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# THE BEST KIND

by *Ken Robertson*

Mike had installed a single-bulbed ceiling fixture in the sparsely furnished bedroom and was covering the wall switch with an ivory plastic plate when the farm woman stepped into the room and announced, "They's two men here saying they want to talk to you."

Mike finished tightening the screws, pocketed the screwdriver, wiped sweaty hands on his coveralls, and went outside through the screen door of the kitchen. Two strangers were waiting by the door of a panel truck marked with a faded McClelland Electric Service sign on its side.

Mike flashed his usual smile, "What can I do for you gents?"

The heavy-set one asked, "You the owner of that rig?" He pointed a hairy thumb at Mike's Harley parked in the shade and surrounded by coils of romex cable, a Navy sea bag bulging with his supply of fixtures and fittings, and the jerrybuilt conduit trailer he pulled behind the motorcycle.

Mike looked and nodded. Before he could sense danger, the tall, wiry one stepped behind him, forced an arm under his left armpit with the hand clutching his neck, and seized his right arm to brutally wrench it high behind his back in a tight half nelson. Mike struggled helplessly and demanded, "What's going on? Let me go!"

The burly one grabbed the front of Mike's coveralls with his left hand and shook his right fist in front of Mike's eyes

"Listen, you dirty gut-sucker, stay out of our territory. We do the electric work in this county and we won't stand for no undercutting by a two-bit scab like you.

We're warning you, get your cotton picking rig out of McClelland County and stay out."

He stuck out a thick leg. The wiry one pushed Mike across it and released him as he fell to the ground. The two jumped into their truck and roared out of the driveway.

Mike lay where he had fallen in the dry August dust until the sound of the truck faded away. He rose and slowly brushed off his clothes. Flashes of pain shot through his right arm. Anger and frustration seethed inside like a fire in dry cedar branches. The racial slur was the first that had been hurled at him since grade school, and he had nearly forgotten the impact. He went inside and, working somewhat slower than usual, finished wiring the farmhouse. He found the woman in the kitchen bent over her kerosene cookstove attending a boiling stewer.

"All finished," he said, "I'll call the Electric Co-op and tell them to run a drop to make it hot and plug in the meter. I'll be back to check it out as soon as they're through. Oh, Ma'am, do you mind if I leave my extra wire and fittings on your front porch overnight? I'll be by first thing in the morning to pick them up. Thank you kindly, Ma'am."

The deep black of a prairie night without moon closed in around him before he rolled into town on the big Harley the dealer had been able to deliver after an eleven month wait. He pulled into Tom's Big Dipper on OK State 23 at the south edge of Concha for a cold one before going home to the meal his mother would be keeping warm for him. The beer joint's dreary plainness was broken only by a garish pink neon line that traced a

square below the ceiling and bathed the room and its occupants in an unnatural glow. The jukebox was spewing a steady dirge of nasal country music.

Mike took his Schlitz to a booth in the far corner. The bar girl and the three or four customers were strangers to him. Most of his friends from high school had gone away to fight the Germans and the Japanese and never returned or had married and moved to the City.

After his discharge from the Navy, he loafed at home for three weeks, gave his mustering out pay to the Harley dealer as earnest money on his bike order, and left Concha to enroll at A and M under the G.I. Bill.

His thoughts returned to the afternoon's unsettling encounter. Until today, the summer had gone better than expected. Brain numb from studying after a full year of classes, he had returned home for the summer break unsure of the kind of work he would find in Concha. Summer jobs seemed limited to working in the wheat harvest, filling cones at the ice cream store, or selling door to door.

He explored the countryside, testing the horsepower of his new Harley on the long straight stretches of highway and on the steep inclines of the dirt roads built across the red rock canyons that drained the flat plains. He imagined how the terrain had appeared to his Cheyenne great grandfather as he traveled these same lands astride his pinto pony.

On his drives, he noticed the new poles, black with creosote, and their gleaming aluminum lines that were being extended by the Electric Cooperative to bring rural Minooka County into the twentieth century.

"A natural," he told himself, "why didn't I think of it before?"

He biked to the Sears store in Clinton to buy their booklet on "How to Wire Your Home" and to get an

electrical catalog. House wiring seemed to be a good fit with the skills he had learned as a Navy electrician.

