

THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SIX-SHOOTER:  
WESTERN SYMBOLISM IN THE NEW YORK  
NEWSPAPER WRITINGS OF FORMER  
GUNFIGHTER BAT MASTERSON

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## PREFACE

Bat Masterson, once one of the most feared gunfighters in the American West, died not with a six-shooter in his hand but with perhaps a more powerful weapon — the pen. Although best known in history as a colorful lawman and gambler in the untamed boom towns of the frontier, Masterson spent the last two decades of his life as a New York newspaper reporter and sports editor. This hero of the West, who owed his fame in great part to the newspaper writings of his exploits on the frontier, in the latter part of his life was himself a journalist, chronicling the exploits not of gunfighters and desperadoes but of some of the most famous athletes of the early twentieth century.

As a newspaper columnist, Masterson had a greater forum for his views and more influence than he ever did as a lawman or gunfighter. While it is significant to examine why a former gunfighter was given such a platform, it is of greater importance to study how he used this forum and what his writings can tell us about that period of American history from the final days of the frontier in the late nineteenth century to the urbanization of America that continued through the time of Masterson's death in 1921.

The attempt to understand the how and what of Masterson's newspaper writings is the guiding force behind this work. Rather than accepting Masterson's role as a sports reporter as merely a footnote in American history, this project begins with the premise that by examining Masterson's writings within the context of the greater events of his era, one can gain a unique insight into American society at this time. Masterson was a product of the American

West and the mythology of the frontier, yet later in his life he became symbolic of another great event in American history, the rural-to-urban movement. Were these events and these themes reflected in the writings of this one-time gunfighter, and if so how?

The nature of this research requires a preliminary discussion of the methodology that will be employed. The primary sources which will be used are Masterson's published columns and articles. In this regard, the research will contain elements of content analysis, as it will follow a systematic approach to examining and attempting to quantify certain themes and elements in his writing. However, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has observed, "almost all the important questions [in history] are important precisely because they are not susceptible to quantitative answers."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the content analysis of Masterson's writing is meant only to "suggest or hint what motives or relationships might be."<sup>2</sup> This is a methodology which has been practiced in communication research, where quantitative methods often are well suited to study topics such as a journalist's attitudes, as is being done here.

A more detailed explanation of the methodology used is given in Chapter 5. However, it should be mentioned here that the "road map" followed in this research project was that provided by James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan, who propose five "controls" in attempting to do interpretation in history. Briefly summarized, these are:

- There must be some logical criteria for the selection of the evidence used;
- The evidence must be studied in historical context (or, "a sense of historical time");
- The study must include the opinions of others on the topic;
- Not only must "general statements. . .rest on evidence. . ." but "[s]pecific material must be related to generalization. . .";

- An effort must be made to transcend the present time and circumstances in order to examine Masterson by the standards of his day.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the newsroom, just as on the frontier, Masterson was a man who inspired not only fear and curiosity but above all respect. No doubt, his reputation as an old West gunman had much to do with the respect his newspaper column commanded. Still, as was noted in the rival *New York Tribune*, Masterson wrote with a "directness of expression" that resulted in stories and columns that contained within them valuable insights into America and American culture as Masterson saw them in this unique period of our history. From an historian's standpoint, the writings by Masterson may tell us more about America than the many writings and tall tales about him.

## WORKS CITED

<sup>1</sup>James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan. *Historical Methods in Mass Communication* (Hillsdale, New Jersey, Hove and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1989) 59.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 59.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 146-148.

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## CHAPTER 1

### BAT MASTERSON: THE MAN AS MYTH

#### Introduction

Among the many tales recounted about Bat Masterson, who gained fame as a frontier lawman, gunfighter, and gambler in the Wild West of the 1870s and 1880s, is one that is alleged to have taken place in May of 1902. Masterson, whose greatest feats as a gunman were behind him, reportedly was drinking at a saloon in Denver and entertaining a large crowd of hangers-on with his loud tales and boasts. In many ways Masterson was a relic of the Old West that quickly was disappearing from the American scene. He was 49 years old, and age and hard drinking had taken a toll on the man who was reputed to have 30 to 40 gunfights and killings to his record. But Masterson still commanded an audience wherever he went, and he presently was drawing laughter from the crowd by relating to them an offer he had received to write for a New York City newspaper, the *Morning Telegraph*.

"Imagine me working indoors," said Masterson. "Why, I'd shoot one man, and the bullet would go through him and hit six others."

The laughter quickly died down when the new sheriff in town entered the room, walked up to Masterson and, with the same icy resolve Masterson had once used to back down outlaws in Dodge City, Kansas, informed Bat that he had two choices: Get out of town or be killed. Masterson paused in the sudden

quiet that had fallen over the room and studied his drink for a moment before giving his reply.

"Do editors spell for you?" he asked.<sup>1</sup>

Like many of the tales about Bat Masterson, this one is part fact, part fiction, and part hyperbole. Unlike the other tales, it touches on a lesser known side of one of the legendary figures of the American West. While most of his famous contemporaries from the Wild West met their end in violent deaths (Wild Bill Hickok was shot in the back of the head while playing poker in Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1876,<sup>2</sup> the year Masterson first arrived in Dodge City) or drifted into obscurity (Wyatt Earp, Masterson's close friend and fellow lawman in Dodge City, quietly lived out his final years in Los Angeles),<sup>3</sup> Masterson carved out for himself a second career that kept him in the public eye. As the above tale indicates, Masterson did leave Denver, not entirely of his own choosing, and headed east to New York, where he became sporting editor of the *Morning Telegraph*. (The term "sporting editor" rather than the current term "sports editor" was the one popularly used in the early years of this century for the editor of the "sporting pages," which had become a part of newspapers in the late 1800s.)

There is a touch of irony in Masterson's later career as a sporting editor and newspaper columnist. To a great degree, newspapers and the loose style of reporting that was so prevalent in American journalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century were responsible for creating the legend of Bat

Masterson and the fame that he would enjoy throughout his life. That Masterson himself would join the ranks of the newspaper writers certainly makes for an interesting twist to history.

Although much has been written about Masterson, these writings primarily concentrate on his exploits as a gunfighter and Western lawman. Two biographies have been written about Masterson, the most recent being Robert K. DeArment's *Bat Masterson: The Man and the Legend*, published in 1979. DeArment's book is an exhaustive look at Masterson's life, and the author debunks many of the myths surrounding Masterson, some of which were included in earlier biographical works on this popular Old West figure.

An earlier biography of Masterson, Richard O'Connor's *Bat Masterson*, was published in 1957. This biography in turn served as the basis for a network television show title "Bat Masterson,"<sup>4</sup> which starred Gene Barry as a sharp-dressing, cane-wielding lawman in a typical Hollywood Western town. Interestingly, Barry only took the role as Masterson because he was impressed with the fact that unlike many of his contemporaries Masterson was a sharp dresser who had about him an air of style and class.<sup>5</sup> Masterson was known for his stylish attire, and he was described by his friend Alfred Henry Lewis as "in his way a swell" whose

. . . spurs were of wrought steel traced with gold, the handkerchief . . . knotted about his brown throat was silk, not cotton, while his gray sombrero had been enriched with a bullion band of

braided gold and silver, made in the likeness of a rattlesnake, fanged and ruby-eyed.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Masterson "wore a narrow crimson sash wound twice about his waist" as "a final expression of dandyism."<sup>7</sup>

For many American Baby Boomers, watching the weekly exploits of Bat Masterson as portrayed by Barry was an integral part of their early knowledge of the Old West.<sup>8</sup> Such television westerns and the romantic portrayals of gunfighters such as Masterson and Wyatt Earp also played a large part in the West becoming "both an actual place with a real history and [a] mythic space populated by projective fantasies."<sup>9</sup>

In addition, Masterson served as the basis for Alfred Henry Lewis' 1905 novel *The Sunset Trail*, which was loosely based on his exploits in the West. Lewis was a friend of Masterson, and his book bore the dedication, "To William Barclay Masterson, This Volume Is Inscribed By His Friend The Author."<sup>10</sup> Lewis' novel reflected his hero-like worship of the former Western gunman, as evidenced by his description of Masterson as "bronzed of brow, cool of eye, alert, indomitable."<sup>11</sup> Although the hero of Lewis's novel was indeed named William Barclay Masterson, it was a fanciful story which took great license in embellishing Masterson's exploits. As Masterson's first true biographer, Richard O'Connor, wrote of *The Sunset Trail*, "Today it would be classified as a fictional biography. The fictional content was at least 90 per cent."<sup>12</sup>

Numerous writings of the American West in the period from 1870-1890 also document Masterson's role as a lawman and gunfighter, and his association with other famous names of this period provide additional material on Masterson. Among these works are three excellent histories of late nineteenth century Kansas. Robert R. Dykstra provides an excellent history of Masterson's days as a Kansas lawman in *The Cattle Towns: A Social History of the Kansas Cattle Trading Centers Abilene, Ellsworth, Wichita, Dodge City and Caldwell 1867 to 1885*, as do Nyle H. Miller and Joseph W. Snell in *Great Gunfighters of the Kansas Cownowns, 1867-1886*. Additionally, Robert M. Wright provides first-hand remembrances of these colorful frontier days in his 1913 book *Dodge City: The Cowboy Capital and The Great Southwest in The Days of The Wild Indian, the Buffalo, the Cowboy, Dance Halls, Gambling Halls and Bad Men*.

More general works on the Old West which feature Masterson include a well-documented examination of his life by James D. Horan in *The Lawmen*, and a flavorful account of Masterson and other frontier figures in *Legends of the Wild West*. Additionally, Masterson's close friendship and long-time relationship with Wyatt Earp makes him a prominent figure in the many writings on Earp, including Glenn G. Boyer's *I Married Wyatt Earp: The Personal Recollections of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp* in 1976, Stuart N. Lake's *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshall* in 1931, and the most recent biography of Earp, Casey Tefertiller's *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*. Because

of his involvement in boxing and his later writings on the sport, Masterson also frequently appears in many of the boxing histories covering this period of the sport's development. Foremost among these is boxing historian Nat Fleischer's autobiography *50 Years at Ringside*. Additionally, Masterson's ties to boxing are included in Elliott J. Gorn's *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* and R.A. Haldane's *Champions and Challengers: One Hundred Years of Queensberry Boxing*.

Finally, Bat Masterson even served as the basis for a character in one of the most popular musicals in Broadway history, *Guys and Dolls*. This musical, later turned into a movie, evolved from a short story written by Damon Runyon, a New York City newspaper columnist who as a young man had become friends with Masterson after the gunfighter had moved to New York and become a sports writer.<sup>13</sup> Runyon's tale of Broadway characters, titled "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown," had as its central character Sky Masterson, an incurable gambler who must "get the prim missionary Sarah Brown . . . to accompany him for a night in Havana" in order to win a wager.<sup>14</sup> As the name would imply, Sky Masterson was based on the real-life Bat Masterson, "whom Runyon had heard spin yarns of gun-toting, high-rolling Colorado gamblers in a corner of Shanley's Grill."<sup>15</sup>

But who was this man who led such a colorful and exciting life, who at the height of his career as a lawman and gunfighter was said to be "the best known man between the Mississippi and the Pacific Coast,"<sup>16</sup> and who later

was romanticized in a 1950s television series based on his exploits? As is so often the case, the truth lies shrouded in legend, hidden among the printed records and transcripts of a romanticized but very real place known as the Old West.

### **Bat Masterson: The Man and the Legend**

In 1881, when America's frontier still was considered the Wild West and gunfighters — both those on the side of the law and those outside of it — were becoming a part of our country's folklore, there appeared in the *New York Sun* newspaper an article under the headline: "A Mild-Eyed Man Who Has Killed Twenty-six Persons."<sup>17</sup> This story recounted in vivid detail how a western lawman with the colorful name of Bat Masterson had gunned down seven men in retaliation for the murder of his brother Ed. As was often the case for such sensational tales, the article was reprinted in several Western newspapers, including the *Ford County Globe*, published in Dodge City, Kansas, the home of this "mild-eyed" lawman.<sup>18</sup>

This in turn led to yet another feature story on Masterson in the *Kansas City (Missouri) Journal* under the headline "Bat's Bullets."<sup>19</sup> In addition to elaborating on Masterson's exploits in Dodge City, the writer mentioned a reputed run-in the lawman had with some soldiers in Texas.

It is popularly supposed that he annihilated a whole regiment, and this belief is strengthened by the fact that there was an urgent call for recruits about that time. Only West Point graduates escaped, and being officers they sought places of safety early in the engagement.<sup>20</sup>

The publication of these articles signaled the birth of the legend of Bat Masterson. By 1887, a newspaper writer in Leoti, Kansas, would go so far as to claim that Masterson "had been accused of killing a man on every birthday since he was a lad."<sup>21</sup> As is often the case of such romantic figures in American history, one must attempt to separate the myth from reality. In truth, Masterson was far from the bloody killer he was portrayed.

Bat Masterson was born Bartholomew Masterson on November 27, 1853, in Canada and later changed his name to William Barclay Masterson.<sup>22</sup> The family moved to a farm outside Wichita, Kansas, when Masterson still was a boy, and in 1871 he and an older brother, Ed, left home seeking adventure on the Kansas frontier. After working briefly as buffalo skinners on the plains, the two brothers ventured to Dodge City, Kansas, in search of work.

Dodge City at the time was one of the wildest and most untamed of the frontier towns, and newspaper accounts of the time variously referred to it as "The Wickedest City in America,"<sup>23</sup> "the rip-roaring burg of the West,"<sup>24</sup> and "The Beautiful, Bibulous Babylon of the Frontier."<sup>25</sup> The reputation of Dodge City was best illustrated in an oft-told story, which Masterson himself repeated in one of his newspaper columns. In Masterson's version, a drunken and surly cowboy boarded the Santa Fe train at Larned, Kansas,

about 65 miles east of Dodge City. After the train pulled out of the station, conductor John Bender asked the cowboy for his ticket. This led to the following exchange, as written by Masterson:

"I have no ticket," growled the cowboy.  
"Where are you going?" Bender asked.  
"To hell," replied the cowboy in a militant tone.  
"Give me a dollar and a half and get off at Dodge," was Bender's laconic request.<sup>26</sup>

Dodge City also claimed the dubious distinction of contributing to the English language a term that still is used in America today. It was said that when a dead body was left stretched out on the dirt streets or wooden sidewalks of this tough little town that residents began to refer to this lifeless corpse, which stiffened as rigor mortis set in, as a "stiff," giving birth to a new meaning of the word.<sup>27</sup> This tough, untamed young town was a perfect fit for the young Masterson, who was eager for adventure. He soon gained a reputation as an expert shot with a pistol and a buffalo gun, and he proved his bravery as a member of a hunting party that fought off a superior force of Indians at the Battle of Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle at the outbreak of the Red River War in 1874.<sup>28</sup>

Masterson's reputation as a gunfighter, however, was born in Dodge City two years before that famous battle. Bat and Ed Masterson worked on a railroad crew building a right of way for the Santa Fe railroad, and upon completion of their work the subcontractor, whose name was Ritter, skipped

out without paying them. The two Masterson brothers subsequently tracked down Ritter and "extracted their pay at point of gun."<sup>29</sup>

Many of Bat Masterson's activities in this time period were recorded in the letters of one of his friends, Henry H. Raymond. For example, in a letter dated December 18, 1874, Raymond wrote: "I hear that Bat has got a job at [C]amp [S]upply [in the present Woodward County, Oklahoma], of counting mules, night and morning."<sup>30</sup> A more significant recording of Masterson's was a news item that appeared in the Jacksboro (Texas) *Frontier Echo* on February 11, 1876. It was the report of an incident around which the legend of Bat Masterson was to be built. The story read simply: "Telegraphic News: King, of H. company, 4th Cavalry, and a woman, Molly Braman [sic], killed at San Antonio by a citizen." <sup>31</sup>

In fact, the shooting took place in Sweetwater, Texas, and the woman killed was Mollie Brennan, who died from a shot fired by King, an Army soldier stationed nearby. King in turn was killed by Bat Masterson. It was Masterson's first recorded killing, and it would be his only one. The shooting stemmed from an argument over Brennan, a saloon girl who had drawn the attention of Corporal King. Brennan and Masterson were together after hours at the Lady Gay dance hall in the Texas Panhandle town one night when a drunken and jealous King showed up. Seeing the two together, the enraged King opened fire with his six-shooter, and one of his shots struck Brennan, with the bullet passing through her and striking Masterson in the

pelvis. Although severely wounded, Masterson was able to draw his gun as he staggered backward and shoot King, killing him instantly with a bullet to the heart. Brennan also died from her wounds.<sup>32</sup>

The shooting left Masterson with a limp that led to his use of a cane, which in turn became a part of his legend. More than anything, it established his reputation as a killer — a reputation that would be embellished with each telling. In truth, however, this would be the only man Masterson would kill in a gunfight, and he never would kill anyone in or around Dodge City.<sup>33</sup> As DeArment wrote:

. . . Forever after the Sweetwater shootout, [Masterson] would live with the reputation of a gunman. As one who had "downed his man," he would be admired and scorned. He would be pointed out on the street by people with fear and awe in their eyes, and in time men would write luridly of the dozens of men he had outgunned. Bat may have killed Corporal King, but if he did, he would never kill another human being.<sup>34</sup>

Another fallacy that would enhance Masterson's reputation as a killer was that he carved a notch in his six-shooter for each man he killed.<sup>35</sup> This was just one of the many exaggerated tales that surrounded not only Masterson but other famed law officers as Wyatt Earp, Billy Tilghman and Charlie Basset, none of whom ever notched his guns with such "credits."<sup>36</sup> Although he marked his gun in this manner, Masterson himself added to his legend, as was illustrated in this tale related by Wyatt Earp to Stuart N. Lake. The popular prejudices of the day also are evident in Masterson's words.

According to Earp, a souvenir hunter so incessantly hounded Masterson for one of his famous six-guns that Masterson went to a nearby shop and secured an old Colt .45 to give to the man. As Masterson waited for the man to come and claim his prize, he decided to play a prank on him, as Earp related:

" . . . So he took out his penknife and then and there cut 'twenty-two credits' in the pawnshop gun. When the collector called for his souvenir and Bat handed it to him, he managed to gasp a question as to whether Bat had killed twenty-two men with it.

" 'I didn't tell him yes and I didn't tell him no,' Bat said, 'and I didn't exactly lie to him. I simply said I hadn't counted either Mexicans or Indians, and he went away tickled to death.' "<sup>37</sup>

It was this reputation that played such a large part in Masterson's success as a lawman in the Old West. Men feared him, and with that fear came respect. As Frank M. Wooley wrote of Masterson as he moved from the cattle towns of Kansas to the boom towns of Colorado in the Old West: "Men stayed out of his way—and Masterson stayed alive."<sup>38</sup> Masterson himself knew full well the value of such a reputation, and he worked it to its fullest advantage. Wyatt Earp's wife, Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp, once asked Masterson about his reputation as a killer, and he confided to her:

Most of that is hot air. If you ever have the bad luck to have to kill someone, the tall tales will grow about you. Even the tough ones hesitate to go up against you if they think you've knocked off a couple of dozen hard cases just like them. Wyatt would tell you the same thing. It's all part of the game.<sup>39</sup>

Masterson also was able to turn even an apparent handicap to his advantage. Following his recovery from the shooting which left him with a limp, the resourceful Masterson, soon found uses for this cane other than walking, and many of his contemporaries and later writers claim this led to his nickname "Bat." Stanley Vestal makes such an assertion, stating that while Masterson was recovering from his wound and serving as a Dodge City law officer, he "used a walking stick to bat down troublemakers."<sup>40</sup> O'Connor makes a similar claim,<sup>42</sup> and Frank M. Wooley described Masterson's walking stick as "a gold-headed cane,"<sup>44</sup> which further added to its mystique.

However, Alfred Henry Lewis tells a different story about how the Bat Masterson in *The Sunset Trail* earned his nickname. Lewis wrote that because Masterson's "quick eye, steady hand, and stealthy foot rendered him invincible against bears and buffaloes and other animals" he reminded old-timers of a celebrated hunter named Batiste Brown.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the nickname "Bat" was passed down from one revered hunter to another, from Brown to Masterson.

Whatever the source of his colorful moniker, it was not long before Masterson's name began appearing in contemporary newspaper accounts of trouble in and around Dodge City. One of the first such accounts concerned Masterson's interference with the arrest of Bobby Gill. The *Dodge City Times* story of June 6, 1877, tells how Masterson objected to sheriff Larry Deger's treatment of Gill as he led his prisoner to the jail house, and an ensuing

scuffle between Masterson and the sheriff led to Masterson's arrest. It took several men coming to the aid of Deger for him to get the best of Masterson in their fight, as reported in the *Times*:

Bat Masterson seemed possessed of extraordinary strength, and every inch of the way was closely contested, but the city dungeon was reached at last, and in he went. If he had got hold of his gun before going in there would have been a general killing. . . .<sup>46</sup>

Masterson subsequently became a lawman himself, both in Dodge City and the surrounding Ford County. During this period, from 1877 to 1885, there are numerous accounts in local newspapers of his activities. Shortly after his run-in with Deger in 1877, Masterson secured a commission as undersheriff of Ford County, and one of his first acts was to relieve Deger of his duties as deputy sheriff.<sup>47</sup> Masterson's ensuing exploits quickly earned him a reputation as a tough and able lawman. His arrest of a gang of armed robbers was recounted in a September 22, 1877, story in the *Dodge City Times* titled, "SWINDLERS, They Come from Kinsley and Try to Swindle the Good People of Dodge."<sup>48</sup> An arrest of a rowdy cowboy was reported in the *Times* on September 29, 1877, under the heading, "Random Shots."<sup>49</sup>

Ed Masterson also became a lawman, and in 1878 he was gunned down by a pair of drunken cowboys in a shootout outside a Dodge City saloon. Bat Masterson was not present at the time of the gunfight, but he quickly rushed to the scene after hearing of his brother's mortal wound. The two men

involved in the fatal shooting also were severely wounded, and one of them, Jack Wagner, later confessed to shooting Ed Masterson before he too passed away. His partner, Alf Walker, later was released because of Wagner's confession and his own serious wounds.<sup>50</sup> There were numerous contemporary newspaper accounts crediting Bat Masterson with gunning down his brothers' killers,<sup>51</sup> but such accounts appear to be greatly exaggerated. Bat Masterson was grieved by his brother's death, but he did not have cause to fire his gun in revenge, and although he arrested four men as accomplices to the two gunmen, they later were released.

