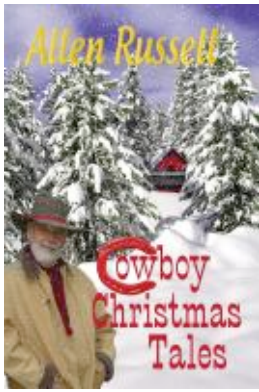




Allen Russell

**Cowboy
Christmas
Tales**



***Cowboy Christmas Tales** is a collection of short stories celebrating Christmas the Cowboy Way. Several of these stories are modern-day tales, dealing with modern-day challenges. Others are traditional tales set on the American frontier. The characters found in these **Cowboy Christmas Tales** include wild-and-wooly cowboys, desperadoes, legendary warriors, and the hardest of young pioneers. Each of these Christmas tales share the traditional values of the holiday season and are suitable for the entire family.*

Cowboy Christmas Tales

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6296.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

*Cowboy
Christmas Tales*

Copyright © 2012 Allen Russell

ISBN: 978-1-62141-721-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by Rough River Press
www.AllenRussellBooks.com

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2012

First Edition

Chapter One: Christmas Comes to Wild Horse Flat

This is my very first Christmas story. The idea came to me when I was on my way home from the airport in Billings, Montana. I was guiding for Dave and Cherri Potts' Sage-N-Sun Outfitters out of Forsyth, Montana. Being a full service outfitter, they offered airport pickup to their clients. Dave didn't like to drive that much, so I usually made the airport run. On that particular day, I had just dropped off a group of mule deer hunters who were catching a flight back east.

It was a typical cold November afternoon on the high plains. Scattered clouds of wind driven snow were rolling over I-94 when I hit the eastbound lanes and headed out of Billings. It was over a hundred miles back to the ranch on Big Porcupine Creek, but there's nothing I like better than going down the road and looking at the country.

Driving along the Interstate, I happened to notice a tiny abandoned cabin sitting way back off the road. I know it sounds like a cliché, but it was pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

The old cabin couldn't have been much more than four hundred square feet. Once, it had been hearth and home to some settler and his family. Now, it's just a lonely hollow sentinel, a testament to the passing of a bygone era.

The little cabin was no doubt left over from the homestead days. The lumber to build it probably came across the plains in a horse-drawn wagon. Now windowless, cold, and empty, it sits within sight of a modern asphalt trail where forty-ton monsters roam at eighty-miles-an-hour.

I got to thinking about what it might have been like for a pioneer family to spend Christmas in that cabin when it was bright and warm. When I got back to the bunkhouse that evening, I wrote, ***Christmas Comes to Wild Horse Flat.***

* * * *

A forlorn young woman stood staring out the window of her isolated homestead cabin. The first few fleeting minutes of each new day were her only private moments, the only time she didn't have to pretend to be something she wasn't. Tears welled up in her eyes as she watched drifting particles of frost glittering in the rays of the just rising sun. Sipping coffee from her first cup of the morning, she tried to muster up the strength to face another difficult and pointless day, adrift in a seemingly endless sea of white.

Her cabin sat 10 miles south of the Yellowstone River, in the Montana Territory. It was built just on the edge of an area known as Wild Horse Flat. Outside her door lay a vast expanse of snow covered buffalo grass, broken only by the ancient sandstone sentinels standing guard atop the distant pine covered hills.

Her husband, John Stewart, brought her and their children here. An inexperienced frontiersman, John met an untimely death the year before. His death left her alone to do the best she could to survive in the wilderness.

Standing there, the young widow asked herself the same unanswered questions as the day before. What did she do to deserve this? Out of all the young men that courted her, why did she choose John Stewart? They were happy back in Ohio. They had a prosperous life and a nice home. The children went to a good school. Why hadn't she just refused to come to this God-forsaken country?

Most of the time, she missed her husband, but there were times when she felt nothing but contempt for him. This ranch was his dream, but it had become the stuff of nightmares for her. She couldn't forgive him for bringing her and the children to the frontier and then leaving them alone to accomplish what half-a-dozen men would find difficult to do. Just feeding her little brood was a never-ending chore.

Her disposition was made even worse because Christmas was coming. This holiday season promised to be the worst of her life. The weather was bitter and money was non-existent. The children, still sleeping across the room from her, were dreaming of Christmas morning and presents from Santa.

Cowboy Christmas Tales

The holidays back home were always so festive with her friends and family around her. There, she could take the buggy and be at the store in ten minutes. Here, it was a hard day's ride to the nearest town, and another hard day back. The trip wasn't without its dangers. There was the very real possibility of hostile Indians or dangerous animals. Strangers were often on the trails. Many of them would be only too happy to take advantage of a lovely young woman alone.

When the need arose, her only choice was to hitch the heavy wagon they had come west in and take her children with her, or go horse back and leave them alone to fend for themselves for two days. It was a trip she seldom ever made.

She didn't have the resources to go back east, and even if she did, there was nothing for her to go back to. John sold everything they owned to get here. Quitting wasn't an option. She had no choice but to stay and make a go of it.

Like most people who are truly alone, she allowed herself to indulge in a fantasy from time to time. She dreamed of a tall handsome stranger at her door, the kind of rawhide-tough frontiersman who could protect her, a man to fill the hole in her heart and the lift the burden from her shoulders.

The early morning sunlight streaming in the window brought her thoughts to a close. It was time to begin another difficult day. Drying her eyes, she tried to put on a smile when she heard her children stirring.

Becky Stewart lived in the cabin with her three children. Ronny, age nine, Donny, age seven and little Molly, just four years old.

"Don't worry, Ma," a young boy said as he walked up to the window. He was her oldest son and the newly anointed man of the family. Ronny put his arms around her waist. He could see she had been crying, "Me and Donny will go hunting after breakfast," he said. "We'll have us a good supper."

