

History of Bishop House

The M. L. Bishop House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its association with the development of Casper and the surrounding area from a small village to a livestock center, and eventually, to an oil town.

Casper is on the banks of the North Platte River. In the effort to locate a path to the West Coast, the Platte River proved the key. Its tributary, the Sweetwater River at the area around the South Pass provided a broad area through the Continental Divide where wagons could pass with ease. This route would become the path of more than a third of a million emigrants bound for Utah, California and Oregon in the 1840's and 1850's. As those emigrants made their way across the continent, they unleashed a set of forces that would alter the West and, as one of their products, generate the circumstances responsible for the emergence of the city of Casper. A ferry was established in 1847 to get emigrants across the Platte River on their way west on the Oregon-California Trail. Later two bridges were erected in the 1850's to improve the passage of settlers on their westward march. John Baptist Richard erected the first bridge in 1851 just east of present day Casper in the area of present day Evansville. A second much more successful bridge was built in 1859-1860. This bridge came to be known as the "Platte Bridge" and was a distinct mark on the Oregon-California trail. The establishment of the Platte Bridge Station in 1858 (later to be renamed Fort Caspar by the military in 1864) was a major force that contributed to the formation of Casper as a future community in what would be known as the state of Wyoming. By the time this military post was abandoned in 1867, the area around modern Casper, between the bridges on the Oregon-California Trail had achieved significant development.

Although the area was officially abandoned by the military, and shortly thereafter, the bridges burned by the Indians, it was only a short period before white settlers began to develop the area. The primary force was ranching. From the 1860's through the 1880's large cattle ranches were established near Casper. Examples are the Sun Ranch on the Sweetwater, the Goose Egg Ranch of the Seebright Brothers at Bessemer Bend, the Carey Ranch near the old Platte Bridge, and the Brooks Ranch east of modern Casper. While these and other ranches began to emerge in the valley of the Platte, an actual settlement did not appear until 1888. In that year the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad (later known as the Chicago and North Western) arrived in the vicinity of modern Casper in a westward course following yet again the trail of the emigrants and mountain men migrating west along the Platte River.

John Merritt and C. W. Eads learned of this railroad expansion. They are attributed with being the first to arrive in what would eventually be known as Casper. On the afternoon of June 7, 1888, they pitched a tent at a spot near what is today known as McKinley and "A" Streets and established the town of Casper. Later this location would become known as "Old Town". Nineteen years later, the Bishop Family Home would be built on Second Street between McKinley and Lincoln Streets, only a few blocks from the original location of Casper.

The town grew slowly and for two decades was one of a number of small villages dotting the plains serving local cattle operations. Few businesses existed in the first years in Casper. These included four saloons and restaurants, three livery stables, one grocery store, and two general stores. Most buildings were frame construction. Fewer than a thousand people lived in the town at the turn of the century. Picture in the hallway. is Marvin L. Bishop his wife Leona (also known as "Lona"), and their two daughters, Lilas and Katherine Elvira, arrived in the community only four years after Casper was established. He moved to Casper, Wyoming on September 1, 1892 after being appointed postmaster by President Grover Cleveland the 22nd President of the United States and a member of the Democratic Party. At the time, Mr. Bishop was also a member of the Democratic Party, although in later years, he changed his affiliation to the Republican Party. His party affiliation resulted in his appointment to this prestigious position of postmaster in the developing community of Casper. While he was not the first postmaster, he was the first person to stay in the position for more than two years and is credited with bringing stability and permanence to the office as the fledgling community developed.

The original post office was located on South Center Street between Second Street and Midwest Avenue. The position of postmaster was important. Early postmasters were on duty from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Their salary ranged from \$50.00 to \$100.00 per month. Little mail was handled in the early days, but it served as the primary means of communication with friends, relatives, and businesses located at great distances from this fledgling community. In early days, the stockman and the cowboy came to town about four times a year. When they came, they always stopped at the post office to get the mail that had accumulated since the last visit or since a neighbor had brought it to them.

The postmaster did all the work in the post office, and he generally had a small store. Mr. Bishop held true to this tradition in that he operated M. L. Bishop's Cash Store for "Fine Family Groceries" which was one of the few businesses established in this small community during the 1890's.

