

# HISTORY SPEAKS

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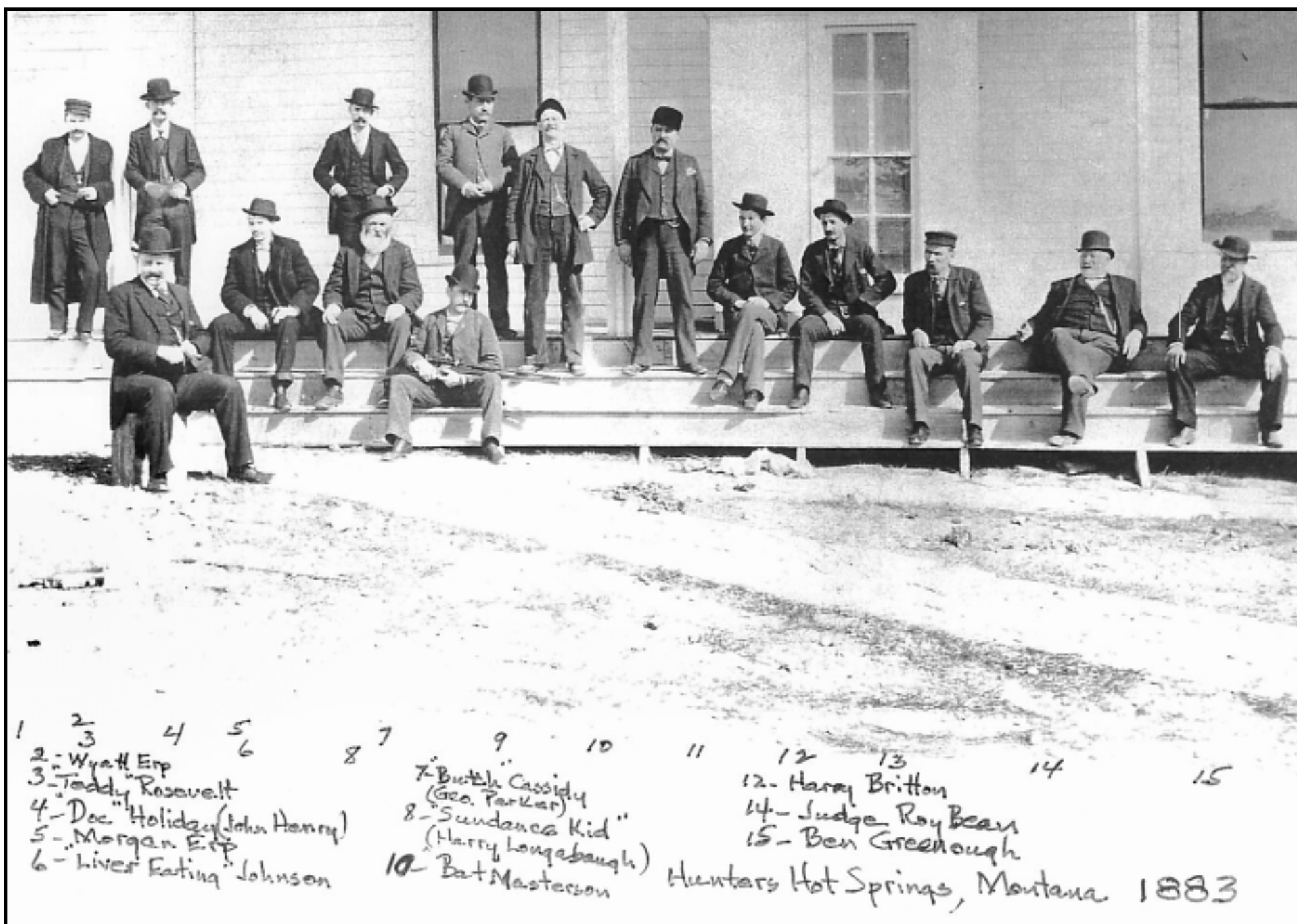


Photo courtesy of Jason Leaf

## Who are they?

This is the famous photograph, dated 1883, that purportedly shows a gathering of famous Old West characters all in one place — at Hunter's Hot Springs, Montana. Shown left to right in the order of the photo's annotations are: 1. (Unidentified) 2. Wyatt Earp (standing)

3. Theodore Roosevelt (seated) 4. Doc Holiday (standing) 5. Morgan Earp (brother of Wyatt Earp — standing) 6. "Liver Eating" Johnson 7. Butch Cassidy (Geo. Parklar) 8. Sundance Kid (Harry Longbaugh) 9. (Unidentified) 10. Bat Masterson 11. (Unidentified) 12. Harry Britton 13. (Unidentified) 14.

