

The Bull Ridin' Preacher

by Paul Peterson ©2002

1 Samuel 17:38-40, Romans 5:1-5

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

With a name like Vanderhoff, Carl Vanderhoff should have been part of the Dutch Reformed Church, but somewhere along the line his family went “soft” on Calvinist theology and descended into lowly Presbyterianism. They were good Presbyterians though. In fact, Carl’s father pastored three different Presbyterian churches in Massachusetts and New Jersey. Thus, no one was surprised when Carl followed his father’s footsteps down the hallowed halls of Princeton Theological Seminary. However, many were surprised when he decided to do a summer internship in the small town of Wisdom, Montana. Wisdom didn’t have a regular pastor and often had seminary students fill the pulpit during the summer.

In the late 1930’s, Montana was still the frontier to most Easterners. Carl’s mother wondered if he would be safe out there in the wild west. Carl’s father snidely remarked that most Montanans couldn’t even spell Presbyterian, much less be one. Carl just smiled and said he looked forward to sharing the gospel out on the range with the cowboys. He loved Western movies. Now, in his mind at least, he was going to be in one.

Even today, Wisdom, Montana is a long way from anything. But in 1937, that long way was even longer

due a lack of good roads. Unless one enjoyed dust and potholes, the ride up the valley was not something to which one looked forward. As Carl drove up that road in his new Packard touring sedan, he began to understand just how big the wild west really was. The distance of his drive from Billings to Wisdom would have covered most of New England. Carl also began to understand that cattle are not well trained in road etiquette, and that both patience and adept steering are required to navigate through the herd and their end products. Carl finally gave up trying to drive around all the cow pies and accepted the fact that his shiny new Packard would spend most of its time in Wisdom being covered in dust and cow manure.

Upon arriving in Wisdom, Carl found it to be everything he had imagined—just not quite as much of it as he had imagined. There were the taverns, the garages, the mercantile, some tourist cabins, the post office, the church, and then nothing for as far as he could see. How could the biggest town in the Big Hole valley be so small? Where was the movie theater, the Carnegie Library, the village square and bandstand?

After settling into the little tourist cabin the congregation had rented for him, Carl inspected the church building. A little more than 25 years old, the Wisdom church was a typical country church. Small and cozy, simple wood frame architecture, pump organ, wood stove, and outhouse in back. Carl loved it. At least this part of Wisdom lived up to his expectation.

That first Sunday, Carl was fired up and ready to preach the gospel. Most of the people had been very warm and welcoming, and he looked forward to a church full of parishioners. Thus, he was taken aback when only twelve people showed up for worship, eleven of whom were women. And he was further taken aback when following the service one of the

women commented on the “good turnout” to see the new preacher.

While shaking hands with the one man in church that morning, Carl shared how glad he was to see at least one other male. The man, a rancher by the name of Fred Thompson, and an elder in the church, replied that he had sprained his knee and had to take it easy for a few days. That’s why he was in church and not out doing ranch work. Carl couldn’t recall any advice from his seminary pastoral care professor that would give a proper response for that kind of statement. So he just smiled and said, “I see.”

The young preacher was bothered by the fact that church was a women thing. Why didn’t the cowboys come to church? Surely out here, surrounded by the glory of God’s creation, they had to believe in God. Carl decided right then that his mission for the summer would be to fill the pews with cowboys.

To accomplish this mission, Carl began to hangout anywhere he saw cowboys gathering. And he wasn’t shy about striking up conversations. It was through this approach that he met “Wily” Clawson. Robert was his real name, but everyone called him “Wily.”

“Well, Preacher,” said Wily, “you seem like a nice young man. Why don’t you come on out to our place tonight for supper. We’re gonna be doing some branding and castrating today, and tonight celebrate with a feast of Rocky Mountain oysters.”

Carl replied, “That would be wonderful. Thank you for the invitation.” Then he added, “You know, I guess I’m a bit wet behind the ears because I didn’t know you had oysters out here in the mountains. I thought they were just an ocean thing. I’m sure looking forward to comparing them with the ones we get back East.”

And so it began. Wily could have told the young preacher the truth about castrated steers being the

source of Rocky Mountain oysters, but he didn't. He just smiled and said, "See ya tonight." And he could have told him the truth that night before they started eating, but he didn't. Wily waited until the preacher had downed quite of few of the nuggets before explaining that some steers might be giving him dirty looks on his way back out to the front gate. By the next day, every soul in Wisdom knew the story, and the story got better with each telling.

Being so isolated, the people of Wisdom had to create a good deal of their entertainment. That summer, part of the entertainment was to see just how naive the young preacher really was. It became sort of a competition.

But Carl Vanderhoff was a young man of great faith and determination. He would not be easily deterred from his goal of bringing those cowboys to church. So he continued to engage them whenever he could. This made him an easy target.

