

**William A. Richards  
Returns to Wyoming  
for Good**

**Explores the Bighorn Basin for a  
homestead and ditch project**

**1884-1886**

**Lucia McCreery**



**Red Bank Press**

[WilliamARichards.com](http://WilliamARichards.com)

IT WAS TWO O’CLOCK in the morning on October 4, 1884, when the train pulled in to Carbon,<sup>1</sup> Wyoming Territory, a coal- and cow-town northwest of Laramie near the Medicine Bow Mountains. William A. Richards stepped down with his personal baggage and his surveying kit.

As the caboose’s lights dimmed and disappeared, he may have looked around for a hotel. None in sight. No town, either. Under the full moon he would have seen only the coal office, coal cars, coal dust, and perhaps some sooty cattle chutes. But there was a depot, and the glow of an oil lamp told Will he was not alone in this carboniferous hellscape. He hauled his gear inside, and would have been greeted by the railroad’s telegraph operator.<sup>2</sup>

Richards was hardly the first passenger to arrive on the late train and find himself with no place to go. The nearest hotel was a half mile away over a bad road, so the operator probably invited him to spend the rest of the night in the depot. It was only normal western hospitality; he had not the slightest inkling that his guest was a future governor of Wyoming and commissioner of the U.S. General Land Office.

The operator may have welcomed company. Even a stranger snoring in a chair might relieve the isolation that would otherwise be broken only by occasional passengers and the impersonal tap-tapping of his device. To Richards, a surveyor used to camping out in all kinds of weather, the shelter of the depot must have been just fine.

A genial soul, Will may have offered his host a cigar and chatted with him by the warmth of a potbellied stove. The new arrival probably asked why the station was outside town, and the operator may have told him that it had been moved out of range of the trigger-happy cowboys whooping it up at a nearby saloon. Their pot-shots at the furniture on the platform and the signs on the depot wall had made his predecessors so nervous that they kept resigning. Finally, the depot was hoisted onto flatcars and moved half a mile down the track.<sup>3</sup>

The traveler may have told the trainman what had brought him to this remote outpost: He was on his way to the Bighorn Basin, which was about the last place in the country with unclaimed grassland. Enough good acreage might still be available for his own homestead and for the large-scale land claim and irrigation project he and his associates had in mind. Richards would need both to start a new life.

He considered his present position—county surveyor and city engineer of Colorado Springs—a “hand-to-mouth” existence that would not provide well enough for his family.<sup>4</sup> Yet any pioneer venture would cost him this meager but reasonably secure living—and might also imperil his recently restored health. He was middle-aged for that era (35), with a wife and two young daughters to support. Thus he had a lot more to lose than he did at age 20, when he struck out from Galena, Illinois, to seek his fortune in Omaha. There he found his way into surveying and also met his future wife, Harriet Alice Hunt. In 1873 and 1874 he helped his elder brother, Alonzo Van Ness Richards, survey the southern and western boundaries of Wyoming Territory. After his wedding he joined his wife’s family on a farm near San Jose, California, and was elected county surveyor. But he contracted tuberculosis in that damp climate and was forced start anew in Colorado Springs. Now he had come back to Wyoming.

At daybreak he stepped out again into the waiting wind and hauled his gear into town, picking his way around the holes and hollows left by mining cave-ins.<sup>5</sup> Once registered at the



Carbon, Wyoming, date unknown. The Scranton House is behind the horse and carriage. Wyoming State Archives<sup>6</sup>

Scranton House hotel, he may have had breakfast and caught a few hours sleep before meeting the foreman and several hands from the Crawford, Thompson & Co. cattle outfit. By prior arrangement with a friend of Will's who was a partner in C.T. & Co., they had brought the horses, pack animals, and supplies for the journey ahead.

A storm came up and Will was sick all night, but the next morning he mailed letters to his wife and brothers, mounted up, and set out with the party for the basin. After crossing the Medicine Bow Mountains and traversing the Shirley Basin, they passed near Independence Rock, a landmark for wagon trains on the California Trail. They would wend their way north across hills and streams with less heartening names—Dry Creek, Rattlesnake Range, Poison Creek, and Badwater Creek—on the way to the No Water and No Wood creeks,\* as they were called then. The party traveled in the wind and occasional snow typical of autumn in Wyoming, but some days were fair and pleasant.<sup>1</sup>

It helped that the journey was warmed by friendship. The expedition had been arranged by Edwin S. Crocker, one of the many friends that Richards would make over the course of his career. The two had probably met when Will visited Evanston, in the Territory's southwest corner, at the time of the boundary surveys. Crocker and another partner in the company, Harvey Booth, were prominent merchants and stockmen there. C.T. & Co. also ran cattle in the Bighorn Basin.

Crocker likely had urged Will to consider the basin. He could hardly have improved on the words of Chief Arapooish, who reportedly said in 1830, "The Crow country is in exactly the right place. Everything good is to be found there. There is no country like the Crow country."<sup>2</sup>

The mid-1880s saw an influx of settlers to Wyoming, quite a few of whom became state leaders, and in the basin a few pioneers had already transformed some of its grassland or sagebrush flats into farmland by diverting the shallower streams. The basin still had lots of unclaimed land, especially along its largest river. The copious waters of the Bighorn could irrigate thousands of acres of fertile alluvial soil if ditches deep enough and long enough could be carved out. Given the difficulty of getting its waters up and out of its deep bed, however, the Bighorn rolled on to Montana undisturbed.

Prior to this expedition, Richards and some associates in Colorado Springs apparently decided to form a company to



*Detail of an 1883 map of Wyoming Territory annotated with some locations mentioned in the diaries plus others. Place names in parentheses did not yet exist. The dotted line roughly indicates Richards's route from Carbon to C.T. & Co.'s home ranch. This map does not show all the high ridges east and south of Red Bank ranch that partly enclose the Bighorn Basin.*

George F. Cram, Chicago<sup>4</sup>

\*Details of route: Shirley Basin, Medicine Bow mountains, Sage Creek, Sand Creek, Sweetwater, Independence Rock, Soda Lake, Dry Creek, Rattlesnake range, Deer Creek, Mustang Springs, Poison Creek, Bad Water ("good water," per Richards<sup>3</sup>), Cottonwood, and the headwaters of the No Wood

finance an irrigation project and claim land. Richards would survey and supervise construction of the canal, and his salary would give him the wherewithal to establish a ranch homestead up in the Nowood country for himself and his family. He would also get paid for locating and surveying claims for investors whom Lon was trying to round up back in Dubuque, Iowa. (In this account the stream will be called No Wood and the country Nowood.)

Ten years after settling in the basin, Richards was governor and his benefactor was awaiting trial for the brutal murder of Booth. But this turn of events could not be imagined when the party set out for the basin in 1884. They would travel 180 miles in ten days. Once arrived at C.T. & Co.'s ranch at the mouth of Box Elder creek on No Wood creek, Richards found work doing surveys for Crocker and others. The settlers just beginning to come into the Nowood country, then part of Johnson County, needed surveys.

The Two-Bar and other outfits ranged cattle on these open grasslands but had not yet filed official claims for land. They had not even staked out large tracts for their own use—unofficially—as had been done elsewhere.

As yet there was little need: three years previously, when Johnson County was organized, its white population numbered all of 671.<sup>1</sup> The county was divided by the formidable Bighorn Mountains, and all but a few whites lived outside the basin, in the eastern half of the county. That was still true in 1884 even though Johnson's population had grown considerably, with 1,312 votes cast in the November election.<sup>2</sup> Pickings were still good for Richards's own homestead and for the land-claim and irrigation ditch that would finance his move.

As elsewhere in the arid West, irrigation was essential for agriculture. The Mormons



*Edwin S. Crocker is the bearded man on the stool. To his left are other members of C.T. & Co., Harvey Booth (standing), William Crawford, and William Thompson. Seated by the safe is Frank Moore, a partner of Booth's in Evanston's early days.<sup>3</sup> Courtesy of Uinta County Library, date unknown*

began the first large-scale projects about 1850 in Utah. Startling green swaths had appeared on many a tawny western vista, and Richards would have been familiar with what irrigation had done for California and Colorado. He had run out a ditch for Crocker in 1881.

From his base at the CT home ranch, Richards explored the area and eventually found what he was looking for. On November 9, he had noted in his diary<sup>1</sup> that the Kirby Creek area is “a dry country & not what we are looking for.” But on November 14, 1884, he announced, “The land we passed over today suits me for the location of *our* scheme.” (Italics added. This is the only evidence that Richards was working with others.) He says little about the country but obviously saw its potential beneath the “uninviting” surface that was described by Charles F. Robertson, head of the canal company that bought up and promoted the tract years later. In 1914, he wrote:<sup>2</sup>

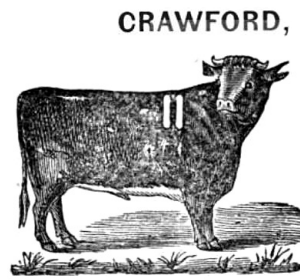
For 35 miles up and down the Big Horn [as it was known then] river from where Worland now stands, there was a desert waste, with only here and there a pioneer’s cabin close to the river bank. Small attempts had been made at agriculture by the early settler, who had demonstrated the soil and climatic conditions favorable to the growing of oats, wheat, potatoes and alfalfa; but in the main, it was a long guess as to just what the barren, sun-baked, severely arid soil was good for. To the uninitiated [*sic*], the prospect was altogether uninviting.

