CATTLE DRIVE

Texas, 1868 -- three years after the War Between the States had ended. The era of the big cattle drives had recently begun and was growing.

Beef which sold for $2 a head in Texas brought as much as $30 a head in hungry Eastern cities like Chicago. Cattle herds would be driven north to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas. From there, the beeves would be loaded onto special train cars for their fateful journey to Chicago's Union Stockyards feed lots -- their final destination being the newly-built, assembly-line slaughterhouses of P.D. Armour and Company.

Matt Haymer was an experienced trail boss, age 32. Married, with three children, he was a native Texan from Waxahachie. Matt was hired by ranch owner T. J. Peller to move two thousand head of prime stock from just outside Fort Worth, up through Indian Territory, and on to Kansas. Upon delivery, he would be paid $125 a month for this contract, which was estimated to take a month and a half. Haymer's next task was to hire ten capable cowboys (at $40/mo. each) and a seasoned cook ($60/mo.) to help with this arduous, five-hundred and twenty mile journey, which would cross vast, open plains and six major rivers. The Spring round-up for branding was already completed, so the cattle were ready to move. It was early May, with favorable weather.

Soon, Matt had his mostly veteran crew: fellow Texans by the names of Wade, Bud, Vance, and Dooley; Karl and Stumpy (who lost an index finger on his left hand), both from Arkansas; Pablo, from Juarez, Mexico; Cotton, a Negro from Louisiana; Luke Lyman, the senior cowboy, who hailed from Tennessee; and the newcomer, Jimmy Unger, from Springfield, Illinois. Luke was the oldest, at age thirty, but the other men were all in their early to mid-twenties. Some had fought for the Southern Cause in the Civil War, but Matt ordered that re-hashing that event would be off-limits for the duration. "No drinking, either, on the trail, so wet your whistles tonight before we shove off at dawn," he commanded. "Your next drink is a long forty-five days away in Abilene. And men, I don't mind you playing cards for fun when you're off duty, but I'll brook no gambling or fighting. Everyone gets paid at the end of the drive, so you don't need to wrangle over money while we're still on the trail," The Boss concluded.

The cook turned out be Ned Wheeler, from the Missouri Ozarks. "Rather than call me 'Cookie,' you boys can just call me 'Pop,' on account of I'm old enough to be the Pappy of some of you youngsters here," he teased. (Pop was forty-two.) "I pledge to keep your bellies full, my coffee always hot and ready, and my biscuits light enough to float down the mighty Mississippi. My dependable chuckwagon, and my four good oxen, have happily served many a cowboy over the years. I've got surefire medicines and herbs, too, if you ever take poorly. I've also yanked a bad tooth or two, should that be necessary. I'll tote your bedrolls, and I've got a full toolbox for fixing busted stirrups, loose horseshoes and such. Yes sir, I even have a barrel of fresh apples to bring along, and I can whip up a mighty tasty load of pies if you all behave." He winked. Having said his piece, Pop took out his corncob pipe, and proceeded to pack some tobacco in its bowl with his calloused thumb. He then put a lucifer to it, and puffed like a reigning lord.

Each cowboy had three horses. Those mounts not currently being ridden were put in a 'remuda,' and kept in a special herd watched over by one of the men on a rotational basis. Other necessary cowboy gear was a good saddle, a lariat, a rifle, a pistol, leather chaps, a pair of spurs, boots (with raised heels for hugging the stirrups), a bandana (to help fight the dust when riding drag), and the all-important wide-brimmed hat (to thwart the sun and rain).

"Now men, we are going to try to make about twelve miles a day if possible," Boss decreed. "It all depends on the grass, the water, and the weather. You already know that we are going across Indian lands once we ford the Red River at Red River Station. Word from our governing authorities is that all is peaceful at this time. However, if we are approached by any hostiles, we'll simply cut out a few head for them as a kind of 'permission gift' to proceed. That usually does the trick."

The Boss continued. "I don't need to remind you that being a cowpuncher is a tough, twenty-four-hour a day job. There's the threat of quicksand and snakebite, and flash-flooding rivers, and lightning storms so fierce that you'll be tempted to run home crying to your Mama. Night time comes, we need to keep a sharp eye out for rustlers. And a loud coyote howl or other sudden noise can trigger a stampede, so when you are on night watch rotation, just keep patrolling the herd slowly and peacefully. Sing a nice, soothing, low-voiced song or two. That keeps 'em calm. And if a stampede ever does occur, I want every man up and mounted fast. Lead the stock always to the right in a wide circle, then tighten the circle gradually until the cows are all packed in tight and can't run anymore. They'll soon settle down from their panic, and then you can lead them back to resume their night's rest while some of us will round up any strays by sunup. Any questions?"

