

Old Sykes

Excerpted from Wylie Sherwin's Journal by Russ Sherwin

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There is so much to tell about “Old Sykes” that I hardly know where to begin. Sykes could easily go down in any man’s book as the “most unforgettable character I’ve ever met.” Physically he was about five-10 or -11 and he weighed about 220 pounds. Oh, he was a powerful man! And there are so many stories about his feats of strength that I won’t have space to relate near all, but I will give you some later. Right now I want to complete my picture of the man. Sykes at this time was well past sixty,¹ but even so, his hair was blond, very fine like a baby’s and although it was definitely thin, he was not in any way bald. Rather I should say that it had always been thin. It was cut rather scraggy for he was his own barber.

The first time I ever saw the man he wore a canvas patch over the left eye, a “breech clout,” moccasins, and a forty-five six-shooter. And that was his usual summer garb. The patch over the left eye was the result of an accident while chasing horses. The eyeball was pierced by the limb of a tree some years before. In winter he wore buckskin pants and coat made by himself from his own traps.

Sykes was a hermit. He lived alone in a one room log cabin on his homestead². The cabin was on a hill, the highest place on his land and from there he could see the entire half section. His piece of land was in Wyoming but bordered on the Montana line³. It was fenced with a six-wire fence [that] was kept tight and in excellent repair. Inside his fence there were no less than a dozen springs and two nice ponds and very good grass due to the springy condition there. Outside there was no water and practically no grass.

Sykes had a team of horses, a black and a gray. They were always as fat as pigs and about the only use they were was to haul a little wood for the cabin now and then, and one trip a year to town. As I said before, the entire place could be seen from the cabin and when Sykes wanted the team, he merely stepped outside and fired his gun in the air to attract their attention and let out a war whoop and here they would come on a dead run. They were always rewarded with a bit of grain and so they always came.

Sykes had come to the state as a young man and as part of the surveying crew which surveyed the line between the two states. He had spotted his claim then and returned later to settle on it.

¹ The 1900 census recorded E. F. Sykes and gave the month and year of his birth as Jan 1854, age 46, and the place of birth was Michigan. This according to Diane Scannell’s research. See books and links.

² We visited the remains of Sykes cabin in July of 2008. It is in remarkably good condition considering it is at least 120 years old. I have corrected some minor details about the cabin with some observations from that trip, but it is accurate for the most part. The cabin faces east and can be seen easily from highway 37, about a mile to the west, just south of the Wyoming/Montana line.

³ The actual Wyoming-Montana line is about a half-mile north of the cabin.

That must have been some forty years before I knew him. He hadn't always been a hermit. The man's early life was a complete mystery, and although I knew him for fourteen years, and probably was the closest friend he ever had, never once did he mention a wife or children to me. Yet people who knew him years before say he had a wife, or at least a woman, when he came there. She was supposed to have been an Indian and later they had two boys. I was never able to contact anyone who had ever talked with either the woman or the kids, but they were seen in or about the cabin by some who chanced that way. People were not nosy in those days, and knew no more of a man's business than he chose to tell, and from what I knew of Sykes in these later years of his life, that would have been very little.

Now what happened to this woman and her children no one ever knew. Even later, when I knew the man, it wasn't unusual that no one saw him for months on end. For his cabin being in the middle of his place, and the gates closed, and him being the unfriendly type, you just didn't bother him. And so as I said no one ever knew what happened to the family. But it was about that time that three new graves showed up, just north of Sykes fence, just outside, and so just outside the State of Wyoming. There was one large mound and two small ones with a flat stone for a headstone for each. But there were no names. The graves were protected from wandering stock by a pole corral-like enclosure. Now it was known that there had been a sewing machine in the cabin and naturally some things that a woman and children would have, but from that time on no one ever saw the sewing machine or any other evidence that there ever had been a woman or kids on the place. And Sykes never mentioned them and so far as I know no one ever made so bold as to ask about them. Of course, there were rumors aplenty. Some had it that he killed the entire family in a fit of rage. Others thought they all died that winter from fever or disease of some kind. But no one knew, and to this day they still don't. Maybe the graves were just dummies, who knows? They are still there though, and untouched⁴.

