

ANNIE'S RAIDERS

Annie McFarlane bought the Ferguson place just outside Fairmont City with the full intention of making a new life for herself. For the first six months, she pretty much stayed on the ranch except for the occasional trip into town to get supplies. Annie came into town a couple of times on Sunday to go to church, but she had not yet joined. Consequently, about the only person who got to know anything about her was Sam Fuller, the proprietor of the general store.

The only thing that Mr. Fuller could say about her past was that she had been on the trail for a long time, and she wanted to settle down in a nice peaceful town. Somewhere in her decision, Annie missed the mark regarding Fairmont City. Under the present conditions, Fairmont City did not fit the description of a nice peaceful town.

One day while in town to purchase some fabric at the general store, Annie ran into Betsy Calder coming out of Sam's place with an arm full of cloth. Putting out her hand, Annie said, "Hi, I'm

Annie McFarlane. I bought the old Ferguson place a while back.”

“Betsy Calder,” said Betsy. “I apologize for not getting out to welcome you. I’ve just been so busy with the harvest and all.”

“That’s okay. I’ve had a lot of work to do fixing things around the place, too. I see you like to sew.”

“Yes, with four young’uns, there’s always something to make or repair. Some days it seems like they’re growing faster than the corn during the summer.”

“Do you ever do any quilting?” asked Annie.

“Oh, I love it, when I have the chance,” answered Betsy. “Unfortunately, it always seems to get shoved to the bottom of the pile, except for if’n we’re expecting a cold winter and firewood’s running a little shy. Then everybody wants more quilts.”

“Would you like to come over to my place next Tuesday and work on a quilt with me?” asked Annie.

“Oh, I couldn’t. I don’t know how I could spare the time. I ah ... ah ... yes, I’d love to come over. Next Tuesday, yes, that would be nice. What time?”

“How about two o’clock in the afternoon?”

“That would be great,” answered Betsy. “I’ll see you then.”

On Tuesday afternoon at two o’clock, Annie McFarlane and Betsy Calder began a long friendship rooted in a love of quilting. Not long after that foundation set out its first roots, the word spread among the ladies living on the farms and ranches near Annie’s place, and the quilters grew to number thirteen. The husbands of twelve of those ladies grumbled frequently about the womenfolk taking out valuable time from all the chores to go to some woman’s house where there was no man to cook and clean for. The twelve ladies remained committed to “their” time.

Six months into the year, tragedy struck in the form of a stray bullet from one of the many outlaw gangs that ravaged Fairmont City. Heidi Schmidt lost her life on an innocent trip to buy flour for a birthday cake for her youngest daughter. The

quilters now numbered only twelve. They stopped quilting for a while so the group could help the Schmidt's get along.

When they met again at Annie's house, they all said it felt a little empty without Heidi because she always laughed at all their stories.

"It's getting to where I don't hardly want to go into town anymore," said Maggie Fostyer. "Especially not with my young'uns. Last Sunday we had to stay in the church for an extra hour cause there was so much shootin goin on outside."

"Somebody should do something about all those outlaws," added Sarah Thoms. "The sheriff, he talks a lot, but it doesn't seem like he does much. I think there are more of them now than there ever were."

"Yes, somebody should," said Annie, without further explanation.

The following week, after all the ladies arrived and were about to sit down around the big table in Annie's great room, Annie said, "Ladies, I want you to come out back behind the cabin. I have something I want to show you."

“What’s going on, Annie?” asked Betsy. “Did you get a new horse?”

“Just come on,” answered Annie.

With all the quilters gathered around her, Annie unbuttoned the coat she wore and set it aside. Shock and surprise could hardly describe their expressions, for resting on Annie’s hips were twin holsters with pearl-handled six guns. She stepped away from the group and spun around facing a rail fence with twelve bottles spread out along the top rail. Lightning fast, she simultaneously drew both guns and fired at the bottles. Working from the outside bottles toward the bottles in the middle, she did not miss a one.

