



# Talking Turkey

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ONE of those "we must reduce taxes" elections swept Skinner and Watson into office as two of the three county commissioners of Mesquite County. Skinner owned a fair share of the county and Watson had spent twenty years saying yes to everything Skinner said; thus it was Skinner found he could run things.

When the word reached the county farm, otherwise the poor farm, a number of old fellows who had had a big hand in winning the West, but small reward in return, felt an icy hand grip their ancient hearts for several moments. Sam Agnew, whose old rifle had brought down three outlaws and several bad Indians in its time, swore; then followed with a prayer.

"Lord help us poor cusses now with old Skinner in office. As he pays taxes he'll figure every cent he can save is keeping the money in his own pocket."

This in a measure was the truth, but Skinner's cattle and lands had been protected and some blood shed by several of the inmates in a happier day. They had done the fighting and he had done the grasping.

The "poor farm" committee, composed of Skinner and Watson, held its first meeting on the farm a month later.

"I ain't going to pay out any more of the county's money than I can help for a lot of worthless people that would have been well fixed

if they'd saved their money like I did. They had just as good chance as I had when I came West." This was Skinner's first statement.

"And I'd sooner be Sam Agnew in the poor house than Skinner in a mansion," growled out Sam when he heard it, and the others said "Amen!"

When the supply of tobacco was exhausted the old fellows stopped smoking, unless it came from the outside in the form of presents. The farm products, such as butter and eggs found a ready market outside, though the inmates produced sufficient for themselves and were almost self-supporting. Old Skinner claimed any farm, poor or otherwise, should show a profit. He was out to prove it could be done. The inmates found themselves drinking milk that had gone through the separator; eggs were seldom on the table, and the best of the vegetables were sold. Even those capable of working, producing, were put on poorer rations.

Lacking some one to go to the bat for them the old-timers accepted what was given them in silence. They were helpless; protests were met with cold silence. Sam Agnew became a leader among them. All his life Sam had fought against oppression and unfairness. He would go down fighting, if need be. At times his tart tongue and pointed references of the past brought a flush to Skinner's cheek, but never changed his vote. He gripped the table convulsively with his clawlike

fingers and said nothing.

Hostilities opened two weeks before Thanksgiving. The superintendent, afraid of losing his job, cleared his throat. "It has been the custom to kill about twenty turkeys Thanksgiving for the big dinner, and to appropriate sufficient money for the side dishes. It takes about twenty turkeys, and——"

"Turkeys are worth five dollars apiece in the pens!" interrupted Skinner. "We've got some fifty birds raised here on the farm. I've been taking bids, and the high bid is two hundred and fifty dollars for the lot!" He glanced at Watson. "I'm going to need fifty turkeys myself, and I bid two hundred and fifty-five dollars for the lot. That puts it above criticism and saves the county just that much."

Watson nodded. "Quite right, Mr. Skinner. I move that your offer be accepted!"

Sam Agnew was on his feet. "Now just a minute; I'm a citizen of this county, and I'm acting for the rest of the boys on the farm. We've always had turkey dinner; it's the one bright spot of the year. It takes twenty turkeys, and that's a hundred dollars. And a hundred dollars for happiness that comes once a year ain't much. We object, and we ask you to give us our dinner as usual. This is the first kick we've made. We didn't say much, out loud, about the skimmed milk, no eggs and no tobacco, but we should have something to be thankful for, and you can be about as thankful putting yourself around a turkey you've raised as any way I know of." Sam seated himself.

"Beggars cannot be choosers!" snapped out Skinner. "You had the chance I had, Sam!"

"Yep, I did many a time, but I wasn't big enough crook to take it! Anybody is a crook that don't do his part, and in those days when we had to sleep with our hands on our guns you weren't up in the front. You was back where it was safe. I'm giving you warning, Skinner. I'll square accounts with you for this if it's the last act of my life and I will square them right too."

Skinner showed his teeth. "Threats, Agnew, often are the first symptoms of insanity. If you become violent we may take you to the asylum." For several seconds the room was silent.

Sam Agnew seemed very tired and old as he stood up. "Yep," he answered, "that would be just about like you. Still—I've got an ace to

play."

That night Sam Agnew and others helped to crate the turkeys Skinner had purchased. Fred Burke, who had been shot through the shoulder during the Indian outbreak and found it hard to control the muscles of his right arm, placed his hand on the crate to keep it still.

"Say, Sam, what does Skinner want these turkeys for? If five dollars is the top price, where does he make any profit?"