Bat Masterson later gained an appointment as a U.S. deputy marshal in 1879. He also took a commission from the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad to make a show of force with an armed posse in a dispute with the Denver & Rio Grande railroad over the right of way through the Raton Pass in Colorado. Although this venture added to his reputation as well as his pocketbook, it kept Masterson away from Dodge City for an extended period and may have played a role in his defeat in the sheriff's election of 1879.<sup>52</sup>

As Masterson moved about the West to various frontier towns in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Arizona, tales of his exploits continued to appear in print. One of the more notable such accounts appeared in 1881 and involved another Masterson brother. While Bat Masterson was in Arizona serving as a deputy under his friend, Wyatt Earp, Jim Masterson became embroiled in some trouble in Dodge City and wired his brother for

help. Bat Masterson responded to the call and arrived back in Dodge City on April 16, 1881. Shortly after his arrival, he confronted the two men feuding with Jim Masterson, and a shootout erupted on the streets of Dodge City. One of the two men was shot and killed in the gunfire, although who fired the fatal shot could not be determined. When calm was restored, Bat Masterson was ordered out of town, and he departed on the train that same night, having fought his last shootout.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, Masterson's involvement in the Dodge City shootout prevented him from participating in a far more famous showdown that became immortalized as part of Western lore. Masterson had gone to Arizona in 1881 after receiving a summons for help from his long-time ally Wyatt Earp, who needed help in keeping order in a gambling house in which he owned a stake. By the time Masterson arrived in Arizona, there was other trouble brewing. A gang of stage-coach robbers and cattle rustlers was operating in the area, and after one attempted holdup resulted in the shooting death of a driver and a passenger, Earp formed a posse to track down the bandits. Masterson was deputized and pressed into duty, and he joined the Earp brothers on a posse that roamed the desert for close to two weeks in a futile search for the outlaws. They were able to bring in one suspected gang member, but he soon escaped from jail and the others managed to elude the posse.<sup>54</sup>

Masterson would not stay around to see this incident to his conclusion, however, as he received the telegram from his brother Jim, calling him back to Dodge City.<sup>55</sup> As a result, Bat Masterson missed the bloody conclusion six months later of Wyatt Earp's confrontation with the troublemakers from the Clanton family in the dusty little town in Arizona. The name of the town was Tombstone, and that final showdown was to become known as "The Shootout at the OK Corral," one of the bloodiest and most famous gunfights in the history of West. It was one of the few times that fate lured Masterson away from trouble.

### *Gambling Days*

Masterson drifted throughout the West in the aftermath of his career as a lawman. After being run out of Dodge City, he headed first to Kansas City, then to Denver and later to Trinidad, Colorado, where he also served in a law enforcement position. He made a living as a gambler and gunman and also ran a saloon and dance hall. It also was during this period that the first reference is made to Masterson as a professional journalist, although the accounts of his first newspaper job, like those of many of his gunfights, appeared to have little basis in fact. The Dodge City *Times* of November 1, 1883 reported:

Col. Bat Masterson, a well known character in the west, has discarded his former illegitimate business and has adopted newspaper writing as a profession. While Col. Masterson's literary effusions do

not have moral or religious tendencies, they are chaste productions in a literary way. The fine artistic style in which Col. Bat wields the pen is adding fame to his already illustrious name.<sup>56</sup>

This prompted the *Globe* to reply on November 6, 1883:

We are charged with having an associate editor, to-wit: Mr. Masterson, and from the showing the Time's [sic] man gives the distinguished gentleman, we feel somewhat flattered. But as Mr. Masterson has left the city, the GLOBE will be rather a tame paper this week. Yet we have managed to put together a few sentences that may not set well on the opposition."<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the remainder of the 1880s, Masterson continued to roam about the frontier involved in a variety of adventures and part-time jobs as a lawman, and his trail can be traced through various news accounts in local newspapers. Some of these notices were posted by Masterson and provide small but interesting snippets into his life, as evidenced by this advertisement which ran in the July 19, 1884, issue of the *Dodge City Kansas Cowboy*: "LOST, Knights of Pythias watch charm. \$5.00 will be paid for it if returned to BAT MASTERSON, Lone Star Saloon."<sup>58</sup> Masterson still was a man of the West, but changes were on the horizon, both for him and the frontier he had come to call home.

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## CHAPTER 2

### GUNFIGHTS TO FISTFIGHTS: BAT MASTERSON AND BOXING

#### *The New Gladiators*

Along with the gunslingers, buffalo hunters, cowboys, gamblers, and others who flocked to the West in the wake of the settlers was a new breed of sportsmen in America. Prize fighting was growing in popularity in the United States, and as Americans moved West in the aftermath of the Civil War, so too did the sport. Boxing historian Elliott J. Gorn wrote that "boxing's center of gravity began shifting west during these years" (the early 1860s), and bare-knuckles prize fights began to be staged in many Old West towns throughout the frontier.<sup>1</sup> Many of these bouts were staged by saloonkeepers or others eager to witness an old-fashioned brawl, and while many land disputes were settled at gunpoint, others were resolved with fists.<sup>2</sup> One of the best at settling disputes in such a manner was Bat Masterson's close friend Wyatt Earp, whose prowess with his fists was as well known as his skills with a six-shooter. Later, Masterson would write of Earp's fighting ability:

Wyatt could scrap with his fists; I doubt if there was a man in the West who could whip him in a rough-and-tumble fight. He often took all the fight out of notorious gunmen with no other weapons than his two hands, and that not only with the bad men armed, but surrounded by gun-toting friends.<sup>3</sup>

Masterson, however, also came to many of these "scraps" armed to ensure there were no undue measures taken against his friend.<sup>4</sup>

While Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp were carving out their reputations as lawmen and gunfighters, another American hero was emerging back East. His name was John L. Sullivan, who was popularly known as "The Boston Strongboy." The son of an Irish immigrant in Boston, Sullivan was a marvelous physical specimen at five feet, eleven inches and two-hundred pounds, with quick and powerful fists. Sullivan gained a national reputation in 1881, when he traveled to New York to box John Flood, the "Bull's Head Terror," on a barge off a Yonkers dock. It took Sullivan only 16 minutes to knock out Flood, after which he picked up the beaten man and handed him to his seconds. The Boston Strongboy then spotted world champion Paddy Ryan in the crowd and sneered, "Ready for yours, Paddy?"<sup>5</sup> A year later, Sullivan made good on his boast by knocking out Ryan in the ninth round to gain the title as heavyweight boxing champion at age twenty-three in 1881. Afterward, Ryan spoke for many of the Boston Strongboy's victims when he marveled, "When Sullivan hit me, I thought a telegraph pole had been shoved against me endways."<sup>6</sup> Sullivan's reign would last 10 years, during which time he established himself as the most popular American sports hero in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

### *Boxing and Social Darwinism*

Although the brutality of boxing alienated many in the middle and upper classes, the sport also came to symbolize other aspects of the American character in the late nineteenth century. There was in America

. . .an ideological interweaving of social Darwinism, rugged athleticism and muscular Christianity [which] encouraged the view that a suitably codified, controlled and gloved version of prize fighting was acceptable for both the physical training and vicarious entertainment of young gentleman."<sup>8</sup>

The significance Americans attached to boxing could be seen in the reaction to the championship fight between Sullivan and James J. Corbett in New Orleans on September 7, 1892. Sullivan had never been beaten during the bare-knuckle days of prize fighting, and his prowess in the ring made him one of the most idolized athletic figures in American history. His fame was such there was a popular jingle of his day which went, "Shake the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan." However, slowed by age and drink, Sullivan was beaten by the younger Corbett in the first "world championship" bout held under the Queensberry rules requiring both fighters to wear gloves. Not only was Corbett's victory seen as a triumph for "youth, skill and science. . .over age, dissipation and brute strength,"<sup>9</sup> the new champion was trumpeted as a shining example of the American character.

Corbett symbolised much that was modern America — a confident and sophisticated urban society which was ready to shake free from the harsh and often brutish conditions which had characterised life both in the cities and at the frontier for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The boxing ring also was seen as an endorsement of "social Darwinism," in which Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest was adapted to society as a whole. For those who believed society was "a physical and intellectual meritocracy," a championship boxer symbolized "not only individual achievement, but also racial and national superiority."<sup>11</sup> However, this racial superiority in the ring, as in so many other areas of American life, was reinforced by artificial barriers against blacks. In the era around the turn of the century, "it was anathema for white America to countenance a black man and a white man in the same ring, particularly if defeat for the white man was a possibility."<sup>12</sup> The nature of the sport and the desire of promoters to stage matches that would draw paying spectators prevented a total color line in boxing, unlike professional baseball, which effectively was segregated from the 1890s until after World War II. Thus, many prominent black boxers were able to overcome the prejudices of the day and enjoy some successes in the ring.

The history of blacks and boxing even pre-dates the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves in America. Bill Richmond, "a negro from Richmond, Stratten Island, New York," is believed by some historians to be

"the first coloured man to take part in a prize fight" in 1804.<sup>13</sup> The next prominent black boxer was Tom Molineux, a slave from Virginia who was given his freedom after winning a prize fight in which "he had been heavily backed by his master."<sup>14</sup> Peter Jackson, a "West Indian Negro who had settled in Australia"<sup>15</sup> was a great fighter in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it was written "[t]here has never been a more highly respected, more modest and courteous fighter than this negro."<sup>16</sup> Sullivan refused to box Jackson, however, so the black man never had the opportunity to win the world title. However, he did fight a 61-round draw against Corbett shortly before Corbett beat Sullivan to claim the title.

The first black boxer to win a world title was Canadian George Dixon, who claimed the bantamweight crown in 1890 and the featherweight title in 1891. Joe Walcott of West India won the welterweight title in 1901, and the following year Joe Gans of Baltimore claimed the lightweight crown.<sup>17</sup> The ring names of the black fighters reflected the racism they faced. Langford was known as the "Boston Tar Baby."<sup>18</sup> George Dixon was "Little Chocolate."<sup>19</sup> There also was a "Kid Chocolate" and an "Old Chocolate."

While blacks and whites were paired against one another in the ring on occasion, for the most part the practice was frowned upon. After one inter-racial bout in 1892 which resulted in a fearful beating administered the white boxer by his black opponent, the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* commented

that it was "a mistake to match a negro and a white man, a mistake to bring the races together on any terms of equality, even in the prize ring."<sup>20</sup> Another inter-racial bout in Mississippi in 1897 was halted by a man named Henry Long, who feared that if the black boxer defeated his white opponent "the niggers would never stop gloating over it, and, as it is, we have enough trouble with them."<sup>21</sup> As Randy Roberts wrote in his biography of black heavyweight Jack Johnson: "Watching boxing was no fun for whites when racial tranquillity was riding on the outcome."<sup>22</sup> When whites were fighting whites, or when a white defeated an inferior black opponent in the ring, it was a different matter. On those occasions, many Americans believed that boxing did indeed embody the virtues that made this country great.

### *Bat Masterson: The Man in the Corner*

John L. Sullivan had been boxing's undisputed champion for eight years when, in July 1889, he staged one of his most famous fights, against a brash young challenger named Jake Kilrain in a ring on the Mississippi delta outside New Orleans. It was the last of the bare-knuckle championship fights (the use of boxing gloves would replace this form of fighting most saw as barbaric but others considered more manly) and it was here that Bat Masterson first became actively involved in the world of prize fighting, which would become one of the great obsessions of his life.

One of Kilrain's seconds in the ring was Charlie Mitchell, the English heavyweight champion and a tough, belligerent boxer whose bellicosity had generated for him a number of enemies throughout the sport, among them Sullivan. For his protection, Mitchell carried with him two guns; he also hired Masterson to serve both as a timekeeper for the fight and a bodyguard for the Kilrain party.<sup>23</sup> Masterson came to get this assignment through his association with Mitchell's father-in-law, George Washington "Pony" Moore, who had become acquainted with Masterson when the former lawman was serving as manager of a theater in Denver. Masterson's employment was in keeping with a trend of the day in boxing circles — the use of hired guns to maintain order so that the combatants could battle one another with only their fists. Boxing historian Nat Fleischer wrote of this practice:

Gunmen were an important part of the pugilistic picture in those rough-and-ready days, when fair play was best maintained by a judicious display of force on both sides.<sup>24</sup>

The fight between Kilrain and Sullivan lasted an incredible 75 rounds, after which Kilrain's party was forced to throw in the towel. Although Kilrain was thoroughly battered and exhausted, the belligerent Sullivan, who had not even bothered to sit down between rounds, still had enough steam left in him to stalk over to the challenger's corner and offer to fight the bombastic Mitchell on the spot.<sup>25</sup> Among those most disappointed in the outcome of the fight was Masterson, who had been so convinced Kilrain would whip the

champion that he had wagered heavily on him.<sup>26</sup> Despite his financial setback, this marked the beginning of Masterson's long association with the sport, as from 1889 until his death in 1921, "there was scarcely a heavyweight prize fight of major importance in the United States that Bat Masterson did not witness."<sup>27</sup>

### *The Last Boom Town*

As the final decade of the nineteenth century began, Bat Masterson was back in Denver, running a gambling house of his own, and, later in 1890, taking over management of the burlesque troupe housed in Ed Chase's Palace gambling hall.<sup>28</sup> It was here that Masterson met Emma Walters, "a blond song and dance girl" and the daughter of "the first Civil War veteran to be buried in Philadelphia."<sup>29</sup> It marked a milepost in Masterson's life. The two were married on November 21, 1891, when Masterson was 37 and Walters 34. The marriage would last almost three decades, until Masterson's death in 1921, just two months shy of their 30th anniversary. For both Bat and Emma, it was a time of transition. Walters gave up her stage career following her marriage, and shortly afterward Bat quit his job at the Palace. Leaving Denver, the couple moved to Creede, Colorado, a mining boom town where Masterson managed the gambling house and saloon.

Creede was a typical frontier boom town, featuring 30 saloons that were open 24 hours a day, and populated by "gunmen, thieves, whores, and con

men. . . ."<sup>30</sup> There even was a special cemetery named "Shotgun Graveyard" reserved for those who died of gunshot wounds. Keeping order in such a town was rough and dangerous work, but Masterson was able to do so, thanks in large part to the reputation that preceded him. Creede historian Nolie Mumey noted that while Masterson's mere presence encouraged respect for the law, he personally was well-spoken and pleasant, and his "deportment and bearing were beyond reproach."<sup>31</sup> A newspaper account from the *Denver Republican* painted a more colorful picture of Masterson:

. . . He wears a corduroy suit of lavender color and a plain black tie, without jewelry of any kind. . . But all the toughs and thugs fear him as they do no other dozen men in camp. Let an incipient riot start and all that is necessary to quell it is the whisper, "There comes Masterson."<sup>32</sup>

This was Masterson's last full-time job as a lawman, and typically it was brought to a close not at the hands of an up-and-coming young gunman but by the lure of a boxing match. In 1892, the undefeated John L. Sullivan accepted the challenge of the brash young James J. Corbett, and the two were scheduled to meet in a championship bout in New Orleans on September 7. Upon hearing the news, Masterson quit his post in Creede and joined the migration of sportsmen and boxing enthusiasts to Louisiana.

### The Lure of the Ring

This time, Masterson's eye for boxing talent was validated. He bet every scrap of money he could round up on Corbett, a former bank clerk who would come to be rated by boxing historians as one of the most scientific fighters ever. Few observers shared Masterson's faith in "Gentleman Jim," as the well-spoken and well-mannered Corbett was known. Sullivan, although 20 pounds overweight, was a four-to-one favorite among the bettors. Corbett, a slender man, was no match for Sullivan physically, but he was quick and clever, and he could punch. He also was supremely confident in his ability to beat Sullivan. "I can lick him without getting my hair mussed," boasted Corbett.<sup>33</sup> Gentleman Jim backed up his tough talk, sending the aging and out-of-shape Sullivan crashing to the canvas in the twenty-first round, bringing to an end the Boston Strongboy's long reign as champion.

A year later, Corbett defended his title against Charlie Mitchell, who had served as Jake Kilrain's second in the famous 1889 fight. This time, Masterson was in Mitchell's corner, serving in the capacity of a second. For Masterson, it was a replay of the 1889 fight. Once more, he was backing a losing horse, as Mitchell was knocked out by Corbett in just three rounds.

By now, Masterson was gaining a reputation for his involvement in boxing, and in 1894 he was featured in the *Illustrated Sporting West* as one of the best known sportsmen in the West. It was noted that Masterson was "considered one of the best judges of pugilists in America," and that he could

"pick the winner in nine cases out of ten when the top-notchers" met.<sup>34</sup> This wasn't always evident in the championship bouts of the decade. By 1897, Masterson had switched his allegiance back to Corbett and boldly predicted the champion would easily defeat challenger Bob Fitzsimmons in their title fight in Carson City, Nevada. Prior to the fight, Corbett traveled through Denver, where he met Masterson at the city's Union Station. The following exchanged took place between the two men.

"He'll be a pudding for you—easiest fight you ever had," Masterson assured Corbett.

"Don't be too sure of that, Bat," replied Corbett. "He's shifty, quick, and a hard fighter."<sup>35</sup>

Corbett's words proved prophetic. For 13 rounds, he dominated the challenger, but in the 14th round, Fitzsimmons felled Corbett with a blow to the solar plexus. Once more, Masterson lost heavily betting on the fight.

Between these championship bouts, Masterson spent most of his time in Colorado working in gambling houses, and he also briefly ventured back East in 1895 to serve as a bodyguard for Charles Gould, heir to the fortune of railroad magnate Jay Gould.<sup>36</sup> But more and more, his attention was being drawn to the prize ring, where his reputation as a gunman if not as a handicapper was as great as ever. This point was illustrated by his role in an 1898 prize fight between Denver Ed Smith and Joe Goddard. Masterson, serving as a second for Smith, climbed into the ring with a gun handle

protruding from each hip pocket. But, the guns were there not to intimidate the crowd but his own fighter, who, according to the *Rocky Mountain News*, was terrified of his opponent. To prevent Smith from backing away from Goddard, he was told he had a choice: face Goddard's fists or Masterson's guns. Smith chose the fists, and he went on to win the fight.

### *Masterson as a Boxing Promoter*

In 1899, Masterson got into the business end of boxing by joining forces with the rhythmically named Otto C. Floto to form the Colorado Athletic Association. Floto was a big man, weighing 250 pounds, and, like Masterson, he had an intense interest in prize fighting. Floto once had served as John L. Sullivan's timekeeper, and later he managed Bob Fitzsimmons' theatrical tour. He also was present in Carson City for the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight, and while there he met Harry Tammen, co-owner of the *Denver Post*. Tammen hired Floto as editor of the *Post* on the spot, because, he later claimed, "his name was so beautiful."<sup>37</sup> The position gave Floto a tremendous amount of clout in Denver, so it seemed a natural fit when he and Masterson teamed up to promote boxing matches. But, the association was not yet a month old when Floto "used the influence he had acquired as a sports editor . . . to freeze out all his partners."<sup>38</sup> Masterson retaliated by forming the Olympic Athletic Club and going into competition with Floto in 1899. The two men remained bitter enemies the rest of their lives.

In addition to promoting the fights, Masterson also served as referee of the main bouts. It was not an easy task. In one fight on July 28, 1899, George Lawler attempted to strangle his opponent, Gus Rublin, in the first round, "then proceeded to knee him, kick him, and bite his shoulder."<sup>39</sup> When the crowd objected and yelled for the fight to be awarded to Rublin, Masterson went over to the ropes following the first round and announced: "You fellows came here to see a fight, didn't you?" When the crowd yelled its approval, Masterson replied: "Well, let these fellow fight. They will get down to fair fighting after a bit."<sup>40</sup> Rublin eventually prevailed in the fight, knocking out the biting and kicking Lawler.

#### *The Gunfighter as Journalist: Masterson Becomes a Sports Writer*

Necessity drove Bat Masterson into the newspaper business. It was not enough that he was a skilled promoter and even-handed referee. To succeed in his new venture, Masterson also needed publicity, and here for once he was at a distinct disadvantage. Floto had at his command the pages of the *Denver Post* to promote his bouts and to denigrate those of his rival. Masterson realized he had to have a forum of his own, and it was this need that led him to a newspaper work. He "talked himself into the sports editor's job" of a small publication titled *George's Weekly*, and each week he wrote a lengthy column plugging his fights and disparaging those staged by Floto. But Masterson never mentioned Floto by name in his columns. Instead, Floto

was referred to as "a former bill poster from Cripple Creek" or "the space killer of a local sheet."<sup>41</sup> Masterson also branded the fights staged by Floto at his new club as "fakes" and "jug-handled matches."<sup>42</sup>

The battle between the two men lasted for two years, and its highlight came not on the pages of their respective papers but on the streets of Denver. The two met on a corner one day, advanced on one another and began fighting. Gene Fowler, who was to become a prominent journalist in Denver, was a boy of 10 at the time, and he witnessed the brawl, which included kicks to the groin and wild swings. When Masterson began to get the upper hand and beat his rival with his trademark cane, Floto fled down the street with Masterson in pursuit.<sup>43</sup>

Although Masterson gained the decision in this street brawl, Floto continued to get the best of it in the bout waged on the pages of their respective newspapers. While Floto's club prospered, Masterson lost many of his top attractions, including Norman "Kid McCoy" Selby, who when he fought always was billed as "The Real McCoy," setting him apart from his many namesakes and giving birth to a popular expression.<sup>44</sup> With his business on the verge of collapse, Masterson traveled to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and then Chicago, before returning to Denver in 1900 to sell his interest in the Olympic Club. A bitter Masterson told a reporter for the *Denver Times* that Denver was "the worst in the country. . .The bootblacks in

Chicago have more sporting blood in their veins than the whole push of Denver sports."<sup>45</sup>

### *The End of the Trail Out West*

Despite his disillusionment with the city he once had admired, it would be two more years before Masterson left town for good. There are two versions of what led to his departure. The first concerned an incident that took place in the spring of 1902, when Masterson went to vote at the same site where he had done so for years. One of the young women running the voting booth did not recognize him and demanded identification. When Masterson protested, the woman "answered with a blow with her umbrella. It was then, Bat insisted, that he decided he would never again return to Denver."<sup>46</sup>

The second version, put forth by western novelist William MacLeod Raine in his *Guns of the Frontier*, was based on information Raine claimed to have gotten from an unpublished manuscript written by Harry Lindsley. Lindsley wrote that Masterson "went on what Calamity Jane always called 'a high lonesome,' a prolonged drinking binge."<sup>47</sup> When Lindsley, then district attorney of Denver, received word that Masterson was making the rounds of the local saloons and becoming belligerent in his criticisms of the city, Lindsley called upon chief of police Hamilton Armstrong. The two were decided the best man to defuse the situation without gunplay was Jim Marshall, the sheriff of Cripple Creek and a friend of Masterson's "since their

'buffalo days.' "<sup>48</sup> Marshall agreed to to arrest Masterson, and he tracked down his old friend in a Denver saloon. Masterson had just ordered a shot of whisky and raised his glass to toss it back when "he felt the delicate prod of a six-shooter in his side." It was Marshall, who came through a side door and "got the drop on Bat." Realizing he had no chance to go for his gun, Masterson listened calmly as the the sheriff told him: "Denver is too big a town for you to hurrah, Bat. Time for you to be moving on."<sup>49</sup> Marshall then "gently suggested" Masterson "should be on 'the four o'clock Burlington' when it pulled out from the depot." Masterson obliged and went peacefully, "jauntily swinging the gold-headed cane"<sup>50</sup> as he bid farewell to the two detectives who accompanied him to the train station. But Masterson never would get over his bitterness toward the city. From then on, whenever anyone mentioned the city to him, his reply was: "I don't want to hear about that burg. The hell with Denver."<sup>51</sup>

The old lawman's next stop was New York. He now was 49 years old, an over-the-hill gunfighter who still had his reputation but little else. He was "broke [and] ill-fitted for the pursuit of any career outside gambling and sporting life."<sup>52</sup> But for Bat Masterson, like so many other Americans making their way from the farms and frontier towns at the dawn of a new century, new opportunities awaited in the city.

