

Growing up in Dodge in 1875

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Acknowledgements

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I recommend both of the above referenced websites for anyone wishing to read fresh and interesting works as well as for those who wish to gain valuable literary advice and engage in conversations with skilled authors from every part of the globe.

I Grew Up in Dodge City

in 1875



by Bill Russo

Prologue

Contrary to popular belief the 'Wild West' was not nearly as violent as it was depicted in the newspapers of the late 1800s and still is, in today's modern stories and films. But it did have its bloody moments, as you'll see in this tale that mixes reality with fiction.

The setting is Front Street in Dodge City - home to the original Long Branch Saloon where the beer was cold and the women were hot. Both were freely available to any cowpoke with the price.

The date is 1875, the year when Charlie Bassett was elected the first sheriff and Larry Darger was appointed as the first Marshall. A few years later, after the newspapers in Boston and New York had made Dodge famous, more colorful lawmen would come to town: Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp to name just two.

As our story starts, Dodge was home to about 750 permanent residents and host to hundreds of riders who came in from the trail as well as the cowhands from dozens of cattle drives.

The town was also, a refuge to a young man – a boy really – named Chalky Jones. Named for the trail dust that coated him after walking 1546 miles to get to Dodge, Chalky is the narrator of our story.

Chapter One: Gawk Larkin and Lute Fowler

On dusty Front Street in Dodge City, Kansas; across the street from the Long Branch Saloon, I took my first steps toward manhood. Times were hard, as were the men. The women? They were even harder. Gunfights were as common as consumption and yielded the same results. Dodge was a brutal town with few soft spots. I was 16 years old and I loved it.

New in town, I drifted in like the tumbleweed from Lone Pine, California, where life was as slow as a Texas river in July and music was heard much more than gunfire.

Lone Pine had seemed fine to me and I would have been content living there - until the first time I heard the roaring sound of the South Wind rushing down Second Avenue rushing past Hoover's Cigar Store, where the smell of gunsmoke lingered in the air after Lute Fowler and Gawk Larkin used their Colts to settle a dispute that started inside Charlie Rath's General Store.



Front Street in 1875

Larkin didn't even clear leather before Lute blazed off a heart shot. Rocketed backwards, Gawk fell and was blowing bloody bubbles with his last breath by the time Sheriff Charlie Bassett rushed out of the Long Branch, beer suds still on his chin; his gun in his hand. Wading into the crowd that had gathered, he scattered those cowpokes as easily as a rodeo bull running through a chicken coop.

"So you finally got Gawk Larkin to draw on you," spat Mr. Bassett as he smashed the back of his hand across Fowler's face. Fowler reeled from the meaty paw of the Dodge sheriff; a crimson wave coming from an angry red welt on his cheek.

"You can't do nothing to me Sheriff. It was a fair fight. Charley Rath saw it. So did everybody else in his store", whined Fowler who seemed near tears as he pressed his palm to his face to staunch the flow of blood.

"You're a rotten liar Lute. You have been trying to goad Gawk into throwing down on you for months and everybody in town knows it. You got him liquored up and forced his hand. Larkin was no gunfighter. He was a bookish man. I ought to make you draw on me right now. Go on DRAW! DRAW I SAID!!! I SAID DRAW ON ME FOWLER!!!!!"

The Sheriff suddenly stopped shouting and whispered, "Either that or I'm going to beat you to death right now with my fists."



Sheriff Bassett in 1885

Chapter Two: Chalky and Charlie

That was Charlie Bassett - a no nonsense lawman who meted out the law like a Faro dealer with 59 cards - he always had something extra. In order to 'Buck the Tiger' you often need to possess five or six aces. It's not that Mr. Bassett was dishonest, it was simply that in barbarous times, a lawman sometimes has to make his own rules; and Bassett's law was pretty good most of the time.

I got my first taste of Mr. Bassett's justice my second day in town. I had wandered in from Lone Pine, walking all the way on the white alkali trail. After many weeks of struggling along, I staggered down Front Street, more dead than alive and collapsed in front of the General Store.

