

3-2008

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Recommended Citation

Rich, Harold (2008) "Strange Bedfellows: "Longhair Jim" Courtright and Political Influence in Fort Worth," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol46/iss1/9>

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STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: "LONGHAIR JIM" COURTRIGHT AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE IN FORT WORTH

By Harold Rich

By most standards Timothy Isiah Courtright fit the popular image of a western lawman. Courtright certainly looked the part, standing well over six feet tall, sporting a distinctive moustache, and wearing a two-gun holster with the pistol butts faced forward. He also lived the life, surviving dramatic exploits as a soldier, a lawman, a guard for mines and railroads, and a gambler. Even Courtright's death in 1877, the result of a shootout with fellow gambler and gunman Luke Short, read like a Hollywood script, including his dying lament, "Ful, they've got me." One of the frontier's heroic figures and Fort Worth's best-known lawman, "Longhair Jim" personified the popular western ideal of a man of action who relied on a rigid code of ethics and a ready six-shooter.¹

In contrast, a recently recovered remembrance suggests that Courtright's rather rapid rise to city marshal, or chief of police, had less to do with qualities that define popular images than with crass municipal politics, especially elite manipulation of elections. That does not, of and by itself, constitute a major criticism of Courtright, whose participation involved more opportunism than corruption, more happenstance than planning, and whose standing actually imparted stability and respect to a police department with neither. It does damage the image, but images are often shallow and easily shattered. The salient issue was not what the event said about one person but what it said about the pervasiveness and transferability of power politics in the American West, that non-democratic influences capable of corrupting the electoral process existed at an early stage.²

Courtright, born in the American Midwest in the mid-1840s, fought for the Union during the Civil War at Fort Donelson and Vicksburg and suffered wounds at Belmont. Following Appomattox he went west as an Army scout, earning the nickname of "Longhair Jim" after foregoing trims, an act of bravado in defiance of scalping threats, then drifted as a buffalo hunter/gambler before marrying. Martial responsibilities probably played a large role in bringing Courtright and his new bride to Fort Worth in 1873 and in his move into wage labor as a fireman, jailer, and, by 1875, deputy city marshal.³

Fort Worth, incorporated that same year, was still a frontier community struggling to support the structure of city government. In April 1873, Ed S. Terrell, a former trapper and reputedly the area's first settler and first saloon-keeper – at The First and Last Change – defeated five challengers to become chief of four law enforcement officers who worked twelve hour shifts, seven days a week, two patrolling by day and two by night. Even that meager force fell victim to economic depression on May 10, 1873, when declining revenues forced discharge of the four deputies. Marshal Terrell continued in office until October 1873, when he resigned following bitter wage disputes, and shortly thereafter all municipal administration ceased.⁴

The marshal's office soon reopened, but struggled in the face of chronic unprofessionalism and higher turnover. Tom Ewing, Fort Worth's second marshal following an election in April 1874, was a local physician who continued his medical practice, at times incorporating the tricks of that trade into his new calling. Dr. Ewing often incapacitated aggressive drunks by drugging their drinks, a method that may have been inventive and effective but which displayed a degree of official ineptitude. Ewing resigned after only eight months, and was succeeded by H.P. Shiel, one of the first four appointed officers, who triumphed in a special election in December 1874, only to resign after only ten months of complaining about wages.⁵

Yet another special election on October 25, 1875, made Tom P. Redding Fort Worth's fourth marshal in thirty months. Redding proved the worst of a remarkably poor group. He had some experience, having served as an unofficial marshal during the Civil War, but was best known as the town barber, a trade that he continued after assuming office. "Uncle Tom," as he was popularly known, represented such a low level of authority and public standing that toughs commonly chased him off the street with lariats or by shooting at his feet. On February 8, 1876, after just three months, the city council suspended Redding pending a hearing to determine the wisdom of filing formal charges. Redding resigned the next day amid reports that his "disgraceful conduct" would lead to a permanent suspension, which precluded a public report.⁶

