"Tell Wes to be a Good Man..." Examining an Early Hardin Killing

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In John Wesley Hardin’s posthumously published Life some three dozen or more killings from the first blood shed in 1868 to the killings in Florida prior to his capture there in 1877 are described. Some of these incidents were highly colored, if not complete fabrications. But for all the picaresque elements in the Life the fact remains that contemporary references to numerous incidents have been located, allowing the historian other viewpoints for purposes of correlation and comparison. One such example of an incident recorded by Hardin which contained elements of truth, and which can be substantiated by contemporary sources, is the killing of an "Arkansas gunman” Benjamin B. Bradley. Judging from the amount of space Hardin devoted to this particular killing, approximately two thousand words, it is believed that he himself may have felt the Bradley killing particularly significant in looking back over his career during the years spent in a prison cell.

With Hardin's account, albeit colored, as well as several letters preserved by descendants, a rare newspaper account, as well as other sources, a partial reconstruction of this killing can be developed. The letters refer to the 1894-95 correspondence between Hardin and Texas lawman Richard M. Glover, Sheriff of Gonzales County. In these letters lie not only the information concerning Hardin’s intent to clear his name of all possible past charges, but also the expression of hope and concern of a lawman that Hardin, certainly the most deadly of Texas gunfighters, would leave his violent past behind him and lead a quiet law-abiding life.

In late 1869 John Wesley moved to Hill County at the request of his brother Joseph Gipson Hardin. The sixteen year old fugitive felt himself a man then, and, in addition to speculating in cotton and hides, spent considerable time gambling. He recalled that it was in Towash, a small town on the east bank of the Brazos river, that he gambled and raced horses. Towash was approximately fifteen miles west of Hillsboro, county seat of Hill County, and approximately sixty miles south of Fort Worth. It had been established in 1853 and was prominent in the western part of Hill County until the middle 1880s. One important establishment was the flour mill operated by Simpson C. Dyer, powered by a dam he himself had constructed. One could visit the ruins of Towash, Dyer’s mill, a store and a church—all built of stone—until 1951 when they were inundated by the waters of the Whitney Reservoir.

Hardin wrote of his youthful activities: “I played poker and seven-up whenever I got a chance and once in a while would bet on a pony..."
race. These races generally came off at the old Boles track near Towash. A man named John Collins had married a cousin of mine, and I went into partnership with him. Things ran smoothly for some time and we were doing well until a tragedy occurred that forever dissolved our partnership.”

The tragedy was the killing of a man Hardin identified as “Jim Bradley,” although his correct name was evidently Benjamin B. Bradley. As he recalled the incident it was on Christmas day, 1869, that he and Collins visited the Boles race track. There were a number of people from Arkansas there, two of whom were Bradley and a Hamp Davis. Possibly Bradley was there for reasons other than merely racing, for Hardin wrote: “We came near having a shooting match several times that day, as everybody in the ‘60’s carried pistols, but all left the track apparently satisfied. Jim Bradley... was introduced to me as a desperado and a killer. I have been reliably informed that he was there for my especial benefit, but in those days an unknown desperado had as much influence on me as a snaffle bit on a wild horse.”

The killing came as the result of a quarrel following a poker game taking place near the grocery store of “Dixie and Jenkins.” The game was “... in a small box house without a door but with a place open for a chimney in the north end. The house was about 13 x 14 feet and was situated about a quarter of a mile from the grocery.” Participants were Hardin, Bradley, Hamp Davis and a Judge Moore. Hardin’s partner, Collins, was an observer and did not play.

An argument ensued over the game and Hardin and Collins were both forced to flee the house at the point of Bradley’s pistol. Later, after acquiring a weapon, (he had been forced to leave his weapons in the box house) Hardin and Collins again met up with Bradley and his associates.

“[We] saw Bradley with six or seven others, including Hamp Davis, coming toward us, threatening to kill me, his crowd urging him on... Bradley... commenced to fire on me, firing once, then snapping, and then firing again. By this time we were within five or six feet of each other, and I fired with a Remington .45 at his heart and right after that at his head. As he staggered and fell, he said, ‘O, Lordy. don’t shoot me any more.’ I could not stop. I was shooting because I did not want to take chances on a reaction. The crowd ran, and I stood there and cursed them long and loud as cowardly devils who had urged a man to fight and when he did and fell, to desert him like cowards and traitors.”

