William A. Richards Gets Started in Wyoming Politics

1886-1888

Lucia McCreery

Red Bank Press

WilliamARichards.com

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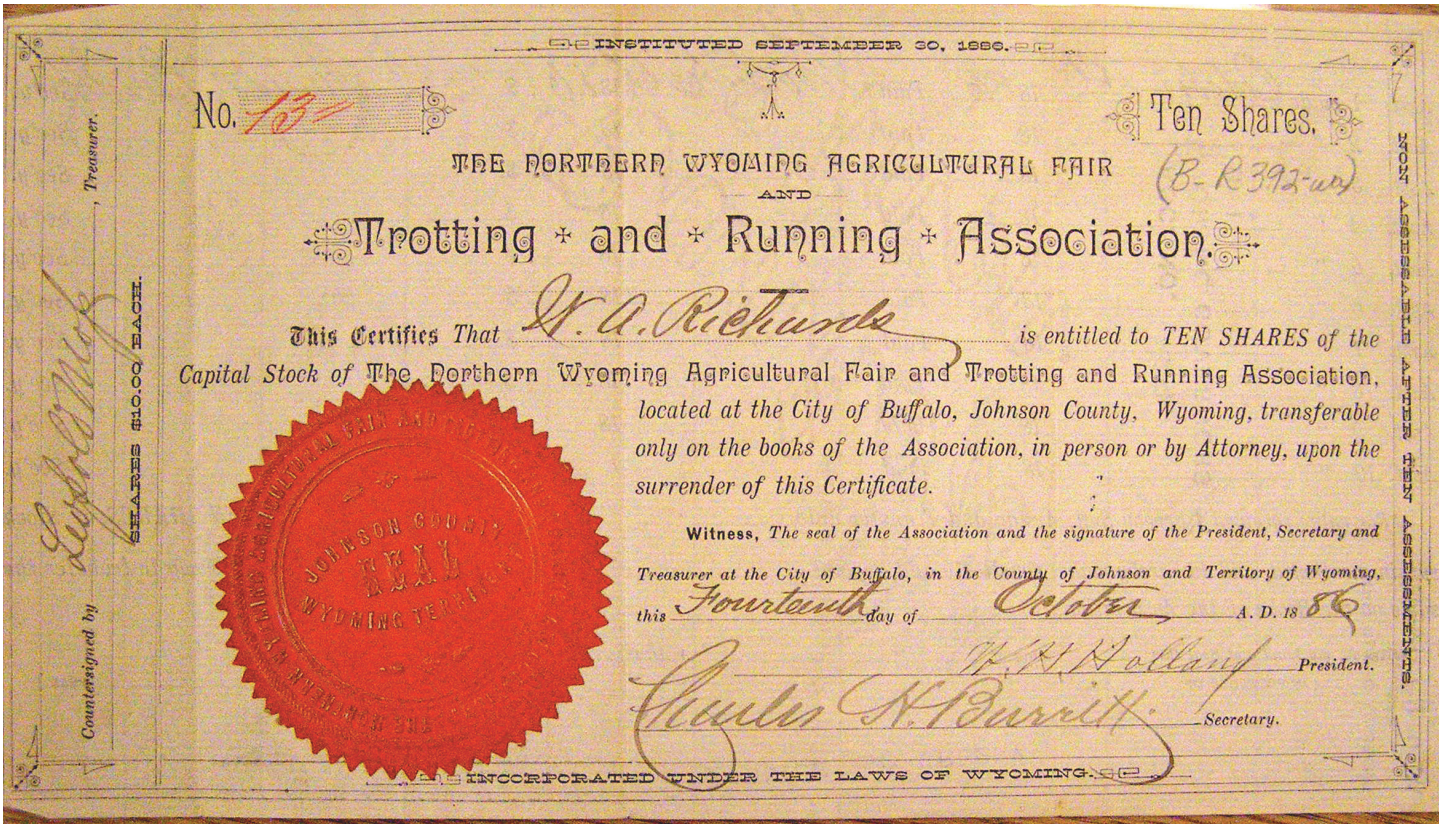
When Harriet Richards learned that her husband was running for Johnson County Commissioner, the news was less important to her than the prospect of a longer separation. She and his daughters had lived in Colorado or California for much of 1884 and 1885 while he was establishing a homestead and irrigation project in Wyoming. She wrote him from California on September 14, 1886,[1]

> Am disappointed a little that you think now it will be necessary for you to stay there till middle of January, but if that is best, so of course.... Am glad there is a good prospect of your being elected commissioner. You may be sent to the legislature yet. Anything like that, that doesn't interfere with your present work & will help toward paying expenses is a good thing. It is true that many are much worse off than we, but there are enough unpleasant things about our separation to suit me, and I shall be very, very glad when I can be with my own loving husband again.

Some of their friends thought Richards had a future in politics. The following week she told him, "People think you are bound to be in office, when I tell them you expect to be Co. Commissioner." Just before the November election, she passed along a sharp query from one of their Omaha friends. "Why did you bury your talents and ability, with the best years of your lives, in the middle of Wyoming, when, if you came to Omaha, you might be a senator from Neb. in time."[2]

No record survives of Will's response, nor of any regrets he might have had about leaving Omaha—or California or Colorado, for that matter. It might have been possible to go back, but to where, and to what? He was happy with his Red Bank ranch claim near the stream then called No Wood creek, and he couldn't very well abandon his commitment to the Big Horn Ditch company. If he harbored political ambitions, they could only have been encouraged by this auspicious entry into county politics.


INSTITUTED SEPTEMBER 30, 1886.

No. 131 Ten Shares.

THE NORTHERN WYOMING AGRICULTURAL FAIR AND Trotting * and * Running * Association.

(B-R 392-un)

This Certifies That W. A. Richards is entitled to TEN SHARES of the Capital Stock of The Northern Wyoming Agricultural Fair and Trotting and Running Association, located at the City of Buffalo, Johnson County, Wyoming, transferable only on the books of the Association, in person or by Attorney, upon the surrender of this Certificate.

Witness, The seal of the Association and the signature of the President, Secretary and Treasurer at the City of Buffalo, in the County of Johnson and Territory of Wyoming, this Fourteenth day of October A. D. 18 86

W. H. H. Hollaway President.

Charles N. Burritt Secretary.

INCORPORATED UNDER THE LAWS OF WYOMING.

JOHNSON COUNTY WYOMING TERRITORY

Countersigned by Lothrop Mack, Treasurer.

SHARES $100 EACH.

NON ASSESSABLE AFTER TEN ASSESSMENTS.

Note on back in Richards's hand says "This was my beginning in politics in Wyoming."
William A. Richards Family Papers, American Heritage Center[3]

The Nowood country was part of a sprawling county whose boundaries did not make sense. The Bighorn* Mountains, 13,167 feet high at Cloud Peak, separated one side of Johnson County from the other. The Bighorn Basin was divided between Johnson and Fremont counties, with a bit of it in Sheridan County. Residents of any part the basin had to cross a mountain range to get to their county seat. For Johnson County that was Buffalo, on the eastern side of the Bighorns. Since most of the county's population lived on that side, all of the county officers had come from there. But the growing number of settlers in the basin thought it was time they were represented.

Was newcomer William A. Richards their man? He was well known on both flanks of the Bighorns, which had not stood in the way of his becoming involved in county affairs. By his own account, he got his start in Wyoming politics in 1886 by serving on the board of directors of the Northern Wyoming Agricultural Fair and Trotting and Running Association, incorporated by Buffalo businessmen the year before. He also served as treasurer of School District No. 11.[1] While in the area he roughed it out of habit and, most likely, to conserve precious cash. His wife inquired on October 1, 1886,

> You must be pretty well acquainted in Buffalo by this time, and have you met any nice ladies there. Wouldn't you like to be invited out to a fine dinner in a private house once more, or are you suited with camp cooking entirely?

It was now two years since Will first explored the Nowood country and began doing surveys for local settlers. By 1886 he would have known everyone in the district. He must have impressed them with his ability and moxie, since this rock-ribbed Republican was endorsed by the Democrats as well as his own party. The Democratic paper of Buffalo, the *Echo*, reported in October,[2]

> A petition signed by 122 voters of the Big Horn Basin was presented to Mr. W. A. Richards of that side of the range asking that he consent to become a candidate for county commissioner. Recognizing the claims of the settlers on that side of the range for representation on the board of county commissioners, and the almost unanimous desire that Mr. Richards be their representative, the democratic convention endorsed him and democrats will give him their support at the polls in November.

The unknown activist may have gone to some trouble to rustle up signatures from the widely scattered ranches in the basin side of the county. Or the petition may have been circulated at a dance attended by the entire district, with Richards himself present (see p. 9).

If elected, he would be the first citizen from the basin to serve on the county's three-member board of commissioners, which acted as managers and adjudicators. It was a lot to ask of anyone from this district. He would have to put aside his own concerns and cross the high mountains to attend meetings. These were usually held monthly and sometimes went on for several weeks. Since members were paid for days served and for mileage traveled, the position was a welcome source of income. But the mileage did not include a bonus for making it over the mountains.

Every route was long and arduous. It was about 50 miles to Buffalo from Spring Creek or Paint Rock, which were at least 60 miles north of Red Bank. (Paint Rock, named after prehistoric petroglyphs, would soon become Hyattville.) It was about 90 miles via the hills east of Red Bank, which were lower in elevation than the mountains. Wagons were limited to a very rough road through Crazy Woman canyon that was steep on the eastern side and impassable in winter. Heavy snows could force long detours around the Bighorns if a traveler decided to risk the trip at all. (See Alice's story on p. 15.)

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*"Big Horn" was eventually shortened to "Bighorn" for the river, mountains, and basin. The original wording will be retained in contemporary accounts.

