



12-15-1981

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Recommended Citation

Spraker, Bob (1981) "McCaslin's Shadow," *Westview*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol1/iss2/5>

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MCCASLIN'S SHADOW

— Bob Spraker

Jody liked the feel of the morning sun on his back as he looked for the mare, and he liked to watch his shadow as big as a grown man moving ahead of him.

He thrust his right hip out and looked with satisfaction at the shape of the holster showing in the shadow. Jody carefully held his hand over his left pocket so the oats would not spill out. Then he went into his gunman's crouch and snatched for the hand carved weapon in its homemade holster.

The wooden gun came out fast and smooth the way Red McCaslin had taught him and Jody was pleased with what the shadow did. He spun the gun around his finger and let it drop into the holster.

Wonder what Red McCaslin would think of that? And, the next thought followed like breathing, I wish Pa was more like him. Jody wished he could see McCaslin more often. A few minutes on Saturday is better than nothing, Jody said to himself and he knew that he was lucky to have the great Red McCaslin for a friend. I'll show Red I been practicing, Jody thought.

He whistled again for the mare and waited to see if she would peek from behind the big boulder in the pasture.

"She's there all right. She always is." He murmured.

Jody practiced the draw again then took a handful of oats from his pocket and held it out toward the boulder. When the mare did not appear he continued with the familiar ritual. He returned the oats to his pocket turned and started back toward the house squinting against the sun in his eyes. Red says "Never face the sun in a showdown."

Jody grinned at the sound of hooves behind him. He walked on pretending not to notice. Even when he knew the little mare was directly behind him he pretended not to notice. Only when she came alongside him and nuzzled the pocket did he stop.

"Oh, you decided to come along did you? What a surprise! I thought you'd left the country."

Jody fed the mare from his hand and patted her neck as she ate. Then with a quick glance toward the house to see if Pa was outside and watching he threw his arms around the mare's neck and hugged her hard. He glanced again at the house and yard. He could see no sign of Pa. Then he spoke to the mare and to himself.

"Pa says it all right to be good to an animal and to like it, but it's wrong to love one. He says love is for people."

Jody kept the mare near him all day as he usually did and he was content. He didn't mind the chores, even carrying the water to the little garden, if he could keep the mare nearby. It was a long strange day because Pa went to town alone and it was only Friday. Jody did all his own work and tried to do some of Pa's. There was no time to ride the mare but he liked just having her near.

31 When he had finished the evening chores, Jody gave the mare an extra portion of the oats and turned her out for the night. He patted her as she ate and said.

"Pa says I have to go easy on the oats from now on. He says you're fat as a butterball anyway."

Pa wasn't home by supertime and Ma said they wouldn't wait, that they would just go ahead and eat. Jody wished Ma would talk at supper like she used to do. She wasn't much fun these days. She didn't laugh and cut up with Pa like before and it had been a long time since Jody had heard her sing at her work.

Jody helped with the dishes then he went to bed. He carefully hung the fast draw rig on the nail on the wall. He hoped he could see Red McCaslin in town tomorrow. He hoped Pa would let him ride the mare instead of in the wagon.

Jody was nearly asleep when he heard Pa ride in to the yard on the Tennessee stud. He whispered into the darkness of the room, "The stud's good for Pa but I'm glad I have you, little mare."

Jody knew it was late when the voices wakened him again. He knew it was late because it felt late. He could hear what Pa was saying but he didn't understand.

"I did all I could Martha but it did no good. It's over. I can do no more. I really thought we could make it here in Oklahoma."

Jody waited through the long silence and he thought Ma wasn't going to answer then her voice came through the thin wall.

"What will they do now, Melvin?"

"They are going to sell us out Martha. I'll have to see the Sheriff tomorrow. He'll tell me when, then."

Jody knew it was trouble talk and he wished he could understand it all. He hoped it wasn't real bad.

The voices came again but they were very low and he couldn't hear well so he decided to think about the mare some more and go back to sleep. Then he heard Ma's voice loud and clear through the wall.

"No Melvin! Not Jody's mare."

He knew it was bad trouble and he would lose the mare.

Jody lay in the dark and thought for a long time. He was afraid and he tried not to shake when he thought about how it would be without the mare. Then he knew what to do. He would find Red McCaslin tomorrow and ask him what to do. He would know. Jody went to sleep feeling angry inside because Pa wasn't like Red.

"Jody! Jody! Breakfast is ready. Your Pa has already done your chores. It's Saturday and we have to go to town."

Jody wished he hadn't overslept. He knew Pa didn't like it even if he didn't say anything. At breakfast he waited a long time before he asked.

"Pa can I ride the mare today instead of going in the wagon?"

He was afraid Pa would say, "No use to wear out a good animal when there was two already pulling the wagon." But Pa looked at Ma and Jody could almost feel her silent plea. He heaved a sigh of relief when Pa said.

