

= Johnson County War =

The Johnson County War , also known as the War on Powder River and the Wyoming Range War , was a series of range conflicts that took place in Johnson , Wyoming between 1889 and 1893 . The conflicts started when cattle companies ruthlessly persecuted supposed rustlers throughout the grazing lands of Wyoming . As tensions swelled between the large established ranchers and the smaller settlers in the state , violence finally culminated in Powder River Country , when the ranchers hired armed gunmen to invade the county and wipe out of scare off the competition , that is , the settlers . When word came out of the gunmen 's initial incursion in the territory , the small farmers and ranchers , as well as the state lawmen , formed a posse of 200 men to fight them , which led to a grueling stand @-@ off . The war ended when the United States Cavalry , on the orders of President Benjamin Harrison , relieved the two forces .

The events have since become a highly mythologized and symbolic story of the Wild West , and over the years variations of the storyline have come to include some of its most famous historical figures . In addition to being one of the most well @-@ known range wars of the American frontier , its themes , especially the theme of class warfare , have served as a basis for numerous popular novels , films , and television shows of the Western genre .

= = Background = =

Conflict over land was a common occurrence in the development of the American West , but was particularly prevalent during the late 19th century , when large portions of the West were being settled by white Americans for the first time through the homesteading act . It is a period which historian Richard Maxwell Brown has called the " Western Civil War of Incorporation , " of which the Johnson County War was a part .

In the early days of Wyoming most of the land was in public domain , which was open to stock raising as an open range and farmlands for homesteading . Large numbers of cattle were turned loose on the open range by large ranches . Each spring , round @-@ ups were held to separate the cattle belonging to different ranches . Before a roundup , an orphan or stray calf was sometimes surreptitiously branded , which was the common way to identify the cow 's owners . Lands and water rights were usually distributed to whoever settled the property first , and farmers and ranchers had to respect these boundaries ( the doctrine was known as Prior Appropriation ) . However , as more and more homesteaders moved into Wyoming , competition for land and water soon enveloped the state , and the cattle companies reacted by monopolizing large areas of the open range to prevent newcomers from using it . They also forbade their employees from owning cattle in fear of them becoming additional competition , and lynched and otherwise threatened anyone they suspected might be rustlers .

The often uneasy relationship between the larger , wealthier ranches and smaller ranch settlers became steadily worse after the harsh winter of 1886 @-@ 1887 , when a series of blizzards and temperatures of 40 @-@ 50 degrees below 0 ° F ( -45 ° C ) followed by an extremely hot and dry summer , ravaged the frontier . Thousands of cattle were lost and the large companies began appropriating land and the water supply in the area . Some of the harsher tactics included forcing settlers off their land , setting fire to their properties , and excluding them from participating in the annual roundup . They justified these excesses on what was public land by using the catch @-@ all allegation of rustling . Hostilities worsened when the Wyoming legislature passed the " Maverick Act , " which stated that all unbranded cattle in the open range automatically belonged to the cattlemen 's association . The cattlemen also held a firm grip on Wyoming 's stock interests by limiting the number of small ranchers that could participate .

= = = Wyoming Stock Growers Association = = =

Many of the large ranching outfits in Wyoming were organized as the Wyoming Stock Growers Association ( the WSGA ) and gathered socially as the Cheyenne Club in Cheyenne , Wyoming .

Comprising some of the state 's wealthiest and most influential residents , the organization held a great deal of political sway in the state and region . The WSGA organized the cattle industry by scheduling roundups and cattle shipments . The WSGA also employed an agency of detectives to investigate cases of cattle theft from its members ' holdings .

