Western audiobook scripts

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Six Days of Tin

Classic, lawman's last week · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Sheriff Amos Pruitt had six days left to wear the badge, and he meant to spend every one of them sitting down.

On Monday a man rode into Halloran on a lathered horse and tied it outside the Drover's Rest, and by noon Deputy Wade Colley was standing in the office door.

"He's asking for you by name," Wade said.

"Plenty have."

"He says you'll know him. Says you put his brother in the ground at Carver's Crossing."

Amos set down his coffee. He remembered the crossing. He remembered a boy of nineteen who would not put his hands up, and a morning he had been trying to set down for twenty-two years.

"You want me to go with you?"

"No. I want you to go home and eat your dinner." Amos stood, and his knees told him his age. "If I'm not back, the stove wants blacking."

He left the gun belt on its peg. That was the part Wade told people afterward.

Professor Hadley Arrives

Classic, schoolteacher · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The town of Bitter Springs had hired a schoolteacher named L. M. Hadley, and they were a good deal surprised when I stepped off the stage in a blue traveling dress.

Three men stood on the hotel porch with a banner. It said WELCOME PROFESSOR. The tallest one took off his hat, looked past me into the empty coach, and put it back on.

"Ma'am, we're waiting on a Mr. Hadley."

"You'll wait a long while. I'm Lucinda Hadley. You have my letter in your pocket, I believe."

He took it out and read it again, as though it might have changed. "It don't say Miss."

"It doesn't say Mister, either. It says Latin, figures and penmanship, and it says forty dollars a month."

The short one coughed. "We figured thirty, for a lady."

"Then you figured wrong twice in one morning." I picked up my trunk by one handle, since nobody had moved. "Which way is the schoolhouse, gentlemen? I'd like to see what forty dollars buys."

Night Herd

Trail drive, night watch · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 30 seconds

Two thousand cattle will sleep through thunder and bolt at a dropped tin cup. I learned that my first week on the trail, at a dead run.

So at night we rode slow circles around them and sang. Not well. Dutch only knew half of four hymns. The singing was not for comfort. It was so the herd always knew where a man was, and nothing came at them sudden out of the dark.

Most folks want the same. Just to know where you are.

The Upper Crossing

Classic, stagecoach · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

The stage stopped a mile short of Mercy Creek, and the driver climbed down to tell four passengers something none of them wanted to hear.

"Creek's up," said Tobe Hanlon. "We'll sit till morning."

The whiskey salesman had his watch out before Tobe finished. "I have an appointment in Garnet at nine o'clock."

"Then you'd best swim."

"I paid eleven dollars for this seat."

"You paid for the seat. Creek's separate."

In the corner, the old woman with the carpetbag had not looked up from her knitting. She had hardly spoken since Fort Dunmore. "How deep at the ford, driver?"

"Belly deep on the leaders, ma'am, and rising."

"And the upper crossing? By the Yoder place?"

Tobe looked at her properly for the first time. Not many people knew about the upper crossing. "Gravel bottom. Two foot, maybe. But it's nine miles around, and the company don't allow it."

"Why not?"

"Wears the teams. Old lady Kessler owns the line, and she'd have my hide. They say she counts the oats."

"She does count the oats." The needles kept going. "She also built that upper crossing, with a hired man and a borrowed mule, the year her husband died. Take it, Mr. Hanlon. I'll square it with her."

The salesman snorted. "And who are you to square it?"

She rolled up her knitting and looked at him over her spectacles, and Tobe Hanlon, who was quicker than he looked, took off his hat.

"Climb in, mister," he said. "And I'd mind my manners clear to Garnet."

Pulled on Two

Classic, frontier doctor · Adult (40–55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

I was the only doctor in two hundred miles, and it still took Hollis Greer most of an hour to decide I would do.

His boy lay on the kitchen table with his leg broken below the knee. Hollis stood between us with his arms folded.

"I sent for Doc Avery."

"Doc Avery died in March. I bought his practice and his horse."

"You went to a school for it? A real one?"

"Four years, back east. Mr. Greer, your son's foot is turning the wrong color."

