

HANGING DAY

I've been to plenty of hangings in my life, 23 to be exact. Most of them during my five years as Sheriff of this bustling cow town. But today will be the first time I've ever attended a hanging knowing for a fact that the doomed prisoner was innocent of the crime for which he was condemned.

This statement may not sit well with some folks, probably soft hearted souls new to this part of the country. But, if not for murder, Jericho Sanchez was destined to be hanged for horse thieving. Yet people didn't come from all parts of the county and state to see him hang for stealing a few ponies from a rich man's herd. They came to see him swing for murdering Emma Jane Harding, the little girl I used to call "Mopsie". She was the 17 year old daughter of Brent Harding, owner of the town's only silver mine, its largest ranch and half the town of Bitter Creek. Personally, I didn't much care which offense Jericho got hung for, he was going to die one way or the other. All that mattered to me was that I've got a \$2,000 bounty sitting in my pocket for bringing him in on the horse thieving charges. Besides, just because a criminal is convicted for the wrong crime doesn't mean he isn't deserving of his punishment.

The hanging of Jericho Sanchez was scheduled for noon, still two hours away. People were already crowding around the gallows set up in the middle of the town square, vying for a close up view of the proceedings. Sheriff Whitey Whitman and two deputies pushed the townsfolk back to set up a rope perimeter about 10 feet around the gallows. Of course, if things turn sour, as they do from time to time when emotions run high, no rope barrier was going to hold back an unruly mob.

It had been nearly two years since the last hanging in Bitter Creek and carpenters were

putting the finishing touches on the gallows assembly, testing the center beam to be sure it was strong enough to hold the weight of the prisoner, examining the rope for frays or weakness, and scrutinizing trap door hinges for rust and corrosion. The town didn't have any gallows when I first became Sheriff. Murderers, thieves and rapists were hung from a large oak tree just outside of town. The prisoner stood on a horse drawn cart with a noose around his neck. The problem with that method was that when the cart drove away, the criminal strangled slowly and it took too long for him to die. It didn't bother me that the scum suffered an extended, painful death, but the long, drawn out affair made it difficult to keep the crowd in check. So I personally commissioned the construction of these gallows nearly 10 years ago. They were state of the art at the time, and still are today. The gallows were built 12 steps up to a 20 foot wide platform with a reinforced crossbeam long enough to hang four men at a time. The scaffold was equipped with four trap-doors, so the victim dropped down and died quickly from a broken neck rather than through strangulation. I even liked to attach extra weights to their ankles to be darn sure there wasn't a hint of life left in the scuzzbag once that door opened. During my last four years as Sheriff, I made sure the gallows remained erect in the town square, a lurking reminder to any and all that the power of justice, law, and order would prevail in the town of Bitter Creek. But the town is a lot more civilized now, so the gallows were taken down and stored after each use, then reassembled if and when needed.

The three story Bitter Creek Hotel, the town's fanciest hotel owned by Brent Harding himself, overlooks the town square. And since Mr. Harding was more than grateful that I brought in his daughter's murderer, he offered me the Governor's Suite on the third floor, free of charge. The room earned its name after being enlarged and spruced up a bit for the governor's visit a few

years back. I've been told that it's the only hotel room in the county with its own private, outdoor balcony, from which I will be able to look down and see the life snapped out of Jericho Sanchez in just a few short hours. Best seat in town for a hanging.

Town merchants and shopkeepers scurried about, readying themselves to take advantage of the large crowd that was expected. Henry Booker, owner of the Red Dog Saloon on the south side of the town square moved eight tables outside the front door so customers could drink while watching the hanging. The boardwalk and street in front of the saloon were owned by the town and using this space for private business was forbidden by local ordinance, but Whitey would probably be too busy to uphold the statute today. The Tanglefoot Saloon on the north side of the square countered by posting a sign that read "10 Cent Beer – 3rd Beer FREE". Molly's Dress Shop, next to the Red Dog, tried to draw attention their way when Molly's randy daughter Delilah stepped into the front bay window as a live mannequin fashioning a frilly, low cut red dress. Delilah never passed an opportunity to shine in the spotlight. Jars of peppermint, lemon drops, jelly beans and toffee lined the shelves of Lucy Lou's Candy Store. Barrels heaped with penny candy and a sign proclaimed the virtues of freshly imported Swiss chocolate.

