



## Palo Verde : The Wanted Poster

By Martin

The time is 1905. Texas oil is not yet a big industry. Spindletop blew in 1901 generating interest in the Beaumont area of East Texas and inspiring oil speculators to hunt for petroleum elsewhere in the state. For most of those living in Texas sour ponds, salt domes, and paraffin soil do not yet portend to much other than bad grazing land for their cattle. Many of the former Confederates, or children of Confederates have come to Texas in search of a better life than that being offered in the ravaged South. Yankees and their ideas are not held in much respect by these independent hardy folk.

Photography is beginning to be used to record crime scenes, fingerprints have been recognized since the 1850s as useful to identify criminals and lands and grooves are used to prove a bullet came from a particular weapon.

**characters**

**Pappy:** Marshal Watson lives in **Amarillo** up in the Texas Panhandle. Tall, bone thin, grey hair hanging down to his shoulders, he is a no nonsense lawman who is willing to try something new when it comes to investigating a case or tracking down a killer. Moving into the new century finds Pappy ready to embrace all the latest 'criminalist' investigation resources at his disposal in 1905. Pappy's black broadcloth coat, shot gun and stovepipe hat are his trademark. The star pinned to his vest proclaims his life's work. If anyone can find Boone; Pappy can. Pappy's horse Shadow is so well trained; he responds to a nod, spoken word, or small tap of the reins. This is not a horse who suffers fools when they kick his flanks.

**Boone:** Tall, black haired, proficient with a gun, this Crawford County rancher has a price on his head. Wanted posters bearing his face have been sent to Indian Territory and hang on near every fence post, stable wall and barn door throughout Texas. Some had thought Boone might have finally gotten past getting himself in trouble, looks like trouble has caught up with him again.

**Bodine:** The Sheriff in Crawford County over in East Texas had Boone locked up in his jail. He has known Marshall Watson, and Boone since the three of them were all kids over to Sand Springs in West Texas. Tom Bodine does not often lose a prisoner. Right after Boone took off Bodine sent a wire to Pappy up in Amarillo. His dog Luke is a good judge of character.

**Walker:** The Easterner came to Texas from Connecticut a few years back. Ignoring the area filled with poor ponds and sparse grass over toward the buttes he bought up about eight or nine thousand acres or more of prime cattle land when he first arrived. The rich Harvard educated man doesn't quite fit in with Crawford County folks. Walker says his hired hand Spurgeon was shot down by Boone. Brought the coffin into town and stirred up a lot of commotion before his hands buried the pine box in the little cemetery out at the edge of town. Luke don't think much of Walker.

**Martinez:** Walker's glacial eyed hired killer has no remorse for his expertise in ridding his boss of unwanted problems. The spurs the man wears can be heard down the street. Has a heavy hand with critters and people.

**Johnson:** BlueBonnet Town, Coryll County seat just west of Crawford has welcomed this college educated chemist who serves as their doctor in a pinch when old Doc Trotter cannot be found. Johnson runs a little pharmacy in BlueBonnet Town and likes to keep up on what is happening in the world of science. He is particularly interested in the new 'criminalist' technology.

**Jim McDermott:** Johnson's friend, the timid man who runs the assay office in BlueBonnet Town recognizes the scum appearing on some cattle ponds in the area as a substance that is soon going to change the face of the state. Won't be too long he believes before everyone hears about the stuff and the riches to be won if you are lucky enough to own land where the residue is found. McDermott isn't real sure that this is going to be a genuine good thing to happen.

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### Prologue

Travis Hollen guided Nell down into the grassy draw. Glad he had put on that poncho after all he mused. He hadn't really wanted to, but Ma just insisted that he take it with him. Kinda cold out here this time of the morning he thought. Travis knew that it was sure to get hot later in the day. He reckoned he would tell Ma about the blossoms on the apple tree just this side

of the ravine. Maybe he thought, I'll just stop and get a branch of them for her on my way back. Ma always liked pretty things. Like apple blossoms.

He had seen a little bunch of cows huddled together down in the sheltered area in the middle of the arroyo. Was the spot they favored for birthin' calves. The fourteen-year-old had set out astride the mare quick as the sun showed over the horizon. Pa said last night at suppertime that he wanted the cattle counted by the time he got back from hauling the load for Mr. Hammond. Uncle Perry and Pa let their cattle run across all the land owned. Had near nine hundred acres between the two of them.

