

# The Story of Lincoln [Linc] Hannan

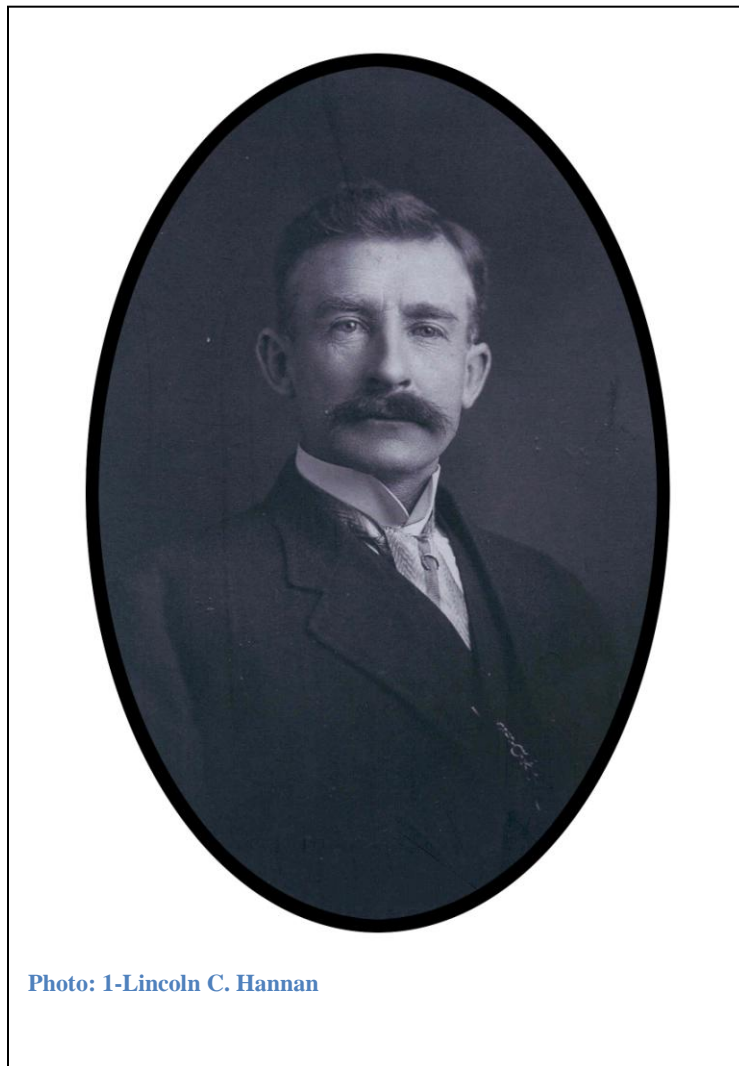
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*This story is taken from Wylie Sherwin's Journal, which he wrote in the 1950s about his early days from 1909 to 1920 as a cowboy in the Bighorn Canyon area of Wyoming and Montana. It is true, as far as I know, and is entirely Wylie's own narrative. I transcribed it from his handwritten journals and have not changed anything except incidental spelling and punctuation. Wylie Sherwin (1895-1967) was my father.*

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Lincoln "Linc" Hannan settled on a small creek that was little more than a spring in the south end of the country about five miles north of Lee Ewing's place. His claim was just above where this little creek, Davis Creek, entered a canyon on its way to the Bighorn canyon, and sat astride the main cattle trails through the Dry Head. So you can readily see what a thorn in the side of the ranchers he would be, and most of all, Lee Ewing and Frank Strong.

Linc Hannan was medium build, very dark of skin, with steel blue eyes, about thirty-five years of age. He walked with a quick and easy stride, the type of man that would vault a fence rather than open a gate. As a homesteader, he comes under the type who expected to make a ranch of his claim. He took the claim knowing full well he would be resented and at the same time hoping to overcome that resentment and become one of the ranchers and [be] among friends. But he never had a chance. He was an interloper from the beginning and at first he was given the old silent treatment. But Linc went about his business of homesteading. He built a cabin and corrals and he brought his wife and two small children, one a boy of three, and a baby girl to their new home. And then he started to fence the creek bottom. He left room for stock trails below his fence, and he purposely left some water outside so that he could not be accused of hogging a water hole.



