



*Figure 1: Loa-Kum Ar-Nuk, a U.S. Army Warm Springs Indian Scout, with his Model 1865 Spencer Carbine. This famous 1873 photograph from California's Modoc Indian War was as phony as its photographer's name. Carefully posed by Edward Muggeridge (aka Eadweard Muybridge) at the Tule Lake army camp miles away from where any actual fighting was taking place, it was one of a stereo pair fraudulently labeled "A Modoc Brave on the War Path" just to boost sales. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

## Guns and Gunslingers of the Old West

Edited by John Dillon

Perhaps no tool has had a greater impact on the history and mythology of the American West than the firearm. It has been a symbol of pioneer self-reliance, frontier lawlessness and justice, and Indian conquest and

resistance. Whether for daring or dastardly deeds, and everything in between, this special issue of *The Branding Iron* is dedicated to shootin' irons and those who used them.

*(Continued on Page 3)*

# The Branding Iron

## Los Angeles Corral of The Westerners

### *Published Quarterly*

### Winter – Spring – Summer – Fall

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*The Branding Iron* is always seeking articles of up to around 20 pages dealing with every phase of the history of the Old West and California. Contributions from both members and friends are always welcome.  
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### Editor's Corner . . .

It's time to "Draw!" at high noon for this Spring 2023 special edition of *The Branding Iron*, dedicated to that other heated metal device, the *shootin' iron*! Enjoy a full revolver cylinder of articles about the guns and gun-slingers of the Old West, with contributors from New Mexico history guru Frank Brito, former Sheriff Brian Dervin Dillon, former *Branding Iron* editor Paul Spitzerri, and Living Legend Gary Turner. Remember to count your shots!

This Spring was packed with exciting Roundup presentations. To relive those talks, or get the inside scoop on any that you

missed, please see the Roundup summaries written by fellows Alan Griffin and Darran Davis. For more law and order tales, see also the book review by Brian Dillon.

*The Branding Iron* is a group effort, so here's a big THANK YOU to all of the people who volunteer their writings for our enjoyment. Cowboy hats off to you!

If you would like to contribute to the Los Angeles Corral's history journal, please feel free to reach out to me with your ideas. I'd love to hear them! Thanks, and Happy Trails!

John Dillon  
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**Figure 2:** Grandpa Dillon's Spencer Carbine, a Model 1865 Burnside contract, .56-50 rimfire, made only days after Appomattox. Hammer cocked, action open, and loading tube removed in lower view. A windfall of prohibition, this was one of two .50 caliber long guns bought off the wall of Sausalito's Gold Dust Saloon in January, 1920. The carbine was reconditioned at the Springfield Armory, possibly in 1867, and then reissued to either Cavalry or to Indian scouts attached to regular U.S. Army units. The old carbine may have seen service in the Modoc War of Northern California. B. Dillon photos.

## Fake Photograph, Fake Name, Real Gun

By Brian Dervin Dillon

California's Modoc Indian war of 1872-73 was front-page news across America, and even on the other side of the world.<sup>1</sup> Queen Victoria, for example, was fascinated by coverage of the conflict sent by British correspondents to the London Newspapers. Before the long, drawn-out, conflict was over, a series of Modoc War photographs, mostly offered as stereo pairs, and taken by two different photographers, were being sold within California.<sup>2</sup> The most famous of these 1873 "action" photos from the Indian War in Northern California was labeled *A Modoc Brave on the War Path* (Figure 1).

Taken by a brain-damaged English photographer, it showed an Indian shooting a Spencer Carbine behind a lava rock defensive wall. This photo has been used as graphic evidence of the Modoc War for exactly 150 years, even showing up on a book cover.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this photo was as phony as its

photographer's own made-up name.

English-born Edward Muggeridge (*aka* Eadweard Muybridge—1830-1904) came to the United States in 1850 and worked as a bookseller, eventually making his way across the continent to New Orleans and then, by 1855, to California. His home base was San Francisco, then as now the epicenter of literacy on the Pacific Coast. During an abortive 1860 trip eastwards with England as his destination, Muggeridge suffered a head injury when his stagecoach overturned in Texas. He was thrown out, and a rock terminated his trajectory. From then onwards he was often identified as a "crazy man" by his detractors, in both civilian and law enforcement contexts. The brain-damaged Englishman continued on his journey, and while recuperating in his home town of Kingston-upon-Thames, began experimenting with photography. He patented at least two innovations

within his new profession.

Muggeridge returned to San Francisco, California in 1867 and opened his own photographic studio, quickly gaining fame for his portraits, architectural views and nature studies. His principal source of income, however, was from stereo views of popular subjects, including cityscapes and literary, political, and theatrical individuals. Meanwhile, during a succession of what his own family considered to be fits of lunacy, he changed his name repeatedly, after many slightly different iterations, to *Eadweard Muybridge*. He justified this by claiming that his peculiar spelling and pronunciation was truer to ancient "Anglo-Saxon" usage than modern English, excessively "polluted" by loan words, mostly from the French.

Muggeridge/Muybridge is often accorded the title of "father of *motion picture* photography" sometimes even as the "father of *modern* photography." That he was an immensely innovative technological pioneer who experimented with faster shutter speeds than any of his contemporaries and moved stop-action photography farther forward than anyone else had previously are both undeniable. Muybridge's "running man" and "running horse" photographic studies (1878-1886) done long after the Modoc War, laid the foundation for Edison and others to develop the earliest true *moving pictures* only a few years later. So Muybridge can also be considered to be the father of what we have called the "movies" for more than a century.

But Muybridge was also a misanthrope, and many of his peers not only considered him to be insane, but *criminally* insane. Much of his adult life was a lie, for he re-invented and re-named himself within his preferred place of residence, California, where fantasy/falsehood, even within life-and-death situations in two as well as three dimensions, masqueraded as reality. The phony Modoc War photo was not the first image the photographer falsified to sell to a gullible public. Three years before he faked his "Modoc Brave on the Warpath" photo, Muggeridge/Muybridge dressed a white man up in a Chinese coolie hat, had him face away from the camera, and faked a photo to capital-

ize on the popularity of Bret Harte's 1870 *Heathen Chinnee* poem. He sold many copies of the putative "Chinese miner" photo to gullible consumers in California, where Harte's racist poem was especially popular.<sup>4</sup> One case of intentional photographic fraud might be excused as a lapse in judgement but *two*, in completely different contexts and years apart, must be interpreted as fundamental dishonesty motivated by greed.

A year after his faked Modoc war photo gained national attention, Muggeridge/Muybridge was in hot water again, this time for murdering his wife's lover. Former California Governor Leland Stanford, for whom the photographer had completed a photographic commission some months earlier, found and paid for the lawyer defending him. Muggeridge/Muybridge pled insanity due to his old head injury, but contradicted this plea by testifying that the killing was premeditated. He was acquitted with a verdict of justifiable homicide by a sympathetic jury, who found his wife's flagrant adultery too much to stomach. After making a photographic trip to and through Central America, the man who *had gotten away with murder* returned to California to work for his benefactor/liberator, Leland Stanford. The two had much in common, for Stanford was one of the most spectacularly crooked politicians of California history—so corrupt, as the saying went, that the only thing he *wouldn't* steal was a red-hot stove.

But what about the *real Indian* in Muggeridge/Muybridge's faked 1873 photograph? Of all the Indian conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, California's Modoc War may have been the most unnecessary and tragic. California Indians, compared to the Apache, Comanche, or Sioux of the Plains and Southwest, were peaceful and inoffensive. Yet any Native American group would fight if pushed too far, and no AmerIndians fought so effectively with so few warriors as California's Modocs did. For half a year only fifty-three Modocs, led by Captain Jack, held off U.S. Army forces that outnumbered them ten-to-one. The U.S. infantry, dismounted cavalry, and artillerymen were supported and guided by several dozen Indian Scouts,



all of them brought south from the Warm Springs Reservation, created in Oregon in 1855. The man in Muggeridge/Muybridge's 1873 photo (Figure 1) was *Loa-Kum Ar-Nuk*, a Warm Springs Indian scout fighting against the Modocs on behalf of the U.S. Army, the farthest thing from a Modoc himself. In 1874, with the war over, the defeated Indians were, ironically, honored with the name of the newest California County, *Modoc*, encompassing their ancestral territory.

And what about the *real gun* that *Loa-Kum Ar-Nuk* was so carefully posed with? No photographer's prop like the coolie hat in Muggeridge/Muybridge's falsified "Heathen Chinees" photo, the Indian Scout's gun in the 1873 photo was a second-generation, Model 1865, Spencer Repeating Carbine. Spencer carbines were Union General Phil Sheridan's preferred weapon in 1864-65. After the Civil War they continued to be issued to cavalry units, and to Indian scouts. Most Model 1860 and 1865 carbines were chambered for the .56-50 rimfire, a tapered round with 45 grains of powder behind a 350 grain, .512 caliber bullet. Over 45,000 first generation Model 1860 carbines were made, and just over 30,500 second-generation Model 1865 carbines were also produced under contract by the Burnside Rifle Company for the Union Army.

My own Spencer Carbine (Figure 2) just like the "Big Fifty" buffalo gun (Figure 6) described later in this issue, came from the Gold Dust Saloon, Sausalito. Thirty years after the end of the Modoc War, it had been put up on the wall of this bar catering to soldiers from Fort Baker, California. My grandfather, U.S. Army Captain W.T. Dillon bought it for two dollars in 1920. It is a Model 1865 Burnside contract carbine, in .56-50 rimfire, with the original 20-inch, 3-groove barrel. A very low, 4-digit serial number followed by a very lightly stamped "A" indicates manufacture in early May, 1865, and later reconditioning at the Springfield Armory. My Spencer carbine is exactly the kind of firearm carried by the Warm Springs Indian Scouts and the U.S. Cavalry, dismounted, in the Modoc War. Whether it saw service in this conflict, and how it got to Sausalito, are questions still un-

answered at present.

History still walks around upright in Modoc County, California. A quarter-century ago I archaeologically surveyed a ranch where the martyred Indian leader Captain Jack, six score years earlier, before the outbreak of the Modoc War, had worked as a cowboy for the present owner's grandfather. If, over time, much of our history is forgotten or even falsified, then its artifacts sometimes remain intact. My 1865 Spencer Carbine has been a silent reminder of California's Modoc War for 150 years and a treasured family heirloom for more than a century. Unlike Muybridge's fake photograph and his made-up name, it was, and still is, the *real deal*.

## End Notes

1. *California's Modoc War: the best book ever written about the Modoc War was by my father, Richard H. Dillon, published to commemorate its centennial in 1973. Other essential works on the conflict are by Riddle (1914); again by my father R.H. Dillon (1949; 1959; 1970; 1983; 1989), and by myself, B. Dillon (2015a; 2015b; 2018).*
2. *Muybridge vs. Heller, Competing Modoc War Photographers: Palmquist (1977).*
3. *Muybridge's Fake Photo Lives on as a Book Cover: Murray (1959).*
4. *Muybridge Fakes his "Heathen Chinees" Photo: Dillon, Dillon and Dillon (2014: 19-20).*

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## **"The Reckless Use of a Slanderous Tongue": The King Family of El Monte's Epic Gunbattles, 1855 and 1865**

By Paul Spitzer

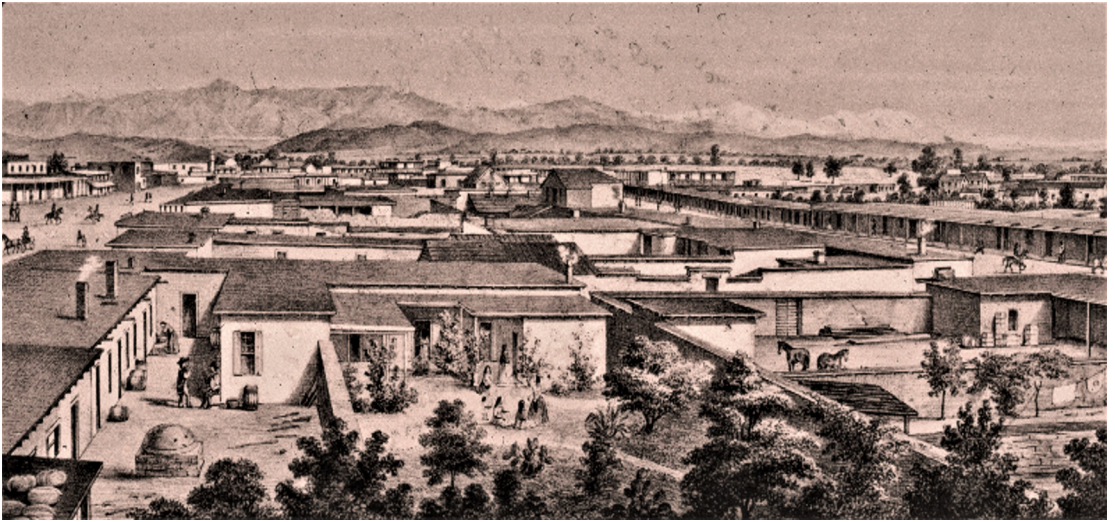
The 1850s and 1860s, the first couple of decades of the American era in greater Los Angeles, included levels of phenomenal violence dwarfing those of the time elsewhere in the country and certainly far and above modern rates in the Angel City. Racial tensions, a chronically underfunded and understaffed law enforcement and criminal justice system, all-too-easy access to weapons such as the recently released Colt six-shooter revolver and a lack of social structure and restraint found in other parts of the nation were some of the reasons why homicide rates in Los Angeles were stratospheric.

Two notable examples of unrestrained gunslinging have to do with one family: the King clan of El Monte. This community, about a dozen miles east of Los Angeles in the San Gabriel Valley, was settled in the early 1850s almost exclusively by white Southerners, many of whom seemed to adhere to a code of chivalry that required revenge for wrongs, real or perceived, perpetrated on them. It was also the home of the so-called "Monte Boys," a very loose confederation of men who were all-too-willing to exact "popular justice"

against criminals, actual or otherwise, who were deemed worthy of punishment by citizens taking the law into their own hands.

