

Joe Lefors-Frontier Marshall and Early Law Enforcement in the Old West

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Abstract:

Article examines the frontier marshal Joe Lefors and his early life and career, as well as his famous encounters with the outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Lefors career is a microcosm of the difficulties for establishing law and order in the American West. The author examines Lefor's own memoirs as well as critics of Lefor's own accounts and modern cinematic portrayals of Lefors.

Keywords: US Marshal, Law Enforcement History, The Wild Bunch, Joe Lefors

Many western novels open with a scene featuring a lone US Marshall riding hard after bank or train robbers, pursuing the bad men through dangerous terrain and weather. And most of the time, in the novels, the lawmen emerge victorious, and often end up with a pretty girl for a wife to boot. As pleasing as these fictional narratives are for relaxation and repose, the true lives of many of these men were not as picturesque and much more complicated to unravel.

One such figure is US Marshall Joe Lefors, probably best known to western aficionados as the man who may or may not have induced the famous confession from hired gun Tom Horn which led to Horn's execution for murder. Lefor's reputation has undoubtedly been soiled by the public perceptions of this incident, especially after the very popular 1970's movie, *Tom Horn*, which featured a U.S. Marshal Joe Belle (Billy Green Bush)-apparently as a fictional stand-in for the real life Joe Lefors- doctoring up a murder confession from a drunken Horn. Many historians believe Lefors was in cahoots with the local cattlemen's association to get Horn out of the way. Recent historians have not helped matters. The late Wyoming historian Chip Carlson released his biography of Joe Lefors, in 1995, entitled "*I slickered Tom Horn-The History of the Texas Cowboy Turned Montana-Wyoming Lawman*" Interestingly, Carlson admitted that the words "I slickered Tom Horn" were not Lefor's-instead Carlson and his editor Carl Hallberg engaged in "creative editing" of Lefor's original manuscript deposited at the University of Wyoming (see complete review of Carlson's book by Larry Ball in Montana; The

Magazine of Western History; Helena Vol. 49, Iss. 1, (Spring 1999): 80) The controversy surrounding Tom Horn's confession (or lack thereof) is certainly the most well-known incident of a crowded life, but there is much more to Joe Lefors.

Joe Lefor's had an almost Zane Grey or Louis Lamour upbringing and background. The Lefors family was part of that vast and roving frontier community that helped found and establish the ranches, towns and cities that make up the modern western United States. Joe's parents, James and Mahala resided first in Dade County Missouri, where they had five children born; Alzada, Dollie, Perry, William, and Newton. They later had eight children born in Arkansas near Jenny Lind; Sam, Katie, Ike, Rufe, Joe, Jeff, Ida, and Bob (<https://www.geni.com/people/Joseph-Joe-Lefors-Deputy-U-S-Marshall/6000000003342655029>). Thus the Lefor's family was prolific and mobile. They eventually settled in the panhandle region of Texas after the oldest Lefor's son, Perry, paved the way by locating there in 1874. Supposedly Joe and his family arrived at their destination via three covered wagons in classic frontier immigrant style. During this trip, according to Joe, he experienced his first real adventure and brush with death. As the wagons traveled towards their new home, they inadvertently stumbled right into the midst of a large group of Comanche Indians. The Indians quickly surrounded the little caravan and confiscated all their weapons and supplies. The leader of the Indians produced some tall poles with a cross stick about 8 feet high. One of Joe's companions informed him that these were "scalp poles" and it seemed the fate of the Lefor's family was sealed. Fortunately for future Wyoming settlers (and perhaps unfortunately for future outlaws) before the Indians could get about their grisly business, a bugle was heard and the beleaguered travelers were rescued in classic John Ford style by three companies of the famous 10th cavalry-the "Buffalo Soldiers". The cavalry officers managed to retrieve most of the family's possessions from the (now very repentant) Comanches and the group was able to continue their trip. This was young Joe's first encounter with the sudden danger and brutality that the frontier world could spring on the unwary-but it would not be his last.ⁱ

Joe's father proceeded to purchase land and establish a ranch, his cattle sporting the LE4 brand. Joe's early years were taken up with learning the basic skills and tasks of the western cowboy-herding and driving cattle, cruising for strays, branding and basic ranch work that always needs to be completed. Young Joe decided that he would rather be paid for his work and wrangled a freighting job with a small outfit run by C.C. Pursley (better known as "Purk") The job paid \$30 a month and as Joe said, "\$30 a month looked mighty big to me".ⁱⁱ Shortly after he accepted the job, he met another man named Ford who was seeking riders for a new long distance mail delivery service.

