

THE “TONTO” OF INDIAN TERRITORY

By Art T. Burton

Long overlooked by historians and the press, black lawman Bass Reeves has become well known among Western historians if not the general public. In my 2006 biography of Reeves I compared him to the Lone Ranger, and in an interview the next year in *Wild West*, I said, “I couldn’t prove conclusively that Reeves was the inspiration for the Lone Ranger, but he is the closest person in real life to compare to the fictional hero.” Reeves made his reputation in dangerous Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), where he stood out as a black deputy U.S. marshal but was hardly the only non-white peace officer. Another standout was Grant Johnson, who though largely forgotten today was a respected lawman in Indian Territory for more than two decades. The police work he performed with Reeves was quoted to me as being legend. In the analogy of the Lone Ranger, Johnson could have been Tonto.

Although Johnson was noted as being African American, he was also noted for having strong American Indian features. He was what some refer to as a “black Indian” or a mixed blood. He was in fact a Creek freedman. Indian freedmen were either former black slaves of Indians or descendants of Indian slaves of the Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole). Johnson and other freedmen worked as lawmen in Indian Territory, tribal policemen or deputy U.S. marshals. Johnson clearly rates among the most important black lawmen in the history of Indian Territory. Some even felt he was superior to Bass Reeves.

Grant Johnson was born into slavery in April 1854 in northern Texas, exact location unknown but perhaps in Denison or Sherman. His father, Alex Johnson, was a Chickasaw Indian slave and his mother, Miley Johnson, was a Creek Indian slave. He grew up speaking fluent Muskogee, the language of the Creeks and Seminoles, and evidently received a good education in English. His penmanship, as evinced by signatures on court documents, was excellent.

Grant Johnson stood about 5-foot-8, considerably shorter than his friend Reeves, and weighed 160 pounds. He often wore a large, wide-brimmed white hat and a black bandanna around his neck. Johnson carried two revolvers on his hips and kept a Winchester rifle in a saddle scabbard on his mount, usually a black or bay horse. Early settlers recalled his fondness for cigars. A tough man in a tough land, he exuded a quiet confidence. Newspapers not only in Indian Territory and Arkansas but also in Kansas, Texas and the Midwest covered his exploits. For instance, the following appeared in **The Dallas Morning News** of March 5, 1891:

SHOOTING ON A TRAIN

A United States Marshal and A Supposed Escaped Convict Exchange Shots

DENISON, Tex., March 4—...Quite an exciting shooting scrape occurred last night on Missouri, Kansas & Texas passenger train No. 3, southbound, near Checotah, I.T. From one of the trainmen The News correspondent gathered the following:

When the train stopped at Checotah, a rough-looking man with a broad, white hat passed into the second-class coach and took a seat near the stove. United States Deputy Marshal Grant Johnson, who got on the train at Muskogee, thought he identified the man as one he arrested several months ago on a charge of murder and had made his escape while in route to Fort Smith, so, passing down the aisle by the side of the new passenger, he stopped at the door and then passed into the next coach. He was then convinced that the new passenger was the man wanted. Johnson examined his pistol and opened the door to return to the second-class coach but was met on the platform by the stranger, who immediately opened fire. The marshal drew his pistol and returned the salute. The train was making...about 30 miles an hour, and the balls from the desperado's pistol flew wide of their mark and were buried in the end of the first-class passenger coach. During the shooting the escaped murderer jumped from the train, and whether or not he was wounded is not known. In all eight shots were fired. Quite a panic prevailed throughout the train as it was supposed it had been attacked by robbers.

A 1901 article in the Indian Journal of Eufaula in the Creek Nation said Johnson had held a deputy U.S. marshal's commission for 14 years—which means he would have entered federal service in 1887. Early on he could have worked as a posseman for other deputy marshals. He doesn't show up in the newspapers, bringing in felons to the Fort Smith, Ark., court of Isaac C. "Hanging Judge" Parker, until 1890. His last commission from Parker's court was in July 1896. The judge described Johnson as one of the best deputy marshals he had worked with or known in Indian Territory.