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## CHAPTER 3

### FROM BOXING TO BROADWAY: BAT MASTERSON IN NEW

#### *The Other End of the Law: Masterson's Arrest in New York*

Bat Masterson's first days in New York City were spent not as a respected figure of law and order as he had been in the West but rather as a suspected outlaw like the many men he had arrested and jailed on the frontier. It was an unpleasant introduction to the city, but in a strange twist of fate it led to Masterson finding a new home far from the desolate cattle and mining towns where he had made his reputation, and a new career unlike any he could have imagined back in his western days.

When Masterson left Denver in May 1902, he and Emma went first to Chicago, where he visited friends, among them William Pinkerton of the famed Pinkerton Detective Agency.<sup>1</sup> He also met a "West Coast sport named James C. Sullivan,"<sup>2</sup> who invited Masterson to travel with him to England to promote prize fights there. Masterson accepted, but he never made it beyond New York, where the group went to arrange passage overseas. The Mastersons and the others involved in the venture had been in New York for two weeks awaiting passage when Masterson, Sullivan and two others involved in the venture were arrested on June 6, 1902, for operating a crooked card game. Their alleged victim was George A. Snow, a Mormon

preacher who claimed to have been cheated out of \$28,000<sup>3</sup> on the train ride from Chicago to New York.

Masterson proclaimed his innocence, a claim which was bolstered when Snow declined to press charges against him. However, Masterson was charged with carrying a concealed weapon, that being his .45-caliber Colt which had been custom made for him in 1877. It was the loss of his gun, as well as the stain on his reputation as a honest sportsman, that most upset Masterson. In a futile appeal to the judge, Masterson sought to regain custody of the six-shooter because "he had carried it ever since 1877, and. . .it was his best friend,"<sup>5</sup>

#### *In the Middle of the Newspaper Wars*

Whatever Masterson's actual involvement in the gambling operation, his arrest created a sensation in New York. The story of the Old West lawman and the band of Western gamblers received prominent play in all of the New York newspapers, and Masterson's presence in town became news in itself. The newspapers kept the story of the famous Western lawman and his gun alive for several days, and "dusted off and reprinted"<sup>6</sup> several of the old tales of his exploits. By the time the incident had blown over, Masterson had given up on his plans to travel to England, and he remained in New York, passing his time the rest of the year working as a "referee and stakes holder" at the important boxing matches and betting on the ponies at the horse race tracks.<sup>7</sup>

But not all of the newspapers had forgotten about him. One of them even recognized there were other ways to capitalize on the fame of the Old West gunfighter.

Early in 1903, a New York daily titled the *Morning Telegraph* changed hands, and the new ownership installed fresh management, headed by Finley Peter Dunne, who was one of America's first and most popular newspaper columnists. Dunne was best known as the creator of the popular "Mr. Dooley" for his political satire columns in Chicago, but his role at the *Morning Telegraph* would be to serve as general manager. The new managing editor was William E. "W.E." Lewis, who had worked for William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* as well as newspapers in Kansas City, Chicago, and Philadelphia. While in Kansas City, Lewis had gone to Dodge City and other frontier towns collecting material for some articles on the famous figures of the West, and it was on this journey that he first met Masterson.<sup>8</sup> Lewis also had a brother, Alfred Henry Lewis, who shared his interest in the West. Alfred Henry Lewis was a former newspaper reporter who now worked as a novelist and magazine editor.<sup>9</sup>

It was only natural that W.E. Lewis saw Masterson as more than just fodder for an occasional story. He knew Masterson, and he knew of his experience as a writer back in Denver. And when Lewis took over as managing editor of the *Morning Telegraph*, one of his first moves was to recruit Masterson as a reporter who would cover news stories as well as write about boxing.

Undoubtedly, Alfred Henry Lewis supported the move by his brother. In the next few years, Alfred Henry would be "Bat's constant companion, chief admirer, and propagandist."<sup>10</sup> He also would be the first to chronicle Masterson's exploits in book form, in *The Sunset Trail*, a novel not only based on Masterson's life in the West but dedicated to him.

Masterson's reaction to Lewis's offer has not been recorded, so it is not known if he had any reluctance to accept the position. Certainly it must have been a daunting challenge for him. He had little formal education, and although he was a seasoned and knowledgeable sportsman, his brief stint touting his boxing matches on the pages of a weekly newspaper in Denver could not have prepared him for the pressures of writing for a daily newspaper in America's foremost city.

### *Life on Park Row: American Newspapers at the Turn of the Century*

American journalism at the turn of the century was marked by intense competition between newspapers that was reflected in the constant battle for scoops and exclusives based on sensationalized tales of murder, greed, and corruption. It was a lively, energetic form of journalism, and it brought into the spotlight the footsoldiers of the profession--the reporters. While these reporters enjoyed the excitement of their profession, they also suffered from job insecurity and low wages, but there were plenty of outlets for talents. There were a dozen or more dailies in New York, most of them located

within walking distance of one another on Park Row. Two of the major exceptions were the *Times*, which was near Times Square, and the *Herald*, which was on Herald Square.

A reporter at a Park Row newspaper just past the turn of the century had a starting salary of \$25 to \$35 a week, and even the best-paid reporters made only \$40 to \$60 a week. Herbert Bayard Swope, who was to become one of the great reporters in American journalism history, was offered only \$7 a week to go to work for the *New York World* in 1909. At newspapers in cities below 100,000 population, the pay was only \$5 to \$20 a week. The practice of "space rates" — by which a reporter might make \$8 to \$10 above his regular pay for a particularly good or, more often, particularly long story — was being phased out. This form of pay had enabled city editors to get by when they were caught short-handed, but the number of reporters needed in a newsroom now could be more accurately determined thanks to the use of telephones, typewriters and the growing news services.<sup>11</sup> The newspapers could be cheap in more than just their pay to reporters. " Sports writer Dan Daniel, recalled that his first newspaper, the *Herald*, was so frugal it did not have electricity and refused to turn on the gas until one o'clock in the afternoon.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of the low wages and the often frantic working conditions, newspapers attracted a special breed of workers, and their non-conformity often was reflected in their reporting. The public perception of the typical "newspaperman" of the early 1900s "was likely to be the man with a byline —

the humorous or serious columnist, the cartoonists, and, above all, the reporter."<sup>13</sup> Among the best-known columnists in the country were Finley Peter Dunne, who created "Mr. Dooley" for his political satire in Chicago, and Bert Leston Taylor, who wrote "A Line o' Type or Two" for the *Chicago Tribune* starting in 1901. Taylor's column consisted of jokes, riddles, short poems, epigrams and short observations. Franklin P. Adams wrote a similar column, "The Conning Tower," in New York starting in 1914. The growing popularity of sports in America made this an increasingly important part of the newspaper. Among the first columnists were sports writers, "who often carried with them many thousands of readers when they switched from one daily to another. . ."<sup>14</sup> On the heels of the sports columnists came "literary columnists, humorous columnists, political columnists, foreign-affairs columnists, philosophical columnists, big-business columnists, financial columnists, military columnists, and, finally, pundit columnists. . ."<sup>15</sup>

The newsroom also served as a training grounds for many successful American writers, both those on their way up and those already at the top of the literary world. Damon Runyon and Ring Lardner were two of the more prominent American writers who got their start on daily newspapers in the early 1900s. And a familiar sight on Park Row in 1900 was novelist Mark Twain, who contributed special articles to Park Row newspapers, especially the *Herald*.<sup>16</sup> O. Henry, then known as Sidney Porter, appeared weekly at the *Sunday World* to collect his \$50 pay for short stories he wrote.<sup>17</sup> This unique

breed of worker was the symbol of a new era in journalism. "The time of the Great Editor had waned and faded, the time of the Great Reporter succeeded," wrote Irvin S. Cobb, who arrived in New York from Kentucky in 1903.<sup>18</sup>

Newspapers of this era were an integral part of American life. By 1910, more than one newspaper was being circulated for every household in the United States. This marked the high point of newspaper circulation, with an average of 1.36 newspapers per household. This figure fell slightly to 1.34 by 1920, and has steadily declined since, to .70 in 1986.<sup>19</sup> Thus, when Bat Masterson joined the profession in 1903, newspapers reigned supreme in American journalism. There was no radio or television, and films still were in their infancy. It was the hey-day of American newspapers, and when he entered the profession, Masterson entered a world as exciting and colorful as the one he had left behind on the frontier.

### *The Morning Telegraph: Horse-Barn Journalism*

With more than a dozen newspapers in New York competing for readers, each of the publications took on a distinct identity and catered to a specific audience. At the top of the pecking order were Joseph Pulitzer's *Morning and Evening World*, James Gordon Bennett's *Herald and Telegram*, the morning and evening *Sun*, Adolph Och's *Times*, and Whitelaw Reid's *Tribune*. Next came the journals "of lesser circulation or distinction," among them William Randolph Hearst's morning *American* and evening *Journal*, the *Mail*, the

*Globe*, the *Commercial Advertiser*, the *Evening Post* and the pre-tabloid *Daily News*. At the bottom of the "journalistic scale" was the *Morning Telegraph*.<sup>20</sup>

That is not to say the *Morning Telegraph* did not have an influential audience. In the American Newspaper Directory of 1904, the *Morning Telegraph* was described as having a circulation principally "among the wealthy and persons interested in theatricals, racing, automobiling and the higher branches of sport. . . The paper is the brightest and breeziest published this side of Paris."<sup>21</sup> Heywood Broun, who got his start on the *Morning Telegraph* and later became a well-known American journalist, wrote that the paper was "a publication devoted chiefly to horses and vaudeville actors."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the *Morning Telegraph* attempted to set itself off from the competition by selling for five cents a copy rather than the standard two cents a copy charged by the other New York dailies. "The Only Five-Cent Paper in New York," it boasted on page one.<sup>23</sup>

The news room of the *Morning Telegraph* also illustrated the character of the newspaper. Broun recalled that when he worked at the newspaper:

. . . Each night we played poker across the copy desk. We had two copy readers and they both sat in and read copy between pots. A story had to be very hot to get any attention after midnight. . . The city room was always cluttered up with all sorts of people who didn't seem to have any business there. Very often you couldn't get to your desk because there would be a couple of chorus girls sitting there waiting for a friend who was finishing an editorial.<sup>24</sup>

The *Morning Telegraph* news room also was situated in surroundings that must have seemed more akin to a western outpost than a respectable big city publication. The offices were located at West Fiftieth and Eighth Avenue in a building which once housed the horse stables for New York's horsecar lines. The stable odor remained, which was fitting for a newspaper which devoted so much attention to horse racing.<sup>25</sup>

This was the world which Bat Masterson entered in 1903. But even here, his reputation preceded him into the newsroom, and this gave him a unique advantage most of his newspaper colleagues did not enjoy. As DeArment has written, ". . . no one, apparently, ever used a blue pencil on any of the articles Bat composed."<sup>26</sup> This respect accorded Masterson was due in part to his penchant for arriving at the office sporting a .45 caliber revolver on those occasions when one of his enemies was in town.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Masterson as a Reporter: "The Wise Man of Longacre Square"*

When Bat Masterson first appeared in the *Morning Telegraph* newsroom in 1903, he did not look like the Western gunfighter of the dime novels. The *New York Tribune* described him at the time of his arrest in 1902 as "a short, thickset man with a small closely cropped black moustache, black hair, slightly gray, and [weighing] about 165 pounds."<sup>28</sup> Reporter Irwin Cobb recalled being unimpressed the first time he laid eyes on Masterson, who

struck him as a "sawed-off and stumpy-legged man with stub nose and a flat-topped derby." But upon closer inspection, Cobb detected:

. . .smooth oval eyes with flecks of mica glistening in them if he were aroused. But you might not notice the glint in his eyes unless you looked closely; it came and was instantly gone. And some of the men who faced him through the smoke fogs of cow town melees haven't lived long enough to get a good look.<sup>29</sup>

As was his style out West, Masterson was a stylish dresser who sported a brown derby, embroidered vest, highly polished boots and his trademark gold-headed cane.<sup>30</sup> His moustache was graying, which, judging from the pictures of Masterson in this era, added a distinguished air about him.

It took Masterson little time to fit into his new routine as a newspaper reporter. He and Emma lived at 300 West Forty-ninth Street in New York, and he became a well-known fixture at all the hangouts in Longacre Square, which now is known as Times Square. O'Connor described Masterson as the "wise man of Longacre Square."<sup>31</sup> He rose late in the day, and he and Emma had lunch before he departed for work. Later, he would boast to friends that "he never missed having lunch with Emma."<sup>32</sup> In the afternoon, he would attend the horse races at Belmont Race Track on Long Island when it was in season. "The horses were a secondary interest to boxing, as far as Bat was concerned, but the sporting crowd attended them faithfully and Bat went along with the crowd."<sup>33</sup> At night, he attended the fights at one of the many arenas in the New York area. "Afterward began the most enjoyable part of his

day, wandering with his friends from saloon to restaurant to cafe to cabaret along what was then called the Gay White Way."<sup>34</sup> When he wrote his articles, Masterson did so with pen and pencil at a rolltop desk "with his black plug hat cocked over one eye, almost as chipper as in his youth."<sup>35</sup>

The articles Masterson wrote in his first few years at the newspaper were not available for inspection, as there are no microfilm copies of the *Morning Telegraph* prior to 1910, nor are there copies of these newspapers at the New York Public Library. There are, however, secondary references to some of Masterson's reporting, and his writing style also was evident in a series of articles he wrote for *Human Life* magazine which since have been reprinted in book form.

Perhaps Masterson's most controversial reporting resulted from one of the most sensational murder trials in American history, that of Chester Gillette in upstate New York. Gillette was a factory worker who had an affair with a co-worker, who later informed him she was pregnant with his baby. By the time Gillette received this bit of news, he already had fallen in love with and hoped to marry another woman, whose wealth and social standing promised to lift him from his lowly status in life. With his hopes of a brighter future threatened, Gillette took his former love, Grace Brown, boating on a lake in the Adirondacks. She never made it back to shore alive. Initially, Gillette confessed to striking the woman over the head with a camera and throwing her in the lake, where she drowned. Later, he recanted his confession and

claimed Brown jumped from the boat to commit suicide. This tale became the basis for Theodore Dreiser's famous novel *An American Tragedy*, and the film *A Place in the Sun*.

At Gillette's highly publicized trial in 1907, Masterson saw a different kind of tragedy. He became convinced of Gillette's innocence, and when the jury returned a guilty verdict, Masterson used the pages of the *Morning Telegraph* to rail against what he saw as a miscarriage of justice. In a Page 1 story under the heading "New Style of Lynch Law in Northern New York," he called the trial "a flagrant travesty on justice. . .an inexcusable insult to the intelligence and civilization of New York. . .and a disgraceful mockery of justice." He also filled his story with such phrases as "lynch law," "mob rule," and "a verdict rendered by 'Herkimer County bushmen.'"<sup>36</sup> Ignoring Masterson's reputation as a lawman, Herkimer County authorities arrested him and charged him with contempt of court in publishing "false and grossly inaccurate" descriptions of the trial.<sup>37</sup> A contrite Masterson managed to avoid jail by paying a \$50 fine.

Another example of Masterson's writing in these early years at the *Morning Telegraph* reflects more highly on his ability as a writer. He was commissioned by *Human Life* magazine, which was edited by his friend and admirer Alfred Henry Lewis, to pen a series of articles on the famous gunfighters he had known in the Old West. These essays, which will be examined in Chapter 6, not only serve as examples of Masterson's writing

skills but also provide valuable insights into some of the most famous figures from this period of American history: Luke Short, Bill Tilghman, Ben Thompson, Doc Holliday, and Wyatt Earp. And while Masterson himself was not included in the series, these articles also reflected one of the more surprising traits of such a bold and outspoken figure of the Old West — his humility. In these tales, Masterson modestly left out his own role in his friends's exploits.

To correct this oversight, Lewis provided the final piece in the series with a very flattering article on Masterson titled, "The King of the Gun-Players, William Barclay Masterson." The article concluded with these words:

These and many more have been the adventures of Mr. Masterson, who, coming up through this perilous trail of smoke and blood, is now peacefully amassing ten thousand dollars a year as a crack writer on a New York City paper and a contributor to *Human Life*.<sup>38</sup>

It cannot be verified if Masterson did indeed have such a substantial income for that time, he did have other sources of revenue. Among his many friends and acquaintances was the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, who in 1904 offered him the post of U.S. Marshall for the Oklahoma Territory. Masterson, ever the realist, turned down the position. His reply to Roosevelt, according to Lewis in his editor's note to the first installment of Masterson's *Human Life* articles, was:

. . . My record would prove a never-failing bait to the dime-novel reading youngsters, loosed to distinguish themselves and make a fire-eating reputation, and I'd have to bump 'em off. So, Mr. President, with all thanks to you, I believe I won't take the place. I've got finally out of that zone of fire and I hope never to go back to it.<sup>39</sup>

Although Masterson passed on this assignment, a year later he did accept an appointment as deputy U.S. marshal for the Southern District of New York, which paid him \$2,000 a year.<sup>40</sup> This position, which was part-time and did not prevent him from continuing his work at the *Morning Telegraph*, lasted until 1909, when William Howard Taft succeeded Roosevelt in the White House and it was decided Masterson's services no longer were necessary. During the time Roosevelt was in office, Masterson visited Washington on several occasions and was Roosevelt's personal guest at the White House.

For the most part, however, Masterson concentrated his efforts on writing his three-times-a-week column, which by 1910 was running under the heading, "Masterson's Views on Timely Topics." His range of topics was not restricted to the sporting world, as he also offered his thoughts on reformers, Americans, New Yorkers, the Chinese and, in his later years, Prohibition. But primarily, he wrote about what interested him the most — boxing. It was an amazing transformation. The former sheriff of Dodge City had become one of the best-read newspaper reporters in New York, and perhaps the best-known sports writer in that city prior to the arrival of Grantland Rice in 1907.

Masterson had made the unlikely transition from Western gunfighter to Eastern newspaper reporter. In doing so, he established himself as one of the first of a new breed of American journalists—the sports columnist.

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## CHAPTER 4

### THE MYTH BECOMES THE MYTHMAKER: BAT MASTERSON AS A SPORTS

The development of the sports section and the emergence of the sports writer whose by-line was recognized by readers went hand in hand. The early sports writers with their colorful language helped stimulate interest in sports and set the sports page apart from the remainder of the newspaper.

Conversely, the increasing popularity of the sports page created the need for talented writers and reporters who could attract readers with their prose and the coverage of sports events and athletes.

The first sports reporters generally were held in low regard, and typically were "poorly paid and . . . often tools of the promoters" of sports events.<sup>1</sup> Their status was summed up in the disdainful remark of a sports businessman of the 1890s: "Sports writers — you can buy them with a steak."<sup>2</sup> However, a new breed of sports writer began to emerge after the turn of the century, and Bat Masterson was one of its most visible symbols. He was, as Grantland Rice's biographer Charles Fountain claimed, perhaps the only "brand-name sportswriter" in New York before Rice's arrival in 1907.<sup>3</sup> That certainly was not the case by the time of Masterson's death in 1921. In addition to Rice, the other popular sports writers in New York included Heywood Broun, Westbrook Pegler, W.O. McGeehan, while across the nation

such celebrated American writers as Ring Lardner and Jack London also developed their talents on the sports beat.

This chapter will be an examination of Bat Masterson's role in this newly developing field. It will be a look at how he compared to the other sports writers of his day and how he was regarded as a sports reporter. It will begin with a brief history of sports writers to accompany the previous history of the sports page, and it then will discuss Masterson's place among the prominent sports writers during his days in New York, from 1903 to 1921.

### *The Sports Writer as Celebrity*

By the time Bat Masterson penned his first article for *George's Weekly* in the 1890s, more and more newspapers were turning to specialists who were well versed in sports to report on these events and write about the athletes who participated in the contests. Previously, newspapers had relied on telegraphers, promoters, or, occasionally, news reporters to provide what sports news they published.

