

# **POLLY BARTLETT, Wyoming's Amazing Poisoner**

*She had a sensual beauty and the spell of a she-devil, and she poisoned her victims with a laugh and a mad kiss.*

By Dean W. Ballinger

■ Carl Armentrout lay on the crude couch and wondered if he had suddenly slipped into a beautiful and exciting heaven. Six months of backbreaking work panning gold in western Wyoming and then on his way back to civilization on the afternoon of June 18, 1868 he had stopped at the Bartlett Inn, three miles east of South Pass City, Wyoming.

This inn was operated by old Jim Bartlett and his daughter Polly. Polly was in her twenties and something to look at in any place or city. She had a sharp, sexy face, hair done in side curls, as was the fashion in that year, a plump body and bouncing breasts. Armentrout took one look at her and all those sex dreams of the dreary and lonely days of panning gold exploded in his head.

Polly wasn't averse to encouraging such an explosion. After a dinner of buffalo steaks she took him to a side room and on the couch made exciting love to him. Armentrout was drunk from food, whiskey, and mad passion. Polly carressed his head and said, "Have another drink, honey."

Armentrout took a deep drink from the glass of whiskey. He was too intoxicated to notice the bitter taste. He reached for Polly, but suddenly strange and paralyzing pains racked his body. He screamed and stiffened and three minutes later he was dead.

Polly's father entered the room. Polly ripped the money belt from the dead victim's waist. It was heavy with gold dust. Polly said, "There's several thousand here. Got his grave dug?"

"I got it dug nice and deep," the father replied.

"All right, take him out and bury him," Polly ordered.

■ The murder of Armentrout followed the pattern of love and swift death practiced by Polly Bartlett and her father in that country of the Territory of Wyoming in those wild days. It was a pattern of well devised murder that was to have a strange and bizarre end.

This unsavory family had originated in Ohio. Bartlett operated a saloon in a shabby section of Cincinnati. Polly, who exercised an ominous domination over her father, was a barmaid; she also took the more affluent customers upstairs and while she loved these men her father looted their wallets and money belts.

In the spring of 1867 the Bartletts succumbed to the lure of fast and easy riches in the Colorado gold field. Accompanied by Hattie, who had lived with them since girlhood, they rode to Council Bluffs, Iowa on a train, then crossed the Missouri River on a ferry. In Omaha they purchased a Conestoga wagon. Late in

June they arrived in the area of the present town of Idaho Springs, Colorado, a rugged mining community in the Rocky Mountains.

They learned quickly that prospecting for gold was backbreaking, frustrating labor and that for everyone who struck it rich a thousand failed. In August they decided to go on to Oregon and establish a saloon.

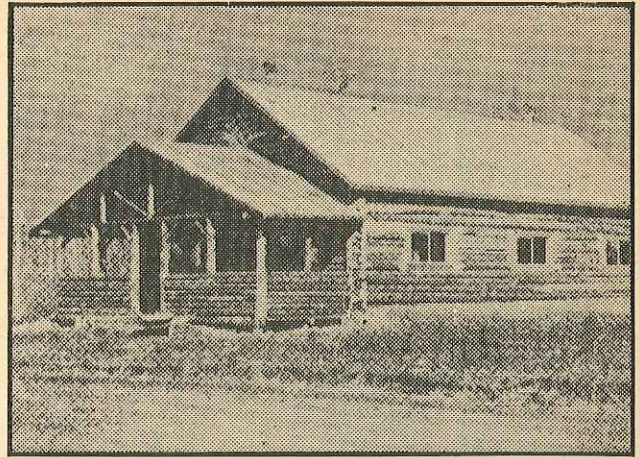
A few weeks later they encamped near South Pass City, Wyoming. While Hattie was preparing the evening meal a middle-aged man named Lewis Nichols rode up on a buckskin gelding.

"I ain't had a woman-cooked meal since I came to the goldfields," he said, alternating his gaze between Polly and the buffalo steaks in the skillet.

He offered to pay \$10 for the privilege of eating with the Bartletts — adding he could afford it as he had made a strike in the South Pass gold field.

