

Main Street, Willow River

*By Marilyn Reeves*

About fifty miles south of the Grand Tetons, the tall rider spurs his horse over the bridge that leads into the Town of Willow River. A sign tells him the road he has been traveling on has given way to Main Street.

Off to his right the water comes cascading down the mountainside, passes under the bridge and then slaps up against the tall granite ridge east of the town in a roar of protest as it is forced to take a sudden turn to the south. Nestled in the elbow of the river is the town's park, where a group of shouting boys are so engaged in a game of softball they don't even bother to look up at the stranger passing by. Just past the park the livery stable, a barbershop, and a two-story bank building sit with their backs to the river.

A number of small houses and cabins are lined up along the west side of the street – some log, some clapboard, each having a deep backyard – some fenced, some not, spreading back to the base of the mountain. In the middle of the row is a wide wooden shed of gray plank board. The sign over its open double doors says Crowfoot Blacksmithing. Inside, a very large Indian with arms the size of most men's thighs is pounding away at an anvil.

A couple more houses down sits a saloon. It looks to be the oldest structure in town, its wooden boards silvered with age. For all that, it seems to maintain a lively clientele, judging from the noise and clatter coming through its swinging Dutch doors.

Next door, a well-dressed lady carrying a parasol is entering Macomb's General Store. All manner of merchandise is displayed behind its big plate-glass windows to tempt passersby with a few coins jingling in their pockets. Macomb's is followed by the two-story, red brick Harlan Hotel. Lacy white curtains flutter gaily in its second-story windows.

At the end of the street, facing forward, is the First Methodist Church, its colorful stained-glass windows shining brightly in the noonday sun. Behind the church is the town cemetery. Here Main Street reclaims the name of Range County Road as it curves around the cemetery and then follows the river wending its way farther south.

But before he crosses over to the other side, the rider looks to the last building on his right. It is a large, well-appointed Victorian mansion, painted white with gray trim. Cheerful pots of red geraniums sit next to a welcoming row of rocking chairs on the front porch. A couple of old geezers look up from their chessboard. "He'p you?" says one.

"Looking for the sheriff's office."

"Right behind you."

Looking back to the east, the man sees an open lot giving access to another bridge that crosses the river, with more houses scattered about on the other side. Off in the distance the spire of St. Andrews Catholic Church thrusts heavenward. Just past the open lot sits a tired-looking building with a sagging front porch. It looks in desperate need of repair and a fresh coat of paint.

"That it?"

"Yep. That's it. And who might you be, young fella?"

"Name's John Dutton," says the rider, doffing his hat to the two old men. "I'm the new sheriff."

John turns around, crosses the street and dismounts. Tying his horse to the railing, he climbs up the rickety steps to the start of a brand new life.