

TRAIL END

by

Shannan Keenan

Just Hank Productions
1843 Amberleaf Lane
Simi Valley, CA 93065
(805) 520-0682
justhankpro@aol.com
www.justhank.com

WGAW # 1063523

FADE IN:

EXT. KANSAS - BARN - DAWN

Early morning mist shrouds a rustic red barn engulfed by mature trees and overgrown grass.

INT. BARN - CONTINUOUS

Filtered light seeps through cracks in rotted wood. The barn door slides open, letting in more light and stirring the occupants. NICKERS and RUSTLING of straw can be heard from each of the six stalls.

A shadowed figure steps into the barn. HANK CROW (72) an average man with an average build, walks down the clay aisle. His eyes are tinged with yellow, his skin is paler than normal. A worn cowboy hat tops his head.

Hank stops in front of a stall where a crusty name plate hangs: CHIP. A red roan Appaloosa pops out his big, flat head. Like Hank, Chip is in his twilight years. His coat is duller than the other horses and his chest thinned. He NICKERS upon seeing Hank.

Hank unlatches a chain and pulls back the stall door. He looks at his friend with reverence.

HANK
It's time ol' boy.

EXT. HIGHWAY - WICHITA, KANSAS - LATER

Hank drives his rusted Ford pick-up along the Wichita skyline. Chip and the horse trailer follow.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - TRAIL HEAD - LATER

The Ford pick-up pulls into a gravel turn-out. A Sedgwick County Sheriff's vehicle slowly drives up behind it.

INT. FORD PICK-UP - CONTINUOUS

Hank looks in the side view mirror at the patrol car.

HANK
(mumbling)
That damn kid.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - TRAIL HEAD - CONTINUOUS

Ignoring the deputy, Hank walks to the back of the trailer and unlatches the trailer door. He cues Chip with a CLICKING SOUND. Chip gingerly backs out of the trailer, a saddle already cinched to his back.

The deputy, JIM, (40's) a clean cut man with proper posture, steps out of his patrol car and casually walks up to Hank. Hank keeps his eyes focused on the saddle and tightens up the cinch.

JIM

Hank.

HANK

How'd you figure me out?

JIM

Been talkin' about the Gyp Hills a lot lately.

Hank bites his bottom lip, mad at himself for foiling the plan. He ties on the saddle bags.

HANK

Glad to know the Sedgwick sheriff's on top of things in Barber County.

JIM

Look Hank, I'm not trying to be difficult, but you're in no condition to ride... not now.

HANK

Then when?

Jim looks away, knowing there isn't a 'when'.

Hank grabs the bridle hanging from the saddle horn and gently asks Chip to take the bit. The horse does so without question.

JIM

Karen's worried.

HANK

Karen's always worried.

Jim reaches for Chip's reins.

JIM

I can't have a cryin' wife, Hank...
and I sure can't have you gettin'
hurt.

Hank turns and faces Jim.

HANK

I've got one more ride, Jim... just
one more ride.

Jim studies the old man's sick but determined eyes.
Physically, Jim could win this battle, but he could never
come close emotionally. Jim reluctantly lets go of the reins.

JIM

Why's it so important anyway? You've
ridden every other state. You grew
up in Kansas, what else is there to
see?

Hank shoves his boot into the stirrup and pulls his tired
bones onto Chip's back.

HANK

Ain't never ridden the Gypsum Hills,
and as far as I know, Chip's never
ridden them either.

JIM

What am I supposed to tell Karen?

HANK

Tell'er her daddy will be home soon.

Hank tosses his keys to Jim and CLICKS Chip to move forward.
Jim looks at the keys.

JIM

I suppose you don't want to tell me
where the trail ends?

HANK

You're smart, figure it out... just
wait six days to do it.

Hank and Chip embark on their journey, while Jim watches with
concern, knowing he's going to catch hell for letting them go.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - LATER

Hank and Chip come over a ridge where they are greeted by stunning red flat-topped mesas and deep canyons dotted with green cedar trees. Delicate summer wildflowers accent the rugged terrain.

