Gunfighters

Gunfighters (also known as gunslingers, shootists, pistoleers, or simply gunmen) are a fixture of literary and cinematic depictions of the post-Civil War American West. The term is still applied to individuals who were (or are) celebrated for their proficiency with handguns and their willingness to use them in deadly confrontations.

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Because fights between men armed with "six-shooters" were allegedly common in the Trans-Mississippi West, the gunfighter is often viewed as the prototypical westerner. However, not all westerners carried (or even owned) revolvers, and more people were shot down in the back alleys of New York and Chicago than were ever murdered in Kansas cow towns. The term is therefore best applied more narrowly to those westerners who employed handguns in a regular, professional capacity. This would exclude mere hotheads armed with pistols but would include lawmen, professional criminals, and quasi-legal figures such as the Pinkertons, private-army "regulators", and bounty hunters.

The word quasi-legal suggests an important proviso. During the gunfighter's alleged heyday (roughly the three decades following the American Civil War, meaning 1866-1895), social order on the frontier was shaky at best. With centers of legal authority widely dispersed, a large vagrant population, and suspected crimes often punished by impromptu hangings, there was some truth to the literary image of the Wild West. The cattle culture often precipitated violence, both on the range, where rustlers battled regulators, and at the railheads, where inebriated cowboys sometimes "shot up the town." Alongside the cattlemen were sheep ranchers, farmers, miners, railroaders, union organizers, scabs, freed slaves, and immigrants.

Into this milieu, a gunman's ability to keep order was often more respected than legal niceties. Hence, some of the most famous gunfighters of western legend were ambiguous characters such as the hired gun William (Billy the Kid) Bonney (1859-1881) and the gambling "civilizer" James Butler (Wild Bill) Hickock (1837-1876). The intermediary status of such historical characters is reflected in the movies' fascination with the "good bad man"—a central figure since the days of actor William S. Hart (1872-1946).

Hickock was the first western gunfighter to attain legendary status, and his career illustrates the importance of myth-making machinery. Born James Butler Hickock in 1837, he acquired the nickname "Wild Bill" in the 1860s, after he allegedly made a lynch mob back down. After working as a Union Army scout, a wagon master, and a gambler, he rose to national prominence in 1867 on the strength of a *Harper's Magazine* story that depicted him as a superhuman "Scout of the Plains." Subsequent dime novel treatments fleshed out the formula, highlighting the shooting of this "Prince of Pistoleers." Although Hickok served only two years as a frontier lawman, popular media, from dime novels to stage plays, made him a national icon, the swiftest and deadliest practitioner of his trade. Anecdotes about Hickok's "almost hypnotic" marksmanship are firmly in the frontier "roarer" tradition (Rosa, 1969, 61-76). Later, thanks to Gary Cooper's (1901-1961) portrayal in the *The Plainsman* (Paramount, 1937) Hickock acquired a mantle that he never wore in life, that of a defender of American civilization against gunrunning and savagery.

Because writers romanticized gunmen, the best known were not necessarily the deadliest. Instead, they were men who caught the fancy of novelists and moviemakers. Bill O'Neal, who "rated" over 250 gunfighters based on the number of verified killings and the number of fights, ranked among the deadliest gunmen the celebrities Hickok, Billy the Kid, John Wesley Hardin (1853-1895), King Fisher (1854-1884), and Ben Thompson (1843-1884). But the most lethal of all shootists, "Deacon" Jim Miller (1866-1909), is obscure to the general public, while the famous trio of Wyatt Earp (1848-1929), John "Doc" Holliday (1851-1887), and William "Bat" Masterson (1853-1921) long enjoyed reputations that, O'Neal notes, "greatly exceeded their accomplishments" (1979, 5). Earp's fame was made by *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, a fictionalized 1931 biography by Stuart Lake (1889-1964) that provided the basis for John Ford's film *My Darling Clementine* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1946). Holliday's fame soared largely on Earp's coattails, and Masterson, once he retired his guns, became his own best publicist. In his later career as a journalist, he wrote a series of sketches of "famous gunfighters" for *Human Life* magazine.

In addition to skewing individual reputations, the popular press and movies contributed heavily to the image of the gunfighter as a heroic loner who employs his skills in the defense of justice. One famous (fictional) example, Shane, comes to the aid of embattled ranchers "out of the heart of the great glowing West" and, after killing his evil counterpart, disappears, like Cain, "alone and unfollowed … and no one knows where" (Shaefer, 1983, 115). A similar mythic isolation defines other film gunfighters, including the heroes of *The Gunfighter* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1950), *Warlock* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1959), *The Magnificent Seven* (United Artists, 1960), and *The Shootist* (Paramount, 1976).

Although most actual gunfighters had more or less stable occupations—many in strike-breaking, law enforcement, or gambling—the Hollywood version is a more paradoxical figure, protecting helpless citizens with a lethal skill whose very possession brands him as a pariah. In one standard plotline, the gunfighter is hired as a town tamer, and then shunned by his respectable employers for doing his job. In another, the "good" gunslinger fights an evil twin who is the objectification of his own dark urges; this doubling is humorously parodied in *Cat Ballou* (Columbia, 1965), where Lee Marvin (1924-1987) plays both villain and hero.

