

EXT. NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS--DUSK.

A calm and darkening southwest desert evening... The horizon line spans wide and dominant, checkered with amber mesas and low-lying amber clouds... Vacant, rugged, yet it hums with the currents of sturdy life enfolded within this magnitude of harsh desert distance.

A long plume of smoke rises in a black line into the sky. It's coming from:

A DINNER CAMP

Snaps and pops from a modest campfire crackle below a worn tin cup overflowing with muddy coffee held just over the flames. Over this, a MAN'S VOICE espoused with a heavy twang chimes in:

BUNT (O.S.)
Well, m'son...

Following the cup to a greasy mouth lined with moist, yellow teeth and surrounded by gristle and beard stubbles. A swig of coffee goes down its hatch.

BUNT
...If your provender has shook down comfortably by now, we might as well jar loose and be moving along out yonder.

The mouth and voice belong to BUNT(60s). A gaunt man, his face chiseled, weather beaten-- an old timer cowboy. He stretches his face out with a yawn, and rises to his feet.

BUNT
Down in the Panamint Country...

Bunt spits out a hunck of chewed gristle.

BUNT
...we had a Chink that was a sure frying-pan expert, but this Dago-- my word! That ain't food fit for consumption by man, that supper.

Bunt makes his way towards a cluster of Pinto horses in the near distance, sharply backlit by the smoldering fire.

BUNT
...That's just an ingenious device for removing superfluous appetite. Next time I assimilate nutriment in this camp, I'm sure to chug some chloroform before hand...

As they approach the horses, Bunt pats the hind-quarters of one sturdy steed and adjusts the saddle's cinch.

BUNT (CONT'D)

...Careful to draw your cinch tight on that pinto bronc' of yours...She always swells up same as a horned toad soon as you begin to saddle up.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.

Riding away from their camp, Bunt and a motley brigade of three other CATTLEMEN, each on his own horse, pull steadily on through the desert night.

BUNT

Truth is, I'm type a guy at knows my west like a cockney knows his Piccadilly. Shoot, I've mined w' and for Ralston, 've soldiered with Crook, turned cards in a faro game at Laredo... I knew the Apache Kid, sure did.

A beat as they ride. The Cattlemen flanking Bunt are a pock-marked, salt and pepper haired MCGINNY with miner's knuckles, and two more no-nonsense COWBOYS with ten-gallon hats pulled down, almost covering their eyes. All of them ride with genuine ease.

Bunt regards the crisp night sky.

BUNT (CONT'D)

...Was fifteen times I've driven cattle from Texas to Dodge City--in the good old, rare old day when Dodge City was king of the cattle trade, and really as near to heaven as a cowboy can get.

The crew continues along a rickety, wooden fence. In the distant darkness, shimmering like a white, clapboarded tooth is a large country home with a wrap-around porch. One of its windows flickers with faint candlelight. A short distance from this home rests the wooden housing frames of three other soon-to-be residential homes still under construction. They are the sure signs of development.

BUNT (CONT'D)

...I've seen the end of gold and buffalo, the beginnings of cattle and wheat and 'course the disbursement of this, uh, urban sprawl... 'Ventually, this sprawlin' here's gonna cost me my occupation, my gun... my usefulness.

The stars spread out in a thick tapestry over the night sky like iridescent lace over black velvet.

The posse makes a right turn away from the private land towards a long and plated cluster of mesas. One of the cowboys slants dozily on his mount. He's getting tired. Bunt notices this, and spits, formulating loose thoughts in his head. He chuckles to himself.

BUNT

I rode a herd once in Nevada. Got to where I couldn't keep m' eyes open, I was that sleepy. And I'll tell you what I did. Had some eatin' tobacco along, and I chewed it to a spell, then rubbed that juice right into m' eyes. Wooo! Kept me up all night. Blame near blinded me, but I came through. Me and another man named Blacklock-- Cockeye Blacklock we called him, by reason of his having one eye that was some out of line.

PHOTOGRAPH

An almost faded turn-of-the-century, black and white PHOTOGRAPH depicting a two-shot of two cowboys in their prime. One of them has a lazy, googley, left eye. This is Cockeye Blacklock.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

Bunt rides, lost in thought.

