

Slices of Life in the Old West - Excerpt

Burt Goldman

I do so love the prairie--especially after a storm when the plains come to life as the sun breaks through the clouds. It is a little bit of heaven I'm thinking. But then again there is something to be said for the mountains as well. I heard tell about mountain men like Jim Bridger and Jebidiah Hawks but they were all long dead and buried. Not many could call themselves mountain men now. Besides the trapping they did wuz played out long afore.

I never did go the mountains to trap beaver nor did I go to get amongs the trees and streams. No sir, I went to get away from, not to get to. The getting to came about from the getting away from.

I decided to leave Drywater Flats the week after BB Calhoun took on the job of Mayor. I can take just so much celebrating and although I did enjoy the party for a hour or so, three days of it were just too much and so I saddled Matty and off we went. Now the nearest mountain was a good piece away but I was in no hurry having nothing waiting for me in the Flats, nor any prospect of anything, being pretty much of a loner myself. I could live off the land as well as any Indian being part one and so I had no worries. I bypassed every civilized place I come to; smelled em long afore I could see them so there was no trouble on that score.

Well now I just give Matty his head and figured he would take me away from any town long afore I could see or smell em and I just let him wander. Food wouldn't be no chore as I had taken a load of hard biscuits and more jerky than I could eat in a month. Had three canteens of water but that wasn't a problem as I could always find some if'n there was any about. I also had my flints and tinder box so fire was available and there just is nothing atall on this good earth I enjoy more than a small fire next to a bedroll on a moonless night. I learnt to build a smokeless fire when I was with the people which came in handy if'n there was a bit of a breeze in the night.

You always want to be downwind of a smokeless fire as the breeze will blow the heat all over you and you will be as comfortable as a snake in a shoe. But if the fire is smoking, downwind is definitely not the place to be as any fool could figure out. Any fool but Nostril Nate that is.

Nostril had the bad luck to have been kicked in the face by a onery mule what he was trying to shoe. Now anyone who would shoe a mule will eat dirt and that's what happened. That mule was upset. He just heaved his rear into the air, lashed out with his hoofs and smashed Nate with his left hoof, right in the face. Busted up his nose so bad it looked like he had just one, big, black nostril. Didn't do his brain any good neither as after that kick Nate didn't have sense enough to get in out of the rain when the sky would occasionally let

loose a load. Someone would always have to pull him into the nearest shelter. Someone, I forget who but I believe it to have been Round Bottom Betty McGee; that was before she changed her name to Elizabeth Tanglethorn after she quit whoring and joined the League for the Betterment of Downtrodden Women.

The League tried to tack the handle of Scrambled Brain on him but that wouldn't have been right. Not with him sporting a nostril you could throw a horseshoe into.

Now Nostril Nate would definitely lie down south of a good fire with the smoke a blowing into his face. More than once I noted he looked like a barbecued ham by the morning. I can say that for a fact as I was unlucky enough to have been on a trot with him for the better part of a week.

It was during the winter of storms, leastways that's what I called it. No sooner had one squall let up then another began. We wuz gonna change the name of the town to Wetwater Falls if'n it kept up much longer. I saw Nostril Nate walking in the middle of the street during a pour, kinda like Skunk Tail Williams used to do, and so I yelled at him to come over to the Absinthe House where I wuz sitting on the porch, under the wide overhang. I was enjoying the shower as I was dry as Homer's bone at the time.

Nostril Nate ambled over to the porch, sat down on the floor with his feet sticking out into the rain like the roots of a tree what needed wetting down. I called out to him to pull his feet back under the overhang. He looked up like he didn't know what was keeping the wet of'n his head, and then down to his feet. A big smile lit up his face as if a sudden jolt of wisdom came over him and he pulled his feet in and slid back on the floor so's he was out of the wet. He looked at me with that puppy dog look of gratitude and threw his arms around my ankles, hugging them. I jumped up out of the way of him but it was pretty hard to get shut of Nostril Nate when he was of a mind to thank you.