Rustling in the local area was likely increasing due to the harsh grazing conditions , and the illegal exploits of organized groups of rustlers were becoming well publicized in the late 1880s . Well @-@ armed outfits of horse and cattle rustlers roamed across various portions of Wyoming and Montana , with Montana vigilantes such as the infamous Stuart 's Stranglers declaring " War on the Rustlers " in 1884 . Bandits taking refuge in the infamous hideout known as the Hole in the Wall were also preying upon the herds . Frank M. Canton , Sheriff of Johnson County in the early 1880s and better known as a detective for the WSGA , was a prominent figure in eliminating these criminals from Wyoming . Before the events in Johnson County , Canton had already developed a reputation as a lethal gunman . At a young age he had worked as a cowboy in Texas , and in 1871 started a career in robbery and cattle @-@ rustling , as well as killing a Buffalo Soldier in October 10 , 1874 . Historian Harry Sinclair Drago described Canton as a " merciless , congenital , emotionless killer . For pay , he murdered eight ? very likely ten ? men . "

= = = Early killings = = =

On July 20 , 1889 , a range detective from the Association named George Henderson accused Ella Watson , a local rancher , of stealing cattle from a fellow rancher by the name of Albert John Bothwell . The cattlemen sent riders to arrest Ella and forced her into a wagon . They then apprehended her husband , Jim Averell , and subsequently hanged them both from a tree . This gruesome act was one of the rare cases in the old West in which a woman was lynched , an event which appalled many of the local residents and paved the way for the conflicts in the war . County Sheriff Frank Hadsell arrested six men for the lynching and a trial date was set . However , before the trial , threats were sent to the witnesses who would testify against the aggressors . One of those witnesses was young Gene Crowder , who mysteriously disappeared under unknown circumstances . Another , Jim 's nephew and foreman Frank Buchanan , after a shoot @-@ out with unknown suspects , disappeared from the county as well , and was presumed to have been murdered or to be in hiding . Ralph Cole , another nephew of Averell 's , died on the day of the trial from poisoning .

The men working for the cattle barons weren 't safe from the locals they had enraged . George Henderson , who had pinned Ella Watson , was murdered by rustlers near Sweetwater Creek in October 1890 , an obvious challenge to the Association . The cattle barons soon tightened their control and hunted down anyone who opposed them . Soon , the double lynching of the Averells was followed by the lynching of Tom Waggoner , a horse trader from Newcastle , in June 1891 . These killings would precipitate more hostilities and violence in the years to come .

= = War = =

= = = Prelude = = =

After the lynchings of their prominent competitors , the WSGA 's control over the range was undisputed , until a group of smaller ranchers led by a local cowboy named Nate Champion formed the Northern Wyoming Farmers and Stock Growers ' Association ( NWFSGA ) to compete with the WSGA . Upon hearing this , the WSGA immediately viewed Champion 's association as a threat to their hold on the stock interests . The WSGA then blacklisted members of the NWFSGA from the round @-@ ups in order to stop their operations . However , the latter refused the orders to disband and instead publicly announced their plans to hold their own round @-@ up in the spring of 1892 .

Soon , the prominent cattlemen sent out an assassination squad to kill Nate Champion on the morning of November 1 , 1891 . Champion and another man named Ross Gilbertson were sleeping in a cabin in Middle Fork of Powder River , when two men armed with pistols burst in . Champion

was immediately awakened by the intrusion , and as the gunmen pointed their weapons at him , Champion reached for his own pistol hidden under a pillow and a shootout commenced . Champion successfully shot both gunmen ; one of them named Billy Lykins died a month later . The rest of the assassination squad subsequently fled . Champion was left uninjured except for some facial powder burns from the gunfight . In a subsequent investigation of the attack , one of the gunmen gave the names of two witnesses who had been involved : ranchers John A. Tisdale and Orley ? Ranger ? Jones . However , both men were assassinated on or about December 1 , 1891 , before the formal trial , outraging many of the small ranchers and farmers in the county . By early 1892 , violence had reached something of a peak ; newspapers , such as the Big Horn County Rustler , published articles and speculations that a " war " was on the way .

