

Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves (Race and Ethnicity in the American West)

By Art T. Burton

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Deputy U.S. Marshal Bass Reeves appears as one of “eight notable Oklahomans,” the “most feared U.S. marshal in the Indian country.” That Reeves was also an African American who had spent his early life as a slave in Arkansas and Texas makes his accomplishments all the more remarkable. Bucking the odds (“I’m sorry, we didn’t keep black people’s history,” a clerk at one of Oklahoma’s local historical societies answered a query), Art T. Burton sifts through fact and legend to discover the truth about one of the most outstanding peace officers in late nineteenth-century America—and perhaps the greatest lawman of the Wild West era.

Fluent in Creek and other southern Native languages, physically powerful, skilled with firearms, and a master of disguise, Reeves was exceptionally adept at apprehending fugitives and outlaws, and his exploits were legendary in Oklahoma and Arkansas. A finalist for the 2007 Spur Award, sponsored by the Western Writers of America, *Black Gun, Silver Star* tells Bass Reeves’s story for the first time and restores this remarkable figure to his rightful place in the history of the American West.

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Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves (Race and Ethnicity in the American West) By Art T. Burton Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #198033 in Books
- Brand: Burton, Art T.
- Published on: 2008-04-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x .81" w x 5.98" l, 1.17 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 392 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Aside from a few fluff films (like Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles*) and a smattering of lesser-known scholarship, the African-American presence in Wild West history has been severely underrepresented. Against this backdrop rises Burton's painstaking account of U.S. Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves, a former slave who negotiated the boundaries between whites, Indians and blacks in the lawless Oklahoma and Indian Territories, and emerged with a sterling law enforcement record after 32 years of service, despite remaining illiterate. Readers expecting a narrative will be disappointed, however, by Burton's focus on separating myth from fact in conflicting testimonies, tall tales and breaches in the written record. The book is primarily a compilation of written and oral texts about Reeves's ambidextrous skill with pistols and rifles, and his mastery of disguise, which allowed him to arrest as many as 10 prisoners and hold them in an open wagon as he went about his business. Rigorous and impartial, Burton is less concerned with entertainment than faithful research—no small task given the Old West's diverse and troubled racial climate, in which black accomplishment often went overlooked. But dedicated readers will become acquainted with a brave, resourceful lawman and the patchwork of homesteaders, murderers, horse thieves and bootleggers he governed. Two maps. *(July)*
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Review

BLACK GUN, SILVER STAR, by Art T. Burton
5 Stars
Highly Recommended

Brief though the period of the Wild West was, the exploits of its villains and lawmen have fascinated people around the world, and been disproportionately represented in pop culture. But the multicultural nature of the Wild West has rarely been evidenced in the plethora of films, books and television shows. Which probably explains why the arrival of Sheriff Black Bart in Mel Brooks' "Blazing Saddles" (1974) elicited such a stunned response from the townspeople, and a riot of laughter from the audience. Imagine: a black lawman in the Old West!

Imagine no more. Deputy U.S. Marshal Bass Reeves, a former slave, served for nearly 30 years in the Oklahoma and Indian Territories, the most deadly location for U.S. marshals. And according to glowing accounts of his bravery, skill and steadfast devotion to duty (found in white newspapers of the time, mind you) nobody was laughing when he rode into to town, especially not the bad guys. As this book amply illustrates, Reeves is remarkable not merely for being a black marshal (there were others) but for being one of the greatest U.S. Marshals, period.

But Reeves' story - with the exception of references published here and there - has been largely ignored by western historians. Though widely known and respected during his lifetime, he was illiterate and left behind no diaries or letters, so what little has come down has been in the form of oral history and legends. Art T. Burton has spent the better part of 20 years reclaiming the heritage of African Americans in the American West, and has scoured through a wide range of primary sources - including Reeves' federal criminal court cases available in the National Archives, and account books at Fort Smith Historic Site - to separate legend from fact and painstakingly piece together the story of this American hero.