The second year, Linc was able to break some ground and start a meadow. It wasn't much, only about ten acres, but by now he had a couple of milk cows and about a dozen range cows, a team and a couple of saddle horses, and his hopes were to raise enough oat hay to feed them during the worst winter weather. His prospects looked good until in August he found his fence down one morning and some range cattle in his grain. They had eaten and tromped down a good deal of his hay, and when he ran them out he found several posts on a sharp ridge had been broken off. These posts had been snapped off at the ground and were broken toward the outside. Obviously, someone had roped them and jerked them over with a saddle horse.

Hannan cut what was left of his crop and hauled it to the corral. It was some time later that fall when Linc went out to get his team and he found the outside gate open and all four horses gone. From their tracks, they had gone out the gate and up the trail on the run, as though being driven or scared. And Linc was left afoot. He scouted the nearby country all day, but no sight of his horses. And so, for several days he watched the water hole for their return. He left the gate open so that if they should return, they could come in, and this meant that he was continually running stray cattle out on foot. But one morning the horses were there. They had come back in the night, from wherever they had been chased.

It became harder and harder to keep the fence up until finally Linc got two big dogs and trained them to run the strays out. They liked their work so well that they not only ran them out, they frequently jerked their tails off, and soon the outside cattle gave that place a wide berth.

Things went from bad to worse, and one day, the following spring, Linc saw a bunch of about a hundred steers coming over the ridge. There were three men with them and as they came closer, he saw that it was Frank Strong, Lee Ewing and Ed Morris. They brought the cattle down to the fence where the water was and they dropped them there. Linc mounted his horse and rode out to talk to the men.

As friendly as possible, he asked Lee, "Where are you taking the steers?"

And Lee replied, "Right here."

"But," said Link, "there isn't that much field around here."

"That's my worry," said Lee.

"Well, it's mine, too," said Link. "I have a few head of stock myself, and if your steers clean this up I won't have any range for my cattle at all."

"You catch on fast," said Lee. "That's the idea."

"I see," said Link. "You are going to eat me out. Well, we'll see." And he rode back to the corral.

Frank and Lee and Ed stayed close by all afternoon, holding the cattle along Linc's fence and on the water. They were still there at dark and Linc had to take the dogs inside to keep them quiet for they were anxious to get at those stray cattle.

Next morning when Hannan looked out, he was not surprised to see that the whole bunch of steers was inside his fence. The fence had been cut on the creek below the house, and just above the little canyon. Linc had kept his own stock in the corral for he had expected this.

“Well, Alice,” he said [to his wife], “It looks like we have a job to do. Can you help me run those steers out?”

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“Well, we are going to run those steers off,” Said Linc. “And we will have to give them a good enough run so they won’t come right back.”

So while the children still slept, Linc and Alice rode out. They took the dogs and they kept out of sight of the cattle as they rode up the north side of the creek, for those steers were fresh and plenty wild this morning. They would stampede easily, so when Linc and Alice came out of the brush, it was well above the cattle, thus making sure they would go out the way they came in and not tear down any more fence. They moved easy at first, and held the dogs in check. One steer after another threw up his head and trotted back to the main bunch, and in no time, every steer had seen the riders and turned to go toward the break in the fence.

It was then that Linc gave the dogs the word, and at the same time, Alice and he put spurs to their horses and, letting out a war whoop, charged down on the herd. And it was then that an entirely unpredictable thing happened. As the leaders went out through the down place in the fence, they should have followed the trail and turned slightly to left or right. But they did not. They went straight ahead between the two low rims of the creek canyon. The creek dropped off fast and the canyon walls were soon quite high. For a ways, the bottom was wide and brushy, but it soon narrowed down and from there to the Bighorn River far below in the canyon, there was only a deer trail. Deer, of course, use rather rough trails and will go down or up over a ledge that a man on foot would have trouble with, and they will go along ledges where no cow or horse could possibly find footing. For a mile, this little creek canyon was a series of slides and drops until it tumbled into the big one below.

