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# Old West Ghosts & Legends

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Retold By  
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except where noted.



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## The Spook Of Misery Hill

By Charles M. Skinner

Tom Bowers, who mined on Misery Hill, near Pike City, California, never had a partner, and he never took kindly to the rough crowd about the place. One day he was missing. They traced his steps through the snow from his cabin to the brink of a great slope where he had been prospecting, but there they vanished, for a landslide had blotted them out. His body was exhumed far below and decently buried, yet it was said that it was so often seen walking about the mouth of his old shaft that other men avoided the spot.

Thrifless Jim Brandon, in a spasm of industry, began work on the abandoned mine, and for a while he made it pay, for he got money and squared accounts with his creditors; but after a time it appeared that somebody else was working on the claim, for every morning he found that the sluice had been tampered with and the water turned on. He searched for the trespasser in vain, and told "the boys" that if they called that joking it had grown tiresome.

One night he loaded his rifle, and, from a convenient nook, he watched for the intruder. The tamaracks crooned in the wind, the Yuba mumbled in the canon, the Sierras lay in a line of white against the stars. As he crept along to a point of better vantage he came to a tree with something tacked on it--something that shone in the dark like a match. In its own light he read, "Notice! I, Thomas Bowers, claim this ground for placer mining." Raising his hand to tear off the paper, he was amazed to feel a thrill pass through it, and his arm fell palsied at his side. But the notice was gone.

Now came the sound of water flowing, and, as he angrily caught his gun and turned toward the sluice, the letters shone again in phosphorescence on the tree. There was the

sound of a pick in the gravel now, and, crawling stealthily towards the sluice, he saw, at work there, Tom Bowers--dead, lank, his head and face covered with white hair, his eyes glowing from black sockets. Half unconsciously Jim brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired. A yell followed the report, then the dead man came running at him like the wind, with pick and shovel in either hand.

Away went Brandon, and the spectre followed, up hill, in and out of woods, over ditches, through scrub, on toward Pike City. The miners were celebrating a new find with liberal potations and a dance in the saloon when, high above the crash of boots, the shouted jokes, the laughter, and the clink of glasses, came a sound of falling, a scream--then silence.

They hurried into the road. There lay Brandon's rifle, and a pick and shovel with "T. B." cut in the handles. Jim returned no more, and the sluice is running every night on Misery Hill.

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## The Bloody Benders of Labette County, Kansas

Though most of us know of Dodge City's wicked, the deadly gunfight of the Daltons in Coffeyville, and the many outlaws and gunfighters who spent time in the Sunflower State, few aware of a family of mass murderers, living a supposed quiet life near the small town of Cherryvale, Kansas.

It just after the Civil War ended that the United States government moved the Osage Indians from Labette County in southeast Kansas to the "new" Indian Territory of what would later become the state of Oklahoma. The "vacated" land was then made available to homesteaders, who, for the most part, were a group of hard-working pioneers farming the area's softly rolling hills and windswept prairies.

In 1870, five families of "spiritualists" settled in western

Labette County, about seven miles northeast of where Cherryvale would be plotted a year later. One of these families was the Benders, comprised of John Bender, Sr.; his wife; son, John, Jr.; and daughter, Kate. A cult-like group, the families chose from several available claims and began to make their homes. John Bender, Sr. chose a 160 acre section on the western slopes of the mounds that today continue to bear their name. The property was located directly on the Osage Mission-Independence Trail that operated from Independence to Fort Scott. His son chose a narrow piece of land just north of his father's; however, he never lived on his claim, nor made any improvements.

The family soon built a small one-room framed cabin, a barn, corral, and dug a well. Inside the wooden cabin the area was partitioned with a large canvas, creating living quarters in the back and a small inn and store in the front. A crude sign was hung above the front door that advertised "Groceries" to the many travelers along the Osage Trail. The little "store" carried a few supplies such as powder, shot, groceries, liquor, and tobacco; sold meals, and provided a "safe" overnight resting place to the strangers along the road.

Keeping mostly to themselves, the Benders appeared to simply be struggling homesteaders who worked hard to earn their living like the other area pioneers. Immigrating from Germany, John Bender, Sr. was sixty years old when he arrived to the area; his wife about 55. Standing over six feet tall, John was a giant of a man who, because of his piercing black eyes set deeply under huge bushy brows, earned him the nickname of "old beetle-browed John." His ruddy face, mostly covered by a heavy beard, sullen expression and long hair, often led to him being described as a "wild and wooly looking man."

Both John and his raw-boned wife spoke with such guttural accents that few people could understand them. Mrs. Bender, a heavy set woman, was so unfriendly and had such sinister eyes, that her neighbors began to call her a "she-devil." To add to her fierce look, Ma Bender also claimed to be a "medium" who could speak with the "dead" and boiled herbs

and roots that she declared could be used to cast charms or wicked spells. Her husband and son were said to have feared her as she ran the household with an iron hand.

John Bender, Jr. was a tall, slender man of about about 25 who was handsome with auburn hair and moustache. Speaking English fluently with a German accent, he was said to have been social but he was prone to laughing aimlessly, which led many people to think of him as a half-wit.

Daughter Kate was the "friendliest" of the bunch, speaking good English with just a slight accent and bore cultivated social skills. A beautiful girl of about 23, she was quick to laugh and talk to strangers. She and her brother John often attended Sunday School at nearby Harmony Grove and were readily accepted in the community.

Kate was a self-proclaimed healer and psychic, gave lectures on spiritualism, and conducted séances. She also claimed to possess psychic powers, including the ability to communicate with the dead. Distributing circulars that proclaimed her "skills," including supernatural powers and the ability to cure illnesses and infirmities, she soon found the lecture circuit profitable.

