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Crook County, Wyoming

[Nicole Lebsack](#)

The area that is now Crook County, Wyo. was once covered by a prehistoric ocean, as demonstrated by sea-plant imprints and shellfish and shark fossils found in the area. These fossils date back 110 million years to the Cretaceous Period. The water receded millions of years later, however, and just 13,000 years ago or so, people arrived—ancestors of today’s American Indians.

Petroglyphs dated from around 1,000 to 500 years ago show the presence of aboriginal people well before Europeans began settling in the area. Plains Indian tribes followed bison through the land and were largely unbothered by white settlers until 1811, when the [Wilson Price Hunt Expedition](#) passed through on a fur-trading venture bound for Oregon.



George A. Custer (left center in light clothing) and his military expedition to the Black Hills, 1874. William H. Illingworth, National Archives.

Long-simmering tensions between Indian tribes and white people erupted into war in the mid-1860s, when the U.S. Army built a string of forts to protect emigrants on the [Bozeman Trail](#), bound from the Oregon Trail toward gold fields of Montana. This route came north through what soon became [Wyoming](#) Territory, east of where Crook County is now.

Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux warriors drove the Army away and burned the forts in what became known as [Red Cloud's War](#). The Treaty of [Fort Laramie](#) in 1868 set aside the area east of Dakota Territory and south of Montana—parts of the Black Hills and the [Powder River Basin](#)—as hunting grounds for the tribes.

The treaty prohibited white settlers from passing through the area without explicit permission from the tribes. In the 1870s, rumors of gold in the Black Hills began to spread. The government originally ordered the U.S. Army to keep prospectors out, but many slipped through. Those who were not caught and killed by Indians brought back stories, largely exaggerated, of huge gold deposits.

In 1874, the government sent a large military expedition under Lt. Col. George A. Custer to the Black Hills. He came back with reports that there was, in fact, gold there. A gold rush began, and pressure mounted on the tribes to sell their homelands.

Government officials met with Lakota Sioux chiefs in May and June 1875 to attempt to purchase the Black

Hills, but the Indians balked. The land was holy ground for them, and they refused to part with it.

On Dec. 8, 1875, Wyoming's territorial legislature created Pease (later Johnson) and Crook counties out of the northeast fourth of the territory. It was still Indian land, however. Just four days earlier, the Legislature showed its true intent in a memorial—that is, a message—to the U.S. Congress. The memorial referred to the Lakota Sioux as “the blood-seeking brave ... and his filthy squaw,” and urged Congress to open the land “to settlement and improvement” so that Wyoming could “become what her natural resources entitle her to be ... a great and prosperous state ...”

The act only created the county on paper, however; it would be nearly 10 years before a county government was organized.

In early 1876, meanwhile, the government ordered the tribes out of the [Powder River](#) Basin and the Black Hills and onto reservations in Dakota Territory and Nebraska. The tribes, however, refused to go without a fight, and this led to the 1876 and 1877 campaign against the Sioux, including the fights on the Rosebud on June 17, 1876, Custer's defeat on the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, and the attack on Dull Knife's village of Cheyenne on the Red Fork of Powder River on Nov. 24, 1876. The war concluded with Indian surrender in 1877 and relocation to reservations. Brig. [Gen. George Crook](#), the county's namesake, directed these campaigns.

As early as late 1876, some brave settlers entered Crook County and began staking mining claims and launching small ranches. Cattle driven north from Texas began entering the area, and with them came more ranchers.

Beulah, now on Interstate 90 two miles east of the Wyoming-South Dakota line, is considered the first settlement in Crook County. First known as Sand Creek, the area drew gold prospectors in the late 1870s. The 1876 rush that began in Lead and Deadwood, Dakota Territory, extended west to Sand Creek, and while discoveries of the precious metal dwindled, the lush grass and plentiful water were enough to attract [cattlemen](#) to replace the gold-seekers who left.

Sundance, Wyo., was named after the adjacent Sundance Mountain, which was named in turn for the ritual ceremonies the Sioux performed on that sacred site. The town, founded in 1879, became the county seat when the county government was organized a few years later. A stage line connecting Spearfish, Dakota Territory and Sundance established a relay station at Beulah, and Beulah flourished, with a hotel, saloons and a dance hall.