During this time Bishop helped to establish one of the earliest churches in Casper, the First Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as the First United Methodist Church. He was one of five men in Casper who met in the early spring of 1893 to discuss the importance of establishing a religious community in the developing town of Casper and to formulate plans for the formation of this church. The total membership in 1896 was listed as 22 members, so his family that had now grown to six represented a significant presence in the congregation.

Bishop recognized that his days as postmaster were limited since it was a political patronage position. He began making plans in May 1894 to enter into sheep ranching and purchased land from Edward T. David, another early pioneer and foreman for the Carey Ranch. His resignation as Postmaster in August 1898 began a period of 40 years when M. L. Bishop became a woolgrower with holdings in the Pathfinder Dam area southwest of Casper and the owner of the sheep shearing pens located at Casper Creek.

The sheep business played an important part in the economy of Wyoming and Casper. A variety of accounts place the introduction of domestic sheep into Wyoming at various points, some with the Spanish, some with the Mexicans, and others with eastern emigrants.

During the Civil War, as emigration on the trails slowed, the potential of the area that in a few years would become Wyoming Territory began to materialize. Cheap land meant that, as the U. S. Commissioner of Agriculture expressed in 1862, raising sheep in this country would be twice as cheap as in the eastern farm belt. In the three decades between 1880 and 1910, the center of wool production shifted from the east to the high plains and mountains. The sheep business continued to grow in Wyoming until 1909. In this year the number of sheep raised in the state reached a peak of more than six million.

The Bishop's second eldest daughter, Katherine Elvira, had homesteaded Cadoma, a site twelve miles west of Casper. Good fortune fell on the family when this location was selected as the first railroad station established on the Chicago and Northwestern Railway between Casper and Lander, Wyoming. Railroads were the primary mode of transportation in these times. They provided the means to transport the livestock and mineral products, such as oil and coal, from Wyoming to the markets in the east and west. The word that the railroad was expanding was always good news. As they expanded, new developments occurred and new markets were served.

In 1905, M. L. Bishop's shearing pen operation was located at Cadoma. With the expansion of the railroad, the shearing pens at Cadoma were well situated to allow for sheep to be sheared, dipped, and shipped at one location. A. J. Mokler describes Cadoma as a station with few dwelling houses and no business houses except for large sheep shearing pens.

In 1907, Natrona County led the State in the number of sheep reported for assessment purposes. Many of these sheep passed through Bishop's pens for shearing on their way to summer grazing or market. The success of these operations allowed the Bishops to build their home and move their family of now eight children into 818 East Second Street.

Bishop's businesses were thriving and he decided to purchase land for a new home in 1906. He bought two adjacent lots on East Second Street in Casper in the Capitol Hill Addition from another early pioneer, Robert White.

This early Capitol Hill subdivision was a central location for residential development in anticipation of Casper being selected as the capitol of Wyoming. The temporary state capitol for Wyoming had been designated as Cheyenne. With this in mind, White speculated that the most likely site for the capitol building would be on the hill just east of town that overlooked the city. He acquired the land that was platted for the Capitol Hill Addition as part of his patented homestead claim. In 1896, he platted the Capitol Hill Addition to Casper, Wyoming, near the foot of this hill, presuming that the neighborhood would be most popular with all those that wanted to live in close

proximity to the capitol. He sold the first lot in 1897 to John Bryan, but as the political debate on the capitol continued, the enthusiasm for the lots was slow to grow. Three years later another lot sold.

The contractor for the Bishop Home was W. T. Evans, founder of Evansville, Wyoming. Mr. Evans built numerous other buildings in the burgeoning town of Casper such as the Town Hall in 1890 and the Saint Mark's Episcopal Church in 1891. In addition, he built the first one-story, four-room brick home at First and Wolcott streets for his daughter and son-in-law in the late 1890's. This home was considered one of the largest homes in Casper until Mr. Evans built the two and one-half story Bishop home with fifteen rooms. The Bishop home, built in 1907, is believed to be his first venture into large-scale, multi-story family homes.

The architect was probably Elias N. Miller. The house is an example of a large Four Square Home.

