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# Fiction: Day of the Buffalo

by Laird Roberts

*(Based on the diaries and accounts of Ephraim Hanks and Feramorz Little)*

*Many lives depended on what happened in the next few minutes.*

*Ephraim Hanks knew that it was out of his hands.*

Laird Roberts, "Day of the Buffalo," *New Era*, July 1984, 15

"Sixteen-inch walls." Ephraim Hanks whispered the words and the sound was lost in an icy wind. It had been summer when he built the walls, and now it was winter. Now there was a deep, penetrating, cold wind that reached through his clothes with frozen, burning fingers, and even his bones ached from its touch. Now he wanted to get out of the wind, to find shelter from it; but the thought of the walls kept him going.

The low winter sky was darkening. The wind grew strong into a steady, unbroken gust and raised up a fine mist of crystal spray across a vast rolling ocean of moon-white hills. A dark curtain of tattered storm clouds blew along the horizon. Hidden behind the clouds the sun was setting, and night, a cold liquid blackness, was coming fast.

At night, with the wind, Ephraim knew it would get cold enough to kill a man without shelter. His instincts told him to stop, to bury himself wrapped in buffalo robes under the snow. He had been caught in cold before, many times, and it was his instinct, his will for survival, that had kept him alive. But now there was something else, something deeper, something he trusted more; and the walls, memory of the walls, stood a fortress between that and the powerful wind instinct.

His horse, a big-boned black, slipped, suddenly plunging forward and down into the snow. Catching its balance it stood breathing heavily, then staggered on through the knee-deep snow. It was a powerful animal with great endurance, but it had been going since morning and was wearing down. Ephraim knew it wouldn't last much longer.

It would be better to stop, he thought, better for the horse.

He lifted his head into the wind, searching the horizon. Somewhere ahead, somewhere along the Sweetwater River (Wyoming), he had heard a large band of Sioux were camped for the winter.

If I can reach the village, he thought. But why now? Why tonight? Even if I found the village and they would help, it would be impossible to get back until late tomorrow. It would be better to stop now and look for the village in the morning. A couple of hours, even a half a day, won't matter to the men.

He thought of them, behind him 20 miles, 30, 40—it seemed an endless distance back through the snow, waiting for him, counting on his help. If he didn't make it back ...

Ephraim stopped his horse. It was dark. He had to stop. He clasped his gloved hands together and whispered a prayer. His frozen breath steamed up white in the cold air.

He finished. Inside, deep, distant and close, the voice, if it could be called a voice (it was more like fire) whispered for him to keep going.

The horse started again.

Ephraim remembered seeing a man die in the snow. The man just gave up, lay down, and stopped living. The man had been strong and healthy. Ephraim had seen that in another way in other men, good men who laid down what they believed in.

The wind blew wraiths of snow around and against Ephraim. It made a soft, flutelike sound. His mind seemed to dull with the sound, and his thoughts moved like the mists the wind blew across the hills.

He was bent over in the saddle with his head down. His fingers and cheeks were numb, and the numbness spread gently around, covering his neck and arms, burning flesh yielding to anesthesia. It slowly moved inward. A drowsy warmth spread over his body. He had seen this happen to other men in the cold. Soon it would be too late. Soon he would slip into a warm, comfortable sleep. There was a drifting, falling sensation.

In Ephraim's mind the winter, the cold, the flutelike sound began to dissolve. It was summer, July. The sun burned hot and bright in the sky. There was the spicy, warm smell of hot sagebrush. A lizard with a gray body and bright blue sides sat motionless on a rock with only his transparent eyelids moving.

Sweat streaked Ephraim's face. He had arrived in Salt Lake Valley a few weeks before and was building his first home. There was a strong frame of thick pine poles. Next to the frame, piles of yellow-brown adobe bricks were stacked neatly. They were good, strong bricks made from fine clay, the finest in the valley.

To help him build the walls, Ephraim had hired a bricklayer. They had finished laying the brick walls waist high when they heard the carriage coming. The lizard vanished beneath the rock.

Brigham Young leaned forward in his carriage. His shirt and trousers were gray with dust.

"Brother Hanks, how thick are you building the walls?"

"Eight inches, President Young."

Brigham licked his lips, moved his eyes slowly over the building frame and partially finished walls, over the stacked pile of bricks, and then directly into Ephraim's eyes. Ephraim felt their deep, blue embracing power. Brigham's lip curled up and a broad smile spread across his face.

"Double that," he said. "Make those walls 16 inches thick."

Before Ephraim could ask questions President Young disappeared behind a cloud of dust. The dust settled slow in the still, hot air.

