

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE FIRST DUDES—THE STORY OF PITTSBURGH AND EATONS RANCH

BUCKY KING

IN 1879 Howard Eaton left Pittsburgh and struck a trail west for the Dakota Badlands. He was followed by his brothers, Willis Larimer and Alden Eaton. In '80 and '81 he was engaged in the "butcher business, furnishing fresh meat (not beefsteak or lamb chops, but buffalo, elk, deer, and antelope) to the men building the Northern Pacific Railway and opening up the Northwest region to settlement, cattlemen, tenderfoots, and dudes.

A brief résumé of the history of the region is perhaps necessary to set the background for the present-day reader of events prior to the 1880s which lured Eaton, and men like him, into the region. This is the same area opened to gold mining after General George A. Custer's expedition into the Black Hills in 1874. The resulting gold rush was a violation of the treaty rights of the Sioux and Cheyenne, entered into at Fort Laramie in 1868. Though the government attempted to purchase the Black Hills from the Indians, the Allison Commission failed. The government then ordered all the northern tribes back on the reservations, apparently feeling that the Indians would be easier to deal with and less able to protect their sacred Black Hills property. When the Indians failed to return to their reservations, or sell their land, by the deadline established by the Indian Bureau of January 31, 1876, the matter was turned over to the army, and the ensuing war and campaign of 1876 took place.

Although Colonel Reynolds was successful in burning a Cheyenne village on March 17, 1876, General George Crook was far less fortunate on June 17 at the Rosebud, and General Custer was defeated massively on June 25 at the Little Big Horn. (Historians electing to refer to the battle as the "Custer Massacre" would be wise to remember the United States government forced the war on the Indians by violating existing treaty agreements.) The government campaign of 1876 started a new cycle of conflict, in which column after column was thrown

Bucky King is married to Wilbur Staunton King, grandson of Willis Larimer King, a direct descendant of Joseph Coltart, the builder of Pittsburgh's first courthouse, and of the old Larimer and McMaster families. She attended Chatham College, has written two books in the textile field, and writes professionally for several quarterly journals. She is a teacher, designer, gallery owner, and rancher. — Editor

against the Indians, resulting in the above-mentioned battles as well as Slim Buttes, Dull Knife, and Wolf Mountain. Finally, in 1879, the Sioux and Cheyenne were subjugated and herded onto reservations, ending an era of bloodshed and conflict on the plains. A few of the more friendly Indians signed a new treaty giving the Black Hills to the United States government without compensation and bringing the war cycle to a close. With the Indian wars concluded, the Northern Pacific Railway, completed in 1880, began to lay tracks across this area, and men like Howard Eaton came West to make their name and fortune.

Four miles south of Medora, North Dakota, on the east side of the Little Missouri River, lies the old Custer Trail Ranch, started in 1880 when Howard, Willis, and Alden Eaton settled on the ranch by squatter's right. It was beautiful open country, backed by Picket Butte, with rushing cold creeks, rocks, pines and cottonwoods, and filled with game. At one time the ranch site was a camping place of General George Custer and the Seventh Cavalry and Picket Butte, to the north of the ranch buildings, was the lookout for Custer's sentinels; so the Custer Trail Ranch was a fitting name.

When Howard Eaton and his brothers came to the Dakota territory the land was not surveyed, and they simply moved into one of the abandoned log cabins and established residence. Originally there were two log shacks on the ranch and a log chicken coop, formerly a buffalo hunter's home; it was surrounded by a stockade. The Eatons built additional buildings and developed it into a thriving cattle ranch.

Through their natural hospitality to neighbors and Eastern friends who came visiting, and with generous open hearts, the dude-ranching business began by accident but was made successful because the Eaton brothers were engaging hosts and genial sportsmen. The Custer Trail Ranch became the site of the first dude ranch in the United States and possibly the first in the world. Friends and tenderfoots came from the East to visit, and some stayed to work to pay their way. Wealthy Easterners were delighted to find a place where they could be part of the Western scene without being a burden to anyone.

