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Compendium of
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LOUIS JOHN FREDERICK LAEGER

Louis John Frederick laeger, better known throughout the western part of the United States as "Billy, the Bear" is one of the prosperous and prominent citizens of Dawes county, Nebraska, where for the past twenty-two years he has resided and acted in many official capacities, having been elected four terms as



L. J. F. LAEGER.

police judge and justice of the peace in the early days of the county when times were red hot for officials of any character. He was also elected for eleven years as city clerk of his favorite city of Chadron, Nebraska, and is at present serving a four-year term as clerk of the district court of Dawes county, as well as filling the offices of deputy clerk of the United States circuit and district courts.

He is a native of Pennsylvania, where, in 1855, he first saw the light of day. His ancestors were all of strong German pioneer stock; his great grandfather was spiritual adviser to Frederick the Great and the use of the royal coat of arms was given the laeger family, which fact is a matter of historical record, at this day, in Washington, District Columbus (sic).

His grandfather on his father's side was the Rev. G. F. I. laeger, a pioneer who helped to settle Pennsylvania and whose record is monumental among the Lutheran synods of that state for his good deeds in the pulpit of Berks county. From this venerable ancestor it is believed that the subject of this sketch inherited his own truly charitable instincts, his exceptional business integrity and his systematic quality of mind. His father, Charles S. laeger, was a coachmaker by trade and followed his profession at Hamburg, Pennsylvania, up to the time of his death which occurred when Louis was five years of age. A year later his mother was stricken with paralysis, caused from a runaway team, which killed his father the year before and at which time our subject was with his parents, but was unhurt in the affair.

His democratic principles, as the meaning of liberty and freedom of speech, never suited his next of kin after the death of his parents and at the tender age of six he was sent, via Central America, to California, where he was raised by his father's brother in Yuma, California, who, at that time, was one of the wealthiest and largest contractors on the Pacific coast and who was known as Don Diego. From 1861 to 1869 our subject's associates were mostly Spaniards, his uncle being married to one of the Castile's beauties, and together with his cousins attended Spanish school until after the civil war, after which his education was entrusted to private tutors. His progress was rapid among the arts and mechanics of those days while nautical works were the preferred studies of this wonderful boy of only thirteen who, by this time, had learned to be a pilot on one of the river boats, of which uncle was owner.

At sixteen years of age he passed the educational examination for the Annapolis Naval Academy, but was rejected on account of a slight defect with one of his ears. He never faltered, however, and in the fall of the same year underwent a critical examination before the New York Nautical Academy and was granted his diploma and two years later he received a navigator's certificate as a sailing master entitling him to sail the high seas as a captain notwithstanding he was at that time under the age limit and was compelled to undergo a severe examination in consequence. In 1873 he entered the employ of W. R. Grace &

Co., of New York city, in what was then known as the California Grain Fleet between Liverpool and San Francisco; but his blood was too fast for so slow going crafts and the following year, after having made a trip overland from New York to San Francisco, he was especially employed as quartermaster on board the City of Peking, one of the finest 5,000 ton liners then plying between San Francisco and the Oriental ports including the Yellow Pearl domain, and which vessel was a sister ship to the City of Tokio, both of which belonged to the Pacific Mail Steam Ship Company. Having already traveled twice around the world as sailor and tourist and while thus employed as quartermaster on one of his trips, he made the acquaintance of a rich nobleman's son, who taking a fancy to his roving spirit and bright disposition, sought him as a partner and guide in his travel over the world, offering to pay all bills, which offer was accepted and the "Ropes" were again overhauled and the world was seen from "High Points."

In 1876 he cast anchor in the publishing house of A. L. Bancroft & Co., of 721 Market street, San Francisco, where he worked as proof reader on the Herbert H. Bancroft series, the most remarkable original historical work ever produced on this side of the Atlantic by a single brain. "Around the world in eighty days" again took him to Australia in the early part of 1877 and, returning to San Francisco in June of that year, he appeared on the boards of the Grand Opera House in the play of "Snowflake." Buffalo Bill was that time touring the Pacific coast with "The Buffalo Bill Combination Company," and soon Mr. Laeger was engaged to play the part of a bear in the play of "Red Right Hand," with which Cody was taking the Californians by storm. He soon became Cody's private secretary and, with the closing of the season, he accompanied the noted scout to North Platte, Nebraska, where he decided to cast his lot with the plainsmen and cowpuncher of the frontier, anything for novelty and newness being his sole enjoyment.

