

## Isom Dart

Isom Dart was born as Ned Huddleston, a slave, in Arkansas in 1849. Since he was twelve years old when the Civil War began, nothing is known of his childhood and very little is known of his life during the war. Legend has that as a teenager, he served as an orderly, cook, and nurse for his owner, Mr. Huddleston and a group of his fellow Confederate officers. He went to Texas with his unit and helped Confederate soldiers steal food and goods during the war. At the end of the war, as a young lad of about sixteen, he became a free man and drifted around Texas and Mexico, working as a rodeo clown and a stunt rider. He honed his already efficient skills as a horseman and bronc-buster. His skills and reputation earned him the nicknames of “Black Cowboy,” “Calico Cowboy” and “Black Fox.”

Huddleston learned that there was more money to be made by stealing Mexican horses and cattle, driving them across the Rio Grande and selling them in Texas. So he spent some time straddling the law and the border. He and a Mexican friend, known only as Teresa, survived on the money from rustling cattle. After a period of time, Huddleston and Matt Rash, another friend, signed on with a cattle drive that was headed to the plains of the northwest. After the drive, the pair drifted south to a place called Brown’s Hole, later renamed Brown’s Park by the Bassett family. Brown’s Park is located in the northwest corner of Colorado and Utah. in Moffat County, Colorado and Daggett County, Utah and right on the Wyoming border. It was a no-man’s land of outlaws and rustlers, a favorite hangout for Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid and the rest of the Wild Bunch. No lawman would ever dare enter this outlaw haven. It was just after 1890 when Sheriff John T. Pope (Vol 1) became the first sheriff to enter the Park and survive.

Huddleston left the Park for a while and had some success mining for gold and silver until he claimed his partner cheated him out of his earnings. He supposedly followed this up with a torrid love affair with a Shoshone Indian woman. A fight with her husband may have resulted in having one of his ears cut off. After the affair, Huddleston joined up with the infamous Tip Gault Gang. One evening the gang was digging a grave to bury one of the gang members who had been kicked to death by a horse. They were ambushed by a gang of cowboys seeking revenge for earlier wrongs. All of the gang was killed except Huddleston who escaped by falling into the grave and playing dead. After several hours cuddled up with a dead member of the gang, he climbed out and began to search for a horse. He found one at a nearby ranch and mounted up to ride off. The rancher had spotted him and took a shot as he rode away. The bullet hit him in the leg



and it began to bleed badly. He passed out from loss of blood and fell on to the trail. Luck was with him again as William “Billy Buck” Tittsworth found him and nursed him back to life. Tittsworth was also from Arkansas and lived on the plantation bordering the Huddleston plantation. The two had been close friends at that time, but hadn’t seen each other in years. Huddleston managed to make it to Green River, Wyoming and caught the first train leaving town. He changed his name to Isom Dart and pledge to go straight

Dart drifted back to Brown’s Park and started his own ranch in 1890. He was a top cowhand and had a way with horses that few could understand. He raised his cow ponies by hand and when grown, they were among the best in the west. But, he was also a skilled rustler and that really stood him in good stead in Brown’s Park, for this was the headquarters for some of the top outlaws in the old west, like Butch Cassidy and his gang. The Park was such a badland that no lawman would ever enter. But it did not endear to him to the large ranchers outside the park. They were sure that his livestock herd had been built up with cattle from their ranches. Several large ranches seemed to have forgotten their own ranches had been started by the very same method.

Dart was a loyal friend to the Bassett family and a valued member of the Bassett Gang. His good friend Matt Rash was engaged to Ann Bassett. He gained such a reputation as a rustler that it was said he “could slip in and take cattle from underneath your nose.” The ranchers outside the Park were losing cattle at a serious rate. They also had their eyes on the valuable land inside the Park. The ranchers began to press the Rock Springs sheriff for some action. He was certainly not going to enter the Park. Lawmen that went in, never came out. He hooked upon an idea that it would take a crook to catch a crook. So, he deputized an outlaw named Philbrick to go into the Park undercover and arrest Dart.

