



# TRAILBLAZERS OF AMERICA

PragerU



# BASS REEVES



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"...To him, the one supreme document  
and law of the country is a 'writ.'  
Place a warrant for arrest in  
his hands and no circumstance  
can cause him to deviate."

— *Kansas City Star*, 1907



# Fugitive on the Run

*Arkansas, during the American Civil War, 1862*

Bass held his cards close to his chest. He had a good hand, probably a winning hand, but he wasn't sure if he should play or fold.

Ultimately, winning or losing at cards didn't matter much for Bass. He was a slave, and no matter the outcome of the card game, he'd soon be forced to the battlefields of war.

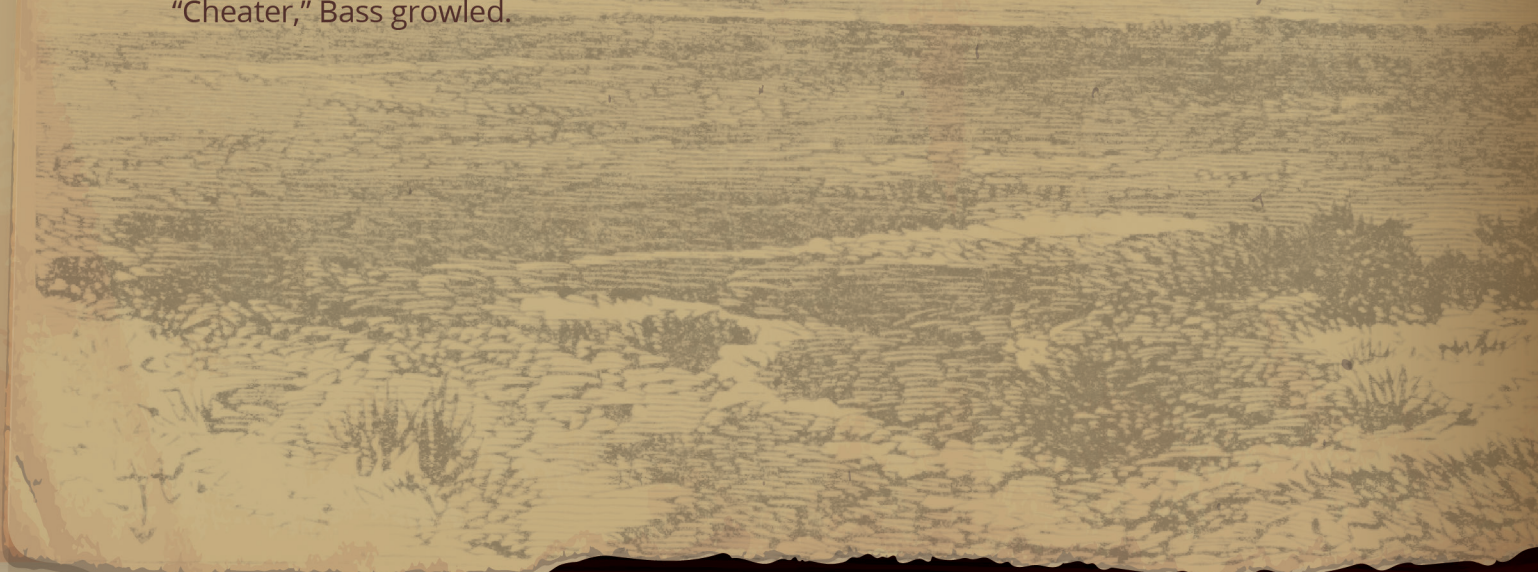
His master, George, sat across the table from Bass and watched him closely. If Bass folded his cards and let his master win, he knew tomorrow's trip to rejoin the **Confederate Army** would be more pleasant. However, any chance for a slave to beat his master was just too good to pass up.

"That's enough thinking," George said. "Let's see 'em."

Bass calmly and confidently played his hand. The sight of the fifth spade hitting the table sent George into a coughing fit. When George raised his arm to cover his mouth, Bass caught a glimpse of something in his sleeve. In a flash, Bass was around the table and grabbed his master at the wrist.

"Careful now, Bass," George warned.

"Cheater," Bass growled.



"Get your hands off me and remember your place!" George snapped, pushing him away.

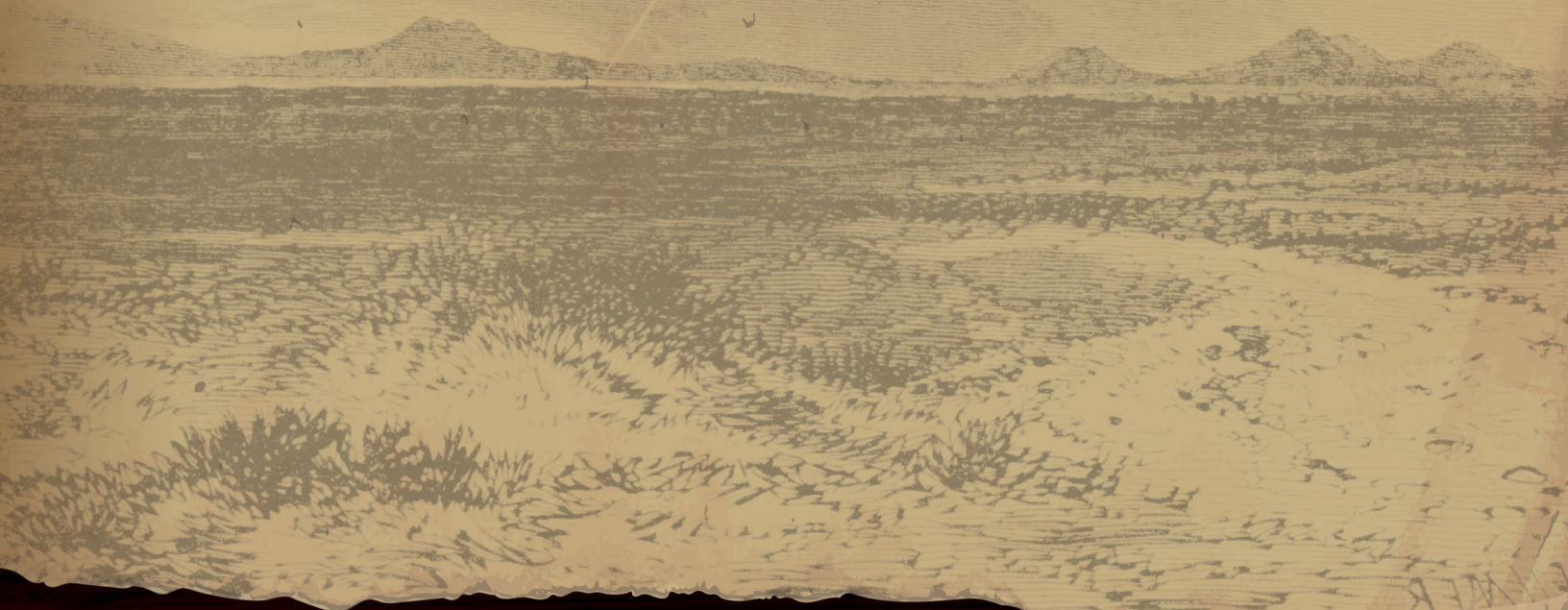
Both men stood, the card game forgotten. Tension was thick in the air, but Bass didn't move an inch or avert his eyes.