Imagine yourself, coming from the beautiful blue grass regions of the central states and dropping into a land where the average yearly precipitation of moisture is less than five inches, where instead of grass, new and strange plants, such as black sage, curly sage, salt sage, grease wood and rabbit brush are indigenous to the soil and nature’s only covering, where the thermometer sometimes registers 40 degrees below zero in winter and 114 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade in summer, a wit having aptly added, “and no shade.”

Just here I am reminded of a traveling man making a drive down the Big Horn river from Thermopolis to Basin; the day was hot, the road dusty, wiping the sweat and dust out of his eyes he spied a small bird by the roadside and laconically remarked, “You poor little feathered son-of-a-gun, [you got wings but stay in this country?]”

(For the story of Robertson’s adventures with the Hanover Canal Co., the Bonanza oilfield and more, see Hanover.pdf on WilliamARichards.com.)

*Annotated relief map of the Bighorn Basin. The lake at the southern end is today’s Boysen Reservoir, where the north-flowing Wind River becomes the Bighorn River. The circled gap on the right is Birdseye Pass, used by Richards and others traveling to the Nowood country.*

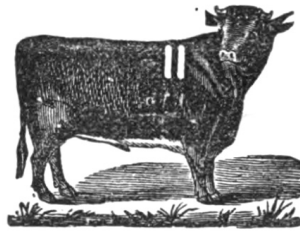


### CRAWFORD, THOMPSON & CO.

P. O. address, Evanston, Wyo. Range, twenty miles north of Evanston, Bear River; also, on No Wood River, Johnson county, Wyo.

Brand, both sides; also, I on both sides.

All horses branded II on left shoulder.



### BOOTH & CROCKER.

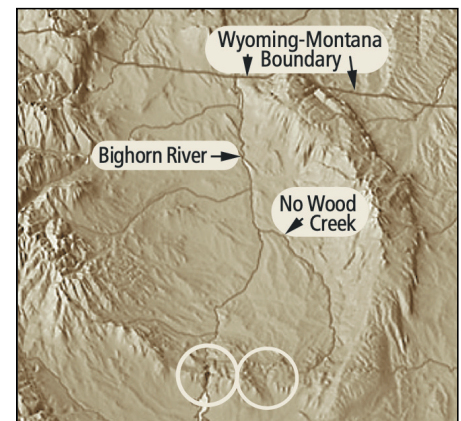
P. O. address, Evanston, Wyo. Range, twenty miles north of Evanston, Bear River.

Brand, both sides; also, I on both sides, (II II) left side, with wattle on nose.

O on right thigh with OO on right side. Earmark, overslope each ear, and wattle on nose.

Horse brands II left shoulder, OOO left thigh.

*From the brand books of the Wyoming Stock Growers’ Association, 1884 and 1885 respectively. Crawford, Thompson & Co.’s 2 bar was in the first book, published in 1882.<sup>3</sup> Johnson County was spelled correctly in later editions.*



Nothing about the country discouraged Richards from staying in it. Exploring and working until early December, he also located and surveyed a claim for himself that would become his Red Bank ranch. Since he was used to winter the occasional snow got no more comment or complaint in his diary than the other weather notes. More worthy of a few lines was a close call one night with a grizzly at the C.T. & Co. ranch, where he had been doing a survey. Richards estimated that his adversary, which nearly got him, weighed more than 1,000 lbs.<sup>1</sup>

Saturday, Oct. 25 Killed a bear last night & skinned him today. A very large Silver Tip. I shot the bear [as] I stood just outside the door in my night-clothes—having been awakened by the bear trying to get at some meat hanging outside. [illegible line] He ran only 200 yards & we found him dead in the morning. He roared most terribly when I shot—more like the bellow of a mad bull.

The bearskin was eventually sent to his brother Aut in Oakland, California, for tanning and lining. It was splendid enough to merit display in store windows there and in Colorado Springs.<sup>2</sup> Another trophy was the story itself, which Richards wrote up for *Forest and Stream* magazine. (See his hunting stories in *William A. Richards, Diaries of a Frontier Surveyor*, available through bookstores and online retailers.)

At the end of November he was still doing surveys for settlers and getting acquainted. Finally he could head for home—doing more surveys along the way. He made his way west to Lander, the main town and county seat of Fremont County, then took a stage to Rawlins. The team stalled on the treacherous Beaver Rim, then continued on in a snowstorm. His diary gives the route as “Lander – Little Popo Agie – Beaver – Sweetwater Bridge – Rongis – Crooks Creek – Lost Soldier – Bull Springs – Bell Springs – Rawlins.” At Rawlins he caught a train for home.

LETTERS FROM his brothers and parents reflect his doubts about moving on yet again, but by the end of December his mind was made up. As he and his forebears had done more than once, William A. Richards would take a chance in a new country. This time he would go the true pioneer route, claiming a homestead and building a log cabin. Unlike many pioneers, though, he had help—and could also check out the promised land first.

As always, he had the backing of his folks. His father offered financial help even after losing his badly needed job at the Illinois statehouse. In the waning days of 1884, Truman Richards offered his son his entire savings—all of \$150 (about \$4,620 in 2022<sup>3</sup>).<sup>4</sup>

from the tone of your letter to Lon I conclude your future is not vary brite I am sorry you have to go off into the wild country & leave your family or take them there. It seems worse to me I suppose than it realy is but it may be the best thing to do it is time to begin to save something to get a home with and if by a few years of ruffing it you can accomplish it I think you are justified in the move

Now Wil...if you want some or all of my pile to help you through the winter you can have it. I would like to put in a little money on a land clame it would be a paying investment or do any thing I can to help



*Beaver Hill about 1901. The stage company at some point began requiring their drivers to stop before climbing or descending the hill and ask riders if they would rather proceed on foot.*

Photo and information courtesy of Riverton Museum

The offer was touching, but Richards would need a lot more than his poor old father's "pile," even if he had been willing to accept it.

Will's elder brother, Lon, had frequently talked up the western dream. Now he was less than gung-ho about the reality. Unlike Will, he had never left Illinois except temporarily. And this time of year, frost on the windows and freezing winds may have chilled the romantic vision of pioneer life. Lon showed his concern for his brother by asking on New Year's Day, 1885, whether he wouldn't be better off where he was:

Are you still intending to go to Wyoming in the spring and are you certain that is the best thing you can do? Is there not some business you can go into right there in Col'o at the Springs or at Denver or Pueblo? With half the vim you have always displayed in your own line you can succeed in any business, and be with your family. To go up there to be a cowboy for an indefinite time & build up a herd with your wages would be a long & tedious job, as you must support your family also from your earnings. You would be very differently circumstanced from the young men whom you saw up there, who have no expenses hardly and can use all of their earnings & buy cattle.

Will's younger brother, Aut, wanted to leave California to join his brother in homesteading, but felt he could not afford to do so. His income from occasional surveying jobs and seasonal work in the Oakland tax-collector's office was meager to begin with, and little remained at the end of the month after he sent money for the support of their parents. Aut contributed more than his share because "the grass is pretty short with you," he wrote Will on January 21, 1885. "We must not impose on Lon when he insists on bearing his share of their living and taking care of them too."

The brothers agonized over the plight of their parents. After Truman lost his position in Illinois, he and Eleanor moved in with Lon and his family, which was hard on everyone. Though feeble and nearly blind, Truman wanted to find some kind of work, even tinkering, that might restore his independence.

