

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. 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 116 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 22 markers I have not seen probably are standing on side roads I have not checked or were hidden by vegetation.

Sites of BOD stations and one campground are marked only generally in the center of sections away from roads on the maps with green circles to discourage looters. **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 northern portion of the Fort Hays-Fort Dodge Military Road in Ellis County and its 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”.** The base maps (1/4-inch scale) are from the Kansas Department of Transportation website (<http://www.ksdot.org/maps.asp>). City maps also are available on this website. Comments or corrections are welcome (e-mail: meberle@fhsu.edu). Enjoy your journey in history.

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

Inclement Weather Route on Paved Roads for the Smoky Hill Trail and Kansas Pacific Railroad

This tour begins in central Kansas at Kanopolis and runs to Colorado — the trail segment marked by Howard Raynesford. 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 Smoky Hill 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 vehicles.

A few museums and historical sites are mentioned in this itinerary. Many communities along the route have history or fossil museums, but only museums and historical sites dealing with western history through the era of the Smoky Hill Trail and its replacement by the Kansas Pacific Railroad are mentioned here. Stop at the others as your tastes dictate and support their efforts to educate and to protect our history, culture, and natural history.

As you look for Raynesford's limestone "BOD 1865" posts, they are often located near fence lines along the road. In the eastern portion of the tour route, they can be difficult to distinguish from limestone fence posts. The challenge of finding them is part of the fun.

Kanopolis to Russell, Kansas

- Beginning at the site of Fort Harker in Kanopolis, take Avenue L west from the museum and follow the paved road to Ellsworth.
 - Fort Harker Museum Complex in Kanopolis (open year-round; admission fee; <http://myellsworth.com/echs/>). Four original sandstone buildings constructed in 1867 remain: the Guardhouse (now the museum), Commanding Officer's Quarters, and two Junior Officer's Quarters. One Junior Officer's Quarters building is a private residence; the other three buildings are open to the public.
 - There is a limestone "BOD 1865" marker (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 Smoky Hill Trail is within 2 miles of the highway, first north of the highway, then crossing to the south side of the highway just west of where it passes under the railroad. The highway closely parallels the 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.
 - A limestone "BOD 1865" marker is on the south side of the highway at Gay Street just as you leave Ellsworth (another 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 (paved). 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 (paved; NOT 200th Street, which is a gravel road). It is on the east side of the road just north of Plymouth Road (a gravel road).
- From Dorrance, I recommend staying on Old Highway 40 rather than traveling on Interstate Highway 70. Old Highway 40 runs along the south side of I-70. The Smoky Hill Trail is a little more than 1 mile south of the highway.

- About 6 miles west of Dorrance on Old Highway 40, turn left on 193rd Street (paved) and go south 3 miles to Four Corners Road (also paved). This would be south from exit 193 on I-70.
 - There is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker a little more than 1½ miles south on 193rd Street on the east side of the road.
- Turn right on Four Corners Road and go 8 miles west to US Highway 281. After 3 miles, the Smoky Hill Trail is less than ½ mile from this road.
 - There are 3 limestone “BOD 1865” markers along Four Corners Road. The first is just north of the intersection with 189th Street (paved) on the east side. The second 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).
- Turn right on US Highway 281 and go north 3½ miles to I-70 (exit 184) and continue another 1½ miles north into Russell to Old Highway 40 (Wichita Street).
 - You will pass a limestone “BOD 1865” marker along US Highway 281 about ⅓ mile north of Four Corners Road. It is on the west side of the highway.

Russell to Ellis, Kansas

- From Russell, turn left on Old Highway 40 and go west to the south side of Hays. Old Highway 40 follows the railroad, but runs about 4–5 miles north of the Smoky Hill Trail.
 - Many small towns in this region are 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 1908-1911; open to the public).
 - At Victoria, just north of the intersection of Old Highway 40 and Third Street, is a small gravesite memorial for 6 of 7 railroad workers killed by Plains Indians in October 1867.
- Entering Hays, the highway splits. The right (north) branch becomes 8th Street and goes through downtown Hays and past 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. The two routes through Hays rejoin on the west side of town and go west under the overpass over the railroad. However, a paved road south of Hays closely parallels the Smoky Hill Trail.
 - Fort Hays State Historic Site (open year-round; admission fee; http://www.kshs.org/fort_hays) is on the US Highway 183 Bypass about 1⅓ miles 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 in northwestern Kansas. A museum and several original buildings are open to visitors.
- To follow the Smoky Hill Trail, turn south at the 4-way stop on Vine Street and Old US Highway 40 on the south side of Hays and take US Highway 183 south about 5¼ miles to Antonino Road (paved).
 - About 4¾ miles south, there is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker along US Highway 183 (½ mile south of Butterfield Trail Road, a gravel road). It is on the east side of the highway.
- Turn right on Antonino Road, which closely parallels the Smoky Hill Trail, and go west 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 is just west of 160th Avenue on the south side and a second is just east of 140th Avenue on the north side.
- Turn right and take Ellis Avenue north for 11½ miles through the city of Ellis to I-70. 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 Smoky Hill Trail closely on paved roads through Trego, Gove, and Logan counties, and the pavement on Old Highway 40 is now gravel through most of this section. Not being able to follow the Smoky Hill Trail 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 Monument Rocks, isolated limestone monoliths just north of the Smoky Hill River in Gove County. The Smoky Valley Ranch (16,800 acres) owned by The Nature Conservancy is just to the west in Logan County; public access to the ranch is limited. However, part of the ranch 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, Kansas to Colorado

