



11-15-1996

John Sprockett Reminisces About His Conversion in 1868

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Recommended Citation

Cooperman, Robert (1996) "John Sprockett Reminisces About His Conversion in 1868," *Westview*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol16/iss1/18>

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JOHN SPROCKETT REMINISCES ABOUT HIS CONVERSION IN 1868

When I robbed the Salida stage-
my one descent into outright thievery-
a lady clung to a book as if jewels.
One glance at my slashed face
and she dropped that collection of poems.
My mother's school-marm voice,
quoting Shakespeare, streamed back to me.
I left the strong box, watches, and cash,
apologized to that trembling angel,
and rode off, leafing the pages.

I'd not gone three miles-laughing, crying
to be in such uplifting company again-
when I spied a farmer drowning kittens.
Without a thought, I drew and fired.
"Nothing ill come near thee!" I roared.
Cradling his shattered arm and cursing,
he shambled off like an African ape.
I hope he died in his barley field.

I scooped the burlap-
all but one kitten drowned-
and dried the whimpering thing,
gave it to a whore, to help her forget
the gold-rats making her bed creak
like mine walls about to buckle.

When the sheriff asked
about my earlier whereabouts,
I turned the grizzly-ripped side
of my face to him, growled
that manners shouldn't be abandoned
when a man steps into a saloon
for a small, social drink.

He winced at my scar: a greenhorn
feeling cow-shit beneath his feet.
I proceeded to finish my bottle,
poems pouring out of me, to amaze
whores, miners, and sheriff alike.

by Robert Cooperman

