

The saga of a boy of 15, left alone in the mountains of the Choctaw Nation in the 1800's. His battle for survival, dealing with trouble, and finding true love make for an unforgettable tale.

Kiamichi Trail

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KIAMICHI TRAIL

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Chapter 1

Near Kiamichi River, Indian Nation, 1800's

I stood on that lonely knob over the mound of fresh turned earth and felt the whisper of the dying breeze ruffle my hair. Hat in hand, I watched it flow off down the valley, rustling through the grass as it dried the final dampness on my cheeks.

I knew not my mother, for she had died on my bornin', and that pile of fresh dirt held the remains of my paw. I was alone now. Fifteen years alive, and the last of my line.

My paw had not been an overly lovin' kinda' man, but had always shown me his gentler side. Oh, he had him a temper, I reckon, but I'd only seen it once or twice and that was plenty enough. I knew I'd miss him somethin' terrible.

I taken one last look down that valley at the grass movin' slow, like timid waves crossing a lake of green, the half-set sun just bouncing bits of light off the tips. Then, all used up, I settled my battered old hat atop my mop of coal black hair and headed for the cabin. I had a heap of thinking ahead of me.

That tumble down cabin seemed mighty lonesome with just me and ol' Rip there. Rip was a big, dirty yeller kinda' dog

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who'd just come walkin' up to the cabin a few years back, one ear sorta' chewed by some critter he'd tangled with. He reminded me some of a black dog I seen once, only Rip was slick haired and bigger.

I reckoned he'd run about one twenty or more, and I figured him for a mix of some kind.

Bein' about twelve years old then, with never a dog to call mine, I taken to him right off. That tore up ear just naturally led to the name "Rip".

Now Paw had always been tolerant of me and Rip, but would have had no truck with a dog in the cabin. Being as it was only him and me now, I held open that door and invited him on in. He just kinda looked at me, sniffed a couple of times, and sashayed on over to the fire like he'd been doin' it all his life.

"Rip," I says to him, "Me and you got to study some on what we do now."

A fifteen year old boy and a big yeller dog, all alone, might have a time of it here in these hills, and I was sure wonderin' which way to jump as I took stock of our worldly goods.

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First off, I had a leaky, leanin', wind blown cabin settin' on a rocky hillside where wouldn't nothing grow but rabbits, squirrels, and trees. Of these, there was plenty. Next, there was Paw's horse. He was a surefooted blue roan, kinda' rangy, but could travel all day and night on a handful of grass and the dew licked from a leaf. Paw's saddle weren't much, but better'n none, that's for sure.

I had my squirrel gun, Paw's rifle, and his Walker colt. It was a 44 caliber, and named for a Texas Ranger, Sam Walker, who'd helped Samuel Colt design it.

My squirrel gun hadn't seen much use 'cause I was real handy at flinging rocks to get squirrels and rabbits, but Paw had taught me a lot about shootin' so I weren't too bad at it.

Anyway, these few things, a bait of flour and salt, some venison, my kit, and forty dollars in coin that Paw had put back for hard times just about summed up my wealth. Now to get on with stayin' alive.

Chapter 2

It weren't unusual for Paw to leave me alone for a few days whilst he went about the hills and worked or traded for the necessaries we couldn't hunt, catch, or grow for our own selves. This last time, though, he'd been gone longer than usual and it was getting worrisome. Long about sundown on the thirteenth day, his horse come home without him.

Now Paw had taught me not to be foolish and rush off into something I hadn't studied on. Bein' near dark, I reckoned on waitin' for morning to take up the back trail of that roan. Weren't no sense in trampin' around them woods in the dark and maybe messing up what sign there was, so I taken that horse to the lean-to and rubbed him down good. I fed him a bite of what corn I had, and me and Rip settled in.

Long before gray-up that next morning, me and Rip had et, packed my kit, and saddled up. Knowin' how he'd come up to home, picking up the roan's trail weren't hard. Being without a hand on his reins, he'd perambulated somewhat between, betwixt, and around trees and deadfalls. Not wanting to lose the trail, I went right back along his track.

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Stopping often to just sit asaddle and listen to the hills whisper, ol' Rip ranging out around me, sometimes ahead, sometimes back, I wondered about Paw. He had to be hurt bad, or dead, or he would have come in with his horse.

Paw was a fair sized man, and strong, More'n once I'd seen him carry on with a hurt that would put many men abed. One time a mountain cat, not sensing Paw was nearby, had jumped his horse. Paw, not chancing shootin' his own horse, just out with his skinning knife and tangled with that cat. Afore it got smart and lit a shuck, that cat was some tore up, but so was Paw.