= = = Invaders = = =

The WSGA , led by Frank Wolcott ( WSGA Member and large North Platte rancher ) , hired gunmen with the intention of eliminating alleged rustlers in Johnson County and breaking up the NWFSGA . By that time , prominent names in Wyoming started taking sides . Acting Governor Amos W. Barber supported the cattlemen , who blamed the small ranchers and homesteaders for the criminal activity in the state , while former cowboy and sheriff of Buffalo ( the county seat of Johnson County ) , Red Angus , supported the homesteaders , who believed that the cattle barons were stealing their land .

In March 1892 , the cattlemen sent agents to Texas from Cheyenne and Idaho to recruit gunmen and finally carry out their plans for exterminating the homesteaders . Soon , 23 gunmen from Paris , Texas and 4 cattle detectives from the WSGA were hired , as well as Wyoming dignitaries who also joined the expedition . State Senator Bob Tisdale , state water commissioner W. J. Clarke , as well as W. C. Irvine and Hubert Teshemacher , who had both been instrumental in organizing Wyoming 's statehood four years earlier , also joined the band . They were accompanied by surgeon Dr. Charles Penrose as well as Ed Towse , a reporter for the Cheyenne Sun , and a newspaper reporter for the Chicago Herald , Sam T. Clover , whose lurid first @-@ hand accounts later appeared in eastern newspapers . A total expedition of 50 men was organized which consisted of cattlemen and range detectives , as well as the 23 hired guns from Texas . To lead the expedition , the WSGA hired Canton . Canton 's gripsack was later found to contain a list of 70 county residents to be either shot or hanged , and a contract to pay the Texans \$ 5 a day plus a bonus of \$ 50 for every rustler , real or alleged , they killed . The group became known as " The Invaders , " or alternately , " Wolcott 's Regulators . "

John Clay , a prominent Wyoming businessman , was suspected of playing a major role in planning the Johnson County invasion . Clay denied this , saying that in 1891 he advised Wolcott against the scheme and was out of the country when it was undertaken . He later helped the " invaders " avoid punishment after their surrender . The group organized in Cheyenne and proceeded by train to Casper , Wyoming and then toward Johnson County on horseback , cutting the telegraph lines north of Douglas , Wyoming in order to prevent an alarm . While on horseback , Canton and the gunmen traveled ahead while the party of WSGA officials led by Wolcott followed a safe distance behind .

= = = Battle of KC Ranch = = =

The first target of the WSGA was Nate Champion , who was at the KC Ranch ( also known as Kaycee ) at that time . They were tasked to perform the assassination that others had failed to carry out five months before . The group traveled to the ranch late Friday , April 8 , 1892 , quietly surrounded the buildings , and waited for daybreak . Three men besides Champion were at the KC . Two men who were evidently going to spend the night on their way through were captured as they emerged from the cabin early that morning to collect water at the nearby Powder River , while the third , Nick Ray , was shot while standing inside the doorway of the cabin and died a few hours later . Champion was besieged inside the log cabin .

Champion held out for several hours , killing at least four of the vigilantes , and wounding several others . During the siege , Champion kept a poignant journal which contained a number of notes he

wrote to friends while taking cover inside the cabin . " Boys , I feel pretty lonesome just now . I wish there was someone here with me so we could watch all sides at once , " he wrote . The last journal entry read : " Well , they have just got through shelling the house like hail . I heard them splitting wood . I guess they are going to fire the house tonight . I think I will make a break when night comes , if alive . Shooting again . It 's not night yet . The house is all fired . Goodbye , boys , if I never see you again . "

With the house on fire , Nate Champion signed his journal entry and put it in his pocket before running from the back door with a six shooter in one hand and a knife in the other . As he emerged , four men shot him dead . The killers pinned a note on Champion 's bullet @-@ riddled chest that read , " Cattle Thieves Beware . " Two passers @-@ by heard the ruckus that Saturday afternoon and local rancher Jack Flagg rode to Buffalo where he reported Champion 's death to the townsfolk . Sheriff Angus then raised a posse of 200 men over the next 24 hours and the party set out for the KC on Sunday night , April 10 .

