

Rock Well Homestead  
North Rochelle Coal Mine Permit Area  
15 mis. SE of Wright  
Wright vicinity  
Campbell County  
Wyoming

HABS No. WY-109

HABS  
WYO  
3-WRTY,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ROCK WELL HOMESTEAD

HABS No. WY-109

HABS  
WYO  
3-WRT.V  
1-

Location: North Rochelle Coal Mine Permit Area, 15 miles southeast of Wright, Wright vicinity, Campbell County, Wyoming.  
E-1/2/NW/NW/NW, W-1/2/NW/NE/NW/NW Section 14, T42N-R70W.

USGS Piney Canyon SW, Wyoming, Quadrangle, UTM Coordinates:  
A.13.480720E.4822964N. B.13.480720E.4829495N.  
C.13.480560E.4829495N. D.13.480560E.4829640N.

Present Owner: Shell Mining Company, Houston, Texas.

Present Use: Abandoned.

Significance: The Rock Well or Thornburg Homestead is associated with early twentieth-century dry-land farming and ranching on the semi-arid lands of Campbell County. The stone dugout represents one of the best-preserved examples of this kind of dwelling in northeastern Wyoming. It is still in good physical condition and is unusually well crafted.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. The Rock Well Homestead

On November 26, 1923, Jack Thornburg received an enlarged homestead patent (No. 924270) for a 320-acre parcel consisting of the north half of Section 14, T42N-R70W. Thornburg first filed on the property on June 25, 1920. He also patented a 320-acre homestead on November 26, 1923, consisting of the north half of Section 13 adjoining the first parcel on the east, and he also filed on this property on June 25, 1920. He therefore had a total of 640 acres. George Thornburg, his brother, also patented two 320-acre parcels located just south of Jack Thornburg's property, consisting of the south half of Section 13 and the south half of Section 14. George filed on both parcels on May 26, 1919, receiving patents on December 9, 1922. The two brothers thus controlled two full sections of land.<sup>1</sup>

Preceding the Thornburgs, Hartwell B. Kelley of Gillette filed on two homesteads composing all of Section 14 on March 17, 1917. However, Kelley relinquished his homesteads on May 26, 1919. Since Kelley owned the land for over two years, it is possible that he could have constructed the stone dugout prior to Thornburg's occupancy.

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<sup>1</sup>Bureau of Land Management, Master Title Plats, Historical Indices, and Serial Register Books (Cheyenne: Land Office, Bureau of Land Management).

Thornburg homesteaded in a portion of Campbell County that was not generally settled until the 1920s. Although large cattle outfits ranged their cattle throughout the region in the 1880s, Township 42 North-Range 70 West had very few land entries prior to 1900. The area was poorly watered and far from main transportation routes. Although the railroad came to the region in 1891 and created the town of Gillette, Thornburg's homestead was nearly 60 miles south of Gillette. The settlement nearest to Thornburg's homestead was known as Tecla or Tekla. Tecla was little more than a post office, established on June 10, 1919, and discontinued on January 31, 1952. It was located in Section 35, T42N-R71W, near Porcupine Creek and about 6 miles southwest of Thornburg's homestead.<sup>2</sup>

The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 and the Stockraising Homestead Act of 1916 allowed settlers to file on large land parcels. These acts and the rise of the dry-land farming movement in Wyoming after 1900 encouraged homesteading on the more remote semi-arid lands that had been thus far shunned by homesteaders. Although a total of forty-five homestead entries were filed in this township between 1900 and 1920, only five entries were patented.<sup>3</sup>

The main homesteading period in Thornburg's township (T42N-R70W) occurred in the 1920s when Thornburg settled there. Between 1921 and 1929, a total of seventy-one land entries were filed, and sixty were patented.<sup>4</sup> Although these homesteaders may have met with initial success, the Great Depression and the accompanying drought cycles of the 1930s followed closely on the heels of prosperity, and many of these homesteads failed in the next decade. Most of these small homesteads were ultimately absorbed into a small number of large ranching units.

