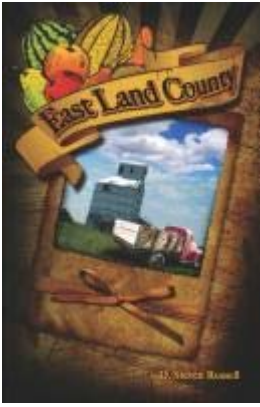




# East Land County



D. Steven Russell



Boots Gallego just got out of prison. Tommy and Chew are alcoholic Kansas farmers who find him along a Mississippi road. He is a simpleton, and strong, so they quickly surmise that he may be free labor. Boots doesn't know the penniless venture that lies ahead.

## **East Land County**

by D. Steven Russell

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First Edition

# ***East Land County***

D. Steven Russell



**Parchman, Mississippi prison farm** would not release a man out of kindred sympathy or because he was a likable moron. Nonetheless, Boots Gallego stands proudly along the road as that man.

He doesn't raise his thumb to oncoming cars because that would seemingly entail a lick of hobo's sense. Further, the oncoming 1947 International Harvester truck would not stop out of charity, but because they, coincidentally, blew a tire.

The two men were driving the backwoods of Mississippi because they did not want to stick out as drunken Yankees with Kansas license plates.

Their concern was not that of driving drunk—nobody cared in 1956 if a man drove drunk—their concern was avoiding Mississippi troupers under ANY circumstances.

Folks in New Orleans told them that Mississippi fuzz are merciless and that "foreigners" frequently disappear to a prison farm without trial or trace.

If they had known that Sunflower County was not just a fascinating name to hicks from *the Sunflower State*, but the ultimate freight train of a lawman's harvest, they would never have taken this particular backwoods road. They would also have never picked up Boots Gallego unless they had realized—while changing the tire—that he was a complete idiot. This would certainly be a lucky day.

Boots strolled up and looked at them stupidly, without word or an intelligent countenance, as they each struggled with the heavy tire. Then, Boots grabbed the blown tire as though it were nothing and threw it onto the flatbed of their truck.

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Both men looked with amazement at the feat and then looked at one another with an unspoken plan. If he could do this, then ...

Well, hell, after a wordless interview, they knew that they could use an idiot to do brawny and menial work on their East Land County farm in western Kansas.

Maybe the fool could cook, take care of the animals, milk the cows, tend the garden, buck bails, and a hundred other tasks, for which they would allow him to sleep in their closet and eat three squares a day.

If he could not answer this plan, they would simply leave him standing along a similar abandoned road in western Kansas—no harm, no foul. They both knew all of this without speaking.

“Hi, I’m Tommy and this is Chew.”

“Boots.”

They waited for something more, but there was nothing.

“Boots,” they responded in unison. “Boots. Yeah, Boots.”

Tommy was a lanky giant; Chew was about 6’ 1” and, ugly-together, they were obviously flatland hillbillies. Boots was maybe 5’ 8” and built precisely like a cinder block. His blue long-sleeved shirt, plain pants, and giant hands made him look even squarer, as his arms remained dangling at his side.

“Wanna job?” Tommy looked like an angler with a nibbled hook bobbing the cork.

Boots threw his small suitcase of clothes on and jumped onto the back of their truck.

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Chew lowered the Avery jack and tossed it beside Boots.

Off they drove to Kansas.

They passed a large black man about 30 miles up the road, stopped, waited until he began walking toward them, laughed, yelled a word, and sped away. They could not see it, but Boots looked sad and waved kindly.

They finally wiggled along the Mississippi, across Arkansas, across Southeast Kansas, past Great Bend and on through a scattering of wheat towns that, small and sparse as they were, seemed a connected metropolis compared to Sunflower County, Mississippi.

They made stops along the way to grab beer, but Boots only drank Coca Cola, so they indulged him that.

They ultimately bought a loaf of white bread and some bologna to whip up sandwiches. They spread mayonnaise with their greasy, dick-holding index fingers and offered Boots a black and white, crotch-smelling sandwich. He inhaled it as though he had not eaten for days. He had not.

