Don Alonzo Taylor

Old Sam

and the Horse Thieves

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Books by Don Alonzo Taylor:

Old Sam, Dakota Trotter
(Original title: *Old Sam, Thoroughbred Trotter*)

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By

Don Alonzo Taylor

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BETHLEHEM BOOKS • IGNATIUS PRESS
Bathgate San Francisco

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Cover art and inside illustrations by Lorence Bjorklund
Cover design by Theodore Schluenderfritz

First Bethlehem Books printing July 2015
A new edition of the second of the two books in our previous Budget Book edition

ISBN 978-1-932350-53-1
Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2015932184

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield St South
Bathgate ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com
1 (800) 757-6831

Printed in the United States on acid free paper

CONTENTS

1. *Threshing Time* 1

2. *Mike Gives a Lesson* 16

3. *Disaster* 33

4. *Sam is Lost* 40

5. *A Call in the Dark* 65

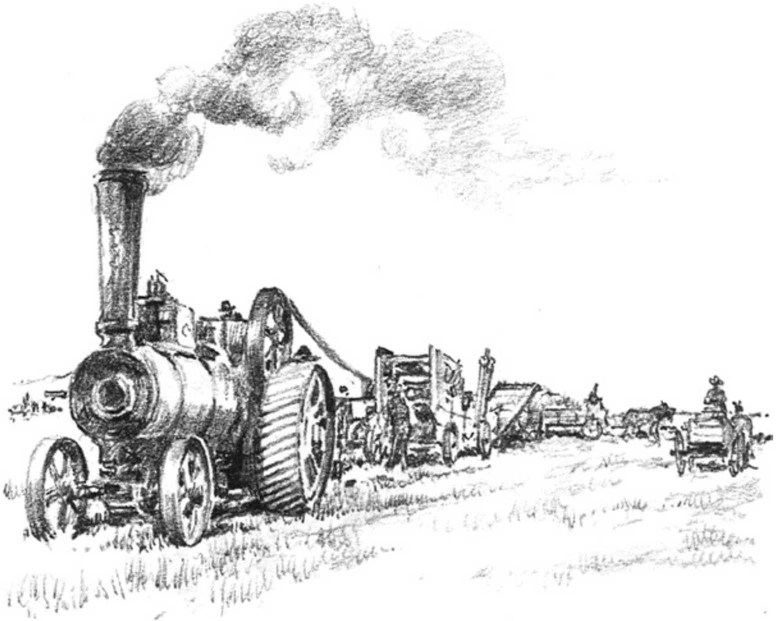
6. *Dividing the Spoils* 77

7. *Pursuit in the Coteaus* 88

8. *The Flash Code Brings Mike* 109

9. *Sam Leads Home* 128

About the Author



CHAPTER ONE

Threshing Time

NEW PEOPLE WERE continually moving in, to add to the twenty families who had come out to Dakota in the spring of 1882. My father, Joe Scott, had organized that immigrant train. Along with our family had come the Sherms, the Shipleys and the Frenches, whose two boys Jess and Levi were good friends of my brother Lee and me. Then of course, there was Mike Strub, the young man who had taken up the north half of

the section that cornered our homestead on the southwest. He had a team and a wagon and a saddle pony, and spent as much of his time as he could spare from his homestead, just driving about the country, hunting and camping.

Everyone knew each other and even their neighbors' horses by their first names. Everyone knew Old Sam. We had brought him with us on that immigrant train. He had belonged to us for five years—since that time on the bridge near our Illinois home, when Sam had broken his leg. My brother Lee and I, and my cousins Laura and Frank, had begged and pleaded for his life. Old Sam's owner had asked my father to shoot the horse. How thankful we were that he didn't! Sam's hock healed, and eventually he could race again. His right hip always rode high, but crippled though he was, my brother Lee and I never doubted that he could beat any trotter in the world. You have probably read the story of the famous race on the Fourth of July, 1884, that made Old Sam the best-known horse on the plains. Sam had beaten Thompson's famous trotter, Chestnut Prince, and won a purse of fifty dollars in gold.

Only three years before we came to Dakota, this had been the feeding ground of thousands of buffaloes. Since then they had become nearly extinct.

Now the farmers were breaking hundreds of acres of the tough sod and planting grain. The tree claims were greening with the seedlings sprouted from the wild plum, box-elder and chokecherry seeds we had gathered in the Coteaus—the hills to the west of our prairie land.

