Outlaw of the Wild Midwest: The Story of Doc Middleton

In order to make a living after the Civil War in the Midwest, income was generated by ranching, farming, and gold mining. Only a few were fortunate enough to strike gold. Then eventually the railroad came and revolutionized transportation, towns began to swarm among the tracks every twenty miles, and more jobs became available. By no means did farming or ranching make a man rich, but it supported a family and was the main career path to those in the Great Plains. Those who did not choose the path of the family business either went to college if lucky enough, or resorted to crime to make a living and gambled with the law and their life.

February 9, 1851, Nancy Cherry gave birth to James M. Riley in Bastrop Texas (Hutton pg. 9). The Civil War began when James was only 10 years old. Too young to join the Confederate Army with his older brothers and father, James stayed at home with his mother on the ranch. Unfortunately enough this is when his devious behavior began. Furthermore, in the year of 1866 in Gillespie County Texas James stole his first horse at fourteen years old and was booked into jail. Later James was released because no one claimed the horse missing. It was after this instance James decided making an honest living was not a choice for him. His lifestyle would soon be on the constant run using the alias Doc Middleton.

In 1876 Doc Middleton began his first long cattle drive to South Dakota, consisting of 2,500 head to supply an Indian agency purchased by the United State Interior Department. Accompanied by his older half-brother and a few other men and healthy steers, the group was able to make good time. Doc was known as a first class cow hand, and this is one of the fables to where the name Doc came from. Doc was also known to have a little fun and was notorious to do quite a lot of gambling when possible. One town in particular that Doc seemed to enjoy was in Ogallala, Nebraska, this also seems to be the only place that Doc never found himself getting
in trouble with the law. After the herd was successfully driven to South Dakota Doc needed to find a new job so he joined a freighting crew in the Black Hills. His job along with others was to bring supplies to those in the mines and also traveling to Sidney Nebraska. This is where the central transshipping depot was.

It was the night of January 13, 1877, where Doc’s tale of outlawry began. Sidney was home of a military post, multiple gambling spots and many dance halls where the freighters, desperados, cowboys, gamblers, and military men liked to gather. The place where Doc found himself against the law was in Joe Lane’s Dance Hall. It happened to be soldiers’ night so all the female dancers were only paid to dance with the soldiers. As the night grew older the men got drunker and tensions grew between the soldiers and citizens. One dancer began to flirt with a citizen and made a soldier mad and that’s when the entire place turned into a brawl between citizens and soldiers. The man who was being flirted with was nearly beaten to death for something he did not even start, then suddenly a single gunshot went off. Doc Middleton was involved in the fight but witnesses testimonies vary on whether Doc was the one who fired the round killing an army private. Those on the military side blame Middleton and those on Middleton’s side obviously blamed someone else. The newspaper the following day reported the incident but did not give any names until the Sidney police chief did some investigating and was given the name “Dock Middleton.” Middleton immediately fled town on a stagecoach and was last known to be at Fort Rob. This is where he would hide out for the next several months undetected by anyone. April 7th of that same year, Cheyenne County (Sidney) brought an indictment charge against “Dock Middleton.” Doc was being charged for second degree murder and that is the believed reason he stayed quiet for a period of time (Hutton pg. 7).
Doc Middleton was accused of three homicides that have been recorded by history, but Doc himself only admits to one of them. One homicide pinned on Doc was the Sidney incident and another was the slaying of a man that his family actually journaled. The first and only homicide that Doc admitted to, and without providing a date was while taking care of cows in Texas on a ranch. Doc got into an argument with a fellow African American cowhand and killed him. Doc provided no further information, just that he killed the man and immediately fled the ranch. The other instance is told by Doc’s immediate family, Doc never did deny the killing but also would never admit to doing it. Doc and his first wife (marriage documents say only 1870 to 1871) when Doc could have been maybe 20 years old, was visiting his grandfather because he was ill. Upon approaching the house Doc and his wife heard screams from the inside. Doc grabbed a broken fence post and rushed inside to find his ex-brother in law beating his grandmother. The man was looking for the hidden money the family supposedly had. Doc beat the man to death, spent the rest of the night with his family, and then they all came to an agreement that Doc better flee the area before being hunted down by the dead man’s family.

