Juliet L. Galonska

African-American Deputy Marshals in Arkansas

In the Visitor Center of Fort Smith National Historic Site stands an exhibit honoring “The Men Who Rode for Parker,” a reference to the hundreds of deputy U.S. marshals, posse and other officers charged with enforcing law and order over the Indian Territory during the tenure of Judge Isaac C. Parker. Prominent in the middle of the display is Bass Reeves, an African-American deputy who served the U. S. Court for the Western District of Arkansas for over 20 years. He is one of several challenging the traditional image of the lawman on the frontier.

Until 1896, the jurisdiction of the Western District of Arkansas encompassed all or parts of Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma). This vast area was home to the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles, removed from their homelands in the Southeast by the U.S. government during the 1830s. Treaties in 1866 reduced the territory of those nations as a result of alliances of at least some portions of each tribe with the Confederacy. This resulted in the relocation of additional Indian tribes in the territory, as well as increasing pressure from whites to open the lands to settlement. The treaties also granted the railroads access, creating a transportation link that enhanced the possibility of huge profits in cattle, lumbering, and mineral mining. With these opportunities for wealth, the overlapping jurisdictions of the U.S. government and independent Indian nations, and the vast acreage and distances that made avoiding justice easy, the Indian Territory became a chaotic refuge for the lawless.

Responsibility for policing this area fell to the federal court in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The Western District of Arkansas, created in 1851, derived its uniqueness from the responsibility to handle cases between Indians and those who were not tribal members. The court, unlike most of its federal counterparts, handled an extraordinary criminal caseload, with most of this activity erupting after the Civil War. Until 1875, when Judge Parker arrived from Missouri, the court’s reputation for justice was poor. Parker’s predecessor had resigned under the threat of impeachment; the past five U.S. Marshals had all left under similar clouds of scandal; and the deputies had a history of using perjury and bribery for their own ends. In his 21 years at Fort Smith, Parker would restore the court to respectability. He gave much of the credit for his success to his deputies, once commenting that “without these officers, what is the use of this court?”[1]

While the majority of deputies were white, the law enforcement force working in Indian Territory was probably the most integrated on the frontier at that time, having its share of both Indian and African-American members. The use of these officers was an efficient and effective way of carrying out the work of the federal court because of the multicultural population in the jurisdiction. As one historian has noted, “A deputy’s authority to a great extent depended on his being accepted and respected by the Indians.”[2] African-American deputies held a decided advantage here because of the Five Tribes history of slaveholding. Unlike white deputies, many African-American officers had lived with the Indians, understood local customs and possessed knowledge of tribal languages. Some were freedmen, like Grant Johnson, the son of a Chickasaw Freedman and a Creek Freedwoman. Deputy Bass Reeves, an ex-slave, left his owner in Texas sometime prior to or during the Civil War and found refuge in the Indian Territory where he learned several Indian dialects. Although not all black deputies were former slaves—Zeke Miller had been a mine inspector in Ohio—a high percentage of them had some previous dealings with the tribes and often seemed trustworthy as a result.

How these men were chosen remains somewhat of a mystery. Some may have been sought out by the court, which was in need of brave men who knew the territory. Bass Reeves, possibly the first black American west of the Mississippi to become a deputy U.S. marshal, was approached by Judge Parker himself and convinced to serve as a lawman.[3]

By all means, it was a dangerous profession. Gunfights and ambushes erupted as suspects fought arrest or prisoners attempted escape. Bass Reeves killed 14 men in his career, but proved self defense in each case. Deputy John Garrett, another African American, became one of the first victims of the infamous Rufus Buck Gang as they carried out their spree of robberies, murders, and rapes in the summer of 1895. Frequently working with celebrated lawman Heck Thomas, Deputy Rufus Cannon, the descendent of an ex-slave and a Cherokee mixed-blood, assisted in arresting some of the most notorious outlaws of the period, including Bill Doolin, William Christian, and Bill Carr.[4]

Making those arrests often took ingenious methods. On one occasion, Bass Reeves, disguised himself as a tramp and walked 28 miles to the home of two outlaws. Although they were not home at the time, Reeves convinced their mother that he could be trusted and she invited him to spend the night. When the sons returned that evening, they shared a room with the deputy who proceeded to handcuff them while they slept. After breakfast the next morning, he marched them back to his camp and transported them to Fort Smith. Reeves was also known for his incredible memory. Lacking a formal education and the ability to read or write was a formidable obstacle, considering that all legal writs and subpoenas required proper service. Bass Reeves studied the paperwork until he could associate the symbols of a written name with the sounds of the name as spoken. When he located the suspects or witnesses, Reeves selected the correct documents by matching the symbols. He would then have the person read the paper aloud themselves. In this way, only if the person could not read was Reeves forced to find someone that could.[5]

Although African-American deputies may have been welcomed into the Indian communities they served more easily than white lawmen, prejudice against them remained. Much of this derived from the placement of blacks in positions of authority over whites.

Despite such prejudice and adversity, African-American deputy marshals performed their duties efficiently and heroically in the Indian Territory. Fort Smith National Historic Site continues to do research on these individuals and their contributions to law enforcement history. Dr. Nudie Williams of the University of Arkansas once wrote about Bass Reeves that “the mark of this man was not that he died with his boots on, but what he did with them while he wore them.”[6] The same may be said about those other deputies who proved so instrumental in preserving law and order in Indian Territory.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Fred Harvey Harrington, *Hanging Judge*, (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1951: Reprinted by University of Oklahoma Press 1966) p. 66.

[2] Paul L. Brady, *A Certain Blindness: A Black Family’s Quest for the Promise of America* (Atlanta: ALP Publishing, 1990) p. 20.

[3] Brady, p. 20; *Fort Smith* (Arkansas) *Weekly Elevator*. April 15, 1887: July 13, 1888.

[4] Nudie E. Williams, “United States vs. Bass Reeves: Black Lawman on Trial” *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Summer 1990, p. 156; Glenn Shirley, *Law West of Fort Smith: A History of Frontier Justice in the Indian Territory 1834-1896*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), p. 160; Arthur T. Burton, *Black Red and Deadly:Black and Indian Gunfighters of the Indian Territory, 1870-1907* (Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1991) p. 243.

[5] Burton, pp. 176-177, 204-205.

[6] Williams, “Bass Reves: Lawman in the Western Ozarks,” *Negro History Bulletin* (April/May/June, 1979) p. 39.

Juliet Galonska is the park historian at Fort Smith National Historic Site. Recently she served as project director for two history conferences at Fort Smith NHS. In 1994 she received Oklahoma State University’s Leroy H. Fisher Award for the best graduate paper in history. She has a master’s degree in history from Oklahoma State University.

Mary McLeod Bethune Council House Dedication

Mary McLeod Bethune
NATIONAL
HISTORIC SITE
Council House

The Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site was dedicated as the newest African-American unit of the national park system on October 10, 1996. Dignitaries attending the dedication celebration in Washington, DC, included NPS Field Director for the National Capital Area, Robert Stanton; and the following Federal Advisory Commission Members—Dr. Dorothy Height, Dr. Savannah C. Jones; Mrs. Romaine B. Thomas; Ms. Brenda Girton-Mitchell; Dr. Sheila Y. Flemming; Dr. Bettye J. Gardner; and Mrs. Bertha S. Waters. Actress Cicely Tyson also attended.

Photo courtesy NPS.