

# Biography of bass reeves: the slave who became a legend



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## Bass Reeves: The Slave Who Became a Legend

When people talk about legendary lawmen of the oldwest there are a few names that most likely will be discussed. The majority of people are aware of the Earp brothers, the most famous being Wyatt. Pat Garrett and Bat Masterson are a couple other names that are synonymous with the oldwest. There is one man, however, that few people are aware of that deserves as much recognition as all the other lawmen. Bass Reeves was born a slave, but became a legend.

### **Growing Up Bass**

Bass Reeves was born in Crawford, county, Arkansas sometime in the year 1838. The boy was raised as a slave in Grayson, county, Texas with his owner, William S. Reeves, who was a farmer and politician. Bass took the surname, Reeves, from his master as it was customary for slaves during that time period. As a slave, Reeves worked as a water boy, quenching the thirst of the other slaves. When he was old enough he ended up working as a field hand. As a young adult Bass Reeves became a personal valet, companion and bodyguard for George Reeves, William's son. He would work in this capacity until the Civil War broke out. At this point George would go to fight for the confederacy, and he took Bass with him. <sup>1</sup>

Very little is known about what exactly Reeves did during the Civil War. One theory is that he served under Colonel George Reeves' command in several battles, to include; Pea Ridge and Missionary Ridge. Others claim that he had escaped slavery during that time. One popular notion is that Bass and George got into a struggle over a card game, and he used that opportunity to flee to

Indian territory. Being a mountain of a man, standing at 6'2", this idea seemed highly plausible.

Reeves took refuge with numerous tribes, to include the Cherokee. While living with the indigenous people he developed a great understanding of their customs, language, and mastered their tracking skills. Reeves also used this opportunity to enhance his firearm talents. He became very deadly accurate and swift with his revolver. The Indians trusted Reeves more than the white lawmen in the territory because of his skin color. They felt more of a kinship with him. When Reeves learned that he was a free man, due to the Emancipation Proclamation, he bought some land in Arkansas and became a successful farmer and rancher. It was here that he met and married Nellie Jennie with whom he fathered ten children. <sup>2</sup>

### **The Legend Begins**

It was during this point in Reeves' life that it really became interesting. While working as a rancher he was hired on several occasions as a guide and scout for the U. S. Marshals to execute warrants in the Indian territories. In May of 1875 the Federal Western District Court was supervised by Judge Isaac Parker. <sup>3</sup> As his first official act, he appointed U. S. Marshal James F. Fagan to head up 200 deputies to patrol the territory. The Oklahoma Range covered over 75, 000 square miles. <sup>4</sup> Because of his extensive knowledge of the area and its people, and his ability to speak several tribal languages, Reeves was hired as a permanent U. S. Deputy during this period. <sup>5</sup> Thad Morgan explains that, " Upon taking the job, he became the first black deputy U. S. marshal west of the Mississippi." <sup>6</sup> Reeves was illiterate but it did not hinder

his performance. He would have someone read the warrants to him and he'd have them memorized before they rode out. When he issued a warrant for an arrest, he would produce the correct one each time. <sup>7</sup>

The federal laws stated that every marshal had to be joined by at least one posse member. Since Reeves worked in Indian Territories, he often used just one Indian for assistance. He would often ride alone toward the end of his career. From his short stint in the civil war to his 35 years as a marshal, and short term as a policeman, Reeves' life had been in danger many times. He was in several gunfights with outlaws and he had survived numerous assassination attempts. Miraculously, Reeves had never been shot or seriously injured. Reeves was a large and imposing figure as he rode his white horse. He was always a fancy dresser with shined boots and constantly wore a large hat. Being ambidextrous he permanently had his two colt revolvers ready for a quick draw, and he rarely missed. <sup>8</sup> He would often use other identities and disguises as a way to issue warrants or capture outlaws. Even though he had a very intimidating appearance, he was known as a polite and courteous man with honesty and integrity. He was a fair lawman and treated his detainees humanely and with respect. While transporting his prisoners, accompanied by a cook and at least one posse man, he would ensure that they were well fed and would even deliver a sermon after each meal. <sup>9</sup> Even though Reeves was very fast and accurate with his guns, he did not draw unless he had to. In his obituary, the Shawnee Herald expressed that, " Bass Reeves always said that he had never shot a

man when it was not necessary for him to do so in the discharge of his duty to save his own life.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Accomplishments and Accolades**

One of the most famous tales of Reeves' accomplishments was how he captured two outlaw brothers. He had used his disguise mastery to pose as a weary outlaw on the run from a posse. He convinced the mother of the two brothers to allow him to stay with her until the men returned home. When the two outlaws arrived at the house, they were none the wiser, and were planning to join forces with the mob to continue on with more illegal shenanigans. Before the two siblings awoke the next morning, he had them locked in handcuffs ready to take them. The mother of the two men cursed Reeves for miles as he escorted the criminals to the awaiting posse.<sup>11</sup>