On a hill in Otis, Kansas, they stopped in a bar and got completely drunk.

At 9:00 pm, they jumped in the truck and drove toward Ness City. They weaved between the shoulders and—thank God—stopped often to take a piss. They ultimately stopped in Ness City.

At 12:00 something, they emerged from the unburnable limestone bar toting four cases of beer.



*East Land County*

Boots patiently sat in the truck where they had left him. He was grateful, because both of the men chain-smoked filterless Lucky Strikes, lighting one off another.

After this stop they meandered again, ditch-to-ditch—and beyond—for another 20 miles to their farm in East Land County.

It was nearly 1:00, so Boots couldn't see it, but he could tell that they drove about a half-mile of L-shaped dirt road from the time they left the sand road. The sand road ran perhaps a mile from the asphalt of Highway 96.

The two drunks passed out and Boots slept on the concrete floor, using his boots for a pillow.

In the morning, Tommy and Chew awoke to eggs, bacon, toast, and beer.

Boots knew enough to give them the beer first, which they appreciated.

After gagging and guzzling Coors, they looked at one another with hope that their moron might be self-starting and useful after all. Hell, if he could cook ...

*IT WAS JUNE 6, 1956.* This was the day that Boots would see his new Kansas home.

He seemed unimpressed or, at best, indifferent as Chew milked the cow, fed the chickens, and then walked or drove him around their 320 acres of land and along the Walnut Creek that ran through it, northwest to southeast.

Boots could see from steep banks and exposed tree roots that the Creek sometimes ran deep and mean. He observed that the home and barn were on a large

convex bowl of the acreage, perhaps an eighth of a mile from the creek. It seemed odd to him that they would build the house on a flat bowl, given that they could have built it on any number of hills. His instincts argued for higher ground, but he had been wrong before. He would not dwell on it because thoughts beyond instinct were not comfortable for him.

"Tha crick swells up sometimes, holds water year round n has catfish n er." Chew smiled with that twisted grin that Boots would soon see covered a lazy spirit. The smile would seem to be an invitation to enjoy one of the few forms of recreation available here—fishing. But in fact, all else would be slave labor meant to keep Tommy and Chew happy at the expense of fishing or any other form of joy.

Boots was simple, maybe, but he understood the *nature* of things. During the entire tour Boots remained silent, leading Chew to the conclusion that he spoke only his name. Chew was barely wrong.

"Why they call ya 'Boots?'"

"Caynt pour piss outta a boot wid instructions on da bottom."

"Christ."

"Ya seem perty quiet, Boots."

"Don't know shit from shinola"

"Hell, I lyke ya, Boots."

Boots gave Chew the finger. "You're number one with me."

Now Boots saw the meaner side of Chew.

Chew turned beet red, made a fist, hesitated, spun on his boot heel, and walked to the truck, mumbling. "You's a fuckin idiot!"

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Boots got in the truck, again silent. He had responded to Chew's questions and comments...Seemed to go poorly.

Back at the house, Chew muttered to Tommy in whispering tones as Boots sat patiently on the rat-chewed couch.

Finally, Tommy came up to Boots, obviously angry. "Why'd ya flip-off Chew?"

"Lost as a goose."

"What tha fuck's that mean?"

"Get back on tha horse."

"You makin fun a me, Boy?!"

"Silence is golden." He clammed up and looked out the window.

"Boy's a idiot, Chew. We knowed that from tha getgo. No reason ta be mad. He's a moron, plain n simple...a moron. Hell, he only knows sayins ta talk. That's ok, long as he works when we tell him ta. Right?"

Chew was nodding his head as if he wanted revenge or an apology, but now understood that an idiot could not compile it.

"A breath a fresh air." Boots arose quickly and walked outside.

"He's a dumb sombitch alright, Tommy. A dumb sombitch. 'a breath a fresh air.' Ain't talked n English since he talked a tall. Talks n sayins n riddles...naw, too stupid ta talk n riddles...just sayins. I'll see if I cn teach him ta milk tha cow."

Chew walked outside, past a gawking man. "Come on, Boots. Let's see if ya cn milk a cow."