Ronny Stewart had been forced to grow up in a hurry when his father died. The boy was becoming a pretty decent cowhand and a

proficient provider for his family. Life on the frontier was difficult at best, but it suited him. Even with the added responsibility, he wouldn't care to be anywhere else.

Becky only had fifty cows and a few horses, but the grass was good on Wild Horse Flat and Sweet Water Creek was a dependable year-round source of water. She knew if they could somehow hold it together, the ranch would be a good one someday.

So far, the winter had been difficult, but not unbearable for the Stewart's. The forested hills behind the cabin supplied them with plenty of firewood. The boys were good hunters, and they kept the family larder stocked with raccoons, rabbits, and when they could find one sitting still, a sage hen or a sharp-tail grouse. They couldn't afford to eat the cattle except in a dire emergency. They were the family's future and the only foreseeable source of income.

Ronny would hunt with his rim-fire rifle and he was a good shot. His little brother Donny was a natural-born predator with the eyes of a hunting hawk. He would go along and spot the rabbits in the brush. The boys were too young to shoot the big-bore Spencer rifle their dad left behind. They would wait until they were older to hunt the deer living in the hills above the flat.

Twenty miles north of the Stewart cabin, the cowboys at the Lonesome Wind Ranch were kicked back, taking it easy, and enjoying life. With the long hours and hard work of the roundup season behind them, things were quiet around the bunkhouse. Their daily routine consisted of busting the ice in the creek so the horse herd could water and keeping the wood box filled.

Most of the cattle were wintering on the southern part of the ranch, between Cherry Crick and the Yellowstone. The grass down there was good and there was abundant flowing water. The Yellowstone Camp sat alongside the river. It marked the southern gateway to the vast Lonesome Wind Ranch.

The boys took turns living at the Yellowstone Camp and watching the cattle. The camp was isolated, but the cowhands were happy to have three square meals a day, and a good warm place to ride out the winter. The entire crew planned to gather at the main house on

Cowboy Christmas Tales

Christmas Day where they would have a big meal and rip-roaring cowboy Christmas celebration.

Two members of the Lonesome Wind crew had been trapping coyotes and a few beaver throughout the fall. Creek Cagle and Thomas Jefferson Burke, better known as TJ, were good friends and saddle partners. TJ was in his late twenties, average height, clean shaven, round faced, and stocky. He was normally easy going and slow to anger.

Creek was in his mid-thirties, tall, broad shouldered, with collar length brown hair, steel blue eyes, and a deep gravelly voice. He was plain spoken when he felt like talking, but normally he was quiet and hard to get to know. Creek usually had four or five days-worth of whiskers on his chin and he wore a big bushy mustache.

The two of them intended to ride to Fort Keogh and sell the pelts to the fur trading company there. The proceeds would buy Christmas gifts for all their friends at the ranch.

Creek and TJ saddled up on the morning of December 22nd, loaded their furs on a packhorse, and set out on the long day's ride to reach the trading post at Ft. Keogh. They planned to come back through Coulter Creek to do their Christmas shopping. Coulter Creek was the only town within a hundred miles of the ranch that had any kind of a store.

A few miles upriver from the Yellowstone Camp, sat an Indian winter encampment. Throughout history, the Crow Indians, like most of the other high plains tribes spent the winter camped near the rivers where there was plenty of firewood and running water. This small band of Crow Indians weren't pursued with the same fervor as the Sioux and the Cheyenne. So far, the army had left them alone.

In this camp lived a proud old Indian named Tall Eagle. This battle-scarred old warrior had fought with rival tribes and the white man for years. His bravery was legendary among his people.

Tall Eagle was tired of fighting the white man, but he would never submit to agency life. He was weary of the constant struggle and the cycle of death and revenge. He wanted to live in peace and try to get

along with the whites if they would let him, but if any of them tried to force him to an agency, they would soon find he would not go easy.

This old warrior knew about the white family living on Wild Horse Flat. He knew there was a woman alone with three young children. He often watched from a distance while Ronny and Donny were hunting. The old warrior admired the youngster's cunning and their ability to feed the family. He told stories about them to the other warriors around the council fire at night. Tall Eagle named them, "Little Wolf" the hunter, and "The One Who Follows."

Tall Eagle knew the boys might be afraid of him if he rode his pony down to talk to them, so he always kept his distance. Someday, when the time was right, he would make his presence known.

It was nearly noon when Creek and TJ rode across Wild Horse Flat. Smelling smoke, they were surprised to see the Stewart's cabin when they broke out of the trees on the edge of the flat.

"I didn't know anybody was homesteading down here," Creek said.

"Looks like a fairly new place," TJ said, "They haven't been here long."

"Maybe they got some hot coffee on the stove," Creek said, reining his horse toward the cabin.

"I hope so," TJ said, "I'm about as cold as a man can be."

"Hello in the cabin!" Creek called out from his saddle as they pulled up in front, "Is anyone home?"

Inside the cabin, the sudden sound of a man's voice startled Becky. She wasn't even sure it was real until she heard it again.

"Hello in the cabin!"

"Stay back," she warned little Molly. They were alone as the boys were out hunting. Becky went to the door and opened it slightly. She hesitated to step outside. Aware danger comes in many disguises on the frontier, she was a little nervous about the sudden appearance of these two strangers. "Gentlemen," she said, "Can I help you?"

"Just passing through, ma'am," Creek said, tipping his hat, "Saw your smoke, thought we'd say hello."

Cowboy Christmas Tales

“Have you ridden far?” she asked, noticing the ice in Creek’s mustache, “You look half frozen.”

“We’ve come a pretty fair piece,” TJ said.

“Pardon us for riding in here uninvited, ma’am,” Creek said, sensing her insecurity, “I’m Creek Cagle, this is my partner, TJ Burke. We ride for Coop Cooper on the Lonesome Wind; up north of the Yellowstone.”

“I’ve heard of Mr. Cooper, but you men are a long way from the Lonesome Wind.”