He'd come on to the cabin then, all ragged and bloody, big gashes on his arms and shoulders, and weak from pain and bleedin'. Before he'd let me tend him, though, we'd taken care of that horse. Only then did he allow me to wash and sew up his cuts.

One gash, on his left shoulder, taken twenty-four stitches with sinew, with our only pain killer bein' a touch of whiskey, inside and out. Paw taken him a big slug, had me pour a little on his wounds, and just set there in that old hand built chair whilst I washed and stitched. He just looked into the fire and never a grunt nor groan come out of him. Yep, Paw was one hard man,

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but hard men had mishaps, just like weak ones. If he was just bad hurt, Paw knowed I would come for him.

That roan had shore seen some country on his way home, but his trail gradually led me eastward, into the Kiamichi Mountains. A traveling man had told us these were mighty pore mountains compared to some out in the far western lands, but they was all the mountains I knowed, and big enough, at that.

It taken me three days to find Paw. He'd been shot through, and was dead as they left him lay.

I stepped down from that roan horse and studied sign before fetchin' Paw acrost his saddle and to his spot on that lonely knoll. He'd of wished to lie beside Ma, I know, but she lay across the blue mountains to the east. Someday, he kept sayin', we was going back there, but we never got to it.

There'd been two of them, and they'd come up from behind like they was following him. Paw had turned to face them, but his gun was still tied down when I found him, and he never was considered fast anyway. They hadn't robbed him for he still had his gun and four dollars in his pockets, along with his folding knife. That seemed peculiar to me. I wondered about his kit, but figured it had been brushed off somewhere along the

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trail and some critter had dragged it off for the food in it. I hadn't been lookin' for that kind of sign, and must of missed it. I did see where one of their horses had a kind of kicked out hoof on the back left. I could tell by the marks he made.

I knowed it weren't Indians what got him, 'cause of not being robbed, and the Indians hereabouts was mostly Choctaw or Chickasaw, with a few Cherokee or Seminoles, and they was mostly all tame. Why, there was even a school down north of Fort Towson for them.

It was called the Spencer Academy, I think. There could have been a few of the unsettled tribes around, but they didn't raid around here very often. Besides, these horses was shod. Nope, it was white men alright, and the only white men I knowed of Paw ever havin' troubles with was them Wiggins folks further east in the mountains toward Fort Smith. One of 'em had tried to skin Paw in a deal, then, even dumber, tried to back him down with hard talk. Well, Paw whupped him right in front of some folks, told him he was a cheat, and rode off. There was some talk about him huntin' Paw, but it never come to nothin'. He tried to make out that Paw had suckered him, but word got around and folks allowed as he was just no account.

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Now I had me a mind to saddle up, load them guns, and go have a talk with them Wigginses, but Paw's teaching come through. I reckoned I'd only get whupped, or killed, and that would have been a foolish thing. I had no proof, nor idea really, except that everybody else liked and respected Paw. Besides, I had some growin' to do, and things come to those that wait.

Chapter 3

At fifteen, I was getting my growth and was already near five foot eight. Like I said, Paw was a big man, and he'd told me Ma was a fair sized woman, but shapely. Problem was, I'd been shootin' upwards faster than outwards. Oh, I was big boned and broad across the shoulders for my age, but lean and rawboned.

The years of trompin' those wild woods, and runnin' with ol' Rip had toughened and leaned out my muscles so I didn't look my weight. Even so, I'd be no match for them Wiggins men, so me and Rip settled down to homesteadin'. Some day I'd find out about Paw.

We'd had a good corn patch that year, along with some taters, onions, and a few other vegetables. I tended that patch best I could, and hoped to get enough corn and such to get us through the winter. Of game, there'd be plenty, and fish, but that horse would need some corn. Besides, a man can't live good on meat alone. If I was savin', I'd not need to ride down to Pine Ridge, where there was a little settlement, or Fort Towson further south, to buy sugar, flour, salt and such.

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One thing I had plenty of was ammo for my guns. Paw weren't one to run short.

"As long as you got powder, you can get meat," he always said, "Buy ammo before food." With Forty-four dollars, I had a fair sum of spending money, but felt it wise to hold on to it as best I could. Come spring, I'd have a few pelts, too. Like I said, being savin', we'd get by.

