

# Along Winding Trails

**Eunice Boeve**

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# Dedication



In memory of my dad, Harry R. Goyen.



# 1



Joshua Ryder turned up the collar of his brown canvas coat and tugged his gray Stetson down firmer on his head of long, dark, curly hair. A sharp wind rose out of the north, ruffling the horses' manes and setting a-flutter the leaves of a nearby grove of aspens. A cold snap had swept into this Montana high country overnight, leaving a light glitter of frost, but the sun, coming up over the edge of the distant snow-capped mountains, promised a warm summer day, and by midmorning Josh will have shed his coat and likely his vest as well.

On the high flat-topped ridge that overlooked the Webber ranch, Josh brought Shadow to a stop and leaned forward in the saddle, giving slack to the reins so the buckskin gelding could graze on the sparse growth along with Top, the bay pack horse.

He felt a deep sense of satisfaction and some pride as he surveyed the buildings below. The cabin, flanked by two tall cottonwoods, had served through the winter as both ranch house and bunkhouse. He and the other hands had moved into the bunkhouse several weeks ago, and another week's work would finish the hay barn.

Although he'd been ready to go since early spring, he had stayed on rather than leave the Webbers short-handed. Since he'd hired on for the drive up from Texas with Ben and Joe's Bar-W herd last spring, he'd known he would not go back to Texas, but that was all he'd known. Some time this past winter he'd decided he'd settle somewhere within sight of the Pacific Ocean. Now, well into summer, the work eased until haying and two new men added to the ranch payroll, he finally felt free to move on toward the life he'd set for himself.

Odd, he thought, how a man could be so anxious to go and still want to stay. How he could want to leave what he'd helped to build and still think of the work yet to do. He'd like to be here for the fall roundup and the branding, but his greater need was to be free of any attachments or obligations, or any chance of finding another Belle.

He sighed and turned his gaze from the ranch buildings to the wide valley floor flanked by long sloping, grass-covered hills that rose to meet the dark pines high along the ridgeline. The longhorns they'd brought up from Texas last fall dotted the valley and hillsides, fattening up on the summer grasses. He grinned to himself at the thought of the lean, rangy animal ever getting fat. The longhorn was a tough breed, having run wild for some generations before men, seeing their value, began popping them out of the Texas brush. Wild-eyed and quick to go on the prod, they were still far from tame when they were started up the trail to the railheads in Kansas where, loaded on railroad cars, they were shipped to the

markets in the east. The longhorn had also stocked many a new ranch, like this one of the Webbers. They had arrived with the Webbers' herd in late September, just ahead of a winter as unlike a winter in Texas as steak was to sowbelly, and not only had most of the herd survived, but many now had calves at their side.

Ben and Joe Webber were ambitious and hard working, the kind that men were proud to ride for, and they were counting on these Texas longhorns to build the ranch into one of the biggest, if not the biggest ranch in Montana.

When he told them he was leaving, Joe, the silent brother, had simply nodded, but Ben had said, "I reckon you're aiming to head back to Texas."

They were all from Texas, including the Webber brothers, but only he and Richards and Boone had actually been born and raised there. Richards and Boone had headed back in early October, Richards declaring it wouldn't be more'n a month before they'd be butt-deep in snow with a cold wind whistling up their shirttails. He'd been right about that.

None of the men had talked about leaving then, nor did the talk turn that way when spring finally arrived. But during the winter, they'd all remembered Texas as being as close to God's country as a man could get.

Last winter out breaking up ice in the creek for the stock to drink, Stub Willet had joked about writing his name in the snow. He said he reckoned that if he was to haul out his writing instrument and let loose, he'd end up with a yellow icicle hanging off the end of it.

Tom Licken allowed as how his name-writing-thing-of-a-bob was so shriveled up with the cold, he doubted if he'd be able to find the dang thing come spring. He also bet that even Hell would freeze over if it ever came to Montana.

Josh had grinned hearing them grumble and gripe. He wasn't too crazy about the snow and cold either, but what struck him each time was how he'd miss the easy give and take, the bantering common among these men and the hands he'd worked alongside when he'd ridden for Mrs. Rawlins' Lazy R. It was times like those that he doubted his notion of a self-imposed exile.

"I'll head on west for a ways," he'd told Ben. "See that new park they call the Yellowstone."

Ben had snorted. "Sure puzzlin' to me why the government'd make a park out of some chunk of land just 'cause it's got waterfalls and steaming hot pools. Who the hell's gonna go there just to see waterfalls and steaming hot pools?"

"Me for one," Josh had told him, grinning.