With lightning speed, George grabbed a glass from the table and hurled it at his slave. Bass instinctively ducked—and in one fluid motion, he grabbed the card-cheat, picked him off the ground, and slammed his master down on the game table.

George's head hit the wood with a loud crack, and blood began trickling down his neck. He weakly tried scratching Bass's face as his body went limp.

Bass wiped a few beads of sweat from his forehead and looked down at his master lying unconscious. He knew this was it. The time was now or never.

The slave raced for the door and didn't look back. Bass ran as fast as his long legs would carry him. Freedom was out there, and he knew where to find it. In true American fashion, he went west.



# Meet the Legendary Lawman: Bass Reeves

Bass Reeves was born a slave in Arkansas sometime in July of 1838. He was owned by the William Reeves household and grew to stand six feet and two inches. In his youth, Bass was said to be clever, well-mannered, and good-humored. He was very important to the Reeves family. When they moved to Texas, he was brought along, and in another sign of his value, Bass was not allowed to learn to read.

Slaveholders regularly took great efforts in order to keep their slaves from learning to read. They understood the power of education. Because reading allows ideas and information to spread, it was feared by some slaveholders even more than actual weapons. The Reeves family proved this because they trusted Bass with guns.

Bass learned to shoot early in life, and his quick reflexes and steady aim made him not just a good shot, but a fast shot too. As a teen, he was so good at turkey shooting contests his opponents stopped showing up to compete.

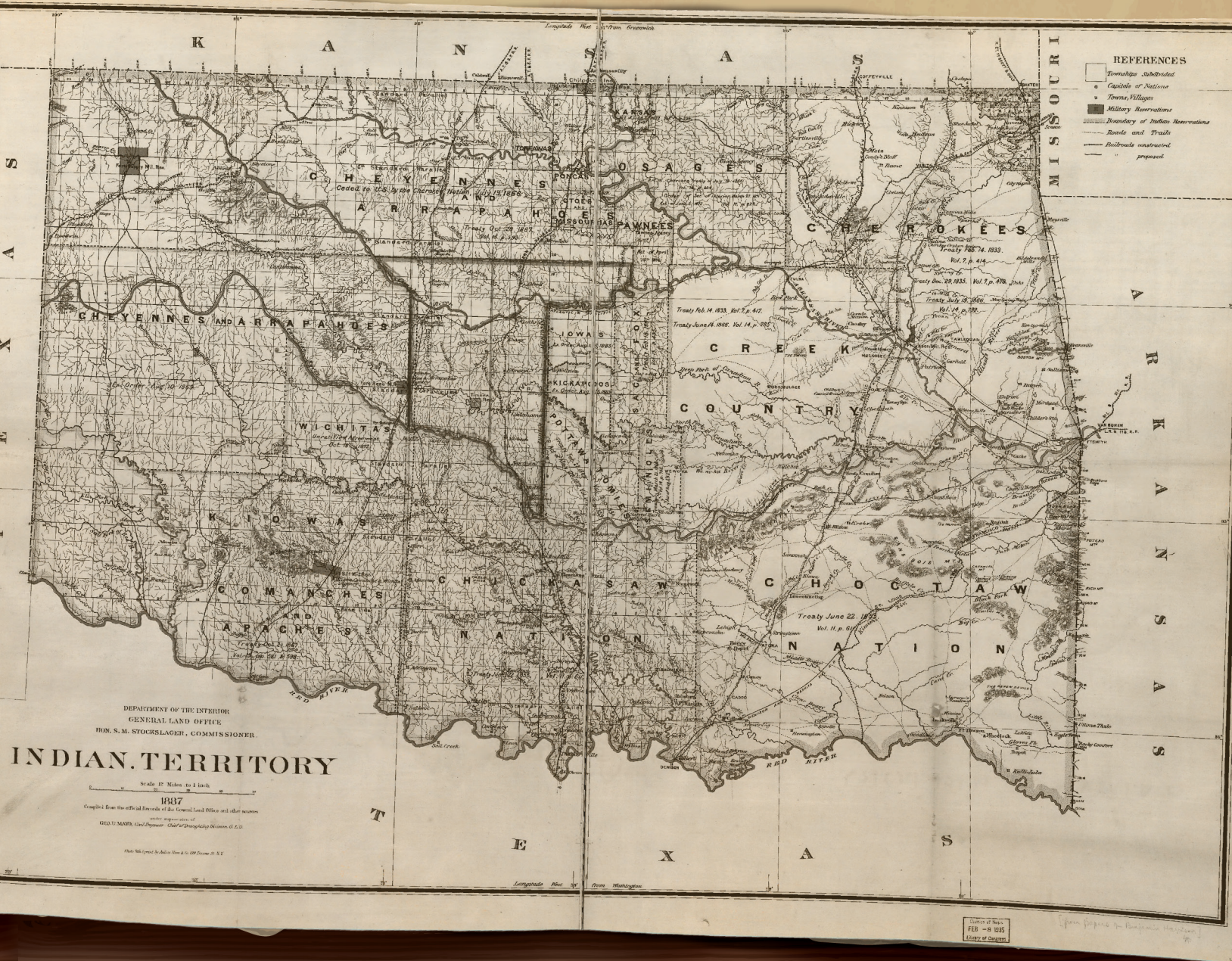
After decades of growing tension over the issue of slavery, America erupted into Civil War in April of 1861. George Reeves, a son of William, joined the **Confederacy** as a colonel and brought Bass along as his **body servant**.

Despite his lack of education, Bass knew that life as a free man was his destiny, and even though he didn't have a choice, how could he help those fighting to keep him enslaved? While traveling with Colonel Reeves, Bass found an opportunity to escape, and he didn't hesitate.

Legend has it, a dispute over a card game led to Bass's escape from his master, but whatever the details, he was a runaway slave. If caught, he would face severe punishment, but he knew just the place to avoid capture.

