



The Horse Eater

By Shane Lacy Hensley

Our twisted tale of the Weird West(TM) begins, of all places, in the City of Lost Angels, California. The Cult of Lost Angels, under the leadership of Hezekiah Grimme, is constantly trying to thwart the influx of settlers and technology to the region. Such things upset their secret cannibalistic rituals, you see.

The railroads are the cult's worst nightmares. They bring more tinhorns and lawmen to California than a fellow can shake a gnawed leg-bone at. So the cult sends its followers out to sabotage any company that gets close to linking their lines into a transcontinental railroad.

The latest object of their peculiar affections is the Iron Dragon Railroad. Iron Dragon signed a treaty with the Sioux Nations earlier this year ('76) and ran a line right through South Dakota and the treaty city of Deadwood. The Sioux's only restrictions were that Iron Dragon could not make any stops other than Deadwood and they could not lay their tracks through the sacred "Paha Sapa" or Black Hills.



Iron Dragon eagerly agreed. Who wanted to build a rail line over steep hills anyway? Even better, the protection of the fierce Sioux warbands meant rival railroad gangs couldn't sabotage their line. This made the "Dakota Stretch" a crucial link in completing Iron Dragon's transcontinental railroad.

The Cult of Lost Angels isn't pleased with this platonic arrangement, so Grimme sent two of his Outer Circle members to start trouble between the railroad and the Sioux. The cultists hope to start a war that will ruin the entire Dakota Stretch and raise their status with Brother Grimme.

The Scheme

To do this, Brothers Emmanuelle Strong and Jacob Wyse spent some time in Deadwood to study the situation and then devised a simple but cunning plan. They sabotaged a bridge between Deadwood and the Iron Dragon's main line and lay in wait for a repair crew to come fix it. Then they jumped the crew, pushed their pump-car into the river, and took the captives up into the Black Hills.

The cultists made camp the first night in an old trapper's cabin near a swamp formed by the bowl of several peaks. They planned on killing their captives the next morning and planting

false evidence to suggest the rail crew was actually a survey team looking to lay a line through the Black Hills. This would anger the Sioux, while Iron Dragon would assume the Indians murdered their repairmen.

Chance Encounter

But that night, something went terribly amiss. An ancient creature known to the Sioux as the "Horse Eater" lived in the swamp beside the cultist's camp. The cultists watched in reverent fascination as it's slimy touch burned the flesh of the captured rail crew's horse. It devoured the liquefied animal in minutes, then killed one of the crewmen who tried to rush by it and escape. One of the repair crew got away--Brothers Strong and Wyse jumped into the stolen wagon and fled into the night.

The next day, Strong and Wyse returned to the swamp. Strangely, the horse had been devoured but the body of the dead rail worker was left untouched. Brother Strong instantly realized how he could turn misfortune into opportunity. They had spotted a Sioux village nearby with a large herd of horses. If he could get the swamp creature to attack the Sioux's horses, then set it up so that the Sioux found the body of the repair man and the fake survey maps, the Indians would believe that not only had Iron Dragon secretly surveyed the Black Hills for a new rail line, their careless treachery had also awakened a monster.

The trouble was leading the creature to the Sioux village. This meant stealing a few of their horses to make a "trail" from the swamp to the village. Strong pulled this off easily enough, and within three days, the Horse Eater attacked the Sioux village.

Never Smiles

One of the Sioux, a champion named Never Smiles fought the Horse Eater and was burnt by its acidic touch. Never Smiles could not defeat the monster and fled for his life, but the touch of its slug-like flesh gave him an idea how he might defeat it. Salt.

Never Smiles hoped shotguns loaded with rock salt would kill the Horse Eater. Unfortunately, he had neither shotguns nor enough salt to kill a monster the size of the Horse Eater. So Never Smiles sent money and an order to a trader he knew in Deadwood. Besides the shotguns, shells, and salt he ordered several other items to help conceal the contraband (the Federal government does not allow the sale of weapons to tribes of the Sioux Nations.)