A horse's shrill whinny rose up from the ranch below and his horses lifted their heads and whickered, ears pricked forward. Josh could see one of the hands in the corral working with a black horse. He was too far away to be sure, but he thought the man looked like Jeb Callahan.

Jeb had called him "Teach," and got the men to teasing him about always having his nose in a book. They were uneducated men when it came to books, but experts in handling horses and cattle and in reading tracks. He had taken a liking to poetry and once

mentioned that he had memorized a poem. He never mentioned poetry again. If he'd said he was planning to rope the moon, they'd have understood that a whole lot better.

He grinned to himself and straightened in the saddle. Gathering the reins, he urged Shadow up into the timbered hills. Top, on his lead rope, followed close behind.

It took him nearly two weeks to reach the Yellowstone. Seeing no one on the way and seeing no one the week he spent in the park, he thought of Ben Webber's words, "Who in the hell's gonna go just to see waterfalls and steaming pools?" and had to smile, for it appeared he was the only one.

The waterfalls were spectacular, one in particular falling from incredible heights down canyon walls to the river below. He found the deep hot pools and the geysers interesting, but he was anxious to travel on to the Pacific where he planned to settle within sight of the ocean.

Until he was eight-years-old he'd lived with his mother in the Texas seacoast town of Indianola and most of that time he'd spent playing alone on the shoreline, going in and out of the waters of Matagorda Bay. His mother had not allowed him to play with other children, neither the white children like both his fathers had been: (the one she made up and the bastard who'd really sired him), nor the Mexican children of her race. She had protected him so well that when the Dunkirk boys had called her a dirty Mexican whore, he'd had no idea what they meant.

Before breaking camp on the day he headed north out of the Yellowstone, Josh started a new notebook and as always, before writing anything inside, he wrote the date on the cover. He liked keeping track of the days, so he knew it was August 19th in this year of 1877. He'd carried a small notebook in his vest pocket ever since Mrs. Rawlins had given him his first one. One of two women ranch owners he knew of who had taken a herd north to market, she had taught him the basics of reading and writing on that trail drive to Kansas. Ever since, he'd used a notebook diligently, writing new words, copied excerpts from books and newspapers, or wrote his observations of life around him. He often smiled at the thought of Mrs. Rawlins looking over his shoulder in approval.

"I've written your assignment in this to study as time allows," she'd told him, and he'd studied the words every chance he got. Riding night-herd he'd "sung" and "talked" the words and made up sentences to the bedded longhorns, for as they'd all learned, their voices tended to calm the skittish, half wild critters. During the day, riding drag, the dust so thick it could be cut with a knife, he'd mentally worked on the words. His lessons keeping his mind thus occupied, had the extra benefit of relieving the monotony of the trail drive.

In his saddlebags were a dozen of the small notebooks and now that he'd taken this one out, only one unused one was left. He'd pick up a half dozen when he stopped in Virginia City for more supplies.

He'd be forever grateful to Mrs. Rawlins for teaching him to read and write and in the two years since, he'd furthered his education by reading everything he could get his hands on and by practicing his writing and spelling. He was probably the only man who'd learned to read and write on a trail drive, not to mention the only one whose boss had been his teacher; the shady side of her wagon, their school room.

It was rare for a woman to accompany a herd. Although some married women had gone up the trail with their husbands, the only other widowed woman ranch owner he'd heard of was a Margaret Borland whose ranch was also out of Victoria, Texas. Like Mrs. Borland, Martha Rawlins had taken her children along on the drive. Her son Lee was his age and they'd hit it off right from the start, and he'd adored Kit, a sweet, loving child. He'd found in Mrs. Rawlins a kind of substitute mother. And he'd fallen hard for beautiful, sixteen-year-old Belle whose death on that drive had forever altered his life.

It was hot and sultry the afternoon he came to a lake. He made camp early and turned the horses loose to graze. He never hobbled them, for Shadow would not stray far from him, and Top would stay with Shadow.

He caught two large trout in the lake and threaded their gills through a stick stuck in the bank to hold them in the cool water, and went for a swim. Afterwards, changed into clean clothes, the others washed and hung over some bushes to dry, he trimmed his beard and mustache. He read away

the afternoon stretched out on the ground under an aspen, his saddle for a pillow.

Mrs. Rawlins had given him a book of poems, titled *Music and Moonlight*, as a parting gift when he'd stopped at the ranch to say goodbye. She knew that he had loved her daughter and grieved as they did over her death. He wondered if the book had been a way to say that she did not hold him to blame.

The book had become a favorite. One of the poems, "O'Shaughnessy's Ode," especially appealed to him and he had memorized it, the first lines often running through his head. *We are the music makers, And we are the dreamers of dreams.* He wondered why those words appealed to him for the dreams he had once dreamed were now dust.

