

## Fire, Ice and Ashes

By J. W. Henson

I, John vanEgmont, was born into a remnant of the Dutch vanEgmont family in the year 1930. We could trace our family back into the 800s through The Hague in the Netherlands. Goethe wrote the Egmont Tragedy and some years later Beethoven put to music the Egmont Overture.

Six months after I was born my father died suddenly leaving mother and me to fend for ourselves against the world. Times were hard and I had to work long hours every day, even as a young child. Of course I was not in school, being of such young age. I was not a bad boy, but I did have an enormous amount of energy, and it was not all dissipated by the hard fieldwork that I did. I believe that I could carry as much of a workload by the age of fourteen as most any man. Some of the tasks that I was given seemed endless and others cruel and were instrumental in hardening, and toughening me physically and emotionally well beyond my years.

Yes, my mother loved me, for she often told me so, of this I was sure, but she had the most unusual way of demonstrating it. She would find some of my trifling more than a bit annoying, and would appoint herself as detective, jury, judge, and executioner, all rolled into one. For corporal punishment she had a double piece of one-eighth inch thick leather three inches wide and 30" long, fastened at the top with a handle. The thing was called a *razor strap* and was used in barbershops to keep a sharp edge on the razors. She used it to keep a razor sharp edge on me. When time came for a whipping she would bend me across the bed and take many good licks with that two and one-half foot long strap. Then at other times for diversion she would take a hickory withe and wear it completely away on me before returning to her other pressing chores. It was really more than a withe; it was a shillelagh, or a spontoon. Needing the whipping I cannot deny.

Mother was not the only one who whipped youngsters in those day. I was without a father and was fair game for every one in the community, back then. Teachers in school were as vicious as were the parents at home. I suffered many a thrashing from those well-meaning institutionalists. When I got a beating at school I got another when I got home, if it were ever discovered. That was one of mom's *Thousand Rules of Behavior*.

Mom was a great believer in the Biblical statement, "Spare the rod and spoil the child!" She did not apply the other injunctions of scripture with equal merit. Rod and strap were never idle long at her house. This also hardened me and gave me more than my share of hate. I did not hate her, however, for I knew what a great struggle it was for her to keep our body and souls together in those days of the Great Depression.

Just out of the city of Chattanooga there was an orphanage and reformatory call Bonny Oaks School for Boys. Mother would threaten to send me there if I were to give her any trouble that she could not handle. That was not likely for she seemed able and willing to tackle all manner of behavior problems. I often thought it might be fun to be in the reformatory with other high-spirited children.

Another time Mother told me that she would "turn me over to my uncle Robert to correct" if I were to give her any trouble. He was her baby brother and several families in the community had sent sons there to be taught the elements of hard work, discipline, and respect. I informed her that I would never tolerate his abuses, but I had no idea how soon I would have the opportunity to see the fulfillment of those words.

One day she said she thought that a summer with Robert on his farm would be good for me. She and Robert had made some secret arrangements and the next time he was in our home he took me undertow and drifted rapidly toward his automobile. He put me into the front seat from the passenger's side of the car. As he started around the car I locked the doors. It had been raining so the windows of the car were already rolled up. He had left the keys in the car as was usual in those country days. Our house sat on a grade so I pushed the clutch in and the car started down the hill. When I got about a quarter of a mile from the house, I drove it into a deep ditch that would require some help to get it extricated. I started the engine running and left it so. Getting out I locked the door with the keys still in the ignition. Just an extra touch of bewilderment for him.

The next day he returned to our house and took me by the arm and led me to the car. Of course it was with my protest. It was summer time and hot as is usual in that part of the country at that season. There was no air conditioning in the vehicles back then so the windows were down. As he got up to speed I reached across, turned off the engine, pulled out the ignition key and threw it out of the window. Those cars did not have steering wheel locks at that time, and he brought it to a rapid stop. I jumped from the car and returned home. When he found the key he continued on his journey north to his farm.

The next time Robert got his hands on me he half carried and half dragged me along at his side. When we reached the top of the seven concrete steps going down from our lawn into the street where his car was parked, I stuck my foot between his legs and he took a very nasty tumble down to the road pulling me along in the process. By the time we reached the bottom he had released his hold on me trying hard to save his own hide. I was free to make my escape. He went limping to his car and I returned to the house, for after all it was my home.

Well, Robert didn't come around again for some time. I guess he was recovering physically and emotionally from our last encounter. But alas one day he appeared and with a rope he bound my hands behind me, and dragging me to the car chucked me into the backseat, locking the door. He didn't do a very good job securing me, so as he drove away I was soon out of the restraint.

Wrapping an end of the rope around each hand, I threw a loop of it around his neck and bracing myself against the back of the front seat with my knees I pulled back tight. At this point he was making a strange gurgling sound and was bringing the car to a rapid halt. When the car slid to a stop I unlocked the door and stepped outside. He sat working his head back and forth and massaging his neck. As I walked toward home I saw him drive slowly away. I wondered, "Will this man ever learn?"

It was some weeks before he tried to get me again. I am sure that a proud man such as he was suffering from a loss of image that a 14 year old lad could abort his every plan of capture. This

time he came better prepared. Hemming me in a corner of a room in our house he took a rope from his pocket and tied my legs and arms behind me. He then tied my arms to my legs to secure me. He stuffed me rather roughly into the back seat of the car, locked the doors, and drove away to his farm.

