

## INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to “Longhair Jim” Courtright some twenty years ago when I began working on the history of Hell’s Half Acre. The “Acre” was Fort Worth’s notorious red-light district from its wild and woolly days, and Courtright was one of the most colorful characters from those very colorful days. He is also, I decided, one of the West’s *forgotten* legendary gunfighters; that is, his exploits were legendary, but the man himself was largely forgotten. Or perhaps I should say he was unknown. Unfortunately for his place in history, Courtright (his real name) never made it to either Tombstone or Dodge City, the media-created capitals of western gunfighter mythology.

If he is remembered at all today, it is as “Longhair Jim,” a colorful sobriquet like “Wild Bill” Hickok, “Bat” Masterson, or “Billy the Kid” that should have helped him attain legendary gunfighter immortality. But he had two strikes against him. First, he practiced his craft in Fort Worth, Texas, which, although one of the wildest towns of the frontier West, never achieved the widespread notoriety of Abilene and Dodge City, Kansas, or Lincoln, New Mexico. Second, his fifteen minutes of fame came from being on the losing end of a gun battle with Luke Short. Popular history likes its legendary gunfighters to be killers, not victims. So Courtright’s remarkable story went unappreciated until well into the twentieth century.

In 1929 Eugene Cunningham, a popular western novelist, first brought Courtright to the reading public’s attention as the subject of an article in *Frontier Times*.<sup>1</sup> Cunningham wove a fascinating tale out of thin air and fabricated quotes. His “drawling,” two-gunned Jim Courtright, who could draw with either hand quick as “a rattler striking,”

sparked a Luke Short piece in the following month's issue but inspired no biographer to take on either man for many years. Then in 1957 the least likely of western gunfighter biographers, a Catholic Franciscan priest named Father Stanley Crocchiola, tackled Courtright's story.

Father Stanley neatly turned the tables on his subject. Usually, biographers make a name for themselves writing books about western outlaws best known by their aliases (*e.g.*, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid). But Father Stanley in this case was the one with the alias, not his subject, writing under the name "F. Stanley" for reasons that are not entirely clear. His book, *Longhair Jim Courtright: Two-gun Marshal of Fort Worth*, was part hagiography, part romance, and part potboiler.<sup>2</sup> But in terms of a full-length biography, it was all we had until now. And that was the problem.

When we consult bibliographer Ramon F. Adams seminal work *Six-Guns and Saddle Leather*<sup>3</sup> we see only one meager entry for Timothy Isaiah Courtright over the course of nearly eighty years of bounteous western writing, making F. Stanley's 1957 book the source of virtually all information on this obscure gunman until now. F. Stanley turned out to be a moonlighting Catholic friar who simply rehashed family stories. Building a biography around a gunfighter who lost his only face-off is a tall order. In other words, if western historian Thomas Penfield was anywhere close to correct when he estimated that some twenty thousand men were killed in illegal gunfights across the West between 1830 and 1900,<sup>4</sup> Jim Courtright contributed not a single victim to the total. His only known killings were a couple of New Mexico homesteaders. Thus, his qualifications for admission into the "Gunfighters Hall of Shame" are pretty skimpy. But being overrated is not the same thing as being boring or unimportant.

For years, I considered writing a “serious” biography of Fort Worth’s hometown gunfighter but was deterred by the apparent dearth of sources. How do you write the life story of a man who scarcely left a paper trail? No one to date has produced a single document over Courtright’s signature or even a birth certificate. He is purely a third-person subject for the would-be biographer. Fortunately, Bob DeArment, much like Alex Haley doggedly searching for his family’s roots, was not easily intimidated by the paucity of known sources nor by all the nay-sayers (me included) who told him he was on a fool’s errand.

The result is a book which puts a long-overdue spotlight on a man who has been forgotten not because he was insignificant but for two very good reasons: 1) Courtright lacked a “Boswell,” a clever writer like Walter Noble Burns, Alfred Henry Lewis, or Stuart Lake (chronicler of Wyatt Earp’s life) to tell his story; and 2) Courtright, a near illiterate, was unable to write his own legend as did John Wesley Hardin and Tom Horn.

One thing is certain. Timothy Isaiah Courtright’s life did not lack for drama. Like many of his brethren in the fraternity of the six-gun, he worked both sides of the law. He was at various times a lowly jailer, city marshal, deputy sheriff, deputy U.S. marshal, “special [police] officer,” private detective, hired killer, and racketeer. Contrary to local lore and family history, he was never a U.S. Marshal or a Texas Ranger. He lived out his life on a smaller stage than did men like Wyatt Earp or Bat Masterson. Unlike those two he also lacked a strong circle of men to back him up when trouble came along. He was a lone wolf, apparently rootless until he landed in Fort Worth.

Courtright certainly had a talent for attracting trouble wherever he went. There was the shootout during the railroad strike of 1886, the New Mexico shootings, and the

gunfight with Luke Short, just to name the lowlights of his foreshortened lifetime. Depending on your perspective, Courtright was either a “game” man with courage to spare or a vicious bully who preferred to beat up men with his fists rather than shoot them down in cold blood. F. Stanley was obviously an admirer-- but his chief source of information was the Courtright family.

Even now T.I. Courtright is still a cipher in many ways. As Bob points out, we still do not know what Courtright did in the Civil War, anything about his family or childhood, or even what provoked the feud with Luke Short that led to his death. (I have my own ideas about that last one.) But those things will probably have to remain ciphers. As Wyatt Earp, Butch Cassidy, and their ilk show us, western gunmen are known by their legends, not their biographical profiles.

Courtright’s whole reputation rests on one gunfight, fought out in the shadows on a cold winter night against a man he should have bested. After the former lawman was put in the grave, to great fanfare it must be said, no one even spoke up for him or defended his memory. He left a wife and three children who quickly packed up and left town for good. And the town that had considered him a hometown hero when he patrolled the saloons keeping the cowboys in line soon forgot all about him as it embraced urbanization and civilization.

Then there is the matter of Courtright’s character. Truth be told, he was not a nice man. His image would need a major makeover to be Hollywood-ready. He was no mustache-twirling villain, but he was closer to that stereotype than to the steely-eyed, two-gun marshal of Father Stanley’s biography. At the end of his life he was running a protection racket, and he probably came calling on Luke Short that night because, as

mobsters in the Roaring Twenties knew, if you're going to run a protection racket, you have to rub out a dry cleaner every once in a while. The trouble was, this particular "dry cleaner" shot back.

As I write this, I am listening to the stirring title song from "The Magnificent Seven." And I am reminded of all the beloved western movie and TV series of my youth, each with its own distinctive theme music, ruggedly handsome hero, and clear moral lessons. The Timothy Courtright story lacks all of these ingredients for dramatization. "Longhair Jim" has never had his own "biopic," his own theme song, or a group of Hollywood writers to put words in his mouth long after the fact. Probably never will. He will have to be content with a first-rate scholarly biography.

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### **Endnotes: Introduction.**

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Cunningham, "Long-Haired Jim Courtright," *Frontier Times*, (February 1929): 202.

<sup>2</sup> F. Stanley, *Longhair Jim Courtright, Two-Gun Marshal of Fort Worth* (Denver, Co.: World Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Ramon Adams, *Six-Guns and Saddle Leather* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 608-609.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Penfield, *Western Sheriffs and Marshals* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Publishers, 1955), xii.