BIG WEST

October 1967

TRUE STORIES OF THE WESTERN FRONTIER

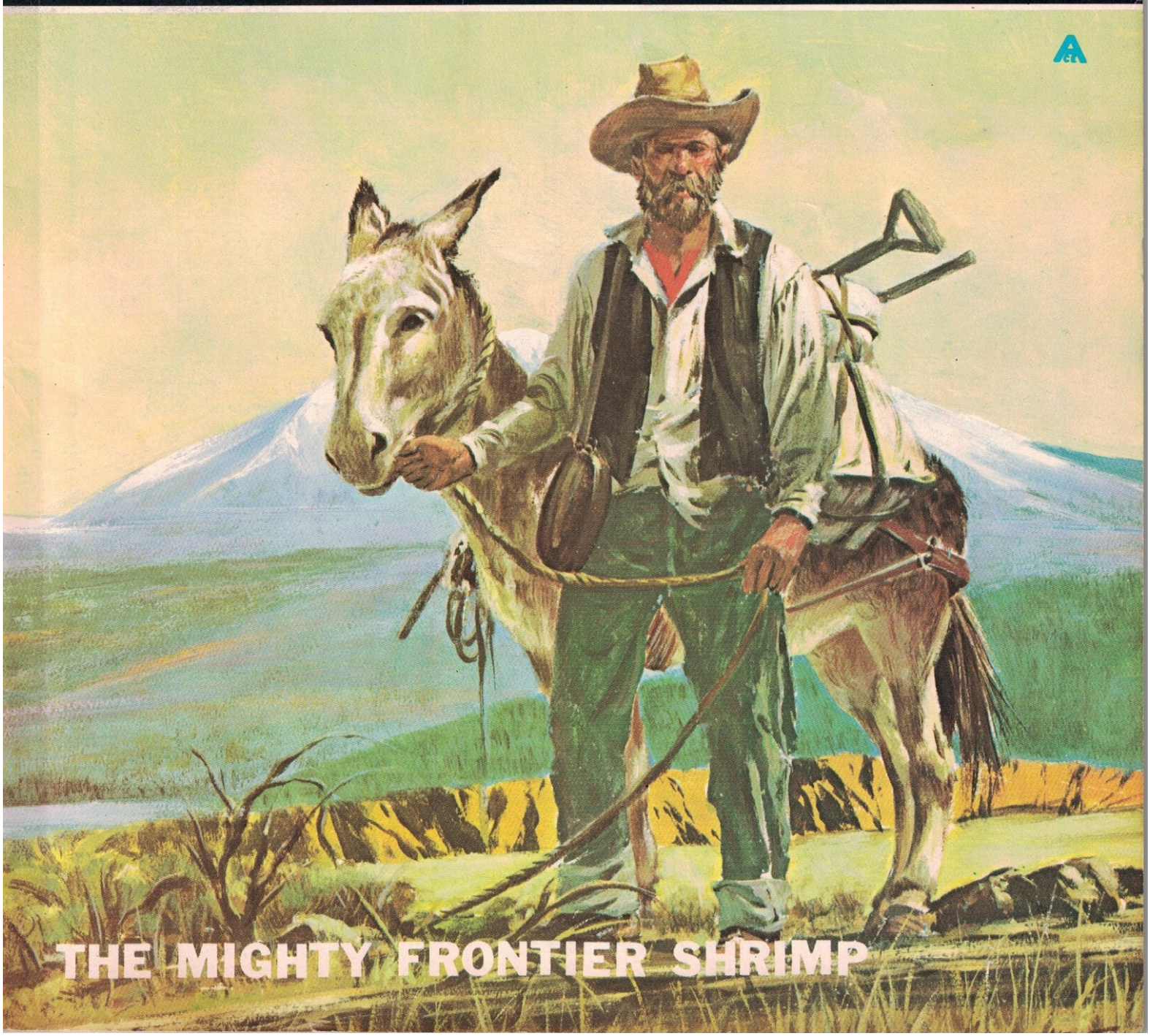
35c

THE PIED PIPER OF TEXAS

MAVERICK RIVER BARON

RED NAPOLEON OF THE WEST

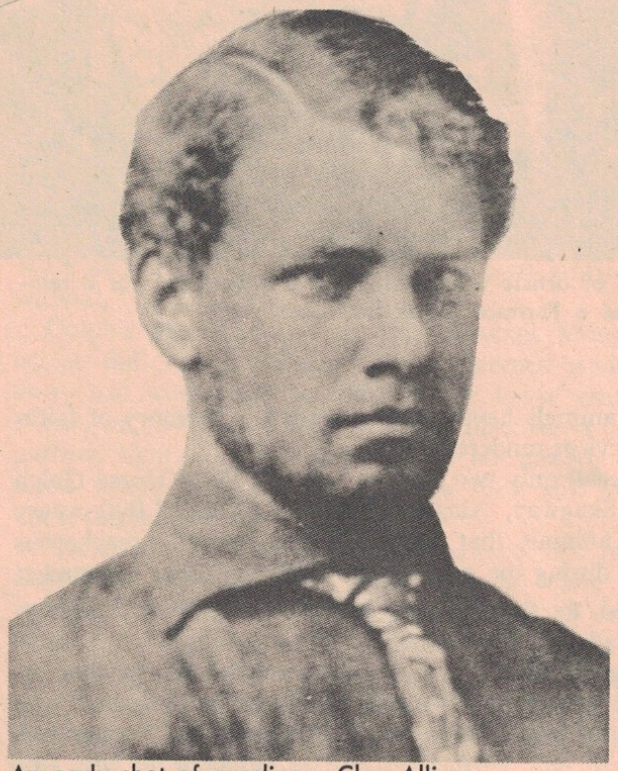
WILD WOLF ALLISON



THE MIGHTY FRONTIER SHRIMP

WILD WOLF ALLISON

On TV and in the movies he's usually portrayed as an unassuming ladies man who is alway being goaded into gun-play and coming out victorious. The fact that some people feel that the way he died was too good for him will perhaps give you a better idea of what kind of man he really was.



An early shot of gunslinger Clay Allison.

by GRAIG BARSTOW

In his lifetime, Clay Allison became known as "The Wild Wolf" because he seemed to take naturally to the very excesses of which legends are made. Fast with a gun and good-looking, the tall, slender cowboy rode a horse with the best of the riders in the Southwest, drank with some of the worst, and killed a good many in between.

When he was finally dead, perhaps it was from a sense of relief, or perhaps it was the same kind of distortion that came out of many a Ned Buntline dime novel, but either way, he produced the same results. He became a future hero for TV shows, comic books, and Western lore that was more romanticized than real. He became known as the hard-drinking trail hand with a sense of fair play and a quick hand, not only with a .44 but with the ladies as well.

Nothing could be further from the truth, even though there were plenty of tall stories to confound the issue. Western historians James D. Horan and Paul Sann agree. "Clay Allison was a quick-tempered, quick-triggered, alcoholic killer," they say. Theirs is a view that is certainly more in line with the findings of the available records.

Born Robert Clay Allison in 1840, he spent his first twenty-one years on his parents' farm in Wayne County, Tennessee, growing to a lean and sturdy six feet, two inches, with 175 pounds of sinew and muscle. He developed a great familiarity with "white lightning," the backwoods whiskey, and could use his cold blue eyes to good advantage in bringing down large or small game with one well-placed shot. He showed no preference between the long rifle and a hand gun, although it was with the latter that he would eventually distinguish himself.

Somewhat lamed in his right foot from a birth defect, Allison was nevertheless able to move about with remarkable deftness, even though this handicap has caused some speculation that there was brain damage at birth. Clay's limp was barely noticable until he helped it out by accidentally plugging himself in the same foot while drunk. This was probably the first time he shot a human, but it certainly was not the last. Clay frequently had to use a cane after this self-inflicted addition to his bad foot.