### **Phoenix's Ashes**

Uncle Robert's farm consisted of approximately 300 acres of forested timber, meadow and cropland. The heart of the property was a single story house that had been built in the 1920s and some years later a second story added without any improvement to its box like appearance. Next was built a large barn to the south of the house. He continued to add to the property, as money became available. Next was a potato house for curing and storing potatoes and sweet potatoes, or sweet roots as we called them in jest. A chicken house and garage were the last two of the additions. It was a three-car garage without doors to enclose the vehicles.

Robert had never been able to see the virtue of insuring his property. He thought if the large insurance companies could make money selling insurance he could save money by not buying it. He was a man who was very close with his money, and operated his farm well in the black while other depression age neighbors were having trouble borrowing money for seed and fertilizer in the Spring, and depending upon the weather to provide enough crop in return to pay the creditors back in the Fall.

His farmland lay in a gentle roll across forest, field, and lea. The soil was a rock encrusted, red loamy earth that was not overly productive, but raised adequate crops under his intense care. Hay for the livestock, potatoes, corn, cotton, melons, tomatoes, fruit and beef were some of the products raised for the market. Help was brought in at harvest time to secure the labor of a summer before the onslaught of winter. The boys and girls worked hard and flirted with each other when there was no one about to reprimand them. The produce was taken to the farmer's market in Chattanooga for sale to grocer, and citizen.

Robert was a true disciple of Emerson. He believed that what was true for him was right and true for all mankind. I thought of him, as Hoyle for all things had to be according to him. The Bible refers to a "certain" man. Well that was Robert for he was *certain* that he was always right. He believed that all people watched him and tried to pattern their lives after his ways. Weaker men often look up to men of this caliber. As I have said before several people had loaned him their sons to keep for a season to teach them respect and strong work ethics. I had seen the abuse that he heaped upon his own children. He kicked his young teen-age son so hard one time that the mud from his heavy boot flew 130 feet. I measured it while he stood aside and watched, but said nothing.

Robert wheeled his car off the main gravel road and proceeded up his driveway to the garage. Taking me by the arm he roughly pulled me from the vehicle, and threw me to the ground. I promptly arose to a kneeling position as best I could.

Carrying and dragging me to the back of the garage he removed his belt and wrapped it once around his hand. He commanded that I kneel down. I continued to stand as well as a manacled

one could. He gave me a fierce blow across the head and I felt the buckle slash my face. I said to him, "I wouldn't do that if I were you!" With the next lick across my back I could feel warm blood trickling down my spine. With each lick I drew a quick, sharp breath much as one does when jumping into a very cold pool of water. With the first blow his anger came over him in resurgent waves remembering all of the previous pain and embarrassment that I had caused him. The beating continued until at last I fell to the ground in an unconscious state.

When I awoke I was lying on a hard, wooden floor with my hands and legs free. A full moon was shining at its zenith through double open windows. Seeing the moon at that position I knew that it was around midnight. I felt sore from head to foot, and as I tried to stand the dried blood on my shredded shirt pulled against the tortured flesh. My head whirled and I dropped back onto the floor. At last I stood, holding on to the windowsill until my head began to clear. I removed the shirt and dabbed dry the blood that was still oozing from the wounds. As my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness I could see a door on the wall opposite the windows.

I was dizzy as I stumbled toward the door. Very softly I turned the doorknob only to discover that the door was locked from the other side. I lay my blood soaked shirt at the foot of the door to block out any light that might come from my room. I felt along the wall to the right side of the door and found a light switch. Turning on the light I discovered that I was in a small boxlike bedroom. It was a rectangular shaped room with a closet at the far end. The closet must have been used for storage of winter clothing that was not needed at this season of the year. There was a twin bed with a thin cotton mattress, two sheets and a blanket. A five-drawer chest stood along the wall near the door. A strong wooden chair was at the foot of the bed and a heavy nightstand stood at its head. On the stand was a kerosene lamp full of oil for emergency lighting. By the lamp was a plate with two slices of bread and nearby a glass of water. So Robert had me on a bread and water diet. Inside the nightstand drawer was a candle and a box of matches. I put a hand full of the matches into my left pocket and closed the drawer.

Stepping over to the window and looking down I discovered that I was in a second story room. I saw a movement beneath me on the ground. Looking closer I could tell that it was Robert's mangy, cur dog. It was staked to a short rope to keep me from climbing out of the window. It was a dirty white animal without pedigree. He did not feed the beast well and its killer instincts were honed razor sharp by hunger. I turned the light off and sat on the saggy bed for a while to regain my composure. I had a full night's work before me and was soon up and about it. Turning the light on again, I took a man's heavy shirt from the clothes closet. Removing the globe from the lamp and unscrewing the wick, I dampened the back of the shirt with some of the kerosene and put it on my sore body. Kerosene was the miracle drug of those days in our part of the country. However, the more I moved around the more I got the use of my muscles.

I took the chair and forced its sturdy back under the doorknob so that Robert could not gain entrance into my room. Very quietly I slid the chest of drawers in place also against the door. I tore the sheets from the bed into foot wide strips, tied them together, and then around the frame between the double windows. I laid this rope on the floor at the foot of the windows. Next I tore the slices of bread into half-inch squares, and placed the plate on the windowsill. I then splashed kerosene over the clothes in the closet, along the floor, walls, and over the mattress. The heavy nightstand was next moved to the window, and with a match I set fire to all of the oil soaked, wet

surfaces.

