

# **Homesteader: Finding Sharon**

A novel

By D.M. McGowan

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## **Forward**

Early on in my writing journey I wrote a few contemporary stories with political intrigue, foreign incursion, spies and national protection efforts which were ---acceptable story ideas but needed a few re-writes, which I may work at again someday.

The important part though was that I wasn't happy and I didn't think a ready would be.

During the course of those efforts, however, in reading a collection of C Police stories I found a story about the BC Provincial Police and the North West Mounted Police having a serious altercation which resulted, eventually with the help of an Ontario Premier, in Canadian Provinces having dominion over sales of liquor. So, I created a fictional story around that historical fact and included a few other tid bits.

I was entertained and hoped readers would be as well.

Apparently, they were.

I created someone to help make Hank into a real person and had to make her disappear in order to conform to when the “last spike” was driven on the railroad. She could have been a real character if I had a little more time!

What other historical events were taking place in Canada in the years after the building of the CPR and the “last spike”?

The result of those questions and the subsequent research is “Homesteader: Finding Sharon”.

My usual explanation of the historical events included in one of my stories can be found at the end in my “Author’s Notes” and there is also an introduction to another one of my stories.

Enjoy.

D. M. (Dave) McGowan

Novels by D.M. McGowan

\*\*The Great Liquor War  
\*\*Homesteader: Finding Sharon  
(\*\* Hank James series)

Partners  
The Making of Jake McTavish  
Gunfighters, Thieves and Lawmen  
Boundaries

Short Stories by D.M. McGowan

Marker of Stone  
Lucky  
Into the Mountains  
Stealing Janet's Cattle  
A Voice from Beyond  
Deacon  
Invasion  
Blizzard  
Sure, I can do that!  
What We Need Is a Good Cattle Dog

People of the West: A short story timeline

## **Homesteader: Finding Sharon**

Harry didn't actually say anything, but I could tell he wasn't happy about getting off the train at Cochrane siding. However, I had paid the train fare for us, the gear and horses, so I thought it was my call. I expect that's why he didn't voice his displeasure.

On the other hand, he was the quiet type. It was hard to get him to express an opinion on anything unless you goaded him in to it. Or if you did something more than a little foolish there would be some comment designed to ensure you had learned something from your error.

Perhaps it would have been better had he said something that time. Had he talked me into staying aboard until we reached Calgary, things might have turned out a lot different.

We originally mounted the train in Farwell for the same reason most people do. It's a lot easier on horses, riders and equipment going through the mountains with steam doing the pulling. In addition, one needs to consider the weather, for even though the winter had been extremely mild, the high country can give a man some fatal surprises even in late spring. Those big snow throwers the railroad use can be the difference between making the trip and leaving a pile of old bones beside the trail for the coyotes and wolves to fight over.

In Cochrane, however, the weather was fine, if anything too warm and I wanted to see some country. I also expected to be staying in that area for a while and I wanted get used to the land while we spent a few days riding on in to Calgary.

Not that I was completely ignorant of what to expect. I had spent several hours over camp fires and in saloons, particularly during the previous winter, talking with those who knew the eastern slope and the foothills.

For instance, I knew there were several large ranches in the country, most of them owned by men from other parts of the world. Often these large spreads were owned by a group of people or what was called a combine. Some of those owners had even seen the land and the stock that ran on it, but not many. In between these big outfits were smaller outfits run by one man and his family or a small partnership. Most of these ranches were located between the rail line, or Bow River which it paralleled, and the U.S Border, but a few had holdings north of the river. The siding where we unloaded was on the north bank of the Bow, at the

headquarters of one of the better managed of those ranches, known, as you might have guessed, as the Cochrane Ranch.

Things were changing on the Cochrane, that spring of '86. They had just lost their foreman, Jim Dunlap, who many considered the best cattleman in the country. He had been riding north from Ft. MacLeod to the ranch the previous winter when he froze his feet. He would not let them cut. It took some time, but those frozen feet eventually killed him.

