

Bass Reeves: Legendary American Lawman

Courageous U.S. Marshal brought justice to a violent frontier

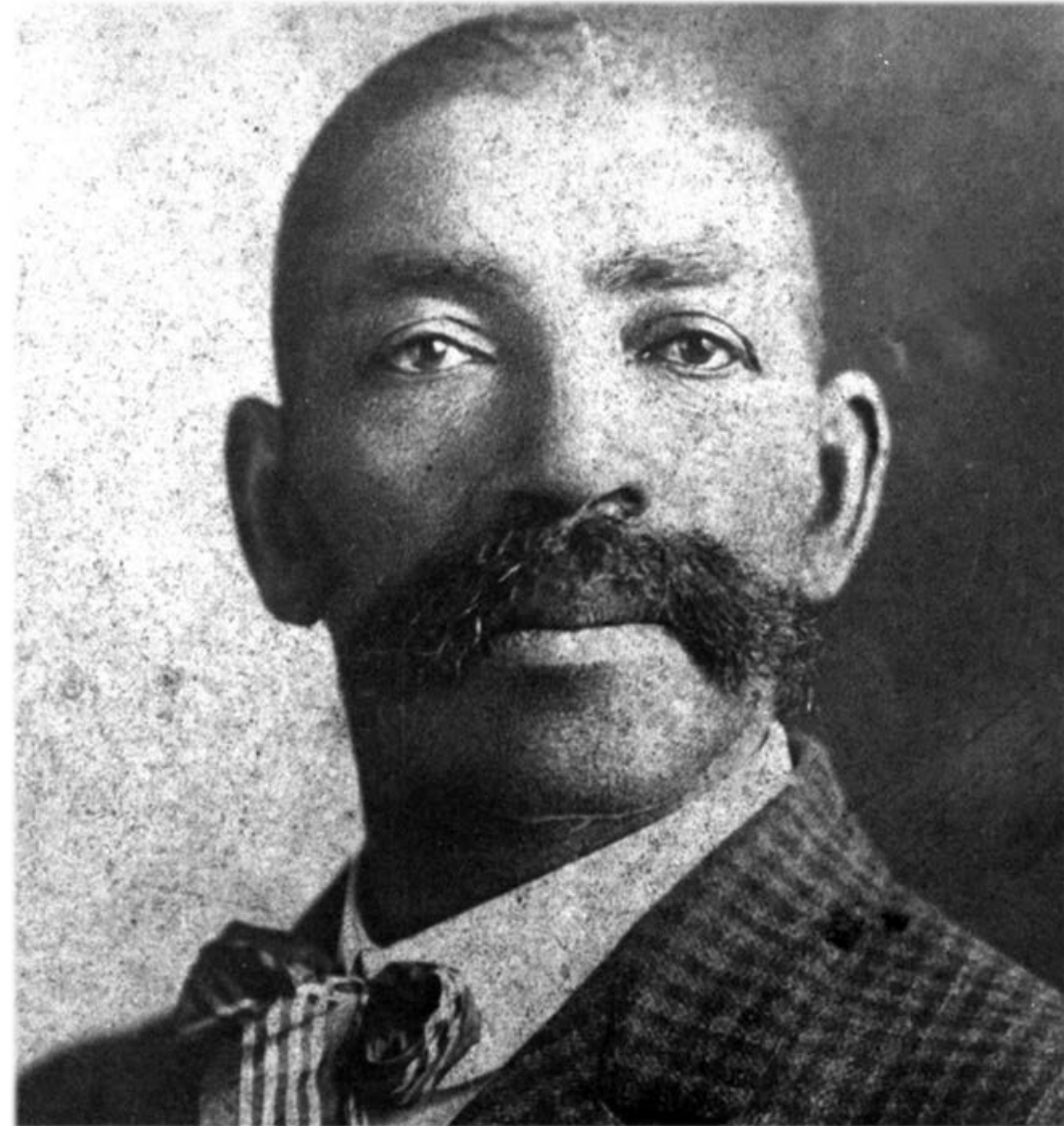
1838-1910

Peace Officer

Frontier Hero

Trailblazing Lawman

Western Legend



Shootout in the Cherokee Nation

On a stormy night in December 1878, an outlaw named Bob Dozier crept up on his enemy, ready to fire. Dozier, a prosperous African American farmer who had turned to a life of crime many years earlier, was a **notorious** con artist, cattle thief, and killer.

Now he was on the run in the Cherokee nation, pursued by the most feared U.S. Marshal in Indian Territory: **Bass Reeves**.



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Shootout in the Cherokee Nation



Bass Reeves was hard not to notice, even in the wind and rain: standing well over six feet, wearing a black cowboy hat and sporting a long walrus mustache, Reeves was the first Black man to be sworn in as a U.S. Marshal west of the Mississippi River.

He was known to be fair and good-tempered – unless he was forced to defend himself.

Deadly accurate with either his Colt pistols or his .44 Winchester rifle and undefeated in a fistfight, he was the last person most outlaws wanted on their tail.

Silhouette of the Bass Reeves monument in Fort Smith, Arkansas.





Shootout in the Cherokee Nation

But Dozier thought he was smarter and faster than Reeves. For over a decade, Dozier had slipped past every officer sent to arrest him. When Dozier heard that Reeves was tracking him, he sent word to the Marshal: if Reeves tried to capture him, Dozier would shoot him dead.

But Reeves wouldn't quit, and now it looked like Dozier would make good on his threat.

As Reeves and his companion sought shelter from a storm near the bottom of a ravine, Dozier fired from above. The bullet whistled past the marshal's head, and he dove for cover.





Shootout in the Cherokee Nation

Gunfire rang out through the trees as lightning flashed across the skies. Reeves shot one of Dozier's **posse**, and Dozier shot back, sending Reeves scrambling to the ground. After a moment of silence, Reeves heard laughter and footsteps. It was Dozier, believing he'd killed the famous Bass Reeves.

Reeves snapped up and leveled his six-gun at Dozier, shouting one last order to surrender. Shocked, the outlaw tried to duck and fire his rifle at Reeves. But he wasn't quick enough.

Bass Reeves, who had offered Dozier many chances to go peacefully, shot him through the neck. Dozier was dead before he hit the ground.





Legend of the Old West

This story, like many stories from the Old West, has been told many times, and possibly **embellished**. On the other hand, it could be completely true! Most serious research into these events didn't happen until decades later, pieced together from surviving documents, the recollection of eyewitnesses, and local legends.

But we do know that Deputy U.S. Marshal Bass Reeves was a highly respected and wildly successful peace officer in western Arkansas and neighboring Indian Territory for over thirty years, starting when he was first commissioned by federal Judge Isaac Parker in 1875.



1937 edition of The Lone Ranger magazine, which features stories based on the popular radio drama. Some have argued that Bass Reeves was the inspiration for the Lone Ranger character – but more on that later!

Legend of the Old West

Reeves had a reputation as a tough, fair-minded, jovial man who knew the landscapes of the territory (now eastern Oklahoma) like the back of his hand and could speak the languages of the Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Chickasaw peoples – the “Five Nations” who had been driven westward on the Trail of Tears generations earlier.

This knowledge, combined with his physical strength, **marksmanship**, and talent for disguise and deception, made him invaluable in policing the uniquely multiracial world of the frontier.



National Parks Service map showing routes, across modern state lines, the Five Nations took from their lands in the southeast towards the federal Indian Territory, after the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced them from their homes.



