

Grasshoppers



As Large as Pheasants

Being
One Summer's
Travels
by the Author



by Mack Hitch

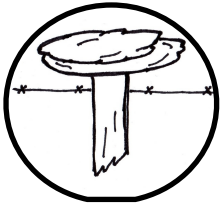
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Cover photos are of sixty-foot sculptures by Gary Greff. They are located on the Enchanted Highway between Regent and Lefor, North Dakota

(Approach them from the Interstate Highway up north. If you come from the south you will encounter about thirty miles of aggravating gravel.)



All Cats are Liars

“All cats are liars.”

I had just entered the little bar, eating place, and unofficial town hall that is sometimes open in Hillrose and I wasn't sure the comment was even directed at me though the only other person in the bar besides the speaker was the bartender.

I had to turn completely around on my stool to see the man. He was seated at a small, round table near the far window in this comfortable bar and grill that advertised itself outside in amateurish lettering as *The Place*. It was an honest name as, indeed, it was the *only* place in Hillrose.

What had caused me to turn off the old highway was an odd plastic sign jutting from one of the closed store fronts. *Fishing Tackle and Laundromat* it still said in brave colors that were neonic compared to the old weathered boards and bleached-out brick drabness of the deserted main street. I had envisioned going in

and washing a load of laundry while picking up a dozen minnows, an unusual convenience that I don't believe you can find in most cities.

Still not sure the man at the table was addressing me, I swiveled back on the stool and asked the bartender to pull me a Bud Light. *The Place* had Budweiser and Bud Light on tap. Anything else came in bottles. To the left of the tap was a framed picture of the eleven member 1948 graduating class at Hillrose High School--not a hat or a smile in the bunch. Well, there was one exception--a smiling girl.

After sliding the glass in front of me on an already soaked napkin, the bartender went around the elbow of the bar into the darkness and began pushing a spatula edge across the grill. The atmosphere was so comfortable that I felt I could have rested my head on my arms and gone to sleep without being any more of an annoyance than an old dog that likes to sleep in doorways and be stepped over.

"Liars every one of them," the man behind me spoke sharply and bitterly. "They have more ways of lying than people out here have of cursing the wind."

Now I took that to be a damned lie. I had been living down the road in Sterling for a little over a month and already my vocabulary had enlarged by a thousand terms or more where wind is concerned. I would have called him on it, but when I turned I noticed that he was nervously fingering aside one of the vertical blinds so as to see something outside. He did it carefully, ever so cautiously.

It was then that I noticed he was drinking coffee, and that his eyes darted about, afraid to rest any one place for fear of missing something elsewhere. When he lifted his cup, he did it daintily, using only his thumb and forefinger as if partaking of high tea. Even so, the vessel quivered and he sloshed coffee onto an already splotched table. This wasn't a man drinking coffee just to be sociable.

This was a man afraid to close his eyes, a man who would have gone broke in a Starbucks in half an hour.

“What brings you out this way?” the bartender asked, attempting to move the conversation to something besides cats. He was still working at the grill, so I had to talk to his back.

“Just on my way back to Sterling from Brush,” I explained “Went to the yearling bull sale at the Livestock Exchange.”

“Oh.” The bartender lifted his chin in remembrance and half turned toward me. “That would be the Keith Probst sale,” he said, clacking his tongue in irritation. “Missed it again.” He lamented the loss only a moment before asking, “What was the top scrotal score?”

I had no idea what a scrotal score was, but I had guessed while listening to the auctioneer and had been interested enough in the subject to remember the score of the top seller. “It was a little above forty-one if I remember correctly,” I said.

“The cats around here all claim to have a scrotal score of fifty or better.” It was the man at the table behind me again.

“You telling me. . .” I started as I spun around, but halted instantly. He was dead serious in what he had said and his finger was still just barely parting the vertical blind. “You saying,” I started again, “that the cats around here have a higher scrotal score than a yearling bull?”

“I told you they were all liars,” he said, finally turning around after a false start because of a worried second look. Something outside unsettled him.

I couldn't resist. “You can understand cat talk?”

He nodded. “The dialect around here, I can.”

“But can *they* understand *you*?”

He looked at the man behind the bar and I could see that this question had been asked before. “They *pretend* not to,” he said, raising the quivering cup to his lips.

I had nothing on my afternoon slate, so I asked: “How do you mean they lie?”

“How?” he huffed, as if there were a thousand and one ways and he couldn’t sift between them to discover where to start. “Take that cat out there.”

“I wish you would,” the bartender said.

I attempted to smile at the bartender in appreciation of his joke, but he was stone faced. Unsettled, I decided to follow the directions and look at the cat outside. Because its transparency was nearly filled with flyers and Budweiser signs, I could just barely see through the grated window next to the door.

“That big tom sitting in front of the door across the street. See him?”

“Saw him when I drove up,” I said. I *had* noticed the cat because it had eyed me suspiciously when I got out of the car. It stared at me for maybe three seconds, and then--as if I had suddenly vanished from the planet--it casually averted its gaze. What struck me was not the typical cat-like dismissal of my presence: it was the definitiveness of it. It wasn’t as if a door had been closed; it was as if the Milky Way had suddenly winked out.

“Well just this morning that cat--calls himself Dexter--scratched at my back screen and told me he hadn’t had anything to eat in a thousand and fourteen years and could I see my way to tossing something his way, something from a freshly opened can of cat food if it wasn’t too much of a bother.”

“A thousand and fourteen,” the bartender snorted but didn’t actually laugh. “It’s always over a thousand.”

“Forget the thousand, it hadn’t been fourteen minutes since I saw him coming out of the grain elevator up the street and you know what a free lunch that place is.”

“No, I don’t,” I admitted.

He tried to laugh at what he was picturing, but the memory of it almost produced tears. “Wally,” he pointed up the road, “runs more of a fast food place for rodents than a grain storage facility. The mice have the run of the place, don’t they, Roy?” The bartender who had stopped puttering around was leaning on the other side of the bar near me. He nodded that it was so.

“That is until the cats show up.”

“Why doesn’t Wally do something about the mice?” I asked. It seemed an obvious enough question.

The man at the table looked at me as if I hadn’t been listening. “The cats won’t *let* him. That’s why.”

I needed time to consider this statement and turned back to the bar for a sip of beer and found a freshly filled glass beside my half filled one. The bartender smiled, not the smile that said *Free beer*, but one that said *You may be here for a while*. Maybe it wasn’t a smile at all: maybe it was just a flicker of something across his face.

The nervous man at the table, intent on his story, had noticed nothing. “The mice over there are so fat they can’t hardly get around. Like penguins, you know. Can’t really walk. Just slide clumsily on their bellies?”

His voice sounded as if he were asking a question, but he didn’t wait for an answer. “That’s the way the mice are. Little legs that hardly reach the ground. Actually, now that I think about it, they’re more like turned over turtles than penguins. When the cats come in they can’t run. They just spin like dying flies on

a window sill. About as much sense of direction as a pat of butter on a hot skillet. And they're as fat."

I returned by first beer, now empty, to the bar and wiped my upper lip.

"Sounds like the heaven of smorgasbords for cats."

"Well, that may have sounded like what I said because it should be the case. But it isn't. The cats hardly ever eat the mice, except when they're too lazy to leave the silos and saunter up to some back door to smooch a meal.

"No," he continued, "they use them mostly for sport. Tennis and squash and handball mostly. They do have one hell of an arena hockey tournament every year. I'll give them that."

"Against the mice?"

"Against? You haven't you been listening at all, have you. It's *with*. They *use* the mice. The mice are the balls, the shuttlecocks, the hockey pucks."

The bartender behind me had something to add. "Must use three or four dozen mice a game."

"That's right," the man at the table said, causing me to swivel. "By the time they're through batting around and swatting the mice, the floor of that hockey arena looks like a cookie sheet buttered and ready for the dough."

"But do they eat them after the game?"

"No," the worried man answered. "They throw the used mice on to a pile out back. Reminds me of a chicken fight I went to once. All they did with the losers was throw them into a pile and let them rot. One guy did take a few feathers to tie flies with, though."

"Well who'd want to eat one of them anyway?" the bartender asked. He waited until I swiveled back to answer his own question. "I mean have you ever

seen a leather marble bag filled with lard. That's what they look and feel like. All gooey and squishy. No bones left. I sure wouldn't call them appetizing."

"I don't know," the man back at the window offered. "I think they'd be a whole lot like one of them eclairs. You know, squeeze one end and the filling comes out the other." He let the vertical blind ease back into place but continued to point. "Dexter out there was the winning goalie this past season."

"So you *didn't* feed him when he showed up at your backdoor?" I've heard some stories before and figured it was about time to get back to the subject.

"What?" The man at the window was at sea as far as my question went.

"Dexter? I mean you didn't feed Dexter when he showed up at your back door."

"You bet I fed him. The whole can like I always do."

"But how you going to break him if you keep feeding him?"

"Break him of what?" He thought about my question, or my intelligence, before continuing. "You're saying *not* to feed him?"

"It's that simple," I nodded.

The bartender made a noise that was a cross between a snort and a chuckle. "The last man to try that was Slim Watkins down one block and one over." His finger showed me which direction *over* was.

"And?"

I had to wait out a silent spell before the man with his finger at the curtain spoke. "Slim isn't with us any more."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean he isn't *with* us anymore."

"Did he move?"

"Moved to the cemetery, but he had some help."

“Was it natural causes or an accident?”

“Neither. It was *peculiar*. Least ways that’s what the coroner said. *Peculiar*.”

“But how peculiar?”

“Coroner said it looked like a cat slept on his face and suffocated him. Said they do that to babies sometimes.”

“But he wasn’t a baby, was he?” I asked. “A cat couldn’t just sit on his face and smother him.”

“Could if it was a 500-pound cat,” the bartender behind me said. When I turned he was nodding his head as proof of the absolute certainty of his statement. “Abe Jones two blocks over and two down tried to give Dexter dry food one time. Said he was fresh out of tuna.” The nervous man was still pointing out the direction by the time I got turned around.

“The cats don’t like dry?”

“Not Dexter.”

“And. . .?”

“Abe isn’t with us anymore.”

The bartender placed another draw beside my barely touched glass. “Now that was *really* a peculiar death,” he said.

“Oh, come on,” I protested. “Another mysterious death and the coroner doesn’t even bother to look for a cause?”

The bartender produced a napkin as an afterthought and placed it under the glass. “Folks out here don’t go up and down the alleys looking for answers.”

“So everyone out here in Hillrose feeds any cat that shows up at the back door?”

The man by the vertical blinds tapped his cup on the table and the bartender hurried over with the coffee carafe.

When the cup was brimming, the nervous man took a sip and looked at me over the lip. “People out here feed *any* cat. At least the people who don’t want the word *peculiar* attached to their passing.”

It was silent in the room for a long while. Fortunately, the door burst open and quickly closed all but for a crack. The man holding it peered through that crack while struggling to catch his breath.

Finally he eased the door shut and turned around. “Did I leave my cigarette lighter in here last night? A black enamel one?”

I haven’t mentioned it, but this was a smoker-friendly bar. Very friendly in fact. The whole time I had been there the bartender and the nervous man had been sucking down smokes as if they had nothing to lose. It had been a long time since I’d seen a pack of Lucky Strike shorts lying on a table.

“No,” the bartender held up a silver lighter. “The only one here is my wife’s.” “Must have lost it in the trash on the floor of my pickup,” the still panting man said. He was about to leave but craned his neck around a glassed-in white 1938 Hillrose High letter jacket hanging from the wall. “Hey, Floyd. Didn’t see you over there.” He then doubled his fist and held it in front of him. “Solidarity.” He was about to leave again but pushed the door to after opening it.

“You wouldn’t have a can of cat food I could borrow, would you?”

“Fresh out,” the bartender said. There was no sympathy in his voice.

“But Dexter’s out there and I’m dry.”

“We seen him,” the bartender said without changing his expression.

The man missing his cigarette lighter swallowed and took a deep breath for courage. “Well, here goes.” He was out the door in a sudden flash of sunlight and I could hear his steps as he ran down the sidewalk. To his pickup, I presumed.

So the nervous man was **Floyd** and the bartender was **Roy**. I was going to try to remember those names even though I am horrible with people's names.

