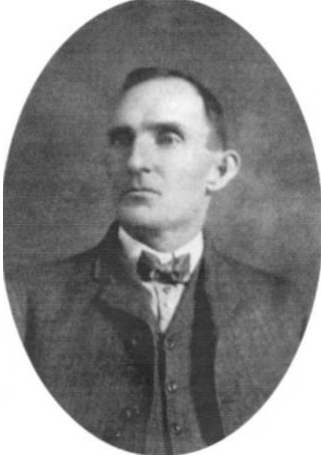


James “Jim” Brown Miller

Who was the most vicious killer of the Old West? Was it John Wesley Hardin? Cullen Baker? Bill Longley? I suppose vicious killers, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. One man that gets many votes for that title is James Brown Miller. The only difference between Miller and many of the others is that the average white or black man was in no danger from Miller unless someone had hired him to kill. Most, but not quite all, of his killings were contracts, where the other killers were indiscriminate in their murders.



Miller was born to Jacob and Cynthia (Basham) Miller on October 25, 1861, in Van Buren, Crawford County, Arkansas. Miller’s father was sixty-one years-old and his wife was thirty-nine. Their first child was born in Texas in 1842 and the next seven were all born in Arkansas. James (**photo at left**) was the eighth child and last son born. When James was about one-year-old the family moved to Texas and in 1864 the last child, Georgia, was born. Between 1864 and the census of 1880, Jacob Miller died leaving Cynthia at home with three children.



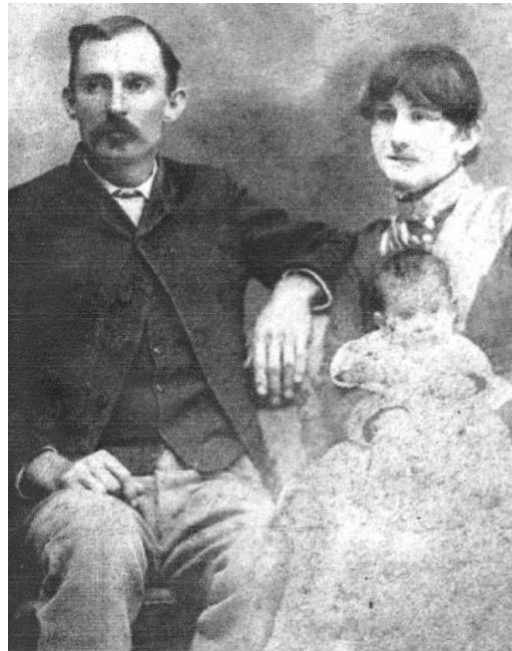
Georgia married John Thomas Coop who was a farmer from Tennessee and twice her age. Perhaps the marriage was troubled by marital discord and Jim Miller thought he could solve the problem for his sister. On the night of July 30, 1884, Coop (**grave photo at left**) expired from a shotgun blast as he slept on the gallery of their home. Miller was suspected of the murder and convicted. His life sentence was overturned on an appeal and he was never tried again. He would be convicted of other murders but his time in prisons was very short. He mastered the art of beating the judicial system. The murder of his brother-in-law is believed to be the first of many killings for Miller. Some writers would have you believe that when he was eight years old he killed his grandparents. Probably not.

Miller had no known aliases, although around Fort Worth some people called him by the nickname “Kid Miller.” Modern writers had assigned such nicknames as ‘Killin’ Jim’, ‘Killer Miller’ and ‘Deacon Jim.’ His appearance always belied his reputation and his occupation. He was an immaculate dresser, only drank on rare occasions, attended church regularly in his early years and was a good husband and father. He associated with both criminals and good men of the community, who often were excellent character witnesses every time he went to court.

In March of 1887, Ballinger, Texas Deputy Sheriff Joe Townsend killed Emanuel “Mannen” Clements, who would have become Miller’s father-in-law. Clements drew a

pistol on the sheriff who had no choice but to defend himself. Seven months later Townsend was the recipient of a shotgun blast from an unknown concealed person. It was never proven that Miller did it, but he and Clements were close and in the terms of today a shotgun blast from ambush was surely Miller's "modus operandi." Townsend survived the blast but had to have his right arm amputated.

