

Restricted Territory

The Property in Question

[Where it Began]

Monday, 20 Nov 2017

The broken clouds filter the sun as it washes across the open span between the cabin and the barn. Wac ih a' is mounted on a fine-looking horse facing toward Sam and the cabin. Sam is standing beside another horse that is not quite as big as Wac ih a's, but still a fine animal. Before mounting, Sam adjusts the bridle of his horse and checks the chinch straps. Then, he mounts the horse and settles comfortably in the saddle.

Sam speaks to the horse while patting it on the neck, "Easy now. We're just going to take it slow and easy today. There's no need to get in a hurry."

Wac ih a' smiles, "Looks like you know what you are doing. Not as rusty as you thought?"

"Naw, it's all coming back to me now. I spent a summer at a dude ranch in my early teens. I didn't know I could remember so much," confides Sam.

Wac ih a' warns, "Don't get overconfident just yet. There are some tricky areas (Pointing back over his shoulder) along the fence line, and there is likely ice in the shade as well."

Sam agrees, "Don't worry. I know just enough to be dangerous. At fifty-two, I've learned that I don't revivify quickly."

Wac ih a' points to the cabin and barn, "Since this ride is supposed to inform you about the property, we might as well start here. This is the first family cabin the Creighton clan built when they arrived in 1872. All three Creighton families lived here as they built the homes down in the valley."

Wac ih a' corrects himself, "Well, it's actually a remodel of the prospector's cabin. Ren, the prospector, built the kitchen, pantry, and east bedroom when he took over the mine about five years before the Creightons arrived. Ren had mining rights and the five acres around the mine. The Creightons received twelve hundred eighty acres through a government land grant adjacent to Ren. Ren made a deal with them. Ren would let them use and modify his cabin by adding extra bedrooms, and they would also build him a small cabin, but when their homes were built in the valley, Ren would get the big cabin back."

Sam looks around, "So, where is the small cabin?"

“It was used to finish up Bryan’s cabin,” explains Wac ih a’. “Building materials were expensive, and they considered it wasteful to leave the small cabin here when Ren would be living in the larger cabin.”

Wac ih a’ turns his horse to follow the two-track road going down the hill, past the barn, and into the wilderness. Sam nudges his horse onward, closing the gap between himself and Wac ih a’.

When Sam catches up to him, Wac ih a’ continues his narrative, “None of them moved into their new homes until all three ranch houses were built. It took a bit over two years. After that, Ren put these five acres,” Wac ih a’ gestures toward the cabin and barn area, “Into a mining easement attached to Creighton’s land that was to be managed by Bill Creighton’s family. Ren knew that Wilson would jump the claim when he died, so he did that to keep Wilson out of Creighton Valley.”

Sam and Wac ih a’ are riding side by side at a leisurely pace. Wac ih a’ points out a deer in the forest to Sam, who nods and smiles in acknowledgment. Sam is enjoying his vacation in the forest. He’ll have to report his findings as promised, but that doesn’t preclude him from having a good time during the reconnoiter.

Wac ih a’ picks up where he left off: “The first tenant was an old prospector named Ren. He wasn’t always here but would come by every few weeks, get re-supplied, and head back out. It’s been said Ren and the young Creighton got along well. It seems Austin liked the stories of adventure and gold.”

“What kid wouldn’t?” asks Sam. “How about Ren’s family?”

“Nope. No family, just a lone prospector,” Replies Wac ih a’, “Never caused trouble. Almost everybody liked him.”

Sam, hoping for a positive response, “Did he ever get a good strike?”

Wac ih a’ shakes his head, “Sure didn’t hear of it. They say he’d go out for a while ‘till he got enough gold for more supplies. Then he’d return to the cabin, rest a few days, gather what he needed, and head back out. He died in the summer of 1877. My family has been the caretakers since the winter of that year. We maintain the cabin and watch over the rest of the place.”

The trail passes over a narrow wooden bridge that crosses the creek.

