

Crazy Eye

A Novel of the Red River Wars

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EPISODE ONE – “There’s somethin’ peculiar about that boy.”

Timothy “Crazy Eye” Jackson

Fort Wayne, Michigan

1862-1872

I was born on Christmas Eve, 1862, although I don’t recall the event directly. My relatives liked to talk about how Lieutenant Jackson was off galavanting about the country while Mrs. Jackson was left to have me all by herself, which is a lie. My grandmother, who was also Mrs. Jackson, lived just a few miles away in Detroit and was there to assist. I barely knew the woman before she died but I can imagine she took charge and made sure I came out properly and didn’t kill Mrs. Jackson in the process.

At the time, Detroit was an up-and-coming town, and surely my family could afford a doctor. But Lieutenant Jackson is a bit of a skinflint, seeing how his monthly U.S. Army salary was barely enough to keep Mrs. Jackson (the younger) and my sister fed, let alone a new baby boy. My grandmother, Mrs. Jackson (the older) pulled my shriveled little body from between my mother’s legs, cleaned me up, and handed me over. As my sister, Jenny told it, my grandmother said, “There’s somethin’ peculiar about that boy.”

When the wives of the other officers came to visit, it’s easy to imagine how they each anticipated the joy of holding a newborn. But once they got a look at my face, they fought hard not to seem shocked so they “oohed” and “aahed” and said “what a lovely child” and all that nonsense. Once out of my mother’s earshot, they’d whisper, “He doesn’t look right.”

It wasn’t that my mouth was deformed like the harelip I saw years later. In fact, unless you looked straight at me, I looked mostly normal. The average person who saw me on the street wouldn’t cringe in horror, for one of my eyes was only slightly out of alignment. I myself didn’t know this until halfway through my third year, when Jenny, who was always a spiteful individual, taunted me with “Crazy eye! Timmy Jackson has a crazy eye!”

Like most boys who lived in a military fort, I pretty much had the run of the place once I was out of my nappies and able to walk around without being kicked by a mule. It wasn’t long before I became used to the other children calling me Crazy Eye. Rather than get angry about the teasing, I decided to revel in the knowledge that my eyes were unique. I told Mitch Reynolds and Frankie Thompson, my two best buddies, that the eye gave me special powers to look right through people and know if they were telling the truth or not. Mitch blushed and asked if I could see through clothes and look at women’s undergarments, and I said no, see-through vision wasn’t part of the deal. But maybe there was a hint of truth about me being able to know when someone was lying.

Lieutenant Jackson, who I eventually came to understand was married to Mrs. Jackson and was my father, was currently in charge of rounding up the Indians and putting them on reservation land. The job must’ve been hard on the Lieutenant, for he was a fussy, unhappy sort of person. Thankfully, my mother canceled him out with her sunny disposition. The other officer’s wives loved to sit and visit with my mother

in our small set of three rooms located in the officer's quarters, next door to the commander, Colonel Parker. The women, including Mrs. Parker, the colonel's wife, and Captain Madd's wife (Her first name was Gladys which for some reason made me giggle) would spend hours chatting while they tatted or knitted and drank tea. I'd sit quietly in the corner and play with wooden soldiers and listen to them say, "Why Mrs. Jackson, you are so fortunate to have such a loving husband and fine children."

What the women actually wanted to say was, "Mrs. Jackson, you are fortunate that Lieutenant Jackson isn't a drunk and scoundrel like my husband," for it was common to see troopers stagger from the back of the stable where a shot of rotgut could be purchased for two pennies. My father might have not been the most loving individual, and he was a skinflint as I've previously stated, but he was *not* a drunkard.

Something I need to mention - for it is somewhat integral to this story - is that from the time I was an infant I've had a fascination with music. Fortunately, there are many opportunities to listen to music in an army fort. The officers are always attending balls, where a trio of enlisted men performed on piano, banjo, and fiddle. In the barracks, a place I'm not normally supposed to visit, you can hear mouth harp and guitar. But my favorite sound in the world is that of the lone bugle. I swear I can remember the sound of the bugler playing Taps during my first months as a baby. In the mornings I'd awake to the sound of reveille, which never failed to put me in a happy mood. By the age of two, I could sing every one of the standard military bugle calls. At age three, unless it was raining or blizzarding outdoors, I'd stand by the company bugler, Corporal Wright, stiff in salute through the entirety of the song. The enlisted men thought that this was a hoot, and they even went so far as to have a special uniform made for me. I didn't care that some of the men made fun of my crazy eye or my love of the bugle, for at that point in my life I only had one dream and that was to become a bugler myself.