Sam winked. "He ain't going to make any profit this time. You see each year Skinner holds a turkey shoot and most of the big men in this part of the country goes up to his place. They pay a dollar entry fee and fifty cents a shot. A lot of 'em ain't the best shots the West has known, and Skinner gets as high as ten dollars a turkey on an average. That's one of the real reasons why he wanted these turkeys. They were the only ones he could buy."

"What do you aim to do, Sam?"

"Plenty! But it's going to take some money. I got eighty cents myself. How much you got?"

"Twenty. That makes a dollar."

Sam nodded. "Old Button got his tobacco money today, a whole dollar; he might put it into the pot."

They approached Button. He fumbled about a bit and found the dollar. Sam had two, then. Gossip travels fast, and these old people were following the creed of a lifetime—sticking to each other in a tight place. The money came in in nickles, dimes, and even pennies, because they had faith in Sam Agnew. Sam's word had been good on the range for half a century. They accepted his plan without question. Old Lady Harrington's black hand bag made a fine bank, and when Sam had finished there wasn't a cent left among the inmates, while the black bag was nearly full of small change, with here and there a dollar. Then Sam got out his old rifle and cleaned it.

**P**EOPLE came to Skinner's annual turkey shoot from miles around. A few walked, but most of them came from distant ranches. Crack shots from the cities were also present. It was a gathering of the best shots, and hence many of the best people in the State. And this year the governor came!

Hours before most people were out of bed,

Sam Agnew slipped out to the barn and saddled the county farm mule, Job. Into the saddlebags went the "treasury" and ammunition for the ancient rifle. Then Sam climbed stiffly into the saddle. It was like old times, this riding off at dawn with a rifle across his saddle. The air was crisp, laden with sage.

"Pretty good old world," Sam observed, "when people stick to a man like those back there. Sticking with your last cent is what counts. Anybody can stick when they've got plenty. Wonder if I'm any good or just an old false alarm."

He caught up the rifle and fired at a lump of dirt a hundred yards away. The clod leaped and floated away—dust. Sam's eyes twinkled. "Good shootin' is like any other lifetime habit, you can't forget it in a hurry. Come along, Job, there's work to be done this day."

The sight of an old man astride a mule coming down the road leading to Skinner's fine home attracted attention. "Who's your friend, Skinner?" some one inquired.

Skinner frowned and hurried toward the arrival. "Agnew," he ordered, "you get back to the farm!"

"Got permission from the superintendent to go hunting! I'm here to get a few turkeys for our Thanksgiving dinner," replied Sam. He sensed trouble ahead. A lifetime of sensing trouble, had made him quick to recognize symptoms.

"You can't shoot here. Only sportsmen attend this shoot!"

"In my time I was one of the best sports in the West, and I took chances," he added pointedly.

"You can't shoot!" Skinner repeated. "And if you make a scene I'll see to it you are removed from the farm—set adrift if necessary. When beggars start rising against the hand that feeds them, it is time something was done."

"I kinda wish you'd start something, Skinner," Sam replied. "I just wish you would. I'm here ready to shoot. I got my entry fee paid and accepted without you getting onto it; the shoot is an open shoot, and I'd like to see you keep me out." Sam dug Job in the ribs with his bootheels.

Skinner caught the bridle. "Listen, Sam," he pleaded. "Have some sense. The governor of the State is here and a lot of big people. You can't

expect them to shoot beside a man from the poor farm."

"Can't see how it'd spoil their aim, any. You say Governor Trent is here?" Sam was interested. Skinner took hope. I

"Yes, the governor himself!"

Sam Agnew chuckled, "Where is the old cuss?" he queried. Then he noticed the official moving swiftly across a pasture. "Hey, Jim!" he bellowed.

Skinner gasped out. "Agnew, shut up!"

The governor turned, then came toward them. He vaulted the fence in a way indicating he had met fences before—practical as well as political.

"Well! Well! Well! Sam Agnew, why, you old pirate! Where are you keeping yourself these days?"

He shook Sam's gnarled hand warmly.

"I'm stopping at the poor farm, Jim!"

"Is that so? Well! Well!"

Sympathy was in his heart, but he did not let it creep into his tone; he was too fine a man for that. Sam Agnew had served his West well and deserved better luck, but Sam was not bitter, and that was everything.

Sam blinked. "Ain't any objections to me shooting beside you, governor?"

"I object to you taking more than one shot, Sam," the governor replied. "There won't be anything left for the rest of us."

