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PREVIEW

BLOOD ON THE CAMAS

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BLOOD ON THE CAMAS

by

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THESIS

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"...One last thing, Ishi never told anyone his real name. The California Indians never uttered their own names, and were very careful how they spoke the names of others. Ishi would never refer to the dead by name either.

"In the end, no one ever found out a single name of the vanished community. Not even Ishi's. For Ishi simply means man."

--Thomas Merton "Ishi: A Meditation"

"...I don't know what it means, but I know it is important."

--A Zuni Indian after studying a single drawing on an extensive rock art site for three hours, 1984.

Preface

While living in Oregon I had several occasions to visit the vast and desolate southeast quarter of the state. This desert land, a part of the Great Basin, is sparsely inhabited and relatively untouched by the modern world. The largest airport, for example, is a single paved runway for light planes. Hitching posts and two stables are a part of Main Street in the area's largest town, Burns. The ecology, while suffering from over grazing, over irrigation and other ills of the modern world, still contains large unspoiled zones. Antelope, bear, deer and large flocks of migratory birds roam an area the size of Ohio. A small fish called an Alvord Chub inhabits a hot springs-fed lake and exists nowhere else in the world. Part of the reason for its survival is that in order to reach the lake a person needs to drive fifty miles over a rutted dirt road and then hike ten miles across a featureless alkali desert.

Once on a trip through this area I came on the idea of writing a "western." I knew only that I wanted to somehow try to catch a bit of the vastness of the Oregon desert and to capture some of the old west flavor the area still has. The result of that ambition is represented by this thesis.

As in my previous work with historical information, I have taken the faint framework of historical "truth" and have sent it through my own imagination in order to present a story. I would be the first to admit that I have little regard for the accuracy of events as I represent them in my writing. My concept has always been not to try to reproduce historical incidents, but rather to attempt to create the mood of a particular event or era. I am less concerned that a reader of my fiction, or an audience to my plays, comes away from my works knowing the facts of history than I am that they begin to see the characters as real people. In short, I am trying not to represent what actually did happen, but rather what may have happened.

The myth of the American West is an ideal setting for such a concept. The "western" genre has many strict conventions and although I found these conventions too restricting for the story I wanted to tell, I nevertheless have attempted to reproduce some of the elements in this fiction.

One critical aspect of the western is that all information and detail be accurate. That is to say, if the author places a particular type of rifle in the hands of a character, the genre demands that the rifle could have been used by someone in that time and place in American history.

In order to satisfy this demand for historical accuracy, I have used a variety of historical information in creating this fiction.

--The Liberty Bell toured the American West shortly after the Centennial celebration.

--There was a judge in eastern Oregon named Cincinnatus Hiner Miller who later wrote poetry and gained international fame as "Joaquin" Miller--"The Byron of the West." I have previously written a play about Miller and have used his character in creating Judge Miller.

--There was a man named Pete French and some facts of his life are reproduced here. He was killed by an irate homesteader who shot him twice in the chest while French and the homesteader argued about who owned some land. They were standing in the middle of one of French's large herds of cattle when the shooting took place.

--In 1852 a Chinaman rowed across the Pacific in a rowboat. Pete French did have a Chinese cook. French abandoned this man during a skirmish with Indians. He ordered his men to forget the Chinaman and to save the cook wagon.

--Sara Winnemucca was the name of an Indian woman who worked on and off for the whites, who traveled often with her own people and who, for a time, had a stage show which toured the west. The real Sara, unlike the fictional

one, was a bit more mercenary. She scouted and worked as a translator for the Army, but never against her own people, the Northern Paiutes. Most of the money she earned she gave to her tribe.

--The central confrontation between Oytes, Pete French, the Army and Sara could have happened. All historical counterparts were involved in the Bannock/Paiute Indian Wars of 1879-1880. Little is known of the historical prototype for Oytes, although there was a religious leader by this name who had quite a following of Indians in the Pacific Northwest.

--The incident of the misspelled Camas Valley is based on a similar incident which took place in Idaho. That incident was supposed to have been an "accident." A well-intentioned clerk corrected what he thought was a spelling error. The appearance of "Kansas Prairie" instead of "Camas Prairie" in the final copies of a treaty allowed homesteaders to move in on the good farm land and started the Bannock War.

One change I have made in the traditional "western" is that I have a heroine instead of a hero. Likewise, seldom are the Indians made to be the central protagonist and if they are, they are usually pictured as being more evil than good. If westerns have "good" Indians it is usually because the Indians have abandoned traditional

values and have accepted wholeheartedly the white way of life.