Hank takes in the seemingly endless view, having seen the Gypsum Hills for the first, and last time.

HANK

I know you're fond of Montana boy,
but you gotta admit, that ain't bad
lookin' either.

Chip ignores Hank and keeps walking.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - LATER

Nostrils flared, Chip GRUNTS as he climbs up a steep butte. The power of his hoofs gouge the red dirt, leaving a permanent groove. Hank leans forward, taking the pressure off Chip's back and giving proper balance. With one last push forward, Chip lunges onto flat land. Hank pats Chip's neck.

HANK

And you thought Kansas would be easy,
huh?

Chip PUFFS, trying to catch his breath. No matter what he thought before, he now knows that this ride won't be easy.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - NIGHT

The saddle and bridle lean against a tree, Hank's bed roll laid out next to it.

Under another tree, Hank rubs ointment on Chip's legs, massaging his overworked muscles.

HANK

How's that for service?

Chip SNEEZES on Hank.

HANK

You ungrateful ol' thing.

Hank pulls out a kerchief and wipes horse snot from his face.

Chip throws his head into Hank's chest, using it as a convenient scratching post.

HANK

You done?

Chip pulls back, his head sufficiently scratched. Hank pats Chip on the forelock and slips down to his bed roll.

HANK

Keep laughing, boy... we got more mesas to climb tomorrow.

Chip tosses his head, seemingly unappreciative of Hank's humor.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - CREEK - DAY

A layer of sweat on his chest and red dirt caked on his knees, Chip eagerly GULPS refreshing water from a creek. Hank is filling the canteen next to him.

HANK

You seemed to have lost your smirk.

Nearby bushes suddenly RUSTLE causing Chip to spook and jump to the side. Hank quickly spins around and scans the bushes, finally spotting the culprit: a wild turkey who nonchalantly pokes his body out.

Hank shakes his head at Chip and lifts his arm up to Chip's withers.

HANK

When it's about yay high, then jump.

Hank finishes filling the canteen while Chip hesitantly returns to drinking, but still keeping both eyes on the turkey.

EXT. GYPSUM HILLS - FIRE ROAD - DAY

The jagged mesas have flattened to rocky hills. A thin metal sign riddled with bullet holes reads: OPEN RANGE. Hank and Chip leisurely stroll down a dirt fire road. Chip lazily swings his body side to side, while Hank's relaxed head bobs to the rhythm of Chip's step.

When suddenly, Chip's ears perch straight up and he stops hard, jolting Hank to full attention. Off to the side, a herd of BUFFALO graze.

Chip studies the unusual creatures, particularly the large bull who seems to be studying Chip back.

HANK

Now that's somethin' to jump at.

Hank quietly nudges Chip forward, all the while carefully eyeing the bull. Chip reluctantly moves ahead, testing the bull's tolerance. The bull returns to grazing, sending the signal that all is well.

EXT. KANSAS PRAIRIE - DAY

The beauty and wonder of the Gypsum Hills are long out of sight, as Hank and Chip cut out a trail in a rolling open field of waist high prairie grass. A lone grain elevator in the far distance serves as the only visible landmark.

EXT. KANSAS HIGHWAY - DAY

At a desolate highway intersection where telephone poles and ditch weeds are the only scenery, Hank digs out rocks and muck from Chip's hoofs.

Behind them stands a sign with wood arrows pointing to its respective destinations: NEW YORK 1561 MI. / SAN FRANCISCO 1561 MI. A board in between reads: HALF WAY KINSLEY OLD SANTA FE TRAIL.

EXT. KANSAS TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

Hank ties Chip to a railing in front of a charming brick building with a sign that reads: A PLACE TO EAT.

A PIG-TAILED GIRL with her tongue wrapped around a soft cone watches Hank and Chip from a nearby bench.

PIG-TAILED GIRL

How come your horse has spots?

HANK

That's how God made him.

The girl thinks about it a second.

