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*A Terror to the People: The Evolution of an Outlaw Gang in the Lower Midwest**

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ABSTRACT

The details of the heretofore unexamined Reeves Gang may serve as an important case study of violence and lawlessness in the Lower Midwest in the decades following the Civil War. Unlike the “social bandits” such as the Jesse James and Dalton Gangs of the Middle Border region, most outlaw gangs made little attempt to get along with locals. These groups ruled by fear and typically fell afoul of vigilante hangings and shootings—a one-act play, if you will. The Reeves Gang, the focus of this study, would come to be atypical, their tale turning into a three-act play, moving from petty crime to more sophisticated criminal activities, and then to an attempted life of normalcy. Though now long forgotten, several instances of the Reeves Gang’s violent activities, as well as their eventual capture, were to be found in newspapers across the nation at the time.

KEY WORDS Outlaw Gangs; Violence; Lower Midwest Region

In 1896, newly arrived brothers John and George Clark began selling merchandise from a wagon in the remote Horse Creek region of southern Illinois. The middle-aged men were completely close-mouthed when it came to explaining anything about their past, and it seemed a bit odd to some that the two entrepreneurial brothers would settle in the Horse Creek area in the first place. The Horse Creek community was considered a backward, exclusive, frontier-type region, spanning the southeastern portion of Marion County, all of Farrington Township in northeastern Jefferson County, and a small part of Hickory Hill Township to the southeast, in Wayne County (Hales 2006). Trading with the clannish people there would not be easy, but the Clark brothers apparently had charm or, more likely, came from a similar place and knew how to fit in, and their enterprise soon seemed to be thriving.¹ Eventually, John would marry a nearby Centralia girl and move there, but George was more comfortable staying in the heart of the Horse Creek district, living with the “William Byars family on the banks of Horse Creek.”²

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By early 1900, Jefferson County, Illinois, law enforcement began to suspect that John and George Clark were not the good citizens they seemed to be. Suspicion arose when rumors began to circulate that the items sold from the Clark wagon were sometimes stolen goods. At first, Jefferson County's Sheriff Manion hesitated to investigate the matter, the two Clark men being "held in high esteem."³ Finally, Manion's initial instincts won out and he began seeking information from law enforcement in the region, asking about anyone matching the description of the Clark brothers. A response quickly arrived by telegram from Kentucky, telling him all about two brothers named George and John Reeves. A Montana newspaper later reported of the gang's disturbing history, "Twenty years ago [1881], John and George Reeves went to Dubois County from Terre Haute. They settled in the hills of Columbia township and organized the Reeves gang of ten or a dozen members that terrorized the whole neighborhood. Robberies of stores, houses, and barns, [plus] highway robbery and numerous petty crimes were committed by the gang."⁴ This description, as it turned out, was just the tip of the iceberg. The Reeves Gang's overall work was a story of brutal murders and extreme outlaw behavior carried out over two decades in Southern Indiana, central Kentucky, and Tennessee, and their crimes were often mentioned in state and national newspaper publications. While the Reeves brothers' gang fit the profile of other such groups, this research discovered that they also came to possess some characteristics that stand out as unique.

"THE LAST OF THE JESSE JAMES TYPE ROBBERS"

The details of the heretofore unexamined Reeves Gang's story may serve as an important case study regarding violence and lawlessness in rural America in the decades following the Civil War. After the conflict, small violent groups like the Reeves Gang sprang up in many locations in the Lower Midwest—the Reno and Archer Gangs in Southern Indiana and the Belt family in Hardin County (deep southern Illinois), to name a few.⁵ The locations of these outlaw groups shared many of the same characteristics: they had remained remote and isolated, keeping many of the traditions and practices of the disappearing frontier; they were initially settled by people from the Upland South, the populations mostly being Jacksonian Democrats in politics and philosophy, disdaining authority and being quick to fight over any perceived loss of personal honor; and law enforcement was easily intimidated in the immediate remote areas where these gangs operated (Etcheson 1996, 2018). Most of these areas also witnessed either guerilla warfare activity or incidents of Copperhead endeavors during the Civil War, these violent occurrences weakening a respect for legal authority (White 1981).

