

Escape from Ogalalla

By G.R. Williamson

In the summer of 1875 Billy Thompson was shot up in a saloon in Ogalalla, Nebraska. Following the shooting the law held him under guard at the town's only hotel, The Ogalalla House, until he could be tried and hung – which was a forgone conclusion of all of the residents. His brother Ben Thompson, a noted gambler and pistol fighter, was convinced that the mob in Ogalalla was waiting for him to come after Billy. He had reason to believe that if he showed up they intended to stage a necktie party for two. Hedging his bets Ben called in an old friend, Bat Masterson, to free his brother from the clutches of what was reputed to be the crooked law of Ogalalla.

It all began when Billy vied for the affections of a local whore with the ignominious moniker of Big Alice. A saloon owner named Bill Tucker lay claim to her off-duty trysts and warned Billy to stay away from the damsel. Billy, not known to heed warnings, continued to commingle with Big Alice until he decided to confront Tucker in his saloon, the Cowboy's Rest. After downing a gut full of liquor Billy swung into the saloon and ripped off a quick shot at Tucker. The bullet caught the saloon owner in his hand as he was serving a customer a shot of whiskey. Tucker quickly counted the fingers on his left hand and found that he was missing his thumb and three other fingers. He grabbed a bar towel, wrapped his bloody hand, and ducked behind the bar. Billy, thinking he had killed the man, holstered his pistol and staggered out of the saloon.

Tucker was far from dead. He pulled up from behind the bar with a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. He ran to the door and with his good hand leveled the ten-gauge at Thompson and got off both barrels. Billy, who was a short distance from the saloon, pitched forward into the street with five buckshot wounds to his back and buttocks. Tucker's friends rushed him to his house for medical attention while the law dragged Billy to the Ogalalla House where he was treated and held prisoner.

Bat Masterson had never been particularly fond of Billy Thompson stemming from their first meeting in Mobeetie, Texas a few years earlier. Billy had brought another whore named Mollie Brennan from Kansas to work for him in a Mobeetie dancehall. In less than a few months Billy took off to avoid the lawmen who were hot on his trail for the shooting of Sheriff C.B. Whitney in Ellsworth, Kansas. Mollie was left stranded in throng of buffalo hide hunters and soldiers from the nearby garrison at Fort Elliott.

Bat took an immediate interest in the comely Miss Brennan and saw himself as her benefactor. As was common in those rough frontier towns an army officer named King decided that she was his private property and warned Masterson to stay away from her. A short time later King, thoroughly lubricated with liquor, found Bat and Mollie dancing at the Lady Gay. He cursed them both and punctuated his words with his pistol. Molly managed to move in front of Bat and was hit with a round through the midsection. As she fell to the floor Bat took a bullet through the groin but still managed to pull his Colt and plow a bloody hole through King's heart.

If Wyatt Earp's memoirs are correct this is where Ben Thompson stepped up and saved Masterson's life. He held the other soldiers at bay with his pistol while Bat was carried away for medical attention. King was dead the minute he hit the floor and Mollie

died a few hours later. Thompson stayed on in Mobeetie for a few weeks to make sure Masterson would recover enough to make it to Dodge City where he eventually took a job as the deputy sheriff of Ford County.

Because Ben Thompson had saved his life or for whatever the reason Masterson felt obligated to help Ben retrieve his wayward brother from the toughs of Ogalalla and boarded a train for Nebraska. Arriving in town, which was little more than a few rough-hewn buildings huddled around the Union Pacific line on the north bank of the South Platte River, Bat surveyed the situation and found he was bucking bad odds. Billy's wounds rendered him incapable of riding a horse so Bat had to devise another method of getting him out of town. He told Billy to pretend that he was so weak that he could not manage to escape while he came up with a plan.

Biding his time Bat befriended the young deputy charged with guarding Billy in the hotel. They played cards to pass the time and often Bat paid for a round of drinks. Then after a few days Bat saw his opportunity on a Sunday night when the whole community turned out for a dance that was held in a schoolhouse on the edge of town. The sheriff, who was the best fiddle player in the area, dearly liked to play and would keep the crowd dancing until the wee hours of the next morning.