The trend toward specialized sports reporters began with the celebrity sports writers of the late nineteenth century. Typical of these "reporters" was boxing champion John L. Sullivan, who in 1889 was appointed sports editor of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. In truth, Pulitzer was hiring Sullivan's name, not the boxer himself. He was expected only to sit at his desk for a couple of hours a day, while others did his work for him and the *World*

capitalized on his fame. Even these generous terms were too demanding for Sullivan, who in his eight months of employment did no work and reportedly appeared in the *World* news room only once. On that occasion, Sullivan "blustered in. . .bought the staff a drink, and then refused to come again."<sup>4</sup> The *World* did have better luck with some of its other celebrity sports reporters. Heavyweight boxer Dominick McCaffery wrote in a by-lined article in 1889 that John L. Sullivan beat Jake Kilrain in their title fight "not by face hits, but by blows to the heart."<sup>5</sup> And by the 1890s, the famous actor and baseball fan De Wolfe Hopper, whose stage performances made the poem "Casey At The Bat" a national favorite, used the *World* columns to write news of baseball.<sup>6</sup>

During the "yellow journalism" wars of the late 1890s, William Randolph Hearst went his rival one better by signing champion athletes from several sports to lucrative contracts that paid as much as \$5,000 a year to put their by-lines over articles penned for them by ghost writer Herbert H. Davis. In this manner, Hearst featured on his sports pages the "writings" of "Hobart on tennis, Bald on bicycling, Batchaler on wheeling, and Heffelfinger, the Yale hero, on football."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Amos Rusie, the star fastball pitcher of the New York Giants, explained in print how to throw a curve ball, and former baseball player and manager Arthur Irwin, revealed the secrets of the hit-and-run play. Thoroughbred jockeys A. Hammond and Willie Sims shared the by-line on another insider's story, "How a Horse Race Is Ridden."<sup>8</sup>

Hearst even went so far as to hire perhaps the first female sports writer, Winifred Black, who gave her view of the Yale football team in 1895 in an article headlined:

At Old Yale  
The Journal's Woman Reporter Trains With the Little Boys in Blue  
Once Around the Clock With the Lads Who Will Uphold Yale's  
Prestige  
The First time a Woman was Invited to Dinner by a College Football  
Team<sup>9</sup>

While Hearst was capitalizing on the person behind his sports by-lines, a sports reporter in Chicago was creating a following for how he wrote his accounts of the games and events he covered. His name was Charles Dryden, and he was, in the eyes of one of his protégés, Hugh Fullerton, "the Mark Twain of baseball. . .In any other line of writing he probably would have been accepted as one of our greatest humorists."<sup>10</sup>

Dryden picked on striking features of a game or a player. He would comment on the size of a player's feet, or his whiskers, and would spin it through his story as a sort of theme song. Soon Dryden's stuff was read as much for his comical treatment as for the news it contained.<sup>11</sup>

Dryden made sports writing entertaining, and his writings were a rare combination of drama and the realization that at its heart sports was a folly. His coverage of a World Series game began: "Although bested in the struggle for the supremacy of the world, and parts of New Jersey, the white elephants

[Philadelphia Athletics] are not too much cast down."<sup>12</sup> When Chicago's two teams, the Cubs and White Sox, played one another, Dryden led with: "Like the lunch hour in local chop houses, the action was fast and effective, but not so clean as it might have been."<sup>13</sup> Dryden also was the master of one-liners such as "the huge crowd left no noise unturned"<sup>14</sup> and "[t]he American League champions had no more of a look-in than a man peering down a well at midnight."<sup>15</sup>

Dryden inspired a number of imitators, and he played a role in the lively and colorful language that sports reporters introduced to the newspaper. Initially, many newspaper editors attempted to tone down such writing, but eventually they surrendered to the trend and by the time of Masterson's death in 1921, sports writers were allowed "greater liberties than those granted to reporters in the other departments of the paper."<sup>16</sup>

While much of this writing became almost incomprehensible to the average reader, a number of other talented writers followed Dryden's lead and used the sports page to hone their skills. Ring Lardner began his newspaper career covering baseball in Chicago, and even after he began writing a popular general interest column that was syndicated nationally and penning several short stories, Lardner continued to rely on sports as a popular theme in his work. Grantland Rice also arrived on the scene with his lyrical verses and literary metaphors, while rising stars such as Heywood Broun and Damon Runyon used the sports pages as a springboard for greater

success on the news pages. By the time of Masterson's death in 1921, the profession was entering what has been called the "Golden Age of Sports Writing" in the 1920s.

### *Bat Masterson's Place Among the Sports Writers of His Era*

When William E. Lewis hired Bat Masterson at the *Morning Telegraph* in 1903, it must have appeared at first glance as little more than a publicity stunt such as William Randolph Hearst sending a female reporter to cover the Yale football team or Joseph Pulitzer paying John L. Sullivan to come and sit in the New York World's news room. Here was an aging gunfighter and gambler with little to qualify him for a position on a New York daily other than his colorful reputation and his promotional writings on an obscure weekly newspaper out West. Surely, there were been skeptics, but Masterson would prove them wrong. He lasted more than 18 years as a newspaper writer, and at the time of his death still was meeting the demands of a three-times-a-week column, which is quite a feat for a 67-year-old journalist.

In order to understand and to appreciate the significance of what Masterson wrote during those two decades, it first is necessary to judge him in the context of the other leading sports writers of his day. To do this, Masterson and a representative sample of his contemporaries will be examined and compared in five general categories: 1. Education, 2. Previous Jobs/Training, 3. Writing Style, 4. Subject Matter/Topics of Writings, and 5. Professional

Stature. This survey includes 40 sports reporters who wrote for major U.S. daily newspapers during the period of Masterson's employment in New York, from 1903 to 1921. Included among them are major figures such as Grantland Rice and Ring Lardner, as well as less-remembered but respected sports writers such as Henry Edwards of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

### Education

The stereotype of the sports reporter on an American newspaper in the early twentieth century is that of a writer who does not measure up to the standards of the news reporter and who drifted into the profession for his love of sports or, worse, the under-the-table payments of sports promoters. Stanley Walker, the city editor of the *New York Herald*, spoke for many in the news room when he wrote in 1934: "With a few scholarly exceptions, sports writers used to be rather unlettered chroniclers (muggs) writing for an audience of their own kind."<sup>17</sup> However, Walker's harsh summation is not borne out by a survey of sports writers in Masterson's day. Of the 40 contemporaries of Masterson who were studied, 13 had college degrees, 7 others had some college education, 15 had only a public school education, and 5 others had undetermined educational backgrounds. Thus, 50 percent of the sports writers had at least a partial college education.

The breakdown of the sports reporters by education level was:

| <u>Education Level</u>     | <u>Number</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| College Degree             | 13            | 32.5%          |
| Some College but No Degree | 7             | 17.5%          |
| Public School Degree       | 15            | 37.5%          |
| Failed to Complete School  | 3             | 7.5%           |
| No Education Mentioned     | 2             | .5%            |

Certainly, these were no "muggs," to borrow Stanley Walker's term. Paul Shannon of the *Boston Post* received degrees from Boston College in 1898 and Harvard in 1906 before going to work for the *Post*. There were two other Harvard men among the sports writers in the survey. Augustine Rooney of the *Boston Evening Herald* and later the *Boston American* was educated at Boston Latin School and Harvard, while Joe Vila spent two years at Harvard in the 1880s before becoming a cub reporter at the *New York Morning Journal* in its pre-Hearst days. "Uncle Jim" Crusinberry received his degree from the University of Chicago before working on papers in Chicago, St. Louis, and New York, while Grantland Rice was the product of prep schools before graduating from Vanderbilt University.

Two of the writers studied chose newspaper work over medicine. Bill Brandt, who worked for four newspapers in Philadelphia, attended Philadelphia College of Osteopathy while writing sports,<sup>18</sup> and Dan Daniel came from "a line of doctors in the family as far back as we could remember" but turned to sports writing because he "couldn't take the cadavers."<sup>19</sup> Another, Henry Edwards, abandoned his plans to become a lawyer after one

year of law school and went to work for the *Cleveland Recorder* as a sports reporter.

Four other sports writers had backgrounds worth mentioning. Joe Campbell of the *Washington Post* "was one of the foremost authorities in America on the Shakespearean drama, author of a standard work on Chaucer, and [the writer of] editorials and dramatic reviews."<sup>20</sup> Tommy Rice of Washington and Brooklyn not only was "a lawyer, an authority on criminology [and] a member of the New York State Crime Commission," but he also was an authority on earthquakes and volcanoes and spent many winters in the West Indies and Central America studying seismology."<sup>21</sup> Jimmy Gilruth of Chicago "spent all his spare time, while traveling, in libraries, collecting material for his book on the Children's Crusades."<sup>22</sup> Finally, Bill Phelon "was an authority and wrote books upon the American Indian and the movement of the tribes, and spent years studying reptilian life."<sup>23</sup>

Bat Masterson, by comparison, had little formal education on the Kansas plains, and was for practical purposes a self-educated man. While this makes his achievements in the newspaper world all the more remarkable, he was not alone among his contemporaries. Three of the sports writers surveyed had not even made it through public school. James Dawson of the *New York Times* was indicative of this breed of newspaper reporter. He came from a poor family on New York's west side and left school to go to work at age 11.

He began his newspaper career as an office boy for the *Times*, and, like Masterson, later became a well-known boxing writer. Like many who have risen from such tough circumstances, Dawson took pride in his lack of formal schooling. He used to boast that he got his education "in the best combination of schools existent — the college of hard, hard knocks and the *New York Times*."<sup>24</sup>

#### Training/Previous Jobs

Bat Masterson's background as a gunfighter set him apart from his contemporaries, and he also was among a small minority of sports reporters who gained employment on a newspaper with little or no training in the profession. Most of the sports reporters went to work as newspaper reporters either while they were in school or after leaving school, while a minority started in non-reporting capacities such as office boys or copy boys and worked their ways up to reporting positions. One, Damon Runyon, was kicked out of school in the sixth grade "for being mischievous" and got his first job as a reporter at age 15, apparently with no other training.<sup>25</sup> Only five became reporters after working in another field.

| <u>Previous Training/Experience</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| School                              | 19            | 47.5%          |
| Entry-Level Newspaper Job           | 7             | 17.5%          |
| Other Career or Job                 | 5             | 12.5%          |
| Unknown                             | 9             | 22.5%          |

The entry-level positions at the newspaper included office boy, typesetter, copy boy, printer's devil, and newspaper telegrapher.

Of those who worked outside the newspaper profession before becoming reporters, only two had experiences even remotely similar to those of Bat Masterson. Jack London quit school in Oakland at age 15 to become an "oyster pirate," robbing oyster beds, and then was hired by fishermen to guard against such theft. As such, he could be considered a law-enforcement official of sorts. At 17, London signed on as a seaman and left home, later to become a sports reporter for a brief time before turning his full-time efforts to writing novels.<sup>26</sup> Jim Gould of the *Newark Star* could match Masterson's brief military stint (as an Indian fighter at the Battle of Adobe Walls), as he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1903 and then served in the Philippines with John Pershing.<sup>27</sup>

Edward Balinger of the *Pittsburgh Post* had a background that while not as exciting as Masterson's was almost as colorful. After studying music in college, he traveled with "a minstrel troupe, circus and other theatrical outfits" before embarking on his newspaper career.<sup>28</sup> Joe Vila had a less glamorous past, working two years as a baggage master on the railroad between his time at Harvard and his first newspaper job. Glen Waller, whose father was a prominent physician in Lancaster, Illinois, and mother a musician and singer, graduated from Southern Collegiate Institute in 1902

and went to work in the business and circulation departments of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* before becoming a sports reporter.<sup>29</sup>

Subject Matter/Topics

Bat Masterson was for all practical purposes a boxing writer rather than a sports writer in the general sense of the term. He wrote almost exclusively on prize fighting, and when he did stray from this subject it usually was to express his opinions on general topics, not other sports. Masterson occasionally made reference to thoroughbred racing, and in 1910 the *Morning Telegraph* published his picks on the horse races. However, this appeared to be only of peripheral interest to him, and his primary duties in this regard appeared to involve his duties as manager of the Turf Advertising Department. As Masterson explained in one of his columns, the tipsters paid to have their picks published in the *Morning Telegraph*, and it was Masterson's duty to ensure that their selections were received prior to post time. He stressed, however, that this was paid advertising and "the *Morning Telegraph* assumes no more direct responsibility for turf advertising than it does for liquor, champagne or specialty house advertising. . ."30

Despite such responsibilities, Masterson devoted his columns almost exclusively to prize fighting. When he did mention another sports such as baseball or football, it was likely to be in reference to certain athletes or teams appearing at an event he happened to be attending. This practice of

specializing in the coverage of only one or two sports was not uncommon among sports reporters of Masterson's era, although more research is needed to gain a more thorough analysis of this practice. Several of the sports reporters surveyed were identified as "baseball writers," but although this was their primary coverage, many of them also covered other sports such as football in the offseason. Ring Lardner was just such a writer early in his career, as he traveled to the baseball training camps in the spring and accompanied the Chicago teams on their travels throughout the season, which lasted into October. However, Lardner, unlike Masterson, also covered and wrote about other sports when time permitted.

Twenty-nine of the 40 sports writers in this survey were identified as baseball writers, but no significance can be attached to this figure because background information on more than half of the writers was compiled from biographical sketches from the *Baseball Writers Association of America*, thus biasing the survey. However, it is possible to read the works of Masterson's most prominent contemporaries such as Grantland Rice, Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon, and Hugh Fullerton and see examples of their writings on different sports such as baseball, football, and boxing. That versatility is not seen in Masterson's work.

### Professional Stature

Professional stature is not easy to define, and it is even more difficult to measure. For the purposes of this study, it is worth attempting to do so. Basically, this is an attempt to determine Bat Masterson's relative importance among sports writers of his day. Thus, the term professional stature is defined for these purposes as, "The level of achievement in newspaper work and related endeavors, and the regard in which one is held by the public and his/her contemporaries." It will be measured by one's position in the profession, the newspaper or newspapers for which one worked, length of service, respect of his peers, and other writings and publications.

### **Newspaper Position**

As to the first measure, it can be seen that Masterson attained a high-ranking and prestigious newspaper position. He not only held the title of sporting editor, he also had the forum of a three-days-a-week column which generally ran two columns in length (across two columns, roughly the length of the page). Through both his title and the amount of newspaper space at his disposal, Masterson rated with the leading figures of his profession. The columnist was a celebrity of sorts, and the competition for such a position was fierce. In terms of writing, there was no higher position to attain on a newspaper, other than to become a general columnist and gain an even wider audience. Among the sports writers in this survey, it is believed that only

Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon, and Heywood Broun made this progression to even greater fame than they enjoyed on the sports pages. There is no indication in the biographical material gathered on the other sports writers to suggest similar advancements. In fact, only a handful of the 40 writers surveyed rose to become either a sports editor or columnist, according to the biographical material available. The breakdown of those surveyed was:

| <u>Position Attained</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|--------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Sports Editor            | 6             | 15%            |
| Assistant Sports Editor  | 1             | 2.5%           |
| Sports Columnist         | 5             | 12.5%          |
| Sports Writer            | 28            | 70%            |

### **Prestige of Newspaper**

In terms of the newspaper of employment, Masterson does not fare as well against his New York counterparts, as the *Morning Telegraph* was, according to veteran New York newspaper reporter Heywood Broun, "[a]t the very bottom of the journalistic scale . . . and never on the more respectable breakfast tables."<sup>31</sup> However, New York was at the forefront of American journalism, so even to be employed by the newspaper at the bottom of the scale there meant that one was in the "big leagues" of American dailies.

### **Length of Newspaper Career**

Masterson also compares well in length of service, especially if one dates the beginning of his newspaper career to before 1900 when he began writing sports for *George's Weekly* in Denver. His New York newspaper career last 18

years; his overall writing career for more than 20 years. While this is a fairly lengthy career, it does not measure up to the majority of the sports reporters in this survey, 75 percent of whom had careers lasting more than 20 years. However, it must be noted that this survey is biased by the fact that a majority of these writers were chosen for the sample because their biographical material was available in the 1933 edition of *Who's Who in Baseball*. Of the writers, listed in that publication, only those who were active between 1900 and 1920 were included. Thus, all of these were older writers whose longevity in the profession enabled them to be included in a book that was not published until 13 years after the time period in question. All of those writers who had shorter careers than Masterson already had passed from the scene and were not available for inclusion in *Who's Who in Baseball* in 1933.

While acknowledging this flaw in the research, these are the results of the longevity study of the sports writers:

| <u>Years as Sports Reporter</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Less Than 10                    | 2             | 5%             |
| 10 to Less Than 20              | 4             | 10%            |
| 20 or More                      | 30            | 75%            |
| Unknown                         | 4             | 10%            |

### **Respect of Peers**

In terms of the respect he commanded from his peers, Bat Masterson also fared well. Heywood Broun admitted that as a young reporter at the *Morning Telegraph* he was in awe of Masterson, and he said Masterson's "views on

prizefighting and horse racing were generally regarded as magisterial."<sup>32</sup>

Masterson was especially highly regarded among boxing writers, and boxing historian Nat Fleischer singles him out with only 11 others in a select group of newspaper reporters he ranked as the best boxing writers he knew in his more than 50 years in the sport.<sup>33</sup>

Admittedly, Masterson was not held in the same esteem as the truly great sports writers of his time. It was said of Grantland Rice that his "leads sang of sunsets which displayed the colors of the victorious college football teams."<sup>34</sup>

Masterson's leads never sang, nor did they match the eloquence of Heywood Broun, who could pay homage to the great baseball pitcher Christy

Mathewson with a lead such as:

Robbed of his catcher, a wrecked machine tottering to ruin at his back, and the greatest sluggers in baseball poised for the onslaught, old Chris Mathewson, master, king, emperor and ruler of all baseball pitchers at home and in the dominions beyond the seas, annihilated the attack of the Philadelphia Athletics by the might of his wizardy.<sup>35</sup>

Masterson also lacked the wit of a Hugh Fullerton, who once wrote of his brief fling with college:

I got along fine that winter — won the pool championship, helped steal a professor's cow, tied another professor up in a tennis net, and changed boarding houses three times by special request.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, Masterson's writing skills were no match for Ring Lardner, whom Grantland Rice once described as "closer to being a genius than anyone

I've known. He had a sense of humor that was at times beyond this world."<sup>37</sup>

Lardner's talent was "making something interesting out of an essentially uninteresting situation,"<sup>38</sup> which to a great degree is the essence of writing sports on a daily basis, week in and week out.

Jack London was another who elevated sports writing to higher level, and doing so by writing about the same sport as Masterson — prize fighting. Nat Fleischer said London "had the gift of making a reader actually see and feel what he described within the ring."<sup>39</sup> Another who wrote boxing with an eloquence far beyond Masterson's reach was W.O. McGeehan, who took a jaundiced view of the sport he dubbed "the manly art of modified murder."<sup>40</sup>

Masterson also lacked the breadth of knowledge and innovation of Joe Vila, who in addition to being credited with originating the "play-by-play technique" for reporting a sports contest<sup>41</sup> also was known as a "reporter-historian" who took "a long-range view of sport."<sup>42</sup>

However, Masterson was a solid reporter who adopted a hard-hitting, straightforward style that was in keeping with his personality. He never attempted to write verse as Grantland Rice did, nor did he try to copy the clever writing or catchy phraseology of his more talented peers. Instead, the respect Masterson commanded stemmed from his forceful opinions and his inside knowledge of the fight game. Just as in his days in the West, Masterson was not always well liked, but he always was respected. "Bat was more feared

than loved in the boxing world," James P. Sinnott said after Masterson's death in 1921. "His opinions were sometimes colored by prejudice that none could shake, but there was never any question of their honesty."<sup>43</sup>

### Other Writings and Publications

The better sports writers of Masterson's days capitalized on their talents by writing for magazines on the side or, in the case of the more gifted writers, turning to more literary pursuits such as writing novels. While Stanley Walker may have disparaged the early sports writers as "muggs," the survey of his peers in the sports writing profession reveals a far different caliber of writer. Ten of these writers, or one-fourth of those surveyed, later authored at least one book, and eight of these sports reporters-turned-authors wrote on subjects other than sports. For example, Jack Kofoed wrote two books and co-authored two others, including one with Jimmy Durante titled *Night Clubs*. Jack London became famous for his adventure novels, and Ring Lardner is recognized as one of America's foremost short-story writers. Lardner started writing fiction in 1914, six years after he began his newspaper career as a baseball writer, and he gained national fame with his *You Know Me Al* stories, a collection of letters from a fictional minor-league ballplayer which were made into book form. Several of Lardner's later short stories and magazine writings also have been compiled in books, and he is acclaimed as one of America's great writers.

His short stories were read by millions, honored and anthologized, scrutinized and praised by critics. . . .For a time, at least, his name was invariably listed alongside those of the other certifiably "important" writers of the period: Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson.<sup>44</sup>

Masterson's close friend Damon Runyon also wrote short stories, including "The Idylls of Miss Sarah Brown," which was turned into the popular stage play *Guys and Dolls*, featuring Sky Masterson, the character modeled after Bat Masterson.

While the real Bat Masterson could not match these literary achievements, he did extend his reach beyond the newspaper pages with his series of profiles on "Famous Gunfighters of the Western Frontier" for *Human Life* magazine. Unlike his peers on the sports desk, Masterson's ties to literature are as the subject of the many works based on his life, not his writings themselves.

### Conclusion

Bat Masterson arrived in New York with little formal education and only a brief and somewhat tainted experience as a newspaper reporter. That he was able to take these limited assets and his knowledge of prize fighting and parlay them into a career as a prominent New York sports editor is perhaps as impressive as any of his exploits in the Old West.

As has been demonstrated, Masterson was not a bit player on the newspaper scene, nor was he merely a celebrity writer who lent his name to

the works of a ghost writer. Bat Masterson was a genuine sports reporter. He was a self-taught writer who overcame his lack of formal education to compete against writers who, for the most part, had the benefit of advanced schooling. Just as he once beat the odds to survive in the violent and deadly world of gunfighters, he also enjoyed a long and productive career in the newspaper world. He was more limited in his scope than most of his peers, but in the territory he staked out for himself — the prize ring — he was a respected and influential writer. Masterson's friend Col. Jefferson Davis Orear, editor of the *Arkansaw Thomas Cat*, once wrote of him:

Mr. Masterson writes very entertainingly. His stuff, while pregnant with fearsome facts, contains enough cocktail brilliancy and tobasco [sic] sauce trimmings to warrant it occupying a conspicuous position in *The Morning Telegraph*.<sup>45</sup>

For a one-time gunfighter and gambler from the West, that was high praise.

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## CHAPTER 5

### THE URBAN FRONTIER: BAT MASTERSON AS A SYMBOL OF THE WESTERN MAN IN TWENTIETH CENTURY URBAN AMERICA

When Bat Masterson still was at the peak of his career as a Western lawman and gunfighter, he met and became friends with another adventurous young man, whose name was Charlie Rogers. Although he had been born in Alexandria Bay, New York, Rogers left home at an early age and headed to the West in search of excitement. It was while he was in El Paso, Texas, that Rogers became acquainted with Masterson, and the two formed a life-long friendship. Undoubtedly, it was Rogers's daring nature and sense of adventure that appealed to Masterson. As Masterson later recalled, Rogers was "the only white man ever known to have successfully negotiated the Lachine Rapids, with no other aid or protection than a rubber suit and a life preserver," a "daring and seemingly impossible feat" he performed simply to win a bet.<sup>1</sup>

Forty years after they first met, Masterson and Rogers again crossed paths, this time in Alexandria Bay, where Rogers had returned to become "one of the prominent and substantial citizens of this enterprising village."<sup>2</sup> It was August 1921, just two months before Masterson's death, and while he was vacationing in the resort town, he and Rogers were talking one day when Masterson spied an "aeroplane" parked nearby. Masterson mentioned to his friend that he would like to fly in one of the machines one day, so Rogers

went to talk to an old man who happened to be standing near-by. After a few minutes, Rogers turned to Masterson and said, "Get in and I'll drive you over [to Kingston] and back." When Masterson balked at the notion of his Old West friend piloting him in the airplane, Rogers added, "Don't be afraid for I have handled this sort of an animal a thousand times since I've been living here and never had the slightest accident."<sup>3</sup>

In a few moments, the two men were airborne, with Rogers at the controls of the airplane. And as Masterson later assured his readers, "Charlie Rogers may be somewhat overweight and he may be crawling along in years, but he can steer an aeroplane or a hydroplane either, for that matter, as skillfully as any man in this part of Governor Miller's State with its Mullan-Gage Act thrown in."<sup>4</sup>

There was a great deal of significance in this otherwise brief and uneventful airplane journey. Here were two men who forty years earlier had ridden the dusty trails of the American West together in search of adventure. When they were young, America also seemed young, with its open frontier and seemingly endless opportunities facing both them and the country. Now, two eras had overlapped; the past had merged with the future. As old men, Masterson and Rogers were riding together not on horseback but in one of the marvels of the twentieth century, the airplane, which was piloted by "the only white man ever known to have successfully negotiated the Lachine Rapids."

