

The Baddest Outlaw of the West

CHUCK LANEHART



EDITOR'S NOTE: Caprock Chronicles is edited by Jack Becker, a Librarian at Texas Tech University. Today's article is by Chuck Lanehart. He writes about Jim Miller, the Baddest Outlaw of the West.

Many infamous outlaws terrorized the Old West, gunslingers like Billy the Kid and John Wesley Hardin. But one name stands out as the most efficient, elusive killer of the bunch—Deacon Jim Miller. His dastardly deeds included the first documented murder on the South Plains.



Lubbock attorney
James Jarrott, victim
of Deacon Jim Miller.
[PHOTO COURTESY
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COLLECTION, TEXAS
TECH UNIVERSITY.]

Miller's homicidal exploits — from Central Texas to New Mexico to West Texas to Indian Territory—resulted in the deaths of as many as 51 men, by Miller's own count.

Soon after his 1861 birth in Arkansas, Miller's family moved to Central Texas. At age 8, Miller was suspected of murdering his grandparents, but the boy was too young to be prosecuted.

In 1884, he was indicted for the shotgun slaying of his brother-in-law, John Coop. A Coryell County jury sentenced Miller to life in prison, but the conviction was overturned on appeal.

He drifted through southeast New Mexico, bragging "I lost my notch stick on shepherders I killed on the border."

By 1891, Miller was living in Pecos. Bad blood developed between Miller and the local sheriff, Bud Frazer. In 1896, Miller cornered Frazer in a saloon. As bystanders watched, he killed Frazer with two shotgun blasts.

The case was transferred to Eastland County. To prepare for trial, Miller moved to Eastland, where he lived peacefully with his family, attending church regularly.

The community came to accept the Millers, and his churchgoing ways won him a paradoxical nickname: "Deacon" Jim Miller. An Eastland jury acquitted Miller of the Frazer murder on a plea of self-defense.

Miller stood six-feet-one, with black hair, grey eyes and dark complexion. He assumed the appearance of a pious Methodist, with ramrod-straight posture and impeccable attire. He didn't curse, nor did he smoke or drink.

At some point, Miller changed roles from a common murderer to a contract killer.

In 1900, lawyer James Jarrott began recruiting Central Texas families to settle grassland west of Lubbock pursuant to the Four Sections Act.

The arrival of Jarrott's two dozen small agricultural families angered cattlemen who grazed livestock on the open range. Powerful ranchers brought lawsuits against the "nesters." Among Jarrott's adversaries was Pap Brownfield, patriarch of an influential South Plains ranching family.

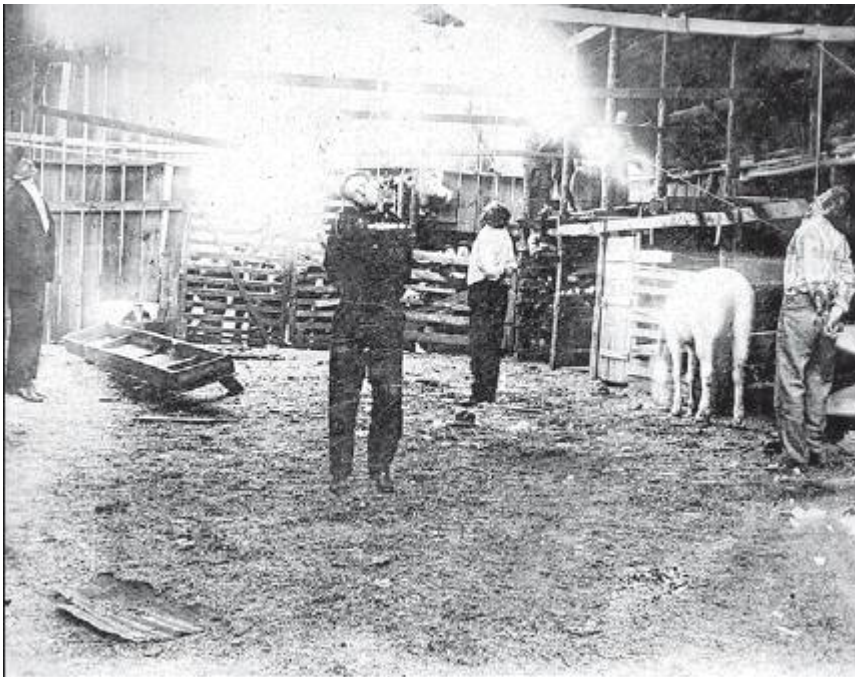
Jarrott prevailed in the litigation, legally establishing his clients on land in Hockley, Terry and Cochran Counties.