Mike's father had inherited a swarthy handsomeness from his Cheyenne mother and a genial nature from his Scottish father. After sixteen years as County Commissioner, he knew most of the whites and many of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes in Minooka County. He took Mike to the Co-op office and introduced him to the manager, Walt Thompson, who was helpful and enthusiastic. Walt gave Mike a copy of construction standards and a map showing their recent line extensions.

Mike followed the routes of the new lines, knocking on doors, asking for business. Concha Electric, the sole electrical contractor in the county, was overwhelmed with the demands of rural customers impatient for service and their estimator had surged far ahead of their construction crew. Mike discovered he could bypass the tedious work of making a cost estimate and bid by telling a farmer, "You got a quote from Concha Electric? I'll do exactly the same work for fifty dollars less, and I'll finish it this week with satisfaction guaranteed. If there's any part of my work you don't like just tell me and I'll stay with it until you're happy."

The offer worked often enough to gain him all the work he could do. When a customer asked if he were a qualified electrician, Mike would pull out the Navy photo I.D. card he had managed to keep.

"The best kind," he would say confidently, "this shows I was an Electrician's Mate, First Class, in the United States Navy."

The weeks fell into a pattern. Mondays, dressed in white shirt and chino slacks, Mike followed the route of the line, ahead of the Concha Electric crew, and arranged for enough work to last the week. Tuesdays through Fridays, clad in tan coveralls, he worked from

early light to dusk, installing the service entrances and meter loops on the old farm houses, pulling wire in the stifling summer heat of attics lined with the fine, earthen powder blown in during the dust bowl years, attaching boxes for light fixtures, drilling holes in the two by four top plates of the frame homes, and fishing the cable down through the walls to the holes he cut for switches and receptacles. Saturdays, he ordered supplies and collected for jobs that remained unpaid. Sundays, he slept late and relaxed with fun trips on his Harley or flirted with the high school girls that gathered in coveys by the pool at Roman Nose Park.

Mike became a familiar sight on the rural roads of Minooka County. "That electrician that carries all his tools and supplies on his motorcycle? Why that's Hank Campbell's boy. Seen him coming out of Concha last Tuesday morning, two coils of wired wrapped around his

belly, a big sack full of fittings tied on behind him, tools poking out of his saddle bags, and pulling a wobbly little trailer loaded with electric pipe. He's just like Old Hank, never met a stranger, and do anything to help a neighbor."

In late July, Mike's wiring jobs in Minooka County became harder to find, and by August, ended completely. Concerned, he stopped to see Walt Thompson. Walt said he read somewhere the Co-op in McClelland County was extending some lines down where the Government was building that new dam on Salt Creek. Mike scouted the new construction on Sunday and, on Monday, began working the area. By that time he could walk through a house, count the rooms, and quickly set a price for his work.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JAN BRADFEILD

The jukebox went silent for a moment. The bar girl's thin voice broke into Mike's thoughts, "You going to have another Schlitz?"

Mike smiled at her and nodded with enthusiasm. The first beer had quenched his thirst and he needed a second to relax with. "And here're some extra dimes, Hon', play some popular music for a change. You know, Dinah Shore—Andy Russell—something from the Hit Parade."

As the strains of Dinah Shore's "For Sentimental Reasons" filled the room, his mind returned to the afternoon's encounter.

"It's a free country," he concluded, "I'm not going to be bullied by a couple of rednecks."

But Mike decided to shorten his workday so he would be on the road only during daylight. He finished the week without further incident. Once he thought he glimpsed the McClelland Electric panel truck driving slowly by the house where he was working, but it had continued ahead without stopping.

Wednesday of the following week he was finishing the wiring at Adam Blake's house. A huge, talkative man who had just laid his crops by until harvest, Adam insisted he help Mike with the wiring. He had been a fireman on the battleship Oklahoma in the World War I Navy, working, stripped to the waist, in the sweltering heat of the boiler compartments, shoveling coal into the blazing fireboxes.

Adam wanted a wall switch installed next to the side of his bed so he could turn the light off and on from the comfort of his mattress. He was so pleased with Mike's work that at the end of the day he invited him to stay for the smothered chicken and fried okra his wife was preparing for supper.

Before the meal, Adam brought out a partly used

bottle of bourbon he said was left over from Christmas. They shared the bootleg whiskey and exchanged stories from their war years with the three Blake children gathered around, listening, and trying to ignore their mother's pleas for help in the kitchen. After supper, there was fresh peach cobbler for dessert and more stories.

