

# Preface-Amos Branson

*Dear Reader, This is a story written in the third person. That means you and I are going on a journey of discovery and, perhaps, trepidation. I refer to us as "we" (you and I) in the following Story. Are you game?*

An oddity was Amos Branson. Certainly not one of the typical denizens one would meet in church. Or, for that matter, in polite society. Add to this his inheritance and the oddities simply grew.

Amos Branson, though a wealthy man, was also a deviant. His definition of a good time was bilking someone out of five dollars; or less. A mere \$2.50 bilked would leave him chortling like mad when he got home. It was the chase that got him off. More if possible but he found that the more money people had the smarter they were with it. As he would say, "It's axiomatic." He used newspapers and, to a degree, the internet.

He had, at first, put up a "Go Fund Me" page on Facebook asking for \$1000.00 to help his wife procure needed medications for her disease; unnamed. Both disease and wife were non-existent. The ploy worked until someone, probably an ex-fleeting friend, complained to Facebook of his shenanigans and he was summarily banned. Not, however, before he bilked another \$517.34 he didn't really need from the good members of Facebook.

So, instead, he made the noble decision to prey on widows, friends and acquaintances. The latter of which he had few of and friends were, as mentioned, fleeting. A lonelier man you could not find. A more bitter man you probably could find for Amos had something that allowed him to tolerate his alone time. He wrote. He wrote using the non de plume of "Cedrick Hawthorne:" to be exact. He had sold his work for years, all

the while refusing to go on book tours or even meet his editors. He conducted all his business through a law firm which he had jokingly named "Tidily, Hood, and Wink." Not the firm's real name of course but it suited Amos just fine. Amos did have a sense of humor after all.

Our story starts on a rainy Sunday afternoon. Well, rainy does not do the weather justice. His estate was in Oklahoma and it was Tornado season. As we look in on Amos he is headed for the storm shelter outside his rather large and rambling home. A home paid for by an inheritance. Not money earned by Amos. This may explain him for some of my readers. However, there is much more to Amos than meets the eye. Shall we say, he had, in his spare time, and most of his time was spare, gotten into some rather iffy channels of endeavor above and beyond his bilking of widows. The darkness of the storm shelter may offer us all an unabridged idea of just how much of a screwed up Amos he had made himself. It is, in the final analysis, axiomatic!

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## **Amos Branson-Part 1-The House**

Were we in a small plane or helicopter, flying over the midwest, we would peer down at the ineffable beauty of the green shades of corn fields running off in every direction. Here and there we would see the dots of homes and barns with roads leading to and away from those dots. Rather like a tinker toy construction with the joining hubs being the cleared land of the houses and the roads being the wooden dowels that run between them; from horizon to horizon.

Flying just a little over 15 miles west above this beauty we look down to see a surprisingly ugly parallelogram of

devastation interrupting this expansive green sea. Standing as a scab in this beauty are about 150 acres of brownish, desert-like land. In many ways it appears as we might imagine a nuclear accident to look. We ask the pilot to turn and take us around the perimeter of this scar; our curiosity spiked, like one who gawks at a terrible accident scene on a highway. Looking down from on high we try to get a grip on what caused this horrible blemish on the land.

Our pilot banks into a gentle left turn tilting the passenger side of the aircraft down so that we might witness this inglorious intrusion into our sea of green. At the outskirts of this parallelogram we see the ruin of farming machinery; too numerous to count. There are small tractors, green and yellow fading into the abyss of elemental destruction. There is a large hole dug into the soil filled with debris which is an obvious dump site. Old washing machines, tires, indiscriminate machine parts such as harrows and plows, wheels and drive trains lying, baking in the midwest sun. There is also garbage and litter from household usage on which flocks of crows fight and clamor over small niceties of rotting food.

As we turn from the south and nose toward the north we see on the far reaches of this scar a home. At least, we assume it is a home. A structure which rambles and appears to be at least two stories tall shaped like an "L" with varied, patchwork additions added on over many decades. It squats on the desolation in disrepair. A clothes line with a pair of pants dangling tells us that it is most likely inhabited.

