

*Rattlesnakes, Ghosts and Murderers: Volume 1, McKenna and Barnett*  
by Len Francis Monahan

(This was cut and pasted from the book's PDF File. There is only one space between sentences.)

# 1

## 1896: THE UNJUST REWARD

Barnett had worked for Mr. McKenna for just over ten years. Mr. McKenna has a big ranch, thousands and thousands of acres: the largest spread in the entire county. Though, for the past couple of years, Mr. McKenna has been acting sort of strange, more demanding and kind of crazy-like. And sometimes he would make us cowboys do crazy work that didn't make no sense either; like the time he had me – Ole Smoke – use good branding time to skedaddle into town for a bunch of roses, only to have Mr. McKenna rip those flowers up right in front of my – Ole Smoke's – eyes. Or the time he sat by that puddle of shit-mud water next to the barn, just looking at his reflection and making hand gestures. We all thought he was sort of feeling down, with his wife leaving him and all. They used to have some bang-up fights when she was there. Sometimes we'd hear Mrs. McKenna screaming at Mr. McKenna and throwing things. A couple times after a fight, Mr. McKenna would stand out in front of the main house and make a huge bonfire. Now I'm not talking no little-bitty campfire either. Those bonfires were doozy large. They was so big, we was all afraid he might set the main house on fire. But he never did. He'd just sit there for hours, sweating and glowing from the heat until the fire died down and he turned to shadows. Then he'd go to bed and no one would see him for days. Even if he was bughouse mad, he was still the boss – so we all ignored it. Anyways, he acted normal most of the time.

Now for some reason, B.C. (Bald Curley) who is Mr. McKenna's top man and holds the boss' ear more than anybody, took a real disliking to Barnett. He always used to give Barnett the crappiest jobs and bad mouth Barnett whenever he got the chance. And that didn't make no sense to me either because Barnett was a real straight-shooter. He was honest. And he wouldn't lie nor steal nor nothing. And he wouldn't hardly drink nor did he smoke too awful much either. So why B.C. started in on Barnett was always a mystery to me. But Barnett wasn't the kind to let stuff go: He'd tell you right to your face what he thought of you – and maybe that's what got B.C. going in the first place. Then one day it all came to a head: Barnett stormed into the chow house and confronted B.C. He wanted to know if it was true what B.C. was saying about him behind his back, and he threatened to whup B.C.'s ass right then and there in front of everybody. Well, you could see B.C. was scared. Barnett was no little guy and he could've mopped the floor with B.C. So B.C. backed down. He said he never said no such things about Barnett and that he never would. But, of course, we all knew B.C. was lying – and B.C. knew we all knew – because we'd all heard him say that stuff. But here he was quaking in his boots and denying he'd ever said anything bad about Barnett. After it was over, B.C. got real quiet and left the room. It was one of the most humiliating things I'd ever seen. Looking back, I guess this may be what caused it all.

One day Mr. McKenna called Barnett in for a little talk. Barnett had been in Mr. McKenna's office before, and those were always friendly times. Mr. McKenna used to ask Barnett to sit with him and have a drink or two, and they'd talk about the ranch and how things were going. Barnett always liked Mr. McKenna. But this time, when Barnett came in the room, Mr. McKenna told him to keep standing. There was no drinking nor friendly talk this time around. Mr. McKenna simply wanted to know where "it" was. When Barnett asked Mr. McKenna what he meant by "it," Mr. McKenna got real antsy and told Barnett to quit playing "bullshit poker." Barnett said he didn't know what Mr. McKenna was talking about, and Mr. McKenna asked Barnett for his storehouse key. At that moment, Barnett knew he was fired.

Barnett told Mr. McKenna he didn't have his key on him, and Mr. McKenna told him to go fetch "it" and the key before gathering up his stuff and clearing out. Somehow, Barnett remained calm. He didn't curse, and he didn't press the matter neither. He just turned and walked away, not slamming the door on the way out nor nothing. But he didn't return. And in the morning, all the fellas knew he was gone.

Mr. McKenna was agitated for days afterwards. Nobody knew what was eating him exactly, but he was crazier than usual. He'd yell and throw rocks at steers, and

this was something he'd never done before. Then one night, someone said Barnett was at the gate. Mr. McKenna sent B.C. out to handle it. When B.C. got to the big, iron, Mexicali gate, he wouldn't unlock it. He just stared out through the gate at Barnett and asked for the key. But Barnett only smiled and held the key up for B.C. to see, as much to say, "Come out and get it if you want it so bad." But B.C. was no fool.

"I want to see Mr. McKenna," Barnett told him.

"Mr. McKenna's busy and can't be bothered."

"Well, he's going to have to be bothered if he wants to get this key back."

"I said no. Are you stupid or something? Just give me the damn key and get off this property before I come out there and throw you off."

Barnett laughed and said, "You just tell Mr. McKenna I'll be here tomorrow night at this same time. I want to talk to him by himself. And if he's not happy with what I got to say, I'll give him his key and you'll never see me again." Then Barnett walked away, got on his horse and rode off.

