

For Lands Sake

Excerpts From a Soon to be Published Novel By Charles E. Chupp, SR/WA

For Lands Sake a rollicking fantasy that practitioners of the right of way profession can easily identify with in situations experienced by these intrepid land agents. Delve back into time—the year is 1984—an era when horse swapping and right-of-way barter began to play out. Author Charles Chupp has “been there—done that,” and gives us an exclusive on the first few chapters of his novel.

A traffic accident, a death, and a forced retirement left Benjamin Arthur Drill as a sole land agent at Texas Lightning Company in early 1984. A massive reconstruction program of TLC's transmission system necessitated an infusion of five trainee agents, but Ben's problems were not all work related. The ensuing struggle to assemble an effective right of way acquisition team provides an amusing story of land acquisition just prior to the metamorphosis of flesh and blood utility companies to chrome and glass.

CHAPTER I

Ben saw the ribbon of snake a hundred yards ahead, and instinctively eased his foot from the accelerator onto the brake. The new sun was making its way over the horizon and the reflected broadside segments of the snake glistened like neon as it worked a zig zag route toward the shallow bar ditch and meager cover of broom weed and scrub mesquite. That snake had most likely spent the cool of the early spring night on the warm road surface.

The Ford Tempo stopped within ten feet of the crossing and Ben watched as the rattler left the oil soaked lease road. It was at least a five footer and sported a sizable length of beads in its rattle. It took discipline not to rev up and flatten a rattlesnake when he got the chance, but Ben sat and waited just in case the mate might be tagging along. Not that he was going to run over it if there was a second one, he had broken the habit of flattening rattlesnakes, a good while back.

Back in the spring of '79 he'd been traveling a similar lease road down in Crain County when he got the opportunity to snuff a rattler. He'd put his left front tire across that one's middle, and was pleased and satisfied to hear the succession of thumps as the snake collided with the underside of his vehicle. “One less sidewinder!” he'd smiled with satisfaction.

Unfortunately, he only ran halfway over that snake. It tangled up in the undercarriage and rode forty miles to the Ramada Inn in Vast Plain. When Ben alit at his room, that snake slithered out and struck his roughout boot with the suddenness and force of a lightning bolt. Luckily, the fangs had broken off due to the collision or the wild ride and the

stubs did not pierce the leather. He dispatched that snake with a jack handle, hurried into his room and changed into dry underwear. Since then, he'd curbed any inclination to run over rattlesnakes. Just the recall would raise the hair on the back of his neck.

Satisfied that he'd see no parade, he resumed his interrupted journey to the Kelly ranch. The radio was tuned to KRIG in Midway and Coy Works was spinning Country Classics for his audience in the great Permian Basin. Ben sang “City Lights”, along with Ray Price. He knew the lyrics as well as Ray, and most of the words to most of the recorded country and western songs of the past thirty years. His singing voice might not be the equal of the professionals, but his repertoire was second to none. He'd honed his word recall in thirty-five years of on the job travel, averaging better than a hundred thousand miles a year. He'd worn out a Ford every year during that span, but he'd never worn out a radio, and since he traveled alone, his singing didn't abuse any ears except his own.

As Ben neared the house he clicked the radio off, and eased to a stop in the goathead sticker infested, unfenced, debris littered expanse, which served as a front yard. He shook his head at the mess and rolled the window glass halfway down, but he did not get out. He sat quietly with the motor still running and tried to see into the darkness beneath the front porch.

He'd not been to the Kelly place for a good while, but he remembered the big yellow dog that had put him on the hood of his car on that visit. He'd made the mistake of getting out, and was almost to the porch when that growling dog charged and almost overtook him before he could jump to the hood of his car. Biting dogs are standard

equipment at most of the remote dwellings in West Texas, and Goose Kelly's sentry ranked in the top ten of the Permian Basin species. At least, that was Ben's belief.

On that occasion he had been to see Goose Kelly about a two-mile length of 69KV electric line right of way. The negotiations had spanned two months and Ben made a dozen trips to dicker with Goose Kelly. Ben was as patient as Job when negotiations were underway, and his patience had paid off. He hoped he hadn't used all his patience last time. Goose Kelly could be a trying man.