Johnson had a home in Eufaula. Before the Civil War the most important Creek settlement in the area was at North Fork Town. After the war the Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railroad built a line through Indian Territory, and most of North Fork Town's citizens moved three miles west to Eufaula, which was on the line. Eufaula residents John H. Hubble, C.E. Foley and Lizzie Gibson, all interviewed in the late 1930s, said Deputy U.S. Marshal Johnson was the only law officer in the area during the town's formative years. James M. Calhoun said, "Grant Johnson, a mulatto, of Eufaula, was the best marshal they ever had."

The same quick-thinking Johnson needed to get his man and stay alive in Indian Territory was on display at one of Eufaula's Emancipation Day celebrations. The Indian freedmen always held two picnics, one at each end of town, and Johnson could not possibly be in both places at the same time to keep the peace. But he did own two horses, a black one and a white one. Early on the holiday he tied one horse to a tree in full view of the crowd at one end of town. When the festivities began later in the day, Johnson rode to the other end of town and mingled with the crowd. The people who saw his horse back at the opposite end assumed he was somewhere in the crowd and decided they best stay out

of trouble. It turned out to be one of the quietest Emancipation Day celebrations Eufaula ever witnessed.

In an interview early settler Nancy E. Pruitt speculated on why the federal government had decided to hire dark-skinned men to uphold the law in the area. "Bass Reeves and Grant Johnson were colored officers," she said. "They could talk Creek, and the Creeks liked Negroes better than they did whites, [which] I suppose is the reason they had colored officers." The lawmen's actions earned them widespread respect. W.R. Mulkey, an early Cherokee resident of the territory, said in a 1938 interview, "Bass Reeves [colored], Grant Johnson [colored] never used devious means for arrest."

On September 24, 1892, a white woman named Mattie Bittle wrote Bass Reeves a letter, rife with misspellings, complaining about her husband:

Mr. Bass Reeves sir

I though I would write a few lines to you. I never never can get to see you. I want you to come soon as you can get here. My husband on the first Sunday in August beat me all most to death. I was real sick I wanted him to go for a doctor he said I need no doctor I was able to work as he was I said I wished he had stade in the penitinty he got a stick and beat me I don't think I can get over it they hindred him as he would killed me he is in Redfork I gess

Mrs. Matie Bittle

Deputy Marshal Reeves was not able to investigate the case, but his friend and colleague Johnson stepped in for him. On October 9 Johnson requested a warrant for George Bittle on a charge of assault and battery with intent to kill. In the request Johnson stated Mrs. Bittle was in bed at William Arnold's house and was not expected to live. The request was denied, with no reason given. After Mattie Bittle died, Johnson repeated his request to officials at Fort Smith. This time he got his warrant, and he arrested George Bittle on October 16, 1892, at Red Fork in the Creek Nation. The outcome of the case does not appear in the federal criminal file.

The next year Johnson dealt with rustlers, as reported in **The Dallas Morning News** of January 6, 1893:

CATTLE STEALING MYSTERY CLEARED

KANSAS CITY, Jan. 5—Two arrests made here are expected to clear up the mystery of huge cattle thefts in the Creek nation. W.H. Heath and his son, G.W. Heath, were arrested on a warrant charging them with stealing 31 head of cattle from the range near Checotah and shipping them here. Last night Deputy United States Marshal Grant Johnson of Eufaula, I.T., arrived with a United States warrant sworn out by T.W. Turk, a well known ranchman, and says eight other arrests are to follow. Turk says the Heaths have been at the head of a gang which are engaged in running cattle off the ranges.

