

HARDIN: THE TEXAS PISTOLEER

by Lynn Wood



John Wesley Hardin taken in Abilene, KS at the age of 18. (1871)
Picture from *John Wesley Hardin: Dark Angel of Texas* by Leon Metz.²

John Wesley Hardin may not be the most well-known outlaw, but he is probably the most written about. Books written about him have a dynamic range; from his own autobiography to historical to fiction to a graphic novel. Hardin seems to be a polarizing figure. Many see him as nothing more than a heartless outlaw who needed hardly any excuse to exercise his dominance with a firearm. Others see him as a folk hero and protector of a Southern life that was quickly being squashed in a post-Civil War Texas. However, like many notorious people of the era, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. One thing is for certain, he is definitely a notable figure in Texas' illustrious history.

Hardin, along with nine other siblings, including his older brother Joe, was raised in a God-fearing home where education was important. His father was a Methodist circuit preacher, lawyer and educator (Figure 1). John describes his mother as "...*highly cultured, and charity predominated in her disposition.*"¹ (Figure 2). Hardin describes himself as being good in school and playful by nature. The way he was raised went a long way toward how he conducted his future life. "*John's parents had taught him and Joe to be 'honest, truthful, and brave...to let no one call them liar,' it naturally followed that John and Joe frequently defended their honor against boys reckless with truth and free with false*

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charges.”² Hardin learned early in life to not back down from a fight – or be made fun of. As a young boy he was “naturally active and strong and always came out best, though sometimes with a bleeding nose, scratched face or black eye; but true to [his] early training, [he] would try, try, try again.”³ A boyhood friend and schoolmate of Hardin’s, William Teagarden, describes Hardin as candid and honorable, a practical joker who confessed to things he was guilty of, and protected those who he felt were being picked on unjustly. “All men who treated [Hardin] fairly and decently were met more than half-way, but those who, by mistake or preference, treated him wrongfully or disrespectfully always had their challenge accepted, and they usually got what was coming to them.”⁴



Figure 1: Rev. James Hardin, Father. Picture taken at the Comanche County Historical Museum.

Born in 1853, Hardin was at an impressionable age when the Civil War erupted and during Texas’ post-war recovery (Figure 3). “Reconstruction [of Texas] really amounted to a second civil war, one that pitted whites who had supported the Confederacy against loyal white Union men, the freemen, and the Northern forces who occupied Texas. It was a guerrilla war that the ex-Confederates were determined to win at any cost.”⁵ In this environment, Hardin would kill his first man, a former slave, at the age of 15 and become one of the pivotal participants in the Sutton-Taylor Feud.

Sutton-Taylor Feud

The Sutton-Taylor Feud has the reputation of being the deadliest, bloodiest and longest feud in Texas. It lasted 30 years and approximately 86 people were killed (Figure 4). Hardin found his way into the feud in 1871 through strong ties to family and friends.⁶ T.C. Robinson, who wrote letters to Texas newspapers about the participants in the Sutton-Taylor Feud, said, “The leaders of each party...turn the cylinder of a revolver as a rattle for the

infants of this country, and give them empty cartridge cases as teething rings; they are weaned on gunpowder and brandy, and learn to shoot before they can talk.”⁷ This is an apt description as both parties believed they had just foundation for their tit-for-tat slaying of each other. Two of the top leaders of the Sutton side were William “Bill” Sutton and Jack Helm (Figure 5). Leading up to Hardin’s involvement, Helm and Sutton were witnessed killing the Kelly brothers by Amanda Kelly. She was the daughter of Pitkin Taylor, the leader of the Taylor side (Figure 6). Pitkin swore to avenge the killing of his son-in-law. Hearing wind of this, Sutton laid a trap for Pitkin and killed him before Pitkin could make good on his threat. This led to Pitkin’s son, James “Jim” Taylor, to vow retaliation on Sutton (Figure 7). Hardin and Jim Taylor would dispatch Jack Helm on May 17, 1873. Although Hardin often gets the blame for Helm’s death, Taylor was the one who actually killed Helm. Incidents like this are one of the reasons the true number of deaths at the hand of Hardin are unknown, and estimates range from 20 to 40 people. Jim Taylor would attempt to kill Bill Sutton on several occasions, but was successful on March 11, 1874, when Sutton, his friend, Gabe Slaughter and their wives boarded the steamer “Clinton” in Indianola, Texas. Although Hardin wasn’t there for the killings, he and his brother, Joe, had a hand in assisting Jim and his cousin, Billy Taylor, in the killing of Sutton (Figure 8). Sutton had at the time he was killed, a Smith & Wesson Model 3 revolver. Jim Taylor took it after he killed Sutton. A few days later Jim would give Billy the revolver. On April 3, 1874, Billy would be arrested in Cuero, Texas, for carrying the revolver and it would be confiscated by Marshal Reuben Brown. Billy would eventually be arrested for the murder of Sutton, transferred to Galveston, Texas and later to Indianola for trial. Witnesses at Billy’s trial in September 1875, would testify that Sutton’s Smith & Wesson revolver was purchased in Elsworth, Kan.⁸ Smith & Wesson’s records show the revolver probably shipped to M. W. Robinson, Smith & Wesson’s biggest distributor at the time, in June 1873. Billy would escape from prison in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane that hit Indianola on September 15, 1875, and the revolver was probably lost in the devastation.



