

## The Cut Meat Road

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West of Redridge community, the tribal seat of Redridge Reservation, a narrow asphalt-surfaced road dips and turns sharply for two or three miles as it descends into Crazy Horse Canyon—a scenic river valley banked by tall ponderosa pines rising up majestically along the gradual slopes to form a natural protection from the constant prairie wind on the plains above. A two-lane bridge spans the Little White River that winds through the canyon. Past the bridge, the road straightens as it ascends to flat open country.

An old Jesuit priest used this road frequently, traveling between the reservation communities of Redridge and Cut Meat. As he reached the straight stretch of road beyond the bridge, the priest stepped down hard on the gas pedal. He loved the sudden thrust as his new Chevrolet with its special eight-cylinder engine rapidly accelerated. After skillfully negotiating the sharp curves of Crazy Horse Canyon, the opportunity to test the outer limits of the speed at which he could safely (in his own mind) traverse the straight stretches of his route always exhilarated him.

Now he came to the open prairie above the canyon. He could see the road ahead curving ever so gently as it reached into the fading light far out on the westerly horizon. The river canyon behind him was now pitch black and rather foreboding. The covering of green-black pines prevented the last light of the winter's day from penetrating.

Off the road to his left on a windswept hill the priest could see rows of small wooden crosses in a tiny cemetery encircled by a shabby picket fence bare of paint from constant punishment of rain, wind and snow. The brown of the dead prairie grasses extending as far as one could see made the countryside seem uninviting and uninhabitable, like a remote tundra. Though there was no snow on the ground, a long cold spell had gripped the reservation area for more than two weeks. Temperatures were well below zero every night; the incessant wind gave the cold a greater profundity. The timid sun warmed the earth only slightly on these short winter days.

Soon the priest fell into a melancholy mood; he was unusually weary as he drove along the monotonously straight road. He was accompanied by an old man and a younger woman, neither of whom had uttered a word since they'd left Redridge community. The old man, Leroy Hawkman, sat next to him on the front seat. His hands were folded like an obedient schoolboy's and his small dark eyes were fixed stonily on the road ahead. A huge red nose dominated his deeply wrinkled face.

The woman, One Feather, occupied the rear seat. She appeared to be about thirty-five years old, though you could never really tell about these reservation women. Her

shoulders were draped with a shawl, and over her long, straight black hair she wore a colorful scarf. A faint streak of gray showed where part of her hair was exposed. Her face was smooth except for a few lines around her eyes just above prominent cheekbones. Her eyes focused from side to side as she took in the scenery.

The taciturn group was headed home to Cut Meat, a village of about four hundred inhabitants. The interest One Feather took in the passing countryside would have suggested to a casual observer that she was traveling through new, unfamiliar territory. In truth, she'd lived in Cut Meat for more than ten years, and had made this ride several times a week with Father Hauser for the past five. Along with seven or eight others, One Feather worked at Father Hauser's printing shop at St. Andrew's Mission in Redridge community. The father was mechanically inclined, and thus well-suited for his work with the Mission's vital printing operation.

If the whole truth were told, the priest was, in fact, suited for little else than his mechanical chores. His unpleasant, gruff personality and habitual scowl had long ago shown his superiors at the Mission that the man was woefully ineffective in dealing with people, be they Indian or white. His quick temper and sharp tongue only served to worsen matters in any given situation.

Yet none of the Mission's work was more important than Father Hauser's. He was the man who monthly sent out hundreds of letters (known in the trade as *beg letters*) soliciting funds for the Mission's activities. He ran an efficient shop and took particular pride in the mailing list he'd built up over his three decades on the reservation. His list, however, was nowhere near as extensive as that of Boys Town in Nebraska, he would sometimes remark lugubriously.

Father Hauser, orphaned at an early age, had spent his formative years at that very Boys Town. Engraved on his memory was the harshness of the fathers in those early days, but he believed he'd truly profited from their steady and stern discipline. His faith was dogmatic and unflinching, and the resolve that had carried him through the lonely years of service as a reservation priest was apprenticed at Boys Town. It was of course at Boys Town that he'd decided (with ample encouragement, certainly) on the life of the priesthood.

