



Hoosier on the High Plains

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Article Summary: Frink emphasizes the importance of the historical record. He recommends telling what has happened "the way it was" and doing so while witnesses can confirm it. (He presented this paper at the 1957 meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society.)

Cataloging Information:

Names: Joe and Mary Back (Dubois, Wyoming), Casey Barthelmess (Olive, Montana), J Elmer Brock (Kaycee, Wyoming), H V Williams (Sidney, Nebraska)

Photographs / Images: Joe Back with one of his sculptures, Casey Barthelmess

HOOSIER ON THE HIGH PLAINS

BY MAURICE FRINK

ONE day last summer, at Joe and Mary Back's ranch on the Wind River, in Wyoming, with our elbows on the table at which we had just feasted on elk steaks, home-made bread and wild plum jam, me and Joe wuz tradin' windies. Joe is a lean, leathery big-game hunting guide, and an artist. He sculptures animals. You may have stopped at his studio, near Dubois, on the road to Jackson Hole. I stopped there one morning, a stranger, expecting to stay perhaps an hour—and stayed twenty-four.

So Joe and I were swapping stories, and Joe told about the time he crawled out of bed one morning and shot a deer from his bedroom window. Joe saw the deer in a pasture near the house. The bedroom window was open—and so, I assume, was the season—so Joe seized the rifle in the corner of his room, took a quick shot and there was venison waiting for him in his backyard.

Maurice Frink is Executive Director of the State Historical Society of Colorado. This paper was presented at the luncheon session of the 79th annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 28 September 1957.

"I'm walkin' out to get my deer," said Joe, "when a Chevvy pickup stops along the highway and some *hoosier* gets out and starts toward my meat—"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "How did you know this man was from Indiana?"

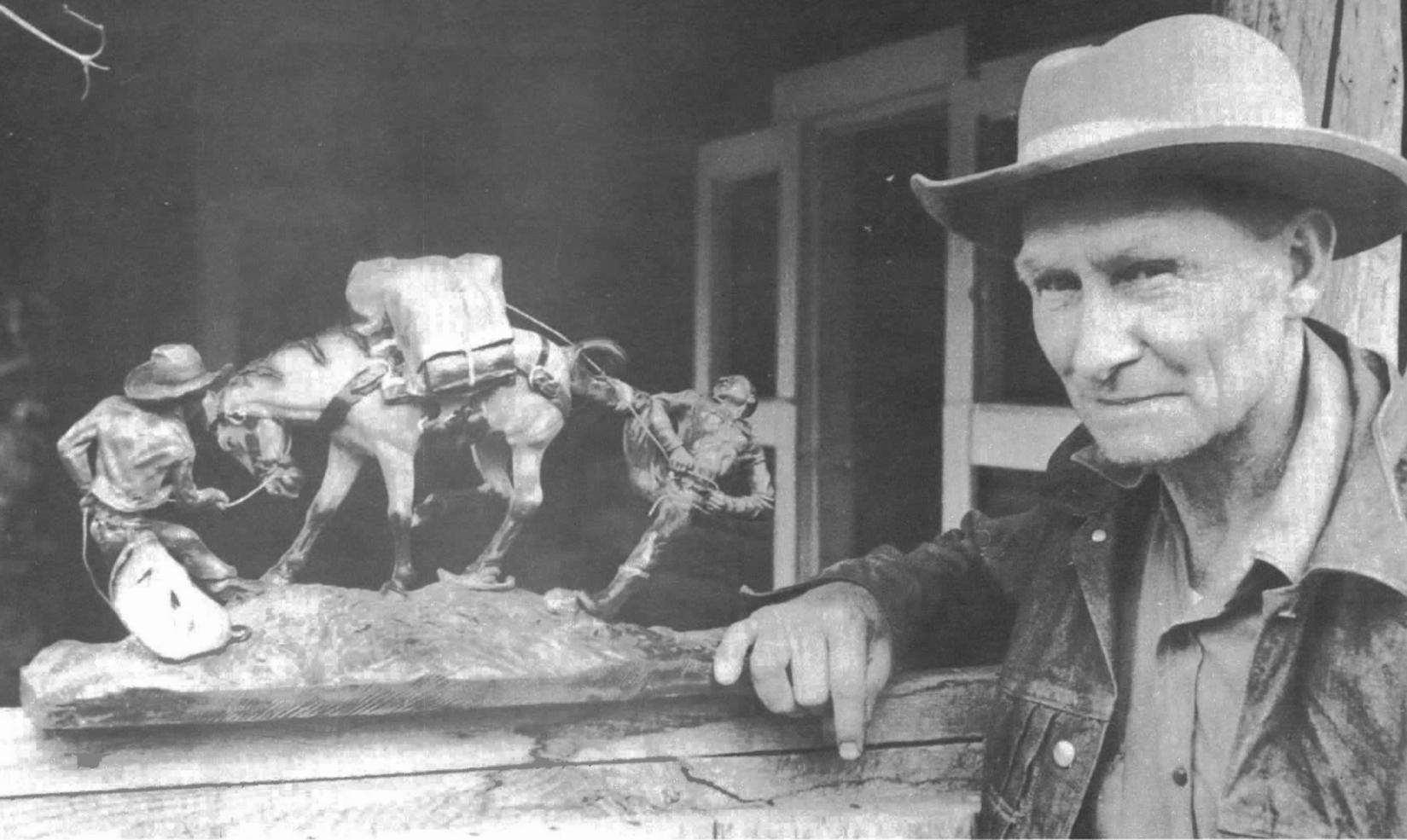
"Who said anybody was from Indiana? I didn't know where he was from. I just knew that here was some green-horn, some *hoosier*, trespassin' in my pasture—" and Joe went on with his story.