Handicap or no, Allison was able to join the Confederate Army when Tennessee seceded from the Union in 1861. His early roamings are obscure and were probably confined to his home county until enlistment time, but the Civil War gave him opportunities to develop tastes and personality traits which would completely forge his character and remain with him for the rest of his life.

Very quickly, Clay's ability with a gun was turned to picking off the "Blue bellies," which he came to hate with increasing vengence. It is reputed that he liked the idea of killing, and was perfectly willing to shoot at any Confederate soldier who crossed him.

One of the most revealing approaches to his personality is a medical discharge document which was made out on January 10, 1862, when Allison was released from the Confederate Army because of a "mental condition." This condition caused him to be "incapable of performing the duties of a soldier because of a blow received many years ago," and went on to discuss such details as the manner in which "emotional or physical excitement produces paroxysmal of a mixed character, partly epileptic and partly maniacal." The report goes on to cite one of Allison's attacks which was apparently so intense that the young man spoke of suicide. This is the document which has caused some Western historians to think Allison had brain damage from birth, much like Billy the Kid. It has also caused speculation that Allison was the Civil War equivalent of a gold brick, putting on a show to gain his discharge. The facts seem to argue against these theories. Allison reenlisted, this time with the Ninth Tennessee Regiment on September 22, 1862. He did this voluntarily and with a sense of eagerness. Also, Allison's drinking bouts, at that time and in the future, seemed to take on the same characteristics. Sober, he was comparatively shy and well-man-

nered. After he'd been out seeing the elephant, Clay's temper was on a hair-trigger. Hoorawing towns, shooting up bars, and entering drunken shooting contests with others were only a part of it. His violent nature was apt to take hold and turn a prank into a tragedy. Naturally, when sober, he'd be contrite.

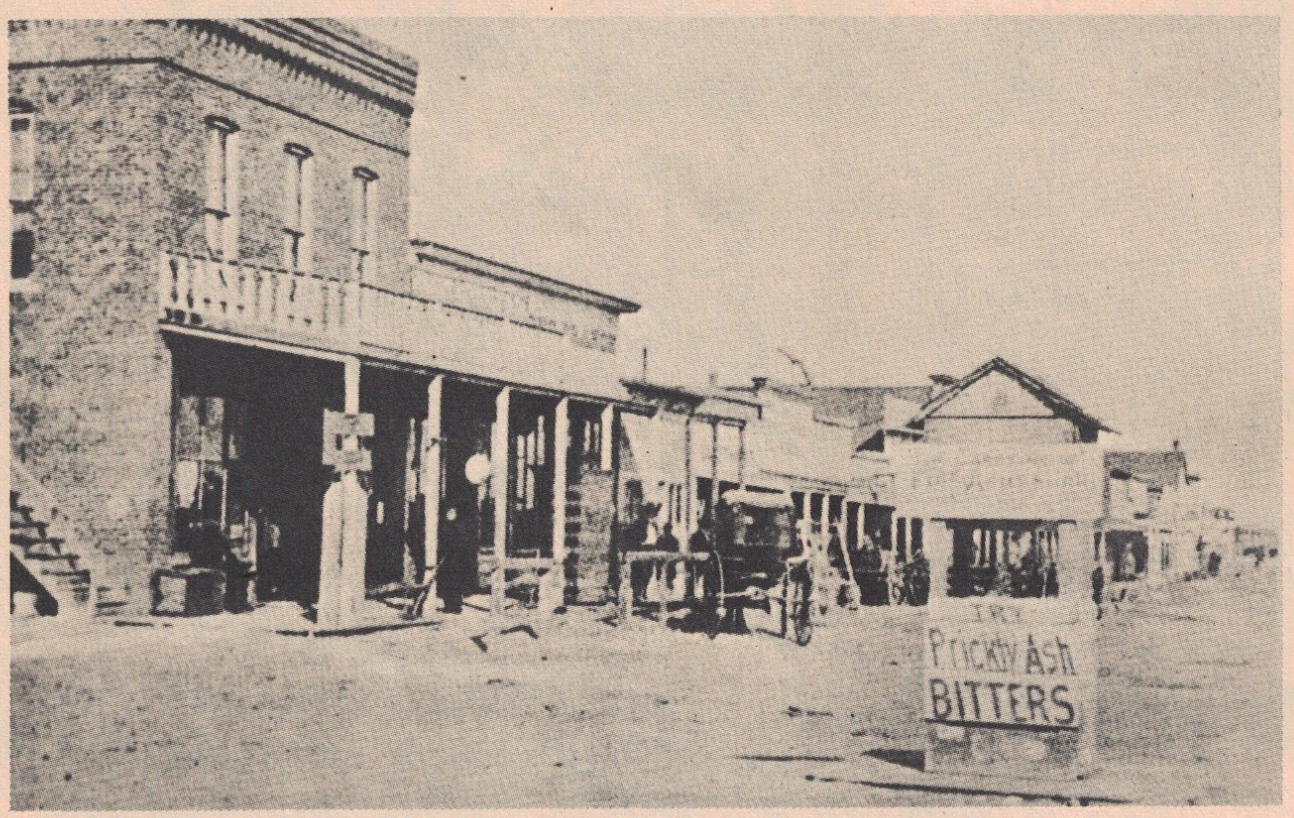
After his discharge, Allison returned to his parents' farm, where he recouperated by helping with the crops, drinking huge quantities of moonshine, and reportedly killing a Union soldier who broke one of Ma Allison's favorite serving dishes during a raid. Considering Allison's hot temper and the vast number of Union raids into the territory during the time, this account could very easily be true, it is certainly one of the stories reported about Clay, even from those who are at pains to make him out as anything but a legend.

