

THE OUTBACK GHOST OF ALLISONJanuary 14, 2002Frank Koucky

Allison, Australia is named for a woman, Allison Bell Morgan, who nearly overnight built herself the fanciest saloon in a brand new boom town. I'm writing this down forty years later, as people are confusing the tale a bit with the years, for the sake of my old mates, I think that I should tell the story right, particularly as it concerns the greatest treasure ever to come out of Australia.

At the last century's turn, the Australian Outback was a lonely, dry place with no wells, a few dirt trails, no settlements and little hope. Where there was water a few lonely sheep stations worked by dusty squatters barely got by and the only real inhabitants were small groups of wandering Aborigines walking the hot baked deserts as they had for a million years, naked, carrying their long spears and boomerangs and followed by their hungry half-dingo dogs and sunbaked children as they trudged from billabong to billabong.

All that isolation changed in a moment when fabulous opals as big as partridge eggs were discovered in the dry hills. Suddenly every get-rich-quick grifter, failed prospector and walkabout swagman in all Australia was headed for the opal strike. Thanks to Allison's efforts, a dry miner ("diggers" we called them, then) walking out of the bleak hills would suddenly come upon the amazing sight of a glittering big-city saloon and hotel with real glass windows topped with a gold painted sign saying "Allison's".

A full-length "long bar" with a brass rail and plate glass mirrors brought all the way from San Francisco served real Scotch whiskey, French Champagne and dark Jamaica rum to those who could afford it and cold, cheap Aussie beer to those who couldn't, pumped

up from barrels in a deep root cellar that lowered the temperature well below the afternoon highs of 115 degrees in the shade while a German piano carted overland provided the music.

Nearly six feet tall with flaming red hair, Allison Bell Morgan had built it all, somehow transporting the whole outfit overland two thousand miles by steamboat, rail and wagon. She had made her grubstake in the gold fields of the Yukon, discovering the fact that newly rich prospectors will hand out nuggets like candy to anyone who has real whiskey, good food, hot baths and civilized hotel rooms to rent in the heart of a howling desolation. She took her money and went searching for the next boom in the wilderness and found it in blistering hot Australia, half a world from her previous icy polar employment. As she often said later, she traded an icy hell for a hot one.

She owned it all, gambling, hotel rooms, whiskey, good food, music, lights and showgirls (a polite name for them, at best) in from France (who really were from Darwin with phony French names and accents), and, as long as the opal market held up, the money rolled in like a river every night as hundreds of miners spent their earnings in a flash, trying to capture a great time and a huge hangover before returning to the unbelievable isolation, heat and misery of their distant claims to start digging in their hole again.

Allison was watched over by the toughest man in the Outback, brought with her from the Yukon to keep her healthy in rough quarters, her bodyguard, bouncer and saloon manager Sailor Jack. Their relationship was all business, but Jack would have laid down in front of a steam locomotive if Allison asked him to. Jack was a bald-headed tattooed brute who dressed like a dandy London pimp, but he had the finest manners you ever saw, at least when he wasn't beating someone's brains out in a prizefight. Weighing about three hundred pounds, he would fight anyone for a first bet of ten guineas, Marquis of Queensbury "toe-the-line" boxing or

free-for-all brawler no rules at all, right there in a chalk ring in Allison's Saloon, matching the side bets himself. The former bully mate of a Yankee merchant ship in the China trade, he had never been beaten in at least two dozen fights, due in part to a set of brass knuckles in his darby hat. His reputation for ferocity was a legend even in the Outback, with a speed and precision that seemed impossible for one so huge.

He wore a huge handforged Australian Bowie on his belt and viewed guns as a coward's weapon, preferring his fights "close up and personal". His tattooed arms were covered with the thin white scars a knife fighters wears from battles won, the losers never getting the chance to show off any scars at all. Like many sailors, he could throw the knife with incredible accuracy, a demonstration that he put on many evenings in the saloon, while several former gunslingers could tell how they were pinned to the table right through their gun hand by twelve inches of cold steel blade. Woe to the drunken digger stupid enough to try to set a grimy paw on Allison in Jack's sight.

Although she had the fanciest property in the settlement, Allison was not the richest person in town, not by a long shot. That distinction belonged to "Chinaman" Chen who owned the little opal buyer's shop next to the saloon, and his wealth came from years of honest dealing in the opal trade. When a miner made a strike, he brought the opal to the Chinaman, who weighed and appraised the rough stone, offering, every single time, a very fair price. Those who turned down the Chinaman in favor of trying to get a better price in the cities soon found that they had traveled for nothing, as the Chinaman's price was always as good or better than what they could get even in London, a mystery that miners tried to explain in any incorrect ways. The truth was just that the Chinaman took very little profit but did huge volume, a wise business practice lost on most of the jewel and gold traders who thought the miners were ignorant fools.