Lefors took a job as a rider delivering the mail but since he was not yet 16 years of age, he could not be officially sworn in or entered on the company roster. Joe was given a 30

miles stretch of country between the Sweetwater river to Sandstone as his route. Young Lefors had several close calls with Indians during his tenure with the mail service. During one such episode he was chased almost 20 miles and fired on by a band of Indians until he made it safely to the next station.ⁱⁱⁱ In his biography “Wyoming Peace Officer”, Lefors makes the claim that this job was with “The Pony Express”. But as this episode of his life occurred in 1879 and the real Pony express only existed for about 18 months in 1860-1861, this is impossible. As Wyoming author Chip Carlson noted about this episode, “Historical societies and libraries in both Texas and Oklahoma indicate that there never was any Pony Express line as such in either state or territory. However there likely was a form of mail communication by horseback between the forts mentioned by Lefors, probably an army courier or independent parties contracted to perform this service. Lefors may have been attempting to inflate his early accomplishments, or as a young teen, perceived his work as a Pony Express rider. In the interest of giving him the benefit of the doubt, he did refer to the job as one on the “mail line”. It has often been said that the Pony Express is one of the only historic organizations that has more people who claim to have been a part of it than actually served-one suspects that might the case here as well.^{iv}

Joe’s father decided that Joe needed to complete his schooling but the only available facility was almost 300 miles south of the ranch in Caddo Grove. Joe’s older brother Bill was a resident however, so Joe would have a place to stay while he finished his primary education. Lefors stayed at the school for a year. His father passed away during this time and his brother Bill left the ranch to trail a herd of cattle to Montana, leaving young Joe on the ranch with Bill’s wife. Lefors later wrote that this was one of the loneliest periods of his life. The one bright spot that summer was his acquisition of a young mustang pony from a local horse trader. Joe was able to tame the pony (which he named Yellowhammer) and they eventually became great friends.^v

Lefors decided that he would return north to the panhandle country but this was some 300 miles to the north of Caddo and the area between was known to be dangerous Indian country. Lefors decided to chance the trip and set off alone on the long ride. He managed to skirt any encounters with Indians but had several close calls- he was also fortunate to meet up with a friendly family of ranchers who took the boy in and fed him and his horse. So taken with Lefors’s story of his lonely ride and the recent death of his father, the ranching family asked if they might adopt him as their own. Lefors reluctantly rejected their offer and continued his journey eventually reaching his families ranch in the panhandle safely.^{vi}

Joe found work as a cowboy with several area ranchers. He honed his skills as a trail rider, calf roper and all around cowboy until in April of 1885 he found a spot on a trail crew that was driving almost 300 head of cattle to Buffalo Wyoming. Lefors had been yearning to see the north country and he was quick jump at this chance. The trail boss

proved to be an unmerciful taskmaster but the herd was delivered in just 60 days from Mobeetie Texas to Buffalo Wyoming.^{vii}

Lefors decided to stay and take a job with the Murphy Cattle Company who had accepted the delivery of the trail herd. This marked the 17 year old's first encounters with real outlaws, many of whom had found seasonal work with the various cattle ranches in the area. Local law enforcement officers made many visits to the ranch where Joe worked to pick up wanted men but most of the time the lawbreakers had advanced warning and managed to sneak away with a Winchester until the officers of the law departed. Lefors was shocked by the lawlessness he found in Wyoming, "In Texas I always heard it said that it was a rank disgrace to steal from the man you were working for. But the ethics among the Wyoming thieves greatly differed from that. They showed no favor, irrespective of who it was just as long as they didn't get caught." Lefors decided to spend the winter of 1885 at the ranch primarily because of the free room and board but the company would provide no pay for its cowboys again until the 1st of April. Lefors regretted his decision as many of the area outlaws also decided to take advantage of a warm bunkhouse and free stew for the winter as well, "...but it was no place I assure you for a person with high ideals. Gambling, drinking, drunkards, fighting-everything was permissible." One casualty of the lawless frontier environment was Joe's close friend, his horse Yellowhammer, who had been lifted during the winter by horse thieves.^{viii}

Lefors made it through his first northern winter and next year he went to work for a smaller outfit, the Wyoming Land and Cattle Company. His new job began after the devastating winter of 1887-1888 (sometimes referred to as the "Big Die-Up") which wiped out thousands of head of cattle all across the northern plains. One result of this huge loss of stock was the beef prices went up due to lack of supply and cattle rustler's became much bolder and more numerous. Many of the "black-balled" cowboys who had been so named for being caught stealing stock from their employers began to band together at a place in the foot of the Big Horn Mountains-known as "The Reservation" and later famously as "Hole-In-The-Wall".