PIG-TAILED GIRL

How come God made him with spots?

Hank finishes his break-away knot then turns toward the girl.

HANK

So God could find him in the pasture.

Hank walks into the diner, leaving the pig-tailed girl with a confused crinkle between her eyes.

INT. A PLACE TO EAT DINER - LATER

A Mom and Pop greasy spoon bustling with LOCALS. Hank sits at the bar, his cap resting on the counter. Hank picks at hot roast beef smothered in rich brown gravy, his appetite dwindling.

The bell above the front door JINGLES.

In walks ED (70's), a retiree with a healthy belly. He saddles up next to Hank.

ED

That your Appy parked out front?

HANK

Yep.

ED

Come out of the Gyp Hills?

HANK

Yep.

ED

Knew that horse's red socks weren't natural.

Hank SMIRKS as he takes a sip of coffee.

ED

Where ya headin'?

HANK

Dighton.

Ed raises his brows, surprised by the answer. He discreetly observes Hank's crooked posture and motions toward Chip:

ED

Sure that ol' model can make it?

HANK

(proudly)

That ol' model's logged in over five thousand trail miles in the last ten years. Hasn't broken down yet.

Ed nods impressed.

ED
It was golfin' for me after
retiring... and after the misses died.

Hank tenses up.

ED
Never much cared for golf before...
guess things change when you get old.

HANK
Yep.

ED
Bet you seen some pretty country from
that ol' boy's back.

HANK
Seen my share and then some.

DOTTIE a career waitress with dyed ruby hair walks in from the kitchen carrying a ziplock of carrots. She hands the bag to Hank, while efficiently grabbing the coffee pot for the boys.

DOTTIE
Here ya go hon', found ya' a couple.

HANK
Thank ya, miss.

DOTTIE
The usual, Ed?

ED
You bet Dottie.

Hank lays his change on the counter.

DOTTIE
Thanks, hon.

Dottie tends to Ed's order. Hank stands and slides on his hat.

ED
Rattlesnake River's on the edge of
town... good place to water up.

Hank tips his hat.

HANK

Thanks.

ED

Hope you mak'er.

HANK

I do too.

The bell above the door JINGLES as Hank walks out.

EXT. KANSAS PRAIRIE - DUSK

Chip munches on grass while Hank leans against a tree. He holds a small quilt in the shape of the contiguous United States. State hat pins mark their respective territories on the quilt. All are accounted for except Kansas, which leaves a noticeable hole in the middle.

HANK

That woman sure could sew. I remember when she whipped this up for me.

Chip twitches his ears, but keeps munching.

HANK

You were supposed to be an RV, Chip. California was going to be the first state.

(voice trailing)

At least she'll still get her hat pins.

Hank stares at the quilt, loneliness etched in his eyes, mirroring the empty prairie.

EXT. KANSAS PASTURE - DAY

Hank and Chip tread a wood-post fence. A Paint and two bays run up on the other side, curiously observing Hank and Chip. Chip suddenly taps into some distant Arabian bloodline and erects his tail and prances. He WHINNIES at the horses. Hank tightens the reins a bit, just a reminder to Chip that he's still there.

HANK

Nobody likes a braggart, boy.

The Paint lowers his head and knocks out an impressive buck. His buddies follow suit and the three of them bolt across the pasture, showing Chip what they can do.

Chip tosses his head, annoyed by the restraint of the bit.

HANK

Well, if they're gonna be like that...

Hank loosens the reins and gives Chip a nudge with the heel, which is all the old horse needs to take off at a full gallop. The three pasture horses run alongside of Chip, accepting his challenge to race. Hank hangs on for the ride, vastly enjoying the speed and power Chip still has.

It's neck and neck, although old Chip is losing steam. But Chip has something these young pasture horses don't. Freedom. The pasture horses abruptly slam on their hoofs as they approach the end of the fence line, bumping off one another to avoid a wreck with the wire. The horses SNORT and paw at the ground, mad.

