

They Call Me Trep is a work of historical fiction, following the life of a young man who fought and died in WWI. After his death, a journal was found in which he written a pledge. President Reagan recited that pledge in his first Inaugural Address.

They Call Me Trep

By Bob Spurlock

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A vintage black and white photograph of a man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie. He is sitting in a chair, looking slightly to the right of the camera. In the background, a barber's pole with red and white stripes is visible, along with shelves containing various items, suggesting a barbershop or a similar setting. The overall tone is sepia or aged.

They Call Me Trep

The Journey Of
An Improbable Hero

Bob Spurlock

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Chapter Six

Winter 1916

Martin figured he had about two hours of daylight left and decided if no one came into the shop in the next ten minutes, he'd close early and enjoy the January thaw. He peered out the front door, down the street toward the railroad depot, and saw no one. He turned the sign in the window to "closed" and swept up the remnants of a slow day's barbering. Not five minutes later, a well-dressed elderly gentleman poked his head around the door. "Is it too late for a shave and a haircut?" he asked.

The man stepped into the shop slowly and removed his hat. He was almost entirely bald, save for vestiges of a more hirsute past above each ear. "I'm happy to stay open for you, mister, and I'll give you a shave, but I think a haircut would be stealing. No offense, but if I miss a few hairs, who would notice?"

"I would notice, young man. Your task is to make one side exactly match the other, and I'll pay you one dollar."

Martin's standard fair was 25 cents for a haircut and 10 cents for a shave. Eight bits wouldn't make up for a slow day, but it wouldn't hurt.

"Then sit yourself down, sir. What brings you to Marshfield?"

"I have speaking engagements. I spoke last night in Wausau, and in two days I'll be in Eau Claire. I've been retained to speak in your fair city this summer, in what I'm told will be the world's largest round barn," the man said.

“Oh, yes, the round barn. They’re building it down on 17th Street and it’ll be completed this spring. My customers tell me they plan to drive the Norwegians crazy by offering them a dollar if they can piss in a corner.”

The old man laughed. “May I use that joke this summer, or will I anger the Norwegians?”

“The Norwegians have a good sense of humor, sir, but I’m afraid it’s already an old joke.”

“Advice taken, young man.”

“Now what exactly is it you lecture about?”

The old man moved very deliberately away from the front door. If not for his steady gaze, Martin might have assumed him to be feeble minded. He stopped in front of the barber chair, turned and placed both hands on the armrests. He stepped backward gingerly and lifted himself with a grunt. He winced as he turned to look at Martin. He wasn’t dressed like a laborer, and his hands weren’t calloused. Martin guessed the fellow to be about 70, and figured some natural malady, rheumatism maybe, had stiffened him up.

The man ignored Martin’s question while he tried to find a position that didn’t make him grimace. Finally he turned, raised his chin, and for the first time smiled a little. “I give two different lectures; ‘Crime Does Not Pay’, and ‘What Life Has Taught Me.’”

“Crime does not pay? Were you a gunfighter?” Martin asked.

“Gunfighter? That word’s an invention of dime novelists. I suppose one would say I was once a shootist.” the old man said.

That explained the pained movements. “You were shot!”

“Twelve times. The first time at the Battle of Little Rock in 1864 when I was barely 20. And 12 years later, I was shot 11 times”. He paused and looked directly at Martin. “In Northfield.”

“Northfield? You were with the James Gang?”

“I was. And I didn’t dare take a drink for a year afterwards, for fear I wouldn’t hold water.”

Martin knew the ad lib was long practiced, but he indulged the old man a smile. He figured he was getting one line of “Crime does not pay” for free, and besides, the fellow was paying him three times the usual rate.

The old man met Martin’s gaze again. “That was a long time ago, and now people pay to hear my stories.”

“I’m sure they want to hear how you found the straight and narrow.”

“Young fella, I could wax eloquent about passing gas and people would still come. They care not at all about what life’s taught me. To them I’m the last fleeting whiff of adventure. When I travel in the south they ask about Quantrill; when I get in the Great Plains, they ask about Billy the Kid or Wild Bill Hickok, neither of whom I ever met, by the way. I tell folks adventure is where they make it. The trouble with people nowadays is they either pine for the past or waste their time dreaming about the future. Folks need to live in the present.

“I’ll tell you a story. Three months ago, I was riding a train that stopped outside Kearny, Nebraska. We all got out to stretch our legs, and by God, what do we see but a herd of buffalo. Of

course, they weren't wild; some farmer was raising 'em. I'm enjoying the chance to see something I'll probably never see again. I turn to say that to the fellow next to me, and he says 'I gotta run in the car and get my Kodak!' Well, of course by the time he gets back these buffalo have wandered way off, and what'd he lose? He lost his chance to live in the present.

"But hell, who am I to complain? Let folks pay to hear the wild stories of the old gunfighter. Let 'em place their hands on my scars. 'Touch me and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.'"

"I don't think St. Luke was referring to a shootist."

"You know your Good Book. Very commendable. So, tell me about yourself, young barber. Are you a wealthy merchant?" the old man asked.

