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## Article Title: The Legend of Rawhide Revisited

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Article Summary: The Rawhide legend is associated with the mid-nineteenth century overland migrations of the American West. Shooting an Indian without provocation and skinning a man alive are consistent themes in many versions of the story. This article includes variations on the basic tale and an alternate explanation for places named Rawhide.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Orsamus Charles Dake, Elvira Gaston Platt, Baptiste Bahylle, Luther North, William F Drannan

Place Names: Rawhide Creek, Dodge County, Nebraska; Rawhide Creek and Rawhide Buttes, near Lusk, Wyoming

Books Recounting the Legend of Rawhide Creek, Nebraska: Orsamus Charles Dake, *Nebraska Legends and Poems*, 1871; AC Edmunds, *Pen Sketches of Nebraskans*, 1872; William Philo Clark, *The Indian Sign Language*, 1885; Alfred Sorensen, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time*, 1889; Reuben W Hazen, *History of the Pawnee Indians*, 1893; Herman Robert Lyon, "Freighting in the '60s," *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 10 (1902); John William Ross, *Only for Others or, Twenty-Five Years a Household Evangelist*, undated

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Photographs / Images: FF Pohlman illustration of the legend of Rawhide (John William Ross, *Only for Others*, n.d.); Orsamus Charles Dake, who included a dramatic poem about the Rawhide story in his *Nebraska Legends and Poems*, 1871; Rawhide Creek, Dodge County, Nebraska; Elvira Gaston Platt, teacher and missionary to the Pawnees, who questioned the credibility of Dake's story; 1851 sketch by Rudolph F Kurz of Indians with skin boats that may explain the name "Rawhide"; Baptiste Bahylle with four Pawnee Indians; Luther North, who confirmed most details of the Rawhide story (photo circa 1925); William F Drannan, whose fictionalized autobiography (1910) said that he had witnessed the Rawhide skinning in 1850 near Fort Kearny; Rawhide Buttes, near Lusk, Wyoming, another site associated with the legend; "Bull-Boating," 1837 painting by Alfred Jacob Miller, showing the skin boats used by Indians and traders to transport goods across rivers



A venerable legend from the overland migrations of the mid-nineteenth century is the story of an impulsive youth who wantonly kills an Indian and is skinned alive by members of the tribe. Reported from many locations throughout the West, including Rawhide Creek in Dodge County, Nebraska, there is no evidence that such an event ever occurred. John William Ross, *Only for Others* (Bedford, Iowa: The Author, n.d.)—

# T • H • E LEGEND OF RAWHIDE REVISITED

BY  
JAMES E. POTTER

The woman sat quietly near the stream, oblivious to danger. Suddenly a shot rang out, and she toppled over dead. The perpetrator of this heinous crime, a brash and reckless youth, had redeemed his vow to shoot the first Indian he saw. Although his fellow Forty-niners had hardly credited his often-repeated boast, swift retribution now stared them in the face. Give him up for punishment, the woman's tribe demanded, or all of you will pay the price.

## The Legend of Rawhide

**T**he choice was grim, but clear.

Better one should die than all.  
Revenge would be instructive.

Thoughtless, brutal acts demand punishment in kind. While the travelers watched in horror, the Indians stripped the luckless murderer, tied him to a tree, and flayed him as he screamed for mercy. The culprit finally died, his corpse consigned to a nameless grave beside the trail. But the memory of his deed and the manner of his demise live on in the meandering stream forever known as Rawhide.

Thus unfolds the basic outline of one of the most venerable legends associated with the overland migrations of the mid-nineteenth century American West. Various localities are said to have been the setting, and several victims have been identified. Most accounts place the episode in 1849 or 1850. The first published version surfaced at that time, and overland travelers' diaries began to mention the Rawhide story as early as 1853. Some tellers of the tale claimed to have heard it from a person who knew the murderer or had been present at his death, while others said the victim was a relative and the story had been handed down as "pioneer family history." There is little likelihood that any of these stories are true.

Perhaps the earliest version of the Rawhide story to reach the West appeared in the Kanesville [later Council Bluffs], Iowa, *Frontier Guardian*, May 1, 1850, reprinted from a newspaper in Galena, Illinois:

[A]mong the overland emigrants for California last spring was Mr. Green of "Green's Woolen Factory," Fox River, and two of his sons, the youngest a youth. It is reported that, while passing through a tribe of Indians, this young man, naturally full of mischief, killed a squaw. This tribe, having become well advised of the fact, hastened after the company and overtook them and demanded the murderer. At first the demand was resisted but after the Indians had informed them that they

would destroy the company if their request was not granted, the youth was surrendered into their hands. They then stripped him, and in the presence of his father and the whole company, *they skinned him from his head to his feet.* He lived four hours after he was thus flayed.



In 1871 Orsamus Charles Dake, professor of literature at the University of Nebraska, gave new life to the Rawhide story, which had been in circulation since at least 1850, by including a dramatic poetic rendering of the story in his *Nebraska Legends and Poems*. University Archives and Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Although the article did not say where the episode was supposed to have happened, later writers attributed it to the vicinity of Rawhide Creek in Dodge County, Nebraska, which flows into the Elkhorn River east of present-day Fremont. Travelers following the trail north of the Platte (the "Mormon Trail" or Council Bluffs Road) had to cross this troublesome stream.

