

AN EXCERPT FROM:
LAST OF THE ROBBERS ROOST OUTLAWS
Moab's BILL TIBBETTS...PART 6 Tom McCourt

Cowboy Life Along the River

Bill and Ephraim spent the winter of 1919-1920 in the Laterite country, camping out in a tent. They tended the cows and explored their new rangeland, digging out the springs and rough-fencing the water sources to prevent the cows from stomping them out. They also developed their trail between Moab and Elaterite Basin.

From Moab, Bill and Ephraim rode up Seven Mile Canyon to the Big Flat. There, they took the Horsethief Trail down Mineral Canyon to the Green River. Then they rode down the east side of the river about twelve miles to a place called Queen Anne Bottom. There was a wide, gravelly ford at Queen Anne Bottom, and for most of the year they could cross the river there without swimming the horses. On the west bank of the river, across from Queen Anne Bottom, the cowboys followed the north fork of Horse Canyon away from the river and into Elaterite Basin.

Each of the small valleys or "bottoms" along the Green River channel had a name. Places like Tidwell Bottom, Anderson Bottom, and Valentine Bottom were named after families who had attempted homesteads there in the early 1900s. Places like Potato Bottom, Tent Bottom, and Turks Head Bottom were named after abandoned fields, abandoned equipment, and geologic features.

Queen Anne Bottom was probably named after Queen Ann Bassett (Ann without an "e") who was a good friend of Butch Cassidy and The Wild Bunch. Ann Bassett was a member of a prominent ranching family in the Brown's Park area of northwestern Colorado. She was one of the few women allowed to spend time with the outlaws in the Robbers Roost during the 1890s.

The new country Bill and Eph explored was surrounded by some of the world's most spectacular scenery, and one of the most impressive areas was a place the cowboys called "The Maze." It was an impossible tangle of deep, sandstone-finned canyons that stretched for several miles between Elaterite Basin and the river channel. The cowboys were aware of the beauty of the place, but they didn't go there often. It was a bad place to lose a cow. In 1919, only a handful of Anglo-Americans had ever seen the place. The rest of the world had no clue it even existed.

Elaterite Basin was terribly remote. There were no developed roads. Everything had to be taken in with mules or packhorses. The French sheepmen had pioneered what they called The Flint Trail. It was a steep and rocky pack trail that traversed The Big Ledge to the west, and it was the best trail to Hanksville or the town of Green River. There was a North Trail out of Elaterite, too. It went over North Point toward Hans Flat and the Robbers Roost country. But Bill and Ephraim were from Moab and they preferred to do their shopping there. When they went to Moab for supplies, they had the river crossing at Queen Anne Bottom and their new trail along the river all to themselves.

The Green River was a special challenge for the cowboys. There were no dams upstream to regulate the flow of water and the river ran wild and free. The water level fluctuated constantly, depending on the weather and time of year. Floods were common and river crossings were dangerous.

Bill and Ephraim kept extra horses and caches of riding equipment, saddles, and other supplies on both sides of the river so they could cross back and forth on rafts when the water was high and dangerous. When they made a raft, they would spread a canvas tarp over the top of the raft to keep water from splashing up between the logs and wetting the cargo. The rafts were guided with long, cottonwood poles.

But the cowboys preferred to ride or swim their horses across the river if they could. It was easier, faster, and less bother than making a raft, even if they did get wet in the process.

Bill and Ephraim were riding through Potato Bottom one fine summer morning when Ephraim said he had been looking at a spot on the river that he thought might be shallow enough to ford without swimming. Since the weather was warm and the water was low, he thought it might be a good time to check it out. As Bill watched, Ephraim got down from his horse and cut a stout cottonwood sapling, about twelve feet long, to use as a "sounding rod" to test the depth of the river. He then rode to the edge of the water and sat watching the current.

"Looks too deep to me," Bill declared.