Before Doc was forced to flee and join freighting crews in Nebraska and South Dakota his horse thievery began in Texas. In March of 1874 Doc was indicted on horse thief charges, and on July 15 his father bonded him out to guarantee his appearance in court. Doc failed to appear which was an almost obvious outcome but none the less still happened. Doc found himself on the Texas Rangers fugitive from Justice list (as James M. Riley at the time) and knew he had to be more careful if he planned on stealing horses and selling them for money. It had worked up until July of 1874 when he was caught again, this time with his cousin. While in Cooke County Texas custody they were charged with three separate horse thefts and received six years a piece for each charge. On July 22nd they were admitted into Huntsville Penitentiary and
by September 17th Doc had already escaped. Though Doc was captured in his first escape attempt, it was not until April 1st of the following year he would escape for good. It took another full year before his cousin would also escape safely. That following summer of 1876 Doc joined his father Joe Riley (unknown if biological father of Doc) to herd and drive cattle to Dodge City Kansas. It was this summer that Doc actually changed his name to David C. Middleton, but was given the nickname Doc.

Doc’s whereabouts are uncertain once he stepped foot in Fort Robinson after fleeing from Sidney in 1877. It was not until late that year, that Doc was heard of again stealing more horses. According to Wyoming accounts, Doc was at a ranch house near Horse Creek being cared for because he was ill. Mr. Irvine the ranch owner knew that Doc was a fugitive but had no intentions of turning him over to the law. Once Doc was well enough to go back on his way, he admitted that he did something he had regretted most. Doc confessed to stealing the majority of Mr. Irvine’s horses. Before arriving at Mr. Irvine’s ranch, Doc had made acquaintances with Edgar Scurry and George Smith. On December 30th, they stole 34 horses and headed for Kansas. The three men and all of the horses were soon followed by a posse of men. Doc and the other two men had to give up the horses, except for the ones they were riding near Julesburg Colorado and head for the closest hills. Doc was chased for nearly 20 miles until his horse was fully exhausted and he could no longer ride it. Doc made bunker by some large rocks near a butte hiding from the men following him. The story after that goes two different ways. The first story claims that after exchanging a few shots with the men, Doc finally surrendered to the men. The second story, a little more exciting goes as follows; one of the men from the posse, detective William Lykens charged at Doc while on horseback unaware that Doc was armed. Doc pointed his rifle at Lykens and yelled “Duck, you little Dutch Fool! I do not want to kill you”! Lykens
continued at Doc, and so Doc tried to fire at him, but his rifle failed. Lykens jumped off of his horse, modern day bulldogging style, and tackled Doc taking him prisoner. No matter the truth of the two stories, the outcome of both resulted in Doc being taken prisoner and being taken back to Sidney for the murder of the military private. It took two days via horseback and Doc most likely was forced to walk the entire way. Given every chance he had, Doc tried to escape the men but was unsuccessful. Doc only stayed half a day before escaping the little log jail in Sidney and was once again fleeing Sidney. No known charges were filed against the three men for horse thievery until Smith was caught in Cheyenne Wyoming and warrants were set out for Doc and Scurry for grand larceny. Smith eventually plead guilty and was sentenced for a year in the Nebraska penitentiary, Scurry supposedly fled to Texas and Doc still remained at large.

Doc’s legend began to grow in Nebraska in the late 1870s, so much which the people of Nebraska started to call the Elkhorn and Niobrara valleys Doc Middleton’s Country. Local sheriffs, bounty hunters, and vigilantes could not capture the elusive Doc even when they knew where he was. Doc had a small band of partners that was eventually got labeled as the Middleton Gang which Doc was not a huge fan of. Horse thievery was so bad in this region that settlers began only to keep one old raggedy horse around and did the rest of their work with oxen since thieves had no interest in them. The Doc Middleton gang was soon compared to that of the Jesse James gang, and to some accounts even worse. Middleton and his followers stole the majority of their horses from nearby Indian tribes and also from settlers who seemed to be the wealthiest. In some accounts Doc would steal every single horse to those who tried assisting in the capture of himself. Living the life like Doc did there was no possibility to have a permanent household. Doc and his partners had to mooch off of everyone they could to stay the night and maybe get a warm meal before they would leave the following morning. It is said that Doc had
multiple hideouts along the Niobrara River, which in fact were true. One of the biggest Doc Middleton legends is that he had an underground fortress that was capable of hiding many men and herds of the stolen horses. Since no one could catch Doc everyone believed it, and so it virtually became true. In an 1879 newspaper, it stated that the “Niobrara bandits” and their “Chief” Doc Middleton had an impregnable fortress where few men could defend against many times their number (Hutton pg. 44). Such a hideout was never found and even modern day ranchers and historians cannot find such a bunker. The only explainable and rational way that Doc was so successful in escaping the law was that he fled immediately and for long distances. Knowing the land was also his strength, he knew where to hide that provided water and food so he could remain hidden for long periods of time.