The dynamics of the gangs themselves were also often similar. The bands were typically built around an individual family, often brothers, with a few local followers. The termination of these gangs was almost always brought about by the death of the main leaders in shootouts, or by vigilante lynching of some or the entire group, as in the cases of the Reno and Archer Gangs. The Reeves brothers were an exception to one of these traits, as they changed their identities after escaping from a Kentucky prison in 1896 and apparently seeking to leave the criminal world behind and live normal lives. Justice, however, would find them. Their gang activities also seemed to

mark the end of an era, with one New England newspaper calling them “the last of the Jesse James type robbers.”⁶

Richard Brown’s classic study of American violence lends an important framework to a study of the Reeves Gang. Brown noted that “violence has accompanied nearly every stage and aspect of our national history” (1975:3). He further argued that the circumstance of the American Revolution set American citizens leaning toward resisting authority from the onset. The Civil War only increased the violence made legitimate by the revolution, claimed Brown, with the latter 19th century becoming “one of the most violent periods of American history—an era of Ku Kluxers, lynch mobs, white caps, Bald Knobbers, night riders, feuders, and outlaws” (p. 7).⁷ Most significantly for this study, Brown noted several different categories of violence in American history, including family feuds—especially in the Upland South, where intense combat was driven by an emphasis on manliness and protection of one’s honor—vigilantism, cultural attacks on outsiders, and crime. The Reeves easily fit the criminal category.

Richard White, in his “Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border” (1981), examined the criminal aspect of outlaw gangs more specifically, emphasizing the “social bandit” feature, in which outlaw groups seem to possess the support of the people—bands like the Jesse James and Dalton Gangs of the Middle Border region. Most outlaw gangs, however, made little attempt to get along with locals. These groups ruled by fear and typically fell afoul of vigilante hangings and shootings, in a one-act play, if you will. At the core of the Reeves Gang were brothers George and John Reeves, and their desperado story would come to be atypical, their tale turning into a three-act play—their moving from petty crime to more sophisticated criminal activities, and then to an attempted life of normalcy. Though now long forgotten, several of the Reeves Gang’s violent activities, along with their eventual capture, were to be found in newspapers across the nation.

“STOLEN BY THE REEVES BOYS”

The father of the Reeves boys, Robert Reeves, was a doctor who possessed a criminal history before coming to Dubois County, Indiana, in the early 1880s. His criminal activities may have been why his first wife, mother of George and John, divorced him in 1869 while they lived in Terre Haute. The *Indianapolis News* reported on November 30, 1878, that “the trial of Dr. Robert Reeves, living in the vicinity of Seymour, on a charge of having counterfeit money in his possession, and selling it, is in progress in the United States court.” This case had come up in 1876, but Reeves was already serving time for a similar crime, having operated a counterfeit scam in the Martin and Orange County areas earlier.⁸ Upon his release from prison in 1883, Doc Reeves returned to Southern Indiana, staying with his second wife and her people in Columbia Township in Dubois County. Here, he traded “a team and wagon for forty acres of land ... not generally working much it is said but living well.”⁹ A lost traveler, a new local teacher, stumbled across the Reeves homeplace just after Doc Reeves had arrived and found an odd notice posted in a bold hand on the structure’s front door: “I have just bought this farm and paid for it. I want my neighbors to keep off this place and quit stealing my fence rails—REEVES.”¹⁰ The note suggested that the elder Reeves was not one to be crossed.

Doc Reeves could not have found a more remote place in Indiana in which to live. The northeastern corner of Dubois County touched the notorious home of the Archer Gang in Lost River Township, just to the north in rugged Martin County, as well as the hills and valleys of Orange County to the east where Reeves had previously worked his counterfeit game. Reeves's new home was a hilly landscape of caves, sinkholes, beautiful flowing springs, and curious monolith formations, such as Raven Rock and Hanging Rock (Wilson 1910). Having lived in Martin and Orange Counties before, Reeves knew that the steep scenic hills, deep gorges, and dark valleys of the region offered a number of places where secret activities could safely be carried out. It helped in this latter case, too, that there were no towns with strong law-enforcement elements, only tiny villages such as Hillham, Ellsworth, Cuzco, and Kellerville, small communities built around a post office, a general store, a livery stable, and a few other small businesses.

Local and county law enforcement in Columbia Township was hampered by the complex web of kinship loyalties found there, and county law officials were also often unable to arrest someone from the area, for lack of knowing the lay of the land, leaving the general population to deal with those like the Reeves family who committed petty crimes. The area was also a place of Upland South settlers, the Upland South having a culture that historically resisted authority. Many locals, for example, had resisted the draft during the Civil War. In 1864, the *Evansville Daily Journal* (October 11) lamented this circumstance, complaining that citizens there "defied the laws, fired upon and killed enrolling officers, and wounded law-abiding citizens, and robbed them of their property, with the avowed determination of adding to the rebellion." After the war, resistance to authority continued. One newspaper reported in 1879, for example, how two Dubois County deputies sent into Columbia Township on "a lively chase for some fugitives" were chased away by an angry woman "for shooting at her boy."¹¹