When Allison reenlisted, he became a scout for a general, Nathan B. Forrest, on the strength of his horsemanship and tracking abilities. He remained in this position until the beginning of 1865, when he was captured by Union forces in Alabama.

When the war was ended, Clay returned home again, but quickly became restless and, along with thousands of other Southern men, decided there was more money to be made and better conditions to be had further west in Texas. Joining forces with two of his brothers, Monroe and John, a sister, Mary, and her new husband, Lewis Coleman, Clay set out for the Brazos River country. For a while, his spirits seemed high and it became apparent to his sister, Mary, that Clay's explosive temper and desire to drink had settled down.

This belief of Mary's lasted all the way into Texas, but then an argument started between Clay and Zack Colbert, the ferryman who was to take them across the Red River. Clay didn't like Colbert's notions about the fee for crossing the river and began pummeling the older man with his fists, knocked him overboard, and himself ferried the group across the Red River.

Almost immediately upon their arrival in Brazos River country, Clay raised his sister's hopes again by finding work as a cow hand. He quit this job and took excellent references with him to M.L. Dalton, a former Tennessean who had started a large cattle spread in Texas. Clay knew his business, kept out of trouble, and spent a good deal of time learning the land around the Brazos, proving himself a capable and reliable hand.



Clay was no stranger to rough and tumble cowtown Dodge City (Above).

Thus, it seemed only natural that when his brother-in-law, Lew Coleman, formed a partnership with Isaac W. Lacy and bought a large cattle ranch, Clay was appointed trail boss. Taking his job seriously, he spent more time learning the trails, recruiting a crew, and studying the market.

With this "solid" background behind him, no one thought too seriously of Clay's escapade in the little Texas town of Canadian. Roaring drunk and filled with deviltry, Clay decided to hooraw the main street of the town. His preparations were elegant in their simplicity. Completely naked except for his boots, gunbelt, and hat, Clay rode his big black down from College Hill and shot up the town of Canadian. The town marshall appeared and tried to take Clay in on a variety of charges ranging from disorderly conduct and indecent exposure to disturbing the peace. But Clay got the draw on the marshall, forced him into the saloon, and ordered him to buy a round of drinks.