Although the tale of Rawhide Creek achieved some currency among overland emigrants during the 1850s and 1860s, as will be discussed below, it gained new life when Orsamus Charles

Dake penned his *Nebraska Legends and Poems*, published in February 1871. Touted as the first book of Nebraska poetry, it included "The Rawhide," which told the story in dramatic detail, as the following excerpt shows:

But him—the unhappy man of blood—  
The avengers hurried to that spot  
Where, in last sunset's waning light,  
He had the maiden shot.  
And there, with cruel taunt and gibe,  
They flayed him that he died,  
And left his body to the birds,  
Close by the runnel side;  
But stuffed his skin, and set it up  
Before all evil men,  
To warn them, lest so foul a thing  
Should e'er be done again.<sup>1</sup>

Dake, professor of literature at the University of Nebraska, had come to Nebraska in 1862, following ordainment as an Episcopal minister. In 1865 he moved to Fremont, where he organized a church. It is likely that his sojourn there explains his interest in Rawhide Creek, although it is not known where he heard the story.<sup>2</sup> In his preface to the poem Dake did not identify the skinning victim by name, but in all other particulars closely paraphrased the episode as first reported. In his version, the Indians were Pawnees, a logical conclusion because that tribe had long resided near the Platte and its tributaries. Whether or not Dake believed the story, it made perfect fodder for a book on Nebraska legends.

Barely a month after Dake's book came out, Moses K. Turner, editor of *The Platte Journal* in Columbus, Nebraska, took the professor to task. Under the headline "Poetry versus Fact," Turner noted, "We like poetry, but the memory of the dead should not be blackened to make a foundation for fanciful rhymes." He added, "Let our first book of poetry contain no libel of a dead man or an unjust reproach to a living race."<sup>3</sup>

This commentary was the lead for Turner's effort to present a credible explanation of the Rawhide legend's origin. Apparently at Turner's request, J. G. Higgins of Columbus, who knew a

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relative of the alleged perpetrator/victim mentioned in the 1850 newspaper account, solicited information from a Mr. D. Green of Dayton, Illinois, whose March 31, 1871, letter formed the core of Turner's article. Green wrote, in part,

The Rev. Mr. Dake has given in the above [the Rawhide poem] the substance of a report which in 1849 found its way into nearly every newspaper in the United States, and no doubt but he, together with many others in good faith and very innocently, believes that such a tragedy did really take place as stated, but the whole story is a base and *unmitigated falsehood* from beginning to end, as there never was the least foundation for said report. The hoax was gotten up in Magnolia, Putnam County, Illinois, in a bar-room to gull a gaping crowd, without any thought of its going any farther, but

some one present took it to be true and communicated it to the editor of a paper published in Lacon, Marshall County, Illinois, from which it was, as stated, very extensively copied.<sup>4</sup>

Green went on to say that D. P. Fyffe and David Law of Magnolia perpetrated the hoax, as Fyffe admitted in a March 27, 1871, letter. Furthermore, Green added, the Forty-niners allegedly involved in the Rawhide episode were his father, two brothers, and twenty or thirty other men, and it was his brother, Joseph Green, who was supposed to have been skinned alive. In fact, said Green, the company reached California and Joseph Green returned to Illinois in 1851, where he died of consumption in 1855. D. Green concluded his letter with

the hope "that you will use your best efforts to correct this infamous slander."<sup>5</sup>

Professor Dake promptly responded with his own letter to the newspaper, noting that the Rawhide story, as reflected in his poem, was substantially correct. Living persons could verify it if necessary, he claimed. Green was not the victim, but Dake had no intention of publishing the real victim's name and it "may be allowed to perish." *Platte Journal* editor Turner replied that Dake had not claimed his poem about the legend of Nebraska's Weeping Water Creek was literally true, and "we are inclined to believe . . . that the 'facts' of the Rawhide are little less dubious than the 'facts' of the Weeping Water and are disposed to classify both stories as 'legends'."<sup>6</sup>



Rawhide Creek in Dodge County, Nebraska, which flows into the Elkhorn River east of present-day Fremont, is the supposed site of an 1850 version of the tale published in the Kaneshville (Council Bluffs), Iowa *Frontier Guardian*. James E. Potter

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Elvira Gaston Platt, a teacher and missionary to the Pawnees from 1843 to 1872 joined Moses K. Turner, editor of the *Platte Journal* of Columbus, Nebraska, in questioning the credibility of Dake's story, and was apparently the first to declare that Rawhide Creek had been named by French traders who crossed it in skin boats. NSHS, RG2411-4396b



A sketch made by Rudolph F. Kurz in 1851 depicts Indians with skin boats like those described by Elvira Platt. Made of rawhide stretched over a framework of willows, these "bull boats" were used by Plains Indians and adopted by traders. "Journal of Rudolph F. Kurz," *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 115, plate 37

Turner went on to print a letter from Elvira Gaston Platt, who came west as a teacher/missionary to the Pawnees in 1843 and continued to teach school on the tribe's Nebraska reservation until 1872.<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Platt had planned to write anonymously about Dake's Rawhide poem, but since Turner had already published his request for her comments, she let her name be used. Platt said Rawhide Creek had borne that name at least since 1835 and probably earlier. It had been so named by French traders, who often found the stream in flood during their annual visits to the Pawnee. According to Platt, the traders had a saying, "now for the rawhide," meaning that they had to build skin boats in order to cross the creek.<sup>8</sup>

Exactly four years later, in 1875, the

*Schuyler Register* published a recollection by David Anderson, an early Platte Valley settler near Columbus, which corroborated Platt's explanation of how Rawhide Creek was named. Anderson acknowledged the traditional "skinned alive" story, but seemed to prefer the version related to him by a Pawnee interpreter named "Babtist," probably the mixed-blood Baptiste Bahylle. Bahylle's explanation was simple. Traders and Indians who took furs to Peter Sarpy's trading post at Bellevue often found "this treacherous little creek" overflowing its banks. In such circumstances, they improvised boats from dried elk or buffalo hides in order to transport their cargo across the stream. Anderson concluded, "The reader will observe it was the semi-

aborigines who favored that stream with its present name, as the Pawnees all deny any knowledge of the traditional account above related."<sup>9</sup>

Legends die hard, particularly because few people would ever read Green's exposure of the hoax, or Platt and Anderson's realistic explanations of how the stream was named. The Rawhide myth rolled on, gaining momentum with each passing decade, expanding to encompass various locales, Indian tribes, and victims, and becoming firmly entrenched folklore masquerading as history.