Most of the pranks were harmless. Like when Carl was asked if he had been out to see the "big hole" yet. Not knowing that "hole" was the old trapper's term for valley, Carl said no, but he would like to see it. What followed were the most convoluted directions ever given in the valley. When Carl would return saying he couldn't find the hole, a new set of equally convoluted directions were provided. Finally, after burning a great deal of gas and being stuck in the mud twice, one old-timer took him aside and confessed the truth.

Another fairly harmless prank concerned the many beaverslides that dotted the valley floor. Carl asked how they came to be called beaverslides. It was explained to him that originally they were called hayslides, but late one night a local rancher was out in the field and happened to see in the moonlight some beavers climbing up the apparatus and sliding down. It was like a game to them. The young preacher was then told that if you sit out in the

moonlight and are very quiet, you can occasionally catch the beavers playing their game. During the next full moon, Carl sat out in the field for three straight nights and never saw a beaver, although one night a moose passed by and wondered what that crazy human was doing.

Most of the pranks were harmless. But there was one that was downright mean. Jeb Garrett was an itinerant cowboy who talked more than he worked. He spent a great deal of his time sitting on the front porch of the tavern. He always had a chaw of tobacco in his mouth.

One day as Carl was walking past the tavern, Jeb called out, "Hey Preach! Why don't you come on over here and I'll share a chaw of t'baccy with you."

Carl hesitated for a moment, then decided that if he was going to be accepted by the cowboys, he would have to socialize in the cowboy way. "When in Rome," he thought to himself.

Jeb asked, "You ever chewed t'baccy before?"

"No sir, this is the first time."

"Well, son, you in for a treat." Jeb reached into his pouch and pulled out a wad the size of a golf ball.

Carl accepted the tobacco, but wavered for moment as he wondered how much to put in his mouth.

"What's you waiting for sonny. Pop that chaw in your mouth and get down to business."

Carl opened his mouth and inserted the tobacco between his teeth and cheek, just like he had seen in the movies. Surprisingly, the taste wasn't half bad. In fact, it got the juices in his mouth flowing. After a few seconds, Carl looked at Jeb and asked, "Where do I spit. Do you have a spittoon or do I just spit on the ground?"

Jeb stared at him like he was crazy. "Spit?" he said. "What do you mean spit?" Then before Carl could answer, Jeb cackled, "Oh, I see. You been watching too many movies, Preach. It's only them sissy

Hollywood cowboys that spit. Real cowboys swallow.”

Carl eyes grew wide. “S . . . s . . . swallow?”

“Don’t be a fool, son,” scolded Jeb. “Spitting it out would be like lighting a cigarette and not inhaling the smoke. How you gonna get the full effect of the t’baccy without swallowing?”

Carl was pretty sure he was being made the fool, and was just about to spit, when Jeb said the magic words, “Look boy, do ya wanna be a cowboy or not?”

Carl swallowed.

Like every human, Carl had been sick before with the flu and other stomach ailments, but that day he discovered there is a whole different level of vomiting that few people ever encounter. Or at least that few live through to tell about. Thankfully, the full effect of the tobacco didn’t hit him until he was back at the cabin, so no one could hear his cursing and loud prayers to God to be merciful and kill him before all his insides came out.

At this point, most normal people would have packed up and gone home. But not Carl Vanderhoff. He had come to Wisdom, Montana to preach to cowboys in the pews. And he was going to accomplish that goal even if it killed him. The problem was that he didn’t have a clue as to how he would accomplish the goal. He knew he was a joke to the cowboys. They just wouldn’t respect him as a man.

Most people have heard the old saying, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” But not many know the rest of the saying, which goes, “Desperation is the father of foolishness.” It was this part of the saying that had full control of Carl while he was looking at the poster in the mercantile window about the upcoming rodeo. On the poster was the picture of a cowboy hanging on to a bucking bull with one hand and swinging his hat in the air with the other. Only sheer desperation could have allowed Carl to envision his face on the face of the cowboy. “If I can ride that bull,” he thought, “they’ll know I’m not a sissy East

coast boy. They'll listen."

The rodeo was to be out at the Fred Thompson ranch on Friday night, only two days away. Fred was the one man who had been in church on Carl's first Sunday. Even though Fred didn't make it to church as often as he should, especially in summer, he was a kind man who had a deep faith in God. Fred wasn't happy with the grilling the young preacher had received from many of the cowboys. He had spoken with a few of them about the matter.

Carl drove out to Fred's place to sign-up for the bull riding event. Fred thought the preacher was just kidding at first, but when he finally realized that Carl was serious, he shouted, "Have you lost your mind, son! You don't know the first thing about bull riding."

"What's there to know. You sit on the back of a bull and hold on for eight seconds."

