

# LIGHT IN THE WESTERN SKY

by Marcus W. Meyer

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## LIGHT IN THE WESTERN SKY

Opening the door to my small office in the farmhouse, I immediately felt bathed in an eerie orange glow. The spring green trees of a quilted wall hanging that my wife had made now appeared emblazoned in the colors of autumn. The monochromatic light drew out aspects to the room that I had never noticed, despite my years of occupancy. Not wanting to diminish this power of revelation, I refrained from turning on the overhead fluorescent light.

I repositioned my office chair slightly for a more complete view out the window and took in the sight of a magnificent sunset. A lone, large buffalo grazed at the top of the hill, but it was barely visible. Several trees stretched out from the dark with their silhouettes. As purple clouds soon mixed with the orange, an odd band of almost pure white rays appeared beneath the orange and purple, stretching across the sky and beyond the frame

given me by the office window. Even odder, as the sun finally slipped completely below the hill, the band of white rays remained. Wonder prompted me to leave my chair and walk outside where I saw the white rays, now alone against the dark sky, extending fully across to the eastern sky. There have been a few incidents in my life when I found myself just standing in awe of something I've seen. This eerie spectacle certainly qualified as one of those occasions.

The dusky scene pulled a few thoughts from inside my sometimes-cluttered mind:

What would the early pioneers and settlers heading west across America have thought of such a scene? Would they have looked at it with awe like I just did? Was it possible that they could have considered it a sign from their Creator guiding them to their own Promised Land farther west?

At the same time, I pondered a different light in an earlier history. The pioneers' counterparts in my parallel thoughts came from the east as well. Wise men saw the light of his star and followed it

until it came to rest over the place in Bethlehem where they found the child.

Eventually, the white band of light left the night sky, and I walked back into the house, making my way back to my office. With the flip of a switch, the darkened forms of the room came to life in the light from the fluorescent fixture overhead. While waiting for the computer to boot up, I glanced around the room and took in the previously mentioned quilted wall hanging where the trees now stood a vibrant spring green.

When the “Welcome” screen appeared on the monitor, I knew I had another minute or two before I could start work. I looked over at the library wall and surveyed the shelves of books. About halfway down the middle shelf, I saw several versions of the Bible with some accompanying commentaries. Just below that shelf stood my Louis L’Amour collection, a book about Lewis and Clark, Mark Twain’s classic about his travels out west: Roughing It, and a few Zane Grey favorites.

As I still waited for the computer to obey my first command, my old Golden Retriever came strolling into the office. She rested her head on my leg for a minute so I could scratch behind her ears and then she collapsed down at my feet. Eventually, the computer stood ready for work, though it seems like it's taking longer to do so every time I turn it on. I do know it's getting old, just like me and my dog. With seven dog years per human year, Goldie would be 91. I don't know what the year conversion factor is for computers and humans.

I clicked the word processing program and waited for it to appear on the screen. While I was waiting, though, I turned my attention away from the computer and looked back at the bookshelves. I thought it kind of funny that a few minutes earlier I pondered the two parallel thoughts of the light in the western sky and now on those two parallel shelves of books, I saw volumes on those same two parallel thoughts.

Not quite ready to concede that maybe God was trying to tell me something, I entered a test of the memory as to how many times the Bible



referenced light, both metaphorically and descriptively. Some passages came easily to mind, such as in the beginning, “And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day . . .” And then, of course, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” After establishing the fact that my memory on such matters had clearly lacked exercise of late, I resorted to pulling out Strong’s Concordance for a more comprehensive list. Besides this list where passages clearly contained the word “light”, I thought about other instances where light entered into the equation—the Transfiguration of Jesus, the dazzling appearance of the angel at the tomb, and so on. Then I gave consideration to more contemporary subjects such as the Shroud of Turin and the possibility of how a light may have been a factor in the image’s formation, as well as the most common witness of a bright light that people who have had an after-death experience have proclaimed.

By that time, my computer got tired of waiting for me and it slipped into screensaver mode. Normally, that might be a point of little significance, as a simple movement of the mouse would bring the word processor screen back up; however, I would be remiss to not mention that the screensaver scene showing on the monitor comprised a wagon train throwing up a dusty haze on the trail as it headed into a bright orange sunset of a wide open prairie. Now I know there is probably someone out there who will see this scene as being highly contrived, but I assure you, while I may be prone to exaggeration once in a while, I rarely venture into contrivance, at least not enough to consider in this instance. The average person might see nothing sinister in the mere coincidence of that particular screensaver coming up at that particular moment in time, but it is also within the realm of possibility that someone else might see the first inkling of the artificial intelligence of the computer gaining a foothold over the natural intelligence of man. Of course, pointing to me as a prime example of the latter is hardly a fair representation. That I then revisited the shelf housing my western and pioneer

volumes could only have been, once again, pure coincidence. At least, I think that to be the most plausible explanation.

I spent the next three hours poring through some of the works of authors in the western genre, both factual and not. Naturally, I shut down my computer prior to starting this exploration to eliminate the possibility of undue influence by subliminal machine forces—just in case. For the people of that era, the Bible certainly served as the primary educational resource. A general belief in God formed the core facet of lives filled with both hopeful anticipation and long hardship. They recorded little in the way of deeper theological discussion among the pioneers and denizens of the west. Granted, there were differences in beliefs among the denominations around at that time, but they seemed secondary to whether a man just believed in his Creator and the Good Book. When the tragedy of death struck, and it often came early and suddenly, denominational lines disappeared as the survivors paid their respects. The way a man lived his life seemed to carry more weight to the folks

out there than did his exact theological makeup. Something that Mark Twain said came to mind, “Let us endeavor to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry.”

The heavy burden of sleepiness put an end to my rambling thoughts for the night. I kissed my wife and said good night. When my head hit the pillow, I didn’t know if a fresh day would enlighten me further or not.

If you will pardon the pun, the light of day strengthened my resolve to find more common ground in my parallel thoughts. I even came to believe that the star of Bethlehem and the light coming from the western sky would leave their straight paths in history and merge at some point. Perhaps they would vacillate from parallel lines to merge multiple times.

In light of all this thought about light, I am contributing a selection of stories to The Collection that I believe illustrate how the “Light of the World” shown in the lives of the people of the American West. As with any such collection of

work, there is always the possibility that exaggeration may seep into the body of the work occasionally. I leave discernment on what to take literally in the mind of the individual reader.

Finally, I encourage you to enjoy the beauty of every sunset that you can. Just as that light in the western sky on that evening drew out aspects to my office that I had not previously noticed, opening the shades of your mind may allow the light to reveal truths that you had not previously considered.

*Clint Lincoln*

*The Homestead, Cedar Crossing*

## A PEARL AMONG SWINE

“Two-hundred dollars?”

“Yes, sir. We took up a collection, and it’s all we have. Everyone had to sacrifice to just come up with that amount.”

“What you’re asking isn’t something I ordinarily do.”

“I understand, sir, but we want to get her back.”

“Two-hundred dollars, huh?”

“Yes, sir. Will you do it?”

“Mmm ... agreed, Revrund.”

“Here’s her description and everything else we know about her.”

“If she’s still alive out there, I’ll find her,” said Tyler. “She must be pretty important to you, Revrund.”

“They are all important, Mr. Graves,” replied Reverend Wall.

While he gave Reverend Wall a confident response, Tyler had to do some serious thinking that night in his hotel room. He had been plying his trade as a bounty hunter for a long time. He had spent a great deal of time studying outlaws’ habits and their ways of thinking. He often used a certain predictability to his advantage. But this was different. He wasn’t even sure if there was any outlaw mind involved with this young woman.

Before heading out in the morning, he needed to have some idea which direction to go. The main trail through town lead to the plains going east and to the mountains going west. The railroad ran north and south. Ten miles or so to the north, the Missouri River provided passage to the Mississippi. Plugging the mind of a teenage girl into a possible outlaw profile with that many exit scenarios almost seemed too challenging. And he had to get some sleep. When the morning came, Tyler was no more sure which way to go than he was the night before.

He ate a hearty breakfast at the diner and headed to the livery.

Before climbing into the saddle, Tyler grabbed a piece of straw and put it into his mouth. He always thought better with straw. Looking east and then west, he saw a train loaded with coal pull into the station to take on water. He took the straw out of his mouth and shook off a couple of dead leaves that still clung to the straw. Watching the wind carry the leaves to the west, Tyler made his decision and rode west out of town towards the mountains.

A two-hour ride produced nothing he could call a clue. He took a break underneath a small grove of trees. Hoping the trail would yield something of value soon, the bounty hunter fell asleep. About an hour later, he continued west. A half mile up the trail, Tyler noticed a brown branch on the wall of green that lined the trail.

“Whoa there, Fargo,” said Tyler, pulling back on the reins. “What do we have here? A broken branch and hoofprints ... it’s tight, but you could



easily fit through that gap.” Getting down off his horse, the bounty hunter looked closer at the hoofprints. “Looks like four, maybe five, horses, boy. I think we should see where it leads.”

Making it through the gap, Tyler followed the prints for a while until the path became rocky. While he lost them at that point, there was only one way to go, so he continued on. At the peak of a little rise, he looked out into the distant forest where a small column of smoke became visible.

“I’d say there was definitely somebody up there, boy.” Pulling a spyglass out of his saddlebag, Tyler scanned the area near the column of smoke. “Yeah, looks like a cabin. You game to check it out, Fargo?”

Fargo nodded and neighed.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Fargo and Tyler went about another fifty yards when they came to a group of tall boulders on the left. Tyler got off his horse and tied him to a tree behind the boulders. He pulled out his bullet bag and grabbed his rifle off the saddle.

“Can’t be too careful, boy. I gotta get a little closer.”

Working his way to within about fifty yards of the cabin, Tyler stopped behind a rock and lifted the spyglass. He saw four horses in a makeshift corral and a wagon just outside the cabin. A man came out of the cabin, turned back towards the door, and started yelling at someone in the doorway. Three other men followed the first man out. All four now engaged in a heated conversation, but it was a little too far away for Tyler to make out what they were saying. Finally, three of the men headed for the barn, and the fourth man stayed in front of the cabin.

“Well, I’ll be doggone. That sure looks like Frank Cody. I wondered if I’d ever pick up his trail again.”

Then a girl came out the cabin door. She started talking to Frank when he pointed back to the cabin and raised his hand. The girl cowered and turned back to the cabin. Frank kicked her in the rear as she went back inside.

“And that girl matches the description of Rebecca.”

Frank headed for the barn and went inside. Tyler watched the whole scene for a half hour, but no one came back outside. He made his way back up to Fargo and reached inside his saddlebag. Pulling out a handful of wanted posters, he found the one he was looking for.

“Yeah, boy. That was him. Frank Cody, alias Buffalo Rogers. One-thousand dollars—dead or alive.”

The bounty hunter needed a plan. Four of them and one of him. And then there’s the girl. The odds were against him, and he had no backup buddies to call on. Leaning on the saddle, he started consulting with Fargo.

“Well, boy. We gotta figure something out here. I’m thinking the best way to go is to get the men separated and take them out one at a time without alerting anyone else. Then we get to the girl and get her out. I’m liking that wagon by the cabin. It’d be good to haul out live men tied up or

dead men laid out. We could hook up two of the horses to the wagon and trail the others behind. No, I wouldn't make you stay with them. You could carry the girl. Well ... whatta you think, Fargo?"

Fargo nodded and neighed.

"I thought you'd like it."

As Tyler continued thinking about how he could separate the men, he noticed a little skunk coming out of the bush. He kept heading for Tyler, apparently unaware that the horse and man were there. The little skunk stopped when he ran into Tyler's boot. The bounty hunter had spent a lot of time outdoors and was quite aware of a skunk's capability. But this little guy didn't take any defensive posture. He sniffed Tyler's boot and looked up. Tyler reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a small piece of jerky.

"Would you like some of this, little guy?"

The little skunk snatched it right up and then looked back up at Tyler.

“You know, if I invest too much in you, you’re going to have to work it off.” Tyler looked back down at the skunk and started thinking. “Yeah, that just might work.”

Tyler reached back into his saddlebag and pulled out an old shirt and two pairs of handcuffs. Then he grabbed two pieces of rope that hung from the saddle and tore the shirt into strips. Snatching up the little skunk in his arms, he headed back to the cabin. When he got closer, he took out his spyglass and scanned the area around the cabin and the barn. Nobody was outside, so he made his way to the back of the barn. He heard voices inside the barn, but he couldn’t tell how many. Near the back corner of the barn, he saw a big enough gap in the siding to look inside. All four men were still inside the barn. Then he crept over to the corral and set the little skunk down. Pulling out another piece of jerky, he let the skunk smell it, and then he tossed it into the corral. The little skunk ran over to get the piece of jerky, making the horses nervous and voice their displeasure. Tyler ran back to the edge of the barn.

“Jesse, go see what’s going on with the horses,” said Frank.

“Okay, boss.”

When Jesse came out to the corral, Tyler was waiting for him.

“Say a word and it will be your last,” warned Tyler. “Unbuckle the gun belt and set it on the ground.”

When the outlaw did as he was told, Tyler continued, “Good. Now get on the ground, face down with your hands behind your back.”

Tyler put the cuffs on him, used a strip of the shirt to gag him, and then wrapped his feet with another strip. He dragged Jesse behind the barn and waited.

“Where is that boy?” bellowed Frank. “Billie, go see if Jesse needs some help.”

Billie got up and went outside to the corral. He met with the same fate as Jesse.

Inside the barn, Jake said, “Frank, I don’t like that Jesse and Billie aren’t coming back. I’m going out to see what’s going on.”

“I’ll be right behind you in a couple of minutes,” said Frank.

When Jake got to the corral, he saw where the others had been dragged off. He pulled his gun and looked around. When he saw Tyler out of the corner of his eye, he wheeled around and started firing. Tyler placed a bullet in Jake’s right shoulder, knocking him down. He grabbed Jake’s gun and turned towards the barn, fully expecting Frank to come out firing. Tyler let loose a couple of rounds into the barn door. When Rebecca came outside the cabin, Frank ran towards her.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” hollered Frank as he ran and shot. “Get back inside the cabin.”

Tyler had to make a quick decision. He always tried to bring in his bounty alive whenever possible. If he let Frank reach Rebecca, he might try to use her as a shield or as a bargaining chip.

Either way would put her in more danger. He aimed at Frank's boots and fired. The first two shots missed the fast-moving target. The third connected with Frank's right foot, and he went down just before reaching the front porch. Tyler ran over to the moaning outlaw and slammed his rifle butt into Frank's chin, knocking him out cold.

"You'll probably thank me for that later," said Tyler to the unconscious outlaw. "At least, you won't have to feel the pain in your ankle for a while." He yelled to Rebecca inside the cabin, "You can come out now, Rebecca. It's safe."

The girl slowly opened the cabin door and looked at Tyler. Then she broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. Tyler gave her some time and finally asked, "You are Rebecca, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to go home?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Back behind that rock is my horse. His name is Fargo. Bring him down here."



“Okay.”

They hooked up two horses to the wagon and tied a third behind. The other horse that was in the corral ran off. With the gang loaded into the wagon and Rebecca on Fargo, they found another path through the brush that the wagon could make. As they made their way on the trail back to Rebecca’s home, Fargo kept abreast of the wagon right next to Tyler in the seat, so he and Rebecca were in close talking distance.

“Did you leave home voluntarily or were you kidnapped by this bunch, Rebecca?”

“Please call me Pearl, Mr. Graves. It’s my middle name and the name I like.”

“Will do, Pearl.”

“I left on my own. I guess I just wanted to see more of the world than our little town. I just wanted some adventure. I ran across Frank and his boys on the trail, and they seemed genuinely interested in helping me at first. But then when they kept me in that cabin and wouldn’t let me go, I realized I had made a terrible mistake.”

“Have you seen enough of the world for a little while?”

“I didn’t really get very far, but all I want now is to go home to my little town. I’m thankful you showed up.”

“I’m glad I could help, Pearl. Looking for you was a little different for me. In hindsight, it almost seemed like pure luck that I found you ... or maybe some divine intervention through an east wind ... I’m not sure. Do you know what I do for a living, Pearl?”

“Are you a marshal or something?”

“Oh, I spend much of my life hunting down the likes of these guys, but it’s not as a law officer. I’m a bounty hunter.”

“You mean like you collect money to bring in outlaws?”

“Yeah.”

“Did somebody pay you to find me?”

“Yes, your family and the whole congregation of your little church.”

Pearl remained silent for quite a while, but then she said, “I guess they really care about me.”

“Yes, they do.”

“How much did they pay you?”

“They haven’t paid me yet, but it doesn’t really matter. I’m not gonna take it, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Well, somehow, I don’t think the good Lord would look too kindly on me, if I did.”

Pearl looked at Tyler and smiled.

“Besides, even if I split the reward money for these guys with you, I’ll still have plenty to go in my pocket.”

“Why would you split the reward money with me?”

“You helped me load them into the wagon, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but ...”

“And your dress is torn. If you have to go into town and buy a new one ... well, I have no idea how much that would cost, and a pearl should always look like a pearl.”

Pearl just smiled, and Fargo nodded and neighed.

# SHERIFF JONAS MCCLINTOCK

Sheriff Jonas McClintock, the head lawman out in Buzzard's Creek, Texas, stared out the window at the freshly cut ruts of the afternoon stage. Autumn's cool wind made him glad he had a fresh cup of coffee in his hands. Focusing back on his somewhat messy desk, he grabbed a fresh batch of wanted posters and proceeded to the bulletin board. All of a sudden, Gully Watson, the local telegraph operator, came busting through the front door.

"Sheriff, I brung this over right away cause it looked mighty important."

Jonas opened the telegram and commenced to reading. "Sheriff, I need you to go over to Dry Gulch. There's a bunch of outlaws hanging out at the Nine Mile Saloon, and I want you to tell them that if they don't start mending their ways, you're going to have to run them in."

It was signed, 'The Lord'.

The sheriff thanked Gully for his professional dedication. Then he folded up the telegram and put it into his front vest pocket. He walked over to the gun rack, pulled out a Winchester, and headed out the front door. Grabbing the reins of Tornado, his trusty horse, he slipped his right leg up over the broad strong back of the animal. Turning Tornado's head to the west, he headed for Dry Gulch.

About five miles out of town, Jonas came to a fork in the road. The left side led to Dry Gulch, his intended destination. The right side led to Bear Lake. Sitting there for a couple of minutes in contemplation, the sheriff pulled Tornado's reins hard to the right. A little fishing seemed a might safer than going over to that outlaw den all by himself.

The fisherman had him a good afternoon, catching two walleyes, a mountain trout, and even an old gar. Glancing out at the horizon, Jonas noticed a storm abrewin in the west. He figured he'd better find some cover. By the time he'd gathered up his gear, the wind had already begun to blow respectably. Right about the time he reached for Tornado's reins, there come a vicious bolt of

lightning. Spooked by the sizzling air, Tornado came up hard with that big ol' head of his and knocked Sheriff Jonas right smack into the lake.

Jonas struggled to maintain his footing on the slippery rocks and almost made it out of the water when something really strange happened. Seemingly out of nowhere, there come along this here huge, big-mouth bass and, with one gulp, he swallowed the sheriff clean up.

Sheriff Jonas learned that there were two really bad things about being in the belly of a fish. One, there's that terrible stench. It stank so bad the sheriff couldn't help but, well, it smelled really bad. Two, there just weren't a whole lot to do inside the belly of a fish. So, Sheriff Jonas had him a goodly amount of time to do some thinking. After a while, he begun to recognize the error of his ways and he commenced to beseech the Lord to help him out of his situation. After three days, the Lord figured ol' Sheriff Jonas had learned his lesson. He made that big ol' fish spit Jonas out onto the bank of Bear Lake.

Luckily, Tornado was still aggrazin on the lush grass near the lake bank. As Jonas walked over to his horse, he felt for the telegram in his vest pocket. He pulled it out and refreshed his memory on the blurry words. Then he got up onto his trusty steed, rode over to Dry Gulch, and did what the Lord had told him to do.

When the sheriff got back to his office, he began to delve more deeply into the meaning of the little side path he had taken, particularly about his time inside that fish. Now he knew that there was gonna be some folks who would say that there ain't no way a man can stay alive for three days inside the belly of a fish. But how he come to see it was that if the Lord knew how to make him and that big ol' fish and that lake and that storm and that hard ground that he stood on, then He wouldn't have any trouble figuring out how to keep him alive for three days inside the belly of that fish. And he oughta know, cause he was there with a little first-hand knowledge.



Sheriff Jonas also kinda got a feeling he better do at least one more thing. So, he got up outta his chair and headed over to the telegraph office.

“Gully, I want you to send this telegram to the sheriff down in El Paso and the marshal in Laredo. Here’s what I want you to say, ‘Boys, if the Lord tells you to do something, you best just go ahead and do it and save yourself a whole pack of trouble. But if you feel a little stubborn streak comin on, and you decide to go ahead and take another path, I just want to tell you that sometimes that other path can really stink.’ I’d like you to get that out right away, Gully.”

# THE DOGS OF J.W. CALLAHAN

J.W. Callahan owned a big old spread out in western Colorado where he pursued ranching as a livelihood. Though that was a common occupation out there, J.W. coulda rightly been called uncommon. Many considered him a maverick in his time. While every other cattle rancher around depended totally on cowboys and good cutting horses, J.W. assigned a goodly portion of his herding duties to his dogs. The rancher did have some mighty fine dogs, one hundred of them to be exact. Nowadays, such a move would draw praise as a progressive and effective means of increasing profitability. Back then, most cattle ranchers didn't act real quickly on anything that might diminish the way of life of their local labor pool.

With the end of autumn approaching, J.W. set out to bring in the last few head of cattle from the back areas of his massive ranch. Overwintering in that part of the country meant plenty of hay and some type of protected quarters. Naturally, he sent

out his mixed crew of dogs and traditional wranglers to comb the range for the stragglers. The roundup went well, and when the last of the riders and dogs had returned, J.W. seemed pleased. A final head count, though, revealed that one of the dogs was missing.

Ol' Pete never made it back, and that stuck in J.W.'s side. He had a fondness for every one of his dogs. When he heard the news, he saddled up his faithful steed and headed for the hills.

As he left, he told his men, "Boys, I don't know how long I'll be gone, so's ya best get the rest of the dogs and horses settled in for the cold."

A week went by without any sign of J.W. After the second week, some of the boys got a little concerned. When a fierce winter storm blew across the land, Jeb Hawkins, the ramrod of the crew, and a couple of other men started packing up some provisions to form a search party. As they got ready to mount up, there appeared on the horizon a shadowy rider headed their way. As the horse and rider got closer, it filled some of the boys with trepidation.

The quivering icicles hanging from the rider's beard and the smoky breath of the horse gave all the appearance of a ghostly visitor from beyond. The sound of ninety-nine dogs barking simultaneously broke the eerie silence. Yeah, them dogs recognized the figure of the shadowy intruder as that of their master. And sure enough, J.W. had ol' Pete draped across the back of his big horse. The good dog appeared a might down in the mouth, but alive, nonetheless.

They had quite a celebration at the Bar-J ranch the next day. The frigid temperature outside didn't matter cause inside their hearts were aglowin at the return of Ol' Pete. J.W. threw such a big barbeque that, believe it or not, no one gave a second thought to one hundred dogs and twenty cowboys sitting at the same table chowing down on the same delicious feast.

*Now, pardners, I got a feeling it's kinda the same way with the Lord when one wandering spirit returns to the fold. Them angels probably throw a great big barbeque up there in heaven just in celebration.*

*So, the next time you step outside, and you take in the sweet aroma of hickory smoke in the air, consider its source. It could be your neighbor grilling up some thick juicy steaks. Or it could be the wind blowing in from that barbeque restaurant down the road that just fired up for the evening crowd. Or maybe ... just maybe, there coulda been another lost soul saved today.*

# RIDING SHOTGUN WITH RAGGEDY JONES

Buck had but twenty years of life behind him when he rode the solitary journey that took him away from the burned-out ruins of an old oak log house. A hundred yards to the east he had dug seven graves for the seven wooden caskets that held everyone he had ever loved. The sheriff said he had never seen such an evil act committed in those parts.

“Satan himself had a hand in this,” the lawman declared.

With that thought firmly planted in his mind, Buck saddled his horse and rode off. He never looked back. He had no idea where the trail would lead.

After four days of riding, he came to a fairly large town at the edge of a river. Bone tired, the

young man stopped at a hotel and paid two bits for a room.

As Buck headed up the stairs, the clerk hol-lered up to him, “The contest starts at ten o’clock in the morning.”

“What contest?” Buck asked.

“The shooting contest,” the clerk answered. “I thought that’s why you were here.”

“No, not me. I’m just passing through.”

When dawn broke the next morning, Buck went down to have some breakfast at the café and then he went back to his room. At nine o’clock, he checked out of the hotel. As he got ready to put his foot in the stirrup, curiosity got the best of him. He followed the crowd over to the field where they were holding the shooting contest.

“Two bucks gets you entered,” yelled the barker. “Come on down and sign up.”

As he had said when he left his only home, he had no idea where he was going to be led. It

appeared as though that contest called his name. He won the shooting contest hands down. Fifty dollars in gold coin and a job riding shotgun for the Overland Express Stage Line couldn't have come at a better time. Buck reported to the stage depot the next morning for his assignment. Lance Berry, a driver for the Kansas to Texas run, approached Buck while he waited for the dispatcher.

“That was some nice shooting yesterday,” Lance said.

“Thanks,” Buck replied.

“Do you know who you're riding with?” the driver asked.

“Jones.”

“Old Raggedy Jones,” said Lance. “Best driver in the country on the most dangerous route in the country.”

Looking him in the eye, Buck asked, “What do you mean?”



“Renegade Indians, outlaws, rockslides, narrow mountain paths. You just about got it all. If I had to make that run, I wouldn’t want anyone other than Raggedy Jones by my side.”

Buck started to wonder what he had gotten himself into. As he stared out the front window, he saw the Denver Express come to a stop outside the stage depot. He watched the shotgun get off, but he couldn’t see the driver, who had gotten off on the other side of the coach. As the driver moved to the front of the team to talk to the handler, Buck could see he was a tall man by how he stood in relation to the horses. Finally, the driver stepped into the door of the depot and moved inside to the dispatcher’s desk. After a couple of minutes, Billie, the dispatcher, came over and introduced Pete Jones to Buck.

“Raggedy, Buck here is your new shotgun. He won the shooting contest yesterday easily.”