In those intervening four decades, Bat Masterson had grown old and America had grown up. And because of Masterson's unique experiences as a Western gunfighter and Eastern newspaper writer, through him we can learn much about what was happening in this country during that period when the American frontier closed and the great migration from the country to the city took place.

This chapter will be an examination of Masterson as a symbol of the Western Man in Urban America. It will be centered on the research question "Are the themes of the Western frontier and the rural-to-urban movement in America represented in Bat Masterson's writings as a New York sports columnist?" It will include an overview of the rural-to-urban movement in the United States and the closing of the American frontier, which were dominant themes of American history at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century; a look at the mythology of the American West as represented in literature; a discussion of methodology; and a study of the symbolism of the dominant themes in Masterson's writing, with a particular emphasis on determining what symbols, if any, there were of the American West and the urbanization of America.

## Overview

### *The Rise of the City*

America at the time of Bat Masterson's birth was a predominantly rural society. In 1860, when Masterson was a young boy and about the time his family moved to Illinois from Canada, about four in every five Americans lived either in the country or in towns or villages of fewer than 2,500 people. When Masterson left home and first arrived in Dodge City, Kansas, in 1871, three out of every four Americans still lived in rural areas. That figure steadily declined so that by the time Masterson himself first arrived in New York City in 1902, only three out of five Americans lived in the country while two of five were city dwellers. By 1910, when Masterson was established as a leading sports authority in New York, the split was almost half and half, as 55 percent of Americans lived in rural settings while 45 percent were in urban centers.<sup>5</sup>

There were many factors which spurred this migration from the country to the city. The economic development of the United States following the Civil War created new jobs in the cities, a growing network of railroads provided transportation for manufacturing, and the mechanization of agriculture not only increased the food supply but also displaced many farm workers. Additionally, technological advances such as trolley cars allowed cities to grow outward, and elevators and taller buildings enabled them to grow upward.<sup>6</sup>

Using the 2,500 figure to define an urban area, the number of "cities" in the United States grew from 400 at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, to 1,737 at the turn of the century. This meant that approximately from the time Masterson was a young boy living on the family farm in Kansas until he joined this migration by moving to New York in 1902, the increase in urban places in the United States jumped by a remarkable 343 percent.<sup>7</sup> Looked at in terms of numbers, the city population in the United States increased from 6.2 million to 42 million in the fifty-year period from 1860 to 1910.<sup>8</sup> More important, the very large cities showed equally dramatic increases in population. New York City (the boroughs of which were brought under one government in 1898) had a four-fold increase of population in this period, to a total of 5 million in 1910. There also was a dramatic increase in the number of big cities, or those with at least 100,000 residents. There were only nine such cities in the United States in 1860; by 1900, there were 38.<sup>9</sup>

This urbanization of America reflected a general world trend. From 1850 to 1900, world population increased by 37.3 percent, while the population of cities under 100,000 increased by 174.5 percent, and cities over 100,000 increased by 222.2 percent.<sup>10</sup> Still, the urban growth in America was marked by the dramatic change it represented. By the turn of the century, "America had some of the biggest, most densely populated cities in the world. . . . Added together, the twenty biggest urban centers accounted for less than two million people in 1850; but New York alone had more than three million half a

century later. . . ."11 Meanwhile, Chicago and Philadelphia surpassed one million inhabitants, while St. Louis, Boston and Baltimore had more than 500,000 at the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup>

This explosion of population in American cities also was fueled by immigration from abroad, "which in its broader outlines also represented a movement from the countryside to the city."<sup>13</sup> For example, in the 1880s about five million immigrants arrived in the U.S., and most settled in cities. In 1890, 42 percent of New York City's population was foreign-born. In Chicago, the figure was 41 percent, and in Minneapolis it was 37 percent.<sup>14</sup> By 1910, more than one-third of the eight largest cities in the U.S. was foreign born. "In contrast less than 8 percent of the rural population of that year had been born outside the United States."<sup>15</sup>

It was during this time period that the American frontier itself disappeared from the landscape. For practical purposes, the American frontier closed about the time Bat Masterson left Kansas in the late 1880s and himself migrated to the western metropolis of Denver in search of new opportunities. An 1890 bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census stated:

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas the West once had been the "safety valve" to absorb excess population from the cities, primarily those in the East and Northeast, now the reverse hypothesis was in effect. High birth rates and agricultural mechanization, along with the closing of the frontier, resulted in a surplus of rural population, led to an "urban exodus, especially to the manufacturing cities of the Northeast and Midwest."<sup>17</sup> This marked a turning point in American history and, consequently, in how Americans viewed themselves and their country. Frederick Jackson Turner stated that American history up to the 1890s had been the history of the colonization of the western frontier. "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development," wrote Turner.<sup>18</sup> With that frontier closed and a new century dawning, American history had taken a turn and the migration to the urban centers was in full force, so much so that even a symbol of the frontier such as Bat Masterson was himself being drawn to the city.

### *The Mythology of the West*

It also was Turner who captured the importance of the American frontier when he wrote, "The West was another name for opportunity,"<sup>19</sup> (Turner's essay is used here for his views on how the American West had a defining role in shaping American character and democracy, not for his ideas on the frontier). This symbolism was especially evident in the writings about the

American West. One can begin with James Fenimore Cooper's series of "Leatherstocking Tales," the most famous of which was *Last of the Mohicans* in 1826. The hero of Cooper's novels was "a solitary man" who displayed "inherent goodness,"<sup>20</sup> and, like the poet Albert Pike, "listed as the prime attractions of the lonely hunter's life its independence, its freedom from law and restraint, its lack of ceremony."<sup>21</sup> To many, Leatherstocking also "was a symbol of anarchic freedom, an enemy of law and order."<sup>22</sup> By the mid-1800s, the symbol of the independent Western man had evolved from the Daniel Boone-like character evident in Cooper's tales to the mountain man epitomized by Kit Carson.

The Wild Western hero has been secularized. . .and magnified. He no longer looks to God through nature, for nature is no longer benign. . .The scene has been shifted from the deep fertile forests east of the Mississippi to the barren plains. . .It throws the hero back in upon himself and accentuates his terrible and sublime isolation. He is an anarchic and self-contained atom. . .alone in a hostile, or at best a neutral, universe.<sup>23</sup>

Into this universe stepped the frontier hero of the Beadle Westerns. Erastus Beadle had begun publishing a weekly series of "Dime Novels" in 1860, with an increasing emphasis on Western adventure, and these became known as Beadle Westerns.

The strongest link connecting the Beadle Westerns with Cooper is the representation of a benevolent hunter without a fixed place of abode, advanced in age, celibate, and of unequalled prowess in trailing, marksmanship, and Indian fighting."<sup>24</sup>

It was during the time of the Beadle Westerns that Bat Masterson became a "Western hero" for his exploits in Dodge City and the surrounding plains. Most of the traits which these western novels shared with Cooper's tales can be applied to Masterson, most notably his marksmanship and Indian fighting, his absence of a fixed home and the lack of romance in the tales of his exploits (save his encounter with the saloon girl that led to the shootout in which he was injured). There also are obvious comparisons between Masterson and Kirk Waltermeyer, "Nature's Nobleman" in the first of the Beadle Dime Novels by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens in 1869. Stephens described Waltermeyer as "the very beau ideal of that pioneer race" which left behind the comforts of city life to move into the West to pave the way for new states before moving "onward in search of new fields of enterprise, leaving the great results to be gathered by the settlers that came slowly after him."<sup>25</sup> There are obvious similarities between Waltermeyer and Masterson, who, although he did not come from the city, helped tame the frontier towns in Kansas for those who followed and then moved westward to Colorado in search of "new fields of enterprise."

Richard Slotkin writes in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* that in this "imagined America, the role and character of the hero would define the ideal traits of a new class of 'natural rulers,' and the hero story would show those characteristics triumphing over the countervailing powers of an older

order."<sup>26</sup> Another transformation also was taking place both in this Western literature and American thought. The nemesis in the early western novels was the Indian, whose role of antagonist eventually was taken in the latter part of the nineteenth century by "road agents or counterfeiters as the standard enemy."<sup>27</sup>

The prototypical Western heroes of the late 1800s were Deadwood Dick, created by Edward L. Wheeler, and "the literary" Buffalo Bill, based on the very real person William Cody. This marked the emergence of "the two-gun man of the 1890's."<sup>28</sup> The literary character of Buffalo Bill was the "most famous of dime novel heroes,"<sup>29</sup> but perhaps Deadwood Dick was more illustrative of the representation of this American hero. He derived his name "from the mining town which sprang up with the gold rush to the Black Hills in Dakota Territory, in the middle 1870's,"<sup>30</sup> and unlike previous Western heroes who migrated from the East, Deadwood Dick appeared to have originated in the West. Thus, he was "without the upper-class rank that belongs exclusively to Easterners or Englishmen."<sup>31</sup> He also possessed "to a high degree such characteristic skills as riding and shooting."<sup>32</sup> It was this portrayal of Deadwood Dick that illustrated how the Western hero symbolized the American dream.

Such a hero, presumably humble in his origins and without formal education or inherited wealth, "confirmed Americans in the

traditional belief that obstacles were to be overcome by the courageous, virile, and determined stand of the individual as an individual."<sup>33</sup>

Next came the "Wild Western hero as cowboy, who . . . first appeared in the wake of Buffalo Bill in the late 1880's."<sup>34</sup> The development of the symbolism of the cowboy was boosted by Henry King, a writer for *Scribner's* who observed that while the cowboy was violent he displayed such virtues as generosity, courage, and honesty, with "a strange, paradoxical code of personal honor, in vindication of which he will obtrude his life as though it were but a toy."<sup>35</sup> The cowboy of the dime store novels had little to do with cattle, however. "The professional duty of Beadle cowboys is to fight Indians, Mexicans, and outlaws."<sup>36</sup>

Another literary figure who emerged during Masterson's days in Kansas was Captain Arthur Farnham, the hero of John Hay's *The Breadwinners* (1884-85). Farnham is "an ex-soldier of aristocratic character and breeding"<sup>37</sup> who served in the Civil War and in the West fighting Indians. Although Farnham was born in the East, he "is distinctly 'of the frontier.'"<sup>38</sup> Hay's hero also reflects another popular theme in American, as Slotkin notes. He is of the upper class and is a firm believer in maintaining the existing social order against the "urban 'savages' whose lust for power, wealth — or the women of the upper classes — leads them to challenge" that order.<sup>39</sup> Driven by these principles, when Hay's hero recruits and leads a group of loyal followers to

defeat a mob of strikers who threaten their homes, this vigilante force is able to prevail "by virtue of its superior discipline, and by its devotion to principles other than personal gain."<sup>40</sup> In his rescue of his fiancée, Farnham displays "the virile and even violent qualities that. . .are essential. . .for a modern man to possess. . .It is that love of battle, as much as anything, that makes Farnham a hero and a model for his class."<sup>41</sup>

It was from this environment that Bat Masterson emerged, both as a symbol of the Western hero and later as a chronicler of those who shared similar virtues — the prize fighters. Not only did Masterson share many of the qualities of these Western heroes, he also would reflect in his writings principles similar to those who created these heroes. It can be argued that the myth of Bat Masterson as a gunfighter and lawman was shaped by these themes that run throughout American literature of the West. This in turn leads to the hypothesis that his writings were shaped not only by his experiences in the West but by these same myths.

### **Methodology**

To determine whether Bat Masterson's work as a New York sports writer reflected the themes that shaped the mythology of the American West, it first is necessary define these themes. Based on previous such studies of the West, a list of broad themes, or categories, will serve as the framework for this research. Within these categories are included a number of sub-categories

which encompass more specific traits or characteristics of Western mythology. It is the mention of or reference to these more defined traits or virtues that make it possible to study Masterson's writings in this manner. For example, when a reference is made to a boxer's fighting spirit in the ring, this can be labeled "courage" and recorded with similar examples under the broader category "Man of Action."

These themes, or categories, are:

- **Conflict** — "The theme of conflict. . .tributes to a natural as contrasted with a civilized life. . .[and] the notion that the essence of civilization is struggle."<sup>42</sup> *Subcategories: Antagonists, Good Versus Evil.*

- **Equality of Classes** — Social class was not as important in the West, as one's previous status in society did not translate well to the harsh demands of the frontier. It stemmed from "Jacksonian democracy, [which was] based on the good fellowship and genuine social feeling of the frontier, in which classes and inequalities of fortune played little part."<sup>43</sup> *Subcategories: Equality, Prejudice.*

- **Freedom of the Individual** — The ideal of individualism was crucial to the Western man. Turner stated that this point could not be emphasized too much. "The world was to be made a better world by the example of a democracy in which there was freedom of the individual, in which there was the vitality and mobility productive of originality and variety," he wrote.<sup>44</sup>

*Subcategories: Freedom, Lonely Hunter/Frontiersman, Survival of the Fittest.*

- **Frontier Versus Metropolis** — The rural-urban differences in American literature often emphasized the evil and corruption of the city and the inherent goodness and character of the country. *Subcategories: The City, Modern Life, Technology, The West, Western Hero.*

- **Sense of Honor and Justice** — The sense of justice on the frontier was based on what was right, not necessarily the antiquated and often ineffective laws of society. For Western literary heroes such as John Hay's Captain Farnham, the frontier represented not a liberation from the social order of the East, "but rather a more perfect commitment to hierarchy and against anarchic freedom than the soft society of the Metropolis has had to make."<sup>45</sup> *Subcategories: Fairness, Greed, Honesty, Honor, Justice, Law and Order, Loyalty, Trust.*

- **Man of Action** — The Western man was "less a man of culture, more a man of action."<sup>46</sup> *Subcategories: Courage, Ego, Heroic Individual, Humility, Skill, Strength.*

- **Manifest Destiny** — It was the Western man who was at the forefront of America fulfilling its "manifest destiny" through the taming and settlement of the frontier. *Subcategories: Patriotism.*

- **Opportunity** — As Turner stated, "The West was another name for opportunity."<sup>47</sup> *Subcategories: Discipline, Immigrants, Personal Sacrifice.*

- **Self-Made Man** — Turner wrote that the self-made man "was the Western man's ideal, was the kind of man that all men might become." Through his exploits on the frontier, he created a "formula for social regeneration — the freedom of the individual to seek his own."<sup>48</sup>

*Subcategories:* Pioneers.

- **Exploitation of Violence** — Charles W. Webber, who enjoyed a prolific career from 1844 to 1856 writing magazine articles based on his adventures in Texas, was the first to popularize this theme of the West. He "started with the simple exploitation of violence on the frontier that was to furnish the substance of so many hundreds of subliterate tales in the Beadle period and after."<sup>49</sup> *Subcategories:* Death, Violence.

These 10 themes will serve as the categories for the examination of Masterson's columns. His writings will be analyzed, and from them examples of these themes will be recorded and categorized. This will not be a content analysis in which the number of occurrences will be counted for comparisons of one category to another. Rather, an effort will be made to pull from these thematic occurrences a feeling for the deeper message in Masterson's writing. Using these broad themes as a guiding light, it will be determined which more specific themes, if any, were evident in Masterson's work. On the surface, he wrote about sports, primarily boxing, and also expressed his views on a range of topics, from reformers to politicians. But what was the driving force behind these statements? What shaped Masterson's views, and how can

they be taken and applied to the broader context of the transformation America was undergoing at that time?

The articles examined will not be a census of Masterson's writings in New York. During his 19 years at the *Morning Telegraph*, Masterson wrote on average three columns a week, or about 150 columns a year. That makes about 2,850 columns he wrote in addition to the special stories he did from major events he covered. All told, Masterson wrote close to 3,000 articles and columns. Rather than examine each of these stories, a systematic representative sampling of his work will be taken. This will be done by reading his July columns starting in 1910 and for every even-numbered year thereafter until his death in 1921. Added to this survey will be a selected number of months which correspond to significant events in Masterson's life or in the sports world in which he traveled. These months include January and February of 1910 (in anticipation of the famous Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries heavyweight championship fight that July), January of 1912 (when former lightweight champion Abe Attell was involved in what was believed to be a "fixed" fight), March and April of 1915 (when Jess Willard, the latest "Great White Hope," defeated Johnson, the controversial black champion), July 1917 (when events were leading America toward entry into the Great War in Europe), and July through October of 1921 (the time leading up to Masterson's death). In all, a total of 280 of Masterson's newspapers columns were included in this survey. Additionally, Masterson's 1907 series of biographies of famous

gunfighters for *Human Life* magazine are included in the research, to serve as a representation of his early writings and also as a contrast to his sports reporting.

### **The Symbolism of the American West and the Urbanization of America As Evidenced In Bat Masterson's Writing**

On Bat Masterson's last day at the *Morning Telegraph*, he arrived for work after a late breakfast with his wife Emma and a short walk down Eighth Avenue to the office. It was October 25, 1921, and, despite an attack of the grippe (a form of influenza) a couple of weeks earlier, Masterson at age 67 was continuing his practice of writing out his column by hand at his desk in the offices of the newspaper. His assistant, Sam Taub, was concerned about Masterson's health, and so he stopped by to check on the old man but was assured he was well. In his column that day, Masterson took aim at something that had been bothering him more than the grippe. It had become a common complaint of Masterson's — the money paid out to what he considered second-rate boxers.

"Lew Tendler received a little more than \$12,000 for his scrap with Rocky Kansas at the Garden a week ago," wrote Masterson. "Not so bad for a little job like that. And, by the way, old boy Rocky got nearly \$10,000 for the part he played in the show."<sup>50</sup> The next few lines penned by Masterson captured the essence of the inequality he felt he had battled all his life.

No wonder these birds are flying high when they can get that sort of money for an hour's work. Just think of an honest, hard-working farmer laboring from daylight to dark for forty of the best years of his life, and lucky if he finishes with as much as one of these birds gets in an hour. Yet there are those who argue that everything breaks even in this old dump of a world of ours.<sup>51</sup>

Such injustice had been a common refrain of Masterson's, but now he seemed especially bitter. All his life he had fought against what he perceived as injustice, and now in his old age he seemed to sense that the world was an even more hostile and less equitable place than it had been in his youth. He summed up his bitterness and his frustration with these final lines:

I suppose these ginks who argue that way hold that because the rich man gets ice in the Summer and the poor man gets it in the Winter things are breaking even for both. Maybe so, but I'll swear I can't see it that way.<sup>52</sup>

This was the last column Bat Masterson wrote. Shortly after he penned those words, Sam Taub returned to check on him and found the old man once so feared on the Kansas plains slumped over at his desk, dead of a heart attack. This final column of Masterson's was a fitting farewell to "this old dump of a world of ours." In it were expressed two of the four themes which were dominant in his writings. One was his portrayal of the boxer as the twentieth-century gunfighter, a species of men who, for both good and bad, represented through their exploits in the prize ring their counterparts from that violent yet heroic era of the American West. The other was the strong

sense of Honor and Justice that was evident throughout Masterson's writings, from early in his career until the day of his death.

There were two other dominant themes in Masterson's writing. One can be categorized as Manifest Destiny, and it includes his strong sense of patriotism as evidenced through his concerns about a changing America and the immigrants, reformers, politicians and others who were driving that change. Finally, there was the evolving theme of the rural-to-urban shift both in Masterson's life and in America as a whole. This process first was evidenced by Masterson's sense of identity with the West and its values, and continued through his absorption into city life until in his final years he had become an urban man learning to adapt to modern technologies and having to cope with such nuisances of city life as smoking restrictions in his favorite boxing arena.

Although Masterson is best known for his romanticized exploits in the West, his true legacy may be these writings he left behind and the underlying messages beneath his words and thoughts.

### *Boxers as the Twentieth-Century Gunfighters*

#### *Traits of the Gunfighter*

In his portrayal of lawman Ben Thompson for the *Human Life* series on "Famous Gunfighters of the Western Frontier," Bat Masterson listed the three essential qualities of a gunfighter. They were "courage, proficiency in the use of fire-arms, and deliberation."<sup>53</sup> The need for physical courage is

evident, and Masterson stated he had known "many courageous men in that vast territory lying west and southwest of the Missouri River — men who would when called upon face death with utter indifference as to consequences. . . ."54 The ability to handle a six-shooter with skill also was well known, for courage "is of little use to a man who essays to arbitrate a difference with the pistol if he is inexperienced in the use of the weapon he is going to use."55 Interestingly, Masterson placed an equal value on the third and less obvious trait — deliberation. Masterson emphasized this by citing examples of men he had known whose courage could not be questioned and whose ability to shoot straight and fast was well documented, but who met with tragic ends because they lacked this third quality.