BUNT

...Cockeye sure ought to have got it that night. He was a bad man for sure after all that I'd known him, and he did a heap a killin' 'fore he did get it.

A beat. One of the cowboys tips his hat up.

COWBOY 1

He did 'get it' finally, you say?

BUNT

Sure he did.

COWBOY 2

... This story have anything in it about treasure?

BUNT

No, it ain't 'bout treasure... ya nut... 's just 'bout the partial development, and subsequent decease, of as mean a greaser as ever stole stock...

EXT. CAMPFIRE. NIGHT.

Settled now for the night, Bunt and the crew lazily lay about around another popping campfire. Bunt lies on a woolen blanket, comfortable with a wad of tobacco in his cheeks, a leather satchel for a pillow and his hands behind his head.

BUNT

...See, Blacklock, as it started, worked down in Yuma and over into Arizona, where he'd picked up with a sure-thing gambler, and the two'd began to devastate the population.

EXT. NEW MEXICO SUNSET--EVENING.

A lone horserider gallops into a golden, southwestern, desert sunset.

BUNT (V.O.)

Then Blacklock cuts loose from his running mate...

BEGIN MONTAGE:

INT. POKER SALOONS. DAY/NIGHT.

Behind a man, Cockeye, sitting hunched over VARIOUS POKER TABLES-- constantly filled with empty shot glasses, spent meals, half-drunk bottles of some concoction or another, other cowboys, different sorts of country riff-raff, whores, crooked stacks of poker chips and thick fogs of cigar smoke.

BUNT (V.O.)
 ...and plays a lone hand through
 So' Cal and Nevada, up as far as
 Reno again...

END MONTAGE.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

Bunt sits up a little more now.

BUNT
 ...and there he stacks up against a
 kid-- a little tenderfoot kid so
 new he ain't cracked the green
 paint off him--and *skins* 'im.

PHOTOGRAPH

Sliding up another old black and white PHOTOGRAPH. First we see the chaps, then to the clean hands, and neatly pressed plaid shirt, to a freckled young TEENAGE BOY(17). But his frozen face looks mean-- he's ready for a fight.

BUNT (V.O.)
 ...And the kid, being foolish and
 impulsive-like, pulls out a
 peashooter.

EXT. RENO CITY STREET. DAY

A young hand slides out a little nickel-plated .22 pistol.

BUNT (V.O.)
 It was a dinky-pore, twenty-two.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

A frown slides down over Bunt's countenance. His eyes moist with sad memories. The twang in his voice seems to straighten.

BUNT
 And with the tears runnin' down his
 cheeks, he begins to talk tall.

EXT. RENO CITY STREET. DAY

An old-fashioned, high noon showdown. Behind Cockeye again with both hands ready to pull holstered fire-arms on either side. The young Teenager from the photograph stands 40 feet in the distance.

BUNT (V.O.)

Now what does that Cockeye do with that poor kid and his poor little bric-a-brac? Does he take his little dinky-metal away from him, and spank him, and tell him to go home'n slither away to his mamma? No, he never.

The Teenager whips out his little gun and SNAP-KA-BOOM-- it explodes in his hand.

BUNT (V.O.)

The kid's little tin pop-shooter explodes right in his hand before he can crook his fore finger twice, and while he's a-wondering what all has happened...

Behind Cockeye as he steps slowly towards the bewildered Teenager.

BUNT (V.O.)

Cockeye gets his two guns on him, slow and deliberate like, mind you, and throws forty-eights into him till he ain't worth shooting at no more.

The Teenager is ravaged with hungry bullets, ripping away his clothes and flesh, knocking his hat off, then his body down in a grim and gory spectacle.

BUNT (V.O.)

...Murders him like the mud-eating, horse-thieving, snake of a Greaser that he was...

Behind Cockeye as he holsters his flint-black .48s.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

Bunt momentarily stares towards the ground, searching for an answer to an unknown question. He drinks something strong and toxic from a tin flask.

BUNT

...but being with the law, the kid drawing on him first, he don't stretch hemp the way he should.

(MORE)

BUNT (cont'd)

Well, fin'ly this Blacklock blows into a mining camp with the cu-roos name, Why-Not, over in Placer County California where I'm chuck-tending on the night shift... Well, Cockeye drifts into town and begins diffusing trouble.

