

THE BEST OF FRONTIER TALES

Volume 1



Featuring stories by Dusty Richards

Terry Alexander ~ Greg Camp ~ Pamela Foster

Nancy Hartney ~ J. B. Hogan ~ Kenneth Mark Hoover

Ellen Gray Massey ~ Kenneth Newton ~ Larry Payne

John Putnam ~ Kathi Sprayberry

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FRONTIER
TALES**

Volume 1

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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

BROTHERS UNDER THE SKIN

Kathi Sprayberry

On a cool mid-March evening, long after the decent, law-abiding citizens of Tombstone had taken to their beds, Morgan Earp pushed through the batwings of Campbell & Hatch's Saloon. Thumbing back his Stetson, he crossed the expanse of beer stained floorboards to where older brother, Wyatt, and their gambler friend, Doc Holliday, played pool.

"Sorry it took so long," Morgan said. "Lou felt uneasy about my leaving."

"One of these days," Doc drawled.

"Don't finish that thought." Wyatt lobbed a pool cue across the table. "Go ahead and break, Morgan. I don't have much time before I have to make my rounds."

A badge proclaiming Wyatt's position as Tombstone's City Marshal decorated his black coat. The mayor placed it there three months ago, after an ambush nearly killed another of their brothers, Virgil.

"Things heating up again?" Morgan lined up his shot.

"Not really." Wyatt sighed. "Sure wish Behan would settle the cowboys."

"Just an observation," Doc drawled. "Seems like you

and those good old boys are more alike than you realize.”

“Right.” Morgan laughed.

Comparing the invincible Earps to the cowboy gang was unbelievable. Doc knew better. He and Wyatt were long time friends since the gambler foiled an attempt on Wyatt’s life. Folks often said where they found one the other showed up eventually.

“Look at that fool.” The shout came from across the street.

Doc sidled across the room and peered through an oiled paper window.

“Trouble’s brewing.”

“Tell me about it.” Wyatt squinted at the windows. “Do you see miners or cowboys?”

“A bunch of miners hasslin’ Billy Claiborne.” Doc snickered. “Probably giving him a hard time about his unnatural ways. Ain’t right, a man wanting to be with another man.”

“Bet there’s no sign of Behan.” Morgan moved for a better angle.

“You nailed it,” Doc said.

“We might get home before sunrise.” Morgan pulled back the stick.

As he slid it forward, a boom rocked the room. Burning pain lanced his back.

He clutched the table, his fingers digging into the green felt.

Pain spread in all directions and Morgan gasped. Another shot penetrated the fuzziness blanketing him. Doc dove under the table. Wyatt brushed a hand through his hair and turned toward the wall, his features stretching into anger at the sight of the bullet riddled planks.

“Wyatt, get over here.” Doc scrambled to his feet.

DOUBLE EVENT

Terry Alexander

The woman tugged the laces of her best high-topped shoes, tying them in an even bow. "Come on, Ester. Get moving. We need to get there early, give the men a good look at us."

"Do you really think this will work?" Ester tugged the blue dress over her head.

"I've been around a few hangin's and believe me, business always picks up after." She studied her reflection in the small cracked mirror above the night table.

"I've never been to a hanging before, Lola. What's it like?"

"You're not there to watch. You're there to be seen." She smoothed the wrinkles in her dress, a full-skirted yellow outfit worn thin at the sleeves. "They'll remember you later when they get some liquor."

"How do I look?" She pranced from behind the oilcloth partition, her bare feet kicking dust from the floor as she danced circles around the small room.

"Pretty, very pretty." Lola nodded her approval. "Take a couple drops of arsenic with some water. It'll make you look younger. Men like being with a young woman."

"I don't like arsenic." Ester frowned. "It makes me light-

headed.”

“It’ll help bring in the customers.”

Ester nodded, her face wrinkled with distaste.

“Be sure you wear those new stockings, and clean up your shoes. You’re gonna give these men something to look at.” She stroked the younger woman’s red hair. “It’ll be worth it when we get to a big city. You’ll be in big demand. We’ll make a wagon load of money.”

