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Cover illustration from an oil painting by Dean Francis, 2007.

Dean Francis resides east of Empress, Alberta, on an acreage near the scenic South Saskatchewan River surrounded by the land and wildlife that inspire his art. Here, he developed Sagebrush Studios with wife and fellow artist, Fran Francis. Three galleries and a studio are housed in renovated old churches, all set within beautifully landscaped grounds. Born and raised on the prairies, Dean spends as much time as possible outdoors, exploring and photographing new material for his work. He has a love and understanding of the land, its light, the wildlife, and its habitat. This is reflected in his paintings, where he captures the prairies in a rich array of colour, shape, and texture. You are invited to visit Dean Francis's web site at: <http://www.deanfrancis.ca/>

TWICE UPON A TIME

C. C. Phillips

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PART ONE

Following the pointing crooked finger
On a gnarled and shaking hand
I stared across the sweeping plains
Of a barren and empty land

“See riders up there on that ridge?
Must be a dozen or so.”
The old cowman's cataract and faded eyes
Stayed my reply of, “No”

Blinking hard against the strain
My eyelids squeezed out tears
Then I saw them, not across the miles,
But there, across the years

November 30, 2005

Fearful apprehension haunted the faces of the two adult occupants of ultra sterile quarantine rooms as they paced restlessly about the brightly lit, very private, test lab. A third person, an effervescent young lady of, perhaps, sixteen, with luxurious auburn hair hanging down to her slim waist, presented a look of suppressed excitement. Her blue eyes sparkled as she alternated her gaze from her nervous senior companions to a rather large volume she scanned with apparent preoccupation. The trio wore thin synthetic one-piece white suits, which clung to their bodies like a painted veneer. Short anklet socks and gloves of the same material served as foot wear and hand protection.

Outside the chamber, separated by an imposing wall of one way plate glass, a second group of people in various stages of anxiety struggled to restore a communications link with the quarantined area. Two communications experts exchanged verbal innuendo as to who might be responsible for the glitch. The elder of the pair, a no longer pretty woman of forty-something, ranted, while her colleague, a beleaguered man perhaps half her age, frantically sorted through a black Platt laden with test equipment and tools. Meanwhile, Otto Kronburger, a slight framed balding fellow wearing heavy dark rimmed spectacles and a white lab coat, sought the source of the damage. Kronburger was aided by his younger, similarly clad assistant, Larry Doolittle. The professionals remained calm though they were under far more pressure than the quarrelling pseudo-technicians behind them.

Removed from the immediate area, a tall, distinguished gentleman with a full head of dark hair—showing only a hint of grey—and wearing an expensive three-piece suit, conversed in low tones with

the third member of the lab coat threesome. Tom O'Brien acted as liaison for this highly covert project and through him funding from government coffers had been made possible. O'Brien, now in his fifties, had spent most of his career in the federal government circle. His most recent post, prior to taking interest in this project, had been Canada's ambassador to the United States. Known and trusted by Canadians nationwide, 'Tom O'Brien' had become a household word in his homeland and, in fact, throughout the political world.

"If the comm. link is not restored in time, they know the drill, Tom," Bill Spencer, the director in chief, spoke with unconvincing assurance. "When the green opal lights up they will move into their assigned TDSM's and the dimension shift will begin. Remember, we've done this successfully thirty-six times without failure," he added.

Tom O'Brien glanced at the digital countdown timer stationed above the heads of the communications duo. "Seventeen minutes," he said. "I would have liked to say one more last minute goodbye."

"Well, you'll be able to say 'hello' in," the scientist did a quick mental calculation, "75 minutes. That is when they return, although they'll have been gone fifteen years in shift time."

"Fifteen years!" Tom repeated. "Shift 58 minutes and add 15 years to your life? I just cannot wrap my head around that. Indeed, a brief time in history."

"An abstract application of what physicists refer to as the Twin Paradox. Incredible, isn't it?" the project director said.

Spencer stepped toward the quarrelling communications people.

"...You're the pathetic one, Sandy!" the young man shouted. "At least I've gotten this far without losing my pants!"

Bill Spencer intervened, "You'll have to leave this area now," he said. "We shall proceed without the intercom link." The woman referred to as Sandy, incapable of supplying a quick response to her colleague's verbal slap, turned a flushed and anger-distorted face on the director. A single, half-raised, eyebrow prevented comment and the pair were unceremoniously ushered toward the exit. As Spencer passed by O'Brien, he rolled his eyes by way of apology.

"Good help is hard to find," Tom said.

Tom O'Brien moved close to the glass as Bill Spencer returned and addressed his subordinates who were still working on the communications error. "Leave it for now, we haven't enough time left to restore the link. Take your positions and prepare for the shift." Checking the atomic clock he added, "We have nine minutes and fifty four seconds."

While the scientists readied their computer stations, Tom O'Brien reflected upon the momentous event less than ten minutes away. He had a very personal interest in the outcome of this operation though he had made mention of such to no one other than Kronburger and Spencer. O'Brien trusted these two men implicitly.

He had to.

The former ambassador gazed at the three time travellers on the opposite side of the reflective glass. They were dear friends, far more so than they knew at this time. The experiment, this incredible time shift, had to go smoothly; not only were the lives of the quarantined trio at stake but more than forty years of Tom's past were resting on this all-or-nothing bet.

Spencer turned to O'Brien, whose paling features indicated a slight fissure forming in the diplomat's normally iron composure. "You best take a seat, too,

Tom... right here.” He pulled a large swivel armchair on casters from behind a desk and parked it facing the glass wall, “front-row, centre.”

O'Brien could feel perspiration under the collar of his shirt and loosened his tie a little more. His eyes traced a nervous circuit from the digital timer, to the trio confined in the laboratory, to the technicians on his side of the glass, then back to the timer.

“The green opal is on... now,” Bill Spencer said in a controlled voice which sounded loud above the quiet hum of electronic equipment. No one else spoke.

The politician watched the white-suited individuals within the chamber gather for an affectionate group hug. As they moved toward the time shifting modules, the youngest member stalled a moment to retrieve the large volume she had laid aside when the green LED illuminated.

Spencer hit the intercom switch and said, “Leave the book, Toni!” but the girl paid no attention.

Otto Kronburger, rising from his seat said, “The intercom is dead.”

Both men pounded with their fists on the thick glass. Their attempts were in vain as the dull muffled thudding went unheard within the sealed laboratory.

“We can't stop the transfer now, she's already in the Cosmic energy field!” said Larry Doolittle, the programming engineer. “Let it go!”

The pale white figures, discernible through the translucent closures of the modules suddenly began to fade and Tom O'Brien suffered a searing pain as if the top of his head had split open. As the travellers vanished entirely, O'Brien's world went completely blank. He slumped down in his seat, unconscious....

Inside the chamber, oblivious to the proceedings a short, muted, distance away, Evan Tungstall could feel his palms sweating in the skin-tight gloves. His entire body itched from perspiration and the confinement of the undignified synthetic suit. He smiled, a nervous attempt at reassuring Analyse, his beautiful wife, as her path of pacing intercepted his. "The suit looks *good* on her," he mused.

Toni Tungstall, the youngest member, was their only child and as Evan marked her keen eagerness, he asked himself how and why he had brought his family into this peril. How could a reasonably sane man recklessly jeopardize his own existence, and the lives of the two people he held dearest, only to satisfy such a daring sense of adventure? Why had he allowed Tom O'Brien to cajole and entice them? Another question remained unanswered: what impetus led the former diplomat who seemed so hell-bent, at times even desperate, to persuade Evan Tungstall and his family to enter into the nebulous and secretive Shiva program? For that matter, how did the ambassador himself ever become involved? Though the family's decision had been enthusiastically unanimous, Tungstall held himself responsible for the very real possibility of failure; a failure which meant uncertain death lost in a fourth dimensional, space-time, quantum gamble. He didn't even understand the jargon, much less the functionality of the nascent experiment. Now he and his small family were guinea pigs in an unprecedented triple human time-shift; an unfathomable transport backwards in history.

Evan reflected, for the hundredth time, upon the fantastic sequence of events leading up to their confinement in this sterile cell of stainless steel, enamel and porcelain. Only these three organisms were permitted to exist here; there were virtually no germs, viruses or bacteria, much less another human being. The single live

contact with the outside world had been through an intercom which now, at the most crucial moment, didn't work. In another room, they had been able to see through a second, transparent plate window and, via the pager system, talk with the four people who now watched from the viewing side of the one way glass. This room was sealed from, but adjacent to, the laboratory, in a section of the quarantine quarters where the Tungstall family had been confined for nearly two months. The project was so intensely guarded that only a handful of select individuals were aware of the exact nature of the experiment. Technicians periodically required, such as communications and computer personnel, along with medical and nutrition experts, were permitted in the outer chamber to perform their necessary functions but were presented a guarded and ambiguous explanation for the quarantine operation.

Twenty individuals had gone before, some of them more than once, for a total of thirty-six successful shifts into the past or laterally in the present. However, this would be the first multi-person phase departure. Bill Spencer and his head scientist, Otto Kronburger, were adamant that additional time passengers were inconsequential to the operation.

Spencer had said, "The number of people we can time shift is only restricted by the number of Telephase Dimension Shift Modules available. We have only three so far." The, "only three so far", comment had been a score for the scientific community against Tom O'Brien's department in the age-old funding game.

To date, the longest time shift duration had been less than a year and for that particular 'leap of faith' Otto Kronburger himself had volunteered. Tungstall doubted that the scientist, whose life and work were entirely synonymous, spent many of his waking hours actually in the present moment, or, for that matter, perhaps not

always on the planet Earth either. Otto had gone back in history to the year 1986 and spent the time in his native Austria. Evan Tungstall hadn't been privy to the particulars; apparently the experiment had proven successful.

Now the Project Shiva team pursued a simultaneous triple dimension shift. The Tungstalls were to be the lab mice.

Until six months ago, Evan Tungstall led what he considered a fairly normal life. He was a successful livestock grower, breeding a quality herd of cattle on a large scale operation in the beautiful Rocky Mountain foothills. He held a degree in Agriculture with a major in animal husbandry and had kept in close communication with several universities since his graduation twenty years previous. His experience, success and education were the assets which the organizers of the time project, 'Shiva,' claimed to be seeking when, nearly half a year ago, Tom O'Brien had paid an unannounced visit to the Tungstall ranch...

June 20, 2005

Though the sun had passed its zenith an hour ago, the hottest part of the day had just arrived as Evan Tungstall strode across his lush green, but wilting, yard. He was seeking a cold refreshment in the cool confines of the cedar-log ranch house, but was interrupted by the distant sound of a vehicle slowing down on the main road and making the turn into the drive. The rancher checked his pace to await the new arrival. The car, an ordinary looking sedan, contained one occupant whom the cattleman did not, at first glance, recognize. He did, however, note the white license plate with black lettering: "Federal Government," he said.

The G-plated unit coasted quietly to a stop near the cattleman and he watched as a tall, well-dressed man, whom Evan estimated to be fifty, lithely extracted himself from the vehicle. The fellow had an almost wistful smile and seemed vaguely familiar. Offering his hand the stranger said, “Tom O'Brien.”

The rancher shook the hand, noting the firm grip as he said, “Evan Tungstall.”

“Yes, I know your name,” the government man said, his smile widening to expose a perfect set of white teeth.

Recognition dawned on Tungstall, “Of course! Tom O'Brien! It is an honour to have you here and, since you know my name, I presume you aren't lost. What's the occasion? We don't have a lot of ambassadors visit our ranch.”

O'Brien chuckled. “Well, my diplomatic relations days have come to an end, I've taken up a different job—still with the government—it's...it is quite removed from my previous post.”

“Come on into the house,” Evan said, “I was just on my way for a glass of lemonade.”

“Ah, it's been a long time...” O'Brien paused, then went on, “I'd like a glass of lemonade. I hadn't noticed this heat with the air conditioning in the car.”

Evan Tungstall's wife met the men at the doorway. Mrs. Tungstall was unable to mask her astonishment as she recognized Tom O'Brien.

“To what do we owe this honour?” she echoed her husband's word after the government official had been formally introduced.

“The honour, I assure you, is all mine.”

O'Brien was led into the spacious kitchen and offered a chair at a massive maple wood table. Analyse brought out a pitcher of lemonade and poured three glasses. The platitudes of weather and cattle business were discussed at

length before Tom O'Brien casually switched the conversation to the reason for this visit, so far from the nation's capital.

"I opted to drive west so as to have a relaxing trip and to give myself time to come up with a convincing proposal.

"You may or may not be aware that the federal government, particularly individuals within the agriculture department, are quite familiar with your successful cattle operation out here, Evan. Through the University of Guelph, Ontario, we have monitored and admired your dedication to improvement in the industry. There are those of us who wish we had had your perspicacity forty or fifty years ago."

The politician delayed, considering the incongruity of the presentation he had rehearsed so many times. Now it all seemed laboured and minuscule as he faced Evan Tungstall.

The Tungstalls were riveted to the speaker and remained expectantly silent as O'Brien paused and helped himself to a refill of lemonade. Fixing the couple with an expression of grim determination, he said, "It is not too late to do that."

"It's not too late to improve the cattle industry's position fifty years ago?" Evan Tungstall asked, doubting his own hearing.

"Well, let's say forty-five years. In the early 1960's, the University of Guelph was developing an artificial insemination program that would enable cattle breeders of dairy and beef operations to have access to the finest breeding bulls in the world. As you know, AI is popular in the business today but in its nascent state, it was quite slow to catch on. An estimated fifteen to twenty years passed before the program was accepted on a large scale.

Our beef and dairy prominence in the world market was slow to emerge and we continued to play catch-up hockey for years after that.”

The rancher said, “What’s done is done, we can only go forward, not retrace our steps....”

O’Brien cut in, “That has been the case until very recently. What I have to say is so unbelievable, so far fetched, that you may think I should be committed to a lunatic asylum.” He flashed a rueful smile. “Maybe I should be, but I swear upon my honour that what I am about to tell you is entirely truthful. Furthermore, it is paramount that not a word of this conversation is repeated. The information is of the strictest confidentiality; even my own office has no solid cognizance of the operation.”

“What is this *operation*, exactly?” Analyse Tungstall asked.

Evan said, “You have our oath of confidentiality.”

O’Brien took the plunge. “There is a cabal of scientists, who have developed a system for time shifting. It is possible to transport people back in time and retrieve them to the present.”

Shocked silence.

Mrs. Tungstall was the first to recover. “That *is* far fetched!”

“Hold on a minute, Analyse,” Evan said. “If what you say is true, Tom, and frankly I am having a very tough time chewing such a wad, why are you telling *us*? Where do we fit in?”

Through the open window, the sound of an approaching vehicle interrupted the conversation. Analyse Tungstall glanced up at the kitchen clock. “The school bus,” she said, “Toni’s home.”

As the sound of the departing bus diminished, quick footsteps could be heard crossing the wooden deck. The screened entrance door opened and abruptly banged closed. An attractive teenage girl with long auburn hair

strode into the room, carrying a lunch bucket and an armload of school books. She read the distraught look on her parents' faces, and after politely acknowledging the stranger, asked, "What's wrong?"

Failing to hide the quaver in her voice, Mrs. Tungstall said, "This is Mr. O'Brien, from Ottawa, honey."

Tom O'Brien stood and took the offered hand but instead of shaking it, he held on tenderly and, in a low voice, said, "Milt Milto."

Evan Tungstall took offence at the over familiarity. He quickly rose to his full height, a couple inches over six feet. "Mr. O'Brien, you have a very short time to explain your actions. My patience is running thin and I don't care what your political history may be."

"My... history?" The term seemed to have him stalled but the former ambassador quickly regained his composure and spoke in the controlled voice of a veteran diplomat. "I apologize, my history of being a figure, perhaps of some import in the international political arena, has not adequately prepared me for the presentation of this seemingly outrageous scientific program. I'm not about to deceive you people, I do have a personal stake in the outcome. I have solicited funding from our government coffers to provide for experimentation and testing and it has been an enormously expensive project. For its success or failure I must accept personal responsibility." His tone shifted to apologetic. "Please allow me to explain further."

His gaze turned to Toni who had taken a chair at the table beside her mother. The girl had a confused, almost hostile expression. Evan Tungstall grudgingly resumed his seat and indicated that O'Brien follow suit.

The rancher said, "Continue; Toni is to be trusted if her mother and I are."

"Of course," O'Brien agreed.

His voice strengthened and the smile warmed upon returning to the topic. “We, that is, the Federal Department Of Agriculture, the Project Shiva people and indeed, myself, would like you to consider becoming a part of the dimension shift program. We are asking you to volunteer to travel back in time.”

“What is he talking about, Mom?” Toni asked.

“Perhaps you can enlighten your daughter with the sketchy information I have provided so far, while I retrieve further documentation from my vehicle,” Tom O'Brien said.

“It's sketchy, that's a fact,” Tungstall said. “If you were any other politician, including a few prime ministers I could name, I'd have had you off this ranch half an hour ago.”

“Well, I'll take that as encouragement,” the ambassador said as he rose and left the room.

Toni's defiant mien had turned to bewilderment by the time O'Brien returned with a rather bulky leather briefcase in his left hand and a huge book tucked under his right arm.

“None of the documentation contained here has blatant, direct reference to the actual dimension time shift program. The information is far too critical to be allowed beyond the experimental station but, between the lines, the entire study can be deciphered. You just need the initial key which I have presented verbally to realize the content.”

He placed the volume on the table and, as Analyse Tungstall cleared away the lemonade pitcher and glasses, he set the briefcase down and extracted a sheaf of papers and a CD-ROM from it.

“This disc is yours to keep, please guard it with utmost care. As I mentioned, this layout is a red herring, ostensibly pertaining to experimental testing in our space program.”

“We have a space program?” Evan Tungstall asked.

“Oh yes, not as glamorous and candid as our American neighbours but we do research and testing here on a smaller scale. In fact, a lot of Canada's space related work is in conjunction with NASA. CSA, the Canadian Space Agency was inaugurated in 1989. ”

“Are other countries involved in the project you are proposing?” Analyse asked.

“Not specifically, not in our program but we have reason to believe that there are certain parallel experiments in progress. None are so advanced, nor as functional, as ours.”

Evan Tungstall had been leafing through a folder. He now slid the paper over to his wife, “Mr. O'Brien, this material seems quite incomplete and vague at best.”

“That's right, Evan, the real proof will be realized when you come with me to project headquarters. You will see our lab, meet my associates and, perhaps, even, a demonstration can be made possible.”

Analyse asked, “When would that take place?”

“Analyse, we can be there and back tomorrow, if you like. I'll have a government jet pick us up and return us—same day service.”

This announcement provided the desired effect of incorporating a more stern fabric into the previously flimsy fairytale. When someone is willing to spend money, albeit tax payers' dollars, to establish a point, tangibility becomes more concrete. Tom O'Brien was extremely well versed in the technique.

As the Tungstalls digested this more plausible proposal, O'Brien continued his pitch. “Though the finer details are not hammered out as yet; that depends upon your final decision; I ought to point out the benefits for you: The federal government is sponsoring the entire program, although they do not know where or how the money is being spent; a common occurrence. You will be

compensated financially for your participation. *But*, the opportunity for you is unimaginable. You will have a *fifteen year holiday*, a working vacation so to speak, running a huge ranch starting in the year 1963.” Tom’s voice rose with excitement as he made the final delivery.

“Fifteen years in dimensionally shifted time, but actually only a matter of hours in the time we consider the present.”

The former ambassador could not suppress a chuckle as the three gobsmacked individuals stared at him in disbelief.

Toni Tungstall was the first to respond, “But I’ll be over thirty in one afternoon,” she groaned.

The comment eased the tension. “No,” O’Brien said, “that is the fantastic perquisite, Toni. None of you will age at all. However, the people of the period, with whom you will necessarily associate, shall continue living a normal existence.

“I must point out too, it is vital that the strictest confidentiality be maintained with that population as well. You must not interfere or alter history in any way.”

Evan Tungstall said dryly, “Except to improve the cattle industry.”

“Yes, we’re hoping you can bolster the quality of the national herd by demonstrating the obvious advantages of artificial breeding.”

Doubt clouded the rancher’s thinking. The entire presentation seemed an absurd dream or perhaps the first episode of a recurrent nightmare. He reached across the table and squeezed his wife’s hand in an effort to reassure them both. A trace of humour shone in his grey eyes as he turned to the visitor, “What makes you assume another fifteen years of ranching tacked on to my life is a benefit?”

Analyse Tungstall smiled at her husband. “Evan, you will still be feeding cows when you are a hundred. What difference is a hundred and fifteen!”

Evan said, “You haven't sold me on this scheme but I must admit it sounds like a tremendous opportunity for our family. I appreciate the fact that we have been selected for such a... well, unbelievable, adventure.” He paused, his grey eyes riveting the corresponding blue gaze of his guest, “To my way of thinking, a former U.S. Ambassador is not likely to be concerned with the beef industry; not fifty years ago, not even today. You mentioned a personal interest?”

Tom maintained unblinking eye contact as he said, “It means everything to me, Evan.”

“So, if we refuse this offer, your future is in jeopardy?” the rancher said. “I find that hard to believe. Tom O'Brien is the complete envy of every elected official in the country, past, present and, probably future. Your name is internationally renowned....”

O'Brien broke in, “It is not the future that is my concern, it is my past.”

The Tungstalls agreed to fly to Ottawa the next morning and in turn invited Tom to spend the night at their ranch.

The government aircraft, a recent Bombardier Challenger 300, complete with stewardess and two pilots, sat parked on the apron, cargo and passenger doors yawning open as Tom O'Brien and the Tungstalls emerged from the airport terminal. In minutes they were airborne and four hours later, the pilot announced final descent into Ottawa's McDonald-Cartier International Airport.

The Challenger touched down with a faint squeak of rubber striking asphalt and the jet was guided to a parking area by a marshal dressed in phosphorescent lime, and waving a bright orange baton in each hand.

“Welcome to Ottawa,” Tom announced as the westerners stepped onto the tarmac.

O'Brien didn't have a chauffeur driven limo waiting at the terminal, but he did hire one of the stretched units waiting in the busy taxi stand. Evan and Analyse had been to Ottawa on several occasions in the past but the city, and the province, were new to their daughter. She had a torrent of questions; Tom O'Brien handled tour guide duties for the excited teenager.

The limousine pulled into a short lot in front of a two story edifice with a pair of large plate glass doors. A tall, carefully manicured hedge obscured most of the face of the structure. An unimposing commercial sign entitled *C R Laboratories* adorned the exposed view of the grey green building. It appeared to be a recent addition in the area. Two vehicles, a vintage Thunderbird, and a shiny red sports car, were parked side by side at the extreme left of the lot; a wide tired mountain bike was chained to a lamp post beside the T-Bird.

O'Brien paid the driver and led the apprehensive family along a wide cement sidewalk to the building's entrance. “C R Laboratories is the cover name we use for the program,” he said. Cosmetology Research Labs is a red herring; to those who know, the 'C' actually stands for 'Cosmology'. We keep a low profile but require a moniker for deliveries and other necessary day to day interactions.”

Tom pressed the thumb of his right hand against a security scanner embedded in the wall. An electronic latch buzzed and the door opened, revealing a small foyer. A security man wearing an officer's cap and dark uniform greeted Tom. “Hello, Mr. O'Brien, haven't seen you for a while.”

“Hi Stan. I've been travelling out West on business. These are my friends, the Tungstalls. They will be taking a tour of the premises with me this afternoon.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. O'Brien. Anyone else coming today?”

“Not that I am aware of....”

Toni read the security guard's name tag, *Stan LaFond*, as he punched in a code on his keyboard. A door to his right silently slid open.

“Stan doesn't have much company in this building,” Tom O'Brien said, “and *nobody* enters this area without an escort.”

The area Tom referred to was a complex monitoring centre. A tall bank of metal cabinets lined the entire wall on the left side. Multi coloured lights flickered constantly amid a fantastic assortment of switches, dials, buttons and stamped metal labels. Across the room, a plate glass window gave full view of a brightly lit area so pristine and sterile that it hurt the unaccustomed eye. The mid-to-right hand portion of the room, contained four steel office desks with an LCD display on each and a swivel chair behind. A second door, near the wall of glass, stood slightly ajar. The air conditioned room felt cooler than the outer office and a low hum from the electronics filled the background.

Three lab coated workers, clustered around a computer screen on the near desk, looked up in surprise at the intrusion. “Interoffice joke on the email, Bill?” Tom O'Brien asked.

The man O'Brien had addressed rounded the desk, right hand extended to Evan Tungstall. “Bill Spencer,” he said. “You folks are the Tungstalls, of course.”

Tom O'Brien presented the introductions with a dignitary's flair, “Analyze, Evan and Toni Tungstall. These are my associates here at C R Labs: our chief administrator, Dr. Bill Spencer, Otto Kronburger, PhD, head of research and operations, and Larry Doolittle, Master of Science in Computer Science. He acts as programmer and Dr. Kronburger's worthy assistant.

Kronburger shook the ladies' proffered hands, "We dispense with the 'doctor' formality except for Mr. Doolittle. We call him Doc, although he doesn't usually talk to animals."

After a brief flurry of small talk, Spencer, apologizing in advance for the crowded quarters, invited all into an adjoining room which doubled as a staff kitchen and passageway. They crossed to a door bearing a label in brilliant red on white lettering: *Quarantine Zone: No Admittance*. An austere kitchenette, in need of a thorough cleaning, attested to a meagre existence for Shiva employees working extended hours.

Soon Otto Kronburger and Doc Doolittle withdrew to their workplace. The three Tungstall's squeezed onto a small tweed couch while the former ambassador and the project director sat opposite them in a pair of thin cushioned arm chairs that only nearly matched the couch. The Shiva Project budget did not permit extravagance in office furniture. The visitors declined an offer of beverages.

"What is the Quarantine Zone?" Toni asked as she surveyed the room.

"That door," Spencer indicated with a nod, "is the entrance to the living quarters and transport equipment room. You may have seen the latter through that glass wall in the control centre you just came through. Actually, the entrance to the quarantined area proper is one more room beyond this one. We call it the intermediate quarantine zone. It serves the dual purpose of visual and audio communication and decontamination area."

Tom O'Brien said, "Bill, I've given the Tungstalls no information regarding C R Labs at all. We have so far discussed only the 'adventure', if I may use the term, not the actual trip and preliminaries."

“So, Tom has offered you the sales pitch and I am left to deliver the catch. Obviously you have a general idea of the phase program and I can expand on the intricacies of functionality if you so desire. However, we best confirm your dedication beforehand and it is only fair to submit the cons along with the benefits of the *adventure*,” Bill Spencer winked, “if I may also use the term.

“To travel back in time, there are many obstacles to surmount prior to departure. We will not risk the consequences of a latter day disease or infection among our historic population. Imagine the turmoil in the present if an outbreak of SARS or the Avian Flu suddenly cropped up somewhere in the past. Toward this end we ensure that tentative transport personnel are unquestionably '*clear*'. '*Clear*' is our term for uncontaminated.

“Decontamination requires a quarantine period of sixty days...” Spencer paused, hearing Evan Tungstall's quick intake of breath. However, the cattleman did not interrupt.

“From the time you people enter the intermediate zone and then on to the final stage, quarantine will be a full two months. That is a long time to spend in a not-so-spacious living quarters with no access to the outdoors, no ordinary food and only distilled beverages. We have a two person medical team to monitor your metabolism and keep you healthy via remote. There is live communication but only with the project team. Your commitment must be unwavering. We want you to be unequivocally certain before we proceed.”

Spencer paused to take a sip from a mug of coffee, which had grown cold. O'Brien said, “That is not to say you must decide right now, not at this moment.”

“No, no,” the director agreed, “I mean after you've had some time...”

“I’d need a lot of time, especially time to prepare for our absence if we were to leave the ranch for two months,” Tungstall said. “And what are the risks? What are our odds of actually surviving this experiment?”

Spencer shifted in his chair, “There can be no absolute guarantees. There is a remote possibility the dimension shift could go wrong: One, two or all of the modules may malfunction during the cosmic energy agitation or dissolution; Doc’s programming could be errant; you might miss your appointed energy collapse instant; there is always a possibility of something running amok, the ‘unknown factor’. We have accomplished thirty-six attempts to date with no errors, glitches or even side effects. Still... it is a gamble.”

Tom O’Brien said, “Speaking of side effects, a fifteen year absence to an historic period of four decades previous will definitely have an emotional impact upon all of you.”

“Of course,” Spencer said, “your situation will have minimal return phase time effect; however, a decade and a half of what could be termed ‘cosmic jet lag’ may leave you in turmoil for some time.”

“Possibly we should arrange a real vacation to... say, the Caribbean for a few weeks upon your return. That may help mitigate the shock of an abrupt transition from one life of ranching in the late seventies to your present day operation.” said O’Brien.

Evan Tungstall said, “The idea has merit. During the last weeks at Stockton we could convince ourselves we are heading to the Bahamas, transport back into the present, take the trip, then try to slip back into ranching in 2005. However, it would mean even more time away from our current operation and I’m not certain any of us need that.”

“In any event,” Spencer said, “upon your return we shall require at least two more days of your time for medical examination and completion of a full report by Project Shiva staff. So, you may have to calculate,

including quarantine, travel arrangements to and from your home, and the debriefing period, a minimum absence of sixty-five days.”

“Is that at all feasible?” O'Brien asked.

Evan Tungstall shrugged his broad shoulders. “Well, of course *it is feasible*. However, at the moment our optimism is running on steroids. Tom, we all have reservations, but the trade-off is disparate. How can we rate a decade and a half of extra living, in the prime of our lives, against sixty or sixty-five days of limited freedom?”

Though Bill Spencer had offered to explain the theory behind time shift operation, it was Otto Kronburger who later delivered the 'lecture.' Tungstall likened Kronburger to a subject saturated chemistry professor he had known in his College of Agriculture days. No world existed for Kronburger beyond his capsule of expertise. His voice assumed a dull monotone and the theory went deeper than the Tungstalls' comprehension. Evan periodically tuned out then back in:

“...So, we literally turn the participant into contained energy which is coupled with a second simultaneous facet of our operation: the shift to the dimension plane and then 'ported' or 'gated', if you will—we use the term ported—at a predetermined destination. Because energy prefers to be at its lowest state, the particle component is resumed and 'voilà!’” Kronburger smiled and spread his arms, “the subject reappears at his or her predetermined location.”

After a confused silence, Analyse said, “Through the looking glass?”

Otto Kronburger said, “The Dance of Shiva.”

Evan, feeling he should say something, asked, “Dimension plane? What is that?”

“The fourth dimension; a purely mathematical construct most individuals are unable to conceive because such a space/time concept is obfuscated by our three dimensional interpretation of reality. Allow me a quote

from a great man whose intuition approximately one hundred and thirty years ago has been a major catalyst in propelling the campaign that has led us to this moment in Phase-time Dimension Shifting; Edward Carpenter wrote:

“Space itself, as we know it, may be practically annihilated in the consciousness of a larger space of which it is but the superficies; and a person living in London may not unlikely find that he has a back door opening quite simply and unceremoniously out in Bombay.”

Bill Spencer said, “Otto has a photographic memory; he doesn't forget many notes that pique his interest,”

Though he knew the answer, Tom O'Brien asked, “We have made no forays into the future as yet, have we, Bill? Otto?”

Kronburger took this question. “The future may hold problems the lab is not capable of dealing with. In the same way we are so cautious about a present day virus contaminating ancestors, we must be even more tactful in avoiding a possible 'plague', if you will, from tomorrow breaking out today. For that reason, we have not yet tested the opportunity for advancing into the future.”

Larry Doolittle came in from the control room as Bill Spencer resumed Kronburger's topic. The director said, “In the beginning, or at least at the commencement of C R Lab's testing, we initially experimented with fourth dimension travel in the present. Our first transfer occurred more or less by accident. Doc hadn't joined our group at that time; it was just Otto and I; Tom was off begging alms from his peers.”

“We were trying to open a passage in the fourth plane when suddenly Otto disappeared! He had stepped into the transport modules...”

“I do that occasionally,” Otto interrupted. “It gives me a bit of a... er, buzz, if you will.”

“When he didn't come back, I became frantic. Try explaining this to the authorities. Lucky for me, Otto doesn't have a wife! Turns out, after about half an hour of sheer terror, the telephone in the lab started ringing and, as only a few restricted numbers can contact this location, I knew it had to be either Tom's or Otto's cell phone incoming. I picked up the receiver and shouted 'Where the hell are you?' and Otto said as casually as if he were in the coffee shop down the street, 'I think it's Tokyo.'”

Spencer's audience laughed and Otto said, “I was! I was in Tokyo! No money, no credit cards, not even proper identification. I'd left everything in my sport jacket, here in the lab. *And* I didn't know how to shift back. Fortunately, my cell phone had been in my lab coat and survived the transfer with a battery that was fully charged. It took a lot of calls before Bill could arrange transport home.”

Spencer said, “Tom's ambassadorship came in handy on that occasion. He was able to contact the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo to have Otto picked up and sent home.”

“It wasn't easy, calling in that mark,” O'Brien said. “Especially because I couldn't offer an explanation as to why this 'mad scientist,' *if you will*, had suddenly appeared wearing a lab coat on a busy street in Japan's largest city.”

Spencer said, “It was a lucky break he reappeared somewhere with cell coverage.”

“Yeah, Otto, you could have been out in the Sahara Desert or maybe the South Pole,” said Doc, “in the 12th century.”

Tom said, “I have participated in lateral same-time shifts, but Doc Doolittle, here, was the daring initiate to historical travel when his computer program first established co-ordinates for a shift.”

“How far back and where did you travel to, Mr. Doolittle,” Analyse asked.

Doc said, “I only went back a week in time and I reappeared right here in the lab. These three,” Larry nodded at his colleagues, “were watching from outside the Quarantine Room. It’s still a bit hazy from my point of view. I went back in time and didn’t know it. These guys were back in time and didn’t know I had transferred back. I don’t where the other *me* was at either end. Tom, you tell them what happened here.”

Tom laughed and said, “At that point the Quarantine Room had not been used, having only recently been constructed, but the single pod had been relocated there and Larry vanished in the same way as our lateral transfer subjects. While we were waiting for Doc to come back, he was telling us, at the same time *to him*, but a week previous *to us*, that the transfer had been a failure. What a confusion! Only when he became aware of the current date did he twig upon the fact that he was indeed back in history. Then, when he reappeared, we had a time convincing him that he had actually returned to the present.”

June 23, 2005

Tom O'Brien's government plated vehicle traversed the great distance from the Rocky Mountain foothills to the nation's capital at widely varying speeds according to the driver's fluctuating moods: sometimes the former ambassador motored along at normal posted limits, his thoughts clear and outlook bright; occasionally a passionate burst would have him racing madly down the pavement in a fury to reach his destination; once, O'Brien found himself parked at a roadside rest stop with no memory of having pulled over.

Tom O'Brien was more than distracted. In all his years of being a diplomat he had never faced a greater personal challenge. On their return flight from Ottawa he felt the Tungstalls were convinced; they were ready to make the journey back in time. Next morning, the day he left the ranch, O'Brien knew the family was having second thoughts about the Shiva project.

In his opinion they could not refuse.

But his opinion was not necessarily their opinion.

This turmoil, the root of O'Brien's suffering, had started about twenty-five months ago.

May, 2003

A newspaper, carelessly tossed on the desk of an associate, changed the course of Tom O'Brien's life. It caused him to retire from the ambassadorship, return to Canada and pursue, full time, a position as liaison for an obscure government branch quietly involved in an arcane scientific research project.

O'Brien had arrived that day at a colleague's office, having previously planned a luncheon and, while waiting for a telephone conversation to conclude, noticed a photograph on the half open page of the Herald. A clear black and white image of a western family receiving an agricultural award for 'outstanding achievement' in the industry left no doubt in the ambassador's mind as to who the people were, though the caption below the picture listed the three individuals with unfamiliar names: "Evan, Analyse, and daughter, Toni Tungstall." Scarcely able to contain his excitement, O'Brien begged the paper from his mystified friend. "Help yourself, it's a week old rag from home: Calgary."

Tom stopped at a pharmacy on his way back to his hotel room to purchase a magnifying glass. He feverishly studied the photo in minute detail. Additional information along with several more digital pictures appeared when

the temporary sleuth searched the Internet with his laptop. The images here were far more convincing, though further conviction was not necessary. Tom found he could enlarge a few of the coloured shots so as to identify more personal characteristics of the individuals such as eye colour and freckles.

The people on the page were positively the same family O'Brien had met on a ranch in the Great Sandhills region of Western Canada.

In 1968.

When Tom was seventeen years old.

How could the Tungstall family so closely match the Miltons of so long ago? There could be no mistake, no possibility of a triple 'everybody has a double' scenario; or could there? O'Brien had to find out.

He hired a private detective to carry out quiet 'research' (Tom didn't like the term 'spy'). Entirely efficient, the detective supplied many more digital photographs, copies of credentials, video footage and even audio of the family in conversation. This sound tracking eliminated the last shadows of doubt. In Tom's mind the families were positively identical.

But... How?

The ambassador couldn't possibly confide in anyone, for the absurdity of the abstract notion, he felt, would place his sanity in question. And, in the days to come, when frustrated by still another trail to a dead end, he wondered about that himself.

A break finally appeared at a moment when O'Brien, nearing wits end, had almost given up. While riding an elevator in a Washington, D.C. high rise with a remarkably pretty lady, he stooped to pick up a brochure that had fallen from a loose bundle she carried. Upon returning the paper to the woman, she at first accepted it,

then handed it back to him when the elevator stopped and Tom stepped out. With a friendly smile she said, “Read it over, perhaps you will find something of interest...”

The little brochure eventually led Tom a circuitous route through Berkeley, California, where he met Otto Kronburger and Bill Spencer and, ultimately, back to Ottawa, Kanata, and CR Labs.

July, 2005

A few weeks following the family's unexpected trip to Ottawa, the phone in the ranch house kitchen startled Evan Tungstall while he was preparing a pot of coffee to kick start the morning. He lifted the receiver on the first ring, hoping the disturbance hadn't awakened his wife and daughter.

“You're in the house this morning?” Tom O'Brien stated the question upon hearing the rancher's distant “Hello?”

“Well, it's 6:30 here,” Evan said.

“Oh, yes, there's a two hour time difference between us, isn't there?” O'Brien didn't mince words. “Our little cabal here at C R Labs thought we should check in on you folks. Have you come to any conclusions as to the holiday plan?”

“Well, Tom, we have given the decision our attention nearly exclusively since our return from Ottawa. Everything else has been on auto pilot and it appears unanimous; we accept your offer.”

Evan Tungstall's integrity had never been compromised and everyone who dealt with him in business or friendship accepted his word, often more so than a signature or a handshake from most others. Tom O'Brien knew this and exuded smug confidence when reporting to his colleagues that the Tungstall's dimension transfer—which necessarily included advancement of Shiva's triple phase-shift experiment—was a sure thing.

The rancher, however, still held reservations.

As the fresh brew filled a large mug, Evan Tungstall's thoughts riveted on the subject dominating his world. The decision had been made and the family were eager to take part in Tom O'Brien's impossibly far fetched expedition, but the risks were enormous and the consequences of failure... Well, just what would happen in the event the project went awry?

Tungstall had not exaggerated when informing O'Brien that the ranch had operated on auto pilot the past fortnight. The whole family seemed to be functioning like preprogrammed robots while their every waking thought and even the dreams and nightmares which filled their heads while sleeping, centred around the time experiment. Over and over again in his mind's eye, Evan reviewed the developments following the former ambassador's appearance at the ranch: the unfathomable proposal, the extravagant trip to Ottawa in the luxurious government aircraft and the clandestine visit to the restricted C R Laboratories.

The untouched coffee grew cold in its cup as the rancher pondered. What about that one way plate glass? Why was it necessary to have the participants' view screened while they themselves were on open display under the glare of the laboratory's brilliant lighting? He imagined a feeling of the 'bug in a jar' when the time came that the family would actually live on the opposite side, like lab mice.

Tungstall was jolted from his reverie by the warm touch of his wife's hand on his shoulder. "Your coffee is cold, sweetheart," Analyse said.

Evan looked up into the loving eyes of his beautiful bride. She too showed the haggard signs of too little sleep. The rancher rose from his chair, took her in his

arms and kissed her tenderly. In a voice husky with emotion, he said, "O'Brien called this morning... I told him we would accept the offer."

"I'm glad," Analyse sighed. "Worried, but glad. At least now we have made our decision."

"Let's hope it's the right one. I've got a month of haying in front of me so I'll just have to sideline this excursion and concentrate on the work at hand. Our cows will want to eat next winter and I hope I'm the one feeding them."

And though the experiment, excursion, or *adventure*, depending from who's point of view one chose to observe, remained foremost in the Tungstall family's conscience, they gradually progressed from a state of reserved apprehension to keen enthusiasm. What an enviable opportunity! A paid fifteen year holiday without taxing one's longevity.

End of July, 2005

Toward the end of a near perfect haying season, in which the weather had co-operated exceptionally, Tom O'Brien returned to the Tungstall ranch for a visit and stayed with the family for a week. He pitched in with the task of bale hauling and stacking. There were a few hundred square bales destined for the loft of the hip roof barn and the easterner considered it his good fortune to suffer the stiff and sore muscles of manual labour. The unpaid citified hired hand adapted to the ranch work with a whole hearted enthusiasm that caused Evan Tungstall to shake his head in disbelief. He said to his wife, "You'd swear the man was in his second childhood. If he wants to help put up hay for no wages, he'll be welcome around here every summer."

The short evenings between a late supper and early bedtime were passed in conversation predominantly geared toward the time phase experiment.

“What if we fail to meet the deadline?” Evan Tungstall asked.

“Don't let that happen,” O'Brien said, “and do not send someone in your place!

“Incidentally, Bill Spencer is in quarantine at this very moment. Doc's programming wizardry unearthed the perfect thirty day time slot for our project director to shift back to the year 1962. Bill has a relative back then whom we believe will help coordinate the Tungstall/Milto time shift. No doubt there will be an enormous amount of collaboration required. We must ensure a seamless transition for you people to move to the ranch at Stockton after the first half of the dimension shift has transpired.”

The Tungstall's grew quite fond of O'Brien. His tales of world travel, a welcome diversion from the consuming time program topic, enthralled the western family. It seemed Tom had been everywhere and he had contributed much to his country as a negotiator, liaison, member of the United Nations Council and, of course, Ambassador to the United States.

The witty, charismatic diplomat had lived a bachelor's life and Analyse Tungstall thought this very peculiar. At the risk of being intrusive she asked, “You've never had a wife?”

Tom said, “Well, I never married, that is true... I was very much in love once... back in my younger days.”

He offered no further explanation.

Evan Tungstall wondered, but did not ask, how the man came to be involved in the Shiva project, for the illustrious career of Tom O'Brien shared little in common with the confined laboratory existence of his white-coated colleagues.

One evening during his visit Tom had gone for a stroll and returned to the ranch house, his face beaming with excitement. "I've found the perfect location for my retirement home!" He went on to describe the spot chosen, quite unmindful of the fact the 'perfect location' was on land belonging to his hosts.

When Tom took his leave, the Tungstalls gathered in the driveway very close to the spot where, just a few weeks earlier, the rancher was first introduced to the federal man. It was a sad parting and the family remained in place as Tom's rented car disappeared down the lane and the sound of tires on gravel diminished to be replaced by the more distant smooth acceleration of the vehicle on the main road.

"What a remarkable individual he is," Analyse said.

"Sometimes he seems... so lonely," Toni said, "I mean, he never had a wife or kids of his own. He has millions of friends but no family. What does he do for Christmas?"

Evan said, "There is something more to Tom O'Brien than meets the eye.

"I have to check on the silos and park haying equipment in the shed. After that, what say we all go for a ride?"

"Oh, yes!" Toni cried, "I'll go catch Clover and bring in your horses right now." She dashed off toward the corrals.

Analyse laughed, watching her retreating daughter, auburn hair streaming behind her. "It appears I am volunteered too."

Summer flew by at the Tungstall ranch where cattle and horses thrived on the lush grass, growing all the more green for the frequent rain showers which seemed to call

by night and vanish by morning; their nocturnal visitations permitted the brilliant sunshine of each new day an unobstructed view of dew drenched foothills.

In a similar fashion, excitement allayed angst among the Tungstalls as the clouds of apprehension and fear that gathered in darkness were driven to light's most remote recesses when dawn's first rays ushered in tomorrow. Father, mother and daughter frequently discussed the opportunity in private, being careful to avoid the topic if a neighbour or other company should visit the ranch. The trio had reviewed the data left with them by Tom O'Brien on his first visit. However, that documentation, so vague and purposely misleading to distract an unauthorized observer, failed to provide sufficient usable information for the family.

The history book he had also left behind encouraged Toni's growing enthusiasm. The teenager enjoyed poring over the information, particularly that era between 1960 and 1980, in an effort to glean some understanding of the population she would soon be living among. Curiously, she had not found any mention of a Milto family, but the volume was huge, iterating the life and times of hundreds of prairie folk.

One evening while Evan was relaxing in his chair, flipping through the pages of a car magazine, he paused a moment, flipped back a page, and turned to his wife. His eyes sparkled like a kid under a Christmas tree.

"In mid 1968, Ford introduced the GT500KR Shelby Mustang; the famous 68 ½ Shelby with a 428 cobra-jet engine; the hottest machine of the decade."

Analyse smiled, "That's rather old news, Evan."

"I know Dear, but... when we go back in history, we can buy a brand new, out-of-the-factory Shelby, and they only cost four thousand dollars!"

September, 2005

A few days after the Labour Day weekend, when Toni returned to the tedium of school and the daily monotony of the bus ride, Tom O'Brien called from Ottawa to request another visit to the ranch. He hoped that Bill Spencer might be permitted to share in the Tungstall's western hospitality. Analyse, who had answered the ring, assured the former ambassador both he and his associate would be welcome. Upon hearing Tom's calculated time of arrival, Mrs. Tungstall said, "I'll have a late supper set for you tomorrow evening and we'll have 'your' room and one for Bill ready." Though Tom O'Brien had planned to stay in a motel and travel to the ranch by rental car the morning after arriving out west, he knew better than to refuse the invitation.