By 1880, many large cattle operations were working the area and claimed all the land with direct access to Sand and Redwater creeks near Beulah. The 1880 census documented 239 residents in the on-paper Crook County, less than half of the 500 necessary to officially create a county.

Becoming a county

By mid-1884, the population had increased significantly. In October, the required 500 signatures appeared on a petition to organize a Crook County government. Territorial Gov. **William Hale** appointed W.F. Draper, J.S. Harper and W.H. Harlow as founding commissioners. They met in Sundance on Nov. 28, 1884, and set Dec. 9 as the date for the county's voters to select a county seat and elect officers.



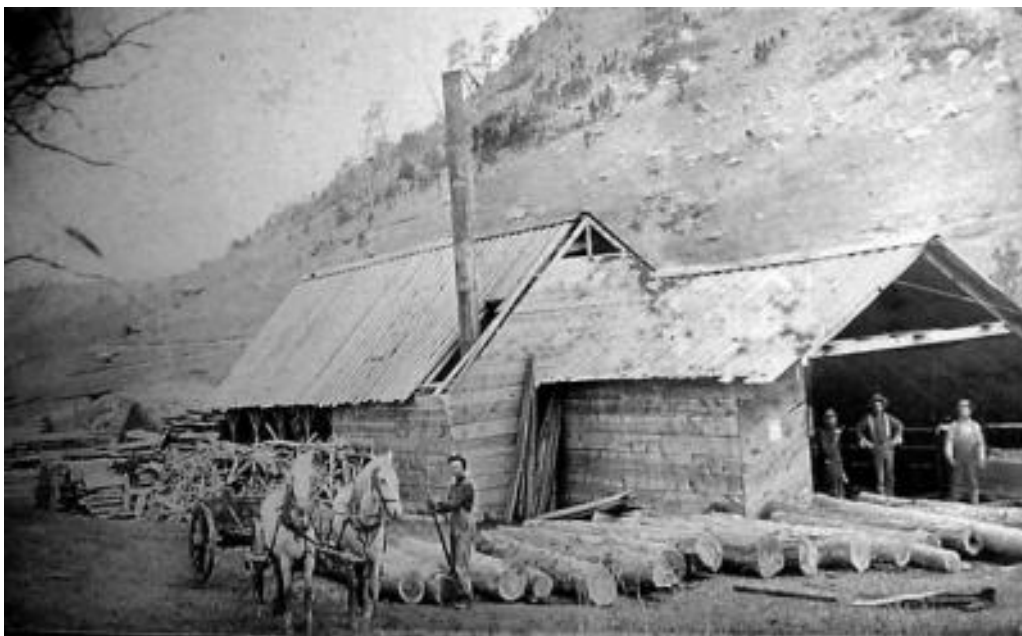
Loggers near Hulett, around 1910. Wyoming Tales and Trails.

The commissioners met again on Jan. 22, 1885. Sundance was named the county seat. The county attorney and prosecutor, county clerk, probate judge, ex-officio justice of the peace and treasurer, sheriff, superintendent of schools, surveyor, assessor and coroner were administered oaths of office.

The second floor of a log building, rented for a monthly fee of \$15 and moved to the center of town, was selected for the location of county offices. In its early years, the county's commission work mostly involved roads, taxes and financial issues.

As the county grew, so did demand for better county offices. Early in 1886, the commissioners issued county bonds for \$25,000 at 6 percent interest to pay for construction of a new courthouse and jail. They had no trouble raising the needed funds. In May, they accepted plans for the two new buildings. Construction began on Aug. 17, 1886. Winter weather and labor shortages delayed progress. Officers finally moved into the new building in December 1887.

Sundance made its way into the legends of the West after desperado Harry Longabaugh, then about 20, spent 18 months in the Sundance jail for horse theft beginning in 1887. Afterward, Longabaugh became known as the Sundance Kid. Longabaugh, his friend Robert Leroy Parker, a.k.a. **Butch Cassidy** and members of Cassidy's Wild Bunch were responsible for a string of successful train and bank robberies between 1889 and 1901, when Longabaugh and Parker left the West for South America.



Sawmill near Hulett, 1910. Wyoming Tales and Trails.

In 1890, the Wyoming Legislature created **Weston County** from the southern half of Crook County. Crook County was now bound by **Johnson County** on the west, South Dakota on the east, Montana on the north and Weston County on the south. In 1913, **Campbell County** was created, taking the western halves of Crook and Weston counties. Since then, the boundaries of Crook County have

remained the same.

