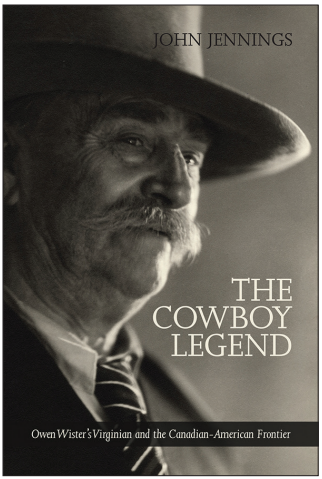

THE COWBOY LEGEND: OWEN WISTER'S VIRGINIAN AND THE CANADIAN-AMERICAN FRONTIER by John Jennings

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1: Beginnings (1860–74)

Everett Cyril Johnson was a Virginian whose forebears had come to America from Scotland before the American Revolution. His great-grandfather, William Johnson, had arrived in Virginia just in time to fight in the Revolution, finally becoming a captain in the Army of Virginia. Because of his military service, he was given land in Powhaten County. There he married an Irish girl, Elizabeth Hunter, and had two children, Thomas William and Elizabeth Hunter.[1]

Johnson's grandfather, Thomas William Johnson, acquired land in Goochland County, Virginia, and married Sarah Quarles Poindexter, a member of one of Virginia's most prominent families. Although Tom Johnson was a well-educated man, the Poindexter family did not consider him much of a catch and, for a while at least, resisted the marriage.

But Sarah's parents finally relented, Tom and Sarah were married, and they eventually produced seven children. Their third son, George Poindexter, was Everett Johnson's father. George, born in 1830, was named after his great-uncle George Poindexter, who had moved to Mississippi and had been governor of that state from 1820 to 1822. In his youth, George had spent much of his time with an aunt, Patricia Quarles Holliday, whose husband, Alexander Holliday, had been an ambassador to England. Aunt Patricia had a house in Richmond and a plantation called Cherry Grove.

In 1855, George went to Black Hawk, Mississippi, where his eldest brother had opened an academy. There he met and fell in love with Martha Lucretia Foster, whose mother was an Adams. The Fosters and the Adamses, natives of Mathews County, Virginia, had come to Mississippi and established many successful plantations in Carroll County.

Cyril Foster thought that his daughter was too young for marriage and sent her off to Mrs. Young's School for Young Ladies in Vicksburg, but George pursued her there and finally persuaded Martha's parents to give their consent to the marriage, which took place in 1856. George and Martha at first lived on Tom Johnson's plantation near Manassas. Here their daughter, Jessie Foster, was born in 1859 and their son, Everett Cyril, in November 1860.

Life was rather pleasant in this self-contained world of the plantation; slaves did virtually all the work, and almost everything was produced on the plantation itself. Young Ebb, as he was called, was raised by a slave woman who was devoted to him. But he remembered little of this southern life so soon to be shattered.

When the Civil War broke out, Johnson's father, George, fought with the Confederate Army and was wounded at Vicksburg. The first battle of Bull Run was fought over Tom Johnson's land; all that the Johnsons had built was destroyed in that battle. Johnson's mother had to take her children and go over the mountains to Lost Creek in West Virginia, where Sarah Johnson, now a widow, had another plantation.

Several years before he died, Tom Johnson made a trip to Minnesota and was very favourably impressed by what he saw. So he acquired farmland there and placed a German family on it as tenants. After the war, Ebb Johnson's father, thinking that his young family might have a brighter future in the North, moved them to the farm in Minnesota. Although she was now free, the children's mammy refused to be left behind and accompanied the family to their new home. Another person who was to have a profound effect upon young Ebb – his maternal grandmother – also came with them.

