

JOE ELLIOTT, HIS SHARPS RIFLE, AND “THE” JOHNSON COUNTY, WYOMING WARS

by David Carter



This is a factual story of a man, Joe Elliott (Figure 1), the owner of a full dress Sharps rifle totally customized by the Freund Bros. in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and what occurred in the 1890s called “The Johnson County War”.¹ Also known as the “War on Powder River”.²



Figure 1. Early picture of Joe Elliott.³

The “War” was actually the culmination of a range war between large cattle ranchers and homesteaders in northern Wyoming in April 1892. Johnson County is located in northwestern Wyoming; Buffalo is the county seat. The area was ideal for raising cattle until the winter of 1886-87 when large numbers of cattle died and many cowboys became homesteaders with small herds of cattle to survive. As a result, the large ranchers used their influence to pass a “Maverick Law” which made it illegal to brand a “loose” maverick (orphan calf) unaccompanied by a branded cow. This did NOT stop the illegal branding of mavericks by rustlers and homesteaders.

Eastern Wyoming, 1891-92

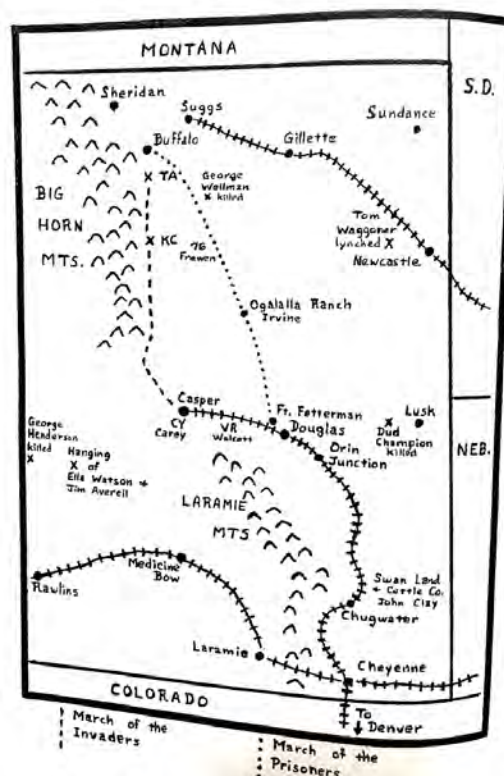


Figure 2. Map of eastern Wyoming, Buffalo is located in the upper left corner with the path taken by the invaders and subsequent prisoners indicated.⁴

Prior to 1892 large ranchers took justice into their own hands, but the “problem” had gotten out of hand and the power players of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (WSGA) decided to rid themselves of all the individuals who threatened their prosperity. The plan was to use hired, armed individuals to kill or drive the “rustlers” from the state. These invaders were generally hired guns from out of state, mostly Texas and Idaho. The plan was to take the train from Cheyenne to Casper, Wyoming. They would then continue by wagon and horseback to the Court House in Buffalo,

confiscate the available firearms and ammunition and go about dispensing “severe treatment” to those on a “death list” compiled by the cattlemen. The death list may have had as many as 70 names. Supported by powerful politicians the cattlemen believed that the public would support them and rise up to help rid the county of these troublemakers. The hired guns were told they would be serving warrants to known rustlers and dangerous outlaws.



Nate Champion, who ran a small herd of cattle in the Hole-in-the-Wall country, was murdered by the invaders of Johnson County April 9, 1892. Courtesy Jim Gatchell Memorial Museum.

Figure 3. Nate Champion.⁵

On April 5, 1892 a large party, including ranchers, ranch superintendents, foremen of six large eastern Wyoming ranches, five stock detectives, 23 gunfighters along with WSGA Commander Major Frank Wolcott, reporters from the Chicago Herald and the Cheyenne Sun and a surgeon, left Cheyenne and arrived in Casper on April 6th. They then set out with wagons and supplies, arriving at the Tisdale ranch, south of Buffalo that afternoon (Figure 2). It was here that the invaders were told that 14 rustlers were at the KC Ranch, about 18 miles north. They then amended their plan and rode to the KC Ranch. This would prove to be a costly error.

When they arrived at the KC Ranch they discovered only four individuals, two innocent trappers, Nate Champion (Figure 3) and Rueben Ray. The trappers were let go and a siege ended with the killing of Champion and Ray. Nate Champion was a well-known person in the Buffalo area, well respected AND he had testified against Joe Elliott in Court. He was so well liked that there is a brass monument to him in Buffalo, with his diary entries of the last days before he died (Figure 4). During the siege Jack Flagg, a suspected rustler, and his stepson stumbled upon the scene, but escaped after being chased by the gunmen. Flagg then warned the people of Buffalo that armed men were hunting rustlers and small ranchers.