Samuel King and Martha Mee were among the early settlers of El Monte and, among their children, were sons Frank, Houston and Andrew Jackson. In early January 1855, a dispute arose between the patriarch and Micajah Johnson, who, with his wife Susannah and their children, came to the community shortly after the Kings. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, Johnson was in a bar in town when, it was reported in the *Los Angeles Star*, he saw one of the King boys, probably Houston, the youngest, and unloaded a string of curses and other forms of verbal abuse on him.

Young King immediately went home to relate what had transpired and Samuel and his other sons went to find Johnson. It was suggested that Samuel was the first to draw a pistol and fire, which sent his target stumbling off his steed and fleeing to a nearby building. This version stated that Johnson then pulled out his weapon and shot Samuel in the lungs just above the heart, a fatal wound from which King died the next day.



**Figure 3:** A sanitized 1857 print of Los Angeles by Charles Conrad Kuchel and Emil Dresel. Photo courtesy of Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum, City of Industry.

The account continued that, as King tumbled to the ground, he implored his progeny to wreak revenge on his murderer. While the versions in the *Star* and its contemporary, the *Southern Californian* vary, it was stated that Johnson was, in the former account, either badly beaten and then shot by all three of the King sons or, according to the latter, that he was shot and wounded outside and then fled to a building, where he was killed by one of them. However it took place, the sons succeeded in avenging their father's death. Even though they surrendered to local authority—either the township constable or justice of the peace—the county grand jury decided not to file an indictment.

Perhaps the jury felt that the Kings somehow acted in some form of self-defense, despite the clear fact that King fired first. It may well be that an extralegal “code of honor” was at work here. The *Southern Californian* claimed that Johnson was “a notorious character” whose use of “the most outrageous and obscene language” against King, who was deemed “a very estimable citizen,” was unwarranted. Yet, both papers added caveats that the reports received were suggestive, if not definitive. The *Star* refrained from editorializing, citing the likelihood of legal proceedings, but its contemporary, as was it wont generally, had no problem in saying:

Thus has the lives of two citizens been sacrificed and their families left to mourn their untimely bereavement, directly consequent upon the reckless use of a slanderous tongue and a criminal disregard of the feelings of others . . . never can we condemn the motives that prompted the terrible punishment that so swiftly overtook Johnson. And we cannot believe that there can be a jury found in this section of the county who would take any other view of the subject.

In early 1857, after Sheriff James R. Barton and members of a small posse were gunned down in what's now Irvine while seeking the Flores-Daniel Gang, who were accused of robberies and a murder at San Juan Capistrano, an extraordinarily widespread manhunt ensued countywide. It included unrestrained killings of Latinos who were broadly accused either of direct involvement with the gang or were considered to be criminals generally. In any case, due process was duly dispensed with by vigilantes motivated by sheer bloodlust.

At San Gabriel, a “Mr. King of the Monte” appeared at the scene of a hunt for a man accused of complicity in the Barton massacre and who was flushed out of a marsh near the old mission church and then gunned down

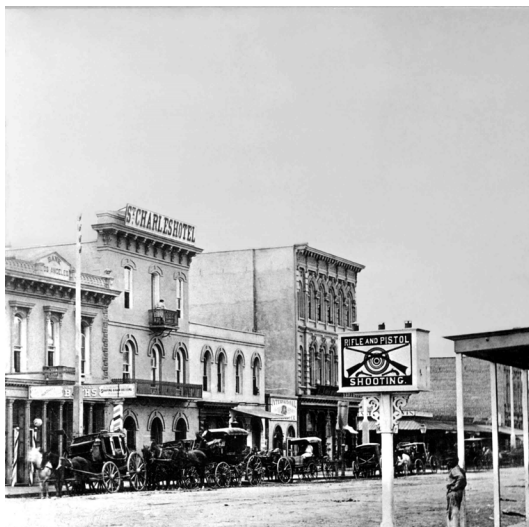


by this unidentified King brother (a “Mr. Houston” was mentioned, so it may well have been Houston King who committed the killing.) There were, of course, no recriminations nor accountability for this heinous crime, which was followed by the decapitation of the deceased. The claim was that it was needed for identification, but was much like what happened to the *bandido* Joaquín Murrieta about four years prior.

The Kings managed to remain quiet (so far as we know) for another eight years, but, in July 1865, they were involved in another infamous gunbattle. In 1862, Rancho Cucamonga owner John Rains was found dead on the road from Los Angeles to San Bernardino near what later became San Dimas. Rains had long feuded with his brother-in-law Robert Carlisle of the Chino ranch (they were married to the sisters, Merced and Francisca Williams, heirs to that property). Both were hot-headed Southerners and it was rumored that Carlisle directly or indirectly was responsible for Rains’ death, though he chose to blame the county under-sheriff for not being aggressive enough in seeking the perpetrator.

That official was Andrew J. King, who, moreover, earlier in 1865 had been given power of attorney over the desperate financial affairs of Merced Rains, succeeding Carlisle in that role. On 6 July, Carlisle was at a wedding reception held in the dining room and bar of the Bella Union Hotel (formerly owned by Rains) in Los Angeles, when he spotted King and, not unlike Johnson a decade before, spat out curses and invectives against him. King walked in and slapped Carlisle across the cheek and, in the melee that followed, King pulled out a Derringer and popped off an errant shot, then with his knife severed an artery in his foe’s hand.

Instead of reporting the incident to his boss, Sheriff Tomás Sánchez, however, King opted for personal justice and the Southern code of honor and summoned his siblings. When Frank and Houston appeared, they immediately directed their guns at their target and blasted away, but Carlisle managed to return fire and instantly killed Frank King. Harris Newmark, whose relative was



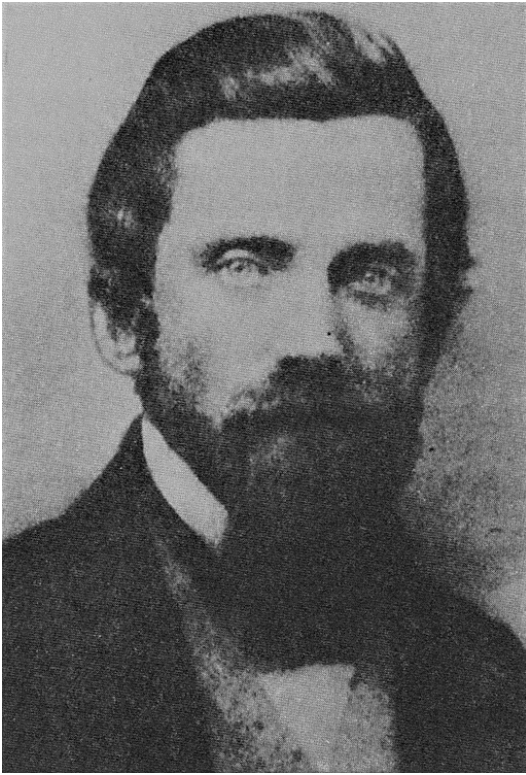
*Figure 4: An 1870s photograph from a stereo pair showing the former Bella Union Hotel, known later as the Clarendon and then the St. Charles, at left on the east side of Main Street. Note the “Rifle and Pistol Shooting” sign, which seems particularly striking given the Angel City’s notoriously violent past. Photo courtesy of Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum, City of Industry.*

the groom in the nuptials, recorded that, as Carlisle fell mortally wounded, Houston King pummeled him with his pistol, breaking the weapon. Even still, the “man of iron,” as Newmark called Carlisle, was able to lean against a wall with his revolver in both hands and squeezed off a final shot, seriously wounding his adversary.

Carlisle writhed in agony on the Bella Union’s billiard table for a few hours before expiring and he and Frank King were consigned to the earth the next day. Carlisle’s tomb was still at the old city cemetery on Bunker Hill into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when the site was headquarters for the Los Angeles School District. Houston King was tried in 1866 for Carlisle’s death but, perhaps unsurprisingly, was found not guilty, even though, once again, the Kings precipitated the violence.

Houston King remained at El Monte until the early 1870s and then decamped to Arizona where he died in 1915. His son Frank M. King wrote a colorful memoir and made wild claims about both the Johnson and





**Figure 5:** Robert S. Carlisle (1830-1865), the “man of iron” who shot it out with the King Brothers at the Bella Union. Photo from Rhodes, 1951.

Carlisle gunbattles, saying, with the first, that his father tracked his prey down at Tehachapi Pass and killed him, while stating, in the second, that his father swore that Carlisle fired first, that Houston killed the Chino *ranchero*, and that Frank’s role was limited to rapping his revolver on Carlisle’s head.

Moreover, Houston purportedly told his son that an unnamed friend of Carlisle killed Frank King—evidently to deny Carlisle any posthumous credit for killing him. Houston also boasted that, if he’d been convicted of Carlisle’s killing, a hundred men would have arranged a jailbreak. Frank M. King wrote that “it has always been the custom of our family to kill anyone who kills any member of the family” and he claimed that his father hunted down the killer of Frank King and launched him into eternity with a fusillade of bullets on a Texas road in 1875.

As for Andrew Jackson King, he went on to publish the *Los Angeles News* and served

as an attorney and judge and lived into his 90s, being considered a very respectable and highly contributing public servant, untainted by association with two of the most notorious gunbattles in a place that had no shortage of them: mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Los Angeles.

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**Figure 6:** The Dillon family Remington Rolling Block No. 1 Sporting Rifle, made in 1870. A “plain Jane” buffalo gun with fixed rear sight and heavy octagon barrel in standard 26” length, it is chambered for the .50-70 Government round. Subsequent to its use by market hunters this rifle passed into Plains Indian hands. After its stock was broken during a horse rollover the gun was repaired with tin-can strips and tacks, then wrapped with a single, long “green” rawhide buffalo thong that tightened as it dried. Grandpa Dillon bought it off the wall of the Gold Dust Saloon in Sausalito in 1920. B. Dillon photo.

## “Big Fifties” and Old Joe

By Brian Dervin Dillon

George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) owned several Remington Rolling Block rifles in different calibers. His favorite was the .50-70 buffalo gun he took on his Yellowstone expedition of 1873. Custer appears with this rifle in several photos, in some alongside his Indian scouts, or with game he killed with it (Figure 7). This .50-70 Remington is thought by most scholars to have been with him at the Little Bighorn when he was killed. Arguments about the precise spot where Custer fell have, for decades, depended upon the archaeological presence or absence of fired casings from this rifle, for these were unlike the smaller, standard issue .45-55-405 Springfield carbine rounds fired by his troopers.

The Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe, who in many cases were shooting at the 7th Cavalrymen with .44-40 Winchester repeaters, won the battle on June 25, 1876. Unfortunately, they had already lost the larger war: their “on the hoof” primary food supply was fast disappearing to swarms of white buffalo hunters, aided by an American government committed to the elimination of the buffalo as a long-term solution to the ongoing Indian wars on the Great Plains. On that day Custer’s .50-70 Remington Rolling Block rifle became an Indian trophy of their stunning victory at the Little Bighorn. Its whereabouts have been unknown for the

past hundred and forty-seven years.

My own .50-70 Remington Rolling Block buffalo gun (Figure 6) occupied a place of honor up on the wall above the dining table in the house I grew up in, alongside other rifles and carbines, some older, some younger. Grandpa Dillon, a U.S. Army mustang, avid gun collector and teetotaler, bought the monster from the Gold Dust Saloon in Sausalito, California, in January, 1920, shortly before prohibition forced its closure. For many years the rifle was proudly displayed on the wall behind the bar of that saloon. Its neighbor was a .56-50 Spencer Carbine, also brought home to the Dillon house, described earlier in this issue. Both were potent reminders of the historical forces that had moved our forbears westwards across the American continent. The Gold Dust Saloon was just outside the Fort Baker military reservation, and was a favorite of off-duty soldiers. Grandpa Dillon was familiar with this watering hole from many visits as Sergeant of the Guard, beginning in 1902, while removing obstreperous, inebriated, enlisted patrons. How the old rifle originally made its way to the drinking establishment remains unknown.

During a 30-year period more than a million Remington Rolling Blocks were made in just about every caliber under the sun. More of these single-shot rifles were shipped



**Figure 7:** George Armstrong Custer with one of his Remington Rolling Block rifles and a bull elk just killed with it during his September, 1873 Yellowstone expedition. The gun is a No. 1 Sporting Rifle with standard 26-inch octagon barrel, just like the Dillon family buffalo gun. Most historians believe that Custer's rifle at the Little Bighorn was this same .50-70 Remington Rolling Block. After he was killed there on June 25 1876, the rifle passed into Indian hands, and vanished from history. National Archives photo.

to Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America than were ever sold at home in the United States. Although they could be ordered in as fancy a grade as any customer desired, at many times the cost of the basic rifle, most guns sold both domestically and abroad were "plain Jane," no-frills versions. Remington began chambering its rifles in the .50-70 Government centerfire cartridge for the Army and Navy as early as 1867. The Dillon family gun, an octagon-barreled variant with fixed rear sight and very low serial number, was one of the first offered to civilians in 1870. By 1872, the company was advertising a round-barreled variant as its ".50-70 Government Buffalo Rifle" capitalizing on the popularity of the earlier version.

The Dillon family Rolling Block is a very early Model No.1 with straight bar extractor, and faint "50" caliber marking stamped on its barrel's underside. After a few years of use as a buffalo gun in the early 1870's, it passed into the possession of a Plains Indian. At some point, its new owner's horse rolled over, snapping the Remington's stock in

half just behind its receiver. The gun was repaired, Plains Indian fashion, with strips cut from tin cans with a hunting knife, hammered on with small brads. Afterwards the stock was tightly wrapped with a single, very long, green buffalo rawhide thong soaked in water and stretched. As it dried it contracted, tightening and hardening.

The premier buffalo gun just before the Civil War was the Sharps, beautifully made and supremely accurate. A percussion breech-loader employing a linen cartridge, it was much faster to reload than any contemporary muzzle-loader. And, if you ran out of its special cartridges, in a pinch you could still "roll your own," wrapping homemade rounds with newspaper. During the Civil War tens of thousands of .52 caliber Sharps carbines, but many fewer rifles, were used by Union troops. Most of the Sharps in the hands of buffalo hunters immediately after the Civil War were these same .52 percussion guns, now sold as Army surplus.