The petite auburn haired beauty had a desire for notoriety and often advocated free love and justification for murder in her lectures. Along with her desire for fame, she also craved wealth and position. Though her beauty and social skills gained her popularity with the locals, her actions began to cause them to say that she was "satanic." It was to be this diminutive Bender family member that would take most of the blame for what was soon to be found out about this infamous family.

When the Benders opened their store and inn in 1871, many travelers would stop for a meal or supplies. However, some of those men, who frequently carried large sums of cash with the intention of settling, buying stock, or purchasing a claim; began to go missing. When friends and family began to look for them, they could trace them as far as the Big Hill Country of southeast Kansas before they could find no trace of the lost traveler.

These first few missing travelers did not raise an overall alarm in the area as it was not uncommon during those days for men to simply continue their journey westward. However, as more time passed, the disappearances became more frequent and by the spring of 1873, the region had become strife with rumors and travelers began to avoid the trail.

When neighboring communities started to make slanderous insinuations, the Osage Township called a meeting held at the Harmony Grove schoolhouse in March to see what, if anything, could be done. About 75 people attended the gathering, including both Bender men.

The discussion began regarding the ten people who were reported missing, including a well-known Independence physician named Dr. William H. York. With the full realization that there truly was a major problem in their township, the group decided to search every farmstead between Big Hill Creek and Drum Creek. When most of the attendees volunteered to have their premises searched, the Benders remained silent.

Some time later, Billy Tole, a neighbor of the Benders, noticed that the Bender Inn was abandoned and their farm animals unfed. Tole reported the news to Leroy F Dick, the Township Trustee, and a search party was soon formed, which included Dr. York's brother, Colonel A.M. York, of Fort Scott. When the men arrived at the property, they found the cabin empty of food, clothing, and personal possessions. They were also met by a terrible smell inside the abandoned inn. A trap door, nailed shut, was discovered in the floor of the cabin.

Prying it open, the men found a six foot deep hole that was filled with clotted blood, causing the terrible odor. However, there were no bodies in the hole. Finally, the men physically moved the entire cabin to the side and began to search beneath, but no bodies were found there either. Continuing, they began to dig around the cabin, especially in an area the Bender's had utilized as a vegetable garden and orchard. At the site of a freshly stirred depression in the earth, they found the first body, buried head downward with its feet

scarcely covered. The corpse was that of Dr. William H. York, his skull bludgeoned and his throat cut from ear to ear.

The digging continued the next day and nine other bodies and numerous dismembered body parts were found, including a woman and a little girl. The burial site was christened "Hell's Half-Acre" and another brother of Dr. York, a lawyer and State Senator residing in Independence, offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the Bender family's arrest. On May 17th, Governor Thomas Osborn added to that amount by offering a \$2,000 reward for the apprehension of all four.

Word the gruesome murders spread fast and thousands of people flocked to the site, including news reporters from as far away as New York and Chicago. The Bender cabin was ripped apart by gruesome souvenir hunters, right down to the bloody bricks that lined the cellar. Bit by bit, the story of the Benders was pieced together.

When the visitors stopped in for a meal, they were seated at a table with their back to the large canvas that separated the "inn" from the living quarters. Then Kate would begin to charm the men with her social skills, flirting, or her psychic "gifts." As the men gave their full attention to the alluring Kate, Pa and John Bender, hiding behind the canvas, would strike the unsuspecting traveler in the skull with a hammer. Ma Bender and Kate would then rifle the body for money pushing him through the trap door into the hole below the cabin, where Kate would slit his throat. During the night, the body would then be buried in the garden behind the house.

After Colonel York's visit and the meeting at the Harmony Grove schoolhouse, the Bender family fled. It was only a few days later that the homestead was found abandoned and the search party began to discover the grisly remains of the bodies.

The diggers were astounded to find what would become known as one of America's first mass murder burial grounds as body after body was uncovered. Ten bodies were found in the Bender's apple orchard, including Dr. York and the

people he had been searching for – Mr. Loncher and his daughter, just seven or eight years old. More gruesomely, though the little girl's body was found to have multiple injuries, none of them would have caused death and it was speculated that the poor lass may have been buried alive. Of the discovery of her remains, the Kansas City Times reported:

“The little girl was probably eight years of age, and had long, sunny hair, and some traces of beauty on a countenance that was not yet entirely disfigured by decay. One arm was broken. The breastbone had been driven in. The right knee had been wrenched from its socket and the leg doubled up under the body. Nothing like this sickening series of crimes had ever been recorded in the whole history of the country.”

Other bodies found in the garden were those of Henry McKenzie's mutilated remains, three men by the names of Ben Brown, W.F. McCrotty, and John Geary, as well as an unidentified male and female. Johnny Boyle's body was found in the well. Dismembered parts of several other victims were also discovered, but could never be identified. Four other bodies with crushed skulls and slit throats were also found outside the property in Drum Creek and on the surrounding prairie.

For all these deaths the Benders gained only about \$4,600, two teams of horses and wagons, and a pony and a saddle. Because some of the travelers were carrying nothing of value, it was widely speculated that the Benders killed simply for the bloody thrill of it.

As word of the grisly murders spread, more and more travelers came forward to tell their own stories of narrow escape, including one gentleman by the name of William Pickering. When he refused to sit with his back to the canvas because of its disgusting stains, Pickering said that Kate Bender threatened him with a knife, at which point he fled the premises. A Catholic priest said that he too fled when he saw one of the Bender men concealing a large hammer.

After following a fresh trail of wagon tracks, a search party found that the Benders had gone to the town of nearby Thayer, some twelve miles to the north. There, they purchased tickets on the northbound Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston Train to Humboldt. Several days later the Benders' team and wagon were found a short distance away, the horses nearly starved.

