

BILL TIBBETTS "THE LAST OUTLAW" (continued)

the hillside above their camp and hundreds more dotted the landscape for as far as they could see.

"Damn!" Bill cussed. "Those Frenchmen have been runnin' sheep over under the ledge for several winters now, but there ain't supposed to be any sheep here along the river. This is our range, damn it."

"Looks like a million of them," Tom said with some alarm. "There won't be enough grass left to feed a rabbit if they stick around for more than a day or two. Those sheep eat everything right down to the roots."

"Well, we're gonna help this herd keep moving," Bill said with real conviction. "I ain't puttin' up with this. Let's go find that herder and tell him to get the flock outta here. We got the grazing rights to this river bottom and we're not giving it up."

But it was getting dark and they couldn't find a herder anywhere.

"Don't they bunch sheep at night to keep the coyotes and wolves away?" Tom asked.

"Most sheepmen do," Bill agreed. "But this herd is so big and scattered so far, there probably ain't enough sheepherders in the whole country to gather this bunch."

"So, what we gonna do?" Tom asked.

"Well, I guess we'll have to wait until morning to do anything," Bill said. "But since those woolies are eatin' our grass tonight, I think it's only fair that we have mutton for supper. What do you think?"

"You wouldn't dare," Tom grinned.

Bill took his coiled rope from his saddle and rode over to the nearest little bunch of sheep. The light was fading fast, but he picked out a young one and threw the rope. He dragged the big lamb over to their camp, killed, skinned, and butchered it while Tom took care of the horses, kindled a fire and made coffee. A short time later they kicked back to enjoy a well-deserved feast of lamb chops and Dutch oven biscuits.

"Kinda greasy, ain't it?" Tom suggested, not meaning to complain, but just stating a fact.

"This meat's a lot different than eating beef or deer."

"You gotta eat it hot," Bill grinned. "You let it cool and that sheep tallow sticks to the roof of your mouth."

"I don't think I like eatin' sheep much," Tom decided.

"That's why an old coyote will sit out on a hill in the evening and lick his ass," Bill said with a big smile. "He's tryin' to get the taste of those sheep outta his mouth."

Early the next morning, just at daylight, Bill was awakened by the sound of footsteps near the tent. He peeked out from under the flap of the tent and saw a pair of boots just a few feet away. Grabbing his .44 from under his bedroll, he took a quick aim and



Uncle Eph at Tirk's Head on the Green River

Ephraim stepped down from his horse, turned his back to the boys, and began undoing the cinch on his saddle. Then, very matter-of-fact, he asked over his shoulder, "Are you the guys who shot that sheepherder?" Tom turned toward Bill with real concern in his eyes. Bill stood his ground, stoic as an Indian, and didn't say anything.

blasted dirt all over the boots. Jumping up, he ran to the door of the tent and shot two or three more times into the dirt and into the air. He yelled for the herders to get the hell out of there and take those stinkin' damn sheep with them. By that afternoon the sheep were gone.

"You didn't shoot that man, did you, Bill?"

"I don't think so. I was just tryin' to help him move those sheep along. A man's got to protect what's rightfully his."

A few days later, Uncle Ephraim came riding into the camp at Anderson Bottom. He was leading a string of packhorses loaded down with panniers stuffed with oats, food, and camp supplies. He had been in Moab for a few weeks and was coming back to take over the cow operation to give Bill and Tom a chance to go to town.

But when Eph rode into camp he wasn't smiling or cracking any jokes. Bill and Tom could tell right off that something wasn't right. The boys stood by anxiously and waited for the man to speak.

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"Somebody shot a sheepherder a few days ago," Eph said as he pulled his saddle from 28

the horse. "At least that's the word around town. Rumor has it there's a warrant for the arrest of the man who did it."

"Do they know who did it?" Bill asked with a wrinkled brow, beginning to show signs of nervous concern.

"No," Eph said. "The herder didn't get a look at the guy, but they say it happened at

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Anderson Bottom. You fellers know anyone who might have been camped in Anderson Bottom the past week or so?"

"Aw, damn it all, Eph. I didn't shoot that sheepherder. I only shot near his feet. I needed to give him a reason to move those mountain maggots outta here. There were millions of 'em and they were eatin' everything right down to the dirt."

"Well, the rumor is, that sheepman was shot. True, he wasn't hurt bad, but shooting sheepherders is against the law, even if you only wing one. You boys better pack your gear and get the hell outta here. I'd go over in Laterite and lay low for a month or two if it was me. I just come from town so they know I didn't do it. I'll take over your camp here to cover your tracks."

"Probably peppered him with gravel," Bill decided, thinking it over. "I did shoot purdy close to his feet. But I didn't shoot the guy. That .44 would have took his foot off."

"I didn't hear any calls in town for a posse," Eph continued. "But I wouldn't be surprised if the sheriff ain't here in a day or so to check things out."

The boys went to work gathering up their gear.

"I'll bet the trappin' is real good over in Laterite," Tom said hopefully as he rolled up his bedroll.

"Yeah, I'll bet you're right," Bill agreed as he stuffed his army mess kit into a saddlebag. "We better go over there and check it out. Who knows, maybe we'll stay all summer."

"Take two of those packhorses with you," Eph offered. "They're packin' enough grub and horse feed to get you by for a month or so. I'll let you know when the dust settles around here and the coast is clear."

Bill and Tom hurried down the river, into the wilds of Elaterite Basin and the land under the ledge. They stayed there for a few months, lying low and waiting for word from Ephraim about the sheriff. While there, they trapped for the rest of the season and worked the Moore, Tibbetts, and Allred cattle.

The boys laughed about their new status as wanted desperados, but it just didn't seem right that they were in so much trouble. Making a sheepherder dance to the tune of a .44-Special was sport and not criminal assault, at least the way they saw it. And besides, Bill was defending his territory. Those sheepmen should expect to be shot when they moved in on a cowman like that.

Around the campfire at night, Bill smiled when telling Tom how those sheepherders sure could dance when they put their mind to it. And Tom grumbled that if he was going to be arrested for the incident, it was sure too bad he didn't get to see it happen. He'd never seen a sheepman do the high-step before. The boys laughed about it, but they were very cautious about strangers and they kept a close eye on their back-trail, just in case.

The sheriff never showed up. Some people in Moab suspected that Bill and Tom had done the shooting, but a warrant for their arrest was never served. Probably, the sheriff knew that if the sheepman couldn't identify the gunman, the effort to arrest and try the boys in a court would be futile. The savvy lawman chalked it up as one more incident in the continuing mini-range wars plaguing the whole territory. The injured sheepman left town quietly, none the worse for wear, and the incident was soon forgotten.

NEXT TIME: *The Last Robbers Roost Outlaw, part 7*



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