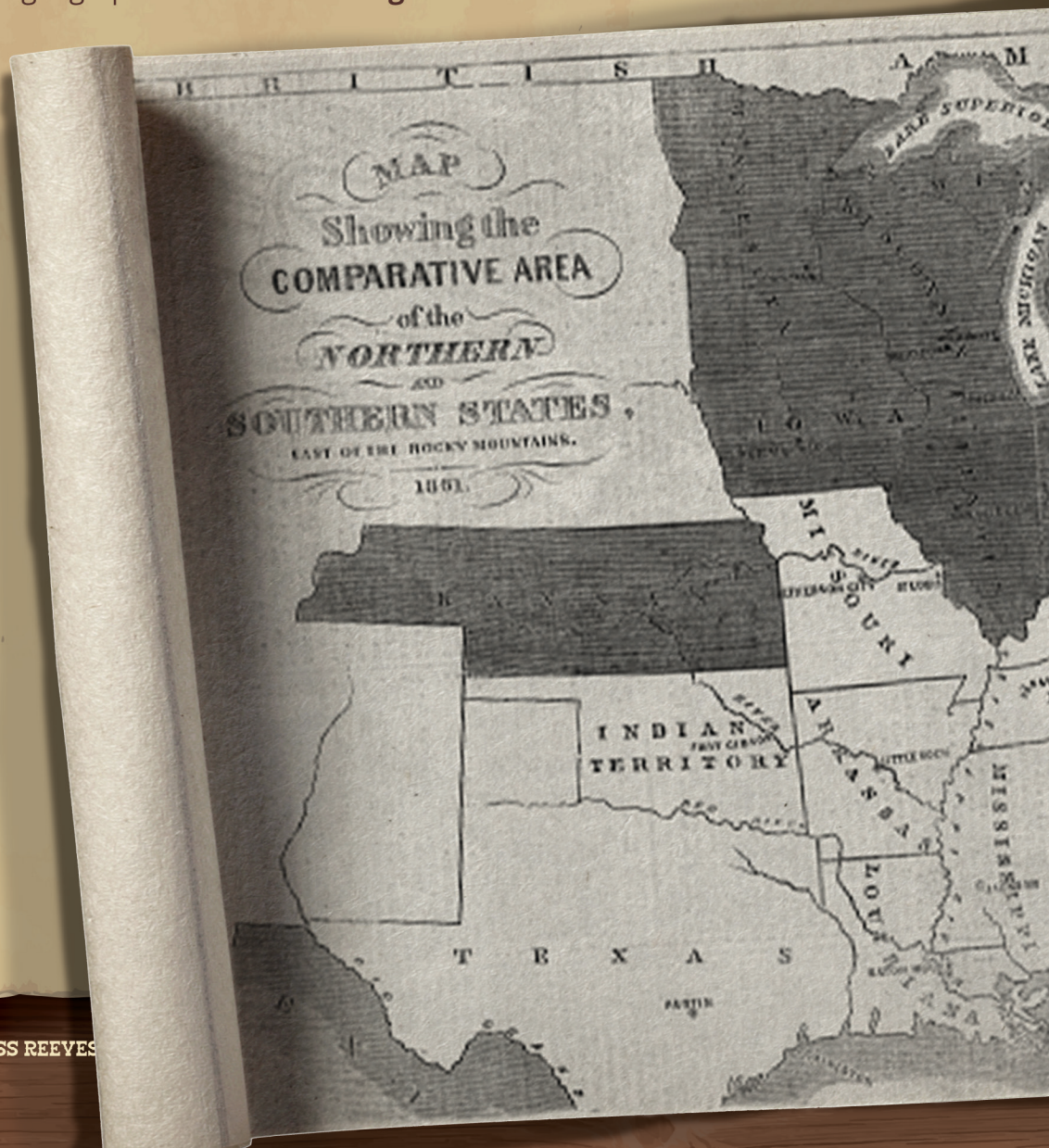
Bass made his way west to the **Indian Territory** beyond the reach of American laws. The lands of modern Oklahoma were then home of the **Five Civilized Tribes**—the Cherokee, Seminole, Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw—and they governed the area without involvement from the United States.

Though Bass's movement and activities during his time in the Indian Territory are mostly unknown, he learned the land and gained knowledge of Native languages and customs. It was an easy place to blend in, particularly *because* it was lawless. It was the **Wild West**: a perfect hiding place for outlaws, bandits... and runaways like Bass.



# The Abolition of Slavery

Slavery in America began when it was allowed in each of Britain's colonies. Not long after winning independence and uniting as one country, America's Northern states quickly began outlawing slavery, but it remained in the South. As the country grew westward, when states were added, some entered "free" and others "slave," but the division remained geographic as well as **ideological**.



During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln initiated a legendary wave of freedom with his **Emancipation Proclamation**. The document freed all slaves in the rebelling Southern states, but in reality, the new measures were difficult to enforce in Confederate-held areas. Plus, Lincoln's proclamation did not end slavery in the border states (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware) or in areas of the Confederacy already under **Union** control.

It wasn't until 1865 that real change came about. First, the Civil War ended with a Union victory. The reunited country then added the **13th Amendment** to the Constitution, which officially **abolished** slavery throughout the entire nation.



# Rise to Deputy Marshal

With the ending of the Civil War, slavery was over, and Bass was no longer a fugitive. He settled not far from Indian Territory in Van Buren, Arkansas where he married his wife, Jennie. The two had a successful farm and had a family with eleven children.

