

POSTSCRIPT



Was the Wild West More Violent Than the Rest of the United States?

David T. Courtwright believes that the frontier was a very violent place. He qualifies his answer by accepting the distinction of Professor Walter Nugent, who distinguishes between the two types of frontiers: type one, which centered on farming, and type two, which focused on mining, ranching, and other extractive industries. The author argues that type one had minimal violence because of its concentration of large nuclear families engaged in farming. On the other hand, the more volatile type-two frontiers of mining and cattle raising were manned by young, single males who often brawled in bar fights that were caused by excessive drinking, gambling, and womanizing.

Courtwright also takes a quick look at the violence that occurred on the multicultural West stressed in the writings of the new Western historians. He argues that Native Americans and whites engaged in some serious atrocities committed by both sides. He also discusses high crime rates among the Chinese in San Francisco because of tong (gang) battles.

Justice was limited in type-two frontier communities. The army was spread too thin, and local governments concentrated on property claims. Consequently, vigilante movements or quasi-legal groups emerged to enforce the law. Professor Richard Maxwell Brown, who has spent a lifetime writing books and articles about these movements, has calculated that 326 such movements emerged in the country between 1767 and 1904. Most of these movements occurred in the southern and southwestern territories and states, with Texas being the most violent.

Richard Maxwell Brown divides Western violence into roughly three periods. Period one, which is what this issue is concerned with, extends from 1850 to 1910. It parallels the tumult brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Brown employs the concept Western Civil War of Incorporation (WCWI) to interpret the feuds between Yankees and ex-Confederates, cattlemen and land barons, and Republicans and Democrats who use violence to gain power in the last American frontier. See Brown's summative article on "Violence" in Clyde A. Milner, II, et al., eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

Ironically, in recent years, historians have tried to lay to rest the myths about gunfighters. Writers such as Joseph Rosa have argued the term "gunfight" did not come into popular usage until the 1890s. The number of killings by Wild Bill Hickok was really seven or eight, not between 30 and 85. Even psychopathic killers like John Wesley Hardin and Billy the Kid had the

numbers of killings inflated over the years by pop writers and the movie industry. The bar-room brawl, not "the stereotypical walkdown of motion picture fame," was responsible for most of the violence. And when gunfights took place, the most famous killers were often outnumbered and ambushed. See Joseph G. Rosa, *The Gunfighter: Man or Myth* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), and Gary L. Roberts, "The West's Gunmen," *American West* (January 1972, 10–15, 64; March 1972, 18–23, 61–62), and "Gunfighters and Outlaws, Western," in Ronald Gottesman and Richard Maxwell Brown, eds., *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999).

Robert R. Dykstra was one of the first historians to challenge the image of the West as a section more violent than the rest of the country. His study of *The Cattle towns* (Knopf, 1968, 1983) rejected the view that the five towns of Abilene, Caldwell, Dodge City, Ellsworth, and Wichita were hellholes. In fact, from 1870 to 1885 only a total of 45 killings took place. The homicides varied widely from accidental deaths to those that involved law officers, cowboys, and gamblers, among others. Of the shootings that took place, "less than a third of them returned the fire."

Dykstra has been criticized on numerous grounds. First of all, he did not count the 17-plus murders committed in three of the five towns in the years prior to his study, a point the author concedes. Secondly, he has been challenged by studies of other communities whose authors compare the high crime rates of some of these Western counties and communities with the lower crime rates of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities. Finally, Dykstra has been taken to task for relying on contemporary newspaper accounts for his main sources.

The author has responded vigorously to these charges. He challenges writers who use the FBI statistical rate of crimes per 100,000 by claiming the samples of a town or county are too small and, therefore, one less murder can radically skew the homicide ratio downward. In addition, the comparisons may be between apples and oranges. As Harold J. Weiss, Jr., points out in his valuable article, "Overdosing and Underestimating: A Look at a Violent and Not-So-Violent American West," *Quarterly of the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History* (April–June 2003), "Have western historical writers used the same database? Information about criminal homicides can be collected in several ways; those committed; those reported to the police; those cleared by police arrests; those that resulted in an indictment by a Grand Jury; those that came to trial; those that ended in a court conviction; and those that involve prison time."

Dykstra also believes that contemporary newspapers reported every homicide in as much detail as possible. Would a nineteenth-century newspaper miss a major crime any more than the nightly local news broadcasts, which comb the police blotter for every gruesome homicide?

Dykstra's most recent assessments of the newest literature on Western violence are (1) "Overdosing on Dodge City," *Western Historical Quarterly* (Winter 1996); (2) "Violence, Gender and Methodology in the 'New' Western History," *Reviews in American History* (March 1999); and (3) "Body Counts and Murder Rates: The Contested Statistics of Western Violence," *Reviews in American History* (December 2003).

The most recent assessment, "Guns, Murder, and Probability: How Can We Decide Which Figures to Trust," *Reviews in American History* (June 2007) by Randolph Roth, challenges Dykstra's theory of the statistical fallacy of small numbers. A recent study by Clare V. McKanna, Jr., *Race and Homicide in Nineteenth Century California* (University of Nevada Press, 2002), examines seven counties in California and the one by David Peterson Del Mar, *Beaten Down: A History of Interpersonal Violence in the West* (University of Washington Press, 2002), studies all of Oregon. These figures, says Roth, constitute representative samples similar to contemporary pollsters who use small numbers to predict elections. Both books argue that very high crime rates existed in the nineteenth-century West.

Students interested in pursuing the subject further should consult the following bibliographical articles and books: Indispensable and balanced are Harold J. Weiss, Jr., "Overdosing and Underestimating: A Look at a Violent and Not-So-Violent American West," *Quarterly of the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History, Inc.* (April-June 2003) and Michael A. Bellesiles, "Western Violence," in William Deverell, ed., *A Companion to the American West* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), which plays down Western violence, while Robert McGrath is ambivalent in *Gunfighters, Highwaymen and Vigilantes: Violence in the Frontier* (University of California Press, 1984). Giles Vandal's *Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866-1884* (Ohio State University Press, 2000) offers a comprehensive look at the 4,986 recorded homicides in a southern state mostly against African Americans committed collectively by whites who refused to accept the new political order of the Reconstruction era.

More general are Michael A. Bellesiles, ed., *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History* (New York University Press, 1999), and the three-volume reference work in alphabetical order by Ronald Gottesman and Richard M. Brown, eds., *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999). Easier to locate are two anthologies written in the shadow of the violent 1960s: Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New American Library, 1969) and Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (Random House, 1971), which argues that America has a history, but not a tradition, of violence.