Richards could hardly have turned down his neighbors' flattering appeal by saying he was "too busy" or it was "too much trouble." He was sociable and a joiner, and, as Harriet noted, the position was a source of badly needed income. Though always interested in politics and involved in local Republican affairs, Richards seems to have had no particular desire for high office, at least none that surfaced in his early letters and diaries.

The newcomer must also have impressed the men he had met on the more settled side of the mountain. Buffalo's *Big Horn Sentinel*, the county's more or less independent paper of record, reported that Democrat "C. H. Grinnell, of Goose creek, and W. A. Richards, of the No Wood country, are favorably spoken of for commissioners by leading men of both parties... [they] would be a credit to either party to serve as commissioners." The paper later reminded readers that it favored the best candidates regardless of political faith. "Such men as W. A. Richards, C. H. Grinnell and W. H. Holland, who have property interests at stake, and aside from that good financial judgment, will make a good board of county commissioners."[1] He was endorsed in similar terms by *The Johnson County Republican*, launched just before the election to spread the party word in the strongly Democratic district.[2]

> Mr. Richards is almost an entire stranger in the older settled parts of the county. He is located in the No Wood country, where he has a large ranch and ditching interests, is a thoroughly practical man and a gentleman of excellent business qualificaions. In Messrs. Holland, Richards and Willits no better selection can be made to serve as a board of commissioners.

The *Republican* reported the next week that Richards had no opposition, which is also reflected in the votes he received at the county conventions. He was nominated unanimously at the Republican convention (receiving 44 votes to the 35 and 22 of the other winning nominees). As the representative of the basin side of the county, he also presented the petition to the Democratic convention, and won their nomination as well (receiving 43 out of 44 possible votes to the 30 and 18 of the other two winners).[3]

Dual endorsement, along with recognition that the basin was entitled to representation, helped Richards garner 1,381 votes—a whopping 89% of those cast, according to the returns published in the *Sentinel* on November 13. (Voters could put their X by three candidates.) In all but one precinct he garnered more votes than any other candidate for commissioner, though there were a couple of ties and near-ties. The next highest total for any candidate was 906 (58%), received by the Democratic candidate for county treasurer. Also elected county commissioner were Democrat A. J. McCray and Republican W. H. Holland. The four basin precincts recorded 115 ballots, seven less than the number who reportedly signed the petition. Of those, six snubbed Richards despite the dual endorsement and ability to vote for three candidates.*

The *Sentinel* remarked,

> Commissioner Richards will have to come over to the first meeting of the new board in January on snow shoes, or make an extra trip of a hundred miles or so to get around the Big Horn mountains. Richards seems to be of the right stuff, and you can depend upon his getting there.

So why not just spend the winter in Buffalo? The family could join him there instead of at Colorado Springs. Harriet had wondered in October,[4]

> You have visited Buffalo so often & will go again as often, that it almost seems to me, we ought to be there too, this winter! <u>Would</u> it be such an impossibility?

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*Local tally: Paint Rock, 43 out of 48 for Richards; Ten Sleep, 46 out of 47. The 14 voters at Mahogany Butte and the 6 at Shell Creek voted for him unanimously. Nov. 13, 1886 *Big Horn Sentinel*

It would. The legendary winter of 1886–87 blew in, putting any such hopes on ice. Late in November, after another lament about her isolation, she once again resigned herself to waiting.[1]

> I saw in the papers that you are having a "blizzard" in Wyo. Hope you are all right & comfortable, tho. Of course it would be nonsense for me to come up there now & I must be more patient. I shall stay right here I guess till you come.

Not for her, however, was the total self-sacrifice of the ideal Victorian woman. Harriet resumed voice lessons, and the joy and consolation they brought her must have helped her endure the separation.[2]

> I took another lesson today & Mr. Wilkins says if I could take a year's lessons I would make a grand singer, that I have a clear bright & high soprano voice, &c. that I shall astonish you, anyway, when you come in Jan'y. I do not think he is trying to flatter me, indeed I think he finds considerable fault.

She finally received word that her husband had made it to Rawlins despite the blizzards. But it was a month after the election and she still did not know whether he had won or lost, the storms having delayed delivery of the newspaper.[3]

> …on the 27th rec'd your letter written Nov. 8. It looked as if it had been carried in some one's pocket, until it was nearly worn thro' and quite dirty, but was very glad to hear from you. Hope you were not caught in the severe snowstorm that prevailed all thro' the East last week.

She was talking about a big storm east of the Mississippi that made the national papers. The *Big Horn Sentinel* on the 27th reported the measures being taken on Powder River to save cattle, but "the loss will be very large should the snow continue as it now is." A force of 25 cowboys had been mobilized to manage the herds.

Even though Harriet was in Oakland, which would be reached by the snowstorms later, she had her own worries. About Christmastime she wrote that rheumatism was once again troubling her. "I have been lame all the week & my hands & feet are beginning to swell & I am so afraid I shall have the Inflammatory Rheumatism I don't know what to do. I still take my medicine." After her usual warm closing wishes, she adds a P.S. "I am completely out of money and owe considerable." She questions whether she should continue with the voice lessons, but doesn't give them up.[4]

On January 15, the *Sentinel* reported that two weeks of "almost ceaseless storms" had raked the region. Yet winter was barely mentioned in a letter Will wrote Lon on February 5, 1887.[5] He matter-of-factly reported that he met his family in Cheyenne on January 25th and they proceeded on to Colorado Springs. Neither was anything said about the storm that "swept down on Cheyenne from the ice bound north" on the 19th, according to *The Cheyenne Daily Sun*.[6] If he did get caught in that one, the snow was soft and melted rapidly. (That means cold and wet.) His trip may have been so uneventful, even over Beaver Hill, that this noted raconteur had no stories for his brother.

Nothing at that time was giving him second thoughts about staying in that country, either. "It appears to me now that it would be best for us to spend a year or two in Wyo.," he told Lon. "I ought to be there now on the Commissioner business. Have heard but little from there, but understand that cattle are wintering well." Richards would try to return for meetings if necessary, he assured the other commissioners, but the heavy snows might require him to take a very roundabout route.

The cattle are wintering well? This sounds surprising to anyone familiar with the legend of the "big die-up," in which up to 90% of western range cattle are said to have perished. But as of January they did seem to be doing well despite the weather and the previous summer's drought, according to newspapers Richards might have read. In Wyoming, only the

Sentinel seems to have thought otherwise; on January 15 it predicted "extreme mortality" of herds out on the range if the weather did not improve. Though many cattle and some humans perished that winter, livestock losses were not as bad as some had feared, at least not in Wyoming; Montana and Dakota fared worse. Wyoming assessors determined that numbers fell by about 15% overall, with Johnson county suffering a loss of 5% (the worst was the 45% in Crook County.[1]) The winter was indeed severe enough that livestock starved, and Charles Wells recalled that in the spring snowmelt No Wood creek became "a surging, boiling stream of beef soup" from all the carcasses floating downstream. John Luman of Paint Rock, the first and largest cattleman in the area, branded only 400 calves during the spring roundup, breathtakingly fewer than the 3,000 total for the previous year.[2]

Actual mortality figures are scarce, and there is much disagreement about them, but nobody disagrees about the winter's overall severity. Richards is lucky to have spent most of it in Colorado Springs instead of on his remote and isolated homestead.

Since he wasn't yet a stock owner, he was not personally concerned about the effects of the weather on herds out on the range. But it did hamper work on the Big Horn Ditch the previous fall and kept him from timely repayment of a $500 loan from his brother-in-law (about $16,000 in 2022 dollars).[3] Richards wrote George Hunt on February 16,

> You may not be much interested in the reasons why I cannot, because I have of late so often failed of accomplishing what I expected to do, but this Fall the unprecedented severity of the weather in November forced me to quit work a month sooner than I intended, which made a difference of $1000.00 to me. I have the work to do now and will return to that country next month. If we succeed in getting our patents all right we will have a valuable piece of land.

Newspapers and old-timers told many a story about the fate of travelers caught in winter storms. Richards's daughter Alice recalled,[4]

> During a fierce blizzard, two men had climbed over the fence, perhaps helped by the drifts, and come to the house for help. They were partly frozen. The next day or two they were taken to Thermopolis Hot Springs. One man died, another survived but never got over the effects. I saw him at a Wyoming picnic in California many years later.

She did not say which winter, but it would have been after her arrival at the ranch in 1887. Paul Frison, a basin historian who as a boy met Richards, related a storm story he had heard from the pioneer himself.[5]

> It was a good thing that our door opened in and not out, as we couldn't have opened it. I shoveled a path to the woodpile every day for ten days while the wind continued to blow.

Living in Colorado Springs for part of the winter of 1886–87, Richards missed the March and April commissioner meetings as well; none was held in May. He was back on the Bighorn River by April 24, when he wrote his wife.

> A couple of men going to Lander have stopped here for the night and offer me an opportunity to send out mail. I intended to start for Buffalo today but cannot leave just yet and may not go at all until June 1st, when I will come from there to you. We have had several storms mostly of rain here but upon the mountain it has been snow and the crossing was bad enough before, so that I am not anxious to try it until it gets better.
>
> I rec'd a letter from you of Apl. 3rd. Am awful sorry to know that you are no better. I so much hoped that you would write me that you were well. If you do not improve very much before June you will have to go to Glenwood or some other

springs and that will necessitate another change in our programme. I hope though that you will be able to come up here and stay all Winter for if you don't I shall be tempted to give up the idea of a ranch up here, and leave the country, and I dislike to do that.