Being from Indiana, I was startled at this meaning given to a word that I knew had originated more than a hundred years ago, somewhere along the banks of the Wabash or the storied Ohio. In those days, a pioneer, hearing a knock at his cabin door, would, before lifting the latch-string, approach the door, quite likely with candlestick in uplifted hand, and call out, "Who's yere?" Eventually the word came into good repute as meaning just a native of Indiana, but in its earliest connotations it stood for rustic illiteracy or boorishness, and it was in this, its original sense, that I thus encountered the word on the high plains of Wyoming.

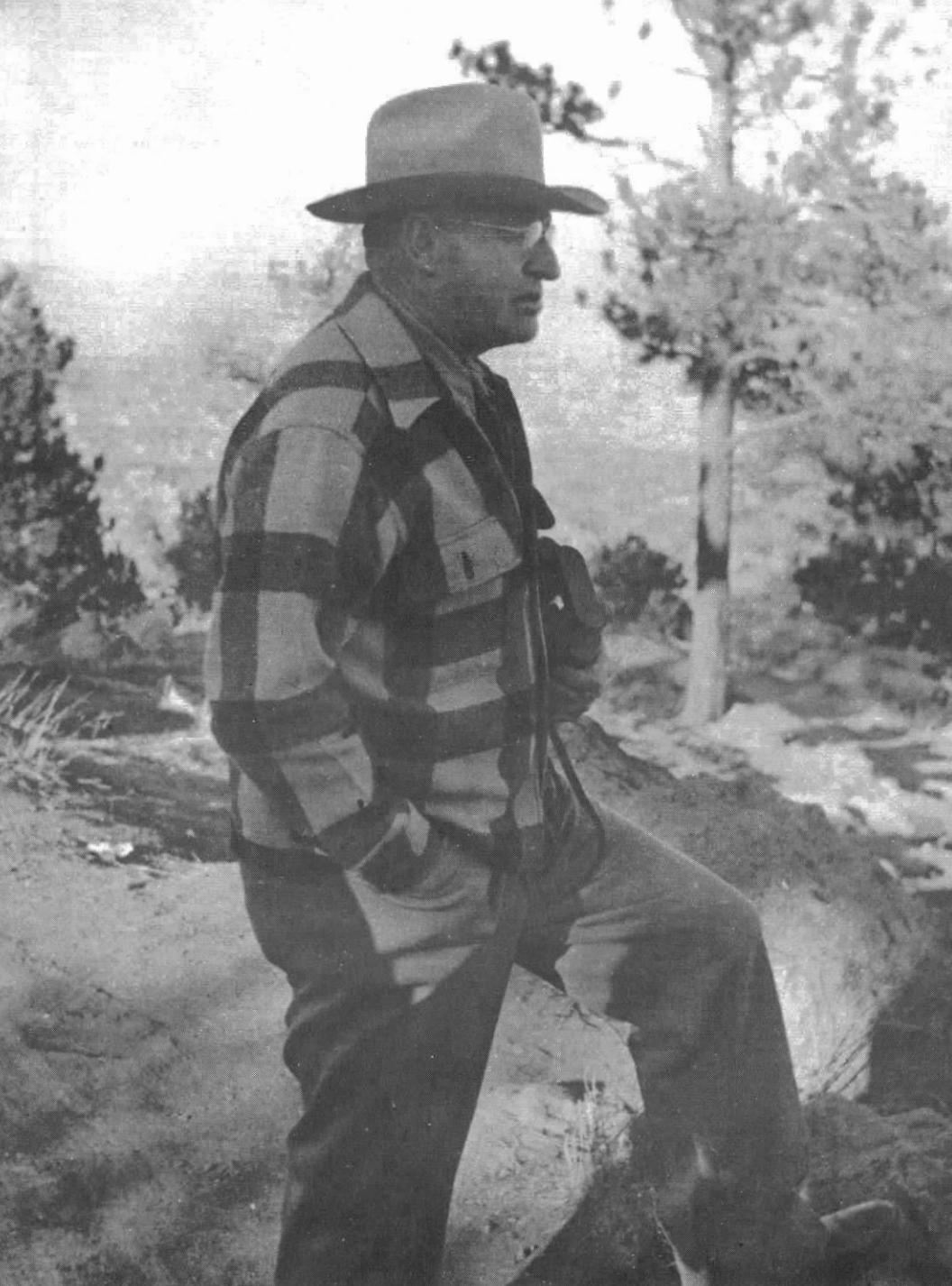
Strangely enough, the very next day, in the same locality, the same word turned up with a different meaning. This time I was talking to an old tie-hack, one, that is, who climbed the mountains to cut trees for railroad ties, floating the logs down the river. This old-timer was showing me his collection of Arapaho bead work.

"My son," he said, "wants me to let him put all this stuff on the market. He wants to peddle it to tourists, in his filling station down the road. He's tryin' to *hoosier* me into gettin' rid of it all."

I would have said my son was trying to *bulldoze* or *bamboozle* me, but this old man said *hoosier*. I told him what the word meant to me and commented on the number of strange new words I was learning in the West. It was all, I said, very interesting. The old tie-hack agreed, but



Joe Back, of Dubois, Wyoming, and a Bit of His Sculpture



Casey Barthelmess, of Olive, Montana—Cowman of the
Old School

said it better. "Yessir," he nodded, "some o' them things is really holdin'."