Meanwhile, the .50 Government or .50-70-450, so designated because it employed a .50 caliber bullet weighing 450 grains ahead of 70 grains of black powder (Figure 8, right), had become the first U.S. Army centerfire rifle cartridge. It rendered the larger caliber (.58, .54, and .52) muzzle-loaders used by both sides during the Civil War obsolete. The Union experiment with rimfires, more than 80,000 big-bore Spencers, both rifles and carbines, as well as a few old percussion Sharps carbines re-chambered for metallic cartridges, had convinced the U.S. Army's ordnance department that the finicky, low-powered *rimfires* were unacceptable. They were superseded by *centerfire* cartridge guns. The first of the new .50-70-450 Trapdoor Springfield centerfire rifles (Figure 10) were issued in 1866, only a year after the Civil War's end. As more of the longer-range, more reliable single-shot centerfires were produced, the old rimfire repeaters were phased out, although some special troops, especially the U.S. Army's Indian scouts, still carried them.

The first all-new, post-Civil War, civilian Sharps was the Model 1869, also the earliest purposely-designed for metallic cartridges. These were offered in several calibers, the





**Figure 8 (Left):** The .50-70-450 Government cartridge introduced in 1866 (right) next to its slimmer, smaller-caliber descendant, the .45-70-500 Government cartridge of 1873 (left). **Figure 9 (Right):** The legacy of the buffalo hunters on the Great Plains, a mountain of buffalo skulls. The supposedly inexhaustible herds of American Bison were slaughtered for their hides, their meat, their tongues, and simply to deny their use by the AmerIndians for whom they were the most vital source of food. In one year alone more than 1.5 million buffalo were killed, and by the mid-1880s they were on the brink of extinction. Both photos from the Internet, in the public domain.

most popular the tried-and-true Government .50-70. Remington also chambered its No.1 Rolling Block Rifle for the same round, standard in the U.S. Army-issue Springfield Trapdoors for the preceding four years. So, by 1870 three different single-shot breechloaders (Springfield, Sharps and Remington) were chambered for the same .50-70 Government round. Of the three, the Remington Rolling Block became the most common buffalo gun. It was simple, easy to make, and inexpensive to buy. By comparison, the Model 1869 Sharps was produced in much smaller numbers and was costly. Foreign governments and journeyman market hunters alike found it too expensive and bought the Remington instead. The Rolling Block was joined, after 1873, by large numbers of Army surplus .50-70 Springfield Trapdoors, made obsolete by the new, smaller, .45-70 round (Figure 8, left). From the mid-1870's onwards, as the herds dwindled, these surplus Springfields became the poor man's buffalo gun.

The .50-90-600 Sharps cartridge was introduced in 1872, an obvious attempt to out-

do the .50-70, now six years old. But few guns were chambered for the .50-90 until the new model Sharps became available two years later. In 1874 the Sharps concern was reorganized, relocated, and renamed the *Sharps Rifle Company*. That year it brought out its most famous rifle, the Model 1874 (Figure 11), still in very small numbers compared to the many thousands of Remington Rolling Blocks being sold. The .50-90 used a 2½ inch casing, compared to the shorter, 1¾ inch case of the .50-70 Government Round.

The later Sharps .50-100 and .50-110 rounds used the same .50-90 case, simply increasing the powder charge while lightening the bullet for these two even more exotic "Big Fifty" cartridges. These were the rounds frequently identified by dime novel and penny-dreadful scribblers (most of them writing about "the West" from New York City hotel rooms) as fired in "Big Fifty Buffalo Guns" despite the fact that *very few* were ever actually used for buffalo hunting. Even as these fancy rifles began to appear in shooting competitions in big American cities





**Figure 10 (Top):** The .50-70 Trapdoor Springfield of 1866, the U.S. Army's first "Big Fifty" centerfire infantry rifle. After the smaller-caliber .45-70 Trapdoor Springfield was introduced in 1873, thousands of these earlier rifles were sold as surplus to buffalo hunters for pennies on the dollar. **Figure 11 (Above):** Sharps Model 1874 .50-90 Buffalo Rifle with heavy octagon barrel and double set triggers. One of the "Big Fifties" so beloved of Hollywood myth-makers, the Sharps was four times as expensive as the Remington Rolling Block if bought new, and its hard-to-find ammunition was too costly in comparison with the .50-70 Government round for any Plains Indian or White buffalo hunter to afford. So these very accurate rifles were bought by well-heeled Eastern American target shooters, not by Western cowboys, Indians, nor buffalo hunters. Both internet images in the public domain.

east of the Mississippi, they still remained too costly for workaday buffalo hunters out on the plains. The Sharps .50-90, -100 or -110 cartridges were hard to find and very expensive to shoot. Consequently, it was the earliest "buffalo cartridge," the old, reliable, .50-70 Government, that killed the greatest number of woolies out on the Plains. Only a few behemoths went down to the exotic, Johnny-come-lately Sharps rounds.

Using the costly 1874 Sharps rifles with their rare and expensive ammunition at long-distance shooting competitions in Connecticut did not make them "buffalo guns." Nor were the much later rifles, chambered for exotic, long-range cartridges towards the end of the 1880's "buffalo guns" either, for they appeared only *after* the great herds had already been wiped out. The Sharps, instead, became the favorite of well-heeled competitive shooters back East, only infrequently fired by greenhorns during short-term junkets out West. For every Philadelphia rube that stuck a hundred-dollar Sharps target rifle out the window of a slow-moving train and popped off at distant, dwindling, herds of buffalo, fifty to a hundred professional buffalo hunters were

each taking down dozens of the big animals, day after day, week after week on the Great Plains with ten-dollar surplus Springfields, or newer, twenty-five-dollar, Remingtons.

The more pedestrian, and earlier, Sharps Model 1869 .50-70 buffalo gun shot the same cheap, plentiful ammo as the Remingtons and Springfields, yet market hunters in the early 1870s could buy three brand-new rolling blocks for the price of a single Sharps. And, once the old Army surplus guns became available, market hunters could buy ten used .50-70 Trapdoor Springfields for what just one brand-new Sharps cost. They did exactly that. More importantly, the thousands of rounds of obsolete .50-70 government surplus ammo fired every day by professional buffalo hunters only cost pennies compared to the expensive Sharps rounds expended only occasionally by wealthy sportsmen. This ammunition was even occasionally given free of charge to the buffalo hunters, since U.S. government officials no less than western military base commanders reasoned that diminishing the buffalo herds would severely compromise the freedom of action of the Plains Indians they were fighting.

The last buffalo hunters on the Great



**Figure 12:** Just how big is a “Big 50?” The “business end” of the 1870 .50-70 Remington Rolling Block, at right, compared with a .30 caliber Model 94 Winchester at center, and a .22 caliber Model 43 Mossberg bull-barrelled .22LR Target Rifle at far left. The old buffalo gun had a hard life, to judge from the its battered muzzle. B. Dillon photo.

Plains were also the first, the American Indians. No reservation Indian could afford expensive “big fifty” Sharps ammunition, but .50-70 rounds were cheap, plentiful, and still available long after they had been made obsolete by the .45-70. Fifty years after the Dillon family buffalo gun became a Plains Indian rifle, Bannerman’s mail order house was still selling Army surplus .50-70 Government ammunition for \$2.50 per 100 rounds or \$25.00 per thousand. As late as 1927 they still came in the original U.S. Army wooden cases of 1,000 rounds. This ancient ammunition remained in stock until 1940.

More than half a century ago, in my Northern California grammar school, we studied American history. The curriculum out on the Pacific Coast was very light on pigtailed Bostonians tossing crates of tea into their harbor. It was heavier on wagon trains crossing the plains, and heavier still on gold prospecting in places that were, in some cases, still locally familiar to us kids. When it came time for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade “show and tell,” most of the boys in my class brought in autographed baseballs, and mumbled something incomprehensible about batting averages. Most of the girls brought in curry-combs or bridles, and bored us with love stories focused upon horses, both real and imaginary.

No baseballs for me: I lugged Grandpa Dillon’s .50 Caliber Remington Rolling Block



**Figure 13:** “Old Joe” the symbol of the 70+ Westerners corrals around the world This image of a single buffalo skull harkens back to a time when most of the American West was still “wild” but when buffalo hunters were doing their best to destroy that wildness. So, in a very real sense, it is a symbol both of what used to be, and what has been lost forever. L.A. Corral image archives.

buffalo gun to class instead. I talked for twenty minutes about the westward movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, about buffalo hunting on the Plains, and the Transcontinental Railroad. My 1870 “Big Fifty” buffalo gun was visible proof of the story I was spinning. I told the class that by the early 1880s the buffalo, numbering millions before the Civil War, had been almost completely wiped out. I explained that hunting the great northern and southern herds to the brink of extinction was no accident, but by the 1870s was strategic American military policy to end the long, drawn-out, Indian Wars. If the Plains tribes were “starved out,” they would have to stop fighting. My “show and tell” episode ended with Custer dead at the Little Bighorn in 1876, killed beside his own .50-70 Remington Rolling Block, just like the one I was holding. His rifle, again *just like mine*, then became an Indian gun. My old buffalo gun was the ice-breaker. I later took other guns to school for show and tell, as props for subsequent lectures on the Civil War, the California Gold Rush, and so forth and so on. These became

so routine that other kids sometimes asked “what, no gun today?” when I showed up on the playground without one.

Long ago and far away, as an 8-year old in the San Francisco Bay Area I took guns to school for show and tell. The firearms I carried into my Mill Valley, Marin County, classroom were recognized by my teachers as well as my fellow 3rd grade students as historically important artifacts, icons of our shared experience way out west. The old Dillon family buffalo gun first “went to school” in 1961. It has continued to do so, off and on, ever since. Twenty years later it reappeared as a teaching tool in my American History, American Indian Ethnology and Historical Archaeology University classes and then, another dozen years later, in the archaeology and history lectures I taught for the State of California.

I have also had the privilege, on several occasions over the past 45 years, of showing it to American Indians descended from warriors who fought at the Little Bighorn. The old rifle, with its buffalo hunting and Custer

connections, never fails to spark a reaction. My AmerIndian friends always tell me that “Custer had it coming,” then, when they heft the old buffalo gun, some say “if only we had had something like this long *before* Custer came along...”

So, for more than fifty years, the Dillon family buffalo gun has been going to school for “show and tell,” and it always stole the show. Today, through this brief publication, an entirely new group of people all around the world are becoming aware of it, and so they should, for these are the members of Westerners International, whose “Old Joe” buffalo skull (Figure 13) symbolizes an American West that used to be, but is no more.

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## Tom Turner (1861-1937), Shootist Extraordinaire

By Gary Turner

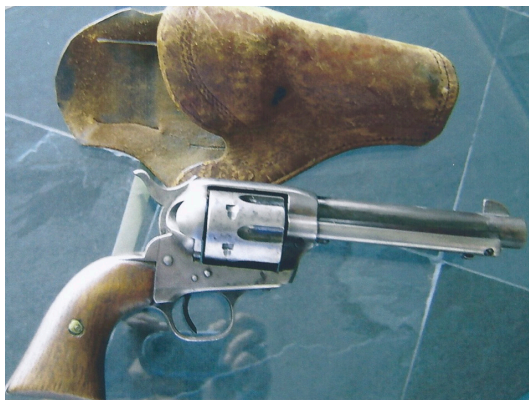
### The Early Years and Texas Cattle Drives—1861-1879

My grandfather was an Arizona cowboy that, as a lad, grew up on Texas cattle drives. Born in Waco, Texas, on November 12, 1861, early in the Civil War, his family was poor, so Thomas Jefferson Turner signed onto a Texas cattle drive as a hired hand at just 14 years of age. During this, and other drives, he experienced many cold nights, hot dusty days, harsh winds and downpours of rain. He rode across flooded rivers, experienced stampedes, rounded up cattle after thunder storms, survived the many hazards of bumps, bruises, broken bones, and even Indian and rustler attacks. He also taught himself how to use pistol and rifle and learned to keep his weapons clean and shoot straight.

Turner worked as a cowboy with dif-

ferent outfits and even went as far north as Wyoming on one drive. There are no written records of Tom Turner on these cattle drives but stories persisted in the Turner family about his many exploits and experiences. We do know that there was trouble on many of these drives and it was said in family circles that Tom learned “everything there was to learn” about tending and herding cattle, as well as life in the big cities of Abilene and Laramie. Family stories tell of Tom firing his pistol but no one knows if he ever shot anyone. Usually, whatever Tom fired at, he hit. The “old men” of these trail drives (those in their late teens or early twenties) learned not to trifle with Tom for he grew up tough, could handle himself in a fistfight, and outshoot all of the drive wranglers.

Cattle towns were tough places and Tom had to make his own way with the men with



**Figure 14 (Left):** Grandpa Tom Turner looking handsome as always. Unusually, the Nogales Sheriff is not packing heat in this circa 1900-1904 portrait. Photo courtesy of the Pimeria Alta Historical Society. **Figure 15 (Above):** Tom Turner's Colt SAA six-shooter and holster, now owned by his great-granddaughter. Turner collection photo.

whom he cowboied, the town toughs, the women of the night, and anyone who might have wanted to "lift his poke." He certainly was exposed to gun play in the towns on the cattle drives. There are some stories about Tom and some hostile Indians that were encountered on the trail but no written documentation could be found about shooting either a White man or an Indian. Tom married Mary Fenter in 1893. Mary's grandfather, Christian Fenter, had married a Chickasaw maiden in Hot Springs Arkansas, in 1830. Mary Fenter was my "Indian" Grandmother who I knew growing up in Los Angeles and who died in 1956.

It was said in the family that Tom was strong and coordinated, could shoot a tin can out of the air with a pistol, fight any town drunk that may have thought Tom was an easy touch, and acted older and wiser than most of the men he rode with.

