

With Six Guns Under Their Aprons

The Tiler stood guard at the door of the church with his sword over his shoulder – and his revolver under his apron.

It was May 13, 1892, in Buffalo, Johnson County Wyoming; two years after the U.S. Census Bureau declared the American frontier closed.

Freemason George Wellman has been shot in an ambush. The newly married ranch foreman had just been commissioned a deputy U.S. Marshal when a .44-40 caliber saddle carbine shot to his spine killed him instantly.

The Red Sash Gang of rustlers during the famed Johnson County Cattle War had sworn to kill him. They also threatened the lives of any who would bury him with proper ceremony.

The word from the gang leaders for Brother Wellman? “Potter’s Field for him.”

The gang was so feared and fearless they had set fire to a military barracks at Fort McKinney just outside Buffalo as a warning to the U.S. Army to stay out of their affairs.

Despite the threats of the gang, the Reverend Charles Duell and Brethren of Anchor Lodge No. 7 in Buffalo refused to be cowed, but instead chose to put their own lives in peril to see that their brother received a proper burial.

The vicar carried arms under his vestments and the Masons had six-guns under their aprons. It was said that the gang was impressed with the courage and combat potential of the Masons; the services and burial proceeded without incident.

The Johnson County Cattle War is the stuff of legend and movie scripts – literally – because it became in such a modern era. There were telephones, rails, telegraph, phonograph, and store bought clothing.

The Masonic Lodge was an old establishment. Newspapers were in print every week. Nobody considered it the dark ages.

Yet unlike more settled areas, Wyoming’s open range was covered with huge cattle herds owned by corporations that bought young cattle, fed them free on government grass, and then sold beef at profits.

Then in the 1880s, horrid winters brought huge losses. The cattlemen were very sensitive to anything that lessened their margins. And even the barren northern high plains drew their own tough settlers. Some were cowboys who yearned for something of their own. Nobody owned the grass and mavericking was easy.

Mavericking is putting your brand on a calf that has none. In practice, plenty of these ambitious cowboys gathered and claimed calves that still were with their branded mother.

That to the big cattlemen was theft. Rustling, as they put it.

As the Johnson County Cattle War wound down, Wellman was slain. Some in the Buffalo community during the famed cattle war were critical of the sheriff. “Red” Angus they said should have quickly chased down Wellman’s killer or killers but there was neither arrest nor prosecution.

Some believe that the killer was known throughout the community, although he got away free. And Angus? He was also a Mason and Knight Templar in the York Rite. On the other hand he was aligned in the public mind with the “rustler” side of the cattle war.

It was an interesting era.