

**THE BEST OF
FRONTIER
TALES**

Volume 1

Pen-L

Published by
Pen-L Publishing
PO Box 4455
Fayetteville, AR 72702

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Printed and bound in USA

First Edition

ISBN: 978-0-9851274-0-4

Cover art *Cowboys in the Bad Lands* by Thomas Eakins, 1888

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THE BEST OF FRONTIER TALES

VOLUME 1

PREFACE

Frontier Tales started out because I was frustrated. I had a Western short story I wanted to publish, but I couldn't find anywhere to submit it. I talked with my friend and mentor, Dusty Richards, about it. He told me how the magazine markets are drying up, how the mainstream publishers were backing away from Westerns, and about the uncertainty that's facing new authors.

I was just a beginner at this fiction writing business. I couldn't do anything to influence the mainstream media or anyone else. But in my nine-to-five world, I'm a computer engineer and websites are one of my specialties. It occurred to me that I could create an online magazine devoted to Western short stories. I couldn't rightly publish my own work there (self-publishing wasn't quite as acceptable then as it is today) but I could provide a venue for other writers. And that's what I've done.

A lot of stories have now seen the light of day and a lot of authors, new ones as well as veterans, have gotten exposure they wouldn't have otherwise. Most importantly, readers have had a chance to see some new tales. They've told me they like them. They've voted on them. Now, here are the best. Enjoy!

~ Duke Pennell, Editor

Dusty Richards –

If there was a Saturday matinee, Dusty was there with Hoppy, Roy and Gene.

He went to roundup at seven years old, sat on a real horse and watched them brand calves on the Peterson Ranch in Othello, Washington. When his family moved to Arizona from the Midwest, at age 13, he knew he'd gone to heaven. A horse of his own, ranches to work on, rodeos to ride in. Dusty's mother worried all his growing up years he'd turn out to be some "old cowboy bum."

He read every western book on the library shelves. He sat on the stoop of Zane Grey's cabin on Mrs. Winter's ranch and looked out over the "Muggie-own Rim" and promised the writer's ghost his book would join Grey's some day on the book rack.

In 1992, his first novel, *Noble's Way*, was published. In 2003, his novel *The Natural* won the Oklahoma Writer's Federation Fiction Book of the Year Award. In 2004, *The Abilene Trail* won the same award. Since then, he's had over 100 novels published, won two Spur Awards from the Western Writers of America, a Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, and was named in a True West Magazine poll as the Greatest Living Western Author.

WHEN THE JINGLE BOB JOB WAS OVER

Dusty Richards

Billy Tom Tabor was no chuck-line-riding cowboy. At fifteen, he'd been to Abilene with Herman Brooks' herd. Two more trips up the Chisholm Trail in preceding years made him a veteran of the cattle drives; next he took the job as jingle bob boss on the Half-Circle X outfit. But in a financial hard spot, old man Yarborough blew his own brains out with a shotgun and the bank dispersed the ranch and cattle.

He'd found day work with a few outfits, but nothing permanent. Short and banty-legged, he did one thing well – cowboy. But when folks learned that he'd once been a boss, they shied away from hiring him for ordinary work. Drifting through the Hill Country, a man told him about the great dance they had every Saturday night at the McFarland Flats School House.

“Where is this place and do they let strangers in?”
“Why lands sake, Billy Tom, you'd fit right in with them folks,” his new found friend assured him.

“Reckon if’n you’d make me a map, I’d ride up there and see.”

So with a good map in his mind, he took a long bath in a crick, shaved off his whiskers before a cracked mirror hung on a tree. Bought a new shirt and pants at a general store. In his still-starched duds, he rode up there on Saturday.

Arriving in late afternoon he found there was lots going on – women cooking over some hardwood fire pits, kids running about playing and screaming. Men tossing horse shoes. Looked like there soon would be a typical Texas dance and pot luck to him. He hitched his cowpony Buster to a long empty rack and then used his thumb to push his felt hat up some to look over the whole operation.

“Stranger,” someone called out and he looked around to see who she meant.

It was a tall willowy-figured woman who was waving for him to come over to her cooking operation. He quickly acknowledged her and hurried over with his hat in his hand. “What can I do to help you, ma’am?”