Figure 2: Elizabeth Hardin, Mother. Picture taken at the Comanche County Historical Museum.

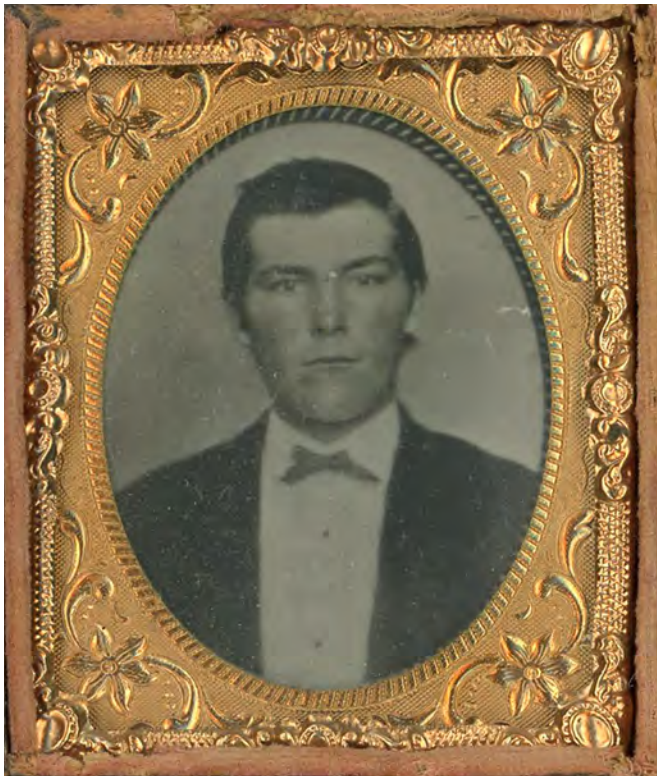


Figure 3: Picture of John Wesley Hardin. Author's collection.

after only 2 months and 20 days. He achieved the Degree of Master Mason status in the Brown County Freemasons on March 14, 1874.¹⁰ After Ranger service, he joined the Brown County Sheriff's department as a Deputy Sheriff. In March 1874, just after becoming Deputy Sheriff, Webb was chosen by Sheriff J. H. Gideon to head up the investigation into some unscrupulous business with cattle in Brown County (Figure 9). Ranchers in Brown County suspected the Hardin gang, which included Joe Hardin (Figure 10). Joe Hardin had moved to neighboring Comanche County in 1871. He settled into life in Comanche being a lawyer, a Mason, a member of the Friends of Temperance, a real estate agent, served as Deputy County Clerk and postmaster.¹¹ Just as his brother used his skills with firearms, Joe used his skills to arrange for the origins of the Brown County cattle to be buried deep in a sophisticated maze of paperwork.¹² Joe had no ownership of the animals, but as agent he had the authority to control what happened to them. John Hardin secreted the cattle out of Brown County the week of May 21, 1874. Not knowing exactly where the cattle went, but suspecting members of the Hardin gang, Webb arrested Jim Waldrip and James Beard at the Waldrip Ranch. That night the Hardin gang had dinner at the Waldrip Ranch, where Mrs. Waldrip complained that her son, Jim, had been arrested and accused Webb of cursing and abusing her.¹³

