BASS REEVES – DEPUTY UNITED STATES MARSHAL

A Legendary Lawman on the Western Frontier Who Rode for Judge Isaac Parker

By Art T. Burton

Bass Reeves was often called “one of the bravest men this country has ever known.” “Invincible,” others noted, “a Deputy U.S. Marshal whose devotion to duty was beyond reproach.” He was honored posthumously with the National Cowboy Hall of Fame’s “Great Westerner” at a Western Heritage Award program.

Believed to have been born in Texas or Arkansas in 1838, Reeves was one of 200 Deputy U.S. Marshals hired by Judge Isaac C. Parker in 1875 to track down criminals in western Arkansas and Indian Territory. This was a lawless and untamed region of Oklahoma that was an attractive refuge for criminals due to the territory’s scarcity of towns and villages and the presence of so many Indians, who had jurisdiction only over themselves.

When Judge Parker assumed jurisdiction of the Fort Smith, Arkansas court in 1875, he believed blacks would be good candidates for Deputy U.S. Marshals. Many Indians who lived in the Territory had a distrust of white deputies, some of whom had abused their power, and the Indians often trusted blacks more than they did whites. There were black Freedmen in all the Five Civilized Tribes and in some instances, these African American were utilized as Indian policeman. They sat on governing councils and some towns even had black chiefs.

Parker consider Bass Reeves a good man for the tough job of a Deputy U.S. Marshal. Reeves had once boasted that he knew Indian Territory “like a cook knows her kitchen” and, as a result of his skill and his knowledge of the territory, (gleaned in part from living among the Indians for a time) he was able to make substantial sums as a scout and tracker for peace officers. His service included enforcement of everything from petty misdemeanors to murder.

Believed to be the first African American deputy marshal commissioned west of the Mississippi River, Reeves served longer than any Deputy U.S. Marshal on record in Indian Territory and during this thirty-five year tenure, he acquired a reputation as “one of the best deputy marshals to ever work out of the Fort Smith Federal Court.”

He was in fabled company. The Fort Smith court helped create reputations not only for Bass Reeves and Judge Parker, but for such other noted deputy marshals as Heck Thomas, Bud Ledbetter, Grant Johnson, Heck Bruner and Bill Tilghman.

A big man – six feet two inches tall and weighing 180 pounds – he was an imposing figure, a lawman to be feared and a man who was legendary in the territory. A police chief once noted, “The veteran Negro deputy never quailed in facing any man.”

He had no fear of his master and once, when they got into a argument over a card game in the early 1860s, Reeves knocked his master out cold, an offense punishable by death. He fled across the Red River, finding refuge living with and fighting Civil War battles for the Seminoles and Creek Indians and eventually becoming close friends with the Creek Chief Opothleyaholo. Everything about Bass Reeves seemed to invite legend. People

said he always rode a large red stallion with a white blazed face. But he kept two good riding horses for pursuit, as well as a run-of-the-mill horse for undercover work. To outlaws, the sign of a superior pony was a tip-off that the rider was a deputy marshal.

Reeves always wore a large black hat with a straight trim that was slightly upturned in the front. And old-timers said he often carried his guns in many different ways. He was particularly noted for wearing two Colt revolvers, calibrated for the .38-.40 cartridge, butt forward for a fast draw. It didn't matter that he was ambidextrous. Bass Reeves always got the job done. When the Colts weren't pressed into service, he used his fine Winchester rifle, chambered for the same .38-.40 cartridge. He was such an expert with pistols and rifles that later in his life, he wasn't even allowed to compete in turkey shoots because his skill was far superior to any competition.

Given to using aliases, he also was known as a natty dresser, with his boots always polished to a gleaming shine. But most of the time, when he was pursuit of an outlaw, he was a master of disguise. Sometimes he dressed as a drover or a cowboy, other times as a farmer or a gunslinger. He even dressed as an outlaw when the occasion warranted that approach.

When Reeves began riding for Judge Parker, the jurisdiction covered more than 75,000 square miles. The deputies from Fort Smith rode to Fort Reno, Fort Sill and Anadarko, a round trip of more than eight hundred miles. Whenever a deputy marshal left Fort Smith to capture outlaws in the territory, he took with him a wagon, a cook and usually a posseman, depending on the temperament and reputation of the outlaws he was pursuing.

The Missouri, Kansas and Texas (MK&T) Railroad, running across the territory, marked the western fringe of civilization. Eighty miles west of Fort Smith was known as "the dead line," and whenever a deputy marshal from Fort Smith or Paris, Texas crossed the "dead line" they would most likely be killed. To Reeves, the "dead line" posed a thrilling challenge.

Reeves figured there were three principal classes of outlaws in the territory: murderers, horse thieves and whiskey bootleggers. Added to the Indians and mixed Africans were the white outlaws who had fled from Texas, Kansas and other states.

His reputation was praised often and on November 19, 1909, the Muskogee (Oklahoma) Times Democrat wrote: "In the early days when the Indian country was overridden with outlaws, 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 that sometimes amounted to thousands of dollars for a single trip. . . trips that sometimes lasted for months."

