

## Nathan D. "Nate" Champion

Northern Wyoming was the scene of a bloody range war in the early 1890s. Known as the Johnson County War, it pitted the large Wyoming ranchers against the small ranchers and homesteaders who they accused of being rustlers whether they were guilty or not. The large ranchers formed an association known as the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (WSGA). They made up a long hit list of the small ranchers in Johnson County and imported a large band of gunslingers from Texas to eliminate those on the list.

Nate Champion was one of the key figures in the war that came from Texas, but he happened to be one of the small ranchers on the hit list, and probably not a rustler at all. He was born on September 29, 1857, near Round Rock, Texas, and not in 1858 as inscribed on his tombstone. He and his younger brother, Rufus Dudley "Dud" Champion grew up to be cowboys. Probably in 1881, the two brothers joined an outfit herding cattle up the Goodnight-Loving Trail to Wyoming.



**Nate Champion**

They decided to remain in Wyoming and became top hands for several of the local ranches and Nate earned an excellent reputation and respect for his skills and leadership abilities. Even Frank Canton, who was among the murderers of Nate, said, "Nate Champion was the only man among the rustlers that I considered a dead-game man. He was an expert shot with a rifle."

Nate acquired a couple hundred head of cattle and began a small ranch. In short order he upset a couple of big ranchers when he cut his own cattle from their herd after they had mixed. He was immediately accused of being a rustler, as the leader of the rustlers and blacklisted.

In the fall of 1891, Nate decided to winter in the canyon known as the "Hole-in-the-Wall." He and a cowboy named Ross Gilbertson were bunked together on the night of October 31<sup>st</sup>. Nate hung his gun belt on the bed post and went to sleep. About dawn a group of WSGA gunmen who reportedly had been offered "\$500 for each man killed" surrounded the cabin and were going to hang Nate and Gilbertson in the cabin.

Two men stepped into the cabin and a third stood just behind the door. One of the gunmen demanded, "Give up boys, we've got you." Nate grabbed his gun and the two men fired. Nate was powder burned by the blast, but neither of them was hit. Nate fired off a shot, the gunmen fled the cabin, closed the door and Nate fired through the door. Nate went outside and found a new .38-56 Winchester, belonging to Frank Canton, leaning against the cabin wall and another rifle lying in the yard. A gunman came around the corner of the house not expecting Nate to be outside. Nate jumped back into the house and fired through the chinking of the cabin. One of the gunmen was hit in the stomach and later died. The gunmen were in full retreat and left a considerable amount of gear at their camp. All the attackers were identified, but only one went to trial. In the meantime, Ross Gilbertson, the only eyewitness disappeared, probably murdered, and there was no conviction.



**Nate on the left white horse, Dud on the far right horse**

On April 5, 1892, the WSGA assembled all their gunmen in Cheyenne, Wyoming. They all had carried revolver and Winchesters, but they were given new, more powerful .45-90 and .38-50 Winchesters. They were on their way, by train, to invade Johnson County and eliminate, once and for all, the rustlers and homesteaders. After spending the night on the train, they unloaded and mounted their horses at Casper. Frank Canton was the field commander of this group and his intention was to get to and capture Buffalo, Wyoming.

Around noon on the April 7, the party received word that about 15 rustlers were held up at the KC Ranch about 15 miles away. Canton did not want to delay the arrival in Buffalo, but the ranch owners, his bosses, wanted to get the rustlers. On Friday evening, April 8, a small scouting group was sent to assess the situation at the ranch. The large party left shortly thereafter in the midst of a snowstorm. The scouting party

met them about five miles from the KC Ranch and reported hearing fiddle music. The group camped in a canyon, built a fire and tried to thaw out until almost dawn.

Just before dawn the party surrounded the KC Ranch and at first light spotted a wagon that did not belong there. Joe Elliott, the only man to be prosecuted in the first assault on Nate, wanted to dynamite the sturdy ranch house. Cooler heads that refused to kill strangers ruled the day and they waited.

