

## **John Jeremiah "Liver Eating" Johnston**

The following is a reproduction of the plaque at Johnston's grave in the cemetery in Old Trail Town, Wyoming:

John Johnson was born of Scotch-English descent in New Jersey in 1824. Johnston, described as a 6' 6", 250 pound giant, came west in the early 1840's as a trapper. He began his career in the Medicine Bow Mountains of Wyoming, gradually working his way northward through the Wind River, Owl Creek, and Absaroka Mountains, then into the Yellowstone region and Montana.

About 1850 Johnston had acquired a Flathead Indian wife, of whom he was very fond, and had built a cabin on the Little Snake River in Wyoming. One day, on returning from trapping, he found his wife and unborn child dead and mutilated on the cabin floor. They had been killed by Crow Indians.

This started a personal revenge war against the Crow, which lasted nearly twelve years. According to legend, Johnston would on occasion remove the liver from a dead enemy and take a bite of it, or pretend to, in order to make a fierce impression on his savage foes. Consequently, he received the name "Liver Eating" Johnston.

Johnston went to Colorado in 1862 and enlisted in the Second Colorado Cavalry to fight in the Civil War. He was wounded in Missouri at the Battle of Newtonia, but remained in the service until his honorable discharge on September 23, 1865.

The winter after the war was spent in Fort Laramie, Wyoming, where he was hired to help supply buffalo and elk meat for the Army post.

Johnston worked his way north to the Missouri River in Montana where he started a wood yard, supplying firewood for the steamboats that were traveling the river in those days.

In 1868, at the mouth of the Musselshell River, Johnston and some companions defeated a Sioux war party that intended to wipe out the group of trappers and wood cutters.

In 1877 Johnson became Chief of Scouts for General Nelson A. Miles. Johnson and ten scouts were credited with saving Miles' command in a battle with the Cheyenne on Muddy Creek in 1877.

Johnston became the first Marshal at Coulson (Billings) Montand (sic) in 1882, and later in 1888, the first sheriff of Red Lodge, Montana.

In old age he developed rheumatism, and in the late 1890's would treat his ailment at the DeMaris Hot Springs, near the river just below the site of Old Trail Town. His camping spot was just beneath the cliffs that can be seen from the grave site.

In the winter of 1899 Johnston's health failed him and he was sent to the old soldiers home in Santa Monica, California, where he died January 21, 1900.

"Liver Eating" Johnston, also known as Jeremiah Johnston from the Warner Bros. movie based on his life, was reburied near the mountains he loved on June 8, 1974.

The reburial was made possible through the efforts of Tri Robinson, and his seventh grade class of Lancaster, California.

The bronze statue of Johnston was sculpted by Peter Fillerup of Cody, Wyoming and donated by Larry Clark of Salt Lake City, Utah.

(Author's note: The movie misspelled his name as Jeremiah Johnson, and it starred Robert Redford as Jeremiah. When Johnston was reinterred, Redford was one of the pall bearers at the funeral.)

Johnston is said to have been born near Little York, New Jersey, with the name of John Garrison. It is reported that he joined the U.S. Navy during the Mexican-American War, but deserted after he struck his superior officer. He then headed west and changed his name to Johnston.

Eventually, Johnson made peace with the Crow, who became "his brothers," and his personal vendetta against them finally ended after twenty-five years and scores of Crow warriors had fallen. The West, however, was still a very violent and territorial place, particularly during the Plains Indian Wars of the mid-19th century. Many more Indians of different tribes, especially but not limited to, the Sioux and Blackfoot, would know the wrath of Johnston, also known to them as "Dapiek Absaroka" (Crow Killer) and his fellow mountain men.



