

# Iowa's "Oll" Coomes;

or,

## Desperado of the Dime Novel Industry

by Becky Wilson Hawbaker

*"The clear report of a rifle rang out on the still summer air, and rolled, in sharp reverberations, back through the forest hills, followed by a wild wail, whose intonations announced the unmistakable presence of death."*

**S**O BEGAN Beadle's Pocket Novel #236, first published in 1872, now part of the State Historical Society of Iowa's small collection of dime novels. This heart-pounding adventure story is filled — true to nineteenth-century stereotypes — with treacherous villains, a bold and brave young hero, a pure and beautiful heroine, and a formulaic plot of deceptions, chases, revenge, and true love, all set in the exotic location of . . . Silver Basin, Iowa.

Both the setting and the author of this story are interesting exceptions to the popular image of dime novels as Wild West tales written by colorful cowboys like Buffalo Bill. This particular dime novel, *Antelope Abe, the Boy Guide; or, The Forest Bride. A Tale of the North-west*, was not only set in Iowa, but was written by an



The cover illustration of *Antelope Abe* is remarkably serene compared to Oll Coomes's story inside. The cover was a dime novel's major selling point, designed to entice readers with colorful, exciting action. More covers of Coomes's novels follow.

# BEADLE'S HALF-DIME LIBRARY

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No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,  
5 Cents.

No. 422.

## Baby Sam,

The Boy Giant of the Yellowstone;

OR,

Old Spokane Joe's Trust.

BY OLL COOMES,  
AUTHOR OF "HERCULES, THE DUMB DESTROYER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLEASURE PARTY.

FAR up on the borders of the Yellowstone Park, on the rugged breast of the grim old mountains, Mary's Lake lay sparkling like a jewel under a bright September sun—mirroring in its crystal depths the envying peaks that rose thousands of feet above it on all sides. Dotted with several little islands and indented with narrow tongues of land covered with the richest of foliage that was now all aglow with the soft autumnal tints, the lakelet and its surroundings presented as grand and romantic a picture as ever enraptured the human heart or filled the mind and soul with the majesty and power of the Creator.

A party of four persons, drawing rein on an eminence overlooking this lake, gazed in speechless wonder and admiration on the scene outspread before them. Two men and two women composed the party—all in the very prime of young man and womanhood.

The eldest of the four must have been about five-and-twenty years of age. He was a man a little above medium height, with a well-developed physique, a handsome, intelligent face, dark-blue eyes and heavy brown mustache. He sat his horse like a young cavalier, and no one looking upon Frank Rodman could have regarded him as

ought else than a gallant and manly young man. He was well-dressed and well-mounted, and carried a rifle and a pair of revolvers hung at his saddle-bow.

At Frank Rodman's side rode Miss Sarah Marshall, a blue-eyed, fair-faced girl of eighteen, whose ladylike bearing and vivacious spirit made her in every respect worthy of the attention of her gallant cavalier.

The third person, Frederick Sears, was a young man of two-and-twenty, strong and robust, with an intelligent face and pleasant address. Like Rodman, he was well-mounted and armed with rifle and revolvers.

At Sears's side rode Wilma Rodman, Frank's sister, who would have attracted more attention than any one of the four. She was, perhaps, seventeen years of age, with a form, while rather *petite*, possessed of all the graces of perfect womanhood, and a face of rare beauty

made radiant in its loveliness by its intellectual brightness and the peerless bearing of its possessor. Her eyes, shaded with long dark lashes, were of a dark brown, large and lustrous. Her rosy cheeks and dimpled chin had been touched with brown by exposure to sun and wind, but this served rather to heighten her beauty than to mar it.

These four young people were residents of the Gallatin valley, and were on their way for a trip through the Yellowstone Park, of whose wonders they had heard so much. Wilma Rodman had been the leading spirit in getting up the party. She so dearly loved the wild, romantic and rugged scenery of the mountains that she would give her brother Frank no rest nor peace until he had not only promised to take her to the Park, but had actually started on the trip.

They were well equipped for the journey, being provided with tents, cooking utensils and food, all of which were loaded upon the backs of four pack horses.

They had come in by the old Bozeman trail, and before leaving home it had been arranged that they go into camp at Mary's Lake for a day or two, or until they were joined there by a fifth person who was to be their guide during their stay in the Park. This person was none other than the noted Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone; and when they came in sight of the lake, its presence sent a thrill through Wilma's breast that perhaps none of the others experienced—not that they were less enthusiastic or less capable of appreciating the scene—but because it was the appointed place of meeting with her big-hearted boy-lover.

Besides the young mountaineer their number was to be further increased by a party of three men, on their arrival at the Yellowstone Lake. One of these was Wilma and Frank's father, who, with an old hunter named Spokane Joe, was assisting one Professor Droad, of the Government service, in making some geological researches in the wonderful vari-



"ME? WELL, I'M PLAIN KA-RISTOPHER KO LUMBUS BANDY, AND—" "NOT OLD KIT BANDY, THE MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE?" EXCLAIMED SAM. "I SHOULD LAUGH TO SMILE THAT I AM THAT MAN."

Beadle's Half-Dime Library was written chiefly for young boys, and was one of Beadle & Adams's longest running series. Eighteen original Coomes stories appear in this format, as well as fifty reprints of his older stories.

Iowan. Oliver "Oll" Coomes, a Cass County farmer and two-term Iowa legislator, had a successful third career writing dime novels from 1870 to 1895. He became amazingly successful, writing seventy-seven separate stories, almost all of which were reprinted at least once. His most popular stories were reprinted five times. At least sixteen of these seventy-seven stories were set in Iowa.