In 1906, Crook County won national attention when President **Theodore Roosevelt** declared **Devils Tower**, 25 miles northwest of Sundance, the nation's first national monument.

Early industry

Crook County's industrial past dates to the discovery in the 1870s of **coal** deposits about 20 miles northeast of Sundance, near what would become Aladdin, Wyo. Wagon teams originally transported coal 50 miles or more to gold smelters in Lead and Deadwood, Dakota Territory.

In 1895, the Black Hills Coal Company was founded and began mining coal in Crook County. Soon, the company needed a more efficient way than wagons to ship the coal. In 1898, the Black Hills Coal Company built the Wyoming and Missouri River Railroad to haul coal from the Aladdin area 18 miles to the east to the main Chicago and Northwestern Railroad line, at Belle Fourche, S.D. The new line also connected the mines to gold smelters in Lead and Deadwood, S.D.

The line between Aladdin and Belle Fourche operated from 1899 to 1927, but long before that the coal mines had begun to play out; coal transport was rare after 1910. Aladdin became a loading point for cattle bound for Omaha, Neb., markets.

After the turn of the last century, bentonite mining also became important in Weston and Crook counties. Demand for this clay mineral grew dramatically over the decades, as it came to be used in cement and plaster, cosmetics, insecticides and textiles.

Colony, Wyoming's

northeasternmost community, was established April 7, 1908. There was never a town there – just a post office, store, telephone exchange and gas pump – but the Baroid Bentonite Plant was located in the area and later American Colloid Company (in the 1920s) and Archer-Daniels-Midland (in 1964) plants were built there.



The coal tippie at Aladdin, 2005. John Piepkorn photo.

Cattle, sheep and farming

Texas cattle had been coming into northeastern Wyoming since the late 1870s along the Texas Trail, which ran north along the eastern edge of the Territory and then turned northwest along a route followed in 1890 and 1891 by the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. Once they reached the Wyoming end of the trail, some Texas cowboys from the trail herds stayed, settled in Crook County and went to work on large ranches; a few built thriving ranching operations of their own.

The Burlington crossed Crook and Weston counties through the new towns of [Newcastle](#), [Upton](#), and Moorcroft, a settlement 20 miles northwest of Upton. Moorcroft, in the southwest corner of what's now Crook County, soon became a shipping hub for cattle. Before then, cattle in the northeastern ranges of the Territory were trailed to Rock Creek on the Union Pacific, in southern Wyoming, or after 1881 to Miles City, Montana for shipment to market. Now it was a much shorter trip for local herds to the [Burlington Railroad](#) at Moorcroft.

During the 1890s Moorcroft became the largest cattle-shipping point in the U.S., and remained an important shipping point until soon after the end of World War II.

[Sheep](#) followed the cattle industry to the area, and sheep significantly outnumbered cattle in Wyoming by the turn of the last century.



Aladdin General Store. Wyoming SHPO.

Over time, ranching and agriculture became the real successes for Crook County. With relatively mild winters and an average 24 inches of annual precipitation, the place was well suited for farming. Early day farmers cultivated wheat, oats, rye, corn, garden vegetables and small fruits for profit.

Current industry

Ranching and farming continue to be significant in the county economy. The **oil** and gas industry provides steady employment in Crook County, with Anadarko Petroleum Corporation, Merit Energy Company Co.,

Strata Energy Inc., Citation Oil and Gas Corp., T Roustabout, Flying J Oil & Gas, Rex A Brown Pumping Inc., Sterling Oil & Gas Company and True Oil LLC all operating here.

Coal mining has left its traces in Crook County, with abandoned mines in the area and some structures, like the remarkable coal tippie at Aladdin, remaining from the early days. Some county residents find employment in the coal mines near Gillette and Wright, Wyo., in Campbell County just to the west.

Logging has long been a big industry in Crook County. Neiman Sawmill Inc., founded in 1936 and using timber from U.S. Forest Service timber sales on the Black Hills National Forest, still operates in Hulett. In 2005, the county provided 58 percent of Wyoming's timber, with more than 38,000,000 board feet produced.

Uranium was discovered in 1949, and the Homestake Mining Company opened north of Hulett to take advantage of this growing industry. The mine is still in operation.

