

BASS REEVES AND THE NATIONAL MEDIA OF THE FRONTIER ERA

By Art T. Burton

In recent years Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves has garnered quite a bit of national publicity. My last book, published in 2006 by the University of Nebraska Press, was a biography on Reeves, entitled "*Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves*". The following year, the book won an award from the Western Writers of America as a finalist for Best Biography of 2007. Author Vaunda Nelson wrote a children's book on Reeves titled, "*Bad News for Outlaws*", which won the American Library Association's Coretta Scott King Award as best children's book in 2010. Recently, the bridge across the Arkansas River in Muskogee, Oklahoma was named the Bass Reeves Memorial Bridge and in Fort Smith, there will be a statue of Bass Reeves unveiled on May 26, 2012.

This article is not about the recent media attention on Reeves, but the attention he received in the nineteenth and early twentieth century from around the nation. As a continuation to my research on Reeves, none of the noted newspaper narratives in this article appeared in my biography on Reeves. The articles start in the early 1880s and stop at the time of his death in 1910.

The first article is from **The Fort Smith Elevator** from August 11, 1882:

Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves came in on Monday with sixteen prisoners as follows: W. S. Smith, violating revenue law – on bond; Austin Laflore, Jake Gardener, Charles Holmes, larceny; Dick Randolph, Thos. McGiesey, G. W. Brashears, Russell Rowland, introducing liquor in the Territory: Chas. McNally, Boss Kemp, Chas. Carter, N. R. Rozell, W. H. Wynne, assault with intent to kill: W. F. Skeggs, Richard Robinson, arson.

Near twenty years later McGiesey [sic/McGeisy], a Seminole Indian, would be involved in one of the most sensational murder cases involving Oklahoma and Indian Territories, known as the Seminole Burnings. McGeisy became superintendent of Seminole schools and his son, Lincoln was murdered by a white mob along with another Seminole in January of 1898.

On August 20, 1883, from the **Fort Smith Elevator**:

Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves reported on Monday with the following prisoners, thirteen in all: Jeremiah Wilson, (white), Tommy Lowe, Cheeky, Jakey-meeko, Paddy (Indians), Caesar Jones, Isaac Frazier (negroes), all charged with larceny; Simon, Little George, Walleska, Scotsie, Homalney, Wilsey Willow (Indians), all whiskey cases; Phillip Jackson (negro), assault with intent to kill.

It is interesting to note that sometimes the newspaper gave the ethnicity of parties arrested and some time they did not. The same newspaper on July 20, 1883 carried another item on Reeves:

W. T. Haynes, a white man, was lodged in jail Wednesday by deputy Bass Reeves. He was caught as he was crossing the river with some two gallons of alcohol and whiskey in his saddle bags which he had purchased in this city

St. Louis, Missouri was a major gateway city to the American west in the nineteenth century. A newspaper from that city called **The St. Louis Globe Democrat** carried a story on Reeves police work on February 3, 1884:

Captured in the Indian Territory

Fort Smith, Ark., February 2 – Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves [sic/Reeves] came in this morning with twelve prisoners from the Indian country. Among the number was John Black, charged with the murder of Arthur Hancock in the Chickasaw Nation, on Christmas. He had a partial hearing before the United States Commissioner this afternoon and his case was continued till Monday, when it will likely receive the attention of the Grand Jury, which meets Monday morning.

Back in Arkansas, **The Fort Smith Elevator** carried a story on Reeves on February 29, 1884, which read:

Horse Thief Jailed

On Monday last Robert Landers and Bill Wilson were arrested in this city by Deputy Marshals Wilson and Reeves, assisted by Charlie Leflore, of the Indian police. Landers has been here about three weeks, and was recognized by Leflore as a man who had stolen some horses at Gainesville, Texas, about six weeks ago, and for whom the Texas Stock Association offers a large reward. Leflore says he is one of a gang of thieves and robbers who have committed depredations in the Indian Territory, Texas and Missouri for some time. He recently robbed a man near Cherokee Town of \$120, and is said to be one of the gang who robbed the telegraph operations at Colbert Station a short time since. One of his pals was arrested a few days ago in the Nation and told of some of the plans of the gang, one of which was to rob Alex. McKinney, who lives between Stringtown and Atoka. Landers will likely be taken to Gainesville, the authorities there having been telegraphed to. He sold a horse at Van Buren a few weeks ago...

