

— THE LAST POSSE —
Steven Key Meyers

1.

WE SIPPED OUR COFFEE as the sun stabbed its first flat rays into the town. Uncle Jim liked to take the pot up to the roof; said it was the only peace he got. Made it himself on the kitchen stove, next to the swill Aunt Wilhelmina—her my classmates called *the terrifying shemale*—was boiling for the prisoners.

Looking out between crenellations of the jail's castle roofline we could see everything. Vernon, Texas was a metropolis of 10,000 in those days; it's shrunk some since. The courthouse across the street—three stories tall—was brick, as were our two-story Sheriff's Department with lock-up and living quarters, both banks, the Wilbarger Hotel and the Methodist-Episcopal Church. Every other

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

establishment lining the public square was wooden and had a gabled false front. Wooden houses with front porches and gable roofs crowded up behind the square. The rising sun sharpened the gables into arrowhead shadows and launched them in slow motion.

Uncle Jim said it amused him how that solemn march of shadows imprinted steeple shapes on the town.

“Don’t believe it,” he said. “Behind their fronts, people here’re like people anywhere. Not so bad, really, but take ’em at face value at your own peril.” In 1922 Jim Groves, still shy of forty, had been Sheriff of Wilbarger County for fifteen years.

I lifted my big cup (about half milk) and looked out over the parapet with—judging from the smile he cracked—his own solemn expression.

From below we could hear wagon wheels turning, horses nickering, Model Ts sputtering, voices raised in greeting; could smell fresh manure and oily automotive exhaust, and see the wind biting at the cornucopia of coal smoke blowing skywards from the approaching 7:48. The morning clouds were still

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

novel to me: coconut macaroons pressed against glass, pink on their eastern sides.

Uncle Jim was talking about the big day we had ahead of us: A famous bank robber named Frank Holloway was being handed over to his care to await trial. Exactly one year earlier Holloway had robbed (allegedly) the bank in Harrold, a crossroads to the southeast. November's the time to do it—the cattlemen sell out and deposit their take, the farmers, too. The robber had sidled indoors, revolver in hand, politely ordered the safe opened and bags filled, and left with \$12,000. That was a lot of money in those days.

Uncle Jim said from the moment the call came in he suspected Frank Holloway. He was famous thereabouts — *the Oklahoma Yeggman*, they called him.

"What's a yeggman?" I asked. Didn't know of any in California, where I'm from.

"Safe-cracker," said Uncle Jim. "Newfangled word for an old-fashioned thing: Just an outlaw." Classic black hat, he said, silver-plated Colt 45 on either hip, silver spurs to his high-heeled boots. Uncle Jim had rushed off to Harrold to investigate, even as Frank

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

Holloway was getting back to Vernon and standing drinks at the Wilbarger Hotel, Prohibition be damned.

Then he vanished.

“You know him?” I asked.

“Oh, for years. As Sheriff you have to meet a lot of characters you really wouldn’t rather.” I was flattered, taking this as said for my distant possible benefit. Uncle Jim’s son, Shorty, playing that year for Southwest Texas State Teachers College, seemed too football-crazy to go into the family line.

“What’s Frank Holloway like?”

“Snake. *And* a bit long in the tooth to be doing what he does,” said Uncle Jim. He looked at me. “That means old.”

“He’s *old*?”

“Not so very—my age, thereabouts. But hair goinghin, gut getting thick, some rust in the joints. Too old to be robbing banks. Th tat’s a young man’s game. Like being Sheriff. Should be talking about what a hotshot he used to be, ’stead of trying to be one still.” He smiled. “Like me.”

Said it was mortifying to know who he was looking for but finding him plumb gone. Timing the

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

bank robbery with the railway schedule, the Yeggman boarded a fast train north, Gladstone bag in hand—whisked away before Uncle Jim realized it. Since then, nothing.

Nothing, until a few days earlier, when word came from the Texas Rangers in Austin. The Chicago Police Department had telephoned. Seems they'd arrested a man for pickpocketing in Grant Park, were about to send him down for a stretch in Joliet when he started spinning yarns, claiming he was Frank Holloway, the Oklahoma Yeggman wanted for a litany of crimes. Took credit for that big British Columbia job a few months back—\$350,000!—and also the one in Harrold, Texas. Not that they believed him, they told the Rangers, but thought they should call. Didn't believe him because their pickpocket looked like a bum.

Here the Rangers brought Chicago up short: Good, yes, they'd made Holloway for that Harrold robbery, could they please come get him?

Uncle Jim said that was doubtless Frank Holloway's whole idea—escape the clutches of the Chicago P.D. and get to Texas, where he'd recant his

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

confession and insist on a jury trial. Bank robbery? If convicted, five or ten years in prison, but with a jury who knows what will happen? So it was a shrewd play. Anyway, today the Rangers were handing him over, from now on he'd be Uncle Jim's headache, his guest in the calaboose downstairs.

