

Edgar Beecher Bronson

NEBRASKA'S "RANCHMAN"

By Anne DeCorey

The 1870s were boom times for cattle ranching on the northern Great Plains. Longhorn cattle were being trailed up to Wyoming and Montana to meet the demands of speculators as rich easterners, and even members of the British nobility, invested money in four-footed stock in hopes of making a killing. Names of roads in this part of the West still bear witness to the high-rolling investors of those times, like Moreton Frewen, a British gentleman who built a log mansion in the upper Powder River basin in Wyoming.¹

Some of these moneyed sophisticates did turn a profit, but most of them held on too long and were wiped out by the combination of falling prices in the mid-1880s and the killing winter of 1886–87. One who got out in time, however, was a Sioux County, Nebraska, rancher named Edgar Beecher Bronson, who ran cattle on the Niobrara and White rivers from 1877 until 1882.²

Bronson is best known as the author of *Reminiscences of a Ranchman*, a volume of Wild West tales published in 1908.³ The book describes his arrival in Nebraska, his transformation from a tenderfoot to an experienced hand, his involvement with the Cheyennes' escape from Fort Robinson in 1879, and his decision to sell out before the bust. Historians and popular writers alike have cited the book. Mari Sandoz draws upon Bronson in *Cheyenne Autumn* for events surrounding the tribe's outbreak and

subsequent defeat, and Peter J. Powell uses *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* as a source for his Cheyenne history, *People of the Sacred Mountain*.⁴

Bronson's recollections, however, do not add up to a trustworthy historical source. *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* was written starting around 1904, a good

twenty-five years after most of the experiences contained in it, and was based, in Bronson's own words, on "not a single line of diary or memo." Although he consulted a few telegraphic dispatches and newspaper accounts, "for the rest, it was my memory alone for it."⁵ Often his memory failed him. Some of



Clarence King (left), seated in front of his tent during the 1867 survey of the fortieth parallel. National Archives and Records Administration

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the incidents related in *Reminiscences* appear to be garbled confluents of several events, misremembered by a middle-aged writer trying to recapture the exploits of his youth. Others are outright fabrications.

To mention a few: Bronson's account of the Cheyenne outbreak is rife with error, as is his description of a cattle-selling trip to Ogallala. He dated the establishment of Camp Robinson and the discovery of gold in the Black Hills as 1876, instead of 1874.⁶ He also errs in his account of friction at the Pine Ridge Agency before "the last great sun dance" of 1881. The cattleman omits some important details of his life in Nebraska and Wyoming, such as his involvement with the Cheyenne Club, not to mention his marriage. And while not an error of fact, Bronson's effusive chapter on the late Clarence King, first head of the United States Geological Survey and Bronson's former employer, is bizarre in light of Bronson's later chicanery. King installed Bronson as president of a bank he owned in El Paso, only to have Bronson divert funds to his own use, causing the bank to collapse in the Panic of 1893, ruining King.⁷

Born in 1856 in Bradford County, Pennsylvania, Edgar Beecher Bronson was the son of a "traveling merchant" and a mother who was said to be a second cousin to Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The family history written by his grandson, Lawrence Tweedy, says that young Bronson moved to New York to work for the *New York Tribune* in the 1870s.⁸ There, despite the family connection, he did the verbatim transcription of the adultery trial of Henry Ward Beecher in Brooklyn in 1875. The strain broke Bronson's health. In *Reminiscences*, Bronson says he suffered from "a brain fever," but recovered sufficiently to act as a "sort of secretary" for Clarence King from 1875 to 1877. King was then compiling the results of his 40th Parallel survey, and Bronson lent a hand with the paperwork. Inspired by King's stories of the West, Bronson obtained a job at the Wyoming

ranch of Nathaniel R. Davis, who had been one of King's field assistants.⁹

Bronson may not have been the first starry-eyed youngster King dispatched to points West, and he certainly wasn't the last. King's dealings in cattle in the late 1870s were extensive, and protégés like Bronson were given the task of assembling a herd. A few years after presenting him with Bronson, King promised Davis, "I have shipped you the last Kid."¹⁰



Nathaniel R. Davis. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

After learning the cattle business at Davis's ranch south of Cheyenne, Bronson went to work for the Lakota Cattle Company, whose principals were King; Abram S. Hewitt, King's friend and a member of the House of Representatives; Edward Cooper, Hewitt's partner in the steel business, his relative by marriage, and the son of a mayor of New York; James T. Gardiner, a former Yale classmate of King's and survey assistant; and two locals, Reuben Rickard and Raphael Pumpelly, a mining engineer.¹¹

Sioux County, Nebraska, was open range in those days, and the Lakota

Cattle Company's animals were among the first, if not the first, to be raised there. Bronson took up residence on Deadman Creek, five miles south of Fort Robinson. No trace remains today of the log cabin he occupied, although nails and old shell casings still litter the area. The brand of the Deadman was "three crows," depicted like this: .¹² The area his cattle grazed was registered with the fledgling Wyoming Stock Growers Association and described as "White River from its head down to Fort Robinson, twenty miles, and also twenty miles of the Niobrara, averaging fourteen miles to the south of the White River range."¹³

Reminiscences of a Ranchman opens with Bronson, King, and members of his field staff chatting during a lull in work at King's family home in Newport, Rhode Island, but the bulk of the chapter is a long and wholly irrelevant anecdote by King about a salty old frontiersman, his dog, and his horse.

