

Bass Reeves: Legendary American Lawman

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

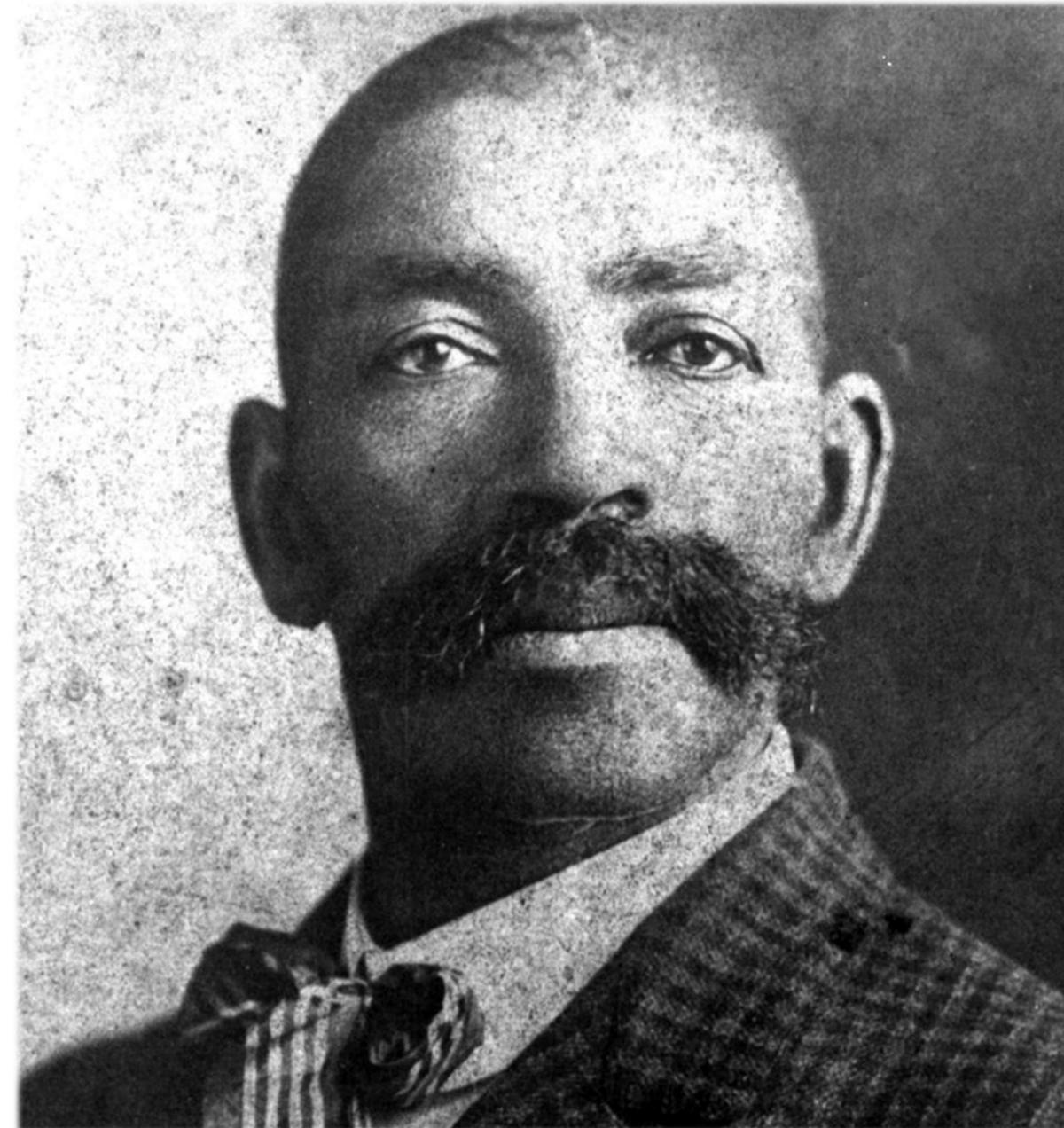
1838-1910

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**.



Shootout in the Cherokee Nation



Bass Reeves was hard not to notice, even in the wind and rain: over six feet tall, 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 **jovial** – unless he was forced to defend himself.

Relentless in the pursuit of justice, Bass Reeves 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 to kill.

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 the storm in 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 approaching 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.

