

Finding Kid Wade

Retracing the adventures of one of the Midwest's favorite 1800s outlaws and his Pony Boys

By **Richard Prosch**

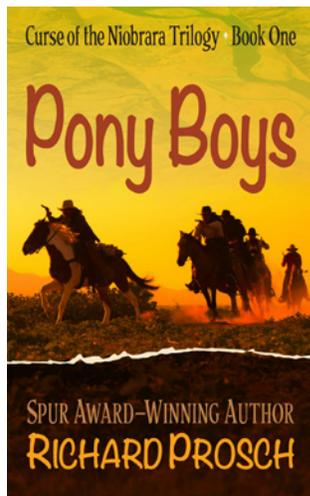
I was 17 years old in 1983, living near the Niobrara rough country in northern Nebraska, a century after William Albert “Kid” Wade and the Pony Boys roamed the unorganized territories west of Holt County, stealing horses, raising hell, and generally having the time of their lives. More than once, I saw his ghost in the guys I ran with. More than anything, I wished I could’ve met him.



Kid Wade
National Archives

Kid Wade, Curley Grimes and Jack Nolan, Black George and Count Shevaloff – these fellow Nebraskans lived and breathed the Keya Paha air in the winter of 1884, poised on the chronological edge of a new era of law and order. They were the last of a passing vocation, all but forgotten by the time I took the high-country stage 100 years later.

In December, Five Star Publishing released my historical novel *Pony Boys*, first in a series based on the lives of the Kid and his outlaw cronies. Connecting



with those historical peers made it a fun book to write. Sobering, too, in the necessary separation of romance from reality and the realization of just how forgotten these once legendary characters have become.

Forgotten by the teachers in my high school, who never mentioned them. Forgotten by my grandparents and great-grandparents, who surely heard of their exploits but didn’t find them interesting enough to mention. But never forgotten by the Niobrara River friends I met when I reached adulthood.

Among the locals, stories about the Kid were still shared. Legends were still hotly debated by old men over steaming cups of coffee. What was the real relationship between Doc Middleton and the Kid? How did Henry Richardson view Doc tying the knot with his daughter? What was detective William H.H. Lewellyn’s true intent for Doc, the Kid and all the others, and what were the play-by-play logistics of the Laughing Water shoot-out involving them?

Wyatt Earp, Bill Hickok, Jesse James – fictional narratives painting them as heroes, anti-heroes and villains fill the West’s literary and celluloid canon. But there has been next to nothing done with the tales of Kid Wade.

In 2023, little has changed since Nebraska author Will Henry Spindler wrote the introduction to his seminal Christian melodrama *Rim of the Sandhills* (Educator Supply Company, Mitchell, South Dakota, 1941).

“Each succeeding year

finds a few more ... old timers silently slipping over the knoll, carrying with them the treasured memories of this era in old Nebraska’s thrilling history that has become so famous by word of mouth all over the West but which has, strange to say, been so little chronicled in writing. And so it seems that I must attempt to pierce this long silence and enshrouding mystery and get this treasured old story of love and hate and romance – before it is too late.”

Spindler, who taught on the Pine Ridge Reservation with his wife, self-published a number of books dealing with the history of old Nebraska, including *Tragedy Strikes at Wounded Knee: And Other Essays on Indian Life in South Dakota and Nebraska* (1955) and *Yesterday’s Trails* (1961).

Rim of the Sandhills isn’t a true novel, but rather a compilation of Spindler family histories, Holt County legends and a pulp-fiction melodrama

featuring star-crossed lovers Esther Rill and Jack Laramie. Kid Wade shows up as a secondary character in what might be his first published fictional representation, and Spindler presents him as a good-hearted but devilish lout playing slap-and-tickle with Esther’s sister, Liz. He’s quick on the draw, jocular and eminently likable – consistent with most of the historical record, if stretched for a ’40s audience familiar with Western pulp fiction.

Spindler ignores most of the facts while weaving a typical outlaw backstory for the Kid, then drops the final fate of Wade into a succinct account of his capture in Lemars, Iowa before being hanged by masked vigilantes.