Charlie Harrison was just such a man. He was "of unquestioned courage and the most expert man I ever saw with a pistol," wrote Masterson. He was so courageous and so skilled that when he became embroiled in a dispute with Jim Levy in Cheyenne, Wyoming, it "looked like 100 to 1 that Harrison would win the fight." When the showdown came, Harrison drew first and got off five quick shots before Levy was able to take aim at him. All five shots missed. Levy then calmly "looked through the sights on his pistol" and fired only one shot, but that single shot sent Harrison "to rest alongside others who had gone before in a similar way." The lesson was clear. Many a brave gunfighter shot too fast and missed, while his more deliberate opponent took

aim and fired with deadly consequences. "Courage, generally speaking, is daring," stated Masterson. "Nerve is steadiness."<sup>56</sup>

In the course of the hundreds of prize fights he saw and covered, Masterson consistently referred to these same traits in championship boxers. That the best of these men — famous boxers such as James J. Corbett, Robert Fitzsimmons, Jack Johnson, and Jess Willard — possessed courage was evident in their bravery against equally lethal opponents in a 10-foot-by-10-foot ring. That they were skilled in the art of boxing also was evident in their ability to jab, to block punches, and to know when to strike out at their opponents. But Masterson also detected in championship boxers the third trait of deliberation, and in doing so he unknowingly completed his analogy of the boxer as gunfighter. Masterson never attached this label to boxers, nor did he ever outwardly draw a comparison between a prize fighter and a Western gunfighter. But the symbolism was evident in his writing, as illustrated by his account of the world championship heavyweight bout between American Jack Dempsey and Frenchman Georges Carpentier on July 2, 1921, in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Both fighters were courageous and extremely skilled. Dempsey, who was known as the "Manassa Mauler," had won the heavyweight championship two years earlier by knocking down Jess Willard, who outweighed him by 57 pounds, an incredible seven times in the first round before sending him crashing to the canvas for good in the third round. Carpentier, who had lost

five years of his career while serving in the French Air Force in World War I, was the European heavyweight champion and also had stepped down a class in weight to win the world light-heavyweight title. Certainly, Carpentier did not lack for courage, as his boxing and military record attested. But his style was to lay back and wear down his larger opponents before moving in for the kill. In other words, he was deliberate, and he took aim before striking. Against Dempsey, however, Carpentier was too impatient, as Masterson noted in a description of the action that contained strong overtones of an Old West shootout.

Masterson began his account by stating: "Dempsey and Carpentier fought a real interesting battle for four rounds. Interesting because it was waged fairly, furiously and in man-fashion. . . ." Masterson then wrote:

Carpentier was the first to shoot and his left fist landed with no visible effect. The next time the Frenchman cut loose with the same fist he missed. Dempsey then took a turn at shooting and he too missed.<sup>57</sup>

In Masterson's description, the boxers were not throwing punches, they were shooting. In the second round, Carpentier "landed a heavy right smash on Dempsey's jaw and the champion reeled backward and for a moment looked as if he would fall." This "shot," however, was not fatal, and Dempsey managed to stay on his feet. The third round "was a real battle," and although Carpentier got off several good shots, Dempsey "was as busy as a bird dog killing snakes himself."

"How that fellow Dempsey did bombard the Frenchman's midsection with both gloves and maybe you think these punches didn't hurt — what?" marveled Masterson. By the fourth round, Dempsey sensed that Carpentier was wounded and he "went after him tiger-like and soon had him down again — this time for keeps."

While praising Carpentier for being "a skillful, heady fighter with plenty of courage," Masterson noted that on this occasion he lacked that final ingredient necessary for success in a man-to-man fight, whether it be with gloves or six-shooters. Normally, Carpentier "fought at long range and only stepped in when he found an opening."<sup>58</sup> Against, Dempsey, however, he chose to fight at close quarters and slug it out. In doing so, Carpentier was like the gunfighter who had courage and skill but lacked the deliberation that was so important. Like Charlie Harrison, he fired too soon.

#### *The Sport of Confrontation*

It also is important to note here Masterson's reference to the 100 to 1 betting odds on Harrison in his fatal showdown with Levy. Gambling was a well-known part of life on the frontier, and Masterson himself was a gambler as well as lawman in the West. The most recognized form of gambling in these saloons and gaming houses in the West was the card table, and apparently it was a difference of opinion over a card game that prompted Harrison and Levy to resort to six-shooters to settle their differences. But Masterson's reference to the odds on the gunfight reveals another aspect of

this violent culture. A gunfight also was a sporting proposition, just as was a showdown in the prize ring. The participants of the gunfight were betting their lives on the outcome; the spectators were betting their money. As Masterson wrote of the Harrison-Levy shootout, "Harrison was made a hot favorite in the betting in the various gambling resorts of Cheyenne."<sup>59</sup>

This was another common thread between gunfighting and boxing. Both attracted the interest of "sporting men," who not only wagered on their outcomes but also established betting odds to stimulate interest. In one, men used six-shooters to settle their differences, in the other they used their fists. In one, the loser paid with his life. In the other, the loser lived to fight another day. In all other respects, they were very similar propositions.

### *Men of Courage*

While skill and deliberation were vital to gunfighters and boxers, it was courage that Masterson admired most in a man. This theme ran throughout his series on Western gunfighters. Masterson described these men, such as Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp, as "men with nerves of steel. . .any one of whom would not have hesitated a moment to put up his life as the stake to be played for."<sup>60</sup> Masterson had particular admiration for Earp, his close friend and fellow lawman who elicited the tribute that the West "knew no braver nor more desperate man than Wyatt Earp."<sup>61</sup> This theme continued in Masterson's many writings of boxers. Of one match, he wrote: "Evidently. . .Sailor [Burke] had all his courage with him, for he beat [Soldier] Delaney

from start to finish."<sup>62</sup> When an aging and out-of-shape Jack Johnson lost his championship to a younger, stronger Jess Willard, Masterson wrote of the fallen champion:

. . . [Johnson] knows that a strong, healthy young fellow, who has courage, is almost sure to defeat a fat old man fairly well worn out from years of fast living, no matter how skillful he might have been. . . Willard was the strong, healthy, courageous young fellow, while Johnson was the sublimation of the other. All this the big smoke knew as well as any man who had ever entered a prize ring to do battle. Yet he fought Willard in the face of all this knowledge and fought him when his cherished championship title was at stake and he lost."<sup>63</sup>

This was Masterson's tribute to the deposed champion, who knew beforehand the odds against him yet gallantly fought the battle anyway. But Masterson also knew that courage did not mean a lack of fear. Rather, it was the ability to overcome that fear when necessary, a point he made in his coverage to the buildup between that title fight between Johnson and Willard in April 1915 in Havana, Cuba. The challenger, Willard, was an imposing physical specimen, a 6-foot, 6-inch "cowpuncher" from Kansas, who, in Masterson's words, was "young, muscular and corn-fed, and kicks up as much dust when in action as a Kansas cyclone."<sup>64</sup> Yet despite his size, Willard was nervous about stepping into the "squared ring" with Johnson, the black man who five years earlier had felled previously unbeaten Jim Jeffries in a racially-tinged showdown in the Nevada desert. Ever since, much of the

American public had been searching for a "white hope," but no one had come close to standing up to the boisterous, cocky, hard-punching Johnson.

As the fight in Havana drew near, Masterson could see Willard was noticeably apprehensive about the looming showdown. While Johnson laughed his way through his training, there were no smiles in the Willard camp. Instead, there were "constant inquiries couched in a nervous, at times querulous, tone of voice as to how Johnson's training work is progressing."<sup>65</sup> To Masterson, it was "plainly evident that Willard is worried over the fight." But Willard did not succumb to his fear, and by the time of the match he had "lost all anxiety" and spoke "of his chances against the big smoke with the utmost confidence."<sup>66</sup> Willard went on to win the fight and the title by knocking out Johnson in the 26th round, verifying Masterson's pre-fight statement, "As to courage we believe the big Kansan possesses all that is necessary."<sup>67</sup>

Conversely, Masterson had a disdain for those who lacked this manly quality. In his account of the famous "Gunfight at the OK Corral," Masterson wrote of Ike Clanton, who had escaped from the shootout with his life but in doing so had proven himself "a coward of the first magnitude." As Masterson noted disdainfully of Clanton, "No sooner had the shooting commenced than he threw down his pistol and with both hands high above his head, he ran to Wyatt Earp and begged him not to kill him."<sup>68</sup> On this occasion, Earp proved himself not only a man of courage but one of true honor, "for instead of

killing Clanton as most any other man would have done under the circumstances, he told him to run away, and he did."<sup>69</sup> When Masterson wrote of a showdown between Luke Short and Mayor Webster of Dodge City and his henchmen who ran the town, he observed: "Webster, himself no coward, saw. . .the yellow streak he knew was in the makeup of his followers. . . ." <sup>70</sup>

Those who possessed this yellow streak in their makeup included the many letter writers who failed to sign their names to the correspondence they sent to Masterson, disagreeing with one of the many opinions he stated in his columns. Of these people, Masterson concluded: "The anonymous letter writer is generally a dog of amber hue."<sup>71</sup>

Masterson also endorsed the view of one of his readers, who in 1914 wrote to complain about boxer Willie Ritchie, who, according to news accounts, not only "cried bitterly in his dressing room" but "actually sobbed as if his heart would break" after he lost a fight to Freddie Welsh in London. While not objecting to the large payoff Ritchie received for the fight, the letter writer did "most emphatically draw the line at sobbing" by a boxer.<sup>72</sup> Masterson concurred, stating, "The views expressed therein, although seemingly old-fashioned, have much to recommend them from a common-sense standpoint."<sup>73</sup> Certainly, the old gunfighter could not imagine a real man of the West sobbing as if his heart would break following a showdown on the frontier.

*A Man of Action*

It was not just courage that tied prize fighters to the gun fighters of the West. Masterson also saw the boxer as a "Man of Action," as was the hero of the frontier. A man of action was one who took matters into his own hands, who acted boldly and forcefully when called upon to do so. Wyatt Earp was just such a man, as Masterson illustrated by this tale of the time Earp, then the assistant city marshal of Dodge City, refused a city alderman's order "to perform some official act that did not look exactly right to him."<sup>74</sup> The alderman reacted to Earp's insolence by attempting to remove the badge from his chest. Earp, a man of action, was swift in his response.

Wyatt knocked him down as soon as he laid his hands on him, and then reached down and picked him up with one hand and slammed a few hooks and upper-cuts into his face, dragged his limp form over to the city calaboose, and chucked it in one of the cells, just the same as he would any other disturber of the peace.<sup>75</sup>

Boxing champion Jack Johnson was a similar man of action. When confronted by a heckler in a New York saloon, Johnson retaliated by striking the man and, according to some accounts, using a chair and his feet as well as his fists in dispensing of his antagonist. The victim retaliated by pressing charges against the boxer. Masterson defended Johnson's actions with the statement: "There are a good many leeches of this sort in this city, both white and black, who deserve just the sort of treatment Johnson dealt out to the negro Pinder."<sup>76</sup>

Masterson was well acquainted with such "leeches," and he firmly believed the best way to deal with them swiftly and effectively, just as was done on the frontier. "Their purpose in precipitating quarrels is usually blackmail," he wrote. "As soon as they get smashed they rush out for a policeman and have their assailant arrested and if they think there is a possibility of getting some money out of him they will sue him for damages."<sup>77</sup>

A similar situation occurred in 1920, when Masterson was dining with Eduardo Cautino, the former secretary of the Puerto Rico Racing Commission. On this occasion, a "lounge lizard" began "annoying" Cautino and his "charming wife." Cautino responded by inviting the heckler to step outside. Although the slender Cautino was outsized by his "husky" opponent, he knocked the bigger man to the pavement with a few "well-placed punches," sending the lounge lizard retreating "down the street at a ten-second gait."<sup>78</sup> Again, the man of action had emerged triumphant.

This man of action, both in the West and in the city, also fit another stereotype of the Western hero, that of the "Heroic Individual." Masterson saw this quality in two young New Yorkers, Bert Young and Jimmie Eustis, who in 1914 jumped into a lake and pulled to safety a young woman and her two male companions whose canoe had tipped over. None of the three could swim and all probably would have drowned had it not been for the quick action of Young and Eustis, who in Masterson's estimation "entered the hero class."<sup>79</sup>

Courage, skill, deliberation, action — all these were traits Masterson admired in others throughout his life both on the plains, in the city and in the boxing arena. And unlike many Americans of his era, Masterson was not discriminating in acknowledging these qualities in other men, even those of color. In 1921, he recalled a bout 30 years earlier when Peter Jackson, "the Australian negro pugilist," beat Frank P. Slavin in a savage battle in London. "Skill, courage and ability to assimilate severe punishment were outstanding features of the battle," Masterson recalled with admiration.<sup>80</sup>

#### *Equality of Class and Race*

This ability to judge one by his or her character and actions and not class or origin was another theme of Western mythology. The prototypical Western hero was "humble in his origins and without formal education or inherited wealth,"<sup>81</sup> attributes which fit Masterson himself. Like Masterson, this hero rose above such inherent disadvantages and overcame all obstacles through the "courageous, vile, and determined stand of the individual as an individual."<sup>82</sup> Having traveled this path to his own successes as a lawman and newspaper reporter, Masterson also was willing to judge others by their own merits and not by pre-ordained class or rank. It was for this reason that, unlike so many others, he could judge Peter Jackson as the great fighter he was despite the color of his skin. However, Masterson's views on race often were contradictory. For all his ability to judge a man by his accomplishments, he still could be clouded by the prejudices and common stereotypes of his day.

This paradox was evident in his conflicting views of the so-called color line in boxing. In 1916, he wrote of the injustice of banning blacks from fighting whites by praising a lifting of this ban by the Boxing Commission. Masterson called this ban an "obnoxious rule," which "grievously discriminated against the black fighter."<sup>83</sup> A year later, Masterson chided Oklahoma heavyweight Carl Morris for drawing "the color line" and refusing to fight Kid Norfolk, a black man. As Masterson noted, had Morris been challenged by an inferior black fighter he felt confident in beating, "big Carl would have found no fault with the selection."<sup>84</sup> Norfolk, however, was a tough, smart boxer who was quick on his feet. "This will probably account for big Carl's run-out," wrote Masterson. "The Oklahoman, we imagined, would hardly care to be whipped by a negro."<sup>85</sup>

However, on other occasions, Masterson accepted the color line as a financial reality of the sport and did not question its validity. If the public did not want to see prize fights between blacks and whites, he reasoned, they would not pay to do so, therefore no promoter should be expected to put up the money to arrange such a bout. Thus, Masterson could write in 1921 that in his "personal opinion. . . [Harry] Wills or any other negro heavyweight who possesses the qualifications entitling him to a match for the championship ought to be given a chance," but "it must not be forgotten that the promoter, along with the public, must be consulted first of all."<sup>86</sup> The injustice of such a system did not seem to bother Masterson, who sarcastically chided black

boxers such as Wills and Jack Johnson for their tendency to "sit back and complain about the negro being discriminated against and, at the same time, expect some white man to come along and finance" an inter-racial match.<sup>87</sup>

Nor was Masterson averse to occasional racial slurs, following the lead of other writers who referred to black boxers by such common nicknames as "the big smoke," "Kid Chocolate," "the Tar Baby," or "Darkey Griffin." Masterson also once observed that black boxer Jack Johnson "looked more like a buffalo bull than a human being,"<sup>88</sup> and he ridiculed white boxer Packy McFarland for "displaying a waistline resembling that which is usually carried by a negro washerwoman."<sup>89</sup> On another occasion, Masterson reverted to a common racial insult, that of mocking black speech. Masterson wrote of a bout in Hot Springs, Arkansas, between two black boxers, one of whom told the other when they squared off, "I suah pity you for ah wuz bawn with boxing gloves on." To this, the other black boxer replied, "Maybe you wuz, an ah reckon you'se gwine to die the same way."<sup>90</sup>

Masterson's lapses into racial stereotyping appear to be more a product of the common prejudices of the day than any deep-seated racism on his part. These racial slurs were a common part of the American culture, and Masterson no doubt accepted them without question. However, when called upon to judge the quality of the boxer, he, unlike many of his contemporaries, did so without prejudice. This was illustrated by Masterson's tempered coverage of the Johnson-Jeffries fight in 1910. Johnson, the son of a

former slave, had become the first black man to win the title, knocking out Tommy Burns in Australia in 1908. For many whites, Johnson's victory had been a dangerous threat to their notions of racial superiority. This mood was captured in the words of journalist Randolph Bedford, who wrote of the courageous but beaten Burns: "He was still beauty by contrast—beautiful but to be beaten; clean sunlight fighting darkness and losing."<sup>91</sup>

After winning the title, Johnson fought and easily beat five "white hopes." Finally, former heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries, who had retired from the ring unbeaten in 1905, was persuaded to make a comeback to redeem the white man's honor. From the beginning, the fight was billed as "a match of civilization and virtue against savagery and baseness."<sup>92</sup> Capitalizing on this theme to boost the gate, fight promoter Tex Rickard dubbed Jeffries the "Hope of the White Race." Johnson was the "Negroes' Deliverer."<sup>93</sup> Many of the writers who converged on Reno, Nevada, for the Fourth of July showdown were unabashed in their racism. Jack London, who covered the fight for the *New York Sun*, "was Jeff's most ardent rooter."<sup>94</sup> Every known racial stereotype was applied to Johnson. Arthur Ruhl, wrote that Johnson "has a yellow streak, there was nothing to it, and anyway, 'let's hope he kills the coon' "<sup>95</sup>

Masterson was more restrained in his analysis. While he believed that Jeffries would win, he respectfully referred to Johnson as "the negro" or "the black champion," and he considered him a worthy opponent. After Johnson

knocked out the white man in the 15th round, Masterson gave the champion the credit he deserved. "Cunningly [Johnson] tested Jeff's speed, cleverness and ring generalship," wrote Masterson. "Once he had these gauged the rest was easy. The white man's prodigious strength had no terrors for the black."<sup>96</sup>

Masterson's dislike of Johnson appeared to stem more from the champion's fast living, his boastfulness, and his arrogant ways rather than his race. After Johnson ran afoul of the law and fled the country to avoid arrest for violation of the Mann Act, he became a man without a country, forced to hide out in France and for the remainder of his boxing career never stray closer to the United States than Cuba, where he fought Jess Willard. Prior to the fight, Masterson wrote of the champion:

There has seldom been a champion so unpopular as Johnson — not because of his color, a thing for which he can be held in no way responsible, but for his numerous misdeeds. Indictments are hanging over his head in America, and he has been forced to flee his native land to escape the penitentiary. Certainly, Johnson is a man without a country, and if he loses his championship title — his only asset in gaining recognition in the world — it will leave him poor, indeed, as Shakespeare would have put it.<sup>97</sup>

As the fight drew nearer, Masterson added, "Johnson doesn't seem to realize even now that he is in a large measure the architect of most of his own troubles. He is too self-centered for that."<sup>98</sup>

It was Johnson's arrogance, his willingness to flout the customs of the day that seemed to bother Masterson the most. The black champion even went so

far as to have a white wife, a matter which he defended at a banquet in Chicago. "I have as much right to choose my mate as the white man has to choose his," claimed Johnson. While conceding that "speaking in the abstract, Johnson might be right," Masterson argued that if Johnson "had stopped long enough to consider what the white people think of one of their race who mates with a member of the negro race he might not have been so bold and defiant in his attitude."<sup>99</sup>

It was this perceived temerity and Johnson's tendency to taunt opponents in the ring that bothered Masterson about the black champion. Masterson's attitude on this was summed up in a statement which he made about lightweight champion Freddie Welsh but could have been applied to Johnson or any other boxer, "Don't let your head run away with you. . .for there is nothing that will make a fighter unpopular so quickly as a swelled head."<sup>100</sup>

#### *A Culture of Violence*

Finally, there was another powerful theme that symbolized the prize fighter as the representation of the Western gunman. That was the culture of violence in which both men dwelled. It was this exploitation of violence which helped to popularize the Beadle novels, and violence was a common theme of Masterson's writings about the West and his experiences there. This violence was closely tied to the theme of conflict, which contributed "to a natural as contrasted with a civilized life. . .[and] the notion that the essence of civilization is struggle."<sup>101</sup>

Violence was a natural part of Masterson's world when he lived in the West, and this thread ran throughout his writings of that period of his life. In his profile of his Old West friend Luke Short, Masterson recalled a gun fight between Short and Jim Courtright in which Short fired "a bullet from [his] Colt 45-calibre pistol [that] went crashing through Courtright's body." In vivid detail, Masterson recounted: "The shock caused him to reel backward, then he got another [bullet] and still another, and by the time his lifeless form had reached the floor, Luke had succeeded in shooting him five times."<sup>102</sup>

This tale was written in 1907. Three years later, Masterson would describe a boxing match in similar detail. He was reminiscing about the time he took a boxer who had "several dashes of negro blood in his make-up" out to San Francisco to fight Johnny Herget, who boxed under the name "Young Mitchell." Young Mitchell did to Masterson's fighter what Luke Short did to Jim Courtright, "fairly [slaughtering] him from the start." Like Short pumping bullets into Courtright, Mitchell "would whang him in the nose with his left and then shoot his right straight under my half-breed's left wing. It was fierce the way Mitchell was doing things to my man." Finally, Masterson's "hunk of cheese concluded he had enough and sat down on the floor until he was counted out."<sup>103</sup> His body was not a lifeless form, but, like the loser of a gunfight, this boxer ended up prone on the floor.

Masterson could be callous in his descriptions of such violence. He wrote of Wyatt Earp that he "proceeded, without further ceremony, to shoot the

Mexican to pieces with buckshot. They left the greaser's body where it fell."<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Masterson described a fight in which Jack Johnson was struck a blow and "wobbled for an instant and then he got another almost equally as hard but a bit high on the cheek that caused the blood to spurt in all directions."<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps because of this violent culture in which he lived, Masterson became hardened to death. He showed little signs of sympathy in describing the fatal shooting of his friend and fellow lawman Ben Thompson. In his final shootout, Thompson was shot eight times and King Fisher five times. "All the shots were fired simultaneously and both sank to the floor [as] dead as it is possible to ever be."<sup>106</sup> Masterson was equally as callous in describing how boxer Arthur Pelky's "chief claim to pugilistic fame" stemmed from the time "he hit Luther McCarty a crack on the jaw . . . and as a result Luther was carried from the ring to the morgue, and from there to his grave. Of course, Arthur didn't mean to hit Luther hard enough to kill him."<sup>107</sup>

In Masterson's estimation, that was the law of the frontier as well as of the "squared ring." It was kill or be killed, hit or be hit. In this culture, there was no dishonor in dying. Dishonor came from backing down from a fight, whether with a bully on a dusty Kansas street or a challenger who wore "the padded mitts." Masterson's beliefs on this matter were summed up in his description of the death of his friend Luke Short, who "might have 'died with his boots on,' for he had many chances, but. . .didn't" and instead ". . .lived to

die in bed. . . ."<sup>108</sup> When that time came, according to Masterson, Short remained defiant. In Masterson's words, while lying on his death bed Short seemed to be saying:

"Death! You skulking coward! I know you are near; I also realize I cannot defeat you; but, if you will only make yourself visible for one brief moment, I will try!"<sup>108</sup>

In Masterson's mind, that was the credo of the gunfighter, and of the boxer: "I may not defeat you, but if you will make yourself visible I will try."

