

Frank Boardman “Pistol Pete” Eaton

Pistol Pete was one of the most colorful men in the history of the Old West. In his 97 years of living he would hold down many occupations. He had been an author, cowboy, scout, Indian fighter, trail rider and U.S. Marshal. He was most known for his ability to use his pistols and his ability to shoot the head off a snake with either hand. This was even more remarkable in light of the fact that he was born with a crossed left eye and had to shoot without aiming. Over his life Pete killed many men and all of them were lawbreakers in one form or another. His quickness and accuracy earned him the name of Pistol Pete at the ripe old age of fifteen. By the time Frank Eaton reached that age he had become the best gun handler the folks had ever seen.

Frank Boardman “Pistol Pete” Eaton was born in Hartford, Connecticut on October 26, 1860. Had he remained there we would probably never have heard of Pistol Pete. Frank’s father was a veteran of the Civil War and when the war was over he sold his business and went to Kansas. When he had obtained a farm and built a home he sent for his family. They settled in Osage County about thirty-eight miles east of Lawrence. The house was built on the site of the ruins of a hotel that William Quantrill and his men burned to the ground as they left the Lawrence Massacre.

This was the period shortly after the Civil War ended and this area had been the scene of many bloody battles between Kansas Jayhawks and Redlegs on the Union side and guerillas like William Quantrill and Bloody Bill Anderson on the Confederate side. Hatred on both sides still ran deep and the area was divided into two factions. The Northerners operated as a group known as the Vigilantes under the leadership of Mose Beaman, a good friend of Frank’s father. The Southerners were known as Regulators and led by Si Dodder.

Late one evening, while Frank and his father were still up, a horse was heard approaching the Eaton home. Thinking it was Mose Beaman and some of the boys, Frank ran to the door. A man called for Frank’s father, there was a burst of gunfire and Frank’s father was shot six times. Frank fell on his father’s body screaming. One of the men got off of his horse, pulled Frank off the body, hit him with his riding whip and emptied his gun into the body and yelled, “Take that, you Goddamn Yankee.”

Then they rode away, but Frank had seen their faces and recognized them.



Frank’s mother sent him to get their closest neighbor, George Saffles, for help. As they returned to the home Mose Beaman (photo at left) and his boys were just arriving. Beaman asked if Frank knew who did it and was told it was four members of the Campsey family and two Ferbers. Beaman sent his men to trail the murderers and before long they could see black smoke rising from Si Dodder’s place.

Although Frank was only eight-years-old Mose said to him, “My boy, may an old man’s curse rest upon you, if you do not try to avenge your father”. Frank assured him he would as soon as he was big enough and learned enough about guns.

The next day, Beaman gave Frank his first gun, an old Navy revolver with an eight-inch barrel. Beaman also gave him the tools and lead to mold bullets and taught Frank how to do make his own ammunition. When he was able to make his own bullets Beaman taught him to load the cap and ball so that the weapon could be fired. Then he told Frank he should shoot at least 10 to 20 rounds every day. He also told Frank that when he was older, he should never drink whiskey or gamble as it would ruin his eyesight. Frank promised he would do neither and he kept his word. Moses provided him with a gun belt, holster and all his ammunition and Frank practiced with both hands every day.

By the time Frank Eaton reached the ripe old age of 15 he had become the best gun handler the folks had ever seen. But he wanted to learn more and went to Fort Gibson to see what the 6th Cavalry soldiers could teach him. However, he ended up outshooting ever soldier on the post. Colonel Copinger, commander of the post, gave him a badge for his marksmanship and said, “I

am going to give you a new name. From now on you are Pistol Pete.” A full-blooded Cherokee councilman, Jim Starr, gave Frank a Colt .45 and his first two boxes of factory-made ammunition.

Frank learned that two of his father’s killers, Doc Ferber and Shannon Campsey, were living in a cabin on the Canadian River southwest of Webbers Fall. When Frank rode into the cabin clearing, Campsey grabbed a rifle. Frank called out, “Hello, Shan, don’t you know me? Campsey aimed and Frank shot him dead on the porch. Frank found Ferber working cattle in a nearby clearing and again proved his ability with a pistol and adding his second notch to his pistol. Campsey and Ferber were both cattle thieves and his action won him a job as a detective with the Cattlemen’s Association.