There have been numerous books and other publications dealing with Hardin’s career as premier Texas gunfighter and mankiller.
Unfortunately, none, to this writer’s knowledge, have added any new reliable information about the Bradley killing. For that reason the discovery of a three paragraph news item from Hill County, printed in the El Paso Daily Herald shortly after Hardin’s death, is of great value. The killing occurred as follows, according to the Hill County account:

“It has been said that John Wesley Hardin began his career of crime in this county, but old settlers here say he kill [ed] a negro in Leon county before coming here. He had been in the county four or five months when he got into a difficulty with and killed Benjamin B. Bradley. After killing Bradley he fled the county. The history of the killing from creditable sources are as follows: He engaged in a game of cards on the Brazos near Towash with J. B. Williams, I. B. Collins [,] Benjamin B. Bradley and a man named Moore on the night of the 4th of January, 1870. During the game he got into a difficulty with Bradley. They were seperated and made friends.

“Later Hardin missed some money and charged Bradley with taking it. Somebody put the lights out. The lamps were lit again and Moore was missing. Hardin went out to hunt for him. Hardin and Collins left the house to go up to a saloon on the hill. On the way they met Bradley. He was on the ground holding his horse. He said: ‘Is that you Ben?’ Bradley answered, ‘Yes,’ and he had no sooner spoken than Hardin fired. Mounting his horse he disappeared. Moore was never seen after that night.”

A number of discrepancies between Hardin’s account and the Hill County account are readily apparent. Hardin’s “Jim Bradley” is no doubt correctly identified as Benjamin B. Bradley. Probably the “I. B. Collins” of the Hill County account should have been “J. B. Collins,” being a simple misprint, as one would think Hardin would correctly recall the name of his own relative, albeit by marriage. In addition, the 1870 Hill County census does list a James B. Collins, which may be the man who had married a Hardin cousin. In the Life no mention is made of a J. B. Williams, although the census does list one James B. Williams who may have been the same man as identified in the Hill County account. The name Hamp Davis does not appear in the Hill County account nor the 1870 census record. An additional discrepancy is the difference in dates: Hardin placed the shooting as having occurred December 25, 1869, whereas the Hill County account placed it on January 4, 1870. This is not a great difference in time, of course, but it is suspected that Hardin deliberately changed the date to add a touch of what he must have considered to be a romantic element. Or possibly he only had a vague idea that the killing had taken place around Christmas time, 1869.

Most significant is the Hill County account providing a reason for what Hardin termed a “regular mob” being formed to lynch him.
The crowd that he had cursed "loud and long as cowardly devils" aroused the countryside. He soon learned his situation was critical, as many people joined together to capture him. He recalled that "... the whole country, with the exception of a few friends and relatives" were hunting him.

If Hardin's account was accurate in its details, that a desperado from Arkansas deliberately set out to rob and if necessary kill him, why did the populace of Hill County form into an angry mob so quickly? Hardin was not a stranger in a strange land, as Bradley was if we...
Sheriff Richard M. Glover in the early 1890s. Published for the first time. Courtesy Lylamae H. Williams, Batesville, Arkansas.
believe Hardin's own account. There were relatives there, Aunt Ann Hardin and family, as well as Uncle Barnett Hardin and his sons. There were also relatives named Page in the country so it is difficult to believe that this sixteen year old youth, in a country where relatives lived, who were presumably respectable God-fearing people, could so quickly become a fugitive from an angry mob, especially if the victim of this youth was indeed a desperado and a killer from a neighboring state. One is almost forced to conclude that the Bradley killing in reality occurred quite differently from the version found in Hardin’s autobiography. If one accepts the Hill County account as probably having been written with more objectivity in mind, the logical conclusion is that the men of Hill County became enraged because Hardin killed his man without justification. Quite possibly Bradley was no more of a desperado than any one else in that settlement! The possible motive for the killing is that Bradley had won considerable money from Hardin in a fair game.

