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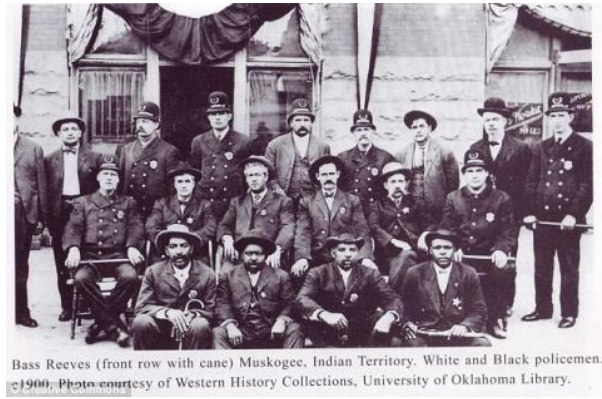
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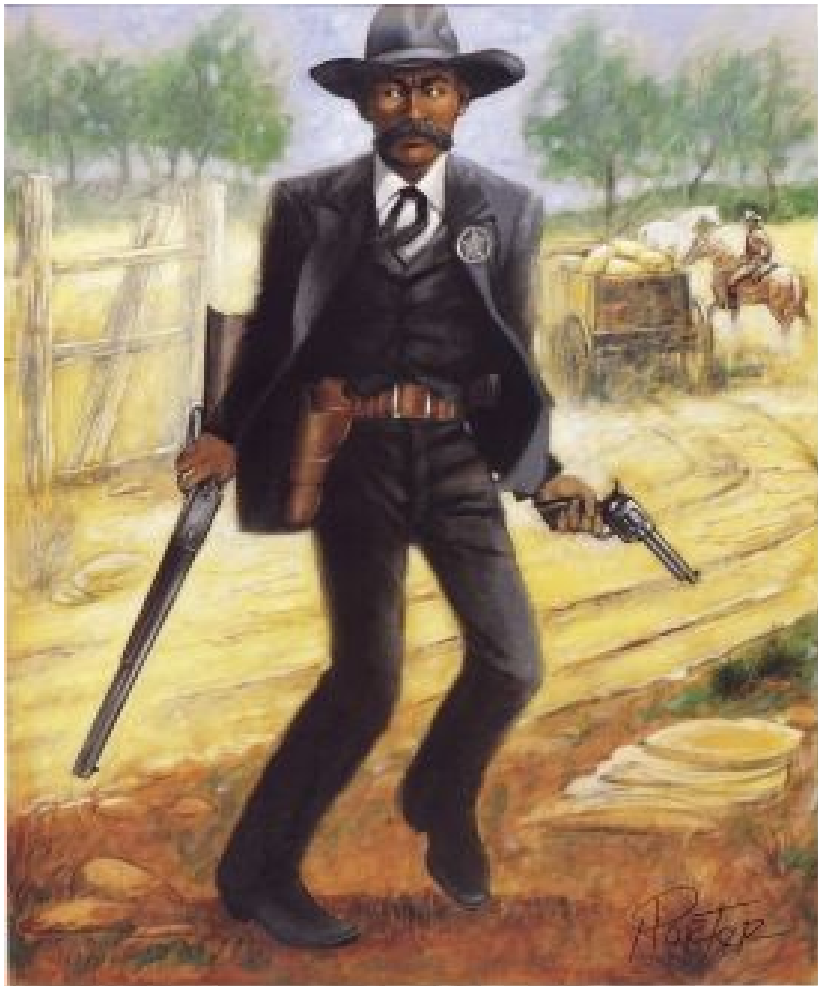
Bass Reeves became an officer of the law in Muskogee (in today's State of Oklahoma) after the federal government no-longer gave jurisdiction over Indian-Territory lands to the federal court for the Western District of Arkansas. In this image, we see former deputy-marshal Reeves in the front row, on the left side of the picture, with cane in hand. Image online via Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library. License: CC BY-SA 3.0. Click on the image for a better view.

Looking for criminals in a territory covering more than 74,000 square miles took time. Sometimes it took the deputies months to locate one fugitive or another.

Bass Reeves, however, was a patient man. By the time his career as a Deputy Marshal in Indian Territory was over, he'd captured around 3,000 people "wanted by the law."

Denied an education, while he was a slave, Bass could neither read nor write, but he had a great memory. He'd have someone read arrest-warrants to him, which he was able to completely recall. He'd remember not only long lists of criminals but also their physical descriptions and the nature of their alleged crimes.

Wearing a black hat, Bass carried a pair of Colt .45 Peacemakers. He was known for getting his man and avoiding physical injury to himself.



Art T. Burton, in his book about Bass called *Black Gun, Silver Star*, quotes a contemporary who knew the lawman:

Reeves had many narrow escapes. At different times his belt was shot in two, a button shot off his coat, his hat brim shot off, and the bridle reins, which he held in his hands, cut by a bullet.

However, in spite of all these narrow escapes, and many conflicts in which he was engaged, Reeves was never wounded. And this notwithstanding the fact that he said he never fired a shot until the desperado he was trying to arrest had started the shooting. (Burton, at [page 300.](#))

One of Bass' most-famous arrests was of his own son, Ben. Accused of killing his wife, in 1902, Bennie said she'd been having an affair with another man. That didn't make any difference to his Father.

Bass arrested his boy, who was convicted of murder. Ben then served 10 years of a Leavenworth-Prison sentence before he was eventually released for good behavior.

Then there was the time when Bass himself was a defendant. He'd shot his cook, William Leach, apparently accidentally, and the cook died in 1884. Bass was arrested, in January of 1886, and posted a bond of \$3,000 (a very large sum of money at the time).

