

INTRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY 1930s newspapers and magazines followed the crimes, exploits, and misdeeds of Bonnie and Clyde, “Pretty Boy” Floyd, “Baby Face” Nelson, and John Dillinger. These desperadoes and criminals lived a two-year-long spree of bank robberies, kidnappings, and killings, eluding capture and arrest and even escaping from jail. Bonnie and Clyde prowled Oklahoma and Texas. Dillinger and his gang robbed banks in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Iowa—ten heists in a little less than a year. After robbing forty banks and committing ten murders, Charles Floyd was killed by an FBI agent. Nelson was a heartless criminal from adolescence on—car thief, bootlegger, bank robber. By the time he was shot down, he had killed several men, including three FBI agents.

These men and molls gone bad were really only smalltime thieves and thugs. In 1934 J. Edgar Hoover’s G-men got permission to carry and use guns. Before the year was out, the law killed every one of these criminals. Gangsters and mobsters still went about their business, but small gangs and lone operators were less frequently encountered. The crooks and thugs still around were not the flamboyant, riveting characters that these earlier outlaws had been.

But in March 1939, a young Wyoming desperado blazed on the scene like a meteor. As a result of his crime spree, which began with an elk poach, seven men died, including the desperado himself. It was over in a matter of days. But it caught the nation’s attention.

On March 13 near Cody, Wyoming, two game wardens stopped a car carrying Earl Durand, two teenaged friends, the father of one of the boys, and a trunkful of poached elk meat. As the car stopped,

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Durand jumped out and ran off into the night, rifle in hand. That night marked the beginning of Durand's last eleven days. The next morning he shot a rancher's calf, cutting out the tenderloin and eating it. That same day Durand was caught, arrested, tried, sentenced, jailed. But two days later he broke out, taking a deputy sheriff as hostage and making him drive to Durand's parents' farm. There he shot and killed two law officers who came to arrest him again. A posse searched for Durand for four days fruitlessly.

After hiding in the wilds for six days Durand made his way to several neighbors' farms, gathering food and more weapons. Early on the morning of the tenth day, he forced an elderly farm couple to drive him to the Beartooth mountains nearby. Soon a posse led by Sheriff Frank Blackburn approached Durand's hideout. Two hangers-on—not official members of the posse—broke out and ran toward Durand with the idea of killing him. Durand killed them instead.

At the search's climax, a posse of a dozen hunting guides and outfitters—all skilled marksmen—and a detachment of Montana National Guardsmen armed with a howitzer and mortar headed toward Durand's mountain lair. A plane armed with tear-gas canisters and dynamite bombs flew low through the canyon ready to flush Earl out. But, Earl had skedaddled after stealing an old deputy sheriff's badge from one of the men he killed. Impersonating a posseman, he flagged down a car and hijacked it, taking the driver and passengers hostage. Earl demanded they take him to the nearby town of Powell. After dumping his hostages outside of Powell, he drove into town and robbed the First National Bank of Powell, terrorizing the customers and staff. Another man was killed in the melee. Making his way from the bank to the car, Durand was shot by a high school kid kneeling in the doorway of a gas station across the street. Crawling back inside, Durand pressed his own gun to his neck, fired, and met his end there on the floor. The date: March 24, 1939.

Earl Durand's last eleven days left families, neighbors, and friends bereft. Park County was grief-stricken. The effects of the horrors rippled through the community.

Dramatic, unexpected, and with something of the inevitable about them, Earl Durand's last days led editorialists to predict that the story would become part of the lore and history of the country.

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The *Denver Post* described the events in literary terms: “The most imaginative creator of pulp melodrama never, in his wildest dreams, produced as wild a story as Durand lived in his last eleven days. If it had been portrayed on the screen, no one would have believed it could be real.” The writer went on to say, “To the saga of the wild west will be added tales of the strange lonely life of a 26-year-old mountain Tarzan who came back to civilization for a spectacular, bizarre exit. . . . Earl Durand. . . is destined to become a topic of folklore.” The *Cody Enterprise* struck the same theme: “The story will endure through future generations and will become a part of the saga of the west.”

