

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

### 1. Name of Property

historic name: Black Otter Trail  
other name/site number: Rimrock Road/Rimrock Drive/24YL1580

### 2. Location

street & number: Black Otter Trail not for publication: n/a  
city/town: Billings vicinity: n/a  
state: Montana code: MT county: Yellowstone code: 111 zip code: 59105

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally.

*Mark F. Samber / SAPO*  
Signature of certifying official/Title

11/21/2006  
Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office  
State or Federal agency or bureau

( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

### 4. National Park Service Certification

hereby certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register  
     see continuation sheet  
 determined eligible for the National Register  
     see continuation sheet  
 determined not eligible for the National Register  
     see continuation sheet  
 removed from the National Register  
     see continuation sheet  
 other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

*[Signature]*  
Signature of the Keeper

1/5/2007  
Date of Action

**5. Classification**

<b>Ownership of Property:</b>	Public	<b>Number of Resources within Property</b>	
<b>Category of Property:</b>	District	Contributing	Noncontributing
<b>Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register:</b>	n/a	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> buildings
		<u>3</u>	<u>0</u> sites
		<u>5</u>	<u>6</u> structures
		<u>1</u>	<u>   </u> objects
<b>Name of related multiple property listing:</b>	n/a	<u>9</u>	<u>6</u> Total

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions:**

RECREATION: outdoor  
TRANSPORTATION: road related  
FUNERARY: grave

**Current Functions:**

RECREATION: outdoor  
TRANSPORTATION: road-related; pedestrian-related  
(bike/hiking) hiking trail

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification:**  
n/a

**Materials:**  
foundation: n/a  
walls: n/a  
roof: n/a  
other: concrete, sandstone, cobblestone, asphalt; wood

**Narrative Description**

Located in southcentral Montana, the Black Otter Trail is situated across the top and eastern slope of the rimrocks that overlook Billings, MT.<sup>1</sup> These rimrocks are composed of Eagle sandstone, deposited as the inland sea receded eastward over 60 million years ago during the Cretaceous Period. The massive weathering of the Eagle sandstone creates the steep valley wall that serves as a prominent backdrop for the City of Billings. Billings is nestled between the Yellowstone River to the south and the rimrocks to the north, on the eastern edge of the area historically known as Clark's Fork Bottom. It is the largest city in Montana with a population of over 100,000 and serves as the socio-economic center for eastern Montana, northern Wyoming and western North Dakota.

The Black Otter Trail is a 2.8 mile historic scenic roadway begun in 1936 under a New Deal Works Progress Administration (WPA) program. The entire trail is within the City of Billings Parks system. The Trail is anchored to the east by Boothill Cemetery, a National Register Site (listed 4/17/1979) that contains the graves of individuals who lived in the town of Coulson, the first settlement in the Clark's Fork Bottom. To the west, the trail historically was anchored, although today discontinuous to, the "Range Rider of the Yellowstone" statue located next to the Yellowstone County Museum at the entrance to Billings Logan International Airport.

Black Otter Trail begins at the eastern end of the rimrocks above Alkali Creek and winds through the scattered timber across the east and south face of the rimrocks. The road climbs towards the summit of Kelly Mountain, the highest point on the rims, and then descends in a westerly direction to the base of the mountain. This eastern portion exhibits associated features like stone retaining walls, stone road markers, remnants of observation points and interpretative signs. The primary historic site at the top of Kelly Mountain is the grave site of Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly, a well-known Montana scout and explorer.

From the western base of Kelly Mountain, Black Otter Trail stretches across the open, flat, grassland plateau of the rims in an almost due west direction one mile until it angles slightly north to intersect with Airport Road. From this portion of the trail, spectacular views to the south, across the cityscape and beyond to multiple mountain ranges, are unobstructed.

(see continuation sheet)

<sup>1</sup> The rimrocks are a sandstone rock formation north of the Yellowstone River that extend for miles to the east and west, but for the purpose of this nomination, rimrocks only refer to the portion that Black Otter Trail travels over.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Applicable National Register Criteria: A

Areas of Significance: RECREATION; TRANSPORTATION

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): C (Kelly's Grave)

Period(s) of Significance: 1936 to 1956

Significant Person(s): n/a

Significant Dates: 1936

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect/Builder: n/a

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

**Summary Statement of Significance**

The Black Otter Trail is significant under Criteria A for its association with one of the largest WPA road improvement projects in Billings. Hand labor, rather than machinery, was specifically chosen for construction of the road in order to maximize the number of workers and their length of employment on the project. The Black Otter Trail also represents the efforts by the citizenry of Billings, both private and public, to develop a scenic rimrock drive and tourist attraction as well as the continuous efforts to promote the Black Otter Trail and the historical and cultural sites along the road after its construction. The Black Otter Trail remains essentially unaltered from its original design in 1936.

The site retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and conveys its historic appearance and character. With some attention it could be returned more fully to its historic condition and wonderfully represent an earlier era of civic pride that promoted scenic vistas and historic settings.

Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly's grave meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration C (grave of a Historical figure) because it is "the only substantial intact link" to Kelly's productive life as an explorer and scout in Montana.

**Introduction**

North of the Yellowstone River, striking rimrocks rise above the valley floor once known as the Clark's Fork Bottom. Joseph Medicine Crow, the renowned Crow historian, believes the Crow were the first of the modern tribes to come to the rimrocks and regarded that place as a main part of the Crow Country.<sup>18</sup> The Yellowstone Valley served as home to the Crow for many centuries, while numerous other tribes camped and hunted here. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 gave much of the Yellowstone River Basin west of the Powder River to the Crow Tribe. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 reduced Crow Reservation boundaries by removing all lands north (thereby including the rimrocks) and west of the Yellowstone River.<sup>19</sup>

The rimrocks are recognized as a culturally significant place by the Crow Indians, who claim spiritual, cultural and historical associations. High places, such as the rimrocks, are important places for spiritual activities such as fasting and vision quests and as burial places. The Crow warrior Two Leggings wrote that while fasting near the rims area he dreamed of seven men and one woman appearing "on the rimrocks north of the present town of Billings, singing "Buffalo are coming toward me." Roger Turns Plenty understood that the Crow "used those high areas as fasting places . . . to get spiritual help." Mary Wallace and Nelson Wallace both mention that the Crow used the rimrocks as a burial place where they made "Four Legs" (scaffolds) for burials.<sup>20</sup>

(see continuation sheet)

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Medicine Crow Interview. Archaeological evidence indicates that early native peoples have visited this Yellowstone River region in the vicinity of Billings for over 10,000 years.

<sup>19</sup> Crow Treaties and agreements are available in Charles J. Kappler, compiled and edited, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* 2 vols. (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office (GPO), 1904; <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/>).

<sup>20</sup> George Reed, Jr. as quoted in Blain Fandrich, "Swords Park: A Cultural Resource Inventory," Prepared for HKM Engineering by Ethnoscience, Inc., Billings, MT, 2003: 7; Roger Turns Plenty Interview; Mary Hogan Nelson Interview; Nelson Wallace, Jr. Interview.

**9. Major Bibliographic References**

(see continuation sheet)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
  - Other State agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Specify Repository:

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property:** approximately 2.8 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	12	695735E	5075053N (east terminus)
B	12	694855E	5074465N
C	12	692960E	5074645N (west terminus)

**Legal Location (Township, Range & Section(s)):**

The Black Otter Trail transects portions of the following:  
T1N R26E, SW1/4 of Section 27; the SE1/4 and SW1/4 of Section 28; NE1/4 and NW1/4 of Section 33; SE1/4 Section 29.

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The boundary of the Black Otter Trail Historic District begins at the east end of the rimrocks, at the intersection of the Swords Lane Bypass with the east terminus of the Black Otter Trail. The boundary encompasses the entire length of the trail or approximately 2.8 miles from its beginning point at the east end of the trail to its western terminus where it intersections with Airport Road. The boundary encompasses all segments of the road, including the loop encircling Skeleton Cliff and the two branches that split around Kelly Mountain.

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary encompasses the linear path of the Black Otter Trail.

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Joan L. Brownell and Blain Fandrich on behalf of Montana Department of Transportation  
organization: MDOT date: November 2006  
street & number: 2701 Prospect Ave telephone: (406) 444-6258  
city or town: Helena state: MT zip code: 59620

**Property Owner**

name/title: City of Billings Parks Department  
street & number: 360 North 23rd Street  
city or town: Billings state: MT zip code: 59101

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 1

The entire Black Otter Trail's unique location and setting, simple design and construction techniques allows it to convey its original historic feeling, appearance and character as a WPA scenic roadway. The roadway retains the alignment of its original construction and extensive off-road motorized trails have not destroyed the trail's integrity.

