

Ella Watson, aka Ellen Liddy Watson, aka Cattle Kate

In the late 1880s Wyoming was in the midst of one of the most vicious range wars in all of the Old West. Almost all Wyoming land was owned by the government. Wyoming's large ranchers used the land to graze their huge herds of cattle. It was open range, free for their use. The large ranchers had formed the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (WSGA) and it was likely the most powerful association in all the western states. They were rich and powerful. They controlled the politicians, to include both of the Senators.

The Desert Land Act of 1877 gave people the right to homestead 160 acres of the government land in the dry, desert country of the western states. This act was very similar to the original Homestead Act. Improvements to the property were required, but unlike the original act occupation of the property during the improvement were not a requirement. The problems arose when the homesteaders naturally chose their 160 acres on the creeks where water was available. This severely crimped the land where the large ranchers had always grazed their herds. The homesteaders used the hated fences on their property to keep their livestock in place and keep the cattle off their land.

The ranchers accused all of them as being rustlers and building their herds at the expense of the ranchers. The WSGA hired cattle detectives and paid them \$50 per head for every proven rustler they could kill.

On Saturday, July 20, 1889, eleven months before Wyoming became a state, a woman and a man were hanged from a pine tree in a gulch in the central part of the territory, not far from the Sweetwater River. The woman and the man were homesteaders. The six men who lynched them were cattlemen. Ella, or Ellen, Watson was the only woman ever lynched in the state of Wyoming. And that lynching was one of the sparks that set off the Johnson County War.

The WSGA, through the three state newspapers that they also controlled, were doing their best to destroy Watson's reputation. They wrote that she was a prostitute and even ran a "hog ranch," an Old West term for a whore house. They claimed that cowboys would bring her cattle instead of money to pay for the pleasure she gave them. Everyone in the Johnson County area that knew her knew it was all lies and an attempt to get rid of her.

Watson was the first of ten children born on July 2, 1860, to Thomas Lewis Watson and Frances Close in Canada. The following year on May 15, 1861, the couple were married in Grey County, Ontario. There would be nine more children born to the couple who would move near to Lebanon, Kansas in 1877. The four youngest children would be born in Kansas.

Soon after the move, Watson went to Smith Center, Kansas to work as a cook and housekeeper for H.R. Stone. While there, she met farm laborer William A. Pickell. They married on November 24, 1879. Their wedding portrait survives, depicting a "tall, square-faced woman", Watson was probably 5 foot 8 inches tall, and weighed about 165 pounds. She had brown hair, blue eyes and a Scottish accent, inherited from her parents.



Wedding photo

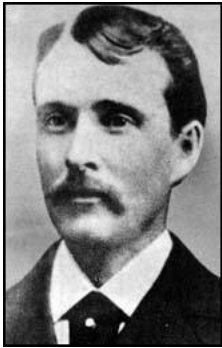
Pickell was verbally and physically abusive and drank heavily. He would often beat Ella with a horsewhip. In January 1883, Watson fled back to her parents' home. Pickell came after her, but was intimidated by her father and fled, and had no contact with her afterwards. Watson moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, 12 miles north of her family's homestead. She worked at the Royal Hotel for a year while establishing residency. On February 14, 1884, Ella filed for a divorce in the Webster County Courthouse in Red Cloud, Nebraska, while living in Red Cloud, asking for her maiden name back. The court sent out three different summonses to William A. Pickell in Smith County, Kansas, to appear, but he refused to show up at the hearings. The Sheriff from Jewell County, Kansas delivered each summons. The last summons that the court sent out was on July 17, 1884. The divorce was finally granted in March of 1886.

Following the divorce, Watson began a series of moves which was unusual for a single lady in that era. But she was an unusual lady. She went to Denver, Colorado to be with a brother. Her next move was to Cheyenne, Wyoming where she found work as a cook and a seamstress. Watson disliked Cheyenne and in late 1885 or early 1886 followed the railroad to Rawlins, Wyoming where she began working as cook and waitress in the premier boarding-house in town, the Rawlins House. It has often been alleged, and reported by historical authors, that the Rawlins House was a place of ill-repute and that Ellen worked as a prostitute. It was not a brothel and there is no evidence that Ellen was ever a prostitute at any place where she lived or work. The idea that she had been was to be circulated by large ranchers in an effort to discredit her.

Averill was also a Canadian born on March 20, 1851. Shortly thereafter the family moved south into New York and the father died soon after that. At about the age of thirteen; he became the ward of his sister and brother-in-law near Eureka, Wisconsin. He attended school there until he went to work in a sawmill at the age of sixteen.

When he was 20 years old he enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army and was assigned to Company H of the 13th Infantry at Ft. Douglas, Utah, just outside Salt Lake City. It was not long until he was transferred to Ft. Fred Steele, east of Rawlins, Wyoming where he and his unit fought Indians until he was transferred to Louisiana. Upon his discharge on May 27, 1876, he returned to Wisconsin. Adjusting to civilian life was not coming easy for Averill and on June 20, 1876, he

was in Chicago reenlisting in the Army and headed back to Wyoming to rejoin the Ninth Infantry. He had somehow saved enough money to purchase a house in Buffalo, Wyoming, but rather than living in it he rented it to the local jailer.



