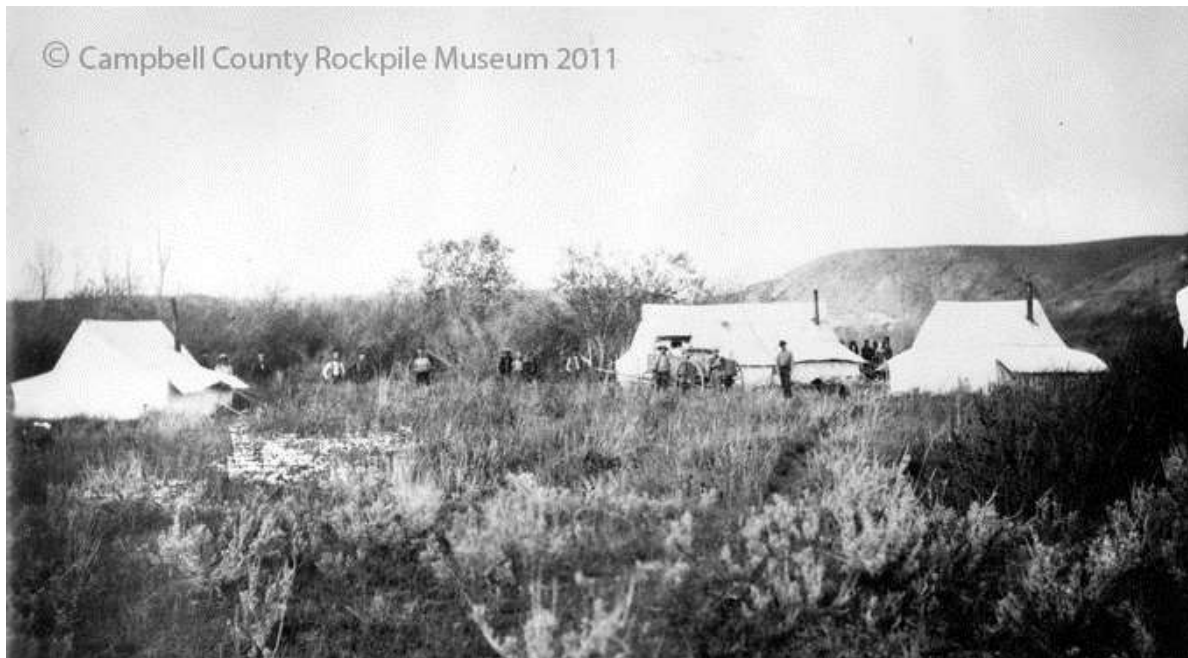


# Gillette History

## GILLETTE, 1892:

The original settlement in the area that would become Gillette was a small tent town west of present day Gillette. This community known as Donkey Town became a temporary base camp for survey crews from the Burlington and Missouri Railroad who were planning to build a line through Northeast Wyoming in the late 1880s. Engineer and surveyor Edward Gillette was in charge of surveying the area. The original survey was to follow Donkey Creek and move to the south of present day Gillette, but Edward Gillette found a shorter route that saved the railroad five miles of track and thirty bridges. The railroad was grateful for the savings and honored Edward Gillette by naming the new town after him.



Donkey Town, ca. 1891

The first settlers in Gillette were four young men by the names of Frank Murrey, Robert and George Durley, and Charles T. Weir. These men filed homestead rights in Rockpile (Rock Pile) Draw through which the railroad survey passed. Their patent was right where the museum stands today. Soon after this in July of 1891, the Lincoln Land and Livestock Company, who owned much of the land the railroad passed by, planned the town of Gillette and sold lots. The Burlington and Missouri arrived in August, 1891 and the wildest days for Gillette ensued. Gillette was incorporated as a city in 1892 and Herbert A. Alden was elected mayor.

For a list of [Gillette mayors](#), visit the City of Gillette website.



Main Street in Gillette, 1892

### **LIFE IN EARLY GILLETTE:**

The railroad kept moving on and was to Sheridan in 1892. This effectively meant the end to any “boom” that little Gillette had seen. Sheridan was a well established community and was a much more attractive place for railroad crews to live and work. The railroad commissary moved on as well which brought further decline to Gillette.