Fighting in the Texas Calvary

Bass Reeves was born into slavery in Crawford County, Arkansas in 1838, but was brought to Texas as a boy by his enslaver, William Reeves. When the Civil War broke out, William's son George enlisted in the Confederate Army with the Eleventh Texas Calvary – and brought Bass with him as a valet and bodyguard.

Unusual for the time, Bass was trained with firearms from his youth by the Reeves family, who entered him in shooting contests, which he typically won. By his own account, Reeves was present at the battles of Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge. But at some point during the war Reeves decided to free himself.

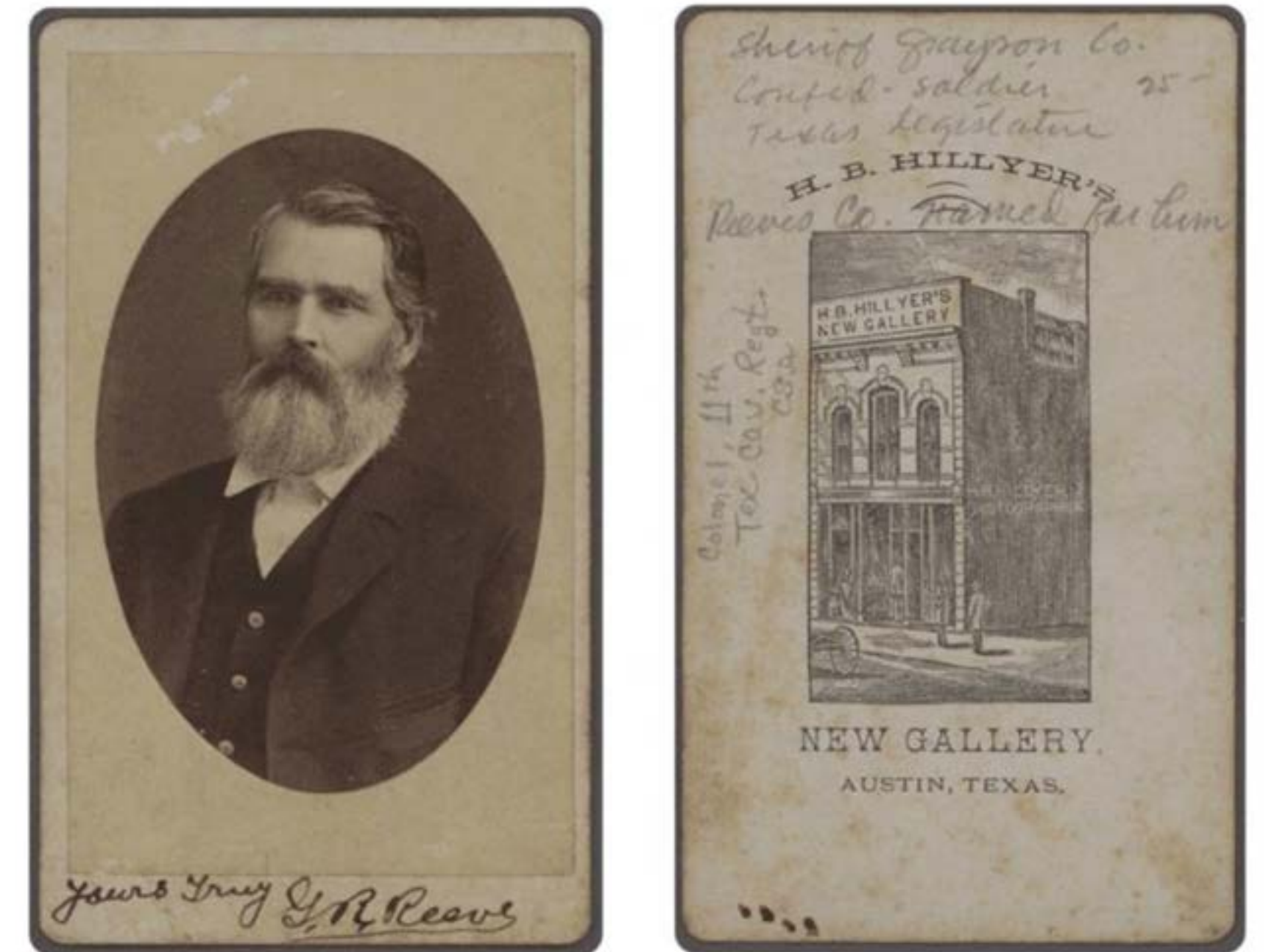


Photo card, front and back, of Bass Reeves' enslaver, George Reeves, who later became Speaker of the House in the Texas State Legislature, c. 1881.

Getting Free – and Fleeing to the Territory

Stories passed down by Bass's children and grandchildren say that Bass and George got in a fight during a card game when Bass thought he had been cheated. Bass pummeled George and made a break for it, fleeing to Indian Territory.

He lived among the Five Nations for the rest of the war, learning their languages and customs and becoming intimately familiar with the terrain.

*The Ouachita
Mountains, in
what is now
southeast
Oklahoma.*





A Quiet Postwar Decade

Little is known about the life of Bass Reeves in the decade between Emancipation and his commissioning as a marshal.

In 1875, the year President Ulysses S. Grant appointed former Missouri congressman Isaac Parker federal judge for the Western District of Arkansas, Reeves was living as a farmer with his wife, Jennie, and their children in Van Buren, Arkansas.

Some historians think this undated photograph of a man and woman is of Bass Reeves and his wife, Jennie – perhaps from his days before serving as a U.S. Marshal.





Judge Isaac Parker



Judge Parker had begun his political career at the start of the Civil War as a pro-Union Democrat, but by 1864 was an anti-slavery “radical” Republican and supporter of Abraham Lincoln.

As a judge, he was tasked with bringing order to the lawless Indian Territory, which had become a refuge for criminals. One of the first men upon whom Judge Parker pinned the silver star of the U.S. Marshals Service was Bass Reeves.

Judge Isaac Parker in the early 1860s, about a decade before his appointment to the Western District.



