

Jail Break at Bear Creek

By Tom Sheehan

Not a soul in the whole west, including Bear Creek, where the desperado Cleve Hallows was jailed and waiting trial for numerous murders and robberies, had any idea of the man's ingenuity and wiles. Hallows, for all intents and purposes, was ahead of his time and his capture was due to good old-fashioned luck on the part of Bear Creek's sheriff who once operated on the other side of the law, "was saved," and like a reformed drinker or smoker, could not stand to see any other bad man make good. It became his sole aim to make sure that development did not occur in his territory, in his town.

The setting of this tale is of prime importance, so it is that we visit the town of Bear Creek and unveil its place and character.

Not one person on the town council didn't hold it true that Bear Creek was one of the most inviting and pleasant places at the foothills of the Rockies. Most other people in town felt the same and visitors, passing through on the Overland Stage, all admitted the same thing, some of them with a nostalgic look at departure. The mountains thrusting up behind town were rugged and picturesque, the creek made a sparkling and diving entrance from a steep cliff worn to a trough by the thousands of years of flow, and the spread of grass leaving the foothills was resplendent with flowers in good weather.

But within all those good feelings and euphoric hope, nobody ever asked an inmate of the Bear Creek jail, under the command of the notorious outlaw-turned-lawman, Crowd Dobler, how they viewed their situation. Dobler was known far and wide, including a good stretch of the Rockies, for his strict controls and harsh treatment of prisoners. He sat in a chair the way he sat a horse, high and haughty, as if nothing in reach could or dared touch him. As he sat at the BC Hotel's dining room, having his eggs and other vittles with Homer Barnes, his chief deputy, his scorn was evident concerning Barnes' worries about a jailbreak.

"Homer, you got to learn to relax, boy. You're a top dog around them boys back there, mostly drunks, one hungry rustler who ought to know better, and that Hallows gent who's going to hang soon as the judge sets foot in town. Learn to

relax, snap the whip when you got to, and don't let them get any closer than spit range."

He sat his chair ever upright, on top of it all.

"You got to relax, Homer. That's the key in this whole thing, relaxing, not letting them scum know what you're at or how you feel."

"He's out and out mean, Crowd, to those other boys in there. Those poor gents who have paid for spending their money in the saloon first chance out of the saddle. I don't hate them poor pokes. They have it tough enough out there with the cows and some of them cow drovers would drive me crazy too. Don't know what Hallows'd do if he caught hold of one of us. Only real thing about him is him wanting to read all the newspapers I can find."

"Worry about yourself, Homer, but not on the outside, not on your face. Don't show them nothing but boss. It's all that counts. I'll break Hallows' arm or his back he makes a move at me. Count on it. Now eat. You need it."

Ramrod straight as ever, Dobler lifted food to his mouth, eyes moving, measuring all in sight, the morning shadows caught in corners, the grass smell riding the air as if sighing off the prairie, how people moved at their early tasks.

"Probably trying to find where his name is printed. Make sure he gets none of that. Give him what you have where his name is not printed. That won't hurt a bit."

At that same moment, sun breaking clear of clouds and mountains, prairie personality spilling into the town, as Dobler and his deputy ate breakfast, Cleve Hallows fed some of his breakfast remains from the day before to a bird that had lighted at the barred cell window set into blocks of squared mountain rock. Cool prairie air fed itself into the cells, bringing a bit of comfort atop the general deposit of stale air. Hallows spent ten minutes at the opening, feeding the bird. Smiling, nodding a kind of approval that was not really approval, he ignored some of the whispers that came to him from the other prisoners. He caught every word sifting through the cells of the jail.

"He ain't so tough, the bird lover. He's been doing that for weeks now. Bet he couldn't last a week on a drive, some drover boss find him out soon enough.

'Magine the big killer and robber playing games with the birds. If that ain't the proper clue to the real man, every morning I been here, I don't know what is."

As for Hallows, he kept most things to his own person, but allowed himself to hear again and again some words he'd recently said to Dobler at one point, and a second message said to a confederate another time.

“Tell you what, Dobler. I’m going to be the first man to break out of your jail and I’ll spread the word across the grass and up and down the Rockies. Won’t miss any odd lots, kinfolk, townspeople, drovers passing each other out on the grass or in the pens of the railheads. Conductors on the UP will spread the word and the last of the wagon masters coming to a stop from the east. They’ll all know about it sooner or later, and that’s a promise.”

Dobler, as always, looked as cool as a mountain breath of air. He smiled, waved his hand as if nothing at all had been said, sat tall and rigid in his office chair just outside the main cell section. Every morning he came clean-shaven after a decent breakfast at the hotel.

Up in the Rockies, at a hideout operated for a few years by Hallows, his confederate Jud Parsons could easily recall Hallows’ words said a few weeks earlier: “Do just what I tell you, Jud. It’ll be easy. I’ve taught you all I know. Just make the best of each trip. No load too heavy it messes up. The judge won’t be here for a couple of weeks. I know that for sure, and got some other stuff hidden up in here we get to split when I get out of here. I got a lot of sauce for the gander. Count on it.”