"Did he make it, Floyd?" Roy asked.

Floyd parted the vertical blind. "This time."

I had had it. "Enough of this," I said, trying to be forceful yet polite. "I'm from out of town and you're trying to make me think that *cats* rule this town."

Floyd pulled out a black enamel lighter and ignited another Lucky. "I told you they was all liars. No way could they run this town. They don't know the first thing about water and sewerage or road maintenance. They *have* been boning up on running a postal service, however."

"They need that for their world domination," the bartender explained.

"For their *what*?"

"They need it to take over the world. They're going to finance it with a mail order business, so they have to worry about the mail getting through. That's why the fellow who was just in here was so nervous."

The struck look on my face was apparently question enough to get him to elaborate.

"Up until last week he delivered the rural mail in this area. A contract worker. Not an official uniformed mailman."

"So?"

"So the postal inspector discovered that he was shoving most of it into a culvert near the Prewitt Reservoir inlet."

"The cats won't tolerate a negligent postal worker, especially Dexter," Floyd said, nervously twirling the black lighter with his fingers. When he realized what he was doing, he slipped it into his breast pocket. "Bill won't be needing this no more."

Again I was exasperated. “Are you telling me that you actually think that cats can take over the world?”

Floyd was standing now. “I told you when you came in here that all cats are liars,” he said, dropping his coffee cup to the table with finality. “They’d be lucky to take more than a few western states. The prairie states mostly. I don’t think they’d even try for California and Arizona and Texas and such like states.”

“Why not those states?”

“Mexicans.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m just repeating what Dexter told me. He said why bother trying to defeat someone you can hire for less than minimum wage to do anything. Dexter says he’ll hire illegals for the menial tasks. A few of us,” he indicated himself and Roy, “he’ll keep around as straw bosses.”

Floyd was on his way to the back of the building, but he kept explaining the situation to me.

“The way Dexter sees it, with me and Roy keeping the illegals in line--and backed by cat cunning--world conquest would be kittens’ play.”

He was now lost to my sight but I could hear him as he called back. “Can I get out through the beer garden, Roy?”

“If you pull the dead bolt, you can.”

I heard him slide the dead bolt and then call back into the bar. “Roy, would you go over to my table and pretend that you’re pouring me another cup of coffee. You know. Make a shadow on the curtain. Pretend I’ve gone to the bathroom or something.”

“Can do.” Roy walked over with the carafe and pantomimed pouring coffee. Finished, he parted the vertical blind ever so slightly and smiled. “That about proves it.”

“Proves what?”

“That the cats really *are* liars. Dexter claims all cats are clairvoyant. Know what we’re planning. But look at him over there.” I took another glance. “That Know-it-All thinks Floyd’s still in here.”

“Do you know how silly you people sound?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean this is a small town and there’s not much else to do around here but make up stories. But cats and world domination. Come on. For starters, what would a cat use as a weapon?”

“They’ve got a secret weapon.” Roy had that struck expression, as if to say *How could you call me a liar.*

“What’s this secret weapon?”

“Buffalo Soap.”

I was on my feet, my hand at my wallet. “How much? What do I owe you?”

“I’m not lying.” He truly looked hurt. “They have a product they call Buffalo Soap. It’s the same soap their ancestors sold in the early 1840’s to finance their movement West. They had to *buy* their way out here, you know. Pioneers hardly ever took a cat along for *free*. Dogs, yes, because dogs will work for people. Will look out for people. Will guard them. But not a cat. How often have you heard of a *guard cat*. Cats can’t be petted and coddled into herding sheep or chasing coyotes or smelling out Indians or answering to whistles. They have other plans and people aren’t a part of those plans--except where opposable thumbs come in handy.”

The train of his indignation had many more cars to pull before my presence, so I had to stop him. “But how can they take over the world with soap?”

He stopped short. “They’re going to buy weapons with the profits. Chemical weapons. Biological weapons. Nuclear weapons. All kinds of weapons. I’ve already seen Dexter talking to some Middle Eastern-looking fellows. These were religious fellows, so Dexter promised that he would see to it that all cats converted to Islam.”

“Islam? What do cats worship now?”

Apparently I had asked another stupid question. “Themselves. Have you never been around a cat? Have you ever seen them genuflect to anything other than their own appetites?”

I knew a cat once that not only looked like Buddha but worshipped its own appetites. Roy had me on this score. “That still doesn’t explain the soap.”

“Buffalo Soap will cure anything. It’ll sell just like hot cakes. Just like it did when they financed the movement west. I mean it’ll knock arthritis overnight. Boils, abscesses, psoriasis, fever blisters, cold sores--gone with a single washing. And gone forever.

“Break a leg? Buffalo Soap. Hang a nail? Buffalo Soap. Pregnant when you don’t want to be? Buffalo Soap. Not pregnant and want to be? Buffalo Soap. I mean it’s a love potion and an abortive in one. There isn’t a cancer that can withstand its final rinse. Stomach cancer? Gnaw on the bar and swallow a few flakes.

“Bald? Not anymore. Lamé? Halt? Got a hitch in your get-along? Buffalo Soap. Need a face lift? No you don’t. Just get a bar of Buffalo Soap and rub it on. Flat feet? Not anymore. Double jointed if you don’t want to be? Gone. Double jointed if you want to be? There.”

“What about teeth?” I had missed my last dental appointment because of my move.

He waved his hand as if there was no problem. “Even the old timers who can do little more than gum soggy bread have no problem. Wash your mouth out with Buffalo Soap at night and wake in the morning with new, healthy, straight, white, strong teeth.”

“No one is going to fall for snake oil in a bar. This is nothing more than a buck wagon song and dance. It doesn’t stand a chance.”

Roy wasn’t dissuaded. “Worked in the century before the last and it’ll work just as well in this.”

“The Food and Drug Administration will stop them. The cats can’t make such outrageous claims.”

“Dexter has that figured out. He thinks the FDA will let his product float because it seems to be a novelty, humorous item. A joke like the pet rock of a couple decades back. Besides, there’s nothing in the soap that isn’t natural. A little potash and some fat. A little pumice if you want some grit. The cats around here have been burning wood and stockpiling wood ash for years, and Dexter tells me he has just completed an agreement with the Ted Turner Buffalo Ranches for all the tallow he can handle.

“Besides, if the FDA should come down hard, and it won’t, Dexter will just move the operation to Canada and market into the states. After all, it only takes an extra stamp to send an order to Canada. And an 800-number or an e-mail don’t cost any extra at all.”

He was picturing the enterprise as a great adventure, as if it were his own plan. His eyes weren’t glazed, but they stared at a spot as if he was seeing

something. “Me and Dexter have it planned. He says I can help. We’ll use my barn to render it and package it and . . .”

“And what happens when Dexter doesn’t need you anymore, or thinks you are getting too big, or just thinks that you, as a human, can’t be trusted?”

This brought him down and I began to see again the man who had earlier asked me to “take that the cat, please.”

“I’ve never crossed Dexter.”

“What about pretending that Floyd is still here?”

“That can be explained. It can. We need a little time to ourselves occasionally. We--” He might have continued but a vehicle horn began sounding from the east end of the street.

At first we tried to ignore it, but it was stochastic yet syncopated--like a two-year-old’s fist discovery of the horn button on a steering wheel. Roy hurried around the end of the bar and took up the position Floyd had previously occupied, even to the fingering aside of the vertical blind.

“I don’t believe. . .” Urgently he left the window by the small round table and snaked his way to the window near me. “What’s Floyd doing?” he asked me as if I knew.

I ignored his question and sidled in beside him to try to get a view between the pink tubes of a Budweiser sign. “That’s Floyd’s pickup?” I asked and took Roy’s silence for assent. The truck, probably a Ford 150 that had once been green, was creeping along the gravel toward the bar. “I don’t see Floyd,” I said. “I don’t see anyone behind the wheel.”

Somehow, the truck, that had been coasting straight down the street, veered slightly toward the bar and once it was aimed at us continued its snail’s pace unabated.

“Floyd,” Roy yelled at the window but then looked toward the back of the building. He said *Floyd* again, but this time weakly, wonderingly.

He turned back to the window and together we watched as the pickup slowly clipped the edge of a commercial ice chest near the other window, flattened a dispenser that sold the Brush newspaper and slightly dented the Pepsi machine just next to our window.

Stopped, but still in gear, the truck sputtered, shook itself, and then died.

“Not a whole lot of damage,” Roy noted.

I was about to open the door and go outside to turn off the ignition key and see if Floyd was in the pickup lying down. Sick maybe or even dead.

“No, no, no,” Roy cautioned. “Don’t go out there. Are you crazy?”

He wasn’t insulting me; he truly seemed concerned for my safety.

“I’ll be hanged,” he said, returning his attention to the window. “Would you look at this. What a liar. *What* a liar.”

I poked my nose back between the tubes of the Budweiser sign until I could see the pickup again. Sitting on the gravel beside it, on the driver’s side, was a cat. A black one with a white blaze and nose. Looked like a panda.

“What a liar that Rexroth is. What a *lye-arr*.”

“You talking about *that* cat?”

“Course I’m talking about that cat, Rexroth’s his name. He’s got to be the biggest liar in town. Bigger even than Dexter. Said he could *drive* a stick shift. Hah! I don’t call that any kind of driving. Look at that,” he asked me, “would you call that driving? Hitting the Pepsi machine?”

I looked at the cat by the driver’s door. It was grooming itself leisurely as if it had just returned from a hunt and was nonchalantly preparing for a well-deserved nap.

“Floyd will love to hear about this.” Roy had gone back behind the bar and picked up a cell phone. “He’s going to bust a gut, trust me,” he said while listening to the phone ring. “Rexroth thinking he could drive a stick.”

I watched Roy’s face turn subtly whiter as the phone rang and rang and rang.

“Maybe he went over to his sister’s. Maybe that’s what he did.”

I tried to be reassuring. “Probably went over to his sister’s for a cup of coffee.”

Roy folded the phone and placed it thoughtfully next to the cash register. “Closing time,” he said without looking at the clock. “I’ve got to lock up and prepare for tonight.”

I knew the bar closed at two once the lunch rush was over and didn’t open again until the evening when the real patrons got off work. People who needed a drink. People who needed the camaraderie of others. The protection. I could see them circling their pickups and their few cars and huddling, solaced by drink, while outside, in the dark, the cats circled.

Not wishing to worry him further, I tossed off the remainder of the beer in my glass and started for the door.

“Take this with you.”

When he came around the end of the bar he was carrying a baseball bat. It was an old bat and someone had burned *Hillrose High 1938* into it just up the barrel from the Louisville Slugger logo.

“If you get to your car okay, throw this on the ground. I’ll pick it up later.” I wanted to smile or even laugh at his humor, but the weariness, the concern in his face struck me cold and I took the bat without opening my mouth.

“Ready?” He had positioned himself to the right of the door, his hands on the latch, and was ready to spring it open for my sprint to the car. He was also ready to slam it upon my exit and to throw the dead bolt and turn the key.

I found myself testing the heft of the bat by slamming it against my left palm. I couldn't believe what I was doing. I couldn't believe I had bought into this silliness.

“I'm out of here,” I yelled and lurched my body sideways through the opening, scraping my back and chest on the narrow crack Roy had provided. Like the mailman, I ran. I shifted the bat into my left hand and fished into my right pocket for the keys to my Chrysler, trying to depress the proper button to open the door locks before I reached the car. Silently, I cursed myself for programming out the horn honk in favor of the lights flashing to announce the unlocking. It was too bright to see if the parking lights had flashed.

Fortunately the latch gave and the door swung open. I fell into the leather seat and slammed the door, automatically locking it. Finding the bat still in my hand, I pressed down the window and threw it out onto the gravel. Once the window was up again, I turned to my right to look through the passenger window at Floyd's pickup.

That cat, Rexroth, was no longer sitting on the gravel next to Floyd's pickup door. Instead, he had hopped onto the hood where he continued to leisurely groom himself. I thought of leaving my car, picking up the bat, and going over to the pickup to see if Floyd was inside, lying on the seat, perhaps. But the thought had no sooner left my mind than Rexroth interrupted his grooming to fix his eyes on me.

Clairvoyant? Roy had said they claimed such powers.