Localisms such as these brighten the speech of Americans everywhere, but it seems to me that the West is especially rich in picturesque words and phrases, and that these the historian as well as the linguist must consider within his field. The language spoken by a people surely is part of the history of their times. As Carl Sandburg, speaking of something else, has said,

These are belongings of the people, dusty with
the dust of earth.

Some people collect rocks or stamps or firearms; others of us like to store away in our memories if not in our notebooks some of those idiomatic phrases that fall from the lips of men in whose speech they were long ago ingrained. Cattlemen, I have noticed, are especially eloquent in this. I have a valued friend in Montana, Casey Barthelmess, who for many years rode for the old LO outfit, and now has a ranch of his own along the Mizpah. Thinking of the roundup days, when the wagons worked their way down along the streams of a watershed, Casey says he's going "down the creek" when he means toward home. On a long auto trip last summer, he wrote me several times along the way—or as he put it "by settin's." He speaks of slow auto drivers as once he did of lazy cow-horses—"jest shakin' along." Like yesterday's cow-punchers, people "dish in" to help other people out, or they "tail up" someone who needs help, as a line rider would pull a bogged-down cow to its feet. Casey's father served with the Second Infantry at old Fort Keogh, and is buried in the National Cemetery at Custer Battlefield. I have gone there several times with Casey, and every time he goes first to his father's grave, standing there reverently a few minutes with bowed head and I know not what fond thoughts, just "to give the old man Howdy."

