

The Ghost of Keno Springs by Dave Meeker

The notion of a ghost at Keno Springs developed slowly. It began with a story my father told us soon after we moved up to that small mountain ranch nestled in a basin within the Fremont National Forest. It seems that Dave "Somebody", whose last name I've forgotten, lived at the ranch and ran sheep in the surrounding range in the early 1900's. That was not common as, at that time, there was an aversion to sheep and shepherders among the general, "cattle-raising", population in that part of Oregon. It was, sometimes, more than a simple "aversion". A story told amongst the ranchers was of a flock of sheep in neighboring Dry Prairie that was shot up and scattered by a band of "unknown" cowboys. Truly, cattle and sheep and cowboys and shepherders required some time to develop a peaceable cohabitation in much of the west.

Nevertheless, according to Dad, Old Dave, as he came to be called within the family, had an unusual business plan. It seemed that each spring he would import Basque shepherders, "Bascos" in common parlance, each to herd a flock of sheep during the summer months. This was not unusual, many sheepmen would bring in either Basque or Irish shepherders for the summer's grazing. Since the shepherds were mostly alone in their little wagon camps with just their horses and dogs for company, it was not an exceptionally popular summer job. In addition, anything dealing with horses, dogs, and livestock in the open range had a hazardous side and it sometime happened that a scattering flock would be found wandering the range without their herder. In later years laws were passed requiring "camptenders" to visit each herder at least once a week, but that was after Old Dave's time.

Dave's business creativity involved the end of the summer routine. It seemed that only a few of his herders ever returned to civilization at the end of the summer. The story that followed the ranch was that in the fall he would visit his herders scattered around the range then murder and bury them in isolated places in the forest and, thus, save himself their summer wages. To tell the truth, I never heard the story from anyone but my father – but he told it with great conviction.

This would have just been a passing and interesting but unimportant part of the history of the ranch, if it were not for some unusual topographic configuration of the house and road. The ranch house was at least 15 miles from any regular source of electricity and we only had lanterns and lamps and, occasionally, a small generator for night-time lighting. Nevertheless, as the family would return after dark from a trip "down to the valley" and still a quarter mile or more from the house, the windows on the unoccupied house would flash brightly through the trees between the road and car. At the time of the flash the car seemed to be heading away from the house making the obvious explanation, a reflection of the car lights, unlikely. The house, however, was always in total darkness when we reached it. To the family there was only one explanation – Old Dave snuffed the lamp light when he heard us coming home.

It was a family joke that soon developed a wider following. Anyone coming to the ranch with us at night could not help but notice the flash and, of course, then be given the popular explanation. Consequently, Old Dave became well-known amongst our wider family and friends. He also expanded his repertoire as time passed.

My Aunt Dorothy was very inclined toward the spiritual side of life. She was a fan of Ouiji boards and often drove over the stomach-testing Greensprings Road from Klamath Falls to Medford to visit Mrs.

Jessel, a faith-healer who had a strong following in southern Oregon. I am not sure of the reasons behind her visits, but Aunt Dorothy was a strong believer in Mrs. Jessel. My Uncle Joe was not so inclined until he accompanied Aunt Dorothy on a visit. At the time Uncle Joe used a hearing aid for normal conversations and was wearing it when Mrs. Jessel walked into the room where they were waiting. As he related to me, "As soon as she walked in my hearing aid began buzzing and I had to shut it off. I haven't used it since!"

That experience was as hard for Joe to understand as it is for me – he didn't become "a believer" nor a "non-believer" but a "not know-er" with observed facts hard to reconcile within his basic belief system. However, to Aunt Dorothy, with her belief system, the explanation was obvious.

During deer-hunting season one year, Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Joe, along with Dorothy's sister Dode Wood and her husband, Art, set up a tent just in front of the house while they hunted in the surrounding forest. One morning, when Dorothy and Dode came into the house for coffee, Dorothy asked, "What happened last night?". She had awakened and went outside to go to the outhouse and found the windows of the house all "lit up". She woke Dode up to see the sight but did not go inside to see what we might have been up to. That was a puzzle as the family slept soundly all night, no lamps were lit, and the "light plant" was not running. The natural suggestion was the moon reflecting in the windows – but Aunt Dorothy did not accept that – the moon was not right and the light was too bright. She and Dode were convinced that there was another explanation – the house had a ghost and was haunted by it. Old Dave was the natural candidate for that role.