A. C. Edmunds offered a variation on the identification of the skinning victim in his 1872 book, *Pen Sketches of Nebraskans*. Responding to the publication of Dake's Rawhide poem, Edmunds



**Baptiste Bahylle (standing) with four Pawnee Indians. In 1875 the *Schuyler Register* published reminiscences of an early settler who declared that Bahylle, a mixed-blood Pawnee interpreter, had also attributed the creek's name to traders who crossed it in boats made of dried elk or buffalo hide. NSHS, RG2065-3-5b**

noted, "We are credibly informed" that the person skinned was a seventeen-year-old youth named Oliver Smith of Logan County, Illinois.<sup>10</sup>

In the mid-1880s two writers weighed in on the Rawhide story. One was Lt. William Philo Clark, an aide to Gen. George Crook, who was known for his service at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, during the surrender and death of Crazy Horse in 1877. Clark's book, *The Indian Sign Language*, was published in 1885 shortly after his death, and included a

chapter on the Pawnees, much of which Clark took verbatim from an article by former Pawnee missionary John Dunbar. Dunbar's version placed the Rawhide incident in the spring of 1852, but other particulars fit the 1850 newspaper story. No victim was named, but Dunbar claimed to have heard the tale from a Pawnee Indian who participated in the skinning.<sup>11</sup>

Also in 1885 the *Fremont Weekly Herald* reported a visit to that town by Mr. and Mrs. M. M. Dodd of East Orange,

New Jersey. Editor N. W. Smails called on the couple and heard Dodd tell about a party of New Jersey Forty-niners from Newark that included "a boy named Force, about seventeen years of age, a blustering sort of chap." Young Force shot a Pawnee woman without provocation, and the Pawnees demanded that he be given up or the entire party would be slaughtered. Force was then skinned alive. Dodd had heard the story from "Mr. Lewis," who had been a member of the party.<sup>12</sup>

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The next published Rawhide story appears to be the one in Alfred Sorensen's 1889 *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time*. He also dated the story from 1852, but said the victim was Rhines, a silversmith from Wisconsin. Sorensen got his information from Experience Estabrook, former U.S. attorney and delegate to Congress from Nebraska Territory, who had lived in Wisconsin. Sorensen said Estabrook had heard the Rawhide details from a relative of the same name, who had been with the overland party when the skinning took place. Sorensen concluded, "This story is known to nearly all the old settlers of Omaha and Nebraska to be an actual fact."<sup>13</sup>

Reuben W. Hazen repeated the Rawhide story in graphic detail in his 1893 *History of the Pawnee Indians*. He also had the party coming from Wisconsin, but the episode occurred in the spring of 1850. Hazen identified the victim as "Seth Esterbrook." Interestingly, Experience Estabrook's father's name was Seth, though in Sorensen's account, a man named Estabrook was merely one of the party, Experience Estabrook's distant relative, and not the victim. Hazen threw in a new twist when he reported that the victim's skin had been tanned and the Pawnees still had it "when they went to their reservation," meaning their Nebraska reservation, later Nance County.<sup>14</sup> Hazen could not resist applying epithets such as "blood-thirsty fiends," "barbarians," and "savages" to the Pawnees, while the man who allegedly shot the woman in cold blood was described only as "rather wild in nature" and a "culprit."

Herman Robert Lyon of Glenwood, Iowa, wrote his recollections of overland freighting for the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1900. He recalled meeting a Pawnee at Rawhide Creek during a trek west in 1864, and proceeded to describe the incident whereby the creek was named. In Lyon's version, the event took place in 1850 and the perpetrator of the crime,

frustrated at a lack of game to hunt, stated "he would shoot the first live thing he saw," which turned out to be a Pawnee woman. The rest of the story unfolded in the conventional way.<sup>15</sup>

The *Stanton* (Nebraska) *Picket* of January 20, 1905, carried a feature article on the front page entitled, "Man Was Skinned Alive." Readers were assured the story was "not a mere myth." The article combined two accounts, one by Rev. John William Ross, an evangelist attending a Baptist convention in Fremont, whose story had first appeared in the *Fremont Tribune*. Ross claimed the Rawhide story as "pioneer family history" because the man who had been skinned alive was Dave Bailey, the husband of his father's sister. Bailey was from Taylor County, Iowa, and was "a reckless, dare-devil sort of a young man." It was in 1848, according to Ross, that Bailey joined the party traveling by ox team into "the great Nebraska desert." The story then unfolds as usual, except Bailey used a pistol, rather than a rifle, to shoot the Indian woman. Ross concluded, "The story is doubtless true. I could not conceive of members of the party returning home and giving such a horrible account of something that did not happen." What's more, said Ross, his uncle was never seen again after leaving home.