St. Andrew's was one of the first Catholic missions in the territory, established in 1890 at the request (according to some accounts) of various Sioux chieftains—Spotted Tail, Iron Shell, Left Hand Bull, Big Turkey, Two Strikes, and others. An elementary school was opened in 1891 with forty pupils. Thereafter, enrollment increased rapidly.

During his years on the reservation, Father Hauser had witnessed many changes, some good and some bad, but the most painful to him were developments that saw the influence of the Roman Catholic Church diminishing among the Sioux people. It seemed to him the significant changes really started after World War II when missionaries of other faiths began moving onto the reservation. Until the sudden influx of these new denominations, the Roman Catholics and Episcopalians were in the majority. He didn't mind the Episcopalians so much—they were kind of like the Roman church and might even find their way back to the Mother Church someday, he figured.

But these newcomers! They really got his ire up. What with Sister Evangeline, sent by some little-known sect in California, and the Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, and even Mormons last year! Nineteen- and twenty-year-old kids called Elders, coming to convert Indians who were plenty happy as Catholics—or at least somewhat happy as Episcopalians. Why, at Soldier Creek community, someone in the Mission had remarked recently, it got so there were almost more churches than houses. Last count had it at ten churches in that village of fewer than eight hundred souls.

Father Hauser, engrossed in his angry reverie, slowed his car as he approached Highway 60, a main east-west artery that cuts through the center of the reservation. It was completely dark now. Without stopping, he gave a quick glance to his left, a slightly longer one to his right where visibility was lessened by a dip in the main highway, then glided across the intersection in second gear. The asphalt-paved road ended here; the remaining three-mile stretch into Cut Meat was gravel-surfaced.

The car tires spewed up a hail of pebbles as Father Hauser stepped down hard on the accelerator. Moving along, the car's headlights shone on haystacks at the edge of the road, some of which had stood there for a year or more. The newly-cut hay was light-colored and fresh; the older hay, blackened and rain-soaked. Occasionally a piece of farm equipment could be seen parked next to a haystack.

There were only a few houses on the road into Cut Meat. The one nearest the main highway, a small wooden frame structure with a peaked roof, was vacant. Its paint was peeling and most of its window panes were broken. A growth of scrub trees sparsely covered the barbed wire-fenced yard.

The priest was not paying particularly close attention to his driving when a rabbit darted in front of the car. When he belatedly swerved to his left, the rabbit, blinded by the car's headlights, changed direction suddenly and was clipped by the right front wheel. Braking to a halt, Father Hauser got out of the car and retrieved the small animal, which was still alive and twitching. He tossed it into the trunk and slammed the lid shut.

His mood brightened as he got back behind the wheel. He smiled and uttered a shrill, nervous laugh. "One Feather's supper," he said to Leroy Hawkman, who merely grunted in reply. One Feather said nothing, as if what had happened was a matter of no concern to her, although in fact she'd not missed a moment of the action. It didn't seem important enough to start talking with the priest, however—not that she really objected to speaking with him or anything. It was just that she was always a little uncomfortable around whites when they started talking, on and on, getting more friendly-like. She didn't know how to act or what to say when they got like that, and had learned over the years just to keep silent at such moments. It was always easier that way. Anyhow, she mused, most priests—and especially Father Hauser—seemed to anger very easily, a trait she would never understand.

Three or four large grain storage bins and assorted pieces of farm equipment on the right hand side of the road marked the beginning of Cut Meat proper. Beyond the grain bins, the dim flicker of kerosene lamps emitted from the diminutive Indian houses lying a few yards off the road. Few of the houses had electricity or plumbing.

In its heyday, Cut Meat had a population of about one thousand. Over the years, since World War II, many of the young men of the village had drifted away to seek better lives, and the number of permanent inhabitants had dwindled to less than half that number. Today, a Legion hall, post office, garage, grocery store, and a couple of buildings that originally housed now-defunct business establishments make up the village center. The Catholic Mission had acquired one of the buildings, using it mostly as a recreation center, and occasionally for community meetings. The other was bought by the Mormons, who'd converted it into a meeting hall for worship and for their social activities.

In the doorway of the Mormons' building, Father Hauser spotted two young white men in dark suits. The area was well lighted, and Indians were filing into the hall, probably for a movie sponsored by the elders. The two young men waved vigorously to the priest but he pretended not to notice. He thoroughly disliked the Mormons, much moreso than any other of the new church groups that had come to the reservation.

