

Texas, 1881, a bank robbery, kidnapping, a fist fight, a budding romance, gunfights, forgiveness, and the building of a church. Matt Scanlon, 21, finds a home, love and Christian charity at the prodigious McAllister ranch.

THE McALLISTER BRAND

By William Neil Martin

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A cowboy wearing a brown hat and vest is seen from behind, riding a brown horse. He is herding a large group of black and brown cattle across a vast, open landscape. The terrain is a mix of dry grass and scrub brush. In the distance, there are low mountains and a horizon line under a sky filled with colorful, dramatic clouds. The overall scene is a classic depiction of a cowboy herding cattle in the American West.

WILLIAM NEIL MARTIN

*The
McAllister
Brand*

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958877-33-3

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-310-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Martin, William Neil
The McAllister Brand by William Neil Martin
Library of Congress Control Number: 2022913817

TWO

THE STAGE WAS more than an hour late when it turned south from the stage road and entered the main street of McAllister. Jack Cobb, the stage line supervisor, stood in front of the depot and glared scornfully at Junior as the coach came to a stop. His wrinkled forehead gave Matt the impression of stair steps leading upward to the top of the supervisor's balding head. In an annoyingly high-pitched voice, he launched into a tirade directed at his two subordinates. Junior slowly stepped to the ground and received the luggage from Butch, turning his back on his boss, which infuriated Cobb even more. He walked over to Junior and angrily pulled the driver around by the shoulder.

When Junior was facing him, Cobb said, "So what do you have to say for yourself?"

Matt, still inside the coach, watched the altercation with amusement. Junior, who seemed to be in no rush, calmly explained what had happened. Then, with apparent pleasure, and a few embellishments, he recited the words that McAllister had spoken just prior to their departure from the ranch. Matt noticed an immediate change come over Cobb. His assertiveness faded and he quietly returned to the interior of the stage office. It reinforced Matt's observation that Wade McAllister carried a great deal of weight in this part of the country.

When Matt alighted from the coach, Junior and Butch were standing a few feet away. They were both laughing out loud over their recent victory.

Matt approached them and asked, "When will the next stage be leaving for Abilene?"

They stopped laughing and looked in his direction. "Oh, Matt," Junior said between a few remaining chuckles, "Sorry about not opening the door for you, but we were sidetracked."

Matt smiled. "So I noticed."

"Now, what did you want to know?"

“When will the stage for Abilene be leaving?”

“Let me go check,” Butch said, then walked to the depot door and stepped inside. A moment later he returned and announced that the stage would not depart until the following afternoon. Butch then nudged Junior, who was standing beside him and added, “When I went in there ol’ Cobb wouldn’t even look at me. He’s still madder’n a wet hen.” The two men began a second round of laughter.

“I hate to interrupt your gaiety, gentlemen,” Matt said, unable to suppress a broad grin, “but might there be a place where I could hold up for the night?”

Both men immediately composed themselves and Junior cleared his throat. “There’s a hotel down the street yonder,” he said, pointing southward, toward the middle of town. “You can stay there tonight. It’s not fancy, but it’s clean.”

“Thanks,” Matt said. He picked up his bags and started walking in the direction Junior had indicated.

“Oh, Matt,” Junior called after him. When Matt turned around the driver continued, “For what it’s worth, I’d say you made a friend in Mr. McAllister. He’s the biggest man in these parts, and he’s took a liking to you.”

Matt nodded in acknowledgement, then resumed his walk toward the hotel. As he moved along the boardwalk, he gazed about at the various buildings that straddled both sides of the street. It was indeed a new town. Most of the structures were freshly painted. Those that were not painted revealed freshly cut lumber, for the sun had not yet had time to bleach the wood.

There were the usual businesses; a general store, barber shop, a saloon, a bank, feed store, hotel, stage depot and several other establishments to fill the needs of the surrounding ranches. At the north end of town was a blacksmith shop and livery stable. He looked around for a schoolhouse and church, but did not see one. He concluded that they were probably somewhere on the outskirts of town.

Matt entered the hotel and crossed the small lobby to the counter, where a clerk sat reading a western dime novel. Matt could not make out the title, but he was reminded of Wade McAllister’s disdain of such publications. After registering he was handed a key and directed to a staircase that would take him to the second floor, where his room was

located. As he ascended the stairs the effort reminded him of his fatigue after the long ride from Fort Worth.

Opening the door to his room, he set the luggage on the floor and inspected his quarters. It was as Junior had described – not fancy, but clean. Against the left wall was a dresser, on the top of which were a pitcher and a wash pan. Above the dresser hung a mirror on the wall. In the far-right corner was a bed. It was much smaller than his bed at home, with a thinner mattress, but, to Matt, it was quite inviting.

He moved to the far end of the room and looked out the window at the street below. It was late afternoon and the town seemed quiet. From across the street and to the north he could hear the muffled clanging of the blacksmith's hammer striking metal. A buckboard passed below the window, and from farther north, four riders rode slowly toward the center of town. Otherwise, there was no visible activity on the street.

Directly across from the hotel was the bank. Next door was a café. It suddenly reminded Matt that he was hungry, for the only thing he had eaten since late morning at the stage relay station was one doughnut at the McAllister's. He decided to go to the café for an early supper. Afterward, he would purchase a newspaper, then return to his room and spend the remainder of the day reading, resting and updating his journal.

After taking a few minutes to brush the dust from his suit and wash his face and hands, Matt went downstairs. He turned in his key to the hotel clerk, and then stepped outside. Pausing on the boardwalk for a moment, he casually noticed that two of the four riders who had just ridden into town were sitting on their horses in front of the bank. Each was holding the reins of another horse. One of them, a man of medium height with bright red hair, fidgeted nervously in his saddle and glanced all about him, as if expecting something or someone to do him harm. The second rider, also of medium height with nondescript brown hair, seemed to be of a calmer disposition.

Matt stepped into the street and walked toward the café. The brown-haired man glanced in his direction and grinned, revealing gapped and crooked teeth. He appeared to be not much older than Matt. The red-haired man looked at Matt, then at his companion. He turned again toward Matt and stared with apparent concern. He was obviously on edge about something.

