

# **THE LAST POSSE**

A novel

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## 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 was our two-story Sheriff's Department with lock-up and living quarters, both banks, the Wilbarger Hotel and the Methodist-Episcopal Church; every other establishment lining the public square was wooden, with a gabled false front. Behind the square, wooden houses with front porches and gable roofs crowded up. The rising sun sharpened the gables into arrowheads of shadow 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 calling in greeting; could smell fresh manure and oily automotive exhaust, and see the wind biting at the cornucopia of coal smoke the approaching 7:48 was blowing skywards. The morning

clouds were still novel to me: coconut macaroons pressing up 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 start 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.

"Outlaw," Uncle Jim explained. "Old-fashioned word for an old-fashioned thing." Classic black hat, he said, silver-plated Colt 45 on either hip, silver spurs on his high-heeled boots. Uncle Jim had rushed off to Harrold to investigate, even as Frank 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 going thin, gut getting thick, some rust in the joints. Too old to be robbing banks. That'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 bank robbery with the train schedule, the Yeggman had boarded a fast train north, Gladstone bag in hand, and been 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 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, to signal 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—

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son of schoolteachers, I knew school was sacred—but his mind was on his outlaw.

“Hungry, Bing?”

“You bet, Uncle Jim.”

“Let’s get out of this hoosegow, go find us some chow.”

2.

I WAS WHAT THEY USED to call a pretty boy.

Not good.

“So *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 button nose: “*Awww, cute!*”

Other boys? Don’t ask. But it toughened me up, be sure of that. My 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 should have tried my luck in Hollywood.

At my prettiest when I turned twelve years old and my parents sent me and my rosy-cheeked blush, ringlets shyly 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 stuff in Vernon. Four brothers lived in town, 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, I towered over her. Bent over, not five feet tall, she wore long dresses, bonnets tied under her chin and 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.

Gram had 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. The food was swill, but 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 (and assistant jailer), 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 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 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 a sheriff 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 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 – three 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 away with his girlfriend, 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 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 thirteen, insisted 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 Dad’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 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 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 they took when they finally hauled him in to Fort Smith, Arkansas. Stands there grinning like an idiot, deputies on either side and 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 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 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, I instinctively 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.”

3.

MY FIRST SATURDAY IN VERNON, Uncle Jim drove me out in his official Model T to visit his father's grave in the cemetery rising over Beaver Creek twenty miles southwest of town. A sister was buried there, too.

He had to squeeze behind the wheel—six foot three, 230 pounds, all of it muscle. Never felt smaller in my life than sitting next to my Uncle Jim. Biggest of four big brothers, he was the son of an even bigger father.

That grandfather of mine, Nathan Micajah Groves, was legendary to me. Came of poor but good Southern stock, Uncle Jim said, brought to Texas as a boy, and at 13, big for his age, fought Civil War battles in a Texas militia, even getting to Sand Creek, and after that hunted buffalo and homesteaded two different places, ending up with the Beaver Creek spread, and blacksmithing in addition. Gram showed me her tintype of him, and it was startling, even scary, to peer into it and meet the incendiary eyes of the wild man snarling back, hair and beard long and black, onyx eyes *afire*. My grandfather.

From a long ways off we could see the graveyard's cottonwood trees. Not many other trees around; Uncle Jim said they got thinned out whenever hard times hit and people had to cut wood in order to survive. A wrought-iron railing protected a few dozen graves in various stages of neglect. My grandfather's stone was the biggest, a white marble slab four feet tall carved with his name and dates and symbols Uncle

Jim said were Masonic; big Mason, his dad. Next to his grave was his little girl's—Nelly, dead at two years old by the same typhoid fever that took him. Her marker was a stone shaped like a pillow.

It was a boon to the family when, in the late 1890s, the Waggoners started acquiring land along Beaver Creek. They paid top dollar, made it possible for my grandmother to buy a house in town and for Ma to go to school and enjoy an easier life than the ranch ever offered.

Ma was seven when Gram sold out, and though her stories would make you think the ranch had been a showplace, when Uncle Jim took me out there that day all I saw were the silvery remains of a few barns and fences near a dugout house. The land, never tilled, had a funny feel to it, too, as if the big bluestem and Indian grasses were swaying at the top of the world, where the air's thin, the possibilities stark. The Waggoner Ranch now encompassed the horizon in three directions.

"How Dad loved it out here," Uncle Jim said softly. "Wild, in those days. Used to see buffalo, wolves, even panthers.

"And the sandstorms! Remember your Ma was raising a little calf she loved dearly when a sandstorm drove a straw—a *straw!*—through its throat, and it bled to death in her arms."

I was glad to get back to town.

Everyone said of all the sons, Uncle Jim most resembled his father, but he seemed anything but wild; instead, about as sad and gentle as Uncle Rube.

Now we walked over to meet the 9:17. Vernon was planning to build a brick railroad depot with ladies' and gentlemen's waiting rooms, a café, toilets, baggage rooms, crew quarters, stone columns out front and a platform under glass and iron; I'd seen the pictures. But for now the Fort Worth & Denver City Railroad station was a shack beside an open platform.

