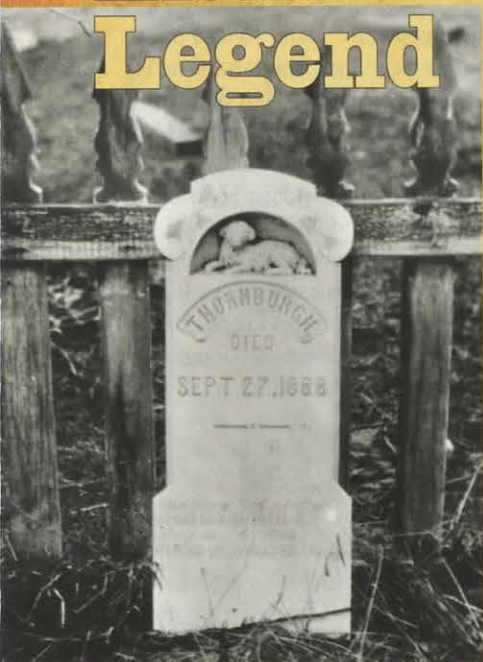
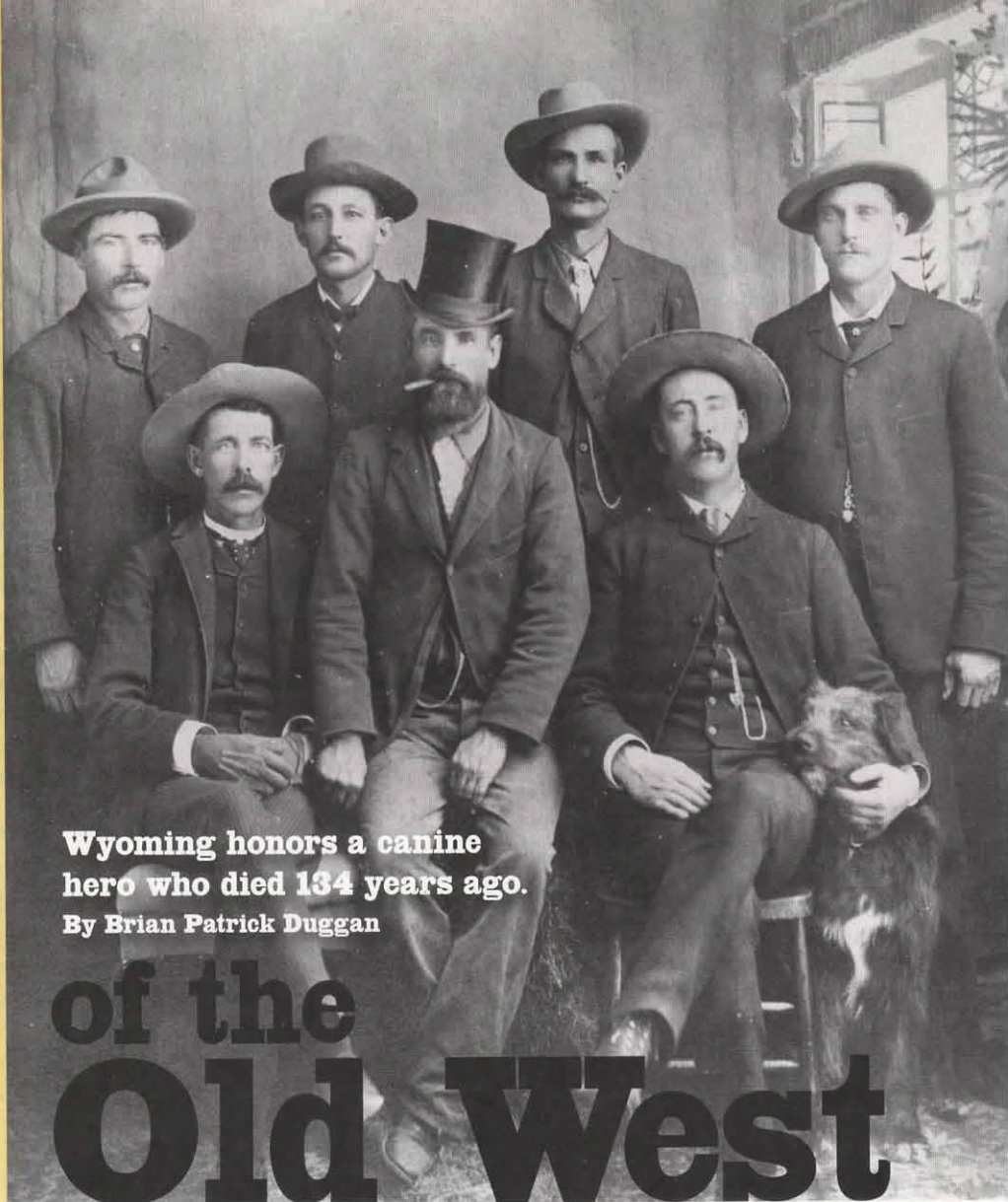


A Little Legend



Left: Today, Thornburgh's grave looks very much the same as it is shown here at the end of the 19th century.

Right: In his best duds, "Buck" Buchanan, sporting a cigar and top hat, poses with Thornburgh (and friends) for a formal portrait.



Wyoming honors a canine hero who died 134 years ago.

By Brian Patrick Duggan

of the Old West

In the 1950s TV series *Rin Tin Tin*, the U.S. Cavalry finds and adopts the sole survivors of a wagon train massacre—a boy and puppy. Seventy-five years before that fiction, it really happened, but with only one survivor—a pup named Thornburgh.

