

# **PRIMER FOR BOOK I**

## **THE SNOWS**

Intent on escaping into the mountains, Bill Durban found himself fighting for survival in an early winter storm, and meeting a surly mountain man also caught out by the snows. Bill and his horse struggle through deepening drifts in a desperate attempt to reach the sheltered valley below. The snowy western mountains in which he found himself are the source of all the water that fills the western rivers that enabled hordes of new settlers to thrive. But that lofty appreciation did not, for one moment, lessen the notion that being winter-bound in these mountains was a risk-laden enterprise. One that threatened to freeze to death any unprepared fool wishing to test mettle and luck when a single blinding snowstorm could hide draws deep enough to swallow man and beast.

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## **THE TERRITORY**

Before statehood arrived to the West the land was divided into Territories that were largely independent but generally overseen by the U.S. Federal Government. Initially, all of the West was unorganized until Oregon Territory was organized in 1848, created from land claimed by several European nations and Russia. Washington Territory, up until the creation of Idaho Territory in 1863, was a vast swath of land filled with mountainous timber and hidden minerals all the way from the Pacific Ocean to the Continental Divide. Here it was that the source of much of the West's power began; first from trapping, then gold that drew people West in search of riches and to fund the Civil War, and then from timber and the great torrential rivers that enabled populous cities to exist in a string of arid deserts south and west of the Great Basin. But in 1862 it was a wild, open, uncivilized place, though not for long. As civilization surged West the Territory became ungovernable and was destined to shrink, sectioned off first into Idaho and then Montana Territories, which took a large western slice from the open plains of Dakota Territory. But for this story, Montana did not yet exist.

..... 9 - 15

## **THE VALLEY**

The valleys found in these beautiful untouched lands were created eons ago by the surrounding volcanic rock, and the fertile grounds excavated smooth by retreating glacial lakes over many millennia past. With short summers the growing season was quick, relying on the run-off from the mountains, hot summer sun and the cooling river running from south to north. Winters were cold and this river provided beast with winter forage along its banks while the mountains shielded it from the worst of the winter storms. It had long been on a path of an Indian trail, leading them to the plains and herding buffalo by the millions. It was also a trading valley where cultures collided and peoples learned, for the most part, to peacefully coexist.

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## **THE WOMEN**

A woman in the West was surely a hardy soul. Resigned to fend for her man and children in a land yet untamed, a land teeming with a myriad ways to both enhance and extinguish a hopeful life. They came from all backgrounds and cultures and each fought to survive, no different, really, from the wild, heart-rending beasts in the woods, or the Indian on whose land they were trespassing. They, as much as anyone, possibly even more, forged a country from this land. While their menfolk fought, toiled and engineered, they fed and clothed them, nursed them back from the brink, and bore their children by the score, who then became learned people, given the knowledge of generations and a new country in which to wield it.

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## **THE SALOON**

The gathering place. A simple low wooden shack for the most part, with a central warming stove perhaps, lit by dull oil lamps, swamped in tobacco smoke, and serving up dubious home concocted liquor and tepid beer. A place for tall stories, a place to learn and do business, make friends, discover enemies and find a fool's bravado in the bottom of a bottle of cheap whiskey. A place to enjoy, have a draft or two, play cards, and a place in which to die, if one is too trusting, a cheat, or too damned slow. Or too resigned to one's fate and dying of liquor-induced consumption. When men drew down on each other with their six-shooters, and missed, their weapons were deemed to have been wholly inaccurate. The only inaccuracy was that which was found in the bottom of a jar, though. The same place as resided the bluster needed to pull those thundering pistols in the first place.

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## **THE LIVERY**

The American horse filling up livery stables across the country originated from those left by Spanish Conquistadors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the colonization of New Spain, then in the North American Southwest. Tall English thoroughbreds were crossed with the tough descendants of those Spanish breeds, creating the Quarter Horse. A quick, short, sturdy horse that soon grew in popularity to become the mainstay of work and play across the rapidly expanding territories. These fine animals had a natural, plucky understanding of cattle after decades of freedom roaming the plains, where they were later called Mustangs.

..... 31 - 34

## **THE GUNSMITH**

Firearms had remained mostly unchanged until the commercial production of the revolver. Samuel Colt's new handgun, with a rotating cylinder allowing for six shots without requiring reloading—the 'six-shooter'—revolutionized the world but more so the West, and especially the American War with Mexico. But it was later in the West, across this new frontier that the revolver came to prominence. Then, with Colt's revolvers being used on both sides in the Civil War, these single-action, muzzle-loaded handguns with interchangeable parts became lighter, cheaper and more plentiful, quickly becoming the must have tool for survival by emigrants in the lawless lands west of the Missouri.

