

## [Old Man Saunderson]

Dup-300091 Tales FRONTIER LIFE AND CHARACTERS

Subject: OLD MAN SAUNDERSON

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8/15/36 - cl-550 OLD MAN SAUNDERSON

When "Newcomb's Trading Post" was one small building and a "dug-out" under the hillside, operated by Charley Nelson, during the early years of this century, it was the scene of a weird incident - when two young freighters, named Roy and Clinton Burnham, cousins, drove up to the store with a dead man as a part of their load of freight. They had left Farmington, the morning before for Gallup, with freight and one passenger, an old prospector named Saunderson, who had come down from the mountains to go to Arizona for the winter months, and whom they had agreed to take as far as Gallup. They had not made Nelson's Post the first night, so had camped by the roadside when dusk overtook them. Drawing the two wagons close together, they had a bite to eat, then made their

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three beds on the ground between the two wagons, throwing a big canvass across both wagons and tying the four corners to the wheels, thus making a shelter and giving them some protection from the cold of the December night. In the morning, the two younger men were up as soon as it began to get light, not disturbing the older man till breakfast was cooked. Then Roy called him a couple of times, but without response, so he went nearer and laid his hand on the old man's shoulder to awaken him, but he found the old man was cold and dead, "deader than a door nail."

After the first shock was over, the problem confronting them was what to do with the body. The law required certain observances, 2 none of which were possible out there in the middle of the great American desert. The law required that the body be untouched till the arrival of an officer. As this could not be complied with, they decided to move on to Nelson's Post, and send an Indian runner back to Farmington with a note to the Justice of the Peace.

It was a well known fact that the Navajo Indians immediately leave the vicinity of a dead body, and the young men were not inclined to thus ruin the Indian business of Nelson's Post. So, to keep the fact that they had a dead body on the wagon, a secret, from the Indians at least, they, accordingly, before leaving camp, wrapped the body in the big canvass, and strapped it, in a careless fashion, to the top of the covered wagon, thus hiding it in the most conspicuous place, on the very top of the wagon. Their arrival at the store was without incident, and as far as known the Indians never learned of anything unusual about it.

After telling the trader their experience, he gave them permission to lock the body in the dug-out after dark, and to leave it there till the Indian runner came back with directions from the Justice of the Peace, which they supposed would be to take the body back to Farmington. So that night they stealthily put the body under the hillside in the dug-out, and locked the door, and next went on their way to Gallup.

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Returning from Gallup with a load of “turkeys and trimmings” for the Christmas trade in Farmington, they stopped at the Nelson Trading Post to make sure the Justice of the Peace had taken the body and attended to it. They were most astonished that the note brought in by the Indian runner had instructed them to “bury the 3 body there”.

This was a very hard task, as it also involved concealing the death from the Navajos. However, instead of sleeping that night, they went down to the flats and with axes they chopped a hole in the ground - a very long one it seemed to them - for the man was tall, the ground was frozen, it was dark and gruesome and they thought the task would never be finished. But they made better time when they got below the frozen crust, and could work with shovels, and they finally completed the task. They had dug a grave in the darkness of the night. Unlocking the door to the dug-out, they stumbled out, bearing the body of the old man, laid him on his own pillow, and his own bed, wrapped him in his own bedding, slowly and with much difficulty, carried him to the newly made grave, and slowly and reverently placed him in his last resting place down in the flats, where today the drifting sands [?] leveled the lonely grave, and left not a sign to tell where lies the body of Old Man Saunderson.

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Source of Information:

Ray Burnham, Farmington, New Mexico.