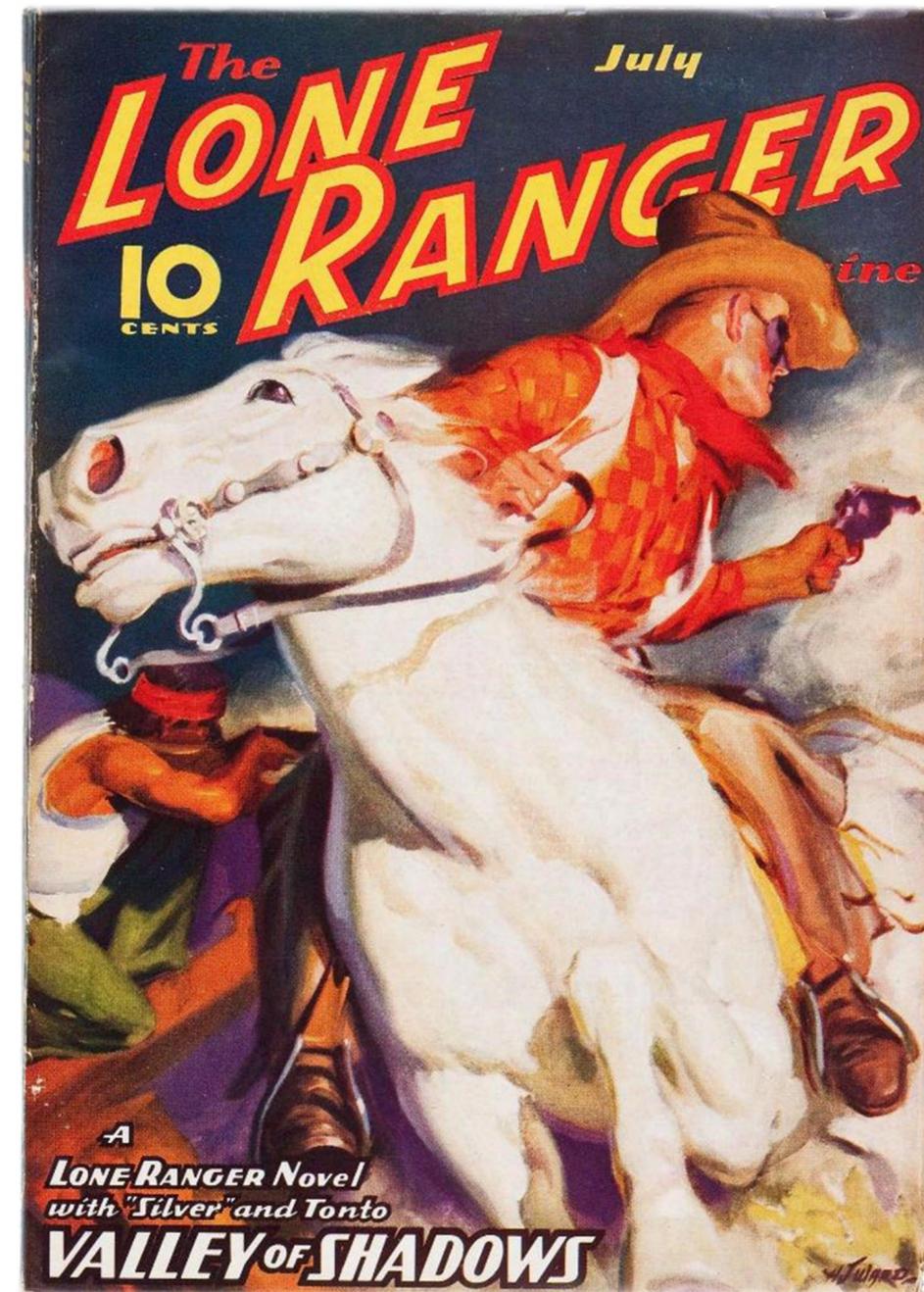
Reeves, who had offered Dozier many chances to surrender peacefully, shot him dead.



Legend of the Old West

This story, like many stories from the Old West, has been told many times, and possibly **embellished**. Or it could be completely true! These stories are put together from a mix of surviving documents, news reports from the time, and local legends.

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



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

Legend of the Old West

Reeves had a reputation as a tough, fair, cheerful man who knew the territory (now eastern Oklahoma) like the back of his hand and could speak the languages of the Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, 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, made him a perfect fit for policing the uniquely multiracial world of the frontier.

