



# **John Clay, Jr.: Commission Man, Banker and Rancher (Western Frontiersmen Series)**

*Lawrence M. Woods*

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In the western cattle industry, John Clay's name looms large. The young scotsman entered the field in the late 1870s, and he was soon employed by Scottish investors, purchasing and overseeing land and cattle. From Texas to Kansas to Wyoming to California, Clay's story covers the full breadth of ranching in the West. Clay's story includes tales of trail drives, rustlers, the Johnson County Invasion, the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the Swan Land and Cattle Company, Tom Horn, and much, much more.

Called by some the dean of American stockmen, John Clay also ran perhaps the largest livestock commission firm in the country, and controlled a network of nearly two dozen banks that were directed by a private lending operation that we can only call large because there are no surviving records to give us a more precise measure. Through such diversity, Clay escaped the tribulations of other professionals in the same fields by controlling his assets in a way that was probably unique.

But there was also the John Clay who followed the hounds in his native Scotland, astride the great horse Chicago, until his eyesight and growing weight forced him to retire from the hunt, and there was John Clay, publisher and author, whose work is nowhere fully catalogued, and a partial list fills several pages.

Finally, there is the John Clay who led the cattlemen's confrontation with the "rustler" faction of frontier Wyoming at the time of the infamous Johnson County Invasion. Clay's blanket denials of involvement in that dispute have always been greeted with skepticism by historians, but the paucity of documentation has prevented more than a general review of the issue. Here, Clay's extensive presence in the West is placed in the context of that conflict.

Most of what is known about John Clay and his family comes from his own prolific pen, and much of this biography comes from that source, but also added are some of the details which Clay did not give, and place his work in the context of an exciting period in the history of the American West.

Cattle Rancho and Wyoming Cattle Rancho companies, Western Ranches, Limited, and the Swan Land and Cattle Company are just a few of the outfits which he managed. In 1890 was elected sixth president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, serving for six years during the tumultuous era which included the invasion of Johnson County. Jim Averell and Ella Watson (Cattle Kate) were lynched by men in the employ of Clay and his associates. Clay also had close contact with Tom Horn, and is suspected by some of having been his employer.

Fully annotated and with an analytical index, the work includes a partial bibliography of the writings of John Clay, with a thorough bibliography of other sources on the man and the period. Seven illustrations enhance the work.

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