If the "grass was short" with Will in January of 1885, the family was at least protected from penury. Mrs. Richards had inherited "a small fortune," wrote their daughter Alice later, but it evidently was tied up in real estate. The elder Hunts had owned town lots in Omaha and Oakland that grew ever more valuable. One of the downtown Omaha lots was worth as much as \$100,000 (about \$2.850 million in 2021 dollars), according to someone they knew there. As of 1888 the letters indicate the properties still had not been sold, and



*Truman and Eleanor Swinnerton Richards*

William's photo album, family papers

### ***Truman on money: Wisdom for any era***

its not so much of a trick to make money as it is to no how to use it to good advantage and about the only way to learn is by exsperiance its no use talking in order to save money we must be saving, equinomical stop paying money for what we dont nead, almost every boddy can get what they really nead its for what we dont nead that keeps mankind poor if you dont beleave it just investigate the facts. I can live wel on 50cts a day and had I plenty of money I could spend 5 or 10 [dollars] & be no better off or satisfied [and] would be worse off feel worse worse for the health worse every way its the exstravagant waise the world has got in to is whats the matter<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The initial capitalization was \$17,020, per the certificate of incorporation.<sup>2</sup> (About 534,000 in 2022 dollars.) In 1892 *The Cheyenne Daily Sun* reported that it was \$40,000.<sup>3</sup> The investors had to keep putting money into the ditch, but \$40,000 seems high. Basin historian Paul Frison claimed it cost \$35,000 but he did not give a source.<sup>4</sup> There was also a company by the same name on Powder River, on the other side of the Bighorn Mountains.

the family's ongoing financial pinch must have meant that there was little cash in the legacy. Richards wrote Aut that he did not want to borrow from his wife by selling any of the Oakland lots, but holding valuable pieces of civilization must have been reassuring to someone contemplating a leap into the wilderness.<sup>1</sup>

### **Financing the big move**

BY SPRING 1885, the Big Horn Ditch Co. had been incorporated, with 26 men from Colorado as investors, plus Richards.\* The company would pay him \$100 per month (about \$3,140 in 2022 dollars) to survey and supervise construction of an irrigation canal that would bring water to each investor's claim. Their plan would take advantage of the Desert Land Act (DLA) of 1877, which granted individuals 640 acres at the price of \$1.25 (about \$39.30 in 2022) per acre provided the land were irrigated. Its intention was to promote the settlement of the vast arid West, but unlike the Homestead Act the DLA did not require the claimant to live on his or her tract or even visit it. This loophole enabled the Colorado men to acquire some 15,000 acres. They could, however, do what many were doing: take advantage of the cattle boom and the land laws to make money without leaving home. A Colorado Springs newspaper of the time<sup>2</sup> says they intended to form

a joint stock company shortly for the purpose of irrigating and reclaiming this land; and in connection with this in all probability a cattle company will also be formed, as Johnson County is said to be the best cattle grazing county in Wyoming. Filings were also made in Cheyenne the past week under the same land act by other parties on 40,000 acres in the same county. ...Mr. Richards' scheme is to have the different claims located together for the purpose of cooperation and mutual advantages in irrigation and stock raising.

Lon talked up stock raising, urging his brother on February 4, 1885,

If you can get this Cattle Co. into good shape and get a salary out of it, and go up there and start it, and have a contract in writing with the company which will secure your tenure as manager for a term of years, I think it will be all right, and I would be in favor of buying up every dollar of the stock we could get so as to eventually the whole of it, or enough to have absolute say in all things.

None of Lon's letters mention acquiring land for speculation, only for his colony or a cattle business. Will, of course, wanted a patch of ground that might support his family, and the more he could claim, the better. The land laws were so loosely drawn that the savvy could legally acquire enough acreage to give them a shot at making a living in arid country. Claiming land under the DLA did not disqualify anyone from using the earlier Homestead Act, so Richards took advantage of both and ended up with 600 acres on the Bighorn River and 160 acres at Red Bank in his own name. He then filed a Desert claim for his wife (160 acres) and his brother Aut (520 acres). He also had planned to take out "tree claims" under the Timber Culture Act of 1873,\* including one for his father, but patent records indicate he did not.

Aut wanted land as well—apparently without having to homestead. Unmarried and with no steady job, he could have joined Will in Wyoming. Perhaps he felt duty-bound to contribute to his parents' upkeep, or that gave him a reason to stay in Oakland. In any case, the claim Will filed for him required Aut to sign an affidavit. Aut showed it to their friend William Murray Gilcrest (who later went to Wyoming), then wrote Will on February 4, 1885,

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\*The Timber Culture Act was drafted by Nebraska Senator Phineas W. Hitchcock to encourage reforestation of the Plains. Homesteaders could acquire another 160 acres of land if they planted trees on a quarter of those acres. Millions of trees were set out in an attempt to qualify for land under the Act, with disappointing results. There is a reason that trees don't do well in arid country. The Timber Culture Act was repealed in 1891.<sup>3</sup>



Mur thought the affidavit—which recited that I had been all over the land—a little strong, and so did I, but “everything goes” when once you commence to grab land.

Aut’s remarks are probably facetious. True land-grabbers were acquiring many thousands of acres through such frauds as having their cowhands file claims, then “selling” them to the boss. The Land Office had nowhere near enough agents to check claims on those millions of acres out west unless someone filed a complaint. Aut added on September 10,

Am glad you are going to file the tree claims, and as many more as you can and keep within the Law. I would like to send you the money to pay the men while at work on my claim, but it is impossible now.

Not long after receiving title, Aut sold his land to Will’s brother-in-law George Hunt, and George sold it to Harriet in 1898.<sup>1</sup>

Only the Colorado project came back to haunt Richards. When he was running for governor a decade later, political opponents condemned him as a land-grabber, and the charges resurfaced a decade after that, when he was commissioner of the General Land Office.

So Will and Harriet faced another separation. The first had been before their marriage, others during his surveying trips in California. Then came his abrupt departure for Colorado to save his life, followed by the exploration of the Bighorn Basin in 1884. Daughter Alice (Allie), age 8, was all too familiar with Papa’s absences, and now Ruth, barely 18 months old, seemed to miss him as well. And of course his separation from his parents and brothers was effectively permanent. The letters he saved from family and friends tell the story of their trials and their support as he found his way in the world.

On May 6, 1885, Richards set out for Wyoming again—this time for keeps. The day after he left, Harriet lamented,

My Own Darling Husband,

After you left I had my cry as I said I would.... At meal time the house seemed desolate & we all felt out of sorts. When I ask Ruth if she wants “Papa,” do you know she sets up a cry right away. Seems to understand that you are not coming back soon. It is very hard for me to have you go, but then it is fully as hard for you to leave us for so long, and we must all be brave and endure the separation as well as we can. Look forward to the letters and then, the return!

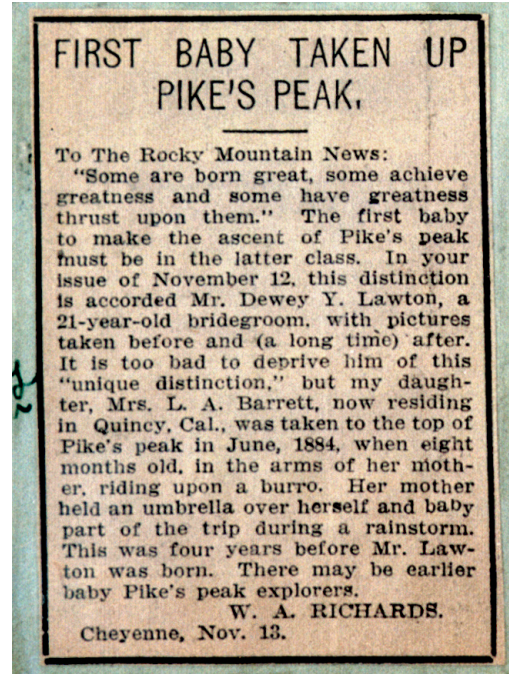
During his absence his family—Harriet, Allie, Ruth, and their hired orphan girl, Laura—would spend the summer at their cabin named Mountain House on the trail up to Pikes Peak. Charles had joined them for their protection as well as for company.

Richards’s expedition set forth with two wagons, one buckboard, eight horses and a camping outfit. Joining him were two friends from the Springs, Augustus C. Coleman and Charles E. Black, along with a friend of Black’s, Owen Thomas (Tom) Gebhart, and a William Gamble. Like Richards, Coleman was a surveyor who had come to Colorado for his health, leaving his wife and child behind temporarily. Coleman, age 30, arrived from New York State in 1883 and had worked with Richards.<sup>2</sup> Gebhart, 23, was a printer since boyhood who had come from Pennsylvania to Colorado the same year as Coleman, and had worked with Black, a fellow ink-stained wretch, as the saying went.<sup>3</sup> (Nothing could be found about Gamble.)