“Where are we gonna go?” Ester asked.

“Anywhere but here,” Lola said. “Someplace where a woman can get an even chance, where we won’t be dollar whores.”

Ester rolled her eyes; she had heard it all before. Make your money, get out of the business while you’re young, find a man and settle down. Deep in her heart she knew Lola was right, but it was hard to see tomorrow from a one room shanty with oilcloth partitions separating the beds.

“Really, where are we going?”

“California; someplace by the ocean, or maybe New Orleans.” A red flush crept up Lola’s face. “Someplace where we have a chance. You’re too pretty to be working these cribs.”

“I hope this works.” Ester pulled an old brush with several missing bristles through her hair. “I want to leave El Paso, get out and see the world.”

“Remember to smile, show your teeth, bat those green eyes, and we’ll have them lined up at our door.” Lola smiled; the crow’s feet stood out prominently around her eyes. “Believe me, when a man’s little general stands at attention, they’ll follow him into battle and the devil take the consequences.”

Ester’s hand covered her mouth, stifling her laughter.

WINDWARD ROCK

Greg Camp

Dowland sat fingering the butts of his Navy revolvers, wondering how much longer he would have to wait. He was sitting on a shelf of rock a man's height down from the top of the mesa, looking out at the rolling hills and sloping plateau a hundred feet below. The shelf jutted out into the air from the nearly vertical western wall.

Below, the sheriff's men worked their way toward him. They were well out of rifle shot – two miles, at least – but still crouched low and darted from juniper tree to rock to new juniper tree. Did they think that this cover kept him from seeing them, or were they always cowards under the light of the sun?

That sun was three hours from setting. The sheriff and his twenty sucklings would surround the mesa soon enough and sit out of range until dark. Only then would they attack, and Dowland knew that whether or not Morrison showed up, it was going to be a long night.

He stood and stretched, thinking about calling out a greeting when Sheriff Carver got within earshot, but figured that neighborliness had no part to play here. He had seen to it

that the sheriff knew where to find him, and he was in no mood for any more gifts. He might have offered the sheriff a horse, like the Saracen knight that he had read about in his history lessons, but someone had already killed his, and that score would be settled tonight along with the total bill.

He climbed from the shelf to the top of the mesa. Had he had his choice of where to fight it out with the sheriff and his men, this mesa would not have been it. There were three easy ways to the top and not much cover, but Dowland smiled, remembering the wisdom that his father had shared with him eighteen years ago that if we could choose the time and place of all of our battles, we would never get around to fighting them.

Of course, his father had said this on the day that the younger Dowland had passed the bar examination, but there were many kinds of battles, and this coming fight was of his choosing. He had led the sheriff out here, rather than letting him be distracted by the possibility of doing greater mischief elsewhere. There were times when a man had to be ready to take a bullet or to give one. Dowland had survived four years of that kind of time, and after coming west, he knew that he would see such times again.

He had had no immediate thought that this was one of them when he was passing through Santa Fe on his way to somewhere else. He just happened upon his friend, Billy Morrison, one evening outside of town.

As he did every day, he had gone out of immediate civilization for a session with Alpha and Omega. That late afternoon, he had set up a coffee tin on the branch of a juniper tree and a spent whiskey bottle on another, both thirty paces away. His first shot at the can had tipped it on its

APACHE GOLD

Kenneth Newton

Sgt. Sam Gage stopped his mount alongside Capt. Harlan Drake's horse. "Cap'n, you reckon we might git lucky enough to find the gold and git gone without runnin' into that big Injun?"

"That would be OK with me, Sam," Drake replied, studying his map. "But right now I'm more worried about Yanks. I think we're already a lot closer to Fort Craig than I want to be. When we clear these hills, we'll bear southwest and put those mountains between us and the fort." He rolled the map and scanned the countryside. "But Milagro could be anywhere out here."

The remnants of Troop B, First Texas Volunteer Cavalry, were in a high desert valley with scattered patches of prairie grass, dotted with clumps of pinion pine and juniper shrubs. They were trying to stay close enough to the hills to be seen, but far enough away to avoid an ambush.

