

# THE GIRLS OF THE GOLDEN WEST

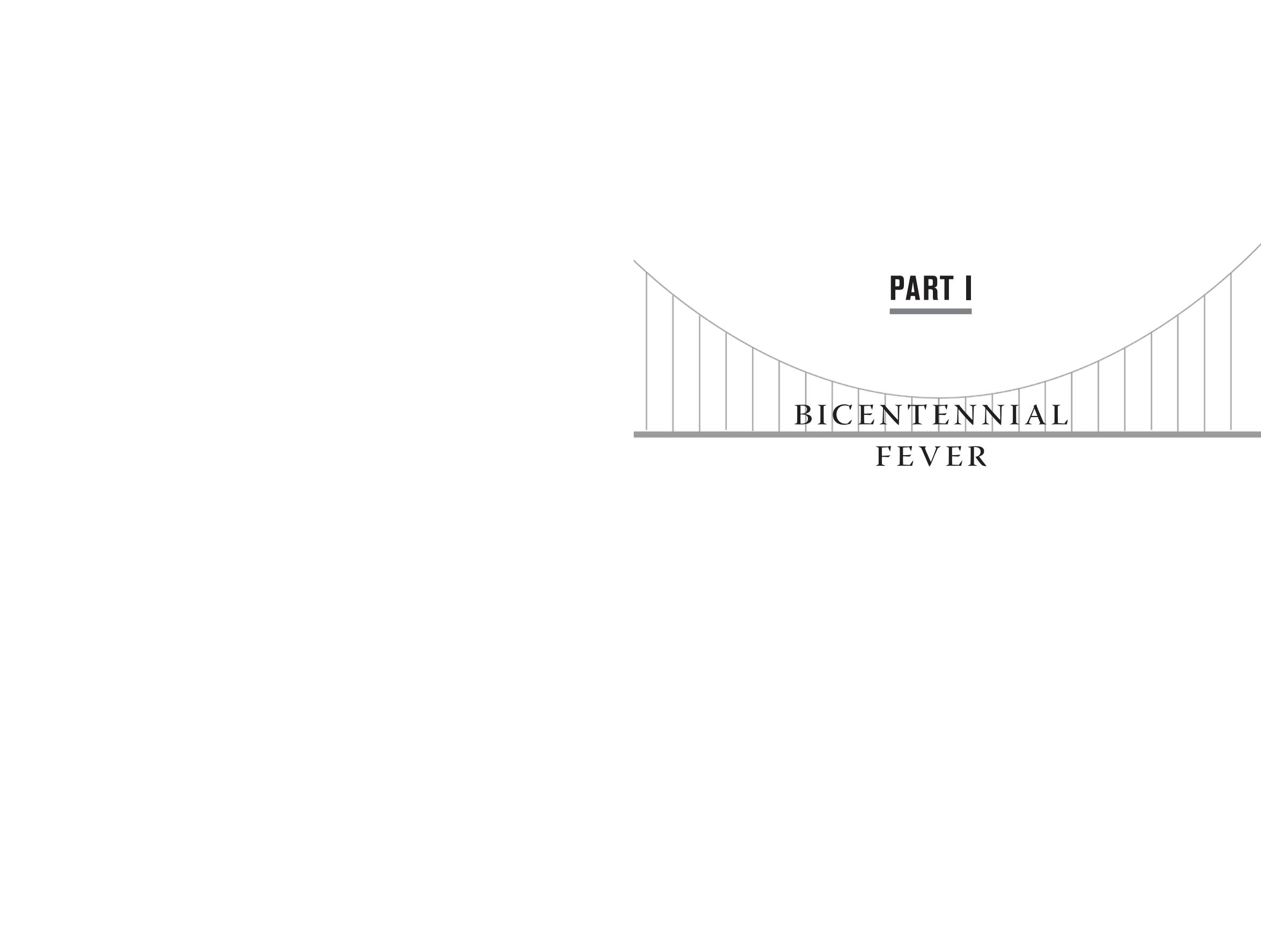
---

A NOVEL

JAMES WARD LEE



Fort Worth, Texas



**PART I**

**BICENTENNIAL  
FEVER**

## CHAPTER 1

---

I make it a point never to answer my door. Nothing good ever comes of it. It's nearly always somebody wanting to sell magazine subscriptions or paint my house number on the curb or get me signed up for one of the new off-brand churches that seem to be springing up all over Bodark Springs.