He had been whispering all the while in the jail at Parsons’ visit.

“Make sure that damned sheriff don’t follow you back uphill to the place. I’m counting on you, and the big payoff is coming. You can get that spread back in Wyoming you always wanted, let your old man get his hands dirty the clean way.”

He smiled at his own turn of the phrase, seeing a glint of joy cross Parsons’ face, knowing he had touched a soft spot. Things were so easy, he believed, and Crowd Dobler would find that out the hard way.

A few weeks later, Dobler sauntered into the cell section and said, as matter-of-factly as he could manage, “Judge is coming in two days, Hallows. Got word last night. Looks like a piece of cake from where I sit out there in my office. Piece of cake. Sure as the best brand you know heading back east for them Chicago butchers and them New York platters.”

“Don’t count on it, sheriff. That judge has me to contend with. I ain’t no kid at this business.”

“Is that the killing business, Hallows, knocking down old ladies and old men who can’t point a weapon at you? That your kind of business? I never did that stuff. Oh, I robbed a few trains they don’t know about and a few stage coaches in the mix, but never killed an old man or an old lady. You got to have rules in that game. You got to be your own judge before you stand up in front of a real one. Prepare your own way as they might say down at the church. Looks like they’ve been right all along, the parsons and preachers and such.”

“Sure agree with you there, sheriff, on those men.”

Hallows did not even break a smile as he saw his sidekick Jud up at the hideout, getting ready for another task. The hideout sifted into his mind and he received an image of its hidden beauty in among some serious rocks and secret growth. He’d found it by accident and he’d been caught by Crowd Dobler because he had relaxed his mind descending from the place, wondering why he loved it so much, letting himself fall into the hands of the sheriff also by complete accident. Chance happened to the best of men, he agreed. Looking up he had seen the sheriff’s rifle pointed right at his guts.

Jail at Bear Creek came sooner than he ever thought.

Now the judge would be here in two days. He had one day to get ready. The time had to be right. The bread crumbs fell from his hand atop the stone block the bars were set into. The bird fluttered in a little later. The whispers started again in the cells.

At midnight, all cellmates asleep, some snoring up a storm, Hallows rose from his cot. The breeze at the window was minimal but fresh, right off the prairie or down from a mountain canyon. He didn’t care where it was from, but it was free and almost liquid in his throat. Some of Bear Creek, the real creak, came along with the drink.

Beyond the jail, through window opening without glass but with stout bars, Bear Creek was dark and silent. The snicker of two horses came from close by, at the end of an alley beside the jail. Overhead, the moon was not due for three days, according to his count. Beside his bunk, from behind the cell slop pail, Hallows pulled a pouch filled with a dark mixture. From behind a cot leg he pulled a long

thin funnel made from newspapers and hardened by a mix of water and urine. It stank as bad as he imagined it would, even gone dry and sort of rigid, but suitable for its purpose.

Hefting the pouch, he pictured the smile on Jug Parsons' face as he would have smiled filling the small bags he attached to a homing pigeon every morning for weeks, as he thought about the ranch he was going to buy in Wyoming.

All the planning came back to Hallows as he listened again and heard only silence beyond the snoring. The funnel was set up, aimed right down into the cell door lock, the back side of the key hole fitted with paper plugs he had also formed from the newspapers. Taking a thin blanket off his cot, he wrapped it around the lock on the cell door.

Then, thinking of the haughty sheriff with the sickening grin on his face, trying his best to hide it, being as tricky as he could be, he started pouring the mix from the pouch down into the funnel and into the lock on the cell door. When the lock was full of the pigeon-delivered gunpowder, and some left over for kicks, Hallows contemplated the coming few minutes. The deputy Barnes would be asleep on his cot, his boots off, his hand gun near. He would rush through the door into the cell area when he rudely awoke. He'd hit him with the slop pail, get his gun, and run out the door and down the alley to Parsons and the horses. They'd be out of town before the sheriff knew what happened. He could see the look on the sheriff's face. It was priceless. He'd give away a bank's haul for the privilege of seeing it. He lit the fuse, dropped the rest of the blanket over the key hole, and stepped back. The blast blew the cell door wide open. Cell mates screamed.

The deputy, frantic, opened the door and was hit on the head with the slop pail. He fell as if he had been gunned down, his revolver falling to the floor. Hallows grabbed it and raced to the front door and ran down the alley. In a matter of minutes he and Parson were heading out of town on a well-used trail marked by recent traffic.

"Free as a bird," Hallows said aloud, and seeing Crowd Dobler trying forever to determine how the jail break had come off.

Once they got into the Rockies, up in the safe area, he'd let Parsons go chase his dream. As for himself, he just had to know, somehow, how close Dobler might get to the truth.

There was always the chance the revelation might come, but he'd wait on it.
Maybe he'd send a few pigeons to test him.

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