He looked. Then he looked at my hands, which are small, and I watched him weigh them.

"It takes a strong man to set a leg."

"It takes a strong man to hold the shoulders. That's you." I rolled my sleeves. "Tommy, I am going to count to three, and I am going to lie to you about when."

The boy almost smiled. His father took hold of him.

I pulled on two.

Four Hundred and Nine

Homestead, proving up · Adult (25-40) · Midwestern US · 1 minute

We had to live on the claim five years to own it, and in the fourth winter I started counting the days out loud.

Eli didn't care for that. He was mending harness by the stove, and the wind was coming through the sod wall the way it always did, like something breathing.

"Four hundred and nine," I said.

"Ruth."

"I only said a number."

"You said it like a sentence being served." He put the awl down. "You want to go back to Ohio, say so."

"I don't want to go back to Ohio. I want a floor. I want one tree. I want to hang washing without it freezing into boards."

He was quiet a while. Then he got up, took the calendar off its nail, and turned it to the wall.

"What's that for?"

"We quit counting what's left. Tomorrow we start counting what we built. You go first. I'll bet you can't get past ten."

I got to thirty-one. I was still angry, and I got to thirty-one.

Queens Over

Classic, gambler · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 1 minute

I have made my living at cards for nineteen years, and the first rule is that you never, ever feel sorry for the man across the table.

The man across the table was about twenty. He had three months of trail wages in front of him, and he kept touching his shirt pocket, where I judged there was a letter.

"Your bet, son."

"I'll see you. And raise it all."

"That's a deal of money on one hand."

"I got a good hand."

He had two pair. I had a full house, queens over, and it sat in my fingers like a warm stone.

"Who's the letter from?"

His hand went to the pocket. "My ma. She's needing a roof before winter."

I looked at my queens a good while. They were handsome ladies.

"Too rich for me," I said, and laid them face down. "Take it, and take some advice. Buy the roof tonight. I am only this stupid about once a year."

The Gray Colt

Ranch, horse trainer · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Everybody in the valley said the gray colt could not be ridden, which was why Nell Aubrey got him for eleven dollars.

She did not rope him. She carried a chair into the corral, sat down with her back to him, and peeled an apple.

Walt Sorrell leaned on the rail. He had sold her the horse, and he had come to watch her lose.

"That your method? Ignore him to death?"

"My hands had a saddle on him in an hour."

"And off him in a minute, I heard. How's Pete's collarbone?"

Behind her the colt had stopped circling. She could hear him breathing, working it out.

"A horse like that only understands one thing," Walt said.

"He understands plenty. He understands every man who came through that gate wanted something off him." She cut a slice and held it out behind her. "I'm just waiting for him to get curious."

Something warm and whiskered lifted the apple from her palm.

"Day two," said Nell.

The Count at Camp Nine

Railroad, track camp · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Chen Wei kept the count for forty men, and on the first of the month the railroad's count came up eleven dollars short of his.

He did not raise his voice. He had learned that a raised voice was what the paymaster waited for. He set his ledger on the table next to the company's, and turned both to the same page.

"Mr. Doyle. Your book says my crew laid track twenty-two days. They laid twenty-four."

"Company book's the company book."

"Yes. And on the eighth and ninth it says no work, for snow." Chen put a finger on the line. "On the eighth and ninth, your own crew sat in camp. Mine cleared the cut. You stood on the grade and watched. You had a red scarf."

The paymaster's ears went pink. Behind Chen, forty men had gone quiet. They were holding shovels.

"I don't recall a scarf," Doyle said.

"I wrote it down," said Chen. "I write everything down."

Doyle counted out eleven dollars.

Stillwater

Contemporary, ranch for sale · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

The man from the land company drove up in a truck that had never hauled anything, and he offered my mother four million dollars for the place before he had finished his coffee.

She is eighty-one. She topped up his cup.

"That's a lot of money, Mr. Pryce."

"It's a fair price, ma'am. The water rights alone..."

"Oh, I know what the water's worth. I've been hauling it to cows since before your daddy was born."

