

A Fine Howdy Do

# A Fine Howdy Do

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Trapped in Yuma Prison for a crime he didn't commit, a happy go lucky cowboy vows to never again cross the law.

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Like every other man in this hellhole, I am innocent and I want to be released. Like every other man in this place, I can't stand being cooped up behind bars. Like every other man in this place I would do almost anything to gain my freedom. Unlike every other man in this place I won't even attempt to try and escape. I have two years, nine days and a matter of hours left to serve on my sentence and I will do nothing to add one single day to it.

I have served thirteen years, two hundred and fifty-six days and some hours, I'm not sure just what time it is. I will make it, I will still be alive and healthy and fit when my sentence is up, they are not going to break me, I won't let them. I have spent many an hour, many a day and many a night in this cell. I have spent many an hour and many a day making little rocks out of big rocks by beating on them with a sledgehammer. This on days so hot the hammer handle would burn your hands and you thought you would never make it to the next water call. You won't find much fat anywhere on me, I have sweat it all off. You won't have much trouble finding muscle though because I have grown a lot of it over the years. Muscle and determination, those things I have a lot of.

And patience, a body learns how to be patient, very patient, month after month, after month as the years drag on. At first there is anger and hate for those that put you here but after enough years have gone by, there is just the hate. The anger has long since hardened into a fierce unrelenting hate. A hate that won't be satisfied until those who put me here have been repaid in full, in full and then some, call it with interest. Trouble is, I don't have anybody much to blame but myself, really, the sheriff was only doing his duty, the judge and jury could only do what they saw as the right thing to do and them three cattlemen didn't kill me, they just took me to the sheriff to let him investigate me, which leaves only me for being dumb enough to stick my nose in, now ain't that a fine howdy do.

My name is Harley Wayne Taggert and I was nineteen years old that hot dusty summer. I was young and full of piss and vinegar, thought there was nothing I couldn't handle. I had a Colts on my hip and a Winchester in my saddle scabbard a full stomach from a breakfast of biscuits, bacon and some left over beans and a fine horse with a lot of sand, life was good.

I was riding across the center part of the Arizona Territory just a drifting and taking it easy, riding mostly at night through the Mohave desert, I wasn't in no particular hurry because I knew I had plenty of water, plenty of time and at least for my purposes, plenty of money. I had enough grub to last me for a couple of days and by then I knew I would be in Hardyville. That morning, it hadn't gotten hot enough to lay over for the day and besides there was no real good spot with enough shade for me and my horse both anywhere in sight. So I was just moseying along, seeing the country from between my horses ears and talking to my horse once in awhile, though I don't know why, he never answers me, just not much of a conversationalist, I reckon. Anyway, a movement caught my eye and I looked up to see several buzzards circling, low in the sky some distance off to my left.

Well, I knew something was dead over there, or at least close to it and I should have just ridden on and tended my own business but being young and impetuous, swerved left and urged my horse up to a trot to go take a look see. Wanting to keep my hair, I loosened my belt gun in its holster, pulled my rifle and checked it, then put it back loose and ready in the scabbard. I made sure I didn't skyline myself anymore than I

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absolutely had to and kept a wary eye out for anything besides those buzzards that might be moving, namely Apache.

I circled a little so the sun wouldn't be behind me and cast my shadow over where I was going and when I was close enough, judging by them buzzards, I dismounted, taking my rifle with me, and sort of crept up a small dune, bellying down close to the top, taking off my hat and crawling forward until I could see what was over there, hopefully without anyone seeing me. It was mostly sand where I was with just a few rocks scattered here and there but nothing really big enough to hide behind unless I was Apache, which I surely am not. The ground cover, if you want to call it that, was a little scraggly mesquite brush around close, off a short way to my right a small Joshua tree and I sure couldn't spot anything moving or that I felt was of immediate danger, so I looked to see what was attracting all the carrion eaters.

There was a body laying there but he wasn't dead, at least he wasn't yet. Every once in awhile, while I was watching, he would sort of wave one arm and I could hear him a cussing them buzzards, telling them they weren't fixing to eat him just yet.

Well, it may have been a mite hard on that old boy but I bided my time and watched for awhile because I had no desire to get myself killed going for what might just be bait. When I felt pretty sure it wasn't a trap, or at least not an obvious one, I stood up and moved over to that fella to see if I could help him. I couldn't help noticing a small fire, mostly burned out now, with a running iron still stuck in what was left of the coals.