■ The Bartletts stared open-mouthed while Nichols extracted a \$10 gold coin from a bulging leather poke. A few moments later, while Nichols' attention was focused on the steaks, Polly whispered to her father. He looked incredulously at his daughter, then he grinned.

What Polly had whispered to her father was a new plan to relieve victims of their money, a plan that had come to her with the realization that they were in the wide open spaces. In Cincinnati the police had been ready to pounce on them for any brazen actions.



Wyoming Historical Society.  
Remains of Bartlett Inn standing near South Pass City.

The father went to Nichols and started talking to him. Polly went to their wagon, dug under some clothes, and came out with a bottle of arsenic, which they had purchased in Cheyenne to sprinkle around their wagon and tent each night to keep the Rocky Mountain ticks away.

Polly emptied some of the powder in a whiskey bottle, and then proceeded to cook Nichols a meal of

Rare map of Wyoming, showing the old Oregon Trail where it passed South Pass City and Bartlett Inn.

Faye Smith Collection.

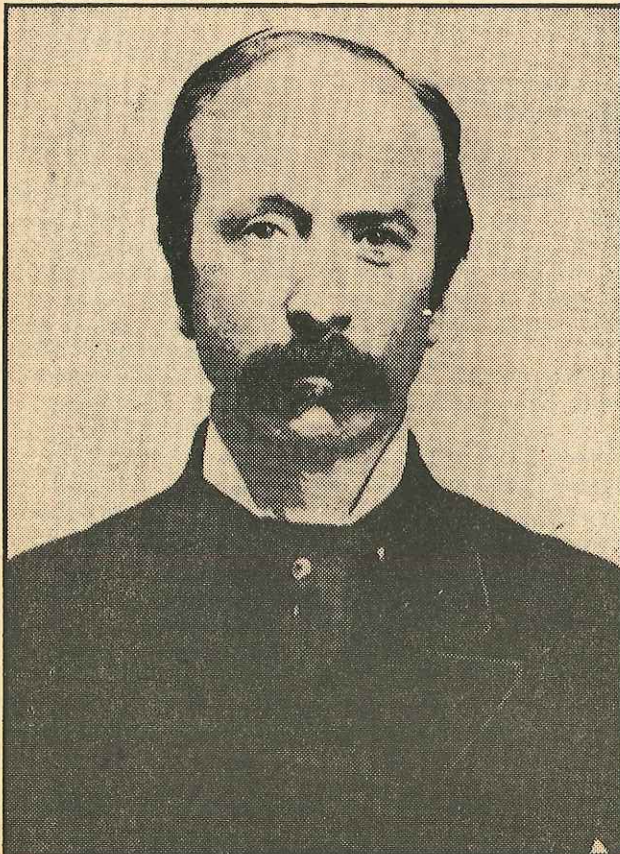




Courtesy Mrs. Dale Smith.

James Lee (above), one of Polly Barlett's intended victims. John Vaness (below) who fell for Polly's charms and made mistake of going to the barn with her.

John Cullen Collection.



buffalo steaks, potatoes and greens. When the meal was over, and Nichols felt full and happy, Polly took him some distance from the wagon for a love scene, in which Nichols was all eager to participate.

After the love scene, Polly gave him a drink of the whiskey. Five minutes later Nichols was dead and Polly had taken close to \$4,000 in gold coins and gold dust off his body. The father quickly buried the body.

When he got back from this chore he ran his fingers through the gold dust and the gold coins. "When we get to Oregon," he exclaimed, "we'll have money to live on . . ."

"We're not going to Oregon," Polly said. "We're going to stay here and open up an inn. And every time a rich man comes along by himself we're going to poison him. People will think he was annihilated by the Cheyennes, or by the white renegades who roam the area."

■ Within a week the Bartletts selected the site for their inn. It was a discreet choice and it portrayed Polly's astuteness. There was much traffic. The South Pass afforded the easiest passage over the Continental Divide to Green River Valley, Colter's Hell (Yellowstone National Park), the Three Forks of the Missouri on the north, to Bear Lake, Cache Valley, Ogden's Hole, the Great Salt Lake Valley, and the Pacific territories.

