



12-15-1982

Belle Starr and Her Times / Ghost Towns of Oklahoma

Donita Lucas Shields

John W. Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

Recommended Citation

Shields, Donita Lucas and Morris, John W. (1982) "Belle Starr and Her Times / Ghost Towns of Oklahoma," *Westview*. Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol2/iss2/13>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



REVIEWS

Belle Starr and Her Times

— by Donita Lucas Shields

Glenn Shirley, the noted Oklahoma historian and writer, presents both documented facts and distorted legends that have followed the infamous woman who carried such titles as "Petticoat Terror of the Plains," "Female Jesse James," "Queen of the Desperadoes," and "Bandit Queen."

In his *BELLE STARR AND HER TIMES*, Shirley proves that Belle was never the glamorous outlaw as portrayed by early writers. In truth, she was a desolate woman, a victim of her times.

Legends of Belle Starr originated in 1889 from the pen of Alton B. Myers, a freelance writer for *NATIONAL POLICE GAZETTE*. Myers entered Fort Smith, Arkansas, with an empty stomach, seven cents in his pocket, and desperate need for a story. After reading an article in a Fort Smith newspaper concerning the death of Belle Starr, Myers began a fabricated version of her life.

The Eastern correspondent compiled his vicious story of the Bandit Queen with distorted, inaccurate facts, dates, and names. He embellished her characterization with excerpts from nonexistent diaries and letters. Most yellow-journalism writers in early days used this procedure for a tone of authenticity.

Other writers followed Myers' lead after Editor Richard K. Fox published "Life and Adventures of Belle Starr" in his *POLICE GAZETTE*. In 1941, 20th Century-Fox's movie, *BELLE STARR, THE BANDIT QUEEN*, created another flurry of "Belle" escapades. Still, none dealt with information from court records and true facts.

The private life of Belle Starr remained hidden, waiting for Glenn Shirley to undertake the task of clarifying earlier misrepresentations and unexposed facts.

Beautiful, high-spirited Myra Maybelle Shirley, i.e. Belle Starr, was known as the rich little girl of Carthage, Missouri. Surrounded with books, culture, and music, she was educated in the best schools in her home town. Myra Maybelle was the darling of travelers who stayed at the comfortable inn belonging to her father and mother, John and Eliza Shirley.

Myra's happy world crashed in 1860 when she was twelve years old. During the Civil War, Yankees destroyed her parents' prosperity and burned their property. Her beloved brother Bud was killed in 1864 while he fought as a Confederate bushwacker. Myra vowed revenge for his death.

After reading Glenn Shirley's dynamic, heart-warming portrayal of Belle Starr's true story, the reader must conclude that Myra Maybelle was a living casualty of the most tragic era in American history. Mr. Shirley's efforts will undoubtedly atone for many of the wrong accusations given to Belle in the past.

BELLE STARR AND HER TIMES is Glenn Shirley's latest publication. The 324-page book may be purchased for \$19.95 through the University of Oklahoma Press, 1005 Asp Avenue, Norman, Oklahoma 73019.

REVIEWS

Ghost Towns of Oklahoma

by John W. Morris

— William J. Swanson

They are listed alphabetically from Academy through Yewed, these dead — or dying — Oklahoma communities celebrated in John W. Morris' *GHOST TOWNS OF OKLAHOMA*.

An O.U. Emeritus Professor of Geography and a prolific writer on topics geographical, Morris is also a formidable folklorist and something of a poet besides.

The clear, colorful and vigorous prose of the town histories is enhanced by abundant photographs and illustrations. At the back of the book are maps which locate in the various counties of Oklahoma the towns described in the book's body.

GHOST TOWNS OF OKLAHOMA, then, is a good source for serious researchers in Oklahoma history and geography. It is also — and perhaps more importantly — good entertainment for that intelligent amateur reader to whom human nature, in its infinite manifestations, is of paramount interest.

It might be instructive to consider how three of the enduring human motivations — altruism, acquisitiveness, and concupiscence — played a part in the settlement of some of the towns chronicled in *GHOST TOWNS OF OKLAHOMA*.

The Bryan County town of Academy was founded in 1844 as a school for Choctaw Indian boys. It was administered first by Baptist missionaries and later by Cumberland Presbyterians. Sacred Heart, in Pottawatomie County, was founded in 1876 by the Benedictine Father Isidore Robot as a school and church for Pottawatomie Indians. That altruism inspired the foundings of Academy and of Sacred Heart is manifest.

It is equally evident that the less noble motive of acquisitiveness inspired the founding of Picher in Ottawa County and of Three Sands in Noble-Kay Counties. As Professor Morris notes, "For the period of 1915 to about 1930 Picher was the center of the largest zinc mining area in the world . . ." and "Three Sands was a booming, brawling, battling oil-field town that started development in June, 1921, when the first oil strike of the area was made." But when the mineral wealth underlying these communities was exhausted, the boomers, dealers, and enterprisers went elsewhere to seek their fortunes.

The absolute antithesis of the altruism manifest by the founders of Academy and Sacred Heart might be attributed to the founders of Texas County's Beer City — which came into being in the late 80's. Painted ladies, games of chance, and strong waters were what Beer City was about. When the Panhandle was added to Oklahoma Territory in 1890, Beer City died of an overdose of law and order.

GHOST TOWNS OF OKLAHOMA is a laudable achievement, a book that can be enjoyed both by the scholar and by the general reader. Moreover, *GHOST TOWNS OF OKLAHOMA* should serve to intensify the knowledgeable Oklahoman's pride in the rich and varied history of his state.

Available from OU Press in Norman.