

# Tree Rings

by

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## Chapter One Cowboy, 1895



The Fall of the Cowboy

painting by

Frederic Remington

I didn't know my daddy much and didn't know much about 'im 'cept he was a cowboy, born 'n raised in Texas back when they's as many Mexicans livin' there as Texians. S'pose that makes me as much Texian as anythin' 'cept the truth is, I spent most o' my life cowboyin' up North. I prefer the cold to the hot. A buff'lo robe'll keep a man warm when the world turns t' ice, but when it gets hot down there in the desert, a man can be as naked as the day he is born an'll sizzle like spit on a hot griddle. Jus' can't 'scape heat.

I love my horse 's much, maybe more 'n I ever loved a woman. Got a dog, too, 'n I love him more 'n I love my horse. I call my dog Rusty 'cause he got the color o' rust. Call my horse Paint, not 'cause he's painted, though. Paint is brown like good leather. I call 'im Paint 'cause I like that song, "Goodbye, Old Paint, I'm a Leavin' Cheyenne." Ain't never been t' Cheyenne, though, but 'is a catchy tune, alright. Gets me hummin' to m'self jus' thinkin' 'bout it.

My daddy got killed by Injuns, leastwise that's what my Momma said. Happened when he was drivin' a herd o' cattle t' Kansas City. Apaches made a habit o' raidin' trail drives back then. Got enough meat, they did, t' last 'em through winter. They ain't no mo' Apaches, leastwise that's what I been told. Prob'ly ain't true, but they say the gov'ment killed 'em all. Gov'ment did the same thing to the buff'lo, leastwise that's what I been led t' believe.

Momma 'n me was a waitin' for 'im – my pa, that is – in Kansas City. He never made face, 'n a crew showed up off the trail 'n told us he's dead. She was a looker, Momma was, 'n didn't take her long t' pick up with another man, one o' them Mormons, but she didn't like 'im that much, 'n he left her in Kanessville, what they call Council Bluffs now'days. She died there o' the fever in '65. I was 10-years ol' and by myself. Momma had another baby after me, but he died before he could even walk, so 'is jus' me 'n nobody else. I don't 'member bein' scared, though.

Local preacher 'n his wife knowed a trail boss headed south to Texas with a crew o' cowboys. Said he needed a wrangler. I told 'im I didn't know much 'bout horses. He told me, don't say nothin' 'bout that to G.W., the trail boss. "You'll figure it out right quick."

Amen t' that. Preacher was right. I signed on fo' daily grub, a new set o' clothes and \$5 a month, which is the mos' money I'd ever held in my hand, leastwise up t' that point in m' life.

Wrangler gotta know horses, and I didn't, but horses got a language all their own, 'n I learned it right quick. They liked me, the horses did, and so did the rest of the cowboys. Two drives later, they's callin' me a cowboy, 'n G.W. hired a new wrangler, a black boy who done 'scaped from one of them plantations 'midst the war we know's goin' on, but G.W. didn't want no part o'.

He kep' us t'gether 'n we managed t' avoid that war, but we did have one run in with a fella named Quantrill and his band o' rebel bushwackers. They's a nasty group of men. Seems those boys made a livin' o' trackin' down runaway slaves, runaways jus' like our wrangler, Jim. G.W. wasn' 'bout to give Jim up, though. Quantrill left in a tizzy, an' Jim stayed on with us. Don't quite know how that happened 'cause the other cowboys was real uncomf'ble when Quantrill was in the camp. The boys tell me, they's murderers, those men is. They mus' o' thought G.W. was pretty nasty hisself, 'cause after a shoutin' match with our trail boss, Quantrill 'n his gang left 'n we never seen 'em again.

Some years later, G.W. got hisself bit by a rattler 'n it cost 'im his leg. I made a band for 'im outta that snakeskin, 'n G.W. wore it 'round his hat, but within the year, G.W. figured he jus' didn' have it in 'im for 'nother drive, 'n he settled down in Abilene with a nice gal who owned a saloon. I seen 'em from time to time 'til I moved up north to stay.

Me 'n Cookie – Cookie's the chuckwagon master – stayed with the group another ten years. Jim, too. They made 'im a cowboy in '70 or so, 'n brought on a new wrangler.

This new one had hair as red as a flamin' desert sunset, 'n freckles, too. He was a good boy 'n done his job well. Tha's one redheaded stepchil' what never got beat, leastwise by any o' us.

