New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 36 | Issue 2 Article 2

1966

# A Cold Wind

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# A Cold Wind

BY TOM MAYER

GRANDAD was a big man with long legs and no pot to speak of and a long nose and little blue eyes, and you would never of thought he was old, except he had him some false teeth that didn't fit good. He filed them on a emery wheel to where they was sharp enough to cut paper, but that didn't help how they fit none, so he come to the point where he didn't wear them unless he had to. In the house he had to wear them or my mother give him hell, but outside he stuck them in his back pocket, and only stuck them in when he had to talk to somebody. I could understand him fine with them out, and I never said nothing to my mother, but then Grandad and me was good friends from the start.

Before I was hardly big enough to walk he'd take me riding with him holding me on the pommel, and when he'd lope I'd bounce up and down on my butt and he'd hold me up tight to his chest so I could smell the Bull Durham in his shirt pocket. Later, when I was seven, he give me my first horse, a little bay pony we called Gunshy after the rodeo bucker, and he helped me with the training. He also taught me to shoot, with a slide-action octagon-barrel Winchester .22 that only fired long rifles. After school he'd meet me in his pickup down at the east pasture gate, where the school bus left me off, and we'd set up tin cans in the arroyo near there and practice. He said I'd get me a lot more shots standing up than I ever would laying or setting, so I didn't practice much prone. He'd keep telling me to squeeze the trigger instead of pull or jerk, and to keep my left elbow down.

When I could hit the cans most of the time at fifty steps we done some rabbit-hunting, and once we got us a coyote. We was in the pickup and Grandad seen him first and busted out cross country, whooping and hollering and wham-slamming over grama-grass clumps so you'd a thought we was going to bounce through the cab-roof and now and again he'd tromp on the brakes and say, "Git him," and I'd

fire out the window. A couple of times I missed him and the shots throwed up dirt spouts behind him and Grandad said, "You ain't leadin' him enough—them animals can run," and then I got him outlined on a ridge and led him and squeezed the shot off careful holding my breath. I heard the bullet whine and then whunk, but the coyote run a little more and I thought I'd missed him again but Grandad said, "That got him," and the coyote done two forward headers and laid still. When we come up to him we seen I had hit him just back of the shoulder and killed him clean.

But besides rabbit and coyote hunting Grandad and me was always planning projects, to go up in the Chama country hunting deer, or to float through the Big Bend in one a them rubber rafts, or spend a week in Colorado fishing trout, but then in the fall the year I was twelve Grandad passed on. I didn't take it hard as you would of expected, considering what good friends we was, and I always figured maybe that was because it happened sudden. One night at dinner Grandad said he had heartburn and gas on the belly and was going to bed, which he done, and then in the middle of the night I heard my mother and father up, but the old man told me to go back to sleep, and they took Grandad into Santa Fe to the hospital, but he was dead when they got him there. I didn't even have no chance to say good-by.

The funeral was at McGurk's Funeral Home and there was a good many ushers with oily wavey black hair and a lot of organ music and flowers, and a preacher who preached so long I almost went to sleep. They had the coffin open and after the preacher got finished I wanted to go up and look at Grandad like all the rest of them done, but my mother said no, and the old man told me to mind my mother.

After that nobody met me at the pasture gate no more and when it got cold I sure didn't like it any the mile walk to the house, and I missed having somebody to hunt with, but otherwise things was about like before. We had a cowboy name of Hank living in the bunkhouse, and a couple of times I tried to buddy up to him, but he worked long hours, and was just naturally mean, so when he wasn't working he slept or read girlie magazines and didn't want no part of me. I hunted a lot and killed the rabbit population down to where you hardly never seen one, and started breaking a little filly, but the only friend I had was a old nester who lived behind the run-off tank in the south pasture. He was a old Okie named Mr. Alexander with a moustache, and in the Thirties Grandad let him squat. He never bothered nothing and neither Grandad or the old man charged him rent. He raised a little

corn and a few potatoes and kept a milk cow and helped us with branding and in the winters he rode fence lines and busted up the ice in the stock tanks. Grandad always said he was a gentlemen, even if he was a Okie, and, when I got the rabbits thinned down so there wasn't enough left to hunt, I begun going down to see him some.