The town of South Pass City, 3 miles west of the inn's site, was among the nation's most important outposts on the frontier of western communications and transportation. Located on present Wyoming State Highway 28 between Rock Springs and Lander is now a ghost town of about 30 population. In 1868 it was the northern terminal for two stage lines connecting with the Union Pacific railroad at Point of Rocks, 80 miles south. It had 5 hotels, 17 saloons, 3 general stores, 2 bakeries, a weekly newspaper, 2 doctors who also functioned as dentists, and 2 undertakers who divided their time between the customers and their gold diggings. And South Pass boasted of the only woman Justice of the Peace, Esther Morris, mother of Woman suffrage.

Polly's decision to locate east of this thriving frontier town was no happenstance. The traffic was westbound. The Bartletts would have an opportunity to ply their evil scheme upon travelers before the gamblers and entrepreneurs in town could fleece them. Armentrout's and Nichols' money financed the construction and furnishing of an impressive log structure. Polly named it "Bartlett's Inn."

■ About a week after its completion a drummer named Timothy Flaherty, enroute to South Pass City, appeared at the inn. Polly plied him with whiskey and questions and after she learned that he was carrying about \$2,000 of collections for this firm, she detained him until the other patrons went away by strolling with him in the woods near the inn and hinting that steaks weren't the only hospitality she intended to dispense. Polly and Flaherty returned to the inn about dusk. Immediately Polly prepared a steak for Flaherty. He was dead a half hour later.

Polly and her father were elated. The inn's first murder-robbery had gone off without the slightest difficulty.

Marshal Adam Lombardi of South Pass City and his deputies later estimated that during the winter of 1867-68 Polly poisoned at least seven victims. The number could have been greater. Polly's technique varied. Sometimes she would play the part of the lover before the steak dinner. In that case, she would sprin-

kle arsenic over the steak and the victim would die quickly.

Sometimes she played it a little more coy. She would serve bounteous feasts of steak and all the trimmings and then take her victim either into a side room, or if the weather was warm, she preferred the haymow of the barn. Here she would make love leisurely and then give her victim a drink of whiskey loaded with arsenic. The father would have the grave dug in the cow yard and the victim would be dumped in the grave after all his money and gold had been taken from his body.

■ On April 14th Edmund Ford, a young cattle buyer, rode up to the Bartlett Inn, dismounted and walked inside to make inquiry about some food. Polly greeted him and Edmund Ford's eyes opened a little wider at the sight of the plump and very desirable Polly. Polly's eyes also widened a little as she stared at the tall and broad shouldered Edmund Ford.

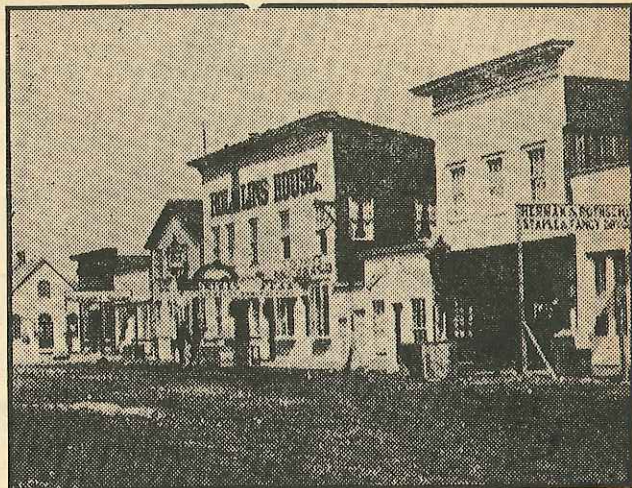
Polly decided that she would feed him first, and since it was a warm spring evening, she would take him to the haymow. After all, Polly wasn't averse to a little sex excitement with her murders, and after dinner in the haymow there would be more time for sex and Edmund Ford excited her.

The steak dinner had been bounteous and Polly and Ford went to the haymow, Polly stretching the love scene out, enjoying it greatly, and then when the moment came to feed her lover poisoned whiskey, she ran into an unforeseen handicap. Ford pushed the glass away, saying, "Sorry, but I can't drink. It makes me violently sick."