The group looked at each other in understood silence.

"No? All right, men. We start north at sunup."

Pop was up at his chuckwagon the following morning by 4 a.m., quietly making -- then baking -- biscuits in his Dutch oven, grinding the coffee beans, and boiling the water. Bacon would be fried next, and slapped over the warm biscuits for breakfast with hot coffee when the crew stirred at daybreak.

Meals had little variety on a cattle drive. It was beef, beans ( nicknamed 'Pecos Strawberries'), bacon ('Chuckwagon Chicken'), biscuits ('Sourdough Bullets'), and black coffee. Pop already mentioned the barrel of apples, but he also had a surprise sack of sweet Vidalia onions, which came all the way from Georgia. Seeing as fruits and vegetables were sparse on the trail, Pop explained that chewing an onion a week would aid one's health. "And they are so sweet that you can eat them plain, just like a juicy apple!" he added.

The crew initially got along well. No one minded working with either a Mexican or a Negro, for both Pablo and Cotton were attentive, capable workers, and amiable trail buddies. They did their share, and then some.

But senior cowboy Luke took an odd, subtle dislike of the newcomer, Jimmy.

Jimmy Unger was tall but somewhat facially unattractive, with protruding jug-ears, freckles, and slightly bucked teeth. His tousled hair was the color of stale straw. Yet Jimmy's body was strongly muscled, and he moved with confident grace and pride, almost like an athlete, with no wasted motion. He was quickly seen to be a wonder around animals, and was able to charm horses, Pop's oxen, and even the cattle. Unger was easy-going, even-tempered, and affable. He knew several tunes and could play them smoothly on his harmonica. As the newcomer, he volunteered a few times to ride drag in the dusty rear of the cattle procession, rather than his side rotation or that of point in front. His blue eyes twinkled as he smiled whenever he told a joke or a story, and Jimmy was soon the favorite buckaroo of the group.

Except for Luke. He was secretly jealous that -- as senior cowboy -- he was not getting the attention and respect which he felt he was entitled to. Unger had unwittingly usurped him, and Luke would make him pay for that.

It started out small. Petty things, like bumping into Jimmy and not saying excuse me. Kicking his coffee cup over 'by accident.' Blaming Jimmy for something he didn't do correctly. The other cowpokes began to notice the growing animosity, but held back their opinions or interference. In the meantime, Unger humbly apologized (unnecessarily), or tried to be extra nice towards Luke. But Luke's responses to Jimmy's reactions were always cold or condescending. If others mentioned anything casually in passing, Unger would simply say, "Oh, Luke didn't mean it," or "It was an accident...Just let it go." Matt Haymer, also noticed the subtle tension between the two cowhands, and asked Jimmy if he wanted an intervening word (being the Boss) spoken in private to Luke, but Unger politely declined.

It took two weeks in the saddle to get to Red River Station, which was located two miles from the actual river. The drive had three days of rain so far, with one a real, all-day downpour. But the cattle were happy to graze on the sweet, moist grasses during their trail rest stops, and so they were not too parched when they finally arrived at the river. The Boss was pleased that the beeves were keeping their body weights up, so as to bring top dollar for sale in Abilene. "We could drive them harder and faster, but then they would arrive in Kansas all tired, skinny and weak. The twelve miles-a-day pace we are currently doing is perfect," he announced to his crew.

Everyone took advantage of the river to bath and shave. Other than a mustache, most cowboys didn't favor any facial hair. Water on the trail was usually too precious to waste shaving each day, so any river or creek was put to good use.

Pop later took advantage of their single day's rest at the settlement to replenish some food supplies for his chuckwagon. He bought another large sack of flour, and he also found a big jar with a dozen pickles soaking in brine, as a sour but crunchy treat for the crew. In addition, Pablo -- somewhat missing his more spicy Mexican meals -- artfully asked Pop if he would also buy a string of red chili peppers to help liven up their daily beef rations. The cook was naturally glad to oblige.

