

## RAILROADS, TOURISM AND FOSSILS

**Vincent L. Santucci,**  
Chief Ranger / Paleontologist,  
Fossil Butte National Monument  
Kemmerer, WY 83101  
vincent\_santucci@nps.gov

Early historical archives associated with western exploration and expansion in North America are punctuated with a few isolated references to fossil discoveries. Mountain man Jim Bridger first reported on the "petrified birds, a singin' petrified trees, in petrified trees" in Yellowstone. Fur traders such as Alexander Culbertson collected fossil mammal remains from the *mauvaises terres* (badlands) in the Dakota Territory. In a few pioneer diaries there are brief entries regarding fossils and other petrifications that were observed on the westward journeys. Likewise, the construction of transcontinental railroads resulted in the discovery of new fossil localities.

During the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1868, fossilized fish were unearthed along a cut four miles west of Green River City, Wyoming. Two Union Pacific Railroad employees, A.W. Hillard and L. E. Rickseeker, are credited for the discovery of the site referred to as "Fish Cut". Fossils from this locality were originally presented to Ferdinand Hayden and later forwarded to paleontologist E.D. Cope. The "Fish Cut" is referenced in Hayden's 1871 report along with Cope's description of the fossil fish (Cope, 1870; Hayden, 1871).

The 1884 publication *The Pacific Tourist* both describes and illustrates the "Fish Cut" stating, "This place will eventually be a popular resort for those who are seeking for fossiliferous remains..." (Shearer, 1884). The publication further reports the sale of the abundant fossil



**The excavation of the railroad bed in 1868, just west of Green River City, Wyoming. During the excavation, fossil fish were found in the ancient lake sediments (now referred to as the Green River Fm.). The site has been referred to as "Fish Cut" since its discovery and is referenced in both scientific reports (Hayden Survey Reports) and popular publications. Courtesy of Green River Historical Museum.**



**Fossil, Wyoming, with Fossil Butte (now within the Monument named after it) in the background. Photo taken around late 1800's or early 1900's. Courtesy of Green River Historical Museum.**

specimens by local businesses in Green River City. An exhibit currently at the Sweetwater County Historical Museum in Green River, Wyoming, displays a small card from the 1870s advertising the sale of fossil specimens by the businessman S.I. Field.

In an effort to link the Union Pacific Railroad to the Pacific Northwest, the Oregon Shortline Railroad began laying track from Granger, Wyoming in 1881. During that year a section of track was extended as far as Sage, Wyoming, and the town of Fossil was founded as a station for servicing the trains near Twin Creek, Wyoming. Settlers began to arrive at Fossil in 1884 claiming land and constructing buildings. Eventually a hotel, saloon, train station and a store with post office were built at Fossil. By the turn of the century the Fossil train stop was known as a place to purchase fossils. Today the town of Fossil is a ghost town just outside the boundary of Fossil Butte National Monument.

In northern Arizona the Sante Fe Railroad established a depot at the small town of Adamana, a stop once referenced as "The Gateway to the Petrified Forest". At its peak, the town boasted thirty families, a post office, school, trading post, and the Adamana Hotel. Railroad passengers and cross-country travelers would spend the night at the hotel and visit the "Petrified Forest" by touring car.

In 1905, conservationist John Muir visited Adamana and the surrounding "Painted Desert" and "Petrified Forest". Muir observed wagonloads of petrified wood emerge from the "Forest". According to biographer Thurman Wilkins (1995), "Muir was disturbed by the Santa Fe Railroad's practice of carting petrified logs away to be hacked and polished into baubles for the tourist trade." A second Muir biographer, Frederick Turner (2000) wrote, "...vandals dynamited the petrified logs to get at

their crystallized innards, and at Adamana a mill had been set up to crush logs into abrasives."

After Muir's visit to Adamana and the "Petrified Forest", he wrote to President Teddy Roosevelt regarding the commercial exploitation of the petrified wood. A few months after Congress passed the Antiquities Act, Roosevelt used this legislation to proclaim Petrified Forest National Monument. This was the second national monument established under the Antiquities Act.

Today the Sante Fe Railroad bisects Petrified Forest National Park, the train stop at Adamana is now a ghost town, and the old Adamana Hotel was destroyed in a fire during 1965. Whereas, the National Park Service strives to protect the "Petrified Forest" for future generations. There are likely other examples of fossil discovery related to the expansion of railroads across the American West.

### **Additional Reading**

Cope, Edward D., 1870. Observations on the fishes of the Tertiary shales of Green River, Wyoming Territory. *Proc. Amer. Phil. Soc.*, XI, p. 380-384.

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