Was it murder? The all-white, male jury - who heard the case in front of Judge Isaac Parker, in his Fort Smith courtroom - didn't think so. After telling the jury that his Winchester rifle discharged accidentally, Bass was acquitted of the crime in October of 1887.

During his 32-year career, Bass Reeves "faced death a hundred times," according to an article which ran in the *Muskogee Phoenix* on January 15, 1910:

Absolutely fearless and knowing no master but duty, the placing of a writ in his hands for service meant that the letter of the law would be fulfilled though his life paid the penalty.

In the carrying-out of his orders during his thirty-two years as a deputy United States marshal in the old Indian Territory days, Bass Reeves faced death a hundred times, many desperate characters sought his life yet the old man even on the brink of the grave went along the pathway of duty with the simple faith that some men have who believe that they are in the care of special providence when they are doing right. (See Burton, at [pages 300-301.](#))

Among his various other accolades, Bass had a nickname: "The Invincible Marshal." Of the 200 deputy U.S. Marshals whom General Fagan hired, Bass was the last to keep his position when the Indian Territory gave way

to Oklahoma's statehood, in 1907.

During that same year, an Oklahoma City newspaper praised the long-serving Marshal with these words:

...In those days [when Reeves first became a Deputy Marshal] the Missouri, Kansas & Texas railroad, running south across the territory, marked the fringe of civilization.

Eighty miles west of Fort Smith was known as "the dead line," and whenever a deputy marshal from Fort Smith or Paris, Texas, crossed the Missouri, Kansas & Texas track he took his own life in his hands and he knew it. On nearly every trail would be found posted by outlaws a small card warning certain deputies that if they ever crossed the dead line they would be killed.

Reeves has a dozen of these cards which were posted for his special benefit. And in those days such a notice was no idle boast, and many an outlaw has bitten the dust trying to ambush a deputy on these trails. (Burton, page 28.)

Despite the cards, the bullets and all the other collective outlaw efforts, Bass Reeves stood tall. After Oklahoma became a State, he became a police officer for the town of Muskogee. He worked at that job for about two years, until he was diagnosed with Bright's disease in 1909.

When he died, in January of 1910, the *Muskogee Phoenix* ran a tribute to him. Among the many words of this lengthy article are some which compare Bass to politicians of the day:

...His simple, honest faith in the righteousness of the law would brook no disrespect for its mandates, and some of the little ones in charge now would not have dared suggest such a thing to this man who feared nothing but the possibility that he might do wrong.

Bass is dead. He was buried with high honors, and his name will be recorded in the archives of the court as a faithful servant of the law and a brave officer. And it was fitting that such recognition was bestowed upon this man. It is fitting that, black or white, our people have the manhood to recognize character and faithfulness to duty... (Quoted by Burton, at page 28.)

As we leave the days of cattle drives and cowboys, outlaws and lawmen, there is one more thing to know about Bass Reeves. It may be impossible to prove, but he just might have been the inspiration for "The Lone Ranger." Why is that?

- It was required, of every Deputy U.S. Marshal, to be accompanied by at least one posseman while he was on duty in the field. Reeves often rode with Native Americans (like "Tonto" in the Long-Ranger stories.
- It was common for Bass to wear disguises as he hunted fugitives-from-justice. That brings to mind the black mask which the Long Ranger always wore.

Can we say, for sure, that the Lone Ranger—whose radio stories originated in Detroit, during 1933—was based on the real-life stories of Bass Reeves? Probably not, but as Art Burton concludes in *Black Gun, Silver Star*:

...Bass Reeves is the closest real person to resemble the fictional Lone Ranger on the American western frontier of the nineteenth century. (Burton, page 14.)

Credits:

In-text illustration of U.S. Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves by Henry C. Porter. Copyright, Estate of Henry C. Porter, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with Porter's work.

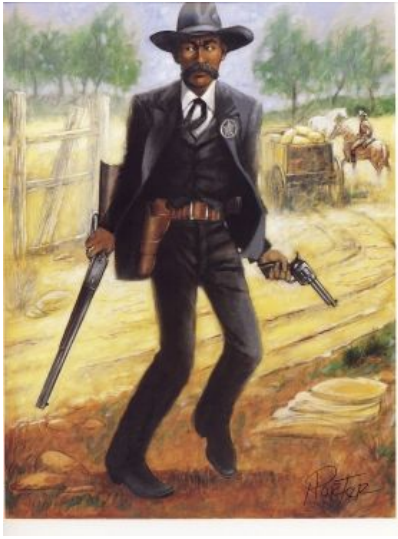
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Media Stream



Bass Reeves by Henry C. Porter

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Bass Reeves in 1907

In this image, taken on the 16th of November 1907, we see a group of federal marshals. Notice the image caption:

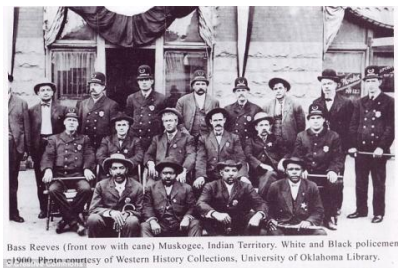
The Federal Official Family

There are two African-American marshals among this group of men. Baas Reeves is at the far left of the photograph.

Image maintained by the Oklahoma Historical Society and is online via the U.S. National Park Service.

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Bass Reeves (front row with cane) Muskogee, Indian Territory. White and Black policemen.
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BASS REEVES in ACTION

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