DEAD OR ALIVE

Calvin ("Cal") Longmire was a 'reward hunter' in the northeastern quadrant of the vast Dakota Territory.

The year was 1873. The town of Fargo had just been established two years earlier, coinciding with the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad.

A 'reward hunter' (the term 'bounty hunter' actually didn't appear until 1953) was usually a sheriff or peace officer -- active or retired -- trying to earn some extra cash by rounding up a fugitive of the law. Private detective agencies like the Pinkerton's, or the railroads themselves, also hired out reward hunters. Most rewards were $100 or less per man captured. [The largest 'Wanted: Dead or Alive' rewards were $50,000 for the heinous Lincoln assassin John Wilkes Booth, and $25,000 for the outlaw Jesses James.] But any man -- willing and brave enough -- could legally track down any wanted outlaw and bring him in for justice, and get paid for it.

Fargo was located on the Red River of the North, just over the border from Moorhead, Minnesota. It was prone to annual flooding, brutally cold and snowy winters, and constant winds. The town was divided into two sections: the peaceful and orderly 'Fargo of the Prairie,' and the rowdy and more lawless 'Fargo in the Timber.' It was this latter area that Cal Longmire would frequent for any tips on the latest wanted outlaws.

Cal was forty-six years old, of average size and heft. A Civil War veteran who fought for the Union, he had to abandon cow punching due to physical injuries from man- handling cattle and horses over a five year stretch -- not to mention suffering from other infirmities simply due to old age. His best qualities, however, were twofold: he was an expert gun hand, and he felt he was keen in his understanding of human nature. He knew how and when to kill, and had demonstrated his skill in plenty of tough situations, especially during the War. As a reward hunter, he always gave his prey a chance to surrender peacefully and be taken in alive. But if the fugitive was of a mind to resist or refuse, that sorry soul was promptly sent to Hell.

Longmire favored using two 1851 Navy Colt revolvers, loaded with .38 caliber long 'rim-fire' cartridges. [These were the same pistol models favored by both Buffalo Bill Cody and Doc Holliday.] After years of practice, Cal had perfected the famous 'cross-draw' that Wild Bill Hickok was currently using in the Black Hills town of Deadwood. Often referred to as the 'reverse', the 'twist', or the 'cavalry draw', it consisted of having the butts of both pistols facing outward -- either in holsters or tucked in a belly sash -- and drawn out with the shooter's opposite hands crossing over his belly before firing.

Cal lived a hard life -- no wife, no family, no living relatives, no real home. He traveled alone now, hunting men down for cash. Although some looked down upon this necessary occupation as pathetic, Cal found no shame in it. It was a job that had to be done, no matter how odious. There was the law -- with the principles of right and wrong -- and justice always to be served. He had brought in eleven fugitives so far, and had to kill only four men, in these past three years as a 'man-hunter.'

Longmire had been shot only twice in his life. Once was in the left thigh during a shootout with some rustlers during his cow-punching days, and the other was in the shoulder after being bush-whacked by a wanted outlaw he was tracking -- a fierce, half-breed (Teton-Sioux and Mexican) bandit named Pedro Serrano, whom Cal later killed. That bitter incident had been a bloody and rough way to earn $100.

There was an overworked and underpaid sheriff named Weldon Dooley in 'Fargo in the Timber' that Longmire checked in with from time to time, to look at the latest wanted posters.

Dooley was sitting behind his desk -- his expanding gut straining against his shirt and pressing against the edge of the worn desktop -- when Calvin walked in. The sheriff's face was florid, his eyes were reddened, and he likely had just been drinking. There was a welcomed fire going in the room stove, though, seeing as it was already getting cold outside, even at the end of September.

"Jesus, Cal, how the hell are you?" the fat lawman bellowed. "I'd offer you a drink, but I hear you only take coffee nowadays -- just like Wyatt Earp!" He shoved a half-empty bottle of hooch back in its hideaway desk drawer.

"Oh, I'm not too bad, Wel. My back hurts like sin every morning, but it usually feels better as the day goes by, unless I'm stuck in the saddle. I take some laudanum from time to time, but only when I have to. Can't afford to throw off my gun hands... And you're right about no more booze. I gave up the bottle after I found out last year that my Pa had died drunk -- drowned face down in a pool of mud, rainwater, and horse piss -- in the street outside some shithole saloon in Omaha..."

Cal paused a moment, thinking back when he vowed to himself to avoid the same fate as his father, then asked, "So, pardner, you got any fresh wanted posters?"