The book is not a biography in the traditional sense, but as the subtitle states, a reader. It reproduces many of the court documents and contemporary newspaper articles with just enough narrative to put them into context. Not being a Wild West buff myself, I felt the author did an excellent job providing background to help me make sense of it all.

As the author recounts, one of the first responses he received from a local town historical society in Oklahoma when inquiring about Reeves was "I am sorry, we didn't keep black people's history." This book is the perfect example of the wealth of information which can be gleaned by a creative, dedicated historian who looks beyond the usual sources in order to root out the hidden history of multicultural America. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Western history and culture, law enforcement, American or African American Studies.

And I hope this book inspires someone to finally bring the life and times of Bass Reeves to the big screen. (Gerri Gribi *AfroAmericanHeritage.com* 2007-03-13)

Old West Law Was White and Black
Bass Reeves, U.S. deputy marshal, overcomes naysayers.

You want the definition of a touch Old West lawman? Bass Reeves was the very model of a U.S. deputy marshal, serving the Indian Territory for an incredible 32 years. He was tall at 6'2", expert shooter with either hand. He was a dogged tracker with a reputation for getting his man. He reportedly killed 14 fugitives in the line of duty.

And Bass Reeves as a black, former slave.

Sure, he faced discrimination throughout his life. But a new biography by Art Burton, *Black Gun, Silver Star,* shows that Reeves overcame the naysayers through sheer guts and determination.

Take one case from the spring of 1883.

Cowboy Jim Webb had killed a black preacher in a dispute over a brush fire. Reeves was given the warrant to arrest Webb, so he and white posse member Floyd Wilson headed to a ranch in the Chickasaw Nation where Webb worked.

Reeves and Wilson got there in the early morning, greeted by Webb and fellow cowboy Frank Smith. The lawmen didn't identify themselves, but the wranglers were both suspicious and kept their hands on their guns. A hearty breakfast didn't break the tension.

After the meal, Reeves and Wilson went outside and sat on a bench; Webb and Smith took positions standing behind them. Webb momentarily relaxed - Reeves jumped up, knocked the fun out of the cowboy's hand while pulling his own pistol with his right hand and grabbing Webb by the throat with his left. Wilson froze. Frank smith didn't, firing two shots at Reeves from nearly point-blank range - and missing both. Reeves turned his gun on Smith and fired once, hitting his target in the gut. Smith lingered a couple of days before dying. The officers took Webb to Hanging Judge Isaac Parker's jail in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Webb and Reeves would meet again.

The cowboy was released on bail after nearly a year in jail. He promptly ran—and Bass Reeves was sent to

get him. The deputy found him at a store in what is now Woodford, Oklahoma. Webb saw Reeves coming, and he sprinted from the building, firing as he went. Reeves was lucky; one shot grazed his saddle horn, a second ripped a button from his coat, a third cut the bridle reins from his hands and a fourth tore the brim of his hat. Bass fired his Winchester twice, hitting his man both times. Webb lay dying in the dirt as Reeves approached—and in a weird scene, the nearly departed gave his pistol and holster to the lawman as a present to remember him by.

Reeves would later say that Jim Webb was the bravest man he ever saw. Webb likely felt the same way about the man who killed him.

Black Gun, Silver Star by **Art Burton** is published by the University of Nebraska Press. To order this book, visit *unp.unl.edu/press* or call 800-755-1105.
(*True West* 2006-10-23)

“Aside from a few fluff films (like Mel Brooks’s Blazing Saddles) and a smattering of lesser-known scholarship, the African-American presence in Wild West history has been severely underrepresented. . . . Against this backdrop rises Burton’s painstaking account of U.S. Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves. . . . Rigorous and impartial, Burton is less concerned with entertainment than faithful research—no small task given the Old West’s diverse and troubled racial climate, in which black accomplishment often went overlooked. But dedicated readers will become acquainted with a brave, resourceful lawman and the patchwork of homesteaders, murderers, horse thieves and bootleggers he governed.” —*Publishers Weekly*.
(*Publishers Weekly*)