In November of 1877, Doc and his counterparts came across Chief Red Cloud’s tribe near the Niobrara River in Northwestern Nebraska. Doc and his men would scope out the tribe and figure out when their horses were most vulnerable to be taken. Around the first of the December, Doc and his men snuck up on the tribe’s camp during the night and rounded up an unknown amount of horses and took off. They immediately headed for the Niobrara River to cross it and escape from the Indian Tribe. The river was only half frozen, and nearly half of the stolen horses broke through the ice and drowned. Doc was able to escape with a few horses but it is unknown if any horses survived and were sold for profit (Hutton pg. 47). These horse raids continued throughout the winter and into the spring of 1878, infuriating Indian tribes. An article in the “Pen and Plow” newspaper of Oakdale Nebraska stated “The Indians are in a vicious mood. Their ponies have been stolen in large numbers. They believe their horses are scattered all along down this valley and have been sold in Columbus.” It was most likely true and even more horses were probably sold in the Elkhorn Valley where a wholesale market was being ran.
There was also another market farther away from the thefts that was between the North and South Platte Rivers. In mid-May of 1878, seventy-five horses were stolen from the Spotted Tail Indians and ten or fifteen horses from settlers around Paddock. These thefts were at separate times and it is unknown if they are related. Upon hearing the news that even the whites had their horses stolen the Spotted Tail Indians decided against a retaliation.

One of the largest horse heists known in Nebraska and South Dakota history points at Doc as the culprit. Again, in 1878 while teamed up with four other mean they scouted a Sioux Tribe with close to 150 horses. The Sioux Tribe had thousands of horses throughout western Nebraska and into South Dakota which made them a target. Doc and his team made a night run near the camp of a Sioux Tribe and were successful in herding up 140 horses and headed south for the Platte River. Once they crossed the Middle Loup did they believe they were assured safety from any following savages and were able to rest and let the horses graze? Throughout the entire year of 1879 Doc and his men stole countless horses from different Indian tribes, infuriating the Indians. Doc still stole from white settlers but primarily from the Indians. On May 19, 1879, Governor Albinus Nance received a telegram from Thomas Henry Tibbles of the Omaha Herald. The telegram requested that the governor go to Omaha to meet with a large group of cattleman who had “desperate troubles with Doc Middleton and the Indians” (Hutton pg. 94). Governor Nance next would receive a letter on May 29 from the Pine Ridge Agency reporting that 97 horses were stolen and action needs to be taken. The letter does not name Doc but Doc did participate in many horse thefts involving the Indian agencies. The last known attempted large raid Doc admitted to was against a Red Cloud Indian Agency. Thinking that their guard would be down, Doc and three others snuck up onto the Red Cloud agency spotting
the horses they wanted only to be guarded by many men. They were soon spotted, exchanged gun fire, but no one was hurt. They fled off barely escaping the Indians with their lives.

Even though Doc was a thief and people wanted him dead, he was also known for being kind mannered, good looking, and a robin hood of his time. There were many other outlaws in the same business, but most of the men who Doc sold the stolen horses to preferred him because he was dressy and personable. Doc would also give a horse to those who were need or who he felt indebted to. Because Doc was such a respectable man, it made his horse stealing business that much more profitable. An estimated 3,000 horses were stolen in 1878 and 1879, with the blame solely on Doc and his gang (Hutton pg. 51). Mostly Indian horses, they were ran off to various parts in Nebraska, South Dakota, Iowa, Wyoming, and Colorado. Doc was very successful in the horse business and had very little trouble selling the stolen stock.