..... 35 - 39

## **THE RANCH**

The ranch, with its big white house and fancy windows, sat among some of the most splendid countryside within the whole territory. Nestled in the wide windy valley at the base of the foothills, it was sheltered by mountains on its east and west flanks and fed by a large pristine river and endless creeks. Cattle grazed freely along fertile banks on native bunch grasses and up onto the rolling foothills, finding summer shade under the sweet-smelling pines and firs and among thick copses of golden aspen. They were some of the most fortunate cattle on the whole continent. Until the harsh winter of 1886/87 arrived to freeze half of them to death. Proving that ranching was not at all an easy living in the best of times. But in the worst of times it was utterly devastating. Largely because of that, and the hardy people ranching attracted, the ranch as a place retains an inherent romanticism, unmatched in any other civilian occupation. When that ranch then expands to cover 10 million acres of land, it is destined to become legendary.

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## **THE SHOOTING**

People knew of shootings but they were not as common as often reported, not in the frontier towns of 1862. People generally had more intelligence and more pressing things to worry about than solving a dumb feud by powder and ball. And a full population was important for the town's protection and survival in a still wild land. But villains and scoundrels roaming the countryside there were aplenty, especially with the discovery of gold in the mountains and hordes of emigrants arriving, carrying with them their poor worldly possessions. A

vigilante's rope was where the murder was more than shootings. But shootings there occasionally were, when necessity spoke its name, spitting fire and vengeance in a cloud of smoke, yet reaping little reward except for notoriety among the embellished pages of a dime novel

..... 45 - 53

## **THE DOCTOR**

Doctoring was as noble an occupation as ever was likely to be found in the West. Revered by kings and emperors, queens and consorts, the rich and poor, strong, healthy and the weak. Especially the weak; those promptly pious wretched souls that become us all when ridden with disease, broken, beaten, butchered or bullet-holed. The reward, however, for trying to heal the multitudes of damage that can be willfully forced upon a human body, at a time when amputation was often the only primary cure, has to be a life of utter frustration. It is, then, no wonder that so many doctors of this time resorted to occupy so much of their time imbibing in the saloon.

..... 54 - 62

## **THE CATTLEMAN**

Since the first white man set foot in North America he brought with him beef. Corriente cattle were already plentiful in the arid North American Southwest long before New England cattle farmers even began grazing their stock on New York's lush Long Island grass. As early settlers moved westward they took with them their European breeds, which then merged with the Spanish breeds as they closed towards the Pacific Northwest and Oregon. But the need for beef wasn't ever as great until the mass of Western Movement prior to the Civil War and the Gold Rush. Miners, settlers and the army were in constant demand for more and more quality beef. In that time the first large-scale cattle ranches began appearing in the Northwest, taking advantage of lush summer grasses, high summer shade and plentiful water along the ancient Indian trade trails. For a brief period the ranch was its own domain, stretching unbounded across unfenced territory for as far as the eye could see, and the overseer, the cattleman, was, for a time, King of that domain.

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## **THE HANGOVER**

Good quality alcohol was hard to find on the frontier. Most saloons of the time either: diluted cheap purchased whisky with dubious other ingredients, such as, ammonia, turpentine, cayenne pepper and even gunpowder; or made their own concoction from whatever was locally available—burnt sugar, raw alcohol and putrid chewing tobacco with a tad of strychnine for bite. Beer was always unrefrigerated (except for during winter) and always unpasteurized. It's hardly surprising then that the term 'rotgut' gained infamous notoriety, or that a hangover could last several days—even after drinking 'the good stuff.'

..... 72 - 76

## **THE FIGHT**

The man in the West was little different to any other man or beast when it came to killing. He wouldn't risk a bullet himself since he knew doctoring was basic butchery and that he would likely either die or be maimed for life. He preferred, instead, to ambush his prey like a wild cat; wait until his prey was unprepared, sleeping, drunk, or otherwise distracted. Knife fights often broke out into impromptu opportunistic shootings. Drunken brawls the same, with obvious results that most people missed at what they were shooting and, instead, hit something else entirely. Not surprising with all the lead flying about in moments of drunken panic and hidden among thick clouds of powder smoke.

..... 77 - 86

# THE SNOWS

*FINDING ONESELF STUCK IN THE MOUNTAINS IN WINTER COMPOUNDS THE BELIEF THAT WE HUMANS HAVE EVOLVED INTO A SOFT SPECIES. THE RAW, BITING WIND THAT BEATS THE SNOW INCESSANTLY AGAINST AN UNPREPARED TRAVELER IS NATURE'S WAY OF REMINDING US THIS IS NO PLACE FOR US; THAT WE WILL BE ALONE, AND THAT WE WILL LIKELY DIE ALONE FROZEN AGAINST A DAMN TREE.*

– Bill Durban

**T**HE SNOWS CAME EARLY to Washington Territory in the autumn of 1862. Bill Durban's horse was having a tough time high stepping through the thickening drifts and over deeply hidden rocks and logs. It was possibly the worst place to be caught in this early storm: working his way back from south of the mountains, having earlier found one of the men he'd been looking for and afterwards making a run for it. A ball had just missed his bony elbow but had, instead, carried away a chunk of his forearm. Thankfully it wasn't his good shooting arm, but it made reloading his three revolvers with powder and ball that much more difficult and measurably slower.

