



0. BASS REEVES - U.S. DEPUTY MARSHAL - Story
Preface

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8. BASS REEVES in ACTION

In this image we see Bass Reeves as he appeared in 1907. By this time he was an Oklahoma police officer instead of a federal deputy marshal. Online via the Digital Library at Oklahoma State University.

Born a slave in 1838, most likely in Crawford County (Arkansas), Bass Reeves and his family were living in Texas by 1846. Like many other slaves, the family took the last name of their "master," William S. Reeves.

When America's Civil War began, Bass accompanied George Reeves (Bill's son) who'd enlisted as a Confederate officer. It was his job to look after George, and serve as his personal assistant, even during the conflict between the states.

Bass was an imposing man, weighing around 180 pounds and standing 6' 2" (at a time when the average male was 5' 6" tall). Like most slaves, he could neither read nor write.

Although the exact reason has been lost to history, there came a time during the war when Bass Reeves was fed-up with being a slave. He ran away, to Indian Territory, where he spent the rest of the war (mostly living among the Creek and Seminoles).

By the time the war was over, Bass could speak at least five different Native-American languages. He'd also learned how to shoot, track and ride a horse really well.

After the war, when it no longer mattered that Bass was a fugitive slave, he left the Indian Territory and settled in Van Buren, Arkansas. He married a woman, whose name was Nellie Jennie, and became the first African-American to establish a home in that town.

He built a house, boasting eight rooms, and worked the land. He and Jennie had ten children.

Life was good, but Bass Reeves was never destined to live such a simple life. One day he was approached by James Fagan, the former Confederate General whom Judge Parker had appointed U.S. Marshal.

Fagan was aware that Bass knew five Native-American languages and understood tribal culture. He also knew that Bass was a great tracker and marksman. Fagan wondered whether Bass might like a new job which would require him to go back to the Indian Territory which was swarming with criminals.

How bad was the crime situation in Indian Territory during 1875 (the year Fagan approached Bass)? Horrific, according to the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*:

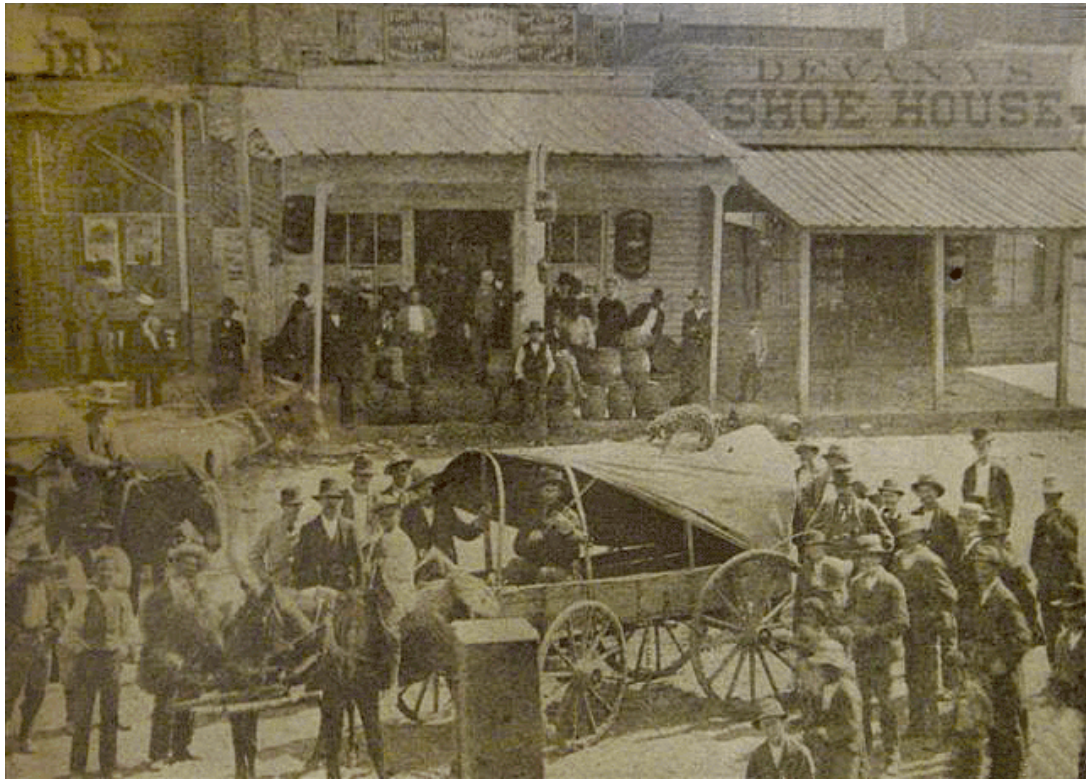
The early history of the ... whole Indian Territory, is crimsoned with blood. Many of the white men in the Chickasaw Nation could hardly be classed as good citizens. The unsettled condition of the country and the difficulty of bringing criminals to justice made it an ideal refuge for renegades and outlaws from other states. (Chronicles of Oklahoma, Volume 13, No. 2, at pages 179-180.)

Indian Territory had tribal courts, but those courts only had jurisdiction over Native Americans (not Caucasians). The *Chronicles* continue:

The United States Criminal Court with headquarters at Ft. Smith, Ark., was the only court having jurisdiction in the Indian Territory. It is true that there were Indian Courts but they had jurisdiction only in cases involving Indian citizens.

A few Deputy United States Marshals, scattered over this vast territory constituted the only police force and energetic and efficient though they might have been, they were too few in number to apprehend many of the law violators and all round bad men of that day and time. (Chronicles, page 180.)

The time had come to round-up the non-Indian criminals and try them either at Fort Smith, Arkansas (depicted, hereafter, as the town appeared, along Garrison Avenue, in 1867) or Paris, Texas.

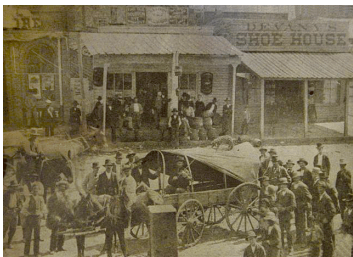


Bass Reeves agreed to serve as a Deputy U.S. Marshal, the first African-American to hold that position west of the Mississippi River.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
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See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
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Media Stream



Ft. Smith in 1867
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Bass Reeves - Oath of Office as U.S. Deputy Marshal

This image depicts an Oath of Office which Bass Reeves took during his career as a Deputy U.S. Marshal.

As this document indicates, Reeves worked for the Federal District Court for the Western District of Arkansas.

Although he could neither read nor write—since he was born a slave and American slaves were generally not allowed to have an education—Reeves was able to do his job because others would read arrest warrants to him. Reeves would then memorize the words of the warrant before he went after the outlaw.

In addition, Reeves knew five different Native-American languages, which significantly benefitted his employer (since Reeves' jurisdiction included "Indian Territory").

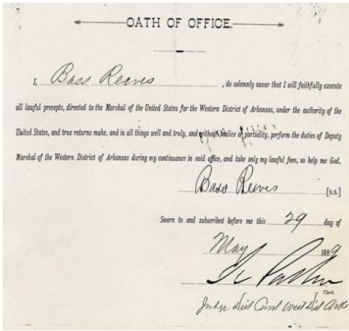
Speaking of Reeves' employer ... note that this Oath was also signed by "I C Parker." That is Judge Isaac C. Parker (of the District Court for the Western District of Arkansas).

Click on the image for a better view.

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives. Public-Domain image.

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BASS REEVES - U.S. DEPUTY MARSHAL

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