Pointing to the bridge, Wac ih a’ explains, “The miners put this road in when they started the mine by the cabin. It goes down to the lake.” He points through the trees. “It’s just a few hundred yards through the trees.”

Wac Ih a’ continues to point out the various points of interest as they descend into the valley floor.

Sam is quite interested as Wac ih a’ talks about the property lines, the ridge lines, power lines, the transmission tower, the river path, and the old fence lines. They stop at an opening in the trees and look across a narrow meadow that stretches between the lake to the north and the steep slope back up to the cabin to the south.

The narrow meadow eventually expands to a large meadow on the west side of the lake. In the distance, across the meadow, are the remains of the Ben Creighton cabin site. They proceed another

five hundred yards along the creek, then turn west into the trees, just across the creek and up on a small knoll in the forest.

[Secret Burial Site]

Wac ih a' speaks softly to his horse, "Whoa." Then, addressing Sam, he says, "Out of respect, we should leave the horses here and go to this next spot on foot. It shouldn't be needlessly disturbed."

Sam wonders why the site is so sensitive, but he trusts Wac ih a's judgment and dismounts. "Umm, okay. I'll just follow your lead."

Wac ih a' leads Sam to a clearing in the trees. There are six wooden head markers in three groups: A group of three, a single marker, and a group of two. There are fresh flowers at each marker. The wooden markers are hard to read, but some writing can be made out. All markers have the date of death: "Killed on the 21st of November 1877", with one exception. The third marker of the group of three has no name, just an upright image of a squirrel. It says, "Missing, November 1877."

Wac ih a' whispers to Sam, "This is the secret burial place of the Creighton clan."

Sam responds in a hushed tone, "Why are they hidden, and why is it a secret?"

Wac ih a's voice remains hushed, "As the story goes, Yellow Feather, a family friend of the Creightons, was afraid that Hank Wilson's men would dig them up to hide evidence of the murders. Her family and some friends from town snuck up here one night and buried them. Yellow Feather is my grandmother many generations ago."

Sam, quietly surprised, says, "Oh. It sounds rather ominous." He points at the third marker, which is not standing upright like the others. "What about this one?"

Wac ih a' lowers his head, "White Squirrel was the name given to Austin Creighton by his Miwok friend, Falling Leaf. She was the daughter of Yellow Feather. It is said that, after the murders, his body was never found. Legend has it that Falling Leaf refused to accept his death. She put this marker here as a symbol of her belief that he was just missing and not dead."

Sam queries, "And the girl? Um, Victoria?"

Wac ih a' starts to look nervous about spending so much time at the burial site. The increased number of trespassers threatens the secrecy of the burial site, so he keeps his explanation short: "She is the only known survivor of the murders that night. She moved to Ohio to continue her nursing career, got married to a doctor, raised a family, and became a respected doctor in her own right. When she died, she was buried in Ohio next to her husband. The letter you received must have come from one of their descendants." Sam steps up, straightens Austin's marker, and takes a reverent step back. They both turn and exit the way they came in.

They continue their ride through the various areas, visiting the home sites that were burned 140 years earlier. The homes have only crumbling remnants of stone used for the fireplaces. Old fruit trees indicate where the gardens once were. The two-track trail that connected the properties is barely

noticeable. Wac ih a' points out another radio tower and some more power lines. As they are riding, snow begins to fall. Wac ih a' puts on a snow-camo poncho while Sam zips up his coat a little more.

They arrive back at the cabin at dusk and take the horses to the barn. Sam helps Wac ih a' brush, feed, and water the horses, then Sam and Wac ih a' head to the house as it becomes dark. Sam closes the barn door. Wac ih a' waits for him so they can walk together to the cabin.

The nearly full moon peeks briefly between the clouds, providing enough light to allow safe passage to the cabin. Light snow continues to fall but is not enough to obscure the blinking red light on the tower, low on the horizon.

