

A Cold and Moonlit Night: A Memoir by *David Meeker*

It's a very cold and moonlit winter's night in New Hampshire. Frost nips my nose and ears as I hurry through the snow to feed the hungry horse waiting in the barn. Nights like this, with the cold, the moonlight, and the snow, invariably remind me of another night many, many years ago – a night in 1952 when I was almost 20 years old and within 2 weeks of becoming a "Boot" in the U.S. Navy.

It was late afternoon of a bitterly cold January day when I shut the corral gate on the last of the cattle Dad and I had driven to the McCartie ranch that day. Jerry McCartie's invitation, "You fellas better come in, get warm, and have some supper.", was exceedingly welcome as it had been many cold hours since breakfast. We put our horses in the barn, loosened their cinches, and left them before a manger of hay. Leaving chaps and spurs in the barn, we tramped into the McCartie house to get warm, visit, and enjoy Mrs. McCartie's dinner.

Jerry McCartie was a slim, raw-boned, Irishman of some 60 years of age. He and his older brother, Charlie, ran several herds of sheep on leased land in the Fremont National Forest that surrounded the ranch at Keno Springs where we were living. Despite their many years in this country, the brothers' birthplace was obvious once they began to talk. Jerry's wife, somewhat younger than Jerry and a good deal less "raw-boned", had been raised in the surrounding Bonanza country.

After a day in the cold, Mrs. McCartie's warm kitchen was a welcome haven with its smells of dinner in preparation. We clustered around the heating stove, mugs of coffee warming our hands, waiting for the "dinner bell" and trying to ignore the aromas wafting from the cookstove. Finally, at the call "Come sit down, dinners on the table!", we took our places before a platter of pot roast with its accompanying potatoes, gravy, and vegetables. While I sought to make up for the lunch I'd missed before going on to enjoy my current supper, Dad and Jerry, with their dinner, discussed plans for gathering wild horses from the National Forest.

It was well after dark when, our pie and coffee finished, Dad and I left the warm kitchen to start the ten cold miles and 1000 feet in altitude that lay between us and Keno Springs. We had planned on a cold day and were

well bundled up in wool shirts and sweaters, heavy coats, and our leather chaps. Ears are vulnerable in the cold so, under our hats, we were wearing the original “stocking caps” – the tops of my mother’s nylon stockings cut off, knotted, and pulled over our ears. In addition, we each had our “Andy Bodnar”, which was my family’s name for a neckerchief “draft stopper” around our necks. The name memorialized a once neighboring rancher who taught us the cold weather value of such a kerchief. We were well prepared, but riding horseback in the cold, it is very hard to keep your fingers and toes in anything like comfort no matter how warm you are everywhere else.

We left the McCartie ranch in single file as the first four miles followed the narrow trail through the snow made by the cattle on their way down. We struck the plowed road to the ranch just below Rocky Canyon with the red ochre petroglyphs on its rimrocks. From there on we were able to ride side-by-side. The night was clear and starlit, and the nearly full moon, reflecting off the snow-covered landscape, gave us almost daylight visibility.

The two horses were in our “travel gait”, a fast trot, and their breath, in the cold air, frosted their whiskered muzzles and deposited a white rime on their chests and shoulders. Their hoofbeats were the only sound in the frigid world around us. We rode standing in our stirrups hunched against the cold of the night. Usually, our gloved hands were on our pommels taking some of the shock of the trot from our knees, but, occasionally, a hand would come off the saddle to be tucked inside a coat and under an arm for a brief warm-up of freezing fingers. At other times a hand would come up to, momentarily, shield the nose and cheeks from the cold and bathe them with a puff of warm breath. Unfortunately, there are no armpits or warm breath for cold toes and, as the miles went by, our toes got colder and colder.

Five miles more and we passed Mortar Point, where foot-deep mortars in the boulders and thousands of scattered obsidian flakes testified to centuries of occupation by indigenous people. About that time, the freezing noses gave up and the “Andy Bodnars” were loosened and pulled up to our eyes. From there on we continued the hard trot through the night like

masked desperadoes fleeing the sheriff's posse – and our toes got colder and colder.

One more mile brought us to the gate into the ranch. There someone must dismount and risk shattering their frozen toes on the hard ground. It was the young guy's job -- and my toes survived. Through the gate and both mounted again, we trotted on to the barn. After a careful dismount, with proper care for those toes, the horses with their frost-covered whiskers and ice-coated chests were unsaddled, rubbed down, fed a can of oats, and left in the barn with plenty of hay. Our fingers, stiff from the cold, painfully struggled to undo the snaps and buckles on our chaps. After hanging chaps and spurs on the frost-covered saddles in the tack room, we walked, carefully, on our cold, cold toes and ride-stiffened knees to the lamplit house where my mother and brother were waiting around the glowing woodstove.

Once inside, the boots came off and the toes in their stockings cuddled up to the warm stove. In a few minutes they were joined by a pan of warming milk with its promise of cups of steaming hot chocolate as a "sleeping potion" to finish a long and cold day.

The memory of that night and that ride are brought fresh to my mind every cold, bright, and snowy winter night – even if the night is in New Hampshire 3,000 miles and 68 years from Keno Springs.