Polly was frustrated and then she said eagerly, "You can drink beer. I'll get you a glass of beer."

"No, I can't drink beer," Ford answered. "I can't drink any alcoholic drink."

Faced with this Polly was stumped, and then old John Bartlett, thinking Ford was dead by now, came up the ladder to the haymow to pick up the body



Wyoming Historical Society

**Polly Bartlett purchased some of her poison in Cheyenne.**

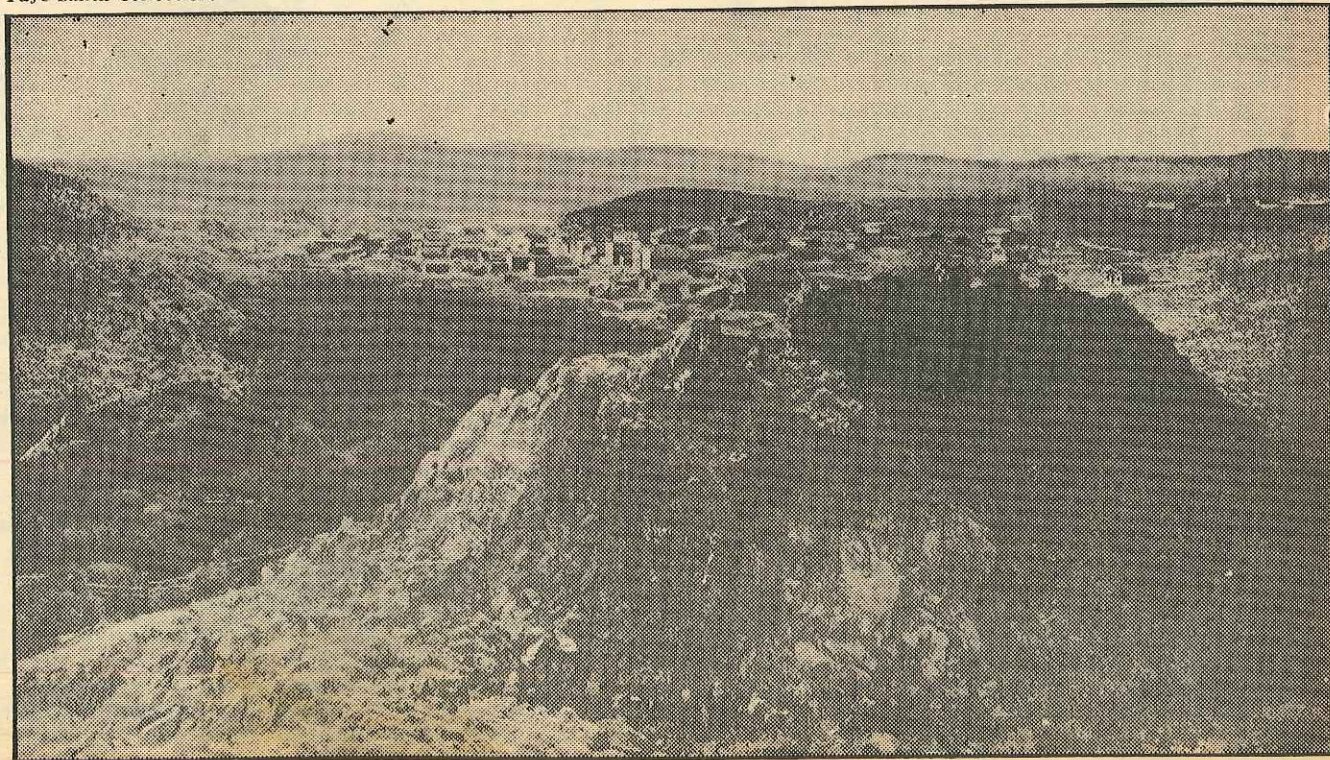
and bury it. When he saw Ford alive, he was flustered and embarrassed and made some lame excuse. Ford was angry at the interruption of the love scene and said to Polly, "Let's go somewhere where we won't be bothered by old men."

