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Incident at Simpson's Gulch

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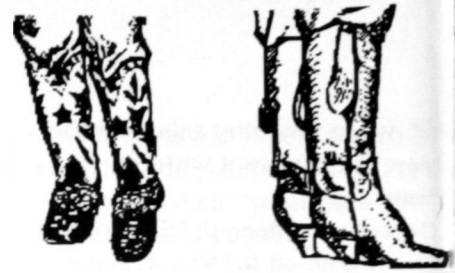
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INCIDENT AT SIMPSON'S GULCH

BY DAVID BURLISON

A frigid northern wind blew frozen raindrops against Allan's window as he put on his riding jacket and searched hurriedly in the cold darkness for his leather gloves. He opened the door on the cast-iron stove to warm his hands, but only a flicker of a flame remained; so he placed several pieces of kindling into the belly of the stove and blew gently into the coals. The wood ignited, and he warmed himself.

From the warm glow of the fire, Allan found his gloves, food pack, and western boots. He knew from last night's weather report on the shortwave radio that an unexpected arctic cold front could reach Independence Pass by noon today; and from the sound of the frozen moisture tapping steadily at his window, he realized that it had arrived hours early.

As he tugged at his boots to pull them on, Allan thought of how his father normally supervised the cattle drive from the meadow in the high country to the warmer winter pastures in the valleys below Nelson's Peak; but unexpectedly, he had become ill with appendicitis. Allan knew the importance of moving the cattle from the mountain ranges soon--they could never survive a blizzard in the high country. In order to save the herd, Allan had volunteered to drive the cattle himself.

Allan pushed open the door and hunched forward as the sting from the intense cold



wind pierced his face. While saddling his sorrel gelding, Mike, he contemplated the consequences of not making it past Simpson's Gulch before the storm covered it with ice and snow. As a boy, he had heard men--seasoned men--talk of fierce winter storms that showed no mercy to the men or animals caught in their lethal grasp.

The sorrel bowed his back as Allan tightened the cinch up on the saddle and placed his weight into the stirrup. Nudging Mike forward toward the twenty-five head of steers, he shouted, "Move your hairy carcasses before we are all snowed in." Allan made his first cattle drive when he was six years old, and he had made ten since then. So he knew the trail, but he had never traveled it covered with snow and never without his father.

As the sun's glow shone through the metallic glaze, Allan pondered the ironic beauty of such a treacherous storm. Majestic white pines bent meekly as thousands of ice pellets blanketed their limbs. Because of the snow and sleet, the cattle slipped, and one fell down the icy slope.

"We must make it past Simpson's Gulch before the south slope becomes completely covered with ice," Allan said as he patted Mike's neck. Allan had overheard men grumble about the south slope that overlooked the gulch. He remembered what old Fred Picker once said, "Yes sir, I near lost my life on that there slope moving a mule train, and I did lose my saddle horse. Fell

clear to the bottom. Never did get my saddle back. That ravine's just a mite too deep for a man to wrestle out of."

The long shadows of morning shortened as the sun rose higher in the cloud-filled sky. "Mike, just a little farther, old boy," Allan said as he dismounted; Mike nuzzled Allan's side coat pocket searching for sugar cubes. Allan took off his glove and placed two squares of sweetness in his hand, and Mike devoured the cubes as he stomped back and forth. "This is it, Mike," Allan said while he studied the light reflecting off the icy slope. He planned every move. He decided to take the cattle down the west end of the slope. The trail was more narrow, but the outstretched limbs of an aspen grove kept the ice from accumulating on the trail. Allan mounted Mike and attempted to drive the lead steer down the steep trail, but the steer bolted to the left. Mike lunged forward and cut the steer back toward the trail. Allan positioned Mike on the left side of the steer. On the right side of the maverick, there was only a steep cliff. The steer bellowed in protest but sauntered down the slippery trail. After circling to the back of her, Allan began to push the rest of the cattle down the rocky path.

The aspens screeched as the wind blew their heavy, ice-laden limbs. Suddenly an ice-encumbered branch made a thunderous crash onto the trail directly in front of Mike. Spooked, Mike leapt sideways sending Allan tumbling



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downward onto the ledge. As Allan landed, he grasped for a hand hold--anything to stop his downward slide. The slick ice-covered trail provided no hand holds, but Allan's right foot caught on a sandstone rock, stopping his fall to certain harm. Allan listened nervously as rocks separated from the bottom of his foothold and crashed on the snow-covered rocks below. He listened nervously as rocks separated from the bottom of his foothold and crashed on the snow-covered rocks below. Allan attempted to pull himself up onto the trail; but without a sturdy handhold, it appeared useless.

The sun began to sink slowly behind the ridge; and across the gulch, he could see the warm glow from a light in the Ranger Station. As Allan thought of the warmth and safety that was

only a short distance away, his hands began to ache with numbness from the intense cold.

He knew he must climb out before he froze or slipped to his death. In desperation, he called out to Mike, "Here boy--come here, boy." He tried to talk Mike over to the edge so he could grab onto his bridle and pull himself to safety. But Mike looked puzzled and didn't move. Allan reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his last two cubes of sugar. "Come here, boy. I have some sugar for ya. Easy, boy. That's it--reach out." Mike stretched out his neck and nibbled at the sugar cubes. Allan quickly grabbed for the bridle and startled Mike. Mike attempted to dart backward, but Allan's weight prevented him from moving. "Easy--whoa, boy," Allan said, trying to calm Mike. "Back,

back -that's it, boy. pull me up. Only a little farther," Allan said calmly. He reached solid footing once more.

Allan decided to walk to the Ranger Station instead of riding because his legs ached from the cold, and he felt that

Mike deserved a rest. He had earned it. The cattle had tramped their way down, down to safety and feed at the Ranger Station. As Allan entered the yard at the Ranger's Station, he could smell fresh coffee; that meant warmth, safety. ☺☺

(DAVID BURLISON, a former SOSU English major from Tecumseh, now lives in Moore where he works as a professional photographer and free-lance writer. This story about Allan is his second work published in WESTVIEW).

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