

Tribute to Sheriff Cook

David J. Cook was born August 12, 1840, in Laporte county, Ind., being a son of George Cook, a farmer and land speculator. Receiving a moderate education, he worked on farms in Indiana, Iowa and Kansas until 1859. His father settled in Iowa in 1853, on the present site of Laporte, now a thriving city, but then a howling wilderness. Selling out to good advantage, the family moved to Jefferson county, Kan., in 1855, settling on a tract of land north of where the little city of Meriden now stands, on Rock creek. When the wave of excitement which swept the country on the discovery of gold at Pike's Peak came, it bore him to the Rocky Mountains, where he spent nearly two years in mining in what is now called Gilpin County, Colorado. Returning to Kansas he bought a farm, but in the fall of 1861 he went to Rolla, Mo., and engaged in running supply trains.

He was soon afterward transferred to the ordnance department of the Army of the Frontier, and early in 1863 came again to Colorado and established the association with which his name has since been connected, and which has so long been a terror to evil doers and a trusty guardian of the public safety.

Enlisting in the Colorado cavalry, he was in the spring of 1864 detailed by the quartermaster of the Denver post as government detective in Colorado, and served until the abandonment of the post in 1866. He next served three years as city marshal of Denver, and in the fall of 1869, was elected sheriff of Arapahoe county. So satisfactory to the people of the county, of both political parties, was his administration of the sheriff's office, that at the end of his term he was reëlected without opposition, and served two years longer. From 1873 he gave his entire attention to the detective work, holding at the same time the position of deputy United States marshal until the fall of 1875, when he was again elected sheriff, and reëlected at the end of two years, his last term expiring in January, 1880. In 1873 he was appointed by Gov. Elbert, and confirmed by the senate, major general of Colorado militia; was reappointed by Gov. Routt, and again by Gov. Pitkin, serving four years under each. He has served as major general for nine years, and has rendered efficient service in quelling riots throughout the state, as well as in recent Indian troubles. During the Leadville strike, which occurred in June, 1880, and in which Mooney was to that city what Dennis Kearney has been to San Francisco, Gen. Cook was sent by Gov. Pitkin as commander-in-chief of the state militia, and by his efficiency soon brought the rioters under subjection to the laws of the state. During what was known as the Chinese riot, which caused such disgrace to Denver on October 31, 1880, the mayor and sheriff called on Gen. Cook to quell the riot, after the authorities had failed to do so. Gen. Cook took charge of the police and twenty-five special police, nearly all of whom were trusted members of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association, that he swore into service, and in a short time brought the rioters under subjection and caused them to disperse, after arresting the ringleaders and placing them in jail. The resignation of Mr. Hickey as chief of police caused a vacancy which the leading business men of Denver thought Gen. Cook the most fitting man to fill. Knowing the great desire manifested in regard to having an efficient chief of police, the city council confirmed Gen. Cook in that position.

In addition to the responsible position to which Gen. Cook was then elevated, he has also acted as deputy United States marshal for the district of Colorado, to which he was again appointed two years previous.

Gen. Cook is a born detective. When asked one day how he happened to follow this business, he replied: "It is natural. I can't help it; I like it." He never received a day's training from any other

detective in his life, and yet from the very beginning he took rank with the best in the country. He stands to-day alongside of Mr. Pinkerton. Indeed, many of his exploits have far exceeded those of that justly-renowned officer in thrilling detail and startling climax. A hundred times in his life Dave Cook has been placed in positions where another man, under the same circumstances, less shrewd or less courageous, would have been shot dead in his tracks or eternally disgraced. But he was ever the right man in the right place as a detective, and it is owing to this fact that he has passed thirty-five years of detective and official life on the frontier without being killed. He possesses the essential qualities of mind and body necessary to become a successful detective in a degree rarely equaled in one man. He is both brave and discreet. He is never afraid to strike. No position appals him. Yet he is cool-headed and cautious and wastes no blows—ventures into no unnecessary danger, and knows how to reserve his strength until it is needed most. When the time comes to act he acts with decision and promptness, always accomplishes his purpose, no difference what the odds. He is an excellent judge of men. He knows how to select the best [Pg 6] assistants, and he “spots” a criminal nine times out of ten. He knows when to talk and when to allow others to talk. He will listen half a day to a string of surmises entirely contrary to his own without interposing an objection, with the hope of getting a clue, where other men would spoil everything by airing their own opinions. His memory is excellent, his patience inexhaustible, his ability to put this and that together is unexcelled, his perception is sharp, his reasoning is clear, his courage is undoubted and his judgment is cool under all circumstances. Add to these faculties the fact that he always deals fairly with the public; that he never fails to protect his prisoners, and that he is a man of fine bearing, of splendid figure, a face of iron on which a smile appears at home, and you will discover the secret of Dave Cook’s success as a detective and as an executive officer on the frontier in the Rocky Mountains.