The Johnson family travelled by riverboat down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi to a point not far from Lake City, Minnesota, and there they settled on the farm called "Twin Mounds," which was a short distance from the river. A large eight-room house was built, as well as barns, granaries, sheds for machinery, a chicken house, and a smokehouse. They kept horses, cows, turkeys, and chickens, but Ebb's father refused to have pigs on the place. That did not fit with his Tidewater background. They also had a grain field, a hay meadow, a good garden, and a small orchard of apple and plum trees. Two small lakes provided water for the livestock and a place for the children to swim in the summer and skate in the winter. About a quarter of a mile from the house, there was a four-room log cabin for Carson Minke, the German who worked the land. Jessie and Ebb spent much of their time playing with the Minke children, Heinrich and Inger. The children had a great deal of freedom, but they were responsible for certain chores. As well,

although at first there was little in the way of schooling, their grandmother made sure that they learned to read.

During the winter evenings, their father read to them from Shakespeare or Sir Walter Scott. Among the other books in that pioneer home, Johnson could remember Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Roman history and poetry. Jessie read Josephus with her father's help. He gave her a melodeon, and she could play both the piano and the organ by the time she was eleven.

Both children loved animals. They each owned a pony and a calf. Ebb was given a bulldog, an inveterate fighter that he named Cassius M. Clay. When he was ten years old, he was given a shotgun with which he soon began to take a toll on the numerous prairie chickens, quail, and ducks.

The family were briefly Episcopalian until, one Sunday, the minister pounded the pulpit and shouted, "No man who has ever owned a slave will enter the Kingdom of Heaven!" So Johnson's father gathered up his family and left the church. Ebb Johnson never became a churchgoer.

The children heard stories of the Santee Sioux uprising in Minnesota in 1862, in which the Sioux killed many hundreds of settlers. The uprising had resulted from the federal government's neglect of treaty obligations to the Santees due to the impending Civil War. When the Santee complained that the government was starving them, trader Andrew Myrick allegedly responded that if the Sioux were so hungry, "let them eat grass." He was very pleased with his historical allusion until he became the first victim of the outbreak, found scalped and with his mouth stuffed with grass.[2]

Johnson's father joined the western army to fight in the Indian wars, which had again erupted during the Civil War. For this and for the fact that he left the South as soon as the war was over, his brothers never forgave him. To the brothers in Virginia, Minnesota was enemy territory, and the blue uniform was the crowning insult. George felt the estrangement keenly and was quite overcome when, years later, he received a letter from his brother William. Undoubtedly, his father's experiences as an Indian fighter coloured Ebb Johnson's attitudes toward Native people.

Two more children were born at Twin Mounds: a girl, Elizabeth Ann, and a boy, Charles Robert Colfax. With their father away, the children had to become even more self-reliant and resourceful. Ebb became the man of the house, responsible for the horses, cattle, and much of the farm work. He found many excuses to avoid school.

When his father came home on leave, he brought with him buffalo robes, beaded buckskin, and tomahawks and told the children stories of the Sioux, Winnebagos, Crows, and the Chippewas, whom he liked best. He was a cavalry officer and one winter was stationed at Fort Snelling, near Saint

Paul. Johnson's mother, wishing to be near her husband, took Jessie and the two youngest children and moved to Saint Paul for the winter, leaving Ebb, aged ten, at home with his grandmother, his mammy, and a neighbour boy to help with the chores.

The grandmother, whose Virginia accent was even more pronounced than her son's, enthralled young Ebb with stories of Poindexter derring-do. She told him, too, of Meriwether Lewis, who was connected to the family by marriage – of Lewis's expedition with William Clark up the Missouri River and over the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia. She told him of the meeting of these two explorers with John Colter in 1806 and of Colter's incredible journeys alone through Indian Country and of his even more incredible ordeals and escapes. And so, with stories of romance and danger, she fired the boy's imagination and pride in his family. When Johnson's mother came home, Sarah Poindexter Johnson returned to her home at Lost Creek, where she died. And when Johnson left Minnesota for the West, he carried with him only one picture, a little tintype of his grandmother.