The term "dime novels" is often used loosely, to include all nineteenth-century commercial, mass-produced, sensational cheap fiction. Yet dime novels actually appeared in three distinct formats. The earliest format was the story paper, which first appeared in the 1830s. A story paper was usually a nationally distributed, eight-page weekly that included installments of at least five stories, as well as letters from readers, fashion advice, and perhaps even a reprinted sermon. Two of the most successful story papers were Richard Bonner's *New York Ledger* (established in 1855) and Street & Smith's *New York Weekly* (established in 1859).

The second format, the pamphlet novel, appeared sporadically in the 1840s, but was first made successful by the publishing house of Irwin P. Beadle & Co., which published its first dime novel in 1860. (Although Beadle's company went through several name changes over the years, the firm will be referred to as Beadle & Adams throughout this article.) Each pamphlet was a pocket-sized 4 by 6 inches and usually had about a hundred pages. Beadle's innovation was not the fiction itself, which was modeled on other story-paper fiction and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Rather, the innovation was issuing complete novels on a regular schedule (monthly at first, later far more often), at a cheap price (a nickel or a dime), with uniform packaging and distinct, recognizable logos.

The third format of dime novels to appear was the cheap library, which was a nickel or dime pamphlet of a larger size — 8 by 11 inches with sixteen or thirty-two pages of two- or three-column print. Beadle & Adams published Oll Coomes's work in all three formats. For example, *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper-Ranger* was first serialized in the Beadle & Adams story paper *Saturday Journal*

(from June 1 to July 6, 1872). It was reprinted in pamphlet novel form (in the "Pocket Novel" series in 1874 and the "New Dime Novel" series in 1883), and in cheap library form (as part of the "Half-Dime Library" in 1878 and again in 1904).

Dime novels quickly became quite a phenomenon. An *Atlantic Monthly* journalist later claimed, "Many Americans who were old enough to read at that time remember 1860 better from [Beadle's first dime novel] than they do because it was the year of Lincoln's election and the secession of South Carolina." Iowans shared in the general enthusiasm for dime novels, but a native novelist could generate a more specific interest. One Iowan reminisced that "the announcement of a new story by Oll Coomes . . . was sufficient to cause [one's] pulse to beat with wildest excitement."

IOWA'S illustrious dime novelist Oll Coomes was born in Licking County, Ohio, on August 26, 1845. He moved to a farm near Colfax in Jasper County, Iowa, with his family when he was eleven. His father was a potter, and though Oll learned his father's trade during school vacations, his true love was writing, and he had several poems published in a Newton paper in his youth. He attended Iowa College (now Grinnell) for one year — 1866 — but left for financial reasons. In 1867 he married Adelia A. Kellogg, and in 1870 they bought a 280-acre Cass County farm.

It was on this farm that Coomes began writing dime novels. Coomes once explained to a friend that a copy of Street & Smith's *New York Weekly* story paper inspired his launch into the fiction industry. The friend recalled that Coomes had read the thrilling Western and simply "decided he could write as good a yarn." Coomes's first novel, *Wild Raven, the Scout; or, The Mississippi Guide*, set along Nebraska's South Platte River, was published by Beadle & Adams on June 14, 1870. They paid Coomes \$25 for complete rights to the story.

This first novel proved to be one of Coomes's most popular and eventually was reprinted five times. Coomes had immediate success selling

his next stories. In his first year of writing dime novels, he sold three to Beadle & Adams and five to Street & Smith.

Coomes entered the world of publishing at a time when competition between the publishing houses had reached fever pitch, and he seems to have used the publishing war to his own advantage, as publishers scrambled to secure the services of the best writers. At first, Beadle & Adams paid Coomes average rates for his work (\$50-\$100 per story) but Street & Smith lured him to the *New York Weekly* in 1870, in their attempt to corner the fiction market by paying top dollar for almost any story, regardless of quality. That year, Coomes sold five stories to Street & Smith for \$500 each; in 1874, Street & Smith paid Coomes the fantastic amount of \$1000 for *Omaha, Prince of the Prairie*. (Ironically, this story was never even published.)

Despite the higher pay offered by Street & Smith, Coomes soon returned to Beadle & Adams. He became one of their best paid and most loyal authors. (The price paid for his novels steadily increased to \$500 by the late 1870s and early 1880s and decreased thereafter.) He was published numerous times a year.

In 1872, Beadle & Adams published three of

Coomes's stories under the pseudonym Will Dexter. This strategy was sometimes employed when writers became so prolific that the frequent appearance of their own byline might lead readers to suspect that the novels were hastily written. However, pseudonyms were also used by publishing houses to maintain ownership of the fame and profits the pseudonym might attract. Nineteenth-century court cases regarding common-law trademarks established that a pseudonym was owned by the publisher alone, not by any of the hack writers who penned the stories.

**C**OOMES USED the standard dime novel formula for successful writing. Suspense, surprise, mystery, clever disguises, and constant action were necessary elements in any dime novel, whether the story was a Western, a detective story, or a romance. Each 100-page novel was divided into at least twenty chapters. Without fail, each chapter began and ended with a cliff-hanging mystery, an ambush with impossible odds, or a deadly trap that had

#### BEADLE & ADAMS RULES FOR PUBLICATION

**Beadle & Adams publishers frequently reprinted these rules for dime novel authors in their story papers:**

“Our Literature

So much is said, and justly said against a considerable number of papers and libraries now on the market, that we beg leave to call the attention of the public to the following circular, which we send to all who propose to write for any of our publications:

Authors who write for our consideration will bear in mind that

We prohibit all things offensive to good taste, in expression or incident —

We prohibit subjects or characters that carry an immoral taint —

We prohibit the repetition of any occurrence, which, though true, is yet better untold —

We prohibit what cannot be read with satisfaction by every right-minded person — old and young alike —

We require your best work —

We require unquestioned originality —

We require pronounced strength of plot and high dramatic interest of story —

We require grace and precision of narrative style, and correctness in composition.