The resulting campaign and election appeared to be just another unremarkable exercise in a process made common by the revolving door nature of the city marshal's office. Following Redding's resignation in February 1875, the council appointed Deputy John Stoker interim marshal, opting to wait two months until the regularly scheduled municipal election. The ensuing campaign hardly made a ripple in the local press; as late as two weeks prior to voting the local press listed only one candidate for marshal – Stoker – and no reports concerning Redding or the incident leading to his suspension ever appeared. At the polls Timothy Courtright defeated Stoker and four others, outpolling the nearest competitor with a plurality of only three votes, 106 to 103. By all accounts and appearances Courtright's victory was an unremarkable expression of the democratic process and unrelated to Redding's departure. Almost exactly thirty years later, in 1907, those perceptions were challenged with allegations that collusion and political payoffs fixed the election for Courtright, charges that, if true, posited the existence and vitality of an early Fort Worth elite with sufficient political muscle to call the election in 1876.⁷

The allegations focused on an incident first reported by the *Fort Worth Democrat* on December 18, 1875, and the *Fort Worth Standard* on December 23, 1875, the *Standard* was a weekly, which accounted for the delayed reporting. On the afternoon of December 16, 1875, two young men, William Nance, described only as a teenager, and Bingham Feild, nineteen years old, entered the Club Room Saloon at 22 Main Street. Because of their ages and advanced state of intoxication, the bartender, Lem Grisham, refused service, continuing to do so even under threats of bodily injury. Enraged by the rejection and hav-

ing their bluff called, Nance and Feild fired several random shots in the street and continued the rampage as they entered an alley between the City Bakery at 23 Main Street and an adjacent bowling alley. Deputy Marshal Courtright, responding to the sound of gunfire, found the two still in a four-foot wide alley enclosed on one end by a fence. Courtright approached from the alley's open end, advancing despite warnings and threats to shoot. Nance relented, surrendering his weapon, but Feild refused, stating he would rather die. Courtright, perhaps motivated by Feild's youth, tried to disarm him rather than answer the challenge, a decision that almost proved fatal. As the two struggled, Bingham's pistol discharged, striking Courtright's abdomen and traveling upwards towards his right shoulder. Several onlookers, led by David Crawford, broke down the fence, subdued Feild, and marched both miscreants to jail.⁸

Contemporary newspapers agreed that Courtright sustained serious injuries. The *Democrat* claimed "little hope is entertained" of recovery while the *Standard* expressed deep sympathy, describing the wound as dangerous and offering faint hopes of recovery. Despite the similarities, a letter to the editor in the *Democrat* from "B" on December 25, 1875, took the *Standard* and a third local newspaper, the *Mortar*, no longer extant, to task for exaggerating Courtright's wounds. The polemic noted that Courtright never considered the injuries life-threatening and that he laughingly refused when asked to make a dying statement, insisting that Nance and Feild were friends and calling the shooting an accident occasioned by the struggle over Feild's pistol. The "letter" may have been a disguised editorial – newspapers often used the façade of letters to the editor to hide editorial opinions.⁹

The matter remained closed, without further entry in existing records, until 1907, when J.B. Roberts, a reporter with thirty-five years experience, recounted the incident in a newspaper article commemorating the leveling of the city hall built in the 1870s. Roberts first noted that one of the two youths was then a practicing physician in Oklahoma Indian Territory and that the other had died. He verified the initial fatal prognosis for Courtright but recalled that the melee began on Main Street at Bohart's Saloon when Marshal Redding, not Deputy Courtright, responded to the sounds of Nance and Feild shooting at flies on the ceiling. The two drunkards chased Redding out of the building by firing at his feet, causing the hapless marshal to jump "like a cat on a hot griddle" and as he retreated to city hall, where Mayor G.H. Day ordered him to return and arrest both men. Perhaps realizing the marshal's limitations, Day suggested that Redding seek the assistance of Courtright, who the mayor knew to be "game." Roberts contends that Courtright was not then a deputy marshal and had not taken any part in municipal affairs but that he agreed to help after Redding found him chopping wood on the nearby Trinity River bottom. Courtright, unarmed, approached from the rear of the alley between Bohart's Saloon and Byrne's Place – Henry Byrne was the proprietor of the Club Room Saloon – calling for the two to surrender. According to Roberts, both Nance and Feild then fired, with one shot striking Courtright "through the body." Courtright, although seriously wounded, subdued and disarmed both men before walking them to jail and collapsing.¹⁰

While the later report differed slightly from the contemporary accounts, its major impact lay in revelations concerning the shooting's aftermath. Roberts claimed that the suspects were scions of two of Fort Worth's most prominent families and their criminal culpability in such a serious offense presented quite a dilemma for their kin and the rest of Fort Worth society. If tried, the two, clearly guilty of a felonious assault, surely would have been convicted and sentenced to the state penitentiary, possibilities that Roberts termed out of the question due to their community standing. One of the two, already a doctor according to Roberts, proposed to use the influence of both families to elect Courtright city marshal if the matter was dropped. When Courtright agreed the families forced Redding's resignation, opening the door for a new election in which Courtright became marshal.¹¹