When Spindler gets the history wrong, it’s often by design. In his open-

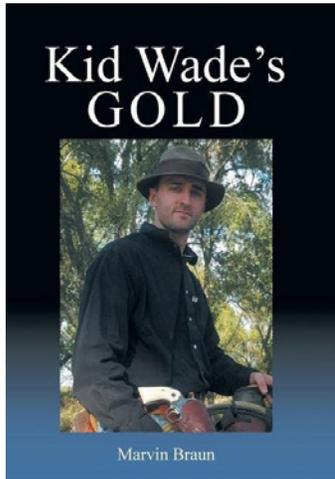
KID WADE (continued on page 18)

KID WADE (from page 17)

ing remarks to the book, he readily admits to embellishing the action and changing the names of characters who, in 1941, were still alive and kicking.

“But those of you who are familiar with Holt County’s early history will have no difficulty in figuring out true identities,” he writes.

Out of print for decades and hard to find in the wild, *Rim of the Sandhills* is readily available at online booksellers or through interlibrary loan.



Likewise available on the web is *Kid Wade’s Gold* (Xlibris, 2021) by South Dakota author Marvin Braun. Based on historical accounts, but interwoven with a story contemporary with its audience, this recent book for young readers brings the past – and Albert Wade – alive for new readers.

Braun’s work embellishes on a legend local to the Keya Paha River country regarding the theft of a Fort Niobrara payroll in 1883. While Kid Wade never copped to it, the deed is generally attrib-

uted to him, and half of Braun’s enjoyable work weaves a speculative tale set in the summer of 1883. Interspaced with the Kid’s narrative, the Brown family of today sets out on a mission to find prehistoric fossils only to be lured into a treasure hunt for this hidden gold and the long dead outlaw’s final secret.

Kid Wade’s Gold especially shines when the author’s intimacy with local Nebraska geography takes center stage. From Turtle Butte to the cat-like formation of Cougar Rock, the Brown family explores the northern Nebraska landscape with Braun relating plenty of history along the way.

Again, Albert Wade is shown to be a forgivable, if criminal, ruffian who means no real harm to anybody, and it was this persona that I sympathized with when I began my own fictional narrative starring the Kid.

But truth is more complicated than fiction.

With hindsight, it’s clear that Albert Wade, his horse thief pals and mentor Doc Middleton weren’t especially good people. Complicated, mixed-up, misguided young men who were kind to their mothers? Maybe. But even then, only sometimes. And it was that reality I worked to convey with *Pony Boys*.



Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, 1880. Many believe that Kid Wade stole a payroll there in 1883. Library of Congress

So, I found myself back at the beginning. What would it have been like to ride with the Kid and his pals? I can’t go back in time, but my protagonist, John Augustus, could find out for me. Through first-hand experience, John helped me sort out my own feelings – riding with Doc Middleton, stealing horses from the Pine Ridge agency and trembling in the dark as friends vanished only to appear later swinging at the end of vigilante hang-ropes.

As Doc struggles with change and Kid Wade fights white-knuckled against it, young John “Gus” Augustus, aka August John, faces the most important challenge of his life. A challenge sure to tear at the fabrics of loyalty and friendship, rending the Pony Boys apart forever.

I didn’t intend to write a fast-action pulp romance like *Rim of the Sandhills*. Neither did I intend to write a book for young readers like *Kid Wade’s Gold*.

But like the authors of those books, in finding Kid Wade, I found an all-ages story of adventure, history, and more – a shared humanity, not with larger-than-life mythic figures, but actual human beings who struggled with their actions just as we do. Men, women and Pony Boys, who went before us, but whose moral and ethical challenges are eternal.

WWA members set to appear at Tucson book festival

From Staff Reports

TUCSON, Arizona – WWA is again scheduled to have a big presence at the Tucson Festival of Books.

WWA and *True West* magazine plan to share a booth, passing out copies of *Roundup* and *True West* and information about WWA and announcing the 2023 Spur Award winners and finalists during the event, scheduled for March 4-5 at the University of Arizona.

Past Spur Award winners scheduled to appear on panels/presentations include Johnny D. Boggs, Wynne Brown, Kirk Ellis, Jeff Guinn and Craig Johnson. *True West* executive editor Bob Boze Bell and other WWA members are expected on panels.

Since 2009, the Tucson Festival of Books (TucsonFestivalOfBooks.org) has been held on the University of Arizona campus, and WWA has had a booth since 2010.

WWA members may have one book or advance reading copy (published in 2022 or 2023) displayed at the WWA booth.

Send one copy to WWA, Tucson Festival of Books, 10 Dovela Road, Santa Fe, NM 87508. Items must be received by February 22. Books will be given away or donated to a library or literacy program.