

Old West Stories

Cullen Montgomery Baker

The period immediately following the Civil War, known as Reconstruction, produced some of the blackest pages in the history of our nation. The era lasted from the end of the war in 1865 through 1877. The radical Republicans in Washington gained control of the Federal Government and assigned the US Army, Union civilians and freed slaves, known as Freedmen to control all the southern states. This caused a violent uprising among many whites and led to the formation of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan and to some of the bloodiest killers in Old West history, such as Wild Bill Longley and John Wesley Hardin. Some folks even call this the beginning of the Old West.

One of the most prolific killers to arise out of this era was the former Confederate soldier Cullen Montgomery Baker. He was born on June 23, 1835 (or '36 or '37) in Weakley County, Tennessee. He was the second born and only son of John Baker and his first wife (Elizabeth?). When Cullen was four years old the family moved to Texas and his mother died within about four years of the move. Very little is known of the family of Cullen's parents and many of the writers have confused his mother and step-mother. There would be four more children with the step-mother.

Baker led a tumultuous childhood and began to drink early and way too much, even for those days. In 1853, he and his brother-in-law Matthew Powell were drinking in one of the local establishments when Baker got into a fight. Powell jumped in to help him and friends of the opponent joined in and a brawl was going on. Powell was stabbed in the leg and someone struck Baker on the head with a hatchet or tomahawk. The severity of the wound caused an unknown amount of damage, but some writers give the wound partial credit for the violent rampage that would consume his future years. He did, however, profess reformation and vowed to abstain from drinking and fast company. This only lasted a few months.

On July 11, 1854, while his head was still in bandages he married seventeen-year-old Mary Jane Petty. It was nine months after the wedding before Baker killed his first man. He got into a fight with a boy by the name of Stallcup in Forest Home, Texas. Baker grabbed a whip from a nearby store and almost whipped the boy to death in front of many witnesses. Wesley Bailey, a prominent and highly respected citizen, was the principal witness against Baker as he was convicted of assault. Shortly after the trial was over, Baker rode up to Bailey's home. Bailey hid behind a post with only his head exposed. Baker ordered him to step out and told him he was not going to kill him, but just shoot him in the leg. When Bailey stepped out, Baker shot him in the legs and hips as several family members looked on. Baker rode away and one of the Bailey boys rode after him, but Baker escaped. Bailey died within a few days and Baker fled Texas for Arkansas.

In 1856 Baker returned to Texas and took Mary Jane back to Arkansas. Their only child, a daughter named Louise Jane, was born on May 4, 1857, and on July 2, 1860, Mary Jane died and is buried in the Nooner Cemetery in Perry County, Arkansas. Following the funeral Baker took the child to live with Mary Jane's parents. He very rarely ever saw her after that

Just before the outbreak of the Civil War a neighbor named Mrs. Wartham began to severely criticize Baker and his conduct. Baker decided he would have to give her a

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whipping. Baker obtained several good switches, went to the residence and informed Mrs. Wartham what he intended to do. Mr. Wartham rushed out of the house and while they fought for Baker's shotgun Baker pulled out a knife and stabbed Wartham to death. Baker mounted his horse and rode away. There seems to be no contemporary proof of this story such as newspapers or court records, but every writer who has written about Baker has included it.

On July 21, 1862, one day less than two years after Mary Jane died Baker married fifteen-year-old Martha Foster of Bright Star, Arkansas. Shortly after the marriage Colonel Phillip Crum raised a brigade to fight the Northern Aggression and Baker enlisted. His military record is virtually unknown but was certainly less than honorable. He fought in the Battle of Wilson's Creek in Missouri, also known as Oak Hills, and the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas, also known as Elkhorn Tavern. At Des Arc, Arkansas, 20,000 Texas troops were dismounted and their horses sent back to Texas. Baker was one of the troops detailed to return the horses. He failed to return to his unit and claimed later that he had to protect his sisters and that he found during his absence the blacks had been robbing his family. He stated afterwards that he intended to go back but by the time he got the black situation cleaned up he had over stayed his leave of absence and was afraid to go back. He was declared a deserter and the Confederacy sent scouts to hunt for him.