"I don't think it's that bad," Eph proclaimed. "I think me and ol' Sugarfoot here can walk on across."

"Sugarfoot ain't that tall," Bill insisted. "You better build a raft or give it up. That river has swallowed better swimmers than you and that old red horse."

"We can do it," Eph insisted, as he turned the horse down the bank and into the water.

Bill sat and watched as Ephraim went farther and farther out into the current. The water came higher and higher up Eph's leg toward his saddlebags and coiled rope. The man was going along slowly, cautiously sounding the bottom with his long, cottonwood pole.

Then, in slow motion, the big horse simply dropped out of sight beneath the waves. Then Eph went under, still sitting in the saddle. The long pole went slowly down and out of sight, and there wasn't a ruffle or a bubble to be seen while Bill watched anxiously, holding his breath.

Finally, the long pole came rocketing up out of the water like a cork, followed by Ephraim, blowing like a whale. Then came the wild-eyed horse, swimming for all he was worth. Horses are good swimmers, but Eph beat that horse to the far shore, cowboy boots and all. They crossed the river somewhere else after that.

During one of the winters in the early 1920s, the Green and Colorado rivers froze solid. In Moab, Bill nailed corked shoes on old Ute and his packhorses and was able to ride on the ice down the Colorado and up the Green River all the way to Anderson Bottom. The journey was about sixty miles following the contours of the rivers, and the ice made a smooth, flat road. The weather was cold but it was the fastest, easiest, and most pleasant trip to the cow camps Bill had ever experienced. The only trouble was, once in a while the ice would crack with a sound like a rifle shot and it would scare the hell out of him and the horses.

When all of that ice broke up in the spring, the noise was terrible, sounding like cannon fire in the canyons, and it kept the cowboys awake for several nights. Masses of ice dammed the river near Anderson Bottom and flooded most of the low-lying areas. When the ice dam collapsed, huge blocks of ice pushed down the river, spilling over the banks and ripping out willows and cottonwood trees like giant bulldozers. Having no news or contact with anyone outside of the river canyons, Bill wondered if the whole world wasn't in the beginning stages of a new ice age.

Through the early 1920s, Elaterite Basin became the core area for the Moore, Tibbetts, and Allred cattle operation. Bill and Ephraim ran several hundred head of cattle there and along the river bottoms as far north as Mineral Canyon. They maintained control of Ephraim's range on the White Rim above the river, as well. Their operation was spread for more than forty miles along that narrow strip of river and they held the outfit together with sweat, determination, and miles in the saddle.

They never did build a cabin in Elaterite, preferring to remain mobile and follow the cattle with just a bedroll and a light camp outfit. Stockmen of the day called it "laying out" with the cattle. Being able to stay with the herd gave them an advantage in the cow business. Their losses to the elements, quicksand, rustlers, and predators were less than most of their neighbors.

However, it was still necessary to go to town for supplies, and it was a long trek. Most often, only one of them would go to town while the other stayed and watched over the herd. A quick trip to Moab and back to Elaterite would usually take eight to ten days, depending on the time of year and such variables as weather, the flow of the river, and what business needed to be taken care of in town.

On one of those early springtime supply runs, Ephraim told Bill that he would be back in two weeks, but he never showed up. After waiting for a month, Bill was out of grub and down to shooting rabbits for his supper. He worried that something terrible must have happened to Ephraim, and he decided to ride to town to find out.

Bill was camped on the west side of the river near Anderson Bottom, and the river was high with spring runoff. Instead of swimming old Ute across the river, he turned the horse loose and made a raft of cottonwood logs to ferry himself across. On the east side, he got a saddle and riding gear from a cache near one of his old cowboy camps. There, too, he was able to catch an old gray gelding belonging to Uncle Ephraim. The gray horse hadn't been used for quite some time and he was fat and lazy. When Bill stepped into the stirrup, the horse exploded in a squealing, snorting, bucking-horse fit.