Sgt. Gage spoke up. "Ya figger that 'pache will take us fer soldiers in these rags?"

Drake had to agree that in his tattered gray tunic with its faded gold piping, he only slightly resembled a uniformed

soldier. He wore a Confederate cavalry officer's hat and sported the requisite beard. He had lived his life clean-shaven before the war, but there were things that took too much time and effort for a soldier more than two years in the field, and shaving was one of them. The gray whiskers made him look older than his years, but he was long past worrying about such things.

In their butternut homespuns, his men looked more like hard-scrabble farmers, save for the makeshift stripes on their sleeves. "He'll know we're soldiers. He would've seen the stars and bars, or something similar, back in '62." He glanced up at the white flag high above Sgt. Gage's head. "And we know he's come in to talk under a white flag before. Let's hope he's willing to do it again, because he's bound to have us outnumbered. According to Colonel Becker, O'Kelly counted a good forty warriors and a village of around two hundred all together."

Drake's conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Ellis Becker had taken place more than three months before and a good 2,000 miles away. Drake had been summoned to the colonel's tent at their winter encampment near the Shenandoah Valley. "Captain," Becker said, warming his hands at his small stove, "it's no secret the Confederacy is strapped. It's near impossible to fight defensively, let alone wage a campaign. There's damn little forage to be found, and we're running short of everything from ammunition to shoes."

"Yes, sir," Drake said, "including payroll."

Becker arched his brow. "You and your Texans are being paid every month, according to the paymaster, just like everyone else attached to my Division."

"True enough, sir, and we're not mercenaries, but every-

WHITE HAWK

Kenneth Mark Hoover

I walked between the bodies. Everyone was dead. Horses, dogs, men.

The smoke from the burning wagons towered like black pillars against the blue, unwinking sky. Canvas from the canopy ribs snapped and tore in flaming shreds. Sometimes the wind moaned through the broken wheels like a ghost trying to find his way home.

There were a lot of ghosts here.

Jake leaned forward in his saddle. "I don't know why we live here, Marshal Marwood. The desert . . . it kills people."

A young girl lay at my feet. Her green dress was torn. "The desert didn't do this, Jake."

"Apache? Savage enough. And they didn't just count coup."

I studied the arrow in the back of a man. He was face down, holding the girl. He had tried to protect her with his last breath. Her father, maybe, or brother.

I put my boot against him, took hold of the shaft and pulled it free. "Look at this point, Jake, and the fletching. That's not Apache."

“Navajo.” He tossed the arrow away. “That’s not like them. They’re mostly peaceful folk.”

“Someone made them mad.” I took the reins from Jake and swung into my saddle. “We’d better find out why.”

“But, Mr. Marwood, we’re riding to Las Cruces to pick up a prisoner. Sheriff White is waiting with transfer papers.”

“Henry White can hold that man a while longer. If renegades jumped the reservation, they might hit Haxan next. They’re headed in the right direction. We can’t let that happen.”

I had come a long way through time and wind and dust to make sure something like that never happened. Either to the town, or her.

We followed the unshod pony tracks. It was hard to judge on the hard earth, but it looked like twenty or thirty horses in the war party. “A good sized group, Jake, moving fast.”

“Lucky thing we were skirting Crooked Mesa to the east or we’d have never found them.” He turned round in his saddle. “Six wagons. And they didn’t have time to circle up and defend themselves.”

I pointed to a hillock a hundred yards away. “Looks like the war party came over that rise. Let’s ride that way.” Jake pulled his rifle from his boot. The desert was quiet around us. We were holding our breaths, too.

I was thinking about the dead girl. Her hair was long and black. Just like Magra’s.

“My stars, can you imagine what it was like?” Jake whispered. “Thirty men on war ponies screaming out of the sun. It’s enough to freeze your blood.”

“That’s enough, Jake.”

“Yes, sir.”

AND HELL CAME WITH HIM

Larry Payne

Lightning streaked the darkened sky above the solemn group around the grave. The Preacher, standing at the head of the grave, read passages from his worn Bible as four men, dressed in black suits, grasped the ends of the two ropes stretched under both ends of the wooden coffin. Slowly, they moved the coffin over the open grave and began to lower it.

