BRIMSTONE

Walter Brimley was a haberdasher in a popular store in downtown Philadelphia called Johaan's. He sold men’s shirts, suits and neckties, but mostly he was obsessed with tales of the Old West. He avidly read the exciting and popular Beadle’s New Dime Novels about tough cowboys, hero sheriffs and dastardly desperados, and he yearned to see that wild frontier for himself before that way of life vanished forever. The year was 1879, and Walter had just turned twenty-four.

Three years earlier, Brimley attended the city's 1876 Centennial International Exposition, along with ten million other curious visitors. With exhibits from thirty-seven countries, Walter marveled at the new technological inventions and consumer products. He saw Bell’s original telephone, Edison’s automatic telegraph, and Remington’s typographic machine – the first typewriter. He tried a new snack called popcorn, sipped a Hires Root Beer, and sampled Heinz Ketchup. For fifty cents, he climbed to the top of the right arm and torch of the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France which was shipped to America in pieces, to eventually be built in the harbor of New York City.

All of his experiences at the Exposition, however, convinced Walter that the future was rushing up to meet him, inconveniently at a time when he only wanted to savor the vivid but fading past. Wild Bill Hickok had been killed while playing cards in Deadwood just this year. Wyatt Earp had left Dodge City with his brothers James and Virgil for Tombstone, in the Arizona Territory. But Jesse James and his gang had recently robbed two stores in western Mississippi, netting a haul of over $2000. And Billy the Kid was still roaming around. Thrills and adventure were still alive, thankfully! The germ of a plan of action was thus formed in Walter’s mind. He started saving his money at that point. He figured he would wander out West for a minimum of one year. He even imagined he would write up his adventures and sell them to Beadle's, and possibly become rich and famous!

Now, in 1879, he was ready. Walter quit his haberdasher job, and bought a one-way train ticket to Fort Smith, Arkansas, located on the river opposite the border of Indian Territory. He carried a single cardboard suitcase with his belongings. The five-day rail ride took him through Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Joplin. Once in Fort Smith, he went directly to a hotel near the train depot, checked in (oblivious to the bemused clerk’s raised eyebrows), and soon found a nearby bath house to wash up and shave. Next, he went to a Western clothes outfitter on Garrison Avenue and purchased two cotton Drover shirts (one tan, one brown), a light gray felt 'Boss of the Plains' Stetson hat, a pair of Levi's XX blue denim waist overalls with suspenders, a red bandana, and a pair of dark leather cowboy boots. Admiring himself in the store’s full-length mirror after changing, Brimley felt he was transformed from a greenhorn city dude into a real Man of the West! The fact that he had never fired a gun or rode a horse had not yet entered his thinking.

Fort Smith was famous for its merciless town District Judge, Isaac Charles Parker, who was dubbed “Hanging Judge Parker.” He had every apprehended outlaw dragged before his bench, and then dispensed swift, heavy jail sentences, or even the death penalty by public hanging for the worst – often repeat – offenders. Walter Brimley saw his first real hanging the following day, August 29, having been tipped off to the spectacle right after breakfast by the hotel clerk, a skinny, red-haired man named Rufus. “You’ll get to see ‘em dance for the Devil, ‘cause the Judge never has their legs hog-tied,” Rufus explained. “It’s really something to see, young fella. You ought to go."

The hanging itself was a shocking and sickening display for Walter to witness. A crowd of about two-hundred people had formed – men, women, even children. Two downcast-looking men were marched out -- William Elliott Wiley, alias 'Colorado Bill,' and Dr. Henri Stewart, both earlier convicted of murder -- then placed on a six-man platform in an open courtyard area adjacent to the large, multi-storied Army Barracks/Jail/Courthouse building. After the rafter nooses were slipped over the men’s heads and partly tightened around their necks, a weary-sounding minister read aloud from the Bible. A sheriff next read the charges and proclaimed the death sentence. At his concluding signal, a large hand lever was pulled by the County executioner, and the two hapless criminals dropped through the floor. Their faces first turned red, then bluish-purple, as they slowly strangled to death, making hideous gurgling sounds in their throats. In their final throes, Brimley saw what Rufus was referring to when the hanged pair ‘danced’ until they departed this life. Frontier justice had been served. But what would the folks back in Philadelphia think about this grisly spectacle? Walter wondered. It wasn’t anything like the dime novels at all. Yet the crowd seemed unemotional, and slowly dispersed, once the gruesome act was over.

But Texas, not Arkansas, was what Walter really wanted to see, so he left by train the next day and headed south and west to Denison, the nearest Texas town of any consequence. Population: 3,842.

Anxious to see some local Texas 'color,' and also being thirsty on this hot, humid, late August afternoon, Brimley saw he had a choice of at least six saloons on Main Street. He picked one called the Cattle Pen and entered its cool, darkened interior. He was still clutching his cardboard suitcase.

Walter walked with feigned confidence up to the long bar -- remembering how it was done in the dime novels he so admired -- put his right boot on the brass foot rail (narrowly missing a spittoon), and said, "Bartender, I'll have a beer." He gazed around the room at the other dozen or so patrons who were either further down the rail or seated at tables of four, drinking and playing cards.

“Ain’t got no beer left, sonny. Just rye whiskey,” the grizzled barkeep replied, peering curiously at the newcomer.