The business seems to have really started when one dude told Howard Eaton: "I'm having a good time. I need the outdoor life and I don't want to go home. I've got plenty of money and I'd consider it a favor if you'd let me stay on awhile and pay something each week for my board and the use of a horse." So people around Medora started calling Custer Trail Ranch a "dude ranch," and the name stuck

hard, developing into a multimillion-dollar business all over the West.

In 1924 and 1927, Mr. Burt Struthers, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Outlook* magazines, had this to say about the Eatons: "After awhile so many visitors came that Eaton [Howard] conceived the idea of turning his love of vicarious ranching into something more solid. It was Eaton who invented the word 'dude,' or rather, used it in this new way; and used in this new way it means nothing more or less than a stranger to a country. There is nothing about it in the least derogatory.

"Now a business developed in the mind of one man usually is an interesting and original business if that man has any trace of idealism, and Howard Eaton loved the country he was in and its life; loved these in a way not altogether conceivable to any but those who feel a similar passion. The stamp he put upon his business has never been lost, and all but the less intelligent dude wranglers are his followers. Probably if it had not been for Howard Eaton there would have been no dude ranches, and the desire of people to visit the far West would have been inadequately satisfied by summer boardinghouses and hotels. Eaton realized that it was not altogether the scenery, not altogether the climate, quietness, or sport, that brought people to his place; but that to a great extent it was the picturesque, charming, and peculiar life of a ranch, and so, even when he became prosperous and the dude end of his outfit the largest part of it, he never made the mistake of turning his place into anything other than what it was. It began as a ranch, and it is a ranch today, although the Eatons have moved from the Dakotas to Wyoming, and Howard, alas, is dead."

In 1883 Howard Eaton began his first of ninety trips on horseback to Yellowstone Park. This venture was to add an even more desirable feature to his infant dude business.

Although most of the livestock trade was in cattle, the Eatons also raised sheep. The February 24, 1884, edition of A. T. Packard's *Bad Lands Cow Boy* states that: "On the other hand, look at some of the successful sheep raising in the Bad Lands. Howard Eaton has some large, long woolled variety that also labored under the disadvantage of being driven upon the new ranges late in the fall, but they have done as well as cattle." The same edition notes that a huge bull buffalo was shot by the Eatons that winter within "20 rods of the Custer Trail home ranch." On June 19, 1884, the same paper notes that Howard Eaton and Lloyd Roberts came into Medora driving 1,000 head of cattle for the Badger Cattle Co. What an exciting life for the dudes

who were visiting. Many found it a fascinating way of life that they could enjoy for short periods without the responsibility of ownership.

In those early years the Eatons kept a guest book, asking each dude to sign his name and home residence. The first paying dude, unlisted in the guest book which begins in 1883, was Burt Rumsey of Buffalo, New York, in 1882. The year 1883 brought many dudes from Pittsburgh, including D. Herbert Hostetter, fondly called "the Bronco Buster," who was to repeat his visits in 1885 and 1896. Hostetter was followed by the Clarkes; Thomas, Charles J., and Louis J. Thomas Keir; and James Gardner, followed by the F. M. Gillespies including Mary and Josephine who returned again in 1893, '94, and '96. C. S. Magee, referred to as "Cannonball Pete," came with Margaret Cust and Eleanor Louise Magee. Women were now on the scene. The Magees repeated their visits in 1885, '86, and '87. Margaret Cust Magee married J. Fremont Steel, who was a dude in 1886 and 1902.

The years 1884 and '85 brought dudes from other Eastern cities, but only George E. Rose, W. S. Stewart, James B. Stevenson, F. M. Magee, and Anne and Will Conway ventured out from Pittsburgh. Teddy Roosevelt signed the guestbook in 1884 indicating at least a brief visit as an Eaton dude.

