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THE AMERICAN OLD WEST WAS A WILD AND DANGEROUS PLACE TO BE

Few areas of history have gripped the imagination as much as the expansion of the United States into the wilderness of the West. Sensational tales of the 'Wild West' portrayed a violent and brutal land where hardy settlers rubbed alongside brave cowboys, ruthless outlaws and savage Indians, where people took the law into their own hands to protect themselves and their families.

This image of the Old West proved hugely popular and was consolidated in American folklore, music and dime novels that were published in their millions in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Soldier and showman Buffalo Bill Cody similarly popularized the legend of the frontier land through his Wild West shows. Queen Victoria attended one of his shows at Earls Court in 1867 and wrote in her diary, 'an attack on a coach and on a ranch, with an immense deal of firing, was most exciting, so was the buffalo hunt, and the bucking ponies, that were almost impossible to sit ...'

In the twentieth century, the legend of the Wild West spread to the rest of the world as artists, magazines and movies spun a whole industry around its mythologization, in which gun-slinging heroes battled against 'Injuns' in places where, as Sergio Leone put it, 'life has no value'. The first Western movie, *The Great Train Robbery*, came out in 1903 and by the 1950s the genre

was also lapped up by US television audiences who by 1959 could choose from no fewer than twenty-six prime-time Western series.

Yet the reality of life in the West was quite different from the general lawlessness depicted in the movies. Recent research has shown that crime was relatively low among the West's settlers and you were more likely to be gunned down in Victorian London than in the Wild West. In the real Dodge City, which at one point was thought of as the biggest and rowdiest town of the Wild West, a total of five deaths in 1878 amounted to the town's worst year for homicides. Similarly, the legendary shoot-out at the OK Corral, a gunfight between two gangs led by Wyatt Earp and Ike Clanton (and regarded as the most famous gun battle in the history of the Old West) lasted all of sixty seconds and resulted in just three deaths. Face-offs at noon were not common events and gunfights were usually spontaneous and the result of drunken arguments that had got out of hand. The Wild West mythmakers would also have us believe that bank robberies were everyday events, but Larry Schweikart of the University of Dayton has estimated that between 1859 and 1900 just *twelve* bank robberies occurred along the Western frontier.

Research has also shown that, in the absence of any formal government, settlers devised surprisingly effective ways to protect themselves from all manner of crimes. Voluntary organizations in the form of 'wagon-train' governments were set up to police and protect the 300,000 pioneers travelling west to California and Oregon, whilst in the Midwest, land clubs and cattlemen associations settled disputes and enforced property rights. On the west coast, gold-mining districts set up legal

systems that punished crimes against life and property. On the whole, miners avoided violence and abided by the rules of the district. Andrew Morriss of Case Western Reserve University writes, ‘This amazing polyglot of men seeking rapid wealth, and with virtually no intention of building a lasting society, created a set of customary legal institutions which not only flourished in California but successfully adapted to conditions across the West.’

COWBOYS

Also central to the Wild West myth was the gun-sliding cowboy, the embodiment of the brave lone-rider, who, we’re led to believe, overran the frontier land. In reality, farmers outnumbered cowboys in the West by about a *thousand* to one: there were (at the most) only 10,000 working cowboys, the majority of whom were either Hispanic, African American or Mexican. Few cowboys could afford a firearm (a modern Colt weapon represented an average nine months’ salary) and many died young, not from shoot-outs but from riding accidents or illnesses borne from a hard but decidedly unglamorous life herding cows across vast plains.

Other old West myths, largely popularized by the entertainment industry, include the image of westward migrants