"Your pa did not fight at Gettysburg!"

"He did too!"

"You're a liar, Crazy Eye Jackson!"

I pulled back my arm and intended to slug Micky in the nose, but even though I was ten years old, I was small. I ended up punching him in the chest, which for some reason caused him to immediately fall to the ground. He whimpered and wheezed for what seemed like an eternity before he finally found the will to crawl to his knees. "You little pipsqueak... knocked the wind out of me."

Who knew you could disable someone so easily by striking them in the chest? I suppose most boys get punched in the gut a few times before they learn how to defend themselves, but Micky went down much easier than I expected.

My hackles (whatever *they* are) were still up and I wasn't done with setting the record straight with the fellow who was known to all as the "Terror of Fort Wayne" and the only child of Colonel Parker. "Take back what you said about the Lieutenant!"

"Your pa's a coward," Mickey repeated as he found his feet. "And I'm gonna prove that you're a chicken too."

My two buddies, Mitch and Frankie stood back and watched as Mickey proceeded to beat me to a pulp. Oh, I tried to put up a solid defense, but my adversary was at least three years older and outweighed me by 50 pounds. The last thing I remembered before I woke up at home in my bed was someone saying, "Quick, run and get the doctor!"

Mickey must've banged my head harder than he'd planned. I don't believe that he thought he'd hurt me bad enough to knock me out, but that's what happened. I spent a couple of days in bed, with Mrs. Jackson worrying over me so much I got plum tired of looking at her, especially since every time I opened my eyes she spun around the room and made me sick to my stomach.

When I finally began to return to normal, she came into the small curtained-off space we call my bedroom and sat down on a stool next to my bed. "Are you going to tell me what happened, Timothy?"

Before answering, my mind wandered to the fact that only my ma and pa called me by my given name. To everyone else I was you-know-who. I wasn't bothered by my nickname, and I'm glad to admit that I felt some sort of affection for my folks for not making fun of me like everyone else. That's what parents do. They ignore your peculiarities as much as possible unless it's something vile like picking your nose or passing gas.

"Tim, I asked you to tell me who hurt you."

Should I rat out Mickey? Everyone knew he was a bully. He deserved a good whipping by his dad the Colonel. But I also felt a bit sorry for him, since he didn't have a ma and the Colonel was such a turd. I'd heard the enlisted men talk about how the Colonel had only ever been a pencil pusher and had never done any real soldiering, which is probably what got me in hot water with Mickey. The Lieutenant – my pa – *did* fight in the war and led a company of infantry against Longstreet's grey coats in the rocky hills of Pennsylvania. I didn't hear this from the Lieutenant, for he'd never talk of such things. No, one of the enlisted men, a corporal who had also fought and survived the great battle told the story to some of his companions while I was outside the barracks eavesdropping. I was hoping to hear some music that day, but instead, I heard the corporal say, "Jackson doesn't come off as the sort who'd head straight into battle, but let me tell you, on that day he showed everyone what he was made of. The Lieutenant pointed his saber at the enemy and directed those of us that wasn't all shot up to go up the hill where the rebs was hidin'. Lead was flyin' all around us and I saw men on my left and right go down. But the Lieutenant kept on pointin' that sword and we all felt that there was no way we *couldn't* go with that man. Know what I mean? He was willin' to do what had to be done and dang it all, we went with him and took that hill."

All of this came to me while my ma waited for an answer. I slowly shook my head and told her, "I don't remember what happened."

With a sigh, she stood. "You'll report to the Lieutenant when he returns. Until then, you're confined to quarters." (Actually, she said, "You'll take this up with your father when he gets back from rustling up Indians... and you will stay in your room." I like to talk in military lingo as much as possible).