Crossing the Red River with two-thousand head of cattle was no picnic, but luckily no cows were lost. Once safe on the opposite shore, they had officially left Texas. They would now be in Indian Territory for the next few weeks -- up until the time they would eventually cross into Kansas, if all went well.

Meanwhile, in the days ahead, the cowboys found out a little bit more about each other's backgrounds.

Cotton explained that he got his nickname from picking that crop in northeastern Louisiana, beginning as a boy. "I was one of thirteen children. We was dirt poor. Everyone had to work so we could eat. Picking cotton in the hot sun all day is brutal, I can tell you that. But my Daddy was a free man, so we was never no slaves. We was sharecroppers. When I turned fifteen, I took off for Texas to try my luck at being a cowboy. It suits me real good. I'll send half of my pay from this drive back home to help the family. By the way, my real name is Nicodemus...you know, from the Bible. But I like to go by Cotton instead, 'cause it ain't so formal and high-soundin'."

Stumpy, meanwhile, knew that everyone was very curious on how he lost his left index finger.

"I was bit on that finger by an old, fat rattlesnake, way out in the middle of nowhere. I was walking alone a fair piece between two towns in Arkansas on business, and sat down on a log to rest near a creek. I placed my left hand behind me when I leaned back, and suddenly I got bit. The rattler didn't rattle a warning beforehand, 'cause his tail done been chewed off earlier by some varmint or other. Well, boys, I knew I wouldn't make it to safety in time with that poison moving in my body, so I made the hard choice to cut off the bit finger with my knife before the snakebite venom could spread. And hell yes it hurt! But doing that saved my life. I wrapped my bloody hand in my shirt and made it to the next town, about three miles away. The Doc that patched me up said I was a lucky man. By the way, I never thought to save that chopped finger as a souvenir, so I reckon some buzzard ate it back there after I left. And you can be sure that I shot that son-of-a-bitchin' snake dead. I'm just thankful that he didn't get my trigger finger!"

When asked later, Stumpy revealed that his real name was Uriah.

Pablo was short but sturdy, with a ready grin. He liked to sing sad love ballads in a low voice in Spanish in the evenings around the campfire. He translated the lyrics into English afterwards when asked. Pablo was an expert with a lariat. "Just like a real *vaquero*," he announced. He could impressively twirl his rope from small into large circles, then jump in and out of the loop while it was still spinning. He also told about his young wife, Josefina, back in Juarez, and how hard it was when he needed to be away for six months every year in *El Norte* working as a cowboy. "There is no work for good wages anywhere in Mexico, so I must come here," he explained. He missed his parents too. His first child was due in October. "I hope to have a fine, healthy son," he added. "If God will so bless me."

Karl was from Arkansas, like Stumpy. He was a husky, blonde-haired German, and was the only member of the crew to sport a proud, handlebar -style mustache. He shared many detailed stories about his boyhood in Europe. The cowpokes were fascinated to hear about castles and cathedrals and their history -- something most of them would never experience in person.

As for the Texans, Wade was from Waco, Dooley was from San Jacinto, Bud was from Nacogdoches, and Vance was from Longview. All four had grown up on farms, and were good with livestock and used to hard work outdoors.

Senior cowhand Luke Lyman hailed from Nashville. He still made it known in subtle ways that he didn't care for Jimmy Unger. Little things, unceasing, everyday. A snide remark. A glance of distain when the newcomer got an approving laugh from the others after telling a funny story. Thinly-veiled criticism of Jimmy's cowboy abilities. Everything short of an exploding knockdown fight. But Unger just shrugged it off. The Boss was impressed how Jimmy always kept his calm in the face of such hurtful abuse. Matt Haymer made a mental note to skip signing Luke on for any future drives, even though he was a good, steady worker. Lyman was a jealous man with an odd character flaw, and no team player, the Boss decided. Lyman was simply a bad member for group harmony.

Jimmy talked about his life back in Springfield, Illinois. His father ran a livery stable, so his only son learned everything about horses, then all about oxen and cattle. Unger loved animals, but he also loved the great outdoors and adventure, so he got it into his mind to become a cowboy.

"My Pa's livery and our house was right down the road from Abe Lincoln's house on 8th Street. I was there when the black-draped funeral train brought the President's body back home from Washington to the depot in Springfield. Thousands of folks gatherin' and weepin'. I'll never forget that sight," Jimmy related one night around the campfire.