Not knowing what else to say, Walter ordered a whiskey. When it arrived and he sipped it out of a less-than-clean glass, he almost gagged. The drink was fiery but foul, tasting unlike any liquor he had ever tasted. When he started coughing, two rough-looking men at the rail slid over, so that there was now one on each side of Brimley. They were filthy, with blood-shot eyes, and stank like an overflowing latrine.

“Where you from, stranger? You look new to these parts,” the first man asked. He looked about ten years older than Walter, his face scoured from sun and wind and dirt. He coolly noted Walter’s smooth, clean city hands and even fingernails.

When Brimley cordially replied to the query, the other man angrily said, “See…I told you he was a Goddamn Yankee, Chet! And I bet he’s a nigger lover too. How about it, boy? You a nigger lover? Lots of good Southern men died on account of those black bastards.”

“Look, mister…I don’t want any trouble,” Walter carefully replied. “And if this has something to do about the Civil War, keep in mind that I was only six years old when Ft. Sumter was shelled,” he further explained, beginning to get very nervous and uncomfortable.

The first man, Chet, then replied, “Well…that being the case, I don’t think you’d object to buying us both another drink and toasting the honored Stars and Bars right here,” the drunk offered, indicating the tattered Confederate flag on the wall above the bar’s backdrop mirror. “You know…to show your respect for all our fallen Rebels.”

Walter awkwardly declined, saying, “Sorry, friend…but I don’t know either one of you well enough to be buying any drinks. Maybe another time,” he added, moving away from the stench of booze and the fetid breath of the pair. He went towards the saloon exit, holding his cardboard suitcase.

“Why you son-of-a-bitch! Don’t walk away from me when we’re talking to you!” the second man -- who was named Dunk -- crudely side-stepped and blocked Walter’s escape path. Then he threw the remains of his clutched whiskey glass in Brimley’s startled face. “There…now you can go. You’ve been baptized, Texas-style! And don’t come back!” he roared, then laughed along with Chet at the newcomer’s cruel shaming.

Walter wiped his face with his shirt sleeve once outside in the harsh sunlight. He felt humiliated and angry and embarrassed, but didn’t know exactly how to react. He decided to check into the nearest hotel, wash his face, and have some lunch while he did some serious thinking.

Later that afternoon, Brimley felt that he couldn’t hide and be seen as a coward, so he visited three other saloons to try his luck to be accepted as a Westerner. But at the Shady Lady, the No Chance, and the Black Bull, he met with similar rude distain: first, he suffered a bruised jaw from a drunk’s punch who claimed Walter stepped on his foot; next, a pre-arranged tripping when a cowboy playing cards stuck out his leg as Walter was trying to leave; and finally, the remains of a mug of beer deliberately spilled on his new shirt as an ‘accident.’

The former haberdasher from Philadelphia was ready at this point to leave Denison forever. In somewhat of a daze, he slowly walked through more of the town. But when he peered inside the Last Call saloon at the far end of Main Street, and noticed it was empty except for the barkeep, he decided to take one last risk and step inside.

“Howdy, pardner! Come on in. My thirsty regulars won’t be along until later tonight, so it’s nice and quiet now. You must be the dude everyone in town is talking about, seeing as you’re wearing those new duds. I heard you ran into Chet Carver and Dunk Webb. Webb’s real first name is Duncan, but he hates being called that. They’re two worthless skunks, if you want to know my opinion. The dirty secret about that pair is that they hide behind Confederate patriotism even though they were both deserters in the Rebel Army. Say, how about a beer, on the house? Tell me how you wound up in Denison, of all places, if you feel like talking. By the way, my name’s Clem…and you are…?” the friendly bartender inquired.

Walter shared his basics. In return he learned that Clem Harper was fifty-five, a widower and father of four, and a veteran of Shiloh and Pea Ridge. He took a ball in his right knee, which still caused him a slight limp. He was originally from Alabama. He moved to Texas three years ago, looking for a fresh start, like most folks.

“Well, Walter, I can give you a crash course in bar room habits and etiquette, such as they are here in the Lone Star state. First of all, never sip your drink. It is considered unmanly. You need to knock it back down in one gulp. Next, always offer to buy the person next to you at the rail a drink. It’s being friendly and polite. Third, never refuse a drink, even if you don’t want one. That’s considered very rude,” Clem advised.

When Brimley asked why the whiskey tasted awful, Harper had to laugh. “It’s because most saloons cut their liquor with turpentine, ammonia, chewing tobacco, burnt sugar, or black pepper. If you notice a tin funnel behind the counter, you can guarantee the bartender is thinning his bottles. Of course, further west of Texas, they even soak their 100-proof rotgut in barrels with rattlesnake heads, cayenne pepper, hot chilies, even gunpowder…you name it. Anything to give the drinker a burning throat and belly bite. Whiskey out here is also called snake piss, coffin varnish, red-eye, ol’ tanglefoot, or tarantula juice. Now you know why!” Clem chuckled.