A woman's white-gloved hand appeared from the coffin, sliding the lid to the side. She reached out to the group above.

"WIL, NO. DON'T LET ME GO."

Wil Sunday sat upright in his bed. With a chill running over his sweat soaked body, he looked around the moonlit bedroom. The recurring nightmare was a frequent part of his nights since he buried his beloved wife, Cassie.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat staring at the floor. Finally rising, he lifted his pants from the chair next to the bed and stepped into them. Running his fingers through his hair, he walked from the bedroom to the front door.

The cool night breeze greeted him as he walked out and sat down on the edge of the porch, looking up at the full

moon amid the dark blanket of twinkling stars. His big, brown dog, Buck, who had followed him out the door, lay down next to him, resting his head in Wil's lap. Wil looked around the yard, and the events of that tragic day flooded back to him.

Wil was repairing a harness in the barn when the three gunmen rode up to the house. Buck's barking brought him out of the barn. Seeing the three riders, he went to the front of the house.

"Howdy," said the rider closest to Wil. The first to speak, Wil figured this was the leader.

Wil walked up beside Buck, who was growling at the new arrivals, and patted him on the neck to calm him down. He looked at each of the three riders in turn, all hardcases.

"Your dog's a mite unfriendly," added the gray-haired rider.

"He doesn't like strangers. What can I do for you fellas?"

Just then, Cassie walked out of the house onto the porch. Her appearance got the attention of the four outlaws.

"I think you and your missus can do quite a lot for us."

Suddenly, Wil wished he hadn't left his rifle in the house. With a slight nod of his head, he motioned Cassie back into the house.

"I've got work to do, so I'd be obliged if you'd water your horses and be on your way."

"Yeah, so do we," said the outlaw, drawing his Colt as his two companions dismounted.

Wil dove as the outlaw fired, feeling an intense pain in his side. Despite the burning pain, he tried to get up. The outlaw fired a second time, hitting Wil in the shoulder, knocking him to the ground again.

SPLIT NOSE

Terry Alexander

Trey Dunlap saw the stream through the tree-cover, sunlight reflected off the water's smooth surface. Twilight was hardly an hour away. It would be good to camp by fresh water, get a rabbit or squirrel, eat a hot meal and watch the evening sky. A movement in the underbrush caught his attention. His hand dropped to the pistol at his side. The Nations were well known to host horse thieves and murderers.

A loud commotion came from a thicket of wild plums near the water's edge. He saw the red dots of ripened fruit long before he saw the source of the ruckus. A mouse-gray horse stamped its hooves, pawing at the dirt.

Trey looked at his immediate surroundings, searching for a campfire or an injured rider. On closer inspection, the gelding had traveled a long distance; the dry sweat on its coat gave it a dull unhealthy look. The saddle had slipped, riding under the animal's belly. The stirrups dragged along the ground.

He slipped off the black horse and approached the gelding, unsure how the animal would react.

“Easy fella,” he said softly. “I’ll have you out of there in a jiffy.”

His hand moved slowly, touching the gray’s hind leg. His fingers traced the outline of an S burned into the flesh. The muscles rippled beneath the hide, the horse snorted and sidestepped away from his touch.

“Take it easy,” he said, his voice low. “Give me a minute and I’ll have you loose.”

He rubbed the gray’s back, moving his hand up the backbone. The horse flinched, its front hooves working the loose earth.

“Just a little more.” He patted the gelding’s shoulder, rubbing along the neck to the jawbone and down to the reins.

“Almost there,” he said. “This is the tricky part.”

He tugged the gray’s head toward the ground; gaining him enough slack to loosen the reins from the base of the plum tree.

“We’re gonna be friends, you and me.” He rubbed the animal’s nose, finding an old wound that ran from his nostril halfway to the eye.

“I see you found split-nose.” A rough voice spoke behind him. “I’ve been looking for that lunkhead for two days.”

Trey froze at the words, his hands moved away from his body. “I ain’t stealing this horse. I found him tangled up in the trees.”

