

Fire Eyes

“ Hey! Get the hell outta there! Whatta you doin in my wagon?” these harsh words yelled by Fred Bently, driver for the Butterfield freight company in St. Joseph, Missouri. He was yelling at fifteen year old destitute Benny Hawkins hitch hiker from Richmond Virginia. Ben jumped from the back of the wagon saying, **“Sorry sir , it was raining when I walked in here last night the ground was cold and wet. I didn’t bother nothing. I’ll grab my pack and git. “** Fred said, **“Wait a minute boy! I’m tired of thieves like you stealing stuff. Let me see that pack!’** Ben said **“ Yes Sir “** and handed it over. Fred took a look at the meager things inside and said, **“” Boy you ain’t got a damn thing in here to eat. Them black walnuts won’t be much. What the hell is a boy your age doin out here walkin the road. Ain’t you got a home. Where you goin?”** Ben replied , **“ Ain’t gotta home. Do you know where Pacos is? My Grand Pa lives there.”**

Fred exclaimed , “Pacos ! Boy that’s a thousand miles from here. You better go back where you came from or stay here in St. Jo. You’ll never make it to Pacos walkin, You’ll die out there boy .” Ben said, **‘ Mom died. My grand pa is all I’ve got. It’s been tough getting this far, but folks have been good to me all the way from Richmond.”** Fred replied, **“ Damn boy all the way from Richmond. That’s hard to believe . lots of folks between here and there , but there ain’t many where you wanna go. Not much water either. No you’d be best staying right here and find work. Lotta boys your age workin in the fields. Look , I’ve gotta get something to eat and get down the trail. You any good at gittin a fire goin. You do that and I’ll throw some bacon on for you. “** Ben said, **“Thanks mister ,I’ll get it goin. I can hitch up for you too. I’ve done a lotta that.”**

Finished and hitched Fred said, “” There’s a settlement about ten miles down the trail , I’ll drop you off there, lotta farming goin on. You can pick up something pretty easy.” Ben replied, **“ Thank you sir, that’ll get me ten miles closer to Pacos.”** Fred said, **“ Said your name was Benny, well boy just call me Fred we’ll get by just fine. Looks like you know your way around horses. That was a pretty quick job of hitching up. Four ups ain’t the easiest, but locking the wagon break keeps things from happening. Pretty smart thinking . Outta make ten**

miles easy today. Where did you learn so much about doing a four up; ain't many boys your age can do that?" Ben replied, " Ma'ma moved from Clay county in Missouri three years ago with a four up. My Dad was killed by union soldiers looking for Jesse James and Mom moved back to Virginia. She died last year. Everything we had, she had sold to live there. She had no family left. We were pretty poor, but almost everyone was. The Union regulators took what they wanted. Our wagon and team they took. Mom died and there was nothing for me . I took what food we had and came this far. Mom's father lives in Pacos, he's the only family I have. I couldn't stay in Richmond . The Law there claims I stole one of our own horses, but it wasn't me that did it. I left as quick as I could. "

Fred said, "Pretty bad Ben , but this worthless war has killed hundreds of thousands and for what. We're no better off for it and neither are the black folks. Most of them worse off than when they had a place to live. Say you're from that county where Jesse lived. Too bad about him; guess he was mistreated pretty bad by the Union." Ben said, " No Mom said he was a murderer. Him and his brother Frank were part of that murderer Quantrill and Bloody Bill Anderson's Raiders. They killed all those Fathers and older boys in Lawrence Kansas. Just brought 'em out and shot'em down right in front of their families. Dad was killed because of that raid when the Redlegs came south for vengeance. I lost Mom and Dad and everything because of Jesse James. He needs hanging!"

Fred exclaimed , " Didn't know none of that. Folks making a hero outta him. Sorry Ben. Look I cain't give you a ride, it'll cost me my job . When we get to Kansas City they have a station and I have to get new teams, you drop off outta town and walk on through. I'll look for you when I leave. These little towns don't count so much and I can drive on through, but some drivers have picked up women so it's a firing now to carry anyone.

Ben thanked him and they made ten miles that day. Fred was taken by Ben's story and wanted to help the boy. Kind of nice to have the help too. Fred said, " we meet another Freighter, stay in back cause one bad report and we'll both be walking . I've really gotta watch it at the big campsites. No tellin who you meet there." Ben said,

“Mister Fred, I don’t wanna get you in trouble, I can get off and walk.” Fred replied , “ No , if I see a problem , then keep your pack together and you can get off and I’ll wait for you down the line. That should work, Ben it’s a long way to Pacos. We’ll hit Moberly in a couple of days , you might wanna hang out there for awhile. There’s a lady friend of mine there that I wanna see. Jeanie Long. You mentioned Jesse James, she’s had some bad times with one of his gang. They hit a lot of places here in Missouri. I think she lost a brother in one of their robberies. They robbed the bank there and killed the Mayor and her brother Dan. Yeah, she would love to put a bullet in Jesse. She works at the Bluebird Saloon. Blames Jesse for her present situation. I don’t know how true that is but I have a lotta fun with her. Jim Cahill was a gang member and I think he was sweet on her. Gonna marry her I heard. Had a couple of fights in Moberly over her . That was a couple of years back. Hasn’t been around in over a year. Don’t know if he’s still a gang member or not. Any way we’ll lay over there for a night or two. You can stay with my wagon and keep an eye on things. Stable’s just down the street from the Bluebird. I’ll leave you my rifle. It’s an old Henry from the big war. You said, you had done some shooting and Ben, a Spencer ain’t much different than a Henry except number of shells .The Henry shoots all day . Holds seventeen rounds. Don’t think you’ll need to face anyone . Just keep it handy and most will leave you alone.