Luke made a low 'harrumph' sound, and maybe even muttered the words "Yankee trash," but no one could be sure. Matt gave Luke a stern look over the flickering flames illuminating the prairie darkness. Lyman quickly averted his gaze and went poker-face.

Pop surprised the men one evening later with two large apple pies for dessert. "Dig in, boys, but only one slab apiece! Boss says you done earned it so far." And it was sweet and rich and delicious. Another night, the cook offered each cowpoke a crunchy green pickle with their beef and beans. And the crew praised Pablo for helping Pop slip some hot chilis into their daily meals. Talk quickly settled on what foods each man wanted to have first thing when they reached trail's end.

Karl craved a platter of thick pork sausages and potatoes with sauerkraut. Jimmy wanted a big tin of peaches. Wade wanted a large stack of flapjacks with plenty of syrup. Stumpy had a taste for his mother's fresh corn dodgers. Bud admitted that he wanted a juicy watermelon, but they were not in season yet, so he would settle instead for a big slab of cheddar cheese. Dooley wanted a whole pecan pie, while Vance wanted pan-fried catfish with hush puppies. Cotton craved breaded fried okra and grits with Cajun hot sauce. Pablo wanted a skillet full of Josefina's *pollo con arroz*. And Luke had his heart set on some home-style Kentucky burgoo stew, with a nice chunk of cornbread on the side.

The trail was peaceful for the next several days. Then Cotton reported to Boss that new three calves had been born in the night. Part of the crew and Pop assembled to hear what was next as Boss spoke. "As you men know, we can't slow the herd down to let the mothers tend to their babies. The only thing to do is kill the calves and leave them to the buzzards. It's a hard thing to do when we are used to raising calves to adulthood under normal circumstances. But it's got to be done."

Pablo volunteered to do the dirty work. "I have done such killings on other drives before, Boss. I understand why it must be done. I will be quick and merciful," he admitted.

The three calves were gathered by Cotton to be slaughtered. Cowboys never killed any stock for butchered meat while on the trail. It simply took too much time. All the beef the cowboys ate was always purchased in dry form by the cook before the journey, then rehydrated with water and fried up in lard. This is why the calves would not be killed then eaten as fresh veal for the crew's upcoming meal.

Just then Dooley rode up. He had been leading point. "Boss, about two miles ahead...Injuns coming...about twenty of 'em, I reckon."

Matt explained that they were now on Chickasaw land. "Probably no threat. Not a warlike tribe. They came to Indian Territory about thirty years ago from the southeastern part of the U.S. The Army marched them west on the Trail of Tears with four other tribal groups. Dooley, tell Vance to cut out five head and bring them here to me. Tell Wade, Karl, and Bud to stop the herd for an hour. Rotate Jimmy and Luke on point. Cotton, bring me those three calves too. We'll make the Injuns a fair gift in exchange for permission to peacefully cross their lands."

As Unger rode forward to replace Dooley, he saw his very first Redmen as they slowly and proudly rode by. They were bronze-skinned and finely muscled, in leather breech-skins, and were armed with lances and bows, but they wore no war paint. The Indians wore a variety of feathers, animal bones, and beads as ornamentation around their necks and heads. It was a dramatic, noble sight that probably no one back in civilized Springfield could even imagine! Jimmy realized.

The impressive Native procession soon ended in front of Boss Haymer. He dismounted his horse as a sign of friendliness and respect.

"Stay away from your guns, men, unless we need them," Matt advised in a low, calm voice. Then, using sign language, he welcomed the Chickasaw group leader, and offered to give his people five cows and three calves in exchange for permission to cross their lands peacefully. Both sides knew this was a fair deal, so it was accepted without any hard bargaining. Pop also came out with a platter of biscuits for the Redmen, and that sealed the bargain. The Chickasaw eagerly enjoyed this surprise treat, whooped and hollered in acknowledgement, then turned their horses and left with their new livestock winfall.

That evening, Stumpy asked Matt if the Indians would raise the three calves into adulthood, for the purpose of having much more meat a few years later.

"No, Stumpy...Injuns just think about living for today. They don't think ahead to the future very much, like we do. They are not much for delaying their needs and wants. I figure they will roast and feast on those calves this very night at their camp."