As Sam speaks, fog forms from his warm breath, mixing with the cold night air, "Wac ih a', thank you for the ride and the information. I don't think I can remember it all, but amazingly, this family's tragedy hasn't been adequately exposed - yet. It takes a lot of political and financial power to conceal something like this for well over a hundred years. Hopefully, the renewed interest in the property may reveal information that will return the property to the rightful owners and unveil the complete story of this family's horrific demise."

Wac ih a' confidently states, "I'm sure that is one of the reasons you were asked to visit here."

Sam, reinforcing the reason he volunteered, said, "Of course, that's exactly the reason."

Wac ih a' responds in a tone of wisdom, "Perhaps only one of the reasons."

Sam looks at Wac ih a' a little befuddled and shakes his head, wondering what Wac ih a' is talking about.

At the cabin's back door, Wac ih a' removes his poncho outside, shakes it off, and takes it inside to dry. Sam removes his coat before entering the cabin. His shirt and pants are wet from the snow. As Wac ih a' crosses the kitchen to the anteroom, he sees that Sam is quite wet.

Wac ih a' reaches out to take Sam's coat, "Next time you go ridin' in the snow, you should try using a poncho. You'll stay much drier."

Sam looks at his wet clothes, "Yeah, I'll keep that in mind." He hands his wet coat to Wac ih a'.

Wac ih a' hangs both the poncho and the coat on hooks in the anteroom where other hats and coats hang, "Why don't you get on some dry clothes?" He points to Sam's room. "I'll get dinner ready."

Wac ih a' heads over to the stove to get it fired up for cooking dinner.

Sam crosses to his room, "Okay. I'll just be a minute, then I can help out."

Wac ih a' starts moving pots onto the stove. "There's no need to help, but I wouldn't mind the company. It gets a little quiet around here with the wife gone."

Sam exits to change, "Understandable. Be right back."

Sam looks at the wet clothes in his bag. His hydration pack leaked, soaking everything in his bag.

Sam yells in disbelief, “What the – !” His voice trails off; he rarely cusses. “This is certainly not a good way to end the night.”

Sam begins to think to himself, ‘The boys won’t be here ‘till day after tomorrow, so I guess I’ll be wet for a few days.’

Wac ih a’ is standing at the doorway. “Sam, is everything alright? I heard a disappointing tone from the kitchen.”

Sam, startled that Wac ih a’ was there, “Seems like I sprung a leak. My whole bag is soaked.” Sam holds up the wet clothes and the offending hydration pack.

Wac ih a’ smiles, “It’s not a worry. Some old things handed down over the years will likely fit you. You’re more than welcome to use ‘em for the next couple of days while your things dry.” As he’s walking away, he off-handedly states, “I’ll get ‘em now so you have something dry to wear for dinner.”

Sam raises his voice so Wac ih a’ can hear him, “Wac ih a’, I deeply appreciate your hospitality. I certainly did not come to be a burden on you.”

Wac ih a’ calls back from a distance, “Of course, my pleasure.”

Sam’s room has become a drying locker. His pocket contents, including his keys, change, pocket knife, and wallet, are on the wash table. His clothes are hung all over the bedroom to dry them.

Sam and Wac ih a’ eat dinner at the large family dining table. Sam wears clothing almost identical to Wac ih a’, except without a vest. Sam compliments Wac ih a’, “This is very good. Thanks for cooking. I’ll do the cooking tomorrow.”

Wac ih a’ accepting the offer, “Sounds good. You’ll find the food in the pantry through there.” He points to the doorway of the anteroom.”

Sam is impressed by the ingenuity, “That’s a great idea to put the pantry in the mountain like that.”

Wac ih a’ continues educating Sam about the property, “This used to be the head of the Ladybird gold mine. They shut it down not long after it opened due to low production. The mineral rights were ceded back to Ren, the property owner, when the land grant was issued for the rest of the valley.”

Sam empathizes with the miners, “Looks like it was a lot of work for nothing.”

Wac ih a’ agrees, “Yep. That’s pretty much the way mining was around here. Quick to open, quick to close. Miners around here didn’t have much patience. Some of the old mines have been reopened with great success.”

Sam replies with a simple, “Humph. Didn’t know that.”