Three days ago this journey had been quicker than the long wheel-rutted trail around the mountains, on a good strong horse such as she was anyway. But now, in these wintry conditions, he was rethinking his earlier decision to go over, instead of around the mountains. However, that choice had been born more from the inherent flight instinct in escaping from where he had come, rather than tempting fate and risking going in a direction, and on a road, he did not know and where others could more easily follow.

The likelihood of anyone following him in these conditions was remote, however. In that, his choice and, moreover, his timing had been impeccable. But he would nevertheless need to seek shelter and rest up before his horse completely collapsed. Finding a large cedar with long, thick overhanging branches protecting a small patch of bare, needle encrusted ground he broke off a few neighboring branches and built a quick lean-to, sheltering both him and his horse from the ferocious wind now howling over the ridge running north to south. A tiny fraction of the great long Rocky Mountain Range, stretching all the way from Canada south to New Mexico. He could risk a fire in this weather and gathered lichen to catch the spark from the muzzle of his revolver after loading the one empty chamber with half a charge of powder and a small cotton wad. The brittle lichen caught fire immediately and started to smolder, and took further hold as Bill fanned flames over a pyramid of kindling before adding larger chunks of the dead fallen branches that were scattered around.

Warmth finally. He rubbed his hands together over the flames to get the blood flowing before building a small rock wall around the circumference of the fire and then placing a series of smaller rocks directly into the flames. Then, retrieving the saucepan from his saddlebags he scooped a heap of fresh snow and balanced the pan over the rocks. Soon he would have water enough for coffee, and hot water to bathe his wound.

His horse was comfortable, her head to the huge trunk of the cedar and sheltered from the wind. In a while he would give her a little warm water, but he was concerned with colic since she hadn't eaten well for a couple of days, and a sick horse in these conditions meant a dead horse. But he also knew she wouldn't drink much in the cold. Once the weather improved he'd

let her wander around and scavenge for food between the trees and beneath the snow. Before then, though, after a cup of strong coffee to warm him, he'd strop her down to remove the white crystalized sweat from her back and cut the ice from her fetlocks.

Once his horse was cared for he removed the few rocks from the fire and buried them just beneath the surface of the soft dirt. On top he placed his waterproof cloth, with the saddle at one end, and lay down, covering himself with his thick bedroll blanket. He'd been more comfortable in the past but this was acceptable given the harsh conditions. He doubted he could sleep, but at least he could rest. Closing his eyes he listened to the steady rhythmic breathing of his horse and the wind as it howled through branches hundreds of feet above, twisting the tops of the flexible firs back and forth through extraordinary angles of sway.

Outside the sheltered confines of the tall spruce the snow had stopped piling up. White, deep and powdery it muffled the sounds of everything around them. Even that of the wind had changed as the air became distinctly colder and crisper, the dark clouds slowly migrating to another range of mountains and leaving moonlight to occasionally flicker through the branches to startle his eyes and spark his thoughts.

How did he get to this point? From a quiet farm in Minnesota to the western mountains? How did a simple farmer come to have three .44 caliber revolvers about his person; two light 1860 Colts' and a heavy older Dragoon saddle gun. But more to the point; how the hell did he get to learn how to use them so damn quickly?

Feeling the pleasant warmth of the rocks he was engulfed in a semi-dreamy weariness, his eyes flittering involuntarily, almost painfully, as light occasionally scythed through the gently swaying branches. His mind's eye wandering, watching himself gallop over fresh plowed fields, through poplar woods and along dusty trails. A tired horse laboring, dying in the relentless effort of the chase, falling beneath him, heart and legs forever gone. Him flying off, hitting a rock and then silence, unconsciousness, as the murderers escape into the night and over the border to another state.

He awoke in the middle of the night absolutely freezing. The fire had burned to nothing, just the charcoal left smoldering as he added more dry timber and switched cold rocks beneath him for warm ones. Settling back down he thought he heard something; branches moving perhaps, a delicate thud, a long way off but clear in the morning silence. Maybe it was just heavy snow falling from a branch. Or a deer digging in the snow for food. He wanted more sleep. He wanted to rest his arm. He wanted peace. To be left alone. But peace would not arrive for him this night after all; there was something more about, a hint of something in the air.

Ears pricked on his horse, she turned slightly, stiffly, aware of something in the distance. She lifted her head, like a dog sniffing at the wind, her nostrils flaring, inhaling what man had long ago forgotten. He rose immediately, checked his guns, put on his long stiff oilcloth and ruffled up the deep layer of needle litter beneath the bedroll before quickly striding off to the shadows of the woods. He waited and watched the sensitive prickled ears of his horse. She was getting increasingly skittish, unsure, but securely tethered to the tree and unable to gallop away. She was his eyes and ears, his scrutinizing canary.