The mechanics of the gunfighter's skill, including variable rules for carrying, drawing, and firing a gun, have been much debated, especially in response to moviemakers' penchant for standardization. Among actual westerners, some guns were worn with the butt end facing backward, some with the butt end facing forward to facilitate a reverse draw, others in shoulder holsters, and yet others tucked into waistbands or pockets. Yet virtually all Hollywood gunfighters wear side holsters with the butt ends of their guns facing backward. This has become the standard version of "fast draw" dress.

The fast draw itself (the nineteenth-century term was "quick draw") defines the normative gunfight, which the movies give the etiquette of a formal duel. In the typical movie showdown, the hero, often forced to fight despite the apprehensions of his wife or sweetheart, faces down the villain in a western street. The villain draws his gun first, and when he does, the hero draws and kills him in a "fair fight"—sometimes by "fanning" the pistol's hammer for even greater speed. With the exception of the fanning trickery, all of the dramatic motifs of this convention were established in the 1902 novel *The Virginian*, by Owen Wister (1860- 1938). This book was the basis for Hollywood films in 1914, 1923, 1929, and 1946, an NBC television series that ran from 1962-1971, and a made-for TV movie in 2000.

As for the accuracy of this tableau, Texas gunman King Fisher is reputed to have said, "Fair play is a jewel, but I don't care for jewelry" (quoted in Horan, 1976, 4). Many of his compatriots seem to have agreed. Sheriff Pat Garrett (1850-1908) shot Billy the Kid from the protection of a darkened room. Fisher died in a vaudeville theater scuffle. The "unerring" Hickok accidentally killed his own deputy. And according to one version, the canonical gunfight at the OK Corral in 1881 started when Morgan Earp (1851-1882), Wyatt's brother, ignored Billy Clanton's (1862-1881) protestation "I don't want to fight" and shot the young rustler dead at point-blank range (O'Neal, 1979).

Alert to such unromantic facts, filmmakers of the 1960s turned to more realistic treatment. Prominent examples include John Ford's (1894-1973) *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Paramount, 1962) and the "spaghetti Westerns" of director Sergio Leone (1929-1889). By 1992, *Unforgiven*, made by Leone's protégé Clint Eastwood (1930-), made a point of debunking this heroic tradition. Yet, in popular memory, the fair fight remains de rigueur.

With regard to the fast draw, too, convention rules: movies ritualize the instant of "getting the drop" on the bad guy. Wyatt Earp, recalling the value of mental deliberation, said he never knew "a really proficient gun-fighter who had anything but contempt for the gun-fanner, or the man who literally shot from the hip…. [He] stood small chance to live against a man who… took his time and pulled the trigger once" (Lake, 1931, 39). Ben Thompson, the famous city marshal of Austin, Texas, agreed. "I always make it a rule to let the other fellow fire first," he said. "I know that he is pretty certain, in his hurry, to miss. I never do" (quoted in Horan, 1976, 142). Such deliberation is not emphasized by fictional gunmen. A rare exception is the Anthony Mann (1906-1967) film *The Tin Star* (Paramount, 1957), in which veteran gunfighter Morgan Hickman (Henry Fonda, 1905-1982) counsels the novice sheriff (Anthony Perkins, 1932-1992), "Draw fast but don't snap shoot. Take that split second."

Mythology also surrounds the idea that gunfighters kept tallies of their victims by carving notches in the handles of their guns—one notch for each man killed. Although the practice was not unknown, it was hardly routine. Outlaw Emmett Dalton (1871-1937) recalled that braggarts and "fake bad men" sometimes notched their guns, but added that the custom's alleged ubiquity was "a fiction writer's elaboration." Wyatt Earp reflected that no man "who amounted to anything" ever observed it (Hendricks, 1950, 45).

Gunfighters or their followers were not oblivious to the numbers. Indeed, a gunman's reputation was fatefully linked to the number of men he was thought to have slain, and tallies of a dozen or more were not uncommon. Billy the Kid's reputation was linked to the belief that he had killed twenty-one men—one for each year of his life—and similar beliefs swelled the legends of other gunmen. Although even Hardin, the most lethal of the celebrated bad men, probably had no more than eleven victims (O'Neal, 1979, 5), popular culture has enshrined western gunmen as profligate "man-killers" (Masterson, 1957, 25). The aging Jimmy Ringo in Henry King's (1886-1982) *The Gunfighter* (1950) kills an even dozen before he himself is gunned down, while in the Louis L'Amour (1908-1988) novel *Heller with a Gun*, King Mabry is credited with fifteen—before he corrects the record by admitting to just eleven (1992, 19).