Since there were no doctors on these cattle drives, Tom Turner learned to not only to get along, but to survive and complete the job at hand. He also developed some basic thoughts about living that he held throughout his life. He followed these self-taught ideas until the day he died, February 5, 1937, in Los Angeles:

1. Respect the law and the people you meet.
2. Be fair in all matters.
3. Be smart, tenacious, and tough.
4. Always do the right thing.

These life guidelines were passed down through the family generations and every Turner child, grandchild, great grandchild, etc., were brought up with them as the way which people should live. They are still taught today in all factions of the family.

### Tom Turner vs. Wyatt Earp

The oral "Turner Family History" that was told to me by my Grandmother, Leda Aquilla (Beaty) Turner, daughter-in-law of Tom Turner, was that my Great Grandpa shot and killed more than twice the men that Wyatt Earp has been credited with. Leda also said that Wyatt Earp used many of Tom Turner's incidents or stories when spinning tales to credulous writers and movie-makers. Since Earp may be the most famous lawman in the annals of Western history, my grandma's statement was quite the boost!

Although it is sometimes difficult to discern fact from fiction in those rough and tumble early days of Arizona history it is a



known fact that Wyatt, a Southern Arizona friend of Tom Turner, and friends who got together in Los Angeles in their later years, killed at least 8 men. This does not include the exact number of men that Wyatt killed or murdered in his "Vendetta or Vengeance" ride after his brother was shot, as no exact records were kept at the time. Since Frank McLaury and Billy Clanton also had Doc Holliday, Morgan Earp, and Virgil Earp firing at them, the "kill" bullet or bullets will never be known. Wyatt did shoot:

1. An unnamed desperado while he was a guard for Wells Fargo
2. George Hoy (Dodge City, 1878)
3. Frank McLaury (OK Corral Tombstone)
4. Billy Clanton (OK Corral, Tombstone)
5. Frank Stilwell (Railroad depot in Tombstone)
6. John Ringo (Vengeance ride)
7. Indian Charlie (Vengeance ride)
8. "Curly" Bill Brocius (Vengeance ride)

With this accounting, according to Grandma Turner's calculation, Tom Turner killed 16 men while on cattle drives, as a resident of Southern Arizona, and finally, as the first elected Sheriff of Nogales (1900-1904). I am sure that my grandmother was just repeating the stories that were told to her, but I don't know if my grandmother clearly understood the veracity of all the facts and numbers. I will state that the men Tom Turner killed far exceeded what the average man or sheriff usually kills in one lifetime and he did match or exceed Wyatt Earp.

### **Auction—2007**

In October 2007, the James D. Julia Auction Company put up for auction a Colt Single Action Army Revolver with belt and holster rig. The advertisement stated:

"This fine Colt & rig were the property of a man named Tom Turner who was for many years connected with the

area of Nogales, Arizona, where he was sheriff of Santa Cruz County, headquartered in Nogales and at various times a rancher, wagon foreman on the San Rafael Ranch, manager of the Empire Ranch and later general foreman of the Greene Cattle Company."

"Mr. Turner, according to numerous newspaper articles and stories, was not a man to trifle with. He apparently was very tenacious in pursuing outlaws who stole livestock from his ranch and in one instance trailed four of them into the north end of the Chiricahua Mountains and in a gun battle killed three of the four of them and recovered his livestock. In another instance, when he was manager of the Empire Ranch, he confronted six individuals who were giving him trouble and in the ensuing gun battle, killed five of them hiding 'in a length of a boxcar.'"

In 2007, no living member of the Turner Family knew that this auction was taking place or where Tom Turner's most famous gun and holster came from. At this time Yvonne Carothers-Reider, great grand-daughter of Tom, owned another gun and holster that he used. Specific information from the auction company on where the fancy gun and holster came from, and who purchased the gun and holster, were not forthcoming. There is nothing in the extensive Turner Archive files that mentioned the existence of this gun and holster. Had the family known about the gun, and if there was proof that the gun actually did belong to Tom Turner, there would have been an interesting bidding battle on who would eventually own the weapon and holster. As of this writing, no more information on the pistol has been found.

### **The Mexican Horse Thieves Shootings**

Upon his return from a Texas-to-Wyoming cattle drive, Tom Turner was ready to set out on his own and make a life for himself in the West, which he believed held many opportunities for a knowledgeable, hard-working cowboy. Tom left Texas and headed to Arizona. He settled on a ranch

on the San Pedro River, south of Benson. He was in his early 20's at this time and was a rough and ready young man. He was over 6 feet tall and could out-fight, out-ride, and out-shoot most of the men; seldom did anyone mess with him. In a word, Tom Turner was tough!

Tom had little money when he came to Southern Arizona in the early 1880s but invested all he could afford in a small ranch and stock. One night a band of Mexican rustlers invaded his ranch, and seeing what they thought was an easy target, ran off with 26 head of horses. Tom took out after them the following morning. After a hard day and a half of riding, he finally overtook the thieves at the north end of the Chiricahua Mountains, more than 40 miles from his ranch.

Tom circled in front of the horses, dismounted, set himself up in the rocks, and a gunfight immediately ensued. Tom was an excellent shot with both pistol and rifle. Three horse thieves were shot dead and the fourth made his escape. There is no record as to how many shots were fired but one bullet cut a hole in Tom's shirt sleeve and another went through the fleshy part of his leg.

What helped make Tom Turner a legend in the Southwest was the judge who presided over the hearing. To quote directly from an article in the University of Arizona Historical Library regarding the shooting of the Mexican *bandidos* in Wilcox, Arizona, the judge stated:

"Young man, you have committed a very serious offense, and you deserve the severest punishment this court can inflict upon you. Damned if I don't fine you the drinks for the town for letting that other Mexican get away."

Tom Turner immediately began the payment of his fine. It took him all day to round up the populace of Wilcox, but eventually he treated every man who could be induced to take a drink. It cost him \$14.

### **Empire Ranch Foreman**

Southern Arizona, Nogales, Tombstone,

and the border towns were wild and unruly, especially by the standards of today. Mexican *vaqueros* and American cowboys who made their homes in Arizona worked both sides of the border. But along with law-abiding cowboys were rustlers, thieves, and gunmen also working both sides of the border. Tom Turner, as did many border cowboys, spoke English and Spanish. This was especially helpful some years later when he rode into Pancho Villa's camp and asked the Mexican Revolutionary to stop killing the bulls when they needed food for their army. It was all right to take a few steers from the herd but the Mexican and American ranchers needed the bulls for breeding. Villa agreed with Turner and let him return from his camp alive. He did, however, take his boots and his horse, and Tom had to walk over 30 miles in the desert in his bare feet.

Turner's reputation as a shooter was enhanced when he was the foreman for the Empire Ranch. Rustlers were an ever-present danger to the cattle ranches on both sides of the border when Tom confronted six men who were suspected rustlers. Outlaws from the U.S. side and Mexican *bandidos* rustled cattle whenever possible and big cattle ranches had to be on the alert at all times. Turner followed the thieves and in the ensuing gun-battle Turner killed five of them "hiding in the length of a boxcar." No names were ever listed for those killed and most folk believed that justice was served. Specific names, dates, and places were seldom recorded or verified.

### **Nogales Sheriff**

Although it was not frowned upon for a White man to have a dalliance with a Mexican woman, it was not accepted for a Mexican man to run off with a White woman at that time and place. This happened while Tom Turner was Sheriff of Nogales. A complaint was filed by an irate father that a young Mexican man had kidnapped and run away with his daughter.

As Sheriff, Turner was obliged to return the daughter to her parents. He saddled up and soon found their trail. The specifics of the fight have never been documented, but it

is known that Turner brought back the young lady. The Turner Family stories state that Tom killed the young man in a gun fight. Not much else is known except that Tom's reputation as a quality shootist was well earned.

### Conclusion

My grandmother's statements about the men Tom Turner shot may be exaggerated, but he did shoot and kill at least ten men in Southern Arizona. The total might have been even higher if accurate records were kept on his trail drives as a young man. Grandma Turner was correct to claim that his total was higher than Wyatt Earp's.

Turner also worked as a foreman on the Mexican side of the border and not much is known about any shooting he may have done during this period. This was a dangerous time when many shootings went unrecorded. Spanish-language newspapers from Nogales and Northern Mexico should be studied to see if Tom Turner had any more shootings that are not yet part of the recorded or oral histories. Of course, this will have to be undertaken by younger generations of Turners as old age and language barriers cannot be overcome by this author.

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*Figure 16: Be still my heart! Isn't this a beauty? Colt Single Action Army Revolver made in 1901. It is nickel-plated, has bone grips, and was engraved by Charles Baker. It is in caliber .38-40 with a 4 3/4" barrel. All photos in this article were taken with the cooperation of collector friends who wish to remain anonymous.*

## Colt Single Action Army Revolvers

By Frank Brito

The above title is the proper name for this revolver and is a mouthful. Probably labeled as such by the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps, it is descriptive of the manufacturer, operating mechanism, service branch and type of firearm. There are two theories on how Samuel Colt invented the mechanism of a revolving cylinder holding six chambers. One is that as a young sailor, he was inspired by watching the steering wheel of a sailing ship. The other is that he got the idea from watching a ship's windlass. This is a more plausible theory because a windlass has teeth and a pawl allowing only one direction to be rotated with the pawl providing a sure stop in its rotation. He applied the windlass idea to a cylinder with notches at its rear as a "cylinder stop," or bolt, to hold the cylinder perfectly aligned or "indexed" to the gun barrel in front of it. This was his critical contribution to making a revolving firearm safe and accurate.

Samuel Colt put his revolver ideas into wooden models and patented them as cap and ball guns using black powder as a propellant. Each cylinder was charged with powder, a wad, and a lead projectile rammed

into place. For safety, the load was often sealed with grease to prevent the other chambers from being ignited by the main charge as it traveled down the barrel. "Chain firing" could cost a shooter his fingers, eyesight, or severe facial disfigurement. Since the Colt revolver went through several evolutions and our main topic is the one purchased by the U.S. Army, we'll touch only lightly on its history before 1871. By that year, copper or brass cases were coming into use by other manufacturers such as Smith & Wesson. The Colt factory switched to metallic cartridges late in their history and offered "conversions," whereby cap-and-ball pistols were converted to accept black powder brass cartridges.

For brevity's sake, the Colt Single Action Army Revolver is shortened to "Colt SAA" by most Colt aficionados. It has had several nicknames such as, "Hogleg," "Six-shooter," "Judge Colt and his jury of six," and, most commonly, "Peacemaker." It has also been called the "Model P" by Colt factory workers themselves. Henry Ford is often credited with creating the assembly line and interchangeable parts. But much earlier, making





**Figure 17:** Various grips were available for Colt SAAs, some custom-ordered from the factory, others bought through after-market vendors. Since most revolvers were slightly different, grips (also called “furniture”) purchased from after-market vendors required careful fitting. Clockwise from top: factory hard rubber grips; pearlite grips, factory fitted on a 1961 nickel-plated .357 magnum; factory walnut grips on a U.S. Army martial revolver; real or faux ivory grips on a Second Generation SAA. Other grip styles will be shown in succeeding photos.

a Colt SAA was almost an assembly line process. There were stages where each employee had a specific function, received a part, performed it, and passed it on the next worker. Parts were placed in bins and the parts were mostly interchangeable. I say “mostly” because some hand fitting was required during final assembly. Did the Colt process inspire Mr. Ford? In eighth grade, I was told that Eli Whitney advanced interchangeability to a high degree and then, perhaps, the Colt Factory improved upon it.

As a youth in the 1940s and 1950s, movies and television shows featuring western stars such as Ken Maynard, Crash Corrigan, Hoot Gibson and Bob Steele were staples of my entertainment. Even Max Terhune carried a six-shooter, but his dummy didn’t. Young-uns will have to look *that one* up. I carried a nickel-plated cap gun and pretended to be Roy Rogers, Gene Autry or any other western movie star that popped into my head. Going door-to-door, I collected

soda bottles and redeemed them at the little store on Eastlake Avenue in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, for boxes containing rolls of caps. We had a group of about a dozen boys my age that got together in summer playing “cowboys and bad guys.” We’d hide behind trees, cars, around corners and often in the brush jungle in the swale behind the Celotex paper mill on Valley Boulevard. When we ran out of caps, we uttered explosive sounds with our mouths, “Pow. Pow!” We all had our nickel-plated cap guns and left pieces of red cap paper everywhere.

The beautiful ergonomic shape of the Colt SAA imprinted on my childhood brain like a hypnotic symbol, never to be erased. We children all called it, “The Cowboy Gun.” In the 1970s, I began attending gun shows in Northern California, primarily to buy reloading supplies for my very ordinary Dan Wesson double-action revolver. It shot both .38 Specials and .357 Magnums. I bought-powder, bullets, brass cases, primers, tools and ammo boxes. Of course, the gun shows were like a wonderful Disneyland to a family man living on a budget. The most attractive aisles were the ones filled with Colt SAAs. Some originals were in rubber grips, martial models were in walnut, others had mother-of-pearl, stag, or beautiful, exotic woods. The best were nickel-plated with carved ivory handles, just like my old cap guns. All the Colt SAAs were unjustly expensive, but still the hypnotic imprint flashed in my brain like a neon sign. Oh, they were all *beautiful!*

Flash forward to about 1988 and I was still shooting my inexpensive Ruger .22 and Dan Wesson revolvers at the gun range. We took a trip to New Mexico to visit relatives and do some genealogy research. The subject of firearms came up with my Uncle Jim (Santiago Padilla Brito), a gun nut like me. He had a large collection of miscellaneous firearms including a Ruger revolver, a .30 cal. M1 carbine clone, a Springfield O3-A3 .30-06, and a Winchester Model 94 .30-30 Theodore Roosevelt Commemorative to show me. After putting them away, he said something like, “I have something else to show you, but I have to look for it.” In a few minutes, he came out of his bedroom with a revolver wrapped in



**Figure 18:** A Colt SAA revolver with a 4 ¾" long barrel marked, "Colt Frontier Six Shooter .44-40." This gun was manufactured in 1916.

a flannel pajama leg. It was a Colt SAA with a 4 ¾ barrel in .38 Special. I was stunned to see one and to hold it. He said it had been in the family a long time and that it needed to stay in the family. He said it was his father's and that I could have it. All I could say was, "Thank you" because no other words came to mind as I admired it. It was a real Colt and fit my hand like a glove. I now had a real honest-to-goodness "Cowboy Gun," and so much more valuable because he said it was Grandpa Frank's.<sup>1</sup>

My fascination with these revolvers initiated some research and knowledge acquired prior to ever actually receiving my uncle's gift. This accumulated education was obtained in the hope of someday owning one. Arriving back home, I looked up its manufacture date and sent off a request for a "Colt Factory Letter." It arrived some weeks later and was signed by Kathleen Hoyt, the Colt Firearms Company Historian. The letter stated it was sold to Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Company of Chicago, Illinois, a large hardware firm. It was in a group of ten revolvers shipped on January 5, 1906. This hardware firm also conducted wholesale operations and the revolver found its way in a shipment to Las Cruces, New Mexico, probably to a small gun shop or hardware store. Most interesting was that the letter provided the original caliber and barrel length. It was shipped as a .44-40 caliber, 4 ¾" barrel, "Colt Frontier Six-Shooter." I immediately called Uncle Jim and he said, "Dad probably converted it to .38 Special in the 1940s or 50s because those bullets were cheaper and easy to find." I asked him if I could restore it to the

original configuration and he said, "Yes."