Fred sighed deeply. "This isn't a pony you're holding onto. It's a 2000 pound piece of solid muscle. A bull can break any bone you have with one twist of its body. This is no game, Carl."

Carl replied, "I know its not a game. But I also know that I have to show people I'm not afraid. You see, if I do this to get some of the cowboys into church, then I have faith God will give me the strength I need. It says in the Bible that with God, all things are possible."

Fred shook his head in frustration. "I don't doubt that God could ride a bull. It's you I'm worried about."

Carl smiled patiently. "Think about this way, Fred. That little boy David went out and killed the giant warrior Goliath with a sling and one stone. He had faith. He knew God would give him the strength. Now do we believe that story was real or just a fairy tale? I believe it was real, and I believe God will give me the strength I need to do this. Have faith in God, Fred. It'll be alright."

Fred pondered the preacher's words for a few moments, and then responded, "You have the

makings of good sermon there, Carl. But I think you need to read that Bible story a bit more carefully. It says David went down to the creek and picked up five smooth stones. Now if he was sure he only needed one, what was the reason for the other four?"

Carl started to say something, but Fred cut him off, saying, "I'll tell you the reason. David wasn't a fool. He had faith. But he also had common sense. He knew that if he missed with the first shot, he at least had four more chances."

Carl was silent. He'd never thought of it that way before.

Fred placed his hand on Carl's shoulder in a fatherly way, and then said, "Son, I've walked this earth for many more years than you. And I've come to learn that there's a only fine line between faith and foolishness. If you get on the back of that bull, you will have crossed it."

"I appreciate the advice, Fred. But I've got to do this. Remember, as it turned out, David only needed one stone. Maybe God will be just as kind to me."

"Son, if you don't die or get crippled for life, then God will have been kind to you."

As usual, it didn't take long for the news to spread around town. Carl expected everyone to laugh at him or taunt him. But for the most part, they didn't. Unlike Rocky Mountain oysters or chewing tobacco, this was no laughing matter. Many a cowboy had been seriously hurt over the years trying to stay on the back of a bull. It was no place for an East coast greenhorn. Even Wily Clawson didn't think it was funny, and he told the preacher so.

"Don't do it, Preacher. Just don't do it! No one will think the worse of you if you back out."

"I don't think people can think worse of me. I'm already the butt of every joke," Carl said sadly. He got a determined look in his eyes, and then

continued, “Anyway, I think all of you are worried that I might just last that eight seconds. A greenhorn doing what most of you can’t do would certainly knock you down a notch or two.”

“You ain’t gonna do it. Believe me when I say that.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what then. How ‘bout we make a little bet? If I stay on that bull, you and all your cowboy buddies show up for church Sunday morning.”

“And if you don’t stay on?”

Carl thought for a moment. Finally he said, “If I don’t stay on, I promise I’ll never put on another pair of cowboy boots. I won’t pretend to be what I’m not.”

“That’s fine,” said Wily. “Though there’s no chance that I’ll be need’n to polish up my boots this Saturday night, unless’n it’s to go to a funeral.”

Bull riding was always the last event at the rodeo—the highlight of the evening. Needless to say, with the “Bull Ridin’ Preacher” in the lineup, everyone was doubly anxious to get to the main event. Quite a few people had come up from Dillon and Hamilton when they heard about the preacher. It was that same magnetic attraction that causes people to slow down and gaze at the scene of an accident. No one wanted the preacher to get hurt, but everyone was sure that he would get hurt, so they might as well be there to see it.

In the two days before the rodeo, Carl had learned everything he could about bull riding. He trusted God, but still heeded some of Fred Thompson’s advice and tried to pick up as many smooth stones as he could before he climbed on the back of Goliath.

Carl learned that bull riders aren’t required to spur and that the rider should try to remain forward, or “over his hand” at all times. Leaning back could

cause him to be whipped forward when the bull bucks. Being whipped forward by a 2000 pound animal could have had consequences. Carl also learned that his free hand could not touch the bull or he would be disqualified. To be honest, he wasn't too worried about that part. All he wanted to do was stay on the bull's back for eight seconds, any way he could manage. That would be enough to accomplish his goal.

Fred Thompson lent Carl some chaps and gloves. Fred told him to grip the bull with his legs as tight as he could. There was no way a single hand could hold on. Bull riding required all your muscles.

Carl always thought of himself as being pretty muscular. He was a good athlete in high school and college, having lettered in track and basketball. But as soon as he climbed into the chute and onto the back of the bull, Carl realized that all the muscles in his body didn't equal what that bull had in his neck alone. It felt like he was sitting on a rock. A living rock. An unfriendly rock. A rock that didn't want him sitting there.