Undoubtedly the deputy identified as Wilson in the above article was Floyd Wilson who worked with Reeves on numerous occasions during the 1880s. Wilson would later be killed in the 1890s by the famous bank robber Henry Starr. Charles Leflore also had a celebrated law enforcement career and would later become the Captain of the United States Indian Police headquartered at Muskogee. Leflore was one of the most famous Indian lawmen of the frontier era. The following article from **The Elevator** on April 25, 1884, discusses Wilson and Reeves working together:

Deputies Reeves and Wilson came in Wednesday with the following prisoners: James Greeson, assault with intent to kill; Eleck Bruner, Aaron Sancho and Hotabisy, larceny; Crolsey Fixico, Tobey Hill, Golmo Jessee, Wiley Hawkins, Noah, Charley Jones, Amos Hill and G. H. Brewer, introducing spirituous liquors. One of the prisoners who was severely wounded while resisting arrest had to be left in the Territory, a physician saying that to move him would endanger his life.

The newspaper in the capital city of Arkansas, Little Rock, **The Daily Arkansas Gazette**, carried a short item on Reeves on April 25, 1884:

Prisoners Arrive

Fort Smith, Ark., April 24 – ...Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves brought in twelve prisoners from the Indian Territory yesterday charged with various offenses.

The Daily Arkansas Gazette wrote about Reeves later in the year on September 2, 1884:

A Good Haul

Fifteen Prisoners Brought to Fort Smith from the Nation

Fort Smith, Sept. 1 – Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves came in this afternoon with fifteen prisoners, two of whom Chub Moore and Hanna, are charged with murder. Chub was severely wounded in the leg at the time of arrest, on the 7th of August, but nevertheless was hauled down here a distance of about 265 miles, lying on his back on a mattress, and stood the trip very well. He was at the head of a gang of men who hung a negro about two years ago, who was charged with having attempted to commit a rape. On the trip Reeves killed one Frank Buck in self-defense. Buck was charged with larceny.

The St. Louis Globe Democrat newspaper carried an article concerning the same trip into the Indian Territory made by Reeves and his posse on September 6, 1884:

A Disabled Desperado

Ft. Smith, Ark., September 5 – Chub Moore, the Indian desperado who was brought in last Monday by Deputy Marshal Reeves, and who was severely wounded in the thigh on August 7 by the officer who made the arrest, is now in a precarious condition in the United States Jail, and the jail physician has decided to amputate his leg near the hip. The operation will be performed tomorrow at 12 o'clock. Chub is charged with murder.

Chub Moore had been arrested by Reeves and his posse in the Chickasaw Nation. He had a warrant for murder for leading a lynch mob that killed a young African American. Chub Moore died in the Fort Smith federal jail.

The Daily Arkansas Gazette of Little Rock wrote the following byline on Reeves on March 10, 1885:

Fort Smith, March 9 – ...Criminal Notes

Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves came in on Saturday with thirteen prisoners from the Indian country. Eleven of them were Indians, one a white man and one a negro. The latter gave bond. Eleven of them are charged with introducing and selling whiskey in the nation, one with murder, and one with larceny. The one charged with murder is an ignorant, uncouth Indian boy, who says he is only 13 years old, but is probably 17 or 18. This invoice swells the number in jail to 106.

The St. Louis Globe Democrat on October 27, 1885, carried an in-depth article on the men Reeves captured:

A Batch of United States Prisoners

Fort Smith, Ark., October 26 – Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves [Reeves] came about dark tonight with seventeen prisoners from the Indian Territory, all of whom were lodged in the United States Jail. Among them is Hens Hosey, a white man well known all through the district, who is charged with murder of Mitchell Collins, a Creek Indian, on the 11th of March last. Hens claims that Collins stole his horse, and he followed and killed him in recovering the animal.

One Delderick is a white man, and is charged with the murder of a Creek Indian in the Choctaw Nation on the 7th of September last in a manner that places his neck in jeopardy. It is said that the Indian seduced the daughter of Delderick, and that Delderick slipped up to a lot at night when his victim was attending to some stock and shot him down without warning.

John Robinson is charged with assault with intent to kill, while Robert Johnson, Wiley Kelly, Colbert Lasley, and an old man named Crump are charged with larceny. The others are all for introducing and selling whiskey in the Indian country. There are now nearly 100 prisoners in jail here, notwithstanding twenty-nine were taken to Detroit last week. Thirty-two of them are awaiting trial for murder.