The herd proceeded north. There was a fierce thunderstorm one night, with gusty winds and lashing rain, but the cattle stayed grouped and there was no stampede. "We lucked out on that one, men," The Boss remarked. And there was no sign so far of any outlaw night rustlers either.

Grazing was also remained favorable as they moved forward. The weather was not too hot yet, so the grass was still green and rich. The large string of horses -- rotated in their remuda -- were likewise healthy and energetic.

The stars at night were a wonder to behold, and the cowboys shared their puzzlement over why anybody would ever want to live in a crowded, noisy, big city when they could enjoy life instead in the wide, open spaces of the frontier. The contented sound of cattle lowing under the moon, and the sweet smell of sagebrush and creosote bushes after a gentle rain, was all anyone really needed, they agreed. It signified a man's freedom, his true nature.

Naturally, the young men also liked to talk around the evening fire about the mysterious female gender. They debated, as some of the cowhands rolled their own cigarettes and smoked: Blonde, brunette, or redhead? 'Soiled dove' or farm girl, or maybe a schoolteacher? Getting married and settling down, or blissful bachelorhood? Having a litter of little ones or not? Everyone had a boast or brag, or a serious opinion. Matt, Pablo, and Dooley spoke in support of being married with children. "If you're lucky -- and keep your eyes open for the opportunity -- you'll fall in love with the right woman, and it goes on from there," Dooley confessed. "Having kids is also a blessing -- raisin' 'em and learnin' 'em the ropes, and teachin' 'em what's right and wrong. Pablo, you'll see what I mean soon enough. Having a warm gal in bed with you every cold night is a fine comfort too. And if'n your woman don't nag you, and she's good tending the kitchen stove, well then, boys, you'll be in hog heaven!" The whole crew laughed heartily at that last mention.

It was now June, and they were two-thirds the way to Abilene. They had successfully crossed the Washita, Canadian, North Canadian, and Cimarron Rivers -- the cowboys bathing and shaving at each stop after fording the herd. On the Cimarron, the chuckwagon got struck in the mud for an hour, but Pop's oxen team eventually did their job and pulled it out.

When both Bud and Vance came down with diarrhea, Pop brewed the flowers of the Bachelor's Button plant into a kind of tea and made them drink it, and that fixed them up in no time. And when anyone got a noticeable cut or bad skin scrape, Pop applied a poultice made from the Prickly Pear cactus to help fight infection and aid healing. It worked well too.

Before long, the drive left Indian Territory -- seeing a passing hunting party of Osage in the distance east one morning -- and entered Kansas. Matt was encouraged that they would probably make Abilene ("The Queen of the Cowtowns") by mid-month. Several days later, they arrived in the town of Wichita, on the Arkansas River. and stopped for a day of rest and clean-up. Pop bought three dozen fresh eggs here, and fried them up (in real butter he had also procured) for the hungry crew's breakfast the next day.

The last town before Abilene would be Newton. By this time, more and more of the crew was avoiding Luke Lyman whenever possible, for they objected to his still unwarranted harshness towards Jimmy Unger. Jimmy, however, was consistently polite and unflappable towards Luke, noting to the rest of the crew, "Look, we are all trail mates together on this drive. We need to get along as best we can. We have to rely on each other to get the job done, no matter what. Luke is just being himself, I don't know why. He probably can't help it." The Boss smiled and nodded when he later heard what Jimmy had said. "That young man is wise beyond his years," he later said idly to the inside of his tin coffee cup, when he was alone.

On June 18, 1868, T. J. Peller's herd -- under the careful management of Matt Haymer and his ten steadfast cowhands -- marched through Abilene's main street to the cattle pens on the outskirts of town, which were located adjacent to the Kansas Pacific R.R. line. The initial number of 2000 cows was down just twelve head after having crossed 520 miles -- five to the Indians, and seven to hoof or leg injuries which necessitated them being destroyed on the journey.

The Boss next went to the office of Joe McCoy, the relatively new but already well-regarded town's #1 beef dealer, and signed the necessary papers to seal the purchase deal and get paid. Owner T. J. Peller would be sent a bank draft for $58,762. Matt had earned $188. Ned "Pop" Wheeler made $90, and each of the ten cowhands earned $60 each. After getting paid, the cowboys stabled their horses, then went for hot baths, barber shaves and haircuts. Next, they had their laundry attended to, purchased a new shirt or pair of socks at a mercantile, then finally found a soft bed at a choice of hotels for the night. After sleeping in late and relaxing, the next night would be for a bordello visit, then serious drinking and gambling at one or more of Abilene's famous saloons. Most cowboys could spent their money fast, figuring they earned the right to 'let the badger out.' And temptations were everywhere.

