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Front Cover: There never was much room between the United Railroads' "inside tracks" on San Francisco's Market Street, but one could take that in stride back in 1915 when riding a streetcar to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. SFMTA, URR Photographer John Mentz U04957.

Back Cover. Half-plate daguerreotype of Edward Gilbert, the dueling San Francisco newspaper editor.

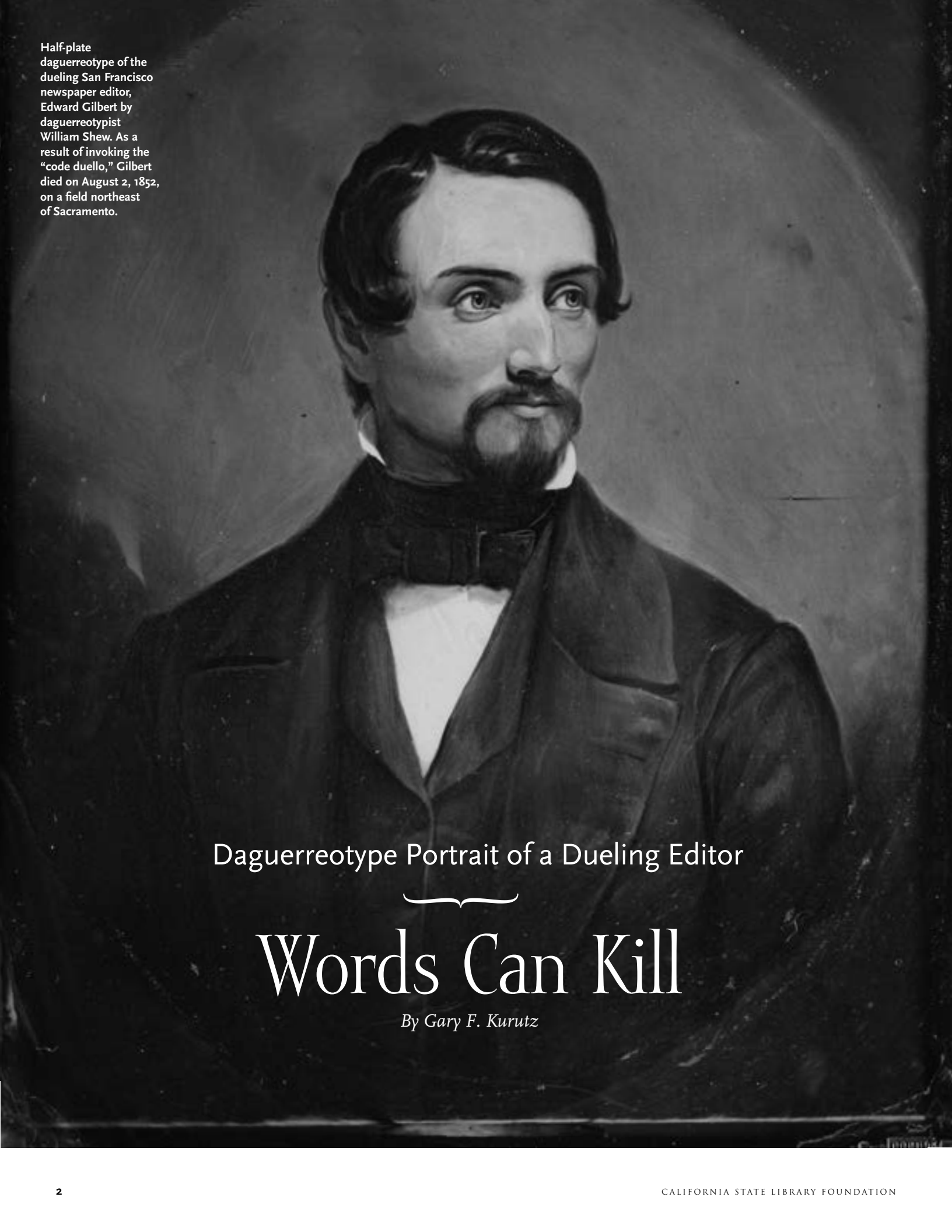
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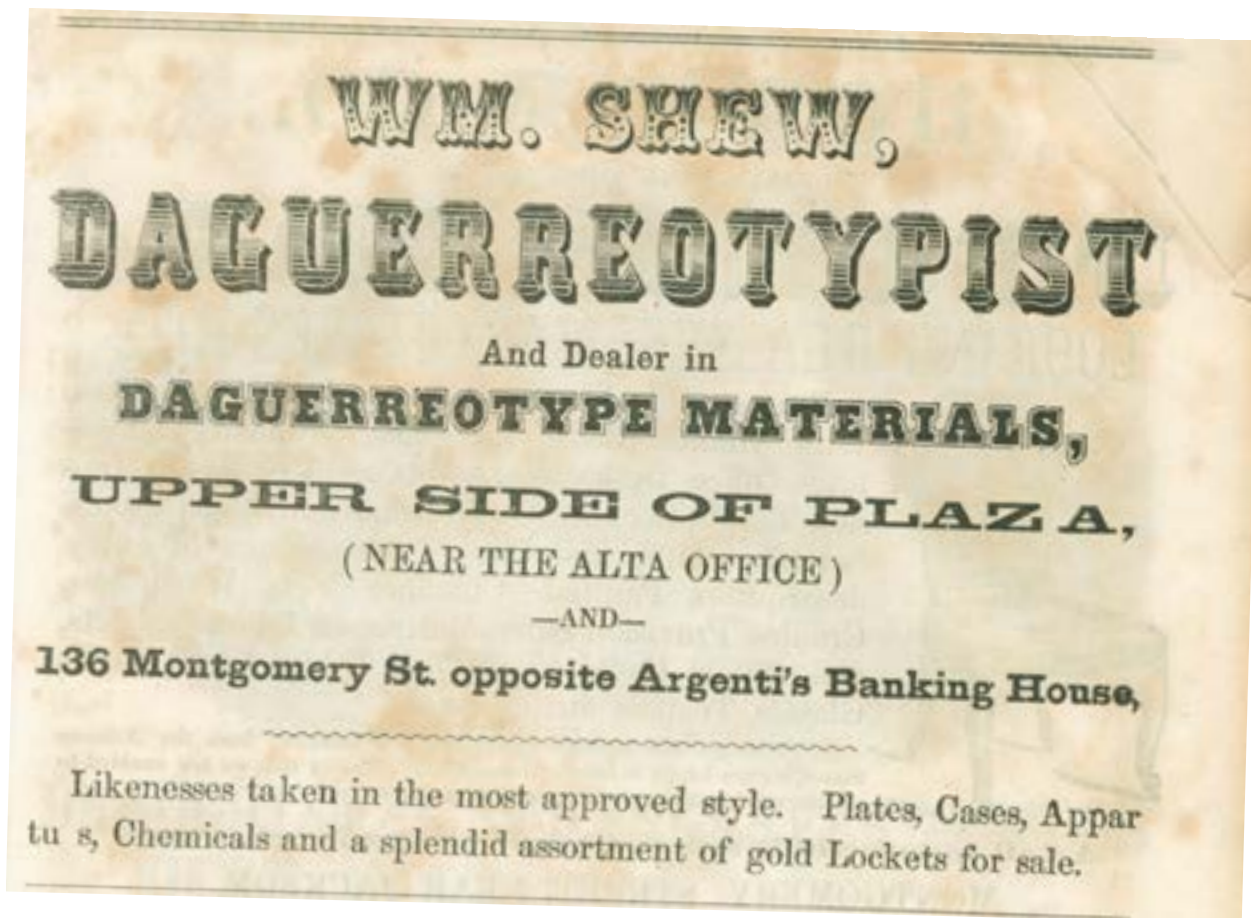
Half-plate daguerreotype of the dueling San Francisco newspaper editor, Edward Gilbert by daguerreotypist William Shew. As a result of invoking the "code duello," Gilbert died on August 2, 1852, on a field northeast of Sacramento.



