

from Gary McCarthy's

*OUR AMERICAN WEST*

*Bat Masterson*  
*Gambler, Lawyer and Journalist*

There are few characters that lived on the American frontier that enjoyed a more interesting life than "Bat" Bartholomew Masterson. He was born in 1853, and before he died at the age of sixty-eight, he had seen the entire saga of the West unfold and had been an active participant in nearly every phase of its development. His parents were sodbusters and Bat, along with his brothers and sisters, grew up on a succession of poor farms. When Bat was nineteen, he and his older brother, Ed, decided to leave the family's struggling Wichita, Kansas farm and strike out on their own. Their first job was with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad where they obtained a subcontract to grade a mile of roadway leading west out of Dodge City. The two brothers worked for months but when they were finished the contractor who promised to pay them skipped town. Discouraged, broke and hungry, Ed Masterson returned to the family farm but young Bat stayed in town, and the following spring, collected over three hundred dollars at gunpoint when the contractor made the mistake of passing back through Dodge City.

Hard work was not to Bat's liking. He was a natural prankster and a man who loved excitement. It was during the early 1870's that the great buffalo slaughter was taking place on the prairies and an expert rifle shot could earn as much as a hundred dollars a day. Bat Masterson was an expert shot so he signed up as a buffalo hunter in the spring of 1873. He had several close calls

with the Comanche and Kiowa who were staging a desperate fight against the buffalo hunters and encroaching white settlers. The recently concluded Medicine Lodge Treaty between the United States government and the Plains Indians stated that the Arkansas River was to be the southern boundary beyond which buffalo hunters and white settlers could not cross into Indian Territory. But like most frontier treaties, this one was ignored by the whites and, in June of 1874, Bat Masterson along with about thirty-five other hunters boldly and illegally traveled into the Texas Panhandle where they were attacked by a force of over five hundred Indians. It was a long and desperate siege lasting five days. Several whites were killed along with many Indians. The great Chief Quanah Parker and his warriors finally called off the battle and the survivors of the Battle of Adobe Walls became famous, especially Bat Masterson whose long-range shooting accuracy had been devastating to the Indians. Only twenty-one and already somewhat of a legend around Dodge City, Bat found himself out of work and dead broke again. Not wishing to clerk in a store and refusing to return to his parent's hardscrabble farm, Bat enlisted as an Army scout and served during the Red River War against the Indians. Again, he distinguished himself with his marksmanship and coolness under fire.

Bat Masterson had already survived more scrapes at a youthful age than most men would experience in an entire lifetime. By now, he had decided that his future was not in hunting buffalo but in gambling. Settling into Dodge City, Bat was a handsome and distinguished gentleman as he moved from saloon to saloon where he plied his newfound trade. He wore gold-mounted spurs, a crimson Mexican sash, a red silk neckerchief, a fine Stetson with an elegant rattlesnake hatband and a pair of beautiful ivory-handled Colt revolvers. It was agreed by the sporting ladies of Dodge City that Bat Masterson was the handsomest man in the territory with his lascivious smile and striking grey eyes. Because of his good looks, his swagger and cockiness, it was probably inevitable that Bat found himself caught in a romantic triangle one cold day in January of 1876. He was attracted to a lovely dance hall girl named Molly Brennan, but so was a hot-tempered and dashing young

Army corporal named Melvin King. Reports vary on what happened when the two men went for their guns over the affections of Molly. Most agree that King, in a fit of jealous rage, drew first and that Molly threw herself in front of Bat to shield him and took a bullet which passed through her body and still managed to shatter Bat's pelvis. Bat, holding the dying woman in his arms coolly shot King to death. Early dime novelists liked to paint this tragedy as one in which the love of Bat's life was lost, but that seems doubtful. Bat Masterson was a ladies' man all his life and I suspect that he did not long grieve over poor Molly Brennan. Because of his shattered pelvis Bat began to use a silver-tipped cane which became an indelible part of his flamboyant image.



While in Dodge City, Bat became good friends with Wyatt Earp and it was only natural that Earp would encourage the young shootist to become a lawman. "Now listen," Wyatt must have explained, "you can still ply your trade as a gambler and even own a saloon or gambling hall as long as it's mostly honest. I have and so have most of the other lawmen who figure they deserve better than a city council is willing to pay us in wages each month."

The argument made good sense to Bat. He ran against the incumbent sheriff, a huge man named Larry Deger and defeated him by only three votes in a hotly contested race to become the Sheriff of Ford County. Coincidentally, Bat's dearest brother, Ed, had grown tired of pushing a family plow and had come back to Dodge City where he was soon appointed the town's new marshal. Suddenly, the Masterson brothers found themselves in a position of great power and influence. With his newfound responsibility, Bat assumed a more subdued dress and modest demeanor. He rid himself of the sash and bright silk neckerchief and began wearing a tailored and expensive black suit, white shirt, starched collar and tie. The Stetson and the fine

rattlesnake hatband were replaced by a dignified bowler. But the pair of well-oiled, ivory-handled Colts remained on his hips. My oh my but the Masterson brothers, sons of poor sod-busting farmers were riding high, wide and handsome!