The night of the dance the Ogalalla House had emptied leaving only Bat, Billy, the deputy, and a bartender named Jim Dunn. Masterson managed to bribe Dunn into slipping a "Mickey Finn" into one of the whiskey sours he ordered for himself and the guard. The guard downed the doctored drink and Bat called for another round. A few minutes after the second drink the guard slumped to the floor in a stupor. Bat paid the bartender and rushed to Billy's room where he got the wounded man dressed. He then

rolled Billy up in a carpet, hoisted him over his shoulder, and carried him down to the depot. They arrived just as the train was pulling into the station around midnight. Bat boarded the train, heaved Billy into a seat, and they quietly left for North Platte some fifty miles east of Ogalalla.

At about two o'clock in the morning they pulled into North Platte where Bat shouldered Thompson and climbed down the steps to the station. It was pitch black but up the street Masterson could see the gaslights of Dave Perry's saloon. He managed to lug Billy through the saloon doors and deposit him onto a pool table. As luck would have it Bill Cody was in the saloon drinking and telling stories to his friends. Bat explained their plight and Cody, ever the showman, dramatically swore that he would personally see to it that they would not fall into the hands of the Ogalalla authorities and would provide a means of getting them back to Dodge City.

Here is where the story takes a comedic twist. Without telling his wife, Cody gave Masterson her new phaeton buggy and a well-bred horse to transport Billy out of Nebraska. In addition, he offered to let them follow along with the group of dignitaries he was leading on a trip to a large cattle ranch about twenty-five miles to the south of North Platte. The Europeans, who had been sent by General Sheridan, were touring the west for a first hand look at the wilds of the frontier and Cody was in charge of escorting them to the Keith ranch. The twenty foreigners arrived eager to have the famous Buffalo Bill guide them through the wild plains and he was in his element – full of grandiose gestures and dramatic flair.

As the caravan assembled Cody asked Masterson to drive his double teamed mess wagon and let another ranch hand drive the buggy carrying Thompson. Bat quickly found

that the mess wagon was loaded with a small quantity of food and a massive amount of liquor. All of the riders were given a stout drink and then Cody signaled for the group to set out on their journey. After traveling for a short while Cody halted the riders for a rest stop that included a liberal amount of "liquid refreshments". He repeated this routine for several more stops until the caravan was now having a grand old time but finding it harder and harder to stay in the saddle. Finally Cody, reeling in his saddle, rode up to the mess wagon and sloshed aboard. He fell asleep immediately and Bat was left in charge of leading the group to the south. Bat, who had also had his share of liquid refreshment, was barely able to navigate the wagon and after a short distance hit a rut and flipped the wagon over on its back. Masterson was pitched from the wagon but Cody was trapped under the bed, covered with the load of "refreshments". Bat had landed on his face and was nursing a bloody gash in his lower lip. He and the others managed to right the mess wagon only to find that Cody was unscathed and wondering what in thunder had happened.

They finally made it to Keith's ranch where they had supper and Cody sobered up enough to entertain his entourage with his legendary skills of shooting and riding. The next morning Masterson, nursing a swollen lip and a massive hangover, hitched up Mrs. Cody's phaeton and headed for Dodge City with Billy. A short time after leaving the ranch a massive black cloud overtook them from the west drenching them in torrents of bone-chilling rain. It continued to rain on the pair for the remainder of their two hundred-mile trip. Several days later Mrs. Cody's carriage rolled into Dodge City with Masterson at the reins and Thompson in a soggy buffalo robe. Both were covered with mud and thoroughly soaked. Shivering, Bat urged the tired horse toward his favorite hotel

where a hot bath and a decent meal were always available. Billy stirred from beneath his buffalo hide and demanded that they first stop at the telegraph office where he wired the sheriff of Ogalalla. The message said that he had arrived safely in Dodge and that the sheriff could find him there if he wanted to come and get him.

Over the years Billy Thompson had been accused of many things but never, never of being very bright. Fortunately for him the sheriff decided he was not worth the effort and let the matter drop.

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