Upon further investigation, Captain James B. Ransom, the train's conductor, said that John, Jr. and Kate disembarked at Chanute and took the MK&T (Missouri, Kansas & Texas) train south to the Red River country near Dennison, Texas, which was then the terminus of the railroad. Allegedly, the pair then fled to a tough outlaw colony along the border of Texas and New Mexico. Meanwhile, Ma and Pa Bender continued on the train north to Kansas City where it was believed they transferred to a train headed to St. Louis.

Attempts to capture the bloodthirsty family were immediately made by both law officers and vigilantes alike. Though no one ever collected on the rewards offered, rumors began to fly of several parties who had captured and killed the Benders. One vigilante group claimed to have shot down the men and Ma Bender, and burned Kate alive, as the witch they believed her to be. Another group claimed they had caught the Benders while escaping to the south and lynched them before throwing their bodies into the Verdigris River. Yet another group claimed to have killed the Benders during a gunfight and buried their bodies on the prairie.

However, none of these tales were ever confirmed, nor bodies found, so most thought that the Benders had managed to escape. For years, sightings of Ma Bender and Kate were reported and in 1889, two women were actually extradited from Detroit on the charge. Though the pair was jailed, the case was eventually dropped for lack of evidence.

Though the tales of what happened to the Benders can only be speculated as to their accuracy, the fact that ten bodies were found on the property is not disputed. Other corpses found in the area, as well as the many mysterious disappearances of other lonely travelers, led the locals to believe that the Benders actually killed more than 20 people.

The sensational tales and rumors of the Benders continued well into the 20th century, but as to what actually happened to them remains one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of the Old West.

If the terrible story of the Bender murders was not, in and of itself, "legend" enough, another tale began to circulate regarding the property upon which the Benders had once lived. The old Bender property was haunted, began to fly the rumors of the locals. A decade after the gruesome killings, nothing was left of the cabin and outbuildings on the property, the only thing remaining -- an empty hole that had once been the cellar. From these depths allegedly came the souls of those murdered on the site, wandering about the property and making moaning sounds that could be heard by passersby. Of those most often reporting seeing glowing apparitions on the property were those who came to the site in search of some long lost souvenir of the grisly murders. Quickly, the scavengers were frightened away by the dead souls to spread their ghostly tales.

As the legend of the haunting continued, people began to say that Kate Bender, herself, had returned to the property, doomed to roam the very land where she had committed so many atrocities. Whether the stuff of folklore or fact, many believe that the trapped souls of these century-old ghosts continue to lurk at the site today.

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## The Lost Breyfogle Mine

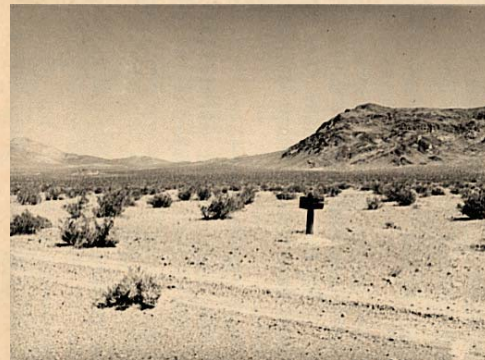
Joining the thousands of "49ers" rushing into California were brothers, Charles and Joshua Breyfogle. Hailing from Lockhart, New York, the pair headed west with a train of saddle and draft horses and two wagons in the spring of 1849. They soon teamed up with other pioneers in Columbus, Ohio and continued their long journey to the California goldfields.

After many trials and tribulations through the Indian ridden

plains, steep mountains, and harsh desert, they finally reached Sacramento on August, 14, 1849.

About a month later the Breyfogles began searching for their fortunes in the promising areas of Butte Creek and the Chico River. Having no success, they had moved on to the Yuba River, some 12 miles above the California gold rush tent city of Marysville, in January, 1850.

Again disappointed, they moved upstream a month later to Goodhues, where they began to work on a new claim. This time their efforts paid off, as they began to find gold in the river bottom and along the banks above the river.



By December, 1850, Charles Breyfogle returned to New York with some \$20,000, leaving his brother Joshua to work the claim. A year later, Charles returned to California, settling in Oakland where he was elected county assessor in

1854 and treasurer in 1859. When he couldn't account for \$6500 in county fund, he was thrown in jail. Though he was soon exonerated and released, he evidently had had his fill of politics and decided to return to prospecting.

Following the new silver strike in Nevada, he went to Virginia City where the buzz was about the new finds near Austin, Nevada in 1862. More stories were circulating about gold in the Big Smoky Valley and seeing opportunity, Breyfogle opened a real estate office in a hotel at the mining camp of Geneva. Unfortunately, by the time Charles arrived the Geneva veins were already dwindling and he was once again looking for opportunities.

In 1863, he heard three men at the hotel discussing a crude map. Sure that they were discussing the legendary Lost

Gunsight Mine of Death Valley, he decided to follow them when they left the next day. Trailing them across Nevada, he caught up with them between Tonopah and Goldfield, where he was surprised to find that the men were not looking for the lost Gunsight lode, but rather were on their way to Texas to join the Confederate army. The men were on their way to join a wagon train on the Los Angeles trail and Breyfogle decided to ride with them for a couple of days.

Three days later, the men were encamped south of Ash Meadows in the Mohave Desert's Amargosa River Valley. Laying his bedroll out apart from the others, he awoke in the middle of the night to see Indians attacking the other three men. Grabbing his bedroll and boot, he fled in the darkness.

