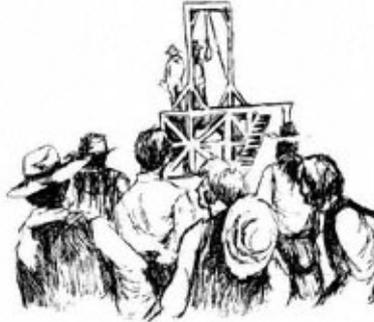


# Life of TOM HORN



government scout & interpreter

Written by Himself

Introduction by Dean Krakel

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# Life of Tom Horn

THE WESTERN FRONTIER LIBRARY

Life of Tom Horn  
Government Scout and Interpreter

Written by Himself

TOGETHER WITH HIS LETTERS  
AND STATEMENTS BY HIS FRIENDS

*A Vindication*

With an Introduction  
by Dean Krakel

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## Introduction

By Dean Krakel

I was born and grew to young manhood in northern Colorado. East of Ault, where we lived, there is a high grass-covered plain. It had been buffalo range at one time a vast treeless expanse edged with miles and miles of nothing but blue horizon. This country is filled with remnants of days gone by: dried buffalo horns, crumbling homesteads, windmill towers, stretches of barbed wire, parts of wagons strewn about, and a maze of trails yesterday's symbols of fighting today's elements.

Then too, there were Indian campsites with tell-tale tipi rings, fire holes, pieces of flint, and broken stone implements. Poking about as a boy, I could always muster up visions of the Indian and his free way of living.

Ault is located in a richly irrigated district, fed by snow water from the towering Front Range of the Rockies. These mountains begin down around Pikes Peak and run north through the country, then west to the Medicine Bows and Laramie Plains. The sweep of this range is one of the most thrilling panoramas in the world: a chain of giants, blue-white and translucent, telescoped by the crispness of high altitude. It was a wonderful country to have lived in rich in history, natural beauty, and strong people.

Having been a huge cattle range at one time, this area was well known to Tom Horn, who had a brother, Charles, living in Boulder and a sister in Briggsdale (twenty miles east of Ault). The business of being a stock detective meant trips to Denver and Cheyenne, so he was around quite often.

Tom was born in Missouri and grew up in the post-

Civil War violence of the Middle West. He was impressive in appearance, being well over six feet tall, with sharp, clean facial features. His eyes however, were small and penetrating. In reminiscing about the gunman, one cowboy recalled, "Tom could stare a hole straight through you." He was meticulous about his dress and everything he owned, especially his horse. Tom read widely, but most of all he enjoyed seeing an ornery bronc and a good rider tangle in the sagebrush. He was an admirer of Theodore Roosevelt. T.R.'s philosophy of walking softly and carrying a big stick apparently appealed to him. Physically Horn was lean and muscular; he sat well in the saddle and was an excellent calf roper. I have known old-timers around Ault who said they rode with Horn and shared the same pot of beans with him. One claimed to possess his rifle. Most of them declared emphatically that he hadn't "hung" in Cheyenne, on that dismal November day back in '03; it had all been faked.

Since Dad's brother lived in Cheyenne, quite often we drove the forty miles in our model "A." I can still see Cheyenne as it appeared then. Once we had crossed the state line and topped the last hill, "there she was," scattered along bottomland and shrouded in layers of gray smoke. Seeing the place always gave me a pleasant sensation. The name itself was magic. It had personality. The wind was always blowing and a freight train or two was to be heard wailing in the distance, building up steam for the struggle up cantankerous Sherman Hill. The store windows were filled with saddles, horse blankets, boots, and bright Western clothing. A trip to Cheyenne wouldn't have been complete without a tour through the old majestic-looking Union Pacific Depot and a long nostalgic look at the Deadwood Stage Coach encased there.

No city was quite like Cheyenne during Frontier Days.