I was shocked at the intensity of the conflagration in such a confined area, and was spurred onto more intense action. I lifted the plate of broken bread, holding it out of the window, let the bread slide down along the side of the house to within reach of the dog. He was at once upon the bread but it being in many pieces he could not wolf it all down in an instant. I lifted the heavy nightstand to the windowsill and with good aim released it directly above the dog. In his hunger and haste to eat he did not notice the great weight falling upon him. It hit him squarely in the center of the back breaking the spine so quickly that there was not the slightest yelp from the mutt. The animal broke some of the sound of the falling nightstand, but I did not pause to see if Robert was awakened by the noise. Obviously he slept well, being satisfied with his night's work. I threw the sheet strips from the window and climbed down.

A grand glow came from the windows but since there were no other houses in sight and Robert slept on the far side of the house no alarm had been given. I ran for the garage. Inside I found two lawn mowers. I removed the gasoline caps from each and turned them on their sides so that the fuel came gushing out and ran under the two vehicles. I saw a five gallon can of spare fuel and opened it and poured it along the walls and any flammable substances that I could find, including the seats and tires on the vehicles. Standing well outside I threw a match onto the soaked ground. As it exploded it made a hollow boom that lifted the roof about a foot into the air and then fell back in place with a thud. That, I knew for sure, would awaken Robert. As I was turning to run away a pickaxe caught my eye. Positioning it upside down I knocked the head free from the sturdy hickory handle with one stroke on the ground and made a mad dash for the back door of the house. I hid myself within the shadows at the foot of the stairway. I did not have long to wait for Robert appeared at the top of the stairs with his shotgun in hand. He started down the steps two at a time and just as he reached the landing I released a powerful blow against his shins with the hickory cudgel, breaking both legs between the knees and ankles. He drew a monstrous deep breath and howled like a stuck bull. The gun went airborne, landing in the next room. He raised his arms against the second blow. It broke them both at the elbows. The final blow was across his chest cracking some ribs. I leaned over and looked into his frightened, pained filled ashen face and whispered, "I told you that you ought not give me that beating, but you just wouldn't listen, would you?"

I ran out of the house and through the gate that lead to the barn. In passing I saw a hay manger where fresh hay was put for the animals. Taking another of the matches I set this ablaze, and then took an armload of the hay that was burning and stuffed it under the corner of the chicken house. I heard the roof on the north side of the house cave in while I was igniting the chicken house. Hurrying along to the barn I climbed up into the hayloft and set it to burning in several places among the dry fodder and hay. As I left, everything was aflame except the potato house, and I thought that they might need that for some purpose in the near future. However, as I was later to learn, it too burned, having caught from the intense heat of the house and garage that had stood close by.

I started on a run for the county road and in passing the upper corner of the ten-acre cornfield I stopped and broke off three or four stalks of the dry corn. Setting them afire I dragged the flaming stalks from row to row as I ran for the road. The blaze was upwind and soon the entire

north side of the cornfield was burning and spreading rapidly to the south. Robert had told me last night that today I was to begin harvesting that field of corn, and I did it in the most unexpected and imaginative way!

Retreating from the farm, or should I say the ex-farm, I ran south along the gravel road. It must have been near three o'clock in the morning by this time. On reaching the summit of a hill I looked back down on the blaze that I had set. It was beginning to wash the countryside with a soft golden yellow light. About a mile further on I could see the lights of a car coming. I hid myself in the ditch behind a bush until it was gone. I do not know how long I rested there before pushing on to my mother's house. I arrived there in the gray of dawn. Slipping around to the back of the house I fetched my bicycle and headed south toward Ringgold, Georgia. The fire was now just a dim glow on the distant northern horizon as the halo of a new day was arising along the eastern skirt of the sky.

### **Up From The Ashes**

I arrived in the village of Ringgold before lunch, and found the strength ebbing from my body caused by the beating, the emotions provoked by the fire, and by the long bike ride in the early hours of the morning. It had been the most frustrating of nights.

I happened upon a man harvesting in his pumpkin patch. He spoke to me in the friendliest manner and paused from his labors to continue with a conversation. I learned that his name was Robert Millwright. I asked him if he had any work that I could do in exchange for a warm meal. It was almost lunchtime so we made our way to the house where his wife had a grand meal prepared. To his question of where I had started, I told him that I had an uncle in Calhoun, Georgia, and was riding down to spend a month with him. He said that it was forty miles to Calhoun, but that he had to drive down there on some business, and could go this very afternoon as good as any other time.

That food tasted the best of any that I can ever remember. I have often thought back on it, and considered the man's wife the world's best cook. Or was I just super hungry? He had some things to do before we left for Calhoun, and he told me to rest while he was gone. No sooner suggested than I was fast asleep in a comfortable overstuffed chair.

Upon being awakened the man placed my bike in the back of his pick-up truck and we started south along US Highway 41. It was about an hour's drive and we talked about many things as we went along. I was still groggy from the night that I had just gone through.

When we arrived in Calhoun I directed him through various streets until I saw a house that looked as if no one was home. I asked him to stop and I got out, telling him that they had told me where the key to the house was hidden. As he drove away I got on my bike and rode out to the banks of the Oostanaula River. I found a secluded spot and laid down to rest. I immediately dropped off to sleep.

When I awoke a bright sun was shining through a window into the room where I was. A nurse was standing by my bed. "What am I doing here?," I asked of her. She said that I was found a couple of days before on the banks of the river unconscious and running a high fever.