I kept my mouth shut. I had run the numbers at two in the morning more than once. Hay up, beef down, and me fifty-three with a bad shoulder and no kids who wanted it.

"Dale thinks I should take it," she said.

"I never said that, Mama."

"You never say anything. You sigh at the checkbook." She turned back to Pryce. "What would you put here?"

"Homes. Tasteful ones. Forty lots and a clubhouse. We'd keep the name. Stillwater Ranch Estates."

"You'd keep the name."

"Yes, ma'am. People like a story."

She looked out the window a long time. The cottonwoods my grandfather planted were just coming yellow.

"Mr. Pryce, I'm going to say no, and I'd like you to understand it isn't the money. It is more money than I can picture." She stood up, which took her a moment. "But I've buried a husband and two good dogs on this ground, and I don't believe I'd care to be a clubhouse."

Then she looked at me. "You can sigh now, Dale."

Turning the Hat

Romance, ranch widow · Adult (30–45) · Southern US · 1 minute

Sam Rudd had worked for me two years and had never once used my first name, so I knew something was wrong the day he took off his hat to talk about a fence.

"North line's down by the creek, Mrs. Lyle. I'll have it up by dark."

He did not go. He turned the hat around by the brim.

"I've had an offer. Foreman, down on the Rafter T. Sixty a month."

"That's twice what I pay you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you'd be a fool not to go."

"Yes, ma'am." He turned it again. "I told him no."

The kettle was starting. I let it.

"Why would you do a thing like that?"

He looked at the floor, and finally at me. He has gray eyes. I had gone two years without noticing, which took effort.

"I'd say, but then I couldn't keep working here."

"Sam." I took the hat out of his hands, because one of us had to. "My name is Clara. Try it."

Closed on Wednesdays

Comic, bank robbery · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Virgil Tate robbed the bank at Plum Hollow on a Wednesday, which was his first mistake, because on Wednesdays the bank was closed.

He stood on the boardwalk with a flour sack over his head and tried the door twice. Then he knocked.

Miss Odalie Finch opened the window above. She kept the books and lived upstairs. "We open at nine tomorrow."

"This is a holdup, ma'am."

"Not until nine it isn't."

"I've got a gun."

"I can see that. You've also got the sack on backward. The eyeholes are round the other side."

Virgil turned the sack. It was a great improvement. "Ma'am, I rode eleven miles."

"On the Hendry mule, by the look of her. Does Abel Hendry know?"

"He's my uncle."

"Then you're Virgil." She sighed. "Virgil, that safe has forty dollars and a deed in it. Come up the back stairs. There's pie, and you can tell me what's actually the matter."

He thought it over. He had not eaten since Monday.

"What kind of pie?"

Wrong Side of the Wire

Elegiac, end of the open range · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The wire came to our country in the spring of my sixtieth year, and I helped string it, because a man has to eat.

I'd ridden that grass when you could go from the Antler breaks to the Canadian line and never get down to open a gate. I am not saying it was better. Men froze. Cattle starved by the thousand in a bad winter, and nobody owned enough of anything to feel responsible.

But it was big. I don't have a finer word. You woke up and the size of it sat on your chest like a hand, and you felt small and lucky at once.

We set posts for nine days. On the tenth I rode the line to check the staples, and a band of antelope came up to the wire and stopped. They stood there. They didn't know what it was.

I didn't either, not entirely. I only knew I had built it, and that I was standing on the wrong side.

Goodnight, Pearl

Comic, trail cook · Mature (55+) · Southern US · 45 seconds

Our cook slept with a crock of sourdough under his blankets every night for eleven hundred miles, and he would not have done as much for any of us.

"She's nineteen years old," Gus told the new hand. "Older than you. Better company."

"It's a jar of dough."

"It's the only reason you've had bread since Texas. She gets cold, she dies. She dies, I quit. I quit, and you boys are down to beans and each other."

The boy looked round the fire. Nobody was laughing. Fourteen grown men looked back at him the way you'd look at somebody who had spoken ill of a mother.

"What's her name?" he asked.

Gus nodded slowly. "Now you're learning. Her name's Pearl. Say goodnight."

He said goodnight.

