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Book Review: Goodbye, Judge Lynch: The End of a Lawless Era in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin

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Goodbye, Judge Lynch: The End of a Lawless Era in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin. By John W. Davis. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xiii+ 266 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

In *Goodbye, Judge Lynch*, John W. Davis details two early twentieth-century murder cases and their aftermaths in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin. In 1902, Jim Gordon killed his older brother, Thomas, supposedly because Jim coveted Thomas's wife, Margaret. The jury found Jim innocent of first- and second-degree murder, but convicted him of manslaughter. Jim demanded a new trial. The second jury convicted him of first-degree murder, a capital offense. Jim's attorney appealed to the Wyoming Supreme Court arguing that conviction of a greater offense in the second trial violated the U.S. Constitution's prohibition against double jeopardy.

Before the Court heard the case, vigilantes lynched Jim. During their attack on the Big Horn County jail at Basin City on July 20, 1903, they also killed Jim's cellmate and a deputy sheriff. Officials failed in their efforts to bring the lynchers to justice. In 1903, pro-lynching attitudes still reigned.

Six years passed during which farmers and sheep men populated a region once almost exclusively the domain of cattle men. On April 2, 1909, after sheep men trespassed on ground claimed by cattle men, three shepherds were murdered seven miles south of Ten Sleep near Spring Creek. Thanks to financial support from various woolgrowers associations, the five Spring Creek raiders were tried and convicted. Although the last of them to be released from the penitentiary served only until December 1914, the fact that they were punished at all, Davis argues, heralded a new era as Wyoming bid Judge Lynch adieu.

Davis realizes Judge Lynch was sick, but not completely dead in 1909. Michael J. Pfeifer in *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (2004) lists three Wyoming lynchings after 1909. However, Pfeifer's chronicle of Wyoming lynchings, which shows ten between 1902 and 1904, none between 1904 and 1908, three in 1909, and three between 1912 and 1918, supports Davis's point that lynching sharply declined after 1909.

Fans of western and Wyoming history will delight in Davis's detailed and clearly written account and will be drawn to read his *A Vast Amount of Trouble: A History of the Spring Creek Raid* (1993). Historians will appreciate attorney Davis's legal insights, including his careful analysis of jury selection and his discussion of the double jeopardy defense. Moreover, former U.S. senator Alan Simpson will be happy to learn, if he does not already know it, that his grandfather, attorney Will L. Simpson, helped ferret out the Spring Creek murderers.

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