The alkali trail had coated me with a half inch of white dust and folks immediately started calling me Chalky and that's the name I've gone by ever since. Mr. Rath gave me some grub and Mr. Grimmick said I could sleep in one of the empty stalls in his stable.

But that wasn't good enough for Mr. Bassett. He heard about me and before nine the next morning he was at the stable questioning me.

"Where are you from kid?"

"I came in from Lone Pine Sheriff."

"Where's your horse?"

"I don't have a horse. I walked."

"You walked all the way from Lone Pine, California to Dodge City?"

"Yes sir I did. Before he died, my pa always said that when the railroad comes to Dodge, the city's going to be smothered in gold and be the biggest town in the West. First Ma got the pox and died. Then a month later Pa got it and he died"

"So you decided to come to Dodge?"

"No sheriff. Not right away. I tried to run Pa's spread by myself and I was doing pretty good till the men from the bank came."

“What did the bank men want?”

“They threw me off the land. They held a mortgage. They kicked me out with nothing but the 40 dollars that Ma and Pa had been saving in a jar in the kitchen. I used that money for food that I ate along the trail but the money ran out a week ago. Just before I left, I found out there were only six more payments due on the property.”

“Well son that’s a sad story, but we have a problem. Dodge has vagrancy laws. If you don’t have a job and you have no money, I have to lock you up.

So that’s how my second night in Dodge City came to being spent in Mr. Bassett’s jail. I didn’t stay there long though. After being served a pretty decent breakfast that was brought in from the Front Street Café, Mr. Bassett told me the only way I could get out of jail was if I had a job. Then he offered me 35 dollars a month to work for him.

I accepted and was immediately put to work swamping out the cells and the outbuildings of the jail house and the town hall. Later my duties were expanded to include running errands, fetching the mail, and some clerical work like sifting through the wanted posters, and tacking some of them up in various places around Dodge.

Within three months Mr. Bassett started training me for law work. A new Colt, and a horse and saddle were provided for me. Mr. Bassett even started letting me accompany him on his daily rounds. I got room and board at Mrs. Spinney’s house for the ‘lawman price’ of \$3.50 a week.

Chapter Three: Bassett's Street Justice

Getting back to my story; you remember that Lute Fowler gunned down Gawk Larkin in a shootout in front of Charley Rath's store. There had been bad blood between Fowler and Larkin for some time. Gawk Larkin was a fairly successful farmer with a spread about five miles outside of the city.

Fowler was a fast hand with a gun and a gambler who took occasional jobs for drinking money when his luck was bad. During one such period, he worked for a few months at the Larkin property. He didn't much like Gawk, but he didn't mind Mrs. Larkin at all.

Victoria (Vicky) Larkin was tall and large framed with long, flowing hair the color of honey from the hive. An ample woman - her assets were clearly displayed when she lent a hand with the chores, which was her custom. Fowler eyed Vicky with the intensity of a bear getting ready for a feast of spawning salmon.

Gawk noticed Lute's interest and the tension between the two men escalated. As for Vicky, she never gave Lute any encouragement whatsoever. She was devoted to Gawk and they sweated out the work of the farm side by side just like a well trained pair of draft horses. Besides being a strong worker, Vicky Larkin was an enterprising cook. She could make beans, biscuits and bacon seem like a meal snatched from the expensive tables of the Tremont Street House Hotel back East in Boston.

After Lute Fowler had finished plowing the sections that he was hired for. He took his pay and went back to Dodge, harboring a resentment that only grew as time went on. He took to 'riding' Gawk every time the farmer came to town for supplies or whatever. As they argued Lute would always challenge Gawk with: "If you don't like it, why don't you just reach for that gun you're wearing."

In the store that day, Fowler was especially insulting. There were more than half a dozen customers in the emporium when Lute said, "I'll tell you boys something. That Vicky Larkin is one really sweet woman and I should know, cause when I was plowing for Mr. Larkin I was also helping out with Mrs. Larkin's plowing, if you know what I mean."

