

My Name is Truman, T-H-O-M-P-S-O-N

By Jerry Peterson

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Buck Thompson ran the forty-eight stars up the pole in front of the Cottonwood Grange Hall. He tied off the rope, then stepped back in line with the other election judges. Up came his hand to just above his right eyebrow. "I pledge allegiance . . ."

Four of the five – the men of the group plus one of the two women – spoke those words they had learned as first graders at the Liloam Country School with more fervor than the fifth, for they had been to war and, as the lucky ones, had come home, though in various states of disrepair.

" . . . with liberty and justice for all."

The words over, Thompson's hand came down. "Let's do this thing," he said, grimacing as he went up the steps to the hall's stoop. There Thompson picked up a handbell and swung it like an old-time school teacher calling his students in for the start of the day.

"Hear ye! Hear ye!" he bellowed. "By order of the Honorable Garth Dandridge, Riley County Clerk, I do declare this polling place open. All ye who wish to vote, come forth!"

The others shambled up the steps. Three went inside, but one – Ernie Guest – stayed back with Thompson. "Notice you limping a bit," Guest said. "How's the leg?"

"Stump's a bit tender. Thanks for asking."

They, too, went in, Guest to his assigned place at the table next to Lawrence Forney. Two Republicans, two Democrats and Thompson. As chief judge, his party affiliation didn't count. This was the third election his crew had worked since Nineteen Forty-Eight, when the old crew retired and insisted that these five take their places.

Eldora Wilson, a red-haired ranch wife who could wrestle stock with the best of the men, and Gladys Nilsson, a slight woman and a teller at the Leonardville State Bank, opened the twin voter registration books at their table. The books may have been important in Topeka and Wichita where neighbors didn't know one another, but in this section of the Flint Hills they were brought out only because the law required it.

Lawrence, a rancher, school-bus driver and also Eldora's brother, and Guest, a county grader operator when he wasn't sitting on a bluff somewhere with a pad, drawing pastel scenics, set out a stack of numbered ballots, enough they figured to carry them through the day. Out, too, came the numbered discs and the recording sheets.

The Regulator clock over the door struck the first of seven bells for seven o'clock. Buck glanced up, then at his watch. "Ready?"

At seven-oh-one precisely, the door opened and an elderly couple entered the hall.

"Hi-dee, Arch, Eunice," Buck called out. "Always the first and right on time."

He motioned for his crew to stand, and they applauded the Baldwins. The couple responded with smiles.

"Eunice," Buck said, "you cleaned the old boy up real good and got him in his Sunday duds, too. He does look smart."

"I also made him wear his Spanish-American War cavalry pin. He rode with Teddy Roosevelt, you know."

“Oh, now don’t go braggin’ on me,” the old rancher said as he moved at a stately gait over the planked floor, his wife, stooped from osteo, holding tight to his arm.

Buck ushered them to Eldora’s and Gladys’ table.

The women ran their index fingers down through the A’s to the B’s. Then they checked the Baldwins off their lists.

“You’re numbers one and two,” Lawrence said, handing each a numbered disc.

Ernie gave them ballots and pointed to the curtained booths.

“When do the playing cards come out?” Baldwin asked.

“Soon as you vote and get out of here,” Buck said. “We don’t expect the next voter for fifteen minutes, when Uncle Dwight stops by on his mail route.”

“Bet he feels good about having his first name on the ballot for president.”

“Oh, hell no, he’s a Democrat.”

The two ancients disappeared with their ballots into the voting booths, leaving the judges to shuffle this and move that, giving their best effort to look busy. A minute later, Missus Baldwin came out of her booth, then Arch. With care, they dropped their ballots through the slot of the locked box painted the classless color of Henry Ford black.

Buck collected the Baldwins’ numbered discs and passed them to Ernie, then walked with the Baldwins to the door. “Arch, Eunice, we thank you for your business. If you’d like to vote again, you come on back after lunch.”

The couple gave the smiles expected of them, then left. Buck turned back. He slapped one hand against the other. “Bring out the cards!”

The judges pushed their tables together, and Thompson dragged a wooden folding chair over from the wall. “What’s the game?”

Lawrence tossed a boxed deck in the middle. “Eucher.”

“Huh-uh, Texas hold-’em,” Eldora said.

Lawrence nudged her. “What do you know about Texas hold-’em?”

