

The Ridgeline and the Creek Landscape and Memory in Rapid City

Executive Summary

For millennia, the natural resources and allure of the Black Hills have drawn people to the region to hunt, explore, pray, recreate, and live in and around what is now Rapid City. The community sits where the open prairie meets rocky hills and thick forests. For generations, area residents have shaped their lives, in terms of both work and play, in response to the opportunities and limitations presented by these surroundings. High ridges on Skyline Drive and Cowboy Hill, flowing waters in Rapid Creek and Canyon Lake, and pine forests and grasslands fill the city limits. Rapid City's scenery attracts visitors and transplants to the area. Although connections to place are articulated through different cultural and spiritual lenses, many residents feel a strong connection to the landscapes, waterscapes, and skyscapes in and around Rapid City.

The settlement of Rapid City was part of the imposition of Euro-American land ethics onto the Northern Plains. Throughout Rapid City's history, as in much of the American West, competition for land and natural resources has fueled tensions over public and private management, industry and development, and preservation and conservation. These tensions have shaped and reshaped the landscape even as natural forces have altered the environment through slow processes like erosion or climate change, as well as sudden disasters like floods, fires, and blizzards.

The landscape that endures, reflected in public parks and open spaces, has played a critical part in building and sustaining community identity and character. In many cases, it has been preserved by private citizens and public policymakers at the behest of their constituents. The Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission faces many opportunities to document environmental changes, explore the meaning and value of the natural world from myriad cultural perspectives, and to partner with local groups to interpret, protect, and enjoy the natural environment.

Historical Research & Narrative

The Black Hills formed when a large, oblong section of igneous rock lifted through the earth's mantle some 65 million years ago, breaking through the limestone crust to expose the large, stone center of the Hills. In and around this central ring, forests thick with ponderosa pines, blue spruce, and cedar trees cropped up. They intersperse in meadows with prairie grasses and shrubs and are home to an array of animals including deer, elk, beavers, squirrels, raccoons, skunks, rabbits, and more. Bison, grizzly bears, wolves, mountain lions, and coyote once inhabited the vast prairies surrounding the Black Hills. Most of the large predators and most of the bison were killed off or pushed out as Euro-Americans displaced early Indigenous inhabitants.

Rapid City grew up at the vertex of water and stone. A long, narrow ridgeline juts from south to north. Residents can look up at the ridge from any side of town or peer down over the vast distance visible from Skyline Drive or Highway 16. The ridge forms the backbone of the Rapid City landscape and includes two main parts from south to north: Hangman's Hill, which is traversed by Skyline Drive, and Cowboy Hill, which begins immediately north of Rapid Creek. The Black Hills are an island in a vast sea of prairie, and as writer Dan Daly put it, "this ridge runs all the way

through the city. It's symbolic. [It's] what makes Rapid City a city in the Black Hills, not a city near the Black Hills."¹

Rapid Creek, meanwhile, transverses this ridge. It runs from west to east, passing through Rapid City before emptying into the Cheyenne River about 30 miles east of town. For centuries, the creek has made Rapid City a passing place. Untold generations of Indigenous peoples camped on its banks and utilized its resources.² Later, settlers chose a rocky outcropping to found Hay Camp and lay out Rapid City. Over time, wagon trains, railroads, highways, and airports connected the Rapid City community to the outside world, and the town became known as the "Gate City" given its central location and its utility as an access point to the Black Hills. Major commercial arteries have paralleled the Creek's path through town. In 1972, in the midst of an enormous downpour, the Creek flooded and devastated much of Rapid City. In the aftermath of the flood, the community devised new uses for the creek, and its banks host many beloved parks and recreational spaces.

Hangman's Hill and Skyline Drive

The neighborhoods on the eastern foothills of the ridgeline are among the oldest in Rapid City. Several cross streets, from Flormann north to Quincy or Kansas City Streets, provide multiple points of access to Skyline Drive. From the top of the ridge, a viewer can look down on the central core of Rapid City or the urban sprawl that has continued north past the interstate, east to Ellsworth Air Force Base, south to the Monument Health building complex, or west towards the American Legion baseball fields. Similarly, the views up and down Mount Rushmore Road from atop Highway 16 or the Omaha Street I-90 exit reveal the many businesses along the central corridor into the heart of the city.