In succeeding chapters, Bronson goes on to give an account of his own arrival in the West to work for Davis. Bronson's privileged perspective on ranching is indicated by his dining the first evening at Davis's table, with its "snowy linen and gleaming silver and cut glass."¹⁴

Throughout the book, in fact, Bronson drops names with abandon, presenting himself rubbing shoulders with famous Indian agent Valentine McGillycuddy, and John Bourke, the army officer who authored the classic frontier volume *On the Border With Crook*.¹⁵ Yet Bronson is equally determined to paint himself as a pull-no-punches buckaroo.

Various sections of *Reminiscences* show Bronson managing to gentle an outlaw horse with treats of sugar, the nasty foreman's attempt to sabotage this budding relationship, and Bronson's brave confrontation of him. Then, the self-styled "tenderfoot" successfully completes the impossible task the foreman sets for him—driving a cow and her calf back to the home ranch through range country filled with numerous cow com-

panions she is eager to rejoin.

Bronson later buys cattle in Wyoming, suffers a stampede, and faces down a pistol-toting employee by saying, "Drop her!" He winters his herd north of Laramie where he breaks a cowboy mutiny by hiring scab labor, sending the mutineers off on foot to walk back to civilization. He travels to Deadwood on the stage to recover rustled cattle and takes part in the army's pursuit and defeat of the Cheyennes who escaped from Fort Robinson in 1879.

The ranchman also takes a cattle-selling trip to Ogallala, where he witnesses a flood and a "waterspout." In an anecdote that is almost certainly neither true nor original, he takes one of his hands to Chicago, where "Concho Curly" is so carried away by the opera that he jumps onstage to interpose himself between the soprano and her knife-wielding, would-be assassin, much to the delight of the audience.¹⁶ In 1882, sensing that the cattle business had reached the crest of the boom, Bronson sold out and departed the country by stage.

Enormous portions of *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* are written in "cowboy dialect," which makes it close to unreadable. "One day, about three years ago, I got started—when to my surprise I found it difficult to think or write in any other than the old idiom," Bronson brags in a letter to Bartlett Richards, who took over management of the ranch after Bronson left.¹⁷ An example:

Th' oldest rawhide livin', one that rid a runnin' iron fo' a hobby-hoss, wi' a rawhide hobble fo' a bridle, 'fore he was big enough t' fork a pony, 'n' was bornded w' cow sense from his daddy, 'n' was throwin' strings at th' cat 'fore he could swing a rope, has t' cash in his last stack o' breath, 'n' turn into buzzard feed 'thout learnin' all th' meanness plannin' below th' horn wrinkles 'v a moss-back.¹⁸

By the time Bronson was writing his reminiscences, he was mining a vein that had already been worked for decades, not only in newspaper accounts, but in dime novels as well. He is telling readers the story they expect to hear, featuring stock characters speaking the



Little Wolf (standing) and Dull Knife. NSHS-RG1227:10-3

way such fictions are expected to talk. His are less reminiscences than tall tales into which the author has inserted himself as a character.

Bronson's weakness as a source lies in his predilection to write history as if he had witnessed it, even when the events he relates are imaginative recre-

ations. Bronson's account of his speedy return from Wyoming upon hearing that Dull Knife's Indians were approaching his ranch is one instance.

Certainly Bronson was in the area of Fort Robinson in late 1878 and early 1879, when the Northern Cheyennes who had been resettled in Oklahoma

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left their agency and made their famous trek north, unsuccessfully pursued by U.S. troops across Kansas and the Nebraska Sand Hills. Hopping upon his horse, ND, Bronson covers the 121 miles home in twenty-four hours—a ride reminiscent of that of John “Portugee” Phillips, who in 1866 rode 236 miles from Fort Phil Kearny to Fort Laramie with dispatches telling of the Fetterman Massacre.¹⁹ Phillips remained in the area as a rancher and often played host to travelers between Cheyenne and the Black Hills.²⁰ Bronson could hardly have missed hearing of Phillips’s famous ride, which had also been retold in print several times between 1875 and 1910, increasingly embellished with fabrications and myths.²¹

Bronson commits a more serious error when he describes how an advance party of Dull Knife’s Cheyennes robs trader Clay Dear’s store, then escapes to Crow Butte. Although encircled by troops from nearby Fort Robinson, the Indians manage to slip away during the night. Something of the sort did happen at Crow Butte, a notable landmark in the Nebraska Panhandle located about nine miles east of Bronson’s headquarters on Deadman Creek. The battle, however, was in 1849 and involved the Brulés and the Crows. A Crow raiding party had run off horses from James Bordeaux’s trading post and part of the group had taken refuge atop Crow Butte—which was so named because of the incident. Lakota warriors, in pursuit of the horses on behalf of Bordeaux, remained down below, hoping to outwait the Crows. Unfortunately the horse thieves managed to slip away during the night with the stolen animals, prompting Bordeaux to file a claim with the government.²²

Bronson’s memory fails him again when he attempts to sort out the movements of the Cheyennes heading north from Oklahoma. He correctly says that the group under Chief Dull Knife surrendered near Chadron, Nebraska, some thirty miles east of Fort Robinson, to which they were then taken. But