A short, fat monk with the hood pulled too low on his forehead waddled along the boardwalk in front of the Post Office on the east side of the square. Must be Friar Tuck, the crazy old monk who has been chanting in his one man monastery in the nearby hills for the past 20 years. Nobody knew his real name, so he got tagged as Robin Hood's sidekick. The shy friar didn't seem to mind. He keeps to himself and doesn't show up in town too often, but there's a lot more to this character than appears at first glance. Heard him speak English, German, Italian and Spanish one afternoon at the Red Dog when he let his guard down after a wedding.

I swayed back in my cushioned rocking chair and settled in for the event. I lit up one of those Cuban cigars and poured myself a glass of the finest Kentucky bourbon, both compliments of Mr. Harding. The crowd continued to swell, but the prisoner wouldn't appear until just before noon. I don't know much about Jericho Sanchez. I've heard that he was a poor, migrant worker from Mexico. He'd worked as a laborer and wrangler for Mr. Harding the past few years, but when a dozen or so horses were stolen off the Harding Ranch, suspicions were cast in his direction. Jericho had been sent out that morning to bring in the horses, but did not return until after sundown, without the horses and no good explanation for his long absence. He claimed he spent the whole day looking for the horses. Nobody believed him and he was accused of the crime. He sat in jail for a week, but was subsequently released for lack of evidence. The following day, a second wave of horses were stolen off a nearby ranch and Jericho knew he would be accused, so he took off, presumably for Mexico. He was spotted riding a stallion that matched the description of one of the missing horses by a stage coach driver coming into town. Wanted Dead or Alive posters with a \$2,000 reward for Jericho Sanchez, Horse Thief, soon popped up all across the county.

I caught wind of the reward and went searching for Jericho Sanchez. I'd been roaming the local hills and forests for a few days, trying to pick up any semblance of a trail or whereabouts of the horse thief when, on Sunday morning, I stumbled upon evidence of a small camp. Coals from a campfire were still warm, not more than an hour old, and fresh tracks led out of the camp. The path sent me in the general direction back towards Bitter Creek, but stayed clear of the main road. As I got closer to town, I started wondering if I'd picked up the wrong trail, surely Jericho would not come anywhere close to town. Then the tracks turned sharply

north. I wasn't sure where I was heading, but by avoiding both the main road towards town and the road north, it was clear that I was following someone who was conscious of possible pursuers. There were a number of ranches scattered north of town, but the more I rode, the more I came to realize that we were in route to the Harding Ranch. Questions flooded my mind. Why wasn't Jericho Sanchez already in Mexico? Why would he ever want to go to the Harding Ranch? Is he risking going back to retrieve something left behind? Someone? Settle a score with Mr. Harding? If he came to plead his innocence, he had a better chance of catching a bullet in his head than a sympathetic ear. The poster did, after all, read "Wanted, Dead or Alive". Less than half mile away and our destination was no longer in question. I dismounted and walked my horse the last 100 yards. The bunk house nestled in the woods about a half mile to the West, across a large pasture, the main house 50 yards straight ahead. His tracks were lost in a flurry of traffic activity in the area, but a horse was tied to the hitching post in front of the Harding house. I tied my gelding out of sight behind a shed, and crept around to the back of the house. It was nearly noon and I knew the Hardings never missed the 11 am Sunday church service in town. Did Sanchez actually have the gall to risk sticking around for nearly a week, then come back to rob the Hardings when he knew they would be gone? Jericho Sanchez was proving to be a bolder character than I originally thought.

I peeked into the back window, no sign of life. I pulled my gun, opened the back door and gingerly stepped into the kitchen. I hadn't taken two steps when the silence was shattered by a sharp bang and glass exploding behind me. I ducked down, flipped the kitchen table onto its side and slid behind the barrier. A man dressed in black flashed across the opening from the kitchen to the hallway. I lifted to my knees and fired three wild shots into the front room, a

whining moan followed by a thud filled the air. I rose, but was immediately driven back to the ground as another gunshot from Jericho rang out and entombed itself into the kitchen table. Footsteps pounded across the front room, the door flew open and slammed against the wall. I set out in pursuit without hesitation. I arrived in the next room just in time to see Jericho racing along the front porch towards his horse. I stopped, took aim and fired through the front window. Jericho Sanchez tumbled to the ground, grabbed his knee and rolled up to the feet of his horse. That \$2,000 reward was now mine.

Elbow to elbow, crowds swelled in the town square. Four deputies strolled the perimeter of the square and I spotted at least three more on rooftops, rifles cradled across their chests. It was Whitey's first hanging as Sheriff and he must have been nervous enough to call in reinforcements from the County Marshall's office. Six vaqueros strolled into the square from the West, ponchos draped off their shoulders, sombreros shaded their eyes from the sun. They had no doubt been searched and disarmed at the edge of town, Whitey had continued the "No Weapons in Town" policy I started years ago.