I note what you say of the church and of my awful condition. I am sorry that I cannot be classed among such christians as Cooper or Colburn or even Merrill. It must be pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity. I do not want to scoff at religion but I have no use for such men. There are some good christians [*sic*], and I think you are one of them, and I and the children feel the effects of your piety, and I honor you for your consistent devotion to your faith and am glad that you are satisfied with it, but you must not worry about me. I am not very bad. Write to Lost Cabin, as before. My love to you & Allie & Ruth & lots of kisses.

Perhaps because of the harsh weather and Harriet's rheumatism, Richards had told George Hunt in February of 1887 that she and the girls might remain in Colorado Springs permanently. But Harriet may have put her foot down about another separation. In October, after his commissioner meetings in Buffalo, Richards went first to Red Bank[1] and then met his family in the Springs. When he returned to his ranch this time, they came with him. Alice will now take up the story, a composite of an article in the *Annals of Wyoming*[2] and her unpublished recollections.[3]

At last, the family joins him at the ranch

Family life was not at all satisfactory with one of the Richardses living on a ranch and the rest here and there, having no home in particular. So in the fall of 1887 we joined him at the Red Bank Ranch. The household goods, which probably had been stored for a couple of years, were shipped to Rawlins, the nearest railroad town, 275 miles south of the ranch, and we took the train to the same place. Rawlins was then a small, flourishing frontier town with several good stores, hotels and homes. The main store, catering to all the countryside, was that of J.W. Hugus.

I was now almost eleven years old, hence have many recollections of the trip. We went "in style," having a fine mountain buggy for ourselves and a large lumber wagon for our supplies, both Studebaker. The buggy was a strong, two-seated carriage with splendid curtains, easy cushions, etc. As there were not many stopping places along our road, we camped out, sleeping in tents on bedding on the ground. The cooking was done by my father and the men with us. My mother was city bred and knew nothing about roughing it. I imagine both she and Ruth got very tired—but I was sorry when the trip ended.*

My main recollection was of losing our horses. One was kept securely in camp, the rest were hobbled and turned loose. Sometimes they were not to be found in the morning, and on one such occasion it was a long time before they were found and the journey could proceed.

My father had left men at the Red Bank ranch with instructions to make certain changes, but when he arrived with the family he found that nothing had been done. This was very annoying as the newcomers got a very harsh idea of the roughness of the new country. The house to which we came had only one room, 16 by 20, with door and windows, with a dirt floor sloping from rear to front. A cook stove in the corner was vented by a stove pipe out a window instead of through a chimney.

One can imagine my father's chagrin and my mother's distress at finding such rude conditions. We stayed there that night. I presume we occupied the house and the men the bunkhouse. There was no place for us to stay during the repair work so the next day we were taken about five miles farther north along No Wood Creek to the "home ranch" of a large

*In a detailed chronology apparently written in 1911, Alice gave their route as Cheyenne to Rawlins via UPRR, then Rongis, Lost Cabin, Cottonwood Pass, Mahogany Buttes, Chas. Wells Ranch & Red Bank.[4]

English cattle company where we were the guests of the manager, A. L. Coleman, and his wife until our house was put in proper shape. [This was the Big Horn Cattle Co.; see next page.]

Two weeks later we returned to the renovated Red Bank house. Wonders had been wrought under the boss's eagle eye. The stovepipe went out the proper place, the dirt floor had been leveled and a board floor laid. A double-decker bed had been built in the upper right hand corner. A table with benches, large enough to seat a goodly number of people, was placed in the middle of the room. A kitchen table had been placed along the west wall. The usual wash-basin and towels were near the door, although the men washed up in the bunk-house. A sizeable enclosed porch was built to the south. I remember my mother standing in the window of this porch and with her .32 rifle shooting bluejays, as they were quite a pest.

To the west was a spring of delicious water—known the country round. To reach it we had to go around the head of a slough caused by other springs. It was fun to jump across the stepping stones in the semi-circle—though sometimes I was too active and fell. A "springhouse" over the spring made a fine cool place for storing milk and butter. We had very little milk at first because range cattle were not very good milkers, but later we had a good Jersey cow. I used to help myself to cream occasionally, though none of us could use much raw milk, or cream. This was too bad in a land where it was sometimes a little hard to get the food we needed. Our recollection is that there was often a joke about food. Sometimes we had plenty of meat, sometimes none, sometimes potatoes and no meat.

We had ham and bacon and salt sides, but our fresh meat was either game killed in the mountains nearby or our part of a neighborhood beef when someone "killed." You may be sure that every available portion was used. I don't think my mother ever got around to making use of the poorer parts of meat, but there were others nearby who had the skill and they were given that job. By nearby, I mean four to five miles in either direction—no neighbors and no telephones. Willa Cather in her novels tells of similar conditions—in a very unhappy manner. She leads one to think that such conditions were so very terrible. I am certain none of the people in the basin felt especially abused. Life was a little hard but there were many advantages and most of the settlers had very pleasant times.

Hauling a piano to their new parlor

The next spring two large rooms were added to the house, and the goods that had been shipped from Colorado Springs [to Rawlins] the fall before were brought in from the railroad at Casper, 170 miles away [from the ranch], and installed in the new home. These goods included a massive, square Chickering piano.

[Just getting them to Casper was more complicated, and undoubtedly more expensive, than it sounds. The town sprang up when railroad service reached that point in June 1888—coming from Nebraska, not Cheyenne. The furniture must have gone from Rawlins to Omaha on the Union Pacific, then back to Wyoming on the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley Railroad (part of the Chicago & North Western Railway). The goods would have to be hauled from Casper to the ranch by wagon. "Roads were very rough in those days," Alice noted, "with many gullies and 'Thank-you ma'ams' at the bottom of them."]

Mrs. Richards had missed her music greatly at Red Bank. Trying to make the hard life of the ranch as pleasant as possible, her husband decided she should have her piano. Off he went to Casper in a trail wagon pulled by a six-horse team, among them an outlaw that no one but he could handle. At Casper he was told that he would never get the piano out to his ranch, but he did. The outlaw was still so lively at the end of the journey that, scared by a rattlesnake, he came prancing into the ranch as though he had not pulled a heavy load 170 miles. [The piano alone weighed around 850-900 lbs.]

By the second winter an addition had been built—a large bedroom and parlor, nicely

Gus Coleman and his family

Photo shows the likely home of the Colemans, who had a claim north of Red Bank.

Gus returned to New York State in the fall of 1886 and came back with his wife, Irena, and son, George (age 7), in the spring of 1887.[1] They were employed as caretakers at the Bar X Bar home ranch for the British owner, Algernon James Winn. The winter of 1886–87 would end the western cattle adventure for Winn and many patricians foreign and domestic. In July 1887 he sold his herd to the American Cattle Trust but remained in Wyoming.[2] He returned to Europe for the winter of 1887–88, and that may have been when the Colemans moved from the Bar X Bar to the Shield ranch, owned by Beckwith, Quinn & Co.[3] The following year Winn came back to the Powder River ranges in some capacity, but on a trip over the mountains he found his western dream house abandoned.[4] By then the Colemans had their own place at Big Trails, named after the existing paths that converged there. We are told that they lived there from about 1888 until 1910.[5]

*That may be Gus on the porch and Richards at right. The girl can only be Alice and the boy George Coleman, ages 11 and 7 respectively in 1887. The woman may be Irena Coleman.**

The ladders and other tools support the idea that this is the Coleman homestead. It could not be Red Bank or the Bar X Bar because the layout is different from either of those houses.

Alice fondly recalled that at one dance, "George and I spent the early evening lighting matches at one end and seeing how many could be burned up entirely by taking hold of the end first burnt."[6]

George grew up to become owner of a freighting company that served the Basin.

*The man on the right is wearing the same kind of cap as Richards is in the Cloud Peak photo. Gus was a surveyor, and the man on the porch is wearing a surveyor's hat. Both men were tall. Alice and George were the only children their age in the area.

The house in the photo at top, from the Paul Frison Collection at the Wyoming State Archives, is misidentified as Red Bank. Mrs. Coleman later recalled that she and her husband were caretakers of the 10-room ranch house at the Bar X Bar. Photo of Bar X Bar house, right, courtesy of Lawrence M. Woods.[7]

furnished. In the evenings the men would gather in the parlor to sing and talk. My father enjoyed these evenings, he enjoyed singing and as always was a good raconteur.

A squeezebox surprise

W. A. Richards came in one evening from a trip to the railroad. The family and men all lingered long at the table for they were all eager for news of the outside world and Richards was a good narrator. But after a while he rose and said, "Come into the other room and we will open the packages."

The group responded eagerly, some of the men as curious as the little girls. First, he passed some candy, just one piece to each, the rest being put away to be doled out later to the children. Then he unwrapped an accordion, asking Bill, one of the boys who worked on the ranch, to play. Bill required a good deal of coaxing, since he knew his limitations, but he finally tried to play "Swanee River." It was terrible but all were patient. Finally, Tommy, a Welshman, blurted out from one corner, "Why all this butchery?"

Everyone turned on him. "Play it yourself if you don't like Bill's playing."

Much to the surprise of all present, Tommy took the instrument, fingered it lovingly, and began to play. Amazingly from the cheap instrument flowed music from the masters. Then followed the airs of his native Wales and folk songs. Never had the assembled company heard such music. They glanced at each other dumfounded. Who was this man and why was he out here in the wilds? He played on, holding them all spellbound until Richards at last said, "Well, boys, it's time to turn in. We will hear more from Tommy later and tomorrow I will send to town for a decent accordion."

It developed that Tommy had been a master player in his village, had competed in the national Eisteddfod, but being disappointed in taking only second place, had taken his prize money and come to America and on to the West.