Another problem raised by the Hill County account is in the nature of the relationship of the man named Moore to both Hardin and Bradley. It is stated that Hardin was looking for him when he met Bradley; as well Moore was never seen again after that night. Hardin, in his autobiographical writing, gave no hint as to Moore’s fate either. Was Moore a friend of Bradley, and left the country fearing Hardin’s wrath? Quite possibly Hardin blamed both Moore and Bradley for his losing money in that poker game. There is some evidence, although elusive, that about the time of the Bradley killing another man died at the hands of Hardin. This is not hinted at in Hardin’s Life, however. In an article appearing in the Daily Democratic Statesman of Austin, entitled “Accusations Against Wesley Hardin,” appeared the following intriguing statement: “George W. Taylor, of Travis County, on October 10, 1872, made an affidavit that Hardin confessed in his presence that he killed two men in Peoria, Hill County, two years previously.” The affidavit had been recorded in the Adjutant General’s office.

The Bradley killing occurred near Towash, and although it may seem odd that Hardin did not mention Peoria, or another killing at the same time as that of the Bradley killing, there are possible explanations for this apparent omission. It can be said that at the time of the “confession” that George W. Taylor reported hearing, Hardin may have been making an idle boast. But Hardin had killed enough in reality so that boasting was hardly necessary. What may be more significant is that if indeed Moore was later killed by Hardin, he chose not to relate this experience fearing that a calculated pursuit of Moore, who may have been responsible for Hardin’s gambling losses, would make him appear to be too cold-blooded a killer in the mind of his readers. We must not forget the fact that Hardin, in his autobiographical writings, was attempting to create an image in the mind of the reading public of
his having been forced to lead a life of desperadoism. This was of greater priority in his writing than historical fact.

It was easy to describe the Bradley killing as an act of self-defense; it would have been much more difficult to fictionalize a pursuit of Moore in such a way as to make it appear to be a "self-defense" killing as well. It is possibly significant that the Hill County account stated so emphatically that Moore was never seen again, twenty-four years after the gunfight at Towash. Did Hardin, in actuality, after killing Bradley, pursue Moore and kill him in a lonely secluded place, so that the body was never found? Hardin could have conveniently forgotten about this killing when writing the story of his adventures years later.

Hardin never did stand trial for the Bradley killing. It was not until the killing of Charles S. Webb, a deputy sheriff of Brown County, that Hardin felt deep concern for his personal safety. In the aftermath of the Webb killing a number of Hardin's friends and relatives were killed by Texas Rangers and citizen vigilante groups. Hardin fled Texas and remained in hiding in Florida for three years. In August, 1877, he was arrested by Florida and Texas lawmen, returned to Texas where he stood trial for the killing of Webb. After being found guilty of second degree murder he was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, but was pardoned after serving only sixteen.

In March, 1894, only a month after his release with a full pardon and citizenship rights fully restored, Hardin began making inquiries about the Bradley killing of twenty-four years before. We again turn to the Hill County account of August 30, 1895, to learn of the background of Hardin's inquiries.

"In October, 1872, Hardin was indicted for the murder of Bradley. Last year when Hardin was released from the penitentiary he wrote to Sheriff Bell and County Attorney Jordan, stating that he would like to have the case here dismissed, as he intended to reform and lead an honorable life, and wished to have the case off his hands. He said he was confident that he would have no difficulty in beating the case, but wished to be saved the expense of the trial. The letters also stated that he intended to take up the profession of law. An investigation of the case was made and it was discovered that all the witnesses to the killing were dead, so when the district court met in the fall the case against him was dismissed."

The correspondence mentioned in this account between Hardin, Sheriff Bell and County Attorney Jordan, as well as Gonzales County Sheriff Richard M. Glover, is only partially preserved today. There is more than a mere exchange of facts and opinions in these letters. There is the expression of the elements of friendship and loyalty, as well as the suggestion of a man considering the misuse of the law, not
for personal gain, but to coerce Hardin into proving his intentions to lead a good and respectable life.

Glover was himself a child when Hardin was in his prime; he had had two uncles who went up the cattle trail to Abilene, Kansas, in 1871, with Hardin. Bell was four years older than Hardin, and knew him while Hardin lived in Hill County. County Attorney Jordan lived in Hill County in 1869 so he quite probably knew Hardin as well.

At least a dozen letters were exchanged between these individuals concerning the Bradley killing and standing indictments against Hardin in Hill County. Bell did investigate and found the indictment still on the docket. But due to the intervening years witnesses had died or had moved on, and Bell doubted if Hardin could be convicted. He did express what certainly was an attitude of many in his letter of March 27: "I knowed Hardin while here, and supose [sic] there has been considerable change in him Since that time [.] I Know all his Relations In this county and they are all fine people and the citizens thinks Generaly [sic] that John Wesley Hardin has been punished enough and had I not thought so I would have went after him before he was released from the pen, But it might Be Best to hold this case on the Dockett unill [sic] he thoroughly Proves by His conduct that he intends to Keep out of trouble and not [cause] any one else trouble [.] However If you Insist on it I will get the case Dismissed [.]"

