

RIDING SHOTGUN WITH RAGGEDY JONES

Buck had but twenty years of life behind him when he rode the solitary journey that took him away from the burned-out ruins of an old oak log house. A hundred yards to the east he had dug seven graves for the seven wooden caskets that held everyone he had ever loved. The sheriff said he had never seen such an evil act committed in those parts.

“Satan himself had a hand in this,” the lawman declared.

With that thought firmly planted in his mind, Buck saddled his horse and rode off. He never looked back. He had no idea where the trail would lead.

After four days of riding, he came to a fairly large town at the edge of a river. Bone tired, the young man stopped at a hotel and paid two bits for a room.

As Buck headed up the stairs, the clerk hollered up to him, “The contest starts at ten o’clock in the morning.”

“What contest?” Buck asked.

“The shooting contest,” the clerk answered. “I thought that’s why you were here.”

“No, not me. I’m just passing through.”

When dawn broke the next morning, Buck went down to have some breakfast at the café and then he went back to his room. At nine o’clock, he checked out of the hotel. As he got ready to put his foot in the stirrup, curiosity got the best of him. He followed the crowd over to the field where they were holding the shooting contest.

“Two bucks gets you entered,” yelled the barker. “Come on down and sign up.”

As he had said when he left his only home, he had no idea where he was going to be led. It appeared as though that contest called his name. He won the shooting contest hands down. Fifty dollars in gold coin and a job riding shotgun for the Overland Express Stage Line couldn’t have come at a

better time. Buck reported to the stage depot the next morning for his assignment. Lance Berry, a driver for the Kansas to Texas run, approached Buck while he waited for the dispatcher.

“That was some nice shooting yesterday,” Lance said.

“Thanks,” Buck replied.

“Do you know who you’re riding with?” the driver asked.

“Jones.”

“Old Raggedy Jones,” said Lance. “Best driver in the country on the most dangerous route in the country.”

Looking him in the eye, Buck asked, “What do you mean?”

“Renegade Indians, outlaws, rockslides, narrow mountain paths. You just about got it all. If I had to make that run, I wouldn’t want anyone other than Raggedy Jones by my side.”

Buck started to wonder what he had gotten himself into. As he stared out the front window, he

saw the Denver Express come to a stop outside the stage depot. He watched the shotgun get off, but he couldn't see the driver, who had gotten off on the other side of the coach. As the driver moved to the front of the team to talk to the handler, Buck could see he was a tall man by how he stood in relation to the horses. Finally, the driver stepped into the door of the depot and moved inside to the dispatcher's desk. After a couple of minutes, Billie, the dispatcher, came over and introduced Pete Jones to Buck.

“Raggedy, Buck here is your new shotgun. He won the shooting contest yesterday easily.”

Stretching out his hand, Buck said, “Good to meet you, sir.”

“Sir? I kinda like that, Billie ... son, most people just call me Raggedy.”

“Okay,” Buck replied.

“Let me see your gun, Buck,” said Raggedy. “Got a good feel. I'm using these twins right now. Don't get the distance, but they've got a fast action. Billy, I'm gonna go down to Mabel's and have

something to eat. I'll be back in about an hour. Buck, you had dinner?"

"Yeah, Raggedy, I'm okay."

"Then why don't you take a walk around the coach and get a feel for the horses."

"Sure, Raggedy," Buck said.

An hour later, the Denver Express rolled out of town with two passengers in the cab and three sacks of mail on the back. The first day went smoothly, with no trouble whatsoever. The days that followed brought many a test for Raggedy and his new partner. Raggedy and Buck remained a team for three years, making the most dangerous run the company had. Over such an expanse of time, Buck learned a lot about life and a lot about the legendary figure of Raggedy Jones.

There was the time they came across that family whose wagon broke down on the trail. The coach already overflowed with both passengers and cargo. Any other driver would have left the people and told them he would let the sheriff know when he got to town. Not Raggedy Jones. When

they pulled into town, there were kids hanging all over that coach.