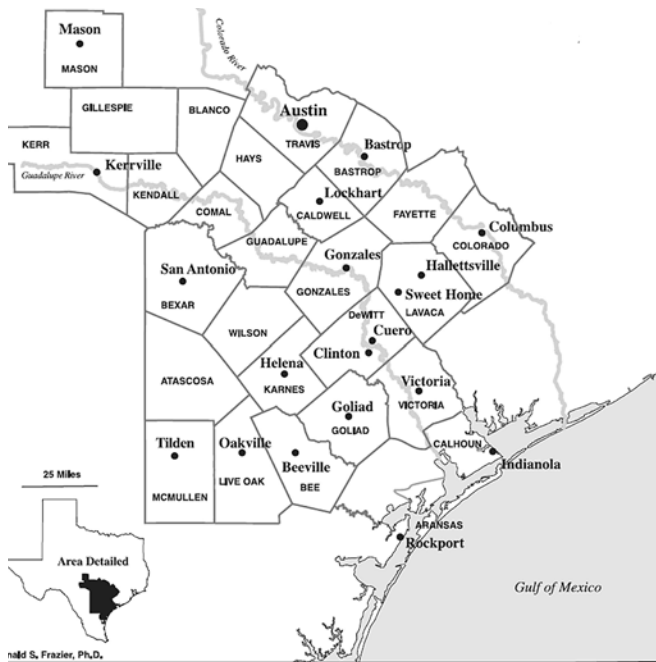


Figure 4: Area of Texas where the Sutton-Taylor Feud mostly occurred. Courtesy Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D.



Figure 5: William & Laura Sutton. Picture taken from *The Sutton-Taylor Feud* by Chuck Parsons.⁶

John Wesley Hardin and Charlie Webb

Charles M. Webb is a fairly unknown character. He was born on May 2, 1848; this made him only 4 years older than Hardin. Webb may have come from Kentucky. His grandfather was a pastor and his father died the year he was born. Webb first showed up in Texas as a 1st Lieutenant in Lieutenant James G. Connell's company of the Brown and San Saba County Ranger force.⁹ He mustered out

On May 26, 1874, the town of Comanche was having a great celebration and horse race. People from all over Brown and Comanche counties had come to Comanche for the festivities. John Wesley Hardin was also celebrating – his 21st birthday. Charles Webb was also in town. There is much speculation as to why Webb

was in town. Like so many others, he could have just been there for the festivities. Some, speculate he was there to see a girl. Others speculate Webb was there to arrest Hardin for the cattle rustling and the price Hardin and Jim Taylor had on their heads. Whatever the reason, by the end of the night Webb would be dead and Hardin would be on the run.

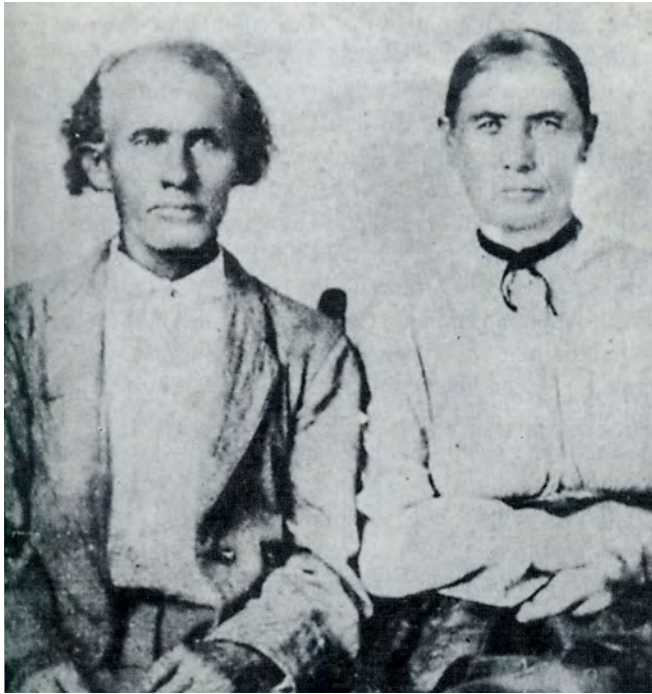


Figure 6: Pitkin & Susan Taylor. Picture taken from *The Sutton-Taylor Feud* by Chuck Parsons.⁶ Courtesy of the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.



Figure 7: James "Jim" Taylor. Picture taken from *The Sutton-Taylor Feud* by Chuck Parsons.⁶ Courtesy of the Robert G. McCubbin Collection.