Dances—with 100 men, seven women

When things got a little thick and the people felt fed up they had a dance—our only social life. There were no telephones until later and irregular mail, but there certainly was some kind of a "grapevine" and dances were planned. People from all around would gather at some place which had room, food would be brought and music of a sort provided. There were some fiddles, some guitars and mouth-organs [harmonicas]. One of our men returned from a trip very tired and with badly swollen lips. My mother was much concerned and said, "What have you been doing?" He replied, "I played all one night for a dance on the mouth-organ. They had planned the dance, no music appeared so what else could I do?"

One dance was held about 60 miles to the north, at Hyattville. Our family went in a big sleigh, which was great fun, but as we stayed several days and the weather became warm we had a hard time getting home.

[Another was held in March 1888, a birthday party for her father.[1]]

We would go to these dances in the evening, dance all night, and return home in the early morning. Sometimes we would catch a few hours rest and go on to the next party.

There were, that winter, about 100 men in the area and seven women, one of the seven being myself, only eleven years old. I was allowed to dance very little. The men were very respectful and well behaved. I remember at one dance that a couple of the boys who became intoxicated were taken out, placed on their horses and shown the way home. I do not remember seeing any intoxicated men at the parties. There were so many men and so few women that they knew they must behave if they wished to have a good time. Some of them were splendid, but some were not; some were honest, but some were crooks; some were college graduates, but some were uneducated, many had come for adventure; some to escape from deeds they had left behind. But all were chivalrous to the women and to the one lone little girl.

The men usually wore their ordinary working clothes because that was all most of the

cowboys had. Mrs. Milo Burke,* gently raised like most of the women, remarked one day that she didn't like the dances because "There are no gentlemen at them." This appealed to my father's sense of humor, so he got word around that any man who had "store clothes" should wear them to the next dance. They did—and she was greatly surprised at the result. My father was just six feet and a handsome man—especially in store clothes—and several of the other men were, too. She realized that many of the settlers came from environments similar to hers, which made her more contented with life in the basin.

Several men were employed at the ranch. They slept in the bunkhouse but had their meals with the family. My mother did the cooking, my father and I did the dishes because my mother had had inflammatory rheumatism in earlier years and found it unwise to have her hands in water. As our family was seldom less than eight, I was kept busy, but I never grew to dislike dishwashing. To this day I get a thrill in having everything nicely cleaned up and put away. We also did the family washing. We must have eaten off the plain board table, with tablecloths only when company arrived.

Learning manners & grammar

The men were of all types and did all kinds of work but they were generally gentlemanly and courteous when in the house. I know I didn't pick up any swear words though I do remember one or two expressions. One day I used one of them, having no idea what it meant, and was very kindly told by one of the men that little girls did not use such expressions.

Some of the men did not have very good table manners and my mother had hard work to keep me from imitating them. I did so want to put my elbows on the table when eating! She also watched my grammar very closely: when we went down to Cheyenne in 1889 I had no bad habits along that line.

I was eleven years old in 1887, Ruth was four. Naturally she was a favorite with the men, but they were very polite to both of us. Many of the men were from the far east. One was Clarence Higbee from New England. He was very quiet and talked very little about himself. He was the only man that Ruth and I were allowed to associate with. Even Ruth, little as she was then, remembers him. He was not a cowboy but worked as a ranch hand. As I remember it he heard regularly from the east, so he probably had come west for his health. Clarence thought it too bad that I could not go to school so he subscribed to the Youth's Companion for me. Either he or someone else [her father, actually] had the St. Nicholas sent to me. I loved to read and read everything else on the ranch including Rider Haggard, Mark Twain and current magazines—which we did get. I think Clarence stayed on the ranch for many years, maybe for the rest of his life.

Cowboy chivalry

Before the disastrous winter of 1886–87, many English people came into the basin, some to live, some just for a vacation. One recollection is of two very pleasant young men from the lesser nobility of England. They were very good mixers and thoroughly liked by the basin people—and the cowboys. One was hale and hearty, the other so lame that he had to use a side-saddle, so he got the nickname of "Side-saddle." They mingled freely with the cowboys, going on the round-up, etc.

One day some strange "cow-punchers" came into the neighborhood and on the round-up began making fun of the fellow who rode side-saddle. To a man the other "punchers" rose to his defense and threatened to "chap" his tormentors and make them leave the round-up. (Am not sure but that they did chap them [explained elsewhere as "to beat with chaps"]) The young man told my father that never in his life had he been as chivalrously treated as in this "wild and wooly" section of the "Wild West."

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*Nee Bessie Celeste Tannyhill.[1] She met Milo while she was teaching school in Kansas City, according to another account by Alice. More about Milo Burke follows.

School 60 miles away

As to schools—the nearest was at Hyattville, about 60 miles [north] down the No Wood creek, then ten miles northeast toward Buffalo. They had a good teacher from the east [Coleman], but not enough scholars to make up the salary....* So we made the trip down there (down the river, but up north) so that I could be enrolled. I was in "the district" but too far away to attend regularly!

I think the first school in the district now known as Big Trails was started about 1890. My mother tried to start a Sunday School but with little success.

We made the trip to Buffalo each summer, staying with friends or at the hotel. My father was at that time the manager of the large 2 Bar ranch [Crawford Thompson & Co.] which was five miles south on the No Wood. On one trip he took along a young man who had been at that ranch and an extra horse for him to ride. We went over the mountains on the Crazy Woman road, which had a very steep grade on the Buffalo side (travellers now go through the beautiful Ten Sleep pass).** The young man started out all right on Dempsey but soon gave out and begged for a seat in our very nice mountain carriage. I had asked to ride Dempsey although my own horse, Mack, had been taken along in the team of our horses so that I would have a horse to ride in Buffalo. Dempsey, being a fine cow horse, would never submit to being led behind our conveyance so there was nothing to do but for me to ride him—which I gladly did.

Riding a tree down the mountain

When we came to the ride down the mountain with its very steep grade, my father cut a small pine tree and fastened it on behind the carriage as an extra brake—a common custom. One of the 2 Bar men was with us; he took charge of Dempsey and I "rode" the tree down. It was scary but fun. You will say, "Why didn't the cowboy take charge of Dempsey before?" Probably because I coaxed so hard to ride him. He was beautiful chestnut sorrel—I was very proud of him.

For a few days we stayed with a family named Hopkins who lived on the edge of town. There were two boys and a girl, Sadie, in the family. I quite enjoyed being with another girl as there were none my age in our neighborhood.

We young folks had several fine rides but my father made them all promise that there be no racing and no attempt made to pass Dempsey. He was one of the fastest and best of the cow ponies in our section and just did not approve of being passed. I still remember how nice they were about it and how I often rode on ahead because they were afraid to ride as fast as they wanted to do—because they must not pass my horse.

One day Sadie and I decided to take a ride so we went out to the stable to get our horses. She often rode bareback, I had never been allowed to do so, but after a little urging I got on Dempsey and started out. Dempsey had gotten quite used to having a female on his back—I was the first—but he had never been ridden bareback. Quite startled, he started off quite fast—and I soon went off, landing rather easily in a little hollow. Did my horse run on? No, indeed, he stopped short to look at this girl who had dared to ride him bareback. I never tried it again, though I rode him often.

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*Richards, a county commissioner, was authorized to offer Coleman the job at $60 per month.[1]

**If today's unpaved back roads are about where they were in the 1880s, the Richardses could have taken the Upper Nowood Road to Big Trails, then Dry Farm Road east to Hazelton Road. Turning north, they would continue until reaching the Crazy Woman Road, then once safely descended take some other road north to Buffalo. In 1912, the Hazelton route, praised for its scenery, was pushed to become the main road from Buffalo to the basin.[2] Thanks to Terril Mills for information and research. It's unclear when the Ten Sleep route (16) was built, but photos from the 1920s and 30s, in its unpaved state, are on wyomingtrailsandtales website. Route 16 goes through Powder River Pass, elev. 9,665′.

Not being used to boys my mother thought the family too rough and that we made too much work, so we moved into town and to the hotel. I remember part of the old hotel very well. We went to our rooms up an outside staircase. This ended on a small porch from which led a long hall from which opened the rooms.

Escaping a flash flood

Another recollection of Buffalo visits was one of the noted cloudbursts of that section. We had gone out on the plains some distance toward the mountains for a picnic. On the way out we went over a small gully, fairly wide and deep. Early in the afternoon it rained in torrents and we hastened to start back. We found the gully a river of madly rushing water. What should we do? How could we get across? The 2 Bar man was with us and I remember we feared for his life as he rode his horse into the torrent. After several attempts he found a place which was wider and fordable and we drove across, very grateful to him. I imagine I rode Dempsey, but I don't remember. We came to the bridge across the creek which ran through the center of the town, but it was about to go out. My father drove very fast across it just as it went out.

We spent three Christmases at the ranch. I have no special memories of them but we did hang up our stockings and had some gifts.

I know we did not have any feeling of being deprived of the good things of life. My mother, city bred though she was, took it all happily and did not complain. Indeed, she became the sunshine of that section of the country.

Will gives a picture of frontier life

Alice was writing with fond hindsight. With an eye to the future her father wrote a number of friends in early 1888 about the pros and cons of life in the Nowood country and the prospects for the Bighorn basin in general, trying to interest them in starting a business there or investing in a cattle partnership. In the aftermath of the winter of 1886-87 many cattlemen were selling out, which presented a buying opportunity to those who thought the industry would recover. In March 1888 Richards told a Colorado friend, W. W. Wishon, who was not a member of the ditch company,[1]

> I hope that you will make us a visit when the weather gets warm and if you do I am certain that you will put some money in here and perhaps make your residence here. This is surely a healthy place to live. Our family have never passed so good a winter as this one in point of health. Just no ailments at all, not even colds. I have known this locality for over 3 years and with the exception of two infants there has not been a single death from disease or natural causes and only four adults from any cause. One Englishman fell off a cliff and broke his neck,* a cowboy was accidentally shot, another was purposely killed off by a settler Mch. 11th because he became too "ornery" to live, and one horse thief was killed resisting arrest.
>
> ...I have stated some of the advantages of this locality, but it has its unpleasant features also. They are those incident to any new country, the want of society and the advantages of the town: churches, schools, physicians, stores, &c. We miss the churches & schools more than anything else, but get along pretty well as it is. Are not retrograding perceptibly either in morals, manners or general intelligence.