They pulled into Moberly in the afternoon and hit the mercantile for supplies. Fred had Company credit there and loaded up for the long haul over to Kansas City. Ben stayed with the wagon and was surprised by Fred. He had bought two bottle of whiskey with his groceries and a trail hat for Ben. Fred said . ‘Put this on Ben and man you look ten years older; well maybe two or three anyway. You’re gonna need a sunshade when we git south a bit. We’ll go over and get a good meal . They eat pretty good at the Bluebird but they won’t want a boy your age in there. We’ll hit the Road House. Beat eatin over a campfire.” When dinner was over Fred headed for the Saloon and Ben went back to their wagon and teams. Ben took extra care with each animal and taking Fred’s advice, he kept the rifle handy.

He had been asleep for a few hours when gun shots woke him up ! He was thinking, “Pretty close, but he’d seen and heard a lot of that

in Richmond” getting out and checking the team , there was suddenly a flurry of shooting coming from The Bluebird saloon. Fear for Fred jolted him and he ran over to the Saloon never thinking he might get shot. The street was full of people and he heard someone saying “ Jesse James” The Marshal was standing on the porch and said, ‘ it’s over folks. There’s some wounded in there. I need help getting them out to the doc’s place. Ben ran forward to help and later was shocked to find that Fred had been wounded! He helped carry him on a blanket to the Doc’s office and stayed with him. Fred was in no shape to talk. He had been shot in the side near his right hip and his left leg was broken with two bullet holes in it .Doc was trying to put tight wraps on to stop the bleeding. He gave him a strong dose of Opium to kill his pain and Fred was soon unconscious while they worked on him. Ben stayed all night helping the Doc.

He overheard the story from the Marshall and Doc talking. Fred was upstairs with Jeanie when a very drunk Cahill kicked open her door and began shooting. Jeanie was killed and Cahill came down the stairs waving his pistol and half a dozen men shot him to pieces. Ben was in a state of uncertainty and fear for Fred. Too often in his young life fate had dealt him devastation and loss. He had no idea what to do except hope that Fred recovered . He didn’t. Internal blood loss killed him and Ben was now really alone. When the Doctor assumed that he was Fred’s son, Ben made his decision. The wagon had to be returned to St. Jo , go on to Kansas City or abandoned there at the livery in town. Ben said to the Doc, “ I don’t know what to do. We have a Freight wagon and on our way to Kansas City.” Doc replied, “ Son, you’re gonna have to take over for your Father. The Marshal has made arrangements to take his body to Boot Hill tomorrow. You’ll want to say your Good bye to him . I’m sorry son but since the War there’s been a lot of this sorta thing and this Cahill was said to be part of that murdering Jesse James Gang.”

Ben spent the afternoon thinking what he had to do .Fred had no family that he had spoken of. The Kansas Office would know what to do with the wagon and freight. He was thinking, ‘ I drove a four up to Richmond. I reckon I can make this trip to Kansas city. Maybe they’ll pay me for it and I can use the money to get to Pacos.” Ben’s thinking was typical of young boys growing up in the war torn Missouri and

Kansas. Frank and Jesse were younger than Ben when they were murdering in the Lawrence Kansas massacre . Fifteen was man size and just brash and fool enough to make things work without regard for their own safety. Fifteen years old, but that night he shed tears for Fred, the man that had reached out a helping hand to him.

The Marshall had also assumed Ben to be Fred's son and was helpful in getting things set for the burial. He was surprised to see that Ben had made a marker for Fred's grave burning his name in a head board. Most boys his age couldn't write or read. He shook Ben's hand wishing him good luck when he drove out of town. Living for so long on his own and fifteen year old Ben was far ahead of many that claimed to be adults. It was during a stop over by a creek that he found Fred's personal box of private things well hidden under the Wagon seat and thanks to his mother's teaching, he was able to read Fred's packet of papers. Inside were a few letters , some new Lincoln Green money and a bank draft made out to Carmelita Fernandez. It was for two thousand dollars from the First National Bank in Saint Louis. In green money there was three hundred and forty dollars with six double eagle gold pieces and some silver coins. More money than Ben had ever seen and it scared him . He found himself quickly looking around for anyone watching him! There was also a loaded pistol in the box with a full box of shells. "Dummy !" he said out loud . "There's nobody but you for miles out here." He was wrong! Quickly he put the box back under the wagon seat, carefully hiding it again. He pulled the rifle to him and now felt the concern that valuables always brought to a person. He was still scolding himself for being scared and stepped down from the wagon when suddenly and violently the rifle was jerked from his hands and he was knocked to the ground. He heard the jacking of a shell in the chamber and feared he'd be killed. He yelled " No ! No ! please!"

A rough voice said , "Hold it! Larry don't kill him . He's just a kid! We don't need a kid killing on us. Boy where the Hell is Bently? This is his wagon?" Larry said, " Cain't leave him here George. We got no choice. I wanted Bently. Where's Bently Boy?" Ben, laying flat on the ground and fearfull they'd kill him said, " He's dead , got killed in Moberly." Larry said, " He's lying George. I saw this wagon leaving town and Fred was driving it. He wouldn't let no sniveling kid take his

wagon. Get up boy!" Ben said, " Please I'm not lying , he's dead!" Larry exploded , hitting Ben the side of his head with the rifle splitting his ear and blood immediately covered the side of his face. Ben fell again, this time unconscious. George yelled , " Damnit Larry you mighta killed him." Larry replied, 'Lying little bastard! I don't give a damn." George said , " Larry we got what we wanted. Drag his body off in the brush and get our horses . I'll drive. We gotta get outta here. There'll be a stink about this. I wonder where Bently is. That Butterfield company'll be damn sorry they fired us. They'll fire Bently too." Larry said, " I wanted to kill the bastard. Well take this wagon south and sell the tools he's carrying. I told you they'll bring a good price it's all farming country south a ways. Damn kid wouldn't talk! Just as well , we damn sure couldn't take him with us. The buzzards'll find him."