Without provisions or weapons he wandered in the desert for several days until he finally found a spring. Resting there he found gold in a deposit of quartz and took with him several samples, vying to return if he could ever find his way out of the desert. Heading south, he eventually came upon wagon tracks which he followed to Stump Spring in the Pahrump Valley, in Nevada's eastern Mohave desert.

Deciding to wait at the spring for a wagon train to show up, he was instead found by Indians first. Taking him captive, they worked him as a slave for months. Finally a Mormon wagon train came upon the Indian village and freed him with a ransom. Taking him to a ranch at Manse Spring in southern Nevada, he was cared for by the wife's owner, Mrs. Yount. Grateful, he told the family about his gold discovery, showing them the samples he had held onto.

After Breyfogle had fully recovered he settled in Austin, Nevada, where he would organize search parties for the next 26 years. Concentrating on the region northeast of Death Valley, the men would search in vain, never finding that lost outcropping. But Breyfogle never stopped looking, becoming so obsessed with the search that he once said, "I shall come back a rich man or leave my bones in Death Valley."

Through the years, many theorized as to where Breyfogle had found the gold, believing it to be located near Las

Vegas, Salt Spring or Daylight Pass. However, many believed that the very same rich quartz that Charles had discovered ended up becoming the Johnnie Mine, north of Pahrump, Nevada. The rich lodes of the Johnnie District were first discovered in 1891 by a man named George Montgomery who was searching for the famous Lost Breyfogle Mine. Yet others believe the mine to be in California in the Amargosa River Valley. Though the vast majority believe that Breyfogle's find was in the Johnnie Mining District, not all researchers and hobbyists are convinced, as they continue to search for Breyfogle's lost gold.

The Johnnie District is in Nye County, in southwestern Nevada. On the north end of the Pahrump Valley, most of the placer activity was conducted in the washes below the Congress Mine, but also to the northeast of Johnnie on the west slope of the Spring Mountains, and other surrounding areas. To get there, travel south from Las Vegas on Interstate 15 to the junction of State Route 16, then follow northwest past Pahrump for approximately 70 miles to reach the Johnnie District. Here, mines and placers can be seen on both sides of the highway and on the slopes of Mount Schader and Montgomery.

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## Ruggles Brothers Loot in Middle Creek

John and Charles Ruggles came from a respected family in Tulare County, California. Handsome men, Charles attended college but John was seemingly a "problem" from a young age. The boys' father had high hopes for Charles but little faith in John as he was already in trouble with the law, arrested and imprisoned for robbery, while still a very young man. However, about the time Charles graduated college, John was released from prison and began to corrupt his younger brother, who had never committed a crime.

He soon talked Charles into making his living the "easy way" by robbing a stagecoach. On May 14, 1892, the pair lay in wait for the Redding & Weaverville Stage just outside of



Redding, California, intent upon taking a strong box filled with some \$5,000 in gold coins.

As the stage headed east in the late afternoon on what is now Middle Creek Road, from Shasta to Redding, it was driven by John Boyce. Its only passenger was George Suhr, who was riding up front with the driver.

However, the stage guard, who also acted as the stage messenger, Amos "Buck" Montgomery, was riding inside the coach. When the stage came to a sharp curve in the road it slowed and out of the trees stepped Charles Ruggles. Wearing a long coat and a bandanna covering his face, he was pointing a shotgun at the driver. When he ordered Boyce to stop the stage and throw down the strong box, Boyce immediately complied, heaving the heavy box to the ground.

Almost simultaneously, a blast sounded from inside the coach as Montgomery fired his shotgun riddling Charles in the face and upper body with buckshot. As the bandit fell, he returned the fire, hitting both Boyce and Suhr in the legs.

Suddenly, John, who was hidden nearby, retaliated by firing shots into the stagecoach. He hit Montgomery who would die just hours later from his wounds. Frightened by the blasts, the horses took off running, pulling the stage behind them.

John, believing that his brother was dying, grabbed the heavy strongbox, hid it nearby, and fled. As soon as the stage reached "civilization" to tell their tale, a posse was immediately formed who quickly found Charles. Though severely wounded, they took him to the Redding jail where he was his injuries were treated.

## WARNING!

NOTICE IS GIVEN that any person found Pilfering, Stealing, Robbing, or committing any act of Lawless Violence will be summarily

### HANGED

Vigilance Committee.

John made a clean getaway for a short time, winding up at his aunt's house in Woodland. However, when she learned that he had robbed a stage and killed a man she kicked him out and reported him to the local sheriff. Six weeks after the robbery, on June 19th, John was arrested while sitting in a restaurant in Woodland. Returned to the Redding jail, John was surprised to find his brother very much alive and recovering from his wounds.

In an effort to save himself and his brother, John told the authorities that the stage guard, Montgomery, was in cahoots with them. He also revealed where he had hidden the gold, telling authorities that he had hidden it in Middle Creek. Attached to the strong box was a floating device that came within a foot of the top of the water that would help him in finding it later.

Both John and Charles were both handsome and charming and before long they drew the attention of the local ladies who began pamper them. Some brought cakes and fruits, others gave them flower bouquets, and allegedly, the pair even received offers of marriage.

This, of course, enraged the local men who were already upset over the killing of Montgomery. On the evening of July 24, 1892, a vigilante mob of some 40 men stormed the jail. The lone jailer, George Albro, could do nothing as the men blew open the safe that held the jail keys.

As the lynch mob forcibly took the pair from the jail, John Ruggles offered to divulge the location of the stolen loot if the mob would free his brother. "Spare Charley and I will tell you," John Ruggles was quoted as saying.

But the lynch mob wouldn't hear of it, dragging the men to a tree next to the Redding Blacksmith shop at the northwest corner of Shasta Street and the railroad tracks. John was 33 years old, Charles, just 22.