They camped in the rain some nights and in snow on others. From Denver the “boys” set out for Rawlins and Richards took the train to Evanston to do some surveying for Crocker and Booth. On May 18, “Snowing, hailing, thunder, lightning. Two men injured by lightning.” Booth offered the use of a work team and milk cows. Returning to Rawlins, Richards and the crew took possession of the teams, plows, and scrapers for use on the ditch and headed north.<sup>4</sup>



Portrait of Harriet by an Oakland photographer, 1885.  
Frison Collection, WSA<sup>1</sup>



from Richards' scrapbook  
WSA<sup>2</sup>

The Richards family at their Mountain House, August 1885. Charles Hunt, Harriet's brother, stands at left, Harriet and Ruth are seated on porch, their hired girl Laura and elder daughter, Allie, age 9, lean on the fence. Always athletic, Allie enjoyed climbing large rocks. The clipping above concerns Ruth's ascent the previous year. © Colorado Historical Society<sup>3</sup>



Just getting to their destination was a challenge, particularly for the horses that had to haul the wagons over the rough, trackless, unfamiliar country. A few times the party had to stay in camp because the horses were too tired or too sore to continue—or had strayed. A cracked tongue on the buckboard (a small wagon) seems not to have caused much delay, and the men kept on despite the frequent diarrhea caused by bad water. Finally, they arrived at their destination, the mouth of the No Water on the Bighorn River. Wrote Will on June 7—a month after leaving Colorado Springs—“It has been a hard disagreeable trip but a firm purpose & a good deal of energy brought us through.”<sup>1</sup>

More of both would be required in the weeks, months and years ahead. Besides work on the ditch, effort would be needed just to get mail and supplies. The nearest town was Buffalo, the Johnson County seat—but it was nearly 100 miles away, on the other side of the Bighorn Mountains. Named after Buffalo, New York, the town had been incorporated just the year before. Johnson County’s first agricultural fair, held in the year of Will’s arrival, showed off the livestock and farm produce of the prosperous Powder River country. Very shortly Buffalo would boast a \$35,000 court-house and a brick business block, a \$15,000 schoolhouse, and two churches. All this to serve a population that numbered about 800—but it was growing rapidly.<sup>2</sup> When Will finally got to Buffalo he would find not only the county offices but a full complement of businesses: a bank, general stores, two hotels, a jeweler, livery stables, even a photographer. He would have been interested in the cigar store but not the saloons or the brewery.

From Buffalo Will mailed his wife a letter describing their journey, camp, work, a visit from a band of Crows, the cowmen’s annual roundup of their cattle and calves, and his own thoughts about the venture. It is included here with a few cuts and one insertion from his diary. As noted earlier, his wife went by her middle name, Alice, as did her daughter Eleanor Alice, called “Allie” in girlhood. To prevent confusion Mrs. Richards is referred to as “Harriet” in these pages.

Monday, June 15, 1885

In Camp on Big Horn

My Darling Alice, [Harriet]

It will be at least two weeks before I can go out to Buffalo and mail this letter but I am kept in the tent this afternoon by rain and feel like talking to you awhile although it must be through the unfeeling medium of the pencil. Perhaps the most interesting thing I can say will be to give you an account of our trip from the “D” Ranch where I last wrote you. The country from there here is very rough and difficult to traverse with heavy loads and was unknown to me, but I heard that the Round up would be on the No Water near where we wanted to go, so we endeavored to catch them.

June 2nd we left the “D” Ranch and drove 25 miles crossing the Rattlesnake Range of Mts. where in places we had to put six horses on our big wagon. [The next day was hard going as well:] About 5 P.M. Susie the pretty mare gave out & we had to leave one wagon. About 3 miles from where we left it we overtook the Round up, in the most [un]imaginable place for a camp of any kind. The Round up consists of representatives from every Company, Ranch, or party owning cattle in this vicinity, or district which includes a tract nearly 80 miles square. It was composed of about 12 separate camps, consisting of wagons & tents, scattered along a small muddy stream of alkali water, with hardly enough level land on its side to camp upon & no trees. There were over 50 men in the outfit and 400 horses. Each outfit kept its horses separate & a man herded them some distance from the camp. They had gathered several hundred head of cattle that they were taking with them, & all night mounted men rode around them & kept them in a body or

“bunch.” We had to take such a camp as was left and it was the worst we had on the trip. The boys were considerably down-hearted and discouraged but I told them not to be alarmed[,] we would go through all right.

I hunted up Crocker’s outfit and found that their Foreman, Jim Stone, was Foreman of the Round up, in charge of all that gang of men and horses. They seemed glad to see me, and having been out in camp a month were about out of tobacco, and as I had plenty I repaid them for some of their kindness to me last Fall. They informed me that it was 35 miles to the mouth of No Water, that there was no road leading there, that the Spring had been unusually dry and there was “no water” literally in the bed of the stream & could give me no assistance towards getting there & that they were not going there, but were going over to the No Wood, so that our following them was in vain, & we were where we didn’t want to be and no visible way of getting out. When I told the boys all this they were blue.

Next morning I had breakfast with Stone at 3.30 A.M. & rode out with some of his men who showed me a she bear and two cubs that they had killed the previous day. Gus & I skinned them, but their hides are worthless at this season as the hair all comes off. I will get \$5.00 apiece bounty on them by taking the hides to Buffalo.

I sent Charlie & Tom out that afternoon looking up a road to go upon & they found water 4 miles from camp. Next morning we hitched up and started[,] intending to drive ten miles and send the horses back to the nearest water[,] taking enough for ourselves in the little keg & canteens. Just where we wanted to camp we found a tiny little spring which we dug out & from which we watched the horses that night & next morning. The next day was a hard drive, but we again found a standing pool at noon of good rain water & refilled our keg.

Will’s long letter continued,

That night, Saturday, June 6th, we camped in sight of the Big Horn but [just] five miles distant, but our horses were too tired to get there. Next morning at 10 o’clock we reached the end of our long tedious trip, and I never saw a better pleased lot of men. The Big Horn is too high to ford or we could have crossed it at the mouth of Kirby Creek & recrossed here and had a good road all the way. We could make the same trip again in a week’s less time, as we now know all the country.

We arrived in good order, nothing broken or lost & the horses about as good as when we started. We had no accidents or unusually hard times but the constant moving & tearing up camp & repitching it & the anxiety about water were all wearing & we were glad when we found a resting place.

We have a beautiful camp under huge old cottonwood trees, in the angle between the No Water and the Big Horn, the former being about 50 feet South and the latter 100 feet west. The ground is covered with a rich growth of grass, which is pleasing to us & acceptable to the horses. There are quite a good many birds here, and several have nests in the trees. They are not the least bit afraid of us, and go on with their business as though we were only cattle or other harmless beasts. A couple of larks are the most familiar, and they perch on the wagon or corner of the tent and sing their short but sweet little song to us all the day long.

Monday morning we began surveying the ditch & worked hard all the week. I think as favorably of the land as I did last Fall & guess it will make splendid farming land. We had no fresh meat last week & the boys all but Will Gamble disliked bacon very much. Saturday afternoon I took my gun out and told Will to come out about 5 o’clock with a team to bring in an antelope. We quit work at 4:30 & the

boys went to camp, 3 miles distant, & I went up on a hill looking for antelope. I could see but one, between me & the wagon which was coming toward me. I kept back out of sight and as I expected the old buck took fright at the wagon and came tearing over the hill past me as hard as he could run. My nerves were steady and we wanted meat and although he was going at a fearful rate of speed I fired, and had the satisfaction of seeing him turn a sommersault & land with his heels in the air— shot through the heart. I motioned Will to drive up; we threw him into the buckboard & started for camp.

Had proceeded but a little when a fearful rain and hail storm struck us & we got wet through. We reached camp almost as soon as the boys and they were surprised and overjoyed to see the antelope. The storm continued all night and all yesterday and at intervals today. We kept comfortable, and ate & read & smoked & slept alternately. I read a story called "Geoffrey's Wife" by "The Duchess." The heroine Mona is in many respects like you. Her truthfulness, candor & goodness fit you exactly, and the trials she had with her mother-in-law you can appreciate. Her beauty is of course over-rated and you are as handsome as Mona. To my mind you are the only one I know whom the character fits at all, and I am sure that I have all the love for you and trust in you that Geoff. had for Mona. It is no. 90 of the Lowell's Library and I hope you will get it as it is a good story and nothing sensational or vulgar in it. Some of [Nolly's?] sayings will surely make you laugh—your very heartiest and most musical laugh. It is nearly dark so I will kiss you good bye for today—

July 5th Sunday

I wonder how my girls spent the "Glorious 4th"? I will probably find out when I reach Buffalo. We spent the day tamely enough. The survey of the ditch has been more difficult than I anticipated and we had got so near the end that we could finish in one day, so we determined to work the 4th & finish it. But a heavy rain storm came up about noon and [we] couldn't work in the afternoon, and lay in the tent. It was just as well for me for I had an attack of Diarrhea, such as I had twice last summer & it was best for me to remain quiet. I lay abed all the afternoon and read "The Giant's Robe" by "F. Austey". No. 1845 of the Seaside Library. It is a good story & made the author's reputation & fortune. You can get it and it will be pleasant to know we have both read it, & admired and detested the same characters.

Since I wrote the first part of this letter we have worked steadily and hard. We have all been well, and no accidents have happened. The boys do well, and work well, and I think we will get along pleasantly. I am getting awfully tired of teaching "tenderfeet" how to live in camp, and often wish for some one who had had more experience. The boys are all willing enough & obedient, but I at last begin to feel that I am getting older than "the boys," and find them neglecting many small but important things, through thoughtlessness, which cause us serious trouble. I am getting to think that there are no unimportant things in life. The neglect of a trifle often causes the direst disaster. To be safe we must be careful about every detail. We are constantly employed and time flies rapidly. We are cheerful and apparently contented.