On one of his earlier cattle drives for Charles Good-

night, Allison had been through Colfax County in New Mexico. The land there seemed particularly attractive and, after a drunken brawl had forced an argument with his brother-in-law, Lew Coleman, Clay left Texas and headed for the country of his choice. He worked at odd jobs, moving cattle, and sending back glowing reports to his sister. Mary showed the letters to her husband, who appreciated Clay's shrewdness if not his personality, and before long, Lew Coleman and his partner, Lacy, bought a strip of land along the Varmejo River in Colfax County.

Perhaps it was Coleman's appreciation of Clay's abilities, perhaps it was just Mary's constant hopes that her brother would settle down, at any rate. Coleman persuaded Clay to make a drive of the entire Colemn-Lacy herd from Texas to the Varmejo. Mary's influence can certainly be seen in the terms of the payoff. Instead

Not far from the Lambert Hotel (U.) Clay shot a man at another one, the St. James, Cimarron, New Mexico.

of money, which Clay could be suspected to blow in riotous living, he was to be given three hundred head of choice beef. The plan suited Clay perfectly. He used the cows to stock a spread he'd purchased near Cimarron.

For a time, running his own spread kept Clay out of trouble, but the desire for a spree caught up with him and carried him headlong into his first major trouble in New Mexico. Drinking it up in Elizabethtown with some of his cowboy and hardcase friends, Allison encountered a distraught Dulcinea Kennedy, the wife of a trapper. Dulcinea, racked with sobs and hysteria, told Clay and his friends that her husband had just murdered their little daughter. Not only that, Dulcinea said, Charles Kennedy frequently murdered travelers who stopped by at their cabin.

Clay and his friends left immediately for the Kennedy cabin, finding the trapper completely passed out from a drinking spree of his own. Searching the cabin and grounds, the men found nothing to substantiate Mrs. Kennedy's story, although the daughter was not present. The drunken trapper was hustled back to town

The old Cimarron jail once housed Clay.

Painting by C.M. Russell

Clay was the instigator of many a shoot-out like the one shown above.

and jailed. The judge ordered an extensive investigation, which produced two bags filled with bones, but the five doctors who examined these bones could not say for certain whether or not they were human.

Allison, unhappy over the slowness of the investigation, and convinced of Kennedy's guilt because the daughter was still missing, organized a mob over a bottle of whiskey. He and his friends forced their way into the Elizabethtown jail, removed Kennedy, took him to the town slaughterhouse, and hanged him from a rafter. Immediately after Kennedy stopped jerking and kicking, Allison cut him down, lopped off his head and impailed it on a spike, which he carried with him

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ations. A group of bright-eyed Indian children waited eagerly with their little white brothers for Santa Claus to arrive. What a surprise when Santa came in the wide front door! He wasn't driving reindeer — Santa was bringing presents in big sacks on either side of an humble burro whose eyes were as big and curious as those of the children.

So it seems that before the day of Christ, the burro not only has served man faithfully and loyally, but he has also helped to bring joy to the world from the day he took Mary to the stable in Bethlehem.

We, of the present generation, have little chance to pay our obligations to the burro of yesterday. But we can remember that when we find them in the silent places they still call home, we can treat them kindly, or let them alone. ■

WILD WOLF ALLISON

back to the saloon as a sign of victory.

Clay's first New Mexican gunfight, and the real beginning of his reputation as a fast gun, came in 1874. Chunk Colbert, a West Texas gunman with a record of seven kills, let it be known that Clay Allison was to be number eight. The closest motive available for this decision of Colbert's was the fact that his most recent victim, Walt Walled, was a close friend of Porter Stockton, a Colorado gunfighter, who was a friend of Clay's. More probable than this relationship was the fact that Colbert had drifted into town, heard a good deal about the fast shooting and fancy drinking of Clay, and decide the Tennessean would make a good opponent.