The hospital photographed my back from all possible angles while treating it with various antibiotics, or what was beginning to be called the miracle drugs. The bandages were changed a couple of times each day. As I grew stronger I came to notice a policeman outside my door. Then one day a man came from the courts with a member of the sheriff's office. They asked me how I came to have such grievous cuts, abrasions, and bruises on my back and head. I knew that by this time Robert's story was published in the Chattanooga Times and all of these people were probably readers. I had no identification on me, but knew that they were well aware of who I was.

I told them the whole story of how my uncle had beaten me until I was unconscious. I said that he would never admit to the beatings.. I explained that it was about the third or fourth time that he had captured me, and how I escaped each time but the last. They then moved into another direction and inquired about the fires and the beating that Robert had sustained. I asked what fires and what beating they were speaking about. They explained that Robert's entire farm was burned to a crisp cinder. I told them that if I did such things that I must have been out of my head with pain from the beatings.

I was transferred to a secure house as I began to heal and grow stronger. They were good to me, and I did all I could around the house to be of help. I also kept my ears open and discovered that they were going to have my mother and Robert down to Calhoun in one week for a court of inquiry. My strength began to return and I grew stronger every day until by the time the hearing came up I was back at my best. One day I discovered my bicycle in the tool shed behind the safe house. It would come in handy later on.

I was lead into the courthouse at nine o'clock on the appointed morning. Just as we were passing a door identified as the Men's Restroom, I told the policeman that I needed to go to the toilet before spending a lot of time with the judge and my folks. He pushed me inside and told me to hurry. I glanced out the window and saw a drainpipe going down the wall in a corner of the building, only a foot or so from the window's edge. I filed that bit of information away for use later on. When I went into the room where Robert and mother were seated with the juvenile judge, I drew a quick, short breath when I saw the appearance of Robert. He didn't look well at all. Something had happened to him since the last time that I had seen him! He was in a full plaster of Paris cast except for his neck and head. He had a waxen color that contrasted with the stark white of the plaster cast. He was seated and his legs stuck straight out in front of his torso, and the arms were in a position that looked as if he had just shot for a basket in a game of basketball. Robert showed no emotion as I came in front of him, but my mother said in a low voice, "How could you have done such a thing!" I didn't tell her but it was rather simple.

The hearing dragged on for a couple of hours. Robert told how he beat me after I assaulted him with a cudgel. The judge was not to be hood winked and said that Robert was unable to move after the beating that he had taken. However, as the day wore on and each of them showing such tender compassion toward me the judge was in favor of returning me to their custody. I told the judge that they would have to keep me tied or otherwise restrained for I would not willing stay with either one of them. He said, "Would you rather be confined to a Boys' Reformatory?" I replied, "Yes! I certainly would!" He indicated that he was still in favor of turning me over to

*my friendly family.* When I saw how the land lay I began to think of saving myself. I approached the judge and told him that I needed to go to the toilet. He said that it had been an unusually long session and that we would recess until tomorrow morning at 9am. at which time he would issue his verdict. He assigned the bailiff to take me to the restroom, before returning me to the safe house. Just as I was leaving the courtroom I turned and took a long look at Uncle Robert and my Mother, only to be brusquely jerked into the hallway by the strong-arm-of-the-law.

We were on the second floor, and just as we approached the toilet door another official of the court approached the policeman and asked if he could see him for just a moment. The big burly policeman turned me into the toilet and told me to go to the restroom and to be quick about it. He returned to the member of the court at the outside of the restroom door. I had been in that toilet earlier in the day under the escort of the policeman. The corner window had been open and I could see a gutter downspout not far from the opening. I now rushed to the window, lowering it behind me so they would misinterpret how I had fled the room. I was down the spout in no more than 15 seconds and running full speed along a ditch that hid me from the windows of the building.

As I ran along I came upon a bike sitting along side of the street. I jumped on it and started riding for dear life toward the safe house. As I rode away a young boy about my age on his own bike approached me and said, “You are John vanEgmont, aren’t you?” He said that he was George Green. I said that I was in fact John vanEgmont. He explained that he had been following my case in the newspapers and would like to help me if he could. “Is there anything that I can do to assist you?”, he asked. I was never short when it came to recognizing opportunity so I laid out the following plan to him. “Yes! There is something that you can do that would be a great service to me. You can go home and call all of your friends and have them call their friends and have them get their bicycles out on the streets and into the country lanes and highways, and ride as many hours and as far as possible. With all the bikes out I just might be able to slip through.” It was no sooner said than he turned homeward in great haste. Back at the safe house I exchanged the loaner bike for mine and headed south on back streets until I came to the edge of town and returned to US Highway 41. I found a safe place to hide and spent the balance of the day there. The officers returned to the safe house to see if I might have come back. They saw the stolen bicycle in the tool shed and assumed that it was mine and that I had never returned.

### **The Flight of the Phoenix**

I began to see bicycles passing with young boys and girls riding with purpose. Later I saw a newspaper in a service station that I was passing and quickly glanced through it. There was nothing about the bikes, but plenty about me replete with photographs. Night fell and I pressed on through the darkness toward Cartersville, keeping an alert eye out for police cars. Just as a new day dawned I spotted a garden not too far off the road. A few tomatoes and bell peppers hung on their vines waiting for the first frost. I ate my fill and said a short prayer of thanks for the owners of the patch. A nice wooded lot, soft with a carpet of pine needles provided me a place for repose during the day.