**Description of Resources**

**BLACK OTTER TRAIL HISTORIC DISTRICT (24YL1580)**

Black Otter Trail Historic District consists of the linear scenic roadway called Black Otter Trail. This scenic roadway extends from the rimrocks eastern edge to near the east end of airport. The roadway displays historic features like stone retaining walls and stone road markers. All historic stone work along the roadway is considered contributing to the historic district.

The Black Otter Trail Historic District also consists of three historic sites stationed adjacent to the trail. The primary historic site is Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly's grave site. "Yellowstone" Kelly, a famous Montana explorer and scout, requested that his remains be buried in Montana. In July 1929, Kelly was buried on a high point on the rimrocks, overlooking the Yellowstone River Valley. The unpretentious grave site consists of a concrete block and concrete headstone surrounded by a deteriorating cobblestone and cement base.

The two other historic sites are two observation point remnants, both situated on high points along the trail. The Billings Commercial Club (predecessor to the Chamber of Commerce) in 1938 began extensive promotional efforts for the scenic Black Otter Trail. By 1944, these efforts culminated with the location of observation points. Positioned at "excellent vantage points," the Billings Commercial Club believed that these observation posts "permit interesting views of the valley and distant mountain ranges." Markers placed at these posts identified seven mountain ranges surrounding Billings.<sup>2</sup> At a later date, telescopes were permanently mounted at the observation posts to allow visitors better views of distant scenery. Today these observation point remnants are in varying stages of deterioration and all the telescopes have been removed.

By 1944, the Commercial Club also erected road markers and interpretative signs to identify historic and cultural sites either along the Black Otter Trail or visible from it. All signs originally stood on concrete bases faced with cobblestone and framed on log posts. In 1956, the Chamber of Commerce replaced all interpretative signs due to vandalism. At some point after 1956, all signs were removed and today, only two remnants have been located.

The two observation point remnants are contributing sites within the Black Otter Trail Historic District. The minimal remnants of the interpretative signs are considered small scale features, collectively counted as one contributing object.

**Black Otter Trail** (*one contributing structure*)

The Black Otter Trail is a scenic roadway that crosses the top and east end of the rimrocks north of the City of Billings. This paved road is approximately 16 feet in width and extends approximately 2.8 miles in a generally east/west direction.

From east to west, the path of the Black Otter Trail begins at the bottom east end of the rimrocks off the Swords Lane bypass, immediately south of the intersection of Airport Road and Alkali Creek. The road heads in a westerly direction for approximately 600 feet, then switchbacks to traverse the east side slope. The road then continues to wrap around the rimrocks across its southeast slope. As it swings around the slope, a loop diverts from the main road to encircle a solitary knoll, called Skeleton Cliff, on the edge of the rims.

The main road climbs gradually across an open area until it splits near the crest of a side slope of Kelly Mountain. One branch proceeds in a northwesterly direction through scattered timber, incorporating several wide curves before beginning to descend to the

<sup>2</sup> *Midland Review*, September 20, 1944.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 2

open flat plateau that constitutes the top of the rims. The other branch cuts below the high point of Kelly Mountain across the south side of the rims until it rejoins the first branch to traverse the open flat plateau.

The tops of the rimrocks provided a "natural roadbed" that needed little construction. Black Otter Trail continues from the base of the west slope of Kelly Mountain, and extends in an almost straight due west linear path across the top of the rims towards the airport terminal. Originally the road proceeded to the airport but the construction of Airport Road in 1956 destroyed this last road section. Today the west end of Black Otter Trail curves northward to intersect with Airport Road.

Features found along the eastern portion of Black Otter Trail are: a vehicle stone barrier, two stone retaining walls and numerous stone road markers. Associated sites along the road include remnants of observation points and interpretation signs. Of particular historic interest is the Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly grave site.

*Vehicle barrier (one contributing structure)*

This vehicle barrier is situated in a wide area adjacent to the first switchback at the base of the rimrocks approximately 530 feet into Black Otter Trail from its east terminus. This low barrier wall aligns the downhill (north) side of the road. It is made of hand cut sandstone blocks and cement and measures 141 feet long, three feet tall and two and one-half feet wide. This lichen-covered wall retains its shape and form. The vehicle wall is positioned at the wide area that "was improved at the start of the ascent so that there will be sufficient room to turn around in case that the driver should desire to return to the airport by the new road."<sup>3</sup>

*Stone road markers (one contributing structure)*

Stone and cement road markers align the downhill side of Black Otter Trail along its eastern route. Originally, the road markers' alignment appears to have been evenly spaced, but today, due to vandalism, the alignment is more irregular. These pyramid-shaped road markers are made of rough hand cut sandstone blocks and cement. Each road marker measures approximately three feet square at the base and stand approximately four feet tall. The road markers extend from the east end of the trail, beginning at the first switchback, to the west end of Kelly Mountain. They define the downhill side of the road including the loop that encircles Skeleton Cliff and both branches of the road around Kelly Mountain.

The road markers are in varying stages of deterioration. The four sides of the road markers have weathered considerably over the years. Some road markers have been destroyed and others vandalized and found pushed down the slopes. A few still exhibits a single cobblestone at the top of the pyramid that served as a decorative element. The *Billings Gazette* reported during the construction that "strong guard rails will border the highway on the mile and a half area. The road will be fool-proof and give reckless motorist no opportunity to hurdle the guard rail and crash down the steep side of the hard sandstone hills."<sup>4</sup> There is no indication of guard rails on the road markers.

These distinctive stone road markers define the road and even today in their deteriorated state, impart a special character to the Black Otter Trail. Historic postcards of Black Otter Trail, often hand tinted, present the narrow road along the rims with a row of stone markers aligning the road's edge overlooking the Yellowstone Valley in the distance.

*Wood posts (one non-contributing structure)*

Wood posts intermittently align the Black Otter Trail right-of-way, apparently placed to curtail off-road travel. The posts are approximately one foot square and stand two feet high. They are connected by coiled metal and evenly spaced. It is unknown when these wood posts were installed but they are not considered contributing components of the historic Black Otter Trail.

*Retaining walls (two contributing structures)*

Two well-defined retaining walls are situated along Black Otter Trail. These walls are both composed of dry laid (unmortared) sandstone of varying sizes and irregular shapes. One retaining wall is located on the downhill side of the loop that surrounds Skeleton

<sup>3</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 15, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 3

Cliff. This wall extends approximately 45 feet in length. The second and more substantial wall is situated around Kelly Mountain on its downhill (south) side. This wall extends approximately 240 feet in length.

According to Art Lever, the county road supervisor in the 1930s, the sandstone on the road "is in precise strata form" and workmen could "break most of the layers with pick and ax. After the layers are loosened, the pieces are placed at the outer side of the road to build the embankment."<sup>5</sup>

**Observation Point 1** (*one contributing site*)

This observation point is situated on Skeleton Cliff, an isolated knoll on the south slope of the rimrocks where a loop of the Black Otter Trail surrounds the knoll. The knoll itself is covered with some scattered pines and sparse grasses. The observation point remnant is reached from the Black Otter Trail by climbing the barren north slope of the knoll.

This site consists of a cobblestone pyramid which stands on the top and slightly left of center of the small high knoll. The pyramid stands approximately four feet in height and measures four foot square at its base and tapers to almost three feet at its top. It consists of a sandstone base, 20 courses of river cobbles bonded with cement, and is topped with a concrete cap. A two inch diameter steel pipe is set in the center of the feature. This pipe originally supported the observation telescope.

According to L. M. Prill, in his *Midland Review* column "Driftwood," Chief Black Otter requested to be buried on this knoll so he could "look down the Yellowstone Valley and also look up the valley."<sup>6</sup> In 1944, the Billings Commercial Club's Black Otter Trail map showed this knoll as a lookout point and Black Otter's burial ground. They declared this knoll an "excellent vantage point from which to view the valley and distant mountains." Originally a marker at this location identified seven distant mountain ranges. Apparently a telescope replaced the marker sometime between 1944 and 1956. By 1962, the telescopes had been removed or destroyed by vandalism.<sup>7</sup>

**Observation Point 2** (*one contributing site*)

This observation point sits on the south edge of Kelly Mountain and is situated west of and slightly higher than "Yellowstone" Kelly's gravesite. The observation point remnant is approximately 100 feet west of the upper branch of the Black Otter Trail surrounding Kelly Mountain.

