads was still a problem. The YTA had been working to improve roads for nine years by that time.

Around 1912 another phenomenon was afoot. The sudden proliferating of the automobile was rapidly changing American life. Trainloads of autos moved into every area of America. Horses began losing their roles as providers of transportation. Dirt roads may have been fine for horses' hooves, but autos needed gravel, culverts, bridges, width, and engineering.

With the auto came a sense of freedom, self determination, opportunity. It was the auto that ignited the quest for the "open road" and the Association was quick to understand "tourism," and their growing routing took on an additional, economic meaning for towns.

There is little doubt that the Trail was an economic success for communities and responsible for:

- About 100 garages named "on the Yellowstone Trail" whether or not they were actually located on the Trail.
- Many restaurants also claimed the Yellowstone Trail address
- Farm acreage next to the route sold for an additional $12/acre in some areas
- Many community camping parks sprouted up in towns along the route
- Attractions along the route reported increases in attendance, for instance Yellowstone National Park
- Disagreements that towns had among themselves to be chosen for the route of the Trail, one town even stooping to bribery

An obvious observation is that the advent of more roads and routes aided shipping and trade. This is true of the smallest villages like Marmarth, North Dakota, to great cities like Chicago and Cleveland, making the small more sustainable and giving the large more options. Both help build America. Before the Trail came to Marmarth, the only way to ship was via the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific railroad (the Milwaukee Road) on its schedule. Humble as it was, the road out of Marmarth toward neighboring Montana became improved through persuasion of the YTA, enabling an alternate way to trade and travel.

Another phenomenon afoot that demanded better roads was the rise of the lowly truck.
According to Wikipedia, "the few trucks that existed before around 1900 were mostly novelties. The use of range-limited electric engines, lack of paved rural roads, and small load capacities limited trucks to mostly short-haul urban routes."

Truck in Wallace, Idaho

Starting in 1910, the advent of the gasoline-powered internal combustion engine, improvements in transmissions, and the move to gear drives, allowed the truck to gain in popularity. In 1913, state laws issued weight limits for trucks came about in a few states. These laws were enacted to protect the earth and gravel-surfaced roads from damage caused by the iron and solid rubber wheels of early trucks. These “knights of the road” became advocates for better roads, as were motorcyclists.

A sample of early roads near Dusty in eastern Washington.

The years of World War I (1914–18) spurred rising truck use and development. During the busy war years the increased congestion of railroads exposed the need for alternative modes of transporting cargo. The first long-distance trucks and pneumatic (inflated) tires were developed which enabled trucks to drive at higher speeds. By 1914 there were almost 100,000 trucks on America's roads. By 1920 there were over a million.

One can see profits accruing to individual towns with a preeminent and acknowledged national route running through them. Note today’s trend of towns moving out to meet the Interstate highway, pulling their chain stores behind them. Looks like a 115- year re-do of the concept that “where the road goes, so do we.” Businesses and major industries do not build nor do people settle where there is no possibility of roads. No doubt that very tandem relationship is what helped build America.

Let's look at three examples of how the Yellowstone Trail helped build Washington state.

The summit of Snoqualmie Pass (3022 ft) was crested by a wiggly Yellowstone Trail in 1915, opening an auto route through the beautiful northwest to travelers to Seattle. The route of today's Interstate 90 is similar to the old Trail, but it is smoother and master of the terrain - although the weather still dominates all.

The lack of a decent road through Blewett Pass in central Washington forced the YTA to pursue a southern route, along the state's south and eastern sides. To get from Walla Walla to Spokane the Yellowstone Trail provided you a way through the Palouse. Little towns like Dusty, Delany, Steptoe, and Rosalia welcomed the Trail and prospered from the extra business. Rosalia's Texico gas station, now a museum certainly appreciated the business then.

After the Blewett Pass was finally opened in 1925, the Trail moved north. It ran between Wenatchee and Waterville, preceding the modern US2 and US97. The Trail wound through Pine Canyon, allowing Waterville and Wenatchee to grow, especially since Wenatchee was at the confluence of the Columbia and Wenatchee Rivers. The fruit industry of Wenatchee had a new, although difficult, market path. Waterville served as a gateway between western Washington and the agricultural areas of the Columbia Plateau to the east.
Also in Washington, in 1922, after years of cogitation by two cities, and persuasion by the YTA, the "Green Bridge" crossing the Columbia River between Pasco and Kennewick was finally opened. To the YTA it meant completion of their auto route in Washington. This bridge obviated the need to use the small, slow ferry and was considered a giant step toward the future of transportation.

Let's move east for more examples of the Trail helping to build America.

In Idaho, between Coeur d'Alene on the west and Wallace on the east in the narrow neck of northern Idaho lay the Bitterroot Mountains with its 4th of July Pass at 3,l63 feet. Speed limits of 20mph were posted; trucks struggled. A 1919 map, and a 1930 tunnel under the pass, testify to the difficulty here.