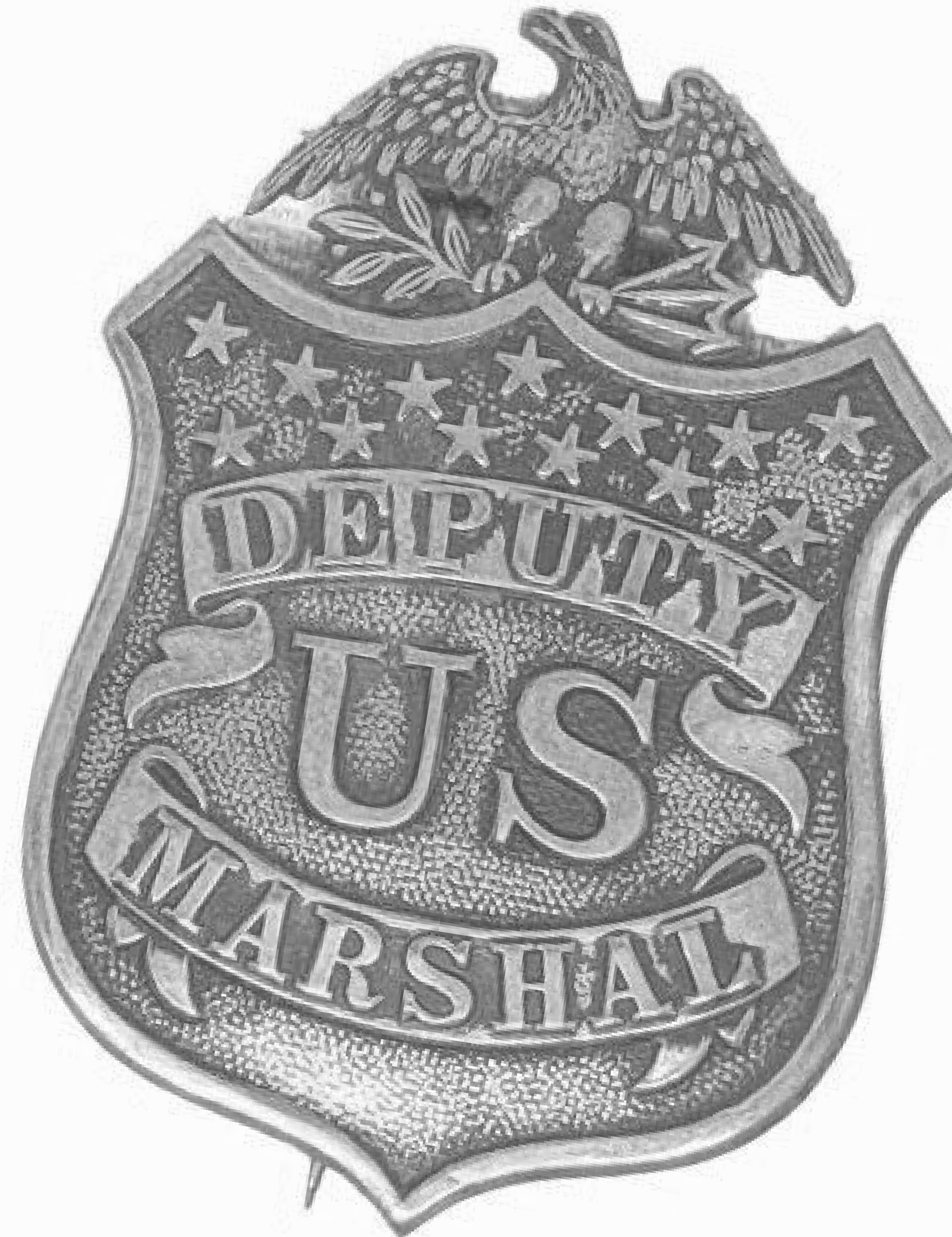
The Silver Star

To be a U.S. Marshal in Indian Territory was incredibly dangerous.

Of the over 300 marshals who have been killed in line of duty – from the service's creation by President George Washington in 1789 up to the present day – about 100 were killed in the territories a few decades after the Civil War, in a time and place remembered now as the “Old West.”

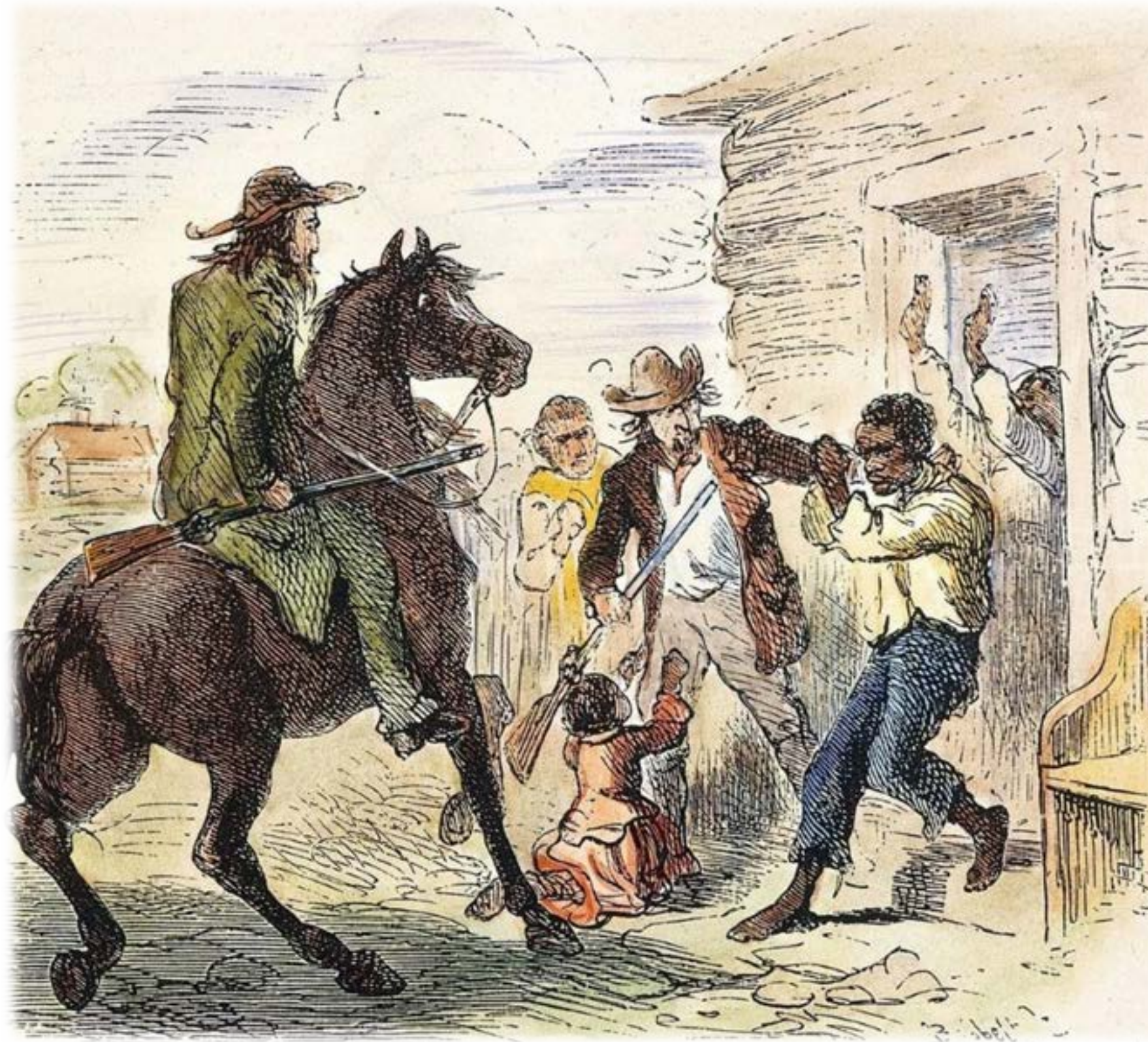
When you hear the phrase “Old West,” what kind of images or ideas come to mind?

What books or films about the Old West have you read or seen?





The Multiracial World of the Frontier



“Operations of the Fugitive Slave Law,” and illustration from the New York Times, December 10, 1860.

Reeves’ appointment by Parker was part of a **sea change** in American life. Before the Civil War, the Fugitive Slave Act tasked U.S. Marshals with hunting down runaway slaves like Reeves. Now an ex-fugitive had the law on his side, arresting Black, Indian, and White outlaws.