He had not seen a dead animal all winter, Richards told Wishon. By this time the worst of it was over, and it had been kind—mostly. As of February 22, 1888, when he wrote his

*The unfortunate must have been Gilbert Henry Chandos Leigh, whose western adventure ended in Ten Sleep Canyon in 1884. Leigh creek is named after him. He actually suffered a fractured skull and broken legs. Leigh had been visiting Moreton Frewen, a wealthy Englishman who maintained a large ranch across the mountains.[2] Frewen's 76 outfit was the first and largest of the English cattle ranches on Powder River until the winter of 1886–87 did it in.[3]

Red Bank Ranch, about 1907 and 2007

Above, a composite of two photographs taken by Richards's daughter Edna;[1] *the one below was taken by the author. Bluffs of vivid red (as well as other colors) grace the landscape of central Wyoming for miles. The color photo was taken in June, when the lush green of the fields contrast strikingly with the vermilion buttes.*

A visitor wrote, "The governor's ranch is remarkable for its elevation. It is nearer heaven (in more ways than one) than any ranch in the Big Horn basin."[2]

Red Bank is no longer called that. At the time of the later photo, the original log house was almost completely collapsed on the side not visible.

old friend Arthur Wakeley, there had been no blizzards, just a three-day cold snap in mid-January, when it got to –50°. Since then, the temperature had ranged from 40° to 60° during the day. Richards told Arthur more about his homestead and what could be done in the cattle business.[1]

> I am now preparing to fence the land we have here which comprises 1360 acres. My plan is to get as many cattle as I can carry through the winter by feeding hay. I would like to start with [blank space] head, and increase my hay crop as the herd increases. I have put so much money into land and ditches and fences that I have not the money to purchase the cattle and would like to form a company or take a partner. …
>
> The range business is about "played out" and the cattle for future use must be raised on the plan that I propose, and if I can get started with low priced cattle we can make a fortune in a few years. I am not much of an enthusiast over any "scheme" but I am very confident of the success of this undertaking. I would like to have you and George & Charlie Hunt & my Bro. Aut in with me. I would stay here and run things.

The 500 head is a mere handful compared to the enormous herds run on the open range by other Bighorn Basin cattlemen at the height of the cattle boom. The largest was the 12,000 head owned by Mason & Lovell; a close second was the 10,000 owned by Capt. Robert A. Torrey, according to newspaper reports in 1883 that may or may not be reliable. Of the dozen listed, the smallest was 600 head, and the grand estimated total was 55,600. Wyoming's largest cattle company, the Scot-owned Swan Land and Cattle Co., was said to have run over 110,000 head. These figures, inaccurate or not, put Richards's modest ambitions in perspective.[2]

Then came the inevitable bust. In the midwestern markets the prices of cattle began to slide in 1884, and by 1886 had declined by about a third. In 1887, prices were about half what they had been at the height of the boom.[3] Most companies owned by foreigners or easterners who were in it for the profits—and the western adventure—went out of business entirely, partly because of absentee mismanagement; many British-owned outfits in the Powder River country were among them. Wyoming barons began reducing their herds in the harsh light of reality. In 1888 the market was glutted with animals with little meat on their bones and correspondingly low prices—opportunity for people like Richards.

He was already invested in horses. Some may already have been owned jointly with Tom Gebhart, with whom he may have gone into partnership some time before the brand ad for their herd was published in 1890. For Richards, cattle would be next. To a member of the ditch company, William L. Swift, he wrote on March 14, 1888,

> I have 14 horses running out upon this range which have no shelter and have not been fed an ounce of food all winter, and they are in good condition now. Formerly all stock ran loose upon the range all the year round but the heavy losses in cattle in the winter of '86 & 7 was so disastrous to many cattle men and companies, that they are contracting their business and intend to keep only so many as they can feed through the winter. The supply of cattle will soon be so reduced that prices must be much higher, then those who can raise beef cheapest will make the most money.
>
> My idea is to run my cattle during the summer upon the range back of me which I virtually control and in Winter feed so far as it is necessary to carry them through. Next summer the R.R. will be completed to within 100 miles of this place [Casper] which is near enough for shipping cattle. I intend to make this a perfectly safe business and am certain of making it pay. I have spent a good deal of money for land and improvements and have not sufficient capital to properly start with, and would like to form a company with $30,000 capital, one half of which I would take. The money

would need to be paid by July 1st and put into cattle. I have a number of parties ready to put in from $1000 to $3000 apiece and think I can start the business in good shape.

Bargains were close at hand. M. Burke & Sons was in trouble and wanted to sell its 500 head, Richards informed Wakeley. Established in 1885, this Omaha company was owned by a widow, Margareta Burke, and her eight sons.[1] One of them, Milo, was foreman of the Big Horn Cattle Co. (Bar X Bar) until he was replaced in the fall of 1887.[2] Milo would remain in Ten Sleep and prosper, building up his own outfit and a sawmill.[3]

Richards' stock company did not materialize, so he would invest in cattle gradually. The industry began to recover but never regained its former size or profitability. It wasn't long before there were more sheep than cattle on the ranges of the Cowboy State.

The weather may have been all right in the basin, but something, perhaps deep snow, kept Richards from getting to Buffalo in January and March 1888 for the meetings of the board of county commissioners. (No meetings were held in December or February.) We have two stories that show what he was up against in the colder months, one from his daughter Alice and the other from the *Big Horn Sentinel*. Alice wrote about a time her father ran into trouble when on horseback:[4]

A very bad storm came up, he was late in getting home and we were all greatly worried. When he did arrive he said that he had come home the long way around on the western [she probably meant eastern] side of the range because the pass over the mountain was closed. He said it was difficult to cross the various branches of Powder River and that the snow on the trail was treacherous. One time the horse went through the crust and he thought he was done for—but managed to get out.

In an attempt to get to his first meeting since November 1887, Richards had a harrowing trek over the mountain, and must have told the *Sentinel* all about it. An article in its April 7, 1888, issue shows just how cut off his neighborhood was from its county seat. If Richards had so much as twisted an ankle, he could have frozen to death. (The county paper of record also thought he lived on the Bighorn River, which wasn't the case.)

TRAVELING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

The Pleasure of Being a County Official in Some Parts of Wyoming.

To one who thinks there is pleasure in making the trip across the Big Horn mountains at this season of the year from the No Wood country, an experience such as that gone through by County Commissioner Richards a few days ago would certainly convince him to the contrary. Mr. Richards resides on the Big Horn river with his family, where he is engaged in ranching and stock growing.

The inconvenience of reaching the county seat in the winter season, Mr. Richards was fully aware of, but thinking his presence might be required on matters pertaining to the interest of the county he left his home on horseback last Tuesday morning, booked for Buffalo, accompanied by one of his men with a pack-horse loaded with the necessary provsions and bedding for camping out, if necessary. The party rapidly covered the distance to the mountains by the morning's ride, but about noon they encountered snow of a considerable depth, and the nearer they approached the top of the "divide" the more apparent did it become that the abandonment of the trip on horseback, at least, was necessary.

This being done, Mr. Richards sent his companion back to the ranch with the horses, after arming himself with a pair of snowshoes and a scanty supply of provisions (which consisted of a part of a loaf of bread), and made tracks Buffalo-ward. His progress on the trip was not as rapid as he anticipated, for no sooner had he lost

> sight of his companion than he found that he was to encounter a "chinnook," and with the wind blowing at a terrific speed and the snow thawing traveling was almost impossible.
>
> Night finally overtook the traveler before he had quite reached the top of the divide. Mr. Richards concluded to make the best of the situation, and finding the most suitable spot, he drove his stakes for the night at the side of a big pine stump, where he built a fire and rested his weary limbs on top of several feet of snow. The wind kept up at a furious rate all night and with his scant supply of food and a pipe and tobacco the traveler sat up all night, first warming on side and then the other, and reflecting over the bad deeds committed in his past life.
>
> Day dawned and the Johnson county commissioner resumed his onward march, first over precipices and then down ravines and picturesque canyons. All day long he tramped faithfully, not knowing where night would again overtake him. About 6 o'clock in the evening a broad valley opened out before him and in looking over the country he discovered that he was on one of the tributaries of Powder river and within a few miles of the Frontier Cattle company's home ranch.*
>
> Reaching the ranch Mr. Richards received a kindly welcome, and here he remained two days to rest up from a tiresome and what may be termed a very difficult journey. Being supplied with a saddle horse from the ranch Mr. Richards ...resumed his journey, arriving in Buffalo Sunday without experiencing any further trouble.

Richards's rough trek underscored one of the commissioners' concerns: the growing need for a good road over the mountains. Buffalo merchants were losing business to enterprising merchants in Billings, Montana. Wagons could be sent straight down the flatlands of the basin to obtain and then deliver orders from residents of the Nowood country.