I said I was probably one of the closest and certainly one of the few friends the man ever had. I was but fifteen when we first met, and him in his sixties. George and I were hunting ducks, and as I have said, Sykes place was well watered and as he never allowed anyone on there, it was alive with ducks in the fall. I had seen the man earlier that summer and I had heard hundreds of wild tales about him. How he took pot shots at strangers who came on his land, and various other unfriendly habits of his. But we were just boys and I didn't think he would hurt us. We had tried all the other likely places for ducks, so I suggested we go by there. You see, it was only a couple of miles from our place. We were on foot and we had this one twelve-gage single-shot shotgun. Well, we came to his fence and crawled through and headed for the cabin. We were careful to steer clear of the ponds so as not to scare the ducks and so we wouldn't be suspected of hunting without permission.

We came to the cabin without incident and were about to rap on the door when it opened and Sykes stood there. He said, "How!" like an Indian. We said, "Hello." And before we could say any more, Sykes said, "What day of the week is it?"

"Sunday," I said.

"What date?"

"September 29."

"Good. Come in."

⁴ And the graves are still there in 2008, unmarked.

That was my first meeting with Sykes. I learned as I saw him more that that was the way I would always be greeted, and it didn't matter whether you went there or he came to our place, as he got so he would do later, he always said "How! What day of the week is it?" and I learned why. He

kept his own calendar and as he didn't see people for long periods of time, this was his check on his own record of time. As he said himself, "If I don't ask first thing I forget it." And so we were taken inside the cabin. We leaned the gun against the wall outside.



Photo: 1 - Syke's Cabin can be seen from State Rte 37, just south of the Montana line, looking west. The ponds Dad refers to are behind the cabin to the left and still exist. The site is being considered for preservation by the Bighorn Canyon NRA.

Sykes was dressed in the usual buckskins and his forty-five hung low on his right hip and was tied down with a thong around his leg. The cabin was about twelve by twelve, made of heavy logs, with a small high window in [the south wall and another in the rear opposite the door]. You stepped over a log sill about a foot high to enter and the floor inside was lower than the ground outside, for it was the ground itself, and from long use it had been worn away and hadn't been

replaced. However it was hard and well-packed and practically dust-proof, from grease that would be spilled there over the years. Don't get the idea it was dirty though, for that was not the impression I got at all -- just long use. And anyway, there wasn't much of this floor to be seen. The cabin was too small and there was too much in there. In the [left] corner [as you came in the door] there was a small cook stove, the kind we call a "sheep-herder stove" with four lids and a small oven. The legs were gone and the stove sat on a sort of hearth made from flat rocks leaving room around the side to set things to warm or dry out. In the corner by or behind the stove was the wood box and over this on the wall a few very old looking iron frying pans and pots and a battered up old dishpan with a black old dishrag made from overalls spread to dry across it.

There were no chairs and Sykes told us to sit on the bed. The bed was a built-in bunk in the back corner, but the room was so small that you could practically sit on it and warm your feet by the stove. In the front opposite the stove there was a sawed length of log on end for a water bucket to sit on and beside it there was an old wash pan. The high door sill was used for a wash bench, I found out later. On a



Photo: 2 - Interior of Old Syke's cabin as we found it in 2008. The remains of the bed frame are in the NW corner.

nail beside the water bucket there was a hand towel, grimy but having the appearance of having been freshly washed. This was made from half a grain sack. Seamless sacks, we called them.

Do you get the picture so far? There is lots more, for this cabin was really packed and I thought of the stories about a wife and two boys.⁵

On the [south wall] there was a table made from hewed poles. It was high, more like a bench, about four feet long and two feet wide. I suppose this was more in the nature of a work bench for it was too high for comfortable eating, and anyway, Sykes always ate with his plate in his lap, either sitting on the door sill or the bunk. This bunk was rather ingenious, I thought. The corner of the cabin made two sides and the other two were framed with poles. One leg is all it required. The bottom then was rawhide thongs laced back and forth like a snow shoe. This lacing had been done wet and was as tight as a fiddle string yet springy. For a mattress he had a canvas pad filled with deer hair. Deer hair, you know, is hollow and stiff and the very best of insulation. Then along with this he had an old tarp and a pair of old blankets.