Three months later, on April 17, 1893, **The Emporia Daily Gazette** in Kansas discussed Johnson's police work:

CRIMES IN THE TERRITORY

Meat Thieves Captured

EUFAULA, Ind. Ter., April 17—For the past six weeks the meat thief has been living high in Eufaula. During this length of time he has made away with about 500 pounds in all, and is seemed almost impossible to catch him. Last night he got into Marion Horn's smokehouse and relieved him of about 200 pounds and departed without even leaving his card. Mr. Horn reported his loss to Deputy Marshal Grant Johnson, and he immediately went in search of him. Late evening he came in with Bill and Ned Yates, brothers, charged with the offense. He has strong evidence against them and will at once take them to Fort Smith.

In July 1893, Johnson made an important arrest in a case that also involved Reeves. Back in October 1890 in Harrison, Ark., Abner Brassfield, a white man, killed Justice of the Peace William Ham and was later convicted of the crime. While his case was under appeal, Brassfield escaped into Indian Territory, where three years later Johnson, Reeves and posseman Andy Deering arrested him at a dance in Brooken, Creek Nation. But the next day, while Johnson and Reeves were at breakfast, Brassfield, with the help of family members, got away from Deering. **The Dallas Morning News** reported on July 22, 1893:

SHOT HIMSELF FREE

EUFAULA, I.T., July 21—At 8 o'clock quite a flurry of excitement was caused by rapid shots in the eastern part of town. The cause was soon found to be the escape of Abner Brasfield [sic]. He escaped from the authorities and officers of Arkansas after having been convicted and sentenced to 21 years imprisonment for murder. The officers arrested him night before last at Brooken, surprising him completely. Deputy Grant Johnson caught him around the arms and waist and carried him from the building. His friends followed to Eufaula, and his father, it is alleged, gave him a pistol. His father was immediately placed in irons and A.B. Brasfield was also arrested, charged with aiding the escape. Some 10 or 12 shots were fired, but no one was hurt.

Abner Brassfield eventually turned himself in and, after doing time in prison, returned to Eufaula and served as an assistant to Johnson.

Another interesting case came in 1895, involving another white man, Wade Chamberlee, who had been originally arrested for harboring outlaws involved in a train robbery at Blackstone Switch. Chamberlee had been arraigned at the federal court in Muskogee but released after a preliminary hearing. On hearing new evidence, a grand jury indicted him on February 11, 1895. The next day Chamberlee rode into town and spoke with Johnson, neither man being aware of the indictment. Later Deputy U.S. Marshal George Lawson sought out Chamberlee, to rearrest him, and asked Johnson if knew the man well enough to point him out. After a good laugh over the incident, the two deputies arrested Chamberlee while he was in one of Muskogee's finest establishments.

That June, Johnson may have killed his first man in the line of duty. “Deputy Marshal Grant Johnson killed a whiskey peddler near Eufaula on Monday,” reported the June 7, 1895, Fort Smith Elevator. “He ran on to three of them when they made fight, killing one and capturing the other two.” (It is uncertain whether the outlaw Johnson had shot in 1891 on the Missouri, Kansas & Texas train died or not.) In July, according to The Kansas City Times, Johnson went to “the famous criminal hiding place known as Younger Bend in the Cherokee Nation” and captured a man named John Moore, who was charged with assaulting his wife. Younger Bend had gained notoriety through an earlier resident—Belle Starr, “Queen of the Oklahoma Outlaws.” Also in July, Johnson arrested Israel Carr, a young Creek who more than a year earlier had killed a white man, William Conway, near Okmulgee. That October, Johnson brought into custody a man named Jonah Bristow, who lived near Eufaula and had whipped his own son to death.

In 1889–90 the United States established federal courts in Indian Territory at Muskogee, Ardmore and McAlester with limited jurisdiction, while Fort Smith in adjacent Arkansas held on to capital cases. By 1896 the Fort Smith court no longer had jurisdiction in Indian Territory, and the three new courts assumed those federal powers. Judge Parker died that year, and the government transferred many of his former deputies to the new Indian Territory courts. “A petition has been circulated in Eufaula and sent to Marshal [S. Morton] Rutherford requesting that Grant Johnson be made an officer of the Muskogee court with headquarters at Eufaula,” the Muskogee Phoenix reported in September. Indeed, the transfer happened soon after, and Johnson was headquartered at Eufaula for the duration of his federal service. He worked under U.S. Marshal Rutherford and later U.S. Marshal Leo Bennett, both headquartered at Muskogee.

