

## Ragtime Cowboy Kit - A Wyoming Ghost Story

by Dennis Payton Knight

I've never had much truck with ghost stories. I'm not for them one way or another, but there were never any ghosts at 718 Spruce. I know, because it's where I spent most of the first two decades of my life. It was a few blocks west of the railyards with the Laramie River running behind it.

It was that combination of river and railroad that had made our neighborhood, before there were houses, a hub of frontier activity with sawmills and plaster mills, brickyards and stockyards. A tannery, convenient to the local slaughterhouse, occupied what became the house I grew up in.

Not long before I was born, my folks bought and moved with my brother and sister into the converted ramshackle dwelling at 718 Spruce. From the time I could walk, I watched Dad create paradise under the cottonwoods in our backyard. He built a barbecue big enough to roast a goat and dug a fishpond that he lined with stone slabs. In excavating the pond, his shovel pulled out old hair-covered hides buried by the tanners that once occupied the structure.

And it was in that backyard wonderland where I met my secret friend, Ragtime Cowboy Kit. About my age and size, whatever that was, he was the rootin'est tootin'est sonofagun ever to come out of old Wyoming. He came a-ridin' out of the hills one morning, along the Laramie River, ambling into our yard through the back gate. He hitched his hoss to the clothesline, climbed up and sat a spell with me on a cottonwood branch, and told me his story.

"My pa was the meanest durn critter ever lived over there to Tie Siding. He took a switch to me near every day, but one time he got so danged mad over me nailin' his boots to the floor he said he was goin' to tan my hide. Then he hitched his hoss and dragged me over to this here Wyoming Tannery.

"Well, I didn't cotton to have my hide turned into a billfold, so I proceeded to tan *his* hide and kicked him in a hole somebody dug under this here tree. Then I took his hoss and found me a cabin up at Wood's Landin. Ain't seen hide nor hair of the old man since, and I ain't never come back here 'til I saw you sittin' on this branch."

And then came a voice from nowhere in particular, maybe up, maybe down, but louder than anything I've ever heard. "Kit, you get down here, now. I'll tan your hide yet."

Kit hopped off the branch. "I'll be getting along now," he declared. He rode off to the hills, and I got my own hide down and back in the house real pronto.

It's been a long while since I've even thought about Ragtime Cowboy Kit. But sorry, I've been digressing. I was getting ready to tell you a ghost story.