Harper continued. “Saloons won’t serve Indians or Chinamen. Negroes aren’t particularly welcome, unless they are working a cattle drive with a crew of white cowboys. Mexicans are mostly tolerated, except by those who are still bitter about the Alamo. Anyone new in a saloon is asked their first name only, and you won’t ever learn their last names or life history unless they offer it. There are many types of saloons too: although every one serves alcohol, some are mostly set up for billiards, or as a dancehall/restaurant, or as a gambling den for games like Faro, Stud poker, Three-Card-Monte, or Chuck-A-Luck.”

Thinking back to his reading of dime novels, Walter asked about women in bar rooms.

“The ladies there are almost never whores. Those ‘soiled doves’ have their own particular section in every town. The women in saloons are paid to keep company with the spenders by asking for drinks while they provide conversation and attention, or sing songs, or encourage gambling. But they drink only cold tea in their special shot glasses -- although their clients are overcharged for whiskey. In dance halls, the women charge per dance, with the house keeping half the cash at the end of the night,” Clem explained.

“The bottom line out here, Walter, is: shoot first, and ask questions later. You need to buy a pistol and holster and learn how to use it right. You also need to learn to ride a horse. And you need to always fight back. That is the only law out West. Sure, some towns have sheriffs, but they can be away when you need them most, or out drunk. So if you don’t heed my advice, young man, you’re going to wind up deader than ol' Abe Lincoln. You’re going to encounter every manner of saddle tramp, drifter, outlaw, ex-soldier, drunk, cowboy, and mental defective. You need to decide right now if you want to stay, or if you want to go back home to Philadelphia…while you’re still alive.” Clem Harper gave Brimley a serious stare.

Walter said he would stay. “My Pa was a drunkard who beat me regular when I was a boy, and I have lots of repressed anger,” Brimley confessed. “He never taught me any of the manly arts, particularly in self-defense. So I want to learn everything I need."

“Good, Walter. I like your grit. Now, I have a friend in Waco who can help you out. His name is Ben Steed. Just tell him Clem Harper sent you. He’s a bona-fide Texas Ranger. Don’t know if he’s retired yet. Haven’t seen him for several years. The last I heard, he helped track down and kill Sam Bass after that outlaw and his gang robbed the Round Rock Bank near Austin. I believe that was on July 21 or thereabouts, last year. Bass was only twenty-seven years old when he met his Maker, but he was a murderous thug, and the world is better off without his sort,” Harper remarked.

The two men warmly shook hands, as Walter gratefully thanked the first man out West who was sincerely friendly to him. Brimley then checked out of his hotel the next day and took the train, via Dallas, south and west to Waco.

Walter had no difficulty finding Ben Steed. He had retired as a Ranger, however, and was now living safe and comfortably with his wife, Anabelle, on a modest ranch spread just outside of town. Brimley walked the four miles from the train depot to the homestead. Steed was sixty-years old, tall and trim, with black hair streaked with gray and a thick salt & pepper moustache. He had dark, observant eyes. Ben exuded a no-nonsense aura of command and control. The couple had twin daughters who had both recently married and moved with their husbands to Oregon.

“Glad to hear that old Clem is still doing well, Walter,” Steed remarked. “I need to visit him one day soon, now that I have the time.” The men were enjoying sitting in the shade on Ben’s porch. Anabelle had served them glasses of cold lemonade. The weather was even hotter here than it was in Denison, and still humid. But there was a nice breeze coming off the Brazos River. Waco itself, in the distance of heat haze, was twice the size of Denison, Walter had earlier noted when he arrived at the train depot.

“I was one of three brothers, and we all became lawmen,” Ben began. “My older brother, Hank, was a deputy who was killed at the Long Branch Saloon last year in Dodge City. Shot in the back by a coward who himself was later caught and hung. When I went north for the funeral and burial, I met Wyatt Earp and two of his brothers. Wyatt was tall and dignified, with blond hair and a long, tawny mustache. He used a pistol with an extra-long barrel, I remember. He shook my hand and gave me his condolences. Nice fella, highly respected. Piercing blue eyes. Moved with his brothers to Tombstone by now, I heard. My younger brother, Ted, is sheriff down in San Marcos, a ways south of Austin. His town badly needs a new deputy. The last one up and quit. It a lawless town of 1200, just getting started – or trying to. Lots of killing going on down there.” Ben looked off silently to the far horizon for a few moments, the sound of the cicadas in the heat shrill and insistent.

Steed continued. “I’m going to make a bargain with you, Walter. I’ll teach you how to ride and how to fight and how to shoot. We will devote eight months together to accomplish this task. You will room and board here with me for free. You’ll need to buy your own gun and holster and horse and saddle, of course. But in return for my training, you must promise me to go down to San Marcos and help out Ted by becoming his deputy for a minimum commitment of one year. That’s our deal, Mr. Brimley. No negotiations. Can we shake on it?”

Walter realized his good luck in these unique circumstances. To be trained by a real Texas Ranger! Maybe his dime novel fantasies would turn out all right after all.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Steed. When can we get started?”

“You can call me Ben now, Walter. We are going to be friends,” Steed smiled. “Can I call you Walt? I’ll let Anabelle know about our new arrangement, then we’ll go into town and get you your necessaries. Let’s put your suitcase in the guest room, then I’ll hitch up the buckboard.”

The four-mile ride to Waco took under an hour. They went first to a gunsmith shop.