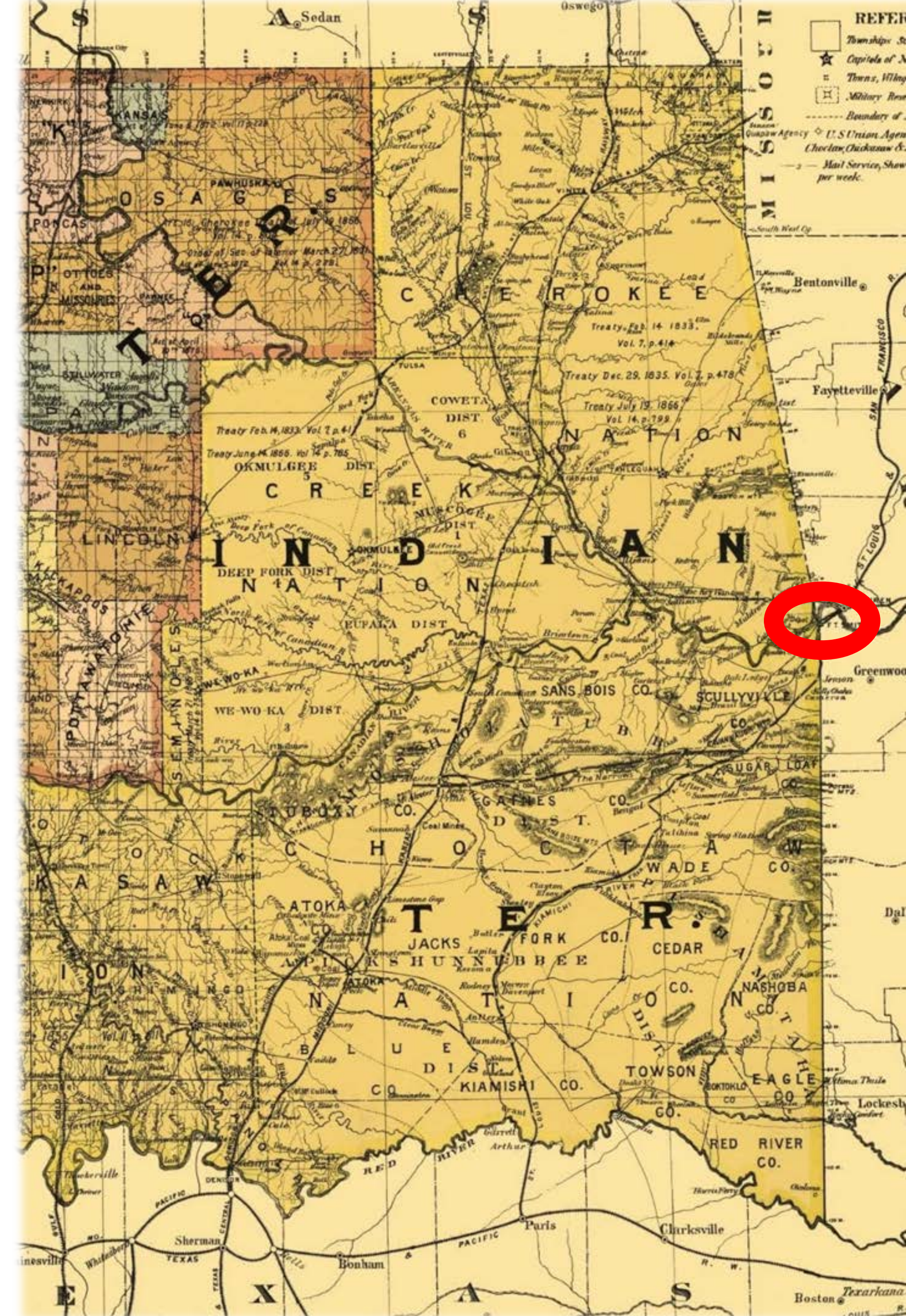
These imperfect efforts at multiracial democracy lasted until the 1890s, when postwar Reconstruction governments across the South – created to build racial equality and provide for freed slaves – were overthrown by force. The new, all-white governments established “Jim Crow” laws.

“No God West of Fort Smith”

When Reeves began his career as a lawman, he worked for Judge Parker out of Fort Smith, Arkansas, bordering the Cherokee and Choctaw nations. Their jurisdiction then covered 62,000 square miles of Indian Territory.

By contemporary estimates, the murder rate there was among the highest in the country.

*Fort Smith,
Arkansas on an
1894 map of
Indian Territory*





“No God West of Fort Smith”

In the 1870s and 80s, the region held everything that scared and fascinated Americans east of the Mississippi about life in the West: crime was rampant; native peoples were still widely self-governing; and the institutions of everyday life in the East, like churches and civic clubs, were largely absent.



Garrison Avenue, Fort Smith, Arkansas, c. 1900

A common expression from the era declared: “No Sunday west of St. Louis, and no God west of Fort Smith.”

But Reeves was at home in this country, a place he knew, in his own words, “like a cook knows his kitchen.” He would serve as a marshal in the territory until 1893.

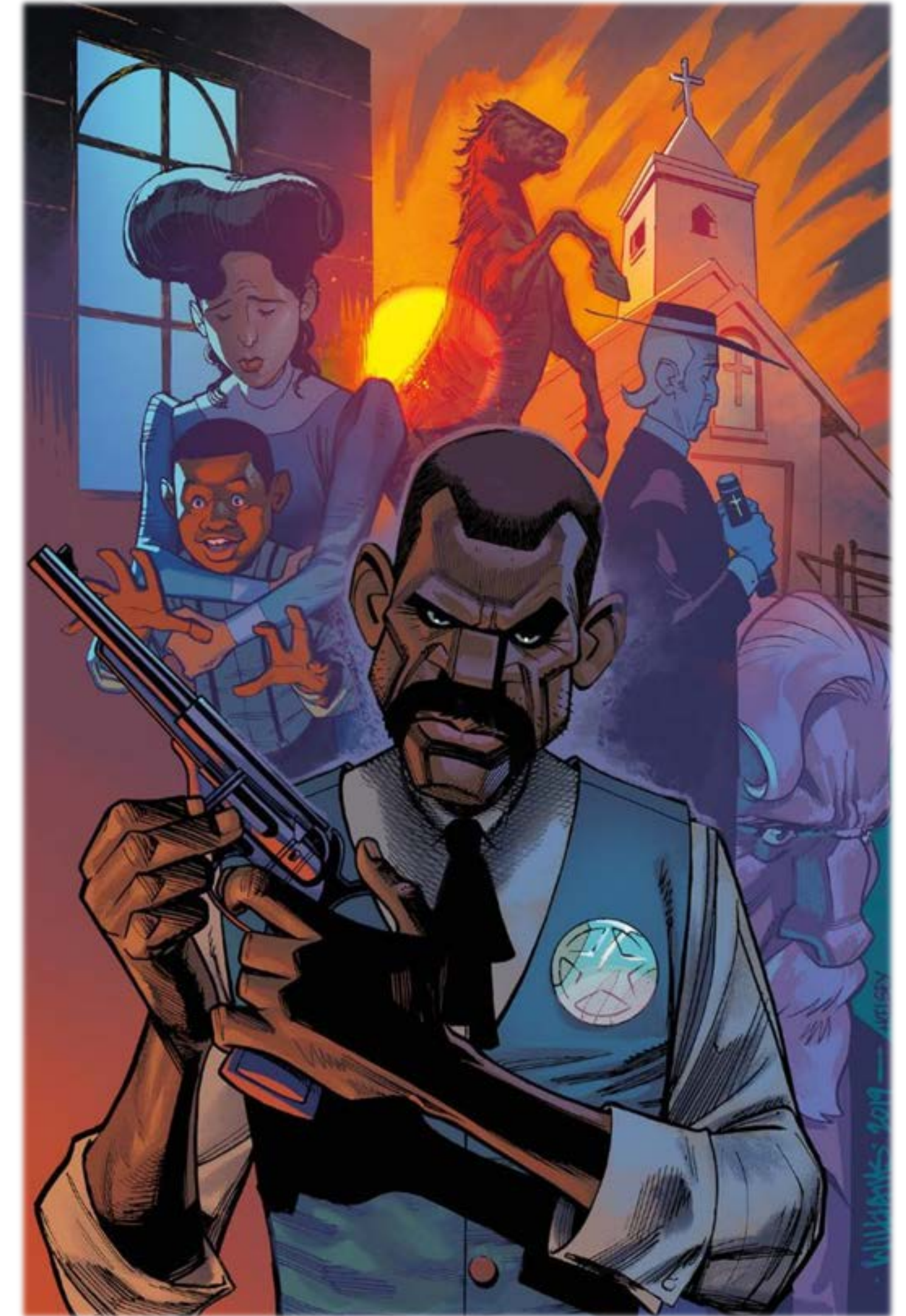


Life of a Frontier Lawman

Despite the danger, the job could be lucrative, earning Reeves the modern equivalent of \$90,000 in some years.