Shortly after the Townsend killing, Miller married the seventeen-year-old daughter of Mannen Clements, Sarah Francis "Sallie" Clements. They would have four children and it appears that none of them inherited the evil of their father. Their first daughter, Carrie Brown was born in Alpine, Texas, and died in infancy. Claude C. was born in Pecos, Texas, on October 10, 1892, and lived a quiet life into old age. Edwin was born on March 6, 1895, also in Pecos. He was also known as Clement and he died on February 3, 1957. Mary Wesley was born in Eastland, Texas, on November 9, 1897. Mary and Claude both died on June 27, 1979. The deaths were a pure coincidence as the two were separated by 125 miles. The 1910 census shows that Miller's thirty-nine-year-old widow was married to a twenty-seven-year-old Texan named Thomas McHam, a saloon keeper, and she was still operating a rooming house with her three children and mother living with her. How long she waited to marry is unknown, how long the marriage lasted is unknown and what happened to the husband is unknown. It is known that in 1920 the census shows her as having married Roy J. Redwine and yet it lists her as head of household.



**James, Sallie and unknown child around 1900.
Photo from Wikipedia**

Being a bad guy did not keep Miller from becoming a law officer. In 1891 he served as a deputy to Reeves County Sheriff George Frazer until he killed an unidentified Mexican he claimed was "attempting to escape." Frazer fired him for misconduct and suspected murder of the Mexican who was aware of some of Miller's shady dealings. This set off the bad feelings between Miller and Frazer that would end in gunplay. In fact, in 1894 the two would have two gun battles. Both times Miller came out on the

wrong end and was wounded, but recovered. On September 14, 1896, Miller walked into a saloon in Toyah, Texas, where Frazer was playing cards. Miller raised his shotgun and put both barrels of buckshot into Frazer's head. One of the few killings that he did for personal reasons and that was not done from ambush. Despite the witnesses, Miller was acquitted because of conflicting testimony.



Thanks to Bob McCubbin for Frazer's photo and C. Fahey for the marker photo from the Forest Hill Cemetery in Fort Stockton , Texas,

In 1898 he was actually sworn in as a Special Ranger for the State of Texas. He must have completely forgotten about his conviction for the murder of his brother-in-law fourteen years earlier as he was required to sign a document swearing to temperate habits and never having been convicted of a crime.

Around 1900 Miller and his partner Lawrence Angel killed a man in Collingsworth County that Miller was likely paid to kill. The killing was done with a shotgun, Miller's preferred way of killing. Miller was arrested and Angel claimed he was the killer. Miller then became a witness and swore it was self-defense and he got away with it again. By 1900 Miller and his wife were living in Fort Worth and operating what must have been a very nice boarding house. The census taker reported thirty-one guests in the home and seven employees. This may be the time when Miller began to advertise his killer-for-hire business which had reported rates of \$50 to \$2000.

In 1902, in Ward County, Texas, he killed two men and wounded another using a Winchester. This time he claimed they were herding stolen cattle and fired at him as he approached. The wounded man managed to ride away.

Miller was guarding a herd of cattle in West Texas near the New Mexico border in 1903 when he caught two Mexicans butchering cattle. His two shots took effect and the Mexicans would slaughter no more cows.

In 1902 Miller would be paid \$500 to kill Lubbock, Texas lawyer James Jarrott. Jarrott had won several cases representing local farmers suing the large ranchers. The ranchers hired Miller and he caught Jarrott watering his buggy horses at a stock tank near his farm. He fired one shot into his chest from ambush and then another quick shot which knocked him down. Jarrott rose to his knees and Miller shot him through the neck and shoulder. It took the fourth shot to finally kill him. "He was the hardest damn man to kill I ever tackled," admired Miller.

The next known contract killing occurred in the Delaware Hotel in Fort Worth, Texas. Miller followed Frank Fore into the hotel lavatory and shot him. Fore may have taken as long as three days to die.

The next verified killing took place near Emet, Oklahoma, August 1, 1906. In 1903 US Deputy Marshal Ben Collins, an Indian, had shot and partially paralyzed Port Pruitt. The Pruitt family swore to get their revenge. On that Wednesday evening as Collins approached his home, a load of number 8 buckshot to his stomach knocked him from his saddle. He still managed to pull his revolver and fire four of his six rounds before another round of buckshot to his face took his life. Once again, Miller was indicted for murder but managed to get released.

