

BIZARRE STORIES OF MINING, PAST AND PRESENT

By Jungle George

"Ambush at Tallahassee Creek"...

Continued from Issue Number 7

Where the story left off, two exploration geologists during the uranium boom of the late 1970's were ambushed in the Colorado mountains:

....."You Sonofabitches know who we are, don't you?", the old man yelled, shoving the muzzle of the cocked .44 close to my chest and head. I didn't want to, I thought, and Bruce was new to this area and project and as shocked by the attack as I was. Having endured some verbal and physical abuse in the Marines, the situation was not quite as bad (so far) as when I was seven and nearly killed by a twister in Oklahoma. The mental trauma and fear of the long-past disaster that killed over 100 people, flooded back as the same old dreadful feelings; seeing bodies like ragdolls caught in tree limbs and debris, smelling death and fear. Yes! Now I remembered that these men were people I knew, transformed into enraged animals... but by what?

Perhaps a month or two before, I was doing a geologic reconnaissance in the same mountains after finding evidence of uranium deposits in areas still open for staking claims (while taking a weekend picnic with family and friends!). Keeping a low profile while doing the exploration was important, since other competitors were active in the region. Despite this, I was friendly to the local ranchers and stopped to tell them of my prospecting in the area, the old man and his nephew, who still operated their ranch that was founded almost a hundred

years earlier. I had spoken with the elder rancher on several occasions, indicating potential interest by the company to make an agreement for minerals, and gaining permission to prospect.

Meanwhile, Dan, my contact in the company's land department, completed the usual title searches, finding much of the land was open for staking of mining claims, and that a good portion was "severed estate" (with private surface, but which could still be staked legally for minerals). Since a major discovery by a competitor was rumored in my area, the company mobilized survey crews to stake the ground as soon as possible. Several other companies also had similar ideas, so a "claim-staking race", with numerous 4X4 vehicles and people stirred clouds of dust in the hills, triggering another mining rush in the Rockies... a modern equivalent of the "Pikes Peak" rush of 1859 and Cripple Creek in the 1890's!

"...Goddamned Sonofabitches!", screamed the old man. "You tore down our fences and let our cows out. When you came in and staked the first place (referring to their ranch), that was like ——— my wife! Then when you did this place and let our stock loose, that was like raping my daughter! And how could you be so brash (his word) and risk 'innocent blood' (referring to young Bruce), because when you drove up, our guns were trained on you and we were about to blow you both away!"

"...Sonofabitch! You sweet-talked me to where I trusted you and now I'm

about to risk that goddamned place in Cañon City (the State Prison)...”, the old man lamented as he fingered the .44. About then, I heard Bruce speak up, after being asked his name. He said he had the same last name as theirs; maybe he was related? Would they shoot him, if he was? They hesitated and said “Yes... but we ‘might’ go for your funeral.” (I thought... Why am I sweating this out, with these almost comical punchlines?).

Then the old man seemed to have made up his mind on something, and turned to concentrate on me with a vengeance.

“If you bastards want to walk away from this, you (me) have to swear to do a few things, and even then I may not be done with this.” I had to swear at the point of a .44 on my life, the lives of my mother and family not to ever set foot on the ground again. I swore...Then, with their guns pointed at us, they ordered us to get into the trucks (carefully) and get out, before they changed their minds. As I was getting in my truck, I asked the old man if he might still negotiate with the company, if I was not involved in any way? He just stared at me and said “No, ... now just get out.” His hair-lipped nephew looked like he was ready to open fire, so we left.

I called the Denver headquarters office as soon as possible to report the incident and its severity, criminal implications, etc.. Management at first shined it off and appeared not too concerned. However, the next day the manager of the office received a dose of the same medicine from the old man on the phone, who said he was going to come to town and personally kill him and wreck his whole office!! Then, I perceived action in the Denver office toward negotia-

tions with the ranchers, since I had declined to press any charges against them. I carried a revolver for months afterwards, and still do in remote areas. My associate Dan, in the company land department, was able to cut a lease deal with the same ranchers during the next few weeks and the company was able to conduct exploration operations until the uranium boom went bust in the early 1980's.

The old man is dead now, his obituary outlining a colorful and productive life as a true western rancher from pioneer days (no hint of this incident, of course). Others involved are mostly retired, dead, or a few still working... who knows where?

True to my sworn word, I never set foot in that district again. But I know there have been, and will be, many more untold stories of mining and exploration out there. I'm still a restless field geologist, born under a wandering star of Scorpio, always on the verge of making that big strike. And, as such, I'm keeping an eye peeled (and a bullet marked) for that next hare-lipped Sonof-a-bitch! Because nice guys rarely win, you must be willing to risk everything to generate original wealth. It is the American Way.