Just an hour to go, I poured myself another whiskey. Old Lady Barnes was being walked on a short leash by her white French poodle, a pudgy boy drooled over pastries in the bakery window, and a lady without a smile sold elixir from a cart near the entrance to the square. A stout man with a Wyatt Earp mustache and a hook nose urged a two young lovers meandering arm in arm to enter his little café. The sweet aroma of freshly baked muffins and pastries waft in the air. Two cowboys galloped in from the East, splashes of whiskey escaping the bottles each held in one hand, reins to their horse clutched tight in the other. Shrieks escaped from frightened onlookers flinging themselves out of the way to avoid the charging riders. The cowboys came

to an abrupt halt in front of the Red Dog, dismounted, dropped their reins, and barked out commands in the direction of Henry Booker. Friar Tuck took a seat at one of the tables in front of the Red Dog and ordered a beer, his head buried in a hand sized book.

Brent Harding sauntered out the front door of his hotel, wife Rose clamped to his left elbow, albeit a half step behind. All eyes were on the despot who bestowed a faint smirk and half-hearted wave to those he viewed as peasants of his fiefdom. The smirk morphed into a poorly disguised Mona Lisa smile as he tipped his cap in the direction of Delilah, and was rewarded with a wink in return. Rose's head hung low, away from her husband. The veil over her face could not disguise her sorrow and years of neglect. Her feet begrudgingly propelled her forward. A deputy rushed out of the Sheriff's office and escorted the couple to the front row seats reserved for dignitaries, including the Hardings, the mayor and the governor who probably would not show.

Brent Harding had long been feared and Rose Harding pitied. But the genuine affection for Emma Jane Harding ran deep in the town of Bitter Creek. I wouldn't describe myself as a family man or a lover of little kids, but Mopsie chiseled her way into my heart at an early age. She always accompanied her ma or pa into town and while they were doing their business, Mopsie flew directly to my office, plopped her feet up on the desk next to mine and said, "Well, what should be talk about today, Billy Joe." She's the only person I ever let call me Billy Joe. To everyone else I was Sheriff Blanton, or simply Bill, if I considered them a friend. I'm not sure how she discovered my real name, but she loved to dip her head, pucker her lips, and roll that Billlly Joooe off her tongue. And I have to admit that I fancied watching her do it. After the initial hellos, first thing Mopsie wanted to do was wear a Deputy Sheriff badge. I resisted at first,

but it wasn't long before I was pinning that badge onto her chest myself. She walked rounds with me and made sure that everyone could see that big, shiny medallion on her dress. Shortly thereafter she asked to do rounds on her own, insisting that she could do the job and nobody would dare cross her. She was probably right, so, of course, I let her. The only condition was that she fetch me a bag of jelly beans from Lucy Lou's on the way back. She did, and we devoured them together. I'm going to miss Emma Jane, I miss her already. But I try not thinking about her too much, dead is dead and life goes on. I keep telling myself that.

Whitey had disappeared back into the Jail House and would emerge with the prisoner any minute. The crowd grew restless, Whitey will have a tough time blazing a trail through this horde. A huge roar erupted over the square as Whitey and Jericho Sanchez emerged from the Jail House, surrounded by four deputies. The usual flurry of barbs, curses and tomatoes were hurled their way. A cowboy stood upon his table at the Red Dog and fired a shot into the air, then was immediately tackled and handcuffed by two deputies as they confiscated the smuggled weapon. The pudgy boy gnawed on his pastry, it wasn't his first, the vaqueros huddled in front of the Tanglefoot Saloon and Friar Tuck settled into the chair reserved for the governor, next to Rose Harding. The mob swallowed the prisoner and his escort. Obscenities and tomatoes were replaced by dirt clods and stones. Jericho and the deputies buried their heads into their elbows, a feeble attempt to shield themselves from the onslaught. Whitey furiously waved for reinforcements while urging his cohorts forward. They trudged, heads down, struggling for every inch. A well-aimed rock struck Jericho in the skull, blood squirted onto the Sheriff. The only lingering question was whether or not Jericho Sanchez would survive long enough to hang for his crimes. Four deputy marshals galloped into the square on war horse like stallions, one from each

direction, charging through the onlookers without mercy, waving pistols in the air. Women screamed, men dove out of their path. The horsemen never slowed down. Only when their own lives were imperiled did the mob's blitz upon Jericho Sanchez abate. The marshals surrounded the Bitter Creek deputies and escorted the prisoner's escort to the gallows without further incident.