On Leap Day, 1908, about four miles outside of Las Cruces, New Mexico, Pat Garrett and two companions, Wayne Brazel and Carl Adamson, stopped their buggy so that Garrett could relieve himself. An assassin sent a .45 slug into the back of his head and out just above the right eye. Garrett spun around and took another shot to the stomach and was dead immediately. The assassin took off to create an alibi. Who killed the man who killed Billy the Kid? A funny thing happened, Wayne Brazel confessed to doing it, but was acquitted. Where is the Miller connection? Miller's wife was the first cousin of Adamson's wife. That isn't enough to create suspicion, but Miller was certainly a prime suspect. Joseph K. Treat, a descendant of Adamson's wife, claims that before Adamson died he named Miller as the killer and that he had done the job he was hired to do. It was also thought that Brazel's confession was just a smoke screen to give Miller time to get away.

Miller committed his last murder in the area of Ada, Oklahoma, on February 27, 1909, again a hit job that is said to have earned him between \$1,700 and \$2,000. This time he killed a very popular ex-deputy US marshal named Allen Augustus "Gus" Bobbitt. Miller had been hired by a couple of ranch owners by the name of Jesse Jolly West and Joseph Cephus Allen. The two were longtime friends and sometime partners. Bobbitt, West and Allen were all in the cattle business and at one time had all been friends.

In 1894 Jesse West's wife Docia died in a house fire leaving four children motherless. Without any evidence, some suspected that Bobbitt was involved in the fire. West then married Nettie Venable and they had five children. A second tragedy struck the West family on Christmas Eve 1901 when Jesse and Docia's thirteen-year-old son Martin was shot by Cephus Bruner, a fourteen-year-old Seminole Negro-Indian. Martin

died two days later. Bruner was sentenced to hang, but the sentence was then changed to 99 years. Then on April 1, 1906, he was pardoned due to bad health. He died in 1907 from consumption.

West may have accused Bobbitt of stealing some of his cattle. Bobbitt may have favored Bruner in the shooting. For whatever reason, the bad feelings were strong and would get worse. West and Allen, besides owning their own ranches were partners in a saloon known as the Corners. By some means, in 1903 when Bobbitt was no longer marshal he managed to apply enough pressure to West and Allen to force them to move over into the Texas Panhandle. They were very successful in their new adjoining ranches, even to the point of bragging that they were worth \$150,000. In 1908 the two started talking about moving back to Ada. They just couldn't seem to get over Bobbitt and felt they were losing face over the rumors around Ada about being run out by Bobbitt over crooked deals. West and Allen knew Miller, maybe by reputation only, and he could solve the Bobbitt problem and clear their way to return.

The logistics of how the whole thing was set up is not known. But West was able to make the contract with Miller. Miller brought in a fourth man. Berry Banks Burrell had been involved with Miller in the past on his land swindles and murder-for-hire business. Burrell was now living in the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) and his job was to go to Ada, watch Bobbitt and procure any needed supplies or equipment. How they all got together and laid out the plan is not known, but it all came together and would eventually involve more people with reduced responsibilities and culpabilities. A young fellow by the name of Oscar Peeler was hired to find a house that Miller could rent. It was claimed that Miller and Peeler's widowed mother were living together and that Miller claimed to be her brother. John A. Williamson made a deal to rent Miller a horse.

With all the plans in place it was decided that February 27, 1909, would be the terminus of Gus Bobbitt. On that day Bobbitt and Robert Ferguson, a neighboring farmer and friend, were in town with two wagons to buy feed for Bobbitt's livestock. On the way back to Bobbitt's ranch they met a well-dressed man on horseback. The man was wearing a suit, tie and hat and was riding a shabby looking brown mare farm horse. He was also careful to keep his face hidden. Ferguson said later that he was holding a handkerchief up to his face and wiping his eye with it. The man was Miller.

