

Butterfield Overland Despatch/Smoky Hill Trail (1865-1870) Possible Auto Tour Route from Kanopolis, KS to Cheyenne Wells, CO

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The Smoky Hill Trail — the shortest route to Denver from the Missouri River in northeastern Kansas — had a brief but active history during the 1800s summarized by Wayne C. Lee and Howard C. Raynesford (1980, *Trails of the Smoky Hill*, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 235 pages). The Smoky Hill Trail Association (<http://www.smokyhilltrail.com>) was formed in 2007 to preserve the historical legacy of the trail and its successors, including the Union (Kansas) Pacific railroad (the “first” transcontinental railroad route) and US Highway 40 (the Victory Highway dedicated in the 1920s to American dead in World War I).

As a tangent to research I conduct on the natural history of western Kansas streams — and just for fun — I drove a route across western Kansas that approximated the Butterfield Overland Despatch (BOD) along the Smoky Hill River. The route is based on studies by Kansas historian Howard Raynesford and is highlighted in green on the accompanying maps (gray highlight when printed in black-and-white). Road names and approximate mileages for the route also are listed for each county from east to west. Someone with a passenger car can drive all of these roads when they are dry and graded (I drove a Chevy Prizm). However, caution should be used, especially by people with limited experience on roads with surfaces of loose gravel and sand. Be alert for slow-moving farm vehicles and for vehicles over the crests of hills. Do not assume cross traffic will stop, even if they have stop or yield signs. And be prepared for some local drivers to wave as they pass in the opposite direction. It is a greeting, not some sort of rude gesture.

In 1963, the Kansas Legislature authorized the marking of the Smoky Hill Trail in western Kansas (Kansas Statute 68-1017), and 138 limestone posts engraved with “BOD 1865” were placed in a concrete base where the trail crossed modern roads from Kanopolis to the Kansas-Colorado border. The website <http://www.waymarking.com/cat/> has a category dedicated to documenting these markers (do a “category search” on the website for “BOD”). The 113 standing markers I have seen since October 2008 (a few were leaning or damaged) are marked on maps in the accompanying pdf files with green squares at their approximate locations; the squares extend to the side of the road or corner of the intersection where the marker is located. Broken markers (distinguished from limestone fence posts by their unique concrete base) are marked with a white square. Although at least 4 markers are broken, some of the 21 markers I have not seen probably are standing on side roads I have not checked or were hidden by vegetation.

Approximate sites of BOD stations and one campground are marked on the maps with green circles (identified in the text), but none are marked in a manner visible from the road. They are on private property; please do not enter without permission. The five federal forts built along or near the Smoky Hill Trail in western Kansas — Fort Ellsworth (Ellsworth County southwest of Kanopolis), Fort Harker (Ellsworth County in Kanopolis), Fort Fletcher (the original Fort Hays; Ellis County south of Walker), Fort Hays (Ellis County at Hays), and Fort Wallace (Wallace County southeast of Wallace) — are marked with blue circles on the maps. The Fort Hays-Fort Dodge Military Road in Ellis County and limestone markers are highlighted in blue.

Directions and maps for the route in northwestern Kansas are provided through the following links to pdf files for each county. **To print the files, be sure the “Comments and Forms” box in the upper right of the Adobe print screen is set to “Documents and Markups”.** Maps (1/4-inch scale) are from the Kansas Department of Transportation website (www.ksdot.org/maps.asp). City maps also are available on this website. Comments or corrections for my summary are welcome (meberle@fhsu.edu). Enjoy your journey in history.

[Ellsworth](#) | [Russell](#) | [Ellis](#) | [Trego](#) | [Gove](#) | [Logan](#) | [Wallace](#)

Many of the highlighted roads on the accompanying maps might not be drivable following rain or snow, some being no more than scraped dirt, with no gravel or sand added and no parallel drainage ditches. Under such conditions, routes with concrete or asphalt surfaces closely follow or cross some sections of the BOD trail described in the accompanying pdf files. Outlined here is a suggested auto tour route for periods during or shortly after storms. It can take several days for unpaved roads to dry, stream levels to drop at low-water crossings, and road crews to grade surfaces rutted by farm vehicles.