As night began to fall I straddled my bike and headed south again. About 10pm I eased into the

parking lot of a gasoline service station to use their restroom. Now the newspaper was describing the many bikers as a protest against the officials for my pursuit. As I came out of the restroom I heard a voice as soft as the coo of a dove saying, "John". There was only one car in the parking lot and in it sat a young woman. Again she called and I went over to see what she wanted. She said, "You are John vanEgmont the fugitive, aren't you?". It was in every newspaper of the area and she recognized me from my bike and an enlarged personal photo that had been published. My heart skipped a beat at being recognized, but I was too weary, hungry, and frustrated to care.

She said that her name was Catherine Plumber, and that she had been following my story from the first with great interest. She had seen the pictures of my torn back that were printed in the newspapers, and she did not believe that I was a bad person. She asked if I would like to go to her house, rest and eat before continuing on my way. She said that I would be perfectly safe there. Her house was only about a mile from the service station and I followed her car at top speed on my bicycle until we arrived at the small house near a great wood.

She prepared me a wonderful meal and furnished a soft, clean bed for the night. She said that I could rest all the next day at her house while she was away at work. My luck was changing. I took every opportunity to read the local papers about my escape and the search being made for me. The bike protest had now spread to several States and was causing concern over so many youths out on the highways both day and night.

I stayed on for a couple of days and then one evening she stated that she had an uncle who had a large ranch along the Pecos River in western Texas. She was very friendly with her uncle and had talked to him about my plight on the telephone that very day. He too had been following my story, for it was making the newspapers all across the country by this time. Roy Compton, for that was his name, had suggested that she send me down to his ranch to work. We looked through a photo album and I saw that the place was beautifully situated in a natural valley skirting the river. Mr. Compton had a face full of noble features and compassion. It did not take me long to accept his kind offer. The newspapers were now calling the bike protest a national phenomenon and said that it had spread to several foreign countries and was growing in intensity every day. The search for me was being intensified, and all roads, and means of transportation were being watched day and night all around a growing area.

The next day Catherine drove me to Rome, Georgia, bought me a bus ticket. She gave me \$40 for food along the way and for another bus ticket from Dallas-Fort Worth to the Compton Ranch on the Pecos. Breaking the trip into two completely different parts would throw off anyone who might later put together my parting from Rome and come looking for me.

She had furnished me with a hat and new clothes to form a disguise. I told her that I would repay her for the expense and trouble that she had gone to on my behalf. She said that she would sell my bicycle and that it would cover some of the expenses. I knew that I was still deeply in her debt and was determined some day to repay her for all the kindnesses shown to me.

The trip to Texas went very smoothly and without incident except that I had my 15th birthday on the bus while crossing Louisiana. When I arrived in Dallas-Fort Worth I decided on a plan of

my own. Instead of buying another Greyhound Bus ticket I walked across town to the Trailways Bus Terminal and bought my ticket for the final leg of the journey.

When I arrived in the town of Pecos, Texas I was taken to the Bar None Ranch, for that was the name of Mr. Compton's ranch. He gave me a place to live in the auxiliary bunkhouse. It was clean, located near the main house and I was alone and away from the prying questions of the other ranch hands.

After a few days of recuperation I was given minor chores about the house and always kept under the close scrutiny of Mr. Compton. He was very interested in my life's story and asked to see the scars on my back several times. He and I built some fence near one of the corrals and he was very pleased with my work since I was so young. As fall drew on I was assigned a horse and worked fences in the backcountry for several days. Mr. Compton would come out a couple of times a day to see that I was working and what progress I was making. He was always surprised at the quality and quantity of fence that I was constructing all alone.

At this one location I had about two miles more of fence to build. Before leaving for the job one Monday morning I loaded a wagon with metal fence posts, crossties, Sacrete, post hole diggers, barbed wire, hammer, staples, nails, and many other items that I might need on the job. I was planning to stay over night until I was finished, so I took a sleeping bag, rifle, handgun, and lots of trail food and cooking utensils. Butch, the ranch dog had taken me over for a friend, and he followed the two horses, the wagon and me to the work site.

### **The End of the Andrews River Gang**

Mr. Compton saw me leaving and asked why I was taking so much material. I told him that I was going to stay on location until I was finished with that part of the fence. He asked how many nights I would be gone. "Three days and two nights should do the rest of the fence," I answered him.

"I am worried about you being out there all alone," he said. "There are three men from the Andrews River Gang loose in the area. They are bad hombres. There is a thousand dollar reward on each man's head."

"Sounds like an easy \$3,000.00 for an energetic man. It may be easier money than building fence. I will keep my eyes open for them. Anyway I will not be alone for Butch is with me." Butch looked up at the mention of his name, rubbed his head on my arm and gave a sharp yap. "You say a prayer for those hombres in case they do stumble into my camp," then I was off. He removed his hat from his head and gave the scalp a brisk scratch. I could see that he was grinning as I drove away. My camp would be about six miles from our ranch down along the river.

I didn't forget about the men, however. They were robbers and murders. I had heard about them on the local news. My camp would be a godsend to men in their desperate circumstances. It was unreal the evil acts they executed against men, women, and children who were in their way.

That night as dusk fell I prepared a meal, ate, cleaned the dishes, and put the camp in order. Being tired from a day of fencing I prepared for bed. I am not sure if it was a case of nerves or something that I had seen or heard during the day, but I felt that those bad men were watching

me at work all day I rolled out a blanket by the fire, put some things in it to make it look like a man sleeping. I placed my cap over my canteen for a head. It was a very good ruse.