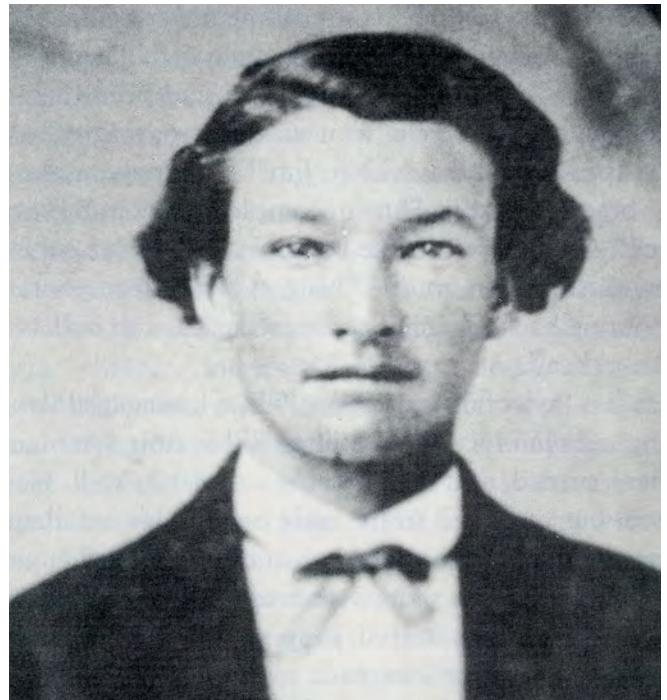


Figure 8: Billy Taylor. Picture taken from *The Sutton-Taylor Feud* by Chuck Parsons.⁶ Courtesy of the Eddie Day Truitt Collection.

Hardin had won big at the races that day. His prizes included \$3,000, cattle, wagons and horses. He was celebrating the day with his friends and family. In fact, Hardin was having so much fun his friends feared there would be trouble. Hardin says in his book:

*"We were all going from bar to bar, trying to spend some of the money we had won. I remember in one saloon I threw a handful of \$20 gold pieces on the counter and called for the drinks. Some of my friends picked them up and thought I was drinking too freely, and told me if any scrap came up, I would not be able to protect myself. I assured them I was all right, but at last thought I had better go home to avoid any possible trouble."*¹⁴



Figure 9: Map of Texas. Picture from *John Wesley Hardin: Dark Angel of Texas* by Leon Metz.²

Hardin asked his little brother, Jeff, to get the horse and buggy so they could go home to their father's house which was a couple of miles outside of town. In the meantime, Comanche Deputy Sheriff Frank Wilson came up, locked arms with Hardin and steered him

down the street (Figure 11). Wilson told Hardin it was about time to head home and avoid any trouble. Hardin informed Wilson he planned on heading home and was just waiting for his ride. Wilson may have felt a pistol when he locked arms with Hardin, but when asked about it, Hardin assured Wilson that his pistol was left behind the bar. About this time, Webb came walking up the street with two six-shooters and hands behind his back.



Figure 10: Hardin's oldest brother, Joe Hardin and his wife Arabella. Picture taken at the Comanche County Historical Museum.

Hardin's account of the gunfight had him asking Webb if he knew who [Hardin] was and if [Webb] had papers for [Hardin's] arrest (Figure 12). Webb stated that he knew who Hardin was after Hardin introduced himself and he had no papers for his arrest. The two had a few other words with each other. Hardin asked Webb what he had behind his back and Webb produced a cigar. Hardin invited Webb to have a drink and a cigar with him inside Jack Wright's saloon. Webb accepted the invitation and as Hardin turned to go inside, Bud Dixon yelled to Hardin a warning to "look out!". As Hardin turned, he saw Webb drawing his pistol. As Webb drew, Hardin turned, drew, and shot Webb in his left cheek. Webb's bullet hit Hardin in the side. Jim Taylor and Bud Dixon joined in by shooting Webb in the side and chest¹⁷ (Figure 13).