He pulled his long, booted legs off an embrasure and planted his feet flat, signaling he had something serious to say.

"Bad stuff, Frank Holloway. Has a hooligan sneer that rejects *me, you, Vernon*, any stab at decency. Feels entitled to take whatever he wants. Undercuts the rest of us just trying to get along and do the best we can. That yeggman's bad stuff."

As he drained his cup, I begged him not to make me go to school that day, and without fuss he agreed. I was stunned — son of schoolteachers, I knew school was sacred — but his mind was on his yeggman.

"Hungry, Bing?"

"You bet, Uncle Jim."

Let's get out of this hoosegow, go find us some chow."

– THE LAST POSSE –
Steven Key Meyers

2.

I WAS WHAT they used to call a pretty boy.

Not good.

"*Precious!*" the biddies would go. "*Adorable!* Features like a *doll!* If only my Mary had those *curls!* And his *complexion* – peaches and *cream!*" What really got them? My freckled button nose: "*Awww!*"

Other boys? Don't ask. But it toughened me up, be sure of that. Classmates never made kissy sounds at me, not after the first time. Learned early how to fight, and though I wasn't big, I was good. My Texas sojourn helped me grow out of being pretty, though years later Ben Johnson, my movie star neighbor in Pawhuska, told me I could have tried my luck in Hollywood.

– THE LAST POSSE –

Steven Key Meyers

At my prettiest when I turned twelve years old and my parents sent me and my rosy-cheeked blush, ringlets framing wide-set blue eyes over an upturned nose, off to stay with Uncle Jim and Aunt Willie. I was a raving beauty! On Labor Day when I was expecting to start school in Pasadena the next day, Dad put me on the train for Texas—Ma said goodbye at home, she was feeling poorly—and I ended up entering seventh grade a few days late in Vernon.

Hadn't met Uncle Jim before, but knew he was Ma's favorite brother. He called her his baby sister. I'd heard the stories, also how Groveses were big in Vernon. Four brothers lived in town, and Gram and her widowed daughter Effie one block behind the square. Gram—*very* old, over *seventy!*—was the tiniest woman I ever met. A shrimp myself, not five feet tall, I towered over her. Bent over, wearing long dresses and bonnets tied under her chin, she looked tough as a fairy-tale witch. Well, Ma said she had to be tough to raise a family on a ranch in the middle of nowhere and have her husband die on her in the prime of life while she was expecting their seventh child.

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

Gram looked me up and down and said sourly, “My, ain’t you a pretty thing.”

The Oklahoma Yeggman was due on the 9:17. From the roof we went downstairs, past the apartment where Aunt Willie was washing dishes, to the jail on the ground floor. Six freshly-fed prisoners looked out at us like something didn’t agree with them. Didn’t say anything, though. However bad the food, prisoners soon learned that complaining was a mistake. It didn’t change anything and was resented—not so much by Uncle Jim as by Aunt Willie.

The deal was that the County paid her, as official jail cook, 25 cents a day per prisoner, and anything she didn’t spend on meat or eggs or butter and the rest she could keep. Well, she managed to keep most of it. Knew every trick in the book, so the prisoners got watered-down porridge, soup with sorry scraps afloat in it, watery stews, liquefied sauerkraut, jellied ham, mashed potatoes that found their own level in the bowls she served them up in. *Jail’s not a holiday camp*, she’d tell them, *nor a dude ranch neither. Learn what jail is, won’t be back.* So howevermuch she

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

pocketed, she claimed to be saving the County money in the long run. Anyway, her kitchen. Uncle Jim left it to her, except for making his own coffee, spooning in the grounds and an egg and letting it boil.

In the office he just checked to see if his deputy wanted to go eat, too.

His deputy was his younger brother Reuben. Uncle Rube was enormous and melancholy, and hungry, sure enough, so leaving Aunt Willie to hold the fort—she was assistant jailer, too—we three tramped up the sidewalk, careful not to step on the crack Shorty's head made when he fell out the window as a baby.

The Swasteeka Restaurant occupied half the ground floor of the Wilbarger Hotel. The hotel boasted twenty rooms, but Uncle Jim said it wasn't a very good one—he'd seen better in Fort Worth. I liked it, though. Downstairs was all polished wood, bronze gaslight fixtures and shiny brass railings. Before Prohibition the restaurant had been a saloon, where in 1895 the sheriff of the day was shot to death trying to break up a fight. The floor still had bloodstains. There was always a warm buzz of conversation from the

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

leading lights of town joshing one another while they ate.

Everyone greeted Uncle Jim and Rube, was greeted in return. Our table beside the window ruled the room.