At the time of its construction, the Bishop house was a dramatic contrast to the single story frame houses that dominated Casper's residential areas and other residences in Capitol Hill Addition. The construction of this residence began a new era in the style of Casper's residential housing. The house remains virtually unchanged to this present day.

By 1909, Natrona County dropped to third place in the number of sheep returned for assessment behind other Wyoming Counties, Sweetwater and Uinta. However, the overall number of sheep in the State increased from 3.3 million to over 4.5 million during this year, and Wyoming led the nation in the number of pounds of wool washed and scoured for use in textile products.

Even though the ranching business was starting to decline, times were still good in Casper. Casper had been considered a sleepy town, populated by many transients who moved with the expansion of the railroads. The construction of substantial brick residences during the affluent sheep and cattle ranching times signified Casper was destined to become the business center of central Wyoming. Other large homes such as the Sullivan, Cunningham, and Gothberg "Mansions" in the Historic Wolcott district followed during 1908 and 1912.

As the unprecedented growth in the ranching business began to level off, the boom in the oil industry sustained the economy of Casper, and this industry took the development of the community to another level. During the decade and a half that the first oil boom occurred, Casper was transformed. People poured into the town. From 1913 to approximately 1914, the population went from under three thousand to four thousand. In 1913, the Post Office reported a population increase of a third. Then, according to one estimate, "the population doubled, assessed valuations doubled and redoubled, and there was still no end in sight. Between 1918 and 1921 population doubled again, but the wool growing industry had continued to decline. Oil boom money in amounts undreamed before circulated. Construction of buildings and

expansion of the community seemed endless. New values and habits and technologies infused the community and gave it a new orientation. Casper roared.

In 1916 the shearing pens were relocated from Cadoma to Bishop, Wyoming, a town named for M. L. Bishop, and located approximately 15 miles southwest of Casper. The relocation was at the request of Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad. The Bishop shearing pens could house 3,000 sheep under cover, which equaled two days of shearing. The town of Bishop had a post office, schoolhouse, living accommodations for the family and a boarding house for the herders and sheep shearers.

In addition to the success, Bishop enjoyed in the sheep business, he became a leading force in the wool growing industry. As the Wyoming wool growing business matured, the woolgrowers came together as a community to speak more effectively in the changing economic world. In 1915, M. L. Bishop helped found the Natrona County Woolgrowers Association and served as its president for 15 years. He was instrumental during these years in obtaining a series of stock drives and rest stations on main stock trails in Natrona County. During this time dry farmers began to settle and fence the open range lands, Mr. Bishop was a prominent spokesperson advocating the need for rights-of-way to allow transport of sheep along the railways. These trails and rest stations are still in use to this day. In 1925, the Bishop/Hawley case was filed in the Wyoming Supreme Court to defend the woolgrowers' need for sufficient grazing rights-of-way to transport the sheep to the shearing pens and on to summer or winter pastures. The sheep ranching business fell victim to the same forces that drove others from the countryside and from town to the city. Sheep operations declined, and the number of sheep being kept in Wyoming dropped to around two and a half million head by 1924. By 1929, the year the stock market crashed, the oil boom was coming to an end, also. The boom had been furious, powerful, and seemingly endless, and before it faded from sight, that boom had made Casper, Wyoming what it was and largely what it remains today.

M. L. Bishop was 68 and established as a respected leader in the wool growing community as well as the community at large. He had served as a City Councilman from 1918 to 1919, the oil boom years when Casper was a rapidly expanding community, and he continued to operate his ranch and shearing pens through the difficult years of the depression. In 1938, he was elected County Commissioner and his years of accumulated knowledge of sheep ranching were recorded that same year by the Wyoming Works Progress Administration (WPA). M. L. Bishop died the following year. With his death, the strains on the economy from the great depression, and the decline in the Wyoming sheep production, the family could not maintain the ranch and shearing pens. Wyoming.

M. L. Bishop's wife, Leona, continued to live in this home until her death in 1948. In total the couple had ten children. All children resided in Wyoming and were prominent in their communities with the exception of one daughter who died in infancy. Their youngest daughter, Lucile L. Bishop, lived in the family home from the time of her birth in October 1908 until her death in 1997.