

THE LEGEND OF BAT JOHNSON

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Original Screenplay

By

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based on the short story
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FADE IN:

BEGIN OPENING CREDITS

EXT 1880's NEW MEXICO WILDERNESS- CLEAR NIGHT

3 BANDITOS (Angelito, Sanchez and Juarez, all Hispanic males) are rustling cattle on the open range. They speak to each other in Spanish while trying to get a number of cattle into a small herd.

ANGELITO suddenly sees a man's silhouette against the night sky in the distance. The rustlers hear TWO RIFLE SHOTS from the distance. They pull up on their horses and stop.

ANGELITO

Sanchez! Mira!

SANCHEZ

Si! Si! Quantos vacas?

ANGELITO

Sequenta!

SANCHEZ

Sequenta! Mierda! No mas, no mas!
Vamanos! Andale!

SANCHEZ and ANGELITO head the cattle around to get them out of the area while JUAREZ gets off return fire at the man in the distance.

The man in the distance dismounts and disappears. The rustlers disappear into the distance with the cattle.

CUT TO:

EXT WILDERNESS- NIGHT

BARTHOLOMEW JOHNSON (late 30's, Black American) is standing near a lone tree trying to see the rustlers in the distance. He pulls his hat off and throws it on the ground in disgust.

CUT TO:

INT SHERIFF'S OFFICE- DAY

SHERIFF MULDOON

How many were there?

BARTHOLOMEW

I saw three. Don't know if there were any more. I got off two shots and scared em out of there. I figure if there were any more, they woulda come after me.

SHERIFF MULDOON

Speaking Spanish huh? If it's the fellers I'm thinking, they run on both sides of the border, out of Mexico. I was hoping they wouldn't come up this far north, but it seems my hope was misplaced. How well you armed?

BARTHOLOMEW

We have the Henry.

SHERIFF MULDOON

Hmmm. With those fellers in the area it would be good idea to pick up a hogleg, or another rifle. Have a gun on you and one at the house. Can Blessi shoot?

BARTHOLOMEW

She knows her way around a Henry. They really that dangerous?

SHERIFF MULDOON

Let's just say that someone was looking out for you survivin a run in with those coyotes. I'll see what we can do, but I don't know that I can promise much. I wish the Mexican Federales would work with us, but that don't seem likely.

BARTHOLOMEW

Thanks sheriff.

CUT TO:

EXT SHERIFF'S OFFICE- DAY

BARTHOLOMEW exits the sheriff's office and mounts his

horse. He looks up at the sky for a minute, seeing lightning in the distance.

BARTHOLOMEW

Uh oh. That's no good.

BARTHOLOMEW points his horse out of town and slaps the horse with the reins.

BARTHOLOMEW

Yaahhh!

END OPENING CREDITS

CUT TO:

EXT WILDERNESS- DUSK

MAN on horseback dressed in typical cowboys gear trying to make headway against a raging storm but it is very difficult.

WIND, RAIN, LIGHTNING

MAN raises his hand to his face to try to keep the rain out of his eyes and get some bearing.

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL HOMESTEAD HOUSE -DUSK

BLESSING JOHNSON (late 30s, Black), Bartholomew's wife, and two small girls are huddled near the ROARING FIRE. BARTHOLOMEW is checking himself against the elements. He's listening to the RAIN AND WIND.

BARTHOLOMEW

Starting to really howl out there. I'll be back in a little bit. You and the girls stay warm.

BLESSING

We will. And those horses are pretty riled up. You be careful.

BARTHOLOMEW

You know me. I always am.

EXT. SMALL NEW MEXICO HOMESTEAD

BARTHOLOMEW is taking the horses one at a time from the corral to the barn. The horses are spirited and nervous. He has to take time to calm some of them down.

CUT TO:

EXT WILDERNESS- DUSK

MAN on horseback is still trying to catch his bearings. He squints into the distance and sees a structure. MAN pulls on the reins to take the horse in the direction of the structure.

CUT TO:

EXT. SMALL NEW MEXICO HOMESTEAD

BARTHOLOMEW is walking the property. He checks the shutters on the windows for strength, checks the tarps on some outdoor supplies, stares up at the trees while listening to the HOWLING WIND. He walks over to the CHICKEN COOP and checks the door, the windows and the eaves.

CUT TO:

EXT HOMESTEAD- DUSK

Bartholomew takes one last look at his property. He turns and walks up the steps and into his house.

