

# **The Mighty Peculiar Incident at Muddy Creek**

**by Ian Thomas Healy,**

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The day was already hot, and that would mean tempers flaring by nightfall. Sheriff Jesse Hawkins scraped his boots on the edge of the boardwalk to remove the mud. Whoever said that the West was supposed to be dry and dusty had never been to Muddy Creek. Damned if it didn't rain four days out of every week during the spring and summer. Rain meant mud, and mud meant that both the Chinese laundry and the general store both did a brisk business in cleaning and cleaning supplies.

But the rain also meant that the surrounding plains were lush and green, and made for good farming and better ranching, and that was why the citizens of Muddy Creek were more than willing to put up with dirty footprints. Times were good, and there was a lot of money being spread around the town because of it—

mostly at the gambling halls, taverns, and bordellos at the south end, and that often led to trouble of one kind or another.

Jesse removed his hat, a wide-brimmed gaucho with a beaded leather strip around the crown, and brushed his sleeve across the tin star pinned to his vest, making sure no errant spatters marred its surface. He sauntered into the front office of the department, whistling.

„Mornin‘, Jesse. You’re awful cheerful,“ said Hank Clemson, the nighttime deputy. He had his feet up on the desk and was playing with a deck of cards, working them through his fingers with amazing dexterity.

„Hank,“ said Jesse. „Coffee on?“

„Just brewed up a fresh pot. Joe Gentry done drank it all up earlier, trying to sober up. He’s in the back. Poor bastard puked all over hisself. His old lady’s gonna be spittin‘ mad.“

Jesse nodded, pouring out a cup of the thick, fragrant coffee that Hank preferred. It looked exceptionally dark that morning. „He puke before or after you gave him this swill?“

Hank chuckled. „I’ll just go wake him up so he don’t stink up the place too bad today.“ He picked up a bucket of water and headed for the cells in the back of the building. Jesse set down his cup, waiting.

„Mornin‘, sunshine!“ hollered Hank, followed by the sound of water splashing. Jesse broke out in great guffaws of laughter. The first time Hank had done that to someone, he’d nearly pissed himself from laughing so hard, and that was three years ago. Even today, it was still funny as hell.

A minute later, a sopping-wet Joe Gentry trudged out from the back of the jail, followed by a grinning Hank. „Oh, Lordy ... I ain’t never drinkin‘ again,“ he moaned.

„I believe you said that to me last time, Joe,“ said Jesse.

„And the time before,“ said Hank.

„And the time before that,“ said Jesse. „Now how many more times are we gonna have to lock you up ‘fore you figure out that you just ain’t cut out for drinkin‘?“

„I’m sorry, Sheriff. I didn’t mean to cause no trouble.“ Gentry sounded truly apologetic, looking as pitiful as a half-drowned cat with his soaking hat held in his hands.

„I know you didn’t, Joe. Now get on out of here and go home. And stop by the store on your way and buy something nice for Hattie and maybe she won’t make you sleep in the coop again.“ Jesse held open the door for the miserable man.

„Dang, it’s bright out.“ Gentry jammed the wet hat onto his head and staggered out into the morning.

Jesse and Hank watched him wander off down the street, nearly veering into a tavern before apparently thinking better of it and making for the general store. „That’s one sorry son of a bitch who ain’t gonna live to be forty,“ said Hank.

„What, and you are? The way you carry on with them whores, you’ll be lucky if your cock don’t drop off.“

Hank grinned. „Well, speakin‘ of that, Jesse. If you ain’t gonna need me for anything, I’ll be on my way. There’s a bed out there somewhere that’s callin‘ my name.“ He moseyed off, heading toward the Elegant Pussycat, his favorite house of ill repute.

Jesse sighed, taking a sip of his coffee. He had reports to write. The new Mayor, a tenderfoot from somewhere in Connecticut, liked to know exactly what his civil servants were doing with their time, and he'd made it clear that those who didn't turn in paperwork to him with some sort of regularity would find themselves turned out of office. He sat down with a pencil and soon became absorbed in his work.

The door banged open. Jesse's gun was out of its holster before he was even aware of it, but the man in the doorway was certainly no threat. Angus McTavish was the town barber, and his shop was only four doors down from the Sheriff's department.

„Lord A'mighty, Jesse, I thought ye were goin' te shoot me!“ cried the Scotsman, waving his empty hands up in the air.