By the time Mike gathered his unused wire and fittings and stacked them for storage overnight on the porch, the summer evening had waned into heavy dusk except for a lingering red glow in the western sky. Mike told the Blakes goodbye, kicked his Harley into action, and departed.

As he glanced right before making a left turn out of the driveway, he saw a pair of headlights down the road flash on as if someone were waiting for him. Alarmed, he accelerated and sped to the brim of the red rock canyon the section road crossed. As he dropped into the canyon, he glimpsed a vehicle in the road on the opposite side silhouetted against the red glow in the sky. Its headlights flicked on and he saw it was stopped in the center of the dirt road, facing him and blocking his way. At the bottom of the grade, out of the beam of the facing headlights, he switched off his own lights, accelerated with full throttle, and steered to the narrow shoulder of the road. He was temporarily blinded as he cut through the glare of the lights and then out of their field as he sped by on the passenger side of the waiting truck.

For a moment, his rapid heartbeats seemed to stop as he felt his wheels begin to skid on the sandy slope of the shoulder, but the skid ended when his tires dug into the tough roots of Bermuda grass lining the road's edge. Suddenly he was past the pickup that had blocked his way and back into the center of the road. He switched on his lights and leaned low over his machine. He thought he heard the sound of a bullet whiz past his head but the sound was indistinct in the roar of his exhaust.

"Those bozos mean what they say," he muttered.

Ahead to his right was the angling intersection with the construction road leading to the Salt Creek Reservoir. A collection of Le Tourneau earth movers and Cat graders had worked day and night all summer moving and shaping the red clay and shale from the borrowed areas along the banks of Salt Creek into the long, earthen dam. Again, to foil his pursuers, Mike snapped off his lights. He turned into the construction road entrance and bumped over the cattle guard.

At the dam, with his lights on again, he avoided the machines working at the top of the structure and rumbled along the gentle slope of the inner wall in the open space between the newly spread limestone riprap and the top of the earthen fill. Halfway across, he slowed to look back. He saw only the lights of the dirt contractor's machines. Relieved, he crossed the temporary bridge over the diversion channel for Salt Creek and followed the construction road on the other side to Highway 23 that led back to Concha. The cool evening air rushing by his face and body soothed his anxiety. His heartbeat returned to normal.

He found his father sitting on the front porch enjoying a final pipe of Granger before going to bed. During the war years, the older man had taken a job at the gyp mill and turned the prairie land Mike's grandfather had homesteaded back to grass and cattle.

"Say, Dad," Mike opened as he approached the porch. "You've been wanting to try out the Harley. How about trading for the rest of the week? You ride my bike to work and I'll drive the old Chevy."

He was silent about his encounters in McClelland County. He knew how his father would react.

"Those scoundrels," he would explode in a mixture of Scottish determination and Cheyenne fierceness, "we'll go down there tomorrow and clean their plow!"

Mike's summer work had been far more profitable than he had dared to dream of and he was determined to resolve the matter in his own way.

The next morning, Mike explained the bike's controls to his father and checked him with a test drive before he left for the mill. Satisfied with the performance, he waved him off, confident his father would be safe on the familiar and friendly roads of Minooka County.

Mike threw the saddle bags with his tools onto the floorboards of the Chevy and drove to the Blakes' farmhouse to pick up his trailer and the leftover wire and fittings. He showed Adam Blake how to insert the fuses and turn on the main switch after the Co-op crew had strung the service wires and set the meter. Mike drove a mile east to the last farmhouse that remained on his work list. On Friday afternoon, with the wiring of the three-room house completed, he instructed the woman about the fuses and the switches, and telephoned the McClelland County Co-op office with the names of his customers who were ready for electric service.

Saturday morning, he slept late and got to the bank just before it closed to withdraw enough cash from his summer's savings to pay the balance owed on his Harley and to buy traveler's checks.

Lunch was waiting for him when he returned. At the table, he told his parents, "I finished my work down in McClelland County yesterday. Still have a few accounts to collect, but I'm going to log some vacation time before I go back to school."

After the meal, he replaced the tools in his saddle bags with his shave kit and an extra set of Levi's and skivvies, attached the bags to his bike, and headed west for the Grand Canyon.