At the foot of this bed there was a large oak barrel. This was where he did his tanning and the barrel was usually filled with deer hides in one stage or another of the process. Sykes made wonderful buckskin and I still have some of it around⁶.

On the [rear] wall between the bed and stove there were a couple of pegs, and here, hung high and smelling the same, was his harness and saddle, halters, ropes and other equipment, for this was the only building on the place. After all, the man had only been there forty years and these things take time, you know! Over the bed there was a hanging shelf. This was loaded to the ceiling with sacks of things and rolls of things and other things, and bulging from under the bed there were boxes of garden tools with home-made handles, rolls of deer hides, and various other things. I happened to notice that one box contained old magazines, so I asked him if he liked to read and he said he did. After that I always brought him old magazines and rags, and he seemed glad to get them both.

I know I haven't mentioned near all the things there were in that cabin for the walls and ceilings were fair dripping with furs, seed corn, sacks of dried pemmican and jerky, beans and other dried edibles. Sykes was almost entirely self sustaining, both as to food and wearing apparel and other essentials as well. He made jerky from venison and he made pemmican from everything from rabbits to ducks or muskrats to woodchuck or porcupines. He had a few plum trees and crabapples and wild berries. For sugar, he could always find a bee tree. He dried his fruit for winter and made berry jam using honey. He raised Indian corn which he used green in summer and pounded for meal in winter. He usually had a small patch of wheat that he threshed by hand and used for flour, and his clothing was hand-me-downs from the animals he caught.

Sykes did make one trip each year to the county seat. That was Basin, Wyoming. He always went to pay his taxes and bring back his years supply. He had to have salt, and he usually

⁶ On tanning days, Sykes would put up a sign at the gate to his property, "Tanning today – No visitors". This was because he always did his tanning in the nude. This is from NPS archives, and from other accounts of Frank Sykes.

brought some alum and Blue Vitriol. The last two he used in tanning, and sometimes he would buy a sack of flour. This he claimed was to get the sack, not the flour.

It was on one of these annual trips to town that he got caught in a terrific windstorm. The wagon bed was blown off and landed on top of Sykes, resulting in several broken ribs and a badly sprained back. He managed to get things together again and got home, then before lying down, he rigged a rope above the bed to pull himself up again. No one knew about it until he was up and about again.

But we were hunting ducks. After visiting with the old fellow for a while and listening to some of his yarns, we got up nerve enough to broach the subject of duck hunting on his ponds. Sykes seemed to have enjoyed having us kids there and someone to talk to. He laughed a lot at his own jokes and he could really tell the yarns, so we were somewhat surprised when his whole attitude changed at the mention of hunting. He didn't say anything for a while, then, "I'll tell you boys, I have never allowed anyone to fire a shot on my place. I want the ducks here. I trap the ones I need to eat, but I'll get you a duck to take home. Come with me." And he went out the door.

We started off toward one of the ponds. I was on one side of Sykes and George on the other. We had barely started when he stopped, looked from one to the other of us, and then asked us both to walk on his right. He said, "I never allow anyone on my blind side." And he didn't smile when he said that.

When we came close to the pond we detoured to keep in a draw and behind a clump of willows. We crawled close to the water and could see through the brush that there were three hens and one drake about one hundred feet up along our shore. Sykes parted the willows carefully, then drew his six-shooter and fired. He blew the head clear off the drake, put his gun back and walked over and fished the duck out. "Here," he said, "you can have this." And like an Indian, he turned and walked off. He didn't say goodbye, come again, go to hell, but we went home.

I had been quite impressed with the old hermit. I enjoyed his stories and I wanted to hear more. Not just yarns, but facts of the early days and of his early life, and I felt that he was really lonesome and would respond to a little genuine kindness and interest in him. So I went back there many times that fall and winter, sometimes with some of the other boys of the neighborhood or with George, but mostly alone. But I never took a gun onto his place again. If I was hunting rabbits or ducks or deer, I always set my gun by a fence post before going on to the cabin.