The two Reeves brothers, George and John, had been in the Columbia Township area off and on since the mid-1870s, and in 1884, they joined their father there, helping the elder Reeves "sow a patch of oats."¹² George, at 35, was the oldest and stood almost six feet tall. John was a bit shorter and five years younger. Both men were well built, had dark hair and complexions, and wore long dark moustaches.¹³ The latter feature gave them a distinct bandito look. The boys had been born and raised in Terre Haute, where John had learned to be a machinist when he was not tending bar. George had also worked around machines and occasionally worked as a bar tender and in the merchandizing business, clerking for a relative. Much of the time, however, the brothers had been restless and unemployed, though they did have hopes and plans to purchase their own wagon and go into the peddling business one day in an area north of Terre Haute where a relative lived. Unfortunately, this dream was just out of reach, as they were always short on cash. This may have driven them to turn to petty crime to raise money for the new venture.¹⁴ Apparently, they discovered that crime paid; one Dubois County neighbor later observed, "I never saw either of them work a lick in my life."¹⁵

At that time, the scenic but remote hills of Dubois and nearby Martin and Orange Counties were in great turmoil, being under the heavy hand of the Archer Gang. The Archers were labeled by one newspaper as "the most notorious family in the criminal history of Indiana," burning houses, robbing neighbors and travelers alike, stealing

livestock, and murdering those who crossed them.¹⁶ Interestingly, another newspaper account later claimed the Reeves Gang “belonged to the John Archer gang of outlaws which terrorized Indiana on the Jesse James order.”¹⁷ This claim cannot be substantiated, though it is highly likely the two groups knew one another and interacted in some way. It is more certain, however, that the region, because of the Archers, had a volatile environment and was a place mostly absent of law, presenting the Reeves brothers and their father the opportunity to gain easy money. Stealing and selling horses became an important part of their criminal enterprise, but these were activities that required help.

The Reeves brothers must have had some commanding presence about them, as they were able to quickly assemble at least six gang members from the Columbia Township area to help steal and move horses. “They were all married men,” one newspaper later reported, “and most of them raised in the neighborhood, but were willingly led to rascality by such tutors as the Reeves.”¹⁸ This system also allowed the gang to tap into the elaborate kinship system in the area—one that may have shielded them to a degree from probing law enforcement. The Reeves boys may have possessed another method of persuasion: doing whatever it took to get what they wanted and to protect their outlaw business. Earlier, in the mid-1870s, they had “shot four men who were attempting to arrest them in Orange County” and escaped, this at the time their father was running a counterfeit racket there.¹⁹ The Reeves brothers were also known and respected for their quick use of and accurate aim with pistols.²⁰

By 1885, suspicion about the Reeves Gang’s activities revolved around several incidents of horse theft, with newspapers often reporting of horses “supposed to have been stolen by the Reeves boys.”²¹ These actions and others would soon make the brothers “a terror to the people in that part of the country.”²² Local farmers and shopkeepers found they could not leave any tools or other materials lying about. The Reeves brothers also intimidated local citizens to get money and other items. In one case, they approached the postmaster and store merchant of Ellsworth, James Ellis, demanding fifty dollars and a suit of clothes. Several farmhands and a visiting surveying team came to the rescue, however, and drove the brothers away.²³ George Reeves especially plagued James Ellis’s store, carrying off “all manner of dry goods and groceries and lived fat.”²⁴ Local customers at the store in Kellerville would warily stare at any of the Reeves family entering the store “because the people were suspicious of them.”²⁵

One of the Reeves Gang members, James Jones, later confessed to a newspaper of another robbery, this one of a 70-year-old man named Merrit Tabor, who lived by himself in a cabin near the town of Dubois. The old pioneer always paid cash for any purchase, so it was supposed by his neighbors that he had money hidden in his home. Tabor’s cabin was crude, “with the chink and daubin out in many places.” Jones, Reeves, and another member of the gang were able to spy on the old man one night through the missing chink “when his single room was lit up by the fire in the large stick chimney.” Seeing Tabor place his trousers beneath his head for a pillow, and believing he kept the money in that article of clothing, the robbers entered the cabin when they finally heard snoring. The sleeping man had a gun lying next to him, but Reeves daringly “pulled the old man’s pants from under his head” and the robbers went running out the door, laughing. As they ran, Jones saw George Reeves going through the

pockets, taking out “a fist full of money.” When the three men stopped to divide their spoils, Reeves claimed the pockets had been empty. The other two robbers knew better than to challenge Reeves on the matter. The newspaper confession ended with Jones telling he knew of “many such incidents he could relate regarding mysterious disappearances of property taken by the gang.”²⁶

“SHOT THEM! SHOT THEM IN THE GUTS!”

Regardless of the Reeves’ unlawful activities, other matters were beginning to converge that would lead to a deadly encounter near the Dubois County seat at Jasper—one that would bring violent deaths to two law enforcement officials and reshape the rest of the Reeves brothers’ lives. In early June of 1885, Doc Reeves journeyed to Jasper, Indiana, to pick up a new wagon he was buying his sons so they could finally leave the area, escape from an arrest warrant hanging over them, and begin a peddling business near Terre Haute.