EXT. CAMP WHY-NOT. DUSK

Behind Cockeye again as he approaches a town sign labeled '*Why-Not*' in red paint. He stops to read it.

BUNT (V.O.)

First, he skinned some of the boys in the hotel over in town and a big row'd come of it.

Cockeye lifts his cowboy hat up to take in the vista of the small mining town, then heads for a building with a '*help welcome. paid.*' sign stuck onto a window.

BUNT (V.O.)

Next thing, one of the bedrock cleaners tried to get the jump on Cockeye, so he cuts loose on him with both guns-- Nobody hurt 'cept for a quarter breed, a good one too, but...

EXT. NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Bunt throws a fresh batch of snuff into his bottom lip. Bits of it hang out from his lips, at times breaking off and falling to the ground.

BUNT

...Amongst certain other tainted mem'ries, eventually he shoots up a Chink who's panning tailings, and by and by he finally gets run outta camp.

EXT. NEVADA MOUNTAINS. NIGHT

A lone cabin, nestled at the bottom of a gorgeous, sub-alpine basin, puffs out a billowing plume of black smoke from its chimney.

BUNT (V.O.)

So he goes to live in a ol' cabin
up by the mine ditch, and sits
there doing heaps a thinking, and
hatching up trouble like an old he-
hen.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

BUNT

You see, he always managed, with
all his killings and robbings and
generally sundry flimflamming, to
be just within the law. If anybody
took a notion to shoot him up, why,
his luck saw him through, and the
other man's shooting iron missed
fire, or exploded, or threw wild,
or such like, till it seemed as if
he sure did bear a charmed life;
and so he did...

PHOTOGRAPH

An old black and white PHOTOGRAPH of a confident GOLDEN LAB,
BEAGLE MUTT. Its nose points forward like a darting arrow.
This is Sloppy Weather.

BUNT (V.O.)

...till a yeller tamale of a fool
dog did for him what the law of the
land couldn't do.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

BUNT

...Yessir, a fool dog, a pup, a
blame yeller pup named Sloppy
Weather, did it in for that three-
card monte man, killer, and general
bedeviler.

Bunt takes a strong, double-gulp from the flask.

BUNT (CONT'D)

...Over in American Canyon, some
five miles maybe back of the mine,
they was a creek called the
American River, and it was chock-a-
block full of trouts.

(MORE)

BUNT (CONT'D)

The Boss used to go over there with a dinky fish pole like a buggy whip about once a week, and scout that stream for fish. Well, I used to go along with him to pack the truck, and one Saturday, about a month after Cockeye'd been run outta camp, we hiked up over the divide, to round up a bunch o' trouts. But when we got to the river, there was a mess for your life.

EXT. AMERICAN RIVER BANK. DAY

White bellies of dead, half-dead and wildly flopping FISH litter the banks of the AMERICAN RIVER.

BUNT (V.O.)

That river was full a dead trouts and not a scratch on'em, just dead...

Along with Bunt is the BOSS(50s), an older prospector with a heroic squint of a four-star general. He looks over the dead fish, his infuriation increasing until he rips his hat off and throws it to the ground.

BUNT (V.O.)

The Boss had the papsy-lals. I never did see a man so rip-r'aring, nose-snortin' mad.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

COWBOY 1 lifts his hat, peering out with one eye.

COWBOY 1

How'd you come to suspect ol' Cockeye?

BUNT

...It don't take no seventh daughter of no seventh daughter to trace trouble where Blackcock's about. I mean, he'd sudden shown up in town with a bunch of simoleons, buying bacon and tin cows and such, and generally giving it away that he's come into money. The Boss was watchin' his movements real sharp too and says to me one day:

INT. TOWN OFFICE. DAY

Inside a bare, log shack of a single-room office. Bunt and THE BOSS stand looking out the window towards:

COMMISSARY ENTRANCE

Cockeye Blacklock, stumbles out of a commissary stacked to his chin with white meat packages and fully-stocked paper bags.

THE BOSS

Bunt, the storm center of this here low area is man with a cockeye, an' I'll back that play with a paint horse against a paper dime.