Reeves and other marshals were often in the field for months at a time, tracking down fugitives and serving warrants, sometimes rounding up several – even dozens – of accused criminals at once and taking them back to Fort Smith to stand trial.

This meant that Reeves almost always rode with a posse that could consist of deputies, Indian guides, cooks, and other companions—armed or not—who would be useful on the journey.



Comic book cover illustration of Bass Reeves for the Allegiance Comics Bass Reeves series, written by Kevin Greivoux with art by David Williams.



Master of Disguise

Reeves was famous for his use of disguises and false identities to lure in fugitives or lull them into a false sense of security. Sometimes he would dress as a down-on-his-luck **vagabond**, complete with ragged clothes and **pungent** body odor.

In one notable incident, Reeves and his posse were tracking two outlaw brothers. He put on his tramp disguise and left the posse behind, walking twenty miles to a house where the brothers had been last seen. Reeves was greeted by their mother and he claimed to be, like her sons, on the run from the law.



Illustration of Bass Reeves on a white horse from True West magazine.

Master of Disguise

The mother accepted him into her house as a fellow outlaw in need of a hot meal and a roof over his head. Reeves made polite conversation with the woman until the brothers arrived. He kept up the ruse until the family was asleep, then drew his guns and sprang the trap.

The brothers woke up handcuffed, and Reeves led them back to the waiting posse at gunpoint – while their mother followed, cursing the marshal up and down the whole way.



*Bass Reeves monument in
Fort Smith, Arkansas.*



Easy on the trigger

After his decades of service, late in life Reeves estimated that he had killed 14 men in self-defense – out of thousands he helped arrest. While he could be ruthless in the face of violence, Reeves was never bloodthirsty, granting even hardened crooks like Bob Dozier a chance to be taken into custody unharmed.

Friends, peers, and law-abiding neighbors described Reeves as boisterous, fun-loving, and (when not in disguise) sharply dressed: cowboy boots always polished to a mirror shine, iconic mustache neatly groomed.



Bass Reeves on horseback (circled) in a crowd in Muskogee, Indian Territory, 1889.

Respected by the best ...



*Choctaw Nation Lighthorse
policemen, c. 1885.*

Reeves was held in the highest regard by Judge Parker and other white government officials.

Crucially for his success, he also had the trust and friendship of the Five Nations Indians, often partnering with the nations' native law enforcement, the Lighthorse Police, in apprehending suspects.

After the Civil War, these nations included emancipated Black men and women who had been enslaved by the Five Nations but were given tribal membership after abolition.





Respected by the best ... and worst

Reeves also earned the fear and respect of the territory's outlaws and criminal gangs. In one famous 1883 incident, Reeves was chasing Jim Webb, a white cowboy with a vicious temper who had already been arrested once by Reeves, for the cold-blooded murder of a Black farmer and preacher named William Steward.

Webb and Steward had argued after Steward's **controlled burn** of his fields accidentally spread to the pastures of a neighboring ranch where Webb worked.

Webb's friends posted bail, and he escaped to the Chickasaw nation. But Reeves tracked him down. Webb fled on foot, firing back at Reeves, who pursued on horseback.

Bass Reeves monument in Fort Smith, Arkansas.





Respected by the best ... and worst

Webb's bullet took a chunk from the brim of Reeves' hat. But Reeves was a dead shot with his Winchester, and took Webb down. According to witnesses, Webb's last words paid tribute to his killer:

"Give me your hand, Bass. You are a brave man. I want you to accept my revolver and scabbard as a present, and you must accept. Take it, for with it I have killed eleven men, four of them in Indian Territory—and I expected you to make the twelfth."

Reeves later judged Webb "the bravest man I ever saw" among the outlaws he confronted.

1941 painting of a gunslinger on the run by Robert G. Harris for Wild West Weekly, a "pulp" magazine that published adventure stories set in a sensationalized version of the Old West.



Lawman on Trial

In January of 1886, Bass Reeves was arrested for the murder of William Leach, an African American posse cook who had traveled with Reeves in April 1884.

Witnesses at the time, including Reeves' nephew, claimed that Bass shot Leach in a tragic accident. His rifle had been loaded with the wrong **caliber** ammunition, and Bass was working to dislodge the round from the chamber when the weapon fired.

Why had these charges only come down nearly two years after the incident?
Many observers in the territory saw the prosecution as racially motivated.