All three Tungstalls were there to greet the easterners when they arrived. Immediately, Bill Spencer was inundated with a salvo of questions regarding his 'recent' trip to Stockton, 1962. Analyse called a halt to the inquisition insisting that the guests be 'fed, watered and given a chance to wind down' after their long journey.

After supper the group moved outdoors and took up seats on the raised, split-log veranda that ran the length of the ranch house. The easterners were speechless as they watched the last rays of sun vanish in the inevitably darkening shades of colour above the distant peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Darkness rolled down the eastern slopes, paused briefly in the foothills, then swept away across the plains. Evan Tungstall switched on several lights embedded in the floor of the deck and turned thoughtfully to Spencer who was lighting a rather large Cuban cigar.

"Bill, this ranch at Stockton....does it have electricity?"

The project director blew out a blue cloud of smoke and sighed contentedly as he placed the dead match in an ashtray Toni had given him. "I don't smoke often," he said, "in fact the cigar ritual is something I resumed only recently... in 1962, and after a fine meal like that, Mrs. Tungstall, I would be remiss to let the opportunity pass.

"Yes, Evan, the ranch house is quite modern, given the era: Running hot and cold water, electricity, central heat from a stove oil furnace. It could use a paint job on the exterior as could all the outbuildings and, no doubt, you'll will want to redecorate inside. Of course, there isn't a dishwasher or microwave oven in the kitchen. There is a bunkhouse complete with a Norwegian chap who apparently goes with the ranch. He has been a hired hand there for ages."

He studied the red glow of the Cuban, savouring the cigar and the expectant faces of his companions.

Tom O'Brien urged, "Well, come on, let's have the story."

Spencer took another long draught, exhaled and said, "Okay, I'll start at the beginning..."

April, 1962

Turns out, the sixty day quarantine didn't seem that long for me as I had communication with Doc and Otto and my work continued from inside the lab, much the same as though I were on the other side of the plate glass. The departure date arrived and at the appointed time I locked myself in a shift module. After several anxious moments I felt an energy buzz... Next instant I found myself in a musty, dingy little garage. By the light in the window, I guessed the time to be late evening or early morning; Doc neglected to mention that when he told me my time and co-ordinates for departure so I only knew it to be the first of April, 1962: April Fool's Day.

Great Uncle Charles must have been alerted by the commotion when I lost my balance and knocked over a wheel barrow loaded with garden tools on my reappearing... equilibrium suffers a momentary lapse during the shift. He stormed into the shed cussing a streak directed at the neighbour and his cat. He wore a two-piece suit that looked new, but it was either just coming into style or was decades out. When I saw his striped tie with a shiny jewelled clip holding it in place, I knew that I had landed back in time somewhere. He appeared a healthy fortyish, though I knew him to be into his fifties. Well, I hadn't rehearsed for this meeting. I just blurted, "Hello, Great Uncle Charles!"

I thought his eyes would pop completely out of their sockets, but he's a politician, so he couldn't be stuck for words very long.

"Great Uncle Charles? Try my Aunt Fanny! Who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing in my shop wearing those... those tights?" he sputtered.

Well, it turned out the time of day was 7 AM and Uncle Charles had been about to leave for his office though it was a Sunday. He's an MP—he even had a portfolio—Minister of Transport. I convinced him that I wasn't a cat burglar with a penchant for garden tools and he allowed me into his home where he led a bachelor's life. Eventually, I managed to beg an out of date shirt, jacket and dress pants from Uncle Charles. I couldn't really complain, as all his apparel was nearing fifty years behind times anyway. The suit fit me rather well.

I heard my uncle telephoning someone from a den off the living room to cancel an appointment. When he came back into the room where I was admiring myself in the new clothes, he still appeared sceptical, but his eyes held a glint of amusement, maybe curiosity. Either way, I felt that he wouldn't bring down the police department for the time being.

He sized me up and said something about the clothes being a good fit. Then we had a little chat that went something like this: He said, "Correct me if I am wrong: Though you appear ten years my senior you are my great nephew, the —what is he, twelve?— twelve year old son of my nephew, Dave Spencer and his wife, Brenda? And you have come here to my work shop in Ottawa, today, April 1, 1962, from Ottawa, in the year 2005?"

"Sorry for looking ten years older than you. We are about the same age at the moment; must be a trait on my mother's side of the family."

Then I went on to tell him that I actually came from Kanata, which, in 2005, has become a part of Ottawa. As an incidental I said that metropolitan Toronto now, or perhaps then, depending on how you look at it, has a population of nearly six million and Canada has more than 33 million citizens within her borders.

But Uncle Charles wasn't buying that malarkey. He grunted and said, "Those figures could have come out of a hat and you know it. Tell me something imminent so I don't have to wait forty years for proof."

I think Uncle Charles wanted to believe me but he needed more convincing; a lot more convincing.

So I said, "In three week's time, April 22 to be exact, Dick Duff will score the game and Stanley Cup winning goal for Toronto over Chicago, game six. You can bet on it." As expected, the word bet grabbed his attention. "This afternoon at the Atlantic Rural Fairground, Richmond, Virginia, the tenth race of the Grand National is being run. Rex White will win, driving his '61 Chevrolet. The race, intended to be 250 laps will be cut to 180, due to darkness. You can check that out on the late news this evening. And, I have brought with me a few results for Woodbine this afternoon..."

It was paramount that I shouldn't relate any specific news items, other than the sports scores, that might allow my uncle to alter history, however unintentionally; for example, the overdose of Marilyn Monroe, in August of that year, Diefenbaker's impending election defeat, Kennedy assassinations and so on up to the present. Human nature is difficult to restrain, regardless of will power.

My stomach started to growl, so I cajoled my uncle into feeding me something solid to eat. I had just spent sixty days living on a squeeze-from-a-tube menu so you can imagine my overpowering desire for real food.

The indelible ink scribbblings on the inside of my synthetic suit were still reasonably legible. We copied them onto small pieces of note paper and drove Great Uncle Charlie's—he told me to call him Charlie, for now we were becoming close pals, especially with him anticipating the betting action—so we drove Great Uncle Charlie's three year old Thunderbird down to Toronto for the day. The drive in that T-bird was a real treat for me; I bought it from Uncle Charles when I first passed my driver's test and I still have the car today.

Turns out, my horse race information proved to be accurate, though we started tentatively... especially me; I had no money at all. Soon, Charlie warmed up to the betting and he aced a win, place and show combination. He was as excited as a school kid at the fair and insisted on buying us some cigars. They were good ones and the habit still has me hooked forty-three years—or two weeks—later. We were careful to avoid attracting undue attention and didn't break the house, but we walked away with a lot of cash and my Great Uncle was completely and totally convinced of my authenticity. Not far into the winning streak he found a public phone and called a 'friend' in Las Vegas who placed some coin on the Grand

National race I had mentioned; turns out, he pocketed some really big dollars, by 1962 standards, from that action.

Well, we had a night on the town and stayed in Toronto celebrating our 'day at the races'. Uncle Charlie called his office next morning to cancel his schedule for that day too and we eventually arrived back at his place late in the evening. I took time to buy clothes and personal effects with my winnings, after reimbursing my benefactor for the initial loan. I certainly was pleasantly surprised by the prices in those times!

I'll never forget that first morning waking up in the hotel room in Toronto. I looked over at Great Uncle Charlie sitting bolt upright in his bed. He was rubbing his eyes with both fists, periodically stopping to stare at me with the oddest mask of disbelief I have ever seen. Finally he blurted, "So it must be true, because you're still here!"

During breakfast at the hotel I proceeded to tell him the reason for my visit. It seemed a tall order from my perspective, but he didn't appear to think so. He offered to pull a few strings and call in several marks to promote the sale of Stockton ranch, delaying the Federal Government take over for fifteen years. He assured me it would take some time but felt comfortable that it could be done.

By the end of my third week, everything was ready; I acted as Robert Milto's lawyer and the deeds are in Great Uncle Charlie's safe, at his home in Ottawa in 1962. Possession date is December 15 of that year.

It seems there were government loans available for certain, special projects and that included the purchase of the Stockton Ranch and a healthy sum for operating capital as well. Though Canada was in a trough,

economically, in 1962, we really weren't talking about a significant impact on the national debt. Land and cattle were very cheap in those days.

So we bought the place, lock, stock and barrel. I mean stock too, for the cattle, about 300 head, came with it. The place will handle triple that number but Robert Milto is required to start up a purebred operation with an extensive artificial insemination program in conjunction with the University of Guelph and the Federal Government. That is the angle my Great Uncle used to make it happen.

I'm getting ahead of myself though. The third day, Uncle Charlie took me to the Parliament Buildings, which really weren't a great deal different from today, but I saw Prime Minister Diefenbaker! That was eerie, watching someone who you know to have been dead for twenty five years. But after the initial shock, I got over it and quite enjoyed the day. Then my uncle arranged a venture west for him and me plus two other gentlemen: one from the Federal Department of Agriculture and the other from the Veterinary Medicine college at Guelph University. We had a wonderful trip; of course Uncle Charlie and I kept quiet about my being a time transplant. He, that is, Uncle Charlie, won a few dollars from the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine by betting on the Phillies the day of the season opener. Frankly, I think he also called Las Vegas to place bets on the outcome of those games too.

But you know, he never asked me any questions other than the sports information. I had explained the danger of knowing too much about the future, and he let it go at that. One evening I did tell him we had met at my mother's place, she is his niece, for Christmas dinner 2004, and he was delighted to have that tidbit. I told him he looked remarkably well for a ninety year old.

And, we visited the Stockton Ranch. The owner took us on an interesting tour. It is wonderful country, not as much greenery, especially in April, and perhaps not as scenic as the foothills, but it will grow on a person. The Miltons will enjoy living there, I am certain.

The actual purchase of the ranch from the retiring couple took several days of negotiating. In the meantime, we easterners bunked in at the sixty year old Stockton Hotel. There were plenty of cowboys in that era and area; my room was situated right over the bar and two out of the three nights a fist fight broke out below me.

Too soon our entourage returned to the Capital and my companions turned to their respective duties. Great Uncle Charlie had pressing matters to attend to as he had taxed his staff quite heavily by taking the impromptu trip west. So, while he spent the next few days in Parliament, I wandered about the city. Ottawa was much smaller and less hurried than today and I strolled the quiet streets and avenues with renewed interest. One thing that really made me stop and stare was the fantastic display of 'new' old cars. People must have thought me an auto thief or similar, for I often caught myself gazing in total amazement at a show-room pristine vintage vehicle. One evening I told Uncle Charlie; he always met up with me somewhere after his workday. I said to him, "Ford is designing a car called the Mustang to be released in April 1964. I strongly advise you to buy one, clean out the garden shed and park the car in there for thirty years!"

Well, it turns out, the day we locked the deeds away in Great Uncle Charlie's safe was also game six of the Stanley Cup playoffs; you may have deduced that my uncle was, —in fact, still is— an avid sports fan so the NHL finals were a priority for him. He chided me for not remembering more statistics in the series but he made bets with everyone who would oblige him on the outcome of that game, including the chap down in Las Vegas, who

must have been growing suspicious of Charlie's luck. He cleaned up; I don't know what odds he had in Vegas but I'm sure he made his retirement money right then. So, we celebrated... again.

There were plenty of loose ends left to bring together and we worked on those when Great Uncle Charlie could pry himself away from the office and parliament. It was necessary to procure proper identification for the Milto family and make arrangements for my uncle to receive the next time travellers. We even bought clothes; turns out, Uncle Charles has a lady friend who did the shopping for the ladies. There is ample cash deposited in Robert Milto's bank account in Ottawa, and it is transferable to the bank in Stockton. I think the transition will go off without a glitch.

When the time came to enter into the collapsing energy field, Great Uncle Charles followed me to his garden shed to witness my disappearing act. We had a few minutes to say our farewells and then I positioned myself in the exact spot of my materialization thirty days previous; we had moved the wheel barrow. He stood back a safe distance near the doorway. "I'll see you at Mother's for Christmas dinner, 2005, Charlie." Then, just as I felt the first faint tingles of Cosmic energy, I said, "Next Saturday; the Kentucky Derby; Bill Hartack will ride a horse named Decidedly; bet on him to win!"

September, 2005

"Great Uncle Charles has the exact timing and coordinates of your arrival and will be on hand to greet you and supply the materials I've mentioned.

Analyse asked, "Where do we appear? In the garden shed?"

"No," Spencer laughed, "Doc found a more suitable location for your arrival; a nice hotel room in downtown Montreal."

“For the triple phase procedure there can be absolutely no extra baggage so-to-speak. As a precautionary measure we have designed the synthetic transport suits, or *leotards* as Uncle Charles called them, to isolate, or more accurately, *contain* the prospective transport individual's sub-atomic make-up.

“Evan, we want you to participate in another experiment while you are at Stockton ranch.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“We want to experiment with a data transfer across the dimension. While I was at Uncle Charles's place, Doc was able to send a bare-bones, no metal, laptop computer through one of the TDSM's. You can imagine it caused quite a stir when Charlie found it in his basement. I tried it out and the thing actually worked; it even had an instant message. So now we would like to send another laptop to the ranch and have you establish a telephone link from Stockton to Ottawa. Turns out, Larry thinks he can loop from Kanata 2005 to Ottawa 1960's with a wireless connection. Of course that won't work to Stockton and that is why we need the telephone link.

Tom said, “Larry told me he would fill you in during your quarantine, Evan.”

A stifled yawn from Spencer prompted Analyse's suggestion that the guests might be ready to turn in for the night as the long day of travel plus the western time difference would have the gentlemen missing their regular bed time. The discussion adjourned until the following evening, when Bill Spencer again resumed his narrative. The scientist recited more anecdotes from his 'historic' journey and held his audience's rapt attention while enjoying another large Cuban cigar.

October, 2005

At the rancher's request, Tom O'Brien arranged for a competent federal pasture grazing manager and his wife to handle the Tungstall's cattle operations during the family's sixty day absence for quarantine. The congenial couple were past middle age, their children grown and moved away from home. Evan Tungstall took an instant liking to the weather-worn cowman who soon demonstrated proprietary proficiency about the ranch. He assured Tungstall in a voice raspy from years of roll-your-owns, "I'll bring in an extra hand once in awhile if I need one. Don't you worry at all, Mr. Tungstall, Emily and I will keep your home and livestock in top shape."

Later, Tungstall felt even more grateful for that assurance as the days dragged by in the confinement of the quarantine quarters. Initially, living space appeared quite adequate as more than half of the C R Labs building had been dedicated to time transfer tenants' ease, comfort and entertainment. However, for people as accustomed to the outdoors as the Tungstalls, no enclosure could satisfactorily suffice for a solid two months. The structure housed a living area complete with kitchenette, entertainment centre, two bedrooms, a bathroom and a capacious gymnasium/recreation area combined. All the rooms, every piece in each room and every component of every item down to the basic molecular structure were as ultra sterile as scalded stainless steel. The only outside item the family had been allowed to retain upon entering the chamber had been the Stockton history book which Toni Tungstall begged to have with her. Otto Kronburger had purified the volume during the two tedious days the Tungstall family had existed in the decontamination zone. The forty eight hour marathon became an exercise in humiliation for the trio; when they emerged into their new temporary home, a refreshing wave of relief engulfed them. Analyse proved the most capable of maintaining

her composure throughout the ignominious ordeal, feeling that it was her duty to hold the family together while her husband's patience suffered inexorably and Toni alternated between weariness, boredom and homesickness.

So transpired the first forty-eight hours.

Though the synthetic garments issued for quarantine life were as luxurious as the finest silk, the rancher longed for blue jeans, a regular shirt you could snap button and roll up the sleeves on, and a comfortable pair of shit-kickers on his feet. He felt both naked and embarrassed with the 'get up' from the lab and the little sock-like slippers were a bane to all; soon the family simply went barefoot in their immaculate environment.

"Purified air, purified, distilled water, purified food from tubes —astronaut fare— everything so pure it would make a fellow sick," Tungstall said.

That was near the end of the second week.

"The toilet tried to bite me," Toni complained to her mother one morning.

Evan, failing to enjoy a mug of 'purified' coffee, said, "Yeah, tell me about it! That toilet uses a small amount of liquid per flush to conserve the purified water. I don't know why, but the flushing unit seems to carry a grudge."

Analyse started to laugh and soon both females had the giggles. Tungstall's humour improved, too.

After that, the family seemed resigned to their fate and began to accept the restricted space. Like an extended stay in the hospital, at some point it starts to feel like a second home in spite of limitations.

Access to unlimited audio and video entertainment had been provided, with hundreds of satellite television channels, AM and FM radio stations, virtual books and finger tip selection of most movies ever recorded. Internet access and email supplied Toni with a medium to remain in contact with her friends and school work, though outgoing mail had to be double scanned for possible

unintentional information leaks before it could be sent. A private tutor, on-line, coordinated Toni's education with the secondary school facility back home. Each member of the family had their own computer position and long hours passed in front of those screens. Evan followed the commodity markets and world news while his thoughts were in the pastures fixing fence or working with the horses and cattle. He also took the opportunity to cram his brain full of statistics and history of the era and area to which the family were voyaging. Using Spencer's technique, Evan etched notes into the fabric of the transport suit he would wear at the the time of the dimension shift.

Analyse missed her garden, though the growing season had passed. The quarantine quarters required no housework; no dish washing, laundry, vacuuming or cooking. "A fellow can't even take the garbage out!" Evan lamented; all the 'purified' food containers were placed in airtight dispensers for disposal at the conclusion of the confinement.

Often, one or more of Tom O'Brien, Doc Doolittle, Bill Spencer or Otto Kronburger would come to the "visiting room of the condemned." The full length two way plate glass windows and intercom system were adequate to exchange pleasantries and information with the family. The former ambassador, especially, dedicated his time to maintaining the spirits of the captured and they never tired of his tales of world travel.

The gymnasium provided hours of activity and vigorous exercise to keep the trio physically fit and healthy.

Day sixty arrived.

On the morning of the long awaited event, all four of the time shift crew came to wish their friends a happy and successful adventure. Bill Spencer went over the procedure, it seemed to Toni, for the hundredth time.

“...The door to the laboratory will open in,” he checked his watch, “37 minutes. You will see the orange opal illuminate one minute before the panel automatically slides open. You must be wearing your individual synthetic form fitting suits... including the socks. Then, enter the lab in single file and do so quickly but safely as the opening seals itself in ten seconds. That's plenty of time, but you cannot hesitate either and you will be unable to return to quarantine quarters. Now, the next step is quite tedious as you must be scanned for possible impurities, excuse me for saying that, and treated with a fine mist, sort of like hair spray. It creates a protective capsule to contain your 'personal' energy fields. You will be in the laboratory almost two hours, a hundred and eighteen minutes to be exact.”

Otto Kronburger leaned over and spoke to Spencer, “Oh yes, good point, Otto; as you will be in the lab two hours and there are no facilities available, be sure to visit the washroom before leaving quarantine, definitely before the orange LED flashes on.”

“So... one hour and eighteen minutes from the time you enter the lab, a green opal will illuminate beside the digital counter situated above the one way glass wall. When that green opal comes on, go to your respective telephase dimension shift modules as we demonstrated on the TDSM prototype in our office and position yourselves. Do not enter that area before the green opal is lit. You have four minutes to mentally prepare for your journey. First thing you will feel is the Cosmic energy flow and then you will reappear in Montreal, December 15, 1962.”

Spencer took a moment to review his checklist, then he said, “If there are complications, a red alarm light will show and the quarantine quarters will be opened. We have a communication link to the lab to keep you updated. However, in the unlikely event of a communications failure, you are now prepared.”

The tension building up to the departure had been gradually increasing but grew exponentially upon hearing Spencer's final instructions. Adieus were exchanged and the scientific members returned to their stations while Tom O'Brien stayed to spend a few more precious moments with the Tungstalls. Again he said, "How I would love to be going with you."

Analyse smiled through her anxiety. "We'll send you a postcard."

Toni said, "And bring back the tee shirt."

Evan Tungstall simply waved a solemn salute.

In a husky tone, Tom O'Brien spoke through the microphone, "Happy Trails."

PART TWO

On a humid day the silver sage has an over-whelming redolence which can make such a strong impression as to seemingly become a part of the genetic make-up of local inhabitants.x In the Great Sandhills, sage grows abundantly in the draws, atop the grassy ridges and knolls, and on barren windswept hillsides, desperately trying to retain a root hold in the constantly drifting dunes. Its lingering scent imprints upon the minds and souls of the animals... human, domestic and wild. If ever fortune allows you to become captive of the silver sage, its delicious fragrance will be with you always...

CHAPTER 1

April 26, 1968

Milt Milto threaded her passage through the tall sage on a sandy ridge which marked a point where, to the south and west, lay miles and miles of virgin never-seen-a-plow prairie while to the north and east lay the rolling hills of checkerboard summerfallow and seeded acreage of the farmland. At sixteen, the pretty girl still enjoyed her tomboy freedom but could not hide her budding femininity. A ponytail of long auburn hair that would reach her slim waist when allowed to tumble free, bounced and bobbed with the rhythm of her horse's gait. Her christened name was Sherry but the nickname of Milt had been appended soon after the family's arrival in the district; even her parents referred to the teenager as Milt. The girl drew back gently on the braided split-leather reins and spoke softly to the big buckskin gelding. "Whiskey, there's something shiny over there along the trail... It looks like sun glinting on a mirror."

The seven year old gelding pricked his ears in the direction of the reflection but the girl didn't know if he actually saw the object or was merely responding to her voice. Milt gently dug her heels into the buckskin's flank and urged him up the slope to a higher vantage point. Although the bank grew steep, the horse took the incline at an easy stride. The rider took a firm hold on a handful of black mane as she clung like a burr to the bareback mount. From the crest of the higher elevation along the

ridge, Milt could see that the shining object in the distance was, in fact, a reflection of sunlight off the windshield of a vehicle.

Curiosity led the pair to a closer inspection.

As horse and rider moved out on the flat land extending away from the ridge, Milt again drew rein and studied the intrusion on her privacy. The vehicle she recognized as the '52 Chevrolet pickup that Benny Collins' father had given him for a runabout. The driver's side door hung open but there seemed to be no people in the truck. Across the quiet space between rider and vehicle the muffled sound of voices and a throaty giggle reached Milt's ears. The girl on the horse grinned suddenly. She quickly reined the buckskin along a route which led toward the pickup but concealed her approach with an intervening grove of aspen poplars.

Benny Collins had a lot in common with his father, Lou. The lad had a rather lengthy nose on a face that tapered down to a dimpled chin and a wide grin which opened up to a smile that made his head disappear. His unruly blond hair had the same cowlick that Lou's unruly grey hair possessed. If you filled in the plaster cracks and erosion of the original mould from which Lou Collins face was shaped, you would have young Benny looking back at you. Father and son were seldom apart since Benny's mother had passed away three days before the boy's fifth birthday. However, Benny had recently reached the youthful age of eighteen and today father definitely was not with the son.

The girl on the buckskin knew who supplied the giggling half of the conversation: Brenda Yeast. Brenda lived down the road about a mile and a half east of where Milt and her parents resided. She was a friendly girl, pretty, with shoulder length blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. At seventeen she had a figure to turn any young lad's head. She certainly turned Benny's head, so much so

that his dad wondered if the youngster was having dizzy spells. Milt halted the gelding again before stepping out from behind her aspen cover. She noticed Benny's beat up wide-brimmed western hat hanging on the single post mirror of the open truck door. Seeing this, the tomboy smiled mischievously and slipped softly off the sleek back of the buckskin. Ground hitching the horse, Milt eased silently through the grove and paused again at the far edge of the aspens. Grasping a six foot length of deadfall, Milt passed through the pony-high silverberry bush that skirted the edge of the little grove and noiselessly approached the front of the vehicle from the off side. When near enough, she quickly stretched the pole over the tapered hood of the truck, flicked the Stetson from the mirror and retrieved it on the end of the stick. Continued giggling from inside the cab told the thief she had not been detected. Milt gently tossed the stick aside and dashed back to her horse with the contraband clutched in her hand. Grabbing the reins and grasping a handful of mane, she vaulted astride the buckskin and made a circuitous route around the vehicle and the unsuspecting couple.

Horse and rider made their way down the ancient ruts of the prairie trail to a gate that Milt knew Benny would have to drive through on his return. She chuckled, noting that the young fellow had carelessly tossed the barbwire fence on the grass without taking time to pull it back properly before driving through the opening. "Benny must have been in a hurry," she mused as she jumped off the horse, drew open the downed gate and led the buckskin through. Using the broken lariat that served as latch, the girl expertly snugged up the rope and threw a half-hitch over the gate post. On top of this she hung the battered Stetson, then grasping a handful of the long black mane, swung swiftly astride her mount and rode away.

...We always figured the Sandhills would stay the same forever, but the past decade has brought some changes that aren't necessarily for the better. Much of the old pasture is messed up with gas wells and pipelines and there are roads running every which way. Maybe some day it will be back to the way it was when I was a lad, but I don't expect that in my lifetime...

Submitted by Ben Collins

CHAPTER 2

April 26, 1968

The deepened wheel tracks of the capricious prairie trail gave way to a maintained bi-way the locals called the Sandhill Road. Milto lifted the whiskey coloured horse into a brisk trot upon reaching this confluence. Here, the path varied from the prairie trail only in that it had the ruts removed; over the years of machine grading and wind erosion, high sand ridges paralleled its course instead of the ditches of standard maintained roads in the area. Generally, the first good snow storm served to nullify all travel along this route as the inevitable drifting snow filled in the trough between the sand banks, leaving the trail impassable until spring. On rare occasions, however, a particularly mild winter or a prolonged Chinook would keep the road open.

Whiskey cantered along easily, the dull thudding of his hooves muffled by the layer of loose sand that partitioned the sage and wild rose choked banks along the roadside from the hardpan of the travelled central portion. A border collie erupted from a deer trail intersecting the Sandhill Road, falling in step with the horse.

“Did you catch that old jack rabbit, Chase?” the girl asked as the trio trotted down the trail.

The mid-sized black and mostly white dog grinned back at his best friend as if he understood the question. Chase had become a very appropriate name for this energetic cow dog due to his propensity to pursue the fleet

and numerous jack rabbits of the area. The habit possessed the animal only during his leisure; when tending the livestock the four year old canine adhered strictly to the business at hand. The buckskin, the collie and the girl were the best of companions.

Topping the rise which supported an unobstructed view of the farming country, Milt slowed the gelding to a walk and studied the landscape. A mile northwest she could see a green tinge of new spring growth at her parents' ranch headquarters. Tall cotton poplars surrounded the farmyard and well kept buildings. A double row of prairie hardy caragannas created a wind break around the perimeter of the poplars, and the lane which stretched eastward from the yard for a quarter of a mile had tall and welcoming Manitoba maples down each side. In full leaf, these reached across the narrow path to form a tunnel-like canopy of green. Milt's mother referred to that portion as Lover's Lane.

Milt had moved here almost five and a half years previously when her father had acquired a large holding of deeded farmland and a substantial acreage of leased pasture. The normally friendly local people were reserved and a few were almost hostile when the Milto's moved in. This neighbourhood, and in fact all the neighbouring neighbourhoods, could not produce such obvious affluence in their agrarian world. Little was known of the new folk and though they soon demonstrated themselves excellent neighbours and, eventually, good friends, their history remained an unapproachable subject. Robert Milto proved to be an energetic and capable stockman; rumour held that he was well-connected with the Federal Government on issues of livestock production. Milto was particularly enthusiastic about urging his fellow stock growers to take advantage of the nascent artificial insemination program. The big rancher's purebred cattle herd was fast gaining acclaim throughout the industry in

western Canada and his neighbours, once suspicious and envious, had started to consider his opinions more critically.

Brenda Yeast's parents' farm lay sprawled north and east of where Milt now rode. The Yeasts were hard working folks, not at all embittered by small return for their labours. Leonard Yeast seemed to understand and enjoy the philosophy of life on a mixed farm. He personified the adage, "Next year country." Taking the numerous setbacks in stride, he always viewed the future from an optimistic angle. Milt's father said of Leonard Yeast that the fellow would live forever if stress was his only foe.

Straight east from Milt lay the Collins' ranch, their buildings not far from those of the Yeasts. The neighbours shared the same entrance trail for a mile before it forked to the individual spreads. Lou and Benny concentrated more on livestock than the farming end of their operation. Milt had visited the Collins' home many times with her father and noted how harmoniously Benny and his dad lived within their spartan and obviously bachelor style quarters. Mrs. Milto thought the place needed a woman's touch but Milt believed the father-son team to be doing quite well on their own.

Astride the gelding, Milt could see the white and green country school that she had attended during her first four years in the neighbourhood. During that tenure, the horse she now rode had been her chief means of transport. However, last spring marked the end of an era as Prairie Hills School, the last of the rural hold-outs, closed its doors for education. Milt's folks fought and won a bitter battle with the truant officer, school unit officials and the Department of Education as the rancher and his wife stolidly refused to have their daughter ride the school bus for a monotonous one and a half hours each morning and evening to travel the twenty-five miles to Stockton, the

nearest town. While the school board argued that the Milto headquarters were situated within the required maximum distance of the urban facility, Mr. Milto had vowed to move the family to a line shack outside the boundary if necessary. The Board of Education learned more than they would have otherwise imagined during the heated political scuffle and Milt quite enjoyed furthering her education via correspondence.

Several other farm yards were visible from the high knoll on which Milt rested her horse but activity nearer to hand interrupted her reverie. About a quarter of a mile up the trail the rider noted a familiar holly green '65 Ford pickup with tool storage box and side tanks; a reel of wire and two ladders perched on top of a steel rack mounted above the truck box. Belted in at the top of a telephone pole nearby was the owner of the vehicle. Milt urged Whiskey to a trot and jogged down the hill to meet Danny Reid, the telephone lineman for the rather large area served by Stockton telephone office.

The Rural Telephone Company of Stockton had placed an ad for a full time 'install and repair man' in 1965. Up until then the local board of directors, the patrons, and anybody who knew even a little about communication transmission, or more pointedly, building a barbed-wire fence, had pitched in to construct and maintain the local phone system. Danny Reid answered the request, fit the billing and was hired on the spot. The sturdy young lineman and his pretty wife, Val, had moved to the small town and settled in, easily adapting to their new surroundings. Val soon became employed as secretary for the local aluminium and glass merchant that supplied the district with automobile windshields and windows. The new couple had come from a large metropolis down east but since they didn't talk at length about their city life, the town's folk soon adopted them as their own.

“Hello Button!” Danny called from his perch as the teenager drew rein and slid the gelding to a stop beside the pickup. “Where did you find the old nag and that mangy mutt?”

“You looking for a 'bum wire' or a 'bad connection'?” Milt asked, ignoring the taunt from up the pole.

Danny grinned upon hearing the girl's question. A few weeks earlier the repairman had explained to Milt that the local farmers almost invariably offered their diagnosis of a faulty line as a “bad wire” or a “bum connection.” Or, “She must be short somewheres. Short somewheres b'cause she's plumb dead.”

“Maybe she's short somewheres,” Milt said.

“Well,” Danny said, “she was short but she's not short now.” He deftly unclipped the pole belt at his right side, passed the loose end around to his left and latched it in the 'D' ring on the body belt. Suddenly he kicked out both spurs and with two long jumps and a shower of splinters, the lineman slowly and deliberately took the last step cautiously on to solid ground.

“Show-off!” the girl accused from the back of her horse.

As the lineman unbuckled and tossed his climbing gear into the Ford's utility box, Milt asked whose phone was out of order.

Danny Reid looked at her and grinned. “Quite a few people were out of service on this loop.” Then he added, “The Milto family are the only folks with a private line in this area, you know.”

Milt looked away, slightly embarrassed by the statement. Well she knew of the difference money made in these depressed times. Danny changed the subject, saying, “They were playing my favourite song on the radio today.”

Milt smiled as she appraised the young telephone repairman. "Let me guess... It's Merle Haggard's 'The Legend Of Bonnie And Clyde!'"

Danny Reid said, "Nice try, but it's The First Edition's new hit, 'Just Dropped In To See What Condition My Condition Was In.'"

"Oh, I like that one! Mom and Dad sure do enjoy listening to these old... the songs that are coming out this year, too."

Danny said, "Yes, maybe someday they will all be classics."

"I suppose you've been plenty busy after that terrible wind storm on the weekend?" Milt asked.

"Yeah, there are still some folks up North who are without phones and power. I should be fixing their problems instead standing here jawing with a pretty little button astride a rack of bones."

"My 'rack of bones' will out run that green tin can you rattle around in!" Milt challenged.

The lineman chuckled at the show of fire. "Ah now, Button, relax, you know I think Old Whiskey is the best... especially if you throw in a little water."

Before the girl could retort he said, "Got to make a mile. You be a good girl and say, "Hi," to your folks for me."

As Danny opened the door of the line truck, Milt called to him "Don't work too hard, Mr. Reid, people can manage without phones for a few days." She levelled her gaze at the telephone company employee. "It isn't like they're connecting to Internet."

Danny Reid had travelled a few miles before the impact of the girl's parting statement dawned on him. He shook his head slowly as if trying to clear a foggy memory. "I must have misunderstood her. Did she say 'internet'?"

The lineman puzzled over Milt's words and reviewed their conversation; there had been another oddity in the girl's chatter, but Danny could not remember what it was. He shrugged it off as a sign of his being overextended with all the line work incurred from the storm. "I'll shut down a little earlier today," he promised himself.

The unusual circumstance of violent spring storms accompanied with vicious lightning strikes kept the young lineman very busy for the ensuing weeks. Lightning blasted poles, downed lines and smoked carbons in the arrestor equipment seemed to have occurred in every corner of Danny's district. As the load stacked higher, the repairman found himself "putting out fires," which meant quick fixes and temporary repairs with the intention of returning when time permitted.

The next time Danny Reid and Milt Milto crossed paths, they were both putting out fires.

...Nowadays, all the telephones are hooked up to underground cables but when we first started out, the lines were strung up on poles around the countryside. A fellow could find his way home in a bad ground drift or snowstorm by keeping an eye on them poles along the side of the road...

Submitted by Kent Miller

CHAPTER 3

May 8, 1968

A real bonus of correspondence education lay in the fact that a student was not required to adhere to a regular clock schedule for completing school work. Milt Milto always started her day at the same hour as the children attending the school in town but she usually had the day's work completed ahead of time and didn't have to endure the monotonous and trying bus ride.

On this day the young tomboy had finished her studies even earlier than usual and was enjoying the freedom of a brisk ride on her buckskin. The black and white border collie raced along with horse and rider. As Milt topped the rise which opened out on to the farmland east of the Milto headquarters, her quick eyes detected a plume of smoke billowing up in the vicinity of Pete Liscombe's buildings. Fire on the prairies is never taken lightly and the girl instantly goaded the gelding to a full gallop and fairly flew down the road toward the bachelor's yard. Whiskey's long legs ate up the sandy trail, while Chase's shorter legs were a blur. The cow dog barely managed to keep pace as the trio raced toward the scene. Milt had opted to use a saddle today and now she clung tightly to the horn as she leaned forward, cutting the wind resistance, and urged the horse to greater speed. Sensing the anxious urgency in the young girl's voice the buckskin

delivered a heroic burst of energy and they swept into the yard sliding to a halt with the horse rearing up in a whirlwind of dust.

The east end of Pete's barn flamed a wicked bright orange and clouds of thick grey smoke belched from the partially open door in the loft. Dropping the reins, Milt swung from the saddle, calling for Mr. Liscombe. No answer came and the girl sprinted into the small one story farm-house, located the telephone and yanked the receiver from its hook. Giving the crank on the magneto set a hefty twist she tried to calm her pounding heart. Vera Mitchell, the exchange operator, responded to the call.

"Pete Liscombe's barn is on fire!" Milt reported in a breathless rush.

The operator repeated the statement before saying, "I'll put through a general right now."

One of the benefits of the open wire and rural telephone exchanges was the ability for the local operator to seize all lines and supply an extended ring that reached every household having a telephone. Vera Mitchell placed the 'general' and waited briefly as many phones went off-hook in response to the "emergency" summons. In a coolly professional voice, she announced that a fire was out of control at the Pete Liscombe residence. Milt did not stay on the line to hear the message. The long ring of the general faded from her ears as she raced out to the fire.

Assessing the situation, Milt noticed a pen attached to the barn surrounding a litter of half-grown pigs who were squealing with fright as they crowded each other in an attempt to escape the heat, smoke and roar of the fire. The young girl searched for a gate and realized with horror that the only opening in the fence was almost engulfed with flames. Milt dashed over to her horse who had strayed away from the blaze and stood tossing his head, shaking the reins in nervous fear. The girl tried to suppress her own anxiety, talking soothingly to the frightened creature.

She climbed into the saddle and urged the reluctant horse toward the flaming barn. Milt uncoiled the lariat that was tied to her saddle and though she did not consider herself a roper, managed to dab a loop on the weathered corner post of the pig pen. With a quick dally around the horn she slapped heels to the gelding. Pointed in a direction away from the fire, Whiskey had keen interest in moving that way. The big horse rose on hind legs and plunged forward. Slack in the rope was taken up at the optimum second. As the front feet of the buckskin struck earth and powerful hind quarters delivered more thrust, the corner post snapped like a picket. Two posts adjacent broke as well and the buckskin hauled fifty feet of page wire away from the barn.

Though an escape route had now been provided, the young porkers were too confused and afraid to leave the enclosure which had always been their home. Milt whistled for Chase and the obedient cow dog darted in among the pigs.

“Lift 'em, Chase. Lift 'em outta there!” With the collie snapping at their haunches, the squealing weaners burst through the opening and raced away as though scalded with hot bacon grease.

As the noise of the frightened pigs diminished Milt detected another bawling of anguish above the roar of the hungry flames. The sound seemed to originate from within the burning structure. The girl hadn't considered that any livestock would be in the barn as most farmers kept their animals outdoors during the milder weather. The flames as yet consumed only the east end of the building and Milt believed she could enter from the west side hoping to free the trapped creature that puled pitifully from inside. When she opened the main door of the barn the smoke almost choked her and the heat seared her face. Fortunately, the fresh air swept in around her and, though it fed the roaring flame at the far end of the barn, the

breeze served to clear the air near by. Immediately, Milt spotted a small, Hereford-Jersey crossbred calf staring wild eyed and blatting plaintively through the bars of a nearby pen. The girl ran forward, snapped up the latch and yanked the door of the box stall penning the frightened calf and tried to haze the little animal out. The terror stricken creature would not be pushed, pulled or dragged from its pen. Milt recalled her father's statement about obdurate and foolish people: "Dumber than a pail fed calf." She knew how well that anecdote applied now. With the smoke building again and the heat growing dangerously intense, Milt could not wrestle any longer with the little waif. Abandoning the box stall, she quickly scanned the barn for other occupants. Seeing nothing alive, Milt picked up what she could. She grabbed Pete Liscombe's aged Association saddle, blanket and a hackamore from the saddle rest, collected a pitch fork and lugged the equipment toward the open doorway. As she struggled toward the exit trying to salvage anything she could, Milt jabbed the long wooden shaft of the fork through the wire hooped handle of a milk bucket which happened to be standing in the barn's alleyway. The stricken calf saw the moving pail and immediately ran after the fleeing girl. Coughing and gasping, Milt lunged out of the barn and dragged the treasures to safety. The diminutive cross breed dogged her heels trying to shove its head in the pail.

"You're even dumber than a pail fed calf!" Milt scolded the little animal when she regained her breath.

Shouts from the other end of the building alerted her that help had arrived. Robert Milto and his hired man were the second people on the scene. Danny Reid soon arrived, still wringing his hands in pain as he had been testing a line when the exchange operator delivered the high AC voltage for the 'general' call. Milt glanced down

the road leading into Pete Liscombe's yard and noticed the dust rising into the sky from the steady stream of traffic racing to the fire.

Milt's clothes were covered with dirty black streaks and her face fairly glowed a bright red from the heat and exertion.

"Are you all right?" Robert Milto asked.

Milt nodded, "I don't know where Mr. Liscombe is though! I called for him but he didn't answer."

As nothing could be done to save the barn which had rapidly become totally engulfed with the roaring flames, a crowd gathered near the young girl who seemed to have the most information about the blaze.

Danny Reid stepped closer to father and daughter. He said, "I saw Pete heading down the road with a stock rack on his truck earlier this morning. He is probably off to the auction with some pigs or a couple of cows."

An audible sigh of relief arose from the onlookers upon hearing this good news.

Mr. Milto addressed the group, "There isn't much we can do for the barn but we best make sure the fire doesn't spread to the other buildings."

"What about livestock? Was there any critters in the barn?" Lou Collins asked.

"Whiskey and I tore down the pig fence, so there will be some hogs on the loose around here somewhere, and there was a little calf in the barn, but he escaped."

"Probably Pete's Jersey milk cow's calf... but, how did the calf break out of there?" Ben Collins asked.

The neighbours listened with a suitable mix of humour and approval as the brave girl related the story of rescuing the baby bovine.

Lou Collins said. "Ol' Pete ought to give you a medal for saving that Association saddle of his. That danged ol' piece of leather has been up and down this country for sixty years and Pete treated it better than his kin."

The old barn collapsed inward, the flaming walls and roof sagged under weakened supports as beams, rafters and studs were eaten up by the blaze. A blistering cloud of sparks and debris mushroomed skyward as the weather battered structure lent itself to cremation. With shovels, pitchforks and wet gunny sacks that had been dipped in the stock watering trough, the fire fighters hurried about the yard beating out the dozens of little flames which sprang up where flaming debris alit. In a short time the entire building had been consumed, leaving a smouldering pile of ashes and rubble. As the fire diminished, so did the fire fighters. Only a handful were on site when Pete Liscombe came driving up the lane in his pickup, a home-built wooden stock rack loaded on the back. The leathern features of the old stockman allowed little emotion as he surveyed the ruins and talked with his neighbours. When Lou Collins related the story about the calf and Milt saving the saddle, Pete's face broke into a wide grin.

He gave a gentle tug on Milt's ponytail and said, "When you folks came here, I couldn't decide what to think. You seemed to have so much and the rest of us was all dirt poor. A man can make a hell of a mistake judging others by what they have and not by what they do. I reckon you're made of the same stuff as the rest of us." He placed his long bony arm around Milt's shoulders and drew her close to his side with a little hug and said in a husky voice, "An' I especially want to thank you, little girl, for savin' my saddle."

The next day, Robert Milto brought a tractor with a front-end loader to push the rubble into a heap. Together he and Pete Liscombe loaded the remains of the barn on Pete's old two-ton grain truck and hauled the loads to the municipal landfill. Pete insisted it would be all right just to dump the garbage in a deep draw he had on his property, but the younger man advised that such an idea, though seemingly perfectly normal today, may not appear so prudent in the eyes of the next generation.

Old Pete shook his head in amusement. "You are the doggonedest guy for lookin' down the road. Sometimes I think you can see into the future. An' I'll have to agree with you too; we don't need no junk pile on ever' quarter section in the country."

The grizzled old cowman's tone changed, "Bob, do you think I ought to build a new barn?"

Robert Milto was a tall, solid built man. His dark hair and keen grey eyes set off the chiselled features of his handsome face. The prosperous cattleman now leaned on the shovel he had been using to scoop up refuse the tractor loader had missed, and gazed at his neighbour in surprise. Though he knew Pete had been among the first to accept his family in the district, it shocked the newcomer to be asked advice by a man thirty-five years his senior. "Well, Pete," he began slowly, "that depends on what your plans are. You could go on raising cattle and farming here for a long time yet, and if you keep cows, you'll be needing a barn for calving and that sort of thing."

Pete Liscombe interrupted, his faded blue eyes peering intensely into the honest greys of his neighbour. "But do you think I'll be needing a barn?" he asked as if Robert Milto knew the answer.

Milto never skirted or evaded an issue in his life and he didn't hedge now. "You know, seventy-five years old isn't exactly the proper age for starting over, Pete. Maybe

you should consider taking up a house in town. You'll have plenty to live on with the proceeds from a sale of your property, livestock and equipment."

Pete Liscombe grinned. "Well, you're honest, Bob. You could have been more definite but you've told me more than you think."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're telling me, Pete."

"It was something I saw yesterday when you folks was up here fighting fire. After everybody finished talking and started to head home, I fetched that buckskin gelding for your girl. He had wandered off by that row of caragannas over there." Robert Milto nodded as his gaze followed the out-stretched arm and crooked, pointing finger. Pete continued, "The rope was still trailing behind the horse from when Milt had pulled that there corner post. I coiled up the lariat and tied it to her saddle and when I done that I seen that one of the saddle bags was tore part way open and was scarred pretty good from that rope."

The old man paused as this was the most he'd talked for a long time. At Robert Milto's urging he continued. "I seen, through the tore part of that saddle bag, a real nice book; it was bound in leather and lettered in gold. Now, I couldn't read my own name without my spectacles if the print was held up close, but I could read it if it were a few feet away. Bob, I saw some of the writing on that book's cover."

Realization and a slight hint of panic may have flared in the younger man's eyes. Pete Liscombe said, "Your secret is safe with me, Bob. I am confounded if I can grasp it all, but I won't ask any questions and I sure as hell won't tell anybody else." He chuckled at the thought. "Most everybody figgers I'm crazy as it is!"

“...Though neighbours insisted on a barn raising bee, Pete Liscombe never rebuilt his barn. His health took a turn for the worse and he passed away less than a year after the fire.”

Submitted by Leonard Yeast

CHAPTER 4

May 14, 1968

Increasing vehicular traffic in the area offered the first signs that construction had begun.

After many years of lobbying by the folks who lived on the southern side, the provincial and federal governments begrudgingly coughed up sufficient funding to build a bridge spanning the broad and deceptively swift Western River. Dubbed “The Western River Bridge Project,” an extravagance of four-by-eight foot, conspicuous billboards along the highway broadcast the joint effort and included propaganda for the political parties involved. An estimated two years with one hundred and fifty labourers would be required to complete the mammoth construction. The sudden influx of a hoard of workers, many of whom brought their wives and children, delivered considerable impact to the normally quiet district. Mobile homes by the score came to park in the riverside camping area near the site. Housing in neighbouring towns became impossible to find; the few travellers and peddlers normally passing through the area were unable to obtain accommodation in the local hotels. Urban economy enjoyed a definite upswing while rural folk were embittered by the intrusion.