Never Smiles also knew a friend in Deadwood who owed him a favor, and sent word for him to escort the wagon-load of supplies to his village just east of the Black Hills.

While the impatient Never Smiles was waiting for his salt and shotguns, he decided to venture into the hills and find the thing's lair. The creature attacked only at night, so Never Smiles figured he would be safe if he searched the Black Hills only in the daytime. He hadn't counted on the Brothers Strong and Wyse. The cultists caught Never Smiles poking around the swamp and got the drop on him with their rifles. Then they beat him up and dragged him to a ruined cabin along the Horse Eater's nightly path.

Chapter One: Deadwood

One of the posse is the unfortunate fellow who owes Never Smiles a favor. The Marshal, that's you, partner, needs to pick a character that will feel honor-bound to pay back the favor and keep this adventure going. Another Indian makes a good choice, as does a cowpoke with Hindrances like loyal, honest, or heroic. Good guys make such easy pickings.

Never Smiles has sent word that it's time to repay his favor. He's arranged for a wagon-load of supplies to be picked up from an Indian trader named Dean. He needs his friend and his companions to escort the wagon to his village some 40 miles northeast of Deadwood.

The trip starts in Deadwood on Saturday, November 6th, 1876, sometime before noon. It's cold and wet in South Dakota this time of year, so the group should be well-outfitted with coats, blankets, and rain-slickers. Never Smiles' supplies are already paid for. Trader Dean has everything packed in a rickety buckboard ready to go. Dean chucked the list of what's supposed to be in the wagon, so the posse will have to trust the trader that what's inside is what Never Smiles paid for.

Inside the Wagon

The supplies are concealed by a tight canvas tarp tied over the wagon. The posse shouldn't get an inventory unless they actually untie the tarp and poke around. If they do, they'll find the following:

Contents

4 Barrels of flour

16 20 pound bags of rock salt

107 surplus US Army blankets with shotguns wrapped in the bottom-most blankets

A barrel of 50 shotgun shells covered by a layer of nails

1 keg of whiskey marked "sugar"

A character who makes a Foolproof (3) Knowledge roll knows the Sioux Nations have announced that anyone caught bringing whiskey into their territory would be dealt with under the law of the tribe that catches them. This means death in most tribes. Never Smiles hopes the whiskey will burn the creature if the salt doesn't work.

Dean's rickety wagon can make 40 miles a day, so it should take the posse only about a day or two to get to the village.

Bounty

Give the posse 1 bounty point for agreeing to repay Never Smile's favor. Add 1 for each of the 3 contraband items they discover in the wagon.

Chapter Two: Portents

As the posse journeys east, they'll come across Elk Creek. The Iron Dragon line crosses the creek here before heading southwest toward Deadwood. Or at least it would if a 3 yard section of track in the middle of the bridge wasn't missing it's ties.

Anyone looking for tracks will have a difficult time because of the cultist's efforts to conceal

their presence. Still, on an Incredible (11) *trackin'* roll, wagon tracks leading from the east can be found. The wagon was heavily loaded until it stopped a few yards from the bridge. At that point there are strange drag marks leading into the deeper water beneath the bridge. The tracks then get much lighter as they lead to a shallow ford twenty yards to the north. The wagon came out the other side but disappears a few yards from shore.

The creek below the bridge is just over 4 feet deep. Should anyone plumb its depths they'll see what made the strange drag marks-enough wooden ties to repair those missing from the center of the bridge.

This is where the repair crew's wagon full of replacement ties was jumped by Brothers Strong and Wyse. The cultists then dumped the railroad ties into the river and took the captives and their wagon into the hills.

Bounty

The posse gets 1 bounty point for poking around the mess and gathering clues. Add two more if they find the rail ties hidden in the creek.

Chapter Three: Angry Clouds

The posse will be noticed as they approach Never Smiles' village. Braves on horseback will ride near and ask them their business. The characters are expected so there shouldn't be much difficulty in dealing with the warriors. The Sioux village is but one of many Lakota settlements. Twenty men, 28 women, and 8 children currently occupy the various lodges. All stare curiously at the posse as they ride into the center of their home.