Maybe I was imagining it, ascribing talents to a cat that were all out of proportion to their abilities. As if by answer, Rexroth dismissed my existence and gazed casually across the road. My relief, a sigh, lasted only until I followed the direction of that gaze and its recipient--Dexter.

Unlike in the movies, my car started instantly and I backed into the middle of the street, slamming on the brakes. As I paused to shift into drive, I glanced at the store front advertising laundry and fishing gear. Dexter still watched me, but he gave a big yawn, blinked his eyes, and turned his head. Again my relief was brief, for Dexter's gaze was now directed to a striped tabby at the intersection of Emerson Street--the main drag--and Highway 6. This new cat was now watching me.

After I turned right, the eyes of a cat on the steps of the elevator office followed me. My surveillance was being passed from cat to cat.

On the thirty mile drive to Sterling my attention had never been so riveted. My senses never so sharp. Each farm I passed possessed at least one pair of eyes, the pupils as narrow as a venomous snake's. Vacant fields sprouted eared radar dishes, their vortices rotating with the direction of my travel. In Atwood I saw two cats sitting atop fence posts. Not birds. Not meadowlarks as would be expected. But CATS. The ends of their tails twitched. Cracked.

Finally, reaching my home in Country Club Hills by way of the back road, I pulled into the garage and closed the door. Until the automatic light attached to the door opener clicked off, I sat in my car, looking into the deep shadows on the shelves and listening to the hot engine snap and ping as it cooled.

Upon regaining my composure, I entered the house and tried to settle my fears. A meal didn't help. Twenty minutes in my bubbling spa eased the tension in my muscles only, not my mind. I tried reading in the solarium to no avail: I

couldn't even concentrate sufficiently to hold the thought of a single sentence. The words went by like cars on a train, all clack and clunk but without meaning. What finally helped was a mixture of vodka, lime juice, and sparking water-- generous with the first. And more than one of these.

By bedtime I could smile. It was a silly smile, but one that remembered a silly but interesting day. The good ol' boys in Hillrose had had a good ol' time at my expense. But they deserved it. It's been a very rough season for small towns and small farmers. It isn't just the drought. Prospects in general are grim. I shouldn't complain if I was able to give them a moment's levity, lighten their dreary day. They were probably recounting their joke at this very moment, sitting out of doors in the beer garden. Having a good time. A good laugh.

Satisfied that I had been of service, I turned out the reading lamp and curled onto my right side so as to gaze through my bedroom windows at the prairie outside.

From somewhere a car turned, its lights flashing across the field I lay watching. In that instant, the prairie sparked to life. Each sagebrush held a pair of reflectors, burning like wind whiffed coals in a forgotten campfire. Piercing, intense, dual points of purpose.

Cats' eyes. Many cats' eyes.

Maybe it was my exhaustion. Perhaps it was the vodka. Whatever, fear was not my first response. Instead, I wondered. I had at least two questions. The first was:

*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the prairie of my night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

By the time I asked my second question, I was less philosophical:

I wonder if there are any

500-pounders out there?



The Barbed-wire Buffalo

I was innocently heading along Interstate 80 in Nebraska, anxious to see the just opened Great Platte River Road Archway--which commemorates the Oregon Trail, the Pony Express, early trappers and buffalo hunters, and the Lincoln Highway by arching over the highway itself--when I was lured off the road by a billboard promising an authentic Pony Express Way Station. The town was Gothenburg. Something about the first part of that name should have warned me.

I couldn't miss the way station because the town possessed almost no other signs, as if the shack itself was the major industry in the town--though I was sure I smelled an alfalfa desiccating plant and the town was surrounded by said fields. The station, itself, was nothing special, looking exactly like the ones I had seen in Colorado and Wyoming, and why shouldn't they. They were all built to the same malleable specifications. Being a responsible tourist--and besides the town looked as if it could use some help--I decided to purchase a couple of novelty postcards and send them to friends in Arizona and California--people who didn't deserve word from the outside world, but I thought I would be magnanimous and bring a little fresh air into their lives. (I had hoped the smell of the drying alfalfa would evaporate from the postcards before arriving at their destinations.)

One of the cards showed a single ear of Nebraska corn completely filling the back of a flatbed truck. The other featured a cow puncher astride a jackrabbit as he drove a herd of cows--one of them mysteriously facing left while the remainder of the herd faced right.

The girl in the Express station looked at my choice of cards and told me with a familiarity that suggested that I knew better, that there actually existed people who thought the pictures on my selected postcards were *not* real--were, in fact, optic tricks. Holding the one with the ear of corn up for me to see, she said, "This is actually a puny one. Must have been taken in a drought year. Why, up north I've seen some so big that it took six men to carry one out of the field. They carry them the way pallbearers carry a casket," she explained.

Being an outsider, and polite, I said nothing.

"This one," she held up the cowboy on the saddled jackrabbit, "was taken up around Valentine--near Smith Falls, the highest waterfall in Nebraska. The cowboys had to leave their horses and take to the jacks after that equine plague in the late 80's. That was the 1880's," she explained. "Can you believe," she went on, ignoring the other customers as teenagers country-wide are want to do, "that some people don't believe this picture either. Why, all they got to do is drive up there and see for themselves, but they can't be bothered. And then there are others that believe the picture but think it's a *white-tailed* jackrabbit. Can you believe such ignorance? Everyone knows that the black-tailed jack is much easier to gentle and takes to the bit way more readily than does the white."

Being an outsider, and polite, I said nothing.

Finally, after ignoring the other customers further, she gave me my change and slid the cards into a little sack. I was almost out the door scott free when she yelled at me to be sure and not miss the barbed-wire buffalo. "It's at the tourist station just before you get to the interstate," she said.

Since it was on the way out of town--and that's the direction I suddenly wanted to be--I took her direction and pulled off the city road as soon as I saw a sod house with a sure enough barbed-wire buffalo standing off to the side of it. From a distance it looked like a real buffalo because the barbed wire it was made of had rusted and was almost a perfect match for the animal's curly coat. I looked at it and I looked at it. Then I studied it some more, and finally I went to the trunk of my car and came back with my camera and took a picture of it.

The wire was so twisted up and curled and bent and broken and spiraled and kinked and coiled and braided and intertwined and spooled and zigzagged that I couldn't imagine how the artist had created it. This wasn't simply taking a stone and chipping away what wasn't buffalo; this was as complex and convoluted as the animal's DNA itself. The artist had to be just that--a sure enough creator.

Somehow, after seeing the barbed-wire buffalo, the Great Platte River Road Archway was a let down--even if the President was soon to arrive to dedicate it. I was headed back to Colorado and decided to avoid the interstate by going up into the sandhills instead. It was a cool, cloudy day in the 80's. Not at all like the 90's and 100's I had encountered while en route to the archway or viewing the barbed-wire buffalo.

Even given the cool day, there is something about sand and hills that causes a dryness and itching in the back of my throat that can only be amended by a short, bracing one. (Since I have recently sworn off Old Grand-Dad 114 I wasn't sure what that *one* would be.) The town I was approaching--actually the only settlement of any kind in the county--was Arthur. If you are an old time reader of *Ripley's Believe It or Not* you may remember this community of 128--and that count was taken on a Memorial Day weekend when the kids had reluctantly returned home. Arthur, reputedly, possesses the only church in the world made from baled straw and what at one time was the smallest county courthouse in America.

I saw both and neither compared to the barbed-wire buffalo.

On the main street--which was also the only way into or out of Arthur, or the county of Arthur for that matter--was a bar, a run down, decrepit-looking place called the Long Branch. I had heard of that name before but what caused me to nose my Chrysler in and stop was the sign above the door: *We Only Look Expensive*. These had to be simple, honest folk of the sandhill variety.

The brass railed bar itself wasn't long and even though I tried to find a seat by myself the fellow at the other end was almost a near neighbor. He raised his long-necked Bud by way of salute as I sat down and I returned his salute with a weak smile. The barkeep brought me what I ended up wanting without my having asked. That should have been a clue, but I was aware these back hills people have a way of knowing things the way a farm dog can spot lightning two days off.

After giving me my drink, the barkeep leaned back against the register and the cowboy rolled his nearly empty long-neck back and forth by twisting its mouth between his thumb and forefinger. They both looked at me as if it was *my* turn. I had to say something.

"That barbed-wire buffalo in Gothenburg is sure one hell of a piece of art," I said finally. I was so uncomfortable I tossed off my drink and motioned for another.

"You ain't from around these parts, are you?" It came out of the cowboy's mouth as a question but it sounded more like an accusation.

I proved suitably apologetic for not having the good sense to have been from around there, and the cowboy seemed to accept my honesty. When the barkeep brought my second drink he motioned to the cowboy and said that if I bought him

another long-necked Bud he might just tell me the *real* story of the barbed-wire buffalo. Seems the cowboy worked for the Haythorn Ranch, the largest breeder of American Quarter Horses in the United States and the third largest in the world. At least that's where the barkeep said he worked, though I suspect any cowboy in Nebraska who owns a set of spurs would make such a claim. At any rate, the cowboy at the end of the bar was an authority on all things Nebraska *whether they actually happened or not*. The barkeep's words.

The following tale cost me \$2.25 and I have a hunch the price of the long neck would have been less if the cowboy had bought it himself. Regardless, the next time I'm near Gothenburg I'm going to stop by and take a much closer look at that piece of *sculpture*.

Lloyd Ledbetter, it seems, had always wanted a baby buffalo since the time he first saw one in a corral at the Buffalo Bill Homestead in North Platte, Nebraska. When they're little, they are kind of cute and you can put your hand on them without their trying to press your belly button to see what it opens.

Knowing that a buffalo, when it gets grown, can take down most fences, Lloyd built himself a sturdy wooden corral near his barn. He was older now and entitled to buy a buffalo of his own accord without first whining about the ankles of grown-ups. The one he got had the usual doleful eyes and curiosity you find in most stock animals up until that time they reach weight and you have to run them up onto the back of a truck and take them to market where their curiosity is soon satisfied.

Lloyd coddled his buffalo more than he should have, named it Cody for obvious reasons, and bottle fed it long after it should have been weaned. As a result it was little more than a big pet, a big dangerous pet. Try as he might, Lloyd just couldn't teach it that it couldn't always run and leap into his arms each time he came into the corral with a bottle of milk laced with molasses. It didn't learn when Lloyd was reduced to crutches and it still didn't learn when Lloyd was reduced to a motorized wheelchair.

Some said Lloyd didn't learn too quick either, but that is another story.

Maybe it was because of the wheelchair and maybe it was because he had learned something during his last coma, but Lloyd finally decided to keep the wooden fence between himself and Cody. He could still shove bits of grass through the boards for Cody to eat and there was room enough to get his hand through to scratch Cody's forehead, though it became more difficult once his right hand had to be put in that cast and even more difficult once the left hand had to be put into a cast in spite of the doctor telling him not to stick his hand in there again.

But Cody was like a pet. You've seen people with big dogs who tell strangers not to worry because they won't bite--but they do, just not the owners. Well, Cody wasn't even that loyal. But that's buffalo. Can't be helped. It's in their nature just as it's in the nature of a white-tailed jackrabbit to be shy of a harness bit even if you tie a carrot to it.

Well, truth be told, Lloyd kind of lost interest in Cody, as a pet at any rate. As a novelty, he was okay. The kind of novelty that lets you say, "Why just the other day my buffalo. . ." And so on. It carried weight, his owning an actual

buffalo, and caused people to look up to Lloyd. Well, actually, it was down because of the wheelchair, but you get my drift. To make short of the long, Lloyd entrusted the care of Cody to a lad of about fifteen. His name might have been Floyd. At any rate he must have been a bright boy because no one ever saw him around town in a cast, on crutches, or in a wheelchair. He was tending Cody, he said, so as to get enough money to go to vet school after he graduated from college. He'd go to Nebraska U., of course. He was a big strong boy and no way would he be allowed out of state. In fact, if he'd been seen heading in the direction of Colorado for any longer than seemed necessary, he'd have been shot.

The problem, and that's where the barbed-wire buffalo comes in, is that neither Lloyd nor the boy thought about termites. But the termites thought about the posts in the wooden fence. One day Cody was brushing against the wooden fence when it gave way and he could look out clear across Nebraska. Buffalo don't lift their heads too high, so clear across Nebraska to him was the immediate hill.

