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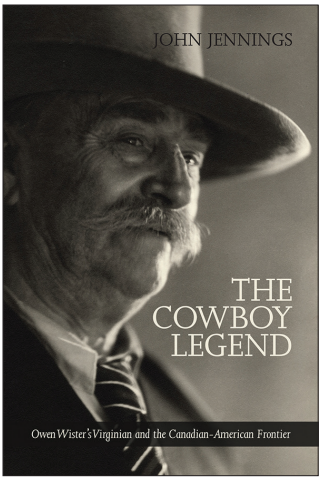

THE COWBOY LEGEND: OWEN WISTER'S VIRGINIAN AND THE CANADIAN-AMERICAN FRONTIER by John Jennings

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5: *Owen Wister and Wyoming (1885)*

Before the Great Die-Up and the Johnson County War, Wyoming was, indeed, the ideal cattle country, a land of breathtaking vistas and seemingly endless cattle range. To this cattle Mecca Owen Wister was sent in the summer of 1885 to restore his fragile health. That summer Johnson took a leave of absence from the 76 and eventually drifted down to visit Mike Henry's 88 Ranch near Fort Fetterman. Johnson had at one time been engaged to Lizzie Henry and still remained a good friend of the family. It was while he was staying at the 88 that the manager of a nearby ranch, Frank Wolcott, heard that he was in the area and, being short-handed, asked him to help out with a dude who was about to arrive from the East.[1] This eastern greenhorn, as it happened, was Owen Wister, who was making his first visit to the West. Two spinster friends of his mother – Maisie Irwin, who operated a private girls' school in Philadelphia, and her assistant Sophy – accompanied him. They came west, it seems, to keep an eye on Wister's delicate health.[2]

This was the first of many trips to the West for Wister. He came in 1885 as a young man in his mid-twenties, sent by his family doctor in the hope that the West would help cure him of one of the most fashionable complaints of the period – frayed nerves, or "neurasthenia" in the popular jargon of the time. Wister had recently graduated from Harvard and was about to enrol in law school. He was in a most uncertain frame of mind about his future. His first love was music, and for a while he hoped that he might make a career as a pianist. But this was not to be. Though very accomplished, he was probably not quite good enough to pursue a career as a professional pianist and, besides, his father, who controlled his finances, discouraged his ambitions. These years of training, though, would certainly not be wasted. At

this stage in his life, he had no serious pretensions about becoming a writer; these thoughts would not enter his head until the early 1890s. But when at last he found his calling and produced the first great western novel, an important part of its appeal rested on Wister's acute ear and his masterful ability to pick up the cadences of western speech and expressions peculiar to the West.

All of this was far in the future. Wister came west in 1885 as an effete tourist whose real love was for the old cultures of Europe. He was not drawn, it seems, to the rawness of Wyoming, only to the possible restorative power of its air. It was not until he reached Wyoming that something, quite unexpectedly, stirred within him and set in motion thoughts that would germinate for the best part of a decade before taking precise shape.

Two things are clear from Wister's first western diary of 1885. He certainly did not come to Wyoming with thoughts of writing. The sparse entries are those of a tourist more interested in hunting and in his close circle of contacts than with any notion of seeing Wyoming and its people through literary eyes. Yet it is equally clear that he fell hopelessly in love with Wyoming. After a stop in Cheyenne to sample the famous Cheyenne Club, Wister and his chaperones left the train west of Cheyenne and set off for the Wolcotts' VR Ranch by stage. It was at the Cheyenne Club that Johnson first met Wister and his two companions. He picked them up at the club and accompanied them by train to Rock Creek and then fifty miles by stagecoach to the VR Ranch.

The Cheyenne Club was unique in the West and just the sort of place to make Wister feel at home; it was the foremost anomaly on the frontier. It became the focal point for the big ranchers of Wyoming, which is why, shortly before Wister's visit, Cheyenne was reputed to be the richest city per capita in the world.[3] The Cheyenne Club rivalled the best clubs of New York and London with its superb French chef and impeccably trained servants from Ottawa. It is not hard to see why it attracted the cream of British and eastern American ranching investors, most of whom spent more time in Cheyenne than at their ranches. Dinner jackets, not chaps, served as the dress code, and many members seemed less interested in cattle than in supporting the new Cheyenne Opera House, whose formal opening included satin programs scented with just a hint of perfume. One legendary dinner in 1883 for forty-two members, at which the English members entertained the Americans, demolished sixty-six bottles of champagne – more than a bottle and a half per member.[4] There was much to celebrate. In those heady days, profits from cattle in Wyoming fluctuated, according to Agnes Spring, from 50 percent to 100 percent.[5]

Perhaps, while at the club, Wister might have run into Van Rensselaer Schuyler Van Tassel, who was one of the first major investors in northern Wyoming and whose family was featured in Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Or perhaps Wister encountered G. A. Searight of Austin, Texas, whose Goose Egg Ranch south of Casper on Poison Spider Creek would allegedly be the setting for the baby swapping incident in *The Virginian*.

On July 4, on the way north from Cheyenne, Wister recorded in his diary:

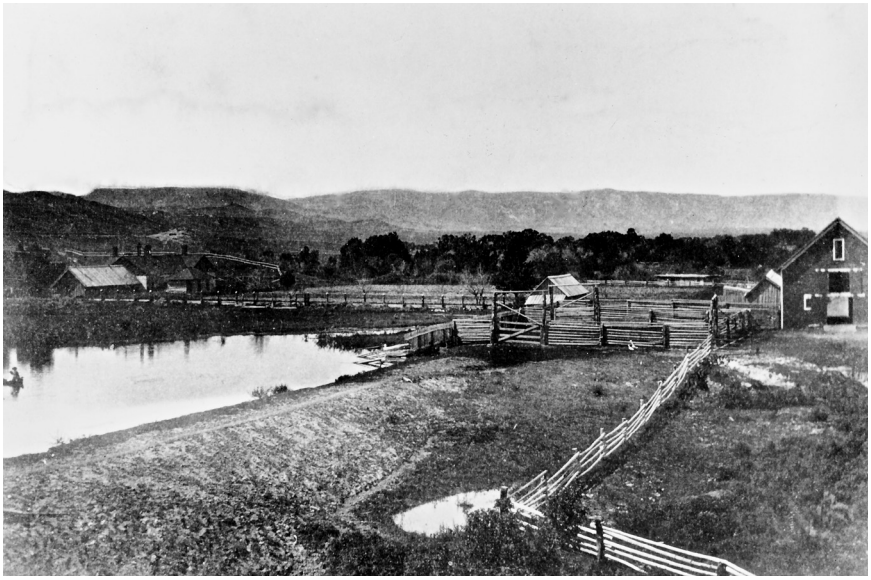
> I can't possibly say how extraordinary and beautiful the valleys we've been going through are. They're different from all things I've seen.… You never see a human being, only now and then some disappearing wild animal. It's what scenery on the moon must be like. Then suddenly you come around a turn and down into a green cut where there are horsemen and wagons and hundreds of cattle, and then it's like Genesis.[6]

In one of his first letters from Wyoming to his mother, he told her that "the air is better than all other air. Each breath you take tells you that no one else has ever used it before you."[7]

Wister arrived on July 6 at the VR Ranch near present-day Douglas, whose cattle range extended along both sides of the North Platte River, and met his "delightful" hosts, Major and Mrs. Wolcott. He was soon ensconced in a tent on the lawn and began a routine of daily rides on his "broncho," a wise little animal, it seems, who registered its disgust at having an eastern dude aboard by almost immediately lying down with him.

There is a most interesting passage in the diary for July 10, only four days after arriving at the VR. Something in the Wyoming atmosphere had already triggered the germ of what was to become, a decade later, Wister's great mission to place Wyoming and the cowboy at the forefront of the American consciousness. Appended to a lament on the lack of a true American type is this observation:

> Every man, woman and cowboy I see comes from the East – and generally from New England, thank goodness – If that's the stock that is going to fill these big fields with people our first hundred years will grow to be only the mythological beginnings in the time to come. I feel more certainly than ever, that no matter how completely the East may be the headwaters from which the West has flown and is flowing, it won't be a century before the West is simply



Major Wilcott's VR Ranch near Glenrock, Wyoming, where Owen Wister and Everett Johnson spent the summer of 1885 together. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, R151-VR.

> the true America with thought, type, and life of its own kind. We Atlantic Coast people, all varnished with Europe, and some of us having a good lot of Europe in our marrow besides, will vanish from the face of the earth. We're no type – no race – we're transient. The young New Yorker of today is far different from the man his grandfather was – even when the grandfather was a gentleman. The young Englishman of today is not so different from his grandfather – for the Englishman is a congealed specimen – a permanent pattern – while each generation of us is a new experiment. All the patriotism of the War doesn't make us an institution yet. But this West is going to do it. I wish I could come back in two hundred years and see a townful of real Americans – and not a collection of revolutionary scions of English families and emigrants arrived yesterday from Cork and Breman, for that is what our Eastern Cities are today.

At the same time, he expressed his ideas more succinctly to his good friend John Jay Chapman:

> [Easterners] are too clogged with Europe to have any real national marrow. No matter how completely the East may be the headwaters from which the West has flown and is flowing, it won't be a century before the West is simply the true America.[8]

On the face of it, these passages seem rather strange. It would have been difficult at the time to find an American more "varnished with Europe" than Wister. And it would have been difficult to find a worse snob – except for his mother, who, as Wister commented in a letter to her, would have hated Wyoming. Yet, in these simple, uncultured westerners, Wister thought he had discovered the future of America. The logic seems deficient, but what is fascinating is that Wister's mind – in a sudden, almost unconscious revelation – was beginning to shape his great theme. Although this revelation would take some time to be represented in his writing, Wister learned more about ranching that summer of 1885 than at any time later. Most of his subsequent trips would be for the purpose of hunting or searching for other western themes. So, almost a decade before Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay on the significance of the frontier, Wister's own frontier thesis was beginning to stir in his brain. Perhaps this should not be too surprising because the frontier was a subject of interest for most Americans of the time. The beliefs that Turner distilled in his 1893 thesis were certainly not novel. But in 1885, everything in Wister's upbringing and intellectual training should have prepared him for a role as a prime skeptic of Turner's argument.

Turner's thesis is perhaps best expressed by Gertrude Stein, who observed that "in the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is." Turner was a bit more expansive. His great contribution to American thought was to distill in one short essay what had been in the air in one form or another for the best part of a century. In language that caught the imagination, he made it clear that what was important in American civilization was not the product of European culture; instead, it was the result of the frontier. The distinctive American character had been shaped through American history by the freedom and equal opportunity that the frontier imparted. (See chapter 7 for a further discussion of Turner.)

It is rather a puzzlement why this line of thought should have so appealed to Wister. Perhaps opposites attract. He was most unhappy with his country as he saw it in the 1880s and was drawn – as were a number of educated, cultured Americans of the time – to the culture of Europe. The

intense ugliness of the Gilded Age in America was overwhelming; a great many of his "set" escaped either literally or spiritually to Europe or retreated into their exclusive enclaves. If Wister's music career had flowered, he might have become, like his mother's good friend Henry James, an expatriate.