Jericho hobbled up the gallows steps behind Whitey, blood oozing down the side of his face. The deputies and marshals followed and positioned themselves about the perimeter of the gallows, facing the crowd, weapons at the ready. The executioner waited for his cue from Whitey, then stepped forward and exchanged a few words with the Sheriff. He wore a black hood over his head, but everyone knew he was Judge Roy Barker. Roy sometimes leapt to conclusions with a bit too much haste, but he was, by and large, a fair man and ran unopposed in the past ten biannual elections. He insisted on executing all prisoners that he sentenced to die. He claimed it wouldn't be fair to ask somebody else to put another human being to death without the opportunity to examine all the evidence and assure themselves of the prisoner's guilt. Since nobody else wanted the job and the pay stunk, Roy's logic remained unchallenged all these years.

The Bitter Creek Judge and Executioner slipped the noose over Jericho's head and cinched the knot without hesitation. The subdued crowd released a collective gasp. Silence hung in the air, lingering awkwardly. Jericho Sanchez seemed to make eye contact with Friar Tuck, scanned the throngs, and then tossed a quick glance my way. Some cowboy hollered, "hang his ass", and more taunts, jeers and insults heaved forth, yet not so intensely as before. Whitey forgot the order of things and sought help from the Executioner. Roy nodded towards the prisoner as his lips moved under the hood. The Sheriff understood, stepped forward and raised

both hands. “The prisoner will now be granted the opportunity to say a few last words.” More catcalls burst forth, but Old Lady Barnes whirled and shushed them all. Her poodle echoed support with three rapid, high pitched yelps, but was quickly calmed with a pat on the head.

Jericho shuffled forward until his rope went taut. He surveyed the square, lingered on the vaqueros, and returned his attention front and center. Many prisoners were well rehearsed with a speech, often an outpouring of apology coupled with a plea for forgiveness in a desperate endeavor to convince their Creator that they are worthy of ever-lasting life in Paradise or Heaven or wherever it is that the Preacher gets to go. Others spewed tough guy quips, or snide remarks. But Jericho Sanchez was any one of them. He looked bewildered, resigned to his fate, certainly at a loss for words. Hundreds of eyes zeroed in on him and that noose around his neck, yet he had no idea whatsoever what was expected of him. A tall, skinny man howled, “let’s get on with it”, and immediately incurred the wrath of the Old Lady. Friar Tucker rose and calmly, deliberately, uttered a few words directly to the prisoner in Spanish. Jericho hesitated for a moment, then began spewing out words in Spanish at Gattling gun speed. His shoulders rocked, head bobbed up and down, and his hands would have been thrashing through the air had they not been tied behind his back. The animated Mexican worked himself into a tizzy, talking faster and louder by the second. The vaqueros shoved their way forward, the deputies readied their weapons and the seat next to Rose Harding had been vacated. Everyone else in the square froze in shock, they didn’t understand a word Jericho Sanchez was saying.

A wavy haired Mexican girl in her Sunday dress, about ten years old, spurted out of the crowd and dashed towards the gallows. Her mother chased close behind, wailing, sobbing and seemed to proclaim Jericho’s innocence, although I couldn’t be sure, her Spanish no more

comprehensible than his. They barged by dignitary row, ready to crash the stage. A deputy dove from the platform, knocking the mother down. He rolled her onto her belly, yanked her arms and tied her wrists behind her back. He jerked her to her feet and slapped her across the cheek. Old Lady Barnes led the chorus of jeers and boos directed at the deputy. The little girl was briefly forgotten in the chaos and slithered up the steps. She sprinted to her daddy and wrapped her arms around his legs. I rose to my feet and leaned forward, bracing myself on the balcony rail. Jericho tried to cuddle up to her, but his hands, feet and neck were bound. All he could do was tilt forward and smile at his little girl.

Tears streamed down the little girl's cheeks and her lips parted, but there were no words. Her eyes pleaded for understanding as to why her father was being taken from her, much as Mopsie's eyes bore into mine in her own dying moments, as she gasped for air, begging for an explanation. A quick glance at the pool of blood on the floor, her belly ripped apart, and the gaping hole in her chest told me that her next breath could be her last. "What are you doing at home? Why aren't you in church?" Mopsie read her fate in my eyes, and a faint smile came to her lips. "Well, what should we talk about today, Billy Joe?" Those words were her last before nodding off into oblivion. The person I revered more than any other on Earth, and all I could say was, "What are you doing at home?" That's the best I could come up with, pretty sad I would say, pretty sad. I wish I could have the last few moments back.

