

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Eight

Hickok And Masterson

LESSON IDEA

To describe the exploits of Bat Masterson and Wild Bill Hickok — two of the most famous lawmen of the Old West.

PREPARATION

Be prepared to discuss the concept of law: what it is and what it is supposed to accomplish in a civilized society.

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PRIOR TO THE eruption of the buffalo hunting and cattle business in Kansas, most communities found no pressing need for professional lawmen. Men settled their scores on their own or depended upon the U.S. Army to maintain order. But as the free-wheeling, rambunctious Texas cowpokes continued to "shoot it up" in such towns as Abilene, Ellsworth, Newton, and Dodge City, the peaceful citizens of these communities formed vigilante committees. Their justice was swift, and they would string up troublemakers whenever necessary.

Later they hired iron-nerved lawmen to keep the peace — men who were good with a gun, like Wild Bill Hickok and Bat Masterson.

Ironically, James Butler Hickok first came to Kansas to escape the law; he thought mistakenly that he had killed a fellow laborer on the Michigan Canal in Illinois. Hickok worked for a time in Leavenworth and later became the constable of Monticello. He was not very happy, however, living in one place very long. Craving adventure, he signed on with the Overland Stage Company to drive freight wagons

down the Santa Fe Trail from Independence, Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico. On one trip through Raton Pass, Hickok was scouting ahead of the train when his horse spooked at the sight of a grizzly and threw him to the ground. The huge bear attacked, believing her two cubs were threatened, and Hickok emptied his pistol into the attacker's stomach. The wounded bear, enraged still further, grabbed him and began mauling his arms. Somehow he managed to pull out his Bowie knife and ram the razor-sharp blade deep into the grizzly's chest. The dying bear fell on top of him, knocking him unconscious.

Fortunately Hickok's friends found him before he bled to death and got him to a doctor. When he was well enough to go back to work, his employers sent him to Rock Creek Station in Nebraska to work as a stocktender. After his close brush with death, Hickok was content feeding horses at Rock Creek for awhile, but his peace was soon destroyed by a boisterous bully named Dave McCandles. Whenever McCandles rode by the station he'd stop to ridicule Hickok, calling him "Duck Bill" because of Hickok's protruding upper lip.

Feelings got so hot between the two men that Hickok was forced to kill him in self-defense. The bully's two friends, who had come along to help, were wounded in the shoot-out and ran off into the woods. They didn't get far. Two of Hickok's friends finished them off. Although Hickok and his two helpers were arrested, they were soon released after pleading self-defense.

HICKOK DECIDED to move on to other areas of adventure. The War Between the States had begun; and Wild Bill signed on with John C. Frémont's Army of the Southwest as a wagon master. On his first assignment, to get a supply train from Leavenworth to Sedalia, Missouri, a band of Confederates ambushed him and his men. Fortunately, he escaped to Independence to report what had happened. Later in the war he worked as a Union spy, gathering vital intelligence as he maneuvered behind enemy lines. From 1866 to 1869 he worked for the government as a Deputy Marshal, scout, guide, and dispatch rider.

But these exploits, noteworthy as they were, were forever dimmed by his legendary service as Marshal of Abilene, Kansas. In 1871, Abilene was one of the wildest, most sinful towns in Kansas. The previous Marshal, Bear River Tom Smith, had lasted only five months; he was beheaded by a farmer who was wanted for murder.

Hickok was not about to lose his life if he could help it. And he knew exactly what to expect in Abilene. On his first day of duty he strapped on his two pearl-handled pistols, dropped a derringer in each front pocket of his coat, shoved a Bowie knife into his belt, draped a loaded shotgun over his arm, and then made his presence known to the drunken inhabitants of every bar in town.

Wild Bill was not looking for trouble; but if it came his way, he was prepared to shoot first and ask questions later. Once, when a newsman asked him about his thoughts on shooting men, he replied philosophically: "As to killing, I never think much about it. I don't believe in ghosts, and I don't keep the lights burning all night to keep them away. That's because I'm not a murderer. It is the other man or me in a fight, and I don't stop to think — is it a sin to do this thing? And after it's over, what's the use of disturbing the mind? The killing of a bad man shouldn't trouble one any more than killing a rat or an ugly cat or a vicious dog." [*Discuss the Hickok philosophy with your children. Do they agree or disagree with his attitude? How would it apply to a lawman's job today?*]

October 5, 1871, was a bad day for Wild Bill — one that cut short his career in Abilene. That night in front of a saloon a drunk foolishly tried to shoot it out with Hickok, but was dropped to the dust with two bullets in his stomach. Out of the corner

of his eye, Wild Bill sensed someone else coming toward him from the shadows. He fired twice, placing two bullets in the man's head. When the victim slumped to the ground, Hickok was shocked to realize it was his own assistant, Mike Williams. Wild Bill carried his limp body to the Alamo Saloon, laid it gently on a poker table, and wept.

But the townsfolk had had all the gun fighting they could take — from both cowboys and marshals. They demanded Hickok be fired — and fired he was. A few days later they drafted a manifesto demanding an end to the cattle drives in Abilene. The manifesto read: "We the undersigned members of Dickinson County, Kansas most respectfully request all who have contemplated driving Texas cattle to Abilene the coming season to seek some other point for shipment, as the inhabitants of Dickinson will no longer submit to the evils of the trade." They got their wish. The cattle drives moved farther and farther west until they reached Dodge City. Abilene slowly but surely became a quiet, respectable western town.

AFTER LOSING his job in Abilene, Hickok drifted out to Colorado where he served for a time as a peace officer. Then, an odd thing happened. His friend, Buffalo Bill Cody, invited him to New York to star in Cody's Wild West shows.

Unfortunately, Hickok was totally unsuited for the theater. Buffalo Bill put it this way: "Although he had a fine stage presence, and was a handsome fellow, and possessed a good strong voice, yet it was almost impossible for him to utter a word. He insisted that we were making a set of fools of ourselves, and that we were the laughing stock of the people." Hickok starred briefly in *Scouts of the*

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The Law by Frederic Bastiat is a classic discussion of conservative beliefs about the true purpose of law in organized society. We recommend it for the student who wishes to gain a clear concept of law. After reading it, ask yourself if the lawmen of the Old West abided by the principles outlined by Bastiat. Has the concept of law as a force to protect individuals from fraud or physical harm been distorted in recent years? *The Law* (paperback, \$1.00) is available from your local American Opinion Bookstore or directly from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