“I suggest the Colt .45, Walt. The Remington 1875 is a reliable weapon, but the barrel is a might long for quick draws. Plus, the Colt is easy to load and dissemble for cleaning. Cartridges and parts are widely available too. As for a holster, you need to pick one that sets low on your hips. I notice that you are a right-hander like me. Good. It will make training simpler. And I’ll show you how to wax the inside of your holster back at the house. You want your pull to be fast and smooth. Every second counts when you have a showdown, I’m sure you can imagine, when life or death are on the line.”

Next, the men went to a livery to trade for a horse. Walt ultimately selected a good mount and saddle with Ben’s help. It was a spirited tan and white Paint mare, four years old, whom Walt named Lucky. They harnessed the horse to the back of the buckboard and returned to Steed’s homestead.

Over the next eight months, Brimley gradually learned everything he needed to know -- beginning with riding, then progressing to fighting (bare-knuckle and buck-knife), and finally to shooting. Lucky proved herself smart, dependable and obedient, with a steady temperament. Ben led Walt on horseback out on various local trails, then showed him how to camp overnight under the stars – first together, then Ben let Walt try it alone. Steed also taught the urban newcomer how to fish, and how to hunt for fresh meat, and how to dress the carcass, and explained which wild plants were edible or poisonous. For fist-fighting practice, Ben demonstrated various techniques in slow-motion, then had Walt try his moves out in actual speed with two, part-time ‘hired help’ men (Rory and Taggert) at the ranch, who were about Brimley’s height and weight (5‘6” and 150 pounds – average for the time). “And in a knife fight, remember: there are no rules. Watch out for kicks or dirt thrown in your face. Try to slash the arms or cheeks, or go for an eye. If you have to kill, twist the blade sideways once you plunge it deep in the belly. This will have your opponent weaken by bleeding out faster,” Steed gravely advised.

Gun practice with the Colt began with aiming and blasting stationary bottles and tin cans on rocks and fence posts, then graduated to moving targets. “Slide your piece out smoothly and cock it on the pull. Shoot from your hip level. If you draw, you draw to kill, because the other man will too. Always watch his eyes. You’ll know when to kill or when to just maim. Shoot first and ask questions later. Aim dead center. Give a man a fair chance to surrender, but if he won’t, then you’ll know what to do,” Ben explained. Next, Steed showed him how to ‘fan’ his revolver for multiple shots – “Hold the trigger down and flip the hammer back repeatedly with the side of your other hand. That’ll give you six quick shots.” He also had Walt practice with a sawed-off scattergun (“Always good for hitting anything without fail at close range.”) and with a lever-action rifle. The men went through dozens of various boxes of ammunition every week. Walt practiced hour after hour with fierce seriousness and deadly focus. His confidence was soon solidified. And Ben Steed was impressed with his earnest pupil.

At mealtimes and in the evening, everyone got to know each other better. Anabelle was a lively and interesting conversationalist and a wonderful cook. Meanwhile, Walter added noticeable muscle to his trim frame due to all of his new activities and exertions. His face and hands were burnished by the outdoor elements. Fall, winter, and spring came and went. Christmas and the New Year – 1880 -- had been happily observed and celebrated. Walt also marked his twenty-fifth birthday on February 15.

By the end of April, Walt was ready to leave Ben Steed for San Marcos and begin his new partnership with Sheriff Ted Steed.

As Brimley said his goodbyes, Ben offered him some parting advice.

“The first time you have to kill a man, Walt, it won’t be a pleasant experience. You will probably feel remorse and maybe regret, even if the outlaw totally deserved your lethal punishment. But always remember my favorite Bible verse. It is from Genesis 19:24, in the Old Testament. It goes like this (Ben spoke from memory):

‘Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.’

So you see, Walt, sometimes we must do God’s work here on Earth. We are entrusted to do so, backed by the laws of civilized men, to bring justice and retribution to the wicked people that still sour our frontier. That being said, I want to give you a gift, my friend, as a reminder of our times together and as re-assurance of your new authority once you are sworn in as a legal deputy." He handed Brimley a compact leather-bound Bible. "Go now with God, Walt, and bring fire and brimstone down upon any sinner, whenever and wherever you need to.” Ben solemnly shook Walt’s hand ("You were like the son I never had, Walt, these last eight months…"), then Anabelle hugged him. She also gave him a generous poke filled with food (he could smell the ham and the fresh corn dodgers through the sacking) for his journey on Lucky to San Marcos. It would be about a five-day ride of some 135 miles, passing for a stop through Austin, the Lone Star capitol. “Write us from time to time if you can,” Anabelle urged, as Walt waved his light gray Stetson adios and rode off south under the bright, mid-morning sky.

Brimley hoped to finally see some real Indians somewhere along his journey, but didn’t. He did note, however, that more Mexicans were working about in the tiny hamlets and settlements that he passed through on Lucky. He recalled a few Spanish phrases from his dime novel readings, and called them out where appropriate, such as ‘Buenos Dias,’ ‘amigo,’or ‘Buenos Noches.’ Such words were always returned with a friendly wave and a toothy smile. Walt had never even seen a single Mexican when he lived in Philadelphia. He made camp each night, tired but contented, and cooked his meal using mesquite wood, often while listening to coyotes yipping somewhere in the distance. He had since bought a Winchester rifle and a large Buck knife with a leather sheath to compliment his Colt. He gazed at the vast, clear field of stars overhead, and figured that his dime novel fantasies were at last coming true. He thought, too, again about what Ben had said regarding Genesis 19:24. He got out his Bible and read it for himself. I can be God's instrument of justice, he vowed -- an avenger against any and all evil! Turning in, he always arranged his saddle rope in a circle around his bedroll on the ground as he had been taught, to keep away the snakes. In the morning, he remembered to carefully shake out his boots, because scorpions and other such critters liked to burrow in them overnight for warmth. Such was Walt's routine, until he arrived in Austin, where he treated himself to a nice hotel bed, a hot bath, and a shave. And that's when he decided to grow a good, manly moustache like Ben's.