In 1886 a few more ventured forth from the smoky city, including E. M. Rook; Elizabeth Clarke; F. M. Magee; Eleanor Louise and Margaret Cust Magee; and Christopher L., William Addison, and Thomas Steel Magee. Obviously the Magees liked the ranch and enjoyed the game shooting. C. A. Carpenter and Ralph and Mary Bagaley also paid a short visit that year.

The following is a list of Pittsburghers taken from the Eatons' guest book from 1887 through 1903, when the Eatons moved their operation to its present site in Wolf, Wyoming, eighteen miles west of Sheridan at the foot of the Big Horn Mountains on Wolf Creek. Some Pittsburghers who started with them at the Custer Trail Ranch, namely Henry Hall, followed them to Wyoming and even built their own summer cabins on Eaton property. This idea caught on so well in Wyoming that Mary Roberts Rinehart, the Mellons, the Nimicks, and the Elliots soon followed suit and erected summer residences. Two of Mary Roberts Rinehart's mysteries were written at the ranch. Willis L. King, Jr., liked the Badlands so much he bought his own ranch outside of Medora, which was family-owned until 1946. Many of the names listed here have descendants who have continued to return to Eatons Ranch on a regular basis. Certainly there were dudes from



Eatons Ranch today, Wolf, Wyoming.



"Bad Land Bill," a cowboy at Custer Trail Ranch — 1888.



Janet Barber, Howe Nimick, Florence Rook. Florence Rook's father first came to Custer Trail in 1886.



Howard Eaton on one of his famous pack trips to Yellowstone Park.

other cities who came during these early years, but the largest number of early dudes came from Pittsburgh. By listing their names here, a small tribute is paid these early pioneers who loved the country and the scenery better than inside plumbing and who pioneered the dude-ranch business.

LIST OF PITTSBURGH DUDES FROM 1887 THROUGH 1903

- W. M. Kennedy, 1887, '89, '94, '96, '97
 Theo. R. Hostetter (a bad shot), 1888, '93, '96, '98
 L. McC. Kennedy and Charlotte Kennedy, 1887
 J. F. Milligan, 1889
 James King and Mabel Clarke, 1892, '95, '96, '97, '99 (shot 5 sheep, 2 elk, 1 black bear)
 Charles E. Speer, Jr., 1892
 John S. Clarke, 1892
 E. G. Craig, 1892
 Frank W. Kennedy, 1893, '94, '95, '96, '97, '98 (also listed in 1885)
 William Thaw, 1893
 Col. Henry Hall, 1893, '94, '96, '97, '99, 1900, '02, '03 — called, "the dreamer"
 J. R. Tindle, 1893, '98, '99
 George H. Flinn, 1893
 Samuel Stottler Steele, 1894, '96, '97, '99, 1900 (senator from Green Tree Boro.)
 Oliver McClintock, 1895
 Walter McClintock, Jr., 1895
 Thomas and Radcliffe Denniston, 1895, '96
 Mary Eaton Gillespie, 1895, '96, '97, '99
 M. W. Loring, 1896
 John G. Magee, 1896, '97, '98, '99, 1900
 Bryan Sterrit, 1896, '97
 W. Hays Sterrit, 1897
 William H. Hays, 1896
 William Thaw Denniston, 1896
 R. C. Porter, 1896, 1900
 Karl and Grace Waremcastle, 1896, '97
 A. C. Robertson, 1896
 W. E. Keir, 1897
 Lawrence Darr, 1897, '98
 J. Page Laughlin, 1897, '99
 D. C. Phillips, 1897
 C. W. Phillips, 1897
 C. M. South, 1897, '98
 Mrs. Lawlis (Mrs. G. B. Lawlis), 1897
 A. L. McFarlane, 1897
 W. A. Stanton, 1897
 H. E. Wainwright, Jr., 1897, '98, '99
 James R. Wainwright, 1897, '98, '99
 William B. Morgan, 1897, '98, '99
 Stewart Morgan, 1899
 Charles R. Shurman, 1898
 J. Howard McFeely, 1898
 George Rafferty, 1898, 1900, '02
 James M. Sleith, 1898
 Samuel Ridall, 1898
 Josephine Gillespie, 1898
 D. R. Kerr, 1898, 1900 (from Sewickley)
 Willis Larimer King, Jr., 1898, '99, '03
 Alexander Brodley, 1898
 John W. Hussey, 1898
 W. Wilfred DuPuy, 1898
 Josephine A. and Margaret McConway, 1898
 Frank M. Carnegie, 1898
 George B. Bughman, 1898
 Samuel B. Plumer, 1898, L. M. Plumer, 1900
 C. V. McKaig, 1899, 1900
 Donald McKaig, 1902
 Charles Arbuthnot, Jr., 1899, 1900
 Carrie B. and W. S. Arbuthnot, 1899
 Elizabeth M. Pollard, 1899
 S. P. Walker, 1899
 D. B. Fleming, 1899
 J. C. Phipps (Pie), 1899 — the would-be scout
 Rex Flinn, Jr., 1899, 1900, '01
 William, Edith, and Mary Flinn, 1901
 Jos. H. Bakewell, 1899
 B. C. Weinhaus, 1899
 Walter Lyon, Jr., 1899
 George B. Morris, 1899
 E. K. Trent, 1899, 1901
 Edmund K. Trent, 1901
 R. E. Clemson, 1899
 M. E. Gable, 1899
 Albert Schmertz, 1900
 John G. Warwick, 1900
 J. P. Reed and Margaret A., Marguerite, and Bessie, 1900
 Edwin Barr, 1900
 N. L. Ogden, 1900
 H. L. Gehring, 1900
 O. B. Torrence, 1901
 Kenneth, Donald, and Ewing L. Rafferty, 1901
 Arch Williams, 1901, '02
 Charlotte Kennedy, 1901

