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Tales from the Neighborhood

James Calvin Schaap

Clear as a friend's heart, 'twas, and seeming cool—
A crystal bowl whence skyey deeps looked up.
So might a god set down his drinking cup
Charged with a distillation of haut skies.
As famished horses, thrusting to the eyes
Parched muzzles, take a long-south water-hole,
Hugh plunged his head into the brimming bowl
as though to share the joy with every sense.
And lo, the tang of that wide insolence
Of sky and plain was acrid in the draught!
How ripplingly the lying water laughed!
How like fine sentiment the mirrored sky
Won credence for a sin of alkali!
So with false friends.

Pretend this is Lit 101. What on earth is going on in this poem? If you know some history, you might have a leg up. This parched soul is named Hugh, and he's alone and in very tough shape. If you remember the violence of *The Revenant*, your nightmares might just lead you to think "Hugh" is the bear-torn hero of that movie. He is.

But the rest of the class may need some background.

Hugh Glass has been left for dead. If you saw *The Revenant* or read the novel or read *Lord Grizzily*, by Frederick Manfred, you know the story of Hugh Glass, beaver trapper, circa 1830, left for dead after being mauled by a she-bear.

In this odd poem I just read, Hugh Glass is really thirsty; but what's with those "parched muzzles ... thrusting"? And what kind of "lying water laughed" anyway? —and "ripplingly"? Seriously? "The sin of alkali" does a ton more than suggest that the crystal bowl so long-sought (I'm picking up the bug) turns out to be "acrid in the draught!" It ain't good—that's for sure. But isn't the whole thing a little ridiculous?

"The Song of Hugh Glass" is an ancestor to

Frederic Manfred's Hugh, as well as Punke's and Leonardo DiCaprio's. What we're reading is the verse of John Neihardt, who was once himself a legend in Nebraska and left a state monument in Bancroft. Neihardt penned his version of the Hugh Glass saga in an epic poem that sounds for all the world like Shakespeare or John Milton. That's a long haul from Bancroft.

When Neihardt took Lit 101, what he learned was that true literary stardom, a readership across the ages, needed to be penned in something called epic poetry. Think Homer--*The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Maybe *Beowulf*?

So right out here in our backyard, John Neihardt figured the Hugh Glass story was just as great as any big legend—and just as central to a nation's identity.

"Why not?" Neihardt must have told himself. What America needs is its own *Epic of Gilgamesh* or *Divine Comedy*. Why not start with a wilderness man like Hugh Glass?

You've got to love the aspiration. John Neihardt argued for world-class heroism right here on the Plains:

Plunged deeper than the seats of hate and grief,
He gazed about for aught that might deny
Such baseness: saw the non-committal sky,
The prairie apathetic in a shroud,
The bland complacency of a vagrant cloud--
World-wide connivance.

Amazing. In his dire hunger and thirst, Glass looks to nature for sweet solace and gets "the prairie apathetic" and a "vagrant cloud" because—dang it!—it seems to him that no one cares.

Okay, let's be blunt. A full century after Neihardt wrote the Hugh Glass story in Shakespearean English, the idea seems preposterously lunatic, doesn't it?

Maybe. But you've got to love Neihardt the bard. What he was doing was something we may

well need more of—cheerleading. Neihardt believed our own stories ranked with anyone's anywhere in time and space.

And he was right. Just a couple of years ago, *The Revenant* garnered three Oscars. It wasn't the same Hugh Glass saga, and it wasn't set in Siouxland; but Neihardt was without a doubt on to something when he sang "The Song of Hugh Glass," something that began here, a story that happened not so very far west and was first written here.

Once upon a time, Frederick Manfred told me that he came back from the barn after milking—he was just a kid—and sat on the back step of the house, sat there and looked out over fields that seem to stretch into eternity. He said he couldn't help but think that there was a story here—stories, in fact, stories he didn't know and wanted to.

That late afternoon eventually became the *Buckskin Man Tales* and includes, among others, "Lord Grizzly."

There are epics underfoot in the landscape all around. They just have to be unearthed.

A January thaw is what all of us look forward to mid-winter, a breath of warmth to reopen our hope that someday soon, April will return. Two cold-of-winter days, maybe three, of forty degrees. No wind. For a moment, heaven descends to Siouxland.

That's the relief people here must have felt early on January 12, 1888, when most of those who'd dug out homesteads had just arrived.

Here's how David Laskin describes that morning:

Everyone who wrote about January 12 noticed something different about the quality of that morning—the strange color and texture of the sky, the preternatural balminess, the haze, the fog, the softness of the south wind, the thrilling smell of thaw, the "great waves" of snow on the prairie that gleamed in the winter sun.

And then this: "The one aspect they all agreed on was the sudden, welcome rise of temperature." A January thaw, a seeming blessing was, in reality, a balmy prelude to horror.

David Laskin's book *The Children's Blizzard* tells the story. When that strange warmth suddenly lifted, hundreds of people, most of them children, perished in a storm that made prairie skies dark as night and swept up massive drifts in winds, driving hard crystallized snow so fero-

ciously into your face that it scoured what flesh it didn't tear away.

Seven miles east of Freeman, South Dakota, five boys died, lost in the unremitting blast of snow. Three of them were Kaufmanns—Johann, Heinrich, and Elias. What they and two other boys intended that morning was simply to get to safety at the Graber house, a quarter mile east of the school, Ratzlaff #66. The wall they hit was a zero-visibility blizzard.

The victims' families were all "Schweizers," German-speaking Mennonites booted from Russia, who'd come to the Dakota Territory with fifty other families, all of them seeking the religious freedom they'd looked to find for 200 years, the opportunity to live a good and safe life. None of them had it easy; sometimes children would alternate attending the little country school up the road because families didn't have shoes enough to go around.