Many problems existed with Roberts' version of the events, including what proved to be a time corrupting memory. Clear and irrefutable evidence exists that Courtright had served several functions in the city's employ, including fire-fighter and jailer, and that he was a deputy city marshal prior to and during the shooting. On November 18, 1875, less than a month before the shooting, the *Standard* reported that "Deputy Marshal Courtright" had broken his right fore-finger shooting a man the previous Saturday. The historical record also argues against the idea of Redding's forced resignation to accommodate an election. Although the particulars of the suspension remained hidden, the press did report that it stemmed from an incident occurring on February 7, 1876, several weeks after December 16, 1875. Of course, the undescribed incident could have been manipulated, but that seems unlikely since it was not necessary. At the time all city positions carried one-year appointments, with elections the first week of April. Therefore, removing Redding in February accomplished nothing. In addition, in contemporary press reports Courtright stated that the wound happened during a struggle, contradicting Roberts' claim that Courtright was shot as he approached. Also, it was unlikely that either Feild or Nance held a medical degree in their teen years.¹²

Hero worship also may have corrupted Roberts' memory. Courtright's bravery in the face of fire approaches legendary status but it would have been foolhardy for any unarmed person to approach aggressively intoxicated men who had fired on the city marshal. Also, for all his attributes, Courtright remained mortal and it stretches credulity to believe that he, while seriously wounded, subdued two young men and then walked several blocks to the city jail. Exaggerations often develop around persons of notoriety, and several apocrypha surround Courtright, including a report that he twice knocked down heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan in the fighter's prime.¹³

Those exceptions noted, considerable circumstantial evidence supports the critical part of Roberts' account, that the two families arranged Courtright's election to earn and reward his silence. Courtright won the election despite facing a lengthy recovery and having entered the race rather late. Late in January 1876, reports surfaced that he was only beginning to walk and no public mention of his candidacy appeared prior to voting, yet he triumphed

over four other opponents, including the acting marshal. Of course, Courtright probably received significant popular support by virtue of his heroism and resulting injury, but the neatness of the developments suggests machinations.¹⁴

In addition, all we know indicates that Courtright was not the sort to let even a minor slight pass without retribution, making it unlikely that he would laugh off a serious personal attack. However, he did so, calling the shooting an accident owing more to drunkenness than intent and even stipulating in the event of his death that the two not face prosecution. Courtright's atypical forbearance suggests that ulterior motives might have played a major role.¹⁵

A rather curious phenomenon following the shooting tends to support the prominence of the suspects' families. From the first, press accounts demonstrated a curious level of support for actors who had critically injured a local police officer. The *Democrat* adopted a conciliatory tone, writing that the "boys" were friends of Courtright, that it was Feild's first "spree," and that the shooting would not have occurred if they had not been "crazed" by liquor. The paper spoke of "a feeling of deep sympathy that pervades the entire community for the unfortunate youths and their friends and relatives," expressing hope that mercy would be shown the "unfortunate boys." The *Standard* excused the matter as a youthful episode gone wrong, reporting that drunkenness would be the defense. Calls for leniency, published excuses, and discussion of defenses probably were visible effects of the high status suggested by Roberts.¹⁶

Professional advertisements in the local papers and city directories also support the prominence of the families and their possible political connections, especially that of Bingham Feild. A Dr. J.T. Feild shared an office with Dr. W.P. Burts, Fort Worth's first mayor, at 53 Main Street at Third Street, relatively close to the scene – ironically they treated Courtright just after the shooting. Another physician, J.T. Feild, had an office at 74 West Belknap Street. In addition, W. Henry Field maintained a law office at Main and Second streets. Henry Feild was not just any lawyer; he was the Fort Worth's city attorney. No evidence definitively ties the professional Feilds to Bingham, but the shared, uncommon surname and indications that he became a physician strongly hint at connections to a family with strong associational links to city hall.¹⁷