I went into the Absinthe dining room as I had not yet had my breakfast and any excuse to get away from Nostril was a good one. Well, I plopped down at a table and Fat Maria came over to get my order but as I always wanted the same thing I just said, "Bring it."

That meant six fried eggs, a steak, a mess of biscuits and a pitcher of coffee. Just as I was digging into my meal Nostril Nate plops down on a chair opposite me with a big grin on his face and asks if he can have something to eat as well. So I tell Fat Maria to bring him the same. I try to eat but everytime I look up I see that big, black hole in his face that is his nostril. It is disconcerting as it looks like a cannon is aimed at me and my appetite gets away for looking at that big nostril. I try to look away from it but just can't do it.

I am about to tell him to get up and sit somewhere else when he kind of screws up his face and appears to be about to sneeze. Now I am surely not a bit curious about how he's gonna do it. I throw him a napkin as his is wrapped around his neck and it doesn't look as though he is going to get to it in time. He catches my napkin and throws his head back as the sneeze is about to come

out. He puts the napkin in front of his nostril but it is like putting a newspaper in the mouth of a cannon. He lets out a sneeze that blows the hair back on my head and the napkin flies from his hand and lands smack dap on my face. Lucky for Nostril Nate, the napkin was dry.

There is that smile of a person who is a bit touched on Nostril's face along with a look of satisfaction. "I love to sneeze." He says taking a breath and reaching for the napkin that I had pulled off my face and thrown to the floor. He picks it up and wipes his face like he's brushing off dust. Now I don't know what came out of the nostril nor do I want to find out. What I am sure of is that I want to get out of there and away from him as my appetite for the six fried eggs is now somewhere around the southern tip of Mexicali. I mean it is gone.

Suddenly I get a great idea. I can get rid of Nostril Nate and feel good about it at the same time. You see, normally, I would have ventilated any one who would do what he did. I have put lead into more than one gentleman who disturbed my habits but you can't put holes in someone who has had his senses taken away. No sir. I learned that from my seven year sojourn with the Cheyenne.

We had a Pawnee walk into camp on one occasion and no one lifted a bow, drew an arrow, nor pulled a knife as the braves mind was obviously gone. None of the people would bother themselves with a mindgone as we called them. Not many around but they were there. Why I remember a night just after the buffalo dance that... well more about that one another time. Anyway I wouldn't slap leather on Nostril Nate no how, but I figured out how to use him, and maybe make a bit of gold too boot. My idea was brilliant, and it came to me like a flash.

Belly Button Watkins was the fattest man I had ever seen. And his wife Matilda was hands down the fattest woman. When either one of them approached a saddled up horse why that horse would take a look at what was about to climb onto his back, let out a scream, and off they would go, at a dead run from the start. More than one horse took off for the far horizon on getting a peek at Belly Button Watkins about to climb on. And the pair of them on a wagon would require an extra team just to pull away from the post.

Now I should say that Belly Button and Matilda were always trying to get rid of some of the heft they carried around but they just couldn't do it. I asked him once why he was so fat and his reply was something to be noted. "Why I don't rightly know Jason," he said, "I guess it's just the Lord's way of telling me I'm a healthy man, and Matilda feels that way too. We are two healthy people."

Now I don't know about that. I figured that there were a lot of skinny healthy people around and fat had not a thing to do with health. But I did figure it out one day when Matilda had me over for dinner. "I'm going to put some meat on those bones of yours Jason." She said as she pushed a plate of stewed beef in front of me. It was good, I will say that and after I finished up, here came another big bowl of stew. Being a polite kind of fellow I dug into that

one as well but my oh my I was feeling as stuffed as a Christmas goose. Belly Button had by then finished off four bowls. And was looking around for a fifth. Weren't much cleaning needed neither as Button polished the bowls with a chunk of bread to get the last bit of the gravy. I noticed that the loaf of bread what was in front on him looked like a pack of rats had got to it. Nothing left but a few crumbs. But Matilda just put another loaf in front of him along with a bowl of stewed beef.