It was when Cook was sixteen years of age that he went, with his father, to Leavenworth. He was a country boy, roughly clad and without experience in life. His father sent him forward to the hotel to engage rooms. He had never before had such a duty as this imposed upon him. When he went in there was no one behind the counter, but the seats outside were filled with the usual crowd of hotel loafers—young fellows living in the city, who, seeing a country boy enter, concluded to “guy” him. Finding no one at the counter, he turned to the crowd and asked for the proprietor. The loafers were inclined to giggle, and as they pointed out one of their own crowd as the individual sought, the country boy thought he observed several sly winks and heard suppressed laughter. Turning to the man whom he was told was the party sought, he asked:

“Are you the proprietor?”

“I am,” he replied, and he and all the rest laughed.

Then it was that Dave’s insight into character and his ready ability to “say things that hurt” came to the surface at the right time.

“I just wanted to know,” he replied, “for if you are I shall hunt another hotel.”

The character of the laugh which accompanied the boy’s walk to the door was quite different from that which had prevailed before.

Mr. Cook did his first detective work three years afterwards, and then discovered his ability in that line. He left Kansas and came to the Rocky mountains in 1859, accompanied by a brother, their purpose being to seek their fortunes mining. They were operating in the placer diggings in Missouri

Flat, between Black Hawk and Russell Gulch, and had accumulated \$250 in gold-dust, which they discovered one morning to be missing. Mr. Cook remembered that a man, against whom no one had suspicions, however, had been around the camp until recently, but now found that he was gone. Contrary to the advice of all the "older heads," he decided this to be the man he wanted, and concluded to follow him. He overtook the fellow near Golden and made him disgorge, and, besides, pay all the expenses which Cook had incurred in his pursuit. This man was one of the very few criminals whom Cook has allowed to escape without placing them in the hands of the authorities. But in this case the offense was against Cook himself, and he was his own officer. The law of the miners of that day inflicted the death penalty for stealing only \$5 worth of any article from a miner. Cook knew what the result would be if he took the man back to camp, and he allowed the promptings of humanity to prevail and permitted the fellow to go free, much to the man's relief, who also knew the laws of the pioneer gold hunters to be more severe than those of the Medes and Persians.

