About a hundred years ago, a young traveler named John C. Van Dyke tied up his horse and threw down his bedroll in the desert mountains on the Arizona-Mexico border. It was a wild and forlorn place. Coyotes wailed and the moonlight twitched on huge boulders. This was a haunt for bandits, who regularly evaded the law by sliding back and forth from one country to the other. Aware of the danger, Van Dyke says he slept with his "ear to the ground."¹

Suddenly, hearing hoofbeats, he leapt to his feet. Crouched in the darkness, Winchester in hand, the young man waited. When a band of five horse thieves approached, he stepped out, halting the men while covering them with his rifle. Startled, the desperadoes obeyed his command and, grumbling as they turned their horses' heads, retreated into Mexico. "I ... could have bagged all five," the young Easterner chuckled to himself before climbing back into his blankets.²

Later, deep in Mexico, Van Dyke had a scrape with a band of wandering Seri Indians, rumored to be cannibals,³ and was entertained by the nightly singing of sloe-eyed señoritas at isolated ranchos.⁴

What all this has to do with the famous Homestead strike is, of course, not at all apparent. But some years after the strike, in the

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Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1973, Peter Wild, professor of English at the University of Arizona, is also a poet and historian. He recently unearthed and annotated the memoir of John C. Van Dyke's nephew, a rancher in the Mojave Desert. Detailing how a wild frontier town was dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th century, the book will be published in the fall of 1997 as Daggett: Life on the Mojave Frontier (The Johns Hopkins University Press).
middle of Mexico’s Sonoran desert, the same self-professed adventurer claims to have met none other than “Honest” John McLuckie, former burgess (mayor) of Homestead and strike leader whose staunch support of the labor cause earned him his nickname. The exact nature of their encounter may never be known. Yet recent revelations make clear that what transpired in the dusty little burg of La Noria Verde surely is different from the account repeated by students of the strike. And getting some focus on the meeting throws a new light on the convoluted, little-studied aftermath of the strike.

Dramatic circumstances tend to spawn their own mythologies, and this truisms applies as much to a mysterious meeting in the desert as it does to the bloody events of July 1892, when Henry Clay Frick locked out striking workers at the Carnegie Steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. To this day, certain residents of Homestead, if properly befriended by visitors, will rummage around in closets for the rifles their ancestors seized as souvenirs from Frick’s surrendering Pinkerton guards. And folk singers, getting teary-eyed, still delight in renditions of the lachrymose “Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men,” a tune widely current following the grim fray.

If Homestead was a balladeer’s inspiration, it was a newspaperman’s dream. “If it bleeds, it leads,” was a watchword of the media then, as today. Garish headlines reigned for weeks after the lockout began, and cartoonist after cartoonist pilloried the wealthiest man in America for the hypocrisy of proclaiming support for workingmen as underlings hired the Pinkerton guards to crush them. By the time the nation’s hunger returned in early fall for sports events and the presidential election, a second, more subtly insidious battle for Homestead had begun.

In reaction to the summer-long barrage, Carnegie had launched a vehement campaign to discredit strike leaders, in hopes of snuffing out unionism while redeeming his reputation. He brought down the full power of his wealth and legal staff. Accusing the strike leaders of murder, Carnegie had them, including McLuckie, thrown into jail. When juries acquitted the accused, Carnegie had them hauled back into the courts to face a variety of further charges ranging from conspiracy to aggravate riot to treason. So went what one scholar calls “the legal merry-go-round.”

Deprived of its chief organizers, the union flagged. Its coffers, already drawn down by distributing strike relief to workers’ families, received a double and triple blow in the high costs of the trials and the exorbitant bail set by a court sympathetic to Carnegie’s ends. His activities marked the start of an effort to revise history and burnish his public image that continued until his dying day; they also created the circumstances for the strange Mexico-McLuckie connection.