"Yep...you're in luck, old pal. The train brought one in yesterday. Your new fugitive is Bob Mickle. I've heard he's one mean son-of-a-bitch. Goes by the name 'Bad Bob.' Killed and robbed a poor German sodbuster out on the prairie, then raped his wife in front of their kids. The widow identified the culprit. As always, $100 cash money is yours if'n you bring him in. I'd prefer him brought back face down over a saddle, but if you bring him in still kickin', we'll transfer him to Yankton [the Dakota Territorial capitol, a 300-mile trip up river -- the Red here flows north into Canada -- on a steamboat, close to the Nebraska border] for a fair trial and a nice, decent hangin'."

Longmire studied the wanted poster. The face of his next prey was typical of lawless fugitives -- crazed eyes, a battered face, a pitiless, almost inhuman expression of hate at everything normal and good in the world. Mickle's special distinguishing characteristic, however, was a badly healed busted nose that clearly leaned to the right. Cal remarked on this.

"They say he got smashed in the face with a chair in a bar fight somewhere down in Nebraska," Weldon added. "Be extra careful with this one, Cal. He's 101% trouble."

"Any hints where he might be headed?"

"Best guess would be north into Canada, probably near Pembina. He could take the steamboat from here all the way up to Lake Winnipeg if he had a mind. But he might go west too, out to the Badlands. Plenty of Indians still out there, but no civilization or law to badger him."

"OK, Wel, thanks for the tips. I'll head west to Worthington [renamed Valley City the following year] and see if I can pick up Bad Bob's trail. And do yourself a favor, my friend: cut down on the whiskey, and try to lose some weight. I don't want to go to your funeral just yet. I'll be seeing you..."

With the ugly face of Bob Mickle burned into his memory, Longmire got back on his horse (he had named his dun mare 'Dancer'), and turned her head towards where the sun always set. It was getting colder now, so Cal was in a race to get the job done over the next few weeks before the first snows fell. His plan was ultimately to head down south to the warmth of Texas for the winter. His achy bones hated the cold.

It was a sixty-mile ride to Worthington. In his younger days, Cal could have covered this in two days, but with his back pain, he stretched it out to a less bothersome three days. He was warmly dressed with a heavy wool coat, leather gloves, and a long scarf to tie down his hat when the winds blew really bad.

The Northern Pacific Railroad (NP) was pushing its way westward as well. It would run to Worthington next, then continue on to Bismarck and eventually into Montana. But for now, Longmire rode mostly over empty, flat prairie.

After a hot bath and a real bed in Worthington, Cal asked around to see if anyone knew the whereabouts of Bad Bob. Some folks said the man with the tell-tale crooked nose was last seen heading for Bismarck. So, after stocking up on more provisions and caring for his horse, Longmire continued west in more cold, windy weather under leaden skies.

Two days later, he passed the railroad line camp at Jamestown. A handful of advance track surveyors were busy measuring the grade for the eventual NP train route. Longmire pressed on after enquiring if anyone knew the whereabouts of Bad Bob Mickle. No luck there.

It was in a grove of trees, another day's ride past Jamestown, near a creek -- where Cal stopped to water and rest his mount -- that he came across a not uncommon sight in the silent, windswept Old West:

A man trussed up on horseback, with a hangman's noose around his neck -- the rope attached to a sturdy tree limb above. Four men were assembled around the grey stallion, and one of them was about to slap the horse's rump and send the hapless victim swinging and choking into eternity.

Longmire rode up slowly, and called out, "Howdy, boys! What's ya got going on here?" He carefully assessed the eyes of each of the four men, as well as their weapons, while still acting casual.

"We got us a horse thief here, mister, and we aim to hang him proper, as you can plainly see," one of the men replied.

It was then that Cal looked directly at the man about to be hung.

By God, it was Mitch Harris! He was an old ranching pal from Cal's cow-punching days back in Kansas -- in fact, he was the same man who saved Longmire's left leg by carving out the bullet that rustlers had plugged him with. Shit! He had to get both Harris and himself out this situation alive. A surprised Mitch recognized Cal too. His eyes grew large for an instant, but both men wisely contained themselves. The wilderness setting took on the appearance of some sort of deadly stage play, its ending unknown.

Getting down off of Dancer, Cal introduced himself while gently moving his hands toward his pistol grips. He had to concoct a good story fast, and convincingly.