Like so many predictions editorialists make in the heat of the moment, this one did not come true. People in the vicinity kept their views and opinions about the episode to themselves, and for good reason. The events were unpleasant. People did not want to offend. Neighbors did not find them a fit topic for conversation. As a result, the story pretty much faded from memory.

Still, vestiges remained. For years Cody’s Irma Hotel offered guests a souvenir local history newspaper. Each guest room at the Irma is named for a local notable, and the paper describes the life of each room’s namesake. One is named for Frank Blackburn, the much-respected sheriff of Park County, of which Cody is the county seat. Blackburn was the man who chased Durand to his undoing; the souvenir paper told the story and displayed the bizarre letter Durand left for Blackburn.

IN 1973 I WAS A PROFESSOR at Webster College in St. Louis, Missouri. I taught a course called “The Outsider and the American Dream,” in which students studied American culture and values from the point of view of outsiders and outlaws. The students read and discussed books about hoboes during the Depression, the lexicon of pickpockets, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, and a dozen other works—a typical multi-disciplinary American studies course. When we read some Zane Grey outlaw tales, a student said she knew a song that fit those stories’ themes. At our next class, accompanying herself on the autoharp, she performed “The Ballad of Earl Durand”—another vestige of the story. A 1960s singer of classic folk songs wrote it, a

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fellow who called himself Charlie Brown. Brown performed it for Broadside Records in 1967 on a record called *Teton Tea Party*. The song's seven verses, refrain, and a narrative recited between verses depicted Durand as a man misunderstood. Claiming that Durand was "born too late a mountain man" and "in an earlier time he'd have been a mountain man," the song is sympathetic toward Durand and one-sided in his favor. It portrays Earl as a man hounded "by the law's bloodthirsty hand." Fascinated by the story the song tells (incorrectly), I then studied newspaper accounts of these 1939 events in the *Denver Post*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *New York Times*. What actually happened was more interesting than the song's version of the story.

I wondered whether the people named in the newspaper reports might still live in the area, even forty years after Durand's spree of crime. The Cody and Powell telephone books confirmed my hunch. Several letters and phone calls later, I had arranged to interview some of the people who had taken part in the events. To see if the story was worth pursuing, in 1978 I took my wife and son to Cody to talk with the people, Ronnie Knopp among them. Sixteen at the time of Earl's spree, Ronnie was the young neighbor who perhaps knew him best. On a warm summer's evening our families met. (Ronnie's own son had never heard about Earl Durand and those days in his father's life.) Speaking freely, Ronnie talked about his friendship with Earl and what had happened to him during those eleven days.

When I turned the tape recorder off that evening, I could tell that if the other people I wanted to interview were as forthright and plainspoken as Ronnie was, I could recreate a rich piece of Wyoming history. As it turned out, they were. Between 1978 and 1981, I taped interviews with fourteen people in Cody and Powell and one in Billings, Montana, who played a role in the ordeal.

The hallmarks of historical writing are research, objectivity, and an accurate rendering of events and personalities. In writing of this kind, the author usually refers to the people in the account by name, or some designation, or with third-person pronouns: "he," "she," or "they." In this book's fifteen chapters, fifteen people who took part in the events describe their roles in what happened. Each speaks in the first person as "I." In this regard *The Last Eleven Days of Earl Durand* differs from

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most other accounts of actual events. Don't let the unusual form fool you; everything in this factual recreation really happened.

The fifteen speakers were not bystanders, observers, or mere commentators; they were participants. Nor was Earl an outsider; he was part of the community. He grew up in Powell. At the time of Earl's "bloody reign of terror" (as the *Denver Post* put it), the Durands were a well-known and respected family. Earl's father, Walter, was a successful farmer and a member of the Freemasons, having served as Worshipful Master of the Powell Lodge. Two of the Durand daughters were teachers at Powell High School. Mrs. Durand was well liked in the community. The family attended church every Sunday.