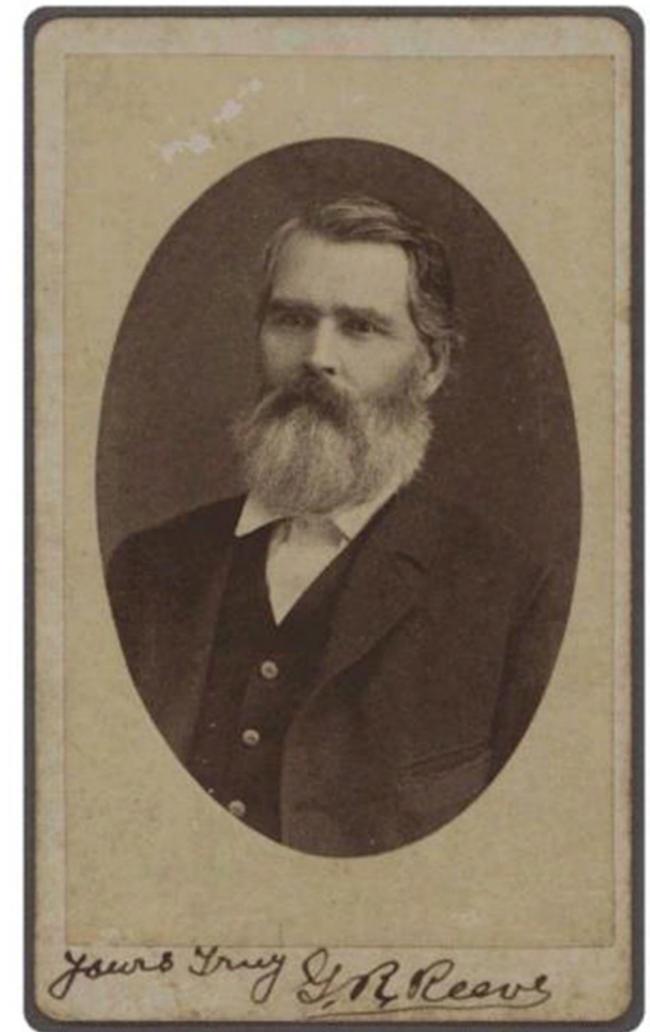


National Parks Service map showing routes, across modern state lines, the Five Nations took from their lands in the southeast towards the federal Indian Territory, after the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced them from their homes.

Fighting in the Texas Calvary

Bass Reeves was born into slavery in 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 Texas Calvary – and brought Bass with him as a valet and bodyguard.

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.



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.

He fled to Indian Territory and lived among the Five Nations for the rest of the war, learning their languages and customs and getting to know the land itself.

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



A Quiet Postwar Decade

Little is known about Bass Reeves in the decade between Emancipation and the start of his law enforcement career.

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 a woman is of Bass Reeves and his wife, Jennie – perhaps from his days before Judge Parker hired him 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, his job was to bring order to the lawless Indian Territory, which had become a **refuge** for criminals. One of the first men Judge Parker gave 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.