On May 2, 1880, Averill (Photo at left), a small man, was being harassed in a Buffalo saloon by a large bully named Charlie Johnson. When Johnson called Averill a “a cowardly son of a bitch” and came at him, Averill fired a warning shot. When Johnson kept coming Averill put two in his chest. That stopped him but did not kill him immediately. He lasted for nine days.

Averill was arrested, released, arrested again and then turned over to the Army who apparently had no interest in charging him. After being discharged at the end of his enlistment he hung around for a while. Then he decided to return to Wisconsin and sold his house in Buffalo. This trip brought him into the blissful state of matrimony. He married Sophia Yaeger on February 23, 1882, the bride’s 22nd birthday. He and his new bride moved to Wyoming and set up a homestead. Soon thereafter their premature son died and shortly after that Sophia became sick and passed away. Completely devastated by his losses Averill sold the home and homestead and relocated just southeast of the of the famous landmark, Independence Rock. Here he was able to file on two 160-acre plots. He built a home on both properties and used one for a combination restaurant and general store for travelers and local cowboys.

On February 24, 1886, James Averill, who was in town to file the claim on his second homestead, and Ellen Watson (Photo at right) met in the Rawlins house. There was an immediate attraction between the two despite the ten-year difference in age and a size differential. Watson was five-foot-eight inches tall and a buxom 165 pounds. Averill was about 5’ 8” ad 135 pounds. She was a very attractive woman. Averill’s visits to town and the Rawlins House became fairly frequent. Soon a full-fledged romance blossomed and she moved with him to his homestead near the Sweetwater River country. In March of that year, Watson’s divorce became final and in May the couple traveled to Lander, Wyoming and obtained a marriage license. There has never been found any evidence that an actual marriage took pace. But why obtain a license if you are not going to use it. The plan was to have Ellen file on the two homesteads that were available, giving the couple 640 acres. If she were married this would not be available for her and the couple would only be able to home stead 320 acres. So it is possible that they did get married, but never filed the license. Still in the year 1886, Averill was appointed postmaster for the area on June 26. Watson, however, expressed her desire to have her own ranch, working independently from his.



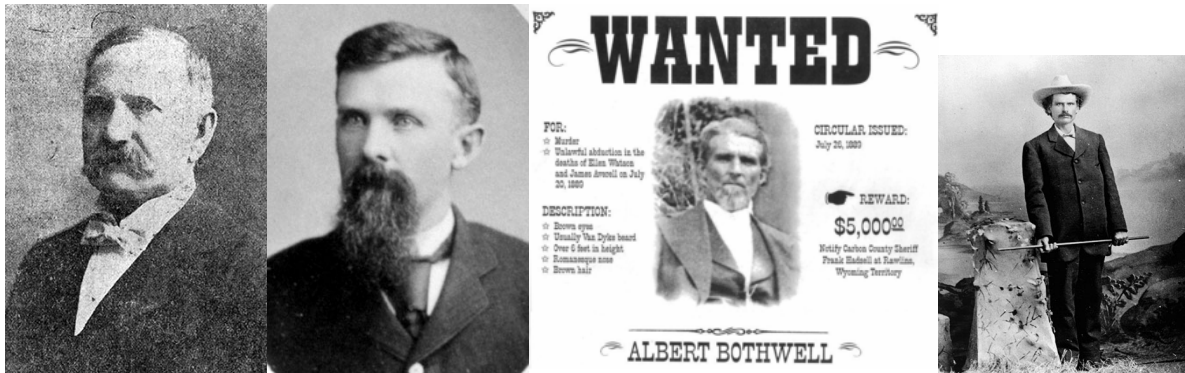
Albert John Bothwell was one of the wealthy, large ranchers, member of the WSGA, and one of the most feared cattlemen living in the area. And he lived just about a mile from Watson’s homestead. Before Watson and Averill homesteaded their property Bothwell had used the area as pastureland for his cattle. In fact he was accustomed to running his cattle throughout the twenty miles of the Sweetwater Valley. He did not own all of the land but he enjoyed acting as if he did. He was really furious that the pair homesteaded the property that he considered his best grazing land.

Now his goal in life was to get rid of the homesteaders by whatever means necessary. He was totally furious with the couple for homesteading on what he considered to be his best pastureland. To his credit he did make several attempts to buy Watson’s property. The answer was always a resounding no. Averill had given Bothwell a right of way through his own property so that Bothwell could irrigate his pastureland. Bothwell was even more irritated when Averill would occasionally threaten to cutoff his water supply. Bothwell was determined to run the couple off their homesteads.

Bothwell would often send his men to harass the couple. Sometimes they would just sit outside the home and watch the pair. Other times they would do more threatening things, like placing skulls and crossbones on the doorways. He would also have his men fence in areas that did not belong to him but would provide some hindrance to Watson and Averill.