There was a soft delicate sound, unlike footsteps and unlike a horse, almost ghostlike and getting closer by the moment, as if something was gliding across the snow, just scratching its surface. Flickering flames were bouncing deep into the shadows, making every tree, every branch, seemingly come alive. Then nothing. Silence. Just the crackling of the fire as it spat out

shards of ice and frozen sap clinging to the broken branches. He held his breath to hear, listen for a sound, any sound, and then exhaled the misty air into his coat so as not to signal his position. Inside his coat he slowly and methodically cocked the revolver to mute the metallic triple click as it spun the cylinder, locked the hammer back into position and set the trigger. Another step, muffled, coming from beyond the camp, high and to the left. His horse shifted its weight from one back leg to the other, her eyes on the movement now. She snorted softly and nervously shuffled her hooves, the whites of her dark eyes growing.

The sharp blast ripped through the quietness and ricocheted around the mountains. Bill saw dust rise from around the blanket. A new hole appeared exactly where his back had been. He waited, still, standing in the shadows like a marble statue. The smoke from the powder wafted down the slope in the early morning breeze and amongst the hazy grayness arrived movement, slowly, cautiously, but confidently, switching one rifle for another. Bill's horse tried to turn around the tree but was tethered too short so she skewed her head to see, eyes wide, the whites now glistening in the moonlight. A big man, completely covered in a heavy bearskin with large flat wooden shoes on his feet, enabling him to walk on top of the snow, neared the camp, leveling his fresh cocked rifle at the mound under the blanket.

At twenty feet Bill took aim and fired. The ball entered below the man's right shoulder, breaking the tip off the second rib before stopping, twisting the man violently around but not dropping him. Bill cocked the revolver quickly again and waited to see if anyone else was in the vicinity. The man stumbled forward to retrieve his dropped rifle but before he could lift it to aim Bill placed another ball into him. A few inches further to the left this time and easily splintering the breastbone before ripping into the man's heart. He fell to the ground, face first, already a flaccid corpse. To add insult to injury Bill's horse kicked the dead body in the head on its way down, splitting it asunder and opening the brains to the world.

Bill stayed among the shadows, waiting for more movement, but there was none forthcoming. After a little while he emerged to check over the body, removing the skins, snowshoes, rifles and a revolver before dragging it away from the camp and dumping it deep into the fresh snow. He put on the snowshoes and retraced the man's snowy trail to find a horse, but found nothing, just solitary footsteps reaching off into the distance. He must have just been a mountain man, caught in the snow while out hunting away from his cabin, and discovering a moment of opportunity that foolishly killed him. No one would ever know, the carcass would be picked clean by scavengers and the remaining scattered bones bleached white and brittle to be unrecognizable by the following summer.

Bill would have to leave soon, though, tired or not. It was early for snow and the smell of the rotting carcass would attract the grizzlies still roaming the forest searching for food before sleeping away the winter. He couldn't risk a fight with a bear and possibly lose his horse. The activity and sudden surge of adrenaline had warmed Bill up considerably, so before collecting his gear together he collected snow to melt for his companion, gently calming her down after the recent excitement. Gathering his new possessions he saddled the horse, packed her with his newfound weapons and walked out into the depths again, the horse almost leaping through the snow that was already up to her belly. It would be hard going for a while, until he found a valley in the lower elevations. But the snowshoes helped immensely and the skins protected him from the frigid wind blowing from the north. One man's loss was his gain.

A hundred feet at a time he stepped, jumped and tripped down the slope, trying to stay just

within the tree line, protected from the weather and out of sight from whoever might be following him after his murderous rampage during the preceding days. Almost by chance he'd found one of the men responsible for his wife's death: a fool wildly bragging about the episode in far away Minnesota. A fool still wearing the same gray Confederate jacket, and still with a bloodstained sleeve, thinking himself safe while among citizens in a mostly secessionist territory. But now being a dead damned fool.

The thought was pleasing to Bill. It was a satisfying thought, and it made the effort of this part of his journey more worthwhile, almost enjoyable. He even quietly laughed when a bushel of snow careened off a high branch and dropped heavy on his head. His horse, however, was not so amused; she was enduring a torturous life without the advantage of large wooden feet. Every step was an effort in relentless perseverance as she sank up to her belly in the fresh powder. Her breath was labored as she exerted the massive strength in her legs over the next drift, half walking and half at an almost stationary lope. Stopping every once in a while at the full length of the reins to regain her strength. The sweat pouring from the large muscles of her neck, chest and flickering flanks. Her eyes wide, tired and worried, instinctively promoting her exhaustion.