Except for local spring run off in April, followed by the June flood from the arrival of Rocky Mountain break-up, the Western flowed at a moderate level, which in dry years could be reduced to a mere stream. Steamships had

navigated this river system before the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway. People who lived anywhere along the Western's great length seldom referred to the watercourse by its geographical moniker. Because it is the only water of any significance for a very long distance, locals simply referred to the stream as 'The River'.

On the occasional 'flats' adjacent to the water, irrigation projects facilitated the production of alfalfa. However, the great majority of the rugged terrain along the south border of the Western had been fenced for cattle grazing as the imposing 'River Hills' were far too steep to permit cultivation.

Although the Milto's lived more than ten miles away from the route which led to the "Western River Bridge Project," traffic in their vicinity also increased noticeably. The bulk of the vehicles appearing in the neighbourhood had a definite destination: Leonard Yeast's farm yard. Leonard's pretty daughter had caught the attention of the young men who toiled on the bridge, and though the lads worked hard on the project, they always had reserve energy for playtime at the end of the shift. Brenda Yeast enjoyed the energy and loved the attention. Robert Milto commented that the dust never settled on his neighbour's road.

However, not all of the traffic went to Leonard Yeast's farm. Many passers-by were simply out for a drive in their leisure time. They enjoyed touring down the numerous back roads and trails interconnecting the widespread agricultural community. Before construction, "foreign" vehicles had been very rare in the area, now the rural residents were inundated with strangers and sightseers.

As Milt trotted her horse home along the sand road one evening, an unfamiliar automobile topped a rise and bore down the narrow trail toward the young girl. With no room to avoid the vehicle, Milt hauled on the reins and

dug in her heels in an effort to make Whiskey leap the steep bank bordering the trail. The big gelding quickly responded with a huge lunge that placed both horse and rider atop the ridge. Unfortunately, Milt did not have time to snatch a firm grip on the long, black mane of her bare-back mount. She slid off and tumbled into the sand, barking her head on a stout sage brush. The horse had barely cleared the bank when the truck whizzed by, swerving and skidding in the soft sand. As soon as the vehicle braked to a stop, two young men leaped from the cab and ran to the assistance of the girl now sitting up dazedly, half hidden in the sage brush. Her face had a few scratches and her nose dripped blood. She gently massaged a sore spot on her forehead that already promised to be a goose egg.

“Are you OK?” the driver asked anxiously. The stranger offered a hand to help Milt to her feet, but as he reached for the injured girl, a snarling, white and black streak of fury leaped over the sage, viciously clamping its teeth into the offending hand. Before the man could shake free, or even cry out in pain, the dog had released its grip and turned on the second intruder. “Chase!” Milt screamed as the angry collie drove the fellows back to their vehicle. Gaping holes in pants and blood stains appeared on the calves of both men as they fled the four-legged terror.

“Chase! Chase! Stop it!” Milt cried as the men scrambled into the truck, slammed the doors and sped off.

Whiskey trailed loose bridle reins as he returned to nuzzle his injured friend. Milt dabbed at her nose with her handkerchief. The collie came trotting back after assuring himself that the vehicle had no intentions of returning. Milt felt too sore to scold the faithful dog and he sat down beside her, his tongue lolling out, a satisfied

grin on his blood-flecked face. At the sound of another approaching vehicle, Milt looked up and spat, "More traffic."

This automobile, however, was the familiar, navy blue '52 Chev of Benny Collins. The blond haired youth stared in astonishment as he coasted past. Rapidly turning the vehicle around at a pasture gate, Benny returned and parked as far to the right as the sand allowed. Bolting from the truck, he scrambled up the bank to join Milt. The girl noted that he had found his Stetson. "Did Ol' Whiskey pile you?" he asked. "I haven't seen you in the dirt for three years!"

Milt smiled through her pain, recalling the incident to which Benny referred:

One of the Collins' Hereford bulls had broken through the neighbour's fence to spend time with the Miltos' purebred Charolais heifers. Whiskey, still on the green side, wasn't proficient with handling docile cows, much less a determined bull. Milt wore out herself, her horse and the Hereford before the eighteen hundred pound bovine finally decided he'd had enough.

Unfortunately, when the bull had had enough he grew testy along with his stubbornness. Benny was just topping a rise, coming at a full gallop on his own horse, when the Hereford broadsided Whiskey, sending the young gelding to his knees and throwing the girl into the sage. The veteran mount that Benny rode bowled the bull over before it could do further damage. When the Hereford regained his feet, most of the fight had been knocked out of him. Benny pointed the bull homeward then returned to extract his young neighbour from the bushes.

Today the damage appeared more severe as the lad studied the bloody, scratched face and the darkening bruise on the girl's forehead.

"You hurt bad, Milt?"

"I'll be okay as soon as my nose stops bleeding," Milt assured him in a non-too assuring voice.

"Can you stand up, er... or do you... er, want me to carry you? I think we better get you home right away, could be you got a concussion."

"I don't have a *concussion*, Benny, but I do have a headache. Could you help me on my horse?"

"Nope. You ain't ridin' that pony no more today. If you're able, we'll put you in my truck and I'll drive you home."

"What about Whiskey?"

Without answer, Benny grasped the gelding's reins and led him to the parked truck. Securing the horse to the mirror bracket, he returned to assist his neighbour to her feet. Milt leaned on Benny's shoulder as he helped her to the truck and then seated her in the cab. Benny walked around to the driver's side of the pickup stopping at the rear to drop the tail-gate. He slapped his palm on the truck bed and said, "Hop in, Chase." The collie needed no second invitation and bounded into the truck box.

Benny squeezed past the tied horse and, after unhitching, passed the reins through the open window of his truck, opened the door far enough to climb in and seated himself behind the wheel. He drew the door closed and, holding the reins loosely in his hand in case the horse should struggle, started the engine. The truck eased ahead and Whiskey followed along as the slack came out of reins.

"Well broke horse," Benny said as the four companions moved slowly up the trail and over the rise en route to the Milto headquarters.

As the entourage emerged from the arched lane of Manitoba Maples, Constance Milto, Milt's pretty and youthful mother, espied the group from the garden where she had been pruning a huge rose bush. Upon seeing the

riderless horse she dropped her shears and rushed over to the pickup, at the same time calling to her husband who was working on a piece of machinery across the yard.

The Milto's only child argued that she felt just fine but Mrs. Milto insisted that the girl be taken to town to be checked over by Dr. O'Brien. Robert Milto intervened saying, "Connie, we can't be running to the doctor every time someone has a scratch or a bump. Remember, Doc is a very busy man. Things aren't the same..." he checked himself. "We'll keep a close eye on her and make sure she stays awake just in case that goose egg is more than a bump."

As Mrs. Milto led the girl to the house, Chase leaped over the side of the truck box and followed along. Robert Milto and Benny led the horse over to the corral where he was turned loose.

"Thanks for bringing her home, Benny."

Benny shrugged, "That's what neighbours is for Mr. Milto."

The young man could not accept Robert Milto's invitation for a cool drink, excusing himself that he had to check a windmill on their lease; his destination before discovering the battered Milt. "Maybe I'll stop by tomorrow to see how she's doing."

Benny Collins did stop by the next afternoon. Except for scratch marks and a dark swelling on her forehead, the girl had recovered completely; it was Benny who had suffered a setback. The bridge crew had found Brenda Yeast and Brenda Yeast had forgotten Benny Collins.

Milt had never seen her perpetually happy neighbour in such a dejected mood and nothing she said would cheer the heartbroken lad. He blamed all his woes on the bridge. She was amazed that Benny had been the last to find out about Brenda's interest in the young men on the bridge

gang. It seemed to Milt that everyone in the county had been talking about the busy road to Leonard Yeast's farm. Last evening, when Milt had told her parents about her spill and the subsequent heroic deed Chase believed he had performed, Robert Milto laughed and suggested that Milt lend her dog to Leonard Yeast for the duration of the bridge project

Milt gazed into the sad, blue eyes of her friend, "Don't worry Benny, everything will work out in the end. You and Brenda will be married someday and you'll have a whole bunch of babies."

Benny shook his head miserably. "That danged old bridge, I wish it had never been started. I'd like to blow the whole thing up."

...My Dad ran the ferry before they built the bridge across the Western River. We had a healthy respect for that stream as it has taken a lot of lives over the years, but it provided many an adventure for a lad growing up along the shore, living in the ferryman's house. I learned to fish, hunt ducks and paddle a canoe along that old river...

Submitted by Robert Harper Jr.

CHAPTER 5

May, 1968

The explosion could be felt for two miles and the blast was heard for five.

The explosives expert from the bridge construction project exaggerated a little when saying enough dynamite had been used to knock out a dozen bridges. However, the person or persons involved were obviously amateurs. They had succeeded in completely vaporizing only the first pillar of the partially completed structure. On the other hand, the ferryman who lived a quarter mile downstream lost two windows on the blast side of his house.

The local population for twenty miles knew who “blew up the bridge”; everyone except Constable Stein. The young officer who represented the entirety of the Stockton area’s law enforcement possessed an ego easily identifiable by his pigeon chest and matching strut. He vaunted his abilities to any audience he could capture, but when faced with a challenge more puzzling than catching high school boys drinking beer on a country road, he came up short. Country folk have an uncanny ability to see or not see some incidents as they deem fit. Naturally, no one had seen or heard any vehicles on the River Project Road around four AM on the night of the blast, and no one could even guess as to a possible suspect. Tire tracks and the felon’s footprints were completely erased; most of the neighbourhood had visited the scene before the officer

had been notified. Many locals figured the damage needn't be reported at all. However, when the manager of the project arrived on the site he called in the 'Queen's Cowboys'.

Constable Stein inspected the crime scene, belligerently ordering the people to stand back. While the stuffed uniform strutted about searching for clues, the crowd continued to swell; this was free entertainment. A burly farmer in dusty overalls said, "He must have stood on a soap box to be tall enough to join the Mounties."

The evidence that remained consisted of a very large hole blasted into the earth and flooded by the muddied waters of the Western River. Credit must be given to the officer for locating the source of the explosives used to disintegrate the pillar: someone had broken the lock on the Project tool shed and stolen a crate of dynamite, several caps and a roll of fuse. Beyond the tool shed, the trail turned cold and there were no witnesses to provide additional evidence. Stymied and embarrassed, Constable Stein could not pursue the culprit further.

Though the destruction of the new bridge caused no bodily harm and there were no reported injuries resulting from the blast, Stockton's only doctor did have many patients who were members of the construction crew; these patients had an indirect link to the explosion itself.

For a couple of weeks a number of the young men employed by the Western River Bridge Project were to be seen making trips to the local physician. The lads all shared a common approach when entering Doctor O'Brien's office. They would invariably park a few blocks from the clinic, skulk down the back alley and eventually emerge on the side walk nearest the entrance. Following a brief pause and furtive glance around to see if the street was empty, the young men would dash up the steps to quickly disappear into the cool confines of the doctor's

office. After a tight-lipped registration with the receptionist, they would slip into a chair in the waiting room, hiding their faces behind a newspaper or magazine until the doctor admitted them to his examination room.

The physician was a tall, spare man with a full head of sandy, yielding to grey, hair. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles which, more often than not, he looked over rather than through. These were supported at a point about halfway down a longish nose. The doctor had a robust, healthy look as evidenced by a ruddy outdoor complexion and a well-tuned physique. Possessing a wealth of medical experience, Doctor O'Brien had truly been a godsend for the community. He had arrived in Canada soon after earning a medical degree in his homeland of Ireland and the physician had practised medicine for three decades in several large Canadian cities. Now, in his declining years, Doctor O'Brien and the bride he had taken more than thirty years previously had settled in the small town of Stockton. The population were exceedingly pleased and proud to have such an accomplished medical practitioner. The good doctor enjoyed Stockton too; here he could pursue his two loves outside the practice: golfing and fishing. Stockton boasted a fine golf course with real 'sand' greens, while the man-made reservoir near town and the Western River both provided excellent fishing.

After the first few lads from the bridge project visited Stockton's doctor he was able to diagnose the remainder without close examination. It seems the young men had contracted a sexually transmitted disease with Leonard Yeast's pretty daughter being the common denominator. Dr. O'Brien gave the boys a shot of penicillin and warned them to be more discreet in the future. The physician advised them to practice abstinence for a few weeks as well, explaining that though they had taken the cure the disease may possibly continue to be transmitted. When

one chap pleaded that his betrothed may not understand his inactivity when he returned home, Dr. O'Brien, who refused to bend the truth under any circumstance, said, "You might tell your Marla-May that you have a 'Yeast' infection."

Benny Collins heard the horse snort before he saw the trio approaching. Milt had purposely placed herself directly between Benny and the setting sun as she rode up to the neighbour she had espied engrossed in barbwire fence repairs. The girl, the collie and the buckskin gelding were only a few yards away when Benny peered out from under the brim of his battered hat and squinted into the reddened haze of the western sky.

"Doggone it, Milt, you oughtn't sneak up on a guy like that!"

She slipped off the gelding and led him nearer to where Benny stood mopping a sleeve across his sweat dampened forehead. Chase ran up to the boy and danced around, wagging his tail in anticipation of a kind word and a scratch behind the ears.

"You should pay more attention to what is going on around you. A whole herd of cows could have walked right through this hole in the fence and wandered on down the trail without you even noticing."

Cuffing the dog playfully, Benny grinned at Milto. "Nice to see those scratches you got when you fell off your horse didn't leave any scars. You greenhorns should ought to be more careful where you ride."

Milt didn't take the bait. "You appear somewhat more cheerful than the last time I saw you. Tell me, what is the cure for the broken heart? Perhaps a little dynamite shakes everything back into place?"

Benny's face turned red. "H-how did you know about the dynamite?" he stuttered.

The girl broke into a peal of laughter, causing the buckskin to toss his head and pull back on the reins. “Everybody in the country knows who blasted the bridge!” Milt giggled. “Except for the cops. It seems nobody around has ever seen a navy '52 Chevy pickup on that river road. *Epecially* at four in the morning the day of the explosion.”

Benny sighed, “I was that obvious, eh?”

“Well, you told me that you wanted to 'blow up that danged old bridge'. I sure didn't repeat your words but it came as such a matter of course that everybody had a big, big hunch who the culprit might be and it doesn't take long for rumour to become fact in this neighbourhood.”

The grin returned to the young man's face. “Well, it worked! Brenda is my girl again. She's been doctoring lately 'cause she has some woman problem, but we're going to the dance that's comin' up”

“I told you everything would work out.”

A thoughtful expression flitted across Benny Collins' face. “You did tell me that Milt. Sometimes it seems like you can per-dict the future.”

...Our oldest daughter, Brenda, married Benny Collins in August, 1970. They have five daughters...

Submitted by Myrna Yeast

CHAPTER 6

May 23, 1968

Morning sunshine filled the kitchen of Vera Mitchell's large two story house as the tall, regal woman set the table for her tea time. Red checked curtains were drawn back from two cross framed windows which occupied the east wall of the residence. The brilliant sunlight brightened the room as Danny Reid, the rural lineman, watched her fluid movements; with swift efficiency, she prepared a snack for her visitor. The faint but distinct odour of tobacco smoke lingered in the room and the visitor sub-consciously wondered about the source. He had never known Vera to have a cigarette. The young lineman often stopped to chat with Mrs. Mitchell, who ran the local telephone exchange. She had managed the operator duties for the company for more than twenty-five years and for most of those years she had been a widow. Her husband had been killed overseas during World War II and the lady had never remarried, seemingly disinterested in seeking love again.

Vera Mitchell understood her role as operator and few people could have performed the service with the extreme discretion she exhibited. All manner of conversation passed through the lines Mrs. Mitchell monitored, and if the tendency were not beneath her, she could have created enough gossip to fill many columns in the local rag. In the years that Danny Reid had managed the maintenance of the open wire circuits, he had never

heard the veteran operator repeat a word of any telephone correspondence. The greying woman, now past middle age, very accurately assessed problems on the lines through her duty as monitor and this information often aided Danny immensely when called upon to repair a particular circuit. The operator informed the lineman of noise, ringing and out-of-service situations, often before the customers were aware of the difficulty. Stockton was not a terribly busy exchange, and though the operator sometimes requested an assistant, she managed most of the daily switching routine by herself. Jean Hatt, whose husband owned the John Deere dealership, and another lady from town, shared the night shift. Jean also relieved the Chief Operator in the event of Vera Mitchell's absence.

Today, between turns at monitoring the maze of circuits which terminated on a large circuit board perforated with plug-in jacks and situated in a corner of the big kitchen, Mrs. Mitchell, wearing a headset and tethered to the panel with a long cord, served her guest and passed along tidbits of information which may help Danny out on the route.

Pouring the steeped tea into Danny's cup, she said, "During that strong west wind the other day, I noticed that bunch-block 06 had intermittent hitting on it. There must be a little slack in a span out there on the north-south run."

Danny added a spoonful of sugar to his cup, "I think I know the spot. During the storm break I made quite a few 'quick fixes'. There is still one out there on that run where the side blocks take over from that six pin running north."

"Aside from that one trouble though, I would say you've pretty well cleared up the havoc wreaked by that thunder storm."

The operator reached over and pulled a cord from the jack of a circuit as the ring-off sounded and then turned back to Danny. A slight frown creased her forehead, "Jean asked me to run a part of the night shift last

Saturday and a call came through at 11:15 PM. It started out normal and I switched the call to a long-distance trunk. No ring-down came on and so, after awhile, I monitored the line to see that the call remained up. There was this horrendous screeching on the trunk. It was the most annoying sound, like someone dragging their finger nails down a chalkboard. At first I thought something had crashed on the toll route but the line was indeed connected. The noise kept up for almost an hour and then a disconnect ring came and I terminated the call.”

Danny Reid paused with his tea cup halfway to his lips. A shadow of worry creased his brow. “Whose line was it, Vera?”

“The private line. Robert Milto's.”

Setting the tea cup back on its saucer, Danny asked, “Have you ever heard the noise before? Have the Miltos been reporting any grief with their line?”

Vera Mitchell paused to route a long-distance request, “There have been no trouble reports from the Milto residence for a long time. And I have never heard the noise before, however, Jean has mentioned something about an odd sound a few times in the past... I think that she said it had been on the Milto line, too.”

After finishing his tea and bidding Mrs. Mitchell a good day, Danny Reid drove out to the six pin lead that ran north of town. He pondered the weird noise Vera had reported on the “Private Line,” the name assigned by the operator and the repairman. Danny had hired a construction crew to build the twenty-five mile stretch that ran out to the Milto headquarters. Local folk were astounded that someone outside of town would even consider having a private telephone line. Robert Milto did not so much as blink at the exorbitant price quoted for this service. He simply requested that the line be built to the very latest specifications and engineered accordingly. At the time Danny thought the man eccentric but his

subsequent encounters with Robert Milto proved that the rancher was quite level headed and extremely intelligent. When Danny asked about the necessity of a private line for such expense, Robert Milto smiled disarmingly and said, "Someday everyone will have a private line, Danny."

Where the six-pin crossarm line turned west, a single pair of wires on side-blocks continued northward to serve those customers on the circuit labelled bunch-block 06. Danny decreased his speed and studied the line carefully as he patrolled the pole lead near the road. The sunshine reflected on the fine ribbons of steel wire and the trouble was easy to discern upon arrival at the suspected area. When the lineman had hurriedly pulled up the downed lines during the storm break, the upper strand had caught on the tie wire preventing the line from becoming as taut as its neighbour. Due to the slack in the span, an east or west wind would cause the lines to intermittently collide causing the "hits" Vera Mitchell had reported.

Danny stopped the line-truck, quickly donned his climbing gear and spurred up the sturdy creosote treated pole. He belted in and jack-strapped the slack out of the line to make it even with its partner. Snipping off the excess and splicing the ends together took but a few minutes and the lineman was soon back in the truck, his thoughts reverting to the noise problem at the Milto establishment.

...We called it the 'Private Line' because there were no others in the entire Stockton rural exchange. I can't remember what the cost was, but it must have been enormous even in those days, to run steel or copper open wire all that distance...

Submitted by Wendy Miller as told by the late Vera Larson (Mitchell)

CHAPTER 7

May 31, 1968

Robert and Constance Milto agonized over their daughter's pleading for permission to attend the sock hop scheduled for Friday night. The dance was to be held in Stockton's high school gymnasium. Most of the young people Milt had attended school with in the district would be at the function and the friendly, outgoing girl had also made acquaintance with many of the students from the larger school in town. Extenuating circumstances forced the anxious parents to harbour reluctance but Robert Milto finally relented, stating that Milt would travel with them and be ready to leave the dance before midnight.

Danny and Val Reid had extended an open invitation to the Miltos asking them to stop by their home for a visit in town. Mr. and Mrs. Milto arranged to be at the Reids' house while Milt attended the dance.

As the family parked in front of the school, Benny Collins and Brenda Yeast pulled in beside them. Benny exchanged pleasantries with the Miltos while Brenda and Milt chattered excitedly and urged Benny to lead the way to the dance floor.

Before leaving her parents, Milt poked her head in the open window on her mother's side of the luxury sedan. "Thanks for letting me come, Mom," she said.

Constance Milto smiled weakly, "Have fun, honey, and mind what you say."

Robert Milto said, "Milt, we'll be back to pick you up at a quarter to twelve. Be sure that you are here."

Music blared from a hi-fi as Benny led the girls into the festively adorned gymnasium. Balloons and colourful streamers swayed from the huge laminated beams which spanned the court. A table had been set up at the front of the room and a large glass punch bowl filled with refreshments rested in the middle. On a second table a banquet of food awaited distribution. Kenny Rogers and the First Edition belted out *Just Dropped In To See What Condition My Condition Was In* from a 45 single whirling around on the record machine. Benny and Brenda joined the cluster of couples dancing in the centre of the gym and Milt soon found herself amid a throng of jubilant ex-class mates. The fact that Milt's education now came from a correspondence school did not place the pretty girl as an outcast and her effervescent personality drew friends near; a trait that had served her well when the Milto family first arrived in the area. Tommy Regier, who had attended the country school with Milt but was a couple years her senior, asked his former classmate for a dance and the pair waltzed around the floor while Neil Diamond sang *Red Red Wine*. Following Tommy's example many of the young lads jostled for a turn to dance with "the new girl" as Milt had been christened five years previous. By Stockton standards, she continued to be a recent arrival.

Sixteen year old Paula St. Jacques and her sister Andrea, who was a year younger, joined the growing crowd of chattering teenagers. Paula had blond hair and stood an inch taller than her brunette sister. Both girls were strikingly beautiful. Milt thanked her partner for the dance and quickly edged close to the pair. Giving both girls a hug she said, "Oh, it's so nice to see you. Did your Mom and Dad bring you to town?"

Andrea giggled. "Paula's boyfriend brought us in his dad's car."

Paula said, "Les is just a friend. He is not my *boyfriend*."

Anyone who knew the St. Jacques girls knew of their constant bantering. Everyone also knew that the pair were inseparable. Les Moffat, a tall, athletic lad whose perpetually grinning countenance and friendly nature made him at home in most situations, arrived with a glass of punch in each hand and presented the beverage to the sisters. Milt gave the boy's hand a squeeze, "Hello Les, it's nice to see you."

"It's nice to see you here too, stranger. Last time I saw you, your face was red as a beet, you were covered in ashes and smelled like the inside of Gunnar Hofsted's smokehouse."

Paula said, "Oh yes, Milt! Everyone says how brave you were to save all of Pete Liscombe's animals when the barn burned down. Weren't you terrified?"

Before she could reply, Benny Collins, who had taken a time out from dancing, spoke up from the edge of the circle. "Shucks, it weren't Milt did anything. It was that mutt of hers and that big gelding done it all."

Everyone laughed at Benny's assessment of the situation. Andrea St. Jacques said in Milt's ear, "Well, I think you are a hero, Milt."

A tear welled up in Milt's eye as she whispered, "Thank you so much for that, Andrea."

Les Moffat couldn't resist a shot at the Collins lad and loudly announced to everyone within earshot that the bridge crew was looking for an explosives expert.

Milt rescued her red-faced young neighbour from the moment by requesting a dance. The two friends moved out on the floor, Milt gliding gracefully, Benny strolling awkwardly in his tall heeled riding boots. The pair danced to Otis Redding's *Sitting on the Dock of the Bay*.

The evening flew by as the young people enjoyed the last gathering before final exams. Soon summer holidays would separate most of them until the next school year. Laughter flowed and tunes continued from the hi-fi. Several of the boys were in charge of the records and they kept the dancers hopping with a good mixture of the latest and old favourites destined to become all time classics. Milt's feet began to hurt as she seldom had the opportunity to sit for very long. Les Moffat and Milt bopped to the Beatles' newest *Lady Madonna*, and then the amateur deejays rolled out a tune from a few years back, J Frank Wilson and The Cavaliers' *Last Kiss*.

We were out on a date in my Daddy's car...

"What's wrong, Milt?" Les asked as his dance partner suddenly stiffened and her face turned ashen.

"I... I don't feel so good," Milt said. "My... my feet are sore. Perhaps I've overdone it."

"Well, come on, we'll go sit with the St. Jacques sisters and you can have a break. I'll keep the boys back."

As Les and Milt left the dance floor, Andrea and Paula escaped the lads who lingered about hoping to dance with them. The four seated themselves on a row of benches along one wall of the gymnasium. Tears welled up in Milt's eyes as she sat down between the sisters. It seemed as though the young lady were on the verge of crying.

"What's wrong, Milt?" Andrea asked, her deep brown eyes searching the tear filled blues of her friend.

The song ended but the words pounded in Milt's brain. *Oh where oh where can my baby be? The lord took her away from me.* "It's that song," Milt whispered. "It's so sad. It... it just makes me want to cry."

Paula smiled. "Now, Milt, that song has been out for four years. Don't tell me it bothers you that much."

Milt grasped Paula's hand. "Most times it doesn't get to me but tonight... Paula, Andrea, do you have to go home tonight? I mean, could you come and stay at my place?" Milt's voice rose as she pleaded, "We could have a sleep-over."

"Wow!" Les interrupted. "Mind if I come along, too?"

Milt didn't slow down in her rising enthusiasm, "Sure, Les, you come too! You can stay in the bunkhouse."

"Shucks, I want to be in on the... What did you call it, a sleep-over? Is that kind of like a pyjama party?"

Milt smiled through her tears and spoke earnestly. "I mean it. Won't you all come to our ranch tonight?"

Andrea placed her arm around the distraught girl's shoulders. "We can't come over tonight, Milt. We have to attend the 4-H picnic tomorrow and Dad needs us to help with the preparations. He's one of the leaders, you know."

Paula patted the hand that still clung desperately to her own. "We can have a pyjama party next weekend."

Suddenly Robert Milto stood before his daughter. "It's time to go, honey," he said.

Milt looked deeply into her father's grey eyes and saw the sadness and grief the handsome man managed to conceal from those who did not know him as well as she. "Dad... Daddy, can Paula and Andrea come to our place tonight... and Les too?"

A stern line tightened Mr. Milto's jaw. "Not tonight, Milt. Come along, your mother is waiting in the car."

Milt stood to follow her father and the dam of tears burst forth as she hugged each of the three friends and clung desperately to Andrea. Robert Milto grasped his daughter's arm and gently but forcefully made her release the younger St. Jacques sister, then with a curt nod to Les

Moffat, led his sobbing daughter from the school gymnasium. A solemn group of teenagers stared in confused wonder as the Milto's exited.

Constance Milto rushed from the car and helped her husband settle the now hysterical Milt on the bench front seat and the couple slid into the vehicle on either side of her. As Robert Milto slowly drove out of the parking lot, his wife rocked their distraught daughter in her arms as she too sobbed quietly.

...A community never fully recovers from a tragic event that claims young lives. In May of 1968, three teenagers: Les Moffat, and sisters Paula and Andrea St. Jacques, were killed in a vehicle accident. The trio were headed home from a school dance when, apparently, a deer darted in front of the car. The animal was struck down and the automobile skidded out of control, crashed over an embankment, and rolled over several times before coming to rest at the bottom of the steep grade along Miller's Creek...

Submitted by Hazel Regier

CHAPTER 8

Early June, 1968

The 4-H achievement day was postponed while a stricken community attempted to come to terms with the sudden and devastating loss of three local teenagers.

While driving home to the ranch, Sven Larson, Robert Milto's hired man, found the wrecked vehicle and its occupants in the ravine through which the seasonal stream known as Miller's Creek flows. A piece of the guard rail had been torn away from the old wooden bridge and Sven noticed the skid marks from the tires and saw the broken remains of a badly smashed deer lying on the road. Further investigation led to the wreckage. Dr. O'Brien, in his capacity as coroner, examined the bodies and announced that God had been merciful in that the three friends had not suffered.

The high school gymnasium served as chapel for the triple funeral, with both Reverend Franklin and Father Cloutier performing the duties. The entire community attended, filling the school and spilling out into the parking lot where a public address system had been temporarily installed for the service. Eighteen young lads performed pallbearer duties for the deceased teenagers.

In the ensuing weeks, Robert and Constance Milto were instrumental in organizing community members to help the grieving families with their barn chores and field work. No amount of consoling could soothe Mrs. St. Jacques and Dr. O'Brien reluctantly had her temporarily

committed to hospital where she was kept sedated. Connie Milto became the stricken lady's most frequent visitor.

Les Moffat's father very nearly had a breakdown as well. The honour student and high school athlete had been Fred Moffat's pride and joy. "My only reason for living," he confided bitterly to Robert Milto, who now spent more time working at his grieving neighbours' farms than at home.

The two men had taken a moment to rest in the shade of the tractor wheel that they had been trying to remove from the "720" John Deere which the Moffats used for most of their farm work. Robert Milto grasped the man's work-calloused hand as though he were a young child and Fred Moffat blinked sadly, allowing two tears to edge their way down his weather leathered, bewhiskered cheeks. Gazing into the honest face, he found solace in the warm grey eyes and took strength and heart from Robert Milto's assuring words. "You'll pull through this, Fred. It is a terrible blow and I can't make it smaller than it is, but I know that you will come through."

Frustrated by his tears, Fred Moffat wiped a dusty shirt sleeve across his face, straightened his shoulders and said, "Bob, you haven't been in these parts long. I have a habit of keepin' things all bottled up inside, but I feel different around you and I can tell you now, you are the best damn neighbour a man could have."

In an era when neighbours were, for the most part, given the highest regard, this admission said so much more than the simple words expressed. Robert Milto *knew* in years to come a cloud of guarded independence would settle upon the rural population and the unspoken policy of treating a neighbour with utmost respect would become less customary.

Milt Milto spent a lot of time pounding the pastures astride her big buckskin gelding. Whiskey and Chase seemed to sense the young girl's grief and they did the best their animal instincts could to help her through. Whiskey flew across the pale green, rolling hills with their bushy sage caps and ragged coats of prairie wool. He carried her up the steep sand dunes and dodged the chokecherry bluffs as if they were playing tag. Sometimes, the load lightened from the stricken girl's mind as the open country passed beneath them. Whenever they paused for a breather atop some sandy knob or knoll, Chase would inevitably catch up to them and stretch out on the short grass, panting heavily with his long pink tongue lolling out from grinning jaws.

These times were the best for Milt. The evenings when her parents talked in low tones and came to check on her in bed were the toughest. Late one night as her father held her in his strong arms trying to bring some comfort, she asked, "How come we couldn't change it? It was so hard to believe that I would never see them again. Why couldn't we have done something?"

"It's history, honey. The accident happened a long, long time ago, before we were in the picture; before you were born; almost before your mother and I were born. You know *we can't change history.*" Robert Milto's words seemed hollow as he spoke them and he too wondered why it had to be so.

The next morning Milt awoke to a cheery but tuneless whistle drifting in her window from somewhere in the yard. She quickly rolled out of bed and ran to locate the source. Danny Reid, his tool pouch strapped around his slim waist and slung low like a fast-draw holster, busily worked on the terminal where the underground lines branched out to several buildings within the Milto headquarters. Robert Milto requested that the steel wire pole lead be terminated at the edge of

the yard and everything within that perimeter should be buried. Buried wire was a rare commodity in rural telephone installations and Danny had had a time finding a supplier to meet the Milto request.

Milt pushed the second story window farther open and called down to the whistling lineman, "You're scaring the birds."

Danny turned and grinned up at the tousle haired teenager. "Oh, you are awake! I thought it too early in the year to be gone into hibernation, but anyone who isn't out of bed at this time of day must be a little slow in the metabolism."

Robert Milto, hearing the exchange, appeared from around the corner of a quonset and called a greeting as he strode over to where the lineman worked. "Troubles on our line, Danny?"

"Oh, just doing some checking," Danny said. Then, seeing the question in Mr. Milto's keen grey eyes, he added, "Vera Mitchell heard some strange noise on here the other night and I thought I should check it out before something serious put the line out of order. Have you noticed anything unfamiliar, Robert?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, just that faint, low hum which is always on these rural lines."

A hastily dressed Milt with her dog close behind approached the pair, and Danny said, "Hello, Button, I see Chase has been up long enough to brush his hair, but yours looks somewhat in disarray."

Constance Milto, holding a small garden trowel with fresh earth clinging to it, joined the group. After greeting the repairman, she insisted that he come into the house for morning coffee. "And you, young lady, had better get some breakfast into you before it is dinner time."

Over cups of fresh perked coffee the conversation inevitably turned to "The Accident."

“How's Fred Moffat making out these days?” Danny asked.

The cattleman shook his head. “It's a terrible blow for any person, but Fred and that boy of his were as close as a father and son can get. He's really hit hard, but you know these old timers around here... They're tough. Fred will heal with time.”

Danny thought the term “old timers” sounded a bit odd as Fred Moffat and Robert Milto couldn't have had much age difference between them. Perhaps he meant old timers as being long of the area.

Constance said, “Claudette St. Jacques is finally coming around. Dr. O'Brien still has her in the hospital but she is on sedation only at night to help her sleep.”

“God! What a living nightmare!” Danny said.

Milt had stopped eating the cereal she had dug out of the cupboard and tears welled up in her pretty blue eyes. “When will the nightmares stop, though?”

Connie Milto slid her arm around her daughter's shoulders and, after an awkward silence, Danny said, “Pretty hard on you too, hey, Button?”

“We should have stopped them!” Milt burst out. Seeing the reproving glint in her father's eyes, she said, “If we had known what would happen, we could have stopped them.”

Unmoved by Danny Reid's sharp questioning glance, Robert Milto addressed his daughter in a gentle tone, “Life, or in this case, death, are things which are in the hands of God and we cannot alter His bidding. What happened, happened, and we cannot change that.”

Milt glared at her father for what she regarded as insensitivity, and stalked out of the kitchen.

Turning to the lineman, Robert switched the topic. “The noise Vera Mitchell heard... has she picked it up on any of the other lines?”

Danny set his coffee mug on the table and shook his head as though trying to recall the conversation. “No, she specifically said, 'The private line,' and you are the only private line I know of outside of Stockton.

“Well, that is odd.” Robert Milto now shook his head. “We'll have to pay more attention, I guess. No complaints as far as we are concerned though.”

After thanking his hosts for the coffee, Danny went back to the pedestal and reconnected all the terminations he had cut out for testing. He briefly checked the lightning arrestor fastened to an outside wall of the big farm house, making a mental note of how many wires fed the telephones within the home.

As the young repairman drove his line truck down the shady maple treed lane, he recounted in his mind's eye the number of telephone boxes he had installed in the Milto residence when the private line had been completed. Most everybody on the party lines only had one of the large, oak framed, magneto telephones, but the Miltos had requested a phone in the big red hip-roof barn, the machine shop and one in the house. Danny tried to jog his memory. There was an extra line installed at the time. Robert Milto asked to have an extra line run to his office in case he wanted a phone in there someday. The line had been left unconnected, but now it was attached to the copper lugs of the lightning arrestor....

“How many phones does one man need?” Danny said, aloud.

...I remember the party lines, everyone knew everyone else's business. There was one particular old lady who never failed to be rubber-necking on the line and she wasn't content to just listen in, she often butted in to give her opinion...

Submitted by Myrna and Leonard Yeast

CHAPTER 9

June 15, 1968

June fifteenth is an unusual time of year for a farm auction but circumstances dictated that Pete Liscombe should sell off his equipment a month after the local farm sales were finished. The fire that had destroyed his barn had encouraged the retirement decision, or so he told his neighbours. While “bellied up” to the bar in Stockton’s hotel beverage room a few days before the sale, the weather beaten rancher admitted, “A man can’t go on forever, wintering cows and pulling calves.”

“Textbook perfect weather!” the auctioneer announced on the morning of the sale. Brilliant sunshine from an azure sky bathed the time-worn farmyard and, for a brief respite, the leaves on the stunted caraganna trees in their scraggly rows were moving not at all. Dust clouds boiled up from an onslaught of vehicles as they approached Pete Liscombe’s yard and from the many tendrils spiralling skyward, the promise of a good turnout appeared certain. Ralph Osborne, an ambitious local cowman of about thirty years, had taken a course in auctioneering down in Oklahoma some time previous. He handled most of the farm dispersals, household and estate sales as well as being the auctioneer for the stockyards situated along the railway track just south of Stockton. Because Ralph was the only man of his profession in the

area, most charities and clubs coerced him into handling their fund-raising auctions as well. Although these functions were time consuming and unpaid, the busy auctioneer did his best to accommodate everyone.

Milt Milto had arrived at the sale quite early as her father had been helping Pete and Ralph assemble the machinery in neat rows, loading the hay racks with equipment and hauling household items out into the yard. Milt's father hadn't spent much time on his own big ranch as he dedicated so much effort to his neighbours, the St. Jaques and the Moffats, who had suffered the loss of their children in "The Accident." Robert Milto pitched in where he could and Pete Liscombe didn't have to ask for assistance with his sale. Milt now left her father talking with Ralph Osborne and walked over to join her young neighbour, Benny Collins.

"Good morning, Benny," Milt said as she pulled a lock of her long auburn hair back from her face and edged up to the hay rack where Benny stared transfixed at a particular object among the dozens of items to be auctioned. A soft poke in the ribs followed the lack of response. "Earth to Benny!" Milt raised her voice.

"Huh? Oh, hi Milt. I didn't see you standing there."

"What's taken your fancy so much that you can't speak to a neighbour?" Milt asked as she scanned the strange assortment assembled on the flat wooden deck of the hay rack.

"Oh, nothin', I was just eye-balling that old Winchester of Pete's. Damn! I never expected he would sell that gun, it goes part and parcel with his ol' Association Saddle an' I heard the saddle isn't being sold; Pete plans to be straddling it when he 'crosses the Divide,' or so he claims."

Benny took a last lingering look at the rifle. "I'd kind of like to buy that gun though. You know, kind of a reminder of Old Pete after he's gone... moved to town."

Milt said, "Well, maybe you can buy it. How much can an old gun be worth?"

Benny shook his head. "That particular old gun may sell quite high and I don't have very much money to spend these days."

"Spending too much trying to impress Brenda Yeast, are you, Benny?"

The blond haired youth took the remark with a sigh and a shrug. "Well, I sure would like to have that Winchester...."

As ten o'clock, the time for the sale to commence, drew near, the farmyard's parking space continued filling with vehicles. Late arrivals had to park on the grass strips paralleling either side of Pete Liscombe's narrow lane all the way out to the main road.

Milt rejoined her father as he helped Pete with last minute final preparations. She overheard Pete's muffled growl about there being something wrong with folks these days.

Robert Milto grinned at his aged neighbour, "Don't let it bother you, Pete. Besides, the shot was directed at me, not you."

"What shot was directed at you, Dad?" Milto asked.

"It's nothing, Milt," said Robert Milto, in a vain attempt to dismiss the matter.

But Pete had his dander up and wouldn't drop the subject. "Some of the folks around here seem a tad peeved 'cause your Dad bought my property."

Milt paled, realizing the significance of Pete's statement, but her thoughts were interrupted by Ralph Osborne drawling into the microphone that the sale was about to begin.

Ralph stood on the hay rack where Milt and Benny Collins had been discussing the old rifle. Before he could clear the dust from his throat to continue the announcement, Pete Liscombe had strode up and, with surprising agility, swung a long leg over the side of the rack, sprang aboard and grabbed the microphone from Ralph's hand. Keen blue eyes scanned the crowd and the initial glowering faded to a more amicable expression.

"I ain't never been one for speeches and this is a late age to begin, but I have a few things to say that needs sayin', and since this here is my auction, I reckon a fellow may be allowed... First off, I'd like to thank you all for a-turnin' out today. It is a real pleasure to see so many of my neighbours here at the old homestead. I'm kinda glad you all never came at once before 'cause my cookin' ain't up to much and I would have had to kill a prime beef to feed everybody." A ripple of laughter passed through the bystanders,

The old rancher straightened up his shoulders and continued with a fierce determination, "I been hearing some stories and comments lately which brings a touch of grief to me and so I'd like to clear up a few details of this here dispersal of my holdings: First thing, Bob Milto is new to this area by our standards as the rest of us have lived here for generations. Well, I don't want anyone to think that makes him an outsider. Some of you folks have sour grapes because I sold the land to Bob. I'll tell you just exactly how that came about though it ain't none of your damn business anyway.

Milt glanced up at her father to see how he was taking Pete Liscombe's address. The tall cattleman seemed completely detached; the oration could have been directed at the Prime Minister for all his concern in the matter.

“It was my idea to have Bob buy this place. He didn't want to step on anyone's toes and I had to convince him that it was the right thing to do. He paid more than I asked and more than anybody else would have offered so you can't fault the man at all.

“The second thing, and this ain't none of your damn business either, is that I turned my lease over to young Benny Collins. He bought my cows and he needs the pasture to graze 'em on. Now, if any of you have trouble swallowing that, just ask yourself: How we are going to keep our young people on the farms if they don't get an even break now and then? That's all I got to say.”

The whole crowd began to clap as their beloved old neighbour handed the microphone back to the auctioneer. Pete glowered back at them and then grinned as he muttered, “Gol damnedest bunch...”

Ralph Osborne chuckled as the rancher climbed down off the hay rack, “Well, if it's all right with Pete, we'll get this auction under way...”

Milt's mother had volunteered to help with the food booth serving coffee, baked goods and sandwiches to the throng of sale goers. Proceeds from funds raised at these functions were used for various community projects and benefits. Today, Pete Liscombe's sale enjoyed the refreshments compliments of a recently conceived group whose direction was to save Prairie Hills School from becoming another pigeon cote while on its way to extinction. As more and more country schools had closed down, the old halls of learning were allowed to deteriorate and eventually become a simple plaque or marker beside a field of grain or, more often, just a small flag of a quarter section representation on a dusty Municipal map. Constance Milto chided the community for their complacency in the demise of Prairie Hills. Her energy

and influence eventually led to the formation of 'Prairie Hills Forever' and everyone who belonged to the old school district became members. The idea of preserving the school house for future generations to use as a rural hall appealed to folks. Guided by Constance Milto's encouragement, they were soon eager volunteers in the campaign.

The canvas tent serving as kitchen and booth for the farm ladies working the refreshment stand grew oppressively warm with the hot grill, huge, steaming coffee urns, bustling apron-clad "waitresses" and an unrelenting sun. Constance Milto brushed her arm across a warm brow and said as Myrna Yeast held the urn tap open to pour coffee in a paper cup, "My goodness, Pete couldn't have picked a better day. Everyone in the area is here.

Myrna smiled. "We'll have our hands full today. It seems folks have been looking for an outing like this."

Connie Milto glanced over at the hay rack nearest the kitchen, noting the array of household articles displayed neatly for prospective buyers' viewing. Nodding her head in the direction of her gaze she said, "I'd like to bid on some of those antiques. They must be worth a fortune."

Myrna straightened up and handed the filled coffee cup to a young farmer and accepted his dime. Dropping the coin in the cash box she looked where Connie Milto had indicated. "What antiques?"

Another customer interrupted the conversation and Myrna Yeast had forgotten the topic when next the two ladies had a chance to chat.

Ralph Osborne had started rattling off the auctioneer's jargon as the bidding started on the battered collection of Pete Liscombe's furniture. Eager buyers waved their hands while cautious bidders casually nodded. Ralph was

flanked by two assistants who helped to display the goods and scanned the crowd for bidders. “Going once, going twice... Sold! To Rex Miller for six dollars.”

Ralph's wife, Marie, acted as clerk for the business and she recorded each article sold, including price and buyer. As the sale progressed, buyers would step up to the portable wicket house Ralph had built for the purpose and pay their bills. Mrs. Osborne would then issue a receipt. If they planned on buying more, she would assign a number to the item and then tally the total purchases at the end of the day, allowing the purchaser to make payment with one cheque.

Milt had been to a few auction sales with her parents but this one had keened her interest because of the closeness of the neighbour, both in proximity and friendship. She watched now as one of the assistants handed Ralph the rifle that Benny Collins had been examining before the sale. Milt noticed that Benny stood front-row centre, his eyes riveted to the auctioneer. Curiosity overcame the young girl and she decided to move closer to her neighbour to share in the excitement.

“...And here we have the gun that shot at least one deer on every knoll in the Sandhills...” Ralph Osborne paused as the crowd erupted with laughter. Pete Liscombe's prowess with the rifle and his disregard for hunting seasons were well known in the area. While conservation and law enforcement people turned a blind eye, the rancher provided venison for the elderly pioneers who spent their last years at 'The Lodge' in Stockton. “It's a beauty, Model 1894 Winchester, lever-action, .32 Special. It may be a tad scarred but Pete assures me it works just fine folks... octagon barrel, buck-horn sights, a real collector's item. What am I bid...”