Authors must be familiar with the characters and places which they introduce, nor attempt to write in fields of which they have no intimate knowledge.

Those who fail to reach the standard here indicated cannot write acceptably for our several Libraries, or for any of our publications.”

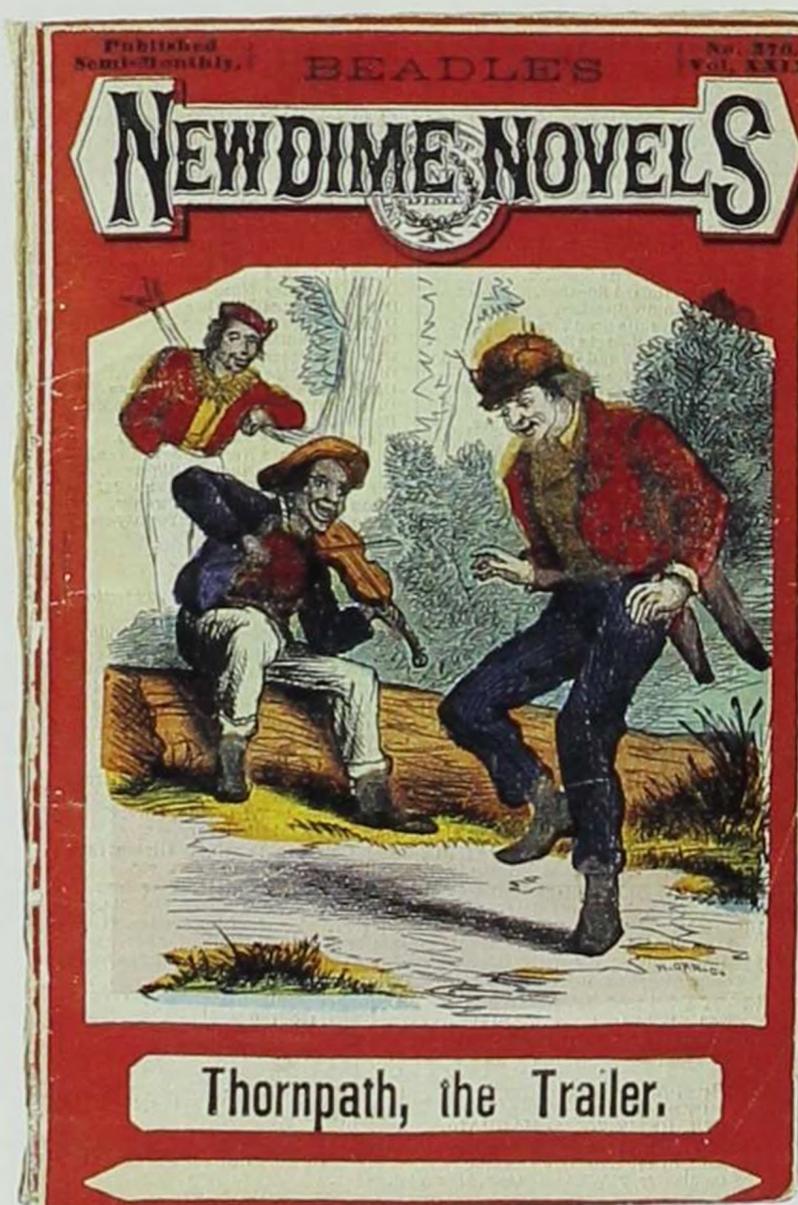
From Edmund Pearson, *Dime Novels; or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* (1929).

(Note: This last rule was regularly abused. Coomes, despite his sixteen Iowa stories, was no exception. He got the information for his other sixty-one stories from atlases and newspapers.)

ensnared the hero and/or heroine. The novel's ending was almost always happy—outlaws brought to justice, revenge and détente with Indians, ghostly mysteries solved, true identities revealed, and at least one wedding. (Coomes's *Antelope Abe* and *The Boy Chief* each closed with three weddings.)

An Iowa setting was certainly not a specific part of the formula for Westerns, but Beadle & Adams allowed their authors more freedom in the story specifics than other publishers, as long as authors stayed within the moral guidelines of the company [see box]. Beadle & Adams also encouraged their authors to write only in fields in which they had "intimate knowledge." In Coomes's case this naturally meant including stories about Iowa and Iowans. He began *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger* with this explanation: "The geographical formation of that portion of our country lying between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, and south of the forty-third degree of north latitude, now comprising the state of Iowa, furnishes a vast field for the pen of the romancer. Though devoid of bold scenery and wild mountainous ruggedness, it presents a romantic picturesqueness which the hand of the Creator has modified to a degree well-calculated to awaken enthusiastic admiration."

**I**OWA INDEED furnished a vast field for Coomes's pen. Stretches of "undulating prairie" became the scene of exciting chases, tracking, and ambushes. Its tall grasses were perfect for hiding the fearless hero when outnumbered by bloodthirsty Indian braves or sinister outlaws (usually both). Muddy ponds were used to hide chests of gold, and clear lakes were always good for revealing the reflection of a kidnapper as the heroine peered at her own beauty, or for Red Star, spirit of the lake, to walk upon and haunt. Tiny Iowa settlements were home to organized bands of counterfeiters, road agents, thieves, and kidnappers, with appropriately menacing names like "Rat Rouge's gang" or "Jubal Wolfgang's den."