Hangman's Hill illustrates Skyline Drive's prominent role in local history. In June 1877, a local man discovered three outsiders camping at the base of Cowboy Hill, near the creek. It was an era of violence and tension between Native and non-Native people. Mistaking the men for Indigenous people, he reported the trio to the sheriff. The officer quickly formed a posse who arrived at the men's campsite and found six horses tied to a tree. On the thin evidence that three men with six horses meant the men must be horse thieves, the sheriff had them arrested and imprisoned in a small, temporary jailhouse east of town. Before the judge could arrive from Deadwood, a mob broke the men, one of whom was still a teenager, out of jail, hauled them to the top of Skyline Drive and executed them on what came to be known as "Hangman's Tree."³

What began as an attempt at swift justice and a warning to would-be thieves ended up having a paradoxical effect on local memory. On one hand, the story of the hanging became part of the frontier lore of early Rapid City. According to the author Robert J. Casey, who tried to reconstruct the story of Hangman's Tree in the 1940s, residents preserved the site for decades after the event. City leaders even replaced the original, withering Hangman's Tree with another one to mark the site. Yet, over time, locals began to regret the incident. Many participants, Casey wrote, came to deny their involvement and other Hills towns viewed the incident as a stain on Rapid City's reputation. Still today, *a* Hangman's Tree (if not *the* Hangman's Tree), stands near the top of Skyline Drive, but is on a portion of private property and inaccessible to members of the public.⁴

¹ Dan Daly, "Skyline Wilderness Area a 'Hidden Treasure,'" *Rapid City Journal*, July 30, 2005.

² Linea Sundstrom & Wini Michael, "Archaeological Investigations in the Gap at Founders Park, Rapid City, South Dakota: A Report Prepared for the City of Rapid City, South Dakota, March 2009, 2, 7.

³ Robert J. Casey, *The Black Hills and Their Incredible Characters* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949), 32.

⁴ Robert J. Casey, *The Black Hills and Their Incredible Characters* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949), 32.

Despite this early, violent incident, the Skyline Drive area was a place where early generations of residents and children hiked and played. Building on this legacy in the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration undertook several enhancements to the area. Most notable among them was Skyline Drive itself, which the WPA completed in November 1935. The new road wound from the base of Hangman's Hill to the top of the ridgeline and connected with Highway 16 to the south. Winding up the new road in the 1930s, visitors passed a series of other projects underway, as well as a memorial to longtime Black Hills newspaper publisher Alice Gossage. (The Gossage monument was later moved to Halley Park in the Gap.)⁵

Dinosaur Park was another popular WPA project. Conceived to honor the legacy of Dr. C.C. O'Hara, a respected president of South Dakota Mines who passed away in early 1935, the park came to include a visitor's center and parking lot situated across from a large stone staircase that leads up to a series of walking paths. Once atop "Dinosaur Hill," visitors stroll around several large, concrete replicas of dinosaurs that once lived on what became the Northern Plains.⁶

In addition to honoring O'Hara's legacy, local boosters saw the project as a way to deepen Rapid City's ties to the growing Black Hills tourism economy. By creating "one of the most unique, attractive and educational recreation spots anywhere to be found," wrote George Mansfield in 1936, the Skyline Drive and Dinosaur Park projects could attract visitors and "afford to the people of Rapid City a short pleasure drive for themselves and their friends," all while providing much-needed Depression-era relief.⁷

Others saw Dinosaur Hill as a poor use of natural space and a waste of government resources. One man steamed in a letter to the *Rapid City Journal*: "we have Skyline Drive, a road which leads nowhere, accomplishes no useful purpose, which marches up a hill and marches down again. And now at a cost of \$24,000," he complained, "we are to have a bevy of pink elephants in commemoration of our illustrious reptile dead."⁸ Despite this protest, the park was completed in 1938 and became part of a broader, national trend that saw the establishment of several dinosaur-themed parks across the United States at midcentury.⁹ Over the years, Dinosaur Park has made occasional appearances in national media and advertising campaigns.¹⁰ A Rapid City couple managed the visitor's center until the late 1960s, when the city took over. It has since contracted concessions at the site to a series of vendors.¹¹

The Skyline Drive area included two other nature-themed attractions. First was the Chamber of Commerce-managed Skyline Fossil Forest, an admissions-only exhibit that displayed samples of petrified wood excavated from the hillside. The attraction was destroyed by a fire in the 1960s.¹² Another project, a large outdoor amphitheater, was designed by a graduate of the South Dakota Mines civil engineering program. An earthen stadium was to be carved into a natural bend in a hillside overlooking a meadow that could serve as a stage. Some locals hoped that the amphitheater

⁵ "Sky Line Drive To Be Completed," *Rapid City Journal*, November 19, 1935.

⁶ "Dr. C.C. O'Hara Passes Away at Home in Rapid," *Lead Daily Call*, February 21, 2021.

⁷ George Mansfield, "Letter to the Editor," *Rapid City Journal*, March 10, 1936.

⁸ George S. Reeves, "Letter to the Editor," *Rapid City Journal*, March 6, 1936.

⁹ Ross J. Wilson, "Encountering Dinosaurs: Public History and Environmental Heritage," *The Public Historian* 42, no. 4 (November 2020): 126.

¹⁰ See for example "Stegosaurus with Sex Appeal," *Dunkirk Evening Observer* (Dunkirk, NY), June 15, 1938; "Dakota Parks Trace History," *San Antonio Express and News*, April 22, 1962; "A Monster Emerges from the Mist," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 10, 1986; "OK, Big Smiles!," *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 2002.

