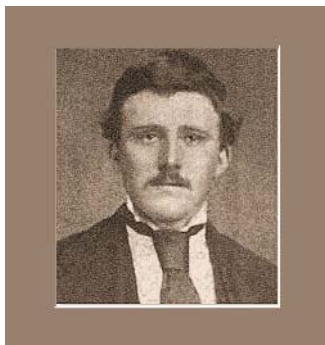


## HOT TEMPER, FAST GUN John Wesley Hardin in Trinity



Texas after the Civil War was both a land of opportunity for those seeking to improve their lives and a wild frontier area attracting a wide assortment of desperados and gunfighters. One of the most infamous did not come to Texas in search of fame and fortune. He was a homegrown product of his times who, by the time of his violent death at age 42, had killed at least 35 men.

John Wesley Hardin became one of the most notorious gunfighters of the Old West, earning a reputation for his hot temper and for his skill with a six-gun. He was able to accurately shoot with either hand or with both at the same time and until his final arrest in 1877 he demonstrated that deadly skill in almost every town he visited.

He also was credited with inventing many of the tactics and the equipment used by gunfighters, including "the road agent's spin," the "border shift" or "border roll" and the shoulder holster

Born in Bonham on May 26, 1853, young John Wesley (or "Wes" as he became known) spent most of his childhood alternating between the communities of Moscow in Polk County and Sumpter in Trinity County. At the time, Sumpter was the seat of the county's government and young Wes' father, the Rev. James G. Hardin, worked there as a preacher, lawyer and school teacher.

The elder Hardin was a Methodist minister and he named his second son after the founder of that denomination, John Wesley. During his time in Sumpter, the Rev. Hardin established an academy where Wes and his older brother, Joe, attended school. This is where Wes Hardin later said he received most of his education.

It was while attending the Sumpter school in 1867 that the first violent episode of Wes' young life was recorded. One day, another student by the name of Charles Slotter challenged him to a wrestling match. Young Hardin had pinned his opponent when Slotter pulled a knife. One of Wes' friends tossed him a knife and the fight became bloody with Slotter suffered two stab wounds. When the young Hardin was not punished, Slotter's parents pro-tested, but dropped the matter when witnesses proved he had acted in self-defense.

At the tender age of 15, Hardin's career as a notorious gunman began. While visiting an uncle in Moscow in 1868, he killed an ex-slave. Hardin would later recall that he and a cousin, Barnett Jones, were arm wrestling a former slave by the name of Mage. His ring scratched Mage's face and a fist fight broke out. The following morning, while returning home to Sumpter, the young man said Mage accosted him and tried to club him. Hardin shot him.

Mage died soon after and John Wesley's father worried that "union-dominated" courts of the Post-Civil War Reconstruction era would treat his son harshly. He sent his son to Nogalus Prairie, a Trinity County community about 25 miles from Sumpter. John Wesley's older brother, Joe, was working there as a school teacher. The young fugitive did not remain there for long. When three Union soldiers were discovered in the vicinity "snooping around," Hardin decided to become the hunter, rather than the prey. He confronted and killed all three.

On the run again, Hardin joined two of his cousins, Manning Clements and Tom Dixon, herding longhorn cattle. They spent their free time in saloons and gambling halls, even though they were all still teenagers.

Young Hardin became very skilled with his Colt .44 and developed into an expert at various card games, including poker, euchre and seven-up. He also developed a reputation at being a good judge of race horses.

Hardin visited cattle camps throughout the country and his young, naive appearance caused several professional gamblers to feel un-obligated to pay their gambling losses. On several occasions, a gambler would "go for his gun" and would lose the ultimate wager to Hardin's faster and more deadly reflexes.

Much to his delight, the teenager was fast becoming known as a gunman and word spread that drawing a gun on Wes Hardin was a fast way to commit suicide. This reputation was enhanced because just about everywhere the young man traveled, he initiated gun-fire. He killed a desperado named Bradley in Towash (Hill County), a circus man in Horn Hill (Limestone County) and a man in Kosse (Limestone County), who apparently had schemed with a girl to defraud Hardin of his money.