When the group stops, an old, haggard Indian approaches. This is Angry Clouds, the tribe's Shaman. After brief formalities, Angry Clouds speaks:

"Welcome to our home. The one you seek is not here. Never Smiles has gone to Paha Sapa to fight the evil. But he cannot succeed without this wagon. You must take it to him."

Paha Sapa are, of course, the Black Hills. Should the party refuse to travel there, Angry Clouds reminds the character who owed Never Smiles of his obligation. A few angry young braves might also encourage the posse to take the wagon on to Never Smiles.

When the party does finally agree, Angry Clouds tells them what he knows of Never Smiles' fate:

"The evil came several nights ago. Every night one pony was taken. Never Smiles and several other braves vowed they would catch the thief and hid among the ponies on the sixth night. The evil came and killed most of them before taking another pony. This time the evil ate the pony and left its bones. Never Smiles was hurt badly but he said he knew how to defeat the evil. The next morning he sent two notes to Deadwood. He said he would slay the creature when it returned that night with the supplies you were to bring. He wanted to spend the day trying to find the creature's lair. Never Smiles promised he would be gone only a few hours then he would return and tell us of his

plan. That was early this morning. Now it is almost night and he has not returned. You must find him tonight-before the Horse Eater rises again."

Angry Clouds is insistent that the posse go looking for Never Smiles immediately. His fresh tracks require only a Fair (5) *trackin'* roll to follow.

Bounty

Add 1 to the posse's bounty once they've picked up Never Smiles' trail.

Chapter Four: Lacy O'Malley

Black Hills: Fear Level 2

Never Smiles' trail leads the group down a winding trail for just under half an hour. The trail is usually 3-4 yards wide, so they should have little difficulty getting their wagon through the hills.

After a half hour of travel, the posse sees a burnt wagon in a pass between two steep cliffs fifty yards ahead. Standing before it are two men and their horses. One man wears an all white suit and hat. The other is hidden beneath the canvas sack of a tripod camera.

When the group draws near enough, the camera flashes on the macabre scene and a dark-haired Italian man emerges from beneath the canvas. He is a studio photographer dragged from Deadwood by the other man, a blonde-haired Irishman named Lacy O'Malley, a well-known newshound for the *Tombstone Epitaph*. Anyone who reads the rag likely knows his name as well as his reputation.

Lacy greets the posse cautiously when they first approach. He was in Deadwood when he got a tip that an Iron Dragon rail crew had gone missing. His investigations brought him here. If asked, Lacy tells the posse that Iron Dragon is not allowed into the sacred Black Hills. In his opinion, these men trespassed and were killed by nearby Sioux. As far as he can figure, Iron Dragon is looking to break their treaty with the Sioux by running a line through the Black Hills. He figures they staged the break themselves as an excuse to send their "repair crew" out into the Nations. From there the crew could sneak on into the hills to survey a pass.

In truth, Brother Strong staged this scene to blame the murder of the repair crew on the Sioux. He was forced to burn the body to hide the horrible scars caused by the repairman's death at the hands of the Horse Eater.

Lacy O'Malley

Lacy is tenacious to the point of annoying. Both the Pinkertons and the Texas Rangers despise him for constantly revealing abominations to the public.