* * * * *

When Johnson was twelve, his father left the army and moved the family into Lake City, where, he hoped, the children could attend school regularly. Johnson hated to leave the farm and did not take much to school. But he was not to endure school for long. One day, one of the boys at school called him a dirty rebel. Johnson picked up a piece of broken slate and threw it at the boy, cutting him badly on the face. He knew he was in trouble so he decided to run away from home. This was not a new idea; he and an older boy, Will Furlow, had often talked of going west to seek their fortunes. So one night they rode off, taking with them some food, two blankets, and a gun apiece. There were rumours at the time of gold in Colorado, so they headed in that direction.

They found work at Camp Clark, Nebraska, where they lived in rough quarters with miners, trappers, and stockmen, altogether a wild breed of men. Unfortunately, Will Furlow was hot-tempered and ready to fight at the least provocation. Finally, one night, he got into a gunfight and was killed. His death caused little stir in frontier Nebraska. The shooting was considered a fair fight, so there was no recourse to the law.

With his friend dead, Johnson decided that there was nothing to keep him in Nebraska. Longhorned cattle were now coming into the northern plains, and Johnson had become acquainted with some cowhands who had trailed cattle north from Texas and were returning home. So he decided to

accompany them since he had an uncle ranching in Victoria County, not far from San Antonio.

It was not unusual at this time for a boy of twelve to be hired on for such a trip. During the Civil War thousands of young boys fought in the Confederate Army. Boys of twelve were expected to pull their weight. For instance, Charles Goodnight, the famous Texas cattleman, rode bareback from Illinois to Texas when he was only nine years old. Boys grew up fast on the frontier. Johnson hired on as a horse wrangler on that trip and considered himself a man when he reached his uncle's ranch.

Texas, in 1872, was not altogether tamed. According to T. R. Fehrenbach, an expert on the subject, the amount and character of lawlessness in Texas at this time was entirely unprecedented in the United States. "As often as not, justice was private and vengeance was personal."[3] The legacy of the Alamo, the Mexican War, and the Civil War still had an immediacy for Texans in the 1870s, as did their campaign to clear the state of the "Indian menace."

Texas, perhaps more than any other state in the Union, had been conceived in violence and was developed by Anglo-Celtic frontiersmen, the descendants of those who had pushed through the Cumberland Gap and wrested the interior from the Comanche and Apache. They were a tough, stubborn, independent lot who asked for and gave no quarter to Mexican, Comanche, or Yankee. More than all other types put together, they were responsible for advancing the frontier. Johnson would have felt right at home with these people; after all, he was very much of the same breed, though his Tidewater Virginia background undoubtedly distanced him from some of the coarser aspects of the Texas frontier.

It was not long after reaching his uncle's ranch that Johnson was introduced to a typical brand of Texas violence. His uncle somehow got wind of a plot on the part of his Mexican cowboys to kill him. He was in the habit of rising early and going to the bunkhouse to wake the men. This particular morning, he went, gun in hand, and, after waking the men, began to shoot; he killed every Mexican. This was Johnson's introduction to Texas. This incident perhaps inspired Johnson to become adept in the handling of a six-gun. Self-preservation in frontier Texas had little to do with formal law. He later became an expert with a revolver. He also learned the art of roping from some of the best Texans in the trade and was later considered one the best ropers in both Wyoming and Alberta.

Most of Johnson's work consisted of searching for elusive longhorns. The trick was to rope an animal and get it snubbed to a mesquite tree. When the men had enough of them secured, they would bring up a bunch

of quieter cattle, work the mavericks in with them, and so take them to the ranch. Sometimes they hazed them in one at a time, and a man who could not handle his rope and his horse could meet with disaster. Their ropes were made of rawhide, as many as eight strands braided, rubbed, and oiled. Once, Johnson saw one of these ropes break, the whiplash end of it striking a Mexican across the stomach, laying it open and killing him. These ropes were sometimes used as weapons of war; many men have been dragged to death at the end of one.