I get through the days all right, but I seldom go to sleep at once after going to bed. My mind leaves this wild & desolate region when I close my eyes and in an instant I see the little sitting room and bedroom, with my dear good wife at the table reading or writing to me—Allie & Laura writing or cutting out pictures, little Ruth watching them intently and sometimes saying a little easy word or two. I see

it all very vividly and my heart sinks as I think how long it must before I can take the dear ones to my arms again. After that it takes me a long time to shut out the vision and get to sleep.

You know I am not morbidly sentimental nor easily made homesick, but I feel as though I ought not to have come here to stay so long. I know the separation is as hard for you as for me, but life is not long enough for us to throw away half a year of each other's society. It will require a very grave necessity to cause me to do so again. I have always tried to put my own pleasure & desires [to] one side, at least partially, when duty seemed to call me. ... My one great fear is that something may happen to some of you before I get home. I know that there is no more likelihood of it now than if I were with you, but when I allow myself to think of what might transpire in a month or a day even it makes me turn faint. It is unnecessary to urge you to be careful of yourself and the children, for I know you are, but you are acting as both Mama & Papa now, & I hope & pray to find you well & happy when I get home.

Richards resumed his letter on a more cheerful note.

I will now tell you a little of our life since the first pages were written. We have only two things to be anxious about. One is our horses which have to run loose, and the other is to keep a supply of game on hand. The horses have behaved admirably. We keep one picketed and the rest stay near camp, but if they were to run away or be stolen by the Indians you have had sufficient experience with lost horses to know where we would be. The Indians are all peaceable & we have seen but one band, but they will all steal horses if they think they can get away with them. We don't worry much about them, but the anxiety will be with us until we finish the work.

The meat question is an important one but more easily controlled. So far I have killed all the game, all antelope. We have not been out long at any time. Gus Coleman is the only one who hunts any. The others don't care to after working. Gus is out now, where he saw some elk the other evening. He didn't shoot at them then because he thought they were mules, & didn't discover his mistake until it was too late. Two weeks ago three cowboys passed through here & they were out of provisions.[\*] I invited them to stay all night which they did, two nights. Just then we were eating bacon and a cowboy detests bacon, so they caught a yearling calf nice and fat, & killed it, and left nearly all of it with us.

We kept it for a good 8 days when it spoiled & we gave it to the Indians I spoke of seeing. They like spoiled meat. They were a band of about 20 Crow Indians going on a visit to the Shoshones. There were two ugly old squaws and several children—no little babies or papooses though. The youngest was a little girl about 4 years and she was riding a pony all alone. She was dressed in calico & buckskin, had her black hair braided & ornamented with rings & brass fixings tied into it, and had her face painted with a red paint. The boys wore ordinary clothing but were painted & all wore moccasins. One of the men was an Indian Dandy, a regular Dude. He was tricked out with all the beads and finery he possessed, and had on a stove pipe hat with a piece of looking glass fastened on one side. He wore brass bracelets on his wrists & on his arms above his elbows and had rings in his ears and all over his fingers. He was the funniest looking creature I ever saw. Another one could talk English some, and I asked him who the Dude was but I couldn't understand his reply. He made us all laugh & he soon rode away. They

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\*They were from Luman's and Lovell's outfits, according to his June 21 diary entry.

wanted us to give them flour and coffee & sugar & matches & were the worst beggars I ever saw. I finally gave them a quarter of the beef that was spoiled & they left. We heard of another band of them about 30 miles from here, & one of the squaws stole a package of arsenic & thought it was baking powder and made biscuits with it, and it nearly killed all of them, but I haven't heard that any have died yet.

The Round Up reached here the 23rd June, and were near here two days. It was quite a treat to us to see a white man. They had horse racing two afternoons & we saw the races. They were very good races too. Jim Stone caught a cow & calf for us & we expected to have trouble in breaking the cow to milk but to our delight, we found she had been milked before & was very gentle. We have a pen built for the calf at every camp, & keep him in it during the day & the cow in it at night. She comes up regularly and we get about three quarts of milk twice a day. It comes very handy in making bread & we have some oatmeal too. We have some Farina & I am going to make a pudding for dinner. We live very plain. Will Gamble is cooking and he isn't a very good cook. After awhile I will [hole in paper] cooking. Bread, coffee, beans, and dried apples or peaches with meat is our regular diet. I have all the milk I want to drink, but am afraid it makes me bilious.

We have had good camps, & have found dozens of birds' nests. If the children were here I could show them a dove on a nest not ten steps from the tent. When I first went out near her, she flew off out of the tree down on the ground, and went fluttering along dragging her wings on the ground like she was wounded & it seemed that I could catch her easily, but every time I put out my hand she fluttered off, and when she had led me quite a distance from her nest, she suddenly became all right, and flew away out of sight. Wasn't that a cute trick for a bird to do, Allie! I have seen lots of them do it. I found her nest and now I can go quite near it and she won't fly at all. There were lots of young antelope now too, but we can't catch any of them. Today is Sunday, and Tuesday I expect to start for Buffalo and if the P.M. there has sent my mail to Booth's as I wrote him I will hear from my little family Tuesday night. I can hardly wait till then. Good bye for today.

... Do you like long letters? You have all my love & I send you lots of kisses.

Your loving husband, Will

He must have realized the story about the Crows might worry her, as the same envelope contained a letter dated July 10.

You needn't worry at all about the Indians, for we have seen none except those I mentioned, and I thought it would interest the children or I wouldn't have said anything about it. There are so many people in this country now that there is no danger at all. The most of the people travel unarmed.

She was not reassured, replying July 19,

Your letter was just splendid, all but the Indian part. I cannot help but think of your little party & what would you do, if surrounded by fifty Indians, or your horses stolen, & only three guns & one or two pistols. Did you get back to camp all right? Do hurry up & come home. Am sorry you laughed at the I. "Dude." I do not think you need worry over us, I think there is no doubt but that we will be all right when you come, but I think the cause for worry is all on my side, with you among so many Indians & so far from any white men, but we will hope that this is our last separation for such a long time, & that we will be repaid in the future for our sacrifices [sic]. Am glad Sancho is such a good watch dog....

Though her letters sound stoic, she could hardly have had enjoyed much peace of mind, and brought up the matter again the following week.<sup>1</sup>

Have you had any more visits from the Indians lately? They are such a treacherous, sly lot, that you want to take every care. Did any of those die that ate the arsenic & did they steal it from you? ...

As for the safety of herself and her children, she told him how she coped at the remote mountain cabin while her brother was away. When two men stopped at the house during a rainstorm Harriet and the girls pretended nobody was home. The visitors passed on after the rain stopped, and there were no further incidents. "If they had tried to get in I should have threatened to shoot them as I had Charlie's gun handy," she added.

Fears mounted, of course, when days went by with no mail. Delivery of letters could take weeks. Ranchers in the basin sometimes received mail for Richards and his crew, but he did not get to visit them very often. The Bighorn Mountains stood between them and the post office at Buffalo, and rugged red buttes east of Red Bank stood between them and the Riverside post office, at the Bar C ranch. The Bar C was only twenty miles from Red Bank and the route was easier than the one to Buffalo, but the ranch wasn't a town. For the next decade and beyond, Wyoming officials and citizens such as Richards would pressure the government to provide adequate mail service to the sparse and scattered settlements in the northern part of the state.

Will's letter to his wife doesn't mention hot weather, and it only appears in his diary a few times, with little comment. Only once did the heat interfere with the survey work.

Monday, June 29. Ran level line. Very hot, so hot that couldn't run in P.M. as the level swelled.

Soon they were ready to start digging the ditch. Under the fierce sun of early July, men and horses got to work with plows and scrapers at what must have been hard, hot, and monotonous toil. Though the land was flat and not stony, the finish line was three years and 18.5 miles away—and diversions were few. Richards, at least, got to leave occasionally to attend to other business and get mail and provisions. There should have been some comfort in his wife's comment in a letter in July, which noted, "Aut thinks you are far better off than he or Mur or John & wishes he never had become a clerk."<sup>1</sup>

Richards was able to send encouraging news home in August, after spending three weeks surveying claims for Booth and for Aut on the No Wood, working on the ditch for his own claim, and going to Buffalo. He wrote Harriet on August 5, "I am well pleased with our Red Bank claim, which is Aut's and mine. Everyone says it is the best place in this vicinity." He continued,

We take the ditch from Cañon creek\* which runs through one corner, and we can run water wherever we want it. There is a splendid location for a house near a spring as large as the one at your Mountain House, and just below it a fine place for a fish pond, which only needs cleaning out and a dam across it. Just back of the house, or place for one and over a low ridge, and about 300 yards distant is Cañon Creek... containing lots of trout. We can raise anything we want to there, and our land alone, fenced in, will support all the cattle & horses we will have for several years.

