

Bell County
Bushwhackers

Will Davis

Outskirts Press, Inc.
Denver, Colorado

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described here are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

Bell County Bushwhackers
All Rights Reserved
Copyright © 2007 Will Davis
V2.0

Cover Image © 2007 JupiterImages Corporation
All Rights Reserved. Used With Permission.

This book may not be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in whole or in part by any means, including graphic, electronic, or mechanical without the express written consent of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Outskirts Press
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-4327-0832-0

Outskirts Press and the “OP” logo are trademarks belonging to
Outskirts Press, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to my wife Melba whose support and advice helped bring Lance Kincaid to life.

CHAPTER 1

Lance Kincaid tossed another chunk of wood on the fire to help take the chill off the evening breeze. As the fire flared and the burning embers swirled toward the night sky, he instinctively turned his gaze away from the flames to allow himself to see into the darkness that so closely reminded him of his past. It had been eighteen months since that day at Five Forks, Virginia. On the afternoon of April 1, 1865, General Sheridan called up two of General Custer's brigades to engage General Pickett's Confederate infantry on a rise just north of the village.

Lance had served as a cavalry captain with one of the Union brigades. He had led his unit at Five Forks in a final charge to dislodge the Virginians from the high ground. It was a crisp, foggy day with

WILL DAVIS

a light breeze, visibility coming and going as the air currents moved the mist over the battlefield. He was guided more by the sound of enemy fire than by sight. Without warning, Lance found himself surrounded by Rebel infantry as he attempted to disable the Rebs' artillery pieces. The air hung heavy with the smell of gunpowder, and the sound of the artillery was deafening. As he approached the canons, the fog and smoke cleared just enough to give him a glimpse of the Rebs. He saw the smoke from the rifle pointed at him. An instant later he felt his horse drop out from under him. Violently thrown headfirst into a large oak tree, Lance pitched forward as the horse dropped to the ground.

It was months before Lance regained consciousness. He found himself recuperating near Nashville, Illinois, at the home of a farmer, suffering six broken ribs, a fractured left leg and a bullet wound to his left shoulder. More significantly, a concussion left him with no memory of the event or anything before it. He knew little more than his name which he found out from Cord Schroeder, the farmer looking after him.

The Union officer who brought Lance to the farm told Cord that Lance had shown up at a Union field headquarters in early 1863 and volunteered for the cavalry. He was quickly recognized as a "take charge" natural leader and an accomplished horseman. His ability with the handgun and the long rifle was the envy of the entire unit, and it was obvious that guns had been a big part of his past. After a

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

year of service he advanced to the rank of captain. Not prone to small talk, little was known about him. After the accident he was transferred to a field hospital, and then moved to the home of the Illinois farmer, who offered to look after Lance until he was back on his feet. It was six months before Lance was strong enough to begin earning his keep.

It was not unusual for families to take in soldiers that needed rehabilitation after the Civil War, and Lance was fortunate to be taken in by Cord and Johanna Schroeder, who lived just north of town. The little community was made up mostly of folks who had come to America from Germany by way of New Orleans. Many of the nearby villages were named after towns in Germany. Church services were held in German, followed by an English service. Cord and Johanna were first-generation immigrants. They had a two-hundred-acre farm and a farmhouse that could accommodate Lance and the family as they nursed him back to health.

During the early weeks of Lance's recovery Johanna and Cord would sit and talk with Lance. They shared their past with Lance and talked about their son who they lost in the war. They tried to ask questions of Lance that they thought might trigger his memory, but had no luck. Lance was very thankful to have the Schroeders to look after him and although he had little to share about himself, he enjoyed hearing about the life of Johanna and Cord.

Lance's recovery was timely, since the death of their son left Cord in need of help on the farm.

WILL DAVIS

Cord's farm had 80 acres of cultivated land and 120 acres of timber. It became Lance's job to begin clearing the 120 acres. Day after day Lance kept focused on doing a good job for Cord and on his desire to recover his past. He took little time off, and his only socializing was after the evening meal with Cord and Johanna. The Schroeders had a fine collection of books and each night Lance would select one and read by candlelight for an hour before turning in. His favorite was "The Complete Works of Shakespeare."