Enraged, Gawk, spat, "Okay Fowler. That's enough of your rotten lies. Outside right now. I'm gonna shoot you like the mad wolf that you are!"

The boys in the general store pleaded with Gawk not to go up against a man he had no chance against, but Larkin was 'blind' crazy as the accumulated weight of Fowler's lies and insults caused something in his head to burst. .

Fowler and Larkin strode outside, followed by the crowd, buzzing like agitated bees.

Less than a minute after Gawk fell mortally wounded into the dust of Front Street, Mr. Bassett came running out of the Long Branch and confronted the shooter.



Front Street 1880

"So you finally got Gawk Larkin to draw on you," screamed Mr. Bassett as he smashed the back of his hand across Fowler's face. Fowler reeled from the meaty paw of the Dodge sheriff; a crimson wave coming from an angry red welt on his cheek.

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Mr. Bassett suddenly stopped shouting and whispered, "Either that or I'm going to beat you to death right now with my hands."

Fowler tried to avoid it but the big right fist of Charlie Bassett caught him flush in the gut, lifting him off his feet and forcing all the wind out of him like a Kansas twister. His boots came back to the ground just as the sheriff's left hook smashed into his already battered cheek. Lute fell to the ground in a defensive fetal position. Mr. Bassett got on his knees and was wildly flaying Fowler's face when myself and a half dozen cowpokes pulled him off, leaving Fowler senseless, battered, and bloody.

Chapter Four: The Final Shot

"It was murder, Chalky," said Mr. Bassett back in his office. "Gawk Larkin didn't have a prayer against Fowler."

"I know that sir. But the fact is that Gawk had a gun and was going to draw on him."

The front door of the office opened and the newly appointed marshall, Larry Denger came in shaking his head as he looked at the sheriff -

"That was a pretty stupid thing you did Charlie. I'll tell you that."

"I know it Marshall. But I just lost my temper. This isn't the first time Fowler's killed a man by goading him into a gunfight. What am I supposed to do?"

"Your job!" Denger replied "and your job is to keep the peace, not busting up a man because you can't jail him. You're just lucky that Chalky here pulled you off before you did any real damage."

"How is Fowler, Marshall?" I asked.

"He's okay Chalky, "It was blood mostly. But if you had let it go on much longer, you'd have to put Charlie in one of his own cells. You still might have to. Fowler came to me to file a complaint against you Charlie. He left my office muttering that he's going to have your badge and he may be able to do it. He said he was going to going to see his lawyer Bart Kelton over in Hayes to get Judge Brookish to fire you."

"I know Kelton," Mr. Bassett said, "he's a part time gambler, part time lawyer and a full time skunk. Him and Lute Fowler ran a crooked Faro game over in Saline County, though neither one ever got charged with anything."

"I don't know lawyer Kelton sir, but I don't think he can take your badge," I said.

"I can't worry about that now Chalky. First thing I have to do is ride out to Gawk's farm and give the sad news to Mrs. Larkin."

"You don't have to do that." The marshall informed him. "Vicky Larkin was here in town. She forgot to tell Gawk that they needed some canning supplies for her jellies so she came to get them and found all about the murder. She went over to see Percival Canner about the undertaking and then went back home."

"Well I've got to go out there anyway. Pay my respects and take care of a few legal matters concerning the shooting. Saddle up your horse Chalky. You're going to be my deputy someday soon, so you may as well come along with me and learn this part of the law business right now."

Meanwhile, Lute Fowler was pushing his horse hard towards Hays City, still fuming about the beating that he took from the sheriff and hoping that his pal Kelton could make some trouble for Mr. Bassett. Digging his spurs in hard, he galloped past the lightly used trail that led towards the Larkin place and bore on towards Hayes. Then he got to thinking about Vicky. Reining in his mount he backtracked to the fork. This time he did take the path towards the farm.