County characteristics

Crook is Wyoming's second smallest county in population.

The population soared between 1880, when 239 people were listed, and 1890, when there were 2,338. This dramatic increase was most likely caused by an influx of ranchers. The population continued to rise, but more slowly. By 1900, there were 3,137 people. By 1910, the number more than doubled and 6,492 residents were counted. Following that year, and for several decades, the population remained between 4,500 and 5,000 until 2000, when it jumped to 5,887, and 2010, growing to 7,083.

The lowest elevation in Wyoming, 3,125 feet above sea level, is located north of Aladdin where the Belle

Fourche River flows into South Dakota.

Resources

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Illustrations

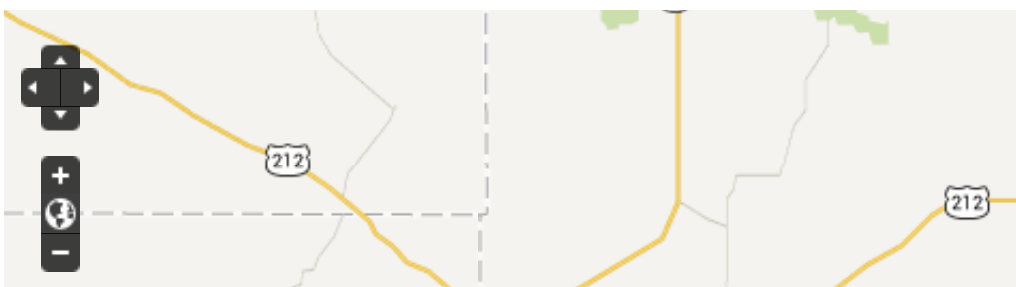
- The postcard of Sundance in 1902 is from the [Crook County Museum and Art Gallery](#)'s website. Used with thanks.
- William Illingworth's photo of the 1874 Custer Expedition is from the National Archives, and is featured with many others from the same expedition on the website for the PBS production, [The West](#).
- The photos of loggers and a sawmill near Hulett are from [Wyoming Tales and Trails](#). Used with thanks.
- The 2005 photo of the Aladdin Tipple is by John Piepkorn, from [Flickr](#). Used with thanks.
- The photo of the Aladdin store is from the [Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office](#). Used with thanks.

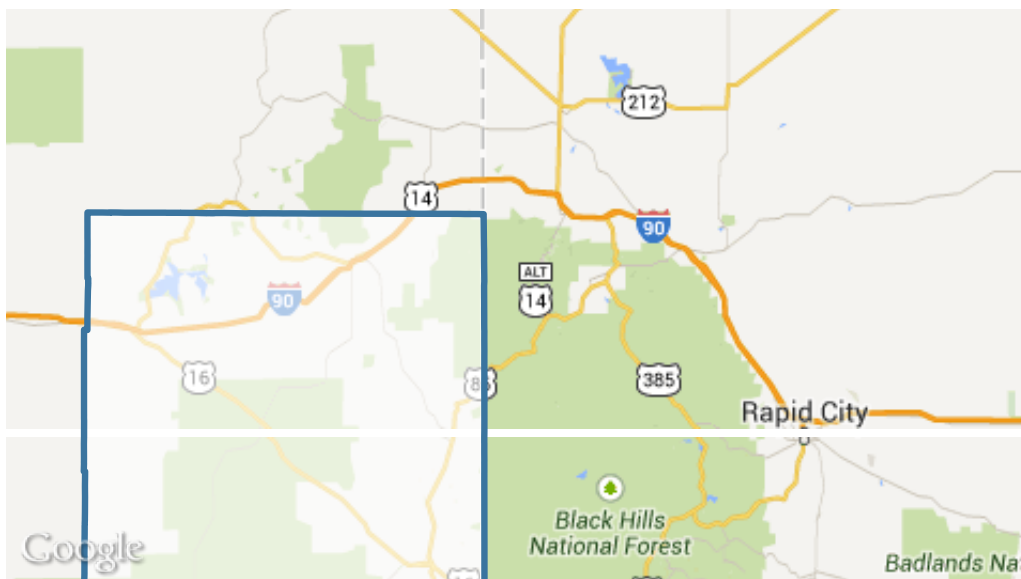
Like 29

Key Dates

January 22, 1885

Crook County, Wyo., organized, with Sundance as county seat.