“I cleaned up at my church women’s circle last week.”

“I didn’t know they let Methodists gamble.”

“Canasta,” Gladys said, bringing two decks and a tray of chips out of her picnic hamper.

“No no no no,” Lawrence said. “Save that for the afternoon when we got uninterrupted hours.”

“Yeah, morning it’s got to be a fast game,” Buck said.

Ernie flipped a boxed deck of picture cards on the table. “Old Maid.”

“You sure you wouldn’t prefer something more challenging, like Authors?”

Ernie shook his head.

“Old Maid, huh?” Buck swept up the deck. “Well, damn, we can bet on that. Nickel a hand, a dime if you get stuck with the luckless gal.”

Lawrence rolled his eyes. “Hooo, big spender.”

Voters dribbled in by ones and twos during the first hours, often with great gaps of time between them. But that changed as the hands of the Grange’s Regulator clock moved toward noon.

A truck backfire lifted the judges from their chairs. Lawrence’s cards took flight, and he

knocked a pile of nickels to the floor.

Buck glanced toward the window. Beyond stood a garbage truck, smoke belching from the tailpipe and steam boiling out the grill.

“No. NO.” He raced for the door as two shabby figures trudged away from the ancient GMC, the driver in a battered cowboy hat, his helper with a faded Army fatigue cap worn one-quarter from square.

“Jim, Charley! You guys can’t come in here!”

“We come to vote,” the driver said, he and his partner coming on.

“I don’t give a damn. You guys stink. What kind of garbage you been handling?”

“The kind that’s cooked a couple days, and we picked up a dead skunk on the way, but it ain’t too bad.”

“No, no, you guys stay out there and air out some. We’ll bring the ballots out to you.”

“Is that legal?”

“I don’t give a damn if it’s legal or not. We’re about to set out lunch, and I don’t want my judges turning green on me.”

Buck dashed back in. “Girls, bring your books. Ernie, two ballots and a couple pencils. Our trashmen are voting in the parking lot.”

“Is that legal?” Lawrence asked from the floor where he, like a blind mole, felt around for stray nickels.

“You forget how sick you got two years ago when those guys voted in here, and you who’d been bragging about having a cast-iron stomach?”

Lawrence sat on his butt. He waved at Ernie. “I’ll trust you. Go.”

The judges, minus Lawrence, marched outside. The women stood as far back as they could while they went through their lists to Charles Dumford and James Randall. They checked them off. Ernie held a handkerchief over his nose and mouth when he handed the men their ballots and pencils.

“What are we gonna mark on?” the driver asked.

“Well, none of us are going to offer our backs,” Buck said. “Use the side of your truck. Just don’t get those ballots mussed up. We gotta be able to read ’em when we count ’em.”

An elderly woman drove in in a bullet-nosed Ford coupe while the trashmen scrawled their X’s on their ballots. Buck opened the door for her, Martha Tolliver.

“We got to vote outside this year, Bucky?” she asked.

“Only the smelly ones. You take a bath before you come?”

“Every day. Even put on a little lilac water.”

“Then you can go right on inside. We’ll be with you directly.”

Following the judges, Missus Tolliver, in her black lace-up shoes, went on in while Buck collected Dumford’s and Randall’s ballots. “I’ll put them in the box for you.”

“Can we trust ya?” Randall asked.

“You want, you can watch through the window, ’cause I’m not lettin’ you come in.”

Dumford shrugged. “Window’s fine by me,” he said and ambled off toward the side of the Grange hall.

When Buck got back inside, he found his crew had already checked Missus Tolliver off the rolls and had directed her to a voting booth. He hauled the ballot box to the window and made

a business of stuffing the two ballots down the slot while the trashmen observed from the other side of the glass. Buck pointed to the slot and gave the men a thumbs-up, they responding with okay signs.

“May I never have to quit teaching school and become a trashman,” Buck said to Eldora as he brought the ballot box back. “Cooked garbage and dead skunks, phew.”

“Bucky?” came a voice from a voting booth.

“Yes, Missus Tolliver.”

“I seem to have forgotten my glasses. Would you read the ballot to me?”

Thompson looked to the heavens, then went on in. Just as quickly, he poked his head out between the curtains. “I need one Republican and one Democrat in here to observe so none of you yahoos challenge Missus Tolliver’s ballot.”