¹¹ "Dinosaur Park, Rapid City," *The Living New Deal*, accessed January 23, 2021, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/dinosaur-park-rapid-city-sd/>.

¹² "Sky Line Drive To Be Completed," *Rapid City Journal*, November 19, 1935.

might host the Black Hills Passion Play, a popular reenactment of the Christian crucifixion story, which was held in the Northern Hills town of Spearfish for years. The WPA cut terraced steps into the side of the hogback, which remain visible today. Although the amphitheater did not host the large performances its designers had intended, its construction reflected the marriage of work relief, landscape development, and support for the tourism economy that was prevalent at midcentury.¹³

In the decades after Skyline Drive and its amenities were built, Rapid City continued to grow. The top of the ridge was the logical place for several broadcast companies to situate their studio or communications towers, which could take advantage of the altitude to transmit radio and television signals across a vast airspace. Independence Day fireworks blazed over the ridge each summer. Boy Scout Troops and the Jaycees held annual cleanup days. Recreating on and around Skyline Drive became a common part of life in Rapid City.¹⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, the community debated carving a tunnel through the base of the ridge to increase traffic flow between the east and west sides of town. Concerns over the impact to private property and area ecology halted these plans.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the quiet forests and stunning vistas made the Skyline area desirable for housing developments.¹⁶ As large homes filled the hillsides on both slopes of the ridge, a group of conservation advocates and outdoor enthusiasts began searching for ways to protect parts of the hillside from development. By the 1990s, an informal network of game trails had become popular routes for local hikers. As plans for further residential development began to take shape, a nonprofit group called Skyline Preservation, Inc. organized to protect the Skyline Wilderness Area in 1999. By 2005, the group held 105 acres on the eastern slope after the City of Rapid City passed on an opportunity to acquire the property. Working alongside other organizations like the Black Hills Mountain Bike Association, Skyline Preservation, Inc. developed trails and infrastructure while carrying out environmental mitigation techniques to use the land responsibly.¹⁷

As the project progressed, some neighborhood residents were skeptical of increased public use near their property. Other community members were confused by signage and rules and regulations about whether, for example, mountain bikes could be used in the Skyline Wilderness Area, since bicycles were prohibited in federally protected preserves like the Black Elk Wilderness in the Black Hills. Advocates worked through these issues and donated a total of about 184 acres to the city around 2008.¹⁸ Since then, multiple investments from the Rapid City Vision Fund have supported trail maintenance, wayfinding and signage, and the construction of several parking lots and trailheads. In 2015, for example, an expansion added 10 additional miles of trails and a new parking lot, as well as enhancements to existing parking and the lot at Dinosaur Park.¹⁹ The Skyline Area remains a popular place to live, play, and enjoy the natural beauty of Rapid City.²⁰

Cowboy Hill and Hanson-Larson Memorial Park

¹³ “The Amphitheater,” interpretive sign at Skyline Wilderness Area, installed by Troop 131 of the Eagle Scouts.

¹⁴ “Final Plans Set for Fourth Fireworks Here,” *Rapid City Journal*, June 30, 1948; “Jaycees, Boys Clubbers Clean Up Skyline Drive,” *Rapid City Journal*, April 4, 1965.

¹⁵ “Skyline Drive Ecology Must Be Part of Any Plans for a Road,” *Rapid City Journal*, April 26, 1970.

¹⁶ Dan Daly, “Skyline Wilderness Area a ‘Hidden Treasure,’” *Rapid City Journal*, July 30, 2005.

¹⁷ Daly, “Skyline Wilderness Area a ‘Hidden Treasure,’” *Rapid City Journal*, July 30, 2005.

¹⁸ John McLaughlin, “\$1.4m Skyline Wilderness Park Project Open for Bids,” *Rapid City Journal*, January 8, 2015; Drew Matthews, “City Poised to Accept Skyline Land Donation,” *Rapid City Journal*, February 2, 2017.

¹⁹ John McLaughlin, “\$1.4m Skyline Wilderness Park Project Open for Bids,” *Rapid City Journal*, January 8, 2015.

²⁰ Daly, “Skyline Wilderness Area a ‘Hidden Treasure,’” *Rapid City Journal*, July 30, 2005.

Across the Gap, on the north bank of Rapid Creek, the ridgeline continues through Rapid City. Like the hogback straddled by Skyline Drive, this ridge—known as Cowboy Hill—is a rocky outcropping of ponderosa pine, stone, and prairie meadows. For more than a century, it too, has held a prominent place in the history of economy, environment, industry, and civil pride in Rapid City.