The warrant went back to an episode in 1883. That year, George and John Reeves had been arrested for robbing a store in Martin County. They had posted bail but never showed up at court. A warrant had been issued for their arrest, but law enforcement had found it difficult to seize the brothers, fearing their impulsive behaviors. Sheriff Joseph Hoffman, who knew Doc Reeves, having traded for horses with him, confronted John Reeves in a garden patch by the Reeves home but made the mistake of going there alone. Reeves drew a gun on the sheriff and hollered, “Hoffman, god damn you, get out of here.”²⁷ Hoffman quickly mounted his horse and retreated to Jasper.

By 1885, a new sheriff, George Cox, wanted to get the Reeves arrest warrant off his list. The Dubois County sheriff was especially desperate to capture the two hoodlums, as they had long been successful in committing crimes while hiding in the wilds of northeastern Dubois County and to the north, in the hills of Martin County. Hearing that the elder Reeves was coming to Jasper to buy a new wagon, the sheriff, “thinking the Reeves boys might be hiding near the town, and would join him on his way home, sent his deputies, John Gardner and William Cox, to follow the old man.”²⁸ William Cox was the sheriff’s son.

There were several different stories about what happened when the two deputies converged on the Reeves boys and their father. John Reeves testified 16 years after the fact that he and his brother had traveled to Jasper “to get a wagon to be used for peddling.” Just as the brothers found their father in the wagon headed home, the three Reeves men were jumped by two men on horseback, “one cursing and making a great deal of noise . . . whooping and hallooing and swaying in his saddle.” The rider seemed drunk. Then one of the mounted men pulled a pistol and shouted, “These are the sons of bitches. Shoot them! Shoot them in the guts!” According to John Reeves, at no time did the two men declare that they were deputies or that they had a warrant for an arrest. George, claimed John, acted instinctively, grabbing one of the officer’s guns, and a quick, explosive fight ensued, George taking down the two men. The Reeves men hastily left the area. The horrible event happened so fast that John later told that he was unable to clearly remember exactly how the gunfight had played out.²⁹ The two deputies both survived the

initial fight and told much different stories before they died than John Reeves did, but even their stories varied as to which Reeves shot them.

Newspapers had a field day with the tragic event. One reported that half a mile east of Jasper, the Reeves brothers had come out of their hiding place and got into the new wagon with Doc Reeves. The deputies, on horseback, had meanwhile slipped up on their prey near the Schroeder schoolhouse, taking the bandit family entirely by surprise, and when called upon to surrender, the Reeves men “meekly did so.” Then, everything soon went to hell, the young deputies unaware of the depth of violence the brothers were capable of. One paper reported, “Cox nor Gardner knew the Reeves well at that time.” To make matters worse, the paper explained, Deputy Gardner had been drinking, “and in addition, was a great braggart and fond of showing his bravery and prowess. He told the brothers that he was not afraid of them in spite of their reputation.” As the deputies and their prisoners began their travel back to Jasper, Doc Reeves noticed the handsome pistol sticking out of Gardner’s pocket and remarked on its beauty. “The deputy handed it to him to look at and said there was none better. The old man passed it over to John, his son.” John Reeves immediately opened fire, shooting Gardner in the head, then turned the gun on Cox, “whose horse had reared. The first shot struck Cox in the wrist, knocking the gun from him. the second in the chest.” The deputies were now disarmed and wounded, having not fired a shot, and George Reeves picked up Cox’s revolver and walked over to where the bleeding Gardner lay, begging to be allowed to live a few hours longer. Reeves told him, “Dead men tell no tales,” placed the barrel of the gun between the deputy’s eyes, and pulled the trigger. Then he shot Cox in the lower back, severing his spine. Gardner died within a few hours, but not before telling several people, “I foolishly let the boys get my pistol.”³⁰ Cox lingered for several months, paralyzed, before “finally dying of his wounds.”³¹

Initial newspaper reports were followed by more-detailed testimonies from Gardner before his death and from Cox as he lay in bed, permanently paralyzed. Gardner told a friend, “I’m killed by my own revolver. I carelessly let the old man get my revolver and he shot me.” Cox gave a slightly different report, saying George Reeves did the shooting. “Gardner had been drinking. He was waving his revolver and told them to stop. George Reeves asked to see the revolver. Took it from Gardner and shot him, and I got excited and drew my revolver, and George Reeves shot me. They held John and shot him twice in the face.” Cox also said that as he begged for his life, the elder Reeves said, “Let’s go boys. They got enough.”³²

Regardless of exactly what had happened, the horrible damage could not be undone. For a brief time, the community was frozen in shock, with a stunned Sheriff Cox too busy trying to take care of his horribly wounded son, and the three county commissioners whose job it was to put up a reward not doing so. The latter item had an interesting dynamic. It took at least two votes from the commissioners to make things happen. One commissioner was out of town on the day the murders occurred, and one of the other two, the man who represented Columbia Township, was fearful of the Reeves family and their gang. When the missing commissioner returned, a reward was posted for \$800, but critical hours had been lost.³³