Ben came awake two hours after the hit he took and slowly the memory came to him. He thought at first it was all a dream , but the head pain and dried blood on his shoulder was a quick reminder. Scared he lay still listening. There was no sound at all and there was brush all around him. He wondered where the two men were . If they were still around he had to get away. Slowly and cautiously he stood looking all around. There was the creek, but nothing else. The wagon was gone . He was alone with nothing and scared. No food and not even a canteen . He went to the creek and washed the blood off. His ear began bleeding and he stripped his shirt sleeve to make a bangage. He sat on the creek bank and let himself cry with self pity, but only for an instant. He became angry. Too many times , this young boy had suffered misfortune. Jumping to his feet, he began thinking , " What to do ? No water; he'd follow the creek south and maybe hit a homestead." Grabbing a quick drink and with a hurting head he began a fast walk south. He saw a small hill in the distance and headed for it thinking he might see something from there. Sundown and coming dark , there was nothing. He decided to stay there over night. The creek ran around the base of the hill. He was hungry , cold and terribly angry, but could only set and worry. His hurting head kept him awake and it was pitch black when he saw a campfire in the distance.

Walking down off the hill he couldn't see it and stopped to find a star or mark on the skyline to follow. It was after midnight when he had walked through brush, brambles and swampy ground to get near

the camp fire. It was only a glow when he finally arrived He feared waking anyone in surprise , he might wait until daylight and looked for a place to rest. It was while he looked around that he discovered horses teathered for grazing and was shocked to realize these were his horses! This was his wagon! The little moonlight shown him the two bed rolls by the camp fire. Scared and trying to decide what to do, he suddenly remembered the seat box. There was a gun in it. If he could get that box without waking the two thieves, he might get his wagon back. How he would do that and what to do afterward didn't cross his mind. He just wanted a gun! His rifle lay over on a saddle near the two men.

Ben was afraid of waking them and had no idea that they had found Bently's two bottles of whiskey. They were both dead to the world and he easily took the wagon box out and got the loaded pistol. Now in command , he wondered what to do next He kept the pistol out, ready to shoot , as he cautiously went to the fire and took the rifle. He was scared, but then seeing the two empty bottles, he suspected they wouldn't be coming awake. He was young, but he'd seen many drunks including his Dad. The two thieves were wearing belt guns which he easily with drew and took to the wagon. There was one rifle on a saddle which he also took. Bringing in one horse at a time he harnessed and hooked up all four in the early morning light. It was now a lot easier for him to collect what had been taken from the wagon and reload everything even the saddles of the two men. He was thinking how he had been left to die as he tied both of their horses to the rear of the wagon thinking, "They can walk . If I leave their horses they'll come after me. The creeks only a couple of miles and they have their bedrolls. I'm leaving them a whole lot more than they left me."

Ben drove a few feet slowly turning the wagon to go back north. At last look the two bed rolls hadn't moved. He pushed the team into a trot. He wanted to get outta the country fast and promised himself to never take any thing for granted. There were terrible people out there and he had been more than just lucky. What their fight with Bently was all about , he didn't care. That gun belt of Bently's would stay around his waist and he'd do a little shooting practice as he went to Kansas City. Ben Hawkins had been pushed into a young adult fully capable and now dangerous to push around. The bandage and pain of his torn

ear kept him wishing he'd just shot the two. Kansas city couldn't get there quick enough. He needed a Doc to check it over. Ben got lucky two days later he drove into Carrollton where the local horse doctor livery owner stitched him up , but gave him some bad news. Ben would lose half of his ear, there was too much infection and he had to remove it. Not wishing to show any kind of money, he sold one of the thieves horses and traded the saddle for the ear work and horse medicine grease to keep on it. The livery man took one look at the saddle and asked where he got it .Ben saw no reason to lie and said , “ I took it from thieves that robbed and tried to kill me.” He thanked the Horse doc and drove on out of town where he could camp.

Ben was seated eating his supper when a rider came loping up to his wagon. He met the rider with hand on his gun. The rider held a hand up and said, “ Hold up Son! I'm Daniels the Sheriff hereabouts. I need to ask a few questions. Mel at the livery showed me the saddle you traded him. He recognized it as the one Larry Julian stole in a killing raid on the Turner shop here in town he's a killer. Can you tell me where you ran into him and how you got this saddle? You're mighty young to be driving Freight for Butterfield. What's going on.” As he told his story he let the Sheriff , like everyone else, believe he was Fred Bently's son and he had to get the freight to Kansas City.

Sheriff said, “ Pretty tall story Ben , but I can see you have evidence . Sure sorry about your Dad. That ear looks like hell. So Larry and George are wondering around out there unarmed just waiting for me and a posse to pick'em up for a hanging. Son, you'll make a great lawman. I think I would have shot'em ; treating me the way they did you. Two days back you say, we'll get after them right away ; good luck to you.” He rode off shaking his head in wonder at this young boy.

Ben picked up the pace and stayed clear of every one. When he arrive in Kansas city , the station Manager had heard tales coming in on Stage of a young driver of theirs that had taken down Larry Julian. The manager Bob Wilkes couldn't believe the tale and asked how young Ben was in town when Fred was killed. Ben didn't wanna lie , but didn't wanna admit he was not Fred's son. He told Wilkes it was kinda accidental and he had arrived only that day. He had stayed for the burying and decided to bring the wagon to Kansas city on his own.