Travis kinda liked coming out alone to check on the cattle. Ma fixed him up a lunch with corn bread and a lunch bucket of beans. And she had wrapped up the last of the pie that they had for supper last night and gave that to him as well. Of course both of his brothers had asked if they could come along too. Quick as they did the girls all started in too. Even Katie the three year old. Travis grinned thinking about it. Perry and John just wanted an excuse for not going to school. Pa saw right through their arguments that Travis might need help. Pa said no, the boys was to go on to school.

Pa said next year he might ask Mr. Hammond for a job for Travis driving one of the Hammond delivery wagons. Travis looked forward to it. He didn't care much for the school his pa and the others built last year. Ma already taught him his letters and his numbers. Pa said he had enough learning to do what he had to do. Travis figured to be a rancher like Pa.

Three wary cows eyed him from the shelter of the draw, sure enough Travis saw three new calves on the ground between their feet. Nearby stood four more cows. With a practiced eye Travis took in the heaving sides and wide eyes of two more of the critters. Reckon there will be two more calves right smart he thought. Them other two standing over by the little spring will be a little longer. Pa and Uncle Perry will be glad for the news he mused, this brings it to fourteen new calves this week.

Travis tugged the reins turning Nell just as the impassive, dark eyed man who had been watching him for the better part of an hour squeezed the trigger. The crack of the rifle sounded loud from the copse of cottonwoods down at the far end of the draw. Travis heard the noise but had no time to react. The bullet that should have gone dead center in the kid's forehead entered just above his ear instead. The youngster slid to the ground as the mare reared. Nell tore out of the draw and headed for the house.

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Sitting astride the big bay Pappy's water colored eyes searched the horizon. Wouldn't be a whole lot of dust at this time of day he calculated.

The sun was just coming up. Even so it don't pay to be caught napping. Pappy always figured keeping alert was a whole lot smarter than having to fight your way out of trouble.

Naw, his eyes narrowed, nothing yet. Sliding to the ground, the Marshal opened the saddlebag. He eyed the can of milk before deciding against it and taking out instead a can of beans. Wouldn't taste like too much cold he figured, how some ever, Pappy didn't want to chance stirring up the fire where the coffeepot simmered hidden behind the rocky outcropping. Too much chance that it might be seen if a rider was out there on the trail through the Palo Verde. Pappy calculated that there sure enough was a rider out there in the Palo Verde. Might even be a bunch of 'em. But, the one in particular was the one the Marshal was waiting for.

The bay eyed the tall thin man for a moment before lowering his head to tug at a tuft of dewy grass. The reins hung loose against his neck. The hackamore the gelding wore didn't keep him from chomping on the grass.

Pappy slid his knife into the top of the can of beans then cut half the circle top away. He wiped the piece of metal on the dew-wet grass then slipped it into his shirt pocket. Pocket is beginning to bulge he chuckled. Got to get them things throwed away one of these days. No need to leave anything on the ground to catch somebody's eye as they pass by.

Bodine's cryptic telegram was Pappy's only notice that Boone was on the run. Pappy's thin mirthless grin curved his lips but it shore didn't reach up to his faded green eyes. Bodine, Boone, himself they was all aging however from the looks of things didn't necessarily mean any of 'em was getting any smarter. Boone is sure to come this way Pappy calculated. Where else can he go? He always came this way when he was in trouble. Nothing new. Pappy only had to wait and eventually Boone was sure to show. Of course *this* time Boone was sure to be followed Pappy reflected. Chewing the cold beans Pappy gazed out into the basin below. Wanted posters and rewards do tend to cause a lot of interest in a man and Bodine said Walker is posting a big reward for the killer who the rancher said had gunned down his hand. Walker was wanting the posters plastered all over Texas and up into Indian Territory, mebbe beyond from what Bodine said.

Boone's life ain't going to be worth much even if he can stay alive long enough to reach the spot where the thin Marshal sat waiting for him. Pappy shivered. Pulling his frock coat a little closer he stared up at the sky. Going to be hot later in the day. Always hot this time of year. How some ever Pappy reflected, it sure ain't hot at five in the morning. His black broadcloth jacket didn't do a whole lot to keep off the cold. On his head Pappy wore his old stovepipe hat. Wore it for years now. The Marshall didn't much care for the wide brims that Bodine and Boone both favored. Had himself the tatty old

slouch hat Pa had wore in The War in his saddlebag. When the sun just got too overbearing Pappy got it out and used it for a spell. Kept the sun off his neck. Didn't like wearing it too often though.