Lefors described the climate as almost completely lawless. Rustling became so common that sometimes ranchers had to negotiate with rustlers about how many of their herd they would have to give to the rustlers in order to get the rest to round-up. Lefors had several encounters with rustlers when he was tasked with returning cattle that had been "appropriated". Local law enforcement was also little help as the sheriff, Red Angus, was, according to Lefors, most likely in on the rustling business.^{ix}

Lefors went back to the Murphy company in 1890 when he was offered a promotion and the chance to lead the company's beef deliveries to the Sioux Indians at the Standing Rock Agency. This was a job of some importance as the Murphy company was a government contractor for the Indians and delivered around three thousand steers a year. Lefors worked in this position until the company ceased deliveries in 1895.

Lefors began his first law enforcement job most likely sometime in 1895, after his previous employer The Murphy Company ceased the Indian agency beef deliveries. It's not clear if Lefors was employed directly by the state of Montana or if a group of ranchers may have pooled their resources and hired him. In any case, he went right to work as rustling was rampant.^x

As a livestock inspector, Lefors tracked down stolen cattle (often by locating their hides and rendering yards) with the telltale signs of a burned out and "switched brand" on the underside of the hide. He soon discovered that the majority of the rustling activities in Montana and Wyoming emanated from the area around Hole-In-The-Wall which by now had been transformed into a sort of illegal livestock operation all its own. Lefors tried various stratagems to gain access to the secrets of this outlaw hideout including trying to turn one of the outlaws he knew into an informant.^{xi}

George Farland was the name of Lefors new informant and he proved a valuable source if intelligence on various gangs operating out of Hole-In-The-Wall such as groups involved in horse stealing, cattle rustling, brand switching and even organized cattle drives of rustled cattle headed to livestock yards in Nebraska. Perhaps most disturbingly, Farland also informed him that he was now a marked man by the outlaws and that they even knew the description of his horse, and advised Lefors to switch mounts-advice which Lefors ignored.^{xii}

Farland gained information on a band of horse thieves who were planning on moving a large band of stolen horses. Lefors organized a group of inspectors who were deputized by the local sheriff John Owens. The little posse caught up with the rustlers 50 miles south of Newcastle and both groups were surprised at the sudden discovery of the other. A brisk gunfight ensued with around 50 shots being fired. Lefors emerged unharmed but found he had many bulletholes in his clothes and part of his hat brim had been shot off. He chased down one rustler on horseback and induced him to surrender. This was the first time he was involved in a gunfight as a law enforcement officer.^{xiii}

Lefors was tough on the rustlers but he did make some exceptions. He caught one rustler whom he referred to only as "J.C." red handed, in the midst of butchering a stolen beef. He took the man back to his poor homestead and Lefors horse "stuck his head into the door...The smallest child, a boy, was crying. I felt sure he was hungry. Two little girls about 6 and eight were shy and did not look one bit well." He let J.C. and his family escape in a wagon and did not pursue them.^{xiv}

One of Lefors most under reported accomplishments was leading a round-up of lost or stolen cattle in the area directly around the Hole-In-The-Wall in 1897. Many hundreds of head of area ranchers were on the open range and they were too afraid to send cowboys into the outlaws territory to round-up their missing cattle. Lefors had tried to lead a smaller party into the area earlier but found himself badly outnumbered by the outlaws and this time he organized a large well armed party of deputies and cowboys totalling 54

men, all well armed with six shooters and Winchesters. It was also thought that a group of bank robbers were in the outlaw bunch so Lefors was joined by a South Dakota sheriff and deputy. Although at one point the group led by Lefors sighted an armed group of over 60 outlaws riding near them, they managed to conduct their roundup without any mishaps or gunfights, eventually rounding up 1,163 head of stolen cattle for the area ranchers.