Driving through southwest Wyoming, I stopped to stroll around old Fort Bridger on the site of mountain man Jim Bridger's 1843 trading post. In the middle of a lawn beside the stone Pony Express stable and markers for long-gone barracks, I saw a double enclosure of whitewashed, wooden pickets.

There was a well-kept grave, complete with headstone and enigmatic inscription.

THORNBURGH

DIED

SEPT 27, 1888

MAN NEVER HAD A BETTER, TRUER,
BRAVER FRIEND.

SLEEP ON, OLD FELLOW, WE'LL MEET
ACROSS THE RANGE.

An interpretive sign outlined Thornburgh's adventurous life.

Now, here was a challenge for a canine historian! In my time there, I cornered two docents and later the superintendent to learn more about this intriguing dog.

In 1879, Major Thomas Tipton Thornburgh, goaded by Nathan Meeker, an impossibly idealistic and rigid

Indian agent, led a column of cavalry and wagons from Wyoming Territory into the Ute reservation in northwest Colorado. His orders were to peacefully resolve Meeker's vague grievances and misunderstandings on both sides.

On September 29, Thornburgh unwisely crossed Milk River into sovereign Ute land. Nicaagat, aka Chief Jack, and his warriors furiously attacked. Inside a hasty barricade of circled wagons, the soldiers returned fire.

Thornburgh was killed soon after the shooting began. Simultaneously, other Utes wiped out Meeker's trading post and, at nearby Stinking Gulch, independent freighter George Gordon's three wagons with agency supplies.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: WYOMING STATE ARCHIVES; BACKGROUND: ©THEPALMER/GETTY IMAGES

"The Thornburgh Scavenger Hunt has proven the most popular of the three we offer—a fun and interactive way to experience the fort. If the hunt is completed, the visitor has the opportunity to purchase a hatpin sold only in connection with the hunts. The pin that correlates with Thornburgh's hunt is a paw print engraved with his name and it's always the most popular. There have been visitors who specifically completed the hunt just to get that pin." —Fort Bridger State Historic Site Superintendent Linley Mayer



The Milk River siege lasted six days before relief cavalry could arrive. A burial detail found the slaughtered bodies of Gordon, his two teamsters, their livestock, and a mother dog. Miraculously, one of her puppies was alive. The shaggy brown pup was named Thornburgh to honor the commander.

Thornburgh grew up with the other rambling dogs on post, living in the stable, depending on food handouts but subservient to no one. There are several tales, perhaps apocryphal, of his heroism but the best one changed his life. Thornburgh once caught a knife-wielding commissary thief red-handed (during a lightning storm, no less), and was slashed in the fight. The feat earned him a collar with brass nametag, meals from the company kitchen, and, from the commanding officer, he was awarded privileged status above other post dogs.

Eventually, Thornburgh went with his soldiers to Fort Bridger along the Old Oregon Trail and Pony Express route. There, his life changed again for the better.

The dog had no bond with anyone until fate sent a particular muleskinner to Fort Bridger. "Buck" Buchanan set his sights on befriending the wary, growling hound. "Thornburgh, you've made a mistake. You and me has got to be friends or enemies, and we're going to settle it right here. Come, let's be friends," he was quoted as saying in a

magazine article.

It took patience and kindness but, in time, the teamster and dog became devoted to each other.

Thornburgh trekked with Buck on his freight runs and became quite good at cutting out his master's mules for harnessing. Both freight and Army mules were kept in a corral and the unbroken, potentially volatile ones had part of their tails shaved as an alert. On Thornburgh's last day alive, he and Buck were separating mules in the corral when the shavetails (young, inexperienced pack mules) became unsettled. One charged into the midst of Thornburgh's work. The 9-year-old dog barked a warning, but the mule kicked him in the ribs, launching him across the corral. Buck scooped up the limp dog and carried him back to his bunk—but there was nothing that could be done.

In a very irregular move, the commanding officer granted Buck permission to bury his dog on the post. A quiet spot under a weeping willow behind the stone stables and a barrack was chosen, and the plot was enclosed with a picket fence. At some expense, Buck sent to Salt Lake City for a headstone carved with the figure of a lamb—the Victorian funerary symbol of a child's innocence.

In 1890, two years after Thornburgh was killed, Wyoming became a state and the fort was closed. Buck relo-

cated a hundred miles away to Fort Douglas in Utah Territory, visiting his dog's resting place whenever he could. Records are sketchy but Buck probably died about 1901. At old Fort Bridger, ranchers occupied the post's houses and while many Army buildings fell into ruin, residents faithfully tended the dog's plot. In 1933, the state of Wyoming accepted custody of the historic property and Thornburgh's grave is an important responsibility for the staff—and a popular stop for visitors.

133 years after the dog's death, the willow tree is gone, the picket fence has been replaced a few times, and the head- and footstones have had their cracks carefully repaired. Understandably, visitors mistake the carved lamb for a dog but they leave coins as a gesture of respect and remembrance. For a dog lover, it's a profoundly moving spot—stirring memories of the special dogs with whom I've shared my life.

Ironically, Buck is probably buried in an unmarked grave in Salt Lake City, but I'd like to think that he did meet his true and brave friend "across the range." **FD**

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Linley Mayer and Christine Housekeeper at Fort Bridger for their cheerful assistance.

Brian Patrick Duggan is the author of *General Custer, Libbie Custer and their Dogs: A Passion for Hounds from the Civil War to Little Bighorn* and the award-winning *Saluki: The Desert Hound and the English Travelers Who Brought It to the West*. He has written widely on canine history, is an AKC judge, and the editor for McFarland Publishers' *Dogs in Our World* series.

For more information, visit wyoparks.wyo.gov/index.php/places-to-go/fort-bridger