John S. and Cornelius Scully, 1901
Marcus A. Woodward, Jr., 1902
Ralph D. Marlin, 1902
James McCutcheon, 1902
Joseph Patterson, 1902
Charles Magee, 1902

A. French Kaufman, 1902
William Albert Harbison, 1902
Ralph Harbison, 1902
John S. Ferguson, Jr., 1903
Mrs. Robert Arthurs, 1902
John Culbertson, 1903

Eatons Ranch in Wolf, Wyoming, continues today under family management. After the deaths of Howard, Willis, and Alden, "Big Bill," the son of "Uncle Alden" and "Auntie Mame," took over the management. He was married to Patty Alderson, daughter of the heroine in *A Bride Goes West*, which is the story of "Domo" (Patty's mother) who came out West in a covered wagon. "Big Bill" and Patty had two children: Nancy married to Tom Ferguson and now running the business end of the ranch, and Bill Eaton, Jr., deceased. Nancy and Tom Ferguson have four children, two of which, Bill and "T.J.," work on the ranch. Bill Eaton, Jr.'s, son, Frank, and his wife Kathy run the corral and horses. Patty Alderson Eaton is still the active, involved number one major-domo of the family, loved and remembered by hundreds of dudes.

That Pittsburgh people still go West to visit Eatons Ranch is evident by the present guest book, which still lists many Pittsburgh families each summer. At least two former Pittsburghers, Mrs. William Schiller (Katie) and Mr. Ernest Dorbritz, list the ranch as their official residence.

Eatons Ranch is now nearing its first hundred years of operation, since its beginning in the Badlands to its present location in Wyoming. During this time, hundreds of people have enjoyed its pleasures, tasted its clear creek water, and trailed their horses over its mountain trails. Some Pittsburgh families, like the Nimicks and the Kings, have seen three and four generations of their families enjoy this life. The ranch has become a living memorial to the three Eaton brothers from Pittsburgh who built it into a dream for other people to remember. There is much of Pittsburgh in its history, and many have dreamed Eaton dreams through three and four generations.