Immediately after the shootings, as the two deputies lay in the gore of their own blood, Gardner's head wounds leaking with each heartbeat, the Reeves brothers went through the pockets of the wounded men, finding \$19, which they took, along with the deputies' horses and the handsome pistol that had started the tragic event.³⁴ There were a few sightings of the Reeves men shortly after the shooting. One witness, who came across the Reeves brothers just as they had left the murder scene, heard one of them say, "We did those two sons of bitches up, didn't we." The brothers whipped the stolen horses to a lather, putting as many miles between them and Jasper as possible.³⁵

Doc Reeves took his team and new wagon home, using an unfamiliar route to avoid the law. His efforts to get his boys away from the arrest warrant and into a new life of peddling had been blown to pieces. He stopped at Breitweiser's Mill to ask for directions and related what he said he had heard about the shootings, saying that the two boys involved had just been defending themselves and "had acted the man." He did not mention that the boys involved were his sons.³⁶

After these initial sightings, the Reeves boys and their father disappeared. Two months later came a reported sighting of the brothers near Kellerville that proved false. Local papers throughout the area also reported a number of untrue stories about Doc Reeves's location, having him hiding in the "rocky fastness and lonely woods of eastern Dubois County," assassinated by vigilantes, and "running a saloon" in Washington, Indiana.³⁷ Meanwhile, the remainder of the Reeves gang in Dubois County—six young men—were found guilty of crimes and sent to the penitentiary.³⁸ In late June, Doc Reeves was found dead in the secluded Willow Valley area of Martin County. He had a leg wound and was "said to have starved to death."³⁹ The Reeves sons, however, were nowhere to be found. Act two of their story began to unfold.

TWO ESCAPES

In 1901, John Reeves revealed at his trial for the Dubois County murders how his brother and he had escaped Indiana. After the shooting, the brothers had sneaked back to their father's house near Hillham before their father arrived home. They left as night gathered, telling their stepmother to have their father meet them nearby for a difficult 20-mile cross-country trek to Huron, a small village deep in the hills of Martin County but on a railroad line. From Huron, they could hop a train and get outside the local area, escaping to relatives in Sullivan County. The governor had placed a \$700 reward for their capture, and the woods were soon thick with men and boys searching for the Reeves Gang. John remembered that once united, he and his two family members discovered "the woods were full of men hunting for us. We were surrounded two or three days and were shot at several times. Father was shot in the leg. I saw the blood." Doc Reeves told his sons to go on and that he would try to get back to Hillham. The brothers did so, hopping a train and eventually making their way to Sullivan County, where they hid out. What was left of Doc Reeves's body was discovered in wild tangled countryside in Willow Valley, near Shoals, in late June. His sons read of their father's death in the paper.⁴⁰

In March of 1886, the Reeves brothers secretly left their hiding place in Sullivan County and went to Centralia, Illinois, where they worked in a machine shop that spring

and in the strawberry fields that summer. This quiet life, although safe, made the brothers restless, and they plotted a new course, going to Kentucky sometime in early 1887.⁴¹ Once in Kentucky, they evolved into more sophisticated thieves, developing an expertise in safecracking and explosives, and created another gang, including two younger brothers. One newspaper reported that John Reeves “mastered every detail of safe construction. In order to successfully open safes, such as ordinarily kept in the store of village or country merchants, he needed only a diamond drill, a brace and bit, and a few pinches of powder.”⁴² The gang spent careful time sizing up places to rob and traveling great distances to get equipment and horses while creating elaborate ploys to set up safe-blowing jobs. These changes heralded a move from petty local crimes to a new type of gang strategy—a more sophisticated operation taking in more money, moving through larger areas of strangers, and using the latest technology rather than crude intimidation to pull off robberies.

The Reeveses’ efforts soon moved beyond Kentucky, with the gang blowing safes in Dover, Jellico, and Celina, Tennessee, and at a small village in Alabama, but their biggest haul was from a safe in Tompkinsville, Kentucky, in late 1887, with the powerful safe explosion setting off a fire that burned down much of the town, including the courthouse.⁴³ During this spree, the gang put away at least \$30,000.⁴⁴

After the big Tompkinsville haul, the Reeves brothers made plans to rob a Knoxville, Tennessee, bank but were finally captured and taken back to Monroe County, Kentucky, to stand trial for the robbery and fire in Tompkinsville. On the way there, George Reeves, always the mechanic, demonstrated his amazing skill “in freeing himself from the grasp of handcuffs.”⁴⁵ In January of 1888, the brothers found themselves traveling to prison in Frankfort, George Reeves bragging to a reporter at a train station that he was able “to drill into any safe in the United States within twenty minutes.”⁴⁶ George’s bragging aside, he and his brother John faced a bleak situation, having been sentenced to 31 years in the Kentucky State Penitentiary for the Tompkinsville fire. And Indiana waited to try them for murder when their Kentucky term ended.