Hardin had met the girl and arranged to meet her again that evening in her home. Shortly after arriving at the home, in came her "boyfriend" brandishing a gun and demanding money to ease his jealousy. During the exchange of the money, Hardin purposely dropped some of the cash and within seconds, the boyfriend had a bullet hole between his eyes. Hardin quickly departed with the sound of a horse echoing in the darkness in the general direction of Brenham.

Not being a person to stay in one place for too long, Hardin soon moved on from Brenham, only to be jailed in Marshall. While being transferred to Waco, Hardin got a gun, shot an officer and escaped. He shot three more lawmen near Belton before heading for Mexico.

On his way to the border, Hardin stopped in Cuero in Dewitt County. A San Antonio gambler by the name of Dreyfus was working there as a Monte dealer. One evening, Hardin thought the game was moving a bit too slow and asked Dreyfus to speed things up. The dealer told him to be more patient and, noticing the young man's two gun rig, remarked, "Looks like you're a little too pistoled." Other men in the area began to scatter in all directions but one rushed up to Dreyfus and whispered, "You crazy fool! That's John Wesley Hardin." The dealer quickly found the back door as he fled the gambling hall and was never seen in the area again.

Continuing toward Mexico, Hardin decided to stop off in Gonzales to visit with relatives, the Clements. While there, he met Jane Bowen. The two would be married in March 1873 and would have three children -- two girls and a boy.

Rather than continue on to Mexico as he had planned, Hardin became involved with friends and relatives in the cattle business, an enterprise which would lead him to Abilene, Kansas, by way of the Old Chisholm Trail. It also led to the death of another 10 men to Hardin's quick temper and swift guns.

It was in Abilene, Kansas that Hardin, at the age of 18, encountered Marshal James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickock who found himself suddenly looking into the muzzles of two guns rather than at their handles when Hardin was supposedly surrendering. Instead of pulling out his weapons handles first, Hardin had performed the "border roll" on the unsuspecting marshal and flipped them around in the blink of an eye.

It was also during his stay in Abilene that Hardin shot a man for snoring. The young gunman was staying in a hotel when the snoring of a man in the next room kept him awake. Hardin's quick temper flared and he fired several shots through the adjoining wall to get the neighbor to be quiet. However, his second bullet struck and killed the sleeping man and Hardin was forced to make a hasty exit from Abilene.

After his Kansas visit, he returned to Gonzales County to visit Jane Bowen in the community of Smiley and learned two state policemen were on his trail. Once again, Hardin set out to hunt those who were hunting him and confronted them in a general store while they were eating cheese and crackers. He shot one in the head and the other, who was wounded in the mouth, managed to save himself by jumping into a nearby lake.

Following a business trip to Hemphill, Hardin decided to return home by way of Polk and Trinity counties in order to visit with friends and relatives. The visit included a stop in the John Gates Saloon in Trinity, where Hardin became engaged in a game of tenpins with a man named Phil Sublet. A misunderstanding as to how the game should be conducted led to violence. However, the interference of a drunken bystander hindered Hardin's ability to move quickly and Hardin was shot for the first time, catching part of the blast from a shotgun in the stomach. Hardin was loaded into a wagon, carried across a set of railroad tracks to the Manning Hotel where he received emergency surgery.

The wounded man was then taken by wagon to Sumpter and was shuffled around the area by friends until he reached a home near Lufkin in Angelina County. His recovery there was cut short by the arrival of two lawmen. Hardin, who refused to surrender, was wounded again but managed to kill both of the officers with a shotgun.

After the battle, Hardin decided he could run no more and sent for Cherokee County Sheriff Richard Reagan, a friend whom he believed would give him temporary protection. However, while he was in the process of surrendering, one of Reagan's deputies thought Hardin was going to his gun and shot him in the knee. Hardin was carried to Rusk to recuperate under the care of Sheriff Reagan's family. After he had sufficiently recovered from his wounds, he was turned over to a sheriff in Austin and was returned to Gonzales to stand trial for the killing of the state policeman in Smiley.

On Oct. 10, 1872, Hardin broke out of jail and returned to his gunfighter life. He shot J.B. Morgan after a drinking bout in a Cuero saloon and later, while visiting his family in Comanche, killed Charles Webb, a Brown County deputy sheriff. Webb had vowed he would kill Hardin and rode to Comanche where Hardin and his cousins were betting on horses. The deputy knew it would be foolish to go after the gunfighter among all of his friends and family so he waited until later in the day when Hardin was celebrating his 21st birthday at Jack Wright's saloon. Several Brown County residents accompanied the deputy to back him up.