Perhaps (besides the well known Tom Horn case well covered in Wild West magazine previously see: <https://www.historynet.com/did-tom-horn-kill-willie-nickell/> and <https://www.historynet.com/book-review-the-trial-of-tom-horn/>) Lefors most famous run-ins had to do with Butch Cassidy and his gang known as “The Wild Bunch”. His first brush with the famed outlaw was the Wilcox Train Robbery. A Union Pacific train was robbed near Wilcox Wyoming on June 2, 1899 and representatives from the railroad asked specifically if Lefors would join the posse to hunt down the robbers. Lefors rode a long distance to join the posse which he found consisted of over 40 men, a grub wagon and a cook. He advised the leadership that such an outfit would accomplish very little and suggested that instead each man be given a loaf of bread and some bologna tied to his saddle.

During the chase, Lefors had several vocal disagreements with the leader of the posse, Frank Wheeling, the Union Pacific Chief Special Agent. It seems very likely that if Lefors advice had been taken, the outlaws might have been apprehended. Instead, they obtained fresh mounts making them all but impossible to catch. After this episode, Lefors was so disgusted with crime fighting that he turned in his badge and bought a meat market in Newcastle Wyoming.^{xv}

He found, however, that despite making a sizeable income for the first time in his life he was not happy with “the inside work” as he called it. A few months later, U.S. Marshal Frank Hasdell, who had also been a member of the Wilcox posse, stopped at Lefors store and offered him a position as a Deputy U.S. Marshal.^{xvi} Lefors accepted and soon he found himself on the trail of another group of train robbers, who this time had held up a train near Tipton Wyoming August 29 1900. It was later confirmed that Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid and Kid Curry were involved in the hold up. Lefors was an experienced man hunter but the Wild Bunch had carefully planned their escape from the scene of the crime. The outlaw’s trail led the posse through the area known as the Red Desert, also sometimes called the Great American Desert, a very dry and inhospitable area known for a lack of water.^{xvii} Members of the posse dropped out of the chase one by one until Lefors was left with just a few men out of the original large group that started the chase. At one point, Lefors actually caught sight of the robbers but it was nearing nightfall and the posse was almost out of provisions. It was discovered in the morning that once again the Wild Bunch had obtained fresh mounts and others on the posse (not Lefors who was all for a rapid pursuit) opted to retire to a nearby ranch to also get fresh

mounts and some food. And once again the Wild Bunch managed to slip away during the night and evade capture.

This was as close as Joe Lefors ever got to the fabled Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, although various theatrical productions have portrayed the chase as a personal vendetta between Lefors and the outlaws (see sidebar). Lefors retired from active law enforcement work in 1908 but took a private job as a stock detective with the Wyoming Wool Growers Association for \$200 a month. He became instrumental in stopping raids against sheep herders by rival cattle ranchers who wanted the sheep off the range.^{xviii}

Later in life Lefors bounced around the country, resided for a time in California and even spent some time in South and Central America. His career in law enforcement occupied that time when the Old West was transitioning into modern America. He was not always happy with what he saw, “Nevertheless, I sometimes think that the Curry gang of train and bank robbers was made up of gentlemen compared with the crooks of today. There was nothing petty about them. They were always courteous and well behaved toward women and children and very generous. There are crimes committed every day now that the old Rocky Mountain train and bank robbers never would have stooped to do”.^{xix} Joe Lefors passed away at his home October 1, 1940 from pancreatic cancer and a heart attack believed to have been caused by years of untreated high blood pressure-no doubt a consequence of his hard driving, outlaw chasing life.

ⁱ Joe Lefors, Wyoming Peace Officer (Laramie Printing Company, Laramie, 1953), pp.4-6

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p.14

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p.16

^{iv} Chip Carlson, Joe Lefors-I Slickered Tom Horn (Beartooth Corall LLC, Cheyenne, 1995) p.32

^v LeFors, p.24

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid., p.47.

^{viii} Ibid., p.52.

^{ix} Ibid., p.57.

^x Ibid., p.59.

^{xi} Ibid., p.60.

^{xii} Ibid, pp.65-66.

^{xiii} Ibid., pp.71-72.

^{xiv} Ibid., pp.74-75.

^{xv} Ibid., pps.89-95, 109-113.

^{xvi} Ibid., p.116.

^{xvii} Ibid., p.121.

^{xviii} Ibid., p.166.

^{xix} Ibid., p.183.

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Dr. Woodard has taught at the university level for 25 years. He is the author of **Soft Fur and Iron Men-A History of the Fur Trade in South Dakota and the Upper Missouri** (E-Booktime, 2006) and **The Revenger-The Life and Times of Wild Bill Hickok** (TwoDot Publishing, 2018). He has also authored numerous articles for *Journal of the West*.