As if to be the guarantor of our thoughts we see an older satellite dish looking to be about 10 feet in diameter on the north side of the home. It points west into the sky toward a satellite which may or may not be still in orbit. Its antiquity makes the question of its functioning suspect.

We've seen enough at this point. With an affirmative nod to the pilot we turn east to take us back to the field from which

we took off. Our curiosity about this blight in the middle of so much beauty has, however, piqued our interest. This bears looking into as its oddity and starkness will not allow it to drift away without seeking answers to its birth and development. We will investigate this until we find answers to our questions. To start, who owns this mess?

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## Amos Branson-Part 2-The House

*Remember, this is written in the third person.*

We have just turned off the main road onto the road which steers through the corn fields, by-passing the Branson property. Like most midwest roads this one is also of whitish coloring due to the gravel used for decades on such roads. It's a five, or so, mile trip to Branson's driveway and we finally get there when we see an old weathered and cracked sign hanging from one nail which has three letters left on it: B-R-A. We smirk at the spelling and turn left onto the drive. It isn't one hundred and fifty yards before we are stopped by a 1954 Cadillac blocking the road. It was a convertible with white top and the chrome is still attempting to shine through decades of rust to say, "I'm still here!" While its age speaks to us we notice that the hood is missing as is the intake manifold and carburetor. A vestige of the convertible top flaps in the wind behind the rear seat adding a little haunted atmosphere to the scene. Still, we feel that a good restorer could make this a prize still as the patina of rust shows no holes or rot in the fenders or rocker panels.

Now we have an idea of what to expect as we proceed. If the Caddy looks like this we need to prepare ourselves for what lies ahead. With a little trepidation we dismount our Subaru Forester rental and scramble around the old Caddy to walk the rest of the way on foot. It's hot and humid and we neglected to bring any water. We can't blame ourselves, though, as we really never intended to actually make this trip out here in the first place. Ruminating about the wisdom of this short journey is crossing our common sense somewhere in the back alleys of our mind. The thought comes unbidden whether we should trust anything that Mr. Branson might be willing to offer us should we get so thirsty as to ask. With nothing known for us to lose we throw caution to the wind and trudge onward.

It isn't long before we make a slight left turn and there we are, looking straight at what fills the need for shelter. It is long and rambling as we witnessed in the plane. From here, however, it is more decrepit than we could have imagined. It is approximately 60 feet in length, 30 in height and had once, by all appearances, been a tight and water proof dwelling. No longer. We see holes in the roof in at least 7 places and doors hanging ajar on one rusted hinge. These are haphazardly boarded up to keep them from falling from the doorway completely. No professional carpentry job this. Looking beyond the house proper we see the roof of the barn has collapsed inward and only the rear wall still stands. What looks to be a faded "Burma Shave" sign was once painted on that roof.

Looking farther west we see a couple of outbuildings which are reasonably well maintained. The tower that used to house the windmill for the well is fallen over on yet another outbuilding. One of the well maintained buildings has power lines running to it so the well pump must be fairly new.

In the foremost front of the house it looks like the original homestead has been incorporated into the house which was added on. Obviously sod, the structure has not been properly kept

and is disintegrating was we gaze upon it. It also houses the front door which, lo and behold, is brightly painted an azure blue. We make our way to the front door trying hard to quell our stomachs in preparation for what we might meet once through that portal. Our fears and trepidation are met by an obnoxious odor on the wind blowing past the rear of the building and into our faces. An odor redolent with decay.

Screwing up our courage we knock on the door. There is a doorbell button to push it is hanging out of the receptacle by a single wire; useless. With no answer to our knock we knock yet again. No answer so we launch a fullisade of knocks. Still, nothing. The urge to just barge in is tempered by our fear of trespassing. If we just walk into the house we are "open season" to be shot, stabbed or bludgeoned by any occupant of the house. We decide, instead to walk around the house yelling, "Hello! Anyone home?" We do so, not once, but twice. To be honest, we are feeling more than a little foolish and wondering what the hell we are trying to prove by even being here. Still, our curiosity grows. Not only from our hours spent finding the house but from the plane ride overhead.

As we look at each other the same question is etched in our eyes, *"What the HELL were we thinking?"*

That's when we hear a voice yell at us, "Stop! I have a gun!"