When the sun had drifted to the top of the dark pines on the mountain across the lake, he built a fire and set the coffee to boil.

He'd dug the last of his potatoes, soft and sprouting, but still edible, and the Dutch oven out of the pack Top carried, and set about cooking his supper. He had the trout gutted, and the potatoes frying, when a donkey brayed. As he stood up, his hand dropped to the butt of the gun at his hip.

His first thought was of Indians. Most were on the reservations now, even the Sioux. They had led the battle that had wiped out Custer and the entire Seventh Cavalry last year at the Little Bighorn in northeast Montana. Crazy Horse had surrendered earlier this year, and the Crow and the Blackfoot tribes were also on reservations. But any or all of them at any given time could rise up and try to reclaim what

they deemed their own, which in truth was probably their right. He didn't blame them for trying to get their land back, but he also knew they'd play hell trying. They were licked, and all but a handful had accepted it. But it was this handful that made a fellow nervous. Still, he grinned to himself, he didn't figure an Indian warrior to be riding a donkey, so he was probably a white man. Who that white man was, though, could make a heck of a difference.

He could hear the soft thud of hooves hitting the ground and the creak of saddle leather, but a thick stand of pine hid the newcomer from view.

Shadow and Top, heads up and ears pricked toward the sound, nickered a greeting and a horse answered them. Josh wondered if more than one man was about to come out of those trees and he kept his hand on the butt of his holstered pistol.

"Hello the camp," the man called as he emerged from the trees and pulled the horse he rode to a standstill, waiting for an invitation from Josh. Behind him a small donkey carrying two well-balanced packs moved up past the horse's spotted rump.

"Come on in." Josh strained to see the man's face in the gathering shadows. "I'm just fixing some supper. If you haven't eaten yet, I have enough to share."

"I reckon I ain't heard cheerier words in a month of Sundays," the man said and nudged his dapple gray forward. Josh took note of a pickax and two round flat pans attached to the pack on the dun-colored donkey's back. Undoubtedly, the man was a roving prospector.

As the man swung down off his horse and approached the campfire, Josh noted his pleasant manner and the good humor in his dark eyes shaded by a battered gray hat. As he moved his hand away from his gun, Josh said, "I'm frying up some trout and potatoes. It'll be ready by the time you've taken care of your animals."

"I'd be obliged," the man said scratching at his beard. "Name's Ned Sillman. I've got some beans if you want to heat 'em up."

Later, the last of the coffee cooling in their tin cups and the light of day fading from the sky, Ned said, "You hear anything about that Nez Perce Injun war with old General Howard and his blue-coated soldiers?"

"No," Josh said.

"Guess the fight started over in Idehoe at a place called White Bird Canyon."

"The Indians start it?"

"More likely the gov'ment got itself on the war-path. The way I heard it, some of them Nez Perce signed a paper saying they'd give up their land to white folks and go off on to some piece of ground the gov'ment picked for 'em. Seems the ones that didn't sign got lumped with the ones that did and they got plumb mad about it and started killing off white folks." Ned pulled a chunk of tobacco from his pocket, cut a piece and offered it to Josh on the blade of his knife.

Josh shook his head. "The soldiers were to force them onto this land and they resisted."