He had been raised working horses and driving a four up. Except for the run in he had with the Julians, the trip was easy. Wilke's said, "We cain't keep you on son, you're man grown and I'd love to keep you, but too young, the big man would have my job. We need drivers bad. I've got two loads for Santa Fe and cain't get drivers. Son, I've got an idea; no that won't work you've already given your age as fifteen year old Ben Bently. I was thinkin maybe call you eighteen and go from there. No that won't work." Ben said, "No sir I reckon that wouldn't work and I need to get to Pacos. My Grand Pa lives there." Wilkes said, "well Damn Boy! Pacos is just spittin distance from Santa Fe. Matter of fact, it's just before you git to Santa Fe." Ben couldn't believe what he heard and here was his big opportunity. He said, "Mister Wilkes, my Momma's name was Hawkins. I go by that a lot. Most folks know me as Ben Hawkins. I reckon I could go as eighteen." Wilkes exclaimed, "Hawkins you're hired! Get you stuff together from that St. Jo wagon, you'll get outta here tomorrow with Bud Hanks. It's two loads of mining gear. Hanks will have the lead wagon; you'll meet him in the moning. I'll give you Fred's wages in greenies if that's ok. They're a lot easier to handle than gold.

Ben pulled everything from his wagon. He had forgotten the guns, but took them along; he wouldn't have time to sell anything. He already had the company rifle of Fred's. His other Julian horse was a mustang, not worth much, but Ben kinda liked him and tailed him along. He knew it would cost him extra work and care, but he'd have a horse when he got to Pacos.

The following morning he met Bud Hanks and right way took a dim view of him. He was sober, but just; and smelled from whiskey. Ben shook his hand and wondered what he had gotten himself into, but Hanks knew his stuff and by nine high they were rolling. Wasn't no need for palaver as he said, "We'll be together for a couple months. You can tell me how wonderful you are then." Ben was thinking, "Suits me, I hope he don't carry whiskey with him, but I doubt that."

They were a week down the road before farms and ranches scattered out. The further they went the lonelier it got and Ben had never seen that much empty in his life. East of the big river there were thousands of farms. Hank said, "Boy, you think this is lonely, wait till

we hit the territories and the dry desert. I don't know why I keep doing this when I know there's a bullet or poison waterhole waitin for me. Injuns ain't been too bad lately, but you cain't go to sleep in this country. Always keep a gun handy. Hope you know which end of a gun shoots. Don't mean to scare you boy, but out here you grow up pretty quick or the coyotes git you. They say you're eighteen. They're lyin ain't they. Well boy you sure don't talk much, but I'm use to that. You lose a lotta partners out here. On your part I give you credit ; you shore know your stuff around wagons and horses. Gotta thank you for your help. Yeah, I think we'll do ok. It's about seven hundred miles we gotta travel so ain't no need to git in a hurry about nothing, just drag one day into the next like walkin and we'll git there. Sure glad you brought that skate of a Mustang along. Makes taking the horses to grass a hell of a lot easier. Pretty smart." Ben said his thanks and went to his wagon thinking, ' Maybe I should ask him to get that seat box to Grand Pa in case I don't make it. I'll wait awhile. There's a bit too much in there and I think he's outta whiskey money. I don't know what to do about that Bank Draft either. I wonder about those letters, maybe I'll get'em out and see what they say."

One read, Dear Freddy, I won't blame you if you don't answer my letter. I'm desperate, our little Jenny is terribly ill. Doctor don't know what's wrong. Someone from back east say's he thinks she's allergic to something. I'm leaving Texas and going with her to Santa Fe. I don't think that will help, but I've gotta try. You told me Charlie was no good, you were so right. He tried to assault Jenny, even took her and kept her hidden from me for a week. Jenny got away and walked six miles to get back home . I would have killed the bastard, but he never came back. Jenny was lucky and wasn't hurt. Freddy dear, I'm so sorry for running out on you, but you were gone all the time hauling freight and Charlie was so exciting. I just had to find a better life. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me. Bye for now.

Freddy I'm gonna finish this letter, we're now in New Mexico.If you get to Santa Fe, we live in the Mexican adobe section of town. Please, I need your help, I have to leave her alone while I work and I fear for her . it's a rough and poor place to live. You know I could use any money you could send. General delivery will be Ok. Please forgive me for Jenny's sake, Ann.

Ben read the next letter , and wished he could see what Fred wrote to his ex wife Ann. He could only guess from the reply of, “ Dear Freddy, I desperately need more money. Charlie came back and he was so very sorry for what he tried with Jenny, She is very beautiful and desirable for a fourteen year old girl. I can understand his desire for her, He has been so wonderful Freddy since he returned. I loaned him half of the three hundred dollars you sent. He needed pin money to get in a poker game . He’s a very good gambler Last night was a bad night for him . He lost most of the money , but hopes to have better luck tonight. I only had fifty dollars left to loan him. He’s very good with the playing cards. You should see how well he shuffles them and is always doing card tricks for Jenny, but she’s still afraid of him. I think he was drunk when he tried to hurt her. Please send me all the money you can , I desperately need your help. Love, Ann.”

Her final letter read, “ Oh Dear Freddy, please for Jenny’s sake don’t be that way. I promise to never loan Charlie any of your money again. No please don’t come to Santa Fe. Charlie won’t like you being here. He was very angry when he discovered you had opened a credit account at the Farmer’s Mercantile for only fifty dollars per month and named Jenny as the only user. I don’t understand you. Why would you do that. I promised you I wouldn’t loan Charlie any more. Cain’t you trust me? Jenny is not a responsible person. She’s still too young and she don’t like Charlie. I don’t understand that. Please send me two hundred dollars. They’re threatening to put Charlie in Jail and he wants me to go work at the Saloon to pay his gambling debts. I don’t want to do that again. I did it for him in Texas, but I thought he’d find work here in Santa Fe. Twice now I’ve found Jenny at the jail scared to come home. The sheriff has threatened Charlie with hanging if he tries anything more with Jenny. Please Freddy , I’m desperate. I need some money Please. Love Ann

Ben sat for a long time trying to understand what was happening to Fred’s Daughter. Finally , still confused, when Bud asks what the matter was. He seemed awful quiet about something. Ben replied, “ Bud I’ve told you about Fred Bently and the whole story. From these letters , It looks like Fred’s daughter really needs his help and he’s dead. Here I know you cain’t read too good so I’ll read’em to you and tell me what you think. I’m confused about what to do. I’ve got all of

Fred's stuff in my wagon and we are going to Santa Fe. His daughter will need that credit bill paid. I know a little bit about that stuff. My Mom ran a credit in Clay county at the local mercantile, but you gotta have cash to pay it I think."