There were cattle and horse tracks in profusion and I don't claim to be the best tracker who ever came along, but if I read them tracks right, some fella was changing the brands on some stock and three other fellers took it the wrong way.

When I knelt down beside this here fella, he darned near shot me, probably would have if he hadn't already emptied his gun. He wasn't really in his right mind and by the time I convinced him I was neither a buzzard nor the fella who had shot him in the first place, he was already pretty far gone.

He had been shot three times, near as I could tell from just looking. Once in each leg, in the upper thigh and once through the upper chest on the left side and all of them had been bleeding freely.

â Feels like at least one of my legs is broken,â he said, and I think a rib or two as well.â

â The way that hole in your chest id bubbling, it looks like it tore a hole in your lung too,â I said.

He had bled a lot, plumb bled out I reckon and was very weak. He wasn't gut shot, so I let him have a little water out of my canteen and he come around enough to tell me his name was Frank Ridder and would I let his brother Charles know he had been killed. I said as how I would try to locate his brother and let him know and I asked who had shot him.

â I don't know their names,â he said, â they caught me red handed, sure enough, so I reckon as how I can't blame them too much, but they didn't have to kill me, at least they could have let the law do it, if they had to see me dead.â

â You were doing a little brand changing, weren't you,â I asked.

â Reckon I was,â he moaned, â been rustling a few head here and there for a month now, figured I would get me three or four today and add them to the small bunch I got gathered up over west of here and push them down into Mexico and sell them.â

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“ You have bled out so much, I donâ€™t reckon I can do much for you partner,” I said.

“ I know I ainâ€™t going to make it,” he said, “ Iâ€™d just as soon you didnâ€™t try to move me.”

“ Kind of figured that much,” I said, “ You have to be in a lot of pain.”

“ Hurts some,” he tried to grin, but it turned into a loud groan and he closed his eyes. “ Donâ€™t leave me laying out here, please,” he said. “ Iâ€™d like to at least be buried.”

“ Iâ€™ll do that for you,” I said, “ that much I can do.”

That was about the last thing he said, just sort of mumbled a little a couple of times, then he breathed his last and I started in digging his grave.

I was just finishing up, sort of patting the sand down with the flat of my shovel when I saw a dust trail off a ways and heading my way. Now Indians donâ€™t usually make a dust trail to give them away like that, for one thing and these men were riding side by side. Mostly, Indians will ride single file and keep to low ground, whereas these boys were riding straight towards me, up and over small hills and rises instead of around them. It was obvious they had seen me too, so I just loosened my Colts in its holster and stood my ground. I shouldnâ€™t have, but I did it anyway.

I was expecting them to be curious about the fresh grave at my feet, maybe even about the running iron in what was left of the coals where the fire had been, in fact I was expecting them to ask some very pointed and suspicious questions, what I didnâ€™t expect was for them to ride up with their guns already in their hands and all of them pointed at me, now wasnâ€™t that a fine howdy do. What I did was keep my hand away from my colts and try to act as nonchalant as I could under the circumstances.

“ Burying your pal?” the tallest one asked.

“ Whoâ€™s asking,” I asked.

“ Well, the ones who killed him, I reckon,” he said, “ but if it will make you feel better before you join your pal in hell, my name is John Cabin and these here boys are Will Channel and Rusty Vaughn.”

“ Well, I wish I could say I was pleased to meet you boys but it sounds to me like we havenâ€™t gotten off on the right foot. Before you do something Iâ€™m just pretty sure I would regret, my name is Josh Chandler and I just followed the buzzards to this here feller. I never seen him before in my life and he was never no pal of mine.”

“ I say we just shoot him and get it over with,” the one called Rusty said.

“ Iâ€™ll buy that too,” said Will.

“ Now, letâ€™s not get hasty,” I said, “ all I done is bury a feller I found dead in the desert. You can check my saddle bags, I have papers saying who I am from the feller I bought my horse from, itâ€™s just over that rise there.”

“ Check it out Rusty,” John said.

“ Oh come on boss, why waste time, letâ€™s just shoot the sonofabitch,” Rusty said.

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“Time enough for that when I say so,” John said, “now check out that horse like I told you to.”

Well it didn’t take them but a minute to bring my horse back to where we were and it was just like I had said.