Early in 1864 he joined a band of Irregular Rangers that was nothing more than a gang of guerillas. They primarily harassed the Yankees, but they lived off the land and took horses, cattle, corn and flour whenever they needed. Baker's expertise in riding and shooting and lack of fear placed him in high regard among the Ranger commanding officers. By summer of that year he was a leader of the Independent Rangers in Northwest Arkansas, an area made up largely of Union sympathizers. In September of 1864 his band stopped a wagon train of Arkansas Union supporters headed for the northwestern states. When he ordered the train to turn back the leader refused. Baker drew his pistol and killed the man. The rest of the train turned back and reported that most of the group was slain.

Martha, living at home with her parents, got the word that Baker had been captured by Federal troops in Perry County, Arkansas. On February 5, 1865, she told her mother she was going to visit a friend and instead began a 200 mile ride to find her husband. In the dead of winter she rode through swamps, crossed rivers and traveled through freezing rain. At one point she rode for 36 hours without food or sleep. When she arrived in Perry County she found Baker to be safe. Apparently, she remained in Perry County through the end of the war while Baker was riding with his band of Rangers through the middle portion of Arkansas.

An often told story relates that on one of his furloughs back home Baker met a wagon train heading for refuge in Texas. Perhaps it was a slave master taking his slaves to a safer place. Baker didn't like the looks of one of the black ladies and murdered her in cold-blood. His hatred for blacks had become a disease to him and this would be just the beginning of his murderous rampage against them.

After the war ended, Baker seemed to be anxious to settle down. He and Martha started a ferry business on the Sulphur River but had to close it when there were no customers. In early 1866, he became manager of Line Ferry, a major crossing on the

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Sulphur River. On March 1, 1866, Martha died suddenly and no explanation has ever been given. Baker went into deep mourning. He carved a wooden likeness of Martha, placed it in the living room, dressed it in her clothing and talked to it for hours. Many writers blame her loss for the mayhem he would create.

However, two months later on May 6, 1866, he proposed marriage to Martha's sixteen-year-old sister Belle Foster. The Foster family had not considered him a worthy husband for Martha, so he was devastated when Belle and the family rejected him. Belle had another suitor, Thomas Orr, and this created hatred between the two that would last until Baker's death. Orr, a school teacher, claims in his writings that the Foster family rejoiced at Martha's death because of the abuse heaped upon her by Baker. But he also wrote about Baker's grief over Martha saying, "In that grave he appeared to bury his senses, his reason and his remaining respect for the human race."

Upon Orr's first arrival in the community Baker offered to let him room in his home. Orr chose to room with the Foster's instead and was living there when Baker proposed to Belle. This did not set with Baker. On June 2, Orr rode up to the south bank of the Saline River intending to ferry across. He was riding the same horse that Martha rode on her ride to find Baker. Baker rode up to the north bank with a jug of whiskey and when the ferry landed Orr refused to drink with him and Baker began a fight. Baker grabbed Orr by the throat, threw him on the ground and struck him in the head with a heavy limb. When the fight was over, Baker ran away and left Orr and his horse on the bank of the river. Orr had to ride into town to seek medical attention.

A month later Baker and a friend appeared in Orr's classroom and demanded that he pay for the ferry crossing. After Orr paid, Baker verbally abused him in front of the students. Baker then notified Orr that, "if he ever caught him on his dead wife's horse again he would shoot his damn head off smooth with the shoulders." The parents heard of the affair, called a meeting and confronted Baker. Baker gave a written statement that he would not interrupt or bother Orr again. He made a further statement that when Orr's ten month contract with the school was over there would be trouble.