I took my sleeping bag behind a big rock a short distance away from camp, and went to bed with the rifle and handgun within easy reach. I must have dropped off to sleep, but shortly heard a snort from one of the horses. Very stealthily I scanned the camp area from my fortress. I thought I saw a shadow move above the wagon. I continued to watch and listen. Then I saw a man crouched over, moving like a snake approaching the dummy sleeper. With several rapid thrusts of a large hunter's knife into the mannequin, he called out, "Come on in fellows. I got him." Two other men approached on a run.

I stood up and called out to them, "Drop your weapons and move toward the fire. Easy now, this gun has a hair trigger," and at that point I shot the boot of one of the men. They did not immediately reply to my demand, at least not rapidly enough.

"Don't shoot Mister. We don't mean you no harm," said a timid little fellow.

"Well, that's more than I can say for my intentions toward you. Now Butch you watch these hombres." The dog responded by moving between two of the men and with a snarl showed a brace of pearly white teeth. I lit a lantern and stepped from behind my stone fortress. The leader, a man called Gruff, saw that I was only a young fellow and he demanded in his coarse, broken voice, "Now boy drop your gun at once and run for it, or at the count of three I will kill you. Its the only way you will get out of this encounter alive!" He no more than got 'one' out of his mouth than I shot him through the heart and he dropped down dead without further word.

The other two men immediately dropped their weapons. "Now back away three paces from the guns," I demanded. They replied, but the large evil looking man glanced about him and in making a quarter turn that I considered a preparation to flee I shot him through the shoe foot and all. He dropped to the ground cursing and grasping the injured foot.

I went to the wagon and got two large bandanas that I had brought to tie about my neck as I worked. These two had become sweat soaked from my work the day before. I spread one of them out flat and placed a handful of fence staples in a line across the cloth. I then rolled the bandana about this line of staples and handed it to the timid little fellow. "Gag him," I demanded, and don't be weak in pulling it tight and securing it with good tight knots." "Man, are you crazy?" the big fellow asked. "Those things will cut my mouth to shreds!" "And this gun will do worse if you protest again!" I prepared the other gag and gave it to the big man. He seemed to derive pleasure in putting the bit in the mouth of his buddy. I placed them on their honor, told them not to try to communicate with each other, promising to shoot either one that I caught trying.

I gave a rope to the cowardly little fellow and told him to tie the big boy's hands fast. I did not worry about his feet at this point since I had hobbled him quite adequately. The other man tied the craven hand and foot at my instruction.

Leaving Butch to guard them I walked back into the countryside. About a quarter of a mile from camp I found their three horses. I brought the horses to camp, removed the saddles placing them neatly into the wagon.

Removing the bond from their hands they were instructed to place old Gruff on the larger of their animals, and securely tie the dead man to the mount so that he would not fall off in transporting him. The large fellow had more trouble walking with his shot foot than the timid one did with bound feet.

I took the larger of the three men to one of my horses and placed him on it's back spread eagle and face down. I tied one wrist very tightly, ran the rope under the horse's neck and drew the other end of the rope to his other wrist. I then tied one leg, running the line under the belly of the animal, tying the other end to a foot. I ran another line under the horse's tail to each foot. I shot the little fellow also in the foot and what wailing and crying he did. They were both now well hobbled. I placed him on my other horse, keeping their two horses to pull the wagon as I returned to the ranch, and secured him to the horse except with his head facing rearward.

I then cut two twenty-foot poles and tied the horses' bridle to one of them separating the animals from each other by ten feet. The other pole I used to separate their rear end by the same distance.

It was just beginning to get dawn when I had them all loaded and ready to be transported. I tied a lead line to the bridle of the center horse and gave it to Butch, telling him to take them back to the ranch. I pinned a note to the seat of the dead man saying that they are the bad men being sought by the authorities. I just happened to mention that I was expecting the reward. I made a very solemn speech to the criminals telling them that I tied them so tightly to keep them from rotating and ending up under the horses. "If you are determined to wriggle and loosen your bonds, your death is sure. It really doesn't matter to me since the reward is the same for dead or alive." It was a most unusual sight that vanished across a small rise. A dog leading a caravan that was reminiscent of an image from the Arabian Nights.

At breakfast early that morning Mr. Compton had heard on the news that the three bad men had been spotted down near the river. He knew that was where I was working so he called the local sheriff and within 20 minutes a posse of six men and Mr. Compton were on the way down to the river on horseback. About three miles from the ranch they came to within sight of a strange apparition moving in their direction. It was Butch and his caravan. Butch wasn't too sure that he should release his charges to Mr. Compton and the sheriff, but after some friendly talk he allowed them to approach the prisoners. They read the note and eased the restraints on the fugitives. "Well, I guess John was really serious about my saying a prayer for these men if they stumbled into his camp," said Mr. Compton.

The sheriff sent five of his men back to town with the hombres while Mr. Compton and he rode on down to my campsite, with Butch in the lead. They had to be shown the stab marks in the bedroll and listen to the tale several times before Compton told me to load up and follow him back to the ranch. I didn't argue for I had had no sleep that night.