In the early morning of July 20, 1889, George Henderson, a stock detective and member of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, rode through Ella's property and spotted some cattle with her fresh brand. Henderson suggested to Bothwell that might mean she was doing some illegal branding. In all likelihood Bothwell knew that she had owned the cattle for more than a year. The brands were fresh because the state branding committee had rejected all of her proposed brands. On March 16, 1889, she had purchased an L-U brand from a neighbor. The committee did not have to approve existing brands. So the brands were still fresh in July.

Bothwell sent a message to nearby neighbors that an urgent meeting was needed. What he actually told them is unknown, but a meeting was quickly convened. One member rode over to Watson's pasture to verify the fresh brand. By the time the meeting was over the attendees were convinced that Averill and Watson had stolen the newly branded cattle. They further decided that they would take the law into their own hands. Several of the ranchers decided that they wanted no part in the vigilante justice, but six members remained. These six ranchers included Bothwell, the ringleader, M. Earnest McLean, Robert "Captain" M. Galbraith, John Henry Durbin, Robert Conner, and Tom Sun.



R to L: Durbin, Galbraith, Bothwell and Sun

They decided that all six would ride over and see the evidence for themselves. It was still early afternoon when they arrived. They found the recently branded cattle and their suspicions were confirmed. John Durbin lost his and began to cut down the barbed wire fence and chase the cattle away. Gene Crowder, a young boy that Watson had unofficially adopted, watched as Watson was being detained by McLain and Conners and prevented from going back to her home. She was forced into their buggy and they headed for Averill's place. When Crowder tried to go around them Bothwell stopped him and forced him to stay with Durbin.

Averill was on his way to Casper for supplies when the vigilantes arrived and stopped his wagon just before his gate. The vigilantes told Averill they had a warrant and he was to go with them. When he asked to see the warrant they pulled their weapons forced him to unhitch his wagon and placed him in the buggy with Ella. Frank Buchanan, an Averill friend and hired hand, jumped on his horse and followed the ranchers at a safe distance.

The vigilantes and their victims headed toward the Sweetwater River. At the river they headed upstream, west, for a couple of miles. They left the river and headed up a rocky gulch south of Independence Rock. Buchanan got close enough to see Watson and Averill standing on a large rock under a tree. There were two ropes over a limb of the tree. Bothwell placed one rope around Averill's neck and Watson was trying to prevent McLean from getting the other rope around her neck. Buchanan opened fire with his revolver and the vigilantes returned fire forcing Buchanan to flee for his life.

An investigation was started immediately but it was 2 ½ days of hot July sun before the victims were cut down. A reporter, who was the first to talk to members of the posse, described it as thus:

“Hanging from the limb of a stunted pine growing on the summit of a cliff fronting the Sweetwater River, were the bodies of James Averell and Ella Watson. Side by side they swing, their arms touching each other, their tongues protruding and their faces swollen and discolored almost beyond recognition. Common cowboy lariats had been used, and both had died by strangulation, neither fallen over two feet. Judging from signs too plain to be mistaken a desperate struggle had taken place on the cliff, and both man and woman had fought for their lives until the last.”



The bodies were taken to Averill’s roadhouse where a justice of the peace held an inquest and declared that that the pair had met their death at the hands of John Durbin, Tom Sun, A.J. Bothwell, Robert Conner, Robert Galbraith and a man named Earnest McLean. The remains of the two were buried on Averill’s ranch. Ella was 27 years old and Jim Averill was 38.

The six vigilantes were arrested the next day by Deputy Philip Watson, no relation. They were turned over to Sheriff Frank Haskell. On July 6, 1889, the Cheyenne Daily Leader reported:



“A Rawlins telegram says that all the men were arrested by Sheriff Hadsell of Carbon County and given a preliminary hearing yesterday afternoon. Bail was fixed at a \$5,000 bond. Each lyncher was allowed to post each other’s bond.”

On August 25, 1889, the Grand Jury was convened and the witnesses against the ranchers were either already disappearing or would be doing so soon. Gene Crowder, Ella’s unofficially adopted son disappeared and was never heard from again. Another young boy working for Watson supposedly went to Steamboat Springs, Colorado but was never summoned. Buchanan disappeared before the hearing. It was rumored he had been seen a couple of times over the next couple of years. Ralph Cole, Averill’s nephew, died on the very day of the hearing. He was likely poisoned. Without wit-

ness the case was dismissed.

The homesteads had not been lived in long enough to legally belong to Jim and Ella and they reverted back to the government. The appointed administrator would dispose of their belongings at auction, Watson bringing \$322.75 and Averill’s was sold for \$657.90. The administrator also sued Bothwell for the return of 41 head of cattle. The lawsuit was never given a hearing.

Later, in the same year, Bothwell and Tom Sun became members of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association Executive Committee. Galbraith was elected to the legislature and Durbin served one year with his two neighbors in 1894.

References: *The Lynching of Cattle Kate* by
The Johnson County War by Bill O’Neal
Wyoming Range War by John W Davis