When Matt was almost across the street the bank door suddenly burst open and two men, both wearing kerchiefs over their faces, ran out, their guns drawn. The men on horseback then pulled bandannas over their faces. As the two men from the bank ran toward their waiting mounts, the horses began to dance about nervously, causing the two men on the ground some momentary difficulty in getting their feet in the stirrups.

Matt stood in the street and watched with astonishment. He felt as if he were frozen in place, unable to move. Just as one man succeeded in mounting his horse, a middle-aged bespectacled man wearing a suit rushed out of the bank.

“The bank’s been robbed!” he shouted. “The bank’s been robbed!”

The robber who had just gotten onto his horse turned in his saddle. His gun still in his hand, he fired at the bank employee. The bullet splintered the door jamb and the clerk quickly retreated to the bank’s interior.

Shifting again in his saddle to face forward, he saw Matt. “Grab that man!” He gave the order to the outlaw who was still on the ground.

The outlaw moved the ten feet to Matt and grabbed him roughly by the arm. Two inches taller than Matt, the man was thick and powerfully built, outweighing his quarry by at least thirty pounds.

“Put him on your horse,” the mounted outlaw directed. “We’ll take him with us!”

Matt struggled to free himself, but the larger aggressor twisted Matt’s arm behind his back until the intense pain caused him to cease any further resistance. Matt was pushed to the horse. Following the gruff orders of the man who held him, he placed a foot in the stirrup and was lifted onto the animal’s back, behind the saddle.

“If you try to get off, I’ll shoot you in the back,” one of the other men warned.

By this time several merchants and other townspeople, curious about the commotion, began to venture to the front of their businesses. Some of them hurriedly retreated to shelter. Others would eventually return to the street carrying guns.

Behind the stage depot Junior Jackson and Butch Raymond were busy stabling, feeding and tending to the team of horses that had recently brought their stage in when they heard the gunshot that had barely missed the bank clerk. Both men walked to the edge of the street to see what was going on. As soon as they saw that the bank

was being robbed, Butch ran back to the coach and retrieved his double-barreled shotgun from the driver's box. As he ran back to where Junior was standing, he broke open the barrels to make sure each barrel contained a ten-gauge shell, then he closed it and pulled both hammers back.

The outlaw on the ground followed Matt onto the horse. Sitting in the saddle, he swung his right leg over the horse's neck to the opposite stirrup. The four robbers spurred their mounts and the horses galloped up the street to the north. As they passed the café a man wearing a marshal's badge stepped out the door, pistol in hand. Before he could take aim, one of the outlaws fired at him. Matt saw the lawman drop the pistol and fall back through the door of the café.

The horse carrying Matt took up the rear in their ride out of town, thus providing a shield in their getaway. This had been the leader's plan in taking him in the first place. As they passed the stage station, Junior and Butch stepped out from behind two large barrels that had concealed them from the outlaws.

Butch leveled the double-barreled shotgun and was about to let go with both barrels when Junior grabbed the gun from him. "Don't shoot, you danged fool!"

"Why not?"

"Can't you see who they got ridin' in the back of that last horse? It's Matt!"

Butch squinted in their direction as the outlaws continued down the street, by this time far out of range of the shotgun. "That's Matt? Why in tar nation would Matt be ridin' with bank robbers?"

"They've took him hostage, so folks with good sense wouldn't shoot at 'em." Looking crossly at Butch, he added, "Course them outlaws weren't countin' on folks with bad eyesight shootin' at things they can't see." Junior shook his head. "Why don't you get some glasses?"

"I got glasses!"

"Then wear 'em, for Pete's sake!"

At the edge of town, the outlaws turned right and headed north by northeast, across the open plain. When they were out of sight of the town they stopped to determine if they were being followed. Matt looked behind him. There was no sign of pursuers. He knew he had to get away or he would surely be killed. But they were in flat, open country, with no place to hide, and escape at this time was impossible.

His thoughts were interrupted as one of the outlaws moved his horse to the side of the large mouse-colored dun on which Matt was sitting. This was the robber who had ordered the larger man to take Matt hostage. He was obviously the leader. Putting his hand into his saddlebag, the man removed a two-foot length of leather strap, then reached over and tied Matt's wrists behind his back.

"Shooting Marshal Brewster was a lucky break," the leader said after checking the knots he had tied and straightening back in his saddle. "With him out of the way, it ain't likely a posse'll get organized any time soon."

"Then why don't we get rid 'o the dude?" the man carrying Matt suggested.

"We will later, but we ain't out of the woods yet." He turned his horse to the east and was about to urge it forward when the red-haired outlaw spoke.

"Why are we headin' east, Verne? Shouldn't we be headin' west?"

"Shut up, you fool!" the robber named Verne said. He glanced at Matt, then returned his attention to the nervous outlaw. "We'll go east for a while to throw 'em off, then head back home."

As they resumed their north-northeast journey Matt found that it was all he could do to stay on the horse with his hands tied behind him. It became even more difficult as the flat plains to which he was slowly becoming accustomed began to subtly change. The terrain was slightly more broken, with occasional knolls and gullies to make his struggle more difficult. He was grateful, however, for the slower pace they had assumed. He could not have remained on the horse while at a gallop.

They rode for another hour before Verne ordered them to stop. They reined up beside a gully that descended into a narrow arroyo that ran in an east-west direction.

"This is far enough," the outlaw leader announced. He pulled the kerchief down to his neck, revealing a clean-shaven face. He regarded Matt for a moment, then continued, "You're a real tenderfoot, ain't you, dressed all fancy in your Sunday-go-to-meetin' suit."

Matt did not reply. He noted that the other outlaws had also removed their masks. A sinking feeling raced through him. If he had even the slightest hope that they might have let him go, that hope was gone now. He now fully realized they were going to kill him. Had they decided to let him go, their faces would have remained covered.

“Get off the horse,” Verne abruptly demanded as his hand casually moved to the butt of his gun.