He, Cody, being curious, took out to see what was on the back side of what he couldn't see. Except for one thing, this would have been fine because there is a lot of emptiness around Arthur. But Cody had never seen a barbed-wire fence before. Next to a wooden fence they look kind of puny like, insubstantial. The sort of thing a buffalo would munch on until he could find something with a little more fiber. It surely wasn't something to cause him to break stride, and it didn't look any more troublesome than a swarm of gnats.

Lloyd was sitting in his wheel chair in front of the television when it must have happened, so he didn't see anything. His neighbor two sections over saw

something, but he thought it was one devil of a dust storm and was herding his chickens into their coop--if you've seen wind-swept chickens rolling across the prairie you'll understand why--until he realized different. It was the bawling and squalling that caused him to question whether it was a true dust storm. And it was a different color than the ones that usually roll out of Oklahoma. By the time he got on his tractor and got it over the hills to where he had seen the turbulence and heard the sounds, all he could find was a great big ball of barbed wire. It was a huge roll, as big as those world's largest balls of twine that can be found in any number of small Midwestern towns were time is long and the scraps of bailing twine even longer. Instead of a ball of twine, it looked to Lloyd's neighbor like the world's largest meatball because it was that color--which, now that I think about it, is pretty much the same color as the hair on a buffalo's hump. What detracted from the art, though, were the fence posts sticking out here and there like the quills on a rolled-up porcupine.

Where the wire had come from was no mystery at all. A half mile of Lloyd's four-strand barbed-wire fence had been taken out, posts, stays, splices, and all. Even the gate wasn't where the gate used to be.

When Lloyd got up there, on a specially equipped ATV, all he could do was wonder. He had seen ball lightning, he had seen a cyclone, but he had never encountered an act of nature that stripped up a half mile of fence and rolled it up into such a ball--such a neat ball, anyway. He was about to roll back down and report it to his insurance agent as an act of God when he heard a grunt from

somewhere in the middle of the wire and recognized it as the kind of grunt Cody would make if he was dissatisfied about something.

Having been raised a ranch boy, Lloyd wasn't one to give up easy, so he used his cell phone to call the boy who had been taking care of Cody and told him to get up there as fast as he could and to bring a pair of wire cutters. "Better make that two," he told the phone.

It wasn't as easy a job as it might sound, but Lloyd and the boy worked at it until supper and then they came back later and turned the tractor lights on it so they could work some more. The first thing was to cut loose the fence posts that hadn't already popped their staples and fallen free. That proved some help with the small cutting, but it took away the footholds needed when the boy climbed on top the ball of barbed wire to make cuts there.

Lloyd cautioned the boy not to cut too close because he didn't want to hurt Cody. He told him to cut away everything that didn't look like buffalo. Towards dawn the neighbor came back with a hay rake and pulled as much of the cut wire away as he could. The result was a barbed-wire haystack that still stands and is worth seeing, in and of itself, but Lloyd has gotten tired of tourists driving up there and has padlocked the new gate. He says they threw pop cans out and left them them to lie.

Even before first light Lloyd and the boy realized that not only was Cody in there, but that he was standing upright. At first they could feel the breeze when he snorted, and when it was light enough they could now and then catch a glimpse of

an eyeball when Cody blinked to show the difference between black and not so black.

Knowing he was standing on his feet made the snipping much easier and it went faster from that point on. When the last snip was made, Cody stood there as real as life except that he couldn't move. Couldn't even wag his tail to ward off a fly.

Lloyd sent the boy down to the tin barn and he came back with the fork lift. It was one of those adjustable fork lifts, and the size they needed turned out to be almost exactly the size used for small bales of alfalfa. Lloyd wanted to do it because he thought he had a better touch on the lift, but the boy insisted and maneuvered the forks under Cody's belly. Gently, he lifted the animal clean off the ground and took him clear back to the ranch and set him on his feet in the little bit of pasture between the ranch house and the county road. It proved perfect because Lloyd could sit in his wheelchair in his living room and check on Cody whenever he liked.

The boy's duties about the ranch were altered and he was instructed to see to Cody exclusively. At first they thought feeding was going to be a problem until they found a quarter sized hole that permitted the insertion of bits of grass and hay. It took some time, but the boy was on the patient side and found he could even do his studies while he fed Cody.

Watering Cody was a chore at first. They had to fill a bucket with water and hang it by its bail from one of Cody's barbed-wire horns. Then the boy would siphon water into the hose and stick it quick up that quarter-sized opening for Cody

to drink. It wasn't long before this chore became much easier, though, because Cody learned to suck on the hose and all that was then required was to set the bucket in front of Cody and to then extend the hose up through the hole. Hoses wore out pretty quick, however, as Cody chewed on them more than was necessary. A nervous habit he had developed from somewhere.

The boy proved such good help that Lloyd almost lost interest in Cody. He would look at the animal from his front window now and again, but even the sentimental at heart had to admit Cody was little more than barbed-wire topiary.

On some Fridays Lloyd would consent to let his wife open the curtains so that they could watch the boy set a bucket of beer in front of Cody instead of the usual water. This made the animal quite frisky. Lloyd could hear Cody humming all the way to the house, and that was most twenty rods. Some times he swore he could feel the ground shake from Cody running about inside his encasement, though he didn't see any actual movement.

Eventually, all things wear thin, but not barbed-wire. It lasts. Just try running barefooted across a prairie. No, what happened is that Lloyd quit opening his curtains, even on Fridays. It wasn't many weeks before he even forgot about the ground shaking. Lloyd had stopped paying attention to the boy, even. And, unbeknownst to Lloyd, his wife had stopped paying him.

The boy never noticed the lack of pay, however, because--thanks to all the study time he found while feeding Cody--he had graduated valedictorian of his class and been given a full ride scholarship to Nebraska. True, because of his size

it was an athletic instead of an academic scholarship, but the one paid much better than the other.

But forgetfulness isn't as strong as sentiment, and one day Lloyd got to missing ol' Cody and decided to trade his wheel chair for the ATV and go out and have a word with his old friend. Sentiment caused him to remember the doleful-eyed little creature that didn't go sixty pounds, not the sixteen hundred pound bull that bounced him off the stock fence.

The weeds around Cody had grown up, but Lloyd thought little of that. Cody wasn't much of a grazer. Just to show he bore no ill will, Lloyd picked a particularly juicy stem of yellow clover as he wheeled past and, when he rolled up to Cody, stuck it up the eating hole.

Talk about a surprise. Cody was gone.

Lloyd looked all around the field but couldn't find him. None of the fences were busted through, but he cell phoned the sheriff anyway to see if anyone had reported a runaway bull buffalo. Not recently, the sheriff told him.

He was tapping on the barbed wire that Cody had somehow gotten out of when Lloyd got an idea. Maybe it was the singing of the wire over the hollowness inside that gave him the idea, and maybe it wasn't. What Lloyd finally figured had to have happened was that Cody had pupated. He'd seen caterpillars spin chrysalis and then emerge from them as butterflies. But they always left a hole in the top of their chrysalis. He'd seen cicadas do as much and some of their shells still clung to trees in his yard.

He wheeled all around Cody's shell looking for the necessary opening. At first he thought he had found it, a hole under the barbed-wire tail--but he remembered he had cut that there for another purpose. This was becoming a riddle that was almost without solution. It reminded him of that time two years back when blue bottle flies were such a nuisance. They hung around the house in clouds darker than an August lightning storm and twice as noisy. That, as he recalled, was just prior to that other mystery--all the buzzards that descended on his place. They were such a nuisance his wife had to sweep them off the porch each morning and three of his dogs died from the exhaustion of just trying to run them off. Both the flies and the buzzards finally run their course, though, so those problems, at least, were past.

But Lloyd wasn't about to give up on the current one. When you raise a buffalo bull from a pup, an attachment develops that's hard to explain. It's kind of like old marrieds. They may sleep in different rooms, but now and then they think kindly of one another before rolling over and going back to sleep.

Gothenburg got word of the barbed-wire buffalo through an ad Lloyd placed in the *Thrifty Nickel* advertising for the return of his buffalo if found. On an off chance, he even suggested that the missing buffalo might have developed wings. He spent considerable money explaining the problem in the ad and ballyhooed it around so much that he finally got on one of those television morning shows. Well, the folks in Gothenburg aren't as dumb as I admit they look. They figured that they already had a Pony Express station, why not a barbed-wire buffalo as well?

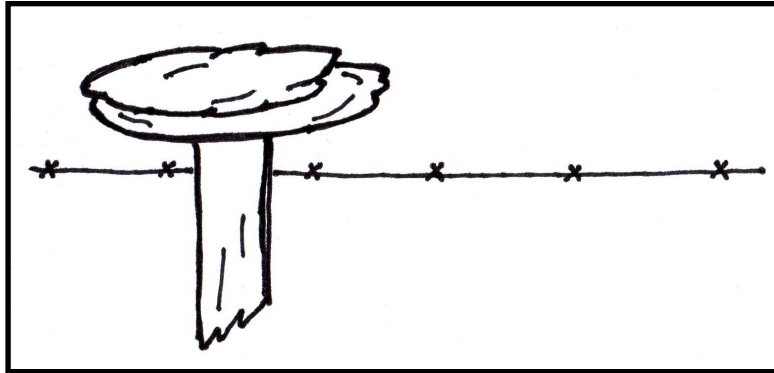
Lloyd gave them what remained of Cody. He was interested in what had been *inside*. He wasn't an outside kind of guy. He did watch Cody's remains go, though. A boy, all by himself, picked up the barbed-wire shell, carried it to the fence, hoisted it over, and stood it in the back of a pickup truck.

He couldn't have done that when Cody was in there and Lloyd knew it. Just knowing that gave him some satisfaction.

Lloyd has by no means given up. Each spring he places another ad in the *Thrifty Nickel* and waits patiently in his wheelchair beside the phone. It's not easy to give up on such a friend as Cody, especially one that's left such a lasting impression on you. Twice that people can remember, he has driven into Gothenburg to the sod house just to look at the barbed-wire remains. Once he called into the wire just to make sure Cody hadn't come back.

It was getting dark in the bar about this time and I could see that the cowboy had finished his long-necked Bud and was licking his lips for another. "So that's pretty much the story of Cody the Barbed-Wire Buffalo," he said. When I didn't comment he asked me if I had also seen the other barbed-wire sculpture in the same lot beside the sod house, the one of an Indian on a pony. When I said I had, he said, that for another beer, he'd tell me the story of the Barbed-wire Indian on the Barbed-Wire Pony.

I thought it best I get on down the road while I still had my innocence.



The Fence Post in Question

I had seen them occasionally all throughout the shortgrass prairie and had dismissed them as either a natural phenomenon unknown to me or as one of those freaks of nature one often associates with tornadoes: the straw embedded in a telephone pole as if it were a railroad spike comes to mind as one example.

The first I remember seeing this summer was along U.S. 36 in northern Kansas after visiting my dad in the nursing home in Ellis. Another appeared on the prairie near Frenchman's Creek in southwestern Nebraska. Maybe it wasn't Frenchman's Creek. Maybe it was near the tiny town of Hamlet along the Republican River, but regardless, it was still in that same general vicinity.

The one that finally caused me to stop my car and take a picture of it was beside Weld County Road 106 in the Pawnee National Grasslands of northern Colorado near Sligo. Just east of the cemetery. You can't miss it. At any rate, it

reminded me of ones I had seen the year before on the Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and Rosebud Indian Reservations in South and North Dakota.

I'm sure by now you realize I am referring to the sight of a flat rock sitting on top of a wooden fence post.

I took the picture with the Minolta I bought in Qui Nhon when I was in Vietnam, so I knew it would be good. What I needed was the story to go with it. Getting it proved even more of a nuisance than you might imagine.

The first person I interviewed about this particular rock and post happened along just as I was returning my camera to its bag in the trunk of my car. "You're an *evolutionist*, I see," he said, easing his pickup to a stop on the gravel and leaning out of the cab. "That right there," he pointed to the post with the flat piece of sandstone on it, "is proof positive, and if I was you I'd send one of those pictures of yours to the state school board in Kansas. You know all about that state school board, don't you?"