“Yes ma’am,” Creek said, “On our way to the fur trader’s at Fort Keogh.”

“What kind of fur do you have?” she asked.

“Mostly Coyote,” TJ said, “and a few...”

“We’ll just be on our way,” Creek said, turning his horse, “Sorry for the intrusion.”

Becky was feeling better about these men and it was cold outside. They seemed to be well mannered and showed no signs of even getting down from their horses unless they were invited.

“No...No...Please,” she said, “won’t you come in and warm up.”

“That’s most kind of you, ma’am,” TJ said.

Becky seldom had any company. She longed for a little adult conversation now and then. Maybe she was being too trusting, but there was something about these two men that put her at ease.

“I’ve got some hot cocoa on the stove,” she said, or I can make some coffee, if you prefer.”

“Cocoa sounds mighty good, Ma’am,” Creek said as he stepped down off his horse.

After tying their horses, Creek and TJ walked up on the porch. They stomped the snow off their boots, removed their hats, and made their way inside the Stewart cabin. The warm interior was a welcome change from the frigid air they had been riding through since leaving the Lonesome.

Little Molly came into the kitchen while the boys were warming up at the stove.

“Hi there, little one,” TJ said with a big grin, “You sure are a pretty little girl.” The rugged cowpuncher had a soft spot for little kids, even though he had none of his own.

Molly smiled at the big man standing in her mom’s kitchen.

“Are you Santa Claus?” she asked.

“Santa Clause,” TJ repeated, “Not hardly, I’m TJ Burke from the Lonesome Wind...this is my partner, you can call him Creek.”

“She knows it will be Christmas soon,” Becky said, “She’s talked about nothing else for the last few days. I’m afraid it will be a mighty lean Christmas around here this year, we’re just getting by.”

Creek couldn’t help but notice the apparent lack of any masculine presence in the cabin.

“Pardon me for asking,” he finally said, “are you and this child alone out here?”

Becky hesitated to answer. In reality, it was fairly obvious there was no man around her place, and she couldn’t think of any reason why she should lie to these men.

“Yes, my husband passed last year,” she finally said. “I have two boys, they’re out hunting.”

Becky was impressed and even a little intrigued by these big rugged cowboys. It had been a long time since a man had crossed her threshold. Her late husband wasn’t a big man. With their heavy coats, hats, and chaps, Creek and TJ were larger than life. The thud of their boot heels on her planked floor indicated solid, confident men of substance. Their very essence seemed to fill the entire cabin.

When they removed their coats, Becky’s attention lingered on the heavy revolvers that hung at each man’s side. Becky knew nearly all men, good and bad, went armed in this untamed country. She tried to put her mind at ease as they took a seat at her table. Little Molly climbed up on the bench next to TJ.

Becky placed a steaming cup in front of each cowboy, and took a seat opposite them.

“Thank you, ma’am,” TJ said over the top of his mug, “I haven’t had any cocoa since I was a pup.”

Cowboy Christmas Tales

“It’s mighty good,” Creek added, “thank you kindly.”

Becky would eventually come to know she had nothing to fear from these men. All the cowboys on the Lonesome Wind live by a strict code of conduct. They’re honest, hard-working cowpunchers and their word is solid gold. These cowboys treat all women with respect. Please, thank you, yes ma’am, and no ma’am were words they used often when in the company of ladies.

That show of manners should never be mistaken for weakness. They were kind and gentle men when in the presence of innocence, but these cowboys were range-hardened, iron-willed men. They would stand shoulder to shoulder against any threat that happened to come their way.

Both were capable of using their fists or firearms to back each other’s play. Life on the Great Plains was an adventure, but dangerous and deadly at times. Quite a few evil men had come up against this pair of friends, most of them regretted it. The rest didn’t live long enough. The men of the Lonesome Wind simply referred to their code as the cowboy way.

After finishing their cocoa, the cowboys went outside, split a load of firewood, and stacked it on the porch.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Becky said, when they were finished, “But I appreciate it.”

“It was our pleasure,” Creek said.

Creek and TJ went up on the ridge and cut a little pine tree.

“Molly,” TJ said, when they were back inside, “We cut you a Christmas tree so you could decorate it and make the cabin seem more like the holidays.”

He showed Molly how to take the tender new growth from sagebrush and tie the ends together to make a little wreath. They made a dozen or so to hang on the tree as the scent of sage and pine filled the cabin.

Ronny and Donny came in about that time with two snowshoe hares for dinner.

“Howdy, boys,” Creek said, “That’s a mighty nice pair of rabbits. Which one of you is the hunter?”

“I am, Sir,” Ronny said. “My brother spots ‘em and I shoot ‘em. The sharp tails fly most of the time...I can’t hit ‘em with my rifle.”

“Won’t you stay for supper?” Becky asked.

“Thank you kindly,” Creek said, “we have to keep riding if we’re going to make Ft. Keogh before dark.” Creek didn’t want to eat any of the rabbit. He knew it was barely enough meat for Becky and her children.

“Thank you again, Ma’am,” TJ said, “It felt good to warm up.”

Now that Becky had gotten comfortable with these men, she hated to see them leave.

“Thank you for your help,” she said, “you’re both welcome to stop by here...anytime.” She was talking to both of them, but she was looking at Creek.

“We’ll do that,” Creek said, “I look forward to it.”

“As do I,” Becky replied.

As he was leaving, TJ felt little Molly tugging on his coat. The big man went down on one knee and Molly put her arms around his neck. TJ’s heart melted away with the child’s embrace.

“If I see old Santa Claus,” he said, “I’ll tell him you’re a real good little girl.”

Back outside, TJ was wiping his eye as he stepped up on his horse.

“What’s the matter with you?” Creek asked.

“Never you mind,” TJ said, “Let’s just finish this ride. It’s getting colder and we got a ways to go.” When they were away from the cabin, TJ turned to his partner, “You know,” he said, “We need to make sure that little family makes it through the winter alright.”