At a special meeting in May, the commissioners (including Richards) appointed a two-man committee "to ascertain the most practicable route for the construction of a road from Buffalo over the Big Horn mountains and request of them to report at the next regular meeting of the board, in July 1888." They also ordered Robert A. Waln of Spring Creek to be appointed as road supervisor of the "district known as the Big Horn Basin, and that he be instructed to commence work on top of the mountain at once under the supervision of W.A. Richards." The nature of the work was unspecified, but it may have been to fix the "bog holes" and other impediments to wagons. A supervisor was appointed for the eastern portion of the county as well.[1] By 1896 a decent wagon road had been built and was being maintained, according to *The Buffalo Bulletin* in April 1896,[2] but it wasn't until 1931, well into the automobile era, that a road was completed from Greybull to Sheridan, through Shell Canyon.[3] U. S. Highway 16 was built in stages between Buffalo and the basin, through Ten Sleep pass. Even that was still unpaved in 1939.[4]

Billings was also trying to interfere with mail service to his isolated neighborhood, complained Commissioner Richards to Territorial Governor Thomas Moonlight. The mail was their only link with the outside world, bringing not only letters, newspapers, and magazines but also goods unavailable locally. Richards was now using the post office at Lost Cabin, just outside the basin. It was 40 miles south of Red Bank, via Birdseye Pass. He had already been in contact with Joseph M. Carey, the Territory's delegate to Congress.** Richards wrote Moonlight on June 4, 1888,

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*Owned by Sir Horace Plunkett, an Irish aristocrat. Plunkett did not spend winters at the ranch.[5]

**Joseph Maull Carey (1845-1924) was a Philadelphia lawyer who became one of Wyoming's most powerful figures. In 1869, as a reward for helping Ulysses S. Grant get elected President, 26-year-old Carey was appointed U.S. attorney for the new Wyoming Territory. He became "Judge Carey" upon his 1871 appointment as an associate justice of the territorial Supreme Court. In 1876 he retired from the bench, expanded into the cattle and ranching business, and became Wyoming's

> I fear that the Billings people are working against the establishment of a mail route from Hyattville to Lost Cabin. They are working earnestly to control the trade of this Basin and claim the credit of getting service put on from Corbett to Bonanza, but desire to have it stop there, endeavoring to force us to go to them for supplies. Now I do not propose to submit to any such juggling tricks nor to have the actual prosperity of this community retarded in order to bolster up the declining business of a sickly Montana village. Judge Carey writes me that he has asked to have the service continued from Hyattville to Lost Cabin and expects to hear from it soon.

Corbett was across the basin, on the Stinking Water river (eventually rechristened the Shoshone River to attract settlers). The post office at Bonanza, 50 miles north of Red Bank, had been established the previous summer.

Campaigning for mail service

Whether it was the machinations of Billings or the glacial pace of government, something was holding up the opening of post offices at Red Bank and Spring Creek, which were in the works as of January 1888. Commissioner Richards wrote the Second Assistant Postmaster General on February 15, 1888, that the necessary forms had been received and filled out. He added,

> With the appointment of postmaster at Red Bank and Spring I believe the line will be complete between Lost Cabin and Billings, but the office at Bonanza, one hundred miles from Lost Cabin, was established last August and the mail is still being brought to that place by private carrier. I enclose affidavits showing that the Cottonwood Pass does not become impassable, and also one relative to the amount of mail now coming here via Lost Cabin. With a government mail service it would be three times as much. The people here unanimously request that a weekly mail service be put upon the route between Lost Cabin & Billings at once without waiting for the annual advertising.

Richards even turned to his brother Lon that same day to see if he could pull strings.

> I have sent off a lot of letters relating our P.O. business and I think it probable that your influence may help some. I enclose a letter to Judge Carey our delegate in Congress which you can read and forward to him. The distance from Lost Cabin to Billings is about 260 miles with settlements all along the route. I think the appointments will be made for our place and Spring Creek but we want service put on at once. I have not had any correspondence with Carey before as the Governor (Moonlight) & I thought we could make it without him. Moonlight has written very strongly and intelligently on this matter.... I presume that Judge Carey would be glad of any assistance that any other members of Congress could lend him. Do not impose on any of your friends on this acct. as we will get along someway.

The president pro-tempore of the Senate, John J. Ingalls of Kansas, also heard from Richards about "postal facilities, or rather lack of them."[1] First noting that the basin comprises more than 6,000 square miles, "a tract larger in area than the state of Connecticut & Rhode Island combined," Richards related in detail what the citizens have to endure:

> This Basin has been settled or occupied by settlers for six years and now probably

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lone delegate to Congress from 1885–90, when statehood was achieved. Along with Francis E. Warren, also a Republican, Carey was elected to the United States Senate. Carey served from November 15, 1890, until March 3, 1895. Denied re-election, he resumed the practice of law in Cheyenne; in 1910 he was elected Governor—as a Democrat. Long at odds with Warren and other state Republicans, Carey in 1912 helped Theodore Roosevelt organize the Progressive Party. Carey was a member of the board of trustees of the University of Wyoming at Laramie. He died in Cheyenne on February 5, 1924.[2]

W. A. and his brother A. V. Richards met Carey when they stopped off in Cheyenne during the 1873 Wyoming boundary survey.[3]

> contains 1000 people. I have lived here three years and one of my first acts was to circulate a petition and forward the same to the Post Office Dept. asking for a mail route and the establishment of Post Offices. Although we have done all that has been asked of us no mail has been carried here by the Government and there is no route approaching nearer to this [part of the] Basin than twenty miles.
>
> We are now and for many months have been bringing our own mail in by a private carrier from Lost Cabin P.O. twenty miles south of the Southern limit of this Basin, consequently the mail of those persons living in the Northern part of this Basin is carried more than one hundred miles by private carrier. It costs, and has cost me for two years, five dollars per month to get my mail brought into the basin and then I frequently have to ride twenty miles to get it. In response to a united and vigorous application for relief endorsed by Governor Moonlight the P.O. Dept. has appointed Postmasters at a few points in this vast district and instructed them to employ carriers to bring the mail from the nearest P.O. for which service said carriers will receive a sum equal to two thirds of said Postmaster's salary, which is equivalent to offering about ten dollars per year for carrying a weekly mail one hundred miles.
>
> ...I am one of the Commissioners of this County but have no mail communication with the County seat except by way of [rail to] Rawlins, Cheyenne & Omaha, thence by the Fremont Elkhorn & Mo. Valley to Douglas & thence by stage to Buffalo the county seat, a distance of 1500 miles consuming two weeks' time.

The voice of William A. Richards had joined a chorus that had been ignored by the government for years. Every Wyoming governor since 1881 had tried to get better mail service to remote locations, according to the 1886 report of Territorial Governor Francis E. Warren.*

> This office is constantly receiving letters, petitions, and complaints, alleging insufficient mail service, and careful investigation proves that the complaints are too often well founded.

As an example, he included a long letter from Buffalo attorney Charles H. Burritt, Secretary of a citizens' committee, that said in part,

> We have now in process of preparation also an application for a mail route from Buffalo to Paint Rock and the No Wood country, and here, too, we have now a private line running once a week, and last Saturday night the carrier from No Wood brought in on horseback a sack containing 25 pounds of first-class mail. There is now in that section of our county 500 inhabitants, and they are settled upon as rich land and in as good a section as Wyoming affords, and they must come 100 miles for their mail.

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*Francis Emroy Warren (1844–1929) may never be surpassed as Wyoming's most powerful and prodigious politician. As a boy in Massachusetts he was forced to drop out of school, but he distinguished himself in the Civil War and state militia. In 1868 he set out for Cheyenne, then a new railroad town in Dakota Territory. He got a job at a general store and eventually bought out its owner. Having once herded sheep in Massachusetts, Warren expanded into livestock, principally sheep. He found time to serve as president of the American Woolgrowers Association and eventually came to be called "the greatest shepherd since Abraham." His light and power company brought electricity to Cheyenne and he built its first opera house. Warren's early political résumé includes the Territorial Senate, which he served as president; Cheyenne City Council; treasurer of Wyoming, and mayor of Cheyenne. A Republican, he served briefly as Territorial Governor, from 1885–86, until President Grover Cleveland replaced him with a Democrat. In March 1889 Warren was restored to the governorship by Republican President Benjamin Harrison. Once Wyoming achieved statehood, Warren became its first elected Governor. But he resigned shortly thereafter, on November 24, 1890, upon election as U.S. Senator. The Democratic victory of 1892 cost him that position, but upon his party's resurgence he replaced Carey in the Senate. Thanks to his political acumen and service to the state and its citizens, Warren kept his seat from 1895 until his death in 1929. Among the committees he chaired were the Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands and the Committee on Appropriations.[1]

The Warren Livestock Company was still in business in 2022.[2]

(Burritt's figure seems suspiciously round, and may be inflated for effect. The voter turnout in the 1886 election from the Nowood country was 115, rising to 170 in 1888.[1])

The actual total was not that important. There was a sizeable number of settlers in the Bighorn Basin, with more coming in, and they deserved better mail service. Warren concluded,

> To limit a new and growing country to such meager mail service as shall oblige its pioneer settlers to club together and run private mail routes is unworthy of our Government and its postal service, and I am sure relief must follow when our true condition is known to Congress and the Postal Department.
>
> As well might the child be expected to wear its infant shoes until "of age" as to expect a territory to develop and become a state without constant increase of its mail routes and post-offices as population increases and new localities are inhabited.
>
> I venture to hope that the Postal Department will immediately afford us every aid possible under present appropriations, and regulations, and that Congress may consider our urgent needs and take measures accordingly.

Whatever improvements the government did make were inadequate, as Richards' complaints attest. Still, his efforts probably helped establish Post Offices at Spring Creek and Red Bank, in 1888. It was announced in May[2] that Mrs. Richards had been named Postmaster (the official title) of Red Bank, which served the entire neighborhood of 100 or so people, but Richards's letter in June indicates that there was still no service.

What the mail itself went through is shown by orders that Richards placed for items for his family and their new home.

In February 1888, to J. W. Hugus & Co., Rawlins:

> Please send me by first mail one pair ladies kid buttoned shoes, good quality, No. 4-1/2 round toes, high instep & broad soles. Also one pair ladies woollen, garnet hose. If you have not this color send black. Please do them up securely in strong paper & sealed as the mails get rough usage before reaching us. Charge to me.