Chip drops down to a gentle lope, leaving the pasture horses with a nice view of his tail.

EXT. KANSAS FARM HOUSE - DAY

Hank and Chip walk by a small ranch style house on the corner of an empty intersection. Dozens of kitschy weather vanes litter the yard, creating an unusual sight.

Chip cranks his head around, as if waiting for an explanation from Hank. Hank simply shrugs his shoulders.

EXT. ROAD TO NOWHERE - DAY

Hank and Chip travel down a long stretch of road that seemingly knows no end. Like a frightening amusement ride, the road leads directly into a menacing low wall cloud building in the distance. Hank eyes the brewing storm, trying to determine its movement.

A light wind kicks in and sporadic splats of rain smack Hank and Chip. Suddenly a vehicle outfitted with weather detection equipment speeds past Hank and Chip, heading directly toward the gray mass swallowing the road.

HANK

Hmm?

Hank turns Chip the opposite direction.

EXT. RAILROAD BRIDGE - LATER

Hank and Chip take refuge under an abandoned railroad bridge as mother nature demonstrates her power with a fierce thunderstorm.

Hank is wrapped in a yellow slicker, huddled against the bridge, fighting a brutal COUGH. Chip stands in the middle, trying to avoid the blowing rain. His ears are laid back, making his displeasure known. Hank looks up at Chip:

HANK
(coughing)
What? Next time you pick.

Shards of rain crash around the bridge.

EXT. RIVERBANK - DAY

The rain has cleared, but mother nature has definitely left her mark. Hank and Chip approach the edge of an eroded riverbank. The overgrown vegetation masks the muddy, steep slope underneath.

Hank nervously eyes the drop and questionable footing, but there's no other place to cross.

HANK
Just take her slow, boy.

Chip gingerly starts his descent down the slope, carefully eyeing each step as his hoofs are swallowed up by thick, black goop. Chip forcibly jerks his legs from the suction, causing him to bound into the murky water. He quickly sinks into the slimy, soft riverbed. Water suddenly fills up Hank's boots.

HANK
Whoa... easy...

Chip violently splashes, desperately searching for footing. Hank grabs the horn, but is too weak to stay on. He tumbles into the water, slamming his left elbow on a boulder.

With one final lunge, Chip explodes out of the sink hole and scrambles up the embankment to solid ground. Shaking, he turns and looks for Hank.

Hank wades across the water, tucking his bruised arm. He claws up mud and shrubs, finally reaching Chip.

HANK
Easy, boy... easy.

Hank grabs onto the stirrup for leverage and slowly pulls himself up. He leans against Chip, COUGHING and catching his breath.

Hank studies the distance from the ground to the stirrup. It's never seemed so tall before. He tries to lift his leg, but exhaustion is winning.

HANK

Weren't you supposed to stop growing about fifteen years ago?

Hank again tries to lift himself into the saddle, but stumbles, his left arm hanging limp.

He observes the unoccupied land and assesses the situation.

HANK

I'll be damned if I'm gonna become vulture food in Hodgeman county.

Hank grips the saddle seat with his right hand and forces his left hand onto the horn. Through gritted teeth, he struggles to pull his weight, finally getting high enough to swing his leg over. He lets out a relieved SIGH and settles into the saddle.

HANK

Probably be best if you don't lose me again, boy.

Hank nudges Chip forward.

EXT. KANSAS TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

Vacant buildings and empty streets are rather uninviting in this decrepit town on the verge of vanishing.

Two disheveled TEENAGERS sit on the curb and toss FIRECRACKERS onto the street.

POP! POP! POP!

Caked with mud and visibly weakened, Hank and Chip walk down Main Street.

Despite the presence of Hank and Chip, the teens continue tossing the firecrackers, seemingly oblivious to anything but the sound of the poppers.

POP! POP! POP!

Their vacant stares are unsettling. Chip sidesteps the firecrackers.