“We’ll do that,” Creek said, “we’ll sure enough come back to check on her...them.”

After selling their furs, the boys went to Coulter Creek to buy Christmas gifts for their friends. It was the afternoon of December 23rd

Cowboy Christmas Tales

and only two days till Christmas. TJ was looking at the new pocket knives in the case at the general store.

“I wish I had one of these knives,” he said.

“You got twenty dollars,” Creek said.

“I can’t spend this money on me,” TJ said, “This trapping money is for Christmas gifts for the boys at the ranch, but everything is so expensive.” TJ was trying to find just the right gift for his friends, but he had someone else on his mind. “These neckerchiefs are nice and they’re only four bits apiece,” he said as he was looking around the store.

“I don’t see anything the boys at the ranch need,” Creek said. Suddenly there was a twinkle in his eye as he turned to his partner, “TJ, you got any money left from payday?”

“A little, why do you...wait just a dang minute...you know what I think?”

“I believe I do,” Creek said, “I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

“The boys at the Lonesome would look good in a new neckerchief,” TJ said, “and we can spend the rest of this money on little Molly and her brothers.”

“You’re mighty right. Old Santa is coming to Wild Horse Flat after all!”

These roughed-out cowpunchers were suddenly acting like a couple of school kids.

“Let’s get to it,” TJ said, “we got a lot of ground to cover if we’re going to make it to Wild Horse Flat and back to the ranch by Christmas morning.”

Creek was pounding his fist on the counter so hard the lids on the candy jars were rattling as he started yelling for the store keeper.

“Get yourself out here, Man! Don’t you know it’s nearly Christmas?”

It was two hours before dawn on the morning of Christmas Eve when Creek and TJ headed out of Coulter Creek. They were pounding leather towards Wild Horse Flat. Their packhorse was loaded down with presents, candy, and treats for all three children, as well as bacon,

flour, sugar, and some other groceries. They had a slightly used sixteen-gauge shotgun for "Little Wolf" the hunter along with two boxes of shells.

"Those sharp tails had better head for Wyoming now!" Creek hollered at his partner as they galloped southwest. Snow was flying from their horse's hooves. The cold wind was stinging TJ's face and making his eyes water, but it couldn't erase the big grin from his face.

It was a long ride to the Stewart cabin, and another twenty miles from there to the Lonesome Wind and home. The boys had good horses and they would ride till it was done. They instructed the man at the livery stable to feed the horses an extra portion of grain the night before.

Those tough Montana mustang cowponies were covering ground like the wind on that cold Christmas Eve. These cowboys didn't use words like quit or can't. When they started out to do something, they didn't stop till it was done. They didn't know any other way.

Christmas Eve dawned cold on Wild Horse Flat. Becky's mood had changed for the better. Suddenly, she wasn't so alone. It seemed as if she had a couple of friends in the world. She was especially pleased to have made the acquaintance of a certain big rough-stock, blue-eyed cowboy. She was humming a Christmas tune as she cleaned up the breakfast dishes. Her woman's intuition was telling her she wasn't the only one considering the possibly pleasant consequences of their new found relationship.

While out on the porch gathering an armload of firewood, Ronny happened to glance up at the ridgeline and spotted an Indian approaching on horseback.

"Ma, it's an Indian!" he shouted as he ran back in the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"He's coming to the cabin," Donny said, watching out the window. Becky got the old Spencer and joined her sons at the window.

Cowboy Christmas Tales

When the Indian rode his pony up to the Stewart cabin, Becky could see he had a buffalo robe across the front of his saddle and a small mule deer tied on behind.

“Can you see, I am Tall Eagle,” he said to the faces in the window. “I have brought gifts for the mother of Little Wolf and the One Who Follows.”

Becky cautiously opened the door and walked out on the porch, still holding the rifle. The old warrior sat on a painted pony. His empty hands were held out to his sides as a sign of his peaceful intentions. He was dressed in buckskins, an elk robe, and a coyote-skin bonnet.

“The robe of the buffalo will keep the little girl warm,” he said, lowering the robe to the ground. “The deer has given himself to be meat for the hunters and their mother.”

Becky was still unsure, but as she studied the deep wrinkles in the ancient Indian’s face, she saw only kindness.

“Are you Santa Claus?” Molly suddenly asked, breaking Becky’s train of thought. The little girl was peeking out from behind her mother’s apron strings.

Tall Eagle knew nothing of Christmas, but the girl child warmed his heart.

“No, little one,” he said. The old warrior wore just the slightest hint of a smile as he looked down on her, “I am not the one you call Santa Claus? I am Tall Eagle of the Crow Nation.”

The old warrior was uncomfortable speaking to this white woman. He was unarmed, and she held a rifle. He knew she was a little bit afraid of him. In spite of those feelings, he was determined to do the right thing and help this woman and her children.

“I will pass this way again,” he said, sweeping his hand across his chest and pointing at the cabin, “I will be watching my friends, Little Wolf and The One Who Follows. When you are older,” he said, pointing toward the distant hills, “we will hunt buffalo and elk...together.”

When the old warrior was finished, he dumped the deer onto the ground, turned his pony, and rode away without another word. They watched him go up through the trees until he was out of sight.

“Wow, Ma, a real Indian and he called us his friends,” Ronny said. “I’m Little Wolf, the Hunter,” he said, thumping his chest. “You’re The One Who Follows,” he told Donny.

“I want an Indian name,” Molly said.

“You’re the one who looks for Santa Claus,” Ronny said with a grin as he began dragging the deer toward the barn.

“You know it just don’t seem like Christmas without a turkey,” TJ complained as they rode along. “Back home in Nebraska we always had a turkey for Christmas dinner.”

“Just in case, you didn’t notice,” Creek said, “We ain’t in Nebraska.”

“I know just exactly where we are,” TJ said, “I’m just saying, it would be nice if those kids had a turkey for Christmas dinner.”