“Relax; I’m not looking to gun you down. Turn around and let me get a look at you.”

“Don’t do anything hasty.” Trey moved slowly, taking care to keep his hands visible. “Name’s Trey Dunlap. I’m traveling up to Colorado. Heard about the gold strike around Cripple Creek.”

LAST RIDER: NOPAL, TEXAS

by J. B. Hogan

When Moses Traven crossed over into the Territory from Fort Smith, he had every intention of avoiding the Boston Mountains in the north of Arkansas. He planned to skirt those hard-to-ride hills and the rest of the Ozarks altogether until picking up the old trail in southwest Missouri that led to the one-time trailhead town of Sedalia. Mose hoped there might still be work there.

During his first full day out of Fort Smith, however, Mose's plans changed – and changed quick. From out of nowhere, an early norther blew up across the flat lands of the Territory and drove him south towards Texas.

Riding into the little town of Nopal at daybreak, the norther still on his heels, Mose headed Buster, his dependable buckskin, for the usual place he figured he could hole up and ride out the weather – the local livery stable. Remembering the kindness of Henry Hallow, the blacksmith and stable man back in Fort Smith, Mose hoped the Nopal smithy would run just as friendly an establishment. It turned out be a false hope.

“One dollar a night,” this blacksmith grunted, not even looking at Mose, who had reached his hand out for shaking.

“You sleep on the hay you feed your animal.”

“One dollar?” Mose questioned.

“Take it or leave it,” the blacksmith said. Mose turned Buster to go. “Six-bits.” Mose kept Buster moving. “Four-bits.” Mose reined in Buster and backed him up.

“Clean hay for my horse and for me.”

“Suit yourself. Four-bits.”

Mose dug in his shirt pocket and came up with the money.

“Put the animal in the middle stall across there,” the blacksmith said curtly.

“That’ll do,” Mose said, nodding his head.

What a difference between good old Henry in Fort Smith and this character. The man still hadn’t even looked at Mose, much less introduced himself or asked who Mose was.

After unsaddling Buster and giving him a good currying, Mose climbed up to the stable loft and found some clean hay to lay his bedroll on. He dug in his saddle bags for some jerky he’d bought in Fort Smith and after eating a couple of chunks of it, lay down for a rest.

Around dusk the smith stopped his banging and clanging below and left the stable. Mose tried to sleep but it was just too early. Instead he closed his eyes and daydreamed about riding a wide, sure-footed trail into a land of high green grass and tall thick trees. He could see a small creek running alongside the trail and there were small mountains, not much more than hills, in the blue distance and a –

Suddenly, Mose opened his eyes, quickly out of his daydream. Someone was in the stable below.

It had turned dark and Mose couldn’t see the floor or stables very well but he heard Buster snort and dig at the ground with his hooves. Carefully reaching for his .36

BOTTOMLESS BARTLETT'S BEAUTIFUL BRIDE

John Putnam

I stood there idly wiping clean glasses with a dirty bar rag and watching my only customer shovel food down his maw like a hungry grizzly bear after a long winter nap. Bottomless Bartlett they called him and the man could pack enough grub away in one day to feed Kearny's Army of the West for a week. He ate all the time and never seemed to get enough. No doubt he was a big fellow, at least a head taller than anyone in San Francisco and not an ounce of fat on him. Bartlett was as fit as a fiddle and proud of it.

Six eggs scrambled together with hot chili peppers, four pork chops each half as thick as your little finger is long, a loaf of fresh bread smothered in a pound of butter, three plates of refried Mexican beans, all washed down with a pot of coffee and five pints of beer. Now, if all that wasn't enough, he hollered for my cook to bring him dessert. Right away Rafael burst out the kitchen door with a plate full of apple pan dowdy and Bartlett dug right in like he hadn't seen food in a month.

"Bartlett, why don't you find a good woman and settle

down? You could save a small fortune just eating at home,” I said, knowing as soon as the words passed my lips that I had stepped in a deep pile of fresh horse leavings.

“Aw, Willie, you know there ain’t no woman around gonna marry me. Heck, I just ain’t good looking enough for any of the gals I know.”