"I moved here six months ago. I like the people, and I like the town, but I don't think it's working out."

"It must be your boss. Is he stingy? Is he a tyrant?"

"If only he was", Martin mused. "Frank Dolezal might be the friendliest, most popular man in Marshfield. And the stories he tells – Why, he's worked in the Dakotas in the fields, and he's been a lumberjack. He hunts and fishes, and always brings in enough for me and all his neighbors."

"And your problem is...?"

"Well, most of my pay comes from the heads I cut and the faces I shave. Everyone who comes in wants to hear one of Frank's stories. The only locals who don't want Frank cutting their hair are those who don't like his politics. But he's a

Republican, like most everyone around these parts. So, I just get the Socialists, and they tend to leave their hair long.”

The old man smiled again. “And what are your politics? Do you favor temperance? Where do you stand on the suffrage? Will you be voting for Wilson?” the man inquired.

“I find it safer to keep my politics to myself,” Martin responded. “I enjoy a good beer, and if the vote means that women will be too busy to cut their husband’s hair, I’m all for suffrage. Will I vote for Wilson? We’re not at war. Although after what the Huns did to the *Lusitania*, I don’t know how long we can avoid it.”

“Don’t believe everything you read about the *Lusitania*, young man. There’s money in warfare, and I’m sure that ship was carrying munitions. And I’ll bet the British could have done more than they did to protect that ship. Make no mistake; their generals want America in the war. Do you have any idea how many they lost at Ypres and Gallipoli? They need more cannon fodder, son, and before long, it will be young fellas like you in the trenches.

“But for now, my tonsorial friend, make yourself happy. Find a good woman. If there are too few hairy heads in this town, find another town. I’ve lectured, and I’ve performed with Buffalo Bill in every state of the union. I’ve seen every railroad town in the Middle West, and there’s a thousand Marshfields.

“Put the scissors down and hand me my grip. I have newspaper clippings from places I lectured, and you’re free to look and find yourself a home with more heads in need of your services. I’m at the Blodgett just up the street. Bring ‘em back to me this evening.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll look at them after I close up, and I’ll bring them by,” Martin said.

The haircut took no longer than their brief discussion, and Martin was not in the habit of soliciting conversation during a shave. Talk moves the Adam’s apple, and enthusiasm causes movement of the neck, not a recommended *pas de deux* with a sharp straight razor.

When his shave was finished, the old man rose slowly from the chair, looked in the mirror and rubbed the back of his left hand against his chin and neck. “A fine performance, young man. On Friday I’ll be 72, and I’ll consider this my birthday shave and haircut.”

Martin watched the old man move haltingly toward the door. “Can I ask you one question before you leave?”

“Certainly.”

“Were you ever afraid?”

Martin clearly caught him by surprise. Apparently this was a question a thousand audiences had never posed. “Now why in heaven’s name would you ask me that?”

“I was reading about Ypres. I’ve never faced real danger, and I don’t know what I would do.”

The old man said nothing for a long moment. He was staring at Martin, but his eyes were somewhere far away.” One day...somewhere... you’ll look and everyone around you will be shitting themselves. If you’re truly a man, you’ll do what they can’t bring themselves to do.” He turned and gazed into the sunset, then spoke again. “It’s funny. Time just slows down, and it’s just you. In all the noise and commotion, you’re all by

yourself. And when you get through it, by God, you're respected."

Then he indulged Martin a wry smile. "Course...you might not get through it."

The old outlaw laid four quarters on the counter and ambled into the setting sun.

Martin locked the door, and finished cleaning. He picked up the stack of clippings, sat back in the barber chair and skimmed two dozen newspapers. Unfortunately, the old man generally saved only the notices of his upcoming lectures, and occasionally a review of his performance. Martin was about to put the clippings down when a page from the April 17, 1911 *Cherokee Times* caught his eye. It included an article for a lecture entitled, "What Life Has Taught Me", by Cole Younger, "The Famous Outlaw". But that wasn't what got Martin's attention. What he noticed was a small ad at the bottom of the page for "Popma's Barber Shop." The ad promised "The closest shave in Cherokee!" and finished with, "Always looking for good assistants."

Bob Spurlock



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Chapter Eight

Martin awoke bright and early Thursday morning, determined to shave, bathe and be out the door before it got too hot to wear a shirt and tie. He planned to head to the barbershop, then search the local papers--he was surprised to learn Cherokee had two--to find more permanent lodging. The Lewis was impressive and comfortable but his meager savings from the Marshfield shop didn't grant him the luxury of an extended stay.

Al Popma was just opening his shop when Martin came down the steps. A bell above the door rang, and in front of the owner stood a tall, well-dressed young man commencing to sweat just a little.

“You don't appear to need a haircut or a shave mister. What can I do for you?”

“Well, sir, I saw an ad that you were looking for assistants, and I'm here to apply.”

Al grinned. “That ad was from five years ago. Did you come here from China?”