Stretching out his hand, Buck said, “Good to meet you, sir.”

“Sir? I kinda like that, Billie ... son, most people just call me Raggedy.”

“Okay,” Buck replied.

“Let me see your gun, Buck,” said Raggedy. “Got a good feel. I’m using these twins right now. Don’t get the distance, but they’ve got a fast action. Billy, I’m gonna go down to Mabel’s and have something to eat. I’ll be back in about an hour. Buck, you had dinner?”

“Yeah, Raggedy, I’m okay.”

“Then why don’t you take a walk around the coach and get a feel for the horses.”

“Sure, Raggedy,” Buck said.

An hour later, the Denver Express rolled out of town with two passengers in the cab and three sacks of mail on the back. The first day went smoothly, with no trouble whatsoever. The days that followed brought many a test for Raggedy and his new partner. Raggedy and Buck remained a team for three years, making the most dangerous run the company had. Over such an expanse of

time, Buck learned a lot about life and a lot about the legendary figure of Raggedy Jones.

There was the time they came across that family whose wagon broke down on the trail. The coach already overflowed with both passengers and cargo. Any other driver would have left the people and told them he would let the sheriff know when he got to town. Not Raggedy Jones. When they pulled into town, there were kids hanging all over that coach.

An incident just outside Wichita gave Buck a glimpse of the physical finesse of his partner. While under attack from a gang of outlaws, Raggedy put the reins in his teeth and fired his twins simultaneously at the villains, all the while keeping the stage on the trail.

One time they pulled into Denver at nine o'clock in the morning and Raggedy dragged Buck into the church across the street from the depot. Pete Jones didn't have a Sunday-go-to-meeting suit, just that raggedy old buckskin coat that gained him his nickname. The folks in the pews could

have cared less what Raggedy Jones wore, cause they knew what the man wore on the inside. Sitting next to him that Sunday, widow McSwain gave him a hug. Raggedy had given her his last twenty dollars to pay for her mother to come to Denny's funeral. Two rows up the Cox family they had helped on the trail proudly celebrated child number eight. It seemed as though Raggedy Jones had touched every member of that church in one way or another. Sometimes when they had a layover and the trip had been exceptionally harrowing, Buck would ask Raggedy deeper questions.

“Raggedy, don't you ever get scared out there?” Buck asked.

“Buck, there isn't a man alive who can say doing this every day don't get you a little scared. But when I get to feeling that way, I always remember what the Good Book says, ‘Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell.’ Course, I ain't got no proper family. It's a little easier when you ain't got nobody worrying over you. I've been doing this for

so long, I kinda figure anything the Good Lord wants to give me at this point is just gravy. Besides, there's that line about 'which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life?' I know that you ain't got a family anymore to worry about you, Buck, but if you look at it right, every man, woman, and child we help along the way kinda becomes our family. And if they're our family, then we gotta protect 'em, so that kinda overrides the fear most of the time."

"Well, I'm proud to be riding alongside you, Raggedy. There's a lot of folks around here that look at you like some kind of folk hero, you know."

"Shoot, my friend, we can all be heroes in our own lives every day."

The sun rose on another day with hues of orange and purple cascading through the sky. Buck and Raggedy headed back east with a coach full of dignitaries of some rank. A four-man cavalry escort rode with them the entire trip. When they got back to St. Louis, they dropped their passengers off in front of The Altamonte Hotel, where there was to

be a high-level meeting of officials from many arenas.

“What do you think’s going on, Raggedy?”

“I heard through the grapevine that The President is coming here today. I reckon that would explain all the fuss and ado.”

“Maybe they’re all gathering here to give a medal or something to somebody important.”

“Could be, but I reckon we won’t have to worry about that, Buck. I do gotta tell you though, the hairs on the back of my neck are standing up. I can’t put my finger on it, but something just doesn’t feel right about today.”

“How long do you think they’ll lay us over this trip, Raggedy?”

“Don’t know, but I reckon we better go find out, pardner.”

After pulling up to the depot, Raggedy and Buck helped the handler unload the mail and secure the horses. They walked over to the front door of

the depot and Raggedy went in first. Then came what seemed like a lifetime condensed into several seconds. A blast of gunfire greeted them and they hit the deck. Three men rushed past them and jumped on horses being held by another man. Buck pulled his gun and dropped one rider before he got twenty yards. The rest of the band got away.

“You alright, Raggedy?” Buck asked.

His trail partner didn’t answer. When Buck turned his friend over, he saw a pool of blood on the wood floor underneath Raggedy.

“Somebody go get a doc,” yelled Buck. “Hold on, Raggedy. They’re going to get help.”

“It’s been a long ride, Buck,” whispered Raggedy. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Pete ‘Raggedy’ Jones died in the arms of his friend that bright August day. Perhaps it was all coincidence, but over a thousand people attended Raggedy’s funeral, including every single person from the get-together at the Altamonte Hotel. Many of the people in attendance took a turn at digging a

shovel full of dirt for Raggedy's grave. The President of the United States held the first shovel to touch the ground.

Buck said quietly to himself as he dug the last shovel full of dirt, "Yeah, they came here to give something to somebody important. See you on the other side, Raggedy."



## JEDEDIAH'S MULES

Jedediah Payson lived on a ridge overlooking Clinger Holler in the Cobalt Mountains. His little piece of heaven on earth consisted of 160 acres of mostly rock. His family came by the land honorably with one of the homestead acts, but by the time Jedediah's pappy got to the area, others had snatched up all the good land. Those who knew old Jedediah might describe him as a free spirit kind of guy. Since he didn't have a wife or any children to support, he eked out a living on his small farm. His closest kin lived way back in West Virginia. So, with no loved ones nearby and with only a meager life from Payson Acres, it was kinda hard to see what motivated the man to continue.

While it's true that Jedediah had little in the way of material possessions, the man did have two mules that went by the names of Hannibal and Norman. But it didn't matter, because Jedediah's motivation came as a grand idea. You see, up where he lived the preferred method of transportation, in

fact, happened to be the mule. The creature was much more sure-footed than the horse in the terrain of the mountains. Consequently, Jedediah figured he had a good market for “trained” mules. He didn’t mean just trained in the traditional sense, such as hauling a pack. No, Jedediah’s plan went way beyond that.

His plan centered on the hope that he could reach the point where he could say, “Hannibal, take this load over to Josh Gibson’s place” or “Norman, take these apples to the Edwards’ farm” and, of course, those mules would do exactly as they were told. He spent seven years teaching those mules how to understand words and how to read maps. Why, he spent so much time working with those mules, it almost seemed like he had two sons.

Well, eventually, the big day came for Hannibal and Norman. Jedediah said to Norman, “Pull this cartload of timothy hay over to Old Man Evans in Finch’s Gully.” Then he told Hannibal, “Take these packs of corn meal over to Milt Howard in Liberty Junction.” Just to make sure he had everything covered, he drew a couple of really big maps

for them to follow with their destinations marked with big red circles. He figured he'd better do that because, after all, they were mules, and everybody knows mules won't stop to ask directions.

Old Norman took to studying his map for a few minutes, and then he dutifully started heading for Old Man Evans' farm. Hannibal looked at his map, and then he looked up at Jedediah. With an insidious grin that only mules can give, he bolted off in the opposite direction, kicking up his heels and leaving Jedediah to fume at his orneriness.

The dejected trainer figured he would have to walk over to Milt Howard's place and try to explain why he would not get that load of corn meal. He spent the next hour walking and mumbling to himself about that miserable mule. When Jedediah approached the front door, Milt's wife, Rebecca, greeted him and said Milt was out back unloading the corn meal. When Jedediah saw Hannibal out back, he started feeling mighty bad about all the things he had thought about that mule. He figured he had seen the last of Hannibal.

Since he already had an hour of walking time behind him, he figured he was close enough to Old Man Evans' place to merit seeing if Norman had completed his task. When he approached the gate, the old man came out and tore into him like a badger. He wanted to know what had happened to the load of timothy hay he had ordered. Jedediah apologized profusely and backtracked the route that Norman should have taken.

About halfway down the mountain, Jedediah heard a terrible noise somewhat akin to when Bessie Mae Stoddard went into labor. He glanced off to a big pine tree on a little knoll. There he saw Norman leaning up against the tree just snoring away, the load of hay still in the cart behind him.

Now any good mule training program (and Jedediah had him a good one) would have a provision for disciplining the trainees. Old Norman found himself to be the first and last probationary member of the disciplinary provision. Tragically, he never rose above that status and so, on any cold winter night, it wasn't unusual to see old Hannibal laying by the fire in Jedediah's cabin, a cozy

blanket over his legs and a bowl of corn right in front of his nose. And Norman, well, he often stood out in a lonely pasture in the freezing rain, chewing on some bitter wire grass.

*I reckon we all have a little of Old Norman in us, but when it comes to the last day, the best hope we have is that the Almighty remembers all our Hannibal days and forgets all our Norman days.*

## IN THE EYE OF THE CAMEL

Jagged, forked streaks of lightning dominated the western sky. Hunkered down in the massive log house that served as the focal point of the 10,000-acre ranch his family owned, Jackson Davis III fidgeted with the gold necklace around his neck. The young man's impatience ebbed and flowed with every thunderous boom. An hour later, blue sky emerged from the dingy gray clouds.

Jackson walked to the enormous stable, stopped at the third door, and saddled a fine-looking stallion. He still had time to make his appointment with a cattle buyer in Bascom. When Jackson reached the edge of the Davis property, he looked down the trail that bordered the ranch. Not liking the muddy track as far as he could see, he decided to take an alternate route through Hawk's Gulch.

Rarely traveled, Hawk's Gulch could be dangerous because there were so many blind turns in the path, but Jackson practically had it memorized,

so often had he explored it as a youth. The deeper he got into the gulch, the more uneasy he felt. He couldn't see anything behind him, but he felt like something followed his every move. He glanced back again but still found nothing raising its head. As he rounded the last curve before exiting Hawk's Gulch, he suddenly faced six men with six revolvers aimed at his head.

Although Jackson could handle a gun with proficiency, he had absolutely no chance. The outlaws made him get off his horse and walk behind the trail rider. Stumbling on a rock, the young man continued to be drug along by the rope that bound his hands. The rider stopped long enough for him to get to his feet.

Jackson's mind drifted. Surely his father would eventually get word that he hadn't made his appointment, and he would come looking for him. His father would come riding down on his magnificent white horse and rescue him. The hired hands would form a posse and track down the outlaws. Everyone would see justice served. That's how he

had been taught it should be done. That's how he expected it would come.

When the young man opened his eyes later that afternoon, he realized the outlaws had left him for dead in the middle of the desert. Bruised and sapped of energy by the brutal sun, Jackson struggled to sit up and feel for his canteen. Of course, the outlaws wouldn't leave it for him if they had left him for dead, but he had to try. Without success, he slumped back down and closed his eyes.

"No, I can't give up," he said to himself. "My father will rescue me."

His left eye now swollen shut, he had to turn his head slightly to avoid looking directly into the sun with his right eye. As he tried to focus, he kept getting a reflection of what appeared to be another eye. The surreal reflection of the eye got closer and closer until it filled his entire range of vision. He knew many men who, as they approached death in the grip of the deadly sun and barren sand, began seeing things that were not there, but what he saw looked so familiar. The reflection appeared to be a



cascade of everything he had done in his life looking back at him. The most haunting flashes were of wrongs he had committed without acceptance of responsibility. He vowed that if he ever made it out of the desert, he would seek reconciliation and make amends. As soon as that thought left his awareness, the reflection seemed to move backwards and get smaller.

As Jackson tried to refocus on the diminishing object in front of him, he suddenly felt his face being wiped by something warm and wet. Standing over the young man, a large camel repeatedly licked his entire head.

“How did... how did you get here?” asked Jackson, now lucid enough to know the answer would not come verbally.

The camel backed up and knelt down, waiting for Jackson to mount him.

Realizing what the camel’s actions meant, Jackson said, “Okay. Okay, boy. Just give me a minute. I’m not moving real fast right now.”

With awkwardness, the seasoned rider eventually completed the mount. The first hundred feet of travel required every ounce of ridership skill he could muster to just stay atop his rescuer. The camel's unorthodox gait gradually became more fluid, or at least Jackson's perception of it became so.

“Look, big fella, I’ve never seen anything like you around these parts. I heard tell there was somebody in some little backwater town upstate who worked with camels, but I’m really glad you came down here. I don’t really have bearings on where we’re at, so I’m going to have to put my trust in you to get us out of here.”

About a half hour into the journey, the camel veered sharply to the right, went about a hundred feet, and climbed a small hill. At the crest of the hill, Jackson could see a water hole below. When they reached the little spring, the camel knelt down, allowing his rider to get off. The camel then went to the water's edge and began drinking. He stopped momentarily to look back at the young man as if to say, “It’s okay. The water is safe to drink.” Never

had Jackson had such a thirst and never had his thirst been so quenched.

As the orange sun slipped behind the horizon, it bathed the camel and his rider in an almost eerie purplish hue; one could say almost a royal hue. Off in the distance, Jackson could see the familiar silhouette of the Davis ranch house. You can imagine the sight of the young man riding a camel into the domain of horse and cowboy. The camel came to a stop in front of the house and knelt down to let his rider off. Jackson's father came rushing out of the house and ran to his son. Jackson collapsed into his father's strong arms, remembering little until he awoke in his comfortable bed some twenty hours later.

As Jackson gradually recuperated from his ordeal, his rescue story spread far and wide throughout the region. Many came to see the dromedary at the Davis ranch where he now stayed. They marveled at the creature in the lush stall with the gold name plate over the door that read "King". Some doubted Jackson's story. Many believed it.

Some secretly ridiculed the young man, calling the whole thing “Jackson’s Folly”.

Jackson understood why some people reacted the way they did. No one could have remotely imagined that one of the richest men in the state could have escaped death by the actions of an animal considered so lowly in comparison to the fine steeds so prevalent in the region. In Jackson’s eye, there couldn’t have been a finer gift, whether or not others could see that gift. And, most assuredly, Jackson H. Davis III would never forget the things he had seen that day in the eye of the camel.

## A JEWEL FOR SISTER SARAH

Hooking up Bonny to the buckboard, Colton patted the sturdy horse on the neck and gave her an apple. He wiped the dew off the seat, checked the wheels, and went back into the house.

“She’s all ready, Ma,” said Colton.

“Thank you, Colton. Now where’s that sister of yours?”

“I’m coming, Ma,” said Sarah, as she bound down the stairs.

Meg Patterson and her family left the farm and headed for town. They only lived about a mile out of the small town of Cassville, but it could still be a rough ride, depending on the past week’s weather. Fortunately, Colton knew every bump and soft spot, so he skillfully kept the wagon moving behind Bonny’s steady pull.

“Last Sunday at church, I heard Mrs. Wilson say that they were expecting a new shipment of

fabric this week,” said Meg. “Maybe we will find something pretty to get, if we have money left after the essentials.”

“When will pa be back?” asked Sarah.

“The return run from Chicago is supposed to be back on Thursday, provided they don’t run into any trouble on the rails.”

“Do you think he’ll have anything exciting to bring back, Ma?” asked Sarah.

“Oh, I don’t know, Sarah. Chicago is a pretty big city with lots of fancy stuff, but you know your father. His idea of exciting isn’t always the same as ours.”

“But we can always hope, can’t we?”

“Of course, Sarah. Sometimes, he will surprise us.”

“We stopping at the general store first, Ma?” asked Colton.

“Yes, that would be fine, son.”

Pulling the buckboard up to Henry's General Store, Colton got down and helped his ma and his sister get off.

"Ma, I'm going down to the livery to see if Matthew's got that new bridle in that we've been needing. I'll be back in a few minutes to help you load things on the wagon."

"Okay, Colton."

The livery stable could be a busy place sometimes, but Colton always liked to look at the horses and gear that Matthew had on hand, so he spent his time well. Today, only one well-dressed stranger stood talking to Matthew. The stranger soon shook Matthew's hand and left.

"Well, howdy, Colton," said Matthew. "I've got that new bridle in for you."

"Thanks, Matthew. How much do I owe you?"

"Five dollars, Colton ... I don't know if it would interest you or not, but that man that was just in here has a fine-looking horse he wants to

sell. I've checked him out and I have to say it's one of the best-looking geldings I've seen come through here in a while. Looks strong, and the man said he's very fast. He even comes with a good sturdy saddle and reins."

"How much does he want?"

"One hundred dollars."

"I don't know. Seems like a good price. I'll ask pa when he gets back on Thursday."

"Okay, Colton. Here's your bridle."

"Thanks, Matthew."

Colton walked back to Henry's General Store to see if his ma needed help with anything yet.

"Look, Colton," said Sarah, excitedly.

"Look at what Mr. Wilson got in yesterday."

Mrs. Wilson smiled and pulled out a case from under the counter. When she opened it up, Sarah's face became as dazzling as the necklaces that shown from their soft velvet bed. Her brother looked at her face, and then he looked at his ma.



Meg smiled but shook her head. Henry's General Store rarely ever got anything in of that nature. When Colton looked at the prices, he understood why his ma had shook her head no.

"My favorites are the sterling silver cross and the ruby in the star," said Sarah. "I'd give anything for one of those."

"Some day, Sarah," said Colton. "Some day, maybe ... Those ready for the wagon, Ma?"

"Yes, Colton."

After loading up the boxes that sat by the counter, Colton went back in to see if there was anything else. He overheard Mr. Wilson talking to a lady across the room. Henry said he would see if he could figure something out but, off hand, he didn't know anybody who might have a spare wagon that they could bring the supplies out to her. Her wagon had apparently broken down and wouldn't be fixed for a week. When the lady turned around, Colton saw that it was Mrs. Parks who lived about a mile farther out from their farm.

“What do you need delivered, Mr. Wilson?” asked Colton.

“Mrs. Parks here has some sacks of feed and a few building materials,” answered Henry.

“If it’s okay with ma, we’ve got room, and I could bring them out to you after I drop ma and Sarah off at home.”

Meg shook her head yes, and the young man finished loading the wagon with Mrs. Parks’ goods.”

When he got home from the delivery, Colton grabbed an old tin and dropped five coins into it. The seeds for Colton Patterson’s business idea were planted. When his pa got home on Thursday, the young lad talked to his father about the horse that Matthew had for sale at the livery. When his pa gave him the go ahead, he headed for town and got himself the first horse of his own. He then started passing the word around town that he made deliveries of most any kind. He even stopped at the telegraph office and offered his services for delivering telegrams to surrounding

farms and ranches. New ventures such as Colton's were sometimes slow to catch on in that part of the country, but gradually people began to like the speed and convenience that his services provided. Each new week brought a few more coins to drop into the tin after meeting expenses. He made a vow to himself that when he had enough, he was going to buy one of those necklaces for his sister.

On Tuesday morning, the Patterson family got ready to make their weekly trip into town for supplies. Colton emptied the coin tin into a leather pouch and put the strap over his shoulder. Pa was with them today, so he drove the buckboard, and Colton rode Blue Moon alongside. With their first stop at Henry's General Store, Sarah ran inside to ask Mrs. Wilson if she could look at her jewelry case. Her brother could hardly wait to surprise her with the purchase of one of the necklaces. But when he got inside, she was already coming back out with a little tear falling from her eye.

"What's wrong, Sarah?" asked Colton.

“The necklaces are gone. Someone bought them on Saturday, and Mrs. Wilson doesn’t know when she will get any more.”

Colton didn’t know what to say to his sister. He couldn’t tell her that he was going to buy one for her. That would only make it worse. But his sister was resilient, as were most of the people in that part of the country. You had to be to survive. Tomorrow was another day. Maybe something would come.

A few months later, Quinton Patterson told his family that a gang had stopped the train and robbed everyone on it. Whether it was well-planned or just a spur of the moment opportunity, they didn’t know. The outlaws made a big haul, though, as the end car was privately owned by a wealthy man who had a lot of valuables to put into their sacks. He told his son to be careful out there as there was talk that the gang was in the Cassville area.

The next day, Colton and his friend Running Bear from the Indian village went into the woods

to do some hunting. Colton always liked hunting with Running Bear, as he was the best tracker he had ever known. He could sneak up on a deer and touch the deer's antlers before the deer would even know he was there. The two young men had grown up together in school. It was unusual for an Indian brave to be allowed in school, but Colton heard it had something to do with a peace treaty from many years ago. Whatever the reason, he was glad to have Running Bear's friendship. The young Indian brave preferred that Colton call him Sam, and so he did.

When Sam and Colton came upon a rocky overhang, they heard voices from below. Peering over the edge, they saw four men resting around a campfire.

"What do you think, my friend?" asked Sam.

"I'm wondering if they could be that gang that robbed the train," answered Colton. "Let's watch them for a while."

“I don’t think they’re going anywhere more today,” said Sam. “It looks like they’re getting ready to bed down.”

“If it is them, there’s supposed to be two rewards out there, one for their capture and one for the return of the wealthy man’s valuables.”

“You want to take first watch, or do you want me to?” asked Sam.

“You take it, Sam.”

Darkness soon fell, and when it did, Sam woke his friend.

“Look at that, Colton.”

Three of the men had gone to sleep, and the fourth man stood watch. The fourth man took something out of a saddlebag he had next to him. Something in his hand kept shining with the flickering light of the campfire.

“That must be it, Sam. The saddlebag is filled with the wealthy man’s valuables ... We split the reward fifty/fifty?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Let’s keep watching. I’m betting that the guard will fall asleep too. If he does, do you think you could sneak down and get that saddlebag?”

“Can I not touch the tooth of a sleeping bear?”

“I’ve never doubted you, Sam, but I will keep you covered just in case.”

About an hour later, the fourth man did fall asleep, and Running Bear came back up with the saddlebag in hand.

“Okay, Sam, you take this into town and give it to the sheriff. He knows you, so he’ll believe you. Tell him that I am still up here. As soon as he can get a posse together, you lead him back up here. Hopefully, those guys down there won’t realize what’s happened before the sheriff can get up here.”

Running Bear knew the paths that led to town like the back of his hand, even in the dark. With his swift pony, he got to town quickly. The bag of valuables proved who they would be dealing with, so the sheriff and ten men followed

Running Bear back up into the hills. When they got up to where Colton stood watch, they found all to be quiet. The posse took the gang into custody without firing a shot.

When the wealthy man heard that his valuables had been recovered, he rushed to Cassville the next day. He was so happy that he told Colton he could pick out anything in the bag as an extra above the reward. In the end, Colton gave Sam all the reward money to take back to his village. For his bonus gift, Colton picked out a large silver cross necklace that had a heart-shaped ruby in the center of the cross.



## THE FALL

Come the later part of July, Horace Kilyer left his comfortable bed in the Riverside Hotel of East St. Louis and headed west. It was a half-fanciful and half-business move. Horace had a hankering to see the land of gold and silver, and the company he represented thought the west would yield lucrative new markets.

The first few hundred miles passed without incident, despite the constant threat of danger. When he reached Dodge City, he caught on with a wagon train taking the same route. Horace and the wagon train parted ways just outside Denver. He'd been riding for about a day when he came to a narrow pass through the Baker Mountain range. Easing his horse around several tricky curves, he thought he heard a faint rumble. Half frozen with curiosity, he looked up to see a rockslide headed his way. Digging his heels into his horse's sides, he tried to outrun the mass. In one of those rare moments of time that few survive to relate, Horace lost

the race with the barrage that knocked him and his horse down into a secluded ravine.

At some point in time, Horace woke up with a terrible headache. He thought he had his eyes open, but everything looked so dark, without any form or shadow. He couldn't understand why he felt so hot. The warmth on his face and arms could only be from the midday sun. But if the sun shone brightly, he couldn't see it, and that could only mean ... he must be blind. A man of steely composition, Horace rarely gave in to panic. He knew he had to come up with a plan. He reckoned he must be down in the ravine beneath the trail. He hollered for help for a while, but the only response he got was a dozen echoes of his own voice.

Horace felt weak, but he knew he couldn't give up. Then he thought about his horse. A couple of quick whistles brought a muted snort off to his right. Horace continued whistling and listening. Trying to follow his horse's response as best he could, he eventually felt the warm welcome of his friend with his right hand. As he stood there leaning against the muscular side of the big bay, he

wondered if his horse had suffered any injuries. He grabbed the reins and took a few steps to see if the horse would follow. He heard no protest, and the animal offered no resistance to the reins. Horace knew his chance for rescue had just increased dramatically.

Whispering into the horse's ear, he said, "Boy, I'm depending on you to get me outta this place. I trust that somehow you'll find a way."

The saddle still felt snug, so he climbed up onto his horse's broad back. As the animal began to move, Horace felt his head start to spin, but he held on tight to the saddle horn. After a while he felt his left leg scraping a rocky wall. Slowly, they made their way up a narrow steep path. Then Horace suddenly felt a fresh breeze against his face. When the horse stopped, he knew they had made it out of the ravine. His spirit gained renewed strength with the sound of someone talking.

A strong voice asked, "Are ya alright, pardner?"

“I’m hanging in there, friend,” answered Horace. “A rockslide knocked us down into that ravine. I hit my head and, unfortunately, now I can’t see anything. If it wasn’t for this big ol’ horse of mine, though, I would have never gotten outta there alive.”

“Rest easy, pardner,” said the voice. “I own a ranch beyond that next ridge. My boys and me, we’ll get ya to a doc.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” replied Horace. “Take a look at my horse and make sure he isn’t too bruised up, will ya? I owe him my life.”

“Sure, pardner,” answered the rancher. “Ya say this horse got you outta that ravine?”

“Yeah, he sure did,” answered Horace. “Somehow, he found a path up the rocks.”

The rancher peered over the edge of the trail down into the ravine. He saw a steep rocky path no wider than two feet at any point. Then he asked, “And ya couldn’t see a thing?”

“No,” answered Horace.

The rancher looked at the path a second time, and then he looked at the horse. Gently rubbing behind the animal's ears, he turned back to Horace and said, "Well, mister, I tell ya, you've got quite ... quite a horse here."

"Yeah, I'm real thankful, but why do I sense a hesitation in your voice? Is there something wrong with him?"

"Well, it's just that ... I reckon I best just spell it out," answered the rancher. "It's just that I been around horses for nigh onto forty years now and I, well, I ain't never seen a horse that'd walk a path like that by himself. It's too steep and too narrow. The way it drops off like that, a horse would panic at the sight of it. If anybody were to tell me a story like that, I'd say he's a little loco. It's impossible."

"Well, he did. I'm livin proof of it. Besides, don't you believe in miracles?"