The Sweeping Up

Classic, aftermath · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

After the shooting there was the sweeping up. Nobody writes that part down.

Somebody had to right the chairs in the Longhorn and pay for the mirror. Somebody had to walk out to the Bassett place and say the words to his wife, and stand there while she took her apron off and folded it. The preacher did that. I swept. By supper the street looked like any street, and that, I believe, was the worst of it.

Put It in Writing

Ranch, top hand · Adult (30-45) · Southern US · 1 minute

I was the best hand with a rope on the Double Seven, and everybody on the place knew it, including the man they hired over me.

His name was Carl Whitlow and he was the owner's nephew. He came down to the corral my second morning under him and stood a while not saying it.

"Isom, they tell me you can heel a calf nine throws in ten."

"They're being modest."

"My uncle made me foreman so I'd learn the business. I figure you know that."

"I figured."

"I figure you also know I can't rope a fence post."

"I'd seen."

"So here it is. I can give orders I don't understand and get somebody hurt. Or you tell me what the orders ought to be, and I say them out loud, and come fall I tell my uncle whose they were."

I looked at him. I had been promised things before, by men with easier smiles.

"Put it in writing," I said. "Then go fetch a rope."

The White Rock

Ranch, land grant · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

My family had run cattle on the Tres Alamos for ninety years when the young man from the county came to tell me where my land was.

He spread his map on my table and held the corners down with my own salt cellar.

"Mrs. Rosales, the survey puts your line here. At the creek."

"The creek moved in the flood of '74. My line is the white rock. My grandfather's grant says the white rock."

"A Spanish grant, ma'am. The county works from the new survey."

"And who is on the other side of the new line?"

"Mr. Haskell has filed on it."

"Mr. Haskell, who paid for the survey."

He did not answer. He was not a bad boy. He had only never been asked.

I went to the chest and brought back the grant, and beneath it the tax receipts. Thirty-one years of them, for the land to the white rock.

"You took my money for it," I said. "Sit down. I have all afternoon."

Not From Here

Contemporary, family ranch · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

My aunt Lorraine has run cattle on the reservation for forty years, and she still does not trust anything I learned at the university.

"The app says rain by four," I told her.

"The app." She didn't look up from the cinch. "What do the cows say?"

"The cows don't have a weather service, Auntie."

"Look at them."

I looked. Sixty head, all bunched in the low corner with their tails to the north.

"That's wind coming. Hail, maybe. By two, not four." She swung up. She is sixty-eight and she swings up like a girl. "Your phone is smart. It's just not from here."

It hailed at ten past two. She never said a word, which was worse.

Tea for Mr. Renfro

Classic, range war · Mature (55+) · Scottish · 1 minute

Three cattlemen rode up to my wagon after dark to tell me the country was closed to sheep, and I asked them in for tea, which threw them.

Only the big one got down, a man named Renfro. He stood at my fire with his thumbs in his belt.

"You'll have them woollies off this range by Friday, MacRae."

"Will I? Sugar?"

"I'm not here for tea."

"No, you're here to frighten me. Sit down and do it comfortable."

He sat.

"Cattle won't graze after sheep. They ruin the grass."

"So I've heard. I heard it at home too, only there it was the laird saying it about people." I handed him the cup. "They burned my father's roof to make room for sheep, Mr. Renfro. I crossed an ocean, and now I'm to be burned out for keeping them. You'll forgive me if I find it comical."

He looked at the tea a long while.

"Friday," he said. But he drank it, and he did not say it like before.

What I Will Leave Out

Mining camp, letter home · Young adult (18-25) · Irish · 45 seconds

Dear Mam, I am writing to tell you that America is every bit as grand as they said, and I want you to believe me, so I will leave out a good deal.

I will leave out the mud. I will leave out that Copper Gulch is one street, and that the street is mostly the mud. Danny has steady work below ground, and I do not think about where.

I take in washing for forty miners. My hands would frighten you.

But Mam, here is a true thing. On Saturday a man paid me in gold dust and called me ma'am. Nobody at home ever called a Brennan ma'am. I have decided to stay until it stops surprising me.