At the peak of Doc’s horse thieving career, while hiding out at a ranch, he met and instantly fell in love with the rancher’s daughter. Mary Richardson was her name and she was eighteen years old at the time she met Doc. Doc immediately revealed his love, proposed to Mary, and she accepted. At the time it would have been less than woman if she would have declined. The next obstacle that Doc faced was obtaining a marriage license at a local courthouse where he was a nationwide fugitive, and also wanted by the Indians. Doc was able to acquire a marriage license in Holt County Nebraska on May 24, 1879. Marriage License number twelve of Holt County was issued to Mr. James M. Sheppard and Miss Mary Richardson (Hutton pg. 97). Returning back with two stolen ponies, the new lovers rode off for the Niobrara where a clergyman was contacted to perform the necessary procedures. Four days later on the night of May 28, Doc and Mary were united in marriage by Reverend I. H. Skinner. In a later interview with the Reverends wife she told what she knew of their affair: Recently moving to the Niobrara
in the spring of 1879, Rev. Skinner was very ill and hoping to regain his health. Ignorant of the “pony boy” clan (Doc Middleton Gang) the pitched a tent on the South side of the river. Only being there a few days, Rev. Skinner and his wife were approached by Doc and another man by the name of Morris. Introducing himself as James Sheppard, Doc asked the Rev. Skinner if he would minister a marriage which he accepted in fear. Rev. Skinner’s wife noted that the room was crowded with readily armed men, most likely to fend off attacking Indians or lawmen. Once Rev. Skinner performed his duty, judging the room by its character, he and his wife fled the area as soon as possible. Mary’s little brother gave a little more in detail story behind Doc and Marys’ encounters: Mary lived on the Haptonstall ranch where she first met Doc who came there frequently. After a short while, Mary became “plumb nuts” over Doc. Mary’s dad was not entirely fond of Doc because he knew of his horse thieving business. Doc asked Mr. Richardson for his daughters hand in marriage but he declined saying: “you boys is either goin’ to be hung up or go to the pen.” Then followed that with “if you was a clean, clear man, I wouldn’t say a word.”

A couple weeks after the marriage, Detective Llewellyn from Omaha Nebraska heard a rumor that the Doc Middleton just got married on the Niobrara River. Detectives Llewellyn and his partner Hazen immediately hopped on the next available train and headed west for Middleton. Llewellyn sent a telegram to Detective Lykens from Sidney (where Doc is still wanted for murder) to meet with him in Columbus. On June 14th, the three detectives were united and rode to the Niobrara to capture Doc. Two days later the three made it to the Elkhorn Valley, where Lykens split off to go undetected by any citizens. Doc somehow someway found out that the detectives were close by, and sent a man to meet with Llewellyn to possibly come up with an agreement so Doc would avoid prison or being hung. Doc and Llewellyn agreed to meet
on the O'Connell ranch near Atkinson. June 17 was the day they agreed upon meeting and Doc failed to show. The next day Llewelyn and Hazen waited while Lykens hid but insight of the potential meeting. Doc again did not show but sent a man again to inform the detectives of another meeting place some six miles away from the Niobrara River and forty miles from where the detectives were camping. Now June 19, the detectives made their way to the new meeting point. Sometime around noon, Lykens split off again to stay hidden from Doc and anyone else. Around 2:00 P.M Llewellyn and Hazen discovered fresh horse tracks and instantly knew they have already been watched by someone. An hour later arriving at the Peacock ranch Doc greeted the two detectives. According the Omaha Daily Bee, Llewellyn and Hazen met with Middleton five miles from his retreat. Middleton had previously agreed to meet alone but was accompanied by three other men, a jailbird from Niobrara (meaning St. Helena), Bill Shebley (new recruit), and Limber Dick (Hutton pg. 116). The official meeting purpose was a consultation about a pardon, or “conditional papers of help or immunity, which were bona fide. The men had visited for an hour and half when Mrs. Peacock called them in for supper. Also according to the Omaha Daily Bee, all of the men went inside except for Doc and Hazen; Doc asked Hazen “Is this thing all on the square?” “Yes, sir, it means business on the part of the government,” said Hazen (Hutton pg. 117). After supper at the Peacock ranch they rode back to the Niobrara River, where Doc and his men would use the ferry to cross to the North side. Llewellyn wanted to meet one more time in the morning with Doc, and they agreed to meet at a man’s house. When morning came around that June 20th, Detective Lykens hid in some dense brush while Llewellyn and Hazen met Doc one last time. Doc arrived with Kid Wade via horseback, Llewellyn also on horseback lured the two men down a trail towards Lykens. Before getting close enough for Lykens to take an accurate shot at Doc, Doc spotted Lykens and began firing his revolver at
Lykens. A gunfight ensued wounding Doc, Llewellyn, and Hazen the most severe. The pardon
turned out to be fake, and the plot all along was an assassination attempt of Doc. The accounts
are unclear on who shot who, but it is certain that detective Hazen died due to his wounds, and
two of Doc’s men were killed in the shootout. Doc fled the area to a ranch house to get medical
treatment, and the two remaining detectives went in the opposite direction for medical attention.