Both hero and enemy are usually portrayed as loners or outcasts in the western genre. I have attempted to create a group of such outcasts who find themselves drawn into a common series of events. Sara has the solitary role of being an educated Indian. This phenomenon, although much more common after the 1890's, was rare in her day. She is a loner: not totally Indian anymore, and not white.

Pete French as well is an outcast from the normal working range of the cowboy. He has been forced to leave his native California and ends up a loner on the desolate Oregon grasslands.

In the same fashion General Howard, Old Winnemucca, Ah Sin and Oytes are set apart from the "normal" society and have become outcasts either by their own actions, or by the very nature of their personalities.

I have not attempted to write a "revisionist" view of the Indian. While I trust Sara comes off as somewhat heroic, she still has flaws. Likewise, when the Paiute Oytes is introduced a more realistic and balanced view will be established. Oytes will not be a stoicly doomed Indian trying to hold onto a better way of life, but rather a self-serving, power-hungry opportunist. He will be a parallel for Pete French.

While developing these characters my main concern remained the plot. I wanted this novel to depend a lot on the development and unfolding of the plot rather than on character, interpersonal relationships and setting. These qualities are the traditional strengths of my writing, while plot has always suffered. It was my personal challenge to write a novel where the plot was an aspect as important as the other aspects.

In writing this work I have used a wide variety of source books. I would like to mention a few of the more significant ones. The Chinese Who Built America: Fusang by Stan Steiner was an excellent overview of the Chinese history of America. The Way of Zen by Alan Watts, An American Indian Ecology by J. Donald Hughes, Ghost Dance by David E. Miller and several books by Thomas Merton provided a religious overview which helped to create Ah Sin, Oytes, Old Winnemucca and, to an extent, General Howard. Will Henry's West, edited by Dale Walker, Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee by Dee Brown, Sara Winnemucca by G. W. Canfield, Gunfighters, Highwaymen and Vigilantes by Roger McGrath, were some of the books which helped with historical information. Others included The Oregon Desert by Jackman and Long, two biographies of Pete French, A Pictorial History of the Old West by James Horan, Touch the Earth, compiled by T. C. McLuhan, Portrait of the

Old West by Harold McCracken, The World of the American Indian from the National Geographic Society and Zen Flesh, Zen Bones. These were books that were always close at hand.

It is my hope that a small bit of both the beauty and the feel of what life must have been like years ago in the vast Oregon desert have been captured in the words of this thesis.

PREVIEW

One
Liberty

Sara Winnemucca stood deep in the crowd, surrounded by white people. The spring of 1879 had been a mild one and the warm weather had brought people from ranches and homesteads all over Eastern Oregon into town for the event. Men and women and dirty children pressed at her from all sides, trying to get a look at the train and at what the train was carrying as it pulled into Canyon City.

She wished that she had worn her buckskins, and maybe even braided her hair. That way, at least, they wouldn't have pressed so close to her.

The sunlit streets beyond the station were filled with a fine dust which hung in the air and scratched at

her lungs. Up near the tracks, on the platform that had been erected, sat Judge Hiner Miller, his hair still tangled the way it had been when the two of them rose out of bed a few hours ago. He was working hard at avoiding any eye contact with her. Even from this distance Sara could see the red in his cheeks from the morning's whiskey.

The engine was already in the station, but was waiting to move beyond the building and into view until a sign from the Judge. The Judge straightened a wrinkle on his trousers, and a band started up from the side of the platform. A low cheer went through the crowd and the engine puffed a cloud of steam and smoke and pulled into view.

Sara didn't mind instrumental music if it was played well. She even enjoyed the symphony in San Francisco but this band sounded more like a buffalo giving birth in a camas field.

The train blew its whistle, drowning out the band, and the crowd pressed tighter around her. They let out a roar now, and men threw their hats in the air.

Sara stood silently. A woman near her noticed her indifference and stared at her. Sara met the woman's eyes and held them. The woman turned quickly away.

"Yet another white man's church," she said to herself and laughed. They did indeed worship the bell. The shouting and the music and even what promised to be a long-winded speech by the Judge were all part of what they would probably

call "religion."

The locomotive was draped in red, white and blue banners and dozens of small United States flags were flapping in the wind from the canyon.

The locomotive moved behind the platform, and then the coal tender. There came a flatcar so covered with banners and flags that Sara could barely make out the bell itself: supported by a large wooden frame and protected from the elements by a metal canopy.

Everyone was shouting. Men lifted children in the air and women waved scarves and stretched.

The bell itself was old and worn. It had some writing on it, but even though Sara stood close to the platform she could not make out the words. It was cracked too: a ragged wound split the bell at its widest point. It appeared as if someone had tried to fix it a time or two, but she could still see light through the widest part of the crack. She laughed again. The damn thing was cracked!