My mother was a very down-to-earth and privately religious woman but, nevertheless, she was not immune to the family's spectral houseguest and his powers. As she related it, one winter's day she was alone at the ranch as the rest of us had gone to town. It began to get dark and she started to worry that our car might have broken down or slid off the road and got stuck somewhere in the 10 miles of snow between the ranch and the gravel road from Bonanza. Her worries increased until she finally decided that she should come to meet us. Accordingly, she started the jeep and drove to the big gate, stopped, and got out to open it. Opening the gate and returning to the jeep to drive through she found that the gate had swung closed behind her. So, she got back out of the jeep and reopened the gate only to find that, when she was back in the jeep, the gate was once more closed. At that, she said to herself "I guess Old Dave doesn't think I need to go – I'll just wait a little longer" – so she did. Then, shortly after she returned to the house, we showed up – and were told how Old Dave saved her a jeep ride.

As for me, I almost saw Old Dave one morning. In my mother's "daybook" for January 1, 1951:

Mon. 1st

14° to 38°

29.35F

Cloudy, ... Went in to turkey dinner at Mary's and to see Jimmy Stewart in "Harvey", a pookie. "Old Dave" locked the bedroom door and David couldn't get his shirt.

There is quite a bit of amplification needed before that brief comment is understandable.

That New Year's morning we got up early, had breakfast, cranked up the CleTrac, loaded the wagon with bales of hay, and fed the cattle their breakfast, which was also their lunch and dinner. After feeding we cleaned up and changed our clothes for the trip into Klamath Falls for the family's New Year's dinner at

Aunt Mary's house. We were all loaded in the Jeep station wagon and ready to go when I realized that I had left a shirt in my brother Art's bedroom that I wanted to bring with us. I jumped out of the car, leaving everyone else in their seats and went into the empty house to pick it up. When I got to Art's room and opened the door – I couldn't. It wasn't that the door was stuck, it would unlatch but, as I pushed to open it, someone would push back! I could get it open, against the pusher, about 4 inches, but no farther. It didn't hit anything solid; it would "give" a little but it wouldn't open any farther. If I eased off, it snapped back, and the latch clicked. That was very spooky. I felt a shiver go up my back and the hair on my neck stand up. Who, or what, could be pushing back on the door when I tried to enter an empty room – was this Old Dave defending his time alone in the house? Finally, with a last hope in rationality, I pushed very hard – and the door opened.

Inside I found a crumpled and bent cardboard tube with a few wraps of Christmas paper still on it. It seems that Old Dave, realizing how serious I was about entering had, before leaving the room for a more private location, moved the tube from its place behind the dresser and propped it against the doorknob. Wedged between the dresser and the door it would bend a little as I tried to open the door but was still stiff enough to flex considerably while still pushing back with substantial force. Finally, my last big effort had forced the tube to crease at the door's edge, collapse, and bend allowing me into the room. Old Dave, of course, was long gone.

Gathering up the forgotten shirt, I returned to the family waiting in the car and told them of the happening that led to Mom's note in the family history.

We were all gone from the ranch at Keno Springs by 1953, but when I returned some 30 years later it was very depressing. The house and big barn with its corrals had burned down and the only buildings still standing were the equipment shed Dad and I had cobbled up using walls and rafters recovered from the Japanese Internment Camp at Tule Lake, the wood shed, and part of my mother's chicken house. The country was undergoing a multi-year drought and the many springs that watered the meadows and gave the ranch its name were dry and sagebrush was again taking over. The big spring that fed the duck pond and watered the animals in the corrals was a gaping dry hole dug out by a backhoe in search of a source of water. There remained no rooms or windows for Old Dave to inhabit or light, so I expect he must have moved on – as have we all.