According to court records, three years later, witnesses stated a slightly different story. They testified that Hardin and Webb did have words. But, Mr. Thurmond, a lawyer, standing a short distance away, called out to Webb for him to come over to [Thurmond]. Hardin responded to Thurmond that he was attending to Webb. Webb made a move away from Hardin toward Thurmond which seemed to anger Hardin, saying something like "You *aint* going away from me in that way." Webb then stepped back saying, "No, G—d d—n you, I'm not afraid of you." Webb then drew his

weapon and fired as soon as he got it out of the scabbard. Henry Carnes testified, "They all drew their pistols, and all fired at once, or nearly so. If there was any difference, Webb fired first; there was very little difference, if any; they all fired in an instant."¹⁸ (Figure 14).



Figure 11: Comanche County Deputy Sheriff Frank Wilson. Picture taken at Comanche County Historical Museum.

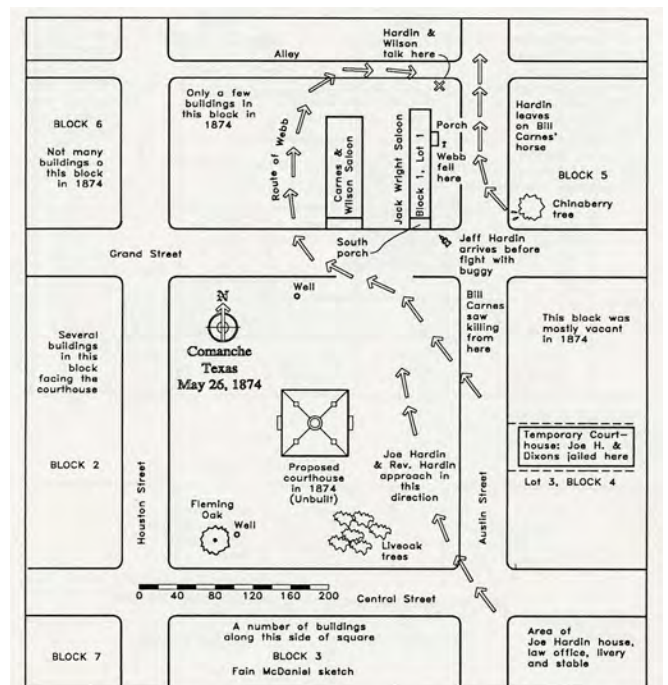


Figure 12: Overview diagram of the gunfight in Comanche. Drawing created by Fain McDaniel, Comanche historian. Drawing from *The Last Gunfighter* by Richard C. Marohn.¹⁵



Figure 13: Depiction of Hardin in the shootout with Webb. Image from the graphic novel *Lost Cause* by Jack Jackson.¹⁶



Figure 14: Charles Webb's gravestone with Freemasonry symbol and Texas Ranger marker. Grave located in Greenleaf Cemetery, Brownwood, TX. Author's photograph.

No matter how it happened, Hardin had killed Charles Webb and he had done it with his Smith & Wesson Model 3 First Model Russian or Old, Old Model Russian (Figure 15). It seems that after Hardin shot Webb, he turned himself and his pistol over to Comanche County Sheriff John Carnes, who had just arrived on the scene (Figure 16). As one can imagine with such a public

event, a mob quickly formed to take matters into their own hands. Hardin's greatest fear was to be taken by a mob and Sheriff Carnes knew there was no safe place he could hold Hardin, as he had no jail. So, Carnes made the decision to let Hardin go. Carnes gave the revolver back to Hardin. Hardin and Jim Taylor ran across the street where some horses were tied up. As Hardin went to get on his horse, the gun and gun belt fell off. Carnes tried to hand it back to Hardin, but his horse was spooking too badly.¹⁹

Unlike some of Hardin's other killings, the hammer had been dropped on Hardin and anyone who was associated with him. A Brown County mob lynched Hardin's brother, Joe, and cousins Bud and Tom Dixon (Figure 17). The newly formed Texas Rangers were put on Hardin's trail. With all this new pressure, Hardin, fled Texas for Florida. In Florida, Hardin started a few business pursuits under the assumed name of Swain. At one point Hardin was even deputized! Freedom only lasted a few years for Hardin. On August 23, 1877, Lieutenant John B. Armstrong of the Texas Rangers and Special Detective Jack Duncan arrested Hardin on a train in Pensacola, Fla., and brought him back for trial (Figure 18). Hardin was sentenced to 25 years in the Texas State Penitentiary after a two-day trial. After 17 years in jail, Hardin was pardoned by Governor Jim Hogg. Hardin, earning a law degree in jail, began practicing law in El Paso, Texas (Figure 19). Hardin was a better gunfighter and gambler than a lawyer. He was in the midst of throwing dice, exclaiming, "That's four sixes to beat!" when he was shot to death in the back of the head by John Selman, Sr. in El Paso, Texas, on August 19, 1895.²⁰