He particularly enjoyed Johanna. She seemed to hold a place in his heart. He wondered if perhaps she reminded him of his mother. She came across as a hardheaded woman with a mindset and she tried to hide her caring side. Johanna did her share of work and then some around the farm, and there was no question where she stood on issues that concerned her.

Cord, for his part, found Lance to be a hand with the axe and the crosscut saw. He worked out an agreement with Lance to do the clearing for his keep and to share profits from the sale of the timber. As weeks turned into months, Cord found himself growing very fond of Lance. It was obvious that this young man was ingrained with a strong sense of right and wrong, an appreciation for the kindness of others, and the will to stand his ground when he knew he was in the right. He tried to control his attachment for Lance, since he was sure, one day soon, the young man would be leaving to search for

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

his identity. He knew that Lance could not become the son he had lost.

In a few months Lance's six foot two inch broad-shouldered frame began to fill out. He now weighed 230 pounds, and his work with the axe had given him a powerful upper body. His physique, deep blue eyes, and coal-black hair drew the attention of those around him. The long hours of hard physical work and the fine cooking of Johanna brought Lance up to a hard and powerful body but, his loss of memory continued to make him feel incomplete.

He was also troubled by a recurring dream. In that dream, he would see himself in a Confederate uniform being attacked by a Union cavalry lieutenant, whose face he could clearly see just before the lieutenant struck. Lance looked around to see that all of the Confederate soldiers were spitin' images of himself. At that point Lance would wake up in a cold sweat, making no sense of this strange fantasy

After hours of swinging an axe one hot summer afternoon, Cord invited Lance to join him for a beer at the tavern in Nashville. At first Lance declined, but Cord was persistent, and said he would sure appreciate his company. Lance finally acquiesced and went back to the house to clean up for his first trip to town.

"Mind your drinking," Johanna said as they walked toward the buckboard. Cord nodded his head without looking back. They climbed aboard the wagon and headed for Wood's Tavern.

WILL DAVIS

“You’ll find the tavern an interesting gathering place,” Cord said as they rolled along. “It was built in the 1820s by John Wood. He located it smack on the Shawnee–St Louis Trace. John does a little farming, but mostly he tends to the tavern. Word is that ol’ Abe Lincoln stayed in one of the tavern’s rooms some years back. Being on the trace, the tavern entertains most every kind of transient you can imagine. John will cotton to you, beings as how he was a Union major and you were a Union captain.”

“I would just as leave you didn’t mention my military experience, Cord.”

Cord shrugged. “Sure, have it your way, Lance.”

Lance felt that bringing up his military background would lead to questions that he couldn’t begin to answer.

As they tied up at the tavern, Lance noticed two salty horses at the hitching post. They looked to Lance like they had been ridden hard and poorly tended to. Their hooves were split and in need of a good trimming and a set of shoes. Whoever rode them didn’t have enough consideration to take some tension out of the cinches while they were not being ridden. The dried salt told Lance that they had been standing there for some time. By the looks of the gear, the riders were not locals. Lance had little respect for men who would treat their mounts the way these horses had been treated. He hadn’t met these men, but he already knew he didn’t like them.

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

Lance and Cord went up the three wooden steps, walked across the boardwalk, and pushed open the swinging doors. Without thinking, Lance stepped to the side of the door and surveyed the large room. There was a large oak bar with a mirror that ran the length of the wall. Standing at the bar, a person would have a good view of the room in the mirror. ‘That’s a fact worth remembering,’ thought Lance. There were six round tables, each with four wooden chairs, and a potbelly stove off in one corner. Cord and John exchanged greetings. John was a lean gent in his fifties with graying hair and mutton chop side burns. He looked to be one to walk the river with. Cord ordered two beers and introduced Lance to John.

