



Chronology of Significant Events

1835 Notorious Reconstruction outlaw Cullen Montgomery Baker was born near the Obion River, Weakley County, Tennessee.

1840 Benjamin Bickerstaff, Reconstruction outlaw, was born near Gray Rock, Titus County, Texas.

1844 Thomas Orr, the nemesis of Cullen Montgomery Baker, was born in Henry County, Georgia.

1851 Lampasas, Texas, feudist Pink Higgins was born in Macon, Georgia (March 28).

1853 John Wesley Hardin was born at Blair's Springs, near Bonham, Texas.

1854 Cullen Montgomery Baker killed his first victim near Forest Home, Texas.

1857 The Higgins and Horrell families migrated to Lampasas, Texas within months of each other.

1865 Union general Gordon Granger declared emancipation for Texas slaves (June 19).

1867 The Baker gang ambushed a Federal soldier and teamster (October 6). James Miller, one of the most

notorious assassins in the West, was born eighteen days later in Van Buren, Arkansas.

1868 A reward was posted for Cullen Baker, who reciprocated with a Wanted Dead or Alive poster offering a \$5,000 reward for Arkansas governor Clayton (September).

Reconstruction official John Kirkman was assassinated at Boston, Texas, by persons unknown (October 7). Cullen Baker was among the chief suspects.

Wild Bill Longley was hanged for the first time in northeast Texas but rescued by a brother of his associate Tom Johnson, who did not survive the lynching.

1869 Cullen Montgomery Baker was assassinated near present-day Doddridge, Arkansas (January).

The outlaw Bob Lee was killed (May 24).

1871 Hardin killed Pt. Jim Smalley near Waco after being arrested for murder (January 22). He also killed Charles Cougar in Abilene, Kansas, supposedly for snoring (August) and freedman Green Paramore of Gonzales, Texas (October 6).

1873 Mart, Tom, and Merritt Horrell killed three state policemen and mortally wounded a fourth while resisting arrest at Scott's Saloon in Lampasas (March 14).

Hardin killed Irishman James B. Morgan in a bar fight at Cuero (April).

Sutton factionist Jack Helm was killed by John Wesley Hardin and Jim Taylor at Albuquerque, sometime between March 1 and July 31.

1874 William Sutton, supposed agitator of the Sutton-Taylor feud, was assassinated with his associate Gabe Slaughter by Taylor factionists as the pair boarded a steamboat at Indianola, Texas (March 11).

1875 Accused cattle rustlers and cousins Pete and Lige Baccus were hanged by vigilantes near Mason on February 18.

Bill Longley killed William Anderson in revenge for the death of Longley's cousin in Evergreen, Texas, or so the story goes (April 1).

Tim Williamson, friend and mentor of former Texas Ranger Scott Cooley, was murdered on May 13, prompting Cooley to begin the Mason County War by killing and scalping former deputy sheriff John Worley (Wohrle) on August 10. Karl Bader was killed nine days later by Cooley associates.

Leading Taylor factionist Jim Taylor was assassinated at Clinton, Texas, with the collusion of Martin King, who carelessly allowed Taylor's horse to become loose, eliminating his chances for a quick escape (December 27).

1876 Pink Higgins killed Merritt Horrell at Scott's Saloon in Lampasas (January 22).

John B. Armstrong captured John Wesley Hardin on a train at Pensacola, Florida, and killed his associate Jim Mann (August 23).

1877 Sam Bass and other members of the Joel Collins gang robbed a stagecoach near Deadwood, South Dakota, and killed driver Johnny Slaughter (March 25).

The Horrell-Higgins feudists fought a two-hour battle in downtown Lampasas, killing two (June 7).

The Joel Collins gang robbed the eastbound Union Pacific No. 4 train at Big Springs, Nebraska, taking some \$60,000 (September 18).

Bass associate Jim Berry was mortally wounded resisting arrest near Mexico, Missouri (October 14).

The Sam Bass gang launched a Lone Star stage and train robbing campaign ten miles west of Fort Worth, robbing the Concho stage (December 22).

1878 Texas Rangers and the Wise County sheriff attacked the Bass gang, killing associate Arkansas Johnson and all the horses, forcing the other gang members to flee on foot (June 13).

Reconstruction outlaw Bill Longley was hanged twice for good measure in Giddings, Texas (October 11).

1882 Former DeWitt County, Texas, resident and Sutton-Taylor feudist John Peters Ringo was killed in the mountains near Tombstone, by his own pistol or otherwise (July 14).

1887 Mannen Clements, Sr., cousin of John Wesley Hardin, was killed in Ballenger, Texas, by City Marshal Joe Townsend in an election-related gunfight (March 29).

1903 Pink Higgins killed his archenemy Bill Standifer near Higgins' Kent County, Texas, ranch, then reported the incident to the county sheriff by telephone, only to be told to make sure Standifer was dead, or so the story goes (October 1).