Colbert decided to start things off by challenging Clay to a horse race, but the results were inconclusive, and the two men retired to the Clifton House, in Ralton, New Mexico, for dinner. The two men watched each other warily through dinner, and, as coffee was being served, the shoot-out took place. Chunk Colbert reached for another cup of coffee with his left hand. With his right, he moved slowly to his gun, cocking it as he brought it up to table level. Colbert fired, but the bullet struck the table and deflected away. The motion had Allison drawing and pushing the table over on Colbert with one movement. Allison plugged Colbert directly above the right eye and death was immediate. Clay turned his gun immediately on Bill Cooper, a friend of Colbert's who had come along as a witness. After enlisting Cooper's help in arranging for Colbert's burial, Clay rode toward Cimarron with him. Cooper never reached Cimarron, and he was never seen again.

Shooting a man who'd had seven gunfights gave Clay a reputation he was never to live down. It was this very reputation that got him into his next scrape, involving local politics, and a still smouldering hatred of Yankees.

Colfax County affairs were being run by a group who affiliated themselves with a Yankee-run clique in Santa Fe. Clay Allison bitterly opposed this "Blue belly" rule, and his opposition took on action when the Reverend F.J. Tolby, a dear friend of Clay, and an outspoken critic of the Santa Fe ring, was murdered as he rode back to his home in Cimarron, after conducting services in Elizabethtown. The official verdict on Tolby's death was that it came at the hands of "persons or persons unknown," a particularly galling verdict to Clay, who was positive the Santa Fe ring had ordered the death.

Reverend O.P. McMains, a fellow churchman of Tolby's, had his own suspicions, which he promptly passed on to Clay, over several drinks. The man McMains had in mind was Cruz Vega, a mail carrier. Clay and a few friends got hold of Vega and carried him out of town with the intention of lynching him. This threat did not produce the desired results; Vega denied any complicity in the death of Reverend Tolby. Worked into a fever pitch, Clay dropped his rope over Vega's chest, secured the other end to his saddle and proceeded to drag the hapless postman through the greasewood and shrubs. Vega, almost with his dying breath, confessed that the killing had been done by a notorious hater of Americans, Manuel Cardenas, a convicted killer, who was later given a commuted sentence. Acting on this information, Allison and his friends had Cardenas jailed, but when it appeared that the wheels of justice were not going to turn, Allison and his men broke into the jail, removed Cardenas and shot him.

The death of Cruz Vega brought Allison more difficulties than that of Cardenas. Vega had been a relative of Pancho Griego, an American-born Mexican gun fighter, who seemed to have as big a chip on his shoulder for all *gringos* as Clay Allison had for Blue bellies. The moment he heard of his relative's death, Griego blamed Clay Allison and swore revenge.

The two men met at the St. James Hotel in Cimarron, and The *Daily New Mexican* of Santa Fe, published on Nov. 5, 1875, had this to say about it: "Francisco Pancho Griego was shot and killed by R.C. Allison. Both parties met at the door of the St. James Hotel, entered and with some friends took a drink, when the two walked into the corner of the room and had some conversation, when Allison drew his revolver and shot Griego three times . . . He has killed a great many men, and was considered as a dangerous man; few regret his loss."

Clay did not fare so well with newspapers closer to home. The *Cimarron News and Press,* upon his shooting of Griego, blamed Clay for a good deal of the violence and mob rule taking place in Colfax County. Clay's reaction was standard. He drank himself into a lather, gathered a few hardcases and invaded the offices of the paper, where he wrecked the machinery, threw type and blank paper into the Cimarron River, and, amply fortified by more drink, went out on the streets to sell copies of the next day's paper, which had already been printed. Also typical of Clay's reaction was his performance when he sobered up. He paid the wife of the owner of the paper $200 for damages and apologized profusely.