Jack Thornburg established his homestead at the beginning of the flurry of homestead activity around Tecla. Thornburg was born in Moberly, Missouri, on September 19, 1892. It appears that his brother George first came to the Tecla area and may have encouraged his brother to join him. However, the remainder of the large Thornburg family stayed in Missouri.

Jack Thornburg was 28 when he came to Campbell County in 1920. Since the brothers held adjoining homesteads, it is likely that they worked them together. Jack remained a bachelor throughout his life and resided on his homestead until his death on May 26, 1937, at the age of 45. He

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<sup>2</sup>John S. Gallagher and Alan H. Patera, Wyoming Post Offices from 1850-1980 (Burtonsville, Maryland: The Depot, 1980), 41.

<sup>3</sup>Dena S. Markoff, "Historical Assessment of the Rock Well Homestead, North Rochelle Mine, Campbell County, Wyoming" (Boulder, Colorado: Cultural Resource Management, Inc., August 1981), 14.

<sup>4</sup>Markoff, "Rock Well Homestead," 14.

died after a prolonged illness caused by tularemia and pneumonia. Tularemia is an infectious disease of rodents, especially rabbits, that could be transmitted to man in handling the flesh of infected animals or by the bite of certain insects. At the time of his death, his brother George was living in Midwest, perhaps attracted by the oil boom in the Salt Creek fields.<sup>5</sup> George acted as administrator of his estate, and deeded the land belonging to Jack and himself to B. Everett Reno. Reno thus obtained all of sections 13 and 14. The property remained in the Reno family until it was conveyed to the Peabody Coal Company in 1980 and subsequently to the Shell Oil Company.<sup>6</sup>

The effective historic occupation for the Rock Well Homestead appears to be from March 1877 to May 1937, when Jack Thornburg died. It is not known whether the Renos ever occupied the site or merely used it for livestock grazing.

B. Land Settlement in Campbell County, Wyoming

The region that now comprises the state of Wyoming was settled quite late in the nation's history. Arable land east of the Mississippi River had been claimed prior to the Great Westward Migration to Oregon, California, and the Salt Lake Valley that began in the 1840s. Although thousands of west-bound emigrants passed through the region on the Oregon Trail and other east-west migration routes, their goal was to reach more fertile lands to the west. The rapid populating of these fertile areas, coupled with the development of the cattle industry and Texas Trail drives in the late 1860s and 1870s, compelled the cattlemen to turn their attention to the northern plains.

With the building of the first transcontinental railroad through what is now southern Wyoming in 1867-68, distant cattle markets could be easily reached, and the vast grass and sagebrush that covered the lands of Wyoming Territory were found to be conducive to the fattening of livestock. Thus, Wyoming became more attractive to the prospective stock raiser. Unfortunately, the federal land policy already in operation had been conceived under far different environmental and climatic conditions east of the Mississippi River. Therefore, the various homestead acts passed by Congress to settle the public lands involved parcels that were too small for successful stock-raising operations in the semi-arid environment of Wyoming Territory. Although the prairie grasses proved nutritious to livestock, up to forty acres of range land were needed to maintain each animal.

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<sup>5</sup>News-Record (Gillette, Wyoming), May 27 and 28, 1937.

<sup>6</sup>"Memorandum of Title," Campbell County Abstract Company, Gillette, Wyoming.

Congress belatedly recognized the needs of the western rancher and farmer, but the resulting alteration in the land laws was piecemeal and often occurred too late to save the homesteader. Such untenable measures as the Timber Culture Act of 1873 assumed that somehow a homesteader on the northern plains could grow large stands of trees on semi-arid submarginal lands. The Desert Land Act of 1877 assumed that the West could be made to bloom like the eastern United States merely by irrigating unwatered lands. Legislators failed to realize that few year-round water sources existed in large portions of Wyoming Territory, and those that did were already usurped or controlled by the earliest arrivals.