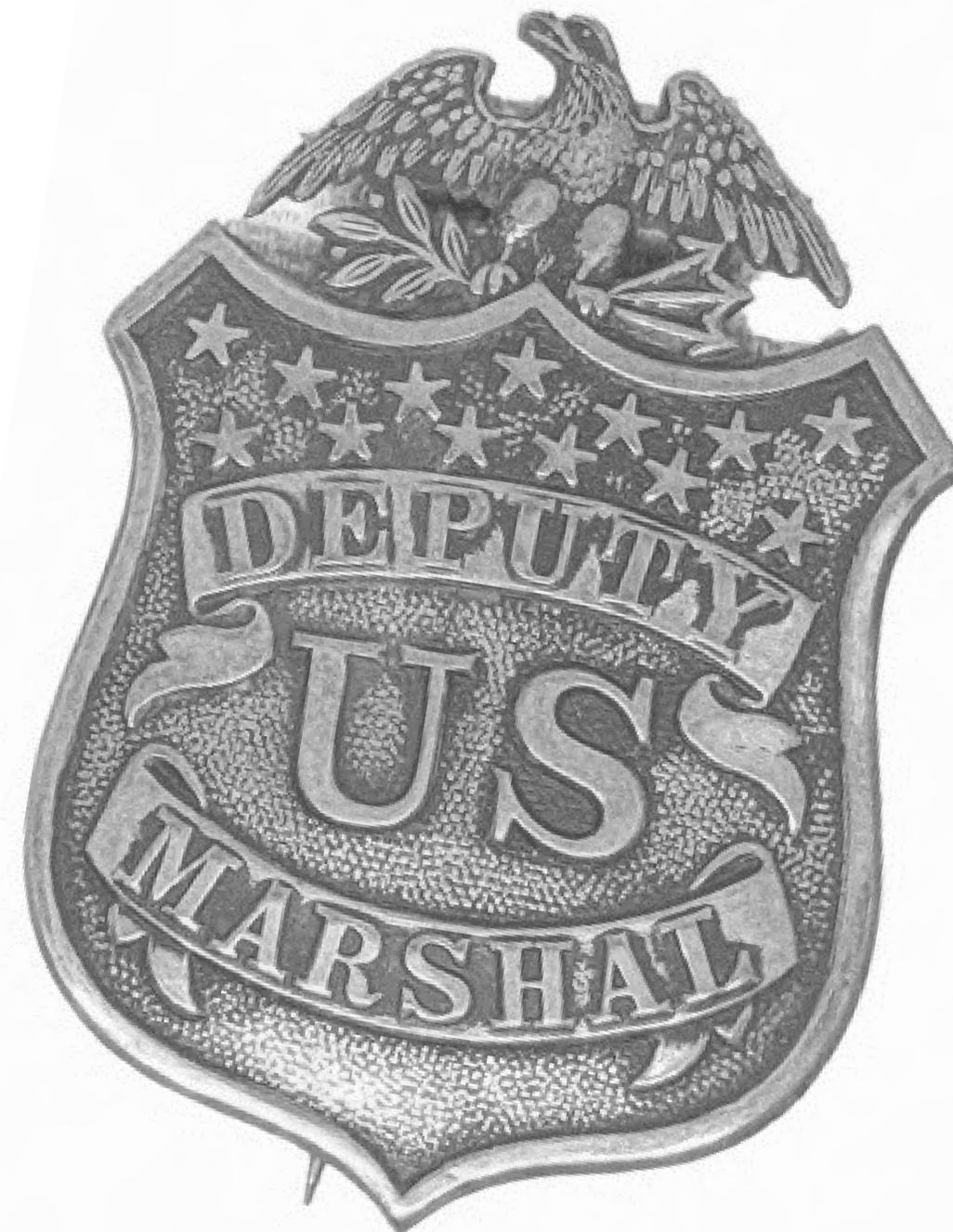
The Silver Star

Serving as 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 pictures come to mind?

Do you know any stories of the Old West?



“No God west of Fort Smith”



*Garrison Avenue, Fort Smith,
Arkansas ca. 1900*

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 everywhere; native peoples were still widely self-governing; and the normal stuff of everyday life in the East, like churches and civic clubs, were largely absent.

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

But Reeves knew Indian Territory, 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

But because of the danger, the job paid well, earning Reeves today's equivalent of \$90,000 a year. Reeves and other marshals would often be in the field for months at a time, hunting 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 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 tramp, 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 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



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

In old age, Reeves guessed that he had killed 14 men in self-defense – out of thousands he helped arrest. While he could be tough in the face of violence, Reeves was never bloodthirsty, granting even hardened crooks like Dozier a chance to surrender unharmed.

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

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.

