

Dorris Bridge

CLIVE RIDDLE

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First Ten Pages....

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Tuesday, September 1st
12:01 AM Demon Ridge

The two young men from Dorris Bridge ran over the already-dead rattlesnake that was plastered into the asphalt of Highway 395, as they ventured towards the turnoff that would take them to the entrance of Demon Ridge. Great Basin Rattlesnakes periodically gathered warmth on Highway 395 and met such as fate.

The 1975 Paiute County Chamber of Commerce brochure boasts Dorris Bridge is situated close to the half-way point on Highway 395's 1,490-mile journey from the Canadian to the Mexican border, winding through the eastern side of Washington, Oregon and California plus a small stretch of Nevada. Actually, Highway 395 was cut back to 1,305 miles in length in 1969 with the extension of Interstate 15 in the Mojave Desert. But such updated information often did not find its way into documents emanating from Dorris Bridge for some time.

The two young men, hours from beginning their senior year at Paiute High School, wound their way up the road to the cliffs of Demon Ridge, surrounded by sagebrush, juniper trees and lava rock. They reached the top, armed with a six pack of Coors beer still situated in a small brown paper bag with the receipt from their buyers' purchase. They slammed the doors to their 1954 Chevy Pickup and selected rocks to recline on, less than ten feet from the precipice. They gazed at the panorama of stars above, and diminishing lights of Dorris Bridge below. They could have just as easily been taking in the lights of Lone Pine, California; Burns, Oregon; or any other number of high mountain desert small towns that dotted Highway 395 with great similarity.

Dorris Bridge, the seat of Paiute County, California, harbored 2,000 or so residents nestled in the small valley

overshadowed by the Demon Ridge plateau to the west. Outlying areas were occupied by small cattle, sheep and alfalfa operations. The town had not changed much in size since before the turn of the century. Stucco and brick storefronts lined Main Street (Highway 395) - the buildings erected mostly in the 1940's with faded advertisements and names of past establishments painted into their sides. Street lights and uneven sidewalks lined Main Street, unlike most of the remainder of town. Homes throughout Dorris Bridge represented every decade of the century, with a number in various states of disrepair. One hill rose out of the southwest corner of town, adorned by an abandoned old mansion. The Dorris River snaked its way around the town's periphery with the two bridges crossing it both situated north of the city limits. The original bridge after which the town was named had long ago met its demise.

As the two young men yanked the pull tabs from their second beers, they took in the quiet of the night. No sounds escaped from the town below, or the Demon Ridge Indian reservation due north of them on the plateau. Without benefit of a cooler, their beers grew progressively warmer.

So their last hours of summer vacation slipped away on the cliffs of Demon Ridge. Time passed and their conversation drifted, as conversations do. At some point, they came to the realization the keys to their vehicle were not residing in either of their pockets. One of them arose to see if the keys were still in the ignition, or somewhere else nearby.

The rustling of juniper branches accompanied by the crackling of dry twigs on the ground, broke the stillness of the midnight hour. Kyle Burgess, perched on the rock, stared into the tall blackish-purple shadows that enveloped the noise. He pulled the metal tab off his last Coors, then dropped it into the empty can at his side and took a long loud slurp of his lukewarm beer. Kyle detected the unmistakable thump of someone falling to the ground. He squinted, but could not pull into focus his best friend before him in the fuzzy darkness.

“A flashlight would be just the thing right now. One without dead batteries,” Rick Pearl admonished Kyle as he returned empty-handed from Kyle’s 1954 Chevy Pickup, the taste of dust lingering in his mouth. “I couldn’t find any sign of your keys, you dipstick.” Rick sat himself down again, cross-legged next to Kyle.

Kyle sighed, offering Rick a share of their one remaining beer. Kyle chuckled softly. “My dad’s gonna kill me, for being out this late. And then he’ll kill you for being with me.”

Rick grinned, guzzled half the Coors, wiped his mouth, and craned his neck towards the pickup. “By the time we find your keys and get out of here, we’ll just be showing up for breakfast and he’ll think we’re just getting up.” Rick’s voice was always seemingly filled with confidence, just as much as Kyle’s was filled with self-doubt.