O' course by now, I's makin' \$50 a month. I ain't never been much of a drinkin' man, 'n never met a woman I loved more 'n Rusty 'n Paint, so all them years, I saved up a lot of money.

It was fences what got me thinkin', fences 'n railroads. In the ol' days, we'd drive 3,000 or so head o' cattle up that Chisolm Trail. The only thin' I seen with more critters than what we moved on a trail drive was one o' them herds o' buff'lo, 'n they went wherever they pleased. Them buff'lo didn't need no trail boss tellin' 'em where to go. No, sir. Like I said, they went wherever they pleased, 'n they stretched from east to west as far as a man can see. Stopped us dead in our tracks for a whole day jus' t' let 'em pass by. Seen an Injun or two take 'em down with bow 'n arrow. That's a sight t' see. We had no quarrel with 'em, the Injuns, that is. They's jus' hungry, and them buff'lo's so big, one'd feed a fam'ly for the winter.

Ain't seen many buff'lo or big herds like that in ten, twenty years. Ain't seen many Injuns, neither, not since the gov'ment decided the bes' place for 'em is what the gov'ment called reservations. Gov'ment killed the buff'lo thinkin' the Injuns die with 'em. Would o' happened, too, had some man in Wash'n'ton not decided the Christian thin' t' do was give 'em religion and make 'em all white men, the Injuns, not the buff'lo.

That's when we started seein' fences. Seems like fences growed up right from the ground like trees or somethin'. Next thing I knows, they's fences ever'where. Fences t' keep livestock from roamin', fences t' keep Injuns on what land the gov'ment give 'em. O' course, gov'ment didn't give 'em shit. Truth be told, all that land belonged to the Injuns in the first place. I never quite figured that one out.

Fact is, when I start seein' fences, it got me thinkin' 'bout where my life 's headed. I's jus' a boy startin' out as a wrangler for G.W. when that railroad laid down tracks from Kansas City all the way t' Californi', a place I ain't never seen. Pret' soon, tracks started growin', much like those fences. They say one o' them loc'motives can cover more groun' in 'n hour than we can move a herd in a day. I believe it. I seen a train pass by once movin' faster than the fastest horse I ever seen, 'n when we move a herd, we's basic'ly crawlin' cross the land. You move too fast 'n the cattle lose weight 'n the boss man don' like that t'all.

So with all this fence and track poppin' up like corn stalks in the springtime, it's gettin' harder 'n harder t' move a herd from Texas t' Kansas City 'n on t' Chicago. One o' the boys done heard some man say they's gonna be movin' livestock on them trains, too. Cattle cars, he called 'em. They's buildin' cattle cars.

So what's all this mean for me 'n the cowboys? The way I see it, our days is numbered, jus' like it says in the only book I own. It was that man Job what said it, "A man's days is numbered."

I read 'bout them land grants in that new state up near the border, North Dakota. I got great respec' for Injuns, and I like the fact that 'spite all the bad things the gov'ment done to 'em, they named a state – two of 'em, I think – after that tribe. Them Dakota's a proud people, part o' the Sioux, I think. Anyways, I applied for one o' them land grants, and next thing I knows, I git a letter from a Mr. William F. Vilas, Secretary o' the

Interior. Don't know much 'bout no secretary o' the interior o' any other secretary fo' that matter, but Mr. Vilas sold me 'bout 200 acres fo' \$1.25 'n acre.

I never knowed how much money I had, but when I counted out that two-hunert-two dollars 'n forty-three cents, I laughed to myself. I had lots more 'n that, 'nough to build a decent home 'n barn and buy me 500 head o' cattle. I didn' have t' do much talkin' t' git Jim 'n Cookie t' sign on with me, neither. I paid 'em more 'an they was makin' on our last drive, though I 'spect they would 'a come with me for no pay 't all, that's how good friends we become over the years we rode t'gether and cowboied from Texas all the way up here t' the Dakotas.

Five-hunert acres ain't no Texas, but's a good piece 'o land, 'n me, Jim 'n Cookie done made it profitable. I ain't got no regrets fo' spendin' my life in the saddle. They's a lot worse things a man could do.

I been out mendin' fences this morning. Got a lot o' snow 'n wind last night, 'n sky's still gray as ashes. It's darn cold out t' boot. Me 'n Jim is mighty glad Cookie'll be waitin' with hot coffee when we get back t' the house. He always stands at that big window and watches for us. Ain't nothin' better than sharin' a cup o' coffee with friends who been cowboys.