

MORGAN BROWNLEE AND THE STRANGER

The Story of One of Idaho's Pioneers
on the Payette National Forest

by
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On the wind swept plains of Kansas, in the autumn of 1887, Morgan Brownlee was born to Mary Ellen and Franklin Brownlee. Before Morgan was three years old his father grew tired of Kansas with its rattlesnakes, prairie dogs and coyotes. Looking for a new home, he loaded his family and possessions on a wagon and headed south into Oklahoma Territory.

After joining in the wild homestead race across the Cherokee Strip in 1889, Franklin Brownlee lost his claim when another homesteader beat him to the survey office, registering the section Brownlee had staked. After being beat out of his claim, Brownlee rented farm land, but times were hard and money difficult to come by. Morgan was twelve when he got his first job walking behind two horses and a plow for forty cents a day and board. Payday he took his wages home to his family.

After a bout with malaria Morgan's father was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The prognosis wasn't good. The family was advised to head for a different climate or their husband and father wouldn't live a year. Packing up the wagon in 1902 they started north, stopping here and there along the way to work for expense money.

By the time they pulled into Southern Idaho, the trip across rough country roads had worn out the wagon, so the family stopped in Twin Falls looking for work. Jobs on Idaho's irrigation development projects were paying well and easy to find. Morgan, fifteen by this time and weighing in at ninety pounds, got a job grubbing sagebrush on a ditch right-of-way. It would be 1907 before the family loaded up, and headed north again.

The Brownlee's destination was the state of Washington. The trip went along as planned until one evening they camped in the trees along the river at Eagle, Idaho. At sunset several freight wagons pulled into their camp site. Being sociable, Franklin Brownlee invited the drivers to join them around the campfire. Talk was full of praise for Long Valley where the freighters had filed on homesteads. Hearing land was still available, Franklin Brownlee decided to follow along behind the freight wagons and take a look.

The first night they camped at Dry Buck; the next day crossing the Payette River at Smith's Ferry. Following the wagon route, they passed through Round Valley into Long Valley, camping that night at Crawford. The meadows had plenty of grass for the horses, and wood and water for camping. After inquiring what sections were available, Morgan's Dad homesteaded 80 acres on Lake Fork.

After helping his father build a cabin and barn, twenty year old Morgan filed on forty acres east of Roseberry.

To help out his mother and father and still have money to improve his own homestead, Morgan took a job driving a freight wagon. He would load grain at the P. & I. N. (Pacific & Idaho Northern) Railroad siding at Evergreen, haul it north past Meadows, turn south at Payette Lake, and off-load in Long Valley for \$.75

per hundred pounds.

Facilities were few and far between. The freighters always took bedrolls and a grub box, camping out all seasons. No matter how cold it got they slept in the open or in the livery barn with their horses. One winter concession was eating in a restaurant when close to a town or a stage stop. A hot meal on a cold day tasted pretty good. In the summer they kept food in the grub box and camped wherever they found grass and water for the team.

On one of these trips Morgan met the stranger. It was a story he wouldn't tell until he was an elderly man, and best told today in his own voice.

MORGAN'S STORY

I kinda hesitate to write the next thing that comes to mind, as I never told anyone till last summer (1971). The reason I never told it is, if one of my friends had found out, they would of laughed themselves to death, but I'm so near the end of my journey, I won't mind if they do laugh now.

It happened when I was about 22 years old, when I was freighting. Coming in from Evergreen with a good load of freight on the summit between Mud Creek and Price Valley, I saw a fellow setting under a tree near the road. He motioned me to stop, and asked if that road went to Warren where the mines were.

I said, "Yes, but it forks several times and there are no sign posts. You will have to do a lot of guessing or inquiring, if you see anyone."

He said he wanted to work at the mines if he could get there, but didn't know if he could make it or not, being about played out.

"I can give you a ride as far as Payette Lake, if you can stand the rough ride, but it will be a pretty slow pace."

"It will be faster than setting under a tree." He climbed up on the other side of the spring seat and we went on. He looked awful tired and seemed almost asleep at times.