Hank spots a loose LITTLE COWBOY dart around an old building. He's sporting a straw cowboy hat and dirty cowboy boots. A holster carrying two toy guns dangles from his britches. Hank CHUCKLES at the sight. Maybe there is some normalcy to this town after all.

The little boy sees Hank and Chip and abruptly halts. He instinctively pulls his guns and takes aim at Hank.

LITTLE COWBOY
Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Hank playfully shoots back with a finger gun. The boy stares at him confused.

LITTLE COWBOY
You're dead.

POP! POP! POP!

Hank is suddenly startled by the firecrackers.

Hank CLICKS Chip into a trot. The little cowboy watches them ride away.

EXT. LAKE SCOTT - DAY

A large body of water serves as an oasis in the dry plains. Craggy bluffs enclose the lake, providing surprisingly high elevation to an otherwise flat terrain.

Hank and Chip walk to the edge of a bluff. While Chip remains focused on the thirty foot drop to the rocky shore, Hank gazes out over the still waters and breathes in familiar scents from long ago.

Down below, a YOUNG COUPLE sit on a rock, feet dangling in the water. The man playfully kicks water on his unsuspecting lover. She SQUEALS, then playfully kicks water back.

Hank watches the lovers longingly. He subconsciously thumbs his wedding band. There was a time when he too was a young man in love.

Flirting with her male companion, the woman tosses her hair back and in doing so notices Hank and Chip on top of the bluff.

Hank looks away, embarrassed for having interrupted their privacy. He tugs on the reins.

The woman scans the bluff, but the man and horse have disappeared.

EXT. MONUMENT ROCKS - DAY

Hank and Chip work their way across a vast, dry ocean floor of cracked chalk. Puffs of white dust kick up from Chip's hoofs. Hank's cowboy hat offers little protection from the intense sun.

Erupting conspicuously from the middle of this barren wasteland is a seventy foot formation of eroded chalk pinnacles. The site is breathtaking, if not, bizarre.

Hank and Chip approach the rocks. Hank steers Chip to a massive keyhole that nature has carved. Feeling every bit his 72 years and then some, Hank rigidly dismounts. The ride is visibly taking its toll.

Hank straightens his body and looks up at the arch as if he just stepped into a cathedral.

HANK

This is where I asked her... in the window.

He returns his gaze eye level.

HANK

She was standing right there.

Hank points so Chip can imagine it for himself.

HANK

You should've seen her face light up when I popped out that measly diamond. To her everything was always more than what it was. Like these rocks... she thought it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Tried to tell her it was just limestone.

Hank reevaluates the view.

HANK

I guess it is kinda pretty.

Chip stands quietly, not committed to respond one way or the other.

Hank unsnaps a saddle bag and pulls out a camp shovel. He bends down under the arch and digs a shallow hole.

HANK

Never been one for funerals. Guess that ain't much of an excuse. I know it wasn't fair on the girls, having to take care of everything. But I couldn't go... I just couldn't go, Chip.

Hank shudders, the pain much deeper than bones now. He pulls the gold band from his thinning finger and drops it into the hole, carrying out his own burial ritual.

Hank hovers over the fresh mound of limestone earth, Chip gallantly serving as witness. Two frail beings lost among the majestic rocks.

EXT. KANSAS - HIGH PLAINS - NIGHT

A full moon illuminates the tundra of vapid land. Lying lifelessly in the middle of it are Hank and Chip.

Hank is curled into a fetus position on top of his bed roll, tightly gripping his sides as if that would somehow contain the pain. Chip lies on a smooth patch of dirt, his legs tucked vulnerably under his belly. Free from man-made restraints, both are tied down to nothing but their own physical inability to move.

Hank looks over at Chip, the horse nodding off for some desperately needed rest. As if to apologize:

HANK

We're almost there, boy.

EXT. KANSAS - HIGH PLAINS - DAWN

The morning sun now colors the badlands a different hue. Hank wets a rag from his canteen. As if it were blessed water, he gently rubs the rag over Chip's head, meticulously following the hair growth.