The Reeves boys did rather well in prison, or at least they kept busy. In 1890, they attacked and took a gun from a guard, “bound and gagged him, but were discovered before any mischief could be done.” After that, they “were regularly locked up in the dungeon on days when they were not at work.” When a new warden came, they were given more freedom, but they soon plotted “to tunnel under the walls,” and the new warden placed them in solitary, regarding them “as the most desperate prisoners in the penitentiary.”⁴⁷

In 1893, the Reeves brothers hatched a more elaborate plan for escape, a plot the warden described as “hellish” after it was thwarted. With outside help, the Reeves brothers received and buried “three bottles filled with dynamite, one hundred rounds of cartridges and two pistols” under a shed near the warden’s house. The two convicts intended to use these materials “to either escape by killing the wall guard between the male and female yards, or by going through the main entrance as the gates were swung open for the passage of wagons.” Either attempt would have led to a bloody mess. Fortunately, another inmate revealed the plan to the warden, the deadly items were unearthed and removed, and the Reeves boys went back to the dungeon.⁴⁸

In September 1896, a ruling by the Kentucky Supreme Court drastically altered the Reeves brothers' lives. Their original 30-year sentence was dropped to 10 years, as the court ruled the initial cumulative sentence to be unconstitutional. Their term would now be up on October 26, a month away. In any other circumstance, George and John Reeves would have been overjoyed, but when Indiana authorities learned of the ruling, Hoosier governor Matthews issued a "requisition upon the governor of Kentucky for the return of George and John Reeves."⁴⁹ Dubois County authorities quickly arranged for Sheriff Cassidy to go to Frankfort and haul the Reeves brother back to Indiana, where they would stand trial in Jasper for the brutal murders of Deputies Gardner and Cox and would likely be hanged.

Two days before Cassidy left for Kentucky, a Reeves family member arrived at the penitentiary and told their kin of what was transpiring. The family member perhaps also brought money to bribe guards.⁵⁰ At any rate, that night, George and John Reeves scaled a wall of the prison, disappearing into thin air. They did leave a playful message for the warden, an almost-illegible note that said, "Excuse haste and a bad pen."⁵¹

HORSE CREEK DAYS

John Reeves's 1901 testimony indicated that he and his brother fled immediately from Kentucky and went to the remote Horse Creek community in southern Illinois, near an area where they had lived for a short while after the Dubois County shootout in 1885. Taking the name of Clark, the two fugitives boarded with Jefferson Simmons, who lived in the northern portion of Farrington Township. Here, they finally got to go into the peddling business, likely finding their slow, laid-back wagon trips through the wooded countryside wonderfully pleasant after 10 years in prison. George was now 51 years old and John 46, both old enough to be slowing down. Three years after coming to the region, John married Maud Dawkins, a 19-year-old woman from nearby Centralia, Illinois, and the couple purchased a house east of that city. Her family was prominent, and "half the county was present at the wedding."⁵² The couple soon had a child, and John began farming with his father-in-law while George continued most of the merchandizing work in the Horse Creek location, continuing to sell goods from a wagon,⁵³ and boarded with "the William Byars family on the banks of Horse Creek."⁵⁴

It probably helped the two strangers' anonymity that the Horse Creek people and the Clark brothers shared a similar cultural heritage, that of the rugged Upland South. Horse Creekers were not surprised or particularly upset when they learned that someone was not perfect. In fact, there seemed to be a grittiness about the Clark brothers that Horse Creek people quickly came to admire. The mechanical skills of the brothers probably helped make friendships, too; in one case, John Reeves fixed a housewife's sewing machine. The episode almost caused trouble, however, when she told Reeves she was originally from Jasper, Indiana. John, knowing the Clark name probably protected him, dared to reply that he had been "in Jasper 15 or 16 years ago and knew the Eckerts."⁵⁵

While John thrived as a farmer and became a church deacon, George's love of hunting and fishing, as well as his comfort in interacting with Horse Creek's colorful

frontier-like population, made him bond with his rural neighbors. Perhaps too, the Horse Creek area reminded him of his father's home in the remote hills of Dubois and Martin Counties. Indeed, Horse Creek had a similar reputation for violence, but Horse Creek's violence had less to do with criminal gangs than with family feuds, resistance to authority, and fights over honor and manliness. These violent episodes often brought state- and nationwide newspaper attention, along with interesting headlines such as "Another Horse Creek 'Shooting Match'" and, in a Chicago newspaper, "They Quarreled Over Hogs." People from Horse Creek were also often made fun of for their backward ways, being called "Barefoots" and "Horse Creekers" in local newspapers.⁵⁶ The Reeves brothers—or Clark brothers, as they were now calling themselves—were perfect fits, and it looked as if they had finally slipped away from their violent past and found a place where they could grow old.