Johnson’s duties included trying to maintain order at traditional Indian ball games, which were popular but not always peaceful pastimes in the Creek Nation. On September 7, 1899, the **Muskogee Phoenix** ran this report from the **Checotah Enquirer**:

The big Indian ball game that was advertised to come off last Wednesday between the Eufaula and Okmulgee ‘towns’ resulted in a free-for-all fight between the two teams, and the game was declared off. When the ball was first tossed up, the scrapping began and continued for two or three minutes, when Deputy Marshal Grant Johnson, of Eufaula, got among them and caused them to scatter by shooting in the ground.

On June 11, 1900, according to the next day’s Dallas Morning News, Johnson brought in from Proctor, west of Eufaula, a young Creek charged with murdering his fiancée earlier that month. That fall the Muskogee Phoenix reported Johnson brought three men to Muskogee to be tried for “attempt at train wrecking” on the Missouri, Kansas & Texas line.

Among the best-known gunfights in which Johnson participated took place on Christmas Day 1900 in Eufaula. Early resident J.S. “Shorty” Brown told of the incident (but gave the wrong date) in a 1938 interview:

“John Tiger, a Creek Indian, came to town one day in 1899. He was very drunk, and his wife had to drive the team part of the way. Upon reaching Eufaula, John stopped in front

of a small restaurant. He had two guns, a Winchester, the other a six-shooter, and being too drunk to know what he was doing, he picked up his guns and began firing at the people on the street. Before the "law" could stop him, he had killed three men, and there was a small boy some distance from him who had some of his waist buttons shot from his pants. Tiger saw the United States Marshal, Grant Johnson, who was a Negro, coming and knew that his game was up, so he ran for a short distance, then stumbled over a low fence. He then started firing with his six-shooter at the marshal. There were two large trees between John Tiger and Grant Johnson, and each one took to a tree for protection. While fighting, the bullets could be heard hitting the trees. The marshal shot Tiger in the arm and captured him. The people in Eufaula were in a panic and wanted to string John Tiger up, but Mr. Foley quieted the mob and prevented them from lynching John Tiger."

Eufaula's citizens hailed Johnson for his swift action. The **Indian Journal** reported on January 25, 1901:

The people of Eufaula made a purse a few days since and sent it to Grant Johnson as a mark of their appreciation of the prompt and courageous manner in which he arrested John Tiger on Christmas Day and also for his effective work in preserving the public peace during the excitement that followed the lamentable occurrences of that day. A man cannot be paid cash for this kind of work. Duty is all that prompts a man under such circumstances. This present to Grant is not, therefore, a reward but a mark of appreciation of duty well done, the reward for which is only the sense of duty well done.

On September 6, 1901, the same newspaper reported Johnson had killed another man in the line of duty. A recent quarrel between two Eufaula black men, Frank Wilson and Wade Smith, had led to Wilson firing two errant shots at the fleeing Smith. Wilson then fled himself, but Johnson gave chase on horseback. The marshal called for Wilson to stop and fired his revolver in the air for emphasis, but Wilson said he would rather die than surrender and leveled his pistol at Johnson. The marshal fired first, hitting Wilson in the belly. Smith reappeared with a shotgun and would have shot the wounded Wilson again, but Johnson intervened. Despite good medical attention, Wilson died the next day.