Bell's suggestion to hold the case over Hardin's head until he proved he was a reformed man was rejected by Glover. He wrote Bell a strong letter condemning the notion. At the same time he wrote Hardin that he believed the case would be dismissed.

Bell did confer with Attorney Jordan. In April court convened and Glover's prediction proved correct—the Bradley case against Hardin was dismissed. Wrote Bell to Glover on April 14: "Our District Court adjourned last evening, will meet no more until Sept. The Case against John Wesley Hardin was dismissed So there is nothing in Hill Co [.] against Wes. Tell Wes to be a good man and Keep out of trouble."

Glover did relay Bell's advice to Hardin to avoid trouble and to be a good man. It is unfortunate that Glover has remained a relatively unknown personality as his correspondence dealing with Hardin's concerns over the Bradley killing reveal him as a compassionate and insightful individual.

Unfortunately Hardin was unable to follow the advice of Sheriff Bell. He soon left the Gonzales area and traveled westward to El Paso. His passion for gambling, gunplay and frequenting saloons was kindled again in the rough atmosphere of the border city. He was now in a near-identical environment of his youth in Towash.
In early May, 1895, Hardin lost considerable money in the Gem saloon and held up the game to retrieve it. He felt justified in his actions and wrote a lengthy explanation which was printed in the El Paso “Times.” This letter, entitled “John Wesley Hardin’s Say” was reprinted in the Gonzales “Inquirer” and read by Sheriff Glover, his old friend. Glover felt it necessary to again write Hardin to express his concern over his safety. Glover’s compassion and understanding are clearly revealed in the letter, reproduced below in full:

“Smiley 5/18/95
Jno. W. Hardin
El Paso
Dear Wes:
I have just seen your letter to the [El Paso] “Times” as copied by the Gonzales “Inquirer” My Friend let me once more enjoin you to be Cautious and guard well your ever [y] act and word. Your many friends here that Know you and are acquainted with your honorable aim in life very much regret that you have found it necessary to again return to your old gaming life as they think that it will throw temptation in your way which Could be avoided in the quiet practice of your chosen profession. write me a long letter and let me Know how you are getting along. I hope you will not deem this piece of free advise [sic] presumptive on my part as you must Know that I am prompted by oft expressed motives only. I am not one to “turn loose” because some one else dose [sic] and can only say that I entertain now all the feelings of friendship heretofore expressed and have the utmost confidence in your honorable and manly aim as expressed to me and as evidenced by your acts while here [.] I believe however that you are more susceptible to temptation under certain influences than the ordinary man viz: whiskey cards & bad men (claimed to be fighters &c) hence this unasked for advice. Remember that wherever we be that there is a God, whether it be in a Saloon Gaming room or elsewhere and that He holds us accountable for all our acts and is ready and willing to remove all difficulties and troubles. With kindest regards and love from wife & children to you
I am as ever
Sincerely Your friends
R. M. Glover”.

Glover had, in various ways, relayed Sheriff Bell’s advice to Wes To “be a good man and keep out of trouble” but Hardin was unable to resist the attraction of the harder life—the gambling dens, the carrying of weapons (which in his youth was commonplace but now illegal), the consumption of alcohol. These elements were all contributive factors in the Bradley killing. They were just as evident in the days preceding his own death in El Paso in August, 1895, little more than a year after Sheriff Bell’s advice to “be a good man and keep out of trouble.”
One statement in the *Life* may provide a clue as to why he became so inextricably involved in deadly encounters. In the concluding sentences of narrative regarding the Bradley killing, he had written “... as he staggered and fell, he said, ‘O, Lordy, don’t shoot me any more.’ I could not stop. I was shooting because I did not want to take chances on a reaction.” (Boldface by author.)

Unknowingly Hardin may have provided the reason for his attraction to a life of violence, that he was impelled to it. Granted, killings and other acts of violence were not uncommon during the years immediately following the end of the Civil War, especially on the Texas frontier which had besides the hatreds of Reconstruction to deal with the problems of Indian savagery and Mexican-American prejudices. Hardin, although frequently in company with friends and relatives who tended also to be prone to violence, still must be considered a “loner” in the annals of gunfighter lore. Paul Trachtman accurately wrote that the loners “... frequently murdered out of sudden impulse. They appeared to lack any semblance of self-control, any means of cooling the passion to wipe other men off the face of the earth, any inner check that told them when to stop.”