Well, me and Rip taken to the woods. I had a pair of brogans and, since Paw got 'em big, they still fit. I hadn't growed into his boots yet, but had a few pair of moccasins Paw had taught me to make. I liked them when huntin' or easing quiet like through the woods.

I'd learned well how to injun up on things and, once, got almost close enough to touch a white tail afore it sensed me and ripped a hole through the brush. For the work at hand, though, them brogans was just the ticket.

I had, besides tending my truck patch, to cut and haul wood, hunt and smoke meat and fish, cut some tall meadow grass for hay, chink gaps, and even sweep out that old cabin on occasion. What with cookin', eatin', and chores, the days just melted away like a late snowfall. Mild winters was common

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hereabouts, but it could get pretty bad at times, and I had to be ready for it.

One morning I finally noticed the chill and took my old coat down from the loft where I used to sleep. When I put it on and reached for the door, that coat split right down the seam! It seems that size, like the weather, had snuck right up on me. I taken that coat off and fetched Paw's. It were still a mite big, but come nearer fittin' than my own. I'd been wearing his shirts for some time now, but had thought little of it.

Along with chores, huntin', and such, I'd taken to walkin' out to the edge of the meadow and practicing with Paw's Walker Colt. For the longest, I didn't waste powder, but just practiced getting it out of the holster and pointed in the general direction of what I pretended to shoot. Havin' a 9 inch barrel, it seemed almighty cumbersome. I had a thought of cuttin' off the barrel but seemed to have heard that would throw off the aim. One day I had another thought, cut down the holster!

Well, I didn't want to ruin Paw's holster, so I taken a piece of wild hog hide and I soaked it, cut it, shaped it, and, using an awl and rawhide string, fixed it to the belt. I filed the

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sight plumb off that colt figurin' anything I had to sight on was to far off for a handgun, anyway.

The front of my hand-made holster was cut plumb down to within an inch of the bottom in front. The part up around the cylinder was split and shaped to hold that gun snug if pushed down into it.

If it was loosened first, that colt would slide right out the split by only liftin' it a coupla inches. I ran, jumped, and even rolled on the ground, but never lost it when it was snugged down.

That holster was strange lookin' but, with practice, I could snake that six-shooter out pretty quick. It shore made fetchin' that hog-leg some easier.

The last traveling man to stop over at the cabin had stayed the night and broke fast with us. I'd laid up in my sleeping loft and listened to him and Paw yarn far into the night. We seldom got any visitors up here on the creek, so it was the thing to learn all one could of the country, politics, Indians, and other people when there was a chance. Many an educated and wise man traveled the lonely trails of this great land.

That sleepless night, I learned of those far off mountains to the west, and the endless plains before them. Of desert

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country so dry a man was as good as dead if he didn't learn its' secrets. He spoke of cattle far to the south with great horns to reach from our door to the fireplace. I was some skeptical of this, but believed most of what he said.

He also talked of men like Cullen Baker, and others, who made a practice of shootin' fast with a handgun. This knowledge brought about my later practice.

To most folks, a gun was a tool just like a hammer or awl. You took care of it and kept it handy for use when needed. Fast drawin' and such wasn't much heard of but, knowin' I might one day have the need, I went to studying on it.

One evenin', as was my wont, I stood to the edge of the meadow and picked out a piece of a stick about thirty feet away with a small knot in it. I drew, fired, and put up that long barrel colt in what seemed the blink of an eye. The knot disappeared.

Now I'd not make out to be a gunslinger, but figured I could hold my own, if needed. Practice, though, would not stop.

As I stood there, quiet like, and gazed out over that valley, I noted the color of the grass and the shortage of leaves on the trees.

A single white flake drifted past my face from the lead colored sky and it hit me that winter was nigh, and I'd worked

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right through my birthday. I couldn't be sure, but I figured this was November. I'd been born in early September.

Well, I'd done my best and now it was up to the man upstairs 'cause me and Rip was as ready as we'd get.

That was a shore lonesome winter. If it hadn't been for ol' Rip, who I talked to so much he taken to givin' me hard looks so's he could sleep, I'd of gone plumb crazy. I think Rip learned more of people, politics, and philosophy than he really wanted to know, but him, and Paw's books, kept me sane.

I was thankful that Paw had taught me my letters and helped me learn to read his books. With no spare time in the last few months, they were like new to me. One fellow, that Shakespeare, I hadn't liked before 'cause I just didn't understand his writing. Through that long winter, though, he became a friend and a comfort. I was later to learn that many a man could quote whole pages from his books. It might be a cowhand, or a banker, and it would often surprise you, the one's that knew of him, though it shouldn't have.