It was not, however, until Cook returned to Colorado, in 1863, that he really began his detective career in earnest. He was engaged at first as an assistant detective for the quartermaster's department in the district composed of the camps at Denver, Fort Collins, Booneville, on the Arkansas, and Julesburg. But he soon became chief of the department for the district, a position which he held for three years, resigning at the end of that time to be elected city marshal of Denver. During the three years of his service as government detective he saved the country over \$100,000 worth of property, such as horses, mules, provisions and feed, which would otherwise have been lost, and was the means of exposing the tricks of many who were high in authority. His first exploit of note was the breaking up of a gang of horse thieves, who were plundering both the army and the citizens, and by both of which parties he was engaged to perform the service. Being allotted to this special work, he went to Chase & Healey's gambling hall, on Blake street, then a noted gambling establishment, and took a table and began to deal Spanish monte between two then notorious characters, who afterwards met death at the hands of vigilance committees, called respectively "Goggle-Eyed Ed" and "Smiley," whom he suspected of being at the head of the thieves. In less than ten days he was in possession of their secrets, and was able to "spot" their assistants, to arrest several aids and to recover some twenty horses, besides a vast deal of other property, worth in the aggregate \$10,000. He discovered, among other things, that some of the soldiers were in the habit of selling army horses to a certain saloon-keeper. Ten horses had disappeared, but they could not be traced. He procured an assistant in the person of a soldier, who succeeded in negotiating the sale of a horse to this purchaser for a mere song, and was requested to deliver him at midnight at the saloon. Stationing himself at a convenient point with a companion, Cook saw an assistant of the purchaser mounted upon the horse which the soldier detective had turned over to him, and start off at a brisk gallop towards the north. Cook and his man followed at a safe distance behind, through the darkness, over the plains and into the mountains and out again, down to a secure hiding place on the St. Vrain, where the rider stopped, after a fifteen hours' gallop, quite unconscious that he had been pursued. Coming upon him Cook captured the rider and twelve head of army horses, which were grazing nearby. The details of other captures made at this time are just as thrilling as this, but this will serve as a specimen, and will help to explain the popularity which Mr. Cook soon attained as an efficient officer—a popularity which a few years afterwards elected him to the city marshalship in the face of vigorous opposition by numerous contestants for the prize.

A strong point with Gen. Cook has ever been his splendid capacity for organization and controlling men. This faculty makes him one of the most capable as well as one of the most popular commanders of our militia, and it has also aided him in making the Rocky Mountain Detective Agency, of which he was the originator, one of the most efficient of the kind in the world. It covers Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Utah, Texas, Wyoming, Arizona and California, the entire country north of Mexico and between the Missouri river and the Pacific, besides having agents in all the principal cities of the United States, and is perfectly organized, every detail being understood and superintended by Mr. Cook. Its operations have been very extensive and its "dead certainty" has made it a terror to evil-doers. Cook has held his place at its head by the undisputed right of superiority. As good a detective as the best of his aides, he is a better commander and organizer than any of them. He is versatile and quick to see a point, and just as quick in adapting himself to circumstances. He knows when to smile, when to frown. He can drive steers, play faro or become a lawyer when circumstances demand.

As an officer, Mr. Cook's career has been quite remarkable. He has almost continuously since 1866 held some office besides that of superintendent of detectives, which has placed him in positions of danger. Beginning as city marshal, he held that place for years, and was afterwards deputy United States marshal, sheriff of Arapahoe county eight years and also chief of police. It is doubted whether there is a parallel case in the country, especially in this far western country, where men are more often desperate than elsewhere. During his experience he has arrested over three thousand men, fully fifty of whom have been the most desperate murderers, whom he has often taken at great disadvantage to himself. Of all these three thousand he never allowed one to seriously hurt him, not one of them to get away when taken, and not one to be violently dealt with when in his hands as an officer. His remarkable success he attributes to the observance of the following rules which he here prints for the benefit of young officers:

I. Never hit a prisoner over the head with your pistol, because you may afterwards want to use your weapon and find it disabled. Criminals often conceal weapons and sometimes draw one when they are supposed to have been disarmed.

II. Never attempt to make an arrest without being sure of your authority. Either have a warrant or satisfy yourself thoroughly that the man whom you seek to arrest has committed an offense.

III. When you attempt to make an arrest be on your guard. Give your man no opportunity to draw a pistol. If the man is supposed to be a desperado, have your pistol in your hand or be ready to draw when you make yourself known. If he makes no resistance there will be no harm done by your precaution. My motto has always been "It is better to kill two men than to allow one to kill you."

IV. After your prisoner is arrested and disarmed treat him as a prisoner should be treated—as kindly as his conduct will permit. You will find that if you do not protect your prisoners when they are in your possession, those whom you afterwards attempt to arrest will resist you more fiercely, and if they think they will be badly dealt with after arrest, will be inclined to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

V. Never trust much to the honor of prisoners. Give them no liberties which might endanger your own safety or afford them an opportunity to escape. Nine out of ten of them have no honor.