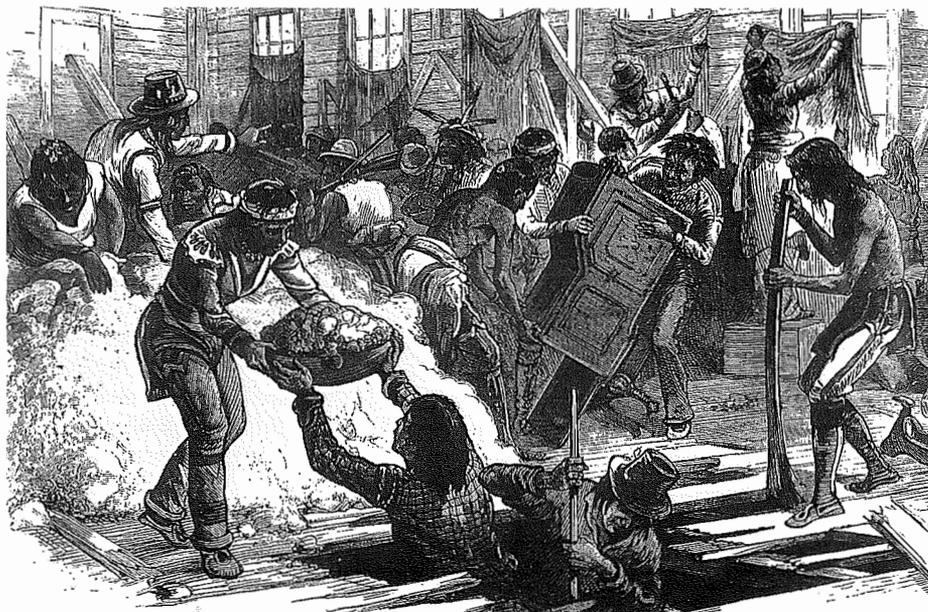
Bronson incorrectly claims that the group of Cheyennes under Little Wolf arrived that very fall in Canada, where they joined the Sioux under Sitting Bull. This alleged journey of more than a thousand miles in fewer than fifty days “is not excelled in the annals of warfare,” Bronson writes.²³ In fact, after separating from Dull Knife north of the Platte River in Nebraska, Little Wolf’s Cheyennes spent the winter in the Sand Hills. They surrendered to the army the following spring in eastern Montana, where they were allowed to stay.²⁴

Bronson has apparently conflated two well-known and roughly contemporary Indian treks, the Cheyennes’ and the Nez Perce’s. After being ordered onto the Lapwai reservation in Idaho in 1877, the Nez Perce set off on a 1,300-mile journey, hoping to arrive in Canada and seek refuge with Sitting Bull. One group, under White Bird, did make it to Canada, although the unhappy surrender of Chief Joseph and his pledge to “fight no more forever” is better known.²⁵

Bronson is also on shaky ground



“The Defiance of Dull Knife.” Edgar Beecher Bronson, *Cowboy Life on the Western Plains: The Reminiscences of a Ranchman* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1910)



“The Imprisoned Cheyennes Fortifying Their Temporary Quarters at Fort Robinson.” Frank Leslie’s *Illustrated Newspaper*, Feb. 15, 1879

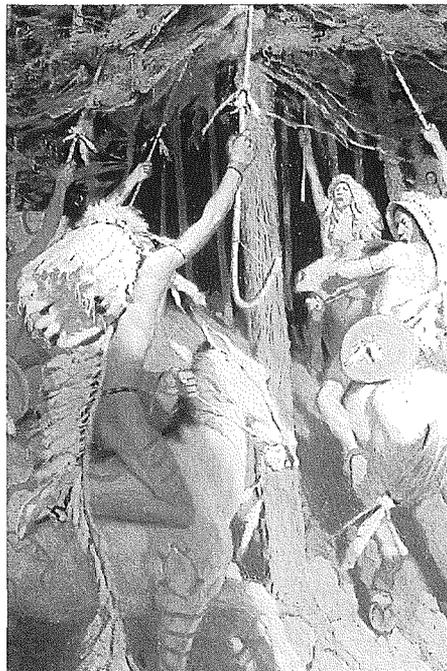
when he describes a meeting that included officers of Fort Robinson, Cheyenne leader Dull Knife, and Lakota leader Red Cloud, at whose agency the captured Cheyennes were negotiating to remain. He summarizes speeches by both Red Cloud and Dull Knife, and also notes the presence of Dull Knife's son, Buffalo Hump, who paced the room angrily although saying nothing.²⁶

Notes taken at the army's official inquiry into the events surrounding the Cheyennes' confinement do indicate that Red Cloud visited the imprisoned Indians and that a council had taken place, but the witness mentions the meeting only briefly, without Bronson's dramatic description. (Investigators were more concerned with determining whether the visiting Sioux were the source of the guns and rifles with which the Cheyennes made their escape.) Nonetheless, Cheyenne historian Peter Powell repeats the speeches Bronson places in the mouths of Red Cloud and Dull Knife in his *People of the Sacred Mountain*.²⁷

Later in the book Bronson also confuses the facts concerning another confrontation. In this case, an angry Brulé chief and a group of cohorts burst into Indian Agent Valentine McGillicuddy's office on the Pine Ridge Reservation, demanding food and threatening to kill all the white men on the reservation if they don't get it. The leader is faced down by the brave McGillicuddy, who forcibly pushes him from the room. Indian police chief George Sword then arrives with his men and backs up McGillicuddy, Bronson, Capt. John G. Bourke, and several other visiting white men before the Brulés finally retreat.²⁸ This event supposedly took place just before "the last great Sun Dance," which Bronson dates to "1880 or 1881, I cannot be certain which," a lack of exactitude characteristic of his memoir.