Often, the auctioneer will suggest a starting price if no offer comes from the crowd. Sometimes, buyers may wait until the auctioneer's price is absurdly low before

taking up the call and then escalating much higher than the original opening bid. This time, a townsman from Stockton opened the bidding with an offer of thirty dollars. Benny Collins glared at the man as if he were an intruder. "Thirty-one!" he called, a little too loudly. Someone else said thirty-five and the bid was on. As the price neared fifty dollars, Benny's bids were less enthusiastic and he began to turn pale. Now only he and the fellow from town were bidding.

"Forty-eight dollars to you, Benny. Do I hear fifty?"

Benny squirmed then nodded.

Ralph Osborne turned to the other bidder who grunted, "Fifty-two."

"Fifty-four, Benny? Anyone, fifty-four?" A long silence followed and Benny almost whispered, "Fifty-three."

Ralph grinned at the boy and looked back at the Stockton man whom Milt now recognized as the John Deere implement dealer. "Fifty-five," he said as though it was petty cash for him and he was tiring of this game.

Benny slumped down under his Stetson and started to turn away. Milt grabbed his arm desperately and whispered, "Buy it and I'll go halfers!"

The auctioneer rattled off the final bid, "Fifty-five... Going once. Going twice..."

"Sixty dollars!" Benny shouted.

Ralph blinked in surprise at Benny then swung his gaze to the implement dealer who shook his head in disgust. "Sold! Sold to Benny Collins for sixty dollars."

"You won it!" Milt cried hugging her young neighbour.

Benny gazed at Milt with a look of complete amazement. "What do you want with half ownership in a Winchester rifle?"

“Well, somebody has to provide deer meat for those old-timers now that Pete is retiring and they may as well use the same gun.”

Benny placed his battered hat on the pretty girl's head. “You don't look much like a boy but your dad sure ain't lacking for a son. By the way, have you got thirty bucks, 'cause I don't got sixty?”

Milt dashed off to find her dad whom she located at the refreshment stand. Her mom was passing two cups of coffee over the board counter for her husband and Leonard Yeast. Leonard gave Mrs. Milto a quarter, winked and said, “Keep the change.”

“Dad!” Milt said breathlessly. “Could you lend me some money? I'll pay you back when I can get to the bank.”

Leonard Yeast interrupted, “You won't need a loan. I'll buy you a cup of coffee.”

Robert Milto seemed surprised at his daughter's request, “What are you going to buy and how much do you need?”

“Benny and I went halfers on a gun. You know ... Pete's old gun.”

Leonard Yeast threw back his head and laughed. “By the Lord Harry, I wisht my girls was interested in guns!”

As Robert Milto bemusedly studied his daughter's reddening face, Constance Milto said, “Robert, give her the money and Milt, you come take my place back here for a moment... They are about to auction off that old cream separator of Pete's.”

Milt pocketed the money her father handed over then grabbed the apron her mother tossed to her as she squeezed behind the counter of the refreshment stand. Robert Milto and Leonard Yeast followed Constance Milto with their eyes as she made her way through the crowd. Leonard Yeast lifted his cap and scratched his

head in bewilderment. "Why do you suppose your wife wants a cream separator when you don't even have a dang milk cow?"

The tall rancher scratched his own head. "I'm not quite sure."

Constance Milto reached the hay rack as Ralph Osborne informed the crowd about the fine implement up for bid now. "Many a gallon of milk has gone through this unit and I believe it still works, doesn't it, Pete?"

Pete Liscombe answered, "Yep, it was still working last Tuesday morning when I sold old Josie my milk cow to young Benny Collins."

The auctioneer grasped the wooden handle of the crank and gave it a turn. "Well, there you are folks, this one works even when the power is off. Now what am I bid? Twenty dollars? Do I hear twenty? How about fifteen? I got fifteen! Now twenty?" He began to rattle off the numbers in rapid-fire, running them together.

Smoothing her dress and brushing a wisp of hair from her brow, Constance Milto discreetly tried to gain the attention of the auctioneer's helper who stood nearest to her. She recognized the lad as one of the Miller boys who farmed the bottom land along Miller's Creek. Being a very attractive lady, it didn't take long for the young man to notice her. Ralph Osborne had a bid of twenty-seven dollars and was looking for thirty. Mrs. Milto gave only the slightest nod and the Miller lad cocked his head in an inquisitive manner. Mrs. Milto nodded slightly again and the helper shouted, "Yep."

Ralph Osborne continued on in his lingo upping the bid with "Thirty, I've got thirty, thirty-five ?

"Yep!" shouted the helper on Ralph's other side.

Constance Milto nodded and Kent Miller bellowed "Yep" as the auctioneer asked for forty dollars. The bid see-sawed back and forth jumping five dollars every pass and the crowd stood hushed as the game continued.

Someone asked, "Who's bidding against who anyway?" Another spoke up when the bid reached one hundred dollars, "God! I just bought a brand new Westfalia a month ago for eighty dollars, and it's electric!"

Robert Milto slipped up beside his wife as the bid reached one hundred and twenty dollars. "Connie," he said urgently, "you're bidding against Valerie Reid!"

When the turn came back to Mrs. Milto, she shook her head to indicate negative to the auctioneer's helper and Ralph went through the final pleas for another bid finally saying, "Sold! Sold to Mrs. Reid," then added, "I guess you'll have to buy a milk cow now, Danny."

Constance Milto threaded her way through the crowd again until she spotted Valerie Reid standing beside her husband. "Oh! I am sorry, Valerie!" she cried, "I didn't know it was you bidding against me."

Val Reid gasped in astonishment, "I didn't know it was you either!"

Danny grinned at Robert Milto. "Did you stop Connie or did she run out of money?"

The rancher shook his head, "I noticed your wife's index finger flicking a little every time the bid changed so I figured out who Connie's competition was. By the time I managed to slow her down, the offer had gone up another twenty dollars."

The cream separator happened to be the final item of small merchandise and the entourage carried on to the double row of machinery. Pete didn't have much in the line of harvest and seeding equipment but the old rancher possessed some well maintained haying equipment, an old grain truck in good shape and two late model tractors.

Lou Collins gained stride with Robert Milto as the two cattlemen moved along with the crowd. Robert Milto nodded a greeting and said, "Anything special you're looking at in the machinery, Lou?"

“Well, if that boy of mine would consider haying a priority over hunting— either girls or critters— I'd be able to scrounge up some cash to bid on that pitmanless mower of Ol' Pete's. How about you, Bob, see anything you like?”

“Actually, I had been thinking about bidding on that mower, too. I cut hay with a sickle mower but since this one is pitmanless and can run horizontal or vertical, I had figured maybe a guy could mount it on the front end loader of a tractor and use it for trimming hedges. If a fellow rigged up a hydraulic driven orbit motor it might be quite handy.”

Lou nodded, “Yeah, I can see where that would be a useful tool around your place with all them neat tree rows...”

“What do you suppose that mower would sell for? I haven't priced them out at all.”

Lou Collins paused for a moment and then said, “It probably ain't worth more'n two hundred and fifty bucks, I s'pose.”

“Well, maybe we should buy it together. We won't be needing it at the same time, since I can trim hedges any time during the summer and you'll be needing it during haying season...”

Lou Collins grinned, “First our young 'uns buy a rifle together and now we become partners on a mower. Suits me fine though.”

“Okay,” Robert Milto said. “You do the bidding and we'll split the cost.”

Lou Collins changed the subject. “Benny gotten' that lease and you buying the deeded land rubbed some of these folks raw. Good thing Ol' Pete straightened everybody out. It ain't good to have neighbours quarrelling. Hell's bells, times is tough enough without that!”

Robert Milto said, "This sale has been good for patching up a few things."

"Yeah, seems like there's been a dark cloud over the area ever since them kids was killed."

Ralph Osborne had transferred his public address system from the platform of the hay rack to the back of his pickup truck and he commenced selling the machinery from this mobile dais. People were in a spending mood and items went higher than expected. Pete Liscombe made a good dollar overall as the machinery went especially high, though Robert Milto and Lou Collins bought the pitmanless mower for two hundred and forty dollars; ten dollars less than Lou had calculated.

The little Massey Ferguson tractor equipped with three point hitch and factory front end loader was the last piece of equipment and it topped the sale, selling near new price. As Ralph Osborne made the closing comments to terminate the auction, Pete Liscombe climbed into the back of Ralph's truck once again grasping the microphone. Robert Milto, standing beside Leonard Yeast, heard his neighbour mutter, "Never could get Pete to say two words in front of a dang crowd all the years I've known him and now he won't shut up."

"Just hold on a moment before all you folks head home," Pete growled. "I got an announcement to make and I'd like to have Connie Milto come up here for a minute."

Pete shuffled nervously from one foot to the other as he waited for Mrs. Milto to be summoned from the refreshment stand. The crowd wore amused expressions as they wondered what the old-timer had in mind. As Connie Milto reached the truck Pete Liscombe said, "Come on up here, neighbour."

The young Miller boy who had been helping the auctioneer throughout the sale offered the lady a hand assisting her to step up into the truck box.

“Since you have worked so hard,” Pete began, “at preserving the old school for the future, I’d like to make a donation to your cause. This district is my home and I went to school at Prairie Hills when it was near new, sixty years ago.” He grinned at the crowd. “And it ain’t none of your damn business how long I attended. So, for the future of the Hall I want to donate this two hundred dollar cheque.”

Two hundred dollars was an unheard of sum for a donation and the crowd gasped in disbelief. Constance Milto gratefully accepted the paper and with tears in her eyes thanked the old cowboy for his benevolence. Turning to the crowd as Pete held the microphone to her lips she said in a quavering but clear voice, “This has been a wonderful day. It is indeed very kind of Pete to make this generous donation to Prairie Hills Hall. I would also like to thank the ladies who donated food and refreshments as well as their time for the booth today. Myrna Yeast and I have done a quick tally and our earnings for the event are in the neighbourhood of sixty dollars.” An enthusiastic applause ensued and as Pete lowered the mike Connie Milto grasped his hand and spoke into the transmitter. “It has been an enjoyable day for all of us and it is still young. Perhaps we could dash home to our chores and then head over to the Prairie Hills Hall. Let’s have a dance!”

...That sale was the most memorable this area has ever seen. Folks was just so grieved with The Accident and all, that they needed to bust loose and sort of shake it off. Nobody wanted to go home after the auction so we all headed over to the school and had a shindig. I can remember that evening pretty clear too. I had my banjo and my son-in-law Benny brought a guitar. Sven Larson, he had a fiddle. Connie Milto played the old piano that is still in the Prairie Hills Hall today, and she could play mighty good too. She done a couple of solo tunes while the rest of us just stood and listened...

Submitted by Leonard Yeast

CHAPTER 10

June 30, 1968

The tires of the pickup seemed particularly adept at finding the gopher and badger holes as Sven Larson navigated the winding, two wheel track of the prairie trail leading west from Milto headquarters to a set of holding corrals seven miles distant. Milt hooked the heels of her riding boots under the passenger side of the bench seat and wrapped her left arm around Chase to keep herself from bouncing and the dog from jostling the driver. A second truck, driven by Robert Milto, followed at a quarter mile distant. Constance Milto sat next to her husband in that vehicle.

The Miltos and their hired hand had made an early start this morning. It was the last day of June and they would need all the light of the long summer day to round up their beef herd for tomorrow's branding.

Robert Milto ran close to twelve hundred cow-calf pairs —the numbers being split equally between a purebred herd and another bunch of commercial beef animals— on his vast acres of prairie wool. Branding of the new calf crop required considerable labour with round-up itself consuming an entire day for half a dozen riders. The Miltos branded the calves of their purebred stock before they went to pasture but the commercial beef, which calved later in the spring, were left for an early summer chore.

Ben and Lou Collins, along with Leonard Yeast, would join the three Milto's at the holding corrals where all had ridden their horses the day before. Sven didn't ride but he had plenty of odd jobs to occupy his time while the cattle were being rounded up. He devoted his time to tending gates, corral repairs or windmill maintenance and, using the pickup for a chuck wagon, delivering Mrs. Milto's prepared meals to the riders at various waterholes on the big lease.

The first light of day faintly illuminated the top of the steel-framed windmill as Sven and Milt approached the corrals.

"I hope Whiskey had a good night in that pen," Milt said. "Sometimes he doesn't get along real good with that bay of Lou Collins."

"More's the worry for Lou's horess if Viskery don' like him."

Robert Milto quipped that Sven Larson had been here before Confederation but the Scandinavian, whose age actually favoured the early part of sixty, still held his strong Norwegian accent. When the Milto's bought the ranch, which had less deeded land at the time, Sven came with the package. An excellent operator of machinery and equipment and adept at handling livestock, he fit the bill perfectly, except he flatly refused to ride a 'horess'. Robert Milto's well equipped machine shop was more to Sven's liking as he claimed to have come from generations of blacksmiths in the old country. "If you want shoes for your horess, okay, but Old Sven von't never ride him."

Milt straightened up from pouring the last ration of oats into a small pile for her mother's horse when Ben Collins' old Chevy pickup bounced to a stop near the waterhole that contained the overflow from the windmill's stock trough. Ben's father and Leonard Yeast were with

him. A pair of sharp-tailed grouse, 'prairie chicken,' who had arrived with the sun, drummed away from the water, chuckling vexedly as the men climbed out of the truck.

Ben ambled over to the inner corral where Milt tended the horses. Stretching and yawning the tow-headed lad groaned, "Too early for me to be up."

Milt kept her voice low so Mr. Yeast wouldn't hear. "Maybe you didn't go to bed early enough."

Ben laughed off the innuendo, "No, no, I was workin'... you know sun up 'til sun down."

"Well, it's sun up now."

"Yeah," Ben conceded. "And a fine day it is too!"

The adults exchanged greetings then Mrs. Milto brought out a Thermos of coffee and poured steaming cups for all, warning, "It's black enough for Sven, so brace yourselves."

"Anything different this year?" Leonard Yeast asked of Robert Milto in regards to the round-up.

"No. We'll handle things the same as last year. It seemed to go all right, unless you fellows have any suggestions?"

The six riders had worked together on the round-up for the past two seasons and the work had become somewhat routine. The pasture was divided into thirds with the horsemen covering their area in pairs. The holding corrals were situated near the centre of the lease and all cattle would be driven to this point. A long arm of barbwire fence extended out from a 60 acre holding field where the herd would spend the night; as the round-up teams hazed their bunches up to this fence line it served to divert the cattle into the smaller pasture. Tomorrow, the riders would move the bunch into the sturdily built rough-cut lumber corrals for sorting. Once the calves were separated, branding could begin.

Sven busied himself closing and opening the appropriate gates while the riders caught and saddled their mounts. The hired hand was there to open the corral gate as the cowboys filed out.

“Not riding today, Sven?” Ben Collins goaded as he rode past.

“You just make sure you don' fall off your horess and don' be vorrying about Sven.”

“I heard you used to work for a sheep rancher across the river... You like sheep better than horses?”

“You get down off that horess and I be showen' you how Sven handles young billy goats.”

Connie Milto came to the hired hand's aid. “Sven couldn't have worked across the river, Ben, there's no bridge...”

Everyone laughed and Ben pulled his straw hat low to hide a reddening face.

Milt eased Whiskey closer to Ben's horse, “I told you everyone knew who blew up the bridge.”

Sven called after the young girl, “Don' be vorking that Viskery horess too hard today.”

“I'll be easy on him, Sven, Chase can roust 'em out of the rough stuff.”

The collie, as if on cue, trotted into position behind Milt's buckskin.

Robert Milto reined up his horse before leaving the corral and passed along some last minute instructions to his hired man. The group then loped across the holding pen and paired off in three separate directions.

Cattle trails radiated out from the windmill hub like spokes on a wagon wheel. The relatively flat area encompassing the holding field soon gave way to sharp ridges with deep draws chopped in at their base. Generally, the dips ran east-to-westerly, but in the rugged landscape that now absorbed the riders, no pattern existed. Huge sand dunes swallowed up the prairie grass and

inched their way up and over patches of saskatoon and chokecherry. The sand advanced with the prevailing winds. Here and there plains prickly pear cactus clung tenaciously to an arid existence on the siliceous slopes.

The majority of the bovine contingent were found near the windmills and salt licks. These were relatively easy to round up and head in the right direction. However, as the heat of the day asserted itself, the cows sought refuge in the shadow of dense thickets forcing the chap-clad cowpokes to go in after them. Milt put Chase to work in these situations and angry cows bellowed with fear for their calves as the collie dove in and out, nipping heels relentlessly.

Milt topped a ridge and paused to give Whiskey a breather in the light breeze which skimmed over the hills. The big buckskin's flanks heaved and sweat glistened on his shoulders. Chase stretched out on the grass, panting, tongue lolling and grinning happily. Ben, who worked as Milt's partner, trotted up to the trio. His horse, Scoundrel, was wringing wet and flecks of white foam clung to his chest. Ben lifted his hat and brushed perspiration from his face with a sleeved forearm. Streaks of blood formed on his left cheek where an errant branch had slapped his face.

"Whew! She's gonna be a cooker today," he said. "The beggars keep wanting to head back into that brush. There's one Charolais-cross giving me plenty of grief."

"I'll put Chase on her tail for awhile," Milt offered. "They usually come around to his way of thinking. We've moved them out of the worst of it now."

"Good thing," Ben said. "cause my ol' horse won't last the day at this pace."

"You've had the worst going so far so I'll take your side with Chase. We'll move that Charolais and pick up the rest of this corner. How does that suit you?"

Ben agreed, saying, "I suppose we will catch up with Sven at that mill over that way?"

Milt nodded her response, adding, "It's easy going from there to the holding field."

The tables turned when Chase tried to tune up the stubborn Charolais and she put the run on him. The fleet-footed cow dog let the cow believe she had the upper hand and led her, bellowing, back to the bunch where he quickly dodged behind and nipped viciously at a hock just to reassert his authority.

By the time the blistering sun reached noon the young riders had their herd built and drifting eastward across a large flat. A windmill stood idle at the far edge and the cowboys shifted the herd toward it. Cinches were loosened and the mounts were allowed a short drink at the mill. Milt and Benny then stretched out on the prairie for a brief rest; the ground hitched horses cropped the short grass nearby. Soon, the hired hand, driving Robert Milto's four wheel drive, came idling along the prairie trail leading to the mill.

Chase's tail thumped the ground as the canine cowboy was too tuckered to offer his usual effervescent greeting. Sven lowered the tailgate of the pickup to be used as a table, then poured a small measure of oats on the ground for each horse. The riders took turns doling out some special treats Mrs. Milto had provided for the collie. The young dog's energy soon returned and he trotted ahead of the horses as Ben and Milt rode out again to bunch their now slightly scattered herd.

Milt was able to see the mill at the holding corrals when she and Ben met up with Leonard Yeast and Lou Collins as they brought their herd along towards a fork in the trail. Both older men looked warm from the heat but their horses had not been overworked. By the time the riders reached the holding field, Robert and Constance Milto's bunch could be seen approaching from the far side of the flat. Ben Collins swapped horses with his dad and,

with Milt, Whiskey and Chase, rode out to help the Milto bring their cattle up to the drift fence and into the holding field.

The rancher and his wife had had a larger portion of pasture to cover but the terrain was more forgiving. Their herd comprised about half of the total.

The afternoon had slipped away when at last the three herds were within the confines of the holding field. The riders saw to their horses before congregating around Sven's four-by-four cum 'chuck wagon' to compare notes on the day.

"Bob, when did you put the bulls out?" Lou Collins asked.

"They've been in here just over two weeks now."

"There's one crippled up pretty dang bad over there by the hidden mill. He must have got hurt fighting,"

Robert Milto digested this bit of news. "A young Charolais?" he asked.

"Yeah, yellow tag, number 6-12."

The rancher nodded. "He's one that I bought last fall at the Exhibition bull sale. Is he bologna bound?"

Lou Collins considered. "Well, his hip is either dislocated or broke and he don't get around too good."

"I can't get in there with a stock trailer— it's too rough, and we probably couldn't load him in a truck..."

"Too danged hot to butcher," Leonard Yeast said, "the carcass would come back to life before a feller could get it to a cooler to hang."

Milto said, "I guess... the coyotes have got to eat too. Ben, do you have your rifle with you?"

Lou Collins snorted. "Ever since he bought that old smoke-pole of Pete's, he ain't left the yard without it."

Ben nodded, "Yeah, it's in the truck, Mr. Milto," then, turning to his father reminded him, "It's only half mine, Milt owns the other half."

"Milt be'n doing much shooten' with it?" Lou asked.

The group decided that Ben and Milt would make the journey to the 'Hidden Mill', so called because the water hole was secluded in a low spot among tall dunes and heavy aspen poplar bluffs. They would use Robert Milto's four-wheel drive to ensure passage through several rather long, dry sand blow outs occurring along that part of the trail. Sven and Connie, with Chase in back, returned to the ranch in the other Milto truck while the three ranchers squeezed into the small cab of Ben's pickup.

With the elder Collins driving, the men made a swing through some of Robert Milto's lease where he kept his purebred stock. Lou Collins and Leonard Yeast were anxious to see the progress of the Milto's calf crop. These calves were a product of a continuing artificial insemination program the big rancher had begun several years previously in conjunction with a university research project and the two neighbours hoped to profit in the future using young bulls kept from this herd.

The terrain in the lease where the purebred animals grazed was considerably more forgiving than the pasture where the round-up had taken place and consequently easier on both the suspension of the 16 year old truck and its three occupants. The rancher found the bulk of the bunch lingering near the mill for a cool drink as the slowly sinking sun relented its assault on man and beast for this day.

There was enough light for Robert Milto's neighbours to study the big Charolais calves closely.

"Lord, God!" Leonard Yeast said. "Them danged calves is half-growed already! They're most as big as mine when I wean in October!"

"You wouldn't want to be using that French bull on first calf heifers," Lou Collins said.

The 'French bull' he referred to was a famous Charolais champion from Europe named 'Artiste' and, unbeknown to him, his progeny were springing up on continents all over the world.

Referring to the artificial insemination program, Robert Milto pointed out, "It's labour intensive during the breeding season but a fellow doesn't have to feed bulls all winter either."

"No, I suppose them bulls keep right cool in that liquid nitrogen," Lou agreed. "I prefer the natural method, but a feller can't afford to buy them danged exotic bulls; the bugger might die or go lame on you anyway. So, we grow some danged good bulls now and a man can do his own cullin' down the road."

Robert Milto said, "That's true, if we put the best breeding into our herds today, it will ensure a top placement in the market for our beef in the future."

"You are a man with an eye on the future, Bob. Me, I just look across the fence and take my direction from there," Leonard Yeast said.

"You both ought to envision the future because your kids are going to be part of it."

Lou glanced at Leonard. "Yeah, I suspect Benny and Brenda may be thinkin' bout building a nest afore too long."

The Collins father and son had often shared Myrna Yeast's cooking including turkey feasts at Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving ever since the passing of Lou's wife thirteen years previous so there was no misunderstanding when Leonard said, "You and Ben have been part of the family so dang long now, it might be considered incest."

"So... when are you going to pop the question?" Milt asked as Ben manoeuvred the four wheel drive through a sequence of soft sand stretches.

The young lad turned his head so fast to look at his passenger that he jerked the steering wheel forcing the truck to climb up and straddle the 'wagon rut'.

He glared at her as she smiled back innocently. "I swear, Milt, sometimes you can read my mind."

"It's not psychic; it's just that when you're thinking of Brenda you have this little half grin on your face. I only guessed proposing might be on your mind."

"Well, it's none of your affair but since you poked your nose in anyway, I'll admit we have talked about it some... I just can't get up my nerve... What if she says 'No'?"

"She won't say 'No',"

The trail the pair navigated took an abrupt dip with a sharp bend at the bottom where it cut through a thick stand of black birch. They threaded their way through the trees across a flat area then rose up a sharp incline on the far side. Branches slapped at the West Coast mirrors and clawed at the paint of the truck as the lug tires chewed a foothold.

"Sven won't be pleased if I bring back your dad's truck with no paint on it."

"Sometimes, he has to come this way to check the mill and drop off salt. Not all that often though; I guess that's why the birch is closing in."

"Too much traffic in this dry sand will get the whole pasture blowed into a desert," Ben said.

The incline was so precipitous that evening sky filled the windshield briefly and then the pickup crested and began a slow descent into an open area where a wooden framed Eclipse windmill, a shorter version of the one in the ranch yard, stood silent in the cooling calm of early twilight.

The crippled bull, standing akilter near the water trough, stared balefully at the approaching vehicle. There were no other cattle in the vicinity, Ben noted appreciatively; his Dad and Leonard Yeast were efficient cowpokes: they had missed no animals on the round up.

“Jeez, he’s a fine looking critter,” Ben said as he parked the truck about 50 yards back from the young Charolais bull.

“Polled, too,” he added, noting the rounded forehead typical of cattle that grow no horns.

“It’s a shame to shoot such a prime piece of breeding stock,” Ben said to the stillness, broken only by the creaking of the vehicle’s cooling engine.

He looked over at Milt who stared fixedly at the snow white bovine, its right rear leg lifted up, forward and outward at a strange angle. A ghastly bulge protruded above the hip bone. “The leg isn’t broken,” she said, “it’s dislocated.”

Ben reached behind the truck seat to retrieve the scabbard encased rifle.

“If we could have hauled him out of this hole in the wilderness, maybe Doc Rigby could have fixed him up. As it is, he’ll just go downhill cause he can’t get around to graze and the pickin’s is pretty short near this mill. Sooner or later, the coyotes will get him.”

Milt said nothing.

“He’s better off if we end it now,” Ben said.

Milt made no response, though her lips were moving silently.

Ben said, “We’ll have to move him back a good distance from the water so he don’t pollute the well.”

He stared at Milt, who continued to stare at the animal.

“Where’s that box of bullets, Milt?”

“I planned to be a veterinarian,” Milt said. “It’s what I wanted to be when I grew up.”

“You're hardly grown up now, Milt,” Ben said. “You got plenty of time and all kinds of brains to do that someday... but today isn't that day. And besides, this day is almost over.”

Paying no heed to Ben's common sense appeal, Milt went on, “I watched an operation to fix a cow's hip joint on a video one time...”

“You watched a *what?*”

“I mean a TV show,” she amended.

“Really, Milt. Were they caught in the middle of nowhere, with no equipment, no know-how and in the dark, too?”

“We have ropes and there's headlights on the truck. We can try at least, what can it hurt to try?”

“Well, it's going to hurt that bull a-plenty, cause we don't know what the heck we're doing, Milt. He'd be better off with the coyotes eaten' him alive.”

But Ben looked again at the stricken animal and shared a spark of his young friend's hope. “You can kind of see where that hip joint is popped out, can't you? I mean, just by looking at his structure?”

Ben stepped out of the vehicle and walked nearer the injured beast. The bull did not move away as Ben assessed the situation. Milt came up and stood beside her friend. As though figuring out a puzzle as he spoke, Ben said, “Let's get a rope halter on him and tie his head low on that big black post anchoring the trough... We'll dab a loop on his good hind foot and stretch him out... with the truck. Once he's pinned down with that good leg on the bottom side we can have a look at that joint. But I don't know how you figure to slide that sprung hip back in place - there's fifteen hundred pounds of critter there and he ain't agoin' to believe we're trying to help.”

“He hasn't been injured for long,” Milt persisted. “He doesn't show signs of emaciation, so I'd guess this accident happened quite recently. If we can put the hip back, it might stay...”

Ben Collins demonstrated his prowess with a lariat and soon had the young bull snubbed tight and low on the stout post he had mentioned earlier. Prolonged grief of pain restrained the animal and it cooperated quite well.

“I'll bet this critter was halter broke,” Ben said.

The two young people had to set a loop in the damp earth beside the Charolais' good leg and then push the beast sideways to make him step in the noose. This done, Ben anchored the free end of the second lariat to a tow hook on the front of the truck. Milt backed the vehicle, tightening the rope slowly, while Ben grasped the thick white tail and sharply pulled the off-balance bull over on his side. The animal grunted with pain as the fall knocked the wind out of him and the free leg flopped uselessly.

Milt set the parking brake and, leaving the truck idling to preserve the battery while the pair worked in the headlights, trotted up to assist Ben, who stood panting from exertion.

“Now what?”

“We pull that leg down and away so it can pop back into place.”

“We're fresh out of lariats, Milt.”

“Give me your knife, I'll cut the slack off the one holding his head.”

“That's a twenty dollar lariat!” Ben protested.

“It's a two thousand dollar bull.”

“What! That bull there is worth as much as this truck?”

“He's a champion, Benny, that's why he was halter broke.”

“Well, why ain't this guy back home with all them pretty purebreds, then?”

“Dad figures we need good bloodlines in the beef herd, too; besides, they are mostly part of the AI program. Now, help me tie off this leg.”

Luck was with the young medical team: they found a fence stretcher in the back of the truck. The tool utilized a combination of ropes and pulleys—a block and tackle system—to tighten long strands of barbed wire. With this unit attached to the severed lariat, in its turn looped round the foot of the bull's damaged limb and the opposite end of the tackle anchored to the near leg of the windmill tower, Ben and Milt were able to apply steady and increasing tension on the bull's leg. With the huge appendage stretched out, Milt applied gentle but forceful pressure on the joint, trying to ease the hip back into its socket. Sweat glistened on her face as she pushed desperately on the dislocated joint. Long shadows speared away from the lights of the vehicle and a faint mist of steam rose from the nostrils of the distressed bull. The surrounding darkness hemmed the three beings into a tiny capsule where, for the moment, nothing else existed.

Ben strained on the fence stretcher. “It's no go,” he panted. “I'm pulling so hard the bull is skidding my way. We're apt to dislocate his good leg.”

“Set the lock and help me here, Ben...It's so close. I know it is.”

With both of them pushing on the bulging muscle, there came a sudden, sodden “clunk” and the bulge disappeared. A long, deep groan of relief escaped from the bull.

Milt collapsed face first in the warm white hide.

Ben stood up. Staring in amazement at the greatly reduced mound of muscle and bone, he said, “We did it.”

Milt looked up at Ben, sweat and tears mingled on her cheeks. Damp strands of auburn hair hid her face but the smile beamed through.

“We'll have to get him up right away or he'll stiffen up and be useless,” Ben said.

After Milt retrieved her straw hat, lost in the struggle, she went to the animal's head while Ben let off the tension of the fence stretcher. He then hopped in the truck and eased it ahead to create just enough slack in the lariat holding the bull's good limb.

The creature made no attempt to rise as Ben removed the loosened rope from the back leg and Milt doled out more tether on the make-shift halter. At Ben's suggestion, they kept the halter on and used it to urge the stricken beast to get up. With both young people pulling on the halter shank, the bull soon made an effort. Sore muscles failed to lift his hind end on the first two attempts but, with gentle encouragement from his captors, the invalid finally managed a three-legged, wobbly stance.

Ben held the rope while Milt circled around to the injured side. The leg dangled off the ground a couple of inches but she could see that the Charolais had control of it. Ben urged the animal forward and, as it stepped gingerly on the damaged quarter, a painful groan escaped.. Ben continued to coax the bovine to follow and it gradually but daintily placed more weight on the repaired joint. To the surprise and delight of the medical team, the bull took a long drink from the water trough when Ben led him near.

“He's gonna be alright!” Ben said. “He'll have to be moved home before he tries to impress the cows and re-injures himself. But, he'll be a herd sire next year... which is a whole lot better than being coyote fodder tomorrow.”

The pair left the bull near the windmill and Ben navigated the treacherous trail back to the holding corrals where they paused briefly to check on their saddle horses. The big herd of cattle were quiet on this sultry night, now illuminated by a gibbous moon.

While Milt was fastening the first gate east of the corrals on the trail back to the ranch headquarters, a set of headlights appeared jouncing towards them. Milt climbed back in the passenger's seat and Ben manoeuvred the 4X4 off the trail and parked to await the arrival of the oncoming vehicle.

Sven, driving Robert Milto's second pickup, rolled to a stop beside them, window down on this warm evening.

"Are you lost?" he asked as Chase, who shared the bench seat, crowded the driver for window space.

Milt broke the news before Ben could reply. The dog barked happily when he heard her voice and Sven pushed the nuisance over to the far side of the truck.

"Vot you say?" Sven asked, while rubbing his ear to mitigate the reverberation from Chase's yelp.

"We didn't have to shoot the Charolais," Ben took over the conversation. "Milt, the vet here, put that dislocated hip back in place and the bull got up and ran a few laps around the windmill. He'll be all right in a few days."

"Vell, you can tell everybody the story at vonce, but you best be heading home now, coss your folks be'n gettin' vorried."

Lamps on the large open veranda welcomed invitingly and several rooms were lit up inside as Ben parked in front of the big house. Sven, who stopped to close the last gate, pulled up behind them and climbed out of the truck with Chase, in his excitement, bolting over the hired man. Milt made a fuss over her dog as the group walked to the house.

Robert Milto laughed and his wife beamed with pride as the young people recounted their adventure. Ben made Milt out to be a heroine and downplayed his part in the rescue but there was no denying that the pair had both contributed substantial effort.

“We'd all best get some rest. It's been a long, long day,” the rancher said at length. “Ben, you can take the truck home for the night. Your dad took yours when he and Leonard left a couple hours ago.”

“Although my Dad and father-in-law had been running cattle for twenty five years before Bob Milto showed up in the district, it was his foresight that got us around to thinking seriously about real herd improvement. Descendants of Miltos' purebred stock are among the herd Brenda and I are running today.”

Submitted by Ben Collins

CHAPTER 11

July 1, 1968

Robert and Constance Milto allowed their daughter to sleep though they were up with first light. Branding five or six hundred calves demanded considerable labour in preparation as well as the actual chore. Connie Milto would not be helping at the corrals this day as she was preparing a huge meal to feed the army of volunteers who would be assisting the rancher. The supper had become a community event. More than a hundred and fifty helpers, spouses, girlfriends and bystanders came for the 'entertainment' in previous years and that was a lot of mouths to feed. Robert Milto contracted Stan Olson, a heavy-set Norwegian friend of Sven's, whose forte was the fabulous beef pit-barbecue. Stan would share quarters in Sven's bunkhouse for a day or two leading up to the branding and during that time he would dig a deep pit and burn about two truck loads of wood in it. Most of the wood came from old fence posts, broken corral timbers and trim from the maple lane leading into the ranch yard; when this had burned to a mass of glowing red hot coals, Stan would place large roasts of seasoned beef, wrapped securely in wet cheese cloth and then tin foil, directly upon the coals. He left ample spacing between packets and attached long wires to facilitate removal of the hot barbecued bundles later. The chef then filled the hole with dirt and banked it up, leaving the beef to cook in its underground oven.

Stan Olson had mastered the art of the pit-barbecue and, though he steadfastly refused to share his spice recipe, he welcomed the compliments bestowed upon him. At 5' 7" and 225 pounds, the Scandinavian obviously enjoyed his own culinary skills and certainly wasn't opposed to washing it down with a few beers if occasion presented itself.

Connie Milto was usually assisted in the kitchen by Myrna Yeast and at least one of her daughters. This year Claudette St. Jacques had been persuaded to come and help as well. Mrs. Milto felt that time away from the grieving lady's empty, memory-haunted house might detract from the sorrow, at least temporarily.

When the Miltos first arrived in the Stockton-Prairie Hills district, people were cautious about welcoming the newcomers. Their apparent wealth made local folks envious or nervous and, in the extreme, hostile. The new family worked very hard to overcome the gap. Near neighbours such as Pete Liscombe, the Yeast's, and Ben and Lou Collins soon spread the word that the Miltos were good solid 'folks' and it was Myrna Yeast who saved Connie Milto from a near disaster on the occasion of their first branding five years previous:

The pit-barbecue for a large branding operation was not entirely new to the area; Robert Milto followed example by hiring Stan Olson; what better method of attracting volunteers than providing free victuals? The date had been set and preparations for the round up were in order. It was a Wednesday afternoon, the day before the herd gather and two days ahead of the branding, when Connie visited Myrna Yeast to request assistance with the kitchen chores. Mrs. Yeast advised, "You'll have a lot of roast beef left over from the barbecue, Connie, if you are planning for Friday."

Mrs. Milto was completely mystified by this statement and said as much.

“Half this community belongs to the Roman Catholic faith,” Myrna explained. “Catholics can't eat meat on Friday.”

The Miltos quickly moved the branding ahead one day.

In 1966, the rules changed and, excepting a Hindu high school teacher in Stockton, a vegetarian, everyone could eat beef seven days a week. Robert Milto predicted the decision would boost the beef industry.

This year Myrna Yeast had commenced preparations at home, making twenty five pounds of her locally famous potato salad and various desserts. Claudette St. Jacques offered to bake several dozen buns to bring along on branding day and the three ladies planned to create the remaining food complement for Stan Olsen's barbecued beef in the spacious kitchen of the Milto ranch house. Connie Milto had purchased disposable paper plates to alleviate a portion of the post feast cleaning duties.

The morning of the branding Robert Milto, Sven Larson and Stan Olsen turned to their duties following an early breakfast in the main house. Sven often took his meals with the Miltos and was treated as one of the family; Stan Olsen was naturally shown the typical western hospitality of a guest. The barbecue chef went about his chores, setting up tables and benches for an outdoor feast with a back-up plan to relocate to an emptied machine shed if a sudden thunder shower should come up. Meanwhile, Sven and Robert assembled various paraphernalia for the upcoming job.

The equipment and extra firewood were loaded in the pickup and hauled out to the holding corrals. Horses were fed and watered and the wood was stacked by a shallow fire pit which the two men excavated for the occasion. Dozens of previous fires had left the soil under the new layer of drifted sand a baked and blackened testimony to years of branding at this exact location.

“Voss many hot irons come out of that forge,” Sven said as the two men placed an adequate supply of dry wood in the depression. A steel frame, which Sven had manufactured in the machine shop, was installed near the edge of the pit. Its purpose was to hold up the long handles so the wielders of the branding irons, or 'iron men' would have ease of access to the red hot tools. The irons were rotated to ensure that a fresh one would always be hot. The Milto brand required two applications consisting of a large M slightly above a curved bar: the “Rocking M.”

Two vehicles arrived moments apart as first Milt and Ben Collins pulled up to the fire pit in the Milto's four wheel drive followed by Lou Collins and Leonard Yeast in Lou's truck. Chase had been left behind. Greetings were exchanged and the symbolic thermos of coffee produced.

“Did you Norwegians empty a beer keg last night?” Ben mimicked the hired hand.

“No beer for Sven, I voss out looking for lost kids past my bed time.”

“So, Stan had all the beer to himself?”

“I t'ink Stan had some beers, jah.”

“You'll catch up tonight maybe?” Ben goaded.

Milt noticed a twinkle in the hired man's eyes and his sun wrinkled and deeply tanned face may have turned a shade darker but he quickly hid behind the coffee mug and said nothing.

“Your pony is moving slow this morning; looks like stiffness in his front end, Ben,” Robert Milto said. “You may not want to use him too much today.”

Ben took this news with grave concern, for the saddle horse was to be used for roping calves this day.

Leonard Yeast said, "I heard you and Milt was a couple of danged good veterinarians. You can fix him up, I expect."

The group made their way to the horse corral. Ben examined Scoundrel closely as Milt stood near. "He's sore all right," Ben admitted. "Maybe just stiff though. I'll work him on the round-up this morning and if he's off I'll have to use Dad's horse for ropin'."

Horses were saddled and the riders rode together as they made their way around the sixty acre holding pasture to the far side of the herd. Another beautiful day graced the prairie landscape as the sun climbed higher and hotter. Wildlife had long since retired to the shaded areas and the cattle grazed peacefully on the tough prairie wool of the small, treeless pasture. Several of the nearer cattle watched with mild interest as the horsemen trotted past.

Robert Milto stood tall in his stirrups and said, "Well, I'll be damned!" He urged his horse forward; the others followed suit. Soon all could see the cause of the big rancher's surprise. On the opposite side of the fence, looking baleful as a lost puppy, stood the Charolais bull Ben and Milt had ministered to late last night.

Leonard Yeast said, "By God! That's a dang tough bull to come this far on a game leg, it must be two, three mile back to that hidden mill."

"A rough two or three miles," Ben said.

Robert Milto dismounted and opened the gate that had finally thwarted the bull in his crippled trek down the prairie trail in a valiant attempt to rejoin the herd. Without urging, the animal limped through the opening and walked past the riders.

"He'll be wantin' to get over to that mill, I'll bet," said Lou Collins.

Milt offered to follow the Charolais to ensure no further harm came from other bulls in the field; she would allow the beast a good drink then pen him out of the way of the morning round-up. The others started gathering the herd.

In a short time the cattle were brought in from the holding field and hazed into the large corral complex. Sorting commenced. The bulls were cut out from the bunch early and then the more difficult process of separating cows from their calves began. Ben's horse proved to be too sore from the arduous round-up of the day before. The lad traded horses with his father and Lou turned the injured Scoundrel loose in the horse corral. Milt rode Whiskey, who was learning the cutting business, but he wasn't in the same league as either of the veteran Collins mounts. Robert Milto kept the cows that had already been cut out from breaking back to rejoin their calves. Sven and Leonard handled the necessary gates.

Dust spiralled up in the windless morning air while separated cows and calves bellowed and bawled incessantly. Ben recognized the troublesome Charolais-cross that wore his horse down the day before. The crazed bovine faced the rider, head low, its mouth open; a roar to drown out the entire herd thundered from its core and dirt clods filled the air as she pawed the dry earth. Milt noted the angry beast's intention and, shouting a warning to Ben, the girl slapped heels to Whiskey's flanks and raced across the enclosure to broadside the cow, thwarting an attack on Ben and his horse. The big buckskin's shoulder struck solidly on the near hind quarter, spinning the bovine one hundred and eighty degrees, leaving it pointed towards Robert Milto and the sorted cows. Whiskey left a few cents change on a dime and Milt desperately grabbed the saddle horn as he turned and caught the maddened Charolais-cross again and pushed her toward the gate. Milt regained her seat and yelled, "Lift her out of there,

Chase!” Though the collie was seven miles away, the cow seemed to remember the phrase as she had heard it so often the day before. Head low, she bellowed again, bolted past a laughing Robert Milto and charged out into the holding field.

Sorting went smoothly and quickly; soon all the calves were separated and penned in a large corral. The cattlemen left a half dozen older cows in with the calves to help keep them settled down.

Cinches were loosened and the horses given a sparing drink. Milt climbed in the back of the pickup she and Ben had travelled to the corrals in this morning and retrieved the lunch box. Using the tailgate as a table, the workers gathered round for food and refreshments. The cacophony of the cattle became slightly muted as the human ears adjusted and the company conversed in near normal tones.

“Your horse didn't limber up for you, Ben?” Leonard Yeast asked.

“No, he's pretty stiff and really favouring that right front shoulder. He must have hurt it when we were trying to bring in that miserable Charolais-cross.”

Lou said, “I seen Whiskey fetched her a good thumping today.”

“That cow won't be on the place come winter time, I'll bet.” said Robert Milto.

Ben laughed, “You ought to know.”

“I won't forget either,” Milt said. “She's tagged B324.”

“We'll bring out a stock trailer and haul your horse and that crippled bull home tomorrow,” Robert said. “It'll be a slow trip out of here loaded, but neither animal is able to walk that far.”

“Yeah, we'll trail the rest of these knotheads home tomorrow, too,” Lou Collins put in.

“We really appreciate all the help you fellows are giving us, especially when it's getting so close to haying time. I know you could be busy at home,” Robert Milto said.

“Don't mention it,” Leonard Yeast shrugged. “That's what neighbours is for.”

Dust on the trail announced the arrival of the first of a long string of vehicles transporting the branding helpers.

“Time to fire up the forge, jah?” Sven asked of the rancher. Milto nodded his approval.

The hired hand dumped a hefty portion of a gasoline-used oil mixture over the wood in the pit, then, ensuring everyone was standing clear, struck a wooden match with his thumbnail and tossed it low in the pit. The gas fumes caught instantly and with a loud 'whoosh' the fire took hold. Flames licked at the dry logs and black smoke from the used oil billowed into the sky in an inky cloud. No breeze deflected the smoke as it rose straight up.

Danny Reid, along with Shaun and Dennis Miller, were in the first vehicle that drove up to the branding arena and Ben said, “I figgered a telephone guy might be able to read those smoke signals.”

Dennis Miller said, “Yeah, We thought they were beer clouds.”

As the flames dropped down to a more approachable level, Leonard and Sven placed the branding irons in the rapidly growing bed of coals. Robert Milto and Lou Collins lifted the last of the gear out of the pickup while Milt hastily stowed the remainder of their lunch.

“We stopped by the yard and loaded up that ice cooler unit in Len's pickup,” Danny told the rancher. This chore had been prearranged as Robert had decided to leave the ice bags in the electric freezer at the ranch house as long as possible. He thought the cooler contents would not survive a full day in the hot prairie sun.

“Thanks, Danny,” Robert said.

“Priority one: keep the brew cool.”

More vehicles pulled up and Ralph Osborne, the auctioneer, along with Kent Miller, oldest of the Miller brothers, drove in, towing a small double wide stock trailer. As Ralph parked on a level area a view from the rear showed two saddled horses standing side by side in the trailer.

As Ben and Milt strolled over to help unload the horses a second trailer unit arrived with a single horse in it. The new arrival parked beside the auctioneer's vehicle and Milt recognized the driver: Stockton veterinarian, Stewart Rigby. The vet enjoyed roping calves for the local branding events and was always willing to help the Milts. Naturally, due to the size of their herd, they were preferred customers at his veterinary practice.

Two surprise guests also climbed out of 'Doc' Rigby's truck: Stockton's family physician Dr. O'Brien and a stranger; a tall young lad whom Milt guessed to be around her age, handsome in a pale sort of way. His flashy garb—a Hollywood misconception for a low budget western movie— instantly drew everyone's attention: blue jeans, the preferred choice for men's pants anywhere in the west, but these were a brand new, off-the-shelf, starch stiff pair, somewhat dressy for the occasion and *no one* would dream of donning a pair of 'Cowboy Kings' that hadn't first received at least one workout in the wringer washing machine; a fancy, tooled leather belt with a gaudy buckle the size of a “Chevy hub cap” (Ben Collins's description) circled the slim waist to hold up the new jeans which were tucked *into* a fancy stitched pair of high-top, high-heeled cowboy boots. These were in turn equipped with gaudy metal toe caps and little spurs with useless decorative rowels; a bright red cotton shirt with white satin fringe across the chest and shoulders dazzled the eyes of the

onlookers. The lad's dark curly hair was mostly concealed by a black felt 'cowboy' hat which he wore tilted back high on his untanned forehead.