She was a full hand taller than most of the quarter horses in the west, and stronger than the taller European horses of the east, but she was not having an easy time of it. Bill made the decision to rest her and sought out a sheltered stand of timber in a draw. But finding a spot that was less steep and uncluttered with downed logs was the trick. He persuaded her a little further until she pretty much said "no more" and stopped dead in her tracks, exhausted as only a loyal horse can be after giving it her all.

"Alright then, this'll do." Bill said to her quietly.

He removed the saddle with all his gear and lashed her reins to a branch, removing his bedroll to cover her. This was no time to lose his horse. She had carried him all the way from Minnesota, his most loyal companion for the past few weeks. He started to rub her down with a rag to remove the excess sweat, talking to her the whole time as if she was an old friend. After about ten minutes she regained her breathing and started to relax, then shaking her whole body vigorously for a few seconds to rid herself of the kinks in her aching muscles; something strange she had done for years.

"We'll be in the valley in a few more hours old girl," Bill told her. "Fresh water, some grass and plenty of hay for that big empty belly of yours."

She seemed to sense what he was saying and took comfort in the different low sounds of his voice. He removed a couple of stale biscuits from his pouch and gave them to her while he chewed on a thick chunk of jerky. He wanted to brew himself up some coffee but didn't want to start a fire because the air was so crystal clear today and the smoke could be easily seen from afar. The smoke just going straight up into the cold mountain air would be visible for miles. He didn't want a reception committee on emerging from the mountains, even though he doubted news could have traveled this far this quickly. But he had survived thus far by being careful, and being prepared. Besides, he wasn't certain about the friendliness of the local tribes. He'd heard about Shoshone going on raiding parties for food against new settlers on their farms and ranches and wasn't sure if he was still in their territory or that of the Crow, who were supposed to be more amenable towards the encroaching white man. So he had been told anyway. Maybe it was the other way around. Either way, he wasn't about to test a theory out of desperation now that he was so close to civilization again—such as it was in this part of the world.

# THE TERRITORY

*FOR A RELATIVELY BRIEF PERIOD THE TERRITORY OF WASHINGTON SPREAD FROM THE PACIFIC OCEAN NORTH OF OREGON AND THE GREAT COLUMBIA RIVER ALL THE WAY TO THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE, WHERE IT BORDERED DAKOTA TERRITORY. TO THE SOUTH AND EAST, NEBRASKA TERRITORY SHIELDED IT FROM WAR TORN KANSAS. TO THE SOUTH, NEVADA AND UTAH TERRITORIES WERE THE BARRIER TO WAR RAVAGED TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO.*

– Author

**T**HE BLOODY WAR THAT ERUPTED between the states hadn't directly impacted the Northwest Territories of Oregon, Washington and the great Dakota. The closest military action was over a thousand miles away; either southeast to Kansas or way down south in New Mexico, at the southernmost tip of the Rocky Mountain chain. However, the war was destined to be the distant spark that forever changed the West: dramatically affecting its current inhabitants, how the land would be used, and inevitably abused in many cases, and how the territories would be ultimately governed and by whom. Displaced persons from both sides of the conflict were arriving in droves, as were deserters, the walking wounded and the downcast limbless. With them, mostly came hope, but also, with some, came the cheapness of life. Two years of bloody strife had whittled away the inherent kindness of many ordinary folk, who remained generally good in heart but had developed an untrusting character as a safeguard. But to others the unbridled, unashamed butchery of this internecine war between cousins just compounded their already miserable existence. While some rode west in rickety covered wagons in search of hope and to escape the horrors of the war, others arrived to reap more horror from that sanguine hope. In 1862, many of these hopefuls came also for gold. And as these wretched white hordes emerged onto the Great Plains, teams of mules and oxen pulling their Dearborns and Studebakers, inevitably shoving away the longstanding native tribes further and further in front of them, so too came the trials of the Indian Wars. The West was destined to change forever.

But, given time, a colossus of a country would be born from what the towering western mountains had to offer; immeasurable expanses of good quality timber, gold, silver, tin and copper, and numerous torrential rivers of fresh water which, eventually, would create enough electrical power to sustain hundreds of factories that would, one day, win a global war of unimaginable proportions. All this, the West provided and more. And those now arriving on the forested foothilled steps of the Rocky Mountains were yet another source of pathfinders. The tough, rugged, weary stalwarts come to seek a better destiny, provide a better life for themselves and their future sturdy offspring.

But the Civil War had temporarily suppressed the great mass of westward movement earlier predicted. Healthy manpower was, instead, desperately needed in the eastern states to fight the war, to toil in the iron works to forge tons of war material and construct the first steam-driven ironclads, even early submarines. Thousands upon thousands of healthy young men were pitifully wasted on the bloody battlefields fighting 19<sup>th</sup> century battles with new, efficient and much more accurate 19<sup>th</sup> century weaponry, but still using 18<sup>th</sup> century inline tactics. For either side it was murder. Nevertheless, westward expansion continued, albeit a mite abated for a while.