Our friendship grew. I learned that Sykes had been born in the North Woods. He had been in a logging camp school a few months a year until he was twelve years old. He ran away from home then and got a job backpacking supplies for timber surveyors. He was large for his age and very strong even then. He wandered west and lived with the Crow Indians for a good many years. I gathered that even after he took his claim, he still spent much time with the Indians, but that was as far as he ever traced his life for me. He spoke of incidents of his later life, but the chain was broken, and even his early life story was completely unrelated to any certain place or named person. Never [spoke of] a town, a river or a lake by name, and maybe Sykes wasn't his real name either.

Rumor had it that there was a cave in the hills back of his place where he had all sorts of things cached including his wife's sewing machine and other [of her] belongings as well as three thousand dollars in cash which he was known to have received for a claim he once sold. At least no one ever could figure where he could have spent it, and he didn't trust banks. He received a few dollars each year for tanning hides, and for fur he caught, and also some of the cowboys used to have him braid hair ropes, hackamores, or cinches for their saddles. The money received this way was adequate for his few needs.

These hills are of limestone and I myself have found and explored dozens of caves there, but none that showed any signs of being used in that way. One time, much later, when Sykes was feeling rather old he said, "Boy" (he always called me "Boy"). "Boy, when I am through with this place I want you to have it."

I said, "You won't be through with it for some time." And we started talking about things that had been never mentioned before and he mentioned his cave for the first and only time as far as I was concerned. He said, "When my time comes, I will head for my cave and I will die there where no one will ever find me." I said, "But suppose you don't have time?" He replied, "I'll have time all right, and everything is ready." I gathered from that that the cave must be close by, but no one has ever found it. And Sykes, well, he wasn't able to carry out his plans. I'll tell you about that later.

Sykes had the reputation of never having entered another man's house or eating his food. Why this was so I never found out, but I was able to get him to break that precedent. Once when I was at his place, he had a kettle of stew on cooking. He never ate but one meal a day and that usually in mid-afternoon. It came time to eat and the stew was done. It was a bitter cold day and storming outside and I was asked to eat. The stew was good. Lots of vegetables and some small animal, for the bones were small, but I never knew what the meat was. When I left I said, "You must eat with me some time," and it was left that way.

I guess it was the next fall at threshing time. We were short of help and I thought of Sykes. Dad said he wouldn't come, but I said, "We'll see, anyway." So I went over and asked him. He said sure, he'd help out when we wanted him. I told him the day and left. In those days we were still using the old horse-power machines and it took lots of men and lots of horses to do the job and if you didn't have a pretty good crop, between the horses and the men, they ate it all up.

Sykes came and we wanted him to haul the grain from the machine to the bin. It wasn't far, only about forty yards in fact. We had two wagons and the plan was to put a bushel of wheat, 60-pounds, in a sack, set it in the wagon and then another and another until there was perhaps thirty bushels. Then Sykes was to drive to the bin and empty those sacks while the man at the machine filled another wagon. But that was not the way he did it. He grabbed each sack as it was filled, swung it up on his back and trotted to the bin and back for another. By keeping a good fast trot he could keep up with the machine and he kept up that pace all day long. He was not a young man and we were afraid he would collapse, but he would do it no other way and wouldn't admit he was tired.

Because we were afraid he wouldn't come in the house, we had one table in the yard where several of us ate. But at any rate, he did eat our food, and one time when he came there on an errand, I got him to step inside, but he would not sit down.

One time I went over to see if I could get him to tan some deer hides for me. But he said he couldn't because he had his barrel full. I said, "I have a big oak barrel over at our place and I'll bring it over to you."

"No," he said, "I'll come after it." The next day here he came on a jog trot. That is the way he always traveled if he was going any distance. He seemed to use the ball of his foot and traveled with lots of spring in his stride. It looked so effortless. After the usual salute: "How! What day of the week is it?" just as if I hadn't been over there the day before, he announced his errand, the barrel, of course.