Gillette survived in order to serve the ranchers, cowboys, and homesteaders who were trying to make a life in the countryside surrounding the town. Cattlemen drove their herds into the livestock yards at Gillette for sale and transportation to the markets back east. Industrious citizens set up businesses to cater to these people and any who passed through on the rails. Livery barns, stables, and blacksmiths popped up to house travelers’ horses and haulers’ draft teams. Hotels were created to house anyone who needed a place. Bars and brothels catered to those who pursued that lifestyle. Cafes and eateries fed those who were hungry. It was not long before Gillette began to build up into a typical Western community.



Main Street in Gillette - circa 1902

Schools and churches also began to pop up. The first school was built in 1891 and several more thereafter. The first church building in Gillette was the First Baptist Church which was built in 1901 followed in a few years by the Catholic Church, the Episcopal church, and the Presbyterian church. Prior to this time, services were held in private homes or whatever public buildings were accessible.



Gillette school building - built in 1901

Life gradually grew better for citizens of Gillette. The first bank, The Bank of Gillette was started in 1902. In 1904, the first newspaper entitled the Gillette News began to be printed. Communication increased beyond the post office when telephone service came to town in 1905. A full telephone exchange arrived in 1910. Electricity was supplied in 1915 and the first motion picture theater was opened that same year.

Gillette's inclusion on the Black and Yellow Trail in 1912, a highway extending from the Black Hills to Yellowstone, brought many different travelers and tourists into town via automobile. It wasn't long before tourist camps, cottages, and motels began to pop up all over town. Tourism became an important part of the local economy and remains so to this day.

The late 1910s and the 1920s were years of growth in both population and infrastructure for Gillette. The population was 448 people in 1910 and grew to 1,340 by 1930 and 2,177 by 1940. This growth forced the city to expand with several new additions and subdivisions. The Sunnyside Addition was built to the south of the old part of town on the 4J Hill, the Northside Addition expanded the city to the north side of the Burlington tracks, and the Bivens Addition expanded Gillette to the East.

Public buildings and utilities were built and expanded as well. The City of Gillette built a power plant and water system that supplied the city's homes and businesses. A new high school building was built at the top of Gillette Avenue in 1924 and the Fairgrounds was built below the Rockpile on the western edge of town.



Campbell County High School on Gillette Avenue

### **The 1930s - Public Works and the CCC**

The Great Depression slowed the growth of Gillette for some time, but the city was given a boost with the establishment of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Gillette in 1933. Nearly 200 men were sent to the area to put out coal fires that had been burning longer than anyone knew. The fires were considered a hazard to the valuable mineral that was so abundant in Campbell County.



The first two summers the camp was mainly tents, but beginning in 1935 the men started building a more permanent camp with wooden barracks, offices, and a large mess hall. A second camp was also built in 1935 and brought the total number of men to 400. Supplies for these men were bought locally and this was of great benefit to the local business.



CCC Camp in Gillette, ca. 1935 (as seen from the Rockpile)

The camp in Gillette was open until May of 1942 when it was closed and dismantled. The barracks buildings were moved to different places including another CCC camp at Devils Tower and a German POW camp near Clearmont, Wyoming. Most of the men were transferred to other camps or joined the military.

In a six year period, from 1933 through 1938, the total number of hours worked by the local crews was 768 thousand hours. The men put out several fires and moved millions of tons of coal and overburden.



CCC workers putting out a coal fire

The 1930s also saw the construction of several public buildings in Gillette. The Gillette Post office was built in 1935 by the Public Works Administration and has recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places. A new Gillette City Hall was built in 1936 and the George Amos Memorial Library was finished in 1941.



Gillette Post Office under construction in 1935

**The homefront during World War II:**

The people of Gillette were focused on helping the war effort during the first half of the 1940s. Bond rallies and scrap drives became the events of the day and rationing became a part of life.



### Gillette Scrap Drive - 1943

In 1944 and 1945, the local Business and Professional Women's club opened up the Campbell County Canteen to feed the service men and women who passed through Gillette. The canteen was housed in a building near the railroad depot. Many community organizations, clubs, and churches assisted in making the Campbell County Canteen a successful venture.