He could not recall the dog's name, but he whistled softly and called for him to come out. Nothing stirred, and Ben's hope that Goose might be away with his dog seemed to be a good bet. He'd already made up his mind to drive up to Carlsbad for breakfast and coffee, if the trip turned out to be a water haul. It was only a two-hour drive, and Ben hungered for some home made gravy and biscuits - served up by Brenda. Brenda was actually more interesting to Ben than the food, but the sixty-weight gravy was widely known and admired around south New Mexico and the adjoining west Texas area. So was Brenda.

Ben seldom made appointments with people like Goose Kelly. He believed blindsiding was the best way to gain the initial interview - with men like Goose.

Ben got out, leaving the door ajar just in case that dog was lurking under the house. He walked toward the three riser plank steps and called Mr. Kelly's name. A well service truck rattled by on the lease road but there was no sound

of life in the house. Ben knocked on the rattletrap screen door and listened intently for a radio or television set. Nothing.

Joyfully, Ben leaped from the porch and was almost back to his car when he heard the protesting groan of the screen doorframe, as it scraped open.

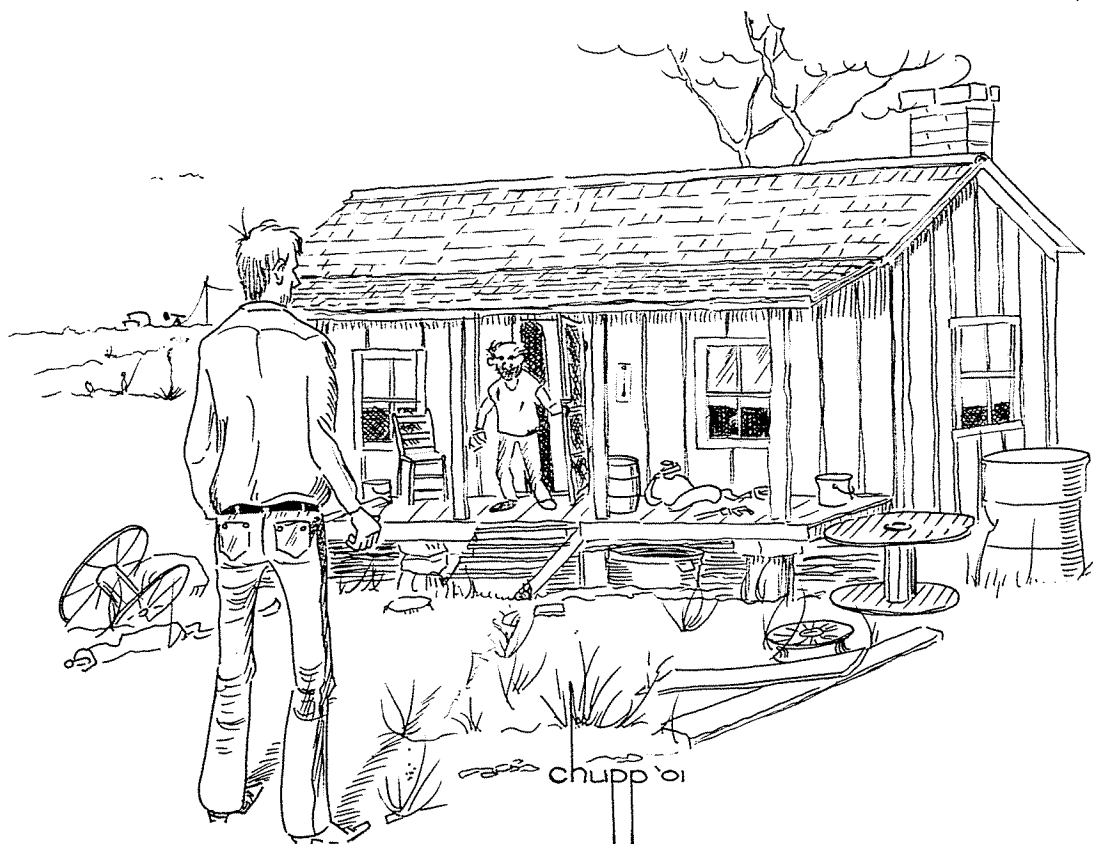
"Who the hell's that banging on my door!?" Goose was on the premises.