Instead, he discovered the West and gradually began to believe that here lay the solution to America's moral and physical ugliness. This was not to be an easy discovery, for the strengths he found in the West were his own weaknesses. Almost all that he stood for – culture, education, pedigree, wealth – meant nothing under the harsh scrutiny of the western gaze. It would not have been an enjoyable discovery that the ingredients of his considerable self-importance were considered liabilities in Wyoming. Later, in *The Virginian*, he was able to produce a very successful self-parody, juxtaposing his ineptitudes in the areas that really counted with the Virginian's strengths. But in 1885, it is doubtful that he was able to do this easily.

It is clear, too, from the first diary that his view of the cowboy was still in its infancy. After a month in Wyoming, he observed:

> They're a queer episode in the history of this country. Purely nomadic, and leaving no trace of posterity, for they don't marry. I'm told they are without any moral sense whatever. Perhaps they are – but I wonder how much less they have than the poor classes of New York.

There is no hint in this passage that a decade later Wister would have self-consciously decided to become the Kipling of the American West and the literary champion of the cowboy. In 1885, he seemed to view the cowboy with a combination of fascination and condescension. It is perhaps not reading too much into this first diary to argue that Wister in 1885 was mainly preoccupied with the arresting scenery of Wyoming and with his small circle of friends, which now included the Wolcotts. He had practically nothing to say about the cowboys he met whom, it seems, he regarded as picturesque employees, there to make his time more interesting. This attitude perhaps explains why there is no mention of Johnson in this diary, even though Johnson spent a lot of time with him that summer; he was not someone that counted.

There is very little mention, either, of the 76 Ranch, yet some of the cowboys in *The Virginian* were recognizable to Johnson as 76 hands, so it is probable that in the summer of 1885 Wister and Johnson rode from Wolcott's ranch to the 76. And, in *The Virginian*, the distance from Medicine

Bow to Judge Henry's ranch is 263 miles. That is roughly the distance from Medicine Bow to the 76 Ranch.

There is also no mention of Mike Henry in the diary, yet it is known that Wister was a guest at the Henry ranch that summer for a week, escorted there by Johnson. Proof of that is to be found on a barn door at the Henry ranch, where Wister carved his initials beside those of numerous cowboys. (I saw the initials "OW" carved on the door when I visited the Henry Ranch, together with Buckeye, Slim, and Eb – the name that Johnson went by in Wyoming). So the initial inspiration for Judge Henry in *The Virginian* is nowhere mentioned by Wister in his correspondence, then or later. This could be merely an oversight, but perhaps not. The fact that neither Mike Henry nor Johnson was mentioned in Wister's diary is consistent with Wister's focus in the diary on his tight little social set. But what is intriguing here is that Wister could lament in his diary that easterners were "all varnished with Europe," and yet in 1885, he seems to have behaved exactly as he had Molly Wood's family behave toward the Virginian in the novel; he, like her family, could not see beneath the rough exterior and treat westerners as more than intriguing frontier types. Perhaps someone like Wister was so accustomed in Philadelphia and Boston to keeping the common people at bay that it was hard to break the habit. It is ironic that over the next half decade Wister would not only come to value men like Henry and Johnson, but also find his mission in portraying them to the American public as the natural aristocracy of America.

Mike Henry, known in the area as "Judge" Henry, was in many ways an ideal model for Wister's host in *The Virginian* – a much better model than his real host, Frank Wolcott, who had all the snob appeal that Wister initially found attractive. Wolcott was a distinctly unpleasant man when he became tired of being a charming host; Mike Henry, on the other hand, came close in real life to Wister's Judge Henry.

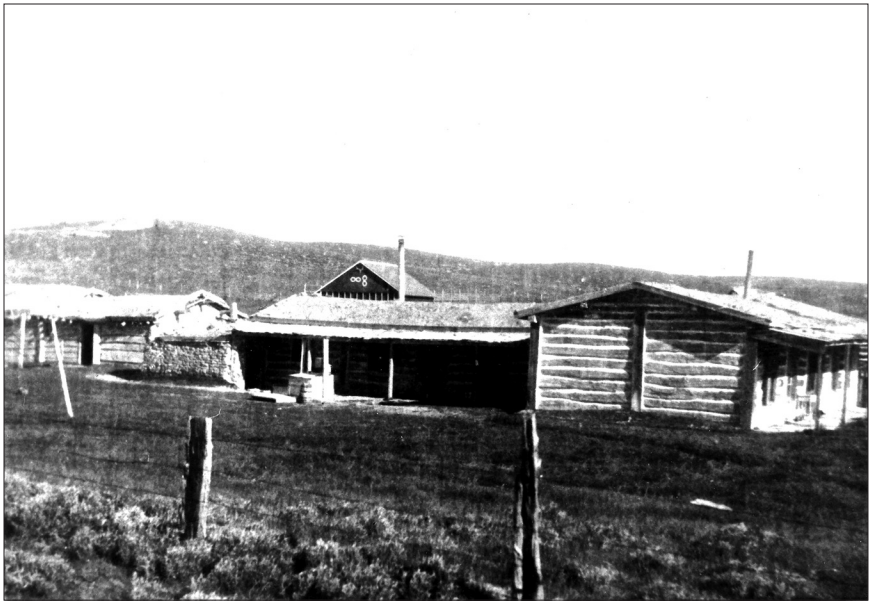
Born in Athlone, Ireland, in 1840, Henry come to New York as a child and there attended military school. He then enlisted at the age of thirteen as a bugler in the regular army. In 1855 he came west with the command of General William S. Harney and first saw the Oregon Trail. After serving in the Civil War, he again enlisted in the army and was involved in considerable Indian fighting, including the Battle of the Rosebud under General George Crook in 1876. The next year, he took his discharge after serving for thirty years and filed on land, first at the mouth of House Creek and then along the Bozeman Trail near Brown's Springs, in the northern part of Converse County, named for a soldier who had his scalp lifted at that spot. He was one of the very first ranchers in the northern part of Converse County.

The Henry ranch was initiated in 1878 and became one of the more enduring success stories in Wyoming history. It weathered the disastrous winter of 1886 and by the turn of the century was running 3,000 head of cattle.[9]

By the time Wister visited the Henrys for a week in 1885, their 88 Ranch, on La Prele Creek, south of Douglas and only a short ride from Wolcott's VR Ranch, was well-known in the area for its cattle and horses and was also a stage relay station for the Patrick Brothers' stage line. The Henrys ran a roadhouse there, and Mrs. Henry cooked for the guests. Perhaps it was this involvement in trade that excluded the Henrys from Wister's diary. But it appears that, in retrospect, the visit was very important to Wister. Not only does it appear that Judge Henry in *The Virginian* was based partly on Mike Henry, but, also, two of the bronco busters working on the 88, "Chalkeye" and "Red-Wing," were included in the novel. Family tradition also has it that two of the babies who were switched at the Bear Creek barbecue were Henry boys, a story that Wister heard while staying with the Henrys and used to good effect in *The Virginian*.[10] According to the Henrys, this baby switching occurred at the Searights' Goose Egg Ranch, which was started in 1879 at the confluence of Poison Spider Creek and the Platte River (nine miles northwest of present-day Casper).[11] Johnson also claimed that the baby swapping really did happen, and his account supports the Henry family's claim that the swapping took place at the Searight Ranch and that the two Henry boys were among the victims. The Goose Egg is near the real Bear Creek.[12] Johnson said that he and Jim Drummond did the switching and that there were three babies switched. Wister wrote in his 1893 journal that he heard the baby-swapping story from Jim Neil in Texas, but that didn't mean that the story couldn't have originated in Wyoming. Stories like that would pass quickly up and down the cattle trails.

According to Johnson, part of the character of Molly Wood, the heroine of *The Virginian*, was based on Mike Henry's daughter Lizzie. She ran the post office, which was located on the 88, and later married Frank Merrill, a rancher and member of the Wyoming legislature. They lived at the Double Box Ranch, eighteen miles north of the 88.

It is not known whether Wister met Henry again after his 1885 trip. It is interesting to speculate whether Wister, in retrospect, saw in Henry during that short visit the basis for Judge Henry in *The Virginian*, the figure that Wister meant to represent what was best in the western character, and one of the true builders of the West. Certainly Henry, in later years, lived up to the role. He became one of Wyoming's most respected citizens and a major force in ranching, oil, mining, banking, and real estate. And today the ranching tradition he began is still strong. His great-grandson, Mike, still



Mike Henry's 88 Ranch at the time that Wister visited the ranch in 1885. Courtesy of Bill Henry, Mike Henry's grandson.

runs the 88, which now covers some 30,000 acres.[13] When asked about the character of Judge Henry in Wister's novel, Johnson said that there was no question in his mind that it was based on Mike Henry. "It was Mike Henry, no question. It sure warn't Wolcott."

Wolcott's VR Ranch (for Victoria Regina – Queen of England) was, and still is, located on Deer Creek (pronounced "krik" in Wyoming) where it flows out of the Laramie Mountains, about ten miles south of Glenrock. Here, in 1878, Major Frank Wolcott, a Kentuckian of Scottish descent who had served on the Union side in the Civil War, staked his claim. The Mormons had used the land in the 1850s as a supply station for the trek to Utah. Then, when Fort Fetterman was built in 1867, the government had established a hay reserve on the site. Here, in a beautiful lush valley with the Medicine Bow Mountains in the background, Wolcott built his stone ranch house. When Wister visited, the major had established a style that Wister clearly enjoyed – Persian rugs, immaculate table linen, a piano in better condition than the one in the Wister house, and a Chinese waiter, "properly instructed."

Wister visited the VR at its most prosperous moment, though the ranch faced financial problems of which Wister was probably unaware. Typical of so many of the big ranchers, Wolcott, in order to expand, had added partners to the company. The Scottish American Investment Company, headed by Thomas Nelson of the famous publishing firm, invested substantial capital in the ranch in 1885. The VR, when Wister visited, was vilified by the locals as one of those foreign outfits that were robbing the people of their right to the land. Also, typical of so many of the big spreads, the devastating winter of 1886–87 was to cause economic havoc at the VR, which lost a third of its stock that winter. By 1892, when Wolcott led the Invaders in the Johnson County War, he had been forced to turn the ranch over to his creditors, the Tolland Company, though he stayed on as manager. He owed the Nelson family so much money that he was forced to sell them all his stock in the VR. After that, he seems to have drifted out of the picture.[14]

But in 1885, Wolcott was full of optimism and assurance. He had established an impressive cattle empire and was able to entertain his guests in considerable style. Yet there were cracks in his geniality, even toward guests. On one occasion he refused to speak to anyone because camping arrangements had gone awry. Wister also found Mrs. Wolcott most daunting; he recorded in his diary for August 1:

> Mrs. Wolcott has the Puritan virtues and she congealed early. The result is she doesn't understand and gets no pleasure out of new people – and gives them none. She is high minded, narrow, intelligent, clean and capable – but I don't think she has derived a moment's satisfaction from our visit – or a moment's dissatisfaction either.… Its a bad thing to have no humour – and she hasn't a grain.