[Bed Time]

Since Wac ih a' cooked, Sam volunteered to clean the kitchen after dinner. At the fire station, doing the dishes and general clean-up was the responsibility of those who did not cook. After he dries the last plate and puts it in the cupboard, he turns the oil lamp off and proceeds to the main room, where Wac ih a' is feeding and stoking the heating stove.

Sam stops near the stove Wac ih a' is working on to warm his hands. He can not get the tragic story of the Creighton clan out of his mind. He tries to grasp the brutality of the times that would allow such a massacre to go unprosecuted. "Sure was quite a story about those families."

Wac ih a' adjusts the flue damper, "All true, my friend, unfortunately, all true."

Sam makes his way to his room, carrying an oil lamp. He puts the lamp on the nightstand by the bed, turns it off, gets undressed, and climbs into bed. The moonlight occasionally breaks through the clouds, giving the now quiet room a light bluish tint.

Sam utters quietly to himself, "If these walls could talk"

As Sam's mind races from image to image of the tragedy hidden in the forest below, his tired body settles into a restless sleep.

[In Town]

Tuesday night, Nov 20, 1877, 140 years earlier.

Hank Wilson, the Bar R Bar ranch owner, stands at the Harmony Valley Inn bar. It is a Tuesday night, and the bar is almost empty. The light from the oil lamps gives the place a golden glow, falsely hiding the evil that thrives within its walls. Hank is sipping whiskey and waiting for someone.

Isaac Wells, a loner with a bad attitude, saunters to the bar and stands beside Hank. Erik, the bartender, places a drink in front of Isaac and then leaves the area. Isaac looks around at the other patrons. Anyone within twenty feet moves away from the two men.

When Isaac is satisfied with the clearing, he addresses Hank, "Boss says that the investors' representative will be here next week. He'll be very disappointed if the rail land isn't secured by then. Without the rail line, we can't harvest the timber. No rail, no timber, no deal."

Hank angrily finishes his drink and slams down his glass, "Tell him I'll get the land one way or another tomorrow night."

Isaac finishes his drink in one shot. "I'll make sure he gets the message." He gently puts his glass down on the bar. He looks at Erik, who is sitting at a table outside the twenty-foot buffer, waiting for the conversation to end. Isaac points to the drink, then to Hank.

Erik nods, indicating that Isaac's drink is on the house. Isaac leaves through the front doors, never looking back.

[Up the Hill]

The rustic ranch house's main room in Greg and Gwen Hill's cabin is dimly lit by the fireplace and oil lamps. Two doors lead to bedrooms from this main dining/living room. The front door is cross-bared, and the interior shutters are closed.

Three men - Ben Creighton, Bryan Creighton, and Gregory Hill - sit around the table, with a whiskey glass in front of each of them and a saddle bag hung over the back of their chairs. Each is wearing a holster with a revolver. Hats and coats are hung near the door. Keeping their voices low and reserved, they discuss a private, secret matter.

Bryan stares intently at the glass of whiskey he holds with both hands. With inescapable worry in his voice, he says, "I don't know what Hank is capable of . . . and don't really wanna find out. The deadline for us to sell to him is tomorrow. He never said what would happen if we didn't sell, but he's got plenty of men to cause us problems if we don't."

"I agree." Ben glances at the other two men to indicate the importance of what he is about to say: "His men have been watching us for a while now. He's definitely planning something."

Gregory slowly turns his glass on the table, listening to the conversation's various particulars. He has been quiet most of the conversation as he assembles the puzzle pieces of the situation in his head. Still determining if additional information will help or cloud their discussion, he throws this in the mix. "Sean O'Brien mentioned that Hank had a couple of strangers stop by town late last week. They showed up for a few days, then left in the night. Weren't going far, though. Packed real light. Said one of'em's a doctor."

Ben cautions, "So he's already got players movin' into position. Whatever he's plannin', it'll be startin' real soon." He pushes his empty glass toward the center of the table in frustration.