Riding out across the dry expanse from Big Springs four days ago Pappy had seen no one. Took him a little while to *get* to Big Springs from Amarillo. The almost three hundred miles down to Ft. Stockton wasn't all that bad. The Marshal had things he had to do in Amarillo before he could board the southbound train. Train don't go into Adobe Ridge but Pappy calculated that was no never mind. He enjoyed the train trip down from Amarillo to Fort Stockton. From there it was just he and Shad traveling on to Big Springs. Trail from Big Springs to Adobe Ridge is pretty good and even on to the buttes from Adobe Ridge ain't too bad, just takes time to get the ground covered. Course, he smiled that mirthless grin again, Shadow can peart near walk the distance in his sleep.

Briggs can handle the Marshal's office for a while thought Pappy. Pappy didn't tell him anything about Bodine's wire. Just told his deputy that he would be gone for a while and until he got back Briggs was going to serve as acting Marshal. Pappy calculated it was going to take a while to meet up with Boone and get done what had to be done before he would be able to get back to Amarillo. Briggs is capable of handling anything that might come up and this is something Pappy figured he had to do on his own.

No way Bodine woulda sent the telegram up from Crawford so Pappy calculated he musta rode over to BlueBonnet Town. Means Boone musta already been on the road a day, mebbe two before Bodine was able to ride over to the Coryll county seat and have old man Daniels send the wire. Bodine always said you can trust Daniels. Old coot knows how to keep his mouth shut Pappy reflected. When the telegram came Pappy sure didn't expect to be getting any wire from Bodine. More'n that he wasn't waiting for word that Boone was coming his way with a price hanging over his head. Well, Pappy mused with a sardonic grin showing, reckon its about time, *has* been a good long while since Boone has gone and found himself in a big old heap of trouble.

Pappy held the glass to his eye. Sun was just coming up. Yep, he grinned, right on time. The little spate of dust kicking up way out on the valley floor showed a lone rider picking a path across the Palo Verde forest. Got to be Boone Pappy grinned again. Who else but Boone sent a tiny puff of dust up like that. Sure got that black trained to step careful. Almost he mulled, almost as good as Shadow.

Boone learned to ride almost before he could walk. Said one time he figured he could live in the saddle if he had to. Well, Pappy considered, with all those wanted posters Walker had made up and with 10,000 cash dollars

hanging over Boone's head in reward money plastered all over Texas the boy just might have to just that.

Dipping his spoon into the can he leaned half hidden against the sandstone. Pappy chewed the beans as Shad pulled another tuft of grass free. Raising his canteen Pappy washed his breakfast down with water taken from a little known spring not far from where he was standing. Might be Pappy calculated that only he and Boone knowed where the spring was. Boone and the big black was most like getting real thirsty by now. The spring was sure to be what Boone was aiming for.

All of a sudden Shad stared out across the Palo Verde. His ears flicked forward again. Pappy pushed his hat back away from his forehead. The bay noticed the movement and swung his head around. Pappy put his finger to his lips. Shad understood. The nicker died in his throat.

Pappy eased the shotgun from where he had stood it in a recess in the rocks. Shad picked his way slow and real careful to come stand close to where Pappy stood half hidden in the shadows. Pappy went on eating his can of beans. Shad chewed the clump of grass he had pulled close to Pappy's feet.

The can was almost empty when Pappy heard a tiny metallic sound. Sounded a ways off. The bay heard it as well. Shadow's ears flickered forward. Again his eyes turned toward pappy for just a moment. Pappy put a finger to his lips.

"Heard it too fella," he whispered. Shad's eyes were once again riveted somewhere out in the Palo Verde.

Didn't take long before the horse and rider became visible. Yeah Pappy grinned, it was Boone. No one else rode slumped over in the saddle quite like Boone. The Black was picking his way along the narrow trail. Nit Picking Boone always said.

Boone appeared to be sleeping. Pappy wasn't fooled. Boone knew exactly where he was and what was going on.

Pappy didn't figure Boone seen him yet. Wouldn't be more'n a minute though before the black was to step into the clearing. Shad stood staring toward the Palo Verde with his ears following every step of the other horse. Boone would know it was Pappy waiting as soon as he saw the big bay.