We sat down and were served our breakfast—eggs sunny side up, bacon, sausage, grits, biscuits and gravy, more coffee—and Rube nodded outdoors. I knew the story that was coming; he told it every few days. Always on his mind, apparently.

“That’s where your Ma and Jim and me saw them hang the reverend,” he said. Uncle Jim’s predecessor did it, and it remained Vernon’s sole legal public hanging, for the predecessor never cared to repeat the experience, nor had Uncle Jim any hankering to be a hangman. The reverend had poisoned his wife with strychnine and gone off with his girlfriend (soprano in the choir), but not far enough. When he was condemned—despite appeals from his lawyer, Sam Houston’s own son—the Sheriff volunteered to do the honors himself.

From miles around people crowded into the square to witness the once-in-a-lifetime event, and

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

they trooped the pupils over from school. "Make room for the children!" the Sheriff bellowed from the gallows, next to him the reverend looking as if his mind was already on other things. "Let the little children up!" I knew Ma, then nine, never could get the sights nor sounds out of her mind, though Rube, then fourteen, said she closed her eyes tight at the drop.

"All right, Rube," Uncle Jim said.

"Uncle Jim," I asked, "how'd you get to be Sheriff, anyway?"

"Well, old Sheriff Ish was a friend of Daddy's, like a father to us after he passed, and when he saw me getting big and strong, brought me in as deputy. So when he retired, I took over."

"Oh!"

He sighed. "Always wanted to be a cattleman, but that's all right. But when you're Sheriff, sure better know which way the wind's blowing."

Rube nodded solemnly.

"Now, then: Frank Holloway. We'll go over, meet the train. He'll be cuffed to one or both of the

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

Rangers, and they might want to hand him over on the spot, but we'll ask 'em to bring him to the jail.

"Take Holloway's belt, empty his pockets. Put him in an end cell, keep the next one vacant. Rube, you disarm and go in the cell with them, help uncuff him while I hold a gun and Bing holds the door. Bing, let the Rangers and Rube out, and lock him up. Got it?"

"Sure, Jim."

"Got it, Uncle Jim."

"He's a slippery S.O.B. Don't like having him here.

This afternoon for the hearing—*arraignment*—Rube'll cuff him up in his cell—I'll hold the gun, Bing the door—and take him over. Bring him back the same way, stuff him in 'til trial, 'less he bonds out, though I don't expect he will. Trial should be next week."

"OK."

"Just have to be careful." Uncle Jim shoved a forkful of egg into his mouth and licked yolk off his mustache. "Bing, ever have the chance, take a look at the famous photograph of Six-Shot Stan finally being hauled in to Fort Smith, Arkansas. Stands there grinning like an idiot, deputies on either side and

— THE LAST POSSE —

Steven Key Meyers

sheriff in front, but four seconds after the flash goes off, the lawmen are dead and he's running.

"Well, look close, and while the sheriff's standing *proud* in front of the camera, highlight of his *life*, you can see that despite the cuffs, Six-Shot's already got his hands at his gunbelt. Gun comes up *blazing*."

"What happened to him, Uncle Jim?"

He patted his lips dry.

"Didn't get far. But I don't intend on being that foolish. Hey, how'ra *you*, ol'Bossie?" Said this to the man I already knew was Mayor, chatted with him about getting that yeggman, big day for our burg, and so forth.

Then the Mayor's eyes narrowed and he nodded at the far wall.

"Jim, don't know what those two Slicks are peddling," he said, low. "Brooklyn Bridge, for all I know. But they wear perfume."

"Look into it," Uncle Jim assured him.

The Mayor went on his way. I turned around and looked. The Slicks were from out of town. Hell, they were from New York! One was the father, other his son. They'd rolled into town a week earlier, taken the

– THE LAST POSSE –

Steven Key Meyers

suite upstairs, been getting to know people. I'd noticed them in the back of the ME church on Sunday, putting their heads together and seeming to assess members of the congregation. When we Groveses emptied out of our pew and went up the aisle, one nudged the other.

They made it their business to get to know my cousins Harry Groves and Ginger Groves. Harry was twenty and Ginger nineteen—family closest in age to me, so I hung around with them. That's how I knew what the Slicks were “peddling,” and it was even more exciting than the Oklahoma Yeggman! But I didn't volunteer anything. No one had to tell me to keep quiet; even before Harry and Ginger spit-swore me to silence, instinctively I sensed my uncles' knowing about it would make it go *poof!* like a dream.

Now Uncle Jim gave the Slicks a hard look. Didn't faze 'em. The younger smiled back like he was having fun.

But they were for another time. Uncle Jim looked across at the courthouse clock and said, “We better git.”

The Last Posse

Copyright © 2018 Steven Key Meyers

ISBN: 978-1-63263-870-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Booklocker.com, Inc.

2018

First Edition