

VIPER'S REVENGE

by Verne Wheelwright

Some stories of mysterious death seem so logical, so plausible, and they are often told about someone the teller of the story actually almost knew. This story is one I was told many times by the “old-timers” as I grew up in a very small town in Idaho, where everyone really did know nearly everyone else in town.

I heard this story again when I lived in Oregon, and then once more here in the valley of the Rio Grande.

David had been working all morning repairing fencing around the pasture just west of his two-story family home. The weather was warm for early spring, but a strong wind had been blowing most of the day. He came back to the house at lunchtime and ate the meal his wife, Maria, had prepared for him with the obvious enthusiasm of a hungry man. While they ate, he mentioned to her that he had killed a medium size rattlesnake that morning, probably about four feet long, the first one David had seen that spring. “Whapped ‘im with a fencepost.”

This was quite a change from their first years on the farm, when they encountered large rattlers nearly every week. David felt that the family’s active working of the farm had probably sent the large snakes looking for quieter surroundings.

People on farms had differing opinions about snakes, and particularly rattlers. They knew that snakes ate rodents and other costly pests, but a rattler was a risk to children and livestock, as well as to adults that failed to give them wide berth. It was said that in the heat of late summer, when they were shedding their skins, rattlers couldn’t see, so they struck at anything that came close. Men often carried pistols loaded with shot, which would spread quickly and hit a small target without careful aim. Women working in their gardens were adept with their sharp edged hoes, and would separate most any snake that came within reach into two wiggling parts. Most felt that the best snake was a dead one.

After lunch, David pulled up the straps of his overhauls, put his broad-brimmed straw hat on his head, held Maria in a warm hug and kissed her before he strode off to the barn where he had more repairs to do. On the way, he stopped at the tool shed to pick up a pry bar, an adjustable wrench and large bolt, then went on to the barn.

In those times, most farmers had a few cows, enough to provide milk, cream and butter for the family, and often a few gallons to sell to the local “creamery” The creamery would send a truck out at regular times to pick up the large, five gallon milk cans that the farmers placed at the side of the road in the morning, and leave some empty cans for the farmer to refill. When the cows came into the barn for milking each morning and evening, they would go to a large wooden trough where the farmer would strew hay for them to eat. They would put their heads through an opening between two upright posts, often 2x4s, in order to get to the hay. One of these uprights would pivot from the bottom, allowing the farmer to close the gap between the two uprights just enough that the cow could not remove her head while he was milking. She could move her head up and down to eat, she just couldn’t back up. For someone sitting on a stool beside the cow, milking into a bucket that was under her, this was important. The whole point of this is that the device for keeping the cow in place is called a stanchion, a word that is not familiar to most folks these days.

As he worked to replace the pivot bolt on the old stanchion, David braced himself with one foot against the nearby wall, pushing hard to line up the large bolt through the hole in the two-by-four. Once the bolt was in place, he threaded on the nut and tightened it. When his repair of the stanchion was complete, David stood, picked up his tools and walked slowly toward the big door at the end of the barn. The fresh air would feel good.

Later that afternoon, Maria made iced tea, filled a fruit jar, and took the slightly bitter brown liquid to David in the barn. But he was nowhere in sight. She expected to find him from the sound of his work, but the barn was silent, except for the sound of wind moving through the old structure. She thought he would be working at the milking stanchions, but he wasn't there, so she called his name, but there was no response. As she walked on through the barn, looking up into the lofts and peering at the far recesses, she called his name again, but again, no answer.

Thinking he might be at the big door where the cows entered the barn every evening, she went there, slid the door open and froze! David was lying on the ground, apparently unconscious. Frantic, she knelt beside him, urgently calling his name. He tried to answer, but although his lips moved as though he was trying to speak, no sound could be heard. His eyes remained closed. She knew she couldn't move him to the house herself, so she told him she was going to phone for help.

This all took place many years ago, when phone calls took longer to make because all calls went first to a central operator who then put your call through. The advantage of this system was that the operator, often known simply as "Central" usually knew where to find the local doctor. Doctors went to the homes of patients who were too sick or too contagious to come to the doctor's office. In emergencies, "Central" would call the home of the last patient where she knew the doctor had been, then call the next stop or the next until she found him. Ambulances were common only in the cities, and getting a doctor out to a farm home took time. Although David and Maria's neighbors were alerted by "Central," by the time help arrived, it was too late for David.

What had happened to take David's life so suddenly? David was a healthy man, or had been. There was no sign of injury, no bleeding, not even a bruise. When the doctor arrived, a closer examination revealed that David's right leg was swollen, and when his boot was cut off, the foot was discolored. Almost as though he had bitten by a rattlesnake, but there were no signs of a bite, or even an injury.

When Maria was told, she remembered that David had reported his encounter with a rattler that morning. But he hadn't been bitten! He had killed the poisonous viper with a fence post. The doctor was puzzled, then asked Maria to show him where David had been working that morning. It didn't take long to find the dead rattler, its head crushed into the imprint of David's boot. Mystified, the doctor walked back across the pasture to the farmhouse. Later, he examined David's boot, which had been cut completely open along the inside seam in order to remove it from David's swollen foot.

The doctor looked at the boot carefully, peering inside, and examining the sole. He asked for a sharp knife, then carefully cut along the line where the boot joined the sole, laying the inside of the boot open. There, just protruding through the sole could be seen the tips of a pair of fangs.

As I said at the beginning, this is a story I heard many times, and in different versions. In one variation, a young ranch hand, proudly wearing a brand new pair of boots, encounters and kills a large rattler. (The rattlesnakes in these stories were always very large). As the still-wriggling snake lay dying, the young hand finished him off by stomping the snake's head into

the flat rock outcropping where it had been lying in wait for a meal. That night, while the young hand slept in the bunkhouse, someone stole the new boots of which he was so proud.

Several days later another ranch hand was found dead where he had been working to mend fences. He was wearing the stolen boots, and the rattlesnake's fangs had worked through the sole of the boot and killed him.

This version offers a sense of tough Western justice to the tale. There are other variations on this story, in some cases more than one person dies from the same pair of boots, but all versions have in common the dead rattlesnake and the fatal boots, and all arrive at similar conclusions. The variety of stories based on this single plot is limited only by the imagination of the storyteller.