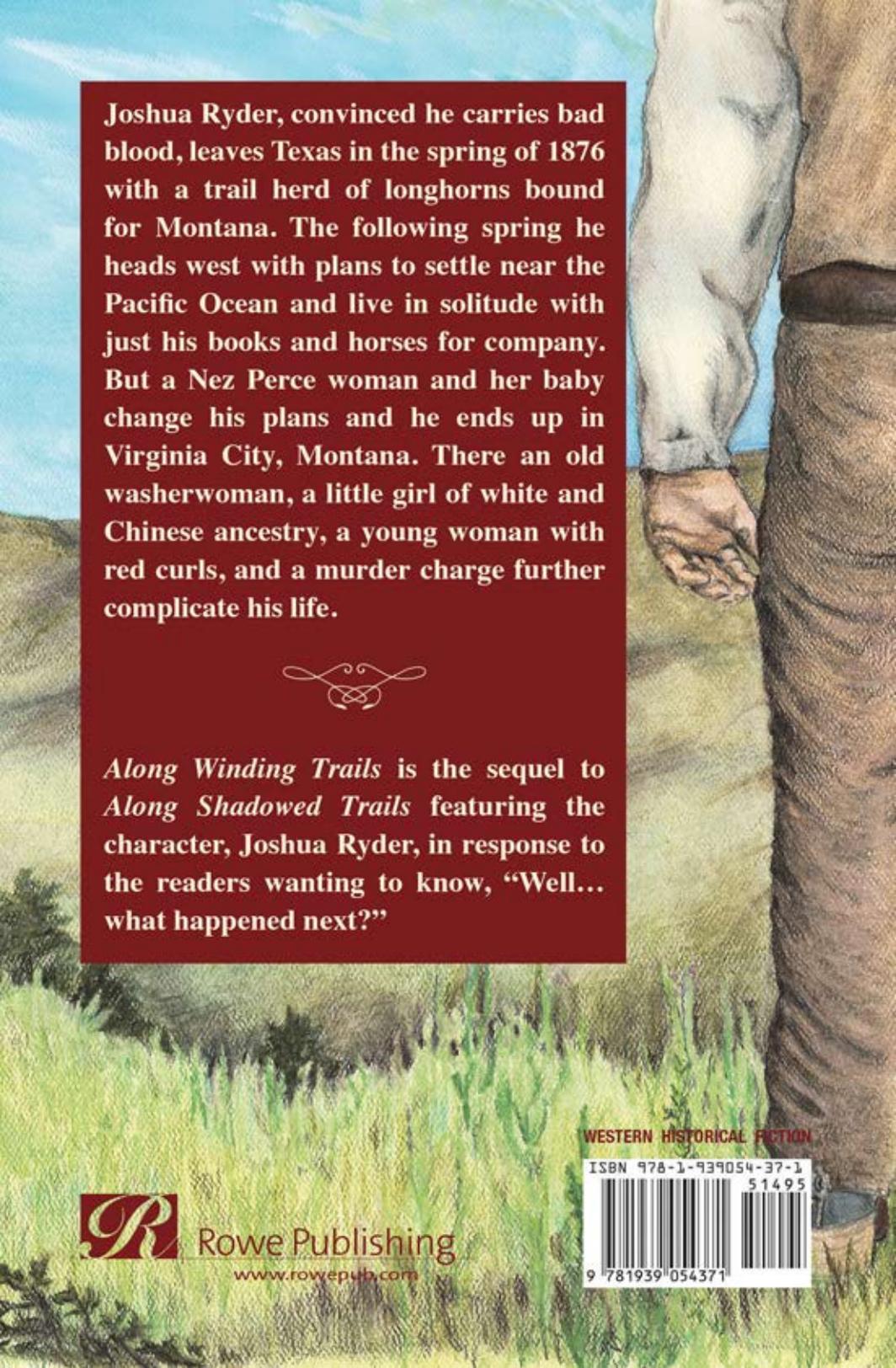
Ned popped the chaw in his mouth and chuckled. “They’s trying to, anyhow. The Nez Perce had come over into Montany some north and west of here, to a place called Big Hole, and reckoned they was safe. But they reckoned wrong. Howard’s troops snuck up on ‘em one morning, real early, a couple a-weeks ago and started shooting. A bunch was killed, but some got away. I reckon they’re still chasing ‘em, if they ain’t caught ‘em by now.”

He spit a liquid stream off into the dark and wiped his hand across his mouth and turned back to Josh. “Lots of folks think they ought to be wiped out, like they was vermin. Me, now, I’ve knowed some real good folks that was Injun. I reckon folks is folks, no matter if’n they is Injun or white. Some’s real good and some ain’t fit to keep on living.”

Josh nodded, his bastard of a father coming to mind.

Later, rolled up in his bedroll, Josh lay awake listening to the sounds of the night. Above Ned’s snores, he could hear the horses and the donkey moving about, an occasional coyote’s howl, and the hooting call of an owl.

He thought about Ned roaming over the country, rarely seeing anyone for months and he likened it to his own situation, except for the wandering part. He could envision a cabin close to the water and a life of solitude, with just his books and his horses for company. He hoped he could be as content as Ned appeared to be, and yet Ned had not ridden on by, but had sought out his company.

A painting of a person's hand resting on a tree trunk in a landscape. The hand is light-skinned and appears to be holding onto the rough bark of a large tree. The background shows a vast, open landscape with rolling hills and a clear blue sky. The overall style is that of a classic Western painting.

Joshua Ryder, convinced he carries bad blood, leaves Texas in the spring of 1876 with a trail herd of longhorns bound for Montana. The following spring he heads west with plans to settle near the Pacific Ocean and live in solitude with just his books and horses for company. But a Nez Perce woman and her baby change his plans and he ends up in Virginia City, Montana. There an old washerwoman, a little girl of white and Chinese ancestry, a young woman with red curls, and a murder charge further complicate his life.



*Along Winding Trails* is the sequel to *Along Shadowed Trails* featuring the character, Joshua Ryder, in response to the readers wanting to know, “Well... what happened next?”



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