Bill was a good cowboy and he hung in there, but the horse took him down through a jungle of greasewoods, tall willows, and cottonwood saplings along the river bottom where the tangled brush and thorns tore Bill's clothes to shreds and cut him up pretty good. But in spite of the beating he suffered from the brush, Bill rode the horse until it gave out and quit bucking. He couldn't let the horse throw him and escape with the saddle. He also knew it was a long way to town, and no self-respecting cowboy would ever walk to town and admit that he had been bucked off and abandoned by his stupid horse. He would be laughed at forever.

After subduing the horse, Bill was covered with bruises and bloodied with dozens of cuts and scrapes from the willows and greasewood thorns. To complicate matters, his



Bill on the Green River carrying supplies

shirt and jeans were ripped to tatters and he didn't have a change of clothes. Luckily, there was another man's cow camp between him and Moab. He decided to stop there and see if he could borrow a shirt and a pair of Levis.

Loren Taylor was still sleeping the next morning when Bill threw open the tent flap and loudly announced his presence. "Get up and pee, Loren! The world's on fire!"

The sleep-groggy young man sat up in his bedroll and was nearly scared out of his wits to see a wild man standing in the doorway of his tent. The wild man was nearly naked and his body was covered with cuts and bruises. The unrecognized whiskered face was scraped and bruised and the eyes were almost swollen shut.

With a scream, the young cowboy dove for the back of the tent and started digging like a prairie dog to get out from under the tent skirt. Bill caught him by the foot and dragged him back, squealing like a pig. Loren was wearing only his long underwear and Bill was laughing so hard he could hardly talk, but he tried to calm his panicked friend. "Hold on there, pardner, it's me, Bill Tibbetts. Don't you recognize me, for Pete's sake? ...I need yer help, Loren. Quit kickin' and listen to me for a minute..." It took some fast-talking to convince the man to settle down and stop kicking.

Finally, the hypertensive Loren calmed down a little and found his voice. Still breathing heavily, and with his face flushed with embarrassment, he said, "Damn you, Bill. I thought you was the devil for sure. What happened to you? You look like you been through a corn chopper. Where's your clothes?"

"Little accident with a bad horse," Bill said as he helped Loren to his feet.

"You ever tell anyone about this, I'll knock the shit out of you," Loren warned.

"I'd buy a ticket to see that," Bill grinned, reaching out to further mess up the young man's hair.

The boys had a good laugh, and then Bill asked for a change of clothes. Unfortunately, Loren didn't have any extras. However, he did tell Bill about an abandoned cow camp over on the rim where he (Loren) had thrown away an old pair of worn-out Levis the winter before.

Bill rode the bad-tempered gray horse over there and found the discards. They were sunbleached, rotten, and filled with sand. The knees and the seat were threadbare and worn through, but they were better than nothing, and nothing was the only alternative. Bill shook the sand and spiders out and put them on. They didn't fit worth a darn, and they made him itch like crazy, but at least they covered his private parts ... some. They were too tight in the waist to button and the legs ended way above his ankles.

Bill tried to reach Moab while it was still dark, but morning overtook him at the bottom of Moab Canyon. As he crossed the river bridge he could see people coming from town and he recognized a pretty girl he knew and her mother riding in a buggy. Not wearing a shirt and not wanting to be seen in his rotting, castoff Levis, he quickly turned his horse into a little cove where the road forked at a place called Matrimony Springs.

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As luck would have it, the pretty girl and her mother turned that way, too. They drove the carriage right past the bare and blushing young cowboy. The women looked right at him, then turned their noses up in disgust and continued on their way, pretending they hadn't seen the scantily dressed young saddle tramp. Proper and respectable ladies would never speak to such a bum. With delight, Bill realized they hadn't recognized him with his long hair, winter whiskers, and scratched and swollen face.