Corporeal: D:3d6, N:2d8, Q:1d6, S:2d6, V:1d6

Climbin' 1d8, dodge 2d8, filchin' 2d6, horse ridin' 1d8, lockpickin' 2d6, shootin': pistols 2d6, sneak 4d8, swimmin' 1d8

Mental: C:3d6, K:1d6, M:1d4, Sm:1d8, Sp:2d4

Academia: occult 3d6, area knowledge: Tombstone 2d6, arts: photography 2d8, bluff 2d8, guts

2d4, language: French 2d6, overawe 1d4, persuasion 3d4, professional: journalism 3d6, ridicule 2d8, scroungin' 1d8, scrutinize 5d6, search 4d6, streetwise 2d8

Gear: Lacy carries a steno pad, pen, and a .38 caliber revolver

Examining the Scene

In the seat of the wagon is a charred body with several arrows sticking out of it. Everyone present should make *guts* checks, but the Marshal should modify the difficulty based on each character's previous experiences. The blackened sideboards of the wagon read "Iron Dragon Railroad." Lying in and about it are survey tools and hand-drawn maps of the area showing a new rail line cutting directly through this pass.

There is one important clue that can later help reveal Strong's scheme. The hand-drawn survey maps were made by brother Wyse, not an experienced engineer. If a character has *science: engineerin'* or experience working on a railroad, have him or her make a roll. On an Onerous (7) success for the former or an Incredible (11) success for the latter, the examiner realizes the maps are completely useless.

Babblings of a Madman

Just as the group finishes investigating the scene, Lacy says that there were supposed to be two members of the repair crew. As if on cue, the surviving repairman comes running out of the woods. The man grabs onto the nearest character and starts ranting.

"Eyes. . . evil. . . claws like Bowie knives. . . slimy skin like an eel. Bullets bounced right off it. I want to go home!"

Charlie is the man lying dead in the burnt wagon. The repairman will point at him as he says his name. If the posse asks him about the wagon or the "attack," he'll simply shake his head and say "No!" That's the best the posse will get out of this fellow. The things he's seen in the last two days have driven him completely over the edge.

Assuming the party has told Lacy about the missing Never Smiles, he'll decide to tag along. His photographer eagerly volunteers to take the mad repairman back to Deadwood.

Bounty

The posse gets 2 bounty points for poking around the mess and gathering clues. Add 1 more if someone notices the poor quality of the survey maps.

Chapter Five: The Rescue

The Bog and Overlook: Fear Level 3

Never Smile's tracks lead to a deep bowl between several high hills. The bowl holds a large swamp full of scraggly trees, tall weeds, and thick muck. Never Smiles' tracks lead around the swamp several times before they disappear.

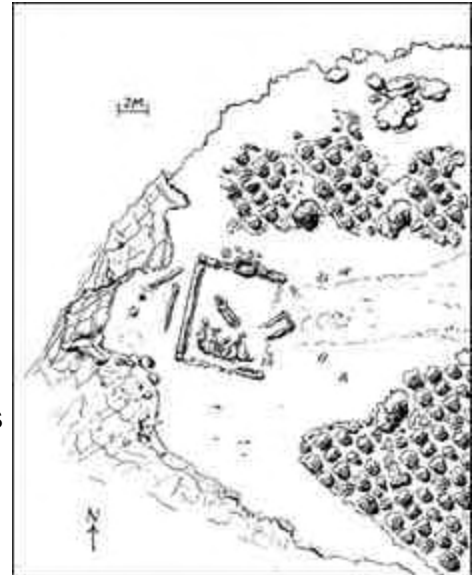
As the group tries to pick up the trail, they come upon the bones of a pony a short ways up the

northern slope of the bowl that forms the swamp. A Fair (5) search roll also reveals a ruined blood-stained rope hanging from a nearby tree. This is one of the ponies the cultists used to draw the Horse Eater to the top of the hill where it could see the Sioux village below. The Horse Eater typically follows this path up the hill and climbs down the front of the cliff to attack the Sioux's herd. Every 100 yards up the wide path of the hill is another horse carcass. Each one looks slightly fresher than the last.

The Overlook

At the top of the hill is a ruined trapper's cabin. The group should reach this spot shortly after dark. Tied to a post inside the ruin is Never Smiles. The cultists beat him senseless and left him here in the path of the Horse Eater to see if it would attack humans that weren't actually provoking it. It will, of course.