Eldora pointed to Gladys, and Lawrence waved Ernie on while he, still on all fours, searched a far corner for errant coins.

“I want to vote for that Eisenhower man,” Missus Tolliver said. “My sister knew him when the family lived in Abilene.”

“Put an X right here then.”

“Do I have to vote for a vice president?”

“No, you get one of them automatic.”

Lawrence surfaced at Eldora’s side. He held up a nickel. “Believe that’s the last one.”

The door opened and in came a mustached cowboy wearing a cattleman’s hat that had seen better days. He peeled it off. “Is this where I vote?”

Eldora studied the man as he strolled toward her. “You new in the precinct?”

“Yup. Live over by the Nelson place.”

“Registered?”

“Did that at the courthouse. I work there.”

“Name?”

“James Early.”

“You wouldn’t happen to be the sheriff?”

“That’s me. Used to live and vote over in Keats.”

Buck’s voice blasted from the curtained booth. “Don’t you believe him. Make him prove who he is. Make him show you a driver’s license, a Social Security card. Anyone can buy a toy badge at the Woolworth store.”

Early took out his wallet. “That wouldn’t be Buck Thompson in there, would it?”

“Yes,” Eldora said as she examined Early’s driver’s license. She checked his name off her voter roll. “You know him?”

“We were both Army dog faces a decade back, in Italy, then France and Belgium. Same unit. I managed to keep both my legs while he lost one from the knee down.”

Missus Tolliver came out of the booth, followed by the three poll workers. Early glanced their way. “You vote by committee in this precinct?”

Buck snorted, then came over, his arms open wide. The two men fell together and pounded one another on the back. “Cactus, about time you showed up. If you hadn’t, I intended to vote your ballot.”

“You can do that here?” Early asked.

“Hell, I can do anything. I’m the chief judge.”

Missus Tolliver tugged at Buck’s sleeve. “Bucky, I wish you wouldn’t use that language. You know I taught you better.”

He gestured at Early. “You ever meet the sheriff?”

“Well, I try not to break the law, so, no, I never have.” Missus Tolliver held out her hand. “I’m Martha Tolliver. I was little Bucky’s Sunday school teacher.”

“Bet he was a handful,” Early said.

“Yes, I had to wallop him a few times with my Bible. Well, I’ve done my civic duty, so I must be going.” She took hold of Early’s lapel and tugged him down to her level. “Now I want you to vote for that Eisenhower man. My sister knows him. If he wins, she’s going to get us an invitation to the White House.”

“I vote a secret ballot, but I’ll seriously consider it.”

Missus Tolliver patted the sheriff’s cheek and went on her way. The door opened before she got to it. A man stepped in, then stepped back. He held the door for her. “Remember to vote for that Mister Eisenhower,” Missus Tolliver said as she passed.

The man stepped in and Buck bellowed, “George, why don’t you ever ask your wife? You’re in the Elcott precinct. You vote up the road in the school house.”

“But I always come here.”

“And I always send you up to the Elcott school.”

After much near-sighted eye blinking, the man left.

“Anybody you don’t know?” Early asked.

“Damn few, Cactus, damn few.”

“How am I doing in this precinct?”

Buck put his arm around Early’s shoulders. “Tell me, how well would you like to do?”

“I carried my old precinct by ninety percent.”

“We could arrange that.” He turned to his fellow judges. “What are votes going for these days?”

“Two dollars or a half-pint of whiskey,” Lawrence said. “I can make some calls, maybe get you five, ten people here. How about you, Eldora?”

“Oh, easy.”

Early gazed from one to the next, then to Buck. “You wouldn’t be putting me on?”

“Cactus, you’re so honest you’ll never know. . . . Give this man a ballot.” With that he pushed Early on toward Guest, the Regulator clock chiming the first of twelve bells.

Buck slapped his hands. “Lunchtime. What didja bring, girls? Lawrence?”

Ernie went for a table. He hauled it over. Gladys, ready for him, shook out a checkered tablecloth. She smoothed out the wrinkles as Eldora handed a stack of plates to her brother to deal out.

From hampers and baskets came bowls of potato salad and baked beans, a platter of cold chicken, biscuits, butter and wild grape jam, thermoses of coffee, porcelain cups and three pies. “Strawberry-rhubarb,” Ernie said, gesturing to the one he had set down.

