

*Ghost Rider*

News travels fast in a little town like Juniper, Utah, and by midmorning the story was everywhere. The town drunk, old Amos Hayes, claimed to have seen a spectral figure on horseback cantering across the bridge into town a little past midnight. Now he was down hanging around by the general store, telling his tale to anyone who'd listen.

On an errand for my mother but hoping to delay returning to my chores, I joined Hayes's crowd of curious but skeptical listeners.

"I saw it just like I'm seeing you! It was a ghost for sure!" he said.

Mr. Winters, who ran the bank, sighed and shook his head. "Amos, there is no such thing as a ghost. All the dear departed souls from around here are up in Paradise where they belong, not riding around at midnight causing trouble."

"Maybe your ghost was trying to warn you to quit drinking," joked someone else in the crowd.

Hayes realized he was about to lose his audience. Trying to regain their interest, he launched into another description of his so-called ghost. I guessed this version of the story would be his most exaggerated yet, and kept my ears peeled.

"You know that old plank bridge over the Sevier River right where you come into town?" Of course they did, and said so.

"That's where I saw it. It was wearing a billowing white robe and riding a giant white horse. And do you know what its eyes were like?" Here he paused for dramatic effect.

"Get on with the story!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

Hayes cast an aggrieved look in the heckler's direction, but continued. "They were just pools of shadow in empty sockets. That's all they were. And that ghost didn't even see me! I was real close to it and it nearly ran me down!"

Our nearest neighbor, Joe Wilcox, laughed and stepped to the edge of the crowd, tipping his battered old Stetson in the story-teller's general direction. "Well, your ghost sure makes a good story, Amos, but I think the only thing you saw last night was a bottle of whiskey. See you later, everybody!"

That was the signal for the crowd to break up. I belatedly remembered that Mama had sent me up to the store for a twenty-pound sack of sugar and wanted me back quick. Listening to ghost stories from the town drunk was no excuse for being late.

I stepped hastily into the store and handed the clerk a pair of silver dollars, then shoved the change into my skirt pocket and hauled the sack of sugar out to where my horse, Old Gray, was tied. Old Gray had been Dad's horse until he started getting too old to chase cows, at which point he was retired and sent out to pasture. I had managed to befriend Old Gray and rode him just about everywhere. I was an expert rider, at least in my own estimation, and covering the two miles out of town along the narrow path through the woods back to our house while balancing a 20-pound sugar sack over my lap was no trouble.

It was the middle of July, and today we were making apricot jam. I rode through our battered old front gate, which was held together mainly with odds and ends of baling wire, unsaddled Old Gray, and put him in the corral. Then, I carried the sugar inside and plunked it down on the kitchen table.

Mama turned around from our old wood stove, where she was stirring two big kettles of jam, and smiled. "Jessie! There you are!"

I picked up a paring knife from the table and pulled up a chair to join my younger sisters Liza and Adeline, who were pitting apricots for the next batch of jam. About forty pounds of apricots were floating in our big metal wash tub, and there were another couple of full baskets stacked along the wall waiting their turn. When you have to feed seven people at every meal, you can't do your cooking by halves. I'd been cutting up apricots all morning, until we ran out of sugar and Mama sent me for more.

While I'd been gone, Mrs. Adams, one of our neighbors, had arrived to help. She and her husband were a childless couple living on the outskirts of town, only half a mile or so away from us, and we knew each other pretty well. She and Mama were chatting, and I half listened to their conversation as I worked.

The conversation gradually turned to my two older brothers, Dan and Allen. Allen was seventeen, just a year older than me. We teased each other mercilessly and generally got along pretty well. Dan was the serious one of the family and almost grown up. At the moment, they were both out fixing fence with Dad.

Mama was saying how responsible they both had turned out to be, when Liza interrupted. "Allen isn't always responsible. Last week he hid his boots in the pantry!" This was true enough, but it wasn't the whole story. Yes, Allen had put his boots in the pantry, but he had been sleepwalking at the time.

I hadn't actually seen him sleepwalk, having been fast asleep myself, but I remembered what happened the next morning. Allen had started looking for his boots soon after breakfast, searching increasingly unlikely places as his puzzlement grew. Liza, who'd been spluttering with pent-up laughter the whole time, eventually admitted she'd seen him get up in the middle of the night and put his boots on a shelf in the pantry.

Sleepwalking seemed to run in our family, somehow. My great-great grandma Ida, who was one of the handcart pioneers, had been an incurable sleepwalker. Family lore held that she had, while sound asleep, picked up a rifle and shot a one-ton bull buffalo, thereby saving the entire handcart company from starvation. I suspected this particular legend had about as much truth in it as Amos Hayes's tale of ghosts on horseback, but you never know.

After a couple more hours of apricot slicing, Mrs. Adams had to head back home, leaving us to finish up. In the hurry of cooking dinner, Amos Hayes' ghost story slipped my mind, and by the time I went to sleep I had forgotten about it completely.