"Yes, pardner, I do," answered the rancher, as he continued stroking the horse's head. "And I think ... that's just what ya got here, a genuine

miracle. Cause ya see, friend, this here horse, well .... this horse, he's blind, too."

Horace's mind rushed with strange visions, as he exclaimed, "Blind! How is it possible he got us outta there?"

"Pardner, I've had a few blind horses in my time. If a horse loses his sight suddenly, it will frequently get scared and panic at the darkness. Now a calm, easy-going one sometimes remains calm and adapts. A high-strung steed doesn't always do as well. I'd say ya gotcha a good calm one here, but I think in this case he also had someone guiding him from up above ... now, let's get ya to the doc."

After about an hour of tedious travel over rocky paths, Horace could hear the sounds of a bustling country town. He then heard the rancher say, "Pardner, the doc's place is just down the street. One of my boys rode ahead, so's the doc knows we're comin."

As grizzled hands helped him down off the horse, Horace said, "I know you've done a lot for me, but could ya do one more thing?"

“Sure, pardner. Just name it.”

“Could ya see to it that they take care of my horse?”

“He’ll be down at the livery on the other side of town. Joshua Banks, the owner, is a friend of mine. He’ll take real good care of him.”

“Thanks ... I’m sorry. I don’t even know your name. I’m Horace.”

“Jake ... Jake Crockett.”

The doctor learned his medicine back at one of those northeast schools, but he wasn’t any less inclined, on occasion, to fall back on some cures he learned from a spell he spent with the Cherokee Indians. He mixed up a strange combination of herbs, spittle, and clay, which he applied to Horace’s eyes. He had his assistant take Horace over to the hotel with instructions not to wash the mixture off for two days. On the third day, the doc said he’d be over to check on his progress. Horace perked up when he heard the doc’s voice on that third day. When the doc removed the bandages over his eyes, Horace blinked a few times and then took in the

glorious ruddy face of the man standing over him. After profusely thanking the man of medicine, Horace suddenly had an idea hit him.

“Doc, that mixture that ya made up, would it work on ... on a horse?”

“I would say it depends on what caused the blindness.”

“My horse went blind in the same fall as me. He’s down at the livery. Could ya come down and try it?”

“I reckon I’ve got the time today. Besides, I always enjoy a challenge.”

Horace and the doctor walked over to the livery, where they found Joshua Banks busy mending some harness.

“Excuse me,” said Horace. “A few days ago, a friend of yours, Jake Crockett, brought in a blind horse. He’s mine and I wonder if I could see him.”

“Sure, friend. He’s in the back paddock. Hey, Doc, how ya doin?”

“Middlin, Joshua. Middlin.”



“Well, I’ll be dogged,” said Joshua Banks. “He was here a minute ago.”

“Look,” said the doc, pointing to the right of their position.

Running at breakneck speed, the horse jumped over three fences and then stopped at the top of a ridge overlooking a small cemetery. Raising up on his hind legs, the big bay, with the morning sun behind him, cast a large shadow onto a small wooden cross marking the grave of an unknown traveler. A full-of-life neigh affirmed no need for a miracle salve.

“Yes,” said Horace, softly. “I understand, old boy. Someone else has fallen.”

# THE GHOSTS OF WILLOW VALLEY

The town of Decipere sits precisely in the middle of a verdant valley some ten miles west of the Bounty River. Oddly, at the base of the hills surrounding the valley grows a rim of willow trees. I say oddly, because, except for the narrow entrance at the east end, the trees completely enclose the valley. Standing precisely ten feet on center (a fact that seems quite improbable in nature), the willows give the appearance of a prison with the trunks forming the bars and the thick branches completing the barrier.

*Sir Jonathan Barrymore, Fort Contra Expedition, 1867*

But for the journal entry above, I could find no other historical record explaining the strange formation surrounding Willow Valley and the town

of Decipere. Furthermore, I could find no official record of the town of Decipere at all. Myths and fantastic expanding stories abound, but they don't satisfy the probing mind of an investigative reporter such as I am.

What follows is an account of my experience in Willow Valley. Having heard stories about the area as far away as Boston, I felt compelled to expose the myths surrounding Decipere and the valley. As the only town in Willow Valley, Decipere supposedly laid claim to far deeper oddities than the willow prison. It stood as a desolate monument to a fallen civilization. Flesh and blood residents no longer called it home.

I made my first stop Mansfield, the closest town with residents who might have had some direct history with the valley. To my disappointment, I found no one who would admit to any such association. I did receive numerous words of warning: Watch; take heed and watch; keep an eye on your back; beware of the winds; do not fall asleep, and so forth. It did not surprise me that I could not find

a soul willing to make the journey into the valley, so I traveled alone.

Entering through the narrow gap at the east end of the valley, I immediately felt the surreal impression given by the willow prison. Countering that impression, the lush summer green of the meadow grass provided little evidence of the dark, desolate past of Decipere and the valley. Training my eyeglass farther down the valley, I spotted the distant outline of my destination some two miles or so away.

Walking my horse through the clover filled me with the delight of pleasant childhood memories, so much so I felt like all the stories of gloom and doom had led me astray. And then I found a path—a well-worn path. An obvious question arose in my mind: Why would there be a well-worn path to a town without people? Perhaps it was merely one used by animals of one sort or another. Still, the words of warning that I had received in Mansfield made their first mark on my nerves.

To be certain, I took the path, but with all my senses on alert. Periodically, I looked at the path behind me. Finally, I reached the edge of the town. Standing in front of a weathered sign welcoming those who dared to visit, I felt a modicum of uneasiness. Looking to the left and then to the right, I saw a perfectly straight line where the lush meadow grass abruptly ended, and the barren dirt of the town began. Within the confines of the town limits that I could see, there existed not the first blade of grass or leaf of green. It had all the appearance of a bleak, snowless winter day. I noted the lifeless scene in my journal before venturing any farther. I added the words, “Something drastic must have happened on Decipere’s final day.” I did not know that for sure, but it did not strike me as a gradual death.

The first street that I came to appeared to be a primary avenue for commerce. Judging from the boardwalk in front of each wooden skeleton, I would say it consisted mostly of shops and small businesses. I took a step up onto one of the boardwalks and immediately felt a jolt go up my leg. My

foot went through the rotten wood as it turned to dust. It took every ounce of strength I had to pull my foot out of the hole that seemed to exert a powerful holding force. Breathing heavily, I rubbed my ankle and then stood back erect to see a mini-whirlwind moving down the dirty path once laden with busy human traffic. As the whirlwind disappeared around a corner, I heard an odd sound coming from one of the buildings opposite to where I stood. Moving closer to the building, I found the sound to be more haunting and yet more clear. The words besieged my ears with pleadings, “Follow me”, “No, come follow me”, “Look, it is me”, “I am the one”.

It wasn't until I had cleared the last building of the main street that the words stopped their assault on my mind. I can't honestly say whether the words came from every building or whether the words simply followed me down the street. Savoring the silence, I proceeded down yet another dirty street. To my right stood a row of what must have once been great wonderful stone buildings. The mighty stone could not escape destruction either, as

someone appeared to have cast them down from their lofty positions. Then, another whirlwind sucked up the lifeless soil of the path in front of me. And the words returned, but this time they were in French. Processing the words as best I could with my meager foreign language study, I concluded they were the same pleadings as before. Silence did not return until the whirlwind lost its breath. At the time, I didn't even contemplate the strangeness of another language.

Leaving the avenue of broken stones, I felt an irresistible urge to cast one more look down the street. Vestiges of dirt clouds from the whirlwind remained atop the remnants of the man-made stone monuments. Then a sudden burst of wind forced the nebulous remains to flee into the surrounding hills. I felt a similar urgency to flee, but there was one more street between my position and the exit path.

The pace of my walk increased on a parallel with my heart rate. The last building on the street had all the appearance of a public or governmental meeting place, maybe even a school. As my hand

touched the cold stone pillar out front, I felt a sharp pain in my back. Momentarily, it eased, only to return to my legs. A cycle of sharp and dull lingering pain continued to alternate between my back and my chest. I finally realized that the sensations stopped every time I took my hand off the stone. A sane man would have resisted the urge to step up and peer into the open chamber of the building, but I did not. I could not resist. Stepping across the threshold, I heard muffled cries or moans. The cleansing of an afternoon sun shining through a large gap in the wall only revealed barren floors and barren walls. Yet, the sounds came as if from someone under duress, and the only thing keeping them from screaming hideously was the conviction of their soul.

I could take no more. I ran the last hundred yards to the path I thought would provide my escape. I untied my horse and mounted up. Hope propelled me to the waiting meadow of clover. By the time I reached the halfway point to the valley entrance, only a few lingering rays of light remained to the day. How quickly they departed, leaving me



with a moonless night to navigate the last of the path. Casting a parting look at Willow Valley, all I saw was darkness. The town of Decipere rested deep within the bowels of a tormented valley, or maybe the valley only surrounded a tormented town. The inky desolation of the darkness kept me from seeing any of its form in my final look. And I was glad.

My numbed mind fought any rational thought on the trip back to Mansfield. My normally steady hand struggled with unlocking the door to my room. After washing the dust off my face, I sat down on the bed. I felt my heel bump up against something under the edge of the bed. Retrieving the object, I found a well-worn leather-bound Bible. Curiosity led me to open the book to the spot where a letter of some sort appeared to be serving as a bookmark. My eyes were drawn to a passage underlined in red: “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.”

After the experience of the day, I was willing to accept any explanation, even from an underlined passage in a Bible that just happened to be under my bed in a hotel room. I opened the letter in the Bible hoping to find more clues. The single sheet of writing paper began with the words, “Dearest Matilda”. The rest of the paper was blank.

I shuddered at what I read. Questions abounded in my mind. Did my hands hold evidence of a survivor from Decipere? Might they have been sitting down at their desk to write a letter to a loved one and suddenly had to leave? Were the people of Willow Valley watching? Or did their blind complacency doom them to ghostly lives without substance? Why the people in that one specific town? Was Mansfield any different? Was Boston any different? Were the dozens of towns I passed on the way to Willow Valley soon to become future ghostly Deciperes? I had the incredible urge to go home and hug my wife and two children. At times, the line between Willow Valley and the rest of the world seemed almost indistinguishable. And that was scary. That night I made a vow to never take

any day that the Creator of it all gave to me. I looked out the window of my hotel room that overlooked the main street of Mansfield. In the gaslight, I saw a mini whirlwind suck up loose dirt from the street and disappear beyond the rows of street-lights.

## AN EDUCATED HORSE

*Life pushing cattle on long drives to market could be dreary, dirty, and sometimes lonely. At the end of the day, when the temperature dropped, and the belly was full of the limited cuisine offered by the chuck wagon, the cowboy sometimes had a moment or two around the campfire to offer up his own brand of philosophical meanderings. On this one particular day on the trail, the Lone G Ranch's cowboys had a rare opportunity to interact with the people from a wagon train heading west.*

Seeing as how only half the sun remained above the horizon, the two parties from the cattle drive and the wagon train who crossed paths on that lonely prairie trail mutually agreed to a joint camp for the night. After the drovers got the cattle settled down and after the wagons formed a circle, the womenfolk served a dandy feast to all. With their bellies full of a welcome change in grub, the cowboys just naturally gravitated to the campfire where

they could exchange marginally believable stories. Of course, it was only proper to invite some of their new friends to the roundtable discussion of a sort. A preacher man from the wagon train listened intently for a while and then added a few of his own stories to the session. The preacher man seemed like a real decent fellow, but his stories ... well, maybe it was his use of the King's English and all; it quickly became apparent to the boys that they had a greenhorn in front of them. The cowboys and professional storytellers then proceeded to milk the situation for everything they could get, all at the preacher's expense. The boys reveled so much in the moment that they failed to see the growing sparkle in the preacher's eyes. When it came around to his turn again, the Rev. Bartholomew Mattson commenced to tell about the time he ran into this man who claimed he had an educated horse.

And so, the preacher began his tale:

The man who is at the center of this story went by the name of Ezekiel Hanover Jones. Zeke, as his friends called him, pushed cows for most of

his life. One day, after completing a particularly hard drive, the ramrod told Zeke and the boys they could go into town for a little relaxation. As was frequently the case with cowboys in that situation, the source of such relaxation resided in the local saloon.

Virginia Appleby, one of the barmaids at the Bottom of the Hill Saloon, happened to be looking out of the window when she saw a big cloud of dust coming over the hill.

“We’re about to have company,” shouted Virginia. “Get ready, everybody.”

Now, an observant sort of person, when walking by the front of the Bottom of the Hill Saloon, would notice a curious architectural feature over the swinging front doors to the saloon. There could be seen a shape somewhat resembling the silhouette of a human from about the shoulder level up. A thinking man or woman might question the history of this architectural oddity. For those thinking people sitting around this campfire, I will offer an explanation. You see, with the saloon sitting at the

bottom of a hill and all ... well, when some of the cowboys came flying over the top of that hill, not all of them could stop in time to avoid a confrontation with the structural integrity of the building. After a year or so, the owner of the establishment decided he had to do something. All those cowboys knocked out cold on his front walkway couldn't do any drinking, and that was bad for business. So, he came up with the idea of cutting out part of the wall in the shape of a man with his hat. That way those riders could go right on through the swinging doors with at least another fifty feet to get stopped.

Anyway, Zeke and all the boys made it safely into the Bottom of the Hill Saloon that day. Settling down at a table at the far end of the room, Zeke had a good view of the front door when he noticed a big man enter the bar. Within earshot of the big man, Zeke overheard him claim that he had an educated horse and that for any man willing to put up a wager, he would prove it. Well, Zeke and the boys laid out a few dollars and called the man's bluff. Everyone in the bar followed the big man outside.

Whispering something into the horse's ear, the man then stooped down and drew a circle in the dirt.

“Gentlemen,” announced the man. “My horse will now calculate the square footage area of this circle I have just drawn.” The horse stomped down once, then again, and then a third time. The fourth time the horse's foot did not come fully down onto the ground, instead stopping at a funny angle. “As you can see, boys, the angle of the horse's foot to the ground is approximately one-seventh to the horizontal. This means that the horse has calculated the area of this circle to be three and one-seventh square feet. Barkeeper, I suggest that you measure the diameter of the circle.”

Joe, the barkeeper, went back into the bar to get a yardstick, and then did as the man asked. Joe replied, “She measures exactly two feet across.”

“Now, gentlemen,” said the big man. “I'm sure all of you are familiar with the simple law of mathematics that says to calculate the area of a circle, you square the radius and multiply it by the constant of  $\pi$ . So, if we use the measurement, as



taken by this completely unbiased barkeeper, of two feet, divide it by two to get the radius, square the radius, and then multiply it by the constant of *pi*, which is 3.14, we will then arrive at an answer of three and one-seventh square feet.”

The boys just kind of looked at one another like this man had been speaking in tongues or something, when the barkeeper spoke up, “I had a third cousin who’d done some surveying once and I vaguely recall him talking about that thing called *pi*.”

Naturally, the boys didn’t want to have their ignorance on public display, so they all agreed the horse must be right. They all had a good laugh and paid their bets to the big man. It was then that old Zeke got him an idea. He figured if he could get that stranger to sell him that horse, he could make some pretty easy money. Remarkably, Zeke didn’t have to do a whole lot of talking to convince the man to let go of his horse. Giving the big man every dollar he had, Zeke could hardly contain himself as he waited for a stranger to come into the bar. After a bit, a stranger did, in fact, come into the bar.

Zeke announced just loudly enough for the stranger to hear, “I got me an educated horse and for any man willing to put up a wager, I’ll prove it.”

The stranger, apparently being a reckless bettor by nature, put up five-hundred dollars to call Zeke out. Several of the boys later commented that, except for the beard, the stranger had a vaguely familiar look about him. Everyone in the bar then followed Zeke outside. Zeke swallowed hard, whispered into the horse’s ear, and drew a circle in the dirt. The horse stomped three times and on the fourth time came down at an angle of approximately one-seventh to the horizontal. Zeke breathed a premature sigh of relief and repeated all the words he’d heard the big man say about mathematical calculations.

“Well now, son,” said the stranger. “That all sounds pretty convincing, but uh ...why don’t we let the barkeep measure the diameter of that circle you drew on the dirt.”

“I reckon that’s acceptable,” said Zeke, confidently.

The barkeeper took out his yardstick, measured across the circle and announced, “She measures four feet across.”

Now, everyone in the bar, having recently got an education in mathematics, knew that the correct answer differed slightly from what it was supposed to be. The horse was wrong; Zeke lost; he had no money to back up his bet; he lost his two horses; he lost his saddle; he lost his boots; he had to ride out of town on a borrowed mule.

On his way back to camp, old Zeke got lost and ended up in a ravine between two cliffs. He stopped for a moment to see if he could figure out where he was when this big old rattlesnake crossed the path right in front of him. It startled the mule so that he reared up on his hind legs, threw Zeke off, and took off running. Zeke got up and ran to the top of the cliff to see where the mule went. When he saw the mule down below, he got so mad that he grabbed the first thing he could get his hands on to

throw at the mule. Unfortunately, the first thing he could get his hands on was his canteen. Zeke's throw put the canteen about three feet in front of the mule, who got spooked by it and took off running again. Sadly, the mule did not take the time to step around the canteen. As Zeke started back down from the cliff, he continued fuming about that mule and, consequently, he didn't pay attention to where he was walking. As it turns out, the prickly pear cactus in those parts had extra-long thorns. Sitting down on a flat rock, Zeke pulled out his bowie knife and began prying the thorns out of his feet. When he got the last of the thorns out, he heard a familiar sound. That big old rattlesnake didn't take kindly to Zeke occupying the rock that was his favorite sunning spot. The man jumped up and ran. We don't know if he realized he was running toward the edge of the cliff or not. Poor Zeke lost his footing and fell off the cliff. At that point, Zeke received both good news and bad news. The good news consisted of the fact that he landed on his back, felt fine, and even started to get up. The bad news consisted of the fact that Zeke's big old bowie knife followed the same path off the cliff

that Zeke did. They had a real nice funeral for Zeke. That big fella that sold him his horse even came to it.

An angel met Zeke at the pearly gates and asked him a question, “Ezekiel Hanover Jones, what’s the key to getting into heaven?”

Sensing the seriousness of the question, Zeke decided he’d better think about it for a while lest he give the wrong answer. The angel soon grew impatient and decided to give Zeke a clue. The angel bent down and drew a circle on the ground. Now you have to understand that one of Zeke’s more frequent sins was to use the good name of the Lord ... shall we say, rather loosely. When Zeke saw that circle, he buried his face in his hands and, in a loose manner of speaking, said “Jeeeee-sus”. In a moment of panic, he did the only thing he could think of to do—he stomped his foot three times and on the fourth time stopped at an angle of one-seventh to the horizontal. In all the history of time, there probably hasn’t been anyone more surprised than old Zeke when he saw the gates of heaven open up.

*Needless to say, the cowboys around the campfire knew they couldn't top that story. They all laughed and, at best, figured they had another story to add to their vast repertoire of tales. Rev. Bart smiled and, knowing that the story would undoubtedly be repeated many times, merely considered it another opportunity to spread a little seed.*

## RIDE FOR THE BRAND

When ya work for Big Jim Travis, ya get tired. When ya finish the day, ya hit the sack and just kinda melt into it. But ya still feel fortunate that ya have a nice soft bed to get into. There's guys out there that are asleepin with the cactus, so ya appreciate what ya got. The old bunkhouse could get a little drafty now and then, but she keeps the rain off ya and they're aworking on replacing the siding.

During the day when I get too far away from the house, I always pull out a little jerky from the saddlebag to keep me goin. Now when it comes to real eatin, old Charly the cook ... well, he's a master. In fact, some of the boys have got to callin him 'The Grubmaster'. I think they do it just to rile him, cause he don't seem to like it. Yeah, old Charly can get kinda cranky sometimes, but if ya take the time to get a good read on him, he's alright. I've found that the quickest way to turn that snarl into a smile is to go bragging on his stew. Truth be told, a bowl

of his stew and some of his fresh baked bread is about the finest eatin a man could get.

Whenever ya run across someone new and they ask ya what ya do, there won't nobody hesitate to say ya work for Big Jim Travis. Jim's brand is a crossed 't' with a 'J' overlaid on it. Jim is tough, but he's fair. His rules are pretty simple, so if ya keep to em, ya can ride with Jim forever. Now that don't mean ya have to be perfect. Ain't nobody perfect. If Jim knows you're really trying, and ya just mess up, he'll always cut ya some slack. Ya just gotta go to him with it, lay it out on the table, and tell him how you're gonna rein in whatever it was that made ya mess up.

Every now and then, Jim will put on a young cowboy who's a little green. Jim likes to take em under his wing and guide em down the right path. He'll always give the young cowboy a piece of paper and tells em to put it up by his bunk. That paper contains some simple advice that his pa had given him.

Get to know your maker; talk to Him often



Always do what you say you're going to do,  
and then do a little bit more

Always keep your hands open; closed fists  
usually come with trouble

If it ain't yours, leave it be

Master your fears and courage will come

Always give your best to get the job done

Know where to draw the line and don't back  
up

If you sell your honor, you ain't got nothing  
left to sell

Weigh your words; make them count

Be at peace with God before you hit the trail

Big Jim's ranch is so far out in lonesome  
country that there ain't no animal docs anywhere  
near. When calvin time comes round, all of us cow-  
boys that been round awhile take on the chore of  
helpin out in that area. We just pitch in with our  
experience and horse sense. There's one thing for

sure; Big Jim has clearly impressed upon our minds that he wants every one of them calves out alive and we best do everything we can to get it done. If we got a real tough one, Big Jim kinda takes over and we just step back and give it to his hands. And I gotta tell ya, there ain't nothin like seein one that's been a little stubborn getting cleaned up by his momma and finally standin on four wobbly legs. When he gets a little older, it's kinda fun watchin him bolt out across the pasture and look back to make sure he ain't too far from momma.

One of our top herdin dogs had puppies a couple of years ago. She had nine of them, but she could only nurse eight. She abandoned the one that had been born with only three legs. Big Jim gave his daughter the chore of takin care of that little one. And I'll be dogged if that three-legged dog didn't become the best herder of the lot.

Roundin up strays that go up into the hills is a regular job on the ranch. I don't know how he does it, but Big Jim knows every one of his cows. He can tell us which ones we need to find. If we don't find one, then he'll go out with us, and we'll

keep lookin till we do find em. I guess it's just a gift that's beyond somebody like me.

Ownin a ranch can be a risky business with a host of things ya gotta battle. There ain't much ya can do about the weather, except hunker down when ya have to. We got enough water holes and creeks on the place to keep the animals alive when the rain stays away too long. The pastures are good native grass, and we do our best to keep the loco-weed out. There's one thing that's been causin the ranchers round here some real problems lately—cattle rustlers or, as the locals call em, the scum of the lot. We been havin to take shifts stayin with the herd at night. Ya always make sure your rifle and six-gun are loaded, and ya got plenty of ammo to spare. I always like to take that old three-legged dog with me. He can hear things way sooner than any of them others.

When I first started with Big Jim, he took me with him to St. Louis to pick up some valuable supplies for the ranch. On one of many clear, starry nights, we had a conversation round the campfire.

I asked him if he ever had trouble with Indians on the ranch.

“There’s always been a lot of stories going round, Seth,” said Jim. “But most of them are probably exaggerated. I first encountered them the first year when I was rounding up some strays in the hills. I went down to the creek to give my horse a drink, when I found an Indian brave spread out on the rocks. He’d been shot through the shoulder, and it looked like he had fallen down the hill. He was still alive, so I took him back to the house. We took care of him the best we could and eventually he got better and went back to his tribe.”

“Anything ever come of it?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t know it at the time, but he was the chief’s son. Several months later, three Indians rode up to the barn. With his headdress, one of them was obviously the chief. His son accompanied him, as did a young woman from his tribe. The chief wanted to thank me for saving his son by offering me the young woman as a bride. I quickly went into the house and brought out my wife. He

must have gotten the idea, because he said he would be back. When he came back, he brought me the two best male and female goats he had. Talking was a challenge, but he motioned for me to come out into the pasture. As we walked along, he pointed to some weeds and brush, and then he pointed to the goats. Then he pointed to the good grass and shook his head no. I had to think about it for a few minutes, but I finally understood what he was trying to tell me. The goats would eat the weeds and brush and not the grass.”

“So that’s how we started using goats to clear a pasture,” I said.

“Yep ... every so often the chief will come around to do some trading. We don’t talk much, but we understand each other. His tribe has hunted our hills for many years, long before we got here. There’s plenty of game up there, so I let them keep hunting and fishing the streams. His braves know not to shoot my cattle, so it all works out. I kind of like having his tribe beyond those hills. They know if anybody tries moving our branded cattle near their land that it’s not us. I believe if rustlers made

it that far, the chief would send someone to warn us.”

“So ya kinda help each other?”

“Yep ... we had a brutal winter ... I think it was about two years before you started ... the game in the hills was hunkered down and pretty scarce. The chief came to the ranch one day and wanted to trade for two of my cows. I knew that meant they were hurting, because he’d never asked for cows before. I would have given him the cows, but that’s not their way. We had to trade for them. What he gave wasn’t near worth what the cows were, but I made the trade. I think he knew that I knew what they were facing.”

Now I don’t know what made Big Jim choose me to go with him on that trip. Maybe he saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself. Whatever the reason, I’ll never forget them talks round the campfire with Big Jim.

Last week, Big Jim, Old Smoky, and me went out to see if we could find that missing cow that me and the boys couldn't find earlier. We weren't havin much luck when Old Smoky's horse started pullin up lame. We got down off our horses and Old Smoky bent down to see if something had gotten up under the shoe. Old Smoky was getting along in years, but he was still a good cowboy. He was startin to lose his hearing, so when that big old rattlesnake right behind him started rattlin, Old Smoky never heard him. As I reached to get my shotgun from the saddle, Big Jim jumped in front of Smoky and pushed him out of the way. That big old snake grabbed Big Jim's arm and put a lot of venom in him. When that snake dropped, I blew his head off. Smoky and me figured Big Jim was a goner with that big snake. But he took out his knife, cut into the bite, and sucked out the blood, and we figure most of the venom.

Then he stood up and said, "You okay, Smoky?"

"Yeah, boss," answered Smoky. "What about you?"

“I’ll be alright.”

What we didn’t know was that Big Jim had taken so many bites from rattlesnakes over the years that they no longer got to him.

“Find anything in the shoe?” asked Big Jim.