While Hardin's life ended at age 42, the Smith & Wesson he used to kill Webb continued to have a life. After Hardin dropped the revolver, it was picked up and kept by Sheriff Carnes for some time. Carnes then gave the revolver to Dr. Andrew Hamilton who owned the only drug store in town. Dr. Hamilton had the revolver displayed in the drug store for a number of years. Dr. Hamilton sold the revolver to Harvey Lumpkin. Mr. Lumpkin grew up next door to the Hamilton's and was good friends with Dr. Hamilton's son, George. Mr. Lumpkin talked Dr. Hamilton into borrowing the revolver to use as his sidearm as he patrolled around the Comanche court house and businesses as a night watchman. In 1911, Mr. Lumpkin sold the revolver to Roy Sherrill (Figure 20). Mr. Sherrill carried the revolver while on his rural courier route and used it to kill a rabbit at 126 yards. Mr. Sherrill sold the revolver to the author's grandfather, John Wilson, in 1970²¹ (Figure 21). The revolver has been in the author's family ever since. In 2018, the revolver received an NRA Silver Medal and the holster received a Certificate of Recognition which is given to unique firearms-related items (Figure 22).

Smith & Wesson Model 3

After the Civil War there was a need for a large caliber revolver and Smith & Wesson delivered. Their Model 3 was the first large caliber, centerfire, cartridge revolver in the United States. This .44 caliber revolver featured the ability to eject the spent cartridges when the revolver was opened (Figure 23). This feature allowed for quick unloading and reloading. Production of the Model 3 began in 1870 and lasted until 1913 in different variations. The Model 3 American (1870-1874) was the first of the variations. One thousand were ordered by the US Army and 32 were adopted by the Nashville Police Department (Figure 24, 25). Long time collector, Roy Double, sums up the American well:

Figure 15: Hardin's Smith & Wesson Model 3 First Model Russian with holster, belt, and belt buckle. Author's photograph.



The history of the S&W Model 3 American is one of service. Neither toy nor ornament, few were tucked away in bureau drawers to be discovered in pristine condition a century later. This was a work gun; a big, heavy-caliber holster gun worn openly and ready to hand; a timely gun indigenous to America on the move and a part of America's greatest adventures.²²

become known as the First Model Russian. The First Model Russian is identical to the American Model, except being chambered in .44 Russian versus .44 American. Because of the Russian military contract, Smith and Wesson only made 5,165 First Model Russians for the civilian market from 1871-1874. Other foreign users of the Model 3 included the Turkish government, Japanese Navy and the Australian Colonial Police (Figure 26 - 28). Due to Smith & Wesson's focus on supplying foreign contracts, the average person seems to recognize Colt's Single Action revolver as an icon of the American Old West, even though the Model 3 preceded the Colt to market by three years. However, outlaws, lawmen, and target shooters alike found the Model 3 to be powerful, accurate and easy to use. Besides Hardin and Sutton, users of the Model 3 include: Alford Day (a member of the Taylor clan), members of the James gang, including Jesse James, Cole and Jim Younger, Dallas Stoudenmire (Marshal of El Paso in 1881), Ben Thompson and Elizabeth "Plinky" Toepperwein just to name a few. Historical figures such as these made the Model 3 an Old West iconic firearm (Figure 29 - 31).