He was small, and looked to be about 20 years old. Of course I was curious about him; as to where he was from and so on, but them times if you met a stranger, he was supposed to tell what he wanted known about himself and it wasn't good manners to ask questions. It was kinda a rule: We ask not wither lies your way, nor whence you came, nor what's your name.

The road crossed the Little Salmon River about a mile above where it does now. When we got to the crossing, I told him we'd eat lunch. He asked what he could do to help.

"Go along on your side of the team and take the bits out of the horses mouths." I did the same on my side, and we let the wagon tongue down. I handed him a pail, and told him to carry water for the horses. I used the other pail and we soon had them watered. I put grain in the nosebags and he hung them on the horses.

We made coffee and had lunch of bread, butter, cheese, bologna and fruit. He was awful hungry. Ashamed to eat so much, he said it was the first meal since noon the day before. After lunch he wanted to know how soon we would start on.

"It will be about an hour, as I always give the horses a long

rest at noon." He went over behind the willows and took a nap. I was sure then he was on the dodge.

I woke him up when it was time to go; he seemed more alive after a meal and a nap.

I was heavy loaded, and when we got to the lower end of Rock Flat the horses were tired and it was nearly camping time. The grass was good there, so I said, "This is where we camp for the night."

He got down off the wagon, and asked if I was going to let him camp with me as he didn't have much money.

"Sure you can stay, you don't need any money."

"Well, I don't know much about taking care of work horses, but I can drag in wood and help with the camp work."

I told him to hop to it, and if he had time to start supper. I unhitched, unharnessed and hobbled the horses, then went over to the campfire.

He was peeling spuds, "Looks like I ate most of the bread at noon."

"Peel as many spuds as that pan will hold. Fry some ham in the frying pan; put the ham on a plate when its done, then, cook the spuds in the ham grease. I will use the other pan for bread." By the time he had the ham, spuds and coffee ready, I had the bread baked.

We both put away quite a lot of grub. As we sat there finishing off the coffee, he declared, "I never ate such good bread before."

I went out and grained the horses and put the bell on one, while he washed the dishes.

We set around the fire a while, neither of us talking much. I had offered him a chew of tobacco soon after he got on to ride with me, but he said he didn't use tobacco.

I noticed he seemed sleepy, and I was kinda tired, so I said, "I haven't got a very large bedroll, but I can spread it out wide enough for two. It won't be soft, but there will be enough over us so we won't be cold."

"If you can spare me a blanket, I could roll up by the fire?"

"You could roll up by the fire and damned near freeze. It gets cold here nights, and there will be frost in the morning." I went ahead and fixed the bed for two. Each of us sat down on either side of the bed.

He ask, "How much do you take off?"

"Just my shoes and jacket."

"That's fine by me."

He was asleep as soon as we got the cover up and every time I woke up in the night, he was snoring to beat the band.

The next morning I woke up at daylight and told him, "I hear the bell horse quite a ways up the creek, you start breakfast while I get the horses in."

"I have never made camp bread, shall I try it?"

" Sure." By the time I got the horses harnessed and fed, he had breakfast ready. Then he washed the dishes and packed the grub box while I hitched up and we got an early start.

I forgot to mention it--the bread he made was real good for a beginner.

He said, "That is the best nights sleep I have had for an awful long time."

I thought for a moment he was going to tell me his troubles. He hesitated, then seemed to change his mind.

We got to Payette Lake about mid-morning. I told him which road to take to Warren, and told him to take enough food for two or three meals. He took what bread was left from breakfast, some bologna and a little other stuff. He offered me what money he had, which was less than \$5.00. I told him he had earned his way at camp work, and that he might need it if he didn't get a job at Warren. I started on down the road.

While I was unloading at Roseberry, the merchant came over. "I'll have another load waiting at Evergreen by the time you can get back there."

"Okay, I'll let my team rest one day, and go right back."