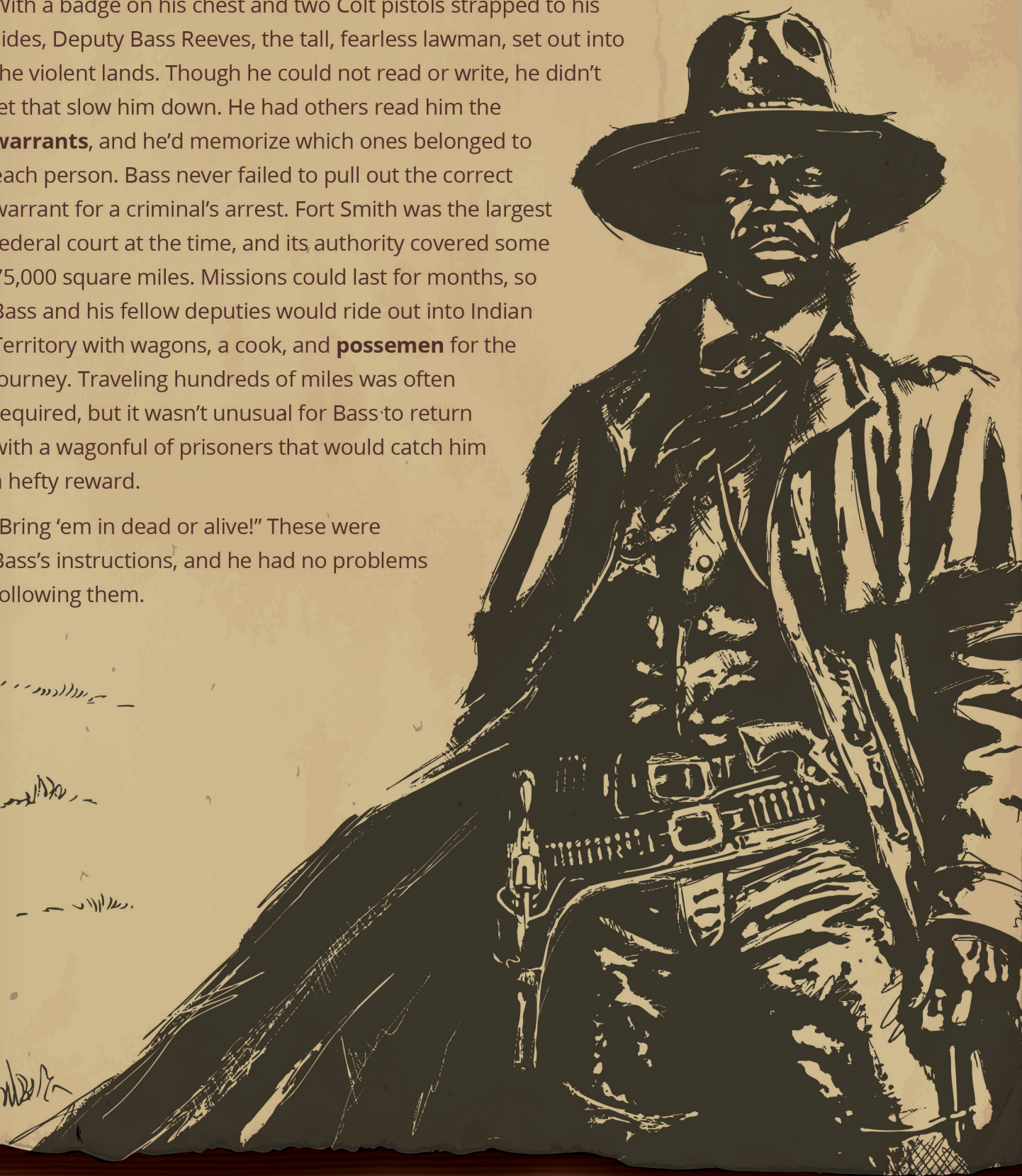
Bass was known to assist the deputy marshals at Fort Smith, Arkansas. Bass claimed to know the Indian Territory like “a cook knows her kitchen,” and his help as a guide and interpreter was in high demand. Indian Territory’s lawlessness had attracted waves of crime and violence to neighboring communities, and if the Five Tribes weren’t going to bring order to the area, the U.S. government decided they would.

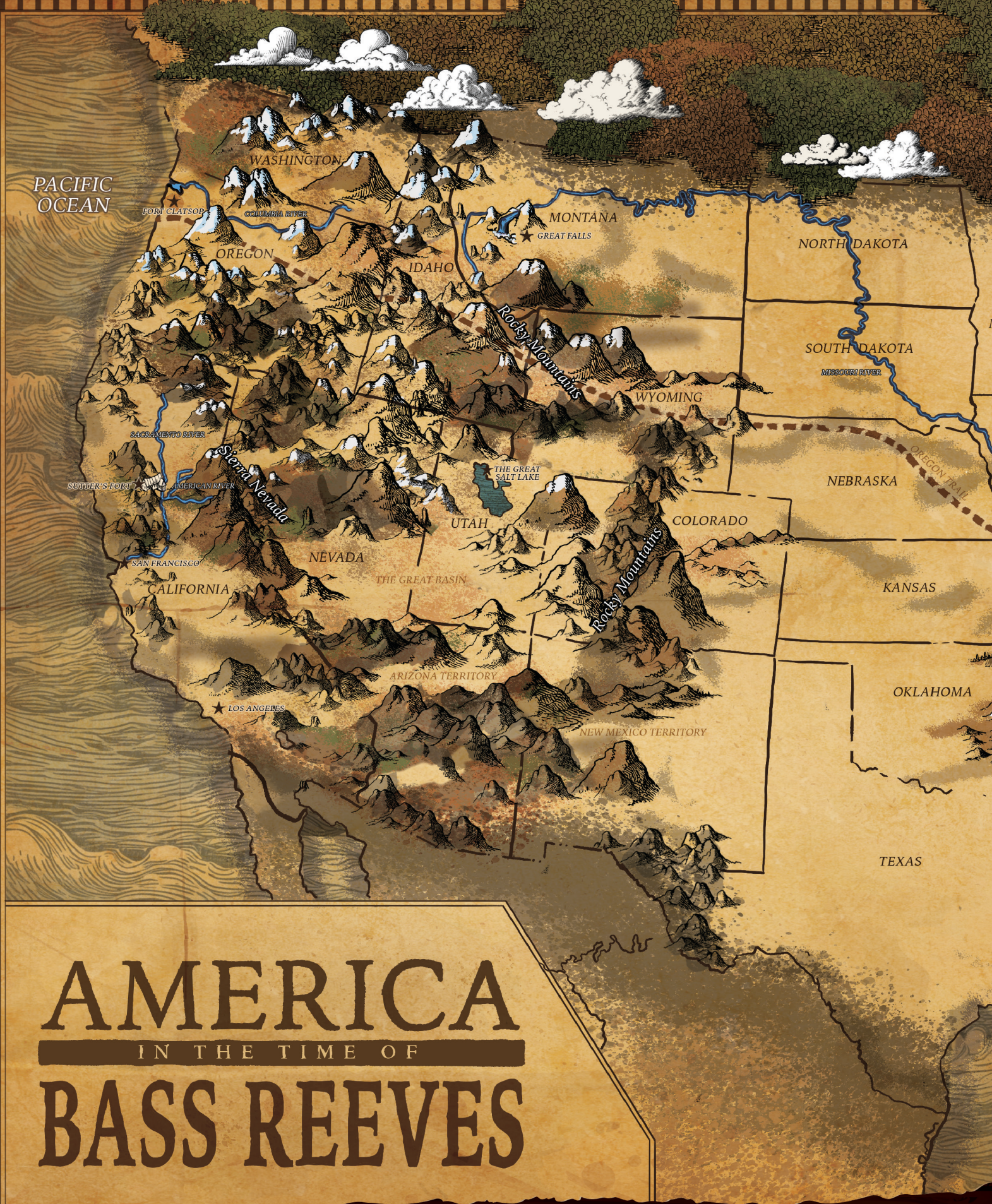
In 1875, Isaac Parker was appointed the first judge of Western Arkansas and the Indian Territory, and he immediately commissioned 200 deputies to clean it up. Murders, thefts, and other illegal activity were rampant. Bass was among the recruits, and he became one of the first black marshals in U.S. history.



With a badge on his chest and two Colt pistols strapped to his sides, Deputy Bass Reeves, the tall, fearless lawman, set out into the violent lands. Though he could not read or write, he didn't let that slow him down. He had others read him the **warrants**, and he'd memorize which ones belonged to each person. Bass never failed to pull out the correct warrant for a criminal's arrest. Fort Smith was the largest federal court at the time, and its authority covered some 75,000 square miles. Missions could last for months, so Bass and his fellow deputies would ride out into Indian Territory with wagons, a cook, and **possemen** for the journey. Traveling hundreds of miles was often required, but it wasn't unusual for Bass to return with a wagonful of prisoners that would catch him a hefty reward.