When Brimley arrived in San Marcos, however, he was stunned to learn that Sheriff Ted Steed lay dying in the town doctor's house, having been bush-wacked earlier that very day while on routine patrol.

Walt went directly there, and was allowed to quickly tell Ted -- who was bleeding out from three bullet wounds -- who he was, and why he was there as the new deputy, and about Ted's brother, Ben.

Steed grabbed Walt's arm and pulled him close and whispered, "You've got to be sheriff now, Walt...there's no one else. Take my badge. And bury me back in Waco, on Ben's spread..." Ted then took a final, sighing breath and died. He was fifty-two years old.

Doc Leighton explained that San Marcos didn't have a telegraph office yet, but that he would transfer the body by horse and buggy to Austin tomorrow afternoon and inform Ben Steed by wire from there, after loading Ted's casket on the train to Waco.

The town gathered for a brief but touching funeral service -- with several fitting tributes -- the next morning, then Walt Brimley was sworn in legally as the new lawman by the local Justice of the Peace, Stephen J. Bishop. "The Territorial U.S. Marshal usually swings through here every eight weeks or so, and he'll probably check up on you, and give you any pertinent information regarding your new position," Stephen explained. As to exactly who killed Ted Steed, there were unfortunately no clues and no witnesses. "Not unusual out here," Bishop remarked. "It's a rough world. Just watch out for yourself at all times, Sheriff."

Walt set up shop in Ted's former office, a tiny room with an adjoining two-man jail cell. Lucky was fed and comfortably stabled across the street. All was quiet in San Marcos for about two weeks, but suddenly there was a reported disturbance at one of the four saloons on Austin Street, called the Watering Hole. Gunshots were heard.

Sheriff Brimley walked in with his Colt drawn, and saw two ragged muleskinners attempting to rob the panicked, unarmed, elderly bartender of his cash box.

"Drop your guns, boys...slowly," Walt ordered, His mind was awash in adrenaline, but he steadied his nerves by trying to remember everything that Ben had taught him, especially,' Watch the eyes,' and "Shoot for dead center.'

"So you're the law in this piss-ant town? Why, you're nothing but a kid," one of the men scoffed. "Go away before you get hurt. We're taking the money here and leaving."

"Can't let you do that. I'm asking you and your companion one more time to drop those hog legs and come with me," Brimley commanded. "Or there's going to be some killing, here and now." Walt was suddenly flushed with clear-minded courage and determination. So he added, "Ever read the Bible, mister? Maybe you know Genesis 19:24. It says: 'Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.' Well, I'm ready to do God's will and bring brimstone down upon you both if you don't do as I ask right now," Walt directed, his Colt in position.

The filthy pair darted side glances at each other, then the heavier of the two barked, "The hell, you say! We's two agin one! You ain't got the sand!"

The novice sheriff somehow knew what was coming, as he saw the muleskinners' eyes and their pistols turn towards him and cock, ready to shoot. This was it.

As he had practiced many times, Walt held down the trigger on his pistol and fanned the hammer with the butt of his left hand, blasting off one shot into each man, then another in each, for a total of four fanned shots. The saloon filled with the sight and acrid smell of gun smoke. The barkeep was startled but safe now, as the other three saloon patrons crouching in a far corner rose to their feet. Along with the sheriff, they walked towards the inert bodies of the two would-be thieves. Nobody recognized them, or knew their names. Their blood was leaking and pooling into the thin layer of sawdust covering the bar's wooden floor. Lawman Walt was understandably shaken up by what he instinctually had to do, but he also felt a kind of elation at serving God's justice of right over wrong.

From that fateful day onward, Sheriff Walt Brimley became known as "Bible Brimley," or more simply (and lethally) as "Brimstone." He carried the compact, leather-bound Bible that Ben Steed had gifted him, and he displayed it publicly whenever making a point about doing God's work of good vs. evil. Then he vowed to go after wickedness with a single-minded vengeance. But unlike the actions of a common vigilante, this would all be sanctioned by the law, and was encouraged by the grateful community.

Several days later, the U.S. Marshal, Ross Argent, rode into to San Marcos and introduced himself to Sheriff Brimley. Ross was a large man with cheek whiskers and a worn face reddened by the sun. He read Walt's report about the killing of the two muleskinners, who had since been buried in unmarked graves on the barren prairie outside the town limits.

"You did a good job, Walt. I have to commend you with how smartly you handled your first killing in the line of duty," Argent remarked, putting aside the report and lighting a cheroot. "Some skinners have been known to turn to crime in desperation, now that most of the buffalo herds are fast disappearing." Ross then asked if the sheriff needed a deputy.