"Sixteen-inch walls," the bricklayer exhaled. "That's crazy. That's twice as many bricks. We'd have to tear everything down, start over. We'd even have to build new frames. Most people only build six-inch walls. Sixteen inches is crazy."

The bricklayer looked down at his hands and then took off his hat and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. It left a dark streak.

"You're not going to do it are you, Eph?"

"Sixteen-inch walls," Ephraim repeated the words. Silent, he watched the dust settle. The lizard came from under the rock and sat motionless in the sun. Ephraim tasted the hot air.

Sixteen-inch walls, why? He thought of the work already put into the house. It would take two more weeks just for brick with 16-inch walls. Was President Young just throwing advice out of the top of his hat?

Ephraim squatted down and drew a circle in the gray soil. The hot stillness was intense. He could hear the bricklayer's breathing. Anger came into him suddenly. He took a handful of soil in a tight fist.

"No. I will not do it."

His muscles tensed. The veins stuck out on his arms.

Then he relaxed his hand. The soil sifted through his fingers.

"Have I come this far for nothing? Nauvoo, the Mormon Battalion? I've followed him here. I won't stop now." He exhaled softly.

"Sixteen-inch walls," Ephraim smiled and looked at the bricklayer. "Maybe President Young is just throwing advice out of the top of his hat, maybe not. It doesn't matter. The Lord chose him to lead, and I'm gonna follow."

A week after the house was finished, the rain came. After a month of no rain, it came in hard driving waves from fierce, black clouds. At first it pocked the earth with small craters, the dry soil unable to hold it, and the water rolled off, cutting little, growing furrows. Then the furrows snaked down and met with a hundred more furrows until the dry wash beds filled with angry, gray water. The floods came out of the canyons, newborn rivers, covering, fanning out, ripping, and tearing.

Then the rain stopped, and the sun sent warm, orange radials down from a rift in the clouds. Most of the new houses along the foothills were gone, clothing, furniture, everything not carried to high ground, lost beneath alluvials of mud and rock.

But in the orange glow the 16-inch walls still stood.

"Sixteen-inch walls," Ephraim formed the words in his mouth. The cold burned his face around his lips. It was winter again, but there was still the orange light.

Light from inner fires made the tepees glow in the night and washed across the hollow, the small village spread across with a pale orange. Somewhere below Ephraim, in the village, the sharp yelp of a dog broke the night silence. More dogs followed the first, and this chorus was mixed with the soft sound of human voices.

Ephraim stopped his horse in a circle of tepees. The air smelled of burning pine. He waited on his horse, as was Sioux custom, to be invited to step down. Several dogs, growling and crouching low, moved close, smelling and threatening.

An old woman came from a large tepee and motioned Ephraim to follow her. The dogs cowered back.

Inside the tepee the woman pointed to a pile of buffalo robes and disappeared through the entrance. Ephraim sank onto the robes. A fire near the center of the tent threw waves of heat against him. The warmth brought feeling back to his skin. It throbbed with pain and blood. There was smell of wet leather and smoke. Smoke hung low in the tepee and curled up slowly through a hole in the top. Ephraim's clothes thawed and steamed.

After awhile an old man with bowed legs and a seamed, leather face came in and sat cross-legged opposite from Ephraim. A large, lanky dog followed and sprawled next to him on the floor.

The fire slanted shadows of the old Indian's form against the tepee wall. He rested his right hand on his left and silently studied Ephraim with strong, unyielding eyes. His eyes were large and brown with small flecks of yellow around the edges, and the large, dark irises reflected the flames from the fire. Below the eyes a scar ran jagged down his face to his neck. The old Indian's face was as expressionless as stone.

More Indians came until there was a circle of them around the fire.

The old Indian lifted his shoulders back. His hair shone silver in the firelight. He looked around the circle and back to Ephraim.

"Who are you? What do you want with us?" He spoke English.

Ephraim looked directly into the old Indian's eyes. Only the crackling of the fire was heard.

"I am Ephraim Hanks, and I have come as a friend. My people are the people who pulled the carts across the prairie." Ephraim waved his hands up to emphasize his words.

"Our leader is Brigham Young, who speaks with the Great Spirit."

The old Indian suddenly stood. The eyes of all the Indians in the circle followed him up and then went quickly back to Ephraim, glaring. Their eyes looked fierce in the firelight.

Ephraim felt a weight in the pit of his stomach, and the muscles on the back of his neck stiffened. His heart pounded in his chest. The old dog lifted his head, sniffing the tension in the air. The fire popped loudly and made gooseflesh on Ephraim's arm. He felt for his knife handle under his shirt.

Ephraim calmed himself. He wouldn't fight unless he had to.

The old Indian narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Do you also speak with the Great Spirit?"