Daguerreotype Portrait of a Dueling Editor

Words Can Kill

By Gary F. Kurutz



William Shew ran this advertisement in the San Francisco Directory for the Years 1852–53. Coincidentally, his establishment is listed near Editor Gilbert's *Alta* California office.

One of the many dealers who have helped build the California State Library's historical photography collections recently brought in a half-plate (4 ¹/₄ x 5 ¹/₂ inches) daguerreotype of Edward Gilbert, the famed and powerful editor of the *San Francisco Daily Alta California*.¹ I knew at once that we had to have this one-of-a-kind image since Gilbert was killed in a duel with James W. Denver, a future California secretary of state and ex-officio state librarian.² Knowing the amazing story of the duel and seeing this spectacular "mirror image" made by William Shew, one of California's foremost daguerrean artists, I immediately contacted the California State Library Foundation's most generous donor Mead B. Kibbey who enthusiastically said "yes" to its purchase.³

What led to this famous duel between an illustrious newspaper editor and a future state librarian? Dueling has long been recognized as a barbarous way of settling disputes, but during those rough and tumble

times following the Gold Rush, it was all too common. When editorials appeared in the early press, those who disagreed with the writer frequently resorted to confronting the author in person. Sometimes these differences of opinion erupted into fist-cuffs or worse, gunplay. In this particular case, Editor Edward Gilbert accused Governor John Bigler, himself a former newspaper editor, of political grandstanding for the way he was handling the relief of California-bound travelers bogged down in Nevada's Carson Valley.⁴ Memories of the Donner Party no doubt still lingered. After receiving an appropriation from the state legislature, wagons, horses, and supplies were purchased and organized in Sacramento.⁵ The governor placed six-foot, two-inch Denver, a lawyer and Mexican War veteran, in charge of the relief expedition over the Sierra. On the appointed day in late June, Bigler led

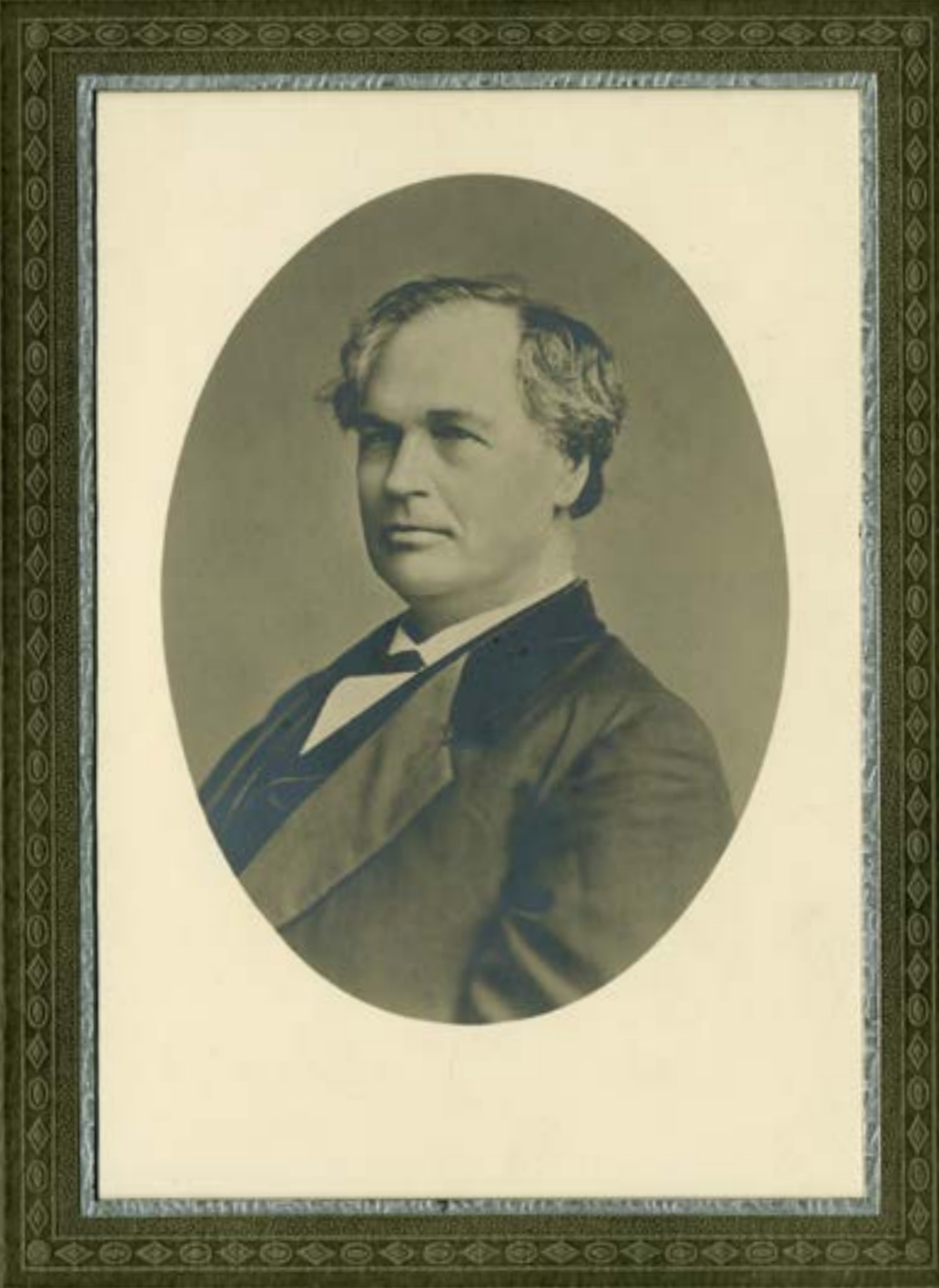
the relief train on horseback through the streets of Sacramento as it headed east on this seemingly heroic mission.

