

Tombstone by Tombstone

Bass Reeves

Some historians claim that Bass Reeves was one of the first black deputy US Marshals west of the Mississippi, most claim he was THE first. He was also one of the most feared and respected US marshals to ever serve in the west. During his thirty-two years of service under seven different US marshals he arrested over 3,000 men. That would be almost 100 per year or one every three days. These would be some of the most dangerous men and women of the southwest like murderers, bootleggers selling whiskey to Indians, thieves and rustlers. His reputation for persistence, fearlessness, skill with pistol and rifle and his ability to outsmart outlaws struck fear in the hearts of lawbreakers. In 1885 he had a warrant for the outlaw queen Belle Starr. She allegedly turned herself in when she heard that Reeves was after her.

During his terms as a lawman he killed at least fourteen men and never shed his own blood in a fight. He had lots of real close calls. Once his belt was shot in two, a button on his coat was shot off and the bridle in his hand was shot in two by a bullet.

As a young slave born in Crawford County, Arkansas, in June of 1838, he was given the name Bass after his grandfather and would later take the last name of the family slave master, William Steele Reeves. His owner moved the family to Grayson County, Texas, in 1846. Steele's son George was commissioned a colonel in the Confederate States Army at the outset of the Civil War and took Bass with him. At the first opportunity Bass became a fugitive slave and headed for the Indian Territory. He went to live among the Creek and Seminole Indians where he learned their customs and languages.

In 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation, he procured a homestead in Van Buren, Crawford County, Arkansas, and became the first black settler there. After he established his farm he married Nellie Jennie (or Jinney) from Texas. He built an eight-room house with his own hands and raised five boys and five girls.



In 1875, Isaac C. Parker was sworn in as the federal judge for the Western District of Arkansas with jurisdiction over all of the Indian Territory. In the same year he swore in James Fagan as U.S. marshal along with orders to hire 200 deputies. Fagan, knowing of Reeves' familiarity with the Indian Territory and his ability to speak the Indian Language, made him one of his early hires. Reeves now thirty-eight-years-old, 6 feet 2 inches tall, weighing 180 pounds and riding a big horse made an imposing figure. Life was not easy for a deputy U.S. marshal. Eighty-six of the 200 paid with their lives. The U.S. marshal was paid \$90 per month and the deputies drew no salary. They were paid six cents for every mile they traveled whether delivering court papers or tracking killers. They were paid \$2.00 for each summons when they delivered the prisoner. They were also allowed to keep any territorial or state reward offered for a prisoner. They could not receive federal awards as they were employees of the U.S. Government. Judge Parker did not want his deputies to be judge, jury and hangman, so if they brought in a dead prisoner, they were required to pay for the

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funeral. Casket, headstone and plot could put a real dent in a deputy's income at about \$60 each.

Reeves would be given a stack of warrants for wanted outlaws and would head into the Indian Territories with a chuck wagon, a cook, prisoner wagon, driver, extra mules and horses and a posse, usually one other man. He might be gone for several months and return with a dozen or more prisoners chained to the wagon. It was especially hard for Reeves and many of the other deputies who were illiterate. When given his bunch of warrants, Reeves would find someone to read them to him. He would study them carefully and when he found a wanted outlaw he would present him with the warrant. In his more than 3,000 arrests he was never known to give the wrong warrant to a person.

Reeves related that the closest call he ever had was in 1884 when he was ambushed by the three Brunter (possibly Bruner) brothers. They had their guns on him and made him dismount. He showed them a warrant he had for their arrest. The brothers dropped their guard for just a moment to look down at the warrant. Reeves drew and killed one brother and grabbed the gun of another. He shot and killed the other brother dead while still holding on to the gun of the third brother who fired the gun three times with Reeves still holding the gun away from him. He finally stuck him over the head with his own gun so hard that he killed him also.

In April 1887, Reeves himself was arrested for murder. While returning to Ft. Smith with a load of prisoners he got into an argument with his cook, William Leach. The details are a little fuzzy, but it was probably caused by the cook throwing hot oil on Reeves little dog. Later that evening the cook was shot through the throat and died before medical help could arrive. Reeves hired the best attorneys and his defense was that a cartridge got lodged in his rifle and while trying to extract it, the gun accidentally fired and the bullet struck the cook. The jury found that Reeves was not guilty.