It took some time to find a barrel and cylinder to match the original specifications, but this was done in the mid-1990s. First Generation Colt SAA parts are hard to find and very expensive, but this was finally accomplished at gun show parts counters. I sent the revolver to John Kopec, an official Colt restorer and he reconfigured it, blued the cylinder and barrel and color-case-hardened the frame. He also returned the .38 Special barrel and cylinder. I test fired it, took it to Las Cruces on one of our trips and Uncle Jim and I fired it at Lloyd's Ranch, the site of a large Apache depredation in the late 1800s. The late Bob McNellis of El Paso Saddlery made a period-correct holster and gun belt for this Colt SAA and the whole package is now a family heirloom.

A brief mention of holsters for the Colt SAA is necessary to this discussion. Many law enforcement officers and citizens carrying firearms in the late 19th century purchased their holsters from S. D. Myres Saddlery of Sweetwater, Texas. They were known for the high quality of their leather work. Many surviving gun belt and holster rigs from that period made by Myres still survive and command a high price. Myres later moved to El Paso and the company eventually folded. Fortunately, a young man named Robert McNellis purchased Myres' old patterns and opened his own factory, hired skilled leatherworkers, and began making holsters and gunbelts using fine leather replicating old west rigs. At first, he stuck to the classic "Over the gunbelt" holsters such as the authentic cowboys would have worn (Figure



**Figure 19:** A mixture of memorabilia: jail key once in the possession of Deputy Sheriff Frank C. Brito; his railroad watch; a Colt Frontier as in Figure 18; An El Paso Saddlery replica holster manufactured to late 1800s patterns; an actual U.S. Deputy Marshal badge with hallmarks once in the possession of Santiago Padilla Brito. Provenance is unknown. Six Morgan silver dollars dated prior to 1900. Cartridges are .44-40 caliber.

19). Later, he started making “Buscadero” rigs with a flap under the belt emulating the quick-draw Hollywood, low-hanging gun-belts nobody in the “Old West” ever wore or even imagined. As a history buff, Bob faithfully reproduced several styles and began taking orders using the trade name, “El Paso Saddlery.” Knowing the fragility of Colt SAA revolver bluing and color case hardening, Bob offered pigskin liners in his holsters. This soft skin greatly reduces “holster wear” from the finish of Colt revolvers. As a frequent visitor to El Paso, I got to know Bob and we enjoyed our visits discussing El Paso and Mesilla Valley history. Unfortunately, Bob passed away, but his company continues to make quality gun leather.

Colt SAAs have been manufactured and sold since 1873 with two pauses. First Generation revolvers ceased production at Colt in 1940 when the company resources were dedicated to the World War Two effort. The final First Generation Colt was issued serial number 357859.<sup>2</sup> Between 1945 and 1972 about 300 Colt SAAs were assembled from First Generation parts and given or sold to



**Figure 20:** Left to right, .45 Colt, .44WCF (.44-40), .38WCF (.38-40), .32WCF (.32-20), .38 Special, .357 Magnum, and .44 Special. The three calibers marked “WCF” are all “bottle-neck” cartridges in which the case at bottom is large and tapers toward the lead projectile. The four on the left were the most common First Generation calibers. The three on the right are more modern calibers for Second Generation Colt SAAs.

select individuals. The machinery and tools for these revolvers was 73 years old and had not been preserved well during the war.

Then, in the 1950s, with increasing popularity of movie and television westerns, other manufacturers began making Colt SAA clones. Seeing that they were missing a revenue opportunity, Colt brought back the old, neglected machinery and began making Second Generation revolvers in 1956.<sup>3</sup> These were eagerly sought after by western gun aficionados wanting a “real Colt.” In 1978, the hundred-year-old machinery was finally beyond repair and Colt ceased making the Colt SAA revolver. These Second Generation guns are nearly the equivalent of First Generation revolvers in quality and workmanship and are prized by collectors second only to First Generation models. Also in 1978, Colt began manufacturing Third Generation models with new machinery. The first few were assembled using Second Generation parts. The last of these Third Generation models were made in 1981 when interest in western movies diminished. Currently, Colt SAA revolvers can still be purchased as special orders.

The Colt SAA over its very long run was made in over three dozen calibers. Some of them were at the request of foreign countries. In the United States, the most common calibers were the .45 Colt, .44WCF, .38WCF and the .32WCF. The “WCF” stood for “Winchester Center Fire” (Figure 20), and all three began life as rifle, not pistol cartridges.





**Figure 21:** The most common barrel lengths, top to bottom: 7 ½ inches; 5 ½ inches; 4 ¾ inches. Other barrel lengths could be obtained by factory order. Note the hard rubber grips on the long-barreled revolver. It is a Type 2 eagle grip containing two profiles: on top, the trademark Rampant Colt, on bottom an eagle. The two bottom revolvers have the Type 1 hard rubber grip containing only the Rampant Colt. The original hard rubber grips issued in the 1880s were made of a substance called "gutta percha," an early type of latex.

Colt did not appreciate Winchester nomenclature on its revolvers, so these cartridges were marked as .44-40, .38-40, and .32-20, respectively. The first numbers represented the diameter of the bullet in fractions of an inch, and the second number signified the grains of black powder in the casing. However, the .38-40 was not a ".38," but actually .40 caliber. A more accurate designation might have been .40WCF or .40-40. The .38-40 was a robust round with muzzle energy similar to a .357 Magnum. In a Winchester rifle, it was a fine deer hunting round. All three calibers were present in First Generation Colt SAA revolvers. Colt made a few .357 Magnum revolvers prior to World War Two. They also made them as a Second Generation caliber. Common modern calibers are .38 Special and .44 Special and the venerable .45 Colt. Why not .44 Magnum? The frame and cylinders cannot bear the very high pressures generated by this round.

The Colt SAA was first issued to the United States Army as a cavalry revolver in 1873. It had a seven and one-half inch barrel, walnut grips and fired the .45 Colt black powder center-fire cartridge. It was a fearsome weapon, easily reloadable and very accurate. Civilians took note of this and in

1874, Colt Firearms began selling this same revolver to civilians. Soon, different barrel lengths were available to the civilian market, the most common were the Cavalry model length in 7 ½", a shorter 5 ½", and another at 4 ¾". Personally, I find the 4 ¾" barrel model the most attractive, possibly because the ejector housing and barrel length are the same. There is an artistic symmetry to this configuration that appeals to my eye. See if you agree (Figure 21). Beauty in a firearm is subjective, and in today's cultural climate, it is likely questioned by some. My own family history prevents me from assenting with those so disposed.

Factory finishes were at first blue and color-case hardened. The barrels, cylinder and grip frames were blued steel. The frame was case hardened in a charcoal bed to add strength. This resulted in a beautiful random mosaic pattern. As in snowflakes, no two revolver frames were of like appearance. Nickel plating was offered at a slightly higher cost and later, silver plating was available. Some engravers inlaid their work with gold, especially for presentation models given to political, military or business leaders. Also offered was a Colt Royal Blue finish.

Successive small or large changes were made to First Generation models each passing year. These are called "Variations" by Keith Cochran in his detailed study of Colt Single Action Army Revolvers. There are too many to include in this short article, but one important variation is noted. In 1896, the frame screw (Figure 22) anchoring the cylinder pin was replaced by a transverse retaining screw and spring (Figure 23). This was a major improvement because vibration over time from firing loosened the frame screw and it was easily lost. Frequent tightening was necessary after practice firing and combat. Revolvers with the frame screw are popularly called "black powder models." This is a misnomer because stronger steel was not introduced for smokeless powder until 1898 or a year later. Experts are divided over the exact year. It is therefore considered unsafe to shoot a Colt SAA with smokeless powder cartridges if it was made before 1900. My opinion is that shooting any





**Figure 22:** Early style cylinder base pin retaining screw on frame.



**Figure 23:** Late style transverse screw holding cylinder base pin.



**Figure 24:** On left is a Colt SAA cylinder of late manufacture. Note the sharp edges at top. These cylinders eliminate the costly and intense labor of beveling. At the right is a cylinder of early manufacture. Note the rounded beveling at the top of the cylinder. This is a stylish adornment great for looks, but adds nothing to accuracy or reliability.



**Figure 25:** Note the inspectors proof marks on this military revolver or "martial gun." It is not a Colt SAA, but many Colt SAAs did have these stamps or "cartouches." The inspectors could be civilians or military ordnance officers proof-firing the revolvers. Their initials signify approval. The initials RAC are those of Rinaldo A. Carr. The initials L.E.S. are unknown.

First Generation Colt SAA is unwise because only about 358,000 were made. Many have been lost, discarded, or rusted out, and it is unknown how many survive today in working order. They have become a rare firearm and since nearly identical Second and Third Generation Colt SAAs and inexpensive clones of foreign manufacture exist, why risk the damage to an irreplaceable firearm? First Generation models are true historical items; the last-manufactured gun would be 83 years old today. If collectors yield to the temptation of shooting these old guns, mild loads should be used when reloading. There are also commercial "cowboy" reduced loads for these revolvers.

Some of the SAA variations were not just for safety. Many were for economy. For example, the cylinder base pin had an attractive hole in the head. This was eliminated as

a step in production. Another economy was the elimination of beveling sharp corners. This is most evident in cylinders (Figure 24). This beveling elimination was a gradual process with earlier models having a high degree of beveling and later models showing none whatsoever. No doubt, this beveling was done by hand by a craftsman with a sharp eye, skilled hand and a small grinding wheel. These manual operations adding style and elegance to the revolver, but were eventually phased out to save time and money.

Revolvers issued to the military were given stringent tests before contracts were signed. After acceptance but before issuance to soldiers, each firearm was proof-tested by Colt, and by either a civilian or military inspector. Theoretically, every martial firearm leaving the Colt plant was thoroughly inspected, fired and stamped with the initials



**Figure 26:** The two Colt SAA designs are shown for comparison. The top example is the classic Colt SAA we are all familiar with. At bottom is the Bisley. Note the longer and inward canted grip, lowered hammer spur, and enlarged trigger guard. Some say this design is even more beautiful than the original. This Bisley model was made in 1903, is in .32-20 caliber with a 5 ½" barrel and has stag grips.

of the inspector (Figure 25).

The design of the Colt SAA was brilliant and ergonomic for its time, even though the word "ergonomic" was unknown in the 19th century. The grip fits comfortably in the hand, the hammer is placed exactly where the thumb engages it and recoil rolls the revolver up the wrist at a comfortable angle. The front sight is large and easily located from the rear sights. It is an accurate firearm, easily cleaned, maintained and disassembled. The screws must be occasionally tightened because they loosen from repeated firings. The primary disadvantage was the weak spring. In First Generation models it was a relatively thin and narrow length of spring steel subject to breakage.

The SAA design remains a classic and has been copied by too many other gun manufacturers to list. The Italians have produced many clones that operate in the same manner with some added safety features. Rather than a firing pin on the hammer, they use transfer bars or a base pin that can be pushed back to block the hammer from a negligent discharge. However, to a Single Action enthusiast, there is only one genuine article, and that is a Colt Single Action Army in any of its generations



**Figure 27 (Top):** Top: Original Colt SAA rear groove sight on frame. Bottom: New Frontier adjustable rear sight. **Figure 28 (Above):** Left: Original Colt SAA "Ten Gallon" style front sight. Right: Colt SAA "New Frontier" front ramp sight. This Colt is a .22 caliber model. Note the smaller diameter barrel.

or configurations. For safety, a "Six Shooter" was only loaded with 5 rounds. The hammer rested on an empty chamber because if dropped, the revolver was easily discharged.

While the traditional design was instrumental to its popularity, Colt deviated from its classic pattern by offering a slightly different shape. It produced a SAA Bisley model (Figure 26, bottom), named for the international pistol matches held at the shooting ranges in Bisley, England. The shape supposedly facilitated accuracy and the revolver did well in those matches. Colt expert Keith Cochran states the Bisley was introduced in 1895 and production continued through 1912. The NRA on its website states it was available from 1894 to 1915. Mr. Cochran has conducted a detailed history of all Colt SAA revolvers, so his research earns my trust. The NRA states that about 45,000 Bisley revolvers were made, other sources state the true number is unknown. Adding to this confusion is that the Bisley models did not have separate serial numbers, but were integrated into same sequence as standard Colt SAAs.

Pancho Villa was known to carry a Bisley. In the 1982 historical movie, *The Grey Fox*, actor Richard Farnsworth carried a Bisley revolver. He portrayed Canadian train robber Bill Miner who favored the Bisley. This movie was my first exposure to a Colt Bisley model and it was a revelation. Of course, I thought the star of the show was the Bisley revolver, not Farnsworth.