CHAPTER II

Kent Fields downed two cups of coffee before Lilly set his scrambled eggs and crisp bacon on the snack bar. He picked up his fork and a triangle of toast, but his normal breakfast appetite had not come to the table with him. He had a lot on his mind since that meeting yesterday with his supervisor, Marv Freeman. Something bad was about to happen in the Sales and Customer Relations Department at Texas Lighting Company, or TLC, according to the acronym and logo.

Kent had tossed and worried the night away and what sleeping he'd done had not been the sort that refreshes. He was weary from the effort of trying to sleep, and was trying to decide whether he should involve Lilly in his problem and if so - how to go about it. The information Marv had imposed on him had cost him a night's sleep, and he couldn't get it off his mind.

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Land's Sake, *continued*

"We need to talk Kent," Marv had begun as soon as Kent closed the door and found a chair.

"Let's do it," Kent said as he lit a smoke and slouched down in the padded chair. "That's the way I make my living," he laughed, but Marv did not even smile.

"Management has advised me that TLC is going to lean down. We've got to reduce our employee head count ten percent within the next ninety days. Our department

has twenty employees - so that means I'm going to lose two - whether I like it or not. And of course, I don't like it one bit."

"I don't think I like it either," Kent admitted. "Who all have you told?"

"You're the first, and I'm going to ask that you keep this confidential. I hate to worry the whole department until it's absolutely necessary."

"The hell you say!" Kent responded with considerable heat, "Why did you pick me to unload on? Am I a candidate for that ten percent?"

"Not at this point," Marv blushed guiltily. "You're my lead man, but it could include you, or me."

"I've been in this department for better than twenty years and worked hard at my job. I've never had to back up to the pay table since I hired on. Are you telling me that my job is playing out?" Kent lit another cigarette, took a draw and placed it beside his first, which was still smoking. He stubbed it out and stared at Marv Freeman.

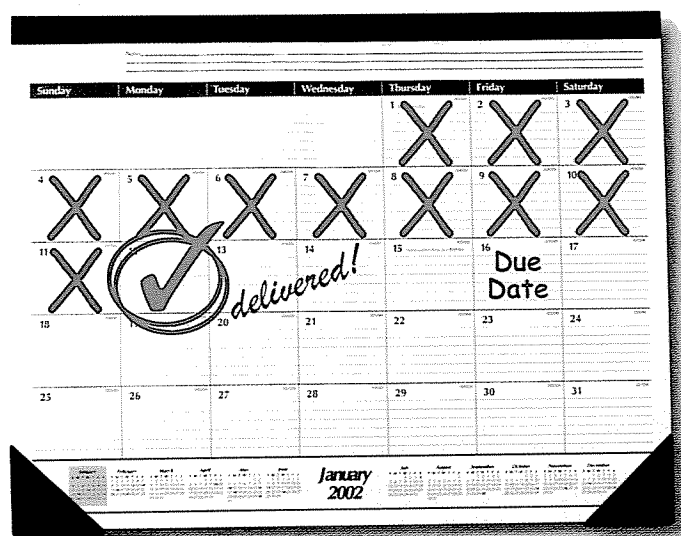
"Are you telling me that my job is playing out?" Kent lit another cigarette, took a draw and placed it beside his first, which was still smoking.

It was true that Kent had twenty years employment at TLC. He'd been hired immediately after graduating high school, and the company had tailored his education with specialized courses to sharpen his skills in sales promotion and keeping customers happy. He had excelled in both facets, mainly because people liked him immediately. Most of his customers had become friends, and even the minority who did not like him considered him to be honest.

Kent had worked through the ranks, from trainee to Senior Customer Service Representative. He drew a living wage, had an expense account and a compact company car. His dues to the Lion's Club were paid by the company and he had endured to the plateau of four weeks paid vacation.

"Jim Sloan is almost sixty five," Marv continued. "He'll count as half our mandated reduction, but that still leaves us one short. Since you rank second to Jim in years of service, I wanted you to be the first to know."

