

## **Red, Bootjack, Little Stevie and the Red Indian**

**by James B. Goode**

Red, Bootjack, and Little Stevie came out of their clapboard shack on Sanctified Hill carrying their burlap tow sacks thrown over their left shoulders, a twist held tightly with their right hands. A red tomato sun rested half in the sky and half below the dark ridges across the valley. Bootjack led the way down the narrow, winding gravel road. His stride was wide and deliberate. His dishwater blonde hair stood up on his head like a field of wheat. His beard stubble was a mass of red and gray and his chin bobbed up and down as he ground a rounded wad of Red Man chew with his stained teeth. Red followed. His gait, a hesitating skip as he stepped forward, paused, and dragged the other foot along like a comical version of a wedding march. His head jerked in spasms, first left and then right. Little Stevie shuffled in short staccato steps, his chin dropped to his chest with a steady stream of drool feathering down his dark blue button-up work shirt. A badly swollen hernia along his right side made him look like he had a huge penis running along his thigh. He carried a ball of string in his left pocket.

Collecting string had become his hobby. He had several large balls of it back at the shack. He found it everywhere, hanging in bushes, among the boxes behind the grocery store, and blood-stained pieces of it where the butcher threw his trash out at the meat market. Nobody fooled with his string. Nobody. Bootjack and Red had often been a victim of his wrath, just for picking up a ball to admire its colors.

“You’uns all is slower than cold molasses,” Bootjack said, with spittle flying from his mouth and landing on the limestone gravel. He glanced back at the parade with an impatient, disapproving look. Red and Little Stevie gave him a vacant stare, like some hidden switch was in the off position.

The parade was headed into town, going to the cowboy movie playing at the Lyric Theater. Every month the group saved seventy-five cents each from their pop bottle money to spend at the show. Fifty cents went for the ticket and the rest was spent for popcorn, Goobers, Necco Wafers, Tootsie Rolls, Boston Beans or Double Bubble Gum Cigars.

“Me not like Injuns,” Little Stevie said. “They bad. They try kill John Wayne.” He looked up and down the street, as if one of the savages might jump from the shadows of the storefront doorways. He had seen one on a carnival barker’s stage. The Chief’s fierce eyes had peered from between the eagle feathers, frightening Little Stevie and causing him hide under an old concessions trailer. Red and Bootjack had to lure him

out with a big pink ball of cotton candy. They had called to him like he was a puppy under a porch.

"Come on, Stevie. Come on boy! Here's some cotton candy. You like cotton candy," they had said as they tried to coax him from the mud beneath the trailer. He had finally crawled out the other side, covered with a sticky, yellow paste of mud. When he saw the pink cotton candy, a jack-o-lantern grin spread beneath his nose.

"You give Stevie," he had said. Bootjack had stretched out his arm, holding the paper cone toward him. Stevie snatched it away and buried his face into the pink cloud, making a sticky mask on his face.

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The parade marched on down Main Street. They passed the Texaco station with its bright red star set on a big white oval. Red avoided stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back," he kept repeating.

"I ain't puttin' up with no red Injuns no more," Stevie said as he stared at the mannequins in the Wells' Department Store window. "They chop and chop. Steal people's hair. They ain't no good. No good bastards."

Bootjack kept prodding them to hurry. "The picture show starts at six," he said, as he looked at the big Westclox pocket watch he carried attached to his belt loop with a strand of rawhide. "We have to be there," he said. "They don't wait on nobody." The parade moved past Halcomb's Barber Shop where the shoeshine boy sang out and snapped his polishing rag across a pair of wing-tipped shoes and then toward God's Grace Funeral Home where they paused to look at the funeral announcements posted on the blackboard in the window.

"My name not there," Red said, as he carefully avoided a big crack on the sidewalk near the window. "I glad my name not there," he said. He laughed in a high pitched shriek and slapped his rough, cracked hands on his overall covered thigh. "Bo Cornett's name there . . . Bo Cornett drink whiskey . . . Bo die . . ."

The parade moved across the bridge separating the upper and lower parts of the town. It filed past the Williams' Shoe Shop where Mr. Williams was grinding a shoe sole on the long shaft of spinning wheels. It moved past the cut sandstone city hall where they could see "Gunsmoke," the city policeman through an open window as he sat at his desk completing paperwork. A young boy saw them coming and ducked down behind a row of parked cars. He began to yell.

"Hey Red! Hey Red!"