U.S. Courthouse in Fort Smith, c. 1880



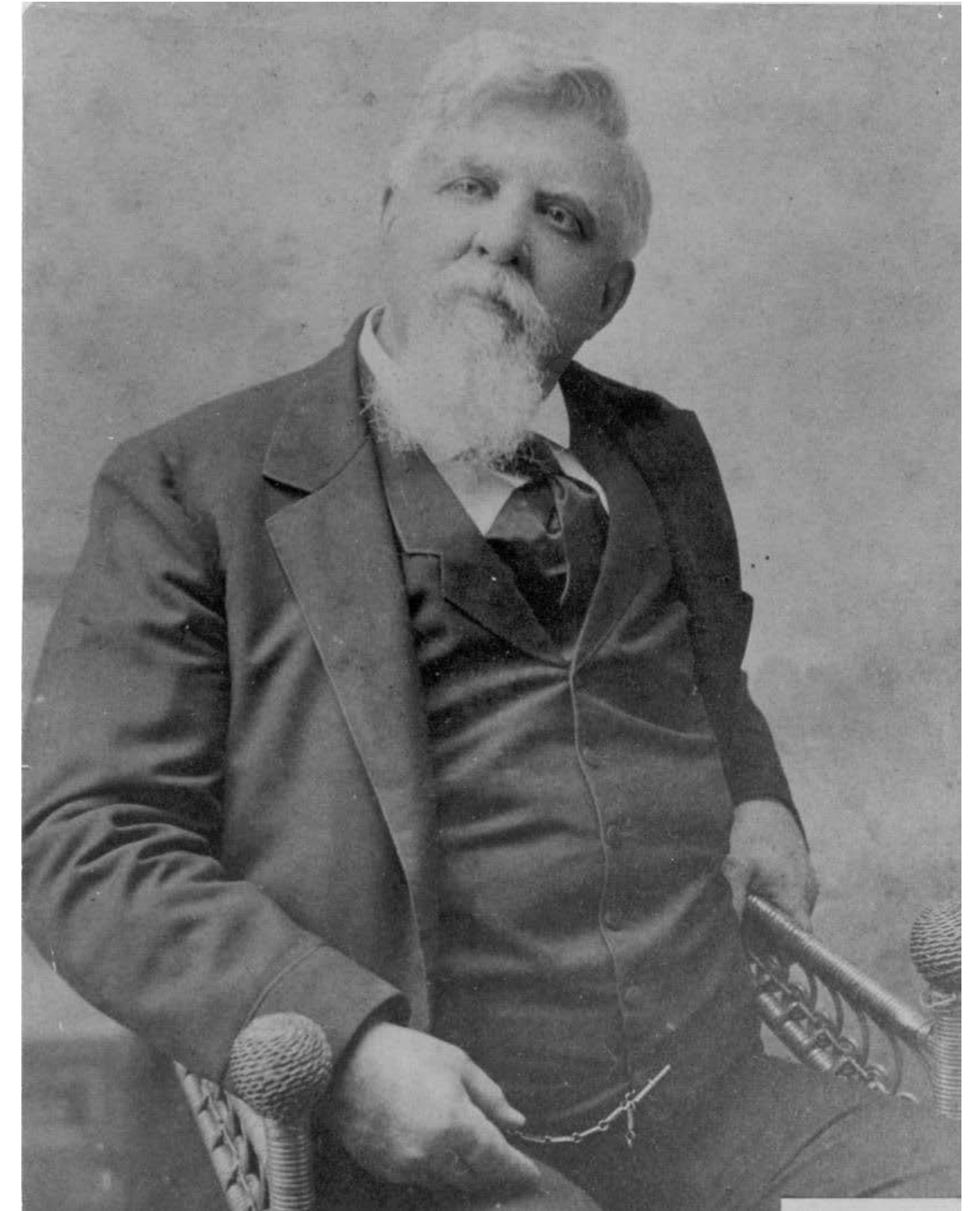


Lawman on Trial

Judge Parker himself presided over the trial, and Reeves was defended by his friend W.H.H. Clayton, who usually served as the district's chief prosecutor.

In October 1887, Reeves was found *not guilty*. The jury did not find most of the prosecution's evidence **credible**; one key witness was James Grayson, a man Reeves had arrested for attempted murder and taken prisoner; another was James' wife, Mary.

Judge Parker in the late 1880s, about a decade before his death in 1896.

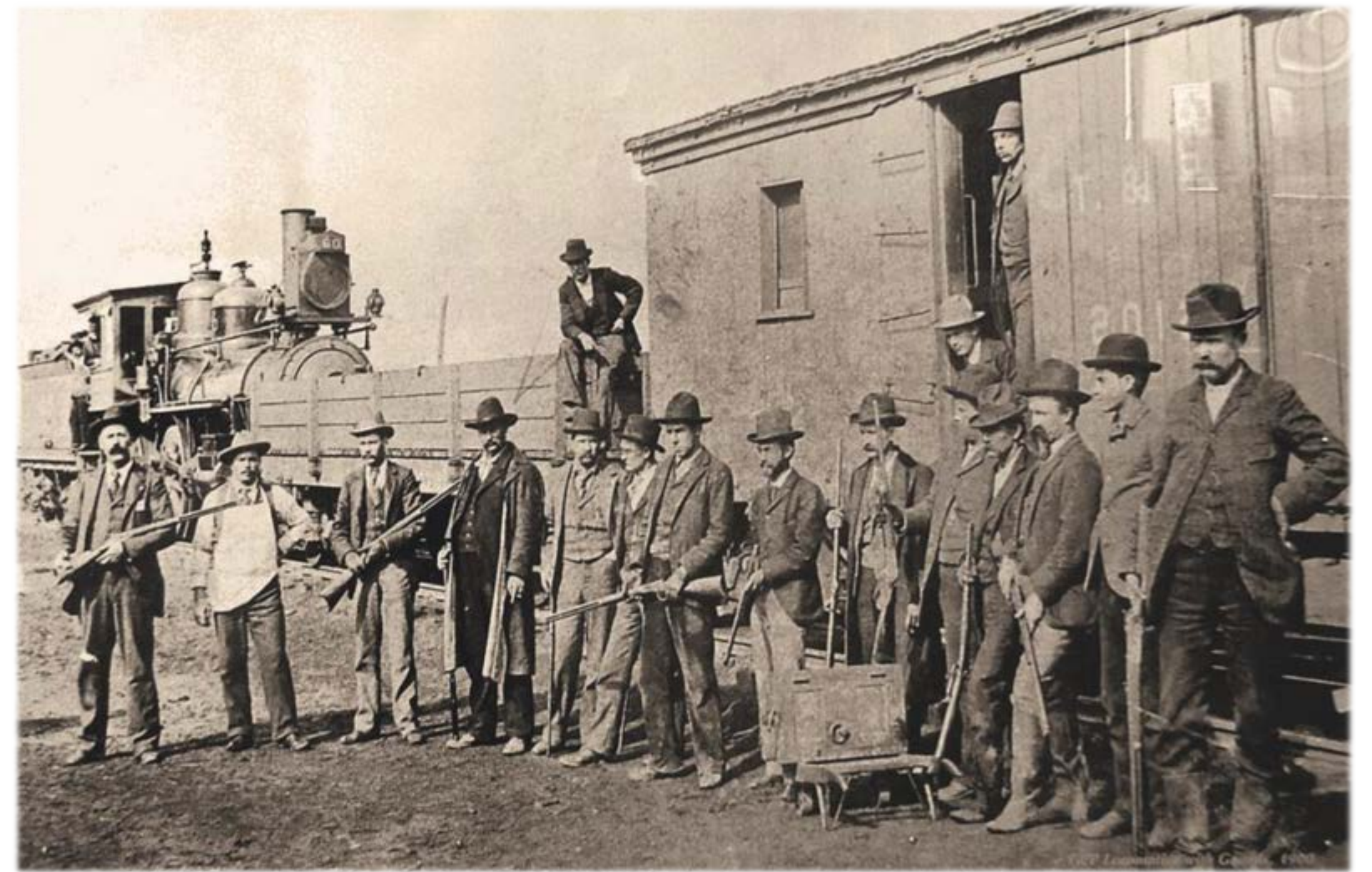


Lawman on Trial

The jury also concluded that Reeves had tried everything to save Leach's life after the shooting.

Despite this **exoneration**, the trial took a heavy toll on Reeves.

He had spent six months in jail. The cost of his legal defense had left him nearly bankrupt, and he was forced to sell his farm.



Posse of lawmen protecting a train near Muskogee (then Indian Territory, now Oklahoma), c. 1900. On the far left is the famous Deputy Marshal Bud Ledbetter; in the boxcar doorway is Bass Reeves.



A Family Tragedy

One of the saddest episodes in Reeves' life began in 1902 when his son, Bennie, shot and killed his own wife during an argument. Bennie went on the run, swearing he would not be taken alive.

Bass insisted on serving the warrant so that he could persuade Bennie to surrender. Bass Reeves arrested his own son and brought him back to Muskogee for trial.