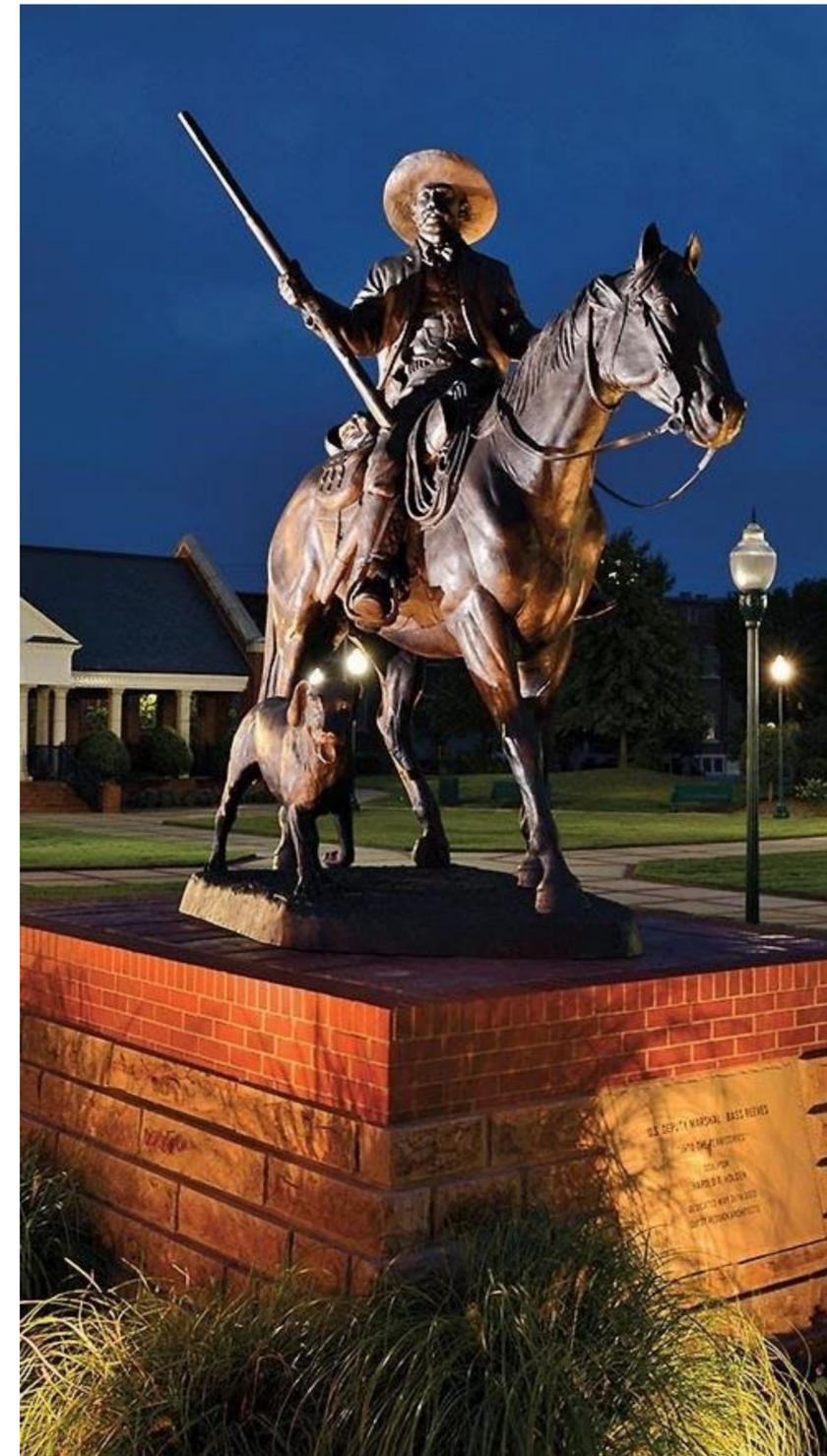
Respected by the best ... and the worst

And he earned the fear and respect of the territory's outlaws and criminals. In an 1883 incident, Reeves was chasing Jim Webb, a 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 when a fire Steward had started accidentally spread to the pastures of a neighboring ranch where Webb worked.

Webb's friends posted his 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 the worst

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

“Give me your hand, Bass. You are a brave man. I want you to accept my revolver as a present, and you must 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 captured.

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's 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 was Reeves only charged nearly two years after the incident? Many in the territory saw the prosecution as racially motivated. Reeves was eventually found *not guilty*.



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

Lawman on Trial



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.

During the trial, the jury 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.

A Family Tragedy



Bennie Reeves after his arrest.

One of the saddest episodes in Reeves's life began in 1902 when his son, Bennie, shot and killed his 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.

1907: Statehood – and segregation



Of the hundreds of marshals who served under Judge Parker, at least 50 were African American. Their work in law enforcement made the territories safe for newcomers, and Oklahoma statehood possible.

But the new state's constitution established segregation. Men like Reeves, who inhabited many cultures at once, were now pushed aside by White settlers who reaped the benefits of the Black marshals' work.

1907: 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 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.