1908 Pat Garrett was killed near Las Cruces, New Mexico Territory (February 29). Although Wayne Brazil claimed self-defense, James Miller has long been suspected of the crime.

1909 Notorious killer Clyde Chestnut Barrow was born near Telico, Texas (March 24).

1913 Pink Higgins died of a heart attack at home in West Texas (December 18).

1927 Marshal Ratliff, better known as the Santa Claus robber, escaped from a Cisco bank on December 23 with a large amount of cash, only to leave it behind in a stolen getaway car, after mortally wounding two lawmen. One month earlier, the Texas Bankers Association had increased the Dead Bank Robber program reward from \$500 to \$5,000, today worth about \$55,000. Ratliff was lynched two years later following an escape attempt.

1934 Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were ambushed and killed eight miles south of Gibsland, Louisiana, on State Highway 154 (May 23).

1935 Barrow gang stalwarts Joe Palmer and Ray Hamilton were executed (May 10).



Outlaw Hideouts, Hangouts, and Locales

Abilene, Kansas

Kansas mythology says that John Wesley Hardin killed Charles Cougar here on July 6, 1871, in a hotel for snoring, although contemporary newspaper reports make no mention of such a newsworthy motivation.

Ada, Oklahoma

James Miller and three other men accused of murdering Augustus Bobbitt were lynched here, April 19, 1909.

Atlanta, Texas

James Salmon was killed about five miles east of town, reportedly by the Baker gang (October 24).

Austin County, Texas

Dreaded shootist Wild Bill Longley was born here on October 6, 1851, then participated in many Reconstruction-era killings before he was hanged in Giddings, Texas.

Big Thicket

Wooded area where Grayson, Fannin, Collin, and Hunt counties converge, providing a refuge for deserters from both armies during the Civil War and for outlaws in the years following.

Bonham, Texas

Cullen Baker and Benjamin Bickerstaff reportedly murdered a Reconstruction official here in May 1868.

Comanche, Texas

John Wesley Hardin killed Deputy Sheriff Charles Webb here May 26, 1874.

Dallas, Texas

The Barrow family gas station and residence is located at 1221 Singleton Road, not far from the first Dallas residence of Bonnie Parker, 2908 Eagle Ford Road. Deputy Sheriff Malcolm Davis was killed by Clyde Barrow at 507 County Avenue, west Dallas, on January 6, 1933.

Denton, Texas

Motor Mark Garage, 311 West Oak, was burglarized by Clyde and Buck Barrow on November 29, 1929.

Eagle Ford, Texas

Sam Bass and associates robbed the Texas and Pacific here on April 4, 1878, taking \$234, today worth about \$4,500.

Eastham, Texas

Joe Palmer mortally wounded Major (given name) Joseph Crowson here during a prison-farm break on January 16, 1934.

El Paso, Texas

John Wesley Hardin established a law office at the Wells Fargo Building, 200½ El Paso Street, after serving a prison term. John Selman, Sr., assassinated Hardin at the Acme Saloon on August 19, 1895. The next year (April 5, 1896) Selman himself was killed by lawman George Scarborough

near the Wigwam Saloon before Selman could even draw his weapon.

Evant, Texas

Eight-year-old James Miller was arrested for killing his grandparents here in 1874 but was never prosecuted. Ten years later he killed his sister's husband near Gatesville, July 30, 1884.

Evergreen, Texas

Wild Bill Longley and others killed freedman Green Evans near here in December 1868.

Fort Sill, Oklahoma

Sam Bass absconded with several Indian ponies wagered in a disputed horse race, then refused a request by deputy U.S. marshals to return them.

Fort Worth, Texas

Sam Bass robbed the Weatherford and Fort Worth stage of \$400 near here on January 26, 1878.

James Miller killed his real estate partner Frank Fore in a hotel washroom in 1904.

Fredericksburg, Texas

Mason County feudist Scott Cooley died near town after dining at the Nimitz Hotel, possibly of heavy-metal poisoning, on June 10, 1876.

Gladewater, Texas

Temporarily paroled prisoner Wade Hampton McNabb was kidnapped here by Clyde Barrow, Joe Palmer, and Henry Methvin on March 29, 1934, according to Barrow

gang member Ralph Fults. His body was found a few days later about ten miles north of Waskom, Texas, after Palmer tipped off a Houston newspaper reporter.

Grapevine, Texas

The Home Bank at 404 South Main was robbed by Ray Hamilton associates Les Stewart and Odell Chambless on December 29, 1932.

Houston, Texas

Wild Bill Longley arrived here by freight train in 1866, then supposedly killed a freedman.

