

CEMETERY

Loren D. Estleman

ROY GRANGER—HE WASN'T "UNCLE ROY" THEN—SOLD HIS house in the territorial capital in 1871 and spent most of the proceeds outfitting himself as a prospector. The proprietor asked him what he was hoping to find.

"My fortune."

"You're past the age for fortunes, old-timer. Anyway, all the gold and silver that ain't been dug up belongs to big outfits from back East. Where you fixing to look?"

"The San Pablos."

"Hell, that's injun land. Even if you manage to outrun 'em, all you'll dig up's a nest of rattlers. The only pay dirt you hit will be a cemetery."

"I'll remember the advice."

And he did, nearly a year later, when he struck the richest vein of copper west of anywhere. Six months along, his little shack sat dead center in the middle of a canvas-and-clapboard metropolis, teeming with hard-rock miners, Chinese laundries, saloons, and whores. When it came time to petition Washington for a post office, he received a questionnaire asking for population figures and such. That first blank was easy: "8,000, give or take 100."

The second, asking the name of the town, gave him pause while he scratched a thinning temple with the cottonwood twig he used for a pen. Then he grinned and wrote:

"Cemetery."

Which in the early years was more than just a private joke. Claim jumpers, tinhorn gamblers, and all the rest of the vermin that flocked to money like ants to sugar swelled the local graveyard population and filled the telegraph columns as far east as Philadelphia with entertaining stories of gun feuds and stagecoach robberies; but a Committee of Public Vigilance was formed, bad hats strung up like dried chili peppers, and a hard-as-nails marshal appointed

to sweep up the leavings all legal-like. A church and a schoolhouse went up and promptly burned to the ground, but that was nothing unusual in a dry place. A volunteer fire department organized, and by order of the new city council the ruined buildings were replaced with brick structures.

The opera house attracted musical acts and Shakespearean companies, then tourists, who marveled at the bright-red metal fixtures in the Copper King Hotel and visited the local saloons-palaces now, with crystal chandeliers, well-dressed bouncers seated in chairs on raised platforms with shotguns across their laps to keep the peace, and even side entrances where ladies could sip cordials in a separate room without fear of molestation. Some of the original prospectors grumbled about all that downright civilization, but they were in the minority now. The storekeepers, dress-shop proprietresses, and customers of the ice-cream shop didn't complain: for them, lurid stories of mirror-busting brawls and daylight back shootings were something you read about in *Captain Jack's Tales of the Border* and other sensational periodicals wrapped in bright colors and available in C. J. McGonigle's General Emporium for a dime apiece. By then, even the *St. Louis Gazette*, which has built its circulation on grisly accounts of daily life in Cemetery, was referring to it as "the Renaissance Capital of the Frontier."

It wasn't that, of course; but neither was it "Granger's Hell" any longer.

By this time, he was well established in the community as "Uncle Roy." For many years, adults who'd spent their childhood in Cemetery told fond stories of gathering around Fenner's Confectionery waiting for the old man to come out, his pockets stuffed with jawbreakers, peppermint sticks, and rock candy, and stand, laughing and squirming, while the little barbarians stripped him of all his sweet wealth.

He was a beloved character, not just because of the prosperity he'd brought or even his own good nature, but also because no one could tell by looking at him he was the richest man in town. His only concession to dressing up was an old necktie and a clean pair of overalls for church, and while others who'd hit pay dirt had lost no time building big houses, all gabled and gewgawed, on every hill tall enough to overlook the city, he retired each evening to a horsehair-stuffed mattress in the same cottonwood shack where he'd slept in his pick-and-shovel days.

"Uncle Roy," everyone said. "There's quality for you; and I don't believe he ever finished third grade."

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It was no surprise, then, in the tenth year of the city's founding, when a special meeting was called in the community hall to discuss how best to honor the old gent while he was still upright and breathing.

Granger himself wasn't invited; pains had been taken to ensure he was ignorant of the gathering. Everyone knew he was a modest man, who would object to being singled out for public praise. Best to make all the arrangements before someone broke the news; then it would be too late for him to back out. He was too sensitive of his friends' and neighbors' feelings to disappoint them after they'd gone to all the trouble.