While westward migration of the average citizens was abated, official and clandestine



movement westward was encouraged by both sides. The Union held much of the continent's riches and was determined to protect what it had while actively seizing more. The South, on the other hand, had little riches of its own and was eager to find and promote access to the new gold mines springing up in the Rockies. It was no secret that the majority of emigrants in the northern territories were secessionist, and would willingly align to the South, for they would often talk of taking the boat to "return to America" once they struck rich or got too tired of fighting Indians. So when the South actively engaged people to populate and control the new gold mining camps and towns in the lawless northwestern territories, it wasn't too hard for these folks to fit in with the local, mostly secessionist, emigrant communities that had poured in from beyond the Missouri.

Then, with the war over, people from North and South would travel westward in their hundreds of thousands. Arriving in long trains of covered wagons pulled by mules and oxen. Riding astride clapped out swaybacks on their last tired, footsore hooves. Some even walked over the entire Great Plains with a lifetime's meager possessions hanging on the broadness of their shoulders. Traveling first across the eastern forested mountains, over the great open steppe, forging raging rivers and arid desert, until buttressed up against the greatest of all the continental barriers; the massive, majestic western mountains. Some arrived unmolested. Others fought every step of the way; against each other, against hostile Indian tribes desperately trying to cling to their homes and hunting lands, against the weather, disease, the land and, of course, against themselves. It was a frontier like no other on earth and only the most hardy, along, equally, with the most foolhardy it has to be said, made the journey, either in utter desperation or abject hope of reaching something better. But from wherever they came; England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Sweden and Russia, or even deep inside the far Asian East, they were now all Americans, and each determined to look ahead to the future, to make a continent all their own, forging a nation from the wide open expansive Western Territories, while those remaining in the more populated richer eastern states seemed more bent on annihilation, before then being destined to endure the failures of post-war Reconstruction.

The bright canvas tarps on the rickety covered wagons told the story of their journey. Starting out white, pristine and proud on the banks of the Missouri, they soon turned a yellow-tan while on the plains. While under torrential flooding rains they quickly lost any sparkle and became gray, the prairie dust becoming more ingrained as the thundering wheels rolled over each mile passed. By the time they reached the foothills they had been torn, repaired, ripped and repaired again, and were now a dark dingy gray or dark brown. Six long months of travelling had taken its toll on both the canvas and their lives. Both were hardened by the experience, but both brittle also. Many had been lost along the way.

They arrived worn out on the eastern slopes of the Rockies in Dakota Territory, before climbing the eastern slope into the high mountains to populate the new mining towns of Bannack, Virginia City, Cooke City, Garnet and, the largest of all, Helena, which eventually became home to more millionaires per-capita than any place on earth thanks to the tangible raw wealth of rare metals in the western earth.

With the discovery of gold in the mountains of Washington Territory the white man's greed became prioritized above all else. Previously, those weary emigrants had been used to relentless hard work, eking out a subsistence-type living with their bare hands in the rich fertile dirt of the eastern states after first logging off the lumber for shelter and forts for protection against the

beleaguered and ever-cheated tribes, which were forever getting pushed away from their hereditary hunting grounds and constantly discarded in the face of increasing white settlers. But on hearing of gold many of these Europeans instantly became aware of the notion of getting something for nothing. No more hard work for no end in sight. No more poverty. It forever transformed the mentality of some folk and in that avarice many of them, once again, became desperate; uncaring for the rights of others and especially uncaring for the utopian pristine environment in which they now found themselves. Voraciously grabbing something for themselves while they could, and before more damnable newcomers arrived. It was humanity at its irreverent worst, derived from hunger, craving and desperation. That desperation stemming from an innate sense of self-deserving after short-lived generations of their families had first endured the crossing of the ocean in overly crowded wooden sailboats, fought for freedom and independence from a delusional European king, successfully built a country with global prestige, and then crossed a continent in search of even more of the riches that this massive land had to offer for the taking. And truly be damned to anything or anyone that ever stood in their way.

For now, though, in the cool autumn of 1862, the 400 miners along Grasshopper Creek, south in the Big Hole, were chaotically busy. This secluded sun-drenched valley, home only previously to Shoshone Indians, a few scraggly alder and cottonwood trees, and surrounded by sage-covered hills, was echoing with the sounds of steel against stone and carpentry. In the more distant hills scores of pine trees were being chopped and felled before being dragged down the hills by teams of overworked mules. In this burgeoning little town, growing by leaps and bounds each day, the lumber was sawed and hewn as teams of carpenters toiled to construct the next house, the next store, the first saloon, the hotel, a barbershop and a myriad stinking outhouses to offset the new brewery.