Red paused to see from where the voice was coming. The boy again ducked behind the row of cars and scurried along just ahead of the parade.

"Hey Red! Heyyyyy Red!" he continued to yell.

Red stopped suddenly, his toes halting just before another crack in the sidewalk. He had developed that habit after he was told that if he stepped on a crack, he would break his mother's back. "I wish somebody would holler blue instead of red," he said as he puffed on his crook stem pipe. "Holler yellow, green, blue or anything but red," he declared as he blew a cloud of smoke into the gentle wind and watched it being pulled toward the draft of an alleyway.

The parade moved to near the front of the Stardust Theatre. The line for the ticket booth ended two doors down at Creech's Grocery. The parade got in line. They shuffled forward as the clerk in the enclosed glass booth took the crowd's money, pushed the button, and handed out tickets as they appeared like rectangular green tongues from the narrow slit in the polished metal surface. The crowd shunned the parade, keeping

a safe distance. The parade hadn't taken a bath in over two months and the heat cast a wave of body odor in a wash over the line.

Boot Jack stepped up to the booth and, after rummaging through the deep pockets of his greasy suit jacket, palmed six quarters and pushed them through the rectangular cutout in the glass. "Gimme three fer duh show," he said. The clerk with white cat eye glasses stared back, her features magnified and distorted by the irregular glass in the booth.

"You boys will have to behave this time, if I let you into the theater. The last time you were here, you made ugly noises from the front row and acted like a bunch of wild monkeys all during the show. You must promise to behave," she declared from her perch on the wooden stool. The parade looked at her sharp nose as it caught a whiff of them. Her nostrils moved in and out like the gills of a catfish. Red grinned and showed his crosscut saw teeth. Little Stevie gripped his tow sack tightly and squinted at the cat-eye clerk with his beady eyes set deep in his fat. Boot Jack blew his nose by pinching his nostrils with his thumb and middle finger, blowing and slinging at the same time. The snot flew out in a long strand, attaching itself like a snail trail to the bottom of the booth. He grabbed the tickets and darted through the door and into the lobby. The parade followed. They got in line at the concession counter. Stevie got down on his knees and plastered his face against the display case. His breath clouded the glass as he exhaled. His eyes were fixed on the Goobers. Drool was flowing in rivers. Boot Jack finally reached the head of the line.

"Gimme a box of popcorn. Red wants them Red Hots. Little Stevie wants a box of Goobers. We need grape drink, in a cup," he said as ran his cracked, dirty hand through his blonde hair, flattening it to look like someone had run a push mower down the middle.

The soda jerk wrinkled his nose, but went about preparing the order, finally setting it on the beveled glass counter. Boot Jack jabbed his hand deep into his pants pocket and came out with the coins to pay. The parade followed him as he headed into the dimly lit theater, each carrying his snack with Boot Jack balancing the grape drink in one hand and the other holding his popcorn box and the dangling tow-sack. The parade made its way to the front row and across to the center. They placed their tow sacks between their feet, clamping them with their ankles to make sure they didn't go anywhere. Boot Jack held the grape drink, passing it periodically down the line to the parade. He ate the popcorn in large handfuls, most of it falling to his lap and onto the floor. Little Stevie threw the Goobers in the air, catching them like a hungry pup. Red sucked on the Red Hots, blowing in and out as they burned his tongue and lips.

On the screen, a box of popcorn sang: *Let's all go to the lobby; let's all go to the lobby; let's all go to lobby and get ourselves a coke.* Boxes of Goobers and bags of Red Hots danced around the screen.

Then the news reel came on, showing a giant, bald General Dwight Eisenhower talking about the war. Images of soldiers running from the trenches and firing their weapons flew across the screen, sometimes appearing to come toward them, causing the parade to jump in their seats.

Then a Buck Rogers serial came on. "Planet Outlaws" in jerky 3-D black and white script quivered on the screen with a space ship as a backdrop. Newspaper headlines spun toward them: *Ghosts in D.C. Skies Outrace Chasing Jets; Jets Chase D.C. Sky Ghosts; Jets to Shoot Down Saucers.* Then the familiar voice of the mustachioed narrator who sat at his news desk with his headset in place said: *From somewhere in the skies above us have come, from time to time, flaming discs and weird phenom-*

*ena. What are they? Whence have they come? Dr. Maurice Biot, one of the leading aerodynamists in the world, stated that in his opinion they have originated elsewhere than the earth, and that they are artificially controlled.* The narrator recounted how mankind had been suspicious of many things that were now reality.