"Thanks, Marshal, but I think I'm ready to tackle my duties alone at this point. Of course, if overwhelming circumstances arise, I'll ask for help. I've received messages from New Braunfels, San Antonio, and Austin offering any assistance I might require," Brimley explained. The telegraph had finally been connected to San Marcos, and the train line was expected to be here, too, by year's end.

The lawmen shared supper that evening in the cafe, then Ross left Walt with a stack of wanted posters and script from the State which allowed him to draw his pay and trail expenses from any bank. "We've got to clean out the territory of all its lowlifes, and help make Texas a fit place to live for decent folks, Walt. So use every legal means at your disposal to finally rid our great State of such scum. I'll check back with you from time to time. Good luck, Walt...or should I call you Brimstone now?" the Marshal winked and smiled as the men shook hands.

Brimley didn't smoke or chew, and when he wanted a drink, he chose only beer because he never trusted what unknown might have been laced into the whiskey. Often, when visiting a saloon, he would simply order a cup of black coffee. And if he was hungry and on the move, he would enjoy a quick, cold glass of buttermilk instead, if it was available. Walt was also popular with the ladies, for he was careful in public to display a clean, confident appearance whenever possible – trimming his moustache, bathing and shaving once a week, getting regular haircuts, and brushing his teeth. He often took Sunday dinner in the afternoons -- after church at various households with eligible daughters -- when he was not on the trail tracking down outlaws. The town of San Marcos trusted and admired their young sheriff, and the 1200 inhabitants felt safe from lawlessness for the first time in a long time.

Over the coming months, Walt learned that nine out of ten men would quickly obey any command from a lawman. But that left one out of ten that wouldn’t obey the man with a star. Forcing justice on that sort always led to fists, a knife-fight, or a shooting. Brimley always gave the stubborn sort a fair chance and a strict warning before escalating the trouble to the next, sometimes lethal level. During his first year as sheriff, he was forced to kill four men. He also arrested sixteen wanted criminals, and was in seven fist-fights and two knife fights. Folks would murmur by now when Walt Brimley walked into a room, or a saloon, or was seen on the street: “That’s Brimstone…” or “Isn’t that Bible Brimley?” Most of the lawless would come peacefully when ordered, for Walt had earned a reputation for swift, fearless action – always making note of Genesis 19:24, like an Old Testament prophet. He would kill like an avenging angel and later sleep without guilt, but bad men saw him as a devil out of Hell, and they wanted him dead. Those that tried to put out Sheriff Brimstone’s fire, however, wound up six feet under, with their boots off, to a man.

Meanwhile the West continued to change. Billy the Kid was gunned down in New Mexico in 1881. He was only twenty-one years old. And Jesse James was assassinated in St. Joseph, Missouri, the following year.

Over the next few years, Sheriff Brimstone’s pronouncements became somewhat legendary. Here were some of them, verbatim, from eyewitness accounts:

“You must be real stupid to want to die today.”

“I’ve dealt with trash like you my entire life. I’m sick and tired of the likes of you and your ilk. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself before the Almighty and proper, civilized society? Surrender, pay the penalty, reform your ways…or I’ll shoot you down like a rabid stray dog.”

“It’s time to face a fair trial with a judge and a jury, mister…it’s jail or the hangman…or you’ll die here -- right here and right now, so help me God. Genesis 19:24.”

“Come peaceable, or I’ll send you to Hell.”

Ten years after he began his lawman career, Walt continued to fight crime in San Marcos, as well as on the trail searching for wanted men, or while helping out other sheriffs and deputies in New Braunfels and San Antonio. At this point, he had gunned down seventeen men and arrested forty-eight. He had been grazed by bullets six times, but luckily nothing serious. He had earned several facial scars from fist-fights and knife-fights, but he was still formidable at age 35. He burst into saloons and outlaw hideouts, brandishing his Bible, which he slammed on the bar or on a table before quoting Genesis and going into action. “Brimstone is gonna be coming down!” he announced. “Anyone not involved with the law had best leave right now…”

In 1891, while in San Antonio on business, Brimley learned that his comrade, U.S. Marshal Ross Argent, had died at age 62 of natural causes. (Ben Steed had previously died the year before in his sleep at age 70, Annabelle informed Walt in a long, sad letter.) In a deathbed plea to the Texas governor, Ross recommended Walt for his job vacancy. But before he could either accept or decline, Brimley was approached by an imposing Texas Ranger while walking past the mission ruins of the Alamo. The tall, lean Ranger introduced himself as J.R. Jackson.

“You must be Bible Brimley…or Brimstone, if you prefer. I surely recognize you from your picture in the newspapers. You’ve got quite a reputation, my friend. Plus you are specially blessed by not getting killed yet in our hazardous line of work. It’s funny that we should meet, Walt, because I wanted to speak with you, either in person or through a telegram. I wanted to offer you a job as a Texas Ranger,” Jackson declared.

The sudden, twin offers took Walt by surprise. The pair went to a nearby restaurant for pie and coffee. They exchanged career stories in a casual manner, as only real lawmen could do. After more than an hour, J.R. announced that he had to go. Brimley told him he would give the Ranger his answer soon, after careful consideration, via telegram to Jackson’s office in Dallas. Then the men went their ways.

