

# Hell's Half-Acre

by Nicholas Nicastro

*April, 1873*

The grim-faced men gathered on a spring morning with picks and shovels. They collected in a spot midway between the Bender cabin and the claim's makeshift stable, making small talk as they smoked and picked at the ground and waited for Leroy Dick, the town trustee, to arrive from Harmony Grove.

In any other gathering of the township's citizens there would be a degree of high spirits, that good-natured joking around they indulged no matter what the occasion, be it a wedding or funeral, just because they were men, and liked to believe they were impervious to mere circumstances. There was little mirth this time—except for the Irishman, John Moneyhon, who grinned when the name of pretty Kate Bender came up, and made an obscene gesture with his cigarette that drew knowing smiles from the others. But the smiles were thin, and brief.

A steady spring rain the night before had softened the roads, delaying the trustee's arrival until after nine. When he came, Dick was driving the little runabout he took on supply runs to Cherryvale or Parsons. Beside him sat Billy Toles, a neighboring rancher who, the previous afternoon, had first noticed the strange condition of the Bender place, and run to straight to the magistrate.

“You shouldn’t be up there without someone official,” Dick had told him. “They’d be within their rights to shoot you dead.”

“There ain’t nobody up there for days, I tell you,” replied Toles, who observed a pitiful howling from the vicinity of the Benders’ corral while rounding up a cow from the perimeter of the property. Dick listened to his story, and kept his suspicions to himself, as he kept most of his thoughts, even from his wife Mary Ann. “I found the calf tied up. He was a long way dead, maybe four or five days,” Toles said. “And the heifer was not ten feet away, penned up, where she couldn’t get to the calf. Udders unsucked so long they split like old melons. The stink of it, I tell you. And the flies, and the look of the poor beast, still screaming after she watched her baby starve before her eyes. Who does an animal that way? What kind of monster?” And Toles wagged his head slowly and profoundly in disbelief. “Right before her eyes,” he repeated.

“I don’t know,” Dick said after a long silence. “I’ll get word to everyone around. We’ll meet tomorrow morning around nine—and do this thing legal and proper.”

The inquiry commenced as Dick stepped down from his runabout and announced “Here we are, then.” With a heavy sigh of a man about to embark on matters of unfathomed complexity, he led the good citizens of northwestern Labette County to the front door of the Bender cabin.

The first thing they noticed was that the sign formerly posted over the door—GROCERY—was gone. The condition of the nail-holes suggested that it had been roughly separated from the wood, as if wrested away in a hurry.

The door was not locked. It swung open silently on leather hinges, its swing checked by an apple box filled with twists of grass and old corn cobs. The interior of the cabin, furnished

with a table, a few chairs, bedstead, and some meager scraps of merchandise, seemed forlorn but orderly. The fine layer of dust on the floor and the furniture was innocent of finger- or footprints. Yet the pendulum of the eight-day clock was still in motion, suggesting someone must have been there within the week to wind it.

Though their cabin was soundly built, the Benders had never bothered to construct a proper ceiling for it, or to cover the plank walls with anything. This was not unusual—most settlers in the vicinity had other priorities than caulking and papering, and indeed prided themselves on their sturdy plainness. Instead of any formal partition, the space was divided only by a square of duck canvas, grade heavy #3, that had been taken from the roof of a wagon and stretched along a line of joists that bisected the room more or less in the center. Morning light from the cabin's back window shone through the material; at the very center of it, partly obscuring the light, was a greasy splotch, as if something had exploded upon the canvas. The magistrate looked at the stain carefully, but could see neither color nor consistency in it.

Nothing was necessarily unusual, except for the feel of the place, which had always struck visitors as exceedingly odd, as if the doing of perverse things had somehow impressed themselves on the general atmosphere. It made grown men nervous under normal circumstances. Their disquiet was relieved only with the appearance of the daughter, coming forth with an open fearlessness that aroused and confounded them. Kate, with the eyes that laughed or ridiculed. Kate who swore like a man, whose hair blazed like whiskey held up to the sun. If most the men said they were not hoping they would come upon a disrobed Kate on their uninvited tour, they'd have been lying.

The contents of the place were more or less in place, except for one detail: there were

virtually no personal items. No clothing on the drying rope, no linens on the bed. No dirty dishes in the washtub. Not so much as a dirty sock on the floor. Sifting the ashes in the stove, John Moneyhon reported them cold through and through. He found the singed remnant of a shoe among them, with three eyelets. The men wanted to read something dark into this, but Leroy Dick set no stock in it—his own mother burned old shoes in the hearth, for the usual purpose of driving snakes out of the house.

The planks on the wall were unclad—but not undecorated. On the wall behind the clock, there were odd things carved in the wood. Nudging the clock aside, Dick uncovered carvings of roughly human shape. The homunculus was more or less true to life, except that certain body parts, like the head and the male genitalia, were exaggerated in size. Through the arms, head, torso and penis there were carved rough X's. No one knew what they meant.

Checking under the stove, Moneyhon found three hammers of varying size. These were not clumsy mallets but the kind of iron tools used by cobblers or farriers. These were hardly suspicious in themselves, but only puzzling in the method of their disposal. What man kept his tools under a stove? And if they were supposed to be hidden, why not find a better place to conceal them?