Inside the house there were only four men, two of whom were on the "death list," Nate and his friend Nick Ray. The other two were trappers, named Bill Jones and William Walker, who had spent the night. After two hours of shivering in the cold, the back door opened and Walker came out to relieve himself and went right back in. A few minutes later, Jones came out with a bucket to fetch water. As soon as he was out of sight of the ranch house, the gunmen grabbed him. He convinced them he was an innocent traveler and that Nate and Nick were still asleep. They held him captive and 30 minutes later Walker came out to check on Jones. Now they were both captive and the wait for the other two began.

After a long wait Nick finally stepped outside to urinate. Inside the stable, a young man begged his older brother "to let me kill him." Permission was granted, but he only wounded Nick who fell to the ground. Seeing him begin to wriggle, they all begin to shoot. Nate jumped to the doorway and began a rapid fire at the stable with his Winchester. Nate jumped back inside, reloaded and began to fire again. When his rifle was empty, Nick was about five feet outside the door and Nate grabbed him and manhandled his partner into the house.

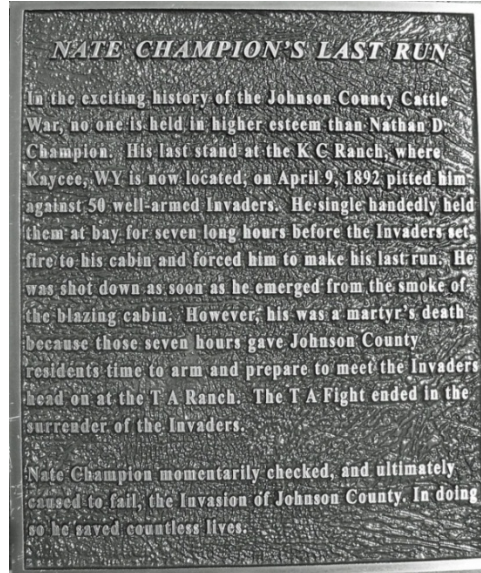
Nate began to fire again, but hearing slugs hit the house on every side, he began to run from room to room firing and keeping the attackers at bay. He wounded several of his assailants before they learned to be more cautious. He had lots of guns and ammunition to work with, but the odds were greater than 50 to 1. He also grabbed a pencil and paper and kept a diary at intervals throughout the day. He expressed concern for Nick who was alive until he recorded the following: Nick is dead. He died around 9 o'clock. I see a smoke down at the stable. I think they have fired it. I don't think they intend to let me get away this time.

The stable was not ablaze, it was a fire to keep warm. But a crew had been dispatched to find a hay wagon they could use as a torch to fire the house. In the meantime, a father, riding a horse, and his step-son, driving a wagon, passed near the ranch and saw what was happening. The attackers gave chase, but turned back when they saw the father with a rifle. One of the wagon's horses was wounded, so the other was cut loose, the wagon abandoned and the pair fled to Buffalo on the horses.

The abandoned wagon was exactly what the attackers needed. They rigged it for their purpose, filled it with hay and pitch pine and pushed it up to the northwest window. All the time they were firing on the house to keep Nate away from the windows.

Nate's final entry said. "Shooting again. I think they will fire the house this time. It's not night yet. The house is all fired. Good bye, boys, if I ever see you again." He placed the notebook in his pocket and a revolver in his waistband. He grabbed a rifle and when the roof started to fall in he bolted from the house and ran right into a bunch of Texans. He died immediately and never knew that he had delayed the Invaders long enough for the folks in Buffalo to set up an offense of their own and the WSGA goal was never achieved





**Nate's statue and plaque at the Gatchell Museum in Buffalo, WY  
(Author's Collection)**

In May of 1893, one of the Invaders had a quarrel with Dud Champion and killed him. Nate, Dud, and Nick Ray are all buried in the Willow Grove Cemetery in Buffalo, Wyoming, along with other participants in the war, including WSGA members.



**Source: *The Johnson County War*, by Bill O'Neal**