

## **The Gunslinger's Lament by Dave Meeker**

"Bang", a shot rings out and an evil rustler bites the dust!

"Bang", there goes another, and -- "Bang" yet one more!

Clearly, "Deadeye Dave" is more than a match for any roadside beer can or bottle in the country!

"Deadeye Dave" is not mounted on a snow-white stallion with flowing mane, rather, he is on an old 1920's Farmall tractor. Nor are the two of them driving a herd of cattle through fields of purple sage along the Old Chisholm Trail. The deadeye shooter on the old tractor is on a Forest Service road on the way through the woods to the home place at Keno Springs after finishing work on the field at Round Prairie. At the speed of the old tractor over the rocks and bumps of the country road the 5-mile trip needed something to make it more interesting. That "something" explains the sporadic shots echoing through the forest.

That afternoon in 1951 I carried my 22-caliber Colt revolver in its holster so that I could protect the tractor from any rampaging beer can that might be along the road. As anyone who grew up reading the books of Clarence E. Mulford, B. M. Bower, or Owen Wister knows, a real "gunslinger", when in peril, shoots from the hip while fixing the villain with his steely eyes. That was the scenario I sought to emulate on that afternoon.

Now, for that reader whose experience with the classic literature of Hopalong Cassidy of the Bar-20, Chip of the Flying U, or the "Smile when you say that" Virginian is lacking, I must explain a critical and historical piece of gun-manship. The revolver of the gunslinger days, the classic Colt "Peacemaker", was a single-action revolver. That means that shooting it involved two steps. The first step was to pull the hammer back and cock it and, in that process, rotate the cylinder to put a fresh cartridge under the hammer ready to be fired. The second, and final, step was to pull the trigger, release the hammer, and fire the shot. Those two steps are accomplished in one action in our modern double-action revolvers, like mine. Pulling the trigger on these revolvers rotates the cylinder into position and cocks and releases the hammer to make the shot. Alternatively, one can cock the hammer (and rotate the cylinder) with a thumb and leave the pistol ready to be shot with a pull of the trigger thus copying the procedure for the old "Peacemaker". (Note to the reader: One should not be overly concerned that "single-action" requires "two-steps" while "double-action" requires "one-step".)

A careful, thoughtful, and observant reader may reply, "That is all very interesting and may, in fact, be true, but I have often seen a cowboy hero, or villain, shoot from his "six-shooter" multiple shots (at times more than six!) in rapid sequence. How can that be?" The answer to such a question is, "They 'fan' the gun." To accomplish this, the right-handed shooter uses the edge of his left hand sweeping back-and-forth over the pistol to rapidly cock the hammer and rotate the cylinder. If the trigger is continuously depressed, the revolver will fire immediately. "Fanning" might be considered a 19<sup>th</sup> century version of a 21<sup>st</sup> century "bump stock".

It is that type of shooting that I practiced the day of the tractor trip. My pistol acts like a single-action "Peacemaker" if I depress the trigger and cock the hammer with my thumb. The dicey part of the business lies in ensuring that my gun is pointed toward the target when my thumb leaves the hammer.

That afternoon, sitting on the old tractor between its two big tires, I was able to frighten several beer cans without, actually, hitting any of them. But then, suddenly, my thumb slipped off the hammer before I was ready! The question then was "Where, exactly, was the gun pointed when it went off?" It didn't hit the tractor, I would have heard that. I couldn't have hit that big tractor tire? No, no, and even if I did, it was only a 22-caliber bullet that wouldn't penetrate a big tire like that, would it? No, it couldn't -- could it? I was uneasy and kept close watch on the tire as I continued toward home -- the beer cans were now perfectly safe. I thought, "Those big tires are full of salt water (to add weight and, therefore, traction) so, if there is a leak, I should see a trail in the dirt." I stopped and looked -- no visible leak. Very good. We continued along the road toward home.

After a short while it became inescapable! The tire on the right side was, without doubt, going flat. There was nothing I could do but stop and walk the remaining miles home. To continue to drive would ruin the tire. I was going to have to tell my father and there was no way that was going to be easy. It wasn't just a flat tire. We were all used to "flat tires". One Sunday during WWII my grandfather took the family on a trip from Klamath Falls to Medford, a trip of some 60 miles. Tires were rationed, and so threadbare tires were still common, and welcome, on cars. That afternoon we had a flat tire, my father put on the spare tire and soon the spare tire went flat. This was not unusual -- just unwelcome. We had a full complement of tools consisting of tire irons, for extracting the inner tube, a tire patching kit consisting of glue, patches, and a "scuffer" to roughen the tube to give the glue some "purchase", and a tire pump to re-inflate the restored tire. Once the tire was patched, pumped up (by hand), and back on the car we continued -- until another tire went flat and the whole sequence was repeated. It was a very long motor trip that day.

I go into this in such detail in order to contrast it with the situation I then faced. This tractor tire is some 4 or 5 feet in diameter, filled with brine to provide more traction, and bolted to the tractor with big and rusty nuts that have probably not been loosened for five years. Once off the tractor there are no "tire irons" that can get that tire off its rim and free the inner tube to patch its unfortunate 22-caliber hole. That tire must be taken off the tractor, somehow loaded into the pickup, and driven the 35 miles into Klamath Falls to a tire shop where the necessary tools reside. Once it's patched and refilled with brine, another 70-mile round trip must be made to retrieve the tire so that it can be man-handled back on the tractor and the tractor can resume the work that has been delayed by the careless action of the "gunslinger".

I walked home and, with great embarrassment, explained the unfortunate (and embarrassing) situation. My father never yelled -- but he could express silent disgust and disappointment with great effect. I don't remember more than that. We got the tire off, patched, remounted, and work went on. But, after that, I left my Colt revolver at home when I moved a tractor.