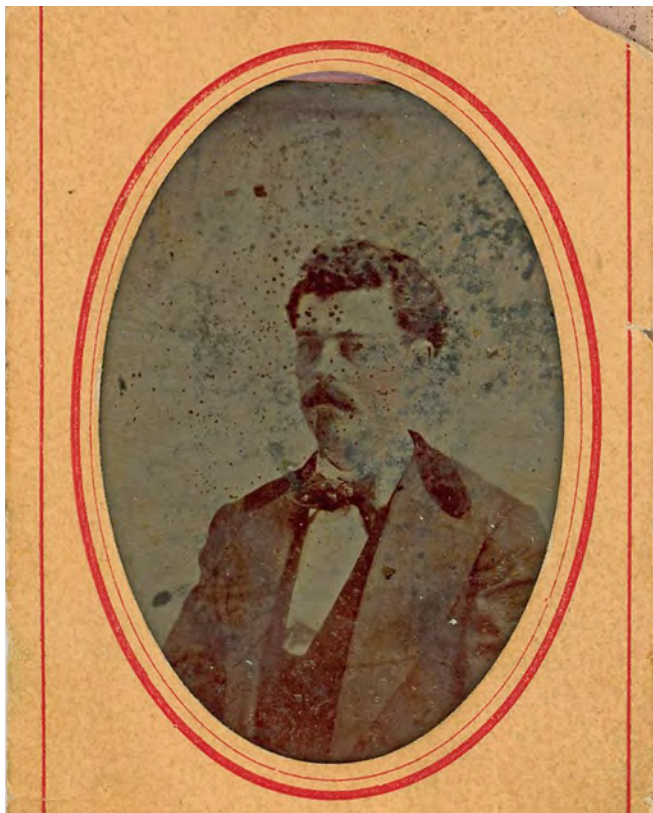


Figure 16: Comanche County Sheriff John Carnes. Author's collection.



Figure 17: What remains of the tree used to hang Joe Hardin, Bud and Tom Dixon. Comanche County Historical Museum. Author's photograph.

The Russian Government became interested in these large caliber revolvers. In 1871, Smith and Wesson agreed to fulfill a contract of 20,000 revolvers for the Russian Government that would



Figure 18: Lieutenant John B. Armstong, Captain of State Rangers and captor of John Wesley Hardin. Photograph courtesy of Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Rose 1431.

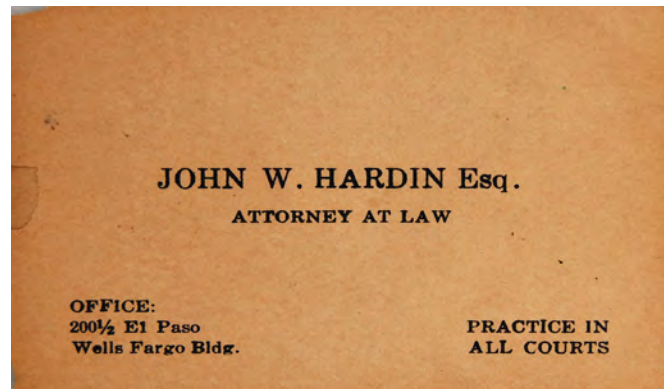


Figure 19: One of Hardin's business cards. Author's collection.



Figure 20: Roy Sherrill and his wife. Author's collection.

Where Hardin obtained his First Model Russian will probably never be known. Did he seek it out? Did he get it as a birthday present? Did he win it in a card game? It's very probable that Hardin would have wanted one of these revolvers, as they were the most advanced technology of the time (Figure 32).

Hardin was a pivotal character in early Texas history. His actions were characterized as heroic by some and evil by others. In his autobiography, Hardin reflects on the killings that happened by his hand and by others. He denies having any malice in killing Webb, "...there is a God in high heaven who knows that I did not shoot Charles Webb through malice, nor through anger, nor for money, but to save my own life."²³ He continues on his reflection saying, "...that the man who does not exercise the first law of nature – that of self-preservation [sic] – is not worthy of living and breathing the breath of life."²⁴ This statement seems to sum up how Hardin lived his life, not only the self-preservation of his own life, but also the preservation of pre-Civil War Texas.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to Dr. Roy Jinks for his help researching Smith & Wesson's historical records.



Figure 21: John Wilson. Author's collection.

Figure 22: Hardin's Old, Old Model Russian. Author's photograph.



Figure 23: Model 3 First Model American extracting a spent cartridge. Author's photograph.



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Figure 24: U.S. Army First Model American. Author's photograph.



Figure 25: Nashville Police First Model American. Author's photograph.



Figure 26: Model 3 New Model #3 used by the Turkish government. Author's photograph.

Figure 27: Model 3 New Model #3 used by the Japanese Navy. Author's photograph.



Figure 28: Model 3 New Model #3 used by the Australian Colonial Police. Author's photograph.





Figure 29: Alford Day. Photo courtesy of Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Rose 442.



Figure 31: Elizabeth "Plinky" Toepperwein. Author's collection. Single column width



Figure 30: Ben Thompson. Photo courtesy of Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Rose 2144.

Figure 32: Hardin's revolver as it might have looked on May 26, 1874. Author's photograph.



Endnotes

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