Though Johnson loved Texas, he became increasingly homesick. So, at fourteen, he decided to leave Texas and started for home with only his horse, rope, bedroll, and gun. After several days on the trail, as he was riding through a grove of oaks, he heard shots and the sound of a galloping horse coming toward him. Suddenly a Mexican came into view around a corner, riding hard with a six-gun in his hand. Johnson's horse shied and threw up its head at the sight of him. This perhaps saved Johnson's life; the Mexican fired, hitting the horse in the middle of the forehead. The horse dropped, instantly killed, but Johnson was able to jump free and fire a shot that killed the Mexican.

Even in Texas it was not usual for horsemen to come galloping around corners, guns blazing. But the cause soon became apparent. A group of Texas Rangers were pursuing the Mexican. They were rather impressed by the young boy's shooting and took him back to their camp, where he discovered that their captain was related to his grandmother. This relative was obviously impressed by Johnson's ability with a revolver and suggested that he join the Rangers, which until this time had been a loose militia, usually brought together to rid the frontier of Comanches or Mexicans. The Rangers were probably eager for recruits since they had just been reconstituted that year (1874) after a period of opposition toward them under Reconstruction policy.[4] But Johnson was too intent on returning home. So the Rangers gave him a new horse, and he got a job with an outfit trailing cattle north on the Western Trail to Dodge City. This herd of cattle numbered about two thousand. About a dozen men and sixty or more horses were needed to trail such a herd. The trail boss rode ahead, scouting out the trail and looking for good watering places and fords. He would stop on a rise of land and signal directions with his arm or his hat. He signalled, too, when they were approaching a watering place, so that the herd could be swung downstream if possible and the greatest number could drink at one time. The cook, too, went ahead with the chuckwagon and the horse wrangler with the remuda. On this drive Johnson rode in the swing position. The two best men rode

Frederic Remington, *Stampeded by Lightning* (1908). Remington was undoubtedly influenced by the work of Eadweard Maybridge, who was the first to use a series of trip cameras to capture the movement of a galloping horse. Here Remington has perfectly caught the horse's moment of suspension at the gallop.

point. Then came the men on swing and flanks. Behind, in the dust, came the inexperienced men on drag.

The herd, being creatures of habit, soon became used to the trail. But the wild, high-strung longhorns often stampeded. Lightning or an unusual noise could set them off. Although Johnson spent his life among cattle, he rarely mentioned stampedes. He took them for granted. They were just part of the day's or night's work. "Of co'se we had stampedes," he would say when asked. "We just tried to get the cattle circling." It was typical of his kind that he would downplay the dangers of such a drive, but these were very real. Numerous crude graves along the cattle trails were a mute reminder of the cowboys who had been crushed beyond recognition by a stampeding herd on a stormy night. Yet there is practically no evidence of any of these cowboys shirking their responsibilities during a stampede. And it is doubtful that it was the dollar a day and grub that kept them to the mark. It was an important part of the cowboy code that they respond to stampedes instantly. Any cowboy who shirked his responsibility would be an instant outcast. There was a strong cowboy ethic that most adhered to: it called for being loyal, almost to a fault, and basically honest. "When the chips were down, you could count on them. What more can anyone say of a man."[5]

Wallace Stegner, the Pulitzer-winning author who grew up on the Saskatchewan-Montana border in the early twentieth century, had this to say about the cowboy code:

> They [cowboys] honored courage, competence, self-reliance, and they honored them tacitly. They took them for granted. It was their absence, not their presence, that was cause for remark. Practicing comradeship in a rough and dangerous job, they lived a life calculated to make a man careless of anything except the few things he really valued.[6]

As a small boy, Stegner would conjure visions of his life as a cowboy:

> I would be bowlegged and taciturn, with deep creases in my cheeks and a hide like stained saddle leather. I would be the quietest and most dangerous man around, best rider, best shot, the one who couldn't be buffaloed. Men twice my size, beginning some brag or other, would catch my cold eye and begin to wilt, and when I had stared them into impotence, I would turn my back contemptuous, hook onto my pony in one bowlegged arc, and ride off.[7]

At the same time, however, Stegner acknowledged the other, darker side of the cowboy character: "the prejudice, the callousness, the destructive practical joking, the tendency to judge everyone by the same raw standard."[8]