In 1961, a modest sight upgrade was added to the traditional design on Second Generation revolvers. Colt introduced its "New Frontier" model (Figures 27 and 28).<sup>4</sup> The frame remained the same, but the rear sights were now adjustable for elevation and windage. The front sight was higher and more pyramidal in shape (called a "ramp"), rather than the traditional round shape. The Colt factory made the New Frontier models in traditional center-fire calibers and in a rim-fire .22 caliber model with an extra cylinder for .22WMR (Winchester Magnum Rifle). All are highly accurate and attract their own collector enthusiasts.

## Conclusion

There is nothing more thoroughly Western American than the Colt Single Action Army revolver. In any part of the world, when seen, it is instantly known as "The cowboy gun." It has appeared in all Western movies, from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) through *Tombstone* (1993) and beyond. Many dozens of Western TV shows have featured the Hogleg. It has also stretched credibility when the Colt SAA appears in media set in time periods before its first appearance in 1873. It is also famous in films as "the gun that never needs reloading." Samuel Colt would be amazed to see a Hollywood cowboy on horseback firing 20 shots out of a six-shooter. Sam Colt died in 1862 and never actually saw his company's first Hogleg. But I think he would applaud just like I did while seeing the good guys win on the big screen with what became a national icon.

Thanks to members of the gun club that dropped by for the photo session illustrating this article. The use of their Colt collections in these photos is much appreciated.

## End Notes

1. *Former Doña Ana County, New Mexico Deputy Sheriff Frank C. Brito*: One of Theodore Roosevelt's Spanish American War "Rough Rider" veterans, he later became that county's chief jailor.
2. *First Generation Colt Single Action Army Revolvers Cease Production in 1940*: Colt Manufacturing tooled up for WW2 and removed their revolver machinery. Some say it was not well-protected from the severe Hartford, CT winters. Cochran (1987): 90.
3. *Colt Firearms Jumps Into the Single Action Army Revolver Market Again*: They saw a sales opportunity when demand for "Cowboy Guns" increased because of western movies and television shows. Garton (1979): 4.
4. *Colt introduces the "New Frontier" Model*: Adjustable sights were added for better accuracy. Garton (1979): 92.

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**Figure 29 (Left):** The most famous image of “Billy the Kid” was a tintype made by a photographer whose name is lost to history. His six-gun is holstered on his right hip, and his Winchester repeater is turned so that the loading gate on the right side of its receiver is clearly visible. **Figure 30 (Right):** A common photographer’s error produced this reversed print. No Winchester repeater was ever made with its loading gate on the left side of its receiver. William H. McCarty, aka William H. Antrim, aka “Handsome Billy” aka William Bonney aka “Billy the Kid” was not left-handed, despite the best efforts of brain-dead Hollywood movie-makers to convince gullible audiences that he was. Internet images in the public domain.

## ***Bog-Trotters, Sassenachs, and the Lincoln County War***

By Brian Dervin Dillon

### **Introduction**

The Lincoln County War of 1876-78 turned Billy the Kid (1859-1881, Figure 29) the American-born offspring of Irish Potato Famine refugees, into one of the Old West’s most infamous gunslingers. “The Kid”<sup>1</sup> was remarkable for only two things: his homicidal tendencies, and the comparatively short time he managed to stay alive on planet earth. No, he didn’t kill one man for each of his 21 years (“not counting Indians”) as the popular myth would have us believe, but he did slaughter

at least five, and possibly as many as eight, men during the final three or four years of his abbreviated life.

Billy the Kid has been portrayed by Hollywood as a tragic, doomed, hero,<sup>2</sup> fighting the good fight against evil on behalf of his martyred boss John Henry Tunstall. Conversely, Billy’s enemies, usually identified as “the Murphy Gang” have been ciphers in just about every retelling they played a supporting role in, be it book, magazine, or *horse opera*.<sup>3</sup> They are often described simply as “cattle barons,” nameless, faceless, inter-



changeable villains so dishonest and cruel that the “kid” had to descend to their level and fight fire with fire. Along the way, according to popular mythology, he was transformed from innocent teenager into deadly psychopath. Parallel to the pseudohistorical situation perpetuated by *Tinseltown*, just about every writer who has studied the Lincoln County War during the past 90 years has done so from the Kid’s perspective.<sup>4</sup> Too many supposedly objective writers have, once again, relegated Billy’s enemies to the shadows simply as “corrupt” stereotypes. In all but a very few recent works the supposed “bad guys” of the Lincoln County War, the so-called “Murphy Gang,” have escaped the same kind of scrutiny devoted to “the Kid” and his upper-crust English boss John Tunstall.

However, if you reverse polarity here, and examine the Lincoln County War’s cast of characters dispassionately, and then evaluate their actions in anthropological and culture-historical terms, a very different picture emerges. Motivations that were cultural imperatives, ignored by generations of past historians, become obvious. The *Irish factor* is missing from most retellings of that conflict, and its absence renders most of the old interpretations of its causes one-sided, incorrect, and obsolete.

### **The Lincoln County War: *Bog-Trotters vs Sassenachs***

As my own illustrious historian father told his college students for more than 40 years, you cannot understand *Western American* history without a working knowledge of contemporary and antecedent *American* history or, for that matter, *World* history. In other words, you cannot focus upon *Microhistory* at the expense of *Macrohistory*. Specific to the present study, since hundreds of thousands of immigrants throughout the second half of the 19th century coming to the New World were *Irish*, you cannot understand *American* history, including *Western American* history, without at least a passing familiarity with contemporary *Irish* history as well. *Microhistorians* who ignore

this “Macro” perspective do so at their peril.

The Potato Famine of the early and mid-1840s *halved* the Irish population. A quarter of all the people living in Ireland in 1840 died of starvation during the next two decades, while another quarter left as impoverished immigrants, most of them going to the United States. Eventual British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli described Ireland in 1844 as characterized by “a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien Church.” Upon their arrival the Potato Famine Refugees quickly became the most despised and unwanted element of the Eastern American population.<sup>5</sup>

Politely termed *Micks* or less politely *Bog-Trotters*,<sup>6</sup> impoverished Irish refugees enlisted in the American Army by tens of thousands to serve in the Mexican War of 1846-48. Some, faced with constant harassment by their intolerant Protestant officers, deserted to take up arms with the Mexicans as fellow Catholics. Many Irishmen took part in the California Gold Rush, either as “early birds” in American uniforms in 1848, or joined the rush to riches the following year and then on through the 1850s. They did not just contribute menial labor in what became the Golden State, but were, in fact, the very first to develop heavy industry anywhere on the Pacific Coast of North, South, or Central America.<sup>7</sup>

The following decade even more Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army to fight against the Confederates. By some estimates up to 30% of the Northern soldiers who actually *fought* in the Civil War (as opposed to those who stayed home for garrison duty) were either Irish-born or first-generation Irish-Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Uncompromising, festering, nearly-pathological hatred of their absentee English landlords, of the British government, and upper-class British society was, and still is within many Irish and Irish-American families, a cultural imperative. Protestant English oppressors were commonly identified by Irishmen with the pejorative term *Sassenachs*.<sup>9</sup> Blue-blooded, strait-laced Protestant Yankees, encountered by penniless Irish refugees washing ashore on the Atlantic Seaboard also soon proved them-

selves no less rapacious nor unfriendly than the English overlords so recently escaped from. Most Boston Brahmins and Wall Street Tycoons, Protestants, every last one, considered the immigrant, Catholic, Irish as sub-human a species as the Black slaves of the American South, and valued them even less. Consequently, these new Yankee overlords were termed *Sassenachs* as well.

The Irish and then the American Irish never forgave both kinds of *Sassenach* that had so abused them on opposite sides of the Atlantic, nor would they ever trust them. But as they moved west within their new American country, the Irish began to enjoy freedoms completely unavailable back on their tortured home island. Some eventually found places without any *Sassenachs* at all, where the local language was Spanish, not English, and the dominant religion was Catholic, just like their own.

To any mid-19th century Irishman New Mexico would have seemed an almost unbelievable kind of promised land. It presented opportunities systematically denied them at every step of their long, difficult, and frequently deadly peregrination westward. Every adult Irishman in 1850s-1870s New Mexico had somehow survived the potato famine back home, and subsequently the coffin ships of the Atlantic Passage, and then had escaped the disease-and vermin infested slums of the Atlantic seaboard. Most later arrivals had also paid the very steep price of marginal acceptance within their new country through service in the victorious Union Army during the Civil War. The Irish who came to New Mexico, Arizona, and California had put unfair *Sassenach* treatment as far behind them as they could, and hoped to never encounter it again.

### **Famine Irish Pioneers of Lincoln County, New Mexico**

Irish-born Lawrence G. Murphy (1831-1878) came to America and enlisted in the U.S. Army at age 17. He served two five-year terms before the outbreak of the Civil War. Like so many penniless Irish refugees, Murphy presumed that such service would

be his ticket to acceptance within his newly adopted country but, like so many others, was sorely disappointed. Repulsed by the blatant anti-Irish bigotry and hostility of the Eastern Seaboard, Murphy moved to New Mexico, where neither his Irish birth nor his Catholic faith were held against him. Meanwhile, the Civil War had begun, so U.S. Army veteran Murphy enlisted in the New Mexico Volunteers, serving for part of the war at Fort Stanton. In April 1866, still in uniform a year after Appomattox, he became Commander of that fort. Towards the end of that year Murphy left the Army, moved seven miles east of Fort Stanton to a wide spot on the old wagon road called *La Placita del Río Bonito*. He opened a brewery and a store, and became the most important “booster” of the tiny hamlet.

Three years later, in 1869, the patriotic former Union soldier Murphy renamed the mostly-Mexican community *Lincoln*, for the martyred American President, and it became the seat of the brand-new county of the same name. Lincoln County was, at the time of its formation, the largest county in the United States, incorporating an estimated 20 to 25% of the entire New Mexico Territory. Murphy expanded into cattle ranching and his rags-to-riches success encouraged him to build the most imposing structure in town, which eventually became the Lincoln County Courthouse.

Irish-born James Joseph Dolan (1848-1898) served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and also in New Mexico afterwards, where, like Lawrence Murphy, he was based at Fort Stanton. Dolan worked for Murphy, and took over his business after Murphy retired.

Irish-born Robert Casey and his wife homesteaded a cattle ranch on the Río Feliz in Lincoln County in the 1870s, but possibly because of illiteracy, failed to file the necessary legal papers with the Territorial Government solidifying their claim. All of their Irish Catholic neighbors like Murphy and Dolan, however, considered them “legal.” After Casey’s premature death, the Lincoln County Hibernian community extended credit and assistance to his widow,

who continued to live on the Río Feliz ranch.

Irish-born William Brady (1829-1878) was a Potato Famine refugee who enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1851 for two-five year terms. He then enlisted in the 2nd New Mexico Volunteer Infantry in 1861. As a loyal Union man he was promoted to Brevet Major and was made the commander of Fort Stanton in 1864, then commander of Fort Selden once it was founded in 1865 approximately 110 miles to the southwest. Brady finally became a U.S. Citizen in 1869, and shortly afterwards was elected the Sheriff of Lincoln County, New Mexico. Brady also became a rancher, and a Territorial Representative.

Irish-born John C. Galvin (1840-1908) was yet another Civil War soldier. He served in the California Column, and lived in New Mexico from the time of his discharge. He was implicated in John Tunstall's murder but never punished for it. Three years later he became one of the founders of Deming, New Mexico, where, in good Irish fashion, he built and operated a saloon.

Irish-born John H. Riley (1850-1916) came to America during the Civil War, but was too young to see active combat. He moved to New Mexico and by 1874 was working for Lawrence Murphy. Two years later, he was promoted to partner in Murphy's business enterprises. Surviving the Lincoln County War, despite being implicated in at least one of its killings, Riley became the civilian trader at Fort Bliss, Texas, in 1878, then moved on to Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1882 where he became a rancher. Just under a dozen years later, Riley pushed on to Denver, Colorado, where he became a very successful land speculator, specializing in ranches and the cattle industry in multiple western States and Territories.

### **Johnny-Come-Lately Sassenachs of Lincoln County**

John Henry Tunstall (1853-1878) was a London-born rich kid, sent by his wealthy father to Victoria, British Columbia, by way of New York and San Francisco, when he was only nineteen. The teenager was deputized to develop a Pacific Coast branch of his father's

England-based business enterprises. At age 22 Tunstall left Canada for California, where he intended to develop sheep ranching in what was then predominantly cattle country, the eastern side of the San Joaquin Valley and adjacent Sierra Nevada Foothills. His plans came to nothing, and hearing of how cheap land was in New Mexico, yet knowing nothing of the place, went to Santa Fe during the late Summer of 1876. Persuaded that Lincoln County was the best place to become a land baron, the 23-year-old John Tunstall moved there in November of that year.

Alexander A. McSween (1843-1878) was a Canadian of Scots ancestry, a Protestant Minister who gave up preaching hellfire and brimstone in favor of practicing law. As his Hibernian contemporaries might have wryly observed, he could do much more damage by defrauding Irish Catholic widows and orphans with his *pen* than simply railing against Papists from the *pulpit* with his voice. McSween moved to Lincoln County, New Mexico, in 1875. A year later he promised his newest client, the young and gullible John Tunstall, that he could facilitate his land-grabs and empire-building through legalistic maneuvering and a blizzard of pettifogging paperwork that the long-established Irish residents could never hope to match. The legality of what McSween was doing for Tunstall, as well as other shady dealings for other clients in New Mexico, was called into question at the Territorial level, but McSween was dead long before any prosecution for fraud or malfeasance could be mounted against him.

The first thing the rich little *Sassenach* John Tunstall did in Lincoln County, on the advice of McSween, was to evict the impoverished widow of Irish homesteader Robert Casey from her Río Feliz ranch, which he then made his own. Dispossessing the most defenseless person of the community reminded the local Irish of the heartless evictions of the Famine three decades earlier. Tunstall splashed his father's money around, attracting employees and business associates, including a teen-aged Billy the Kid, only five years younger than he. The *Sassenach* duo of Tunstall and McSween challenged Lawrence Murphy's

near-monopoly on business in both the town and the county of Lincoln. The aristocratic young English upstart opened his own store right across the street, and, with the help of his crooked lawyer McSween, waged economic war against the Hibernian pioneers who had made Lincoln County their home for the preceding decade-plus. After all, as Irish Catholic *Bog-Trotters*, they were beneath contempt, and thought to be easy marks.