Men in this country learned where they could, and read what they had. Often, around a campfire, or wherever people

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met, men would exchange books, talk of them, and quote others.

This grand and far-reaching country was filled with the knowledge of centuries gleaned from other lands and passed along.

Sure, there were many ignorant and foolish types who had no desire to learn of anything they needn't know to make their way, but there were far more of the others who soaked up learnin' like a drought stricken prairie absorbed the rain. This was some country we had.

Chapter 4

Well, me, Rip, and that roan horse made it fine. Towards the end, we run short on flour and I taken some corn and ground it with my mortar and pestle. This I mixed with a little flour, salt, and water, which made better fry bread than flour alone. I guess I hadn't learned it all. I did learn not to feed beans and salt pork to a dog if you had to stay inside with him!

I hadn't gone soft that winter. On the better days, me and Rip still roamed the hills, fished some, toted wood and water, and hunted far from home.

Near a year of these labors had put some meat on me, and size. I topped out now near six foot, and was packed solid. Taller and heavier than many a full growed man, I reckon I was uncommon large for my age. I was to stop growin' early, just as I begun, and finish up at a shade over six foot with over two hundred pounds of pure muscle.

One day that spring, rubbin' an itch on my nose, I discovered face hair. Checkin' my reflection in the water bucket, I could even see dark shadows on my cheeks. I was becoming a man!

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Now I'd watched Paw with his straight razor, or skinnin' knife when camping, but he'd never had reason to teach me shavin'. That razor was some kinda sharp but, without too much bloodshed, I got the hang of it.

All this time, since I'd buried Paw, I hadn't seen a solitary white man, and only a coupla Choctaws.

Since ol' Rip would now slip off to hunt alone, and get away from my jawin', I had it in me to head down south for a spell. I was needful of staples and ammo for both guns, and I really needed to hear a voice besides my own and see another face, even if an ugly one.

I had me that cash money, but I'd be takin' many rabbit pelts, a few beaver, and some deer hides I hadn't used to make moccasins or britches with. I figured to trade for what I could and get me some shirts and socks.

Paw's boots now fit me, but chaffed somethin' awful since all my socks was wore out. I'd tried my hand at buckskin shirts without much luck. Britches was all I could do good, and some of them weren't pretty

Come mornin', I give that roan a good bait of corn and saddled up. Neither me nor Paw had ever named that horse, but called him 'the roan' or just 'Horse' when we spoke directly to

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him. I reckon he figured that was his name and it was as good as any. Anyways, I tightened his cinch and tied on my bedroll and kit afore mountin' up. He could carry me and pull the travois, but I'd also walk some so as not to wear him too much.

I'd only been once with Paw down to Pine Ridge, and reckoned it was about two or three days south and west of our creek. Not knowin' the country beyond a kids roamin' range, I decided to take my time and get the lay of the land. I weren't in no hurry since nothing was waitin' for me but that old cabin.

Rip was some excited to see me saddle up 'cause he knew that meant a trip. He kept runnin' to the meadow and back, but I taken my time ridin' out. I paused at the knoll and said a few words to Paw, hopin' him and Ma was together again, and rode on out of there.

It was pretty here in the backcountry come springtime. If a man weren't in to big a hurry to enjoy it, it surely rested the soul. Trees a greening and buddin' out, grass coming alive, and birds galore. Just crossin' that meadow, I seen cardinals, bluejays, robins, and plenty more. There was even a hummingbird that hovered alongside and inspected my yellow slicker before zippin' off.

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This was country to make a man pause, and appreciate bein' alive, but it could be a hard country, too. A man had to be alert and watchful. Indians weren't so much a problem anymore, but there were some within raidin' range that might take on a man alone. Some was said to have seen Comanche this far east, but of that I had no knowledge. You had to watch out for other things, too. Deadfalls, burrows, or just holes, might cripple a horse. A gimped horse wouldn't kill you in these woods, but a broke leg of your own just might. More than one pile of bleached, unburied bones littered these hills with no marker to tell the story of who and why. This was a place, too, where some bad men roamed.

I picked up a traveled trail a coupla days out. This, I reckoned, was a part of the trail blazed by Robert Bean and Jesse Chisholm from Fort Towson to Fort Smith.

I'd soon hit the road cut by the army in 1825 from Fort Gibson to Fort Towson. Pine Ridge lay along that route, somewhere southeast of that Spencer Academy. Like I said, I'd only been there once, and I was a kid then. This country was getting' plumb crowded lately.

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