But there was a promise here in Dakota.

Then came "the Children's Blizzard."

Like many others on the Plains, those five Freeman boys just disappeared; and even though search parties went out the next morning in the swirling remnants, no one found them until three days later, on the Sabbath, when a neighbor spotted an arm jutting from a snowbank, an arm belonging to the eldest Kaufmann, Johann, who was likely holding up a coat to shield the little boys from the killer.

They'd wandered two-and-one-half miles southeast of Ratzlaff #6 and were buried by the blizzard, just forty feet from the farm house of the man who found them.

The story goes that this man went to church with the news that Sunday. I don't know if he interrupted worship. I don't know what they might have been singing, but I can guess how hard they must have prayed.

No one knows precisely how many people perished in that massive blizzard. Most estimate the grim death toll at somewhere near 250, many of them children on their way home from school.

It all began with a sweet January thaw that quick as a fox descended into madness. At Valentine, Nebraska, the temperature was 30 degrees at six a.m., six degrees at two in the afternoon, and 14 below at nine that night.

Somewhere out in south central Nebraska you'll find a highway marker that tells that neigh-

borhood's chapter of the story, but there's nothing up at all east of Freeman, where five boys died—no sign, no story, only endless rows of corn and soybeans. Even the farms are gone.

All the way from Russia, those Schweizers carried with them an old Mennonite hymn, something with a first line that went like this: "*Wherlos und verlassen sehnt sich oft mein Herz nach stiller Ruh*"—"When I'm lonely and defenseless,/my heart longs for rest and peace."

Maybe that Sunday, that old favorite was the one they went back to, all of them. If not that Sunday, surely the next.

You don't need to go all that much farther west to find a monument that, these days, looks like a gravestone. Once upon a time—well, for more than a century—an obelisk stood mightily atop that chunk of granite, rose twenty feet into the air above the Missouri River, just a bit east of Greenwood, SD.

But the obelisk is gone. A naked steel bolt reminds you that something proud and mighty once stood there. That it's gone may well be okay. Such issues aren't mine to determine.

The memorial is meant to celebrate the Treaty of 1858, "the Yankton Treaty," not the first among the Sioux treaties but right there among the earliest and, like all of them, a testimony today to promises broken. I don't know how that obelisk tumbled off, but it probably wasn't the wind, no matter how unruly.

The motivation for Indian treaties was essentially the same: undocumented immigrant aliens with white faces and hard-to-pronounce European names wanted good land occupied by Native people, in this case the Yanktons, who roamed and ruled a massive land triangle that began just south of here at the mouth of the Big Sioux River.

To curry favor, impossible as it may be to imagine, the white man's powers-that-be created a delegation of Yankton leaders and brought them to Washington, even though few of them had ever seen a town bigger than frontier Sioux City.

What exactly those Yankton headmen did for four long months in the nation's capital can barely be imagined, but history suggests that what kept them there couldn't be classified as entertainment. Smutty Bear, one of the delegation's headmen, was warned that if he didn't cooperate with the treaty talks, didn't sign, he'd have to walk back to the

Missouri River. Smutty Bear didn't honestly consider that a punishment.

Russell Means says their white hosts rolled out the barrels with calculated frequency, trying to soften up men who weren't inclined to trade their land for wagons, blankets, and bib overalls. They were interested in buffalo, not farming.

Some say the Yankton delegation finally signed the treaty when they were promised that no white man would take control of the red pipestone quarry where generations of Native people from every tribe and nation had dug stone for pipes and amulets, a sacred place.

For that—and the promise of \$1.6 million over a fifty-year period—the Yanktons gave away ("ceded" is the historical term) 11 million Siouxland acres, some of it, perhaps, under your home or office.

Names on that Greenwood memorial are fascinating. Struck by the Ree, according to legend, was born when Lewis and Clark came up the Missouri in 1803 and stopped right there. The Yanktons brought out a brand new baby to the fire where the Corps of Discovery was camped. Lewis and Clark wrapped that child in an American flag, then pledged that he would certainly become a leader of his people and a servant of peace.

Which is exactly what he became. He supported the signing of the treaty in 1858, then kept his own people from joining the Santees during the 1862 Dakota War.

That he was a man of peace, however, did not mean he looked kindly on the invasion ripping through "the Yankton triangle." Just a few years later, Struck by the Ree regretted everything. "I am getting poorer every day," he said:

The white men are coming like maggots. It is useless to resist them. They are many more than we are. We could not hope to stop them. Many of our brave warriors would be killed, our women and children left in sorrow, and still we would not stop them. We must accept it, get the best terms we can get and try to adopt their ways.¹

Throughout his life, old Ree was half villain, half hero. Worship in the Greenwood Catholic church, where Struck by the Ree attended, never officially began until he was seated; but the famous old chief's house was burned to the ground by those who hated him. His horses were stolen.

It's easy to miss that memorial stone up there

on the hill above Greenwood, especially now that the obelisk is gone. But what's left up there and broken is probably a better image for the story of the Yanktons and the Treaty of 1858.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," the Bible says, but when they sell away the people's soul?

It will probably take a boom truck to reset that obelisk. Some guy will have to drive up to the top of that hill, pick it up, and somehow recap the monument. I'm wondering who's going to pay. Who should? Who can?

Some say the treatment of African Americans

and Native Americans throughout the history of this nation is and forever will be "America's Original Sin."

Me? I miss the obelisk towering up there. But then, to many, that monument has been a kind of grave for more than a century.

It's just down the road. It's a pity more people don't see it.

Endnote

1. aktalakota.stja.org.