However, Tunstall's little Anglo-Saxon sagebrush empire lasted only for just over a year, for he was murdered shortly before his 25th birthday on February 18, 1878. His killers were not Irish, yet were firm supporters of Murphy, Dolan, Riley and the Lincoln County Irish faction. Like Tunstall, his Johnny-come-lately *Sassenach* partner in white collar crime, McSween was also killed by supporters of the so-called "Murphy Gang." It wasn't all one-sided, for Irish-born Sheriff Brady was then murdered by Billy the Kid on April Fool's Day, 1878, supposedly in retaliation for turning a blind eye towards the killing of his boss John Tunstall.

Troops were mobilized to keep the peace, but arrests and revenge killings on both sides continued. Tunstall's outraged father back in England demanded satisfaction from the American government. To avert an international incident, Washington, D.C. put what was now being called the *Lincoln County War* under the microscope and sent to New Mexico supposedly neutral investigators (all of them, if it need be said, of course *Sassenachs*), without any local allegiances to dilute their ardor in pursuing those guilty of murdering two British subjects.

### Conclusion

Even a kindergarten-level familiarity with Irish *history*, Irish *culture*, and Irish *attitudes* exposes the root causes of the Lincoln County War. A little cluster of Potato Famine Irish refugees, after having paid their military service dues in the American Army, made a success of themselves against all odds in what they helped become Lincoln County, New Mexico. They enjoyed continued success and expansion for a decade, until confronted by

exactly the same kind of cultural bigotry and economic exploitation they had escaped not once, but twice, first in Ireland, then again in the Eastern United States. John Tunstall and Alexander McSween threatened to destroy the little New Mexican Irish enclave but the Lincoln County Hibernians stood firmly, defending their hard-fought independence *to the death*. The "Murphy Gang" couldn't buy out wealthy John Tunstall, nor could they beat Alexander McSween at his own sleight-of-hand quasi-legal game. They could, however, halt the transplantation of the long, cancerous, Irish nightmare to their new home by killing both predatory *Sassenach* interlopers, and they did.

I am not excusing nor defending premeditated murder, nor advocating it as a viable solution to economic, political, religious, or cultural confrontations. Nevertheless, the "Irish Factor" as a root cause of the Lincoln County War is crystal clear to me, and would probably be equally clear to anyone else with a similar Irish or Irish-American background. This *Irish Factor* has been overlooked by just about every historian chronicling the Lincoln County War, and, of course, has been ignored by generations of *Hollywoodians* who have cranked out movie after movie mythologizing that conflict and its most famous protagonist, Billy the Kid.

Historians and filmmakers no less than the general public need to take their blinders off, and evaluate Western American historical situations not just in terms of politics and economics, nor heroes and villains, but also from an anthropological, ethnohistoric, perspective. Blinding realizations may not always inevitably occur when this is done, but interpretations of past events will certainly become just a little more objective, rooted in the big, *Macrohistorical*, picture. Less frequently will they be narrow, one-sided, and indefensible in light of ethnographic reality.

### End Notes

1. *What Was Your Name in the 'States?* By the time of New Mexico's Lincoln County War, Irishmen had been oppressed by English overlords on their beleaguered home island



for more than 700 years. A protective defense by Irishmen “on the run” from English persecution was changing their surnames so that they could not be easily identified, incarcerated, transported, or hanged. A common practice was taking the mother’s maiden name once the birth patronymic became “too hot” for continued use. Hiding in plain sight under false names, consequently, was a very old Hibernian tradition that continued in use amongst Irish immigrants and their offspring in the United States, including the New Mexico Territory and even farther west.

The Old West’s most famous quasi-mythical teenaged gunslinger *Billy the Kid* was true to his own Hibernian roots. Born William Henry McCarty (1859) to an unwed Irish immigrant mother, he first changed his name, or had it changed for him, to William Antrim (another uber-Irish name, after the predominantly Protestant county and town at the north-easternmost tip of Ireland) when his mother married the man of that name in 1873 and her sons assumed their new step-father’s patronymic. Around two years later, William McCarty/Antrim began calling himself William Bonney. This third pseudonym was probably chosen partly to protect the younger brother and stepfather, still going by Antrim, from guilt by association. But it was also an “in-joke,” since “Bonney” was Irish slang for “handsome.”

William McCarty/Antrim/Bonney was hardly unique. Exactly twenty years after Billy the Kid faked his name as a means of “covering his tracks,” my own American-born Irish grandfather (1869-1938) also changed his name at least three times, going from William Thomas Dervin eventually to William Tarleton Dillon. Like so many of his Irish predecessors, he substituted his mother’s father’s surname for own patronymic. He laundered his identity through successive enlistments in all-Irish Company A of the 1st California Volunteer Infantry (1898) for service in the Philippines, then as a cavalryman (1899) in the Boer War’s Orange Free State forces. In South Africa he lived every Irishman’s dream: killing Englishmen, and, just like some of the Murphy Gang in New Mexico twenty years earlier, getting away with it. He

finally enlisted in the Regular U.S. Army Field Artillery back in the Philippines, just in time to be sent to China for the Boxer Rebellion (1900).

My grandfather’s mentor through all of these enlistments and name-changes was a much older Irishman, a deserter from the British Army who had gone over to the Mahdi’s forces before the fall of Khartoum in 1885, then somehow made it to California. U.S. Army Artillery Sergeant Fitzpatrick was on his own third or fourth false name when he recruited my grandfather into all-Irish Riley’s battery as a protégé. He also stood as Godfather to my Uncle Jack Dillon for his christening at the Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Sausalito, California, many years later in 1915 (Dillon, Dillon and Dillon 2017).

2. **“Earpers” vs “Billythekidders:”** Billy the Kid’s primary rival for the title of most-mythologized Old West gunslingers is, of course, Wyatt Earp (Dillon and Dillon 2015). Oceans of ink have been spilled by writers and thousands of miles of celluloid expended by movie-makers on both the O.K. Corral Shoot-out, the Lincoln County War and their two most notorious protagonists Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid. Aficionados of the former are often labeled *Earpers* by objective historians. *Earpers* in onomatopoeic fashion regurgitate the blather generated by earlier Earpers in an endless, vicious, fictional cycle.

No similar term has yet been coined for those who mindlessly belabor and re-invent Billy the Kid mythology. Those fictionalizers devoted to “the Kid” that continue playing the one-note symphony celebrating him might be termed *Billythekidders*.

3. ***The Lincoln County War—Grist for the Hollywood Mill:*** Hollywood has used New Mexico’s Lincoln County War for well over a century as one of its most reliable incubators as a plot-hatcher for western *shoot-em-up* dramas. If one analyzes the hundreds of sagebrush sagas where 1) plucky townspeople organize against ruthless, monopolistic, ranchers; or 2) teenaged *pistoleros* avenge the murders of their noble, innocent, employers; or 3) the “law” is for sale to the highest bidder; or 4) horse-thieves become Sheriffs (and vice versa); or 5) the U.S. Cavalry rides to the rescue of oppressed

citizens besieged by outlaw hirelings in the employ of corrupt land-barons—to mention just a very few of the hackneyed, repetitive Hollywood movie lines—then the Lincoln County War may be thematically ancestral to 75% of all of the *horse operas* that ever galloped out of Tinseltown and up onto the silver screen or down into the boob-tube.

Just about everybody has portrayed Billy the Kid in big-budget movies within the past half-century-plus, from Paul Newman (1958) to Kris Kristofferson (1973) to Emilio Estevez (1988), to Val Kilmer (1989). Unfortunately, every one of the “Kid” films, since the first one was released in 1911, a hundred and twelve years ago, are only loosely connected to the actual time, place, and ethnic composition of the actual events and protagonists. These films are testimonials to Hollywood’s nearly-complete disconnect with objective reality. Almost all of them violate the laws of human biology (the teenaged “kid” is portrayed by actors in their twenties, thirties, or even forties) and at least one of them (*The Left Handed Gun*, 1958) even violates the laws of physics, demonstrating an appalling (but all-too-typically-*Tinseltonian*) lack of comprehension of a common 19th-century photographic printing accident producing reversed images (Figure 30).

4. **Literary “Billythekidders:”** the literature on Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War of New Mexico is too voluminous to be reviewed here in detail. Nevertheless, each and every screed should be evaluated against what might be called the *historical fraudulometer*, measuring the percentage of fact vs. fiction. The most influential, yet worst-ever, book on the Kid is the 1926 potboiler by the hack newspaper writer Walter Noble Burns (1866-1932). Pegging the needle on the *fraudulometer* right at 75%, Burns’ book is ancestral to 99% of all the Hollywood B.S. subsequently churned out starring “the Kid.” For the best recent exposé of Burns’ historical fabrications, see Dworkin (2015), and my own review (B. Dillon 2016b) of this excellent debunking effort. At the opposite end of the scale from Burns, not raising the *fraudulometer’s* needle from its rest stop at 0%, are the recent studies by David G. Thomas (2021, 2022). He has

ignored all of the fictional blather swirling around the Lincoln County War, and focused his considerable talents upon the documentary record instead. Anybody who wishes to learn anything factual about Billy the Kid and/or the Lincoln County War should begin by reading David G. Thomas.

5. **Mid-19th century Irish Immigration to America:** Dillon, Dillon and Dillon 2017.
  6. **Lace Curtain, Shanty, Bog:** 19th-century absentee English landlords tended to subdivide the downtrodden inhabitants of the Emerald Isle into three social classes: *Lace Curtain* Irish, *Shanty* Irish, and *Bog* Irish. *Lace Curtain* Irish were town-dwellers, often literate English-speakers. *Shanty* Irish were illiterate farmers and herdsman, landless tenants and sharecroppers, mostly Irish-speaking, who still lived in stone huts out in the country. *Bog* Irish, also commonly called *Bog-Trotters*, were unemployed *navvies* haunting the outskirts of towns and camping out on country roads, barely subsisting as day-laborers or beggars, all of them Irish-speaking.
- All three groups were, of course, Catholic, and from the time of King Henry VIII had been systematically stripped of every kind of rights (freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, firearms ownership, horse ownership, etc.) that Protestant English citizens enjoyed and took for granted just across the Irish Sea. The Potato Famine not only killed off just about all *Bog* Irish within a few years, it also bumped the other two groups one notch farther down the social scale. When Potato Famine survivors emigrated to the United States, they found that these pejorative British nick-names had followed them. Their new, sneering, Yankee Protestant landlords, employers, and exploiters now referred to them all generically as *Bog-Trotters*.
7. **The Irish Invent Heavy Industry on the Pacific Coast:** R. Dillon 1984.
  8. **Irishmen in the Civil War:** the service of members of the so-called “Murphy Gang” in the U.S. Army before, during, and after the Civil War was the price most Famine Irish refugees believed they had to pay for acceptance within their new country. Dues paid, they reaped their richly-deserved reward in Lincoln County, New Mexico.

My own Irish-American family's Civil War service paralleled that of the Lincoln County, New Mexico, Irish, and was typical. My great-grandfather William E. Dervin (1840-1916), the youngest of four Irish brothers, was the only one born in America. All four brothers enlisted in the Union Army, and the three eldest were all killed in action. My great-grandfather was shot five (5) times on the final day of 1862 at the Battle of Stones River, Tennessee, and left for dead on the battlefield for three days and nights. He somehow survived, married the Irish-born daughter of another, older, Irish soldier who had also fought in that battle, and lived for another 54 years with unhealed wounds. His proudest, and most typically Irish, boast was that he would "Rather be a corporal in U.S. service than Prime Minister of an Empire," obviously referring to the hated *British Empire* (B. Dillon 2016a).

9. **Sassenach:** was a Gaelic derivation of "Saxon" (as in Anglo-Saxon), meaning the Johnny-come-lately invaders of the previously Celtic British Isles. In its most polite usage it meant "foreigner" but more often indicated an intolerant, exploitative person not to be trusted, in other words, *a typical Englishman*. Depending upon the social, ethnographic, or geographic context, it could also be translated as "hereditary enemy." The word was used in Ireland and in Gaelic-speaking Scotland all through the 19th century (even by English-speaking Irish and Scots) and then came to the New World with Irish Potato Famine Refugees.

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## Next Special Issue: *Cookin' Irons!*

Engage your tastebuds vicariously in our next culinary special edition of *The Branding Iron*, to be published in Winter 2024! Corral members and friends are welcome to share their Western American food histories, dining stories, and rustic recipes. *How 'bout some more beans, Mr. Taggart?*

To be considered for publication in this special issue, please observe a deadline of February 15th, 2024 for submissions about *cookin' irons*. Additionally, articles on other topics are always welcome and encouraged for future non-themed issues.

For submissions and inquiries, please contact *Branding Iron* editor John Dillon at John.Dervin.Dillon@gmail.com. Thank you!

# Monthly Roundup . . .



March 8, 2023

Ed Anderson

March saw the Corral greeted by Ed Anderson and his presentation, *Pioneers in Petticoats: Women's Influence in the Founding of the National Parks; a Tribute to Shirley Sargent, "Yosemite Tomboy."* Those who frequent our Roundups are likely familiar with the "Father of the National Parks," John Muir. But as the old saying goes: "Behind every great man is a great woman," or in this case, dozens of them. As Mr. Anderson expounded, men like Muir may have been the face of the early conservationist movement, but the founding of Yosemite and of our other treasured National Parks would not have been possible, nor nearly as comfortable, without the seldom-lauded efforts of the many women active within the West's rugged hinterland.

First on the list of wonder women was Jeanne Carr, the "Spiritual Mother" of John Muir. Muir met Carr at the Wisconsin State Fair, and soon became a friend to her and her husband, Ezra, a professor at the University of Wisconsin. As Ed tells it, it was Jeanne who advised Muir throughout his adult life,

introducing him not only to Ralph Waldo Emerson, but also to his future wife. Though she only visited Yosemite once, in 1870, her impact on it as a National Park is difficult to overstate.