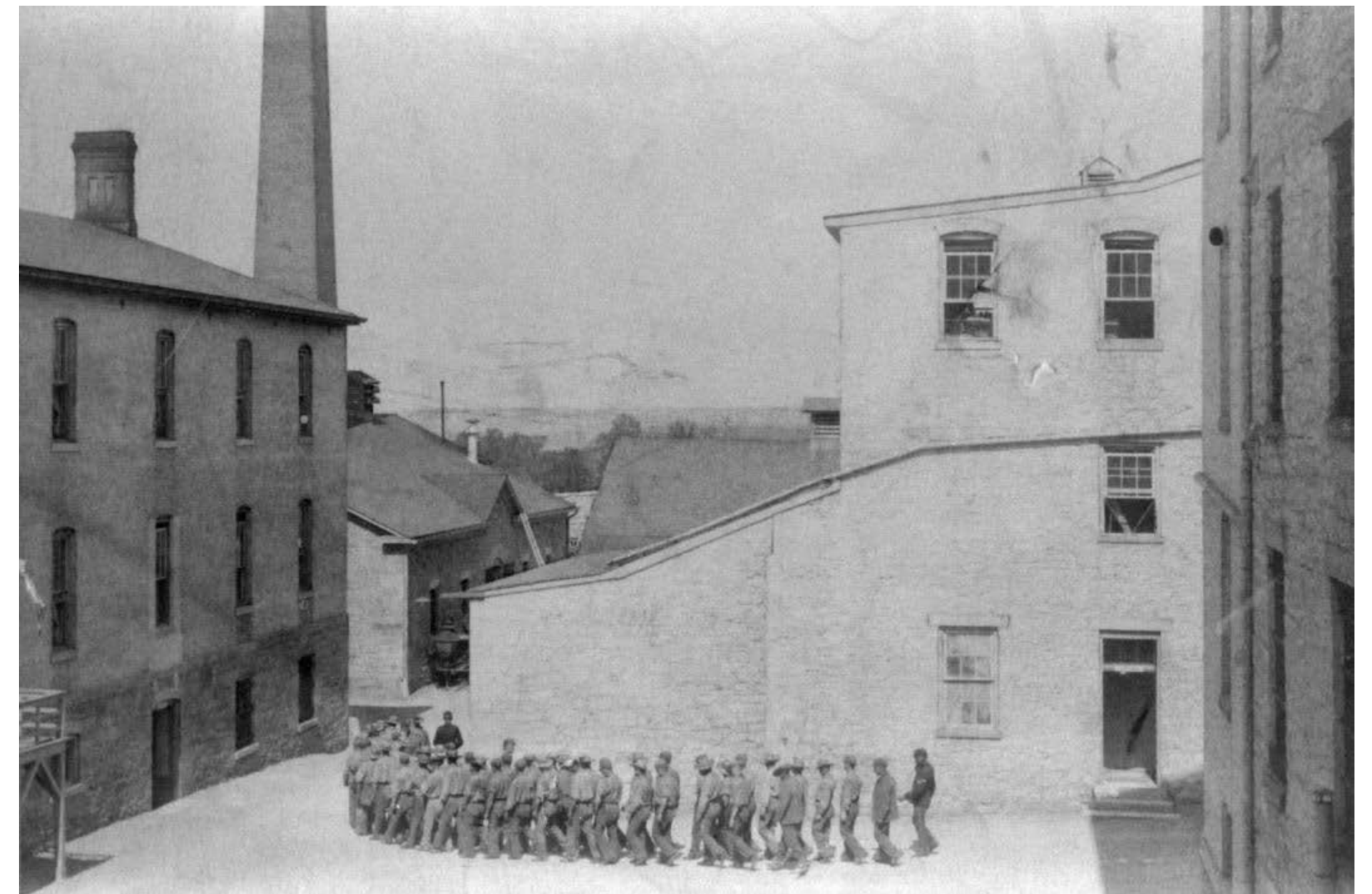


Bennie Reeves after his arrest.

A Family Tragedy

Even with a family member involved, Reeves put his oath to uphold the law above personal feelings.

In 1903, Bennie was convicted and sentenced to life in prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas – though his sentence was **commuted** in 1914, a few years after his father died.



The U.S. Penitentiary at Fort Leavenworth.



1907: Oklahoma statehood – and segregation



A tragic irony of the achievements of African American lawmen like Reeves – over 50 served among the hundreds of marshals under Judge Parker – is that they helped build the stability necessary for Oklahoma statehood. But the new state's constitution established segregation.

Men like Reeves, who inhabited many cultures and had the power to arrest and even kill **desperadoes** of all races, helped tame the “wild west.” Now, they were pushed aside by white settlers who reaped the benefits.



1907: Oklahoma statehood – and segregation



Bass Reeves (far left) and three other African American officers on the Muskogee police force, c. 1900.

Around 1900, in an act practically unheard of even during Reconstruction, Reeves arrested a white landowner for murder, for his role in the lynching of a mixed-race couple. But after Oklahoma joined the union in 1907, Black law enforcement officers were forbidden from policing whites.

Retirement and Death

Later in life, Reeves worked as a marshal in Texas, and concluded his career serving two years as an officer in the Muskogee Police Department. Despite being in his late 60s, Reeves could truthfully brag that he kept his beat crime-free.

Just a year before his death, age and illness forced him to retire. Bass Reeves died in January 1910 of natural causes. At that time, his deeds were still widely known in the area.

The Muskogee Phoenix wrote of this remarkable man from the area's frontier days:



The final known photograph of Bass Reeves (far left), on the steps of the U.S. courthouse with U.S. Marshals and other officers from Indian Territory, on Oklahoma's "Statehood Day," 1907.



Retirement and Death

“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 people, can be complete without [his] mention ...

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.”



Bass Reeves Rediscovered



Author and historian Art T. Burton

For decades, Bass Reeves was remembered mostly in Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma, especially in Black and Indian communities, and in tales passed down within the U.S. Marshal's office. But gradually, more complete written accounts began to emerge.

Historian Art Burton, who has family roots in Texas and the southwest, first heard stories of Bass Reeves by word of mouth in the 1970s.

Intrigued, he began searching the archives of Judge Parker's court for records of Reeves and collecting oral histories, eventually publishing some of the first in-depth articles on Reeves.