After meeting the wagons, Miller turned off the road and headed across country to get ahead of them at a perfect ambush spot he had chosen. To reach the ambush site he had to cut several fences. At the spot he removed his double-barreled shotgun from behind the saddle and waited. It was past sundown when Bobbitt's wagon came into view and Miller fired both barrels into his side. The pellets found their mark in Bobbitt's leg and above the hip, knocking him from the wagon and causing his team to run away.

Miller pulled his pistol and rode over to check the victim and found him still alive. For some unknown reason Miller did not finish the job. Instead, he rode off, threw his shotgun into a nearby stream and allowed Ferguson and Bobbitt to provide a good description of himself and his horse. Ferguson unhitched his team and rode one of them to the ranch to inform Bobbitt's wife, Tennessee, and call for the law and for medical help. Tennessee accompanied Ferguson back to the scene where she comforted her husband as best she could. He told her of the description and his belief that he was hired by old enemies. He died at the scene two hours later. West and Allen would have been the first suspects regardless.

Miller had made a few mistakes that professional killers should never make and he had never made before. It is not unusual for a hired killer to leave someone alive that he/she is not paid to kill. In cutting the fences he left the wire cutters behind. They were identified as a pair that had just been purchased by Burrell. The brown mare that Miller rode was tracked to Miller's nephew, John Williamson. Williamson at first refused to cooperate, but when after being threatened with a death penalty he confessed and said that upon returning the horse Miller had admitted killing Bobbitt. He told them Miller borrowed the horse and would give him \$20 if he returned it, if not he was to get \$80. Peeler, the young man who rented the house to Miller, was implicated in the conspiracy through Williamson's interrogation. Peeler was arrested and also refused to cooperate. When the district attorney charged him with complicity, he decided to talk. He told that he had received \$150 for working with Miller and that payment came in three checks from Jesse West.

They had the names of all the players, now all they needed to do was make some arrests. The problem was that all of the bad guys were in Texas. Miller and Burrell were in Fort Worth and West and Allen were in the Panhandle. Arrest warrants were sent to Texas authorities and on March 23rd Burrell was arrested and Miller on March 31st.

Miller and Burrell joined Peeler and Williamson in the Ada jail. There was a lot less law in the Panhandle, so no one was arresting West and Allen. The sheriff sent a telegram to West in Canadian, Texas, which said, "You and Joe come to Ada at once. Need \$10,000. Miller." The scam worked. When the pair reached the train depot in Oklahoma City on March 6th they were immediately arrested and placed in the Oklahoma City jail overnight. When they were being moved the next morning, West displayed his ability to predict the future. He told the officers that if you take us to Ada we will be killed.

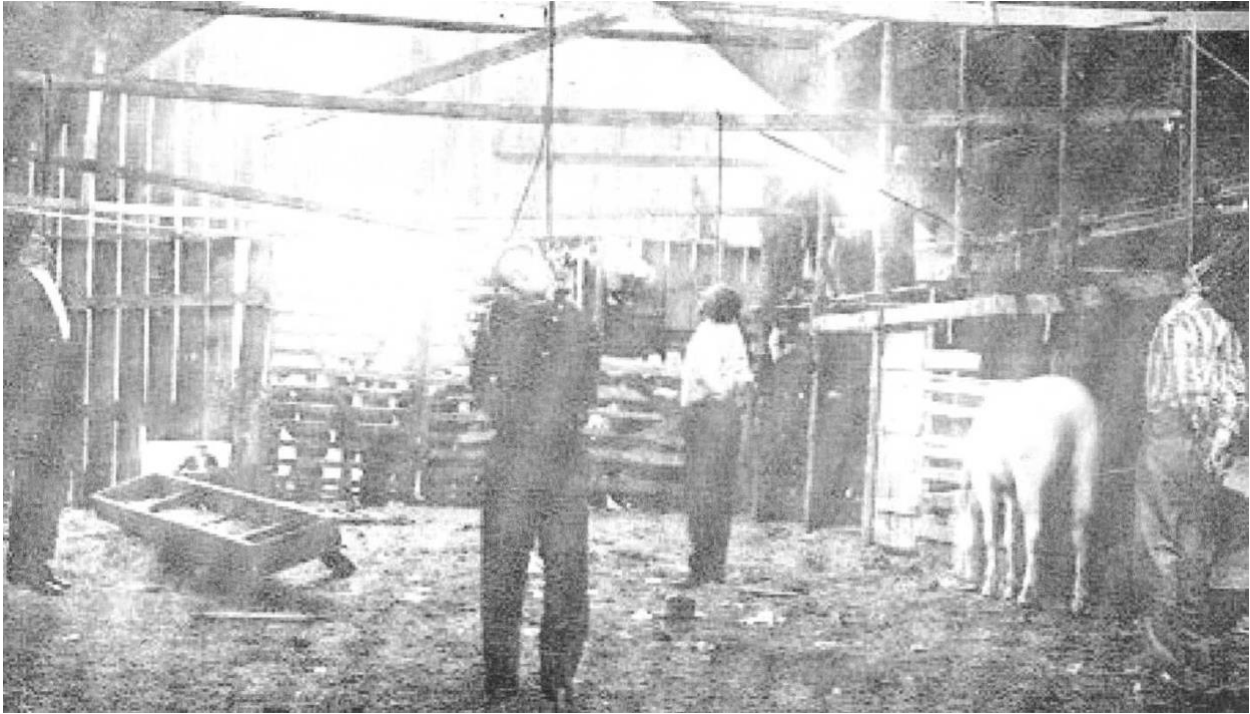
On Friday, April 16, 1909, a preliminary hearing was held and the court was closed to reporters, and everyone entering the court was searched. Bail was denied the co-conspirators.