Matt slowly moved his left leg behind the horse. He would dismount on the right side, placing the horse between him and Verne. Recalling how skittish the horses were at the bank, he managed to nudge the animal, causing it to move about unsteadily. The big man remaining in the saddle was momentarily distracted in his attempt to steady the jittery horse.

Suddenly Matt jumped to the ground and threw his shoulder against the horse’s rump, causing it to dance around the group. During the distraction Matt ran into the gully. He could hear the excited movement behind him. Then he was thrown forward by a bullet in the left shoulder. His hands still tied behind him, he fell forward, his face striking the ground with a stunning, unprotected impact. He fought to remain conscious, and struggled frantically to get back on his feet. He arose and stumbled farther into the gully. A second round hit him in the back, and he fell again at the mouth of the gully. The remaining strength faded from him as he fought to regain his footing, but he could not get up.

Vaguely, Matt could hear the voices of the outlaws behind him. With great effort he managed to turn his head in their direction. Through a haze he saw one of the men aiming a pistol at him. He saw a flash, then felt a jolt as the bullet struck the side of his head. The haze turned to darkness, and he seemed to relax. He lay face down and drifted into unconsciousness, unable to hear the sound of hoof beats as the outlaws rode away.

THREE

THE CHILD SITS on a straight chair holding a violin beneath his chin, his left hand supporting the instrument beneath the neck, while practiced fingers move smoothly along the strings, stopping and moving again, in accordance with the music sheet for beginners. All the while his young mind yearns for the games that his friends are playing outside. His mother enters the parlor and immediately senses the longings of her son.

“That’s very good, Matt. How long have you been at it?”

“For over an hour.”

“Well, I think that’s enough for today.” She pauses a moment, then adds, “It seems to me I hear some of your friends playing kick ball next door. Why don’t you go see if you can join them?”

Young Matt’s eyes brighten. “Yes, ma’am!” He starts to jump from the chair but remembers to carefully place his violin inside its case and set it on a nearby table before darting for the door. He then stops. Returning to his mother, he kisses her on the cheek. She smiles as she hugs him and lovingly ushers him out the door.

“If you see Bridget outside,” his mother calls after him, “send her in for her practice at the piano.”

MATT SCANLON awoke shivering in the cold darkness. The moon was in its first quarter and offered little to illuminate the surroundings. He lay face down where he had fallen. The throbbing pain in his head was incessant. He tried to move but was stopped by an even sharper pain that tore through his left shoulder. His hands were still tied behind his back, and he was helpless to remove the bonds. A moment later he passed out again.

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD Matt Scanlon stands in his backyard, poised in a prizefighter’s stance. His father stands before him with arms outstretched, the palms of his hands facing his son.

"I appreciate your mother's desire to teach you the finer arts, and I must say you're developing into a first-rate violinist," the father says with the slightest hint of an Irish brogue. "But a well-rounded gentleman must also be prepared to defend his honor."

"Yes, sir," Matt replies.

"I was but a lad when my family came across the Atlantic from Ireland in one of them coffin ships and landed in New York Harbor. As a poor immigrant in a strange city, I had to quickly learn the art of fighting. It has saved me many a broken nose and Lord knows what other injuries."

"I understand, Papa. I want to learn how to fight."

"Now you're talking, son. So, let's begin with the jab...."

WHEN Matt awoke the second time it was fully light. The sun's rays bore down on him from somewhere behind. The back of his neck was sunburned, and he felt as if the blood behind his temples was boiling. He tried to move and was instantly reminded of the injury to his shoulder.

Matt lay still for several minutes and considered his situation. He had been shot two... no... three times; once in the shoulder, once in the side of the head – a grazing wound – and once in the back. He thought it strange that he could not feel that wound. He concentrated for a moment, attempting to identify its location, but was not successful. Then a chilling thought occurred to him. What if he had been shot in the spine? There would be no feeling, nor would there be any chance of his survival. Fear began to envelope him, causing him to forget, for the moment, the pain in his head and shoulder. It was an effort to suppress the panic that was beginning to overtake him. He knew he had to be calm – to think.

Slowly, his sense of reasoning returned. It occurred to Matt that, if he could move the lower part of his body, it would mean that his spinal cord was intact. He began with his toes, first one foot, then the other. The toes on both feet wiggled with little effort. He breathed a sigh of relief and said a prayer of thanks. Next, he moved a foot, then bent his left leg at the knee. Sliding his right leg under the left, he took a deep breath and, ignoring the almost intolerable pain, rolled his body onto his back and pushed himself up to a sitting position. As he did so, a searing pain raced through the right side of his back, at the level of the shoulder blade. It was a mixture of agony and relief – for now,

at least, he knew where the third wound was, and it had apparently missed his vital organs.

He had to stand up. He did so by working his legs under him and slowly manipulating his body into a kneeling position. After resting a moment and allowing the swimming in his head to subside, he moved his left leg so that his knee was pointing upward and placed his left foot flat on the ground. Shifting his weight to that leg, Matt began pushing himself up, using every bit of strength that he could muster, until he was finally standing upright.

Immediately he lost his balance due to a sudden rush of dizziness but was able to regain his footing. He stood without moving for a full minute, then slowly staggered out of the mouth of the gully and into the arroyo.

He looked all about him to get his bearings. He appeared to be in the middle of nowhere. He was gunshot and, so far as he could tell, his left shoulder was broken. The loss of blood had weakened him considerably. His throat was extremely dry. His lips were parched and were beginning to crack. Matt was well aware of his situation. If he did not get help soon, he would surely die.

He glanced up at the sun, then had to quickly look away. He estimated that it was either ten a.m. or two p.m. but was not quite sure which. It was important that he know whether the sun was in the east or west, for only then would he have some idea as to what direction he should begin his journey.

Matt recalled that the robbers had traveled more or less north by east out of McAllister. That would mean that, if he walked due south, he would eventually arrive at the stage road. He was thinking of Wade McAllister and how he had proceeded directly to the road after losing his horse and becoming stranded.

Now that his mind was beginning to work, Matt further recalled that when his abductors had ridden up to the gully, they were on the north side of the arroyo, which ran east and west. This meant that he was now standing on the north side of the arroyo looking toward the south bank. Since the sun was to his left, it would have to be morning.