The hombres had been left gagged and upon reaching the jail were put into cells that were apart so they could not communicate. The sheriff had told the deputies to get Mr. Yarfield from the court to take down the interrogation. They started with the small fellow. The gag was removed being well soaked with blood. The judge came in during the questioning and got a feel for the

entire ordeal. The coward told the story pretty true leaning a bit in my favor. He was returned to his cell and the big man was brought out, and his gag removed. All he would utter was, "I have nothing to say!" He repeated that so many times it sounded like a broken record. Before being returned to his cell he asked if they could get the services of a doctor. The judge responded that he saw no end to be served in doing so. Tomorrow you will have a jury trial and if I know the people who have been molested by you three bandits a hanging will take place tomorrow afternoon, and so it was.

It was sometime before I got my reward money because the judge had to make application to the State Capital for the release of the funds.

The next week Mr. Compton furnished me with a ranch hand to supervise and the work moved along at a goodly pace. He got to where he would bring me a mid day snack, and I could tell that we were going to be very fast friends.

The winter turned into spring and one day Mr. Compton approached me and said that he was starting to pay me a dollar a day for my work. That was the same and in some cases more than the other men were getting. He further said that the pay was retroactive to the day I came. One day he took me to town to open an account at the bank. The president of the bank was a dear friend of Mr. Compton's and the banker warmed up to me very rapidly. Compton and the banker bowled once a week in town together.

One day as summer approached Mr. Compton told me that my quarters were being moved into his house and that I was to be a part of his household. He also put me in charge of all the other ranch hands and with the increased responsibility came another 50 cents a day pay increase. I was very frugal with my money and seldom spent any, putting it into the bank every payday.

The production on the ranch dramatically improved because of some changes that I initiated. One evening as Mr. Compton was leaving to go to his bowling in the little town of Pedro, he invited me along. He had said that the banker, Mr. Malcomb Edgerton, always asked about me and was interested in my progress. Over the ensuing months I became a very good bowler, and was winning the friendship of a rich banker. I saved my money and bought beef cattle and horses and sold them at a profit so that by the time I had been on the Bar None for a year I had a little over one thousand dollars to my credit.

One night just before my 16th birthday as we were bowling, Mr. Edgerton said in casual conversation that there were 2500 acres of land for sale for \$5,000.00. The land joined the Bar None Ranch. He said that the land was not good for crops but that it might support 300 to 500 head of grazing cattle. Mr. Compton was not interested in buying worthless property. I asked several questions about the property and at last the banker asked if I were interested in buying the land. The next day he, Mr. Compton and I went to see it. Some of the features of the land fascinated me. I told Mr. Edgerton that I had \$1,000.00 plus the reward money when it came through, and asked about the possibility of obtaining financing for the balance. He told me that if I were really interested that he thought that he could arrange financing with the owner. Within the week the deed was transferred into my name and my life's savings were gone to buy 2500 acres of worthless land.

There had been field engineers from the Texas Gas and Oil Drilling Company prospecting for drilling sites in our part of the State in recent days. It was not a generally known fact for they were trying to hold down the price of drilling contracts. However, one day as I was on the back side of the Bar None I happened upon them, and in conversation they divulged their secret to me. I asked them to look at my land and let me know what they could do.

Without any excitement they approached me the next day with a proposal that they give me \$5,000.00 for the rights to drill one well and if they struck oil they would have the rights to all that it pumped the first six months and 50% for the rest of the life of the well. I told the men to meet me the next day at the bank. I took the proposal down to the bank and discussed it with my friend Edgerton. He said that if I accepted the proposal he thought that he could settle my mortgage on the 2,500 acres for \$3,500.00 with the owner. The papers were signed in Mr. Edgerton's office the following day and he was able to settle the mortgage for \$3,000.00 with the owner. In appreciation of his help I gave him \$500.00. So I now had \$4,500.00 cash in the bank (when the reward arrived) and 2,500 acres of land free and clear. One day I happened to over hear Mr. Edgerton tell another influential merchant in the community that I was a bright young man and that I should be given all the assistance and encouragement possible in getting ahead. You can never imagine the boost that gave my ego. I was being accepted as an equal among the men about town.

The first well that the engineers drilled on my property was a rich success, and drilling continued under contract so that by my 17th birthday I was already a millionaire. Once I reached that level of affluence I sent \$50,000.00 to Catherine Plumber, and gave another \$50,000.00 to my friend Edgerton and \$100,000.00 to my mentor Roy Compton. I moved out of the Compton house and severed connections with the Bar None. I consulted Mr. Edgerton about a house to purchase. There was a mansion on the outskirts of town that was up for a bankruptcy sale. I got it and 3000 acres of good land for \$125,000.00.

Ed Cargoe, a black gentleman, was my farm manager tending the 3000 acres to a high profit. He and I used to go fishing together in the Pecos River. We were true friends. One day I called him into my office and said, "Ed, I want you to hire a new manager for the farm at once. I want a man who can do as good or better job than you are doing! You will supervise his work and manage the construction, renting and management of the new vanEgmont Center here in town." I pulled out a roll of plans and showed him how the 28 store commercial shopping center was to look. "One of these stores is to be a grocery store and it is to belong to you. I have bought the old Carlson place for you and want you to furnish it fittingly for your new station in life. Also, go to the Jacobian Clothiers and get a new business suit tailor made. I want you to put those kids of yours into Young's Academy. Put heavy responsibility on them to see what medal they are made of. I am placing a great trust on you. You are going to be very busy for the rest of your life. You will have the respect of every worthwhile person in town. Conceit, alcohol and a thousand other evils can destroy you. I will fire you just as if you were not my close friend if I ever see any decadence or excessive pride in you. Am I clear?" I had never spoken so plainly to him before and he was amazed. "I want you to take off the rest of the week, except for hiring a new farm manager. Run him by me so I can evaluate your choice and judgment. Buy some new furniture and get settled into your new house. Use me for any temporary credit reference that

you may need. Now be off and get busy, my friend! And the best of luck to you.”