Last night about 7:30 the knocking became so insistent that I peeked out behind the curtains in the front room and saw three women who showed no signs of going away. The two I recognized were Ruby Lathem and Frances Bailey, old students of mine from long ago and now stalwarts of the Eastis County Historical Society. I didn't get a good look at the other woman, but I was pretty sure she was the graduate student from UT who wanted to interview me. Ruby had bored me for years. She was tedious back when she was a student at John Bell Hood High School. Now she droned on at every meeting of the local historical society. If a thing could be talked to death, Ruby was your woman.

I knew I was in for it, but I opened the door wide and said, "Evening, ladies, please come in."

Frances was widely known as Ruby's sidekick. Frances is Smiley Burnett to Ruby's Gene Autry. She probably sings about as well as old Smiley too.

Frances was very tall and built in such a way as to attract men of all ages. Her hair was an impossible shade of red—henna, I think they call it. She had burned through four husbands. Two died of natural causes, one was executed at the state prison in Huntsville, and one survived and lived here in town with his third wife.

Ruby was shorter than Frances and trim, not a bad looking woman for near sixty. Her hair was dark but flecked with gray, and she still had the figure I remembered from her days at the high school, though I wasn't supposed to notice back then. It was, even in those days of enforced modesty, hard not to notice a—oh, better leave it at that. Ruby never married, but she had a son that everybody in town thought was her little brother. People knew that she disappeared from town about twenty-five years ago and went off with her mother to French Lick, Indiana, for two years. They came back with little Donald, who was about a year and a half old. But most didn't tumble to the fact that the baby might be hers. Old Ida Lathem told everyone that the baby was hers and that she'd married and divorced in Indiana. My late wife knew better, knew that the baby belonged to Ruby. She even said she knew who the father was. I can't remember how she knew such a piece of desperate gossip. Most people believed Ida or said they did, at least when Ruby's "brother" Donald was around.

As the years passed, Donald began to look more and more like Buster Cooper, the man who'd squired Ruby around all through high school. Old Bert Little, the horse trader, always said, "Did you ever see a bastard that didn't look just like his daddy?" Even people who believed that Donald was Ida's son remarked at the resemblance between Buster Cooper and Donald Lathem.

But I'm wandering again. I've been doing more and more of that in recent years.

Back to the present. The other woman was much younger than Frances and Ruby. I judged her to be in her midtwenties. When I got a good look at her, my mind reeled. I can't ever remember a shock like this. I thought I was seeing Elizabeth Denney, a woman I'd loved forty years ago..

Ruby said, "Are you all right, Professor? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

I had, but I forced myself to come back to 1971. Now I didn't see Liz, who had to be at least sixty by now, or, damn, near seventy! But I saw an equally beautiful woman who could have passed for her sister or daughter. This young woman was no doubt what we used to call a real "looker." She was as tall as Frances and built the way Ruby was in her girlhood—and the way Liz Denney was. Her hair was red—not henna like Frances's, or like Liz's for that matter. The new woman's hair reminded me of the red in Virginia Johnston's hair. I was desperately in love with Ginny Johnston back before the turn of the century. But before I could get up my nerve to propose, she ran off with Adolph Hunsiker and was never seen in these parts again. I got over my broken heart before Easter and was off in serious love with Elva Brooks. And after Elva—

There I go, drifting off again, but this time it's a pleasant remembrance of things long past. Or not.

Ruby introduced us. She said, "Professor Adams—"

I stopped her and said, "Now, Ruby I'm not a professor and never was. I was a high school teacher forever, and then I had the misfortune to be made principal—again forever."

"But everybody used to call you Professor Adams."