We stood among those waiting to go Amarillo-wards. The September day of my arrival, I'd never felt heat of the intensity that enveloped me when I stepped off the train in Vernon. Windows open across the endless Panhandle—

flattest place on Earth—it had been bearable, but I stepped into a furnace. For all that the sun was setting, heat radiated around me as in an oven just turned off. A breeze came up, so searing I wished it would stop.

“How’s your Ma?” Uncle Jim asked first thing, and I said, “Fine.” But he always wanted to hear about her, her house and garden, her work as principal of the girls school.

Today, in November, it was better, the sun angling in low and vegetation going brown. Around us stood livery stables and garages, grain warehouses, a cotton gin, and overhead a water tower painted *VERNON* in flowery script. We could see the backs of houses, with their lean-tos and outhouses and chicken yards, dogs big and small patrolling the alleyways. Across the street high on a wall was a billboard painted in garish yellows and reds of cowboys, Indians and bucking broncos: *Pawnee Bill’s Historic Wild West Show June 21, 22*. For two Junes ago. *That* was the Texas I wanted, more like Ma’s stories than this colorless agricultural town.

Finally—but right on time—the train steamed in under ballooning clouds of smoke, the panting engine a naked monster of pipes and exposed works, the coupling-rods *jerking-jerking*, then *slowing-slowng*, with a gushing release of steam *stopping*. The engineer snapped off a salute to us.

We strolled down a few cars and stood aside as ranchers and farmers in coveralls got on or off. Last off were two Rangers in white Stetsons, one attached at the wrist to a man faded and insignificant as a middle-aged farmer.

“Sheriff Groves?” a Ranger called, and Jim took off his hat and stepped forward to shake hands. “Got your omelet for you.”

“Your yeggman,” clarified the other.

“Good, good. Yeah, that’s him. How you doin’, Frank?”

“Hey, Jim. Better after I’ve had my bath and shave and manicure and—”

“Don’t mind, gentlemen, show you to the jail, just this way.”

The Rangers came right along.

All the time Frank Holloway's pinched dark eyes shifted back and forth as he looked for a way out, figuratively tapping at the walls for some spot that would give.

"This is it, fellas: *Vernon, Texas*," he spat. "One-horse town, I said? Try one *pony*. Shit, Jim: *Chicago*?"

"Nephew, Frank. Watch the language."

"Sorry. Sorry, kid." Now his eyes settled on *me*. Sized me up head to toe, like he knew a shameful secret and was going to spill. My skin prickled as I realized how deceptive that home-boy appearance was: The eyes he looked out of were cut-outs in the walls of Hell! Gave me the heebie-jeebies. No wonder he was a lousy pickpocket – come close to you, your skin crawled. "Say, but ain't you a pretty thing! *My, my*, make somebody a good wife someday."

For *me*, that did it, far as Frank Holloway was concerned.

Frankly, what a disappointment. My first famous outlaw was short, his hair matted where he'd slept on it, bags under his eyes, clothes ragged – baggy dungarees soiled at seat and knees, torn shirt, jacket stained. *Stank!* And when did he last trim that gray mustache?

Meanwhile Jim chatted with the Rangers. How was the trip? Had breakfast? Time for lunch before the train back to Fort Worth, maybe see the sights? Oh, too bad, the famous Red River crossing at Doan's worth seeing. Next time for sure.

Walking through the courthouse square created a stir. People stopped in their tracks, and some jeered. They knew Frank Holloway.

"Not looking so sharp today, Frank!" "That your convict outfit, Frank?"

He ignored them, as did we, and we jogged up the two steps into the Sheriff's station, office to the left, staircase straight ahead, cells to the right. It went as Uncle Jim had laid it out, he holding a gun while Rube and the Rangers took off the prisoner's belt, emptied his pockets, took him into a cell. As instructed, I shut the door behind them and watched closely. They removed his handcuffs and, while Frank Holloway sat down on the bunk rubbing his wrists and pushing out his lips in annoyance, I opened the door to let

Rube and the Rangers out, quick clanged it shut again, and we had him. I was relieved: I didn't like the Oklahoma Yeggman, not one little bit.

He spoke up. "One thing, Jim: No disrespect to Mrs. Groves, but could you please ask the hotel to send in my meals?"

"All right," said Uncle Jim. Not his way to coddle prisoners, but who could blame the Yeggman? And while Frank Holloway was paying for food from outside, Aunt Willie got to keep the whole County meal allowance.

After he signed their papers, Uncle Jim had me take the Rangers back and wait with them for their train.

"So this is Vernon," one announced like he didn't think much of it.

"Yes, sir."

I seemed to catch his eye. Doing the grand survey of blush, lashes, curls and nose, he started to say something. Then, bless him, stifled it.

"Here we go, Charlie," he murmured instead, as a locomotive hysterically worked the curve into town.