By the time that meal had finished the pair of them had consumed enough food to feed me for a month, but that wasn't all. She brought out three dried apple pies and placed one in front of each of us. I just sighed and watched as the pair of them dug through their pies and then noting that I hadn't touched mine at all Button cut my pie in half and gave it to Matilda, took the other half, and pretty soon that had disappeared as well.

Now just about that time, there appeared in Drywater Flats, a medicine show. It had a Doctor, a hootchy dancer, a man who worked some Punch and Judy puppets, and Clem Doppler, the barker who would announce the show. It were a free show but the upshot was that after the performance they would bring out Doc Klemorfort's Magic Elixir. Guaranteed to grow hair, reduce the pain of a toothache, ease sunburn, and cure piles. Also Clem announced as he looked at the crowd around the wagon, it was guaranteed to cut a persons weight in half. He looked at Belly Button and Matilda when he said that and it did appear that that part was added just for their benefit.

Well Belly Button told me later on that he bought a couple of cases of Doc Klemorfort's Magic Elixir and him and Matilda took it for four months. After that they weighed themselves on the big scale over to the grain store. It appeared as how they each gained thirty seven pounds. So much for the Magic Elixir.

That gave me an idea. They had paid twenty five dollars for the two cases of Elixir what didn't work and twenty five dollars is a goodly sum by any man's standards. I told the pair of them that I had a means of getting weight off'n them and it wouldn't cost them a penny. Now you know they got real interested as I have never been known to lie. "How can you do that Jason?" Matilda asked me.

"Well," I answered, "I know a way to get you out of the box. Your problem is that you just eat too much. I have been with you on a number of occasions and know that for a fact."

Belly Button shrugged and said, "We like food Jason. No law against eating is there?"

"No, not the way I do it. But you do it different, that's why you are both so fat. Why I seen you put away two dozen eggs along with a pound of bacon and two loaves of bread for breakfast."

Matilda said, "We like bread."

"Well I like it too but I don't eat a two loaves at one meal."

Matilda looked sad until I said, "I know a way to cut your eating down to practically nothing. Folks, you follow my plan and I guarantee you will lose that thirty seven pounds and maybe another fifty to boot. Here is what you have to do."

They both leaned into me to hear what I had to say. "What you are going to have to do is to have someone with you at the table every time you eat. That person is going to be with you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Belly Button looked confused. "Who you talking about? What person?"

"Belly Button," I said, "you are about to have a meal guest every time you eat and I guarantee you will look like Ezekial Hawsworth in three months, maybe four. And you Matilda, you are going to be so beautiful you are going to have to beat the cowboys off'n you with a stick."

"All you have to do is to have Nostril Nate sitting across from you everytime you eat. Now aint that an easy thing?"

Belly Button's head was shaking and Matilda scowled. "No sir," she said, "I can't have that man across from me whilst eating. Why Jason, I would lose my appetite."

I smiled and nodded. "Why that's the very idea. But listen to me, this is just an experiment and if'n it works I'm going to rent Nostril Nate out to whoever wants to lose a few pounds. Why I might even send him to Chicago, I hear tell there's a passel of folk there who could use his services. And lookee here Button, you two are getting him for no money atall."

Belly Button Watkins stares into space and strokes his chin. Then he says...

"I guess we could try it for a meal or two. Tell you what Jason, you send him over tonight, Matilda is fixin a nice spread. Why don't you come as well. I hear tell you like a good meal sometimes and tonight's my favorite, fatback, hog jowls, a mess of greens, a tub of mashed potatoes, a gallon of Matilda's famous gravy, fresh sour dough bread and a surprise desert what Matilda is baking right now."

