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Article Summary: Western history based on distorted facts has become common. The author recommends that writers look carefully at contemporary sources like newspaper accounts and correspondence rather than relying upon works written more recently.

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Photographs / Images: "The result of a misdeal" (Frederick Remington), James Butler Hickok

THE WILD AND WOOLLY WEST OF THE POPULAR WRITER

BY JOSEPH W. SNELL

THERE could be but few persons, I feel safe in saying, who would argue that to the layman, the most popular area of American history is the wild and woolly West. Persons who regard history as a subject to be endured in school and ignored after graduation read and enjoy almost any description of the antics of Wyatt Earp, the exploits of Wild Bill and the escapades of Bat Masterson.

I happen to be on the staff of the Kansas State Historical Society. Somehow over the years I have become one of the Society's "consultants" on the cowtown era and as such I am continually amazed at the number of persons who are near authorities on the subject of gun toters and desperadoes. Interest isn't restricted to the United States by any means. It extends to England, Germany, France, Italy and even Japan. Many of you are familiar with the Westerners organization and know that posses and corrals exist in most of these countries and in several American

Joseph W. Snell, Assistant State Archivist of Kansas, delivered this paper at the Western History Association Meeting at El Paso, Texas on October 15, 1966

cities. But there are many, many more unorganized followers of the frontier.

Unfortunately our lovers of the West are being duped in many cases. What they are reading and what they are seeing is an unsavory blend of legend, fiction, and invention with just a dash of fact thrown in for seasoning. But many devotees, who earn their livings in other fields, do not know this and generally accept as factual what is presented to them.

We in the business have almost accepted, but not quite, the premise that movies and TV will always distort truth to present a more "dramatic" approach to a story. This has always been the case and from the looks of things it always will. We complain that Jesse James and Billy the Kid were not really the Robin Hoods portrayed by Tyrone Power and Robert Taylor, but were instead ne'er-do-wells too lazy to earn an honest day's pay. We snort when we see Hugh O'Brien's Wyatt Earp upholding virtue and the American way of life when we know the real Wyatt was once a suspected horse thief, a third grade cop and after all a mortal human being. Bill Longley was anything but the paragon of righteousness as portrayed for several seasons by Rory Calhoun. We complain when Belle Starr achieves respectability and beauty on the silver screen, when mountains loom in the background of a Kansas setting and when countless numbers of bullets issue forth from the barrel of a six shooter without reloading.

We complain, but little notice is taken, and we console ourselves by rationalizing that movies and TV plays are, to use a favorite expression of John James Ingalls, merely an "iridescent dream" lasting for a moment and then gone to be recalled only in one's imagination or during the reruns next summer.

The printed word is a different matter, however. It is a permanent thing, something to be looked at again and again, something that can be consulted any time to refresh the memory. Too, it holds an unexplainable ability to con-

vey truth. Those little black characters printed on paper to form words and phrases signify "this is it, this is the way it really was" to nearly all of us.

Now there is no one alive, there never has been and there never will be who can produce a totally factual book. Try as we might, an error will creep in somewhere only to appear, usually immediately after it is too late to do anything about it, in printed form to harass us the rest of our lives. We historians, amateur and professional, must continually strive for perfection, however, if we want our words to be accepted by those who have trust in us. Unfortunately over the years back to the frontier days themselves, there have been some who do more to perpetuate legend than to preserve history while writing under the guise of "historian."

In spite of the fact that a fictionalized history of the desperado West has been issued in many books recently, I feel that most offending authors have produced this fiction unintentionally while making an honest effort to accurately portray their subject. The fault lies in lack of primary source use and an uncritical acceptance of secondary works.

I have gathered a few examples, taken from recent publications, which will illustrate how authors have been repeating and expanding legends and by this repetition lending them an aura of authenticity almost solely because the writers did not doubt their sources.