I told him I did--the one that took evolution out of the science books--but that I couldn't see what he was getting at.

"It's the missing link between *chaos* and *function*," he said as if surprised that I didn't know and wondered why I'd be taking a picture of a rock on a fence post if it wasn't to illustrate just that point.

Fortunately the man had time to fill in the gaps in my ignorance.

It seems that the fence post wasn't a fence post at all but was a hundreds of millions of years old cycad. That's a plant that looks a little like a palm tree but

isn't. They were around long before flowers, and some dinosaurs actually ate them, the ones that were too short for the conifers at any rate.

This fence post, it seems, had started out life as a monocotyledon. That is it came out of the ground with a single leaf first showing as opposed to the two leafed dicotyledon we are more familiar with, he said, unless you're growing wheat instead of black oil seed sunflowers. When its life as a cycad seemed at a dead end, it metamorphosed and grew instead into a . . .

(I can't remember exactly what he said it was, but it changed into something and then into something else, and so on until it became a cedar tree in our time. It was a little bit like the Dalai Lama being reincarnated, but in this case it was the plant rather than the spirit that kept finding a new line of work. I guess the man in the pickup was espousing Lamarckian evolution. That's the evolution where the creature changes because of a *perceived* need. The example here would be a short-necked animal wanting to eat leaves off of tall trees. After wishing real hard, its *ancestors* finally developed a longer neck and could do just that. Today we'd call such a creature a giraffe. Anyway, the cycad-cum-cedar at last saw its use and died, but not before shedding all its limbs to the point that it looked exactly like a fence post.)

"And, as evolution would have it, it died right on the property line and when Floyd Twiller's father strung this barbed wire fence the dead cycad was right handy so he used it as a post. Now let's see that Kansas state school board find an answer for that one."

"But what about the rock on top?" I asked. "That sandstone is only about thirty million years old. How'd it get there?"

He seemed annoyed. "I specialize in fence posts only," he said, and drove on like a man who had done his duty but who hadn't been properly appreciated.

Well, I considered myself up to speed on fence posts, pretty much--at least the former cycad ones, but I was still up a stump when it came to rocks on the tops of them. I needed more help.

The largest Marian statue in the United States, I had heard, was in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, just up north, so I decided to head in that direction. It was a good choice of direction because I came upon the Zion Church of the Prairie that is situated almost squarely in the middle of nowhere. I say *almost* because an old thrasher sits off on the prairie about a half mile to the west and that seems to be the *exact* center of nowhere. It'd take a surveyor to know for sure.

Standing on the porch of that church was a man in a long-sleeved white shirt and near-dress khaki pants. His shirt, belt and pants met squarely at the roundest point of his belly and made him look neat, if not trim in an indulgent sort of way. I took him to be the minister, but I didn't ask. If he was the sexton or the janitor, I suspect his white-shirted belly would have overlapped and hidden the belt. Sometimes the difference between a preacher and a janitor is just pride of appearance.

"For a point of fact I do know that rock," he responded easily after I told him what I had learned. "And without your telling me I know the man you were talking

to. In fact we pray for his soul each and every Sunday whether it's mentioned in the program or not."

This man proved a big help because he knew the histories of both the post *and* the rock. He assured me that the post had nothing to do with Lamarck or that Frenchman's nonsense idea of evolution. It's true that the cycad did change over a long period of time and eventually become the post, he said, but it had nothing to do with evolution and everything to do with the Devil.

The Devil erected that post there to mislead the unsecured, just as he had placed the giant bones of animals in the earth as a further test. (Some sects, the preacher conceded, claim God himself placed those bones as a test, but God--he was positive on this point--deals more in the proliferation of obscure or discredited texts and contradictory parables than he does in hardware.) At any rate, the Devil wants to destroy our faith with what he calls *science*. He said it is just such learning that has clouded the reason of my friend in the pickup.

As for the age of the post and the rock, both I and the man out on County Road 106 were completely wrong.

"Neither item could have been over six thousand years old." To prove this, he went into the church and returned with a time line that showed the whole history of the earth, beginning with the idea that an idea was possible. It had been put together by a man named Bishop Ussher and the facts looked pretty solid to me. The final creation, if I remember right, happened about 9:25 of a Thursday some six thousand years ago. Whether it was A.M. or P.M. depended upon whether you were standing in the dark half or the light half. The reason it was a Thursday was

to give all the new creatures a long weekend before they had to start running from or after each other. (I said it was *a* creation; I didn't say that I couldn't do better.)

"But the rock?" I asked. Everyone wanted to talk about the post. "How did it *get* there?"

"Surely that should be obvious to you."

It wasn't, so I asked him to explain, though he seemed eager to get to a chicken dinner somewhere.

While the Devil was working--and the Devil should have known this--God was spying on him. Just as the Devil had turned the cycad through the lathe of his mind to make it look like a fence post, God came on with that flood of his. Even in the midst of all that turmoil and rush of water and debris, God still had his eye on that fence post. Some don't recall this, but in that short period of time during the flood when stones floated--(This isn't in all the Bibles, only the unexpurgated ones.)--God caused the rock to settle perfectly on top of the fence post, kind of putting the quietus to the Devil's work and showing once and for all who was Numero Uno, and who was just so much number two.

I thanked the man on the church steps for what was surely the complete story, as it dealt with both the post and rock, but I was still just a little uneasy. It was something the man on the steps had said about the forty days and nights of rain. A fellow in Trudy's restaurant in Grover had already assured me that during that forty days and nights the Grover/Sligo area saw no more than a quarter inch of moisture and that came as *hail*. I questioned the measurement at the time, but the

man swore that at home his daddy had the very gauge that was used. It was his grand dad's.

Fortunately this same man was still in Trudy's when I got back into Grover, having decided not to go to Pine Bluffs after all.

"You've got to be kidding," the man in Trudy's said when I told him both the tales I had heard about the rock on the post. He said it was just like both them fellows to use an ordinary, natural thing to try and explain their gods' creations, evolution being just another creation myth, he said, but with the man doing the creating himself instead of delegating that responsibility by creating a creator.

"No," he said, "that post and rock are *pre*-creation."

"Older than creation itself?"

"Not the rock, of course," the man in Trudy's scoffed. "And maybe not even the post. But, the animus *inside* that post has been around long before anyone's creation."

"I don't understand."

"That's not just a post, son. That's a **Bellwether Post**. You've got to put a rock on them if you expect them to stay put."

I told him I knew what a bellwether *sheep* was, the animal all the other sheep seemed to follow no matter where it went. When I told him this he said, "Now that's the ticket. But don't think of sheep. Think of fence posts."

I knew it sounded silly, but I asked anyway. "A wandering fence post that other fence posts follow?"

He nodded his head to indicate the veracity of my statement. "They will unless you discover the Bellwether Post and put a rock on it."

I thought I had heard it all, but apparently there was more to hear. As with everything, people, clouds, amoebas, or nematodes--my new friend explained--there is the desire to see what's over the next hill. It is the animus of the Bellwether that encourages this--the urge to wonder and wander that preceded creation itself, that was the notion that spawned that first idea. Now this has nothing to do with those few who jump out of airplanes or hurl themselves from high bridges, he explained. "That isn't animus;" he said, "that's just people trying to get out of going to work on Monday."

"So they leave their holes and go hopping off across the prairie?" I had to ask.

"Like pogo sticks," he affirmed. "Wouldn't be so bad--a single post taking off now and then--but not only do other posts follow, those that don't want to follow have to because they're connected by barbed wire and staples. Occasionally, the wire pops out the staples and the post isn't dragged along. That accounts for some of the lone posts you see now and then out on the prairie. The ones that don't seem to have a real purpose."

The problem, he told me, isn't near as bad as it used to be, what with the fence posts, like sheep, getting more domesticated all the time. He thought it might have started getting better with the use of creosote. Before that preservative, the posts were just plugged into the ground and left. The creosoted ones don't have near as itchy feet, and the new preservative that replaced creosote and doesn't

cause cancer--to people, not posts--is even better. Not one in a thousand is a wanderer. The new metal ones? Those driven into the ground with a double-handled pipe maul? They don't wander at all. But they're to a fence post what an electric pump is to a windmill. Forget animus: there's simply no curiosity there at all. "You've heard dumb as a post. Well, it was a metal post they was talking about."

But oh for the good ol' days when men were men and fence posts were wanderers. The man in Trudy's remembered one time--at least his daddy told him about it--when all the fences in northeastern Colorado took to wandering. It was believed a Bellwether Fence Post on the Ball Ranch was to blame for this particular break. It was the FDR or Elvis of Bellwether Fence Posts. A real leader. So many fences went hopping across the prairie that a grand round-up, not seen since open range cattle days back in '17, had to be called. All the cattlemen and their horses met where the South Platte River and Crow Creek come together and started the drive north. Supplies had to be brought into Barnesville on the Union Pacific spur out of Greeley.

As the horses moved north, the fences broke to left and right before them and tried to hid in draws or out run them to the Wyoming border. There was such chaos that four-strand barbed wire fences got tangled up with three-strand fences and such a mess resulted that the drovers had to bring out their wire cutters and make short fences out of long. Pointe Ruffner's daddy had a whole section of fence go missing, as the English would say--that's about four miles, but by the time the snipping was done he didn't have enough wire left to make a gate. The fence

posts, though, would have built a fair sized stockade. He had to hire horses and flatbed wagons to haul them back to his ranch--no way would he trust a bunch of un-wired posts with as few drovers as he had--and it took the Grover football team a month to poke them all back into their empty holes. Just to make sure, they placed a rock on top of every one of them.

He pointed the direction I could go to see Rufner's new fence, but I already had enough pictures of rocks on fence posts.

The dangerous point on the drive came when a badger, maybe it was rabid, came out of its hole and tried to bite the fetlock of a horse. It reared and came down on the back of another horse that eventually fell after staggering around first. The fall would have been bad enough, but it spooked one string of fence and it stampeded crazily, catching up smaller fences and single posts in its wire net. Before it could be headed off, it stampeded itself and about fifteen miles of wire and posts off the top of Chalk Bluffs. The rusted wire can still be seen at the base of the bluffs, but the splintered posts were carted off and burned as kindling.

"So that's why we put rocks on top of fence posts. Keeps them put. But don't think there are that many Bellwether Fence Posts out there. Like I told you, posts have been domesticated. Some ranchers *do* put the rocks up there because they think they see something in the post that makes them think it might be a runner. Most of these ranchers who put rocks up there, though, are just bragging. Trust me. There's no more curiosity left in them posts than in the rancher's bedroom."

If this wasn't the definitive statement on rocks on fence posts I wasn't likely to find it in this lifetime. I felt so satisfied after this interview that I drove back out to Road 106 and had another look at the rock and the post. While I was looking at it I heard a twang from the left, about a half mile off. There was a ranch house there I hadn't noticed earlier, and a boy was out in the beaten, bare yard throwing rocks at the spinning windmill. The name on the mailbox identified them as Hank and Miriam Occum. I didn't figure the boy's name was Hank and I didn't ask.

When I pulled into the yard a woman was just stomping back into the house, but the boy was still there. I introduced myself while he continued testing his arm with the windmill as a target. "Rock on a fence post?" he asked just as a long, arching shot hit the mill.

His mom was immediately on the porch again. "What did I just tell you about throwing rocks at the windmill?"

"I wasn't throwing at the blades," he explained his case. "It was the rudder I hit." His mom looked at the mill's tail, where it said *Aermotor of Chicago*, and saw where her husband had already put bullet holes through all the O's. He hadn't hit them all squarely, but it was a sure enough good grouping. Satisfied, she went back into the house.

The kid finally quit throwing long enough to listen to all the explanations I had heard about the rock on the fence post. I wanted his take on the matter as an impartial viewer. "You mean that rock on the post down the road?"

I could just see it from where we stood. "That's the one."

The kid got to laughing so hard he proved no help at all.



The Great, Soft, Furry-like Things Celebration and Motorcycle Rally

I suppose I can be excused for not knowing about it, but after discovering it by accident I can't imagine why it isn't known internationally, let alone nationally. Like nearly all travelers in the West during the first couple weeks of August, I assumed all the motorcyclists--and there were hundreds of thousands of them--were headed for Sturgis, South Dakota, and the motorcycle rally there.