“Don’t prove a thing to me,” Rusty said.

“Proves he is going to live to see the sheriff,” said John. “I’ll kill a thief in a heartbeat, but I’ll be damned if I’ll murder an innocent man. If he’s guilty, I bet Sheriff Monahan will dig it out of him, one way or another, and hang him quick if he is and I can live with that.”

“You’re the boss,” Rusty grumbled.

“Reckon he has a point, too,” Will said, “I ain’t hankering much to kill an innocent man and probably wind up getting hung for killing a man.”

“Ain’t no probably to it, if I know the sheriff half as well as I think I do,” Said John.

Well, it was a long, hot, hard ride into the town of Kingman, and they weren’t much on hospitality. I got to sit it out in a stinking cell, some drunk had puked his guts out and it hadn’t been cleaned overly well, until the sheriff got a wire back confirming not only who I was but when I had left Texas. I hadn’t had time to be laying around this country for a couple of months stealing cattle, fact is I had made fair time getting here from back in Texas.

Then, since I had gathered up all of that dead boy’s possessions to return to his brother, the sheriff arrested me for theft, now ain’t that a fine howdy do.

I had no address, no known location of any Charles Ridder to be sending those traps to, so it was just my word that I intended to send them anywhere and not keep them for myself. So, I couldn’t prove I was only going to give his traps to his brother and since everyone in town knew the sheriff and no one in town knew me, I got sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor at Yuma Territorial prison. It is a good thing for me that John told them he and his boys had killed the rustler or I probably would have been tried for murder and hanged by the neck until dead, dead, dead.

Since the jury saw fit to believe the worst of me, I was convicted and my only hope was a pardon by the governor for which I tried. I attempted to convince him I was the honest type and was innocent. I said in my petition that all I was trying to do was to do the right thing by the deceased and deliver his traps to his family and to tell them how and where their loved one had passed away.

The governor didn’t choose to intercede in my behalf and for whatever reason, I got no time off for good behavior, though I sure wasn’t no troublemaker. Seeing as how I have just over two years to go, I didn’t reckon I would get any time off either.

Then I got lucky, there was an altercation among the prisoners .and when the guards came to break it up one of the prisoners managed to get behind one of the guards and was about to hit him in the head with a rock hammer. I didn’t even take time to stop and think, I just stepped in and took the hammer away from him. One of the other guards yelled a warning just as I moved and the guard I was helping turned around just in time to see me take the hammer away from that prisoner and toss it away. Of course, the prisoner I took it away from was less than thrilled with my interference and swung on me. I blocked it and landed a punch right on the tip of his jaw, which sat him right down on the ground looking a little dazed.

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Well, they herded us up, me included, and pushed us all back to our cells and I figured I was lucky that feller was in a different cell. I sort of ducked being in the same vicinity as that feller for awhile and pretty soon he got over it and quit trying to get me cornered.

About two months later, I was summoned to the wardens office, seems that guard had talked to the warden about what I had done. The warden said he had reviewed my file and after what I had done he had sent a letter off to the Governor's office in my behalf.

He had waited until he heard back to talk to me and I was very surprised to hear I was a free man, even better yet, it was a full pardon, now ain't that a fine howdy do and I walked away without a record, which meant I could vote, which is one reason I got the pardon, it seems they wanted everyone they could get to vote in the coming election to try to make Arizona a state, and carry a gun again without butting heads with every lawman I ever run into because in Arizona it was against the law for anyone who had been convicted of a serious crime to carry a firearm. I thought that pardon was the least they could do seeing as how I never stole nothing in my life in the first place.

My horse, of course, was history but I got the rest of my traps back and I can speak for their honesty as I even got my money back. A little parleying and I managed to get me a good horse and though somewhat old, my rig was serviceable enough. I even had a few dollars left to jingle in my jeans, could have been a lot worse off.

My only true regret, other than a little over thirteen wasted years, was that I never did get to tell that boy's brother Charles how he had come to die, nor pass on his traps. Now that I am a free man again, I kind of figure I will try to find this here feller Charles Ridder and at least tell him how and where his brother Frank had met his end. I have no idea what happened to his traps but they weren't worth a whole lot to start with, other than thirteen and a half years of my life, it was more just that his brother should have had them.