Wister was far more charitable toward Major Wolcott, but in this he was in the minority. Even Wolcott's friends and associates found him difficult. Malcolm Campbell, who knew him well, described him as a bantam rooster with very positive convictions and violent relations with his neighbours. John Clay, who also knew him well, described him as "a fire-eater, honest, clean, a rabid Republican with a complete absence of tact, very well educated and when you knew him a most delightful companion. Most people hated him, many feared him, a few loved him."[15] Wolcott had been, at one time, a receiver of the United States Land Office and also, for a short time, a US marshal for Wyoming Territory, until a flood of letters and petitions began to flow into Washington, claiming that he was "overbearing and abusive, insolent and dishonest, obnoxious and hateful."[16]

Wister mentions in his diary for July 16 someone who certainly did not fit into the category of the few who loved Wolcott. He mentions the episode casually, but the issue is important both to *The Virginian* and to the atmosphere of law and order in Wyoming. Wister mentions that Wolcott was in a state of rage because one of his former employees was now squatting on prime land that Wolcott claimed. Wolcott had ridden off to have a talk with the man, Brannan, who, Wolcott said, had been goaded into squatting on his land by "a damn scoundrel" by the name of Beach. According to Wister, Brannan, when confronted, asked the Major to step down to his tent where they could talk business. This meant, "How much will you give me to clear out?" "Not a nickel," said Wolcott, who returned home for his rifle before he continued business. Nothing untoward happened, but Wolcott returned home seething, threatening that he would make it hot for them. Wister mentioned nothing more, but the story continues in an article written the next year, which was clearly libellous if not true.[17]

Six months after Wister's visit, Sumner Beach killed Bill Locker, who appears to have been a hired gun sent by Wolcott to clear Beach and Brannan off the disputed land. A random killing here or there in the West at that time is hardly worth mentioning. But the episode is important because, in a minor way, all the ingredients were there that culminated in the violence that erupted in Wyoming in 1892 between the big ranchers and those who also wanted to stake their claim to Wyoming grasslands. Obviously, one of the people who felt victimized by the large landowners wrote the article, which accused Wolcott of being an Anglomaniac – "a lick-spittle to the lordly English; a man who wears knee-britches, parts his hair in the middle and uses a cane." What's more, backed by British gold, he and people like him were defrauding America. What right had "aliens" and their toadies to the heritage of free Americans?

By the mid-80s, as newcomers began to pour into the area and, more important, as ex-cowboys like Beach and Brannan tried to stake their modest claims to land already occupied by the big outfits, hostility flared. The "aliens" became the scapegoats, regarded with a venom instilled in Americans as a legacy of the American Revolution. What right did these foreigners have to swindle honest Americans of their patrimony? The Wyoming Stock Growers' Association was accused of trying to steal the entire territory of Wyoming through a gigantic conspiracy. And Wolcott was using "English gold" and fraudulent claims under the Desert Land Act to defraud "free America."[18] By the mid-80s, a strident Anglophobia had developed in Wyoming because of the scale of British investment, an attitude that is clearly reflected even in scholarly writing and in many present-day attitudes

in Wyoming. In retrospect, the British economic presence in Wyoming was very modest compared to the far larger and far more assertive American economic presence in Canada in the twentieth century. But in Wyoming in the 1880s, it must have seemed both odious and overwhelming. Looking back, it is clear that the British left little mark on Wyoming and, in fact, at a critical time in its development, they provided Wyoming with much-needed development capital.

According to the article on Wolcott, British villainy prospered through the Desert Land Act, "one of the most gigantic swindles that has ever been perpetrated on a free nation." There is no question that this act was often used fraudulently in order to acquire large tracts; many of the big outfits added crucial land with water on it in the names of employees or friends and relations who had never set foot in Wyoming. And, of course, once the water was controlled, all the land stretching back to the height of land was automatically included. It is understandable that this situation caused considerable enmity, but the fault was not with the individuals who took advantage of this law; the fault lay with the system. Since the big outfits could not lease the land, they resorted to questionable practices to safeguard their accustomed ranges from usurpers.

Considerable sympathy should be extended to the usurpers. In most cases they were not new settlers; the aridity of Wyoming discouraged farming. Rather, the struggle was mostly between the early ranchers who claimed huge areas because they were there first and ex-cowboys like Beach and Brannan who, in the best American tradition, were trying to make the transition from employee to small rancher. Friction was inevitable because of the scarcity of water in Wyoming, so anyone filing on water automatically took control of all the range near that water. It is not surprising that, in the absence of effective land legislation and criminal law, violence flared.

Wolcott's problem with squatters was not unusual in the mid-1880s. Many people were filing on free land, hoping to build up large herds as had the first comers. And they knew that many of the early cattlemen, while establishing empires, had acquired strays – mavericks – and put their brand on them before someone else did. The temptation was strong to continue this tradition since the herds of the big outfits often mingled indiscriminately on the open range, and a few calves here or there would not be missed. So many ordinarily honest men, who found it easy to bend their consciences because they were taking cattle from those who were unfairly monopolizing the land, condoned cattle stealing. And it was somehow easier to steal from eastern and foreign nobs, often absentee owners who occasionally turned

up at the ranch at branding time but otherwise spent most of their time while in the West at the Cheyenne Club.

When Wister first visited Wyoming, the epidemic of rustling was just beginning. On subsequent trips, his rancher friends would undoubtedly have told him that the rustlers were destroying their profits and, even if caught, were rarely prosecuted. In the absence of firm direction from the government, the ranchers had tried to control the ranching industry through the WSGA. However, this body became increasingly unpopular with those who were not members but were still bound by its rules. The result was legal chaos on the range, and it is in this atmosphere that the big ranchers decided to take the law into their own hands.

Vigilante law was as old as the nation. By the time it reached Wyoming, it was enshrined in respectability, largely from its roots in the Revolutionary War, when the theory emerged that the people were justified in taking the law into their own hands to counter the iniquity of British control. There emerged the tradition, now given the sanction of legend, that the people have the right, indeed the duty, to uphold the law in the absence of properly constituted law. If the cause was just, then vigilante law was really just a democratic expression of the people.

One of the most compelling and masterful parts of *The Virginian* deals with this aspect of Wyoming life through depicting the lynching of the Virginian's good friend Steve, the persuasive arguments of Judge Henry for vigilante law, and the final showdown with Trampas, the leader of a rustler gang. All this was based on fact. Wister witnessed the beginnings of the trouble in 1885 in the incident over disputed land. When he next came to Wyoming two years later, he undoubtedly heard more on the issue. In 1889, at the height of the rustler problem, he again visited Wyoming and recorded in his diary:

> Sat yesterday in smoking car with one of the gentlemen indicted for lynching the man and the woman. He seemed a good solid citizen, and I hope he'll get off. Sheriff Donell [Hadsell] said "All the good folks say it was a good job; its only the wayward classes that complain."[19]

Wister made it very clear here and in *The Virginian* whose side he was on. Implicit in his view is a belief in the sanctity of property; it is justified to resort to vigilante law when the law is ineffective, or actually opposed to protecting that property. Wister also alluded to another aspect of the problem. The basis for the legal chaos in Wyoming was class warfare, not the

absence of properly constituted authority as the apologists of vigilante law would have you believe.

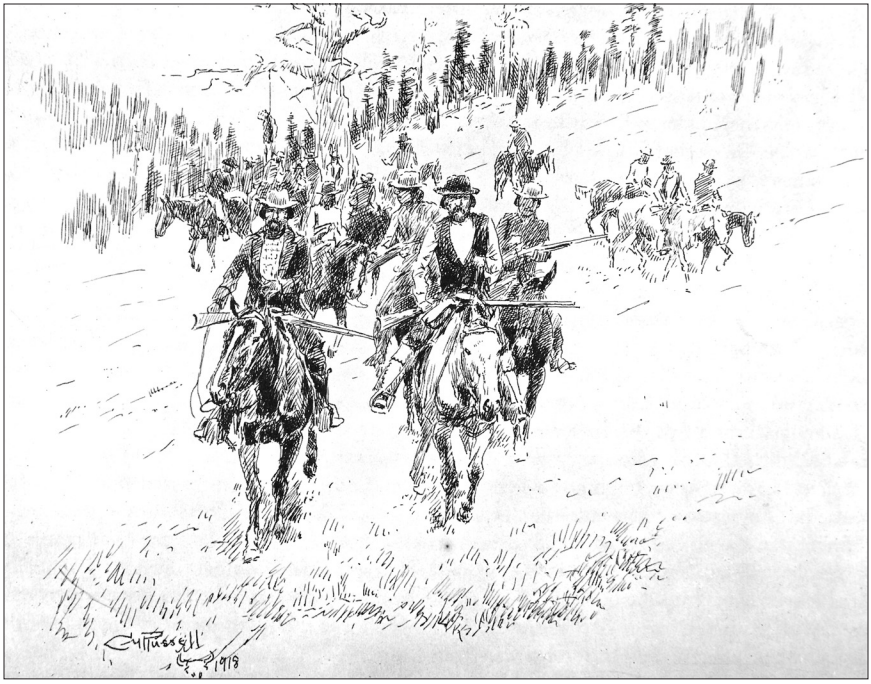
The incident that Wister referred to in his journal was one of the most famous in Wyoming history. On July 20, 1889, "parties unknown" lynched James Averell and Ella Watson on the Sweetwater near Independence Rock. Their crime – it was alleged – was rustling. It is very hard for the historian to get at the truth in this affair, but it does seem possible that Ella Watson was a prostitute who accepted stolen cattle in trade. Also, she and her friend and oft-time lover, Averell, were squatting and filing on choice land that one of the large ranchers claimed. This, in the eyes of the cattle barons, was the more serious crime. Their deaths were to be a warning to that class of squatters that if the courts did not uphold their position, the big ranchers would do it themselves.

The lynching of Watson and Averell was the most famous incident of vigilante law in Wyoming largely because it is the only case in Wyoming's history of lynching a woman. But there seems to have been many more lynchings, most of them unrecorded, so it is impossible to attempt statistics. The big ranchers thought they had no other choice since the law seemed actively hostile to their interests.[20]

What seems extraordinary, in retrospect, is the justification of lynching and vigilante law by men of education and culture. Anyone reading the Englishman Thomas J. Dimsdale's classic account, *The Vigilantes of Montana*, comes away with an impression of stern, moral, upright citizens reluctantly performing a dirty, but necessary, duty. Much the same impression is left in innumerable other western histories. Clearly Wister in his treatment of vigilante law was merely reflecting the viewpoint of the "respectable" set in Wyoming. He left us a classic defence of the institution, one based very much on reality.

There was nothing fanciful in Wister's account of the lynching of Steve, or in the atmosphere on the Wyoming range that prompted that lynching. According to Johnson, Steve was a real cowboy who worked at one time for the 76 and then drifted off to consort with doubtful company. True to the story, Steve had been a good friend of Johnson's. It was only late in life that Johnson told Jean in confidence any details of his lynching. He made it clear that Wister got it more or less right, except for the fate of Steve.