„Ain't you ever heard of knockin'?“ Jesse slid the six-shooter back into his holster. „What're you all excitable over?“

„It's the train, Jesse! It's nae stoppin'!“

Jesse looked sharply at the clock in the corner. Sometimes Hank forgot to wind it in the middle of the night but this time he had. It was ten minutes to nine. The train passed by twice a week, once in each direction, stopping to take on water and any passengers who cared to leave town.

„Not stopping?“ This was a first. The train had been coming by regular as clockwork as long as Jesse could remember.

„Aye! Me brother's supposed te be comin' fer a visit, so I was waitin' by the water tower, an' it just kept ri' on goin'.“

Jesse stood, working the kinks out of his neck. It wasn't common knowledge that the train carried the payroll for the miners five towns down the line, but then it wasn't exactly a secret either. His hand was cramping from writing; men were not meant to write reports. This would be a welcome break, even if, as he suspected, it turned out to be nothing more serious than an engineer asleep at the throttle.

He thrust a pistol at Angus, who visibly recoiled from the weapon. „Oh, for Chrissakes, it ain't a snake, Angus. By the powers vested in me by the township of Muddy Creek, I hereby deputize you.“

„Wha', a deputy? Me? But ... I'm jus' a barber, Jesse.“

„Not today, Angus, now let's go have a look at that train.“

The two men hurried over to the stables. Since Muddy Creek was so small, most people simply walked to where they needed to be and kept their horses at the stables. Andy the stable boy was very excited to be called upon by no less an important personage than the Sheriff, and he fell all over himself trying to get their animals as fast as his eight-year-old legs allowed.

At last, Jesse and Angus rode out to the edge of town, where people had already gathered to watch the train receding in the distance.

„Hey, Sheriff! Train didn't stop!“ someone called.

„You gonna go catch it?“

„Nice tin star, Angus. Givin' up barberin'?“

Jesse ignored the catcalls, his eyes following the column of smoke moving away from the town. The train didn't seem to be rolling particularly fast; he thought that they could catch it on horseback as long as it didn't accelerate.

„Hup!“ Jesse dug his bootheels into the horse’s sides and flipped the reins. The mare leaped forward. „Come on, Angus.“

„But I’m a barber.“ Nevertheless, the Scotsman urged his own horse into a gallop after Jesse.

In fact, it only took a few minutes for them to catch up to the train. It was barely chuffing along, kicking out far more smoke than steam as the boiler was running dry. Angus pointed at the cars as they rode past. „I canna tell if anyone’s aboard.“

„Me neither, Angus. You ride alongside until I get the engine stopped, less’n you’re feelin’ more heroic than me.“

The Scotsman shook his head, so Jesse angled his horse up next to the tender. He couldn’t see anyone in the engine’s cabin where there ought to have been at least two men: an engineer and a fireman. He gauged the distance in his mind. The train wasn’t going all that fast, but still fast enough that if he missed his leap, he’d break his neck or fall under the wheels or something equally as fatal. He swung his leg over the horse, balancing on one stirrup for a moment, then leaped across a few feet and caught the railing alongside the boiler. After dangling for a few seconds, he managed to pull himself up onto the narrow walkway.

Pistol out, he peeked into the small window of the cabin. He couldn’t see anyone inside. Just to be sure, Jesse rapped the butt of his pistol on the cabin door. When there was no response, he opened it, fully expecting to see a dead body.

Instead he found an empty cabin. He didn’t know a lot about the workings of steam engines, but the gauge labeled Pressure was barely twitching. The train would stop on its own soon enough, but Jesse didn’t want to be climbing all over a moving train. That kind of stunt would get a man killed.

„Hey, Angus!“ he shouted out at the barber. „You know how to stop a train?“

„I’d think ye’d want tae use the brake.“

„Smart aleck.“

Jesse looked around the cabin, found a likely lever, and hauled back on it. The squeaking from beneath him sounded promising, as did the sight of Angus having to rein in his horse. The throttle was marked, and Jesse turned it down as far as it would go.

The last of the water in the tank boiled away, leaving only the sound of coals dying in the firebox and ticking of the oil cooling in the cylinders below.

„Is she all settled?“ asked Angus from his horse.