"Name's Calvin Longmire, originally up from Kansas. I make my living as a reward hunter. I'm afraid I can't let you hang this man, boys. His name is Mitch Harris. I've been tracking him for weeks. He's worth $100 for me if I bring him back alive to Fargo. He's wanted to stand trial by the NP for a botched train robbery. He badly wounded a baggage clerk who was guarding a strong box. Then he high-tailed it, empty-handed, with two other outlaws after the train engineer surprised them with twin shotgun blasts. I've got a legal warrant signed by the railroad, right here in my saddle bag, if'n you don't believe me." Cal hoped to God that this bluff wasn't called.

Another of the men spoke. "We caught this varmint without a bill of sale for this grey. It belongs to Seth Briggs. See this here SB brand?" He indicated the horse's flank. "Seth has a spread outside of Bismarck. We're his kin, and he sent us to track this thief down. We found him trying to run. We intend to render frontier justice now, then return Seth's horse."

A helpless, neck-tied Mitch Harris cried out, "I swear I paid Seth $75 for this horse! His wife had taken their buckboard to Bismarck for supplies and to visit some relatives. Seth was feeling poorly and couldn't make the trip himself. He had also run out of writing materials, so he told his wife to buy some more paper and ink too. He told me to ride back later in the week when she returned, and he would write me up a proper bill of sale for my buy. You boys have got to believe me! We can all ride back to his place right now and you can check on my story! I'm an innocent man, I'll swear it plain on the Bible...y'all can't rightly hang me! Please...I'm beggin' you!"

Longmire spoke next. "Now boys, I don't know who's telling the truth here. But I've got my duty to perform. I say cut him down and turn him over to me." Cal removed a pair of dull, used handcuffs from his belt and tossed them over near the boots of the four men. "Put his hands behind his back and slap these on. Take the horse back to Seth Briggs. I'll take the prisoner back with me to Fargo. He'll serve time in prison, that I can promise you. Justice for everyone will then be satisfied."

"Oh, yeah? And what if we don't cotton to your arrangement, mister man-hunter?" one of the men snarled, his hand edging towards his gun belt.

Cal watched the man's eyes, which gave away any intentions faster than his hand ever could. Experience had taught him that vital lesson. Over and over again.

"Well..." Longmire forced a smile, "...if you happen to have five pretty twenty-dollar gold pieces instead -- and give 'em to me right here and now -- I'll simply mount up and say fare-thee-well. You see, I just care about the money, friend, that's all." He casually crossed his arms across his midriff, but was ready to pull a deadly cross-draw with his matching pair of Navy Colts. Mitch watched the unfolding drama nervously. Everybody knew that nobody carried that kind of cash out here in the Big Lonesome. It was a fool's gambit.

However, another man broke the suspense by saying," I heard talk about this here reward hunter, name of Longmire. He's a known killer who uses a special double-draw. Look, Royce...see how both his gun butts are facing out? If you draw on him with your single pistol, he'll cut you down for sure with both of his, and likely then us with you. I say, give him the goddamn horse thief. Go on, grab Seth's horse, and let's get the hell out of here."

Royce paused for a moment, then backed off. Mitch Harris was unsaddled and untied, and then handcuffed with his hands behind his back. One of the men helped hoist him up on Cal's horse, Dancer. The assembled men parted ways. Longmire and Harris rode double in the saddle back east, while Royce and his three riders went west, taking Seth's horse with them. The suspenseful scenario was concluded at last.

When they were far enough away, an hour later, Cal and Mitch relaxed from their risky act. The ruse had worked, and they had won the gamble! "Jesus, Cal, you sure saved my bacon! I would have been a dead man by now if you hadn't come along," he confessed with relief.

Cal stopped his mare and helped Mitch get down. He removed the handcuffs.

"I remembered how you saved my leg back in the day by digging out that rustler's lead, pardner, so I figured I owed you one," Longmire remarked, grinning. The pair shook hands. They shared Cal's canteen for a welcomed drink of water. There was silence for a few moments, then Cal got serious.

"But I have to ask you...so tell me in all honesty, Mitch...did you really steal that horse, or not?"

Harris was clearly embarrassed by his friend's question. He hesitated, and looked down, but then looked up and blurted out: "Yes, I'm afraid I did, Cal. I was flat broke, and had to get something -- anything -- to sell to get some money. I was desperate, I was stupid. And I'm real, real sorry..."

Mitch was about the same age as Cal, and likewise had been beaten down by both time and circumstance. But he had crossed the line by making the unforgivable mistake of stealing another man's horse. It was the worst thing a man could do, out here in the frontier. A horse could mean life or death if one was stranded in the middle of nowhere without a mount.