One month later an unnamed informant from the northern part of Nebraska arrived in
Grand Island and reported the details of Doc Middleton being involved on a shootout with
lawmen. July 26th The Omaha Daily Bee and the Yankton Daily Press and Dakotian reported the
following: Doc Middleton is in a helpless condition, but guarded by sixty of his men; it was
estimated that he could muster 200 men on short notice, to defend against any party sent to attack
him. The northern informant reported a $2,000.00 reward for Doc. With every lawman and
person outside of the Niobrara Valley, Doc was knew he would never be found. He was friends
with every household in the valley and no one would give him up. They knew if they were to
ever give him up they could possibly lose their lives and their property. A healed detective
Llewellyn, along with twenty U.S. soldiers, and four other detectives made their way to the
Niobrara ferry that Doc frequently used. John Morris the ferry operator refused to give up
anything he knew about Doc. The posse of men then went to Henry Richardson (Doc’s father in-
law) and where Llewellyn would threaten Henry until he gave up Doc. This all happening on
July 27th just one day after being printed in the newspapers the posse would come up on Doc’s
camp. Llewellyn reportedly fired a shot into the occupied tent when Henry screamed and said
his daughter was in there. Kid Wade and Black Bill fled the tent, one of the young men
allegedly was captured. Doc tried to sneak out the backside of the tent but still in weak condition
from being shot was captured immediately by the surrounding men. Detective Llewellyn
proudly escorted Doc back to Atkinson where Doc would remain in custody. Doc would soon be transferred to Cheyenne Wyoming where he was being held for previous horse theft charges alongside George Smith and Edgar Scurry as told before. No further charges were filed against Doc because they had no evidence that it was actually Doc’s gang that stole the thousands of horses throughout central Great Plains. Doc agreed to plead guilty on the lesser of the three charges, which was the theft of three horses. September 18 that year, Doc was sentenced to five years in prison but was transferred to the Nebraska Penitentiary because Wyoming’s had recently caught fire. Doc only served three years and nine months, getting out early for good behavior. According to Nebraska State Penitentiary records, Doc was released June 18, 1883 (Hutton pg. 147).