They walked to the barn.

“First ya put this here orange maize n tha wooden trough. Then ya open tha barn door n call tha cow. ‘Suuu Boz! Suuu boz!’ N she’ll come n put er hade n tha trough. She’ll start eatin. Then ya shut tha ‘V’ shaped thang round er hade, drop tha board ta lock it, n we’s ready ta milk. Got that so far?”

“Dumb as a cow.”

“I ssume that means ‘yes.’”

“Now ya take this here metal bucket off tha hook n tha wall, take this here set a kickers, put em n er legs lyke this, get this here ‘T’ shaped stool, sit n tha stool, balance it, put tha bucket a twinxt yer knees, squeeze two a tha four tits n pull em down twards tha bucket. See. Milk squirts out. This cow ell fill tha bucket wid each milkin.”

Chew milked for about a minute and got up from the stool, handing it and the bucket of warm milk to Boots.

Boots grabbed the stool and bucket, sat down clumsily, bobbled the bucket, and fell over on his left side with the stool turned sideways...hooked between his leg and ass. It no doubt hurt.

Chew grabbed the spilled bucket and stool as the cow mooed and looked around nonchalantly. Then it continued eating.

“Let’s practice er a bit, Boots; then ya cn try er again.” Boots nodded.

Chew sat up the stool a few feet from the cow. “Ya set lyke this.” Chew then put the bucket between his legs and pretended to milk in it.

Boots nodded and tried. He waddled and wobbled on the stool until he stopped waddling. Then he took

the bucket and put it between his legs, pretending to milk. He suddenly fell over. He did it again. He fell. He did it again and succeeded.

Boots then went to the cow and sat in place like a pro. He squeezed and pulled the tits but nothing came out.

Chew reached across him and did it, squirting milk. He grabbed Boots' hands, uncomfortably—feeling like a queer—and squeezed the fingers pulling down until milk came out. Then Boots did it successfully and smiled ear to ear. He was milking the cow! He noticed, however, that her bag was hot as though she had a fever.

Chew felt hope that he was done with this chore forever.

Then, when the bucket was three-fourths full, the cow finished eating.

She turned her head toward Boots, looking with big reflective blue-brown eyes, which he looked into. She then slapped him with her tail and kicked him, knocking over the bucket. He fell over, but said nothing. She seemed bored and irritated.

Chew was pissed. "Fuck! Shit!"

Then Chew remembered his first milking. He had done the same thing...even worse. It had taken him three milkings to accomplish a successful first. He told Boots to get up and try it again. Boots was covered with dirt and milk.

First, Chew placed another can of feed in the cow's trough and she began eating happily. Her bag and tits didn't seem as inflamed now.

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This time Boots sat up the stool, grabbed the white-stained bucket, dusted the dirt off it, and finished the milking. All said and done, there was a quarter-bucket of milk.

As Boots stood up, Chew smiled broadly and patted him on the back. Chew knew that, MAYBE, with another supervised milking, he could sleep late, drink more, and have free evenings.

“Great job, Ole Son. Now I’ll teach ya ta separate it.”

After the separating, Chew taught Boots to run a bucket of water through the machine. He then showed him how to wash the top milk bowl and the disks that separated the milk from the cream. Boots seemed to have a natural understanding of this process. The “separator” was logical.

They poured a cup of milk for the cats, a quart for the chickens, and the rest for the pigs.

Boots hated the smell of pigs and the chicken house smelled like chicken shit.

He was amazed how the chickens went into their house at sunset—but they did. He surmised that it made as much sense as birds settling into night trees.

Finally, it was time for supper. Tommy had fixed mush and potatoes. He showed Boots how to do that, though Boots seemed to know how to cook. Mush seemed like grits fried into a sort of pancake.

They sat silently and ate it with butter and molasses. He liked it.

After supper, Tommy went outside, down the concrete stairs to the basement, and grabbed a single sized mattress, covered with mold. He threw lime and lye on it and then beat it senseless to make the lime

and lye come off. He brought it inside, tossed it neatly into the closet, and said, "There, Boots, yer bedroom." He smiled as though he had given Boots a million dollars.