He considered them to be scheming and deceitful in their efforts to gain converts. To his utter dismay, he'd learned that they often proselytized his own St. Rita's Church congregation while he was away at Redridge community.

His sour mood deepened as he recalled that Lawson Shot with Two Arrows, a long-standing member of St. Rita's, had allowed the Latter Day Saints to send two of his children to a Mormon home somewhere in Idaho. Father Hauser had been in a rage when he'd heard about it.

Months later, one of the children's aunts had died. In accordance with Sioux custom, all of the woman's relatives were expected to attend the wake and burial. The children, however, were just getting settled in Idaho, and the family had decided it was best not to upset their adjustment to their new environment by bringing them back to the reservation. No one at first questioned this decision. Then father Hauser spoke up.

"Just one moment," he said. "We can't bury this woman until those children are here!" The Mormons said they would return the children for the funeral if it must be, but would not pay their travel expenses. As it turned out, the children stayed in Idaho after all (Father Hauser had figured up the travel costs), the woman was buried, and the whole matter was quietly forgotten.

The Mormons at Cut Meat were tolerated, but not taken very seriously by the Sioux. Their piety and super-sobriety were foreign to the Sioux's more light-hearted nature. The first elders to come to the community had been unsuspecting victims of the carefree Sioux attitude. Seeking to learn the local language, Lakota, the elders had sought the help of a villager who, with tongue in cheek surely, taught them what he said was an idiomatic Lakota greeting.

Thereafter, two very serious, intense young missionaries routinely greeted potential converts with the Lakota equivalent of "kiss my ass". Of course, no one was offended, for everyone realized the young men had been duped. Still, no one bothered to correct them; the villagers would merely nod, smile, and continue on their way. Eventually, the missionaries stopped using the phrase, probably because they—like most other whites—simply gave up trying to learn the Sioux language.

Father Hauser turned off the gravel road just beyond the Mission-owned building. Lately he'd been renovating the interior, putting in a new gas heating system, linoleum flooring, and acoustical ceiling tiles. He'd done most of the work himself and was proud of his accomplishment.

The road was so deeply rutted, he had to slow down a little as he passed a cluster of small shacks, mud houses, and ancient silver-colored house trailers. Most of these humble habitations were without plumbing, running water or electricity. Before being turned over to the village, the trailers had housed personnel of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. A community water pump stood at the end of the road about a quarter-mile away; it was the only source of water for about eighty families.

At last, the automobile rolled to a stop and One Feather emerged from the back seat. She lived with Joe Stands in a one-room shack about fifty yards distant. They had three children, all out of wedlock, since they'd never bothered to straighten out the legal entanglements of their previous marriages. Father Hauser got out and opened the trunk, picked up the unfortunate rabbit by its ears, now quite dead, and handed it to One Feather.

"Thank you," she murmured softly, then turned toward her house. Leroy got out too, nodded almost imperceptibly toward Father Hauser, and headed off in the opposite direction. He still hadn't uttered a syllable.

Wearily, Father Hauser drove back along the rutted lane. He turned right at the

main road and drove another fifty yards before turning off onto the narrow driveway that led to St. Rita's church. Behind St. Rita's—a small adobe structure reminiscent of a Mexican village church—were three adobe storage sheds filled with tools, old lumber and various pieces of furniture.

Next to the church was a freshly painted white building. It was long and narrow, and apt to call to mind a military barracks in miniature. This was Father Hauser's three-room house. Next to it was still another adobe structure, larger than the others, and boasting a new green-shingled roof. This was the rummage store operated for Father Hauser by one of the village women. It held shoes, clothing and other used articles accumulated by St. Andrew's Mission and trucked from Redridge to Cut Meat. The articles were sold cheaply; a pair of trousers or a shirt might cost no more than five or ten cents. This token charge made the villagers appreciate the items more—or so Father Hauser liked to think.

The church, the parish house (if it could be dignified with such an appellation), the rummage store, and the sheds all formed a sort of compound which was encircled by a barbed-wire fence.