The following year, Clay was arrested twice on murder charges. The first involved the killing of three Negro soldiers and the belief, on the part of Colfax County's sheriff, that Clay had been drinking and airing his Confederate sympathies, but after being taken to Taos for trial, Clay was released on the matter of lack of evidence.

The second incident took place in Las Animas, Colorado, where Clay and his brother John were, to use the cowboy lingo of the day, painting their tonsils with whiskey. The local law was called into action, already having been warned that the notorious hardcases were cutting up. Deputy Faber, perhaps justifled, perhaps a bit nervous, leveled a blast of buckshot at John, probably thinking it was Clay. Clay saw the play in the mirror

of a dance hall, and turned on the deputy, his guns drawn and blazing. Deputy Faber was cut down on the spot. When charges were dropped against Clay and John, it was rumored that the Allison money and reputation had scared off potential key witnesses.

For the next few years, Clay stayed relatively free of trouble, although varying accounts have him tangling with Wyatt Earp, Bat and Jim Masterson. Clay was supposedly in Dodge City to avenge the death of a young cowboy at the hands of a lawman there. But the records of Ford County, which are fairly complete, show no arrests, and there are no significant newspapers accounts which would lend any weight to stories of Clay battling the Earps or the Mastersons. And one account, from a bartender in Dodge City in 1878, holds that Clay Allison was a model of decorum during his entire visit there.

Decorum was not the word, however, when Clay, trail-bossing 1500 steers near Cheyenne, Wyoming, developed tooth trouble. Clay visited a dentist, who attempted to pull the offending molar. Whether it was Clay's appearance or his reputation, we'll never know, but the nervous dentist pulled the wrong tooth and the irate Clay forced the dentist into a chair and extracted several of his teeth.

Clay Allison's life was filled with duels, shootings, and fancifully elaborated tales. Although a violent death was predicted for him and, indeed, befell him, it was not a gun fight or pitched battle that took Clay's life. Partly, it was a ten-year old longhorn steer named Ruidoso, the noisy one.

In 1887, Clay was paying a visit to his wife, Dora, who was staying in Pecos City, Texas, because of her advanced pregnancy, and her desire to be near her family and doctor. Returning from his visit with Dora, Clay, heavily loaded down with supplies, began drinking from a jug he carried in his wagon. Ruidoso, the huge outlaw steer, appeared and spooked Clay's mules. The wagon began a helter-skelter clatter over the rough trail and a box dropped from the bed. Clay reached over the side to pick up the box, lost his balance, spooked the mules some more, and caused them to move forward . . . over his neck.

When the news of Clay's death reached the newspapers, it was recalled that a St. Louis journal had

taken him to task and had been the subject of a vehement denial. "I never killed nary a feller what didn't need it," he once said. And on another occasion, Clay said the St. Louis report was false, any blood he may have spilled was in the line of "protecting the property holders and substantial men of the country from thieves, outlaws, and murderers."

The Ford County Globe, in Dodge City, gave Clay a good epitaph. "Clay Allison knew no fear. To incur his enmity was equivalent to a death sentence. He contended that he never killed a man willingly but out of necessity."

Clay Allison liked very few things and very few people in his life. He was fond of his wife, fond of his Colfax County Ranch, and fond of a select group of hardcase friends. But he certainly would have been pleased to know of the "Wild Wolf" legend that sprung up after his death, and the impact he had on history as a colorful gunman of the West ■

THE EMANCIPATION OF GEORGE WASHINGTON BUSH

The Bushes took the slow monotonous travel, as did most of the emigrants, in their stride. It was a part of the hardships to be endured. And the heat! It bore down on them in relentless intensity and there was no shade. When relief did come, in the form of a thunder storm, there was the ever present danger of the cattle and horses being spooked into a stampede. The pace was intolerably slow. Oxen pulled the wagons about 2 miles an hour. A wagon train was lucky to average sixteen miles a day.