The site consists of the base of a cobblestone pyramid that once supported an observation telescope. The upper portion of the pyramid is gone, destroyed by vandalism. The remaining portion of the pyramid stands two feet seven inches tall, measures four feet three inches at its base and tapers to two feet nine inches at its upper portion where the top is broken off. The pyramid has a sandstone base and 14 courses of river cobbles bonded with cement.

The Billings Commercial Club also identified this observation point on their 1944 map, describing it as "an excellent vantage point from which to view the valley and distant mountains." A marker at this site identified the distant mountain ranges. A telescope replaced the marker sometime between 1944 and 1956. By 1962, the telescope was removed or destroyed by vandalism.<sup>8</sup>

**Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly's Grave Site** (*one contributing site*)

The grave of Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly is located near the highest point of Kelly Mountain. It sits on a fairly level open area. Gravel covers the site area, surrounding the grave site and utilized as a north sloping gravel parking area. From the upper branch of the Black Otter Trail surrounding Kelly Mountain, the grave is reached by a wide turnoff that ascends to a gravel parking area. The grave consists of a concrete block that measures approximately six and a half feet across and almost nine feet in length. The surface

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Midland Review*, May 24, 1944.

<sup>7</sup> *Midland Review*, September 20, 1944; *Billings Gazette*, October 14, 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 4

of the block was once studded with river cobbles of which a few remain intact. The coffin of "Yellowstone" Kelly was placed within this concrete crypt. A beveled headstone made of concrete rests atop the grave. Embedded in the headstone, a metal plaque currently reads: "LUTHER S. KELLY NEW YORK CAPTAIN 40 US VOL INF JULY 27, 1849 DEC 17 1928." A wrought iron fence once protected the grave and was in place by September 1944. The fence was embedded in a three course cobblestone and cement base set approximately five feet out from the grave. Today the fence is gone and the base is partially buried by gravel.<sup>9</sup>

Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly's life has been well documented, both by his own biography and articles and biographies of his life.<sup>10</sup> Born in New York in 1849, Kelly joined the Army during the Civil War. He came to Montana Territory in the early 1870s and served as a scout for both General Forsyth in 1873 and Colonel Nelson Miles from 1876 to 1878 at Fort Keogh. A frontiersman and explorer, he is credited for his accurate map of the Yellowstone River. Later in life, he traveled and worked in Alaska and the Philippines and eventually retired to a fruit farm in California. "Yellowstone" Kelly died on December 17, 1928.

In July 1927, Kelly wrote a codicil to his will where he requested his remains after his death be "tendered to the Authorities of the State of Montana, at Helena," stating that "I feel that my body will rest better in Montana, the scene of my earlier activities, than it would in the vastness of Arlington . . ." <sup>11</sup> While both Billings and Miles City campaigned for the honor, eventually the Montana Historical Society chose the rimrocks above Billings for Kelly's final resting place. Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly was interred atop Kelly Mountain on June 26, 1929.<sup>12</sup>

A recent interpretative sign installed by the City of Billings in 1998 sits northeast of the grave site.<sup>13</sup> It is a steel sheet mounted on a concrete base and reads:

YELLOWSTONE KELLY

"Keep not standing fixed and Rooted  
Briskly Venture, Briskly Roam"

And so he did. These words, oft' quoted by Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly, best describe his adventurous life. Born in New York in 1849, Kelly, a Civil War Veteran, wandered west after his discharge from the Army. He was a Scout, Guide, Trapper and Explorer. Kelly was instrumental in the 1870s-1880s exploration of the Yellowstone River Valley and its tributaries. In later years Captain Kelly served with the military in Alaska and the Philippines. Before his death, on Dec. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1928, he asked to be buried here, overlooking his beloved Yellowstone Valley.

GHM

<sup>9</sup> Yellowstone Kelly's gravesite has experienced numerous transformations over the years. A historic photograph of the grave shows the original headstone was part of the concrete coping that framed the grave. It is not known when it was replaced by the present headstone; photograph in Jerry Keenan, "Yellowstone Kelly: From New York to Paradise," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 40 (3) (Summer 1990): 27.

<sup>10</sup> Quaipe, M. M., editor, "Yellowstone Kelly" *The Memoirs of Luther s. Kelly*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1973); Jerry Kennan, "Yellowstone Kelly: From New York to Paradise," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 40 (3) (Summer 1990): 14-27. Mr. Keenan has a full biography on Kelly soon to be published by the University of New Mexico Press.

<sup>11</sup> Copy of Codicil to the Last Will and Testament of Luther S. Kelly, Small Collection 924, Luther S. Kelly, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT. No primary source has been located that Kelly specifically requested to be buried on Kelly Mountain overlooking the Yellowstone as often cited.

<sup>12</sup> *Billings Gazette*, June 25 and 26, 1929.

<sup>13</sup> The original interpretative sign for Kelly's gravesite once stood north of the grave, close to where the present interpretative sign is today. However, no evidence of this sign has been located.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 5

**Interpretative Sign Remnants** (*one contributing object*)

Two interpretive sign remnants are found in association with the Black Otter Trail, one on Skeleton Cliff and the second on the western slope of Kelly Mountain. Because of their smaller scale, these are counted collectively as one contributing object. On Skeleton Cliff, a pair of concrete footings, situated on the north slope of the knoll, once supported an interpretative sign. The footings are approximately nine feet apart and stand an estimated foot high. Cobblestones originally faced the concrete. The footings originally supported a log frame for an interpretative sign.

The Billings Commercial Club first erected interpretative signs along Black Otter Trail in 1944. Vandalism to the signs necessitated all new sign by the mid-1950s. The interpretive sign erected on Sacrifice Cliff by the Billings Chamber of Commerce in 1956 read as follows:

SKELETON CLIFF

This Butte got its name from its use as a burial place by the Crow Indians. A visitor to the place about 1860 describes it thus:

‘From each tree there was the skeleton, perhaps a hundred all told. The bones dangling from the branches. . . . Bright blankets had been used as shrouds swathing the bodies. The bodies were bound to the trees with tough rawhide thongs. On the ground beneath these there were scattered brass and copper rings, elk tooth necklaces, beaded moccasins, belts etc property of the dead.’

Presented by . . . . Billings Chamber of Commerce<sup>14</sup>

The second interpretive sign remnant consists of three features. Two are sandstone pyramid concrete bases that stand two feet three inches tall, measure four feet square at their base and taper to two feet nine inches at their top. Each consists of four courses of sandstone blocks bonded with cement. Three log segments that once supported the sign comprise the third feature. The sign placed here in 1956 read:

SACRIFICE CLIFF

Plenty Coups, the last of Crow Chiefs, was born near the base of this cliff in 1848. Some years before that, while a large band of Crow Indians was camped in the valley below, an epidemic of small-pox broke out and practically decimated the tribe. According to one legend only two braves survived, the others having fled or died. These two then cast themselves from this cliff, so as to join their friends and relatives in the Happy Hunting Grounds. Another version says that after a large number of the tribe had died from this dreadful disease, the Chief Medicine Man decreed that forty Braves should offer themselves as a sacrifice to appease the anger of the Great Spirit. These young warriors adorned in their ceremonial finery, mounted their ponies, forded the river, then blindfolding themselves and their horses rode to their death from the top of the high bluff across the river.

Presented by . . . Billings Chamber of Commerce.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The location of Skeleton Butte is another source of contention for local historians.

<sup>15</sup> The order of signs as presented by the Chamber from east to west had the Sacrifice Cliff sign before the Hart statue.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 6

Although there is still much contention about the location of Sacrifice Cliff, it appears the Chamber of Commerce sited Sacrifice Cliff across the Yellowstone River.<sup>16</sup> All of the Crow elders interviewed for this nomination (Mary Hogan Nelson, Wallace Nelson, Elias Goes Ahead, Roger Turns Plenty and Joseph Medicine Crow) commented about smallpox destroying a village along the Yellowstone. Several gave a similar story about either warriors or brothers who jumped to their deaths in despair over their loss. Nelson Wallace remembers his uncle told him that two brothers rode double, and the older brother blindfolded the horse and his younger brother and “whipped his horse and went over the rims.”<sup>17</sup>

*Modern Intrusions to Black Otter Trail Historic District (five non-contributing structures)*

Proximity to the largest urban center in Montana has resulted in several modern intrusions within the district boundary. A 911 communication tower built in 1998 is positioned near the summit of Kelly Mountain adjacent to the road. There is a high voltage transmission line that crosses over Black Otter Trail along the west side of Kelly Mountain. Smaller transmission lines also are visible across the top of the rims but are not considered overly intrusive in this urban setting.