"Bring 'em in dead or alive!" These were Bass's instructions, and he had no problems following them.





# AMERICA

IN THE TIME OF

# BASS REEVES



# Dangerous Duel: Webb vs. Reeves

*Bywater's General Store, Indian Territory, 1884*

Jim Webb saw the legendary deputy coming on his horse. His mind nervously raced as his options flashed before him. He'd already been arrested but escaped before his trial. No way he was going back.

The outlaw drew his gun, leaped from the open general store window, and began sprinting. *If he doesn't see me, I'll get my horse and be gone. Just 50 yards, that's all.*

But there was no escaping Bass Reeves. His eyes were as good as his shot, and after spotting Webb scampering across the road, he skillfully maneuvered his horse and blocked the outlaw's easy exit. Now exposed, Webb turned sharply and found cover behind a water trough. He listened for the sounds of Bass turning his horse and planned his next move. Jim had respect for Bass, but he was out of options: either he or Bass would walk out of this alive.

The outlaw sprang up from behind his cover, took aim, and shot. *BANG! BANG! BANG!*

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Jim's first shot grazed Bass's saddle just as he completed turning his horse around. The second cut a button clean off his coat. The third tore through his horse's bridle, and the now-useless reins fell to the dirt.

Bass reached for his rifle, jumped off his horse, and bolted behind a barrier.

*BANG!* A fourth bullet from Jim's gun whizzed past the edge of the barrier an inch from the brim of Bass's hat. Another close call. *Click...* Bass cocked his rifle and listened carefully. Not a sound from Webb.

"Sorry Jim, but you're not gettin' outta here," the lawman hollered to break the silence.

# BLACKSMITH

*BANG!* Another shot flew past Bass's barrier, and then suddenly, there were footsteps. Webb was making a run for it.

Bass calmly stepped into the street, quickly lifted his gun, and aimed. Jim was fast, and he was quickly fading into the distance. For most men, hitting a moving target from about 100 yards away (especially after nearly being shot yourself) would be tricky, but this was Bass Reeves. He released his breath and squeezed the trigger without a hint of worry.

*BANG!*

Jim Webb went down in a cloud of dust. "Reeves!" the outlaw called weakly.

Bass calmly approached the fallen man but kept his rifle aimed and ready. Though mortally wounded, Webb was still breathing, and his revolver remained in his hand.

"Jim, throw the gun away," Bass ordered.

The defeated criminal released the grip of his weapon and looked up at Bass.

Bass crouched down beside Webb, knowing his time alive was short.

"You're a brave man, Bass," Jim wheezed. "Take my gun and its sheath as a gift. I've killed eleven men with it, and I thought you would be the twelfth. I want to die knowing my gun will do some good. Please take it."

Bass didn't say a word, but he did retrieve the outlaw's gun and tucked it away. He let the man pass as peacefully as he could. He had hoped to bring Jim Webb back to face the justice of the courts, but Jim had chosen the justice of the Wild West instead.

*Oh well, Bass thought, at least the world is a little safer with one less bad man in it.*

**"Reeves was never known to show the slightest excitement, under any circumstance. He does not know what fear is."**  
-Oklahoma City Weekly Times-Journal, 1907

A FIELD GUIDE TO  
**INDIAN TERRITORY &  
THE SOUTH PLAINS  
ANIMALS**



SKUNK FRONT  
PAW TRACK



SKUNK REAR  
PAW TRACK



### SKUNK

A small mammal around the size of a dog or cat that has black and white striped fur. It's known for its foul-smelling spray as a form of defense. Skunks live only in North and South America. A story goes that Bass once had a skunk crawl onto him while he was sleeping in Indian Territory. One of the prisoners he was escorting back to Fort Smith tried to make a lot of noise to scare the skunk into spraying Bass, but the lawman talked to the creature calmly, and it eventually walked off without bothering anyone.

### HORSES

They were introduced to North America by Spain in the 1500s, but the Native Americans helped breed them. Horses played a key role in the development of the West. They were used for transportation, hunting, herding cattle, and pulling plows on farms. The West wouldn't have thrived as it did without them. Common breeds were the Palomino, Morgan, and Quarter Horse. Wild horses that popularly roamed the West were called Mustangs! Reeves famously caught and killed Tom Story, leader of a notorious horse-thieving gang.



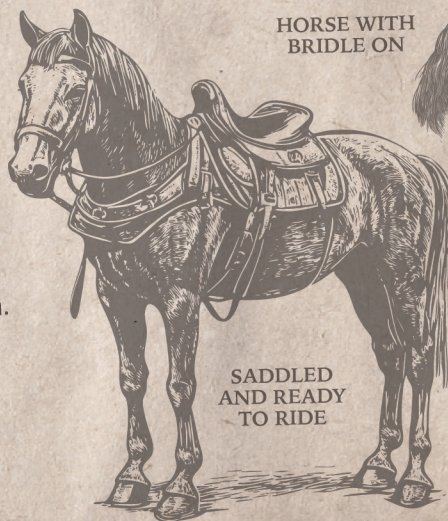
### CATTLE

Large, domesticated mammals usually found on farms as livestock. They're used for their ability to provide milk, meat, or leather. You probably know them as cows, but they come in many different breeds all with varying colors, body size, and horn length. Bass would have come across many cattle herds in the Indian Territory and Texas on farms and ranches. He also chased his fair share of cattle-thieving criminals!

HORSE WITH  
BRIDLE ON



SADDLED  
AND READY  
TO RIDE



A FIELD GUIDE TO  
**INDIAN TERRITORY &  
THE SOUTH PLAINS**  
PLANTS



**PRAIRIE SUNFLOWER**

A yellow sunflower native to the Great Plains of North America. It can grow three to six feet tall and enjoys a habitat of sandy prairies and plains.

**PRICKLY PEAR**

A type of flowering cactus native to the Americas, particularly Mexico and the western and south-central United States. The fruit and flowers of the plant are edible, and it grows in dry, desert-like conditions.



**MESQUITE TREES**

Common trees in dry climates such as the southwestern United States and down into South America. They can be short shrubs if they grow in shallow soil, or they can grow to be 50 feet tall in deep, rich soil. Their roots are known for growing very deep into the soil, searching for water. The trees grow pods, or beans, that can be ground into flour to make bread.