Sundance, Wyo. 1902. Crook County Museum and Art Gallery.

Crook County quick facts

Land Area

2,859 square miles, 14th largest in Wyoming

Land Ownership in Crook County

Owner	Acres	Percent
US Government		
National Park Service	1,347	.07
Forest Service	169,984	9.30
Bureau of Land Mgmt.	150,925	5.13
Bureau of Reclamation	15,843	.42
Wyoming		
State Lands Comm.	120,610	6.60
Game & Fish	284	.02
Local Government / Other		
Total Public Lands	467,078	25.55
Private Lands	1,360,762	74.45
Surface Water	7,635	.42
Total Area	1,827,840	100

Crook County Population

7,083 (2010 U.S. Census)

7,111 (2011 State Estimate)

Incorporated Towns

Town	Population
Sundance (city, county seat)	1,182
Hulett	383
Moorcroft	1,009

Pine Haven

Employment by sector
(2008 state figures)

Sector	Population
Farm	480
Forestry, Fishing & Related	147
Mining	440
Construction	397
Utilities	(D)
Manufacturing	176
Wholesale Trade	(D)
Retail Trade	333
Transportation & Warehousing	123
Information	(D)
Educational	(D)
Health Care & Social Assistance	(D)
Arts / Entertainment / Recreation	72
Accommodations & Food Service	279
Management of Companies	(D)
Finance & Insurance	(D)
Real Estate, Rentals & Leasing	(D)
Professional, Scientific & Technical	120
Administration & Waste Services	(D)
Other Services except Public Admin.	176
Fed, state, local gov't	763
Total	5,550

D=not disclosed to avoid disclosure of confidential information, but estimates included in totals.

Sources: Wyoming Division of Economic Analysis Equality State Almanac, County Profiles, http://eadiv.state.wy.us/almanac/Page135_183.pdf; Wyoming DEA summary of decennial U. S. Census data, http://eadiv.state.wy.us/demog_data/cntycity_hist.htm; Wyoming DEA Employment, Income, and Gross Domestic Product Report, http://eadiv.state.wy.us/i&e/Inc_Emp_Report09.pdf; 2010 Census Summary Report for Wyoming, http://eadiv.state.wy.us/demog_data/pop2010/2010_Census_Summary.pdf; 2011 county population estimates, <http://eadiv.state.wy.us/pop/CO-11est.pdf>.

About the Author

Nicole Lebsack grew up in Newcastle and attended the University of Wyoming. She recently graduated from the University of Missouri-Columbia with a master’s degree in journalism with an emphasis in news editing/design and works at the *Wyoming TribuneEagle*. Her articles and page designs have appeared in the *News Letter Journal* and *Columbia Missourian* newspapers.

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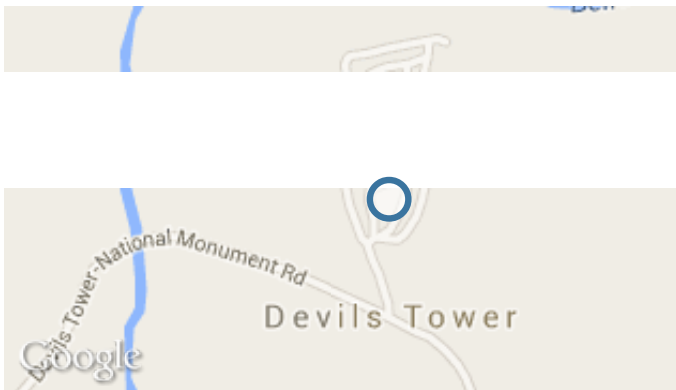
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[More about Black Hills National Forest at Wyoming Places](#)

Field Trips

[Devils Tower National Monument](#)



Devils Tower National Monument was the first national monument in the U.S., declared in 1906 by President **Theodore Roosevelt**. The grounds cover about two square miles in the center of Crook County and are open for hiking and climbing. Geologists recognize the hexagonal basalt columns of the tower as the neck of an ancient volcano, the rest of which has eroded away. Indian legends call the place Bear Lodge of Bear's Tipi and tell of a rock that grew higher and higher to lift two little girls beyond the clutches of a bear that was pursuing them.