The deputy had just about convinced Hardin that he wasn't there to make trouble when Hardin started to turn away and the deputy pulled a gun. Some instinct made Hardin rare back around and he shot Webb first. Hardin and his cousin, Manning Clements, managed to escape in the free-for-all that broke out after the deputy was killed. However, Hardin's brother, Joe, and two other cousins, Tom and Simp Dixon, were arrested. Brown County residents later stormed the jail where they were being held and lynched the three men. Joe Hardin's only crime appears to have been that he was helping his kid brother celebrate his birthday.

It was at this point that Hardin decided that he needed to make major changes in his life. He assumed the alias of James W. Swain, journeyed to New Orleans and then traveled to Alabama, where his wife and children joined him. "Swain" and his family then moved on to Florida.

During that time, "Swain" engaged in such vocations as running a saloon, trading cattle and horses and operating a sawmill. Meanwhile, officials in Texas were pushing for Hardin's capture and had posted a \$4,000 reward.

Hardin's attempt at a new life was cut short after a man named John Duncan went to work as a ranch hand for Hardin's father-in-law back in Texas. The ranch hand was actually a Texas Ranger hot on Hardin's trail and while working on the ranch, Duncan saw a letter that led him to Hardin's hideout. Rangers captured the famed, 24-year-old gunfighter on July 23, 1877, in Pensacola, Fla. and he was returned to Texas to stand trial for the murder of Deputy Webb. He was convicted in Comanche and sentenced to serve 25 years in prison in Huntsville.

The sentence began Oct. 5, 1878, and, at the start, Hardin was anything but an ideal prisoner. He was punished several times for trying to escape and he didn't particularly care for the hard work demanded from the inmates. However, after realizing over time that this strategy wasn't working -- and on the advice of a friend -- Hardin settled down to become a more industrious prisoner, studying law and other subjects.

After serving 19 of his 25-year sentence, Hardin was pardoned and released from prison on Feb. 17, 1894, just over a year after his wife's death. Upon his release, Hardin went to Gonzales, obtained a certificate to practice law and opened a law office.

He also tried to begin a family life with his children but trouble once again interrupted Hardin's plans. The former gunfighter-turned-lawyer became involved in a sheriff's race of such intensity that there could be no compromise. The losing side would be without any political standing in the area. Hardin's candidate lost and he was forced to leave Gonzales.

On the trail again, this time without the killings that marked his previous travels, Hardin arrived in Junction where he met and married Callie Lewis. However, the couple never lived together. From Junction, he traveled to Kerrville where he began writing his life story, "The Life of John Wesley Hardin as Written by Himself".

He then traveled to Pecos to take a law case and from there moved on to El Paso where he completed his autobiography. In the far West Texas city, Hardin took on a law client, Mrs. Martin McRose, who needed help getting her husband, an unsavory character, out of Mexico. There are several different stories that relate to the case. One version is that Mrs. McRose went on a drinking spree while her lawyer was out of town. The story is that she wasn't treated like a lady by the local law enforcement officers and upon his return to town, Hardin voiced his displeasure over the manner Mrs. McRose was handled. According to the story, threats were made. Another story is that Hardin had an affair with his client and that her husband hired some law enforcement officers to kill him.

In either case, on Aug. 19, 1895, the 42-year-old Hardin was in the Acme Saloon in El Paso having a drink with a friend, Henry Brown. The two were rolling dice to decide who would pay when John Selman appeared in the doorway. A former cow thief who now served as a local constable, Selman shot Hardin in the back of the head and then followed up by shooting him several more times.

Legend has it that the gunfighter's last words were, "Four sixes to beat, Henry."

Adapted from the Trinity County Adventure, produced by Polk County Publishing Co.



The site where the Gates Saloon once stood is in the center of this 1936 photo. Hardin was wounded in a gunfight at the saloon in 1872.

Photo courtesy of Lyle Stubbs



The site is now occupied by a brick building built in 1897. The building, which has been used as a theater, saloon, liquor store and restaurant, is now occupied by Stubbs Chemical & Feed.

Photo by Greg Peak