“Burton has completed a solid research effort, and his writing is clear. . . . Available sources do not allow Burton to resolve all the controversies about the exact details of Reeve’s life, but Burton has given new literary life to a black lawman in a white (and Indian) world.”—James M. Smallwood, *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*
(James M. Smallwood *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 2007-05-10)

"As Burton traces Reeves' exploits through oral accounts, records of court proceedings and scraps of correspondence, his fascination with the subject helps to maintain a vigorous pace and ultimately makes *Black Gun, Silver Star* an eye-opening study of justice and race in the Old West."—Nick Smith, *The Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC)
(Nick Smith *Post and Courier* 2006-09-17)

“The book is a good addition to the history of law enforcement in the Twin Territories. Students of this area will certainly want to add the book to their library.”—*Western Outlaw-Lawman History Association Journal*
(*Western Outlaw-Lawman History Association Journal*)

"[Burton's] years of research resulted in a remarkable story of an Old West giant, one who arguably was the best in his business."—*True West*
(*True West*)

"[This] biography is more statement of fact than tribute to Reeves and no punches are pulled. Bass had an exceptionally long tenure as a Deputy U. S. Marshal and made a few mistakes along the way. These are covered. But, so too, are the remarkable feats he accomplished. . . . No critic, then or now has been able to show that Bass did not do good and bring law and order to the frontier. Art's rendering takes on all comers and their questions. The book is a heck of a good read and not the least bit painful."—Mike Tower, *Oklahombres.org*

(Mike Tower *Oklahombres.org* 2006-05-07)

"Burton is a generous author who shares his thinking and analysis with the reader, and explains his personal fascination with the story of Bass Reeves. The result is a highly readable book with a tone that will appeal to several audiences."—Barbara C. Behan, *Journal of African American History*
(Barbara C. Behan *Journal of African American History*)

"This is a book that should become mandatory reading for any student of American Frontier history. *Black Gun, Silver Star* not only answers questions about Bass Reeves, the man, but it also provides insight into the incredible courage and extraordinary skill required in nineteenth-century law enforcement. Those with a passion for history, particularly of the nineteenth century, will find this biography of Reeves to be an essential book for their library."—Angela Y. Walton-Raji, author of *Black Indian Genealogy Research*
(Angela Y. Walton-Raji 2005-12-21)

"Art Burton has resurrected a heroic Black U. S. Deputy Marshal that thieves and outlaws in the Indian Territory could not kill but was practically eliminated by scholars of frontier history."—Bruce T. Fisher, Curator of African American History, Oklahoma Historical Society
(Bruce T. Fisher 2005-12-14)

"In the long, sanguinary history of the battle to bring law and order to the violent American West there was no greater or more important figure than this former slave who spent his life enforcing the law in what was the most lawless section of the country. Because Reeves was black, his remarkable career for the most part was overlooked by the contemporary press, making it difficult now to reconstruct his history, but author Art Burton has admirably tackled the task and told a story, long overdue."—Robert K. DeArment, author of *Bravo of the Brazos: John Larn of Fort Griffin, Texas*
(Robert K. DeArment 2006-01-03)

"Art Burton's extensive research for *Black Gun, Silver Star* fleshes out the fascinating life story and exploits of a former slave who became one of the most famous lawmen in the Indian Territory days of 'Hanging Judge' Isaac Parker."—William Black, Superintendent Fort Smith National Historic Site
(William Black 2005-10-13)

About the Author

Art T. Burton is a professor of history at South Suburban College in South Holland, Illinois. He is the author of *Black, Buckskin, and Blue: African American Scouts and Soldiers on the Western Frontier* and *Black, Red, and Deadly: Black and Indian Gunfighters of the Indian Territory, 1870–1907.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Shaun Richards:

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Is it anyone who having spare time then spend it whole day by watching television programs or just lying down on the bed? Do you need something new? This Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves (Race and Ethnicity in the American West) can be the answer, oh how comes? The new book you know. You are consequently out of date, spending your free time by reading in this new era is common not a geek activity. So what these textbooks have than the others?

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