



Art T. Burton, from *Black Gun, Silver Star* | 2006

Bass Reeves & Jim Webb: Three Versions of a Gunfight

In his major biography of Bass Reeves, *Black Gun, Silver Star*, Art Burton collected many contemporary news accounts and court records of arrests Reeves had made or prosecutions in which he served as a witness. These primary sources are the most reliable information we have about the events in which Reeves was involved.

Here are three different accounts of the famous 1884 gunfight between Reeves and the outlaw Jim Webb, who had murdered an African-American farmer during an argument.

The first is from D.C. Gideon, who collected oral accounts of events on the frontier for his book *Indian Territory* (1901). He interviewed Bass Reeves sometime around 1900.

The second is from an 1884 newspaper report. The third version comes from Bass Reeves himself, as quoted in an interview with an Oklahoma City newspaper in 1907.

Text as quoted in: Art T. Burton. *Black Gun, Silver Star*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. pp 86-88. <https://archive.org/details/blackgunsilverst00burt/page/86/>

From D.C. Gideon, *Indian Territory* (1901):

As he went dashing up, Webb espied him, and jumping through the open window armed with both revolver and Winchester, ran for his horse that stood about 100 yards away.

Reeves cut him off from his horse and Webb turned toward a clump of bushes, ran about 600 yards, turned and fired. The first shot grazed the horn of Reeves' saddle; the second cut a button from his coat; and the third cut off both bridle reins below his hand, allowing them to fall to the ground. As Reeves jumped from his horse another bullet . . . cut the brim from his hat. Reeves then fired his first shot, and before Webb could fall had sent two Winchester balls through his body.

By this time Reeves' posse and Messrs. Bywaters and Smith came running up. Webb lay on the ground with his revolver in his hand, calling Reeves to come to him. Reeves advanced, but while keeping his gun trained on him told Webb to throw the revolver away. He flung it into the grass out of his reach and the whole party walked up to the dying man.

"Give me your hand, Bass," said Webb, as he extended his own with an effort to grasp it. "You are a brave man. I want you to accept my revolver and scabbard as a present and you must accept them. Take it, for with it I have killed eleven men, four of them in Indian Territory, and I expected you to make the twelfth." Bass accepted the present, and has it now carefully stored away. The dying declaration of Webb was taken in writing by Mr. Bywaters, and thus ended the career of another "bad" man.



From the *Arkansas Gazette*, July 4, 1884

Deputy United States Marshals J.S. Mershon and Bass Reeves came in late this evening from the Chickasaw country, with twelve prisoners, five charged with assault with intent to kill, five with larceny and two whiskey peddlers.

Ed McCurry of the number is badly wounded in the groin, having been shot while resisting arrest, near Tishomingo, about three weeks ago. The officers had rough experience on the trip. A man named Webb, charged with murder engaged them in A **RUNNING FIGHT** and was fatally wounded, dying the next day. One Hamilton, a full-blooded Chickasaw, also resisted arrest, and in the fight Mershon's horse fell, and his posse's ran over him, bruising the officer up badly. Hamilton was wounded, but escaped into the woods where it is reported he has since died. He was also charged with murder.

The fight occurred near Fishertown, in the Creek nation.

Bass Reeves in the *Oklahoma City Weekly Time-Journal*, March 8, 1907:

The bravest man I ever saw was Jim Webb, a Mexican that I killed in 1884 near Sacred Heart Mission. He was a murderer, I got in between him and his horse.

He stepped out into the open 500 yards away and commenced to shooting with his Winchester. Before I could drop off my horse his first bullet cut a button off my coat and second cut my bridle rein in two. I shifted my six shooter and grabbed my Winchester and shot twice. He dropped and when I picked him up I found that my two bullets had struck within a half inch of each other.

He shot four times, and every time he shot he kept running closer to me. He was 500 yards away from me when I killed him.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast these different accounts. How are they distinct? How are they similar? In what ways are the writing styles different, and why?
2. In 1907, the year of Oklahoma statehood, Bass Reeves describes Jim Webb as "Mexican." While contemporary newspaper accounts often described the race or nationality of outlaws, Webb was never described as Mexican in those reports. Why would Reeves have added this detail when speaking to a journalist?
3. Why would Bass Reeves describe Jim Webb, a convicted murderer who Reeves had already arrested once, as "brave"? In what sense do you think Reeves meant this description, and what does it reveal about the values of his time and place?