= = = Standoff at the TA Ranch = = =

The WSGA group then headed north on Sunday toward Buffalo to continue its show of force . The posse led by Sheriff Angus , caught up with the WSGA " Invaders " by early Monday morning of the 11th and besieged them at the TA Ranch on Crazy Woman Creek . The gunmen took refuge inside a log barn on the ranch . The sheriff 's posse besieged them for two days , as constant fighting between the two raged on . Sheriff Angus threatened to either blow up the ranch with dynamite , or force his way in with an improvised battering ram , but was held back by rifle fire . 20 of the gunmen then tried to escape the barn behind a fusillade , but the posse beat them back and killed three to five . One of the WSGA group escaped and was able to contact Governor Barber the next day . Frantic efforts to save the WSGA group ensued and two days into the siege Governor Barber was able to telegraph President Benjamin Harrison a plea for help late on the night of April 12 , 1892 .

The telegram read :

Harrison immediately ordered the U.S. Secretary of War Stephen B. Elkins to address the situation under Article IV , Section 4 , Clause 2 of the U.S. Constitution , which allows for the use of U.S. forces under the President 's orders for " protection from invasion and domestic violence . " The Sixth Cavalry from Fort McKinney near Buffalo was ordered to proceed to the TA ranch at once and take the WSGA expedition into custody . The 6th Cavalry left Fort McKinney a few hours later at 2 am on April 13 and reached the TA ranch at 6 : 45 am . The expedition surrendered to the Sixth soon after and was saved just as the posse had finished building a series of breastworks to shoot gunpowder on the invader 's log barn shelter so that it could be set on fire from a distance . The Sixth Cavalry took possession of Wolcott and 45 other men with 45 rifles , 41 revolvers and some 5 @, @ 000 rounds of ammunition .

The text of Barber 's telegram to the President was printed on the front page of The New York Times on April 14 , and a first @-@ hand account of the siege at the T.A. appeared in The Times and the Chicago Herald and other papers . On May 10 , a Marshal named George Wellman , who had been appointed deputy U.S. Marshal by Marshall Rankin , was ambushed and killed by locals en route to the small community of Buffalo . The incident received national attention , with Wellman being the first Marshal to die in the war . His death was grieved by a large crowd , and his funeral service took place in St. Lukes Church , Buffalo .

= = Arrest and legal action = =

The WSGA group was taken to Cheyenne to be held at the barracks of Fort D.A. Russell as the Laramie County jail was unable to hold that many prisoners . They received preferential treatment and were allowed to roam the base by day as long as they agreed to return to the jail to sleep at night . Johnson County officials were upset that the group was not kept locally at Ft . McKinney . The general in charge of the 6th Cavalry felt that tensions were too high for the prisoners to remain in the area . Hundreds of armed locals sympathetic to both sides of the conflict were said to have

gone to Ft . McKinney over the next few days under the mistaken impression the invaders were being held there .

The Johnson County attorney began to gather evidence for the case and the details of the WSGA 's plan emerged . Canton 's gripsack was found to contain a list of seventy alleged rustlers who were to be shot or hanged , a list of ranch houses the invaders had burned , and a contract to pay each Texan five dollars a day plus a bonus of \$ 50 for each person killed . The invaders ' plans reportedly included eventually murdering people as far away as Casper and Douglas . The Times reported on April 23 that ? the evidence is said to implicate more than twenty prominent stockmen of Cheyenne whose names have not been mentioned heretofore , also several wealthy stockmen of Omaha , as well as to compromise men high in authority in the State of Wyoming . They will all be charged with aiding and abetting the invasion , and warrants will be issued for the arrest of all of them . ?

