

B W Harding's Barroom Tales



Roy E Edwards

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Acknowledgements

This one is for Julie my lovely wife of more than 43 years and our sons Steve, Dale and Alan and our daughter Hayley Louise with love

Also by Roy E Edwards

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The Gunfighter

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Dark Wind in Eden

The Egyptian

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A Few Good Men



The day was heat and ashes, the white sun in a baking blue sky. I could hear the wind whispering in the long grass. And later, in the cool of the night, I watched the moon rise in the east and drench the land in pallid light. I listened to the mournful cry of a coyote and hunched in close to my campfire. I drank coffee and looked up at the stars in the deep and the black. Later I stood in silence as the sun burst over the land in a glory of shimmering light, and damn I thought, its going to be another slow burning day by god.

About then a voice interrupted my reverie and wouldn't you just know I was back in the real world again.

A lone voice said, "Heard you was livin' permanent at Neely's these days."

The speaker, a short, thick set man I'd seen around a time or two though up until now we had never spoken.

"I am," I told him, "but I still travel some now and again."

"Collectin' stories is what I hear."

I smiled and said, "Yes, something like that."

"Heard you was a writer."

"Was being the operative word," I said. He looked at me blankly. "I still write," I went on to say, "I just don't get paid much for what I write these days."

"Heard it was you tracked down Johnny Sonora, heard you wrote a book," he said, "you musta made money."

"Don't fuss yourself my friend its too damned hot here." I pushed my pitcher of beer towards him, "pull up a chair and help yourself."

He filled a glass and drained it in one long gulping swallow. "Cuts the dust don't it," I said with a smile as I looked him over, thinking maybe he has a tale to tell. He said he was down on his luck so I grubstaked him five dollars. He said he was good for it and I believed him. We spoke about nothing in particular for a while and then he said, "I rode for McNee up in Butte, Montana. Him and his

daughter, Mary was her name, Mary McNee. If'n you're interested I'll relate what happened in exchange for another pitcher of beer." I said I was interested, called for more beer and later I fed him too. He settled in and said:-

Tom McNee set up a cattle ranch round about the time the Sioux were bein' pushed out of their huntin' grounds. The Sioux were fighters and not likely to give up their land easy. Odd thing was he never had any trouble with the Sioux and when a hunting party crossed his land he'd cut out a dozen or so beeves and hand 'em over cool as you please, and I can tell you back then the Sioux were a fearsome lot. Heard tell they could outfight the Comanche if'n they were pushed. When he was handin' the cattle over, he'd say, "I'll not see your young ones go hungry." McNee was savvy, he gave a gift of what otherwise would most likely be stolen and a whole lot more besides.



One day Skeets Neelson showed up, Skeets was known to be a top hand so McNee signed him on and never looked back. Word was he'd gotten into some trouble down in the Missouri Breaks. Skeets said. "Pa bought title to a thousand acres free and clear back when they was just about givin' land away. He could have gotten more but he said a thousand acres was just about right for a small spread." He said, "Ma took a chill round about the time I was learning to ride and didn't make it through the winter. Pa was cut up some and I think maybe when we laid Ma to rest something inside him slipped away too." Skeets said, "We had a Mexican cook and an old ranch hand by the name of Sweets Wilson. He never said much but damn he could curse a blue streak when he was of a mind to, good hand though, man you could depend on. We ran a few head of cattle, mules too and the cook grew corn, beans, squash and chilli out back of the bunkhouse. Like Pa said it was enough and what with a creek of sweet water that never dried up we were content. Pa was getting on in years when Sharkey Todd and his crew turned up. He said he'd bought land all around us so we were effectively surrounded you might say. He said he had three thousand steers on the trail and was expecting the herd to arrive in a month or so. He had water but not enough. 'I'll buy you out,' he said, 'that creek of yours should just about do it. Name your price,' he said, like he wasn't expectin' Pa to refuse. Pa said, in no uncertain manner, that no amount of money would induce him to sell. Todd got a mean look in his eye and said, 'we'll see



about that, you been offered old man,' he shouted over his shoulder as he rode away, 'ain't gonna offer again.' About then I knew we were in deep trouble. I took to riding with a belt gun close to hand, Sweets too, and the Old Mex kept a scatter gun propped against the cook house door.

When I spoke about Todd's implied threat and the fact that his riders looked more like gun hands than any kind of ranch hands I'd ever seen, Pa just looked right through me. When Ma died Pa wrote out a will and got the Old Mex and Sweets to witness it. He said when he was dead and gone the spread was mine so you could say I had something to fight for, but it seemed like Pa had given up and just plain refused to admit that Todd intended to get our land and water any way he could and if'n that meant murdering the lot of us then he would do just that. Pa refused to see it that way which left me uncertain as to what to do for the best. There was no law in the Missouri Breaks, the nearest town was a good six day ride and the town didn't have a lawman worth a damn. About the best a man could do was look after his own and the devil take the rest. We were outnumbered and outgunned and well, truth is I never saw Sharkey Todd again but once, and that was to kill him.

After that first visit things were pretty quiet and there was work to do. Sweets had gotten himself banged up, a steer stomped on his foot, and he was tending the cook's garden as best he could until the swelling went down so he could get his boots on.

I'd been gone most of the day, rounding up strays and cleaning out water holes. It was going on toward sundown by the time I rode in. It was quiet, too damn quiet by half. Suddenly I got a sick feeling in my gut and dismounted with care, sliding out my pistol as I did so.