One thing was not going well for the brothers, however: the peddling business. The enterprise would have been tough in most places, but Horse Creekers were not wealthy, and the area had a small population. This forced the Reeves boys back into a bad habit. They began traveling to Ohio periodically by train and robbing small stores to replenish their stock in Illinois.⁵⁷ In late 1900, rumors began to spread that the Clark brothers were selling stolen goods. This story caught the attention of Jefferson County's sheriff, Tom Manion. At first, Manion hesitated to investigate the matter, as the two Clark men were "held in high esteem." He also did not want to anger the rough-and-tumble Horse Creek community "by arresting them upon a charge of which they might show themselves to be innocent."⁵⁸ Finally, however, his instincts won out, and he began seeking information from law enforcement in the region about anyone matching the description of the Clark brothers. A response came from Kentucky telling him all about the Reeves brothers, and Sheriff Manion was warned to take extraordinary measures when trying to arrest them. The sheriff did so, putting together a four-man team of seasoned lawmen.

John Reeves went quietly enough, but it took all four lawmen to subdue George Reeves at the William Byars home. News of the arrest made newspapers across the nation. *The Grand Falls* (Montana) *Tribune* and the *Knoxville* (Tennessee) *Sentinel*, for example, carried lengthy articles about the sensational event, and the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* called the arrest "the most important one ever made in this county" and said it happened "under circumstances of the most thrilling nature."⁵⁹ The day after the arrest, Horse Creek farmers came in droves to the Jefferson County Courthouse, offering "to furnish bond for any amount."⁶⁰ Then news came from Frankfort, Kentucky, clearly identifying the arrested pair as the murderous Reeves brothers. The brothers were soon placed on a train and, under heavy guard, sent back to Indiana to stand trial. Their outlaw adventures, however, had one more dramatic act.

"A QUICK JUDICIOUS HANGING MIGHT EVEN UP MATTERS"

Dubois County Sheriff Herman Castrup and Deputy Peter Huther brought the handcuffed prisoners by train from the Indiana penitentiary at Jeffersonville to Huntingburg. From there, the group traveled to Jasper in a two-seat carriage driven by George Castrup. The

sheriff had warned his deputy to be on guard of the older brother, who was known to be the more volatile of the pair. Two miles north of Huntingburg, in the wilds of the Patoka River bottoms, George asked for a cigar. Darkness had fallen and the sheriff wanted to make sure the handcuffs were still secured on George Reeves's wrists, so the carriage was stopped and the request granted. By match light, the sheriff judged the handcuffs were secure, but, puffing on the cigar, Reeves suddenly jumped from the carriage, running into the darkness and the heavily wooded countryside. Huther, a slightly built man, hurried after the escaping Reeves, the deputy firing blindly into the dark night, holding back only one bullet for an emergency.

As George Reeves began scaling a bank, Huther caught up and grabbed at the fleeing man's legs, only to discover the criminal had removed one of his handcuffs. The hulking Reeves used the half-freed cuff to try to beat Huther to death, viciously swinging it like a deadly club. As the deputy desperately dodged blows, he barely managed to lift his pistol and fire his last bullet into Reeves's chest. Even then, the powerful bandit wrestled Huther down to the ground. Finally, the deputy beat his assailant back with the pistol and Reeves fell, dead.⁶¹

Newspapers from all over the state and the nation followed the story of the attempted escape and death of George Reeves, along with the ensuing trial of John Reeves. George Reeves's body was buried in the Jasper cemetery a day later, not far from the grave of Deputy John Gardner, one of the men Reeves had murdered 16 years before, adding to the melodrama.⁶²

The Jasper courtroom was packed with spectators, and more than 50 witnesses testified. At first, John Reeves denied that he had ever been to Dubois County, but witness after witness came forward and identified him. Other witnesses told of their memories of the day of the murder and the last words of the deputies killed, but the defense came back with the point that only the direct narrative of the dying, gathered in an official manner, could be used in a court of law. Then the former prosecuting attorney who had overseen the murder investigation in 1885 revealed that the record of Deputy William Cox's dying declaration had been misplaced and apparently lost.⁶³

The prosecution came back with other arguments and witnesses. Doctor Kempf described the sorry state of William Cox as Cox had lingered for two years before dying: "Bowels and bladder had to be removed artificially. His legs withered away and the flesh on his back rotted away."⁶⁴ Meanwhile, John Reeves's young, sad-looking wife and cooing little baby were prominent factors in the courtroom. Reeves's case was helped, too, by his alternative story about the shooting—which indicated that the deputies might have not identified themselves and one deputy had been plainly drunk and aggressive. The jury and the crowd in the courtroom sat on the edges of their seats when he spoke. Oddly too, Reeves gained some respect when he refused to tell the judge who had helped him and his brother escape from prison in Kentucky, explaining he would rather go to jail than betray a friend.