“I’ve got all this wood, but it’s in too big a hunks to build a hot fire. I’d trade you a couple of dances for some split wood if you’ve got the time.”

“Ma’am, I’d be proud to split you some wood.”

“I ain’t ma’am. My name’s Lorraine. Lorraine Hale.”

He made a small bow for her. “My name’s Billy Tom Tabor and I’m proud to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine. The axe is on the wagon, see it?” She pointed to the double-bitted one on the side of her unpainted farm wagon.

“Yes, I do.” He strode over, undid it, then run his thumb along the edge. It was mighty dull and the other side the

same. "You wouldn't have a file or stone to sharpen it would you?"

"It's in the side box somewhere." She indicated the tool box built on the wagon. When he raised the lid, he realized the man built it was much taller than he was. No way he could stand on the toes of his boots and ever see inside it.

"I'm sorry," she said, stepped over and produced both tools for him.

He thanked her and took them over to a large block. Man, she was tall. He doubted she was hardly impressed by a man who was too short to see in her tool box. He sunk the ax in the block and used the file, then the stone until he was satisfied that edge was sharp then he did the same to the other side of the axe.

The tools set aside, he began splitting out the block, swinging the axe above his head and each time cleaving off a block of wood was about an inch thick. Then splitting it into smaller sticks. He never noticed her coming over until she stood over him.

"Your momma must have taught you how to split wood."

"I've split enough in my day."

"Well, you do a pretty job of it." She bent over and began to gather up an armload.

"Here, I'll do that for you."

Half straightened, she met him face to face and shook her head. "I don't want you to quit busting it."

"No problem, ma'am."

She shook her head again "My name's Lorraine."

"I know and I'm working on that too."

Her laughter sounded free as she went back to her cooking pit with the sticks. He was swinging the axe hard and his

results were identical. He was busy using his foot to right a new chunk when a red-headed boy of maybe eight, with his hands drove down in his overall pockets, joined him.

“Howdy, neighbor,” Billy Tom said, letting the axe’s blow bite deep in the block. It required two more licks to split open the oak.

Then the boy spoke, “I ain’t no neighbor. My name’s Micah. She’s my maw.”

“You’re mighty fine-looking young man. Mine’s Billy Tom.”

“That’s Mr. Tabor to you, Micah,” she called out to her boy.

“Kin you dance?” Micah asked.

“I’ve danced some, why?”

“Cause mom likes to dance.”

“She does?” He spit in both hands and went back to swinging the axe.

“Yeah. She does and she don’t get to dance much.”

“Why’s that?”

“Micah, that man doesn’t need you bothering him,” she said, busy making sourdough on the wagon tailgate.

“Oh, he’s fine, ma’ – Lorraine.”

“Micah, you just go play with those boys your own age.”

Billy Tom drove the bit in a new block and then went to loading up the new supply on his arm to take to her fire. He watched Micah saunter off toward the kids playing games along the crick.

“He wasn’t hurting me none.”

She never looked at him. “I heard him talking about me. I guess I was rather forward offering you dances for my firewood.”

“No, you needed wood and I needed to meet you.”

She blushed. "His father was killed at the end of the war in Mississippi. Micah never knew him. He was only two when Matthew died."

"War did some terrible things to folks."

"Half the men folks around here never came home."

"I see why there isn't anyone to dance with up here."

"How old are you?"

"Does it matter?"

She clapped her hands of the flour from kneading the dough. "I'm a lot older than you are."

"I'm twenty-one."

She chewed on her lip. "I guess three years ain't much."

"Naw, I've been on my own since I was fourteen."

"What brought you up here?"

"A man down in Benderville said you all had a fine dance and supper up here every Saturday night."

"We do." She moved to grease her Dutch oven.

"I imagine you do have a swell one. Do you have a place?"

"I do."

"Who chops your wood for you at home?"

She shrugged.

"I'd say you do."

"Most of it. How do you know that?"

He chuckled. "That axe were so dull it must have worn you out to use it."

She laughed and tossed back her light brown hair with the back of her hand. "It was dull alright."

"You have stock? A farm?"

"I try to do that. An old Mexican works for me – Juan. He's a big help and I can hire some cowboys for roundup." She wrinkled her slender nose. "They don't like women in

their cow camp. I've been running things for five years – even longer than that since he went off to war.”