He selected a large bush on the bank directly across the arroyo from where he stood and began walking toward it. It took the better part of twenty minutes to cross the arroyo and stumble up the slight incline and arrive at the bush. Walking with his hands tied behind him was awkward at first, but soon he became accustomed to it.

From the bush he carefully selected another marker and moved toward it. He continued this way for an hour. The loss of blood and absence of water caused him to become fatigued soon after his journey began. But he knew he could not stop, for his survival depended upon his ability to remain on his feet and continue to move. His one consolation was the fact that he was headed in the right direction. This became apparent as he observed that the sun was now almost directly overhead.

By the time the sun was forty-five degrees off his right shoulder Matt had become so weak he could hardly put one foot ahead of the other. His head felt as if a hammer were pounding inside it. His left shoulder throbbed from the pain and swelling, and his mouth felt dry as cotton.

He forced himself forward, every step an extreme effort. The sun's rays burned his neck and face and seemed to penetrate his clothing. He wanted desperately to shed his wool coat but could not, because his hands were bound behind him. Perspiration was slowly draining the fluids from his body.

Matt walked in a daze, his mind jumping from past to present. As the pain approached the limit of his tolerance, he escaped the incessant torture by retreating to his past – to his childhood in Cincinnati. But his thoughts would inevitably return to the present.

He stumbled.

Unable to regain his balance, Matt fell to the ground, face forward. Turning his head to the side, his cheek struck the hard surface with an impact that caused him to scream out in pain. The searing, shocking sensation in his shoulder brought on a wave of nausea. He made an effort to get up, but his strength was gone. Closing his eyes, Matt allowed his mind to escape the desperation of the moment by drifting peacefully into a less trying period...

JUST PRIOR TO his eighteenth birthday, Matt Scanlon is in the final months of his first year at City College of Cincinnati, where he is studying journalism. On this particular day he is standing in the center of the gymnasium, surrounded by a hundred onlookers. He has assumed the now familiar prizefighter's stance. Standing opposite him is nineteen-year-old Lamar Potts, a six-foot two-inch, one hundred eighty-pound bully who has been antagonizing Matt throughout the academic year.

Matt has taken his boxing lessons as seriously as his violin lessons and has become an accomplished performer in each of the arts, to the immense satisfaction of both his father and mother.

Between Matt and Lamar is the school's intramural boxing coach, who will referee the match. Lamar is his usual arrogant self. He is not on the school's boxing team, as Matt is. His extra weight and intimidating personality are his sources of confidence. But he is somewhat perplexed by Matt's sudden acceptance of the most recent of Lamar's numerous challenges to fight. This has never happened before. Why would this skinny bean pole now want to fight him?

Matt calmly meets his opponent's domineering stare. Lamar's latest challenge was the last straw. He had tried to ignore this arrogant bully, but there comes a time when the only solution is to fight back.

Following a few admonitions from the referee, the fight begins. Almost to the person, the spectators have shown up to lend their support to Matt. They, too, have had their fill of Lamar Potts, and they are not disappointed. The fight lasts less than two minutes. The first minute is used by the opponents in testing each other. Lamar makes a few attempts to hit Matt, but the quickness of the smaller fighter surprises him, and the blows completely miss their mark. Matt soon finds an opening and takes advantage of it. He has been told by both his father and his boxing coach that, for his size, he has a very powerful punch, and if he ever adds muscle to his frame that punch will probably become even stronger. He sends two quick lefts to Lamar's right cheek, then a hard right, which lands solidly on the bridge of the larger man's nose. It breaks his nose and stuns him long enough for Matt to move in with a series of powerful jabs to the mid-section. He then steps back and lands a solid blow to the chin. Lamar stands for a moment on wobbling legs. He stares at Matt through disbelieving eyes, then sinks to the floor. He is out cold.

The crowd cheers wildly, then several of Matt's classmates lift him onto their shoulders and parade him around the gymnasium. The following day Lamar Potts drops out of school.

MATT was awakened by the incessant shivering brought on by the cold night air. His headache was not as intense as before, but the throbbing pain in his shoulder remained. The thirst was almost overwhelming, and his tongue felt twice its normal size. He knew that he had to continue moving and could not wait for daylight.

With great effort, he managed to rise, first to a kneeling position, then to his feet. He looked about for the shadows of landmarks and identified a cluster of bushes that he remembered as being approximately due south of where he was now standing.

Matt gazed up at the few stars that were visible and wished that he had learned how to navigate by them. But this was a skill that he had not needed while growing up in a mid-western city, so it had never occurred to him to learn. He almost swore at his own ignorance but realized that such a reaction was wrong. There was, however, one thing of which he was fairly confident, and that was that the fading stars indicated that dawn was not far off.

Identifying a landmark near where he stood, Matt began walking toward the stand of bushes to the south. He moved slowly, careful not to stumble on some unseen hole or hill or rock. When he arrived at the bushes, he looked back at the landmark from which he had just departed. Moving beyond the bushes, he lined himself up with the two landmarks, thus providing the direction he needed to face in setting up the next landmark. In this way, Matt proceeded, ever so slowly, in the dark.

When dawn finally began to break over the horizon to Matt's left, he was reassured that he was headed in the right direction. The steadily increasing light allowed him to move at a faster pace. The broken land gave way to a flatter terrain, though he realized that it was not as flat as he had thought when viewing it from the window of the stagecoach.

Within two hours after sunrise Matt's headache had returned. Though the bleeding had long since stopped, the blood that had been lost caused him frequent bouts of dizziness. The absence of water caused him to become increasingly weaker. By the time the sun was forty-five degrees off his left shoulder, Matt was staggering as if intoxicated. Only blind determination and an unceasing will to survive prompted him to continually place one foot in front of the other.

He moved onward in this manner for another half hour. The land seemed to go on forever. Then, as if from nowhere, a narrow ribbon appeared in the distance and divided the sea of short brown grass that lay before him.

The stage road!