The Invaders however , were protected by a friendly judicial system , and they took advantage of the cattle barons ' corruption . Charges against the men " high in authority " in Wyoming were never filed . Eventually the invaders were released on bail and were told to return to Wyoming for the trial . Many fled to Texas and were never seen again . In the end , the WSGA group went free after the charges were dropped on the excuse that Johnson County refused to pay for the costs of prosecution . The costs of housing the men at Fort D.A. Russell were said to exceed \$ 18 @, @ 000 and the sparsely populated Johnson County was unable to pay .

Tensions in Johnson County remained high . The 6th Cavalry was said to be influenced by intense local political and social pressure , and they were unable to keep the peace . The 9th Cavalry of " Buffalo Soldiers " was ordered to Fort McKinney to replace the 6th . In a fortnight the Buffalo Soldiers moved from Nebraska to the rail town of Suggs , Wyoming where they created " Camp Bettens " to quell the local population . One Buffalo Soldier was killed and two wounded in gun battles with locals . The 9th Cavalry remained in Wyoming until November , 1892 .

= = = Final killings = = =

In the fall of 1892 , as the aftershock of the stand @-@ off was still being felt throughout the county , two alleged horse rustlers were gunned down by range detectives east of the Big Horn River . The killers escaped the law with assistance from Otto Franc , a rancher who had sided with the large cattle company faction . In May 24 , 1893 , Nate Champion 's brother , Dudley Champion , came to Wyoming looking for work before he was shot and killed in cold blood . Fifteen miles from town , Dudley had come across the ranch of Mike Shonsey , who , after seeing the young man , immediately grabbed a gun and fired at him . A coroner 's inquiry ruled Shonsey 's actions were self @-@ defense and he was acquitted of murder . Afterwards , Shonsey left the country before the officials could continue with the investigation . A year before , Shonsey actually met Nate Champion near the Beaver Creek Canyon , where a fight almost commenced between the two as Nate suspected that Shonsey was one of the five men who had attacked him in his cabin . He further threatened Shonsey and demanded he give up the names of the rest of the assassins . This event made Shonsey harbor hatred toward Nate and probably toward his brother Dudley as well . Dudley Champion was the last person killed who was associated with the Johnson County War .

= = Aftermath = =

Emotions ran high for many years following the " Johnson County Cattle War . " Some considered the large and wealthy ranchers as heroes who had sought what they regarded as justice by using violence to defend what they regarded as their rights to range = land and water rights , while others saw the WSGA as heavy @-@ handed outlaw vigilantes running roughshod over the law . A number of tall tales were spun by both sides afterwards in an attempt to make their actions appear morally justified . Parties sympathetic to the invaders painted Nate Champion as the leader of a vast cattle rustling empire , claiming that he was a leading member of the fabled " Red Sash Gang " of outlaws that supposedly included the likes of the Jesse James gang . These claims have since been discredited , however . While some accounts do note that Champion wore a red sash at the time of

his death , such sashes were common . While the Hole in the Wall Gang was known to hide out in Johnson County , there is no evidence that Champion had any relationship to them . Parties sympathetic to the smaller ranchers spun tales that included some of the West 's most notorious gunslingers under the employ of the Invaders , including such legends as Tom Horn and Big Nose George Parrot . Horn did briefly work as a detective for the WSGA in the 1890s , but there is little evidence he was involved in the war .

= = = Political effects = = =

Although many of the leaders of the WSGA 's hired force , such as W. C. Irvine , were Democrats , the ranchers who had hired the group were tied to the Republican party and their opponents were mostly Democrats . Many viewed the rescue of the WSGA group at the order of President Harrison ( a Republican ) and the failure of the courts to prosecute them a serious political scandal with overtones of class war . As a result of the scandal , the Democratic Party became popular in Wyoming for a time , winning the governorship in 1892 and taking control of both houses of the state legislature in that election . Wyoming voted for the Democrat William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 U.S. Presidential Election , and Johnson County was one of the two counties in the state with the largest Bryan majorities .