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\*He may be referring to what daughter Alice called Clear Creek. Satellite shots show such a creek. It's not Little Canon Creek, though it may be a branch of it. It is definitely not the Cañon Creek that empties into Ten Sleep Creek. Today's maps show a Canyon Creek that debouches into the No Wood at Big Trails; that must be Coleman's Canyon Creek. Right near it is Little Canyon Creek with two forks. The creek behind the ranch house may be a tributary of Little Canyon Creek.



The men here say [this] claim is worth \$2,000 now [about \$62,000 in 2022]. We will do some work on it this Fall and next year must build a house & some fences. I believe that if we stick to it we can make a great deal of money out of it in a few years. It is a pleasant place to live during the summer, and if there were more people near we could winter there comfortably. The people are rapidly coming, and very soon all the available land will be taken up.

At Buffalo he registered Aut's ditch claim and his own brand, the 1/4.\*

Upon return to the Bighorn River it was back to surveying and digging, using four teams of horses. By late September they had worked their way south and camped at the mouth of the No Water, where they finished up the season's excavations and began surveying for the headgate, on the east bank.\*\*

In September of '85 all seemed well in the camp on the No Water, but trouble was brewing back in the Springs. Harriet had learned that some investors were talking about recalling Richards and giving the job to someone else in the company. This proposal was voted down, but the flap prompted her to ask her husband on September 27,

Couldn't we get along on our especial land & let this other run? I do not intend to stay another six or eight months again without you. I miss you too much & hunger for love & kisses too much. Do come home soon.

The earliest inkling of Richards's own growing problems with the Colorado project crops up in another letter from his wife just two weeks later.<sup>2</sup>

I expect you are working on Lon's land now. Do as much work as you can on the Red Bank claim. Much as I wish you were home, I do not want to lose that land. I suppose you have written to the men of the Co. that you tho't of stopping work on the Ditch.

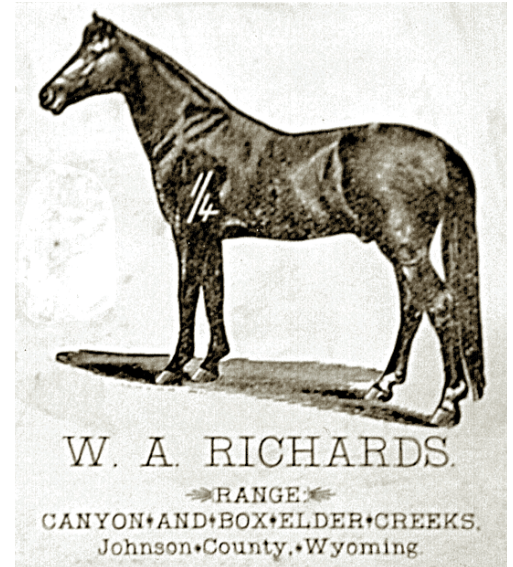
No existing letter or his diary give any hint of why he might have wanted to stop work for the Colorado company at this time.

In early October, Richards, Gus, Tom, and Charley went to the Big Horn tributary of Kirby Creek for a few days to work on the ditch for Lon's Dubuque investors. Lon was happy to hear about the work on his ditch, a bright spot along with improving business. His letter of October 31 was both plaintive and optimistic:

\*When he was governor, Richards registered a second brand, WAR in shorthand, which his daughter Alice helped design (right). The 1/4 brand was eventually used by the Red Bank Cattle Company to mark their cattle, while the shorthand one was among those used for their horses. Contrary to common belief, "Land and" was never part of the company's name. (In confirming the registration, W. P. Keays, Johnson county treasurer, wrote Richards that he got the brand upside down because he was unfamiliar with shorthand, but he would fix it.<sup>3</sup>)

\*\*Possibly owing to a copying error when records were duplicated for Washakie County, the headgate is commonly said to have been on the west bank, with a flume carrying water across to the other side. But Richards's original ditch claim at the Big Horn

County courthouse, in Basin, has it on the east bank. Today's Lower Hanover headgate is also on the east side. The land with the headgate was later claimed by Albert M. Taylor, who began construction of the Taylor-Halstead ditch in 1902.



Brand advertisement, from Richards's scrapbook. WSA<sup>1</sup>



source?, AHC?

...glad to hear that you are O.K. & getting on nicely with the work. I hope sincerely that you may be well repaid for all your privations and hardship. You most certainly deserve the largest success and richest reward. ...I am pushed clear to the wall all the time for money for living expenses, because it takes all we can get to pay expenses of the business and maturing bills for goods. My family is now at its most expensive period, and...I can not fully reconcile myself to the now very apparent fact that at the very best I can only reckon upon 15 to 20 years of active business life. [He was 44 years of age.] My health is good—better than ever at Freeport, and I do not feel old, but then my whitening hair tells me only too plainly that I am. My eyes are still O.K. ...I will be fortunate to provide any sort of competency for old age. If I can not, I certainly do not wish to grow old. No worse fate can await me than to be old and poor.

...I am glad you have completed the Kirby Creek ditch. Please send me a little rough sketch of the same that I can show the other parties.

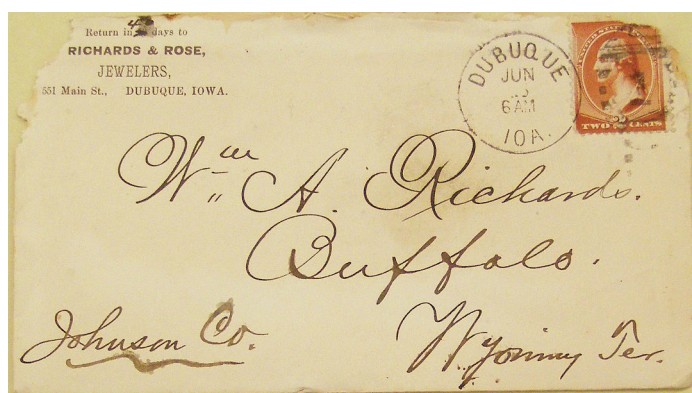
Can there be any more desirable sections entered any where on the Big Horn. Several parties would like them.

As usual, Lon kept helping his parents without asking his brothers to chip in additional funds for their support, since he knew they could not. He and Aut did not pressure Will directly, but the importance of the work in Wyoming was clear from their letters. As Aut put it on October 21,

I sincerely hope the “Red Bank” won’t be jumped for it is about the only anchor to windward, or hope ahead that I have. If it is jumped and lost to us, I hope it will be before we put much money in it. How much money will it take to pay the men while at work on the Red Bank—

Aut had been sending \$15 or \$20 of his \$100 monthly salary to their parents, who were “old, alone and friendless.” His job in the tax-collection office was to draw maps and “give the ill-natured Taxpayer his bill as often as he shows his warlike front.” But this seasonal work was about to end. Like his brothers, he had had enough of the patronage system. In the same letter he sounded off about his boss, who

has surrounded himself with a lot of toadying political deputies, 3 of whom he keeps on all the year round at \$125.00 per month, and after my working my level d—dest for him and the interests of his office for seven years, he lets me shift for myself when the assessment season is over. He is now having a couple of slouches butcher up his block books, which will prevent my going into his office before March. As I get through here Jan. 1st I am probably elected to loaf a couple of months or more. I am sick of the whole business of politics and offices, and get pretty blue sometimes. It seems to me as tho’ the last ten or fifteen years of my life have been entirely wasted.



*Envelope from Lon. Will usually received mail at the Riverside Post Office, at the Bar C Ranch over the hills east of Red Bank. After August 1886, he began using the more convenient new post office at Lost Cabin. Delivery difficulties inspired Lon to request return after 40 days, not 15.*

WSA



*Red Bank house (left), tent, and bunkhouse. Behind them may be the ambitious cut for an irrigation ditch, whose waters seemed to run uphill.*

Undated photo courtesy of the George B. McClellan family

The pressure on Will increased when the ditch company couldn't pay his salary. At his insistence the workers had been paid first, draining the company treasury. Some members, including Richards, were behind in their assessments, and there were rumblings of discontent because the ditch would cost much more money than expected (like many an irrigation project). A man in debt to Richards "might be able to pay what he owes & that will help," wrote Harriet on November 25. "I think you ought to ask \$500.00 for Mt. House, anyway." It was encouraging that "You are quite certain of getting the contract next year, & every one talks fine now." Her brother George sent regrets earlier that month that he could not lend him anything. Richards must have got paid, finally, and the turbulence subsided.



*The house and its corner joints in 1999.*  
Author photo

### **Water that runs uphill?**

*Alice later wrote about the ditch near the ranch house.<sup>1</sup> The tunnel she refers to may be the open cut shown in the photo. The cut is long gone.*

W. A. Richards [got] water from Clear Creek over the hill to the Red Bank ranch through a tunnel in the hill. He irrigated the field below the ranch house with ditches and flumes, and he built one ditch around the hill behind the ranch house to run water around another meadow.