"Is this a company wide deal?" Kent asked, "or just our department?"



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"It's company wide," Marv said. "With one notable exception. The engineering and construction departments are scheduled to increase their numbers. TLC is about to expand facilities and encompass a much larger service area. Our scheduled construction will see erection of 345KV lines over our entire system and we're going to build a nuclear generating plant. Our major undertaking, for the foreseeable future, will be expansion and beefed up transmission and distribution facilities."

"Hold it right there Mr. Freeman," Kent said. "I'm not going to climb around on those steel towers. I don't know how to operate any of that heavy machinery and I don't even want to get close to a nuclear generating plant. If you're priming yourself to ask me to put in an application for a transfer to Engineering, you're barking up the wrong tree. I'd rather read meters or draw unemployment!"

"Now Kent, don't get all hot and bothered. I'm not trying to push you into anything at this stage of the game. All I'm trying to do is keep you advised on what kind of problems we're up against. The 'prestigious jobs and non productive occupations' are drawing criticism from the brass and they're determined to play hell with our way of life! If I

knew a way I'd jump ship and swim to Engineering. I'd do it, but they won't let me. I'm their designated hatchet man and through me they're gonna wipe out our entire operation in the sweet by and by. We're selling all the energy we can generate, and on the brink of not giving a hoot in hell about customer relations, or promotions."

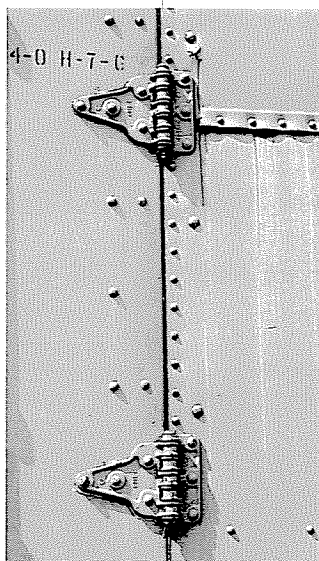
Both men cooled to room temperature as Kent lit one more smoke and waited for a signal that the meeting was at an end. When Marv began to paw through the accumulation of memos and correspondence in his incoming box Kent took that as a sign to go. He left Marv's office, and did not even pause at his own desk. He left the building, got into his car and gave himself the rest of the day off. He drove the twenty miles to his rural home and worked in his vegetable garden until sundown.

"Didn't I get enough salt and pepper on your eggs?" Lilly asked. "You've just picked at your breakfast, and you've already smoked five cigarettes. Are you sick - or is something

bothering you?"

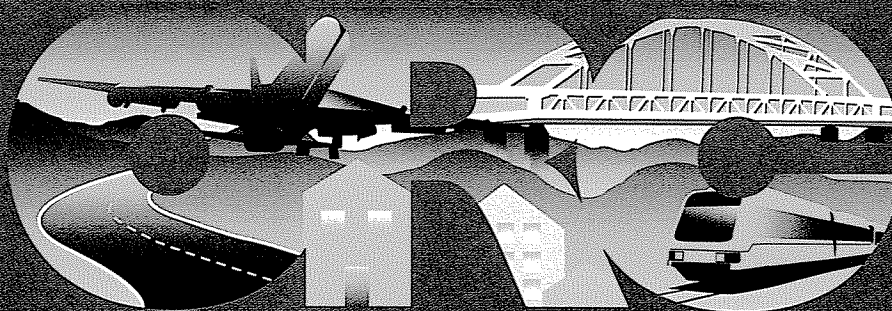
"I'm just a little under the weather," Kent confessed.

"I'm going to call in sick and take it easy today. I'll be okay



Lands Sake, continued page 34

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Land's Sake, *continued*

by tomorrow. Didn't get much rest last night. Probably a sinus infection."

"I need to go to the office," Lilly said. "I've got an appointment to show two houses today, but I'll stay home if you need me."

"You go on to work. I'll be fine. And thanks for the breakfast - it was great. I'll see you when you get in this evening." When he heard Lilly start her car Kent called the office and told June that he'd not be coming in. "Upset stomach," was the way Kent explained it. He opened a fresh pack of cigarettes and settled into his recliner for some serious thought, and old western movie reruns.