"But," I said, "I thought you would come with your team." "Too much trouble," he said, "I'll carry it." He had a rope and he arranged a harness explaining that he had carried barrels half that large full of pork further than that. I mentioned that he was much younger then, too, but that didn't stop him. The rope harness was placed on the barrel and loops fixed for his arms with a cross on his chest and a band on his forehead. He knelt down with his back to the barrel, drew the ropes tight, got to his feet, made a slight adjustment and took off. Same jog trot.



Now an oak barrel like that one weighs about sixty pounds and is very big and awkward. I would hate to carry one from the house to the barn. But I could see that old fellow for over a quarter of a mile, which was slightly uphill, and he never slackened his gait.

Dick Abbot had a small team of mules. It was mid-winter and one mule died in the barn. Dick harnessed the other mule and tried to pull the dead one out to drag it away, but the yard was slick and the live mule couldn't pull the dead one. It was then that Sykes showed up. Again he rigged a harness out of ropes for himself, notched the frozen ground for toe holds, and with Dick on his back for ballast, he pulled the mule out of the barn.

One fall day, I had saddled my horse and was riding out the north gate when a young fellow came along on a sorrel mare. The poor mare was skin poor and her feet were so sore she could hardly walk, but through it all, her breeding showed and I judged her to be a very well bred American Saddle⁷. I waited a moment for the man and horse to come up. He was a total stranger and obviously not a horseman. I judged from his clothes and the way he handled his mount that he was from the city, and when he came up he asked if I could tell him where Mr. Frank Sykes lived. I said, "Sure. I am going that way, or at least part way myself." He said, "Do you mind if I ride along?" "Of course not," I replied, "let's go!"

⁷ Nowdays, I think this is called an American Saddlebred.



Photo: 4 - A modern American Saddlebred horse.

As we rode along he gave me his story. He claimed to be a son of Sykes sister, which I never knew he had. He also told me that he had ridden that poor mare all the way from Oregon and that Sykes didn't know he was coming, nor had he ever seen Sykes or had any communication with him. But he was the Nephew coming to claim the long lost Uncle. And I thought, "Oh, Boy! There are going to be two pretty surprised people, and of the two, I shouldn't want to be the Nephew." I rode as far as the gate and showed him in, then went my way.

I didn't hear any more about it for some time but as I rode by I did notice the Sorrel mare in the pasture with Sykes' horses. So one day I stopped in. I told Sykes I had directed the Nephew that way and asked if he got there OK. Boy! Did he ever blow up! He said he had

never heard of the fellow before and he was no kin of his. He hadn't allowed him to stay on the place an hour. The mare was unable to travel further so he had allowed him to unsaddle her and turn her loose there, but only after the fellow had signed a bill of sale turning the mare over to Sykes as a guarantee for her pasture at the rate of two dollars a month and if not redeemed within 12 months, the mare was forfeit. Likewise, saddle and bridle.

It was the next spring or early summer and one day I saw a man coming on a jog trot and I knew it was Sykes. I could tell he was hopping mad as far as I could see him, and that was once he forgot to ask, "What day of the week is it?"

"That g... d... s... of a b... of a mare!" he said. "She has got my horses so I can't catch them. When I call them to me, they all come but she breaks and runs and takes the team with her. Now they won't even come when I call." And here again he called her every foul name he could think of and included the would-be Nephew. So I saddled my horse and went over and corralled his horses for him, and he caught the sorrel mare and said, "Here, take the s... of a b... You can have her. Take saddle, bridle and all!"

I said, "But what if that fellow comes back for her?" "Send him to me," he said, "but don't let him have the mare until I say so."

I took the mare and right away I fell completely in love with her. By now she was fat and round and fully recovered from her terrible trip. She was a purebred American Saddle and beautifully gaited, and as kind and affectionate as a kitten. But my joy in her was short lived, for the owner came along a few months later, just before the year was up. He had come by train to Lovell,

rented a horse there and rode into our yard one morning just as I had caught the mare to use. He was quite indignant at finding me using her and demanded her at once.

“I am sorry,” I said, “but I got this mare to use from Sykes, and his instructions were not to turn her over to anyone but him or without permission from him. But, I’ll ride over there with you if you like.” This he was reluctant to do, but failing to get the mare from me, he finally agreed to.