The City of Billings Parks Department recently developed a small parking area and a shelter with picnic tables about midway along the western portion of the trail. Landscaping in this area consists of large sandstone boulders that have been placed along edges of trail. In 2005, the parks department constructed a ten-foot wide asphalt-covered multiple-use path that aligns with and snakes across Black Otter Trail in a few places. This path runs between a parking lot near 27<sup>th</sup> Street and the western edge of Kelly Mountain. Three concrete benches have been placed along the path at strategic locations.

**Integrity of Black Otter Trail**

The Black Otter Trail retains excellent integrity, derived from its unique setting, simple construction design and stone features that all reflect the character of the road since its construction. Comparisons between 1940 and 2006 aerial photographs reveal that the alignment of the roadway is basically unchanged. Disturbances to the surrounding terrain caused by off-road travel have been extensive but the aspect of the road allows it to maintain its own identity. While the telescopes have been removed from the observation points and only bases remain of the interpretative signs, the vistas from Black Otter Trail still allow the visitor to view “contrast and change” from the landscapes of mountains and rivers to the changing urban landscape of the city of Billings.

<sup>16</sup> This location is now part of the Bureau of Land Management’s Four Dances Natural Area. Many archaeologists now believe that Sacrifice Cliff is on the low rimrocks above Alkali Cliff north of the fairgrounds.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Hogan Wallace. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, May 31, 2006, Crow Agency, MT; Nelson J. Wallace, Jr. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, May 31, 2006, Crow Agency, MT; Joseph Medicine Crow. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, June 27, 2006, Lodge Grass, MT; Elias Goes Ahead. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, May 31, 2006, Hardin, MT; Roger Turns Plenty. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, June 22, 2006, Pryor, MT.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 7

For the Crow and later the whites, the Yellowstone River Valley served as a major transportation corridor. The "Road to Tongue River" followed the Yellowstone between Bozeman and Miles City. Alkali Creek flowed into the Yellowstone just east of the rimrocks and provided access to all points north. In Clark's Fork Bottom, the first town of Coulson, settled in 1877, was short-lived and surpassed by the establishment of the town of Billings in 1882. The new town of Billings was situated directly on the route of the Northern Pacific railroad, which arrived in Billings in 1883. Billings gradually grew into the major socio-economic trade center for the region and its transportation hub.<sup>21</sup>

**Scenic Road to the Rims**

A Bird's Eye View of Billings drawn in 1898 shows an anticipated Twenty-seventh Street climbing to the top of the rimrocks and disappearing across the rims to the east.<sup>22</sup> West of this imaginary road, Frank Zimmerman had already constructed his own route up the rims in 1890 to reach his sheep camps north of the rims, rather than detour around the rims to Alkali Creek.<sup>23</sup> The development of a public road across the rimrocks took decades.

It took over 30 years for a public road to be built on the rimrocks and during this time, the Billings Commercial Club (the predecessor to the Chamber of Commerce) led the efforts. Throughout the history of Billings, organizations like the commercial club, led by prominent businessmen, strove to promote the business interests and welfare of their community. In 1910, the Commercial Club supported construction of the Heffner Steps, 27 steps cut by Heffner Quarry workers up the face of the rimrocks, for the benefit of sightseers.<sup>24</sup> In 1911, Henry W. Rowley, president of the Billings Commercial Club, thought it was time to "look at that old Rimrock as something valuable after all" and cut a roadway to the top. Rowley felt a road would provide easier access for dry land farmers moving north of Billings. He also envisioned a park or golf course could be developed with proper access.<sup>25</sup>

Although it appears that a crude wagon trail developed over the rims, the impetus for a decent public route languished until after Montana began to recover from the drought and depression that followed World War I. Both automobile and airline travel began to transform the tourist industry and the Billings Commercial Club wanted part of the action. Three factors influenced the Commercial Club's support for a road to the rims in the mid-1920s. First, George W. Swords, a local civic leader, in 1925 donated 57 acres at the east end of the rimrocks to the City of Billings with the attached covenant that the lands be used for park purposes and recreational grounds.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, the City Council, supported by the Commercial Club, considered purchasing land on top of the rimrocks for an airfield. Thirdly, in November 1926, William "Bill" Hart, an actor in silent movie westerns, offered to place his statue on the rimrocks north of Billings, an offer the City readily accepted.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The definitive history of Billings in the nineteenth century is Carroll Van West, *Capitalism on the Frontier Billings and the Yellowstone Valley in the Nineteenth Century*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Augustus Koch, *Bird's eye view of City of Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana*, 1898, Map collection C-119, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, MT.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Zimmermann, *Zimmerman Trail*, (Billings, MT, 1977): 13-15.

<sup>24</sup> Joyce M. Jensen, *Pieces & Place of Billings History Local Markers and Sites*, (Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1994), 86-87.

<sup>25</sup> *Billings Gazette*, December 22, 1911. It is interesting to note that the route Rowley suggested was from 28<sup>th</sup> Street (not 27<sup>th</sup>) eastward across the rims.

<sup>26</sup> George W. Swords and Callie H. Swords to City of Billings, Record Deed Book 116, page 354, Yellowstone County Courthouse, Billings, MT. The City of Billings, in 1931, received a second donation of land from George Swords. This acreage adjoined his original donation to the north and included bottom lands along Alkali Creek. These parks were to be joined and always remain SWORDS RIM ROCK PARK" and the title always remain with the City of Billings. George W. Swords and Violet W. Swords to City of Billings, April 28, 1931, Deed Record Book 158, page 591, Yellowstone County Courthouse, Billings, MT.

<sup>27</sup> Yellowstone Genealogy Forum "Logan Field-Billings Airport," [www.rootsweb.com/~mtygfl/loganfield](http://www.rootsweb.com/~mtygfl/loganfield); see also the Billings Logan International Airport web page at [www.flybillings.com/history](http://www.flybillings.com/history); *Billings Gazette*, November 13, 1926. Carroll Van West found it ironic that a statue of a Hollywood actor would be celebrated rather than a "real" person, Carroll Van West, "Montana's Monuments: History in the Making," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 40 (4), (Fall 1990): 18.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 8

In March 1927, in preparation of the Hart statue unveiling, the City Park Commission began construction of "a new scenic highway along the top of the rimrocks which runs through the new Rimrock park adjacent to Boothill."<sup>28</sup> The plan, designed by members of the Commercial Club, was

to diverge from the Alkali Creek road a short distance beyond Boothill cemetery. It will be built further up against the hill to the south of the present trail and above the old powder house. The road then will continue up the ravine and will finally come out on top of the rimrock just above the entrance of the tunnel of the Billings Land and Irrigation Ditch, continuing from there a short distance from the rimrock.<sup>29</sup>

The Hart statue, entitled "A Range Rider of the Yellowstone," was dedicated on the Fourth of July 1927 during celebrations for the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Billings. Sculpted by Charles Cristadoro of Los Angeles, the full-sized statue of Hart and his horse originally stood at the edge of the rims east of its present location. The Hart statue attracted crowds to the top of the rims and for the unveiling, cars "lined the new Boothill scenic highway from almost the top of the hill to the site of the monument."<sup>30</sup>

By 1928, the *Billings Gazette* described the newly constructed one-mile scenic drive as "interesting and novel."<sup>31</sup> However, the Billings Commercial Club strove to improve the scenic road so it would be "pleasant to travel" for the "Yellowstone" Kelly burial celebration.<sup>32</sup> In 1927, Luther S. "Yellowstone" Kelly, towards the end of his life, added a codicil to his will requesting that the State of Montana accept his remains to be buried in Montana. Kelly wrote "I feel that my body will rest better in Montana, the scene of my earlier activities . . ."<sup>33</sup> He died in December 1928. On June 26, 1929, "Yellowstone" Kelly, with full military honors, was laid to rest on the high point of Kelly Mountain overlooking the Yellowstone Valley.<sup>34</sup>