The incident featuring the threatening Brulés may have been inspired by a confrontation between Red Cloud and Valentine McGillicuddy (with whom the chief had a long-running feud) that

took place around the time of the 1881 sun dance. James Olson recounts the meeting in *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem*. Olson provides another clue to Bronson's confusion. Red Cloud and George Sword were also enemies and had several rancorous disputes. Once more, Bronson appears to have conflated several disparate events. In



"The Mystery Tree." Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* (1910)

any event, neither McGillicuddy in official reports, nor Bourke in his diary, mention such an episode.²⁹

Bronson's account of the Sun Dance takes up an entire chapter in *Reminiscences*. While Bronson witnessed the Sun Dance in 1881, he embellished and considerably garbled the actual ceremonies. Bronson claims the whole affair occupied seven days. In fact, the 1881 Sun Dance lasted only three days according to Bourke, whose diary carefully recorded such observations as part of his ethnographic studies.³⁰

The cattleman exercises his imagination once more to dramatize his own role in the Cheyenne outbreak. Follow-

ing word of the night escape, Bronson and a young ranch employee ride to the fort and on the way encounter the bodies of dead and wounded Cheyennes. Among them Bronson recognizes Buffalo Hump, son of Dull Knife, the warrior who had been stalking angrily about the meeting. Buffalo Hump lay on his back with a small knife in his hand, and as Bronson halts near him, the warrior suddenly sits up and aims the knife at the cattleman's leg. Bronson pulls his gun to protect himself, but Buffalo Hump just as suddenly falls dead. After taking the knife and its sheath from the dead Indian, Bronson and his young man continue to the fort.³¹ In fact, Dull Knife's son, Bull Hump, survived the outbreak. After escaping with the old chief and hiding in the rough country north of the fort, the family traveled to the Pine Ridge Reservation, where they remained.³²

The army's investigation into the outbreak paid special attention to the activities of civilians. Soldiers testifying were at pains to pin on them the blame for mutilations of male Indians and the indecent exposure of female Indians. Luckily for him, Bronson's name is not mentioned by any of the witnesses, for their descriptions of civilians treasure hunting among the dead are far from edifying.³³

Nebraska's ranchman is no more reliable in his account of a trip to Ogallala in July 1882 to sell 1,500 head of cattle. Checking in at the Spofford House on July 2, Bronson finds assembled there "a familiar bunch of famous Texas cattle kings," among them Shanghai Pierce, Seth Mayberry, Dillon Fant, Jim Ellison, John Lytle, Dave Hunter, and Jess Presnall. No sooner had Bronson greeted his old cronies than the temperature dropped, a "waterspout" swept through town, and the streets of Ogallala filled with water. Men, cattle, and parts of houses were caught in the flood that roared by, as the guests at the Spofford watched from the second floor.

Once more, Bronson has rearranged chronology to give himself a starring role. The *Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph* of

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“Inside View of Sun Dance, pole and circle, 29 June 1883,” near Pine Ridge Agency. NSHS-RG1910-8

July 1, 1882, mentions a very heavy rain of the previous Monday, June 26, which rendered the streets of Ogallala impassable, but notes neither floating livestock nor tornado. The Sidney newspaper also lists the stockmen who were staying at the Spofford House that week of 1882. Bronson is not among them.³⁴

In his typical manner, though, Bronson paints himself into a group portrait of the most famous cattlemen of the late nineteenth century, although he mangles several of their names. Shanghai Pierce was one of the earliest Texans to accumulate longhorns. He started before the Civil War, and eventually owned a quarter-million-acre ranch. Another Confederate veteran and cattle pioneer was Seth Mabry, while Dillard Fant was a well-

known trail driver, responsible for the safe arrival of thousands of longhorns in Kansas. Jesse Presnall was also a cattleman and trail driver, as was John T. Lytle, who made a fortune in the business. The man whom Bronson calls Jim Ellison may be Texas cattleman Jesse Ellison, nicknamed Bud. He, however, did not drive a herd north in 1882, so is unlikely to have been in Ogallala.³⁵

Bronson's stay in Ogallala in 1882 was also allegedly enlivened by two events involving cowboys and shootouts. The first he mentions only in passing, noting that the sheriff had to shoot two cowboys from the Hunter and Evans outfit while quelling a disturbance. In fact, two Hunter and Evans cowboys were killed during the uproar he alludes

to, which had taken place three years earlier in 1879.³⁶ Interestingly, a “destructive cyclone” did strike Nebraska the same week the Hunter and Evans cowboys were shot, but it struck along the Loup River, not the Platte.³⁷ Again Bronson may be conflating two trips to the cattle town.