Pulling into the parking space beside his house, Father Hauser spotted a woman approaching in an unsteady gait along the gravel road. As she drew nearer, he recognized her as Gail Yellow Bird (or Eagle Road, if one considered her the common-law wife of Luke Eagle Road).

What the hell can she want? Must need something—looks a little drunk, too. She never comes around unless she wants something, he observed bitterly to himself. After fidgeting with his key chain for a moment, the priest selected his front-door key and let himself into the cold, empty house. He stood just inside, awaiting the inevitable arrival of Gail Eagle Road. He was tired, and still wore his cassock, having celebrated mass at St. Andrew's just before leaving Redridge. Over his cassock, he wore a plaid three-quarter-length coat.

Father Hauser was a little under six feet tall and weighed over 220 pounds. He was somewhat stoop-shouldered, as if the excess pounds and long years of toil on the reservation were finally wearing him down. A few wisps of white hair were all that covered his balding head. He wore spectacles, which enhanced his priestly countenance.

He scowled as the woman approached, bracing himself to deal with her. She was scrawny, only about ninety pounds, and unhealthy-looking. She probably suffered from consumption like many of the reservation Sioux. Her hair was damp and stringy; her clothing, no doubt purchased at the rummage store, was shabby and ill-fitting. She could be taken for a woman of forty-five, but was at most no more than twenty-seven.

To Father Hauser she looked pretty well soused as she stumbled and almost fell, into the lighted entryway. It was then that he noticed her swollen and bruised face, covered with black and blue marks. One eye was closed, and on the side of her head, a knot the size of a small ball had emerged through her thin hair.

"What happened to you?" the priest asked, with all the compassion and concern he could muster so late in the day.

"Luke beat me up," she answered, matter-of-factly. "He got drunk last night after he got his pay from Bill Kearney." Kearney was an influential white rancher who leased large tracts of Indian lands which he sometimes worked with reservation laborers.

"Luke caused a lot of trouble at his father's place," she continued in a monotone, "near killed me and the new baby. He almost stepped on the baby, and one time threw him across the room. The police came and took him to jail. Took three policemen to hold him down, he was so crazy. I gotta call and see how much of a fine he got."

The last remark, as Gail intended, told the priest why she'd come: one of the two or three phones in the village was in Father Hauser's house.

His priestly demeanor gave way to intense annoyance. Damned if they will ever just come right out with it! He pointed impatiently to the phone. Always it's "I gotta use the phone," or "I gotta have two dollars." Never bothering to ask, "Can I?" or "May I?" No sir, just "Gotta have this," or "Gotta have that."

While the woman dialed the Redridge jail, the priest remarked curtly, "After next week, you needn't come here if you need to use the telephone. I'm having it taken out. You'll have to call from somewhere else. I'm sick of getting woke up in the middle of the night to call the police to break up a drunken brawl, and all the time running people to the hospital when they get hurt with their fighting and carrying on. Why don't you get Father White to come live in Cut Meat? See how he likes all the goings-on!"

Father White was an Episcopal minister, and although he was the village's only Anglican pastor, he lived in Redridge. Father Hauser threw in the remark about Father White because he knew that Luke and Gail were now Episcopalians, having deserted the Roman Catholic faith after Father Hauser got a little too stern in lecturing them on the sins of cohabitation.

But it wasn't really the lectures that kept them away; they'd stopped going to St. Rita's after the priest blew up at them for letting Father White baptize their youngest child. Luke had tried to excuse this lapse by claiming he'd been a little drunk that day and was mixed up. But later he admitted to someone else that he liked to spread his business around to keep on good terms with all the preachers in the community. In case he needed something. Fortunately for Luke, the old priest hadn't heard that part.

Gail didn't respond as the priest raged on about all he did for the villagers—for pitiful little thanks or appreciation. He guessed she'd tuned out at least half of what he said, and even if she hadn't, he figured she would only agree with everything anyway—not that he would believe her, of course. They always agree with white men, or at least nod their heads in the affirmative. Then, more than likely, they go out and do exactly as they please.

Gail finished the call, thanked Father Hauser, and hobbled home, pondering how to get the money to pay Luke's fine. Hauser promptly dismissed her from his thoughts and settled down for his favorite supper of fried ground beef, pork and beans, corn-bread and coffee.



photograph by Shawn Rubenfeld