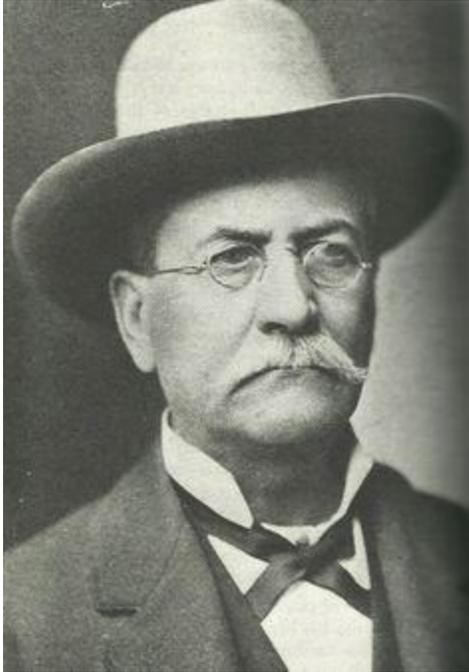
It will not be out of place to remark in closing, that Gen. Cook has never violated a confidence and never failed to satisfy those by whom he was engaged—whether private individuals, corporations, the army officials or the public at large. Gen. Upton, who was the author of “Upton’s Tactics,” was in command in this district while Mr. Cook was chief detective. He wrote of him on a certain occasion: “Mr. Cook is a reliable and an experienced detective.”

The *Tribune* said of him when he was a candidate for sheriff in 1875: “He is admirably adapted to the office to which he has been nominated. This combination of good politics and exact fitness is the source of a great deal of satisfaction to all genuine and steadfast republicans. No one presumes to question D. J. Cook’s official fidelity and efficiency. The common verdict is that he has made the best sheriff Arapahoe county has ever had. And the people in supporting him in the canvass, and voting for him at the polls, support him and vote for him for sheriff. He will be elected to discharge the duties of that office, and for nothing else. And the people all have the certain assurance that he will discharge those duties ably, faithfully, promptly and honestly; that he will surely arrest criminals, and as surely keep them after arrest; that he will effectively aid in the maintenance of peace and order in the community, and that he will afford much sure protection to the persons and property of the citizens.”

He was elected sheriff in the contest above referred to, and after the term of office had expired the *Rocky Mountain News* summed up the results of his term of office as follows:

“Money and property worth \$80,000 was recovered and transferred to the lawful owners. The press of the city was often placed under obligations for valuable and timely information. Four gangs of railroad thieves were effectively broken up in different parts of the state, and riot prevented on several occasions. Three of the apprehended criminals were hanged after transfer to the local authorities: Robert Shamle, in Georgetown, and Woodruff and Seminole, in Golden. The beginning of the term was marked by the arrest of the Italian murderers, nine in all, and its close by the chase and capture of the Hayward murderers. During the four years ending at noon to-day, Sheriff Cook and his deputies conveyed 121 prisoners to the penitentiary at Cañon, and lost none by the way. There was no jail delivery in Arapahoe county, nor was the board of commissioners at any time asked to offer one cent as reward for the return of fugitives. During the term three men were killed while resisting arrest, under orders of Sheriff Cook. They were Doan, at Cheyenne; W. T. McLaughlin, at Garland, and George Wilson, in Arizona. The sheriff and his force, during the term under notice, recovered 315 head of stolen cattle and sent seven of the thieves to Cañon. Also, fifty stolen horses, sending nine of the thieves to Cañon. Of the cattle mentioned, Arapahoe county lost not a hoof during the last eighteen months.”

Indeed, during his entire career he has received many words of praise from press and public, and has seldom been criticized for any other than political reasons or because of personal spite which was the result of treading upon tender corns in the discharge of official duty.



Arapahoe County Sheriff David J. Cook.

One of the most revered lawmen in the west. His experiences became the subject of books that chronicled his pursuit of outlaws in the early years of Denver City.

Excerpt from: Hands UP; Thirty-Five Years of Detective Life in the Mountains and on the Plains. W.F. Robinson Printing Co. 1897