As word of the honest Chinese buyer near Allison's Saloon spread, opal diggers came from hundreds of miles around to seek him out and the fortunes of the House of Chen grew daily, as well as those of the next door saloon. Only once was he unable to make an offer on an opal and that was when James Hawkins found the biggest opal ever taken from the diggings, perfect, huge, a stone that would require the wealth of a rajah to purchase. Ever honest, Chen told Hawkins to take the stone to certain Amsterdam diamond merchants, the only people in the world who could give him what such a treasure was worth, and give Chen a small cut by way of referral when he came back. The kindly Chen even offered a small loan against the stone so that Hawkins could travel to Holland in style, requesting only a modest compound interest rate on his outlay.

Hawkins set out on the road, but never made it to Sydney. Everyone assumed he had been bushwhacked, murdered and robbed along the lonely trail or speared by Aborigines around his campfire. Chinaman Chen took notice and began to carry his highest quality stones, his banknotes and most of his gold buying money on his person at all times. Fearing robbery in his small office, he bought a very large double-barreled 10 bore shotgun that he set in the corner of his single room to the amusement of all the miners. They called it "the Chinaman's Cannon" and laughed that he would break his shoulder if he ever really shot it, but it seemed very frightening to robbers, at least in the eyes of Chen.

It was the regular practice of the Chinaman to close up his small shop promptly at five o'clock every evening and walk alone the two miles home to his modest frame house by the creek, where his bride of two years was always waiting with dinner. This evening, a particularly dark one with a black dust storm brewing, he did not come home.

His wife grew both worried and angry and finally set out to look for him, walking toward his shop in the gathering gloom, calling his name loudly, along with a

few choice Chinese words of uncertain meaning. Finally she reached his shop and found it shuttered and locked for the night as usual, with her husband gone and the shotgun still in the corner. She began to cry softly in fear, and that is when one of the miners brought kindly Allison out of the saloon, dressed in her best red dress and huge Paris bonnet. Allison quickly got the story of the missing Chen from his sobbing wife and gathered together three of her toughest miner friends from the bar, as well as her bald-headed bouncer Sailor Jack.

Gathering up lanterns and candles, the search was on, and within an hour Jack found the missing Chinaman knocked senseless under a big kulaba tree well off the trail. After carefully feeling for broken bones with his huge tattooed hands, Jack gently picked up the Chinaman with one arm and carried him home over his shoulder. Wet towels on a bloody head brought him around enough to say that someone had clubbed him, but he couldn't see who they were. Jack asked him if he had any money and the look of ruined horror in Chen's eyes told it all - all his best opals, a hundred and fifty gold guineas and his entire net worth in London banknotes had been stolen when the robber cut off his heavy money belt after leaving him for dead.

"Too late", said Jack, knowing the robber had a huge lead in getting away, but at least the Chinaman would survive, thanks to the loyal friends who found him before the dingoes could pick his bones clean. Still, Jack and his three mates set out to try to catch the thief on horseback, a fair chase if he was on foot, a lost cause if he had a horse or camel.

Back at the saloon, a stranger thing had happened. It was business as usual, with the music playing a wild can-can and the dancing girls kicking toward the ceiling as a hundred miners tossed down their beer and the card games and roulette wheels rolled on. Suddenly the doors opened wide and a blast of cold dark wind swept through. The music ceased as if the musicians

had forgotten to play, the dancing girls stopped dancing in mid kick, and everyone was suddenly quiet. In the door stood a tall, thin man all in black, wearing high dusty lace-up riding boots like an old foxhunter and a long black drover's coat with a bushranger's hat with one side pinned up, military style. Long black gloves covered his hands and a beautifully inlaid cross-draw Bowie knife hung high below his left shoulder. His face was lost in the shadows of his big hat and over his shoulder outside a dusty thin Aussie camel showed that he had ridden far through the lonely night.

Allison and a hundred others saw him step into the saloon and slowly walk to a dark distant table in the corner, carefully steadying himself before sitting down. Allison herself went to serve him when her girls held back in fear or surprise, and in a soft hoarse voice he said "Irish whiskey and water, your best, Allison".

Allison knew him by his voice - he was James Hawkins, the young opal miner who disappeared three years before after making the biggest opal find in Australia's history, the stone worth a king's ransom, the stone so huge that it could pay for a London townhouse by Christopher Wren and an income like an English Lord, the stone so fabulous that when Hawkins disappeared all the jewelers in Europe were alerted by Scotland Yard to help catch the thief.