Mabry's tally, it should be noted, is "not counting Indians." L'Amour here alludes to a racial peculiarity that gunfighter legends often overlook. In the animosities evoked by the Mexican War (1846-1848), the American Civil War (1861-1865), Reconstruction (1866-1867), and Indian removal (1830-1890), the phrases "not counting Indians," "not counting Negroes," and "not counting Mexicans" were common grotesque refrains in western tales. To the

"rip-roarin', hell-raisin', fire-spittin' American bad man of probable Anglo-Saxon birth," nonwhites didn't count because "everybody shot them" (Hendricks, 1950, 46, 92).

This racist disdain made the gunfighter less an anomaly than a paralegal extension of mainstream mores, and when mainstream mores began to change, "socially conscious" western films reflected the shift. "Bad" gunmen, like the villain of *The Tin Star*, demanded the customary immunity for shooting Indians, while "good" gunmen, like the mercenary cavaliers of John Sturges's (1910-1992) *The Magnificent Seven*, could now defend a black man's right to a proper burial and admit a Mexican hothead as a member of their band.

Of all the legends built around the western gunfighter, none has been more resonant than the knight errant image, which sees the gunman as "a two-gun Galahad whose pistols are always at the service of those in trouble" (Rosa, 1969, 4). The CBS television series *Have Gun, Will Travel* (1957-1963) featured a professional gunman called Paladin, and defense of the weak is a common attribute of the movies' "good bad man." Chivalry also has been applied to unlikely historical prototypes. Billy the Kid became a southwestern Robin Hood in Walter Noble Burns's (1908-1964) *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926), a book that inspired countless "good Billy" westerns; a similar fate befell Frank (1843-1915) and Jesse James (1847-1882). In Bob Dylan's (1941-) song "The Ballad of John Wesley Harding" (Columbia Records, 1967), even Wes Hardin, who claimed his first victim at the age of fifteen, became "a friend to the poor" who was "never known to hurt an honest man." Ever since *The Virginian*, fictional gunmen have been similarly characterized, lending popularity to the notion that, next to quickness, the gunfighter's most valued quality was a sense of honor.

Questions of honor invite comparisons not only to European knights but also to Asian martial artists, and the parallel is not lost on students of the Western. It animates Terence Young's film *Red Sun* (Evergreen Entertainment, 1971), where a gunfighter comes to appreciate the importance of honor by watching a samurai bodyguard observe the code of bushido. The television series *Kung Fu* (ABC, 1972-1975) pitted a wandering Shaolin monk against Wild West bad men, and one of the most successful of gunfighter vehicles, *The Magnificent Seven*, was a sagebrush remake of Kurosawa Akira's (1910-1988) *Seven Samurai* (Toho, 1954).

The differences between East and West are, to be sure, profound. Despite jocular references to "triggernometry" and to "leather slapping as a fine art" (Cunningham, 1947), gun fighting was too chaotic and personal a practice ever to be considered a martial system. Gunfighters formed no schools, passed on no fighting "styles," and respected no lineages or training hierarchies. Nor, beyond the quick draw and a few "eye-training, finger flexing exercises" like the finger roll (Cunningham, 1947, 424), did they perfect marksmanship; even the few print and film references to shooting lessons suggest only perfunctory admonitions: Shane's "Your holster's too low" (Schaefer, 1983, 53) and Morgan Hickman's "Take that split second." In addition, gunfighter culture was, to borrow Ruth Benedict's (1887-1948) famous distinction, as Dionysian as samurai culture was Apollonian. A high percentage of gunmen were gamblers, highwaymen, saloonkeepers, rowdies, or drifters.

Nonetheless, most appear to have observed a certain wild decorum, memorialized in the often cited Code of the West: Play fair, stand by your word, and don't run. Again the locus classicus is found in Wister's *The Virginian*, when the hero, explaining to his fiancée why he must face the villain, says that a man who refuses to defend his name is "a poor sort of jay" (Wister, 1956, 343). The gunman's bravery, Bat Masterson (1957, 54) suggested, was made up largely of "self-respect, egotism, and an apprehension of the opinion of others." Critic Robert Warshow (1974, 153) put it pointedly when he observed that the westerner in general (and the

gunfighter in particular) defends at bottom "the purity of his own image—in fact his honor" (1974, 153). The dying gunfighter of Don Siegel's (1912-1991) elegiac *The Shootist*, John Wayne's (1907-1979) last film, puts it eloquently: "I won't be wronged, I won't be insulted, and I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to other people, and I require the same from them."

The gunfighter dramatizes the contradiction of a society that hires professional killers to ensure tranquility, and in which weapons called Peacemakers are touted as instruments of progress. The gunfighter resolves this contradiction with a personal style that is as much about deportment as it is about courage. Warshow (1974, 153) again gets to the heart of the matter. He asks us to observe a child playing with toy guns: "What interests him is not … the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero." In this, the mythic gunfighter, no less than the samurai, pays an ironic allegiance not only to fairness, but also to a public, theatrical, behavior that popular culture enshrines as a mythical dramatization of the paradox of violence.

-- Tad Tuleja

See also Belief Systems: European Chivalry; Film and the Asian Martial Arts; Invented Traditions; Plains Indians Warrior Societies; and Television and the Martial Arts.

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