The cattlemen were the first permanent white settlers to utilize the vast grasslands of Campbell County. However, they had been prevented from moving into the region until a government treaty in 1876 removed the indigenous Native Americans to reservations outside the territory. Several large cattle outfits were established within the present confines of Campbell County along the major drainages, and vast cattle herds roamed the intervening rangelands. The disastrous blizzard of 1886-87 accompanied by overstocking of the range destroyed many of the large cattle barons and ended the open-range system of ranching. As a result, the cattle industry of Wyoming was depressed for many years. Ranchmen learned to fence their lands and developed hay meadows for winter food supplies during severe storms.

The dry-land farming movement reached its height in Wyoming after 1900 at a time when the cattlemen were still rebuilding the industry. Dry-land farming involved a series of techniques that conserved available rainfall in order to grow crops in regions of light rainfall. This method of farming assumed a basic minimum annual rainfall of 15 inches. Encouraged by the promotional efforts of the state of Wyoming and the railroads, which sought to settle undeveloped areas through which their lines passed, thousands of unwary settlers were lured to the state and its unclaimed submarginal lands.

The town of Gillette was created when the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad entered the region in 1891. The Lincoln Townsite Company bought four homesteads that had been patented on July 25, 1891, by Frank Murrey, Robert and George Durley, and Charles T. Weir and platted the town that week. The first shipment of cattle from the region left the new town of Gillette on August 2. Gillette continued to grow during the early years of the twentieth century, with a population of 151 by 1900, 285 by 1905, and 448 in 1910. Gillette became the county seat when Campbell County was created from portions of Crook and Weston counties in 1911. By the 1915 census, Gillette had grown to 505 people, and Campbell County had a total population of 2,316. Most of the residents were engaged in farming and ranching. Only 7.4 percent of Campbell County residents were listed as foreign-born, and the coal industry that

would later play a major role in the economic development of the county had not yet developed beyond small wagon and ranch mines.<sup>7</sup>

## PART II. DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

The Rock Well or Thornburg Homestead is located along a shallow, ephemeral northwest-southeast-trending unnamed drainage surrounded by gently rolling sagebrush and grass-covered hills. The chief remaining features are a one-room rough-dressed, dry-laid sandstone dugout with a dirt-covered roof and a rock-lined well. The dugout is the only standing structure. However, there are at least three other wood-frame building sites, where the structures have been torn down and scavenged for lumber and other materials. There is also a light-to-moderate scatter of historic artifacts generally associated with the features.

Dugout (Feature A): see HABS No. WY-109-A

Well (Feature B) (see site map) (HABS No. WY-109-B)

Feature B is a circular rock-lined well (43" inside diameter, 74" outside diameter) from which the site derives its name. It is located to the southeast of the dugout in the drainage area, and the waterline was 6' below grade at the time of the survey. The well is partially covered with rotting log fenceposts.

Shed (Feature C)

Feature C appears to be the site of a shed or outbuilding located on the ridge above and northwest of the dugout. The feature is poorly defined but measures about 27' east-west by 35' north-south. The area is slightly depressed and there are vegetational differences where the building once stood. The soil is also darkly stained within the building perimeter and may represent burning or the storage of coal. The site is also marked by two felled dead tree sections. Associated artifacts consist of a silver-plated tablespoon, an embossed "Butternut" coffee can lid, a clear-colored whiskey flask base displaying the Owens-Illinois Glass Company trademark and a rather crude Owens ring on its base from an early automatic bottle machine, numerous oxidized tin can fragments, metal hardware from a wagon, and cream and dark brown crockery fragments.

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<sup>7</sup>Census of the State of Wyoming, 1905 and 1915; T. A. Larson, History of Wyoming (University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 323; Dena S. Markoff, "Cultural Resources of the Black Thunder Mine Permit Area, Southern Campbell County, Wyoming" (Boulder, Colorado: Western Cultural Resource Management, Inc., May 1981), 107-117.