The sight of it caused him to cry aloud. In his excitement Matt began to run. He stumbled but regained his balance. He momentarily

forgot the pain and the thirst. When the road was fifty yards away, Matt stumbled again. This time he was unable to maintain his balance. He fell forward, his chest absorbing the impact, which knocked his breath out. He gasped frantically for several seconds until a semblance of normal breathing returned.

Through sheer will Matt got back up on trembling legs and proceeded forward. Dizziness began to overtake him, and the ground seemed to move. He staggered several more feet before blacking out. When he regained consciousness, he was lying on the ground. He lay there for several minutes, then got up and stumbled forward. When he was six feet from the side of the road his knees suddenly buckled, and he collapsed to the ground in a heap. He knew he could not get up again. Fearful that he may not be seen by a passerby, Matt squirmed like a sidewinder to the edge of the road. Every bit of his strength was now drained from him.

He gazed up the empty road and it was spinning, creating the image of a tunnel. He was overcome with nausea and felt as if he were going to vomit, except there was nothing inside him to bring up.

Closing his eyes, he spoke softly, "Lord, you have led me to the stage road and restored my hope that I will survive this ordeal. As for me, I've taken it as far as I can possibly take it. I now turn the burden of my survival over to You, though I realize that it has been in Your hands all along. And now I think I'll rest, knowing I've done my part, and resting in the assurance that I am fully and completely in Your loving hands. Amen."

For the first time since his torturous trek began, Matt allowed his body to completely relax, and he succumbed to the wave of blackness that mercifully replaced the sight of the land that spun around him.

ELEVEN

IT WAS MID-MORNING when Ben Wainwright and most of the cowhands headed south from the bunkhouse. Riding close behind him were Ernie Pratt and Shorty Phillips, both of whom, along with Jack Latimer and Pinky Carlson, were the preeminent wranglers of the outfit. Cecil Tapp, a compact, muscular rider from Shreveport, Louisiana whose long black hair, dark skin and round face led some to wonder if he was part Cajun. He was quiet and tended to keep to himself, and he did his job well. Flint Harper was a handsome, outgoing person who was also known as the practical joker of the bunkhouse. Frank Moorhouse, at thirty years of age, was one of the older members of the group. His thick brown hair was matched by a full mustache that extended to well below the corners of his mouth. He had a quiet disposition and was seldom seen without a wad of tobacco between his lower lip and gums. The last of the riders that rode close to Wainwright was Leonard Mallett. Aside from his red hair and pronounced overbite, the characteristic that set him apart from the others was his tendency to be obnoxious. His performance as a cowhand, however, was sufficiently competent to keep him on the payroll.

A few lengths behind the group that were bunched up with Wainwright were Matt Scanlon and Sam Jones. Like the other cowhands, Matt was wearing chaps. But unlike theirs, his were brand new, and were so stiff they tended to resist his every leg movement. His hope was that they would become more pliable as the days passed.

Following Matt and Sam was the chuck wagon, driven by Baldy Pringle. Close behind were Charlie Pounds and Billy Neilson in the buckboard. Trailing behind the buckboard was Charlie's horse, which the foreman would be using on his return trip to the ranch.

A mile behind, bringing up the rear, driving a dozen remuda, were two other wranglers, Jack Latimer, the surly-looking man that Sam had warned Matt about in the cookhouse, and Pinky Carlson, a very

competent rider who was well liked among his fellow cowmen. And Pinky got along well with all of them – with the single exception of Jack Latimer. Like the other men, he gave Latimer a wide berth.

Matt and Sam had been riding in silence for the better part of half an hour when Sam asked, “Matt, did you happen to bring your Bible with you?”

“My Bible?” The question seemed to come out of the blue. “No, it didn’t occur to me. Besides, my Bible is pretty large, and I had so many other items to bring along that there wouldn’t have been any room for it.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I didn’t bring mine either. Besides, I keep it up at Mama’s cottage.”

Matt looked over at his friend. “Why did you ask if I had brought my Bible?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just thought maybe we could get together in our free time and do some studyin’ together.”

Matt stared ahead at the group of riders in front of them. “Sam, I don’t think we will have the opportunity to get off to ourselves and engage in any meaningful study.” After a pause he added, “It would be wonderful if we could, but I just don’t think it would happen.”

“Nah, I guess you’re right,” Sam replied, a hint of disappointment in his voice.

They had ridden less than a minute when Sam spoke up again. “Matt, did I ever mention to you that Mama and me usually make it a point to read something from the Bible every Sunday? We do it in the mornin’, or afternoon, or at night – depending on what we have planned for that day. But we always try to take time out for Bible readin’ together once a week.”

“I think that’s great, Sam. That’s a wonderful thing to do,” Matt said.

“I like readin’ from the New Testament, where it talks a lot about Jesus.” Sam made a face. “But I don’t really care about the Old Testament. Everything in it happened a long time before Jesus was born, so why should I bother with it?”

Matt regarded his young friend with a patient smile. “Actually, Sam, there are many things to learn from the Old Testament – things that actually prepare us for what’s to come in the New Testament.”

“That’s what Mama says, but I ain’t found anything yet.” After a pause, Sam continued, “Anyway, what I was getting to was that I’m

glad you think it's good that Mama and I get together for Bible readin', Matt, because I have somethin' else to say to you." When Matt made no reply, Sam continued, "I didn't want to say anything to you until I checked with my mama, but I asked her and she said you would be welcome to join us in our Bible readin' any time."

Matt regarded his friend for a long moment and smiled. Sam's words touched his heart deeply. "I would be proud to be a part of your mom's and your Bible readings. Of course, I'm not sure when we will be able to get together, but when we can do it, you can count me in."

"Thanks, Matt. I'll let Mama know." A frown then appeared on Sam's face. "You know, Mama's and my Bible readin' is the closest thing to a church we have around here."

"That may be, Sam. But it's still very much a church," Matt said reassuringly. "Remember, in Matthew 18 verse 20 Jesus said, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' So, it looks like it will be you, your mom, me and Jesus at those Bible meetings."

