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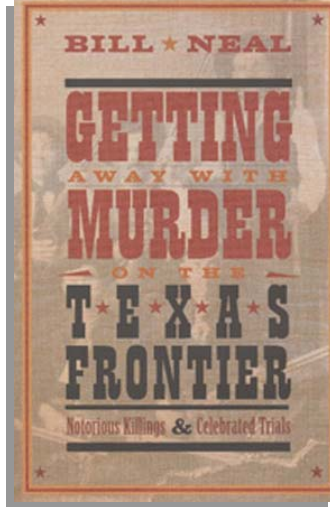
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Getting Away with Murder on the Texas Frontier

Notorious Killings and Celebrated Trials

by Bill Neal

Texas Tech University Press, 2006
Photos and maps, 308 pages, \$27.95 hardcover
ISBN 0-89672-579-0

Any way you look at it, this is an exceptional book. It deals with a unique legal situation in the 19th century Texas legal system in which justice on the western frontier of Texas may or may not have reflected laws passed in Austin. It all depended on the situation. Tough times, rough places, and hard men ruled West Texas, and they required tougher, rougher, and usually meaner men to deal with them.

This area was settled predominately by folks from the Old South who had been recently displaced by the War Between the States. Neal correctly points out that laws and justice were usually based on the Southern code of chivalry and honor.

As pointed out on the inside dust cover, verdicts often swung on reasons completely non-related to the trial. For example, some juror might say, "The son-of-a-gun is guilty all right, but we must turn him loose. He owes me for a pair of boots, and if we convict him, I'll never get my money." The normal explanation for that judgement would have been, "This is Texas."

When convicted for murdering a woman after stomping her to death, one killer walked because his original indictment did not include the words "with his feet." After drowning his victim, another murderer walked away a free man because the words "in water" were not incorporated in the indictment. Such was justice on the Texas frontier.

Even when a conviction was given, it was a rarity that the felon would spend any serious prison time. Today, most law-abiding citizens cringe when approximately 10% of criminals walk away from justice because of a technicality. Incredible as it seems, those escaping justice today pale in comparison to the 60% plus who took a walk in the 19th century.

Bill Neal has been attorney for forty years: twenty as a prosecutor and twenty for the defense. The *Texas Ranger Dispatch* highly recommends this book.

Review by Robert Nieman

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