Shed (Feature D)

This feature is poorly defined and is located close to the dwelling (Feature E). There appears to be a roughly rectangular outline measuring 14' x 18' inside a larger area of scattered milled lumber (28' north-south x 23' east-west). There is no depression or any rock alignments. Once again, the building site is suggested by vegetational change and erosion. Associated artifacts consist of numerous milled lumber fragments, portions of stud walls with sheathing, a window frame, round nails, the tree and front axle of a wooden farm wagon, a pair of sheep shears, chicken wire fragments, leather harness fragments, assorted metal hardware, a homemade branding iron ("5" or "S"), cream and dark brown crockery sherds, a 5-gallon rectangular fuel can, a paint can with a wire handle, thick window glass or glass from a vehicle, a rubber tire, bottle glass fragments (clear, aqua, and amber), a metal overalls button ("Oshkosh B'Gosh"), a tooth from a mowing machine and a mower blade.

House (Feature E)

This is a poorly defined feature measuring about 25' southwest-northeast x 20' southeast-northwest. There is no depression or formal rock-lined foundation, only vegetational changes and erosion to define the outline. A wood-frame building once stood on this site. The core area is surrounded by portions of stud walls and sheathing. Associated artifacts consist of four metal strap hinges, miscellaneous metal hardware, one rubber boot heel, a metal spring, a quart oil can (SAE-20), a .22 cartridge casing, light brown brick fragments, and clear, amber, and aqua-colored bottle glass fragments. There is an artifact concentration located 24' north of the northeast building corner. It consists of milled lumber fragments, metal engine parts from a vehicle motor, cast-iron woodstove parts, a mower blade, and clear, amber and amethyst-colored bottle fragments. About 31' north-northwest of this concentration is a second small concentration consisting of metal fence staples, seven shell buttons, a small oval metal belt buckle, one semi-porcelain ceramic sherd from the lid to a sugar bowl or creamer, and amber beer-bottle glass fragments.

About 100' northeast of Feature E are the remnants of a wooden farm wagon, including milled lumber fragments, U-bolts, and carriage bolts (see HABS photo WY-109-2). There are also some cream and dark brown crockery fragments.