MATT saw the small grove of live oak when they were still a quarter of a mile north of the camp site. A few minutes later Wainwright brought the group of cowhands to a stop at the eastern edge of the trees. It was clear to Matt that this site had been used on more than one occasion for roundups. Immediately south of the grove was a pole corral which would be used to hold the remuda. Immediately in front of where Ben had halted the men was a fire pit beside which the chuck wagon would park. He also noticed, off to the left, a second corral, like the other, but slightly smaller. Several yards north of that corral was another fire pit. He would learn that this corral would be used for holding unbranded cows, and the fire pit was where the branding iron would be heated.

Ben led the riders into the large corral and had them remove the saddles and tack from their mounts and place them on the corral fence. Each horse was then rubbed down with grass, bandannas, or saddle blankets – whatever was handy, before the men sauntered over to the grove of trees where Ben indicated they would set up camp.

Inside the grove were a few makeshift sheds that would be used to stow the cowboys' gear. The men would sleep on the ground. Each rider found a comfortable spot and it was there that he would drop his

blanket roll as soon as Charlie delivered them in the buckboard. Sam claimed the space next to Matt's. Their spot was near the eastern edge of the grove.

They were in the process of claiming their spot when the chuck wagon rolled to a stop on the left side of the fire pit. Seconds later Charlie Pounds arrived with Billy Neilson in the buckboard. Baldy was stepping down from the chuck wagon just as Charlie walked toward him. Matt noticed that Billy waited at the buckboard, with his mouth agape and a look of worried concern on his face.

"Baldy," the foreman began as he approached the cook, "I brought Billy along to be your assistant."

"You did what!" Baldy exploded in a fit of anger. "I will not work with that idiot!"

"I would think you'd be happy to have someone to wash pots, pans and dirty dishes for you. All you will have to do is cook."

"No!" the cook replied tersely.

"I'm not asking you to adopt the kid!"

"I don't want that ugly moron anywhere around me!"

"This isn't a request. It's an order!" Charlie exclaimed.

"I refuse!"

Charlie stared at Baldy for several seconds before speaking, slowly fuming inside. "You refuse? Then you're fired!"

By this time their raised voices had attracted the attention of the other cowhands, who had gathered near Matt and Sam.

"Oh, yeah? If you fire me, who'll do the cooking for you?" Baldy asked in a self-assured manner. He was confident that he had the boss in a bind. He had also noticed the men standing in the grove, taking in every word that was being said.

Without missing a beat, the foreman replied, "I'll bring my wife out here to cook. She'd love to be out in the fresh air and sunshine." He paused, then added, "I might also add that she's a better cook than you are any day."

This seemed to momentarily catch Baldy off guard. Before he could reply, Charlie said, "Another thing I might add: you're part of a cattle roundup right now. Men are depending on you. If you quit, you can't expect us to just drive you back to the ranch at your convenience while you leave the rest of us in a lurch."

"Then I'll walk back!" the cook exclaimed.

“Oh, you’ll walk, all right, but it won’t be in the direction of the ranch!”

Without another word Charlie grabbed the cook by the collar in his huge left hand and lifted the shorter, though corpulent, man up until his heels were off the ground. The foreman began walking southward, carrying Baldy with him. Baldy was now frightened as he awkwardly moved along, practically on his tiptoes. When they were several feet south of the chuck wagon they stopped, and Charlie released his grip on the frightened cook. Pointing south, the foreman said in a voice that was almost trembling from both anger and physical exertion, “Now, if you want to abandon this roundup that’s the direction you can go. You can head south, or even east or west, but you ain’t heading north, toward McAllister.” After a pause to catch his breath he continued, “What I’ll do is put you in the buckboard and haul you several miles south until we are clear of McAllister range, then set you afoot. It’ll take you many days of walking to get anywhere.” A wicked grin appeared on the foreman’s face as he continued, “But one thing you should be aware of – there are rattlesnakes out there, some are four to six feet long. And when you get tired and want to lie down and rest, just remember, when it gets cold at night snakes start looking for warm bodies to snuggle up against to keep warm. You might want to keep that in mind.”

They were far enough away that it was difficult for most of the cowhands to hear what was being said, but Matt caught the gist of what Charlie was telling the cook.

It seemed, to Matt, like a full minute passed before Charlie, staring coldly at the cook, asked, “Well, what’s it gonna be?”

Baldy Pringle, pale and clearly frightened, meekly replied that he would be happy to have Billy assist him with the chores.

DAWN was just breaking as Matt slowly arose from atop his bedroll. Sleeping on the ground had made him sore. He felt it mostly in his left shoulder where the break had occurred when he was attempting his escape from the robbers. Most of the other hands were already awake and moving about – even Sam and Billy had already rolled up their bedding and were nowhere in sight, though he assumed that Billy had been roused out by Baldy early to help in preparing breakfast.

Rotating his left arm in a circular motion to limber the shoulder, Matt then rolled up his bedding and placed it under a nearby tree alongside the bedrolls of Sam and Billy. As he did so he heard his name being called. Looking to his left he saw Ben Wainwright, standing at the edge of the grove, summoning him.

"Morning, Matt," the ramrod greeted as Matt approached. "How'd you sleep?"

Matt grinned. "I slept fine, but I was pretty sore when I tried to get up." After a brief pause, he added, "Guess I'm not used to sleeping on the ground."

"I believe we're all in the same boat," Ben said. "It's been a while since any of us have had to sleep out of doors."

As they talked Matt detected a rustle behind him, but he paid little attention to it, since Ben was facing in that direction. A moment later the rustling ceased, then Ben shouted, "Hey! Who started that fire?"

The ramrod's shout caused Matt to turn around. When he did so he saw a small fire burning behind him and off to his left several yards away.

"Matt!" Ben ordered in a loud, dramatic tone, "Get over there and put that fire out!"

Matt moved quickly toward the fire. When he arrived, he saw that it was a small blaze atop a stack of twigs and appeared to be purposely set. Lifting his right foot, he went about smothering the flame with the sole of his boot. As he pressed down, he detected a squishing sensation. When the fire was extinguished Matt lifted his boot and discovered that the sole and top of the toe were covered in cow manure. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that most of the cowhands were watching his every move. He knew, now, that he had been the victim of a prank, and they were testing him to see how he would react to it. Though the fire was out, Matt, resting his weight on his right foot, lifted his left boot, dropped it in the ashes and pressed down until he detected the squishing of the substance below. Pulling the boot out, he examined it, then turned and walked slowly toward the group of men.