The old 1860s Mullan Road through this area was an immediate success for miners, residents, herds of cattle, and light wagons. Then, around 1915 the YTA's persuasion caused improvement for parts of that decaying 55-year-old trail. Today, the Interstate highway follows the Trail route. Much mining still occurs in the area and the small towns of Kellogg, Smelterville, Silverton and especially Wallace survived and were beneficiaries of the Yellowstone Trail, as they were no longer isolated islands in a vast forest.

Of all the natural wonders Montana has to offer along the Yellowstone Trail, Yellowstone National Park was, and still is, the most attracting. The US Army operated the Park and private companies offered horse-drawn carriage tours from around 1902 until, supremely pressured by state officers, governors, the YTA, and about every auto organization in the country, the Army gave up its embargo and autos were allowed in August 1, 1915. The first 10 days saw 321 cars enter the park.

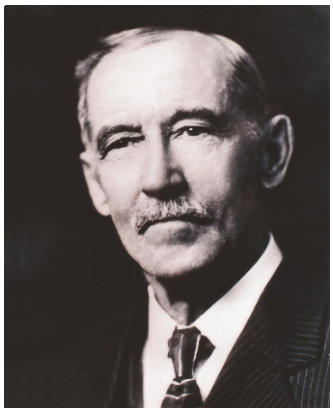
Yellowstone Trail

Livingston, Montana to
Yellowstone Park

Why so few? One reason was that the roads within the Park were designed for horses, and roads within the Park had to be re-routed for autos. Perhaps it was the lack of a decent road from Livingston south 53 miles to the Park's north entrance. Formerly "owned" by Yankee Jim George and his toll gate, then by the Northern Pacific Railroad, that route was hardly fit for the auto, and the train only went as far south as Cinnabar, about 4 miles short of the famous north entry Arch.

Park County Board was put upon by the YTA to improve the road, which it did somewhat with the help of convict labor. With an improved road to the Park's northern entrance and lower entrance fee, in summer of 1920, attendance by auto out-stripped the train: 9,000 by train, 26,000 by auto. Ordinary Americans could see this icon of America on their own schedule. Here the YTA's efforts helped build on Americans' wonder and pride in their country.

South Dakota was the home of the YTA. Ipswich in north central South Dakota was an unlikely place for the hub of a national organization. But it was the home of the organization's founder, Joe Parmley. Joe was a visionary. Back in 1907 he was laughed out of his seat in the South Dakota legislature for his lectures on the need for state funding for roads. (State funding occurred in 1908 in South Dakota.) As a land agent he was out in fields every day showing farming acreage to newcomers and seeing a grand future for a land with better roads. This vision culminated in the transcontinental Yellowstone Trail, ultimately allowing ordinary people to visit American historic destinations on their terms.



Joe Parmley

Flour mills in Minneapolis, Minnesota, used the power of the falls of the St. Anthony River. Every day approximately 175 railroad cars of wheat were processed. During the approximately 45 years between the beginning of the Pillsbury mills and the 1915 Trail, these flour mills changed the way food was produced, marketed, and distributed. The finished product required transportation. But trains, highly efficient in themselves, could only deliver that freight to centralized urban centers for distribution by horse-drawn transport. Trucks and better roads were needed to build a better America here. In Minnesota, US highways 5, 7 and 212 today follow the Trail and there is an active association along US 212 preserving the memory of the Trail.

If you look at a Yellowstone Trail route map of Wisconsin, you will see something that looks like a big 7. It went straight east from Minnesota, hit Lake Michigan and dropped south through Milwaukee and Kenosha toward Chicago. Why didn't it go diagonally across the state from Minnesota to Kenosha which would be more direct, which was their goal? That southwest area of the state was predominantly marshy. Today cranberry bogs occupy some of that land. Population was sparse and the land unreliable. Need more be said? Today's state highway #32 runs along the Lake Michigan shore. It brings the population up and down that busy thoroughfare, as did the Yellowstone Trail in 1915.

We must note that the eastern part of our nation was well ahead of the west in road building. They were even experimenting with concrete in Ohio early in the century. And there was the old Boston Post Road, and short eastern "trails. When the YTA tried to place road signs in New York state in 1914 they were refused because 11 other New York route clubs already had signs up. The YTA persisted with a temporary alternate route to Massachusetts and to their goal of reaching Plymouth the most direct way.

Because the east had more roads and routes in general, the YTA turned to offering tourism advice for both directions along the Trail. The Yellowstone Trail presented the concept of better travel for leisure and business across the upper third of the nation 1912-1930.

The YTA's 17 information bureaus sprinkled about in hotels and Chambers of Commerce along the Trail helped travelers by handing out current weather reports, highway conditions, maps, and lodging suggestions along the route of the Trail. Drawing a western tourist to the east along the Trail allowed the Association's information bureaus much leeway for there was much to see by auto.