People came from all sections to see the "water that ran up-hill" in the ditch — it was so level and efficient. That was in the 1885-1889 period.

### **Arapaho come calling, demand breakfast**

ON TOP OF his other work, Richards also built a house in 1885 with the help of Coleman and perhaps others from the ditch crew. Timber being scarce on the No Wood, they probably ordered logs from the sawmill above Ten Sleep<sup>1</sup> that supplied lumber for the flumes of the ditch. The logs in the house are of uniform size, squared off, and nicely notched at the corner joints—not the work of amateurs. The sawmill probably supplied lumber for the windows and doors that Richards and Coleman were making after Gebhart, Gamble, and Black headed back to Colorado Springs on October 20.<sup>2</sup> It originally “had a dirt floor, and a roof of the same material,” Richards later wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Visitors to the isolated house were infrequent, Alice wrote later, and on at least one occasion were not white men. A biographical article about her father in the *Annals of Wyoming*<sup>4</sup> included this story, using the vocabulary of her less sensitive era.

One morning Richards was at his ranch alone. ...Suddenly the door opened and a couple of big husky bucks walked in carrying their guns. They demanded breakfast in no pleasant way. Richards complied with their demands, setting out some breakfast on the table. As they sat down, they leaned their rifles against the wall.



*The former consumptive, front, atop Cloud Peak,. At 13,167 feet it was the highest in the Bighorn Mountains and among the highest in Wyoming.*

The other man is identified as Richards' surveyor friend J. Frank Warner. Date and photographer unknown (date on photo back—1900— is impossible). The beard suggests the photo was taken before the arrival of Richards's family.

Richards washed his hands and went over to the roller towel to dry them. His six shooter was hanging in its holster beneath the towel. When he went to dry his hands, he quickly slipped his gun out, pointed it at the Indians and told them to get out. He made them leave their guns. After they were outside, he called in the squaws and papooses and gave them their breakfast.

Among the Indians was an educated squaw who could speak English. ... Richards motioned to the bucks outside who were sitting on the woodpile and asked her what they were saying.

“They are saying, ‘What a strange fellow a white man is to have his squaws eat first,’” said the woman in perfect English.

When he learned that she had been educated at some eastern school, he asked her why she still went about with the Indians, dressing and living as they did.

She said, “What else is there for me? If I stayed among the white people, I would have to work in their kitchens. I would not be one of them; I would only be among them. With my own people, I am at least an equal. But to live with them I must live as they live.”

When the squaws had finished their breakfast, Richards called in the bucks and let them eat.\*

None of Harriet’s letters comment on this story. Given her fears about Indians, it’s possible Will kept it from her or told her about it once safely home.

RICHARDS AND COLEMAN remained through November despite very cold weather and occasional storms of rain, hail, or snow. Will did surveys for the 2-Bar and for the Jordan L. Smith family, who had arrived a year earlier. Finally, Richards left for Colorado Springs, stopping at various ranches on his way and gathering a travel party of several men including sheepman John B. Okie of future fame. He arrived home on December 2, Allie’s birthday.<sup>1</sup>

Coleman spent the winter of 1885-86 in the new cabin at Red Bank.<sup>2</sup> Over the mountains, the average maximum temperature in January 1886, was 6°F, according to records kept by a farmer, Gustave E. A. Moeller, that were reported in *The Big Horn Sentinel*.<sup>3</sup> The lowest temperature of the year was reached that month: -42°F. (February and March were considerably warmer, with an average of about 33°F, just above freezing.) Coleman, amazingly, had found employment: When the Smiths learned he was a fellow emigrant from New York State, they engaged him to teach their children. Coleman is said to have taught for two years at this “school,” reputedly the first in the Bighorn Basin.<sup>4</sup>

The Smith place, eventually named Mahogany Butte or Buttes, was about eight miles north of Red Bank. Lost over time are such details as how often Gus rode over there, whether he stayed with the family part of the time, or how many of the children were old enough for lessons. There were six boys and a baby girl, according to Richards’s diary.<sup>5</sup>

Will was with his own family in Colorado Springs for only three months. On March 1, 1886, there was another painful parting as Harriet and the girls left for Oakland even though Richards would not go to Wyoming for another month.

They would live with Harriet’s brother George and his wife, Lena. Harriet would have some income from paid boarders (Aut and her brother Charles), and she would have the company of relatives and old friends. Once arrived, she informed her husband with uncharacteristic tactlessness, “Oakland is just delightful & I wish we could live here, or had never left here. I hate to think of Wyo. after this place.”<sup>6</sup>

Money was sometimes tight, but income from the ditch company and her boarders was

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\*From Richards’s 1885 diary: “Thursday, Nov. 5. Snowy. Arapahoe Indians passed. Mollie with them. Gus got back with 500 lbs. oats...” Mollie may be the name of the woman he mentions.

regular enough that Harriet and the girls got along all right. She rented her piano to someone in Colorado Springs for \$5 a month<sup>1</sup> (about \$160 in 2022).

DELIGHTFUL WAS NOT THE WORD for the weather on the northern plains. Even though it was still winter, Will set out for Wyoming, leaving a month earlier than he had the previous year. In the absence of a diary or letters from him, it's hard to tell who was on the crew in 1886, but Harriet's letters indicate Tom Gebhart and Charley Black returned for more plowing and scraping. Nothing is said about the summer weather, yet it was so hot and dry on the western plains that little grass could grow, setting up the cattle industry for big losses the following winter. Somehow the Big Horn ditch crew and horses kept going. Coleman probably worked on the ditch before returning to New York State, where he would spend the winter with his wife and son.<sup>2</sup> The weather was very much on Harriet's mind when she wrote Will on April 7 from Oakland, California:

Isn't it too bad that you catch all the bad weather. It must be uncomfortable as well as expensive to have to put up in some stable almost every night. ...we see in the reports from the East more snow storms!

She added that she is about out of money and wants to know what she can count on. Aut is "almost penniless." But it is not necessary to sell a horse to provide them with funds, she assures her husband. It was late May, the 25th, but the storms went on and on.

That was a terrible ride you took thro' the snow ...I am indeed sure that you are having all the hardships & we the good times, but we shall be together sometime, to enjoy ourselves all together....Am glad the prospects for the land are so good & favorable. ...I try not to long too much to see you, Will, but do miss you so much.

Richards must have been pleased to receive letters from his eldest daughter and future secretary, now going on ten years of age. Her mother reported proudly, "Allie wrote a note while I was in church & made her own corrections."<sup>3</sup>

Dear Papa,

I staid at home with Ruth while Mama went to church. I have learned how to make candy and I can make good candy. I have got two dollars and 20 cents. I would like to see you very much! Are you coming out to see us before we go to Colorado Springs. Write soon.

Your loving daughter. Allie Richards.

Harriet's letters kept her exiled husband up to date about the picnics, concerts, singing parties and other entertainments—and trials—of the day. "Painless" dentistry was such a boon that tooth-pulling tents were a popular attraction at fairs and conventions; Harriet mentions them several times. "Aut took Allie down to the 'tooth puller' to have a double tooth out, that has ached a great deal lately, but there was such a crowd he could not get her up on the stand." Another letter mentions a concert there. The tent also figured in an amusing romance.

Geo. being at the Convention we started to the tooth-pulling tent. We wanted to see a couple there who have had themselves put in the papers. ...She ran away from her Grandmother's & met her lover at the tent here....she is now married & will help her husband, who is a ventriloquist &c. on the stage.<sup>4</sup>

Though Harriet sent many cheerful missives to her husband, she occasionally gave in to melancholy. Their relationship had survived many separations, and she had shown remarkable forbearance when he was away for months at a time in 1884 and 1885. But the longer one of 1886 was apparently taking a greater emotional toll. By September her growing loneliness was making it harder to bear being away from him for so long. When some of their

friends began leaving her out of their gatherings and activities, she suspected it was in retaliation for their being left out of Will's Wyoming land claims. "Yesterday, felt blue all day. Didn't want to talk & wished every thing was different &c. I hope you are well and contented, & it seems a long time till 1st Dec. to me."<sup>1</sup>

Just when she was feeling so low, tragedy struck. Her younger brother, Ed, aged only 21, died unexpectedly of pneumonia and typhoid. She had to bear the loss and carry on without the comfort of her husband's arms. Her parents and three adult siblings had passed away, and she could be forgiven for wondering, in a letter to Will, who would be next.<sup>2</sup> Beyond that, her letters were stoic, perhaps because of her faith and because the Grim Reaper was ever at the elbow of Victorians. Privately, her fears for Will's safety must have burgeoned, joining forces with grief and melancholy to sorely test her faith and fortitude—and there was little he could do to help except keep on working.

