

BUTTON, BUTTON, WHO DROPPED THE BUTTON?

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Fort Cameron shut down the year I was born, 1883 to be exact, eleven years too soon for me. I'd have liked to watch those soldiers parading and practicing. Instead, I had to settle for scavenging their left behind bits. That's why I was crouched next to the old barracks steps, staring at a button in my palm.

Ephraim and I had found buttons there before, big, brassy ones that might have dropped off a dress uniform. But this one was different—flint-black with a raised buffalo head design.

“Frank”—Ephraim peered at it—“you think this belonged to a soldier?”

“Don't think so,” I said, tipping it to the sun. Everything else we'd collected was tarnished and grimy, but this button glinted like a wink.

“Maybe someone from town's been up here,” Ephraim said. “Maybe someone's trying to clean out the fort afore we can.”

“Maybe.” I said, though I doubted anyone but us would be interested. Still, it needed looking into. With those soldiers gone, somebody had to man the fort.

“Come on.” I beckoned Ephraim. “Uncle Talmage can tell us who belongs to this button.”

A half-mile walk later, we stepped through the door of Uncle Talmage's Variety Store and into its overstuffed aisles. Uncle Talmage carried a bit of everything there, including a whole case full of buttons. I peered through its glass top and saw all sorts of fasteners but none like the one in my hand.

Uncle Talmage moseyed by and asked what we needed. I opened my fingers and showed him our find. He studied it through his specs. "Nope. No soldier could have lost this," he said. "Black glass buttons are fairly new. I've had a few in my store, but none with this design."

"What about the townsfolk?" I asked. "Anyone around here have buttons like this?"

Uncle Talmage shook his head. "Not that I've seen." He smiled wide. "And I pay pretty close attention."

Ephraim grinned at me as we left the store. "That's a relief. The fort's still ours." He paused, a hand on his belly. "Must be nearing supper time."

My stomach agreed. But I couldn't go home just yet. Something strange was going on at that old fort and I could almost hear those long-gone soldiers whispering at me, urging me to figure it out.

"Ephraim," I said, "if that button didn't belong to someone in the fort, or in town, then who dropped it?"

Ephraim stared at me, eyes a-blank, and I could tell his brain was already sitting at the supper table. "I don't know," he said.

Good thing a thought struck me instead. "It had to be somebody from outside." I grabbed his arm and pulled him across Main Street. "What's an out-of-towner doing at our fort?"

That question got Ephraim fired up. He started moving on his own steam 'til we both came to a trot. We galloped through the east side of town and up Canyon Road to where the fort's black rock buildings cozied up against the foothills.

Puffing hard, we stopped next to the barracks porch. The button had been there, next to that hole in the wood slats.

"What now?" Ephraim peered about, as if the outsider might have signed his name somewhere.

"Just look around," I said, "see what else you can find."

Ephraim turned and stopped again just as quick. "Ugh," he groaned, lifting his foot from a pile of horse plop. "Here's something. Pretty fresh, too." He examined his sole with a practiced eye. "Less than a week old, I'd say."

"Somebody on horseback then." I thumped the porch railing. "Must have tied his beast just here."

Stooping, I examined the ground. Yep, there was the pointed toe of a boot, and the heel where he'd sunk deep when he dismounted. And . . .

"Lookee here, Ephraim." I pointed to a slash mark in the dust, just behind the heel.

Ephraim crouched and drew breath. "Spurs," he said, his voice hushed.

Not many men around used spurs, not when a kindly heel nudge was enough for a working horse. Only a feisty few relied on them to get up to speed.

"Outlaw," we both said.

Suddenly, the clues made sense. "Ephraim," I said, "he's stashed something under the porch."

One shared look was enough and then we were both on our knees, scrabbling to get through the hole. The fit between boards was tight—the bandit must have popped the button on his squeeze through.

Once in, we slowed, breathing in dust and dark. And that’s when I heard *clip-clop, clip-clop*, just outside the porch.

The bandit was back.

I was facing the wrong way, but I could picture him out there, perched on his steed, spurs and black buttons gleaming. And I nearly cried. I should’ve ignored those soldiers’ whispers. I should’ve gone home to mama’s biscuits when my stomach told me to.

“Ephraim . . . Frank!” came a call. “Supper’s ready!”

Phew! It was Ephraim’s brother, Sam.

“Here,” Ephraim warbled and he backed out of the hole. I followed him on shaky knees, but took one last glance as I went.

And I saw it—a small traveling trunk, shoved into a corner.

With a lunge, I caught hold of the handle and dragged the trunk out into the sunset.

“Found it,” I said and I threw back the lid.

My eyes must have gone round as moons because that’s what Ephraim’s did. Sam slid from his horse, all the way to his knees.

“Bank notes.” He picked up a bundle. “From that robbery across the mountain, I bet. How’d you find them?”

“With this.” The button winked up at us from my palm.

I didn’t tell Sam about the whispers or about my weak moment when I thought I was surrounded by the enemy. But I’d decided something.

It took a lot of gumption to be a soldier, maybe more than I had. But if they ever nudged me again, I hoped I'd listen. To them. Not to my stomach.