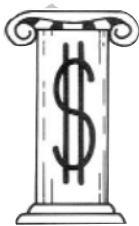


How a Rare Laramie, Wyoming, National Bank Note Was Saved

THE BIG NEWS IN LARAMIE ON WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1891, was the arrival on the Union Pacific Railroad of two skiffs built for prominent bankers at The Wyoming National Bank. The following appeared on page 4 of *The Republican*, Laramie's newspaper.

Two beautiful St. Laurence river skiffs built by John Gunster, formerly of this city, arrived here this morning and were the center of attraction while being unloaded at the freight house. The boats were built for Messrs. F. E. Scrymser and D. C. Bacon, of this city, and are perfect crafts of their kind.

It is the intent of the above gentlemen to launch the skiffs on Hutton's lakes, and as they are identically the same in every particular, even to the amount of canvas carried, the chances are that a race for the championship of the lakes will soon be arranged, as the owners of the boats will undoubtedly wish to ascertain which is the possessor of the smarter craft and to whom the honor of flying the victorious pennant belongs.



The Paper Column by Peter Huntoon

The skiffs are built of cedar, lapstreaked, eighteen feet in length and a trifle over three feet in beam. Both ends are pointed, and each has a seating capacity of four persons. The amount of sail carried will be sixty-five square yards, and a small centerboard will enable the boats to sail close to the wind. The ends are decked over for the space of two feet with inlaid cedar and mahogany, which adds much to the handsome appearance of the boats. They are copper fastened, and the seats are traced with nickel plates, which gives a very pretty effect to the interior. A pair of oarlocks makes it easy work to row when a sail is not desirable, and the masts are so arranged that they can be taken out at any time.

Taking everything into consideration, the two pioneer boats in this section are beauties in every detail, and if they prove the success that their owners anticipate, it will not be long until Laramie can boast of a fleet of yachts on its neighboring lakes.



Modern map showing the location of Hutton Lake southwest of Laramie, Wyoming. Hutton Lake is now a National Wildlife Reserve.

Fred F. Scrymser and D. C. Bacon were principals in The Wyoming National Bank. Scrymser was president and a director, and Bacon was another director. Scrymser was relatively new to the bank, having purchased Edward Iverson's interest in the bank in 1888. Iverson was the venerable pioneer Laramie banker and founder of the bank.

It is clear that Scrymser was very eager to try out his new boat and even to begin construction of a boathouse for it. To these ends on Friday, just two days after the boats arrived, he enlisted Matthew Dawson, the cashier of the bank, and two carpenters to accompany him to Hutton's lake to begin construction of a boat house and to test his boat. The *Saturday Republican* carried this account.

Early yesterday morning a wagon containing President F. E. Scrymser and Cashier M. Dawson of the Wyoming National Bank, and George Stirling and James Davis, carpenters, started for Hutton's lakes, eleven miles southwest of the city. Following them was another wagon loaded with a new sailboat. The craft was the property of Mr. Scrymser, and Mr. Dawson was going to accompany him on its initial voyage. The carpenters were taken along to construct a house for the safe-keeping of the pretty little vessel.

Arriving at the lake, the carpenters began their work on the north shore, and Messrs. Scrymser and Dawson launched the boat and merrily sailed over the choppy water. The carpenters say that a brisk breeze was then blowing, but the gentlemen in the boat did not seem to experience any difficulty in handling her. About noon the craft returned to shore, and its crew ate the lunch which had been taken along, talking meanwhile of the sailing qualities of the vessel and prophesying unlimited pleasure from future trips in her. At 1 o'clock they re-embarked, hoisted the sail and stood out for the middle of the lake.

Meanwhile the breeze had strengthened to a semi-gale, and waxed fiercer as the afternoon advanced. The men at work ashore occasionally glanced at the tiny barque as it was buffeted by the ever-enlarging billows, but they never dreamed of danger to her passengers. When she had been cruising about half an hour, one of the carpenters remarked that the sail was no longer in sight. But he attached no significance to its absence. The boat was then in the center of the lake, and the distance, combined with the roughness of the water, prevented a very clear view of her outlines from where the watchers stood. He plainly saw the craft rising and falling with the undulating water, but he could not tell whether she was overturned or not. Subsequent events proved that even then the catastrophe had occurred.