One of the most popular and financially successful western books to have been published in a long time was a 1960 history of the Kansas cowtowns written by a man who has been a professional author since 1923. To his credit he has novels, mostly western, motion picture screen plays and several "factual" western histories. His history of Kansas cowtowns was acclaimed in many rave book reviews and it was the recipient of several awards of merit. He is an excellent writer.

The dust jacket was, of course, highly insistent in its praise. "Here is the full and accurate story of the hell-roaring Kansas cowtowns . . ." it stated. "Studded with names that were to become part of folk history and myth, this book tells the actual events. . . ." "Here are all their stories [meaning the builders and desperadoes of the West], accurately and vividly told. . ." Judging from the jacket we had here the definitive history of the cattle shipping days in Kansas.

The book itself also contributed to this authoritative feeling with a bibliography and a section of footnotes. I first read it six years ago and was then astounded at the numerous errors it contained, at its attacks on other books while proclaiming its own superiority in finally presenting the facts. Since that time the book has become to me and my associates an example of how to write a good book full of bad history.

Let's place a chapter in this book against what we know to be true. We could pick any chapter; I happened to settle on one concerning Wichita in 1874, the year the cattle business was at its height. The chapter is about eleven and a half pages long. On those pages are 20 unquestionable errors, seven of which are on one page. In addition there were seven untenable assumptions and two cases of poor judgment (for instance, after using several pages in attacking the authenticity of Stuart Lake's biography of Wyatt Earp, the author used Lake as his authority for describing police conditions in Wichita in 1874).

In 1964 the same author published another book, this time about the outlaws of Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma. The dust jacket again reported that we had here "the factual, documented case histories of two score and more . . . [desperadoes]." The author himself was described as "one of the most careful . . . of the present-day writers of Western lore." In his introduction the writer requested that his errors be pointed out to him. "It is the surest

way, . . ." he said, "to get at the truth and demolish the myths and legends that we have been duped into accepting as factual history."

A friend of mine who lives in Kansas City was sent a copy of this book by an eastern organization for review in its periodical. This friend is a Civil War authority and so could check on that portion dealing with Quantrill and the border war but he knew little about the post-war outlaws so asked us to give him a hand. We were delighted with the assignment and pitched right in only to come face to face with a mountain of errors. Many were duly noted and sent to Kansas City where they were incorporated with his findings into a review that was anything but favorable. This was in early June, 1964.

In October, the book was reviewed in the periodical alright, but the review was not the one prepared by my friend. Instead it was by another person and highly complimentary to the quality of the book! Needless to say my Kansas City friend was nonplused and wrote the editors of the periodical to find out what was going on. The answer was that the book's author was getting along in years and the editors of the periodical didn't feel they should be harsh on him at this stage of his life! Apparently the editors failed to note the writer's plea for honest criticism.

As a historian I find it embarrassing that Ramon Adams was able to list 424 titles in his fine bibliography *Burs Under the Saddle* which was published in 1964. Four hundred twenty-four books about the West which contain gross error in fact. However, I think it would be safe to say that if Mr. Adams revised the bibliography today he could list perhaps another hundred books or so for they are being ground out daily, quantity having an apparent priority over quality.

It isn't fair to assign all this disregard for truth to historians for many of these entries were written by old timers as reminiscences, sensationalists out for a fast buck and amateurs who have been unable to discern the truth.

Still, there are enough of us who claim to be historians turning out poor Western history that we should be concerned.

Let me give you an example of a relatively unimportant episode in frontier outlawry which was reported in three recent western books by writers enjoying a high degree of regard by their readers. Each version was incorrect; none of the authors had used any primary source material whatsoever although it was readily available right in Topeka. The episode will serve only as an example, other escapades would have done as well.

The episode had to do with the robbery of a bank in a little town east of Dodge City, the pursuit of the bandits and the fatal shooting of desperado Oliver Yantis.