Hawkins smiled, a warm and trusting smile that set her to remembering how, with no warning, James had asked her to marry him the night he found the opal, and she had made laughing excuses as she did to the many diggers who proposed to her. "Think about my offer while I'm gone - I have a beautiful ring for you. We'll be rich and we can go wherever you want". She had watched him ride off into the desert with his opal on a camel with four hundred miles of lonely bush before the steamboats and the railroad, a stained canvas water bag dangling from his camel's saddle.

Now, it seems, Hawkins hadn't been bushwhacked after all, as there he was, and none the worse for wear.

Hawkins poured himself a tall glass of water with a steady gloved hand and drank it down in a single draft, his dry desert-tanned face happy and his green eyes shining like dark opals. "Sit down, Allison, please" he said in a voice so low that she could hardly hear him. "Sit down and have a drink with an old friend". He slowly poured her a small shot of Jamieson and added a bit of cool water, and then poured himself a double dram straight up.

"Allison, I have always loved you" said the lean dusty man as he looked her full in the face and raised the glass in a toast to her. Without removing his hat or gloves, he drank the whiskey straight down and smiled again that perfect smile as she sipped her drink in amazement.

He spoke quietly in a voice like dry leaves; "Send everyone home early tonight. There's bad trouble out there. When you get your gift from me, get out of here and never look back, like I wanted us both to do." He hesitated and said "The Chinaman will be just fine - I'll get his money back, too." Hawkins set down a shining gold guinea to pay for his drink, stood up and she swore later that his eyes flashed pure green to red to blue to green again, the way a great polished opal will flash when turned in the morning sun. "Never look back" he said as he touched his hat in half salute and walked off into the swirling, wind-swept night, catching up the hackamore bridle on his camel as he walked away.

Somehow she hadn't said a word or asked a single question.

Allison sat down again and sipped her drink. She wondered how he knew how she hated the Outback like she did. To everyone she met she gave the same cheerful

statement that she would rather be there than anywhere else in the world, while secretly hating the heat, flies, snakes, dust and desert with all her heart. She worried about what he said about trouble and decided to act on her feeling that he was right.

Quickly she stood up and rang the big steamer bell for closing. As the confusion and comments swirled around her she spoke loudly: "Drink up! I'm closing up early tonight, boys. I just got a tip that there may be some bad trouble tonight, so take my advice and go home early. No complaints, now, just shut things down." She watched closely as the grumbling diggers and gamblers slowly wandered back to their camps, hotel rooms or tents. She locked the doors, wiped down the bar herself and blew out the gleaming brass lamps, with no sign of Jack or the miners who had gone to help the Chinaman's wife.

She went upstairs to her brass bed in the luxurious wall-papered room above the bar, lay down and slept peacefully until she had a strange dream. In her dream she saw James Hawkins stand quietly beside her bed, dressed as he was that evening in his dusty black bushranger's hat and drover's coat, knife at his side and rifle in his hand, but somehow she wasn't frightened at all. He stood beside her bed a long moment, smiled the sweetest smile she had ever seen and set something down on her small lamp table. Then he turned to go, tipped his hat in farewell and, though it was a dream, she later swore he had stepped right through the locked door.

Outside a dust storm began to howl through the empty street.

In the morning she awakened to someone beating on her locked bedroom door. She found a bandaged Chinaman Chen and Jack with the three diggers and amazing news. Jack and the miners had tried to trail the thief who robbed the Chinaman, but lost his trail outside of town, riding all night in a blind chase that ended

before dawn as a black storm of wind and sand broke over them and they had to find shelter. Coming home, they found the thief face down in the middle of the road with the Chinaman's fat moneybelt in his left hand and an empty Colt revolver in his right, and inside his bloody vest pocket, wrapped in an oiled rag, was the largest opal ever found in Australia, the one James Hawkins dug up three years before. The thief was stone dead, and pegged straight through his murderous heart was a rusty Australian Bowie knife with the initials J.H. inlaid into the handle in abalone shell.

They recognized the dead man at once, a mangy card cheat who had left town soon after Hawkins headed for Sydney. Apparently he had never dared sell the opal for fear of being hanged by Scotland Yard, even in the Outback, or else he had fallen under its spell as those around a great jewel will sometimes do, never letting go even to sleep, carrying it night and day in his dirty vest, wandering a great circle until he returned to the scene of his crime to rob a helpless Chinaman of all he owned.