This was a situation Polly had never faced. She resorted to anger, wanting Ford to get away fast. She said, "You insulted my father. Get out of here."

Ford went, got on his horse and rode toward South Pass City, never suspecting the death trap he had escaped from and the grim fact that he was the only tabbed victim ever to get away from the Bartlett's inn alive. In South Pass City he met the red haired daughter of Marshal Lombardi, and because of this red haired daughter, Ford forgot all about Polly and never returned to the Bartlett Inn.

*(Continued on page 58)*

**South Pass City when it was in its great heyday and when the Bartlett Inn was the scene of many murders.**  
Faye Smith Collection.



"Well," he finally said. "I'll bet twenty-five dollars."

"Without looking at the card you drew?" said Hardin. He paused. "Well, I sure don't believe you've got a set of fours, and so I'm going to raise you fifty. There's your twenty-five and here's fifty better."

The Kid's grin broadened, but his eyes were still mere slits.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I'm a-callin' that fifty-dollar bet of yours; but afore I do, I want to say something." He picked up the .45 with his right hand and with his left hand tossed fifty dollars into the center of the table, remarking as he did so very slowly and distinctively, "You see, Mr. Hardin, as you say, I ain't as yet looked at the card you dealt me. I opened on Aces and Kings—two pairs—and I'll bet my life that the card you dealt me is either an ace or a King; very likely an Ace and I now have a full house—Ace full on Kings." He paused, looking closely at Hardin, then continued, "Keep your hands above the table and listen to what else I've got to say. I also seen you deal yourself the six of hearts off the bottom of the deck, and you've probably got a straight flush, six to ten, or deuce to six; but since you cheated by dealing from the bottom of the deck, I'm a-taking the pot. Got any objections?"

### FATE FLIPS THE ACE OF SPADES FOR POKER ALICE

Rapid City, S.D., February 28, 1930 —

*Yesterday, "Poker Alice" Tubbs, bucked a game that she — that nobody — could beat. Old age and complications following an operation for gall-stones, were given by doctors as the cause of her death on a hospital bed.*

*She was 77 years of age, born in England. She was married 3 times. Her first husband was a mining engineer, Frank Duffield. Then came W.G. Tubbs, a gambler. Her 3rd husband was George Huckeral, but when he died, Poker Alice resumed the name of her 2nd husband.*

■ There was dead silence in the room. A body could've heard a pin drop, if one had been dropped. Hardin's face turned white with fury, but he smiled. "You know I ain't heeled, Kid, and you're figgering on acting smart. However, I haven't got the kind of hand you say I have. I was only trying to run a sandy." He tossed his hand into the discard.

Without taking his eyes off Hardin,

the Kid said, speaking to Tolliver, "Turn his hand over, Nate, and see if I ain't right."

Hardin grabbed for the hand, but Tolliver beat him to it and exposed the 6-7-8-9 and 10 of hearts, a straight flush.

"See?" exclaimed the Kid, letting out his breath. "Just like I said, a straight flush. Now let's see what the card is you dealt me, but I bet it's an Ace."

It was.

"Damn you, Wes Hardin. I orter kill you! Git outa my sight afore I do."

Hardin, his face as white as a bed sheet, shoved his chair back from the table, saying as he did so, "Since I haven't got a gun I'll have to take that; but this isn't all of it. The next time I see you I'll sure as hell be heeled and you'd better come a-smokin', for I sure as hell will be."

"Keno," said the Kid, grinning; "only be sure you come in front of me. Don't git behind my back to shoot."

So that was, according to the way it was told me, the only time Wes Hardin ever crawfished. No, he and the Kid never shot it out, because a day or two later Hardin was shot by old John Selman.

RW

### POLLY BARTLETT, AMAZING POISONER

(Continued from Page 25)

His escape with his life was to prove Polly's one great mistake, the mistake that was to bring a strange and gruesome end to her and the murder of her lovers.