Sam grunted. "Huh! We never did finish that argument about which was the best shot. It'll be settled today."

As Sam became confidential, Skinner squirmed.

"It's like this Jim; down at the home they're changing things a lot. We didn't kick when they gave us skimmed milk and took away most of our eggs and tobacco, but when they called off the Thanksgiving dinner we balked as much as we could. A little money here and there started the pot, and some of 'em only had a few cents to give, but they give it. And I'm here to shoot!"

"I yield my position, Sam, and if the others will just do the same, you should start off the shoot. How many turkeys do you need?"

"Twenty; but then there's the fixin's!"

"That's true. All above twenty you get you can sell and spend the money for mince pie, cranberries and the rest. Wait until I talk it over

with the boys.”

The governor hurried away and talked briefly. “The boys yielded their places quickly. Skinner found himself in a position where he was helpless. He could not threaten, nor could he offer objection. He tried to smile, but he feared the worst. With heavy steps he followed the crowd to the range.

The targets, turkey heads painted on boards, stood at a distance sufficiently great to make the average turkey bring between seven and ten dollars at fifty cents a shot. Sam Agnew paid for his first shot—in pennies. He lifted a rifle so heavy that hands shaking with age did not disturb his aim.

“Bang!”

“A clean miss!” exclaimed Skinner.

“Here’s fifty more pennies, Skinner! That was practice to kinda get the feel of things and give you hope!”

He reloaded the old rifle and fired again. A ripple of applause swept through the crowd. Skinner silently handed the old man a card entitling him to one turkey.

Sam Agnew turned. “Anybody want to buy this card?”

The governor handed him ten dollars. “It’s worth it!” he said.

“Thanks,” replied Sam. “You see I had to spend quite a lot of money on ammunition. Only had enough left for two shots, but I got my start now.” He handed the ten dollars to Skinner. “Twenty shots,” he said briefly.

The crowd saw an old man shoot who had learned the art when his life depended upon it. He did not fire rapidly, but target after target was splintered. When he had reached the end of his twentieth shot, he bought another ten dollar’s worth with money from the sale of a turkey.

“This old musket sure knows how to talk turkey,” he commented as he fired. “Let’s see; that’s nineteen, isn’t it, Skinner?”

Skinner nodded. “You missed four altogether!”

“Try to do better this string,” Sam replied.

He did; he missed three, sold another turkey, and shot enough more to bring his number up to an even fifty. Then he leaned the hot old weapon against a fence. His shoulder ached from the recoil. It would be worse tomorrow and the next day, but by Thanksgiving

he hoped it would be well enough to enable him to get away with a drumstick along with a little of the white meat.

Skinner called him aside. “Well, Agnew, you’ve ruined the shoot. Between two hundred and fifty and three hundred dollars’ worth of turkey went to you for about a tenth of their cost.”

“Always made a profit before, eh?”

“Yep!”

“Guess you’ll have to stand a loss this time. Fair enough. You had it coming. However, I’ve got thirty turkeys the home can’t eat. You can have ‘em for a hundred and fifty dollars.”

Sam did not gloat, he wasn’t that kind of a winner.

“No, hanged if I will. I won’t help you get revenge on me.” Skinner flushed angrily.

“Suit yourself! The turkey shoot is ruined for you, but if you don’t give the others a chance it’ll be ruined for them!”

Skinner fumbled in his pocket and produced a check book. “A hundred and twenty-five for the lot!” he offered.

“Nope!” Sam turned away.

“Here it is, but remember this, Agnew; my day’s coming!”

“Yep! Next election. I heard the men talking about it. Figure there’ll be a change. Thanks for the check; I hope it’s good.”

The county farm truck was coming up after the turkeys that afternoon. Sam Agnew mounted his old mule and the governor himself handed him the heavy rifle.

“Fine work, Sam. I can’t do as well!”

“You could if you had the same reason I had. I ain’t much on church, and I got off the path of righteousness a lot of times in my life, but you can’t make me believe the good Lord wasn’t stiddyng my hand a bit toward the last.”

“Sam, this State owes you a lot personally, more than it can repay. It’s not down on the books in black and white, but it is there! Come down to the capitol; there’s a job for you on the grounds.”

It sounded good, but Sam shook his head. “Going to be kinda hard sledding down at the home for a while. Somebody’s got to stand between them and Skinner, until after election,

and for some reason the job looks good to me.”

“If you need any help, Sam,” said the governor in parting, “remember we old-timers

stick together.”

“I sure will,” said Sam. “Giddap Job!”