There it was. The south end of a northbound mule looked better than Bartlett and had more brains to boot. His ears were too big, his nose too small, his muddy brown hair had never met a brush or a comb and lay on his head like a rat’s nest on top of the gnarly stump of a broken down pine tree. Bartlett was as homely as they come.

But I’d already stepped in it. I had to keep going no matter how much it stank. “You spent two years in the gold country, Bartlett. Can’t you cook for yourself?”

“Never got much past bacon and flapjacks,” he mumbled, his mouth full of pie.

“Well, there ought to be one woman in this town you’d take a fancy to,” I said before I’d thought. There must be ten or twenty men for every gal in town. If any one of them wanted to get married, and most didn’t, they had their choice – and ugly Bottomless Bartlett wouldn’t be at the top of any girl’s wish list.

“Aw, Willie, them women is always talking at me, ordering me around. Even when I was a kid, with my Ma and three older sisters, it was Bartlett do this, Barlett don’t do that. Day after day they’d nag at me, run me ragged – dang near drove me batty. Finally I packed up and left for California. Ain’t met no woman here who didn’t want to boss me around like an old plow horse either.”

I couldn’t help but think that was because he was dumber

FREEDOM FORD

Ellen Gray Massey

As Walking Owl paddled around the bend in the icy Osage River, he was surprised to see a woman wrapped in a faded comforter fishing from the river bank.

Quietly, the Osage nosed his canoe into the soft mud bank and stabbed his paddle into the river bottom to arrest his movement. He did not want to startle her by his sudden appearance.

Back on one of his infrequent trapping trips to the Blue Mounds area to visit his ancestral grounds near the grave of his grandfather, he was traveling upstream to check his catch.

So that the woman would not think he was an outlaw or a Jayhawker, he shed his wool coat and felt hat and searched through his knapsack for his Osage headband and leather jerkin. He reasoned she would not be afraid of an Indian as White-Osage relations in this area had always been amicable; the Osages had peacefully moved to Kansas and only occasionally returned to trap. He had been careful this trip to avoid notice because of the troubles between the Missourians and the Kansas Jayhawkers over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. Preacher Jim

Anderson and John Brown often raided these western border counties of Missouri to kidnap slaves and take them back to Kansas. Encouraged by the growing hostility and unrest, other men used slavery as an excuse to raid, rape, and kill.

The borderland in 1858 was not a safe place for anyone, let alone Indians and Blacks.

As he purposely rattled the steel traps in his canoe, Walking Owl paddled around the bend in full sight. The woman jerked up, stumbled in the folds of the comforter, and dropped her pole.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Walking Owl’s soft voice came from the opposite side of the river. His English was perfect. “I am Walking Owl of the Osages on a trapping trip. I met Caleb Watson here two years ago and he gave me permission to trap.” The woman’s rigid pose relaxed as soon as she heard his cultured voice. “Are you Watson’s wife?” he asked.

“Yes.” She expelled her pent up breath. “I’m Etta Watson. Caleb spoke about you.”

Walking Owl remembered that Watson had just built his house and with the help of his two slaves had broken some of the prairie sod on his farm. He knew the richness of the area. His people had lived for generations on this borderland of the eastern hardwood forests and the western prairie. He was a child when his chief moved the tribe to Kansas.

He remembered something else from his casual meeting two years ago. Watson was letting his slaves pay for their freedom by their labor. The couple should be free by now.

A bite on the line pulled Etta’s pole down the mud bank. She grabbed too late. The pole hit the water and, tugged by the fish, started down the river. With dexterous strokes from his paddle, Walking Owl retrieved the pole. In seconds, a

OZARK CHILD

Pamela Foster

The air carries the first soft hint of spring, warmer than past mornings with a promise of awakening red dirt. I scramble out from under the Double Four Patch quilt my mama sewed specially for me from calico sacks as soft against my skin as the white flour they held. The pine boards are cold on my bare feet as I pad to the window. When I was little, this here window was bigger than my whole head and I could stand flat-footed and look out onto the hills that are the silent guardians of our life.