McLuckie and the others acquitted found themselves blacklisted, nonetheless. No steel-related firm in the nation would hire them. So effective was Carnegie’s campaign that even his industry rivals joined in the ostracism; not one of the union leaders was able to make a living from his chosen trade ever again. As Carnegie biographer Joseph Frazier Wall puts it, they “paid most dearly for the strike,” and, unemployable, adds Homestead
After leaving Homestead, McLuckie is believed to have lived with his Mexican wife in the seaport of Guaymas (date of photo unknown), and worked for Sonora Railway.
student Leon Wolff, they “scattered to the four winds.” One became a liquor salesman, another managed a vaudeville act, while a third drifted about, simply out of work. Little more is known of them; once emasculated, they faded beyond historical recall. Only McLuckie left a recognizable track, though it, too, tends to be skimpy; the Mexican chapter occurred only after a curious chronological and geographical hiatus of several years.

First, we shall present Andrew Carnegie’s version of the story, which was not revealed for nearly 30 years, in the autobiography published after his death. It is well known that Carnegie and John C. Van Dyke were friends for many years in the late 19th century. In the spring of 1900, Van Dyke, a professor of art history at Rutgers College (now University) who had advised Carnegie years before on shaping his art collection, was traveling in Sonora, a state in northwestern Mexico. At La Noria Verde, Van Dyke chanced upon an American, and in conversation, discovered he was Carnegie’s former arch enemy. Having been “wounded, starved, pursued by the officers of the law and obliged to go into hiding” after the Homestead mess, McLuckie was now broke, down on his luck south of the border.

Despite his bedraggled condition, so this account goes, McLuckie expressed regret that the Homestead affair had blackened Carnegie’s reputation. Taking pity on McLuckie, Van Dyke, after returning to Tucson, wrote to the steel magnate, whose heart swelled with empathy; Van Dyke was instructed to “Give McLuckie all the money he wants, but don’t mention my name.”

When Van Dyke next contacted McLuckie, the proud man, with “right enough American spirit,” refused Van Dyke’s offer of help, and when the ragged vagabond learned that Carnegie was behind the eleemosynary act, tears practically welled in his eyes. Van Dyke was so impressed with the man’s virtue that he put in a good word for him with J. A. Naugle, manager of the Sonora Railway. The last Van Dyke heard of McLuckie, he was working for the railroad and prospering. He had taken a Mexican wife and was living in the seaport of Guaymas.

All published accounts of the McLuckie story citing a source give this rendition. Those not offering a reference so nearly parallel Carnegie’s version, repeating much or some of the information, that his book — containing the sole version of the story in print at the time — almost surely is the source.

Somewhat curiously, then, scholars have accepted this account. The uncritical unanimity is surprising because Carnegie had such good reason to put himself in a favorable light. What’s more — beyond psychological speculation — certain large features of the story don’t ring true.

First, we should bear in mind that this was the man who went on an extended vacation to shoot grouse in Scotland at the time of the strike, then dictated the battle’s tactics by transatlantic telegraph to his chief lieutenant, Frick. In this sense, above all, Carnegie was a capable man. Writing about Homestead in his autobiography, he reported that his loyal workers, pained at the upset in his mill caused by a few bad eggs, wired him: “Kind master, tell us what you wish us to do and we shall do it for you” — a message spun entirely from his imagination, and yet, evidence shows, one he also believed. If anything, then, Carnegie had a wonderful ability to imagine events in a way most pleasing to him.

Even more to the point in this matter, however, it wasn’t Carnegie who actually compiled the McLuckie story. Instead, it was his friend John C. Van Dyke. Van Dyke not only committed to paper the chronicle used in Carnegie’s autobiography, but also served as its editor, shaping into a book the disorganized notes that Carnegie left behind in 1919.

As will be seen, this makes doubly suspect the account’s veracity, though Van Dyke should not be slighted; his talents were huge, and his images could be sharp, full of compelling poetic flights. An “Art for Art’s Sake” critic who looked on nature as far more beautiful than any landscape painting hanging in a museum, his work, The Desert, was published in 1901. It was the first book to praise America’s arid lands. Here, sandstorms swirl up in awesome swirls of golden clouds, and at the end of the day, the great Southwestern peaks glow in sunsets “like hot iron.” Off on his aesthetic soars, Van Dyke swathes the desert, widely scorned at the time as cruel and intractable, in forceful and uplifting imagery. Because of the success of his artful fantasy, his little book remains in print after 100 years, still the most popular volume on the subject. Elsewhere, Van Dyke details breathtaking boyhood experiences on wild buffalo chases with Sioux Indians, and he regales readers with his derring-do as a cowboy in Montana and Wyoming.