Because of his youth and turning states evidence before the lynching, Williamson's charges were dismissed. Peeler had been a bit more involved with the plot and even admitted that he knew someone was to be murdered. He did tell everything he knew, but it was after the lynching was over. He was held in the Ada jail for a time and fortunately for him, the mob left him in his cell on the night of the lynching. On July 12, 1909, he was indicted for Accessory to Murder. The case finally came to trial on July 3, 1911, and was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction.

The best defense attorney in the state, Moman Pruiett, had just won a not guilty vote in the case of James Stevenson who murdered the marshal of Pauls Valley and was to defend Miller. Ada town folks were already in a lynching mood over the death of one of their beloved citizens. They were completely fed up with high-priced lawyers getting low-moral killers off scott-free. The town heard of the Stevenson verdict on April 17th. If Pruiett could get Stevenson off, he could do the same for Miller and they were convinced that Miller had hired Pruiett.

On April 19th, two men went to the Ada Electric and Gas Company and forced the night engineer to extinguish all street lights. The mob, estimated from dozens to two hundred removed the four men from the jail, took them to the Frisco Barn and hung them around 2:00 in the morning. Photographer N. B. Stall was on hand early the next morning before anyone arrived to take photos. It is not known how many photos he

took, but the one that is normally seen is the one below. Miller asked that his diamond ring be sent to his wife in Ft. Worth. He took a diamond scarf pin from his necktie and requested it be given to guard McCarty for his kindness. His last words were, "Let the records show that I have killed fifty-one men." There were surely more killings than are documented, but fifty-one is probably exaggerated.



From L. to R., Miller, Allen. Burrell and West (Wikipedia photo)

The bodies hung as they were left until after 7:00 in the morning when the sheriff had them cut down and delivered to the undertaker. Miller's body went to Fort Worth and is buried in the Oakwood Cemetery with the noted gunmen Luke Short and "Longhair" Jim Courtright. The turnout at the undertaker and the funeral was extremely large.



West and Allen's bodies were shipped To Mobeetie, Texas, where they are buried side-by-side with impressive Woodmen of the World monuments. Allen's wife Bessie is buried on his other side. West and Allen's service lasted some three hours and had five hundred people in attendance.



Woodmen of the World memorials for West(I) and Aien (r)

Burrell's body was picked up by his brother, taken to Weatherford, Texas, where it was placed next to his father in an unmarked grave and no one was in attendance.

Sources: *Wild West Magazine*, October 2012 issue: *The Lynching of Assassin Jim Miller*, by Ellis Lindsey

James Brown Miller and Death in Oklahoma: Was Justice Denied in Ada By Chuck Parsons

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Emails with Ellis Lindsey