"Holy Cow!" Ben whispered out the side of his mouth, "his mother should be slapped for dressing him like that."

Milt recovered from her own state of shocked disbelief and gave Ben a glance that said more than words.

"Well..." Ben shrugged.

Ralph Osborne and Kent Miller were at the rear of their stock trailer when Ben and Milto arrived, joined directly by the veterinarian and his entourage. Dr. O'Brien introduced the mystery youth as his nephew, Tom O'Brien, fresh out of Toronto. Milt noted the warm and friendly smile as the easterner swept off his pseudo Stetson to acknowledge her, then turned to Ben and drawled what was meant to be a deep "Howdy, pardner," but his voice broke..

Milt sensed Ben's obvious discomfiture in the presence of the costume and she almost laughed aloud when she caught the sly wink from Tom's uncle, Dr. O'Brien.

Doc Rigby said, "Young Tom here wants to learn the ropes in the cattle business so I figured he ought to get his start on a big spread."

The lad certainly showed enthusiasm as his eyes darted around the scene before him, trying to absorb it all at once. Ben noticed that the kid's gaze tended to refocus on Milt quite often.

Robert Milto came over to the group and, handing Milt a large vaccinating gun, greeted the newcomers. Tom O'Brien demonstrated a more reserved greeting for the tall rancher upon introduction. Robert Milto barely managed to suppress shocked surprise upon hearing the youth's name but he hastily recovered and shook the

youth's hand. A faint glint flashed in the grey eyes. "Pleased to meet you, young Tom O'Brien. We're happy to have the extra help."

Horses were off-loaded and the ropers mounted up. Ben retrieved his dad's horse from the corral, tightened the cinch, lithely swung aboard and rode out into the large calf pen while Sven Larson closed the gate behind him.

A half ton truck, its box loaded with a boisterous lot of high school boys from around the area, joined the growing crowd of vehicles in the sand and sage parking lot. The lads piled over the sides of the truck and, in a troupe, scrambled over the rough plank walls of the corral.

The large herd of calves, along with their chaperones, pressed the far side of the pen, each trying to hide from the human army opposite.

"Jah! The irons are hot," Sven announced, commencing the day's branding.

"Let the games begin," said Shaun Miller.

Ben eased his mount up to the herd, shaking out a large loop in his lariat. The noose snaked out, slapping a big calf low on the hind legs and, as it kicked, the loop fell open and both hind feet landed in the circle of the hemp. With a lightning fast jerk, Ben pulled up the slack, cinched the noose, then dallied two quick turns around the sturdy saddle horn while simultaneously urging his pony to drag the startled, struggling bovine near the fire. Shaun and Dennis Miller, twins and veteran calf wrestlers, were on Ben's prize immediately. The calf's hind legs were slightly off the ground as the rope remained taut and Shaun moved to the back end of the squalling animal and grabbed the tail. With a deft movement up and back, he pulled the calf onto its side and Dennis quickly pinned the front end, grasping a foreleg and folding the hock and knee forwards, immobilizing the animal's shoulder.

While Dennis secured the front end, Shaun, in a fluid movement, grasped the top rear leg and stretched it out while seating himself on the ground behind the calf and firmly pushed a booted foot against the knee joint of the lower leg. This movement loosened the loop around the hind feet .

“Geeze! Ben, this calf is half a cow! Did you have to warm us up on the biggest of the bunch?” Shaun said as he slipped the slackened noose off to allow the roper freedom to select another critter.

Ben flashed his broad grin, “Hang on to him,” and rode back to the herd.

Shaun looked at Dennis. “Rocking M... right side? left side?”

“Oh God, don't tell me we have to flip this big brute,” Dennis groaned.

Sven appeared with a red hot branding iron. “Rocking M, right hip, jah, you have him godt.”

“Jah, we got him godt,” Dennis nodded to his brother.

“You mock ol' Sven and there be Rocking M on more than the calf, jah?” the Norwegian growled.

“Don' mock ol' Sven,” said Shaun.

“Jah, don' mock ol' Sven,” said Dennis.

Acrid yellow smoke billowed up from the burning hair as Sven firmly applied the hot M and the big calf vainly struggled against the straining youths. Lou Collins stepped in with the Rocking iron immediately as Sven finished and Milt ducked past the smoke, calling a greeting to the Miller boys as she knelt down to press the needle of the vaccinating gun into the young bovine's shoulder. She squeezed the handle and then, holding the skin of the puncture, extracted the needle and gave the area a brief massage. She quickly stepped back and went in search of the next patient.

“It's a bull,” Dennis called out to Leonard Yeast, who performed the duty of 'knife man', castrating the males.

“Horns?” Sven asked.

Dennis felt the sides of the calf's upper forehead to check for the telltale nubs which would grow into horns. If the animal had these protrusions, they must be removed or the owner would suffer a percentage loss when the beast went through the sales ring in the fall. Horns were also not a desirable trait on heifers, which may be kept for replacements in the breeding herd. Cows with horns soon learned how to cause trouble in the confines of the winter feed lot.

“Yep! Horns too,” Dennis said.

Fred Moffat appeared with the paraphernalia for dehorning. The farmer gave no indication but he must have been torn apart inside. His son Les had been a willing and sturdy hand at community brandings. The lad's quick wit and ready grin were always at the forefront of the branding banter between ropers and rasslers.

“This one gets the whole treatment, Fred,” Shaun said.

“Looks like quite a few polled ones here, though.” Fred knelt down and began to apply the caustic paste to the budding horns.

A brilliant flash of scarlet swept by the group and Leonard Yeast looked up from his neutering operation. “Nut pail,” he said to Tom O'Brien, who had been assigned the less dignified job of collecting the 'prairie oysters', as the knife man extracted the testicles from the bull calves. The lad sauntered up, extending the pail towards Leonard, nervously reluctant to come too close.

“Bring it over here where I can reach,” Leonard said. “The calf won't bite you.”

The easterner stepped closer. “I hain't skeared of the calf, it's that knife that spooks me!”

Fred, Shaun and Dennis laughed.

“Leonard went all last year with only one mistake,” Shaun said.

“One mistake?”

“Yeah,” Shaun continued. “Len's so fast that he had brother Dennis here,” he indicated with a nod, “half done before we could get him stopped.”

“I didn't complain at all though,” Dennis said.

“That would take balls,” Tom said, the faintest trace of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Leonard dropped the second oyster in the pail, sloshed disinfectant in the incision and stood up. “All done?” he asked the Millers.

‘Horns done,” Fred said as he rose and stepped away.

“Branded,” Dennis said.

“Vaccinated,” Shaun affirmed.

“Let 'em go.”

Dennis released the back leg as Shaun held the front down and, a second later, let go of the foreleg, stood up and stepped back in one motion. The calf lay still for a moment then leaped to its feet and bounded away to rejoin his comrades.

Elsewhere calves were being held down by other wrestling duos, ropers were casting their lariats and the various technicians performed their duties. There were six wrestling teams and four horsemen. Fred Moffat could single-handedly keep up with his duties as dehorner since many of the animals were of a polled ancestry. Leonard Yeast, on the other hand, needed help occasionally when several bull calves were 'on the ground' at once. Robert Milto assisted with the castrating and branding while at the same time keeping an eye on the overall procedure.

Kent Miller towed a large Charolais calf roped by one leg. The struggling animal cavorted back and forth in a semicircle behind the rider. Shouts and yells ensued as the young bull caused pandemonium among the ground crews who hastened to dodge the taut lariat scything past them. Two 'rasslers' desperately chased the beleaguered animal, trying to grasp the elusive rope. Tom O'Brien, with the

oyster pail in hand and unaware of the danger, became stranded between bovine and horse as the runaway calf continued to dance a three legged swath across the corral.

Milt shouted, "Watch out, Tom!" as the bewildered youth darted a fearful look to right and left, looking for an escape route. Just before the lariat made contact, the easterner leaped in the air, scissoring his long legs and cleared the rope, while continuing to retain his grip on the oyster pail. He landed on his feet on the safe side of the rope as Danny Reid finally managed to grasp the lariat and anchor the calf. The boy's black cowboy hat had fallen off and landed in the path of the errant little bull.

Milt dashed over to him and, as Tom stooped to retrieve his battered *sombrero*, asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm all right but my hat is slightly *a-bashed*."

"It's too hot for a felt hat anyway," Milt said.

"Nut pail," Leonard Yeast shouted from his operating position across the corral.

Tom trotted away and Milt, with vaccinating gun in hand, quickly turned to inject the cause of the melee as it now lay subdued, stretched out on the gritty hardpan of the corral.

The branding had reached one side or the other of the halfway point when Leonard Yeast's pickup, driven by his wife, Myrna, pulled into the outer corral and parked near the fence just opposite the branding fire. Claudette St. Jacques rode in the cab with Mrs. Yeast while Myrna's daughters, Brenda, Betty-Anne and Jocelyn, shared the truck box with Constance Milto and Valerie Reid. A large deep-walled circular wash tub with a plywood lid occupied the remainder of the space in the bed of the truck. Ice cold water had been sloshing out around the edges of the tub and Brenda's barefooted younger sisters were dabbing their bare toes in the rivulets then flicking the water at her.

“Hey, the beer truck's here!” Ben announced from his vantage point astride his father's bay.

Robert Milto called a halt to the ropers who soon strapped their lariats to saddles, dismounted, loosened cinches to give the horses a break and made their way to the fence. As soon as the last of the caught calves received their respective ministrations, the ground crew also headed for Leonard Yeast's pickup. A brief beer break ensued as most of the parched crew partook in a cold one.

Ben took a swallow from his chilled Bohemian and grinned over the top of the bottle at Tom O'Brien, whose curly dark hair was no longer obscured by the heavy black hat. “That was an Olympic standing jump you done, clearing that lariat. I figured for certain we'd be salving you down for third degree rope burns.”

“Pretty good for an Oyster Man,” Danny Reid said. “And doing a fine job at that, too.”

Tom accepted the banter. “Oh yeah, a genuine *pearl*. I thought prairie oysters were just a western tall tale.”

Danny said, “Oh no, Tom, when the ladies have those little morsels prepared and fried up they make the very finest of western 'hors d' oeuvre'.”

Shaun Miller asked, “You sure you said that right, Danny?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Do you think you could give me a few lassoing lessons, Ben?” Tom asked.

“Sure, lesson number one... we don't say lasso around here; that one's free, the rest are extra.”

“How much?” .

Doc Rigby now entered the conversation. “Ben Collins Private Roping Lessons... How could you put a price on that?”

“Hey, Doc, I been noticing that loop of yours doesn't always land anywheres near the calf. Is that a new rope trick?” Ben asked.

More jibes went about until Ben allowed he could give the greenhorn a few free tips on tossing a loop.

“But you best practice on the ground before trying it off a horse. You'll wind up with the rope around your neck on a runaway nag.”

“Then I might get the *hang* of it,” the Torontonion said.

“Oh, God, “ Ben groaned, “put me back on my horse.”

Except for the mare Ben was using for roping, the round-up horses had been turned loose in the horse corral before the branding began. Now the sturdy little bay showed signs of strain as Ben's unerring rope had accounted for a large percentage of the caught calves. She had also worked a rough shift on round-up the day before. The unrelenting sun took a toll on man and beast. Milt followed the roper over to the horse when the beer break ended.

“She's growing weary, Ben,” Milt said as the roper tightened his cinch.

“Yeah, I wish Scoundrel hadn't come up lame this morning. He's a lot younger and stronger.”

“You can use Whiskey if you want.”

Ben's face lit up. “Really? Wow! That's quite an offer, Milt. Nobody's be'n on that horse but you in four years!”

“I'll talk to him, Ben. I've been practising roping fence posts off him and he's hauled some stuff around at the end of a lariat.”

“Yeah, like Pete Liscombe's pig fence.”

Milt caught and bridled her buckskin while Ben stripped saddle and gear from his dad's mare. He then hurriedly strapped his rig on Whiskey.

Roping had resumed when Ben proudly guided the big gelding into the calf pen. Whiskey went to work like he'd been a roping horse all his life and Ben's loop never failed as he sought and caught the dwindling number of unbranded calves.

During the latter part of the operation, Tom O'Brien, without reluctance, had relinquished his 'Oyster Man' duties to the two younger Yeast daughters and, under Milt's watchful guidance, proceeded to master the art of vaccination.

Milt demonstrated how to gently, but fast and firmly, insert the needle subcutaneously in the soft skin of the animal's shoulder area.

"Be sure you don't push it in a fold and out the other side, and keep the needle in place until the full measure is injected. It is safer to give the wrestlers time to have the calf subdued before stepping in close with that little weapon."

Milt showed Tom that the gun could be pre-set for a determined amount and then demonstrated the technique of filling the syringe from the glass bottles of vaccine being refrigerated in a small ice chest which also served as oyster locker.

"And don't poke yourself or the wrestlers."

"I'll make a point of it."

Following a turn at vaccinating, Shaun and Dennis Miller were happy to give Tom calf wrestling lessons. The athletic youth demonstrated his strength when Doc Rigby hauled a particularly large calf in to the operating room.

"You're a natural," Shaun said.

"Yeah," agreed Dennis. "What do you practice on down east?"

The breathless lad didn't have time to respond for at that instant the calf put up a violent struggle as Lou Collins applied the iron.

Pressure for the ground crews eased as the ropers took longer to ferret out their targets and sometimes only one or two animals were on the ground. Finally Ben and Whiskey dragged the last struggling calf up to the fire and the Miller brothers claimed it.

Tom then had the honour of placing 'The Rocking M' on the right hip of the elusive final calf of the day. Dennis Miller had to stop the lad from making a quarter circle W as he nearly applied the irons upside down.

Ben Collins slowly coiled his lariat and wound a supple leather thong around to secure rope to saddle then hooked a leg around the horn and sat semi-cross wise, comfortably surveying the procedure from atop Milt's buckskin horse. "We'll have to put you on the payroll," he said when Tom had completed his task.

Lou Collins relieved the Torontonion of the still hot irons and dipped the ends in a pail of used motor oil near the fire while Tom queried Ben about some riding lessons.

"Well, I'll tell you what," said Ben, "there are a couple of big steers in this bunch that was born early on and they didn't need no work today on account of they was branded before being turned out in the spring. We could put a rope on them big fellers and we could do some steer riding - put on a bit of a ro-de-o for the folks."

Tom's eyes grew big upon hearing this opportunity. He was stuck for a pun.

"You mean it? Steer riding?"

Ben said, "Yep, steer riding, no *bull*."

A crowd had begun to gather as the two lads were talking. Most of the listeners, having already made a stop at the beer trough, were holding a bottle of ale. Doc Rigby held a brew in one hand and his horse's reins in the other, likewise did Kent Miller.

Doc set his beer in the shade of a corral post and said, "We'll catch them for you,".

“Head or heels?” Kent asked as he slipped a toe in the stirrup and swung aboard his roping pony.

Doc smiled, “I’ve seen enough calf behinds today, how about if you score the feet?”

Brenda Yeast walked up to Ben and Whiskey and said, “Ben, you be careful, we’ve had a few injuries already, Danny got kicked in the knee, now he’s limping around like Pete Liscombe on a cold day and some of the wrestlers got pretty good rope burns. Besides, haven’t you had enough riding?”

Ben blushed. “They’re just big calves, dear. I’ll be all right.”

Milt brought the shortened piece of rope she and Ben had cut last night while working on the injured bull.

“Good thinkin’, Milt. That will work just fine for riggin’,” Ben said.

Doc Rigby and Kent Miller quickly had one of the big steers stretched out and anchored between their two horses. Shaun Miller slipped the severed length of lariat around the animal’s girth and, with Dennis’s help they rolled the three-quarters grown calf on to its belly. Then Shaun said to Tom, who was donning a pair of thin leather gloves loaned by another wrestler. “Tuck your hand through under here, palm upwards, snug the loose end of the rope back around your fingers and into your hand and grip it tight. When you’re ready, nod. We’ll pull the ropes off both ends when the riders give us some slack. When he jumps up, you hang on and ride ‘im. Danny’s got a stopwatch, when ten seconds are up, if you’re still aboard, one of the riders will come up beside you and help you off.”

Dennis, punching the wrinkles out, handed Tom his black hat. “This’ll let everybody know you’re a cowboy. Screw it on tight.”

Several emotions vied for first place on the determined easterner's visage but fear was not among them.

Settled down on the steer, knees clamped tight, Tom gave a curt nod and the boys pulled the bonds free. At first, the ride appeared anti-climactic as the dazed calf took a few seconds to realize he was free and then deliberated about the burden bolted to his back. Dennis swept off his straw hat and swatted the animal across the rear.

That put the wheels in motion.

Onlookers shouted advice and encouragement to the dark haired greenhorn as he rode the young bovine. The steer performed a commendable job of twisting, turning and spinning around the arena in every effort to dislodge his human cargo but Tom O'Brien hooked his heels in under the flanks and managed to stay astride. Finally, Kent Miller, the pick up rider, guided his horse in close to the bucking steer and helped lift Tom free.

Whistles and cheers went up from the bystanders as Tom dropped clear of the horse and rider, faced the crowd and, doffing his dusty black hat, made a deep sweeping bow.

Benny Collins' wide grin hid his face as he commended the Easterner. "Good ride, Toronto," he said. "Now, you just hop up on that rail right there; let me show you how it's done."

Kent and Doc Rigby roped and stretched out the second calf and Ben was soon strapped astride the inert animal, which demonstrated a more feisty reluctance to human handling. As Ben gave the signal and the ropes came off, the steer, with no urging, sprang into action. Knees clamped hard and heels raking, Ben held tight with his right hand and kept his left free from touching the bucking, bellowing bovine. Steer and cowboy performed a genuine crowd pleaser. When Danny Reid announced

the ten second time was up, the veterinarian —cum pick up rider— rode in to help Ben free of his bovine 'bronc'. Still on the run, Doc pulled Ben clear but his arm slipped and the young cowboy lost balance as the ground swept his feet out from under him. Ben managed a sideways roll to avoid the feet of Doc's horse but, unfortunately, the calf, running along side, caught him on the side of the head with a hind foot.

Momentum kept Ben rolling for another half turn and he lay ominously still. Doc kept the frightened calf away from the inert cowboy as it broke to rejoin its comrades at the far end of the corral.

Momentarily shocked, the crowd stood in silence then, as one, everyone rushed to the stricken lad. The first to reach his side was Brenda Yeast. "Oh, Benny!," she cried, as she knelt beside him and cradled a limp hand in both of hers.

The crowd made room for Lou Collins and Doctor O'Brien to come through. Tears welled up in Brenda's eyes and Lou's face was ashen as they watched the physician examining Ben. After checking the pulse, the doctor turned to the bruised cut trailing a trickle of blood down Benny's face.

"He's taken a pretty stiff rap on the head, but he's just knocked out," Dr. O'Brien said. "The heart beat is strong, he should come round soon."

At that moment, Ben's eyes flickered and he groaned as pain obscured his vision. Slowly he moved his free hand to touch upon the sore spot. Gradually, objects swam into focus and the first thing he saw clearly was the worry in the tear-filled blue eyes of his pretty girlfriend.

"Brenda, darlin', will you marry me?" he asked.

"Oh, Benny!" Brenda gasped again and, mindless of the dust and blood, kissed his face. She whispered, "Yes, I'll marry you!"

Dr. O'Brien smiled. "He'll be okay."

Lou Collins straightened up, his relief audible as he said, “I guess he *needed* a good knock on the head.”

Dennis Miller broke the tension; throwing his hat in the air, he howled, “Hooooly shit! Benny's gettin' married!”

His brother Shaun yelped, “Let there be beer!”

...Brandings today are very similar to the way we did things when I was a kid, in fact, nothing much has changed since my father was a lad back in the old 'dipping vat' days. One occasion truly stands out in my memory, though, for two reasons, and that was a branding we held over at the Milto spread in the late sixties. For one thing, it happened to be the day Brenda and I became engaged and secondly, Tom O'Brien was there and he rode a steer. Everybody in Canada knows Tom O'Brien, the famous statesman and politician, but not everyone realizes that that same Tom O'Brien, city boy from Toronto, once won the title of World Champion Bull Rider at the National Finals Rodeo and he made his first ride right here....

Submitted by Ben Collins

CHAPTER 12

July 1968

Long summer days meant more hours of work for Danny Reid as the young lineman maintained and upgraded the existing plant during these months when weather conditions favoured outdoor commitments. In addition, this year two new farm yards were being established in the area for young farmers who had recently married and set up a home of their own; a telephone was a necessity, not a luxury as it had once been. Danny initiated and designed the new pole line construction jobs, then hired and assisted the imported crew contracted for the projects. The contractors worked quickly and efficiently but the rural man necessarily dedicated many hours to the line construction as well.

The next generation farmers whom the telephone lines were for would be diversified operators like their parents, having grain land, a few cattle, farrowing pigs, maybe sheep, a horse or two and probably a flock of either chickens, ducks, turkeys, geese or a factor of all four. Mixed farming was a mixed blessing, with no end to chores, but a satisfaction of self sufficiency and working for yourself. The young people bore the marks of a tough climate and long hard days of labour a decade before middle age set upon them. Each year brought some minor advancement; perhaps the proverbial light at the end of

the tunnel grew imperceptibly brighter, obvious as the retreating of an ice age, but hearts beat strong and hope rode proud in Next Year Country.

Danny shared the joys and sorrows of his country cousins and enjoyed an intimacy with them closer than their barber. Stalwart sons and grandsons of the pioneers, men who had seen the days of horse, the iron wheel and the threshing machine draw to a close, would confide in the local lineman. They would openly discuss planting a crop of barley here, maybe spring wheat or durum over there and they invariably told him how the yield was running at harvest time. Danny heard all the stories and listened with an attentive ear: "Hoppers took it all in June; most of that piece was hailed; a touch of late frost; it's higher than my truck; she's a bumper crop; maybe next year..." He offered no opinion, only a nod of agreement or a shake of his head in sympathetic disbelief. No one wanted answers, just an understanding audience. Several of the more seasoned veterans were more philosophical about the highs and lows of the industry; one octogenarian summed it up when he related a conversation he had had with a 'young,' neighbour, fifty-six years of age.

"He tol' me, he said 'After thirty-seven years in the business, Andrew', he said, 'I finally got this farming thing figured out.' Well, I said, 'Yessir, I thought that too when I was your age.'"

Rare would be the occasion when Danny appeared at a farm on a trouble call to find no one there. Folks didn't travel far or often, but doors were never locked and people expected Danny to "go on in" if they weren't home. At the start of his career as Stockton's rural lineman, locals were hesitant with the young stranger, but news spread quickly, thanks, in part, to the kind words of Vera Mitchell. Danny had earned the respect he now claimed. He seldom packed a lunch, for the hospitality of farmers and ranchers would not allow someone to work on their premises

without taking meals with the family. Often Danny would be repairing a stretch of line along a remote and seldom travelled road when a farmer would idle up in his farm truck insisting that the lineman join his family for dinner.

On this day meals were of less concern, but Danny especially appreciated the incredibly beautiful weather. He endured a couple of personal problems which would have seemed compounded by a bad bout of climactic vengeance: The top of the steel shank on his climbing spurs coincidentally met with a painfully swollen and bruised area on the inner side of his right knee where one of the Milto's fractious calves had kicked him during the previous day's branding. The soreness made him wince at every step up and down the new poles on which he was tying in line; a second, minor problem was a slightly swollen head from drinking to the health of Ben Collins and his bride-to-be, Brenda Yeast. However, reflection upon the events of the previous day and evening overshadowed the aching. Danny found himself grinning 'out loud'....

After watching Benny walk out of the corral under his own steam, a limping Danny helped Robert Milto inspect the newly branded calves to ensure there was no excess bleeding or other damage. Many of the animals showed slight stiffness, but, for the most part, they just wanted to find their mothers. Satisfied for the moment, the men then began to haze the young bovines into the holding field to join their frantic mothers. As the two herds merged, the din of bellowing that had faded to a constant level of background noise, doubled and rose to a deafening roar with the occasional individual bellow breaking loud above the rest. A considerable amount of

time is required for five hundred cows and calves to sort out who belongs to who and they make no mistakes. A thirsty calf will try to adopt the first udder it sees but the mothers are more particular.

“We’ll leave the gates open so they have access to the mill,” Robert Milto said, “and I’ll come back later to check one more time. If they’re all mothered up, I’ll turn them loose before dark.”

Horses were watered and those that had been hauled to the corrals were loaded in their respective trailers. It was decided that the round-up horses would spend another night in the horse pen. They were led to water at the mill and Milt poured each a ration of oats. She took the burlap sack which served as feed bag over to the small pen where the crippled Charolais bull was corralled and gave him a generous portion. She smiled when the young bovine greedily fed on the grain, a sure sign he was on the road to better health.

Ben, with a startlingly white bandage over the cut on his head, brought a pail of water from the trough. Brenda followed behind, toting a rubber feeder which had been near the mill serving as a dispenser for mineral supplement. Brenda dropped the container inside the pen and Ben dumped the water in it, saying, “That ought to hold him 'til mornin’.”

Danny and Robert Milto had come over to check on the Charolais' progress and the rancher proudly recited the determined effort Benny and Milt had exhibited in preserving the life of the young bull. Though not from a cattleman's background, the telephone lineman could not fail to detect the obvious quality of blood lines in the lame animal. “Good thing they were able to save him.”

Many of the vehicles had departed, heading back to the ranch yard. The ladies, except for Brenda, who had arrived in Leonard Yeast's half ton, were the first to leave, but not before Shaun and Dennis Miller had wrested the

beer tub from the back of the truck and moved it to their pickup where most of the young 'rasslers' were now enjoying a boisterous conversation.

"Come on over for a beer," Shaun called to the group gathered at the bull's pen.

"Yeah, Ben, if your wife will let you," Dennis added, eliciting loud guffaws from his comrades.

By the time Danny and the remainder of the branding crew were ready to leave the corrals, the bawling of the herd had begun to subside; mothers and babes were reunited. The searing sun, like Hell's own branding iron earlier in the day, had begun to relinquish the smoking heat as it sank to summer's five o'clock position. A faint haze, more scent than visible, of alkali dust hung in the air around the pens and Danny inhaled the view as he stood beside the opened door of the Miller's pickup.

A host of subtle sensations stopped time to hold the moment.

His own perspiration mixed with the dust and grime of the corral floor caked Danny's body and traces of cow manure and blood clung to his jeans. The smell of the burning calf hair permeated his clothes. Horse sweat and saddle leather, even the faint hempen odour of the lariats still teased his nostrils. Distant sounds echoing back reverberated in this moment's reflection. He heard the shouts of the 'rasslers', the sizzle of the branding iron, the bawling of the calves above the distant blended roar of the cows, the wind of the cowboys' whirling loops, the jingle of rowels on spurred boots, grunts of the roping ponies straining to drag and anchor struggling calves, creaking saddles and cussing cowboys. He felt again the jerk of the rope in his gloved hands, the burn of hemp across a bare forearm, the dull ache in his calf-kicked knee and the tired but uncomplaining strain in every muscle and sinew....

The interlude vanished abruptly as Shaun Miller said quietly, "You coming, Danny?"

“Oh! Sorry, my mind just wandered off for a moment.” Favouring the sore leg, Danny hopped into the cab and said, “That was a really good day.”

The pole lead the lineman now worked on ran parallel to a recently upgraded trail that led to the new farm location of Kent Miller. The young farmer and his bride, Wendy, had recently moved their mobile trailer home from its temporary residence at his father's farm. They were in the process of setting up their own establishment in a beautifully treed yard, abandoned during the 'Dirty Thirties' by the original homesteaders.

The new double strand of steel line ran two miles north from an existing east-west triple circuit, six pin crossarm lead. The line crew hired by the rural telephone company had set the poles and were now stringing the steel. Danny assisted with the tying in of the open wire. This job necessitated climbing each pole to fasten the line to heavy glass insulators. The insulators were threaded on sturdy oaken side-blocks which had been double spiked on opposite sides of the telephone poles near the top. Usually, for this job, the lineman would strap a bundle of tie wires to his climbing belt and hike down the line, attending each new pole as he reached it, but today the sore knee forced him to drive his line truck between spans. Unfortunately, climbing in and out of the vehicle proved almost as painful as walking.

The fuzzy beer haze of a small hangover gradually dissipated and, as the lineman worked methodically, the stiff and sore muscles, unused to the labour of calf wrestling, limbered up; even the pain in the right leg faded to a dull ache. Danny's thoughts returned to the branding....

The evening that followed turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable occasion. By the time the last of the crew had reached the ranch, those in charge of preparing the meal were almost ready to ring the dinner bell. Towels, wash basins, soap and water were set up on the porch for the help to scrub up, as many of the young lads were too reticent to venture inside the big ranch house. They filed past, jostling one another and keeping up a constant banter. After a hasty wash they gravitated toward the barbecue pit. Stan had reopened the subterranean oven to extract the roasts of beef. The delicious scent was overpowering as the Norwegian chef opened the first package in preparation for carving.

Myrna Yeast's shrill and commanding voice caught everyone's attention as she emerged from the house with a large tray held above, or more accurately, resting upon her ample bosom. Almost as round as she was tall, Myrna's culinary skills were well known in the district. Her husband Leonard, a comparatively spare man, said affectionately that though his wife seldom missed *watching* an episode of Ed Allen's fitness program on television she never seemed to lose much weight. Her offering consisted of little roasted meat morsels skewered on wooden tooth picks and spread out on the serving platter. With a flourish she placed the hors d'oeuvre on the nearest table.

"Now, hold on a minute," she addressed the crowd, "I understand Dr. O'Brien's nephew is responsible for collecting most of these treats so, let him be the first to sample." Tom O'Brien tried to duck out of sight behind a group of branding hands but was ushered to the fore and propelled reluctantly toward Mrs. Yeast, who waited with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Go on, Tom, try one. You can't be a bull rider if you don't eat Prairie Oysters," Ben said.

The Torontonion paled slightly and his Adam's Apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed.

“Well, come on, lad, eat 'em while they're hot,” Myrna said.

The crowd waited in amused silence as Tom delicately picked up a tooth pick and briefly examined the oyster. With a flare he waved it under his nose, sniffed twice, then popped the morsel into his mouth. The youth closed his eyes and chewed thoughtfully, savouring the attention as well as the tidbit.

“Ah... not too dry... not too sweet... a mild but distinct 'nutty' flavour; a delicious and rare vintage indeed.”

He helped himself to a second.

Danny gorged himself on the fantastic feast the Milto family provided. Stan Olsen's pit barbecued beef topped even the chef's own expectations. The ravenous branding crew returned for second and, in several instances, third helpings of roast, potato salad, baked beans and fresh dinner buns loaded with homemade butter. Danny overheard Leonard Yeast complimenting Constance Milto, “You're one helluva woman, Connie,” he said. “Ride a danged horse rounding up cows all one day and the next, cook up a feast like this.”

“Why, thank you for the compliment, Leonard, but I really must share the credit for the meal with all this 'danged' good help I've had.”

Then, just when everyone appeared ready to split at the seams, Claudette St. Jacques, Val Reid and Myrna Yeast dished up huge bowls of home made ice cream. Myrna pointed out that the delicious dessert was compliments of Ben Collin's jersey cow, Josie.

“Pete Liscombe's old cow,” Lou said.

“By the way, where is Pete today?” Fred Moffat asked of Lou as Val Reid passed him a heaping bowl of ice cream.

“He's out west visiting a brother or sister or some other relate.”

“I guess haying time isn't a concern for Pete no more,” Fred said.

The big meal had temporarily stemmed the beer tide for Danny, probably saving him from a more severe headache today. He wondered how his branding cohorts had fared. The younger cowboys had washed down the supper, even the ice cream, with a steady flow of ale; most of them stretched out on the green lawn grass with a fresh bottle after the feast.

Thoughts of drinking a cold beer did not appeal to Danny this morning....

The ladies, including Dr. O'Brien's wife, Rita, who had arrived with Vera Mitchell in time for the supper, were enjoying a few glasses of wine while attending to the crew. Myrna Yeast re-enacted Tom O'Brien's oyster test to the great amusement of her companions.

Sven Larson had disappeared to his bunkhouse immediately following the meal. He emerged, clean shaven, scrubbed almost pink, his greying hair slicked down. He had a fresh white shirt and an almost new pair of blue jeans.

Paying no attention as Shaun Miller whistled and crowed, “Holy cow, Sven, Benny ain't gettin' married *today*,” the hired man walked a determined bee line toward the group of ladies. Vera Mitchell stepped forward, her hands outstretched, to meet him. “You look nice, Sven,” she said.

A slight breeze would have floored the entire gobsmacked crowd.

As one, they stared open mouthed and speechless. All the gossips, the 'rubber-necks' on the party lines, the prairie rumour mill, and even coffee row had not an inkling of the tender affection blooming right under their collective noses.

Sven reached in his pocket and pulled out a small item that glinted in the evening sun. Still holding the hand of the lady most well known by her voice saying "Operator," he addressed the group. "Yo'ng Benny, he's not the only von to be getting married," and he slipped the tiny ring on the unresisting finger.

Several of the ladies had a tear in their eye. Robert Milto shook Sven's hand, "Congratulations... to both of you!"

Dennis Miller hooted, "Holy sh... cow! Is there anybody else?" And then, dropping to one knee, called across the circle, "Hey, Milt, will you marry me?"

Later, Vera confided to Danny, who was even more astonished than the others, that the couple had chosen to make the announcement at the branding event so that a reasonable group of friends would have the information first hand and not be disappointed to hear it as gossip. Danny said, "Perhaps you should have rung out a 'General' from the office!"

Vera was vague in her response when Mrs. O'Brien inquired as to plans for the soon-to-be-new couple's future.

"We aren't sure yet... My job as telephone operator will soon be defunct. Maybe Danny can fill you in on those details"

Rita O'Brien shifted her focus to the lineman as folks who had overheard Vera tuned in to the conversation.

"Well," Danny said, "Stockton is advancing a step in the communications industry; over the course of the next year or so all the phones will be changed to rotary dial.

No more cranks. And with the dial phones comes mechanical switching, which eliminates Vera's operator position."

An excited murmur rippled through the crowd and the telephone man became the centre of attention.

"How will we call long distance then, Danny?" Fred asked.

"There will be people in the bigger centres to handle the traffic, but 'out of' and 'in to' Stockton calls will be completely automated."

"No more 'Generals'," Vera smiled sadly.

Connie Milto, a glass of wine in her hand, said, "New phones! Will they have Name and Number display?"

Robert Milto turned a surprised glance at his wife who paled, then blushed scarlet.

"Will they have what?" Danny asked.

"Connie," Robert chastised, "You've been reading too much science fiction. Next thing you'll expect them to put a man on the moon."

Fred Moffat interjected, "Hey, that might happen sooner than we think. I read an article the other day that said the Americans are planning a manned launch to the moon next year."

Constance Milto's words drifted on the outer rim of Danny's conscience as he spurred in the maiden tracks to the top of the next new pole on this bright sunny morning.

"*Name and number display*," he repeated aloud. "What *futuristic fiction magazine* had she been reading?" Deft fingers quickly double looped the middle portion of the tie wire around the insulator and spun the tails out both ways along the steel line. Belted in at the top, the lineman removed his supple gauntlet gloves and set them on the pole. He brushed sweat from his forehead with a sleeved arm and shifted his hip to a more comfortable

position. A light stab of pain from the bruised knee forced him to readjust again, then, resting comfortably, Danny reviewed yesterday's scene in his mind's eye. The sudden shocked look on Robert Milto's features seemed an overreaction for his wife's exuberant outburst and why had she coloured so rapidly after saying it? Admittedly, everyone was excited about the prospect of having the new dial telephones as they had all seen them in the city or, at the least, on television. This will be a big step toward modernization, the rural people believed, but still, Danny considered, something wasn't quite kosher with the Milto's response.

His thoughts returned to the present. From his lofty perch, the lineman gazed out across the endless chequerboard patchwork of brown summerfallow and lush green crops that, so far, showed great promise for harvest. Not a cloud or jet stream interrupted the incredible pristine blue of an infinite western sky, seemingly oblivious to direction or horizon. The still and tranquil beauty of this prairie landscape tugged at the heartstrings though he had not been not born and bred to it.

Where did Robert and Connie Milto fit in, he wondered. There wasn't an abundance of information regarding their past, although it was rumoured that the rancher had important connections with a big university down east. Danny himself had heard Robert speak of Guelph, Ontario, but that was in regard to his purebred cattle and the A.I. program.

Spiralling dust boiling skyward along the road indicated the approach of a vehicle. As it came into view, Danny recognized the unit as belonging to the line crew. Quickly he descended the pole and crossed the ditch to meet the oncoming truck.

The line contractor, George Arnault, was tall and heavy set. He sported a huge paunch that had served well as temporary holding tank for untold gallons of ale.

Danny wondered how the fellow could spur up and down the poles without repeatedly impaling himself with a belly full of slivers. In his fifties with a full head of hair greying at the sides, the big man exuded conviviality with his ready toothy smile and hearty laugh. There was a trace of French accent in his speech though he often exercised expletives from many languages.

The window was down on the driver's side and George was bellowing good naturedly before the truck rolled to a stop.

“Oh, my boys can tie that line in for you, young Daniel. Hell's Bell's, that's what I pay 'em for.”

The door burst open and the big man swung one leg out which offset his stomach. It rolled out, pulling the remainder of his body with it.

“God, it's hot! It's hot. A man ought to be in the beer hall on a day like this. You got any cold beer, Daniel? We only brung water.”

Not waiting for a reply he continued, “We have the anchors in on the dogleg up at the lad's yard, so if you want to string the braided wire and give him his #!#!* phone, we'll have the line up for you in damn short order.”

“Okay,” Danny agreed, knowing argument would have been futile. “I'll hang the box and pound a ground rod for the lightning arrestor.”

“Oh, don't you go beating in no ground rods in this heat. One o' my boys can do that, too. It's a character builder for 'em. I'll go throw the knife switch and she should be humming like a new bride by the time you're ready.”

Danny had to give the man plenty of credit. Although the most likely candidate for heart trouble the young lineman had ever seen, no grass grew round the contractor's feet while on the job. George and his crew were fast, efficient and conscientious.

The contractor had confided to Danny that the line construction business would probably not last much longer. "They're putting her all underground, Daniel. Near the #!#!* cities, she's all being buried now. I'm gonna have to hang up my spurs and buy a #!#!* cable plowing outfit. Besides that, the damn government phone outfit is trying to crowd out all the rural companies like yours. Oh, it won't be tomorrow or next week, but I tell you now, the #!#!* will have it all within ten years."

Danny nodded his agreement as the contractor lapsed into a spiel on another tangent. Danny Reid had some ideas about the future of communications as well. Maybe someday there would even be *name and number display*.

Kent Miller was repairing a sickle mower when Danny drove into the young farmer's verdant but neglected yard. Kent will have this place looking shipshape before long, he thought.

"Still limping, I see," the farmer said by way of greeting. "That calf must have caught you a good one."

"It's getting better all the time," Danny said. "Haying time, is it?"

"Pretty soon... there's a dandy crop out there if we can put it up dry."

"Not much rain in the sky today. Make hay while the sun shines."

Kent and Wendy did not have a telephone in their mobile unit while living in his parents' yard; it was just about as handy to go over to the main house to make a call, Kent felt. With everyone on party lines, privacy wasn't a concern anyway.

"Had lunch, Danny?" Kent asked.

"No, but I packed one along today, thanks, Kent. It might be best for appearance sake if I eat with the line crew today."

“Well, you're sure welcome, how about a coffee?”

Danny shook his head, “No, thanks, I best hang this phone up for you and make sure it works.”

The second of George Arnault's two line trucks pulled into the yard. A tow-headed lad of about seventeen hopped out and joined Kent and Danny. After a brief greeting he stood to one side waiting for Danny's instruction.

The trio went to the newly positioned mobile home and Danny pointed out where the young lineman should pound in the 8 foot galvanized ground rod. Kent showed Danny where he and Wendy wanted the telephone box installed then went back to work on his mower.

There was no weather skirting installed on the trailer as yet so running the wire from lightning arrestor to the phone was a matter of a few minutes work. George Arnault's helper had the ground rod pounded in place and began to string the 'drop' wire from a mast pole beside the home to the first—or last, depending on your point of view—pole of the open wire lead. Meanwhile, Danny installed the outdoor protector and made the termination.

When the installation was complete to Danny's satisfaction and the new Mallory batteries were in place, he lifted the receiver, listened to see if the line was busy, and gave the crank a turn to signal the operator.

Vera Mitchell's voice responded seconds later, “Operator.”

“Hi, Vera, it's Danny.”

“Oh, ready to test the new Miller phone, are you?”

“You always know where I am, don't you? Say, how is the new bride-elect today?”

“Pretty spry, I suppose,” she laughed. “That was a lovely time at the Milto's' ranch yesterday. And all that delicious food! I ate too much.”

Shifting the conversation, Danny said, "Kent is only the sixth subscriber on this 'bunch block' so I guess his ring will be a code 3?"

"That's right; on the tip," Vera confirmed.

'On the tip' referred to the side of the line the customer's bells should be set. All lines were in pairs: tip and ring; the 'talk path' carried out over this loop combination, but bells were set up to ring 'tip' to ground or 'ring' to ground so that only one side of a party line would hear the bells ring, although everyone could hear the conversation if they lifted their receiver. A code three ring was a combination of one long ring, followed by a half ring—in the vernacular— *a long and a short*.

"Could you give me a burst on the tip side, please, and I'll set up the bells.

"Circuit 8, ring code 3, coming up," Vera said.

The new set worked perfectly and Danny left the trailer to go out into the yard again.

"I heard the phone ring, so I guess you're finished with me?" the lad from the line crew asked.

"That's all, thanks for the help."

The helper started his line truck and drove out of the yard while Danny rejoined Kent Miller and gave him his line information.

"Your number is 8r3, Kent. There are five more subscribers besides yourself on this circuit. It is smaller than most of the bunching blocks, but try to avoid tying the line up for too long."

Kent grinned, "I don't use it much at all but when Wendy gets to jawing with her mother, it can go on."

Danny said, "Vera will let her know if they're too long winded."

"So, Vera Mitchell is marrying Sven Larson." Kent said. "That was the biggest surprise I've had since Wendy agreed to marry me."

“Apparently Sven isn't the confirmed bachelor everyone thought and I've spent a lot of time talking with Vera over the past few years... She had the wool over my eyes too.”

“I'll bet Robert Milto would rather cut off his right arm than lose Sven.”

Conversation shifted to the branding and Danny soon took his leave to join George Arnault and his crew for a lunch on the tailgate of a line truck.

That evening, Danny puzzled again over the Milto's strange words and reactions to the announcement that dial phones were coming to Stockton. He confided in his wife, but she afforded no solution.

“I missed that part of the conversation. What could Connie have meant anyway? What do you think 'Name and number display' are?”

Danny shrugged, “It's a term I've heard somewhere before and I don't read 'futuristic science fiction' unless it's written by Jules Verne.”

Danny filed the remark in the recesses of his mind for possible later reference but vowed to pay close attention to what the Milto's were saying. There were several other statements filed away too, but he failed to recall them at the moment.

“I remember the excitement in the community while we awaited the arrival of the dial office and the new telephones. Stockton was slated for modernization! The cumbersome oak boxes with their heavy receivers and cranks were so large compared to the sleek new dial wall and desk models of the time; no one imagined push button numbers, rural private lines, or cell phones.”

Submitted by Wendy Miller as told by the late Vera Larson (Mitchell)

CHAPTER 13

July 1968

Haying season vaulted into full swing as the dog days of July continued to bestow sunshine on the hay makers. The summer heat was a double-edged sword, as it would take a toll on the cereal crops if a general rain didn't intervene. Robert Milto hired an extra crew to mow, rake and bale the prairie wool of several large meadows, or *flats* as they were customarily referred to, on the more accessible pasture land west of ranch headquarters. The bulk of the rancher's winter feed supply, though, was harvested in the form of silage cut from fall rye crops sown on the light farm land bordering the eastern edge of the big spread. Because it coincided with haying season, additional help was required for this annual project. The rancher was able to hire local farm lads for the operation and, generally, they were quite adept at handling the machinery. Silaging involved cutting the ripening rye crop and laying it in swathes; these were then picked up by a silage harvesting machine drawn by a powerful tractor; the harvester chopped up the feed and blew it into a large wagon. In the Milto operation, two large grain trucks with high racks installed above the boxes were used and these would creep along beside the harvester, collecting the heavy green silage as it was spewed out of a high curved spout attachment. While one truck filled, the other would be in the process of hauling its load to dump at a specially built pit silo. The procedure was labour

intensive, but did not take long, weather permitting. The 'pit' was a wide slit gouged out of the top of a low rise near the ranch's tree sheltered wintering pens. Robert Milto had hired the municipal road building crew to do the excavation work. It was the first of its kind anywhere near Stockton. The trucks offloaded in the pit while yet another equipment operator maintained constant vigilance, packing down the high moisture feed by driving over it repeatedly with a farm tractor.

This season, ample rain until mid June this season had provided the area with a bountiful hay and rye crop. Most years Robert Milto put up as much feed as was available. Unpredictable winters could be long and a big herd required huge quantities of fodder, especially during extended cold snaps. If there was excess hay in the spring, it would keep over the summer to be used first next winter.

Robert and Sven kept the machinery in top condition with a regular servicing and strict attention to maintenance; this diligence held mechanical breakdowns to a minimum when the crops were ready. The adage 'Make hay while the sun shines' applied both literally and figuratively.