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL HOMESSTEAD HOUSE -DUSK

BLESSING

Oh, sweetie, you'll be soaked to the bone. Let me get you over here and warm up.

BARTHOLOMEW

Not yet. Almost. I've double checked everything. The roof on the chicken coup is looking kind of poorly. I should have made time to get on it, but I think it will hold up. Wrangled the horses from the corral to the barn, so I'm sure they will be fine.

BLESSING

But?

BARTHOLOMEW

I'm concerned about the cattle. We've got nearly 500 head now. Well not counting the ones we lost to the rustlers. I've never seen a howler this bad in all the years we been here. I'd hate to lose a lot more of them because of weather.

BLESSING

They'll be... WE'LL BE alright. We always are. God's got us.

BARTHOLOMEW (conceding)

You're right. We've sure lived through more than five lifetimes of trouble. Still it wouldn't hurt to check the horses one last time.

Bartholomew heads out of the house toward the barn. He grabs a lantern off the porch peg and has trouble lighting it in the wind, but gets it lit.

CUT TO:

INT. HOMESTEAD BARN- NIGHT

Bartholomew fights with the barn door to get it closed against the wind. He places the cross member in the door and turns to survey the HORSES who seem nervous. Bartholomew walks to a horse and touches her face.

BARTHOLOMEW

Shhhhh. Shhhhh. It's alright girl. Its alright.

Bartholomew is suddenly aware that someone might be in the barn. He moves around the back of the horse, still mumbling to her and sets the lantern on a barrel. Suddenly grabs his pitchfork.

BARTHOLOMEW

Who's there!!!?

CRANE emerges from the back of the barn, his hands up near his sides showing no aggression.

CRANE

No trouble fiend, please.

Crane steps into the light of Bartholomew's lantern. His coloring is not black, not white, almost a sallow, gray color.

CRANE

I was hoping you folks would be neighborly enough to let me sit out the storm in your barn.

Bartholomew softens his stance a little and puts down the pitchfork.

BARTHOLOMEW

I am sure we can oblige you.

Bartholomew extends his hand for a shake.

BARTHOLOMEW

Bartholomew Johnson.

CRANE

Crane.

BARTHOLOMEW

Mr. Crane, what catches you out in this storm?

CRANE

Traveling on business and had my mind on that. Not paying attention I guess.

BARTHOLOMEW

Hmmm. Have you had anything to eat? My wife Blessi is some cook.

CRANE

That would be very much appreciated Mr. Johnson.

BARTHOLOMEW

Please call me Bartholomew. I'll go see what we have available.

CRANE

Thanks very much.

Bartholomew grabs the lantern and turns to leave.

CRANE (cont)

Bartholomew?

Bartholomew stops at the barn door.

CRANE (cont)

You needn't worry if I am going to ask to come in the house. With a family, and me being a stranger and all. I will be very content to just settle down here. I wouldn't ask you to compromise your family's safety.

BARTHOLOMEW

I appreciate that. Thanks for understanding. I'll be back in just a bit.

Bartholomew leaves the barn.

CUT TO:

INT. HOMESTEAD HOUSE- NIGHT

Blessing is organizing some biscuits and beans on a tin plate.

BLESSING

I just hope he'll be ok out there.

BARTHOLOMEW

He will sugar. And we'll be fine in here.

Bartholomew grabs the barrel of the rifle standing in the corner.

BARTHOLOMEW (cont)

I have my Henry. The cross beam on the door is plenty strong against the wind.

(beat)

Or people.

Blessing glares at him slightly.

BLESSING

And?

BARTHOLOMEW

And we have the protection of the Lord.

Blessing hands Bartholomew the plate.

BLESSING

Take him this. Tell him I'd be glad to put on some coffee if he doesn't mind waiting.

Bartholomew kisses his wife on the cheek.

BARTHOLOMEW

You are a Blessing.

The two girls giggle.

CUT TO:

INT. HOMESTEAD HOUSE- NIGHT

The house is under a torrent. RAIN, WIND and THUNDER are worse. LIGHTNING flashes through the slits in the boarded up windows. The girls have given into exhaustion and are finally asleep huddled up with the mother in the living room on a makeshift bed. Bartolomew is sleeping sitting up, with his Henry rifle in his lap, stirring at any sound that might indicate danger.