The hands at the siding tried to be friendly, but Harry and I could see they were in no mood for visiting strangers. We told them how sorry we were, which doesn't do much good at a time like that, then rode east along the tracks a couple of miles and camped for the night.

The next morning, as we rode on east toward Calgary, I finally got a chance to see the country. Most of what I had been told was true. The more I saw of that eastern slope the more I liked it.

It was close to noon before we met the first discouraging thing although it took us several minutes to realize it. It was a man of perhaps two hundred and fifty pounds riding a sixteen-hundred-pound horse. He came out of the bush on the north side of the draw that ran down hill off to our left, followed by two average size men on two average size horses. We didn't know he was a sorry cuss at that moment, but it didn't take us long to find out.

They sat and watched us approach for a few moments.

Our pack horses were free and followed well, but just in case I dropped back and pulled the halter shank out from under a pack rope. Passing the lead behind my back to my left hand I flipped it over Blackie's rump and looped it around the saddle horn. When Harry saw that he dropped back and did the same with the other pack animal.

The three strangers rode down into the draw and up our side to meet us. The way they jerked their mounts to a halt justified my leading the pack horse. I put a half hitch slip in the lead rope so I wouldn't have to hold it.

All three of them wore the tall crowned, big brimmed hat of the time over hair too long and dirty. Their high heeled boots too narrow for their feet branded them as cattlemen. They all wore handlebar mustaches, usual for the time, but were otherwise clean shaven which was not always usual for men riding the range. The two average size men wore stove-pipe chaps over canvas pants, cotton shirts - one blue and one red - cow hide vests and red neckerchiefs. The big man wore wool pants, a plaid, flannel shirt,

tweed vest fully buttoned with a watch chain stretching across his ample middle and a blue bandana. They all wore Colt pistols, the younger and smallest man carrying two, hung with butts forward.

They drew up abreast, no more than two feet between each of their mounts. The youngster, who, by the appearance of his weapons and how he wore them seemed to think he was a gunfighter, was in the center.

This young fellow and his appearance drew my attention more than he should have. Riding alone in the wilderness or working with wild cattle and horses it always makes sense to wear a hand gun. But in those days many people couldn't afford a hand gun, let alone two. And wearing them butt forward as this young man did, meant they would be catching on things like his rope and the brush as he was trying to do the work of a cow hand. Therefore, I suspected he was probably a poor range rider and a good trouble maker. I should have ignored him and paid more attention to his riding partners.

The way the three of them charged right up to us and stopped so close didn't add to my feeling of comfort. They were crowding us and had an arrogant manner about them. I didn't like the look in their eyes and I was glad I had taken the pack horse lead shank.

Even though he was a few years older than me, Harry Gilmore always followed my lead. Part of the reason was that, up until the fall before, I had been his boss for about a year. Mostly, though, it was because he was part Sioux - although few ever knew that - and several years of folks tramping on him and his people meant that he generally followed and kept his mouth shut. What that meant for me at the time was that I knew I would be handling the conversation with the fat man, and I could depend on Henry to back me up, whatever happened.

"Where do you think you're going?" the fat man asked.

Maybe my confidence in Henry's loyalty and ability made me a little too mouthy in my response to the big man's arrogant manner. And, as I said, I was paying too much attention to the gun man and not enough to the fat man. "East," I replied.

He tried to stare me down. I smiled and he shifted his gaze to Henry, rolling his chew around in his mouth.

He forced his big horse forward a few steps so that its head was on Blackie's off side, its nose about a foot from my right knee. "Where did you come from?" he asked, bringing his gaze back to me.



"West," I replied.

He spit tobacco juice at Blackie's cheek.

Blackie was a good horse but he wouldn't put up with very much foolishness even from me. He was also one of the fastest animals I ever rode. It seemed that stream of tobacco juice was still in the air when he turned and bit the fat man's horse on the shoulder.

Sixteen hundred pounds of horse squealed and jumped to the left, blood flowing from a three-inch gash and down its leg. The horse ridden by the young gunfighter, at least six hundred pounds lighter than the fat man's horse, was too close and no match for the bigger animal. Rider and horse hit the ground hard.