After seeing the wonders of Indiana such as in Valparaiso where the Yellowstone Trail and the Lincoln Highway crossed paths, and seeing another Plymouth where 5 highways met (and are now commemorated in the Marshall County Museum), tourists could move on to Fort Wayne. They could go a little north to Auburn to view the 1926 factory which hand-assembled the Cord automobile (and is still there as the Auburn Cord Deusenberg Auto Museum).

Toledo, Ohio, offered views of Willys Overland Auto manufacturing and the new (1912) Toledo Museum of Art. In Cleveland, the eastern 1922 YT Headquarters on Euclid Avenue could be visited for a refreshing rest stop. Or view covered bridges while moving on to the state line to the widely advertised Gaukel Brothers Camp Ground at East Conneaut.

The Trail occupied only about 42 miles of northwestern-most Pennsylvania. The traveler today is urged to view the Erie Maritime Museum, in Erie, PA to see Admiral Perry's ship, the Niagara, hero of the War of 1812. They can also enjoy a piece of concrete road there built by the Erie Concrete Co. in 1925.

New York offered the tourist many pleasures from the staggering 8-floor tall buildings in Buffalo and its Great Lakes touring ships, east to the cream colored state capitol building in Albany. Or to small spots like the Jell-O factory at LeRoy.

Right on the Trail in central New York sits Seneca Falls, site of the Women's Rights Convention in the mid 19th century. Now called Women's Rights National Historical Park, it was part of the "Freethinkers Philosophy"- a hotbed area of radical, social and religious foment. Freethinkers and progressive thinkers these women were, along with religious "freethinkers" such as Robert Green Ingersoll who lived in nearby Dresden. Incidentally, a favorite late 20th century Christmas movie, "It's A Wonderful Life," was filmed here.

Women's Rights
National Historical Park

The Chautauqua Institute in Westfield was yet another avenue for the expression of ideas. However, these ideas were more conservative and of a more accepted religious bent. Theologians, musicians, artists, and speakers were all featured either here or throughout the nation. No doubt, Trail travelers were guided to a Chautauqua event by the Trail Association. Central New York offered exposure to some new thinking for the westerner.

And through it all ran the Erie Canal. Reportedly, 80% of New York's upstate population lived within 15 miles of the Erie Canal. Beginning in 1817, the New York State Canal System joined rivers and lakes into a complex chain of waterways, mainly for transport of goods by 1918. But a tourist on the Yello wstone Trail could still ride on it for a fun experience.

At the far eastern edge of NY is the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village and, only 5 miles further to the east and just inside Massachusetts, is the Hancock Shaker Village. This society may be new to those from the west and certainly served to spread a new cultural experience.

Here is an interesting tid bit. The Trail once ran literally up to the front door of Longfellow's Wayside Inn near Sudbury, Massachusetts. Later, the Trail was backed up a few feet to allow for visitors to alight from those newfangled autos. Then came US 20 which is about 1/4 mile from the front door. Today, when you leave the parking lot and head for the front door, pause a few feet from the front door and look around. You are standing on the Yellowstone Trail which brought visitors there more than100 years ago.

Longfellow Inn, 1920s.

The Trail did not go through central Boston but skirted it, dropping south to Quincy on its way to Plymouth. This seems odd, missing such a major city from 'Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound' until you remember that the purpose of the YTA was to move people in the most direct way (just like skirting Niagara Falls).

Of course travelers would, no doubt, take a detour to see the symbols of the birth of our country - the Old North Church, Bunker Hill, Boston harbor, site of the famous Tea Party, or perhaps trace Paul Revere's ride.

Instead of Boston, we see Trail tourists encouraged to stop at Quincy, just south of Boston, to visit John Adams' home, about 150 years old by 1920.

If you travel from Quincy to Plymouth on the Trail today, you will travel along the eastern edge of that peninsula, going through small towns like Hingham, Cohasset, Situate, and Daniel Webster's home in Marshfield. The more direct route to Plymouth would have been through the center of that peninsula. However, there were few communities there of note in 1920, and little prospect of growth.

Plymouth Rock
in Plymouth,Massachusetts

These tales of the way the Yellowstone Tail and its creator, the YTA, interacted with the growth of our country, first as a road-builder, then as a tourism association, may seem quaint to the modern reader. But they may reveal a way of building our nation which is foreign to us today. More than one hundred years ago everybody seemed to have "some skin in the game." Roads and routes were fewer, thus very important. Routes seemed to happen through personal involvement, and personal allegiances, but all seemed to be aligned with the progress of our nation.

We all know what came next - federal laying out of roads and marking them with numbers. Localization and personalization left the scene. Dues paid to people you knew were replaced by taxes paid to a mail box. And all were replaced by attention to the Great Depression and the huge dust storms in the west.

But, for a time, the YTA was responsible for addressing the vexing problem of, and the improvements in, transportation of Americans. And the places we all think of as related to our country's birth and growth were made more available to everyday Americans through the growth of the Yellowstone Trail..

Yes, the Yellowstone Trail actually did reflect and help build upon our nation's story. And it still does today.