

Kemmerer

Discover fossils, hot tunes, and a historic store near Wyoming's southwest corner. *By Dina Mishev*

When you're driving to southwest Wyoming—no matter which direction you come from—the only thing as wide open as the landscape is the radio dial. Wyoming Public Radio went fuzzy 45 minutes ago, leaving all my attention focused on the rolling, sage-riddled range stretching into the infinite beyond. Or at least Utah.

Until an oasis appears: Kemmerer in the Hams Fork River Valley. Although the town was founded in 1897 by the partners in the Kemmerer Coal Company, mining isn't what put the place on the map. James Cash Penney opened his first store here in 1902. Wandering into his simple six-room cottage, now a National Historic Landmark maintained by the J.C. Penney Homestead & Historical Foundation, you'd never know that by 1915 he headed an empire of dozens of JCPenney shops across the country moving almost \$5 million in merchandise a year. The "mother store" one block away is equally modest, with wood floors, racks of clothes, and a small, friendly staff willing to talk about the store's history. The Penney branch at your local mall would hardly recognize its parent.

The scattershot collection at the Fossil Country Frontier Museum (a two-bodied lamb, the overalls worn by shepherd Bert Sandburg when he was struck by lightning in 1928) is another reason to linger in this two-stoplight town of 2,427, but visitors shouldn't miss Fossil Butte National Monument, 10 miles to the west. The 8,198-acre park includes part of the world's largest deposit of freshwater fish fossils. If you're short on time, don't feel bad about skipping the hiking trails that snake through the crumpled desert landscape. The visitor center displays more than 80 fossils, including a 13-foot *Borealosuchus*, an extinct, broad-snouted relative of the alligator and crocodile. Ulrich's Fossil Gallery, a private quarry down the road, gives lessons in fossil excavation. You can keep the common items you find, such as finger-size fish—reminders that before humans roamed these wide open spaces, other creatures were swimming through them. ●

DINA MISHEV writes for *Sunset* and *National Geographic Traveler* and is the author of *Wyoming Curiosities*.

{ If you're going . . . }

Pick up the *Idaho, Montana & Wyoming TourBook* and the *Colorado & Wyoming* map. For more information, contact the **Kemmerer-Diamondville Chamber of Commerce**: (307) 877-9761, kemmererchamber.com. Area code is 307.

EATS

Bootlegger's 817 S. Main St., 828-3067. Try the New York steak. **Busy Bee Café** 919 Pine Ave., 877-6820. **Ham's Fork Grill** 307 Hwy. 189, 877-8848.

SLEEPS

Dee's Motel From \$60. 1325 Central Ave., 877-6226. **Fossil Butte Motel** From \$68 for AAA members. 1424 Central Ave., 877-3996, fossilbuttemotel.com. **Frontier Suites** From \$135. 113 Hwy. 233, 877-3377, frontiersuites.net.



QUICK TIP Hear musicians perform everything from bluegrass to boogie at the Oyster Ridge Music Festival, a free party in Triangle Park, July 31 through August 2. oysterridgemusicfestival.com.

Fossil Butte, once a lakebed, has offered up millions of perfectly preserved creatures.