Today, more than 20 tribes have established ties to the tower, and many groups visit the site to perform traditional ceremonies every year.

The rock rises 867 feet from the ground and 1,282 feet above the Belle Fourche River. The base diameter is around 1,000 feet.

Devils Tower is located 28 miles northwest of Sundance, Wyo., just off state Highway 24. From Sundance, take U.S. Highway 14 north to state Highway 24 and follow the signs.

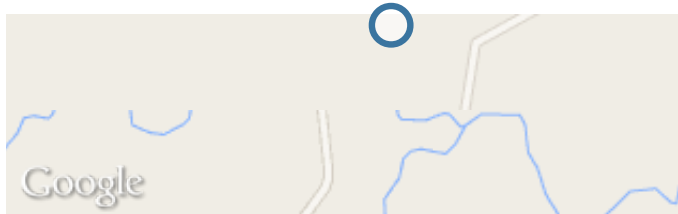
The Devils Tower visitor center is located three miles from the park entrance and contains information about the natural and cultural history of the site. Seven miles of hiking trails are located in the park. The tower is known for its cultural significance as well as its natural beauty. Artifacts, plants, rocks and wildlife must not be disturbed. The speed limit for vehicles in the park is 25 mph.

The monument is open 24 hours per day year-round, when weather permits. For admission and camping fee schedules, and for visitor center hours, see the **National Park Service's website** on the monument, or contact the Devils Tower National Monument Office at (307) 467-5283.

Aladdin Coal Tipple

The **Aladdin Coal Tipple**, dating back to 1898, allows visitors a look at the **coal** mining history of Crook County. Coal from the mines at Aladdin was loaded onto railroad cars at the tipple for shipment through Belle Fourche, S.D. to gold smelters at nearby Lead and Deadwood. The coal was first loaded into the coal bin—the upper, gabled structure, and then allowed to run down the chute into waiting railroad cars. On its way down, it was sorted into nut-sized, egg-sized or larger chunks.

Located on **Wyoming** Highway 24, 1.2 miles east of Aladdin, the structure is one of the last wooden tipples left in the West.



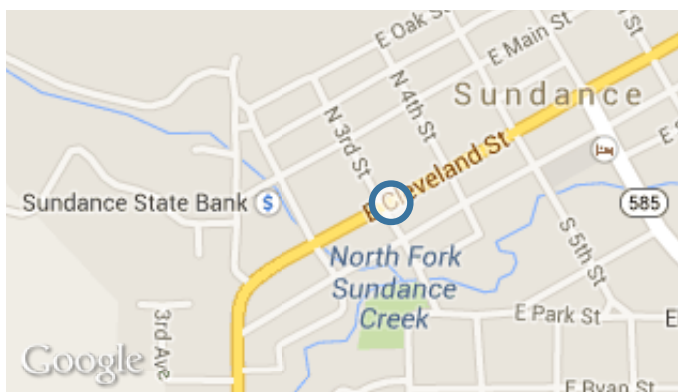
Aladdin General Store

The **Aladdin General Store**, formerly the **Wyoming** Mercantile, opened in 1896 and is still open every day all year in downtown Aladdin, population 15, on Wyoming Highway 24. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

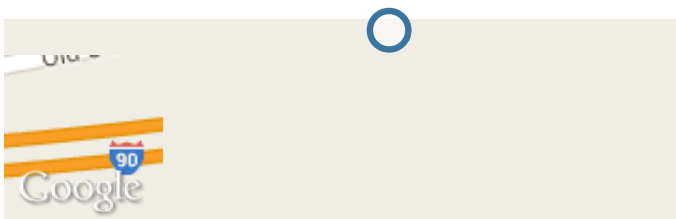


Crook County Museum and Art Gallery

The **Crook County Museum and Art Gallery**, at 309 Cleveland in downtown Sundance features an extensive gun collection and dioramas on **Devils Tower**, the 1874 Custer Expedition, the **Vore Buffalo Jump**, and the trial of Harry Longabaugh, the Sundance Kid.