Sykes made no trouble. He brought out the paper and handed it to me. I read it out loud and with much grumbling the fellow handed Sykes \$24 and I gave him his horse and he rode away. Sykes gave me the money, but I said, “That doesn’t belong to me.” “It sure does,” he said. “If she had stayed here I’d have killed her.” And he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Jim and Claude Kelsey were coming from the Dry Head with about one hundred cattle. It was late at night when they reached the Sykes place. The cattle were tired and dry and hungry. It was still several hours to the Kelsey Ranch, and so, without permission, Jim opened the gate to Sykes place and let the cattle in to water and graze a while. He and Claude stayed between the herd and the cabin to keep them from scattering, but that was hardly necessary for once they had their fill of water and a few bites of grass, they all bedded down. The boys caught a few hours sleep and before daybreak they roused the sleepy herd and, pushing them out the gate, moved on toward home. Sykes was nowhere to be seen and they thought they had really pulled a good one.

But you can’t start that many cattle moving without quite a good bit of noise. Sykes had been aroused [that night] but he thought the cattle were outside his fence. However, at daybreak, he walked over there anyway and saw what had been going on. He followed just far enough to see who had taken the liberty to use his pasture without permission, then without being seen, returned home.

Jim was a rough-and-ready devil-may-care sort and he got quite a kick out of telling how they put one over on old Sykes. It was about a year later when Jim was by that way again. This time he was looking for cattle and he rode in to ask Sykes if he had seen any stock hanging along his fence. Sykes was barely civil, but replied that he had seen none. So Jim said, “What’s the matter, Sykes. Aren’t you going to ask me to stay and eat?”

“Sure,” said Sykes. “Get down.” And Jim did. Sykes motioned him inside. He took a tin plate out and put it on the table, reached down by the stove and got a kettle of cold boiled potatoes, heaped them on the plate, then pulled out his gun and said, “Now, damn you! Eat!” And Jim started to eat. The spuds were small and cooked with the jackets. There was nothing to put on them or eat with them, not even salt. But Jim ate. Then when he thought he had done his part, he heaved a sigh and said, “Gee, thanks, Sykes. That was fine.” But Sykes thumped his gun on the table and said, “Clean them up, every last one.” So Jim ate, and in telling about it later, he swears there were at least ten pounds of those spuds. And when he had finally cleaned up the last one, Sykes said, “Now go! And don’t ever open my gate again. And don’t ever say I refused to give a hungry man a bite to eat!”

Old Sykes was pretty good as a veterinary. We frequently went for him when we had a sick horse or a wire cut. He was always glad to come and I think pleased to be called on. The last

time I saw him he looked very much as he had the first, although fourteen years⁸ had passed. For several years I had been farming the home place and I hadn't had time to spend the day over there as I used to do, but I still dropped by there whenever I could. Then we decided to move to North Fork and time was short. In my haste and with so much to do I neglected to go and tell the old man goodbye. A renter moved into our place and we moved off.

It was some time after that that Sykes showed up at the ranch one evening. He came to the door and asked for me. The new people had heard all the wild tales about the old man and were afraid of him. They told him I wasn't there anymore and he turned and left. About a week later, one of the boys from The Dry Head dropped in there to get a hair rope that Sykes was making for him. Sykes was lying across the bed, one moccasin on, one off, but otherwise fully clothed.⁹ He had been dead about a week they said. And it was warm weather. The authorities were notified and they simply dug a grave in front of the cabin, folded his tarp over him, and buried him there. So he never made it to his cave. I wonder what he came to see me about that evening, and was he sick then? Where is his cave¹⁰? And what are the graves? I wish I had the answers to these and all the other mysteries about Old Sykes.

The End

⁸ This doesn't compute. Dad couldn't have met him before about 1910, and Sykes died in 1921. So more like 10 or 11 years.

⁹ According to an account by Mrs. C. A. Thompson of Lovell, the former Lunita Lowe, it was Mr. Allen Lowe who found him.

¹⁰ Actually, the BLM maps of present day show a "Sykes Spring" and a "Sykes Cave", so perhaps someone found the cave, or what they thought must be the cave.