In March, to a seed merchant in Rochester, New York:

> We live upon a ranch 40 miles from a post office and want to have some flowers. We have no catalogs and don't know what to order. We enclose one dollar and would like to have you send us by mail its value in flower seeds selected according to your own judgment. Our springs are tolerably early and no frost before the middle of September. Altitude 5000 feet. Send us a catalogue, [and] do the seeds up securely as our mail meets with rough usage.

In June, he ordered a subscription for Allie to *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*, published by the prestigious Century company. He cautioned them,

> Please put on extra heavy wrapper as our mail comes one hundred miles on horseback. I enclose cheque for $3.00, the only kind of payment I can make.

When Uncle Sam finally commenced service, "Tom Gebhart distributed the first mail ever delivered by the mail carrier to the Red Bank post office," according to a later article in the *Basin Republican*,[3] of which Gebhart was part owner. "He says it was in a gunny sack, not mail sack."

The high volume of mail to Red Bank raised red flags at the Post Office Department. Alice recalled that her mother received a "scorcher" threatening to remove her from office for incompetence. She had reported that the "town of Red Bank" had eight residents, the population of the ranch itself, but there was too much mail for that possibly to be correct. Alice wrote, "my father replied in no uncertain terms, making things clear." Unfortunately a copy of the scorcher apparently does not survive.

Further details about "Postmaster" Richards were supplied in a *Washington Post* article of 1901, when her husband was assistant commissioner of the General Land Office. Though the article took some potshots at Democrats, it was reprinted in the Laramie *Boomerang*, a Democratic paper.[1]

> The Mail Carrier had to be paid a salary of course, but the fourth-class postmaster must take his chances on a commission for the stamps he cancels. These chances were too slim in that sparsely settled neighborhood to prove much of a temptation to anyone with an itching palm, so Mrs. Richards took charge…
>
> "The most I ever made in one quarter was $10 and sometimes I did not cancel over half a dozen stamps in a whole week," said Mrs. Richards, laughing.
>
> One day [when Richards was governor] she received…a check for $1.09, the balance due her as postmaster at Red Bank. About the same time the women of Wyoming were forming plans for the aid and comfort of their soldiers in the [Spanish-American] War and a scheme had been started for the contribution of a dollar from each woman, the dollar to be the result of her own industry. …the governor's wife was wondering how she could earn her dollar—it never occurred to her to sell her vote. Like wives in our less favored states she mentioned her difficulty to her husband and the governor was ready with a suggestion.
>
> "Why not donate the dollar you have just received from the Post Office Department? You can turn it in just as it came to you in the bank check telling its history to make a little story out of it for the company."

Despite government mail carriers and additional post offices, service remained poor between the Nowood country and the world over the mountains. To blame were "mildewed" post office methods, according to Joseph De Barthe, an editor in Buffalo recently transplanted from the basin. At Bonanza, De Barthe had founded *The Rustler*, the first newspaper in the Bighorn Basin, in June 1889, then established *The Buffalo Bulletin* in October 1890 in partnership with Charles M. Lingle. (In those days, "rustler" meant go-getter more than stock thief.) A gifted writer from the East, De Barthe was well regarded in Wyoming, but his comments about the basin mail in the *Bulletin*, on January 29, 1891, are more colorful than specific. He doesn't mention the biggest problem: the Bighorn Mountains, with or without Old Man Winter, which often defeated the most determined postmen. Perhaps he didn't need to.

> It is a crying shame that the people of the basin are cut off so completely from the county seat by reason of the miserable mail service now furnished by the United States Postoffice department, and it is a matter that must be remedied at once. It takes from four to eight weeks to get a letter from this city to the basin, and one cannot figure on an answer inside a decade. Our business men are losing thousands of dollars yearly through this slipshod method of doing business, while our friends over the range are put to great expense and annoyance by the same means. Buffalo should receive the benefit of the basin trade and must have it; but she will never get it as long as her merchants gaze at the mountain and sigh for it and are satisfied with the mildewed, musty, mossback mail methods that are now in vogue between Buffalo and the basin. …

Mail was supposed to be delivered three times a week. De Barthe thought that "a daily mail would insure the building of decent roads up and down the steep mountain and of having them kept open by travel in winter weather." That was wishful thinking, given the obstacles. On April 2, he reported:

> The mail carrier between this point and Spring Creek came in two days late with his last basin mail. He reports travel over the mountain next to impossible, snow being

> piled in drifts in some places high as a two-story house. These huge drifts have to be gone through, and it requires a deal of hard work with a shovel to dig out passes for the mail cart. Carrying mail over the Big Horn mountains in dead of winter is anything but easy.

A petition to fix service to the basin appeared in the *Rustler*, and De Barthe reprinted it.[1] The petitioners claimed that the past winter had been the mildest known in the area for many years. Yet mail had been received irregularly since December 1, and during January, no mail had been received from any eastern point. This was because mail to Lost Cabin came from Casper by a mountain road at the foot of the Rattlesnake Range. The petitioners urged that an existing wagon road be used instead, which would cut travel from 127 to 65 miles. This route would not help service to and from Buffalo, however.

Instead of improvement came worse news. Mail service between the basin and Buffalo would be discontinued entirely, De Barthe reported the following fall.[2] Once again he urged citizens to protest, and he repeated his conviction that daily mail service would lead to better roads and less risky travel.

In a month he was able to report that Warren, now U.S. senator, had sent a welcome dispatch from Washington: Service would be renewed from Mayoworth to Ten Sleep. The whole trouble had been caused by the discontinuation of the postoffice at Spring Creek, Warren said. De Barthe sang the praises of the senator, perhaps to counter the forces that already were working against his re-election.[3]

But Ten Sleep wasn't far enough. Richards wrote Carey[4] that that post office was not on the U.S. route from Lost Cabin to Meeteetse, so mail from Buffalo could go no farther. The *Bulletin* protested as well. The two routes must have been connected soon thereafter, as no further complaint about it appears in the papers.

Getting the mail to Ten Sleep was an "almost impossible feat" in winter, De Barthe admitted in March.[5] The old mail contractor, Sam Stringer, "expects to reach Ten Sleep before the next general roundup, if resurrection day does not intervene. It takes a man with pluck and nerve to tackle the Big Horns at this season of the year, when the snow lies all the way from three to ten feet on the level." Stringer had laid in a supply of hay for his horses on the route, but still had to turn back, it was reported the next week. "It took him two days to go twelve miles on the top of the mountain, and he abandoned the trip, as the food for his horses gave out. He will try the trip again this week and thinks he can make it." (A month later "Bear George" McClellan, manager of Red Bank ranch, made it over the mountain at the request of certain nervous Nowooders to see what was going on during the Johnson County War.)

In that fall's electoral campaign, a new Buffalo paper, *The People's Voice*, used the basin's mail problems as one reason voters should oust the Republicans.[6]

> We have had facts laid before us lately that satisfy us that irregularities exist in the mail system of the basin that amount to criminalities, and we are going to show them up, and keep showing them up until they cease, and the people there get what the United States senators promised them when they were clamoring for their votes two years ago, and which promises have been totally ignored since that time.

The *Voice* claimed that sacks of mail on four routes had been thrown aside because they were too heavy to carry, and that coach drivers held up delivery by granting the wishes of female passengers who wanted to lay over a day. The paper criticized Warren for paying more attention to his arid-land bill, which it feared would benefit himself and other capitalists, than to the people's problems with the mail.

De Barthe soon moved on, but the *Bulletin* kept up the clamor for better mail service to the basin. On April 16, 1896, it carried a long article about a petition—

> signed by hundreds, praying for a daily mail serve between Buffalo and the basin. The petition sets for the the fact that Johnson county has, at considerable expense, owned and maintained a good wagon road across the Big Horn mountains, that the mail passing through Buffalo is the heaviest going into the basin, and that the increase in mail occasioned by the mining and irrigation interests demands and will repay an increase in postal facilities.

They also fumed about the inefficient routes and schedules drawn up by faraway functionaries who knew little about local conditions and cared less. Sometimes it could take 36 hours for mail to travel the 21 miles from Ten Sleep to Hyattville—and that was when the weather was good. Most infuriating was the scheduling of mail carriers to leave right before the arrival of the mail train, so that the sacks would sit in the station for two days until the next scheduled run. Complaints about poor postal service would continue to this day.

From his perch in Sheridan De Barthe began agitating for a road from there to the basin, to keep business from going to Billings or Casper. It would take decades for that to happen.

ANOTHER THORN in the side of the Nowood settlers was having no Justice of the Peace of their own. Richards suspected this was payback for his efforts to defeat a certain candidate for sheriff at the Republican county convention in October 1888. (He was not running for re-election as county commissioner.) He sent off a stiff letter to a prominent county politico who was chairman of the new board of county commissioners, Horace R. Mann.[1]

> My Dear Sir,
> The people of the basin have conceived the idea that it is to be the policy of the new Administration of County Affairs to not simply ignore us but to put us to all the inconvenience possible. We have been unable to secure a properly qualified officer who could administer oaths, and I can [not help] but think that some of the bonds were rejected for trivial causes, my own as Notary Public for instance.
>
> It is fifty miles from my home to the nearest Justice, supposed to be qualified, and when one has traveled that distance in mid winter, to qualify for an office which will accommodate the people to a greater extent than it will compensate the holder, it certainly looks like spite work to reject the bond, as Mr. Evans* did, without stating what was defective about it.
>
> It is presumed that this disposition to annoy us is the result of our daring to express our opinion in the Convention last Fall in opposition to the views of some of the Buffalo delegates. If this is the case I am as much entitled to punishment as any one, but I deprecate that way of paying political scores. Moreover, in a reasonably active participation in politics for a period of twenty years I have not learned that [it] is a capital offense to use a little independence in voting in convention. I write thus plainly to you, as one of the Republican leaders of this County, in order to learn if possible whether or not my conjectures above mentioned are correct, and whether it is to be peace or war between us. You and I can be mutually helpful to each other or otherwise. I prefer the former but it takes two to declare peace, while less unanimity will suffice for war. Hoping for an early reply, I am Yours Truly,

No reply is known to survive. But Richards sent a warm letter to Mann in October, congratulating him on being appointed register of the U.S. Land Office at Buffalo. Peace evidently had been declared.[2]

Still, Richards and his neighbors were not at peace with high mountains separating them from their government. Since it made sense for the basin to be one undivided county, he and others began to work toward this goal.