Jan Vandergriff, owner of the New Holland Mill, spoke for everyone when he said, "By thunder, we'll give that old man our gratitude if we have to shove it down his throat!"

Mildred Flood, the librarian, suggested a big picnic, to be an annual event named for Granger. That was vetoed: Winter was coming, and Gold alone knew whether Uncle Roy would still be around for favorable weather.

Postmaster Orville Feeny thought a gold watch would be appropriate. Vandergriff shut that down before it could be discussed.

"Appropriate, hell! That's what you give a banker when you boot him out for a younger man. Anyway, it's cruel. Why remind a man of time when he's past his threescore and ten?"

Someone envisioned inviting the governor to hang a medal around Uncle Roy's neck, with flags and bunting and the fire-department brass band playing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Someone else—the town's only Democrat—said that if that august official ever set foot in Cemetery, he'd personally reconvene the Committee of Public Vigilance to hang him by his red sash.

Everyone had an idea, and everyone else had a good reason to call it bad. Then a Christmas festival brought the room to thoughtful silence: There would be a Snow Queen selected from among the members of the Young Ladies' Cultural Society, an "Ode to Uncle Roy" penned and read by Schoolmaster Henty, who considered himself a poet, fireworks, and a shooting contest.

"Why a shooting contest?" Mildred Flood wanted to know.

"Because Christmas Day and the Fourth of July are the only times a man can legally fire a pistol inside the city," Vandergriff replied. "Uncle Roy can take part and award the winner. I don't imagine at his age he can hit the obvious side of a buffalo, but he was a fair marksman in his day. Back then you

didn't carve a ton of copper out of this country without winging an injun or a highwayman or two."

Mildred set her jaw. "It's bad enough men fire off weapons on the holiest of days without throwing a heathen circus."

This led to shouting, but Feeny came up with a compromise. "Let's make it Christmas Eve."

The librarian considered that, then nodded. "We need a central event. Roy can shoot a gun if he wants come Christmas, but surely we can come up with something more substantial than a homemade poem and a pretty girl prancing about."

The miller said, "I'd hate to think I'd get to his age without being able to appreciate a pretty girl."

There followed another lively exchange of opinions. When the noise died down:

"Why not an unveiling?"

All eyes turned to Richard Briggs, the telegraph operator. He was a young man who'd run away from his father's bicycle manufactory in Chicago to find adventure. Those who knew him thought he'd settled for his sedentary occupation out of bitter disappointment, leading to sullenness, the source of his reluctance toward conversation. When a quiet man speaks, others listen.

Reddening from the sudden attention, he touched his gold-rimmed spectacles and cleared his throat. "A statue of Roy Granger, Cemetery's founder, to be unveiled Christmas Eve before the community hall. I'm sure the stonemasons at Wilson's Quarry would know where to find a sculptor."

A vote was called for, and the motion was passed unanimously.

The sculptor was a Russian immigrant named Anton Grigori, who asked when his subject would be available to sit. Informed that the statue was intended to be a surprise, he demanded photographs.

"If he can't pose for you, how can we get him to have his picture taken?" Briggs asked.

"That is for you to decide. Shall I follow him about, making sketches and taking measurements?"

The telegraph operator was a man of ingenuity. When Granger came out of his shack to ask what Briggs was up to with a tripod camera, he told Granger the Cemetery Historical Society had asked him to prepare a

photographic record of the city for future generations to appreciate, and the founder's modest home was a logical place to start.

"What do you want with my old pile of kindling? It should be the first thing the town tears down after I go to Glory."

"All the more reason to have it in the record."

"Go ahead on, then, and don't forget to come in for coffee after."

When he turned to go back inside, Briggs called out to him. "Would you stand next to it? I need something people can compare it to, to show its size."

"Can't you get somebody else? I never got my pitcher took and I'm not used to the idea."

"Who do you suggest? I have to get back to the telegraph office or I'll lose my job."

Granger looked up and down the deserted street. "Tarnation. Can't everybody be down with the ague."

It was indeed an unusual circumstance, involving mass cooperation.