Archaeological evidence and oral histories demonstrate the longstanding use of the creek bed and rocks at the base of Cowboy Hill going back thousands of years. In the 1870s, non-Native settlers founded Hay Camp at the bottom of the hill. Although the place likely had an Indigenous name—or perhaps several of them, used by peoples at different moments in history—these monikers may be lost to history. There is no official account of how the hill came to be called “Cowboy Hill.” A 1926 story from the *Rapid City Journal*, however, lends the following explanation: “As everyone knows Rapid City used to be known as ‘Cow Town,’” the author begins. As the “vast open ranges in every direction attracted cattlemen soon after the gold rush,” ranchers began to fill in the hinterland. When they came to Rapid City for supplies or entertainment, “the riders approaching the town from the northwest kept to the north side of the creek.” After setting camp there, many would head downtown to drink and revel. Townspeople could hear them rowdily shouting and firing guns into the air as they came and went downtown, and “in time the eminence became known as Cowboy Hill.”²¹

As Rapid City transitioned from a rough cattle town to a bustling industrial and educational hub in the early 20th century, Cowboy Hill took on new meaning. In 1911, a professor and a group of students at South Dakota Mines came up with the idea of painting a large “M,” for “Mines” on the side of Cowboy Hill as a publicity stunt and a point of school pride. That October, the university president declared the first “M-Day,” which became the school’s homecoming celebration. Every year for many decades, students climbed the hill with hand tools, sand, water, and whitewash to brighten their school’s emblem. Initially made of sandstone, the M was eventually reified by concrete. In the early years, students also doused it in kerosene and lit the “M” ablaze on M-Day, allowing the flames of their school pride to mark the night sky. In 1953, the students added smaller letters, “S” and “D,” for “South Dakota,” on either side of the M.²²

This annual ritual became an important Mines and city event. So much so, in fact, that when Cowboy Hill changed owners in the 1960s, and the new owner attempted to stop the students from climbing across private property, the State of South Dakota intervened to grant an easement to the crest of M Hill, based on the site’s historical significance and continued use by students.²³ Later on, the South Dakota Mines Foundation acquired the parcel surrounding the “M.”²⁴

The Cowboy Hill area also played a significant role in the early, industrial development of Rapid City. Between 1908 and 1912, a group of entrepreneurs purchased the water rights along Rapid Creek at the base of Cowboy Hill. They constructed a flume along the creek to run enough water to power an early hydroelectric plant that helped power Rapid City.²⁵

The area was also the location of a series of beef processing and meatpacking plants. The first, called Rapid City Packing Co., opened north of the creek in 1910. It changed hands several

²¹ “How Kola,” *Rapid City Journal*, March 19, 1926.

²² “Hardrockers Celebrate Homecoming with More Work on Big Concrete ‘M,’” *Rapid City Journal*, October 4, 1951; “Burn ‘M,’” *Rapid City Journal*, October 25, 1935.

²³ “School of Mines Retains Rights to Cowboy Hill,” *Rapid City Journal*, October 18, 1967.

²⁴ “Cowboy Hill on the Auction Block,” *Rapid City Journal*, August 23, 2006.

²⁵ Eric John Abrahamson and Eric Steven Zimmer, *Expanding the Energy Horizon: A History of Black Hills Corporation Since 1883* (Rapid City, SD: Black Hills Corporation, 2018), 44-48.

times but continued to process, pack, and ship meats from Rapid City until a fire destroyed the plant in 2002. At the time, the facility was owned by Federal Beef Processing and employed around 400 workers.²⁶

A few years after the meat plant opened, in 1914, another pair of businessmen opened the Warren-Lamb Lumber Company. They ran a large lumberyard at the base of Cowboy Hill. For decades, the operation provided blue-collar jobs to white and Native American workers. Like the power company before it, Warren-Lamb invested heavily in a water flume in an effort to efficiently float logs from the central Black Hills, down Rapid Creek, to its plant. The scheme failed for lack of sufficient water flow, and the company relied on railroad transport. For decades, it harvested timber from in and near Custer State Park, along Slate Creek near Hill City, and other locations. The company appears to have closed in the 1930s but restarted its operations before going out of business in the 1960s.²⁷

Cowboy Hill has also been part of the regional advertising and communications industries. Early retailers took advantage of the tall, sandstone cliffs facing the Gap to advertise their stores and wares. Like Skyline Drive, the top of the hill is home to radio towers, and in the 1960s, the Northwestern Bell Telephone Company installed a large aluminum reflector that helped bounce radio signals to the nearby town of Hermosa from the top of Cowboy Hill.²⁸

These industrial pursuits touched on another piece of Rapid City's environmental history: air quality and fire. The caption to a 1937 aerial photograph of Rapid City calls out the Warren-Lamb smokestack for, as the author wrote, "belching a dark cloud of smoke" from its smokestack at the base of Cowboy Hill.²⁹ As late as the 1990s, meanwhile, Federal Processing faced complaints for the pungent, unpleasant smells that wafted from its factory, and neighbors cautioned their children from playing near the creek when it ran red with blood from the plant.³⁰ Meanwhile, over the last century, numerous fires have broken out on Cowboy Hill and Skyline Drive alike. Sometimes, these fires started after reckless hikers and campers failed to douse their flames. Other fires were started by industrial endeavors. Most recently, in 2012, a wildfire construction equipment touched off a fire that burned some 150 acres on Cowboy Hill.³¹ The ponderosa pines on Rapid City's ridgeline, meanwhile, have been threatened by a region-wide mountain pine beetle infestation, which has killed around 430,000 acres of trees since the mid-1990s.³² Despite these threats, both hills have retained much of their forest cover.