“Lance is staying with Johanna and me for a spell to give a hand with clearing some land for farming.”

Cord and John exchanged some small talk until another customer needed attention. Then Lance and Cord took their beers and moved to one of the empty tables. Lance selected a chair that placed him facing the door with his back to the wall. Although Lance seemed to do it without thinking, John Wood noticed the maneuver.

Lance took in his surroundings as he lifted his glass. One table was filled with four men playing poker, another with four men eating and discussing their day on the trace. His eyes fell on two ruffians at the end of the bar who were about three drinks beyond their limit. As he eyed the two, he thought

WILL DAVIS

they looked like trouble waiting to happen. Lance found himself taking in their movements, size, and, what they were wearing. He paid particular attention to the navy revolvers tucked in their belts, and the knives in their boots. They were dirty, unkempt, and smelled worse than last week's fish. It was not difficult to conclude that these were the owners of the two neglected horses out front. They drank up and turned to leave.

"That will be one dollar, boys," John Wood said.

"Put it on our tab," one of the men replied.

"I deal in pay as you go," replied John.

The man closer to John drew his revolver, cocked it, pointed it at John, and said, "Then change your deal."

Lance casually got up from the table and walked calmly toward the men. He drew their attention, but not being armed, he seemed to pose no threat to them.

"Stay out of this, pretty boy," the nearer man growled.

"I just wanted to explain to Mr. Wood here that he must have misunderstood you gentlemen. He thought you were trying to run out on the tab."

"We don't run from nothin', but we ain't paying for his rotgut booze."

By this time, Lance was only two feet from the near man. As the man reached for his revolver, Lance stepped in and threw his full body behind his huge right fist. The blow landed squarely on the

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

troublemaker's nose. His body slammed against the bar rail. His eyes rolled back in his head as he slowly slumped to the floor. That punch and the sound of bones being flattened against the man's face distracted his companion long enough for John Wood to reach across the bar and knock the gun from his hand. As it skidded across the wood floor, the man left standing reached down for the knife in his boot. On the way down, his face met with Lance's heavy left boot. The kick straightened him up. Before he reached full height, Lance landed an uppercut to his flabby midsection. The man crumbled like a building razed with dynamite.

Both men lay out cold and bleeding on the tavern floor. Lance moved to the mouthy one, took a dollar from his vest pocket, flipped it to John, and said, "Paid in full."

"Much obliged, Lance," John said.

"I just didn't like the odds," replied Lance.

"I don't believe I've ever seen anybody move faster than you did. Your pappy must have taught you well."

"I surely guess he did," replied Lance, as he tried without success to remember his father. Had his father taught him? Was his response a natural reaction, or from experience? How did he so easily size up the troublemakers? Had he been one himself? So many questions and so far no answers.

John put his hand on Lance's shoulders. "I think you best arm yourself if you're gonna hold your ground like you just did."

WILL DAVIS

Lance replied calmly, "Those kind are all talk. What they are speaks so loud it's hard to hear what they say."

"Just the same, in these times a man needs to be able to defend himself. That's the Hawthorne brothers from down in the Ozarks that you just laid out. I fear you haven't heard the last of them."

"I hope you're wrong, but I guess that'll be up to them. I do figure a body should own a gun just in case the need arises. It looks as though now is the time to give it a little more thought."

John reached under the bar and brought up a Colt 44-40 revolver, holster, and a belt full of cartridges.

"I owe you, Lance. Take this and pay me when you come by the money. It belonged to one of the officers who served with me. He decided he had no use for it when he turned preacher and started a Lutheran church over in New Minden."

From the second Lance touched the handgun, he knew he was no stranger to its use. The outfit felt good as he strapped it on his hip. Cinching up the belt, he realized it was a natural part of him, a part he had been missing until now. He flipped the thong off the hammer, drew the revolver, and checked the loads. It was loaded except for the cartridge that would rest under the hammer. The butt was a good fit for his large hand, and he liked the balance.

