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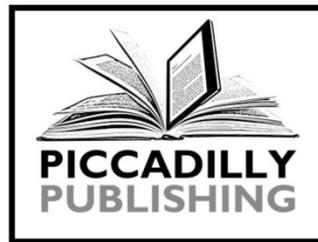
The Home of Great Western Fiction!

The Comanche Crossing—the dreaded width of the Staked Plain between the Texas brasada and Colorado. McAllister and a handful of men, with three thousand cattle, would have to challenge distance, thirst and the most dreaded Indians in the West if they were to make it across in one piece.

But that might be easier said than done, because the Comanche, the finest horsemen in the world, reckoned McAllister owed them a life, and they were determined to collect in full ...

MATT CHISHOLM

**McALLISTER 1:
McALLISTER ON
THE COMANCHE
CROSSING**



2016

One

WHEN DICE ROBERTS thought up the crazy idea of driving a herd of cows to Colorado, it seemed only natural that he should think of McAllister. Not that that was crazy. To my mind, it was the only sensible part of the whole crazy idea. McAllister knew cows and he knew the Colorado trail. In fact, he'd ridden it with none other than the original Goodnight and Loving, the famous pair who defied the Comanches, the lack of water and the forces of nature generally just to get a bunch of longhorns to the lucrative market in Colorado.

It made sense really when you studied on it. Every second son of Texas was getting into the act of trail driving to Kansas and more and more of them were running afoul of the Kansas jayhawkers. And one fine day, the bottom was going to drop out of the market and a whole lot of men were going to be caught on Kansas grass with several thousand longhorns they couldn't sell for love or money.

Colorado was another heap of beans altogether. For a start the market there was insatiable at the moment. Not only were the gold-diggers crying out for beef on the hoof, but they were willing to pay the earth for it. Besides which a good many ranchers were staking claims to prime range in Colorado to raise beef for that very market and were willing to pay high prices for mixed herds.

Old Dice Roberts, who'd come out of the War cash-poor and cow-rich, handed me the jug of his best home-brewed drinking liquor and said, "If you was contemplatin' offerin' that partner of yourn a drivin' job, Matt, where'd you start a-lookin' this season of the year?"

"Well," I said, "Dice, it's anybody's guess where that son-of-a-bitch is right this minute. He could be in a low bordello in Fort Griffin, or hogging it with his natural brothers the Cheyenne, drinking more'n's good for him in San Antone or raising a little hell in Laredo. Take your choice."

Old Dice, he gave me that mean cross-eyed look he reserves for smart alocs like me and says, "Boy, you find that McAllister an' have him here this time next week or he's out of a job he never had."

I was on my feet.

"Yes, sir," I said.

I got off the stoop and forked my horse.

Old Dice yelled “An’ best go along with him an’ keep him outa trouble.” I touched the horse with the quirt and sent it across the yard on the run. The last I heard from Dice was his “If you know how.”

My first stop was Aunt Martha’s, which lay five miles off down a narrow brasada trail of thorn shrub and red dust. Aunt Martha knew where everybody was. And gossip spread faster from her than anybody I ever knew. Let Aunt Martha whisper something and the following day it would be the general topic of conversation up in the Panhandle.

If I tell you that Aunt Martha was a large lady, that’s a slice of Texas understatement. She was fearsome. And married to a little hot pepper of a man who was usually known as Uncle Mart. Martha was a great talker. She liked to talk and folks liked to hear her talk. She was in her rocker on her gallery, shelling beans.

I cocked a leg over the saddle horn and I said: “Howdy, Aunt Martha. Where’s McAllister at?”

“You’re his partner, boy,” she cried. “I caught you out,” I accused her. “You don’t know.”

Uncle Mart, who was sitting alongside her, picking his nose as always, cried, “You wanna bet on it, Matthew?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Try Kelligrew’s,” said Aunt Martha. I thanked her, unwound from the saddle horn, rejected an invitation from old Mart to sample his cellar, and lit out for Kelligrew’s.

This took me five miles further west along one of those trails that made Texas a hell on horses and women. I reckon it was about six inches wide and mostly lined with junco thorn. It cut slathers off a man which were about ready to be sun-dried jerky. By the time I reached Kelligrew’s, I was a sight for sore eyes. My horse, which had been raised a brushpopper, didn’t give a solitary damn.

Kelligrew’s place was not what you might call salubrious. It was a dump. Kelligrew himself was the original poor white trash. If there was any method of making money without lifting a single unwashed finger, Kelligrew had done it. This broken-down, peeling, warped frame house of his was where he sold foul liquor and worse women. McAllister had never bought a woman in his life, so I knew he was here for the liquor. And the fighting. The two went together and Kelligrew didn’t much care how much fighting you did, just so long as it was not perpetrated on his premises.

McAllister was fighting in the yard when I arrived. This time, he had picked on the Moss brothers. Which showed that he was in one of his cowardly moods, because those three boys never really amounted to much. It was a kind of halfhearted affair, I could see, with McAllister going through the performance more as a polite ritual than anything else. So I didn't have any qualms about interrupting the ceremony.