After Ben had read the letters to Bud and tried to discuss everything, Bud said, " Ben this Ann is a dumb bitch. She had a good man and threw him away for a worthless gambler. She can't be trusted with any thing and it sounds like she was selling herself for Charlie to get gambling money. Jenny is the biggest loser. Her mother is too hung up on Charlie to understand the threat he is to Jenny. Sounds like the sheriff read him the good book. We're going through Wichita and they have a bank there. You can send a draft to Santa Fe Farmer's Mercantile and keep them satisfied until we get to Santa Fe. I don't know what to tell you about Jenny, I'd suggest finding her and see what she wants to do about her mother and Charlie before you give her Fred's things. She sounds like a pretty smart girl. Charlie would be smart to leave her alone. I'd bet you anything she keeps a knife handy when Charlie's around. You say you've got a Grand Pa in Pacos. He might be willing to help. The mail is pretty slow, but a bank draft will get there a good month before we do. If your Grand Pa can read, you could write and have him look up Jenny . Sorta see what he might be able to do. Seems to me Ben , you're sure gittin into growed up things awful young, but a man's gotta do. Ain't much of a man that walks away and I know you ain't that kind. I like you boy, you'll do to ride the river with." Ben thanked Bud and it was time to get ready for bedrolls. He'd have to study on what Bud had said.

Ben spent the next few days putting a letter together for his Grand pa in Pacos and when Wichita came up , they stopped overnight to allow Ben to go to the Bank and get an education on handling money. He took Fred's three hundred and bought a draft which went out that day. He had no idea that his draft would arrive in time to cover Jenny's account and pay off her threatening and outstanding bill. He also had no idea that a Bank clerk saw his money exchange with all the new Lincoln greenies and assumed he was loaded with cash. He had a bundle looking number, but mostly small bills. This clerk overheard the conversation and mouthed off at a saloon two days later about a young boy with money travelling south. Ben and Bud's wagons

were now considered targets for a small four man gang of thieves led by Johnny Hunt , that had recently been ran out of Dodge.

Four days of travel and they came to the small Trading Post south of the Derby settlement and Bud wanted to stop for chewing tobacco. No sooner stopped and four outlaws suddenly appeared two with guns drawn. The leader, Johnny Hunt demanded , “ Hold up! Throw those guns down ! Boy get that money bag of yours and damnit make it quick! You ol’man stay right where you are. Any move and I’ll shoot you! Boy! Damnit move! Joe ,you and Bobby see what’s in the wagons.” Bud was shocked , but threw his gun out. Ben did the same as Bud said, “ Do as he says Ben. Money don’t mean that much. He’ll kill you Boy.” Ben turned around and went behind the wagon seat to get his bag. He was scared and was going to throw out the bag, but things took a bad turn when the man Bobby jerked Bud from the wagon and smacked him in the head with his pistol. When Bud hit the ground unconscious, Ben lost whatever fear he may have had and a mad anger took over. He had an arsenal of guns in his wagon and grabbing a pistol he shot at Johnny and then quickly fired at Bobby. The fourth outlaw stood in shock at the sudden shooting, dropped his rifle and jammed his hands in the air, shouting “ Don’t! Don’t shoot .”Joe wasn’t having any part of a shooting and ran for his horse, with Bud’s wagon protecting him. Ben let him go and swung his gun back to Bobby rolling in pain on the ground , his left leg shot above the knee. Ben still in shock himself, almost mechanically, picked up Johnny and Bobby’s guns. The fourth outlaw pleaded with him not to kill him.

Ben in a disbelieving daze was suddenly shocked to see another older man stagger from the store with a shot gun in his hands. His head was bleeding and Ben almost shot at him, but suddenly realized from the apron he was wearing that he worked there. The man stood there in as much disbelief as Ben. Ben said, “ They hit Bud mister. God, I hope he’s Ok. That man hit him with his pistol.”The man said, “ Son look to him I’ll kill any that move. He’s the bastard that clubbed me.” Pointing to Bobby yelling in pain. He then pointed his shotgun at the fourth outlaw who immediately dropped to his knees begging for his life. “ the man asked Ben , “ Who are you son? Your partner on the ground, shoot these outlaws? Hell of a job. This one’s dead.” Ben said , “ I’m Ben Hawkins, this is my wagon. He’s Bud Hanks, we’re travelling

together. Sir I'll get my canteen and see if I can help Bud. The other outlaw ran away. Can you do something for him, he's bleeding some."

The man said , " Son, I'm Sam Thomas, I work this post. It's owned by the Army. They robbed my money drawer, wasn't much . Asked if you two had passed through. Looks like they made a big mistake . That dead man is Johnny Hunt from Dodge. He should a stayed there. I'll let that man's partner wrap his leg. I don't give a damn if he dies. My head hurts like hell. I'll keep an eye on'em. They won't bother you. Go ahead and see to your partner. Ben was busy wetting his neckerchief and washing Bud's face Bud was beginning to come around , and Ben was telling him everything was Ok.