The next morning, Redding residents found the two bandits hanging by their necks. The bodies stayed there for three

days as passengers on nearby trains viewed their gruesome remains.

In a local newspaper editorial, it said that justice had been fairly meted out and further:

'It was a disagreeable job, but under the circumstances appeared to be necessary for the public good and is an example to the courts.'

As to the stolen treasure, an express pouch was later found near Lower Springs with all the letters intact; however, the gold was never recovered. Middle Creek is about six miles west of Redding, California.

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## El Muerto - The Headless Horseman of South Texas

In 1800s Texas was a wild and lawless place attracting all manner of thieves, murderers, and other ruthless outlaws. Though their percentages were far less than those of the many desperadoes, the Texas Rangers set about in taming the wild Texas frontier.

The Rio Grande River to the south had been declared the border between the United States and Mexico; however, the Mexican government refused to recognize the boundary, insisting instead, that the Nueces River was the border. This left a giant chunk of land between the two rivers which became known as "No Man's Land" and a prime target for outlaws.

The dispute between the two countries finally forced the United States to go to war with Mexico in 1846 to make the Rio Grande the official border. However, it would take another thirty years before the Texas Rangers could rid the territory of the Mexican cattle rustlers and thieves.

The Texas Rangers, a roving posse of expert gunmen were

not men to be messed with. Following their adversaries everywhere, they lived out of the saddle and often dispensed justice brutally. Two of these men were Creed Taylor and William Alexander Anderson "Big Foot" Wallace, who was himself a folk hero. It was Big Foot, with Creed's blessing, who unwittingly created El Muerto.

In 1850, a man known simply as Vidal was busy rustling cattle all over South Texas and soon he had a high price on his head - "dead or alive." During that summer, Vidal took advantage of a Comanche raid which pulled most of the men northward to fight off the attack. In the meantime, the sparse settlements were temporarily left unguarded. Vidal, along with three of his henchmen, wasted no time in taking advantage of the situation and gathered up a considerable number of horses on the San Antonio River, heading southwest toward Mexico.

What Vidal didn't know was that, among the stolen herd, were several prized mustangs belonging to Texas Ranger Creed Taylor. Taylor, usually one of the first to defend the settlements against Indian attacks, had not, on this occasion, gone after the Comanches. Creed's ranch lay west of San Antonio, in the thickest of bandit territory, not far from the headwaters of the Nueces River. Due to the location of the ranch, Taylor's livestock and horses were often the target of the many bandits.

Taylor had had enough and quickly gathered fellow ranger, Big Foot Wallace, and a nearby rancher by the name of Flores. Both Wallace and Taylor were as skilled as any Comanche when tracking and the three men shortly found the trail of Vidal and his henchmen.

When the three men found the outlaw camp, they waited until night when the bandits were sleeping to attack. Catching them unaware the thieves were killed. But just killing them was not enough. Taylor and Wallace wanted to set an example that would deter future bandits. In those days, stealing cattle and horses was a crime more serious than murder. The rangers had tried all types of brutal justice including stringing them up in trees and left hanging, shooting them and chopping them to pieces, leaving their

bodies for animal bait. But nothing had worked to stop the outlaws.

In a dramatic example of frontier justice, Wallace beheaded Vidal then lashed him firmly into a saddle on the back of a wild mustang. Tying the outlaw's hands to the pommel and securing the torso to hold him upright, Big Foot then attached Vidal's head and sombrero to the saddle with a long strip of rawhide. He then turned the bucking horse loose to wander the Texas hills with its terrible burden on his back.

Soon, stories began to abound about the headless rider seen usually in remote country, with its sombreroed head swinging back and forth to the rhythm of horse's gallop.

As time went on, more and more cowboys spotted the dark horse with its fearsome cargo and not knowing what it was they riddled it with bullets. But the horse and its rider rode on and the legend of El Muerto, the headless one, began. Soon, the South Texas brush country became a place to avoid as El Muerto was credited with all kinds of evil and misfortune.

Finally, a posse of local ranchers captured the wild pony at a watering hole near the tiny community of Ben Bolt just south of Alice, Texas. Still strapped firmly on its back was the dried-up corpse of Vidal, now riddled by scores of bullet holes and Indian arrows. The body was buried in an unmarked grave near Ben Bolt, and horse was free of its burden at last.

That should have been the end of El Muerto, but the legend would live on to this day. Soon after Vidal's body was laid to rest, soldiers at Fort Inge (present-day Uvalde) began to see the headless rider. Travelers and ranchers in "No Man's Land" also reported continuing to see the apparition.

In 1917, a couple traveling by covered wagon to San Diego, Texas camped for the night outside of town. They would report the next day that as they sat by the campfire a large gray stallion sped by with a headless man shouting "It is mine. It is all mine."

Another sighting of the headless wonder was reported near Freer, Texas in 1969.

The legend lives on and still today, many people report seeing the headless rider galloping through the mesquite on clear and moonlit nights in South Texas.

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## The Legend of Blackbird Hill

Eight miles north of Decatur, Nebraska, on the Omaha Indian Reservation, is a hill overlooking the Missouri River. At its summit is a mound of dirt nearly 45 feet high marking the burial place of the great Omaha Indian Chief Blackbird. The honored Indian Chief was buried here sitting upright on his favorite horse. Back in 1804, Lewis and Clark visited this gravesite, leaving behind decorations to commemorate him.

Blackbird Hill is said to be haunted and every year dozens of people gather at the site, on October 17th. However, it is not the ghost of Chief Blackbird who lingers here, but rather, that of a young woman who was murdered upon this hill more than a century and a half ago.