One of the newcomers, a Mr. Brooks, had bought a half-section adjacent to that owned by Mr. French. Mike Strub owned the land on the other side. Mr. Brooks' home was in Illinois, where he owned considerable property. Each spring he came up to see that his crops were put in, and again to see about harvest and threshing. He was about forty-five years old, of average height, and he had a full beard. His sharp nose was usually wrinkled at the sides, as if the light were too strong. From the start, Mr. Brooks had trouble with his neighbors. Most of the farmers let their stock run in the spring until the grain was planted and again after threshing. If one man's stock got into another man's stubble field, it was all right; no one paid attention to such things. It saved a lot of feed that would otherwise go to waste.

But Mr. Brooks wanted no trespassing on his land at any time. He had nothing to do with his neighbors in any social way, and so of course they had nothing to do with him either. Even good-natured Mike had trouble with Mr. Brooks.

The spring before, Mike's two horses strayed over into Mr. Brooks' stubble field. Men were plowing the field at the time, and the horses could do no damage. Mr. Brooks drove over in his buggy. I was doing some odd jobs for Mike and couldn't help hearing the conversation.

"Strub, your horses are on my land. You get them off and keep them off. If no one else can teach the farmers here to keep their stock at home, I can and I will."

Mike's eyes snapped. "My horses are not on your land now, Brooks. I can see them coming."

"Well, they were when I left the house. I'm getting tired of having other people's stock upon my land. Someone will have some damage to pay pretty soon."

"Yes, Brooks—what is the damage? I want to get that straightened up right now."

"I'm not saying anything about the damage. I want you to keep them off, that's all."

He started to go, but Mike grabbed a wheel.

"No, it isn't all, Brooks. I don't want to owe any man a nickel. I'll settle with you right now. There must be some damage, for no decent man would drive a mile in such a case unless there was. How much do I owe you?"

"Well, call it a dollar."

"A dollar—you sure a dollar's enough?"

"A dollar will cover it this time."

"All right then—here's your dollar and there's the road." Mike turned away. "Johnny, that was the smallest thing I ever had tried on me."

This year Mr. Brooks had brought along his sixteen-year-old son, William. William was as heartily disliked by the young people as his father was by the farmers. William thought himself to be quite a man of the world.

Mr. Brooks had about thirty acres of corn in a field bordering on Mike's west quarter. It would have been convenient for Mr. French, who did the threshing, if he could have threshed his own, then threshed for Brooks, then for Mike, then east for Mr. Sherm. Thus he could let

his bundle teams and band cutters finish on our headed grain. All this with no more moving than as if it were all in one large field.

One morning toward threshing time, Mike and Lee and I drove Old Sam over to make our arrangements with Mr. French. When we arrived, we found him at the granary cleaning out a bin. He came to the door and stood his broom against the wall.

"How are you, Mike? We ran a couple of small loads of wheat through the thresher today, just to get things tuned up. It's a good quality grain, and lots of wheat for the amount of straw. But I don't think it will run more than five bushels an acre."

"Any idea how long it will be before you get to my place?" asked Mike.

"Well, I've got five hundred acres of wheat on this section that I want to thresh first. We can clean up about a hundred acres a day, so I think it is safe to say . . . there's Brooks driving in."

Mr. Brooks and his son William drove into the yard and up to the group by the granary.

The men exchanged greetings, and then Mr. French continued, "So, Mike, I think we'll move onto your place a week from tomorrow."

William got out of his father's buggy and came around to Lee and me.

"Hello, rube," William said to me, looking at Old Sam. "What is that, some kind of a horse?"

"That's a thoroughbred trotting horse."

He continued to make fun of Old Sam, but Lee and I refused to be needled, and turned away to listen to the men.

"I always kept a few sheep when I lived in Illinois," Mr. French was saying. "They're useful to pick up the wheat after threshing. There'll be a lot of it. Too bad we haven't a flock of sheep."

"I know where there're a thousand head for sale," said Mike. "Good sheep, too. Thin, maybe, from not enough food. That's why the man's selling 'em. No grazing land."

"If you want to buy them, Mike, I'll take two hundred off your hands."

"I believe nearly every farmer around here will want some. Water will be the only trouble. It will be a job pumping water. A fellow should have a windmill. Yesterday I saw a homemade windmill. That thing pumps water like a Dutchman."

"How far away are the sheep?" asked Mr. French.

"About forty miles. I can drive it in a day, all right."

"Well, we ought to be through with your threshing in about ten days."

Mr. Brooks had been listening. "What do you charge for threshing wheat?" he asked.

"Fourteen cents a bushel, where the grain is hauled from the field, the farmer to board the crew and furnish feed for the horses."

"That's too much—I can't pay that. What do you expect to charge for those sheep, Strub?"

“I don’t know yet. But I expect to get a bargain and I don’t plan on making anything on those the others buy. Do you want me to get some for you?”