- From Ellis (exit 145), take I-70 to Oakley (exit 76). This section of I-70 is less than 2 miles from Old Highway 40 and the railroad, but it is about 10–20 miles north of the Smoky Hill Trail.
 - A nice sidetrip on paved roads to explore other aspects of western history is south of Oakley from US Highway 40 on US Highway 83.
 - ❖ About 20 miles south, there is a limestone “BOD 1865” marker on the east side of the highway, just north of the bridge over the Smoky Hill River.
 - ❖ About 10 miles farther south, turn right (west) on Kansas Highway 95. The 6-mile-long highway will turn to the south and pass through Scott State Park (vehicle entrance fee; <http://www.kdwpt.state.ks.us/news/State-Parks/Locations/Scott>). In addition to a small, reservoir in a canyon, the park includes the most northeasterly Pueblo Indian site — El Cuartelejo. It was established in the late 1600s by Pueblo Indians trying to escape the Spanish in New Mexico, although the Spanish eventually forced them to return. Foundations of a small pueblo studied by state archeologists can be seen at the park. The park also includes the Steele Homestead Museum in the stone house built over 100 years ago by Herbert Steele.
 - ❖ About 1 mile south of the park off Kansas Highway 95 is Battle Canyon, a Scott County historic site where, on 27 September 1878, a group of Northern Cheyenne fought US troops pursuing them as they fled the reservation in Oklahoma back to their lands in the north. Features of the battlefield remain, and a monument commemorates what was the last such engagement between American Indians and US troops in Kansas.
 - ❖ About 10 miles south on US Highway 83 from the southern end of Kansas Highway 95 is Scott City. The El Cuartelejo Museum (open year-round; donations appreciated; <http://www.elquartelejomuseum.org/>) has information and exhibits on the historical sites mentioned.
 - ❖ From Scott City, return about 44 miles north on US Highway 83 (bypassing the turnoff for Scott State Park) to US Highway 40 at Oakley.
- Take US Highway 40 west from Oakley.
 - Travel about 19 miles west of I-70 exit 76 (or 17 miles west of the junction with US Highway 83 from Scott City) to the junction of Kansas Highway 25.
 - ❖ While traveling west on US Highway 40, after passing through the town of Monument and just before reaching the town of Page City (you will see the grain elevators in front of you), watch the railroad along the north side of the highway for an old limestone arch under the tracks at a dry stream crossing.
 - ❖ During the summer, a sidetrip associated with the Smoky Hill Trail is 12 miles south on Kansas Highway 25 to the Butterfield Trail Museum (donations appreciated; <http://www.windyplains.com/butterfield/>). It 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. Exhibits include artifacts from the Smoky Hill Trail. There is a “BOD 1865” limestone marker on the grounds just northwest of the museum. From Russell Springs, return north on Kansas Highway 25 to US Highway 40.

- Take US Highway 40 west from the intersection of Kansas Highway 25 to Wallace.
 - Through Wallace County, US Highway 40 parallels the Smoky Hill Trail, which is within 5 miles south and then north of the highway.
 - On the highway just east of the town of Wallace is the Fort Wallace Museum (open summers; donations appreciated; <http://www.ftwallace.com/>). The actual fort was about 1 mile east and 1 mile south of the museum (on gravel roads), but only the post cemetery remains (it is open to the public, but no military graves remain); the fort grounds are on private property and are not open to the public. The museum includes a large collection of artifacts from the era of the fort. It also includes 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 west and south of the museum. The museum association also owns a historic railroad depot and the former Section House built for the Kansas-Pacific Railroad in 1879. The two-story, limestone Section House is just north of the grain elevator in Wallace and can be seen from the highway.
- 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 (after crossing the railroad overpass).
 - The final BOD station in Kansas was about 4½ miles north of US Highway 40 on 3 Road (a gravel road). Blue Mound Station was sometimes referred to as Big Timbers 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. The limestone “BOD 1865” markers end at the Kansas-Colorado border.

Continuing West through Eastern Colorado

Cheyenne Wells is 17 miles west of the Kansas-Colorado border on US Highway 40. Cheyenne Wells is near the topographical headwaters of the Smoky Hill River, so the Smoky Hill Trail followed more than one route from here to Denver.

The northern trail route ran from north of Cheyenne Wells to near present-day Hugo, where it merged with the southern trail 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 (exit 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 north of Cheyenne Wells (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.