CHAPTER III

J.B. Clemons always arrived at the office early. He told his secretary Sally that he liked to do his paper work before the workday got too hectic. In actuality J.B., or Bill as he was known around Ringer, hated paper work. Sally, who had been secretary ten years longer than J.B. had been local manager in the fading oil town of Ringer, actually ran the office. J.B. knew it, Sally knew it, J.B.'s wife Florence knew it and unfortunately J.B.'s superior over at Oak Grove knew it.

John Darby had the dubious distinction of being TLC's Division Manager of a five county area that had been in steady decline since WW II. In addition to Division Headquarters at Oak Grove, John also had five local offices as his responsibility. They were located in the crossroads towns of Bo Dark, Morgan, Chocktaw, Hilton and Ringer. John Darby had a force of sixteen employees at headquarters and three at most of his outposts. Each local office featured a local manager, a secretary and a service man with a pickup truck. All, that is, excepting Ringer. Ringer was the least populated and was located only eight miles east of Oak Grove. Maintenance was done by Sam Barnes, who worked out of Oak Grove.

When John got word that he was to jettison one of his outposts he was not surprised. TLC was in the paring down process and rumors of Ringer's closing had preceded official notification by thirty days.

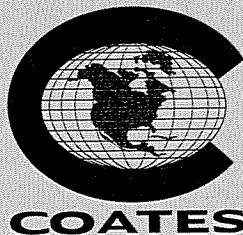
"What will I do with Clemons and Sally Upshaw?" Darby queried when Dill Scratch, V.P. of Operations, appeared at his office with the official word.

"John," Dill looked at him with an unwavering stare, "you'll do what is necessary. You are our Division Manager and we respect your judgment in this matter. We're awash in superfluous employees who perform marginal, unnecessary jobs in outdated and stagnant locations. The Ringer local office has outlived its usefulness, and you and I both know it. The office rent and salaries for two employees exceeds our revenue each and every month and," he added, "Ringer is only the first to go. In due time the other four local offices in your division will be



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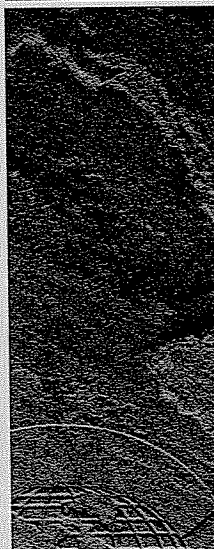


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shut down. All division operations will be handled out of Oak Grove with you in control."

The ax had fallen and John Darby's only comfort was the prospect that he would still have a job when the blood letting was over. Secretly, he relished the opportunity to rid himself of local Manager J.B. Clemens, Sally Upshaw and the TLC office in Ringer, Texas. John followed two steps behind and stood attentively as Scratch seated himself in the sleek Roadmaster Buick.

"When should I begin the operation?" John asked timidly as Scratch reached for the door pull. Scratch looked at his watch.

"It's three in the afternoon," He stated, "Why don't you wait until eight o'clock in the morning? That way you'll have time to plan how you're going to handle it." The Vice Presidential Buick backed from the curb and pulled away from Oak Grove Divisional Headquarters.

J.B.'s early morning paperwork consisted of a cursory glance at the Metroplex Star Telegram and the avid reading of the sport and comic sections. Then, J.B. would get a half dozen sheets of company stationery and run them, one by one, through the paper shredder on the corner of his desk. Next he'd refold and place the newspaper on Sally's desk along with a handwritten note explaining that he would be away from the office on business until around noon. That done, he would climb into his compact two door Chevy and make a bee line for the Ringer Municipal Golf Course. Dusty Lane, Ringer's wheeler-dealer independent oil producer would be waiting, with a cooler full of Rocky Mountain Beer positioned on his golf cart.