When I got back as far as Meadows with the new load I noticed one of my wheelers had pulled a shoe. It was mid-afternoon, so I decided to put up at the livery barn for the night and reset several shoes. I always carried a horseshoeing outfit with me, and shod my own horses.

While I was working, a livery team hitched to a hack pulled in. I noticed the fellow I had given a ride to on my last load was setting beside the driver.

I said, "Hello, didn't you get a job at Warren?"

He raised his left hand, and I saw a hand cuff on his wrist. I went over to his side of the rig.

The driver gave me a sharp look. "Do you know her?"

"Slightly, I gave him a ride from Price Valley to Payette Lake on my last trip with freight."

"Why did you give her a ride?"

"He wanted to get to Warren to work in the mine, and seemed to be tired."

"You ever see him before that date?"

"No, I never saw him before, and if your satisfied, I will finish shoeing my horses."

"Just a minute." He flipped back his jacket and displayed a United States Marshall's badge. "Why do you keep calling the prisoner him?"

"Because of the way he is dressed, and I don't know his name."

He looked down at me, "Hell kid, this is a woman!"

I looked him over to see if he was serious. "This is news to me, and if you think I'm afraid of your badge, your damned mistaken. I have no reason to be afraid of any marshall or sheriff, or any other officer. I am a law abiding citizen and can prove it."

"Don't get sore kid. I believe you, but I want to ask you a few more questions."

The liveryman had heard some of the talk and said, "I have known Morgan three years, and I know he is all right."

The Marshall turned to me, "How long was it from the time you picked her up, to the time you dropped her off at the Lake?"

"A little over a day."

"Where did you spend the night?"

"We camped in Rock Flat."

"You carry two beds with you?"

"No."

"Are you telling me that you shared your bed with her, and didn't know it was a woman?"

"That's right."

He looked at her. She nodded her head, "He is telling the truth."

He started to laugh, and said, "Ye Gods kid, if this gets out on you, you will have something to live down. (Lots of strangers called me "kid" as I looked four or five years younger than I was.)

"Well, go ahead and tell it, you damned jackass. I don't examine everyone I meet to determine their sex."

Then the woman started to cry, "You laugh about it, and you are taking me back to be hung or spend the rest of my life in jail, and I didn't do a thing but hold the horses. I didn't even have a gun. I have never shot a gun in my life."

He looked over at her crying. His voice softened, "Why don't you tell us about it?"

She sobbed, "As if you didn't know why you tracked me down."

"They didn't tell me much, only that three people tried to rob the stage. One was killed at the holdup, a posse got one, and one got away. The one that got away was believed to be a woman. I took the track where the posse lost it, and you led me a hell of a chase."

So she told us.

They were in Nevada, near the mines. Her husband, whom she called Dick, and his brother Jim made plans to rob the stage. They told her she was to go along and hold the horses.

She refused. They said they were going to do it anyway, and if she wouldn't go, she wouldn't be seeing them again.

The stage carrying a large payroll for the mines would be traveling without a guard. There wouldn't be any danger. After it was over, they would go to Canada, start a cattle ranch with the money, and go straight.

They got maps, planning the best route north.

When the day arrived, they left her with the horses near the road, in the timber out of sight.

They had it timed pretty close. She didn't wait long until she heard the stage coming, then a lot of shots. The stage driver began popping the whip; it sounded almost as loud as the gunfire. She could tell the stage was going on; the horses were running hard. She knew that Dick and Jim had failed.

After what seemed an awful long time, Dick came back, barely able to walk. He said, "There was a guard. He had a shotgun and used buckshot, killing Jim the first shot. Then I killed the guard. The driver put two slugs through my side. I fell beside the road

and the stage pulled on. We have to ride for it, as there is sure to be a posse after us."

He had a hard time getting on his horse, and couldn't ride faster than a walk. They started north for Canada, riding until dark.

There was some food, bandages, and arnica in the saddle bags. The bullets had gone clear through Dick's side and were not fatal.

The next morning she had to help him on his horse. About noon they heard the posse coming. Dick said to her, "Ride for it. I'll drop off behind that rock and hold them back as long as I can." She hesitated. He told her bluntly, "Go. They will hang you if they catch you."