The Vore Buffalo Jump

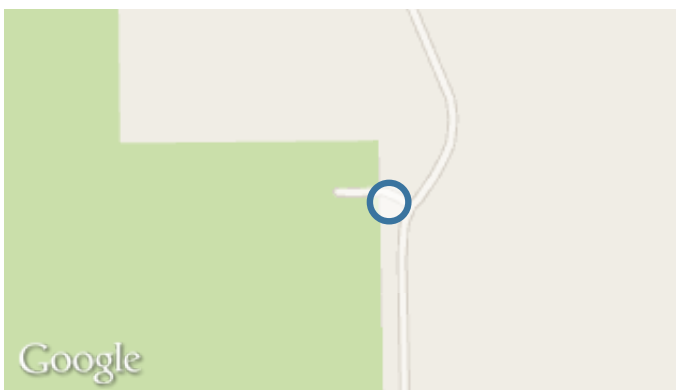


The **Vore Buffalo Jump** is located halfway between Sundance, Wyo., and Spearfish, S.D. From Sundance, head east on Interstate 90. Take Exit 199 and turn left. Travel under the interstate and turn right onto the next access road (old U.S. Highway 14); continue three miles to the site, located just south of the access road.

The site is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. from the second week in June through the second week in August. There is no admission fee, but donations are welcomed. Guides take visitors around the site. Those who visit during times when the University of **Wyoming** conducts field schools will be able to watch archaeological excavations in process. The site is not handicapped accessible. Artifacts must not be disturbed or removed from the area. Pit toilets are available nearby.

For more information contact the Vore Buffalo Jump Foundation at (307)283-1192, (307)766-2208 or (307)766-5136.

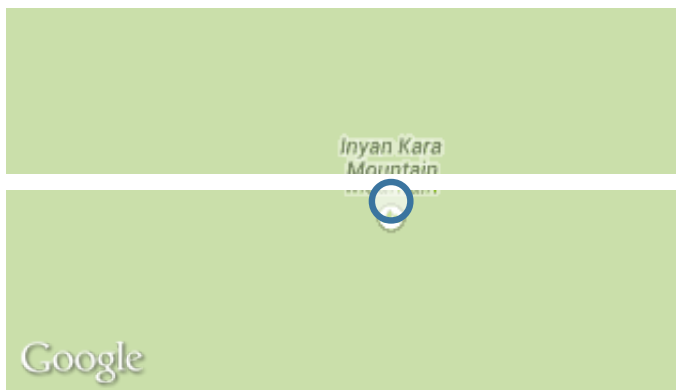
Black Hills National Forest



Black Hills National Forest, an area about 125 miles long and 65 miles wide, is partly in northeastern **Wyoming** and partly in western South Dakota. President Grover Cleveland established the reserve on Feb. 22, 1897. Visitors come from around the world to enjoy natural formations like canyons, gulches, lakes and open grasslands, and to partake in outdoor activities like hiking and rock climbing.

The Sundance trailhead is located within one mile of the town of Sundance. From Sundance, take County Road 123 north for 3.5 miles; the trailhead is on the west side of the road. The trails are rated as moderate to difficult hikes. For more on the diverse history and culture of the area visit the website linked above. To speak with an official at the Black Hills National Forest office in Sundance, visit the Bearlodge Ranger District office at 101 S. 21st St.

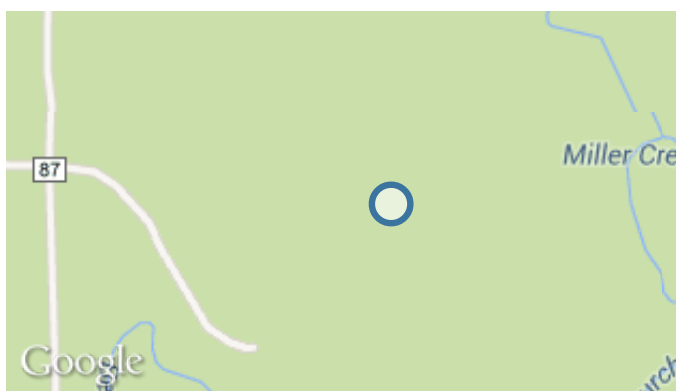
Inyan Kara Mountain



Inyan Kara Mountain is recognized by the Lakota Sioux as a sacred place for mothers giving birth. The mountain reaches a height of 5,348 feet.