A Dollar for a Shave

Classic, retired gunfighter · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The boy who came to kill Jack Darrow found him in a barber's apron, stropping a razor, and it spoiled the speech he had practiced.

"You're Darrow? Of Antelope Flats?"

"I'm a dollar for a shave and two bits for a trim. Sit down or let the next man in."

There was no next man. The boy sat, mostly from confusion. Darrow tipped him back and lathered his throat.

"They say you killed eleven men."

"They say fourteen in Kansas. It goes up the farther you get from anybody who was there." The razor made its first slow pass. "Hold still."

The boy held very still.

"What's your name?"

"Billy Rusk. I'm fast. Folks say I'm the fastest in..."

"I expect you are. I was fast. You know what fast got me, Billy? This chair. And I'm the lucky one out of that eleven." He wiped the blade. "There. You've got a face under all that. Go and use it for something."

He charged the dollar. He always charged the dollar.

Cows Don't Keep the Sabbath

Ranch, water rights · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

In a dry year a man will share his tobacco, his horse and his last dollar, and shoot his own brother over a ditch.

Abel Stroud's ditch ran dry on the fourth of August. He rode up the creek and found Ned Purdy's new dam, and Ned sitting on it with a shotgun across his knees.

"Morning, Ned."

"Abel."

"That's my water you're sitting on."

"It's water. It don't know whose it is."

"My stock does."

Ned looked at the sky, which had been empty since May. "I got forty head and a sick wife."

"I got sixty and four kids."

Neither man moved. A grasshopper landed on the gun barrel.

"Half," said Abel. "Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays."

"Sundays?"

"Cows don't keep the Sabbath."

Route Fixed Via Lodgepole

Railroad, telegraph office · Adult (25-40) · Midwestern US · 1 minute

A telegraph operator knows a town is dying about four minutes before the town does, and the rules say she may not tell a soul.

The wire came through at ten past two. It was for Mr. Garrity at the land office, from the railroad. I wrote it out in my good hand: ROUTE FIXED VIA LODGEPOLE STOP SELL ALL HOLDINGS BRISCOE BEFORE ANNOUNCEMENT STOP.

Briscoe was us.

Mayor Tibbs was at my counter that very moment, sending for a church bell.

"Cast bronze, Miss Lund. Four hundred pounds. They'll hear it clear to the county line. Town's growing! Railroad by spring. Garrity says so himself."

"Does he."

I looked at the paper under my hand. I had sworn an oath to the company. I had also eaten at this man's table every Christmas for six years.

"Mayor, I can't tell you anything. You understand that. But I am going to step out for a drink of water, and I am a careless woman who leaves things lying about."

Agreeing With the Horse

Contemporary, rodeo · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Eight seconds is not a long time unless you are sitting on it.

The gate man looks at you. You nod, because your mouth has quit working. Then the world goes sideways and loud, and there is no crowd and no clock, only a thousand pounds of horse with an opinion. You do not ride him. You just keep agreeing with him a half second early. When the horn goes, you find out you have been holding your breath since Tuesday.

A Good Fence

Comic, graveside · Adult (40-55) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

Nobody in Sorrow Creek had a kind word for Eben Stark while he lived, and the preacher found they were no freer with them once he was dead.

He stood at the grave with his Bible shut. "Would anyone care to speak for the departed?"

Wind. A cough.

The widow studied her gloves. The hired man studied the hole.

At last old Mr. Fenn took his hat off, slow. He had been Stark's neighbor for thirty years and had sued him twice.

"Well," said Mr. Fenn. "He kept a good fence."

There was a murmur. It was true. He had.

"And he never once pretended to like me. Saved us both a deal of time."

The preacher, who knew when he was beaten, said amen.

On Point

Trail drive, river crossing · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 1 minute

They lost one man at the river, and the trail boss gave the outfit one night to be sorry about it.

At first light Ben Kittredge walked the line of bedrolls, kicking boots. He stopped at the kid, who was already awake.

"Saddle up, Lonnie. You're on point."

"I can't, Mr. Kittredge. I was beside him. His horse went down and I had hold of his sleeve, and I let go." The kid's voice cracked on it. "I let go."