The second shoot'em up involved the owner of the bar in which Bronson and his friends were drinking, William Tucker (although Bronson gives his name as Jim) and his antagonist, William Thompson. As Bronson tells it, he and his Texas cattle friends are in the midst of a prank that involved a bearded cowhand arraying himself in several articles of women's clothing and asking cowboys to dance. In the midst of the fun, Thompson enters Tucker's bar and, nursing an old grievance, shoots the owner. As Thompson exits, Tucker in turn shoots him fatally in the back. Thompson's body is brought back into the bar and the party continues.³⁸

Again, a contemporary newspaper account sets the record straight. The Tucker-Thompson set-to took place in 1880, not 1882. Thompson entered the bar and shot Tucker, who returned fire. Thompson, however, survived the attack, was carried to his hotel to nurse his wounds along with his grievance, and later skipped town.³⁹ What is most interesting about Bronson's account is that by the first years of the twentieth century such instances of bloodshed have become ripping good yarns. At the actual time, gun violence was seen for what it was, and deplored by newspapers much as drive-by shootings are today.⁴⁰

In addition to embellishing his experiences in the West, Bronson also commits sins of omission. He neglects to mention that in 1880, with several rich acquaintances, he became one of the first members of the Cheyenne Club. He was also a founding member of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. But perhaps the most surprising omission in *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* is Bronson's wife. She appears in the ledger of the Lakota Cattle Company on

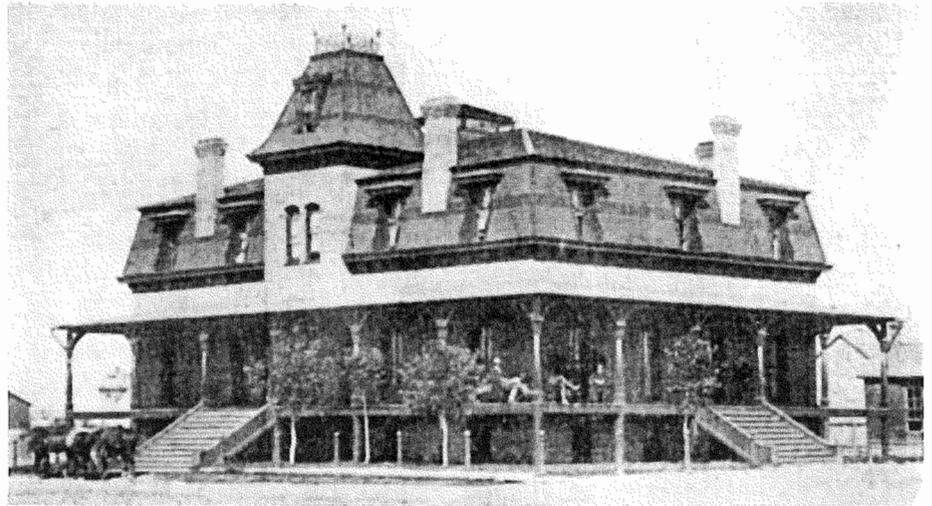
January 31, 1882, as “wife” and on July 2, 1882, as “Mrs. Bronson.”⁴¹

In his biographical entry of Bronson’s life in the Sioux County centennial history, Lawrence L. Tweedy explains the mysterious wife. Her name was Grace Vernon Ross, and she was the daughter of Capt. Francis H. Ross, who was stationed at Fort D. A. Russell near Cheyenne. The account says the young couple lived in Cheyenne after their marriage in 1882, and that a daughter, also named Grace, was born there in 1883.⁴² The problem with this story is that Captain Ross was discharged from the army at his own request in 1870 and would not have been an officer at Fort Russell when Bronson came to Cheyenne.⁴³

Still, Bronson may have met the family at the Cheyenne Club. According to Agnes Wright Spring’s history of the club, its aristocratic eastern members, whose tastes ran to champagne and good cigars, socialized with the families of officers (and perhaps former officers) from Fort D. A. Russell. Band concerts, military balls, horse races, New Year’s calls, and amateur theatricals helped while away the time for both civilians and the military.⁴⁴

Bronson apparently spent a great deal of time in Cheyenne because of his involvement with the club. A neighbor in Sioux County, fellow rancher James H. Cook, notes in his memoirs that Bronson lived for the greater part of the year in Cheyenne, and employed men to care for his herd and ranch. This may explain the curious lack in *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* of any description of the day-to-day operation of the ranch. Bronson listed Cheyenne, Wyoming, as well as Fort Robinson, Nebraska, as his addresses in the Wyoming Stock Growers Association brand book in 1882.⁴⁵

The criteria for membership and the level of opulence maintained at the Cheyenne Club indicate the sort of men who were attracted to the cattle boom in Nebraska and Wyoming in the 1870s and 1880s. Most of the organizers were graduates of Harvard, Yale, Princeton,



The Cheyenne Club. American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Dartmouth, or Columbia; early members also included Moreton and Richard Frewen, members of the British aristocracy. The appointments of the club rivaled anything in New York or London, and great care was devoted to stocking the cellar with good wine.

A letter from William Sturgis, Jr. dated January 1880, invites Bronson to join what was then being called the Cactus Club. The facility would include a billiard room, a reading room, and a good—Sturgis stresses the word—restaurant, at dues of thirty dollars a year and an entrance fee of fifty dollars. Papers from the Cheyenne Club at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming give some indication of how Bronson was spending his time in the capital city.⁴⁶

From August through December 1882, Bronson visited the Cheyenne Club on thirty-seven different days. He was clearly not staying there, since he incurred no expenses for room or laundry. He managed to squeeze in a billiards game on about half of those visits, which were well lubricated. Scarcely a day goes by without some bar tab or other, ranging from \$.10 (a glass of beer?) to \$11.65 (rounds for the house?). The good restaurant, on the other hand, received his patronage only once or twice a month.