Dusty was heir to a sizable fortune which had been amassed by his father, Rusty, during the boom days of Ringer. Rusty had accumulated mineral rights to most of the county before exploration and production of the shallow pools was even a dream. He had profited mightily, saved scrupulously and died at an early age. Young Dusty had lived high on the hog and had gone through five wives before his fortieth birthday. He'd also expended a considerable sum of money during the process, but his stripper wells still operated around the

clock and Dusty had a trusted and honest manager for his oil business, who looked out for the day-to-day operations of the Dusty Lane Oil and Exploration Company. Dusty, also owned Ringer's only bank.

When wife number five left Dusty he consoled himself with a new hobby. He took up golf. He played a round each and every morning, and he always played with Bill Clemons. It was a ritual of ten year's standing.

"Usual stakes?" Bill popped the top on a frosted can.

"Usual stakes," Dusty responded.

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Land's Sake, *continued*

CHAPTER IV

Jimmy John Tolliver entered the break room at precisely 7:30 a.m. His arrival time never varied by sixty seconds, according to Roberta Mullins. He strode around the room and performed his visual inspection as Roberta put the finishing touches to the forty tables. She had to put the chairs back in place most every morning so that there were four at each chromed table, and that was what she was doing when J.J. entered.

"Good morning Roberta, am I late?"

"No sir, Mr. Tolliver," Roberta forced a smile, "you're right on time!" The exchange was a daily ritual, and as far as Roberta was concerned, an interruption to her chores. She'd heard the elevator door operate.

He traveled his usual route, peering at the transparent gauges of the sparkling coffee urns and hefting the sugar and cream pillow baskets for weight. The swizzle stick disbursements were scanned, the napkin dispensers were hand squeezed by J.J. to satisfy himself that they were properly filled, and each ashtray received a cursory inspection for cleanliness.

Next, J.J. wordlessly proceeded to each vending machine to satisfy himself that they were filled to capacity for the morning run. Then he produced his key ring, entered his

private office and brought out the four honor system slot boxes which he placed at their appointed sites around the four sided coffee island. Roberta watched wordlessly and braced herself for the inevitable revelation that she'd overlooked one minor detail. She knew what it would be, since she always left an easily discoverable flaw for J.J. to find. It had not taken her long to perfect this strategy when Mr. Tolliver had come on board. He was going to discover a shortcoming. He'd never failed to come up with one in his ten years as Employee Benefits Coordinator.

"Roberta," he said, "you missed one side of the napkin dispenser on table four. You'll need to take care of that. Otherwise, the place is in top notch condition."

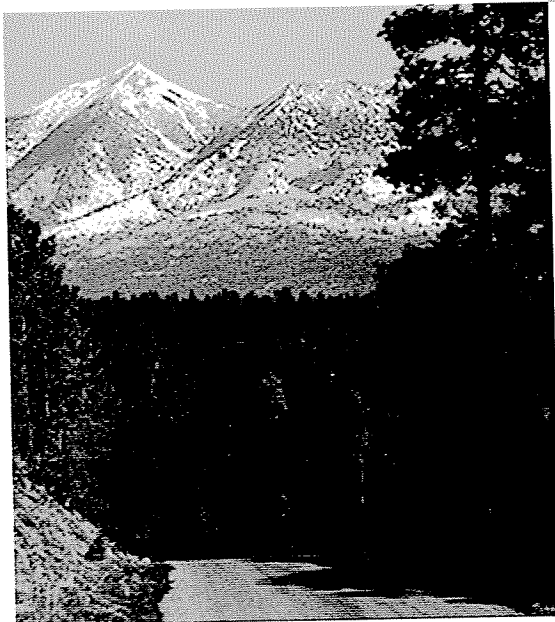
"Yes sir," Roberta responded as she opened a drawer and got the sheaf of napkins she'd put there. "I must have been distracted by something. I'm glad you found it. Thanks."

"No harm done," J.J. chuckled. "Two heads are better than one! We're a good team and I'm always pleased with your job performance." As Roberta walked to table four, he drew himself a steaming cup of decaf and went to his favorite table, where there was no ashtray. He had a low opinion of cigarettes, and cigarette smokers, and if he had his way there'd be no smoking in his break room.

Placement of the honor system coin boxes allowed him unobstructed vision of all four. He also had a low opinion of anyone who failed to deposit full payment for coffee.



