

The Horse Thief: A True Story

Sherri L. Simper-Hauer and James P. Sharp

Editor's Note:

We do not know who the author is or even if he is alive. One of the men in the story, Dan Simper is the great-grandfather of Sherri L. Simper-Hauer who submitted the story for publication.

Few of the young people of today stop, in their mad rush to get somewhere, anywhere, and back in record time, to think of the trials and hardships our parents encountered almost daily when they began to make the West a fit place in which we, their children, can live and enjoy ourselves so few years later.

They had no government relief agencies to fall back upon. It was succeed or go hungry, and many a meal those pioneers ate at which we would turn our noses up today. Those were minutemen and ready for any and all emergencies that arose as the following will show.

The writer, then a lad of eight, well remembers the incidents of this story, for he was there at the beginning and ending and heard the rest of the story when the men returned.

A lone horseman rode into the town of Vernon, Tooele County, one summer afternoon in the year 1885. He told his story which in brief was—a long ride from Nevada—a sick mother in Salt Lake City—a leg-weary horse which he wished to trade for a fresh one so he could continue his journey.

His horse was a fine-looking sorrel that showed plainly the effects of a long, hard ride. Father offered him the pick of saddle animals in the horse pasture for the one he rode. He wanted boot so he would have a few dollars with which to purchase medicine for his sick mother. Finally, a trade was made and father gave \$30.00 gold and turned the new horse in the pasture.

Now this stranger had two very fine revolvers which father tried to purchase, but the man claimed they had been a present to him from his dying father and would not sell. However, he did demonstrate his ability to use them in a really remarkable manner for even those days. He ate a bite of supper and rode away.

The following afternoon a neighbor's girl rode into town and told Father that one of his horses was dead near their home. We investigated and found the horse to be the one father had traded off the night before. He had been shot between the eyes. Further investigation revealed that the horse Father had traded for was missing from the horse pasture. Neighbors gathered around and finally picked up the horse tracks, for the that animal was shod with peculiarly shaped shoes, heading west, back towards the desert and Nevada.

Father was bishop of the ward and took care of religious things ecclesiastical. Adam Sharp, "Uncle Adam" to all,

always took charge of temporal things and horse-stealing was considered almost equal to murder, so he was the one to give orders now. He selected Father (John C. Sharp), S.H. Bennion and Dan Simper, and said "Horse-stealing is a mighty serious offence. Bring that man back dead or alive, but bring him back."

The sun was just setting as the three men rode away. Lookout, eight miles distant, was where Horace Rockwell had a sort of a trading post and where he piped the water down from a spring to his cabin. This water he sold to all travelers, except those who passed in the night and stole what they needed. He had not seen the man pass but had heard someone watering a horse sometime during the night. Simpson Springs, twenty miles farther, was the next water. They arrived there shortly after midnight. After a careful search of the stable without finding the horse there they were looking for, they awoke Ed Meredith, who maintained a feed stable and place where travelers could get something to eat and a place to sleep. He was surprised to learn the man had left, for he had been there when they went to bed at 10 P.M.

The next water was Fish Springs, forty-five miles distant, with not a drop of water, a house or anything between these two places but desert, heat, dust, rocks, brush, and rattlesnakes. They fed their horses some grain while Meredith prepared a meal for them and then headed west.

Ten miles away was River-bed, a dry wash that some say was where Sevier River once flowed on its way to Salt Lake before the sand dunes had changed the course of that river and caused it to flow south and form Sevier Lake. Just as the three men were riding down from the east bench they saw a man hastily throw a saddle on his horse, mount, and speed away, possibly one-quarter of a mile from them.

What a race and what a race track—level as a barn floor with nowhere to hide before Dugway Mountains were reached, ten miles away. The sun was just topping Indian Mountain when the race began. Mile after mile it continued with little change in position, but finally Simper, on a long-legged, rangy horse, began to draw away from the other two. When possibly two hundred yards behind the horse thief, that man turned in his saddle and fired one shot. No damage was done, but Simper decided he needed company, so dropped back.

The race was beginning to tell on the sorrel. It was faltering and the others gained rapidly. Now when the road reaches Dugway it makes sort of horseshoe bend, possibly half mile around and comes back a scant two hundred yards above the road. This the three men knew and hoped the fleeing man did not. He kept on the road.

While two followed, Father took the short cut, riding his horse up the steep hill, through the rocks and brush as fast as the animal could run. Just before he reached the road, he jumped off and hid behind a large rock. He could see the three coming up the road, the sorrel completely winded. He saw the thief draw one revolver, turn in his saddle and then: "Surrender, in the name of the law."

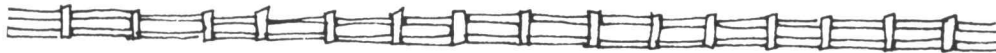
Taken completely by surprise the thief turned in his saddle only to find himself looking right into the business end of a pistol sticking over a large rock. Automatically up went two hands as the tired horse came to a stop. Up came the other two men, Simper swinging a wide loop that snaked out, fell true, and was pulled tight by Simper turning his horse to one side. The thief landed in the road with all of the wind knocked out of him.

They started the return journey, with Simper leading the sorrel. The horse thief in the saddle with his feet tied together under the horse's belly swore considerably while Sharp and Bennion, each with one of those prized revolvers, brought up the rear, joking and laughing.

We saw their dust just after they came over Lookout and met them when they arrived.

Were this fiction, no doubt there would have been enough hot lead slung around on that flat to have warranted us of today building a smelter to reclaim part of it. Enough holes would have been shot in that quiet morning, desert air to have supplied enough holes to have stocked the Swiss cheese market for generations, but this is not fiction. I'll let you in on a secret. The horse pistol Father carried was a fine one. He had plenty of powder and bullets but no caps; Bennion had a belt full of cartridges but no firing pin for his revolver; so Simper had the only serviceable weapon, that is if a rawhide lariat can be called a weapon, that those men had.

Such was the spirit of determination displayed almost daily by our parents in their determination to make this state of ours a fit place in which we might live and enjoy ourselves. Our hats off to all who did such noble work and to all pioneers.



Please Care: Repair a Fence

Raymond D. Ratliff

The "corpse" of the Dry Valley Cemetery lies in a saddle on the edge of the Madeline Plains near Dry Valley Gap and the Termo-Grasshopper Road in Lassen County, north-eastern California (Fig. 1). The original survey plat for the area, made in 1871, shows the Madeline Plains and mentions "good bunchgrass" (Bureau of Land Management, 1959. Range survey-Madeline Unit narrative report).

I first saw the cemetery in the summer of 1958 while on range survey with the Bureau of Land Management out of the town of Susanville. I, as a young range student, saw a textbook example of a "relict area." Inside grew a dense stand of giant wildrye, a few small plants of big sagebrush, a few plants of smaller perennial grasses, and a

little downy brome. Outside the fenced cemetery grew a dense stand of big sagebrush with very little understory vegetation. By looking more carefully, one could spot an occasional plant of giant wildrye which was either closely grazed or well protected by big sagebrush.

Just a few headstones suggested the cemetery's age. Time has dulled my memory, but I recall one headstone for a soldier of World War I who died in the 1920's.

While hunting in the vicinity during the next few years, I passed the cemetery several times. The contrast between the vegetation inside and outside the cemetery always struck me and suggested that management of livestock grazing in the area could be improved.

In the summer of 1965, Richard E. Francis (now with the Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station),

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