At one time Johnson had been very close to Steve. Together they had worked on roundups, camped on many lonely trails, hit town to celebrate, and shared hardships. Once, in the desert, they had come close to dying together. They had run out of water and had only the dew from their blankets to sustain them until they were lucky enough to stumble on a spring.



Charles M. Russell, "The Necktie Party," 1918. Russell has caught perfectly the atmosphere of grim determination and necessity as a group of vigilantes does its distasteful duty.

Steve was the only one to call Johnson "Jeff." It was an affectionate name he used to rib Johnson. He kidded Johnson about his loyalty to the South and to Jefferson Davis; in private he used the name Jeff because Johnson was very bristly about the South. It is not clear how Wister learned of this private nickname.

Unfortunately, Steve left the 76 and fell in with some bad company who began stealing 76 cattle, a relatively easy pastime given the extent of the 76 range. But they ran out of luck and were followed as they were driving some stolen stock to Idaho. Finding themselves closely pursued, they scattered. Steve was captured, and it fell to Johnson as leader of the posse to hang him.

Johnson told Jean near the end of his life what really happened then. He said that he led Steve some distance from the rest of the posse, ostensibly to find a suitable lynching tree. He tied the noose around Steve's neck as he sat on his horse under the hanging tree and then gave the horse a slap. Steve stayed with his horse and rode for his life. Johnson had tied the knot so it would give. As Steve took off, Johnson galloped after him and after some

distance fired a few shots. When he returned and said that Steve was dead, no one doubted his word. It was difficult for Johnson to make this decision; in common with most cowboys, he was loyal to his outfit. But he knew that he had removed Steve from the scene as effectively as if he had killed him. Steve understood that Johnson was risking his life to save him. He made his way to Idaho, changed his name, and never returned to Wyoming. All the people involved in this story were dead before Johnson divulged the real story.

A puzzlement remains. Wister in the novel has the Virginian, while in the throes of delirium after being wounded by Indians, say, "Steve, I have lied for you." This comment means nothing in the context of the story. Why then did Wister put it in? Could Wister perhaps have overheard Johnson talking in his sleep? Johnson recognized the country that was the setting for Wister's lynching of Steve and for the chapter "Superstition Trail," which Wister thought was the best part of the book, as did Roosevelt. Johnson and Wister had ridden the country together, and according to Johnson, Wister described it accurately.

Backing for Johnson's account comes from a somewhat unexpected source. Moreton Frewen in his autobiography had the following to say:

> Readers of that delightful book of Owen Wister, The Virginian, will recall references here and there to the "76 Outfit" and its shadowy "boss," this writer. The hanging of the outlaw by a protectionist posse was a real episode and I was both coroner and chairman of the jury of four who, high up there in the mountains above the south fork of Powder River "viewed the remains" and at a discreet distance returned an open verdict.[21]

Several interesting arguments can be drawn from Frewen's memory of events. First, it can be argued that the lynching that Frewen spoke of formed the basis for Wister's description. His account and Johnson's agree, and both recognized Wister's setting for the lynching in *The Virginian* as the actual location. Second, the lynching had to happen before Frewen left Wyoming in 1885. This is surprisingly early for a Wyoming lynching, but it gives credibility to Johnson's claim that he told Wister about the lynching in 1885 and either described the country where it took place or showed it to Wister. Third, and most intriguing, Johnson's claim that Steve escaped in the manner described is a little hard to swallow. Yet Johnson told Wister that two men were lynched, and Wister faithfully recorded that fact in a most effective way, contrasting the behaviour of the two men on the point

of death. But Frewen mentioned seeing only one body; it is most unlikely that he would forget the presence of another. A lynching would tend to stick in the memory in a vivid and accurate manner. Thus Frewen inadvertently gave credence to Johnson's admittedly doubtful story about Steve's escape.

One of the more intriguing and effective aspects of *The Virginian* deals with Molly's abhorrence of vigilante law and Judge Henry's justification of the institution, an argument that at last convinces Molly so that there can be a final reconciliation with the Virginian, which Wister means to represent the acceptance by New England of western standards. Well, in real life, this was apparently not the case. Johnson said that Molly rejected him for good because she thought he had murdered a good friend. Apparently the western arguments for lynching left her eastern scruples quite unmoved.

Judge Henry's rationalization for lynching in the novel is masterly and, on the surface, reasonable. First, it is ingenious that Wister should have the argument presented by a former federal judge and an easterner. To some degree, certainly, Wister was presenting the defence of many of his friends who were involved in the Johnson County War. Wister, too, was masterful in invoking the classic argument for vigilante law, an argument firmly grounded in democracy and Revolutionary tradition.

First Wister established the gulf between eastern and western law. Molly's aunt, on being presented with the Virginian's picture in western garb, with a gun at his waist, exclaims, "I suppose there are days when he does not kill people." Wister is then able to contrast the law suitable to an ordered, settled society to that in the raw West where institutions have yet to be forged. This sets the scene for Judge Henry's defence of western lynch law. Wister ignored the reality, of course, that it was safer to be in Wyoming in 1885 than in New York City!

Judge Henry begins Molly's education by pointing out that right and wrong are not absolutes; they vary with circumstances. Lynching southern Blacks is vastly different from lynching Wyoming cattle thieves. The former demonstrates the barbarity of the South; the latter indicates that Wyoming is becoming civilized. When Molly suggests that lynching Wyoming cattle thieves defies law and order, the Judge invokes an argument with all the sanctity of the Revolution behind it. In answer to Molly's accusation that vigilantes take the law out of the hands of the courts, the Judge agrees but asks, "What made the courts?" "The Constitution." "How did there come to be any Constitution?" "The delegates." "Who elected them?" "The people." "So you see," said the Judge, "at best, when they lynch they only take back what they once gave." And besides, the Judge argues, the courts in Wyoming had not been convicting rustlers, so it was necessary, in order to bring

civilization to Wyoming, to circumvent the courts. "And when the ordinary citizen … sees that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once in the beginning of all things … so far from being a defiance of the law, it is an assertion of it – the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based."

Here is Thomas Paine with a vengeance. Wister's arguments come, virtually unaltered, from Paine's *Common Sense*, that brilliant revolutionary tract that shaped the course of American history, giving credence to the notion of some distant golden age before monarchy and aristocracy perverted the just will of the people. Of course, Paine's arguments were based on utter nonsense, but that did not prevent them from having enormous influence on people who wished to believe.

And Judge Henry's arguments, though based on pure sophistry, invoked that same powerful belief in the sovereignty of the people and thus appeared plausible to the credulous. But Judge Henry has turned Paine upside down. The Judge is defending the vigilante practices in Wyoming of a group who represented an American moneyed aristocracy, a small minority who were not prepared to abide by the duly constituted will of the majority of settlers in Wyoming. How was this to further civilization? Clearly the result was not the furthering of civilization but, rather, the anarchy that culminated in the Johnson County War.

Judge Henry's argument does not bear analysis. In effect, he is saying that the people can circumvent the institutions they have created if they don't like the way they are functioning. In theory Judge Henry was arguing the "higher law," the belief that moral values transcend legal statutes. This is a most compelling argument when directed toward British misrule in the 1760s, which brought on the American Revolution, or the slavery issue, but what about Wyoming law in the 1880s? In effect, Wister was saying, through Judge Henry, that a small group of the "right people" could flout the law if that law didn't quite suit them.

Wister was arguing for the only possible justification for vigilante law – the obligation of the good people to establish law and order on a raw frontier. But Wister was being dishonest. Wyoming in the late 1880s was not a raw frontier; by 1890, it was a state whose law was not functioning because the elective principle in American law guaranteed that the rich, privileged ranchers would not be protected. It is somewhat ironic that they were in the same boat as the Native peoples of the West, both victims of popular prejudice.

Many Americans would like to believe in the mythology of western vigilante law – that good citizens were doing their duty as the advance agents of civilization. There is clearly some truth to this view, but, in reality, this aspect of vigilante law was completely overshadowed by an uglier sort of truth. For every rustler "jerked to Jesus" by upright citizens, there were many who were taken from jails by mobs who were not especially interested in proof of guilt or due process of law. These mobs, of course, felt little awe for the lawman, who often looked on helplessly as his charge was liberated from his care and "stretched" on the nearest lamppost or suitable tree.

Anyone who has read Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* will be disabused of romantic or honourable notions of lynching. This shocking little book lays bare the base motives and frightening mass psychology that so often lay behind many lynchings. Clearly, vigilante law was resorted to in most cases not because of an absence of law, but because the law was either not working or was not respected.

Also, try as he might, Wister could not separate western lynching from that in the South. The two were linked, both products of a violent society. Wister's picture of eastern decorum and western violence rings false. Many scholars, such as Paul Gilje in his *Road to Mobocracy*, argue convincingly that eastern America became increasingly violent in the nineteenth century as large numbers of Americans embraced the belief, sanctified by revolution, that law was the servant of the people.

Southern lynching, too, cannot be divorced from the western brand, despite Wister's attempts to separate them. They both sprang from the same disrespect for the law. What made southern lynching so much worse were the added ingredients of racism and sexual paranoia, which gave southern mobs a unique level of depravity. But there are also descriptions, from Montana for instance, of crowds of 5,000 or 6,000 coming long distances to view a "good lynching."

It is perhaps not a coincidence that lynching began as a southern custom, though the terrorizing of Tories in Virginia during the Revolutionary era is really not all that different from the hangings in Salem of those who were thought to stray from community standards and were accused of being witches. But it was in the South that lynching was to endure, not as a substitute for law in new country, but as a pre-emption of law in supposedly settled and civilized communities. And the excesses of southern lynch mobs became condoned by community leaders, including state governors.[22]

American statistics on lynching are staggering. From 1889, when the *Chicago Tribune* began to keep count, until 1927, when the practice began to go out of fashion, there were 3,224 recorded lynchings, the vast majority

in the South. Only about 4 percent of these lynchings were performed in the West (and about 7 percent in the North.)[23] Not surprisingly, most of the lynchings were in the Black Belt, where, by the late 1880s, lynching had become the standard method of social control. For extremes of depravity, Texas led the field. As in so many other things, Texans did nothing by halves. Texas, of course, was born in lawlessness and turmoil. But instead of lawlessness being confined to a formative period, it grew as the state matured, fed, it seems, by the proud vision of Texans taking charge of their destiny with both fists and not waiting on legal niceties.

It is perhaps unfair to single out Texas, except that the worst extremes took place there in the wave of southern lynchings that suddenly erupted in 1889. These Texas lynchings so disgusted Wister that they may have been very important in convincing him that his cowboy hero should not be a Texan. The South in that year seemed to be taken over by a sudden paranoia regarding Black sexuality.

Perhaps the ultimate depths were reached in Paris, Texas, in 1893 with the hideous torture and burning of Henry Smith for the alleged rape of a little girl. A crowd of ten thousand, many of them brought to the scene by special trains, gathered around the specially built platform to watch the spectacle and savour the animal screams as Smith's eyes and tongue were burned out with hot irons, prior to him being doused in oil and set alight.[24] And this was by no means an isolated incident.