Bryan is concerned about Wilson's imbalance of force. "We all know McGinn ain't no use t' us 'cause he's in Wilson's back pocket. And even though the sheriff knows Wilson's up to no good, he can't do nothin' to him. Folks here are too scared to say somethin' 'ginst Wilson. Sheriff says there's rumors that Wilson got into trouble back in Kansas over land deals. But fer now, Sheriff just got nothin' on him. So, I guess I'm sayin' that we can't expect any help from the law."

Ben agrees, "Meanin', whatever we're going to do, we'll have to do it ourselves. But we'll do it together." In a matter-of-fact tone, Ben looks directly at Bryan and says, "Bryan, last time we talked, it sounded like you'd rather pick up and go."

Bryan hesitates to formulate a clear response, "No. I just meant I was tired of this Wilson bullshit. More than that, we put in over two years of hard work t' get our houses built and our family settled. We didn't do all this just to move on." Showing his resolve, he continues, "'Spect Wilson t' cause some trouble, but I'm stayin', no matter what! 'Course, we'll need t' be extra mindful and watch our backs."

Ben's feelings parallel Bryan's, "I agree on both points, 'stay' and 'watch our backs.' Greg? What 'bout you?"

"I say we stay and hold our ground." Greg amplifies Bryan's statement, "It took us two years just to get this land *and then* another two and a half to build our homes. I'll be damned if I'm going just to give it away."

The three men sit back in their chairs and unconsciously fidget with their now-empty whiskey glasses as they ponder their options. While contemplating various thoughts, their mannerisms and facial expressions are shared, as only brothers can. (Even though technically Greg is a brother-in-law, they have been together and have always been treated as brothers since they were just out of diapers.)

After about a minute, which seemed like hours, Ben skeptically voices an idea, "Maybe that's precisely what we should do - give it away."

Bryan and Greg are surprised at this notion. They look at him as if he has lost his mind. Though they both have the same thought, Greg spits it out first: "You gone loco? We all just said we're gonna stay."

"Hold on." Ben half-expected this reaction. He puts his hands up to fend off the onslaught of detractors: "Hear me out now. Bryan has a point about being careful. I'm sure Hank has a plan, but maybe we can outflank him on this. What if we transfer the land to Victoria? Just 'till we get a better handle on this."

Bryan is unconvinced: "I don't know. Isn't she leaving for Ohio next week? What could she do from there?"

"That's the point.", counters Ben. "Hank won't be able to harass her in Ohio as he does us. Besides that, Colin has a lot of family there. She'll be safe, and we won't be able to sell him land that ain't ours. He'd have to go through an agent to deal with her, so he wouldn't be able to harass her. I'm sure he ain't plannin' on that. He's been after this land for a long time, but this is the first time he came up with a deadline. Makes me think Wilson's in a hurry. This kind of delay may make him lose interest."

Greg follows Ben's logic and mostly agrees, but he points out that it won't be all flowers and honey between them and Wilson. "Of course, when Hank figures that he can't buy what we don't have, he'll be pretty upset. I'm sure that won't stop him from harassing us."

Following Ben's plan, Bryan suggests, "Of course not, but it could buy us some time. We could use that time to devise a better solution or maybe help the sheriff get 'nough on Wilson, t' put him away."

"Wilson behind bars." Greg smiles as he imagines it, "I would love to see that happen. After the dust settles, we can wire Victoria and return property ownership to how it is now."

"Timing's right!" exclaims Bryan. "I heard that the County Clerk is supposed to be in town tomorrow and Thursday. It'll be a few weeks before he gets back around these parts."

Greg adds, "With winter settin' in it could be months –" Then, addressing Ben, "Do you think we could get it all together that soon?"

Ben nods his head, "I wasn't plannin' on getting down there 'til next week, but if we draw up the papers tonight, we can make the trip in the morning."

Bryan retrieves the saddlebag draped over the back of his chair. "To keep Victoria safe, we'll have to keep this from her. At least until she gets to Ohio, and we can't let Wilson know until after she's been gone a few days."