These were very busy days for Milt and her mother as they prepared all the food for the hired help. Milt delivered hot lunches to the haying crews out on the flat while the silage workers, who were in closer proximity, came to the ranch house to take their meals. Robert Milto paid excellent wages but the young hired hands put in very long days, literally sun-up to sundown. If he felt the job deserved it, the rancher gave the lads a healthy bonus. This incentive encouraged the diligent who in turn extracted a good performance from the occasional would be slacker. Several of the workers had been recruited in past years and these were valued employees as they knew the ropes. This season, as a favour to Dr. and Mrs.

O'Brien, the Milto hired the doctor's nephew, Tom, for the young man was eager to glean further first hand knowledge of the western cattle industry. Trying not to interfere with the regulars, Robert Milto accommodated Tom in as many positions as possible during the 'putting up' of the feed. The Torontonionian, though not practised in the operation of farm equipment, was adroit at driving the big silage trucks and he made only a few minor slips before mastering the knack of maintaining position beside the moving silage machine. One endless day of running the packing tractor in the silage pit was enough for the adventurous Tom, so Robert sent him out to the hay flat with the haying crew. Here the young lad had plenty of opportunity to expend his boundless energy as he was placed on the flat decked bale wagon directly behind the hay baler. Prairie wool made light-weight bales compared to green oats but hour on end of carrying, lifting and stacking the bundles could wear a man down, especially if not seasoned to the work. Tom had help stacking the first load but was then on his own. It proved to be a long and arduous day for him. Sven drove the tractor while pulling the baler and bale wagon. When the load reached a certain level, the Norwegian would disconnect the hay rack and hook onto an empty second wagon. At this point, a lad named Charlie, who did the raking with a side delivery unit, would disconnect his machine and use his tractor to haul the loaded rack back to ranch headquarters. Milt assisted with the offloading and stacking in the feed yard.

At lunchtime, when the crew had gathered, Tom talked Sven into giving him a break from stacking to haul a load in to the ranch so he could see the re-stacking operation. Sven's blue eyes twinkled while listening to the young man's appeal. "Could be you vant to be vorking with Milt, jah?"

Milt, who had just delivered the food baskets, blushed, as did Tom O'Brien, but neither responded to the jibe. The two teenagers had become friends the evening of the Milto's branding. They had accompanied Milt's father when, around nine o'clock, the rancher had driven back out to the holding corrals to make a final check of the cattle and turn them loose. The easterner's boyish enthusiasm, tempered by a mature keen interest, had kept father and daughter busy fielding a plethora of questions.

Milt left her truck parked while the crew took their lunch break and, with Tom riding on the fender of the tractor, hauled the hay rack to the feed yard. In their absence Charlie took Tom's job on the baling wagon. The country girl gave the city lad operating instructions for this tractor as it had several minor differences —starting procedure, shift pattern and a hand clutch— from the packing unit Tom had run the previous day in the silage pit. They worked together in the hot July sun with Milt tossing bales off the rack and Tom piling them neatly and firmly on the growing bale stack.

The feed yard was a very large enclosure with a ten foot high page wire fence surrounding it to keep the voracious herds of mule deer and whitetail out during the winter months. Robert Milto didn't begrudge the wildlife access to food and, in tough winters, put extra feed out for them. However, their table manners were such that more hay was wasted than consumed. The yard was big enough to allow sufficient separation between the hay piles, minimizing loss in the event a fire should ignite in any one of the stacks.

Tom drove the tractor and Milt took up the passenger position on the return trip. Sven and Charlie already had approximately half a new load made by the time Milt and Tom arrived at the meadow. Charlie recommenced raking

hay, Tom stacked bales as Sven produced them and Milt drove the truck back to the ranch to assist her mother until the next load came in.

During the noon lunch break Sven had predicted a change in the weather. Confirmation came that evening when a fierce thunderstorm brought half an inch of rain to the thirsty land. This halted the Milto's haying operation for a day, giving the crew a brief reprieve. Tom O'Brien especially needed the break. The young man felt so stiff and sore from stacking bales that he had difficulty climbing out of bed the next morning. The storm had delivered a crop devastating burst of hail in a concentrated area near Stockton but the amount of precipitation had varied widely throughout the remainder of the community.

Lightning had blasted a six pin open wire stretch running out of Stockton. Danny Reid was on the job as quickly as the storm passed to replace several poles and cross-arms, reconstructing the line. Almost every subscriber on the multi circuit loop had their fuses and carbons blasted to oblivion. The young lineman methodically replaced each set. Remote customers were without service for two days, but no one complained and several farmers living near the line break pitched in to help Danny put the system back in operation.

The last to have service restored was Robert Milto as he, being the sole subscriber on the circuit, ranked a lower priority. The silaging and hay crews, now back on the job, were just leaving for the day when a very tired Danny Reid drove his line truck along the verdantly treed lane into the Milto yard. He parked at the underground breakout point just at dusk on the second day following the storm. Robert Milto and Sven Larson had been talking with the workers, and now made their way over to the line truck.

Robert, noticing the dark stubble on the repairman's face and the tiredness in his eyes, said, "You've been burning the candle at both ends, Danny."

"Evening, Robert, Sven. Yes, I've been busy." Danny said, as he dragged himself out of the truck cab. "Vera says everyone is up and running except you. Hopefully it's just blown fuses. Oh, yes, she says 'Hi' to you, Sven."

Sven nodded and flashed a small grin as he touched his tongue to the paper of a cigarette he had just rolled. He put the roll-your-own in his mouth and the yellow sack of Dominion back in his shirt pocket, then struck a wooden match with a nicotine stained thumbnail. As the smoke wafted in the still evening air, Danny noted the distinct odour of the tobacco. He smiled at the Scandinavian. "That's the smoke I've noticed at Vera Mitchell's house from time to time! I've wondered about that more than once."

Robert said. "Sven's been burning the candle at both ends too, I'd say. If he had confided in me I could have given some slack at this end."

"How's the haying going?" Danny asked. "I see the rain didn't hold you up long."

"What did we end up with from that shower, Sven?"

"Von half of an inch, in the gauge in front of the howess. I heard more rain came in some more other spots, jah?"

"Yes," Danny acknowledged. "Some heavy stuff here and there and a spot of hail that pounded the crop into the mud nearer town."

"Two more days should wrap up the silaging and how much time do you calculate for haying, Sven?"

"With godt veather, ve'll be done in two days... maybe a little more."

Sven and the rancher continued talking with the lineman as he opened up the breakout for yard distribution and tested the individual lines. "I'll just scrape the smoke off the carbons and change the fuses and you should be back on line...."

Danny checked the arrestors at the barn and shop then visited the house. Robert Milto invited the repairman in for a coffee after finding the circuit now tested okay. Constance Milto quickly made a light lunch for Danny while Robert brought cups from the counter and poured coffee for all three. Milt emerged from the bathroom with her hair wrapped up in a damp towel.

"Hi, Danny."

"Hello, Button, still pitching hay bales, are you?"

She made a face at her father. "Yes, I have to keep up with the men because Dad wanted a son."

Everyone laughed at this admission and Mrs. Milto said, "But, I wanted a daughter so she is doing double duty in the kitchen, too."

Danny shifted the topic round to the new dial phone system and though they discussed the topic at length he detected nothing peculiar in the Milto's speech. However, he felt so tired that even the normal conversation was sketchy.

After thanking Connie for the snack, the lineman soon took his leave. As he pulled on to the main road at the end of the long driveway and headed south, a moment of recollection flashed across his tired mind vivid as the lightning in the sky two nights past. As often happened to Danny, the circumstances of being in a familiar neighbourhood triggered thoughts of previous occurrences. For example, a song which may have been playing on the radio of the line truck as he cruised along a dirt road would pop into his head as he passed through the same specific location on a later date. This time, the lineman recalled chatting with Milt as she sat up on her

big gelding last spring, in this very spot, just south of Milto headquarters. In parting she had said, "It's not like anyone is connected to the...." Now what word did she use? Internet?"

"Yes!" Danny exclaimed, pounding the steering wheel. "She said *connecting to the Internet!*"

"But... what the hell is the Internet?"

***...The days of mower and rake have gone by,
most people use a haybine for cutting their
hay now. But you couldn't beat the old sickle
mower for lopping off the short tough prairie
wool out on the big flats...***

Submitted by Leonard Yeast

CHAPTER 14

Late July, 1968

While Danny Reid wended his way down the sand and dirt roads toward the main grid running west of Stockton, the Milto's rehearsed the conversation that had taken place during his brief visit.

"He looked worn out this evening," Connie Milto said as the line truck idled away from the yard.

Robert Milto agreed saying, "I doubt he's had much sleep in the past sixty hours. He seemed to be angling for something, keeping the conversation on the subject of dial phones."

"Well, it's pretty big news in his world," Connie said. "It's a huge step for all the small communities. They'll have all the amenities of their city counterparts."

"Not call display, though, Mom," Milt said.

Robert Milto smiled at the admonishment. "Yes, that little slip raised Danny's eyebrows and I'm afraid my attempt to smooth it over with that science fiction notion didn't improve the situation."

"Danny's a sharp fellow, Dad, but I don't think he can see into the future... at least, I hope not."

"Really," said Constance Milto, "we don't know any more about the Reid's than they know about us. They moved west four or five years ago from somewhere down east. I've never even heard if they lived in a city, small town, or... were they country folk?"

“I believe Danny Reid is far more cosmopolitan than he lets on,” Robert said.

“Hey! Milt said. “We should ask Danny and Val to come along on the ride next week. Maybe I can interrogate them on the sly.”

'The ride' Milt referred to began with a request Tom O'Brien had made, asking for horseback riding lessons. Initially, Milt planned to take Tom on a few short, one day adventures near the ranch headquarters after haying season, but as the pair discussed the outing in more detail while hauling bales and during lunch breaks on the flat, enthusiasm grew and so did the number of participants; the plan eventually evolved into a camp-out using the holding corrals as a base, with the intention of making one day excursions radiating from that point. Benny and Brenda had been asked to join and now, the senior Milto were pleased to hear, Danny and Val Reid may enjoy the opportunity as well.

The rancher finished putting up feed on schedule as the weather remained favourable after the storm's brief interruption. Benny and his dad completed their haying operations at about the same time as their neighbour but Benny then spent a couple days helping his future father-in-law with his hay crop.

Milt spent the extra time preparing for the camp out and giving riding lessons to Tom who had temporarily moved in with Sven in the bunkhouse. The Torontonion was an eager student and though he proved to be adept at staying aboard a bucking steer, the lad had no 'horse sense' whatsoever. Most definitely the well broke saddle stock on the Milto spread knew considerably more about their business than young Tom O'Brien did. Patience and an outward calm were the two attributes Milt first instilled in her student.

“Remember,” she said, “the horses already know what they're doing, you are the green one here.” She taught him to use caution around the animals, never making sudden quick movements or loud noises that may startle the mount. Tom learned how to put on the halter, bridle and saddle, how to lead the animal and care for it, including the art of brush and curry comb.

“There's a lot more to this than hopping on,” Tom admitted, but his enthusiasm continued to grow. Milt spent nearly an entire day on preliminaries. It was late in the afternoon when the Easterner finally put his foot in the stirrup and swung smoothly into the saddle. Milt had guessed well when she lengthened the stirrups before Tom sat astride the mare selected for the training session; he seemed quite adequately positioned, though rigid as a crow bar.

“Relax,” Milt said, “I'll just lead her around while you both become comfortable with each other.”

Tom grinned, “Well, this is much easier than hanging on to a bouncing steer with a piece of rope wrapped around his belly.”

The mare turned her ears back as Tom spoke.

Milt said, “I'm trying to put Dolly at ease more than you!”

After the lad had practised mounting and dismounting to the approval of his mentor, Milt passed up the reins and let Tom walk the mare around the corral. She then opened the gate into a larger pen where Tom lifted Dolly into a trot and then a canter. Milt's patient discipline worked well as Tom and Dolly soon grew used to each other.

“That's really good, Tom,” Milt said when the new horseman rode the mare up to his teacher and reined in. “Tomorrow we'll saddle both Whiskey and Dolly and I'll take you on a more realistic journey.”

Benny and Brenda came over for a visit after Ben had finished working for the day in Leonard Yeast's hay field. The tow-headed young rancher and the 'greenhorn' from Toronto had become quite close friends in the short time they had been acquainted. Ben freely admitted Tom adapted considerably more quickly to western life than he would have to city living. "I'd stick out like a crow on a snow drift with these duds," Ben said.

"Nope, no one would notice you in Toronto," Tom said. "There are so many people there they don't even realize their own individuality. Someone might note the boots and hat but they'd never meet your eyes to see who owned those... *duds*."

"Well... it ain't likely I'll ever know."

"And I wouldn't blame you. Stick to being a cowboy, it's more fun."

"It's not all fun," said Milt. "There's plenty of days when it's all work too."

"How do you decide what's work and what's fun?"

Ben said, "Well, Tom, the difference between a cowboy and a *wannabe* is that sometimes the cowboy is on his horse when he wishes to hell he was somewhere else and the wannabe rides when he feels like it, say Sunday afternoon, when the weather is good."

The Easterner digested this piece of information.

"So, a man on a horse in a snowstorm is a 'don't wannabe' I suppose?"

"I suspect so; especially if he's facing into the wind, going the wrong way with a long ride home."

The young people discussed what groceries they would need for their adventure. Milt made out a long list as ideas sprouted up. Danny Reid called from town to say they would be happy to join in the ride. He was given

instructions for purchases he could make to supplement the food box. Mr. and Mrs. Milto were not riding with the group so Val and Danny were to be loaned the use of their saddle horses and riding gear. Tom was assigned a long legged grey gelding named Lefty from the rancher's small remuda.

"Lefty has a mind of his own," Benny said. "So you'll have to show him who's boss right off, but he'll get you there and back again."

"There and back again?"

"He means the horse won't play out or let you down," Milt said. "Lefty is a dependable horse."

"Just the way I like it. 'Round trip, first class'."

"You can take the boy from the city..." Brenda said.

Whiskey and Dolly were kept in a small grass pasture just south of the home corrals. Tomorrow Tom and Milt would use these mounts to round up the saddle stock kept in the larger wrangle field not far away.

After breakfast next morning, Tom and Milt caught and saddled the two horses in the near pasture. Tom needed only a couple reminders and a few extra coaching notes in readying the mare for the ride. Milt held the reins while Tom swung lithely astride. Then she climbed onto Whiskey's saddle and they rode out together. Round up amounted to a shrill whistle from Milt and the herd of about a dozen horses including several yearlings and foals came on the run to meet them.

Once in the corral the riders caught the three extra horses they wanted. After a small feed of oats the remuda was turned loose again in the wrangle field.

Lefty required hoof trimming and, along with Milt's parents' horses, was given a thorough brushing.

Tom and Milt retrieved their previously saddled mounts and led them through the corral gates. This eventually opened into the pasture referred to as the

calving field where the commercial herd was kept during the spring while the new calves were arriving. The young people mounted up at the gate and trotted leisurely out into the pasture past the glorious smelling stacks of hay in the feed yard. The short prairie wool had begun to lose its verdure as the hot summer days burned away the surface moisture, but chokecherry trees were in full bloom with their tiny white blossom clusters hanging loosely in the still morning air. Sage leaves and prairie rose blossoms added to the intoxicatingly delicious aroma. Except for the distant clarion ring of a hammer striking steel back in the ranch yard where Sven was working a piece of metal, no sound of human nature interrupted the serenity. The long white vapour trail left by a jet plane in passing rent a fading tear in the otherwise perfectly azure sky. The sun appeared to bless the day with wondrous warmth instead of searing heat; the gods themselves could not have desired more.

As often was his custom, Tom O'Brien broke the quiet interlude. "There has been nothing in my life to compare to this, Milt. I feel like a poet, or more correctly, a part of a beautiful poem, a serenade of silence."

Milt studied her companion and noted the sincerity in his eyes. "You sound like a poet yourself at the moment."

"It's all so wonderful, so overwhelming."

The riders reined in atop a small sage crested knoll and gazed out upon the vast rolling horizon; shades of fading greens gave way to grey, then blue and finally the distant purple of the tall ridges far to the west where the rough country met the quietly undulating and comparatively flat terrain of the foreground.

Indicating with a nod of her head toward the west, Milt said, "Out there, in the breaks, is where we plan to spend most of our time during the camp out. It is rough country but very beautiful to the appreciating eye."

“More beautiful than this?” Tom asked, his long sweeping in an expansive gesture to include all the immediate area.

“Not necessarily more, but the remoteness makes that range... different; more exciting. You'll see.”

Whiskey was fighting the bit, eager to stretch his long legs. Milt let him have his head and Dolly galloped alongside, keeping pace. The young lady kept a watchful eye on her student but Tom thrilled to the speed as the ponies loped across the prairie, wind tugging at their manes. Dolly shied and danced a quick step sideways when a jack rabbit exploded right beneath her feet. Milt cast a worried glance at Tom but he kept his seat and threw back his head, laughing joyously. Hooves thudded dully over the prairie sod and Milt urged her buckskin to greater speed. The gelding bunched his magnificent muscles and put his heart into a burst which quickly left the chestnut mare behind. Up a sandy ridge, dodging chokecherry trees and leaping sage, the girl led her companion a glorious race then slowly brought her mount to a standstill near the fence line and another gate.

Tom and Dolly caught up and the aging mare tossed her head like a young filly as she danced around, wanting to go some more.

“Ha!” gasped the recruit. “Now, that is fun!”

“You rode very well, Tom,” Milt said.

Tom patted the mare's neck, “Dolly deserves the credit, she moves so smooth. I thought horses made a person bounce around a lot.”

“Some are rougher than others. Dad says Mom's horse, that is the one Val Reid will ride, is 'the Cadillac'. You may find Lefty less smooth, especially his trot, but you'll get used to it.”

“We may as well combine a little work with our pleasure,” Milt said as she swung down from the saddle and led Whiskey over to the gate. “We’ll ride around this pasture and check on the purebreds. There are three windmills we can visit too so Dad or Sven won’t have that to do later.”

Tom dismounted to assist with the gate. He dropped the reins and Milt scolded him. “Hang on to your horse; if that were Lefty, he may have trotted off and left you walking.”

Tom retrieved the reins and said, by way of apology, “Is that why he’s called Lefty? Lefty left me?”

“If a horse steps on trailing reins it can hurt his mouth, or, if he’s running, could even break his neck, usually it at least snaps the reins.”

“You sound experienced,” Tom noted.

“It happens.”

Fortunately, Milt had the foresight to tuck food provisions and a Thermos of lemonade in her saddle bags before leading her new friend on a journey which turned out to be longer than initially planned. No breeze stirred the windmills so the young pair couldn’t obtain a drink at the trough where their horses watered. Tom learned firsthand about ‘saddle sores’ and felt stiffness in his legs when, late in the afternoon, they returned to the ranch. His enthusiasm, however, had not waned at all.

Mrs. Milto rang the old wooden handled brass school bell—a meal summons for the ranch—just as Milt and Tom turned their mounts loose in the small holding field along with Lefty and the Milto’s horses. The Torontonion could not suppress his residual excitement of the day’s events and chattered constantly throughout the meal saying Milt did this and the horse did that and listing the many wild animals they had encountered.

“There was even a little bobcat kitten!” he said.

“Oh, that’s a rare sighting,” said Mrs. Milto.

Robert Milto asked Milt how the stock fared, the condition of the fences and whether the mills had sufficient water in the event of a prolonged calm.

All seemed in order, Milt reported, adding they had pounded in a few staples along the north fence.

“Danny and Val are coming out this evening and will stay here tonight,” Constance Milto told her daughter. “We’ll sort out the groceries, bed rolls and everything when they arrive.”

“I’ll call Brenda to see if she and Benny can bring their gear too,” Milt said.

Robert Milto said, “We’ll haul your camp equipment and supplies to the holding corrals with a truck in the morning while you ‘cowboys’ trot your horses out. You can pitch the tents and set up camp and still have plenty of time to fit in a short ride.”

The dust along the main road had not quite settled from Danny and Val Reid’s approach to the ranch when Benny and Brenda arrived driving Ben’s 52 Chevrolet. Vera Mitchell had accompanied the urban couple as she intended to spend a short vacation at the ranch. The Miltos, Sven Larson and Tom O’Brien all came to meet the new arrivals as the group congregated in the spacious front yard.

“The phone company will fall apart with both of you absent,” Connie Milto said as she welcomed her guests.

“The weather looks good, so I’m not expecting any major breaks unless a severe lightning storm blows in,” Danny said.

Vera Mitchell added, “I’ve asked Jean Hatt to let you folks know if trouble shows up in a big way. Danny needs his time off too so we won’t be bothering him for any minor incidents.”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” said Robert Milto.

Prior to the guests' arrival, Connie Milto had been in a quandary about where to put Vera Mitchell during her stay. There were plenty of spare rooms in the big ranch house but Vera was engaged to Sven and perhaps she would prefer to move in with her betrothed at his bunk house.

“What protocol applies *these* days?” she asked her husband.

“That's a conundrum for you. Why not call 'Information'?”

Vera Mitchell, being the local telephone switch operator, was the 'Information service' (though no one had heard of such a thing) for the exchange as well.

Connie said, “It's a good thing we have a private line.”

After placing the call and a brief chat, Connie Milto reported to her husband that Vera preferred to stay in the bunk house but had expressed concern that this may upset the Miltos' daughter.

“I assured her Milt would understand. I'll have Tom shift his luggage into a spare bedroom in our house.”

The additional camp supplies and equipment brought by the visitors was sorted through and the nonperishables loaded in Robert Milto's pickup. Bed rolls, grip and Ben's battered but serviceable guitar case were added to the load. The food coolers would be packed just before departure in the morning.

Benny surveyed the load after the truck was parked in a machine shed for the night, a precaution against a surprise rain shower. “Lucky for us we're using the four wheel drive to lug our grip; we'd need that twenty mule team outfit from television to pack all this gear.”

Danny said, “May as well enjoy the luxury. We have enough roughing it day to day.”

Dusk of evening had settled and the two mercury vapour lights that illuminated the main yard were steadily glowing brighter as night approached. In winter and calving season, the ranch had an array of lights to rival a small village. However, these circuits were shut down at this time of year. Ben and Brenda declined an offer for tea and headed home after arranging to meet in the morning when the pair would ride their saddle horses to the Milto headquarters.

Sven and Vera opted for an evening walk and strolled away hand in hand down the long darkened lane where the canopy of maples bowed silently overhead. Somewhere in the dense foliage a robin protested the end of day and an owl hooted questioningly from atop a cupola on the big hip roof barn. The remainder of the group took up seats on the warmly lit veranda of the ranch house. Val and Danny Reid shared the double wide glider positioned against the railing.

“It is so peaceful out here,” Val said.

“Yes, it is,” Connie agreed, “almost too good to last.”

Robert Milto said, “The hot weather has kept the mosquitoes at bay the past few weeks. Back in June, they were thick enough to drive us indoors after dark, mind you, the days were long enough, a fellow should be in bed by then.”

Danny asked about the cattle and made general conversation while everyone appeared to deliberately stay off the subject of communications. The young lineman didn't wish to discuss his work while on vacation and apparently the Miltos respected his wishes. The more pertinent fact, however, was that Robert and Connie Milto were careful not to make any further anachronistic comments.

“It's too bad you and Robert will not be joining us on the ride,” Val said to Connie.

“Oh, it's good for you young people to have time apart from us old fogies. We seem to have plenty of hours on horseback as it is.”

Milt and Tom broke off the quiet conversation they were having and Milt asked, “Why don't you and Dad come out for supper and a bonfire tomorrow night?”

The idea sparked everyone's interest and it was quickly agreed to.

Sven and Vera stopped by the step to say goodnight and the others decided to turn in as well.

“I wish this evening could last forever,” Val whispered to her husband as they tarried a moment longer on the deserted veranda... you know... push pause.”

“Yes,” Danny agreed, “but, I'm really looking forward to tomorrow, too.”

An infinite army of sunbeams sought and soldiered out the last of dawn's reluctant shadows as the brilliance of a new day promised to fulfil the weatherman's prediction. Tom, Milt and Danny emerged from the ranch house and, after filling a bucket with oats from a round steel granary, made their way to the small field where their mounts were confined.

A grinning Tom O'Brien, successfully concealing his aches and soreness from yesterday's ride, said, “The horses have breakfast before we do!”

“I noticed an open bag of oatmeal on the counter as we passed, so Connie must have porridge on the menu. It's the same grain as this, Tom,” Danny said, indicating the pail he carried.

“It's oats all around this morning.”

Milt's clarion whistle brought the equine contingent up to the gate. She let them pass through into a smaller pole corral. Danny spread the oats out evenly in a long trough situated along one side of the enclosure. While the

horses hungrily munched the oats, Milt moved quietly among them, patting each in turn and speaking in soft tones as she checked them over.

Danny and Tom stood back until Milt rejoined them.

“Everybody okay, Button?” Danny asked.

“Top notch. Let's go have our 'oats' and then saddle up these ponies.”

Benny and Brenda trotted their horses down the maple treed lane and arrived in the ranch yard just as Danny, Val, Tom and Milt emerged, leading their saddled horses from the corral. Benny was astride his own horse, Scoundrel, now fully recovered from the injury, and Brenda rode her father's bay mare. Milt felt a twinge of angst towards Brenda's pony because the mare had an unpredictable temperament and sometimes vented her wrath on Whiskey. Milt mentally determined to keep the two mounts separate as much as possible.

Tom's mount, Lefty, grew excited upon espying the newcomers and became a handful for his inexperienced rider. Milt quickly passed Whiskey's reins to Danny and rushed to Tom's assistance. She soon had the grey gelding settled down, although he continued to prance about nervously.

“He hasn't been ridden for awhile,” Milt said.

“Feeling his oats this morning, is he Milt?” Said Benny. It was more an observation than a question. “I can work some of the kinks out for you so he doesn't try to show Tom who's boss.”

Ben dismounted and held the bridle of Brenda's mare while his girlfriend swung out of the saddle. She then took the reins of both horses while Benny relieved Milt of Lefty's braided leather lines.

Ben spent a few moments soothing the grey horse then eased into the saddle in one smooth motion. Lefty crow hopped around a little but soon realized he had a professional at the helm. Benny rode away from the

group, the horse trying to turn back and whinnying in protest. A touch of spur would have worked wonders at this moment, Ben considered, but he normally only wore his spurs while roping and sorting cattle. He dug his boot heels into the gelding's flank and urged him along the lane. Lefty settled down to paying attention as Ben warmed him up then pushed the horse to a gallop out on the main road. The pair soon returned to the ranch yard, Lefty's eyes and ears showing a keen interest and his sides heaving slightly from exertion. Ben pulled him to a halt near the waiting group, then hopped down and handed the reins to Tom. "Make him do what *you* want and he'll respect you for it."

Robert and Connie Milto had joined the horsemen while Ben exercised Lefty. Now Sven and Vera also walked up to the gathering.

Ben cast a discreet wink at Sven as he responded to the exchange of morning greetings. Sven merely offered back his trademark fixed grin, though Ben noted that faint twinkle in his eye.

Vera had her camera and requested a group photo. Everyone and their horse plus Chase posed obediently. Milt asked the hired man and his fiancée to come out to the corrals for the evening with her parents; Vera was pleased to accept.

"I'll be along with the gear before you reach the corrals," Milt's father told them and Connie said she would ride along with her husband to open gates and help off-load the truck.

Milt led the mounted procession down a long alley way (reducing the number of gates to open), across the big corral that contained the lonely bull she and Ben had rescued, and then out into the calving field where Tom had taken his first horseback ride. Brenda's mare constantly swished her tail at invisible horseflies and laid her ears back, suggesting she had a bone to pick with someone.

Lefty behaved well and Tom soon relaxed in the saddle, riding alongside Milt and Whiskey. The troop spread out in double file sharing the rutted tracks of a prairie trail.

Ben and Danny rode side by side conversing idly.

Val was having difficulty finding a comfortable position in Constance Milto's stock saddle. Brenda suggested the stirrups be readjusted and called to Ben to hold up a minute. Just at that moment, the Yeast mare spun sideways, lowered her head and, with ears pinned back flat and a demonic squeal, lashed out viciously with both hind feet, striking the right fender of Val's saddle. The loud double "whack" of hooves hitting leather cracked upon the still morning air like a bull whip. Val cried out in alarm; her horse grunted with pain and danced away from the recalcitrant beast. Imprints of the curved hooves were etched in dust left on the broad thick leather skirt above the stirrup. One hoof had pinched Val's high topped riding boots and scarred her pant leg, barely missing the shin bone. Even so, the near hit stung considerably and put the young woman in a fright.

Ben Collins was off his horse and at Val's side before anyone else could react. "Are you okay, Val?"

"I...I think so," she attempted to smile and pulled up her pant leg to examine the source of her pain. A faint red welt was forming on her calf just at the top of her boot.

Ben's concern swiftly switched to blue anger as he turned to Brenda who had distanced the mare out of reach for a second attack or retaliation.

"Gimme that horse."

Brenda swung a leg over the saddle and slid to the ground then retrieved Scoundrel as Ben grasped the lines and leaped aboard the mare. He whipped the errant horse into instant full gallop and they streaked away to the north, Ben lashing the reins savagely across the mare's shoulders and kicking her flanks mercilessly with his heels.

“The lad has a temper,” Danny said.

“Not very often,” said Brenda. “This is the second time I’ve seen it....”

Milt recalled the first occasion: an altercation at a dance when a loud mouth insulted Ben’s girlfriend. It had taken Les Moffat and two of the Miller boys to pull a ferocious Benny away from the luckless stranger.

The mare pounded across the prairie in a direct line toward a tall sand-capped ridge where Ben angrily put her through the paces; churning up the soft sand, he sidestepped the horse up and down the dune, spun her around and around so tight her nose almost reached her tail and then backed her up the full length of the heavy sand. They returned at a brisk trot, the mare’s head hanging low, sides heaving and white foam on her chest and mouth. Ben halted her, mopping sweat off his brow.

“She won’t kick a sheep now, but I’ll ride her for a while; Brenda, you can ride Scoundrel.” He then asked Val Reid, who still looked a little peaked, “How’s your leg?”

“Oh, it’ll be all right, just a bruise.”

Danny adjusted his wife’s stirrups to make her more comfortable and those who had dismounted climbed back into their saddles.

“Wagons... Ho!” Tom O’Brien called out, breaking the tension. “Back in Toronto, I never miss an episode of *Wagon Train*.”

Mr. and Mrs. Milto overtook the riders as they rode through a long swale about a quarter mile short of their destination.

“See you at the corrals,” Connie called as they drove past the group.

“We'll have to find shade for those coolers or all the grub will be a soggy glob of soup before long,” Danny said.

“Suspend them down the well,” Benny said.

“What a great idea!” Val exclaimed. “Did you just think that up on the instant?”

Ben grinned, “I've done it before, but it wasn't my idea then either.”

Coincidentally, Robert Milto was standing inside the mill tower tightening a bolt when the group arrived. Riders dismounted, loosened cinches and allowed the horses a short drink at the water trough. Connie Milto was aghast to hear of Val Reid's close call. She closely examined the injury which was now a darkening yellow bruise. “Another inch over and your leg would have been kindling!” Connie said.

“I think Ben has taken the mean streak out of Brenda's horse for now,” Val said and Milt added, “Yes, I watched her close the rest of the way and she kept her nasty nose and hooves away from the other horses.”

Lunchtime victuals were extracted from the two food containers, then, with makeshift rope harnesses, the ice chests were suspended just above the water line in the shallow well.

“We can yard them up and tote 'em to camp for the night,” Benny said.

“Where is 'camp' going to be?” Tom asked.

“There is a shady little birch flat just over that ridge,” Robert Milto pointed. “If you can keep the cows out of your gear, that may be a good spot.”

Danny agreed, “Lots of firewood and level ground to set up the tents.”

“I'll sling the ice chests over Scoundrel's saddle and use him for a pack horse when we need the grub in the evening,” Ben said.

Because the less experienced riders, Val and Tom, were already feeling the effects of seven miles in the saddle, an agreement was made to spend the afternoon setting up camp. Appropriate gates were closed and the horses were released into the holding field. Ben leaned on the upper corral rail and studied the little herd. Most of the horses rolled on patches of bare ground, shaking off the hot, cramped feeling of heavy saddles and sweaty blankets. Brenda's mare kept close company with Scoundrel but avoided the other mounts.

Tom and Milt joined Ben. The easterner mimicked Ben's pose by placing a booted foot on the lower rail, crossing his long arms on the top rail and resting chin on hands.

"Sour old nag," Ben said.

"You don't have to take that, Milt," said Tom.

Milt swung a light kick against the back of the knee on Tom's supporting leg and he slipped off the rail, collapsing on the grass.

"Ya best be tenden' your own, young lady, afore Ben has to take the fight outen' ya."

Ben laughed. "Take more'n me to handle Milt if she goes on the fight. I seen her tackle a full grown bull... more'n once."

"The second one wasn't quite full grown," Milt said.

Soon after their truck was offloaded, the elder Milto went home for the afternoon, promising to return for the evening barbecue.

Before he left, Robert Milto cautioned the group about the extreme fire hazard brought on by the prolonged dry spell; the half inch of precipitation toward the end of haying season had done little to relieve the tinder dry prairie wool.

The campers all pitched in and soon two four-person canvas floor tents were set up in a grove of birch and clump willow growing at the foot of a long, low sand

ridge about a quarter mile from the windmill. Several cow/calf pairs wandered into the clearing to check out the visitors. A few others had departed with the arrival of the human contingent. Afoot, Ben ushered these late arrivals back toward the trees. The animals trotted off a short distance then turned back to stare curiously.

Milt said, "Good thing that mean Charolais isn't nearby. If she saw you on foot the tables would be turned."

Bedrolls and personal baggage were tossed in the newly erected dwellings; cooking utensils and dry food containers were stacked to one side near a shallow depression that Danny scooped out of the sand for a fire pit. While the lineman installed an iron grate with a mesh top and adjustable legs above the hollow to serve as cooking surface, Ben and Tom brought in arm loads of the dead wood scattered throughout the area. The ladies installed a temporary clothes line for towels and possible damp disasters by spreading a light cord between two trees.

"All the amenities of home," Danny said, "we just need a TV and microwave."

"What's a microwave?" Brenda asked.

"Oh, er, it's a ...radio type telephone... something recent in the industry."

Val said, "But you aren't going to talk about work, right?"

"We can probably manage without a television too." Milt said.

"Aw, I sure hate to miss *Bonanza*," Tom groaned.

The Milto ranch may not have been as large as the fictional Ponderosa of the famous television series *Bonanza*. However, the property encompassed close to three townships and provided opportunity for Tom

O'Brien and his companions to explore more than they had time for. The ensuing days were filled with pleasant, carefree adventure. Each morning the vacationing cavalry rode out in a different direction from their base camp. The weather, except for one rainy afternoon, held perfectly. The riders spent entire days leisurely wandering through the maze of dunes and ridges; following cattle trails along chokecherry and saskatoon draws, across birch flats and through aspen poplar groves; they loped easily over the vast expanses of prairie wool.

Ben initiated a quest for shed antlers from the area's abundant mule deer and whitetail populations. The search soon developed into a friendly contest as to who could collect the largest and most 'drops'. Using windmills as a base, the group would radiate out from the centre and return with bundles of deer antlers tied to their saddles. Ben then stashed them at the mill to be retrieved by Sven or one of the Milts with a vehicle at a later date. A few buffalo skulls —remnants of a by-gone era— in various stages of preservation, were picked up as well. Usually the heads were buried in the drifted sand and only a small area lay exposed. Ben's keen eye discovered the first skull, laying face down in the centre of a prairie trail; only the first vertebrate joint remained visible. This head was very well preserved with most of the nose and horns still intact.

Tom O'Brien was ecstatic. "Wow! Real buffalo!" he exclaimed.

The easterner's enthusiasm almost boiled over when Milt later spotted an arrowhead in a sand blow. Tom catapulted out of his saddle, leaving Lefty with reins trailing as the boy dashed to Milt's side to see the arrowhead. Brenda seized Lefty's reins before he drifted away and an amused group encouraged the lad's excitement.

Tom vowed to find an arrowhead of his own and diligently scoured every grass devoid patch of sand he encountered. Where the winds had scooped the sand out of a depression and blown the depths clean to the 'hardpan', the remnants of history were laid bare. Lead slugs from rifle bullets and spent cartridges showed up occasionally. The riders found partial and whole arrowheads, spear heads, even a complete stone hammer head with its telltale ring indented around the narrow circumference. Tom dismounted to inspect an ancient stone hide scraper and howled with surprise to find a metal arrowhead close by. The Easterner's boisterous eagerness drew everyone for a look-see.

"That's a rare find," Ben said and went on to explain that it was a Hudson Bay issue offered as barter for animal pelts during the days when the famous Hudson Bay Fur Trading Company empire extended across the northern part of North America.

On this occasion, the Torontonion went uncharacteristically quiet as he gazed transfixed at his prize. Emotion showed in his dark eyes and he addressed the group sombrelly, "I owe you all so much, and I just want you to know what this all means to me... Thank you."

An embarrassed moment passed as the Westerners were not accustomed to such open expressions of heartfelt sincerity.

Milt said simply, "You're welcome, Tom."

"Wouldn't have been the same without you," Danny added.

On the afternoon of the second day when the trail led the cabal of adventurers deeper into the rough country northwest of their base, Milt discovered a healthy stand of saskatoon bushes tucked into the north facing slope of a

long sand ridge. Though late in the season for these succulent purple berries, many over-ripe specimens clung tenaciously to their delicate stems. The riders spent a long time gorging themselves on the delicious fruit and then rode on with lips, tongues and teeth stained purple.

While out in this direction, they encountered the infamous B324, the miserable Charolais-cross cow that had raised hell with Ben during the branding round-up and again at the sorting. She charged deep into a dense thicket when the riders appeared and, head down, glared out at them with unwarranted crazed fear in her eyes. Her calf, barely visible, peeked timidly out from beside its mother.

"I'll be happy to see that one walk up the loading chute and into the cattle liner this fall," Milt said.

Chase sat on his haunches, tongue lolling as he panted and grinned. Perhaps the feisty Border Collie recalled the challenge the wild cow had presented for him. He licked his lips then glanced inquisitively at Milt.

"Not today, Chase."

Tom and Danny both were equally thrilled when they caught sight of a small band of wild ponies roaming freely in the 'breaks'. There were only about twenty in the group although Ben said in years gone by they had numbered in the fifties. Feral horses, escaped from the days when modern machinery replaced them on the farms, had gathered out in the rough country. While not thriving, they managed to exist. Through the years as numbers declined, so did their size until now they were, as Ben described them, "a stunted group of hammer-headed nags." Tom was eager to catch a 'wild mustang' and tame it for his own but Milt and Ben talked him around it.

"They're all right just where they are," Ben said.

"Besides," Milt added, "Lefty and you have become pretty close pals."

The city boy and the gelding had indeed come to friendly terms, with Lefty eager and responsive to Tom's every command. The lad was continually patting the smooth grey neck, talking to the horse and, as Milt put it, "feeding him enough sugar to rot his teeth."

After the first morning when Ben relieved the mare of her mean streak, Brenda's mount had not so much as laid back an ear in aggression. She now stood alert, both ears forward, watching the little herd of wild ponies. They were growing nervous with the propinquity of the humans. Noting the mare's piqued interest, Ben said, "No point in rilin' them up." He reined Scoundrel about and led his comrades down off the high, bald sand hill they had scaled to view the wild horses.

For a while the riders meandered single file behind Ben and Scoundrel as they wound their way through scrub brush and clump willows below the north face of a long, steep sand ridge. Suddenly, a loud crashing disturbance erupted from heavy cover to the right of the trail. A big mule deer buck broke into a clearing ahead of the cavalcade and bounded up the ridge. He paused and looked back when Ben whistled shrilly across the distance.

Seeing no immediate pursuit, the deer eyed the intruders cautiously. A huge rack of antlers, made more impressive by their full velvet cover, weighed heavy on the magnificent animal.

"Ben's thinking hunting season," Brenda whispered as the young rancher stared at this grand patriarch of the Sandhills.

The deer, having seen enough, turned and, in one bound, disappeared over the sand ridge.

"Big enough for you, Ben?" asked a grinning Danny Reid.

“He'll do,” Ben said in a far away tone, as though he were already four months into the future with the hunt afoot. “That's the biggest mule deer I've ever seen,” he added, “and I didn't just spot my first one yesterday.”

“Can people hunt here?” Tom asked.

“Dad screens the strangers who show up for the fall hunting season but local people have free rein,” Milt answered. “We realize that our neighbours are willing to help fight prairie fires and assist with branding and haying season so they are welcome on the ranch year round. Many folks like to pick saskatoons and chokecherries, hunt deer or sharp tailed grouse or just go for a drive out here. We don't stop them, locals know to close gates, prevent fires and leave no garbage.”

“I haven't seen anyone out here other than us, except for your parents, and Sven and Vera last night,” Tom said.

Ben shifted his gaze from the spot where the buck had disappeared. “This part of the hills is quite secluded. The trails are rough and it is a long walk out to the ranch if vehicle problems put you in a bind.”

“It's even further to civilization west or south,” Danny put in. “There are two huge government pastures in those directions and to the north you run into more grassland belonging to several smaller private ranches.”

“It's cattle country,” Ben said.

“Wow! What a place to be a cow! Or one of those wild Mustangs!”

Ben laughed. “Winter is a different story for the animals... and us humans as well.”

The riders moved westward and fell into the natural roll of the land as the horses trooped along a faint cow trail which grew increasingly deeper and wider as tributary paths joined the main, like creeks and streams to a river. The cavalcade rounded a hill and the countryside opened onto a small flat with the ubiquitous windmill tower situated near the middle.

“Race you to the mill!” Tom yelled and goaded Lefty into a canter.

The riders took up the challenge and pursued the rapidly distancing easterner and his grey pony. Though Tom had a head start, Whiskey soon overtook him. In his turn, he gave ground to Danny astride Robert Milt’s powerful quarter horse who possessed both a lightning sprint and a steady ground eating pace he could maintain for hours.

Four, three-quarter grown coyote pups leapt away from something which had their attention near the mill as the riders swept up to the trough in a cloud of alkali dust.

“Coyotes hauled down a fawn,” Ben said as he stood high in the stirrups for a better look.

“This is like an African Safari. The land is teeming with wild animals.” Tom said.

“Perhaps not as much variety but plentiful,” Milt agreed.

“I’d like to find the shed antlers from that monster mule,” Ben said as Scoundrel splashed the water in the mill trough with his muzzle.

“I’ll bet they’re laying within a half mile of here,” Danny said. “Do we have time for a quick search before heading back to camp?”

“We can ride in the dark,” Tom put in.

Brenda and Val vetoed that idea. Making supper in the dark would not be so easy.

Ben looked at the sun which was sliding down the late afternoon position, then he glanced at Milt, who shrugged. “We’re about an hour’s ride from camp. Let’s take a quick look.”

Those who already had a few deer antlers tied to their saddles passed the sheds to Ben who had dismounted and was stowing his own collection inside the mill tower.

A half hour search netted another half dozen antlers, one of which Ben decided had belonged to the big buck. Danny studied the sun bleached bone, white on the inside curve where the sunlight and rain could do their erosive work but still quite dark on the less exposed outer surfaces. The base had a bigger circumference than Danny's thumb and finger could encircle and the four tines were long and high. The lineman held the butt of the antler to his head. "How much spread, Benny?"

"Got to be well over two feet," Ben said. "I ain't gonna lie to you, that's a big, big buck. I'll be looking for the mate to that shed when hunting season rolls around."

Luck smiled on Ben again, for, soon after the riders pointed their ponies back to camp, Tom espied another antler partially hidden in the grass at the base of a ridge just off the trail. The easterner baled off his horse and scooped up the shed with a flourish. "Does this look familiar, Mr. Collins?"

"Atta-go, Tor-on-to!" Ben exclaimed as he trotted Scoundrel over to Tom and Lefty.

Leaping to the ground Ben quickly untied the first antler from his saddle; accepting the second from Tom he compared the two. He said, "They're a pair for sure."

The horsemen followed the prairie trail back to camp at a faster pace. On arrival Brenda and Val dismounted, then passed their horses' reins to Danny and Ben who would release the steeds in the holding pen. Upon reaching the mill, Tom helped Ben hoist the ice chests up out of the well. They restored the plank cover and then slung the makeshift paniers across Scoundrel, who still wore his saddle, and led the temporary pack horse to the tenting area.

“Wood rats or deer mice have been in the grocery box,” Brenda laughed, holding up a loaf of bread with a sizeable chunk nibbled from one end.

“I see they’ve been chewing on my extra blanket, too.” Val said. “They are literally eating us out of house and home.”

After Scoundrel was relieved of the ice chests, Benny swung into the saddle and loosened his lariat.

“There’s dead fall in that aspen grove over yonder. I’ll snag a few trees and pull ‘em in for tonight’s fire wood. They’ll burn longer than the sticks we’ve been gathering.”

Tom strolled back to the holding corral where Danny and Milt were rubbing down the horses. He grasped the top rail and vaulted over the fence, landing lightly on the inside. Lefty whickered softly and came over to Tom, looking for a hand out.

“I swear,” Danny said, “you have that pony acting more like a dog than a horse.”

“I guess Lefty never felt like he belonged to anyone before,” Milt said.

“Maybe I’ll have to take him back to Toronto with me.”

“You could ride him back and save the airfare.” Danny said.

Tom gazed out across the pasture. “Riding down a highway just wouldn’t be the same.”

Ben and Scoundrel trotted up to the pen and Ben stepped out of the saddle. He turned his horse loose after giving him a quick rub down. Scoundrel immediately went for a roll in the dust.

Dusk descended as the last rays of sun lingered softly on the upper fins and tail of the windmill. The dim shapes of several deer could be discerned out on the flat as the nocturnal animals emerged from cover. Danny rationed oats to each horse from a rain and rodent proof tub Robert Milto had dropped off earlier.

Ben suggested that they feed Leonard Yeast's mare a little back from the rest. "Sharing oats may fire that streak in her," He said.

Somewhere across the big flat a chorus of young coyotes started to yodel and Milt laughed aloud. "They haven't learned to howl yet."

