



The Grand Tetons, Wyoming

Tense Times in Casper Wyoming

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In 1888 Kenneth MacRae, then 23 years old, left his home near the Conon River in the Mid-Ross area of the Highlands, to cross the Atlantic for a new life in the USA. He was one of the eight children of John and Grace MacRae who were crofters at Arcan on the Fairburn Estate. We do not know his plans or intentions but the steamship lines and railways now connecting Scotland with the North American interior quickly deposited him in the newly-created state of Wyoming - where the high plains meet the Rockies. By 1890 he had found employment as a shepherd on the open ranges of central Wyoming. The earlier phase of fur-trading and buffalo-hunting in the region had given way to one in which, with the indigenous Native American populations now confined to reservations, the grasslands of the plains were thrown open to pastoralism. The economy and politics of the new state were dominated by the cattle barons who had drifted in with their herds from Texas in the 1870s and 1880s, but alongside the big cattle ranches smaller sheep-rearing businesses had emerged to supply wool for the rapidly-growing textile and clothing industries of the eastern cities. By the 1890s, with over-production and low prices in the US cattle-rearing business, sheep-farming was the more profitable, and the faster expanding, of the two. It was in this line of activity that Kenneth found his footing in his new land.

In 1893 Kenneth was joined by his older brother Duncan, with plans for the two of them to buy a flock and set themselves up as sheep-farmers near the settlement of Medicine Bow. Duncan lasted only a couple of years in Wyoming before retreating back home to be reunited with his wife and take up crofting at Aigas on the Beaully River. However, his assistance seems to have helped Kenneth make the transition from worker to owner. By 1895-6 Kenneth was running his own flock on what was known as a 'sheep-camp', near the little town of Casper which lay to the north of Medicine Bow. Casper, on the banks of the North Platte River, was in 1890 little more than a cluster of timber-buildings hastily constructed on either side of a muddy main street, and had a population of only about 500 people. But by the time that



Casper c. 1890 © Wyoming Tales and Trails

Kenneth arrived it was in the middle of a decade of growth and development as a result of becoming the terminus for a railway and the administrative centre for the newly-established Natrona County.

Kenneth grazed his flock on the open range to the west of Casper, up the ominously-named Poison Spider River, which was a tributary of the North Platte. Still a little further to the west, also on the North Platte, lay the small settlement of Bessemer, which at one point had pretensions to rival Casper but was now lying in the shadow of its more dynamic neighbour. Near Bessemer was the spread known as the Goose Egg Ranch, the home of a vigorous family of Aberdeonians.



Grey Goose Ranch House © Wyoming Tales and Trails

William Clark, who had taken his wife and children across the Atlantic in the 1870s, acted as the manager of the ranch on behalf of its absentee owner (a Texan deeply embroiled in state and national politics). In addition to overseeing the care of the livestock, William ran the stone-built ranch house as a hotel and restaurant. He also owned and managed a stage-coach business that conducted daily scheduled services between Bessemer and Casper. He was assisted in running these enterprises by his large clutch of children.

Among the younger Clarks was Wilhelmina, who was in her early-to-mid twenties - having been born in Aberdeen in 1872 or 1873 (sources differ) and having crossed the Atlantic when she was only one year old. Kenneth and Wilhelmina met in the course of their daily lives, fell in love and became engaged. By this time Casper boasted a photographer's studio. A formal portrait of Wilhelmina was commissioned and sent back home for the MacRae family in Scotland to get a glimpse of Kenneth's bride-to-be.



Wilhelmina Clark © Forbes Munro

By 1897, therefore, Kenneth gave all the impression of being a 'man-on-the-rise': running his own sheep-farming business and being betrothed to the daughter of one of the leading figures in the 'greater Casper' area. But there was trouble ahead.

Shepherding in Wyoming was more than a little different from its counterpart in Scotland. The environment made things more difficult - harsh winters and the local wildlife - including wolves, rattlesnakes, and biting insects and ticks of various kinds - demanded more of the shepherd than even the rains and midges of the Highlands. Instead of being conducted on

foot, with the aid of collie dogs, shepherding in Wyoming was done from horseback and required different sets of skills. There were no equivalent of bothies on the Wyoming ranges, so in moving the flocks from one fresh pasture to another the shepherds had to haul with them 'sheep-wagons' which transported cooking and sleeping gear, and provided sheltered accommodation for one or two people. Finally, everyone carried firearms - not just for protection against the wildlife but because in those 'frontier' conditions horse-theft and the rustling of livestock occurred fairly commonly.

