

Mausoleum for the Leatherbound

Put it this way: Downtown Laramie is an area about three blocks by three blocks and it did not engage me for an excessively ^{long} period. I had heard that the University Library had a collection of Wisteriana and we went off to find it. The Special Collections of the Library were then under rearrangement; John pulled rank and twisted arms. We were put in ^{the} charge of a Rare Book librarian who was simultaneously delighted that we wanted to see his collection and annoyed that we had the gall to take up his time.

With key in hand, as if to the inner chambers of the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington, he admitted us to the Special Collections. The Wister collection was in a particularly advanced state of déshabille, but we managed to see one case that contained some letters and photos, and part of the manuscript of "The Virginian". A good part of this collection

MI 2

was willed to the University by Wister's daughter. The curator told us they would like to enlarge the collection but prices on the open market were out of sight.

I paid my respects to this hallowed manuscript and was all set to leave the library and visit the local dinosaur who is wired up and displayed in an adjacent building; but no, the librarian wanted to show us more. All the while he kept looking at his watch. He led us into a remarkable series of rooms, opening each by a different key, rooms which are best described as tombs, mausoleums, grottoes, each dedicated to the memory of one wealthy individual, each containing intact that individual's rugs, desks, paintings, chinoiserie, leatherbound incunabula, knick knacks, and what have you. I asked what the relationship was between these commemorated millionaires and the University of Wyoming or even to the State of Wyoming. The librarian answered that there was no relationship other than a slight western flavor to the collections. Thus, one man collected fancy saddles, another collected books about big game hunting, etc. There were numerous oil paintings by Catlin, Remington, Farnes, Miller and other painters of the

M1 3

19th Century West. Our guide said that the oils alone were worth millions. I thought otherwise-- in the sense that the best canvases of these artists were in other museums-- but in view of the severe inflation, I allowed him his point.

One of the tombs, in a state of complete chaos since the material had only just arrived, contained the memorabilia of Edward Everett Horton, a popular movie and stage actor of the 1920-1950's. I could see no a priori connection between this personage and the University of Wyoming, and I figured that this memorial was simply the result of an acquisition-crazy Purchasing Committee.

Many years ago I was teaching at the Harvard Summer School and George and Ruth Wald came over for drinks. We got to talking about the acquisitiveness of universities. George said that if some eccentric were to bequeath Harvard a collection of workmen's overalls for the years 1783-1910, the Harvard administration would go down on its knees in thanks and vote supporting funds to keep the overalls washed, housed, and displayed in perpetuity. Well, folks, I have seen it. The collection is not in Cambridge, but in Laramie. And it's not in workmen's

M1 4

overalls. The Mausoleum of the Library contains the largest museum collection of high tension line glass insulators in the world. How is that for a conversation stopper?

The last tomb we were shown was reproduction of the Club Room of the Wyoming Cattle Growers Association (W.C.G.A.) as it was in the 1890's. This club room once served as the nerve center of the conservative cattle baronies. Our guide hustled us around it rapidly and as he did, kept hurling retroactive imprecations on this powerful group.

Enough of this! On to the dinosaurs!