However, as Walt mounted his faithful horse, Lucky (now fifteen years old but still full of pep), to head back home, he saw two familiar faces enter a saloon down the street. The memory of shame from twelve years ago in Denison came rushing back like a bad toothache. Chet Carver and Dunk Webb!

Brimley dismounted and re-tethered his mare, then removed his gun belt and star badge and secured them in a saddlebag. This was going to be done with fists, he decided. But he kept his Buck knife in its sheath on his waist belt, just in case.

The Rebel louts appeared unchanged, though perhaps they were even dirtier and smellier. They were lined up at the bar, ready to quench their need with some cheap, bottled rotgut. Their backs were to Walt so they didn’t notice him come in. The saloon was packed with customers, close to fifty men.

Brimley walked casually up to the motley pair. Several patrons happened to identify Walt as he strode in, and they said to each other, “Hey, isn’t that Bible Brimley?” or “That’s Brimstone! Get ready for a show!” Walt slapped both men on the shoulder in a chummy way.

“Well, if it isn’t Chet Carver and Duncan Webb! Remember me? I was the city dude you boys shamed in the Cattle Pen saloon back in Denison some twelve years ago. Glad I ran into you again, because that will give you both a chance to apologize, and buy me a drink.”

“I hate that name,” said Dunk. “And I’ll be damned if I’m buying you anything.” Chet, meanwhile, peered at Walt in confusion, his eyes blood-shot and his brain pickled.

“That’s a pity, Duncan, because if you ain’t going to be friendly-like, we’ll have to settle matters outside. I’m not heeled – he opened his coat to show that he was unarmed – so it will have to be fists or knives. What’s your pleasure?”

“Jesus Christ, Dunk, don’t you know this man? He’s Sheriff Brimstone from San Marcos. He’ll bust your head so bad that your mother won’t even be able to recognize you. That goes for you too, Chet,” the bartender warned. “You better apologize right proper, and fast!”

Chet had enough sense at this point to stagger, then run tail out the door, mount his horse and gallop away. Dunk stood staring at Walt, unmoving. So Brimley grabbed the man’s whiskey glass and threw the contents in Dunk’s startled face. “There now. You’re baptized. We’re even. You want any more, you lousy, low-down, yellow-bellied Rebel deserter?” Walt stepped back, his brutal fists at the ready, his eyes like smoldering coals.

“No sir,” Dunk meekly mumbled. “It’s done.” He looked down, ashamed, staring at the collection of old tobacco chew juices that had missed the nearest spittoon and had splattered on the floor.

“Alright then, Duncan. Just remember that I’ve got my eye out for you and Chet. Should you get into any mischief anywhere in Texas, I’ll be there. Genesis 19:24. You can count on wrath like you’ve never even imagined. Good day.” With that promise, the sheriff turned and left the bar. The saloon immediately buzzed with comments relating to what they had just witnessed, once Brimstone was out the door.

Walt ultimately decided to take the Texas Ranger position, rather than that of U.S. Marshal. After meeting with J.R. Jackson in Dallas, he next informed the mayor of San Marcos that he was resigning as town sheriff.

Over the next decade, Walt Brimley chased down outlaws across West Texas, from Laredo to El Paso to Lubbock and then Amarillo. He adapted to the heat and dust, the desolation between towns, and to living on the three Texas food staples: beans, beef, and biscuits. His growing reputation was such that he was personally invited by Theodore Roosevelt to join his Rough Riders to fight in the Spanish-American War in 1898, but Walt declined.

In 1901, Ranger Brimstone found himself back in Waco on business, serving an arrest warrant. Stopping by to visit his old friend Anabelle Steed, he was later introduced to the local school teacher, Lola Revere, an attractive brunette with blue-green eyes who was twenty-eight years old and ready for marriage and children. Brimley surprised himself by falling in love, so after courting for six months between his lengthy, state-wide Ranger duties, the happy couple got married on May 12, 1902. Walt was forty-seven, and still in fine health.

Anabelle attended the wedding, but soon fell ill shortly afterward and died. She was seventy-nine. The new couple were stunned when they learned that she bequeathed her entire homestead to Walt and Lola in her will, explaining that Ben would have wanted it this way. So Mr. & Mrs. Brimley now had their first home in Waco.

Walt worked for three more years until 1905, when he turned fifty. Coincidentally, Walt’s loyal horse, Lucky, also died that year at age twenty-nine. She was deeply mourned by her master. Brimley saw it as a sign of sorts that his lawman days were indeed meant to be over. He had been a lawman for twenty-five years, and he figured he had earned a rest, and that his place was now at home with his wife. Over time, they had two sons and a daughter. During his career, the former haberdasher from Philadelphia had killed twenty-two outlaws, and arrested seventy-four men, in the line of duty. He had only been seriously wounded once, in the left shoulder, while taking on two tough desperados simultaneously. The Texas Rangers gave Walt a retirement plaque and banquet in Dallas, and even Governor Lanham sent him an official proclamation of thanks, praising Walt for his devoted service to the People of Texas.

In 1912, Walt discussed with Lola the possibility of moving from the Lone Star state to the exciting, golden promise of Southern California. He carefully researched the fast-growing fruit industry there, and finally focused on buying a mid-sized orange grove. Later that year, the Brimley family made the move to Riverside, and purchased a fifty-acre spread with mature Valencia trees and a farmhouse, which had recently appeared on the market after its former owner retired and sold out.