With a sheepish grin, Matt said, "These boots are brand new. I couldn't very well break one in without breaking in the other one as well."

This was met with laughter and back-slaps from the cowhands. Charlie Pounds, who had joined Ben at the edge of the grove,

exchanged glances with the ramrod as they both nodded their approval. Matt was well on his way to fitting in with the rest of the outfit.

AFTER breakfast, as the men were downing the last of their coffee, Charlie gathered them together to lay out the plans for the roundup.

"Men," he began, "The McAllister spread covers the better part of three hundred square miles, and there are cattle scattered over much of it. Our job, for the next month or so, is to round up as many of those critters as we can.

"On this first day of the roundup Ben Wainwright will lead out with all the hands except for Baldy and Billy. You will start herding the cattle in from about ten miles east of camp. You'll have to eat your noon meal in the saddle, so be sure to take some grub with you. Baldy will see that you will each get what you need. Today is a short drive, and you should be back in camp in time for supper.

"The cattle will be herded into the pasture adjacent to camp south of us. It's got plenty of grass and spring water, so it is unlikely they will wander off. Those cows that don't have brands will be culled from the herd and moved to the cattle pen to the east of the chuck wagon. Tomorrow morning Frank Moorhouse, Matt Scanlon and Sam King will remain in camp to begin branding. Moorhouse will be in charge. They will also be responsible for overseeing the branded cattle ranging free to keep them close to camp. This will involve providing hay for them and keeping the springs free of weeds and other debris. The rest of the crew will resume their search east and south over the next several weeks, covering as much of the spread as possible.

"As for myself, as soon as you cow punchers leave, I will be heading back to the ranch, and the comforts of home with my lovely wife."

This last comment was met with laughter.

"Needless to say," Charlie added, "in my absence, Ben Wainwright is in charge. What he says goes."

"Any questions?"

When no one spoke up, Charlie said, "Ok, men, I'll be seeing you at the end of the week."

Twenty minutes later the wranglers' horses were saddled, and their riders were mounted. With Ben Wainwright in the lead, they

moved out in an east by southeast direction. A few of the riders spurred their mounts to a trot, but Wainwright yelled at them to slow to a walk. There was no need wearing the horses out before the work began.

Matt noticed several head of cattle as the riders made their way east. They were scattered, usually in bunches of four or five. Some were off grazing alone. After riding the better part of an hour, he noticed, off in the distance to his right, what appeared to be the ruins of the McAllisters' first ranch house. The sight of it brought a sickening feeling inside the pit of his stomach as he recalled the terrible misunderstanding that occurred there three days earlier between him and Anne.

Three days!

It was only three days ago? It seemed like ages had passed since he had made a fool of himself at the ruins of the old ranch house.

Wainwright led the wranglers east by southeast for another hour before calling a halt.

"Ok, men," he began, "let's start our first drive here. We'll move west, picking up every critter that resembles a cow between here and camp." Looking at Matt, he said, "Scanlon, you go with Carlson. King, you're with Pratt. These are two of the best wranglers at the ranch. Do exactly as they tell you and you'll learn a lot. The rest of you wadies can hold your own."

FOR the next several hours Matt was too busy to wallow in misery over his fallout with Anne. He learned quickly that working with Pinky Carlson demanded his full attention. Moving west, they encountered the cattle that Matt had observed earlier. To his surprise, though, there were many more than he had seen. He watched as Pinky would direct his mount into a small stand of brush and, moments later, emerge driving three or four head of cattle from within. The mount Pinky rode was a trained cutting horse, and Matt watched as man and horse worked as one. As the cows began to accumulate, Pinky instructed Matt to remain with those that had already been rounded up while he pursued those grazing in the distance.

When the sun was overhead Pinky Carlson rode up beside Matt, who was pushing the small herd along from the rear and announced that it was time to eat. They both reached into their saddle bags and removed the lunch that Baldy had prepared. It was certainly nothing

fancy – some beef jerky and a few biscuits to be washed down with water from their canteens. After retrieving their meal, Pinky instructed Matt to move to the left side of the herd while he went to the right. The cattle would continue moving while the wranglers ate their lunch.

A moment later, having stuffed his jerky in one shirt pocket and the half-eaten biscuit in his hand, Matt and Misty were moving along at a leisurely pace. On the opposite side of the small herd, consisting of about a dozen head, was Pinky Carlson, who was holding his jerky in one hand and his biscuit in the other. The reins were hanging loose over the horse's neck. Matt shook his head and grinned. Those two were certainly a team.

Glancing down at the horse he was astride, Matt said, "You may not be a fancy cutting horse, Misty, but you sure are a pleasure to ride."

Occasionally a cow would stray from the herd and begin wandering off by itself. If it was on Matt's side of the herd it was up to him to ride out and bring it back. This was accomplished by riding out to the far side of the critter and moving Misty toward it. The cow might resist at first by attempting to go around the horse, but Matt would steer Misty so that she remained in front of the cow. Eventually the critter would give up and move back toward the herd, with Misty close behind. Matt enjoyed this activity, for it gave him a sense of accomplishment – and it was probably the closest thing to becoming a wrangler that he would ever experience. The first time it happened, he glanced toward Pinky after successfully guiding the steer back into the fold, and the wrangler had grinned and nodded his approval. This meant a great deal to Matt.

As the afternoon passed, and their small herd continued to grow, Matt noticed, off to the southeast, two other riders leading the cattle they had rounded up. They were heading west by northwest. Sometime later another herd appeared farther south, also on a west by northwest course. Over the next hour two more herds appeared, heading on the same course. Matt would learn that, eventually, all the herds would meet at the pasture just south of the camp. Pinky and Matt had been assigned the northern most route. The remaining four pairs of wranglers had begun their roundups a bit more south and east of where Matt and Pinky started. This was a small slice of the range that would be covered over the next several weeks. Tomorrow they

would begin the roundup farther north near the eastern border of the ranch.