“I’d have to see the sheep first.” William had gotten into the buggy again, and Mr. Brooks touched his horse with the whip and headed for the road.

William looked back. “Say, rube,” he called to me, “I’ll be over to your place Sunday with a trotting horse that is a trotting horse.”

On our way home, Lee looked mad enough to do battle with a nestful of hornets. I said, “You know, I don’t like that William.”

“Wondered what you were going to say,” Mike replied.

“It isn’t what I’m going to say. It’s what I’m going to do. He made fun of Old Sam! Gee whiz!”

The next morning Mike took Old Sam and the light buggy and went to see about the sheep. As he drove out of the yard, Jess rode in.

“Johnny, Father wants to know if you’ll come help drive a grain wagon while we thresh?”

“Would I!” I cried. “You bet!”

It was the first steam thresher I had ever seen. It was a thrilling sight. Everything, men and machinery, were in motion and working together as though driven by the heavy sixty-foot belt that swayed and sagged with its weight as it raced between the engine and separator. It was a wonderful machine.

Great men came with this machine to operate it, each an expert in his line. There was the separator man who knew how to adjust the concaves, the wind, and the sieves. He had to lace the belts and run them on while the wheels were spinning. He had to reach safely into dangerous places to oil or feel for a hot box. At times he had to work in dust so dense that I wondered how he could breathe. The man's lips would close tightly, his eyes become slits, and his nose would pucker to filter the air. But he always stayed until his task was finished. His teeth and eyes always glistened in his dusty face whenever they could be seen. He was a great man, and it seemed to me that there were few who could take his place.

Then there was the feeder. Hour after hour he would stand swaying from side to side as steadily as the pendulum of a clock, sending one bundle after another sliding into the cylinder in a broad unbroken stream without a change in sound.

The band cutters and spike pitchers, and even the field pitchers, were experts in their work. Every man in the crew tried to build up a reputation in his work.

I admired these men and wished that I too might learn to excel in something. The other end of the rig interested me most. I spent every spare moment at the engine, a twelve horsepower traction engine, and because it was a return flue boiler, it had the smokestack on the rear end.

Mr. Bong was the engineer. Well-liked, popular, the engineer was a man of importance indeed. He received

the highest pay of any of the crew. He was not large—I was nearly as tall. But he was such a great man that I stood in awe of him at first.

The fireman was pretty busy, but all Mr. Bong had to do was watch things. He would look up at the smoke, then say to the fireman, "Don't fire too heavy, Pete, you smother the fire. Let the smoke clear up a little."

There was a great din at the separator. But at the engine the noise didn't bother.

Mr. Bong's pleasant way of instructing Pete gave me courage.

"Sir," I said, "I'd sure like to be an engineer."

"Well, let's see. Are you one of Mr. French's boys?"

"No—I'm John Scott. I'm going to haul grain."

"Oh, that's the man who has the headed grain. We're going to thresh for you folks. Well, John, if you want to be an engineer, keep your eyes open, and I'll help you what I can."

He didn't say Johnny. He said John. I liked that.

I asked all the questions I could think of, and Mr. Bong told me many of the secrets of that wonderful engine. Fascinated, I watched the engineer go about his work.

The separator man came to see the engineer. "We're moving to the next stand, Mr. Bong." He pointed to another part of the field.

Mr. Bong got up on the footboard, and when he received the signal from the separator man, pulled

the whistle cord. One single ear-splitting toot burst on the air.

It was so shrill and unexpected that I jumped.

Then Mr. Bong got busy. He shoved the throttle lever forward to shut off the steam, then climbed on top of the engine. The momentum of the heavy belt and flywheel kept them going for a short time. Just at the proper time before they stopped, the separator man leaned against the belt a short distance in front of the engine and ran it off the flywheel and caught the loop with his left arm. This was dangerous unless he did it just right.

As soon as the wheel came to a stop, Mr. Bong shoved a pinion over on the drive shaft to mesh with one that completed the chain of gears that drove the traction wheels.

Quickly Mr. Bong dropped back to the footboard, gave two short toots on the whistle, shoved the reverse lever forward and opened the throttle carefully, so there would be no jerk to the tender. Cranking the steering wheel, he turned the wide circle to pick up the separator. In the meantime the belt had been rolled and placed upon the feeder's footboard, the tables and footboards of the band cutters had been folded, the straw carrier had been cranked up and folded, and an empty grain wagon hitched behind. As the engine went past, a chain attached to the end of the separator pole was hooked to the rear end of the tender and away they went, the engine, tender, separator and wagon, off across the stubble.