Kyle could make out the lights of a vehicle below, working its way down Penlight Road towards town. The thought crossed his mind that it could be a patrol car that his father, the chief of police, sent looking for him. “Yeah, I think we should...” Kyle cut his reply as the two boys heard an odd low-pitched buzz launch abruptly in the distance.

Rick and Kyle rose, peering below the cliffs, searching fruitlessly for the source of the sound. A flash of bluish white light shot across the plateau. Kyle looked for the car he had seen, wondering if it had turned direction so that its headlights somehow had managed to project up to the Ridge. Or perhaps, Kyle thought, it could have been a patrol car, aiming the side spotlights up towards the two boys.

A second and final, much more intense light flashed, long enough for Rick to spot Kyle’s keys protruding out of a bare patch of dirt, less than ten feet to his right.

7:50 AM The Thompson Ranch

He had never felt the texture of human skull before. He found himself caressing it with the forefingers of his blistered right

hand. Arnie floored his faded white '61 Chevy Apache pickup truck in first gear, soaring out of the old riverbed, across the field of sagebrush and onto Penlight Road. A cloud of dust swirled behind him. He released his left hand from the steering wheel, to shift gears while he tightly clung to the skull with his right.

Arnie rounded the turn by the split rail fence where the road changed from dirt to asphalt, spit the last of his Copenhagen out the window, and shook his sandy-haired head. Over the car radio, the KMTN announcer recited the lunch menus for the first day of school. The confirmed bachelor and Thompson Ranch foreman crossed the Dorris River bridge and raced his pickup into town.

Chief Randall Burgess, Kyle's father, had just unlocked the door to the Dorris Bridge police station. The secretary wasn't due until 8:30; his lone officer on duty was already on patrol, so Randall had to open the office by himself. He set down his Oakland Raider key chain, toted his coffee in a white Styrofoam cup with his left hand, and opened the blinds to the window with his right. Randall was still agitated from his son's arrival home two hours after curfew.

Randall called the County Sheriff's office to let them know his station was open. Randall asked the deputy on the other end of the line if his guest was about ready for checkout. The Dorris Bridge police used the County jail for their incarcerations. Randall's night patrol officer had locked up a thoroughly soused local Paiute Indian who had lodged many an evening in the facility.

Arnie grasped the upper edge of the still-ajar front door to the station, to bring himself to a stop. He panted, while Randall stared at him, open-mouthed. Arnie's clothes and face were covered with dirt and grease, his shirt un-tucked, concealing his slightly protruding belly. The doorframe he held onto was now smudged. Before Randall could utter a syllable, Arnie blurted out in his husky voice that there had been a murder. He thrust down the skull from his right hand onto the

secretary's desk, where it promptly rolled off and slowly dropped into the chair.

Arnie cried out while he dove to the chair, envisioning his brittle possession now shattered into tiny pieces, only to see it was still quite intact. He let out a sigh of relief, plucked it up, and set the skull more gingerly onto the center of the desk.

Randall sat his six-foot, one-hundred-ninety-pound frame in his secretary's chair. He smiled slightly and folded his hands in front of him, so that they almost touched his somewhat oversize nose. Randall calmly asked Arnie where he found the skull.

Arnie explained that he had been re-directing the storm drainage from the road around the ranch entrance. He was testing a route and started to dig under some big rocks when he hit a pocket of air and discovered the skull. Arnie was certain someone must have buried a body under the rocks, and implored Randall to come out and mark off a crime scene.

Randall stared at the skull and smiled. "I don't know that I'm the man for the job," Randall imparted in his usual nonsense tone of voice.

Arnie frowned, started to speak, but was interrupted.

The deputy from the County Sheriff's office pushed the front door open and stood halfway inside, propping himself against the door. The deputy informed Randall that the Grand Jury has to do its annual jail inspection later this morning, so the Sheriff was returning the Indian that Randall's man had booked the night before. The Deputy guided the middle aged, alcoholic, slumping Paiute Native American to the waiting chair and promptly left.

Arnie smiled knowingly at Tornado Highsmith, who was slinking in the chair, combing his jet-black grimy hair with his fingers. Arnie turned back towards Randall. "What did Tornado do now?"

Randall chuckled and answered as if Tornado was not seated a few feet away. "Well, it seems Tornado's still in his finest attire from last evening, when we helped him up from

the curb outside the Emperor Saloon, where he had been marking your boss's Cadillac as his own territory, till he stumbled and fell in his own pool of piss. It appears that he's upchucked once or twice on his nice plaid shirt since then."