The posse was coming fast and yelling. She was on a fast horse, and got away. Behind her she heard lots of shooting.

The Marshall said, "Yes, Dick killed two of them, and wounded three more before they finished him. If you tell your story in Court and they believe you, you won't be hung. You will get a light jail sentence. If you don't give me any trouble on the way back by trying to get away, I will help you all I can in my report."

She answered wearily, "You don't need to worry about me trying to get away. I am through running and anxious to get back and get it over with."

He reached over and took the handcuffs off. "I believe I can trust you."

I was finishing the horseshoeing. They had followed me over, so I heard all their talk. I got the shoeing done, and started feeding and caring for the horses with them watching.

The Marshall ask a lot of questions about freighting. When I got the horses cared for, he said, "Let's have supper and spend the evening together."

So we went over to Jones' Saloon. It was in a white building on the north side of the street, just before the road turns southeast. There was a lean-to on the back of the saloon. A Chinaman ran the only restaurant in town there.

The Marshal told the Chinese cook, "Bring us three of the best T-bone steaks in town, with all the trimmings." He turned to us and said, "By the way, my friends call me Burt."

The woman replied, "Jane will do for me."

I said, "I answer to Morgan, it suits me better than "Kid" or "Freighter Boy."

He asked, "Would you folks like something from the bar?"

"A scotch and soda would do me good," I answered.

Jane said, "A cold lemonade would taste good to me."

The Chinese cook stepped to the door, and yelled our order into the saloon. He brought plenty of food and we ate a lot.

Jane said, "That sure was a good meal, but it don't compare with the supper I had with Morgan in Rock Flat." She told Burt about the camp bread.

He laughed, "The reason it tasted so good was because you were half-starved."

She said, "If Morgan will agree to it, we will have breakfast at the wagon in the morning and prove it to you."

I said, "I have six horses to curry and harness, and baking bread takes time. I want to be pulling up Goose Creek Hill before it gets too hot."

She said, "I will do everything but baking the bread."

Burt said he would curry the horses while I harnessed, so I agreed to their plans.

He then asked her to fill us in on her trip from where she left the posse to where I picked her up.

When he saw the posse coming, Dick had given her what money he had, about twenty dollars. "He had never done anything crooked before, bad luck and hard times had discouraged him."

After Jane left Dick, she was afraid of being seen. She hid the horse the best she could in the daytime, and rode at night, always heading north. When the horse played out and went lame, she unsaddled him and turned him loose. Her food ran out and she almost starved.

She finally got to Murphy, which is at the end of the railroad spur that runs out from Nampa. Murphy was such a small town she was afraid to buy a ticket, so she slipped into an empty boxcar and bummed her way to Nampa.

Nampa was a good sized town so she bought some clean clothes and a ticket to Evergreen which was the end of the P. & I. N. Railroad (until 1911 when it was extended to New Meadows).

Jane had talked to a man on the train about work. He told her he had been working at the Warren mines, and she could find work there. He got off the train at Weiser, so she decided to try Warren instead of going on to Canada. She didn't think she would ever make it to Canada.

When the train pulled into Evergreen, she got off on the side opposite the depot so the agent wouldn't see her. She took off up the road on foot, instead of getting on the stage. If she was being followed, it might throw them off the track. She hiked as far as she could that afternoon without coming to any place to buy food. That night she went to bed hungry. I picked her up the next afternoon.

Jane turned to Burt, "Now its your turn to tell us how you were able to find me."

Burt told her, "My trade is mostly luck and the ability to guess right." He had found out from the agent in Nampa a person of her description had bought a ticket to Evergreen. When no one at Evergreen had seen her, he decided she was walking, so he took the stage to Meadows. When no one there had seen her. He debated with himself about going north down the Little Salmon River. Instead he decided to try Warren first. The stage only went to Warren once a month so he decided to rent a livery team, and found her working in a cook shack as a cook's helper.