The robbery occurred on November 1st, 1892. The loot was a mere \$1,697. The outlaws, three of them, rode south into Oklahoma and apparently disappeared. Over in Dodge City the sheriff was Chalkley M. Beeson. He had been one of the pioneers of Dodge, was co-owner of the Long Branch saloon, owned in partnership the COD cattle ranch, had been on the city council and was a rather renowned musician having formed the famous Dodge City Cowboy band. He was a typical frontiersman and he wasn't going to let any upstart rob a bank in his county and get away with it. Chalk circulated wanted posters in the form of penny post cards. About two weeks later one of them resulted in the location and positive identification of Ol Yantis who, along with two others, who may have been Bill Doolin and George "Bittercreek" Newcomb, robbed the Spareville bank.

Beeson journeyed to Stillwater, then to Guthrie, Oklahoma, where he procured a warrant for Yantis' arrest. In Stillwater he persuaded city marshal Thomas J. Heuston, his brother Hamilton B. Heuston and one George Cox to accompany him to Orlando and Yantis' hideout.

During the early morning of November 30 the Kansas sheriff staked out the cabin in which Yantis was hiding. When daylight came Yantis emerged from the house and was challenged by Beeson to surrender. Instead of complying Yantis drew a pistol from a shoulder holster and commenced firing. The posse returned the fire, their shots sounding "as one gun" according to the Dodge City *Globe-Republican*, December 2, 1892. None of the posse knew whose bullet struck the mortally wounded bandit. With the aid of Yantis' sister, who owned the cabin, the still fighting bandit was disarmed and taken to a hotel in Orlando where he soon died. Yantis' personal possessions were receipted for by Chief Deputy U. S. Marshal Chris Madsen and Beeson returned home.

This story of the robbery, manhunt and death of outlaw Oliver Yantis was taken from newspaper accounts and sworn affidavits which repose in the archives of the Kansas Historical Society. There can be little doubt that this is the correct version.

But what about the three authors I mentioned earlier? Let's take a close look.

The first published his book, a biography of Chris Madsen, in 1958. For a while his story goes well, perhaps because the robbery and chase were condensed into four sentences. When Sheriff Beeson goes after Yantis in Oklahoma, he seeks the aid of Madsen. This officer, along with Tom Houston (spelled with an OU instead of EU as it should be) and apparently without Beeson, rides to Orlando and Yantis' hideout. Madsen assumes command and orders Yantis to surrender. Yantis refuses; Madsen fires and wounds the bandit. Tom Houston now finishes Yantis off and Madsen gallantly refuses to accept any credit for the outlaw's death.

Of the three versions this is the most accurate for in its two pages there are only four errors. However, the wrong man is given credit for the capture of a desperate outlaw. What would the editor of the Dodge City *Globe-*

Republican, who in 1892 charged "future biographers of 'deeds of Heroism' . . . [to undertake] the pleasing duty of awarding to our sheriff the homage which we think he has justly earned" say about that?

Now let's look at version number two, a biography of Heck Thomas, published four years later. The first error of note concerns the amount of boodle taken which was stated as being \$10,000 instead of \$1,697 really taken. Sheriff Beeson is represented as having pursued Yantis immediately after the robbery all the way to Oklahoma; Yantis murders a farmer for his horse, thus putting U. S. Marshal William Grimes, Madsen, Thomas and Houston on his trail. Beeson finds Yantis' jaded and abandoned pony which is recognized by Madsen who knows Yantis' sister lives near Orlando. Heck Thomas accompanies Chris Madsen, Tom Houston and Sheriff Beeson to the hideout. This time Heck Thomas takes command and it is he who orders Yantis to surrender; again Madsen initially wounds Yantis. The loot on the bandit's body amounts to \$4,500 in contrast to the \$55 actually receipted for by Madsen. What is the score this time? The episode fills nearly two pages; it contains at least ten errors.