“And don’t that smell good. You didn’t bake it, didja?”

“No, if my family depended on me in the kitchen, we’d all starve.”

Early came out of the booth, holding up his ballot. “Where’s this go?”

Buck thumbed toward the locked box. "Join us for a bite?"

"I could be talked into it."

Ernie pulled over another folding chair while Gladys handed the sheriff a plate.

A man in work tans and barn boots appeared at the door. Buck, a chicken leg in his hand, eyed him. "Democrat or Republican?"

"Democrat," the man said.

"Sorry, only Republicans here. You gotta go up the road to the Elcott school."

The man left.

Eldora swatted Buck. "You can't do that. Go get him back."

"That's my cousin."

"You still can't do that." She swatted him again.

"Oh, the abuse I take." Buck strode to the door. He leaned out, waving the chicken leg. "Richie! Get your butt in here. Eldora says you can vote here this time."

Buck first clawed at his ragged mustache, then thumbed the cards in his hand, the Regulator clock striking three. "What's the name of this game again?"

"Spite and Malice," Lawrence said.

"And you picked it?"

"I didn't want to play canasta again."

"And the point of this game is?"

"To not discard anything the person next to you can use."

The door opened and a heavy-set woman in a white smock hustled in, six more women close at her heels, several with curlers in their hair.

Buck threw his cards up. "Here comes the hen vote."

"I heard that," the woman in the smock said. "Amos came by and said we needed to get out here and vote before you closed up."

"Elvie, we don't close until seven."

"Well, we're here now, so come on, get with it. Give us a little service."

The poll workers scurried to their tables and checked off Elvie Adams who operated a beauty parlor – The Hair'em – at her ranch house, then her customers, each a resident of the precinct. Lawrence handed out numbers, and Ernie ballots.

Elvie came over to Buck, holding her ballot open. "Your cousin is running for something. Which one is he?"

Buck touched the Republican name under country assessor.

She snapped her ballot back. "For what you said, I'm sure as hell not voting for him."

And she huffed away to the first booth.

"Just step through those curtains," Buck said, pointing the way for a farmer in his Oshkosh-By-Gosh bib overalls.

The man went into the second voting booth. A moment later, a muttered "Gawddammit, Buck, who am I supposed to be voting for?" came over the curtains.

Thompson, back at the card game – Five-Card Stud at his insistence – didn't look up from his hand. "Anybody under the Big R column."

“Dammit, Buck, I’m a Democrat. My granddaddy’d die if I voted for a Republican. Who’s running for president on the Democrat side?”

“Kefauver.”

“That coonskin cap guy from Tennessee? I kinda like that Truman fella.”

Buck tapped the table for two more cards. “He’s not running.”

“Can I write him in?”

He pushed a nickel into the pot. “Sure. Harry – just like my first name – then Truman – T-H-O-M-P-S-O-N.”

A head came out from between the curtains. “Gawddammit, Buck, you’re no help at all.”

“All right, T-R-U-M-A-N.”

“Thank you.” The head disappeared back into the booth. “How was that again?”

“Truman – T-R-U-M-A-N.”

“See your nickel and raise you a nickel,” Ernie said, pushing two coins into the pot.

Buck peered over his hand. “Eldora givin’ you aces because she thinks you’re so cute?”

“Aww, dammit,” came the farmer’s plaintive voice from the booth. Out he came, holding his ballot. “I messed up my paper. Can I have a new one?”

“Sorry, Rip, it’s one to a customer.” Buck flicked a nickel into the pot. “You ruin your ballot here, you got to go over to Elcott, see if you can sneak in there.”

“I’m a Christian. I couldn’t do that.”

Buck leaned in to Lawrence and Ernie. “You think we should help him?”

The two shrugged.

He wagged his fingers at Rip Hollister, and the man handed his ballot over. Buck tore a hunk out of the paper. With all the drama of a community playhouse thespian, he announced, “Oh Lordy, we got us a damaged ballot here. We surely cannot count this one.” He thumbed at Ernie. “Give him a new one.”

Lawrence pulled over his record sheet. He wrote down *Ballot #121 damaged and destroyed*, and initialed the notation. While Buck escorted Hollister and his new ballot back to the voting booth, Lawrence handed the sheet to Ernie for his initials.

