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Bones of Oregon Trail pioneers being laid to rest on ranch near Glendo

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April 27--Beneath a little-traveled gravel road many miles east of Glendo State Park, a pioneer cemetery was discovered. Here, travelers from the Oregon Trail had buried their dead. Over a period of 31 years, three skeletons began to emerge from their graves, right on Patten Creek Road, and were excavated. Archaeologists from the University of Wyoming determined these remains belonged to two women and an adolescent boy. They were not of the same family, yet they were buried next to each other, sometime in the 1850s and 1860s, in the soft earth within view of a spring and a stand of trees where the travelers often took breaks. As time went on, the spring became part of a privately owned ranch, and a gravel road that leads to Hartville was built above the graves. Since the bones were unearthed, they have been kept at the University of Wyoming, where they were studied, analyzed and scanned. But this Saturday, they will be returned to the ground. They will be wrapped in quilt tops, placed in wooden boxes and buried on the ranch, not far from where they were found. Patsy Parkin with the Platte County Historic Society is planning the ceremony, which involves meeting at the Glendo Town Hall and caravanning to the ranch. She wants it to be, more than anything, meaningful. One of the UW archeology faculty who took part in two of the digs, Rick Weathermon, will give a talk about what is known of the three pioneers. Larry Cundall, brother of the current landowner, Robyn Rankin, will also talk about the land where he grew up and its rich history. Music will be sung and played on the violin. And members of the Platte County Historic Society have raised money for a marker that will be placed at the site. All in all, the event should be solemn and respectful, Parkin said. The descendants of the three pioneers are not known, though local researchers have pursued a few leads. But with no matches made thus far, they'll be laid back to rest in a spot not far from where their families -- whoever they were -- had left them. Few things are definite about the two women and a boy whose bones were pulled out of the road. Their identities aren't confirmed, nor do we know what they wanted to do in the Oregon territory or what they were leaving behind. Only the grave of the adolescent boy was marked with a stone with the name "Jesse Cole," its faint etchings revealing that he died in July, either the 3rd or the 4th, sometime in the 1860s. Yet their bones, the manner in which they were buried and even an old diary from the trail can tell us enough to create some composite sketches. When we think of pioneers buried on the prairie and left behind, we think of the brutal and pragmatic realities of frontier life. But the fact that the three were buried next to each other reveals something, Weathermon said. Pioneers mourned. A pack of men traveling to the California gold rush, for example, might simply dig a hole for their fellow traveler, who was just an acquaintance among many, and move on, Weathermon said. It was all about convenience. Pioneers, on the other hand, were "specifically picking locations," he said. Some kept an eye out for large trees and overlooks. Others went so far as to keep track in their diaries of the graves they saw, noting people and dates when they could. "As I understand it, the pioneers would bury people together so it wouldn't seem quite so lonely to bury them all by themselves," Parkin said. One of these makeshift pioneer cemeteries was near Box Elder Springs, about 20 miles east of the town of Glendo, near where the three skeletons were excavated. Here, travelers would often stop and water and graze their oxen, eat, gather wood and perhaps even camp overnight. Before they had reached this spot, they had traveled a challenging landscape -- rocky, hilly and slow going, especially when traveling by covered wagon and oxen. Box Elder Springs "was a flat open camp area, rather than a rolling area," Weathermon said. "It's actually a pretty nice spot, even now." The ashy soil is soft and easy to dig. Based on what the diaries say, there are something like 30 individuals buried in this area, Weathermon said, possibly more. Though some trading posts sold coffins, the two women and the boy were laid in a bare hole in the ground, a plain wooden lid placed over them. Some pioneer diaries talked about a desire to give burial sites some kind of barrier protection from scavenging wolves and coyotes, but Weathermon said it seemed the main purpose of these lids was to protect the bodies from the dirt. "So it's more like digging a vault, placing the individual inside and placing this cover over it," Weathermon said. Two of the skeletons bear some Native American attributes, Weathermon said. But remnants from their garments found at the site -- buttons, metal clasps and glass beads -- as well as the manner of burial, indicate these were people who identified as European-American. In the mid-1800s, it wouldn't be out of the question for someone traveling from the eastern U.S. to have, say, a great-grandmother who was Cherokee. Along with shards of wood from the lids, fibers were gathered at the sites, indicating the women were wrapped in a buffalo hide or perhaps a feather bed. Jesse Cole's head rested on a pile of flat rocks. And in these graves, evidence of other nearby gravesites was