As they tightened the bull rope on his hand, Carl felt the mass of muscle shaking between his knees. The bull was anxious to burst out of the chute. It was like a bomb, all wound up and ready to explode. Of course, a good part of the shaking wasn't the bull at all, but Carl's knees. Although Carl's brain hadn't fully fathomed the predicament he was in, his body knew what was going on and was reacting accordingly. This was a fight or flight situation, and his body voted unanimously for flight. Unfortunately, his mind overruled. Upon seeing the trembling body, one of the chute attendants said to the other, "If he faints, pull him out of there before the bull crushes him."

Usually the crowd at a rodeo is continually loud with appropriate applause or groans. Now, however, there was total silence. The second the preacher climbed onto the bull, the full attention of every

person in the arena was focused on that chute. It was so quiet that you could even hear the short, snorting breaths of the bull.

As Carl prepared for the chute door to open, he said a quick silent prayer. "O Lord, give me the strength of Samson and courage of David, and may you be glorified in this moment. Amen." Instantly, Carl's knees stopped shaking and an incredible surge of strength flowed through his arm down to the bull rope. His hand felt like a vise grip. He knew the Holy Spirit was with him. With full confidence in the power of God, Carl looked at the chute attendant and nodded. He was ready.

The chute door opened and the bull exploded into the arena. The bull's head went down to the left. His back end went up to the right. The force of the twist ripped Carl's hand from the rope and he flew nearly ten feet up in the air. He landed face first on the ground to the right of the bull. The bull was doing a spin, came around, and stepped fully onto Carl's left buttock. The crowd held its breath as the rodeo clown ran up to the face of the bull and drew it away from the prostrate body of the preacher. Two cowboys ran out and dragged him by the arms over to the side.

Ever so slowly Carl got up, brushed the sawdust and dried manure off his face, and started to walk away. With his first step, his left leg buckled and he collapsed to the ground. The cowboys carried him out on their shoulders. There was a smattering of applause. At least he wasn't dead.

The next day, Carl's left buttock turned all shades of black and blue. He could barely walk. Of course, he had no desire to walk. The last thing he wanted to do was be seen in public. He spent the day hiding out in his cabin.

On Sunday morning, Carl got to church forty minutes before worship time so he could already be

sitting in front when people came in. Not that he expected many people. He wasn't even sure that he wanted anyone in church that day. He was a failure and a joke. What right did he have to preach to other people? Who in the world would listen to a loser like him?

As worship time approached, the usual handful of women came in. He smiled weakly at them. They smiled back sympathetically. About five minutes before the service, Fred Thompson and his wife walked in. Carl's first thought was, "He's here to gloat." But then he thought better. He knew Fred wasn't that kind of person.

It was finally time for worship, and Carl was just starting his painful attempt to stand, when Wily Clawson walked through the door. He sat down in the back pew. Two of his ranch hands followed. Then two more cowboys came through the door. Three more. Four more after that. And last, and most unbelievably, came Jeb Garrett. And he didn't even have a chaw in his mouth.

Carl was in shock. He had lost the bet, he had failed, and yet, there were cowboys sitting in the pews. How could that be? And then Carl remembered his prayer on the back of the bull. "May you be glorified in this moment." Apparently the prayer was fulfilled, although the method sure hurt like the dickens. With new found confidence, Carl stood up, wincing as he did so, and began the worship service. And in that service, he preached the gospel with enthusiasm and certainty. He told those cowboys that faith may not keep you from being thrown from the wild horse we call life, but it will certainly give you the hope and purpose to saddle up again and face the next day. They understood every word, and he even got a few "amens."

Following the worship service, Carl went up to Wily Clawson and asked, "Why did you come to church? I lost the bet."

“Well, Preach, in the first place, that wasn’t a bet. A bet has to have at least a slight chance of going either way. There was no chance of you staying on that bull. But as I thought about it, it seemed to me that you must really care about this church stuff to go so far out on limb. So I decided to come and hear what you had to say. And I convinced some of my friends that they should give you a listen too.”

“Thank you,” said Carl. “Thank you for coming.”

Wily smiled. “You had some good things to say. I won’t be here every week, but I’ll be back. And I imagine some of these other fellows will be back too.”

For the rest of the summer, Carl never had that many cowboys in church again. But he had at least a few every Sunday. And equally important, he had many heartfelt conversations with them in the café, in front of the mercantile, and sometimes even around the campfire. A good number of them came to know the Lord that summer.

As a going away present, Fred Thompson gave the preacher a framed Bible passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. It read, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”

In that summer of 1937, Carl Vanderhoff came to Wisdom, Montana full of hope. He suffered and endured much, but he wasn’t disappointed. He learned that life’s road to wisdom is sometimes dusty and bumpy, but if we travel it with faith, through the grace of God, we will arrive. And that’s no bull.