For "Yellowstone" Kelly's ceremony, individuals were asked to leave their cars "parked along the rimrock road" and walk to the grave site on top of Kelly Mountain.<sup>35</sup> A year after Kelly's burial, I. D. O'Donnell, a prominent Billings businessman representing Suburban Homes Company, offered the City of Billings land on top of the rimrocks that included Yellowstone Kelly's gravesite. O'Donnell's offer stipulated that the city build and maintain a road to the Kelly monument. He thought a loop road would "enhance" the scenic attractions along the rimrocks. O'Donnell suggested a route with an easy grade which "would do away with the rather steep grade and sharp turn which must be made by cars wishing to go up to the site of the Kelly grave from the scenic drive up to the Bill Hart monument and the airport."<sup>36</sup>

Opened in May 1928, the rapid growth of the airport, situated on the level surface of the rims, increased traffic along the scenic drive. By 1931, historic aerial photographs show a fairly distinct and well-traveled road from the airport eastward across the top of the rims. The time-consuming and arduous trip from downtown Billings to the airport via the scenic road served as the catalyst for a more direct airport route. Support for this endeavor culminated in 1934 when the city blasted a road across the south face of the rimrocks. This new road extended North 27<sup>th</sup> Street to the airport and presumably relieved traffic traveling over the rimrock drive. A "not in my backyard" group called the "Billings Rimrock Club" exclaimed that the money could be better spent in improvements to the present airport road for a "beautiful scenic road."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 27, 1927.

<sup>29</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 27, 1927.

<sup>30</sup> *Billings Gazette*, July 5, 1927. Hart Statue was moved in the late 1930s to its present location near the airport.

<sup>31</sup> *Billings Gazette*, November 28, 1928.

<sup>32</sup> *Billings Gazette*, May 3, 1929.

<sup>33</sup> Codicil, Special Collection 924, Luther S. Kelly, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, MT.

<sup>34</sup> *Billings Gazette*, June 25 and 26, 1929.

<sup>35</sup> *Billings Gazette*, June 26, 1929.

<sup>36</sup> *Billings Gazette*, November 12, 1930; Blain Fandrich reviewed deed records from 1928 to 1931 but could not find any reference to this land transaction.

<sup>37</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 19, 1932.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 9

As the depression deepened in the early 1930s and unemployment across Montana increased, the City of Billings and Yellowstone County began to apply for funds available through the New Deal programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. In November 1933, the City of Billings submitted a proposal to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for improvements to city parks that included plans for the construction of a new road to the Kelly gravesite. The road, slated for construction in "extremely cold weather" was to "branch off the airport highway, near the present trail leading to the summit, and would include rock retaining walls and culverts where needed." The plan also included construction of a "road into the lower limits of Rimrock park, the city's most eastern possession not developed." However, no evidence has been located that the CCC ever conducted any work in Billings.<sup>38</sup>

In January 1936, Yellowstone County submitted a proposal to the WPA for a county-wide road and road structure project, one of the most common WPA projects in the West. Yellowstone County was one of 21 counties in Montana to receive these funds and as a project sponsor, provided equipment and materials. Charles E. Durland, the Yellowstone County surveyor, directed the projects within the county.<sup>39</sup>

The county-wide WPA road project included the development of a scenic rimrock road. This scenic road would replace the "rugged trails that provided a natural roller-coaster" and were often impassable in inclement weather. Art Lever, the county road supervisor, reported: "Travelers over the contemplated road will be within sight of Billings virtually all the way from the eastern end of the rimrocks to the airport." The "new thoroughfare," combined with the North 27<sup>th</sup> Street extension to the airport, will "provide a scenic loop which its sponsors hold will be without rival in the community."<sup>40</sup>

On March 6, 1936, the WPA put 150 men to work on the scenic road, the largest work force employed under the county road project. "All hand labor, no machines whatsoever was being used to construct the drive. It is one of the few WPA projects which affords such opportunity of employment of the greatest number with no outlay for mechanical costs." After acquiring a 60 foot right-of-way, rock work commenced for the construction of a switchback. Specifications for the construction allowed a maximum six percent grade. An estimated three tons of dynamite reportedly would remove "hazardous rocks and other possible obstructions." In some places, the "road will be cut from hard rock."<sup>41</sup>

In early April, the work crews finished the grade work on the scenic road from the east end of the rimrocks to Kelly Mountain. The grade to the airport was expected to take about three weeks for approximately one and a half miles of roadway.

The scenic highway leaves the old road to the airport a short distance west of the Billings Rod and Gun club grounds and swings up a switchback at a grade of approx. 6 per cent to the knoll at the extreme east end of the rimrocks, the highest point along the rims. The road proper swings to the west of this knoll, which has no name, but in addition a road has been built around it. This loop is about 1,000 feet in length. With this, the grade work completed amounts to about a mile.

The maximum cut in the center of the road is about four feet, the surveyor said, but in some cases as much as 10 feet was cut and blasted away on the upper side of the highway.<sup>42</sup>

Work crews began to gravel and oil the scenic road but it is unknown how far the work extended. In mid-May, the WPA temporarily halted the construction on the scenic road, reportedly due to lack of manpower but primarily because of cut-backs to the WPA

<sup>38</sup> *Billings Gazette*, November 16, 1933. This newspaper reference has been used by several authors as proof that the CCC constructed a portion of the Black Otter Trail. However, a review of the *Billings Gazette* for the year 1934 found no references to CCC work being conducted in Billings.

<sup>39</sup> Proceedings of the County Commissioners, Regular Session, January 14, 1936 and January 20, 1936, Yellowstone County Courthouse, Billings, MT; *Billings Gazette*, February 27, 1936.

<sup>40</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 4 and 6, 1936. Other road projects included riprapping along Alkali Creek, removing overhanging rock from North 27<sup>th</sup> Street, and building and painting bridges.

<sup>41</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 6 and 15, 1936.

<sup>42</sup> *Billings Gazette*, April 7, 1936.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 10

administration. The WPA never resumed construction on the scenic road. In October 1936, the *Billings Gazette* presented a rather negative view of WPA work in the county.

The scenic road project that WPA officials said “would skirt the road of the rimrocks and provide one of the best scenic drives in this area of Montana” was started by some 300 WPA clients last February. They remained on that job for 90 days, then abandoned the project. Today WPA engineers say the job is about 30 per cent completed. It has not been worked since early in May. WPA offices here offer the hope that it eventually will be completed.

The WPA tour guide<sup>43</sup> states: “Through far from completed, it (the scenic road) has proven the most popular road in this vicinity, not only for its beautiful location but also for the unobstructed and wonderful view of Billings and the whole valley. This project is part of the county-wide road project and is sponsored by the Yellowstone county commissioners. All work is being done by relief labor and the material and equipment is furnished by the county. When completed, this will be one of Montana’s most interesting scenic drives.”

County commissioners have estimated that they have furnished materials costing \$70 and equipment costing \$700 for the scenic road. WPA officials announced that it would take hours and hours to figure out what they expended on the scenic road up to date. As yet, one-half mile of right of way has not been obtained.<sup>44</sup>

While it is unclear how much work really remained on the scenic road project, the Billings City Council, in August 1937, adopted a city budget that included funding for the completion of “unfinished and abandoned WPA projects.”<sup>45</sup> By 1938, the completion of the road brought a resurgence of promotional efforts for the new road.

In Spring 1938, the Tourist Committee of the Billings Commercial Club presented to the City Council a proposal that expressed “their desire to popularize the drive over the rim rock by naming this ‘Black Otter’s Trail’ in honor of an Indian Chief who was buried near the point of the grave of Yellowstone Kelly.” The City Council granted their request to erect “signs designating places of interest like ‘Place of Skulls,’ Black Otter’s grave, Yellowstone Kelly’s monument and other points of interest to the airport road.” They also planned to place signs on “light posts to attract tourist’s attention to this drive and give them proper direction.”<sup>46</sup>

The existence of a Crow chief named Black Otter, however, is questionable. Alice Ryniker remembers her father, county surveyor C. E. Durland, told her they just made the name up. The idea for the name is often attributed to Arthur Hart, an early Billings printer who lived among the Crow at one time. According to L. M. Prill, in his column “Driftwood,” the name was to honor “one of the old-time Crow Indians chiefs whose name was Bah-poo-tay Spita-cot.” Prill related a story told to him by Frank Shively, a mixed-blood, about the death and burial of Black Otter. Reportedly, Black Otter was mortally wounded on the Missouri River in a battle with the Sioux and requested that “his body be laid to rest in the center of Crow country – on the high point at the North end of the rims.”<sup>47</sup>

None of the five Crow informants interviewed expressed any knowledge of a Chief Black Otter as a member of the Crow Tribe. Joseph Medicine Crow had asked Crow historian Plainfeather if he knew of Black Otter and he said no and he thought the white man created this themselves. Elias Goes Ahead thought there might be some confusion between Black Otter and White or Little Otter, who

<sup>43</sup> This tour guide should not be confused with the WPA *Guide to the 1930 Montana* compiled and written by the Federal Writers’ Project.