He turned to Jane, "Its bedtime, and there is no jail to put you

in. If I get you a room by yourself, will you promise not to leave it till I come for you in the morning?"

She promised.

He asked at the rooming house for three rooms. I said, "I always sleep in my camp bed near my outfit, and if you guys want a campfire breakfast, you had better be at the wagons by daylight."

Next morning, I had just got the horses fed and started to curry them, when Burt came into the barn and took the curry-comb out of my hand, "Jane is building a fire so there will be coals for your bread baking."

We got the horses harnessed and went out to the wagons. Jane had hot water on for us to wash, and everything ready for me to start the bread. I wondered where they had found such good looking wood so close to town, so I asked Jane, "Where'd you get the wood?"

"Burt stole it out of the rooming house wood shed."

He said, "Well you can't have a campfire without some wood, can you?"

I got the bread going. They fried bacon and the eggs. I noticed nine eggs in the pan and said, "I didn't know I had that many eggs."

Burt said, "I like eggs, and got some to be sure we had enough."

Jane asked if he got them the way he got the wood. He grinned.

I had plenty of butter and peach jam to make the bread taste good, and there sure wasn't any of it left.

Burt told her he agreed, the camp bread couldn't be beat. He tried to pay me for the breakfast. Of course I wouldn't let him. He wanted to put it on his expense account.

They washed the dishes, while I hitched up the team.

The stage wouldn't leave for Evergreen until 8 o'clock, so the two of them rode with me up the road as far as Craig Barns, then walked back to catch the stage.

I have never met two people I thought more of after such a short acquaintance, as them. I could tell they felt the same towards me. I asked Jane to write me and tell how she got along with the law. Towards fall I got a letter from her. She got a light sentence, and would be free in three years.

When I went to make coffee for noon that day, I found a \$10.00 bill in the coffee can. I guess Uncle Sam paid for breakfast after all.

CONCLUSION

Morgan Brownlee went on to add to his homestead, and when his mother and father sold their farm, they moved in with him. In few years Morgan sold out, moving them all to Roseberry; he went to work as a logger. In 1922, the elder Mr. Brownlee died, and Mrs. Brownlee moved in with her daughters until her death in 1937.

Morgan had married in 1930. He and his wife had a little girl, Ellen in 1932. But, life wasn't easy. His wife became ill, and died in 1944.

He and his daughter moved to Horseshoe Bend, where she went to high school and he worked at the mill. As Ellen prepared to

graduate, Morgan worried about being alone, but it was that year, 1948, he met and married Fanny Woods. For four years he and Fanny were happily married. Then once more illness plagued his family when the doctors told them Fanny had cancer. The doctors operated, but it was too late. Fanny grew worse, making her last days in the hospital hard. After sleeping the night on a bench, the nurse came into wake Morgan, saying Fanny was asking for him. He recalled those last moments:

I went into her room and spoke to her. She opened her eyes, and I could tell that she knew me. She tried to raise her arms to me. I bent over, and with our lips together and her arms around my neck, she died. Then the nurses were leading me away. The light was gone from my world. It has never fully returned. I had always been able to take my blows standing up before, but losing little Fanny was almost too much for me.

In 1949, Ellen married and had two children. Morgan worked for Hoff Lumber Company until 1953 when he retired.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Morgan Brownlee's The Story of My Life, (1971) was originally recorded in rough draft as a history of his life, by him. The copy is part of the Payette National Forest historical files, McCall, Idaho. It is one of many personal histories on file, however, Morgan's recollections were special. They revealed a wonderful, human drama told by one of Idaho's quiet pioneer heroes; a strong, kind, and dedicated man whose life as an early pioneer had little ease. In the telling, Morgan Brownlee left a personal legacy for all who read it.

In retelling these segments of his history, I summarized selective highlights, edited events, corrected spelling and grammatical errors, contributing only minor elements to make the story more readable.

Morgan Brownlee was apparently not related to the founder of Brownlee's Ferry on the Snake River. The ferry is dated to the 1860's.