"Dammit, Mitch! You shithead!" Cal took off his hat in anger and threw it in the dust. He kicked the dirt with his feet. He paused a minute in silence to calm himself down. Then he cleared his throat.

"Look... I'll take you back to Jamestown, but from there you're on your own. I'll stake you twenty dollars for old time's sake, so you can get a bed, clean up, and get your meals for a few days. The NP railroad will be nearing the edge of town soon, so I suggest you get a job -- any job -- with them and get your life back in order. Pick a new name. Keep a low profile. Never go back west towards Bismarck or you'll get recognized and hung. Once you have a grubstake, leave the Territory for good. Maybe go back down to Nebraska or Kansas.

But if we ever meet again, you know I'll have to arrest you if or when your face is on a wanted poster, because that's the law." Mitch understood, and sheepishly murmured his consent. Cal retrieved his hat, shook it off, and the pair remounted a weary Dancer. The one-time saddle pals parted company awkwardly once they arrived back in Jamestown the following day. Any chance for continued friendship was dashed.

After tending to Dancer at the livery in town and cleaning up, Longmire went into the Stars and Stripes Hotel for a meal and a hot cup of coffee. A stranger approached his table after the Negro waiter took Cal's order.

"Pardon me, sir, but I believe you were recently in town asking about someone called Bad Bob," the man offered. "My name's Abe Stamper. Mind if I sit down?"

Cal introduced himself and had Abe pull up a chair. He asked the waiter to bring another cup of coffee for his guest, and add it to his bill.

"Word has it that this Bad Bob character told someone that he was headed to the Turtle Mountain area up north, near the Canadian border. Do you know it? It's heavily forested and has lots of small kettle lakes. Plenty of game up there too. That's why the Chippewa Injuns still live there. If your man is a fugitive, it's the perfect place for him to hide out and then slip into Canada. If you can ride twenty miles a day, it's about eight days in the saddle from here. Thought you might like to know."

Longmire thanked the man for his tip and they shook hands as Abe left. The cold trail to finding Bad Bob Mickle just got warm again! Cal stocked up on a week's provisions and headed northwest, after asking the rail line surveyor crew if he could study their maps of the entire Dakota Territory for a moment, so as to fix the general location of Turtle Mountain in his mind.

Turtle Mountain wasn't really a mountain at all, just a 2000' high plateau, he was told. But it was the highest point in the northern half of the Territory, so it couldn't be missed, the surveyors promised.

The weather was still lousy and dreary, as falling temperatures turned the next day's rain into sleet. Dancer was steadfast, however, and soldiered on. More than once on the silent trail, Cal wondered if this reward hunting business was worth this much damn trouble and effort. He took some blessed sips of laudanum for the pain when his back acted up.

Thankfully, the sun broke through at last when Longmire approached Turtle Mountain on the eighth day. It was as pretty area as had been described by Abe Stamper: plenty of trees of all varieties, good clear streams, plenty of small lakes, and lots of wild game, which Cal spotted from a distance as he rode ahead. He smelled the heady odors of the damp woods, and even heard a few chattering birds that hadn't flown south yet. Both were welcomed changes from riding the monotony of the prairie.

Suddenly, Longmire was startled to see a young Chippewa brave, perhaps half of Cal's age, in the forest. His horse had gone lame, probably from stepping in a gopher hole. The Indian had killed a deer with his bow and arrow, but now the brave was alone and stuck here, away from his tribe, with fresh meat but a useless, crippled mount.

Calvin went into sign language with his hands and facial gestures to calm the wary brave, who had his bow ready to let loose an arrow, if need be, into this stranger. Longmire went next to examine the injured horse's leg, then carefully indicated that it had to be shot dead to end its pain. The young Indian nodded that he understood, and grunted something in his language. Cal put a quick bullet into the suffering animal's brainpan.

Still using sign language, Longmire made it clear to the brave that he would take both him and his deer back to his tribe's camp. The Indian helped Cal sling the deer carcass across Dancer's neck, then the pair took turns riding on Cal's horse and walking next to her in the direction home that the Indian indicated. To be on the safe side, Cal kept a tight grip on his mare's reins when it was the brave's turn to ride, before they switched off about every hour or so.

It was late afternoon when the two arrived at the Chippewa camp, which consisted of about thirty-five men, women and children. The young brave explained to his community what had happened. Afterward, Longmire was welcomed as a friend, was well fed, and was invited to spend the night -- which he gladly accepted -- in one of their dome-shaped, birch bark, wigwam dwellings. His instincts told him that these Indians were trustworthy and would not harm him.