<sup>44</sup> *Billings Gazette*, October 4, 1936.

<sup>45</sup> *Billings Gazette*, August 1, 1937.

<sup>46</sup> *Billings Gazette*, March 1, 1938.

<sup>47</sup> Alice D. Ryniker. Interview with Joan L. Brownell, May 15, 2006, Billings, MT; *Billings Gazette*, May 6, 1956; *Midland Review*, February 18, 1938.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 11

Elias believes was one of the brothers who jumped off Sacrifice Cliff. Elias has also reviewed censuses for the Crow Tribe but found no references to a Black Otter.<sup>48</sup>

With the naming of the scenic drive Black Otter Trail, the Billings Commercial Club initiated a major campaign to promote the scenic drive and historic sites. In April 1938, they began to distribute tourist folders with maps that described the Black Otter Trail "over the roof of the rimrocks." Later that same month, they placed a signboard advertising the Black Otter Trail in the lobby of the club building that included drawings by Crow artist Buster Bell Rock and a poem by Jack Horan entitled "Black Otter Trail."

The name Black Otter takes us back  
to a day many moons ago  
The redman on his hunting ground  
In the land of the buffalo.  
Just memories of a day gone by,  
Beneath Montana skies so blue  
In the land of the shining mountains  
Where today we welcome you.<sup>49</sup>

The outbreak of World War II curtailed these early efforts towards promoting Black Otter Trail. The Billings Commercial Club's promotional efforts revived after tourism in the West gained momentum. This was a result of increased mobility of the post-war economy. By September 1944, interpretive signs erected by the Billings Commercial Club described "points of interest" along the road. These signs included Boothill Cemetery, Place of Skulls, Yellowstone Kelly's tomb, Chief Black Otter's burial place and "Range Rider of the Yellowstone" monument. The Commercial Club also identified several observation posts and positioned sign markers with a figure of a black otter to designate the route.<sup>50</sup>

In the fall of 1944, the Billings Commercial Club sponsored a Chief Black Otter Trail contest and took out a full-page advertisement in the *Midland Review*. The purpose of the contest was "to secure ideas and designs for appropriately landscaping and furnishing" the Black Otter scenic trail to stimulate interest in the trail. Prizes were war bonds. LeRoy Greene, a renowned landscape artist who lived in Billings, won first prize for his charcoal drawing of Chief Black Otter. Other prize winning suggestions included the erection of a partial ruined "bastion" or fur trading fort by J. K. Ralston and the reproduction of an Indian burial platform submitted by I.D. O'Donnell. Beth Ikerman suggested the emblematic head of Black Otter be used instead of a black otter for markers.<sup>51</sup>

In 1945, stimulated by the contest success, the Billings Commercial Club made the Black Otter Trail "the primary object of a postwar plan for the permanent development of visitor points of interest in the Billings area." The Commercial Club devised a forty-point program towards this purpose. Some of the plans involved the erection of a monument at Kelly's grave site; construction of an Indian prayer monument; a pioneer stockade; tree plantings, and "sowing flower beds of native Montana wild flowers placed in emblematic designs such as tepees, bows and arrows along the trail and development of the sky line along the Bill Hart monument site."<sup>52</sup>

Few of these plans came to fruition, possibly in light of vandalism that took its toll on the existing signs and markers along Black Otter Trail. In 1948, art departments from Billings's high schools and Eastern Montana College created three new replacement signs that were placed along the trail.<sup>53</sup> In 1956, the Commercial Club, now renamed the Billings Chamber of Commerce, invested in

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Medicine Crow Interview; Elias Goes Ahead Interview; Mary Hogan Wallace Interview; Nelson Wallace Jr. Interview; Roger Turns Plenty Interview.

<sup>49</sup> *Billings Gazette*, April 6 and 21, 1938; Roger Turns Plenty mentions Buster Bell Rock who was an artist hired to draw some Indian type paintings and drew some black otters on the side of the rimrocks on North 27<sup>th</sup> Street, Turns Plenty Interview.

<sup>50</sup> *Midland Review*, September 20, 1944.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*; *Billings Gazette*, February 7, 1945.

<sup>52</sup> *Billings Gazette*, August 12, 1945 by Elsie Simpson. The plan also called for foot trails and horseback trails on and around Chief Black Otter trail. Bike and hiking trails were just recently constructed in 2005.

<sup>53</sup> *Billings Gazette*, 1948 (no month or day available), located in vertical file "Black Otter Trail," Montana Room, Parnly Billings Library, Billings, Montana.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 12

---

seventeen new trail markers and seven new interpretative signs for the Black Otter Trail. The trail markers were diamond shaped with a profile of "Chief Black Otter" in red and luminescent at night. The new interpretative signs measured eight and one-half by four and one-half feet and suspended by logs 13 feet high with supports 12 feet apart. The order of the signs from east to west along the road were Chief Black Otter, Boothill Cemetery, the Immell and Jones Massacre, Skeleton Cliff, Yellowstone Kelly, Sacrifice Cliff and the Hart statue.<sup>54</sup>

Although the Tourist Committee Chairman Melvin Bernard hoped that community pride would help protect the new signs, vandalism continued along the Black Otter Trail.<sup>55</sup> North of Black Otter Trail, the 1956 construction of a truck route (Airport Road/Highway 3) across the rims between Alkali Creek and North 27<sup>th</sup> Street possibly exacerbated the problem by making the rims more accessible. Eventually, excessive vandalism forced the Chamber of Commerce to remove all interpretive signs and markers. In 1962, Kathryn Wright, a local historian, lamented the conditions of historic sites along Black Otter Trail, describing them as "trash-covered, vandalized and generally unknown."<sup>56</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the threat of development on the top of the rims brought a group of concerned citizens together who sought unsuccessfully to have the Rimrocks from Laurel to Pompey's Pillar designated a National Monument.<sup>57</sup>

After decades of neglect, the City of Billings today recognizes the natural and historical values of the Black Otter Trail to the community. They have developed a master plan ensuring the protection of Black Otter Trail for future generations. The plan acknowledges that the rims are "one of the few natural places left in the sprawling urban fabric of Billings. The Rims and Black Otter Trail are part of the life experiences of the residents of Billings and a place worth celebrating."<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> *Billings Gazette*, May 6, 1956.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Billings Gazette*, October 14, 1962.

<sup>57</sup> Kimbert Larsen. Interview with Joan L. Brownell, July 2, 2006, Billings, MT; Kimbert Larsen, "The Case for Rimrocks National Monument." (privately published, 1970).

<sup>58</sup> Fischer & Associates, "Swords Park & Black Otter Trail, A Master Plan," prepared for the City of Billings, 2004.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 9

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 13

---

**Bibliography**

Aerial Photographs, Western Heritage Collection, Western Heritage Center, Billings, MT.

*Billings Gazette*, various years beginning 1911. Many of these articles are available in the City of Billings file, Montana Room, Parmly Billings Library, Billings, MT.

Deed Record Books, Office of Clerk and Recorder, Yellowstone County Courthouse, Billings, MT.

Fandrich, Blain. "Airport Road: A Cultural Resource Inventory Along Montana Highway 3 From Main Street to Sky Ranch Drive in Billings, Montana." Prepared for HKM Engineering by Ethnoscience, Inc., Billings, MT, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Swords Park: A Cultural Resource Inventory." Prepared for HKM Engineering by Ethnoscience, Inc., Billings, MT, 2003.

Fischer & Associates. "Swords Park & Black Otter Trail A Master Plan." Prepared for City of Billings by Fisher & Associates, Billings, MT, 2003.

Goes Ahead, Elias. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, June 31, 2006, Hardin, MT.

Hall, George M. and C. S. Howard. "Ground Water in Yellowstone and Treasure Counties Montana." *Water-Supply Paper 599*. U.S. Geological Survey. Washington, D. C: Government Printing Office, 1929.