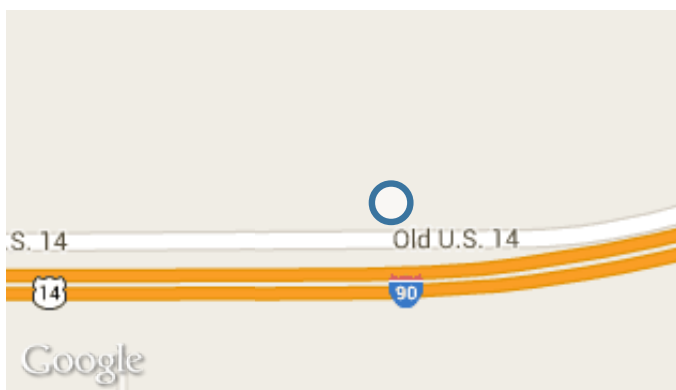
Inyan Kara—the name means “Rock Gatherer”—is located about 20 miles from Sundance, east of **Wyoming** Highway 116. Custer camped nearby on his 1874 expedition to the Black Hills. There are plentiful hiking opportunities here, but permission must be obtained to cross private lands between Sundance and the mountain. For more information, contact the Bearlodge District Ranger Office at (307) 283-1361.

Keyhole State Park



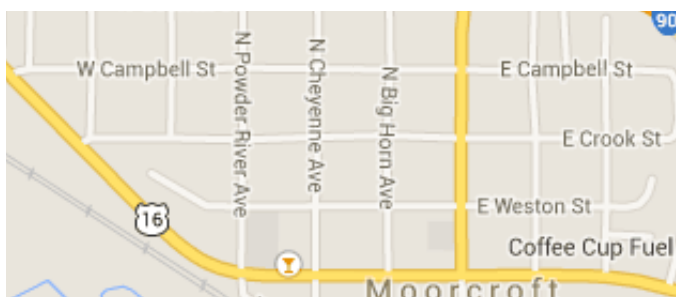
Keyhole State Park is located 23 miles west of Sundance. Take Exit 165 from Interstate 90. Mule deer, pronghorn antelope, wild turkeys and birds of all species can be seen here. The lake is a favorite for locals, whether boating, relaxing or fishing for walleye, catfish, smallmouth bass and northern pike. The park is open year-round and offers more than 170 campsites. For more information, visit the website linked above.

Spearfish Canyon

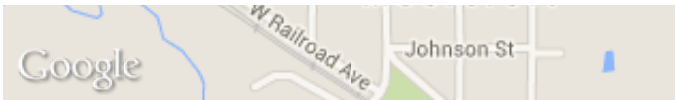


Spearfish Canyon, in South Dakota about 30 miles east from Sundance and south of Interstate 90, is located on the northern edge of Black Hills National Forest. Visitors are drawn to the area for its range of plants and wildlife, rock formations and waterfalls. For more information, visit the website linked above.

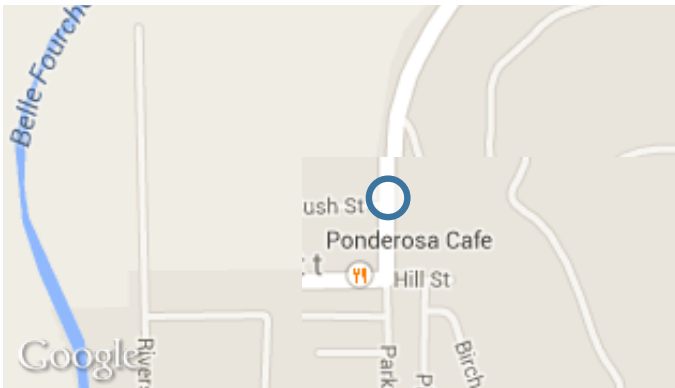
West Texas Trail Museum



More than just trail dust, the **West Texas Trail Museum** at 100 East Weston St. in Moorcroft, Wyo. works with the Moorcroft Historical Society collecting and preserving data and artifacts in order to promote the history of Moorcroft and **Wyoming**. For more information, call (307) 756-9300 or visit the lively Facebook page linked above.



Hulett Museum & Art Gallery



The **Hulett Museum & Art Gallery** at 115 **Wyoming** Highway 24 in Hulett, Wyo. collects and preserves the history, culture and integrity of northeastern Wyoming. Displays include highly regarded local talent, well-known Western artists, archeological finds, paleontology pieces and Native American culture. For more information, call (307) 467-5292, email hulettmuseum@rtconnect.net or visit the website linked above.

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