Like many Cheyenne Club members, Bronson was also active in the nascent Wyoming Stock Growers Association, even though his herds were in Nebraska. Cheyenne was the capital of open-range ranching in that part of the West, and even today Sioux County is closer in spirit to Cheyenne than to Lincoln, and economically continues to have more in common with the Cowboy State than the Cornhusker one.⁴⁷

Bronson had been among the first members of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, having joined perhaps as early as 1877, when it was still being called the Stock Association of Laramie County.⁴⁸ He was one of two members “charged with the interests of the Ass’n in Sioux Co., Nebraska,” and received communication on its behalf involving the annual roundup.⁴⁹

Since Bronson seems so eager to advertise his accomplishments, his omission of the Cheyenne Club and the Wyoming Stock Growers from his recollections seems curious. Perhaps it was simply his desire to portray himself as a working cowman, rather than as an effete sophisticate. Or, it could have stemmed from the later participation of members of the two groups in the notorious Johnson County War.

The Wyoming Stock Growers Association staged a vigilante action in Johnson

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County, Wyoming, in 1892 to stop alleged rustling.⁵⁰ Although Bronson was not among the “invaders,” he certainly knew at least one man who was. Ed deBilliers accompanied the group that later killed two cowboys at the TA Ranch near Buffalo. His name also appears in the records of the Lakota Cattle Company; Bronson appears to have written him a check for one hundred dollars in January of 1882.⁵¹

Although *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* is Edgar Beecher Bronson’s best-known piece of writing, he authored other works as well. *Red-Blooded Heroes of the Frontier*, another collection of cowboy tales, mentions that Bronson was sent to Mexico after he left Nebraska in 1882 by one of the partners in the Deadman operation, James T. Gardiner. By his account, Bronson was to scout out some acreage in Coahuila that the partners wanted to stock with cattle. Bronson also wrote magazine pieces and the book *In Closed Territory*, about his adventures hunting wild animals in Africa. Shortly after his death on February 4, 1917, an article appeared in the *New York Times* chronicling the life of the man the paper referred to as “a great adventurer.”⁵² Bronson may very well have written this, too: He had apparently prepared a brief “obituary” of himself for submission to the Camp-Fire Club, an adventurers’ group similar in spirit to Boone and Crockett.⁵³

The *Times* piece rather overstates Bronson’s importance, mentioning him in the same breath with Buffalo Bill, who had died a month earlier. The account links them both as having been “colored with the romance of the western plains,” and paints Bronson battling hostile Indians, cyclones, blizzards, and outlaws.⁵⁴ Even Teddy Roosevelt makes an appearance, saying that Edgar Beecher Bronson was ahead of him all his life, having just left Mombasa as T. R. was arriving. The article is as significant for what it omits—Bronson’s cheating of Clarence King—as for what it fabricates—two anecdotes that harken all

the way back to Bronson’s days on the *New York Tribune*.

Bronson seems always to have made much of his friendship with Clarence King, dedicating *Reminiscences* to him and even naming his oldest son after King. In *Reminiscences* Bronson adopts an almost worshipful tone while writing about his former employer and a man he considered an intimate, and appends an effusive recounting of the life of King, who had died in 1901.⁵⁵

After working for King as a secretary when he was not yet twenty-one, Bronson maintained his association with the older man after the Lakota Cattle Company was dissolved. At some point King made Bronson president of a bank in El Paso that King owned, a decision that ended in disaster for both men. Bronson may have had money troubles of his own in the Panic of 1893. He certainly caused some for King by illegally diverting the bank’s funds to his own use and causing the institution’s collapse. King was ruined. Bronson’s activities were dubious enough to warrant a federal indictment for “willful misapplication of National Bank funds.”⁵⁶

The *New York Times* story also mentions an anecdote that Bronson had apparently related at the National Arts Club shortly before his death. As an enterprising young reporter, he had once trailed New York Governor Samuel J. Tilden for eleven hours, following the governor from New York City to his residence in Albany, waiting until office seekers had bent his ear and Mrs. Tilden had ushered out dinner guests. Finally, at midnight, Tilden talked to the newsman, and “came across with two columns of front-page stuff.”⁵⁷

Another oft-repeated tale of bravery also concerns Bronson as a reporter, this time while he was working at the Henry Ward Beecher trial in Brooklyn. As Bronson’s grandson tells it, after a long day at the trial Bronson discovered that no ferries were running back to Manhattan because the East River was frozen. The enterprising young man jumped onto the ice and began to hike.

He fell in, but made it across, crawling and swimming, five hours later.⁵⁸ Bronson submitted this incident, as well as his slaying of “the third largest record elephant ever killed” in Africa, to the Camp-Fire Club to lobby for inclusion on its highest honors list.⁵⁹

A few days after the posthumous feature story appeared in the February 11 *New York Times*, a missive in the “Letters to the Editor” section shot holes in its credibility.⁶⁰ Tilden, the letter writer pointed out, was a lifelong bachelor—the incident Bronson described never occurred, the author of the correction said flatly. And Bronson had not crossed the ice to deliver word of the Beecher verdict to the *New York Tribune*. There was no verdict in the trial; the jury was discharged after failing to agree. That had happened on July 2, 1875, when the East River was not at all likely to be frozen. Nor had Bronson covered the trial for the *Tribune*. Of that the letter writer was sure—because he had covered the trial for that paper. Unfortunately, the identity of the letter writer may be impossible to ascertain—he signed his name with the pseudonym “Senex,” which means simply “old man.” The *Tribune*’s stories covering the Beecher trial contained no byline.