Now let's check the last version which appeared in the 1964 book reviewed by my Kansas City friend. This author had the robbery occurring two weeks later than it actually happened; he gave the robbers one extra accomplice, Bill Dalton; his loot was "approximately \$18,000," more than ten times the amount actually taken; Beeson pursues the robbers into Oklahoma directly after the robbery, he having, according to the author, "the rather eccentric notion that his jurisdiction did not end until he caught the men he was chasing." This author has Beeson going to Orlando and wiring for help from Guthrie, which came in the form of Deputy U. S. Marshals Chris Madsen, Heck Thomas and Tom Heuston. At the Yantis hideout it was Heck Thomas who took the initiative and ordered Yantis to surrender; Yantis procured a pistol from a feed bag he was carrying, not from the shoulder holster he

actually wore; Chris Madsen first wounded Yantis and then Thomas and Heuston finished him off; Sheriff Beeson again finds \$4,500 of the bank's money on the bandit's body instead of the \$55 really there.

The 1964 version of the robbery and fight takes only one and one half pages to tell but it contains 11 errors in fact. A pretty good average for a writer whose publisher claims has "never hesitated to attack and demolish the myths and legends that have so entwined themselves with the truth that we have come to accept them as history."

As I said before this is only a minor and relatively unimportant episode in the history of the great American West but it is a graphic portrayal of a common fault of many of the outlaw-oriented books produced in the last several years. A little effort to locate primary evidence could have killed this particular legend in 1958.

At the time I prepared this paper I had on my desk seven book length biographies of James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok. Of course, all contain errors, no one has written the perfect book yet. But until the publication of Joseph G. Rosa's *They Called Him Wild Bill* in 1964 no author had come near presenting a truthful account of the life of that noted plainsman.

The first biography of Wild Bill had been published in 1867. The author was George Ward Nichols and the sketch appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for February. From that time on Wild Bill was good copy and his name appeared in countless magazines, newspapers and books. That first biography was almost completely in error and the many that followed, with one or two exceptions, were nearly as bad.

For purposes of comparison let us look at each of the seven books, checking their treatment of some particular incident in Hickok's life. Any incident would serve, but let us examine Bill's fight with the Fort Hays, Kansas soldiers.

The first account we'll examine was written in 1924. Here it was stated that the row occurred after Hickok's services in Abilene which would place it in 1872 or later. The death toll was four Seventh cavalymen slain. A 1926 biography states that the fight occurred on February 12, 1870. "Three or four" soldiers were killed and Bill hid out in a friend's cabin to recuperate from his wounds and escape the wrath of General Phil Sheridan. Five years later another Hickok biography appeared. The date was again given as February 12, 1870, but the number of dead soldiers was upped to eight. Once more the badly wounded Wild Bill recuperates at a friend's ranch to escape Phil Sheridan's wanted notice.

William E. Connelley, who was secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, wrote in *Wild Bill and His Era*, 1933, that the date was about January 1, 1870, and that Tom Custer, George's brother, had conspired with three Seventh Cavalry troopers to kill Hickok in a dimly lit saloon. Wild Bill killed all three enlisted men, then escaped on the locomotive driven by his friend John W. McDaniel. It might be said here that Connelley made the closest attempt to present a factual history of Hickok but subjectivity interfered and much of what he presented for the first time is now suspect.

Another biography of Wild Bill appeared in 1952. In this version of the soldier fight the date is given as December 31, 1869. Hickok was set upon by three soldiers, two of whom he killed. Tom Custer was again the villain, having vowed to kill Hickok, but he escaped Bill's deadly aim. Again Hickok flees on the locomotive of a Kansas Pacific engineer whose name is now John McDaniels.

Still another Wild Bill Hickok appeared in 1959. The hero once more kills three soldiers, Tom Custer runs to Phil Sheridan and Hickok escapes on John W. McDaniels' locomotive.