Haynes, F. Jay. Photographs of Billings. Haynes Foundation Collection, Photograph Archives. Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

Heidenreich, C. Adrian. "The Native Americans' Yellowstone," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 35 (4) (Autumn 1985): 2-17.

Jensen, Joyce. *Pieces & Places of Billings History: Local Markers and Sites*. Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1994.

Juisto, Chere. "Tales Spun along the Tracks: A History of Downtown Billings." Prepared for Yellowstone Historic Preservation Board, Billings, MT, 1998. [www.billings.com/billings.html](http://www.billings.com/billings.html).

Kappler, Charles J. compiler and editor. *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*. 2 Vols. Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1904; <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/>.

Keenan, Jerry. "Yellowstone Kelly: From New York to Paradise." *Montana the Magazine of Western History*. Vol. 40 (3) (Summer 1990): 14-27.

Quaife, M. M, editor. "*Yellowstone Kelly*" *The Memoirs of Luther S. Kelly*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973.

Lambert, Kimbert. "The Case for Rimrocks National Monument." Privately published, 1970.

Lambert, Kimbert. Interview with Joan L. Brownell, July 5, 2006, Billings, MT.

Lang, William, editor. *Stories From An Open Country Essays on the Yellowstone River Valley*. Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1995.

Medicine Crow, Joseph. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, June 27, 2006, Lodge Grass, MT.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 9

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 14

---

The *Midland Review*, May and September 1944.

Proceedings of County Commissioners, Yellowstone County, MT. 1933-1938.

Ryniker, Alice D. Interview with Joan L. Brownell, May 15, 2006, Billings, MT.

Stevens, Karen D. and Dee Ann Redman. *Billings A to Z*. Billings, MT: Friends of the Library, 2000.

Turns Plenty, Roger. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, June 22, 2006, Pryor, MT.

United States Department of Agriculture. Aerial Photographs. On file, HKM Engineering, Billings, MT.

Van West, Carroll. *Images of Billings A Photographic History*. Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Montana's Monuments: History in the Making." *Montana the Magazine of Western History*. Vol. 40 (4) (Autumn 1990): 12-25.

Vincent, William B. "The Road to Tongue River." *Archaeology in Montana*. Vol. 21 (2), 1980:193-204.

Wallace, Mary Hogan. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, May 31, 2006, Crow Agency, MT.

Wallace, Sr., Nelson. Interview with Mardell Plainfeather, May 31, 2006, Crow Agency, MT.

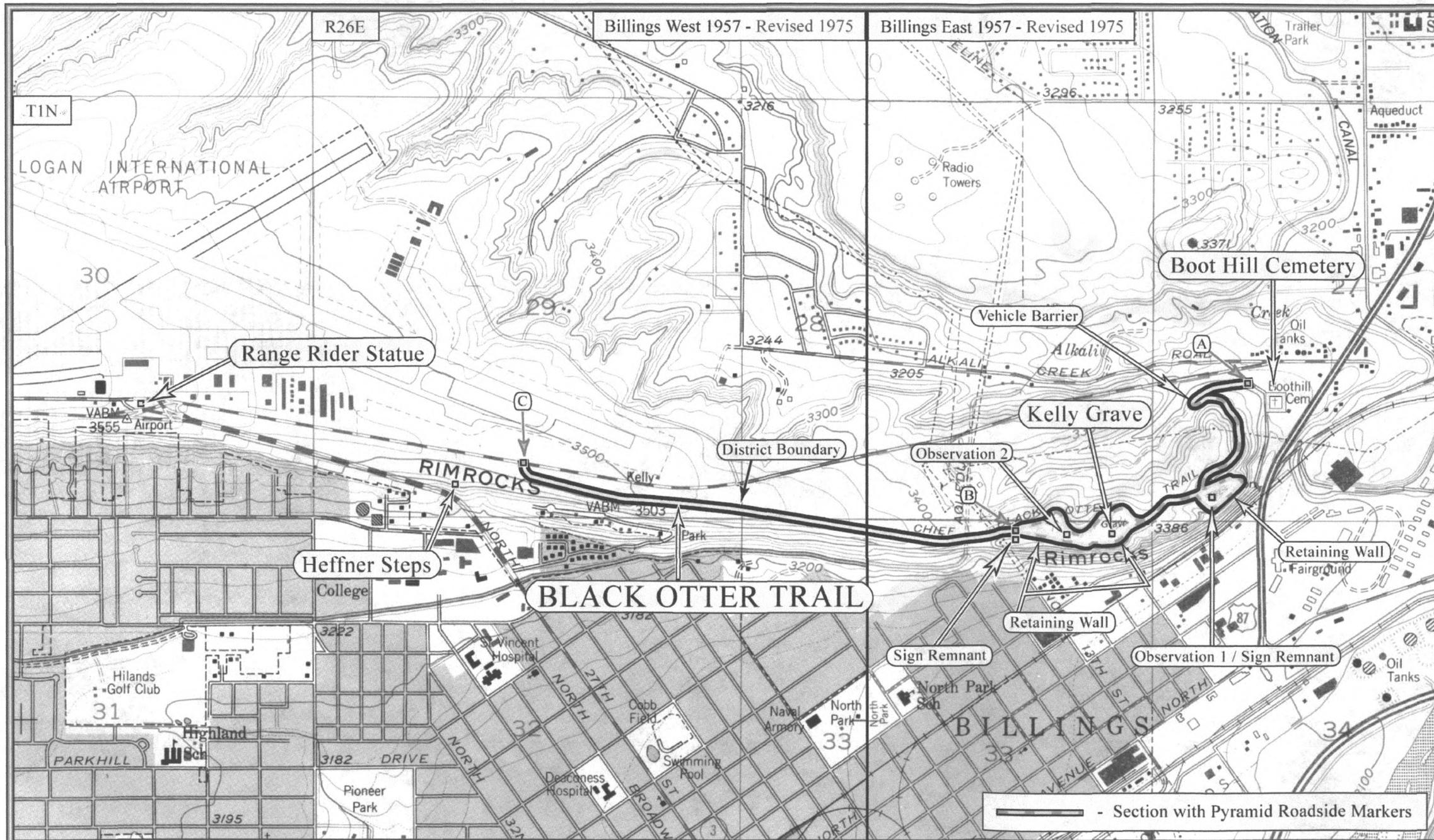
Works Progress Administration. *The WPA Guide to 1930s Montana*. Compiled and Written by Federal Writers' Project for the State of Montana. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1994 reprint.

Wright, Kathryn. *Billings The Magic City and How It Grew*. Billings, MT: The Reporter Printing & Supply Co., 1953.

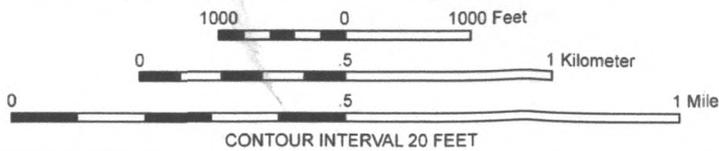
Yellowstone Genealogy Forum at [www.rootsweb.com/mtygf](http://www.rootsweb.com/mtygf).

Zimmerman, Charles. *Zimmerman Trail*. Privately published by Charles Zimmerman, 1977.

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet



BILLINGS WEST &  
BILLINGS EAST, MT  
7.5 MINUTE QUADRANGLES



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 16

**Photographs**

Photographer: Kristi Hager  
Date: May 2005  
Negatives: Montana Department of Transportation

<u>Photo Number</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	Context, from METRA PARK, 4 <sup>th</sup> and Main, view to northwest
2	Context, from Boothill Cemetery, view to southwest
3	Context, from Billings Heights, view to south
4	Context, from West End of Trail, view to east
5	Road Marker at Switchback, looking down at Boothill Cemetery, view to northeast
6	Road Marker along Loop around Skeleton Cliff, looking at Trail, view to North/northeast
7	Road Marker and rock formations, view to southwest [wide angle lens]
8	Road Marker and rock formations, view to southwest
9	Road Marker with Yellowstone River and Bluff in distance. View to southeast
10	North side of one-way Loop, view to northwest
11	South side of one-way loop, view to southwest
12	Retaining wall, view to northeast
13	Road markers, south side of one-way loop, view to east/northeast
14	South side of one-way loop, view to northwest
15	Retaining wall from below, view to northeast
16	Retaining wall, view to east
17	Barrier wall, view to southwest
18	Detail, barrier wall, view to northwest
19	Detail, road marker, view to south
20	Detail, graffiti, view to southwest
21	Large Rock Formation, view to southwest