“Yep,” answered Smoky. “Just a rock, but I got it out.”

“Let’s keep looking then,” said Jim.

I was talkin to Smoky later, and he said he was mighty grateful to Big Jim. Puttin his life on the line to save Smoky’s. That is something that most men ain’t likely to forget. Yep, death had no power over Big Jim that day.

I was sittin in my bunk the other night doin some thinkin. I know I ain’t never gonna get rich workin as a cowboy, but Big Jim gives us plenty of grub, plenty of water, a roof over our heads, and a nice soft bed to sleep in. And I got plenty of pardners that got my back. When ya get right down to it, I got everything a man really needs out here.



Old Smoky and me ... well, we reckon that we're gonna ride for the brand till we can't ride no more and the big boss calls us home. And then we reckon we're still gonna be ridin for the brand when we join them riders in the sky.

# THE VILLAGE OF TALK

The citizens of Talk carried a heavy burden. Even though they didn't have a long history, with westward expansion only recently begun, they rigidly held to the ideal of oral communication. The identity of the first settlers remained undocumented, because no one bothered to write it down. There are different camps, to be sure, within the populace that claim their ancestors were the first, but no one can prove it. It's rather doubtful, even if someone had some tangible proof, that it would ever surface. For it to come to light, the matter would be settled and there would be no need for further talk.

Now, most everyone can agree that it is important to talk a problem out thoroughly lest a rash decision lead to a disastrous result. That falls within the bounds of reasonable consideration. In fact, there occurred many a discussion in the Village of Talk on such a consideration to determine its reasonableness.

For such a small town at the beginning of what they sometimes refer to as the “Old West”, the village produced an exceptional number of fine orators. Though not initially deserving of representation within the official government, eventually they managed to give birth to two senators, four representatives, two governors, and two presidential candidates. Some say that certain individuals from the village bore the seeds for the modern filibuster of senatorial renown. Fortunately, the United States Senate has wisely not entered into the discussion of that claim.

Late in the year of 1849, one of the village’s citizens returned from a trip to California. Filled with gold fever, he couldn’t wait to share his findings with his fellow residents. The café, the saloon, and even the pew bubbled over in excitement with the possibilities. They debated about sending a group from the town to do some prospecting (for the good of the town, of course). They talked about what an influx of much needed funds might do for the town (with talk as their dominant commodity, tax revenues often fell short of town expenses).

After discussing and dissecting everything that could possibly face scrutiny, they finally appointed such a group. That would have been around the year of 1856. Alas, after seven years of deliberation, their window of opportunity had closed, for the gold rush had essentially ended. On the positive side, though, the disappointment served as additional fodder for discussion.

One day, Horace Feldkamp, chief among the discussion leaders at the time, noticed a curious thing about the main business thoroughfare of the village—it didn't have an official name. Folks always referred to it as Main Street, and thus they assumed that it had always held that title. After a committee appointed to investigate the matter pored over all five pages of historical documents (a radical citizen felt that they should have some documentation, rather than relying on just what the mayor said), they confirmed that no official name existed. Ten years of talk, debate, discussion, and analysis only produced an impasse. Such a situation did not present as much of a problem as one might think to the people of the Village of Talk.

Their skills in negotiation emerged from the fire of conflict with a finely honed edge. They concocted a rather simple, ingenious solution. They took all the names submitted and put them to an oral vote. The name that garnered the most votes would become the well-rutted street's name ... for one year. Every year after that, they would change the name of the street to the next highest vote-getter and so on, throughout time. By the time they used up all the original names, a new generation controlled the town and started with their own list of names.

Sadly, or maybe not depending on your religious affiliation, even the three churches in the village succumbed to the temptation of talk. At one time, an ecumenical spirit existed among the Catholic, Lutheran, and Baptist congregations—at least in thought. But there reached a limit to how many times one could get mired in the muddy paths between the three—figuratively and literally. Since the women weren't allowed to vote on anything political or religious, the ladies of the quilt guilds of each church staged a revolt and collaborated on several charitable projects. This brought much

chagrin to the town and church discussion leaders. Martha Grimsley's comment about Jesus being someone of action fell on deaf ears. Mary Scott also quoted Jesus, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". But most of the religious talkmeisters mistook it as a quote from Mary, an uninformed woman, rather than from Jesus himself. Visitors to the churches in the Village of Talk wondered how they ever got the church buildings constructed. All of this is not to say that the religious leaders lacked faith or a compassionate heart. They did send money to many worthwhile causes, once they finally agreed on who, what, and where (as you probably surmised, it often required years of preparation to answer those questions). There simply existed a certain disconnect between words and action that extensive discussion couldn't bridge.

Overthink produced some downright silly (some prefer the word 'stupid') suggestions that resulted in the village council passing some odd laws. They conceived some of their legislative actions with so little common sense that universities from back East sent budding young law graduates to the

village to study them. Here are a few of their nonsensical ordinances:

*No dipping of hats into a horse trough on Wednesdays and Saturdays*—Apparently, no one asked the horses if they cared or not.

*No feeding of giraffes on Main Street during the Christmas holidays*—As far as oral historians of the village can recall, no one has ever seen a giraffe in the Village of Talk.

*Anyone who chews tobacco must carry his own spittoon, unless they are an elected village official*—I withhold any further comment.

*Wagons with at least four mules must yield the right of way to chickens crossing a village street*—Seems fair, if you're a chicken.

*It is illegal for a married man to carry another man's wife or his betrothed across a muddy street, unless the mud is at least four inches deep—* No one could recall such a situation ever occurring in the Village of Talk, at least no one living.

Perhaps nothing that has occurred in the Village of Talk since its inception can compare to the Folly of 1884. In 1879, public discourse on the Presidential election between James A. Garfield and Winfield Scott Hancock proved to be quite contentious. Brother often ran into violent encounters with brother. So much discord arose among the villagers that the greater part of five years from 1879 to 1884 could not produce the slightest consensus as to where to set up the voting sites for the election of 1880. When 1884 came around, no one could cast a vote for Grover Cleveland or James G. Blaine because James A. Garfield and Winfield Scott Hancock were still listed on the ballot. Some historians have suggested that with the 1884



Presidential election so close, the outcome could have been different if the Village of Talk had been able to cast valid ballots.

That old saying, “Actions speak louder than words” seems so shallow, so ‘just too simple’. No further discussion need follow. Yet, it produced a challenge to those people in the village who dedicated their lives to (although, coincidentally, from which they also made money) talk. Any attempt to get beyond the shallow roots of a problem and solve it with such a simple saying quickly hit solid rock.

Fortunately, all the rest of the explorers and pioneers didn’t wait on a lot of talk to plant the prairies, cross the mountains, and discover the gigantic forests of the Great American West.

In conclusion, perhaps it should be noted that the iconic creator of Western stories, Louis L’Amour, once said, “One never realizes how

much and how little he knows until he starts talking.”

# WANTED

## DEAD OR ALIVE

There isn't much to tell about Jesse Waters and his early years. His pa was a wheelwright, and he evidently worked at that trade himself for a while. The schoolmarm in the village said that Jesse seemed to have a keener understanding of life than many of her other students. She also said he had an unusual mastery of words for someone of the common folk. His ma was well-respected in the village, as much as could be given to women at the time. Some scandalous rumors about her floated around the area about the time of Jesse's coming into the world, but his pa put an end to it rather quickly.

At some point in time, Jesse left the wheelwright business to put some of his other skills to work. It's not known if his pa remained in the trade at that point or not. His other ventures did not appear to be financially lucrative, but somehow, he managed to get by. Apparently, folks just kind of

ponied up when they could. He began hanging around with a group of hard-working cowboys and, oddly, one guy that worked for the government.

All in all, Jesse was always well-received wherever he went. Somewhere along the line, though, he must have crossed somebody who had some influence—the wrong kind. There arose some animosity among a group that didn't appreciate Jesse cutting into their territory. They apparently felt threatened enough to get a bounty put on Jesse's head. The law in the area didn't seem to have any interest in pursuing any criminal charges against Jesse, but they didn't inhibit the issuance of the bounty either. The corruption of the law had many facets in those days.

Jesse was smart, though, and he always managed to elude the traps set for him by the group. One day, one of the guys Jesse had been hanging out with decided to line his pockets with some of the bounty's silver. He told the group who offered the bounty exactly where they could find Jesse. One of Jesse's good friends put up a little bit of a fight when they came to apprehend his friend, but

Jesse ended it pretty quickly, though, by not resisting. The rest of his friends figured Jesse knew the odds weren't in their favor.

Some figure that Jesse came out pretty lucky, though, considering the bounty was for dead or alive. In the vast majority of such cases, the wanted man came in dead. While Jesse sat in a jail cell waiting for the regional judge to get to town, his friends just kind of disappeared. Somebody claimed they saw one of his friends hanging around outside the jailhouse, but he apparently took off when confronted. People wondered if they might attempt some kind of jailbreak.

The next morning, an explosion ripped through the jailhouse. The Calhoun gang planted enough dynamite to blow out the complete front of the sheriff's office. The Calhoun's got the keys and unlocked the cell next to Jesse's that held Brett Calhoun. As a matter of professional courtesy, they also unlocked Jesse's cell so he could escape, too. When some of the townsfolk ran over to the sheriff's office, they found the cells empty. But instead

of running away, Jesse tended to the wounds of the deputy who was on guard.

The judge finally arrived in town, and they had a trial for Jesse, if you could call it that. Jesse didn't say a whole lot in his defense, and so the trial ended badly for him. The law took him away, along with two other prisoners the marshals brought over from another town. They strung the three men up across the stout branch of a big oak tree on the hill outside town.

The group that Jesse had crossed remained worried about his influence in the area, so they convinced the sheriff to post two deputies at the entrance to the tomb where they laid Jesse. They feared Jesse's friends might try to take the body and somehow, create more trouble. Their fear of Jesse's friends was unfounded, though. They were all holed up away from the area. The group should have feared what might occur from inside the tomb. When the tomb was found empty, the deputies on guard offered no good answer as to what happened.

Jesse's friends later claimed that they had seen Jesse walking around after his hanging. They said he had, in fact, come to see them where they were holed up. Witnesses to Jesse's hanging abounded. Only a few witnessed him walking around after he was supposedly dead, but they swore it was Jesse. So sure that it was him, they eventually gave their lives defending the memory of their friend and everything he had tried to teach them and inspire them to do.

*This account of Jesse Waters was given to me by Matthew McGuire, an intrepid reporter for the Village Gazette. His father had given it to him before he passed away. Intrigued by the story, Matthew questioned his father as to why there was so little actually written down or recorded at the time. His father told him that he had met one of Jesse's friends in a hotel in Laramie, who told him everything he remembered. Matthew's father made copious notes, but never actually composed an account. When he knew his time was near, he said that*

*perhaps someone should write it all down so the story of Jesse wouldn't be forgotten.*

*As Matthew prepared to leave my office, he reached into his briefcase and carefully pulled out a yellowing, fragile piece of paper. That paper was an original wanted poster for Jesse Waters. The odd thing about the poster was that where it said 'Wanted: Dead or Alive' someone had crossed out the 'or' and written 'and' above it, so it actually read 'Wanted: Dead and Alive'.*



## MORE THAN GOLD

*Gold fever has taken its toll on some extraordinarily fine men. The physical sense is often plain enough—grizzled faces that haven't felt a razor in two seasons past; clothes and boots half-eaten away by the strange combination of sweat and mineral dust; hacking coughs that seem forever entrenched from too many damp holes. The mental metamorphosis, though, turns perfectly reasonable, competent, and hard-working individuals into fodder for the inner depths of the earth, which consumes them with more glee than the already down-trodden. What follows is the story of Randolph P. Stratsworth, a prominent Boston attorney, as told to me, a reporter for the Newville Gazette, by Jake Muldoon, a not-so-prominent claim jumper. I pass it along to you verbatim so individual character nuances can be fully captured.*

There we was, me and Beany Wilson, sittin at a wobbly table in Lucy's Place. As we looked out the winder overlookin Mud Street, we seen this here fine lookin carriage pull up in front of the Ascott Hotel. Me and Beany both stopped chewin when we seen the man that got outta the carriage. He looked lily white and all duded up in his Sunday-go-to-meetin suit. And it weren't even Sunday. Bout the only other time we ever seen anything like that come when somebody got laid to rest. So's we naturally got a little curious. Hastily payin our bill with Miss Lucy, we moseyed on over to the hotel. Unfortunately, Deputy Calhoun was sittin in a rockin chair outside the hotel, and since we done had our share of run-ins with him, we didn't bother to hang round.

Two weeks later we thought we seen that same feller again out in the hills. Only this time he weren't wearin no fancy suit, at least not from what we could tell. Course, with all the dirt he wore, ya couldn't really tell nothin more about him. Since he was by hisself, me and Beany decided to stake him out. We tied our horses to an ol log and moved in a

little closer on foot. When we seen him disappear into a cave, we parked ourselves behind a ledge where we could keep a good watch on the cave entrance.

After about four hours of waitin and watchin while the sun went down, we seen him come out again. Grabbin a sleepin roll outta his wagon, he went back into the cave. Figurin he was abeddin down for the night, we decided to do the same and have a closer look in the morning. When the sun come up, we made our move. Sneakin down to the cave entrance, me and Beany kept our guns cocked just in case. Hearin no commotion, we stepped inside the cave. After goin bout twenty feet, we realized we couldn't see nothin without some light. We went back outside to see if there was an extra lantern on his wagon. Luckily, we found another one, so's we kept movin in. After bout ten minutes of goin round twenty corners and past a coupla dozen side paths, we commenced to getting a little scared, even with the lantern. Two more turns and Beany stopped. Holdin the lantern high, Beany shone it

toward a recess to the right. What we seen was that there feller digging away agin the back wall.

When he saw us, he grabbed his shotgun, pointed it at us, and hollered, "This is my gold. You can't have it."

Well, before me and Beany had a chance to say anythin, the ground started ashakin and rocks started acomin down. Beany and me, we told that feller he better get outta there, but he wouldn't budge. All he kept sayin was, "This is my gold. You can't have it."

Then one big ol pack of rock come down betwixt us and that feller. Beany and me, we wasn't gonna hang round any longer. That feller got to keep his gold, cept it didn't seem like it were gonna do him any good bein buried with it. We turned round and run to get ourselves outta there. I figure we musta been bout half-way out when another big rumble come down. Beany fell and the lantern he had broke all apart. There we was, crawlin round in that dark cave, not sure which way to go. It seemed like we crawled for near half a day, when all of a

sudden we seen a shaft of light up ahead. When we finally made it to that last bend where the light come from, we saw the openin to the cave. Beany and me, we stepped out into the fresh air and just took in one breath after nother.

After a while, me and Beany got to feelin poorly bout that feller. We went into town and told the sheriff bout the cave-in and the feller inside.

At first, he didn't believe us, but then he said, "Well, knowin you boys, if you had done something you shouldn't have, you probably wouldn't be in here tellin me about it."

Then we took him out to the mine to show him. The sheriff and his deputies figured there warn't nothin they could do at that point. It was just too dangerous to try and go back in.

"It looks like the stranger won't be needin the undertaker," said the sheriff. "I'll see if the reverend wants to come out here."

The reverend did come out to the man's tomb and held a little service. Me and Beany was the only other people there. All the rest of the week, me

and Beany kept thinkin bout how close we come to dying in that cave with that feller and all his gold that we'd come to steal. We'd made it outta the cave with our lives, worth far more to us than all that gold. Beany and me, we been changed men since that day, acomin to a better understandin with our Maker. We even saved up for Sunday-go-to-meetin suits. And to think it neer wouldn't ahappened if we hadn't ... seen the light.

## ICICLES IN THE SUN

The northern wind blew cold—bone-chilling cold. Yet, Wesley Parker couldn't stop. He figured if he could make it through Connor's Pass and reach Redwood, then he could blend into the population. Out on the lonely plain, he was an easy target. At least, he would be a moving target. The Hunter clan had vowed revenge for the killing of one of their kin. It didn't matter that it was self-defense, pure and pure. It didn't matter that Chuck Hunter fired four shots at him in a drunken rampage. A fifth shot, if he had gotten it off, would have surely hit Wesley dead-on. The law cleared Wesley completely, but the Hunter gang had no use for the law.

Up ahead stood an oasis of trees that might provide a temporary respite from the savage wind. If nothing else, it gave him an opportunity to hold his hands under the warm breath of his horse. He worried about Chester, his horse. His sturdy mount had been with him a long time and was getting on

in years. He hoped Chester had enough left in him to complete the journey. After a handful of oats for Chester and a few bites of jerky for himself, Wesley remounted and continued on his journey.

As the afternoon wore on, Wesley longed for a crackling, warm fire. But did he dare have a fire come nightfall? It would have to be somewhere protected, so they couldn't see the orange flames in the night sky. The smoke wouldn't be visible against a dark background. He had to make Connor's Pass by nightfall. He would have some cover there and with the right spot, he could watch the path below.

Hours of falling snow made the trail hard to follow. It seemed like every step became a monotonous edge. Every few minutes he whispered encouragement into Chester's ear.

"Just a little bit longer, boy. We can make the pass."

The snowy sky muted the remaining light of a fading afternoon sun, but it shone through just



enough to show the shadow of a mountain range on the horizon.

“There it is, boy. I think we can reach it before dark. Just give me the best you’ve got, big fella.”

While Connor’s Pass stretched higher in the sky as it made its way through the mountains, the rocky windbreak would offset the lower temperature of the higher elevation. As the grade of the trail became more of a struggle, Wesley could feel that warm campfire calling his name.

Seeing a little outcrop of rock overlooking the path off to the right, Wesley got off Chester and they walked the narrow ledge leading up to the overhang. Yes, it would do. It provided just enough cover, and it gave him a view of the path below.

Everything around him was cold and wet, but he needed a fire. He gathered up some small branches and twigs and made a small pile. He tried to light the pile with some matches, but by the fifth match, he knew it wasn’t going to happen. Reaching into his pack, Wesley pulled out a well-worn

Bible. Tearing out the last two pages of Revelations, he crinkled them up and laid them on top of the twigs. Then he took out the last six matches from his pouch and put five of them with their heads together on top of the crinkled-up pages.

“Lord, I know you will provide and I sure hope you’ll forgive me for this.”

He struck the sixth match and laid it on top of the heads of the other five. The dry paper of Revelations caught fire when all the matches lit at the same time. The twigs underneath soon began to burn, and Wesley added more branches to the fire.

Weary and aching, Wesley longed for some sleep. Remembering what an old scout once taught him, he gathered a few rocks and a small log from a fallen tree and placed them together in a line near the fire. Then he took out a spare blanket and covered them up. The final touch was his spare hat placed at the top of the blanket. Then he went up to the small clearing above his campsite and made his bed with his remaining blankets and poncho.

Despite a sense of alert, he could no longer keep his eyes open.

The crisp, early morning air reverberated with the sharp sounds of gunfire. Grabbing his rifle, Wesley looked down and saw the Hunter gang emptying their guns into the rolled-up blanket by the fire. They slowly walked closer to their target and soon realized he had tricked them. Dexter Hunter just caught a glimpse of Wesley peering over the ledge.

“He’s up there, boys,” said Dexter.

The Hunter’s reloaded and began firing wildly at the rocks above them.

“Lord, I’m in a spot here,” said Wesley. “I sure hope you understand what I gotta do. There’s no place left to run. It’s them or me. I’ll either be seeing you shortly or, if you’re willing, later on down the line.”

Wesley moved over twenty feet or so and took another look. Jake Hunter saw him, but Wesley’s aim was sure and Jake fell to the ground. Bullets ricocheted off the surrounding rocks, but he

crawled over another twenty feet and looked below. A shot grazed his right ear and warm blood trickled down his cheek. He waited and slipped over to a flat rock. Laying down, he took aim at Frank Hunter and fired a lethal shot. He then put Billie in his sight and fired. Billie slumped to the ground with a pool of blood quickly covering the ground beneath him.

Wesley got down and slowly walked into the small clearing of his campsite. Standing with his back to Wesley, Clay Hunter, the youngest of the gang, reloaded his gun. Wesley had an easy target to kill, but he didn't pull the trigger.

“Drop the gun, Clay,” said Wesley.

Clay, with his gun pointed at the ground, turned around and faced Wesley.

“I know you only shot Chuck in self-defense, Wesley,” said Clay. “I was there and saw it. But Pa wouldn't listen to me. All he wanted was revenge.”

“It doesn't have to end this way, Clay,” said Wesley. “Just go home.”

“I can’t go home, Wesley,” said Clay. “Not with all them dead ... I can’t.”

“Then just go away. Go to California.”

“I just can’t,” said Clay. “I’m sorry, Wesley.”

Clay raised his gun and fired it at Wesley, but the shot missed. The teenager then joined his lifeless kinfolk on the cold, hard ground. Wesley sat down on a rock and hung his head. Two years of misery and death on the battlefields of Virginia and Tennessee had taken its toll on the man, but the instinct to survive was strong. Somewhere in that war, there seemed to be a long purpose. But this today ... it seemed so senseless.

“I’m sorry, Lord,” said Wesley. “I’m tired ... I just want to know when it will all end. When will it be over?”

After a while, he stood up. He knew he had to keep moving or die from the cold. As he looked around for Chester, his horse, he suddenly saw a hundred tiny rainbows on the white rocks enclosing his campsite. The morning sun came in at just the right angle through the icicles hanging off the

trees to paint the snowy canvas of the rocks in sprays of color. It seemed such a contrast to the red pools on the ground.

“Maybe, it is over,” said Wesley. Putting his gun back in its holster, he wondered, “Maybe, I won’t need this anymore.”

He found Chester laying on his side with six bullet holes in him. He had to find a way out of the Pass. Spotting one of the Hunter gang’s horses a short distance away, he walked over quietly, trying not to spook him. He swung his leg over the saddle and rode it back up to the camp.

The ground was too hard to try and bury the Hunter’s. He soon found a recess in a group of rocks. Carrying each body over to the recess, he laid them out between the rocks. Though he certainly didn’t feel like he owed them anything, Wesley still felt it was the right thing to do. He then piled small boulders in front of the rocky tomb to seal it off. Before completely sealing it off, he covered up Frank Hunter, the head of the gang, with the bullet shredded blanket from the fireside.

Before heading back to the trail, he cast one last glance at the rocks, but the sun had melted the icicles, and the artist had withdrawn his work.

## KINGS

Not having a disposition to work and often full of brewed spirits, Jadie Black spent much of his life as a drifter. Those who came across his path had little trouble discovering rather quickly that the man had few admirable traits.

One day, on the seventh of October, Jadie rode into the fair town of Westview, which sat along the Fergus River. Accompanied by a sense of dread, he elicited sour looks from the townsfolk as he traveled past the boardwalk of Main Street. The man just had that countenance about him. Jadie kept on riding down the middle of the street, offering a brief glimmer of hope to merchants standing in their doorways that he might just be passing through.

When he came to the last building on his right, he got off his horse and tied the reins to the hitching post. Jadie approached the blacksmith, as the smithy pulled a flattened fiery rod out of the furnace.



“Howdy,” said Jadie. “You reckon you could fit my horse with a new shoe for his foreleg.”

“I reckon I could do that,” answered the smithy. “It’ll cost you...”

Before the smithy could finish, Jadie tossed him a shiny gold dollar in advance of the work—a sum twice the usual charge.

“Whereabouts is the closest church in town?” asked Jadie.

Momentarily set aback by the question, cause folks like Jadie normally didn’t see much in a church, the smithy named Matthew replied, “Just go down to the first street on the right and you’ll come up on it.”

“Thanks,” said Jadie.

“You gonna be there long?” asked Matthew. “Cause it’ll take about an hour on the shoe.”

“I reckon it’ll be a lot longer than that before I get back. I gotta go talk to the preacher about a cactus.”

“A cactus?” questioned Matthew. “What about a cactus?”

But Jadie didn’t answer the smithy. He had already turned and walked away towards the church.

“I reckon that you been spending too many lonely nights in the wild,” said Matthew aloud to himself.

Later that afternoon, as Matthew finished the shoe on Jadie’s horse, a man approached his workshop. Clean-shaven and rather dapper in appearance, the man asked Matthew if he’d finished with his horse.

“I reckon there must be some mistake, pardner,” said Matthew. “I only got one horse to work on and it belongs to some drifter who just come into town.”

“Does this look familiar?” asked the gentleman, showing Matthew a shiny gold dollar.

“Yeah ... the drifter gave me one just like it,” said the smithy. “You ain’t...?”

“Yes, I am that man.”

“Yeah, I ... uh ... uh, just finished him up,”  
said Matthew.

Tossing the smithy the second gold dollar,  
Jadie mounted his horse and rode out of town.

Matthew thought the whole thing so curious  
that he decided to make his way on over to the  
church. When he reached the front steps, he looked  
back to see a crowd of about a hundred people fol-  
lowing him. Johnny Walker had overheard Jadie  
talking to the clerk at the hotel where the drifter had  
gotten cleaned up and he started to spread the word  
around town. Newt Johnson told Nellie Muldoon,  
and she told ... and so on.

Sitting in the front pew of the church, Rev  
Dobbins penned the last line of his sermon for the  
upcoming Sunday. Startled by the large crowd of  
people coming into the church, the preacher imme-  
diately stood up and stepped out of the pew. When  
the townsfolk got up to the preacher, they began  
throwing out all kinds of questions about the  
stranger.

“Ah, yes, a changed man, indeed,” replied Rev. Dobbins.

The crowd’s thirsty minds wouldn’t settle for such a simple answer. They lusted for some kind of fantastic story. Despite the reverend’s claims of holding to an oath of confidentiality, the crowd grew more intense in their demands. Finally, the preacher surveyed the many people in front of him and realized he was looking at about double the average attendance at any given Sunday service. He then gave the hungry souls a tale worthy of their appetites, without revealing the stranger’s real identity, of course.

“The gentleman told me of an experience he had while on the edge of a forest,” said Rev. Dobbins. “What follows is his story in his own words, more or less.”

“I was bedded down for the night just outside a large grove of dense trees. I’d been ridin hard all day and was pretty tired, so’s it didn’t take me long to fall asleep. Somewhere in the middle of the

night, I heard voices acoming from the trees. Naturally, the first thing I did was to reach for my old carbine, just in case. As I sat and waited, I listened to words that was as clear as the cloudless sky I was asleepin under.”

The trees said, “Let us go forth and ask the apple to be our king.”