WYOMING AND THE GENESIS OF THE VIRGINIAN

Vigilantism and western law in general have been considered here in some detail for two reasons. First, they were a central issue in the American West, an issue that gave the West its fundamental character and mystique. Second, this issue assumed a large importance in *The Virginian*. The hanging of Steve, the final showdown with Trampas, and the agonizing of Molly over the laxity of western law form critical parts of the novel.

Johnson told his daughter-in-law that Wister stayed close to the truth in this part of the book. Steve did exist, and so did Molly. Johnson maintained that there was a Molly Stark, who really did come from New Hampshire. He was very reticent when speaking about her, but did comment, "there was none of that drop the handkerchief sort of nonsense." He said that he did get into a scrape with Indians, as described in the book, but it was Lizzie Henry,

not Molly, who found him and lifted him into the buckboard. When he said that Molly could not possibly have lifted his weight onto the buckboard, a gentleness in his voice seemed to imply that this was to her credit. Johnson also said that it was Lizzie, not Molly, that he rescued from the stagecoach, which was stuck in the Medicine Bow River. This was an act, Johnson remarked, which required a certain amount of co-operation from the lady.

In the novel, Molly, after much soul-searching, is reconciled to western law – the lynching of rustlers and the code of honour that required a man to stand up to a challenge. Johnson would not say much about this, but he made it clear that the real Molly Stark did not become reconciled; this was the reason for their parting.

I discovered the link between Wister and the fictional Molly Stark quite by accident. While in Concord, New Hampshire, researching both Wister's old school, St. Paul's, and the Concord stagecoach, which Johnson drove into Deadwood, I discovered by chance that Wister, while at St. Paul's, was a frequent visitor at the Stark house in Dunbarton, seven miles southwest of the school. The elderly Stark sisters, Charlotte and Harriet, were in the habit of entertaining boys from the school, including Wister. Harriet died in 1872, a year before Wister arrived at St. Paul's, so he would only have met Charlotte, who was a regular visitor to the school. Undoubtedly, this is where Wister learned of the Stark sisters' connection to General John Stark of the Revolutionary War and his wife Molly. It was General Stark, the commander of the New Hampshire militia in the pivotal Saratoga campaign and in the defeat of the British at the Battle of Bennington in 1777, who uttered the famous words, "Tonight our flag floats over yonder hill or Molly Stark sleeps a widow."[25] Here again is an example of Wister using real people in his writing.

However, when it came to the villain of the book, Wister did not use his real name. As he made clear, he was inspired by a man named Henry Smith in his portrayal of Trampas, but he wanted his villain, like his hero, to have a mystique. In real life, according to Johnson, Trampas was a man named White Clay George or Frank Bull – if those were his real names – a cattle rustler and killer who had been run out of several states and territories.[26] So Wister's Trampas was an amalgam of Henry Smith's character and looks and White Clay George's (or Frank Bull's) actions.

Early in *The Virginian*, there is an episode that is now firmly entrenched in American folklore. During a poker game, Trampas calls the Virginian a "son-of-a-bitch." The Virginian draws his gun, places it on the table, and utters the now immortal words, "When you call me that, *smile*!" Johnson could recall no such incident, but he did say that Wister probably got his

The Stark house in Dunbarton, New Hampshire, that Wister visited while at St. Paul's school. Wister probably based Molly Stark and her connection to General John Stark of Revolutionary fame on the Stark family of Dunbarton. Author's photo.

inspiration for the scene from the regular gambling at Glenrock, where Johnson's friend Monte Cunningham was a dealer. Later, Cunningham followed Johnson to Canada and the two remained close friends. In referring to those famous words, Johnson commented that Wister was puzzled when Johnson called someone "that old son-of-a-bitch." Wister said, "But I thought you liked him." Johnson explained that it was all in the way you said it – "a term of endearment or something that could get you killed."

There is a further explanation for this event in Wister's notes. In his Frontier Notes, 1894, is the following passage: "Fetterman Events, 1885–1886. Card game going on. Big money. Several desperadoes playing. One John Lawrence among others. A player calls him a son-of-a-b–. John Lawrence does not look as if he had heard it. Merely passes his fingers strokingly up and down his pile of chips. When hand is done, he looks across at the man and says, 'You smile when you call me that.' The man smiled and all was well."

And the shootout did not happen as the book depicted, in a classic "walk-down" on the main street of Buffalo. Wister was central to the creation of the ritual shootout on the street, the two steely-eyed antagonists

walking slowly toward their destinies. In fact, this scenario virtually never happened. The vast majority of western shootings happened in saloons, the result of liquor, or from ambush. In Johnson's case, White Clay George (or Frank Bull) rode into Buffalo determined to settle with Johnson and, in anticipation of the meeting, got increasingly liquored up. He told Jim Drummond that he would shoot Johnson if he saw him. Drummond warned his friend and Johnson decided that things had been said that could not be ignored. So he armed himself with two revolvers, one in a holster and the other tucked into the front of his pants – not a usual practice amongst shootists. Johnson walked to the Occidental Hotel, entered the bar, and placed himself facing the door. When George came in the door and saw Johnson, he started to draw. Johnson killed him with two shots. The coroner decided that it was a clear case of self-defence; there was no inquest.

A happy ending, except for Molly's reaction. In the real world, she did not fall into Johnson's arms after the killing. She was repelled by the atmosphere of violence in Wyoming, by the lynchings and killings. That Johnson was at the centre of these things caused a permanent rift.

Unfortunately, I cannot prove that White Clay George (or Frank Bull) even existed. Attempts to trace him through court records came to nothing. But it would have been unusual if they had. Though Johnson did not give the date of his killing of George, it had to be before he left for Alberta in 1886. The newspapers in northern Wyoming at this stage were in their infancy, so the absence of any account of the shooting in the press means nothing. Also, as Johnson stated, the killing was considered self-defence, so there was no inquest, and no mention of the incident in the fledgling court records in Buffalo. Because the court records in Buffalo revealed nothing, I was sent to a nearby funeral home where the coroner's records of that period were kept. When I explained my mission, the owner as much as told me that I was wasting my time. He said he could show me a number of unmarked graves from that period. "If it was considered a fair fight, they just planted the loser, no questions asked." So, no records of Mr. George, if that was his real name, seem to exist.

Wister provides no help. A very careful scrutiny of his writing provides no clue about whether he based the killing of Trampas on an actual incident. He does, however, go into some detail concerning his picture of Trampas. The character of Trampas was clearly based on the personality of a gentleman named Henry Smith whom Wister appears to have first met in 1891 while staying on the ITT Ranch of Bob Tisdale. Tisdale was a thoroughly nasty man with a savage temper. His brutal treatment of horses was to be immortalized by Wister first in his short story "Baalam and Pedro" and

then in *The Virginian* in the chapter "Balaam and Pedro." Both accounts were based on an incident that Wister witnessed, in which Tisdale, as Wister watched helplessly, flew into such an uncontrollable fury that he gouged out one of his horse's eyes. Wister agonized over the fact that he did nothing to stop him. The episode obviously preyed on his mind until he was able to absolve himself, at least partially, by having the Virginian beat Balaam senseless for this disgusting act.

"Black Henry" Smith, the model for Trampas, was the genuine thing – a thoroughly bad man, with the magnetism and fascination that often accompanies that type. In fact, he sounds far more interesting than the character that Wister was to construct in the novel. Trampas, put beside Smith, seems to shrink and become a rather lacklustre and one-dimensional villain, without the perverse attraction and evil energy that Smith exuded. Wister described Smith thus:

> He was the real thing, and the only unabridged "bad man" I have ever had the chance to know. He is originally from Texas. … He has been "run out" of every county he has resided in. … Smith is at present stealing cattle or, more likely, Mavericking.
>
> Before I forget him, I must describe Smith's appearance. A tall – long-nosed, dark fellow, with a shock of straight black hair on end, all over his head. … He is so tall he bends down over almost everyone as he talks, and he has a catching but sardonic smile. His voice is unpleasant, very rasping, though not over loud. The great thing is his eyes. They are of a mottled yellow, like agate or half-clear amber, large and piercing, at times burning with light. They are the very worst eyes I have ever looked at. Perfectly fearless and shrewd, and treacherous. I don't see how an eye can express all that but it does. I have sat and talked to Smith, or rather listened to him, he's a brilliant talker … and he has found me what I set out to be in this world – a good listener.[27]

Wister's preoccupation with Smith's eyes is particularly interesting. Just as a good horseman first looks at a horse's eye in judging its worth, so, too, was it important on the frontier to take account of a man's eyes. They gave you a good estimate of whether you would still be alive at the end of a serious altercation. It was not always how fast you were on the draw; it was more important how cool and steady your nerves were.

Black Henry appears to have been one of the really bad men who gave substance to the legend. When Wister knew him, Smith already brought

with him a mystique of violence and killing. Later – and it is not clear whether Wister was aware of this – Smith became a leading member of the Red Sash gang that terrorized Johnson County in the aftermath of the Johnson County War. He had been one of the leading candidates on the Invaders' blacklist of rustlers. Johnson knew him well, since he had worked both for the Powder River outfit and for the EK. Shortly before the Invasion, in the atmosphere of retribution toward the big ranchers, he became a leading member of the group that looted and indiscriminately terrorized the settlers of Johnson County. Meanwhile, Sheriff Angus and his deputies, the alleged champions of the little people, demonstrated their utter ineptitude in protecting people against the gangs of thugs that preyed on the community. Smith was finally indicted both for trying to burn down Fort McKinney and for the murder of George Wellman, a special US marshal. He was freed on both accounts for lack of evidence, largely the result of Sheriff Angus's ineptitude in investigating the case.[28]

There is an interesting footnote to Wister's acquaintance with Smith. It seems clear that Smith gave Wister the inspiration for his first published story on the West, "Hank's Woman." In his journal for June 17, 1891, Wister records:

> Some of Smith's conversation: "That's a terrible plain woman Hank's got. All driven and dried up. Looks like a picture on one of those shoo-fly boxes. But she's jest as joyous as one of these leave-me-alones. Old Westfall hates her. He calls her that buckskin son of a bitch. … Got that boy Mose down at the EK yet? … Got the oldest-looking head in the world on him. Looks as if it'd wore out four bodies. … Old Gregg's a cunnin' man. Wanted a woman. Couldn't get none in this country as was willin.' Went out to England and fetched one along aback. Told her he had a large interest in the Powder River Cattle Company. Well, she comed and learned he had an interest. Had a cookin' interest in the roundups sometimes. But she couldn't find her way out of the country. Had to stay with Gregg. She'd been raised under a wharf there in Liverpool and like as not she'd have struck west if she started out for England. She's here yet." In all this I omit many pungent expletives.

When "Hank's Woman" appeared, Wister's first western story, its theme was somewhat altered, but there is no question that it was based on Smith's story. It is worth noting that this story introduced Lin McLean, but not the Virginian. The story is somewhat contrived and gives no hint of the huge

talent still seeking an outlet. And it is perhaps interesting that Wister began his western writing with a small and rather squalid story. There is no hint of the great theme that is germinating. As will be seen later in chapter 8, Johnson knew Henry Smith in Alberta – he referred to him as Hank and considered him a friend.