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Admittedly, sometimes when a crowd accumulated he could not always be certain that everyone paid, but he had keen hearing and eagle vision. Not often did TLC lose money on coffee sales. J.J. was a contented man and well qualified for his job.

Attorney Lyndon Moon was normally the first customer unless he was out of town attending to legal matters. J.J. cherished Lyndon's absence. When the councilor was in town he usually made his arrival a full fifteen minutes before the flood of employees at eight o'clock. Regular coffee shop opening time was 7:30, and trade was always brisk from secretaries who took a cup of coffee and a snack to their workstations.

Department heads were exempt from being prompt at their work place, since they needed to touch base with each other and discuss work in progress. In truth, it is doubtful that company business was even in the top ten most popular subjects. Football and baseball games were dissected and examined in detail, the woeful shortage of competent employees and the heavy labor burden being imposed upon supervisors were the main topics, until a gradual erosion of supervisors migrated to their jobs by ascending rank. "The biggest wheels always roll out last," was the way Roberta put it.

Lyndon Moon ranked above all the "Big Wheels" who peopled the lower nine floors of the Corporate Offices of TLC and was often still sipping his coffee and puffing cigarettes when the last of the stragglers departed. His office was, after all, on the tenth floor alongside the many VPs and President and General Manager Vernon Marmaduke. Lyndon was not greatly revered on either floor, but in his role as staff attorney he enjoyed an almost legendary niche in the organization. He knew the exact location of the closets, which housed the skeletons accumulated by the ruling hierarchy of TLC, and he had an extensive rap sheet and running tab on the heirs apparent who were advancing toward the coveted positions on the tenth floor. It was a wise decision to court favor with Lyndon Moon - and keep a wary eye upon him.

J.J. Tolliver went the extra mile in maintaining a tranquil relationship with Lyndon Moon, since he could not weather any tempest Lyndon might spawn upstairs. In his monthly statement, which was forwarded to Vernon Marmaduke, he had never made mention of Lyndon Moon's irritating practice of thumping the honor box in lieu of depositing coins. It was a wise decision. J.J. knew that Lyndon was the ultimate recipient of his "dead bear" report. He'd been told that President Marmaduke didn't even bother to look inside the envelope at his report. Instead, according to an unimpeachable source, he submitted it to the company lawyer, Lyndon Moon.

Once Lyndon mercifully departed, J.J. put his and Lyndon's cups in the trash receptacle and went into his office as Roberta began her sprucing up in preparation for the 9:30 run, which actually began around nine and lasted until eleven.

J.J. seated himself at his desk and unlocked the drawer safe. He poured yesterday's collection of money onto his desktop and began his coin rolling operation. He did not hurry the task. As a matter of fact, he examined each coin's date and mintmark as he prepared them for encasement in the paper sleeves.

An untrained observer might conclude that he was a coin collector, but that conclusion would be an error. J.J. knew the going price for scarce coinage, and when he ran across a rare or semi-rare specimen he would cull it out and replace it with one from his pocket. Once a week he made a trip to the Cow Town coin shop up the street and sold his finds. His big discovery of all time was a 1909 S VDB Lincoln Head Cent. It had appraised at one hundred and sixty five dollars. It had also sold for that amount.

"That coin has a very fine grade," Mr. Ryan had told J.J. "I'll bet it's been in someone's collection for years. Probably spent by accident."

"Could have been," J.J. admitted, "I got it in change at a garage sale I think."

He was interrupted by his telephone and after allowing two rings he picked up the receiver "J.J. Tolliver - Employee Benefits" he said in his most professional voice.

"J.J., Betty Gimble. Mr. Marmaduke has requested your presence in his office at eleven. Is there any reason why you cannot make it?" Betty was Mr. Marmaduke's personal secretary and J.J. often visited with her when she was on coffee break. In his estimation he and Betty were on an equal plane of importance, since they both reported directly to Vernon Marmaduke.

"I'll be there! Do you have any idea why Mr. M wants to see me?" J.J. asked. "Did he ask me to bring anything?"

"No idea," Betty said, "just be here - and don't be late."

*For Lands Sake, will be continued
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