I was too late; the good Lord knows I was way too late. I found Pa and Sweets and the Old Mex out back, their bodies dumped like trash in amongst the corn and beans, all three had their heads stove in and their throats cut like whoever did it was a damn Apache but I knew no wild Indians had done this. I could make out boot heels in the soft earth and plainly see where the bodies had been dragged from the bunkhouse. There'd been a tussle, but not much of one, they were old men way past their prime and what I'd seen of Todd's riders, was hard, brutal men in their prime. The raiders had taken our mules and what horses we owned and killed six hogs in a pen out back of the barn.

I shed no tears, I tried but they just wouldn't come. There was ice in my blood and a raging fire in my heart. I'd see Sharkey Todd dead or die trying.

Come sunup I placed Pa and Sweets and the Old Mex in the bunkhouse. I dumped the slaughtered hogs in the creek and slit their bellies knowing they'd putrefy and poison the water. I hunted around for anything I could find, rat bait coal oil and a heap of the cooks dried chillies.

I dumped everything in the creek. I brought in two steers off the range and herded them over to where the water welled up from deep underground and dropped them in their tracks with two quick shots, their bodies effectively blocking the spring at its source. Give it a few hours and the water in that creek would be liquid shit. No use to man or beast for a long, long time, maybe never. Before I turned my back on the only home I'd ever known I set fire to the barn and the house, pulled down the corral and rode away.

I didn't expect to live much beyond the next few hours: And at that time, the way I felt, I can't say it bothered me none.

I carried a Colt.44 and a new five shot Winchester, but no food or water. I truly did not expect to live long enough to stand in need of one or the other. Sharkey Todd was an ex river boat gambler who decided he'd rather be a cattle baron; he hired a crew of fast guns to take care of any trouble along the way. No, I did not expect to pass this way again or live to see the sun rise on a new day. My family had been ruthlessly murdered and I was pretty sure Sharkey Tod and his gang were responsible. I would find out and kill those in need of killing or die trying. To me it was as simple as that.

My father said, "Evil stalks this earth because we allow it to do so. In a land devoid of law," he said, "all you've got is yourself and your own notion of right and wrong; and you do the best you can to live by your creed and do right by others. But," he went on to say, "when darkness comes calling all bets are off, and if you hesitate,

if you think maybe you should give evil an even break; well, you most likely wont think again because you will be dead. It's that simple Skeets my word on it. Don't think, don't hesitate, just get the job done and then get on with your life: And If you don't get to walk away at least you died trying and that's got to be a whole lot better than not trying at all. It's what you do when evil stares you in the face that counts. You don't think, you don't hesitate, you just get the damn job done and walk away," his words echoed in my head.

Truth is I wasn't fast with a hand gun. I was about what you would call average, no better and no worse than any other ranch hand so I guess it would be fair to say I had no expectation of living long enough to see out the day. Probably what you need to understand is that I didn't give a damn. Todd had my Pa and two good friends killed; a man can't walk away from that.

Pa said, "Evil is like a disease, if you don't contain it, it will spread and most likely contaminate the whole damn world for the sake of one good man making a stand."

The sun was burning a hole in the sky by the time I came in sight of Todd's ranch. There was a big corral off to one side of the main house. I could see Pa's mules and what horses we owned milling about. The mules clinched it, there wasn't another mule breeder in the territory at that time, leastways I didn't think so. Not that it mattered; I recognised those mules, recognised every damn one.

Don't think, don't hesitate.

I chambered a round in my rifle the sound loud in the quiet heat of the day. There was no subterfuge in my approach. I simply rode in, past the ranch house and up to the corral. Yes, I confirmed to myself, those are Pa's mules and horses alright.

Sound behind me: Raised voices: The tramp of boot heels, spurs jingling. I used my knees to turn my horse gun barrel swinging round my finger tightening on the trigger.

Don't think, don't hesitate.

Live or die makes no difference now, choice slipped away when I rode in carrying a loaded weapon in my hands.

A figure moves out from the shadow of the house, I can see his thumb easing back on the hammer of his pistol the barrel swings up towards me, fast as a striking snake.

I shot that man and two more who came at me on the run, guns blazing. They shot high and wild, I did not. All three had been with Todd when Pa refused to sell and Todd mouthed threats. Suddenly the ranch house door slammed open with a crash and Todd came out running and yelling some foolishness. He's carrying a shotgun. The damn fool should have blown me out of the saddle from the safety of the house. I shot him. I could see movement behind the corral but no shots came my way so

I took off running and never stopped,” Skeets said with a sad smile, “until I reached Montana.”

You could see right off that Skeets was taken with Mary McNee; Mary was a plain looking woman but damn, when she smiled it was like the sun shining through an that’s a fact ain’t nobody can deny. Skeets lost the power of speech when Mary was around; and Mary, being somewhat shy, never said a word but it was there, you could see it glowing in her eyes every time Skeets glanced her way.

Tom McNee was canny, he raised his cattle on free range and sold his cattle when beef and cow hides were damn near worth their weight in gold. Like I said he was canny. Later, he realised times were changing and if he did not own the land it could be sold from under him and all he’d have would be a herd of cows with nowhere to go. He took a chance. He scraped together every dollar he owned and bought title to 150,000 acres more or less. During the years that followed he sweated some, what with the price of beef on the hoof jumping up and down from one year to the next like a damn jack rabbit. He made it though, damn if he didn’t. He said he was grazing 200,000 acres of free range back when he was set to make his first trail drive, but “clear title to 150,000 acres will do,” he said with a satisfied smile. “What’s needed now,” he said, “is for Mary to meet a fine upstanding cattleman.” But it never happened, not until Skeets rode in, but neither one nor the other said a word. They just looked at each other in passing, even old man