Judge Roy Bean 15. Ben Greenough. Researcher Jason Leaf says the photo itself is genuine — that is, it hasn't been doctored — but it's the identify of the men that is in question.

# MYSTERY PHOTO

## The story of a vintage photograph and the man who became obsessed with unraveling its secrets

By **Jerry Brekke**  
Montana Best Times

Two-and-a-half years ago a co-worker handed Jason Leaf a photograph. It was a copy of a 19th century photo of a group of 15 men posing on the front porch of a hotel. What made the the print remarkable was a list of names identifying the men.

Wyatt Earp, Teddy Roosevelt, Doc Holiday, Morgan Earp and Montana mountain man "Liver Eating" Johnston were listed, along with Butch

Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, Bat Masterson, Harry Britton, Judge Roy Bean, and Ben Greenough. Noted, too, is a place and date: Hunter's Hot Springs, Montana — 1883.

If the names are to be believed, the image is the largest assemblage of Old West celebrities ever pictured in one group.

Leaf, a 44-year-old Vancouver, British Columbia resident, was skeptical. But a story in a local newspaper began to change his mind.

"Within hours of receiving a copy

of the Hunter's Hot Springs photo in May of 2000, I viewed a copy of the famous 'Fort Worth Five' 1900 photograph in my local paper, which had just come into the news because the original had sold for \$80,000 at auction," said Leaf recently.

The "Fort Worth Five" photograph is an image of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid posing with other outlaw members of the Wild Bunch in a Fort Worth, Texas studio.

"Comparing the real Butch and Sundance from the Fort Worth Five

image to Man 7 and Man 8 in the Hunter's Hot Spring's photo, compounded with finding out from the historical record that both Butch and Sundance were in southeast Montana in 1886, led me to lend credence to the whole list of names," said Leaf.

### The investigation begins

Leaf contacted Daniel Buck, a Washington, D.C.-based historian and noted authority on the lives of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Buck and his wife, Anne Meadows,

### Wyatt Earp?



At left is man #2 in the Hunter's photo, supposedly the lawman Wyatt Earp. At right is the real Wyatt Earp.

### Teddy Roosevelt?



At left is man #3 in the big photo, purportedly Teddy Roosevelt. At right is a picture of the real Roosevelt.

### Butch Cassidy?



The man at left is man # 7 in the Hunter's Hot Springs photo, reportedly the outlaw Butch Cassidy. At center, for comparison, is the real Butch Cassidy. At right is a photo of Franklin Rich, who owned the Rich Hotel at Hunter's Hot Springs in 1886, and whom Jason Leaf has identified as the actual # 7 man.

Photo of Franklin Rich, above right, courtesy of Al Rich and Sharon Pohlman

### The Sundance Kid?



At left is man #8 in the Hunter's photo, purportedly The Sundance Kid. At right is a photograph of the actual Sundance Kid.

### Liver Eating Johnston?



At left is man # 6 in the Hunter's photo, said to be John "Liver Eating" Johnston. At right is the actual "Liver Eating" Johnston. Jason Leaf says it's possible man #6 is the actual "Liver Eating" Johnston.

Photo courtesy of Peaks to Plains Museum, Red Lodge

### Ben Greenough?



At left is man #15 in the Hunter's Hot Springs photo, supposedly Ben Greenough, "Liver Eating" Johnston's friend. At right is Cyrus Mendenhall, owner of Hunter's Hot Springs resort, whom Jason Leaf has identified as the actual #15 man.

Photo courtesy of Crazy Mountain Museum, Big Timber

Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy of Jason Leaf

have written numerous articles and published two books about the outlaws, including Meadows' book, "Digging Up Butch and Sundance." Their work has also been featured on radio and television programs.

1886 Theodore Roosevelt was on a hunting trip in Montana ; Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were in fact working within a day's ride of Hunter's Hot Springs; and "Liver Eating" Johnston made frequent visits to the springs area.

The fact the Northern Pacific Railroad route came within a mile of the resort added more plausibility to these men being at the resort, along with many of the other Western celebrities purportedly in the photo.