The true scope of the matter was much larger than Jim Courtright and a couple of wayward but prominent sons of Fort Worth society. At its core, it involved the state of democratic values and development in frontier urbanization, a subject not unknown to existing historiography. Manipulation of elections for private interests offers ties to the argument of Lawrence Larsen and Ronald L.F. Davis that little was unique or new about the new young Western cities, and that they mirrored the social, economic, and political values of earlier municipalities in that they were driven not by democratic ideals but by exploitation for private gain. Developing that process leads to Timothy R. Mahoney's stress on the importance of the middle class in the urban West as well as a faint linkage to Patricia Limerick Nelson's dismissal of the West defined by hardy independence. Those connections remain tenuous, largely due to the lack of concrete information on several key points, especially con-

cerning how the elite influence operated to ensure electoral victory. Still, the preponderance of the evidence suggests an elite dynamic at work in early Fort Worth politics involving one of the West's quintessential gunfighters.¹⁸

NOTES

¹For the life of Timothy Courtright, see Francis Stanley, *Longhair Jim Courtright: Two Gun Marshal of Fort Worth* (Denver: World Press, 1957); quote taken from *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, February 10, 1887, p. 5.

²For the importance of Courtright to Fort Worth law enforcement, see Harold Rich, "Twenty-five Years of Struggle and Progress: The Fort Worth Police Department, 1873-1897." M.A. thesis, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth. 1999.

³Stanley, *Two Gun Marshal*; Rich, "Fort Worth Police. 1873-1897," pp. 43-60; Richard E. Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre: The Life and Legends of a Red-Light District*, Chisholm Trail Series (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1991), p. 83; Oliver Knight, *Fort Worth: Outpost on the Trinity* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1990), pp. 81-82. Various accounts list Courtright's year of birth from 1844 to 1848 and the birthplace in Iowa and Illinois.

⁴For a general history of the development of Fort Worth's local government, see Knight, *Outpost on the Trinity*; Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre*; Rich, "Fort Worth Police, 1873-1897."

⁵Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre*; Rich, "Fort Worth Police. 1873-1897."

⁶*Fort Worth Telegram*, "Was Built by Mayor Day," by J.B. Roberts, August 20, 1907, p. 7; Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre*, p. 68; Rich, "Fort Worth Police. 1873-1897," *Fort Worth Democrat*, February 19, 1876, pp. 3-4, February 26, 1876, p. 3, April 8, 1876, p. 3; "Fort Worth City Council Minutes," Vol. A. February 8, 1876; *Fort Worth Standard*, February 10, 1876, p. 4.

⁷*Fort Worth Standard*, February 10, 1876, p. 4.

⁸*Fort Worth Democrat*, "The Pistol," December 18, 1875, p. 3; *Fort Worth Standard*, "Pistols and Police," December 23, 1875, p. 3; Chas. J. Swasey and W.M. Melton, *Directory of the City of Fort Worth*, (Fort Worth: *Fort Worth Daily Democrat*, 1877), pp. 51, 62.

⁹Chas. J. Swasey and W.M. Melton, *Directory of the City of Fort Worth*, (Fort Worth: *Fort Worth Daily Democrat*, 1877), pp. 51, 62; *Fort Worth Democrat*, December 25, 1875, p. 3.

¹⁰*Fort Worth Telegram*, "Was Built by Mayor Day," August 20, 1907, p. 8; Swasey and Melton, *City Directory*, p. 51.

¹¹*Fort Worth Telegram*, "Was Built by Mayor Day," August 20, 1907, p. 8.

¹²*Fort Worth Democrat*, April 8, 1876, p. 3; *Fort Worth Standard*, November 18, 1875, p. 1.

¹³Stanley, *Two Gun Marshal*, p. 226.

¹⁴*Fort Worth Standard*, January 27, 1876, p. 3.

¹⁵*Fort Worth Democrat*, "The Pistol," December 18, 1875, p. 3; December 25, 1875, p. 3.

¹⁶*Fort Worth Democrat*, "The Pistol," December 18, 1875, p. 3; December 25, 1875, p. 3; *Fort Worth Standard*, "Pistols and Police," December 23, 1875, p. 3.

¹⁷Swasey and Melton, *City Directory*, pp. 49, 51, 55, 62, 67; *Fort Worth Democrat*, December 11, 1875, p. 1, January 15, 1876, p. 1; *Fort Worth Standard*, November 18, 1875, p. 1.

¹⁸Laurence H. Larsen, *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier*. (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Ronald I.F. Davis, "Western Urban Development: A Critical Analysis," in *The American West: New Perspectives, New Dimensions*, ed. Jerome O. Steffen. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979); Timothy R. Mahoney, *Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Patricia Limerick Nelson, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).