The launch of this rescue effort caught the attention of Gilbert, and he wrote a rather acerbic editorial for the *Alta* accusing the Democratic governor of manufacturing political capital out of the "California Relief Train." Denver, as the governor's appointee, was also included in this diatribe. Gilbert did not oppose sending the relief train but used this as an excuse to attack Bigler. In his editorial, dated June 26, 1852, Gilbert wrote: "Governor Bigler was silly enough to make himself ridiculous by riding on horseback at the head of the procession, and it only needed the addition of an ear-splitting brass band to have made people believe it a parade of newly-arrived ground and lofty tumblers, or a travelling caravan of wild animals." While on their mission



EDITOR'S NOTE

Mr. Kurutz is the Foundation's executive director and curator of special collections.



(Left) James W. Denver, future secretary of state and de facto state librarian of California, was challenged by Editor Gilbert to a duel and won. He served as state librarian from 1853–1855 before being elected to Congress and then becoming governor of Kansas Territory.

of mercy in the Nevada desert, the members of the relief train received a copy of Gilbert's diatribe and were highly insulted. Denver and his colleagues wrote a rebuttal published in the July 24, 1852, issue of the *Sacramento Democratic State Journal*. In this counterattack, the members wrote: "We can have but one opinion of this attack on the Governor—that it could not have emanated only from an envious and malicious heart." Demonstrating mastery of invective, Gilbert, of course, replied with another barb: "Now, we can assure those toadies of his Excellency, their 'indignation,' supreme

and virtuous as it may have been, looks much more like the effervescence and froth of political hangers-on than the genuine article!" Denver then countered with this retort: "If the editor of the *Alta* thinks himself aggrieved by anything that I may have said or done, it is for *him* to find *me*, and when so found he may rest assured that he can have any 'issue upon the matter' he may desire." Despite the odious nature of these verbal attacks, one cannot help being impressed by the powerful eloquence of that era especially in comparison to our present Twitter era.

Gilbert, who was in Sacramento, demanded that Denver "withdraw the offensive and unjust charges and insinuations" of having "an envious and malicious heart." The governor's ally naturally refused to back down, and the editor delivered the fatal ultimatum: "It only remains for me to demand the satisfaction known to the code of honor." Denver, feeling he had no choice, accepted the challenge. Gilbert, on the other hand, had something more to prove. The previous year, he got into a scuffle with John Nugent, the editor of the city's rival newspaper, the *San Francisco*



Daguerreotypist Shew placed the precious portrait of the fallen Edward Gilbert in this beautiful and durable “union” or thermoplastic case.



Herald. After exchanging insults in their respective newspapers, Nugent, in 1851, decided to settle the matter by invoking the *code duello*. Gilbert accepted. However, once they faced each other with weapons drawn, according to one account, Gilbert backed down and publicly retracted his disagreeable statement. Some considered this to be a humiliating sign of cowardice and the embittered and headstrong editor now had to follow through with his challenge to Denver. Another account states that Gilbert scoffed at bloodless duels, and because of this, was seduced into challenging Denver.

Nevertheless, the two agreed to meet on the “field of honor” early on the morning of August 2, at Oak Grove located several miles northeast of Sacramento on the old Auburn Road. Gilbert designated future San Francisco mayor H. F. Teschemaker as his second and Denver selected Vincent F. Geiger. A Dr. Wake Brylay served as the surgeon. Since Gilbert was the challenger, Denver selected the weapons and he chose Wesson rifles at forty paces. Denver definitely had the advantage as he was an expert rifleman who reportedly could “take any Button off the coat of a person.” Gilbert was reportedly

skilled with handguns but could barely hold a rifle. The night before, both parties arrived at the roadside inn of Oak Grove House along with friends and supporters. The seconds asked J. E. Culver, the inn’s owner, to wake everyone early in the morning. When the two principals encountered each other, it marked only the second time they had ever met. Gilbert wore a green suit and Denver a large cloak which he tossed aside. Facing each other at forty paces, the two exchanged shots and both missed their mark. One account states that Denver deliberately fired wide and that Gilbert’s shot whizzed dan-