

1594 Words

I got the word that my uncle Jimmy passed away. Apparently his heart just gave out. He was 91 years old, after all. The funny old coot died in his bed. I hadn't seen him since before the kids were born, but we had still kept in touch. He didn't have a phone, or a computer, so the occasional letter was how we corresponded. Jimmy was a man set in his ways, and adopting progress was not on his list of priorities. Rail thin with a big bushy beard, he reminded me of the eccentric sidekicks you saw in old westerns.

Three months later I received a letter from a lawyer stating that Jimmy had left me the old homestead out in Arizona. I was amazed and excited, having visited there many times in my youth. He and my father had grown up in that house. It was a charming place, with history dating back to the 1880's. An adobe house with only three rooms, it reminded me of the little homes I would see in television westerns like *Gunsmoke*.

My uncle once told me that outlaws used the house to hide in after robbing stagecoaches. According to his stories, his grandfather was a highwayman who stuck up the Butterfield Stage that was carrying \$45,000 in silver from Pinal. It was exciting for a young kid to hear that one of his ancestors was an Old West outlaw, and led me to countless hours of recreating the holdup and imagined shootout in the backyard of our New Jersey home. Armed with a cap gun and a dime store bandana covering my face, I held off Wyatt Earp and Jesse James and escaped into the crimson-colored mountains of Arizona. Of course, the story isn't true. Back then the posse surely would've caught him since the house was only five miles from the stage route. At the very least, great granddad would have been rich enough to build a bigger house. Heck, it was just a campfire yarn spun to spark the imaginations of children. Every kid in America would like to claim that

they are related to a famous outlaw of the Old West. I was pretty certain that I wasn't, and great grandfather was just another pioneer who struggled to make a living on the frontier.

I was thrilled to take my children out to the Arizona homestead. Perhaps they were of age to appreciate the beauty of the cottonwoods, the sunsets, and the 130-year-old adobe home. Bobby, the eight year old, was excited about the adventure of the west he had seen in Hollywood movies. I didn't want to ruin his fantasies about fending off raiding Apaches, so I just kept my mouth shut. Tim, all of ten years old, was less interested. He would rather be at the pool, playing with his friends. Hopefully my plan would work out. We treated it like a camping trip. The kids would help me go through uncle Jimmy's things, we would sleep out under the stars and I'd mystify them with the stories I heard growing up of gunfighters, mining towns, and lost treasure.

The two-hour drive from the phoenix airport was thrilling for the kids. They'd never experienced a landscape like the southwest. I particularly enjoyed listening to them compete over which Saguaro cactus was the biggest. The off-road part of the journey was probably their favorite. The big bumps took their toll on me, but to the boys it was like a ride in an amusement park.

The quaint little house, nestled among the mesquites and cottonwoods, had not changed a bit since my youth. We unloaded our gear and eagerly went to work cleaning the house up. My two boys were perfect for the job at hand. Their curiosity and youthful fearlessness had them scouring every inch of space in that old place. By the afternoon of the second day, we had two of the three rooms ship shape. The home had running water, but no electricity. I was beginning to think it would be a wonderful getaway home for the

family. Then, my youngest son, Bobby, yelled for us to come into the third room he was working in. I noticed upon entering that Bobby's impetuosity had prompted him to pull an old chest away from the wall in one corner. He had been through the chest, which contained all of my uncle's military memorabilia, and found what appeared to be a patched area of floor underneath it. Well, I didn't think much of it. Of course the floor would be patched in places considering it had been there since the Roosevelt Administration. Tim saw an edge sticking up and the two went to work removing that patch, in hopes of finding the bones of Billy the Kid, who they were certain had stashed his fortune under the floorboards. I laughed and let them do it. The floor would have to be redone anyway. After lecturing them on rusty nails, snakes and spiders, I went back to the kitchen to go through old coffee cans.

15 minutes later the boys screamed. I ran into the room fearing the worst. *A rattlesnake. Damn, one of them is bitten! Why did I leave them alone?*

Little Tim came up to me with a big grin on his face and pointed to the hole in the floor.

Up popped Bobby, with a tattered brown hat on his head and a smile on his face.

Relieved, and somewhat curious, I decided to investigate with the boys. The hat, torn and moth-eaten, looked ancient. It was not unlike the hats I had seen in old photos. Large brim, small crown with hardly any lining left in it. While I was looking it over, Tim told me that the bags were too heavy to lift.

Bags?

After pulling Bobby out of the floor opening, I looked in and saw three dust covered bags lying on the ground in what appeared to be a crawl space under the room. I pulled up the first bag, which was extremely heavy. With the boys help, I got it on the wooden floor of

the room and went to work on the next two. Underneath the last bag was the rusted frame of what appeared to be a Colt Peacemaker. I picked that up and the boys were screaming and jumping up and down about finding Billy the Kid's "quick draw" gun.

They immediately calmed down when they saw that I was going to open the bags.

Everyone held their breath as I used my pocketknife to slit the side of a brittle canvas bag. Inside were silver ingots. Each one was stamped Pinal, A.T.

Time seemed to stand still, and it was suddenly quiet. No birds were chirping, no one was breathing. Tears were forming in my eyes. The story was true...my great grandfather robbed the stage and got away with all the silver. The flood of emotions had me frozen in place. The boys voicing their disappointment that it wasn't gold nuggets snapped me out of it. While they were arguing whether or not Billy the Kid ever came to this house, I was scouring the rest of the crawl space. I found a few old cartridges, and another canvas sack. However, this sack contained an old book nestled in the ingots. On closer inspection, it was a journal. I opened it and out fell a folded and yellowed newspaper clipping dated December 5, 1887. "Stagecoach Robbery, Mine Loss \$45,000." The account that followed mentioned an unknown group of armed men rode away on horseback, and although there were no casualties, an investigation was in progress. I put down the clipping and instinctively looked at the last page of the journal. In faded cursive, it read, *The Pinkertons continue to watch the house. I feel I will never be able to spend the silver easily, since each bar is marked and those men are intrepid. I make enough money at the mines to lay low for some time, but it appears my days of banditry are over.*

There was the answer to the mystery. It was my guess that he never told his children or even his wife where this loot was because of the danger involved with them knowing his secret.

That night in front of the fire, I read the boys select pages of the journal that illustrated the action of robbing stagecoaches. The detailed plans mapping escape routes and stage schedules was fascinating. Bobby and Tim were amazed and stared at me with eyes as big as dinner plates. Later that night, as we crawled into our sleeping bags, they both told me that this was the best trip *ever*. Billy the Kid no longer held their interest, for he was nowhere *near* as cool as their great, great grandfather.

What did I do with the stolen silver? I sold two bags of it and used part of the money to refurbish the house so it can withstand another 130 years. My sons and I decided against adding electricity. We thought it would mean more to the history of the place. Bobby and Tim got a hefty chunk in their college fund. The gun, hat, and journal occupy a shadow box in the main room of the homestead which we visit every spring for vacation. The last bag of silver from the Butterfield Stage robbery resides in the crawl space, so that future generations of an outlaw family can rediscover it all over again.