As the posse moves in to free Never Smiles, they'll hear a strange slurping sound from the base of the hill then an eerie thudding. The Horse Eater has risen from the swamp below and is climbing up the hill toward the cabin. When it reaches the top of the hill, it attacks ferociously. If reduced to below its last 10 hits, the Horse Eater retreats to its swamp where it disappears in the mire.



If the posse hasn't already figure it out, Never Smiles will tell them that their only hope is the shotguns and salt in the wagon. Some of the group will have to distract and delay the Horse Eater while the others dig out the shotguns and shells and stuff the barrels full of salt. Loading the shotguns with rock salt takes 1 extra round of reload time.

Never Smiles

Never Smiles name is a bit misleading. He has a great sense of humor, he's just a very stone-faced straight man. He also speaks very good English though he often pretends not to.

Corporeal: D:3d8, N:2d10, Q:2d8, S:2d8, V:1d8

Climbin' 2d10, dodge 2d10, fightin': brawlin', knife 2d10, horse ridin' 3d10, shootin': rifles 3d10, sneak 4d10

Mental: C:3d8, K:1d6, M:1d8, Sm:2d8, Sp:2d8

Bluff 3d8, faith 2d8, guts 4d8, language: English 2d6, overawe 3d8, scrutinize 2d8, search 3d8, survival: hills 3d8

Gear: Never Smiles usually carries a Winchester '73 rifle and a large knife, though the cultists disarmed him.

The Horse Eater

The Horse Eater has slimy blue flesh like that of a slug or an eel. It's teeth and nails are the size of Bowie knives. It doesn't walk so much as bounds, making it very difficult to move through the thick forests of the Black Hills (half move), which is why it usually keeps to the large paths when it emerges from its home in the swamp.

Corporeal: D:3d10, N:4d10, Q:2d12, S:1d20, V:1d20

Climbin' 5d10, fightin': brawlin' 5d10, sneak 2d10, swimmin' 5d10

Mental: C:2d10, K:1d4, M:3d8, Sm:1d6, Sp:1d6

Overawe 4d8, search 4d10

Size: 12

Terror: 9

Special Abilities:

Acid Touch: The Horse Eater's hands emit a powerful acid. Besides the damage from the creature's inherent *Strength*, anyone touched by it suffers hideous wounds that can only be healed by magical or mystical means.

Invulnerability: The Horse Eater is a creature of legend. Bullets, arrows, and normal weapons cannot hurt it. It's slug-like skin makes it extremely vulnerable to salt, however. Handfuls of salt do 1d4 points per hit. Salt shot does a base 2d8 damage per hit.

Weakness: The creature feeds on horse meat. If it is confronted by a mounted target, it attempts to focus its attentions on the more dangerous riders first. If the thing fails a Foolproof (3) *Smarts* roll, however, it attempts to put down a horse so that it can feed on it afterwards.

Coup: A Harrowed character who absorbs the Horse Eater's spirit gains 1 point of natural armor. The character will ever-after have a peculiar taste for horseflesh, however, and every round spent in contact with a handful or more of salt causes 1d4 Wind.

Bounty

The posse gets 3 bounty points if they defeat the Horse Eater. Add 1 more as long as Never Smiles survives the fight.

Chapter Six: The Truth is Out There

Once the Horse Eater is slain or chased back into the swamp, Never Smiles tells the group that two white men have a camp nearby. It was they who jumped him when he was investigating the bog. They beat him with rifles then dragged him to the old cabin and tied him up. He has no idea why the men did it.

An Onerous (7) *trackin'* roll picks up a trail leading back to the cultist's camp. There the posse will find a tent, camping supplies, and the remains of a small fire, but no inhabitants. As soon as the party starts poking around, Brothers Strong and Wyse will emerge from the woods, their horses tied a short distance away. They were watching Never Smiles when the Horse Eater struck and have actually followed the victorious posse back to their own campsite.

Brother Strong's story is that they are two pilgrims come to bring religion to the heathens. They attacked Never Smiles because he pointed a rifle at them. They subdued him and took his rifle (it's sitting in the camp), but being peaceful men, they merely bound the warrior at the nearby cabin where he could eventually work his way free. A few minutes ago they heard the sounds of battle and went to help, but they got lost. Now they've returned only to find strangers poking around their belongings.