"A weapon is only as good or as bad as the person using it," John said. "Use it in good conscience, Lance."

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

“That I will,” replied Lance. He nodded toward the Hawthorne brothers. “Do you need some help getting rid of these customers?”

“No thanks. I’ll just have the sheriff let them sleep it off in the jail. He can decide if he wants to call the ‘sawbones’ and have this one’s nose fixed,” John replied.

Cord and Lance finished their beer and headed back to the farm.

“You took a chance back there,” Cord said.

“Not really,” replied Lance. “The booze had affected their reaction time as well as their good judgment. That’s why I limit myself to a beer now and then. I imagine many a man has been done in by taking on too much liquor. If a body is gonna survive these days, he best be playing with a full deck.”

Both men fell silent for the remainder of the ride home. Lance was preoccupied thinking about John’s tavern. Since it was located on the trace, there would be a lot of travelers stopping over, travelers who might drop some clues as to his past. Lance decided he would spend some of his free time there, taking in the small talk of the customers.

In the months that followed, Lance visited John’s tavern as often as he could, studying people and listening to their trials and tribulations. They came from all walks of life, with a full range of ex-

WILL DAVIS

periences. He envied those who could speak so easily of their past.

One evening while Lance was nursing his beer at the tavern, his eyes met those of a man coming through the swinging doors.

“Lance! Lance Kincaid!” the man said as he walked up to Lance’s table.

Although he had no idea who the man was, Lance recognized him immediately as the Union officer from his dream. The man appeared to be younger than Lance, slight of build and about five eight. He was wearing his leftover union breeches and a wool shirt that had seen better days. His clean shaven face and cropped hair made him look younger than his years. Lance sat in a state of shock and tried to gather his wits enough to reply to the gentleman’s greeting. For lack of a better response, Lance said, “Have we met before?”

Surprised, the stranger replied, “You’re putting the shuck on me, partner. Are you telling me you don’t remember me, after all the time we spent together in Virginia, cleaning those Rebels’s plow?”

Lance collected himself, invited the man to join him, and proceeded to explain how he had lost all recall when he was wounded. Lance could hardly control his emotions, realizing that he had finally made a connection with his past. The man introduced himself as Chad Forrest, an ex-Union cavalry officer who fought at Five Forks alongside Lance.

“The last time I saw you it was in the fog on the morning we hit the Reb artillery unit on that ridge

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

north of Five Forks. We took 'em out, but it cost us dearly as you well remember, or I guess you don't."

Lance wrinkled his brow as in deep thought and said, "When you called to me at the door I recognized you as the Union officer in my dreams, but nothing comes back to me about the charge."

"You're having dreams about me?" Chad asked.

"It's more like a nightmare. I keep seeing you as a Union officer and all of the Rebel soldiers around me look just like me. Then I wake up in a cold sweat trying to make sense of it."

"Well, I was close by when you went down, but I was horsebelly deep in Rebs and they darn sure didn't look like you," Chad replied.

Try as he might, Lance still could not remember any of the particulars that Chad described, and he had so many questions, he didn't know where to start. It was not long into the conversation before Lance realized that this chance meeting was going to be of little help in recovering his past. After a few unanswered questions from Lance, Chad said, "You know, Lance, you were always a loner and not one for idle chatter. Your focus was always on the task at hand and how best to handle it. If it wasn't for picking up your mail occasionally, I wouldn't have known anything about you."

"What do you mean?" replied Lance.

"Well, you received several letters from your pa. At least you said it was your pa. I noticed the name and return address. They were from a Mr.

WILL DAVIS

Kincaid, and postmarked Belton, Texas. You said he had a ranch near Belton.”

Encouraged by this bit of information, Lance peppered him with questions about other possible kin, his mother, and the ranch, but Chad knew no more than what he had just shared. Chad spent the next hour reliving his war experiences and describing the fighting that he and Lance did together serving under Custer. It seemed to Lance it would have taken ten wars to cover all the tales Chad recounted. Nothing he said, however, brought forth any images or details to Lance’s mind.