In spring and summer my morning greeting is thick green, each fall my view is speckled with oranges and yellows, and in winter I see black trees that reach their naked branches to heaven as though they're praying to God for an end to the infernal cold. This morning I hike up my nightgown so as not to get it dirty before kneeling and pressing my face against the cold glass.

The mud puddles in the yard shimmer like old silver mama packed with her all the way from Illinois when she and my daddy came here nine years ago. Beauregard is already in

the field behind the barn, his black nose to the ground, his stubby tail aiming for the sky. I can hear my daddy on the front porch stomping his boots on the bottom step. The milking done, he's coming in to breakfast.

I pull my nightgown over my head quick as I can but the cold air still tickles my skin with goose bumps before I can pull on my last year's Christmas present (I pretended it was a surprise even though I watched my mama knit that green sweater for practically every night the whole month of November). Mama says next year, when I turn ten, I have to start wearing dresses, but with one more year of freedom promised me, I step into the overalls mama cut down from daddy's after he wore them plumb out at the knees and seat.

I am itching to get outside with Beau but I know any exploring will have to wait until after breakfast and chores. I climb down the stairs barefoot, knowing my boots and socks are waiting warm as toast beside the wood stove where mama is just now lifting a flapjack from the cast iron fry pan to my plate.

By the time I've helped clear the breakfast dishes, swept the front porch, and filled the kindling box, the sun has melted the silver puddles into ordinary red slush. Mama is kneading bread for dinner when I reach inside the front door, snatch my jacket from its hook and wave to let her know I'm headed for the woods. She flutters a floury hand of dismissal at me. Beau and I don't wait for her to think of any more chores. We make our escape across the hard packed dirt of the yard.

Daddy is stringing fence. I stop a while and watch a flock of young crows as they make themselves a torment to him. The shiny black birds squawk and caw and fly in a disorga-

THE WHITE OAK'S TALE

Nancy Hartney

The white oak tree had grown on a sweet grass knoll at the edge of the plains for more than a hundred years. It stood against endless wind, grew great and unbending through drought-brown summers and savage, slashing winters. It tolerated these hardships. But, the ancient grandmother suffered mightily under the meanness fostered on it as a hanging tree.

Elijah Red Horse found his brother Micah Little Fox hanging from a stout limb late in the afternoon, two days after the noose tightened around his neck, choking off life. Crows plucked out blood-filled eyeballs, leaving empty sockets staring sightless across the grass sea. These and other scavengers gnawed on the man, ravishing his humanness, leaving only ripped clothes and the medicine bag to identify the earth-red body.

Elijah did not fault the crows or other creatures picking morsels from his brother. They were part of the greater ebb and flow of life around mother earth. The medicine bag held the essence of the dead man.

Nor could Elijah fault the bay mare that bolted away from

some cowboy's quirt, leaving her rider to strangle blue. He could not even fault the hired hand from whose wrist that same quirt might still dangle. The fault lay between Micah and the man that commanded the riders.

Elijah legged his horse toward the dangling corpse. The dun gelding snorted and whirled away from the death scent several times before he could be maneuvered close enough for the hanging rope to be cut. The man carefully lowered his brother back to earth, although there was no longer a need for gentleness.

A half-breed, he honored his Indian blood by wrapping the dead body in a saddle blanket and placing him high in the grandmother's arms. Dry, hot wind whispered a death song. It curled around the grandmother oak with her burden, spilled down the knoll and sank into the rolling waves of grass.

Elijah found a trail of unshod horses herding cattle, accompanied by a wagon with a bent wheel. He saw that, for two days, Micah had ridden point for the wagon and riders. He had helped butcher a cow. The group divided the cattle and splintered into several small groups, moving west and north into Indian Territory. Micah took nothing when he rode alone toward the southeast and Fort Smith.

Sign told a tale of shod horses striking Micah's track and a running struggle ending at the ancient tree. Elijah's white blood curdled and cried for revenge. His Indian blood understood a story of hunger and desperation.

A day slid past before he tracked Micah's bay and shod horses to a corral at Jess Young's River Y Ranch. A lavender dusk had crept across the hard-pack ranch yard by the time