A deputy wrapped his arm around the midsection of the little girl and ripped her away from her father. Jericho tried to kick him, but stumbled backwards, the noose tightening around his neck. The girl punched and screamed as the deputy raced down the stairs. Old Lady Barnes hooted and hissed, the massive crowd chimed in. A tomato splattered onto the forehead of the

deputy, followed by an apple and a few glasses of beer. He stumbled to the ground, smothering the little girl.

I heard the balcony door slam closed behind me and footsteps clomp my way. I stabbed for the pistol hidden under my pant leg and whirled about, raising my weapon. Friar Tuck stood passively before me, rifle in hand, although the butt rested on his right shoe and the barrel pointed skyward. In his usual calm manner, Friar Tuck said, "Hello, Bill".

I kept my pistol designed on Tuck's forehead. It's healthy to assume that a man carrying a rifle has intentions of using it, even a priest.

The monk seemed unaffected by the gun pointed at him. "I talked to Jericho Sanchez. His version of last Sunday's events don't exactly match with the story told in Judge Barker's courtroom."

My hand remained steady, and my aim true. "Are you surprised?"

The monk waddled to the edge of the balcony, leaned the rifle against the rail, and took a step back. "I came to hear your version, Bill."

I relaxed the gun to my side. "I just brought him in the horse thieving charges, that's all."

The Friar stiffened and looked me straight in the eye. "You were pretty fond of that girl, weren't you?"

I couldn't erase that vision of Mopsie lying on the ground, her head on my lap, staring straight at me the same way Friar Tuck was doing at this very moment. I dropped my head and turned slightly, and could manage no more than a weak, "Yeah".

"You know, Sheriff, Jericho told me he didn't steal those horses. And I believe him."

The sincerity in his voice trumped the testimony I'd heard in court.

Friar Tuck grabbed the rifle and extended it to me. “There’s not much time and you’re the only person who can set things right.”

A gunshot cracked through the square and we both spun about. Sheriff Whitey waived a gun in the air and frantically motioned for the Executioner to pull the lever to the trap door. But Roy hesitated, then backed away. Brent Harding charged the platform and ripped the gun away from the nearest deputy and shoved him off the stage. Brent raised his arms, both hands on the six shooter, and took dead aim at Judge Roy Barker. “Pull the damn lever, Hangman”. The crowd took a collective gasp, and all that could be heard were leaves rustling in the breeze. Brent cocked the hammer, “Now!” Roy slid beside Jericho, removed his hood, and muttered a few words into the prisoner’s ear. He placed both hands on the lever, then paused. Old Lady Barnes and Jericho’s wife screamed in unison. The Hangman pulled the lever.

Two shots blasted in rapid succession, one louder than the other. Jericho Sanchez crashed through the opening in the platform, out of sight. The vaqueros swarmed the stage and dove down to fetch their friend. The severed rope swayed from the crossbeam above. Brent’s body sprawled out on the platform, face down, blood pouring out the back of his head.

Storm clouds gathered and the sun never came out the next morning. The town square was empty and the frayed hanging rope fluttered with each gust of wind. I slept better than I would have expected, but I think Rose Harding had a pretty restless night.

Whitey brought our breakfast and left without a word. It was no hotel food, but I was hungry. She picked at her eggs and played with her fork before breaking the silence. “Do you think we’ll be the next ones hanging from those gallows?”

I chanced a glance her way. Sometime between yesterday and this morning her makeup

had been washed away, but her hair had not benefited from the use of a comb. “I think we’d be remiss to ignore that possibility.”

She seemed to think about that for a while. “You know, I’d do it again.”

“I believe you, Mrs. Harding.”

She wiped a few tears on her sleeve, but didn’t seem particularly distressed about her prospects. “I mean, a person has to take a stand, or their life just isn’t worth nothing. It took far too long, but I finally stood my ground.”

“I want you to know that I’m sorry about your daughter, I truly am.”

She turned and looked at me directly for the first time that morning. “She loved you, Sheriff. From the time she was a little girl, she always loved you. You were always the man she looked up to.”

Hard as it was, I maintained eye contact. “You should know, it was me that shot her.”

She didn’t flinch. “I know. Friar Tuck told me everything. He also told me it was an accident and you were hurting as much as I was. I want you to know that I forgive you.”

“I am hurting, Mrs. Harding. I surely am. Although I wouldn’t pretend to compare my sorrow to that of a mother’s. But your forgiveness means everything to me.”

“I’d prefer it if you would call me Rosie.”

“And you can call me Billy Joe.”