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## **Amos Branson-Part 3-Amos**

With our hair standing up we slowly turn to face the direction from which the voice came. Standing just outside the out building behind us is a youngish man of about 30-35 years. Evidently, he had egressed from that outbuilding which is why,

we realize, there was no answer to our knocks on the front door. In his hands is a shotgun. We see that it is a double-barrel shotgun and we are looking into the maw of its two barrels. The shotgun is pointed generally at our faces and the young man is standing roughly ten yards from us, grimacing.

He is wearing a grey and yellow horizontal stripe T-shirt and cut off khaki shorts. On his feet are ankle high, partially unlaced work boots. He is soaked in sweat with stains in the arm pits of the T-shirt and his cut off khakis have one leg about two inches longer than the other. Those too are stained. His demeanor and style makes us glad that the wind is at our backs. If he smells at all the way he looks his odor would probably be gagging.

On his nose rest a pair of gold rimmed spectacles. The left lens is missing leaving a hole into his eye which is disconcerting as it creates the look of dementia. His pot belly only adds to the general state of disrepair he represents, Not what we were expecting to say the least. We realize that we are in what some term, "A pickle."

"What do you think you're doing on my property?" His voice comes to us with a growl. "I oughta drop you right where you stand! I have the right to you know." We see that he is quite angry and don't doubt that he just might discharge the weapon; ruining our day. Actually, his question is the one question we were afraid he would ask us. We both know that, in truth, we haven't have a good answer between us. In fact, we were just asking ourselves that same question.

We start to blurt out some thing like: we were just riding around and saw your place and were wondering if it might be for sale. We don't get the chance though. Amos cocks back both hammers of his shotgun. The sound is like a death knell. Clear and acid-like.

"I think you just better get off my property right now." His

voice bodes no discussion of his principle of our ceasing our trespass.

I finally gain a modicum of control and, trying to keep from stuttering, carefully state, "We were told that your property might be for sale in town. We knocked on your door several times and thought you weren't home. We drove quite a while to get here so we thought we would just take a look-see to see if we're interested in your property. Is it for sale?" You sigh with at my lack of originality. The look on your face says that we are now going to die.

For just a second we see look of hesitation on Amos' face. He blinks, then, lowers the shotgun. When the barrels are pointing toward the ground he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "Who told you that?" There is suspicion in his voice but it feels to us like the worst might be over.

You chime in quickly, "A waitress at the Godfrey Diner said that she had heard this parcel might be on the market." My gratitude for your quick thinking is palpable when you continue, "She said she knows you and that you mentioned to her that you were considering selling a few weeks ago. She also said she wasn't sure but she said it might be worth our time to take a run out here. So, here we are. Sorry if we seemed up to no good. Our fault, completely."

With that, a smile appeared on Amos' face. "Shirley?" he asked.

"Pardon?" I blurt out, half expecting him to finish with "Surely, you jest?"

"Shirley, the girl at the diner."

I come back, "I didn't ask her name. Blond, short hair, if I remember correctly?"

"That's her. Well, pretty dark hair for a blond but...I kind of

like her, you know? She doesn't care much for me I think but she's a nice lady. She knew my mother and father when she was a kid."

The unpronounced sigh when one realizes they aren't going to die suddenly ran through my body. I felt like collapsing and barely not peeing my pants. How close was that? In truth, I didn't know but it seemed for a few slow minutes that blackness was inevitable.

"Well," you interject with suaveness, "perhaps you can show us around?" Amos thinks about that, screwing his face into an almost comical expression. The manner in which he pursed his lips almost sends me into a chuckling fit until I feel your elbow dig painfully into my ribs. You're right though. It probably wouldn't do to laugh at Amos now.

As we wait for his answer his expression changes as he raises the shotgun again. "Her names not Shirley." Anger is seeping back into his face as unease and panic start to sink into ours. *Aw, shit! We blew this big-time.* I feel the loosening of my bowels as he points the gun straight into my face; cocking the triggers again. Taking two steps forward he hisses, "You have two minutes to get off my property."

With that we both say, "No problem, we're going. So sorry to have bothered you." The sound of our voices must have sounded like someone rubbing a balloon; only, acapella. We both turned and started running toward the car. The feeling we had as our backs were turned to him was ghastly. Would he let us go or just shoot us in the back and bury our corpses out in the back forty.