■ Spring passed into summer and summer into autumn. There is no record how many lovers Polly killed, but the number later was believed to be at least ten. One of these was Sam Ford, brother of Edmund Ford. He was a prosperous cattle broker in St. Louis and he had been enroute to South Pass City to discuss business with his brother when he stopped at Bartlett's Inn.

Ford was dismayed by his brother's failure to arrive in South Pass City but he assumed that he had been ambushed and murdered by road agents. This was a logical conclusion. Sam dressed like a prosperous man and he always carried large sums of money as he liked to be able to make a deal on the spot.

Several weeks elapsed. On August 14 Theodore Fountain, 23, the son of wealthy mine owner Bernard (Barney) Fountain failed to arrive on the stage from Point of Rocks, the Union Pacific station 80 miles south of South Pass City. Theodore, known as Teddy to his family and friends, had been touring Europe. He intended to spend two weeks in his parents' baronial home before returning to his studies at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania.

During the subsequent week four more stages arrived from Point of Rocks. Teddy was not a passenger on any of them. Alarmed and frightened, tough and unsophisticated Barney Fountain hired three teams of trail-wise western men to find his son. "The last letter we got was sent from my sister's house in Bellevue, Kansas," he said. "Trace Teddy from there . . . and I don't care what it costs!"

■ Four weeks later the scout reported that Teddy's trail had ended at Bartlett's Inn the night of August 13. Immediately Fountain strapped on his .44s and, accompanied by Marshal Lombardi and two deputies, he rode to the inn.

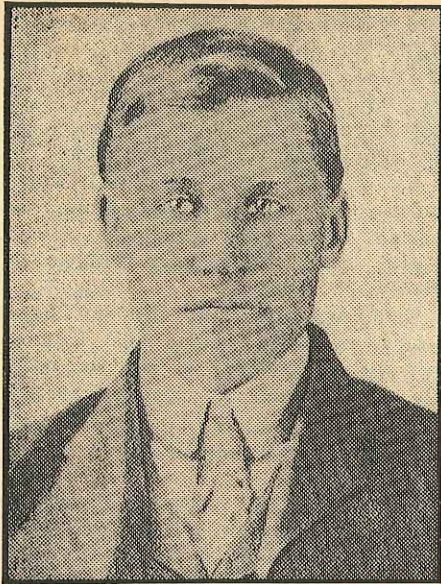
"I remember your son," Polly said to Fountain. "Because he told me he

had gotten off the train at North Platte and bought a horse for the rest of the journey. My father and I both told him it was folly for a man to travel alone in this region at night. But he ignored our advice, and after the meal he rode toward South Pass City. He wanted to surprise his parents."

The scouts had learned that Teddy had abandoned the train at North Platte and had purchased a horse so Polly's explanation of Teddy's departure from the inn did not seem illogical. "He was ambushed somewhere between the inn and town," Fountain speculated during the return to South Pass City. "And even if it costs me a million dollars I'm going to find the man that done it."

■ Word of Fountain's suspicion of the Barletts quickly became the principal topic of conversation in South Pass City and in the morning Ford was assailed by a sudden though terribly belated burst of clairvoyance. He began to associate a parallel to his missing brother and Teddy Fountain and the strange actions of the Bartletts the night he had romanced with Polly.

Ford went to Marshal Lombardi's office. He told him of the Bartlett's repeated attempts to cajole him into



Wyoming Historical Society.

Edmund Ford tricked the clever Polly.

eating or drinking. "Now that I've thought about it," he said, "I wonder if they were trying to poison me with something in that food or whiskey. If they were, I'll bet they poisoned my brother and Teddy Fountain."

"Why would they want to kill you . . . or the others?" Lombardi said.

"I was carrying several thousand, like I always do so I can deal whenever a drover shows up in case it's after banking hours. My brother always carried enough for a deal, too. And you can bet that Teddy Fountain wasn't traveling with just 15 cents in his poke. The way I figure it, the Bartletts calculated that everyone would think the men they murdered were killed by Cheyennes. Or road agents. Which is exactly what everybody thought, including me."

Lombardi said, "It sounds possible except for one factor. How did the Bartletts know these men and you had substantial sums of money in your possession?"

