

'LONG CAME CHARLIE

SYNOPSIS

by Michael Steven Gregory

Florida, 1955. 113-year-old Charlie Smith is forcibly re-tired as a field laborer by social worker Faith Healy. "I ain't ascared a workin an I ain't ascared a dying," he assures her. "It's the ain't-livin scare the kink outta me!" 21 years later, acknowledging his birthday in a Bartow rest home to those gathered to see from whom the Guinness Book of World Records has retracted its "World's Oldest Man" title, Charlie no longer cares.

No sir, his aim today is to finally divulge to longtime friend and reporter Miles Beech the one thing he's dogged him about for 20 years: Was it or was it not really legendary bankrobber Jesse James' body Charlie identified for the government, after his alleged killing in 1876? "Then what, you're just going to lay down and die?" Miles asks. "Jez stood up and lived!" answers Charlie.

But getting a straight answer out of Charlie is a circuitous affair. When a Liberian ambassador invites him to return home to Africa, Charlie gets his dander up: "I ain't no African. I got no home. Took my whole life jez to get here!"

And so begins the chronicle of Mr. Charlie's life, a time-skipping compilation of tall and factual tales observed from both his "middle-age" and eldest perspectives, where:

\* Sold as a slave on the New Orleans auction block July 4th, 1855, he was raised in Texas by a guilt-ridden rancher who called him his own and made him a Mason...

\* He buried the dead at Gettysburg and saved his "father's" life during a Chisolm Trail stampede...

\* He was ostracized by the family and robbed by a preacher...

\* He turned to lawless ways, delivered Jesse James' baby, saw the end of the Old West, became addicted to Coca-Cola, and refused to see his only son for more than fifty years...

\* He confronted Jesse James one last time.

When recounted by the garrulous storyteller of the 1950s the rousing yarns of high-spirited adventure often take a solemn turn when juxtaposed with the recollections of his cynical, celebrity self of 1976. Here the toll of retirement has made itself known. Now a bushed old man tired of warbling cowpoke ditties to strangers, Mr. Charlie's become a bitter soul whose purpose has been revoked, and whose dignity stripped.

Only when movie star John Wayne arrives to pay his respects is it that Charlie begins again to become fully alive.

Though this is the true story of a man who lived, fortunately or unfortunately for Miles Beech, as the stories heap one atop the other and every contradiction becomes increasingly apparent, he is faced with the likely unextravagant fact that Charlie never even met Jesse James. Only then is the truth about Jesse revealed . . . and when Mr. Charlie can finally come home.

# # #