Orr's contract with the school ran thru December 15, 1866, but he abruptly closed the school on November, 2. Baker immediately sent word that he was going to settle matters. They managed not to run into each other for several months.

In April, 1867, Baker went to the Foster home at night to get a horse. Two dogs charged at him and he pulled his pistol and killed one and wounded the other. Angered by the dogs, he went 100 yards from the house and began firing at the roof. Then he rode to the homes of four neighbors and shot all their dogs.

Following the dog killing spree, Baker was disgraced and disowned by the community. He moved into the Sulphur River bottoms and became known as the "Swamp Fox." On June 1, 1867, he visited the store of a Mr. Bowden where he was going to acquire supplies without payment as was his custom. Since he was a sociopathic killer the storeowners had no choice in the matter. Mr. Bowden was away and Baker forced Mrs. Bowden to provide him with supplies, announcing that she could "charge it to the Confederacy." Upon his return Mr. Bowden declared Baker to be a drunkard and a thief. On June 10, Baker hearing about Bowden's comments returned, called him out, verbally berated him and killed him in cold-blood.

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William G. Kirkman was a former Union soldier serving with Company K of the 39th Regiment, Illinois Infantry. After the war he was appointed Subassistant Commissioner of Texas' 58th district. This included Cass and Bowie Counties where Baker concentrated his Texas activities. Cass County was so rebellious that its name was changed to Davis County in honor of Jefferson Davis. It was changed back in 1871. In 1887 Jeff Davis County was establish on the other side of the state. Within a week of his arrival in Boston, Texas, a small town of about 300 people, on Saturday, June 29, 1867, Baker shot a freedman five times, once in the breast and four in the heart. The black man was "peaceful, quiet and industrious" and his sin was that he was working a small farm on his own account. Baker was to become Kirkman's number one nemesis. This was Baker's first known killing of a black man.

Up until this time Baker's crimes had all been against the local community and citizens and he had not run into any trouble with Federal authorities or with the Freedmen's Bureau. But this was about to change. On July 25, 1867, Baker returned to his home and found that Federal soldiers had entered his house, stolen his late wife's jewelry, torn her dresses, nailed her picture to a tree and shot it full of holes. He headed across country to head off the soldiers. At a crossroads he hid in the bushes and waited for the Federals to come along. The Federal party included Kirkman, two officers and three or four enlisted. Baker and some of his men jumped out of the bushes and charged them head-on. The Federals had Baker outnumbered but they wheeled their horses and fled to Boston, Texas, (better known as Old Boston). A while later Baker rode into town, went into a grocery store for oysters and sardines and sent a challenge to the Army. When the soldiers showed up Kirkman was with them. Baker intended to shoot Kirkman who dove through a window as Baker fired and the bullet killed Sergeant Albert E. Titus. Kirkman managed to wound Baker in the right arm below the elbow. Baker was able to escape and hide out at a friend's house.

Baker and about a dozen of his men struck again in September, 1867, when they attacked a wagonload of supplies destined for Kirkman's army escort in Boston. The wagon was escorted by four army guards. One soldier was killed outright, one mortally wounded, and the other two injured. The bandits made off with the wagon and all the supplies.

Baker and one or two of his men struck another supply team on October 6, 1867. This time they killed a teamster and a soldier and wounded a second soldier, while one man escaped. Again Kirkman lost the rations that were intended for Boston. Baker distributed the supplies to neighbors who repaid his generosity and bravery with two new revolvers and a shotgun. Kirkman had asked for some cavalry support prior to the latest attack. All he received after the attack was six additional infantry soldiers for protection as Baker was now threatening to kill him.