The Daily Arkansas Gazette from Little Rock, Arkansas, on October 28, 1885, discussed the same trip made by Reeves:

The Border City

Seventeen Prisoners from the Indian Territory Lodged in Jail

Fort Smith, Oct. 27 – Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves returned late last night to the United States jail with seventeen prisoners, the fruits of a five weeks trip in the Indian Territory. Two of them Hens Posey and one Deidrick, both white men, are charged with murder...

In 1891, another St. Louis newspaper, **The St. Louis Republic**, printed a story concerning Reeves on February 11:

An Outlaw's Hiding Place

Tahlequah, I.T., Feb. 10 – The report that Bass Reeves, a negro deputy United States marshal, had been killed by the Cherokee desperado, Ned Christy, who lives 16 miles northeast of this place, is without foundation. At the time of the reported killing Reeves was not in the Cherokee Nation. Christy, the desperado, is still at large, remaining a portion of his time at the "old fort," his place of refuge. This place, where Christy has hidden, is located in a dense forest amid briars and low shrubbery. The "old fort" is made of logs, roughly hewn, and resembles an old bear trap, with port holes and without doors. The outlaw has a fine collection of "curs," and at the rustling of leaves they made an unearthly noise, which can be heard a long distance. A man cannot be found in the Christy settlement who would tell a word of the outlaw's whereabouts.

By the 1890s, even the Texas newspapers began to write stories about Reeves exploits in the Indian Territory. A good example is the following story from **The Fort Worth Gazette**, from Fort Worth, Texas on June 17, 1891:

A Good Batch of Prisoners

Eufaula, I.T., June 16 – Deputy Marshal Boss [Bass] Reeves passed through Eufaula today with nine prisoners for the Fort Smith court. There were three white men, three Indians, two negro men, and one negro woman; names and crimes as follows. Ugly Bear, murder, whiskey peddling, and horsetealing; John Simmons murder; One McDonnell, murder; One Custer, murder; William Evelina Hawkins, larceny; Phillip Cyrus, introducing and selling whiskey; Sam Lasley, introducing and selling whiskey. Ugly Bear is an all-around desperado, who has for years eluded the law and terrorized all classes of people in the Indian country west of here. He is wanted to answer several charges of murder, horse theft, and whiskey peddling, and other crimes in both the United States and Indian courts. The Eufaula judicial district alone has a reward of \$400 offered for him. His partner, John Simmons, ranks pretty closely on to him in bloody and lawless deeds.

Joe Spencer, charged with murder, used to be a preacher, and yet has preacher spells sometimes. Last year he humbugged the citizens of Okmulgee by initiating them into a supposed order of Masonry. He instituted a lodge there, and, for \$15 a candidate, put them through the first degree, promising to come back in a few weeks to give them the other degrees. He never showed up again, and when his Okmulgee Masons began to make signs at the genuine Masons they were thought to be crazy or drunk.

Boss [Bass] Reeves is the most successful marshal that rides in the Indian country. He is a big ginger-cake colored negro, but is a holy terror to the lawless characters in the west. About every other month he makes a trip west, and after a few days passes back through with from one to two wagons of prisoners to Fort Smith. It is probable that in the past few years he has taken more prisoners, from the Indian Territory, than any other officer.

The Daily Arkansas Gazette of Little Rock covered an incident of Reeves' outstanding police work on June 21, 1891

A Bad Gang Broken Up

Fort Smith, June 20 – Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves came in this afternoon with nine prisoners, among them William Wright, a negro, charged with the murder of his own father in the Creek Nation about a year ago. Wily Bear and John Simmons, Creek Indians, wanted for the murder of Deputy Marshal Phillips and his posse; two white men named McDonald and Cords, charged with killing a negro a few weeks ago. Wiley [sic] Bear is also wanted in the Creek Nation for murdering a woman, and for several cases of horse stealing. He is the last of notorious Wiley Barnett gang, and the Creek authorities offer \$400 reward for him.

The notorious Indian gang alluded to in the above article was not the Wiley Barnett gang but the Wesley Barnett gang.

The major city in Texas in the late nineteenth century was Galveston. On August 26, 1892, Reeves exploits were covered by **The Galveston Daily News**:

Old Man Horribly Abused.

South McAlester, I.T., Aug. 25. – Parties in from the vicinity of Ledor[Leader], I.T., report a deplorable outrage upon an old man residing there which may result fatally. J.