Here was a herd of stampeding cattle headed down that canyon. Linc and Alice stopped at the fence, but the cattle and the dogs went on. Linc tried to call off his dogs, but with the noise of the stampeding steers and with the excitement, the dogs paid no attention.

“Now what have we done,” said Alice.

“God only knows,” said Link. “You better go back to the house. I’ll be there soon.”

Linc rode out along the rim of the canyon and looked down. The dust was rising in clouds, and he could hear the frightened bawling of the steers and the barking of the dogs. When he finally caught sight of the dogs, he was ready with his gun. He fired just in front of them to startle them and attract their attention, and then he was able to call them off. And he stood there, surveying the mess for a while. He could see that some of the herd had somehow made it to the bottom, others were crumpled up in the little canyon bottom, and still others were stranded on ledges.

Linc turned and rode back home. He was sick at the thought of what he had done, yet how could he have known? And certainly he had been provoked into doing what he had done. But Linc was not a man of violence. He had tried for three years to mind his own business. But now he had been forced into a situation from which there could be no peaceful way out. Linc braced himself for real trouble.

It was about noon when Frank Strong and Lee Ewing showed up. Linc watched from the corral as they rode the skyline looking for their cattle. They could see the entire creek bottom where Linc lived, but no cattle. They circled above the fence and down the ridge north of there. Finally, they came to the creek below and saw the trail where the cattle had headed into the canyon, and then they disappeared from Link's sight down the way the cattle had gone.

Linc went to the house and he and Alice had a long talk. Linc sat by the window where he could see the creek below, and he told Alice that he would take her and the kids out to Billings the next day. Alice, of course, would have none of that. She argued that she and the kids were not the ones in danger, and if Linc stayed, so would they.

Lee and Frank followed the cattle down the canyon and soon discovered what a mess they had to contend with. Of course, they felt that this was caused by Linc and his dogs, but I am sure they knew also that it was partly their own doing, for their scheme to eat Linc out had backfired, and where Linc expected Frank and Lee to retaliate in some very violent way, they in turn had learned a hearty respect for Link, and they didn't know to what extent he would go. They knew that Link, although a mild mannered man, always carried a sidearm and a thirty-thirty rifle when on a horse. Of course, they were armed too, and they both had men who worked for them and who were good reinforcements if needed.

While these men were mentally sizing up the situation, Linc probably was doing the same. And I am sure he felt he was one man against the whole bunch, for while thus far he had had no direct trouble with Wells, or the Phelps Ranch, he could be sure where their sympathy lay. And Barry, well he remained on the sideline and I am sure enjoyed it very much.

Frank and Lee could do nothing that day. They went home and came back early the next morning with a half dozen men to help. They found that there were thirty-two dead steers and a dozen more with broken legs that had to be shot. But that was only a portion of the damage, for none of the cattle could be brought out the way they went in. The Bighorn Canyon for miles was very narrow in the bottom, with small bars first on one side then on the other. Otherwise the walls were straight up at most places. It was about twenty miles of this down river to the mouth of Dry Head Creek, the first place where any cattle could possibly get out. The river averages about one hundred feet wide, and is very swift, and this was spring; there would be high water soon. It was not possible to get horses into the canyon, so it was planned to send four men down on foot. They would attempt to swim the cattle from bar to bar down the river until they reached the trail where they could come out.

Now about the only time a cowboy walks is when his horse sets him afoot, and that is the most embarrassing thing that can happen to him. So it was not easy to talk these boys into that kind of cowpunching. There would be no beds, no shelter, little food and lots of foot work. Besides, not a man in the bunch could swim, and none owned a pair of shoes. Riding boots would be pretty bad on the rocks and cobblestones of the river, so it turned out that Frank and Lee and Ed Morris, who was Frank's foreman, and one of Lee's boys, were the ones to make the try.

