

REPUTATION

by

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Reputation is a funny thing. I wouldn't hold my present job if it weren't for my great-great grandfather's undeserved reputation as a pillar of justice. And of course great-great grandpa would be entirely forgotten around Newbury and Eastbeck County if it hadn't been for the honorable Arch Barstowe.

Arch used to be a big name in Eastbeck, and the day I was drawn to his attention, he was worrying about where he could find someone to put up for the sheriff's election who was dumb enough to manage and presently unindicted.

He happened to be paying a courtesy call on his Aunt Verbena, a woman who didn't always know which century she was in. She was gabbling away and he was paying her no more mind than he would a handful of loose screws rattling around in a coffee tin when she said something that caught his attention. Something about how my great-great grandfather Neville had been a byword in the community for integrity.

Arch looked incredulous and said, "You mean Willie Mackinaw's great-great? *Willie?*"

That's me. Honest Willie or Steel-straight Willie as people call me now.

My great-great grandfather Neville founded the Mackinaw Distillery in Newberry back in 1842. For a long time it was the biggest employer in town, and directly or indirectly, that was where everyone got their liquor. They used to run big barrels of whiskey into the Whistling Pig; a couple of them are still on the premises, though now it's the Elegaté, with the distillery's name branded on the side.

Shortly after Arch's visit to his aunt, his friends started talking about building a tourist attraction in Newberry around the ruins of the distillery. Old Neville had been pretty well forgotten, but people dug up passing references to him in *The Newbury Ledger* that indicated he had been a byword for honesty. Then someone found his grave; it was overgrown, but the inscription on it showed the respect in which he had been held. And Arch began to casually connect his name to mine.

By that time, I had had some interesting talks with Arch and had decided to run for sheriff.

That's how I learned about mentoring. This is a process where someone runs a stick up your back and when they twitch it, you jump.

Arch was really good at it.

I've been Sheriff of Eastbeck County eighteen years since then. People look up to me, and I like it.

But the first time I was running for office, I started wondering about old great-great grandpa Neville. Other than what I've just told you, I didn't know anything about him. Nobody did—and my campaign was waving his name around like an American flag. Arch laughed and said nobody but me was worried about that. Then he got a sly smile on his face and said maybe it was just as well for me that no one *was* curious about old Neville.

From time to time after I got to be sheriff, he got his twisted little smile and mentioned Neville casually. Then I sure felt that stick twitching. Hell, so long as no one complained, I didn't care what went on in his backroom business deals.

But it did make me curious.

It wasn't all that easy to learn about my great-great grandpa. *The Newbury Ledger* didn't have any records from before the big fire in 1927. There were some scraps of information in county records, but that was just legal affairs; and between termites and drunk clerks, a fair amount had vanished over the last century and a half. The Newbury Library used to have a cou-

ple of books written by locals on the history of Eastbeck County, but after Arch checked them out, they went lost.

One funny thing did turn up in county records. Neville was listed as having died in 1880, but his funeral wasn't till two years later.

We Mackinaws have never been much for keeping diaries or old letters, but I did find a few with some passing references to Neville. Seems he had a partner in the distillery, a fellow named Jedidiah Thompson, and the two of them fought like cats and dogs. Then there was a letter dated 1880 that referred to Neville's "disappearance." Not his death, his disappearance.

I got to thinking of the fact that Neville's funeral was in 1882. After that, I went back to the county records and discovered that his partner, Thompson, had sold his interest in the distillery in 1881 and didn't turn up in the records anymore. As though he might have left the county.

It wasn't till I "inherited" two old history books—really more like pamphlets—that I understood everything. (It was a shame about Arch, but he shouldn't have got in the habit of driving home drunk late at night from the *Eleganté*; and the way I figured it, he didn't have any more use for those books.)

Remember the barrels that Mackinaw Distillery sent over to the Whistling Pig? Two years after Neville disappeared, they emptied one of the barrels, opened it up—and there was Neville with his head bashed in. Some of the customers claimed afterward that the whiskey from that barrel had been particularly tasty.

Now Neville's reappearance was so dramatic that people wanted something special on his headstone. You might have heard of how, after Admiral Nelson was killed in the battle of Trafalgar, the British navy sent his body home in a cask of brandy. Well that whiskey worked just as well for Neville; people kept remarking how "lifelike" he was. And this is where the truth about great-great grandpa got mislaid. The problem was that by the 1920s and 1930s, most people no longer knew why that inscription had been picked. After all, what would you think if you read the following?

Neville Mackinaw
1813 – 1880
Old Incorruptible

THE END