Invariably Hardin was able to provide reasons for killing, “reasons” which were very justifiable in his troubled mind. But from available sources it appears plausible that the Bradley killing was not one where he justifiably could have claimed “self-defense.”

NOTES


2The 1870 Hill County census record, enumerated by assistant marshal Littleton J. Sturgis, provides only one individual with the Boles surname, that being a twenty year old George Boles, a white male, occupation listed as laborer. Since Hardin refers to the “old Boles track” probably this man was the son of the race track originator. In addition the census record failed to show a John Collins, but did reveal a John B. Collins who may be the man of Hardin’s entourage. Collins was related by marriage, not blood, thus possibly explaining the confusion. If the Hill County account of 1895 should correctly have read J. B. Collins instead of L. B. it is quite probable this was the partner of Hardin. He was a twenty year old farmer, native of Mississippi.

3Hardin here was certainly referring to the property belonging to Simpson C. Dyer.

4The Hill County census record fails to show a Moore with occupation of judge or attorney, although there are several families of that name. Nothing more has been learned of this individual with certainty. Thomas Ripley, in his study of Hardin, called him Ed Moore but gave no source for this information. (*They Died With Their Boots On*, Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., Garden City, New York, 1935, p. 30.)
One exception could be James L. Horan's *The Gunfighters, The Authentic Wild West*, (Crown Publishers, New York, 1976). Wrote Horan in part: "In the winter of 1869 he rode into Towash, a wild cow town where brothels, saloons, and gambling halls were open twenty-four hours a day. The community was ruled by Jim Bradley, a desperado and killer who owned a crude racetrack on the edge of town and enforced his own law with a band of fugitives and gunfighters." Horan also stated that Hardin killed Bradley with a rifle. He provided statements about this incident not found in the *Life*, but unfortunately did not cite his sources for these remarkable statements. Thomas Ripley described Bradley as being the chief of "eight or ten rough customers down from Hot Springs." (p. 28) Ripley based his work essentially on Hardin's *Life*, but also claimed to have interviewed numerous people who had known Hardin; consequently he may have learned additional details of various incidents from witnesses or participants.


The Hill County census provides additional details of the relatives. Ann Hardin, aged sixty, shared her residence with Lycle (?) Hardin and a James Crawford. No Barnett Hardin is listed, but the family of William B. Hardin is, he being a thirty five year old farmer with $10,000 worth of personal and real estate. With his wife Rachel and their three children was a Mary H. Hardin, aged fifty-four. One Page family is listed, James W. and his wife Martha and their five children. In the description of the Bradley killing aftermath Hardin referred to "old Jim Page" so we can be fairly certain that this is the Page family referred to as relatives.

*Daily Democratic Statesman*, (Austin) August 30, 1877, “Accusations Against Wesley Hardin.”

The Hardin Letter Collection is preserved in the Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos. The majority of the letters were written during the prison years, 1878-1894.

Bell, Jordan, and Glover are all relatively unknown today. Thomas Bell (1849-1905) served as Hill County sheriff from 1892 to 1900. He was farming at the time of the Bradley killing. George I. Jordan had come to Texas from Mississippi in 1869 and had located at Covington, Hill County. In 1880 he entered the law profession under Tarlton and Bullock. He was appointed City Attorney in 1881. The Glovers were long time respected citizens of Gonzales County. In 1871 there were at least two Glovers accompanying the young Hardin to Abilene, Kansas on a cattle drive. Richard M. Glover was born in 1862, the only child of Richard M. and Delilah Bundick Glover. He married Miss M. A. Colley in 1887. In November, 1890, he was elected sheriff of Gonzales County, the youngest man to hold that position up to that time. On June 14, 1901, he was killed in the line of duty by outlaw Gregorio Cortez. A huge manhunt involving other lawmen, ordinary citizens, and Texas Rangers finally brought about the capture of Cortez. Of further interest in the Hardin-Glover relationship is that his signature appears on a list of twenty-six sheriffs' names, members of the Sheriffs Association of Texas, on an application for Hardin's pardon, dated May, 1892.