Later Bud was still looking in amazement at this boy partner of his that had just killed a man in a gunfight. Sam was saying, "Hanks, I cain't get over it either. I thought you had done the shooting. How old are you boy?" Bud quickly said, " Just old enough to shoot down an outlaw and protect this old man. Sam , what did you do with Bobby out there?" Sam replied, " That little one is Harley , Bobby's young brother. He was scared to death. I got'em in the storage room right now. Gave him some opium to kill the pain. The Post Master will be here this afternoon with his wagon. I'll send them to the Fort They made a big mistake messing with the Army. They'll see jail time." Ben said, " I'm sorry Bud. I just lost my temper. Could have got us both killed." Bud replied, " Son, I'll take losing your temper anytime , just not at me and don't feel bad about what you had to do today. It goes with trying to live out here. Just hope these are the last skunks you have to deal with." Ben asked , "What about him out there. He'll have to be buried."

Sam replied, "We don't have a Boot Hill and the ground around here is too hard for diggin. He'll get a coyote grave. There's a saying out here, you shoot a man and you gotta dig his grave. East of here there's dunes, we'll take him there and cover the sand with rocks and they'll kinda act like a marker. You stay here and watch the place and Bud and I will see to his burial." Ben was happy with that ,the less he saw of Johnny Hunt's body the better. The gunfight was still unreal to him. Bud and Sam discussed this young Ben Hawkins as they went to bury the body . Sam was saying, ' I'd sure like to have seen it Bud. He only fired two shots Hunt's was dead center of the chest killed almost

instantly and I didn't wanna say this in front of Ben, but that Bobby will lose a leg. Too much damage. Was it me, I'd just as soon be dead. Hard to make it with two legs out here." Bud said, "I knew he was kinda special. Thinks like a thirty year old and gets better all the time. I was sure lucky to tie in with him.

Ben didn't sleep that night and Bud sat up with him for hours talking about home and his childhood hoping to keep his mind off the killing. The following morning they said good bye to Sam and drove south. Later Ben said to Bud, "Thanks for leaving early I needed to get away, but I've thought long and hard about what happened Bud. It bothers me that I had to shoot, but I don't remember hesitating. It was all automatic and I can't remember everything, it's kinda like a dream." Bud replied "Son, I've had to do some killing. I ain't proud of it either, but sometimes life just pushes you in that direction. I'm hoping for a quiet trip, but give me one of those extra's you have and I'll be packing two. If we run into more trouble, we'll answer with gunfire what have you got now? Four rifles and five pistols with enough bullets to stop an Indian attack. There hasn't been one of those in a couple of years north of Santa Fe. Wish I could say the same for Renegades and outlaws. There's plenty of them still making trouble. You put an end to one gang. Son I'm gonna show you the way to shoot that short barrel forty four of Johnny Hunt's. it's a fanning pistol and I hope you never have to use it, but inside of twenty five feet, it can't be beat. You'll have plenty of time to practice how to fan the hammer with your left hand and shoot it. Might take the boredom outta the trip."

"Bud said. Wellington's next and we're gonna make a turn west for Medicine Lodge Should be an easier trip and it'll take us in the direction of the Santa Fe Trail west and south of Dodge Have a couple of streams to cross and the Red Hill country. We should pick up some fresh meat. There's a lotta game in that country."

Six weeks of slugging it out with their heavy wagons and they were in sight of Trinidad and the Santa Fe Trail. They had only met with the normal travel problems and Bud said, "Best and easiest trip I've ever made Ben. You're the very best of partners. We're getting in talkin distance of Santa Fe. We'll stop over a day in Trinidad and load

up for the last leg. I'd kinda like to get a bottle and rest up a little. You ever drink whiskey Ben? No I reckon not . it's the devil's brew Ben , but it helps to calm the fires in your thinking and fades the memories you'd like to forget."

" Trinidad! Yeah!" exclaimed Bud. "We'll set up and if you'll let me use your mustang , I'll run in and get us some beef for dinner." Ben said, "Go ahead, he's fat and sassy . Hasn't had to work except for packing in Antelope and that one desert deer. He's looking really good right now. Grass was good the trail you took. Bud said, " Yeah, most folks don't take that trail west outta Medicine Lodge. Feed and water is the best. Look, I'll only be gone an hour, build up the fire for some beef steaks." Two hours later and Bud comes walking into camp mad as hell. Fuming he said, "Ben, Quade Downey is in town with two of his men . Claims your mustang is his . Say's it was stolen. Yeah he's the big man in town and I wasn't packing a gun. I'm gonna borrow that fannin gun of yours. I ain't no duffer when it comes to using one." Ben said , " No , Bud, it's my horse , I'll go talk to this man. You're the one that made me grow up and like I say , it's my horse . Get that beef out and we'll eat then I'll go back to town and get my horse. " Bud said , " No Damnit Ben , this Quade is a gunfighter . Probably a killer outlaw from what the barkeep says. He'll kill you with no regrets. There's no law in Trinidad and he makes his own. I'll go with you." Ben replied, " No Bud I promise if I cain't talk him into giving me my horse, I'll come on back to camp. You stay here and keep an eye on things. I'll be ok."

Bud wasn't happy, but maybe Ben being a kid could get his horse with no trouble. Ben took his gun out and checked the loading , all six he filled. He was thinking, " All that practice for six weeks and Bud had said many times he was faster than a rattle snake. Maybe he could demonstrate what he could do and stay clear of a gunfight, but I want my horse!" Half an hour later and there in front of the saloon stood his horse He automatically loosened his gun as Bud had beat into him. "Was he nervous ?" he thought , " No , but I am getting mad. I gotta watch that." A big trail hand stood in front of the hitch rail talking and laughing with friends on the porch.

