

David A. Wolff. Seth Bullock: Black Hills Lawman. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Everyone has heard of “Wild Bill” Hickok and “Calamity Jane,” and many would recognize the names of “Preacher” Smith and “Potato Johnny” of Black Hills gold rush fame. Seth Bullock, too, seems to fit into the picture, but exactly how? We think of him as a lawman, the sheriff of Deadwood during the wildest and most exciting days of the mining frontier. But although he subtitles his biography of Bullock “Black Hills Lawman,” David Wolff observes that the pioneer businessman spent only nine and a half months as sheriff of Lawrence County and invested most of his time and effort during the heyday of his career as an entrepreneur, civic booster, and backroom politician. He did come back for eight years in his sixties as U.S. Marshal for the state of South Dakota, but in that job he served primarily as an administrator, leaving the heavy lifting and day-to-day investigatory work to his six deputies.

That his brief tenure as sheriff heavily shaped his public image and reflected his own estimate of the importance of law and order for development and progress in a frontier community is evident. Bullock had served earlier, while still in his twenties, as a county sheriff in Wyoming. For that matter, he was still only thirty when appointed temporary sheriff of Lawrence County in 1877, pending elections to choose permanent county officials. He later contested and lost elections twice for the position, being a Republican in a Democratically inclined area, and never ran for public office again. But for the rest of his life he would work energetically behind the scenes for his party and for the betterment of his community, state, and the nation. The close friendship that he developed with Theodore Roosevelt during and after the Spanish-American War would bring him many invitations to the White House, further enhance his position as a regional and even national celebrity, and bring him two political plums—four years as superintendent of the Black Hills Forest Reserve and eight years as U.S. Marshal. Thus, his career circled around to where it had started almost five decades earlier in Montana.

As with many other characters who rose to prominence during Deadwood’s “wild and woolly” period, Seth Bullock’s life is often hard to disentangle from the myths and legends that inevitably came to surround it. David Wolff says that one of his purposes in writing this biography was to set the record straight, where necessary. But more importantly, he wants to tell the story of an individual who played a highly significant role in building up the business prosperity of Deadwood and the Black Hills, in promoting not only law and order but also a progressive and livable community in general, and in living the kind of life that is satisfying and meaningful and makes a difference.

Bullock did not make it easy for future historians and biographers to tell his story, because he did not leave much of a paper trail behind. The papers that he did leave were used by a grandson to write a book about him. Although these materials were not made available to Wolff for his research, he believes that their significant contents were incorporated in the grandson’s book. In addition, he has diligently utilized what books and articles have been written about Bullock, attempting to sort out fact from fiction, he

ferreted out relevant primary sources, and he relied especially heavily upon newspaper stories to fix dates and facts surrounding Bullock's activities.

His subject's personality remains somewhat enigmatic. We know Bullock was ambitious and success-driven, diligent and confident in his own powers, as well as enterprising and creative in many ways. His forte was thinking up new ideas, however, not in following through on them to insure their successful implementation. Part of his problem was that he had so many balls in the air, so to speak, at any one time that it was difficult to keep his eye on all of them. Some readers might judge him hyperactive. But small-town dwellers, who understand that twenty percent of the people usually do eighty percent of the work and that self-designated community leaders often are called upon to solve every problem, will probably sympathize with a man who was chronically over-extended. There is much to admire in a man so ambitious for himself and so dedicated to the betterment of his fellow citizens.

Wolff does not hesitate to use the "g"-word (greed) to describe one of Bullock's motivations. But prospering personally and getting ahead are probably universal desires. More interesting, in many ways, was the strong sense of civic duty exhibited by Bullock during his lifetime. He always seemed to be in the center of the action. Paraphrasing one of Dwight Eisenhower's Cabinet officials later on, the go-getting pioneer considered that what was good for Deadwood was good for Seth Bullock, and vice versa. In some cases, such as the proposed road to Spearfish, Bullock's self-interested motives for wanting to have it built were all too obvious. But many of his promotional activities for the town and the region need to be understood as fulfilling a high sense of civic duty and responsibility. In this, he was acting as the ultimate community booster.

At times, it may be hard for the reader to believe that this man could be involved in so many different activities and projects. By the mid-1880s he was head of the Star and Bullock hardware stores (their string of outlets made them sort of early day Sam Waltons), the S & B Stock Farm, the Merchants' National Bank, and the Iron Hill mining company. Add to that his activities in the area of law enforcement and in the Deadwood Board of Trade promoting road building, flour mills, railroads, and smelters, and his active role in promoting progress of every type, and one wonders where he found the time to do it all. One can infer, reading between the lines, that his home life did not take too much time away from business and civic responsibilities. His three children remain shrouded in shadows. His wife seems to have managed the household and acted out the role of the quintessential clubwoman, which was about the only one open to a middle-class woman at the time. To give Bullock credit, however, he did join her during the 1910s in pushing for the predominant progressive cause of the period—woman suffrage.