As this cover illustrates, African-American characters in most dime novels were sentimentalized but always portrayed as inferior. Despite the cover stereotype, Coomes depicts ex-slave Egypt as brave, strong, kind, and a major hero in the novel.

In Coomes's plots — as in many dime novels — the settlers were constantly in danger of being massacred by Indians. As historian Merle Curti explained, the typical dime novel portrayed Native Americans "neither as a noble savage nor as a merely backward racial type but as an innately primitive, stubborn, treacherous and vindictive barbarian." This racist image, indicative of nineteenth-century conventions, is certainly present in Coomes's writing. An often recycled description of any Coomes Indian character included eyes "full of that evil cunning light peculiar to his race." Native Americans were dehumanized; as Hawkeye Harry explained to his true love, "I hope, Nora, you will not think hard of me for taking human life, or rather, the life of a savage,



The harrowing cliffs on the cover of Coomes's *Silent Shot, the Slayer* may not look much like Iowa, although the story was set near Council Bluffs.

which is but a grade higher than the wild panther of the woods." Indians were killed with impunity throughout his tales, although the real "bad guy" often turned out to be a white outlaw disguised as an Indian, who was usually permitted to live at the end. Almost every "good" or intelligent Indian later turned out to be a white captive raised by Indians, although there were a few exceptions.

**A**S DIME NOVELS grew in popularity, they were accused of a decline in quality. "By the close of the seventies," commented the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1907, "the dime novel — a term applied to all the cheap fiction indiscriminately

— became an atrocity." The traditional interpretation is that the intense competition in the dime industry during the 1870s forced publishers to issue novels that were more sensationalized and more violent. Even Beadle editor Orville Victor acknowledged, "Oh, we had to kill a few more Indians than we used to; we held our own against [our competitors]." Nevertheless, Beadle & Adams's early novels were generally considered of a high quality and high morals, and an 1880s literary critic, Brander Matthews, would later champion the "ultra-Puritan purity of Beadle dime novels."

Reformer Anthony Comstock, however, who was instrumental in the passage and enforcement of the federal anti-obscenity law of 1873, drew no distinctions between publishers. In his crusading 1883 book *Traps for the Young*, he summarized his judgment of dime novels: "these stories breed vulgarity, profanity, loose ideas of life, impurity of thought and deed. They render the imagination unclean, destroy domestic peace, desolate homes, cheapen women's virtue and make foul mouths, bullies, cheats, vagabonds, thieves, desperadoes and libertines."

Comstock was most concerned about dime novels' influence on juvenile readers. Although several dime novel series were targeted at a young audience, such as Beadle & Adams's Half-Dime Library, dime novels in general were not intended as children's literature. Evidence on readership is sketchy. Historian Michael Denning has argued that the audience was predominantly working-class young men and women, as well as boys and girls. Beadle & Adams bibliographer Albert Johannsen claimed that "almost everyone except schoolma'ams, pedants, and the illiterate" read Beadle & Adams dime novels. The popular image of readership, however, was "uncounted armies of boys . . . [who] were taken to the woodsheds by their fathers, and there subjected to severe physical and mental anguish as a result of the parental discovery that they were reading such 'impossible trash.'"

One wonders whether Coomes entertained his own boys — Royston (born in 1870), Arthur (born in 1873), and Isaiah (born in 1878) — with his dime novel tales. Perhaps Royston St. Claire, one of the heroes of *Old Bald Head* (first



published in 1871) was so named with Coomes's first-born in mind. If the sons were allowed to read their father's stories, it does not seem to have affected them adversely — Arthur, for instance, became a successful farmer and mayor of the city of Atlantic.

Coomes's dime novels were apparently never directly attacked as being immoral. Gilbert Patten, who also wrote for Beadle & Adams and penned the highly successful "Frank Merriwell" stories for Street & Smith, remembered the high quality of Coomes's stories that he had read as a youth: "I quickly became a Beadle fan with a list of favorite authors headed by Oll Coomes, whose Indian stories were replete with thrilling situations, clever stratagems, surprising twists and extravagant but clean and inoffensive humor. No story by Coomes that I can recall depended for interest upon shocking effects or gory details and he had considerable skill in character delineation." Patten continued, "This kind of reading spurred my imagination to such a degree that soon I was writing stories more feverishly than ever."

Coomes relaxes with the *Iowa State Register*, son Arthur (left), wife Adelia, and son Isaiah. One wonders if Coomes entertained his family with the dime-novel tales that social reformer Anthony Comstock called "devil traps."

**R**ELATED TO public condemnation of the dime novel was a stereotype regarding the men and women who wrote them. Patten best enunciated this image in a *Saturday Evening Post* article he wrote in 1931: "Somehow, it seems that practically all of Beadle's authors, with the exception of Oll Coomes, who stuck to the old house to the end, were destined to poverty and disaster. In their desperation . . . some of them committed suicide."

Coomes, however, completely defied this stereotype (as did a number of other dime novelists). Coomes was not only a respected farmer, but also a school director, a bank president, a postmaster, and a two-term Iowa legislator, as well as a successful dime novelist.

Writing dime novels never seems to have



Coomes and his wife Adelia moved into this house, on a farm southeast of Wiota, in 1870. Here he wrote his seventy-seven blood-and-thunder tales.

tarnished Coomes's reputation; locally, it bolstered it. The Cass County history of 1884 refers to him not as a lowly "dime novelist" but as a "well known literateur and writer." In 1877, just as dime novels were allegedly beginning to sink in public estimation, Cass County Republican voters demonstrated their respect for Coomes by nominating him for state representative. The July 18, 1877, *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph* described candidate Coomes as "young, intelligent, honest . . . a most worthy man." It also stated, "He will bring to the consideration of his legislative duties rare common sense, sharpened by business experience and thorough education, and refined by literary pursuits." The editorial spoke of his success as a writer and the "strong and active friendship of his neighbors . . . who very largely aided in conferring the nomination upon him." He won the election easily.

