

WTE Column of Nov. 4, 2014. Editor's headline: "A joyful hike in Vedauwoo"

Wednesday Walkers are a group of outdoor enthusiasts residing in Cheyenne—mostly women, mostly retirees—who are determined to “take a hike,” weather permitting, every single Wednesday. Last month I joined the group for an outing in the Vedauwoo wilderness where, in the course of the walk, I learned an astonishing amount of information about the place and the origin of its name.

I was acquainted with the area's picnic grounds from the days when the Department of English at University of Wyoming held mid-afternoon dinner gatherings as part of a conference that has since fallen into disuse. A couple of times I was a presenter at the conference, at a time when I lived and taught in Tennessee but spent my summers in Wyoming.

My son and his family had built a home and started a hobby ranch near Buford that's within horseback-riding distance to Vedauwoo, provided one manages the tension gates and travels across public lands. One memorable New Year's Day Walter and I attempted the ride, only to renege and turn back halfway though when our toes turned icy in their boots. Another time, together with a group of parents and children, we hiked the easily-managed trail around Turtle Rock.

The hike with Wednesday Walkers happened on a golden day in late October. Stands of aspen were holding onto the last of their yellow leaves. Because hunting season had begun we all donned orange vests. At one point we spotted two bull moose across a beaver pond. Moose can become belligerent, but these two took no note of us whatsoever, despite our garish attire.

A few years back I was told that Vedauwoo once was a Native American sacred site, where tribes gathered for spring and autumnal ritual ceremonies. Naturally, I assumed that its name dates from that era. I was wrong.

What today is Vedauwoo used to be called Skull Rocks—until 1924, that is, when a play was produced in Box Canyon that turned into an extraordinary pageant. Mabelle DeKay, Yale class of 1901, a University of Wyoming Drama and English professor of the time, wrote the script.

Harold Gilbert's memoir about his acting career claims that Vedauwoo was named after the character he played in the pageant. The drama, also named Vedauwoo, sported a cast of nearly 500, from nymphs and sprites to Indians, trappers, and cowboys; even the university's dean and president were represented. 1800 people flocked to the first performance. In spite of the monumental production—or perhaps because of it—the play was performed only twice.

In the play, the character Vedauwoo first emerges from a hole to receive an education in Wyoming's natural wonders and its history. In due course he is transformed spiritually and changes into a man worthy to marry the chaste heroine.

But it was a missionary, the Reverend John Roberts, who coined the hero's name from the Arapaho word for "earth born," "bi-ito`o`wu." So impressive was the outdoorsy drama, the locals no longer talked of going to Skull Rocks. Now they called the rocky outcropping "Vedauwoo."

The wilderness is within easy reach off the I-80 Exit 329, and the Turtle Rock trail provides a comfortable stroll of less than three miles. Hikers take in an impressive mix of geological and biological wonders. They may even spot a number of rock climbers getting up close and personal of what was once Skull Rocks. I'm told that the path circling Turtle Rock is the most popular walking visit in the greater Cheyenne and Laramie areas.

The trails taken by Wednesday Walkers led into glens where the first frost coated puddles that had been left by the previous day's rain. A few patches of snow gleamed from their hiding places. The route descended and climbed from rocks into large pines. Once in a while the trees thinned, and one time we crossed open granite. Another time we heard the sound of splashing water and came upon a small but beautiful stream, a tributary of Middle Crow Creek that might be bringing the area's drinking water from as far back as the Snowy Range. The sky domed overhead in an incredible blue. It was the perfect day for an outing that provided the learning of something new.