Frank had set off to find John Ferber who was selling the cattle that Campsey and Doc Ferber were stealing. Unfortunately, the night before he arrived Ferber was killed in a card game when he was caught pulling a jack from the bottom of the deck. Frank attended the funeral just to make sure John was dead. He did learn that Jim and Jonce Campsey did have a ranch in the Ozarks. Frank found them both at home and issued a challenge to a duel, killing them both just a few feet apart. That left Wyley Campsey as the only living murderer of his father.

In 1877, still only 17 years old Frank was sworn in as Deputy U.S. Marshal in the district of Judge Isaac C. Parker, known as the ‘hanging judge’. He was too young to be a marshal, but an exception was made. In his autobiography Frank said, “In those days the average length of a marshal’s life was about eighteen months. During the period I rode for Parker in a space of six to eight years, sixty-five officers of the Fort Smith Court were killed. Over half of them under thirty-five years of age.”

In 1885, Frank was serving as a scout for Captain Emmet Crawford in his fight with Geronimo. During these battles Frank came very near to being scalped. Captain Crawford was killed in an attack by irregular Mexican troops. The Mexicans claimed the attack was a case of mistaken identity, but Crawford was waving a white flag. Dutchy, one of the Apache scouts, pulled the mortally wounded Crawford to safety, and then killed the Mexican who had shot him. He also slew the Mexican commander. Emmet Crawford did not die immediately, but he never regained consciousness. Following this, Frank returned to the Indian territory and continued his service under Judge Parker.

Frank learned that Wyley Campsey was a bartender in Albuquerque, New Mexico. When he reached Albuquerque he began searching the bars for Campsey. He met Pat Garrett who took him to the saloon where Campsey was working. Garrett warned Frank that Campsey was a mean man, good with a gun and always had two fast gun bodyguards protecting him. Frank related what happened when he entered the saloon in his own words:

“I went to the livery barn, saddled my pony and paid the bill. Then I mounted and rode down the street to the saloon where I had seen Wyley Campsey. I ground-tied old Bowlegs a little to one side of the door so that if any stray shots came through the door they would not hit him. Working my guns to make sure they were loose in the holsters, I walked through the crowd and stopped at the bar. “What do you want, kid?” asked Wyley as I stood in front of him. “I just want you, Wyley.” We were about four feet apart with nothing but the bar between us. Wyley looked at his two guards. They showed a lack of war wisdom for they came to him instead of staying where they were. That move put all of them in a bunch right under my eyes and close to me. “Want me? What do you mean?” asked Wyley, flanked by his two gunmen. “Don’t you remember me, Wyley?” “I never saw you before!” “Oh yes, you have! It was the night you killed my father! I am Frank Eaton, remember? Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!” All three of them went for their guns. Wyley got his to the top of the bar but went down with two forty-fives through his heart. The guards were lightning on the draw. One of them went down without firing a shot but the other one got me in the leg and again in the left arm, knocking one of my guns out of my hand, before he went down. There was a wild stampede among the bystanders when the shooting started, but it was finished before any of them got out the door. Looking over the bar to be sure there was no need for further action I started for the door and ran right into Pat Garrett. He had been standing in the door

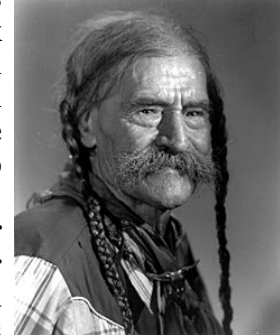
looking in. "How bad are you hit, son?" he asked. "Not so bad but what I can ride if you will help me onto my horse."

Frank recovered and returned to the Indian Territory and on October 6, 1889, he purchased a home west of Perkins. On August 20, 1890, he married Orpha Pearl Miller and they had two daughters. He was left a widower with two small children when Orpha died on April 5, 1902.

Less than a year later he married Anna Rosetta Sillix on August 20, 1890. They had eight children and the oldest, a daughter, was named Orpha. The last, a boy was named Frank Jr. During the '20s, the family moved into Perkins and Frank opened a blacksmith shop. One local boy, Brad Sasser, would recall watching in fascination as Frank would pick-up red-hot pieces of metal with his toes. One of his daughters would explain the Frank could do it because frostbite had left him with no feeling in his feet.



Frank always wore his cowboy hat, vest, blue jeans or frontier pants. Many times he would be bare footed rather than in his boots. His large mustache and long braided hair were an ever-present trademark. Asked about his long hair, Eaton replied, "If the girls are going to cut theirs off, I'll let mine grow." Youngsters loved to go to his house on Saturdays to listen to his yarns about the old days and to witness his lightening quick draw. Eaton always shot from the hip.