Some years later Ross published an undated autobiographical account entitled, *Only for Others or, Twenty-Five Years a Household Evangelist*, in which his Rawhide story resurfaced. This time Ross dated the overland journey during which his uncle had been skinned as 1845, and gave the place as near Norfolk, Nebraska. Ross further embellished the story with lurid details of how the Indians suspended his uncle by his lower jaw from the prong of a tree limb. "There he hung with his feet just off the ground. Then, to teach their young Indians to be brave like themselves, [the Indians] cut Uncle's scalp from side to side and slitting his skin from head to foot in two-inch strips, they

literally skinned him alive."<sup>16</sup>

The same Stanton newspaper article in which Ross's 1905 account appeared also included a Rawhide story courtesy of A. A. Enos of Schuyler, Nebraska, father of editor A. F. Enos. The elder Enos had given his account many times, though his statement differed in a few respects from that of Ross. Enos learned the story from plainsmen and Indians during an 1850 trek to California. He had seen the spot where the execution had occurred, and also the bank where the Indian woman was sitting when she was shot.

At about the same time, Judge Eli S. Ricker of Chadron was interviewing old timers about their experiences. One of the people he talked to was John W. Irion, who settled in Fremont in 1857. Irion told Ricker that he heard the Rawhide story from a ferryman named Fifield at the Elkhorn River crossing. Fifield claimed to have been present at the time of the incident. Irion also remembered reading of the Rawhide affair in a Cincinnati newspaper in 1850-51, thought the affected emigrant party had sent back word of the tragedy after reaching California, and that's how it got into the papers. Irion also claimed that a Pawnee by the name of John Rogers told him in 1858 that the victim's skin had been taken to the Pawnee village. Fifield told Irion that after being skinned, the victim walked to his father's wagon, where he soon died from pain and loss of blood. Irion never mentioned the victim's name, but drew a crude map showing the location of his grave near the bank of Rawhide Creek.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1920s John Thomas Link, professor of geography at Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska, began collecting data for his work, *The Origin of the Place Names of Nebraska*, published in 1933 as a bulletin of the Nebraska Geological Survey. Link gathered information from a variety of sources on the origins of the name of Rawhide Creek. Many of his sources were the same as those noted above, and the basic story was generally consis-

tent. Link also collected testimony from living informants, the most prominent being the elderly Capt. Luther H. North who, with his brother, Frank, led the famous Pawnee Scouts during the 1860s and 1870s.

As one of the last living “frontiersmen,” Luther was often asked to recall the thrilling days of yore and if his memory sometimes failed, few of his contemporaries survived to call him to account. In a 1924 appearance before the Fremont Chamber of Commerce, Luther “substantiated” the Rawhide story, previously considered “more or less a myth.” He had been acquainted with the Pawnee chief who supervised the killing of the white man, and the chief had told him of the details. These details turned out to be the stock Rawhide story in vogue since 1850. North hedged a bit, however, noting that the Pawnees had been reluctant to talk about the incident, and the chief had admitted only that some of the young men “might have cut pieces off of his skin.” Luther had been trying to think of the chief’s name for the last two months, but “I just can’t do it.”<sup>18</sup>

Link also collected an article from the Lincoln *Nebraska State Journal* of March 19, 1926, in which the late W. O. Dodge of Fremont was credited with having had “the identical knife with which the skinning of the white man was performed.” The same article quoted John E. Matthews of Fremont, who stated that a Pawnee woman named “Old Scaro,” a relative of the woman who had been shot, performed the skinning. Prof. E. W. Smith, superintendent of schools at Hooper, Nebraska, reported that his grandfather had been a member of the “Rawhide” wagon train and Smith had heard the story many times from his father’s lips, which “just about proves that the legend of naming Rawhide Creek is something more than mere tradition.” Many of the same accounts had appeared five months earlier in the *Omaha World-Herald*, suggesting how the stories continued to recirculate.<sup>19</sup>



**Luther North, about 1925. One of the last living “frontiersmen,” North, who with his brother Frank had led the famous Pawnee Scouts, appeared before the Fremont Chamber of Commerce in 1924 and confirmed most details of the Rawhide story, saying he had known the Pawnee chief who had supervised the killing. However he stopped short of claiming that the victim had been fully skinned.**  
NSHS, RG2211-8-7

Variations on the Rawhide story began popping up fairly early. Rolf Johnson, who settled in Phelps County, Nebraska, in 1876, recorded in his diary the tale of “Dead Man’s Ranch.”

I had an opportunity of observing this place made famous by a bloody tragedy in [the] day[s] of the old Overland Stage before the U. P. was built, the facts of which are substantially as follows: A party of big bugs from the east were coming through on the stage coach, among them being a son of one of the proprietors of the stage route, a hare brained youth of sixteen who had boasted that he would kill an Indian on this trip. This ranch was then a stage station and as the coach stopped, the boy observed some friendly Indians about the ranch and before any one could devine his intention, he fired and brought one of the red men down with a ball through his brain.<sup>20</sup>

Johnson went on to relate how the whites rushed the murderer into the coach and made their escape, the Indians being too few to retaliate. When the Indians returned to the ranch with reinforcements, the perpetrator was gone so they killed the station keeper instead. From then on, the ranch, located on the Platte west of Fort Kearny, was known as Dead Man’s Ranch.

