

# THE LEGACY OF BASS REEVES

*By Art T. Burton*

As we move toward the millennium I feel more strongly than ever that Bass Reeves was the most important lawman in the Indian Territory and one of the greatest frontier heroes in our country's history. The research on his life is ongoing and I believe we will learn even more in the future about his outstanding dedication and commitment to duty, which will vindicate my Bass Reeves mania. Hopefully the location where he was buried in Muskogee, Oklahoma will be found.

Below are four articles from the two major newspapers in Muskogee, early in the century. They are the Muskogee Phoenix and the Muskogee Times Democrat. The articles discuss Reeves career during his sickness and after his death. The articles were written after statehood when bias and prejudice against African Americans was very strong, some of the comments reflect that mindset. But still it is very impressive testimonials from two white newspapers of the era:

**Muskogee Times Democrat**, November 19, 1909

## ***BASS REEVES IS A VERY SICK MAN***

*Bass Reeves, a deputy United States marshal in old Indian Territory for over thirty years, is very ill at his home in the Fourth ward and is not expected to live.*

*Reeves was a deputy under Leo Bennett in the last years of the federal regime in Oklahoma, and also served in the old days of Judge Parker at Fort Smith. In the early days when the Indian country was overridden with outlaws, Reeves was sent to go through the Indian country and gather up criminals which were tried at Fort Smith. These trips lasted sometimes for months and Reeves would herd into Fort Smith often single handed, bands of men charged with crimes from bootlegging to murder. He was paid fees in those days which some times amounted to thousands of dollars for a single trip. For a time Reeves made a great deal of money and was said to be worth considerable. He then shot a man whom he was trying to arrest and was tried for murder. The fight for life in the courts was a bitter one, but finally Reeves was acquitted on the testimony of a young negro girl. He was freed, but not until most of his money was gone. The veteran negro deputy never quailed in facing any man. Chief Ledbetter says of the old man that he is one of the bravest men this country has ever known.*

*He was honest and fearless, and a terror to the bootleggers. He was as polite as an old-time slave to the white people and most loyal to his superiors.*

*His son shot and killed his own wife and Reeves, enforcing the law arrested his own son. The young negro was sent to the penitentiary.*

*While the old man is slowly sinking, Bud Ledbetter, who for years was in the government service with Reeves is caring for the old man the best he can and is a daily visitor at the Reeves home. Police Judge Walrond, who was United*

*States district attorney while Reeves was an officer, also calls on the old negro.*

*“While Reeves could neither read nor write,” said Judge Walrond today, “he had a faculty of telling what warrants to serve on any one and never made a mistake. Reeves carried a batch of warrants in his pocket and when his superior officers asked him to produce it the old man would run through them and never fail to pick out the one desired.*

*Since statehood, Reeves was given a place on the police force, but became ill and unable to work. For the past year he has been growing weaker, and has but little time to spend in this world. He is nearly seventy years old.*

**Muskogee Times Democrat, Thursday, January 13, 1910**

### **BASS REEVES DEAD**

*Bass Reeves, colored, for 32 years a deputy United States marshal in Indian Territory, who served under the famous Judge Parker at Fort Smith and later at Muskogee, a man credited with fourteen notches on his gun and a terror to outlaws and desperadoes in the old days, died at his home at 816 North Howard Street late yesterday afternoon at the age of 72. Death was caused by Bright's disease and complications.*

**Muskogee Phoenix, Thursday, January 13, 1910**

### **BASS REEVES DEAD; UNIQUE CHARACTER**

#### **Man of the “Old Days” Gone**

#### **Deputy Marshal Thirty-Two Years**

*Bass Reeves is dead. He passed away yesterday afternoon about three o'clock and in a short time news of his death had reached the federal court house where the announcement was received in the various offices with comments of regret and where it recalled to the officers and clerks many incidents in the early days of the United States court here in which the old negro deputy featured heroically.*

*Bass Reeves had completed thirty-two years service as deputy marshal when, with the coming of statehood at the age of sixty-nine he gave up his position. For about two years then he served on the Muskogee police force, which position he gave up about a year ago on account of sickness, from which he never fully recovered. Bright's disease and a complication of ailments together with old age, were the cause of his death.*

*The deceased is survived by his wife and several children, only one of whom, a daughter, Mrs. Alice Spahn, lives in Muskogee. His mother, who is eighty-seven years old, lives at Van Buren, Arkansas, where a sister of his also is living.*