Chase trotted out into the open and barked a response. To the dog's surprise, an adult coyote ripped a deep long howl from another direction. The evening went quiet.

"They're on the hunt now," Ben said.

As the friends strolled back to camp, the flicker of light against the upper branches of the birch trees announced before they could see the actual flames that Val and Brenda had a fire going.

Tom and Milt paused at the foot of the ridge while Danny and Ben continued on toward the tents. The stars were turning on rapidly as the final sunset glow faded in the west. The gibbous moon, well on its way to being a full circle of orange, began to creep up the eastern horizon. A great horned owl glided silently and lit upon the tail of the windmill where he commenced an inquisitive "Hoo? Hoo?"

"These are the best days of my life." Tom's adolescent voice cracked, then he laughed at himself. "I don't know how to howl yet either."

Milt laughed at this admission. "It has been fun having you around, Tom, you make the ordinary seem special."

"What you call ordinary is all so big and new for me. Somehow I feel misplaced in time. City life is so...distant from what you have here."

Tom heard Milt's deep intake of breath then she repeated his words. "Misplaced in time....that's one way of putting it. I would say specifically placed in time is more accurate."

"I'm not sure I follow you there, Milt, but I'd like to think of myself as an anachronism... born too late. Maybe someday we will travel in time, who knows?"

Milt smiled in the gathering darkness. "I'm sure, someday we will."

Danny called from atop the ridge. "You youngsters better come and eat before Val and Brenda throw it to the wood rats."

As Milt turned to ascend the embankment, Tom reached for her hand and they climbed through the soft sand together.

A kerosene lantern hanging from a birch tree beamed a concentrated bright light in a small circle but cast huge grotesque shadows into the perimeter. As Tom and Milt came into the light they heard Brenda announce, "The fare isn't so extravagant as yesterday but it'll pass for camp grub."

The extravagant fare she referred to was the supper of the previous evening. Constance Milto had brought marinated beef steaks for everyone and Danny had grilled them to perfection on the grate over the hot coals of the fire pit.

The Miltos, Sven and Vera had stayed well after dark since the evening and company were so pleasurable. Benny had pulled out his six string and played while everyone joined in for a campfire sing-along.

Tonight the hungry riders hastily grabbed utensils and plates to dish up from steaming pots on the iron grill and 'chowed down'.

"Shall we scrub those dishes in the morning?" Val asked as Milt began collecting the plates.

"Yeah, there isn't enough light to do a proper job tonight," said Brenda.

"Suits me fine," Benny said, "My hands are already raw from washing too many dishes."

“Benny Collins, you haven't washed enough dishes to even get your hands clean!” Brenda accused. “Ever!”

Ben shrugged and grinned. “Dad and I just let the dogs lick 'em up after supper.”

“You may well be in line to learn the use of a dish cloth and tea towel,” Danny said.

“*And* changing diapers,” Milt threw in.

“Better dig out that guitar, Ben,” Tom said. “It looks like you're outnumbered so you'll have to sing your way out.”

The young cowboy reached into the tent and felt for his guitar case. “Dishes, maybe; diapers, never.”

While tuning the six-string to suit his ear, Ben said, “How about a few old songs for tonight? Here's a couple from the great Gene Autry... who probably never had to do dishes.” He sang and played 'That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine' and 'Back in the Saddle Again'. The ladies joined in for 'Red River Valley' and then the guitarist picked up the tempo and had the audience rocking with his version of 'Peggy Sue'. Ben only missed one verse and earned an enthusiastic round of applause for an excellent rendition of Marty Robbins' “The Cowboy In The Continental Suit.” The latter he dedicated to Tom.

A chill crept up to the fire's edge and began gnawing at toes as the last heat of the day evaporated from the sand. Ben put the guitar away while the ladies sought warmer clothing. Danny pumped the air cylinder of the dimming lantern.

Tom, who was examining the large set of antlers Ben had brought back to camp, said “It's amazing those bucks will grow this much horn in just a few months.”

“Well, that's an abnormally large set but it really is a feat of nature,” Danny agreed.

“Imagine those great big moose paddles though,” Ben said, “Those things must weigh a ton in velvet.”

"I'd like to go with you for the hunt," Tom said. "I bet you'll get him, won't you, Ben?"

"Well, I know his territory and I know what he looks like," Ben said. "With a little good luck for me and some not so good luck for him... it's even money."

"You'll have another advantage, too," Danny added, "Pete's old rifle."

"Yeah, I could just leave the Winchester at the windmill and come back next day for the deer. That gun could hunt that ol' buck all by itself."

Everyone climbed the low ridge in back of the camp for a last look out onto the moonlit landscape. A vagrant breeze swung the head of the windmill and it creaked loudly in the stillness. Rodents rustled in the low bush nearby and Ben detected the steady rasp of a porcupine gnawing bark somewhere further along the ridge.

"A specific place in time," Tom murmured. "If it *were* possible to travel in time, I'd stay right in this moment."

Both Val and Danny looked sharply at the easterner. "Travel in time?" Danny asked.

"Milt thinks that some day we will be able to move through time," Tom said. "I'd move here and stay put."

Ben said, "Fred Moffat claims the Americans are planning to send a man to the moon next year, so maybe there will be a way to travel back and forth in time someday, too,"

"Quién sabe; who knows?" Danny said.

Milt said nothing.

Unfortunately, fourth dimension manipulation had not been conceived in Tom O'Brien's teenage years and the young man began to experience feelings toward Robert Milto's pretty daughter that he had here-to-for never felt. Back in Toronto, Tom had been completely

submersed in sport activities and had never considered girls as more than an inconvenience. From the first day he saw Milt at the branding he realized there must be more to life than hockey, football and baseball.

Milt liked the Torontonion as well but in the same way she cared for Ben or Danny. One of the drawbacks of being a history transplant meant romance could not flourish. Milt's mother had explained to the girl soon after the family had moved to the big ranch that all the 'youngsters' she associated with, were —in 'real time'— at least old enough to be her father. “We're a generation and a half out of sequence here,” she said.

So, Doctor O'Brien's nephew was, in fact, long past fifty years old. This thought deterred Milt from a blossoming puppy love. “But, Mom!” she had complained, “I have to dance with old men at the sock hops and any one my age isn't even born yet! You and Dad have each other but all I have is Chase and Whiskey.”

Constance Milto smiled and tenderly brushed back a lock of auburn hair that had fallen across Milt's face. “You have us too, darling. Let's make the most of this chance for it really is the opportunity of *two* lifetimes. When we return to our natural era, you will be able to carry on a normal life and the bonus will be all the fantastic memories of our lives here and now.”

Milt's frustration melted. “I don't want to go back for a long time yet!” She had dashed outside calling for her pup, Chase, and ran to the corral where Whiskey waited.

However, *now* was becoming a difficult problem as Milt attempted to deter Tom's awkward advances; to him Milt was not a virtual reality, a hologram or a link to a distance future; she was here and now, warm as life and a dozen times as pretty.

And while Tom O'Brien snuggled deep in his bedroll using Ben's guitar case for the pillow he did not have, his head swimming with warm thoughts of Milt, Danny lay

wakeful beside him, pondering the brief verbal exchange regarding time travel. Curious situations and strange fragments of conversation occasionally arose involving the Milto family.

Danny silently watched the firelight flickering softly against the canvas wall. At first, a faint snoring came from Ben's bedroll on the far side of the shelter and then the steady even breathing of Tom who slept in the middle. The ladies, who'd had a giggle fit earlier in their tent, were quiet now.

Danny thought about the glorious day they had enjoyed and the subsequent entertaining evening in camp. The previous night had been a fabulous time with the visit from the Miltos, Sven and Vera. The steak barbecue, complete with salad and baked potatoes, had left the campers sated and Benny's guitar had provided a special addition around the campfire. Conversation was simple and had been mostly about cattle, horses and daily activities. The Miltos drove to Stockton only occasionally for their mail and supplies so the single news source was Vera and even she hadn't been in town for a few days.

Danny's thoughts drifted to his work. He had put a few jobs aside in order to take this ride and now wondered if any telephone grief had arisen in the district. Last night Vera reported that she had checked with her assistant operator before leaving the ranch. "No news of thunderstorms or serious line problems," she had said.

Danny reflected, after Vera had said there were no problems, Constance Milto had said something about "No major nine-one-one's." What exactly was the comment? He couldn't recall, but the way she said it triggered a little alarm in his subconscious. "What is a nine-one-one?" he wondered.

Though this day had been a full and exhausting one, Danny remained awake for a long time. The soft crackle of the dying fire, the busy rustling of the nocturnal

animals, the hoot of the owl and again a distant chorus of coyotes howling at the moon, held more somnolence than fillip and eventually Danny drifted off into a fitful dream-filled slumber....

Danny was whirling wildly through time, popping in and out of history, leaping into the future... he awoke with a start, cold sweat on his brow and the bedroll half thrown off. '9-11!' The eleventh day of the ninth month! Thousands of lives were lost... In his mind's eye he saw billowing smoke rising from a giant edifice. Trapped, hysterical victims were plunging to their deaths from windows and ledges far above a street filled with pandemonium and chaos. But where, when? Was it wartime? No, that didn't fit. What had happened? Or, was it going to happen in another time? Somewhere in the future? It all seemed so realistic. It's only a bad dream, he desperately tried to convince himself and thought aloud, "Too many chilli peppers in the camp chilli this evening."

Danny adjusted his bed clothes and finally fell into a deep and trouble free slumber that ended with the clang of the kettle and crackle of a new fire as Ben prepared the morning coffee.

Danny poked his head through the tent flap and squinted into the morning sun, now well clear of the eastern horizon.

"Mornin' Ben, you the only survivor?"

"Nope, you and Tom are the stragglers, the ladies have gone over to the mill for a scrub at the water trough."

A capricious breeze rattled through the birch trees and Danny could hear the distant sounds of the windmill doing its duty. Smoke from Ben's fire drifted lazily upwards until the wind caught at it and sheared the plume, whisking it to oblivion.

"We'll need to watch this fire close today," said Ben.

Danny said, "That wind is south now, if it swings east we may have a shower later. Best take our slickers along and secure the camp against a downpour, too."

"Be prepared. Were you a boy scout, Danny?" Ben asked.

The lineman hesitated. "...not a scout, exactly, I've had some survival training... and a few taps on the noggin when common sense was missing."

A mournful groan from Tom O'Brien announced his awakening. Danny withdrew back into the tent to dress.

"The worst drawback of a sleeping bag is having to leave it," Tom complained. "A fellow gets all warm and comfortable and then nature calls...."

"Were you up in the night?" Danny asked.

"Once, when you were flipping around and talking in your sleep. I thought we may have to get Ben's rope and tie you in."

"Yeah," Ben called from outside. "That must have been one mean bronc you were trying to ride half the night."

"Sorry about that, I had the weirdest nightmares."

As Tom and Danny emerged from the tent the female contingent returned, freshly scrubbed, from the windmill-cum-powder-room.

"Coffee's ready," Ben said, clutching a mug of the aromatic brew in his hand.

Concern showed in Val's eyes as she studied the haggard, stubbly face of her husband. "Are you okay, Danny? You look more than normal camp-life-dishevelled."

"I just need a cup of Benny's mud and I'll be right as rain."

"Was it you making the racket in the night?" Brenda asked. "If I didn't know better, I'd have thought a bear was in camp."

“Crazy dreams. I think I added too many chilli peppers in that second helping of chilli.”

But the vision from Danny's dream did not fade as nightmares do. The burning building appeared more distinct, it was a monstrous skyscraper or maybe a tower and there was another one beside it on fire too. Where? When? And nine-eleven or nine-one-one; September eleventh? What was the significance of that? The question had him preoccupied most of the morning.

The group rode south this day, facing into the breeze which was stiff enough to warrant warmer clothing. Clouds were building in the distance and Danny's monition of a shower became imminent. Ben led the group through a gap of rough broken ridges and into a series of clay buttes which had withstood the incessant winds of aeons; these abrupt, low cliffs faced west like worn teeth in a gigantic horizontal jawbone, the upper edge trailing eastward to blend into the grass-covered landscape beyond.

“We could carve Prime Minister Pearson's face into one of these cliffs,” Tom said.

“We could not, too,” Ben replied dryly.

“Maybe carve a fresh face on there, Pearson resigned a couple months ago,” Danny said.

Brenda stretched out her arm and pointed. “If you look at the buttes in pairs, you could imagine a politician facing the other way.”

Gradually, the saw toothed terrain smoothed out giving way to a background of large, treeless hills like ancient atrophied coulees that had long ago relinquished their profile. Ben rode up to a stout barbwire fence line at a point where it capped a small knoll and swung out of the saddle.

“Drop gate,” he said and commenced pulling the wires away from several of the posts, allowing the strands to drop downward. Tom inspected the simple system closely: Two large fence staples were driven into the post, parallel to the wire about three-quarters of an inch apart, leaving a half inch protruding. The strand rested between these two staples and a third hooked through both to secure the wire. The fence was a sturdy four strand and the curious staple arrangement was installed on each wire for a few spans along the top of the hillock. At ground level on each post, a heavy spike had been driven, the head angling downward. Ben latched the loosened strands under each of these spikes then carefully led Scoundrel across the wires.

“Drop gate,” he repeated. “We’re now off Rocking M range and into the government lease.”

Val asked, “How did you know the gate was here? There’s no trail or anything.”

Ben grinned. “Not everybody knows about this. It’s a short cut to where I want to go.”

“And where’s that?” Danny asked.

Ben pointed. “That biggest hill over there about half a mile has tepee rings on top. I thought you may be interested.”

Everyone was interested.

Tom was ecstatic. “Ancient ruins!”

The tepee rings were simple circles of small boulders laid out in a random pattern on a large level area at the crest of the highest summit. Near the foot of the hill, far below the tepee rings, lay a fairly large body of water, not quite a lake but a deep prairie slough, its perimeter edged with snow white alkali.

The rocks, heavy enough to anchor the buffalo skin tepees, but manoeuvrable by hand, had settled into the earth and only the top most portion remained visible.

Danny counted eight of the stone circles. The wind blew particularly strong on this desolate hill and the reason for the rocks was apparent. "You'd need good anchors to hold a tent on this knoll," he said.

"Why perch way up here? Why not down by the water?" Tom asked.

Ben surmised that this encampment would have been a lookout point. "The Indians depended on their eyesight; it was a time when survival of the fittest applied equally to man and beast. They pitched camp on a high spot probably mainly, to be able to see enemies and spot game such as the buffalo herds that once roamed this country. Another advantage of being up here is to escape the mosquitoes and flies that, some years, could drive people *and* horses crazy."

Ben stretched out his left arm, pointing toward a long sharp ridge that dropped off sheer from a large table land far to the south. "That high clay bank wall is about eight miles away. The Indians used to stampede buffalo herds and drive them over the edge. It's called a buffalo jump."

After a long interval, while each person considered this anecdote, Val said, "God! Imagine the terror and the pain of the crippled animals."

"Imagine the waste," Brenda added. "What would you do with, say fifty dead buffalo in the heat of summer?"

"A lot did go to the coyotes, flies and vultures, I suppose," Ben admitted. "Bone fragments are pretty common at the base of the jump; you can only make so much pemmican."

Ben glanced at the dark cloud bank looming near. "We best put on our slickers before we get wet. I reckon this is far enough for today, anyway."

The riders reached the drop-gate and were back on Milto land when a light rain commenced.

“Pull your hat down and roll your collar up,” Ben advised Tom, who responded, “I’d rather not be riding in the rain but I have to. Does that make me a real cowboy?”

Ben laughed and Danny said, “Tourists who didn’t have the sense to come in out of the rain is what we really are.”

“Let’s shift these ponies to a higher gear,” Milt said. “I don’t mind riding in the rain but there isn’t much sense in prolonging the misery.”

A steady ground eating pace sped the return trip. With the wind behind them, the riders were spared most of the punishing lash of the pelting rain. Ben led the cavalry on a beeline through the rough breaks beyond the clay buttes. In what seemed a very short time, the group broke out onto the flat land that preceded the holding field. The rain had increased but the wind lessened as first the mill and then the holding corrals came into view. The horses were anxious to be finished for the day too and they voluntarily quickened their pace as they neared their temporary home.

“We are tourists and spoiled ones to boot,” Brenda shouted over the thud of running hooves.

Her reasoning became apparent as the rest of the riders saw what the blond girl’s sharp eyes had noticed. Someone had erected a large shelter, as yet only partially visible over the ridge near camp.

“Hey! It’s the portable shack Ralph Osborne uses for a food booth at his auction sales,” Ben said as they cantered into camp.

“Now, I wonder who did that?” Danny said, giving Milt an exaggerated wink.

“It was probably my parents come out from Toronto for the afternoon,” Tom said.

The straight walled tent had been set up opposite the smaller four person units; the open side faced southwest, perpendicular to what had now diminished to a light breeze. All the camp gear had been moved inside out of the rain and a spare kerosene lantern hung on a peg by the entrance.

“We have room to stow saddles and blankets here, too,” Ben said. “And lookee here! There’s a table, chairs, and,” he leaned over in the saddle to read the label, “there’s even a mickey of brandy to warm us up.”

Unhappy prospects of a cold damp evening squeezed in two small tents had weighed on everyone’s mind but the situation had completely reversed now.

“We’ll fire the lanterns to take the dampness out of everything and you men put the horses in the corral,” Brenda ordered.

“You’ll be changing diapers, Ben,” Danny said as the male contingent rode bareback, each leading a second unsaddled horse to the corrals.

“God, she almost sounded like her mother.”

“They’ll have that brandy bracer polished off, too,” Tom grumbled, mimicking Ben.

“Day three, dissension in the ranks,” Danny announced.

But it turned out there was an equal portion of oats for the horses and an even share of nips from the public brandy bottle for the riders. The lanterns, burning at opposite ends of the large enclosure, soon removed the chill from cold limbs and began to dry dampened gear.

A deck of cards was included with the ‘tourist package’ and soon everyone was gathered round the table for dealer’s choice.

“It certainly smells horsey in here,” Val said as the quarters, doubling as tack room, warmed up. “But I like it,” she was quick to add.

When Milt's turn to deal arrived, she said, with a mischievous glint, "Anyone know how to play *Cripple Mr. Onion*?"

The round of blank looks supplied the answer so she said, "That's okay, 'cause I don't remember the rules anyway. How about...*In Between*?"

Benny and Tom discovered that the elves who erected the straight wall shelter had also restocked the ice chest with provisions and a fresh supply of ice. A short note proclaimed that all was well back in civilization.

"Man, we are a spoiled bunch," Ben said as he and Tom packed adequate supper victuals back to camp.

"Spoiled suits me just fine," Tom laughed, "I don't ever want this to end."

Danny worked his barbecue magic on the grate in spite of the dampened wood supply and turned out another fabulous feast.

"I thought cowboys lived on pork and beans," Tom said.

Ben patted his full stomach. "This cowboy is gonna grow fat as a yearlin' steer with all the grub we been puttin' away."

Danny sat back in the chair, tilted up his straw hat and said, "Time to put on some fat, winter's coming."

Darkness descended early under the dense cloud cover. Though the showers had stopped, the evening was sopping wet; the birch and clump willow bent under their burden of rain drops.

After a few more hands of cards, everyone agreed to an early bedtime. The lanterns, used previously for drying damp gear, were moved to the tents to take the chill out of the bed clothes.

Ben, Danny and Tom stood round the shallow pit, poking at the embers and feeding small sticks to the dying fire.

“It’s been a long time since man first stared into the fire,” Danny said.

“In the beginning, he probably ran from it, just like the animals do today,” said Ben.

“Chase isn’t too afraid,” observed Tom as he watched the Border Collie chewing on a steak bone near the flames.

The ladies came by to bid their male counterparts a good evening and Val anxiously asked Danny if he would be able to sleep tonight.

Danny grinned and winked at Milt, “I’ll sleep just fine now unless I dream about that crippled onion fellow.”

A gust of breeze blew raindrops from the trees on to the tent and Danny smiled in the darkness as the bedroll gradually transformed from startlingly chilly to a pleasant penetrating warmth. “Cripple Mr. Onion,” he said and drifted off in placid somnolence.

...Down through the years I've spent many nights out in those hills, occasionally when I hadn't planned for it, but the years when the Miltos owned the ranch were the very best. I recall one particular summer...

Submitted by Ben Collins

CHAPTER 15

August 17, 1968

A distant cloud of dark smoke caught Benny Collins' attention as he, Brenda and Milt were nearing Stockton on a Saturday afternoon in late August. The trio had recently returned from their vacation on horseback exploring the more remote reaches of the Milto ranch and were now off to see a movie at the town cinema. They were also hoping to renew acquaintance with their friends, whom they had not seen for awhile. Milt's parents had left home early on this day for a trip to the city so Ben and Brenda had asked the rancher's daughter to accompany them; Milt had been feeling quite blue since her good friend, Tom O'Brien, had returned to the East.

"Somethin's going on up ahead," Ben said as he coaxed a few more RPM's out of the little six cylinder engine of his '52 Chevy pickup.

Two vehicles were parked side by side facing opposite directions at an approach to the paved highway where it curved by Stockton's north and east quadrants. Several people were standing along the roadside; one holding a white homemade flag.

"Oh!" Brenda cried. "It must be a drag race!"

"Yeah!" Ben said, pushing the truck a little harder, "and they're waiting for us to clear the track!"

The '52 sped past the bystanders who waved exuberantly as they recognized Ben's pickup. A crude 'FINISH' with broad underline had been printed in large

green letters across the road. One quarter of a mile further along, the same paint had been used to inscribe 'START'. Here, a considerably larger crowd of people and vehicles occupied the ditches and shoulders on either side of the highway; an impressive collection of brilliantly coloured late model muscle cars held the foreground. Ben slowed and steered the truck down onto the grass-bottomed boulevard between the road and the embankment of the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks. After manipulating the old Chevrolet around to park facing the action, he and the girls hopped out where they were greeted by more friends.

The source of the smoke Ben had seen was a bright yellow Pontiac GTO whose driver had been 'hot braking' the vehicle to warm up the tires and likely fuelling his own testosterone as well. A second car rolled up to the START line beside the GTO. For a better view, Ben and the girls climbed into the back of the '52. They were soon joined by twins, Shaun and Dennis Miller, the latter carrying a partially consumed box of beer. The pair immediately took command of the conversation, supplying a steady stream of commentary about auto racing. Though not polished veterans of the sound booth, they seemed to have plenty of facts regarding the assortment of muscle cars and their respective drivers from the surrounding area.

Shaun, using a beer bottle as a microphone, announced, "Here we have the Pontiac GTO; for the ladies, that's the yellow car. It has a hot little 396 CID," aside he said to Brenda and Milt, "that's cubic inch displacement," then resumed his commentary, "that turns on right smartly. It is owned and driven by Dale Frieberg from up the line somewhere."

Speaking into his own long neck 'mike,' Dennis interrupted. "These boys," he waved an arm indicating the string of fast cars parked beyond the improvised start line,

“from the bridge crew have too much money. The local dealers can't fill orders for cars quick enough to outfit them all.”

Shaun said, “And the Road Runner that has just pulled up to the line...”

“Also owned by a bridge construction worker, but he's a local, so that's okay.”

“...That's the blue car, has a 383 engine with plenty of horses, all of them ready to run, under the hood of that baby. Stockton's native son Martin Anderson drives that unit.”

Dennis added, “If that Plymouth had the 426 Hemi, we could all go home without watching the race.... But it will be a classic match today and I'm giving even beer on the GTO.”

“Well, the GTO is the more comfortable vehicle, I'll admit. Martin's Road Runner doesn't even have carpet on the floor. She's a bare bones, no frills machine, but that drive train is nothing to sneeze at. I'll bet....one brown buffalo, on the Plymouth.”

“A brown buffalo?” Milt asked.

Dennis held his beer bottle so the 'Calgary' label with its distinctive buffalo head could be seen.

“Oh, a *brown buffalo*.”

“Want one?” Shaun offered.

Brenda said, “She's too young and so are you two!”

“Can Benny have one, Mrs. Collins?” Dennis asked.

“Watch it, Dennis,” Shaun said. “They aren't married yet.”

Benny accepted the offered bottle, saying, “They're waving the flag at the far end so the highway must be clear.”

“And here we go, ladies and gentlemen,” Shaun announced as the flagman on the start line waved in turn, “They're off!”

“That’s horse racing, Shaun,” Dennis broke in over the screaming tires and revving engines.

“She’s a close one...” Shaun shouted, “the GTO has the jump off the line... he’s holding on... but watch now, that little blue Road Runner is opening up....”

Then Dennis yelled as the blue streak edged past the yellow, “Beep-Beep! The Road Runner took him out. I’ll have that buffalo, thank you very much.”

“Speaking of Beep-Beep, Dodge paid fifty thousand bucks for the right to stick that little bird decal on the side of those Plymouths.”

“Anyone at that end running a stop watch?” Ben asked.

“I hope so,” Shaun said, “I’ll bet that was close to the fourteen second mark.”

“Here comes Steven Herschell with that orange Cyclone of his,” Dennis spoke into his microphone as one of the muscle cars cued along the shoulder emerged. “Another one of the boys from up the line, making his future on the bridge crew.”

“That’s a nice little piece of work, too, if you like Fords, and can tolerate the colour. Those hood pins on that unit aren’t for show either because that 390 can really turn in some fast quarter-mile runs.”

“Not in the same league as what we’ve just witnessed,” Dennis argued. “I wonder who will challenge him?”

The answer arrived in the form of a ‘Bolero Red’, ‘67 Chevelle SS and the match up would have been close—the twin’s odds favouring the Chevy— but a missed second to third shift gave the Cyclone a long lonely lead across the green finish line. The racers burned off more rubber as they performed smoking, screeching 180 degree turns, and headed back to the crowd around the Start line.

“Now we have the GTO challenging the Chevelle,” Dennis pointed out. “I’ll go a Buffalo on the Chevelle if Honker doesn’t blow the shift again.”

Shaun said, “Honker wouldn’t miss two shifts in the same weekend so I’ll side with the SS in this go-round, too.”

The Miller boys were accurate in their assessment of Honker and his car for, when they crossed the line, the red Chevelle had its bumper and half a front fender ahead of the yellow GTO.

The Cyclone lost by more than a length to the Road Runner and the Millers’ supply of microphones were dwindling when a late arrival came sifting down the highway from the north west.

“Hey! That’s that Richardson kid from up the line... his dad owns the Chev dealership up in Landsdale.”

“Look at that car!” Shaun interrupted his brother. “That kid has too much money and he doesn’t even work on the bridge crew! That’s the new Camaro RS, folks....brand new for ‘68!”

“Kind of a puke green, though,” Dennis added, his tone matching the colour.

“The hottest machine this country will ever see, I’ll bet! General Motors brag that it is ‘a small vicious animal that eats Mustangs!’”

“Only one Ford here today and that 390 took second behind the Road Runner. Now it looks like Martin is going to match the Plymouth against the Camaro.”

Benny growled, “I hope the Road Runner cleans that Camaro. I don’t like that Richardson kid. Never did.”

Brenda put her hand on Benny’s bare forearm. “I think he knows what you think, Ben, ever since you rearranged his nose.”

“Well, he’s still looking down it most of the time,” Dennis Miller said.

To everyone's dismay, the hot little Camaro convincingly handled the Road Runner, winning by almost a full length.

“Atta go, ass-wipe, you're on a roll!” Shaun hooted at the Camaro as Richardson spun a doughnut on the pavement.

“Had him right out of the chute,” Benny grumbled.

“A fine piece of driving, though. You gotta admit the porky little bugger can shift a four speed,” Shaun said.

“Yeah,” Dennis sighed, “but now watch the snobby little bastard —pardon my language, ladies— the snobby little *brat* come crowing around here.”

This prediction also proved accurate. When the competitors returned to the start line, Aaron Richardson gloatingly climbed out of the cockpit of his shiny new Camaro. The car instantly drew a crowd of enthusiastic bystanders wanting to check out the famous 'Mustang eater'. The pudgy driver commenced strutting about, taunting the other racers. “Anybody want to take some money off me? How about pink slips, gentleman? Any takers? I don't run this unit for free.”

His circuit led him past Benny's derelict pickup and the youth, showing flabby evidence of a soft life, sneered, “Want to race, Collins? You should be able to shift that three-on-the-tree pretty good by now, you've been driving that old wreck forever. Or maybe you ladies would like to hop in my Camaro and go for a ride with me?”

“Watch your mouth, pus guts,” Benny warned and Milt burst out laughing at the fitting appellation.

Aaron Richardson's ample face blushed scarlet, the first half of a second chin starting to wag but, before he could manage a retort, the crowd was alerted that regular highway traffic was approaching north-bound. “Clear the road!” echoed along the line.

A navy coloured Lincoln Continental slowed as it passed the crowd. Milt recognized the family sedan, her mother at the wheel, but no sign of her father in the car with her. If any of the others recognized Mrs. Milto through the tinted glass, no mention was made. Milt felt certain her mother had seen her. "I wonder where Dad is?" she thought to herself.

The Camaro driver had resumed his bantam strut, although he strategically distanced himself from the hostile group in back of Ben's truck. Ben stubbornly refused to leave the impromptu race track before Aaron Richardson though the girls were urging him to take them into town.

A small red Massey Harris tractor ,with '44' stencilled in yellow on the side, came jouncing down the highway from the north. A farmer wearing grey striped bib overalls and a straw hat sat upon the iron seat. The tractor pulled a heavily loaded hay rack with two energetically waving freckle-faced children perched atop the bales. The amusing combination drew the drag-racing crowd's attention as the outfit rattled past.

No one noticed another vehicle approaching from the southerly direction until it was almost upon them.

The intrepid vehicle could be felt more than heard as it slowly rolled to a deliberate stop at the green Start line. The engine had a deep throaty rumble and, even as it sat idling, the unmistakable sound of unleashed power reverberated under the hood. The windows were darkly shaded and the lone occupant, though discernible, could not be identified. The driver did not seem disposed to roll down a window or step out. He stayed behind the wheel, occasionally lightly revving the rumbling motor. The car was obviously a very recent purchase; its factory fresh paint gleamed in the late afternoon sun. Two broad white stripes began at the top of the polished chrome grille, running parallel down the hood, then along the roof and

over the back to terminate at the rear bumper. Complemented by a generous display of chrome, the body of the car shone raven black.

“Ho-o-o-ly Sheee-it!” Dennis Miller bawled. “It’s the King of the Road! Look at that! See the KR initials? That’s Carroll Shelby’s New ‘68 ½ Cobra Jet Mustang! They are so new the paint ain’t even dry!”

Shaun echoed the expletive, “Holy shit! That guy has too much money.” Then he yelled, “Hey, Richardson, have a look at that machine!”

But Aaron Richardson wasn’t listening, his followers were stuffing him into the Camaro.

“This will be the race of all time,” Dennis predicted, forgetting to use his bottle mike. “Right here on the outskirts of Stockton! I wouldn’t have believed there would be one of those KR’s *in Canada*, never mind way out here in the sticks.”

Brenda pulled urgently on Ben’s arm in attempt to break his mesmeric concentration. “Benny, *whose* car is it? Who is *Carol Shelby*?”

Ben could not draw his gaze from the beautiful Mustang, but spoke a slow response, “Carroll Shelby is the guy that built the Cobra a few years ago... but I haven’t a clue who is driving this one: if it’s the car Dennis and Shaun say it is... and the name is right there, GT500KR,” he pointed, “it is somethin’ *real* special.”

Milt tingled from head to toe in her excitement but managed to say nothing.

The Richardson youth pulled the Camaro up to the line beside the mystery Mustang and aggressively revved his engine. Both drivers awaited the ‘all clear’ signal from the far end indicating that the racers would have the highway to themselves.

“Wow! Would you look at that match up!” Shaun said, his voice oozing envy. “Chevy planned to produce a King of the Road but Shelby and Ford beat them to it. I wonder if the Cobra Jet will wax Richardson's Camaro today?”

“Well, it has that big 428 and Carroll Shelby designed the car, so it will move,” Dennis said.

“Ford is saying it only has 335 horsepower though,” Shaun argued.

“Only 335 horsepower,” Ben repeated..

“Everybody knows that story,” Dennis said. “They had to bill the engine as less powerful because of insane insurance premiums for big horsepower in the States. I'll officially bet the rest of these brown buffalo that the 'small vicious little animal that eats Mustangs' will *choke* on that horse.”

At that moment, the start flag dropped and the racers vanished as twin plumes of smoke from the squawking, squealing rubber tires combined into one dense cloud. The thunder of the powerful engines hammered against Milt's chest, augmenting the pounding in her breast; screaming tires and roaring RPM's assaulted her ear drums; thick acrid smoke assailed her nostrils, burning eyes riveted unblinkingly to the speeding drag racers.

A race now run.

“Holy Shit!” the twins pealed in unison as the flagman waved exuberantly at the finish line.

“I told you that Camaro would choke on the Mustang!” Dennis yelled.

“Blew his bloody doors right off!” Shaun said

“He isn't stopping!” Brenda pointed to the distant Cobra Jet, now a rapidly diminishing dot as it continued rocketing down the highway. The vanquished Camaro slowed to turn around.

Milt was so excited she nearly fell out of Ben's truck box. "Waxed 'em clean, right, Ben?" she said, grasping his rolled up sleeve to steady herself.

"Yes, Milt. Cleaned, waxed and polished. He blew by that Chevy so fast I expected Pus Guts to get out to see why his car wasn't moving."

Dennis was grinning from ear to ear as he pried the cap from one Calgary using a second one as an opener. He offered the beer to Ben who declined. "Well, that settles that," Dennis said. "We know who makes the *only* 'King of the Road' now."

Brenda remained staring at the empty highway where the Mustang had vanished. "I wonder who it was and why didn't he stop?"

Ben's glance met Milt's for a second and something passed between them. "Maybe we'll never know," he said.

Benny, Brenda and Milt didn't stay to rib Aaron Richardson over his defeat but climbed into the cab of the pickup, said goodbye to their colourful commentators and drove the short distance into town.

Ben treated the girls to a burger, fries and a coke at Kuan, 'The Chinaman's', Silver Café.

A small queue was forming in front of the theatre as Ben angle parked his pickup on the gravel street half a block from the entrance.

"I hate line ups," he complained and Milt laughed out loud.

"Ben, there's only about six people there ahead of us..."

"Well, it's still a line up."

The Graduate, stencilled in large red lettering above the double doors, announced the presentation. Brenda said, "It's supposed to be really good."

"I've heard it's risky."

"Risqué?" Milt offered.

“Yeah,” Ben grinned. “Maybe they won't let a little kid like you in.”

“I'll say you are my dad, *old timer*.”

Ben wouldn't allow the ladies to pay for the tickets though Milt protested that he had supplied the ride and supper. She insisted on buying popcorn and refreshments.

It was a good show.

On the way home, the miles flew by as, a cappella, the trio sang *Mrs. Robinson*.

Ben and Brenda dropped Milt off in front of the big ranch house where a light burned on the veranda. “Eleven o'clock on the dot,” Ben announced, after checking his pocket watch. “Your folks won't be after my hide for keeping their daughter up too late, I hope?”

“Maybe Leonard and Myrna will be sore at you for keeping Brenda out, though?”

Brenda laughed. “Mom and Dad treat us like we're already married off.”

Milt stood on the bottom step of the veranda, watching her friends depart. Then, instead of going into the house, she trotted across the yard to the large work shop where a tell-tale bar of light shone through the crack at the base of the closed overhead door. She slipped quietly through the smaller walk-in door and found her father seated immobile behind the wheel of a raven black Shelby Mustang. The driver's door hung open revealing a spotless interior with leather bucket seats and gauge crowded dash panel. A new car smell emanated from within.

Hearing Milt's soft tread on the cement floor, Robert Milto looked up; a youthful light shone in his grey eyes, “I've always wanted one of these,” he said.

...There were plenty of fast vehicles in the sixties and early seventies. They became known as muscle cars, and around Stockton, these hot machines kept the pavement warm on the quarter mile stretch of highway we marked off as our local drag strip. My brothers and I couldn't afford a fast vehicle but we had keen interest in them all the same; if the word "Race" was heard, we'd be there to watch. I remember one afternoon when a stranger showed up with a Cobra-Jet Shelby Mustang that pretty much settled all bets as to who was the real 'King Of The Road'....

Submitted by Dennis Miller

CHAPTER 16

August 18, 1968

A similar light shone in a younger man's eyes the next morning as Ben Collins slid behind the wheel of Robert Milto's new Mustang. Ben, Milt and Connie had ridden with the rancher as he babied the new car along the dirt road leading to the two lane black-top. At the paved surface, Milt's dad handed Ben the reins, saying, "It's a thoroughbred."

Milt and her mother were in the rounded back seat, and Robert assumed the passenger position, while their enthusiastic neighbour drove the new unit. As he eased the clutch out, the car lurched awkwardly and Ben fed it some gas; the back tires lit up and two short streaks of burned rubber scorched the pavement.

Robert laughed, noticing Ben's consternation. "It'll do that quite handily in all four gears."

Coining one of Ben's own phrases, Milt said, "Let 'er buck!"

Ben glanced at the Mustang owner.

"Try it out."

The tow-headed youth eagerly put the Cobra-Jet through its paces, keeping the tires warm on a straight stretch of pavement. Several vehicles had slowed to watch the performance and two cars even stopped, their occupants extricating themselves for an up front view.

Connie Milto noted that they wore their Sunday best. “We ought to take this unit home or everyone will be late for church.”

Away from public view, Ben yielded the wheel to Milt who demonstrated her ability with a four speed transmission and her father said, “You must have been practising with the trucks! No wonder the grass has disappeared around the yard!”

Mrs. Milto, in her turn, mostly babied the hot little Shelby but she did open it up on one occasion, leaving three long streaks of first, second and third gear rubber.

Robert got behind the wheel again and grinned boyishly as he left more black strips on the pavement.

Connie said, “Talk about a kid with a new toy!”

“Some toy!” Ben said.

Word of the existence of a '68 ½ Shelby Cobra Jet rapidly spread throughout the district and a long distance in both directions up and down the line from Stockton. The vehicle's true ownership, however, remained a mystery for an unusual length of time; unusual in a rural neighbourhood where rumours spread faster than noxious weeds.

The night after the race, Ben Collins had fallen asleep thinking about the Mustang. Unabashed, next morning he had driven his truck right up to the shop door and discovered Robert Milto in nearly the same position that Milt had found him: admiring his new car. The lad explained that he had had a strong hunch: “Milt seemed so much more excited that last match up yesterday, I s'pected she knew more than the rest of us.”

Robert Milto had good reasons for everything he did and Ben respected his choice of keeping a low profile.

“Nobody will hear about it from me.” Ben promised when the rancher asked him to refrain from broadcasting the whereabouts of the Shelby.

“The Mystery Mustang Man,” Milt said.

Danny Reid hadn't been at the race, however, he and Val were at the church service the following morning. Attendance suffered because harvest time had arrived and many of the farmers were saying their prayers out in the fields. The sermon took a back seat to the congregation's younger contingent animatedly discussing the Mystery Mustang. Several of the out-of-town folk had seen the raven black demon on the highway this morning while en route to church. These people soon became the centre of attention, their audience oblivious to the exaggerated coughs and 'ahems' of Reverend Franklin who finally called out, “Perhaps we may concentrate our attention on the 'human race' at least for the next... fifty minutes?”

Danny agreed that God created the earth in six days. However (and he kept this to himself), those *days* were roughly seven hundred and fifty million years long; He recruited every atom in the universe to assist with the project and on the seventh day God and crew didn't actually rest, they began one Hell of a maintenance program.

Stockton's two churches received equal attendance from the Reids and neither the Catholics nor the Protestants could fathom why the couple couldn't make up their mind. Danny privately enjoyed their confusion.

On this day, Danny failed to devote his total attention to the All Mighty during the parson's delivery. Following benediction, he said privately to his wife, “Let's drop out to the Milto ranch this afternoon, I want to see a man about a horse.”

The telephone call suggesting an afternoon tea quickly extended to a supper invitation. By two o'clock, the guests were seated on the sunny veranda sharing pleasantries with the Miltos. Connie explained that Milt had gone off riding somewhere. Harvest wasn't necessarily a busy time on a grassland operation.

Danny noticed that Vera Mitchell's car was parked beside Sven's bunkhouse and learned that the couple had driven off in one of the ranch trucks, headed in a westerly direction.

"Have Sven and Vera set a date yet?" Val asked.

"I believe it will be around the first of October, maybe Thanksgiving weekend," Connie said.

"It's to be a small affair," Danny added. "Vera has asked us to be there, though she had no firm date."

"Yes," Robert said, "Sven asked me if we could help with the 'paperwork,' as he put it."

"So... bought any new horses lately?" Danny threw the verbal curve ball so fast Robert Milto was caught completely flat-footed. He, Connie and Val all turned to the lineman, confusion mirrored on their faces.

"What's that Danny? We already have more horses than we need."

"Oh, there is a rumour that a herd of about 350 passed through Stockton yesterday and were spotted out on the highway again this morning...I figured with that many horses around you might have picked out a least one mustang? Maybe a black one?"

Connie laughed at her husband's bewilderment. "Robert, you can't hide anything from an old lineman! If he doesn't hear it on the telephone line, he just climbs higher up the pole where he can see for himself."

Val and Danny laughed too, and Robert, with feigned exasperation, said, “Young Benny Collins came poking around here first thing this morning and now you two have ferreted me out; come on, you may as well have a look... *if* we can get through the crowd!”

Robert Milto had meticulously polished away the road dust collected from the morning's excursion. The Shelby gleamed in the afternoon light when the rancher operated the chain winch to open the double wide overhead shop door.

Danny, though prepared, lost control of his bottom jaw; his mouth dropped open in awe.

He and Val were quick to accept an invitation to go for a spin and for the second time that day the Mustang was led out to the pavement and put through its paces on the two-lane black-top. Soon a few more lengthy rubber streaks from squealing tires gave testimonial to a hot set of wheels.

“It feels like three times the jam of our Fairlane's 289,” Danny said as he opened up the powerful Cobra-Jet on the straight-away.

“I think it will pass just about anything but a gas station,” Robert Milto said. “Good thing fuel isn't a tremendous expense these days,” then he added quickly, “not that 38 cents a gallon is cheap either...”

Danny kept his eyes on the road and did not respond but a slight sly smile teased the corners of his mouth.

Everyone converged in the ranch yard at once. Milt, astride Whiskey, with Chase trailing behind, rode up as Danny idled the powerful Shelby down the treed lane. Sven and Vera, had just climbed out of the pickup and were walking hand in hand toward the bunkhouse but they stopped mid stride and turned upon hearing the rumble of the approaching vehicle.

Danny parked the Shelby inside the shop, then he, Robert, Connie and Val emerged into the sunlight. Sven and Vera joined them as Milt slid off her bare backed horse and led him toward the group.

“Hello, Button,” Danny called.

“Hi Danny, hi Val, hello Vera.”

“How was your ride, dear?” Connie asked.

“Well, I saw a rare species of bird out by the second mill.” Milt said

“Oh,” said Val, “I didn't know you were an ornithologist.”

“Normally, I'm not all that keen on feathers, but these were special.” She turned toward Sven and Vera. “They were lovebirds!”

“After the provincial government declared my telephone operator position defunct, I spent many happy days living in Sven's bunkhouse, though we kept my house in town. Sven continued working on the Rocking M until the federal government bought the ranch in the late seventies...”

Submitted by Wendy Miller as told by the late Vera Mitchell (Larson)

CHAPTER 17

October 12, 1968

A frustratingly wet September became a bane for harvesters struggling to preserve quality and yield in their grain crops. Shorter days and increasingly colder nights compounded the grief. Farmers in the lighter land, or those who received less rain during the growing season, were fortunate to have the grain in the bin by the end of August. However, vast acres of ripened wheat lay in swaths while fears of sprouting kernels became a realization.

A nasty blow for the hardy souls in “Next Year Country.”

When at last the overcast skies cleared, Jack Frost paid a brief but bitter visit that allowed gardeners to put away their tools for the season and provided adequate incentive for foliage to surrender its verdure to the brilliant hues of autumn. Flocks of white-fronted 'speckle-bellies' and Canada geese, sandhill cranes and a dozen species of ducks filled the skies with the timeless calls of the migrating flock. A host of warblers, sparrows and other summer resident birds of the boreal forest and parkland regions paused to visit the prairie farmyards on their long flight to a warmer climate.

Grassland thrived on the unexpected moisture. Grey prairie wool began to show renewed growth when encouraged by warmer temperatures in early October. Combines hurriedly gobbled up the swaths as the straw

and grain became less tough; fields of clipped yellow stubble were clear evidence of a harvest nearing completion.

The weekend of Thanksgiving maintained this warm trend. However, a stiff two day gale the previous week had stripped the colourful deciduous trees. Their grotesque skeletal limbs now stood rigid and paralysed in dormancy; a prelude to severe days ahead.

Sven and Vera had chosen this time for their wedding. A quiet affair, the Milto family were guests of the groom; Robert being Sven's best man. Vera had invited Val and Danny Reid, Val stood up as Vera's maid-of-honour. The group had journeyed to the city for the occasion and they took rooms at the commodious and elegant Duchess Hotel.

The Norwegian farm hand who usually presented a gruff and impervious façade revealed the tenderness within as a justice of the peace performed the simple ceremony in a small chamber at City Hall. Two large alligator tears coursed down Sven's ruddy cheeks and Robert Milto placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Vera's face radiated happiness and tears of joy filled her brown eyes too as she took Sven's hand and together they repeated the vows.

A private supper for the wedding party was held in a small banquet room of the hotel. In honour of Sven's heritage, Robert and Danny had gone to great lengths to procure a genuine Norwegian chef to prepare the meal. Both Sven and Vera were delighted by their thoughtfulness. Sven's nose detected the *lutefisk* before it was served; his lop-sided grin erupted into a full smile as the strong odour pervaded the banquet room. Stacks of *lefse*, slices of *fenalor*, and the pungent *gammelost*—Norwegian brown cheese— along with strips of delicious smoked salmon were washed down with *bayer*. For dessert, the caterer made dainty rosettes and a crispy

crepe, Sven called *krumkaka*, stuffed with whipped cream. Sven's normal reticence diminished with the courses of the meal. He expounded upon the culinary treasures as each arrived at the table, explaining that such a feast would only have been plausible during Jul, a Viking celebration pre-dating Christianity, but modified in more recent centuries to adapt to the Christmas theme.