The story begins with a young couple back east who had fallen in love in the early 1840s. When the boy finished his schooling, his plans were to travel abroad for a time and then return to marry the young girl. However, the boy never returned from his trip abroad. The devastated young girl waited for several years, but she finally gave him up for dead and married another man. Soon, the newlyweds headed west, eventually settling in northeast Nebraska, atop Blackbird Hill.

On October 17, 1849, the young girl was astounded when she saw her old fiancé walking up the winding path from the Missouri River to her small cabin. He too was surprised, having no idea that she lived there.

Overjoyed to see him, she confessed that she had never stopped loving him and only married the other man because she thought he was dead. He then began to convey the tale of his previous years. When traveling abroad, he was shipwrecked but managed to survive. However, it took him almost five years to get back to America. When he arrived home he was saddened to find that his mother had died and his fiancée had married another man and moved west. Setting out to find her, he joined a wagon train and headed for California, searching everywhere along the way for his long lost love.

By the time he reached the west coast he had failed to find her and heartbroken, he began the long journey home traveling along the Missouri River. Landing one day at the foot of Blackbird Hill, he saw the winding path up the slope and decided to follow it. That's when fate intervened and brought the long lost pair back together.

The girl told him that when her husband returned home, she would tell him that she wished to be released from her marriage vows so they could leave together the next morning. Giving the couple time to discuss the situation the young man hid in the nearby woods. When the woman's husband returned home, she explained the situation but he did not want her to leave and at first, begged her to stay. When she refused, he began to get angry and soon ended up attacking her with his hunting knife. Screaming, she fell to the floor. The husband then dropped the knife and gathered up his bleeding wife. With her in his arms he ran to the cliff at the top of the hill and jumped with her into the river far below.

Giving chase, you young man arrived at the hill just in time to see the man leap from the summit and to hear the woman's final scream of agony. Collapsing with grief, the young man began to wander the hills aimlessly until he was finally found ragged and half starved by a group of Omaha Indians. Delirious and unable to speak, the Indians carried the man back to their village, where he stayed until he could recover enough to travel.

Today, the path from the cabin to the cliff edge is barren.

Even more than 150 years later, no plant life will grow on the path that led to the woman's death. And, according to the legend, each year on October 17th, the woman's chilling screams can be heard at the top of the hill. Over the years, dozens of people have reportedly heard her cries of terror.

The Omaha Indian Reservation is located in northeastern Nebraska, just west of Highway 75. Blackbird Hill is eight miles north of Decatur along the Missouri River. The hill itself is inside the Omaha reservation and not open to the public, but you can climb a nearby scenic overlook to view the river below.

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## John Colter's Escape From the Indians

By Addison Erwin Sheldon, 1913

Nebraska, when first made on the map, included all the country from the present Nebraska-Kansas line north to Canada. In this first Nebraska of the early days, in the part that is now Montana, there occurred the remarkable escape of John Colter.

John Colter was a trapper who crossed the continent to the Pacific Ocean with Lewis and Clark. On their way back, in 1806, Colter saw so many signs of beaver on the headwaters of the Missouri that he got leave of Captain Lewis to stay there and trap. This was in the heart of the country of the terrible Blackfoot Indians. Captain Lewis had killed a Blackfoot warrior who was trying to steal horses and from that time the tribe hated white men and killed them without mercy.

Colter knew all this, but he loved to trap and with another hunter named Potts he plunged into the wilds of the best beaver streams of the Blackfoot hunting grounds. The two men knew the great risk they ran and they knew also the ways of the Indians. They set their traps at night, took them up early in the morning, and hid during the day.

Early one morning they were softly paddling up a small creek in their canoe to take in some traps when they heard a trampling on the bank. Colter said, "Indians," and wanted to go back. Potts said, "Buffalo," and kept on. A few more strokes of the paddle and they were surrounded on both shores by hundreds of Blackfoot warriors who made signs to the trappers to come to them. Since they could not escape, Colter turned the canoe toward shore. As they came to land an Indian seized Potts' rifle, but Colter, who was a very strong man, wrested it from him and handed it to Potts. The latter killed an Indian with it, but was himself shot full of arrows.

The Indians now took Colter, stripped him, and began to talk about how they would kill him. At first they were going to put him up as a mark to be shot at, but the chief, desiring to have greater sport, asked Colter if he could run fast. Colter understood enough of their language to tell him that he was a very poor runner, although he was one of the swiftest runners among the hunters. Then the chief took him out on the prairie a few hundred yards and turned him loose to run for his life. The Indians gave their war-whoop and started after him. Colter ran straight across an open plain toward the Jefferson River six miles away. The plain was covered with cactus, and at every jump the bare feet of the naked man were filled with cactus thorns. On Colter ran, swifter than he had ever before run in his life, with those hundreds of Blackfoot warriors after him. He ran nearly half way across the plain before he dared to look back over his shoulder. He saw that he had far outrun all the Indians except one who carried a spear and was not more than a hundred yards behind him.

A faint hope now rose in Colter's heart, but he had run so hard that blood gushed from his nose and covered his body. He ran on until within a mile of the river, when he heard the steps of the Indian with the spear close behind him and, turning his head, saw he was not more than twenty yards away. Colter stopped suddenly, turned around and spread out his arms. The Indian, surprised, tried to stop also, but was so exhausted that he fell to the ground and broke his spear. Colter at once picked up the point of the spear and with it pinned the Indian to the earth. He then ran on while

the other Indians came up to their dead comrade and yelled horribly over his body. Colter, using every moment, soon gained the shelter of the trees on the bank and plunged into the river.