The crowd pressed very close, elbows and shoulders rubbing against the cloth of her riding dress. The Judge was standing, trying to quiet them. He raised his flabby arms in the air and waved them around. When she saw him like this, around so many others, Sara was always a little surprised to realize just how big he really was. He towered

above the others on the platform, and stood out like a bluff on some flat river valley.

"Lay-dees and gents!" he shouted. "Lay-dees and gents!" His arms waved as if shooin enormous flies. "May we have it quiet please..."

The crowd settled momentarily before another roar came up and it took several minutes before the Judge could quiet them again.

"I have been asked to say a few words on this historic day in Canyon City..." His voice was covered again, and again it surfaced: "I have been asked to say a few words today on the very meaning of Liberty!"

It truly was a magic word, Sara thought, for at its sound the crowd grew instantly silent and leaned toward the platform. The Judge, shocked at the sudden attention he received, stammered a bit.

"Liberty, yes. That great goddess herself, Liberty!" He unfolded the scrap of paper which held the notes for the speech he had been working on earlier that morning, stared at it a moment, cleared his throat and began.

"Do you recall the time in our history when the sermon and song of freedom was heard from Maine to the banks of the Mississippi? When Thomas Jefferson and George Washington blazed the way through the wilderness for civilization to follow? By the light of their fires they buried

their dead in Hope..."

Crowded as she was, Sara managed to turn a bit and look back over the crowd. Now that the train had pulled forward and the bell was visible, there was very little motion along the street behind her. At the far edge of the crowd a few horses and riders still moved, but otherwise everyone pressed toward the platform and the tracks, straining to see the bell and to hear the Judge's words. For Sara, his words droned on like so many flies on meat hung up to dry.

"...On the glowing olive-set hills of Syria, the burning sands of Arabia, by the blazing shores of the Red Sea where Moses saw the face of God in the burning bush, where men believed and when men believed, when they had faith in God and hope in a promised land, then and there was Liberty conceived..."

Votes, he had told her the night before when they lay on the straw ticking he used for a bed, nearly every face you see out there tomorrow is another vote.

"...I say you might as well send a man out in the darkness to gather flowers on yon sunny hillside as to ask for Liberty in an age when faith and hope and charity are rudely thrust aside by the hard, mailed hand of doubt..."

She had been on top, straddled him as if on a horse. She got up off of the ticking.

She had picked up two dresses from her small saddle-bags and held the dresses to the light that came in from the front window. "Which one should I wear tomorrow?" she asked. Sara didn't care much for clothing, and even less for men's opinions about it, but the Judge was more like a woman in some ways than a man. A white woman, anyway.

"Which one," she asked again, "the buckskin or the riding dress?"

"Jehosophat, woman. Get away from that window!"

She held up the riding dress and studied it. "It should probably be this one."

The Judge sprang from the bed and pushed her aside. "You're standing right in front of the window!"

"I might as well dress like a white woman. No knowing what might happen if I dress like an Indian."

"Most of the voting age population of Grant County, Oregon is passing in front of that window this very moment. All I'd need is for someone to look in and see a stark naked Indian woman standing in my house."

"You don't care which I wear?"

"For God's sake, woman, just put something on." He took a pull at the whiskey jug--never more than a hand's length from his side.

Sara took the jug from him and had a pull herself.

She sat down, still naked, on a cane chair near the door.

The Judge was nervous. "First my wife takes off and leaves for Portland and then I'm seen with a naked squaw in my own cabin--do you know what that would cost me? Let that get out to the women and it might cost me the entire election: too many wives tell their husbands how to vote."

"Say, Hiner..." He hated to be called that, but Sara refused to call him "Judge." "Say, Hiner, try it again. Tell me again why the whites worship a bell."

The Judge sat back on the ticking and used the buffalo blanket to cover his thick white legs and crotch. "It ain't just a bell," he said wiping a trickle of whiskey off his beard. "This is the damn Liberty Bell."

"And you worship it."

"The Liberty Bell rang on the first afternoon this country became a nation. They rang that old bell when ah...well, ah...when Jefferson and these other boys signed the Declaration of Independence. That ringing announced to the whole world that we meant to be a free country."

"Hell," she said. "I don't care how big that bell is, it couldn't have been heard more than ten, twenty miles."

"Heard?" The Judge stared at her. "Are you people that stupid? It don't need to be heard, it's what the

Bell means. It's the Liberty Bell. That bell means we are free."

"A bell means you are free?"

"Exactly."

Sara looked at him closely through the moonlit dust of the cabin's interior. "So you worship a bell."

"Right." As he answered her, Sara began to laugh. He watched her until he felt the blood rising in his temples. "Look," Hiner Miller said, "it is what the Bell means. It's like say...what the eagle is to the Paiutes."

