

Westward, Ho!

As a young girl of 12 or 13, I was in love with the romance of the American West, and my favorite TV show was The Virginian.

Once a week, actor James Drury, as the Virginian, and the other men from the Shiloh Ranch would converge, riding horseback, on a stretch of road near Medicine Bow, Wyoming, galloping onto the TV screen and straight into my heart.

These young men were great...they were cowboys!

I would watch countless episodes, mesmerized by the way they handled horses, drove cattle to winter pastures and fought the bad guys. Week after week, justice prevailed and the West and the American dream were preserved.

I suggested a vacation in Medicine Bow. I'd get a chance to see this wonderful place, the land of author Owen Wister's 1902 classic book *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*.

My dad was a wise man. He informed me we probably wouldn't see Shiloh Ranch at all and that the filming occurred elsewhere. I wouldn't let my hopes be dashed, however. There would at least be cowboys.

I counted down the days until we were finally off to the promised land from our home in Amery, Wisconsin.

We crossed the Mississippi and set out to explore Minnesota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, and then, finally, Wyoming. The Wyoming border signs welcomed me with bucking broncos. I traced my finger around the map to towns with colorful Western names like Sundance, Buffalo, Cody, Cheyenne and Laramie.

At last, we pulled into Medicine Bow, where a sign read, “Population 392.” Another sign featured the Virginian’s most famous words, “When you call me that, SMILE.”

We found the Virginian Cafe and had lunch. There, I purchased an authentic paperback copy of Wister’s novel that had made this town so famous.

After lunch, we roamed the streets; it didn’t take long. I couldn’t find any remnants of the Longbranch Saloon, with its swinging doors and long, shiny counter.

And there weren’t as many trees as portrayed on the TV show. It really didn’t matter, though. There were cowboys.

Dad had been kind to let me come here, but now it was time to leave. As we made our way back to the car, the proprietor of a rock shop caught our attention.

Dad inquired about the road to Casper.

“Yep,” the man said. “Good road. Kind of long and not much traffic, but a good road. Smooth as this sidewalk.”

We wondered how good 90 miles of this smoothness was really going to be. But, true to his word, the road was good. The landscape was arid and had sparse, wide-open spaces dotted with buttes. A brilliant, blue sky stretched as far as the eye could see.

I did not want to leave Wyoming. This was the real West, the harsh, unforgiving terrain that had challenged pioneers over 100 years ago.

And this was truly Owen Wister’s area, the land that became home to The Virginian.

—Joanne F., Amery, Wisconsin