Whatever the power of his prose, the problem is that, far from being a two-fisted outdoorsman, Van Dyke was chronically ill with respiratory problems, and he may have never spent a single night sleeping beneath the desert stars. A Romantic fabulist, at home among servants and tinkling crystal, he observed the desert from plush Pullman cars, spinning his accounts, Carnegie-like, from histrionic bouts of wishful thinking. On top of that, he was unabashed at curryng favor with America’s largest millionaire; Van Dyke hailed his friend and devoted strike-breaker as the very paragon of virtue in labor relations and public charity.

And what of McLuckie? Carnegie was known for occasional largesse to downtrodden people, so sheer pity on his part cannot be ruled out. But McLuckie distinguished himself from other strike leaders by being politically experienced and a savvy public speaker. He was said to embody the “insurgent spirit of the town,” and showed his fire in testimony before a congressional committee investigating the uproar. Time after time, McLuckie seethed before the congressmen, fingering Carnegie and Frick in a gigantic “conspiracy” against honest workingmen wanting only the chance to make a decent living for their families. McLuckie railed against the “horde of cut-throats, thieves, and murderers … in the employ of unscrupulous capital for the oppression of honest labor.” Within a few years of the strike (the date is not clear, but four or five years before he can be placed in Mexico), McLuckie’s political power had expanded and he continued publicly to carry the anti-Carnegie torch. For Carnegie, the activist McLuckie was a continuing irritation.

As one might expect about an alleged chance meeting in the
Mexican desert, not a great deal is verifiable. Yes, there was an American-owned railroad called the Sonoran Railway Company, running from the border town of Nogales south 262 miles to Guaymas.32 And, yes, too, it was managed by a J. A. Naugle33 (the man said to have given McLuckie employment). And, Van Dyke can be traced into the Southwest and Mexico in the years around the century’s turn through his own autobiography.34 Better yet, we can locate Van Dyke in Guaymas about this time through correspondence he wrote on the letterhead of that city's best hotel, the Hotel Almada.35

As for La Noria Verde, the Mexican town where Van Dyke had expected to meet "only a few Mexicans and many Yaqui Indians"36 but instead found McLuckie, it was hardly a crude cattle station far from civilization. In reality, the place’s central feature was a magnificent hacienda, complete with a great inner courtyard and its own chapel for private worship. The grand establishment, now in ruins, was owned by rich and politically powerful descendants of Don José Aguilar, a former governor of the state of Sonora.37

Lastly in this chain of growing suspicions is the sheer coincidence of the meeting. Like a BB rolling around on a billiard table, Van Dyke just happens to be in Mexico at the right moment, just happens to bump into a vagabond named McLuckie, who, in turn, just happens to be the former leader in the strike against America’s largest industrialist. And the latter just happens to be Van Dyke’s close friend, etc.

Still, we would seem to be at an impasse in judging the nature of the transactions between Carnegie and McLuckie in the aftermath of Homestead were it not for key evidence that has recently come to light. Through the actual handwriting of both Carnegie and Van Dyke, we can witness their hoisting themselves on the very petard they used to silence the fugitive.

Van Dyke, in addition to serving as a professor of art history at Rutgers, held a concurrent appointment as director of the Gardner A. Sage Library at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, across the street and up the hill from Rutgers. In a huge scrapbook, chockablock with Van Dyke photographs and correspondence, appears this letter from Scotland (typewritten, except as noted):

Skibo Castle
Ardgay. ["Dornoch" — crossed out] N.B.