Ben went straight to his horse and began to untie the reins . The big man spun around exploding, " Boy ! What the hell do you think

you're doin?" Ben replied, " I'm getting my horse. My partner left him here I'm taking him home." Quade yelled, "The Hell you are boy get away from that horse. He's mine. You trying to steal my horse boy , that a good way to get killed!' Ben shocked the whole porch when he stepped back from the hitch rail planted his feet and said , " Yes it is, But I don't wanna kill you. This is my horse." Quade's eyes flew open as he looked into the calm unafraid eyes before him. It was obvious to every one that he couldn't believe this was happening. That boy wasn't the least bit afraid of him and he couldn't believe the cold fear that gripped him. This couldn't be happening, he'd had his share of gunfights, but here it was! He didn't want to die and the cold casual confidence of Ben scared him. Finally cursing , he spun away saying, " Take your damn horse!" Ben said , " Thank you sir", and mounted his horse. Ben feared he might get a bullet in the back and walked off fearfully into the twilight.

Bud couldn't believe his eyes as Ben rode into the camp fire light. Ben said, " I did just like you taught me Bud and I wasn't scared. He let me have my horse." Bud exclaimed, " Just like that Huh! You would have killed him . He knew it and backed down. Boy you don't know how dangerous you are. Up close like that you've got the upper hand, but remember at any distance you've gotta be accurate and fanning won't get you there. They'll sure be talkin about you tomorrow. I don't think we'll stick around. Some crazy will want to brace you. We'll get out early and let the boy that nobody got a good look at, head on down the trail. We're getting close to Pecos and your Grand pa Ben, no more shootin."

Weeks later they passed the trail to Pacos and Bud said, " we'll ask in town for your Grand Pa Rivers place we'll stop and say hello, but we need to get on into Santa Fe and drop off these wagons. Remember what we heard in Raton Pass. So what ever you do Ben don't say a word about Quade Downey. He was killed in a gunfight in Trinidad after being backed down by a young Boy. Said he lost his nerve. Gunfighters are that way Ben , show the white feather and someone looking for a reputation will take you down. It's best if no one ties you to Quade.

Dan Rivers was tickled to meet his grand son and insisted they stay overnight. Bud and Dan struck off an immediate friendship and things got interesting when Ben brought all of his arsenal of guns into Dans house. Dan was thrilled with Ben and said, “ Bud, I cain’t tell you how grateful I am for bringing Ben here. With his help , I can get this ranch going again. Half my damn cows only carry an ear mark and my calf crop is way down from rustlers.” Bud said, “ Dan , you may have that backwards a little . Without Ben’s help I wouldn’t be here, he’s a thirty year old in a teens body. That boy is a man and one of the best I’ve ever seen. I’ve never had a partner like him and Dan if you could use a hired hand for keep. I’m calling it quits as a teamster and looking for a job. I can still wrangle cows.” Dan said, “ Cain’t pay nothing Bud , but if I can get things goin again I’ll take you on for keep. Sorry but I gotta do the same for Ben. There just ain’t no money and I cain’t get to market, except a few at a time for groceries.”

Ben asked, “ Grand pa did you get my letter? Where you able to find Jenny?” Dan replied, ‘ I haven’t talked to her directly Ben. I went to sheriff Roberts and asked about her. When he heard what you had written about her Dad and the trouble she was having with this Charlie, he has taken a personal interest and checks on her daily. He’s anxious to meet you and see what plans might be made for her benefit. Ben I’ve got to tell you, from what Roberts told me , this Jenny is not a push over and definitely not a fourteen year old girl. Charlie has been lucky to avoid a knife in the stomach. Hang out here for a few day’s and I’ll go into Santa Fe with you, introduce you to Roberts and he can take you to meet Fire Eyes as he calls her.”

Four days of riding around the Ranch and seeing things, they made the run to Santa Fe and met sheriff Roberts. Bud said later, “ Roberts sure gave you the once over Ben, especially that gun you’re wearing. I think he suspects something and he’ll be asking questions . Give him honest answers, we have nothing to hide except a reputation that might get you in a gunfight. Tell him that.” Roberts had to finish a job working on his wagon. Ben , Bud and Dan got right with him getting all the wheels lubed and rims tightened. Roberts offered to buy lunch and they all went to a small eating place in the Mexican side of town.

When they entered, Roberts went to the counter and asked for the cook. A tall pretty girl came from in back and came to speak with him. He gave her orders for all four and she turned to go back when she noticed Ben looking at her. She stopped abruptly and glared at him saying, " Boy, I hope you got an eyeful. We don't serve kids. Put your eyes back in!" Ben was embarrassed because he was guilty. She was a looker. He quickly stood jerking his hat off saying, " I'm sorry Miss. You're right I was staring. Never seen a girl like you before." The girl was about to give Ben a good tongue lashing when Robert's interrupted with, " Ben, I want you to meet Fire Eyes, Jenny Bently! Jenny this is Ben Hawkins!" Jenny was shocked as was Ben. Neither knew what to say, but Ben said, " Miss Jenny, I was your fathers partner on the Butterfield freight wagon. He spoke of you often." Ben knew that wasn't true but how do you tell a beautiful girl her father's dead. He had to say something and continued' "I hate to bring you this news ,but your Father was killed in Missouri and he wanted you to have his things. There was very little, but I sent his wages to the mercantile for you as he wanted." Jenny flopped down in a chair , her eyes now in tears. Roberts came over and patted her shoulder. He said , " Ben she's suspected for sometime he was dead. Jenny can you get away for a little while to talk with Ben. He's traveled over seven hundred miles to bring you your Dad's things." Jenny wiping her eyes said, " Oh I'm sorry Ben for what I said to you, but I get so many nasty comments. I'm sorry" Ben said , " Don't be sorry. I deserved it. Can we go some where and talk. There's things I need to tell you and it's kinda private. Ok?"