Meanwhile, Miller arrived on the South Plains, engaging in a shady real estate deal in Terry County, flipping land for a windfall profit. Miller was allied with the Brownfield family in the suspicious transaction, and the land soon became the City of Brownfield, named in Pap's honor.

On August 27, 1902, Jarrott was ambushed as he rode from Lubbock to his claim in Hockley County. His lifeless, bullet-ridden body was found in a pond near present-day Ropesville. Jarrott, 41, was the first recorded South Plains murder victim.

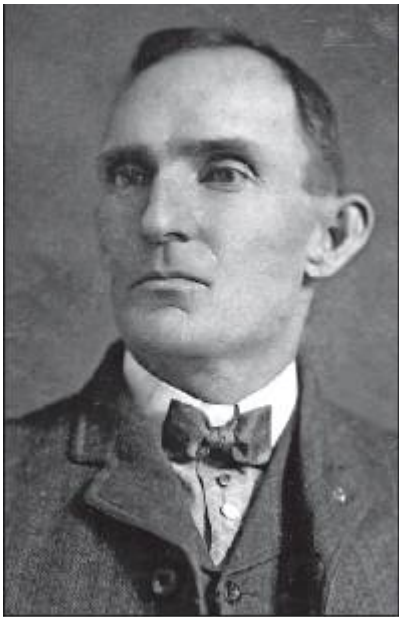
Miller later confessed to Jarrott's assassination, confirming he was paid \$500 to eliminate the tenacious lawyer, "the hardest man I ever had to kill." But he never named Brownfield or anyone else as his employer and died before charges could be brought.

In Indian Territory, which would become Oklahoma, Clint Pruitt hired Miller to avenge the shooting of his brother by Deputy U.S. Marshal Ben Collins. In 1906, the marshal was assassinated by a shotgun blast. Miller was arrested and indicted for Collins' murder but was never tried. The case was pending at the time of Miller's death.



Lynching of Jim Miller, left, and his gang, 1909, in Ada Oklahoma.

[PUBLIC DOMAIN]



Deacon Jim Miller, who bragged of killing 51 men. [PHOTO COURTESY OF FRED R. MAXEY JR.]

He was suspected of assassinating former lawman Pat Garrett—slayer of Billy the Kid—in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1908, though historians question Miller’s connection to the crime.

Early in 1909, Miller arrived in the bustling boom town of Ada, Oklahoma. A bitter feud had developed between saloon operators and former Deputy U.S. Marshal Gus Bobbitt. The saloon owners employed Miller to settle the matter. Soon, Bobbitt was dead from a shotgun blast.

Miller and his co-conspirators were jailed, but Miller’s reputation for beating murder raps alarmed Ada’s citizenry. A mob dragged the prisoners into an abandoned livery stable.

Before he was hanged, Miller said, “I’ve killed 51 men.” He asked that his diamond ring be left for his wife and his diamond shirt stud be given to a friendly jailer. He requested his coat and hollered, “Let ‘er rip!”

A photographer captured the aftermath of the grisly scene, and postcards of the lynching were proudly hawked by Ada merchants for decades. The baddest outlaw of the West was dead.