"I guess so. Do you want my saddle?"

"No sir. I'll ride bareback."

Jody enjoyed the feel of the mare under him on the ride to town. Sometimes he would lag way behind then he would catch up and pass the wagon with the mare in a hard run. Once when the wagon was almost out of sight he leaned over and hugged the mare. Then he got off and stood in her shadow and practiced his fast draw. He was pretty sure now that all that he had heard last night was just a dream. Still the words he had heard nagged at him. He decided that when the wagon caught up to them he would tie the mare behind and ride with Pa and Ma awhile and listen.

Jody lay in the straw and watched the clouds and listened to the sound of the team and the lighter steps of the mare following behind. Then he heard it again. Ma spoke quietly but Jody heard.

"Melvin, are you sure we can't save the mare?"

"I'm sure Martha. I know how you feel but the boy has to learn about life some day."

Jody stiffened. So, it really wasn't a dream. It was really going to happen! Then he smiled. There was still Red McCaslin. Red could change things.

Jody listened to Ma's standard instructions on how to behave in town and got away from her as soon as possible to start his search for McCaslin.

Jody peeked under all the doors of the saloons and he couldn't find Red. He looked every place he could think of with no success. Finally he went to the place he was never, ever to go. Jody went to the outside stairway of the Second Chance saloon.

Jody sucked in his breath and hitched up the gun belt. He was afraid to be here but it was getting late and he knew it was his only chance. He cupped his hands beside his mouth and shouted.

"Red McCaslin! Red! Are you up there?"

The space between the wooden buildings rang with his voice and Jody was sure Ma would hear it clear down the street at the store. Jody shouted again and waited. Hoping against hope that the man would appear. When it was evident that McCaslin was not around Jody's shoulders slumped the way Ma said they shouldn't and he ground a fist into his eyes to keep from crying. Then he started down the narrow passageway toward the street.

"He kid! It's you and me!"

Instinctively Jody dropped into his gun slingers crouch. He drew as he spun on his heel. The weapon cleared leather in a perfect draw and he made the fanning motion.

Jody felt a little foolish when he had done it because it wasn't what he really wanted. He wanted a serious talk with Red.

The boy waited and watched Red go through his exaggerated death scene. Finally the man rose and dusted himself with his hat.

"You're still almost the fastest. You sure took me again."

Jody watched as the man carefully replaced his gun in the low slung holster at his side.

"Who is the fastest Red? Who is faster than you and me. You said you'd tell me sometime. Who is the fastest bravest man you ever saw?"

"I'll tell you some time kid. What's on your mind? Did you come down here and call me away from necessary and urgent business to out-draw me one more time and to ask foolish questions?"

Jody scrunched down on his heels with his back to the building and Red got down beside him. Jody scratched in the dirt with a stick the way he'd seen the men do when there was serious business and he tried to talk low and slow like they did. But when he started it all came with a rush and he couldn't stop. He told Red all he knew about the trouble.

Red squatted with him for a long time and didn't say anything. Then he spoke.

"I heard about it kid. The sale is next Wednesday."

Jody was almost afraid to ask but he did it.

"Can't you stop it red? You're fast and brave and everything. Can't you stop it? They're gonna sell my mare!"

Jody felt Red's arm around his shoulders as the man spoke.

"Jody, there ain't nobody in this world can stop a sheriff's sale."

Jody scratched in the dirt.

"I'll have to lose her then?"

Jody wondered why Red was fishing in his vest pocket. He saw the silver dollar when Red removed it, and he wondered why the man would show him his lucky silver dollar now.

"Take this and do what I tell you. Take care of it. It's the only one I've got."

Jody rode home in the wagon and let the little mare follow. Nobody talked. Pa only clucked to the team and Ma said nothing at all. When they were nearly home Pa said.

"Jody I have to talk to you after supper."

"It's all right Pa. I already heard about it."

Pa looked at him for a long time and Jody thought maybe Pa was going to cry.

"We'll stand straight and tall at the sale son. We'll do it like men."

"Yes Pa."

The next days were too short for all the things that Jody had to say and do. Especially with the mare. Every day Jody spent time with the mare.

The day of the sale was hot and the sheriff arrived before anyone else.

"I thought I'd come early to check you out. No use for everybody to watch that."

Pa nodded and the sheriff walked around and read from a paper.

"One team. One wagon. Tools of his trade. Household goods. Nothin' there you ain't allowed to keep."

The sheriff took off his hat and wiped his bald head with a bandanna.

"Melvin you don't know how I hate to do this. . ."

"It's your job." Pa said.

A good crowd had gathered by nine o'clock and the sheriff looked at his watch, mounted the stump in the yard, and began the sale.