No one expected that Philbrick would live very long and certainly could not bring Dart out with him. Somehow, Philbrick managed to get into the Park and, with his cocked Colt six-shooter, got the drop on Dart. The deputy tied Dart up and put him into the back of a buckboard, which was a strange way to travel in the Park as there were no defined roads. Before they reached Rock Springs, the wagon slid out of the tracks and tumbled down a gully. Dart managed to jump free, but Philbrick was trapped under the wagon and was obviously hurt. Dart managed to free his hands and used a large pole to lever the wagon off the deputy. He stopped the bleeding and tended to the wounded man as best he could. When Philbrick was stable, Dart got the wagon back on its wheels, rounded up the spooked horses and headed to Rock Springs as fast as possible. He nearly killed the horses, but he got the man to medical help, had some stiff drinks and turned himself into the sheriff who thanked him for his heroic efforts and arrested him.

Philbrick recovered, said he would shoot the sheriff himself if that was what it took to get Dart free. The townsfolk agreed with the deputy and two weeks later found Dart not guilty.

Dart had a couple drinks with the local folks and headed back to the Park and his growing ranch. The large ranch owners were further convinced that the justice system was

not about to provide them any relief. Rustlers were arrested and rarely ever convicted by a jury.

So, their solution was to hire their own justice, and they chose Tom Horn (Vol 1). By this time in Horn's life he had experienced just about everything the west had to offer. He ran away from home at the age of 13 and headed west. When he was 15 he met the famous Apache scout, Al Sieber (Vol 1) and went to work for him as a packer and a scout. For many years, he accompanied Sieber and General George Crook (Vol 1) on their campaigns against the Apaches and in particular against Geronimo (Vol 2). On one of the campaigns into Mexico, the unit was accidentally (perhaps it was not an accident) attacked by the Mexican militia. Captain Emmett Crawford was mortally wounded and Horn was wounded in the arm. Horn was there with Lt. Charles Gatewood, acting as an interpreter for Geronimo's final surrender. After the Indian Wars he did some time as a prospector, ranch hand and as a deputy sheriff. The Pinkerton Agency noticed some of his work and hired him as a detective. As a detective, he arrested or killed some of the most notorious train robbers. His life as a hired killer came about in 1894 when he went to work for the Swan Land and Cattle Company in Wyoming. He was being paid \$500 to \$600 for every rustler he killed. In 1895, after killing two small ranchers, it got a bit hot for him, so he returned to Arizona to let things cool off.

On April 23, 1898, Dart signed on as a packer for the Spanish American War. On August 1, he was promoted to Sergeant and on September 6, he was discharged because of malaria and never got to Cuba. In 1900, using the name James Hicks, he went back to hiring out to kill people. He killed in cold blood from a long distance. No excuse, but he only killed when he had absolute proof of their rustling and the courts would not convict.

Entering the Park under the new name of Hicks, he quickly made friends with Dart and Rash and was able to determine beyond a doubt that both were stealing cattle. There were many others that he also witnessed rustling. Hicks did not care to kill the rustlers, so he left a warning note for every one of them in which they were allowed a week to leave the Park or die. Several left. Rash and Dart did not heed the warning. Rash and Hicks had become good friends, so Rash was not worried when Hicks entered his cabin with his pistol drawn. Hicks knew that Rash was a lot faster with a gun than he was. Rash was surprised when the orange flame shot out and the bullet crushed his chest. Hicks shot him again and then removed his boots, put him in his bunk and covered him up. Then he went outside and shot his prize horse that he had gotten from Dart. Hicks hoped that would place the blame on Dart. The plot worked for a short while. Dart was first blamed for the murder, but it was soon realized that Dart would have never killed a prized horse that he once owned. It was also determined that Hicks was Tom Horn, noted killer for the large ranchers.

Months later the Park had decided that Horn had left the area. Then on October 3, 1900, two shots rang out. The first hit Dart in the face and knocked him from his horse. As he fell, a second ripped through his chest and he was dead before he hit the ground. Two .30-30 cases were found 100 yards away and that was one of Horn's calling cards.

There is quite a bit of doubt about the two shots. Chip Carlson, who wrote the definitive biography on Horn, claims there was only one wound and only one shell casing found at the scene.

Dart was wrapped in a blanket and buried near his cabin. Ann Bassett held the funeral and prayed for God to strike Horn dead for killing her friend Isom and her fiancé, Matt. After Dart's death, rustling in the area was greatly reduced.



**Dart's gravesite on the remote ranch. Author's collection**

As for Tom Horn, he continued in his murder for hire until he was convicted for the murder of 15-year-old boy. There is reasonable doubt that he did it, but that wasn't going to stand in the way of a zealous sheriff and prosecutor. He was hanged in Cheyenne, Wyoming on November 20, 1903, the day before his 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday. He is buried in Boulder, Colorado.



**Outhouse on Dart's Ranch. Authors collection**