INSPECTION REPORT OF COMPONENT PARTS and Appendages for ²⁰⁰ ~~200~~ ²⁰⁰ ARMY PISTOLS. ²⁰⁰ ~~200~~ ²⁰⁰
 Manufactured at Hartford Conn. under Gait's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company's Patent from the United States Ordnance Department, dated July 26-1870.

DISHING THE ¹⁸ DATE RECORDED ^{June 25 9} 1892

Serial Number	Caliber	Make	Model	Serial Number	Caliber	Make	Model
1000	20	A	1	1000	20	A	1
1001	20	A	1	1001	20	A	1
1002	20	A	1	1002	20	A	1
1003	20	A	1	1003	20	A	1
1004	20	A	1	1004	20	A	1
1005	20	A	1	1005	20	A	1
1006	20	A	1	1006	20	A	1
1007	20	A	1	1007	20	A	1
1008	20	A	1	1008	20	A	1
1009	20	A	1	1009	20	A	1
1010	20	A	1	1010	20	A	1
1011	20	A	1	1011	20	A	1
1012	20	A	1	1012	20	A	1
1013	20	A	1	1013	20	A	1
1014	20	A	1	1014	20	A	1
1015	20	A	1	1015	20	A	1
1016	20	A	1	1016	20	A	1
1017	20	A	1	1017	20	A	1
1018	20	A	1	1018	20	A	1
1019	20	A	1	1019	20	A	1
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1024	20	A	1	1024	20	A	1
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1026	20	A	1	1026	20	A	1
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1035	20	A	1	1035	20	A	1
1036	20	A	1	1036	20	A	1
1037	20	A	1	1037	20	A	1
1038	20	A	1	1038	20	A	1
1039	20	A	1	1039	20	A	1
1040	20	A	1	1040	20	A	1

1 CERTIFY that the parts and appendages above referred to have been carefully inspected and that the serial numbers are correct and that the same have been examined, packed, and registered.

A. P. Casey
 INSPECTOR

Figure 4. Brass plaque in Buffalo, Wyoming in honor of Nate Champion inscribed with his diary entry from the last days of his life. From the web site of the Gatchell County Memorial Museum, Buffalo, Wyoming.

Since the invaders were within 10 miles of Buffalo a fellow cattleman James Craig warned them that the townsfolk did not believe they were after rustlers, but innocent ranchers. The invaders retreated to the TA Ranch, 13 miles south of Buffalo. The following day the sheriff of Buffalo and several small ranchers surrounded the ranch, joined by dozens of people from town, and lay siege to the ranch house. The standoff lasted two days. The sheriff and his posse were ready to burn the ranch house and “deal” with the invaders when on April 13th Troops of company C, D and H of the 6th Cavalry under Major Fechet from Fort McKinney, outside of Buffalo arrived and accepted the surrender of the invaders. Word had gotten out that the invaders were going to be killed and powerful friends, both U.S. Senators and the acting Governor, convinced the President, Benjamin Harrison, to declare a “State of Insurrection” whereupon he ordered the troops from Fort McKinney at Buffalo to intervene and “rescue/arrest” the invaders. Charges were brought against most of those participating, but in the end, NONE of the invaders were convicted. A group picture of the invaders taken at Fort D.A. Russell, Laramie, Wyoming is presented in Figure 5.

Joe Elliott in the 1880s

Prior to the invasion, there had been a series of violent acts engineered by the Wyoming cattle barons, including the double lynching of Ellen Liddy (called Cattle Kate) and Jim Averill in 1889 and the attempted murder of Nate Champion. Joe Elliott had been tried for the murder (lynching) of Tom Waggoner, suspected of rustling, along with other instances of violence. Joe Elliott always seemed to be near or involved in these acts, however he was always found not guilty.

At the time of the arrest and transport of the invaders to Fort McKinney, all firearms were confiscated and a list made by Major Wolcott of each participant, his weapon by make, model, caliber and serial number was rendered. This list was given to the Army. The invaders were later transferred to Laramie City by train, but on the way to the train, a bunch of the “rustler” homesteaders and towns people blocked the road and confronted the soldiers, with plans of their own. The cavalry did not like the invaders and had little sympathy for them. However, upon a show of force of 300



Figure 5. A posed picture of those “arrested” by the Cavalry taken at Fort D.A. Russell, Laramie, Wyoming in May 1892, including Joe Elliott and Major Wolcott.⁶

“ready arms” the column continued to Laramie City. Tried, and found not guilty, NONE of the invaders were ever punished.