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*Warren A. Evans, county clerk

Despite the often daunting challenges, life in the new country agreed with William and his wife and daughters. But the living was insecure. The Big Horn Ditch project had hit a rough patch, and by early 1888 the company owed him $1,500. So how was he staying afloat? Payments for his work as county commissioner must have helped, and he was foreman of Crocker's outfit during the 1889 roundup. They considered selling one of Harriet's Oakland lots to buy cattle, but apparently decided not to. Finances must have been good enough that he did not seek re-election as county commissioner or try for any other office. At the end of his term he exercised some power at the county Republican convention in October 1888: his name was first of three (listed non-alphabetically) on the Committee of Resolutions named in a *Sentinel* article, and he gloated to Aut that he used eight proxy votes from the basin side of the county to "down" one candidate for sheriff.* Among the resolutions was a commendation of Delegate Carey for his support of statehood and better mail facilities for the territory and the county. Another resolution disapproved of the War Department's threat to remove troops from that part of Wyoming, "leaving the thinly settled portions of the country open to raids by hostile Indians at any time." There was no comment in his letters about the presidential election of 1888—an uncharacteristic lapse.

All in all, he was satisfied with their prospects and would "'stick,'" as he wrote his brothers in the autumn of 1888. Lon and Aut had recently sent good news themselves. Will replied to Lon, "glad to hear that you are getting along so well. I hope you will have no further trouble and will get the business upon a paying basis."[1] Aut, age 35, had become engaged to Grace Camden, daughter of Charles Camden, a prominent Northern California rancher. They did not marry until he advanced from clerk in the Oakland city assessor's office to deputy city assessor.[2]

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*Richards wrote his brother that the candidate was "an unnaturalized Englishman named Clark." Richards favored Delos Babcock, who was nominated after several ballots.[3] Democrat William G. "Red" Angus won the election.

Sources and notes

Page 1

1. All letters from his family are from the William A. Richards Collection, H82-61, Wyoming State Archives (WSA).
2. Nov. 11, 1886.
3. William A. Richards family papers 1870–1965, file 00118, American Heritage Center, Laramie, Wyo. (AHC).

Page 2

1. *The Big Horn Sentinel*, Oct. 2, 1886.
2. AHC. Handwritten "Echo, Oct. 1886." The *Buffalo Echo* existed from 1883-1892.

Page 3

1. *Sentinel*, Sept. 25 and Oct. 2, 1886.
2. Oct. 20, 1886.
3. *Sentinel*, Oct. 2, 1886.
4. Oct. 10, 1886.

Page 4

1. Nov. 27, 1886.
2. Dec. 1, 1886.
3. Nov. 30, 1886.
4. Dec. 25 and 29, 1886.
5. The Feb. 5, 1887, letter to Lon is the first Richards wrote after he began homesteading. He notes, "This is my first use of the Stylograph," a kind of carbon paper that enabled the writer to make a copy. The letters are on microfilm from the AHC, with typed copies in the WSA Richards collection of the more historically important letters. Those copies have been checked against the originals and corrected. William A. Richards Collection, H-215/MSS 83, WSA. A separate, small batch of original letters from 1888 and 1889, not on the microfilm, is at the WSA. (Author regrets losing track of its location but think it was in the Paul Frison collection.)
6. *The Cheyenne Daily Sun*, Jan. 20, 1887.

Page 5

1. T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 191–92.
2. Lawrence M. Woods, "When Cattle Came to—and then Left—the Nowood Valley," *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 89, No. 1, Winter 2017, 35.
3. measuringworth.com, purchasing power
4. Author regrets losing track of the source.
5. Ditto.

Page 6

1. *Sentinel,* Oct. 15, 1887.
2. Mrs. Alice McCreery and Tacetta B. Walker, "Wyoming's Fourth Governor—William A. Richards," *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 20, No. 2, July, 1948.
3. Unpublished memoirs at the Wyoming State Archives (Alice Richards McCreery collection, H63-86) and the American Heritage Center.

4. Author's collection. Last entry was in early 1911.

Page 8

1. Coleman went back to New York State in the fall of 1886 and brought back his wife and son, according to a story by Mrs. Frank Greet (Edna Lucille Pyle Greet) in the *Northern Wyoming Daily News* (Worland), when Mrs. Coleman was 93. The article does not say when they returned, but that happened in the spring of 1887, according to the article on Gus in *Progressive Men of the State of Wyoming*. (Chicago: A. W. Bowen & Co., 1903), with information likely supplied by him. Mrs. Greet's story is from an undated clipping in the Alice Richards McCreery collection, WSA, H54-78. It was published ca. 1952 according to a letter from her to Frison in author's collection.

2. Lawrence M. Woods, *Horace Plunkett in America: An Irish Aristocrat on the Wyoming Range*. (Norman, Oklahoma: The Arthur H. Clark Co., University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 127.

3. Mrs. Greet's article and Alice McCreery's recollections. The Shield ranch was owned by Beckwith & Quinn of Evanston.

4. Woods, *Plunkett*, 112.

5. Greet.

6. "Various Happenings in the Life of Alice Richards McCreery," Alice Richards McCreery collection, H63-86, WSA.

7. Bar X Bar photo scanned from cover of *Annals* issue containing Woods's "Cattle" article. Taken by Geoffroy W. Millais, son of the famous painter John Everett Millais and provided by Fred Drake.

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1. Woods, "Cattle," 36ff.

Page 10

1. Woods, email to author, Oct. 2, 2013

Page 11

1. Letter dated Sept. 1, 1888, from Richards to Coleman. *The Rustler*, April 12, 1890, has Coleman returning at the end of school year from Hyattville. *Rustler* microfilms from Coe Library, University of Wyoming.

2. *Buffalo Voice,* June 21, 1912.

Page 12

1. March 26, 1888.

2. Woods, "Cattle," 32-33

3. "Diary of Major Wise, an Englishman, recites details of Hunting Trip in Powder River Country in 1880." Howard Lott, ed. *Annals of Wyoming*, 1:12, April 1940, 87 ff. Plus other sources.

Page 13

1. Left side in author's collection, right side courtesy of the Washakie Museum and Cultural Center.

2. Dr. A. J. Woodcock, "A Hot Corner on Bears," *Recreation* magazine, Vol. IX, November 1893.

Page 14

1. Feb. 22, 1888.

2. swanlandandcattle.com/history; 1883 *Billings Post, Billings Herald* cited in Lawrence M. Woods's *Big Horn Basin: A Late Frontier*. (Spokane: The Arthur H. Clark Co. 1997), 117.

3. Larson, 187

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1. Woods, *Late Frontier*, 163.

2. *Ibid*., 115.

3. *Progressive Men*. Their cattle range is uncertain but they had ditch claim #1856 dated Aug. 2, 1886, with water taken from Spring Creek. Misc. Records "D," Johnson County Records, Basin, WY. Charles Burke's name is on a claim nearby, but it may just have been in his name. Bessie Burke's name is on the other claims. Mother Burke is listed along with six of her sons.

4. Alice R. McCreery, "Various Happenings."

Page 16

1. *Sentinel*, May 19, 1888.

2. *Buffalo Bulletin*, April 16, 1896.

3. J. Tom. Davis, *Glimpses of Greybull's Past: a History of a Wyoming Railroad Town from 1887–1967.* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2004), 298. It cites the Aug. 30, 1931, edition of the *Greybull Standard*. Courtesy of the Big Horn County Library.

4. Photo, Wyomingtalesandtrails.com. Hard information about road completion and paving has been difficult to obtain.

5. Woods, *Plunkett,* 49.

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1. Feb. 27, 1888.

2. Member biographies, U.S. Congress website: https://bioguide.congress/gov/, accessed Oct. 1, 2023, and other sources

3. W. A. Richards's diary, June 16, 1873, William A. Richards Collection, H-215/MSS 83, WSA. Also in author's *William A. Richards - Diaries of a Frontier Surveyor* (Brooklyn: Red Bank Press, 2023), 85.

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1. Member biographies, U.S. Congress website, multiple other sources including his autobiography; https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/francis-e-warren-massachusetts-farm-boy who changed wyoming/ accessed Oct. 1, 2023

2. https://wsglt.org/inspired-by-the-land-warren-livestock/ accessed Oct. 1, 2023

Page 19

1. Voter count from official returns in newspapers.

2. *Big Horn Sentinel*, May 12; McCreery-Walker article.

3. *Basin Republican,* June 30, 1911.

Page 20

1. *Laramie Boomerang,* Sept. 2, 1901.

Page 21

1. April 16, 1891
2. Nov. 19, 1891
3. June 28, 1892
4. Dec. 24, 1891
5. March 24, 1892
6. Sept. 10, 1892

Page 22

1. March 3, 1889
2. Oct. 5, 1889

Page 23

1. Sept. 18, 1888 to Lon; Oct 18, 1888 to Aut
2. Oakland city directories, 1888-89 and 1892-93
3. *Big Horn Sentinel*, Oct. 13