As a boy, I suspected that during the last week of July all the cowboys, Indians, and cavalrymen in the world were assembled for this annual extravaganza. In those days of the 1930's, the U.S. Cavalry was on its last leg, but you wouldn't have known it from the number of companies there. Each year the parade had a float portraying the hanging of Tom Horn, and generally riding close by was T. Joe Cahill. Joe had been Horn's hangman. The old lawman always wore a big grin and waved his Stetson as he pranced his horse up and down the street, nodding to acquaintances.

Years later I got to know T. Joe, and he, more than anyone else, whetted my interest in the life of Tom Horn. While archivist and assistant professor in the Western History Department at the University of Wyoming Library (1952-56), I would come to Cheyenne and spend hours with Joe at the Elks' Club. He talked, and I listened. One of the most dramatic Western accounts ever told, in my opinion, was his recollection of the hanging. Tom Horn had requested that T. Joe be his executioner. Among Westerners at that time, no tribute could have been higher. A printed version of the story appeared in the *Denver Post's* "Empire Magazine."

There were others involved in the final episode of Horn's life: Judge T. Blake Kennedy, attorney Clyde Watts, newspaperman Charley Thompson, Dr. George Johnston, Governor Fenimore Chatterton, all of Cheyenne, and rancher Andrew Ross of Pierce, Colorado. I had the privilege of interviewing all of them, but none had the spirit and sincerity of T. Joe Cahill.

I felt that I knew the Tom Horn case as well as anyone could, five decades removed; yet when my book *The Saga of Tom Horn* appeared in 1954, I found myself caught in undercurrents of controversy. The *Saga* was primarily a

compilation of source materials arranged chronologically. One thing I had hoped to do was set the record straight, since a farrago of Tom Horn misinformation existed.

My book caused anxiety and trouble. The fact that the biggest newspaper in the Rocky Mountain region had been sued for doing exactly what I had done put me in hot water, so several pages were cut out and new pages tipped in.

In my research of the case I found gaps. Undoubtedly Tom Horn had killed four men, two in Colorado, two in Wyoming. Yet the important question remained unanswered: "Did he kill fourteen-year-old Willie Nickell, near the Nickell ranch at Iron Mountain, Wyoming, on the morning of July 18, 1901?" Horn was a stock detective schooled by the Pinkertons. He had fought the Apaches as a government scout and served in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. He was a professional assassin capable of the most brutal killing, yet for the greater part of his life he was quiet and mannerly. When he drank too much, he became loud, caroused the red-light districts, and was filled with quarrelsome braggadocio. Tom apparently was never completely attuned to the changing times he really didn't like the world in which he lived.

It is my belief that whoever killed little Willie did so mistakenly. Tom Horn was too experienced a bounty man to have committed such a fatal error. Yet, it appears that facts of the long trial over the killing held in Cheyenne's Laramie County Court House might have been stacked against him from the outset. Obviously he knew a great deal. Too many key witnesses weren't heard from in a satisfactory manner. Among them was Tom's occasional girl friend, Glendolene Kimmell, the school teacher from the Iron Mountain District. John C. Coble, a wealthy rancher and admirer of Horn, was another. Coble had become em-

broiled with Kels Nickell, Willie's father, and they had had a gut-cutting feud. Neighbors throughout the country frequently had open disputes with one another, and tradition says that Willie and some of his classmates at the Iron Mountain School were anything but chums. These attitudes obviously mirrored family moods. There are other things, tragic as they may be, that could be discussed; to boil them all down, the motive for the crime was never clearly established.

The Joe LeFors-Charles Ohnhouse so-called "Confession of Tom Horn" was a fiasco. LeFors, a deputy U.S. marshal, had baited Horn into making loose, barroom-like conversation, while Ohnhouse, a stenographer, hid in an adjacent room and listened. Leslie Snow, a Cheyenne officer, joined Ohnhouse in placing his ear to the door. In spite of Tom Horn's having been somewhat boozed up, what the stenographer wrote down, and LeFors and Snow swore was the absolute truth, put him behind bars. I doubt that such a ruse would be accepted in today's courts. Certainly Joe LeFors' jurisdiction in the case would be hotly contested.