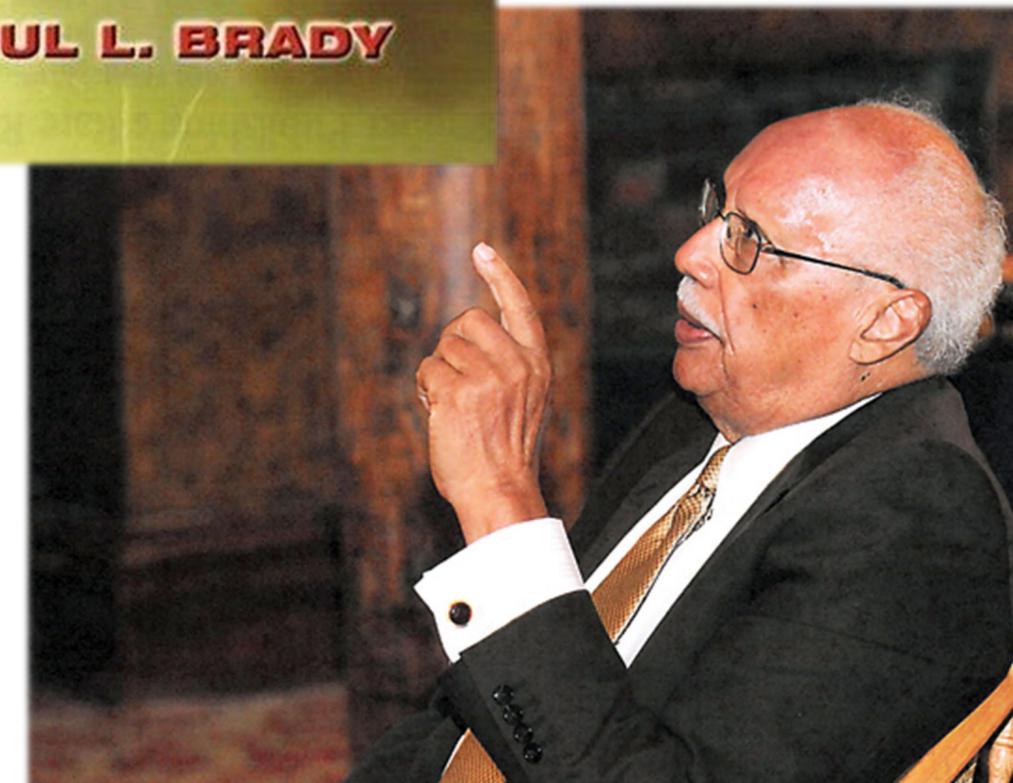
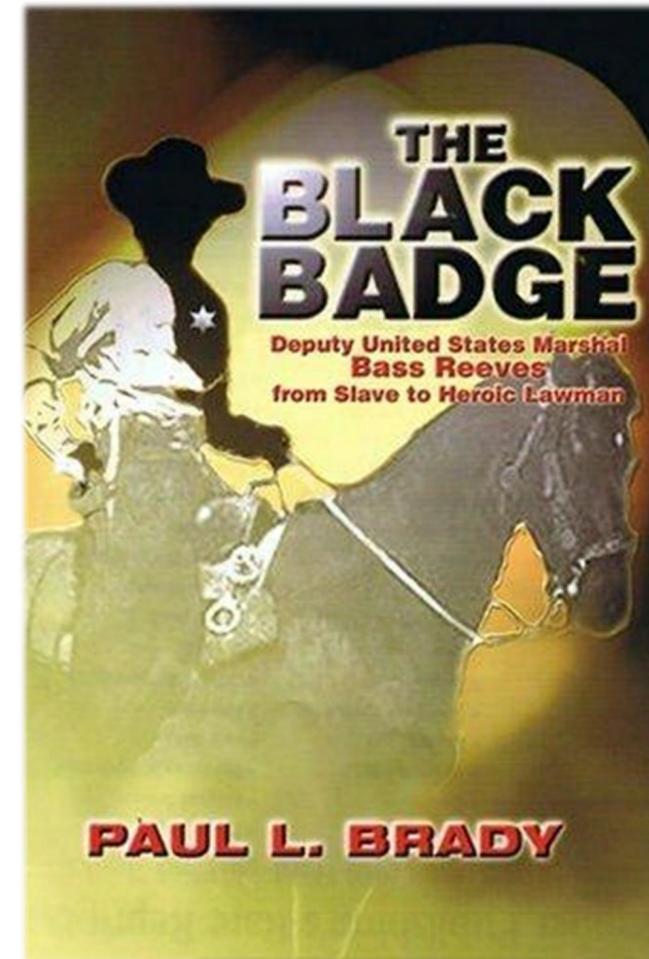
Bass Reeves Rediscovered

In 2005, Reeves's 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?