Now we come to why I’m giving this presentation. On the Wolcott inventory, Joe Elliott, the head detective of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, had an 1874 Sharps rifle, caliber .40 2 1/2” shell with a serial number 162453 (Figure 6). I have owned

this rifle for over 45 years and purchased it because the seller said there was NO history associated with the fancy custom fully engraved Freund modified Sharps. That is until Wolcott’s inventory became known to me.

Joe Elliott was born in Leroy, Dodge County, Wisconsin May 2, 1860. After his family moved to Nebraska Joe drifted from job



Figure 6. 1874 “Full Dress” custom, engraved, modified Freund Sharps rifle serial # 162453, .40 Caliber, 2 1/2” shell. Frank and George Freund were premier gunsmiths in Cheyenne, Wyoming when this gun was completely customized. A fabulous firearm that would only have been owned and used by someone who both had a need and the funds to purchase same. The rifle shows some use, but no abuse, which means a serious gun owner and user. Composite image by Ron Paxton.

to job including working for the South Dakota Stock Growers Association. During this time he witnessed several lynchings, most of which were over horse or cattle thefts. This seemed to have a lasting impact on his future behavior. Joe was also known as a marksman. In Wyoming, he worked for several ranches and ended up as a foreman. This qualified him to be the districts general roundup boss. All the ranches in an area using free range, ran their cattle together and then in the late summer combine forces to bring in the cattle. As foreman he had about 300 men under him and would round up as many as 12,000 head in a day, branding 20,000 orphan calves. The unbranded calves were sold to the participating ranchers each day before the roundup and branded with their respective brand. Thus, there was no way for the smaller ranchers to be involved or to even get their own calves back. This led to Joe going to work for the WSGA as a range detective and eventually being the head detective. A side note: Joe hired Tom Horn as apprentice detective, although Horn was NOT involved with the invaders or the invasion. An image of Joe Elliott later in life is presented in Figure 7.

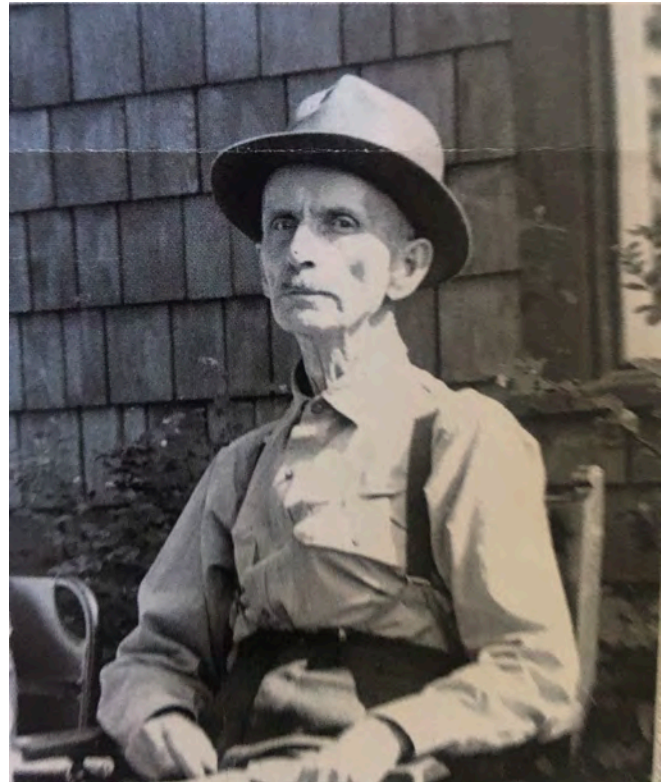


Figure 7. Joe Elliott much later in later in life. He had been a ruthless Range Detective.

Endnotes

- ¹ O'Neal, Bill. *The Johnson County War*. Eakin Press, Ft. Worth, TX. 2004, 296 pages.
- ² Smith, Helena Huntington. *The War on Powder River*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE. 1966, 320 pages.
- ³ O'Neal, op. cit., p. 79.
- ⁴ O'Neal, op. cit., p. 68.
- ⁵ O'Neal, op. cit., p. 71.
- ⁶ O'Neal, op. cit., p. 196.