Of the women who resided in Yosemite, two to highlight were innkeepers Isabella Leidig and Mary Peregoy. Ms. Leidig was the proprietor of Leidig's Hotel, and Ms. Peregoy ran the Mountain View House, an inn that became legendary among the socialites who vacationed there. It's not hard to imagine what these establishments meant to early Yosemite adventurers. These little oases of homey goodness nestled within the spectacular wilds would have been quite a relief from the rigors of the dusty track from Clarke, the last stop on the railroad outside of Yosemite.

While Leidig and Pergoy were caring for the boys, other gals like Sarah "Sallie" Dutcher and the Sweet Sisters were out in the park playing with the boys. Mr. Anderson's research suggests that Dutcher was the first woman to climb the back side of Half Dome, in December 1875, with George Anderson, who was the first (documented) to ever climb it earlier that year in October. The evidence for Ms. Dutcher's accomplishment was an earring of hers, found a few years later by another group of climbers. The Sweet Sisters were the first women to climb Mt. Lyell, and the first to descend into the Tuolumne Canyon. They also set a fashion trend wearing billowy gaucho-styled trousers. Cinched below the knee with gaiters, these pants were more practical than the petticoats eponymous to Ed's presentation.

Whether they were directive, doting, or daring, the women profiled by Mr. Anderson in *Pioneers in Petticoats*, and countless others across the U.S., were instrumental in the popularization of Yosemite, in particular, and our other National Parks, in general. Perhaps in the future, the quote will read: "Behind every great man are *dozens* of appropriately dressed women." Better yet, in the future, perhaps such distinctions of gender will be unnecessary when discussing the greatness of such intrepid people among us.

— Alan Griffin





April 12, 2023

Tom Zoellner

The Los Angeles Westerners gave a warm Southern California welcome to author and 4th-generation Arizonian Tom Zoellner during our April Roundup. Zoellner discussed the history of Arizona and his travels within it, which is the topic of his recently-published memoir, *From Rim to River*.

This book is Zoellner's personal love letter to his home state of Arizona, with which he has a complicated relationship. The memoir revolves around his 2019 790-mile journey along the Arizona Trail traversing the entire north-south length of the state of Arizona from the Utah state line near Red Rock Country to the Mexican border. As Zoellner traveled down this historically scenic route he was inspired to compose essays for his memoir on Arizona copper mining, border crossing paths, dirty politics, Apache culture, drinking water, local cuisine, violence, and the Grand Canyon.

The origin of Arizona's name is disputed, but Zoeller believes it likely means "the Good Oak Tree" in Basque, the language spoken by its first European settlers from Spain's Pyrenean frontier. Arizona history has highs and lows, which were metaphorically tied to the geographic landscape traveled by Zoellner north-to-south down the Arizona Trail. The highest point in Arizona

is a dormant volcano named Humphreys Peak, and its lowest point, at only 72 feet above sea level, is a sad, dried-up portion of the Colorado River near the Mexican Border. Nearby is a historic border crossing named *Camino Del Diablo*, Spanish for "the Devil's Road," which was originally used by Spanish friars in the 18th century. Today this dirt road is used as a border crossing. Border patrol agents drag tires behind their vehicles to regularly smooth this road, so that crossing migrants leave more obvious footprints that can be tracked.

As Zoellner reached the end of the Arizona Trail, he discussed the state's present controversies and contradictions. One is the epidemic of sprawling master-planned communities growing throughout Arizona like mushrooms. These are decorated by faux-Tuscan aqueducts and water-guzzling palm trees. While ugly and wasteful of land and water, these suburbs nevertheless provide affordable housing for working-class families. While he was on the subject of water Zoellner mentioned the La Paz County aquifer theft which resembled the plot of the classic movie *Chinatown* (1974) dramatizing Los Angeles' alleged pillaging of the Owens Valley's water resources. Outside of water, the most important natural resource in Arizona is copper, which is mined throughout the state, and also lies in the lands of the Apache tribe in a place called Oak Flat. Yet despite producing two-thirds of the copper in the nation, Arizona's state capitol building inexplicably bought the copper for its dome from Pennsylvania. It is these foibles that make Arizona so perplexing and endearing.

Many thanks to Tom Zoellner for his entertaining and fascinating talk, and please give his memoir *From Rim to River* a well-deserved read.

— Darran Davis





May 10, 2023

Terry Terrell

The Los Angeles Corral's own Terry Terrell spoke at the May Roundup about the colorful, high-flying life of Florence Leontine Lowe, better known as *Pancho Barnes*. In another installment of what could come to be known as our *Women of the West* series—following Ed Anderson's March talk, *Pioneers in Petticoats*—Terry directed our attention to the rich world of aviation and dude-ranching in the first half of the 20th century, that has become so emblematic of our own city's historical character. Part rancher and restaurateur, part pioneering aviatrix and arial bootlegger, part hostess and perhaps even part madam, Pancho Barnes' eccentric life added more than a few dabs of color to the mural of her unique character.

Though she was born Florence Leontine Lowe, granddaughter to Thaddeus Lowe, it was under her moniker "Pancho" and married name Barnes that she would gain fame. Pancho opened a ranch near Muroc Field (the future Edwards Air Force Base) in the mid-1930s which became home to the "Happy Bottom Riding Club." Its name came from a remark by a guest after a ride on Pancho's horse. The restaurant and inn, along with its own private airstrip, drew the rich and famous (and rugged) to the ranch in droves. In my favorite anecdote of the evening, Terry described the circumstances around legendary test pilot Chuck Yeager being "sundowned" at the ranch.

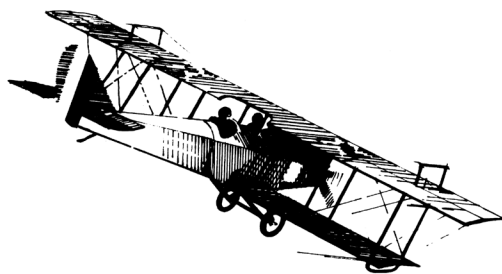
Out riding late one day in 1947, Chuck

Yeager returned to the ranch after sundown. Thanks to the low light, Yeager didn't notice that the corral gate, open when he began his ride, had been shut some time earlier. The horse he was riding sure noticed, though. When it stopped abruptly at the gate, Chuck was sent base over apex, breaking a few ribs on touchdown. One wonders if the libations proffered by Pancho at the ranch played a role in this misfortune. Regardless, Chuck had a job to do, broken ribs or no. The next day he closed the cockpit on *Glamorous Glennis*—the X-1 rocket plane named after his wife—with the aid of a broomhandle, and flew into the history books faster than the speed of sound.

Pancho never flew quite so fast, though she did best Emilia Earhart's women's speed record in the '30s. Barnes also formed a Hollywood union of pilots, and provided the dogfight sounds for Howard Hughes' epic *Hell's Angels* movie in 1930. A crack-pilot, ready hostess, and peer to some of the biggest names of her time, Pancho Barnes was a fixture for decades in the gritty and glitzy world of Hollywood's Golden Age. It's tough to think of a more fitting embodiment of the spirit of Southern California in that era.

Pancho was a one-of-a-kind lady, and an inspiration for all the adventurous types to follow. Let's find more Pancho Barneses to celebrate. Let's make this *Women of the West* series a reality. Who's next?

— Alan Griffin



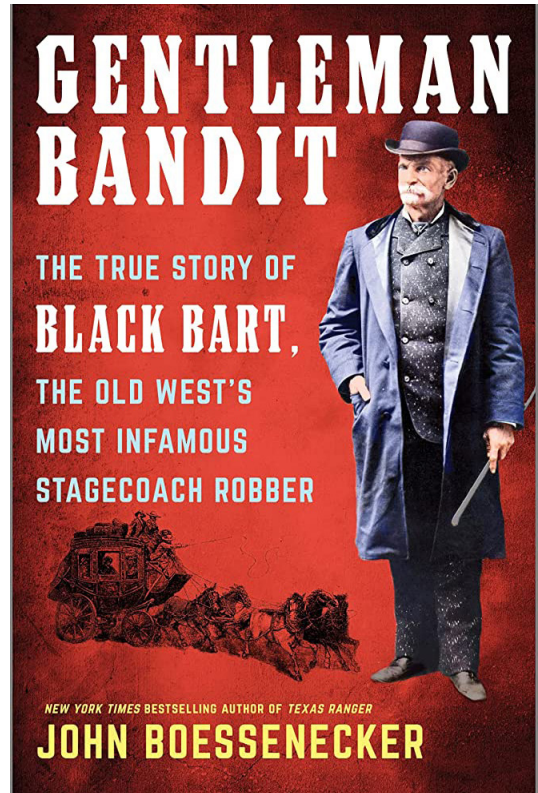
# Down the Western Book Trail . . .

**GENTLEMAN BANDIT: *The True Story of Black Bart, The Old West's Most Infamous Stagecoach Robber***, by John Boessenecker, Hanover Square Press, Toronto, Canada, 2023. 376 pages, Hardbound, Illustrations, Notes, Index. \$32.99.

John Boessenecker's latest book is every bit as good as we should expect from the most accomplished and productive living *Old West Law and Order* author. Many people have written about Charles E. Boles, *aka* Black Bart, but none have captured the essence of this unique Western American Bad Man as well as John has. A two-dimensional, almost cardboard cut-out figure in most Western movie and TV treatments, Boessenecker's *Gentleman Bandit* instead presents Boles/Bart as a fully-formed, three-dimensional human being, with admirable personality traits as well as unlikable ones.

Unexpected, valuable contributions of the book are the detailed descriptions of Boles' childhood and upbringing, his prospecting and mining activities during the California Gold Rush, his military service in the Civil War, and his fractured relations with his own wife and children. Revealing of what might very well have been a split personality was Boles/Bart's unusual interaction with many friends and admirers late in life. Few of his friends suspected that he was Western America's most notorious and successful stagecoach robber. We don't end up liking Black Bart very much, mainly because of his deplorable treatment of his wife and children, but we do end up with a good deal of sympathy for him. Sympathy, for a man who robbed more stagecoaches (over 30) than any other bandit? Certainly, for in all of his holdups Boles/Bart, unlike just about all of his fellow road agents, never "picked the pocket" of any passenger, nor did he ever wound or kill anybody during his depredations.

Bart was no "Robin Hood," for every last bit of his ill-gotten gains went into his own pockets. Nor did he support the wife who



for too many years thought herself to be a widow until her husband's final capture and unmasking. So the "kindest, gentlest" Old West bad man was still fundamentally dishonest. Boles actually obtained more riches by pilfering the U.S. Mail than he ever got from the Wells, Fargo, strongboxes that were his favorite target. Although Black Bart never pointed a pistol at stagecoach passengers nor demanded wallets or pocket watches from them, he nevertheless despoiled a great many private citizens of their hard-earned savings when these were extracted from envelopes entrusted to the U.S. Mail, and sent to loved ones or business associates via local stage lines.

One of the best aspects of John's new book is the intimate familiarity he demonstrates with every location mentioned. Far too many "Old West" writings "float" both in time and space, as do virtually all *Tinseltonian* horse operas. But Boessenecker



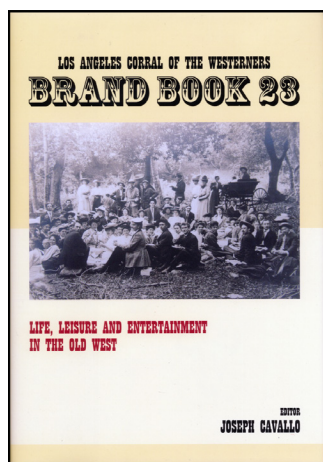
went to every place where Black Bart held up a stagecoach, and scrupulously details every such robbery in his very readable book. He discusses the preparation for each hold-up, and each one's aftermath. Another contribution of this remarkable biography of one of Western America's most enigmatic bad men is one that might be overlooked by readers in Texas, New Mexico, or Arizona. The most successful stagecoach robber in our nation's history worked almost exclusively in California, only venturing beyond the borders of the Golden State twice, just over the line into southern Oregon, to commit his own criminal speciality.

From John Boessenecker's research and the outstanding book resulting from it we finally understand the factors that made Boles/Bart so successful. He always worked *alone*, he always *walked* to and from each robbery,

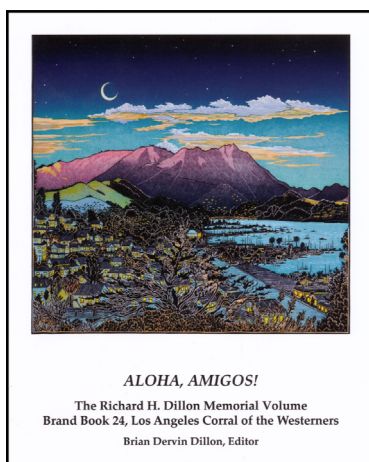
and he lived *quietly*, mostly in San Francisco, after each hold-up, masquerading as a respectable businessman/mining entrepreneur. Equally important was the care that he took *not to shoot* any of his many victims, be they stage drivers, shotgun guards, or passengers. If he had, this would have triggered a much more aggressive pursuit by angry relatives or lawmen, bent on revenge, than the response to the loss of the contents of just one more strongbox. In all four of these imperatives Boles/Bart was fundamentally different from most of his contemporary bad men.

*Gentleman Bandit* sets the bar very high for Old West Law and Order biographies. It deserves a place of honor on every Westerner's bookshelf. And I, for one, cannot wait to see what John Boessenecker will treat us to in his next book. Highly Recommended.

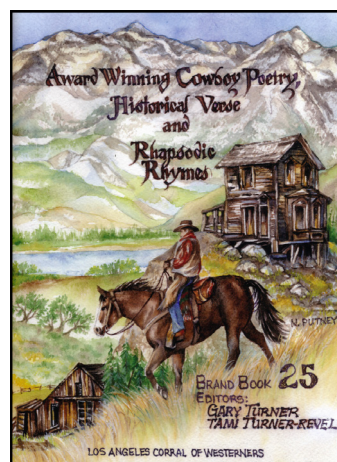
— Brian Dervin Dillon



Brand Book 23, 2019



Brand Book 24, 2020



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