In 1910 William F. Drannan brought forth his “autobiography” entitled *Capt. W. F. Drannan, Chief of Scouts, as Pilot to Emigrant and Government Trains Across the Plains of the Wild West of Fifty Years Ago*. The book was fiction all the way according to historian Dan Thrapp, who listed Drannan’s occupation as “yarn spinner.”<sup>21</sup> Drannan’s version of the Rawhide legend took place near Fort Kearny on the Platte in 1850 (when he would have been only eighteen years old). The precocious Drannan and fellow guide Jim Bridger encountered emigrants from Missouri, whose ranks included a man named “Rebel,” who had sworn to kill the first Indian he saw. Rebel shot a Kiowa woman with a baby in her arms. The rest of the scenario played out predictably. Once the Indians surrounded the wagon train, the perpetrator was turned over and

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skinned alive. According to Drannan, one of the men said "it was a comfort to know that he had no family with him here or back home to grieve at his dreadful death." Given his propensities as a "yarn spinner," Drannan could not resist inserting himself into the hoary Rawhide legend.<sup>22</sup>

Another example of the legend's persistence and susceptibility to modification came in 1923 when Mrs. H. J. Miller sent her account to the *Hebron (Nebraska) Journal*, which was reported in *Nebraska History* magazine. Naturally it had to do with a young man who vowed to shoot the first Indian he saw. According to Mrs. Miller, the incident took place on the Little Blue River in 1858 and was recorded by a Mr. Long en route to Pike's Peak. Then the conventional formula kicks in and the rash young man shoots an Indian woman. After the perpetrator is turned over to the Indians, the tribe unspecified, "they tied him to a back wheel of the wagon, took all his clothes off, and skinned him alive, and burned the wagon. . . . They then began a war dance that lasted all night."<sup>23</sup>

Frank M. Case, who freighted across the Plains in the 1860s, recalled his exploits in the late 1920s and the Rawhide story surfaced in his account. Case placed Rawhide Creek near Fort Kearny on the Platte, though he told the stock story from the 1850s, which he heard from "an old plainsman."<sup>24</sup>

In 1933 Adam W. Schoup, in a short article entitled "Jack Casement's Personal Wagoner," told about a wagon train passing Lodgepole Creek in western Nebraska when a young man from Ohio shot and killed a Sioux child. "The Indians demanded the young man and got him under threat and it was said that they skinned him alive."<sup>25</sup>

Other sites associated with the story of a man being skinned alive during the overland migration days include Rawhide Creek and Rawhide Buttes near Lusk, Wyoming. An early reference to an incident there appeared in John G. Bourke's 1891 book, *On the Border With*



In his highly fictionalized autobiography published in 1910, William F. Drannan said the Rawhide skinning occurred in 1850 near Fort Kearny. Drannan, a notorious "yarn spinner," claimed to have witnessed the event. *Capt. W. F. Drannan, Chief of Scouts, 1910*

*Crook*. Bourke remarked that the Sioux had been friendly with the whites until, “on one occasion, a man offered a grievous wrong to one of the young squaws” and a confrontation took place, the man was given up, and skinned alive.<sup>26</sup>

Another version of the naming of the Wyoming locality, this one comparable to the Nebraska version of the tale, appeared in George Lathrop’s 1919 *Memoirs of a Pioneer*. Lathrop credited High B. Kelley with the story, derived from Kelley’s 1849 crossing of the Plains. As Lathrop remembered Kelley telling it, a young man from Pike County, Missouri, had made the vow to shoot an Indian. “The young fellow had forgotten about it for the first month from the Missouri River.” Then, about June 1, 1849, near Rawhide Creek, Wyoming, he saw an Indian encampment and shot one of them. The outcome then follows the formula, with the fellow living until he had been skinned alive.<sup>27</sup> The legend of Rawhide Buttes surfaced again in 1941 in the Wyoming state guide published by the Federal Writers Project. Some unnamed editor added a new tidbit stating that once the man had been flayed, the Indians stretched his skin upon the buttes.<sup>28</sup>

The Wyoming version of the Rawhide story gained new life in 1946 when the Niobrara County Fair first presented a “pageant spectacle” entitled, “The Legend of the Rawhide Buttes.” Eva Lou Bonsell, who wrote the script, drew from Lathrop and the Wyoming guide for the core story, which generally followed the accounts dating from the 1850s. To make the story work as drama, Bonsell created a cast of characters, gave them dialog, and revised the ending to endow the rash young man who shot the Indian with some ennobling qualities. In Bonsell’s version of the legend, protagonist Clyde Pickett voluntarily surrenders to his horrible fate to save the rest of the people in the wagon train. The *Legend of Rawhide* pageant continues today as a staple of Lusk-area tourism, performed annually the second



Among the other sites associated with the story of a man being skinned alive by Indians are Rawhide Creek and Rawhide Buttes (above) near Lusk, Wyoming. Like the Nebraska Rawhide Creek, the Wyoming features received their name decades before the overland migrations to Oregon and California. Courtesy photo

weekend in July.<sup>29</sup>

The name Rawhide had been applied to the Wyoming buttes and stream well before the great overland migrations to Oregon and California of the late 1840s and early 1850s. In November 1841 fur trader Rufus Sage left the Fort Platte/Fort Laramie area en route for the White River. In his account of the journey, he noted, “A ride of twenty miles brought us to Rawhide, where we passed the following night and day.”<sup>30</sup>

An even earlier source for the naming of Rawhide Buttes is Battiste Good’s winter count from 1793–94, published in the *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*. The count for that year represents “Killed-a-long-haired-man-at-Raw-Hide-Butte-winter.” The Lakotas attacked a village, probably of