Tom's own testimony was strong, and he parried well and openly with the prosecution. His ability to recall names, places, and dates was full evidence of his intelligence. Cowboy friends brought to the stand by his attorneys unintentionally hurt his chances with the jury. In the case of Otto Plaga, testifying to Horn's whereabouts on July 18, the prosecution cleverly tied the witness in knots. In the end, Plaga's veracity was disputed.

I question the pre-trial counseling Horn obviously received, especially regarding statements made to LeFors. This was jurisprudence quicksand, and, once in, there was no getting out. The defense attorneys retained by Tom Horn's backers were to have been the most brilliant bat-

tery of attorneys ever assembled in the Frontier State. Yet Walter Stoll and Associates, for the prosecution, out-talked, out-maneuvered them, won the case, and heard the death sentence pronounced.

There were other important factors that were against Horn: The jury was, by occupation if for no other reason, hostile to the well-heeled interests Horn was accused of representing. Then, too, this was the heyday for throwing darts at big capital in any form, not excluding owners of baronial-like livestock empires. The press, which was tainted with the yellow journalism of the period, gave the man on trial the business by rooting out details that were irrelevant but none the less damning. By the time the final saga of Horn's life was well under way, the Denver and Cheyenne presses, booming in circulation, had molded public opinion into a gigantic mountain of negativism. Politically, a new trial was out of the question.

I have always believed (and it is not my idea singly) that Tom was "handled" for reasons other than his own salvation. Yet not once during a long confinement did he crack or hint of telling tales. One supporter of Tom Horn who lived on the Laramie Plains was so cynical about it that he even suspected that the jail break after Horn had been sentenced was nothing but a desperate frontal hoax. After all, Horn could have gotten killed.

When November 20, the day Tom Horn was to die, finally arrived, Cheyenne took on a carnival atmosphere. Saloons did a land-office trade and a lot of card-table money was bet that he wouldn't swing. Hundreds jammed the streets and, as the hour for the execution drew near, pressed around Laramie County Courthouse. Cordons of special police were summoned to keep the onlookers at a distance. A machine-gun was mounted on top of the county building just in

case. A few blocks away, in the Capitol Building, the governor pondered the magnanimity of a stay of execution.

A high board fence had been hastily erected to veil the gallows and scaffolding from public view. Shortly before the announced time of execution, newspapermen, law officers, and friends of Horn who had been invited to witness the grim event quietly filed into the arena. There were delays which must have been exasperating; a northerly wind blowing over a skiff of frozen snow added to the misery of the hour.

At last all was set. When Tom Horn was escorted from his cell, he was handcuffed and showed no signs of being distraught. During his last minutes of life he joshed, heard a mournful railroad ballad sung by two dear friends, and then listened intently as a churchman droned a message asking for eternal forgiveness. From down below, where knees were beginning to buckle, there came muffled sounds of sobbing. As the hangman readied the black hood to slip over his head and another fumbled with the noose, Tom Horn, surveying the witnesses, said icily: "... that's the sickest-looking lot of damned sheriffs I ever saw."

The *Life of Tom Horn, Government Scout and Interpreter, A Vindication*, by Himself, was published in 1904 by John C. Coble. The book is not really a vindication. It is none the less excellent biography. While the appendix is spiked with interesting letters, testimonials, and transcripts, they don't really add up to anything in the way of an explanation of what happened in Wyoming. The only person who could have written that story was Tom Horn, and he was "hanged by the neck until dead."

## Preface

In preparing this autobiography for publication, there has been no attempt to make it literature. No sentence has been added; and no alterations have been made, save to avoid ambiguity, and to promote clearness and strength. All changes have been kept strictly in harmony with the style of the author. For the convenience of the reader the manuscript has been broken into chapters; and of course the chapter headings were not original with Horn.