Fairly leaping into the car we hear from behind, "And don't ever come back!" Then, a gale of laughter. We look to where he threatened us and see him sitting on his butt laughing and holding his stomach; the shotgun laying in the dirt beside him. "It wasn't even loaded!" He managed to croak. Evidently

he thought we were the funniest thing he'd ever seen. In truth, I guess we probably were.

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## Amos Branson-Part 4-Relapse

The ride back into town was balefully quiet. Each of us editing and reediting the scenes of the past few hours in our minds as tempered by the contrast of the "*it wasn't even loaded*" chortle. That chortle felt to each of us like a rock in our shoes; grinding painfully with each mile back to town.

Finally, you look at me as I'm driving, grim faced, and burst out in guffaw's of laughter at both our discomiture. "What a couple of 'Maroons!' We fell for that hook, line, and sinker!" Your laughter starts grating on me after 5 minutes of stops and loud galed restarts.

"What if it actually was loaded and he just chickened out of shooting us? I'm going back." I say this with grim determination on a face which, just a few minutes ago was grinning like a Cheshire Cats. "I can't let this go."

Plain and simple for me to say but what was really bugging me was that smell. I didn't relate this to you but that smell was, I was pretty sure, death; or remians of same.

"Something is really wrong back there and I aim to find out what."

The look on your face was one as though I had just shit my pants. "You can't be serious? Tell me you're just joking around, right?" I nod over to you, my face set in stone.

"Well, do what you want but I'm not going back there! Not in a million years; or even tonight! That guy is a whack job born

to rouse the devil. Leave me out of this”.

That said, I sigh. “No, you’re probably right. But I am going to call the cops and ask them to do something like a welfare check. That stinch was one of dying, not an old claustrophobic house. I’ve smelled dead animals but this was different. The same, only different, I guess. It had a sick-sweet odor to it and I have heard that human decay has that difference in odor from other animals.

“You’re right though, I’m not built to challenge a situation like this.”

That settled, we got into town, went to our hotel and I called the police which, in this case, was the county Sheriff. They told me they would check this out today or tonight as they were already aware of Amos. The last thing the deputy said was, “it was just a matter of time.”

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## **Amos                      Branson-Part                      5- Mutterings**

I set the room phone down and walked to the window of my bungalow; pulling the drapes aside. Not ten seconds passed before I saw two Sheriff’s cruisers heading out of town fast, the way you and I had come back in; lights, no sirens. I believe that’s called “Code 2.”

“Put your clothes on , Martha, we’ve got company,”

That old saw came out with my breath. An old saying I’d heard as a kid. It never ceased to draw a smile from me. I wonder

about the validity and truth of old sayings at times. You know, who and why had cause to utter them and the how is, how did they get repeated enough to be handed down through time. A bar room comes to mind. At least for the off-color ones. Some are excerpts from the Bible. Some are just too old to ever know how they came to be.

At this point I was muttering, mouthing my words under my breath, but I also really wanted to head back out and see what was going on. If the smell that alerted me was what I thought it was then there'll be a lot more emergency vehicles headed out the same way very shortly. For now, I knew, I wasn't going anywhere. I do, however, remember that you have one of those little bars in your room. The ones that sometimes have Canadian Club in them. I knew I needed to talk this through before I did something really stupid.

Going outside, headed, ultimately, your room, I noticed the lack of light and looked up at the sky. Clouds were scudding in. There had been high cirrus earlier but I hadn't taken much notice then. Now, however, they were getting thick and black and the first thing that came to mind was "tornado weather." The midwest is noted for corn and tornadoes and the old answer to these storms was that they were God's answer to trailer parks. It did seem that way at times but it was also a cruel remark directed toward those less fortunate. The kind of remark born of elite urban dwellers who didn't know which end of a shovel actually made a hole in the dirt.

I was surprised when I saw the maid coming out of your room with a bundle of sheets and towels. "Is he in there?" The question almost was forced out by my surprise.