But the apple said to them, “Why should I leave my orchard to be your king? See my branches. They are loaded with sweet fruit. The farmer takes good care of me, giving me everything I need. No, I quite prefer to stay where I know I can count on the security of good food being provided.”

Then the trees asked the juniper to be their king.

But the juniper said to them, “Why should I leave my beautifully landscaped estate to be your king? Look at how well I’m trimmed. The gardeners pamper me every week to make sure I always look good. If I were to be your king, I would have to return to such a wild and untamed life. No, I quite prefer to stay where I know it’s civilized.”

“Now, reverend, I know I’ve been known to take a nip now and then, but I’m atellin you I hadn’t had a drink in nearly a month. When it comes to hearin trees atalkin, well, I just decided I better get outta there. I threw my bedroll on my horse and hightailed it away from that place. I’d been ridin for a long time, but I didn’t seem to be makin any distance between me and them trees of the forest. All of a sudden, my horse stepped in a hole, and I went head over heels right into this here cactus. When I got done pickin out all them needles from my hide, I looked up to see all them trees had been afollowin me all the time. Then I heard them trees ask this here cactus if he’d like to be their king. Well, once again, I didn’t particularly feel like awaitin around for an answer from a talkin cactus. Gettin back on my horse, I gave him the spurs. After ridin bout two hours, I finally got up the gump-tion to look back again. At last, I’d got shed of them trees. I figure that there cactus musta accepted the position.

Bout a month later, I had occasion to go back the same trail I had gone before. As I was acomin

across a narrow stretch of desert, I ran into this group of dried-up trees. Now I been travelin for a lotta years and I ain't never seen so many dried up trees in one spot. Naturally, bein a curious type of fella, I couldn't help but wander over for a closer look. You know, sittin in front of that whole group of dead trees was this here cactus, justa growin to beat the devil. Now, I ain't a real educated man, but plain old horse sense told me that this weren't no ordinary sight. I decided right then and there that maybe I oughta look into this a little further. So's the first town I came to, I decided to look up a preacher man."

Rev. Dobbins paused as if there was nothing more to the story, but the crowd would not have it. They cried out, "What did you say to him? What could make a man change so?"

"Well, I couldn't be absolutely sure with that gentleman, knowing little else about him, but I believe most every soul longs for answers at some point. I didn't have hours to prepare an answer for the man, so I had to speak what I felt was the simple truth of his experience."

“What was the truth?” yelled Newt Johnson from the back of the crowd.

“Yeah, what, Reverend?” asked a woman at the front of the crowd.

“I told him that he needed to be really careful about who he chose as the king or leader in his life.”

The crowd stood in silence. Rev. Dobbins didn’t know if their silence was from disappointment, or if they were trying to understand such a simple warning.

Then the rugged blacksmith said, “Well, Reverend, it appears as though that stranger done took those words with him when he rode off.”

“Yes, Matthew,” said the preacher. “I think that man had the good fortune to see something that many folks don’t. Of course, now, the truth doesn’t always have to come in the form of talking trees. We read it right here every week ... yet ... I suppose ...when you consider that the pages of this Bible are made from ... trees.”



## FIELDS AND FORBES, PEDDLERS

Many business partnerships dissolve because the partners eventually find themselves at odds on too many fronts. Others thrive because the partners naturally complement each other. Wilber Fields and Caleb Forbes constituted the latter. The skills each partner brought were unique, indeed. Fields and Forbes, Peddlers planned to travel west and sell to whoever would give them the time of day—farmers, miners, town folks, and even outlaws.

On the fourth day of April, the boys began stocking their two covered wagons with goods purchased in St. Louis, Mo.

“Did you get those blankets we wanted, Wilbur?” asked Caleb.

“You bet,” answered Wilbur. “I had to do some hard bargaining to get the best price. They wanted two dollars apiece, but I worked them down to a volume price of ten for thirty dollars.”

“Good thinking, Wilbur. That’s pretty much all we can get on without overloading the wagon and stressing the mules.”

Their first day on the trail, they broke a wheel on Wilbur’s wagon. Fortunately, they broke down just outside a farm owned by the local wheelwright and with some serious bartering, they got off pretty cheap. Despite that first day, the first month of their journey west proved quite profitable for the partners. With their early sales success, they had to change their route plans. Caleb figured they could go another week or so before running out of inventory. They planned to return to St. Louis via Topeka, Kansas, where they would pick up some items to sell on the return trip.

After finishing up in John’s Corner, they headed to Coopersville at the western edge of a valley. The narrow path that led to Elmerton’s Trail, which would take them to Coopersville, was dry, dusty, and overgrown with brown buffalo grass. A gap in the rocks, barely wide enough for their wagons, opened up to Elmerton’s Trail. Though considerably wider and open, the trail continued to be a

source of throat choking dust. The boys were glad they had taken on extra water in John's Corner.

The looming horizon of Coopersville stood as a welcome sight to the weary travelers. A bath to wash off the dust and a hot meal would hit the spot. When they arrived in town, they saw some commotion going on at the bank. They had to bring the wagons to a stop to avoid hitting three men running out of the bank. Quickly mounting their horses, the three men left town in a cloud of dust. A fourth man then came out of the bank and saw his horse had gotten loose and was galloping away with the others. Frantically looking for a way to escape, the fourth man jumped up on Caleb's wagon, put a gun in Caleb's side, and grabbed the reins. Caleb's fleeing wagon left Wilbur in front of the bank.

"Wait," hollered Wilbur. "Where are you going?" Snapping the reins, he continued to yell as he urged his mules to chase after Caleb's wagon, "Wait for me."

Following close behind the two fleeing wagons, the sheriff and his deputies fired a volley of

warning shots, but that didn't stop Caleb, Wilbur, and the apparent bank robber. Eventually, the faster horses of the lawmen enabled them to overtake the wagons and the mules, and they arrested Caleb, Wilbur, and the hijacker.

Looking through the bars of their jail cell, Caleb and Wilbur pleaded with the sheriff. "We didn't do nothing wrong, Sheriff," said Caleb. "We were just sitting there, and this guy jumped up on my wagon with a gun and grabbed the reins. We don't know anything about a bank robbery."

"You boys are lucky," said the sheriff. "The Circuit Judge happens to be in town, so you'll get a speedy trial."

"Trial?" asked Wilbur.

"Yeah, old Judge Hawkins ... Hanging Hawkins they call him, will have you outta here in no time."

"Well, that's a relief," said Wilbur.

"Yeah, outta here and up on the gallows," said the sheriff.

“Gallows?” asked Wilbur.

“Yeah, we haven’t had a hanging in nearly a month. It’ll be over real quick.”

“Real quick?” questioned Caleb. “But we didn’t do anything. We were just sitting there and ...”

“Tell it to the judge, boys,” replied the sheriff.

Two days later, when the judge called Caleb and Wilbur up to the table, he said, “Peddlers, hmph. I hate peddlers. My wife ran off with a peddler.”

“I’m just as sorry as I can be, Judge,” said Caleb. “But we didn’t do anything. We were just sitting there and ...”

“Bank robbery, huh?” murmured the judge. “How do you plead?”

“We’re innocent, Judge,” pleaded Caleb. “We were just sitting there, when ...”

“Good, the Court accepts your plea of guilty. Hanging will take place tomorrow morning ... did we get that box of new rope in yet, Bob?”

“No, sir. Not yet.”

“Well, we can’t have a hanging without any rope,” said Judge Hawkins. “You boys got any rope on those wagons of yours?”

“Yes,” said Wilbur. “I think we ... what did you kick me for, Caleb?”

“No, sir,” answered Caleb. “We sold the last of it back in John’s Corner.”

“Hmm ... well, here’s what I’m going to do, boys. You got thirty days probation to get some rope and then I want you to bring it back here so we can hang you.”

“Thank you, your Honor,” said Caleb. “Thank you. Come on, Wilbur, let’s go.”

“And don’t be late,” added Judge Hawkins, as the boys scurried out the door.

“Do you think they’ll be back, Judge?” asked the sheriff.

“If they do come back, then they deserve to be hung,” said Judge Hanging Hawkins.

When they got back to their wagons, Wilbur asked, “Which kind of rope do you think we should order, Caleb?”

“We’re not ordering any rope, Wilbur. We’re getting away from here as fast as we can and heading back to St. Louis.”

“St. Louis? ... oh, right, St. Louis,” repeated Wilbur.

Two days into their journey back to St. Louis, they entered a dry, brown valley with only a few scattered cottonwood trees. After a couple of hours, Caleb brought his wagon to a stop. Wilbur got off his wagon and went up to Caleb.

“Why are we stopping, Caleb?”

“Look out yonder and tell me what you see, Wilbur.”

“A bunch of dry bones ... a bunch of dry bones that, uh, uh ... that are putting on flesh and rising up from the ground. Uh, uh ... it’s probably just a mirage.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Caleb. “I’m not sticking around to see if the mirage does anything else. Let’s get out of here.”

The next day the boys ran into a wagon train headed west. Seeing as how the wagon train was bedding down for the night, Caleb and Wilbur got permission to spend the night with them for security. They did a little selling to the travelers with the few supplies they had left and then joined a group who were sitting around a crackling campfire. Meaningful words couldn’t compete with the relaxing flame until one man, a traveling preacher, stood up and began reading from the Bible.

“Ezekiel, Chapter 37, Verses 7 to 10,” said the preacher. “So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,



and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.”

“That’s it, Caleb, that’s it,” said Wilbur, excitedly. “That’s what we saw.”

“Quiet, Wilbur. Do you want people to think we’re crazy?”

“But that’s what we saw, Caleb,” whispered Wilbur. “Don’t you want to tell that preacher that’s what we saw?”

“No. Let’s keep it to ourselves and just get back to St. Louis. I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

The peddlers eventually made it back to St. Louis to restock their wagons.

Standing outside their main supplier, Caleb suddenly said, “You know, Wilbur, I’ve been doing some thinking. There’s this little store building for rent back in that last small town we passed through.

I'm kinda thinking we should settle down and get away from those dry, dusty trails."

"You scared of that valley of dry bones, Caleb?"

"Me? No, I'm not scared, Wilbur."

"Yeah ... I'm scared, too."

"Whatta you say we rent that place and open a general store?"

"Okay by me, Caleb," replied Wilbur.

"I was also kinda thinking we should start going to church. There's a little one the next block over from that store building."

"Okay by me, Caleb."

The first Sunday that the boys went to that small church, the preacher stood up and read from the Bible.

"Ezekiel, Chapter 37, Verses 7 to 10," said the preacher. "So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together,

bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.”

Wilbur looked at Caleb and said, “It was probably just a mirage.”

“Yeah, just a mirage,” replied Caleb.

The new storekeepers did pretty well for the first four months. Then one day, a man in dusty clothes got off a wagon in front of their store and came inside.

“Howdy, stranger,” said Caleb. “How can I help you?”

“I ... I don’t know,” answered the stranger. “I’m still a little confused. I feel kind of strange ... like I just woke up from a long nap. I’m not sure

where I came from. I remember walking down this dry, dusty trail that had all kinds of dry bones lining the path. This man with a wagon was kind enough to give me a ride into town. I guess I'm going to need some provisions and clothes. The only thing I have are these clothes on my back."

Caleb began studying the stranger very carefully and then he bagged up all kinds of food, clothing, gear, and medical supplies.

"Here, my friend," said Caleb. "Everything is on the house."

"That's very generous of you, sir. I will repay you as soon as I am able."

"No need, my friend. You have a good day."

"Caleb, you gave that guy all that stuff for free. What were you thinking?"

"You can't be too careful," answered Caleb.

"What do you mean?" asked Wilbur.

"You heard that guy talking about where he was and all, didn't you?"

“Yeah ... oh ... you ... you don’t think he was one of those, do you?” asked Wilbur.

“If God wanted to put flesh on those bones and bring them back to life, then He must have something planned for them to do. And I don’t think we should be on that guy’s bad side.”

“That’d kinda be like being on the bad side of God, right, Caleb?”

“You said it, Wilbur.”

“You can’t never be too careful, huh, Caleb?”

“You can’t never be too careful, Wilbur.”

## THE SIGN MAKER

A sign maker's business in Prairieville rose and fell with an erratic pulse. With seemingly boundless ambition, Delbert Crowley made the move from back east to this harbinger of western life in the great expansion. His skills with a brush provided a modest income in Philadelphia, but Delbert wanted more. He quickly found out that he would have to broaden his business offerings to the people in the small town of Prairieville. So, he learned to work stone with a chisel, to set type for printing, and, oddly, master the craft of an undertaker.

Despite the unusual mix of trades, Delbert found his new knowledge and skills all seemed to mesh quite nicely. In what would seem to be an obvious observation, the liquors served in the two local saloons fostered many a subsequent gunfight. This, of course, provided a steady source of income for headstones and prefatory work. His first love remained, though, with the creation of signs.

A small town in the west provided some unusual business at times, especially compared to big city life back east. To fully understand what this means, you should probably see some examples. Thus, I give you these selections from The Sign Maker's business array.

Prairieville Methodist Church welcomed everybody into their community. Due to the nature of certain of the town's citizens, the church felt they should establish certain rules of decorum for those entering the church. Prominently displayed over the entrance to Prairieville Methodist Church, you would find this rather elegantly painted sign:

*No cussing, No smoking, No chewing, No spitting, No drinking, No gambling, No rioting*

One day the sheriff came into Delbert's establishment and ordered twenty-five wanted posters. Seeing as how the mayor had requested this to be a priority, Delbert dropped everything else and went to work on the order. With the ink barely dry, the sheriff gathered up the posters and began nailing them up all over town.

*Wanted: Dead or Alive*

*A reward of \$5,000.00 is offered for the capture of Roscoe Bedford. Wanted for running off with the mayor's wife.*

Reportedly, several of the wanted posters had a postscript (not in the original print job by Delbert) added to the bottom of the poster.

*Don't you think Roscoe has suffered enough already? Ha. Ha.*



Several weeks later, the sheriff ordered two signs, one for the east end of town and one for the west end of town. They read:

*Attention: Wendell Haines*

*When you robbed the bank last Friday, you dropped your pocket watch. You can pick it up at the Sheriff's office anytime.*

The first job that utilized all of Delbert's skills at one time came from the Calhoun family on Cedar Ridge, just out of town. They recently lost their son and contracted with Delbert to handle the funeral, print up a memorial brochure, make a headstone, and build four signs. They spaced the four signs out along the trail leading up to the cemetery.

*Billy was an unruly child.*

*Grew into an outlaw wild.*

*Failed to heed the Almighty's will.*

*Now he's arestin under Boot Hill.*

Delbert built up such a solid reputation that he received requests similar to the above from all over the region. Of course, most of the region consisted of towns even smaller than Prairieville. None of them had anyone with the same talents as the Sign Maker of Prairieville.

The town of Candlestick contracted with Delbert to build a sign for the train depot. They wanted it to say, "Welcome to Candlestick. Population 346". The oddity of Candlestick was the volatile nature of its population. Births and deaths occurred so rapidly that Delbert had to change the population number six times before he got finished with the sign. Once the sign took its place on the side of the depot door, Delbert had to make a trip there every other day to change the number. One day, he got

tired of riding up there all the time, so he came up with an idea. He made up small signs with twenty numbers up and twenty numbers down from the latest population. Then he gave those to the station master at the depot. Whenever the number of people changed, the station master could just rehang the small sign with the correct number. Eventually, Delbert had to create more small signs when the numbers fell beyond what he had originally done, but it saved him a lot of riding.

Late one spring afternoon, as he got ready to close shop, a rather mysterious looking man came into the store. The man told Delbert that he had come highly recommended as a sign maker, and, so, he would like to place an order. Delbert received one-hundred dollars cash up front to build one-hundred signs. Each sign comprised the same message, "Sunday, May 13. Look up into the eastern sky at 9:00 o'clock in the morning.". Delbert received

instructions to place them around all the towns in the prairie area. The man left no name other than the single letter “M” nor did he reveal what there would be to see in the sky at that time.

Naturally, once Delbert started placing the signs around, it created quite a stir. People’s imaginations started running wild. What could it be? Reverend Miller from the Methodist church asked Delbert a lot of questions, especially about the man who placed the order for the signs. Delbert told him everything he knew. Reverend Miller contacted all the other ministers of the churches across the prairie, and they unanimously gave a sermon on the Sunday before on the wisdom of always being prepared. They couldn’t rule out the possibility of the second coming of Jesus.

When the day finally arrived, everybody from the churches to the saloons to the farmers stood outside watching the eastern sky. At exactly 9:00 o’clock, something began appearing just over the ridge that bounded the eastern side of the prairie. First, it came as one object and then almost the entire eastern sky became filled with ... hot air

balloons. Most of the people stood in awe, as they had never seen such a thing before. Kids and dogs ran wild with excitement. The ministers felt a little let down, but then they figured they should give a sermon like the Sunday before on a regular basis, anyway. As it turned out, that historic day eventually turned into an annual event, as hot air ballooners came from all over the country to take part in a festival.

An eerie fog moved into Prairieville one fall evening, something that rarely occurred at that time of day. Delbert could barely see anything out his window. He decided to just go back to what he was doing, carving a headstone. Suddenly, multiple shots rang out. A woman screamed, "My daughter's been shot." Several of the townsfolk eventually found the woman and carried the young girl over to the doc's. The motive for the wild shooting never

became known. The doc said the young girl would be okay. It was just a glancing wound.

Joshua, a friend of Delbert and one of the people who helped with the girl got to thinking later. All this happened right in front of Delbert's shop. It seemed unusual that Delbert hadn't come out. He was usually one of the first to offer aid in such situations. The man slowly made his way through the fog over to Delbert's shop. As he got closer, he could see the light coming from an oil lamp. A few more steps and he noticed an odd web-like pattern of light on the window. When he reached the window, he discovered a bullet had shattered the glass. He rushed to the sign maker's door and ran inside. He found Delbert slumped over the headstone he had been working on. A bullet had entered his head and killed him.

The sheriff and some men carried Delbert's body over to the doc's where he would stay until an undertaker from one of the other towns could make it over the next day. Joshua went back over to Delbert's shop to see if anything needed to be done. He walked over to the headstone and saw a small

puddle of blood on the stone. He read what Delbert had carved on the stone. It said, “Here lies a man who loved God. Little el”. Joshua wondered who Delbert had made the headstone for. About a month later, Joshua found Delbert’s client.

In one of those strange twists of fate, the headstone that Delbert was working on was his own. Joshua and some of Delbert’s other friends took the headstone out to the cemetery and placed it on Delbert’s grave. A year later, a traveling stone craftsman checked into the Prairieville Hotel. Calvin Thomas, the owner of the hotel, got to talking with him and asked him if he did stone carving. When the man said yes, Calvin offered to allow the man to stay for free if he would finish a small project. The next day, Calvin and the man went to Delbert’s grave, and the stone craftsman finished the headstone.

“Here lies a man who loved God. Little else matters.”

## AN OLD LOG CABIN

Following the tree line to a clearing in the woods, he saw the form of a picturesque log cabin emitting a smoky mist from its stone fireplace. Derrick Hamilton had agreed to let him cross the threshold of its front door on that cool autumn day, as had generations before him. Then they would sit down and take a journey through history.

The crisp morning air filled his lungs with exhilaration. The sweet smell of autumn surrounded him. The crackling sound of the gravel driveway added another dimension to the sensory delight. As he came to a stop in front of an old horse trough, a tall man with a long gray beard waited for him on the front porch.

“Good morning, Derrick.”

“Morning, Roger. Any trouble finding us?”

“No. No trouble at all. You gave good directions ... what a beautiful place, Derrick.”



“Yeah, we kinda like it,” said the man with a slight drawl.

“You’ve lived here, what, forty years?”

Cocking his head to one side, Derrick gave him a questioning look.

“Now, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were gonna try to sell me something.”

“Why, what do you mean?” replied Roger.

“You know I’ve lived here all my life, and I know I look at least two or three years older than forty.”

“Okay, what is it, really?”

“Sixty-eight years, Roger.”

“Sixty-eight good years, right?”

“Oh, I reckon we ain’t had it much different than anybody else. Following what the Good Book says, we set aside enough from good harvests to carry us through the lean ones. Besides, if you consider the alternative, the good years far outweigh the bad.”

“Yes, they do, Derrick. Yes, they do.”

“Before we get started, let’s go around back. I’ve got to feed the chickens.”

When they got to the chicken coop, Derrick went inside with a bag of grain, and Roger remained outside. As he took in the view across the field, Roger noticed something very odd.

“What in the world?” Roger said aloud. “That’s one of the strangest things I’ve ever seen.”

From inside the chicken coop, Derrick said, “What did you say, Roger?”

“Those trees, Derrick. I ... are my eyes deceiving me?”

Coming outside, Derrick answered, “No, your eyes aren’t, Roger. That’s the Crooked Forest.”

“The Crooked Forest?... Well, I can see how it got that name.”

The distorted pine trunks twisted and bent horizontally near the ground and then came back up in the form of a “c” shape. Roger had seen

enough oddities and mutations in the plant world to understand one or two trees growing that way. But this was a large mass of pine trees that were basically all the same. Despite their odd, deformed shape the trees seemed healthy with a dense canopy.

“Any explanation, Derrick?” asked Roger.

“No one knows for sure why the trees have that shape. My daddy didn’t know, and his daddy didn’t know, or at least never said. The two most common rumors involve someone planting and training them that way. Either an Indian ritual or superstition or someone wanted the crooked trunks to make some type of furniture.”

“What a great way to start our historical exploration.”

They went inside the log cabin and pulled up two rocking chairs in front of the crackling fire. Before Roger sat down, he tapped his fist on the log walls.

“Still as solid as the people who put them up,” said Roger. “You’ve lived here sixty-eight years, Derrick, but how long has it been in the family?”

“I can’t be sure of the exact year, Roger. My daddy and his daddy both lived here. Before them ... there was a man by the name of Red Dawkins.”

“What was his background?”

“Okay, this is what I learned from my daddy

...

Red Dawkins had traveled the mountains and streams around the area for several years. He didn’t have to because he wasn’t on the run or anything. No bounty hunter ever had him in the sight of his gun. Traveling light, he learned to live off the land. His saddlebags always contained a few essentials – a bag of beans, some jerky, two extra canteens, and a Bible. On one side of his saddle, he carried a shotgun and on the other, a long rifle. A gun belt on his hip held a heavy Colt 45. A leather sack draped over his shoulder held lots of spare ammo. Despite his impressive arsenal, Red was a gentle man. He never started a fight in his life. He walked away

whenever he could. Not particularly fast on the draw, he could drop an acorn from an oak at a hundred yards.

One day he encountered a narrow rocky path up the mountain. Too steep to ride, he got off his horse and started to walk the path. About thirty yards up. He heard some agonizing moans. Off to his right, he saw an Indian brave sprawled out on the rocks with his head resting in a pool of blood. Red carefully made his way down to the man. Obviously, he was still alive because he continued moaning. When he reached the brave, he slowly turned him over. The gash on his forehead was long and deep, but Red had seen worse. With the Indian not responsive to his voice, it would be tricky getting him out, but he had to try. He cut the sleeve off his shirt and bandaged the man's head to see if he could slow the bleeding. Slowly, he worked his way back up to his horse, carrying the man over his shoulder. Red tied him onto the saddle and headed back down the mountain.

Coming across a recess under a rocky overhang, he decided that it would be a good place to

set up camp. But then he caught a glimpse of a building in a little clearing about a quarter mile away.

As he approached the front of a log cabin, Red hollered out to see if anyone was around. He got no answer, so he knocked on the front door. With no response there either, the mountain man opened the door and walked inside. Somebody had been living there, but judging from the dust buildup, not recently. The cot would have to do to lay out the brave.

A cautious man, Red tied the Indian's wrists to the cot. If he woke up, it would be hard to know what he might do, and Red needed to sleep. Two days later, the patient gained consciousness and wearily pulled at the rope that bound his arms to the cot.

"I'm sorry, my friend," said Red. "I didn't know how you would come out of it."

"Who you?" asked the brave.

"Red. Red Dawkins. Do you speak English?"

“Little,” said the Indian. “I Running Bear.”

“Here, let me cut those ropes. You took a nasty spill off that mountain. What were you doing?”

“I look for little brother... Lost.”

Running Bear eventually regained enough strength to continue his search with Red by his side. Five days in the surrounding woods proved fruitless. Then one day, Red walked behind a thicket of wild elderberries behind the cabin. He called for Running Bear to come quickly. They found two small gravesites with white wooden crosses. The graves didn't look very old. Draped over one cross, they saw a metal crucifix with a tarnished chain. Draped over the other cross, they found a small leather eagle. Running Bear pulled out a leather eagle from around his neck and said, “Brother”. The two leather eagles were identical.

Red and Running Bear remained close, even becoming blood brothers. Nobody ever came back to the cabin, so Red called it home and settled down. He married an orphan girl who wandered

into the mountains, and they had four children. Two of the children died while very young, and they buried them near the other gravesite. A couple of years later, Red's wife and the two remaining children just up and left the mountains. My granddaddy met Red when he was on life's descent. When Red passed away, he gave the cabin to granddaddy.

The cabin survived a devastating fire on the mountain in the 1850's, a Civil War battle, and marauding outlaws after the war. A fierce winter storm drove many of the other settlers off the mountain in the 1890's. I reckon you could say the cabin fit my daddy and granddaddy just right. They remained as sturdy as these old logs through it all. Some in the family called them "stubborn", but I prefer "sturdy".

"So, who's after you?" asked Roger.

"You mean living in the cabin?"

"Yes."

"Well, my wife and I will stay as long as we can, but we ain't got any kin around anymore, so I'm not sure. I know these old walls still have a



lotta life in them. They've been such a fortress for living all these years ... There was this one time, though. Come on outside and let me show you something."

Walking out the front door, Derrick turned right and then stopped near the corner of the cabin. He pointed to a spot on the edge of a log about three feet up. Roger saw a small cross carved into the wood just above a small hole. Derrick tapped lightly inside the hole and Roger heard a slight metallic sound.

"A bullet?" asked Roger.

"Yeah. The scar of death on the cabin."

"What happened?"

"One day a deputy sheriff came riding up to the cabin. He asked my granddaddy if he could feed and water his horse. Just as my granddaddy told him sure, a shot rang out. The deputy fell and two men came out of the bush. They took aim at the deputy to put more lead in him to finish him off. Granddaddy said stop and when they turned their guns on him, he returned their fire and killed them.

The deputy sheriff didn't make it and what we're looking at was my granddaddy's memorial to his death."