He left the camp at sunrise on yet another cold morning to continue his hunt of Bad Bob Mickle. The Chippewa kindly gifted Cal with some buffalo jerky for his journey. He was touched by their openness and generosity. It was a pleasant surprise, for most Indians were generally despised and feared by white men.

As he traveled deeper into the wilderness later that day, he noticed a dim campfire in the distance, in a clearing, as the sun was about to set. He took out his spyglass from one of his saddlebags to get a better look. He noticed a spread out bedroll and some scattered cooking pots, but no people or tethered horses. He decided to head toward the campfire's light and investigate the mystery.

Just then, Cal heard the unmistakable crack of a rifle shot, and he felt an explosive pain in his right thigh. The blast knocked him clear off his horse. He realized with sullen surprise that he had been tricked and bushwhacked!

He heard a sinister voice behind him bark an order: "Don't move, mister! Don't pull your guns, or I'll finish you off..."

Cal heard the crackling sound of dead leaves and broken twigs being stepped on as the assassin walked around and then stopped in front of him and made himself known.

It was, of course, the fugitive murderer Bob Mickle -- he of the crooked nose and crazed eyes.

"I lit that campfire and then doubled back to ambush you, in case you were curious. I see that Abe Stamper did his job right smartly, leading you right to me. I paid him ten silver dollars for his trouble. You must be the man-hunter that I heard has been tracking me. Wanted: Dead or Alive, you say? Ha! I could have shot you in the head and put an end to you -- whatever your name is -- but I took a leg shot instead so you'll die slowly. You won't walk, run, or ride away, mister reward hunter. You'll never collect any bounty on me, you piece of shit!"

Bad Bob took Longmire's gun belt with its matching pair of Navy Colts. "You won't be needing these shooters anymore, either. Hmm...nice irons, these. I do thank you. But seeing as I'm a fair man, I'll let you keep your rifle." He slipped the Winchester out of its long leather saddle holster. He ejected every cartridge except one, and pocketed the rest of the fallen shells. "I'll leave you one shot to kill yourself with -- when you can't stand the cold, the hunger, and the shock of dying slow anymore. Just take off your boot and sock, then put the rifle in your mouth. You can pull the trigger with your toe."

Then, to Cal's utter horror, the criminal fiend suddenly spun around and shot Dancer in the head, dead. "Here's some meat you can chew on, if you can stomach it raw before the coyotes and buzzards arrive." Bad Bob laughed a cruel, sadistic laugh. He strode back in triumph to his own secretly tethered horse, mounted up, and rode off. Darkness approached quickly as the sun finished setting.

Calvin Longmire was in the most desperate situation of his life. He was bleeding out from his serious leg wound, and he felt increasingly weak and woozy. He had some food in his saddlebags on dead Dancer and some water in his canteen, but what he most needed to do was to start a warming fire. He had flint and steel but no dry wood. What should I do now? What can I do to stay alive? Exasperated at having been caught off-guard as well as being suddenly exhausted, Cal slid helplessly into unconsciousness...

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When he woke up, Longmire discovered that he was back in a Chippewa lodge -- a now familiar dome-shaped wigwam made of birch bark over a bended tree branch frame. A crackling fire was in the center of the room. The young brave he had once rescued was kneeling by his side. The Indian smiled, then quickly summoned an Indian maiden to come. She shyly brought back the tribe's medicine woman and some nourishing food. Medicinal roots and herbs were soon administered, along with some native healing chanting.

Cal had renewed hope now that he would live!

He explained using sign language all that had happened to him, and who had done it. The young brave understood, and -- after a quick pow-wow with the community leaders -- formed, then himself joined a war party of five skilled warriors to track down Bad Bob and bring him back to Calvin, dead or alive.

Two days passed. It began to snow, ever so lightly. The camp had gone about its various routines peacefully. Longmire felt better and was gradually recovering from his ordeal. Then the war party returned.

Face down and hog-tied on the back of one of the tribe's horses was the festering corpse of Bad Bob Mickle, still partially riddled with arrows!

With the help of a sturdy tree branch fashioned into a kind of crutch, Cal carefully hobbled outside his wigwam to witness the dramatic finale of his long quest. Grabbing a greasy hank of hair, he lifted Mickle's head to see for himself. The ugly face, with its distinctive bent nose and its eyes eerily still open in death, was unmistakable.