Bat possessed all the instincts of a great frontier lawman and was always on his guard against danger. He practiced with his gun almost daily right in town where any potential enemies could witness his extraordinary speed and marksmanship. He was a very good and impressive frontier lawman who never used excessive force but neither did he waste much time trying to reason with a boisterous drunk. Men feared and respected Sheriff Masterson who relished the excitement of his newfound occupation. He chased and caught several noted outlaws and backed down many deadly professional gunfighters. Bat liked to ride around his huge county in a fine buggy and he was always on the lookout for trouble, staying one step ahead of it.

But Bat's dearest older brother, Marshal Ed Masterson, was a different sort entirely. Everyone liked Ed and thought of him as kind, genial and trustworthy. Ed wanted things in his town to stay quiet and he preferred to avoid using force but instead talk a trouble-maker into handing over his weapons. He never practiced a gun and so he was only a fair shot. Ed was a darned nice fella who should have gone into politics, or owned a general store or maybe become a newspaper reporter because he just wasn't hard enough to command the respect of the wild Texas cowboys who arrived in Dodge City every fall with the stated intention of getting drunk and "hoo-rahhin'" Dodge City. And so, on the night of April 9, 1878, when good-natured Marshal Ed Masterson tried to reason with a bunch of drunken Texas cowboys in front of the Lady Gay Dance Hall, he was gunned down in the shadowy street but not before mortally wounding two of the cowboys. Arrests were quickly made, but because there were no witnesses to the gunfight and the street lighting was so poor, the remaining suspects were released for lack of evidence. It was reliably reported that Ed Masterson's funeral was one of the biggest in the history of Dodge City. Saloons closed, businesses were draped in black bunting, a huge procession followed the hearse and the town's citizens wept in the street. No

doubt about it, Marshal Ed Masterson had been a much loved man and a real nice fella—way too nice for his line of work.

The death of Ed Masterson was the greatest loss of Bat's life. He had worshipped his brother, seen in him all the tolerance, patience and goodness that he lacked. Bat fell into a deep depression that lasted for years. He drank to drown his sorrow and lost his sense of humor and geniality. Bat became much more dangerous and quick-tempered and his popularity plummeted until he was defeated for reelection. Angry and resentful, he shook the dust of Dodge city from his coattails and began to roam around the frontier, taking one dangerous lawman job after another and cleaning up every town he ruled with his gun and cold-eyed fury. He was never popular and was often feared; once he had rid a town like Creede or Leadville, Colorado of its lawless element, he was usually fired. One Denver newspaper wrote, "All the toughs and thugs fear him as they do no other. Let an incipient riot start and all that is necessary to quell it is to whisper, 'Here comes Masterson'!"

Bat did cultivate the friendship of famous gunfighters. Besides his long-time friendship with Wyatt Earp, he assisted Doc Holliday and was instrumental in getting the Governor of Colorado to block an attempt at extradition by the Arizona authorities where Doc was wanted for murder. Bat was also good friends with Luke Short. But the most surprising thing he did was to shock all his friends in 1886 when he became a Prohibitionist and publically swore off liquor—quite likely while courtin' a "respectable and God-fearin' woman". Old newspapers even carried some of Bat's anti-alcohol speeches and he was quite an orator about the evils associated with "demon rum". But the following year, he was drinking again and back in the good graces of his rowdy and dangerous friends.

Bat settled in Denver and for a good number of years, capitalized on his fame and was able to support himself in high fashion as a gambler. He would work for a saloon and, because he was a celebrity, receive a take of the house winnings as well as what he could earn with his own considerable gambling skills. But time and hard living finally started to catch up with Bat. Too often

drunk and always quick tempered and dangerous, the Denver city fathers asked him to leave their city. Insulted, Bat vowed to leave the West forever.

At the beginning of a new century, Bat Masterson found himself in New York City. Dime novelists had made him famous and he sought a way to earn his living without using a gun or a deck of cards. In one of those unusual twists of good fortune and circumstance, Bat met a man named Alfred Lewis, a prominent member of New York's high society. It was Lewis who persuaded Bat to write a personal account of his life and his acquaintances with his legendary gunfighter friends and, to everyone's surprise, the old lawman turned out to be a fine writer. His accounts of Wyatt Earp, Bill Tilghman, William F. Cody, Doc Holliday and Luke Short were immensely popular reading. Bat had finally found himself a new solid and respectable life and vocation. He was feted by high society, and unlike many celebrities, he managed to stay on top and establish himself as a top-notch sports writer. Bat Masterson became an expert on boxing and sport editor of the well-regarded New York Morning Telegram. His columns were sharp, witty and very popular. Still wearing his derby and using his silver-tipped cane, he remained a dashing figure, the darling of a high New York society who loved to listen to his great western stories. In his last years, Bat was crusty, opinionated but highly respected.

Bat Masterson died at his newspaper desk in 1921 and in that desk was found the following note which I think seems to reflect his dry humor and ironic view of life. *"There are many in this old world of ours who hold that things break about even for us. I have observed, for example, that we all get about the same amount of ice. The rich get it in the summertime—the poor only get it in winter."*

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*Gary McCarthy is a national award-winning western and historical novelist who welcomes comments about this column and can be reached through his website:*

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