

All the good old stories I was a part of or were told to me from when I was one until today.

All The Old Stories

By Jonathan Huntress

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ALL THE OLD STORIES



JONATHAN HUNTRESS

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Listening to Charley's Friends Talk About Art in El Paso

I heard this story over 40 years ago at a friend's house in La Cienega outside Santa Fe. It was such a good story I remembered it all these years.

Cherie and I had gone one evening to see Charlie Southard and his wife, Roz. They had just moved to Santa Fe from Alamogordo and were renting a house in La Cienega. Charlie had bought some land down on Route 14 toward Cerrillos and had started building his shop. He made some fine things in that small shop. The sculpture of the burro carrying wood that stands on a street corner near the plaza. Charlie also made the sculpture in the fountain at DeVargas Mall, although it originally was in the bank on the corner of Paseo and Old Santa Fe Trail and was later moved to DeVargas. I remember Charlie holding the larger than life size cowboy hat before he welded it on to the head. He would carefully feel the crease of the hat, then lift a heavy hammer and give it a huge whack and it would ring like a bell, then he would carefully feel the crease again as if it were 4X beaver. The hair of the native American was made from several hundred coat hangers carefully welded on the head then "combed" with hammer and pliers. One of the wooden panels is a door that opens to the mechanism which rotated the three heads at a very slow speed. Charlie often used components and gears he found in cast off machines at the Cerrillos dump.

When we got to La Cienega we met two artist friends of Charlie's up from El Paso, John Hogan and Mark Regalado. They talked about the art scene in El Paso and what they were doing. They had rented a warehouse,

basically one big open space with a kitchen in the corner. The open space was perfect for art projects and painting and classes. There were easels set up. The kitchen was communal, and everyone used it. But it was a warehouse, so they weren't too neat about it. When they cooked spaghetti, which was often because they were poor, to test to see if it was done, they would toss it up to the ceiling, which was nine or ten feet up there. If it stuck, it was done. You remember. I think we all did it until our wives told us to stop.

They had art classes in the space and even offered a life drawing class. They would find someone to model for class and afterwards they would pass the hat for her. After the class was over, some of the students would stay for coffee over in the kitchen area and talk art.

For a while, there was a Catholic priest that would come to the life drawing class. It was clear from his attempts on paper that he had no art background whatsoever, but he was enthusiastic, and he always tipped big at the end of the class. He also liked staying afterward and telling the guys how much art was helping him be more creative as a person. They didn't know whether to believe him or not. After several weeks, he was not showing improvement.

When this was brought to his attention after one class when they were having coffee in the kitchen area, he was quick to protest. He proclaimed that art was opening his soul, and he was realizing new creative areas that were coming into his awareness. To impress upon the artists and hosts his dedication, he loudly proclaimed, "And may God strike me if I am not telling" And at that very moment, a small mass of hardened spaghetti that had

rested quietly on the ceiling for weeks and perhaps even months, - separated itself and fell, hitting him right - - on the top - - of his head.

With a look of total fear and horror, he dropped his cup and ran for the door. They never saw him again.

They also said that an old friend of theirs had died. His name was Ben Turner, originally from Sweden. He was kind of a social outcast, and rough from living a hard life. He had taken to the two young artists and told them of his life. He lived beside their warehouse.

Ben came to El Paso on a freight train, and he got off in the yards and was taking a dump between two lines of cars when he was jumped by the police and arrested. It turned out, the President's train was on the next track. He spent a couple weeks in jail before they let him go.

He got some odd jobs in El Paso and some south of the border in Mexico. He was a machinist and spoke Spanish well. This was around 1914. He knew how to handle dynamite when few did. So, he got some work here and there, until he was kidnapped by Pancho Villa who made him an offer he couldn't refuse. It turns out that Pancho Villa needed another demolition man, and he spent the next couple years running around northern Mexico doing whatever Pancho told him to do. Sometimes the work involved carefully blowing open safes that were taken during raids. Ben told the artists that he didn't go along on the raid on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916, but things got hot very soon after and they had to run from General Pershing. Even though Pershing used trucks and airplanes to try to find Villa, the search ended with nothing. Turner

said that while Pershing was marching through Northern Mexico looking for him, he and Pancho Villa were stretched out side by side on the beach at Acapulco and stayed there until the expedition went back to the United States.

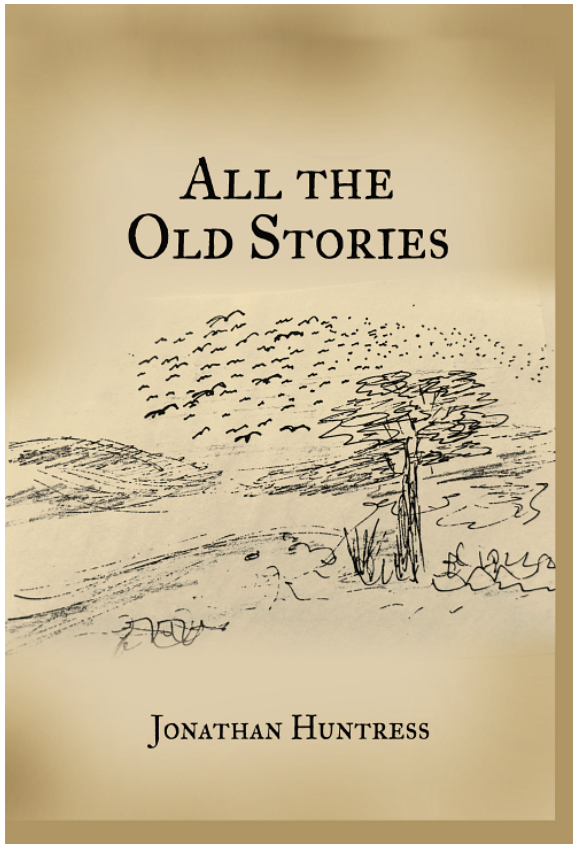
Shortly after, he managed to leave Villa and get back to Texas and got himself into legitimate work on both sides of the border doing construction projects and financing and related things.

He was asked to come to one town and attend a banquet in his honor, for helping them achieve financial stability. At the banquet they thanked him for helping them overcome a more than two decade struggle to pay off the debt that had occurred after Pancho Villa raided the town in 1915.

Ben told the artists, "For once I kept my goddamn mouth shut. For once I didn't say anything. I didn't tell them that I was the son of a bitch who raided their town, blew their safe and took all their money!"

Ben Turner was buried in a small graveyard in El Paso that overlooked the same train yards that had welcomed him so many years before. When the pastor was standing over the grave and began speaking the last words, a train down in the yard blew its whistle, and the whistle continued to sound until the pastor closed the bible and bowed his head.

Hogan and Regalado said it was the most perfect moment they had ever seen.



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