

The Death of a Gun

Grandchildren (most of the time) can be inquisitive. The first weekend of July at Bob and Judy's house is always reserved for the Grandkids. This year the ages range from nine to twelve years old, three boys and one girl. Debbie 10 and Joe 9 are Jim's children. Will 10 and David 12 are the younger sons, Payton's children.

After the parents dropped off the kids and everybody settled down, Mom and Pop, as the children call us, made up sandwiches and the fun began. One of the first things noticed by the kids was a picture hanging on the den wall. This was not a new picture, but an old one, just hanging in a new location. The picture hung on a wall at the office and upon retirement went to a box and in the last year found a new setting on the den wall at the house. The picture is of my grandfather, Connor Wright, as a young man mounted on a horse. Connor was in full cowboy dress sitting up straight and casting a handsome figure. His hat was more of a working cowboy hat with low top and a modest width brim, long sleeve khaki or denim work shirt with button down flaps over the pockets, leather belt, low heel work boots with the jean pant leg pulled over the top of the boots, western saddle on top of fifteen and half hand, Nez Pierce blanket Appaloosa, whose name was Sam, aka "Old Sam".

When the grandkids spied the picture the questions started wildly and furiously without pause. One of the first questions was, "Pop, is that you?" followed by "Do you have a horse?", "Did you used to be a cowboy?", and then "Where is your six-gun?"

At the moment that question arose, all four of them centered in on the absence of a gun holstered on the hip of the man in the picture. Well the consensus was “if you don’t have a gun then you couldn’t be a real cowboy”. I settled the kids down and explained that the person in the picture was not me, but that of their great grandfather, Connor Wright. That just started another array of never ending questions until Joe asked again, “Where is his six-shooter?” Then all four started again about him not having a gun, he could not be a real cowboy. At that point I assured them that their great-grandfather without a doubt, in categorical and non categorical terms, was a real cowboy if there ever was one. In unison they wanted an explanation of the absence of a hand gun. “ Do you want to know right now” and again a unified yes for a reply. I explained that I knew the answer to their question and they all needed to have a seat and get real comfortable, for it was going be short “long” story and everyone needed to put on their listening ears and be quiet.

I started the story when Connor was fifteen living on the family ranch in the Cooweescoowee district of the Cherokee Nation with his mother, Jane, and father Christopher. Connor was the youngest of four, three girls and him. His sisters at this time were married and living in and out of the Nations. His father’s ranch was located about forty miles south of the Kansas state line and sixty-five miles west of the Missouri state line. The ranch house and buildings sat in a valley of two hills about eight hundred yards from the Verdigris River, in what today would be the North West corner of Rogers County, Oklahoma. At the ranch lived fifteen souls. The closest town of any size was Claremore, south east 8 miles crossing the Verdigris River at Sanders Ford just west of Claremore Mound.

There were two ladies that helped Jane with the house and the garden. Both ladies were a little older than Jane and one was a first cousin whose husband had died a few years back and she came to the Wright's ranch to live out her days. The women tended the garden, chicken coup, milked the cows, generated most all food from that of the living to the kitchen table, and ran the house. Other than things that needed mending on the outside of the house and slaughtering, no men were allowed to help, because they messed up more than they fixed.

Jane was the boss of the house and Ben Shell was the boss outside of the house. Chris was gone a lot with other businesses like banking, cattle, land, and Cherokee tribal affairs. Jane was one eighth Cherokee and Chris was a quarter and that placed him well within the tribe and tribal business with the Federal government. When Chris was gone, no doubt about it, Ben's word was final, confirmed by no change in the decision, when Chris returned. Chris was a Colonel during the War Between the States and Ben was his First Sergeant. They fought with Hood's Brigade under Longstreet Corps and every day after the war both wondered how they survived when so many with them did not. Ben was born in 1842, Chris was born in 1840 and when together they were one without dissension or correction. When there were jobs to do or work to be accomplished they both went about their business at hand without a word between them. When Chris was home and the end of the day came about you would find both of them at Ben's living quarters, outside or inside depending on the weather sipping Bourbon and having a smoke, staring at the fire or the sunset, conversing little, spending a hour or so, then departing for the night. On a Sunday when work and preparations took a rest, Ben and Chris would saddle up and take off to who knows where for a half a day and then reappear before the end of the day without a question from the women folk.

Connor at fifteen was precocious, smart, strong, and athletic. He focused well on what he wanted to do, not necessarily what he was asked or told to do. If Connor wanted to have a skill or to learn a discipline he did it with ease. Ben taught Connor everything about being a cowboy. Roping, riding, ranching, cattle, and everything else that goes with the farm or ranch he learned and learned correctly from Ben. Connor on the other hand did what he wanted to when he wanted to do it. Neither Ben nor Chris pushed on Connor in an attempt to direct him, because he was always helping and doing something. He was not lazy just self directed.