I had a security fence build around the manor. In the rear of the manor I built an apartment for the Texas State Governor, also with a security alarm system. It was so arranged that he could enter by registering with the guard at the gate and then I was notified of his presence, but no one else knew that he was there. Of course every time we changed Governors we had a new resident. It was amazing how much more frequently the Governors visited our part of the State. They were always invited to eat with us at the dinner meal. Sometimes they did so, but if they were trying to get seclusion and rest we served their meals with great pomp and ceremony in their apartment. All of the local officials and the main men of my organization had a standing invitation to dinner every night. No reservation was required. They were on a standing guest list and were checked off by the guard as they entered the grounds. There would be from ten to 25 present for dinner every evening. A string quartet was under permanent contract to play each evening for the meal, and then a program of interest was held after dinner for those who stayed. This was the time of day that I got my rest and relaxation.

In the meantime oil wells were coming on line every few months on my property, and I was becoming one of the larger oil producers in Texas. It was not unusual for me to pump a million dollars worth of oil in a month's time. I watched the drilling rigs at work. I noted that one of the foremen was a man of unusual worth. His name was Carl Ashworth. He seemed to have a sixth sense about where to drill, and he had the ability to get the most out of his crews.

I invited him to dinner one night and after about an hour of pleasantries I asked him how much he was paid to work for Texas Oil. He said that they paid him a thousand dollars a month. I said, “If I were to pay you twenty thousand dollars a year, what would it cost me to set up in the oil drilling business myself?” He said that he would pull some figures together and let me know the next day. We met again the next night. His proposal ran like this. We could start out with one drilling rig, a supply of necessary repair parts, a machine shop, an electric generating plant, trucks and pumps, and two crews of the best men in the United States all for one half million dollars for an entire year of operation. What he was suggesting was a new departure in oil well drilling. It was his idea that drilling two twelve hour shifts a day would give three times the number of wells a year that the Texas Company was getting from one crew working twelve hours a day. There would not be the cost of shutting down and starting up each day. The machine shop would be there with all parts to keep the operation running continuously and smoothly around the clock. Continuous maintenance was to be done before breakdowns occurred. I hired him on the spot and told him to keep his eyes open for his replacement so he could direct enlargements and other crews in the future.

His major concern was that we would soon run out of land to drill on. I had already thought that through. The next day I visited my old friend Malcomb Edgerton at the bank. I went directly to the point, and asked him what his yearly salary was. Stunned he told me that it was \$50,000.00 a year. I told him that I was prepared to pay him \$75,000.00 if he could arrange that the bank be sold to me. Within a week we had arranged for the bank to become part of the vanEdgmont Corporation. His duties were to direct the bank and lease and buy land for oil drilling purposes, and other important duties. He was an able man and before the year was up we had five drilling sites running 24 hours a day.

One day I was served a paper that the courts of Tennessee were applying to have me extradited back home to stand trial for the burning of Uncle Robert's farm. However, the governor of the State of Texas was immediately informed about the matter. He was well acquainted with my history and the cause behind my actions back home. He placed a permanent block on all extradition for a period of 25 years. That was the last that was ever heard from the Tennessee courts about the matter.

I called Catherine Plumber and asked her to come to the little town of Pedro for a visit. I did not tell her that I was now in a position to offer her marriage. She arrived a few days later on the train, dressed as a fine southern lady. I sent Mr. Edgerton to meet her at the rail station. He said that she seemed a bit disappointed that I had not come to gather her off the train myself. I had arranged for a small apartment in town for her to stay. I had instructed everyone who might have contact with Catherine (Katie) not to let her know of the great house on the edge of town. I waited until the next day to call on her. I had hired a horse drawn surrey to squire us about town and the surrounding countryside. When we passed vanEdgmont Manor she was very curious about the great house standing far back on its own grounds. The weather was fine and upon completion of a four-hour tour we were driven up to the great house. The head of my household staff came out and welcomed Ms. Plumber by name. She was bewildered by this turn of events. A grand meal was awaiting us with most of the dignitaries of town in attendance. After eating I caught Katie's hand and asked her in very simple language to be my bride. She was astounded, saying that she had dreamed of being Ms. vanEdgmont, but as I had increased in influence she had thought the dream too pretentious for a small town southern girl. With a beautiful speech she accepted in the presence of this august group of people. The wedding was arranged for the following week on the lawn of the great manor. Ms vanEdgmont was now the lady of the manor and I must say that she had her trials in directing such a great household at first. I will not recite all of the happy years we spent together and the six sons that were born to us and reared to follow in their father's footsteps. This information can be gleaned from the chronicles of the State of Texas.

The next project was to find a man to run a cracking and refining plant. I turned that over to Edgerton. He arranged with the best physical oil chemist in the world, a German, to design and run the plant. The most important contribution that Edgerton made to this project was its location. He bought out a fleet of old oil tankers and built a dock right at the refinery. All of the boats were dry docked, painted and refurbished. Railheads and trucking depots, and underground pipelines were also attached to the property, and within three years we were running all of our oil through our own refining plant.

***So I had come from rags to riches. From one who was beaten by others to one who was respected by his fellow man. From the fire and ashes I had risen to be a cool multi-multi-millionaire by the time I was 21 years old. So was the turn of my life!***