CUT TO:

BEGIN DREAM

INT. HOMESTEAD HOUSE - NIGHT

Bat and Blessing get everybody ready for bed except Bat. Bat sits in a chair by the fire and sets the gun in his lap. He is thinking or praying, but quiet.

Bat is in the chair. His chair and the whole house, begins to shake. The ground rumbles like an earthquake is shaking it.

TRAIN ENGINE NOISES- clanking, spewing, grinding. TRAIN HORN is deafening. The train explodes thru the planks of the walls of the house. Everything splinters as the

HEADLIGHT BRIGHTNESS hits Bat full in the face. The cow catcher on the train connects with his body.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Bat is jolted awake in chair and is drenched with sweat.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HOMESTEAD HOUSE- DAY

The sun is up. Everything around the ranch is waterlogged, the ground, the trees, the house. Water runs off its drenched structure in several places. BARTHOLOMEW opens the front door, surveying the damage. One tree across the property has branches down, no structure damage that Bartholomew can see, but flooding all around. The barn looks intact.

CUT TO:

INT. HOMESTEAD BARN- DAY

Bartholomew throws open the barn door. The horses look like they are in good shape.

BARTHOLOMEW

Mr. Crane?

CRANE

Here, Bartholomew.

Crane is sitting near the back of the barn on two hay bales.

CRANE (cont)

And good morning to you. Or is it afternoon?

BARTHOLOMEW

Nearly one o'clock. Everything alright last night?

CRANE

Except for the horses being driven crazy by all that thunder. I thought they were

going to kick the stalls down. You did a good job on this barn though. Steady and strong. You folks?

BARTHOLOMEW

We did fine. Blessi wanted me to let you know she's putting some steak and eggs on, if you don't mind waiting a bit.

CRANE

I appreciate the offer, but I do have to move along. I have some folks waiting for me and I'm sure they are wondering how I fared last night.

BARTHOLOMEW

Folks? Nearby?

CRANE

Oh no, I'm sorry. In the next county. I assumed that when you invited me to stay here last night that offer extended to my horse Diablo, so I went out and brought him in also. He's out back now, saddled and ready to go.

BARTHOLOMEW

Ah. I see.

CRANE

Bartholomew, I wanted to give you something before I go.

BARTHOLOMEW

That's not necessary.

CRANE

I understand that it's not necessary, but I am very appreciative of your hospitality. I don't know what I would have done without it. So you'll understand when I won't take no for an answer.

Crane reaches into a saddle bag and pulls out a cloth bundle, handing it to Bartholomew.

CRANE

This is for your kindness.

Bartholomew unwraps the bundle and pulls out an ebony handle Colt Peacemaker.

BARTHOLOMEW

It's beautiful.

CRANE

Yes sir it is. And it's yours.

Bartholomew looks the pistol over.

BARTHOLOMEW

But this must be worth a lot of money.

CRANE

It's not nearly worth as much as your hospitality.

Bartholomew tries to hand the pistol back to Crane.

BARTHOLOMEW

Mr. Crane, I can't take this.

CRANE

I told you I wouldn't take no for an answer.

BARTHOLOMEW

But I've never handled a six-shooter much. And I always heard its worse to be in a situation with a gun that you can't handle, than not having one at all.

CRANE

Well practice with it. Your good with a rifle aren't you?

BARTHOLOMEW

My Henry? How did you know I have a rifle?

CRANE

Oh, I just assumed you did. Every rancher has to have a rifle for varmints or keeping danger at bay.

Bartholomew looks at the pistol again.

CRANE (cont)

If you get good with that, you can travel into town and leave the Henry here for your wife to use if she needs it. What could be safer than that?

BARTHOLOMEW

That is true.

Crane positions the pistol in Bartholomew's hand.

CRANE

Hold is properly like this. Get the feel of it. Doesn't that weight feel good in your hand?

BAT

It's very nice.

Crane suddenly pushes past Bartholomew through the open barn door.

CRANE

Come out here and try it.

Bartholomew stands looking confused for a moment and then exits.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOMESTEAD BARN- DAY

Crane pulls a silver dollar from his pocket and tosses it about twenty feet away. Then he pulls a cartridge from his belt handing it to Bartholomew.

CRANE

Hit that dollar.

BAT

That's impossible. I can't hit that dollar.

CRANE

Without even trying? Drop that cartridge in that pistol and hit that dollar.