Since arriving in June they had been doing little else every day but digging for gold, to collect as much as they could before the thousands of others they expected to arrive in the spring. But another more pressing priority had their immediate attention. Up to now they had been living rough, in brush wickiups out on the bare ground, huddled in the backs of covered wagons, or sharing tents if they had them. But the necessity to survive a mountain winter at 5,800 feet was fast becoming much more urgent than looking for gold. So a wild rush to build housing was underway. Carpenters of every description were at a premium and soon found themselves in a far more lucrative occupation than many of the digging miners as they logged the surrounding timber, hewed wood and drove nails. Those without such a good mining claim were forced to build their own dwelling, however. But whatever the building style, whatever the quality, this tightly enclosed valley was very quickly brimming with the appearance of a real town, with the most fortunate staking claim to strips of property on what was to become main street, while others found room for a shack on the hill or along bachelor's row, which was soon to have its own bathhouse built to the great relief of everyone else in town.

By spring, those 400 miners would grow to more than 1,500. Then by late spring those numbers would double and continue to climb into summer. Enticing to the territory the best and worst that mankind could offer. But the really smart ones among this crowd were those who made profitable businesses out of servicing and supplying goods to the arriving hordes, especially the new breed of cattlemen.

This gold rush, with its desire for meat, inevitably created the northern cattle industry, and a select few fortunate men were set to reap large rewards. While others, a lot more others, were

set to fail. But for a few years cattle was where the money was, and the big cattlemen became kings. That is, once the Indian had been subdued and all those darned buffalo removed.

Placer gold had, of course, been found elsewhere almost two decades earlier than this northern discovery: starting the California Gold Rush during the 1840s. Bringing to the West the famed forty-niners, following the Oregon Trail from the Missouri and on trails first scouted by the early fur trappers like William Sublette and Jim Bridger, who founded, owned and traded for companies such as the Rocky Mountain Fur and American Fur Companies, which were, for a period, ardent competitors to the longstanding Canadian Hudson's Bay Company, for which John Francis Grant was also a trapper and trader during the fur trapping heyday.

But with over 3,000 trappers working the mountains in teams it wasn't long before the fur trade was trapped out, leaving behind a few lone mountain men to pick the leftovers, and the American fur companies to be overtaken by bigger competition. Those few last remaining stalwarts then moved further north, to ranges such as the Beartooths and the Beaverhead to escape from civilization. Then, when gold was also found across these northern mountains, more emigrants instead branched off from the Oregon Trail and onto the Bozeman Trail, where these few lingering mountaineers began to find an alternate living supplying the new arrivals with tools, food, horses and cattle—especially cattle.

# THE VALLEY

*I ALWAYS MINDED MY OWN BUSINESS, TREATED EVERYBODY ALIKE RICH OR POOR, WHITE OR BLACK, AND AFTER I BECAME RICH AN INDIAN WAS JUST AS WELCOME TO MY HOUSE AS A WHITE MAN.*

– John Francis Grant



AS BILL EMERGED FROM the frozen mountains, finally breaking free from the tree line to reach the open rolling foothills, the temperature warmed considerably and the snow depth lessened with each tiresome step. Now he could ride again to cover ground more quickly. The sun was bright and the gently sloping foothills were carpeted with the long, dead, waving bunch grasses of autumn. An occasional clustered copse of white-barked aspen shone brilliantly on the edge of a meadow, thousands of luminous yellow leaves shivering in the breeze. A dozen or so elk roamed between them, contently grazing the last remaining patches of valley greenery, having been pushed by the snow down from the higher elevations, meandering like stealthy ghosts among nature's grand mountainous façade.

Bill's horse found a narrow deer trail and instinctively began to follow it down. The little hooves had smoothed the trail and she no longer involuntarily tripped over the thick unforgiving tufts of bunch grass in her exhaustion. They were both falling asleep in the sunshine. The sun's warmth feeling good and thawing the frozen extremities. Bill sat slouched in the saddle with his head bobbing up and down with each step of the horse beneath him. Her head moving from side to side at the end of her long tired neck, like a wretched nag going unconcerned to slaughter after a miserable life working the mines. But they were both more comfortable than they had been in days, content even in their exhaustion.

Bill stopped by a meandering half-frozen creek to let her eat the bank grasses. She paddled around in the cooling water as if to soak her aching hooves while he removed his shirts to bathe and care for his blistered prune-like feet in the icy water. After placing his wet clothes on a sun-drenched rock he checked the powder and caps of his revolvers before lying back to relax, pointing his stinking bare feet towards the late afternoon sun. He thought of stopping only for a short while since he wanted to reach the small settler town of Cottonwood in the lower valley well before dark. A new, friendly little town, so far anyway, started by an oft successful self-made Scottish/French/Métis fur trapper, trader and rancher, Johnny Grant. Who managed, on his second try at starting a town, to entice a few of his own family down from Canada, and persuade friends to leave Fort Bridger, to help build a town on his vast free range winter grazing land. Then, once a few simple buildings had been erected, the small town attracted an assortment of emigrants, trappers and traders thanks to the town's proximity to the Clark Fork River, the plentiful hunting and fishing, and even the last hurrah of the fur trapping trade that had mostly been played out in the surrounding mountains. But primarily, of course, because the burgeoning gold fields that were springing up across this expansive territory, each of which was in dire need of more and more quality meat.