We learn less about Sol Star in this book than we may have liked, but it is clear that their business partnership and personal relationship played a major role in whatever financial success Bullock obtained. The vicissitudes of business on Main Street and of economic development, generally, in the Black Hills provide a prominent backdrop for the human story enacted by Seth Bullock. Does the man make history, or does history make the man? Wolff does a pretty good job of showing how energetically and forcefully Bullock worked to carve out a niche for himself within the limits imposed by his environment. But we also get a sense of what those limits were. Although we do not get many of the details of the man's finances, we do know that for significant periods of

his career he was unable to pay his bills and teetered precariously on the edge of financial ruin. Yet, we always have a sense that everything will turn out all right in the end.

Perhaps the most significant point that comes through in this book is that after the first couple of years in Deadwood, which admittedly displayed all of the typical qualities of a mining boomtown, the community settled down into a rather prosaic pattern of development, full of challenges and crises, beset by economic booms and busts, and facing demands for the kinds of social amenities that every other town like it displayed. In other words, this story is a phase of small-town history.

Wolff says he has made no effort to psychoanalyze his subject, but through his careful culling of the sources and unearthing of evidence, he has woven a persuasive explanation of one man's life on the frontier and presented the story succinctly and straightforwardly, and, to be sure, in reader-friendly fashion. There is little more that we can ask of an author.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How much did you know about the Black Hills gold rush and about the life of Seth Bullock before reading this book? Has your viewpoint changed as a result of reading it?

2. Why do you think the author concentrates almost entirely upon Bullock's "public" career and says very little about his domestic life? Does this detract from the book's overall effect?

3. Did you get a clear picture of Seth Bullock, the man? What would you identify as the crucial characteristics of his character and personality?

4. Was Bullock a person fitted for the frontier? In what sense was he or was he not?

5. What do you think attracted Theodore Roosevelt to Bullock? How did they compare as personalities? Were you surprised to discover the close relationship that existed between the two?

6. Why do you think Bullock as a young man in his twenties and thirties was so committed to the idea of law and order? Did this commitment make sense to you? How does Bullock compare to people today who call for "law and order"?

7. "One can discern a tension existing between Bullock's desire for personal achievement and acquisition of wealth, on the one side, and his effort to promote community progress and betterment, on the other." Discuss.

8. Would you have wanted to live in Deadwood during the period that Bullock lived there? Why or why not?

9. What impression do you have of Martha Eccles Bullock? Do you think she had a good life?

10. Describe the relationship that existed between Bullock and his business partner, Sol Star. How do their achievements and contributions compare?

11. What do you think drew Bullock into politics? What role did it play in his life?

12. Were you surprised to discover how much Bullock was able to accomplish at a comparatively young age? Do you think he have been able to achieve the same things in today's society? Why was he able to during the late 1800s?

13. Do you have a sense of class relations in Deadwood during the time Bullock lived there? How did he fit into the class system?

14. Much has been said or implied about the level of violence in Deadwood in the early years, based upon histories, novels, and the HBO program, "Deadwood." How does the author's description of the level of violence there compare to what you had previously judged it to be?

15. Deadwood suffered a number of disastrous fires during its early years? How would the scope of the threats and challenges facing towns today compare?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

David A. Wolff came to history through the back door. He started his professional life as a pharmacist, but after thirteen frustrating years he left pharmacy to try history. He had always been interested in history and decided to combine his hobby and his career. He received his undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Wyoming and his Ph.D. degree from Arizona State University. Black Hills State University hired Wolff in 1998 to be the school's Black Hills, South Dakota, and Western history specialist. The fit at BHSU is a good one for him, as his family came from the Black Hills, and he has spent many summers investigating Black Hills ghost towns and abandoned mines.

Wolff's research focuses on natural resource exploitation, especially with regard to gold and coal, and on Black Hills history in general. He has published articles in a variety of journals and, in 2003, his first book, Industrializing the Rockies: Growth, Competition, and Turmoil in the Coalfields of Colorado and Wyoming, 1868-1914. After publishing his biography of Seth Bullock, Wolff turned his scholarly attention to the subject of violence in the Black Hills.

Wolff is also active in a variety of organizations that reflect his interests. He is vice president of the South Dakota State Historical Society board of trustees, chairman of the board for the Adams Museum and Home in Deadwood, and president-elect for the Mining History Association.

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