29th June 1898
My dear Professor,

Sorry you are getting to be one of the capitalistic class — too bad. We are looking forward to the arrival of the book you have sent us. Sorry we are not to see you here this year, as we fully expected you to come. I think you promised to do so if I recollect, but next year surely we are to have the pleasure of a visit. We told Lady Waterlow she might expect to find you here. There is plenty of fishing at Skibo, salt and freshwater, and you will like it for many reasons, although we have nothing quite so rugged as the scenery at Laggan. We are all well and delighted to hear of your success. Shall see you in October, when we hope this petty war will be over. Frank Thomson is behaving badly to us — so I hear from Frick and Schwab. I wish you would talk to him; he will listen to a capitalist. [added by hand] altho unmindful of poor manufacturers upon his line.

Always very truly yours,

Andrew Carnegie [signed]
John C. Van Dyke, Esq.
Nerzoe Hall, New Brunswick, N. C. ["C" crossed out and "]J" added with pen]38

Innocent as the letter appears, there is a slight edge in the writer’s tone, disguised with an overlay of humor: Carnegie surely knew that Van Dyke’s address was Hertzog, not Nerzoe Hall, and that it was in New Jersey, not North Carolina, though the intentional mistake likely was part of some joshing going on between the two men.39 More seriously, one wonders about the reference to Van Dyke becoming one of "the capitalistic class — too bad"; a mocking repeated later in reference to Frank Thomson. At the time, Carnegie was worried that Thomson, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the art critic’s best friend,40 would put the financial squeeze on the steel company and increase shipping rates; perhaps he wished Van Dyke to exert some influence.41

Putting aside Carnegie’s literary eccentricities, Van Dyke had the peculiar habit of making notes on letters received to identify their importance. And it is this quickness responsible for the revelations at hand. At the top of this missive from Scotland, he wrote slantwise opposite the date: “This is the letter in which A.C. wrote in pencil to give McLuckie all the money he wanted and to ‘rub this out.’ See [Carnegie] Autobiography p. 237.”

An arrow points to an area in the left-hand margin. Though the words are indeed erased, one can make out with a magnifying glass the final three words, “rub this out.”

After studying Van Dyke for years, one develops a sense of his curious bedevillments. On the one hand, someone, likely Van Dyke himself, apparently sanitized much of his personal papers to guard certain aspects of his bachelor life, such as the existence of an illegitimate daughter.42 On the other hand, as with this letter left in his private scrapbook, Van Dyke sometimes was careful to mark a trail, as if — rubbing his hands together in glee over the long-term stratagem — he were tempting future scholars to follow him into what could be some rather dark business. Van Dyke was indeed a foxy man.

The nature of such game-playing in Van Dyke’s circles needs to be expanded on in order to understand the context of the McLuckie letter. Writing about art, Van Dyke sniffed at popular sentiment as “the lowest and most contemptible form,”43 condemning “anything that is of popular interest”44 as inferior. From such elitist attitudes came lofty pronouncements. Upon sending the manuscript of his desert book to Scribner’s, Van Dyke arched a brow: “It is a whole lot better than the swash which today is being turned out as ‘literature,’ and it will sell too, but not up in the hundreds of thousands. It is not so bad as that.”45 That is, Van Dyke, along with any number of entrepreneurs and artists, among them a Van Dyke friend, the acid James McNeill Whistler, looked down their noses at those far below on the social ladder.

The disdain gave license for bizarre antics, some of them
fairly harmless, others pernicious and played for high stakes. For instance, Van Dyke dedicates The Desert to nature-wrecking Carnegie, thus thumbing his nose at the large audience that would come to adore the author’s sentiments. In a related vein is Carnegie’s penchant for making much of his pacifism, while reeling in millions from military contracts. Whatever the case, such antics were all part of the hoodwinking played by people who saw themselves above moral and civil restraints.

Because things in Carnegie’s circle often were not as simple as represented, the McLuckie letter takes on a whole new light. For instance, the casual reader might presume that Van Dyke’s chance encounter occurred while traveling through Mexico in pursuit of the desert’s beauty. Years later, however, Van Dyke confessed that, whatever his soarings in his public prose, he didn’t particularly like the arid lands. Then what on earth was he doing down there?