An incident just outside Wichita gave Buck a glimpse of the physical finesse of his partner. While under attack from a gang of outlaws, Raggedy put the reins in his teeth and fired his twins simultaneously at the villains, all the while keeping the stage on the trail.

One time they pulled into Denver at nine o'clock in the morning and Raggedy dragged Buck into the church across the street from the depot. Pete Jones didn't have a Sunday-go-to-meeting suit, just that raggedy old buckskin coat that gained him his nickname. The folks in the pews could have cared less what Raggedy Jones wore, cause they knew what the man wore on the inside. Sitting next to him that Sunday, widow McSwain gave him a hug. Raggedy had given her his last twenty dollars to pay for her mother to come to Denny's funeral. Two rows up the Cox family they had helped on the trail proudly celebrated child number eight. It seemed as though Raggedy Jones had touched every member of that church in one way or another. Sometimes when they had a layover and

the trip had been exceptionally harrowing, Buck would ask Raggedy deeper questions.

“Raggedy, don’t you ever get scared out there?” Buck asked.

“Buck, there isn’t a man alive who can say doing this every day don’t get you a little scared. But when I get to feeling that way, I always remember what the Good Book says, ‘Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell.’ Course, I ain’t got no proper family. It’s a little easier when you ain’t got nobody worrying over you. I’ve been doing this for so long, I kinda figure anything the Good Lord wants to give me at this point is just gravy. Besides, there’s that line about ‘which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life?’ I know that you ain’t got a family anymore to worry about you, Buck, but if you look at it right, every man, woman, and child we help along the way kinda becomes our family. And if they’re our family, then we gotta protect ‘em, so that kinda overrides the fear most of the time.”

“Well, I’m proud to be riding alongside you, Raggedy. There’s a lot of folks around here that look at you like some kind of folk hero, you know.”

“Shoot, my friend, we can all be heroes in our own lives every day.”

The sun rose on another day with hues of orange and purple cascading through the sky. Buck and Raggedy headed back east with a coach full of dignitaries of some rank. A four-man cavalry escort rode with them the entire trip. When they got back to St. Louis, they dropped their passengers off in front of The Altamonte Hotel, where there was to be a high-level meeting of officials from many arenas.

“What do you think’s going on, Raggedy?”

“I heard through the grapevine that The President is coming here today. I reckon that would explain all the fuss and ado.”

“Maybe they’re all gathering here to give a medal or something to somebody important.”

“Could be, but I reckon we won’t have to worry about that, Buck. I do gotta tell you though,

the hairs on the back of my neck are standing up. I can't put my finger on it, but something just doesn't feel right about today.”

“How long do you think they'll lay us over this trip, Raggedy?”

“Don't know, but I reckon we better go find out, pardner.”

After pulling up to the depot, Raggedy and Buck helped the handler unload the mail and secure the horses. They walked over to the front door of the depot and Raggedy went in first. Then came what seemed like a lifetime condensed into several seconds. A blast of gunfire greeted them and they hit the deck. Three men rushed past them and jumped on horses being held by another man. Buck pulled his gun and dropped one rider before he got twenty yards. The rest of the band got away.

“You alright, Raggedy?” Buck asked.

His trail partner didn't answer. When Buck turned his friend over, he saw a pool of blood on the wood floor underneath Raggedy.

“Somebody go get a doc,” yelled Buck. “Hold on, Raggedy. They’re going to get help.”

“It’s been a long ride, Buck,” whispered Raggedy. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Pete ‘Raggedy’ Jones died in the arms of his friend that bright August day. Perhaps it was all coincidence, but over a thousand people attended Raggedy’s funeral, including every single person from the get-together at the Altamonte Hotel. Many of the people in attendance took a turn at digging a shovel full of dirt for Raggedy’s grave. The President of the United States held the first shovel to touch the ground.

Buck said quietly to himself as he dug the last shovel full of dirt, “Yeah, they came here to give something to somebody important. See you on the other side, Raggedy.”