The Cowboy Hill area has also been a popular place to hike and recreate. In the 1920s, for example, the local YMCA sponsored a "hare and hound chase" that began at Cowboy Hill and made its way over the rural hills and meadows towards the South Canyon neighborhood.³³ By the end of

²⁶ "Beef Plant, Founders Park Timeline," *Rapid City Journal* January 29, 2012.

²⁷ Martha Linde, *Sawmills of the Black Hills* (Rapid City, SD: Jesse Y. Sundstrom/Fiske Printing, 1984), 58–59.

²⁸ "Cowboy Hill Again Plays Key Communications Roll," *Rapid City Journal*, June 25, 1966.

²⁹ "Bird's Eye View," *Rapid City Journal*, July 10, 1937.

³⁰ "Beef Plant, Founders Park Timeline," *Rapid City Journal* January 29, 2012; "Rapid City Meatpacking Plant Burns," *Black Hills Pioneer* January 30, 2002. Oral history with Darla Drew Lerdal, August 22, 2020 by Eric John Abrahamson.

³¹ "City Wildfire Offers Glimpse of Regeneration," *Rapid City Journal*, May 1, 2012.

³² "Mountain Pine Beetle," Black Hills National Forest, USDA Forest Service, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/blackhills/landmanagement/?cid=stelprdb5113978>; R. Keith Stewart and Carol A. Thilenius, "Black Hills Lakes and Streams: Stream and Lake Inventory and Classification in the Black Hills of South Dakota, 1964" Department of Game, Fish and Parks Lake and Stream Classification Report (1964), 50–52.

³³ "YMCA Boys Step Out in Hare and Hound Chase," *Rapid City Journal*, October 21, 1920.

the 20th century, the hillside had also become a popular location for mountain biking, rock climbing, and bouldering—although at the time, these activities occurred on private property.³⁴

That changed in the early 2000s, when Cowboy Hill and the surrounding area became known as Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park. Years before her death in 2004, Edna Marie “Eddie Larson,” a South Dakota Mines graduate and longtime Hermosa resident, had established a trust to create a park to honor her parents’ memory. When Cowboy Hill went up for sale in 2006, the trustees of her estate acquired the 300-acre property. Since 2008, Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park has operated as an independently funded, self-sustaining nonprofit park that is open to the public. It includes over 20 miles of hiking and mountain biking trails and continues to be a popular location for Rapid City residents and visitors who travel to town for events like the Black Hills Fat Tire Festival, a mountain biking race, other gatherings each year.³⁵

Rapid Creek

Fed by runoff from winter snows, spring rains, and smaller tributaries like Castle Creek, Rapid Creek originates in limestone springs west of Rapid City. It flows east along a narrow bed, then pools against the dam at the man-made Pactola Reservoir. From there, the water snakes towards Rapid City, where it fills Canyon Lake on the west side of town.³⁶ The creek connects the central hills to the eastern prairie as it passes through “the Gap,” a large dip in the ridgeline between Hangman’s Hill and Cowboy Hill. Over the years, the creek, the Gap, and a second gap in the hills created by the passage of Interstate 90 on the north side of Cowboy Hill, have become a vital entry point for access to the Black Hills, earning the community the nickname “The Gate City.”

The earliest residents of what is now Rapid City used the area’s access to water and timber to protect themselves from the elements. They also relied on the ample natural resources—game and fish, medicinal plants, edible flora, and stones for tools and trade—to build strong economies that balanced subsistence with participation in vast regional and continent-wide trade networks. Native peoples used dogs to move, hunt, and trade. Later, horses enabled them to travel faster and further to hunt, procure, and exchange goods and ideas. In this way, Native peoples blended subsistence hunting, gathering, and agriculture with travel and transportation. Native peoples also lived along its banks into the 20th century, first in winter camps and later in informal communities.

When Euro-Americans began to settle along Rapid Creek, they appropriated the water for domestic use, livestock, and agriculture. After claiming land and building a home near an “immense and ever-flowing spring” on what would become the west side of town, Daniel Cleghorn began cultivating trout.³⁷ The state of South Dakota would later follow in his footsteps when it established the Cleghorn Springs Fish Hatchery in 1929 to grow and harvest fish to be released into lakes and streams throughout the Black Hills.³⁸ Euro-American settlers also harnessed the water’s industrial power, using it to mine for gold, create electricity, water livestock, and float logs to factories for

³⁴ Cowboy Hill on the Auction Block,” *Rapid City Journal*, August 23, 2006.