Note that the McLuckie letter is sent to Van Dyke in New Brunswick, not in Tucson, as instructions before Van Dyke takes the trip in which he later declares included the surprise interlude; also, the two-year difference in the dates. Such things point not to an accidental, one-time encounter with McLuckie south of the border, but to an ongoing relationship with him. Then there’s the language of Carnegie’s erased scribblings: the clear implication is that McLuckie had requested, or demanded, money, when,  

The remains of a magnificent hacienda (1996) at La Noria Verde, the Sonoran town where Van Dyke claimed to have first encountered McLuckie.
according to Carnegie's autobiography, the gift was entirely voluntary and philanthropic. Lastly, why would Carnegie instruct Van Dyke to "rub this out," unless he had something to hide? And what of Van Dyke? We share an odd intimacy with the man: he not only preserved the letter but probably added the damning notation, knowing it would be found after his death — beyond care about accusations of betrayal. True to the aesthetician's wily form, Van Dyke likely was delighting in delayed-action back-stabbing. In this intricate game, it was not unusual for the players to turn their knives on one another. 2

Notes
2 Van Dyke, The Open Spaces, 8.
3 Van Dyke, The Open Spaces, 95.
4 Van Dyke, The Open Spaces, 95.
6 For the background of the ballad, along with its full text, see Archie Green, Wobbles, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes: Laborlore Explorations (Urbana, 1993), 238-41.
8 Joseph Frazier Wall, Andrew Carnegie (New York, 1970), 579.
9 Wolff, 243.
10 Wolff, 244.
11 Wolff, 243-4.
12 Wolff, 244.
14 Andrew Carnegie, Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie, John C. Van Dyke, ed. (Boston, 1920), 236.
15 "If Andy had been there the trouble would never have arisen," were his exact words, as reported in Carnegie, Autobiography, 236-7.
16 Carnegie, 237.
17 As to these various repetitions, see Wall (579); Wolff (244-5); Paul Krause, The Battle for Homestead, 1889-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel (Pittsburgh, 1992), 330; Arthur C. Burgoyne, The Homestead Strike of 1892, (1893; Pittsburgh, 1979), 297; and David P. Demarest, Jr.'s "Afterword" in Burgoyne (1979), 313. Most of these mentions are brief. For one of the longest renditions, see Steffi Domike and Nicole Fauteux, "The Fate of the Principal Characters," in The River Ran Red: Homestead, 1892, David P. Demarest, Jr., ed. (Pittsburgh, 1992), 199-200. This last contains what appears to be made up dialogue and gives no citation, though, again, the piece so closely resembles Carnegie's version as to make him surely the template.
18 Carnegie, 232.
19 Wall, 571-6.
20 Carnegie, Autobiography, 235, 239 (note 1). Van Dyke repeats the essentials of the McClure story in his own The Autobiography of John C. Van Dyke: A Personal Narrative of American Life, 1861-1921, Peter Wild, ed. (Salt Lake City, 1993), 96-7. This account, written after Carnegie's death, is, if anything, more forceful, referring to someone driving McClure "out of the United States into Mexico" (96), a point with much bearing on the scenario developing below.
24 Van Dyke, The Open Spaces, 41-77.
28 Krause, 358.
30 U.S. Congress, 100.
31 Although McClure's activism after the strike cannot be fully traced, numerous references indicate that the leader's heat continued to burn hot. According to Burgoyne, it was McClure who stirred up the fires when union determination began to fade (180-81) and McClure who boldly brought countercharges against Frick (209). It was McClure who stormed when union lawyers, cowed by Carnegie's massive legal assault, wanted to draw in their horns; McClure who took to the stump in the campaign of 1893 (297); and overall, McClure who kept beating the drums against the Carnegie Company (202). See also Marcus, 70.
32 Some years after the strike, McClure had forged strong connections with prominent members of the Democratic Party. Broadening his activist horizons, he also consulted with Emma Goldman, the most famous anarchist of the day, who was also pursued by the law and was the mistress of Alexander Berkman, the man who tried to assassinate Frick. Among other things discussed at the meeting with Goldman, McClure offered to help get Berkman out of jail. See Emma Goldman, Living My Life (1931; New York, 1970), v, 1, 181.