In 1923, students at Oklahoma A & M College, now Oklahoma State University, asked Eaton to pose as the school's mascot after seeing him in an Armistice Day parade. Eaton agreed and became the "original cowboy" and living symbol of Oklahoma State University until his death. His likeness was also adopted as the mascot of the University of Wyoming and New Mexico State University.

From 1950 to 1956 Eaton wrote a weekly column for The Perkins Journal titled "Truthful Pete Says" and later "Pistol Pete Says." The stories consisted of his philosophy of life, humorous incidents, and recollections of frontier days. Eaton often told of his experiences as a member of The Journal staff setting type by hand and cranking the old hand press.



In 1952, with the help of Eva Gillhouse, Eaton wrote his autobiography, Pistol Pete, Veteran of the Old West, published by Little, Brown & Company. The Chicago Tribune called the book "an exciting genuine bit of Americana." Eaton made several television appearances including the Danny Williams, Tom Paxton, and Prissy Thomas shows.

While talking to one of Dr. B. B. Chapman's history classes at Oklahoma A & M in 1955, Eaton accidentally fired his gun in the Student Union Varsity Room while demonstrating his fast draw. Asked why he would carry a loaded gun, Frank replied, "By George. I'd rather have a pocketful of rocks than an unloaded gun." Today a plaque marks the location where the bullet hit the wall in the Student Union basement.

One of Eaton's last public appearances was in the fall of 1957, riding shotgun on an old Butterfield stagecoach during the half-time festivities at OSU homecoming. That winter he fell on an icy sidewalk breaking his pelvis. Eaton made a remarkable recovery in only a few weeks, able to resume his daily trips to the post office for the many letters he received from all over the world. He prided himself on never failing to answer a letter. Frank Eaton died in his sleep at home on Tuesday morning, April 8, 1958, at the age of 97.

Eaton's funeral was held in the Perkins Community Building on Friday, April 11, at 2:00 p.m. Nearly 1,000 persons attended including Rolla Goodnight of Guthrie, Eaton's closest friend; and Billy McGinty of Ripley, Teddy Roosevelt's orderly in the Rough Riders. Eaton's widow, Anna Rose, was bedfast and could not attend the rites. Rev. A. G. McCowan, a longtime friend of Eaton's, officiated the services and said, "He had a tough exterior, but he was kind and tender hearted. Children loved him. He could quote Shakespeare, Plato, and Aristotle. He knew poetry." Eaton

himself had written, "I know St. Peter has me charged up pretty heavy, but unlike a mortal judge, He knows the innermost motive for every deed committed, whether good or evil, and I think He will not be too hard on a poor old cowboy who did his best as he saw it." Eaton was buried in the Perkins Cemetery wearing a brown suit rather than his regular western attire, his Cherokee Strip cowpuncher ribbon and badge pinned to his chest, but without the six-shooter that had earned him his name. At the cemetery, Cecil Hiatt of Brahman strummed a guitar and sang a song about "Cowboy's Heaven."



After Eaton's death, his revolver with 11 notches, holster, hat, boots, pocket watch, fiddle, and other effects were given to Jimmy Razook, a Wichita, Kansas, businessman by Eaton's daughter, Mae, in return for a headstone for Eaton's grave. In 1965, Razook's nephew, Pat Razook, convinced his uncle to loan the items to OSU. The items were displayed in a glass case on the third floor of the Student Union, where they were soon stolen. The items were never recovered. Eaton's 1892 Model Winchester rifle wound up in a Tulsa pawn shop in 1969. The rifle was purchased from a Michigan gun dealer by David Sasser in 1987 and is on display at the Eaton Home.

On March 15, 1997, the National Cowboy Hall of Fame honored Eaton posthumously by presenting him the prestigious Director's Award. Eaton's daughter, Elizabeth Wise, and Oklahoma State University president, Dr. James Halligan, accepted the award for Eaton.

In 1998, *Campfire Stories: Remembrances of a Cowboy Legend* was published by the Eaton family. The book was written by Eaton in 1957 and was serialized in *The Perkins Journal* by his daughter, Elizabeth.

References: *Pistol Pete, Veteran Of The Old West* by Frank "Pistol Pete" Eaton
The Legends of America
Eatonhome.org
Wikipedia