“Well, no. Wisconsin, actually. I knew the newspaper wasn't current when I read it, but I thought maybe you could still use another barber.”

“Well, to tell the truth, right now we could use another man. I run this shop with my cousin, Walt, and as you can see, we have an open chair. Walt and his father ran the business, and last February his dad passed away. Right now, we're busier than

termites in a sawmill. We don't need an apprentice, though; I want a man with experience."

Martin smiled a little. "I've worked at the trade for a while now. I consider myself fairly experienced."

"What's your name, young man?"

"Martin Treptow, sir."

At that, the proprietor's eyes grew wide, and he ran over to vigorously shake Martin's hand. "By God, you're the fella who caught Wilson McDaniel at the train station in Sioux City! It was my brother's shop over in Marcus that he robbed. He took \$43.00, and some of his best scissors and razors. Gott in Himmel! If you hadn't tackled him the other day, he might still be running."

"I didn't exactly tackle him, sir, but thank you just the same."

"Treptow, you might be just the man I need around here. When can you start?"

"Right now I'm staying at the Lewis, and if it's okay with you, I'd like to spend the rest of the day looking for lodging. I can start tomorrow if you'd like."

"Tomorrow it is then. I'll expect you to come early and help me set up the shop. Can you be here at seven a.m.?"

"Sir, I'll be here at six."

"If you show up at six you'll be waiting for me. Seven is plenty early, and one other thing..."

"Yes, sir?"

“Don’t call me ‘sir’. Makes me feel old. I’m ‘Al’ to everybody in town.”

Al turned down Main Street at six forty-five the next morning, figuring he’d get to the shop ready early, and set up the chair for his new hire. He was hoping for another busy morning. Every day of the heatwave convinced Al and Walt that moving the shop to the basement of the Schuster Building was a good idea. It was cooler in the subterranean shop, and the new electric fans Al installed had all the men in town accelerating their haircut schedules. It also seemed like more of the men were splurging on a haircut and shave rather than spending an hour in the taverns. He knew the wives were getting less afraid to tell their husbands to get home to their families. Al figured if prohibition was coming, business might just pick up even more.

The first thing he noticed when he looked down the street was Martin, sitting on the top stair, spit shining his shoes. He stood straight when Al approached, and said “Good morning, sir.”

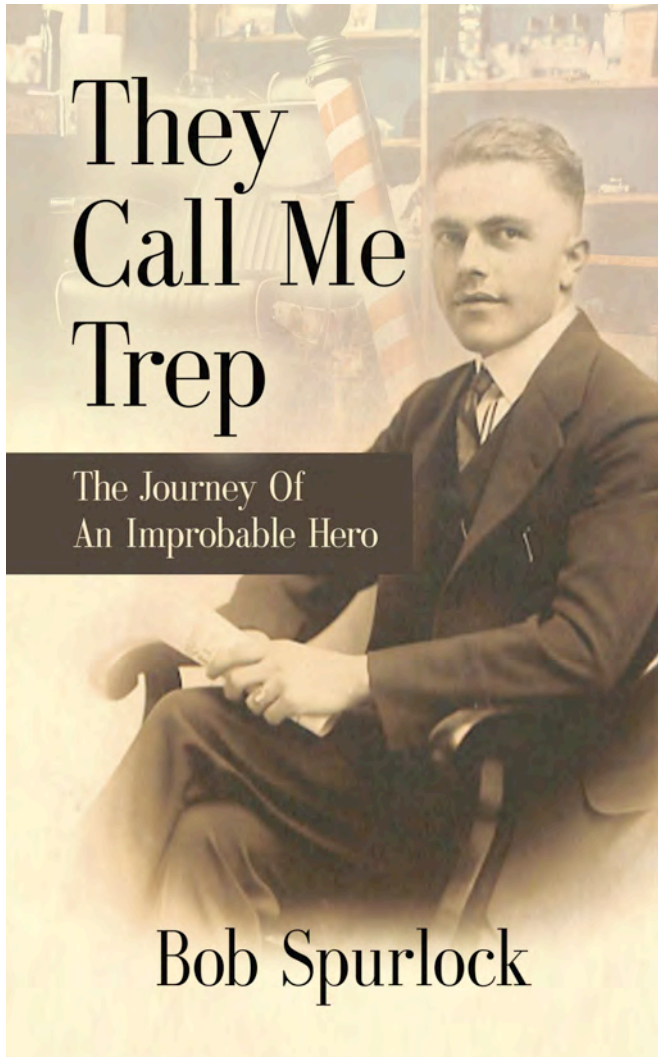
“It’s Al. Not ‘sir,’ just Al. Gott in Himmel, I swear you’ll make a fine soldier someday. By the way, I never asked. What do people call you?”

“I’m fine with Martin. But folks call me Trep.”

“Trep. Trep.” Al repeated the name to himself, test driving the sound. “Yeah, I like that. Strong. Earnest. So, let’s get started, Trep. I assume you have your own kit.”

“Yes, sir ...er, Al, I do.”

They walked down the stairs together, and thus began Martin’s Cherokee barbering career.



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