"You'd better not come back, you stupid son of a bitch, if you know what's good for ya!" B.C. shouted out to Barnett.

But the next night, around the same time, one of the boys got word to B.C. that Barnett was at the gate. B.C. told the fella to tell Barnett he'd be right there but to wait for him because first he'd have to check with Mr. McKenna. After that fella left, I saw B.C. sit there thinking for about ten minutes before going to the main house.

Now, usually, I ain't all that nosy. But since I knew somebody could get killed, I stood outside Mr. McKenna's office window and listened.

"Barnett's back," B.C. went and told Mr. McKenna.

"Did he bring the key and the silver picture frame with him?"

“I don’t know, Mr. McKenna. It’s hard to tell with a sneaky son of a bitch like Barnett.”

Yep, that’s what B.C. called Barnett – a “sneaky son of a bitch.”

“Well, you go talk to him, and if he’s willing to give me my silver picture frame back, you tell him I’ll just forget the whole thing. You tell him I’m not mad at him anymore, and that I understand. It’s just a mistake, and everybody makes ‘em. You tell him that. Barnett’s a good worker, and rugged cattlemen like him are hard to find. All the hands like him, and he really knows his stuff. You tell him I’ll make him foreman if he comes back. You tell him that.”

B.C. was amazed. How could Barnett become foreman? That was B.C.’s job.

“Okay, Mr. McKenna, I’ll tell him. But don’t be surprised if he turns you down. He’s not trustworthy, Mr. McKenna. And once a thief, always a thief.”

I – Ole Smoke – noticed that B.C. was taking his good, old time getting to the front gate. B.C. was thinking this one out good and hard.

“Alright, Barnett, Mr. McKenna will see you,” B.C. told Barnett. “But first he wants that three hundred dollars back you took from his house.”

“So that’s what this is all about? He thinks I stole money from him! I never took no three hundred dollars. You get Mr. McKenna right now and tell him I want to talk to him face-to-face.”

“Okay, Barnett, I’ll go get him, but first things first. He said he wants that three hundred before he says a word to you. And if you don’t give it back, he’s gonna have you thrown right into jail.”

Yep, that’s what B.C. told Barnett, and them’s his exact words – “thrown right into jail” he told him.

By now, Barnett was steaming. Barnett was a good and honest man and probably never, in his entire life, had anyone ever accused him of stealing. And now, here he was, being called a low-down thief by B.C. Barnett was madder than he’d probably ever been before. And that’s when his fiddle-faddle-talking accuser, Mr. McKenna, came walking towards him, shotgun in hand.

“Open the gate, B.C. I want to see this slinky-footed sharpy eye-to-eye.”

B.C. did as Mr. McKenna ordered and opened the gate, and Barnett immediately walked forward. When he did, Mr. McKenna raised his shotgun and pointed it right at Barnett.

“You got it with you?” Mr. McKenna asked.

“No, I don’t have it. You really are crazy. How could you ever think I’d steal three hundred dollars from you?”

“Three hundred dollars! You stole money too? What about my silver picture frame?”

“What silver picture frame?”

“Don’t lie to me, Barnett. You give me my three hundred dollars and that silver picture frame – or I’m going to fill you full of lead hornets!”

“Are you insane? I don’t know anything about no silver picture frame? And I never took no three hundred dollars neither.”

“Yes, you did. Or how else would you have known about the three hundred dollars? I didn’t even know about the three hundred dollars myself until right this very second. So, if you already knew about it, you must have taken it. Guilt got the best of you, didn’t it, Barnett. It made you blurt out your crime. Now you give me my money, you no-good stealer, and my silver picture frame too!”

When Barnett apprehended that he had fallen into a trap, he looked squarely at B.C. and yelled, “Why you rotten...!” And as he charged, B.C. ran and squealed for Mr. McKenna’s help. A shot rang out.

Next thing I knew, Barnett was dead.

Following day, Mr. McKenna made us take Barnett’s body into town. At first, we told folks he was accidentally stuck through by an oak branch; and there was to be a Bible-reading in the far section of the bone orchard. After we gave him his proper lowering, Mrs. McKenna heard tell of what happened and came back home to look

after her husband. And, when she saw how peculiar bad Mr. McKenna had gotten, she stayed at the ranch permanent.

It don't seem right now but, at that time, no one wanted to tell the truth about what really happened that night. Sure as heck, none of us who saw the deed wanted to talk about it. To make things worse, on the night of the shooting, Mr. McKenna found the silver picture frame under a pile of old rags in his closet. That must have made Mr. McKenna feel terrible guilty because, before they put the body into the ground, he made sure the box was opened and that silver picture frame was placed on Barnett's chest.

(This "writ-by-hand" entry was found in Ole Smoke's ten-page diary and dated sometime in 1896. It was edited, punctuated and made coherently readable by present day author, Len Francis Monahan.)