Tornado grinned, glanced over at Randall's secretary's desk, stood up and slowly inched forward.

"So you get to babysit Mr. Tornado?" Arnie inquired, ignoring Tornado's leisurely approach to them.

Randall sighed. He said it appeared so, until he got a hold of someone on the Tribal Council to take Tornado back to the reservation, or he gave up and did it himself.

Tornado reached the secretary's desk and stretched his arm to touch the skull lying next to the phone. Arnie quickly stepped over, pulled the skull back, and admonished Tornado. "This is evidence..."

Randall interrupted. "Would you slow down, Arnie? Let's forget you said anything about a murder. I think it's a bit more dated."

Arnie started to speak, but Tornado interrupted.

"I need to use the toilet. I know where it is. When I come back, I will tell you all what I think about all this," Tornado announced in his soft, deliberate voice, with a cadence that placed pauses between each sentence. Tornado, standing at five-foot-four and skinny as a rail, shuffled across the room in his tattered dark plaid shirt, his odor finally catching up to Arnie. Arnie wrinkled his nose and closed his eyes. Tornado lingered in Arnie's nostrils well after he headed down the hall.

"I don't get it," Arnie finally replied, stepped away and leaned against the filing cabinet by the front window. A pause filled the room for a moment. "How old are you saying this skull is?"

Randall elaborated that he didn't know, and even experts had a hard time dating skeletal remains, but wagered the skull was not from this century. Randall speculated that Arnie found an old Indian grave and maybe an ancient burial ground.

Randall added as luck would have it, some UC Davis kids were already starting a dig in Collins Valley.

“Wait a minute.” Arnie said sharply, pulling away from the filing cabinet and standing firmly on both feet. “You’re not telling me you’re thinking of bringing in those flatlander college kids to start digging where I’m trying to do my work?”

“Arnie, we may have no choice, if this works out to be a burial ground.” Randall responded, rubbing his crew cut dark brown hair. He informed Arnie that a burial site wouldn’t involve a dig. The college team could use forensics on what was exposed near the surface to best guess how old the skull was, if it was Native American, and if a burial site was involved.

Arnie shook his head. “Damn it, Randall. You know I could have just kept my mouth shut.”

Randall put his arm around Arnie’s shoulder. “It’s like that proverb. ‘No great deed goes unpunished.’ Sorry Arnie, but think about it. A murder investigation would tie things up too. We’ll keep your little friend safe and turn him over to those UC Davis kids and the Paiute Tribal Council. And tell you what; I’ll call the *Paiute Sentinel*. I’ll bet they’ll want to put your picture in the paper. You and your little friend.”

Arnie grunted.

“Don’t worry, Arnie, I’ll instruct them to make sure they put captions under the picture, so everyone can tell which one is you and which one is his your new friend.”

Arnie exclaimed an expletive and let loose a resigned laugh. He liked the Chief too much to be mad at him.

Randall finally took a few sips of his now cooling coffee and glanced towards the back of the office.

Arnie smiled. “So, Chief, do you think Tornado is going to fall asleep on the toilet again?”

8:20 AM Paiute High School Gymnasium

The 312 students of Paiute High were packed in the gym for their first day of school assembly. Principal Harris had

introduced the faculty from the center of the gym floor. He stood six-foot-two, with thick, straight brown hair neatly parted to the right side, and was saddled with dark circles under his speckled forlorn brown eyes. He grasped the microphone while it still rested in its stand. Reading from the 3-inch by 5-inch note cards that he held with his left hand, he raised his voice. "You are the most fortunate classes to ever grace the halls of Paiute High. For when this year is completed, you can say you were there, during our nation's bicentennial year, furthering the education that your fathers and forefathers fought so hard for you to have the privilege to enjoy. Let's hear it for the class of 1976 and the underclassmen of Paiute High!"

Scattered applause and a few isolated whoops echoed through the gym. Principal Harris looked bemused, lowered his index cards and visually sifted through the small sea of students sitting before him in the wooden, roll-out bleachers. "And now, without further adieu, here's your student body president, Kyle Burgess!"