His cowboy discipline and abilities were the best. When Ben taught him how to ride, he taught him to ride hard and to know the limits to push. His expertise with a rifle was second to none, what he aimed at and shot was hit with accuracy. When Connor hunted for rabbits you did not have to look for the lead, it was always in the head.

Connor was after Ben to give him a hand gun and Ben would say no because of age. When Connor would ask his father Chris about a hand gun of his own the reply was the same, "What did Ben say when you asked him?". This just made Connor ask the more. Connor was allowed to shoot the hand guns the cowhands had at the ranch. Connor was allowed to shoot Ben's and Chris's hand gun, but not to have one of his own. Connor had his own rifle for two years. Ben had bought Connor a 44.40 Winchester model 1892 with a 20 inch barrel, for him on his thirteenth birthday and it was a real surprise. Ben and all the other hands on the ranch had a Winchester 1873, but Ben thought the 1892 was a little smaller and lighter with a stronger action and it would be perfect for Connor, and it was.

A few months had passed and Connor was still on Ben to buy him a hand gun, but to no avail. Chris had been gone on business a lot and Ben was the only one he could pressure,

although if one of them said no, no it was. After awhile Ben went to Claremore for supplies and it took two to three days to make the trip out and back in a wagon or buckboard. On the third day Connor saw Ben on the rise coming back. Ben told Connor to help unload the wagon and that he had something for him when they were finished. This excited Connor and the job was done in half time. Connor went to Ben's private living quarters, a small two room house of sorts that was separate from the bunk house where the other hands lived and separate from the main house, to see what Ben had brought back from Claremore for him. Typically hard rock candy was the treat from a trip to town and Connor was anticipating the sweet taste as he knocked on Ben's door and then entered.

Ben had purchased a revolver and holster at Knight's Hardware in Claremore on the trip for Connor, a Colt Bisley Model .44-40, nickel plated, checkered black horned grips, five and half inch barrel, and a flat top strap. The holster was a Cheyenne Mexican Loop high cut with a three quarter skirt, with a booth lace hammer loop lash down, and a tear drop toe plug. With it was a three inch wide strait cut 24 loop cartridge belt in a matching smooth British tan color. On the back side of the belt and holster stamped in the leather were the words "R. A. Meanea Maker Cheyenne WT". This was more than Connor could have wished for and it was the nicest rig he had ever seen. There was no engraving or design on the gun, belt, or holster. Ben liked a smooth look and finish and felt like it was easier to maintain. None the less Connor thought it was the greatest thing ever.

Months passed without a day going by that he missed practiced shooting with his Colt. He became an expert marksman. Ben instructed him to shoot without aiming with the sights. Connor practiced on drawing his gun and pointing at the target and hitting the smallest of

targets at 50 feet. Connor would challenge everybody he came in contact with and always best his competition.

Connor was a light hearted, good for a laugh, jokester without a mean spirit in him, but would take on all challengers and not back down. When Connor involved himself in an endeavor his aim was to take first place.

Spring of 1895 arrived and winter was over at the Rocking W ranch and it was time to check and get a head count on the herd. The ranch contained about 20,000 acres, most all open range. Barbed wire fencing was just making its mark on the land. Some small ranches had put up a fence line but none at present was on the Rocking W. Ben wanted to take Connor with him to search out to the south east part of the ranch where the Caney met the Verdigris. This area was known as the Triangle and was all river bottom land with a good growth of trees and protection for the herd in a hard winter. The rivers made a natural barrier for the cattle and maintained enough undergrowth to forage with plenty of water.

Otis and Hank, resident cowboys at the ranch, went along with Ben and Connor in the advent they needed to move that part of the herd closer to the ranch. Ben had thought they could be gone four to five days depending on how far out some of the cattle had roamed. They could be covering five to six miles out and covering a lot of river bank that added more miles in the saddle.

Over the last five years cattle rustling had diminished considerably. The area had other people in it with neighbors as close as seven miles. The Lipes and Sanders had places now on the south side of the Verdigris about half way to Claremore. There were federal marshals in the Nations now and there was talk about setting up a United States District Court in Fort Smith,

Arkansas, which would mean more presence of law in the area. Ben did not have an idea that they would run into trouble, but always left prepared for any encounter, all four men had hand guns and rifles. In the last few years Ben might come on to some squatters that had butchered a head just to survive the winter. When this happened Ben gave them a day to pick up and move out or it would be done for them. The next day they were always gone.

