



# EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

## William Robertson Coe



### Biography

- Born 1869, Worcestershire, England
- Died 1955, Palm Beach, Florida
- Married:
  - Jane Hutchinson Falligant, 1893
  - Mai Huttleston Rogers, 1900
  - Caroline Graham Slaughter, 1926

### Achievements

- Insurance executive and philanthropist
- Donor of major collection of Western Americana to Yale University

William Robertson Coe was among the foremost collectors of Western Americana in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in England, he moved to the United States with his family when he was 14. He began working at age 16 for Johnson & Higgins, a marine insurance firm, rose quickly through its ranks and became President of the firm in 1910 and served as Chairman of the Board from 1916-1943.

He purchased the ranch of William F. Cody (“Buffalo Bill”) in Cody, Wyoming in 1910, and began acquiring material related to the exploration and settlement of the West – rare original maps, diaries, manuscripts, letters, artwork, photographs, books, newspaper files.

He retained Edward Emory Eberstadt (1883-1958), a Western history scholar and prominent book dealer in New York to advise and assist him in expansion of the collection. It grew to about 10,000 items and covered the period beginning with the Spanish explorations of Juan Perez and Fray Tomas and ending about 1890.

One of Coe’s objectives, as described by Eberstadt was a desire “ ... to make known to coming generations the conditions which were faced, the hardships which were endured, and the courage that went into the conquest and settlement of the West.” An index to the collection is a volume in itself. Its myriad treasures included original field maps and field notes from the Lewis and Clark expedition, original manuscripts of Robert Stuart’s journals, and over 900 rare photographs taken by William Henry Jackson on Western expeditions in the 1860s and 1870s.

He donated the collection to Yale University where it was the foundation of what is now the prestigious Yale Collection of Western Americana in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. At the time of its donation the university identified the gift as “the largest group of materials in its field that had ever been assembled.”

Coe’s strong interest in the history of his adopted country also inspired him to provide funding for programs in American Studies at forty colleges and universities. A bequest from his estate funded construction of the William Robertson Coe Library and School of American Studies at the University of Wyoming, dedicated in 1958. He was interested in preservation of pioneer trails and supported the Oregon Trail Memorial Association and American Pioneer Trails Association.

In short, Coe’s life was the embodiment of the American Dream, and through his generous philanthropy his love of American history lives on as his legacy at institutions throughout the country.

Photo: Blank & Stoller. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.