In Coomes's first term, his most notable action also became his most controversial. He introduced the first bill of the 1878 session to repeal the so-called "Granger law" (which had established a schedule of maximum freight and passenger rates for the railroads) and replace it with a commissioner system, a more laissez-faire approach. Coomes's bill was combined with other similar bills and was signed into law on March 23, 1878. Although Coomes claimed that his constituents had asked for such a change to jump-start the "stagnant condition of

railroad building," many apparently had changed their minds.

The new railroad law and Coomes's involvement in its legislation served as the basis for what was later remembered locally as "one of the most spectacular political fights in the history of Cass County," when Coomes sought reelection in 1879. Letters and editorials flew back and forth in the *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*. Close to election day, the campaign began to turn negative, with Coomes insinuating that his opponent, an Atlantic lawyer, collected extortionate attorney's fees. If ever there was an opportunity for Coomes's opponents to exploit negative attitudes about dime novels and novelists, it was here. Yet, the closest the opponent's supporters got was a letter that asked, "What has Mr. Coomes been doing in the interval between writing railroad commission bills and dime novels while he has been representing Cass county? Has he ever proposed to abolish attorney fees? What bill did he introduce on that subject?" A few days after the letter appeared, Coomes was re-elected by a comfortable margin.

Coomes declined to run for a third term. He instead served a brief term as editor of a New York story paper, but very quickly returned to Iowa and to writing, publishing five dime novels with Beadle & Adams in 1881, four each year in 1882 and 1883, three in 1884 and 1885, and averaging less than two a year from 1886 to 1895.

**T**HE PRINCIPLES of mass production, uniformity, and systematization adhered to by the dime novel industry eventually impaired the authors' independence and control over their fiction. Street & Smith went so far as to dictate specific plot lines, characters, and settings to prospective authors. According to historian Michael Denning, the "tendency of the industry was to shift from selling an 'author' who was a free laborer, to selling a character, a trademark whose stories could be written by a host of anonymous hack writers and whose celebrity

[that is, pseudonym] could be protected in court."

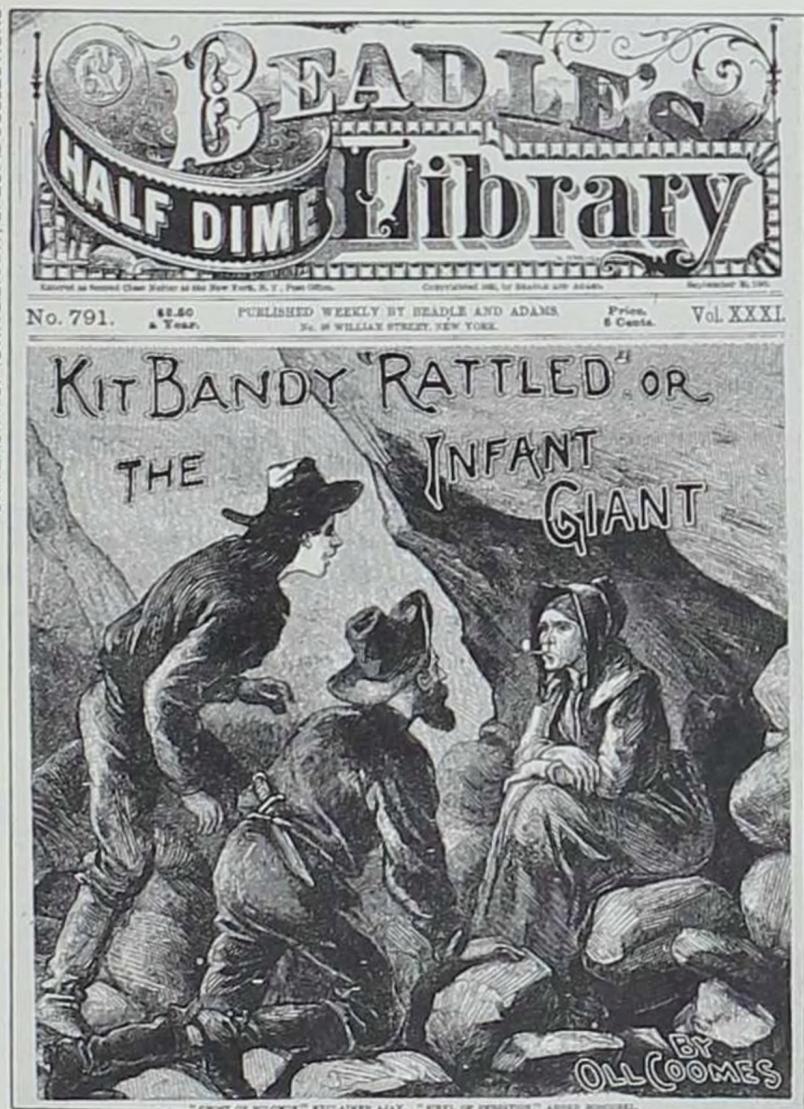
In Coomes's case, this generalization is only partially accurate. Coomes's later stories were a series of twelve "Old Kit Bandy, Mountain Detective" stories. Using the same character in several books implies that character recognition had become as important as author recognition to sell these novels. However, Coomes was always the sole author of the Bandy tales, used no pseudonym at this time, and his name appeared etched into the cover illustration, another main selling point for dime novels.