Other accounts of the period offer graphic evidence of the difficulties encountered in getting cattle from Texas to the Kansas cattle towns: great suffering from lack of water, death or injury from stampeding cattle, and, of course, the Native threat. The Comanches were not militarily defeated until 1875, a year after Johnson rode the Western Trail to Dodge City. James Cook, who was trailing cattle that same year through Dodge to Ogallala to sell to Maj. Frank North and Bill Cody, had many stories of Comanche raids in his classic account *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier*. Cook said that the Comanches were mainly intent on procuring guns and ammunition or running off the stock. Their favourite trick was to gallop through the cattle herd dragging a buffalo hide to make the cattle stampede. Cowboys got into the habit of not sleeping too near the campfire in case of ambush. "Occasionally some unfortunate stockrider would stop a bullet or an arrow. But that was part of the business."[9] One cowboy described a cattle stampede in very realistic terms: "The ones in front go like hell, plumb afraid of the ones behind are goin' to run them over, and the ones behind run like hell to keep up."[10]

Frederic Remington, *The Stampede* (1910). This was Remington's last sculpture. It brilliantly shows the rider's determination and control in the midst of chaos.

Cook, when reminiscing about cowboys up the Texas trails, added, "A large percentage of the boys I have known … were honest and true as steel to their employers…. The real cowboy would never desert a herd in order to protect himself from heavy weather. Many have gone to their deaths in blizzards, tornadoes and bad thunderstorms by staying with the herd."[11]

In 1874, fortunately for Johnson and his herd, the Comanches were rather preoccupied with what would be their last campaign against the whites. Not far to the west of the cattle trail to Dodge, the Battle of Adobe Walls took place on the Canadian River in June 1874, supposedly pitting twenty-eight buffalo hunters from Dodge against a huge party of Comanches.[12] Actually, as the fame of Adobe Walls spread, so did the disparity in numbers. Initial eyewitness reports calculated one hundred buffalo hunters and teamsters against two hundred Indians. Soon it became twenty-eight against five hundred and within a few years twenty-six against a thousand.[13] Though the hunters had no business being where they were – an area forbidden to white hunters by the Treaty of Medicine Lodge – the battle gave the army the necessary excuse to wage a protracted campaign against the Comanches led by one of the best Indian fighters in the business, Col. Ranald Mackenzie. By the fall of 1874 his bulldog methods had thoroughly demoralized the Comanches; they capitulated the following year. The real cause of Adobe Walls was the railroad, which split the northern and southern buffalo herds

and created a booming market in hides that led, by 1875, to the southern herd's extinction.

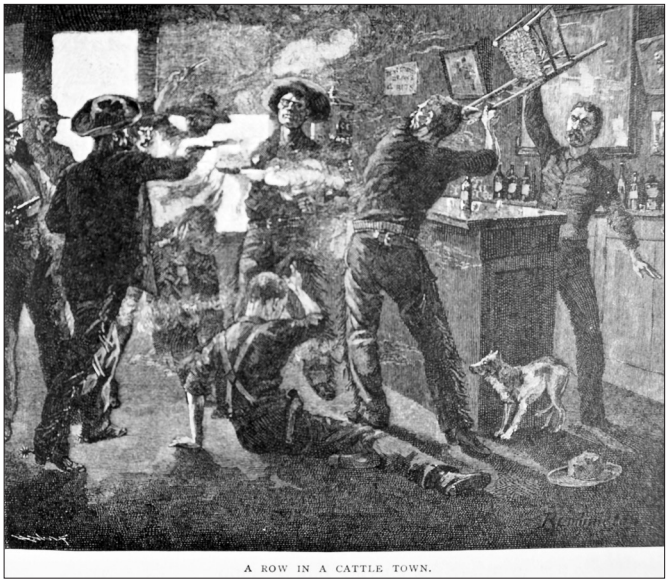
Johnson, until he reached Dodge, was probably unaware that this drama was taking place so near the trail to Dodge, though he may have learned at Fort Griffin that the Comanches were in open hostility. The trail that he was following was the new Western Trail, which was just starting to replace the famous Chisholm Trail to Wichita, Newton, and Abilene. These towns were in the process of shrivelling up and dying as settlers spread west into the region of the Chisholm Trail, and the cattle trail was forced to shift westward.