It was well into the afternoon when Matt and Pinky herded their cattle, which now numbered fourteen, into the pasture designated as the holding area for the herd.

“What now?” Matt asked as he rode over to where Pinky was sitting astride his horse, looking over the collection of cows they had just brought in.

“Well, now we have to go through the lot and pick out the ones that haven’t been branded. Then we herd them over to the corral over yonder,” he said, pointing to the empty corral east of the chuck wagon. Breathing a tired sigh, he added, “Guess we may as well get started now, before our muscles begin to stiffen up on us.”

It took no more than fifteen minutes to identify the cows that were unbranded. Culling them from the herd, Pinky headed them toward the corral, where Matt stood with the gate open. The corral had two gates. The larger gate, facing the pasture, was used to herd several cows at a time into the enclosure. A smaller gate on the north side, now closed, near where the branding would take place, was used to bring one cow out of the holding pen at a time.

This chore done, Matt and Pinky sauntered out to the pasture to await the arrival of the next bunch of cows, which could be seen several hundred yards away. Beyond it the third group was closing behind rapidly, as if they all sensed the end of their trek.

“I was wondering, Pinky,” Matt began as they awaited the arrival of the herd, “I notice that every head we bring in is referred to as a cow. Now, I know they all aren’t cows. Back in Ohio, where I come from, a cow is the female of the species, and the male is called a bull. But here every one of these critters is referred to as a cow.”

Pinky turned to face Matt, and a slow smile appeared before he answered. “Well, I don’t rightly know. I guess you could also ask ‘Why are we called cowboys?’ I suppose it’s simply a way of tacking one simple name on all the bovine critters we deal with.

“Before we start the cattle drive, we try to castrate all the bulls in the herd. Once we do that, what would you call them?”

Matt shrugged but offered no reply.

“After that, they are referred to as steers,” Pinky said. “Within the herd are also heifers, which are cows that have not yet borne a calf.” He paused, then added, “I guess what I’m saying is that there are a

lot of critters in the herd with different handles, so we tend to settle on the simplest name to cover all of them. We just call them all cows.”

“Why are the bulls castrated?” Matt wanted to know.

Pinky removed his hat long enough to scratch his head, then put it back before answering. “The bulls are castrated for a couple reasons. First of all, it makes for a smoother drive. Castration tends to take all the orneriness out of ‘em. They aren’t inclined to get in fights with other steers. Also, it tends to make the beef more tender, or some such thing... or so I’m told.”

“I have one more question, if you don’t mind.”

“Shoot.”

“From what I’ve read about Texas, the longhorn steer seems to be the most prevalent. But I have yet to see one.”

Pinky Carlson offered a crooked smile. “Be grateful for that. I suppose they aren’t quite as plentiful as they are farther south. But they are out there. You can bet on that.” He paused a moment before adding, “The fact is, Mr. McAllister doesn’t cotton to longhorns. Says they aren’t worth the trouble. Too dangerous. He learned that when he worked for Goodnight on the drive to New Mexico.”

“How are they any different from a Hereford?” Matt asked.

“You ever been up close to a longhorn?”

“No. I’ve just seen pictures of them.”

“Well, they’re big and strong and ornery. Their horns can reach as much as seven feet across, and they know how to use ‘em.” Another pause, then he said, “That’s why the boss prefers Herefords. They’re easier to handle.

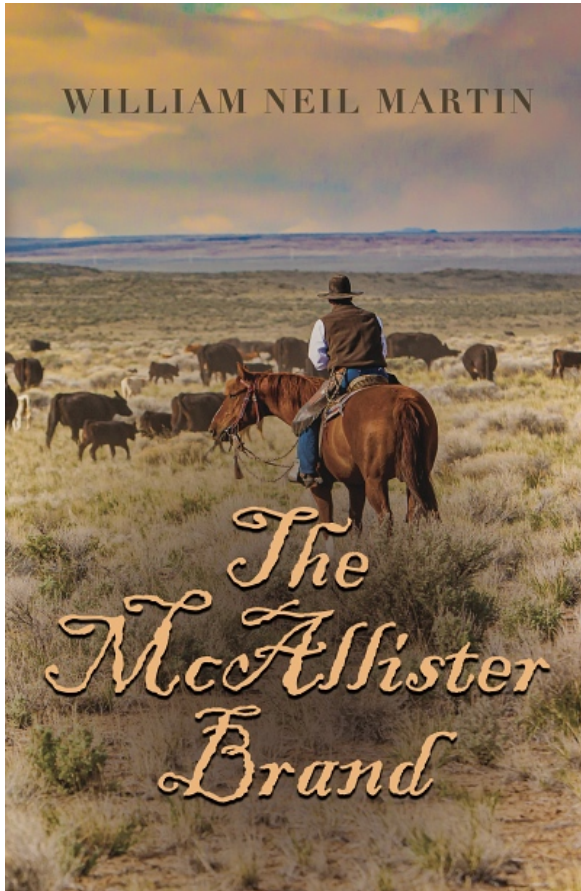
“From what I understand, when Mr. McAllister first went into the ranchin’ business all his cattle were longhorns. But then he began buying Herefords and phasing out the longhorns.” Pinky pushed his hat to one side and scratched his head again. “Says they’re easier to handle – also, there’s more beef on ‘em.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the second group of cattle. Matt noted that there were fewer cows in this bunch. Pinky directed them to a section of the pasture away from the herd he and Matt had brought in to avoid having to inspect them a second time for brands.

A few minutes later a third group brought in a slightly larger number than what he and Pinky had rounded up. Within the next half hour, the remaining two groups arrived, each with only a dozen head.

The McAllister Brand

Before an hour passed all the unbranded cattle were in the holding pen and the cowboys were heading to the remuda corral to unsaddle and rub down their horses, then feed them a well-deserved meal. Only after these chores were done did they wash the trail dust from themselves and move to the chuck wagon. It had been a long day, and to a man, they were bone tired.



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