What really happened? The answer was found in the National Archives and several Kansas newspapers. Hickok

was indeed involved in a fight with some soldiers, one newspaper says five, on July 17, 1870, five months after the most correct guess of any of the authors cited. Two of the soldiers were wounded, one later died. Jeremiah Lanigan and John Kelly (or Kile) were the Seventh Cavalry privates shot and Kelly was the one who died. Post returns for Fort Hays for the month of July, 1870, do not show the presence of any officer named Custer nor was there any mention in any official records of a wanted notice being issued by General Sheridan.

This, again, is a minor incident in frontier history, but it again serves as an apt illustration of how by merely checking primary sources rumor usually can be confirmed or denied. One will notice, by the way, that of the Hickok biographers mentioned, only Rosa, the Englishman who lives 4,000 miles away, bothered to check official records of the Seventh Cavalry or local Kansas newspapers. All others relied on secondary sources and reminiscences.

This same lack of appreciation for contemporary documents has muddied the recounting of the until recently legendary episode of the "Dodge City Peace Commission." This group, which was not called that at all at the time, consisted of residents and ex-residents of Dodge City, eight in number, who came to the aid of gambler Luke Short after he had been run out of town by the city administration. The event occurred in the spring of 1883 and involved such well known personalities as Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Luke, and perhaps Doc Holliday.

Until William Cox published his *Luke Short and His Era* in 1961 all writers known to me stated that A. B. Webster was mayor of the town and as such was the chief instigator of the eviction. According to one author "Webster rammed an ordinance through the City Council which forbade saloonkeepers to provide entertainment on the 'violin or piano or any other musical instrument.'" Another author, writing in 1960, cited exactly the same wordage from the supposed city ordinance.

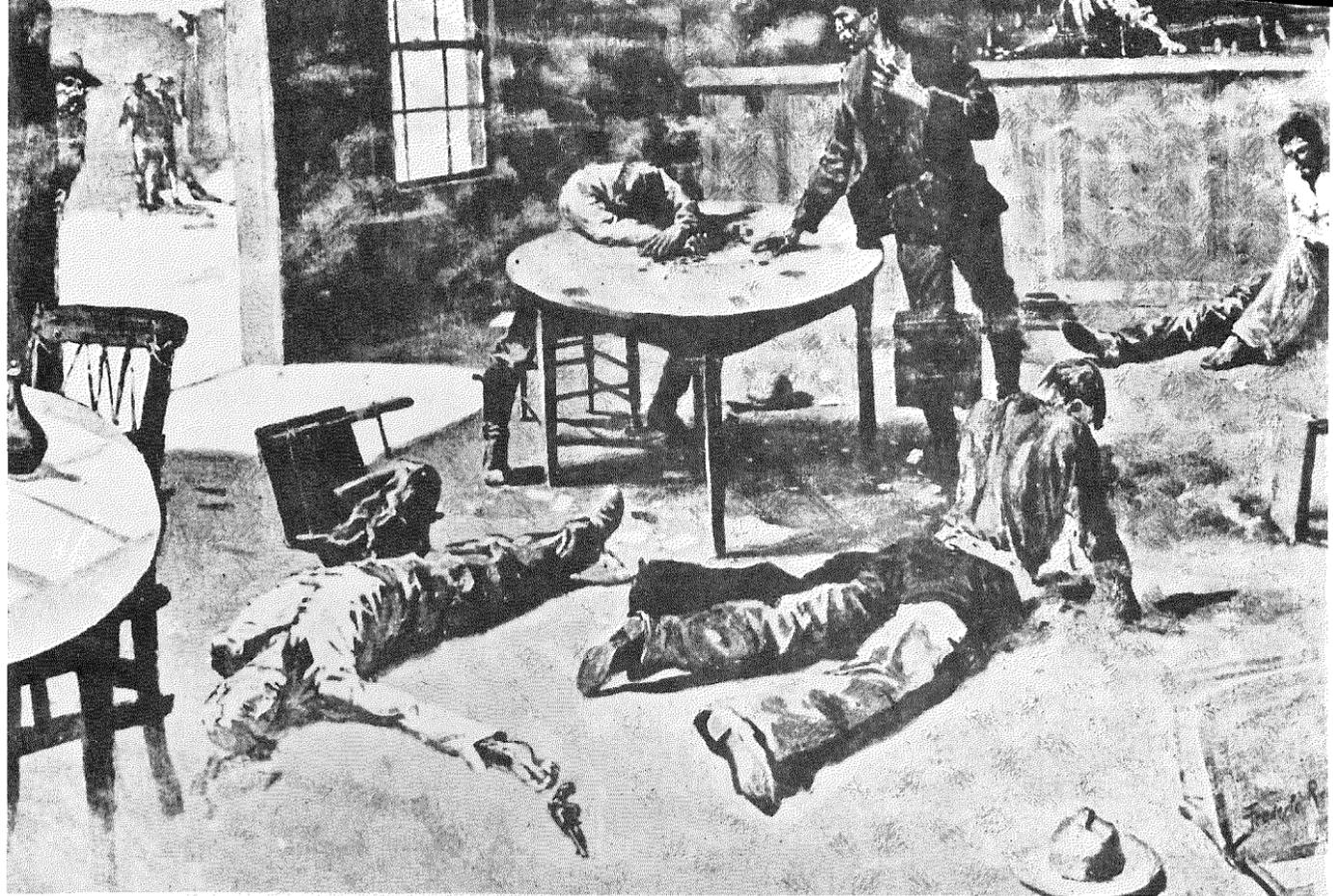
At any rate, according to these writers, Luke Short fired his female piano player, who had been packing them into his Long Branch saloon, and as a consequence lost most of his trade to Webster's saloon which still retained its pianist. Luke rehired his girl, consequently was run out of town and with the help of Earp, Masterson, the governor of Kansas and others, was able to re-establish himself.