After Docs release from prison he did not immediately return to the Niobrara. He took his time getting back and is unknown if any illegal activity pursued. Once returning to the Richardson ranch, he met up with Tom Richardson, his now ex-brother in-law since Mary filed for divorce while Doc was in Prison. Helping out around the Richardson ranch, Doc fell in love with Rene Richardson, the youngest sibling daughter of the family. Doc wound up marrying Rene June 2nd 1884. Doc and his wife would soon move to Gordon Nebraska where Doc would open a tent saloon. Doc admitted to stealing two Indian ponies for personal use but never go into trouble for the theft. By mid-1885 the railroad made its way through and the town began to grown and buildings were being erected rather quickly. On April 16, 1885, Doc’s wife gave birth to girl named Lulu B. Sheridan County was formed in 1885 and with no Sheriff Deputy’s, Doc was appointed as a deputy in Gordon. Doc’s tenure as a deputy only lasted a year before he joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. After a while on the road with the show, Doc made it back to Gordon with his wife. February 2, 1887, Doc would have a son born named David. May
23, 1889, Doc had another son named Joseph. June 1, 1890, Lulu Middleton passed away at the age of five and to this day has a small headstone in the Gordon cemetery. Just prior to the Battle of Wounded knee, Doc was regularly bootlegging whiskey to the Pine Ridge Reservation for a living. Doc’s concealing method while bootlegging was stuffing chickens with a bottle of whiskey and going to the Reservation to sell chickens stuffed with an appetizer. At the end of December 1890 the Battle of Wounded Knee took place and most of Chief Big Foots tribe was slaughtered by the military. In the midst of the chaotic event, Doc went North and rounded up thirty-five or forty Indian horses. Mistakenly stealing two white man horses in the bunch, Doc was pursued by a posse of men. Ex-sheriff Henry Chamberlain stopped Doc and took over the herd and let Doc go scotch free. Doc still remained a saloon owner and was often running illegal gambling rings to make a profit. He would also often leave on “business” to gamble in other places and most likely hustle other gamblers.

Within the next two years, sometime in 1893 Doc’s family had moved to Chadron Nebraska. John G. Maher, the Dawes County Clerk and a correspondent for eastern Nebraska newspapers, was infamous for reporting hoax stories just to get some attention for western Nebraska. One story in particular that started out as a hoax was the Chadron to Chicago horse race. Gaining so much popularity nationwide and even international attention the race soon became a reality. Ground rules were established and the race was to begin on June 13, 1883, leaving from the Blaine Hotel at 8:00 A.M. Doc who loved to be in the limelight, and a prize of $1000.00 decided to join the race. Buffalo Bill Cody heard about the race and offered $500.00 more and a free show to those who finished. Even though the race grew great attention, only nine men signed up for the 1000 mile race. Heavy betting was being done and Doc was the favorite in the Chadron area. The riders were allowed two horses for the race, Doc was doing
well until he had to abandon a horse which greatly slowed him down. Doc even cheated by riding a train with his horse but still was one of the last ones to cross the finish line in Chicago.

October 24, 1894, Doc had another daughter Ruth born into the family. Staying in Chadron a few more years the family moved to Crawford Nebraska for better schooling and then to Oelrichs South Dakota. Then again to Ardmore South Dakota where they would have their last son Henry, born June 26, 1900. Doc made one final move to Douglas Wyoming with a little village Orin nearby. Douglas was another booming town with the railroad being new and businesses establishing fast. On October 4, 1913, Doc leased a building for a year to start a saloon with his son Wesley. Doc’s saloon was described as a “blind pig” and illegal operating saloon. Doc was unsure if he needed a liquor license in Orin since it was uncorroborated, so his illegal actions were unintentional. Doc and his son had only been open ten days, selling more beer and whiskey than any two saloons in Douglas. One day a drunken one armed sheep herder was passed out behind Doc’s saloon when another man approached him. A Knife fight ensued putting one man in the hospital. The publicity and confessions eventually led to Doc’s arrest for selling alcohol illegally without a proper license. Doc plead guilty and was placed in jail. After some days went by Doc became ill with erysipelas contracted from the jail. Unable to pay his fines Doc could not get out of jail.

On December 31, 1913, the Douglas Enterprise Read: D.C. Middleton died on Saturday after a week’s illness with erysipelas and pneumonia, the later developing a few days before, but because of his advanced age and general condition was unable to rally (Hutton pg. 211). Doc Middleton is buried in an unmarked grave in Douglas Park Cemetery.

Doc Middleton, the most successful yet most respected outlaw to ever live on the Great Plains left a story behind that is so amusing sounds like a fable. From escaping the law
numerous times and surviving multiple gunshot wounds in such a time remarkable. The ridiculous amount of horses stolen in a short period of time cannot be compared to anyone else. The settlers and Indians named the western central part of Nebraska “Doc Middleton Country” and forbid going there in risk of losing their possessions. Doc’s luck slowly ran out, he lost a daughter, and soon later would pass away while ill in jail. Doc’s legend lives on through many small Nebraska towns today, he is featured in many museums and has multiple books and articles written about him.

