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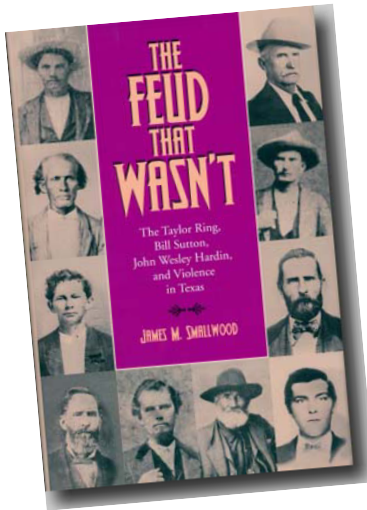
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The Feud That Wasn't

*The Taylor Ring, Bill Sutton,
John Wesley Hardin, and Violence in Texas*

James M. Smallwood

College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. Maps, illus., appendixes, notes, biblio., index, 256 pages. \$29.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-60344-017-2.

Review by Bill O'Neal

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Texas was the site of more frontier blood feuds than any other state or territory. The first of these disputes, the Regulator-Moderator War of the 1840s, produced thirty-one fatalities, half a dozen more than Arizona's Pleasant Valley War. Even deadlier, by far, than these bloody conflicts was the so-called Sutton-Taylor feud in post-Civil War Texas. It piled up scores of victims, including several under the guns of the notorious John Wesley Hardin.

In *The Feud That Wasn't*, however, James M. Smallwood argues that there was no feud, according to the generally accepted definition of the word as a conflict between aggrieved and vengeance-seeking families or factions. The author proves that the doomed William Sutton, a deputy sheriff attempting to enforce the law against the Taylor crime ring, was the sole member of his family to become involved. Insisting that the violence represents far greater significance than a mere feud, Smallwood contends that the vast Taylor criminal operation was an important arm of ex-Confederate resistance to federally imposed Reconstruction.

The Taylors, a pioneer clan, took advantage of the lawlessness in Texas during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era to steal cattle and horses. Although they never served

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the Confederacy as soldiers, “they wrapped themselves in the Confederate flag” during Reconstruction, posturing as “heroic defenders of old Dixie” and of the “Lost Cause.” (p. xix)

Smallwood compiles a list of 197 men, including Wes Hardin, who were part of the “Taylor Criminal Conspiracy,” a crime ring that committed depredations across 45 Texas counties. In addition to wholesale livestock thefts, they murdered scores of people who opposed them: former slaves, white Unionists, occupation soldiers, and lawmen such as William Sutton. The turmoil spread by the Taylor ring “led to the collapse of the Reconstruction process in the Lone Star State.” (pp. 181-182)

Increasing pressure for law and order eventually resulted in the deaths or incarcerations of many of the Taylors and their accomplices. For more than two decades, though, they were instrumental in Texan resistance to Reconstruction, a widespread pattern that allowed the South to prevail in the continuation of the Civil War. *The Feud That Wasn't* provides a lively account of Western violence, along with the latest evolution of the author's conclusions about Reconstruction.

James Smallwood is a professor *emeritus* of Oklahoma State University and an award-winning authority on Reconstruction. Long familiar with archival records of the period, he has amassed overwhelming evidence to describe and verify his revisionist ideas. The book depicts a vast number of shootouts and lynchings, including many that have never before been described in print. Smallwood uses this buffet of frontier violence to illustrate a larger thesis.