Billy Toles fetched a book from under the table. It was Old Man Bender's German Bible—the one he was often seen poring over, and continued to read even when spoken to. "Wasn't this always at the end of his arm?" asked Billy, holding the book up by its corner, like some putrid fish.

"They've absquatulated," declared George Mortimer. He was a farmer who had responded to Dick's summons to investigate strange goings-on at the Bender place by bringing

his plow. What he expected to plow up with it, everyone knew but no one would say.

Then someone noticed something under a leg of the table. “Look! There’s something there!”

All eyes fell on the outline of an opening in the floor—a trap-door flush against the planks except for a short length of boot-leather nailed there as a handle. In a flash the table was lifted away, the door swung open. But light from the windows seemed loathe to penetrate the space beneath.

“Fetch a lantern,” Dick ordered.

Toles was on his way down, using some rude bits of rock stuck in the surface of the passage as handholds. The floor of the cellar was only six feet below, and covered with a large square of undressed stone the Benders had brought in from somewhere. Though Billy credited his own bravery for being first in, a sense of futility struck him as he stood there in the gloom, unable to report anything about his surroundings.

“I can’t see a thing. But it smells,” he said.

“Smells how?”

“Queer.”

They passed a lantern down to him. Now he could see that the dug-out was about eight feet square, with the sandstone monolith on the floor running to within six inches of the walls. From one side, the north, a crawl-space had been excavated, with daylight showing through the cracks of the double doors at the far end. Kneeling, Toles brought the light down to the surface of the stone. Dark stains meandered over its pitted surface.

“What is that smell?” he wondered aloud.

“It’s old blood,” said Leroy Dick, who had lain on his belly to test the air in the passage.

“How do you know?”

The trustee didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled back to let John Moneyhon drop into the pit. “There must be some poor soul buried under this rock,” the Irishman declared. With the heavy work hammer he’d found under the stove, he commenced to pound on the sandstone, trying to break off a piece. With three swings he dislodged a chunk. But when he lifted it away, the soil underneath seemed dry, undisturbed.

“It’s not coming from underneath,” said Billy. “It’s *here*.”

He was sniffing around the loose dirt beyond the edge of the stone, near the wall. Something wet the soil there, giving it a faintly shiny appearance, as if it had been sugared.

“Here, use this,” said someone out of the glare above, holding out an iron rod for him to take. It was the kind of probe used to test the depth of topsoil in fields about to be plowed for the first time. Grasping it, heart pounding now, Billy stuck the end in the discolored ground. The rod sank down with virtually with no resistance, as if penetrating the cream on a pie. There was a faint squish as the tip disappeared, and a slight pull from below, as if a vacuum had formed from its entry. And then the smell hit him.

“Oh my lord!” he cried. A redoubled stench, the stinging odor of concentrated decay, hit him full in the face, making his eyes suddenly pour tears. “Oh my goodness.”

“What is it?” Dick cried. He moved to stick his head back into the hole, but was shoved back as Billy Toles scrambled out. The boy was frantic, crazed with fright from the rot and

darkness and confinement. He didn't stop until he was outside. Pacing, he took great gulps of fresh air, alternately slinging his arms around himself and pumping them, as if his body were a bellows.

Moneyhon scoffed from the cellar. He took up the probe, saying "Leave it to me, boys. This mess don't bother me!"

"Well, if you're sure..." said Dick.

Moneyhon had the rod in the mire again, shoving it down until it stopped, then stirring it around as if he were churning some pot of pure corruption. The layer of adulterated dirt went deep, almost half a yard. But despite his vigorous efforts, he found no victims buried there. And indeed, nothing solid at all. Instead, Moneyhon found the limits of even an Irishman's strong stomach. His gut rolling and heaving, he abandoned the iron and the Bender hammer behind him. Presently he was outside with Billy Toles, gasping.

The men were beginning to feel thwarted now. Clearly, there was a pall of death around the place—a pervasive odor of rank decay—that they all felt. In retrospect, they had always felt it, every time they were here to trade something, or buy something, or flirt with the girl. They always felt it, but said nothing. But now that they were ready, even eager to uncover the truth, there were no bodies. Where were the bodies?

They gathered back at the magistrate's runabout to confer on what to do next. To be sure, they had already learned much in their investigation, but the trustee felt a sense he was being rushed by circumstances, tested against a wave of expectations that was already crashing upon him. What would that pushy Senator from Independence who had lost his brother—Colonel York—do when he learned the Benders had lit out? How soon before the same howls for

vengeance went up, the headlong rush to visit retribution on the Benders and anyone in the way, that had so thoroughly bloodied Kansas earth before the war? How many hours before the same furies of self-righteousness stalked their land again?

Looking up, Leroy Dick could already see dozens of people—a veritable crowd on those parts—converge on the Bender claim. They came from all directions, on horseback, by wheeled conveyance, on foot. All the neighbors, except for Brockman and Ern, who lived less than two miles away. He made a little mental note of that, the incuriousness of that pair, as his eyes continued to sweep the horizon, until they settled on the little orchard behind the cabin—the orchard where the Benders were often seen at work, patiently, meticulously grading and re-grading. And then he saw it.

From the modest height of his carriage, there was a rectangle of discolored soil among the apple trees. With the runoff from the night's rain, the edges of the patch had been deepened, leaving the outline of a shallow mound about six feet long and two feet wide.

“Men, get your shovels,” Dick said, a hollow thrum of regret in his voice. “I think I see a grave.”