The mustang grunted, squealed, and jumped to its feet. The rider's left foot was caught in the stirrup as the horse lunged away from another collision.

The fat man put his hand on his pistol and turned his gaze from the donnybrook back to me. His hand froze when he found my Colt was already in my hand. I didn't point it at him, just let it hang there, muzzle down, my forearm resting on the horn. Very slowly he put his right hand back on top of his left which rested on his own saddle horn.

At the same time the third rider shook out a loop and turned his mount toward the bucking mustang and dragging rider. Within a hundred feet he had the animal roped. It stood on the end of the lariat with legs spread wide and vibrated. The bundle attached to the stirrup didn't move.

"I'm Portis Martin," the fat man said.

I was doing my best to maintain a calm, this-is-an-everyday-thing appearance, but was in fact having a tough time with that. Not only had I been approached poorly in a generally friendly land, but one of my best friends had just been spit on.

"Henry James," I responded. "Some folks call me Hank, but you can call me Mr. James." Without taking my eyes from him I inclined my head to indicate my saddle partner. "This here is Mr. Gilmore."

The roper dismounted on the off side and, speaking slowly and calmly, worked his way up the rope to the frightened horse.

Martin made a sweeping motion with his arm. "This is all my land an' the cattle on it are mine," he said. "Them horses you're ridin' are a whole lot better than any drifter'd be usin'. Or cow punchers, fer that matter."

The other rider took a grip on the headstall on the shaky animal. Very slowly he reached for the stirrup and released his partner's foot. He led the horse off a few steps, and then returned a knelt by the motionless body.

I had to give Martin high marks for guts. Like I said, I wasn't pointing it at him, but I had a loaded Colt in my hand and he was calling me a thief. At the same time, I had to give him fairly low marks for smart. "You callin' me a rustler?" I asked.

He smiled. "Well, I don' see no cows with yuh, but its bin a while since I seen drifters with 'nough truck they gotta have 'em a pack horse. An', like I said, you're on my land."

"Thought this was the Cochrane Ranch," I said.

"Yuh rode off it a ways back," he said. "This land here, an' the land north o' Cochrane right t' the mountains is my problem."

"Looks t' me like a railroad track over there," I noted. I didn't turn to look at it, but kept my eyes on Martin.

"Right smart fer a Yankee," Martin responded.

I ignored the attempted insult. During my years in the country, I had tried to lose my American way of speech, but it appeared I had not been completely successful. "Be about fifty yards?" I asked.

"I reckon," he nodded, his expression somewhat puzzled.

"Railroad claims a hun'ed yards each side o' the roadbed," I informed him. "That means we ain't on your land. They also claim alternatin' sections on each side of the rails, so a lot of what you're claimin' ain't yours."

Martin worked his chaws for a moment, and then sent another stream of tobacco juice into the dust. He made a point of missing Black. "Ain't no nevermind," he said. "Ain't no railroad men out here. Me that runs this country."

"Too bad," I said, putting my pistol back in the leather.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he fired back.

"Country's likely to go to hell," I replied. "One of your men just got himself squished an' dragged. If he's lucky, he won't have more than a broken leg. For ten minutes you been arguin' with me and you ain't even looked at him. You look after the country same way you look after your hands, why, I reckon we're all in trouble."

I turned Black and we started away.

"Don't make no nevermind fer you," Martin said. I looked over my shoulder at him and he continued. "You'll be leavin'."

"Don't reckon," I said, then added before he could threaten me if I stayed. "You claimin' all this land that ain't yours, makes me wonder if maybe we should ask the Mounties to see if you're claimin' cows ain't yours."

Martin smiled. "Rode intu this country in '73 with them boys. Got me two stripes 'for I took t' raisin' beef."

This was not news that I found comforting. However, I didn't let it show and just smiled. "Then they won't likely be too su'prised when I describe our meetin' here today." We rode on, being sure to stay within' the railroad right of way.