The opening up of a new cattle country on the famous Niobrara river in the northern part of Nebraska next caught his fancy and in 1878 he was one of the leaders there in the warfare on the Cheyenne Indians who were burning ranches and killing the cattlemen. For two years this suited him and the hardships of a

nomadic life proved to make a man of steel. Soon, however, civilization commenced to move westward, and Fort Niobrara, was established at Valentine, Nebraska. Sheridan and Fort Robinson were military posts further west and the white covered wagons of the early settlers were getting too numerous and consequently it was no more a good cattle country and "Billy" migrated to the Snake creek country on the Black Hills road on the shores of Broncho Lake years before it could have been dreamed that Alliance would come and drink up its waters. In 1881 he again "moved camp" and went to Texas, where he purchased one thousand five hundred head of stock horses and, to use his own words, made a "wagon full of money."

In the same year the Wood river gold excitement attracted his attention in Idaho and not until he had wasted \$45,000 of money "that was good in Europe," did he make up his mind that mining was out of his class. Those were the days of strenuous and tumultuous life or spectacular times,--up one morning and down the next. The man who could stand loss was a safe one to tie to, but woe to him who sorrowed for gold. Our subject was not of the latter kind; he was constructed of steel bands, and when he came down, he found himself in the saddle once more punching cows for Sudduth and Montgomery on Rock creek in Wyoming, content with \$75.00 per month.

Soon, however, Mr. laeger's services were sought by eastern capitalists then organizing a monster cattle company to be known as "The Yellow Stone Cattle Company." and Colonel Cody, his old friend, was foremost in testimonials touching Mr. laeger's qualifications to manage this vast undertaking, but his star of fate seems to have been against him from this point, for this engagement was the forerunner of the saddest experience of his life, and which has been to him a tragedy for the past twenty-five years, and will be so no matter how hard he may seem to want to forget it until his remains are laid away in the silent tomb.

He was on an errand in obedience to his employers, when, overtaken in a Wyoming blizzard, he lost both feet and all his fingers, after having been exposed for five days and four nights to the coldest weather Wyoming has ever

experienced. His detailed story of those days and nights are enough to chill one's blood and, but for the fact that he has refused to re-write it for this work, we would gladly give it space.

Left penniless and almost distracted at his loss, he still relied on science to assist him in the world. He at once procured a set of Kolbe Artificials and set about to educate himself more with a view of adapting himself to clerical work. From the time of his release from the hospital at Laramie City, Wyoming, May 5, 1883, to April, 1886, he continued his studies and exerted his all-powerful will to overlook his own wants and disadvantages and assist others who might be in greater distress. He has certainly accomplished wonders and bears the name throughout the entire west as a liberal, generous-hearted man, ever ready to lend a hand for the purpose of uplifting a brother in need. In 1882 he married one of the brightest and handsomest young ladies of his county and today stands as a living monument among his fellow citizens as a man fully and thoroughly capable of having a good home of his own adorned by a loving and devoted wife and two boys, aged fifteen and seven, who will soon be able to assist their father in his work for the advancement of mankind. He cast his maiden vote for Samuel J. Tilden and thereby incurred the displeasure of an uncle who cut him short \$59,999, leaving him \$1.00, while to his brothers and sisters, each was given \$60,000.

He is a Democrat to the core, and studies other governments in unison with our own. He swears by W. J. Bryan and hopes the God of Fate may be with his cause. His friends in fraternal orders are legion and especially so among the Fraternal Order of Eagles, in which order he holds high office, both at home and throughout his state, being recognized as a worker for anything that may befriend and do good to a brother in distress.

Judge E. S. Ricker, ex-county judge and journalist, of Chadron, has this to say of him: "I have been personally acquainted with L. J. F. laeger in an official and a business manner as well as in a friendly relation for twenty-one years, and it gives me much happiness to say he possesses exceptional work as a man; a

well recognized capacity for business, which has been developed by study and experience and that in his long service in minor judicial positions he has displayed sound and impartial judgment which recommend him to his fellow citizens for re-election.

"Whenever called to any position of honor or trust he has not failed to continue to deserve the respect which raised him to the public place or confidential connections. He has seen much of the world, and his knowledge of men and of human nature helps to fit him with a special competency for the high and honorable place to which his aspirations invite him.

"He is courteous and obliging in disposition, which qualities of the agreeable man distinctly mark his intercourse with others and at the same time he may be depended upon for ready decision and prompt action, springing from his ability for both, and afterwards to maintain these by such firmness as gives stability to all proceedings.

"It is to me both a personal pleasure and privilege to pay this tribute to such a remarkable and deserving man while he lives; it could do him no good after he is dead."

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