Nearing the house, he led his horse to a Cottonwood and tied it to a hefty branch. Walking silently he snaked his way to an open window. Inside, he saw Vicky putting some things into a carpet bag. It looked like she was getting ready to go away on a trip. He decided to give her a little going away gift.

Just 30 minutes later, me and Sheriff Bassett rode up to the house and hitched our horses. We saw a pair of drag marks leading from the front step around the side of the house. Fearing the worst, we followed them and as we rounded the corner we saw somebody dragging a lifeless form toward a steep gulch.

Mr. Bassett drew his weapon and shouted. "DROP THAT BODY AND RAISE YOUR HANDS. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST FOR MURDER!".

"Wanna tell me about it?" the sheriff said, a few minutes later when we were in the kitchen of the farmhouse.

"There's not much to tell. In town I heard how Fowler gunned down Gawk. I came back here and got a gun. I heard that Lute was heading for Hays City and I was going to ambush him. Just as I was getting ready to leave, he walked through my front door just as bold as ice; saying he's sorry for shooting Gawk. With a poker face as cold as January he says to me that it wasn't his fault; that Gawk pushed him into it. I had my pistol in my carpet bag. I pulled it out and shot him right between the eyes. You know the rest. I was going to dump him in the gulch when you found me"

"Vicky. I'm going to have to take you in. It's murder. Now, I'm guessing that a jury will go easy on you, but you are going to have to go to trial"

"Why's that Sheriff?"

"Cause you killed a man who never even had a chance to defend himself."

"It's funny Charlie. My husband had a gun. But he didn't have a chance against Fowler - yet you couldn't arrest him. Fowler had a gun but he didn't have a chance against me - but you can arrest me? I don't see the difference."

Sheriff Charlie Bassett looked into the blue eyes of Vicky Fowler and smiled as he got an idea.

"In a barbarous country, sometimes lawmen have to make their own rules Vicky. And the way I see it, Fowler broke in your front door, gun in hand, looking to attack you and luckily you had a weapon handy and blasted him before he got you. Is that the way it happened?"

"Yes Sheriff, as I think about it that is the way it came down."

"And that's how I am going to write it up. Goodbye Mrs. Larkin. Sorry for your loss"