If one test of good writing lies in the right use of vernacular speech, of the "lore and the lingo" indigenous to a certain time, place and people, equally important is

precise and accurate detail in the recording of action. It was Casey again who gave me a lesson in this, when I was writing the eighty-year history of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. On the theory that the best way to tell a big story is in terms of people who lived it, I wanted to open this book by centering attention on one plain, ordinary cowman. I wanted to typify such men in a broad general way by describing one—what he looked like, what he wore, what he did, and some of the things I think he might have thought about.

After I had written and rewritten this, scrubbing and polishing the paragraph until I thought it was water tight, I showed it to Casey and invited his comment. This is a part of what I had written:

Darkness hid the sagebrush flats from the squinting eyes of the man loping his horse toward the fire-light. A little ways from the fire he pulled up and stepped off. He picketed his horse and turned it away with a slap on the flank. He put wood on the failing fire. Wind whipped the sparks away. In from the night guard with a herd of longhorns coming up the trail from Texas, the man was home, at the wagon, that is, in the trail camp.

I went on to describe his waking of the new guard, his going to bed on the ground with his saddle for pillow, and in the morning his stowing his bedroll in the chuck-wagon and riding on with the cattle. My cowpuncher friend read it over several times, scowling a little harder each time. Then—

“That’s mighty purty,” he said, “but some of it is just no damn good. First place, there wouldn’t be a fire goin’ that time o’ night. Second place, if the man loped his horse in to camp he might spook the herd or the night horses. A cowboy doesn’t picket his horse. He stakes it. In my time we never put our beds in the wagon. We rolled ‘em up and laid ‘em alongside for the cook to put ‘em where he wanted ‘em ‘cause it was his wagon and he ran it.”

So I slowed the horse to a trot, put out the fire, and placed the bedrolls where the cook expected to find them.

I believe devoutly in the importance of accuracy and authenticity in small matters as well as large. I like colorful writing, with incident and metaphor, and informative pertinent detail, but all this is thrown away unless, as Milton put it, "Truth be in the field."

The trend in some writing of history seems to be away from this and toward emphasis on the startling and the sensational, whether or not it be supported by competent authority. This kind of writing I deplore, even though I know it is done for the sake of reaching a wider audience. I indorse the philosophy of Stanley Vestal, who told me he cares less about writing so as to make people sit up and take notice than he does about writing so as to make them sit down and think.

Some of the new western writing these days that bears the stamp of high approval is, it seems to me, forgetting some of the old fundamentals. Even Herodotus, the Greek historian, had to resist the human instinct to be drawn toward the most romantic and poetic version of each story he recorded, and to think that what he most admired was likeliest to be true. But he did resist this tendency. He included improbable tales in his writings, but he always declared himself not responsible for them—and this perhaps is why he is called the Father of History. I hold no brief for pedantic writing, such as that, "drab as a dead man's hand," in which the robust type of the text is drawn down into the quicksands of fine-type footnotes. This is as bad as the other extreme. I do of course want history to be read by others than historians, just as I think archeologists and anthropologists should write, sometimes at least, so that they will be read by someone beside other scientists, for I think that much of what they have to say would be of interest and value to laymen if the laymen could understand it. But I do not like to see the experts slight their research, or under-or over-emphasize the facts, or lose their balance reaching for a high-sounding phrase, just in order to have more readers or sell more magazines. There is, I think, a middle road, relating what Kipling

called "the undoctored incident that actually occurred," in simple declarative sentences made up of words that most people know, and told the way it was.