Whistling a happy tune, the bare and beat-up young cowboy continued on into Moab. On the way, he passed his brother Joe, and Joe didn't recognize him either. Under the circumstances, Bill decided that being unrecognized was better cover than a shirt. He stopped at his grandma's place, washed up, shaved, and dressed himself in a proper set of clothes.

An hour later, he found Ephraim down in the fields, on a ladder, happily pruning the fruit trees.

"What are you doin'?" Bill challenged with righteous indignation. "I darn near starved to death waitin' for you to come back with the groceries. I had to raft the river, buck-out ol' Blue in the greasewoods, and ride halfway to hell just to find you prunin' the fruit trees? I thought you was dead, or stranded on the desert with a broken leg or somethin'."

"Sorry about that," Eph said sheepishly. "There was lots of chores to do here around the place and time just got away from me. What happened to you, Bill? You look like you been run over by a train."

"Old Blue is in the corral," Bill said with an evil eye. "You want to take him to the livestock sale, or you want me to shoot him?"

"Enough said," Ephraim smiled. "Darn, I wish I'd been there to see it."

"Shut up," Bill said. And then he walked away.

A day or two later, Bill asked that pretty and proper young lady for a date. He took her to an ice cream social. With his new haircut, shave, and clean shirt, she never suspected she was holding hands with the saddle tramp she had encountered along the river. When she asked about the scratches on his face and his swollen eyes, he fed her a long story about wrestling mountain lions to protect the cow camp. She knew it was a tall tale, but enjoyed the story just the same. There was something delightful about a handsome young cowboy with mysterious wounds.

Bill got his turn to go to town for supplies, too. On one of those trips, he was returning to Elaterite Basin with his packsaddles loaded when he reached a familiar old camping spot after dark. There was a fine water hole there. The young cowboy unsaddled his horse and pack animals, hobbled them, and turned them loose to graze. He then lit a fire, made a camp, and settled in to get some supper. Dipping his water bucket in the pond, he went back to his camp to make coffee and Dutch oven biscuits by the light of the fire.

As he sat by the campfire eating his evening meal, he was annoyed to find several strands of hair in the biscuits. He decided that he'd have to be more careful when cooking around the horse gear and saddle blankets from then on.

The next morning, when the sun came up, he found a big, bloated, and very dead horse floating in the water hole. It had been there so long the hair was slipping from the rotting carcass and floating on top of the water. His water bucket was full of putrid horsehair.

When Bill reached Elaterite and found Uncle Ephraim, he told the old cowboy all about it.

"What did you do?" Eph asked with a shudder.

"What could I do?" Bill said with an innocent face. "I discovered a whole new way to make biscuits. I gathered up a bunch of that horsehair and put it in the flour sack. Makes them biscuits hold together real good. Helps 'em stick to yer ribs, too."

"Damn you. If you put that stinkin' horsehair in the flour you'll have to eat it all."

"That's what I figured," Bill said with an impish grin. "I put horsehair in the sugar, molasses, and raisins, too," he teased. "You better stay out of those things, Eph. Wouldn't want you to get horsehair fever. I'm immune, ya know. I got inoculated at the dead horse waterhole."

Illness, accidents, and rattlesnakes were other concerns when town and the doctors were fifty miles away. Bill had a close call during the winter of 1921.

The cowboys made a winter camp in a large rock shelter in Potato Bottom. Bill was sleeping one night with his bedroll spread out near the fire when something bit him on the lip. He jumped up and pulled a small gray scorpion off his face. His mouth was numb for a while, but he managed to go back to sleep.

In the morning his lip was swollen to several times its normal size. His whole face was puffy and his mouth burned like fire. His throat was swollen, too, and it was hard for him to swallow. In his shaving mirror, he discovered the lip was an ugly blue-black color, and he decided he had better ride to Moab and have the doctor check it out.

The first day he rode to the top of the rim near Island in the Sky. He stayed there that night, camping out in the junipers. That night it snowed eighteen inches, and by morning the whole world was filled with fog. Bill couldn't see but a few yards in the soupy mist, but he started for Moab anyway, trusting his instincts to find his way.