Nor could he do much about the declining fortunes of his family back in Illinois. Eleanor had injured her leg in January 1886, leaving her crippled until death granted mercy a year and a half later. Her accident, coupled with bad news from Wyoming, effectively killed Lon's own western dream. He lamented on January 29,

Money is scarce with me, and hard to get. A huge doctor's bill now confronts me, and I don't know what else.

Your last letter about the heavy cutting necessary to get water onto my claim is rather discouraging to me. I can't afford to pay for many heavy cuts, and the other men who took the claims there on my representations will blame me if the cutting is costly.

In relating his troubles, Lon as usual did not ask for more help from brothers who were not in a position to provide it.

Long before Eleanor's accident Truman had seemed far older than he was, and the strain of caregiving may have hastened his own demise at age 71. He died less than a year after her, right before what would have been their 50th wedding anniversary. No letters from their sons survive from this period, but Truman's obituary, probably written by Lon, was a heartfelt homage. "A good man has gone from among us. One who was loved and respected by all who knew him, whose word was as good as a bond, and whose integrity was never questioned."<sup>3</sup> Lon's brothers could only have bowed their heads and murmured, "Amen."

## Sources and notes

WSA = Wyoming State Archives. All letters are from William A. Richards collection, WSA H82-61, unless otherwise indicated.

ARMcC WSA = Alice Richards McCreery collection, WSA H63-86.

AHC = American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Page 1

1. Arrival date and time, and note about spending night in depot, are from Richards's 1884 diary, William A. Richards Collection, H-215/MSS 83, WSA. All diary entries are from this collection. The full diary is in *William A. Richards Diaries of a Frontier Surveyor*, available from bookstores and online retailers.

2. The 1880 Union Pacific timetable indicates Carbon was a "telegraph" station. That suggests it was open 24 hours.—John Bromley, Union Pacific Railroad Museum, email to author, December 12, 2006. Carbon was an important enough station to have trains such as Richards' scheduled round the clock, and would have been staffed by one of the telegraph operators that were so critical to railroad operations and communications.—Patricia LaBounty, curator, Union Pacific Railroad Museum, and David A. Seidel, Union Pacific Museum Volunteer and Camerail Club current president. Emails to author, April 27, 2023.

3. An 1887 newspaper article claimed that the station, coal office, and agent's residence were moved in 1881 to facilitate coal shipments. "Carbon, A Victim of Progress," *Annals of Wyoming*,

Vol. 19, No. 1, January 1947. The cowboy story is from article by John James Fox, "The Far West," *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 21:1:8, January 1949, 8. Fox was a newly arrived Englishman who was utterly bedazzled by the Wild West.

4. June 15, 1885, WSA H82-61. All letters are from this collection unless otherwise indicated.
5. Fox, "The Far West," p. 8.
6. Carbon photo, Negative #13253 or 13252, WSA.

Page 2

1. Richards's 1884 diary.
2. Vera Saban, "Joe Magill, Promotion Man," *True West* magazine, April 1984 (courtesy of Hot Springs County Museum), and many other sources.
3. Diary, October 13, 1884.
4. George Cram, *Cram's Unrivalled Family Atlas of the World* (Chicago, IL: A. C. Shewey & Co., 1883), 76. David Rumsey Map Collection, <https://davidrumsey.com>, accessed June 5, 2023.

Page 3

1. Report of the Governor of Wyoming, Made to the Secretary of the Interior, 1885, from the Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior. It was Wyoming Territory then, and the governor was Francis E. Warren. Few if any of that population would have been women, or homesteaders in the Bighorn Basin.
2. Ibid.
3. [http://www.wyominggenealogy.com/uinta/early\\_days\\_in\\_evanston.htm](http://www.wyominggenealogy.com/uinta/early_days_in_evanston.htm), accessed April 28, 2023

Page 4

1. November 9, 1884.
2. *Wyoming Tribune* (Cheyenne), December 31, 1914.
3. *BRAND BOOK* (Cheyenne: Wyoming Stock Growers' Association). C.T. & Co.'s is from the 1884 book and Booth & Crocker's is from 1885. *Cattle Brands Owned by Members of the Wyoming Stock Growers' Association*. 1882, (Chicago: The J. M. W. Jones Stationery & Printing Co.) First edition. Google books. 1882 book: Hathitrust.org
4. <http://www.shadedrelief.com/physical/pages/about.html>, accessed June 1, 2023. Colorized.

Page 5

1. 1884 diary.
2. Aut's story from Richards' scrapbook, ARMcC WSA.
3. All dollar equivalentents are from measuringworth.com purchasing power calculator.
4. December 29, 1884.

Page 6

1. Letter, December 29, 1884
2. Misc. Record "A", Book 3, Johnson Co. Tran., 278-79, Johnson County Records.
3. November 1, 1892.
4. Paul Frison, *Calendar of Change*, (Worland: Serlkay, Inc. Printing, 1975). 111. No source given.

Page 7

1. ARMcC WSA, handwritten memoir. No known surviving records tell us when the lots were sold, their price, or how the proceeds were divided among the heirs.
2. *Colorado State Republic*, Colorado Springs, February 13, 1885. Richards' scrapbook, WSA.
3. <https://history.nebraska.gov/flashback-friday-timber-culture-act-of-1873/>, accessed April 28, 2023.

Page 8

1. Johnson County records.
2. Jack Seaman, *Ten Sleep: The Area and the People*. (Virginia Beach: Donning Co. Publishers, 2008). 42-43.
3. Black and Gebhart: August 6, 1920, *Big Horn County Rustler*; May 7, 1885, *Fort Collins (Colorado) Courier*.
4. WAR diary, May 20-24.

Page 9

1. Frison Collection, P82-57/36, Subject Negative 26774, WSA.
2. ARMcC collection, WSA.
3. Colorado Historical Society, images number 10035920 and 10035921.

Page 10

1. Ibid., June 7, 1885.
2. *The Daily Boomerang* (Laramie, Wyoming) January 5, 1886; cited in John W. Davis, *Wyoming Range War: The Infamous Invasion of Johnson County*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010, Kindle edition). 23.



## Page 15

1. July 26.

## Page 16

1. ARMcC, WSA.
2. October 11.
3. W. P. Keays to W. A. Richards, December 29, 1895, folder 3, box 2, RG 0001.14, Governor William A. Richards Papers, WSA

## Page 18

1. William A. Richards Family Papers, ACC 118, AHC.

## Page 19

1. H. S. Ridgely, "Historical Facts," *Basin Republican*, June 30, 1911.
2. WAR diary, October 20, has Will Gamble, Tom, and Charlie taking a wagon back to Colorado. Tom Gebhart was said to have spent the winter at Red Bank, according to the *Big Horn County Rustler*, August 6, 1920. Latter-day recollections are notoriously untrustworthy, though: the *Fort Collins Courier*, December 17, 1885, reported, "Tom Gebhart is holding a case in the Colorado Springs Gazette Office." Windows in cabin: WAR diary, October 26.
3. WAR letter to cousin John T. Richards, January 17, 1895, William A. Richards Family Papers, AHC.
4. Mrs. Alice McCreery and Tacetta B. Walker, "Wyoming's Fourth Governor—William A. Richards." *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 20, No. 2, July 1948. 104.
5. Frison Collection, P82-57/36, Subject Negative 26812, WSA.

## Page 20

1. WAR diary.
2. Coleman spending winter at Red Bank from Seaman, *Ten Sleep*; and WAR diary October 15, 1884.
3. January 15, 1887, *The Big Horn Sentinel*.
4. Location of school records is unknown, and nothing could be found about it in the *Sentinel*. Richards's diary has Gus going to the school election at the T D ranch and then with Smith to Buffalo. November 16 and 22; identity of this particular T D ranch unknown; it may have been name of the Smith place.
5. October 15, 1884.
6. March 17, 1886.

## Page 21

1. March 29, 1886.
2. The story of Coleman's return trip to New York State was pieced together from various sources. When Mrs. Coleman was 93 and living in New York State, Mrs. Frank Greet (Edna Lucille Pyle Greet) of Worland wrote a newspaper article that quotes Mrs. Coleman as saying her husband went back to New York State in the fall of 1886 and brought her back with their son, without saying *when* that happened. The return date was the spring of 1887, according to the article on Gus in *Progressive Men of the State of Wyoming* (Chicago: A. W. Bowen & Co., 1903) whose information was likely supplied by him. Also Coleman article in Seaman, *Ten Sleep*. The clipping of Mrs. Greet's story is in the William A. Richards collection, H59-78, WSA. The article appeared in the *Northern Wyoming Daily News*, Worland, 1952 according to a letter from Alice McCreery to Paul Frison in author's collection.
3. August 1, 1886.
4. October 1, 1886.

## Page 22

1. September 7, 1886.
2. October 10, 1886.
3. Author's collection.

The author is a great-granddaughter of William A. Richards and granddaughter of Eleanor Alice Richards McCreery. She holds a B.A. in history and is a retired journalist.