Eleven of the narrators I interviewed knew the Durands, knew Earl, or knew about him. Some were farmers and ranchers Earl had worked for. Some knew him as a generous neighbor who went out of his way to help in time of need. Three raps of a rifle butt against the front door, and they knew Earl was stopping by to say hello, see how they were doing. He was an infrequent but welcome visitor. Three of the people I interviewed knew him as teenagers and hunted or went "plinkin"—target shooting—with Earl. Others belonged to the Heart Mountain Gun Club and shot and hunted with Earl, too. His neighbors knew that he spent the spring, summer, and fall roaming alone in the mountains and lived in a tent beside his family's house for the winter. Some had run into him in the backcountry or the mountains and saw Durand's disregard of the rules of backcountry life. Because they knew Earl, the people I interviewed had much to tell beyond the newspaper accounts.

Based on my initial research, I wrote the first draft in the manner of the typical history book—chronologically ordered and from the historian's perspective—to lay out the sequence of events clearly for myself. But when I interviewed Ronnie Knopp, I could tell that the book would work best in the voices of the narrators. The next few interviews convinced me that this was so. The spoken word—the phrasing of the accounts, the anecdotes specific to the way of life and, hence, to the personalities of the people, the flavor of place, and the texture of the time—gave life to the Durand story. You could say that the interviews are the "woof" for this book, with documentary information woven into the "warp." Most of the text and information

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comes straight from the interviews I taped, transcribed, and edited for clarity. The newspapers reported facts that none of the people I interviewed mentioned or knew. I worked this information into the spoken text to create the impression of seamless conversation. Thus, the reader sees the events, and the observations and opinions about them, from fifteen points of view.

Forty years is a long time to recall events that flew by in a flash. Nonetheless, what these people told me corresponded with the newspaper accounts. Even so, the newspapers made several errors, overstating the number of possemen, for example. In addition, while the *Denver Post* lavished the appellation “Tarzan of the Tetons” on Durand, he did not resemble Tarzan in any regard, and the events took place nearly two hundred miles away from the Teton mountains.

The area Durand had himself driven to is called the Beartooth Plateau of the Beartooth Range. People in the area often refer to locations by the name of the drainage rather than the individual mountain, most of which are unnamed. This was the Clarks Fork drainage. Newspapers reported the name of the mountain where Durand faced the posse variously as Sawtooth Mountain and Beartooth Mountain. For convenience, I call the mountain Beartooth in the book.

EARL DURAND WAS A MAN out of step with his time. The community in which he grew up was a model of its type and time. Modern farming methods supported by an exemplary irrigation system, up-to-date schools, churches, fine people and social institutions: all these surrounded him. But Durand’s heart was in the mountains and in the ways of the mountain men. This bizarre, tragic history is a throwback to the clash of a bygone day between civilization and the wild man, a clash long gone by the late 1930s. Once these mountains had been a place where a man’s own desires governed his actions. The law was his own sense of right, his will, and his gun. Out of this old world of history and folklore, tragedy and melodrama, arose Earl Durand, bringing to life for a moment the old conflict. He was an embodiment, a manifestation, an incarnation of the archetype of the mountain man at the edge of civilization. His last eleven days changed the course of many lives. The seven dead left behind wives, children, mothers and fathers, and friends to live

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through loss, disgrace, and anger. The Durands soon moved to Jackson Hole, a world away from Powell. Ronnie Knopp left home for the Northwest, not to speak with his family for many years. The events seasoned the lives of many. The sad events in Powell the night of Friday, March 24—hundreds of people visiting the bank, crowds clustering around the possemen to hear their stories, more than a thousand citizens passing through the Easton's Funeral Home to see the body of the badman Earl Durand—did not speak well of our morbid curiosity. Around Powell the story reverberates, now a faded memory to some, stories in bits and pieces for others, a legend of a time, of a place and its people.