### *Honor and Justice*

When Luke Short ran the Long Beach saloon, the "biggest and best-paying gambling house"<sup>109</sup> in 1883, he was in competition with a similar operation which happened to be under the control of the Mayor of Dodge City, who was identified in Bat Masterson's profile of Short only as Webster. Threatened by Short's success with the Long Beach, the mayor set about putting him out of business by sending the sheriff to notify him he could not play music in his saloon. Short complied with the order, but to his surprise, the music in the mayor's saloon continued. Not wanting to give his competitor such an advantage, Short brought back his musicians the next night. The sheriff promptly arrested them, and that night an angered Short took a shot at the sheriff when he spotted him on the street. For that offense, Short was placed

on the next train out of Dodge, leaving the town's saloon business under the control of the mayor and his henchmen.

A lesser man might have accepted defeat at this turn of events, but not Luke Short. He wired his friend Bat Masterson for help, and in short order Bat enlisted Wyatt Earp and a couple of his friends to come to Short's aid. In his profile of Short, Masterson recounted the showdown in Dodge City between Short and his allies and Mayor Webster and his cronies who ran the town. It was a common theme in Western literature. The forces of good versus evil. Honesty versus corruption. As was normally the case, the good guys prevailed. Faced with the threat of violence from this coalition of gunfighters, the mayor backed down, even meeting the group's demand of removing two of his law-enforcement officers whom Short did not like. In writing of the climatic confrontation at a town meeting, Masterson recalled the mayor surrendering to Earp's demands with the promise, "I am perfectly willing to agree to that." "And so are we," sung out the meeting in a chorus.<sup>110</sup>

To Masterson, the lesson of this triumph over the mayor's evil coalition was obvious: "Luke had won a bloodless battle, but that such was the case was no fault of his, for he had been willing to fight at any and all stages of the proceedings."<sup>111</sup>

*The Voice of Authority*

This theme of confronting evil and corruption was one that Masterson carried with him long after he left the wild cattle towns of the West. The showdown between the honest, law-abiding Luke Short and the corrupt Mayor Webster was played out over and over in the boxing arenas of New York during Masterson's career in that city. To the end of his life, he continued to battle dishonesty, crookedness, and fraud wherever he found it. In the West, he had used a six-shooter to enforce justice as he saw it. In New York, he used the power of his pen.

Where he once wrote disdainfully of Mayor Webster's cronies who repeated the mayor's words in chorus in the meeting with Wyatt Earp, Masterson later sarcastically referred to the "we boys" in the press who took their payoffs from boxing promoters and then wrote whatever they were asked in order to hype an upcoming fight or praise a chosen boxer. Where once he fought against crooked politicians, Masterson later battled crooked promoters. Where once he tracked down desperadoes on the run from the law, Masterson later exposed fighters who "laid down" in the ring on the command from gamblers. And where he once angrily lashed out at a timid populace that refused to stand up for justice on the frontier, he later scornfully dismissed the "sucker public" which continued to put up with the shenanigans of boxing promoters and pay its money for more.

In his role of sports writer for the *Morning Telegraph*, Masterson assumed the position of sheriff of boxing. He saw it as his duty to expose corruption and dishonesty, and to protect the honor of the sport. He was, in effect, the moral authority of boxing.

*The "We Boys" of the Press*

The "we boys" were a common target of Masterson's wrath. These were the sports writers whose articles and opinions were for sale to promoters eager to boost their fighters and build up their drawing power and, consequently, the size of their purses. One such promoter was Danny Morgan, as Masterson informed his readers when he wrote: "[Knockout Brown] has been well managed by Danny Morgan and well boosted by the local sporting writers, which is no doubt largely due to Morgan's generosity."<sup>112</sup> Masterson claimed even to know how much Morgan paid and how he operated with "the journalistic parasites." He once wrote:

Whenever he met one of the tribe Dan [Morgan] always pretended to be in a hurry and, in his apparent rush to get away, would slip the grab-all a note carefully folded up, and then he would beat it. It was generally a \$2 bill that Morgan slipped his sidekick in this way instead of a twenty, the amount he usually gave, and before Mr. Simp discovered that he had been shortchanged Morgan was gone."<sup>113</sup>

Managers Billy Gibson and Tom O'Rourke as well as promoter Tex Rickard, whether out of greed or necessity, also were slipping money to the "we boys." Masterson was particularly disgusted by the pre-fight hype the "we

boys" put out prior to the bout between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier in 1921.

There never has been anything like it in the history of the prizing. And, worst of all, most of the stuff the sports writers fed their readers on daily was the rankest kind of nonsense. Both fighters must have been disgusted with the trash that was daily being written about them. Dempsey was pictured as the cave man who was about to feast on the inanimate form of the Frenchman, who had been knocked dead with one punch in the first round. Carpentier was made to resemble the lamb being led to the slaughter. New punches and new defenses were being invented every day by the principals. <sup>114</sup>

Masterson claimed to know the "we boys" were receiving kickbacks for the publicity on Jack Dempsey which they were "peddling out in such a generous fashion."<sup>115</sup> And he said he had "a pretty fair idea of the usual scale of prices for such service."<sup>116</sup> On another occasion, when Masterson disagreed with the decision awarding the lightweight championship to Benny Leonard in his fight with Jack Britton in 1918, he conceded that "the 'we boys' will argue otherwise, but the 'we boys' could hardly be expected to say anything else for fear of incurring the displeasure of Billy Gibson [Leonard's manager], the 'we boys' bank roll just now."<sup>117</sup>

As long as the "we boys" were standing guard, a referee could even be bought off to ensure a fight went according to plan. Masterson wrote that some day he hoped "to get the harpoon deep enough under the cuticle of Jack Curley to extract from him the information, more or less interesting, regarding the cost of putting the Carl Morris decision over on Fred Fulton

here in New York."<sup>118</sup> Morris was the one-time "white hope" from Oklahoma, and having observed the Oklahoman's "decision" over the more talented Fulton in 1918, Masterson sensed a set-up.

Masterson also was convinced the fix was in when Freddie Welsh beat Willie Ritchie to win the lightweight title in 1914. It was Masterson's belief that "in nine cases out of ten" fights that in which the winner was determined by a judge's decision were "frame-ups."<sup>119</sup> He believed his suspicions were confirmed when Welsh won the nod over Ritchie in a 20-round fight that was so even that boxing historian Maurice Golesworthy later wrote "there couldn't have been more than half a point between the two fighters."<sup>120</sup> (Interestingly, this was the fight which prompted Ritchie to break down in tears in the dressing room after the decision went against him.)

Masterson blamed the "we boys" for this state of affairs in boxing. "It is the sporting writers, by boosting and encouraging these exhibitions, who are chiefly responsible for buncoing the public,"<sup>121</sup> wrote Masterson in 1915. In his mind,

If the sporting writers were to vigorously condemn these sort of frauds there would be fewer of them perpetrated. But when sporting writers hire themselves out as press agents for promoters and fighters, what can the public expect?<sup>122</sup>

*The Logic of the Law*

Despite his principled stand, Bat Masterson's sense of law and order had a frontier quality to it. He believed in a practical application of the law which was driven not only by common sense but by honor. So it was that when featherweight champion Abe Attell was disqualified by the New York State Athletic Commission and suspended for six months for throwing (or "pulling") a fight against Knockout Brown in January 1912, Masterson spoke out in opposition to the authorities. Masterson, while admitting that he believed Attell was capable of "doing anything and everything after he gets into the ring," argued that in this case "if Attell was pulling, Brown was also pulling, for it seems impossible that Attell could have escaped a knockout had Brown been trying. . . ."123 This might appear to be strange logic, as Masterson goes on to reveal: "Several of Abe's former admirers. . . said to me, when we were leaving the arena, that Attell deliberately pulled." Plus, Masterson himself observed that "Attell fought as if he wanted Brown to win." Still, Masterson was able to conclude, "I'm firmly convinced that the fight was on the level and that both men did their best."<sup>124</sup>

This tortured logic continued when Masterson argued that Attell did indeed deserve to be disqualified, but not for throwing the fight. In Masterson's mind, Attell's true offense was one of honor. He had sought to excuse his poor showing and his defeat by claiming that prior to the bout he had received treatment for an injured hand, and at that time a doctor had

injected too much cocaine into the hand, thus leaving Attell drugged and groggy in the ring. It was this besmirching of another man's honor by Attell that so offended Masterson. ". . .Attell lied and . . .was willing to blacken the character of innocent men in order to save himself from financial loss," wrote Masterson. "For that he deserved to be barred, not only for six months, but for all time in New York."<sup>125</sup> However, to bring up Attell on charges of throwing the fight and then to banish him for slandering the doctor was counter to Masterson's sense of justice. "If a man is arrested for horse stealing and the jury that tries him finds him guilty of burglary the verdict would be promptly set aside," argued Masterson. "That is not only the law, but common sense as well."<sup>126</sup>

Furthermore, Masterson claimed that he repeatedly had "accused Attell of boxing according to prearrangement,"<sup>127</sup> and yet his accusations continued to fall on deaf ears. The response to Masterson's charges had been that "every sporting writer in the city, with one or two exceptions, upheld Attell, and the one or two exceptions remained neutral." The result, according to Masterson, was that Attell continued "to take liberties with the public."<sup>128</sup>

There is an interesting footnote to the Abe Attell story. After his checkered career in the ring ended, Attell remained a prominent figure in the New York sports world, only now as a "sportsman," or gambler. And it was Attell who in 1919, working under the direction of the notorious gambler Arnold Rothstein, engineered the plot to "fix" the World Series, when eight

members of the heavily favored Chicago White Sox conspired to deliberately lose the Series to the Cincinnati Reds in exchange for money. This sordid affair became known as "the Black Sox scandal," and the former boxer Abe Attell was at the very heart of it.

Masterson, meanwhile, continued his crusade to clean up the boxing world just as he had cleaned up Dodge City. In 1918, he claimed that Fred Fulton took a payoff to lose to Jack Dempsey. "Fulton was to get the money and Dempsey the fight was our dope," wrote Masterson. "Whether Fulton got all the money we don't know, but we do know that Dempsey got the fight."<sup>129</sup> It was bad enough that Fulton agreed to lay down for Dempsey, but in Masterson's eyes his sin was compounded by being a poor actor. After watching Fulton take the fall, Masterson wrote that seeing "that big gawk stretched out on the canvas with his head across the lower rope playing 'possum was enough to make a decent man sick."<sup>130</sup>

### *The Sucker Public*

This sense of honor and justice that was dominant in Masterson's writings also surfaced in his frustration with the "sucker" public that put up with such shenanigans and kept coming back for more. Masterson expressed his frustration with the fans in one 1918 column which began:

If the fool fans would go to the ringside armed with hickory sticks and brick bats and have it announced from the ring that they were there to get a fight or cause trouble, they wouldn't be faked as much as they are. But so long as they sit supinely by and allow these big

bohunk fighters to hand them their pre-arranged stuff they'll be sure to get it and get it good and plenty.<sup>131</sup>

This was a repeated theme by Masterson. "Any time the public doesn't get it in the neck it goes away feeling sore and downcast," he wrote on another occasion. "It loves to be trimmed, and the fighters and promoters know it, and they never miss an opportunity to hand the boob public what it wants."<sup>132</sup> Masterson called these sucker fans "a flock of sheep following the bel'wether over a brush fence."<sup>133</sup> He sarcastically wrote of "how complacently the boobs took their medicine"<sup>134</sup> at another fight he believed was staged.

Toward the end of his life, Masterson even was criticizing the boxers for being poor actors in the ring. He chided them by observing that at least "the old-time fighters were such experts at doing 'their act' they could not be detected."<sup>135</sup> Masterson went on to lament: "How different it is with our up-to-date swankers. The sort of barneys these mitt men of ours are now pulling off can be detected by their smell a block away."<sup>136</sup> Sadly, though, the stench did not seem to bother the boxing fans.

. . . [I]t doesn't seem to matter how loudly they smell, the boob public likes it just the same, and therefore [there is] no reason why the grab-all boys should change their act.<sup>137</sup>

### *Personal Honor*

When Bat Masterson was arrested shortly after his arrival in New York, his two biggest concerns were the loss of his beloved six-shooter and the affront to his honor. The accusation that he was involved in a crooked card game was an assault on his reputation as a honest man, and Masterson was deeply offended by it. He was a man of the West, where your word was your bond, and your honor and integrity were of the utmost importance. Masterson believed his reputation for honesty had been earned through his actions over three decades, and while he was a "sportsman," he wanted it known that he was an honest one. "All my friends in Denver and throughout the West will laugh when they hear of this charge," Masterson told a reporter from the *New York Tribune* following his arrest. "I have always been known as the upholder of a straight game, and no man can point a finger at me and say that I am a crooked man."<sup>138</sup>

This was a repeated theme by Masterson. As a sports columnist, he vowed to "give the readers of these columns . . . an unbiased and impersonal viewpoint" about an up-coming prize fight.<sup>139</sup> As Masterson pointed out, he was "not personally interested in either man and didn't have a dollar bet on the result and should, therefore, be able to give an unprejudiced account of the fracas, which I will do to the best of my ability."<sup>140</sup>

On another occasion, Masterson praised the selection of former promoter Tom O'Rourke as deputy commissioner of the New York State Boxing

Commission. "Everywhere O'Rourke is known. . .his word is his bond," wrote Masterson. "Managers of fighters and promoters everywhere never have asked O'Rourke for anything more binding than his word when they did business with him."<sup>141</sup> Like Masterson, Tom O'Rourke was a man of the West.

### *Becoming an Urban Man: Symbolism of the Rural to Urban Movement*

While returning from the Jim Jeffries-Jack Johnson title fight in Reno, Nevada, in 1910, Bat Masterson traveled through Kansas by train on his way back East. It was a nostalgic trip for the old gunfighter as he saw first-hand how much the dusty plains of his youth had changed since his departure. What once had been "one vast prairie dog settlement"<sup>142</sup> in the western part of the state now was rich farmland for as far as one could see. Masterson marveled at what he saw from the train.

As I looked from the car window after reaching the Kansas line at Coolidge, I saw in all directions groves of trees, orchards and fields bearing abundant crops of corn, wheat and alfalfa. . . .The idea that the plains of western Kansas could ever be made fertile was something I had never even dreamed of.<sup>143</sup>

More surprises awaited Masterson when the train made a stop in Dodge City, the once-raucous cow town where he had enforced the law at the barrel of a six-shooter and drunken Texas cowboys stepped over the "stiffs" along the dirty streets. "How different it looked from what it did when I lived

there!" Masterson wrote. He recalled when "the first tent was pitched on the present townsite in the Summer of 1872," and he remembered when Dodge City was "the liveliest [town] ever built in the entire West."<sup>144</sup> But as Masterson walked the streets once more and gazed at the buildings that now populated the downtown area, he saw little of the Dodge City he had left behind.

. . . [I]t's all different now at Dodge. There are no more dance halls, at any rate, the sort that flourished when I was a resident of the place. Dodge City is now a thriving little country village, surrounded by a thrifty farming community. There are many of the old-timers still living there, and it is doubtful if they would care to live elsewhere. . . . And may they live long and continue to prosper, is my sincere wish."<sup>145</sup>

There already were signs in Masterson's writing in 1910 that he was becoming an urban man, leaving his rural roots in the past. References to the West and the usage of Western terminology continued until Masterson's death, but more and more he became a man of the city, turning his attention to city matters and echoing the opinions of many city dwellers. The themes that were evident in his writing were those associated with the rural-versus-urban conflict in American culture. Masterson's view of the world, and in particular America, was reflected in his frequent commentaries on reformers, politicians, and immigrants. Masterson held true to those same values from the West that were exhibited in his writing, but increasingly he was forced to adapt his old values to the modern world he now lived in.

*Symbolism of the West*

In February 1910, Bat Masterson used his column to endorse a play of the Old West at the New Amsterdam Theatre. The title of the production was "The Barrier," based on a tale written by Rex Beach and directed by Eugene W. Presbrey. Masterson was glowing in his praise of "The Barrier," remarking that the stage recreation of "the Western character, as well as incidents that were real in the life of a frontier settlement, show a perfect knowledge of frontiersmen and conditions."<sup>146</sup> Mostly, Masterson enjoyed the play for what it wasn't — one of the cheap "blood and thunder and notches-on-the-pistol" Old West shoot-'em-ups based on those Western writers whose "lurid . . . tales" so misrepresented the true character of the frontier.

Masterson's review of "The Barrier" reflects four themes common to Western literature. One was "the Lonely Hunter, or Frontiersman," in this case portrayed by a fugitive "who has isolated himself far beyond the confines of civilization. . . ."<sup>147</sup> In Masterson's words:

Any one familiar with the character of the cool, calculating and daring desperado, whose presence was a part of frontier life a generation ago, will instantly recognize in Mr. Hart a true type of that reckless nomad who flourished on the border when the six-shooter was the final arbiter of all disputes between man and man. Mr. Hart looks the part, dresses the part and acts it as if he were the real Dan Stark and had stepped out of the book upon the stage.<sup>148</sup>

The second theme was that of "Frontier versus Metropolis," which Masterson alludes to when he lauds the lead character in refraining from

showing the "bluff and bluster" usually associated with the Eastern tenderfoot who goes West seeking to make a name for himself. Masterson's endorsement of the actress who played "Necia" represented to him the "Westerner as a Pioneer Race." He praises the character for never losing "sight of the fact that she is a product of the frontier, light-hearted, true and courageous, always ready to meet any emergency that might arise with the utmost courage and fortitude."<sup>149</sup> The final Western theme in the column is that of "Taming of the Savage," which can be seen in the Native American character No Creek Lee. Masterson wrote that there probably never had "been a mining camp in the West which has not seen a No Creek Lee." This character, as were his real-life counterparts, was "loyal and trustworthy and enjoys the fullest confidence of the settlement"<sup>150</sup> now that he had been converted to American civilization.

Although he grew increasingly detached from the West, and somewhat bitter toward it, Masterson nonetheless continued to rely on these themes in his writing. This conflict toward his past was symbolized through a feud Masterson had with one of his rivals, sporting editor Bob Edgren of the *New York World*. This feud began early in Masterson's career and its resolution late in his life seemed to indicate Masterson's resolution of the inner struggle in his transition from the frontier to the city. The feud began when the two men were in contention to be chosen as referee for the upcoming "Great White Hope" fight between Jim Jeffries and Jack Johnson. The fight was

becoming an intensely watched and debated affair, and to be chosen to referee the bout would be a tremendous boost both financially and professionally.

Subsequently, the two began sniping at one another in print, and so Masterson already was on the outs with Edgren when the *World* writer took a shot in print at Masterson's old friend Wyatt Earp. When Earp got word of what had been written of him, he fired off an angry letter to Masterson in which he closed by stating: "To tell you the truth about it, the way I feel at the present moment, I would like to be near enough to Edgren to put twelve neatly carved notches on his tongue."<sup>151</sup> In this case, Earp represents Western values and personal honor, while Edgren represents the sinister, often unfair ways of the city. And Earp, of course, wants to resolve the affair much as it would be in the West — swiftly and violently.

Long after Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries settled their differences in the Nevada desert, Masterson continued to feud with Bob Edgren. He rarely mentioned Edgren by name, preferring to refer to him sarcastically as the editor of "The Best Sporting Page in New York," which was the motto of the *World* sports page. Masterson ridiculed Edgren's claims to have been a champion hammer thrower in college ("Edgren can throw a bluff about as well as anyone I know. . . ." <sup>152</sup> was Masterson's sarcastic comment), and he delighted in exposing mistakes by "The Best Sporting Page in New York."

However, by 1918, a transition had occurred. That July, Edgren retired after 15 years as sporting editor at the *World*, and Masterson put the feud to rest by

wishing his long-time rival well in his new life. While continuing to insist that Edgren often wrote things that "made him appear ludicrous, not to say ridiculous,"<sup>153</sup> Masterson finally concluded that "Bob Edgren, taken all around, as you would a fish barrel, was not a bad fellow at all." And so Masterson closed by hoping that Edgren does "well wherever he goes and in whatever occupation he engages in hereafter."<sup>154</sup> Ironically, Edgren retired to the West, where, in Masterson's words, he had gone "to grow up with the country."<sup>155</sup> Whereas Edgren once had represented the often treacherous ways of the city, Masterson now was the city man bidding farewell to his rival, who now symbolized the West, which no longer was virgin country but still was in the process of "growing up." In doing so, Masterson seemed to have resolved the conflict between rural and urban which was a part of his transition to the city.

Thus, where his early writings were stamped by a distinctive Western flavor, Masterson now wrote as the city man with an urban view of the world. His problems and concerns now were those of the metropolis — the flood of immigrants crowding the cities, smoking bans at the boxing arena, reformers, new technologies, health resorts, and the travails of the modern married man.

In many ways, this was a conscious transformation. On occasion, Masterson could be sentimental about the Old West, as he was at the Johnson-Jeffries fight in Reno, Nevada, in 1910, when he remarked wistfully:

"I see men here whom I have not seen since the old days when the West was the pleasure ground of stirring adventures and the virgin community in which so many mighty fortunes were made."<sup>156</sup> However, he still harbored hard feelings toward those he felt had wronged him out West, and he was especially bitter toward Denver. When a young Gene Fowler, then a sports reporter from Denver, arrived in New York, he looked up Masterson expecting a cordial greeting from one who shared a common background in the West. Instead, when Masterson learned where Fowler was from, he looked at him coldly and growled, "Denver can go to hell."<sup>157</sup> On another occasion, Masterson told a caller from the West, "I don't care if I never see those dreary old prairies again."<sup>158</sup> It was a sentiment expressed in his writings. The longer Bat Masterson stayed in New York, the greater the distance between him and the West of his youth.

#### *The Reform Movement as a Symbol of Urban Life*

In July 1921, Bat Masterson surveyed the changing world around him — the passage of the Volstead Act outlawing alcohol, the move toward women's suffrage, and a growing spirit of social reform — and remarked, "Things can't go on forever in this country, as they have been going since the reformers have climbed into the saddle and set out on their rampage."<sup>159</sup> The use of Western symbolism by Masterson put the problem in a context familiar to him — the reformers had ridden into town on their horses and were on a rampage just as destructive as the ones the Texas cowboys used to go on back

in Dodge City of the 1870s. And Masterson believed he knew what damage the reformers could do. In a column written one week before his death, he drew on his experiences in the West to illustrate the problem as he saw it.