For obvious reasons, the Westernisms, and even the slang, have been retained. Horn was thoroughly Western. Born and reared in the West, indeed, it can be correctly said that he was "reared" he passed his entire life here, with the exception of the period of his service to his country during the war with Spain; and, being Western, his conversation was replete with local expressions, not always elegant, yet rarely profane and never vulgar.

I wish to repeat this: *Tom Horn was seldom profane.* And this association will be sustained by those who really knew him a fact which alone serves to disprove that so-called famous "confession," the language of which smacks very much more of the talk of those who edited the "notes taken on the spot."

But, as I have suggested, there have been no additions made to this autobiography, and such alterations as have been made do not alter the text in any material manner. Rather, it has been the object, in editing the manuscript, to present the writer's life-story in his own pleasing style, with his own strong personality gleaming through the whole.

Note his unerring memory, even to minute details; the objects of his hero-worship and the sort of men they were; his unconsciously expressed forgiveness for injuries; his untiring faithfulness to duty under the most trying circumstances; his strong sense of justice; and note particularly that although his manuscript was written to hurry lagging time, and for the private perusal of his friends only, it contains not the slightest strain of vulgarity. No expurgation has been necessary.

This autobiography is now given in book form for general circulation, in response to an insistent public demand. The fact that such a "Life" had been written had no sooner become known than I was besieged by his personal friends and acquaintances and by interested readers of the published reports of the trial, for the publication of the autobiography prepared by Tom Horn. Letters reached me by every mail from almost every state and territory of the Union; and I may be permitted here to state that there was scarcely a letter among them all which did not declare a belief in the innocence of Horn, "after carefully considering the details of the case."

Telegrams and letters reached me, also, from daily newspapers, monthly magazines and publishing houses, making propositions for "exclusive publishing rights."

And so I have yielded. In your hands is the book. For it, is asked a reading without prejudice. For its writer, is asked that which, during his closing years, was denied him *fair play*.

JOHN C. COBLE  
IRON MOUNTAIN RANCH, BOSLER, WYOMING  
MARCH 1, 1904

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## Chapter One

Horn's Boyhood His Dog "Shed," Bennie, the Model Boy Horn Leaves Home for th

I was born near Memphis, Scotland County, Missouri, November 21, 1860a troublesome time, to be sure; and anyone born in Missouri is bound to see trou says Bill Nye.

Up to the time I left home I suppose I had more trouble than any man or boy in Missouri. We had Sunday schools and church, and as my mother was a good o fashioned Campbellite, I was supposed to go to church and Sunday school, as of the boys and girls in the neighborhood. I had three brothers and four sisters, was not one of them but acted as though he really liked to go to those places. I nothing particular against going, if it had not been for the 'coon, turkey, quail, prairie chickens, 'possums, skunks, and other game of that kind, with once in a fat, corn-fed deer; and they were all neglected to such an extent by the rest of t that it kept me busy most every Sunday, and many nights through the week, to considered right in trying to keep on proper terms with the game.

I would steal out the gun and take the dog and hunt all day Sunday and many a through the week, knowing full well that whenever I did show up at home I w whipping or a scolding from my mother or a regular thumping from father.

My mother was a tall, powerful woman, and she would

whip me and cry, and tell me how much good she was trying to do me by breaking me of my Indian ways, so she called them (though I had never seen an Indian, and did not know what their ways were). Then if a skunk or 'coon or fox came along and carried off one of her chickens during the night, at daylight she would wake me and give me the gun, and tell me to take old "Shedrick," the dog, and go and follow up the varmint and kill it.

For a kid, I must have been a very successful hunter, for when our neighbors would complain of losing a chicken (and that was a serious loss to them), mother would tell them that whenever any varmint bothered her hen-roost, she just sent out Tom and "Shed," and when they came back they always brought the pelt of the varmint with them.