"McAllister," I said, "old Dice is hiring for a cattle-drive and he wants you should boss his crew."

Manny Moss hit him in the belly and Charlie Moss leapt on his back. Orville Moss was lying on the ground some ways off, telling the world that McAllister was a goddam Indian and shouldn't be allowed around decent white folks.

McAllister said, "Hold your horses, boys, my partner is here with a business proposition."

Either Manny was deaf or he was carried away by battle fervor. He hit McAllister three times in the face. McAllister threw Charlie forward over his head. Charlie draped himself around Manny and they both fell to the ground. In untangling themselves, Charlie trod on Manny's face. It was never much to look on at the best of times. This treatment did not improve it much. Manny rose and kicked McAllister in the crotch. Then, pleased with the way he had executed this, turned and did the same to Charlie.

McAllister raised his voice—"Boys, you heard me. Hold it." Something in his tone must have gotten through to them.

Orville rose to his feet, wandered around in a circle and said, "The law should ought to do somethin'. McAllister should be put down like a mad dog. I mean this most sincerely from the bottom of my heart."

McAllister told me, "Matthew, I done that Kansas trip till I know every blade of grass on the trail. Tell old Dice 'no'."

"Dice isn't driving to Kansas," I told him. "He aims to go across the Staked Plain to Colorado."

McAllister looked at me incredulously for a moment, then he laughed.

"Not this coon," he said.

Orville said with quiet bitterness, "I always knowed it. McAllister is all wind and piss. He's thinkin' of them Comanch' bucks an' he's messin' his pants."

Charlie said, "Naw—it's the shortage of water. This time of year, there's a stretch on the Plain

that's forty-eight hours without water. It sorts the men from the boys."

Manny said, "You got it all wrong, fellers. Once you're past the Pecos, there ain't no women. This lily-white son-of-a-bitch just can't go ten days without a titty."

I said, "You got it all wrong, boys. McAllister's crying off because he knows I ain't going along this trip and he don't have a notion to play in a game without me dealing the cards."

McAllister said, kind of resigned, "I know you're tryin' to talk me into it, boys, but it won't wash. I am definitely not goin' on any trail drive."

I wound a leg around the saddle horn. "That suits me fine, boy. Old Dice said if you were to turn it down, he'd have me ramrod the trip. So I'll get on back there and sign on with him."

"You what?" McAllister roared. "You dumb mick, you couldn't ramrod a turkey drive."

"Watch me."

Me, McAllister and the three Moss boys reached old Dice's the following day and we were all five of us more or less sober. If there was any fight left in the other four, it wasn't too noticeable. Old Dice looked us over and muttered something about how he must be out of his mind to hire five beat-up, broken-down, hung-over bums like us. He said he'd start his gather on the following day. He reckoned that would take two to three weeks, then he'd hire McAllister as his trail-boss. Meanwhile Rem could work as a cowboy.

"Like hell I work as a cowboy," said McAllister. "I hire right off as a ramrod or I don't hire. You don't get me body an' soul for no thirty a month."

So Dice fired him before he hired him and then we all got to work. Dice's two boys, who knew the range thoroughly, threw in with us. There were a couple of Mexicans and a Negro boy, all tried hands, and we straightway started busting cows out of the brush.

I don't know if you've ever seen the brasada in that area, but if you haven't seen it, you wouldn't believe it. To start with, it's the last place on earth you would ever think to find cattle. Mind you, they're not any kind of cattle you ever saw before. They're as wild as deer and as fast as greyhounds. They live in the thickets of the brasada and some of those thickets are a mile long. The only time they come out to see the light of day, as they say, is when they come out at night. Then they mosey out into the clearings to crop the poor grass, ready to head for the nearest thicket at the crack of a twig.

The reason why the cow ponies in that neck of the woods are called brushpoppers is because they make their living popping brush. If you're up on one of them and you hear a longhorn in the

brush, you only have to lift a rein and that little horse heads straight for him, going after him like a terrier dog, no matter what's in the way.

Which explains why a brasada cowboy and a brasada cow-horse are equipped as they are. They're both built to go through thorn thickets headfirst and come out the other side more or less alive.

While you're doing this, the heat is stifling. You're dressed in leather from head to toe—which is not exactly a cool way to go around—and mostly the dust is so thick that you have your bandanna up around the lower part of your face. Now, good cattlemen, knowing what heat can do to horses, always have plenty of spares to hand. So each rider has a string of the animals and the one he rides is called his mount. He changes horses all the time during a cow-hunt. He has to or they would drop dead. That's why Texas is hell on horses and women. It's also hell on men, but nobody ever talks about that. When you're taking part in a gather, you can be in the saddle for forty-eight hours at a stretch, and maybe you bellyache about it to your bunky, but you sure as hell don't raise the matter with your boss. Because everybody expects it. The cows have to be caught and once they're caught and bunched they have to be held. And there's never enough men to go around. You build a holding pen for the cows you've caught because you don't have enough men to catch cows and hold them at the same time, but cows can't stay in one place for too long because if they don't have grass they die of starvation, which makes the whole exercise a waste. You can't move them because the crew's busy catching more cows. So you will see that, by and large, it's impossible to get a herd together for the trail. That was why in those days only damn fools and Texans ever tried to.