The new Western Trail originated west of San Antonio and then went more or less straight north to Dodge before veering somewhat to the west on its way to Ogallala. The first stop was Fort Griffin on the Clear Fork of the Brazos. Here federal troops looked on with seeming unconcern as buffalo hunters set out from the Flat, home to a typically haphazard frontier collection of dance hall girls, gunmen, prostitutes, and professional poker players. The buffalo hunters were not fazed by the fact that they were encroaching on territory guaranteed exclusively for Native hunting by the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge.[14]

After Fort Griffin, the trail crossed the Salt Fork of the Brazos, the Big Wichita, and the Pease, before arriving at Doan's Crossing on Red River. Here Corwin and Jonathan Doan built a store in 1874 to sell supplies to hunters and cowboys. Although they advanced credit to literally hundreds of cowboys over the years, according to J. Frank Dobie, they never lost a dime from their cowboy customers. Some would go several hundred miles out of their way to repay their loans.[15]

From Doan's Crossing, the trail led across two more forks of the Red and then across the Washita, very near the site where, in November 1868, Custer clinched his fame as an Indian fighter by attacking and slaughtering a band of peaceful Cheyennes. It continued across several forks of the Canadian and on to the Arkansas, where the ramshackle beginnings of Dodge City, five miles west of Fort Dodge on the old Santa Fe trail, clung to the north shore, in constant danger of being blown off across the treeless plains.

When Johnson reached Dodge, the cattle boom that would make the town so famous was still a few years away. Dodge would take off as a cattle town in 1876 with the building of cattle pens, replacing Wichita as the centre of the cattle trade and becoming the largest cattle market in the world – and the wildest town in the West – before its demise in 1885. But the extension of the Santa Fe line to Dodge in 1872 had already resulted in the beginnings of a "pitiful masquerade of false front buildings," as Owen Wister would later describe other such western towns. Dodge had begun as a camp

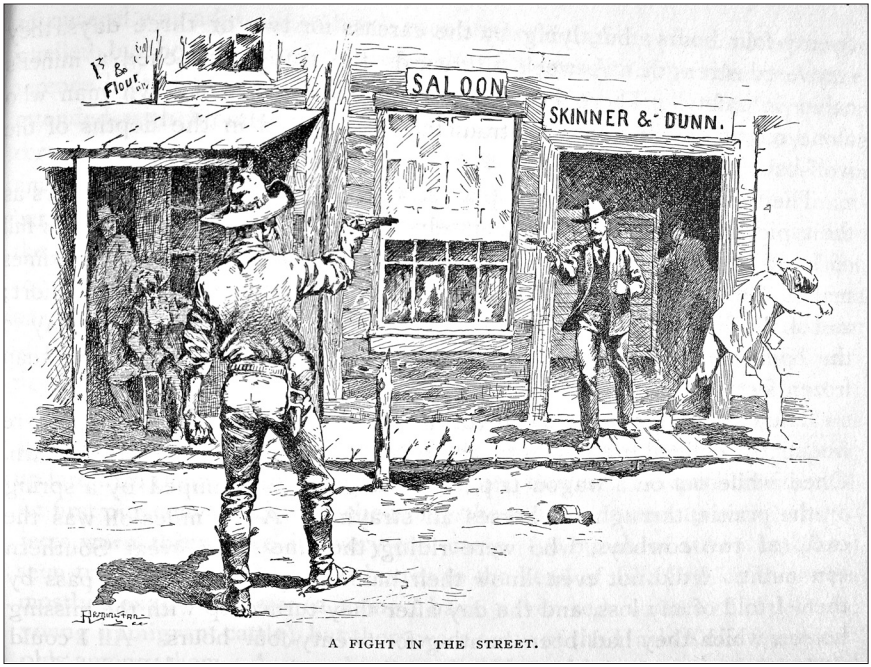


Remington's sketch "A Row in a Cattle Town" perfectly catches the result of mixing guns with alcohol along the cattle trails.