To this day, I believe mother thought the dog was of more importance against varmints than I was. But "Shedrick" and I both understood that I was the better, for I could climb any tree in Missouri, and dig frozen ground with a pick, and follow cold tracks in the mud or snow, and knew more than the dog in a good many ways. Still, I think, even yet, that there never was a better dog. I always thought "Shed" could whip any dog in Missouri (and at that time I did not know there was any other place than Missouri, except, perhaps, Iowa. I knew of Iowa, because one of our neighbors came from there). But I had many a hard fight myself to keep up the reputation of old "Shed," for as he began to get old and wise, I do believe he thought I would always help him. Once in a while Dad would go to an election or public sale or horse race or something, and "Shed" would go with him and sometimes the dog would get whipped. When he did get whipped, he always came home looking pretty badly used up, and after an occurrence of that kind, "Shed" would not leave me for days.

I recollect a family of boys named Griggs who had what they always claimed was the best 'coon dog and the best fighter in the world (Missouri or our neighborhood was the world to them), and now I think he must have been a good dog and no mistake; but at that time I did certainly hate him. Whenever the Griggs boys and I ran together, we had a dog fight, and the termination of the meeting was always a fight between Sam Griggs and myself. I also distinctly recollect that on nearly every occasion "Shed" and I both went home pretty badly used up. Sam Griggs always said I helped "Shed" and he would try to keep me from doing so; then Sam and I would mix. I guess we fought a hundred times and he always quit when he "had his satisfy" for I never did nor could lick him.

The Griggs dog was named "Sandy" (because he was yellow, I suppose), and my argument always was that my dog "Shed" knew more than "Sandy." To illustrate, once Sam Griggs was up in a tree to shake off a 'coon for "Sandy" to kill. A limb of the tree broke and down came Sam, and "Sandy" jumped on him and bit his ear and bit him in the arm and shoulder and used Sam up pretty badly before he could get "Sandy" to understand that he was not a 'coon or a wild cat. I always claimed that "Shed" would have had more sense than to jump on me if I had been fool enough to fall out of a tree.

My mother was always anxious to have all the children go to school during the winter months, and I always had to go, or to start anyway; but all the natural influences of the country were against my acquiring much of an education. During the summer we had to work on the farm, and work hard and long hours putting in crops and tending to them. Thus I had little legitimate time to fish and hunt bee trees. So when winter came and the work was all done and the

crops all in, I wanted to go and look after the game, but as I was ordered to go to school, I had to go.

The first natural influence of any importance was that the school house was a mile from the house we lived in, and there was always more or less snow on the ground in winter, and on the trail to school I would always be finding fresh rabbit or 'coon or cat tracks crossing the trail to school. I never could cross a fresh track, for I would see one and the rest of the children would pay no attention to it, so, I would follow it a little ways just to see which way it went, and then I would go on a little farther, and then I would say to myself, "I will be late for school and get licked." Then an overpowering desire to get that rabbit or 'coon or wild cat, as it happened to be, would overcome me, and I would go back in the orchard behind the house, call the dog, and as he would come running to me, the stuff for school was all off, and "Shed" and I would go hunting. So you see, had the school house been nearer, I could have gotten there a good deal oftener than I did.

I could never keep my mind on my books when I was at school, for if it happened to commence to snow I could not help thinking about how fine it would be to trail 'coon on the morrow, and I would speculate a good deal more on the skins of the varmints I could catch, and could see far more advantage in having a good string of pelts than in learning to read, write, and cipher.

Things were beginning to get rather binding on me about this time anyway, as a cousin named Ben Markley came to live with us. He was a son of my mother's sister, and I guess he was the best boy in the world. Oh, how many hundred times I was whipped or scolded and asked by father, or mother or school teacher, why I did not do as Bennie did.

Ben never forgot to wash or comb his hair. He never