Once or twice I done his milking for him and a couple of times I let him shoot my rifle, but he wasn't no shot, or else he needed glasses and didn't know it. But most times we set on the steps of his shack and he talked to me a lot and had some fine stories. He'd been to California and pulled beets someplace called the Salinas Valley, and he worked sheep in Colorado and knowed the cow country in Wyoming. He said you wouldn't find no better summer country nowhere, but the winters was awful, and once he was in Sheridan when it got so cold it like to froze the horns off a bull.

As long as the fall weather held I seen him quite a bit, but when winter come it was too cold to be out unless you had to, and it got dark early, so that I stayed inside after I got home from school. Saturdays I'd go down and see him, but in February we had a cold streak and it was below zero for a week and when the cold let up it begun to snow. It snowed steady for two days and then got cold again and begun to blow. It blowed hard and steady and whipped the snow up grainy and prickling and cold so that it hit you in the face and stung some. There was too much snow for the school buses, and the cold didn't help to melt it none, and the wind drifted it ten feet on the fences, so I stayed home and helped Hank and the old man throw out feed to the range stock. You couldn't get around in a pick-up, but the old man had a weasel he bought surplus, and we'd load it up with hay and cottonseed cake.

One morning after we come in from the east pasture for another load the old man asked me if I seen my friend Mr. Alexander recently, and I told him no, and the old man said we'd best go down and have a look-see. After we had ate lunch we took the weasel and went to Mr. Alexander's shack. Right off I figured there was something wrong, because there wasn't no smoke. It was cold enough to freeze your hand to metal still, and his stovepipe should of been smoking. When we got to the corral the old man said, "Gawdamnit," because Mr. Alexander's milk cow was laying there on its side froze stiff. It's legs was out stiff and one stuck up in the air and there was two stems of snot froze stiff hanging out of its nose. The old man parked the weasel and told Hank to come on and we went inside the shack. It was dark and at first I

couldn't see nothing, and then I seen Mr. Alexander laying in bed. The old man pulled the covers back and you could see Mr. Alexander was dead. His skin was all yellow and froze and his eyes was open and so was his jaw and inside his mouth it was purplish. For a little, nobody said nothing and you could hear the wind making a moaning sound outside and the blowing snow sounded like somebody was throwing sand against the roof.

Then Hank said, "The pore old sonofabitch. He's froze solid," and the old man said, "He's froze all right. It'll take a week to thaw him out. When you reckon it happened?"

Hank said he didn't know, and the old man said, "I guess it don't matter much, he's shore as hell froze."

They lifted Mr. Alexander out of bed and dragged him outside and dumped him in the back of the weasel, face up, and pulled a tarp over him. He was wearing only long johns and where his wrists and ankles stuck out the skin was yellow and he looked awful skinny. The old man started up the weasel and told me to get in and we headed back toward the house.

Once I turned around and looked in back and seen that the tarp had slid down. When we'd hit a bump Mr. Alexander's head would bang up and down, and he had false teeth that bounced out of his mouth, but his eyes and jaw was froze open and didn't move. I couldn't stop looking at him, and I wanted to ask the old man if that was how Grandad looked, but the old man was concentrating on the driving. Him and Hank was both staring out the windshield and not saying anything to each other, so I knew they wouldn't much appreciate having to say something to me. I kept looking at Mr. Alexander, his head bouncing and banging, his long hair gray and stringy and greasy and flopping, and I wondered some more if that was how Grandad looked and how come Mother hadn't let me go up and look at him, and then I thought that for sure I wasn't never going to look that way, no matter what. But for awhile, I had a knot in my throat to where I was worried I'd bawl, and I wiped my glove across my face in case there was any tears, and after a long time we got to the house.