The army was finally incensed enough to start an intensive search for Baker and his cohorts. Finding Baker would prove next to impossible. Many of the locals had the same dislike for the US Army as did Baker and would provide him shelter and food. Those that were not his friend were so afraid of him that they would not talk to the Army. And then there was the swamp. The Sulphur River bottom was a huge swamp about twelve miles long by five miles wide. It was virtually a jungle with miles and miles of intersecting hog trails. Baker had been using this as a hiding area since his desertion

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from the Confederate Army. He knew it well and the army search leaders recognized the impossibility of catching him. S. H. Starr, the commanding officer of the army post Mount Pleasant, agreed with Kirkman that only a large dead or alive reward would lead to the capture of Baker

On October 21, 1867, a freedman was waylaid by a man claiming to be one of Baker's men. This time his life was spared, but the man was tied to a tree, robbed of his horse, saddle, bridle, a Spencer carbine and his revolver.

In mid-October of 1867, Kirkman convinced Texas Governor E. M. Pease to post a reward for Baker. Kirkman wanted \$2,500 and the Mount Pleasant Commanding Officer, S. H. Starr said anything less than \$8,000 would not work. The governor only posted \$1,000. The military in Texas finally convinced their superiors of the need for a reward. They offered \$1,000 for each of the three people they considered the leaders.

Baker spent Christmas Day in Bright Star, Arkansas, with some comrades and a lot of whiskey. A man by the name of Howell Smith had a farm about three miles outside of Bright Star. In late 1867, Mr Smith hired some black folks to work his farm. Having no quarters or outhouses for these people, he allowed them to stay in his home. Howell was sixty-six-years-old and he and his wife Cynthia had four daughters and three sons. They were neighbors and friends of Baker's former in-laws, the Fosters. It is not known how many of them were at home on Christmas Evening, but Mrs. Smith was away and two grown daughters were home for sure. Nothing about this situation conformed to the standards of white folks in the post war south. Rumors began to flow. One of the black men had insulted a white neighbor; Howell was sleeping with a black woman and so on. None of the rumors were ever substantiated, but they were used for excuses as to what was to follow.

The whiskey made the drinkers decide that it was time to teach Howell Smith and his black workers a lesson. How many men joined in is not certain, but one report numbers it at sixteen. Baker and his band fired over thirty shots into the house killing two and severely wounding two more—all black. The two daughters joined in the fight trying to protect their father who received mortal wounds from a gun whipping. The girls were stabbed and also beaten with pistols, but survived. Baker was seriously wounded in the right thigh by his own men. Unable to walk, he made the girls assist him in mounting his mule. As he rode off he apologized to the girls and told them they would be harmed no more. He then told them that if his men returned to tell them he had gone to Sand Hill to die. He rode on past Sand Hill to the Foster home and Foster tended his wounds. He also told Foster what had happened and urged him to send assistance right away.

It was not until December 28 that a posse was formed. A young boy, Seth Rames, ran through the woods to the Foster home to warn Baker. The posse was joined by a troop of soldiers and an estimated 300 men were on the trail. They were informed of the whereabouts of Baker's camp and early in the morning of the 29th they had it surrounded and waited for dawn. When dawn came they charged an empty camp. They were able to track the murderers to the Sulphur swamp. They searched for two days and found not one man involved in the Smith killings.

Lee Rames, young Seth's older brother, was a member of Baker's group. After Seth had warned Baker and the posse missed them at their camp, Lee took the wounded

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Baker to Mush Island in Bowie County, Texas where he guarded Baker for months while the leg healed.

It occurred to some of the leaders of the civilian posse that Lee's brother Seth might provide some clues as to where the pair went. Six men were designated to go his sister's house where he was staying and get the truth out of him. They promised the sister not to harm a hair on his head. After withstanding all their questions without giving them any information, they shot him in the face and breast and left him lying in the woods for the vultures. Two of the six had pleaded for Seth's life to be spared. A fellow named Rufus Day heard the shots, found the body and buried it. The sister was notified, the body exhumed and given a proper burial.

Seth had been at his sister's house for several days and knew nothing of the whereabouts of Baker and his brother.