Wichita at one time was a real up-to-date place. Everything worth while used to go big at Wichita. But in time the reformers got the State by the neck and in a little while thereafter had the very life strangled out of all that was of any account therein.<sup>160</sup>

This reform spirit was one of the dominant themes of American life in the first two decades of the twentieth century, coinciding with the time Masterson lived in New York. It included the crusade against alcohol, the push for woman's suffrage, the campaign to clean up dirty politics, and an attack on poverty, especially that in the cities. In the years prior to World War I, reform "was in the air" and "the rallying cry in political campaigns was 'social justice.'"<sup>161</sup> As a man of the West — one who believed in such frontier values as freedom of the individual, the virtue of hard work, and a strong sense of patriotism — Masterson saw the reform movement as an intrusion into the rights of the individual and a watering down of American principles. He quoted his friend Alfred Henry Lewis, who defined a reformer as "one who doesn't happen to be in with the other fellow's graft."<sup>162</sup>

Two reform issues that inspired frequent attacks by Masterson were prohibition and women's suffrage. These movements were not unique to the city, but they were representative of the changes in American life as it became

a more urbanized society in the early 1900s. Masterson first had encountered the movement to stamp out alcohol when his native Kansas in 1880 became the first state to adopt a Prohibition amendment, and by 1889 "half a dozen states were bone dry."<sup>163</sup> When the push began more than thirty years later to enact similar legislation on a national level, Masterson remarked cynically:

Since the enactment of prohibition in Kansas thirty-three years ago Democrats, Populists, Republicans, Progressives and Prohibitionists have had their turn in running the State and strange as it may seem, there is as much liquor consumed there now as there was when distilleries, breweries and saloons flourished unmolested. A great State is Kansas, almost as great as Colorado, where they have woman suffrage.<sup>164</sup>

With one stroke of his pen, Masterson had lumped together these two movements, which in his thinking were symbols of the corruption of the West which now were spreading to the rest of the country. In his mind, the effects of Prohibition could be seen in Hot Springs, Arkansas, which went dry in 1916 and soon thereafter, according to Masterson, was "flat broke just like a common tramp."<sup>165</sup> He quoted his friend Jefferson Davis Orear of the *Hot Springs Thomas Cat* as noting, "The old banner 'Prohibition or Bust' was painted over, and on its unkempt face was inscribed: 'Busted, by Cripes.'"<sup>166</sup>

Masterson also echoed a common objection to a law such as Prohibition which attempted to enforce one person's morals on another. In 1921, the year after the Volstead Act went into effect, he complained:

Laws that make criminals instead of inspiring a wholesome respect for constituted authority, as Federal prohibition has been doing, are a menace to law and order. But so long as bunk reformers and bunk politicians succeed in making an easy living out of bunk laws decent citizenship will be made to pay the penalty.<sup>167</sup>

These remarks by Masterson are a reflection of the theme stressed by Turner, that the West was an "example of a democracy in which there was freedom of the individual,"<sup>168</sup> Masterson's sarcastic referral to Kansas as a state "almost as great as Colorado, where they have woman suffrage,"<sup>169</sup> touched upon another element of the changes in society which ran counter to his frontier values. While his objection to women voting is clearly stated in his occasional remarks on the issue, his views on women themselves emerge in a more subtle manner. Masterson liked to repeat jokes about women and marriage, and through these attempts at humor emerges a pattern of the twentieth-century man who must contend with a wife who is becoming increasingly independent.

For example, in 1916 Masterson told his readers of a woman in Arkansas who feeds her husband before her dog, because "if there is anything wrong with the canned goods, it is easy enough to get another husband, but it is hard to get another dog like Fido."<sup>170</sup> Conversely, there was the man who "is offering a substantial reward for the return of his dog which strayed away last month. A year ago the wife of this same man ran away and he never as much as mentioned it to any one."<sup>171</sup> On another occasion, Masterson wrote that he

had been told in confidence "that it wasn't hard to run a typewriter, if you didn't marry her. Oh, boy!"<sup>172</sup>

Undoubtedly, Masterson preferred the frontier woman who accepted her role as the caregiver and child-bearer for the independent hunter/frontiersman. And when Masterson used his column to relate a tale providing a London cabby's definition of a lady, he again tied together the themes of women and a man's right to alcohol.

A London cabman had brought an action against a woman for not paying the legal fare, and his constant remark in court was, "She ain't a lady."

"Do you know a lady when you see one?" asked the judge.

"I do, yer honor. Last week a lady gave me a sovereign instead of a shillin' and I called: 'Beg pardon, madam, I've got a sovereign instead of a shillin', and she shouts back: 'Well, you old fool, keep the change and get drunk with it!' That's what I call a lady!"<sup>173</sup>

In this tale, Masterson makes the point that a real lady recognizes and supports a man's right to have a well-deserved drink. In modern society, however, more and more women were trying to infringe on that right through their involvement in the Prohibition movement. And having achieved the goal of national Prohibition in 1920, the reformers now were trying to push through a woman's right to vote.

Masterson scornfully dismissed this notion with the remark that "women in politics would do the same things men did, but do them worse. . ." <sup>174</sup> He offered as proof a comment in the *Hot Springs Thomas Cat* on the actions of

the "female lobby that worked so openly in Washington" during a debate on a maternity bill. "When women have to get themselves up like courtesans to persuade Senators to vote as they want them to," echoed Masterson, "it isn't purifying anything much and certainly not politics."<sup>175</sup>

### *Politicians as Antagonists*

Henry Nash Smith wrote in *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* of the need for an antagonist in the mythology of the West. In the early Western novels, the Indian provided this nemesis. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the "standard enemy" had become "road agents or counterfeiterers."<sup>176</sup>

This "standard enemy" in Masterson's writings about the West was represented by a similar breed of "bad man," including stage robbers, crooked gamblers, desperadoes, and, increasingly, corrupt politicians. The corrupt politician was represented by the Mayor of Dodge City who used his office to strongarm the public and to intimidate business competitors. Masterson continued this theme in his writings throughout his career, and in his final years he became more and more pointed in his attacks on the politicians he believed were ruining the country. The targets of these broadsides ranged from the president of the United States down to the local politicians who meddled in the boxing game in New York. Of the nation's chief executive in 1912, Masterson observed:

What a joke it is getting to be! Almost every time we read about President Taft it is either in connection with a big feed or a waltz. Isn't there anything else President Taft can do excepting to eat and dance?<sup>177</sup>

When the New York Senate attempted to overturn the Frawley boxing law, which legalized the sport in the state, Masterson complained, "It is not so much that the boxing law is objectionable, as it is a case of getting even by certain sorehead politicians."<sup>178</sup> Masterson believed that all that was wrong with politics in America was expressed in the attempts to enact a racing bill in Arkansas in 1915. After the legislature passed a bill legalizing pari-mutuel wagering in the state, the governor first signed the bill, then a day later changed his mind and vetoed it, only to once more switch sides and sign the bill, before finally flip-flopping yet again and withdrawing his support of the legislation. "Evidently the Arkansas Governor is nothing more nor less than a common, every-day barnyard politician," Masterson observed. "And in this respect it may be said he is no different from politicians everywhere."<sup>179</sup>

Masterson's hope was that one day "the people of this country will awaken to the fact that a politician is nothing more than a 'con' man, who will resort to any means, no matter how despicable or dishonorable, to gain his end."<sup>180</sup>

In this regard, Masterson was repeating the theme in Western mythology observed by Richard Slotkin, that "the role and character of the hero would define the ideal traits of a new class of 'natural rulers,' and the hero story

would show those characteristics triumphing over the countervailing powers of an older order."<sup>181</sup> Here, Masterson, through his writings and his past deeds, represents the hero, while the politicians represent the "older order" which must be overthrown. However, toward the end of his life, Masterson, who by then was an aging and tired warrior, was growing increasingly cynical that anything would be done to overcome these evil politicians. He seemed to be resigned to the fact that no longer could he, Wyatt Earp, Luke Short, and their allies ride into town and break the powerhold of the corrupt ruling circle. In 1921, Masterson lamented:

Dirty politics and still dirtier politicians are, as everybody knows, hard to combat. And it just seems impossible to keep politics out of every line of human endeavor in this country any more.<sup>182</sup>

### *Immigration and the Changing Face of America*

By 1910, one in three Americans in the eight largest cities had been born outside the United States, while fewer than one of 10 people in the country were foreign born.<sup>183</sup> From these figures, it can be seen that immigration was an urban problem, and as such was another symbol of the urban-rural differences in the country.

Like many Americans, Masterson had strong views on immigration, and in his writings he reflected the fears that immigrants were inexorably changing American life and robbing Americans of their national identity. Masterson's views on immigration also are symbolic of his transformation to

an urban man. His early writings show no outward concerns for immigrants, although the theme of immigration is present in his usage of ethnic terms to identify boxers. Late in his life, however, Masterson had strong views on the subject, which he stated in an angry discourse against "hyphenates, hypocrisy and hysteria" in July 1921. "Poor old American," lamented Masterson, "what a lonesome bird he must be!"<sup>184</sup> Complaining that the Statue of Liberty had "become a joke," he suggested that it "be taken down and a gibbet put in its place."<sup>185</sup>

And what had brought about this state of affairs where it was "dangerous for an American to proclaim himself as such"? Masterson argued that it was what he called "the hyphenate menace," an obvious reference to hyphenated Americans such as Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and so forth. And woe be to any American brave enough to stand up to this hyphenate menace.

The hyphenates will put [him] on the blink in short order and he'll get no backing from the few Americans left, who seem to be struck dumb with terror. Between the hyphenates and the profiteering reformers, Americans are certainly in a hulluva fix just now."<sup>186</sup>

A year earlier, Masterson had complained about the "hyphenates" among the prize fighters who continually "put the American flag in 'dutch,' " through their behavior when boxing abroad. Masterson particularly objected to the practice of those boxers who literally wrapped themselves in the American flag when they entered the ring in a foreign country, as did Tommy

Burns, a Canadian-born boxer who wore the flag of his adopted country when he fought in England. Masterson denounced Burns's tactics with the opinion:

Allowing a cheap lot of foreign-bred prizefighters, who have no country and would not know how to be loyal to it if they did have one, to travel about the world using the American flag as a convenient door mat is nothing short of treason.<sup>187</sup>

This bitterness toward immigrants emerged only later in Masterson's career, but throughout all of his writings is the common thread of ethnic stereotypes. This is particularly significant in light of the observations of James Michener and others that the boxing ring was a barometer of where various ethnic groups ranked on the social ladder in American society during the early part of the twentieth century. In other words, for blacks, Irish-Americans, and Italian-Americans at the turn of the century, the prize ring offered one of the few avenues out of the ghetto.

The Irish-Americans in particular resorted to boxing to better themselves. Generally poor and uneducated, their alternatives generally were menial labor, which so many Irish-Americans resorted to that a wheelbarrow became known as an "Irish buggy," a shovel an "Irish spoon," and bricks "Irish confetti."<sup>188</sup> As Summers wrote: "To be an Irishman was to be a hod-carrier, and by 1900 the Irish were losing ground even in skilled trades that they had dominated before the Civil War."<sup>189</sup>

Masterson's treatment of the Irish-Americans was indicative of these popular prejudices. While he was friends with and admired such Irish-American boxers as James J. Corbett, he was not above such observations as his reply to critical letters he received following a column he wrote critical of former boxing champion John L. Sullivan:

Martin Doyle, Michael Shaughnessy, Bart Ryan and Pat McGrath, all typically American names, it will be noted, were the authors of at least four of the letters. . . I expect to get a number of others of like character from those whose patronymic leaves no doubt as to their racial origin. The O's and Macks are yet to be heard from. <sup>190</sup>

On another occasion, Masterson made reference to "a wild-eyed Sinn Feiner whom everybody knows and likes, myself included."<sup>191</sup> Interestingly, Masterson failed to recognize the Irish heritage of Jack Dempsey, a former hobo who took up boxing to pay for his brother's funeral and went on to become the world champion. "Dempsey is quite dark and gives the appearance of having a slight trace of Italian blood in his veins," Masterson wrote in 1918 when Dempsey still was on his way to the top.<sup>192</sup> But it was Irish blood not Italian that flowed in Dempsey, who as much as any man lived up to the reputation of "the fighting Irish."

*Urban Man: Images of the City in Masterson's Writing*

But Masterson observed in 1911 that boxer Freddie Welsh "seems to have the Indian sign" on Charley White.<sup>193</sup> The following year, he compared young heavyweight Jess Willard to "a Kansas cyclone."<sup>194</sup> He described

heavyweight champion Jack Johnson as looking "more like a buffalo bull than a human being."<sup>195</sup> Two prize fighters who had boxed each other twice, with each man winning once, were now "horse and horse," according to Masterson.<sup>196</sup>

This Western imagery was prevalent in Masterson's writing throughout his career. Later in his life, a new language began to creep into his columns, so that he could say of a fighter who began to tire in the late rounds, "just when he needed it most he ran out of gasoline and the old flivver refused to go any further."<sup>197</sup> More and more, Masterson began to rely on city images and urban phrases to make his points, and in so doing he revealed the completion of his transformation to an urban man. An item Masterson wrote in July 1920 illustrated this point.

After soaking up all the Long Branch ozone my system could comfortably hold, I decided to motor over to Perth Amboy, where Fred Fulton has pitched his training camp. . . .It's about thirty-five miles from Long Branch to Perth Amboy, and the road, being a little bit off color in several spots, my lumbago, which had been bothering me considerably for a week, was pretty well jolted out of me by the time we reached our destination.<sup>198</sup>

Masterson, who was 66 years old at the time, touched on two prominent signs of city life in this brief item. His first remark was a commentary on the city air, which was dirty and smelly, in sharp contrast to the fresh air associated with the country. Second, he made reference to one of the emerging symbols of the city when he revealed that he used an automobile

"to motor over to Perth Amboy." The automobile was foremost among the modern technologies that were changing American life, and being a modern man Masterson now used it and not a horse for transportation. The bumpy road, which was "off color in several spots," also can be seen as a metaphor for the often rocky transformation into this modern urban society, while the lumbago is symbolic of Masterson's old age.

As much as Masterson enjoyed the city, it also represented a loss of freedom. This was symbolized by the smoking ban enacted in Madison Square Garden in 1921. The smoke in the boxing arena had been so thick on fight nights that patrons in the gallery could not even see the ring. The Boxing Commission's solution was to prohibit smoking on the main floor, where Masterson and other press members as well as the high-dollar ticket holders sat. In Masterson's mind, this was blatantly unfair.

Masterson, who was by his own account "an inveterate smoker," abided by the ban although he complained that he "saw a dozen or more smoking within a few feet from where I was sitting."<sup>199</sup> That would be the only time he would refrain from smoking, vowed Masterson. He would stay away from the fights altogether if he could not smoke in the arena, but first he proposed to test the commission's willingness to enforce the ban.

If they want to give me the bum's rush for violating the no smoking rule, well and good, but they'll have to actually take me by the neck and throw me out of the building to prevent me from smoking and as soon as I land in the street I'll proceed to set fire to a perfecto and

go on my way rejoicing, leaving the fighters and galleryites to the tender care of the Boxing Commission.<sup>200</sup>

This was the response of the Western man, who rather than submit to what he perceived as undue restrictions on his freedoms, would saddle up and ride on to the next town. In Masterson's case, we never were able to find out whether he would have made good on his threat to continue smoking in Madison Square Garden in the face of the ban. He died shortly after this column, before he was able "to set fire to a perfecto" in the face of the commission's orders.

Two months before his death, Masterson had made another interesting observation in one of his columns. He began an account of his vacation in Alexandria Bay, New York, with these words: "To the sated city man, the refreshing influence of the breezes wafted toward me as I sit on the broad piazza facing the St. Lawrence. . . ." <sup>201</sup> It was an apt description. After almost two decades in New York, the former Western hero had indeed become a weary but satisfied "city man."

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## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: BAT MASTERSON'S LEGACY

It has been written that the gunfighter of the Old West had but one simple prayer: "Lord, let me die in harness."<sup>1</sup> Only the very good or the very lucky had this request honored, for those who lived by the gun often died by the gun. Bat Masterson was one of the lucky ones. He "died in harness," sitting at his desk doing what he had come to love, writing his newspaper column.

There never had been a newspaper reporter like him before, and there hasn't been one since. He was a true Western hero, but unlike his contemporaries, Masterson lived not only to tell his tale but also to record new ones. The man whose legend was created in great part by the American press later became an integral part of that press.

If one dates his newspaper career back to his first writings for *George's Weekly* in Denver in the mid-1890s, Bat Masterson spent as many years in the news room as he did wielding a six-shooter. He ventured onto the frontier plains as a young man in 1872 and roughly a quarter of a century later, he turned his energies to writing, a vocation he pursued for the final quarter of a century of his life.

When Masterson died in October 1921, the rival *New York Tribune* paid tribute to him with these words:

When he came to write he showed directness of expression combined with little notion of veiling his dislikes. The twenty-eight notches on the weapon which he had discarded when he took up the pen inspired a certain respect for Masterson's opinions.<sup>2</sup>

The "twenty-eight notches" on Masterson's gun were a myth, like so much else about the man. Although a fabrication, they were symbolic of the American gunfighter. In the end, however, the number of notches on Masterson's gun and whether he killed only one man or twenty-eight with his six-shooter was irrelevant to the respect he commanded as a journalist. Masterson's choice of boxing as the source of his livelihood, whether as a promoter or reporter, also is significant. Richard Slotkin writes of the significance of the river in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

. . .The world of the river is a "magic" and romantic one, described in the romantic terms common to Frontier romances. But . . .the magic world is a limited one; it cannot spread its power to the world of the shore, in which evil, violence, and greed shape values and behavior.

. . .The contrast of river and shore in *Huckleberry Finn* is an abstraction of the relationship of Frontier to Metropolis.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the relationship between gunfighting and boxing in Masterson's life and in his writing can be viewed as metaphor for the relationship between the Frontier and the Metropolis. The gunfighters were symbolic of the Old West, a place of freedom and opportunity and one where justice often

was enforced at the point of a gun. This could be a violent world, but in Masterson's eyes it was one in which a man had a right, and perhaps even an obligation, to defend himself, even if that meant killing another. "I have never stood for murder and never will," Masterson once wrote, "but I firmly believe that a man who kills another in defense of his own life should always be held blameless and will always lend a helping hand to such a man."<sup>4</sup> That was the way of the gunfighter: kill or be killed.

But as civilization extended into the West, with the resulting closing of the American frontier in the 1880s, the gunfighter became extinct, to be replaced by the more structured laws of society. The arrival of prize fighting in the West was symbolic of this intrusion of society, as prize fighters represented a more civilized manner of resolving disputes. While boxing might be a brutal sport, the loser at least can live to fight another day. The boxer replaced the gunfighter in Masterson's world, where differences were resolved in "man style," one on one. The prize ring thus becomes a metaphor for society, where men compete with one another under a strict set of laws. The "padded mitt" replaced the six-shooter as a means of settling disputes. And in this prize ring were played out class struggles, racial stereotypes, battles between honest and dishonest businessmen, and political battles for control of the sport. Boxing primarily is a city sport, fought in city arenas, and as such stands in contrast to gunfighting, which was a product of the frontier and a symbol of the West.

Masterson's writings of his fellow gunfighters in the West are a reflection of the values of the West and of American ideals. Through his subsequent writings as a New York newspaper reporter, we not only learn of the exploits of the prize fighters he writes about, but we also see a man of the West — who is himself one of the symbols of nineteenth-century America — struggling to adapt to a rapidly changing world. In his progression from a man of the West to an urban man, Masterson touches on the popular issues of the day. He delivered his opinions on reformers and politicians, marriage and smoking, corruption and the "sucker public." This product of the frontier was driving automobiles and riding in airplanes in the later years of his life, and telling us about these experiences in his columns.

Slotkin states that in Mark Twain's stories of *Huckleberry Finn* and later *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, one can see the dilemma facing America at the end of the nineteenth century: "how to preserve the values and social structure of an entrepreneurial-agrarian democracy in an industrial society."<sup>5</sup> Thus, argues Slotkin:

Faced with the choice of "liquidating" the concept of the Frontier or "renaturalizing" it, Americans chose the latter. . . they adapted it to suit the ideological purposes and needs of the new industrial society. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This was the dilemma Bat Masterson dealt with during his two decades as a New York reporter. He struggled to preserve the values of the frontier —

such as Honor and Justice, Freedom of Choice and Action — in the urbanized society of the early twentieth century. He, too, did so by adapting his Frontier to suit the purposes of this new industrial society in which he lived.

### Suggested Future Research

While this examination of Masterson's writings provides valuable insight into how Americans coped with their changing society and the closing of the American Frontier, it also points to other research possibilities on related topics.

- One such project is to study the rise of the various immigrant classes in American society by tracing their participation in the two dominant spectator sports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — prize fighting and baseball. James Michener suggested one could trace the progress of these ethnic groups up the social ladder by looking "at the Boston newspaper of any given era, and . . . seeing who was fighting whom."<sup>7</sup> Apparently, however, no such study ever has been conducted.

- What was the newspaper's role in creating the legends of various Western heroes or outlaws? Bat Masterson shot and killed only one man, and yet the newspapers created the myth that during his time on the Frontier he shot one man for each year of his life, and then recorded each killing with a notch on his gun handle. Even at the time of his death, the *New York Tribune* preserved this myth by remarking on "the twenty-eight notches" on

Masterson's six-shooter. An examination of the part newspapers played in creating this Western legends would be instructive in how the press and not just popular literature contributed to the mythology of the American West.

- It can be argued that in hiring Bat Masterson as a reporter, the *Morning Telegraph* was only following the lead of William Randolph Hearst, who during the "yellow journalism" wars of the late 1890s boosted circulation by hiring sports champions to provide the coverage of their sport. The practice of "celebrity" sports reporters had been used prior to this, but Hearst's "experts" actually wrote their own stories, as did Masterson. A study of how this practice began and how it was used by newspapers would provide valuable insight into the press of the era.

### Summary

There is a final irony to Bat Masterson's career as a newspaper reporter. About the time Masterson left home in search of adventure on the Kansas plains, a Pennsylvania printer by the name of Christopher L. Sholes patented and named the first typewriter, in 1868. This invention would someday become synonymous with the newspaper reporter, but when Masterson went to work at the *Morning Telegraph* in 1903, many if not most of his colleagues still "wrote with pen and ink."<sup>8</sup> Dan Daniel, who began his career as a New York sports writer in 1909, recalled that in 1913, he "was one of the first users of the typewriter in a New York newspaper office."<sup>9</sup> While others quickly

adopted this new machine, Masterson was one of the holdouts. The typewriter was one technology he never mastered. To the end, Masterson continued to write his columns with pen and ink.

So it was that when Masterson's lifeless body was found slumped over his desk on October 25, 1921, he still was holding the pen with which he wrote his final words. The *New York Tribune* could not help but comment on this irony in its obituary of Masterson: "He died at his desk gripping his pen with the tenacity with which he formerly clung to the hilt of his six-shooter."<sup>10</sup> It was a fitting eulogy to the newspaper reporter he had become. Bat Masterson died not only with his boots on, but with his pen in hand.

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