A little below was an island, at the upper end of which was a great raft of driftwood in the water. Colter dived under this raft and after some trouble got his head above the water between large logs which screened him from view. He had hardly done this when the Indians came down the river bank yelling like fiends. They hunted the shores, walked out on the raft of driftwood over Colter's head, pulling the logs and peering among them for hours. Once Colter thought they were about to set the raft on fire. Not until after dark, when the Indians were no longer heard, did Colter dare to venture from his hiding place. He swam down the river a long distance, and then came out on the bank. He was alone in the wilderness, naked, without a weapon and with his feet torn to pieces by the sharp cactus thorns. He was hundreds of miles from the nearest trading post on the Yellowstone, in a country of hostile savages. But he was alive and fearless and strong.

A week later he reached the trading post, sunburned and starving, but saved.

Follow-up to Sheldon's historic tale:

Continued encounters with the Blackfoot eventually drove Colter to give up trapping and with his proceeds from the fur sales he moved to New Haven, Missouri where he purchased a farm. In 1810 he married a woman named Sallie. However his quiet life as a farmer would not last.

In 1812 the United States declared war on Great Britain, and Colter enlisted. Fighting under Nathan Boone, he died while in service for his country. However, after such an eventful life, he died, not by the hand of the British soldiers or the many Indians he encountered in his travels, but by jaundice. After his death, his remains were shipped back to Missouri to his wife. However, Sallie was unable to provide a proper burial. Leaving him lying "in state" in their cabin, she soon moved into her brother's home.

Amazingly, John Colter's body continued to lie in the cabin for the next 114 years, the house slowly falling to ruins around him. In 1926, the land on which the cabin once sat was being cleared and during the process his bones, as well as a leather pouch portraying his name, was found. Afterwards, his remains were gathered and buried on a bluff in New Haven that overlooks the Missouri River.

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## Cody's Lost Gold Ledge of Gabbs Valley

When the great gold strikes in Goldfield, Tonopah and Rawhide began to draw thousands of people to the Nevada desert, they also drew a prospector named Tim Cody. Setting up a base camp at Stewart Springs about 15 miles from Goldyke, Cody quickly began to prospect the area.

Before long, he was running low on supplies and decided to make a trip to Goldyke on an overcast winter's morning. On foot, he began to make the long journey when a storm began to brew. In the blustery storm, he was soon lost and found shelter in an abandoned mine shaft.

Spending the night in the mine, he arose to find the storm gone and the skies clear blue. He began to climb a nearby ridge to get his bearings before continuing his journey to Goldyke. Along the way he found a rich gold vein in a quartz outcropping. Picking up some samples, Cody continued his climb to the top.

At the summit, he could clearly see Paradise Peak and Rawhide Peak to the northwest. Making his way back down to continue his trip to Goldyke, he was soon lost again, but after some difficulty he finally made his way to the settlement. After re-supplying, he returned to his base camp and tried several times to relocate the gold laden quartz vein.

However his continued searches proved fruitless and finally he moved on. However, three men showed up in 1949 with

a map that Cody had supposedly drawn for them. The three scoured the area looking for the lost ledge, but they too, were unable to find the rich vein of gold.

Today, the legend continues. The lost ledge is said to be somewhere in the hills south of Gabbs. Perhaps, you will be the lucky prospector to find it again.

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## The Notorious Mary McCann of Bodie Ghost Town Seekers website

Legends come and legends go, most of them never to be written about. You hear tell of all the little stories, the unbelievable shootouts which leave you laughing and the technical ways the miner found their new strikes—all of which were based around the male population. When Paiute Bob guided the miners to a rich strike on the border of Death Valley, did they say that a female cousin showed him where to go first? Well I think there are a lot of good people in the old days worth writing about, and they're not just men either.

If you lived in Bodie, you would most likely know about Mary McCann. She was considered to be a little odd to say the least. Her normal dress was a man's hat, which showed the worse for wear, a man's vest, which she wore over a woman's skirt. She asked little from no one, in her mannish way of dress as well as her language. She also had a strange way of showing her feelings. When approached by her bachelor neighbor one day, he made the suggestion that she marry him. Mary's reply was; "Marry is it? I'll show you what I think of your marryin'!" At the completion of her answer; he had a broken nose and two black eyes. Now this maybe considered strange in those days I do not know, but I have asked that question many times in my life and none of them ever answered that way.

Now Mary's other neighbor was a brewery, and for some God given reason she never missed an opportunity to

make the brewer's life miserable. During a heavy rain one day Mary clogged up the sewer drain so it would back up into the Brewer's cellar. The beer man raised hell with the constable to have her arrested. The constable was embarrassed to say the least while making the arrest, but Mary assured him it would be all right. Now the mud was knee deep on the way to the jail, and the officer had on gumboots with Mary in slippers. He ended up having to carry her for several blocks. Now this brought an accompaniment of comments from spectators as well as equal remarks from Mary.

Mary was the janitor for the schoolhouse, and at 4 o'clock every afternoon she would come and clean the school. Now right in the middle of the hearing before the 4 o'clock hour, Mary arose and started to leave the courtroom. The justice demanded that she return to her seat, her reply was vivid and straight to the point: "Them kids is gettin' out of school. I have me work to do, and ye kin hould yer coort some other time." Upon which she walked unmolested, leaving the plaintiff to admit his defeat.

With women of this caliber, it is a wonder if the Bad Men from Bodie were really that bad!

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## The Killing of Tom Belmont, Lookout California

Ghost Town Seekers website

The headlines in 1874 might have read 'Seventeen year old Rhode Island boy kills Tom Belmont over Canvas framed Saloon!' Was the saloon worth a killing? Where was the law at this time?

Oliver Roberts de la Fontaine, an adventuresome lad, had just acquired a job working in a charcoal camp near Lookout California. Upon seeking a place to stay, Oliver made the acquaintance of one Tom Belmont, a miner with a reputation for being 'difficult.'