“Don’t go getting your back up,” Creek said with a grin. “I know where there are some wild turkeys down along the Yellowstone. It isn’t far from here. We can maybe get one when they go to roost...if you think you can hit anything with that rifle of yours.”

“If he’s sitting in a dang tree, how could I miss?”

“Just remember, roasted ain’t roasted.”

“You just show me one,” TJ said, “he’s good as roasted.”

The sun was already down when the cowboys rode up to the edge of Wild Horse Flat. It was a quiet peaceful scene that greeted them. The sky overhead was deep purple as a golden light faded from the west. A lamp’s glow was splashed across the snow under the cabin window.

“Creek,” TJ said, “let’s put these presents on the porch and just ride out of here. I don’t want any credit for this. I don’t care if anyone ever knows we had anything to do with it.”

“I think you’re right,” Creek said, “let’s be real quiet and get it done before they know we were ever here.”

Night comes early in late December. When the stars began to twinkle overhead, the cowboy’s left their horses tied in a little stand of cottonwoods and headed for the cabin. As they quietly slipped up to the front porch, they could hear the children talking inside.

Cowboy Christmas Tales

“I wish I could see their faces in the morning,” TJ whispered.

Creek was trying not to laugh out loud.

“I’d like to see their mother’s face when she tries to figure this out.” The big cowpuncher was sorely tempted to knock on the door and take credit for the gifts. He wanted to see Becky again, but he wouldn’t use the children to enhance his standing in their possible relationship.

TJ scribbled a little note and left it on the porch with the turkey and all the gifts. The note read: “*Merry Christmas, be good and mind your Ma.*” He signed it, *Santa Claus*.

“We got to ride for home,” Creek said as they went back for the horses, “It’s going to be a cold night. We’ll be might-near froze by the time we get back to the Lonesome.”

The stars were shining by the thousands in the cold clear sky. The snow made the night seem bright as the two friends rode along. With the temperature near zero, the vapor from their horses’ breath formed billowing clouds of steam.

“There’s no night like Christmas Eve,” TJ said brushing the ice crystals out of his mustache, “I wonder if it was like this on that first Christmas Eve.”

“I bet it wasn’t this cold,” Creek replied from somewhere deep inside his turned up collar, “Those shepherds would have been sleeping in the barn,”

“You ever wonder why the angels first took the good news to them poor old sheep wranglers,” TJ asked.

“Never thought about it.”

“I mean...why didn’t them angels go to some rich king’s palace or a big city to spread the word?”

“The Lord can do as he pleases,” Creek said, “I reckon he prefers plain old cowpunchers to rich kings or big cities...I know I do.”

“They weren’t cowpunchers,” TJ said, “but I see what you mean.”

They crossed the Yellowstone around midnight. Even at the ford, the ice-choked water was stirrup deep on their horses. Water drops splashing up froze instantly on their chaps.

It was after three in the morning when the boys rode up to the ranch gate. They put their horses in the barn and fed them a big portion of grain.

“These horses earned their feed tonight,” Creek said as he closed the door on their stalls. “They need a rest and they’ll be warm here in the barn.”

“Merry Christmas, old horse,” TJ said as he rubbed his horse’s ears. It was two saddle-worn, frosted cowboys who made their way to the bunkhouse to finally warm up and get a little sleep before breakfast.

Christmas morning, the sun was already up on Wild Horse Flat when little Donny Stewart walked out on the porch to get an armload of wood for his mom. Becky was going to start breakfast for the children. She baked cookies for them with some raisins and oatmeal she saved just for the occasion.

Becky made a little cloth doll for Molly and she had a new red ribbon for Molly’s hair. She made each of the boy’s a new shirt from some yard goods she bought the last time she was in town. She had done the best she could to make them happy.

“Great Jumping Horny Toads!” Donny yelled from the cabin door. Becky would have thought a grizzly was in the yard if they weren’t all asleep for the winter.

“Ma, come quick!” Ronny exclaimed when he joined his brother on the porch, “Santa Clause has been here!”

After hearing that, little Molly shot out from under that buffalo robe like a prairie dog running from a rattlesnake. She scurried out onto the porch with her nightgown flapping.

“I knew he’d find us!” she squealed, “I knew it...I knew it!” Molly was clapping her hands and hopping from one bare foot to the other in the wind-blown snow on the porch.

After she got them all back inside, Becky sat at the kitchen table. She pondered the note as the children opened their presents.

Cowboy Christmas Tales

"It couldn't be," she thought to herself. *"That's not possible, but then..."* The image of a couple of big cowboys crossed her mind, but she didn't say anything.

Ronny was holding his new shotgun, "It don't matter if them sharp tails are sitting or flying now," he said, "Come on Donny, let's go hunting!"

"Hold on there, young man," Becky said, "We got a turkey to roast, and it won't hurt to give the birds a day off."

It began to snow that morning and all the tracks were covered before anyone thought to look around the cabin. The cowboy's visit would forever remain their secret. It was a great Christmas on Wild Horse Flat, and that magical Christmas morning would be the topic of conversation around the Stewart's table for generations to come.

Creek and TJ woke up to the sound of happy voices in the bunkhouse. It was Christmas morning and it had been a short night for them. The Lonesome Wind riders liked their new wild-rags. They thanked Creek and TJ for being so thoughtful.

"Why don't you boys, open them presents over there by the window?" an old cowboy named Dakota Cobb asked.

"That's funny, I don't remember that window being open last night when we turned in," another said. The smaller man was none other than Texas Jack Tyler. Texas Jack hailed from somewhere down in New Mexico.

"Creek, come over here and look at this," TJ said after he shoved the window wide open. The snow outside was covered in little deer tracks with a long streak on each side of them. The tracks were only about fifty yards long. They didn't come from anywhere, and they didn't go anywhere.

"It can't be," Creek said, "that ain't possible."

"Maybe not, but there it is," TJ said, scratching his head.