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 17

Additional Photographs:

Photographer: Blain Fandrich

Date: May 2003

Negatives: Ethnoscience, Inc., Billings, MT

Photo Number

Description

22	Observation Point remnant, view to west
23	Interpretative sign remnant, view to west
24	Site Overview, view to northwest
25	Observation Point remnant, view to south
26	Observation Point overview, view to south
27	"Yellowstone" Kelly's Grave site, view to east
28	"Yellowstone" Kelly's Grave site overview, view to south
29	Interpretative Sign remnant, view to east
30	Interpretative Sign overview



22. Observation Point remnant, view to west (24YL1566)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 18



23. Interpretative Sign remnant, view to west (24YL1566)



24. Site Overview, view to northwest (24YL1566)

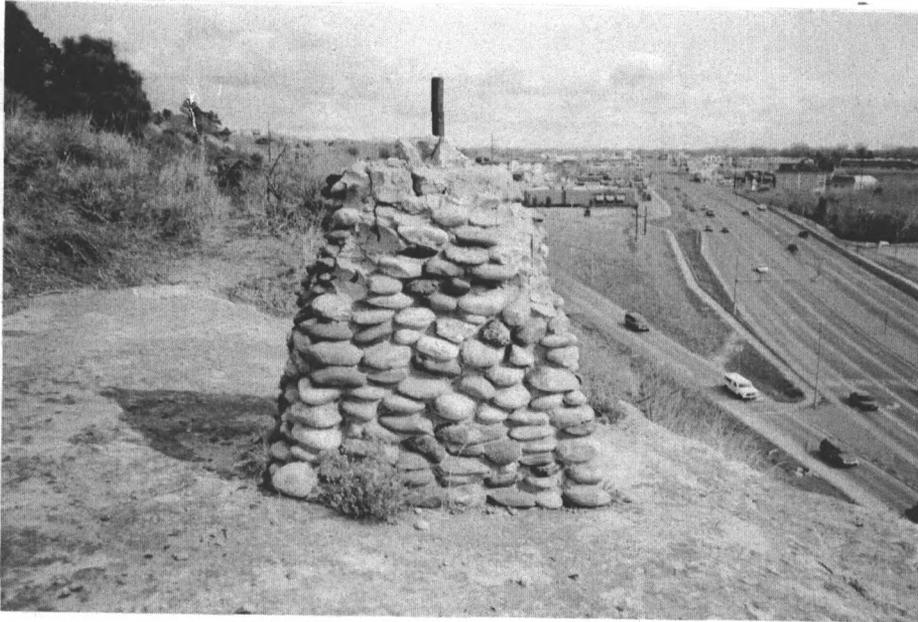
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 19



25. Observation Point remnant, view to north (24YL1567)



26. Observation Point overview, view to southeast (24YL1567)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 20



27. Observation Point remnant, view to south (24YL1569)



28. Observation Point Overview, view to south (24YL1569)

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

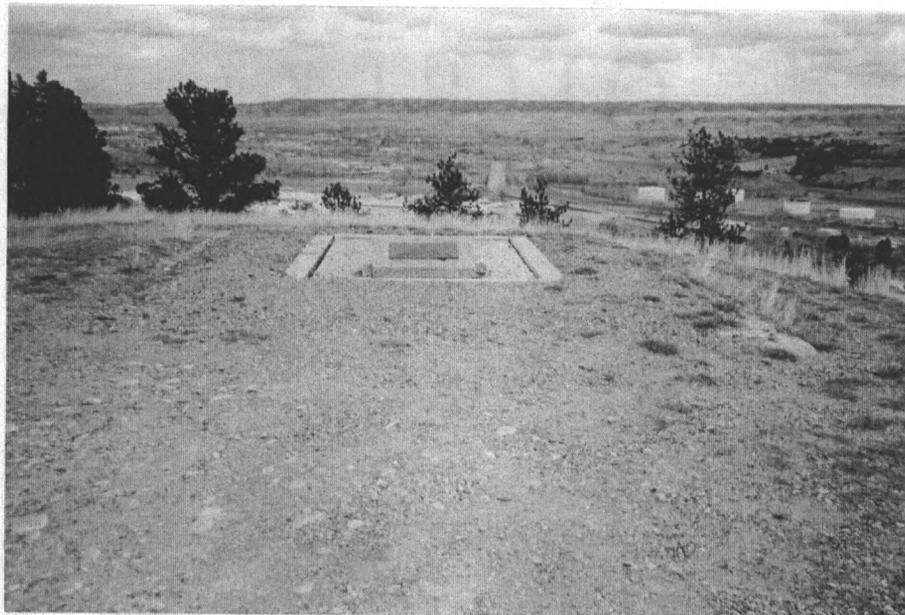
Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 21



29. "Yellowstone Kelly's" Grave Site, view to east (24YL1570)



30. "Yellowstone" Kelly Grave Site overview, view to south (24YL1570)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 22



31. Interpretative Sign remnant, view to east (24YL1573)



32. Interpretative Sign overview (24YL1573)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 23

Historic photographs



1937 Aerial photograph of Billings, Black Otter Trail visible across center of photograph.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 24



500 FT ALT.

Construction of Black Otter Trail at Kelly Mountain, c. 1936

Aerial photograph of construction of Black Otter Trail at Kelly Mountain, c. 1936. Arthur F. Salsbury Photographer, Bob Fears Collection, Western Heritage Center, Billings .

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 25

---

**Views along Black Otter Trail  
1947 Postcard Set**



View from Black Otter Trail Scenic Drive around Kelly Mountain in 1947  
Courtesy of the Western Heritage Center  
2001.04.01 Postcard Collection

1947 postcard of Black Otter Trail, courtesy of Western Heritage Center, Billings

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 26



Skeleton Cliff interpretative sign, 1955, courtesy of Western Heritage Center, Billings

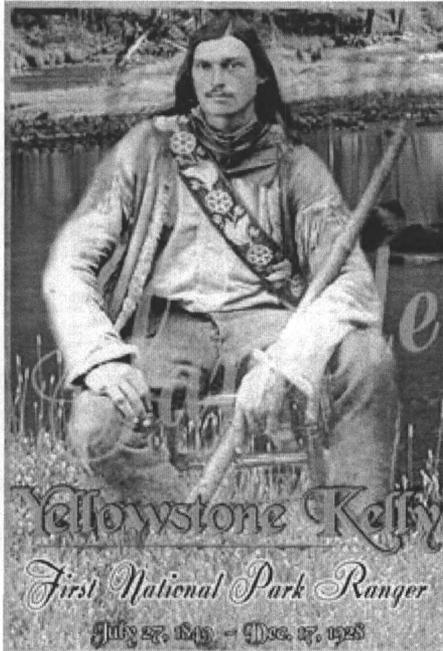
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

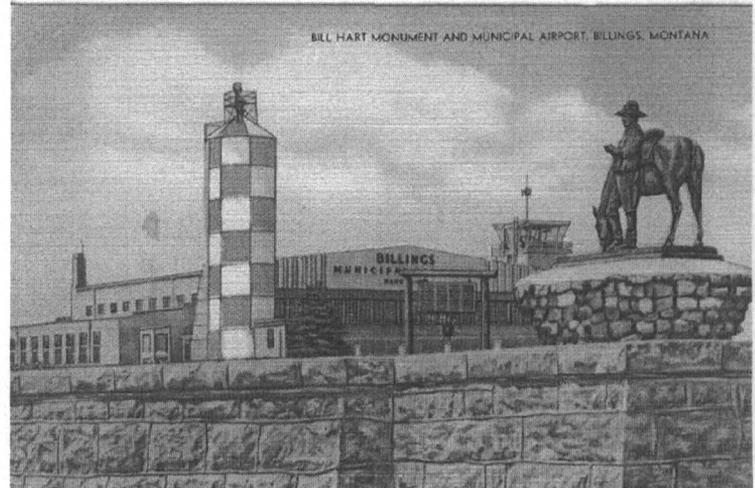
Photographs

Black Otter Trail  
Yellowstone County, MT

Page 27



Yellowstone Kelly, poster image.



Postcard of "A Range Rider of the Yellowstone" statue.



Chief Black Otter Trail sign on Black Otter Trail, 1955  
Courtesy of Western Heritage Center  
93.19.16 Photographic Collection

Modern concrete bench along trail, photo by Joan Brownell, October 2006.