Lyons, who is some 60 years of age, was generally supposed to be possessed of some money on account of his thrifty and frugal habits. On Friday of last week, Lyons was accosted by a young person named Billy the Kid and his money demanded, failing to produce which he was horribly maltreated, dragged some distance from home and finally struck upon the head and left for dead. He lay out in the broiling sun from Friday until Sunday, when he was found and cared for, and it though that there is a bare chance for his recovery. Deputies from Fort Smith were placed in possession of the facts and Deputy Bass Reeves has succeeded in capturing the Kid

The above article notates an outlaw named Billy the Kid, this was not the Billy the Kid of New Mexico fame who had been killed by the time this incident occurred.

About ten years later, we find Reeves being covered by one of the most famous and long serving newspapers in Texas history, **The Dallas Morning News** on May 21, 1902:

Brought Twenty – Four Prisoners

Men Charged with Participation in Braggs Race War Arrested.

Muskogee, I.T., May 20 – Deputy United States Marshals Adams and Reeves came in from Braggs today with twenty-four prisoners who are charged with taking part in the race war. The fifteen white men are: Henry Steel, Tom Hull, Alex Fryer, John Nicholson, John Luman, J. W. Hart, S. Foy, Jon Lovett, Bill Nixson, Ed Guinn, Frank Lambert, Willard Smith, Bill Watkins, George Kirk, and E. M. Kirkpatrick. The negroes are: William Richard, Henry, Ed, and Dave Thompson, Sam and Jesse Roach, Gus Williams, Richard Parker, and Joe Matthews.

The deputies made the arrests without resistance. All prisoners were bound over and will be tried in the United States Court tomorrow.

The same Dallas, Texas newspaper carried a story involving Reeves on June 29, 1906:

Muskogee, I.T., June 28 – Twenty men who were sentenced to the penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth were taken to the penitentiary last night. They were in charge of Chief Deputy Marshal E. H. Hubbard, assisted by George Ledbetter, Theodore Stidham, J. H. Long, Bass Reeves, and Richard Wood.

The above trip undoubtedly gave Reeves a chance to visit his son; Bennie was doing time in Leavenworth, Kansas, federal prison for murder at that time. Bennie had been arrested in Muskogee by his father for domestic murder in 1902.

After Oklahoma statehood, the major town in southwest Oklahoma became Lawton; its newspaper wrote an article concerning Reeves. This item came from **The Lawton Constitution Democrat** on March 10, 1908:

Former Negro Deputy a Policeman

Muskogee, Okla., Jan. 3. – Former Deputy United States Marshal Bass Reeves, a giant negro, who was in many battles with outlaws in the wild days of Indian Territory and during Judge Parker's reign at Fort Smith, is on the Muskogee police force. Reeves was twice tried for murder while he was an officer. He is now over 70 years old and walks with a cane. A bullet in his leg received while in the government service gives him

considerable trouble. He is as quick of trigger, however, as in the days when gunmen were in demand.

When Bass Reeves died on January 12, 1910, his death was covered by newspaper from around the United States. An example of the coverage follows;

The Logansport Pharos, Indiana, Jan. 13, 1910:

U.S. Marshal Dead

Muskogee, Okla., Jan. 13 – Bass Reeves, for thirty years a deputy U.S. marshal in Old Indian Territory, is dead here. He was the most noted man hunter in the territory.

The Daily Oklahoman, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Jan. 13, 1910:

BASS REEVES DEAD.

Muskogee, Okla., Jan. 12 – (Special) –Bass Reeves, the oldest deputy marshal of the old Indian Territory days, died here tonight, of consumption. Reeves served during the days Judge Parker at Fort Smith, when men were hung every week. He was in the government service in Indian Territory for 30 years and is said to have at least 20 notches on his gun.

The Washington Herald, Washington, D. C., Jan. 13, 1910:

***KILLS SCORE IN HIS TIME
BASS REEVES, NOTED SECRET SERVICE MAN HUNTER DEAD.***

Muskogee, Okla., January 12. Bass Reeves for thirty years a deputy U.S. Marshal in Old Indian Territory, died here tonight. Reeves had the distinction of being the most noted man hunter in the territory. He is credited with having more notches on his gun than he had fingers and toes.

It is great to see Bass Reeves receive media recognition today and that a wonderful statue in Fort Smith will cement his legacy for ages to come. It is also good to know that during his era on the frontier as a peace officer, he received recognition for his work, which made him an Arkansas and Oklahoma legend.