That was before I pulled out of Sidney, Nebraska, after visiting my old high school buddy-cum-pharmacist, Gerald Berlage, and getting a prescription filled for a controlled substance. He questioned the doctor's signature until I wrote it more clearly for him on the back of a hundred dollar bill, but that's another story.

As I say, I was heading north on U.S. 385--Bridgeport was my immediate destination--when a convoy of motorcycles passed me, one by one. Each rider scrutinized me as he passed and I saw more bandana headbands, tattooed biceps, nose rings, ear rings, lip rings, snarling mandibles, leather vests, Harley T-shirts, teeth-clenched cigars, tattooed knuckles (for those who wore finger-free gloves), greasy jeans, black combat boots replete with spurs, side arms, brass knuckles, coiled chains, lethal belt buckles, grenades dangling from button holes, opaque sunglasses, receding hairlines, Willy Nelson pony tails, and clinging malls than I care to recount.

As I said, I assumed they were headed for Sturgis, South Dakota, to join the estimated 400 to 600 thousand bikes and the close to a million drivers and drags expected by its Chamber of Commerce. Where else would they be headed with such lemming-like determination?

The answer, and you won't believe me unless you go back with me next year, was to Gurley, Nebraska, and the annual--but little known--**Great Soft, Furry-like Things Celebration and Motorcycle Rally**. (*Gurley* is pronounced exactly like *girly*. I figure it's a coincidence.)

I was late arriving at the affair, so I missed most of the contests such as whose pects could fill the largest bra cup and who could make the prettiest arrangement given the same seven varieties of flowers, heavy on the calla lilies, of course. The Oscar Wilde look-alike and recite-alike contests had also finished, but I was in time to see the winners passed down main street with many hands

supporting their bottoms until they were heaved up onto the stage to receive their furry trophies.

I would have loved to see the forty-yard mince, which requires a minimum of four-inch heels and a feather boa, but I was just too late. A video of last year's event was available on the large, out-door screen and it had been won by the same National Basketball Association player who won this year's event. It was obvious that he won on style points and not speed. The rouged cheeks and painted lips didn't hurt either.

As expected, the street was lined with booths hawking food and apparel. Most of the bikers and their malls were lined up in front of one T-shirt booth in particular. All, and I mean all, were buying a lovely rose colored shirt featuring a cute baby duck. Its body was yellow and its bill and feet were orange. The soft, heavily eyelashed eyes brought tears to the cheeks of nearly all of the purchasers. The brown-black lettering below the baby duck's feet said **Ducky Wucky**.

I didn't know it until later, but this same shirt could be turned inside out to display a snarling skull. Its lettering said **You First, Then Your Mother**. I suspect the message was purposely vague because that could instill more terror.

This booth also hawked another T-shirt, intended for the children of the motorcyclists. It held no picture, only a message: **My folks went to the Great Soft Furry-Like Things Celebration and Motorcycle Rally in Gurley, Nebraska and all I got was this T-shirt and a rabbit's foot on a key chain.**

I've seen many such T-shirts on my travels, but at least the message was correct about the rabbits' feet. There was a booth selling them as well. I could

never fight my way through the crowd to discover what else they had done with the furry feet besides attaching the chain.

As usual, there was a film festival associated with the event. This year the honoree was Edward D. Wood, Jr., the writer/director of such sensational movies as *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and *Bride of the Monster* starring Bela Lugosi. At least those are two of his more famous movies. The one that they showed over and over while I was there was *I Led Two Lives*. Its other title, in parentheses, was *Glen or Glenda*. This movie is somewhat autobiographical and stars Ed Wood himself. It detailed the many trials and tribulations he encountered because of his love for dressing up in women's clothing and going into men's bars. The character--Ed Wood--kept insisting that he was not a homosexual. He simply loved the feel of women's clothes on his body.

The motorcyclists around me at the showing I attended could have cared less about Wood's sexuality. To the man they were salivating over the Angora sweaters Ed Wood was partial to. Identical sweaters were available at many of the booths and I don't believe any of the participants in the Gurley celebration left town without one--whether white, yellow, or pink.

No one I talked to could remember exactly who the film honoree was last year, but all agreed that anything starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day was always welcome.

Another movie was in continual play at the grain elevator that had been cleared out for the event. This movie and the author of the novel it was taken from are actually the cornerstone of the entire celebration and is what started it back in

the forties, long before Sturgis, South Dakota, held its first race. This movie is *Of Mice and Men* and the author, you may remember, is John Steinbeck. As you also may remember, Lennie--one of the two central characters of this short novel--is immensely fond of anything soft. The other character, George, is forever trying to keep Lennie from picking up road kill and carrying it about in his pocket just so he can feel its soft fur from time to time.

When I viewed this movie in the grain elevator, all of the men held one hand in their pockets and I assumed--as with Lennie on the screen before them--they were gently massaging a dead mouse. I'm pretty sure it wasn't rabbits' feet on a key chain they were fingering because they are usually tanned and cured and don't put off such an odor. Anyway, when George put the gun to Lennie's head and started talking about the soft rabbits they were going to have some day, the sound echoing off the tin walls of the elevator reminded me of sou-ee time at the piglet farm. It was all I could do to get out of the building without slipping on the pools of tears.

The fresh air outside the elevator was welcome, but I was surprised by how empty the street was. I could have gotten to any of the booths, even the one selling those soft, furry, round things called Tribbles that are so dear to the hearts of Trexies and Bikies alike.

By way of explanation I was told that the petting zoo had finally opened.

Talk about a mob. The sheriff's deputies' nightsticks were out but the heads they bounced off of were oblivious to the wake-up calls. To a man these motorcyclists were bent on gaining admission to the petting zoo and getting to pet

and fondle soft, furry things from all parts of the world--and even the things that as babies were soft and furry but which would eventually grow into ferocious, mangy creatures. The big cats were popular in this latter category along with the women of certain, old world ethnic groups.

But admission wasn't that easy. The owner of the petting zoo may not have seen Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, but he knew these bikers. They just couldn't hold something small and tiny and soft and furry in the palms of their hands without squeezing. His first year at the celebration he had lost all of his animals except the turtle which no one had paid attention to anyway.

To solve this problem, this time he had brought crates of baby chicks. Before anyone could gain entrance to the petting zoo, the potential petter had to first buy a baby chick for one dollar. That in itself wasn't enough. Next, the patron had to prove that he wouldn't harm any of the animals in the zoo, and he would prove this by cupping the chick in one hand and covering it softly with the other. He had to do this for a full minute at the end of which time if the chick was still alive he was permitted to enter the zoo and his one dollar for the chick was refunded. If the chick had mysteriously died in that minute, the biker was refused permission to enter the zoo and was not given his dollar back. He also did not get to keep the now dead chick.

By the time I got up to the entrance, the pile of empty poultry boxes would have filled a semi and three fifty-five gallon barrels next to the zoo entrance were filled with dead baby chicks. After talking to, and commiserating with, the owner, he let me have one of the dead babies. I reached way down up to my arm pit and

found one that wasn't nearly as crushed and mushy as the others. As soon as I was out of sight of the zoo owner, I sold it for five dollars to a cyclist who claimed to have once owned it. Seems he was headed to the movies and his pockets were empty.

I could have stayed for the rabbit scramble under the lights, but I was headed for Bridgeport, as you remember, and thought I had best get on my way. Besides, I didn't think I wanted to see a baby bunny after it had been thrown into a pen full of Hell's Angels who got to keep it if they caught it.

The remainder of my trip was uneventful--I did see a barbed-wire buffalo, now that I think about it--so there isn't much else to tell. I spent the night in Bridgeport and went out the next morning to look at all the tractor parts north of town. You should go to Bridgeport just to see them.

About a week later I was in The Hilltop Motel in Niabrara, Nebraska, surfing through the thirty-eight channels on the television. I myself don't have cable and am fascinated by what seems to be an endless variety until I rotate through the stations several times to discover that numbers can lie. On one of my rounds the news showed hundreds of bikers making their surly way into Sturgis, South Dakota. I'm sure the pictures of these renegades scared most of the viewers in this country. But I had an advantage:

I knew that under all that leather their hearts beat beneath Angora sweaters, and that their testicles rode comfortably in fur-lined jock straps. They're just a bunch of big teddy bears, teddy bears with soft, furry dead things in their pockets.



The Great Jackalope Hunt

It was with great good fortune that I pulled into Douglas, Wyoming, on a near moonless night in which the number of the fourth Thursday could be divided by the number of the month without leaving a remainder. In this case it was the twenty-fourth and the month was August. Hence, eight goes into twenty-four three times cleanly. And three proved to be a charm.

The only hotel I could find, and I was in the mood for such pampering--craving room service as I do, coupled with my love of tipping the fawning obsequious--was the LaBonte, one word. It was a block north of the main drag and offered a ground floor restaurant to the left and a lounge with neon lights and high

narrow windows on the right. I had to park my car on the street but positioned it so that I could see it from my room.

For the third night in a row the receptionist told me the special as soon as I walked into the restaurant, and for the third night in a row the special was a smothered burrito. The one I had eaten two nights earlier in Thermopolis, Wyoming, was horrible. The one the previous night at the Golden Cavy in Craig, Colorado, was tolerable. Maybe the one here in the LaBonte was excellent, but let's face it: Mexican food at its best is the product of intellectual paucity. Come on now, just how evolved is a culture whose idea of culinary excellence is to wrap something in a piece of fried flour and then to pour something over it in an attempt to disguise its taste?

After poring over the menu for five minutes, I went with the special. Like all Mexican food the chef might have given it any name. It all tastes the same. The difference between a taco, a tamale, or a chalupa is that each ends in a different vowel. There's no other difference. Trust me.

I informed the waitress of my opinion of Mexican food, and she told the cook. He looked at me from his window and I decided not to accept the sopapilla that came as desert. For those who don't know, it's deep fried flour dough. The idea is to pour enough honey or jam over it to smother its taste.

When I went to pay my bill the waitress, who was also the cashier, told me that it was my great good fortune that tonight was Thursday, the fourth of the month, and that eight went into twenty-four three times.

"It does," I admitted, still realizing that math had little to do with culinary excellence.

Further, she informed me that the two greatest jackalope hunters in all of Wyoming were at that moment at the bar in the lounge next door. In fact, she had told them about me and they were waiting to see me.

How she had known of my interest in jackalope (I prefer this spelling of the plural to the more common *jackalopes*.) is beyond me. Perhaps she had seen me addressing postcards with pictures of the animal on them. Whatever, I was eager to increase my knowledge of these elusive creatures by talking to two *bona fide* hunters. It is well known that an amateur alone seldom spots one. Experienced guides are a must.

The light in the bar was dim as it always is, probably to hide the cigarette burns and spittle stains. This is Wyoming, remember, where the slogans *Smoke 'em if you've got 'em* and *Spit if you hafta* pass for pithy aphorisms. Even so, the light in the lounge was sufficient for me to discern the *aspects* of these two gentlemen, and I realized that they and their kind seldom participated in--shall I say--demographics. Unless, of course, participation would result in handouts.

"It takes a man to bag a jackalope," one of the men said and motioned me to sit between them with a wave of the cigarette he was holding. "*Cajones grandes*," the other added. He didn't wave his cigarette but placed it over the end of the bar on the barkeep's side in such a way that it would burn itself out, leaving a black scar in the polished wood.

"I shot a deer with a slug from a shotgun once," I told them to show that I could stalk and was not afraid of a creature as large as I.

"No guns, friend. We use sacks. I said *bag* a jackalope. Not shoot one. The laws have changed a lot since the thirties. You can't just go out in a mob and beat drums until you run them into a corral any more. That's where most of the trophy mounts you see now-a-days come from." He pointed to a dark spot on the wall which finally resolved itself into the mounted head of a jackalope, a two pointer--or a four pointer if you count the way they do in the East.

I knew that the laws were more lax back then, but that was because of the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Between the jackalope and the jack rabbits, there was hardly a blade of grass left for the cattle. Those big roundups had been more effective in ridding the prairie of the jackalope than the jack because of the former's antlers. Because of these they couldn't scoot under the barbed wire and corral fences as easily as the rabbits, and when a club wielder swung there was a lot more to hit when it came to the jackalope. Extinction, for a couple of decades, was a possibility.