Cheyennes, and killed everyone there. “The fight was at Raw-Hide Butte, now so-called by the whites, which they [the Indians] named Buffalo-Hide Butte because they found so many buffalo hides in the lodges.”<sup>31</sup>

If the Rawhide story had a factual basis, one might expect some reference to appear in a diary, journal, or letter written en route by those who traveled the Great Platte River Road in 1849 or 1850. The publication in 1988 of *Platte River Road Narratives*, Merrill Mattes’s monumental bibliography of overland journals, letters, and recollections, afforded an opportunity to review what Mattes discovered in his survey of extant documents from the great migration.<sup>32</sup>

In his summaries Mattes did not indicate that any diary, journal, or letter

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actually written along the trail in 1849 or 1850, the years the skinning most often is said to have taken place, mentioned the Rawhide story. By contrast, after Sioux Indians killed a man named Harrison Rowe at the Loup River crossing in May 1849, no fewer than six 1849 trail diaries or journals reported it. As late as 1854 a diarist mentioned seeing Rowe's grave.<sup>33</sup> But Rawhide hearsay began to crop up in emigrant accounts just a few years after the event was said to have occurred. The earliest such reference Mattes reported was by Calvin West, an 1853 diarist, who had heard of Indians skinning a young man near Fort Leavenworth. West gave a lurid description of the incident in a May 24, 1853, letter to his children.<sup>34</sup> Both George Mohler, in 1860, and Sarah Hively, in 1863, heard the Rawhide story while on the trail.<sup>35</sup>

Mattes's analysis reveals that the Rawhide story surfaced most often in published and unpublished reminiscences written years after an emigrant's overland trek. The circumstances, victims, and locales varied, but shooting an Indian without provocation and skinning a man alive are consistent themes. For example, G. W. Thissell, who went west in 1850 and wrote about the trip years later, reported that the skinning took place at "Squaw Creek" in western Nebraska, and the victim was William Crockett of Arkansas. Kate Furniss, who accompanied her family to California in 1853 when she was ten and wrote of the journey much later, recalled hearing that a sixteen-year-old boy had fired on Sioux mothers, who were teaching their babies to swim, supposedly near Fort Laramie, which would likely connect the story to Rawhide Creek in Wyoming.<sup>36</sup>

Although popular culture has greatly exaggerated the frequency and scenarios of emigrant-Indian conflict, altercations, such as the one that led to the death of Harrison Rowe in 1849, are well documented in the journals.<sup>37</sup> Some of these may have inspired or reinforced the Rawhide stories, at least

in part. They include instances when whites fired on or killed Indians without provocation or Indians killed emigrants, instances when Indians caught lone emigrants away from their companions and stripped them of their clothing, instances where Indians tried to exact tribute or tolls from emigrants crossing their land, and examples of pitched battles between emigrants and Indians.

Benjamin Franklin Bonney, an 1845 emigrant, recalled that John Greenwood, a son of his party's guide, ex-mountain man Caleb Greenwood, shot down in cold blood an Indian who had startled young Greenwood's horse.<sup>38</sup> Chester Ingersoll, en route to California in 1847, reported that Indian depredations along the Humboldt River were handled by shooting "at every Indian we saw. This soon cleared the way."<sup>39</sup> Also in 1847 Rev. Augustin Blanchet's group of missionaries separated from a party of traders near Big Vermillion River in Kansas because the leader had given orders to fire on any Indians who came into camp.<sup>40</sup> In 1849 three Missourians told Ansel McCall they would shoot the first Indian they saw because they thought Indians had stolen their horses.<sup>41</sup> Charles Crawford, reminiscing about his 1851 trip to Oregon, recalled that a man vowed to kill the first Indian he saw in retaliation for stolen horses, and later shot an unsuspecting Indian fishing near the Salmon River.<sup>42</sup> In 1854 Edwin Bird told of a white man who had been taken prisoner by the Sioux for accidentally shooting an Indian woman on the North Platte River near Scott's Bluffs.<sup>43</sup> While this latter incident might provide a grain of truth for some of the Rawhide stories after 1854, it cannot have been the origin of the tale that dated from the 1849 or 1850 newspaper articles. The earlier accounts of assaults on Indians do not include reports of native retaliation.

Emigrants recorded several accounts of Pawnees "stripping" trail travelers, but not literally skinning them alive. In 1847 Loren B. Hastings noted that Pawnees near the Little Blue River

victimized stragglers who were "robbed of their rifles and all their clothing and sent into camp naked." In 1846 J. M. Harrison and Edward Trimble were looking for lost cattle east of the forks of the Platte River when Pawnees surrounded the two, stripped Harrison of his clothing, and killed Trimble as he tried to escape. Evidently the men had gone out on the prairie unarmed.<sup>44</sup>

In an interesting variation on this theme Hugh Cosgrove, reminiscing about his 1847 trek to Oregon, recalled that Indians stripped two young emigrants of their clothing near "Castle Rock" [Courthouse Rock?] and sent them naked back to camp. Cosgrove said that the other emigrants did not feel sorry for the victims, "as they were notorious boasters, and from the first had been declaring that they would shoot, first or last, one Indian a piece before they reached Oregon."<sup>45</sup>

While historian John D. Unruh determined that most emigrant deaths at the hands of Indians occurred west of South Pass, the diaries and journals Mattes surveyed revealed that fatal encounters during the forepart of the journey were frequent enough. In 1847 Mormon Jacob Wetherbee was killed by Omaha Indians near the Elkhorn River, as reported by three narrators. The death of Harrison Rowe at the Loup River ford in 1849 has already been mentioned. In 1850 and 1852 emigrants reported pitched battles with Pawnees at the crossing of Shell Creek near present Columbus, Nebraska, when the Indians tried to exact a toll. In the 1852 fight, emigrants killed three and perhaps as many as nine Indians and wounded several others. Nevertheless, scholars have shown that the frequency of Indian-emigrant conflict has often been overstated.<sup>46</sup>