No one knew how long this would take or how successful it would be, but certain it was, that once started, the men at least would have to keep going until they reached Dry Head Creek. They could not come back up stream.

The first day, they were able to shove the steers off the bar at the mouth of Davis Creek, and they swam down river about a hundred yards, coming out on the same side they went in, but below a ledge. The men were able to make their way along this ledge and shove the cattle in again, but this time they came out on a bar on the east bank, and it would be necessary for the men to cross over before they could push them further. However the steers were where there was some feed and they would be all right for a couple of days. So the boys crawled out and went home that night. Their men on top had waited with the horses. Frank and Lee knew more about what they would want to work with now and they felt that the plan was at least feasible and had a good chance of success.

But they were smarting under their defeat, and they were loud in their declared intentions toward the “Son of a Bitch” who had caused all this. But just the same, they were careful to keep out of sight as much as they could, as they came and went by Hannan’s fence, and every man carried a gun. Had they but known it, no one was in any danger at that time, for they had all had enough and each was willing to give the other a wide berth.

The boys returned again next day with ropes, a few tools and axes, and some food. One man stayed on top to be a lookout and watch the horses. This man on the rim remained there throughout the entire trip. He was their supply man as well as lookout, and it was frequently necessary for him to climb down as far as possible and from there lower or drop supplies to the men below, who, with the aid of a raft and by crawling along ledges, were able to move the cattle less than a mile a day. Those wild steers became pretty docile before long and so sore footed they could hardly walk, for their feet were either in water or on rocks continually.

And so it was just one month to a day when the cattle finally swam ashore at the mouth of Dry Head Creek. Several had drowned and some had just quit, refusing to go any farther, so there were only about half as many came out as went in. And everyone should have been wiser as well as sadder and content to bury the hatchet, but of course, that couldn’t be.

Frank and Lee had set out to run Linc off, and although they certainly had gotten the worst of it thus far, they were not in any mood to admit defeat. Anyway, they had talked too long and loud. They couldn’t quit now.

Linc never relaxed his vigil for one instant. He was on guard constantly. And as spring moved into summer, he got so that he not only carried his six-shooter, but he made it a point to always have his thirty-thirty close by. If he was in the wagon, the rifle was in a scabbard in the front. Even on a mower or hay rake, the rifle was fastened close to him so that he could reach it. A six-shooter is good for short distances, but would not reach very far and Linc must be prepared for either.

Frank and Lee talked more and louder until late that summer they talked themselves into going after Link. They went to see the Phelps, and Charley said to leave him out, but Ma Phelps said,

“Not me! I’ll help run the Son of a Bitch out of the country.” And so she saddled her horse and came along. They stopped by for Dick Wells, who had already agreed to come along, and they stopped for Henry Dahlem<sup>1</sup> also. Henry had a claim and worked for various ranches and was in their good graces, but Henry said leave me out also.

And so the four, Ma Phelps, Lee Ewing, Frank Strong and Dick Wells started for Davis Creek. On the way they came across Ed Morris and he joined the party. I don’t think they had any real plan of action at this time, except to throw a scare into Hannan that would really stick and force him to take his family and leave. Of course, they were all well armed, and their tongues were well oiled, but when they were about to top the ridge where Link’s place lay, a couple of hundred yards below, they stopped and were reluctant to ride over the hill en mass. That, they said, would be just plain stupid, so they all dismounted and tied their horses to some juniper trees, for this ridge was pretty well covered with brush and rocks.