Mitch and Frankie were allowed to visit the next day, and since the Lieutenant wasn't due to come home for another few days, my mother relented and allowed me to leave our quarters as long as I promised to stay out of trouble. Oh, I made the promise, but in an army fort full of questionable individuals, who's to say how long I'd manage to keep my nose clean?

It wasn't easy avoiding Mickey Parker. He spotted me at the water pump. I was bringing water back to our quarters for my ma, which was one of my daily chores. Mickey sort of sidled up to me and whispered in what you'd call a conspiratable way, "You didn't rat me out, did you?"

I continued pumping. "No Mickey, I'll find a way to get even with you. It might take me a while, but I'll get you back for what you did."

He made to punch me in the shoulder, but I guess he thought the better of it and skedaddled. He was a bully, but I suspected that he was exactly what he'd called the Lieutenant - a coward.

The Lieutenant returned to the fort late that summer. I was out in the main yard doing nothing much in particular when he rode in with his Sergeant and eight enlisted men. Walking slowly behind, hands in manacles and legs in irons, were a motley bunch of Indians. My Pa's main job was rounding up renegades who refused to stay in the lands that were set aside for them. Some hid out deep in the northern forests, while others fled to Canada. Once I asked why the Indians couldn't live among white folks and the Lieutenant said, "Some do, Tim. But others... they don't want to change how they've been doing things, so they run off and try to live like they used to."

"What's wrong with that?"

My pa scratched his chin. "I guess it bothers the white folks, having uncivilized people roaming around in the woods."

Seeing this new group of escapees, I ran up to where my father was tying up his mount. I stopped, popped off a crisp salute, and said, "Private Jackson reporting for duty, Sir!"

Always one to appreciate regulations, the Lieutenant saluted back. "At ease, trooper."

Pointing at the Indians, I asked, "Where'd you find this crew, Sir?"

"Quit pointing, Tim." After removing his gloves and tucking them in his belt, he said, "They had a camp set up near a new settlement in the north, about a four-day ride from here."

I looked at the Indians and saw that some wore deerskin leggings and moccasins. They all sported a hodge-podge mix of brightly colored shirts and wore their hair long. They were a handsome group, except that even though I was standing a good distance away, they smelled like they hadn't bathed in months.

"Are they Chippewa?"

"Mostly. Some Potawatomie too."

"Were they causing trouble?"

The Lieutenant looked off into the distance and seemed to be lost in thought. Finally, he replied, "Nothing serious. But our job is to round 'em up, so that's what we did."

He made as if to walk to the Colonel's office, but he remembered something and returned to his mount. "I brought you something, Tim."

I almost fainted from the surprise as he reached into his saddlebag and removed a bugle. Oh, it was fairly beat up with dents and scratches, but to me, it was the most beautiful thing in the world.

"Oh, Pa... I mean Lieutenant..."

He smiled and handed me the instrument. "I found it in the Indian camp and immediately thought of you. Now don't go driving everyone crazy with this, all right? Find somewhere outside of hearing range to practice."

I nodded as my fingers stroked the brass instrument. A bugle! I couldn't believe my luck. I turned to run off and find somewhere to try out *Reveille* and *Taps*, but then suddenly stopped, turned, and saluted at my father. "Thank you so much for this handsome instrument, Sir!"

I played the bugle until my lips could take the pain no longer. But it was a good sort of pain, for I had earned it. By the end of a week, my mouth muscles had strengthened and I could play for hours, much to the consternation of anyone within hearing range. I was humored by some of the enlisted men, as they'd chide, "There goes our new company bugler!" or "Good morning, Corporal!"

I wore the bugle around my chest with a string and joined Corporal Wright at *Reveille* and *Taps*, just like I'd always done. Oh, I didn't play – that would intrude on the responsibility of the Corporal. But one day, maybe he'd be ill or get kicked by a mule and I'd be more than ready to step in and take his place.

And Mickey Parker? I never did get even with him, for his father, the Colonel, sent him away to boarding school. Mickey would come back to the fort for holidays but he seemed not to care about bothering me anymore. I decided this was for the best.