BUNT

No takers. Dirty work and a cockeyed man are two heels of the same mule.

THE BOSS

Which is a-kicking of me in the stummick, frequent and painful.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

Bunt chucks his wad of tobacco away into the air.

BUNT

So me, the Boss, and this other one, Merry-Go-Round...

FILM FOOTAGE

Black and White LUMIERE FOOTAGE of a tall, rustic, regal, and stiff-hatted MERRY-GO-ROUND(50s) holding a shotgun, and winking to the camera.

BUNT (V.O.)

...that's what we called the marshal, him being so much all over the country...

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

BUNT

...gets together an' has a talky-talk, an' we lays it out as how Cockeye must be caught red-handed. Well, let me tell you...

(MORE)

BUNT (cont'd)

We tried him at sunup, an' again at sundown, an' nights too, laying in the chaparral an' tarweed, an' scouting up an' down that blame river, till we were so sore. I'll be a grimy pistolero if that bad egg didn't put it on us same as previous, an' we'd find new-killed fish every time. We were *fitchered*.

EXT. AMERICAN RIVER. DAY

The Boss grinds his teeth furiously and rips his hat off, throwing it to the ground in disgust.

BUNT (V.O.)

...and it got on the Boss's nerves.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

BUNT

We knew Blacklock was shooting the river, but we didn't have no evidence. Y' see, being shut off from cardsharpping, he was pressed to take up pot-hunting to get along... plain as red paint far as we thought... Well, things went along sort of catch-as-catch-can like this for maybe three weeks. And right here I got to interrupt, to talk some about the pup dog, Sloppy Weather.

PHOTOGRAPH

Another look at the black and white PHOTOGRAPH of the Golden Lab, Sloppy Weather-- same champion's pose.

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

BUNT

If he hadn't got caught up into this Blacklock game, no one'd ever thought enough about him to so much as kick him... He just hung round camp, grinning and giggling and playing the goat-- He used to go along with the car boys when they went swimmin' in the resevoy, an' dash along in an' yell an' fetch it to whichever party throwed it.

(MORE)

BUNT (cont'd)

That was his idea of fun-- just like a fool pup... Well, one day Sloppy's off chasing jackrabbits an' don't come home. Very next day after this, Mary-go-round and the Boss plans another scout. I'm to go too. It was a Wednesday, an' we lay it out that Cockeye'd prob'ly shoot that day so's to get his fish down to the railroad Thursday, so they'd reach Sacramento by Friday-- fish day, see... They was one big pool we hadn't covered for sometime, an' we made out we'd watch there... An hour later we heard a shoot some mile or so up the creek. They're no mistaking dynamite, least not to miners, an' that shoot'd been dynamite an' nothin' else. Then, pretty soon, a fish or so began to go by-- big fellers, some of 'em-- dead an' floatin', with their eyes popped way out, same as knobs. Sure sign they'd been shot.

EXT. AMERICAN RIVER BANK. DAY

The Boss glares angrily out over the river--his teeth grinding.

MARY-GO-ROUND crouches, looking up river-- his shimmering, gilded, star-of-the-law stuck to his jacket. He is 'shhhshing' everybody and overdoing it.

BUNT (V.O.)

...By-n-by we heard the manzanitas crack on the far side the canyon, an' there at last we see Blacklock working down toward the pool.

The Boss holds up a lone finger to the sky, causing everyone to freeze. We hold on him, quickly pushing in for a close up.

THE BOSS

...That's our man.

EXT. AMERICAN RIVER BANK. DAY

The rolling river bubbles and meanders its way between surrounding woods.

A large pair of hobnailed boots stalks carefully down the bank.

Cockeyed and rigid with tense shoulders, Cockeye Blacklock edges his way down the river. He nears a huge boulder and lays a big scoop net and a large paper sack nearly full of wet fish on the ground behind it. He squints around, peering into the woods at every leaf and every insect-- anything that moves. He scans the terrain for several moments, squatting down as if to aid his cognizance.

BUNT, MERRY-GO-ROUND, THE BOSS
They lie prone, trying to remain invisible next to some juniper shrubs.

COCKEYE
Still surveying his surroundings, hunting for something that could be there. He slides a single stick of dynamite out from his pants' hip. He takes a clump of twine from a front pocket and hastily ties the dynamite to a large stone.