Several factors contributed to the likelihood that some emigrants would believe a tall tale such as Rawhide. Some may have heard of the documented instances where Indians killed emigrants or emigrants killed Indians, such as the death of Rowe in 1849. In some cases



**“Bull-Boating,”** painted in 1837 by Alfred Jacob Miller, is one of many representations of the skin boats routinely used by Indians and traders for transporting goods across streams and rivers. Although the legend of the rash young man skinned alive for murdering an Indian has had wide currency, it is much more likely that many of the West’s Rawhide Creeks owe their name to this ungainly but utilitarian craft.

Indians engaged in behavior remarkably similar to that described in the Rawhide legend. Thomas Fulton, in an 1849 interview, reported that on the Little Blue River in Nebraska, Pawnees “took him prisoner, stripped him, tied him to a tree, destroyed the loading of the wagons, and then turned him loose” because the Indians blamed the emigrants for a devastating outbreak of cholera.<sup>47</sup>

Even in the absence of such reports, some emigrants were predisposed to believe Indians were always a threat to be treated with suspicion or hostility. Emigrant guidebooks often reinforced such thinking. The very idea of an overland journey to Oregon, California, or Utah raised expectations of an encounter with “the elephant,” a metaphor for terrors that might lie ahead. While the notion that anyone would shoot an Indian without provocation seems preposterous, some emigrants refused to concede that Indians had any rights or even basic humanity, and thus might credit such tales.<sup>48</sup>

Like many legends, Rawhide achieved believability through frequent repetition, publication, and testimony by persons who claimed to know the facts. Although credible commentators, such as Elvira Gaston Platt, came forward with more plausible explanations, their accounts failed to circulate widely enough to gain an equal footing with the folklore version, which had the added advantage of being more appealing to those who wanted the West to be wild. Even gruesome tales, such as Rawhide, lend romance to the retelling of western experiences, undoubtedly influencing some aged writers to include the story in their recollections.<sup>49</sup>

Unfortunately for those who prefer such drama, the historical record, thus far, has provided no evidence to connect the naming of the Rawhide Creeks and Rawhide Buttes to an actual incident in which a rash young man or anyone else was skinned alive for murdering an Indian in cold blood. The routine use of skin boats and untanned hides by Indians and fur traders

provides a logical, although mundane, explanation for what has long been one of the most macabre and cherished legends of the American West.<sup>50</sup>

#### Acknowledgment

I want to thank Richard E. Jensen, my colleague at the Nebraska State Historical Society, who shared my interest in the Rawhide legend and collected several of the versions appearing here.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Orsamus Charles Dake, *Nebraska Legends and Poems* (Cooper Union, N.Y.: Pott & Amery, 1871), 70–71.

<sup>2</sup> A. C. Edmunds, *Pen Sketches of Nebraskans* (R. & J. Wilbur, 1871), 297.

<sup>3</sup> *The Platte Journal* (Columbus, Nebraska), Apr. 12, 1871.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Dake to editor, *The Platte Journal*, Apr. 19, 1871, reprinted in *Fremont Tribune*, May 4, 1871.

<sup>7</sup> J. Sterling Morton, succeeded by Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Jacob North and Co., 1906), 2:214–15.

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<sup>8</sup> E. G. Platt to editor, *The Platte Journal*, Apr. 10, 1871, reprinted in *Fremont Tribune*, May 4, 1871. Jean Baptiste Truteau in 1794–95 reported that traders with the Pawnees used “ox-skin” canoes to bring furs from the villages to the Missouri River, presumably via the Platte, but such boats could have been used on other streams. “Journal of Truteau on the Missouri River, 1794–1795,” in Abraham P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785–1804* (1952, University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 1990) 1:264. For scholarly discussion of the use of “bull boats” and skin canoes by Indians and fur traders, see George Metcalf, “The Bull Boats of the Plains Indians and the Fur Traders,” *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 8 (Summer 1972): 1–10; and James A. Hanson, “James Bridger, et al., Boat Builders: The Skin Canoes of the Great Plains and Rockies,” *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 16 (Spring 1980): 1–6.

<sup>9</sup> The *Schuyler Register* article was reprinted in the *The Columbus Journal*, Mar. 31, 1875.

<sup>10</sup> Edmunds, *Nebraskans*, 299.

<sup>11</sup> W. P. Clark, *The Indian Sign Language* (Philadelphia: Hammersly & Co., 1885), 290. For the Pawnees, Clark extensively quoted John Dunbar, writing in *Magazine of American History*, April 1880.

<sup>12</sup> *Fremont Weekly Herald*, Nov. 5, 1885.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Sorensen, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: Gibson, Miller & Richardson, 1880), 19–20.

<sup>14</sup> R. W. Hazen, *History of the Pawnee Indians* (Fremont, Nebr.: Fremont Tribune, 1893), 29–31. A biography of Experience Estabrook appears in Morton and Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co., 1905), 1:646–48.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Robert Lyon, “Freighting in the ‘60s,” *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 10 (1902): 269.

<sup>16</sup> John William Ross, *Only for Others or, Twenty-Five Years a Household Evangelist* (Bedford, Iowa: The Author, n.d.), 18–19.