³⁵ Visit Rapid City, “Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park,” Youtube, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvGfNe9-Mm8>. Cowboy Hill on the Auction Block,” *Rapid City Journal*, August 23, 2006; “Fat Tire Festival Rolls into Hills,” *Rapid City Journal* June 22, 2014.

³⁶ Strain, *Black Hills Haycamp*, 210–12.

³⁷ *Daily Deadwood Pioneer-Times*, April 9, 1879, 4.

³⁸ “Cleghorn Springs State Fish Hatchery,” South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks, accessed February 8, 2020, <https://gfp.sd.gov/cleghorn/>. See also, “Stage Set for Dedication of Cleghorn Springs Fish Hatchery Near Here Tomorrow Afternoon,” *Rapid City Journal*, July 5, 1930, 1.

processing.³⁹ Recognizing the beauty of creekside property, early developers planted towering poplar and cottonwood trees along the banks.⁴⁰ These trees offered shade to the neighborhoods that developed alongside the water.

Over the years, the banks of Rapid Creek have been home to both the most and least wealthy members of town. Before the 1972 flood, which devastated the neighborhoods along the creek and killed at least 238 people, the picturesque area near Canyon Lake was a desirable location for residential homes and vacation cabins. A few miles downstream, however, communities of less affluent—and primarily, Native American or working-class non-Native—people lived in temporary homes along the creek between Sioux San and the base of Cowboy Hill. After the flood, many wealthier households moved up onto ridges overlooking scenic vistas or set back into the forest. The creation of parks and greenways along the creek displaced many of the less affluent families to other parts of town that were, in some cases, far from basic services like water, sanitation, and electricity.

The 1972 flood destroyed many homes and businesses along the creek bed. In the aftermath, the city restricted construction in the flood zone and built a long, narrow greenway filled with parks, golf courses, bike paths, and outdoor recreational facilities through the heart of Rapid City.⁴¹ These developments and activities have both improved the usability and exacted an environmental toll on the creek and its ecosystems. Silt and seepage from roads and residential developments, along with the leaching of mining chemicals and byproducts further upstream, have impacted the water quality, sometimes with effects on area wildlife, over the last 150 years.⁴²

³⁹ See David F. Strain, *Black Hills Haycamp: Images and Perspectives of Early Rapid City* (Rapid City, SD: Fenske Printing, 1989); Eric John Abrahamson and Eric Steven Zimmer, *Expanding the Energy Horizon: A History of Black Hills Corporation Since 1883* (Rapid City, SD: Black Hills Corporation, 2018), 34–35; Martha Linde, *Sawmills of the Black Hills* (Rapid City, SD: Fenske Printing/Jessie Y. Sundstrom, 1984), 57–59.

⁴⁰ Strain, *Black Hills Haycamp*, 210–12.

⁴¹ Strain, *Black Hills Haycamp*, 210–12.

⁴² See for example South Dakota State Department of Health, Division of Sanitary Engineering, “Water Pollution Investigation: Rapid Creek, Dec. 1963, Pactola Reservoir to Cheyenne River” (Pierre: 1964), v; Bart Pfankuch, “Studies Reveal Health Hazards in Big Sioux River, Rapid Creek,” *Argus Leader* August 29, 2018, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/2018/08/29/studies-reveal-health-hazards-big-sioux-river-rapid-creek-south-dakota-waterways/1134418002/>.

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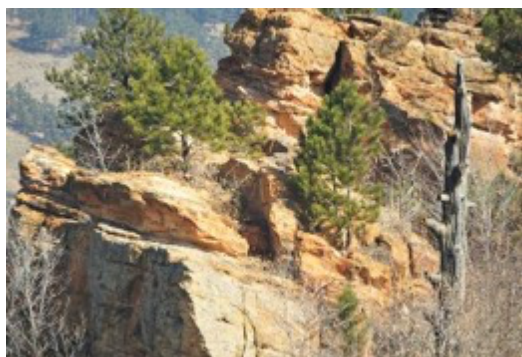
Visit Rapid City, “Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park,” Youtube, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvGfNe9-Mm8>.

Preliminary Documentation

Dinosaur Park, 940 Skyline Drive



Hangman's Tree, Skyline Drive



"M Hill," Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park



Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park

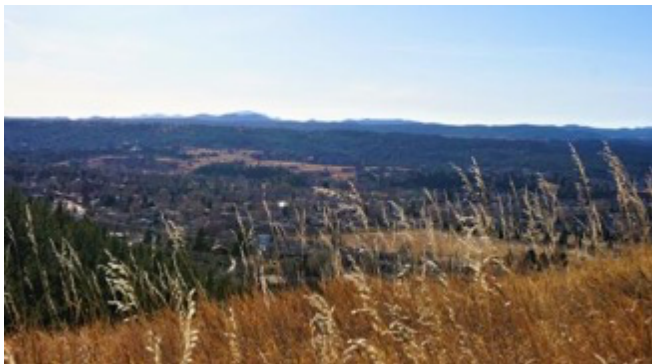


Skyline Drive





Black Elk Peak, visible to the west from Skyline Drive



Looking east from Skyline drive, eastern Rapid City, Rapid Valley, and Ellworth Air Force Base.