Ephraim nodded and relaxed.

"Do you have the power of the Great Spirit?" the old Indian asked.

"Yes."

The old Indian leaned down and said something Ephraim couldn't hear. Two Indians left the tepee, and the rest talked excitedly among themselves. The old Indian's eyes studied Ephraim even more intently. Outside the tepee the eternal night wind blew. The fire flared up and died to glowing coals. An Indian carefully placed more wood on it.

The two Indians came back through the entrance carrying a litter and laid it in front of Ephraim. On it lay an unconscious boy. His closed eyes were sunk deep in his skull. Skin was stretched pale and loose over his skeleton frame. The boy's chest rose and fell with desperate breathing. He smelled of death.

"My grandson was injured several moons ago when his horse fell during a buffalo hunt. He has not moved or spoken since. You have the power of the Great Spirit." The old Indian was looking into the fire.

Ephraim nodded his head.

"I do."

"Will you ask the Great Spirit to make my boy well?"

Ephraim nodded again.

He took a steer horn flask he carried hung from his waist and uncorked it. Ephraim knew if he failed, there would be no help. If the boy dies tonight ... He thought again of the walls. I've come this far. I won't stop now.

The olive oil poured liquid gold in the fire's light. Ephraim anointed the boy the way the boy's own people had done in another time and place with the same power. The prayer came suddenly. Ephraim knew a few Sioux words, and now they flowed in a gushing stream. The fire flared bright and glowed on faces. The old Indian's eyes swam brilliant in tears. A fire burned in Ephraim and cooled. The prayer was finished. The boy opened his eyes. He sat up weakly, looked at Ephraim, and then threw his arms around the old Indian.

It was morning. There was an autumn like mist on the ground. The sky had cleared during the night. Pools of sunlight slanted between the tepees. The air smelled of sunshine and melting snow. The old Indian's eyes were bright.

"Stay with us awhile," he said.

"I can't," Ephraim answered. "My people need help. They need food. They were caught with wagons in the heavy snow 30 days ago. Can you help?"

The old Indian turned from Ephraim.

"Buffalo are scarce this year, and the snows are deep. My people are on the edge of starvation. Our children cry at night. If we give any of our food we will die. No, we cannot help. I am sorry." He turned toward Ephraim but didn't look directly into his eyes. "Ask the Great Spirit to bring us buffalo, and then we will both feast."

The fire burned again in Ephraim. "The Great Spirit led me to you for help. If you will help us now and trust the Great Spirit, there will be many buffalo come through your lands in three days."

The old Indian shook his head. "I am sorry," he said softly. "Our children cry in the night for food. My people would starve if the buffalo did not come. There will be some who will die as it is." He shook his head again. "You ask too much of me."

He turned and walked slowly away.

Ephraim swung up onto his horse. The old Indian turned and watched him disappear over the white hills. Ephraim reached the wagon train before dark that night.

The sun settled the snow the next day, and the going was easier for the wagons. Ephraim was driving the lead wagon. The day was quiet. The only sound was the noise of the mules' hooves in the snow and the rattle of the wagons. The men were silent. Ephraim had been their last hope for food.

As they came over the crest of a small swale, the Indians came down suddenly and formed a double line along the trail. The men raised their guns ready to fight. Ephraim leaned over and waved his hand back at them. He drove forward.

As he passed through the line, the braves each handed him a large bundle of dried buffalo meat. The old Indian was last in the line. He handed Ephraim his bundle, smiled, turned his horse and rode away. The others followed.

Months later, in the spring, Ephraim Hanks and Feramorz Little were making a return trip from Independence, Missouri, to Salt Lake City when they met an old trader on the trail.

"Hey, Ephraim, what did you do to get them Sioux all stirred up?" he asked. "They been ridin' all over the country lookin' for you. They said something about some buffalo. Didn't make any sense. They said the buffalo came in three days."

*Historical note: During the Utah War, Federal troops were ordered to Utah. In an effort to keep news of the order from reaching Utah, mail service to Salt Lake City was stopped. When mail failed to arrive in Salt Lake, the U.S. Postmaster gave Ephraim Hanks and Feramorz Little a special commission to carry mail east to Independence, Missouri. After receiving a special blessing from the First Presidency of the Church, Ephraim and Feramorz left on December 11, 1856.*

*When they crossed over the continental divide and came to Ash Hollow, they found the Majors and Russel freight teams stranded in the snow. They had been there for over 30 days, and their food supplies were dangerously low. Ephraim and Feramorz offered to help the men. Ephraim set out alone looking for food while Little stayed to help with the wagons.*

*Hanks and Little reached Independence on February 27, 1857.*