found, Weathermon said. From the grave of one of the two women, a few bones from an infant also were recovered. Jesse's grave had an extra thumb bone, which came from an older person, he said. Burrowing rodents had disturbed the sites, shifting things around. Back in 1974, when the first skeleton was found, it was excavated by the UW Archaeology Department. In their analysis, the skeleton was that of a young woman who appeared to be in her late 20s or early 30s when she died. They nicknamed her "Glenda," as she was found near Glendo. Her skull bears lines showing where her bones fused together, called sutures. These fade and eventually disappear as you age, Weathermon said, so in a much older person, the surface would be smooth and line-free. Small markings inside her pelvis suggest she was a mother, having given birth at least once. And then there's Jesse Cole, the second skeleton, excavated in 2001. His skull was uncovered by a road grader and later discovered by bicyclists. When the archaeologists came, they found a makeshift gravestone had been placed on his lid. And luckily, it was placed carved side down, or the name and date may have worn away, as the marker was a soft, clay rock. "It's chalk-like," Weathermon said. "Leave it in the weather, and it turns into muck very quickly." The last digit of the year had melted away, so the best anyone can say is that young Jesse died sometime in the 1860s. Weathermon pointed to some other faint lines on the surface of the rock. It appears different letters were once carved there. They believe Jesse's family took the stone from someone else's pioneer grave and repurposed it. The etchings in the rock are not deep. One would guess it took just a minute or two to scratch in Jesse's name and his date of death, though the carver attempted to make it look ornate, with the addition of serifs -- even if both S's are backward. Difficult to read without peering at it, one must tilt the rock so that the scratched lines forming the words and digits fall into shadow. Jesse's bones suggest he had several years of growth ahead of him, as the rough surface of growth plates are still in place, and his femur bone is not yet fused, Weathermon said. The shape of his teeth and the additional bones in the back of his cranium suggest some Native American ancestry. And then the third skeleton was unearthed in 2005. The analysis by UW places her age range in the mid-40s to late 50s. And like Jesse, there is a good lead on who she is, a different kind of lead, though confirmation could be years away. There's a diary kept by Oregon Trail traveler Abigail Scott, who came through with her family in 1852, departing from Illinois when she was 17. Her mother, Ann Roelosfson Scott, had died of cholera on the afternoon of June 20 at the age of 40. Ann, a mother who had given birth to 12 children, was buried near a spring -- believed to be Box Elder Springs -- where the family had camped and then tended to the suddenly ill woman. The diary noted the burial took place next to the fresh grave of another woman who also had died at the same camp the night before. "... Everything was done which we possibly could do to save her life; but her constitution, long impaired by disease, was unable to withstand the attack," Abigail wrote of her mother's sudden demise. Another daughter, Etty, later wrote they had wrapped their mother in a feather bed and placed stones on top of the grave. "The rolling hills were ablaze with beautiful wild roses ... and we heaped and covered mother's grave with the lovely roses, so the cruel stones were hid from view," Etty writes, according to the book, "Covered Wagon Women No. 5: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trail, 1852." And after the burial, Abigail reflects on her mother's resting place: "The place of her interment is a romantic one and one which seems fitted for the last resting place of a lover of rural scenery such as she when in good health always delighted in it." Again, there is no confirmation that this skeleton is the earthly remains of Ann Roelosfson Scott. But if you were to say this woman had 12 children, Weathermon said, referring to the skeleton, "the evidence on the pelvis absolutely supports that." The bones that make up the sacrum are "very, very curved," he said. "And that curvature really restricts the birth canal. She would have had a difficult time." There are markings left on the bone inside the pelvis that are consistent with that of a woman who had experienced difficult births. Weathermon also has a theory she had a rather invasive procedure for her last birth -- barbaric by our standards. It was called a symphysiology, where in an obstructed birth, doctors would split the pelvic bone. He had come to this conclusion more than a month ago, he said, by "pure serendipity." He had been reading old medical journals and came across descriptions of this procedure. When he had a final look at the skeletons before they were sent back to Glendo, it clicked. "We had known all along the pubis on this individual was odd," he said. Two bones that meet in the middle were porous, rather than smooth. They had wondered if this was related to arthritis or some other condition, he said. But now, it appears it had been "sawed in half." And, apparently, she had not completely healed before starting out on the Oregon Trail. The recommended recovery time was staying in bed for a month, the pelvis immobilized by a sandbag. "She survived this long enough to get out to Wyoming. This was not healed. That's one of the things that makes us think this might be the woman," he said. "We know she gave birth before they left. The daughter who wrote the diary wrote that she thought the difficult birth contributed to her death. She was already debilitated. 'I've not seen anything like it. The Smithsonian has not seen anything like it. It's unusual; it's very unusual.'" With permission of the landowner, the archeology department is retaining a tooth and a small bone from each skeleton. If Scott's descendants are found and can provide a DNA sample, then this mystery may one day be solved. The area near Glendo is known for the many treasures that can be found in the ground. Not only are there pioneer artifacts, there are dinosaur bones, and the "Spanish Diggings." This creates many conflict points between individual property rights and community interests. If it were up to Weathermon, the skeletons would stay at the university. "Every time we do this, we take something away from scientific study. Once they're back in the ground, there's very little we can do," he said. "So we try to record everything we can about these individuals before that happens. There's always something new, some new technique that comes out, something else no one's thought of before that would add to scientific interpretation." But at the same time, there are ethical concerns, he added. "Basically, if you have someone who is unidentified, what are the problems with keeping them here to be studied versus this overall perceived