Some people think they *are* extinct, but actually the jackalope have become masters at camouflage. Some hunters have caught them attaching leaves to their antlers to try and pass as trees or shrubs, and one man said he walked right past one that had tied a red, plastic strip to its antler. He had mistaken it for a survey stake. Also, they are great mimics. If need be, they will bark like dogs or purr like cats. One man said a jackalope crawled into the backseat of his car and nagged him for fifty miles before he realized he had left his wife at the last rest stop.

Even without these talents, the jackalope can easily blend in to almost all environments with an almost chameleon-like canniness. Sitting in grass, among rocks, or next to fence posts, they are almost invisible. In winter, when they turn white, they lie along the white lines on asphalt roads, both for disguise and for warmth.

As elusive as they are, it is still possible to spot one. That's why I'm surprised at the continued insistence of some that they are indeed extinct. Some go as far as to label them as *chimera*, creatures that never existed. These people are obviously not up on their Western history. The earliest reference to them was by John Colter, that fellow who accompanied Lewis and Clark but cashiered out about Fort Mandan on the way out to go beaver hunting. He didn't see one while with the Corps of Discovery. The first he saw was on the Stinking Waters up where Cody, Wyoming, is now. (The chamber of commerce has successfully petitioned to have the name of the Stinking Waters changed to the Shoshone River. Go figure.)

Of more importance to me is the stories of the jackalope related by Jimmie Bridger. Any fellow who went to the Rockies when he was seventeen and who did not taste bread (or tortillas) for seventeen years is a fellow to be trusted. In fact, he said that when he discovered that petrified forest in which all the creatures were petrified, including the birds and the notes they had just uttered, the only creatures beside himself to have full movement were the jackalope. He said the petrified forest sounded like a sawmill, what with the jackalope honing their antlers on the rocky trees in preparation for mating battles.

I sighed in envy of Ol' Gabe, aka Jim Bridger to the whites and as Blanket Chief to the Indians. He had done it all. "Wish *I* could go jackalope hunting," I said, not intending for the fellows on each side of me to hear but, still, just wishing aloud.

"Well, well," brightened the fellow on my right, laying his cigarette aside and picking up his bottled beer, "it just happens to be your great good fortune that this fourth Thursday is divisible by the month without a remainder. August being an eight--"

"Yes, I know," I helped. "Eight goes into twenty-four neatly."

"Increasing that good fortune," the fellow on my left said, "is that the night promises to be still and the moon is but a waxing sliver destined to rise late."

"Further enhancing that great good fortune," the bartender came over with a sheet of paper, "is the fact that I have a one-night jackalope hunting license which I am offering to you, sir, for the reasonable sum of twenty dollars."

I had heard licenses could be come by, but I had assumed I would have to go to the state game and fish and enter a drawing to get one. But the license explained itself. Wyoming's dispensers of alcohol were to be the exclusive licensees for such permits, and they were limited to but one sale on any fourth Thursday that was divisible by the month without leaving a remainder. "Wow, that's cutting it close."

"How's that?"

"The license is good only from 10 p.m. until midnight."

"They had a pretty good breeding season this spring, so the game boys will probably up the hours for next year. But if you want to hire us, you'd better buy

that license. It's nine now and it'll take almost an hour to get to the best hunting grounds."

"But I don't have a sack."

"We got a bunch in our pickup. We'll loan you one if you hire us, twenty bucks each, and if you buy the bait."

"Bait?"

"Yes," he said. "Six packs of beer. Doesn't matter what brand, though Pabst Blue Ribbon would be nice. The barkeep here has a case of four six packs he'll let you have for forty dollars."

The cost seemed a bit high, but a fourth Thursday divisible evenly by the month doesn't come very often, so I couldn't resist. I peeled off the twenties, signed the license--to make it official--and almost before you can say "fools and their money" we were outside beside their pickup.

"Follow us," the fellow who had been on my right said. "We're going out to Ayres Natural Bridge in Converse County. If we get too far ahead, take Exit 151 off the Interstate and go four miles south." The fellow who had been on my left was counting gunny sacks in the bed of the pickup and tussling with a pair of dogs that had been guarding the truck. They quit growling at me after a couple of belts with a sack.

The hunters drove as if they were trying to ditch me, but I knew they were just more familiar with the roads than I. My Chrysler was stressed, but it kept up. At the parking lot for the hike to Ayres Natural Bridge, they spun the pickup, raising dust, and got out laughing.

"You're drinking the bait," I protested.

"Just a little bit," the diver said. "Besides, you only need a six pack to attract one. Why don't you take a six pack and go up on the natural bridge--the jackalope use that as a game trail when they come down to the water that's beneath the bridge. We'll take the two remaining six packs and wait down here below. Give you first crack at them."

I listened to the advice from these expert jackalope hunters and then started the climb up the hill to the natural bridge. I was afraid the creatures would be too fast for me because I had heard they could go ninety miles an hour. "No, no," the driver had said. "That's an exaggeration. We've clocked them alongside the pickup at no more than thirty-five. Besides, you get them when they're bending over to pick up the six pack with their teeth. Their tail goes up in the air and that's when you scoop the bag up from behind and capture them. Bring the bag clear over their ears and tie it off around their horns."

He had given me a short cord for that purpose.

I set the bait and hunkered behind a bush for the wait. The spot I had chosen was right next to the game trail, though it was so well beaten that I suspected it might be a regular hikers' trail. I assume the guides had set their trap somewhere below me just where a little water extends in from the LaPrele Reservoir.

I probably sat for no more than twenty minutes before I heard anything. It was the "weep, weep" I had been told was the nocturnal hunting cry of the jackalope. It is a questioning sound as if asking "Have you found the beer yet?" The proper response is a deeper "weep," as if to say "It's right here." What

confused me was how the jackalope had gotten past me, for the "weep, weep" came from below the natural bridge where the guides had set up their watch.

To test to see if these were truly jackalope, and not just some inquisitive night hawk, I sang out, "Ollie, Ollie outs in free."

Almost instantly came the echoed response: "Ollie, Ollie outs in free."

It was an echo, but it wasn't *quite* my voice. That's when I knew it was a sure enough jackalope. It is well known that on still nights jackalope will echo what is called to them. Early journeyers on the Oregon Trail had amused themselves for hours at night by testing tongue twisters on the sporting jackalope.

"Peter Piper picked a pumpkin," I yelled, and back came the response from below: "Peter Piper picked a pumpkin."

"Sally selected sea shells by the sea shore."

"Sally selected shell seas by the. . .ah, shit."

I smiled. They weren't as talented as legend. Or, maybe they were just out of practice. "We-mon-tin-ding, Win-go-la-sic, We-ta-hem-oway." Those were words I had learned as a Boy Scout when I spent a night alone in the forest in order to earn The Order of the Arrow.

"You're an idiot!"

This response confused me, but only for a moment. Jackalope have long mimicked the speech of humans and some of it must have gotten caught in their DNA. What I had heard wasn't directed at me: it was simply some improbable surfacing of racial memory--probably something yelled at an ancient relative by a belligerent pioneer.

I was still ruminating over this anomaly when I heard motion in the brush at the far end of the natural bridge. "Weep, weep?" the cry asked.

"Weep!" I answered, lowering my voice. "Weep," I cried again, to make sure they knew the beer was here.

I heard them coming, making more noise than I had expected, but I unfurled my sack and was ready. Wham! They bowled me over as they stampeded by, one of them striking me with its antler, but I quickly righted myself, employed my sack, and swooped it over the tail end of the stooping jackalope nearest me as it went for the six pack.

Bam! Another hit me from the side just as I touched my quarry and sent me sprawling. When I looked up, they were gone, but I could hear their contented "weep," weeping all the way down the trail I had taken up.

These were bigger jackalope than I had counted on. They weren't the size of those I had seen mounted in the hotel. No, these were much bigger. They were as big, --oh say, as big as a fair sized man running bent over. That big. It was their size that had surprised me. If they had been just run of the litter, I'd have gotten one sure enough.

When I got back to the pickup, dragging my sack behind me, there were the two guides and darned if they hadn't bagged a couple jackalope all by themselves. I had to admit they were sure professionals. They had them in the back of the pickup, still tied in the gunny sacks with only the antlers sticking out. One of the guides shone a flashlight on the sacks for just an instant, and they looked to me like

tree limbs sticking out of the sacks, but I have been around and know what a fool a flashlight in the night can make of the eyes.

But the jackalope were in there. I could see them wiggling around. "Won't the dogs bother them on the way back to town?" I asked.

"No, we sent the dogs on ahead."

"What are you going to do with them when you get back? Skin them and mount the heads?"

"Are you crazy?" the driver accused me. "This is a state park, a catch and release area. We're just going to have out pictures taken with them and then take them back and turn them loose."

I threw my empty sack into the bed of their pickup and stalked back to my Chrysler. I didn't try to keep up with them on the way back, but when I got to the LaBonte Hotel their truck was already there. They must have been in the lounge because I could hear an awful lot of loud talking and laughing in a language I didn't understand.

I wasn't in the mood for a drink even though I hadn't gotten a single bottle out of the case I'd bought for the hunt. I knew what had happened to *my* six pack: the jackalope got it. What happened to the two the guides used as bait they didn't tell me. The jackalope didn't get them. That was for sure. The guides bagged the jackalope before they could make off with the beer.

After such an exciting night, I headed for bed, though sleeping was out of the question until the lounge closed. Until that time there was only loud voices,

laughter, and tinny polka music from the jukebox. Where those people get their money for such foolishness, I'll never understand.

Until the ruckus finally quieted down, I went over the evening in my mind. Again and again I saw the jackalope charging me until I finally hit upon what I had done wrong. I was so excited I was almost unable to sleep the remainder of the night. I couldn't wait until the next time the number of the fourth Thursday is divisible by the month without leaving a remainder. In the morning I was going to find a calendar and learn when that would happen. It didn't matter when that was. I was going to be in Douglas, and. . .

This time I was going to bring a bigger sack.



Robert O'Shaughnessy Winokur

Veteran traveler of the prairie that I am, I was surprised that I had never heard of Robert O. Winokur. Perhaps it is because he doesn't have a proper monument to his name, a pyramid or obelisk to remind people of his existence, and of his passing.

I first learned of him through Mari Sandoz, the great Nebraskan writer of western history and of such enduring novels as *Slogam House*. Learned of him through her *indirectly*, I should say. Any time I am in the northern Nebraskan sand

hills I am obliged to head to Gordon and the Mari Sandoz Museum. It's on main street, housed in the notions and stationary store on the east side of the street. There's a small sign.

If you want hardback copies of of Sandoz' works, the museum has several titles remaining from the defunct Hasting House Publications. They sell for \$10 in the museum, but I have seen the identical books selling for \$25 at the Colorado Antiquarian Book fare at The Mart just off I-70 in Denver.

This time I didn't buy a hardback book, largely because the only title they had that I didn't was *Miss Morissa* and I consider it much inferior to her other works, particularly *Crazy Horse*, *Buffalo Hunters*, *The Beaver Men*, and *Old Jules*. Instead, I purchased a biography of her I didn't already own. Additionally, I learned that Mari's last surviving sibling, Caroline Pifer, had finally moved into an assisted living facility there in Gordon and was no longer making the fifty-two mile round-trip drive daily. Both the ladies in the museum and I were relieved as it was quite a haul from the homestead for a ninety year old, especially since the first six miles were over two-rut sand before she encountered asphalt. I had visited her at that remote site two years prior.

After placing my purchase into the trunk of my car, I thought a short, bracing one might help me on my drive east, as my destination was Smith Falls, along the Niobrara. That's a spring-fed river. To affect this pick-me-up, I chose a bar on the same side of the street as the museum--not the first one to the north, but the second, still on the same short block, of course.

The interior was dark and I scarcely noticed anyone as I slipped in and took a seat at the bar with my back to the brown-glazed, mullioned window that permitted little light. Instantly I was beset upon by a straggly-haired woman mewling silently with her mouth and waving her hands in some random, but apparently meaningful to her, order. She shoved a business-sized card at my nose and I snatched it for fear of losing an eye.