Grant Johnson also had a role in the 1901 Crazy Snake Uprising. Disgruntled Creeks—full bloods of the Snake faction as well as freedmen, led by the charismatic Chitto Harjo ("Crazy Snake")—sought to resurrect the sovereignty of the Creek Nation. The Snakes elected a principal chief and set up a new government. They began whipping the Creeks who willingly took land allotments, employed whites or rented land to outsiders, and that prompted the federal government to intercede. Evidently Johnson had to arrest Harjo and followers several times. On January 28, 1901, the Daily Herald of Delphos, Ohio, reported on one such instance in which Johnson, assisted by posseman Bunnie McIntosh, stormed a hostile Creek camp near Henrietta and made off with Harjo. "The capture of the central figure of the uprising and the show of force which the troops will make will likely put an end to the threatened outbreak," suggested the newspaper. But tensions between the Snakes and the U.S. government continued. The Indian Journal of February 28, 1902,

reported that Johnson led a posse that again captured Harjo, as well as 11 of his followers, without any resistance.

At year's end 1904, Johnson pulled off another notable capture with the aid of Deputy U.S. Marshal J.F. "Bud" Ledbetter. The duo was among hundreds of deputies looking for the Indian outlaws Jim Tiger and Peter Fish, who in November had killed Deputy U.S. Marshal Ed Fink when he tried to stop them from transporting bootleg whiskey into Indian Territory. Tiger had relatives in Eufaula, all full-blood Snake Indians, which made Ledbetter believe the pair had doubled back east toward that town or some hideout near the nexus of the Deep Fork and South Canadian rivers. With horse and saddle Ledbetter took the train from Muskogee to Eufaula, where he picked up Johnson. The two lawmen searched the area trails and at Mellette, 15 miles east of Eufaula, arrested Tiger and Fish without resistance.

In July 1905, Johnson tracked down a murderer named Jonas McIntosh and then shot him dead when the outlaw resisted arrest. Meanwhile, Johnson and Ledbetter continued to work well together, with Johnson taking care of things in Eufaula and Ledbetter handling crime in the Muskogee area. Something of a rift developed in February 1906, however, when their boss, Marshal Bennett, sent Ledbetter to Eufaula to do something about light alcoholic drinks being sold illegally in drugstores and gambling dives there. Johnson resented Ledbetter "invading" his territory, and that same night he raided four craps games and arrested a dozen men in Muskogee, Ledbetter's turf.

Ledbetter disregarded Johnson's action, but on February 9, 1906, Bennett told Johnson he would not be reappointed as a deputy U.S. marshal. It was a blow to Johnson, who took pride in his distinguished record over nearly 20 years as a federal lawman. He then became a police officer in Eufaula's black community and lived there until his death on April 9, 1927. "Johnson, although a Negro, was a fearless, courageous officer and had many friends both among the colored and white citizens of the state," the **Indian Journal** noted in its April 14th edition. "He made a record in the early days of the Indian country and will go down in history as one of the best peace officers this section of the state ever had. He was buried [at Evergreen Cemetery] here Wednesday." More glowing words came on April 16 :

"The death of Grant Johnson brings my mind back 40 years ago when Grant was on the force. Grant was a Negro, but being a marshal did not give him the big head. He was brave, yet he was kind to his prisoners. He was on the force in the day of Belle Starr. When Younger Bend was the suburbs of hell, Grant would go in the Bend and hunt for outlaws. Without a doubt he was the best Negro that was ever on the force. Bass Reeves did a lot of service, but after all this he was mean to his men. Grant Johnson ranks first of the old U.S. Marshals of the Negro race. Oklahoma Negroes should study his record as officer and citizen."

Grant Johnson was unquestionably one of the best lawmen of the Fort Smith federal court. But rating him better than Bass Reeves is a stretch. Nobody trying to uphold justice

in Indian Territory could match Reeves. Still, Johnson was a true hero of the Old West. Perhaps he wasn't the Lone Ranger, but there is nothing wrong with being Tonto.

Oklahoma native **Art Burton**, is a professor at South Suburban College in South Holland, Ill. His books *Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves*; *Black, Red, and Deadly: Black and Indian Gunfighters of the Indian Territories*; and *Black, Buckskin and Blue: African American Scouts and Soldiers on the Western Frontier* are recommended for further reading.