*The funeral will be held at noon Friday from the Reeves' home at 816 North Howard Street. Arrangements for the funeral had not been completed last evening.*

#### **Bass Reeves Career**

*In the history of the early days of Eastern Oklahoma the name of Bass Reeves has a place in the front rank among those who cleansed out the old Indian Territory of outlaws and desperadoes. No story of the conflict of government's officers with those outlaws which ended only a few years ago with the rapid filling up of the territory with people, can be complete without mention of the negro who died yesterday.*

*For thirty-two years, beginning way back in the seventies and ending in 1907, Bass Reeves was a deputy United States marshal. During that time he was sent to arrest some of the most desperate characters that ever infested Indian Territory and endangered life and peace in its borders. And he got his man as often as any of the deputies. At times he was unable to get them alive and so in the course of his long service he killed fourteen men. But Bass Reeves always said that he never shot a man when it was not necessary for him to do so in the discharge of his duty to save his own life. He was tried for murder on one occasion but was acquitted upon proving that he had killed the man in the discharge of his duty and was forced to do it.*

*Reeves was an Arkansan and in his early days was a slave. He entered the federal as a deputy marshal long before a court was established in Indian Territory and served under the marshal at Fort Smith. Then when people started to come into Indian Territory and a marshal was appointed with headquarters in Muskogee, he was sent over here.*

*Reeves served under seven United States marshals and all of them were more than satisfied with his services. Everybody who came in contact with the negro deputy in an official capacity had a great deal of respect for him, and at the court house in Muskogee one can hear stories of his devotion to duty, his unflinching courage and his many thrilling experiences, and although he could not write or read he always took receipts and had his accounts in good shape. Undoubtedly the act which best typifies the man and which at least shows his devotion to duty, was the arrest of his son. A warrant for the arrest of the younger Reeves, who was charged with murder of his wife, had been issued. Marshal Bennett said that perhaps another deputy had better be sent to arrest him. The old negro was in the room at the time, and with a devotion of duty equaling that of the old Roman, Brutus, whose greatest claim on fame has been that the love for his son could not sway him from justice, he said, "Give me the writ," and went out and arrested his son, brought him into court and upon trial and conviction he was sentenced to imprisonment and is still serving the sentence.*

*Reeves had many narrow escapes. At different times his belt was shot in two, a button shot off his coat, his hat brim shot off and the bridle reins which he held in his hands cut by a bullet. However, in spite of all these narrow escapes and many conflicts in which he was engaged, Reeves was never wounded. And this notwithstanding the fact that he said he never fired a shot until the desperado he was trying to arrest had started the shooting.*

**Muskogee Phoenix.** Saturday, January 15, 1910

**BASS REEVES**

*Bass Reeves, negro, was buried yesterday and the funeral was attended by a large number of white people—men who in the early days knew the old deputy marshal and admired him as a faithful officer and respected him as an honest man.*

*Bass Reeves was an unique character. Absolutely fearless and knowing no master but duty, the placing of a writ in his hands for service meant that the letter of the law would be fulfilled though his life paid the penalty. In the carrying out of his orders during his thirty-two years as deputy United States marshal in the old Indian Territory days, Bass Reeves faced death a hundred times, many desperate characters sought his life yet the old man even on the brink of the grave went along the pathway of duty with the simple faith that some men have who believe that they are in the care of special providence when they are doing right.*

*The arrest of his own son for wife-murder, for which crime the young man is now serving a life sentence, is the best illustration of the old deputy's Spartan character. He performed that duty as he did all others entrusted to him—and he was invariably given the worst cases—with an eye single to doing his duty under the law.*

*Black-skinned, illiterate, offspring of slaves whose ancestors were savages, this simple old man's life stands white and pure alongside some of our present-day officials in charge of affairs since the advent of statehood. To them duty, honor and respect for law are but by-words, and their only creed is "get what you can and stand in with the Boss."*

*Bass Reeves would not have served under such a regime. Black though he was he was too white for that. His simple, honest faith in the righteousness of the law would brook no disrespect for its mandates, and some of the little ones in charge now would not have dared suggest such a thing to this man who feared nothing but the possibility that he might do wrong.*

*Bass is dead. He was buried with high honors, and his name will be recorded in the archives of the court as a faithful servant of the law and a brave officer. And it was fitting that such recognition was bestowed upon this man. It is fitting that, black or white, our people have the manhood to recognize character and faithfulness to duty. And it is lamentable that we as white people must go to this poor, simple old negro to learn a lesson in courage, honesty and faithfulness to official duty.*