Jenny said , "We'll go outside and Juan can get the food together." She quickly went in back and came back leading Ben outside to a bench. Jenny said, " I haven't seen daddy since I was a little girl. He always called me Fire Eyes. I guess because I have a bad temper. I really didn't know him well. He's kinda like a dream." Ben said , " I have and have read some of your Mother's letters. Putting all the pieces together still leaves questions, but since I know where you are , maybe you can answer them." Ben proceeded to tell Jenny the whole story. Finally after a good hour, Jenny exclaimed, " Ben , I cain't believe it and you really are a gunfighter." Ben said , " Jenny I'm just a guy that got tired of being pushed around. Yes I don't have to be afraid

of anyone, except you maybe!" Jenny laughed and it was the first time he'd seen her smile. Jenny asked, "What's next for you Ben?" He explained about his grandpa's ranch and where he'd be staying. She said, 'I'm lucky to have this job. Most folks think I'm eighteen or more. It's tough with Mom and Charlie. They wanna move to San Francisco. Gold country, they call it. I don't wanna go. I'll have to stick my knife in Charlie. He's evil when he's drinking and harasses me all the time. He just won't let up. Mom don't see it or don't care. She's lost over her Charlie. He can do no wrong and I'm just imagining things. Every day or so I get a proposal for marriage. Sometimes I think that's what I should do, but men are so bad and I'm afraid to try it. I see what's happened to Mom. I'd sooner be dead."

Ben said, "My Grandpa's pretty smart. He might think of something. Your Dad was carrying a bank draft of two thousand dollars for a Carmelita Fernandez and he was coming to Santa Fe to see you I believe. Do you know such a lady? Maybe a close friend of his. I've asked around but nobody knows of a Fernandez family in Santa Fe. There are some Carmelita's around but not Fernandez." Jenny replied, "Sounds like my Dad was like a lotta men, killed in the arms of a whore! I'm sorry Ben, you didn't need to hear that and I shouldn't say stuff like that, but I'm not a nice girl. Fire Eyes suits me." Ben said, "Jenny I wanna be your friend. I wish we were closer to Santa Fe, I'd be right here if you needed me and I'm gonna see what I can find out about that bank draft. I think it should be yours." Saying good bye was not what Ben would have liked to do, but they had to get their things and wages before going back to the Ranch.

It was days later that Roberts came in his wagon to the Ranch and asked for Dan. He said, "Things are not good in Santa Fe Dan, I've gotta get Jenny outta town. She knifed Charlie in the arm, he swears he'll kill her. I brought her to Pacos. She may get a job here, I hope. She's got a room in town, but her bank roll's pretty small." Dan said, "I'm glad to hear that Roberts, Ben talks about her all the time. He's smitten and I probably won't be able to keep him on the ranch when he hears she's in town. Hell we were just getting our calves branded. I was hoping to get after the older cows, but love comes first with young folks. I'll lose for sure. I'll keep an eye on her Sheriff and I know Ben won't let anything happen to her. He's got it bad." Robert said, "

Send me a note sometime and let me know how it goes. I don't know what else to do. If there's no work here, hate to say it but bring her back to Santa Fe. Her Mom and Charlie will be raising hell. It was her credit at the Mercantile , they were living on." Dan replied, " Don't worry , we'll find something for her . I know why they call her Fire Eyes , she'll come out on top every time." Roberts said, "I'll tell you a story some time." And drove away.

That evening Ben got in late from town. He had already seen Jenny and couldn't quit talking about her. Dan said " Ben let me see that Bank Draft, I may have an idea. I've heard of how some well to do folks kept a woman on the side and sent money to a special named account that belonged to their mistress. The mistress opened a bank account under a different name and received drafts to that account which only they could draw from. It begins to make sense now. Fred upon arrival in Santa Fe would have Jenny open an account in the first national bank in Santa Fe with her name as Carmelita Fernandez this would prevent her being killed for her money as Jennifer Bently when she received the Bank draft. Fred was going to use this as a means to make sure her mother Anne couldn't get her hands on any money without Jennifer's signature, as Carmelita Fernandez. Tomorrow Ben, we go with Jenny to the Bank and she'll have all the money she needs for awhile."

Ben couldn't sleep that night and rode quickly into town to wake Jenny. Surprised , she asked, " Ben , damn you, I hope you didn't come waking me for your pleasure. Don't, please don't tell me that." Ben replied, " No Jen , I've got wonderful news!" Jenny held up her hand saying, " Wait! If you're gonna ask me to marry you so you can support me. The answer is no. I don't need anybody. Go on back home , I may have a job."Ben laughed saying , " No, No! Jenny I'll marry you whenever you like. You can support me. That bank draft is yours. Jenny , Grand pa figured it out. You are Carmelita Fernandez!" Jenny said, " You're crazy in the head Ben. Go home!" Ben said , "We're going to Santa Fe tomorrow and get you your money. Be ready we'll leave early. I'll explain it to sheriff Roberts and he can identify you to the bank ,establish the account ,and deposit the draft. Wait for conformation and the money is yours." The following afternoon Jenny

couldn't believe it. Ben presented the draft to be deposited in the Fernandez account.

It was three weeks later when Jenny gave her Mom two tickets to San Francisco and wished her Good Luck. She refused to let her Mom know where she had gone to live. Ben and Bud's big surprise was to find that the job Jenny had taken was cook for Dan at the ranch! Bud said to sheriff Roberts, " I guess Dan Rivers wants Jenny for a grand daughter in law. Them two cain't wait to get married."

It was almost a year later at the wedding when Roberts said , " Now Ben you can maybe understand, Fred was from Texas , I believe. There is an old story of a beautiful Spanish girl that fought beside her man to the death in the fall of the Alamo. She too was called Fire Eyes. Her name was Carmalita Fernandez.

The End