"All right, then. Just don't show it to me after. I got certain opinions as to my looks and I don't like disappointment."

As an amateur photographer, Briggs, it turned out, was a perfectionist. He had his subject pose ten times, from ten different angles.

"Turn my back? Who in perdition has his pitcher took from behind?"

"I could give you technical details, but—"

"Yeah, you'll lose your job. Just squeeze the bulb." He turned around.

"Thank you, Mr. Granger."

"Call me Uncle Roy. And don't forget to come around later for that cup of coffee."

Working in his studio in the territorial capital, Grigori completed the statue in six weeks, carving Granger out of Carrara marble in a modest pose with his hands in the pockets of his overalls. It was too risky for all the people who voted for it to leave town to inspect it, so Briggs brought his camera. The picture circulated, and everyone agreed it was an excellent likeness. Arrangements were made to carry it by rail to the Lucky Duck Mine outside town until December 23. Then it was loaded into Mordred and Sons' hearse and taken to its right spot in front of the community hall under cover of darkness. Uncle Roy always turned in at sundown, but as an extra precaution the horses' hooves were bound in muslin and the hearse chosen for its rubber tires so as not to rouse the old man with the noise.

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The conspirators stood at the foot of the canvas-covered sculpture, conversing in whispers.

“How do we get him here?” asked Mildred Flood.

Vandergriff said that was easy. “He loves to shoot off that old pistol of his. He lives for Independence Day and Christmas. We’ll tell him we got his targets all set up, waiting for his approval.”

All agreed with this, and the party broke up to retire. It would be an early day for everyone, as Roy Granger hadn’t missed a sunrise in his life, and his morning walk always took him right past the community hall.



“Shucks, I ain’t choosy. Hang a lard can on a fence post, I’m happy as a pig in a pile of compost.” Uncle Roy stood on his doorstep in his everyday overalls, his Christmas pair awaiting pickup at Hip Sung’s Laundry.

C. J. McGonigle said, “You’ll like these better. I just took delivery on a ream of paper bull’s-eye targets at the emporium.”

“What do I owe you?”

“Not a cent, Roy. It’s my gift this year to the sharpshooters.”

“Well, it’s your money. I don’t need to take a look. I’m sure you got ’em set up where no stray rounds’ll hit nobody important.”

“You’d better inspect them,” Mildred said. “You’re the only one here with true field experience. If we’re going to profane the holy day with gunfire, we should at least make sure it’s safe.”

“Heck’s neck, Miss Flood. I only shot one man in all my born days, a Sioux kid fixing to run off with my mule. I caught him in the left ham by pure luck and lost a week’s prospecting patching him up and spoon-feeding him broth from a buffalo liver. But I’ll go along with you, since you’re so fired up.”

“You’re a gentleman, Mr. Granger.”

“No, I ain’t. I never wore no tall hat nor swung no monkey stick. And I’d be obliged if you’d call me Uncle Roy.”

The whole town seemed to have turned out to escort him to the town square in his bearskin coat. He stopped and turned. The crowd pulsed back as if he’d drawn down on it.

“This here’s a business day. Ain’t you folks got nothing better to do than follow an old man around?”

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Briggs said, "We just want to make sure you're satisfied."

"Well, try and hang back a little. I don't much care for attention I didn't ask for."

He couldn't understand why they found this amusing. Then he saw something in front of the community hall that hadn't been there yesterday. It looked like a six-foot-tall sack of grain.

Henty mounted the steps of the hall, turned to face the crowd, cleared his throat, and drew a fold of paper from inside his coat. He opened it and read:

Ode to a Pioneer

There isn't a one in town, woman or girl, man or boy,
who doesn't love our Uncle Roy.
He made himself rich in his sixtieth year,
but the town he built is wealthier.
So let's all have a 'hear, hear, hear,'
and hope each day he's healthier.

Applause thundered. Vandergriff shook his head. "And here I thought the teacher was just bragging on himself."

The schoolmaster put away the paper and took hold of a cord attached to the canvas sheet. "It's my great honor to have been asked to reveal this small token of Cemetery's appreciation for the man who made all our lives possible."