34 Francis Harrold Lane, The Biographical Dictionary of the Railway Officials of America (New York, 1913), 399.
35 Van Dyke, Autobiography, 117-27. See especially the long note 1, 234-37, pinning down specific years.
36 Van Dyke letters of 5 Dec. 1899 to a Mr. Carey and of 1 April 1901 to R.W. Gilder, both in the New York Public Library, Centenary Magazine Collection.
37 Carnegie, 235.
38 The ruins of La Noria Verde are about 25 miles north of Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora. See the map, "San Miguel de Horcasitas," in: "Sonora," Comisión de Estudios del Territorio Nacional (Mexico, D.F., 1923). Francisco R. Almada discusses La Noria Verde (alphabetized under Noria Verde, 450) and Dom José de Aguilar (21-2) in Diccionario de Historia, Geografía y Biografía Sonorense (Hermosillo, 1990). In addition to such documentation, I thank Sr. Leonardo Varela Espinosa for piecing together much of this information through interviews with local people, including an Aguilar relative. A great ruin in the middle of the desert is a startling thing. What remains of the falling buildings, inhabited by two elderly women, descendants of servants from better days, seems straight out of a Gothic novel. In a letter to this author on 7 Aug. 1996, Mr. Varela described the mound heap this way: "Ere mecualul de a amar con otras, una mucha de la huaussen y una..." ("In the patio interior, invaded by the birds and the years, a slight gust of wind sweeps the gathered leaves.")
39 The letter was unearthed by Professor David W. Teague of the University of Delaware while working with me on a project collecting Van Dyke's correspondence. For how delicately, even wittily, Van Dyke played this extended game of cat-and-mouse with a man who could easily have crushed him, see Van Dyke's deft besting of Carnegie on a day of fishing, in The Open Spaces, 203-09.
40 For Van Dyke's friendship with Thornton, see Van Dyke, Autobiography (73-8), and the more profound admission in Van Dyke's The Open Spaces (198).
41 Apparently, Van Dyke's influence worked. See Wall, 620-21.
42 Only the recent testimony of a relative has finally cut through the lingering fog of rumors and brought this out clearly. See Philip L. Strong's "Foreword" to Van Dyke, Autobiography, xxi.
43 Van Dyke, Principles of Art (New York, 1887), 176.
44 Van Dyke, What Is Art? Studies in the Technique and Criticism of Painting (New York, 1910). 87. Van Dyke was a secretive man who considered himself aristocratic. See the sketchy, if frank, confession in his autobiography, 180-1.
47 Van Dyke, Autobiography, 127.
48 As indicated by the discussion above, things rarely were simple in Van Dyke's life. Besides the implied mission for Carnegie, complex circumstances likely lay behind Van Dyke's travel through the Southwest around the turn of the century. Among them were his health and, possibly, a rather heated scandal in his private life making his absence from New Brunswick at the time a convenient interface. David Teague and Peter Wild analyze Van Dyke's motives for travel in "The Secret Life of John C. Van Dyke: Decalcomania on the Desert," Journal of the Southwest 37:1 (Spring 1995), 12-13, 17. Teague and Wild further document the argument in The Secret Life of John C. Van Dyke: Selected Letters (Reno, forthcoming).
My dear Professor,

Sorry you are getting to be one of the capitalistic class—too bad. We are looking forward to the arrival of the book you have sent us. Sorry we are not to see you here this year, as we fully expected you to come. I think you promised to do so if I recollect, but next year surely we are to have the pleasure of a visit. We told Lady Waterlow she might expect to find you here. There is plenty of fishing at Skibo, salt and freshwater, and you will like it for many reasons, although we have nothing quite so rugged as the scenery at Laggan.

We are all well and delighted to hear of your success. Shall see you in October, when we hope this petty war will be over.

Frank Thomson is behaving badly to us — so I hear from Frick and Schwab. I wish you would talk to him; he will listen to a capitalist, although mindful of poor manufacturers.

Always very truly yours,

Andrew Carnegie

John C. Van Dyke, Esq.,
Nerzoe Hall, New Brunswick, N.J.