"Hank's Woman" was not Wister's first attempt at western writing. Before that, he had written "The Story of Chalkeye: A Wind River Romance" in 1891, but had never finished the story. It is worth noting again that Chalkeye was the name of a real cowboy who worked for the 88. It seems clear that, from the start, Wister was basing his western stories on real people and real incidents. Yet these people and incidents are hardly mentioned in Wister's journals. Thus it is not puzzling that Johnson is nowhere mentioned in any of Wister's journals. Neither was Chalkeye. Neither was Mike Henry. Wister obviously had a good memory and included many people and episodes in his writing that were not in his notes. It is important to add that Wister's journals before 1891 are very sketchy; it was only in 1891, when he self-consciously proclaimed himself to be the bard of the American West, that he began to record many western details in his notes. But even then one searches in vain for most of the stories that were used in *The Virginian*. Most of these he kept in his head.

One last point about Wister's first western manuscript, "The Story of Chalkeye." A somewhat shadowy figure by the name of Link Trampas is introduced and features in Wister's first attempt to deal with western justice. Wister has Trampas ruminating on western justice:

> No sir. Why, when any unmerited shooting takes place in this country, we don't think well of it. A man is apt to be shunned after doing such a thing. And if its very bad, he's a sight likelier to get his medicine here than where yu' have attorneys and juries and female witnesses for the accused moppin' and slobberin' with their nose-rags. Why sir, men have to get out of this country on account of public opinion more'n they do in the States. There's a man down the river right now will have to look to himself or – "There yu' go James," said the cook nudging the packer. "Why can't yu' leave poor Link Trampas alone?" "I'm naming nobody," said Chalkeye severely. But when a man's word and deed comes to be mistrusted, Wind River ain't a good place for him.

Trampas was created early in 1891, before Wister met "Black Henry" Smith. Probably "Black Henry" was in the back of Wister's mind as he honed the

character of Trampas, but the idea of Trampas was there earlier, and it is reasonable to argue that the original inspiration for Trampas came from Johnson's description of his troubles with White Clay George, culminating in the shootout in the bar at the Occidental Hotel. Certainly, there was no doubt in Johnson's mind on this score. He said that the character of Trampas and the events surrounding him in *The Virginian* were about an even mix of truth and imagination.

Finally, what credibility can be given to the claim that Johnson was the original inspiration for the Virginian? To begin with, it becomes clear that, in the strict sense, there was no "Virginian," a figure closely based on a real figure like Daniel Boone. Part of the enormous success of the book was certainly Wister's genius in creating a figure who embodied what Americans wanted to believe about themselves, a figure who was mysterious enough to ride down through the ages as the ideal American type. If Wister had linked his Virginian with any one person, the mystique would have vanished. Wister was always very cagey when asked who the real Virginian was. He was coy on this score and must have had much fun deflecting the persistent questions about the identity of his hero. But the figure of the Virginian did not come entirely from his imagination. When one looks at the short stories that became the basis for the novel, it is obvious that Wister initially was intent on accuracy in his western stories. It was only later, when he incorporated these episodes in the novel, that he attempted to create a folk hero. At first, he saw himself more as an accurate recorder of western life and people. His early western stories were based on real people – Chalkeye, Lin McLean, Mike Henry, and Molly Wood – and those familiar with Wyoming often recognized the settings. Only later did he see himself as a writer of the literary imagination, rather than as a recorder of the frontier West. His early stories, though interesting, are earthbound. None of them attempted to soar.

The hints that Wister does give us regarding the Virginian are deliberately frustrating. In the preface of the first edition of *The Virginian*, he had this to say: "Sometimes readers enquire, Did I know the Virginian? As well, I hope, as a father should know his son." This statement is not terribly helpful. Perhaps Wister was saying only that he knew cowboys well enough to draw an accurate image. Later he was to make other statements that have led others to jump to conclusions that were perhaps unwarranted.

Undoubtedly, readers with a thorough knowledge of the subject might be skeptical concerning the latest pretender. Who has ever heard of Everett Johnson? Where is the slightest mention of him in all Wister's detailed notes? Is his name merely the latest to be added to the very large file in the

Wister Collection at the University of Wyoming – or the equally large one at the Library of Congress – of Virginian claimants who, like Gilbert and Sullivan's cousins and aunts, can be reckoned up by dozens? The file is bulging with letters and newspaper clippings concerning this or that cowboy who happened to meet Wister and supposedly unloaded his life story on the author. The files testify to Wister's great success in catching something real in the western atmosphere more than they bolster any claims that can be taken seriously.

But there are two claims, besides Johnson's, that bear serious scrutiny. First, Wister's daughter, Fanny Kemble Wister, who took a deep interest in her father's work and finally edited his western journals and letters, has argued vigorously that the character of the Virginian was based on Charles D. Skirdin.[29] But, as Darwin Payne, Wister's foremost biographer, has stated, this is clearly wrong.[30] Wister did not meet Skirdin, at Fort Bowie, Arizona, until October 1893 – after the Virginian already had appeared in several stories.

In 1894, Wister got to know Skirdin at Fort Bowie and recorded his impression of him in his journal:

> His story, literally and faithfully recorded, would make a book as absorbing as Robinson Crusoe, and he's only twenty seven now, but his life has made him look thirty five! His search and discovery of his family, a taking of many years for which he saved all his money, is deeply touching. Skirdin is uncouth, ugly, and knows only what he has taught himself. But his talk is as simple and strong as nature, and he has a most beautiful eye. The officers place a high value on him.
>
> We grew very intimate, riding about the hot hills, and our views of life were precisely similar. His native wisdom is remarkable, and now and then he says something that many a celebrity would be glad to phrase himself.[31]

At the end of the 1894 journal are twenty-five pages of "frontier notes," which Wister's daughter did not include in the published version of his western writing. Among these notes are a number of Skirdin's anecdotes, but none of them is even remotely similar to the stories that appear in *The Virginian*. It is most difficult to understand how Wister's daughter arrived at the conclusion that Skirdin was the Virginian. She must have seen these notes and realized how little of Skirdin's life was similar to that of the Virginian. Skirdin, for a start, was not a cowboy. He was the wrong age (the

Virginian in the novel was the same age as Wister), and he was not physically similar. The Virginian was certainly not "uncouth and ugly." Then, of course, there remains the slight problem that the character of the Virginian had started to take shape before Wister ever laid eyes on Skirdin.

Undoubtedly, there was some of Skirdin in the final character of the Virginian. Wister was very fond of Skirdin and thought he embodied western virtues more than any westerner he had met. But Skirdin's life, though fascinating, did not even remotely fit the pattern of the Virginian's life. Clearly, the episodes of *The Virginian* were not based on Skirdin's experiences. What probably led Wister's daughter to advance this claim was a statement that Wister made in 1908 concerning Skirdin. He had become a Philadelphia policeman and had been sent to trial for killing a man while in the line of duty. Wister testified on his behalf, stating in court: "That man embodies all the characteristics of the hero of my novel 'The Virginian.' While no person was the actual prototype of the character, Skirdin, more than any man, embodies the type. … I have often hunted with him and he was absolutely fearless, but exceptionally quiet and peace-loving."[32] It is important to note that Wister was making this statement in the context of saving Skirdin from jail and was careful to say only that he represented a *type* of man reflected in *The Virginian*. Wister was careful to keep the Virginian anonymous, thus preserving his mystique. Wister's testimony on behalf of Skirdin was the only time he identified someone closely with the Virginian, and he was careful to qualify his remarks. Later, in 1916, Wister would write in *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* that he had met Skirdin in 1893 and that "much of him went into the Virginian, about whom I had written 'Em'ly' and 'Balaam and Pedro' before I met Skirdin, who *reminded* [author's emphasis] me of my own creation."[33]

The only other serious contender was George West, Wister's guide on numerous hunting trips. Darwin Payne has persuasively advanced the claim, but there are a few problems with the argument. First, Payne argues that before the Virginian appeared in "Baalam and Pedro," the character of Lin McLean, who appeared in Wister's first two western pieces, "Hank's Woman" and "How Lin McLean Went East," was based on George West. Payne then argues later that the Virginian was also George West. Payne is probably partly right, but the argument is unconvincing since Lin McLean and the Virginian were very different characters. Obviously both could not have been closely modelled on the same man. It seems that Payne associates West with Lin McLean largely because part of the story in "How Lin McLean Went East" was based on an event in West's life. And West, to a degree, fits the picture of Lin McLean – a footloose, carefree, irresponsible,

woman-chasing cowboy.[34] But why is it that Wister called him Lin McLean, which was Jim Drummond's real name? According to Johnson, the character of Lin McLean did come close to Drummond's. So it would seem that the character of Lin McLean was perhaps a composite of Drummond, West, and probably others. What is important to note here is that Wister based his first cowboy, Lin McLean, on someone he met in the first summer of 1885, and someone who was never mentioned in his journal or letters.

How likely is it that George West was a model for Lin McLean and also for the Virginian? The answer depends on how far you take the argument. It is plausible to argue that there was some of West in both characters. Wister was initially very fond of West, and on his first meeting described him as "much better looking than any of us."[35] West, though a recent transplant from New England, had acquired many of the characteristics that Wister so admired in western cowboys. It is clear from his journal that Wister was at first in awe of George West. But it is equally clear that it would have been extraordinarily difficult for Wister to transform a New Englander into the soft-spoken, courteous Southerner, an aspect that was a central part of the Virginian's character.

But, by the time he came to write *The Virginian*, much of that awe had soured. By 1892, a decade before the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister was becoming distinctly annoyed by West's frequent requests for money and by his obsequious gratitude. "You are good, Wister, and a Christian if there are any on earth. … Yes, you are a friend to me & the best I have ever had or will ever have I know. I never thought one man could love another as I have grown to love you."[36] A short time later, West asked for another loan and Wister refused. The somewhat grovelling tone of West's letter is so at odds with the remote, proud character of the Virginian that it is impossible to see the connection.

In 1900, just as Wister was immersed in the final development of the Virginian's character, George West wrote to Wister to inform him that he had just been arrested for stealing cattle. His candidacy becomes less and less convincing.[37]

Perhaps the journal entry of June 9, 1891, is the most telling evidence that George West was decidedly not the Virginian. His daughter's editing of his diaries and journals omitted this passage, so Wister's true feelings toward West have not been generally known. Wister wrote:

> Olmstead tells me that West broke out drinking last winter. I am deeply sorry. I hope it was only an "after-glow." Olmstead certainly thinks he is making more attempt at steady occupation than

> ever before. West, himself, wrote me he had not been altogether an angel. But I drew from that that it wasn't serious or he would not have spoken of it. He has every gift for success, but that moral volatility (I'm beginning to think) will never let him get anywhere. I am not quite sure I ever thought anything else.

These words were written *before* the Virginian appeared in "Baalam and Pedro." Wister and West remained friends for many years, but Wister was obviously no longer in awe of West when he began to create the character of the Virginian. The moral laxity that Wister soon recognized in West makes it very difficult to believe that West, in more than a marginal way, could have been the model for the Virginian. West comes much closer to Lin McLean, Wister's first cowboy, who made his way through life on good looks and charm but lacked the iron core and unflinching standards that set the Virginian apart.