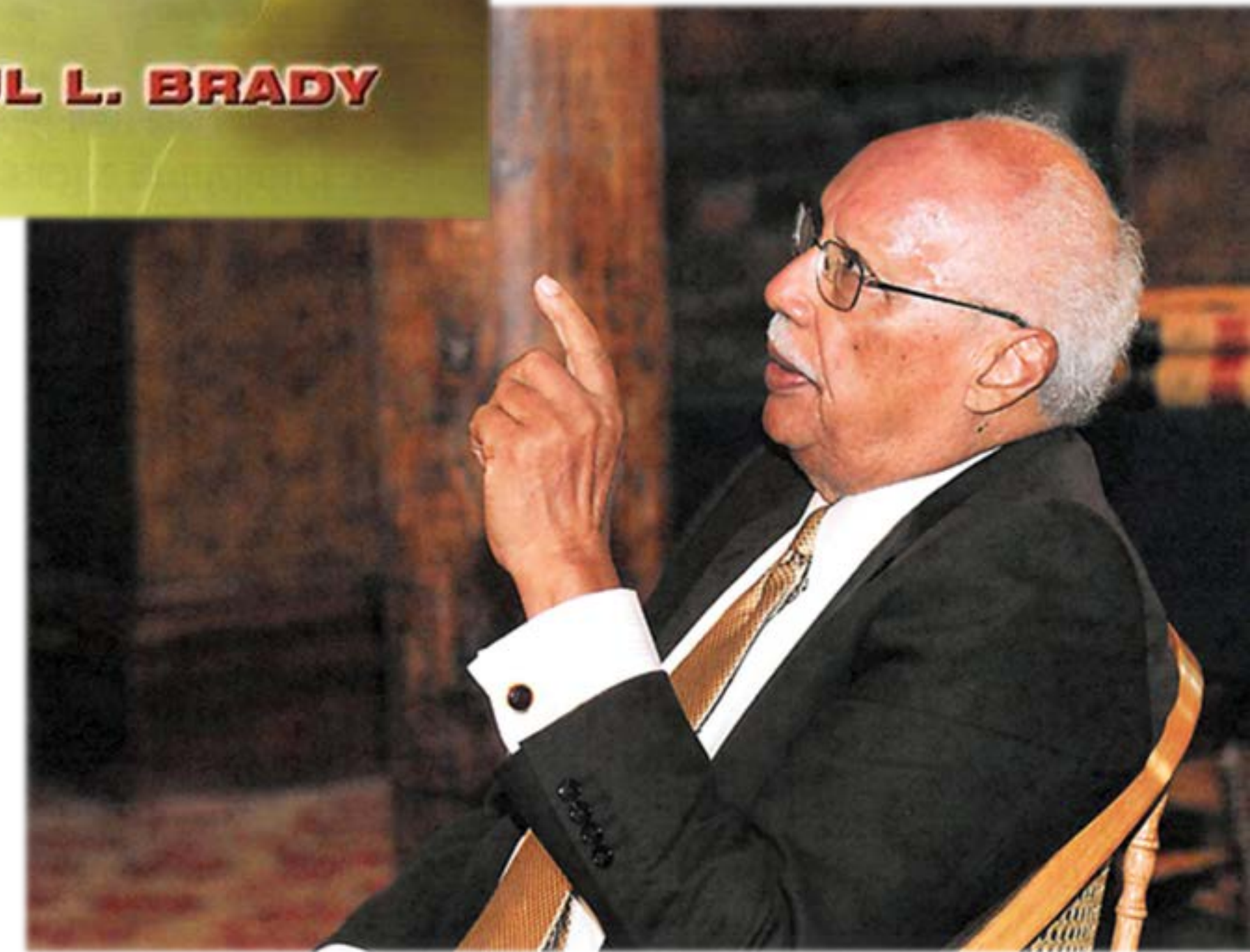
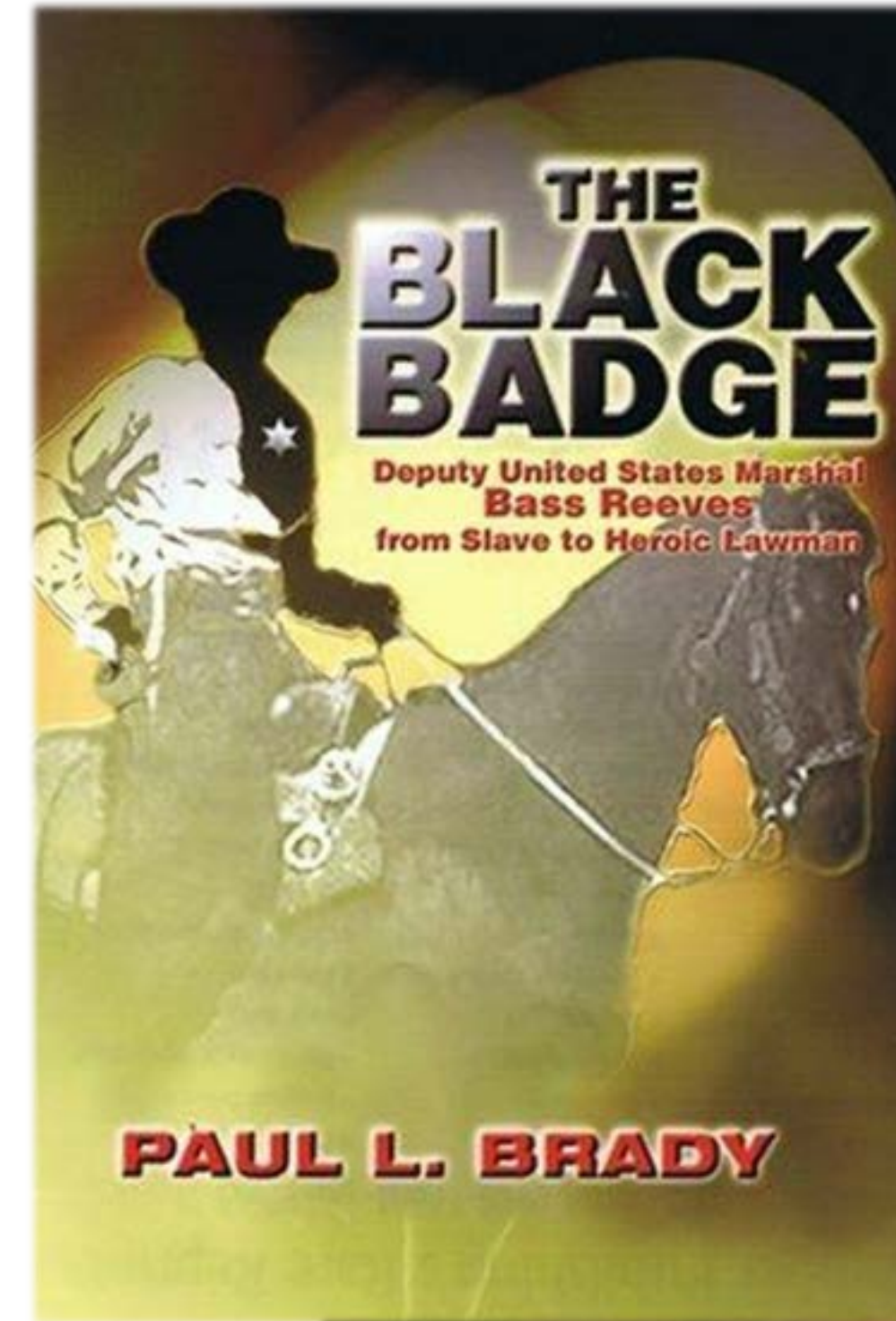
Bass Reeves Rediscovered

In 2005, Reeves' great nephew, Judge Paul L. Brady – the first Black American to sit on the federal administrative bench – published *Black Badge*, a retelling of his ancestor's life based on the existing historical record and family traditions.

What people or events from your family's past have been handed down?

Do you know any stories about, for instance, your great-grandparents – people you didn't know in life?

Judge Paul L. Brady and the cover of his book, The Black Badge.





The Real Lone Ranger?

In his 2006 book *Black Gun, Silver Star*, the **definitive** biography of Reeves, Burton even speculated that the American pulp western hero, the Lone Ranger, was based on Reeves.

This is unlikely – the Lone Ranger was created in 1933 for a radio drama at station WXYZ in Detroit. Notes from the production state the character was created as a variation on similar masked hero characters popular at the time, like Zorro or Robin Hood.

Can you name some fictional characters that closely resemble real, historical figures?

Were these similarities intentional by the authors?



Still from the very popular 1950s television series *The Lone Ranger*, adapted from the 1930s radio drama.



The Legend Continues

But Reeves' documented adventures as a peace officer are just as exciting as anything in fictional Westerns.

As his fame grows in the twenty-first century, the idea that Reeves was "the real Lone Ranger" has become yet another part of the Bass Reeves legend.

Cover of True West magazine, Feb/March 2021



Vocabulary

caliber
commute
controlled burn
credible
definitive
desperado
embellish
exonerate
marksmanship
notorious
posse
pungent
ruse
sea change
vagabond



Hunting party in the Old West. Exact date, place, and origin of the photograph are unknown, but some historians believe the Black man standing on the left side is a young Bass Reeves. Source: True West / Art Burton.



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