“Land sakes, Annie,” exclaimed Sarah.

“Annie, how did ... where did ...” said Betsy, unable to finish her question.

“It’s just part of my past,” answered Annie. “A past I thought I had left to another time, another place.”

Annie McFarlane’s past had suddenly become a part of eleven other women’s futures. For the remainder of that afternoon, no hand took up

needle and thread. A heart-to-heart conversation changed the coming weeks of quilting on Tuesday afternoon at two o'clock. The details of that afternoon's words are less important than the fact that for the next year the first hour of every quilting session had one woman teaching eleven other women how to draw and shoot a six-gun and handle a shotgun with confidence. The second hour the group resumed their quilting, working on a special project dedicated to the memory of Heidi. Several of the ladies commented on how precise their sewing had become since their weekly exercise with the hand and gun. The workouts had dramatically increased their hand to eye coordination.

Jane Conway's daughter, Amy, joined the quilting group on Tuesday afternoon. Too young to take part in the first half of the group's activities, she became their official lookout in case anyone should come down the trail to Annie's place during their practice session.

One year and one month after losing their friend and quilting companion, Annie gathered the group around the table and said, "It's time, ladies. The outlaw group that took our dear Heidi is holed up in Jackson Cove. They've been operating so

long with impunity that they've grown fat and careless. Tomorrow night we'll have a full moon to help us. You all know what you have to do to get out of the house without suspicion. We'll meet here at nine o'clock. Amy, you know you can't come with us this time, but you can say a little prayer for us."

"I will," said Amy. "I'll ask God to bring all of Annie's Raiders back home safely."

"Annie's Raiders," declared Betsy. "I like it."

In their first foray into the outlaw world, Annie's Raiders descended upon the Bassett gang so quietly and so quickly that they fired nary a shot. Stripped of their guns and their boots, the villains arrived in front of the sheriff's office in Fairmont City tied backwards on their horses. No captors accompanied them on the last quarter mile, so the mystery of the moment planted a seed that would germinate into a ghostly legend. And, of course, there stood little chance that the truth would ever see the light of day. What outlaw would ever admit to having been subdued by a group of twelve women. Their stories usually ran along the lines of

“It took Wyatt Earp and fifty deputies to take them”.

Amy Conway’s appellation remained known to only thirteen spirits until some distant point in time. Their deeds, however, became widely disseminated throughout the region. Annie’s Raiders had to make eleven more such missions over the next year before word reached even the darkest regions to stay away from Fairmont City. Not so strangely, the town became a place deemed unsafe by those whose business in life made many a quiet street unsafe. One foolish attempt by an overconfident gunslinger ended quickly when Annie shot the weapon out of his hand before he barely got it out of his holster. No other bullets ever left the guns of Annie’s Raiders during any of their raids.

Two months after their last mission, Annie met Betsy once again coming out of the general store with fabric in her arms. “Hi, Betsy,” said Annie. “Are you bringing any of this on Tuesday?”

“Only this luscious little piece on the bottom.”

While they continued talking, a crowd gathered across the street in front of the saloon. It

seemed Mayor Fike had begun his campaign speech for reelection. The mayor tended to speak quite loudly when he got ramped up. The gist of his speech that day consisted of him taking full credit for the cleanup of the outlaws in “his” fair city.

At the height of his pomposity, Betsy said, “That mayor. Somebody should do something about him.”

“Yes, they should,” said Annie, without further comment.

On Tuesday afternoon at two o’clock, thirteen ladies, including Amy Conway, gathered around the big table in Annie’s great room.

“Ladies, I want you to come out back behind the cabin,” said Annie. “I have something I want to show you.”

“Annie, what could you possibly show us this time that would top the last thing?” asked Maggie.

“Did you buy a new mule or something?” asked Sarah, as they all laughed.

Following Annie outside, they reached the same spot where Annie had made her previous

revelation. But they saw nothing they hadn't seen before.