Despite its deficiencies, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* has been credited as a reliable source. Agnes Wright Spring, for instance, takes Bronson’s word for his being accepted among the cowboys as “a good sport” who was “serious about the cattle business.” Mari Sandoz repeats Bronson’s rather heroic account of his activities during the Cheyennes’ escape from Fort Robinson in 1879, and even writes him some dialogue.⁶¹ Peter J. Powell credits the ranchman’s encounter with one of Dull Knife’s sons the morning after the outbreak, but corrects the identification as Little Hump. Nellie Snyder Yost uses Bronson’s account of the Ogallala flood and tornado in her account of the history of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association.⁶²

A book chronicling the exploits of



The log building at left center is the 1874 cavalry barracks in which the Cheyennes were imprisoned at Fort Robinson. NSHS-RG4488-21

the British gentlemen who dabbled in the cattle business in the Wild West repeats Bronson's story of taming the outlaw horse with sugar, only to have the foreman sabotage his efforts. Powell uses the speech Bronson imagined for Red Cloud in his own description of the Lakota chiefs' sad meeting with the Cheyennes imprisoned at Fort Robinson just before their breakout.⁶³

Folks closer to home were less impressed. Grant Shumway's history of the Nebraska Panhandle published in 1921 casts a colder eye upon Bronson's accomplishments. The volume appears to have been compiled from the work of several researchers. The section devoted to Sioux County refers rather disparagingly to Edgar Beecher Bronson:

It is difficult to call a restless mortal like Edgar Beecher Bronson a ranchman because he tarried on Soldier Creek for a few weeks or months, or on the Niobrara a similar length of time. There were many fly-by-nights that came and tarried, then went into oblivion, or distinction as the case may be, that are as entitled to be called ranchmen as is Bronson.⁶⁴

The author of this chapter is clearly referring to Bronson's *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* and appears to wish upon Bronson oblivion, rather than even the modest distinction he received.

Like many reminiscences, much of Bronson's account fails to stand up to historical scrutiny. Its acceptance derived from authorship by a skilled writer, who was at least peripherally connected to many of the events he de-

scribes, and from its appearance at a time when the public greedily devoured "wild west" offerings such as exhibitions, reminiscences, dime novels, and even early films. Once *Reminiscences of a Ranchman's* reputation had solidified, subsequent readers have tended to give it more weight than it deserves. Ironically, the criticism of Bronson in the Shumway history has a hollow ring to it; the latter work is also riddled with errors and fabrications about the history of western Nebraska.

Notes

¹ Gene M. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) covers this period.

² Bronson says he came West in 1875 (Edgar Beecher Bronson, *Cowboy Life on the Western Plains: Reminiscences of a Ranchman* [Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1910], 4, 5, 24), but also dates his trip to two years after the Henry Ward Beecher trial, which concluded in 1875 (p. 25). He seems to have arrived sometime during 1877, when he bought his first herd. Bronson's grandson, Lawrence Tweedy of Medford, Oregon, has his ancestor's papers but is loath to talk about what they contain. Tweedy fears competition for a book he says he is preparing about Edgar Beecher Bronson.

³ First published in 1908, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* came out in a revised and expanded edition two years later and was reprinted as a University of Nebraska Press Bison Book in 1962.

⁴ Mari Sandoz, *Cheyenne Autumn* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1953; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1992); Peter J. Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

⁵ Bronson to Bartlett Richards, Apr. 5, 1910, quoted in Bartlett Richards, Jr. and Ruth Van

Ackeren, *Bartlett Richards: Nebraska Sandhills Cattleman* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1980), 187.

⁶ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 132–33.

⁷ Thurman Wilkins, *Clarence King* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 338–39.

⁸ Bronson's grandson gives his birthplace as Ithaca, New York. Lawrence L. Tweedy, "Bronson, Edgar Beecher," in *Sioux County History: The First Hundred Years, 1886–1986* (Harrison Community Club, 1986), 332. An article published in the *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1917, after Bronson's death lists his birthplace as Bradford County, Pennsylvania.

⁹ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 4–5, 24–25, 325.

¹⁰ Wilkins, *Clarence King*, 227; Richards and Van Ackeren, *Bartlett Richards*, 41.

¹¹ Richards and Van Ackeren, *Bartlett Richards*, 40–44; Bartlett Richards Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter NSHS), Lincoln.

¹² Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 115. The brand is shown as only two crows, however, in the Wyoming Stock Growers Association Brand Book, 1882, Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne.

¹³ Wyoming Stock Growers Association Brand Book, 1882, 20.

¹⁴ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 28.

¹⁵ John G. Bourke, *On the Border With Crook* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891; reprint Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 1971). A biography of Bourke is Joseph Porter's *Paper Medicine Man: John Gregory Bourke and his American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986).

¹⁶ Opera buffs should be able to figure out what work this is from the words of the aria: "Maudite! Folle! Folle! Say fini!"

¹⁷ Bronson to Richards, Apr. 10, 1910, quoted in Richards and Van Ackeren, *Bartlett Richards*, 187.

¹⁸ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 76.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152–56. Bronson also wrote an account

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of his own ride which is in the E. B. Bronson Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Cheyenne.

²⁰ "Phillips, John (Portugee)" in Dan L. Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, 3 vols. (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1988; reprint Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1991), 3:1140.