This doesn't explain the work done on Never Smiles' face, but is otherwise difficult to disprove.

While Strong tells his story, have any characters who aren't taking an active part in the interrogation make a *search* roll. On a Hard (9) roll or better, they'll see a few clues that contradict Brother Strong's lies. First, piled among their gear is a crowbar. This was used to pry up the railroad ties at Elk Creek. Second, a makeshift desk made of crates inside Wyse's tent has several large pieces of paper atop it. If anyone can get close enough, they'll see these are poorly drawn half-completed survey maps. These were Wyse's first attempts to forge the maps. The final clue is a blue cap lying on Brother Strong's bed. Embroidered on the top of the cap are the words Iron Dragon.

Brothers Strong and Wyse

Strong is older and more forceful. Wyse is nervous and not quite sure of himself yet. Both are brainwashed minions of Grimme's sinister cult.

Corporeal: D:2d6, N:3d6, Q:2d6, S:2d6, V:1d6

Climbin' 1d6, dodge 2d6, fightin': brawlin' 2d6, horse ridin' 2d6, shootin': pistols, rifles 3d6, sneak 1d6

Mental: C:3d6, K:1d6, M:1d4, Sm:1d8, Sp:2d4

academia: occult 3d6, bluff 1d8, faith 4d4, Guts 2d4, medicine: general 1d6, overawe 2d4, persuasion 2d4, scrutinize 2d6, search 3d6, survival: plains 1d8

Gear: Both cultists carry .45 caliber revolvers, Winchester '73 rifles, and a knife

The Truth

If the posse doesn't point out Strong's inconsistencies, the cultists won't do anything rash. If they do point out the major evidence against them, Strong will grimace and pull several gnawed bones from his vest pocket. Wyse does the same and the two back up into cover with their weapons drawn. In two rounds the bones grow into Bloody Ones and the fight begins.

The Bloody Ones

Members of the Cult are often granted enchanted bones taken from their victims. Grimme gifts them with a twisted miracle that summons forth a bloody zombie with putrefying organs, looking much as Grimme did during his rebirth. These blood-soaked skeletons are called the "bloody ones."

A cultist (or anyone else with the bone in hand) need only toss the enchanted bone on the ground to summon the horrid servants. The bloody one follows its summoner's orders to the letter-but only if the summoner is a flesh-eating member of Grimme's cannibal cult. An hour after it is summoned, the shambling thing collapses into a pile of steaming gore. Profile

Corporeal: D:3d6, N:3d10, S:3d8, Q:3d10, V:3d8

Dodge 2d10, fightin': brawlin' 4, sneak 4d10

Mental: C:4d8, K:1d4, M:2d8, Sm:2d8, Sp:3d6

Overawe 4d8, ridicule 4d8, search 4d8, trackin' 3d8 (by scent)

Special Abilities:

Undead: Can only be harmed as if they were Harrowed.

Claws: STR+1d6

Bite: STR+1d6

Terror: 9

Notes: Bloody ones do not speak, though they do sometimes emit a slurpy laugh (hence the high *ridicule*).

The trick here is to expose the cultist's ruse to Lacy O'Malley. He'll publish his story when the encounter is over regardless of the outcome. If he still believes Iron Dargon is violating its treaty with the Sioux and their trespassing roused the Horse Eater, his story will do irreparable harm to the Iron Dragon-Sioux Nations alliance. Worse, it will raise the fear level of the entire Black Hills to 3.

If the posse proves the truth, that Strong and Wyse were behind the whole scam, his story will have a different effect. The fear level of the Black Hills will not decline, but the inspiring story of the posse's fight will drop the fear level of this area to 2.

Bounty

Give the heroes 1 bounty point if the cultists get away with their scheme. Add 3 more if the group forces Strong's hand and defeats him.