It was almost 6 o'clock, and night's shades were falling over prairie and lake, when the carpenters ceased work. The prolonged absence of the boat had created uneasy thoughts in the minds of the men, but they did not reveal to each other their fears until they were ready to start for home. Through the dusk they could perceive the boat lying close to the opposite shore, and as they walked around the lake they hoped that the passengers had moored her and gone home. As they approached her, however, hope gave way to horror. There she lay, about half-a-dozen yards from shore, with her gunwale under water and her mast and sail a mass of wreckage. Entangled in the sail was a dark object. The darkness prevented the startled men from distinguishing it. But the overturned boat told a tale that needed no detail for corroboration. It was plain that both her late occupants had fallen victims to the cruel waves. Else they would have made their presence on earth known to their traveling companions of the morning.

Frightened and saddened, the carpenters hastened to the place where the team which conveyed them to the lake had been hitched so many fateful hours before. Another surprise awaited them here. The horses, doubtless terrified by the gale, had wrenched themselves loose. One was entirely missing and the other was seen a short distance away. But Stirling and Davis did not interfere with it. They started to the city afoot with their direful intelligence.

The carpenters reached Laramie about 10 p.m., and would-be rescuers hastened to the lake. Scrymser's body was found in the frigid water tangled in the sail. His pocket watch had stopped at 1:25. No trace of Dawson was found except for his water-soaked cigar case.

Hutton's lake, which occupies a depression on the prairie, probably was scoured out by the fierce winds which blew across the Laramie basin during the Pleistocene epoch. Those ancient winds were even worse than the gales which commonly blow across the plains now! The bottom of the lake is below the modern water table, so the depression is filled with ground water. The lake is shallow, mostly less than 25 feet deep, with a mud or sand floor covered by a thick mat of dense, long grass.

The lake is about 0.9 mile across in the east-west direction, and about 2/3rds of mile across from north to south. The water level falls during dry periods, so then the lake segments into a series of shallow, smaller lakes.

The search for Dawson's body became a major undertaking involving many men over the succeeding months. Local Judge M. C. Brown ran ads in *The Republican* offering a \$500 reward for the recovery of the body providing dynamite was not used. At first citizens from Laramie including teams of men from various fraternal organizations scoured the shores and dragged the lake, even

posting sentries for weeks on end to watch for the body when it finally floated up from the depths.

Dynamite blasts were detonated over the water on October 25th in hopes the concussions would dislodge the body from the entangling grasses on the bottom. A fully equipped diver was summoned from San Francisco complete with aide. Both arrived on October 29th via train. The diver was a German who went by the single name Dolph, and his assistant was Charlie Thompson. Dolph donned his heavy gear and worked off a raft manned by Thompson who operated the air pump. Dolph walked the bottom of the lake, claiming that the freezing cold water coupled with sucking mud and tangled grasses in some locations comprised the worst conditions he had ever encountered.

The lake was beginning to freeze over by November 11th. Ice extended 100 feet inward from the shore, and Dolph had to concede defeat. Once the lake froze over, Silas Schoonmaker, who was hired to watch the lake during the winter, and others ventured out onto the ice, cleared snow where necessary, and searched through the clear ice and water for the body hidden below. In desperation, Madame Mizpah, a medium, was hired in December to pinpoint the location of the body. Holes were chopped through the spots she selected and poles or dragging tools were used to attempt to find the corpse. *The Republican* reported that "Siberian blasts" drove the searchers off the lake on December 22nd.

Apparently the costs for the search were borne by Luther Fillmore, Dawson's father-in-law. In the meantime, Scrymser's funeral was held on October 18th. On the same day, Robert Homer was elected president of the bank and Otto Gramm was made acting cashier to be assisted by Arthur C. Jones, who was the assistant cashier. Dawson's funeral was held November 14th.

It is an enduring mystery that Dawson's body never was found. The treatment of the two bankers was handled with such Victorian delicacy and discretion by the Laramie press, the possibility that there was no body to be found in the lake was never raised in print.

The Bankers

Fred E. Scrymser was born in New York City in 1852. He came to Laramie where he found employment as a timekeeper for the Union Pacific rolling mill there, then was advanced to a management position. He went on to lease the property in 1884, and operated the mill under contract with the railroad. Scrymser became a director of The Wyoming National Bank in 1886, and its president in 1888. He was still operating the rolling mill at the time of his death.

Scrymser was unmarried. He had three brothers and three sisters, two of the sisters having drowned off the Atlantic coast before his own drowning. His youngest brother Henry was a seaman, and in 1891 was involved in the island trade between San Francisco and the Society Islands on a large yacht-like sailing vessel called the *Tabiti*. The boat was owned by a Mr. Leavitt, a lawyer in San Francisco and former U. S. Consul to Guatemala. Leavitt and Henry were sailing to San Benito, Mexico, at the time of Fred's death. Ironically, they and the *Tabiti* were lost at sea without leaving a trace at about the same time Fred drown at Hutton's lake.