"The West," said Leaf, "was really a very small place."

### Tackling the list of names

Leaf next turned his attention to verifying the list of names — a task much more difficult than authenticating the photograph. The researcher submitted his theories to Western history enthusiasts, historians and historical societies such as Montana Historical Society, the Pinkerton Detective Agency Archives, and the Theodore Roosevelt Collection at Harvard University. Each accepted his presumption of locale, but none accepted the names.

Small details of the photograph and its list were examined and checked against proven records for clues. On the list, Earp was misspelled (Erp). Butch Cassidy's real name, Robert Leroy Parker, was not-

research, posting it on a Web site he designed titled, "Who Are Those Guys?" at [www.huntershotsprings.org](http://www.huntershotsprings.org). The site features comparison photos of the supposed celebrities and frequent updates of information from viewers that are both critical and supportive of Leaf's opinions about the picture.

Largely because of his Web site, by the end of 2001 Leaf had uncovered at least five different lists of names written on copies of the photo identifying the mystery men. They range from recent Internet auction copy of the picture — which the seller dated 1886, apparently as a result of Leaf's research — to a copy of the photo whose list of names is believed to date from 1944.

Discoveries made during a trip to Montana provided new insight into the Hunter's Hot Springs photograph's clandestine history. In Livingston, historian Doris Whithorn, who aided and encouraged Leaf's long-distance investigation, provided what might be the first known public reference to the photo.

It was an April 23, 1964 article in The Park County News headlined, "Who Remembers T. Roosevelt, W. Earp, Bat Masterson, Liver Eating Johnston, Ken [sic] Greenough at Hunter's?" and includes the photograph and a plea to the readership for help identifying the pictured men.

With only five names on the list and the possibility that names may have been tagged on over the years, "My original theory went wrinkly at the edges," said Leaf, "and I gave it the old heave-ho."

Added to Leaf's ever-expanding amount of

## A.A. Rich?



At left is man #1, unidentified in the Hunter's photo, but now thought to be Albert Americus Rich, at right, who operated a ranch one-and-a-half miles northwest of Hunters Hot Springs in 1886.

Photo courtesy of Al Rich and Sharon Pohlman.

Buck told Leaf the photo was not what it purported to be. He speculated that the group was made up of local ranchers and businessmen, somewhere in the West during the late 1880s. Buck also pointed out that Morgan Earp — brother of lawman Wyatt Earp — was dead by 1883 and that Butch and Sundance were too young to be in an 1883 photo. Although Meadows' history confirmed that Butch and Sundance were in southeast Montana in 1886, Buck said a photograph's date should not be changed to fit a theory.

No one, however, had ever made a critical analysis of the Hunter's Hot Springs (HHS) photo. Historians tend to dismiss it out-of-hand as being bogus and those who believe the photo authentic tend to accept it without question. Buck encouraged Leaf to find out what was known about the photo's location and date and to build his case from that point.

Leaf embraced the suggestion. In June, 2000, he launched a research adventure that would consume at least two hours of time every day for the next two and a half years. He based his research on the premise the Hunter's Hot Springs image was accurate.

"What historians had to say went in one ear and out the other," said Leaf. "I decided to accept the photo as authentic until it could be proved otherwise."

### Dating the photo

First on Leaf's research agenda was an attempt to establish the place and date of the photo. Leaf said the process was amazingly easy.

"No one disputes the authenticity of the photograph — the picture does not seem to have been 'doctored' at all, in a photographic sense — it is only the list of names attached to the bottom of the photo which historians have dismissed as bumpkin-esque folklore," said Leaf.

From 1886 newspaper accounts, Leaf learned that Dr. A.J. Hunter sold the resort to Cyrus Mendenhall and the hotel underwent substantial renovation after the purchase. An 1885 sketch of the hotel, provided by Crazy Mountain Museum in Big Timber, confirmed by comparison that steps were added to the porch by Mendenhall. Additional comparisons of the structure left little doubt that the photo was indeed taken at Hunter's Hot Springs, a famous resort a mile north of Springdale, Mont., which is no longer in operation.

Further newspaper research divulged that a second remodeling project in 1888 eliminated the steps when landscaping provided for a graded path to the hotel's entrance. Leaf concluded that the photograph could not have been taken in 1883, but within the period between late summer 1886 and 1888.