Greg pauses while getting papers from his saddlebags: "I was thinkin' that too, but we can't do that. She'll have to sign something to keep it all legal."

Ben forgot to consider the time gap between completing the paperwork and Victoria's departure in his planning. "Guess y're right." He pauses as he realizes the danger his daughter may face. "We'll just have her sign whatever she needs to and keep it quiet 'til after she leaves."

Greg introduces another complication, "What about the deeds and stuff? We certainly can't keep 'em safe at the ranches. We're not thinkin' of puttin' 'em in the bank?"

"You kiddin' me. No way!" Ben adamantly opposes. "Hank don't even need to rob the place. They'd just open the doors and let him take whatever he wanted. We gotta hide 'em somewhere that he'll never find 'em. Any ideas?"

As before, it is quiet enough to hear a cricket chirp as the three men sit back in their chairs to ponder the options.

Sheepishly, Bryan is the first to speak, "Well, ya' might not like it, Ben, but I think Austin's our best bet."

Bryan barely finishes talking when Ben says, "You're right. I don't like it! I don't want him involved in this in any way. It's too dangerous. Besides, if his mother found out, she'd kill me."

Bryan was expecting resistance, but not quite that much. He chooses his next words carefully, "C'mon Ben, y' know I'm right." Bryan takes a deep breath before continuing, "He knows every secret place in this whole damn valley. He's smart and knows how to keep safe. No one will suspect a kid of knowing anything 'bout deeds an' stuff. And there ain't nobody knows what that kid's up to - ever. Can you think of anyone better?"

"It's too big a responsibility for a ten-year-old.", argues Ben. "Greg, back me up on this." Ben's hoping Greg will have a better plan or any plan that does not include Austin.

"Sorry, Ben, I'd like to, but I agree with Bryan," concedes Greg. "No better person to hide anything than Austin. He's so sneaky that no one would ever know he knew anything about this." Ben is not pleased with Greg siding with Bryan. "Bryan and I love Austin nearly as much as you do, Ben." Bryan nods in agreement. "We wouldn't even suggest it if we thought he'd get harmed. Besides, who can you trust more for an assignment like this?"

Ben is steadfast in his disapproval of including Austin in the plan but can find no flaw in their logic, "I don't like it." He pauses as he pours himself a splash of whiskey. "I don't like it one bit, but there's no arguin' yer points. If his mother ever hears of it," he points to his brothers to emphasize their inclusion, "we'd all be strung up by our privates." He takes a sip of whiskey. "I guess we ain't got much choice. However, no one," He emphasizes by putting his fist on the table. "No one except us will know that he's got anything to do with this. We aren't going to put our troubles on him."

Greg and Bryan nod in agreement.

Ben finishes his drink and sits back, pondering the full scope of the situation. "Damnit!" Ben shouts in frustration. Greg and Bryan both jump at being startled by Ben.

“Sorry”, Ben apologizes. “I know this is our only solution, and it started as my plan, but that doesn’t mean I like it. I’ll feel much better about this when Victoria and the documents are safely on their way to Ohio.”

Ben puts his saddlebag on the table to retrieve his documents, “I’ll take the family t’ town first thing in the morning. Austin and I’ll meet up with ya ‘bout an hour after sunrise at O’Brien’s.”

Bryan solidifies their discussion into action, “That’s the plan then. Let’s get things ready for the morning.”

All three men begin reading, signing, and passing papers in preparation for tomorrow. After checking that their documents are in order, they each carefully put them back into the saddlebags.

When Ben gets up to leave, the other two also get up. Greg unbolts the door as Ben and Bryan put on their coats.

Greg acknowledges Ben’s discomfort and pats him on the shoulder. “We’ll see you tomorrow.” Then he turns to Bryan. “Stop by, and we’ll ride in together. It’ll be safer that way.”

Ben, shaking Greg’s hand, “Take care of Gwen.”

Greg closes and bolts the door. Gwen, hearing the door bolt, concludes that the meeting is over. She steps into the doorway from the bedroom. Greg’s concern is unmistakable.