Again, in a journal entry not included in his daughter's published diaries and journals, Wister recorded an observation on George West on July 17, 1893, at a time when the character of the Virginian was taking definite form:

> But next year West will be just as far behind [despite Wister's frequent loans]. … What can one do with such a man? … He thinks he will give up his ranch because the winters are too long. If he does seek towns and gets work on some railroad, I think he will go to pieces with dissipation as he did once before – only then he was 20 and now he is 34. … When I first began to know him well, six years ago, I was always wondering at his moral volatility – he has seen rough days and little else since then, but the volatility remains unprecipitated. With this, he has almost the most loveable nature I have ever known.

George West the Virginian? Hardly. And there is not a shred of specific evidence from his life that events in his life formed a basis for the novel.

There are really no other serious contenders for the title. Many names have been put forward as influencing Wister in developing aspects of the character, but only one other name seems to have much credibility. In 1895, while in New Mexico, Wister met Dean Duke, a colourful ranch foreman. Wister's 1895 diary is full of Dean Duke and his terrific stories, one of which was probably the inspiration for the four chapters in *The Virginian* dealing with Dr. McBride, the pompous preacher who finally leaves the Sunk Creek

Ranch in a state of high dudgeon after the Virginian has kept him up all night ministering to his loss of desire "aftah the sincere milk of the Word." Wister recorded in his journal that the preacher had just been giving a sermon under a tree to the cowboys on Duke's ranch and had informed them that "The Lord will come here – I tell you he will take possession of this valley." At this point, a cowboy whose attention had drifted and had only half caught the last sentence piped up, "The Hell he will. If he does that, Duke will law him out of it."[38]

Wister, too, was obviously taken with the type of cowboys on Duke's ranch. He commented in his journal, "They are the manly, simple, humorous, American type which I hold to be the best and the bravest we possess and our hope for the future – they work hard, they play hard, and they don't go on strikes."[39] Wister's view of the cowboy had certainly matured in a decade! In 1885, he would never have called cowboys America's "hope for the future." A decade had wrought a dramatic change in his thinking.

Duke, like Skirdin, undoubtedly influenced Wister's later thinking on the character of the Virginian as it appeared in the novel, but obviously neither could have been *the* Virginian since he met both of them after the Virginian had already appeared in several short stories. Yet these two were the only ones that Wister ever identified as being linked with his character, Skirdin as "embracing the type" and Duke as the ex post facto model for the Virginian.[40]

Perhaps one more small group of contenders should be mentioned. Wister had a good friend from Harvard days, George Waring, who had settled in the small village of Winthrop in the Methow Valley of Washington. Wister visited Waring in 1892, partly to hunt in the spectacular Cascade Mountains. He came again in 1898 with his new wife Molly to spend part of their honeymoon. Waring was a lifelong friend, the product of a prominent New York family who went west in disgrace because of an inappropriate marriage. Over the strenuous opposition of his parents, he had married his stepmother's sister, Helen Clark Green, who was more than a decade older. Waring in 1892 ran a small general store in Winthrop (now a western theme town!). Wister was appalled by the degraded life his friend was leading but understood the attraction of the country. Several ideas for stories resulted from his first stay; one about cockroaches found its way to "The Right Honorable the Strawberries."[41]

Anna Green Stevens, Waring's stepdaughter, claimed, "when I asked Owen Wister who was the Virginian, he said it was a composite picture of three men, Milton S. Storey being the principle [sic], my daddy, and Pete

Bryan." Methow Valley residents also claimed that Wister wrote *The Virginian* in Winthrop in 1901.[42] As Darwin Payne has observed:

> Claimants for the honor of having served as the original model of the Virginian continued to surface. Wister, quietly amused, never publicly disputed any of them. … The same year another newspaper article from Methow Valley in Washington declared Milton Storey to be the Virginian, and his wife the model for Molly Stark. Wister's private comment was "nonsense." Another account, with an even more unlikely claimant for the honor, emerged in 1924 when the former governor of Puerto Rico, E. Montgomery Reily, wrote to ask if the assertion by his former chief of police that he was the model for the Virginian were true. The man since had been discharged for bootlegging. Other claims were equally farfetched.[43]

Certainly Wister did not make George Waring his model! The rather ridiculous claims of Winthrop are all too typical of the dozens that sprouted seemingly everywhere Wister had trod once his fame began to spread.

So what are we left with? How do we reconcile Wister's statement at Charles Skirdin's murder trial in 1908 that "no person was the actual prototype of the character" with his statement in the preface of the first edition of *The Virginian*, "Did I know the Virginian? As well, I hope, as a father should know his son." It would seem that as the fame of the novel increased, Wister became increasingly coy about the character he had conceived. To link the Virginian with someone specific would utterly destroy the mystique. Besides, Skirdin and West did not go on to distinguished futures. Skirdin ended as a watchman, sweeping floors, and West was arrested for stealing cattle.[44] So Wister was very careful about linking real people to his hero.

What is very clear, however, from a careful reading of all Wister's western letters and journals and his early articles, is that Wister, certainly at first, saw himself as a chronicler of western stories and people, not as an artist of the imagination. He prided himself on the authenticity of his stories and tried to capture real people in his stories. So it is likely, at least at first, that the emerging character of the Virginian in the early 1890s was based on someone real, or a combination of real people. If this was the case, Wister gives us practically no help, except for the above quoted statement in the preface of *The Virginian*.

In retrospect, however, Wister did mention one other who influenced his character. On his first western trip, in 1885, he met a man named Morgan,

a Virginian, who was the proprietor of a stage stop. Morgan's wife was ill and Wister recorded in his diary how taken he was with the man's extreme gentleness in caring for his wife. Almost fifty years later, in the preface of *The Writings of Owen Wister: The Virginian*, Wister was to say that this man was the original inspiration for his Virginian. What can be made of this? In one sense, not very much. This was a fleeting meeting with someone who certainly did not inspire a picture of a cowboy. But, in another sense, this chance meeting probably did trigger something important in Wister's mind. One of the most striking characteristics of the Virginian was his quiet gentleness toward both women and horses, so at odds with the general stereotype of the cowboy at the time. Wister was obviously greatly drawn to southern manners at their best. This later became abundantly clear when he wrote *Lady Baltimore*, a sympathetic study of upper-class Charleston. What so caught the public's imagination when the Virginian appeared fully developed in 1902 was his combination of the western democratic spirit and the manners of the Old South. Wister had created a hero who was unlike any of the dime-novel cowboys who went before him.

It was not a coincidence that Wister chose a Virginian for his hero. He was consciously distancing his hero from both the literary stereotype of the time and from the average American cowboy, both of whom had Texas origins. Wister was not at all fond of Texas, and he was not greatly drawn to the typical Texas cowboy. His fastidious upbringing caused him to draw back from the bumptious, swaggering, coarse, and violent cowboy that he, fairly or unfairly, associated with Texas. And there were a great number of this sort of cowboy who had drifted up from Texas to make the cattle towns of Kansas legendary for roughness and violence.

Wister made it very clear in his 1893 journal why his cowboy hero would not be a Texan. In a passage omitted by his daughter in the published version, he had this to say:

> It is unlucky for Texas that so large a part of her people come from the Southern poor white trash. It is said of them that they have all the vices of the peasant and none of his virtues. They live in the dregs of dirt and poverty. … The men seldom have the courage to work steadily at any honest calling; but they are bold enough to shoot their enemy in the back any time they can catch him not looking. I have heard more stories of cowardly murders here than I have ever heard before. And it is a serious thing to be a witness against any man, for he, or his brother or cousin, will shoot you sooner or later. In fact a man who is likely to be

> a witness at a trial not yet come off is likely to be killed by some unknown person as he sits by his lighted window in the evening.

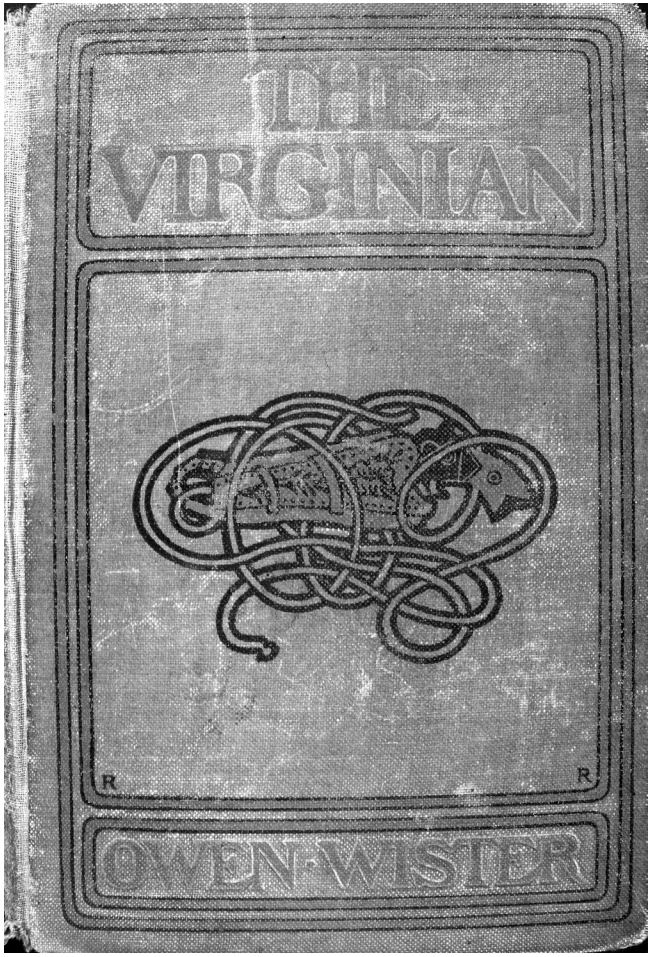
The journal goes on to remark on the epidemic of cattle rustling and the shocking number of murders in the area – thirty-four in the previous year and a half. And Wister was no kinder to Texas women, whom he thought put on the most ludicrous airs even though they were of a low class. Wister mentioned a man named Philpot who was known as Price "because Texas ladies could not possibly say Philpot and feel pure."[45]

Wister, of course, was being terribly unfair to the average Texan. Yet it is important to reveal his attitude toward Texans because it caused him to reject the Texas cowboy as his model and to look for someone very different. He sought a striking contrast to the sort of cowboy – a product of dime novels and the Wild West show – then in the popular imagination.

Instead, Wister chose a Virginian as his ideal cowboy. In doing so, he was probably consciously distancing himself from what he so disliked about the South – the ignorance, intolerance, and closed-mindedness of the common people, the marked propensity for violence and lawlessness, the lack of ambition. His cowboy hero, instead, reflected the standards of the older, more cultured Tidewater South, to which he was greatly attracted. Though Wister's cowboy was supposedly of humble origin, thus giving him the popular appeal of a Horatio Alger figure, he reflected the standards of the old planter aristocracy, standards which, of course, were not confined to the aristocracy itself. The Virginian embodied the code of the Old South – the intense pride of region, an understated courage and code of manliness, an elaborate deference to the right sort of woman, an iron moral code, a gentleness unless aroused, and, above all, a prickly sense of honour. No wonder the most popular author in the South in the nineteenth century was Sir Walter Scott. The cavalier tradition of the South was lifted almost literally from the pages of Scott. What Wister obviously did was to transplant this cavalier tradition to the western plains.