"I've thought about that part, too," Ford said. "Of course I don't know what went on with Sam and Teddy Fountain but I distinctly recall that somehow Polly Bartlett wheedled me into bragging about the money I had in my belt pouch."

"You think Polly had something to do with the murders?"

"I sure as hell do!"

■ An hour later Ford, Fountain and Marshal Lombardi and his deputies tied their horses to the hitching rail at Bartlett's Inn. "We're going to look around," Lombardi said to the Bartletts, who had come out the door to see what was going on.

For three hours the searchers inspected the outbuildings and the sur-

rounding slopes and forest. Then they went into the inn and looked around. They found nothing there, either, that indicated that anyone had been murdered or buried on the premises.

"I'm sorry that you men didn't find whatever you were looking for," Polly said. Then she offered to serve steaks to the search party. "On the house," she said with an enchanting smile.

After the meal the searchers rode toward South Pass City. "You had me wondering for a while," Lombardi said to Ford. "But the Bartletts couldn't have had anything to do with the disappearance of your brother or Teddy Fountain. There's no trace of graves and no caves in which the bodies could be concealed. Also, what would they have done with the horses? They wouldn't have been so stupid as to sell them. And horses aren't something you can hide easily."

About noon the next day a trail boss named Billy Gordon came into the marshal's office. "I heard about you and Fountain snooping around out at Bartlett's place," he said. "Well, today they're not there. It strikes me as peculiar they'd go away when everybody knows there are three trains of pilgrims coming toward the pass that haven't had a decent meal since they left Omaha."

■ Within an hour Ford, Fountain and Lombardi and his deputies rode onto the inn's premises. "They shoved off in a hurry," Lombardi said after he and the others broke into the inn. He turned to Ford. "I've got a hunch," he said grimly, "that you were right all along. But where could they have concealed the bodies?"



Western Collection.

Esther Morris was citizen of South Pass.

It was midafternoon before Ford said, "We've looked every place but the one place that wouldn't show the graves had been dug—the cow lot. Cows tromping around would quickly obscure evidence of graves."

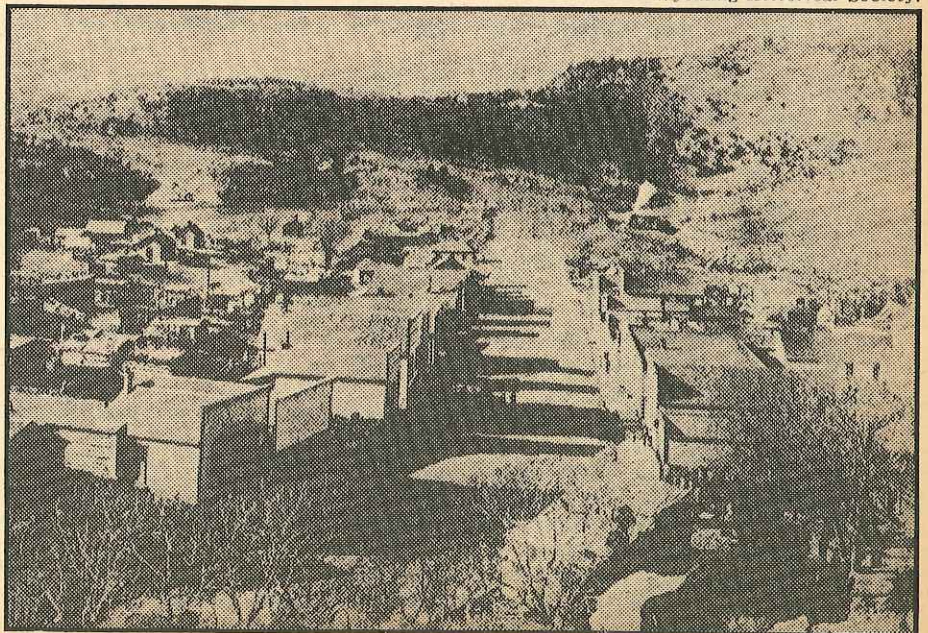
The Bartletts had abandoned their cows. The deputies drove them into the barn. Then the searchers began to dig. Soon they uncovered the remains of a human body.