It was a fat half an hour until dark.

"We's goin ta tha Corner Tavern. Wanna go ta a movie, Boots?" He lit up like a child.

Tommy and Chew dropped Boots off at the theater with 75 cents and went to the tavern, a block away.

"Come ta tha truck when ya get done with tha movie n wait fer us, ok?"

"Joy shared is doubled; pain shared is halved." They were used to this by now.

"Where'd ya get that sayin, Boots?"

"AA."

They drove off, looking at one another and shaking their head.

"Must explain tha Coca Colas. At least he didn't answer tha question with another fuckin sayin."

Boots learned that 75 cents would buy him a movie, popcorn, and a Coca Cola. He was in heaven.

Boots didn't know that movies ran a year late in this little town, and he didn't care. Compared to prison

...

The movie was *The Backboard Jungle* with Glenn Ford. He liked it.

When the movie finished, he went to the tavern, saw the truck, and jumped onto the back, stretching his legs out and snoozing.

The punctured tire was still in the back. He thought about how violent the movie had been. He liked it.

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About midnight two drunken men came weaving to the truck. They were unusually happy and greeted Boots as though he were nearly human.

"Jesus, I'm soused!"

"Drunk as a skunk," added Boots.

"Yeah, Man. Drunk as a skunk." Tommie reached and slapped Boots on the leg.

They stopped to throw the tire in front of the Farmers Oil and drove away, as they had from Ness City.

At dawn, a hung-over voice slurred, "Go milk tha cow."

Boots arose from his 'new' mattress and observed that his entire neck, back, hands, and legs were burning with a rash. The lime and lye had fried him. Tommy's theory was great for the obvious powders, but not for the outcome.

Boots took the mattress outside with him, leaned it against the house, and headed for the barn.

He followed precisely the instructions he had been shown. This time, however, he whispered to the cow and petted her. He was Cajun, so Lord knows what saying he had used to sooth her.

Milking was a clumsy, but complete, success. He felt proud and looked at his powerful hands with pride. He had shit and dirt on them, so he rubbed them together vigorously and cleaned them off. He noticed the burn of lime and lye on the backside of his hands.

He separated the milk, screwed a lid on the cream jar, filled the pan for a half dozen starving cats, filled the chicken pans for a hundred hungry chickens, and



poured the balance in a lengthwise half-barrel for three stinking pigs. He spit on the biggest.

He picked up the cream and put it in the icebox of the house. He surveyed to see what food was there and saw little. He reasoned that the chickens had laid eggs and so, took a basket and fetched them. There were about five dozen eggs. He was very careful to put them in the bucket without breaking them. He laid dozens of rotten eggs to the side—ahh, pig food!

He sat “choice” eggs gently in the sink and observed that drunks were now snoring peacefully. The booze must have worn off, he reasoned—it was that twilight zone between passing out and actually sleeping. The place stunk of next day booze, cigarettes, and beef jerky.

He took this reprieve to go wash off his mattress.

He found a hose near the windmill that sat attached to a tank perched on four steel posts with support crossbars.

He found a gallon of vinegar in the house and doused the mattress with it. He took off his clothes and poured vinegar on the burns, head to toe. He then hosed the mattress, carefully and entirely washing the vinegar into it on both sides. He set one side facing the morning sun. He would turn it later to dry it completely.

He felt proud of his morning accomplishments and went in to cook up some breakfast.

He tiptoed as he started a search for food. He had the eggs. He had milk and cream. He found some green moldy bread and an old toaster. That was good

enough. Meat was gone. He was not about to kill a chicken or saw a piece of meat off the milk cow.

The refrigerator, umm, icebox had today's and yesterday's cream and one gallon of clabbered milk. Later, he could make buttermilk out of that...and more butter out of the cream.

He scratched his head and found several cans of hominy. He squashed it with a potato masher and concluded that it indeed made mush. He had spent his life with grits, but liked mush. He found molasses, some fragments of butter, and three potatoes, whereupon he went to work.

Anticipating resurrection, Boots had chilled four beers after Tommy and Chew passed out the night before.

