
Stop 51. Chimney Rock

Arrival datetime: Monday, July 15, 5:30PM
Sites visited: Fort Laramie National Historic Site,
Chimney Rock National Historic Site
Accommodations: The Oregon Trail Wagon Train
States traveled: Wyoming, Nebraska

We took our time driving out of Rocky Mountain National Park, driving Trail Ridge Road again, but taking one spur that we had previously missed. On our left was a steep rocky mountainside with patches of scrubby juniper. On our right was a rolling green meadow. A “Big Horn Crossing” sign warned there would be no stopping or parking. Yet just beyond the sign was a parking lot with three or four Rangers manning a little hut. We gathered from the Rangers that the sheep are there almost every day, and the parking lot and Rangers were strategically placed for crowd control. But alas, the Big Horns were nowhere to be seen on the day we passed through.

We drove out through Loveland Pass, a small stream cut its way through walls of brown rock on either side of us. We arrived at Fort Laramie just before 3:00PM. We saw the film at the Visitors Center. It was a very non-revisionist history of the establishment of and the changing goals and missions of the Fort Laramie and its occupants. The film fully credited the corporate fur company that established the fort with making a deal with the Indians to allow it. It told of the takeover of the fort by the US Military as part of westward expansion. It described how the first officers went to great lengths to negotiate and defend an Indian Treaty

that Congress would not ratify. It described how the gold miners defied the treaty with the help of other military officials authorized by Congress, and how the fort commanders had to give up for lack of support within their own organization. This of course led to Indian wars. When they were over, the fort was no longer needed. In its last years the fort was generally used for entertaining officers. Elaborate officers quarters were still standing full of artifacts that demonstrated their privileged lifestyle.



Officer's quarters at Fort Laramie.

We wandered through the fort grounds and buildings for about 25 minutes. It was all we could stand in the 101° heat.

We headed into Nebraska on the Oregon Trail Auto Route. Just over the border in Morrill, we saw a field with two camels,

two ostriches, and a horse. We also saw a farm equipment junkyard that was half-mile long and nearly as wide. The landscape was fairly flat and dry, though here and there among the sandstone hills was a butte reminiscent of Utah, or a green field signifying irrigation.

We knew nothing about the area when we made our reservations, but there was very little on the Internet and we had settled on Oregon Trails Wagon Train, thinking we would partake of a pioneer experience. We learned that there were a string of landmarks visible to the first travelers of the Oregon Trail as they proceeded west. First they found Courthouse and Jailhouse Rocks, then within sight came Chimney Rock, then Scots Bluff.

Our accommodation was right across the road from Chimney Rock. We had reserved a log cabin. It was big enough to sleep 6. In it were two double beds, each with a twin on stilts above it. It had a stove, refrigerator, and bathroom, none of which we felt comfortable using. The sink in the bathroom had a permanent drip, highlighted by a brown ring. Underneath it was a plastic tub to accommodate a leaky drainpipe. The floor had been swept, though the walls, ceilings, and crevices had not been touched in years. But there were clean sheets on the bed and it was only one night. We resolved to bring as little into the room as possible, which meant the toiletry bag and the pajama bag, to only bring them in when we were ready to go to sleep, to keep them on the kitchen table, that appeared to be clean, and to keep them securely closed all night.

We went to join the barbecue a bit after 6:00PM. We were a few minutes late because, upon leaving our cabin, we had been attacked by mosquitoes and stopped to put on bug spray, which seemed to help. Also, Michael again used his method of closing the holes in the screens of our cabin with packing tape.

Several people were gathered around, drinking beer. We were told that we were waiting for others to arrive, so we got a beer to split ourselves and sat down at the picnic table. Our fellow guests were two heavysset men in their forties and a rugged-looking woman in her sixties, apparently from the same farm family. With them was a migrant wheat cutter from New Zealand who looked like he just stepped off the cover of a cereal box. Also at the table were a slight spectacled man and his son from Miami. The spectacled man and his son were driving to visit his wife's relatives in South Dakota. His wife and two daughters had taken off for an overnight wagon train experience.

