

Jess

By Pete Clark

Recently a friend inspired me to reach back into the murky recesses of my memory and bring forth a brilliant blaze of gilded light, called Jess. It was the summer of 1954 and I was doing a job for a neighbor, when I noticed a kid standing in the alley, watching what I was doing. Finally he said he was Jess and I said I was Pete and we became instant friends.

For some reason we became enamored with the code created by Samuel F. B. Morse, for use with his invention, the Electric Telegraph. We learned those dots and dashes and sent each other hand written messages in Morse Code. I would know the message was from Jess, when I had deciphered the words, ape shape. That is what we called each other. Goofy? Yes! We were kids, enjoying what was left of our mostly unencumbered years.

I had built a reputation in town for being willing to take on hard, dirty jobs that other kids wouldn't touch. One morning the town plumber stopped by the house and asked if I would like to dig out a water shutoff valve at the school building. I said sure and he took me to the building, dropped me off, with instructions about what needed to be done. He left me there with a shovel. I didn't need a pick or a digging bar, as the hole had been made at least once before. I began my journey to the bottom of the hole, one spade full at a time.

I had been working for a while and had one third to one half of the dirt out of the hole, when Jess showed up to keep me company. While I dug dirt, we chatted. After a while, Jess said that what I was doing looked like fun and asked if he could get down in the hole and dig. I said of course I would share the fun, so he got down in the hole and dug like a badger. After watching him a few minutes, I told him that if he wanted to finish the hole, I would buy him a malt at the drug store when we were finished. He thought that was a great idea.

My dad and the plumber came around to check the progress of the job. My dad asked what Jess was doing in the hole. I told him I had subcontracted the job to Jess for a malt. He said Jess was to get out of the hole and I was to get into the hole and not come out until it was completed. When we were finished, Jess and I went to the drug store and I had a milkshake and he had a malt and I gave him part of the money I had been paid.

About six years ago, I read an item in the *Riverton Ranger* that told me Jess had passed away at his home on the Wind River Reservation. I bowed my head in sorrow, wrapped in the fading warmth of a friend, gone to a better place.