The morning of the second day everyone was up at daybreak. On the first day they saw 20 head and 5 young calves that they would pick up on the way back. They crossed the Caney at Mathews ford and made camp close by the river. It was Ben that made the choice to ask travelers they came across what they had noticed along the way. There was an old stage coach stop less than a mile due east on the edge of the escarpment from the ford that Ben would travel to in reconnoitering the area for trouble. There wasn't much left at the old stop, but a single family by the name of Mathews that still made a living from travelers still pushing west. The Mathews knew Ben and wanted to help but had no knowledge of any strangers in the area.

Ben had done as good as possible of being on the lookout for trouble but was still uneasy going into the triangle because of the thick tree cover and the ability to be undetected. They retraced their steps crossing the ford again and turning west going down the Caney, heading to the Verdigris.

Not a mile from the triangle the land is flat with not many trees and you can see for miles. Down in the bottoms the clear look you have is up or down the river. The river had some flow but there was enough on the edges next to the deep cut bank that you could ride and the horses had good footing. This led to ninety plus degree turn in the river where the bank flattened out widened by five times and a large sandbar jutted out into the river. As they

turned the corner there were three men and 20 head of cattle roped off in the trees and a fire going for changing brands on the stock.

A strong south wind at our backs and the noise in the trees did not give us any warning. Ben was in the lead when we came around the bend at which time they caught sight of us and we of them. There were four of us and three of them and the odds were in our favor that we could work our way out of this without harm. Ben identified himself and asked if they would identify themselves. The tallest of them stated his name, "John Carey" and the short fat one to his side was "Dave Story". Hearing this Ben and Connor both realized that "Killer Carey and Crazy Dave", two outlaws that had spent years in prison and had not been in the area for years, were now within one hundred feet, too close for comfort. Ben knew that the odds were good but not good enough and they needed to back off and come back with more men, but that would not happen. They were out flanked on their right from the woods by two more rustlers. The opportunity to retreat was lost. The rustlers knew they had the odds and were going to take advantage of it.

Crazy Dave went for his gun and the total silence of the moment was over. Connor could feel the bullets wiz by and knew to keep his eye on Ben. Ben was battle hardened and would make the right move for the situation. Ben knew his placement was bad and it had to improve or they would all be dead. The river on the left, out flanked on the right and ahead of them three guns firing. In a split second he charged his horse straight ahead pistols firing. Connor, Hank, and Otis followed Ben's lead. They overran the three men at the camp while Otis and Hank's horses were shot out from under them. Connor and Ben rode through on the first pass. Killer Carey was exposed at this point trying to move to cover and reload at the same

time when a round from one of the other rustlers in the trees caught him in the chest and he dropped. Hank was still returning fire from cover of his dead horse and Otis was not moving. Connor and Ben had dismounted and gained cover in the trees. Connor saw a washout to his left and motioned to Ben that he might out flank the two rustlers. Ben had his Winchester '73 and when Connor made his move, he returned rapid fire. Connor made the cover of the washout and quickly came to the side of the other two rustlers. Connor now saw that Ben was the only one returning fire and Hank was silent. The rustlers did not realize Connor's position and they continued to move in on Ben every time he had to reload. Connor knew when Ben stopped firing next he had to make his move. Ben stopped firing and the two rustlers made their move to rush Ben now just 30 feet away. At that point Connor was less than 15 feet away. He left his cover and fanned two fast shots from his Colt Bisley and hit torso both times. The second rustler looked to his right at 25 feet and unleashed two shots both misses and Connor fanned two more .44-40 from his wide hammered Colt and both rounds caught the rustler chest center, dead before he hit the ground.

Otis, Hank, three rustlers were dead and Killer Carey and Crazy Dave lay groaning but not moving with mortal wounds. Connor and Ben rounded up two of the rustlers' horses, draped the bodies of Hank and Otis over the saddles, and headed back to the Rocking W.

Ben told Connor that they would leave the two alive with hopes that they would still be when coyotes or wolves came out later in the night. He would get in touch with the U.S. Marshalls and let them investigate the scene. Ben and Connor did not talk on the long trip back to the ranch.

Three days passed before Connor talked to Ben about what happened. Connor told Ben he could still see the rustlers' faces that he had shot. Ben understood. Connor had a small shipping box and handed it to Ben and told him it contained the Colt .44-40. It was like a small coffin and was ready for burial. Ben took it and nothing was said about it ever again.

That was the death of Connor Wright's Colt and the reason one does not see it on him in the picture hanging in the den. Then the questions started about where the gun is now and I told them that was a story for next year if they could remember to ask.