Ed Morris was a big man and the youngest of the bunch. He could easily have avoided this mess, but he loved a fight, and a chance to show off to an advantage before his boss, Frank Strong. I say he loved a fight, but maybe only when he was on the side where he had plenty of backing. I doubt if there was a man, and I include the one woman in the group, [who] would have been so brave if they had stood one to five. Ed, keeping a juniper bush for cover, peeked over the hill. It was mid-afternoon, and there below he saw Hannan on a mowing machine, cutting hay. He was at the far end of the field and would come much closer soon, but then when he turned so he was coming toward them, they saw that he had the little boy on his lap and they were talking and laughing. They were cowards, everyone, for none were willing to approach the man openly, but by now they were all laying where they could watch every move the man made and he did not know of their presence.

They watched him for over an hour and they could not agree on the mode of attack, and finally Lee could stand it no longer. He took careful aim across a rock and fired. He didn’t hit Linc and he claimed later it was a deliberate miss so Linc would separate himself from the boy, and that is what Linc did. There were several rather large rocks in the field, right close by, and Linc shoved the boy behind one of these, grabbed his rifle from its scabbard on the mower, and dropped behind another rock himself. About this time the gang on the hill opened up and the bullets would zing off the rock, but Linc laid low, and when the firing ceased, he made his way on his belly through the waist high oats to another boulder someone hundred feet away. He still hadn’t been able to see anyone, but he knew there were several of them, and so he kept quiet and waited, for he felt safe now where he was and he could see the boy hugging the rock where he lay.

There was an occasional shot now, but only from one gun and Linc figured maybe some were changing position in order to smoke him out from a different direction, and that is just what they were doing, but because they had figured Linc to be behind the wrong rock, they had exposed themselves and Linc got his turn.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Dahlem was the first sheriff of Park County, Wyoming. Later after these events, around 1924 he started a tourist camp called Red Star Lodge, just about 5 miles east of Yellowstone’s east entrance. The lodge, now known as Shoshone Lodge, is still operating. The name was changed by Dahlem in the late ‘40s because (the story goes) he felt the name Red Star sounded too “Russian”.



First he saw a black hat behind a rock. He fired and the hat disappeared, but almost instantly there were people everywhere. They had all jumped to their feet and took off. The hat was Strong's and there was a hole through the crown and a burned streak through Frank's hair. And that is when, as the stories had it later, Frank kicked a jackrabbit and said, "Get out of the way and let someone run that can!"

Linc emptied his gun and although no one was killed, Ed Morris got a bullet from the side that clipped the muscles of his back and brought him down. However, he was able to get out of sight and onto his horse. Everyone grabbed their horse and took off. Frank being the oldest was the last to reach his horse, and as he ran up, the horse broke loose and Frank was left afoot until someone noticed the loose horse and went back to look for him.

Hannan waited for some time, then stood up and when no one shot, he felt sure they were all gone, so he took the boy to the house where his wife had watched from the window. From where she was, she could see both Linc and the boy, so she hadn't been too worried. But when Linc said he was going to saddle up and see where they had gone, Alice protested. Linc said, "We can't sleep tonight if we don't know, and maybe I have wounded or killed someone who is laying up there on the ridge. I've got to know." And so he rode up there.

He didn't take a roundabout way, but straight up the trail for he could not leave the house without being seen if they were there, so it would do no good to try a sneak. But of course, they were all gone.

And now, when another scheme had backfired on them, Frank and Lee went to court and had Hannan brought to trial for attempted manslaughter. On the witness stand, when Hannan was asked if he was shooting to kill, he said, "I sure was, but I am not proud of my shooting." And Frank ran a finger along the wide part in his hair, and Ed had a twinge in his back.

The jury said "not guilty" and Hannan returned home. He was not molested after that. But a man cannot live and rear a family where he is not wanted. Humans must have friends. Life without neighbors is only tolerable when there are no people near enough to neighbor with. When Linc found a man who wanted his place, he gave up his dreams of a ranch in the Dry Head and sold out. Maybe this isn't the way it turns out in the movies, but this is a real live story where real men were acting and reacting according to the clay from which they were made.

Of course the Hannan incident didn't end homesteading in the Dry Head. They came and they went, most of them giving up and selling their claims to one of the older ranches, so that in the end, there were only a few more ranches than there had been to begin with.

***The End***