= = = Economic analysis = = =

Historian Daniel Belgrad argues that in the 1880s centralized range management was emerging as the solution to the overgrazing that had depleted open ranges . Moreover , cattle prices at the time were low . Larger ranchers also were hurt by mavericking ( taking lost , unbranded calves from other ranchers ' herds ) , and responded by organizing cooperative roundups , blacklisting , and lobbying for stricter anti @-@ maverick laws . These ranchers formed the WSGA and hired gunmen to hunt down rustlers , but local farmers resented the ranchers ' collective political power . The farmers moved toward decentralization and the use of private winter pastures . Randy McFerrin and Douglas Wills argue that the confrontation represented opposing property rights systems . The result was the end of the open @-@ range system and the ascendancy of large @-@ scale stock ranching and farming . The popular image of the war , however , remains that of vigilantism by aggressive landed interests against small individual settlers defending their rights . The end of the Johnson County War also marked the end of the open range in Wyoming . By 1893 , the WSGA was finally opened to the other small ranchers and farmers , finally ending their monopoly and control over Wyoming business interests .

= = Legacy = =

The Johnson County War , with its overtones of class warfare coupled with the intervention ordered by the President of the United States to save the lives of a gang of hired killers and set them free , is not a flattering reflection on the American myth of the west . The Johnson County War has been one of the best @-@ known range wars of the frontier . It has been a popular feature of the Western genre of fiction , which includes literature , films and television shows . The Banditti of the Plains , written in 1894 by witness Asa Shinn Mercer , is the earliest record of the Johnson County War . The book was suppressed for many years by the WSGA , who seized and destroyed all but a few of the first edition copies from the 1894 printing ; they were rumored to have hijacked and destroyed the second printing as it was being shipped from a printer north of Denver , Colorado . The book was reprinted several times in the 20th century and most recently in 2015 . Frances McElrath 's novel 1902 The Rustler , took inspiration from the Johnson County War , and was sympathetic to the perspective of the small ranchers .

The Virginian , a seminal 1902 western novel by Owen Wister , took the side of the wealthy ranchers , creating a myth of the Johnson County War , but bore little resemblance to a factual account the actual characters and events . Jack Schaefer 's popular 1949 novel Shane treated

themes associated with the Johnson County War and took the side of the settlers . The 1953 film *The Redhead from Wyoming* , starring Maureen O 'Hara , dealt with similar themes ; in one scene Maureen O 'Hara 's character is told , " It won 't be long before they 're calling you Cattle Kate . " In the 1968 novel *True Grit* by Charles Portis , the main character , Rooster Cogburn , was involved in the Johnson County War . In the early 1890s Rooster had gone north to Wyoming where he was " hired by stock owners to terrorize thieves and people called nesters and grangers ... . I fear that Rooster did himself no credit in what they called the Johnson County War . "

Films such as *Heaven 's Gate* and *The Johnson County War* painted the wealthy ranchers as the " bad guys . " *Heaven 's Gate* was a dramatic romance loosely based on historical events , while *The Johnson County War* was based on the 1957 novel *Riders of Judgment* by Frederick Manfred . The range war was also portrayed in an episode of Jim Davis 's syndicated western television series *Stories of the Century* , with Henry Brandon as Nate Champion and Jean Parker as Ella Watson . American Heroes Channel presented the Johnson County War in the 6th episode of their *Blood Feuds* series documentary .

The story of the Johnson County War from the point of view of the small ranchers was chronicled by Kaycee resident Chris LeDoux in his song " Johnson County War " on the 1989 album *Powder River* . The song included references to the burning of the KC Ranch , the capture of the WSGA men , the intervention of the U.S. Cavalry and the release of the cattlemen and hired guns . The Jim Gatchell Memorial Museum in Buffalo featured dioramas and exhibits about the Johnson County War , as well as a 7 @-@ foot ( 2 @.@ 1 m ) bronze statue of Nate Champion . Kaycee , Wyoming , the old site of the KC Ranch , also erected the Hoofprints in the Past Museum to commemorate the war .