The next problem, Longmire realized, was how to get Mickle back to Fargo and collect the $100 reward from Sheriff Dooley, once his leg had recovered. There were two possible routes: ride due east along the American side of the border with Canada for ten days to Pembina, then take the steamboat up river to Fargo; or ride southeast for thirteen days back to Jamestown, then on to Worthington, and finally head due east back to Fargo. He decided on the first option. Less days in the saddle, and less sleeping on the freezing ground!

But what about Bad Bob's body? It was unheard of to even consider lugging his corpse all over creation. The four fugitives that Cal was once forced to kill had only been a day or two's ride from any town or railhead. But ten full days of heavy transport was certainly out of the question, even using a dragging travois.

Well, Longmire decided, there was but one other viable but grisly option: I'll have to cut off Mickle's head, and just bring that part back to Fargo for positive identification.

Explaining again in sign language his plan, the Indians helped with the ghoulish decapitation. Any remaining arrowheads found deep in the corpse's flesh were retrieved and recycled. The rest of Bad Bob's body was promptly chopped up and fed to the tribe's eager, hungry dogs. A fitting end, no doubt, for the notorious killer outlaw...

One of the Chippewa women made a kind of leather pouch out of rough deerskin for transporting Mickle's head. There it was shoved in -- after sprinkling the head with some salt -- and the opening finally sewn shut. It should keep fairly well in this manner for its return trip with Cal to Fargo, he was assured by the tribe's elders.

A full moon later, Longmire was ready to leave his helpful hosts. He would never forget how they had saved his life. For the rest of his days, he would defend the Chippewa by retelling his story to anyone who ever disparaged them.

Fortunately for Calvin, all of his prior equipment -- Dancer's old saddle, Cal's twin saddlebags, his Winchester rifle, and his gun belt (with both pistols intact) -- had been rescued by the war party and were now returned to him. He gave the tribe his extra Buck knife, his spyglass, a pair of scissors (that he had used to trim his hair and beard), and a hand mirror -- all in exchange for a new horse. The Indians gave him enough food too to last for a few days, maybe longer, if he rationed it. With only one cartridge for his rifle, he had to be a lucky shot to bag any fresh meat. But he felt he could make do. He had made his choice. Cal also realized that there would be no settlements of any kind on his journey to stop and rest in. The hard journey would not be a Sunday picnic, by any means...

Ten days later, having suffered through still more wind and cold, but mercifully, only a little more light snow, Longmire arrived safely in Pembina. His Chippewa spotted mare had to adjust at first to having Dancer's old saddle on her back rather than just a thin Indian blanket, but soon she settled down and accepted her lot. Cal had decided to name his new horse 'Prancer.'

The Red River had not frozen yet, so the regular steamboats were still navigating up and down the brownish waters. One of the steamboat captains, Cletis Bell, mentioned to all potential passengers that Lake Winnipeg was beginning to freeze, and that ice was forming in the northern stretches of the river and would soon be expanding southward. He figured two more weeks before river traffic would be forced to halt until the April or May thaw. Cal bought a first-class ticket for Fargo, bunked his horse aboard, and retired to his tiny cabin for a long rest.

The trip up river took two days. Once unloaded at the Fargo docks, Longmire got his horse properly shod by a farrier, then rode directly to Weldon Dooley's office.

Bad Bob's head was going rank by now, but Cal presented it like a prize trophy to the town sheriff.

"Christ Almighty, that is a tale for the ages!" Weldon exclaimed after hearing the whole saga from Calvin. "I'll take your word that it's Bob's head in that poke. Now, here's your $100...so take that disgusting thing out of here and toss it in the trash pile behind the livery. Jesus, Cal...What a stink!" He counted out five twenty-dollar gold pieces from a cloth pouch stashed in his desk drawer and slapped them down. Longmire scooped them up and slipped the shiny coins into his dirty shirt pocket.

"Now, I'm ready for a warm bath, a Chinese laundry, and a hot meal," Cal admitted wearily. "I'm headed back to the river tomorrow, to take the steamship up towards Yankton. From there, I can take the train to the border of Indian Territory [present day Oklahoma] and Kansas at Baxter Springs. I can ride Prancer down to Texas then, and stay put in the fine sunshine until Spring. Maybe pick up a little reward hunting, too, while I'm down there -- though modern civilization keeps spreading, and time is further putting me out of business.

So, friend, I'll be back with the migrating geese when your Dakota weather warms up again, probably next May... See you then, Weldon.

I only hope that 1874 will be a better year than this one, and that we both live to see it..."

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

March 14, 2024