But Pop, Cotton, and Pablo would be heading out the next day, and would skip the upcoming hell-raising. "Maybe we will work together again someday soon, boys...all in all, it was a pretty smooth drive," Boss proclaimed to the whole group before they went their separate ways. "So I'll be thanking you men." He solemnly shook each man's hand. Matt Haymer would now head to Dodge City by train to visit his older brother before returning to Abilene and then riding his horse back home to his family in Waxahachie.

*Vaya con Dios y buenos suerte, amigos*!" added Pablo. The newly independent trio would travel back together the way they came, with Cotton splitting off to return to Louisiana once they got to Fort Worth. Pablo, however, would continue with Pop and his chuckwagon to San Antonio, then split off alone to Juarez and home from that town, which had been made famous by the Battle of the Alamo.

Dooley, Bud, Karl, Vance, Wade, Stumpy, Jimmy, and Luke decided to have an early drink the following mid-afternoon, before they would hit a series of raucous saloons later that evening after supper. They chose a watering hole appropriately called the Trail's End. They would have the place to themselves at this hour.

Jimmy, Stumpy, and Dooley all ordered beer, and the others ordered whiskey. While the Irish barkeep -- Sean "Fitz" Fitzpatrick -- poured, Jimmy noticed out the window a huge, imposing man ride up on his horse and dismount. This stranger resembled nothing less than a grizzly bear, and he easily weighed three-hundred pounds. He looked mean and ornery too.

"Hey, Fitz, do you know this man out there?" Jimmy asked. The other cowpunchers turned to look at who Unger was referring to.

"Aye...you're looking at trouble that's surely coming," Fitz replied. "That be Rufus Dunfrey. Folks call him The Bear. He's a bad one. Always looking for trouble. They say he's killed six men already. Better finish up your drinks, boys, and leave before it's too late. The sheriff is out of town and I'm afraid you're on your own today."

Just then the saloon's wooden half-doors swung open and in walked The Bear.

His face was wind-blistered from a hard day in the saddle. He could have been in his mid-30s. He was thirsty. His beady, dark eyes carefully took in the scene. The bar room was empty except for eight men at the long rail.

"Bottle, and a clean glass," he roared as he slammed his large paw on the bar counter, revealing three silver dollars. Fitz complied. Bear pulled the cork from the whiskey bottle with his teeth and spat it out on the floor, deliberately missing the spittoon. He poured a tumbler full of the rotgut, gulped it back, then sniffed the air and said, "Hey Fitz...Do I smell goddamn cow shit in here?"

The eight cowboys ignored the taunt and focused downward on their drinks.

"Yeah, it's got to be cow shit. These kids come to town after a cattle drive and get paid and then get all spruced up, but they always forget to clean the shit off their boots. It's just plain disgusting. How can a grown man enjoy his drink with that stink? You all need to get the hell out, right now, before I come over and throw your asses out -- one-at-a-time, or all together!" Rufus threatened.

The four Texans and the two Arkansans -- clearly shaken -- quietly conferred. The man was a known killer and he was armed, whereas they were not. So they quickly drank up, paid up, and then headed for the door. "We don't want no trouble, mister. We're saving our energy for better things later tonight. Luke and Jimmy, you coming?" Dooley asked.

"No, I'd like to finish my drink in my own time, like I always do." Luke stated.

"And I'd like to finish my beer too," added Jimmy. "We'll catch up with you all later." It completely surprised Luke that Jimmy would stay behind with him.

So the six cowhands left. The only sound in the room was the large Regulator clock ticking the seconds away dramatically from above and behind the bar. Sean knew he was helpless in such a situation, with the sheriff and his deputy both out of town on a manhunt.

Bear walked over to Luke. "Oh, so we have a smart-ass here, huh? Here, I'll help you finish your whiskey." Rufus threw the drink in Luke's face. "Now, get the hell out of here!" Dunfrey drew his revolver and cocked it, pointing it between Luke's eyes.

But this was when Jimmy put his beer mug down and stepped in.