# Wearing a Badge in the Wild West

Bass's time as a U.S. deputy marshal was full of exciting tales and close calls. As more federal courts opened in the West, he moved from station to station. He took positions in Paris, Texas; Wetumka, Oklahoma; and Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Bass wasn't just known for his shooting skills—he was a master of disguise as well. He would dress as a poor farmer or a fugitive on the run to get close to his suspects. One time, he pretended to be a fugitive to gain the trust of a suspected murderer. Bass traveled with the man for three months and was able to get a full confession. Later, Bass testified against the man at his trial.

Bass's reputation as a man of justice and integrity spread throughout his lifetime, earning him some fame during his career. A notable female criminal, Belle Starr, actually turned herself in as soon as she found out Reeves had a warrant for her arrest.

Most deputies knew they had a dangerous job, but Bass seemed to wear fearlessness alongside his badge. Just 80 miles west of Fort Smith ran the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad. It cut right through Indian Territory, and it was known as the "dead line." Outlaws would leave cards or notes, warning deputies that if they crossed those tracks, they'd be killed. Reeves never hesitated to travel past the "dead line" and was known to show off warning cards he had collected to bandits he captured beyond the tracks.

More than once, Bass returned after months of being away, carting outlaws to be tried, bringing in as many as 17 at one time. Their crimes ranged from murder to theft to **bootlegging**, and Bass wouldn't hesitate to arrest any lawbreaker, whether Indian, black, white, male, or female. To Bass, the law was simply about right and wrong.

When he returned a group of prisoners, he'd collect the reward money, spend time with his family, and then disappear again with a new batch of warrants. The work was never done.



# NOTABLE ARRESTS

During Bass Reeves's career, it's estimated that he killed 14 outlaws and arrested over 3,000 men and women who broke federal laws in the western territories. That's an impressive track record for any deputy, but being one of the earliest black-American deputies makes it all the more notable.

Check out the following warrants to see some of Bass's most notable arrests from his career!

## WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE

**BELLE STARR**  
KNOWN ASSOCIATE OF THE STARR CLAN



**REWARD: \$500**

**CRIMES:** Horse Thievery, Harboring Fugitives

Bass brought in his own son after finding out he killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. Bennie was convicted and sentenced to life in jail, but he got out later on good behavior. Reportedly, he lived the rest of his life as a model citizen.

Though Bass didn't arrest her, when Belle found out he had the warrant for her arrest, she turned herself in at Fort Smith. She was convicted but only served a short jail sentence due to good behavior.

## WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE

**BENNIE REEVES**



**REWARD: \$600**

**CRIMES:** Domestic Murder

# WANTED

DEAD OR ALIVE

**GREENLEAF**  
A SEMINOLE INDIAN



**REWARD: \$900**

**CRIMES:** Murder of 7 people. He was known to kill the people he stole from. Evaded capture and arrest for 18 years.

Bass found out where Greenleaf was staying, hearing that he was passing through with illegal whiskey. In the morning, before Greenleaf woke up, Bass and his men surrounded the house. People were so shocked by the arrest, that they came from all over to confirm he'd actually been arrested.

Bass waited along his suspected route, and when Tom tried to fire on him, Bass beat him to it. With the death of Tom, the entire thieving gang broke apart and was never heard from again.

# WANTED

DEAD OR ALIVE

**TOM STORY**  
LEADER OF THE TOM STORY GANG



**REWARD: \$600**  
**CRIMES:** Horse Thievery

A FIELD GUIDE TO  
**INDIAN TERRITORY &  
THE SOUTH PLAINS  
WEAPONRY & TECHNOLOGY**

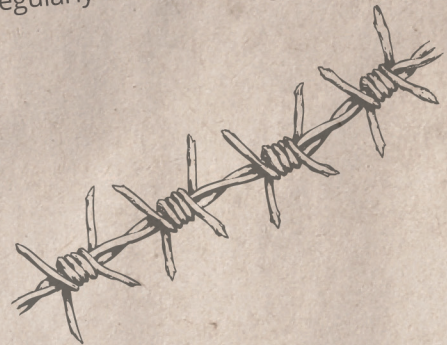


**LANCE**

A weapon used for hunting and combat that could be thrown from horseback. Some lances were over 12-feet long and could travel long distances. Even after rifles were regularly available, Indian tribes like the Comanche, Kiowa, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne regularly used lances.

**BARBED WIRE**

Affordable, effective, and environmentally friendly, barbed wire was a major tool used to tame the American West. Invented and promoted during the last half of the 19th century, barbed wire marked land rights, protected agriculture, and controlled livestock.



**MARSHAL'S BADGE**

A metal star or circle with a star inside it that marshals wore to designate their position. There were many different styles over the years, and in the 1800s, some would cut it out of a coin or metal tin themselves if they didn't have the budget to buy one.



**HANDCUFFS**

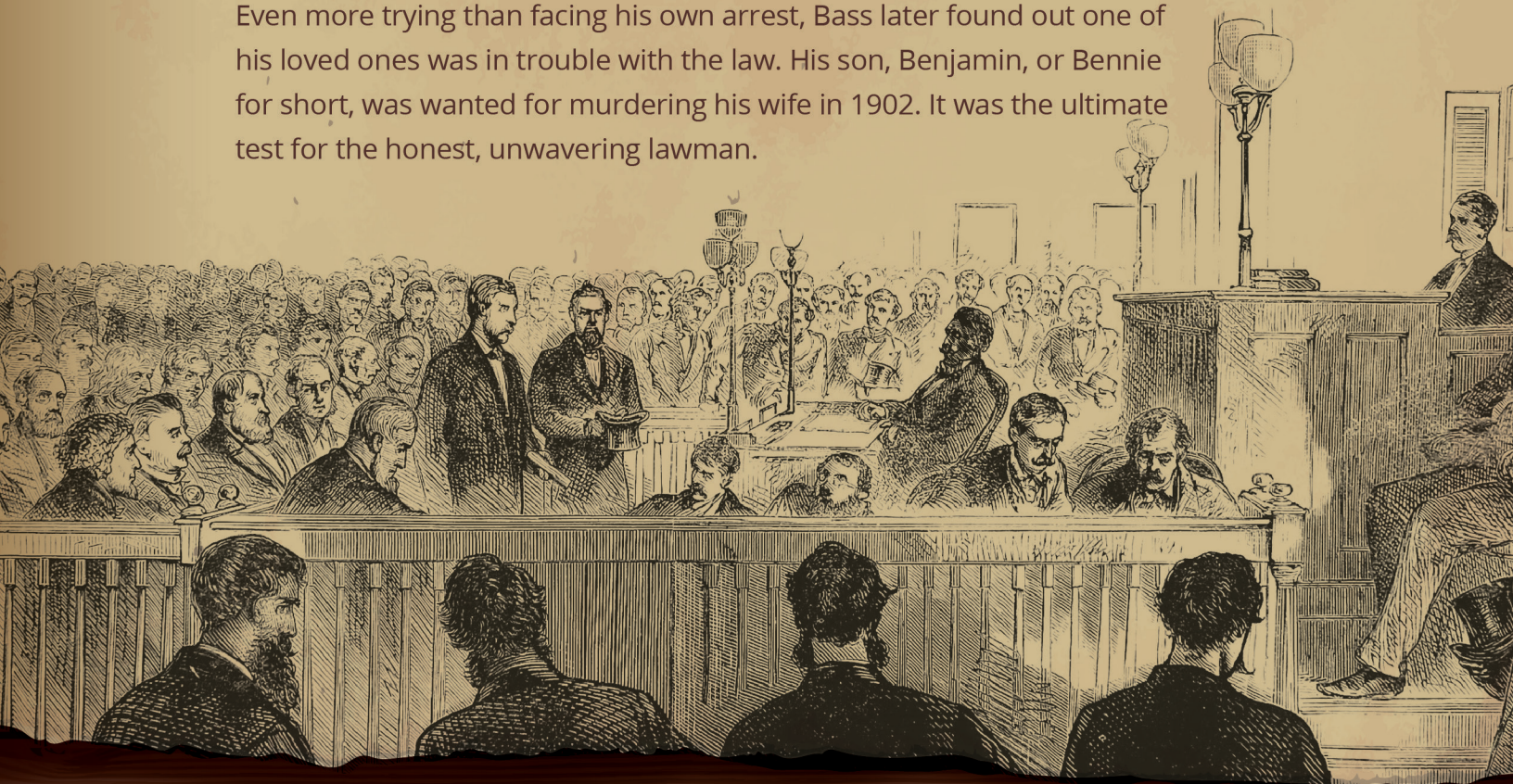
Metal cuffs that go around a person's wrists to restrain them. Law enforcement has used them for many years to apprehend criminals. Bass Reeves carried them whenever he was on the job.