I thought about joining the folks for dinner but the thought of sitting across from Nostril Nate dissuaded me and I said another time.

Later that night, after I had eaten at Chow Lees, I was toothpicking my mouth and rocking myself on the porch of the Absinthe House when Nostril Nate walks up and says, "That food was good food Jason. Thanks a lot for getting me with Button and Matilda. I really like it. She is a good cook. But they hardly ate anything."

"They had all this food on the table and they hardly ate any of it. I did though. I like hog jowls. And when I dipped a chunk of bread into the gravy I offered a bite to Matilda but she just got up from the table and I didn't see her no more. Belly Button picked up a big chunk of jowl and was going to put it in his mouth but he looked at me and put it back in the plate."

“I think he wanted me to have it all. But I’m going back in the morning for breakfast. I hope they have pancakes Jason. I do like pancakes. Matilda said she will have pancakes for me, and eggs too. I like eggs even more than I like pancakes. She wanted to know if you will come also. Will you come Jason? Huh? Will you? They are really nice people. After she invited me back for breakfast she said she had a surprise. Desert. They were going to have cake for desert but then something happened to it and I didn’t get none. I like cake, too bad something happened to it.”

Now if that don’t put the lace to the shoe. I figure I gotta be there to see how Matilda and Button has taken to Nostril but I also figure that I had better put down a half dozen eggs at Chow Lee’s first as I am not sure whether or not my appetite will be there across from Nostril Ned.

The next morning I walk up the steps to Belly Button’s house, being careful to avoid the third step which every fool knows is missing a nail and will swing up and hit you on your backside if you step on the corner of it. I see Nostril sitting on the porch rocking. “How do Nostril Ned.” I say to him being a polite cuss. He just looks at me and I notice a tear in his eye.

Nostril Ned does not respond to my hello attall. So I repeat myself, “I said how do.” But he just looks at me kind of sad like with eyes filled up with tears.

Right about then Button walks out chewing on a sausage and right behind him is Matilda who is just chewing; on what I don’t even want to guess, being as I was curious about Nostril Ned and not with what is about to slide down into Matilda’s massive stomach.

“You will kindly get that man off my porch.” Says Matilda, waving a hand in the direction of Nostril Ned who is now looking as down and as sad as a horse without fodder.

“Why Matilda,” I answer her, “I have never known you to be onery mean to a guest.”

“He aint no guest of mine Jason.”

I looked a bit bewildered and say, “But you agreed to take him in for three months so as to lose 37 pounds of weight. Don’t you remember what we spoke about yesterday behind the Absinthe house?”

Just about that time, Belly Button jumps into the conversation, and he is non to polite about it neither. “Jason,” he says, his voice a high pitched croak. He spoke like that ever since the time when he was resting his neck on the swinging door at the entrance to the 4 Queens saloon and the awning fell offn its track and landed on his head.

“I don’t care if I don’t lose 37 pounds of weight. As a matter of definite factotum,” Factotum. Button often used words like that but only he knew what they meant. He wuz just showing off the fact that he was once in New Jersey and had a place across the street from the Columbia College of Tooth Drawers. To hear him tell it, you would think he was a dentist. “if I never eat again I will

not eat another meal with that man.” He says pointing at Nostril Ned who is now bawling like a baby.

“What did he do?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you what he done, I’ll tell you.”

“Tell him tell him.” Matilda shrieks.

“Come inside.” He says and we all go inside the house, with the exception of Nostril Ned who is sitting on the rocking chair, elbow on knee bent over, staring at the ground.