An 1886 date made Leaf's premise about the photo's accuracy even more plausible. Because in

## Jason Leaf? Definitely



Jason Leaf, of Vancouver, British Columbia, has spent countless hours researching the identity of the men in the Hunter's Hot Springs photograph. Historian Daniel Buck said, "Jason Leaf was the first person to make a serious effort to locate the exact site of the photograph and put a date on it."

Photo courtesy of Jason Leaf

ed on the photo as Geo. Parker, a Pinkerton file misnomer, but also the name of a tennis pro who played at Hunter's Hot Springs in the early 1900s. In the photo Roosevelt is listed as "Teddy Roosevelt," but he actually wasn't called Teddy until after the 1898 Spanish American War. Leaf also contacted experts to identify the rifle held by Man #8 and to date the bottle laying on the ground in front of Man #3.

"I really wanted to believe the list was true," said Leaf.

His first year of research provided Leaf a great deal of circumstantial evidence and hypothetical scenarios, but little undisputable fact. A pivotal point in his investigation came when, through evidence supplied by a family historian, Leaf ruled out Ben Greenough, a young friend of "Liver Eating" Johnston, as a group participant.

"Once I had one famous name drop out," said Leaf, "I had reason to question the rest."

In July of 2001, Leaf went public with his

research material were four volumes of newspaper references compiled by Livingston archivist Miles Iverson, who noted every reference made to Hunter's Hot Springs between 1871 and 1918.

"In looking through his documentation, I couldn't understand why there wasn't mention of these people (in the photograph)," said Leaf. "Then I realized the reason they weren't mentioned is because they weren't there."

### One tantalizing possibility

So who are those guys?

A major contribution to Leaf's project was submitted by a great-grandchild of Franklin Rich and Lizzie Hunter Rich, who operated the Rich Hotel at Hunter's Resort at the same time the photo was taken.

Sharon Pohlman, family archivist for the Rich

**Continued from Page 22**

family, and Al Rich, grandson of Franklin's brother A.A. Rich, submitted photos and a detailed family history. Pohlman's contribution proved to Leaf's satisfaction that Butch Cassidy was, in reality, Franklin Rich and the unidentified Man #1 was his brother Al Rich.

Leaf admits that his insistence the original list of the names on the photo was accurate until proven false skewed his investigation for two years, and he is now prepared to do an about-face — almost.

"My recanting notwithstanding, I haven't yet given up hope on the Liver Eater for the number six position," said Leaf. "There may be one celebrity in the photo, after all."

John "Liver Eating" Johnston was a well known Montana resident and his frequent visits to Hunter's Hot Springs were documented in the press and by the Rich family history.

Leaf's research project has attracted international

attention. A December 2001 article in *Maine Antique Digest* utilized the Hunter's Hot Spring photograph and Leaf's findings as an example to decry the selling of misrepresented collectibles on Internet auction Web sites, and *True West Magazine* has contacted the researcher for an upcoming article dealing with his recantation.

"I don't think the photo was ever a malicious prank," Leaf said. "Copies of the photo have sold over the years and they will continue to sell in the future. No one is hurt too bad when they buy a copy. Most I've seen sell for \$15 to \$20 — not bad for something

you'd like to believe in."

At least once the photograph sold for much higher than that. A couple years ago at a Clyde Park auction, bidding fervor for a copy of the photo took the price to about \$200.

For Leaf, his research has brought its own

**"I haven't yet given up hope on the Liver Eater for the number six position."**

— Jason Leaf

rewards in support received and friendships made.

"Jason Leaf was the first person to make a serious effort to locate the exact site of the photograph and put a date on it," said Wild Bunch historian Daniel Buck. "That in itself was an admirable piece of work. But what came next was extraordinary. Even though he began his journey believing that the caption was correct, that the gentlemen depicted were in fact the largest assembly of Old West celebrities to perch on a porch anywhere any-time, Jason kept an open mind and went to work. He researched, he traveled, he e-mailed. Slowly, the famous names dropped away, replaced by those of Hunter's Hot Springs locals, whose photographs he had uncovered. Jason proved that nothing is impossible."

The adventure is far from over. Leaf said his goal has always been about "verifying 15 biographies" of the men pictured in the mystery photograph.

"I feel an obligation to the descendants of the guys who are really in the picture," said Leaf. "I'm positive that most would like to have a part of their history restored to them."

To visit Jason Leaf's Web site, go to <http://www.huntershotsprings.org>

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