Danny Reid offered a toast to the bride; the wedding guests were touched by Sven's emotional response. Impromptu master of ceremonies, Robert Milto, recited several amusing anecdotes concerning the hired hand. The rancher allowed that he had wondered, but never guessed, where Sven disappeared to on those evenings when the hired hand had driven away in one of the ranch trucks. "I thought he was off to town to visit with Stan Olsen. Maybe they were making plans, over a keg of Norwegian *bayer*, to go into the pit BBQ business on a bigger scale."

Good naturedly, Danny chided Vera for being able to withhold the affair from him as he had had ample opportunity to eaves-drop. He mentioned that the occasional faint aroma of tobacco smoke in Vera's kitchen caused him to speculate but did not make a connection to Sven. The lineman then proposed a second toast to the clandestine romance having been a well kept secret.

The Larsons spent a one night honeymoon in the luxurious hotel. The Reids and Milto had rooms at the Duchess as well and together the small wedding party travelled back to Stockton the next day.

For the time being, Vera intended to keep her home in town and Sven would stay on at the ranch. Vera's job as telephone operator would be ending in less than a year as the new dial telephones were already being installed in many of the rural areas; automatic call switching would soon be a reality. Danny's job would not change significantly except he would lose the professional

assistance and assessment Vera provided when solving line problems. Sven and Vera agreed that Stockton would eventually be their retirement choice so the 'Mitchell' house would serve them both when Sven decided to give up his ranching duties. Vera loved the ranch life and intended to spend her free time with her husband. Both agreed the bunkhouse suited them quite well.

Two weeks into their marriage, late on a Saturday afternoon, Sven and Vera were fixing their supper when a horrendous cacophony erupted outside the bunkhouse. Sven pulled back a frilly lace curtain and blanched white to see a stream of vehicles pouring down the driveway toward his house. The cars in the lead branched to the left and began to circle the low single story home in a clockwise fashion; these soon encountered the continuing onslaught of new arrivals creating a traffic jamb never before imagined in the Stockton area; vehicles then began to form a second ring around the house. Car horns were blaring, hands thumped the sides of automobiles and several pickups loaded with revellers banging loudly on pots and pans increased the din. Milt's dog, Chase, was going wild, barking furiously amid the confusion.

Sven dropped the curtain and turned hesitantly to his new bride, "Jah! What the..." he croaked, aghast.

Vera had her hand to her mouth, laughing so hard she couldn't speak, leaning on the table for support. She finally collapsed in a chair, her limp hand listlessly pointing at Sven. His look of shocked disbelief sent Vera into convulsions of mirth again. The noise increased outside and finally Vera, tears streaming down her face, gasped a single word: "Shivaree!"

Sven's craggy face reflected his bewilderment, bringing on more sobs of laughter from Vera. She explained between hiccups, "All our friends and

neighbours are demanding we hold a wedding dance, Sven. Shivaree is an old tradition, but I haven't heard of such a thing happening in years."

A thumping sounded on the roof and Sven said, "Jah! Now they are on top of the howess too."

"Another old custom," Vera giggled. "They'll block the chimney, threatening to smoke us out; good thing there is no fire in the stove today."

"We'll have to face them, Sven," she said. "If we don't, they won't quit, and if we refuse to have a dance, they won't go home. Then if we say we'll have a dance and don't follow up, they'll be back again, and again, until we do."

"Jah, well, we can have a dance," Sven agreed readily.

So, together Sven and Vera opened the door and emerged on the cement slab that served as a front step. The noise died down eventually as echoes of the last rattle, clang, bang and whistle faded. Leonard Yeast, self-appointed spokesperson, stepped forward. "Sven, Vera," he said. "It seems as you two forgot about having a dang wedding dance... so... being good friends and neighbours, we took it upon ourselves to come on over and jog your memories a little."

Sven's weathered cheeks blushed a deeper shade as he nervously faced the boisterous group, his Adam's apple bobbed up and down while he tried unsuccessfully to find his voice. Vera dabbed at her eyes and said, "We give up! You'll have your dance."

A chorus of whistles, hoots and cheers went up and someone shouted, "When, Vera?"

Vera looked at Sven and the troubled Norwegian finally managed two words: "Tonight! Jah!"

Vera borrowed the Milto's phone to call Jean Hatt, her cross-shift operator. "Put through a General, please, Jean. Sven and I were honoured with a shivaree; we are having our wedding dance tonight at Prairie Hills School." She looked down at her cotton house dress. "And, tell everyone it's 'come as you are!'"

Though Sven's abrupt decision to have the wedding dance that very evening caught folks flat footed, in true country fashion the event went over with the happy fervour that so often accompanies spontaneity. The ladies had no time for glamour. Those who lived nearby were assisted by the more distant friends, who weren't able to return home, in throwing together a banquet of assorted open face buns and sandwiches. There was no provision for baking so cookie jars were emptied, frozen desserts and whatever was available to hand appeared from pantries, larders and ice-boxes. The assortment appeared in appetizing array on the ping-pong table at Prairie Hills alongside the two huge coffee urns which belonged to the school-cum-hall. Most of the men were still in their work clothes. No one appeared in their Sunday best.

The same impromptu band that had played at Prairie Hills the night of Pete Liscombe's auction supplied the music for this dance although the man of the hour yielded his fiddle to Fred Moffat who could 'saw' a pretty good tune. Fred was accompanied by Ben on the guitar, Leonard Yeast picking the banjo and Connie Milto on the piano. During a break in the dancing, while everyone gathered around the bountifully laden table, Brenda Yeast, Val Reid, and Milt Milto, with Ben Collins playing the guitar, sang *Love Me Tender* and *Welcome to My World*, a special tribute to the newlyweds.

The Miller twins had packed along Sven's friend Stan Olson to share in the Norwegian's wedding celebration. Many trips were made outside the hall where Stan had stashed a prodigious supply of his homemade chokecherry

wine; Sven treated every man to at least one shot of the nectar. Several of the gentlemen, including Stan, had almost a few too many, but the revellers simply became more boisterous and remained harmless.

While Sven escaped the throng to treat his friends, Vera wasn't allowed to miss a dance though her feet were beginning to grow tired and sore. Along with many of the other ladies, she finally kicked off her shoes and danced in her nylon-stockinged feet.

The party continued into the wee hours and a second luncheon took place. Sven brought coffee and a sandwich to his bride who had taken the opportunity to sit down.

Someone had volunteered a pretty dried flower arrangement for the bride and the traditional lady's garter appeared from somewhere for the groom. The new couple were led to the front of the room and all the unwed young ladies were lined up facing them. Vera turned her back and tossed the bouquet among the crowd of single girls. Everyone clapped and cheered when the flowers were caught by Brenda Yeast. Next came the eligible bachelors and Sven stretched out the garter, letting it fly toward the group. Shaun Miller made the catch but slipped the garter to Ben Collins so fast it appeared to have burned his fingers. According to folklore, Brenda and Ben would be the next in line at the altar.

Milt passed near Benny and said, "You better buy that engagement ring pretty soon!"

Sven and Vera were ushered into the centre of the dance floor; all the guests joined hands in a circle around them, singing "For They are Jolly Good Fellows" while alternately raising their hands and stepping toward the couple then lowering them as they stepped back.

Earlier, Benny's Stetson had been passed around surreptitiously as the traditional collection was taken for the newly-weds. Robert Milto was deeply touched to witness the generosity of these literally dirt poor country

folk as they dipped into nearly empty pockets to give a little. Leonard Yeast presented the cash to the new couple and Sven, overwhelmed by the largesse of his friends, again found difficulty in speech. He cleared his throat twice before finally managing to speak and an emotional catch could be heard in his voice. "Jah, ve are very thankful to you all for being the friends and neighbours ve have enjoyed for all these so many years." He held the hat, loaded with silver, pennies and more than a few bills. "This is very kind for you." He glanced at his bride who beamed with pride at Sven. She knew how difficult being the centre of attention was for him. "Vera and I, ve could like to keep this money for you, our friends... so," he beckoned to Constance Milto, "so, ve give it back for the long time of the country school." He handed the hat to Connie and the circle applauded enthusiastically.

The clock in the big kitchen of the Milto ranch house said it was almost time to get up when the family trooped in. Sven and Vera accompanied them, accepting Robert and Connie's invitation for a night cap. A tuckered out Milt hugged her mom and dad and bade a good night to the guests as she headed for the stairs up to her room.

Vera sighed. "She looks as tired as I feel."

Connie offered to heat some water and Epsom salts for the older woman to soak her feet but Vera declined.

As the rancher poured a dark liqueur into four small glasses, Connie offered Vera and Sven their guest room for the remainder of the short night. Vera's astonishment echoed in her protest as she said, "But our house is only across the yard."

"I think your bed may be in turmoil though. Some of the ladies were talking...."

"That Myrna Yeast, I'll bet," Vera said. "What did she do, the little scallywag?"

“Well, I think they short sheeted your bed and I heard mention of corn flakes as well.”

Vera groaned and Sven chortled.

Robert Milto pointed out that one of the Miller twins had placed a cream separator bowl over the chimney and advised that the fire not be lit before the obstruction could be removed.

Sven insisted on going home so Connie pulled fresh sheets and blankets from the linen closet and sent the bundle with them.

“You can have the day off tomorrow... today,” Robert Milto said with a tired smile.

...Vera Mitchell married Sven Larson in the late '60's. They went off to the city for a quiet ceremony but upon their return the whole community turned out for an old-fashioned 'shivaree'. We must have been quite forceful in our insistence for they held a dance at Prairie Hills Hall that very evening...

Submitted by Myrna Yeast

CHAPTER 18

November, 1968

Robert Milto preferred to graze his herd until snow cover forced him to commence his winter feeding program. The range cattle, summer residents of the far western reaches of the ranch, were rounded up and driven closer to the home place for several reasons: a precaution against an early winter impeding access to the rough country; an opportunity to sort and wean the calves for market or herd replacement; culling of the less desirable cows; relief for the summer graze; problems associated with freezing at the watering holes. The Winter Field with its wide treeless flats provided late fall and early winter forage as well as a month or so of grazing after the new calves arrived and snow had melted in the spring. Brush choked draws of clump willow and black birch interspersed with pockets of aspen poplar along the northern edges of this pasture supplied shelter for the cattle from the cold seasonal winds which frequently swept unimpeded across the barren open areas.

This autumn, however, the rancher had been temporarily bested by the weatherman.

Benny Collins sat hunkered down in his saddle, chin tucked into his silk scarf and the collar of his sheepskin rolled up around his ears. A bitter wind at his back tugged with grim determination at the horse hide skirting of his

leather chaps. A shock of blond hair and frosty blue eyes bridging a nose reddened by the cold were barely visible beneath the brim of a tightly screwed down, beat-up Stetson.

“A *real cowboy* is a fellow who forked his horse when he really didn't want to” or words to that effect, were a portion of the wisdom Ben imparted to Tom O'Brien last summer when the boy from Toronto had his heart set upon learning to ride.

Ben looked over at his companion riding a big whiskey coloured buckskin. “Tom O'Brien should be here today for some *real cowboy* action.”

Milt, bundled up in multiple layers to fend off the bitter cold, smiled acknowledgement. Her thoughts had been of Tom O'Brien quite often this day recalling his eagerness during the trail riding expedition. The easterner would have endured the challenge of the miserable weather conditions. He had 'no quit' as Ben would say.

Milt and Ben had taken the same section of pasture for fall round-up as they had for the branding back at the end of June. Her parents, along with Lou Collins and Leonard Yeast, had followed their old routes as well. A better day could have been in the offing but Robert Milto had cattle buyer commitments and trucks were booked as well. Postponement of the round-up would have been awkward. Days were shorter now and a sense of urgency hung in the air while the younger cowhands worked the rough stuff. The cold found most of the older and *wiser* (if such a term could be assigned to a cow) animals eager to quit the summer range and follow their instincts to greener or at least grassier pastures. Some of the bovines, however, did not appreciate that sentiment and were obdurately reluctant to abandon the shelters of dense thickets in the roughest part of the land. Riders and horses

were thoroughly warmed by the time the herd had been gathered and chased out onto the flatter areas, pointed east.

Here the cold and wind were equally merciless.

Milt sought shelter in her thoughts of warmer days... Tom O'Brien grew into a man over the course of the summer. Milt had heard his voice change from the higher pitch of an adolescent to the bass of a young man. But, there was more than that. The way he looked at her; after the week of trail riding things between them changed; they were best of friends yet different somehow from the friendship between her and Benny or any of the boys Milt knew. Tom O'Brien was in love. Tom was in love and Milt was in a very awkward position. She may have been in love too for she had never met a person like him, but a budding romance was not to be encouraged. Milt was ageless, at least for ten more years.

The thought suddenly occurred to her that there had been another man named Tom O'Brien... From a different time... Almost six years ago... Before the time transfer. She shrugged off the coincidence: he must be sixty years old! She sighed in exasperation and Whiskey flicked his ears. Milt sighed often these past few months.

Suddenly Whiskey spun sideways on the trail and Milt, with her felt booted feet dangling outside the stirrups, made a fast grab, clutching the horn to stay in the saddle. A bellowing white streak of misery charged through the herd, scattering cattle across the trail. Milt heard Ben cursing as Scoundrel nearly unseated him. "By God, if I had old Pete's .32 that Charolais bitch would be layin' gut shot back where we first put her up."

Earlier in the day the riders had encountered the infamous Charolais-cross cow that had caused pandemonium during the branding round-up. The young cowboy advised Milt to leave the rabidly loco beast behind but take her calf if possible. So when the cow

dove into a dense thicket, Milt put the heels to Whiskey and together they cut the calf out, forcing the young bovine to stay with the small bunch already gathered.

Now, the cow wanted her calf back.

The upside of the ensuing struggle was that it dispensed with any remnants of cold. The havoc wreaked by the the Charolais-cross overheated horses, humans, the herd. The contumacious cow and the uncompromising cowboy locked horns. Benny refused to let the Charolais have her calf though he would have been happy to see her high-tail it back to the breaks, and the cow wouldn't leave without her baby. She wouldn't *leave*, but neither would she stay within the herd. The bewildered calf began to show evidence of fatigue and Ben, in desperation, shook out a loop and roped the five hundred pound animal. The steer struggled briefly until the lariat cut its wind at which time Ben piled off Scoundrel and, using spare rope from the loosened noose, quickly threw a half hitch around the calf's nose. In this manner he formed a makeshift halter that wouldn't choke the beast. Ben remounted and eased Scoundrel toward the still prone bovine, collecting slack in the lariat as he did so. In a short time the dazed steer regained its feet.

Meanwhile, Milt and Whiskey had abandoned the drifting herd to play a hazardous game of running interference between Ben and the onslaught of the bellowing bovine.

For Ben, Scoundrel and their captive, an awkward quarter mile sufficiently subdued the tiring calf and a short distance later it gave up the fight, fully halter broke. The lariat must have made the calf's mother leery for she momentarily dropped back behind the riders and followed at a less menacing distance.

A quarter ton anchor of solid beef limited Ben and Scoundrel in their ability to assist in moving the remainder of the herd. However, Milt, Whiskey and Chase managed

to keep the bunch together and travelling in the general direction intended. They were aided by the fact that the cattle now had a well worn prairie trail to follow.

In this fashion they arrived at the holding corrals where a much warmer day had previously witnessed the branding performance. The other four riders with their gather were already at the pens. Milt could see one of the ranch trucks parked near the mill and assumed Sven must be nearby too.

Robert Milto surveyed the approaching herd. Recognizing the trailing Charolais he anticipated problems at the gate. He mounted his horse and rode to meet Ben and Milt. Lou Collins and Leonard Yeast downed their rapidly cooling mugs of coffee, passed them to Connie Milto and resignedly climbed back into their cold saddles to follow the younger rancher.

Three extra mounts overwhelmed the Charolais-cross and the entire herd was soon locked in the huge enclosure. Ben and Scoundrel led the fatigued calf to a vacant corral; the same pen occupied by the lame bull last summer. Ben turned the young animal loose.

The last half mile had been brutal and Ben wondered how Robert and Connie Milto had fared driving their herd from the east, facing into the nor'wester. Feet stiff from the cold jarred Ben's body at every step as, leading his horse, he walked gingerly across the hard pan of the corral. Gratefully, he joined his companions gathered near the hot coffee.

Frozen droplets on the blade of the axe Sven held gave testimony to the low temperature; the water in the trough had iced over. "She might make snow this night – jah!" he said.

Ben grinned though his cheeks felt stiff from the cold. "Jah, she'll freeze-over the *fjord* tonight." Dropping Scoundrel's reins on the ground, he accepted the mug of hot coffee Connie had poured. Turning to his father, he said, "I put up that big mule buck."

Lou ran his tongue across the paper of a home built. "In close to that mill where you saw him last summer?"

"Same place. If he stays there another week and the snow isn't too deep, we should be able to find him again."

The boy's father struck a wooden match with his thumbnail, cupping the flame in his hand as he touched it to the cigarette, then nodded. "He won't travel far now, the rut will be on soon." He exhaled a cloud of smoke, "If the snow isn't too deep for us to get out there."

"You are welcome to use a four wheel drive," Robert offered.

Ben's appreciation shone. "That would be a real bonus; perhaps you'd lend me the Shelby so I could catch up to him?"

"That's one mustang that won't be seeing any work this winter, I'll wager!" Connie laughed.

"No, it won't be going anywhere for awhile." Robert said. He tossed the dregs of his coffee cup on the grass. "Well, it's too late to sort calves today and the horses could use a rest too. So we may as well corral the ponies and throw them a few forkfuls of feed. I don't know what to do with that calf; most likely his mother will tear down half the fence trying to join him...she'll be on a truck out of here tomorrow if I can run her through the loading chute."

Milt offered to haul water and hay to the young steer in an effort to keep it content for the night. Ben accompanied her.

"I hope the little bugger doesn't get pu-new-monia from being so worked up in this cold weather." he said. "That miserable old heathen raises a good calf, I'll give her that much."

Milt paused a moment as they neared the pole corral.

"What's up?" Ben asked.

"This is the exact spot where you took a kick in the head and woke up proposing."

"Oh yeah!" Ben groaned, "and I still haven't bought her the engagement ring."

"Well, better hurry; maybe Brenda will find another cowboy," Milt said.

"After hunting season."

"After hunting season? Ben, you are impossible!"

"A man has got to keep his priorities straight, Milt. Once Dad and I bag that big mule, I'll take Brenda into the city and she can pick out that ring."

A flash of recollection entered Milt's thoughts. The day Benny proposed had been the first time Milt had met the boy from Toronto; right over there, just beyond the windmill. A pang pierced her heart as she recalled the words of the much older Tom O'Brien: "*I was in love once... a long time ago.*" and now definite realization dawned upon Milt of who he really was and who he had been in love with.... "Poor Tom," she murmured sadly. "He will never buy an engagement ring."

Myrna Yeast and her daughters had commandeered Connie's kitchen to provide a hot supper for the riders. When the help had gone to their respective homes for the night, a tired young lady cried herself to sleep wrapped in her mother's loving arms. It was the first time she had cried since meeting the easterner; it had been his arrival that permitted Milt to let go of haunting memories surrounding the tragic deaths of her three friends. "I

found it in the book,” she sobbed, “Benny wrote a story about branding and he mentioned Tom O'Brien. Our Tom is the same person as the old Tom O'Brien from Ottawa! The man who sent us to this place, to this time.”

“I know, honey,” her mother soothed. “Your dad figured it out the day he met Tom out at the corrals...We didn't know whether to tell you; perhaps we should have but what difference could it make? We aren't allowed to change the past.”

“But Tom is in love with me! And... and... I really like him lots too! He will live his whole life loving a ghost, a transplant from the future, and it will be all my fault!”

Tears welled up, spilling down Constance Milto's cheeks and she held her daughter closer. She thought of Tom O'Brien, man and boy. “What a remarkable individual he is,” she whispered.

Sven's prediction of snow proved accurate the next morning. The headlights of the three trucks bouncing their way along the prairie trail leading to the holding corrals intensified the tiny white flakes. Milt thought it looked like they were driving into the backside of a gigantic porcupine. She and Benny rode with Sven in the lead so Ben could open the gates; Milt's parents followed, while Lou Collins and Leonard Yeast occupied position three. At the first gate Ben piled out and opened the enclosure then waited until all vehicles passed through before closing the gate. The trucks leap-frogged in this fashion but the Milto's weren't allowed the lead. Sven and the other ranchers wouldn't permit a lady to open gates for them.

“Chivalry is alive and well in 1968,” Connie laughed in response to her husband's dry observation: “You have it easy this morning.”

Upon arriving at the corrals, horses were watered at the ice encrusted trough and given a ration of oats before being saddled. Ben checked the penned calf and noticed a dark melted imprint in the snow beside the corral: its mother had lain here during the night. She apparently had broken through the outer perimeter but was stymied by the higher walls of the pole corral.

Snow stopped with the arrival of full daylight and angry grey clouds scudded across the sky. Luckily, Leonard Yeast's forecast, "It'll clear off and warm up some this afternoon", came true.

Sorting of the herd went well with Sven and Robert manning the gates while the riders put their mounts through their cutting horse paces. All the calves were separated and penned in a corral roughly half the size of the sorting pens. Cow prices held fairly strong on the market so Robert Milto selected enough culls to make up a cattle liner load. He allowed that he would cut more later in the year.

The mean tempered Charolais-cross, B324, was in the group to be sold.

It was noon when, accompanied by Sven, the first semi trailer unit pulled up to the pens. He had headed back to the ranch to meet the trucker and then guided him to the corrals, opening gates for the big rig to pass through. More trucks were scheduled to arrive later to haul the calves. The riders and ground team, Milt having taken Sven's place on the ground when the hired hand departed to escort the cattle liner, stopped work for a lunch break. The trucker joined them after backing his trailer up to the raised platform of the loading chute.

The driver surveyed the herd as he sipped from a steaming coffee mug. "Good lookin' bunch of calves." He was a tall, heavy fellow; Milt estimated he would make more than three of Benny.

Robert Milto said above the din of bawling bovines, "I hope the buyers see it that way too."

Lou and Leonard quizzed the trucker about livestock prices. The big man appeared to possess a wealth of information in that regard, having hauled to every auction ring for hundreds of miles.

The lunch was quickly devoured and the crew proceeded to load the culled cows on the semi trailer. As she fought her way up the chute, the Charolais-cross, Benny's nemesis, attempted one last break for freedom as she threw her weight against heavy plank walls and managed to hook a foreleg over the top. B324 met her match at that point. The trucker physically lifted the cow's front end and, none too gently, dropped her back into the chute. She gave him a whip across the face with her soggy, manure stained tail before disappearing into the depths of the 'possum belly.

Sven and Mrs. Milto escorted the liner out of the hills where the hired hand would await the convoy of rigs inbound for the cargo of calves. Connie had chores at the ranch.

Robert Milto's calf crop were a fairly uniform bunch so the sorting of the calves only necessitated the selection of promising heifers for replacements of the previously culled cows. The numbers weren't in a particular ratio as the rancher also used rejections from his artificially inseminated operations to bolster the commercial grade stock. A handful of the smaller heifers and steer calves were also cut back from the market bound animals. These would go into a back-grounding and finishing program the Miltos operated in conjunction with Ben and Lou Collins, Leonard Yeast and, in the past, when he still owned livestock, Pete Liscombe. These animals would eventually become top choice beef for a select, local market: Danny Reid and Doctor O'Brien, for instance, as well as at the kitchen tables of the ranchers involved.

Many producers didn't keep the best quality for their personal consumption but Robert Milto successfully argued that he and his partners in the feeding program should only produce the standard of beef they personally demanded. "Besides," he said, "it's good advertising when company calls." He proved this on a grand scale every year when Stan Olsen performed his magic over the barbecue pit at the Milto's branding. Those who tasted it, agreed that the quality of beef produced in the partnership could not be purchased over-the-counter, even in the city.

Three semi tractor units, each towing a double deck 'possum belly trailer, arrived before Robert Milto was entirely satisfied that he had cut out all the keepers. While his helpers pushed calves into the holding corrals which opened into the loading area, he made a final study of the animals. Only one more particularly promising heifer was cut out of that bunch before they were loaded on the cattle liners. Each of these trucks would make two trips to the auction barn in Stockton. The big trucker who had taken a load of cows earlier would also return for a second shipment of calves. The culls were hauled to the stockyards in the city to be sold at a cow sale but the young 'stuff' would be put through Ralph Osborne's auction ring in town. Robert Milto preferred to deal with local merchants. This year, however, it didn't work out for the selling of the culled cows (or for the purchase of a Shelby Mustang which could not be obtained by the Stockton Ford dealership). Ralph would earn the commission on four hundred and twenty calves tomorrow, bolstering the books at his auction barn. That number represented less than half of the Milto sales; there were more to come: calves, open cows and heifers, bred heifers, bred cows and, of course, the quality selection of bulls, all from the ranch's herds.

During the lull between loads of calves, Milt and Benny hauled Connie Milto's big quarter horse mare back to the ranch. All the clouds had been blown away and a perfectly blue sky now looked down on the fresh white layer of snow. Ben eased the truck and stock trailer along the prairie trail which ran fairly straight in an east west direction across the flats of the winter field.

"You're awful quiet, Milt," Ben said. He was surprised to see tears in the pretty eyes of his young friend when she abandoned her gazing out the truck window and turned to face him.

"It's Tom!"

Ben looked around quickly. "Tom?"

"Not here, not now." Milt smiled in spite of her blues. "I was just thinking about Tom and I hauling hay from out on these flats in haying season... he enjoyed everything so much; even work was fun to him."

"Yeah!" Ben said. "Yeah, he was a good guy... especially for an easterner." He caught the reproach before Milt uttered it. "I mean, he fit in so well in such a short time and he had no western background at all. He was as green as...as green as anything that's real green."

"Ben, your charm really is in the way you can't talk!"

"Well...."

"That's just fine. I wouldn't want you to change... Remember how sore Tom was that first day on the trail ride?"

Ben said, "He must have been hurting something awful, but he wouldn't complain. And, 'member how he rode that calf? He didn't get booted in the head like I did! He told me before heading back east that he wants to be a bull rider," Ben continued. "That's a tough occupation but I'll bet my pony he would be good at it."

Milt looked thoughtful. "Yes, you can bet on Tom when he joins the rodeo.... I mean, if he joins the rodeo."

Ben laughed, "Aw, by next year he will be thinking of joining the Maple Leafs."

"Don't be too sure."

'Stubborn' applies equally well to an obdurate mule or a cow that doesn't want to leave an area because she believes her calf is there; multiply that animal's recalcitrant behaviour by five hundred and the product is roughly equal to the task faced by Robert Milto and his riders as they commenced driving the calf-less herd east to the winter field after the final load of young beef had departed. Horses, fatigued by the gruelling pace of cutting and sorting, were further taxed in trying to keep the herd together while beating back those cows determined to return to the holding corrals. Riders' voices grew hoarse and sweat foamed white on the neck and chests of their ponies as it seemed that each cow in turn had to make at least one attempt at turning back. Fortunately for the drovers the lay of the land presented a fairly treeless and open view, preventing an unobserved escape for the cantankerous cows. At length, the herd was lined out and broken to the trail for the two mile push to their pre-winter lodgings.

Robert Milto was thinking he had misjudged the weather of the past few days and hoped a trend hadn't started in that regard. He smiled ruefully; usually his personal long-term forecast was quite accurate. Darkness had almost fully descended and bitter cold was there to meet it when Sven closed the gate behind the the last few cows passing into the winter field.

"Damn," Lou Collins said, taking the proffered sack of tobacco from his neighbour, "that there is a stubborn bunch of beasts."

Leonard Yeast held off striking his wooden match until Lou was ready to share the flame. "Cows is females," he advised, "they can be gawd-awful headstrong. No offence there, young Milt, but I *know* and when it is four to one, like around my place, there ain't no sense in me even opening my mouth."

Milt laughed. "Well, if Ben would hurry up and buy that ring, the balance would be more in your favour."

"Don't matter for my part, anyway," Leonard sighed. "I go around home like one of them dang mechanical robots they had on the television the other night. Now it will be Ben's turn."

"Sven's too." Ben opted to share the barb.

Lou Collins face glowed orange in the sheltered flare of Leonard's match as he lit the roll-your-own. "Well, boys, it's a whole lot better than *not* having your missus around," he said.

Milt thought again of Tom O'Brien.

...Wintering cows is still a pretty big chore though we have plenty new-fangled equipment to handle the feed and maybe speed things up. When I was a lad we hauled everything with a team of horses hooked to a sleigh, both ways... to the cows and from them...

Submitted by Kent Miller for Dad, Rex Miller

CHAPTER 19

December, 1968

The silent blast from the verbal bombshell was as inaudible as Ben Collins's detonation of the bridge pillar had been deafening. No fall out. No thunderous, earth-shattering tremors. No incendiary. No smoke....

...Just numb silence.

Val Reid sat speechless, petrified in embarrassment, hand over her mouth, dark eyes wide and staring in consternation.

The Milto family appeared equally shocked as mother, father and daughter stared at Val, gobsmacked. Tension flickered about the room like northern lights on a clear, cold night....

Danny and Val Reid were guests at the Milto ranch. The young couple had initially been invited to attend the Prairie Hills Hall Christmas concert on a Friday night in mid December; the invite later extended to include the remainder of the weekend. Through the efforts of Connie Milto and Myrna Yeast, the country school tradition of having a Christmas concert had continued. The two energetic ladies recruited youngsters from the district to provide a program of community entertainment. Folks from as far away as Stockton turned out to enjoy the show. There were skits, carols, a Christmas pageant and an amusing monologue or two. No amount of rehearsing could prevent the inevitable situation of dumb stage fright

and forgotten lines, but the audience applauded enthusiastically; it was all part of the entertainment. The highlight of the evening came when “Santa Claus” arrived. Amid an often repeated, “HO! HO! HO!” Rex Miller, sporting a flowing white beard and dressed in the traditional jolly-old-elf attire —white fur trim on a stuffed red suit, fuzzy white tassel on a long red toque, wide black belt and big black boots— distributed the gifts, bags of candies and Japanese oranges that had been prepared for the wide-eyed little ones. Careful planning on behalf of the organizers ensured that no child should go without a present; there were a few extras.

Next afternoon, the Reids and Milto were enjoying steaming cups of hot chocolate and squares of crumb cake following a fun-filled but frosty outing of tobogganing and skiing towed behind the horses. In the background the AM radio in the kitchen played a combination of Christmas carols and current tunes. Jeannie C. Riley had just sung *Harper Valley PTA* and the conversation shifted to recent releases.

Connie said, “There have been so many hits this year. I can't decide which is my favourite.”

Val Reid said, “I can't wait 'til they release *American Pie*.”

Danny was the first to break the speechlessness. “Val,” he said, “Don McLean released 'American Pie' in the early seventies... this is still 1968.”

Though the Milto shifted their focus to the young lineman, their faces appeared no less incredulous. A *genuine* Santa Claus may as well have materialized in their midst.

“I thought Madonna sang 'American Pie,’” Milt said.

“She re-did the song a very long time after the original release,” Connie Milto murmured.

“Song of the year, song of the decade; I would have voted it song of the century in Millennium 2000. I believe it did make number five without my input,” Robert Milto said. “It seems there are some cats out of the bag?”

Danny laughed ruefully and the tension and surprise dissipated. “I wondered if there might be something amiss out here for almost a year but it was during our week of riding and camping in your pastures that I really noticed something odd. I’m sorry,” he turned to his wife, “I never let you know what I suspected.”

“This is unbelievable!” Connie cried. “What is your history, er... I mean, future?”

“Yeah, and how did you know during our trail ride? Was it something I said?” Milt asked.

Danny smiled at her. “Yes, Button, it was something you said that made me pretty sure but you mustn’t be faulted for my expert sleuthing. Only someone from the future could possibly have twigged.”

A salvo of questions continued, back and forth, until Robert Milto held up his hand, bringing a pause to the commotion. “Hold on, hold on. It seems you,” he nodded at Danny, “have all the answers, so how about if *you* talk and *we* listen?”

Danny agreed, saying this would be a long story and there would be no point in making it short.

“First of all, I don’t know anything about your future, but Val and I have been transplanted from the year 2025. Our tenure will end in 1978; ten more years.”

“We only have ten years left, too,” Milt interjected.

Connie nodded curtly, trying to discourage further interruption.

“One day last spring, while I worked on the line over here,” Danny indicated with his thumb pointed backward and over his shoulder, “Milt came riding along the road on Whiskey. We had a short chat and as I climbed in my truck, she said something about, “No one is connecting to

the Internet.” I was quite preoccupied with work at the time so the word really didn't register for a few months until one evening it popped into my head again.”

Val interrupted, “What's Internet?”

“GIT,” Danny answered. “In 2025 the world favours the term GIT, spelled G-I-T, an acronym for Global Information Transfer; in the beginning it was called ARPANET; later, INTERNET became the word of the day.

“So, that indicated a couple things: you must be history transplants; you come from near the turn of the century, give or take maybe ten years. However, I did not know dimension travel came into existence way back then so I decided my hearing had misled. It did cause me to pay more attention though.

“Vera alerted me to a terrible screeching sound on your telephone line from time to time and, though I never actually heard it, her description of the noise reminded me of data transmission. This thought, coupled with the fact that you folks paid a small fortune for the private line out here and the high degree of specification required along with it, I felt something more than chitchat may be going out on the line.

“You have a modem hook up, Robert?”

“Yes, it is connected to a laptop. I call a number in Ottawa that taps me through to another system. It is prohibitively slow and we try not to over use the system because I had already considered that you or Vera may be curious.”

Again Val interjected, “What is a laptop?”

Robert said, “It is a compact portable computer that people carry around with them when they travel.”

Danny added, “Laptops are similar to our personal communications devices.” He turned to the Miltons, “There are no conventional telephones or even cellular units and only a handful of computers, as you know them,

left in our world. Computers are ginormous memory links accessible to the entire populace. Even the term 'computer' has become a by-word. Host Memory Bus is the ultimate data source and storage with world wide distribution. The world interacts using ubiquitous computing where individuals have simple, compact and portable 'smart pads' that interact with devices placed everywhere: in vehicles, stores, walls, appliances, schools, sidewalks, etcetera; these units are equipped with micro keyboards having life time passwords, issued like birth certificates encoded with P-I-P, another acronym, for Pass Identification Print; originally a finger print, or a retinal scan, now an instant DNA test performed on the individual's personal smart pad. The pads are equipped with plenty of dynamic micro-gadgetry and are used to connect to the HMB where all memory is stored. I think waste computers and components eventually became a severe pollution problem. With a world population surpassing seven billion and few impoverished nations, users have increased exponentially over the previous twenty to twenty-five years.”

Danny nodded toward several papers resting on a small stand: The Western Producer and the Stockton Herald. “The forests have been given a reprieve as well; the news, for the most part is readily available from the Host. Actual printed paper distribution has lost flavour with the world populace.”

Now Connie interrupted, “You said 'few impoverished nations,' what became of the third world countries?”

“Well, GIT, or, I suppose, initially, the Internet, promoted the information age and, coupled with satellite communication, no one anywhere on the globe was denied source. Inevitably, even the poorest of nations gradually became more educated. This learning growth expanded dramatically. An international catchphrase of our time is:

'*impecuniosity is no reflection of intellectuality.*' Most of the developing or, as you say, *Third World*, nations were poised for tremendous growth, however, their advancement had always been hampered by a lack of basic education, training and even understanding for their burgeoning populations. GIT made man equal. We still have poverty, but not at a national level.

"However, I digress.

"The data noise had me scratching my head and while chasing that problem I found that a line had been installed in your house, one that I had not put there. That is an unlikely situation in this area, day and age."

"Sometimes, my suspicions seemed so ludicrous that I'd forget about it for days on end. Another instance occurred at the branding when the subject of dial telephones came up." He looked at Connie, "You asked if there would be "Name And Number Display", definitely out of place in 1968, obsolete in 2025...."

"I've had the odd lip-slip myself: When we were pitching tents out at the holding corrals, I offhandedly said to Brenda that we should have a microwave and television."

"I remember that!" Milt interjected. "It seemed strange, but you made some excuse about a radio telephone and I forgot all about it until now."

"But the trail ride brought out additional information I could not overlook."

"My big mouth again," Milt groaned.

"Actually, Button, no. It was your mother who cost me some sleep out there in the tent."

Connie blushed and said, "Oh dear, what did I blab that time?"

"When you folks came to visit one evening, I inquired as to the state of affairs with respect to my employment."

“You said something to the effect that there were no major nine-one-one's or perhaps nine-eleven's which meant nothing to me except it seemed an abnormal response. Around then, Milt and Tom had a conversation about time travel and possibly the two subjects were lodged in my subconscious. That night a horrible dream haunted me and I saw this vision of people jumping from a burning, smoking skyscraper. Nine-eleven, the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, happened about the time I was born. All I knew of it was old history from out-moded video, but the nightmare jogged my memory and I realized another anachronism had appeared.”

No one spoke and Danny turned to the rancher. “The real clincher came the evening we were playing cards in that straight-wall tent you and your good wife set up for us spoiled campers. After a few hands of Dealer's Choice, Button here,” he nodded toward Milt, “had her turn to deal. She said 'Cripple Mr. Onion'.”

Milt gasped. “Oh no! I did! I thought I was being clever.”

Danny laughed. “Well, Terry Pratchett and 'Cripple Mr. Onion' continue to be quite well known in the year 2025. Pratchett has printed more than four million words and has more than fifty books published; most of them made into a complete Discworld video sensation. He is *the* most read and viewed author, ever. And though Pratchett, Cripple Mr. Onion and the Discworld will last forever, they were not in the limelight in 1968.”

Robert said. “Yes, our family went through a *Discworld* withdrawal when we first arrived back in time.”

Val turned to Connie, “So, what year did you transplant from?”

“We departed December, 2005 and arrived in Ottawa, the same time of year, in 1962. We have been here just about six years exactly.”

Robert Milto laughed and said, “Val, you would be a preschooler in our time.”

“You too, Danny,” said Milt. “I’m older than you are...finally I’ve met someone who isn’t sixty! When we return I’ll look up your parents and bounce you on my knee.”

The rancher, announcing that he had some outdoor obligations before dark, reluctantly excused himself from the exciting flow of conversation. After donning their winter apparel, Danny accompanied Robert to the corrals to do the evening chores and release the horses that had been left in the barn to cool down after their earlier workout. In the warm steamy confines of the capacious hip-roofed barn the men continued the discussion. Danny was not at liberty to expound upon the treasures of the future in great detail but in general terms he fielded the rancher’s enquiries.

“What a peculiar coincidence that we both leave the *era* in 1978. Are you and Val driven by a particular departure time slot as we are or is your return a matter of choice?”

“There were options for an extension but the timing seemed apt. In the latter half of the 1970’s the government bought, or forced out, all the rural telephone companies. My position here in Stockton becomes defunct the same way Vera’s job will in the next year. There isn’t significant government ownership a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century but I am familiar enough to prefer avoidance of that particular enterprise.”

“Are you able to relate any grand scale innovations or discoveries for my family to look forward to in the next twenty years of the new century?” Robert asked.

Danny lifted his Christmas coloured toque and scratched his head. “Well, let me see. Issues that will be very exciting to you are old news to me so I may have a

problem sorting through... At the moment of our tele-port back in time rumours of an alien existence were buzzing the satellite networks on the GIT: nothing so blatant as fossil forms of extra terrestrial life discovered in meteorites but great excitement had arisen from wave transmissions of unknown origin being received at our earth stations; a translation cannot be ciphered as yet and the origin may be of unexplained Cosmic disturbance. Still, it is no small consequence for the scientific community.

“Huge steps, no pun intended, have been made for paraplegics and quadriplegics with regard to spinal injury restructuring; Cancer research continues to receive the lion's share of benevolence; extremely expensive fossil fuels are still on the market though this cost has driven research to find alternate sources such as the hydrogen-fuel cell; nuclear power generation is far more common worldwide. Electric powered vehicles are also quite popular.”

“Any disasters of world consequence?” Robert Milto asked.

“Actually, several large-scale epidemics have made their way around the globe in the past couple of decades. The fatalities far outnumber the plagues of centuries past but the percentages are lower because of the increased population.

“War is still an attraction for some, however, there has been no wholesale world-wide conflict. There was one nuclear *incident* that came very close to wiping out the planet...” Danny added enigmatically, “You will be amazed to see who saves the day...”

He paused a moment, “I repeat these issues in the strictest confidence and I trust you will make no mention upon your return to 2005?”

“That’s a rhetorical question. You have kept the topics quite general and I actually prefer not knowing what lies in store, especially on a day-to-day basis.” The rancher laughed. “Although, many of my decisions concerning ranching operations have been influenced by my ‘keen insight’ since moving *here*.”

After supper Milt brought out the history book for Val and Danny to see. “Ah, yes,” Danny said, “We studied the same volume too, before our transplant but weren’t permitted to bring it along; I’m quite surprised they allowed you.”

The rancher frowned, “Actually, we didn’t know Milt intended to bring it. I hope nothing went wrong in the early time shift experiments?”

Danny said, “There is nothing I’ve ever heard, but then all phase shifts are closely guarded and there are still not an abundance of transplants taking place in the year 2025. I suspect the project is only marginally more publicized than in your time.”

Connie turned to Val. “This sounds lame, but... what brings you here?”

“Actually, Connie, for us it was a combination of good fortune and coincidence: I had been working on an historical project in Sociology—I am a PhD student at the University Of Toronto, in the year 2025—and the research I completed attracted the attention of a relative of Danny’s who is covertly connected with the time travel operation. One thing led to another and we were offered this unbelievable opportunity so that I could *live* a participative, first-hand account of western small-town life in this era. Danny is a Communications Engineer so he knew the intricacies of that industry and fit the bill for the Stockton lineman job.”

Danny laughed. “I knew the intricacies, but I had to learn the basics in a hurry!”

“What happens to everyone?” Milt pondered. “What do you know of Tom O'Brien?”

Danny held up his hand. “My history book is the same as yours and it only goes up to the turn of the century. There hasn't been another Stockton story written as yet; they usually require more than 25 years.” He paused, “Tom O'Brien, though, if he is the same fellow as our Tom, had a very successful career in politics.”

Hastily thumbing through the pages of the big volume, Milt said, “It is the same Tom. I found him in here —Benny wrote about him— he even became a World Champion Bull Rider.”

Danny's brow furrowed in thought. “I wondered if Tom was that same person. In my school days, I wrote an essay about Tom O'Brien as a political history project; I didn't research back far enough to learn about his rodeo life. He had an illustrious international career which culminated in his appointment as King Charles's Governor General of Canada. He even received a knighthood.”

“Is he... Did he die?” Connie Milto's voice quavered.

“Not that I know of,” Danny replied. “Sir Tom O'Brien stepped down from the Governor Generalship and moved out west to the foothills of the Rockies where he purchased a piece of ranch land and built his retirement home.”

Robert Milto's eyes met those of his wife across the table. He said, “I think we know the place.”

...We haven't had a Christmas concert at Prairie Hills Hall for a long time now. Connie Milto and I staged the last one in 1977, the last Christmas before the Milto family sold the ranch and left the district. I'll never forget the excited faces of those little ones when Santa made his appearance....

Submitted by Myrna Yeast

EPILOGUE

Summer, 2026

If memory serves me correctly, it was a beautiful summer in the year 2026 on the occasion of Canada's ex Governor General Tom O'Brien's seventy-fifth birthday; family and friends had gathered at the Tungstall Ranch nestled in the picturesque foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Evan and Analyse Tungstall, along with their daughter Toni and her husband Mikael Frost, had "brought out the good dishes" in Sir Tom's honour. Preparations for a bountiful feast were well under way when a handsome young couple arrived driving a beautifully restored, vintage, petroleum powered Shelby Mustang. Though the newcomers' true identification probably did not correspond with the appellations "Val and Danny Reid" Evan Tungstall used when introducing them to his son-in-law, no one took exception. The confusing, but joyous reunion spanning roughly sixty, twenty or two years took a very emotional moment of sombre reflection when Mikael and Toni's sixteen year old daughter rode into the ranch yard astride a tall, bareback, whiskey coloured gelding. She was a strikingly beautiful young lady. A ponytail of long auburn hair that would reach her slim waist when allowed to tumble free, bounced and bobbed with the rhythm of the horse's gait. Her Christened name was Cherise, but she preferred her nickname, Milt....

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C. C. Phillips grew up on a mixed farm along the edge of the Great Sandhills region of the Canadian prairies. 'The Hills' provided a wonderland of adventure and enchantment for a growing lad, his dog and saddle horse; the semi-annual two day cattle drive through the heart of the uninhabited landscape were highlights of the year.

As a youngster, Phillips attended a country school for the first six seasons of his formal education, making the three mile trek on horseback, buggy or cutter. It was here that he realized a love of stories and writing under the tutelage of Mrs. Harrison, a young teacher hailing from Britain.

With the family farming operation lacking in capacity, a young C. C. Phillips entered the work force, delving into a variety of occupations. He worked for a manufacturer of lenses for eye glasses, a tire retread plant and in the communications industry. Writing was relegated to a hobby as he turned his attention to providing for wife, son and daughter.

Phillips's adventurous spirit moved him and his family to La Ronge in central Saskatchewan, and from there to Uranium City in the province's extreme northwest corner. The latter, once a thriving mining community of five thousand, had dwindled to a near-ghost town of two hundred. Here, the wildlife, scenery and solitude captured his heart and rekindled the writer's imagination within.

Throughout the course of his life, C. C. Phillips has continued to write. Now retired, he is able to devote more time to pencil, pen and keyboard. The restoration of a pioneer's homestead shack, destined to be a writing retreat, occupies Phillips's moments of leisure. He and his wife currently reside in their country home in southern Saskatchewan.