As in most of these other cases I've mentioned, the story is based on facts, but with the passage of time the facts got lost and fiction predominated.

The mayor of Dodge City at the time was not A. B. Webster, but was Lawrence E. Deger. The ordinances passed, actually there were two of them, did not mention violinists, pianists or any other musicians. They were directed at "vice and immorality" and at vagrancy. Luke's girl "singer" was arrested, not because she sang, but because she was soliciting in the Long Branch. Luke didn't deny this. What he objected to was that his saloon was the only one raided under terms of the ordinances. The "war" was not the attempt of one saloon keeper to get the trade of another, but was, instead, a battle between political factions which had existed in Dodge City since its incorporation eight years earlier. Luke was a member of "the gang" as it was locally called, a political force which included James H. "Dog" Kelley, Bat Masterson, W. H. Harris, and others. The opposing faction was led by Webster, Deger, and an ex-member of "the gang," Mike Sutton.

The contest did indeed involve the governor of Kansas but only to the extent that he wanted peace in Dodge City and was willing to help if the sheriff, mayor and marshal were not able to insure it. Where the name "peace commission" evolved is not certain. It did not appear in any account at the time.

Here again we have a mishmash of history told over and over by authors who have never looked at contemporary sources. In this case journalistic coverage included



"The result of a misdeal." Frederick Remington.



James Butler Hickok.

two Dodge City papers and newspapers in Topeka, Kansas City and other near and remote places. Frequently letters from participants in the contest appeared in these papers. The best source material of all, however, was in the archives of the Kansas Historical Society, open to any person wishing to use it. In the files of Governor George W. Glick an entire section is given over to correspondence, telegrams, reports, and so forth relating to the "Dodge City War." Though there since 1885, it apparently was never consulted until the late 1950's.

It has not been my purpose in this paper to ridicule any person nor to hold up to contempt any author or his works. Lack of time prevented a fuller examination of other efforts but a wider survey would produce the same result.

I suggest that no secondary source in the field of the West be accepted as authentic *per se* but instead regarded with suspicion until statements can be proved or disproved through contemporary documents. Professional and amateur historians, teachers and western buffs can well be skeptics and regard with suspicion self-proclaimed definitive works on the wild and woolly West.