"A lot of history here, Derrick," said Roger.

"Yeah."

"And how time treats the rest of these logs' history is left to God."

"Yeah, but you know what's interesting. Running Bear's descendants still come down every winter and visit Little Brother's gravesite."

"Life is precious despite all its hardships and trials," said Roger. "History often blazes a trail for the future to follow."

"I reckon this old log cabin could attest to that," said Derrick.

# THE COURAGEOUS CLERK OF CLEEVER COUNTY

Mild-mannered and small in frame, Calvin Clark didn't seem like the pioneer-type that braved the rugged journey west. He made his way to Cleever County by hitching a ride aboard a wagon owned and driven by Jeremiah Bodie, a tough, solitary man more fitting for the arduous journey. For the first fifty miles of their shared ride, they exchanged polite pleasantries of family, places, and other journeys. For the next five hundred miles, they spoke barely a word.

Jeremiah's leg of the journey ended in a small town at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. He purchased a small farm just outside of town and settled in for a life of raising horses. Calvin picked up a stage in town and continued his trek to Cleever County. The county seat and eventual home for Calvin was Culver City. One of dozens of towns to sprout up in the gold and silver mining area, Culver City comprised miners, storekeepers, miners, bar

entrepreneurs, miners, assayers, miners, six bank employees (including Calvin), miners, and a solitary preacher bent on saving anyone who felt compelled to be saved.

Calvin's skills fit perfectly in his job as a bank clerk. Since the Culver City Bank had no competition, Calvin got to know just about everyone in town, or at least everyone that would trust a bank. The miners were perhaps the strangest lot, depositing hundreds of thousands of dollars one week and withdrawing it all the next week. Mountain men, big city lawyers from the East, journalists, gamblers, and vagabonds swelled the ranks of those seeking fortune from the bowels of the earth.

Culver City was generally a peaceful town compared to many others of the same nature. An abundance of alcohol fueled celebrations for those whose vein came through and misery for those whose weary toil produced nothing. A walk down Main Street during the day posed little risk, but in the dark of night, a locked room greatly reduced the chance of getting hit by a stray bullet from the saloons.

One particular group, called the Mason Gang in reference to their leader—Jake Mason, paid no attention to whether the light shone brightly or not. Though they earned the title of “menace”, they always managed to skirt just outside the law or at least the enforcement thereof. Whenever Calvin took a break to walk to the diner for lunch, the Mason Gang always seemed to occupy the same boardwalk. Jake Mason took every opportunity to harass Calvin. One day, it might consist of taking Calvin’s hat and dipping it into the horse trough. The next day, they might block the boardwalk so Calvin would have to walk in the muddy wagon tracks of Main Street.

The Culver City Bank opened a branch bank in Gold Junction about a month after Calvin arrived. The bank assigned Calvin duties at the new branch for three days of the week to help them get organized. Most riders on the stage to Gold Junction thought the trip barely rose above the level of uneventful. On one particular day, though, as the stage traveled along the banks of Dawson’s Creek, the driver brought the stage to a sudden stop. This

time of year, with the snow melt, Dawson's Creek challenged its banks as a raging torrent instead of a lazy stream. When Calvin looked out the stage window, he could see some type of commotion going on along the bank. It appeared as though a group of riders attempted to cross the creek, and one of them got thrown off his horse into the raging waters. The other riders got back onto the bank and desperately tried throwing their lassos to the man. They were unsuccessful in their efforts, and none dared jump into the water. Without giving it a second thought, Calvin jumped from the stage and dove into the water. His small, wiry frame maneuvered through the flowing water with relative ease until he reached the struggling man. Grabbing the man by the back of his shirt, Calvin swam to the shore. Calvin's courage and their own lack of bravery stunned the onlookers.

Calvin got up on his knees and looked at the man he had just saved. The bank clerk and the man shared a mutual shock as they looked at each other, for the man that Calvin rescued was none other than Jake Mason, his constant tormentor in town.

The next edition of the Culver City Crier carried a big bold headline — ‘Calvin Clark, the Courageous Clerk of Cleever County’.

Life in Culver City for the mild-mannered bank clerk changed dramatically after that fateful day. The Mason Gang no longer tormented Calvin, always giving him the right-of-way on the boardwalk. Jake Mason personally challenged anyone who appeared to be harassing Calvin. Not that the Mason Gang changed their behavior in any other way, for the town still regarded them as a menace.

One Sunday morning, the gang came busting out the doors of the Nugget Saloon and almost bowled over their new friend.

“Howdy, Calvin, old boy,” said Jake Mason. “Where are you headed this morning? ... it is morning, isn’t it?”

“I’m going to the church,” answered Calvin.

“The church? Well, I reckon if you can go to the church, we can go, too. Come on, boys. We’re going to the church.”

The boys grumbled a lot, but they followed their leader. A sudden hush came over those already in the church when the Mason Gang entered. Fully expecting trouble, the congregation didn't know what to do. The preacher sized up the situation and got the service going early to distract his flock. But the parishioners' worries were unfounded, for the Mason Gang caused not a stir. When it came time to pass the collection plates, Jake Mason took off his hat and made his boys pony up from their gambling winnings. Then he emptied his hat into the offering plate. When asked about it later, the preacher said he once knew a man that would cuss up a storm on the steps of the church, sit like an angel during the service, and then when he was back outside, would resume cussing up a storm. He figured Jake Mason must have had a mama that made sure he behaved in church when he was a young'un.

The Mason Gang came to church for two more Sundays with Calvin. Then one day they were gone. No one in town ever saw them again. Of course, rumors abounded on the bench outside



Butch's Tonsorial Parlor. Some said that the Texas Rangers finally caught up with them, or they were the victims of a revenging ambush. Others were kind and said they thought that Jake Mason had finally seen the error of his ways and just wanted to make a clean start some place where no one knew him. But no one really knew for sure, except maybe God.

Some in the town claimed to have heard the preacher say he kinda missed 'em. When asked about it, he admitted to the feeling. He lamented over the common occurrence in the territory of having people come and disappear so frequently, but that was just the way it was in the mining towns. Yet, when he wrote to some of his friends back east, they would often lament about the same thing in the big cities.

The Culver City Bank took full advantage of the publicity that Calvin had generated as an employee. They hung a sign by the door that said, 'You can trust this man and this bank'. Under those words was a copy of the Culver City Crier's

Headline — ‘Calvin Clark, The Courageous Clerk of Cleever County’.

Occasionally, someone would stop Calvin on the boardwalk and ask him if he missed Jake Mason and the boys or if he ever heard from them. Calvin had few words to say, but perhaps the tear in his eye said more than enough.

## THE SMELL OF LEATHER

Growing weary in the saddle, Jake Colbert figured he had about another hour before the sun would give up the light. Already, the distant barren trees were casting a last broken shadow to the day. The monotonous, dusty prairie trail narrowed to a worn path over a small mountain with steep walls that dropped into a deep canyon. Though he could feel his grip on the reins getting weaker, he didn't yet see any good place to bed down for the night. Rounding a blind corner on the path, he flinched at the sight of a big mountain lion coming from the opposite direction. Jake's horse stopped and reared up, but the mountain lion turned around and left them alone on the path.

The mountain air felt frigid to Jake as he continued along the path. Then the path opened wider into a little ravine with a tiny creek. Following the edge of the creek for a while, Jake soon discovered the tiny creek flowed into a larger whitewater stream. The cowboy always loved to stop along

such a stream and just look and listen to the power of the water. With such admiration, though, came a healthy respect for the natural wonder. He urged his horse to move forward very slowly. After a hundred yards or so of such slow motion, Jake pulled back on the reins for Smoke to stop. A broad expanse of flat rock now bordered the stream. Jake had to decide—get off Smoke and lead him across the rock or continue to ride over it very carefully. If he hadn't been so tired, he would have chosen the former. He chose the latter to let Smoke do the work, but he soon came to regret that decision. About ten yards in and the flat rock became slick from a thin film of spray that had turned to ice. Smoke's sturdy legs went sideways, and Jake fell off into the raging stream.

As if the cold water wasn't bad enough, the raging current bashed Jake into every exposed rock in its path. Every attempt to latch on to something—anything—failed. His right leg alternated between extreme pain and frigid numbness. He felt the fight leaving him as his mind began to accept the inevitable. Suddenly, something stopped his

forward movement down the whitecapped stream. He felt himself being pulled sideways toward the calm bank.

He heard the words, “Not yet, my friend”, but his mind could hardly process them. As powerful arms dragged him out of the water, he felt free—no longer on a journey to certain death. One of the strangest things he noticed as he felt the hard ground beneath him was the strong smell of leather. He remembered that strong smell from the saddle shop that his dad often took him to so many years ago. This time it smelled so much sweeter, though.

Jake drifted in and out of consciousness that evening, but he seemed to always be aware of the warmth of the crackling fire that he lay nearby. His rescuer never said a word, but he faithfully tended to Jake’s wounds throughout the night. When the morning came, the man hoisted Jake up onto Smoke and secured him in the saddle with some rope. As the man worked around him, Jake could still smell the strong aroma of the leather coat that the man wore. They left the campsite with Jake on his horse trailing behind the big man on his

palomino. When the sun approached mid sky, the outline of a town appeared on the horizon.

Navareth boasted of two thousand citizens on the welcome sign just outside of town. It had two churches, two doctors, and four undertakers. Of course, such statistics meant nothing to Jake. Had he been more clear thinking at the time, perhaps they might have, especially the number of undertakers compared to doctors. Jake's mind still went through periods of darkness where he wasn't quite sure of his surroundings. He didn't remember much of anything that transpired that afternoon. He woke up in bed in the local boarding house with his right leg and both arms heavily bandaged. The scent of leather filled the room as he consciously took a breath. When the doc walked into the room to check on him, the smell of leather faded.

"Well, Mr. Colbert," said the doc. "It appears you had a rough time of it, but I think you're going to be alright."

"I'm glad to hear that, Doc," managed Jake rather weakly.

“What happened?”

“Oh, I had a little run-in with some wild water, and the rocks got the best of me.”

“Ah,” said Doc Andrews. “I am a little surprised that you made it to my office. The only whitewater I know of around here is a good thirty miles away.”

“Yeah, if that man hadn’t pulled me out of the water, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Oh, what man is that?” asked Doc Andrews.

“That man that brought me here. You know ... that big man wearing leather and the wide brim ... he had a full red beard.”

“I didn’t see any man like that, Mr. Colbert,” replied the doc. “You say he pulled you out of the water?”

“Yeah. Now, I ain’t no lightweight, Doc, but he pulled me outta there like I was nothin. Then he built a fire and warmed me up. Bandaged up my arms and leg.”

“Well, he certainly seemed to know what he was doing. I couldn’t have done much better myself.”

“Then, come morning, he got me up on my horse and led me into town. He helped me up to the bench outside your office and said he was gonna take my horse to the livery.”

“Hmm ... well, you were certainly very lucky. I did hear someone knock on my door and when I came out, I found you on the bench. It seems improbable that you managed all that by yourself.”

“And you never saw or heard him, huh?”

“That I did not, Mr. Colbert.”

“Then ... how did you know my name, Doc?”

“Interesting question ... Billy Jackson, who runs the livery, came into my office and asked me if I had treated anyone lately that I didn’t know. When I told him about you, he guessed that the horse that was left at his place was yours. He never saw anybody leave it, so he got to wondering



whose it was. Then he saw some blood on the saddle and so, he started looking through your saddlebags. He found the old Bible given to you by your mother, as well as some other papers with your name on them.”

“And nobody saw the man who brought me into town?”

“Not that I know of,” answered Doc Andrews.

“Let me ask you a question, Doc. Did you smell the strong scent of leather when you walked into this room?”

“Maybe a little, but there is so much leather in this town, it’s hard to say for sure. Well ... get some rest, and I will be back in two days.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

Two days later, Doc Andrews entered Jake’s room.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Colbert?”

“Still a little sore, but I’m feeling much better.”

“I’m going to take off your bandages and have a look.”

“Let me ask you something, Doc.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you believe in angels?”

“I’m a man of science, Mr. Colbert. I take some accounts of supernatural forces with skepticism; however, I believe in God. Angels would fall in the realm of believability. I can’t say I’ve ever seen an angel, but I’ve seen enough instances that science can’t explain.” Looking at his patient intently, he continued, “Now could an angel have a full red beard and appear in leather with a wide brim hat? I don’t know. If it wasn’t an angel and just a stranger ... well ... you should thank God for either one.”

“Yeah, I guess so ... how do they look, Doc?”

“We can keep the bandages on the arms off. I want to keep the leg wrapped so you’ve got a little padding between the leg and the saddle ... so, you’re good to go, Mr. Colbert.”

“Thanks for everything you’ve done, Doc. I don’t rightly know how I’m going to pay you, though.”

“See Jason down at the desk when you check out. He’s got something of yours that we thought we should put in the safe. Then come see me and we’ll talk about it.”

“Okay, Doc.”

When Jake got down to the desk, he asked Jason for what was his in the safe. Jason went into the back room and came out with a new-looking leather bag.

“Here you go, Mr. Colbert,” said Jason.

Jake didn’t say anything. He just stared at the bag. He didn’t remember having a bag like that.

“Billy found it in your saddlebag along with your Bible, so we thought you’d want us to keep it safe.”

“Uh ... yeah. Thanks, Jason. I appreciate it.”

Jake tried not to look too surprised, but he couldn’t help but wonder what was in the bag. He

raised it up and untied the drawstring. When he opened it up, he saw a hundred or more gold coins, and he smelled the aromatic scent of leather.

Dumping some coins out onto the counter, he asked, “How much do I owe you for the room, Jason?”

Jason placed his finger on one coin and pulled it towards him. “This should cover it, Mr. Colbert.”

Jake took six coins and put them in his pocket. The rest he put back in the bag and closed the drawstring. He nodded at Jason and walked out the door. He then headed over to the doc’s office across the street. As he walked across the rutted dirt, he couldn’t help but think, “There’s only one way that bag could have got into my saddlebag.”

He opened the door and saw Doc Andrews sitting behind his desk.

“I’ve come to settle up, Doc. How much do I owe you?”

“Did you get your valuables from Jason?”

Opening the bag, Jake poured out a few coins and asked again, “How much, Doc?”

“Two of those gold coins should cover everything.”

Jake gave him the coins and while cinching up the drawstring said, “Thanks again for everything, Doc ... I gotta tell you, though ...”

“What’s that, Mr. Colbert?”

“I gotta tell you ... I don’t ... never mind, Doc.”

“Stay safe, Mr. Colbert.”

Jake walked out the door and headed for the livery. He came to the sheriff on the boardwalk, talking to a woman with four kids by her side. Jake stepped off the boardwalk so he wouldn’t interfere with their conversation. When he got closer, he noticed the woman crying and overheard them talking.

“What am I going to do, Sheriff? I’ve got four kids, and the bank is going to take the farm. What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, Lucy. If I had any money, I’d help you out. The bank has every right, though, to take the farm. You haven’t made a payment in six months.”

“I know. I know. Ever since Caleb died, I’ve only been able to feed the young’uns and nothing else.”

Jake kept on walking to the livery. He settled up with Billy and raised up the bag with the coins to put it into his saddlebag. As he was doing so, he smelled the powerful aroma of leather and paused with the bag half in his saddlebag. He then let it fall in the rest of the way and climbed up on his horse.

Heading out of town, he had to pass by the sheriff’s office, where he saw the sheriff still talking to the woman with the four kids. He pulled on the reins for Smoke to stop. Jake reached down into his saddlebag and pulled out the bag of coins. Then he pointed to the woman and tossed the bag to the sheriff. He urged Smoke on, and they rode out of town.

## THE NIGHT SOMETHING IN THE FOREST SPOKE

The Chastaine family had just moved into the Jubal County area, and their first winter couldn't have been any more brutal. None of the settlers in the valley could remember such a dark time. The cold conquered the land and governed all activities with a frigid hand, so much so that the grizzled pioneer veterans spent most of the time gathered around fires longing for summers past and some hint of rescue. Even Granny Prevatte, the oldest citizen around and the local taker of nature's pulse, saw little to show a break in the dark, thick clouds covering their community.

Jesse Chastaine, the middle child of Henry and Maria Chastaine, only knew a few years of life and hadn't yet come to the point of being burdened by such gloomy and worrisome thoughts. He saw unlimited opportunities for fun in the snowy landscape. Other folks' misery became his joy. It was quite common to see the boy outside, seemingly

oblivious to the temperature, frolicking in the white blanket covering the earth. Jesse often frequented the forest bordering the rear of the Chastaine homestead, despite warnings from his momma and daddy about the beasts living there.

Late one afternoon, Jesse took one of his usual strolls down a natural path among the trees. The evergreen tree canopy was so thick overhead that it kept the path relatively snow free for about two hundred feet down its length. The boy suddenly stopped and cupped his left ear. Somewhere from deep inside the forest came a strange sound. Jesse had a gift when it came to sounds, especially critter sounds, and he had heard nothing like this before. The wind blew erratically that day, so he thought at first perhaps the trees, with their load of snow, had just groaned in protest. As Jesse started to walk again, the sound grew louder and scarier. The boy turned and ran, not to flee, but to get his daddy to come and listen.

Carrying a torch and his shotgun, Henry Chastaine went back to the woods with his son, because he knew of his son's gift and if he said that



he had heard a strange sound, he should check it out. About halfway down the path, Henry also heard the sound but was perplexed by its origin. He thought he heard a faint sound of running water, almost as if in the background to the dominant sound. Henry and his son both ran back to the house to get Mrs. Chastaine. As Henry, Maria, Jesse, and the other children began hurrying back to the woods, their neighbors saw them and, with little else to do, followed them out of curiosity. When they were about halfway down the path, Henry turned to see everyone following them, so he motioned for his neighbors to be quiet and listen. The sound seemed to increase in volume the more people came to hear it, yet nobody could make out where it was coming from.

Granny Prevatte soon spoke up and said, “I recollect my great grandma telling me about something similar many, many years ago. She said if ya listen with ya heart, ya can make it out.”

The people had a great deal of respect for Granny Prevatte and her love of nature, but they

looked confused about how you listen with your heart.

“How do you listen with your heart, Granny?” asked Elma Thompson.

“I reckon the closest thing would be to listen as if’n it was your lost child acallin out to you,” answered Granny.

Granny’s words struck home with everyone there, for everyone there had lost a child or two in all the years of hardship endured as settlers in a new uncharted land. The word “change” soon became unmistakable. As the people began to understand it, every limb and every rock in the forest began crying, “Change. Change. Change.” Sometimes the forest spoke reassuringly; sometimes it spoke with a fiery warning. Perhaps the distinction came to each individual hearer, but without question, its message remained constant.

“What does it mean?” asked many in unison.

“Maybe it’s God tellin us that winter is bout to change into spring,” said Jeb Wallace, a husky, bearded man.

“I reckon that surely would be a blessing,” said Mattie Rose. “At last, a rescue from all this cold.”

“What if it’s tellin us that we should change?” asked Zachariah Thomas. “I mean I been watchin this here young’un, Jesse. He’s the only one in this whole blame village who hasn’t been acursin the weather. He’s been alivin life to fullest, regardless.”

“Yeah, but he’s just a boy,” yelled out someone from the back of the crowd. “What does he know?”

“Could be he knows a might more than we do,” answered Zachariah. “It could be he’s alivin like he does cause he’s alivin like his Maker told him to, instead a always fightin the wrong battles. Doesn’t the Good Book say something bout we gotta become like children to enter heaven?”

“Maybe it’s both,” said Granny Prevatte. “There’s always gonna be other winters. If we can figure out how to live during them winters, we know they’ll be a spring acomin. Cause that’s how

the Lord made it, and maybe he's just remindin us of that. Seems like we're always needin remindin bout something. Maybe, like Zachariah said, we need to change what we're adoin too. I think I was wrong when I told ya to listen as if'n it was your lost child acallin out to you. I think we're the lost child and we need to listen as if'n it was our father callin out to us."

Darkness crept into an already gray sky and the wind picked up considerably, blowing the snow into a shroud about the forest. The crowd walked back down the path to their cabins, and the trees and rocks became silent. The sun rose in the morning, like it did every morning, and Jesse Chastaine looked out the cabin window.

"Look, Momma," the boy cried, as a tiny drop of water fell off the long icicle hanging outside the window.

While nature did indeed begin its change that morning, another more subtle change occurred in Jubal County after that night. The community had suffered for a long time with a litany of diseases

that only seemed to afflict people on Sunday mornings. When winter changed to spring, the once empty pews in the local churches overflowed with healed parishioners. The learned men of the cloth never offered a solid explanation, except that maybe the extra cold temperatures had killed whatever germs that were causing the illnesses. At least that's what they were saying publicly. Maybe they knew differently, but they were just glad to be preaching and singing in a full house again. Granny Prevatte said she thought it was just a whole lotta people startin to listen with their hearts.

## KARSON'S SWAMP

Not much goes on in Baxter County. There are probably more alligator residents than people. Jerome Leshay seemed perfectly fine with that statistic. He kinda preferred the company of gators and snakes over the human equivalent.

Jerome lived about a quarter mile inside Karson's Swamp on a little island of Bald Cypress and Water Oak. When the rainy season came, he gathered up anything that might float away and moved up to the second floor of his little cabin.

One day, the man looked out across the swamp to see two strangers on horseback waiting at the edge of the swamp. After a little bit, a third horse and rider joined them. The three men didn't get off their horses or do anything other than talk. About an hour later, a fourth man driving a wagon showed up. The three men on horseback dismounted and walked to the back of the wagon. Two of them grabbed shovels, and the third helped the wagon driver follow with a large chest. They began

digging a hole and eventually reached a depth that satisfied them. They lowered the chest into the hole and covered it up. Gathering brush from a short distance away, the men worked diligently to hide the fresh dirt.

“Very curious,” said Jerome to himself. “They are trying to hide the spot, yet they are marking the spot with a cross ... perhaps ... Perhaps they’re trying to make it look like a gravesite from long ago. Not really a bad idea for concealing whatever it is in that chest. Most people would not think to look in a grave that’s been there a long time.”

The four men then left the site, apparently unaware that they were being watched. Now, intrigue rarely came to Karson’s Swamp, at least not of human origin. Maybe in the back of his mind, Jerome missed that part of civilization. His past contained years spent as a big-city police detective, as well as a brief time as a man of the cloth. Both occupations necessitated solving mysteries of a sort. So, after several days of thought, he could no longer resist finding out what was in that chest.

Loading a shovel into his canoe, Jerome began the trip around his island with his faithful dog, Lucky, at the front of the canoe. Lucky's name used to just be 'dog', but his frequent encounters with gators that he always survived gained him a more fitting name. When they got to the back side of the island, Jerome paddled for the spot of the cross.

"Well, Lucky, I wonder what's in here," said Jerome.

Lucky looked up at Jerome and cocked his head to one side.

"With a little work, I think we can satisfy your curiosity, boy."

Jerome carefully cleared the brush and piled it up to the side. Then he began digging. With the dirt being fresh, it wasn't hard digging, but then Jerome wasn't getting any younger either. Lucky, on the other hand, showed no fatigue from supervising.

"At least, these boys picked a high spot, Lucky. Otherwise, this chest would be sitting in water."



Finally, the shovel made a thud and Jerome knew he'd hit the chest. Carefully, he cleared enough dirt out from around it so he could open the lid.

“A lock ... I should have known that ... a problem, but not an insurmountable one, thanks to Rutherford Caldwell. You remember Ruttty, don't you, boy? ... No, I guess that was before your time. Well, Ruttty was one of the best safe and lock men in the city. After I'd arrested him for the twelfth time, I guess I gained his respect, I think. Anyway, he showed me how to pick a lock. He seemed quite proud to be passing along some of his knowledge, though it was quite curious why he would be proud to be passing it along to the guy who kept arresting him. But here we are. It doesn't look too sophisticated, so if I use the small blade of my knife, I think ... there you go, click.”

Expecting to see some kind of treasure, Jerome knelt on the fresh dirt, looking at a chest full of Bibles. Brand spanking-new Bibles.

“Now, why would somebody bury a chest full of new Bibles, Lucky? That just doesn’t make sense. I can think of all kinds of spiritual metaphors for it, but these guys didn’t look like the kind to attach any spiritual significance to something like this. There’s got to be more to it.”

After digging down through three layers of Bibles, Jerome was about to give up, when he noticed something slightly different about one Bible in the middle of the fourth layer. The Bible was the same as the others, but the gold, boldly embossed writing on the cover clearly stood out. He took it out and began to thumb the pages, when his right index finger felt something odd. They had hollowed out a small chunk of pages in the middle of the book. In the hole, a brass key shone in the morning sun coming over his shoulder. Undoubtedly, it unlocked a treasure somewhere. But what kind of treasure would require such elaborate concealment of the key? With so little to go on, he might never know.

“Lucky, my friend, what do we do now? Do we, and I say “we”, put everything back like it was,

lock the chest back up, and cover it back up with dirt? Look at me, Lucky. You don't seem to be providing any answers."

Lucky looked at Jerome and cocked his head to one side. He then barked once and said no more.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do, old pal. I don't think these guys are going to be back very soon. They went to too much trouble just to come back right away. I think we should take everything back to the cabin. If we take all the Bibles out of the chest, it should be light enough for me to get it out of the hole. Then we need to do some serious thinking this evening. Hopefully, by morning, we'll have an answer ... agreed?"

Lucky remained noncommittal.

By the time Jerome got everything moved into the cabin, it tired him. A light supper and he fell asleep in the comfortable chair that he made himself from old pillows and cypress wood. About three o'clock in the morning, he sat up. Lucky raised his head slightly and gave a look like,

“you’re not really going to start talking now, are you?”.

“Okay, Lucky. Here’s what I’m thinking. This key must unlock a treasure somewhere. Since we don’t have the vaguest clue as to what that treasure is or where it could possibly be, the key carries little meaning for us. It means everything to these criminals ... oh, wait, you’re probably thinking, ‘How do we know they’re criminals?’. Well, don’t forget what I did with most of my life ... Oh, right, that was before your time. Take my word for it. Those guys all had the appearance of criminals. Everything they’ve done is rooted in deception. Sinister deception. From choosing a site out here by a swamp to marking the spot with a cross to filling a chest with Bibles to destroying Holy Scripture to hide a key. It’s all conceived with the veil of secrecy because whatever they’ve done is wrong. Besides, I’ve never met a man who, if he’s decent and God-fearing, would ever consider burying Bibles in a swamp.”

Lucky laid his head back down and went to sleep.