We must have gotten together around four hundred head in the first week and they ran so much sweat out of us we didn't have any idea where we would find the energy to raise another hundred, let alone enough to make up a road herd. Our remuda of saddle horses looked as if they had tangled with a herd of buffalo. The only time we set eyes on Dice Roberts was when he drifted by to enquire with a mean look how we expected to be paid good American money for lolling around like this was a holiday farm. I guess none of us had the strength to curse him to hell so he would have good grounds for firing us. Even his two sons, Hopper and Stew, reckoned the old man must have come from a long line of brothel-keepers who couldn't boast a birth certificate among them.

We drifted the herd for a few days so they could get some grass into their thin bellies and so

we could take a breather. But that wasn't so easy either because new-caught longhorns from the brush can't be called a herd until they have been bunched together for at least a week. There were plenty of outlaws among them who took advantage of the slightest opportunity to break for freedom if it was offered to them. It was one such that nearly cut our crew by one.

It happened this way. A muley cow, tired of being picked on by the rest of the bunch, decided to go home. A muley cow, as I'm sure you all know, is a critter with one or no horns. They are often outcasts and usually the last to bed down at night after a day's drive. They are nervous of the other beasts which, in their turn, do not like muley cows. So this one decided to light out for its home thicket. The trouble was that Golly Adams, our one black rider, at once whirled his horse to turn the muley back. Now Golly was as good a man with cows as ever sat a horse, but every once in a while a man or a horse makes a mistake. Sometimes that's one too many. Longhorn cattle are lethal weapons as much as hoglegs and bowie knives. This one might have only one horn and it might be scared of its fellow cows, but it didn't show a jot of fear of a horse and cowboy. It took a savage hook with its one horn at the belly of the horse which, being raw and no more than half-broken, like the rest of our remuda, did not react quickly enough to the slash of the quirt and the jerked line. When it did move, it stumbled. The muley had aimed for the forefront of the belly, but only managed to hook the horse under the genitals. The light pony seemed to fall sideways and up and over at the same time. Golly, quick as you like, kicked his feet out of the stirrup-irons and tried to land upright. However, the horse fell against him and knocked him over. I saw him take in dust and try to rise and run for it, but that old muley had turned fast as lightning and, instead of going for the horse as we hoped, lit out after Golly.

Before the rider had made three strides, the muley had him. It tossed Golly as if he had weighed no more than paper and he lay there on the ground as if his back was broken. By this time, there must have been two or three of us who were building nooses to catch the cow. One rode in close and slashed at the animal's face with a rope end. The longhorn's only reaction was to jump forward and go for Golly with that one terrible horn. Two ropes dropped on it. We swung it clear of the fallen rider, then lifted its legs out from under him. He hit Texas dirt so hard every bit of fight was knocked out of him. We hogtied him and went to get Golly off the ground. By this time the rest of the herd was uneasy and one old mossy horn on the outskirts nearest Golly was all set to go on the prod. Any man on foot there took his life in his hands. I remember a rider spotted this and cut between us and the herd. We picked Golly up and bore him to a safe

distance.

When we ripped off his shirt, we found that the cow's horn had ripped along his ribs and laid them bare. I guess he should have been thankful the horn had not hit him an inch or two to the right. It would have disemboweled him. As it was, he looked like one mighty sick cowhand to me.

McAllister took one look at him and said in disgust, "Hell, the kid won't be ridin' for at least a couple of days."

"A couple of days?" I said. "You going soft or something, McAllister? Why not lash him up with rawhide and stick him in the saddle right off?"

McAllister gave me one of those withering looks which have been bouncing off me since I was a kid.

"I suppose you think that is goddam funny, Matthew," he said. "You know sometimes I wonder about you and how I am so patient with your foolishness." Golly said, pert as you like, "If hit's all the same to you two white gentlemen, I'd just as soon have me mended as listen to you-all puttin' your differences right." McAllister demanded to know if one of us cowboys had a clean shirt. He knew damn well I did. I gave it to him and he tore it in strips. Somebody, like a miracle, had some whiskey about him and offered it. I reckoned that a man who could offer his whiskey not for drinking was a true comrade. I told him so and he blushed. I swear it. Golly nigh took off the ground when McAllister poured the whiskey into his wound, so we poured what was left down his throat. It seemed a waste for he was not in the right frame of mind to enjoy it. When he was bound up tight and declared he reckoned he'd live, we sent one of the boys to Kelligrew's for some more whiskey. McAllister calculated the donor should have his back and the smell of the stuff had awoken our trail-boss's memory of the stuff. Not, as McAllister told us, he would countenance the slightest sign of insobriety among us. He added that if we caught us another hundred head of longhorns that day, he would consider lacing our coffee that night just in case there was a man among us who couldn't sleep. We propped Golly up against a tree and McAllister told him that, as soon as he could move around, he could rustle us up an evening meal. Like, he added, in an hour or two. Golly didn't seem to take the suggestion too enthusiastically. We went back to work.