That phrase, I think, should be nailed over the desk of every writer of history. The late J. Elmer Brock of Kaycee, Wyoming, nailed it over mine when he first asked me to write the story of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. He said: "You will hear a lot of stories, good and bad, about the Association. I want you to go to the record, and tell it the way it was." This I tried to do, in that book and in my later writing in a second book on the cattle industry. (It wasn't always easy—especially in the parts about the Johnson County War!)

Speculation, hearsay, and legend may have their place in some historical writing, but they should be carefully labeled as such and set apart from established fact. To this extent I believe in segregation! History needs no embroidery. It needs only good telling: selectivity and emphasis, clarity and precision. No Hollywood hand is necessary to make Colorado's Bent's Fort or Nebraska's Fort Robinson both important and interesting. A forthright description of a wagon train stumbling its way across the plains is itself drama and suspense. You don't need to put a gun in Baby Doe Tabor's withered hands to romanticize her thirty-year vigil in the cabin at the Matchless Mine, waiting in poverty and in vain for the miraculous return of the riches the husband of her youthful days had told her would somehow come back. The story as it was is good enough. If it isn't, then make up a better one—but label it the fiction that it is.

One of the factors that give such compelling interest to western history is its recentness. Here on the Great Plains, or in the Rocky Mountains, you can put out your hand and touch yesterday, or stoop and, from the sod at your feet, pick up its fragments in the shape of ox shoes or cartridge shells. But every click of the clock pushes this yesterday farther from us.

There are many persons living whose parents or grandparents came west in covered wagons, but there are few left who actually came that way themselves. Even the letters and other records by which the stories of these people can be verified and amplified are being lost because their descendants grow weary of having the dusty old things around, and, unaware of their historic importance, throw them away.

It is important that the stories of the old people be preserved; it is urgent that their letters and diaries be kept. Your Historical Society is doing wonderfully well on this. Its work is widely recognized—its fine museum here, its publications, its TV programs such as I watched last winter in Denver, its regional museum at Fort Robinson. But I hope you are not satisfied. I hope you never will be. I hope a wholesome discontent with what you have done, fine as it is, impels you ever to try for more and better.

To illustrate the sense of urgency that should haunt the historian, let me quote a short passage from a letter written by a Nebraska man. The letter was sent to Agnes Wright Spring, Colorado state historian, who had a long correspondence with this man as the result of her writing him one day to verify a detail about saddle cinches. Mrs. Spring urged the man—then only 65—to put into form for publication some of the stories he had related in letters to her. This is what he wrote in reply, April 25, 1935, from Sidney, Nebraska :

Yes, I saw the tail end of the cattle business in the days of its glory. My parents brought me here in 1878, when I was eight years old. I never punched cows for any big outfits such as the Bay State or the Ogallala, but I worked on small ranches in the Sandhills and the North Platte valley. I helped trail horses to Wyoming in 1891. In 1902 I hung up my saddle and turned my pet horses into pasture. All I had learned was useless to me now so I went to work for the railroad. I kept my horses until 1909, hoping to realize my dream of a small ranch of my own, but the horses grew old waiting and so did I. In 1920 my father died. The next spring my chance came to acquire a small ranch but before I could act, my sister's health failed and I had to stay where I was and take care of her

and my mother. Since they died I have lived in the old home with nothing to do. I always intended to get out a book. Once I did write a story, and handed it to one of our early cowmen to read. When he gave it back, he said "It is all true. Why don't you follow it up? You could make more money writing than by working." After I was left all alone, I thought maybe now I can do it. One day I opened my desk and laid out paper and sat down to write. I dipped the pen in the ink and then I sat there thinking, just turning back memory's pages. When I came out of it, tears were rolling down my face and I had not written a word. I closed the desk. I had waited too long. I have never tried again. Yours very truly,

H. V. Williams

I thank you for inviting me here today, and for listening so patiently. I hope that in return I may in a small way have helped revisualize the importance of the historian's work, the necessity for his helping preserve the story of our country in all its color—but telling it "the way it was"—and the urgent need for not waiting too long.