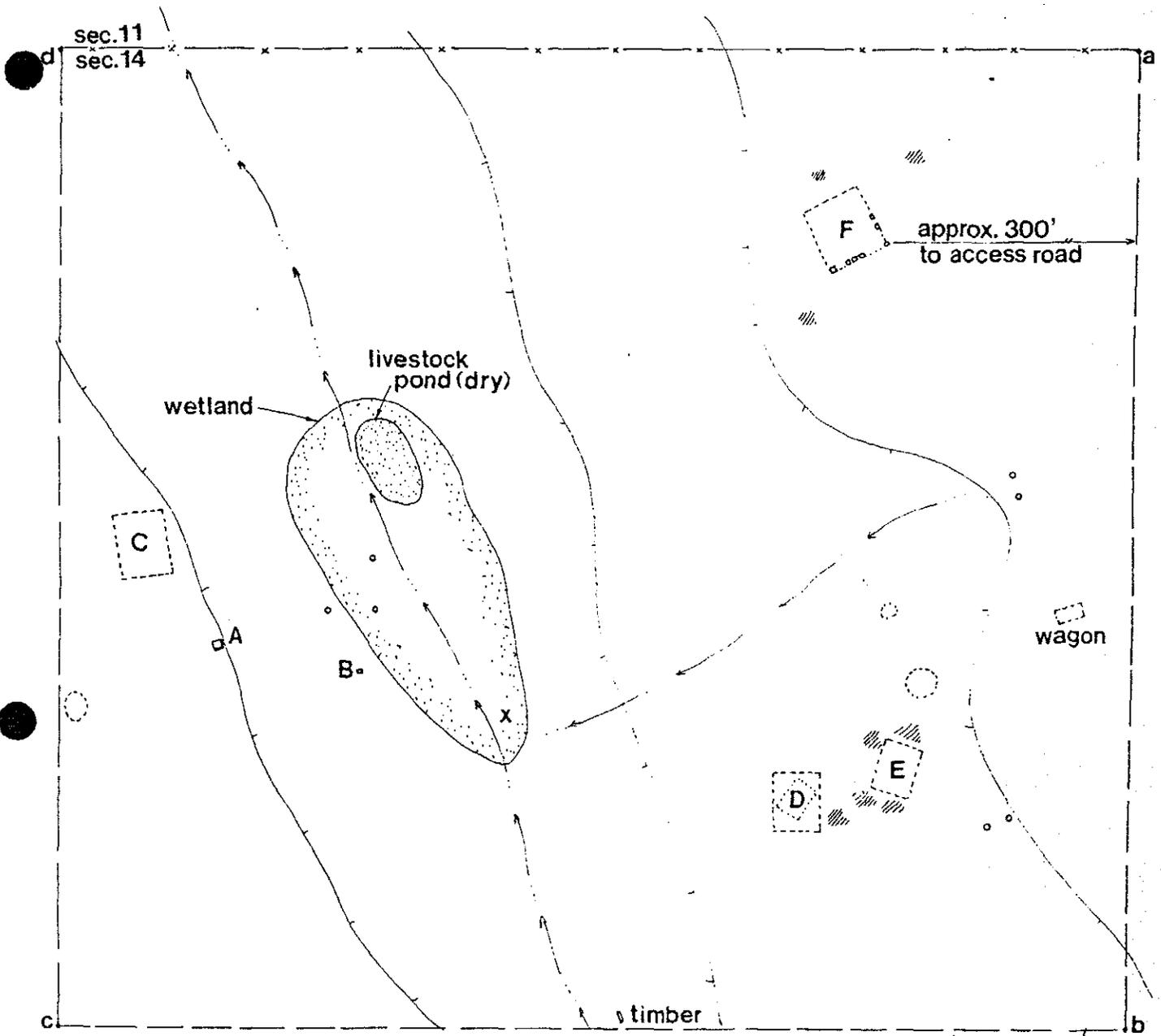
Barn (Feature F)

Feature F is the site of a large wood-frame barn located on the northern perimeter of the site south of the fenceline (HABS photo WY-109-1). It is marked by a roughly rectangular eroded area (34' northwest-southeast x 30' northeast-southwest) surrounded by three distinct lumber piles. Small portions of stud walls and sheathing are scattered around the site. It appears that the barn was torn down and all salvageable lumber and materials were removed from the site. There are a small number of sandstone blocks aligned along the building lines on the east and south elevations. Associated artifacts consist of small animal bones, corrugated tin sheeting, one shell button, and a 1930 Wyoming license plate. There is also a large log post or

tree remnant located northeast of the feature that may have been used for breaking horses. A metal snaffle bit was located at the base of this post. There may have been a windbreak fence associated with a livestock corral off the north elevation of the barn.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The history was compiled by Robert Rosenberg, Rosenberg Historical Consultants, Cheyenne, Wyoming, in January 1990.



ROCK WELL/THORNBURG HOMESTEAD (48CA114)

- |           |                                      |    |                  |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|----|------------------|
| — — — — — | Site boundary                        | A. | Sandstone dugout |
| -x-x-x-   | Northern site boundary, section line | B. | Rock-lined well  |
| ~~~~~     | Contour lines                        | C. | Outbuilding site |
| ~~~~~     | Ephemeral drainages                  | D. | Outbuilding site |
| ○ ○ ○ ○   | Artifact concentrations              | E. | Dwelling site    |
| ○ ○       | Fence posts                          | F. | Barn site        |
|           | Milled lumber                        | x  | Datum point      |