„I think so, but I ain’t never run an engine afore. I hope it don’t catch fire or anything.“ Jesse checked his pistol, making sure all six chambers were full of bullets. Satisfied, he snapped the cylinder back into place. „Come on, Deputy Barber, let’s check this place out.“

They made cursory inspections of the box cars. Half of them were still full of freight; the others were empty, waiting for new cargo. Nothing seemed out of order. A chill of dread came over Jesse as they approached the three passenger cars.

„Brrr ... d’ye feel that chill, Jesse?“ Angus slapped at his arms.

„I do. I thought I was imagining it,“ said Jesse, frowning. „Where’s the gun I gave you?“

Angus searched his clothes and found it tucked into the inside pocket of his vest. Jesse clucked his tongue in irritation. „That’s a good way to wind up in a pine box, Angus. Keep it where you can reach it quick.“

The barber tucked the pistol into the waistband of his pants. „This better not blow off me jimmy riddle.“

„You keep on shovin’ it around like that, you better make plans to die childless.“ Jesse looked closer at the windows of the car. „Can’t see nothin’. It looks like they’re iced over.“

Angus snorted. „Sure, an’ it’s bloody May already. We’ve not seen ice for months.“

Jesse reached up and touched the glass. „It’s ice all right. Something peculiar’s going on here.“

„Bloody witchcraft,“ muttered Angus under his breath.

They climbed onto the end of the car. Jesse had his gun out and motioned to Angus that he should draw his. „Don’t shoot me,“ he whispered. „Don’t shoot nobody else, either.“ He looked at the barber’s shaking hand. „Aw hell, just give it to me.“

Angus relinquished the pistol. Jesse told him to get ready to open the door. The sheriff crouched down, a pistol in each hand, and nodded to his deputy. Angus flung open the door.

A blast of cold air, laden with heavy mist, flew out into the spring afternoon. Jesse drew in his breath sharply as he saw the entire interior of the car was rimed with frost—seats, windows, and the people. He had seen a scene like this once before in his life, when he was much younger and his family had happened upon a wagon that had been buried in the snow. It had scared the bejeezus out of him then, and he wasn’t feeling all too steady now.

„Jesus wept!“ whispered Angus. „’Tis the devil’s work!“

Jesse holstered his pistol and tucked Angus’ into the back of his trousers. „What’s that?“ He pointed at a strange, glowing object in the middle of the floor.

„A lantern?“ asked Angus. The resemblance to a lantern was there, but lantern had never glowed with lights of such color and intensity.

„That ain’t no lantern,“ said Jesse.

„Mebbe it’s one o’ them newfangled ones. Bill Skerrit, he said he saw one back in—“

Jesse shushed him. As Angus shut his mouth, they could both hear a humming sound coming from the device. „Come on,“ said Jesse. He moved into the car, forcing himself to look at each frozen passenger, trying to understand what had happened here. Many of the people seemed to have frozen in the act of ducking or cowering behind their seats. Two people dressed in outlandish clothes were in the middle of the cabin; one was holding a large satchel while the other seemed to be stuck waving toward someone in the rear of the car. The strange sparkling device was on the floor in front of and between them.

„Oh, Lord! ‘Ere’s Douglas now!“ Angus cried out as he recognized his brother. „Frozen as solid as anythin’!“

Jesse ignored Angus’ outburst for the moment, looking closer at the people in the middle of the car. They were dressed like circus performers in clinging garments of unusual weave and pattern. He noticed in shock that one of them was

a woman, dressed like her male companion in clothing at which even a whore would turn up her nose. Both of them had jewelry in their ears, noses, lips, and cheeks, he noticed with distaste. Not even the wild Indians stuck so much metal in their faces, although the markings on their faces were reminiscent of war paint.

He noted the look of murderous intent frozen on the man's face and wondered if the object he was holding was some kind of gun, although it didn't look like anything ever made by Smith & Wesson. The man was pointing it at a fellow standing at the far end of the car, which Jesse recognized as a Pinkerton man the mine hired to watch the payroll. The security guard had his pistol out.

Jesse stepped around the strangers and almost slipped on the icy floor. He grabbed a seat back to keep from falling. When he regained his balance, he found himself staring at a bullet in midair.