"Well I'll be," Dakota said as he pondered the strange tracks.

They were all thinking it, but no one was going to say it out loud. That is, until Texas Jack joined them at the window.

“You don’t suppose it could be old St. Nick?” he asked with a sheepish grin.

“Have you gone plumb loco?” Creek asked, turning to the old cowboy.

“St. Nicholas,” Dakota said, shaking his head in disbelief, “And you a grown man.”

There on the windowsill were two little green boxes with bright red ribbons tied around them. One was for Creek, the other for TJ. In each box was a brand new pocket knife and there was a note. TJ opened it. The others watched his eyes grow wide as he read it.

“Well, what’s it say?” Creek asked.

“Yeah, what’s it say?” Texas Jack repeated, poking his head between their shoulders, trying to get a better look.

“Well just hold on and I’ll tell you,” TJ said, and began to read it out loud.

To Creek and TJ,

I was watching you boys last night on Wild Horse Flat. What you did for those children was a mighty fine thing. It surely was the cowboy way.

The note was signed, *Santa Clause*

All four cowboys were standing there looking dumbfounded. Creek was thinking the boys in the bunkhouse were pulling a fast one.

“None of this bunch had the money to buy a pocket knife, much less two of them,” he thought to himself.

“How did you all know we were on Wild Horse Flat?” TJ asked.

“I never even heard of Wild Horse Flat!” Dakota said.

It was about then they began to hear a noise from outside. It was a faint sound on the wind, coming across the snow covered plains. The sky was heavy with storm clouds, and they couldn’t see much of anything. The sound grew louder and louder, coming at them faster than anything they ever heard before.

Cowboy Christmas Tales

Over the onrushing sound they could hear someone laughing out loud. It was a big belly laugh and it kept coming over and over again.

The four of them were jammed in the window, trying to get a look, when a long indistinct shadow passed over their heads. The fleeting apparition was headed north, toward the Canadian border.

“Did you see that?” TJ asked when it was gone.

“Nope,” Creek and Dakota said together.

“All o’ you lying skunks saw it,” Texas Jack said with a big grin, “Now...now who’s loco?”

* * * *

For more adventures with Creek and TJ, Becky Stewart, Texas Jack, and Dakota Cobb; look for Allen Russell’s -

“Buffalo Grass Rider Series”

Episode One: “The Lonesome Wind”

Episode Two: “Blood on the Rosebud”

Episode Three: “Rebel Gold”

Rough River Press

www.allenrussellbooks.com

Chapter Two: The Midnight Rider

I usually require some kind of inspiration to get my mind working on a new story. This one was no exception: In November 2005, I was once again working as a hunting guide for my good friends, Dave and Cherri Potts, near Forsyth, Montana. A brutal winter storm had raged across the plains for two days, thankfully we didn't have any hunters in camp, so we were free to just hunker down and wait it out.

The heavy snow moved out early on the third morning, but the wind decided to hang around a little longer. The sky cleared just after daylight, but the temperature quickly dropped to sub-zero.

We had three eager deer hunters in camp that morning and in spite of it being minus five with a brisk wind, we went deer hunting. Over the course of the day, the temperature continued a downward spiral. We managed to kill two good mule deer bucks and by sundown, it was minus fifteen.

That night, after a long day of hunting with our clients and a good supper, Dave and I were back out making sure the remote well pumps and tank heaters were working. Big Porcupine Creek and all the manmade reservoirs were frozen over, and in spite of the snow, the scattered cattle needed access to fresh water. Unlike the buffalo, cows don't do very well eating snow.

It was twenty-one-below-zero and just two hours before midnight when we finally left the back-country and got back to the deeply-drifted county road. The wind had died at sundown, leaving the vast snow-covered expanse around us absolutely still and totally silent. Without a whisper of wind, the range seemed to be resting in the wake of the storm.

Before pulling through the last gate, Dave shut the truck off and killed the lights. We both stepped out of the warm confines of the pickup just to take it all in. Until that night, I had no idea there were so many stars. Too cold to hold any moisture; the sky overhead was as clear as I have ever seen it. The glittering points of light hung over me

Allen Russell

in uncounted thousands, a mass of celestial splendor stretching to the horizon in every direction.

There were no trees to block my view, no moon, and with the ranch house ten miles distant, no light source of any kind to pollute the perfect darkness. The now silent pickup and a few forlorn strands of sagging wire were the only reminders of mankind's presence in this frozen high-plains wilderness.

I stood in awe of the mighty hand that scattered those stars across the universe. On that pristine night, God granted me a rare opportunity to stand, if only for a moment, in his high lonesome cathedral. I was humbled, realizing what an insignificant part of all this I really am, and yet, convinced that he knows me just as surely as he knows the stars.

On the way back to the ranch, I got to thinking what it would be like to be out there alone, on foot, in that endless frozen wilderness, trying to get home. I went back to the bunkhouse and began writing, ***The Midnight Rider.***

* * * *

It was cold and blowing snow that afternoon in Sheridan, Wyoming. Christmas Eve 1879 had blown up a blizzard and Zach O'Connell was worried. He had been delayed by the brutal weather while making his way home from Colorado. Now, Christmas was only hours away.

Zach had been working cattle on a big ranch near Durango during the fall roundup. Work was scarce in Wyoming and he needed the extra money to keep his small ranch going for another year. He owned two-thousand acres that straddled the border between the Wyoming and Montana territories.

Zach rode the train to Sheridan, but that was as close as the rails ever got to his spread. He would be on his own from there. Zach's faithful old saddle horse had ridden the train with him and now they faced forty miles of bleak, frozen trails to make it home by Christmas.

Cowboy Christmas Tales

It was already after noon. Zach knew it would take him nearly eight hours in good weather to make the ride. In this blizzard it would take all night and part of the next day, if he could make it at all.

“You’re being foolish if you try to ride all the way to Montana this afternoon,” the bartender warned.