The ex-lawman took to his orchards with determination and vigor, enjoying its new challenges. He carefully hired his Mexican work crew and oversaw all aspects of his investment. Over the years, he kept an eye out for any affordable lands for expanding his holdings, and he also dabbled in the nearby lucrative Los Angeles-area real estate market. Lola and their children – Joe, Paul, and Ava -- likewise loved the healthful, moderate Southern California climate, and the proximity to the Pacific Ocean for relaxing day-trips. Walt’s favorite place to visit was the enormous, red and white deluxe Hotel Del Coronado, on Coronado Island off San Diego. The family always had lunch there (with Walt usually trying new vegetables and fruits like artichokes, avocados, and Chinese gooseberries – things he never even knew existed when growing up in Philadelphia), then they all went swimming off the beautiful, broad stretch of sand beach behind the hotel.

The horrors of World War One and the deadly, global 1919 Spanish Influenza epidemic fortunately bypassed the Brimley family with minimal disruption. The California orange business was booming, the fresh fruit demand from the Eastern U.S. and elsewhere seemingly insatiable.

But now, the Old West that Walt had lived through was virtually gone. Except on farms, horses were not really needed anymore. One might see a few weary dray horses still pulling delivery wagons in the cities, but that sight was becoming rarer and rarer. Motorcars and electric trollies were filling the streets instead. Aeroplanes were now flying overhead in the clear blue skies. Tall brick and steel buildings were regularly going up. And everyone either had (or soon intended to buy) a radio, for entertainment and information.

In late June of 1926, when Walt Brimley was seventy-one, he decided to visit some friends and do some necessary banking business in Los Angeles. While there, he was also curious about the new motion picture industry expanding in Hollywood, so he decided to pay a visit to a real movie studio. Walt had previously seen several silent films with his family, starring famous Western actor William S. Hart, so maybe he would be allowed on an actual movie set to observe the process if he identified himself as a former Texas Ranger.

Hart had basically retired from films the year earlier, after having made a feature called “Tumbleweeds.” The most popular Hollywood cowboy star was now Tom Mix. Brimley learned that Mix was currently working on a new Western called “No Man’s Gold” at Fox Studios, owned by the Fox Film Corporation. Charlie Chaplin’s silent film “The Gold Rush” had been spectacularly popular the previous June, so Fox thought that having the word ‘Gold’ in their title might bring them extra recognition and hence success at the box office.

When Walt introduced himself as a former Texas Ranger eager to visit a Western film set, the guard at the studio gate called in his request, and it was approved. Brimley was given directions to Studio 8. When he walked in from the bright afternoon sunlight, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkened interior. The room was huge, with a thirty-foot high ceiling. In a section of a far corner, Walt saw a flood-lit, Old West-style painted backdrop, with artificial tree and cactus props, and lots of electric wiring on the floor. The minor actors were being ‘blocked’ for various camera angles, while make-up was being applied to their faces. The director, Lewis Seiler (who had replaced the original director, Tom Buckingham), stopped and greeted Brimley, exclaiming, “I know you…you’re Ranger Brimstone! I read about your exploits back in Texas in the newspapers, what was it…maybe twenty or thirty years ago? Well welcome, pardner!” They shook hands. “Pull up a chair, and watch us go to work.”

The movie’s main stars, Tom Mix and his blond co-star, Eva Novak, strode onto the set a few minutes later. This would be their tenth silent picture together. The director introduced them to their visitor, who had also seen several Tim Mix movies before. But it was a bit disconcerting for Walt to see a Western cowboy hero like Tom Mix wearing lipstick and eye shadow! Mix was forty-five years old, and make-up was also applied to hide some of his facial wrinkles.

The filming of the picture’s next scene was fascinating to the newcomer. Walt noted that setting up the scene took much longer than the actual filming action. The actors had a lot of waiting between shots, so they killed time by talking among themselves, or skimming the Los Angeles Times, or smoking, or closing their eyes and taking a nap. Brimley also noted that facial close-ups had to be shot again and again until the director was satisfied with the lighting and the actors’ expressions. The whole experience looked less than fun and not very glamorous. The one-hour silent movie, when completed, was scheduled to premiere in theaters at the end of August, Seiler announced.

That was when a tall, distinguished stranger -- who had been sitting in the shadows, away from the action --got up and walked towards Walt. The man was a bit older than Brimley, but his gait was proud. He wore a finely-cut, pearl-gray, lightweight wool men’s suit over a spotless white shirt. He had a neatly combed full head of white hair and an impressive white moustache. His blue eyes were clear and steady.

“I hear that you’re Ranger Brimstone -- formerly Sheriff Brimstone -- out of Texas. I read about you. Tell me, are all those stories about your exploits true?” the stranger asked in a cordial way, with just the hint of a smile.

“Well, sir, there’s a common saying not to believe everything you read in the papers,” Walt Brimley replied with bemusement.

“Ain’t that the truth,” the stranger agreed. “We both know that…And there aren’t many of us old-timers left now to tell folks the story of what really happened.”

“By the way, friend,” the stranger extended his right hand, “I’m Wyatt Earp…”

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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