“So, what are we going to do about it? This is a pivotal moment ... ah, of course. It’s all in the metaphors. Don’t you get it, Lucky? It’s all in the metaphors. Knowledge is everything.”

Jerome got up out of his chair and went to a closet. He pulled out three old suitcases of various sizes, dusted them off, and took out some old clothes he had been storing in them. Then he started filling the suitcases with the Bibles, except for one. He went to the old desk that he made from wooden crates and opened a drawer. He pulled out a wooden box and opened it up. Inside the box were dozens of keys, most of which were meaningless, but he could never allow himself to throw away a key for anything. Dumping the keys on a table, he searched for one that would come close to matching the brass key he held in his left hand. Finding one that came very close in appearance, he took it over to the remaining Bible. Jerome put the substitute key into the hole in the Bible. Then he wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it up, and put it into the hole with the key. Putting the Bible back into the chest, he closed the lid and locked it.

When the morning light came, Jerome loaded the chest into his canoe and paddled back to the burial site. He placed the chest back into the hole and covered it up with dirt. He took the brush that he had piled up on the side and placed it back over the dirt as the men had done it. When he felt satisfied that it looked undisturbed, he got back into his canoe and paddled back to the cabin. As he walked in the door, he looked at the brass key he held in his hand. The polished key caught the morning light coming through the window and cast a flash of light on Jerome's shirt. He closed his hand, and the light disappeared. Then he went to his desk and opened the drawer with his box of keys. Pulling out a chain, Jerome fixed the key to the chain and hung it around his neck.

“Come on, Lucky. We need to go talk to Rags.”

They walked out the front door and followed a worn path to the stable, where they found Rags leisurely munching on some hay. Jerome poured out a handful of oats and gave it to his horse.

“Rags, old boy, how would you like to take a little trip? We’re likely to be gone for quite a while, but don’t worry, I’ll bring along an extra bag of oats. What’s important is that we’ll all be together.”

Jerome and Lucky went back into the cabin. The former pastor and police detective walked over to his desk and began taking it apart. By the time he finished, he had six good sized crates. Then he opened the pantry door and began filling the crates with all the provisions he had stocked up. He had one empty suitcase and two crates left. He filled the suitcase with some clothes and the remaining crates with tools and odds and ends. Lucky sat in the middle of the room watching everything his master and friend did. When Jerome had everything packed that he had room for, he sat down.

“Well, Lucky, I suppose you’re wondering what I’m doing. Do you remember early this morning when I told you it was all in the metaphors? When the light of dawn came through the window, it suddenly dawned on me. Here these guys had literally buried all these Bibles that held the key to the treasures of heaven. They thought they were

being smart in hiding the key to whatever their earthly treasure is inside the Bible that held the eternal key. I felt a little sorry for them and then I realized that I've been doing the same thing living out here on this isolated little island in Karson's Swamp. Don't get me wrong, my little friend, you've been great company. But there are folks out there that don't know how to unlock the treasure of life. And I've been lighting the lamp in my own life, so to speak, but putting it under a bushel. I've got to believe that when I found those Bibles, it was the Good Lord telling me to wake up and put the light on a stand, so it gives light to the whole house."

Lucky looked at Jerome and barked once.

"So, you, me, Rags, and those Bibles, we're going to head west. I've heard there are a whole lot of fields and pastures filled with sheep to shepherd or cattle to herd."

Lucky barked twice.

"That's right, boy. That's a metaphor, too."



With the rainy season still a few weeks away, they had Karson's Bridge to get everything across the swamp. Karson's Bridge, a narrow strip of ground that formed a natural path across the swamp, had limited use until the water in the swamp rose with the frequent torrential rains. The next morning, with everything loaded on the wagon, Jerome, Lucky, Rags, and, oh yes, the Bibles began the trip west.

As far as the buried chest goes, there are a lot of questions. When did the men return to dig up the chest? When they opened the chest, were they shocked to see only the one Bible in there? Did they understand the note that read, "Woe unto you, lawyers! For ye have taken away the key of knowledge; ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered." How did they react when they discovered that the key in the Bible didn't unlock their treasure? Did they turn on each other?

That's just the way it is. We'll never know why some folks get it and others don't. We'll never know why some folks choose to live in a swamp

and others don't. I reckon there's only One who knows that. For Jerome, the key he wears around his neck reminds him every day how meager earthly treasures really are. As for the rest of us finding the key to life, I reckon we got till our last breath to keep looking. After that, the search will be over, and you'll know whether that key you're carrying unlocks the treasure or not.

## MRS. MAGRUDER'S APPLE PIES

“Sheriff, ya gotta do something. I’m runnin outta pie pans. Ya know we got the church social coming up on Saturday and they’re dependin on me to bring some of my award-winnin apple pies. Now, I ain’t gonna have any to bring, if’n somebody keeps stealin em. You know what I’m sayin, Sheriff?”

“Yes, Ma,” said Sheriff Long.

Everybody called Mrs. Magruder “Ma”, even though she wasn’t anybody’s ma. She just acted like she was everybody’s ma.

“Well...ll?” said Mrs. Magruder.

“Well, I don’t rightly have a lot to go on, Ma. I’ll ask around. I’ll see if anybody’s found any pie pans lying around. Most likely any other evidence has probably been et.”

Sheriff Long had mixed feelings about such a crime as pie stealing. It seemed kind of low on the totem pole of importance. On the other hand, he

didn't have any dead bodies to deal with. At least not if he found the criminal before Ma did.

Before leaving Mrs. Magruder's house, he checked the area outside the porch where she put her pies to cool. There looked like there were two sets of footprints, and one of them had a heel that sunk deep. He followed the prints out to the trail where it looked like the two thieves mounted up and rode off.

Talking to himself, Sheriff Long said, "Those are some strange prints. Mules maybe. No ... those look like cow hoofprints. What kind of fools would ride cows and steal apple pies? ... I wonder if they're back in town ... yeah, could be. Those Stevens brothers have been in jail for about three years. It would be about time for them to get out. They probably stole the cows before they stole the apple pies."

He rode over to Milt Lefler's farm a couple of miles down the road. When he rode in the gate of the dairy farm, Milt came running out to greet him.

“Sheriff, I’m glad you’re here,” said Milt, excitedly. “Somebody made off with two of my best cows.”

“I guessed that, Milt. I found two sets of cow prints over at Ma’s place. Somebody stole her apple pies, too.”

“Who do ya think it is, Sheriff?”

“Well, I’m not absolutely sure, but my gut tells me it’s the Stevens brothers.”

“Are they back?” asked the dairy farmer.

“Could be, Milt ... Let me look around your barn and pasture.”

“Okay, Sheriff.”

Just outside the barn door, Sheriff Long saw something very unusual.

“Milt, you ain’t been walking around here with snowshoes on, have you?”

“What in the world would I be doing that for? It’s the middle of August.”

“Well, somebody has,” said the sheriff.

“I’ll be ... You mean somebody wearing snowshoes stole my cows and then stole Ma’s pies?”

“It looks like it, Milt. Only they took the snowshoes off before they stole Ma’s pies.”

“Crazy, Sheriff. Just plain crazy.”

“I think we’ll get your cows back, Milt. I doubt if these thieves will go very far—especially not riding cows.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.”

Riding down Main Street towards his office, Sheriff Long pulled his horse up short.

“Sheriff, I want to report a theft,” said Byron Greene, the owner of the general store.

“I’m gonna take a wild guess here, Byron. Somebody stole two pairs of snowshoes, right?”

“Why, yes ... How did you know?”

“It’s a long story, but we’ll do everything we can to get them back ... You get a description of

anybody? Anybody see someone take the snowshoes?”

“I didn’t, but Lucy Holmes thought she recognized them. She couldn’t remember their names, but one was a big, heavy guy and the other much smaller.”

“Yeah, sounds like the Stevens brothers, alright.”

“She said she saw them coming out of the hotel before they came in here.”

The lawman figured he better go on over to the hotel and check with Wendell. He walked up to the desk and rang the bell. Wendell came out of the back room, saw the sheriff, and opened a drawer.

“Sheriff, just the man I wanted to see. I had two gentlemen try to pay their bill with these five-dollar bills. My nephew was at the desk at the time, and he didn’t know any better.”

The sheriff looked at the bills and said, “Confederate. I ain’t seen any of these for a while.”

“When I got back to the desk, the two gentlemen had left.”

“One a big, heavy guy and one much smaller?”

“Yes, that’s them,” said the hotel manager.

“Well, Wendell, I don’t know if I’ll be able to get your money, but I’ll try. I think the two guys were a couple of thieves that used to live around here. I will keep you informed as things progress.”

Perhaps you are wondering if the start of the Stevens brothers’ trail was anywhere nearby. Over the course of the day, the sheriff heard from a farmer who gave the boys a ride into town—they stole his rifle. Then the train conductor reported two men taking two suitcases from a traveling salesman and getting onto a wagon headed for town. And then a train detective came into the sheriff’s office looking for two men who stole two tickets for the River’s Edge run.

When lunchtime came around, the sheriff went over to the diner to grab a bite. The cook came out complaining about two men who ordered the



diner's deluxe, top-of-the-line dinner and then skipped out without paying.

About three o'clock that afternoon, he got a telegram from Sheriff McCalley in Richfield about two men who stole two men's clothes from the bathhouse and were last seen heading for the train station. At five o'clock, the sheriff got a telegram from Warden Owens at the state prison. He wanted to alert law enforcement in the area about two prisoners who stole a jailer's keys and escaped.

When Harry Lawson, editor-in-chief at the Glenville Gazette, got word of the whole fiasco, he made it the lead story in Friday's edition. The headline read, "They're Back". The article began with:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where Gomer and Zeke break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves apple pies in heaven, where neither Gomer nor Zeke can consume. For where your apple pies are, there will your stomach be as well."

Harry managed to ruffle a few feathers with his scriptural translation. The paper's sales volume

was such that they had to do a second printing, and they thought about doing a third.

The ladies went ahead with the church social on Saturday, even though they only had two apple pies. They held a drawing to raffle off pieces of Ma's apple pies.

On Sunday, Reverend Smucker based his sermon on Matthew 6.19-21, the King James version and not the Glenville Gazette's.

Remarkably, no reports of theft came into Sheriff Long's office for the entire next week. On Monday of the following week, Bobby Thomason, the blacksmith at the livery stable, approached Sheriff Long outside the diner.

"Sheriff, I need to tell you something about the Stevens brothers' case," said the blacksmith.

"Whatcha got, Bobby?"

"I had a couple of horses in stalls I was supposed to shoe this morning, but when I got there, they were gone. And here's the kicker—two cows

were in the stalls instead. I reckon they must belong to Milt Lefler.”

“I’d reckon, Bobby.”

The sheriff put the cows on leads and headed for Milt’s dairy farm. On the way, he thought a little more about the latest development. He could only hope that it was a sign that the Stevens brothers had moved on and left the area. Milt thanked the sheriff for returning the cows, and the lawman headed back to town.

As it turned out, the sheriff’s hope became a reality, as Glenville never had another run of thievery for a long time. When the Stevens brothers left town, they took the sheriff’s headaches with them.

As the month neared end, the ladies at the church began planning for the next church social. In a move rivaling Solomon’s wisdom, they held their next planning meeting at Ma Magruder’s place. When Ma placed pie number fifteen on the cooling rack, she sat down with the other ladies. With the coming of an early fall, it wasn’t all that unusual to see the ladies gather outside on

someone's porch and enjoy the cooler weather. Perhaps a little unusual in this case, though, was how the rocking chairs were positioned on that porch. The six rockers formed a semi-circle in front of the pie rack—almost a defensive-like arrangement. But the ladies seemed very relaxed, gently rocking in their wooden rockers. They talked about the food for the social on Saturday, they gossiped a little about Harriet Marson and her latest beau, and they talked about Reverend Smucker's sermon last Sunday. The conversation seemed so harmless that a stranger might have difficulty understanding the twelve-gauge shotgun each lady cradled in her arms.

## GUNSLINGER'S LAMENT

Wiley Jackson was a gunslinger, plain and simple. He made his living with his wit and skills with a variety of firearms. Many hired guns of the time did not possess an active conscience. Most died young, not because somebody faster came along, but because they were ambushed.

Wiley had managed to reach the age of thirty-five by being very, very careful and by being very selective in who he worked for. He did not fit the mold of the typical gunfighter, in more ways than one.

On one summer day when temperatures and dispositions ran equally hot, Wiley had the task of trying to get Abel Coles and his gang to stop harassing the stagecoaches along the Carrock Trail, particularly in Gullet Pass. The gang always robbed the passengers and sometimes they got lucky with a strongbox full of gold coins. They did not hesitate to shoot anyone who resisted. The law along the Carrock Trail near Gullet Pass did not

exist from a practical point of view, so the stage lines looked to outside help. Wiley Jackson fit their parameters and after talking with the stage line's representatives, he took the job.

The first thing Wiley did in any job he took was to study. In this case, he studied the trail; he studied the accounts given of past incidents; he studied the stagecoaches; and he studied what was known of Abel Coles and his gang. While the Carrock Trail had patches of forest on either side for many miles, there were also many open areas. The last stretch before Gullet Pass had nothing but low barren rock lining the trail, which could be tough for a gang on horseback to get over. Once a stage entered Gullet Pass, it became a different story. With plenty of cover for hiding and with the stage's team laboring to climb the grade, it became a frequent ambush area.

Trailing behind the stagecoach about a quarter of a mile, Wiley brought his horse to a halt. Up ahead he could see six masked men come out from cover and surround the stage. He nudged his horse closer so he could get a good picture of the gang.

Suddenly one of the gang, riding a speckled mare, fired his gun and hit one of the passengers. Wiley could see where they came out in the pass and where they rode when they finished with the stage. Wiley rode the trail numerous times before in his studying, looking for the most probable ambush site. He also rode the area completely around Gullet Pass and knew how to move quickly and quietly through or around the terrain of the pass. He made a guess as to where they would come out again on the trail as they made their getaway. Veering off the trail on the left, he led his horse down a narrow path in the rock. Once in the open, he rode his horse at a breakneck pace until he reached an area of tall, rocky cliffs. He stopped, grabbed his Winchester, and got off his horse. Climbing onto a ledge, he crawled to the edge and looked below. Abel and his men were walking their horses through a narrow opening. He had to make a quick decision, or they would get through the opening and be out of his sight. Aiming his Winchester, he fired and hit the last man in the column, who was the one with the speckled mare, just before he got out through the opening. The shot's echo seemed to go on forever.

One of the other men in the gang came back to the opening on his horse and tried to help the fallen man, but Wiley let off another round and hit the second man in the leg with the bullet piercing through to the horse. Horse and rider fell to the ground. Wiley could see a third rider enter the opening and start to help the second man onto his horse, but the first man's horse now stood in the opening, blocking his view. By the time the horse made it through the opening, Wiley could no longer see anyone. He didn't see the second man, so he guessed that the third man had gotten him onto his horse and got away. He ran back to his horse and took another shortcut path to try to catch up with the gang, but when he got back to the trail, they were kicking up dust on the trail far beyond any hope Wiley had to catch up with them.

Wiley headed back to the opening where the first man should still be. Along the way, he found the man's horse and led the animal back with him. The first man lay unconscious on the ground, but the bullet had only torn through his shoulder, so Wiley figured he must have hit his head when he



fell. He wasn't dead, so Wiley got him back onto his horse and tied him to the saddle. When they reached a small watering hole, Wiley made up a mud patch and packed the bullet wound to stop the bleeding. Eventually, he caught up with the stage along the trail and followed it into the next town. The stage driver and his partner carried the dead passenger over to the undertaker's and the gang member over to the doc's. Wiley went to see if he could find the sheriff and tell him what happened. He found out they didn't have a sheriff, but according to the blacksmith at the livery stable, a marshal would be around in about a month. The robber woke up quickly in the doctor's office and talked up a storm. He let slip the gang's next target—a large shipment of gold on the stage line. They had planned on taking out the stage in their usual spot in Gullet Pass. How the gang knew of that shipment could only mean they had someone on the inside. That made Wiley a little nervous, because he didn't know if an inside man knew of his presence or not. He would have to be extra careful. In the meantime, the blacksmith said they had a holding cell to keep the robber in till the marshal got there.

Wiley and the stage line came up with a plan for the gold shipment based on what the gang member had said. The stage with the gold had a second stagecoach following it. Just before the last patch of dense forest before Gullet Pass, the stagecoaches pulled over out of sight of Gullet Pass. Since there was someone on the inside, the stage had to leave the depot with a normal load of passengers to not look suspicious. Only Wiley and the top security people of the stage line knew of the second stage. The first stage with the gold and the passengers stayed put out of sight. The second stage had four armed men from the stage line in the cab. Wiley told them to give him a fifteen-minute head start so he could get in position in the pass. Wiley couldn't be sure that there were only four men left in the gang. Abel could just as easily have recruited added help for such a large haul. Whatever the case, Wiley felt his position on the ledge gave him a prime advantage.

When the stage arrived at the most vulnerable area of Gullet Pass, Abel Cole and his gang, now seven other men, emerged and surrounded the

coach. Expecting compliant passengers to come out of the coach, they were caught by surprise when those inside came out with guns blazing. Wiley picked off several of the gang members from his position above. A quick change of guns and he continued firing. When the sound of gunfire no longer filled Gullet Pass, eight outlaws and two stage security men were dead. Wiley felt bad for the security men and wondered if they had any family. He had no such feelings for the outlaws. For the first time in his life, he felt his blood run cold, and he didn't like it.

Wiley collected his money from the stage line and headed for Wichita. In a modest hotel room overlooking Main Street, he laid out on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Though the street below buzzed with activity, he tuned it out. He was tired, and he couldn't shake the feeling he had at the shootout. At some point over the years, he lost track of how many men he had killed. One thing he knew for sure—there didn't stand an innocent man among them. Even though he tried to get them to give up, it almost always came down to kill or be

killed. Many times, he had to kill an evil man to save an innocent person from being killed. That's just how it was when no law was around.

As he lay there on the bed, he started thinking about his family. He had one brother and one sister left. His ma and pa both died when he was a teenager. Closing his eyes, he could remember sitting on his ma's lap while she read him to him from the Bible. She made the Old English come alive in a country voice and heart.

His pa didn't talk a whole lot, but he taught his kids the simple truths of right and wrong. Sometimes he wished his pa was still around to help him sort out the rights and wrongs of what he did today. Had he crossed a line somewhere along the way to now be in the wrong? It could be a fine line, but it had always been his decision. He thought about the commandment—thou shalt not kill. Did God mean never? Did God mean if someone was trying to kill you or your brother or sister that you do nothing to stop them? If an innocent person was about to be killed and you do nothing, is that a greater sin than if you shoot someone to

stop them—maybe even kill them because no man is a good enough shot to always miss an artery? What if you make your living trying to stop people? Does that change anything, even if your intent is to never kill anyone, but to just stop a wrong—sometimes a deadly wrong? That feeling after the shootout when he felt his blood run cold, was that God telling him enough? Was he wrong to only feel for the innocent or the victim? Should he grieve for the killer as well? Maybe his growing sorrow meant the end of it all was near.

Eventually, he drifted off to sleep without his questions being answered. In the morning, he packed his bag and decided to head to Texas to visit his brother. A short walk to the livery and he would be on his way. As he stepped onto the wooden boardwalk in front of the hotel, he heard someone call his name. It was not a friendly voice, especially when accompanied by the sound of a gun being cocked. Instinctively, he dove behind the horse trough to his right, as bullets flew by his position. He rolled to his left and came up firing his 44. He hit the would-be assassin straight in the chest. His

first reaction after shooting the man was to look around to see if they had hit a bystander. Then another shot rang out, and Wiley felt a burning pain from his back to his chest as he fell to his knees. The man had an accomplice, and he had missed that. He always knew this day would come. Quietly, he said to himself, “Sweet Jesus, I’m coming home”. He took his last breath, confident that his questions would receive answers now.

## PROFESSOR SLICK

He came into town aboard a gilded covered wagon. There wasn't anyone around who could recollect such an ornate prairie schooner ever showing up in their small town before. A colorful banner stretched from one side of the wagon to the other highlighting the miracle products the professor had in his inventory. When the professor got off his wagon to begin his entrepreneurial oration, he gathered a crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I applaud your courage in coming forth to face whatever ails you. You, sir, in the brown vest, are you in need of a cure?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the man. “I’ve got a game leg.”

The crowd turned to look at the man to see which of their neighbors would make such a claim so public. But the man also appeared to be a recently arrived stranger.

“A game leg?” asked Professor Slick. “What if I told you that a liberal application of this salve to your leg would completely cure your leg in minutes?”

“Can it really do that?” asked the man excitedly.

“Yes, my friend,” the professor responded. “If this miracle salve doesn’t do as I say, I will give you back twice what you paid for it.”

“I’ll take it,” yelled the man, as he hobbled laboriously up to the wagon. The man then walked over to the boardwalk, sat down, and applied the salve quite liberally. Almost immediately, he ran down the street like a young calf kicking up his legs.

The crowd gasped as if Jesus himself had cleansed the man right there, body and soul. Of course, it must be said that not a lot happened in Banner City that would cause a crowd to gasp. So, such a moment must be gauged accordingly.

“You, young man. That’s a mighty impressive gun and holster you’re wearing.”



The young man nodded with pride.

“Are you fast with the draw?” probed the professor.

“Pretty fast,” answered the young man named Billy.

“Well, I have here an elixir that, if taken once a day for a week, will give you the fastest, slickest draw that anyone will ever see.”

Billy, overcome with such a possibility, looked at his friend and then said, “Okay, I’ll take one.”

It was highly likely that Billy didn’t give much consideration to the fact that Professor Slick would probably be long gone by that time.

All day long people came to the hallowed ground around the visiting prairie schooner, bringing almost every known ailment of the time. Professor Slick always slipped into his wagon and emerged with a different package that specifically addressed each problem. With his prices for his elixirs quite reasonable, those standing before him

wondered how he could manage to sell so cheaply. He declared that volume sales allowed him to be so magnanimous.

As the sun began its descent to the western horizon, the slick professor did not slow his masterful oratory. Adeptly positioning himself with the orange ball at his back, he continued with full stentorian voice. Yet he appeared different. A bright orange glow now framed his gradually darkening silhouette to the point that many thought he appeared to embody a type of transformation. Not only did his physical countenance seem to change, but his message took on a more spiritual tone.

“Madam, yes, you in the red dress. Do you feel spiritually empty?”

The woman nodded sheepishly.

“Then please come closer. I hold in my hand an elixir that will strengthen your inner resolve. It will open your eyes to a world beyond. Your spirit will feel renewed and emboldened.”

The woman had a look of hope come upon her, and she dug into her bag and pulled out one dollar in coin.

“You, sir. Do you feel like life has dealt you a bad hand of cards? Do you struggle every day just to give your family some food? If so, then I have here an elixir specially formulated with a miracle holy water straight from the land of the Bible. This little bottle will give you the strength, hope, and faith to persevere. You can trust that it will provide you with manna from heaven every day.”

The man pulled off his boot and pulled out a dollar bill. He got his holy water and left with a smile.

“Ah, I see a man of the cloth amongst you. Let me ask you a question, Reverend. Has your God provided you with everything you need for your church? Is your building sound and your membership growing?”

The reverend stood mutely.

“Then I tell you, Reverend. One drop of this faith multiplier elixir in the communion chalice

and you will notice a remarkable change in your congregation. Gifts will increase ten-fold. The pews will be full, and soon you will have to build a bigger building.”

The reverend remained silent, but he stayed to listen further. When the night grew inky, the crowd began to thin. Only one person besides the reverend remained. Soon the clergyman became a solitary figure at the feet of Professor Slick who stood on a bale of hay. The reverend glanced left, right, and to the rear. With no one in sight, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a neatly folded dollar bill.

“Ah, Reverend. I see you are indeed a man of faith.”

The next day Professor Slick left the town of hope. As his wagon kicked up a cloud of dust, he passed a solitary rider heading into town. The rider rode up to the front of the hotel and tied up his horse to the hitching post. He went inside and paid for a room for a week with gold coin.

Nothing much happened in Banner City the next week. The buoyant spirits bolstered by Professor Slick's elixirs began to fade. Yet, few could understand why. They were given such promises, such hope,

The solitary stranger who arrived in town a week earlier checked out of the hotel and walked over to the barber shop.

"What are we doing today, mister?" asked the barber.

"Just a trim," replied the stranger.

A few minutes into the trim, the barber said, "You're lucky I could work you in today. The first few days of this week I was swamped. Never had so much business."

"Slowed down now, huh?"

"Yeah, slowed down. Are you just passing through or figuring on settling down?"

"Just passing through."

"Too bad. There're some really good deals on property right now."

“Yeah? How much do you think they’d want for the whole town?”

“What? The whole town? I don’t think the whole town is for sale.”

“Are you sure?”

“No ... no, I don’t think this whole town is for sale. No ... it couldn’t be.”

“Seems to me I met the man who they sold out to leaving as I was coming into town.”

“What ... what do you mean?”

But the stranger never answered. When the barber finished up, the stranger gave him two bits and walked out the door.

“What do you think, Jarvis?” asked his friend Billy.

“I don’t know, Billy,” answered Jarvis. “You’re a lot faster than me, for sure.”

“He said I’d have the fastest and slickest draw anyone would ever see. I took his elixir for a week like he said.”

“I don’t know, Billy.”

Pulling his coat to the side, Billy said, “Hey, mister. You any good with that gun?”

The stranger squinted and stared at Billy. In a blur, Billy had a Colt 45 pointed at his face.

“I wouldn’t go down this path if I were you,” said the stranger.

“I ... I ... I’m sorry, mister,” whined Billy. “I didn’t mean nothin.”

“Well, I reckon you just temporarily lost your way,” said the stranger, holstering his gun and riding out of town.

## ENGINE #77

You could see old #77 for miles as she made her way across the prairie, thick black smoke billowing out her stack. Even when Clover Mountain hid her approach, some of the local youngsters in Harpersville could put their ears to the rails and tell you exactly when she would be arriving. Engine #77 always pulled twelve passenger cars, never more, never less. By the time she reached Harpersville, three-quarters of her seats usually held riders. After leaving that prairie town, she had two more stops in the flatlands before she headed back into the western mountains with nary an empty seat.