Zach was drinking coffee with a little whiskey to fortify him against the cold. Zach knew the barkeep was right, but he had been away from home for the best part of two months. Before he left, he promised his wife he would be home for Christmas.

“I’ve got to be there tomorrow,” he told the barkeep, “I made her a promise and I don’t intend to break it.”

“Son, she’ll understand if you delay a day or two because of the weather. Nobody can survive the night out in this blizzard.”

The howling wind and blowing snow were troubling Zach as he made his way to the stable to get his horse. He knew he was gambling with his life by leaving the shelter of town, but Zach was so much in love with his wife, the thought of ever disappointing her was just out of the question.

“If it was any other night but this one, old horse, we’d hold up here,” he said to Bo as he tightened the cinch. Zach swung up in the saddle, rode out of the stable and pointed Bo north.

Clear of the buildings of town, Zach rode straight into the teeth of the storm. The blowing snow stung his face and his feet were already cold. Zach had a heavy wool coat along with his duster and chaps to help break the wind. He wrapped pieces of an old wool blanket around his boots to keep his feet from freezing and his head was wrapped in a wool scarf Annie made for him.

As he rode along he thought of her sweet face. Her eyes could inspire him to try things any man with an ounce of common sense would step around. Her eyes were the windows to his world. He could spend hours just gazing into them. They were pale blue at times and then fade to hazel green as her mood changed. When she smiled, her eyes sparkled. She was his life and he couldn’t bear one more night without her near him.

Zach met and married his Annie six years before. Both of them were a little older than most newlyweds. They talked about having a family but now that seemed to be a remote possibility. After six years they were content to just be all the family either of them would ever have.

By the time it was full dark, Zack was suffering in the bitter cold. The snow showed no signs of letting up. The temperature was down near zero and he was colder than he could ever remember.

“Just keep going, old horse,” he said to Bo, “it’s too late to turn around now. We don’t have any choice, we have to make it.”

There were no ranches or any kind of a settlement up there. Even the Indians had moved to the shelter of the Bighorns for the winter. Zach had nowhere to go except home to his lover’s side. He was committed to this ride, if he didn’t make it, he would die that very night in a howling cauldron of white.

Mile after mile they went. The going was tough and the hours passed slowly. The storm finally blew itself out around ten that evening and the stars came out. The absence of the wind was a welcome relief, but when the sky cleared, the temperature started downward. Zach tried not to think about the cold. There was nothing he could do about it and he had to keep moving.

He thought about the nights he spent in Annie’s arms and the way she always warmed her feet on him when it was cold. They loved to be under the covers and snuggle the night away in each other’s arms. He longed to be home with her. The cabin would be warm and it was only twenty more miles.

“Don’t count the miles,” he said to himself, “just keep going.”

Just after eleven, Zach began to get sleepy and he felt warm. Zach knew he was in big trouble. He was beginning to freeze and he had to stay awake to survive the night. Getting down from his horse, he walked for awhile to get the blood flowing again.

Bo was weak from busting through two feet of snow, mile after mile. As they descended the side of a steep coulee, the old horse

stumbled, lost his balance, and rolled into the bottom. Zach jumped to the side, barely avoiding being crushed.

“Come on, Bo,” he said, when he got down to his horse, “we only got a few miles to go and you’ll be in the barn with grain and hay and a long rest.”

Bo tried to get up, but he was just too weak. It was no use. After several tries, Zach resigned himself to the fact Bo was done for.

“I’m sorry for getting you into this,” Zach said with his hand on the old horse. “You just rest now; soon you’ll be in green grass up to your knees and you’ll be warm as summertime.”

Zach loosened the cinch, removed the bridle, and rubbed Bo’s ears. He put his hand on his pistol, but he couldn’t bring himself to shoot his faithful old friend. Freezing is a relatively easy way to die. The old horse seemed to know it was his time. He wasn’t in any pain and he seemed content to just lay there and go to sleep. In spite of that, Zach stayed with him as long as he dared.

It was only a short while before sleep began creeping back into his brain. Fighting back the exhaustion, Zach forced himself up. He knew his only choices were to get moving or die there with his horse.

Cowboys aren’t supposed to cry, but Zach wiped a tear from his cheek as he got to his feet. All he could do was turn his back and trudge away into the cold dark night. Leaving Bo to die there all alone was the hardest thing Zach ever had to do.

As midnight approached, Annie watched through the frosted glass for Zach’s return. She placed a lamp in each of the windows, hoping he could see them through the darkness. She knew the temperature was below zero and it would be life threatening to be out in the weather.

“*I hope he had the good sense to stay where he was safe,*” she thought. In her heart, she knew he was determined to be home for Christmas. Her cowboy was a stubborn, iron-willed man, if he said he’d be somewhere, he’d be there.

After several hours of struggling through the deep snow, Zach was all but done. “*I’ll just stop for a minute to rest*”, he thought. “No!” he

said out loud. Zach was startled by the sudden sound of his own voice in the silent landscape. “If you stop now you’re good as dead.” He said it as if it was a warning to someone else. “You have to keep going. It can’t be much further; she’s just a few more miles.”

In reality, Zach had no idea where he was or how far it would be to the cabin. Any sign of a trail had long been covered in deep snow. The familiar coulees were drifted over. Before him lay a vast featureless white wilderness as far as he could see.

The big dipper was there in the night sky and pointing to Polaris. The little star was sitting over the North Pole like it had been since the beginning of time. Placed there by the hand of God, the insignificant little point of light was an unwavering guidepost to those wise enough to look for it. Zach stumbled along, following it ever northward, and hoping for the best.

Finally near exhaustion, Zach slumped to his knees. He desperately needed to rest, if only for a moment. He found himself calling out to the only one who could hear him in that vast frozen wilderness.