Radio Towers



Apartment buildings, housing developments, and new businesses are harbingers of expansion and growth on Highway 16 south of Rapid City, on the ridge that becomes Skyline Drive.



In 2008, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks purchased a 33-acre parcel of land which it designated “Outdoor Campus West.” The space is a microcosm of the Rapid City environment, with ponderosa pine forest, a grassland prairie, a small creek, and a pond.





“The Gap” looking east from Omaha Street towards downtown.



The “I-90 Gap” is a primary entry point for interstate travelers coming to Rapid City. (Above) Looking west from Rushmore Mall. (Below) An aerial view shows the I-90 gap at the far end of the ridgeline occupied by Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park.





Rapid Creek



Chicago Tribune, March 17, 2002 (Photo 1938)



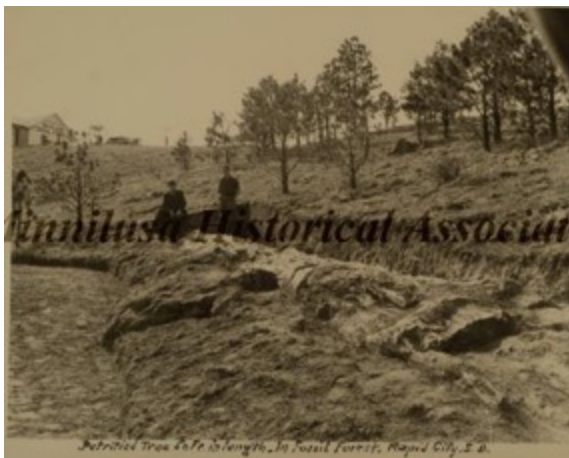
Concession Building Opened 1969
Rapid City Journal, June 5, 1969



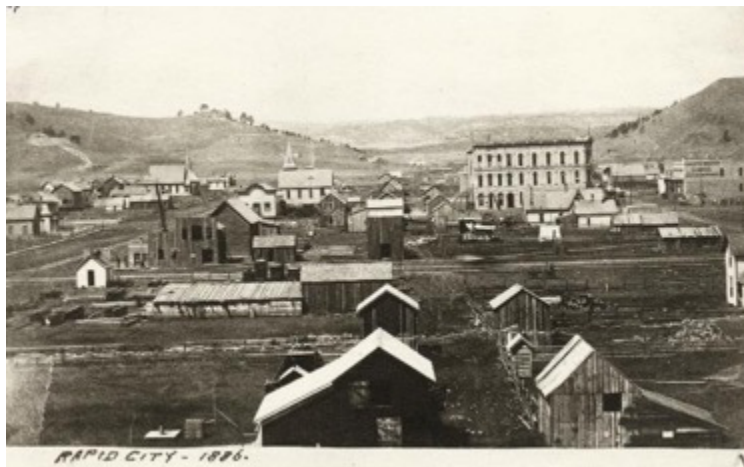
This memorial to newspaperwoman Alice Gossage once sat atop Skyline Drive. It was later moved to Halley Park. Minnilusa Historical Association



A petrified log excavated from the ground at the Skyline Fossil Forest. Minnilusa Historical Association



Rapid City in 1886, note “the Gap” in the background.
Minnilusa Historical Association.



South Dakota Mines students maintained the M on “M Hill” in 1940.
Rapid City Journal, October 4, 1951.



The Ridge at Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park, no date (ca early 20th century?)
Minnilusa Historical Association.



Sub-Station at base of Cowboy Hill
Minnilusa Historical Association.



Timber arriving by rail at the Warren Lamb Lumber Company near the base of Cowboy Hill.
Minnilusa Historical Association.



A “Bird’s Eye View” of Rapid City from 1937 shows the Warren Lamb Lumber Company “belching a dark cloud of smoke,” as the caption reads, at the base of Cowboy Hill.
Rapid City Journal, July 10, 1937



Construction of the Canyon Lake Dam, 1933
Minnilusa Historical Association



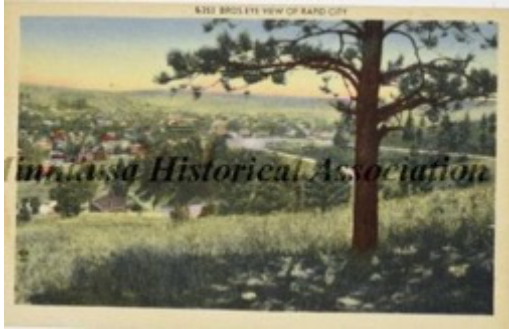
Canyon Lake, no date (early 20th century?)
Minnilusa Historical Association.



