

Guest Column: Wyoming may be too much like America used to be

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If you're hankering for a true Western vacation, come to the Cowboy State, where we live by the slogan, "Wyoming is what America used to be."

Perhaps you're yearning for a conversation that doesn't involve which COVID shot you got, Pfizer or J&J. If so, Wyoming belongs on your itinerary: The state boasts all 11 of the most vaccine-hesitant counties in the nation. There's nothing Moderna about modern Wyoming.

Wyoming has a long history of anti-vaxxers, and many can be found in our Legislature. As Republican State Sen. Troy McKeown falsely claimed, "The death rate from the vaccination so far is almost as high — if not higher — than the death rate from COVID." We did have a mask mandate for a few months, but most people ignored it. Several legislators even hosted mask-burning rallies at the state Capitol.

In Wyoming, we've got cows and we've got coal. But we're having a heck of a time getting rid of that coal. And that is making us mad, because no one could have seen this coming.

But we're responding like rugged individualists: We're going to sue the bastards. After Gov. Mark Gordon said, "I will not waver in my efforts to protect our industries, particularly our coal industry," our legislators passed a bill giving him a \$1.2 million slush fund to sue any state that has the nerve to pass laws that "impede Wyoming's ability to export coal or that cause the early retirement of coal-fired generation facilities in Wyoming."

Once you come to Wyoming, it's easy to pretend you're back on the lightly populated Western frontier of 1890 or so. According to the 2020 census, Wyoming added just 13,000 residents over the past decade, a roughly 2% growth rate — by far the lowest in the Mountain West.

Idaho and Utah might be booming, while Wyoming is playing it safe by staying stagnant. But you won't have to worry about any troublesome young 'uns. A recent study by the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services shows that the population of 25- to 40-year-olds decreased by 6% in the last half of the decade. No rowdy whippersnappers to get in the way: Folks who grow up in Wyoming flee as soon as they get a chance, because good jobs are harder to find than endangered black-footed ferrets.

Fact is, millennials have become our primary export.

So who were those 13,000 people who did move here? Many were millionaires who flocked to Wyoming to dodge taxes. But you won't have to interact with them because they're hidden away on their sprawling ranches.

"Mega-stars like Harrison Ford, Sandra Bullock, Jeffree Star, and RuPaul are snatching up real estate across Wyoming, a state known for mud, manure and manual labor," said MTV Pop Factor host Yoonj Kim on a recent episode. Why Wyoming? "To save money," she explained. Wyoming is a tax haven for the wealthy, which means these newcomers contribute little to the public coffers.

In Wyoming, where revenue ends, adventure begins. In addition to playing the new road-trip game — "Guess the future Wyoming ghost town" — you can experience the thrill of being in the outback without assurance of medical care.

Thanks to Wyoming's refusal to generate tax revenue, at least 10 communities are in danger of losing emergency ambulance service. So if you get seriously hurt while mountain biking (as I did, 30 miles from the nearest hospital), you can howl beside a lonesome road for hours on end — just like the coyotes — with nothing to disturb you, except maybe the coyotes.

And if you do make it to a hospital, you'll get to live like the Wild West gambler you've always longed to be. Most of our rural hospitals are losing money, in large part because the state has refused to expand Medicaid, so they've been forced to eliminate some personnel and services. We call it "Wyoming Roulette": Will the hospital (if you can find one) be equipped to help you?

Be prepared to open your wallet, regardless. Health-care procedures in Wyoming are among the most expensive in the nation. If the hospital you finally stagger into lacks the expertise to treat you, better hope

your insurance covers helicopter rides. Our bare-bones hospitals often have to fly patients elsewhere, and \$100,000 bills are not uncommon.

Still, a no-tax, no-vax Wyoming vacation may be just the adventure you need. Come to Wyoming and live dangerously! We'll be waiting for you, pardner.

Bruce Palmer is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He has long advocated for Medicaid expansion in Wyoming.