It was hovering without any visible means of support at heart-height above the floor. Jesse waved his hands all around it, trying to see if it was somehow dangling by a slender thread, but none was to be found. „Angus, get over here and tell me what you make of this.“

Angus wiped his eyes and stepped away from his brother. Jesse showed him the bullet. Angus' eyes widened. „That's bloody amazing.“ He poked at it with a finger. It didn't move. „It feels solid.“

Jesse touched it, then closed his fist around it, trying to move it. He might as well have been trying to bend a thick iron bar; the bullet couldn't be moved, even when he braced himself against a seat and pushed hard against it. He went back to stand by the Pinkerton man and sighted along the pistol barrel.

„It came from his gun,“ he said. „It was going to hit that funny-lookin' feller over there.“

"Lucky for him it didn't." Angus was staring open-mouthed at the two strange folk.

„I don't think so,“ said Jesse. „I think they was tryin' to rob the mine payroll. And then somethin' happened, and it's like everything stopped.“

„What d'ye suppose this is?“ Angus looked down at the sparkling device at his feet.

„Ain't sure, but five'll get you ten that them folks there brought it.“

Angus crouched down to look more closely at the object. „I think it's broken. Look at this.“ He pointed to a ragged hole in one side.

Jesse examined it. „I believe that's a bullet hole, Angus.“

„Mebbe ye can dig out the bullet?“

„I ain't stickin' my finger inside it.“

„None o' this makes any sense,“ said Angus.

Jesse sat back, scratching his beard in thought. „It does in a way. What if the Pinkerton feller shot at it first and then at the strangers here? And somehow when it got damaged...“ he struggled, not having the vocabulary to accurately describe how he imagined it happening. „It ... it made time stop.“

Angus snorted. „How could ye make time stop?“

„I dunno. Never did have much book learnin',“ said Jesse. „But that seems exactly like what's happened here. It's like the moment between two ticks of a clock, but the next tick ain't never comin'.“

„Bloody hell,“ whispered Angus. „So what do we do about it then?“

„You got me there.“

„What if this thing's like an engine? Mebbe if ye shut it off, time will start ri' back up again. Maybe none o' these folks are dead; they're just stuck between ticks o' the clock.“

Jesse glared at Angus. „Shucks, Angus. Stopping a train is one thing. I ain't got the slightest idea how this jigger works.“

Angus pointed. „That looks like a telegraph key, mebbe. Push it an' see what happens.“

Jesse shook his head. „I ain't gonna touch nothin'. Who knows what'll happen?“

„Then I'll do it.“ The barber reached over and depressed the large button on top of the device.

Everything happened at once. There was no perceived acceleration of time from standstill to full speed; one moment everything was frozen the next everything was in motion. Sounds continued from when they had been interrupted, women screaming, men yelling, the echo of the gunshot. Jesse happened to be watching the bullet hovering overhead at the exact moment Angus pushed the button. It sped out of his view, leaving behind only a few flakes of quickly-melting ice.

The man in the strange clothing groaned and fell, generating fresh screams as a scarlet stain appeared around a hole in the collar of his outlandish jacket.

„Jesus wept! Where'd you fellers come from?“ The Pinkerton man was looking at Jesse and Angus in shock. It occurred to Jesse that from the man's perspective they would simply have just appeared in his vision. It also occurred to him that the man's pistol was now pointing at him.

The strange woman grabbed Angus, pressing a device against his throat in an unmistakable manner. „Shuddup! Walkin' outta here. Leavin' you prehistoric bungs to rot.“

„Hold it right there, ma'am. Now that man ain't done nothin' to you,“ said Jesse. „He's unarmed, and he ain't nothin' but a barber. Why don't you let him go and we'll see about gettin' your friend here to a surgeon?“

She laughed. „He no friend mine. Bidniz partner. Bad luck.“

„Mister, will you please shut up and let me handle this?“ said the Pinkerton man. „This woman and her partner robbed the payroll, and I ain't gonna let her walk away no matter what she's holding on him.“

Jesse didn't look back, instead keeping his attention focused on the woman and Angus. He kept his hands up near his head in plain sight, well away from the pistol in his holster. „Jesse Hawkins. Sheriff of Muddy Creek.“

„'Nother lawman. Lose the pieces, you!“ Her clipped speech was almost incomprehensible to Jesse, but the intent was clear. „Careful, or phzzzzzt!“ He had no idea what the noise she made was but it was obvious that she was prepared to kill Angus with whatever weapon she held.