<sup>17</sup> John W. Irion Interview, Tablet 20, RG 8, Eli S. Ricker Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>18</sup> Luther North and other Rawhide sources recorded by Link are found in his notes on Nebraska place names in the John T. Link Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>19</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 19, 1925.

<sup>20</sup> Rolf Johnson, *Happy as a Big Sunflower: Adventures in the West, 1875–1880*, ed. Richard E. Jensen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 1999), 27–28.

<sup>21</sup> Dan Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books), 1:423.

<sup>22</sup> William F. Drannan, *Capt. W. F. Drannan, Chief of Scouts* (Chicago: Thos. W. Jackson Publishing Co., 1910), 53–54.

<sup>23</sup> Note in *Nebraska History Magazine* 6 (Oct.–Dec. 1923): 121.

<sup>24</sup> Frank M. Case, “Experiences on the Platte River Route in the Sixties,” *The Colorado Magazine*, 4/5 (1927–28): 150–51.

<sup>25</sup> “Jack Casement’s Personal Wagoner,” *Nebraska History Magazine* 14 (July–Sept. 1933): 190.

<sup>26</sup> John G. Bourke, *On the Border With Crook* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891), 249–50.

<sup>27</sup> George Lathrop, *Memoirs of a Pioneer* (Lusk, Wyo.: *The Lusk Herald*, 1929?), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Lester C. Hunt, *Wyoming: A Guide to its History, Highways, and People*, American Guide Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 224.

<sup>29</sup> Souvenir Program, *The Legend of the Rawhide Buttes*, Niobrara County Fair, August 23–24–25, 1946; Brochure, *Legend of Rawhide: Ride in the Winds of a Legend*, (Lusk, Wyo.: n.p., 2000?).

<sup>30</sup> Rufus B. Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life* (New York: Worthington Co., 1887), 105.

<sup>31</sup> Garrick Mallery, ed., “Dakota Winter Courts, 1786–1793,” *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1882–83 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1886), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and other Western States and Territories, 1812–1866* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*: Arms, (343); Hillyer, (489); Jewett, (508); Lorton, (534); Mitchell, (562); Welch, (670); and Burrell, (1460). The numbers in parenthesis, here and below, are the entry numbers in the bibliography. Hillyer blames Rowe “through his own foolishness, for he fired upon them.”

<sup>34</sup> Reginald R. Stuart and Grace D. Stuart, “Calvin B. West of the Umpqua,” *The Pacific Historian* 4 (May 1960): 56–57.

<sup>35</sup> Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*: West, (1447); Mohler, (1787); Hively, (1895).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: Thissell, (986); Furniss, (1372).

<sup>37</sup> I make a distinction between accounts recorded by emigrants while actually on the trail, and reminiscences of an overland journey written years later. Mattes’s bibliography includes both categories.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Lockley, ed., “Recollections of Benjamin Franklin Bonney,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 24 (March 1923): 43–44.

<sup>39</sup> Mattes, *Narratives*: Ingersoll, (250).

<sup>40</sup> Raphael W. Hamilton, ed. and trans., “The Journey of the Bishop of Walla Walla,” *Illinois Catholic Historical Review* 9 (1927): 208–12.

<sup>41</sup> John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–60* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 146.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Howard Crawford, *Scenes of Earlier Days in Crossing the Plains to Oregon, and Experiences of Western Life* (1908, Chicago: Quadrale Books, Inc., 1962), 44–46.

<sup>43</sup> Mattes, *Narratives*: Bird, (1456).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: Hastings, (245); Harrison, (182). See also Joel Palmer’s journal in Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels* 30:251–55.

<sup>45</sup> Hugh Cosgrove, “Reminiscences,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 1 (June 1900): 259–60.

<sup>46</sup> Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*. For Weatherbee see Kingsbury, (257); Sessions, (272); Smith, (275). For conflict at Shell Creek see Newcomb, (908); Carpenter, (1125); Kingery, (1218); and Woodruff, (1327), among others. For a broad review, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, and Robert L. Munkres, “The Plains Indian Threat on the Oregon Trail Before 1860,” *Annals of Wyoming* 40 (Oct. 1968): 193–221.

<sup>47</sup> Mattes, *Narratives*: Fulton, (447).

<sup>48</sup> An outstanding analysis of emigrant-Indian interaction appears in the chapter by that name in Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 117–58.

<sup>49</sup> Once a story becomes firmly embedded in local lore, alternative and often more plausible explanations rarely gain traction. Another example is the story of “John Brown’s Cave” (the Allen Mayhew Cabin) in Nebraska City, Nebraska. After accounts became current in the 1870s and 1880s that the cabin and related root cellar had been a major depot on the Underground Railroad before the Civil War, the son of the cabin’s builder refuted the claims in 1890. Despite credibility gained from having grown up in the cabin during the period of its alleged use as a depot on the Underground Railroad, the younger Mayhew’s account was overwhelmed by the persistent folklore that had grown up around the place then known as “John Brown’s Cave.” See James E. Potter, “Fact and Folklore in the Story of ‘John Brown’s Cave’ and the Underground Railroad in Nebraska,” *Nebraska History* 83 (Summer 2002): 73–88.

<sup>50</sup> Undoubtedly there are many Rawhide Creeks across the country. It would be a daunting task to explore how each was named. It is likely that most names were derived from innocuous circumstances, such as Rawhide Creek in north central Dallas County, Texas: “In the early period of the settlement of Dallas County, a tanning yard was located on the banks of the stream, hence the name Rawhide Creek.” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/RR/rbrcn.html>