Writing in Iowa, Coomes was physically removed from some of the demands of the publishing industry. As librarian and dime novel scholar Edmund Pearson phrased it, Coomes and other long-distant writers were

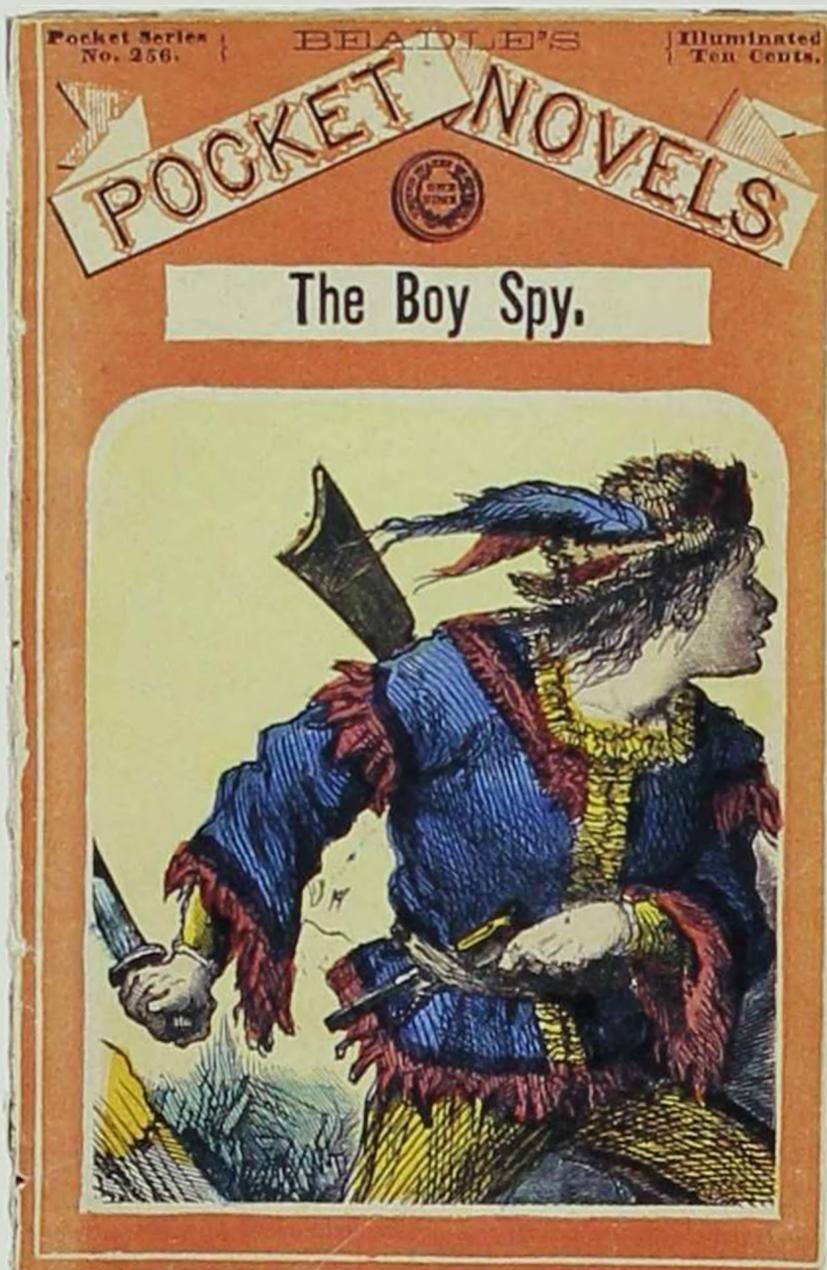
not "in a little upper room at Number 98 William Street," (Beadle & Adams's factory) with Beadle's fiction hacks, "driving their pens across paper with antlike persistence and clocklike punctuality." However, Pearson continued, such authors as Coomes were only "less visibly shackled and tied to the Beadle presses." To survive as a dime novelist, Coomes had to respond to the demands of the market.

The end product — the novels themselves — provide testimony on the increasing standardization demands that handicapped an author's control over his or her fiction. Scholar Christine Bold has written that the "story telling voice" in dime novels serves as a "running commentary by the individual author on his place in the production line." A sampling of Coomes's dime novels throughout his career does seem to suggest a possible decline in control demonstrated by a deterioration of the authorial voice. His early novels contained short interjections sprinkled throughout the story in which Coomes, clearly in control as narrator, explained where the plot was moving next and then led the reader to it. In *Thornpath the Trailer* he interjects, ". . . but that we may fully understand the origin of the strange music, we will cross over to the island whence it emanates." And in *Old Bald Head* he explains: "Again, I change the scene of my story in order to introduce a new character." In most of Coomes's later novels, such as his "Old Kit Bandy, Mountain Detective" series, this voice all but disappears. The author merely describes the action rather than explaining it or leading it, as if the story line and the characters had become more important than the author/narrator.

**A**LTHOUGH THE DOMINANT PLOT formula and the setting of dime novels shifted during the late nineteenth century, there was little clear change in the plots of Coomes's stories. While the rest of the industry was shifting to urban detective stories and train robber tales and away from the old frontier Indian stories,



The prominence of Coomes's byline in the black and white cover woodcut implies that his name still had drawing power in 1892. Hero Kit Bandy's wife, Sabina, defied Coomes's stock damsel-in-distress model. By novel's end, however, it is revealed that "she" is really Kit Bandy's assistant, Ichabod, in disguise. The caption says, "GHOST OF SOLOMON!" EXCLAIMED AJAX. "SIBYL OF PERDITION!" ADDED BOSCOBEL."



Frank Bell, the Boy Spy, was “trained from infancy, almost, to the trail of the red-man, whom he hunted with the vindictive spirit of an avenger.” Beadle & Adams first experimented with color covers like this one in 1874. The colors were printed from rough wood blocks or stencils. A color cover was typically used to dress up a dime-novel series for reprinting.