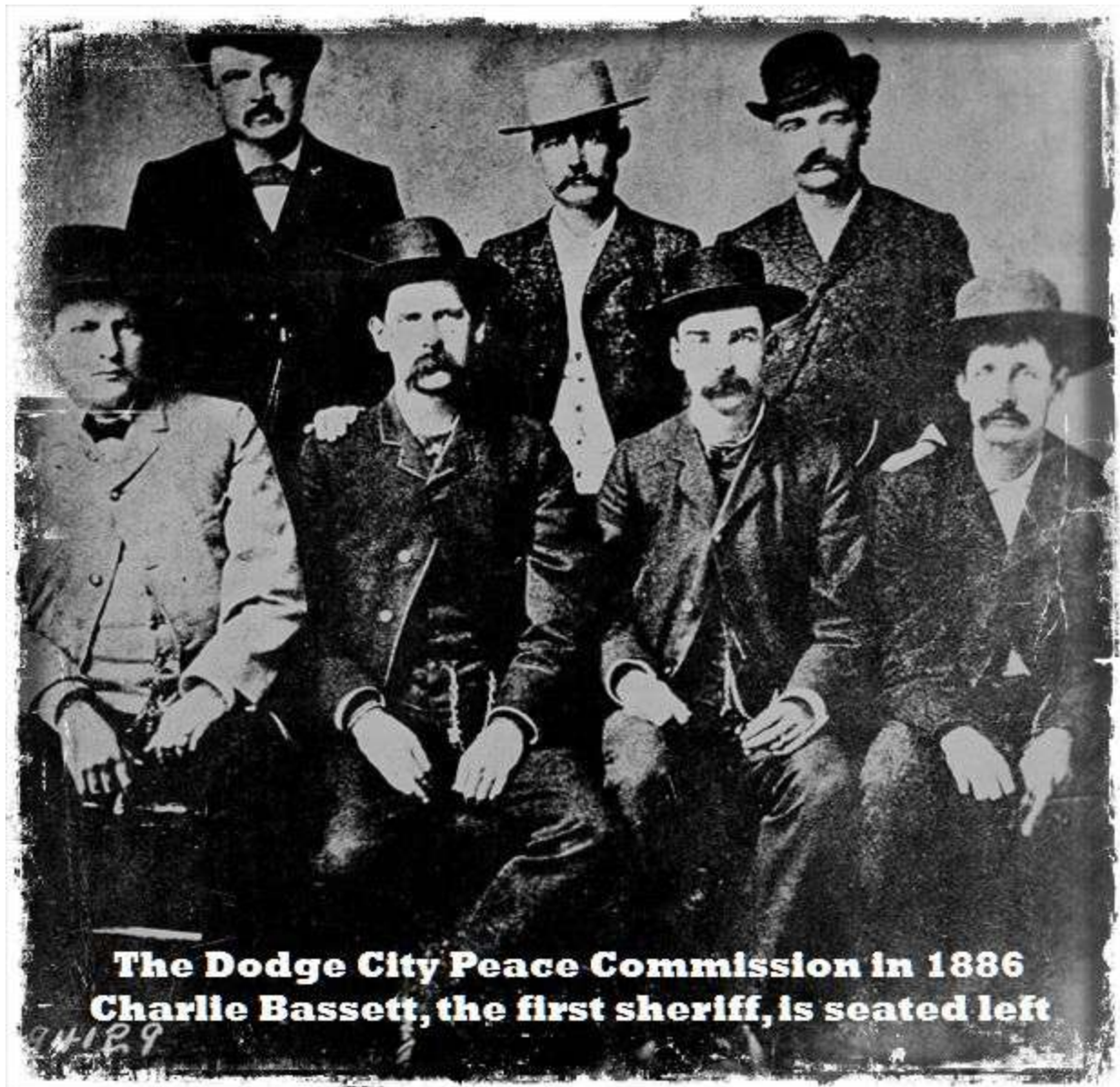
The End

Epilogue

Chalky learned the law business at the side of Mr. Bassett over the following four years right up until the time Charlie was forced out of the sheriff's job. There were two factions of citizens in the town – one that wanted Dodge to be wide open with plenty of saloons, prostitutes, and gambling. The other group hoped to transform the boisterous community into a far more Boston-like city.

They put in term limits for the job of sheriff. This forced Bassett out and paved the way for more the more flamboyant 'lawmen' that followed – Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and others.

As for Chalky, don't worry about that young fellow. He took the skills that he learned at the side of Mr. Bassett and became something of a tycoon, with part ownership of the Long Branch, a profitable mining company, two terms as sheriff in his own right, and ownership of one of the largest meat packing plants in the West.



The Dodge City Peace Commission. Standing in the back is W.H. Harris on the left, with Luke Short in the middle and Bat Masterson on the right. Sheriff Charlie Bassett is seated at the left with Wyatt Earp next to him, then Frank McLain and Neal Brown.

Missing from the photo is Chalky Jones as well as a dentist who at various times worked both sides of the law – John Henry Holliday, known in Dodge City and on West as – ‘Doc’ Holliday.

The Peace Commission photo was taken five years after the most famous shootout in U.S. history, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona.

Earp, Holliday and Masterson were among the featured players in that legendary episode as well as in a number of shared adventures in Dodge City.

Though almost every other man in the Commission picture was more famous than Charlie Bassett, one thing always strikes me about him when I look at this photograph.

Take a close look at those gunmen and see if you notice what's different– the thing that separates Dodge's first sheriff from the rest of those galoots.

It's the droopy hound-dog mustache. Charlie doesn't have one! It perhaps means nothing. But to me it makes Mr. Bassett seem like a modern person. The rest of the bunch look like they were born a full century before Sheriff Bassett.



Front Steet in the 2000s

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