They discovered another body. Then a third. The fourth was Ford's brother Sam. Ford identified it by a Masonic ring on which the dead man's name had been etched.

Several minutes later the diggers lifted the remains of Teddy Fountain

In the escape of the Bartletts they passed through the town of Hartville.

Wyoming Historical Society.



from its grave. The dead youth's father identified him by his belt. "It looks like brass but it ain't," he said. "I had it made from gold from one of my mines and Teddy's mother and I sent it to him for his birthday."

Twenty-two bodies were found. On the ride back to town Lombardi said, "We've been worrying about Bartlett's disposition of the horses. I've got it now . . . they gave them to the Cheyennes. That explains why Cheyenne war parties never molested them."

■ Two days later the Territorial Legislature authorized a \$3000 reward for the apprehension of the Bartletts.

encamped on an aspen bordered meadow on the east bank of the Hoback.

He muzzled his horse and crept into the aspens. Soon he was within a clump of junipers on the edge of the meadow. He saw the Bartletts. Old John Bartlett was close to a double-barreled 10-gauge shotgun lying against the stump of a pine. Then he went into the meadow. "Just raise your hands," he said, "and . . ."

He didn't finish. Bartlett lunged for the 10-gauge. This was a suicidal gesture; Ford had the sights of his Spencer .56 carbine zeroed on Bartlett's chest. He squeezed its trigger.

foreman of one of Barney Fountain's mines. But no one bothered to question Kalkhorst or Fountain about it; the general opinion was that Polly's assassination had saved the taxpayers the expense of a trial and a rope.

As for Ford, he married Sally Lombardi and with the reward money he started a ranch in the Sandy Creek Valley near the present village of Farson, Wyoming.

But Ford and Sally did not have long to enjoy this spread. The following spring warriors of the renegade Cheyenne, Burning Breast Bear Shield, attacked the ranch. They massacred Ford and his wife and 7 ranch hands.



Kansas Historical Society.

The Bartletts on their journey West stopped in town of Ellsworth, but Polly couldn't find any prospective victims.

Meanwhile Barney Fountain announced that he would pay \$10,000 for the Bartletts. "And they don't have to be alive!" he added bitterly.

These bounties inspired numerous men to search for the murderers. But others were already searching. Marshal Lombardi and several deputized posses and Ford, who hunted alone.

Ford recalled that Polly had mentioned her family's original plans to go to Oregon. Gambling that they were fleeing to the Pacific northwest, though not on immigrant trails where apprehension would be likely, Ford spurred his horse toward the western slope of the Wind River range, the fastest alternate route to Oregon.

He caught up with the Bartletts late in the afternoon of the seventh day. It was in the Hoback River Valley of west-central Wyoming. They were

Its enormous slug bowled Bartlett over as though he had been struck by a sledge.

A week later Ford and Polly rode into South Pass City. They were leading the horse which carried Bartlett's body. Ford escorted this grim little caravan to Marshal Lombardi's office. "Here's the Bartletts," he said. "Make out the receipts so I can collect the rewards."

■ About midnight of that fateful day, which was October 7, 1868, someone on a horse rode behind the jail and, standing in his stirrups, fired both barrels of a 10-gauge shotgun through the window of the cell in which Polly Bartlett was confined. She was killed. Later it was rumored that the horseman was a German immigrant named Otto Kalkhorst, who was

Then they set fire to the buildings.

South Pass City died, too, a few years later. Its gold fields fizzled out. The expansion of the Union Pacific Railroad and lowering of passenger rates ended the era of the Conestoga wagon trains.

Recently John W. Woodring, former publisher of the Sterling, Colorado 'Advocate' purchased the remains of the old frontier town. It is one of the best preserved ghost towns in the west. He plans to restore it as a tourist attraction.

Doubtless it will attract many vacationists. But how many of the hordes who will stare at the remains of Bartlett's Inn will realize that this is no ordinary structure . . . that 22 men died in it because of the greed of an evil woman?

**RW**