Coomes stuck to his tried and true formula. Kit Bandy may have been called a “detective” but that was all window dressing. The story itself was the same Indian-fighting, outlaw-hunting, heroine-rescuing tale Coomes had always written, with none of the detective conventions of the time.

One of the few noticeable changes in Coomes’s later stories was the setting. While Coomes’s early tales were set in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and other midwestern states, his later novels took place further west. As the setting moved to the Black Hills, the Dakotas, Colorado, and other places Coomes did not visit until long after he had written



In this sequel to *The Boy Spy*, our hero, Frank Bell, is falsely accused of murder, escapes from jail, is made chief of an Arapaho tribe, breaks up a gang of robbers, negotiates a peace treaty between the Indians and settlers, and marries his sweetheart, Lillian. Frank Bell was also the name of one of Coomes’s neighbors in Cass County, Iowa, and appeared in a local news column.

about them, Coomes had less chance to customize his stories with personal details and personal knowledge from his life in Iowa.

Even his tales set in the Wild West, however, were not completely removed from Coomes’s Cass County experience, and actual events in Iowa certainly could have provided materials for dime novels. Local reports in the county seat newspaper, the *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*, were often racier than Coomes’s dime novels. Articles in the *Telegraph* in 1877 and 1878, for example, included accounts of a murder in “an Atlantic Bawdy House,” the sentencing of an Ottumwa lawyer for seduction, and the suicide of a mother who jumped

into a well with her baby, and many other incidents to remind Iowans that truth is stranger than fiction. The *Telegraph* sometimes found Iowa connections in its sundry articles from the West, and reported on groups of Iowans leaving Wiota, Atlantic, and the surrounding area for points west. "Black Hills fever is raging," it announced on February 14, 1877. On April 11, 1877, it reported that Charles Bennett of Atlantic was riding in a stagecoach that was robbed by masked outlaws near Whitewood Gulch, South Dakota. Other dime novelists, such as William Wallace Cook, kept newspaper clipping files for possible story ideas. If Coomes used such a strategy, he surely found ample material in the *Telegraph*.

**I**N HIS EARLY NOVELS, Coomes sometimes named his heroes after his neighbors and friends, or even Iowa public figures like Cyrus C. Carpenter (governor from 1872 to 1876). Carpenter appeared as one of the young heroes in *Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew*, set in Fort Dodge and published in 1877 (the year of Coomes's election to the General Assembly). The story opened in the village school with Carpenter behind the desk, presiding "with that calm, manly dignity which in after years distinguished him in the gubernatorial chair of the State."

Coomes's characterizations of Iowans were not confined to the pages of his dime novels. In a series of columns titled "Wiota News and Gossip" in the *Atlantic Weekly Telegraph*, the usual neighborhood news of the nearby village was enlivened with humorous vignettes. There is no byline on the columns, but the vocabulary and the writing style suggest that Coomes was the author, and his farm and Wiota were in the same township.

One column told of "Hawk-eye Harry" Houseman, who spots three wolves and recruits four young men to surround the field and close in on them. The suspense builds until one of the "wolves" oinks and the youths realize that it is Bill McClure's pet pigs they have been



This bearded hunter was called Old Bald Head because he "survived the tortures of the Indian scalping knife." In the process of avenging his wife's death, he invents two aliases and kills five Sioux braves. To ensure a happy ending, however, his wife is eventually found alive.

stalking. The names of the four young men and Bill McClure can all be traced in Cass County history sources. The name of Hawk-eye Harry Houseman is not traceable, but it bears a striking resemblance to "Hawkeye Harry Houston," the main character of a Coomes dime novel. Another column was about "Frank Bell, the Boy Spy," who attempts to rescue sauerkraut from overturned boxcars in Turkey Creek after a train wreck. This column was answered in the next edition of the *Telegraph* with a letter from "the Boy Spy" himself, reporting that he had sold the recovered sauerkraut to "Mr. Oll Coomes of this township." Frank Bell was an actual person living in nearby Turkey Grove, and also the name of the main character in Coomes's dime novels *The*

## Preserving Dime Novels

ON APRIL 23, 1948, T. Henry Foster, a rare book collector and chairman of the board at the John Morrell Company in Ottumwa, wrote a letter to the State Historical Society offering to donate ten Beadle & Adams dime novels — all of which were set in Iowa. (Seven of these were authored by Iowan Oll Coomes.) Foster wrote, "I do not want to keep these here in my library because most of them are so fragile that they require library treatment which I cannot give them, and I have in mind presenting them to the State Historical Society where I think they belong. . . . They, of course, are not suitable for lending and should be preserved more as curiosities than anything else."

The Society librarians agree with Foster's assessment of the dime novels. As with all special collections, the dime novels require some restrictions on their use. Because of their extremely fragile nature, and in the interest of preserving them for posterity, the original copies are not available for general public use.

As Society conservator Jane Meggers explains, the paper the dime novels were printed on was simply not meant to last. Like newspapers, they were printed on highly acidic wood pulp paper that deteriorates quickly — designed to be read once and then thrown away. The most vulnerable parts of the dime novels are the cover and outer leaves, which are most threatened by readers. There is no known technique to restore the strength or flexibility of the dime novels. "Ironically," remarked Meggers, "the only way to save them is to not handle them."

Many of the Society's special collections are made available to the public using microfilm or photographic reproduction. Unfortunately, in the case of the Foster collection, the Society does not own facsimile copies. However, all ten of the titles in the Foster collection are available for purchase through University Microfilm International (Ann Arbor, Michigan), or for loan through inter-library loan sources such as the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago.