The three of us go inside leaving Ned staring at the ground and I notice right off the wall of the kitchen is got all kinds of red and white stuff sticking on it. Being a polite cuss I don’t say nothing but Belly Button throws his arm in the direction of the wall and shouts out, “Look. Just look at that wall. What you are looking at Jason is my wife Matilda’s best thing. That is her fourteen layer, cherry whipped cream cake. She spent all day making the durn thing trying to get out appetites back. I mean I would rather eat one of Matilda’s cherry whipped cream fourteen layer cakes then strike it rich in Klondike. I mean that cake is so good you think you died and went to heaven when you clap your lips around a chunk of it. I was looking forward to getting my tongue around a slice, Nostril Ned or no Nostril Ned. Nosir, nothing could stamp on my appetite for cherry whipped cream chocolate layer cake. Not in a double coon’s age. Why I remember oncet when I ate the whole thing myself it were that toothsome.

“Well Jason, Nostril Ned sits himself down and I sit across from him and Matilda puts the cake on the table. That cake were so high I couldn’t see Nostril Ned. Now that made me very happy as I could concentrate on slicing me off a piece. Matilda is at the well pulling up a pitcher of milk what has been cooling in the water. I want to dig in but being polite I wait for my wife to sit down. Purty soon she comes in with the pitcher and is about to pour for Ned when she sees him with his face screwed up.

She falls back and yells, ‘Look out Button, he’s agoin to sneeze.’

“I jump back out of my chair just as a tornado flies out of that big, black nostril. Jason I sware to a Sunday when that sneeze hit Matilda’s cherry whipped cream chocolate layer cake, what she had been working on all the day long, it flew back like a man what has been chest shot with a 12 gauge. And it landed right smack dab on that there wall as any fool can plainly see.

“Well, bad as that was, we could live through it, especially after Nostril high tailed it out of there and we wuz alone again. I never before appreciated being alone Jason, but I shore did last night. It were too late for Matilda to bake up another and so we just scooped a few licks from the wall and went to bed.

“This morning, first thing I was to do was wash that wall. But as I’m used to a dozen eggs and pancakes I want to eat first. Matilda cooks up a meal for the both of us, and pretty soon we are chewing and sneaking peaks at the wall. Finally, after four or five cups of coffee, we calmed down.

"I'm leaning back in my chair getting ready to spoon another fried egg into my mouth when in walks—Nostril Ned."

"What's fer breakfast?" he asks just as chipper as a monkey with a peanut.

"Jason, I sware, quicker than a snake could spit in yer eye, Matilda jumps up and heads for the seat of Nostril Ned's pants and me right behint her. Well he must have bounced three or four times on the steps afore he realized he had been thrown out because when he stopped bouncing he says, "What'dya do that for?"

"At that point I was going to kill him but the sheriff, nor you for that matter, would not take kindly to the dispatching of the town fool right there on my front porch. So I just turned around and pushed Matilda back into the kitchen."

Now this is a fine kettle of ham bones. I was counting on that weight loss thing working. I figure if it worked with Matilda and Belly Button Watkins it could work with anyone. I am thinking about a string of them opening up and down the state line. Shoot, this is as upsetting as a horse with a boil on his back.

"Remember Button," I says, "the whole idea was for you to lose thirty seven pounds in three months. So let's talk about what happened. You must have got rid of a pound or two by not eating last night, and the aggravation of the thing had to take off a few more pounds.

"Hell's fire man, it's working!"

Belly Button Watkins just looked at me like I had partaken of too much loco weed and started shaking his head slow like. After a bit he says, "Jason, rather than have that man in my house I will gain thirty seven pounds, I would rather gain thirty seven hundred pounds than eat with him again. No sir. Not for nothing. And what about this. What about if'n he sneezes whilst looking out the window. There would go my expensive, shipped from Chicago, pane glass window. And if he really uncorked one why he could blow the whole house down."

Now I couldn't really argue with that as Nostril once sneezed in the tent we wuz bedded down in and I know for a fact that he blew that tent apart with a monster sneeze. So I understood.

But shoot, I sure would like to have opened a dozen weight loss shops so I could be the first Drywater Flats entrepenoor.

But then again, where would I find 12 guys with a black nostril you could toss a horseshoe into?