One fine spring day, an extra fancy coach pulled into Harpersville via the Overland Express Trail. Despite its travel over dusty prairie roads, the coach's exterior shine gave ample witness to the wealth of its owner. Four magnificent white stallions pulled it so effortlessly that it appeared to be floating on air. The coach driver sat up in such a rigid posture that one might have thought he had



too much starch in his shirt. The driver's white leather gloves gripped the polished reins with minimal exertion. With the arrival of such a wondrous sight, a crowd soon gathered around the luxurious vehicle. Why even Seth Adams, the official photographer of the Harpersville Gazette, showed up with his camera. When the door of the coach opened, the crowd gasped at the fine-looking clothes worn by the man stepping out.

As they soon found out, the wealthy man came from back east, near Boston way. When all the hoopla died down and everybody went back to their business, the young man took a stroll around town. At four o'clock in the afternoon, he was over by the train station when old #77 pulled in to pick up a load of passengers. The young man noted that no passengers disembarked from the cars for Harpersville. Fascinated by the massive locomotive and its load, he went inside the train station to inquire about ticket availability.

"We don't sell tickets here for that particular train," stated the man behind the counter. "I would suggest that you talk to the conductor about that.

I'm not trying to discourage you, but from what I've heard, the tickets are mighty expensive and hard to come by."

"Thank you for the information, sir. I believe I can manage the cost without a problem."

As the young man left the depot office, he pulled out a little black book from an inside pocket of his magnificent jacket. Flipping through the pages, he noted that his current bank balance stood at \$4,382,611.42. He had grown up in one of Boston's finest society families, so he had little concern about qualifying for a ticket.

Walking over to the conductor with full confidence, he came up to the man and asked, "Tell me, good sir, what must I do to get a ticket for this train?"

"We don't let just anybody ride this train, mister," answered the conductor. "Only a select few can get aboard."

"I've been a law-abiding citizen all my life, and I come from a family with the finest societal connections," said the young man.

“Furthermore,” continued the conductor. “The ticket for this train is very expensive.”

“My good fellow,” replied the young man. “I’m a wealthy man. How much does the ticket cost?”

“The cost for the ticket is \$4,382,611.21.”

“But that’s . . . that’s . . . all the money I have. How did you know exactly how much money I have? You want me to give you all that money for a single ride on that train?”

“No, I don’t want you to give it to me,” said the conductor. “I want you to go up to the Indian village and give it to them. They’ve had a couple of rough winters.”

The cost of the ticket proved a little too much for the wealthy young man. He left the train station and walked back to his fine coach. As the four white stallions headed east with the magnificent vehicle, the young man, all alone in the coach, leaned out the window and looked back to see old Engine #77 against the fading light of an orange sun. Thick black smoke poured out of her stack as

she headed west across the prairie toward the awaiting mountains. He could hear the faint sound of joyous song coming from the cars of the departing train until the distance between his magnificent coach and the train became too great.

*The years have produced many an opinion as to the destination of that old train. A qualified witness does not exist, as all who leave do not return. One oddity that remains is the price of the ticket. Never the same, the ticket price always works out to be everything the ticketholder possesses. Yet, the train line never takes a penny of the ticket price. That might lead one to believe that the cost to operate the train is being heavily subsidized by someone else, and anything the ticketholder has is merely excess baggage of no use to anyone at the train's ultimate destination.*

*Engine #77 has been replaced today by a sleek new diesel-powered machine, but everything else remains the same. It is my opinion that it should be a fixture on the prairies of tomorrow for*

*the course of time as we know it. The ride aboard that particular train seems to transcend everything but the sole entity of the ticketholder, or perhaps we should say the soul entity of the ticketholder.*

## ON THE TRAIL OF A POSSUM

If I may quote a frequent guest of the Chestnut City jail, one Hack Tobias, “Them possums. Theys a strange lot.”

While Mr. Tobias’s summation could be considered rather broad, it was essentially accurate. Possums are rather long in the face with a mouth full of sharp teeth. Folks often said the Good Lord gave them those extra sharp teeth so they could eat most anything they came across. And they did. Usually kind of scraggly looking, they seldom rose above lazy. They roamed the hills alone, except when family arrived. Rarely building a home of their own, the vagabonds would use an abandoned place for a while and then continue their solitary meandering through life. When the possums chose to venture into town, it was always at night so their deeds would go unseen, at least until morning.

At one time, Dawson County had a thriving population of possums, but in the last few years their number had diminished rather quickly. The

main reason for the decrease could be attributed to an efficient bounty hunter by the name of Jeremiah Duke. His name was on the verge of becoming legendary in the region.

Whenever Jeremiah reaped his reward money for ridding the county of possums, he immediately went to the local branch of the Five Card Stud Bank. Sometimes he came out of the bank with considerable interest on his investments. Other times he left sizable deposits with the trusted fiduciaries at the table.

After a heavy night of investing, the bounty hunter decided to take a walk outside the confines of the financial institution and stretch his legs. He noticed a flyer on the post outside the bank. A drawing of Harvey Possum's face preceded the details of the wanted poster.

"Good," he said to himself. "I could use some fresh capital to shore up my finances. I reckon I should get some shuteye before starting out."

He looked down the street towards the hotel and shielded his eyes from the bright morning sun.

Riding in from the east, a lone rider sitting tall in the saddle, wearing a white hat, and reining in a magnificent white stallion, came to a stop near the boardwalk. Getting down from his steed, the rider walked over to the boardwalk, picked up Eliza Macomb by her waist, and effortlessly put her on the back of his horse. He then walked his horse with her on it across the muddy street and stopped at the boardwalk on the opposite side. He once again effortlessly took her off his horse and put her on the dry boardwalk. He tipped his hat to the beautiful young maiden and got back on his horse. Miss Macomb stood awestruck and nearly fainted. She was not alone, though, as four other women on the boardwalk had the same response. It was then that the bounty hunter noticed the shiny badge on the stranger's shirt.

“Huh. A new marshal in town. I wonder why he's here.”

Jeremiah would later come to find out that the new marshal had come to Chestnut City because of the Citizens' Committee to Get Rid of Possums. As it turned out, the Committee discovered that the



balance in their rewards account sat dangerously low. They had made urgent appeals to higher ups for additional help in the apprehension of Harvey Possum. Not that they doubted the efficiency of Jeremiah Duke, but rather they thought him too good. They figured if a lawman in his official position were to capture Mr. Possum that they might not have to pay out any reward money.

Jeremiah rose early, packed up, and headed for the hills. Harvey Possum stood as the last Possum of significance in Dawson County. As such, he had a lot of experience out in the wild. He wouldn't be an easy catch.

After an hour of riding, he came to Freeman's Fork. Out of habit, he turned around and looked at the trail behind him to see if anybody was following him. He could see a lone rider kicking up a cloud of dust, which meant he had to be in a hurry. Jeremiah moved behind a rock near the fork to watch the rider. The new marshal came flying by without hesitating at the fork. He took the right side as if he knew exactly where he was going.

“Does he know something I don’t?”

The bounty hunter stuck with his hunch and took the left fork. Affirmation of his choice came when he ran into old Hack Tobias.

“Howdy, Mr. Duke,” said Hack.

“Hack. Seen any possums on the trail?”

“Uh ... Yes, sir,” answered Hack. “Earlier this morning I seen Harvey Possum a little piece up. He was sacked out in the crotch of an old Oak tree. Yeah, he was asleepin and agrinnin just like ... Well, just like an old possum.”

Jeremiah flipped a gold piece to Hack and continued down the trail.

“Uh ... Thanks, Mr. Duke. Thanks.”

About a hundred yards up the trail, Jeremiah found the old oak tree where Harvey had been, but he had left. Harvey’s mule had a distinctive shoe pattern, so he didn’t have any trouble tracking him. He lost the trail, though, when he came upon a rocky section. With boulders on either side of the path, he could only go straight ahead. He picked up

the trail again when the rocks turned back to dirt. Rounding a couple of bends, Jeremiah came to a stop. He saw Harvey straight ahead sitting on a ledge and he looked like he was thinking. Then Jeremiah saw why. A rockslide had blocked the path and Harvey had no place to go. The bounty hunter moved in slowly. When Harvey saw Jeremiah, he stood up and pulled his gun.

“Before you raise that gun any higher, Possum, you need to ask yourself one question, ‘Are you prepared to meet your Maker?’ ”

Well, we don’t know if Harvey was prepared to meet his Maker or not, but he did raise his gun and fired a shot that knocked Jeremiah off his horse. As soon as he hit the ground, the bounty hunter returned fire and put a forty-five right through Harvey’s heart.

Jeremiah tried to get up, but he couldn’t feel his legs. The pool of blood along the side of his leg kept getting bigger rapidly. He felt so weak. Something was wrong.

The trail for both the Possum and the pursuer ended on that lazy summer afternoon. We don't know if the bounty hunter was prepared to meet his Maker either. He certainly knew of the question. With the way he had lived his life, he hadn't shown much evidence to suggest that he had given serious thought to the answer.

Sometimes that's just how the story ends. None of us know when our trail is gonna run out, so I reckon we best always be prepared to meet our Maker, whether that's in ten minutes, next week, or ten years down the trail. Yep ... I reckon that's the best plan.

# THE RED LINE

Against the backdrop of snow topped mountains and still verdant valleys, one could see a fire-engine red locomotive effortlessly pulling twenty cars along on shiny rails. Obediently following the massive engine were three coal cars, three flat cars carrying logs, four box cars with unknown cargo, and nine passenger cars with one bright red caboose. Depending on your viewpoint, at times the wind would disperse the smoke from the engine back across the cars shrouding them in an ethereal mist.

It has been a point of contention among those living long enough to remember the early years of The Red Line as to the origin of the name. Was it given the name of The Red Line because of the red engine and caboose or were the red engine and caboose chosen to match the existing name of The Red Line? Since many from that early generation have departed this earth, the question is rarely

asked anymore. The current generation has mostly dealt with the question with apathy.

Of almost universal opinion of those who have ridden The Red Line is that it is a very strange ride. A cavalcade of emotions strikes the average rider – awe, wonder, bewilderment, and, yes, even fear.

My life in academic and employment circles has nurtured me in skepticism. There was one incident in my career as an investigative reporter, though, where I questioned my objectivity at discerning fact or fiction. My account of “The Ghosts of Willow Valley”, previously published in this journal, challenged my skepticism.

In two days, I shall be a passenger aboard The Red Line. Hopefully, I can make out what has made this railway gain its reputation for being strange.

It’s a cloudy day as I leave the hotel and head for the depot. The clouds, though, are of the light, fluffy nature rather than the thick and dark that are burdened with rain. Before handing my ticket to the

conductor I walked toward the front of the train to see what cars were making the trip today. The number and type of cars matched the ones I had observed two days earlier making the return trip going east. Going west today, the coal cars were empty, the flat cars carried some type of machinery, and the box cars still didn't reveal their cargo, if any. When I first observed the mixed train, I thought perhaps that was an oddity about The Red Line, but with a little research on the day before my scheduled trip, I found mixing freight and passenger cars to be done regularly, especially on more isolated routes.

I boarded the first passenger car in the lineup right behind the box cars for my ultimate destination of Morgantown. Batesville, our first stop, came into view in about one hour. Nothing appeared unusual in that brief ride. A few passengers got off and about an equal number boarded.

Distant mountains and a clear lake could be seen outside the right-side windows as we continued our journey. As the train rounded a slight curve, the lake came very close to the tracks. The freight

cars in front of us could be clearly seen in the mirror lake. But then ... then ... the passenger cars cast no mirror image, until the red caboose reflected clearly. As the train left the still lake behind, the freight car images disappeared one-by-one. The passenger cars never showed on the surface of the water. Without a doubt, this phenomenon became my first entry labeled as strange. I watched for some type of reaction from my fellow travelers, but they seemed oblivious.

Between the second and third stop, the train slowed to a crawl and blew a long, loud whistle. Those sitting on the left began pointing and talking. Since there were a few empty seats on that side, I moved over to have a look. A narrow trail clutched the side of a mountain. A stagecoach had stopped, and six passengers got off. As they approached the edge of the trail they threw small white crosses down into the ravine. Continuing to follow the path of the white crosses tumbling down the treacherous rocks, I saw dozens of broken and demolished stagecoaches with hundreds of white crosses scattered around. The mood of the travelers moved



from shock, as the reality of what they saw hit them, to hushed somberness.

As I later learned, this scene came to be known as Satan's Revenge. Legend has it that the first to tumble to an early grave were six missionaries sent to save the towns along the line from the grip of Satan. The ravine was so treacherous that no one ever attempted to recover bodies from the wreckage. The white crosses became haphazard markings of the dead where they lay. No one really knows how many above ground graves are down there.

When we reached Callison's Bluff, the train had to drop two coal cars and one box car. They let the passengers get off and go into the depot where they could freshen up and grab a meal.

Back on the move, the train soon approached the peak of the line. The rise had hardly been noticeable with the powerful red locomotive. As it started its descent, you could feel the engineer throttling her down to keep her on the rails.

We were still about ten miles from Madison Township, according to the conductor, when the track began to level out.

There wasn't much to see outside, so I began to study my fellow passengers. There were a few single men like myself. Well-dressed and professional looking, they could have been doctors, lawyers, or business tycoons – certainly not investigative reporters. The rest of the people seemed like decent family men with wives and kids – just your ordinary citizenry. The Red Line had built a reputation as a safe way to travel given the times.

Suddenly, a shot pierced the front window of our car. Someone shouted out, “Train robbers. Must be twenty or more.”

The men told their wives and children to lie down on the floor. Then, in unison, the men all pulled out weapons and began firing at the robbers. Not being armed, I was about to join the women and children when somebody threw me a gun belt. I took my place at a window and emptied the revolver, amateurish aim and all. The three men on

horseback near our car never stood a chance against the onslaught coming from inside. With no targets in our range, we stopped firing. Gunfire could still be heard from farther back. I peeked out a window and saw the same barrage coming from the other cars. The would-be train robbers were dispatched to hell quickly, whether that's theologically correct or not.

No one in our car was hit, and the bodies of the train robbers were left to the vultures. The Red Line never slowed down.

When my journey ended and I had time for more research, I came to find out that in all its history, The Red Line had never experienced any violent attack from outlaws. Why that day? Did all those mild-mannered riders always carry such heavy artillery?

I couldn't help but ask the man who had thrown me the gun belt if he always carried multiple weapons. He said, 'Not usually, but something just told him to on this day.' When others nearby heard me ask him the question, they agreed.

Everything happened so quickly and with such precision by the riders, it makes you wonder if some spiritual voice had given them such a warning. I never felt any such thought in planning my trip. Strange, indeed.

The conductor made his way to the front of our car with a broom and swept up the broken glass. The demeanor of the passengers was calm as they settled back into their seats. Not even the children seemed rattled.

When we reached Madison Township, a few of the families got off and about ten people boarded. All my objective observations momentarily left me as I noticed an absolutely beautiful young woman come into the car. Her elegant dress and fanciful hat seemed foreign after my gunfight experience. She carried herself with the bearing of wealth, so I naturally tipped my hat as she looked into my eyes. When she passed me by, I noticed that she had dropped her ticket in the aisle. Being quick to reach down and retrieve it, I saw that it said she boarded in Carpenter's Village. But this was Madison Township and Carpenter's Village

was where The Red Line began, and I had not seen her when I boarded there. The questioning spirit returned as I wondered why such a refined lady would be headed into the mining and lumber area of Morgantown. A gracious smile was my reward for returning her ticket, and I couldn't have been happier.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my ticket. It said Carpenter's Village to Morgantown, so that raised no question. Out of curiosity, I asked a couple of the other passengers that I knew had boarded after Carpenter's Village what their tickets said. Everyone's ticket read the same, 'Carpenter's Village to Morgantown'. It seemed illogical, but there must have been some reason why The Red Line did things that way. I mused about the concept of The Red Line having a fixed place in time with its origin and its destination, yet those riding the rails entered and left with a seemingly planned randomness. I decided to leave any deeper thought for later.

As the rest of the passengers exited the car, I was left alone for a moment, suddenly feeling a

cold chill. There is no hard evidence to offer, just a feeling that I wasn't alone.

## THE PONY EXPRESS

Wearing a crisp new suit and a pair of spit-shine black shoes, Jeremiah Brown boarded the train headed for Kansas City. He figured the new territories would prove ripe for a salesman's hungry appetite. Would that his enthusiasm not been so green.

Stepping off the train, Jeremiah took in a deep breath of cool prairie air. He walked to the livery stable and arranged for a horse at the meager sum of 50 cents per day. The first day's revenue from the two small towns on the outskirts of Kansas City sufficed to bolster the salesman's confidence.

The next day Jeremiah began his travels toward Johnsonville along one of the few north-south trails in that part of the state. Unfortunately, that path led him into trouble in the form of the Calhoun gang, a rough riding band of wayward youth who rejected their mama's upbringing from the get-go.

The boys took everything that Jeremiah owned and left him for dead—a beaten, bedraggled lump of flesh crumpled up against a mulberry bush along the road.

Well, it wasn't too long after the Calhouns rode away that a wagon approached the spot where Jeremiah lay. Now the occupants of that wagon were Rev. Billie Thompson and his missus, Anna Belle. Jeremiah slowly opened his eyes and tried to read the banner that hung from the side of Rev. Billie's wagon. With blurry sight, he made out the words, "The Holy Revival of Blazin Fire". The poor salesman felt a great deal of relief because he surely had a mighty need for a little reviving at the moment, even if it was one of a "Blazin Fire".

"Look, Billie," said Anna Belle. "That poor man looks hurt."

"Whoa now, hosses," yelled Billie. "I reckon he looks a might under the weather."

"What do you think happened to him, Billie?" asked Anna Belle.



“I don’t rightly know,” said the preacher. “Could be he ran amuck of some desperados.”

“Do you suppose we should see if we can do anything for him, dearest?” asked the preacher’s wife.

Looking at his watch, the reverend replied, “Well, I don’t know, Anna Belle. We gotta be in Larabee by nightfall. Folks there might get a little upset if they ain’t got no preacher for their big revival meeting.”

“I suppose you’re right, Billie, but I just feel like we ought to do something.”

Rev. Billie looked at his wife and knew she was right. Climbing down off the seat, he walked around to the back of the wagon and pulled out a piece of paper. After writing something on the paper, he walked over to the salesman. Folding the paper in half, he put it into the man’s hand. Returning to the wagon, he climbed on board and took the reins in hand.

“Come on now, hosses,” barked the reverend.

“Why whatever did you write on that paper, dearest?” asked Anna Belle.

“I left him one of our flyers with a note inviting him to come on down and join us if he got better.”

“I knew you’d think of something, Billie,” said his wife.

After another hour or so up against that mulberry bush, Jeremiah caught sight of a massive cloud of dust coming up the trail.

“Great,” muttered the salesman to himself. “Just what I need, a tornado.”

Only it wasn’t a tornado. It was something a lot worse—a thousand head of Texas Longhorns. The trail boss of that herd went by the name of Matthew Levitt. A rough-hewn, but surprisingly well-educated man from New Orleans way, his watchful eye scanned everything bordering the outline of the cattle.

“Keep ‘em away from those scrubs, boys,” yelled Matthew.

When Matthew first spotted Jeremiah, he judged the distance to be about twenty yards between them. Pulling back on the reins of his mount, he cautiously eyed the bush behind the man and then the area across the trail. Instinctively, he reached for the Winchester on the right side of the saddle. He'd seen too many ambushes set up by decoys along the trail. Not seeing any signs of hidden accomplices, he studied the poor man leaning against the mulberry bush.

As he often did, Matthew weighed his thoughts on the issue by talking aloud, "If he was a decoy, he should react more to all this dust by now. Seeing as how he's not doing anything, he's probably dead. If he's dead, I suppose we ought to bury him. But doggone it, if I don't get these cattle to market on time, the owners will have my hide. I suppose I could leave a couple of the boys here to dig him a grave, but this country's too wide open. I need everybody to hold these steers in tight. Best just let nature take care of him."

Having made his decision, the trail boss caught up to his herd and never looked back.

Jeremiah's hope for rescue dwindled on a pace with the descent of the hot sun from the highest part of the sky. He wasn't sure if that lone figure appearing on the trail was real or not. The horse moved at a full gallop with the rider sitting low in the saddle. The salesman put little stock in that pair stopping to help. He watched as the horse and rider went flying by.

About two hundred feet up the trail, the rider sat up straight in his saddle and brought his horse to a stop. He turned around and rode back to where Jeremiah sat against the mulberry bush. Jumping off his horse, the young rider ran over to Jeremiah and helped him to his feet. Though he couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds, the kid somehow got the wounded man up on the back of his horse. Bounding back up into the saddle, the kid urged his horse back into a full gallop. Jeremiah held onto anything he could grip.

During the dusty ride, Jeremiah managed to ask the kid, "Who are you?"

"Pony Express, sir."

That was all that was ever said, or at least that's all Jeremiah remembered.

When the Express rider made it to the next town, he stopped in front of the hotel. The nameless lad carried Jeremiah up to a room the company kept in reserve for its riders. He gave the desk clerk all the money he had for the doctor and then took off on a fresh horse. Two days later he returned to town on a back run. Briefly stopping to check on Jeremiah at the hotel, he gave the desk clerk some more money for Jeremiah's expenses. Then, as quickly as he came, he disappeared down the trail as if swallowed by the wind.

# THE FOUR SINGING HORSEMEN

On the twelfth night of the month the dust rose from the trail behind four magnificent horses on their way to Hilyer Mountain. Not that dust doesn't rise behind every horse traversing Skull Trail, for it is a dusty path. Even during the rainy season when the dust turns to mud, the trail returns to dust in short order between rains. These particular four horses, though, produce a unique swirl recognizable by any who knew of them. The funnels of dirt, leaves, and anything else caught up in their grip eventually rose and blended into multi-shaped clouds barely visible in the night sky.

Riding atop these horses were four men. The four men rarely looked the same from ride to ride, but they all had magnificent voices, almost haunting at times. Adding to the mystery of these four riders and horses, there lay something more surreal. On nights when the moon shone down with full light, the four appear almost translucent, as if you could see right through them.

A light snow dusted the trees of Hilyer Mountain that evening. The horsemen's destination was a solid, solitary log cabin belonging to Jeremiah Dickson. The bright, crackling fire in the old rock fireplace gave comfort to Jeremiah and his friends. One must clarify the term 'friends', for they were an unusual bunch. Raccoons, rabbits, squirrels, a skunk (though with an established protocol of safe social distancing), and even an occasional wolf taking up residence gave witness to the diversity of his friends.

Jeremiah was not a real talkative man, but his friends didn't exactly have much worldly sophistication to contribute to the conversation either. The prominent universities of New England or even Europe do not list any required courses of skunk or raccoon in their language curriculum. Never-the-less, Jeremiah has mastered the nuances of body language. When the wolf lays back his ears with a certain glint in his eyes that says, 'Don't mess with me this morning', Jeremiah lifts the quilt on his bed so the rabbit can scoot underneath.

The horsemen approached Jeremiah's cabin and began singing. They sang old hymns and gospel favorites with remarkable clarity and harmony. Their little concert lasted twenty minutes and then they disappeared behind Hilyer Mountain.

The Four Singing Horsemen repeated their musical performance for Jeremiah for seven days. Jeremiah and all his little friends gathered on the front porch every night in expectation. On the eighth day, the Four Singing Horsemen did not arrive. Jeremiah felt disappointed, but he found himself singing and humming songs during the day from the nightly concerts.

Jeremiah never saw the Four Singing Horsemen again.

The town of Millersville sat at the west end of the hills leading up to Hilyer Mountain. The streets had a mix of settlers, miners, farmers, and drifters that could be seen during the daytime. At night the only activity came from Jake's Saloon on Main Street. Considering the type of beverages



served at Jake's and the general character of his clientele, most of the citizens of Millersville paid little attention to the rumors and eyewitness accounts emanating from the establishment.

Somewhere between his fourth or fifth beer Harley Skorich looked out the saloon's front window. He noticed an eerie glow coming from the hills. Calling some of his buddies over to see, they stood silent as the glow got brighter and larger.

Riding atop four magnificent horses were four men. The four men rarely looked the same from ride to ride, but they all had magnificent voices, almost haunting at times. Adding to the mystery of these four riders and horses, there lay something more surreal. On nights when the moon shone down with full light, the four appeared almost translucent, as if you could see right through them.

The horsemen approached Jake's Saloon and began singing. They sang old hymns and gospel favorites with remarkable clarity and harmony.

Their little concert lasted twenty minutes and then they disappeared back into the hills.

The Four Singing Horsemen repeated their musical performance for the patrons of Jake's Saloon for seven days. Those inside the bar began coming outside with their beers every night for the concert. On the eighth day, the Four Singing Horsemen did not arrive. In one of the more unusual responses for saloon customers as they exited at closing time, many were singing gospel songs at the top of their voices. The words to *Amazing Grace* and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* were often slurred, but who's to say how God might have accepted them.

The Four Singing Horsemen never returned to the town of Millersville again.

Emil Cole owned a cattle ranch about three miles outside Millersville. He remained in business by being vigilant with his herd. The area had gained a reputation for cattle rustlers, so Emil

always had one of his ten wranglers on patrol every night. Bobby Smith had the duty that night.

The quiet patrol that evening seemed prolonged for the western perimeter. Not that Bobby was complaining, it just seemed a little eerie. Usually, a coyote or two made their presence known and stirred the cattle a little, but nothing so far. Then Bobby noticed a faint sound and a bright light to the east of the buildings. Riding atop four horses were four men. The four men rarely looked the same from ride to ride, but they all had magnificent voices, almost haunting at times. Adding to the mystery of these four riders and horses, there lay something more surreal. On nights when the moon shone down with full light, the four appear almost translucent, as if you could see right through them.

The horsemen stopped outside the bunkhouse and began singing. They sang old hymns and gospel favorites with remarkable clarity and harmony. Their little concert lasted twenty minutes and then they disappeared behind Bastin Mountain.

The Four Singing Horsemen repeated their musical performance for Emil and his crew for seven days. Emil and the boys lined up along the fence every night in expectation. On the eighth day, the Four Singing Horsemen did not arrive. Every night after that the cowboy on guard found himself quietly singing old gospel songs to the cattle. The entire crew swore it kept the herd calmer than normal.

As far as we know, that last night at the Bar C Ranch was the last recorded contact in the Millersville area.

Who were these sometimes glowing, sometimes translucent Four Singing Horsemen? No one knows. There were other personal notes made telling of what the people saw and heard, but even those were few and far between. Studying everything written about them, you would come away with no clear picture of what they looked like or who they were, but you would most assuredly know what they had done.