"A bell is made of metal and is heavy," she said. "The eagle can fly."

In the sunlight the dust from the churned up streets of Canyon City continued to rise over the locomotive. Sara could tell that Judge Hiner Miller was trying to keep back a cough as he spoke to the crowd.

"Perhaps the greatest source of sorrow in this commercial age is the way men always want to get and get and get--this age of gold and getting will pass, but those of the future will look back on us and see our greed and not our good works if we are not careful..."

A man standing just at Sara's side yelled out, "The Bell. The Bell, does it still ring?"

"...it is up to the politician, the leader solely elected by the men of this great nation, it is up to the

truly elected leader to avert this tidal wave of calamity that could envelop the Christian world..."

Another man, a bit to her left, took it up. "Ring the bell. Let's hear it ring."

"...Seeking riches is not the leader's role. Truth is the leader's role. Truth and honesty in a man who you trust to..." The Judge stopped in mid-sentence and looked around himself. "What?"

"Does the Bell still ring?"

"Hell yes," Hiner Miller said. He did not try to locate where the question had come from. "I'm sure it still rings. It does, certainly. But the tidal wave can be stemmed only by the leader that you can trust..."

"Then ring it!" someone from behind Sara shouted.

"Let's hear it," another joined in.

Judge Miller looked about a moment with a small hint of pain. Then he looked back down at the notes in his hand, and then back to the crowd. He turned to the man who had ridden in on the train and still stood on the flatcar which held the bell. The man on the flatcar did not change his expression, nor look at the crowd.

"Nope," he said, "can't allow it."

The Judge turned back to the crowd.

"Why not?" someone up close shouted. "We want to hear it ring."

"Perhaps striking the bell would harm it," the Judge said, opening his arms to the mob. "After all, it is old."

"Hell, a couple of whacks ain't going to hurt it. Ring it for us, Judge."

A general chorus took up the request. Judge Hiner Miller looked out over the people and then turned to the man on the flatcar. "Why don't we ring it just once?"

"I can't allow it," the man said. "Orders."

"Forget orders," the crowd shouted. "Ring it, Judge."

"You must ring the bell," the Judge said to the man.

"Nope." The man had not changed expressions.

"Ring it! Ring it! RIng it!"

Sara watched the Judge and smiled to herself. It would be something to see how he would get out of this one. The crowd was getting hotter, and she could tell that Hiner was beginning to squirm. Just then, though, she saw him look, startled, out beyond the crowd. His face dropped and Sara could tell that the color had left his cheeks. She turned around to see what had frightened Hiner. The scene behind her looked pretty much the same as it had, although the crowd was packed in even tighter. She was just about to turn forward again when she saw the three riders. Two men dressed in dark clothes sat on their horses on either side of a tall, somber-faced

cowboy on a big, black gelding. Sara knew immediately that they were different from the rest of the crowd; they were waiting for something else beside the ringing of the bell.

When she turned to face the platform, the Judge was still staring out at the three riders. When he spoke it was with an urgency not brought on by the demands of the crowd.

"All right, son," the Judge said. He drew out a small revolver from inside his coat and rested it on the man's shoulder. "You'd best see your way through to breaking orders just this one time."

"Ring it!" the crowd shouted.

The man on the flatcar looked steadily at the Judge's gun, and then turned his eyes toward the crowd. His entire body stiffened, as he realized he was entirely alone. He was surrounded by a mob of half-drunk miners and ruffians and soldiers and cowboys and he was two thousand miles from anywhere, with a madman's .45 pointed at his head.

The man pointed to the Bell. "The clanger's all tied up in there."

"Then untie it," Judge Miller said.

He reached below the bell and worked at the ropes which held the clanger in place. A cheer went through the crowd.

In a moment the man stood up again. "It's all undid," he said to the Judge, and then: "Please, I got orders not to ring it for anybody short of a General or a Governor."

"If that's all you're worried about," the Judge said, "General O. O. Howard himself passed through here just yesterday on his way to Fort Harney...and I'm Judge of Grant County which is larger than any five states east of the Mississippi."

"Ring it!"

The Judge tapped the barrel of the .45 on the man's shoulder.

The man stooped again to the Bell.

Someone behind Sara pushed hard and two or three people fell forward, pushing others in the crowd.

The man reached beneath the Bell and grabbed the clapper. He rocked it first to the left, then to the right and back left again. Then, with the full force of his arm he slapped the clanger against the right rim of the Bell.

The low, crisp note was much louder than Sara had imagined it would be. Its sound instantly quieted the crowd. The silence was complete as the ringing filled the air.

It hurt Sara's ears. The sound was really two