

THE PONY EXPRESS

Wearing a crisp new suit and a pair of spit-shine black shoes, Jeremiah Brown boarded the train headed for Kansas City. He figured the new territories would prove ripe for a salesman's hungry appetite. Would that his enthusiasm not been so green.

Stepping off the train, Jeremiah took in a deep breath of cool prairie air. He walked to the livery stable and arranged for a horse at the meager sum of 50 cents per day. The first day's revenue from the two small towns on the outskirts of Kansas City sufficed to bolster the salesman's confidence.

The next day Jeremiah began his travels toward Johnsonville along one of the few north-south trails in that part of the state. Unfortunately, that path led him into trouble in the form of the Calhoun gang, a rough riding band of wayward youth who rejected their mama's upbringing from the get-go. The boys took everything that Jeremiah owned and left him for dead—a beaten, bedraggled lump of

flesh crumpled up against a mulberry bush along the road.

Well, it wasn't too long after the Calhouns rode away that a wagon approached the spot where Jeremiah laid. Now the occupants of that wagon were Rev. Billie Thompson and his missus, Anna Belle. Jeremiah slowly opened his eyes and tried to read the banner that hung from the side of Rev. Billie's wagon. With blurry sight, he made out the words, "The Holy Revival of Blazin Fire". The poor salesman felt a great deal of relief because he surely had a mighty need for a little reviving at the moment, even if it was one of a "Blazin Fire".

"Look, Billie," said Anna Belle. "That poor man looks hurt."

"Whoa now, hosses," yelled Billie. "I reckon he looks a might under the weather."

"What do you think happened to him, Billie?" asked Anna Belle.

"I don't rightly know," said the preacher. "Could be he ran amuck of some desperados."

“Do you suppose we should see if we can do anything for him, dearest?” asked the preacher’s wife.

Looking at his watch, the reverend replied, “Well, I don’t know, Anna Belle. We gotta be in Larabee by nightfall. Folks there might get a little upset if they ain’t got no preacher for their big revival meeting.”

“I suppose you’re right, Billie, but I just feel like we ought to do something.”

Rev. Billie looked at his wife and knew she was right. Climbing down off the seat, he walked around to the back of the wagon and pulled out a piece of paper. After writing something on the paper, he walked over to the salesman. Folding the paper in half, he put it into the man’s hand. Returning to the wagon, he climbed on board and took the reins in hand.

“Come on now, hosses,” barked the reverend.

“Why whatever did you write on that paper, dearest?” asked Anna Belle.

“I left him one of our flyers with a note inviting him to come on down and join us if he got better.”

“I knew you’d think of something, Billie,” said his wife.

After another hour or so up against that mulberry bush, Jeremiah caught sight of a massive cloud of dust coming up the trail.

“Great,” muttered the salesman to himself. “Just what I need, a tornado.”

Only it wasn’t a tornado. It was something a lot worse—a thousand head of Texas Longhorns. The trail boss of that herd went by the name of Matthew Levitt. A rough-hewn, but surprisingly well-educated man from New Orleans way, his watchful eye scanned everything bordering the outline of the cattle.

“Keep ‘em away from those scrubs, boys,” yelled Matthew.

When Matthew first spotted Jeremiah, he judged the distance to be about twenty yards between them. Pulling back on the reins of his mount,

he cautiously eyed the bush behind the man and then the area across the trail. Instinctively, he reached for the Winchester on the right side of the saddle. He'd seen too many ambushes set up by decoys along the trail. Not seeing any signs of hidden accomplices, he studied the poor man leaning against the mulberry bush.

As he often did, Matthew weighed his thoughts on the issue by talking aloud, "If he was a decoy, he should react more to all this dust by now. Seeing as how he's not doing anything, he's probably dead. If he's dead, I suppose we ought to bury him. But doggone it, if I don't get these cattle to market on time, the owners will have my hide. I suppose I could leave a couple of the boys here to dig him a grave, but this country's too wide open. I need everybody to hold these steers in tight. Best just let nature take care of him."

Having made his decision, the trail boss caught up to his herd and never looked back.

Jeremiah's hope for rescue dwindled on a pace with the descent of the hot sun from the highest part of the sky. He wasn't sure if that lone figure appearing on the trail was real or not. The horse

moved at a full gallop with the rider sitting low in the saddle. The salesman put little stock in that pair stopping to help. He watched as the horse and rider went flying by.

About two hundred feet up the trail, the rider sat up straight in his saddle and brought his horse to a stop. He turned around and rode back to where Jeremiah sat against the mulberry bush. Jumping off his horse, the young rider ran over to Jeremiah and helped him to his feet. Though he couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds, the kid somehow got the wounded man up on the back of his horse. Bounding back up into the saddle, the kid urged his horse back into a full gallop. Jeremiah held onto anything he could grip.

During the dusty ride, Jeremiah managed to ask the kid, "Who are you?"

"Pony Express, sir."

That was all that was ever said, or at least that's all Jeremiah remembered.

When the Express rider made it to the next town, he stopped in front of the hotel. The nameless lad carried Jeremiah up to a room the company kept

in reserve for its riders. He gave the desk clerk all the money he had for the doctor and then took off on a fresh horse. Two days later he returned to town on a back run. Briefly stopping to check on Jeremiah at the hotel, he gave the desk clerk some more money for Jeremiah's expenses. Then, as quickly as he came, he disappeared down the trail as if swallowed by the wind.