# No One Above the Law

Bass Reeves was admired not just for capturing criminals, but for his dedication to upholding the law no matter the circumstances. Even he had to answer to the law when his cook was killed on one of his trips.

Reports vary on what exactly happened. Some say Reeves and his cook got into an argument, some say the cook had attacked Reeves's dog, and others say it was just a misfiring of Reeves's gun while he was cleaning it. Regardless, Bass was later tried for the murder of his cook. He sought the help of one of his lawyer friends, and after all the testimonies were heard, Bass was eventually found innocent. He returned to the line of duty, but the whole trial had cost him most of his savings.

Even more trying than facing his own arrest, Bass later found out one of his loved ones was in trouble with the law. His son, Benjamin, or Bennie for short, was wanted for murdering his wife in 1902. It was the ultimate test for the honest, unwavering lawman.



# No Exceptions

*Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), 1902*

Bass's guns felt heavier in their holsters than normal. If Bennie resisted arrest, he didn't know if he could bring himself to use them on his own son.

He looked at the house where Bennie was holed up. For two weeks, he'd tracked and hunted down his own son like prey. Bass felt like a knife was twisting in his guts. The house appeared abandoned, with broken shutters and a collapsed porch.

"Bennie, don't make me come in there!" Bass called. "Just come out with your hands up!"

The air was still with tense silence. Soon, the slow creak of an old wood board betrayed his son's presence in the house. Sheepishly, Bennie stepped outside.

"They sent you? I... I was hoping it'd be someone else," Bennie said.

"I volunteered," Bass explained. "You're my son. My responsibility."

Bennie didn't move. He seemed glued in place. "I don't know what came over me. She was unfaithful to me, and I just got so angry I grabbed my gun and..."

"Do you still have the weapon on you?" Bass asked.

Bennie shook his head. "It's in the house."

"Alright. Come on. It's time to go." Bass motioned for Bennie to join him. His son shuffled over in his dusty, dirt-stained clothes. His eyes were bloodshot and tired.

Bass gripped his boy tight. He knew Bennie wouldn't run—the grip was to steady himself. He felt hollow and numb as he said, "Benjamin Reeves, you are hereby under arrest."

He clicked the handcuffs onto Bennie's wrists and began the long march back to the courthouse.

# A Lawman to the End

Bass Reeves's 32-year career as a U.S. deputy marshal came to an end in 1907 when Oklahoma became a state and other agencies took over law enforcement. The lawman was in his late 60s, and he found new work as a police officer in Muskogee, Oklahoma. It was a much quieter and less exciting patrol. In the two years he spent on duty there, it's said there wasn't a single crime committed on his beat.

By 1910, Bass was sick and nearing the end of his life. He died of **Bright's disease** on January 12, 1910 at the age of 71. After his passing, a local newspaper called the *Muskogee Phoenix* wrote of him, "Bass Reeves has a place in the front rank among those who cleansed out the old Indian Territory of outlaws and desperadoes... During that time, he was sent to arrest some of the most desperate characters that ever infested Indian Territory and endangered life and peace in its borders. And he got his man as often as any of the deputies."

Bass Reeves was a legend in his time and beyond—a real-life superhero. His incredible rise from slavery to lawman showed true strength, hard work, and integrity. In a time when the West ran wild and crime spread as quickly as disease, Bass Reeves stood firmly on the law of the United States of America.

With his freedom, Bass had options. He could have chosen a peaceful life as a farmer or businessman, but he chose to spend his life serving his country and protecting others from crime. He wasn't in it for fame or money, but for the precious freedoms that come from submitting to the law: peace and prosperity for all.

# Tools of the Trade: Guns

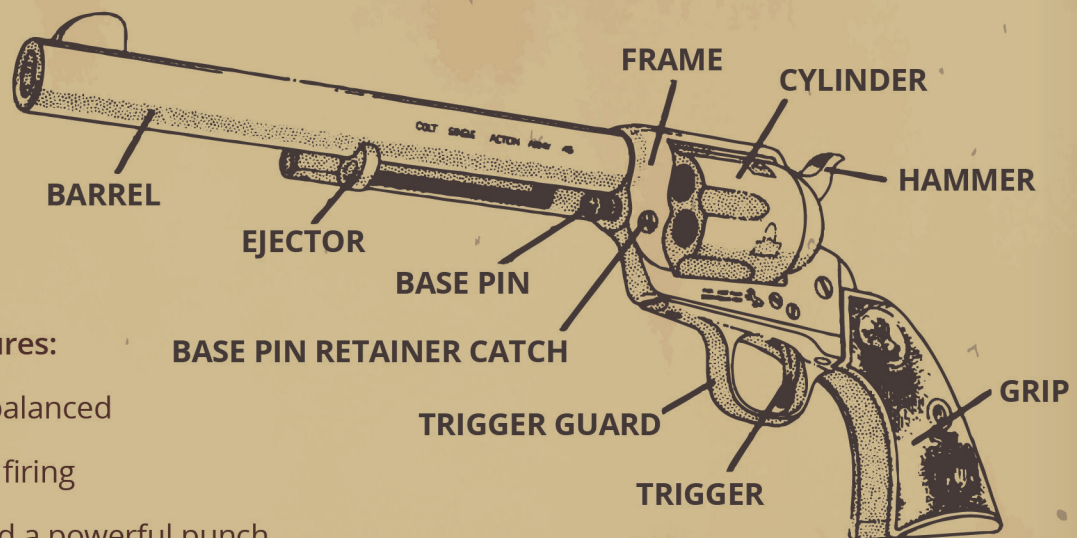
Guns were an essential tool in the Wild West. People needed them for hunting, to put food on the table, and also to defend themselves against any threats. Here are just a few of the guns that were popular in the West during Bass Reeves's lifetime, for both lawmen and outlaws alike!

