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 McCanles. Whenever McCanles 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*

Prairie, an embarrassingly bad play, but finally became so disgusted that he broke his contract and headed for the town of Deadwood in Dakota Territory.

Riding into Deadwood was like being back in Abilene. Wild Bill had returned to his element – playing poker with gold prospectors, fugitives, and buffalo men. Yet he had a premonition of disaster which he could not shake. To his friends he confided his fear: "Boys, I have a hunch that I am in my last camp and will never leave this gulch alive." They scoffed at him, but he continued: "No, I am not dreaming, something tells me my time is up, but where it is coming from I do not know as I cannot think of one living enemy who would wish to kill me."

But someone *did* want to kill him. Late one afternoon, as Hickok was playing cards with his friends, a young drifter named Jack McCall bellied up to the bar and gulped down a shot of liquor. He casually strolled over to the card players, stood for a moment quietly watching the game, then drew his pistol and with deliberate aim put a bullet through the back of Hickok's head. Wild Bill died instantly, still holding his last poker hand – aces and eights – known from that day on as the "dead man's hand."

McCall tried to escape, but was grabbed as he mounted his horse. He was given a trial in Deadwood; but someone bribed the jury, and he was declared not guilty. Subsequently, however, he was arrested by a U.S. Marshal, brought to trial again, and was hanged for the murder of James Butler Hickok.

FORTUNATELY, not all the famous Kansas lawmen ended face down on a poker table. Bat Masterson, for example, was a lawman in Dodge during its most violent days, yet he lived to become famous in an entirely different field.

William Barclay Masterson, like Wild Bill, ran away from his home in Illinois to find adventure in the West. In Dodge, Masterson signed on as a camp boy with some buffalo hunters, who, at that time, were making as much as $100 a day selling hides to furriers on the east coast. Roaming the prairie with these hide hunters turned him into an expert plainsman and served him well when he became an Army scout.

It was after his brief stint with the Army that Masterson returned to Dodge to become the Deputy Marshal. He and his assistant, Wyatt Earp, did their best to keep order in the town Masterson, like Wild Bill, took no pleasure in killing. He avoided gun play whenever possible, preferring instead to dent heads with his gold-tipped cane – hence, his nickname "Bat." And more than once, a drunk would find himself dumped into a water barrel outside a saloon after a brief tangle with Masterson.

Bat stayed in Dodge until November of 1879, when he was defeated for reelection by George Hinkle, a local bartender. Then he pulled up stakes and headed to Arizona and on to Colorado.

By 1902 he had tired of the West and journeyed to New York City to begin an entirely new career. Taking a job as a sports columnist for the New York *Morning Telegraph*, he proved to be as courageous with his pen as he had been on the prairie with his six guns and cane. The late Damon Runyon said of him: "He gained a wide reputation for his fearless writing. Foursquare to all the winds that blew, he despised hypocrisy and dishonesty, and he had a forceful way of expressing his feelings." Bat faithfully covered the sporting world for the *Morning Telegraph* for nineteen years and became recognized, nationwide, as an authority on sports. He died at his desk on October 25, 1921 while working on one of his columns.

Looking Ahead

Bat Masterson and Wild Bill Hickok are both examples of the type of men who helped keep the peace in the booming frontier towns of the Old West. Both lived in an exciting period in American history. During the half century following the War Between the States, while thousands of Americans and freedom-seeking immigrants were settling the West, American inventors burst forth with such revolutionary innovations as the light bulb and the automobile – thus completely changing what had been the normal pattern of life for the preceding 125 years.

In fact, as the Twentieth Century was born, our nation was undergoing one of the most rapid industrial and technological revolutions ever experienced by any civilization. Imagine what it must have been like living in an era that spanned the covered wagon, the automobile, and the airplane! In

looking at the lives of Bat Masterson and Wild Bill Hickok, which man do you think was more successful in adjusting to the changes in his world?

What about the changes we face today? Does all change bring progress? Could we actually be regressing into a style of living which could become more primitive than that of the 1880's? [*Point out to members of your family that the changes which occurred at the turn of the century did not restrict freedom, but actually enabled Americans to increase their mobility and opportunities for personal advancement. Contrast this with the current changes by noting that most of today's changes are happening because of government intervention in the lives of all Americans.*]

DURING THE WEEK

Discuss the dangers of vigilante committees with your children, explaining to them that under our Constitutional Republic, every man is guaranteed the right to trial by jury and is presumed innocent until proven guilty. Point out that a lynch mob or vigilante committee is an ideal example of "democracy in action," while in a Republic, the rights of both the majority and the minority are protected by written laws.