Jesse hunched over a bit more so the Pinkerton man could see the pistol grip peeking out of the back of his trousers. With exaggerated care, he lifted his own pistol out of the holster using two fingers and set it on the floor of the car.

„All right, ma'am. We're doing what you asked. No need to get all jittery.“ Behind Jesse, the Pinkerton man likewise set his gun down. „Pleased to meet you, Sheriff. I'm Frank Holcomb.“

The nervous passengers had grown quiet as they watched the proceedings. One woman had fainted and was being fanned by her companion.

„You barber. Grab timepiece.“

Angus looked at Jesse in confusion.

„The lantern, Angus. She means the lantern.“

„All ri.“ The barber picked up the device. Jesse noted that it was no longer scintillating with multicolored light.

„Ma'am, the way I see it, you don't belong around here, now.“ Jesse tried to keep his voice as calm and soothing as possible.

„What your first clue?“ She backed toward the front of the car. The passengers shrank back from her as if she were possessed.

„Why don't you let the man go? We'll let you be on your way back to wherever it is you came from.“

„The hell we will!“ cried Holcomb. „That money belongs to the miners and it's my job to see they get it.“

„Shut up, Holcomb, fore you get Angus killed.“

„Angus,“ whispered a man wearing a tartan hat and spectacles.

„Douglas! I thought ye were a goner.“ His predicament forgotten, Angus reached for his brother, pulling away from the woman.

The moment her attention was off him, Jesse yanked the pistol from the back of his trousers and put a bullet into her shoulder. Then, for good measure, he put another one into a knee. She screamed, falling against the door.

Holcomb ran up and secured the bag while Jesse confiscated her strange weapon and stomped as hard as he could on the thing she'd called a timepiece. It shattered as if it were made of glass. She called him a wide range of inventive names, using words he'd never heard before, even from infantrymen.

„Holcomb, where's the engineer?“ asked Jesse.

„Found him knocked on the head, along with the fireman. They're in the next car. Folks there are skeered to move. This lady said she set dynamite to go off if they did.“

„I expect she was bluffing.“

„Looks like,“ said the Pinkerton man.

„You go secure that payroll, then see if you can't get them fellers roused up enough to limp this engine back to Muddy Creek.“ Jesse looked back at the passengers, who were staring at him wide-eyed. „Ain't far if'n y'all want to hoof it.“

There was a mass exodus as the passengers ran for the exits, clutching bags and hats.

„Well, now. It seems it's just you and me, ma'am.“

„No touch!“ She squirmed with the pain from her wounds.

„Relax, ma'am. I ain't gonna do anything improper to you. But I do want to know why you're here. I suspect you're from a different place.“

„Time,“ she said. „Far future, you prehistoric ape.“

Jesse nodded. „Why come back here to rob a train? Ain't there better pickins where you come from?“

She winced. „Money's a nest egg,“ she said. „Set up accounts. Thousand years of interest. Buy anything you want.“



Jesse considered this. „But if'n you take it, you're changing your past. Won't that change your present too?“

„Bright boy. Nobody miss the money. Train jumped by Comanche five miles out of Muddy Creek. No survivors.“

„Five miles before or after?“ said Jesse.

„Before, stupid.“

Jesse grinned. „Ma'am, I'm afraid I have some bad news. We're two or three miles after Muddy Creek. Y'all were frozen solid when we found you. I think your timepiece thing caught a stray bullet and done broke somehow.“

„What? No! Not possible. What about Comanche?“

„Well, I can't speak to that, but if I was an injun and I found a white man's train full of folks frozen solid, I'd think it was because of some real bad spirits, and I wouldn't want to have nothin' to do with it.“

The woman laid back and stared vacantly at the ceiling. „Train was supposed to be raided. Everyone supposed to be killed. Changes the future.“

„I suppose it does, at that. But it can't have done changed too much—at least not for you. Everything that made it possible for you to come here must've still happened. Otherwise you'd be gone. And frankly, I ain't so worried about the future. Not when I've got right now.“

The woman wouldn't meet his eyes with hers. „Now what?“

„Well, first we'll get you back to see Doc Meriwether about them holes I put in you. I don't think either one'll do much more than leave a scar.“

„And after that?“

Jesse smiled. „Ma'am, we got laws around here about robbing trains. I'm afraid you're gonna have to stand trial.“

The stream of invective she launched at him was so vitriolic that he had to cover his mouth with his hat lest she see him chuckling.

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