## Colt Single Action Army (1873)

Inventor: Charles B. Richards and William Mason

Gun's Nickname: "The Peacemaker."

- ✦ The Colt was one of the most popular sidearm revolvers of the Civil War.
- ✦ The gun gets its name from Samuel Colt, the owner of the company that produced the weapon.
- ✦ After the Civil War, it continued to be used in the West by lawmen and outlaws due to its multi-chamber capabilities. It had six chambers, giving it another nickname, "the six-shooter."



Best Features:

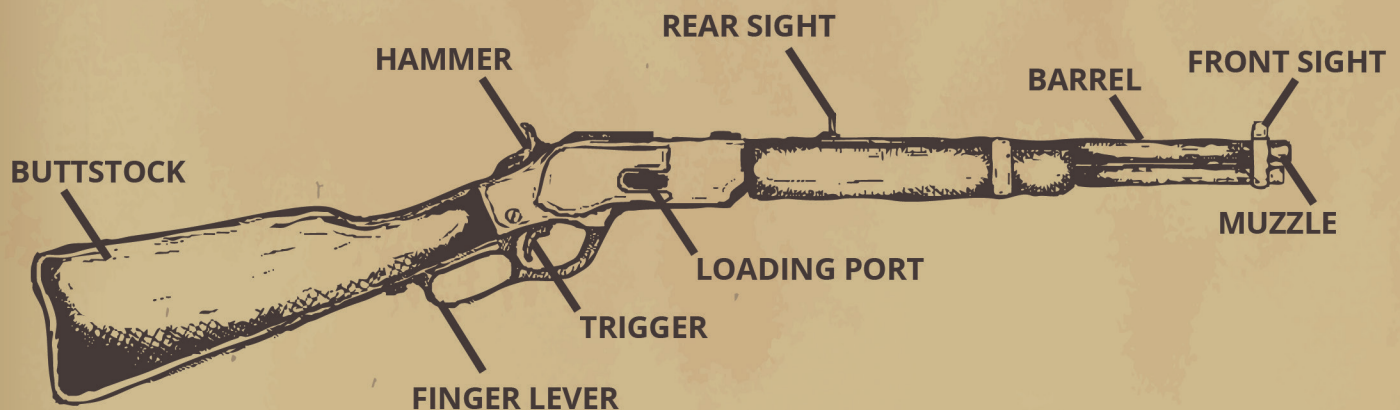
- ✦ Well-balanced
- ✦ Rapid firing
- ✦ Packed a powerful punch

## Winchester Rifle (1873)

Inventor: Oliver Winchester

Marketed as "The Gun that Won the West."

- ✦ It was built off the designs of the Henry repeating rifles used during the Civil War, though the Winchester wasn't used much by the military.
- ✦ It was a great catch-all gun that could handle animal game and self-defense needs. Pretty much anything your handgun couldn't handle, the Winchester could.
- ✦ It was one of the first successful centerfire guns, meaning it was more reliable and easy to reload.



### Best Features:

- ✦ Larger magazine—it could hold up to 14 rounds
- ✦ Reliable and low-maintenance
- ✦ Built to use the same caliber of ammunition as many popular handguns (People could carry around one type of ammo for all their guns!)

# A CHARACTER LARGER THAN LIFE

Bass Reeves has often been described as a real-life Superman or Sherlock Holmes. His imposing physical appearance mixed with his incredible detective skills gave him a legendary reputation. Another character he has often been compared to is the fictional Lone Ranger.

The Lone Ranger was a radio series for many years before getting a movie and TV adaptation. The fearless Texas ranger was the single survivor of a criminal gang attack. He then struck out on his own, with only his Indian sidekick Tonto, to help those in need and establish justice.

Historians debate whether or not this Lone Ranger character was based on the real-life Bass Reeves. Here are a few similarities:

Bass and the Lone Ranger were both Texans who patrolled the Wild West for outlaws.

Bass left silver coins for people, while the Ranger left silver bullets.

Just as the Ranger had an Indian companion, Bass often traveled with Indians in his posse.

Both were masters of disguise.

Both were known to ride horses, and for a part of Bass's career, he was known to ride a gray/white horse similar to the Ranger's.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**IS BASS REEVES THE INSPIRATION FOR THE LONE RANGER?**





# Glossary

**13th Amendment:** Ratified on December 6, 1865, the amendment officially abolished slavery in the United States, making the practice illegal.

**Abolish:** To formally bring an end to a practice, system, or institution.

**Body Servant:** A personal servant or attendant, sometimes called a valet. A body servant would accompany their master wherever they went and attend to their needs.

**Bootlegging:** The act of making, selling, or transporting goods illegally. In the Wild West, this was most often used in reference to alcohol.

**Bright's Disease:** A type of kidney disease where inflammation causes the kidneys to not work properly.

**Confederacy:** The country created by the 11 Southern states that seceded from the United States from 1860 to 1861. These actions led to the Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865.

**Confederate Army:** The land-based military of the 11 rebellious states known as the Confederacy.

**Emancipation Proclamation:** A document President Lincoln issued on January 1, 1863, declaring that all slaves living in the Confederacy were free. It is considered one of the most important documents in American history and a major milestone in expanding freedom in the United States.

**Five Civilized Tribes:** The Cherokee, Seminole, Creek, Choctaw, and the Chickasaw tribes. These tribes were originally located in the southeastern U.S. states and, in hopes of remaining, took on many practices and cultural traditions of white settlers. However, all five tribes were forced to move west and settle in the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

**Ideological:** A system of related ideas. Usually concerning politics, economics, or religion.

**Indian Territory:** It was originally all the lands west of the Mississippi, which were designated as Native American land. After the forced removal of many Indian tribes in the southeastern U.S. in the mid-1800s, the Indian Territory was primarily present-day Oklahoma.

**Posseman:** A member of a posse, which was a group of people who helped a deputy or sheriff enforce the law.

**Union:** The name for the United States government, and its military, during the Civil War that succeeded in preventing the Confederate states from leaving the nation and continuing slavery.

**Warrant:** An official document issued by an authority that allows someone to make an arrest or carry out other acts of justice.

**Wild West:** Another name for the American frontier during the era of westward expansion when crime and lawlessness were common in the territories.

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