Hank reaches for the bridle and solemnly hangs it over Chip's head, crowning him. He looks into Chip's eyes as if it would be for the last time.

EXT. DIGHTON OUTSKIRTS - WHITE ROCK ROAD - LATER

Hank and Chip travel down a white rock road, besieged by thousands of acres of gold wheat. If not for the hypnotic swaying of the wheat, the land would be devoid of any sound.

Remnants of an old house and corrals extend out of the wheat field, looking like misplaced debris in an otherwise pristine sea of gold. Hank and Chip cut across the field to the house.

Hank dismounts and circles the gutted house, touching the weathered wood as if that would somehow give it life. He gazes over the land, letting his memory paint a different time. His eyes rest on the corrals.

He briskly makes his way over, sifting through broken rails until reaching a piece of dull metal. Hank picks it up and at first it appears nothing more than junk, but as Hank brushes dirt from the surface, a name is revealed: CROW.

Hank holds out the sign for Chip to read.

HANK

See Chip, you can go home.

Hank tosses the sign back into the pile, letting it live out its destiny accordingly.

EXT. DIGHTON - MAIN STREET - LATER

The town is rather nondescript with architecture dated in the fifties, except for the recently added two convenience stores.

Hunched over, Hank has both hands on the saddle horn, leaving the steering to Chip. Chip leads them past the IGA grocery store, Dighton newspaper, bank, and bowling alley, where a few cars are parked for "TACO TUESDAYS" at the bowling alley diner.

If it weren't for the Frigid Cream ice cream stand there would be no sign of life, as tired MOTHERS wrangle in excited CHILDREN under a banner that reads: NOW OPEN FOR SUMMER.

The John Deere dealership earmarks the edge of town, which doesn't take long to reach.

As if Dighton were merely a mirage, Hank and Chip quickly return to the landscape of the High Plains. Chip drags his metal shoes along the empty highway. The old horse is tiring too.

In the near distance, like a fort in the middle of nowhere, a mowed pasture is edged with plump, pear-shaped evergreen shrubs.

EXT. DIGHTON - CEMETERY - CONTINUOUS

Hank and Chip walk under an iron archway which reads: DIGHTON CEMETERY. In between a maze of dirt roads, a random mixture of modern and antique headstones poke out of the burnt Buffalo grass.

Hank's forehead drips with perspiration, his breathing now raspy. He glances around the cemetery, searching for familiarity. It suddenly comes. He nudges Chip toward the far southwest corner.

They approach two reddish granite headstones.

HANK
(barely audible)
Whoa, boy.

As asked, Chip stops. Hank looks down at the headstones.

The first stone reads: HANNAH CROW (MAY 27, 1909 - SEPTEMBER 7, 1975) and KENNETH CROW (MAY 11, 1903 - MAY 5, 1975)

The second stone is newer. It reads: LILLIAN CROW (NOVEMBER 2, 1934 - JANUARY 20, 1994) and HENRY CROW (MARCH 3, 1933 -), the date of death intentionally left blank.

HANK
Hello, Lilly.
(beat)
This is Chip... he's come a long way
to meet you.

For one last time, Hank savors the view from Chip's back. He SWALLOWS a deep breath, grips the saddle horn, then dismounts. He leans into Chip for balance. Once steady, he pats Chip on the neck. It's a pat worthy of ten years of service.

Hank unsnaps a saddle bag and pulls out the quilt. He turns away from Chip and stumbles, bracing himself on Lillian's headstone. With aching bones, he slowly bends to the ground, slumping to the grass. Hank unfolds the quilt, revealing all state hat pins, except for one.

HANK
Got so much to tell ya', Lil.

Hank pulls an object out of his jacket pocket. He fumbles with it, finally poking it into the center of the map quilt.

HANK
I got them all, Lil...

REVEAL: A KANSAS STATE HAT PIN

The quilt is now complete.

HANK

We got them all.

Hank lays the quilt flat across his legs and rests his head against Lillian's headstone. Chip dutifully stands guard as the western Kansas sun shines down.

FADE OUT