Baker remained out of sight until September of 1868 when he and the gang came out looking for revenge.

Around 2:00 in the morning of October 7, 1868 Kirkman heard someone calling him out and then about a dozen shots were heard and Kirkman was found dead. In all the killers fired sixteen shots to one of Kirkman. After he fell dead someone shouted, "All is well." People who had heard the whole thing was so frightened that the body lay where it fell until the early morning.

On October 15, 1868, about fifty mounted men attacked the Whitaker place just at sunrise. They killed seven blacks, wounded two or three others, burned the cotton gin with fifty bales of cotton, burned the grist mill and rode off. It was never proven that this was Baker or his men, but he was suspected. The plantation was operated by freed blacks and the Baker organization could not tolerate successful freedmen operations.

Hiram F. Willis was the replacement for Kirkman. On October 24th, Willis, a planter named Porter Andrews and the sheriff of Little River County, Arkansas, Richard Standel were on their way to Andrews' farm to settle a labor dispute. Standel was on horseback and leading the little group. Willis and Andrews were in a buggy driven by an unidentified black man. When they came to a bend in the road, Standel disappeared for a moment. When the buggy came into view, Standel was standing by his horse, his hands in the air, and covered by an armed man. Six other men with drawn pistols approached the buggy. Willis whipped out his revolver and all three men in the buggy died. Standel took advantage of the distraction and ran into the woods. He returned to town, gathered a posse and went back to the scene. They found the three bodies; the horses, buggy and attackers were long gone. Baker was identified as the leader.

Baker only had a couple of months to live. He did know that, but he made the most of the little time left. One of his objectives was to avenge the death of Seth Rames. Early in the morning of late October he and two other men appeared at the home of James Salmon. Baker believed that Salmon had talked about him, assisted the army in their search and that he was connected to Seth's death. They plundered the home, all of the out buildings and took everything of value to them. After assuring Mrs. Salmon that they would return him unharmed, they shot him to death about a quarter of a mile from the home; Mrs. Salmon heard the shots and knew she was a widow. Salmon was the fellow who promised Seth's sister he would not be harmed.

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On October 30th, the group appeared at the home of Frank Scarborough, another suspected in Seth's death. They killed two freedmen, but Baker spared Scarborough's life over the objection of Lee Rames. Scarborough was not one of the men named in Seth's murder.

On December 10th Baker and Lee Rames had a quarrel to the extent that Lee tried to get Baker to shoot it out. They ended up going separate ways.

On January 6, 1869, there was a neighborhood hog killing at the farm of J. Y. Lamar about a quarter mile from the Foster home. No one expected Baker to show up. But they all agreed that if he returned to the area something had to be done about him. With him was one of his most loyal gang members, "Dummy" Kirby. "Uncle Billy" Foster was forced to get on the horse with Baker and they rode to Foster's home.

Thomas Orr was at the Foster home and seeing Baker approach he ran out the back. He was able to acquire the assistance of the people at the hog killing and a neighbor named Frank Davis and his son Bill.

Baker demanded whiskey and, according to his son years later, the whiskey was laced with strychnine. Kirby drank some of the whiskey and called for food. Foster brought him spare ribs that he had also liberally applied the poison. Foster then signaled Orr to bring his people into the house. At 11:00, the men shot and killed both the brigands.

How many people did Baker kill? As is always the case in the Old West, it is not possible to know with any accuracy. If all the stories were true the count would be forty-four blacks and thirty-two whites. The absolute provable killings are fifteen. The count has to be somewhere in between. There is no evidence that he ever killed a woman.

He was buried in an unmarked grave in the Oakwood Cemetery in Jefferson, Texas. It was 1969 before he finally received a marker



There are no known photographs of Cullen Baker

Source: *The Borderlands and Cullen Baker*, by Yvonne Vestal

***Cullen Montgomery Baker: Reconstruction Desperado*, by Barry A. Crouch and Donaly E. Brice**