respect for the dead?" he said. The landowner, along with her family and local history boosters, support reburial. "Their family buried them out there, for heaven sakes," said Randy Brown, a local Oregon Trail researcher and advocate for the preservation of local landmarks. "That's where they belong." Larry Cundall, the brother of the landowner, was asked why the bones should be reburied, rather than kept for research and study. He answered with a question: "Why bury anyone?" State law says anyone who finds human remains must notify law enforcement. That is what was done here, and the archaeology department was called in. In the end, it's up to the coroner to decide if bones like these should be retained at an educational institution like UW or returned to the landowner, Weathermon said. Knowing just how many pioneers were buried along the Oregon Trail is something of a mystery. Based on the numbers by Oregon Trail historian Merrill Mattes, there are potentially 4,000 to 6,000 people buried in Wyoming alone, Weathermon said. "Archaeologically, we know of less than 100," Weathermon said. "Graves are not recorded very often." One reason they are certain of such a small percentage of these burial sites is that landowners will seldom talk about it. Everyone interviewed for this piece said, in most cases, if a landowner discovers what appears to be a pioneer grave, he would most likely keep quiet about it. Part of that is a wariness of getting outside entities involved. "If you find something, you shut your mouth or you'll get the state involved, and it will shut down your project," Parkin said. The other reason is entities like the UW Archaeology Department don't "go out looking for graves," even if they were to be invited to explore an area, Weathermon said. "If the grave is not in danger of being destroyed, or if they're not going to plow it under, or if it's not being actively looted, we don't propose to do anything," Weathermon said. "The best place for these folks is where they were left by their loved ones." When Cundall was asked

about this, he said, "I think about 75 percent of the landowners would just as soon keep it quiet. Once you open that box of worms, it's pretty hard to stuff it back in." Just getting the bones back from UW took more time than he thought was necessary, he added. And some agencies have a reputation for being especially difficult to work with. But if every square foot of land that was historically significant was protected, there would be no usable land left, Cundall said. "When I'm on horseback, I see something historically significant every time. I mean, to me it's part of our heritage. We see teepee rings -- we don't destroy them," he said. Even Parkin, still working through some details of the May 2 ceremony, needed a sounding board. Should Jesse Cole's stone be reburied, she asked, or kept on display someplace? People she talked to so far were split on this issue, she told Cundall, Brown and Nancy Curtis during a recent lunchtime gathering in Glendo. But whether Jesse's stone went below ground or stayed above, Weathermon had warned her it would one day disintegrate. "I'd like to see the stone reburied with the bones," Parkin said. "It seems to me we found it that way." Said Cundall, "If we do, we gotta keep it quiet. Someone will just be digging it up." "Put it back," said Curtis, who is the publisher of Glendo-based High Plains Press. Keeping it is like grave robbing, she added. But Brown, the Oregon Trail historian, thought burying it would be "throwing it away." Yes, Cundall said, especially if the looters come and dig it up. "To me, in a local museum, it would get some respect and be fairly well-protected," he said. And what about the bones? Before the ceremony, should they be displayed or boxed up? She realizes some people might be offended and troubled at the sight of human skulls, she said. "But let's face it, most people would want to see them," she said. As interested as Parkin is in Oregon Trail history -- she jokingly referred to herself as a "reincarnated pioneer" -- and telling what she can about the three pioneers, she sometimes finds the whole situation of reburying these bones as "very macabre." Indeed, everything surrounding this archaeology discovery and the ceremony -- Jesse Cole's stone, the bones, the new marker, the beads, the buttons, the rock pillow -- are sorrowful reminders of lives cut short, journeys not completed. "The wagon trains had to keep going. That's why they didn't stop and mourn, which I think would be awful -- with your wagon pulling off and seeing your mother's grave in the distance," Parkin said. Paired with that are the Wyoming landmarks along the Oregon Trail, like the wagon wheel ruts near Guernsey and the rock carvings of Register Cliff. These markers bring home what a slow, struggling journey it was. One can't help but wonder if the pioneers really understood what they were facing. And if they did, would they have stayed home? Putting yourself in their boots in this middle of this vast, rocky, lonesome wild land, living by your wits, makes you feel small. But recently, Parkin visited Oregon, and she found something very different at their Oregon Trail historic sites. There, she said, she found described something that is perhaps lost and muted in the Oregon Trail stories: a spirit of victory and celebration, along with great pride among the people who finished it, pride that was passed on to their descendents. In fact, the Oregon Trail was "the highlight of their lives," she said. "I think those folks knew they had done something very extraordinary." They had, after all, walked across the new country, the great desert, and started new lives in a new land. If you go What: Honoring the Pioneers, a reburial of the three pioneer remains that were found emerging from their graves on Patten Creek Road. Learn the history about pioneers and the surrounding area. Bring camp chairs. When: May 2, 1 p.m. Where: Gather at Glendo Town Hall, 114 S. Yellowstone Highway, Glendo. Some time between 1-2 p.m., a caravan will depart to the Robyn Rankin ranch for the ceremony. More info: Patsy Parkin of the Platte County Historic Society, 307-322-9365 or spiritquest@wyoming.com

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