The verdict, called a compromise on the part of the jury by the *Jasper Herald*, was a shocker.⁶⁵ Reeves was sentenced from two to twenty years for manslaughter. The *Jasper Weekly Courier* believed the convicted man would probably serve only two years of that time and suggested that "a quick, judicious hanging might even up matters."⁶⁶

Reeves, in fact, served only one year and one month before being released for good behavior and bad health.⁶⁷ This research found no records of what happened after his release; John Reeves simply disappeared into the dark waters of time.

The Reeves Gang never received the recognition of groups like the Jesse James or Dalton Gangs in the border region of the country, but they did manage to escape the wholesale lynching that fell upon the Reno and Archer Gangs, who also terrorized the same general area of Southern Indiana. And though the Reeves Gang never achieved the level of a “social bandit” group supported by local citizens, they did evolve beyond petty crimes in Indiana. Moving on to Kentucky, they become a sophisticated and far-reaching group of safe robbers. Over the years, newspaper stories about George and John Reeves were of great interest to the public, especially as the turn of the 19th century approached, and their surprise arrest in 1901 brought back the memories of the so-called Jesse James-types of desperadoes to a nation just beginning to idealize the days of the American frontier. Thanks to the abundance of newspaper reports, the Reeves Gang’s story, lost to time until this study, adds rich narrative to the literature of criminal activity in the Lower Midwest in the post-Civil War era.

ENDNOTES

1. *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 22, 1901.
2. *Kenney Gazette*, February 1, 1901.
3. *Mt Vernon Register News*, January 22, 1901.
4. *Great Falls Montana Tribune*, March 2, 1901.
5. For details concerning these gangs, see Dickerson (2017), Brewster (1947), Jackson (1888), “Logan Belt’s Trial” (1879), and the *Indianapolis Journal* of August 2, 1887.
6. *Naugatuck Daily News* (Connecticut) May 13, 1901.
7. An informative book about these types of violence in southern Illinois is Paul Angle’s *Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness*.
8. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1885.
9. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1885.
10. *Indianapolis News*, March 12, 1901.
11. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, January 31, 1879.
12. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
13. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1885.
14. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
15. *Jasper Herald*, May 31, 1901.
16. *Bremen Enquirer*, November 7, 1890.
17. *Knoxville Sentinel*, March 5, 1901.
18. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, September 24, 1886.
19. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1885.
20. *Indianapolis News*, March 12, 1901.
21. *Indianapolis News*, September 4, 1885.
22. *Indianapolis News*, August 6, 1886.
23. *Owensboro Messenger*, March 28, 1901.

24. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, September 29, 1886.
25. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 19, 1885.
26. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, September 24, 1886.
27. *Jasper Herald*, May 31, 1901.
28. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, September 29, 1886.
29. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, May 31, 1901.
30. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, May 31, 1901.
31. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, May 31, 1901.
32. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
33. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 5, 1885.
34. *Bedford Weekly Mail*, March 1, 1901.
35. *Indianapolis News*, March 12, 1901.
36. *Indianapolis News*, March 12, 1901.
37. The newspapers were the *Vincennes Commercial*, *Daviess County Democrat*, and *Daviess County Herald Democrat*, in the *Shoals Herald Democrat*, October 25, 1886.
38. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, September 24, 1886.
39. *South Bend Tribune*, June 26, 1885.
40. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
41. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
42. *Louisville Courier and Journal*, March 1, 1901.
43. *Jasper Herald*, March 6, 1901.
44. *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1901.
45. *Courier Journal* (Scottville, Kentucky), August 2, 1895.
46. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 10, 1888.
47. *Owensboro Messenger*, August 10, 1893.
48. *Owensboro Messenger*, August 10, 1893.
49. *Bedford Daily Mail*, September 30, 1896.
50. *Jasper Herald*, October 2, 1896.
51. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
52. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
53. *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 22, 1901.
54. *Kenney Gazette*, February 1, 1901.
55. *Jasper Herald*, May 31, 1901.
56. *Marion County Democrat*, May 17, 1895; *The Inter Ocean*, February 12, 1898; *Salem Republican*, October 5, 1905.
57. *Washington (DC) Times*, May 13, 1901.
58. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 31, 1901.
59. *Great Falls (MT) Tribune*, March 2, 1901; *Knoxville Sentinel*, March 5, 1901; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 22, 1901.
60. *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 22, 1901.
61. *Jasper Herald*, May 17, 1901.
62. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, May 17, 1901.
63. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
64. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.

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65. *Jasper Herald*, June 7, 1901.
66. *Jasper Weekly Courier*, June 7, 1901.
67. *Columbus Indiana Republic*, October 13, 1903.

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