A few days later, Belmont purchased a saloon just outside of Lookout, at Nadoes Station. Peace of mind did not come easy for young Oliver, for every day that passed, Oliver and Belmont would have troubles over one thing or another. Belmont's ways were just more than the boy could tolerate. One day while at Nadoes Station Oliver ran into Welch, the deputy sheriff. Welch told Oliver that he had been looking all over for him. It seem the deputy had some work for Oliver, which he claimed he could not tend to until his return from an out-of-town trip. The deputy gave Oliver attachment papers to serve on Belmont, reclaiming the saloon he had bought. Oliver was to take control of the saloon and hold it until the deputy returned. Oliver proceeded to tell Welch that he thought this might not be a good time to confront Belmont, at least for him. The deputy just laughed. 'You're not afraid of Belmont are you?', was the deputy's reply. The deputy's instructions were not to give up the place to anyone without an order from him, regardless of how many he had to kill.

Well, Oliver went over to the saloon and upon his arrival found no one there. He posted one copy of the attachment papers on the front door and kept the other copy for himself. Now the saloon was just a canvas covered frame building. It had a long bar with a bench and a bunk at the end. Behind the bar was a long slit cut in the canvas for air ventilation and probably a quick exit way.

Oliver spent the rest of the day at the bar and slept on the bunk that night. The following morning in walked Belmont. Since he probably could not read, he asked Oliver what the paper on the door said. Oliver obliged by taking out his copy and reading it to him. Belmont just asked for a cigar and a drink. Others who came in for drinks throughout that day, but Oliver refused to serve them, stating that the bar is closed.

The following morning they both had breakfast at Horner's in complete silence. After they had finished their breakfast they returned to the saloon. Belmont then went out, saddled his horse, and left town.

Oliver stayed holed-up in the saloon all day. It was not until four O'Clock that afternoon when Belmont finally returned. He had a rit signed by judge McMannus in Darwin stating that Oliver was to return the saloon to Belmont. Oliver told Belmont he needed papers from Welch the deputy sheriff if he wanted his saloon back. Belmont then protested, growled and kicked everything in sight but did not cause any great trouble. They spent the night together again at the bar. Oliver was starting to wear down for lack of sleep. He knew that if Belmont had the chance to get the drop on him, it would all be over.

Late the next morning, Oliver talked a man named Mollog into taking his place and left his gun behind the bar in case of any trouble with Belmont. Oliver then saddled up his horse and rode to Darwin where he found no one knew anything about the order to return the saloon. Oliver realized Belmont had tried to pull a fast one. Oliver then had bad feelings about leaving Mollog and his gun at the saloon. After acquiring a British bulldog pistol from the sheriff, Oliver rode back to the saloon.

As Oliver approached, several friends came over and tried to talk him into leaving. About this time out came Mollog claiming he Belmont now had the gun. He then stated there were a dozen men in there and they will kill you if you go in. Oliver told Mollog to tie up his horses as he headed into the saloon. Once inside the door, Oliver found seven drunken men who had been drinking free all day at Belmont's expense. As Oliver made his way over to the end of the bar, in an effort to protect his backside, he ordered everyone to vacate at once. Not a one of them started to move, so Oliver yelled again, Gentlemen, please leave. At that moment, Belmont jumped out of his chair and start cussing, as he went for his gun. Oliver pulled his and fired. Belmont had on a woolen jacket, which slowed his draw, and caused him to miss on his shot. Oliver dropped to one knee and fired several more rounds. It had looked like Belmont had dropped to a knee as well and continued to fire. The room was completely full of smoke and neither one could see the other. At this time, Oliver thought he heard a noise, and fired several more shots. When the smoke cleared, Oliver found the room empty, except for Belmont lying on

the floor. Oliver quickly decided to slip out behind the bar just in case the gang was waiting to jump him out front. In front of the bar he found Mollog, his friend Tom Hamilton and Johnny Barnes. It had seemed that the drunks had left the bar in high order and were headed for Darwin, and were long gone by then.

The men asked about Belmont. 'Go in and check for yourself. He is on the floor,' said Oliver. By this time a crowd had formed outside of the saloon. Once inside, Hamilton looked at Belmont and found he had one shot in the neck, next to his throat, and another one under his ear, but he was still alive. The men managed to get him over to the bunk and bandage his wounds to keep him from bleeding to death.

Oliver knew there would be an inquest to settle the matter and asked Hamilton, Mollog, and Barnes, if they would go with him to Darwin to get the Doc and to testify before the Judge.

When they rode into Darwin the first person they met was the sheriff. Before Oliver could say a word, the sheriff said he had already heard all about it and wanted to know if he was hurt. Oliver said "no." But did you kill him, the sheriff asked? Oliver again said "no", but you need to send the Doc over quick.

By eleven o'clock that night, the Doctor had returned with the news that Belmont was dead. The inquest was set for ten o'clock the following morning, but when Oliver arrived in court, he found the judge to be intoxicated. The hearing was postponed until 3 o'clock that afternoon, and the judge was put to bed to sober up.

The judge finally entered the court, stating that he wanted to hear all evidence, and to make it short. The judge then called upon the first witness, Johnny Barnes. He stated that Oliver was obliged to do want he did to protect himself and property under attachment. The judge then lowered his gavel and said to Oliver, 'you are hereby honorably acquitted.' He then called the court adjourned. Oliver was surprised and asked the Judge, 'am I free?' The Judge replied, 'Yes, and



God Bless you son. I hope you keep up the good work. Now let us all adjourn to the bar and have a drink.'

If there were a newspaper in Lookout, it would have had a major headline. Instead, this is one of those untold stories about the Wild West that never was printed in a newspaper.

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