“Lord, you don’t hear from me much and I haven’t been to church in a long time, but Lord, if you will, please help me up from here. I’m not thinking of myself so much. If my trail ends here tonight, then I got no complaints, but Lord, you know I can’t leave my Annie out here by herself. She can’t run that ranch alone and she has nowhere else to go.”

Still on his hands and knees in the snow, Zach tried to gather enough strength to get up. The night was bone-chilling cold and totally silent. The easy thing would be to fall on his face and give up. Death would be swift and painless, and he could finally rest.

There was just one problem with that plan. Zach wasn’t known for taking the easy way out of anything and he wouldn’t start that night. If death was coming for him, Zach would meet it on his feet. He was struggling to get up when he was startled by the sudden sound of a voice.

“Where you headed on a night like this, Cowboy?”

Cowboy Christmas Tales

At first, Zach thought he was dreaming. The big booming voice was coming from behind him. Afraid of discovering the voice to be only a figment of his imagination, or possibly the angel of death, he cautiously turned around. Raising his eyes, Zack was surprised to find a big white horse with a man leaning in the saddle looking down at him.

This stranger was wearing a bulky fur coat with the hood up over his head. He looked like a grizzly up there on his horse. The big man was a fearsome sight, but Zack was too cold and too tired to care, and somehow knew he had nothing to be afraid of.

"I'm headed home, friend," Zach replied, "Where'd you come from?"

"I'm not from around these parts," the stranger said, "I work on a big spread, quite a ways from here."

Zach got up from his knees and extended his hand to the stranger. He still thought the cold was playing tricks with his mind.

"My friends call me Gabe," the big man said, taking Zach's hand. "Climb up behind me. This old horse can carry both of us with ease."

Almost without effort, the stranger pulled Zach up behind him. Zach couldn't remember ever seeing a horse as large as the one the stranger rode. The big horse was busting through snow drifts without hesitation. The cloud of hot vapor from his nostrils was like steam pumping from a locomotive.

Annie was sitting at the table reading her Bible and praying he would make it. She had some news and she couldn't wait to share it with her cowboy. After all this time she was expecting a child. It would be the greatest Christmas present she could give him.

"I can't think about him being out there. I don't want to raise this child without a father." She desperately tried to put that thought out of her mind. *"Surely he stayed in town and waited out this storm."*

In spite of what she was telling herself, Annie knew in her heart, he was out there somewhere, risking his life to reach her side. He once told her he would ride a hundred miles for one of her kisses and she knew cowboys don't lie. He said he would be home for Christmas, and if he was alive, he would be.

"That's the cowboy way," she could hear him say.

Just as the eastern sky began to turn gray, Zach spotted a lamp in the cabin window.

“It’s just over there, Gabe. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No thanks needed, I enjoyed the company.”

“You saved my life; I’d never have made it without you. Where you headed? Won’t you at least come inside and have some coffee?”

“I appreciate it,” Gabe said, “but it’s Christmas and I’m going home.”

“There’s nothing north of here for miles,” Zach said.

“I’m headed for a place far away from here, my friend, but I’ll see you again. We’ll have time to sit and talk then.” The big man shook Zach’s hand after he helped him down at the cabin door. “So long, Zach,” Gabe said as he turned his horse to go.

“Hold on, I want you to meet my Annie!”

Just then the door flew open and Annie jumped into his arms. She was kissing and holding him. Zach was looking into those beautiful eyes once again and he knew this struggle had been worth it.

“Annie,” he said. “I want you to meet the man who saved me.” When he turned back, Gabe was gone.

“What man?” Annie asked, “How did you get here on foot in all this snow?”

“I wasn’t on foot, it was Gabe. He found me last night after Bo died and brought me here.”

“There’s no one there, Zach. Come inside and get warm.”

Annie got his frozen clothes off and put him into bed. She covered him with extra blankets, packed heated rocks from the hearth around him, and started rubbing his frostbitten feet. Zach was never more content or satisfied to finally be home and with the love of his life.

“I can’t believe he got away so fast,” he said.

“Who are you talking about?” Annie asked.

“Gabe; he saved my life and I hardly know anything about him.”

“You just rest now, we’ll talk later.”

Cowboy Christmas Tales

Completely done in and finally warm, Zach slept most of the day. Later that evening, he was sitting at the table drinking coffee and waiting on supper when he noticed Annie's Bible. It was open to the Gospel of Luke: Chapter One.

He began reading and when he got to verse eighteen, he got a big lump in his throat and his eyes filled with tears.

And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this, for I am an old man and my wife is well advanced in years." And the Angel answered him saying. "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to tell you these glad tidings."

Just as Zach finished, Annie walked up behind him and placed her hands on his shoulder.

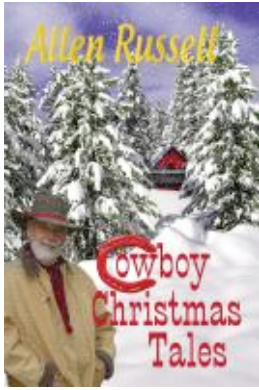
"I have something to tell you," she said.

Zach wiped his eyes and pulled her down on his lap. He placed his hand gently on her belly.

"I think, I already know about it," he said, "Gabe told me last night I was headed for some good news. He said he'd make sure I got home to my family. I didn't think much about it then, but now...I understand."

"You really did meet someone last night didn't you?"

Zach turned to her Bible and pointed to the verse he had just read. Annie's breath caught in her throat as she read it. Putting her arms around him, she whispered, "Merry Christmas, Zacharias."



***Cowboy Christmas Tales** is a collection of short stories celebrating Christmas the Cowboy Way. Several of these stories are modern-day tales, dealing with modern-day challenges. Others are traditional tales set on the American frontier. The characters found in these **Cowboy Christmas Tales** include wild-and-wooly cowboys, desperadoes, legendary warriors, and the hardiest of young pioneers. Each of these Christmas tales share the traditional values of the holiday season and are suitable for the entire family.*

Cowboy Christmas Tales

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6296.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**