On 30 May 1897, Kenneth was managing his flock at a place called Fales Creek, up the Poison Spider River, when a fatal shooting took place. A young man named Robert Gordon whom Kenneth had hired as a shepherd (and who from his name may have been another Scot) was killed. Three days later Kenneth brought Robert's body into Casper, rolled up in a blanket on the back of a horse. He explained to the sheriff that he, Kenneth, had been sleeping in the sheep-wagon, leaving his pistol lying at the foot of the bed, and that Robert, in climbing into the wagon later, in the dark, had dislodged the pistol and shot himself. Robert stumbled out of the wagon shouting 'I've been shot; I've been shot', and died outside on the ground.



Sheep Herders & Waggon © University of Wyoming

The authorities in Casper were suspicious of Kenneth's story. Why, they asked, had it taken Kenneth so long to bring in the body? And the odds of a fatal shot from an accidental discharge seemed a little long. These suspicions hardened into certainty when a witness surfaced. Another 'hired-hand' named Peter Keith, who had been sleeping under the wagon, came into town and alleged that Kenneth's account of events was untrue. Instead, he declared, when Robert climbed into the wagon

a loud argument had broken out, which was terminated by a single shot. Kenneth was arrested and charged with murder.

From the evidence available it is difficult to know now how much truth lay in Peter Keith's account. It is certainly not implausible that two young men of similar backgrounds had a falling out over something, and that Robert so angered Kenneth that in the heat of the moment he fired a single round into him. (It would be very speculative - but not beyond the bounds of possibility - that they had a dispute over Wilhelmina, which might in turn explain Kenneth's anger.) But where the truth lay would be a matter for a jury - and that proved to be no easy matter.

Kenneth stood trial for murder in January 1898 - several anxious months after the events at Fales Creek. The trial resulted in a hung jury - eight jurors wanted acquittal and four wanted a verdict of murder in the second degree (that is, an unpremeditated killing). The judge declared a mistrial and set Kenneth free on bail until a new trial could be arranged. (Where he managed to lay his hands on the 30,000 dollars for the bond is unclear, but one suspects the hand of Wilhelmina's father in this.) The local newspaper's account of events reported that the trial had strongly divided the townsfolk, and that a fierce debate had ensued. It appears that in that debate the balance of public opinion swung strongly against Kenneth, for when his second trial was held, in February 1898, the jury unanimously found him guilty of murder in the first degree (that is premeditated killing) - for which a death penalty was required. However, the presiding judge, arguing that the evidence did not support the verdict, refused to pass sentence and declared that he would entertain a motion for a new trial from the defence. Accusations of bribery and corruption were then hurled against the judge.

The circumstances of Kenneth's case had clearly touched a raw nerve within the populace, although the source of these tensions cannot be identified at this distance. It may have been a matter of workers versus bosses, or American nativist sentiment against recent immigrants. Whatever, the uproar in Casper's courthouse was loud enough to attract the interest of the legal authorities in Cheyenne, the state capital. They intervened, to have formal charges against the judge withdrawn and a third trial to be arranged. This time, however, the trial would be held not in Natrona County but in the neighbouring Carbona County. This ensured a more neutral jury, whose members would not know the principals and would not have been caught up in the social tensions and public debates in Casper. The third of Kenneth's trials took an entire month for its proceedings - and when the verdict was eventually returned - on 2 June 1898 - he was found to be not guilty. He was discharged 'without prejudice'. Three weeks later, Kenneth and Wilhelmina were married.

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It would be very satisfying to be able to lay bare the relationship between Kenneth and Wilhelmina that lies at the heart of this story - a relationship that survived the long months of legal proceedings and social tensions following the incident at Fales Creek, and a relationship that almost certainly brought to Kenneth, a lone individual, the support of an influential local family. But that is not possible. It would also be very satisfying to say that Kenneth and Wilhelmina 'lived happily ever after'. But that would not be entirely true. After their marriage they established and developed a ranch to the northwest of Casper, near a place called Wolton and just off the old Chisholm trail along which had come the earliest cattle drives from Texas into Wyoming. There they raised a family - but two of their children died at a young age, in tragic circumstances. Kenneth too died at a relatively

early age. In 1913 he was struck by Rocky Mountain Fever, a disease borne by the ticks that plagued his sheep, and after some months of pain and discomfort he was moved to the hospital in Casper, where he passed away on 9 June, just short of his 48th birthday. Wilhelmina survived him by many years, living to the ripe old age of 85. She had moved away to Oregon to be with a daughter and son-in-law, but following her death in 1958 her remains were taken back to Casper - to be buried in the appropriately-named Highland Cemetery where she had laid Kenneth to rest some 45 years before.