The hero's southern background was central to Wister's thinking. His next book after *The Virginian* was very different, based as it was on the elite society of Charleston, South Carolina. But *Lady Baltimore* actually has a close tie with *The Virginian*. Both novels are a close study of cultured southern beliefs and manners, though in very different settings. Wister, of course, had a strong southern background through his mother's side of the family, one that he clearly valued highly.

When *The Virginian* was eventually published, Wister must have been surprised by the instantaneous and overwhelming enthusiasm for the book.



The cover of the first edition of *The Virginian,* 1902. Author's copy.

Wister was not a particularly modest man, but he could not have anticipated how completely his Virginia cowboy would catch the imagination of Americans of all regions and levels of sophistication. The extraordinary outpouring of letters to him showed equal enthusiasm from New England literati and from western cowboys.[46]

Wister had tapped into something vital in the American psyche, and the situation was not without irony. The horrors of the Civil War were still of recent memory. Many thousands of northerners died to eradicate the blight of slavery but, more importantly for most of them, they fought to keep the Union intact. To accomplish this, in the broadest sense, the southern

mentality had to be brought to heel. Prior to the Civil War, national politics had become impossible due both to the intransigence of the southern mind on the issue of slavery and the South's determination to preserve a distinct society. So there is a striking irony in the fact that a mere forty years after a war that northerners blamed on an impossible southern outlook, the figure of the Virginian emerged, the embodiment of that intransigent southern outlook.

It took the country by storm. Wister's hero became by far the most popular American folk hero for generations, in all parts of the country. Wister was consciously attempting in his novel to bring about a reconciliation between North and South, but in his wildest imagining he could not have dreamed how successful he would be. Behind the willingness of the North to become reconciled with the South was a general abandonment of the cause of Blacks after Reconstruction. But there was something more. There was something immensely attractive in the southern code of honour and in the southern refusal to be caught up in the frantic northern pursuit of crass material progress. The Virginian, the embodiment of the southern ethic, stood in stark contrast to the vulgar excesses of the Gilded Age, which deeply embarrassed thinking Americans. For millions of Americans, increasingly anxious over the future of an urban, industrial society at a very unattractive stage, the Virginian reassured them that the simple, honest virtues of Jeffersonian America were not lost.

Finally, even if it is plausible to the reader why Wister decided to make his hero a Virginian, there undoubtedly remains a degree of skepticism that Wister chose as his cowboy the particular Virginian who is the preoccupation of this story. Why, after so long, does he suddenly emerge from nowhere? Why is there not the slightest shred of evidence in Wister's voluminous writings that the two ever laid eyes on each other? Considering the number of pretenders to the title, it would be daft to accept uncritically that Everett Johnson was the real Virginian. The West was, and still is, full of old-timers with active imaginations, who embroidered the facts and included themselves in as many stirring events as they could get away with. Was Johnson just one more?

There appears to be almost no proof that Johnson was the Virginian. (See chapter 8.) His case rests mostly on circumstantial evidence and on the credibility of his story. First, the known facts. There is no doubt that he was in Wyoming in 1885, that he worked for the 76, and that he was at Major Wolcott's VR Ranch when Wister visited and saw him roping during a roundup – an important episode in the book. Fred Hesse described him as his trusted man, a kind of assistant foreman. Hesse put Johnson in charge

of annual roundups for the 76, and it was Johnson whom Hesse sent to scout Alberta for good range for 76 cattle. But there is no evidence that Johnson and Wister were friends.

Physically, Johnson fit the picture. He was the same age as Wister, just as Wister described the Virginian. Wister had his twenty-fifth birthday at the VR Ranch, and Johnson turned twenty-five in the fall; Wister had described the Virginian as being twenty-four. Johnson was the right build, tall and lean; he had black hair and the rather "swarthy" complexion of the Virginian. He had, by all accounts, a striking appearance, especially while on horseback. And according to Johnson's daughter-in-law, Wister described his eyes exactly – a dark blue, and able to change colour like the moods of the sea.

Wister stressed the Virginian's horsemanship and skill with a rope. Later, in Alberta, Johnson was considered one of the foremost ropers in the Canadian West and was chosen to do a roping exhibition when the future King George V and Queen Mary visited Canada in 1901 and were given a taste of what would eventually become the Calgary Stampede. He was also renowned for his horsemanship in Alberta. He was continually asked to compete against Alberta's top bucking rider, John Ware, to determine who was number one, but he would not compete against Ware because Ware was Black. Johnson's southern roots never left him!

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the identity of the Virginian concerns the character that Wister developed. The Virginian was not Wister's first cowboy. In creating Lin McLean, Wister demonstrated his early fidelity to the realistic, typical cowboy – charming, rough, picturesque, somewhat lacking in ambition, and morally ambiguous. Darwin Payne is probably right in arguing that George West served as the primary model. Yet there is the fact that Jim Drummond's real name, according to Johnson, was Lin McLean. So, it would seem that Jim Drummond was also a model for Wister's first important cowboy. If Lin McLean had remained Wister's only cowboy, Wister would never have emerged from the ranks of second-rate writers. Lin McLean's character is interesting and believable, but does little to stir the imagination. His character differs little from what had gone before in cowboy literature.

But somewhere before the emergence of the Virginian in 1892, Wister's mind began to turn to quite a different sort of cowboy. His moment of genius – and it was the only one in his career as a writer – was to create a cowboy who was not at all typical. Yet the enormous success of his character resulted in generations of real and want-to-be cowboys modelling themselves on the Virginian, who was a throwback to the old Virginia

planter aristocracy. Wister gave his Virginian a humble background, thus surrounding him with an aura of upward mobility based on character and a desire for improvement through education, one of the most powerful of American beliefs. Otherwise, the character that Wister fashioned, consciously or otherwise, was based not on that of the typical cowboy, but on the characteristics of the old planter aristocracy of the upper South. The Virginian was neither bumptious, crude, boastful or, as was so often the case, bashful to the point of painful silence. The character that Wister created was that of the southern gentleman – with an unshakable code of ethics, an extreme deference to women, a quiet understated assurance, a love of horses and a great gentleness with them (which was not typical at that time on the open range), and an almost exaggerated quiet, unless aroused. Perhaps most characteristic of all, the Virginian embodied the pronounced code of honour by which all southern gentlemen lived – and often, because of the code of the duel – died. The violence latent in the southern gentleman was close to the surface but was of a type very different from the spontaneous and volatile violence of the typical Texas cowboy. At one point in the novel, Wister described his Virginian as having an "aristocratic introspection" that set him apart.

What Wister did was to create a character that transcended his particular surroundings and caught the national imagination in a most extraordinary way. His character had enough of the western patina to appeal to his western readers and strike them as authentic. But the Virginian also possessed the dignity and sophistication to free him of purely local appeal. And, of course, he possessed the mystery that readers found irresistible. How did Wister, who prided himself on the authenticity of his writing, concoct such a character? Well, it is humbly submitted that Wister, beneath the artistic licence of the novelist, was describing the only cowboy he seems to have encountered who represented the aristocratic roots of the Old South that Wister so admired, and later described so fondly in *Lady Baltimore*.

So Johnson was the proper "type" to be considered as Wister's model. But that obviously is not enough to convince the reader. What can be made of Johnson's reminiscences? These are only believable if there is other strong evidence. I could find no proof to back his assertions that there was a teacher named Molly Wood; that he had a friend named Steve, who was supposedly lynched; that there was a baby swapping at the Goose Egg Ranch; that he killed a man named White Clay George in a fashion similar to the killing of Trampas. Certainly local Wyoming lore reinforces his contention that the baby swapping did, in fact, take place at the Goose Egg and that a shootout did take place at the Occidental Hotel in Buffalo, which formed

the basis of Wister's story. But no proof exists that Johnson was involved in either incident.

During the years that I tried to find hard evidence for Johnson's version of events, first in Wyoming and then among the Wister papers in Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston, I had some low moments. I could find nothing. In each case, there was an explanation, but still, it was depressing.

There were no letters from Johnson in the Wister papers. Johnson claimed that Wister wrote to him a few times, but he did not answer the letters because he was too self-conscious about his lack of education. And there was another reason. Johnson was not that close to Wister. In 1885, Wister was not particularly likeable, and Johnson had the somewhat humiliating job of looking after him. This situation is certainly hinted at in the novel. The Virginian, for the most part, remained aloof from his eastern charge and rarely allowed an intimacy to develop. Johnson said that it was considered degrading to have to look after an eastern dude and that he took a lot of ribbing from the boys. But, more important, Johnson had a considerable pride of ancestry and a fierce loyalty to Old Virginia, yet he found himself in the humiliating position of being considered an interesting but ignorant cowhand by a snobbish northerner. It is clear from Wister's early journals that he had not yet developed the appreciation of the cowboy "type" which, a decade later, would cause him to write his "Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," his eulogy to the cowboy as the finest type that America had produced. In 1885, it is clear that Wister was careful to associate only with the "right" people and, understandably, he would have exuded an air of condescension toward rough and uneducated cowboys. Johnson, in turn, undoubtedly had his own air of condescension toward this effete easterner who had to be looked after like a child and had not yet learned how to associate easily with cowboys. Exactly this situation is alluded to in the novel.

In each case, the lack of any supporting evidence can be explained. It quickly becomes evident to the researcher of Wyoming history that very little "proof" exists for many events in the 1870s and 1880s. The newspapers and legal records for northern Wyoming are very haphazard indeed. It is virtually impossible to verify anything concerning the life of someone like Johnson who was not an important force in the community. Ordinary cowboys just do not emerge from the newspapers, diaries, or biographies of the period. Even a decade later, the situation was dramatically different, but in the earlier period, people were too busy doing things to bother about recording them.

There is one more argument to add, one that on the surface might appear rather weak but does have some force. Johnson recorded his memories

to Jean before a rather substantial body of material involving both Wyoming and Wister emerged. Yet nowhere in his manuscript is there any statement that is clearly false. If Johnson had been spinning a story out of whole cloth, it is almost inevitable that he would have tripped himself up somewhere.

But it was still deeply depressing that I could find so little "proof" of his story in general, and none when it came to the Wister connection. Yet I did not lose faith in his credibility for two simple reasons. My father knew Johnson well. My father was one of the most astute judges of both horseflesh and human character I have known. He could not abide the slightest kind of embroidery in someone's stories. I can remember a number of embarrassing moments in our house when a guest's picturesque story shrivelled under my father's "look." So when he said that Johnson was the real thing, I knew he had to be.

But more importantly, my father and others testified to the existence of practically the only proof linking Johnson to Wister. Shortly after the publication of *The Virginian*, Wister sent a copy to Johnson. Unfortunately, this book and a few letters from Wister were lost in a house fire. But there is no question in my mind that the book existed. Both my father and mother told me that they had seen the book with its inscription: "To the hero from the author. Owen Wister."