²¹ See Robert A. Murray, "The John 'Portugee' Phillips Legends, A Study in Wyoming Folklore," in Murray, *The Army on the Powder River* (Bellevue, Nebr.: The Old Army Press, 1969), 11–26.

²² Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "The Battle of Crow Butte," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1969): 2–4.

²³ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 158.

²⁴ George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 409–12.

²⁵ Alvin M. Josephy Jr., *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); William Frederick Zimmer, *Frontier Soldier: An Enlisted Man's Journal of the Sioux and Nez Perce Campaigns, 1877*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1998).

²⁶ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 211–20.

²⁷ Division of the Missouri, Special File, Inquiry into the Cheyenne Outbreak, 1879, No. 20, 204, RG98, Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, National Archives and Records Administration, microfilm copy in RG501, NSHS; Powell, *Sacred Mountain*, 2:1188–89.

²⁸ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 211–20.

²⁹ James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 273–74, 277ff. Red Cloud's meeting with McGillicuddy at the time of the sun dance of 1879 is recounted in Pine Ridge Agency Letters, "Loose Documents," National Archives and Records Administration, Microcopy 1282, RG508, Roll 166, NSHS. Julia B. McGillicuddy's biography of her late husband, *McGillicuddy Agent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1941), describes an 1881 incident in which Little Chief of the Cheyennes, whose band was staying at Red Cloud's camp, en-

gaged in sabre-rattling vis a vis McGillicuddy. Sword and his men kept the peace. Bronson may have had this event in mind as well.

³⁰ John G. Bourke Diaries 40, 41, 1452–1529, originals at U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, NY, microfilm in RG28, NSHS.

³¹ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 181–83.

³² Powell, *Sacred Mountain*, 2:1205, 1207, 1238, 1243, 1244; Joe Starita, *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge* (New York: Putnam, 1995).

³³ Inquiry into the Cheyenne Outbreak, 1879.

³⁴ "Ogallala Notes," *Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph*, July 1, 1882. This is the only note from Ogallala for the month.

³⁵ Biographies of these men are in Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography* and Hunter J. Marvin, ed., *The Trail Drivers of Texas* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1925).

³⁶ *Sidney Telegraph*, July 12, 1879; *North Platte Republican*, July 12, 1879; *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 14, 1879; Karen Stansbery, "The Law at the End of the Trail: Ogallala, 1873–1887," *Nebraska History* 79 (Spring 1998): 7.

³⁷ *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 14, 1879; Stansbery, "The Law," 7.

³⁸ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, 267–73.

³⁹ *Sidney Telegraph*, June 26, 1880; Stansbery, "The Law," 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; *Omaha Republican*, July 12, 1879.

⁴¹ Lakota Cattle Company Papers, MS1148, NSHS.

⁴² Tweedy, "Bronson," 333.

⁴³ Frances B. Heitman, comp., *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1903), 1:846.

⁴⁴ Agnes Wright Spring, *The Cheyenne Club: Mecca of the Aristocrats of the Old Time Cattle Range* (Kansas City: Don Ornduff, 1961), 10.

⁴⁵ James H. Cook, *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 273; Wyoming Stock Growers Association Brand Book, 1882, 20.

⁴⁶ Cheyenne Club Letterpress Book, 1880–84; Cheyenne Club Members Ledger 1882–84 and 1885–86; Wyoming Stock Growers Association Pa-

pers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Box 197, Folders 1 and 2.

⁴⁷ Wilkins, *Clarence King*, 222.

⁴⁸ Applications for Membership, April 1883–86; Membership Ledger 1874–81; WSGA Papers, Boxes 43 and 46, Folders 4, 7, and 12.

⁴⁹ WSGA Papers, Box 46, Folder 12; Valentine McGillicuddy to E. B. Bronson, June 8, 1881, and Mar. 21, 1882, Miscellaneous letters sent by agent or superintendent at Pine Ridge Agency, 1876–1914, National Archives and Records Administration Microcopy 1229, RG 508, Roll 214, NSHS.

⁵⁰ Helena Huntington Smith, *The War on Powder River* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966; reprint, Bison Books, 1967).

⁵¹ Lakota Cattle Company Papers.

⁵² Edgar Beecher Bronson, *The Red-Blooded Heroes of the Frontier* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1910), 194–96; *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1917.

⁵³ Edmund Seymour to Edgar Beecher Bronson, Apr. 3, 1915, E. B. Bronson Biographical File, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

⁵⁴ *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1917.

⁵⁵ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, chap. fourteen.

⁵⁶ Wilkins, *Clarence King*, 338–39, 414n.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1917.

⁵⁸ Tweedy, "Bronson," 332.

⁵⁹ Edmund Seymour to E. M. Gill, June 6, 1911, in Bronson Biographical File and Edmund Seymour Biographical File, University of Wyoming.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1917.

⁶¹ Spring, *Cheyenne Club*, 16; Sandoz, *Cheyenne Autumn*, 173–74, 188, 195, 204.

⁶² Powell, *Sacred Mountain*, 2:1207; Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range, the Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 58–59, 98–100, 125.

⁶³ Lawrence M. Woods, *British Gentlemen in the Wild West* (New York: Free Press/Macmillan, 1989), 73–74; Powell, *Sacred Mountain*, 2:1188–89.

⁶⁴ Grant L. Shumway, ed., *History of Western Nebraska and Its People*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1921), 2:280.