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# GEE, MISTER!

– Susan M. Cabanis Bradford

They were pioneer kids, isolated on the prairie a bit, sheltered from most of life's hard knocks by loving parents. They knew the drudgery of chores and excitement when they heard the sound of a stranger's horse as visitors approached around evening mealtime or after dark. They knew their parents would provide a meal to guests. Prairie hospitality demanded it, but there were those who would take advantage of the pioneers.

A young girl near Watonga had heard the fear of her parents and neighbors when the night riders arrived. One they knew was Red Buck—a tall, red-haired, cold-eyed man known as a horse thief and rumored to be a killer. "Night after night, I cringed in my bed. I was told by neighbors that thieves must be fed."

Young Dora Boyle's neighbors said,

*"Just treat them right and they won't steal,  
Tho they steal your horse and eat their fill."*

Her pioneer parents had been on the prairie claim many months. Sheltered by her Irish mother, the outlaw still caught her interest: "There was Red Buck, who rode like a demon at night. And stole the best horses as he quickly took flight." Her father's best mare was gone the next morning.

His gifts charmed the youngsters, I've heard many say. Did she get a trinket, too, or a gold piece? He would gulp down his meal and then go his way. Sometimes the pioneer mother found a silver dollar under the plate as she cleared plates after the night riders left.

The night thefts and diet of fear led pioneers to form the Anti Horse-Thief Association:



*"Strong were the arms of the AHTA,  
And no doubt caused the gradual decay of  
the ruthless robbers who rode the plains  
Leaving stories that will always remain."*

It fell the lot of the single men to be ready for action, no matter when. Dora said,

*"I loved these men, even as a child,  
Who chased the outlaws fierce and wild."*

Dora wasn't the only pioneer youngster fascinated by the surly stranger on the fast horse. Red Buck told young Allen Stevens he would give him a gold piece if Allen could ride Mr. Stevens' "frisky little pony." Allen was "sore for a week" after the ride but felt it was worth it for the gold piece. It was the only gold piece Allen ever saw. The Stevenses were pioneers to Cheyenne and Arapaho country in the Run of 1892. They lived near Dolph Pickesimer. Allen said that Red Buck was Irish—had red hair and beard and mean eyes.

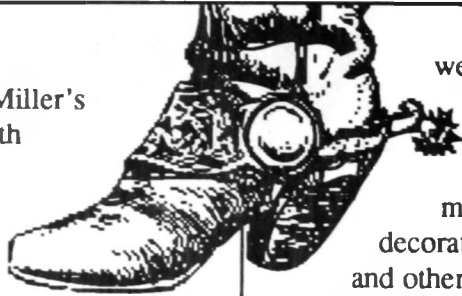
Cowboy bunkhouses were a safe place for an outlaw who could "blend in with the boys." Jack Howenstine's parents lived in Enid; but around 1894, Jack was staying with his brothers (Cy, Joe, and Tom), who had ranches around Arapaho. They had two hundred horses and worked many cowboys. Just a kid, Jack slept late in the bunkhouse one hazy morning while his brothers and their cowboys were working on another ranch. Jack always chose a top bunk to sleep in because the cowboys would throw him out of the lower bunks. When Jack did wake up, he was startled to see Red Buck and his friend George Miller, stretched out sound asleep in two of the bottom bunks. Jack knew who they were and that they were wanted men. He had heard the cowboys say that Red Buck and Miller were good men who "got off wrong."

In 1896, Red Buck and Miller's last wrong turn caught up with them. Near Foss at Dolph Picklesimer's claim on Oak Creek, a posse of lawmen surrounded the dugout. Red Buck Wightman and George Miller shot it out with the posse, and Red Buck was killed in the doorway of the dugout while Miller's hands were shot up. Miller was ever after known as "Hooky."

Red Buck's body and the wounded Miller were loaded onto a farm wagon and hauled through Butler, where a boy named Leonard Kiker asked his dad to heft him up for a look into the wagon at the dead outlaw: "I'll never forget how awful he looked."

The wagon rolled on to Arapaho, where the bloody, bullet-ridden body was photographed and displayed in a storefront window. Pioneers walked by and stared. That's where six-year-old Cordelia saw him. She had come to town with her parents and her eight brothers and sisters to see the corpse of a notorious outlaw. Did she stare or cringe and look away? The body was on display for three days while county officials waited for someone to claim it. No one came forward for the remains. No father, mother, brother, sister, or wife asked for the body to take to burial. So the remains of Red Buck Wightman were buried at county expense in a lonely area of the cemetery south of town.

Cordelia's family lived south of town not too far to walk to the cemetery; the next morning, Cordelia accompanied her strong-willed Irish mother, Sarah Gossett, to the cemetery. The condition of the grave convinced Mrs. Gosset, who had no pity for the evil ways of the outlaw but who had compassion on the unknown mother, that the body had been removed and taken to Texas as the rumor



went. Yet year after year until her mother died many years later, Cordelia and her siblings went with their mother to gather wildflowers to decorate the graves of the family plot and others, including Red Buck's, on Decoration Day. Over the years, a legend about a mystery woman grew about the well-kept grave.

Dora, the Brown boy, Allen, Leonard, and Cordelia remembered the day as pioneer youngsters that the surly, red-haired stranger with mean eyes brushed their lives. They mentioned it to others or wrote it down in later years as part of their pioneer experiences. Pioneering parents no doubt pointed out the error of the outlaw's ways to their impressionable prairie children and made a moral lesson of the meeting. Still, the strange, cold-eyed man made an impression that time can't ERASE. ☘

#### SOURCES

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*(SUSAN M. CABANISS BRADFORD spent her formative years in Clinton, graduated from SOSU, and is rearing her family at Russell, which is located southwest of Mangum. She enjoys the territorial history of Oklahoma; this article dealing with children's views of Red Buck is her first published work.)*