"Yes, and they called old Emmett Jones 'Professor' and he taught shop and drove the school bus. I didn't answer to it then and I don't now. So go on with your introduction."

"Well, Mr. Adams, I'd like to have you meet Miss Annie Baxter from Austin. Miss Baxter, please meet Mr. John Quincy Adams the Second, our town's most distinguished resident."

I stopped her. "She means the oldest person in Bodark Springs, maybe in the county."

"No," Ruby said, "Mrs. Estell Bagley up near Cooks Springs is a hundred, so you aren't nearly the oldest."

And I said, "I guess you don't read the Bodark Springs *Weekly Star*. Mrs. Bagley died a week or two ago. It was all in that silly column that Mrs. Angell sends in to the paper."

"'Tidbits from the Springs,'" Frances pointed out.

Ruby Lathem brought things back to the subject at hand. "Professor Adams—sorry, Mr. Adams—Miss Baxter is here from Austin and—"

I interrupted, "Don't you mean Ms. Baxter? They don't say 'Miss' any

## CHAPTER 2

I slept late after my encounter with the three women, not to mention my two encounters with Mr. John Walker. I'm usually up by six, but then I'm not often challenged by a trio of women desperately wishing me to bare my soul. Or spread scandal about my fellow townsmen—and women. Worrying about that will keep a fellow in bed.

As I looked at the bedside clock, I saw that I'd lain in bed till the number 8:15 flashed its green threat at me. I tried to remember the Housman line about lying abed till all hours. The best I could come up with as the numbers flashed 8:16 and then 8:17 were

Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber  
Sunlit pallets never thrive;  
Morns abed and daylight slumber  
Were not meant for man alive.

That's all I can remember, but my failure to summon it up nags at me. Maybe I am failing the senile test that I'm always reading about in the *AARP Bulletin*. I can't make the poem come to me, but I can recall the title: "Reveille." And that at least is something. Maybe later today I can find my beat-up copy of *A Shropshire Lad* and see what else Housman

says about slugabeds. Here I lay as the clock more or less screamed 8:21 at me. The birds were warring outside my window, and the sunlight was doing its best to blind me. So "up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying." Ah, there's another line. Now all I have to do is recall about twenty more. I can see the poem on the page, but it flees from me. I made my way to the bathroom, performed various morning ablutions, and went downstairs for a visit to my waiting coffeepot.

Here in my golden years—no, those were a couple of decades ago. What are these—my platinum years? Here, in whatever metal is assigned to nonagenarians, I always eat the same breakfast—a small bowl of Raisin Bran, a piece of dry whole wheat toast, and a cup of coffee with fake sugar and fake cream.

Then I dressed. I've made it a point now that I've become so aggressively aged to dress up with coat and tie and polished shoes and carefully combed hair when I present myself to the public. Somebody has to set a standard here in Bodark Springs, Texas, in the late spring in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and seventy-one. Since I'm the oldest person still mobile, the duty to display a little sartorial elegance is up to me. I find my best lightweight tan pants, a medium-blue button-down shirt—Sea Island Cotton, of course—a red Countess Mara tie with a muted blue stripe, and my Brooks Brothers blazer with the gold buttons. If the brothers Brooks could outfit old Teddy for war, surely they could suit me up for peace. All dressed, I look at my hall mirror and, for what seems like the millionth time, find I can't believe what "Time's fell hand" has done in ninety-five short years. Oh, well. I put on my straw fedora with the colorful band, find one of my gold-headed sticks, and step onto the porch of what many in town call "The Adams Mansion."

My father bought this pile after he inherited his brother's oil holdings down at Kilgore and shortly before he himself was killed. The house dates to about 1880 and was built by a plantation owner when cotton was king in this part of the state. Bodark once had three cotton gins and the biggest cotton exchange between Memphis and Dallas. Its exchange didn't compare to Dallas or Waco, but for part of the late summer buyers from all over crowded the old Cotton Exchange Hotel and made the small town seem like a metropolis. And then came 1920, and the boll weevil happened. And then the depressed 1920s for farmers