Finally, as the evening wore on, Lance thanked Chad for the information and explained that he had to be on his way. The ranch in Belton wasn’t much to go on, but at least it was a start. Lance had to get to his father’s ranch in Texas. There were a lot of details to work out before he could leave, on his long ride to Texas and suddenly he was impatient to start.

“I owe you Chad,” he said, shaking his hand. “If you ever need a favor, look me up in Texas at the Kincaid Ranch.”

“Actually, Lance, you could do me a favor right now.”

“Name it.”

“You could let me ride with you to Texas.”

Lance wasn’t prepared for such a request. His mind raced through the advantages and drawbacks of having a partner for his trip. His first thought was, ‘I work alone and I prefer to travel alone’. Be-

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

fore he could answer, Chad explained, “You see, I’m kinda on the run. Not from the law, from the Regulators.”

“What are the Regulators?”

“I thought I knew what they were until several weeks ago,” replied Chad. “The Union government organized them, either officially or unofficially, just after the war. Their stated purpose was to see that the Confederate property owners were fairly treated during the Reconstruction of the South. It seemed like a good cause, and they offered thirty dollars per month, plus keep. Come to find out, a few of them had irons of their own in the fire. It became clear to me they were hidin’ behind the government and using their resources to cheat property owners out of their land and businesses. They were demanding sky-high taxes of the Confederates. When they couldn’t pay, they took possession of their property. When I discovered what they were up to I challenged one of the bosses of the unit. We had a bit of a disagreement, and I stomped a mudhole in him. I’m not sure he survived. I didn’t wait to find out. It was a fair fight; he was twice my size.

“My daddy always said, ‘Son, you’re not too hefty, so you have to be quick and surprise ‘em’. I guess I looked pretty hefty when I surprised that dude. The short of it is I’m not very welcome in these parts. I lost my ma and pa when I was just a youngster. I have no truck with females, so I have no ties or any other reasons to hang around.”

WILL DAVIS

Lance sat there quietly and rubbed his chin with his left hand, as he was prone to do when he was about to make a decision. He knew it was going to be a trip with its share of risks. It would be advantageous to have someone cover his back in case of problems with Indians, thieves, or those with adverse leanings to his own. On the other hand, he figured he would arrive in Texas without any ears, since Chad would have talked them off by then. After weighing the ups and downs of it, Lance decided to accept Chad's offer.

"Okay, 'Hefty'!" replied Lance. "On one condition. Either one of us can decide to end this partnership if it seems to be goin' sour."

"It's a deal, Lance. I guess I asked for that handle. You can call me Hefty or anything that suits you."

"Where are you calling home?" Lance asked.

"Actually, my saddle, for the time being. I'm packing all my belongin's in my saddlebags until I can find a place to light."

"I'm staying with the Schroeders on their farm just north of town. Why don't you return to the farm with me? If they can put you up, we can stay there until we get the necessary arrangements made for our trip."

"That's darn sure the best offer I've had today."

The two mounted up and headed for the farm. Although it was late fall the day was hot and humid. Before long the horses were working up a good sweat.

"We best let up on this pace. These ponies are

BELL COUNTY BUSHWHACKERS

foaming up like a new-drawn beer,” Lance said.

Chad grinned. “You may have lost your memory, but you sure haven’t lost your priority to look after your mount. You were always that way in the unit. You spent more time looking after your horse than you did taking care of yourself.”

“We depend on our mounts, and they’re at our mercy. It seems to me we ought to show them all the care we can. Surely a day will come when our lives will depend on them.” He paused, and then asked, “What happened to the horse I was riding when I was hit?”

“He was hit a lot harder than you were. He had to be put down on the spot.”

“I guess that’s one thing I’d just as soon not remember.”

As they rode on, Lance told Hefty how the Schroeders had taken him in and nursed him back to health. He had developed a strong feeling for the couple, and would regret leaving them. He had no doubt, though, they would understand when he broke the news to them.