Kittredge crouched. He was not a gentle man and did not try to sound like one.

"You hold on, you're both in that river. Then I'm short two hands and writing two letters. I'm obliged to you for the arithmetic."

"That ain't how it feels."

"No. It won't, for about thirty years." He stood. "I let go of a man myself, in '71. I'll tell you his name sometime. Today you're on point, because the cattle don't care how you feel, and that's the one mercy in this work."

Reporting on the Fiddler

Romance, barn dance · Adult (25-40) · Southern US · 45 seconds

I had faced a stampede, a blizzard and a grizzly at forty feet, and not one of them scared me like the walk across Harmon's barn to ask Etta Vance for a waltz.

"Miss Vance."

"Mr. Hobbs."

"I was wondering if. That is. The fiddler's about to."

"Are you asking me to dance, or reporting on the fiddler?"

"The first one, ma'am."

"Then you'd better hurry. It's a short tune."

I can't dance. I told her so somewhere in the second turn, after I had stepped on her twice.

"I know," she said. "I've watched you not ask me since April. I had about decided to do it myself."

One Square of Yellow Grass

Homestead, prairie fire · Adult (40–55) · Midwestern US · 30 seconds

You smell a prairie fire before you see it, and by the time you see it, you have run out of time to be afraid.

Pa plowed the firebreak. Ma wet every sack we owned. I was seven, and my job was the chickens, and I have never worked so hard at anything since. The fire went by us like a train going somewhere else. Afterward the whole world was black except our one square of yellow grass, and us standing in it, counting.

Line Camp

Ranch, winter line camp · Adult (30-45) · Southern US · 90 seconds

Hank Dooley and I spent four months snowed into a line cabin eleven feet square, and by February we had said everything two men can say and had started in on the things they shouldn't.

"You chew loud," he said one night.

"I'm eating a boiled bean, Hank. There is no quiet way."

"My wife chewed quiet."

I put the spoon down. In six years I had never heard him own to a wife.

"Didn't know you'd married."

"Wasn't long. Two years." He was looking at the stove door, the little orange line around it. "Fever took her, and the baby with her. I was up at the summer range. They'd been in the ground nine days when I rode in."

I did not know what to do with my hands.

"What was her name?"

"Alma."

"And the baby?"

"Never had one. Wasn't time." He rubbed his jaw. "I'd picked Thomas. Never told her. Figured I'd tell her when I got down."

We sat. A bean is not much of a supper, and I let mine go cold out of respect.

"Hank, I'm sorry for it."

"I know you are." Then he looked over, and I saw the old meanness come back into his face like a man getting home. "You still chew loud."

"I know I do."

"Thomas wouldn't have."

"No," I said. "I expect he'd have been better than either one of us."

Hank laughed. First time since November. It sounded like a gate that wanted oil.

Shipping Day

Contemporary, family ranch · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

On shipping day my grandfather counts the calves onto the truck out loud, and this year, for the first time, he lost count.

I heard it happen. "Sixty-one, sixty-two, sixty..." and then nothing. The calves kept going up the chute. He stood at the gate with his hand raised and his mouth a little open.

"Sixty-six, Grandpa," I said. I had been counting under my breath since the first one. I had been doing that for three years.

"I know it's sixty-six."

"Okay."

"Don't say okay like that."

I waved the driver to keep loading and came around the fence.

"Go sit in the pickup. I've got it."

"I have shipped off this place fifty-eight falls, Josie. I never needed a girl to count for me."

"You've got one anyway."

He didn't go to the pickup. He leaned on the gate, and after a while he took off his glove and looked at his hand, like the trouble might be in there.

"Your grandmother used to count behind me," he said. "Under her breath, same as you. Thought I couldn't hear. Forty years."

"Were you ever off?"

"Every blessed year. By one or two." He put the glove back on. "I just never had to know it, because she'd lean over and say the number like she was only agreeing with me."

The last calf went up. I called it. "Hundred and twelve."

He waited a second. Then he nodded, slow, like a man signing something.

"Hundred and twelve," he said. "That's what I had."

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