“Now,” Buck said, “you be sure to vote for my cousin for county assessor. That’s little Timmy Russell, right there on your ballot.” He touched the name, then pushed Hollister between the curtains.

“Buck, you’re awful,” Eldora said as she rearranged her cards. “Raise a nickel.”

“Well, I figure Timmy needs all the help he can get ’cause his wife’s sure not voting for him.” Buck straddled his chair and recovered his cards. “If Rip votes for him and I vote for him, Timmy’ll get at least two votes out of this precinct.”

Again a voice billowed up out of the voting booth. “Dammit, Buck, it says here he’s a Republican.”

“Rip, you want us to count your ballot or not?”

Buck glanced up at the Regulator. One minute to seven.

He leaned over to Eldora. “The dead in the precinct vote today?”

She looked down her roll. “Not this year.”

“Well, dammit, you tell that Democratic chairman husband of yours that his people aren’t

doing their job. How can he expect his people to win if he doesn't turn out the cemetery vote?"

A young man in work jeans stepped out of the first booth. He deposited his ballot in the locked box, then dawdled. A moment later, a young woman, also in work jeans and with a child parked in the crook of her arm, came out of the second booth. She dropped her ballot in the box, and the trio headed for the door.

Buck swung in between the adults, his arms going around their shoulders. "Jimmy, April, I want to thank you."

"What for?" the young man asked.

"Well, we started the day with the oldest couple in the precinct voting and we end it with the youngest couple voting. I think that's pretty neat."

"Guess it is, isn't it?"

"You two just may have elected your first president, you know that?"

He walked with them outside, then stopped on the stoop while they went on to their rusting Studebaker and drove off. Buck picked up his handbell. He swung it hard. "Hear ye! Hear ye! By order of the Honorable Garth Dandridge, Riley County Clerk, I do declare this polling place closed. May God bless America."

Ernie came out and the two lowered the flag. Together they folded it in regulation form. "You know where the Grangers keep it," Buck said as he handed the triangle of cloth to his partner.

Headlights came along the road and turned in, someone in a Jeep, the Jeep stopping next to Buck, Ernie already having gone back inside. James Early stepped out. "You want me to drive your ballot box to the courthouse? I'm going in."

Buck leaned up against the Jeep's fender. "Cactus old pard, I know you mean well, and it's not that we don't trust you, but we got us a routine."

"And that would be what?"

"Well, I'm gonna go inside, and we'll all count the votes together and sign off on everybody's records. By Eight, we'll be out here, piling into Ernie's old Hudson over there, and that ballot box and our records will ride between Ernie and me to Manhattan with the others in the back seat to supervise."

"Sounds good."

"It is good. The five of us deliver the caboodle – and I tell you, Cactus, I always wondered what a caboodle was – we deliver it to the county clerk. Old Garth, he'll shake our hands and thank us and tell us he doesn't know how they could have held the election without us, then he'll tell us to go home."

"And you do."

"Oh no. Garth's our boss two days every two years, but we always tell him in the nicest way that we'll stick around and watch the final counting." Buck pointed to a star – Polaris – pushing its brightness through the twilight. "You see like that compass star up there, there's a constant here. When the five of us took this job four years back, we agreed we'd make sure nobody ever cheated our precinct. This is damn serious business for us."

Early settled against the fender, too, his gaze dropping from the North Star to the horizon, to a rising hunter's moon, a mellowish ball going from orange to yellow. "I guess I can understand why it'd be serious for you," he said.

“Uh-huh. If you hadn’t toted me back to an aid station after that grenade blew half my leg away, I’d been one dead bunny out there in that Belgian forest. But you don’t know about my partners.

“Lawrence, he drove gas tankers on the Red Ball Express. Damn dangerous business. Quiet little Ernie got the Navy Cross as a Marine in that hellish jungle war in the Pacific.”

“The women?” Early asked.

“Gladys? She’s our Rosie the Riveter. Went out to St. Louis and helped build some of the best bombers ever to fly. And then there’s Eldora.”

Buck pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. He rubbed it at the tip of his nose and wiped one eye. “Eldora, she was an Army nurse in the Philippines, on Corregidor. Spent four gawd-awful years in Japanese internment camps. Won’t say a thing about it. . . . So, you see, we paid a price for these jobs.”