

Hats and Hearts

by Karen Hamp

“Well, gosh darn! Look over left there, cowboys! I seen dead coyotes and dead carp lined up on fences, but hats? Never seen that before.”

Billy Green had lapsed into his old Oklahoma accent and grammar. This didn't happen at home. He wasn't Billy. He was Bill on the golf course, and signed his name William M Green at the office. He spoke with proper grammar and a nearly undetectable accent.

Today though, “Billy” was back. He and 3 old high school friends were out riding familiar roads - in a car now, instead of on horses. They were in town for the 20th reunion of their class of '96. Friendships and memories were being renewed. .

The Howard brothers, John and Joe, both looked left and saw the row of hats on fence posts. There were hats as far as their eyes went. . “Look' a there,” John said. “A bunch of them have our Dewey High School emblem. But the rest, they're just a bunch of hats. What in the world?”

The “bunch of hats” were baseball style, the brim of each facing the road. They were covered with dust, stained from the weather, and bleached from the Oklahoma sun. Some new, some old, they either looked down at the ground, or out over the endless Oklahoma Prairie, or somewhere in between.

Joe spoke first. “Wasn’t that the old Silver’s Ranch?” “I believe you’re right” his brother said “though it looks like part of it got sold off. The old house is still there, but there are two newer ones over east of it.”

Del Chamiak was with them. Del was quieter than the brothers or Bill, but enjoying the company and memories. He still lived in the house he grew up in. He had graduated with the others, gone away for a while, and then moved back to take care of his parents. They had been badly injured in an accident and were now in their 80’s.

Del spoke and the others noted the thoughtfulness and respect in his voice. “It is the Silver’s Ranch” he said. “Old Man Silver is still around. Don’t know as you remember Dan his son; “Danny” we called him in school. He got killed in the war about 10 years ago. They sent him back in pieces. It was a real tragedy.”

John and Joe both said they barely remembered him, never knew him well, but were sorry to hear.

“It’s because of Dan that those hats are there” Del continued.

“Tell us the story, Del.”

Del looked out across the prairie, took a visible deep breath, and then spoke. His careful

speaking called their attention to his words and voice.

”Even in school, Dan stood out”, he said.. “He was a great basketball player, known for skill, but more for his way of bringing the team together. He was the glue that pushed the team all the way to the State Finals our senior year. Dan was injured in that game. and after that the team fell apart..

“The coach, Remember old Coach Roberts? He urged them to play it out for Danny, but something was missing, and they lost the game. Danny, later, apologized for not being there to help. He was that kind of guy. Wanted to do his share, and took it seriously.

“He was also an expert mechanic. Kids were always bringing their cars over to learn and get help. He was on the debate team too. – powerful, won a lot, never put anyone down. He volunteered after school, tutoring younger kids who were having trouble. And of course he helped around the ranch. After graduation, he worked with his dad for several years, and then joined the service. Story is he was well liked. Got promoted. His dad bragged on him.

“Danny was said to have died trying to save his platoon. His guys were under fire, and he tried to get them to safety. Succeeded too, but lost his life in the battle. That would be Danny. Old man Silver like to have died with grief. He had lost Dan’s mom when Dan was 12. Dan was all Hank had left”.

Del hesitated , then continued: “When Danny was in school, so many people looked up to him, wanted his time and company. So he took to hanging his hat on the fence when he came home. If the hat was there, Dan was home. It was just a thing. That way his friends knew where and when to find him.

“We used to kid him about it. We’d come along and turn the hat sideways, tip it down looking at the ground, tip it up looking at the sky. One Halloween, Dan took his hat inside, but someone brought another one, put a picture of Dan on cardboard, stuffed some old clothes and made it look like Dan was there peein’ on the fence. It was pretty funny. Hand down on his crotch, zipper open. They didn’t figure out how to get a stream of water running, but everyone could tell what it was. It was good natured fun, Dan laughed too.

“When Dan left for service, his friends felt lost. The hat was never on the fence. Dan was never home. Those he had helped had lost sort of a dad or a big brother. Those that just hung out with him lost their best pal, or their leader.

“It was clear Hank felt lost too. After awhile he put his own hat on the fence, bill angled down. He told the town about it; “that it was his hat, not Dan’s and that it meant he was praying for Dan to come home safe”. The Town Crier even wrote about it. People in town started putting their hats on fences or posts in town, so Hank could see they stood with him.

“When Dan got killed, Hank spoke at the funeral. He told his friends the hat was still pointed down now, crying for Dan. He said it with tears running down his face, his voice broken. He had to quit talking. The whole room was crying.

“Then after Dan was buried, Hank put Danny’s hat out there too, the same one that had been there when Danny was alive. He put it a ways from his own hat, saying “of course Danny wasn’t close by now”. Then he said “it’s because Danny is now home forever, though it is a different home.”

“The town knew and loved Hank. They had watched him grieve his wife, and now his son. Hell, we all felt it. You couldn’t help it. Hurts. You know?

“One by one, the hats started appearing out on Hank’s fence. At first, some were next to Hank’s hat and pointed toward Danny’s. And then some reporter picked up the story and wrote that the hats looked as if the whole town was grieving and praying for Dan and his dad. So most hats slowly got nailed in that grieving and praying position. And soon people brought more hats to express their own grief and show their own prayers. Nearly everyone knows what grief is like.

“Early on, someone thought to go buy a bunch of post protectors and put them under the hats, so the hats would dry quickly after rain. That started a lame joke about “Post Caps”, which is how the catalog listed those protectors. “Our post caps are different”, they said. The joke sort of dulled the sadness out there when it got hard to bear.

“There are now over 300 hats lining Hank’s fence” Del concluded. “They fall apart and get replaced. It’s like the Vietnam Wall, but it’s the Danny and Hank Silver Fence, and now it has unofficially become the Dewey Memorial Fence.” There was a long silence before he added one last postscript.

“I looked on the internet, and there is a fence or two in other places with hats on them. I saw photos. They don’t have the meaning this one does. See that car stopped down the road? People come here to be with their lost ones, or to pray for Hank or others. Hank told me it makes him feel good to see them, sometimes to have them visit.”

Words faded into silence.....

“That’s the story, guys.”

With full hearts, tears held back, and nothing more that needed saying, they all got back in the car and slowly started toward town

“You know,” Bill remarked “I’m proud of this town. Glad I came back to visit friends, and especially glad to see and hear this. This town knows who it is, and knows to care. That’s as much as any town needs. It’s as much as anyone needs from their town. Caring hearts, and strong ways to show it.”