After his trial for the murder Reeves was reinstated as a deputy and was transferred to Paris, Texas. Tom Story led a notorious band of horse thieves that was headquartered on the banks of the Red River. Along with Story, the gang had other members that were experts in stealing and disposing of horses, including "Peg Leg" Jim, Kinch West (a former Quantrill raider) and "Long" Henry. From 1884 until 1889 the gang stole horses in the Indian Territory and sold them in Texas. In 1889 they reversed the operation and stole a herd of horses and mules from George Delaney, a Texas rancher, and drove them to the Indian Territory. Delaney did his own investigation and found it was Story who stole the herd and that he would soon be returning to Texas. A warrant was issued for Tom Story at the Paris marshal's office and given to Reeves. Delaney agreed to be Reeves' posse and they waited for Story at the Delaware Bend Crossing of the Red River. When Story crossed the river, Reeves stepped out of the brush and told Story he had a warrant for his arrest and "right then and there Tom Story committed suicide." He thought he had an even chance to beat Reeves whose pistol was still in his holster. Story's gun hadn't cleared leather when Reeves fired and Story was dead when he hit the ground. Reeves and Delaney buried Story where he died, and the Story gang quickly disappeared in history.

In 1890, Reeves arrested the notorious Seminole outlaw Greenleaf who had been on the run for eighteen years and had murdered seven people. In the same year he went after the famed Cherokee outlaw Ned Christie. He and his posse burned Christie's cabin, but the outlaw evaded capture. On January 29, 1891, it was reported in the *Muskogee Phoenix* and several other southwest newspapers that Bass Reeves had been killed by Ned Christie. It was all a mistake and in February all the papers printed a retraction.

In 1896, Reeves' first wife died in Ft. Smith and in 1900, he married Winnie Sumter.

In 1902, tragedy struck in the Reeves family. Bass' son Ben had married a beautiful black girl. Problems developed in the marriage and Ben had caught his wife with another man. They managed to reconcile their problems and things went well until one day Ben came home unexpectedly and found her again with another man. Ben went into a hysterical rage. The man was badly beaten and bloodied but escaped unharmed otherwise. His wife was not so lucky and she was dead. Ben ran into the wilds of the Indian Territory.

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A warrant was issued for Ben's arrest and it lay on the marshal's desk for a few days because no deputy wanted to go after the son of one of the most respected lawmen. Bass solved the problem himself by picking up the warrant and going after his own son. It took two weeks for Bass to return with Ben. At the trial Ben did no whining or pleading to influence the court. Nor did he reveal the real reasons behind his wife's death. The fact that he had run away condemned him and he was sentenced to the Federal Prison at Leavenworth. He determined to become a model citizen and never received a single demerit. Important people of his hometown, Muskogee, Oklahoma, learned of the circumstances in the death and petitioned for his release. The petition and perfect record won him an early release. He returned to Muskogee, led an exemplary life and became one of the town's most popular barbers.

Not all of Reeves arrests were of violent outlaws or bootleggers. In August of 1907, he arrested Wilson Hobson, a black Baptist preacher who was placed on a \$500 bond for selling liquor. Hobson was selling liquor to his membership and they were willing to buy it as long as the money went to pay off the church debt. Reeves' arrest of Hobson came three years after the preacher had baptized him.

When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, Reeves duties as a US deputy marshal came to an end. He was 68 years old by then, but not ready to hang up his guns for good. He joined the Muskogee, Oklahoma, police department and served for two years with very little action. He had to retire in 1909 when he became ill and was diagnosed with Bright's disease. He was buried in the Agency Cemetery in Muskogee and his grave seems to be unmarked. On May 26, 2012, a twenty-five foot statue of Bass Reeves was dedicated at the Ross Pendergraft Park in Fort Smith, Arkansas.



Photo Courtesy of Jerry Minnis

Sources: *Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves*, by Art T. Burton; On the Internet: *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma Culture and History*; *Handbook of Texas*