"No sir, he left in a cab." That stopped me cold. What the... ! Surprise wasn't the operant term here. Shaking, shock, perhaps? I walked quickly to the door and looked in, sure as hell, there were no suitcases or duffle bags in your room. Just the comforter lying on the sculpted green carpet as the

maid put new sheets on the bed.

“Are you sure he didn’t just go to the lobby or down to the cafe?” Her nod was all I got back. Standing there, mouth open, I had to think. That’s when it dawned on me that you had had enough of this. Dumb as a stump I told myself. You weren’t cut out for anything remotely like a murder scene; if that’s what it was out there. You were a family man and a good friend but, it struck me hard, I should never have thought to get involved in this to the extent I had. Saying I was going back there to sneak around had probably been the straw that broke the camel’s back. But, shit, you could have said something. Question is: Would I have listened? Pondering that, I had to say to myself, “Probably not.”

*Now, you’re on your own “buck-o”. Nice going moron. Any thought of a “CC and Seven” dissipated like a drop of water in a hot skillet. Ok, what to do?*

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## **Amos Branson-Part 6-Fini**

You know how you get that feeling that you’re pushing your luck? That, perhaps, “just” one more time will be a disaster?

I once had that feeling about drinking. That I was enjoying it too much and if I continued it might very well take over my life. As I walked back to my motel room that old feeling overwhelmed me. I knew I wasn’t going anywhere near Amos again. Shit man, that’s not your job plus what the hell are you thinking?

I decided to take a short walk around the main street of this little town; with half an idea of going to the cafe to see if I could find “Shirley” the waitress. At least, it occurred to

me, I could find out her actual name and say hello, pleased to meet you. Hell, I'm not attached so it could be a great thing to explore and see what might come from it; if anything. That's exactly what I did; in a round about way.

When the sheriffs cars came back it was about an hour and a half later. The waitress, who ever she was, was not at the cafe when I walked in so I just sat at the counter and had a cup of coffee and a slice of peach pie. The cook was also the waiter so I asked him who the waitress in question was. He returned the name, Doris, so that mystery was settled. That was when the cook said, "Well I'll be damned! They finally arrested that warped piece of shit!"

Looking out the window I saw none other than Amos leaning forward in the back of a cruiser, head down, hands and arms behind his back. The cook continued, "It's way, way past time that shit, Amos, got taken off the street. Now, maybe, we'll find out what really happened to his mother and father."

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*To be continued*

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## **Amos Branson-Part 6-Fini 2**

I have to say, the peach pie sucked. Have you ever had a piece of fresh pie, home-made and then, within a few days had a slice of frozen pie? It's kind of like seeing a movie about scenery such as Yosemite in black and white, thirties vintage maybe, and then actually going to the park for real. The sweet smell of the forest knocks you off your feet. The Merced River is running right at your feet and the pines smell as fresh and clean as if God just planted them. Yeah, that's how the peach

pie tasted: black and white. The coffee was pretty good though!

The cook, his name was Dan, Dan Spiner (in case you know him), was just getting off work and out of the hazy blue asked me if I wanted to go to the sheriffs department and find out what was going on with Amos.

“Hey, if you’re interested, you and me can take a ride down to the sheriffs and find out what they’re going to do with Amos. The sheriff and I went to school together, same grade, and he won’t mind if we drop in. Shit, he’s probably got a rope tied into a noose already. A rope for Amos, not for us.” How could I say “no?”

Riding in his car was a journey of power versus intelligence; if that makes any sense. He was driving a '56 Chevy with a 427 cubic inch engine. At least, that’s what he told me; with a grin on his face. It felt like riding on a bomb. I could feel the engine rumbling right through my stomach and when he accelerated, which he did in fits and starts, he laid me back in my seat with a snap that told me he could probably pop the nose off the ground if he wanted. I thanked God we were in town. Out on the highway he would have scared me to death. He used his head though so it turned out to be just a fun ride with the potential of mayhem. It was interesting!