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

In his 2006 book *Black Gun, Silver Star*, historian Art 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.

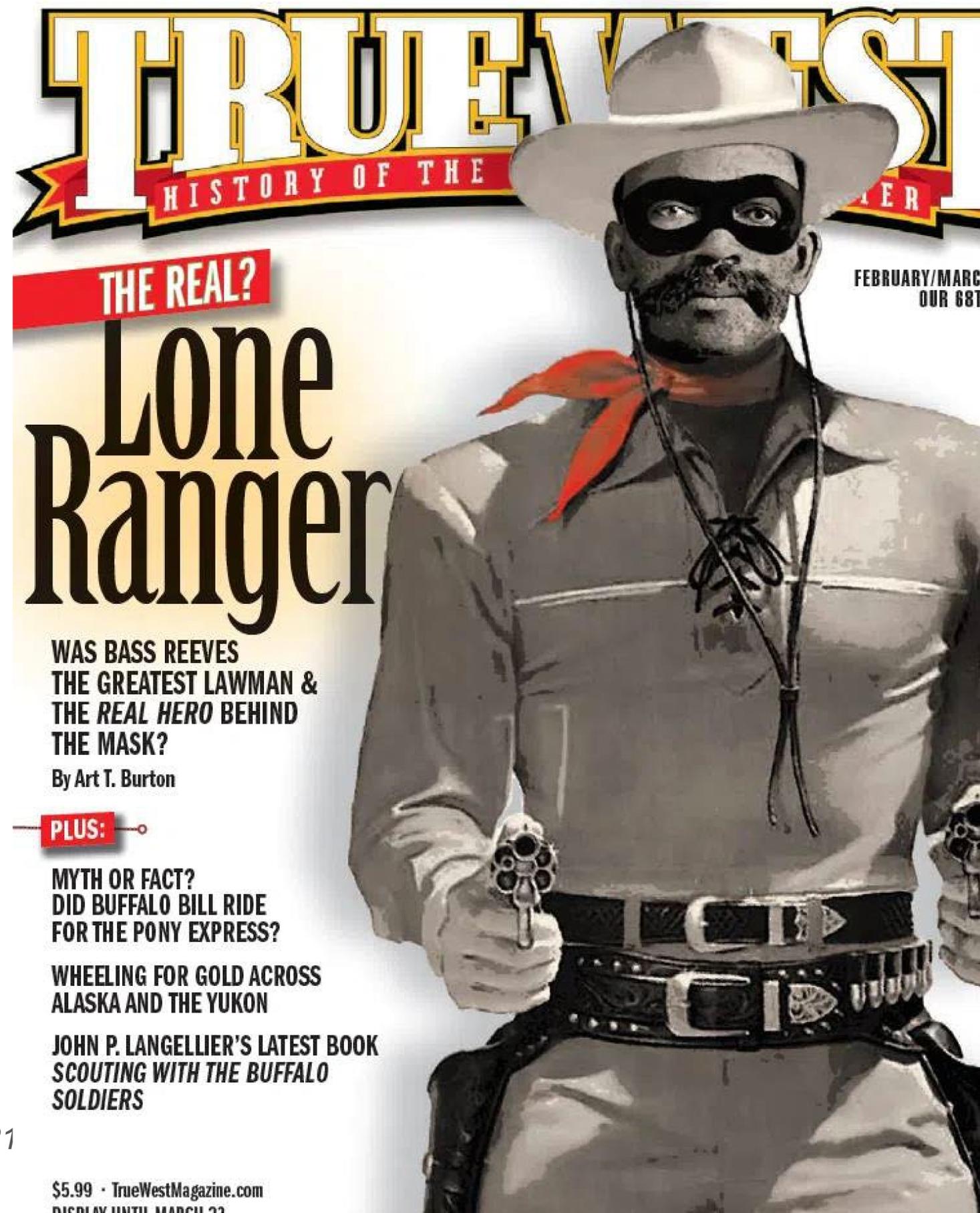
Can you name some fictional characters that closely resemble real, historical figures?

The Legend Continues

But Reeves's 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

boisterous
caliber
embellish
exonerate
jovial
marksmanship
notorious
posse
pungent
refuge
ruse

*Bass Reeves on Oklahoma
statehood day, 1907.*





WOODSON
CENTER

BLACK *History*
and **EXCELLENCE**