



Col. Charles W. Mooney, from *Doctor in Belle Starr Country* | 1975



Belle Starr, c. 1880

The Outlaw Belle Starr & Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves

Col. Charles William Mooney (1911-1982) was the son of enterprising frontier doctor and pharmacist Jesse Mooney – known affectionately by clients as “Dr. Jesse” – and his wife, Ella. Dr. Jesse died when his son was still a child, but Col. Mooney recalls hearing the following story from his mother.

In 1888, Dr. Jesse was the personal physician of the infamous Belle Starr, a career criminal who ran in the same circles as men like Jesse and Frank James (former Confederate guerillas turned bank and train robbers) and many other outlaws in the territories.

Bass Reeves had arrested her for horse theft in 1883, for which she served nine months in prison. Less than a year after the meeting with Reeves described here, Starr was murdered, probably by one of her many outlaw suitors. But the crime was never solved.

From *Doctor in Belle Starr Country* (1975):

While Dr. Jesse and Ella were visiting with Belle Starr one Sunday afternoon, the loud barking of Belle’s Great Dane warned them someone was approaching. Soon a lone rider came into view. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, riding high in the saddle, was clean shaven except for his bushy mustache. As he rode into the clearing in front of Belle’s house, they saw he was a Negro wearing a deputy U.S. marshals badge pinned on his shirt.

“It’s Bass Reeves,” Belle said, as she walked out of her cabin door and called off the dog.

“Howdy, Miss Belle,” the Deputy said politely, dismounting.

“What brings you this way, Bass?” Belle asked.

“Jest ridin’ through and thought I’d stop, but didn’t know you had company.”

“That’s alright, Bass, yore welcome anytime yore near here. This is Doc Mooney and his wife, Ella,” Belle said.

“Please to meetcha,” the Deputy responded, tipping his hat politely. “Your Uncle Isaac told me about you, Doctor. I’ve know’d him a long time.”



“Bass Reeves here is one of the few deputy marshals I trust,” Belle remarked to Jesse and Ella. “He’s been a friend of mine for several years. He was raised around Van Buren.”

“Jest I thought I’d warn you,” the deputy said, “I’m on the trail of Bob and Grat Dalton. They may be headed this way.”

“Much-a-blighed, Bass. But them rascals won’t be comin’ round here for no help. Bob Dalton knows what I think of him,” Belle remarked.

When Deputy Bass Reeves rode away, Belle told Jesse and Ella all about him. She explained that it was unusual for her, who had fought for the Confederacy, to be a friend of a Negro. But Bass Reeves was a dedicated, fearless deputy U.S. marshal. He would “shoot it out” if necessary, and made a reputation throughout the Indian Nations as a lawman second to none.

Discussion Questions

1. This story was told to Col. Mooney by his mother, Ella; her husband, Col. Mooney’s father, was Dr. Jesse Mooney, Belle Starr’s personal physician. Col. Mooney published this account in 1975, about a century after the events described. To what extent, if at all, are such oral traditions reliable?

Explain your answer by using example of what you find believable (or not) in the stories about Bass Reeves.

2. Why does this story contain spellings like “jest” for just, “please to meetcha” for “pleased to meet you,” and “much-a-blighed” for “much obliged”? What was the author trying to convey with this? What is this literary technique called?
3. In her youth, before moving to the territories, Belle Starr and her family were “bushwhackers” – i.e., pro-Confederate guerillas – in Missouri during the Civil War. Her brother, Bud Shirley, was killed in battle with federal troops in 1864. With this in mind, what do you make of the interaction described in this passage? What do you imagine was the attitude of Bass Reeves to former supporters of the Confederacy he interacted with on both sides of the law?

Text as quoted in:

Art T. Burton. *Black Gun, Silver Star*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. pp 121-122.

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