A twitch, and the marble monument shone in the rising sun.

More applause, louder than the first round.

Granger, who was choking on his morning chaw, found himself pushed and pummeled by dozens of pairs of hands to the top of the steps.

Silence while he swallowed the plug. Mildred Flood, who also edited the *Headstone*, the town's weekly newspaper, got her lead right away. "On Christmas Eve, no one could but notice a tear in Uncle Roy's eye when . . ."

The old man blew his nose into a bandanna handkerchief. A swallow of tobacco would make a rattler's eyes water.

"Speech! Speech! Speech!"

"All I come out here for was a comfortable old age," he said. "I don't deserve this."

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He stumbled down the steps and made his way through a hurricane of back slaps and outthrust hands back to his shack. No one saw any more of him that day.

“Well, that was short and sweet.” Feeny’s tone was dry.

Vandergriff said, “He’s never been what you call a gabby coot.”

“Overcome with emotion.” Mildred touched her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

“He didn’t look happy,” Briggs said. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“Poppycock.” Henty was still aglow with authorly triumph. “He’s like all those gallant old men who braved the wilderness. Too proud to show their sentimental side.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Sure he’s right!” Vandergriff whacked the telegrapher on the shoulder, nearly knocking him off his feet. “That pile of rock’s the greatest idea anyone around here ever had since Uncle Roy sold his house in the capital.”

Nearing midnight, Granger rolled off his cot, pulled his overalls on over his nightshirt, stuck yellow-nailed feet into his brogans, and went out into the deserted town square, lit bright as a day by the moon reflecting off a powder of fresh snow. He stared up at his marble image.

“It weren’t no dream.”

Christmas Day dawned shiny as polished copper, with a snap in the air and not a cloud in sight. Penelope McGonigle, C. J.’s seventeen-year-old granddaughter, rode down the street in the livery’s best brougham, shivering a little in her white Snow Queen dress but with a smile that put her tiara to shame and a wave for all. Fresh-baked pies steamed on a trestle table covered with a checked oilcloth, ready for judging, the volunteer fire department played a medley of hymns (most frequently “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow,” because it didn’t make as much use of the broken key on Floyd Ott’s clarinet), and McGonigle set up a row of pickets with bull’s-eye targets tacked to them; he hadn’t lied about those. At noon, all the town’s self-professed Wild Bill Hickoks turned out with their pistols and carbines and lined up to take their chances at a twenty-pound turkey donated by Ernest Schriftseller, who’d raised it himself from a chick on his 160 acres.

“Not so fast.” Vandergriff, the event’s self-appointed chairman, stepped forward just as the first shooter was approaching his mark. “It’s only fair Cemetery’s leading citizen take the first shot.”

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Richard Briggs, still looking troubled, asked if anyone had seen Uncle Roy. “Not since the unveiling,” Mildred Flood said. “Someone ought to check on him.”

“I don’t need no checking on when there’s shooting to be done,” said Granger, stepping through an aisle that had opened up for him between bodies. He had on his best overalls, a clean shirt, and miner’s stovepipe boots, old and cracked but blacked to a high shine. His old ball-and-percussion Colt sagged in a worn leather holster strapped around his waist. “Stop that,” he snapped, when the clapping started. “I got a hankering for turkey meat.”

When the spectators started to step away from the targets, he raised his voice. “Better clear the square! I ain’t just sure but that the whole cylinder might go off all at once, like it did in ’72 when I shot at a prairie dog and slaughtered all its neighbors. Also, I’m old and half-blind. I wouldn’t want to mistake young Briggs for a paper target.”

The throng obeyed, withdrawing into the mouths of the streets converging on the square.

“Go ahead, Uncle Roy!” said Vandergriff. “Show these tenderfeet there’s still plenty of powder in the old barrel.”

“Shut up, Jan. I got to concentrate.” He drew the hotleg and aimed.

In the silence that ensued, a restless shoe squeaked in the snow, loud as thunder.

But not as loud as the blast when Uncle Roy Granger turned parallel to the bull’s-eye, squeezed the trigger, and touched off the bundle of dynamite he’d buried in the earth at the foot of his statue.