All I could really do was stop in every town I came to and send a short note, telling the particulars, to him by the name Charles Ridder, send it to general delivery in every town I could think of and hope I was lucky enough to get one of them to him. If he had a notion to try to contact me, he would just have to do the same because I took right up where I had left off so long ago and started drifting towards Hardyville and Union pass, which I should still be able to get through this time of year and on into Nevada and then on to California and I put that in the note too, so he would have some idea where to send any reply.

I was off a little on my direction of travel; I must have drifted a little south as I found myself riding up to Fort Mohave instead of right to Hardyville. It really isn't much of a fort and other than watering my horse, filing my canteens and I got lucky enough to grab a bite to eat as well, I wasted no time there.

It was a short ride on up to Hardyville and once there, I decided to rest up a day or two before traveling on to California. It should have been a peaceful experience but trouble seems not only to follow me around, but sometimes I think it actually comes looking for me, now ain't that a fine howdy do.

My first mistake was the only hotel in town, I think it had way too many unwanted guests. I had to kill four scorpions before I left for dinner and a couple of drinks at the saloon and I'm just pretty sure their relatives will be waiting on me when I get back. My second mistake was the café, I ain't saying the food was bad, I wouldn't know because the first bite of chili had to have scorched off any taste buds I had left after the food at Yuma Prison. I ate my fill anyway, then headed for the saloon to try to kill the acute burning sensation in my belly.

That first drink wasn't nearly enough to kill the agony, so I ordered up another and another after that one. It was beginning to ease off and I was pretty sure it wouldn't take more than a bottle or two and I

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would begin to feel human.

I picked a bad time to want to drink, I guess, I was leaning up against the bar, which was a long bar with a curve to the wall on one end and that was where I was, right next to the wall. I had my back to the wall, an old habit, and was just watching all the men in the bar while they went about their business of drinking, playing cards, or talking in groups of two, three or four. See, a saloon isn't just a place to drink, gamble or both; it is a meeting place, sort of like a social club. Why I venture to say there have been more deals made, more cattle bought and sold, more horses traded and more tall tales told in saloons than anywhere else. Especially in a small western town, if there are no ladies of the evening present that about sums things up. If there are ladies of the evening present then the age old trade is plied in earnest and there are almost always rooms in back or upstairs for them to ply their trade.

Anytime you are in a town where they don't stop you from wearing your gun or guns inside the town limits and you step into a saloon, there is always the possibility of gunplay. I'm not saying it happens all the time, or even all that frequently but anytime a bunch of men are in an enclosed place, liquor is flowing freely and they are all armed to the teeth, there is an outstanding possibility that one or more of them are going to lose their tempers. If things turn out the way it is always hoped they will, then all that will happen is anything from a fist fight to a real donnybrook.

The problem is a lot of these men ain't into fisticuffs and the first thing they think of is to go for their gun, then you have hell come to visit in that suddenly tight little room. Now I'm here to tell you, you never want to underestimate how good of a shot some of these men are with their six shooters but to be honest most can't hit the broadside of a barn from the inside with the doors shut. At least not on purpose that is and that is the story of my life, I think.

How it started I have no idea, I must have been watching someone else but the first thing I knew was men started moving rapidly away from one of the tables where poker was being played, knocking over chairs and bumping into and pushing other men to get them out of their way. All of a sudden two men were standing facing each other and the guns came out. They both fired and two men went down, one of the combatants and yours truly as a hard smack to my stomach turned out to be a flying chunk of lead. One of them damn fools missed his target and hit me, now ain't that a fine howdy do.

Next thing I knew for certain was some men were carrying me out of the saloon and down the street to the town doc's office. I wasn't in a very talkative mood myself so I didn't even interrupt when they told the doc I was shot in the saloon by accident; after all it was the truth. He sure enough wasn't aiming for me, if he was aiming at all, I reckon.

And that's how I come to spend near a month in Hardyville instead of just a couple of days. I reckon I wasn't ever in any big hurry to get to California anyway.

I took a little razing from some of them boys in the saloon what come to visit me once in awhile where I was laid up in the hotel with a whole family of scorpions to worry about, because I guess in one of the early visits I was a little delirious and apologized to them for being under the weather and not really up to being real sociable. I reckon I told them my stomach was killing me and that it must have been that chili down at the café.

Well they thought that was just about the funniest thing they ever heard and I swear they didn't stop laughing for a week, now ain't that a fine howdy do?

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The End

Ó NOV, 2007 George H. Lafferty

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