When he looked behind the case of beer he found a quarter, which he put in his pocket. He would "borrow" it in case he ever needed a quarter.

He delayed cooking as long as possible, but finally fired up the iron skillet and popped the mush in it. He used bacon grease that was sitting in a blue Mason jar. The mush did not put off much stink, but by the time he made fried eggs and potatoes, the blend of grease and propane reeked.

Without gratitude, Tommy snorted and raised hell. "What tha fuckin hell is ya doin, Boy! It smells like a pig fart n here!!" He woke up Chew with his commotion and they gagged simultaneously.

Boots quickly used the church key to open two Coors beers. They spewed beer foam—aromatic to the corpses. He handed one to each of them. They nursed

and sipped the beers, then guzzled them and, finally, got hungry.

“Whacca cookin?”

“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue ...”

“Hell yeah. Somethin. Sumpen.”

They ate snorting while Boots ate civilized. He had been starving for days and, so, had *greatly* sampled all that he cooked. The toast was not bad after he had scraped the mold and buttered it. Further, with old crystallized sugar stirred into antique grape jelly, the toast tasted chef-like. Boots was now VERY proud of his morning, but it was just beginning.

Chew and Tommy tossed their plates and utensils into the sink and went for a second beer.

“You can worsh em later; right now Chew’ll show ya how ta weed n pick vegetables so we got sometin ta eat fer dinner n supper.”

Boots was used to “dinner” being a civilized nighttime meal, but he knew that high noon was dinner here. “Dinner” would entail more cooking and a chance to “worsh” dried mush and eggs off the breakfast dishes—oh, goodie. He was better off in prison. These men were real bums.

“Hurry up,” scolded Chew. “You’re piddlin n fuckin around n la la land. We got a lotta work ta do.”

“We,” muttered Boots, accidentally in a whisper.

“What ja say?!”

“Aint *we* got fun!”

Chew frowned. “Where’d ya get that shit?”

“Movie.”

“Oh. Cummon, then.”

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"I planted this here garden. If ya ain't noticed, Boots, Tommy don't do no work a tall."

"A tree is known by its fruit."

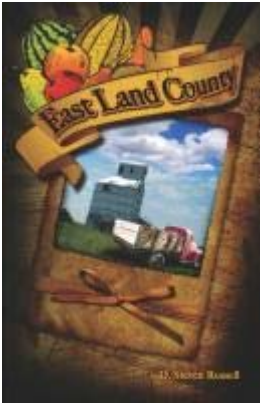
"I get that one. Ok, here's tha garden. Ya know anything bout pickin garden stuff? She'll produce different stuff as tha year goes on. We got carrots, sqorsh, cucumbers, lettuce, radishes, peas, beans, red beets, maters, taters, corns, strawburies, n even some melons. Yeah, n we got watermelon too; umm umm—cucumbers, maters, corn, n melons ell take a bit, but ya can lykely pick some early strawburies, beans, peas, taters, lettuce, n maybe some radishes, carrots, n beets. Got that?"

He handed Boots a glass gallon jug, filled with water, wrapped, and stitched with a wet gunnysack.

"This ell keep ya wet n give ya some cool water. Drink plenty er you'll pass out. This ell take ya nigh all day, so pace yerself. When yer done it'll be bout time ta milk tha cow; then ya can make supper n we'll go ta town fer a few beers n a movie. Here's a couple a baskets ta put tha thangs n. Oh, watch out fer rattlesnakes. Unlykely, n they'll buzz befer they bite...lessen, a course, they's a baby. Baby's only got one rattle and it don't rattle. Deadly little bite n em too. Might wanna look befer ya pick, jest ta be shore."

Chew smiled a shit-eating grin and walked away, then turned around. "Oh, ya know how ta pick em all, right? We got rhubarb too along tha back fence. Ya can made us a rhubarb pie if it's ready."

"Better than sex."



Boots Gallego just got out of prison. Tommy and Chew are alcoholic Kansas farmers who find him along a Mississippi road. He is a simpleton, and strong, so they quickly surmise that he may be free labor. Boots doesn't know the penniless venture that lies ahead.

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