In a small dry gulley's cave beside the road, almost next to the dead thief, was the strangest part of the mystery. The storm had uncovered from the sand the dried body of James Hawkins, dead for years from a Colt .45 bullet hole through the head, his poor remains just a wrinkled mummy from the years of desert heat and sand, dressed in the very clothes that all the town saw him wear the night before, alive at Allison's. His camel lay beside him, also shot through the head and dried like the old leather. James' body was curled up like he was asleep, but his treasured Bowie knife, the one everyone had seen shining new the night before, was left in the heart of the thief on the road, old and rusted now, like it had been years in the sand. Inside his drover's coat pocket, in a sealed oilskin pouch, was a piece of paper carefully witnessed by Chinaman Chen and three trusty miners, leaving all his worldly possessions, claims and the greatest opal in the world to his fiancée Allison Belle Morgan should anything

happen to him. It was signed neatly in ink by James Hawkins, dated the very day he left town three years before, all quite legal, and he wrote it out a few hours after he was turned down in his marriage proposal, written and signed before he was shot from ambush.

Allison, sitting on her brass bed in her white silk dressing gown with an ostrich collar, heard the story and slowly read the will leaving her the wealth to leave the Outback forever.

She suddenly remembered her odd dream and looked to where she imagined she had seen James Hawkins leave something in the night. On her table, glittering in the sunlight, shone an opal ring set with a six carat stone, red and blue like a rainbow on the desert sky, with full carat triangular French baguette diamonds set on either side. She turned it over and inscribed inside the carved platinum band were the words she had heard James Hawkins say the night before: "Never look back." He had carried it when he proposed to her, a wedding ring he'd had made in London for the woman he hoped would accept his hand. Now he had given it to her three years late, after he reclaimed her opal, paid his debt of vengeance and got back the Chinaman's moneybelt.

Beside the ring on the table Sailor Jack carefully placed the greatest opal ever found in all the world. As Allison watched, the morning sun crept in and lit the stone, the colors flashing through a living rainbow of reds and blues and greens, the finest gift ever given in Australia.

They still tell the old ghost stories in Allison, the new town named by the lonely miners for their beloved saloon keeper or, the skeptics say, named for her large gilt saloon sign which stayed up for years after she went back wealthy to the green grass and spring daffodils of her childhood in England. Late at night around the campfire they scare the children with

tales of a miner's ghost came back from heaven or hell for a drink of Irish whiskey with his true love, or how a dead man left as a gift an opal worth a king's ransom, and how Hawkins' dried black ghost hunted down his killer with a Bowie knife in his long-dead skeleton hand, opal eyes gleaming as he stalked the night for revenge.

The stories grow more twisted every year, but if you go to the old miners' graveyard you can see a neat white monument, tall like a column, with a cross above and a digger's pick cut into the marble below, inscribed with James Hawkins' name in fine big letters and below it the words "Thank you for your gift." Above it rises a beautiful cut stone marble church with a tall steeple and a grand gilt altar, a church bell from London and a huge carved organ with gilt pipes sent from Germany, all paid for as a gift from the sale of a perfect opal twice the size of an emu's egg, along with an endowment to bring a real high-church bishop to tend to the miners and their families and the town of Allison that came in the years that followed. There's a lovely stone house for the bishop, too, built with a gift from a heathen Chinaman who never could even go to church there without offending the new town's proper folks.

Allison is a very rich lady in her townhouse on a lovely London crescent overlooking Hyde Park, a bit older, perhaps, surrounded by new friends and wearing the ring left by her ghost beau. Somehow, despite a hundred offers to marry, she never quite found a man to replace the memory of the Australian opal miner in his black bushranger's hat and duster coat. Perhaps her huge tattooed butler discourages gentleman callers, too, although he looked most elegant at the door in his formal morning coat when I visited them last. She even got herself a title the last time I was there, not quite a countess, but something of the sort granted for "service to the Empire", which is pretty fine for a former Outback girl. It's "Lady Allison" now, and I'm

proud for her, driving out in her black Rolls-Royce with old Jack at the wheel to High Tea at Claridge's.

As for that magnificent opal she sold, it now represents the Land Down Under in the Royal Scepter of the Crown Jewels of England, next to the Orb, the Lily Font, the Imperial State Crown and all the other coronation treasures. It is very well watched in a glass case in the Tower of London these days, though the Beefeater guards tell me that tourist children sometimes ask why that tall guard in the long black coat wears a different hat than they do, one with a pinned-up brim.

Me? Well, most of my old digger friends are gone, and I spend more time in London than in the outback. Now I'm living in a big stone house in Sydney, with lovely gardens where fountains never let me remember the heat and flies. I have a bank or two of my own these days and the title "Chairman of the Board of Governors" on my polished office doors as the moneybelt that Hawkins saved seems to have grown just a bit heavier over the years. I thank him when I can, burning joss sticks to his name and keeping a fresh bowl of rice on his grave, asking my most honorable ancestors to help his wandering ghost find peace. I think only my wife calls me "Chinaman Chen" now and that's just when the grandchildren aren't around.

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