At the sheriffs office we went right in. Dan waved at the desk Sergeant who, in turn, motioned us to follow and took us to the back of the station; to receiving. The back of the station wasn’t anything you will ever see in a cop movie. There was a bench with steel eyes in the concrete floor to which “customers”, as the sergeant termed arrestee’s, were manacled until their disposition or cell was made ready. That was it. One door and what appeared to be just old plywood walls. Certainly not the atmosphere of San Francisco’s Mark Hopkins. Sitting there was Amos, hunched over. He looked up at Dan and I when we came in. As he did so his expression changed from

one of boredom to one of deep and utter contempt laced with deep and abiding hate. I remembered, long ago, seeing a mug shot of Charles Manson with wide, satanic eyes. I couldn't imagine seeing worse but the eyes of Amos were burning right through us. "If looks could kill" is an expression which fell short because it doesn't mention the method of killing. Amos' eyes said he wanted to peel strips of skin from me and pour acid on the open wounds all the while suffocating me with filthy, excrement laden rags. It did, in fact, make me nauseous.

The sergeant, seeing sweat break out on my brow, told me not to worry, "He ain't going anywhere. You can put the blood back in your face." Dan chimed in:

"What'd you guys find out there?"

The sergeant looked around almost furtively then whispered, "I ain't supposed to tell anyone this but"...hesitation and more looking around..."We think we found the mom and dad." He then shut up as the sheriff, who had been out at the farm most of the day, came in.

"Danny boy! What the hell are you doing here?" Dan introduced me as the one who originally called the "Amos thing" into the sheriff's office. "Well, son, you did us a huge favor!" he slapped me on the back. "That was quite a mess. Worst I've seen since I've been sheriff these last 11 years. Mom and dad we found in an bedroom upstairs; all splayed out and posed; mummified. Been there, it looks, like at least two years. This piece of shit had it all walled off. We had to break down the whole damned wall but we knew they were there because of the stench. I guess that was what you meant when you said you were pretty sure something was dead out there. Gotta run but, thanks again." He looked back at Amos. "You sorry piece of shit! You're gonna fry for this. Your folks was good people. To good for the likes of you you son of a bitch!"

Amos smiled hugely; flipping the sheriff off from behind his back.

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*Continued*

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## **Amos Branson-Part 7-Fini (End)**

It's been seven months since Amos was arrested. A lot has happened since then. It was a given, in my mind, that the sheriff had him dead to rights. That the law would take its course and that he would, Amos, spend the rest of his life in jail; at the least.

I'm not one who is necessarily opposed to the death penalty but neither am I one who wants to see *any* life taken. It's kind of like Gandalf said to Frodo: "Did he deserve death? Certainly. But, dear Frodo, there are those who deserve life also. Can you give it to them?" Well, that's from memory but it rather nicely packages my thoughts concerning lethal sentencing. I'm just glad I don't have to make those types of decisions or I probably wouldn't have any hair left.

Anyway, all that's beside the point. Life, if nothing else, is full of surprises. I got a call from Dan the cook. After my spending another two days in town Dan and I got to know each other a little so I gave him my number and asked him to keep me informed as the trial and sentencing. I wasn't expecting him to actually call me but he did just a few days ago.

It seems there was a technical evidentiary problem with the

way the sheriff gathered evidence having to do with improper search warrants. It came down to the demolishing of the wall Amos had built to entomb his parents. Dan couldn't explain it very well but the judge, and this is the kicker, threw the case out and let Amos go free. All the while admonishing the sheriff that he had wronged Amos and that he, the sheriff, should be investigated by the F.B.I. for past management decisions in the sheriff's department.

That wasn't the part for which Dan called me however. Seems one of the deputies overheard Amos when he was leaving the jail. He was talking with some friend who came to pick him up and on his way out was overheard to say that he was going to look me up sooner than later. He said that he owed me a debt and he intended to pay it back in full.

I've always wondered why, no matter how hard you try to do the right thing, someone finds a way to shit on you despite your good intentions. The weird part is that this "shit" comes from directions totally unexpected. Usually, it catches you full in the face when you have just turned around. Like when you help an old lady across the street and you get hit by a bus for your effort. She is just standing on the curb thanking you and *wham!* You know what I mean?

I'll tell you what, this town just got to small for me. The last thing Dan said was that Amos had left town. He caught the bus out and was heading south. South is my direction. It's a great time to take that vacation I've been putting off. I hear Fiji is nice this time of year. I wonder if my old friend Buck Hale is back from his "wilderness journey" yet? We might go together.