called Buffalo City, whose purpose was to sell liquor to the soldiers at neighbouring Fort Dodge. When the railroad arrived in 1872, it was renamed. By 1874, Dodge was a booming hide depot for the buffalo trade, which shipped several hundred thousand hides annually from 1872 to 1874.[16] In the first three months of its existence alone, Dodge shipped out 43,029 hides and 1.4 million pounds of buffalo meat. That first winter, more than a hundred buffalo hunters froze to death out on the plains. As Johnson approached Dodge, the entire countryside was littered with thousands of buffalo hides staked out to dry and rows of bone ricks randomly constructed along the tracks. Hides sold for two to four dollars, bones for fourteen dollars a ton.

In 1874, Dodge had a somewhat haphazard air, as thousands of buffalo hunters, freighters, and railway navvies erected tents or hastily built quarters and jostled with the soldiers from the nearby fort for elbow room at the mushrooming saloons. There was, of course, no government or law. Dodge had no official marshal until 1876. When Johnson was in Dodge, Billy Brooks was acting in that capacity unofficially, but that year an irate buffalo hunter ran him out of town.[17]

The closest thing to law in Dodge in 1874 was a vigilante committee, which, according to Col. Richard Dodge, the commandant at Fort Dodge, was composed of the worst element in the town. The year before, this group had dragged one of his Black soldiers out in the street and cold-bloodedly



Frederic Remington, "A Fight in the Street" *Century*, October 1888. The saloon was the American West's most popular killing ground; a number of sheriffs met their death in attempting to defuse the effects of liquor and bravado.

murdered him. Col. Dodge could do nothing; Dodge City was out of his jurisdiction and the nearest civilian law was in Hays City.[18] He was not allowed to interfere with civil matters, on pain of losing his commission.

Despite the escalation in the supposed number killed in Dodge as the legend grew, there is no question that Dodge, when Johnson passed through it in 1874, was a wide-open town; the Boot Hill Cemetery was starting to do a creditable business.[19] There is no proper record of clients buried there. Most were unceremoniously deposited in unmarked graves. Yet, despite the large amounts of money floating around Dodge in those early days – there were no banks yet – crimes of property were very rare. There was an odd double standard at work; property was sacred, especially if it was a horse, but life was not. And women, even prostitutes, were much safer than they would have been in many eastern cities. The violence was almost exclusively between men, and it was usually triggered by drink.[20]

There were as yet no Wyatt Earp or Masterson brothers, or "Doc" Holliday and his prostitute inamorata, Big Nose Kate, to oversee Dodge's virtue.

But the town was beginning to stir. By the time the railroad arrived, Dodge boasted a general store, three dance halls, and six saloons,[21] and the usual collection of urban parasites was drifting in to take advantage of the buffalo trade. And, although an ordinance went into effect early in 1874 prohibiting concealed weapons in Dodge City, it was obeyed about as assiduously as the one prohibiting gambling and frequenting prostitutes.[22] Virtually everyone in Dodge, south of the "dead line" that marked the limits of law enforcement, went about armed to the teeth.

A killing in the south end of Dodge was treated in the most casual way; it was not considered murder if both men were armed, due warning was given, and the loser was shot in the front. People usually expressed concern only if property was destroyed. Southern cowboys, for whom the "Lost Cause" was still a living issue, created most of the violence. Their greatest ambition was to "tree" a northerner or to make life miserable for a northern lawman.[23] Add liquor and violence would almost inevitably follow.

But Johnson had no special adventures while in Dodge, or at least none that he wanted recorded for posterity. Undoubtedly, he made a stop at the Long Branch Saloon on Front Street, which was established the year before by Ford County's first sheriff and later became one of the most famous watering holes in the West. After the cattle were delivered, he drew his pay and headed for home.