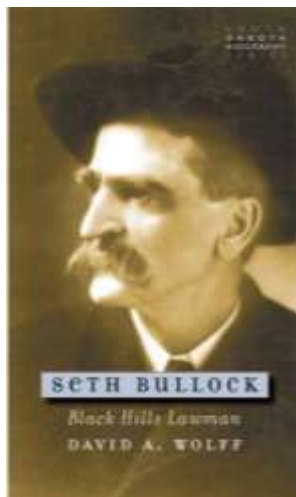


## About the Book



David A. Wolff. *Seth Bullock: Black Hills Lawman*. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2009.

### Synopsis

David Wolff, a professor of history at Black Hills State University, draws upon his vast knowledge of the Black Hills region and intensive research in the historical sources to write a fascinating and highly readable account of Deadwood's first sheriff, a legendary figure of the gold-mining era. The author cuts through the legends and myths surrounding Bullock to draw a detailed and multi-faceted account of his many activities in the business realm, politics, law enforcement, town boosterism, tourism promotion, and family matters. A much more complex figure than is generally known, Bullock became a close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt, which gave him an inside track on several of his appointments.

### Summary of the Book

Everyone has heard of "Wild Bill" Hickok and "Calamity Jane," and many would recognize the names of "Preacher" Smith and "Potato Johnny" of Black Hills gold rush fame. Seth Bullock, too, seems to fit into the picture, but exactly how? We think of him as a lawman, the sheriff of Deadwood during the wildest and most exciting days of the mining frontier. But although he subtitles his biography of Bullock "Black Hills Lawman," David Wolff observes that the pioneer businessman spent only nine and a half months as sheriff of Lawrence County and invested most of his time and effort during the heyday of his career as an entrepreneur, civic booster, and backroom politician. He did come back for eight years in his sixties as U.S. Marshal for the state of South Dakota, but in that job he served primarily as an administrator, leaving the heavy lifting and day-to-day investigatory work to his six deputies.

That his brief tenure as sheriff heavily shaped his public image and reflected his own estimate of the importance of law and order for development and progress in a frontier

community is evident. Bullock had served earlier, while still in his twenties, as a county sheriff in Wyoming. For that matter, he was still only thirty when appointed temporary sheriff of Lawrence County in 1877, pending elections to choose permanent county officials. He later contested and lost elections twice for the position, being a Republican in a Democratically inclined area, and never ran for public office again. But for the rest of his life he would work energetically behind the scenes for his party and for the betterment of his community, state, and the nation. The close friendship that he developed with Theodore Roosevelt during and after the Spanish-American War would bring him many invitations to the White House, further enhance his position as a regional and even national celebrity, and bring him two political plums — four years as superintendent of the Black Hills Forest Reserve and eight years as U.S. Marshal. Thus, his career circled around to where it had started almost five decades earlier in Montana.

As with many other characters who rose to prominence during Deadwood's "wild and woolly" period, Seth Bullock's life is often hard to disentangle from the myths and legends that inevitably came to surround it. David Wolff says that one of his purposes in writing this biography was to set the record straight, where necessary. But more importantly, he wants to tell the story of an individual who played a highly significant role in building up the business prosperity of Deadwood and the Black Hills, in promoting not only law and order but also a progressive and livable community in general, and in living the kind of life that is satisfying and meaningful and makes a difference.

Bullock did not make it easy for future historians and biographers to tell his story, because he did not leave much of a paper trail behind. The papers that he did leave were used by a grandson to write a book about him. Although these materials were not made available to Wolff for his research, he believes that their significant contents were incorporated in the grandson's book. In addition, he has diligently utilized what books and articles have been written about Bullock, attempting to sort out fact from fiction, he ferreted out relevant primary sources, and he relied especially heavily upon newspaper stories to fix dates and facts surrounding Bullock's activities.

His subject's personality remains somewhat enigmatic. We know Bullock was ambitious and success-driven, diligent and confident in his own powers, as well as enterprising and creative in many ways. His forte was thinking up new ideas, however, not in following through on them to insure their successful implementation. Part of his problem was that he had so many balls in the air, so to speak, at any one time that it was difficult to keep his eye on all of them. Some readers might judge him hyperactive. But small-town dwellers, who understand that twenty percent of the people usually do eighty percent of the work and that self-designated community leaders are often called upon to solve every problem, will probably sympathize with a man who was chronically over-extended. There is much to admire in a man so ambitious for himself and so dedicated to the betterment of his fellow citizens.

Wolff does not hesitate to use the “g”-word (greed) to describe one of Bullock’s motivations. But prospering personally and getting ahead are probably universal desires. More interesting, in many ways, was the strong sense of civic duty exhibited by Bullock during his lifetime. He always seemed to be in the center of the action. Paraphrasing one of Dwight Eisenhower’s Cabinet officials later on, the go-getting pioneer considered that what was good for Deadwood was good for Seth Bullock, and vice versa. In some cases, such as the proposed road to Spearfish, Bullock’s self-interested motives for wanting to have it built were all too obvious. But many of his promotional activities for the town and the region need to be understood as fulfilling a high sense of civic duty and responsibility. In this, he was acting as the ultimate community booster.

At times, it may be hard for the reader to believe that this man could be involved in so many different activities and projects. By the mid-1880's he was head of the Star and Bullock hardware stores (their string of outlets made them sort of early day Sam Waltons), the S & B Stock Farm, the Merchants’ National Bank, and the Iron Hill mining company. Add to that his activities in the area of law enforcement and in the Deadwood Board of Trade promoting road building, flour mills, railroads, and smelters, and his active role in promoting progress of every type, and one wonders where he found the time to do it all. One can infer, reading between the lines, that his home life did not take too much time away from his business and civic responsibilities. His three children remain shrouded in shadows. His wife seems to have managed the household and acted out the role of the quintessential clubwoman, which was about the only one open to a middle-class woman at the time. To give Bullock credit, however, he did join her during the 1910's in pushing for the predominant progressive cause of the period — woman suffrage.

We learn less about Sol Star in this book than we may have liked, but it is clear that their business partnership and personal relationship played a major role in whatever financial success Bullock obtained. The vicissitudes of business on Main Street and of economic development, generally, in the Black Hills provide a prominent backdrop for the human story enacted by Seth Bullock. Does the man make history, or does history make the man? Wolff does a pretty good job of showing how energetically and forcefully Bullock worked to carve out a niche for himself within the limits imposed by his environment. But we also get a sense of what those limits were. Although we do not get many of the details of the man’s finances, we do know that for significant periods of his career he was unable to pay his bills and teetered precariously on the edge of financial ruin. Yet, we always have a sense that everything will turn out all right in the end.

Perhaps the most significant point that comes through in this book is that after the first couple of years in Deadwood, which admittedly displayed all of the typical qualities of a mining boomtown, the community settled down into a rather prosaic pattern of development, full of challenges and crises, beset by economic booms and busts, and facing demands for the kinds of social amenities that every other town like it displayed. In other words, this story is a phase of small-town history.

Wolff says he has made no effort to psychoanalyze his subject, but through his careful culling of the sources and unearthing of evidence, he has woven a persuasive explanation of one man's life on the frontier and presented the story succinctly and straightforwardly, and, to be sure, in reader-friendly fashion. There is little more that we can ask of an author.

**[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)**

**Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).**

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