

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for


Fall 2011

Review of *The Johnson~Sims Feud: Romeo and Juliet, West Texas Style* by Bill O'Neal

Robin C. Sager

Rice University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Sager, Robin C., "Review of *The Johnson~Sims Feud: Romeo and Juliet, West Texas Style* by Bill O'Neal" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2718.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2718>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Johnson-Sims Feud: Romeo and Juliet, West Texas Style. By Bill O'Neal. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2010. xiv + 208 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

In *The Johnson-Sims Feud*, Bill O'Neal describes how interactions soured between two West Texas families due, in part, to an unfortunate marriage. Joining numerous scholars who have traced the presence of violence in frontier areas, O'Neal contends that the bad blood between the Johnsons and the Simses escalated into a feuding state that lasted for decades.

The work begins in the late 1870s with the arrival of early settlers "Billy" Johnson and Dave Sims, two men determined to "create cattle empires in the rugged vastness of West Texas." Embracing the intricacies of ranching life, they both met with great success and raised large families in the neighboring counties of Kent and Scurry. Out of these connections came the 1905 marriage of Ed Sims and Gladys Johnson, which ended in divorce and the public murder of Ed by Gladys and her brother.

Once Ed's blood had been shed, according to O'Neal, a reign of unchecked violence began to take hold in the area. Frank Hamer, noted lawman and Gladys's new husband, emerged as a particular target of the Simses' ire and almost lost his life in an ambush connected to them. Judge Cullen Higgins, the mastermind behind the Johnsons' defense team, was not so lucky and was assassinated in March 1918 by individuals connected to the Sims family. O'Neal states that by the end of May 1919, however, the conflict slowed as the family patriarchs fell ill and the remaining relatives shifted their attention to economic survival in a harsh environment.

O'Neal's adept hand at local history tends to outweigh the work's weaknesses, which include an attempt at psychoanalysis when discuss-

ing the relationship between Gladys and her mother. In addition, a fan of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* must be willing to overlook the tenuous, and often overplayed, connections made by O'Neal between the feud and the play. Nonetheless, for scholars interested in frontier violence, ranching, and life in West Texas, this work represents a colorful narrative that places the stories of two families into a larger context.

ROBIN C. SAGER
Department of History
Rice University