Several hours later, when he stumbled upon the remains of his camp from the night before, he realized that he had been riding in circles and had lost his way. He had no choice but to stop and wait for the sky to clear.

For days he waited, alone and in great pain from his infected lip. The weather was frigid and the trees frosted with ice that never melted in the cold, damp fog. He spent days and nights sitting by a smoky campfire, low on food and low in spirit, nursing his throbbing, wounded mouth. It was almost a week before the fog cleared and Bill could get his bearings from the sun and the mountains again. He made his way to Moab where Doc Allen lanced his scorpion wound and drained a great deal of fluid from the abscess. There were no antibiotics in the 1920s, but Bill healed quickly. He hung around town for a few days while his swollen face returned to something closer to normal, and then he headed for the cattle ranges again.

In the course of events, Bill teamed up with his cousin, Tom Perkins, to run a trap line along the river. Cousin Tom was ten years older than Bill, but he was single, footloose, and fancy-free. He loved the desert and his bachelor lifestyle.

Bill and Tom got along very well. Bill was a natural leader and Tom was a natural follower. Tom was a man of sound mind and character, but low on ambition and material wealth. It didn't take much to make him happy. Tom saw no reason to work long hours in an office, a mine, or a hayfield. The few dollars he made with his traps and his rifle fulfilled his meager needs. With no family to feed and no property to maintain, camping out on the desert suited him just fine.

Yet, in spite of his laid-back nature, Tom was a true daredevil, one of the few people who could keep up with Bill Tibbetts when Bill decided to do something wild and crazy. Tom admired Bill and was always entertained by the younger man's energy, rowdy imagination, and devil-may-care attitude.

Along the river bottoms, the boys would tend Bill's cows, and in the course of their travels they would set traps for anything they could catch: beaver, coyotes, bobcats, cougars, and foxes. The furs brought a decent price and there was the additional incentive of bounties paid by stockmen's associations and county governments for wolves, coyotes, and cats. Wolves had pretty well been eradicated by then, but there were still a few. The boys were good at trapping and they did well.

Bill and Tom claimed Anderson Bottom as the base camp for their trapping operation, but they made a log cabin at Turk's Head Bottom, a few miles downstream from there, too. Bill owned a .44 revolver that he packed on his saddle. He practiced with it often and was considered to be a pretty good shot. At night after the boys got into their bedrolls in the cabin, he would put the candle out by shooting the flame off the wick. He got a few packrats and spiders while shooting from his bed, too. Bill slept with the gun tucked under his bedroll where it would be handy in the dark of night. A man never knew who or what might come calling in the moonlight.

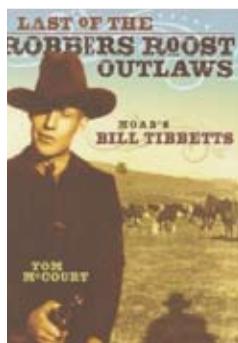
One late-winter afternoon, Bill and Tom Perkins were riding into Anderson Bottom toward their camp. The sun was dropping behind the western rim and the sky was on fire. They had been checking traps and their saddles were adorned with furs, traps, and firearms.

They were almost in sight of their camp when Tom pulled up his horse and held his hand out for Bill to stop. He sat there for a moment with a puzzled look on his face, and then he said, "Good Lord, Bill. What's that awful smell?"

"Smells like sheep," Bill said with his nose in the air. "It sure does. It smells like sheep."

The boys continued around a bend in the trail, and there, sure enough, were fifty or sixty sheep. The woolies were nibbling happily at the bushes and chomping down on the grass. Behind those they could see a whole lot more. Sheep were scattered all across

go to page 28



TOM McCOURT'S great book about Bill Tibbetts is available from the Canyonlands Natural History Association.

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