Bartholomew loads the gun and pulls the hammer back,

looking down the sights are aiming carefully. He misses.

CRANE

This is a special pistol. A real special design. You don't shoot it methodically. You feel it. Relax. Try it again.

Bartholomew shakes his arms, tenses up his neck and shoulders, then relaxes. He fires again and nearly hits the dollar.

CRANE

Much better! Now tuck it in your belt and try it from the draw like the bounty killers do.

BAT

But I can't-

CRANE

Just try it. You're pointed in a safe direction.

Bartholomew loads the gun again, tucks it in his belt, draws and fires. The shot nearly hits the dollar.

CRANE

A little practice and I'd say you and that pistol were made for each other.

Bartholomew face turns solemn.

BAT

Mr. Crane, what do you care so much if I like this gun?

CRANE

That's a fair question. I am going to level with you. When I saw that the owner of this barn was a black man, I knew I had to do something to help him. When I was younger, I got kicked around my whole life. I always said that when I made something out of myself, I was going to do what I could to help others who suffered likewise. When I got older, I didn't forget my promise. It isn't right the way you fellas, the Indians, the Chinese get treated just because

you're not white. Let's just say it matters to me.

Bartholomew rubs his hands over the pistol.

CRANE

Not to long ago, a man named Elfego Baca showed the entire southwest what a man with brown skin can do when he has guts, the ability to shoot and determination. And what about Bass Reeves? I'm sure you've read about him. Both of those men had to fight for things that were already theirs.

Crane turns and heads back inside the barn. He comes out carrying his gear.

CRANE

I have to be on my way. If you don't want it, don't keep it. Sell it. It's up to you.

BAT

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to seem ungrateful. Thanks very much.

CRANE speaks over his shoulder.

CRANE

And thank you again for your hospitality.

Bartholomew sees him mount his horse and ride out into the distance.

CUT TO:

INT. HOMESTEAD HOUSE- DAY

Bartholomew enters the front door with his Henry pointed at his face and Blessi and the girls huddled in the corner of the room.

BLESSING

Bartholomew!

BAT

Easy Blessi!

Blessing carefully lowers the hammer on the rifle.

BLESSING

I thought you were the stranger. I heard the gunshots and assumed... well I set to praying. Never mind what I assumed. What happened out there?

Bartholomew suddenly realizes how that sounded from the house.

BAT

Sugar I am so sorry. The man, Mr. Crane, wanted to give me a gift and had me try it out. I didn't think...

BLESSING

I forgive you. I'm just glad you are safe.

BAT

Mr. Crane, he gave me a pistol to show his appreciation, and he had me firing it.

Bartholomew holds out the pistol, but she doesn't take it. Blessing slows her breathing and relaxes her shoulders.

BLESSING

Is he gone now?

BAT

Yeah, he's gone.

BLESSING

Girls go out and check on the chickens and see if they've any eggs to gather. And don't stomp in the puddles. And be careful of all the mud.

The girls grab a basket and head out the door.

OLDER GIRL

Ok mama.

Blessing turns back and takes the pistol from her husband. She looks it over intently.

BLESSING

Bartholomew, why did he give you a six-gun?

BARTHOLOMEW

Mr. Crane kind of insisted. I didn't want to be rude and turn it down.

BLESSING

Isn't that an unusual gift for a one night stay in a barn and some beans and biscuits?

BARTHOLOMEW

I suppose so.

Blessing focuses her gaze on the gun.

BLESSING

Why would am man want to give away a gun? Especially out here? I wonder if it's stolen.

BARTHOLOMEW

Blessi!

BLESSING

I'm sorry Bartholomew. I shouldn't think like that.

BARTHOLOMEW

Mr. Crane explained that it would be good security for you to have the Henry with you here at the ranch when I travel into town, and I can take the six gun with me.

BLESSING

Well that makes good sense-

BARTHOLOMEW

I thought so too.

Blessing crosses her arms and glares at her husband.

BLESSING

I was going to say that you know pistols send a different message than long guns.

BARTHOLOMEW

I'll keep it in my knapsack. I won't wear it gunfighter style. That way I won't look like I'm looking for trouble.

BLESSING

That's fine. Just keep it with you. I don't want the girls getting anywhere near it.

Bartholomew moves over and hugs his wife.

BARTHOLOMEW

I hate to run off but I have to go see about the herd.

BLESSING

I love you. Go ahead. I'll check on the girls and the chickens.