Probably the most emotional pursuit for Reeves was arresting one of his own children. His son, Bennie, murdered his wife, and Bass decided it should be him, that brought his own son to justice. He was tried and convicted to life in prison. Bennie was later pardoned and spent the remainder of his life as a model citizen.<sup>12</sup> Bob Dozier was a criminal mastermind of his day, but was no match for Bass Reeves. Dozier had committed various crimes, ranging from cattle rustling and bank robbing to murder. He had eluded many lawmen until Reeves used his superior tracking skills to locate him in the Cherokee Nation. Dozier refused to surrender, and was ultimately killed by Reeves in a gunfight between the two men.<sup>13</sup> Another show of his incredible skill was against Tom Story. Story was the leader of a gang of horse thieves. Reeves confronted him to serve an arrest warrant. The outlaw was caught off guard and panicked. He drew his weapon on the famed marshal, but Reeves was much faster and

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shot the man dead.<sup>14</sup> Although Reeves shared a bond and felt close with some of the tribes in the area, it did not deter him from chasing Indian outlaws. One of the most famous ones that he tracked down and arrested was a Seminole named Greenleaf. The man was responsible for killing seven people and had eluded capture for nearly two decades until Reeves got him. He also pursued a Cherokee outlaw named Ned Christie, but was unsuccessful in his capture.<sup>15</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica inform people that, “Reeves killed 14 outlaws and apprehended more than 3,000 throughout his tenure.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Trials and Tribulations**

Reeves was arrested for being falsely accused of killing a cook, one of the members of his own posse in 1887. He stood trial before Judge Isaac Parker, the same man responsible for launching his career over a decade prior. Reeves was represented by his friend, U. S. Attorney W. H. H. Clayton and was ultimately acquitted. Probably the lowest point in his life was when his wife of 30 years passed away in 1896. Even though he remarried in 1900 to Winnie Sumter, Nellie was his first love and the mother of his children. Oklahoma gained statehood in 1907 and Reeves was no longer able to remain a deputy marshal. It was not because he wasn't physically able to do the job, but it was due to new state laws that wouldn't allow African-Americans to hold that position. At this point Reeves became a police officer in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Although it isn't official, it was considered that during this time period there were no crimes committed on his patrol. Two years later, Reeves was diagnosed with Bright's disease, which is a chronic

inflammation of the kidneys. This ended his lawenforcement career and later his life on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1910.<sup>17</sup>

Due to his closeness with several Native American tribes and his ability to exist among them so easily, and the fact that he often rode alone say for an Indian escort, there has been conjecture that Bass Reeves may have been the basis for the Lone Ranger. Many people have considered that there are many key similarities among the exciting fictional character and the real-life legend. One essential element to this theory is many of Reeves' prisoners were incarcerated at the Detroit House of Corrections. This was the city where, in 1933 the world heard the first radio broadcast of the Lone Ranger.

<sup>18</sup> Both of these heroes demonstrated the same moral compass, and similar skill sets. Encyclopedia Britannica claims, "While there is no definitive proof of the connection, Reeves is sometimes speculated to have been the inspiration for the fictional character the Lone Ranger."<sup>19</sup> Whether or not Bass Reeves really was the inspiration for such an iconic character, he himself was truly a legendary hero in his own right.

## Notes

1. Kathy Weiser, "Bass Reeves – Black Hero Marshal," Legends of America, May 2018 <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-bassreeves/>.
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6. Quoted in Thad Morgan, *Was the Real Lone Ranger a Black Man?* , History. com, Feb 1, 2018, [https://www. history. com/news/bass-reeves-real-lone-ranger-a-black-man](https://www.history.com/news/bass-reeves-real-lone-ranger-a-black-man)
7. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
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9. Marshall Trimble, “ Bass Reeves: U. S. Marshal,” True West Magazine, October 2, 2017, [https://truwestmagazine. com/bass-reeves-u-s-marshall](https://truwestmagazine.com/bass-reeves-u-s-marshall)
10. Quoted in Obituary, *The Shawnee Herald* , Friday, January 14, 1910. Pg. 3.
11. Trimble, Bass Reeves.
12. Helm, Reeves, Bass.
13. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
14. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
15. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
16. Quoted in Encyclopedia Britannica, *Bass Reeves, American Lawman* , Accessed October 28, 2018, [https://www. britannica. com/biography/Bass-Reeves](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bass-Reeves)
17. Weiser, Bass Reeves.
18. Morgan, Lone Ranger.
19. Quoted, Encyclopedia Britannica.



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