“What is it, Annie?” asked Betsy. “I don't see anything.”

“Just a minute,” replied Annie. “I have to get it out of the barn.”

When she returned two minutes later, two of the ladies burst out laughing, while the rest tried to stifle their giggles. But it was too much, and soon everyone was holding their sides. With mock pride, Annie stood tall in defense of her purchase.

“Annie, who sold you that mule?” asked Sarah.

“He looks tired, Annie,” stated Maggie.

“Tired?” questioned Jane. “I think we should get started digging his grave right now.”

“What's wrong with him?” asked Annie, looking hurt.

“What exactly did you have in mind for him, Annie?” asked Betsy.

“I bought this fine animal for one reason only,” answered Annie. “I only need him to do one

thing for me, and then he can retire to greener pastures.”

“And what might that be?” asked Betsy.

“Herbert, here, that’s what his name is, is a vital part of one last mission for Annie’s Raiders. This is what we have to do ... and we must do it tomorrow.”

On Wednesday, when the sun touched the bottom of the horizon, the stagecoach from Wendell Springs approached the last mountain pass before Fairmont City. It had been a smooth run for Jake Evans and his shotgun, Harley Smith. They looked forward to it ending, though. Carrying a secret load of payroll money for the mine and a lone passenger to make it look normal added a certain edginess to the trip. They were starting to relax as they neared the homestretch when they brought the stage to a sudden stop. Staring at twelve masked outlaws with twelve guns pointed at their heads, the driver and his shotgun raised their hands in submission.

“We ain’t got nothin valuable on board, today,” yelled Jake.

“Relax, friend, we know what you’re carrying, and we only want your passenger,” said the leader of the gang. “Sorry, boys, but you’re going to be about an hour late in delivering that payroll money.”

Leaving two riders to make sure the stage held fast for an hour, the rest of the gang headed toward town. They stopped at a little grove of trees on the way to pick up a mount for their captive.

Half an hour later, a lone rider approached the front of the saloon on Main Street. Astride an old mule, tied on backwards, and without boots, the mayor of “his” fair city drew a suitable number of cheers and a suitable amount of laughter from the onlookers. For most people, it would have been a very humbling experience, but this was the mayor. According to his testimony, it took the James brothers and twenty-four of his cohorts to put him in that position. And that was only because he didn’t have a gun with him.

In an interesting twist to his campaign, the mayor never again mentioned all that “he” had done to clean up Fairmont City. The good people of Fairmont City did re-elect the mayor, and they

also elected a new sheriff who seemed more diligent in keeping law and order. No one ever questioned whether the mysterious group had taken the law into their own hands. The decent, law-abiding citizens of Fairmont City were grateful to be able to walk the streets without fear of another innocent life being taken by a stray bullet from an outlaw's gun. They didn't want to be held captive in their churches on Sunday morning. They didn't feel that was too much to ask of the law.

The following Tuesday, the ladies finished the special quilt they had been working on for Heidi. The center block consisted of a beautifully stitched rose inside a heart that bore an inscription saying, "For you, Heidi". At the bottom of the quilt, they stitched "From Annie's Raiders". They hung the quilt next to the window overlooking Annie's back lot. The next quilting day they stitched a piece of cloth over the original words "From Annie's Raiders" and signed it "From Your Quilting Sisters".

Annie McFarlane eventually became Annie Travis, having married a man from Texas who bred and raised cattle. They had two healthy sons from that marriage.

At the age of sixteen, Amy Conway suffered the tragic loss of her mother and father to a tornado that swept through the Fairmont City area. The young lady, already like a daughter to Annie, spent the next four years in the Travis household. She married a young lawyer who had moved to Fairmont City from back east. They built a house on the farm right next to Annie and Bart Travis. When Annie passed away, Amy got the quilt that she had helped make so many years earlier. Before she hung it on the wall of their home, she removed the overlaid piece of fabric that covered the words “From Annie’s Raiders”.