The Amphitheater at Skyline Wilderness, nd. (1930s?)
Minnilusa Historical Association.



Postcard—View from Skyline Drive, nd.
Minnilusa Historical Association.



Potential Projects

The RCHPC could lead or partner in the following community history and historic preservation projects related to landscape and memory in Rapid City:

Interpretive Hiking and Cycling: Skyline Drive Wilderness and Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park

The hiking, mountain biking, and trail running communities are very active in Rapid City. Although some interpretive material exists at the base of Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park and at certain points in the Skyline Wilderness Area, the RCHPC could partner with either entity, or the many clubs and groups that meet there, to develop plans for additional educational and interpretive materials. These could include signage and markers or interpretive walks and planned events.

Treasure Hunt: Robbery and Cowboy Hill

Everyone loves a treasure hunt. In the spring of 1922, three men robbed a railroad switchman in Montana, stealing \$15,000. Chased by police, one thief made his way to Rapid City, where he was arrested and interrogated for 24 hours. He confessed and his wife agreed to show the police where the man had buried his share of the booty. She led the sheriff “all over the hills and country” between Rapid City and Black Hawk, before “winding up on the Cowboy Hill northwest of the city,” where she “turn[ed] over a fairly good sized rock” and removed a tin can containing \$2,650. Four thousand other dollars were never recovered.⁴³ To engage families and outdoor enthusiasts and inspire a connection between history and recreation, the RCHPC could sponsor a history-themed treasure hunt and hiking adventure in Hanson-Larsen Memorial Park. This event could include history talks, nature walks, and a fundraiser to support historic preservation in Rapid City.

Reinterpreting Dinosaur Park: A Partnership with South Dakota Mines

According to the historian Ross Wilson, dinosaur parks offer opportunities “to reassess the relationship between humans and the environment” by supporting “a process of transformation [that] takes place as individuals are required to rethink humanity’s place in the vast timescale of the Earth’s history and the fate of our won species in the context of climate change.”⁴⁴ Partnering with paleontologists and geologists at South Dakota Mines, the RCHPC could sponsor a project that evaluates the history of Dinosaur Park and reassesses the interpretation at the site. South Dakota Mines held a series of interpretive programs at Dinosaur Park in the late 1990s; these could be revived and revitalized.

Ethnobotany and Cultural Landscape Studies in Rapid City

From the wind and the moon to rocks, trees, plants, animals, and insects, the natural world is of deep cultural and spiritual significance to various groups of people who have lived in, used, and visited the Black Hills over many centuries. The RCHPC could partner with Oglala Lakota College, or the American Indian Studies program at Black Hills State University, or Native Nations from around the area to study and document the ethnobotany of Rapid City. Similarly, the RCHPC could work with church groups, conservation societies, and other organizations to document the meanings of the environment to the Rapid City community.

⁴³ O’Malley Confesses \$15,000 Robbery Near Missoula; Three Others Implicated,” *Rapid City Journal*, May 14, 1922.

⁴⁴ Wilson, “Encountering Dinosaurs,” 121.

Liaison with Black Hills Astronomical Society

For several years, the Black Hills Astronomical Society (BHAS) has been raising awareness about light pollution in and around Rapid City. The RCHPC could work with the BHAS to host workshops or community discussions aimed at helping the community understand and responsibly mitigate light pollution.

Coordinate with South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks/Outdoor Campus West

The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks (GFP) operates a large interpretive center and outdoor recreation park near the South Canyon neighborhood called “Outdoor Campus West.” There, GFP naturalists offer classes for citizens hoping to learn outdoor skills and learn more about nature and wildlife. The RCHPC could partner with GFP to develop programs on local environmental history and conservation efforts, both at Outdoor Campus West and in parks and nature areas across Rapid City.

National Register Eligibility

Already on national register:

Dinosaur Park, listed 1990⁴⁵

Ineligible

Due to the National Register of Historic Places’ emphasis on structures and other features of the built environment, and the ever-changing nature of natural environments, it is unlikely that many of the places and spaces described above would be eligible for a National Register listing.

Resources

The following is a list of existing public and private community groups, organizations, and institutions who would make strong partners on any RCHPC initiative focused on exploring and understanding the Indigenous history of Rapid City.

Minnilusa Historical Association
Journey Museum and Learning Center
Dahl Fine Arts Center
Rapid City Public Library
Friends of Rapid City Parks
Black Hills Mountain Bike Association
South Dakota Archaeological Research Center
South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks
Black Hills Trails
Norbeck Society

⁴⁵ Dinosaur Park, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/90000956>.



**VANTAGE
POINT**

Black Hills Astronomical Society
Oglala Lakota College
American Indian Studies, Black Hills State University
Regional Native American Tribes