“A pretty woman like you should have found a man by now.”

She looked a little affronted by his words until he realized he'd been talking out loud what he'd been thinking. How could he fix that?

“I didn't mean nothing bad or disrespectful about you –”

“Oh, I've met men I thought I liked. But –”

“You don't have to explain to me, Lorraine. I've met women before and hard as I tried they never worked out.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I'm looking for work. Folks hear that I've been a boss once they won't hire me 'cause they figure that doing work would be beneath me.”

“Handy as you are at sharpening tools and all, I bet you could find a job around here.”

“I'll look for one. And Lorraine, if I'm too short to dance with you, you don't owe me no dances.”

“Too short. Why Billy Tom, I'd be proud to dance with you.”

That settled, she baked her biscuits in the Dutch oven. Later he helped her haul the food up to the school house. At the plank tables she introduced him to every one of the women. And he could tell they were too polite to question him much, except one sharp eyed hen who asked, “Where are you from Mr. Tabor?”

“Waco.”

Acting satisfied, she nodded. “I have kin up there. My uncle Clarence Barr.”

“He's a blacksmith or was the last time I was there.”

That satisfied her and she went back to straightening out the various dishes. The aroma filled his nose. He'd only eaten a snatch or two of beef jerky that day and his belly walls were rubbing together inside. But it wouldn't be long till they went to serving.

One gal swishing a fly away said, "It'll all be cold and spoil if they don't get in here soon."

The preacher gave a long prayer and the line started. Lorraine pushed him in place. "This is no place to be bashful."

"I'll try not to be."

Why did he feel so comfortable in her presence? He was a head shorter than her but it didn't seem to bother her. Still, he didn't want to get his hopes too high. Micah came in and stood in front of him.

"You wash your hands, young man?" she asked, turning around.

"Of course."

"Good, now mind your manners."

"Yes, mother."

Billy Tom winked at him and the boy grinned like they shared a big secret.

Supper went well. The three of them sat on a bench along the wall and Micah told him who everyone was and where they lived. It was like rain water on a duck's back. He shed lots of it. After all that he could eat and pecan pie on top of that, the musicians started up.

He worried a lot about having two left feet and even gave a small prayer that his boots didn't get tangled up. And when the lead fiddle player struck up the waltz, he rose and bowed to her – then they joined hands and went whirling around the floor like feathers. He felt as tall as he'd ever been in his

life and they made great dance partners.

To his shock, no one asked her to dance. So they spent the entire night dancing and sipping lemonade during breaks. When it was over he couldn't believe it had happened nor could he recall anything they'd even talked about.

Going back to her wagon, he led his cowpony Buster up to be hitched with her team. Then she undid his bedroll while he stripped open the girths. "This ain't going to ruin your reputation, me sleeping up here tonight?"

"No, but thanks for thinking of me."

"No problem."

Micah in bed in the wagon, they stood loosely holding each others' hands under the starlight.

"Matthew had big plans for our place. "Course a woman by herself could never do all that."

"The place must have lots of potential."

"It does. I have some good bottom land that grows corn. I can't farm it all and I have lots of pasture under wire and stake fence to keep in my goats and sheep. I run about fifty mother cows on the range land."

"Sure must be lots of work for you."

"It sure beats working for the other fellow."

He shrugged. "If a man could even find work."

"I can tell. You aren't afraid of work."

With a bob of his head, he agreed. "I guess I'm not."

Then he did something he never figured out how he ever did – he reached up and pulled her face down and kissed her.

After they parted, he said, "I ain't much of a man, but I'm wiry."

"Billy Tom Tabor don't you ever say that about yourself again."

“I won’t. Cross my heart and swear to die.”

Three weeks later they were married at the McFarland Flats Schoolhouse. Over the years, Billy Tom and Lorraine Tabor built a large ranch up there in the hill country. And he always blamed losing his job as jingle bob boss as what brought them together.

Micah, who he adopted and changed his name to Tabor, followed in his boot steps and made the TYT ranch even bigger. There’s a large marble marker in the cemetery by the school house. It says *They met at a dance and waltzed all over Texas together.*

The End