Fred's remains were shipped to New York where they were interred in a family plot. He bequeathed his estate to his mother who was living in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Matthew Dawson was born in Woodstock, Ontario, February 21, 1859. He immigrated to Laramie in January 1881, where he was hired as a teller at The Wyoming National Bank. In May 1882, he was promoted to cashier. He married Jennie Fillmore of Laramie in 1889, and had fathered a daughter by the time of his disappearance.



Only surviving \$5 Series of 1875 state note from 491 sheets issued by The Wyoming National Bank of Laramie City, Wyoming. The note carries the signatures of F. E. Scrymer, president, and M. Dawson, cashier, both of whom perished on Hutton's lake October 16, 1891.

A Memorial Souvenir

Series of 1875 \$5 notes were issued from only two banks in the state of Wyoming. There are 15 reported specimens, 14 from The Stockgrowers National Bank of Cheyenne, charter #2652, that were in a hoard discovered several decades ago. Even though most of the Cheyenne notes are high grade, they were pressed at the time of discovery and sold into collections across the country. Undoubtedly more of them remain to be recorded.

The 15th specimen is the note shown here from The Wyoming National Bank of Laramie City, charter #2110. The eye-appeal of the Laramie note stands heads and shoulders above any of the Cheyenne specimens in terms of brightness, color and crispness. It looks as fresh and original as the day it was signed and cut from the sheet.

The note can't make a numismatic grade of Almost Uncirculated owing to three very hard, vertical quarter folds that show on the back. In fact, if you handle the note, your fear is that it might fall apart at the folds. Even so, the visual appearances of the Cheyenne notes pale next to it.

The Laramie \$5 is one of the all-time greatest Wyoming notes ever discovered, coming from a minute issuance of only 491 sheets bearing bank sheet serials 4351 through 4841. Serials 1 through 4350 were used on its territorial predecessors.

In comparison 5,035 sheets of \$5 Series of 1875 state notes were issued from the Cheyenne bank.

The Laramie notes were shipped to the bank between November 24, 1890, and January 23, 1892. The Cheyenne notes were sent between 1891 and 1900.

The plate used to print the Laramie notes was made by the Continental Bank Note Company as an Original Series territorial plate in 1873. Next it was altered at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing into a Series of 1875 territorial plate during the winter of 1876-7. Finally, in 1890, it was altered a second time, this time into a state plate upon the admission of Wyoming to the union.

The title of the bank was changed on January 28, 1892, by dropping City from the town name, but only \$10s and \$20s were issued in the Series of 1875 with the new name, and only 209 sheets of those before the corporate life of the bank was extended in May 1893.

I never expected to see an extant \$5 state note from the bank owing to the small number issued and the short period during which they were used. Besides, any note issued from Wyoming before 1900 represents a miracle of survival, and there just weren't many miracles.

Significantly, the Laramie note bears the signatures of F. E. Scrymser, president, and M. Dawson, cashier -- the down bankers. It is the only surviving note that bears their signatures.

The bankers at The Wyoming National Bank saved a few of their notes, and as a result were responsible for preserving most of the greatest early notes found from the territory and state of Wyoming. Most of those notes were retained within the bank regardless of who owned the bank or who signed the notes.

The Wyoming National Bank was reorganized as The First National Bank in 1895. The early notes passed to The First National Bank, and more were added to the group as the new bank received its various issues.

One individual who worked at both banks was Arthur Colley Jones (1858-1947), known locally as Archie. Jones emigrated from Ireland to Wyoming in 1882, following a brother, Christopher, who was ranching near the Little Laramie River. Jones found employment at The Wyoming National Bank in 1883. He was appointed assistant cashier in 1888, and promoted to cashier in 1891 after Dawson was declared dead. Jones became cashier and secretary of The First National when it came into being in 1895. He served as a director of the new bank for 54 years.

Many of the notes held by the bank became part of Jones' estate. One of the best was the Scrymser-Dawson note shown here. Clearly, someone at the bank had the foresight to put it away after the two men suffered their accident on Hutton's lake.

It is more than likely that the note was retrieved from the personal effects of one of them, because it has the look of a banker's pocket piece with its precise quarter folds and exceptional grade. There is little question that the note never circulated. It was simply signed, cut from the sheet, folded and put in a wallet or otherwise preserved.

The best part was that whoever carried it had the prescience to fold the face inward so that the trivial wear that it did sustain only affected the back.

It is fortunate for us that it wasn't on either man when he slipped below the surface of Hutton's lake on that fateful Friday in October 1891.

Sources of Information

The Republican, October 14, 16, 17, 19, 25, 28, 29; November 3, 7, 11, 13, 14, 20, 23; December 22, 29, 1891. Laramie, WY. ❖