*We are tempted to say they are just a fiction writer's dream. We must remember that Jules Verne once dreamed of exploring the ocean depths and, in time, we have the submarine. Leonardo da Vinci also prophesied that someday man would fly like a bird. Today, flying is commonplace . . . . But now man dreams of limitless power to propel us into outer space where we can explore other worlds. So, while travel to another planet may seem highly imaginative to us today, in the year 2000 it may be commonplace.* A cigar shaped space ship appeared, careening through dark clouds and losing altitude. It crashed in the mountains of the polar region. Then, far into the future, Buck Rogers and Buddy were off to discover and explore the wreck.

The parade sat transfixed and believing. Their eyes fixed on the screen like a pride of lions watching a herd of gazelle. The parade ate their popcorn, Goobers, and Red Hots, lifting the snacks to their mouths without once glancing down to guide their hands. The swashbuckling space adventure played out before them. They grimaced, and punched the air with their fists. They were inside a world of robots and ray guns until the narrator said:

*And that my friend finishes the story of Killer Kane, a man who wanted to conquer the world. No less ruthless, no less cunning, no less a danger to civilization than the very real enemy that threatens the world today. Let us hope that the scientists of the free world will devise the weapons and the craft that will make democracy invincible against any enemy. God bless America!*

The parade rose to its feet, applauding, whistling through their index and little fingers, cheering, and stomping their feet. When the rows behind them jeered and yelled for them to sit down, they turn their backs, bent over, and wiggled their butts from side to side.

They didn't sit down until the giant letters HONDO came on the screen, but then they were back on their feet, cheering John Wayne who, as ex-gunfighter Hondo Lane, towered over them like a giant.

No one saw Little Stevie's right hand drop down toward his tow sack, undo the twist at the opening, slip it into the interior of the rough burlap, and slide out a single action Colt revolver that had belonged to his dad. It had been left to him by default when his mother died. He had found it hidden in a shoebox under his mother's bed. He had kept it in his tow-sack, only taking it out when no one else was around. He admired its cold, blue shininess and its silver bullets. He kept it on his lap until the Apaches appeared.

On the screen, Hondo tried to persuade Angie to leave the ranch before the next Indian raid, but she refused, insisting that the Apaches were friendly. Hondo had to leave Angie, and when he did, Apaches surrounded her ranch, menacing her and her son Johnny. Spears, arrows, and running horses careened toward the parade. Dead men toppled from wagons. Then Johnny raised his gun in an attempt to protect his mother.

Little Stevie could take it no longer. He jumped to his feet, screaming, "You leave her alone. You're a yeller bellied red Injun. You not chop and chop and steal her hair. You no good bastard." He raised the revolver, took aim, and fired two shots into the forehead of Apache Chief Vittorio. Two black holes appeared, and then as the Chief moved they became juxtaposed on the widow Angie Lowe. One of the holes pierced the cleavage of her bosom and another rested on her delicate jaw. A deep

primal scream arose from Little Stevie's drooling mouth as he rushed toward the screen. Boot Jack was on his feet, lunging toward Little Stevie, catching him with a flying tackle, and grabbing his ankles just as he made it to the apron of the stage. He twisted Little Stevie's fingers, trying to wrestle the gun from his fat, stubby hand. A thick band of foam formed around Little Stevie's mouth as they rolled on the floor. He screamed anguished sounds from deep in his throat. The Apaches on the screen screamed, forming a kind of trilling chorus. Then Little Stevie managed to get on top of Boot Jack. He bolted, using Boot Jack's chest as a springboard to propel himself onto the stage, leaving Bootjack holding one of his scarred brogans. He stood with his back to the audience who scattered, some running for the exits and some crouching behind theater seats. His body swayed in circles from the waist up, his image forming an imposing shadow as he raised the pistol again, firing two more holes into the Chief Vittorio's chest.

Red jumped up and down in place, clapping his hands like a Pentecostal song leader. "Touchdown!" he yelled. "Little Stevie, he made a touchdown!" He danced about manically, screaming like a banshee. The Apaches screamed. More shots were fired. The audience was now a mob, shrieking and running up the ramps toward the dimly lit exit signs. Bootjack lay on the floor curled in a fetal position with his eyes covered. Little Stevie fell to his knees, weeping uncontrollably. The four bullet holes moved wildly around the screen like windswept leaves in a violent storm.