"Look, mister, you can see that neither of us is heeled." Unger gestured to show he was unarmed. "Now if you want to settle our score outside, man-to-man, holster your Colt and leave your gun here with Fitz and meet me on the street. Luke, trust me. I can handle this better than you." Luke noticed a strange look come into Unger's eyes, a look of supreme confidence mixed with deadly seriousness.

"So you're going to fight me? Bear asked incredulously. "Why you jug-eared son-of-a-bitch! You look like some kind of goddamned circus freak with those freckles and your bucked teeth. Fine with me. Let's git to it!" Rufus removed his gun belt and left it on the bar counter.

The two opponents faced off in the street. Luke was shocked to see how calm Jimmy appeared, relaxed but athletically ready for action.

The first punch hit Bear squarely in his nose with the force of an anvil. His snout broke like glass, and was soon drooling blood. This made Rufus furious. "I was only going to hurt you a little bit, boy, but now you're gonna get the real stuff," Bear vowed.

But Jimmy had other plans. His next punch was to Bear's throat, hitting the man's Adam's apple so hard that Bear started to gasp and choke, his eyes popping and his face sweating and flushed red.

"You know, Luke, I never told anybody, but my Pa was a middle-weight boxing champion in Springfield before he retired and opened his livery. He taught me from an early age every boxing move he ever knew. He knew because of my face that others would tease me and try to take advantage of me. So I became quite a fighter," Unger yelled aloud to his trail companion and to the now slowly gathering, curious crowd.

"Rufus, I absolutely hate bullies!" Jimmy swore, and proceeded to pound Bear's face raw with both of his iron fists. Dunfrey's face was split, swollen and bleeding. He was gasping and weakening, but he pulled a knife and waved it menacingly at Jimmy. "You're a dead man now, boy," he promised.

Unger, however, shrewdly saw the threat coming, and expertly dodged the deadly thrust, kicking the knife out of Bear's hand, then neatly grabbing the bully's arm and pulling him to the ground. Jimmy next broke Bear's extended arm with his foot, much as one would do with a piece of timber. Bear screamed in pain as the bone cracked. Unger then went to work kicking Bear's face, then his ribs, then his back, with a fury that was truly frightening. The 300-pound man was a pitiful lump of moaning, helpless flesh at this point.

"Luke, go across the street to the blacksmith and ask if I can borrow his hammer for a minute," Jimmy instructed. When Luke returned moments later, he asked Jimmy if he meant to kill the bully.

"No, but he'll be on the mend for months when I'm done with him," the unusual man from Illinois replied.

"Now, Bear, I know you can still hear me, and I know you're right-handed by the way you pulled your knife on me. A big mistake on your part, by the way. So that's gotta mean that you're a right-handed gunslinger too. But we can't have that anymore, now can we?" Jimmy dragged the nearly inert Rufus by his legs over to the nearby raised wooden sidewalk in front of the Trail's End saloon. Placing the hapless man's right hand down flat on the lumber, he smashed the bones in Bear's gun hand hard with the blacksmith's hammer. Rufus Dunfrey screamed one more time and finally passed out.

"O.K., Luke, you can return the hammer now. We're done here," Unger said. He took a deep breath from his labors, examined his knuckles, then re-entered the bar.

"Fitz, call the doctor and have him fetch Bear to get him patched up. And I'll take his gun belt, now, if you please." Jimmy removed all the bullets from the Colt and the belt cartridge slips and pocketed them."Give Rufus his gun back when he recovers," he ordered, handing back the emptied belt to Fitz. Then Unger turned and finished his beer as if nothing had happened.

When Luke rejoined Jimmy in the saloon, he was surprised to see the other six cowboys with him. They had witnessed the whole outside affair, and were as awed as was Luke. They had never witnessed such a thorough beating.

Lyman had to ask Unger why. Why? Why -- after all of my hatred and rudeness and jealousy towards you on the trail for six weeks -- did you come to my aid? Why would you put your life on the line for mine? Why did you help me?

"Because we were trail mates together, Luke. Call it a sacred bond to always stand up for each other. It's that simple, pardner. Now Fitz, let's have a whiskey here for my friend...and for all my friends!" Unger decreed, putting down some money. And all seven cowboys -- including the Irish barkeep -- raised their glasses to the remarkable, never-to-be-forgotten, Jimmy Unger...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

September 14, 2020