After an hour or so Bill gathered his damp clothes, collected his horse and began the short ride to town. The sun was still bright but was now lower on the horizon and would soon dip behind the

high western mountains, causing the temperature to drop quite considerably, even though the pleasant blue evening light would last another hour. Long enough for him to reach town. He loped his horse, a nice even pace that she was well used to and could keep up for hours at a time, a sedate pace that he liked because her motion was smooth and easy, meaning that he expended little to no effort himself as he sat tall and comfortable, his hips rocking forward and back ever so slightly, almost unnoticeably, in the well-worn saddle. In better times they had both been like a freshly oiled machine, each somehow knowing what was good for the other. And after years of being together, they should, even if she was just a big dumb brute to most people.

The dull flickering glow of oil lamps was the only sign of the town. Nestled a distance away from the base of the hills, barely a silhouette of any type could be seen breaking through the darkness without squinting. The buildings were mostly new and the freshly sawn and peeled timber still maintained its beautiful golden color, contrasting greatly against the dull, gray, weathered wood of the older cabins with dirt floors and sod roofs, having already endured a few harsh seasons of winter. As he got closer he could smell the aroma of newly cut wood and split cedar shakes on the roofs of the more expensive buildings. Most of them, however, were simple structures, with tall facing boards that advertised each business and hid the low roofs, giving the impression that each was larger and the town richer and more prominent. Some parts of the town had a raised boardwalk but most were still dirt, with construction still in progress all over, and clearly in a hurry with the onset of an early winter and snow creeping down from the hills behind the town. Piles of fresh firewood were everywhere and the sound of distant chopping could be heard, the easy splintering of fast burning pine that was normal for this time of year. Later, when it turned frigidly cold, they would burn more hardwood, but the area really didn't have a sufficient, sustainable quantity of standing dead hardwoods except for the tall straggly cottonwoods near the creek and river bottom, which were allowed to thrive and provide protection from winter storms and the dust the summer winds kicked up.

There was already a hotel and a few boarding houses, as well as the obligatory saloon mingled amongst a grocer, hardware store, butcher, clothing store, harness maker, paint shop, gunsmith, and the all important blacksmith's shop near the livery stable, as well as an assortment of other small businesses trying to make a living off those passing through on their way to the gold fields and beyond.

Not far away was the small camp of Gold Creek, where James and Granville Stuart had found gold four years earlier, but hadn't fully worked their claim until earlier in the year. The discovery of even a small quantity of gold attracted many settlers to the valley. When the Stuart brothers went further afield in search of gold even more emigrants planted their feet here, in the hope of bigger things to come. And bigger things were to come. The mountains were set to explode with the incessant chinking of emigrants as miners tore up streambeds looking for placer gold, while many others serviced and supplied the miners with all manner of equipment, food, drink and any other hedonistic service they demanded. There was plenty of work and people of all creeds were arriving by the wagonload.

Of those there were many. With their numbers growing by the day they arrived weary and worn after having crossed the wide-open Dakota/Nebraska plains and then the 6,000-foot Continental Divide. More than they, however, their overloaded animals were skinny and footsore and desperately needed food and rest else they would surely die. Hence this little town was well involved in the lucrative businesses of horse trading; trading one healthy horse for two that were

worn out. Then, after wintering them on the range, they sold or traded them the following year. The same for cattle.

It was an excellent location for such a town, Johnny Grant had picked it perfectly; sheltered, with a reasonably mild northern climate with access to abundant year-round water, by a mountain and mostly free of deep sludge-type mud since the ground was so dry during summer it just absorbed like a sponge any autumn rain until the ground froze, and then it was always hard packed snow for a few months. The sloppy, wet and sticky mud season was spring, which was why the boardwalks had a team of carpenters still working on them this late in the day. But now it was just a little dusty and his horse whipped up small eddies with each step as he rode down what was obviously the main street. It was the only street but it was built wide enough to be two streets. The town was clearly optimistic for its future.

Away from the street there were a few buildings dotted about in no particular order, small shacks and tiny single room log cabins mostly, with outhouses littering the low hills and dirt paths going off in every conceivable direction. The stench from some of the outhouses was incredible, so it was clear someone would soon have to grab attention and create order in this little town, otherwise it would become a hodgepodge of chaos and ridden with disease.

But that was not Bill's concern. He was just staying for one, perhaps two nights. Enough time for he and his horse to get rested, fed, and his supplies replenished before making his long way back to Minnesota, where his farm and his home had been. He liveried his horse and paid the stable boy a nickel for a good grooming and extra oats, saying, "If she sparkles in the morning I'll double it."