Before nightfall the train commander had to find a campsite where there would be water and grass. Sometimes a dry camp had to be made, a hardship on both man and animals. If the camp was made where there was plenty of wood a large campfire was built which the women folk believed helped ward off Indian attack. A smaller cooking fire was also built. If there were no trees, the usual experience on the plains, the emigrants made fires from the dried buffalo droppings with which the prairies were liberally strewn. These "buffalo chips," if they were dry, burned quite well, and if one didn't mind the odor, were a good substitute for wood.

The meals of the emigrants were simple. Fresh meat was used as often as the hunters could locate and kill buffalo. This, however, was not as often as one would suppose; even though the plains teemed with multitudes of buffalo they were often "where the wagon train ain't," as Mike Simmons would say. A hunting party could not stray too far away from the moving wagons as the possibility of meeting a wandering band of hostile Indians was always present.

After the evening meal was over and the camp cleaned up, there would be dancing to the tune of fiddles and banjoes. Even after walking all day the emigrants always had enough energy to dance.

George Bush loved these times best of all. But had George Bush really escaped the hatred that forced him to seek a new home in the west? A man walked into the circle of firelight. He was from another party than the Simmons'. He watched the dancers intently; watched George Bush dance with Isabella, with other white women. The firelight flickered across his face and just at that moment George looked into his eyes, saw the burning hate there. Then the man turned and walked swiftly into the shadows cast by the wagons.

George Bush knew at that instant he had not escaped from the hate. It was still there to haunt him.

Each day that passed George Bush worried about the man with the hate showing in his eyes. What would it be like in Oregon? Would this race stigma follow him there?

Several days passed, and again the wagons were encamped for the night. The night was warm and a million stars lit the heavens.

The nightly gathering of children around the Bush campfire had started. George was in the habit of telling his own sons and any other child who cared to sit in stories of his days spent on the Mississippi as a keel boat man or his life out west as a trapper for the Hudson's Bay Company.

"Tell us a story, Mr. Bush! Tell us a story!" the children clamored.

George began a story of an encounter he and his partner had with an angered she-grizzly out on the Yellowstone years before.

"There my partner lay," he told them, "wounded by that old she-devil. His scalp was laid open from the eyebrow to neck, slashed to the bone by those wicked claws. He tried desperately to loose his bowie knife from his belt but it was twisted around out of reach of his hand. Old Lady Grizzly, she was ready to take that child's head clean off when I stepped into —" George's story was interrupted by a tall, bearded man who stepped into the circle of firelight from the deep shadows beside the wagon. In so many words he accused Bush of lying to the children, ending by calling him a black no good S.O.B.

There was dead silence among the boys around the campfire. Then they were startled when a piece of burning poplar wood cracked loudly. A boy laughed. Bush never moved a muscle. Then slowly, without taking his eyes from the man with the rifle, he rose to his feet.

Cold fury clutched his heart. It was time that he showed these people. He heard the man's words ringing in his ears like white hot irons.

As swift as the couger leaping for the kill, Bush's arm shot out and grabbed the rifle before he could pull the trigger. He flung the gun as far as he could into the prairie grass, his left shot out with cobra speed to connect with the man's bearded jaw, sending him sprawling.

Then reaching down the angered mulatto grasped his tormentor by the collar, jerked him to his feet. "Don't you ever, not ever, do that again, either to me or anyone else as long as you live. Do you understand?" His voice was so low that the boys, still tensed around the campfire, barely heard him.

Bush flung the emigrant from him as though he were some piece of rotted carrion. He turned back to the fire and, sitting down once more, resumed his interruped story to the boys.

The man got slowly to his feet, brushed his trousers, hesitated a moment as though thinking of resuming the fight and then thinking better of it walked from the circle of firelight.

There was no more such threats as the campfire incident nor did the man who threatened Bush ever talk to anyone of that night.

By the time the train reached Ft. Hall most of the men and women in the train had accepted the Bushes as one of them. There were a few who openly showed their dislike but nothing that George Bush could not cope with or just ignore.