Kanopolis to Russell, Kansas

- Beginning at the site of Fort Harker in Kanopolis, Kansas, take Avenue L west from the museum and follow the paved road to Ellsworth.
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” (badly worn) about 1½ miles west of Kanopolis at the intersection of 16th Avenue on the north side (just east of the railroad crossing).
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker at the golf course on the north side of the road just east of the Kansas Highway 156 interchange as you enter Ellsworth.
- From the north side of Ellsworth, take Old Highway 40 west through Wilson and Dorrance. The BOD is within 2 miles of Old Highway 40, first north of the highway, then crossing to the south side of the highway just west of where the railroad passes over the highway. The highway closely parallels the Union Pacific railroad that gradually replaced the Smoky Hill Trail as tracks were laid from Kansas City toward Colorado beginning in 1863. The line had only reached Fort Riley (Junction City) by 1866 and Salina in 1867, but the entire route to Denver was completed in 1870.
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker on the south side of the highway at Gay Street just as you leave Ellsworth (a third marker is near the center of town at the intersection of 3rd and 8th Streets).
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker less than 1 mile south of Wilson on 105 Road (a paved road). It is on the west side of the road just north of Avenue E (a gravel road). Wilson, the “Czech Capital of Kansas”, has several restored limestone buildings.
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker a little more than 1 mile south of Dorrance on 200th Boulevard (a paved road; not 200th Street, a gravel road). It is on the east side of the road just north of Plymouth Road (a gravel road).
- From Dorrance, you can take Interstate Highway 70 west (interchange 199 to interchange 193), but I recommend staying on Old Highway 40, which runs along the south side of the interstate highway. The BOD trail is about 1 mile south of the highway.
- At interchange 193 on Interstate Highway 70 or the adjacent Old Highway 40, take 193rd Street (a paved road) south for 3 miles to Four Corners Road (also paved).
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker a little more than 1½ miles south on 193rd Street on the east side of the road.
- Take Four Corners Road 8 miles west to US Highway 281.
 - There are 3 limestone “BOD 1865” markers along or near Four Corners Road. The first is just north of the intersection with 189th Street (a paved road) on the east side of 189th Street. The second marker is nearby on the north side of Four Corners Road, ½ mile west of 189th Street. The third marker is southwest of the intersection of Four Corners Road and 186th Street (a gravel road).
- Take US Highway 281 north 3½ miles to Interstate Highway 70 (interchange 184) or, better yet, 5 miles north to Old Highway 40 (Wichita Street) in Russell.
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker along US Highway 281 about ½ mile north of Four Corners Road. It is on the west side of the highway.

Russell to Ellis, Kansas

- From Russell, take Old Highway 40 west to US Highway 183 at Hays (interchange 159 on Interstate Highway 70). Old Highway 40 again follows the Union Pacific railroad and passes through some small towns dominated architecturally by Catholic churches with exteriors of local limestone. The most widely known of these churches is the unique twin-spired “Cathedral of the Plains” in Victoria (built in 1908-1911; open to the public). Just north of the intersection of Old Highway 40 and Third Street at Victoria is a gravesite memorial for 6 of 7 railroad workers killed by Plains Indians in October 1867.
- Entering Hays, the highway will split. The right (north) branch becomes 8th Street and goes through downtown Hays and by Fort Hays State University, with its limestone-faced buildings, some of which are over 100 years old. The left (south) branch skirts the south edge of Hays toward Fort Hays State Historic Site, about 1½ miles west of the 4-way stop at the intersection with Vine Street (US Highway 183). If you choose to continue west on Old Highway 40, the two routes through Hays rejoin on the west side of town and go west under the overpass over the railroad.
 - Fort Hays State Historic Site (open year-round; <http://www.kshs.org/places/forthays>) is on the US Highway 183 Bypass west of the intersection with Vine Street (US Highway 183) on the south side of town. Fort Hays was established after the Civil War to protect the Smoky Hill Trail and the railroad construction crews across northwestern Kansas. Several original buildings are open to visitors.
- To follow the Smoky Hill Trail, at the 4-way stop on Vine Street on the south side of Hays, take US Highway 183 south about 5¼ miles to Antonino Road (a paved road).
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker along US Highway 183 about ½ mile north of Antonino Road (½ mile south of Butterfield Trail Road, a gravel road). It is on the east side of the highway.
- Go west on Antonino Road, which closely parallels the BOD, for 13 miles to Ellis Avenue.
 - Limestone “BOD 1865” markers are ½ mile or less north or south on the gravel roads that cross Antonino Road along virtually this entire section. Two markers are immediately adjacent to Antonino Road: one marker is just west of 160th Avenue on the south side and a second marker is just east of 140th Avenue on the north side.
 - Lookout Station was northwest of the intersection with 220th Avenue.
 - Louisa Springs Station was southwest of the intersection with 160th Avenue.
- Take Ellis Avenue north 11½ miles to Interstate Highway 70 north of the town of Ellis. Ellis was home to Howard Raynesford, the historian who documented the trail route and arranged the placement of the “BOD 1865” markers from Kanopolis to the Kansas-Colorado border.
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker southwest of the intersection of Ellis Avenue and Butterfield Trail Road (a gravel road 1 mile north of Antonino Road).