But the whole ghost business didn't end there. First, Mrs. Anna Taylor saw a figure draped in billowing white riding down Main Street on a tall white horse around one o'clock in the morning, when she was up with insomnia. Next, our neighbor Mr. Wilcox saw a pale horse and rider dimly appear through the trees around midnight when he was dealing with a sick cow. Adding to the list of late-night disturbances, old Mrs. Hansen's cats started yowling fit to wake the dead every night around midnight. She attempted to blame it on supernatural influence, but those who knew her best suspected that this was an unrelated incident. Luckily, my family lived far enough away to be out of earshot.

Cats notwithstanding, the Ghost of Juniper was getting to be quite the mystery. Amos Hayes' ghost sighting was easy to explain away. The two other incidents? Not so much. Joe Wilcox and Anna Taylor might or might not have seen a ghost, but they had certainly seen *something*, and everybody in town wanted to know what it was.

After a few weeks, however, I found more interesting things to occupy my mind than ghosts. Tomorrow was the 24th of July, Pioneer Day! Pioneer Day was a big holiday in Juniper, and in the rest of Utah as well. It commemorated the arrival of the first group of Latter-Day-Saint

handcart pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley, way back in 1847. We always had a parade, a rodeo, and a barbecue supper to which the whole town was invited. The barbecue was always outside, up the Sevier Valley a little ways, and to cook enough for the whole town we had to start it the day before. Somebody always had to camp there overnight to keep the coyotes away, and over the years it had turned into a party.

Something woke me from a restless sleep late that night. But where the heck was I? When I opened my eyes, I was so surprised I nearly fell off my horse. Cedar trees, a star-speckled black sky, and the glow of campfires further down the valley. Wait—horse? I was in my long white nightgown, on horseback, in the middle of the night, about a quarter mile away from the barbecue set-up for the 24th of July!

I checked and rechecked my memory. How on earth had I ended up here? I had gone to bed as usual, and I didn't remember anything happening after that.

Only one possible explanation came to mind, and it sounded ridiculous even to me. Could I have done all this in my sleep? Couldn't be. But...come to think of it, it wasn't any more ridiculous than Allen hiding his boots in the pantry, or Great-Great-Grandma Ida (allegedly) shooting a buffalo. If anyone had noticed me getting up and going outside in the middle of the night, they would have assumed I was on my way to the privy and thought nothing of it. And I would have made a pretty convincing ghost from a distance, in my white nightgown on my white horse.

Old Gray had walked forward a little ways while I'd been thinking things over. I was now dimly in view to the company down the valley. I had just turned Old Gray around to head home when I heard a distant shout. "I *told* you! I *told* you I'd seen a ghost! There it is!" It was

Amos Hayes, trying to kick his reputation for telling tall tales. I could dimly see people getting on their horses, about to ride up for a closer look.

Well, this simply would not do! If they managed to catch up to me, I would receive undying fame as the Ghost of Juniper. The town would be joking about this at every gathering for years, until I was actually in my grave. Not only that, Allen would tease me incessantly for weeks. There was only one thing to do: ride like heck towards home.

I had a decent head start, but no time to spare. I jabbed Old Gray's sides with my heels and started galloping at full tilt back towards town. The riders, who until now had been moving at a slow canter, set spurs to their horses and gave chase. I pounded down the grassy Sevier valley in record time, then clattered across the old plank bridge with the thunder of horse's hooves behind me.

Main Street was moonlit and deserted, but the stillness was instantly broken as we pounded through town. Candlelight appeared in darkened windows. Risking a desperate glance behind me, I saw that the ghost hunters were about five hundred feet back and closing. If I could get onto the old wagon track that led into the woods near our house without any would-be ghost hunters catching up with me, I'd made it. Nobody in town was foolish enough to go chasing through the woods in the dark and risk riding headlong into a tree. But it was going to be close.

Old Gray was getting tired, and the riders behind me were closing fast. We were at the edge of town now, almost to the trees. Only a few hundred feet more!

I pounded onto the narrow, overgrown old wagon track through the woods and, out of the corner of my eye, saw the ghost hunters behind me rein in their horses and head back. I'd made it, with no room to spare. Breathing hard and grinning, I dismounted and began leading Old Gray back home at a brisk walk. What a night! I'd ridden for miles in my sleep, accidentally

impersonated a ghost, and evaded capture by half the town! Compared to everything I'd accomplished so far, walking the rest of the way home and sneaking back into bed unnoticed was simplicity itself.

News travels fast in a little town like Juniper, Utah, and by midmorning the ghost hunters' story was everywhere. They claimed to have chased a spectral figure on horseback all the way through town and into the woods, where it vanished into the night like smoke. Now they were down at the town barbecue, telling their tale to anyone who'd listen. As for me? I just smiled and let them wonder.