The accompanying article and front and back covers of this *Palimpsest* showcase seven of the colorful cover illustrations from Oll Coomes's dime novels.

—Becky Wilson Hawbaker

*Boy Spy; or, The Young Avenger and The Boy Chief; or, The Doomed Twenty.*

Regardless of who wrote the *Wiota* columns, Coomes's use of actual or slightly modified names in his dime novels suggests a borrowing of Iowa material for plot and character, and a local following of readers who would be familiar with both his newspaper columns and his dime novels.

Local readers would have had more difficulty recognizing friends and neighbors in Coomes's later novels. Kit Bandy, for example, was probably so named in an attempt to capitalize on the success of Frank Tousey's New York Detective Library's popular "Old King Brady" detective character, albeit in a western setting.

**T**HE END of Coomes's writing career was marked by a slow decline in output that paralleled the dime novel industry as a whole, to the extent that journalist Firmin Dredd commented, "The close of the century is witnessing the extinction of what has been popularly known as the Dime Novel." In the case of Beadle & Adams, Dredd was on the money. With the death of Erastus Beadle in 1894 and William Adams in 1896, the firm was sold to M. J. Ivers & Co. in 1898. Ivers & Co. issued reprints until 1905, when they, too, quit, threatened by increased postage rates and slick Western pulp magazines.

Coomes wrote his last story, *Kit Bandy's Big Six; or, the Rustlers of Jackson Basin* in 1895. His novels lived on in M. J. Ivers reprints until 1905. Coomes himself lived on quietly on his Iowa farm, retiring to Atlantic in 1905. When he was killed in a car crash near Storm Lake in 1921, obituaries remembered him not so much for his blood-and-thunder tales, but for his loyalty to the Republican party, and for more important but ordinary things like, "It was never beneath his dignity to give kind attention and consideration to the 'kids' of the town and community, no matter whose 'kid' [it] happened to be."

Oll Coomes not only succeeded in making very good money from writing dime novels and



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Oliver "Oll" Coomes: dime novelist, farmer, legislator, bank president, school director, and postmaster.

investing it fruitfully in improving his Cass County farm; he was also successful in securing a place for Iowa's landscapes and local color in what historian Merle Curti has called "the nearest thing we have in this country to a true 'proletarian' literature, that is, a literature written for the great masses of people and actually read by them." The usual print order for a Beadle dime novel was 60,000. Counting all the reprints, Coomes shared descriptions of Iowa with millions of readers. Granted, his novels were not always historically accurate, most especially in his portrayal of Native Americans, but Coomes's novels must be judged by the standards of his time and by those of the dime novel industry.

Coomes's love for his native state was evident in descriptions of the Iowa setting, and in the fact that he made Iowa his lifelong home despite several job offers in the cheap-fiction business in New York City. Perhaps one of his characters was speaking for her author when she wrote to the main character, Frank Bell, in *The Boy Spy*: "Dear Frank . . . we arrived safely [in St. Louis], but, oh, what a prison we found living in a great city to be! We longed for the wild beauty and freedom of the prairie." She returned to Iowa in time for the book's sequel, *The Boy Chief*. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The State Historical Society collection includes these seven Oll Coomes dime novels (dates refer to publication date of the edition held): *Antelope Abe, the Boy Guide; or, The Forest Bride* (July 10, 1883); *Hawkeye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger* (July 7, 1874); *Thornpath the Trailer; or, The Perils of the Prairie* (Oct. 3, 1876); *Silent Shot, the Slayer; or, The Secret Chamber of the Hunter's Lodge* (Jan. 23, 1877); *The Boy Spy; or, The Young Avenger* (April 15, 1884); *The Boy Chief; or, The Doomed Twenty* (July 27, 1875); and *Old Bald Head; or, Red Star, the Serpent of the Lake* (Feb. 22, 1876).

The University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, holds others by Coomes: *Baby Sam, The Boy Giant of Yellowstone* (Aug. 25, 1885); *Web-Foot Mose, the Tramp Detective; or, The Boy Bear Slayer of the Sierras* (July 21, 1885); *Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper; or, The Bad Man from Wapsipinnicon* (May 1, 1888); *Kit Bandy and Co., the Border Detectives; or, The Big Wipe Out at the Hermit Dome* (Sept. 1905); and *Kit Bandy 'Rattled'; or, The Infant Giant* (Sept. 20, 1892).

Biographical sources include Cass County histories; the *Des Moines Register* (May 31, 1931; Nov. 27, 1938); Albert Johannsen, *The House of Beadle and Adams*, vol. 2 (1950); the *Atlantic Telegraph* (1876-1879); and clippings provided by Lois Coomes. Sources on dime novels and novelists include Albert Johannsen's mammoth index of Beadle titles, biographical dictionary of authors, and history of the firm, *The House of Beadle and Adams* (3 vols., 1950); Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960* (1987); Anthony Comstock, *Traps For the Young* (1883, 1967); William Wallace Cook, *The Fiction Factory* (1912); Michael Denning, *Mechanic's Accent: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture* (1987); Edmund Pearson, *Dime Novels; or Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* (1929); "Story Paper Literature," *Atlantic Monthly* 44 (Sept. 1879), 383-93; George Jencks, "Dime Novel Makers," *The Bookman* 20 (Oct. 1904), 108-14; Gilbert Patten, "Dime Novel Days," *Saturday Evening Post* (Feb. 28, March 7, 1931); Charles Harvey, "The Dime Novel in American Life," *Atlantic Monthly* 100 (July 1907); and Merle Curti, "Dime Novels and the American Tradition," *Yale Review* 26 (Summer 1937).