

NEWS FROM 1921

The Obituary of a Wild West hero by Pete Castle

It's not often a legendary figure from America's Wild West pops into your house. But it happened to me recently. We've been decorating and as part of that we were going to paint the frame of an old mirror. We aren't quite sure where the mirror came from, probably from my wife, Sue's, grandfather's house. Anyway, we took the back off the frame to wash it before painting and what had been dark and grimy suddenly became a smart, light-oak, Arts and Crafts style frame we didn't want to paint!

When we took the back off we found a sheet of newspaper—people seemed to use newspapers for all kinds of things in the past: wrapping chips, laying under carpets, putting in picture frames and so on. This was stained, yellow, and brittle so I put it on one side for a while. When I did look at it properly I found it was a double page from the Daily Chronicle for Wednesday November 9, 1921. (see bottom*) It was an inside page (picture right) and much of it was small ads and short pieces of unimportant news. But there was one story which stood out. It was of the death of a figure well known to fans of the Wild West whose name is probably known to most boys of my sort of age. Bat Masterson is one of those 'heroes' who we think of alongside Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Watson and so on. They are historical figures who have been given a mythic status and probably didn't do many, if any, of the deeds attributed to them. Masterson was, however, the deputy to Wyatt Earp at Dodge City. He is mentioned in cowboy magazines and novels and between 1958 and '61 there was a TV series devoted to his exploits starring Gene Barry with Henry Fonda as his deputy. It was pure hokum—“Dressed-up dandy (derby and cane), gambler and lawman roams the West charming women and defending the unjustly accused. His primary weapon was his wit (and cane) rather than his gun.”

Below is the report of Masterson's death as reported in the Chronicle that day. It doesn't give the cause of death but, far from being glorious or romantic (not killed by Indians, shot by an outlaw or murdered by a jealous husband) he had a heart attack whilst working at his desk in New York City. He was a sports journalist.

21 DAYS' BATTLE WITH REDSKINS.

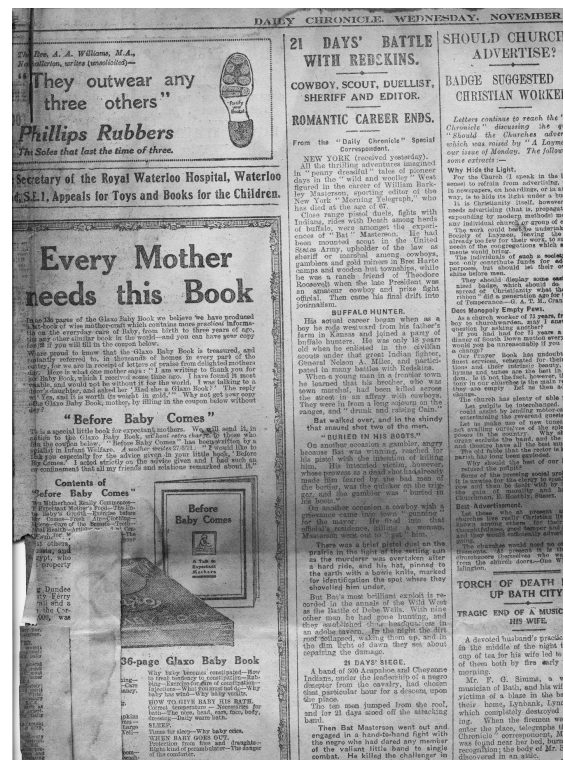
COWBOY, SCOUT, DUELLIST, SHERIFF AND EDITOR.

ROMANTIC CAREER ENDS.

From the “Daily Chronicle” Special Correspondent

NEW YORK (received yesterday).

All the thrilling adventures imagined in “penny dreadful” tales of pioneer days in the “wild and woolley” West figured in the career of William Barkley Masterson, sporting editor of the New York



“Morning Telegraph,” who has died at the age of 67. Close range pistol duels, fights with Indians, rides with Death among herds of buffalo, were amongst the experiences of “Bat” Masterson. He had been mounted scout in the United States Army, upholder of the law as sheriff or marshal among cowboys, gamblers and gold miners in Bret Harte camps and wooden hut townships, while he was a ranch friend of Theodore Roosevelt when the late President was an amateur cowboy and prize fight official. Then came the final drift into journalism.

BUFFALO HUNTER

His actual career began when as a boy he rode westward from his father’s farm in Kansas and joined a party of buffalo hunters. He was only 18 years old when he enlisted in the civilian scouts under that great Indian fighter, General Nelson A. Miles, and participated in many battles with Redskins.

When a young man in a frontier town he learned that his brother, who was town marshal, had been killed across the street in an affray with cowboys. They were in from a long sojourn on the ranges, and “drunk and raising Cain.” **Bat walked over, and in the shindy that ensued shot two of the men.**



Bat Masterson—doesn't look like a gun-slinger!

“BURIED IN HIS BOOTS.”

On another occasion a gambler, angry because Bat was winning, reached for his pistol with the intention of killing him. His intended victim, however, whose prowess as a dead shot had already made him feared by the bad men of the border, was quicker on the trigger, and the gambler was “buried in his boots.”

On another occasion a cowboy with a grievance came into town “gunning” for the mayor. He fired into that official’s residence, killing a woman. Masterson went out to “get” him.

There was a brief pistol duel on the prairie in the light of the setting sun as the murderer was overtaken after a hard ride, and his hat, pinned to the earth with a bowie knife, marked for identification the spot where they shovelled him under.

But Bat’s most brilliant exploit is recorded in the annals of the Wild West as the Battle of Dobe Walls. With nine other men he had gone hunting, and they established their headquarters in an adobe tavern. In the night the dirt roof collapsed, waking them up, and in the dim light of dawn they set about repairing the damage.

21 DAYS SEIGE

A band of 300 Arapahoe and Cheyenne Indians, under the leadership of a negro deserter from the cavalry, had chosen this particular hour for a descent upon the place.

The ten men jumped from the roof, and for 21 days stood off the attacking band.

Then Bat Masterson went out and engaged in a hand-to-hand fight with the negro who had dared any member of the valiant little band to single combat. He killed the challenger in short order, and the Indians, discouraged, in Bat’s parlance, “faded away”.

* The Daily Chronicle was a British newspaper published from 1872 to 1930 when it merged with the Daily News to become the News Chronicle. It was supported by the left wing of the Liberal Party and David Lloyd George in particular. One of its reporters was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.