One of those trips found Reeves in pursuit of two young outlaws in the Red River Valley of the Chickasaw Nation. Reeves studied the many ways in which he might capture them and snare the $5,000 reward.

When he heard they were sequestered near the Texas border, he selected a posse and journeyed to the vicinity where he felt the outlaws were hiding. He set up camp twenty-eight miles from the suspected hideout so he could review the terrain and take his time in planning their capture without creating any suspicions. He disguised himself as a tramp.

In doing so, he removed the heels from a old pair of shoes, carried a cane, concealed his handcuffs, pistol and badge under his clothes and wore a floppy old hat into which he had shot three bullet holes. Thus disguised, Reeves started out on foot in the direction of the outlaws' probable hideout, the home of their mother. When she greeted Reeves at the door, he asked for a bite to eat, and lamented how much his feet hurt after walking such a long distance. Reeves told her this was the first opportunity he had to stop after being pursued by a posse that had put three bullet holes in his hat.

She invited Reeves into her home, gladly fed him and even proceeded to tell him about her two outlaw sons. When Reeves finished eating, he feigned weariness and asked to stay a while longer. She consented and said, "It would be a good plan that you and my two boys join forces so you can be a protection to one another."

After the sun had gone down and the night ruled supreme, Reeves heard a sharp whistle from the nearby creek. The woman went outside and gave an answer. Two riders rode up and had a lengthy conversation with her. When they finally came into the house, she introduced Reeves to her sons as another outlaw. The boys agreed the trio should join forces for theft and plunder.

When they prepared to go to bed, a place in a separate room was made for Reeves. But he immediately suggested they all sleep in one room, saying "something might happen and if we are separated we couldn't be much protection to one another."

While in bed, Reeves kept a watchful eye on the boys. As soon as the outlaws were asleep, Reeves left his bed and managed to handcuff the pair without awaking them. He waited until early morning before he kicked the boys from their sleep and said, "Come on, boys, let's get going from here." When the two boys finally got the sleep out of their eyes, they realized they were in the hands of the law.

As Reeves started out with his prisoners, the mother followed him for three miles, cursing him and calling him all sorts of vile names. The boys were forced to walk the full twenty-eight miles to Reeves' camp, where all his possemen were waiting for him to deliver the outlaws and claim his reward.

By 1901, Reeves had arrested more than three thousand men and women in his service as a deputy marshal. But no manhunt was harder for Reeves than the one involving his own son.

The incident occurred late in Reeves' career as a lawman. Upon delivering two prisoners to the federal jail in Muskogee, Reeves related another harrowing experience. He had nearly been killed when the three men he had warrants for ambushed him deep in the Creek Nation. He killed one in the ambush and got the other two to surrender. After delivering his prisoners to U.S. Marshal Leo Bennett, Reeves was looking forward to a well-deserved rest.

But there was yet another warrant to be served. Bennett had to break the news to Reeves that his own son was charged with the murder of his wife and was a fugitive somewhere in Indian Territory. Bennett wanted to bring young Reeves in alive if he could and for two days the warrant lay on Bennett's desk, with all the deputies fearing they would be chosen for the unpleasant task.

Although Reeves was visibly shaken by this tragedy, he demanded to take the warrant, He told Bennett it was his responsibility to bring his son in even though he knew it would be the toughest, saddest manhunt he was ever involved in.

Almost two weeks passed before Reeves returned to Muskogee with his son, who was turned over to Marshal Bennett and sent to Leavenworth Prison at the end of a trial. With a citizen's petition and an exemplary prison record, Reeves' son was pardoned and lived the rest of his life as a model citizen.

When Reeves retired from federal service, he had numerous stories to tell his eight children and numerous grandchildren, nieces and nephews. And he had in his possession a dozen of those cards that outlaws had posted on the "dead line." To Reeves, those cards were like badges of courage for a career that always found him living on the edge of danger and intrigue.

When Bass Reeves died, January 12, 1910, **The Muskogee Phoenix** wrote of the legendary lawman:

"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 courthouse where it recalled to the officers and clerks many incidents in the early days of the United States in which the old Negro deputy figured heroically."

"Bass Reeves had completed thirty-five years' service as a deputy marshal when, with the coming of statehood at the age of sixty-nine, he gave up his position. For about two years he then served on the Muskogee Police Force, a post he gave up about a year ago on account of sickness, from which he never fully recovered…"

"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 with people, can be complete without mention of the Negro who died yesterday."

"For thirty-five 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 14 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."

"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…"

"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 rein which he held in his hand cut by

a bullet. However, in spite of all these narrow escapes and the many conflicts in which he was engaged, Reeves was never wounded. And this, notwithstanding the fact that he never fired a shot until the desperado he was trying to arrest had started the shooting."

Nine decades after his death, Bass Reeves is still considered one of the truly great American frontier heroes. The legend of Bass Reeves will live as long as people recall stories of bravery and courage in the American West.