From Ellis Avenue, it is not possible to follow the BOD/Smoky Hill Trail closely on paved roads through Trego, Gove, and Logan counties, and the pavement on Old Highway 40 is now gravel through much of this section. Not being able to follow the BOD route through this area during wet weather is truly unfortunate, because some of the most beautiful scenery of limestone monoliths and large ranches in the Smoky Hill River valley occurs in southwestern Gove and southeastern Logan counties. This includes the Smoky Valley Ranch (16,800 acres) owned by The Nature Conservancy, part of which is grazed by bison and has a black-tailed prairie dog town visible from the gravel road. Federally endangered black-footed ferrets have been reintroduced here, but they are nocturnal and spend most of their time below ground, so you are not likely to see one.

Ellis to Colorado

- From Ellis (interchange 145), take Interstate Highway 70 to Oakley (interchange 76). This section of Interstate Highway 70 is less than 2 miles from Old Highway 40 and the Union Pacific railroad.
- Take US Highway 40 west from Oakley to Wallace.
 - The Butterfield Trail Museum (open summers) is housed in the 1887 stone-and-brick former courthouse for Logan County in Russell Springs, established at the site of Eaton Station on the BOD. Russell Springs is 12 miles south of US Highway 40 (18 miles west of Oakley) on Kansas Highway 25. There is a “BOD 1865” limestone marker on the grounds just northwest of the museum.
 - In Wallace County, the BOD/Smoky Hill Trail is within 5 miles south, then north, of US Highway 40.
 - On the highway just east of the town of Wallace is the Fort Wallace Museum (open summers). The fort was about 1 mile east and 1 mile south of the museum (on gravel roads), but only the post cemetery remains. The museum grounds include the Pond Creek Station building, the only remaining structure on exhibit from any of the stations included in this summary for northwestern Kansas. The station originally was about 1½ miles west and 1 mile south of the museum.
- Take US Highway 40 west from Wallace to Colorado.
 - There is a “BOD 1865” limestone marker on the north side of the highway about 3 miles west of the Fort Wallace Museum.
 - The final BOD station in Kansas was about 4½ miles north of US Highway 40 on 3 Road (a gravel road). Blue Mound (Big Timbers) Station was named for the grove of cottonwoods that formerly grew in this section of the Smoky Hill River valley, an unusual sight along the river in western Kansas in the 1860s.

Cheyenne Wells is 17 miles west of the Kansas-Colorado border on US Highway 40. The station (Old Wells) was about 6 miles north on US Highway 385 and 1 mile east on W Road (a gravel road) on the south bank of the Smoky Hill River. Cheyenne Wells is near the “headwaters” of the Smoky Hill River, so the trail followed more than one route from here to Denver.

The northern trail route “cuts across country” from Old Wells Station to near present-day Hugo, where it merges with the southern route for a few miles. From near Hugo, the northern route generally follows US Highway 40 to Denver, which rejoins Interstate Highway 70 at Limon. Just east of Strasburg (interchange 310) is Comanche Crossing, where, on 15 August 1870, the railroad constructed to the west from Kansas met the railroad constructed to the east from Denver. Because there was no permanent railroad bridge across the Missouri River at Omaha in 1870, as there was in Kansas City, Comanche Crossing claims the “final spike” in the first truly transcontinental railroad route to California — by way of Kansas City and Denver to Cheyenne, Wyoming and the main line of the Union Pacific railroad.

The southern trail route ran southwest from Old Wells Station (crossing US Highway 40 about 6 miles west of Cheyenne Wells) to Big Sandy Creek, which it follows northwest to just southeast of Limon. The southern trail route is near US Highway 40 from Kit Carson to near Limon; it covers the same ground as the northern trail route from near Hugo to near Limon. From near Limon, the southern route passes through present-day Kiowa, Parker, and Aurora (Colorado Highways 86 and 83 and nearby roads). Three of the trailside “mile houses” named for their distance from the trail terminus in Denver (Four-Mile House in Denver, Seventeen-Mile House north of Parker, and Twenty-Mile House in Parker) are still standing. The Pioneer Monument/Smoky Hill Trail marker (erected in 1911) is at the western terminus of the trail in Denver at the intersection of Colfax Avenue (US Highway 40) and Broadway.