We said we had been out "since the beginning of the summer..." and were now on our way back. We chatted for fifteen minutes or so about the drought and the price of wheat. Then we were called into a covered wagon drawn by two horses and given a tour of the farm. We drove for a bit on well-worn wagon tracks that had been part of the actual Oregon Trail. We saw a mound of dirt that had once been a pony express station. We saw very clear circles in the dirt where pioneers had circled their wagons at night, "to keep in the livestock." A seven-year-old boy was helping the driver remember his lines.

We were told that the real tour driver was out on the overnight trek.

Back at the ranch, the farmers had another pitcher and we had another beer. It was a friendly group. The spectacled man from Miami was a schoolteacher who lamented his inability to explain the last presidential election to his high schools students. The New Zealander gave us the weather and scuba diving scoop for New Zealand should we ever want to go there. We told them of our three attempts to go rafting that were thwarted by low rivers and fire. The proprietor interrupted us to ask how we liked our steaks, and again a few minutes later to tell us they were done.



A real western barbecue.

We had been given meal tickets and now presented them to a charming two year old with curly blond hair and a dirty face. In return, she handed us our plates. We only hoped that her hands had not been touching her face. Another apprehension we had over dinner was that Jennifer had not eaten beef since she was 22 years old. But put on the spot, with no other choices for dinner, she ordered hers well done. She even ate some of it, along with potatoes, canned string beans, and dry bread with fake butter. The farmer woman took the rest home for her dog.

After dinner, we strolled the grounds for a few minutes, but the thought of menacing mosquitoes kept us from staying out late enough to see Chimney Rock illuminated. We slept, followed our plan to keep clean, and went out for breakfast.

Back at the ranch for our 8:30AM Chimney Rock Wagon Train tour, we again were assaulted by bugs, this time biting flies. We were again a few minutes late in order to put on bug spray, which again seemed to work. Again, others that should have showed up did not. Again, the real tour guide was unavailable. We were the only two in the wagon.

Though the driver did not know a lot about the Oregon Trail, he knew farming. Michael had lots of questions like, why were there piles of hay in all the fields, what type of plant was the small green one, how did the irrigation equipment work, and why were there old boots upside-down on top of fence posts? The answer to the fencepost question was simply that some people thought it made the fence poles last longer. The question also triggered a discussion of electric fences and Michael asked whether cows felt much of a shock. Our driver had once touched an electric fence, and was sure they did. He said that the shock went clear through his whole body and “hurt something considerable.”

We saw a dead cow alongside the Oregon Trail very close to the Ranch. Our guide explained that a truck came around every once and a while and picked them up. Later near Chimney Rock, we passed a thoroughly rotted carcass with ribs exposed. Apparently, the truck either did not make rounds thoroughly or some farmers could not afford the service. We



Chimney Rock as seen from a wagon train on the Oregon Trail.

were supposedly scheduled to meet the real tour guide coming back from the overnight trip at the base of Chimney Rock, but we waited there for a half hour and he did not show up.

We walked around, took in the sights of an irrigation ditch, and persuaded our driver to take us back to the ranch without waiting, telling him we would visit the Visitors Center anyway, so we did not need the extra history.

He accommodated and even threw in what little else he knows about the area, pointing out a green meadow where wagon trains always got stuck, had to be taken apart, the 1800 plus pounds of cargo hauled to a dry location, where the wagon was reassembled and the cargo

reloaded. He let us sit in the front, and when Jennifer asked what the most comfortable seat on the real wagon train was, he confessed that people had not ridden in the wagon. Most had walked along side them. Sometimes they had put their children on top of the wagon to take a nap, and several children had fallen off and gotten crushed under wagon wheels. We would ride because his strong horses could pull much more than the oxen the pioneers had used. We had earlier noticed how large and strong the wagon train horses were. One was as tall in his hindquarters as Jennifer was tall.

Back at the Ranch, we took off in the air-conditioned car for the air-conditioned Visitors Center.

Miles traveled:	343
Departure datetime:	Tuesday, July 16, 11:15AM
Departure weather:	95° Sunny