SLOPPY WEATHER
The Golden Lab jogs just up river from Cockeye. Sloppy sits unnoticed, looking on curiously.

COCKEYE
lights the fuse and readies to heave the whole dynamite/stone contraption into the river. Suddenly, the stones slip from the twine's hold and CLIP-CLOP to the ground. Cockeye, distracted, makes an awkward throw, and the dynamite whirls wildly up and down into a tiny side pool by the river.

SLOPPY WEATHER
bolts for the dynamite bobbing around the pool, fuse smoking.

COCKEYE
spots the sprinting dog and raises his hands.

COCKEYE
Hey... Dog!... Dog!

Sloppy dips into the water and expertly wraps his jaws around the stick. The dog leaps up, and races for Cockeye as the dynamite's fuse continues to smoke.

Cockeye's eyes widen. He turns to run away from the ensuing mutt. He bends down as he runs to collect rocks which he chucks rapid-fire at his pursuer. Cockeye jukes, jives, and even tries to spook the dog away.

COCKEYE
Get outta here! Scat! Scat!

Cockeye makes a bee-line towards thicker woods, but Sloppy keeps close in step-- occasionally bouncing and hopping up next to him.

BUNT, MERRY-GO-ROUND, THE BOSS
They are a captive audience as they look on.

COCKEY
slips and crashes onto the rocky ground. Sloppy jumps up onto his back and hops around his side. Cockeye swipes at it, and scrambles up to resume his sprint. Sloppy keeps jumping up against him, and Cockeye keeps kicking at it and swiping his fist at it, clumsily running on the rocky terrain.

He falls again and gets turned over on his fall, forcing him flat on his butt. He recovers just in time for Sloppy Weather, live stick of dynamite still in its jaws, fuse at its sputtering end, to leap up and into Cockeye's lap-

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT. - CONTINUOUS

Bunt's countenance shows like a wild-eyed oracle after seeing the face of God.

BUNT
...Boom...

The McGinny and the two Cowboys return engrossed stares, on the verge of not believing what they've just heard... Slowly, their shocked faces smear into childlike delight. They laugh hysterically. Cowboy 1 falls to the ground clutching his sides. Bunt eats it up.

BUNT
...The whole bank of the canyon opens out like a big wave, and slops over into the pool, an' the air is full of trees and rocks, and cartloads of dirt, an' dogs, an' Blacklocks, an river, an' smoke, an' fire generally.

EXT. AMERICAN RIVER BANK. DAY

The Boss gets a spat of mud into his eye. Earthy debris drops on Bunt and Mary-go-round's hats. They peer towards the damage.

BUNT (V.O.)

Well, when the smoke had finally cleared, we found a good deal of the man, but there wan't hide nor hair of Sloppy Weather...Didn't have to dig no grave either. Was a big enough hole to bury a horse an' wagon let alone that ol' Greaser... So we planted 'em there an' put up a board.

EXT. AMERICAN RIVER BANK. DAY

A measley, weather-warped board tied up to a stake is pathetically shanked into the ground. It reads:

Here lies most of C. BLACKLOCK, who died of a entangling alliance with a stick of dynamite.

Bunt, The Boss, and Merry-go-round solemnly stand, admiring their handy-work.

BUNT VO

...I think that board lasted for 'bout two years...

EXT. NORTH NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS. NIGHT.(CONT'D)

Bunt is throwing some sticks into the embers of the dying fire. The black sky is slowly illuminating. Bunt's breath steams out of his mouth.

BUNT

...till the freshest of '82 when the American River-- Hello, there's the sun!

The eastern sky begins to flame roseate. Sagebrush bares a thin line of frost. The wilderness seems alive, if but waking from a deep slumber.

The horses are working the ground thoroughly for their morning breakfasts.

Bunt unfolds to his feet, sweeps off his pants and stretches towards the sky.

BUNT

Fire's a ghost now, boys... What's say we get an early go at it...

(MORE)

BUNT (cont'd)
Can't stand bein' stuck for too
long.

The group starts packing up the camp.

On the horizon, the sun's eye cracks and bursts over the edge
of the earth. A new day begins.

Black.

THE END