Jody listened some but spent most of his time hanging around the Tennessee stud and the mare where they were tied under the tree. The mare hung her head in the heat and nuzzled Jody's pocket.

"She knows." He whispered to himself.

"Bring the mare!"

The words cut through him like a knife and for a long moment Jody couldn't breath. He looked for Red McCaslin's hat above the crowd. It was time for the plan and Jody knew he couldn't do his part.

Someone led out the mare while Jody stood and watched. He tried but his feet wouldn't move.

"This here, as most of you know was young Jody's mare. She is gentle as a kitten and most of you know her. What am I bid?"

Jody opened his mouth and no sound came out he tried to move again and nothing happened.

"Come on gentlemen, what will you give for this fine little mare? Give me a bid someone."

Suddenly McCaslin was beside him and Jody felt himself being hurled bodily to the center of the ring.

"Now!" McCaslin hissed.

Jody jammed his hand into his pocket and brought out the silver dollar. He choked and stumbled over his words and his voice sounded like someone else's.

"I bid one dollar!"

Jody held his dollar between his fingers and raised his hand as high as he could get it. He watched as Red rested his hand on his gun and glared at the crowd. Jody tried to do the same. When old Mr. Brooks started to raise his hand Jody thought he would faint, but he felt better when the man didn't bid.

"I have one dollar bid who will give fifty?"

Jody held his breath again and waited. Red stood beside him and glared.

"Gentlemen, one dollar is a ridiculous price for this fine mare. Now give me a bid."

Jody waited.

"All right. If that's the way you want it. I have one dollar once. One dollar twice. One dollar. . ."

"Wait just a moment!"

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Jody had never seen Pa so mad. He strode to the center of the ring and his voice was loud.

"Just a minute sheriff. Everybody can see what's going on here! My son and his gun-slinger friend are trying to intimidate this crowd."

Jody started to ease away and Pa grabbed him by the shoulder.

"I am an honest man and this is what it takes to settle my honest debts. Furthermore I am going to leave here with an honest son. Now! Anyone who wants to is to bid on that mare."

Pa turned and glared at Red.

"McCaslin, I'll deal with you later."

McCaslin moved out of the circle to the back of the crowd. Jody winced at the pain in his shoulder but Pa held him firmly. Jody knew his face was crimson as he listened to the sheriff start again.

"I have one dollar bid who will give more?"

Jody closed his eyes tight and waited for the next bid. The only sound he could hear was the sound of the mare behind him as she breathed and switched her tail. He squinched his eyes tighter and held his breath. When Jody couldn't stand it any longer he let out his breath and opened his eyes and he couldn't believe what he saw.

Not a man in the crowd was looking at or paying any attention to the sheriff. They were simply standing and talking as though no sale was going on.

Finally Jody heard the words.

"Sold! To Jody here for one dollar. She's your horse, Jody."

When everybody had gone Jody tied the mare to the back of the wagon and got on the seat with Pa and Ma. Red McCaslin came over and extended his hand to Pa.

"Melvin, I didn't mean no harm. I hope you know

that."

Jody watched as Pa shook hands with McCaslin.

"It's all right Red. I understand what you were trying to do."

Red paused and looked at Jody. "He's a lot like you was when you was a kid."

Red tipped his hat to Jody's Ma and mounted his horse, and walked him away from the wagon.

"Red! Red! Wait!" Jody called.

Jody waited till Red had crowded the big horse close to the side of the wagon.

"Red you never told me who was the fastest bravest man you ever saw! Tell me! Tell me now before we go!"

Jody waited while the man on the horse took off his hat and looked thoughtful. Red finally grinned and nodded toward Pa.

"Him." He said. Then he kicked his horse and rode away.

Jody felt Ma's gentle fingers under his chin closing his mouth as the team started.

...REVIEWS...

Jean Hager's *YELLOW-FLOWER MOON*

— Genell Smith Dellin

Jean Hager, the Pawnee ranch woman who teaches neophyte novelists in Tulsa and leads the pack in the sale of paperbacks, has been published as one of the first in Doubleday's new hardback ethnic youth series.

YELLOW-FLOWER MOON is a romantic novel with a strong ethnic flavor and a special interest to Oklahomans. It is set in and around Pawhuska and Tulsa with a background of Osage culture and customs.

Maria Hawk, an Osage girl who has just finished law school in the East, returns to her family's ranch. She finds her grandmother desperate for money and on the verge of losing the Hawk land to an arrogant, wealthy neighbor, Dominic Cloud.

Maria has distrusted Dominic since she was 15, and even though she is attracted to him and he to her, she distrusts him still because she knows how much he wants her land.

The intense feelings between these two proud people as they struggle to understand each other are drawn with sensitivity and passion. The descriptions of the land, too, are done lovingly in a way that communicates its strength and beauty to the reader.

This book, available from Doubleday for \$9.95, is one of Jean Hager's best.