Randall's son Kyle had been standing to Principal Harris' left, in the center of the gym. Kyle had very wavy brown hair, long sideburns, and dark brown eyes. He wore corduroy pants to school pretty much every day and was an awkward six-foot-two. He stepped forward to the microphone and gestured towards his principal. "Let's hear it for this Mr. Harris fellow!"

The gym again sounded with scattered applause. Principal Harris thought how long this school year was going to seem. He wondered if his wife was still asleep in bed, nursing a hangover. He rubbed his pudgy cheeks and reached to adjust his pants around his hips, which were recently having a more difficult time holding in his waistline.

Kyle grabbed the mike stand and pulled it right up to his lips. "This is going to be the best year of our lives!" The gym now roared. Kyle's face tightened, his own slight hangover revisiting him, a combination of Coors, not enough sleep, and his father's rant when he finally made it home past one in the morning. His thoughts wandered to the flash of light up on

Demon Ridge that he and Rick had no answers for. Kyle drew in a deep breath and tried to focus. "I know this. Every one of us will think back to this point in time, even when we're as old as Mr. Harris. And we will be proud to have been a Paiute Warrior!" The gym roared again. Kyle concluded, "So, I officially call this school year to order. Go Paiute!"

The gym erupted in chants of "Paiute." Kyle sauntered over from the center of the gym to the empty first row of bleacher seats and sat down. His head throbbed as he looked for his best friend Rick in the seats behind him.

When the assembly finally ended, Kyle rose to join Rick and the gang coming down from the highest row. Kyle stopped suddenly two rows up, when he spotted a new girl, descending the steps. She was an absolute fox. Her mid-length brown hair only curved very slightly at the bottom. She stood slightly taller than the ladies on each side of her. Kyle gawked. She didn't have large breasts, but her top blouse button was undone. Kyle continued to stare at her face, her big loop earrings and her chest. The girls filed past him, leaping off the last step, without acknowledging his presence.

The assembly schedule bell rang just as Rick whacked Kyle on the back of his head with the back of his hand. "Make you hear bells, did I?" Rick cracked as he jumped off the last bleacher steps. Their group headed out the gym's west double doors, Kyle's headache following him closely, not wanting to get left behind.

9:28 AM Mr. Kennedy's American Government Class

Mr. Kennedy was Kyle's favorite teacher as well as his wrestling and track coach. Mr. Kennedy stood just five-foot-five, kept his light brown hair neatly trimmed, but was stocky with a thick neck. He sported a thick, reddish brown moustache and thick glasses. Five minutes into class, he had already written Kyle a hall pass to bring him back a cup of coffee from the teacher's lounge.

Kyle shut the door to Mr. Kennedy's room. He swung the white coffee mug with a picture of the cartoon character Ziggy wildly with his right hand while he strode down the hall. Kyle glanced down past the Social Hall, through the double glass doors leading outside.

Kyle spotted a patrol car cruising down the street. Rick was of the opinion it was a patrol car spotlight that illuminated the Ridge in the middle of the night. Kyle wasn't so sure. His father gave no hint that his night patrol had spotted them, when he lit into Kyle upon his son's arrival home. The patrol car also wouldn't explain the buzzing noise they heard.

Kyle strolled past the open door of an American History class, filled with juniors. He exclaimed in a slow deep voice, "His-tor-eee" so that the entire class could hear. He carelessly swung the Ziggy coffee cup even higher and lost his grip. Ziggy flew several feet forward and landed just before the steps that descend down to the Social Hall. Ziggy now suffered a fractured skull. Kyle quickly contemplated trading Ziggy for a spare coffee mug left in the teacher's lounge and wondered if Mr. Kennedy would notice.

Kyle looked up from where he was kneeling with his broken Ziggy, to witness the new girl trotting up the steps from the Social Hall carrying a folder full of papers. "Hi," she said with a lyrical voice, pausing for just a moment with a wide smile and then resumed her journey towards the office.

She seemed to simply float up the steps, not surrendering to the laws of gravity. Kyle froze for a second and gasped out his response after she was already passing the history class, probably out of earshot. "Hey," was all he could manage.

Friday, September 4th
8:50 AM Dorris Bridge Police Station

Chief Randall sighed as he sipped his lukewarm coffee. He scratched his crew cut, rubbed his chin, and returned to his forms that had nothing to do with his job title. Randall's chair