By holding it up to the light I was just able to read it. The woman was claiming to be a deaf mute and this was her way of raising funds to support the school she attended. Now I've been around and know much of what's what in the world, and this was an obvious scam. I shooed her away with a motion of my hand that would have carried a very explicit message even if she had been a deaf mute.

When she went out the door, providing a brief flood of light, I heard a bottle settle to the wood about four stools down from me. I got only a brief glimpse of this man in a cowboy hat before the door to the outside closed.

"That's what I like to see," said a voice from the darkness where the man's silhouette had appeared before the door closed. "A man who knows how and where to place his money wisely."

"I'm a retired teacher," I told the darkness. That was usually all the explanation I had ever needed.

The man didn't answer, but I heard him shuffling and the first thing I saw was an arm moving into the light along the bar beside me. Its fingers pushed a picture which I judged I was to pick up, and I did. It looked for all the world like a small tombstone engraved with the initials R. O. W. Instead of being horizontal,

the lettering was vertical--the R on top and the W on the bottom. This had been necessary because the tombstone wasn't wide enough to accommodate the letters. Though it was made of stone, it looked more like a stake. Its shape was that of the Cleopatra obelisk along the banks of the Thames in London, but instead of being fifty feet tall it stood only two feet above the prairie.

"It looks like a tombstone," I told the man and pushed the picture back into the darkness.

"Bob Winokur," the voice in the dark said. I knew he was telling me who was buried beneath the stone. When I didn't respond, he said further, "A rather ignominious grave for such a storied pioneer of the West."

"Bob Winokur?" I asked. I consider myself a minor authority on this region but I was drawing a blank.

"Robert Winokur," the voice explained. "Robert O. Winokur. The man who settled the West. The man who guided the first religious figure, Father Pierre-Jean de Smet, over South Pass in present day Wyoming and showed him the way to Oregon. Later took the first white woman, Narcissus Whitman over the same route, though he didn't hang around long and the Indians killed her. He's also the man who taught Jim Bridger how to dip castor onto a stick and where to place it on the river bank to catch the beaver. He was with Ashley when he floated down the Green River through the Gates of Lodore. Some say he even taught the beaver how to gnaw, but I think that might be stretching it just a bit."

"O?" I said, but he misunderstood. "What does the O stand for?"

"O'Shaughnessy. His mother was Irish. But there's more to the man than his ancestry. Remember Jack Slade and Doc Middleton?"

"The bandits?"

"Those are the ones. He caught up to and killed them both. Got a medal from the President for it. He was also the first to discover gold in the Black Hills. Rode Pony Express and could ride the pants off that amateur named Buffalo Bill. First to build a bridge across the North Platte, down around Bridgeport, Nebraska. There's pictures enough of it. Also built the later bridge at Fort Casper. In his spare time he was the first to captain a steamboat all the way up the Missouri to Fort Union. Helped Fremont with three of his four explorations of the West--the successful ones--though he gave most of the credit for it to Kit Carson. Bob didn't go in for that kind of show. First white man to see the Great Salt Lake and Yellowstone Park."

"Indians?"

"No better fighter in his day. Survived both the Fetterman Massacre and Little Big Horn, though he didn't like to brag about it. Some say both he and Little Big Man held Crazy Horse's arms back so that the frightened guard at Fort Robinson could bayonet him. But we here in Gordon don't buy that. Bob wouldn't have needed help."

"This Robert O. Winokur sounds like the perfect hero, the very ideal of western man. Why haven't I heard about him before this?"

The voice in the darkness was quiet for a moment, as if drawing in a reluctant breath. "Bob was close to perfect, but he had one slight imperfection. It

was that flaw that ended up killing him. It's the biggest reason why all he has for a marker is this little piece of stone," he said and shoved the picture along the bar until it was again in my view. "And it's why his earthly remains still lie beneath a fence line just outside of town."

He had me curious now. "A flaw? I can't imagine."

"It was his hair. Bob had a real thatch. If those westerners had known their history they would have called it a pompadour, but most folks out here called it the *Bob*. Oh, did it ever stick up. Added six inches to his height. He was so proud of it he never wore a hat. It was auburn when he was young, and when it turned gray with age, he was all the more imposing. Stood out like a snowbank in July. Hair was important in the West. You remember Custer, don't you?"

Not only did I know Custer, I had waded across the Little Big Horn at the point he had made his first charge, keeping on the lookout for park police the whole time.

"Well Custer was known sometimes as Yellow Hair. At other times the Indians called him the same thing they called Crazy Horse. That was *Curly*," he said and waited for me to respond. I had my drink to my mouth and couldn't. "Both *did* have curly hair, at least wavy," he explained. "The Indians don't like to talk about it, but Crazy Horse was half European. Mari Sandoz has that in her book," he said by way of proof and impressed me. "His dad was probably a French trapper."

"But what's this got to do with his hair and his fatal flaw?"

The hand reached into the light and slid the picture back into the darkness.

"Well, the Indians didn't call him Curly or Yellow Hair. All they said when Bob approached was 'Here comes Bob.' His hair was that distinctive. Naming it or comparing it to anything else just wouldn't do, not even for an Indian. And, of course, you know all about Indians and scalps."

"Oh, no," I uttered. "You don't mean. . ."

"I do mean. A couple of drunken Indians waylaid him one night and scalped him right down the middle, ripped off a big swatch until he looked like a skunk with a white stripe down its back, only this was where flesh had been and was now just gristle. The Indians didn't kill him, not really wanting to hurt him, so they just took the scalp and left him there screaming and holding one hand on his head where the hair had been to keep the blood from running into his eyes.

"By now you know what Bob thought of his hair--never owned a hat to that moment. Well, he took out after that pair, caught them and-- I shouldn't go into much detail here other than to say he was mad. Real mad. To tie this story up, which is more than the relatives of those two Indians could do with any of the pieces they were able to find, Bob got his scalp back.

"He had a gourd with him that he carried water in and he stuffed the piece of his scalp down in the water and added a little salt as preservative. Then he rode here to Gordon to get a doctor to sew it back on. The doctor told him it wouldn't work, but Bob insisted. It looked pretty good for two or three weeks, but when the skin started to turn--he hadn't bothered to tan it as he should have--he wasn't welcome in as many places as he had been before because of the odor.

"Now, when someone said 'Here comes Bob,' people would head the other way. And to say a fellow has a real *Bob* lost all its previous meaning. Bald guys would run their hands over their slick pates and say 'How do you like my *Bob*.' It always got a laugh. Incidentally, that's where the term comes from for to cut your hair real short, to *Bob* it."

I had trouble believing what the man in the dark was telling me. "You say he's buried out along the road somewhere? And all he has is that tiny tombstone you showed me?"

The picture slid slowly back into the light. "When Bob got to be such a pariah, he took to drink. One winter he took a bottle and staggered out of town. Folks didn't really miss him--I think they liked him because of his imposing appearance, his previously imposing appearance that is--so when he didn't return no one even bothered to mention his lack of presence. It wasn't until late the next spring when the drifts along the roadway melted enough for his head to start sticking out. Historians figure he sat down after he'd finished that bottle and wasn't about to budge until another came along.

"Whatever, after three or four more weeks folks began to think they ought to bury him. There was no money in his pockets to buy a plot in the graveyard, so they just buried him right there along the fence line. A couple of years later some kind soul placed this cheap marker there lest we forget."

I don't know when I'd heard such a sad story. "Isn't there something we could do about giving him a proper burial?"

The arm stretched from the darkness and a finger tapped the picture. "That's exactly why I'm here."

It seems the stranger and his buddies had gotten together with the city fathers of Gordon and they were told that if they could raise matching funds, the city would build a proper monument to Bob next to the demonstration windmill beside the feed store on main street.

"It's just about where the railroad tracks used to be," the voice in the dark explained. "Next to the new bicycle path."

As quick as I could, I had my wallet out and placed a twenty beside the picture of the tiny tombstone. "Count me in," I said proudly. "Anything for the memory of Ol' Bob."

The arm and finger re-extended into the light and the bill slid from view. "For another twenty you can have your name carved into one of the red bricks that are going to surround the eternal flame. The flame will be at the base of the forty-foot bronze we are at this moment commissioning."

I couldn't wait until the bronze was erected and pulled out another twenty-dollar bill.

"Print your name on it big," the voice said and a pen slid out from the darkness. I did and the hand retrieved the pen and the bill. "For being such a generous donor to the memory of Bob Winokur, you can keep the picture of his present tombstone."

It felt good to do something right for a change and that glow remained with me on my way out of town. At last, I had contributed to make permanent the

memory of an important person in history. And this man had done such great things. How had all the books managed to omit him. They included such known rascals and liars as Liver Eating Johnson and Hugh Glass. Why not Robert O. Winokur? His exploits were genuine, the man in the bar had told me so himself.

So engrossed was I in adoration of Ol' Bob that I was surprised I even saw it, but I did. It was at the top of the swale that rose from the ditch to the fence line, but it was unmistakable. It was identical to the picture that rested in my left shirt pocket. It was the grave stone of Robert O. Winokur.

I braked immediately and fortunately there was a farm road just at the spot I needed to turn off. Parking in the weeds at the side of this road, I scrambled up the embankment and there it was--the final resting place of the soon to be re-interred hero pioneer of the Old West. Maybe it was the moment or the emotion, and maybe it was because I was out of breath from running up the embankment. Whatever the reason, I removed my hat and knelt with a reverence I hadn't felt at Little Big Horn or Wounded Knee.

"It turned out great, Bob," I told the marker. For some reason I felt compelled to recount all the good that had come from of his efforts. The colonizing and Christianizing of the West. The resolution of the Indian question by allowing them to open gambling casinos. I told him of the discovery of the Ogallala aquifer that made irrigation possible in this otherwise desert--and the stealing of water from the western slope of the Rockies for places where the aquifer didn't reach. Or, paying farmers not to plant crops where crops wouldn't grow anyway. I told him that some of those little towns he worried about were

now big enough to pollute their nearby rivers for miles down stream. Real metropolises, they were. I went on and on telling him of all such good results and didn't stop even when a pickup pulled up next to my car.

I even told him I was sorry about his hair and that its re-implantation was now possible. I suspect he was proud of being ahead of his time.

When I got back to my car, the farmer in the pickup was still waiting for me. He looked at me as if he were afraid I might have a gun.

"Were you talking to that rock?" he asked.

"Rock? Me? No, I was talking to Bob." I pointed but the farmer seemed blind. He looked to one side of me for a view and then craned his neck for a look around the other side of me.

"Where's Bob?" he asked. This time his eyes narrowed on me. I wasn't sure, but I suspect the way he was searching under his seat with his right hand that he was looking for his own gun.

"Right there. *Bob*." I walked up close enough to his pickup that he could sight right along my arm to the tombstone with the initials R. O. W.

"And you call that rock *Bob*?"

"Not the rock. The man buried under it. That great pioneer Robert O. Winokur."

He looked down my arm again to make sure we were talking about the same rock. "Are you tetches, boy? That's a *right of way* marker. They line every roadway in Nebraska. There must be half a jillion or more of 'em."

This time I almost put my shoulder to his nose so that he could sight down my arm as if it were a gun barrel. "No, the tombstone," I said.

He tried again with no better results. "I see it," he said. "A concrete post with the letters R-O-W on it. The letters stand for **Right Of Way**."

I had been a teacher for several years, so I knew there were just some people you couldn't teach. You couldn't convince them a poem was any good even if you read it to them. I knew arguing with him--or in this case attempting to explain--would fail. Instead, I decided to let the old fellow wallow in his ignorance. He seemed more than content to let me do the same. When he ground the truck's gears and lurched forward, he glanced once at me in the side mirror and then looked out to Bob's grave. He shook his head as if he was trying to shoo away a bee without using his hands.

He was right about one thing, though. There is more than one marker for old Bob. The fellow in the bar must have gotten that part wrong. Almost every quarter of a mile I see a small tombstone to his memory. He's quite popular out here. At road crossings there's a little tombstone on each corner. It's all for the good, though. Every time I see one I can't help but think of Robert O. Winokur and his good works. I find it an inspiration for my own life.

I can't wait to see his monument when it's finished in Gordon. And I hope that fellow spells my name right on the brick. It's MACK, like in the truck, not the MAC that's really only a nickname. Not a real name like Bob.