Houston Press reporter Harry McCormick interviewed Barrow gang members Ralph Fults and Ray Hamilton near the intersection of Hempstead Road and Satsuma on March 18, 1935.

Former Barrow gang member W. D. Jones meddled in a domestic dispute on August 20, 1974, at 10616 Woody Lane and was shot to death.

Hueco Tanks, Texas

Horrell gang adherents Zach Crompton and Edward Hart were killed here by a Lincoln County, New Mexico, posse (February 1, 1874).

Hutchins, Texas

Texas Express messenger Heck Thomas prevented the Bass gang from stealing about \$4,000 during a train robbery by simply hiding the money before the train trip even started on March 18, 1878. Heck's cousin, also a Texas Express employee, had been the victim of an earlier train robbery.

Joplin, Missouri

The address of 3347½ Thirty-fourth Street was the site of

an April 13, 1933, shootout between the Barrow gang and local police, two of whom were killed.

Kaufman, Texas

Bonnie Parker, Clyde Barrow, and associate Ralph Fults were forced to flee from an attempted hardware-store robbery in a humiliating mule-back escape after their car stalled in mud. The bandits rode off to nearby Kemp, where Parker and Fults were captured in April 1932.

Lampasas, Texas

Lampasas was the epicenter of the Horrell-Higgins feud, which began in 1873 and ended four years later.

Tom and Mart Horrell were ambushed five miles outside of town by the Higgins faction (March 26, 1877).

Las Cruces, New Mexico

About two miles outside town, former lawman Pat Garrett was assassinated on February 29, 1908.

Lincoln, New Mexico Territory

Ben Horrell and his associate Jackito Gylam were killed in a bordello dispute with Constable Juan Martin (December 1, 1873). Nineteen days later, the Horrells broke up a wedding party in Lincoln, killing four revelers and injuring two.

Loyal Valley, Texas

A town that became a haven for Confederate sympathizers during the Mason County War.

Lubbock, Texas

“Deacon” Jim Miller assassinated attorney James Jarrott near town after Jarrott successfully defended small ranchers derisively called “nesters” by larger ranching interests (1904).

Mason, Texas

This Hill Country town was the epicenter of the Mason County War.

Meridian, Texas

Tom and Mart Horrell were killed in the county jail (December 15, 1878).

Mitchell, Indiana

Sam Bass was born here July 21, 1851.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Barrow gang stalwart Joe Palmer learned about the death of Bonnie and Clyde while lounging in the lobby of the Hutchins Hotel at 16-26 North Broadway on May 23, 1934.

Pecos, Texas

Gunman Barney Riggs killed “Deacon” Jim Miller associates John Denson and Bill Earhart here on March 3, 1896. Riggs himself was killed in a family feud four years later.

Platte City, Missouri

A gunfight between the Barrow gang and local authorities erupted on July 19, 1933, at the Red Crown Tourist Court, then at the intersection of Highways 59 and 71, six miles south of Platte City.

Queen City, Texas

Freedman Jerry Sheffield was murdered about two miles east of town December 6, 1868, after boasting he would collect a reward on Cullen Baker.

Round Rock, Texas

Suspicious lawmen confronted Bass gang associates inside Koppel’s General Merchandise Store at the southeast corner

of Georgetown Avenue and May Street on July 19, 1878. Deputy Sheriff Ellis Grimes and bandit Seaborn Barnes were killed in the ensuing shootout. Sam Bass was wounded while escaping. He was captured and returned to Round Rock, where he died of his wound two days later, on his twenty-seventh birthday.

Rowena, Texas

Hometown of the notorious Bonnie Parker.

Train robber Dock Newton capped his career by robbing a bank here at age seventy-seven.

Scott's Mill, Davis County, Texas

A peace treaty of sorts between Cullen Baker and his enemies, self-described as the Famous Six, was concluded here November 3, 1868.

Shreveport, Louisiana

Clyde Barrow, Bonnie Parker, and Henry Methvin stopped at the Majestic Café (now Pano's Café) at 422 Milam Street but were scared off by a patrol car, May 21, 1934.

Texarkana, Arkansas

Thomas Orr served as the first mayor after planning the killing of Cullen Baker.

Towash, Texas

John Wesley Hardin killed Benjamin B. Bradley here on January 4, 1870, following a gambling dispute.

Toyah, Texas

James Miller ambushed and killed Bud Frazer in a local saloon, then threatened to kill Frazer's sister for complaining, September 14, 1896.

Turkey Creek Canyon, near Tombstone, Arizona

Scott Cooley associate John Ringo died here July 14, 1882, by his own hand or otherwise.

Waco, Texas

Bill Longley killed George Thomas nearby on November 13, 1875, during a fox hunt.

Storekeeper Dorrie Vaughn was murdered about thirty miles to the west on May 28, 1878. The Horrells and their associates were identified as the killers by a prosecution witness.

The Bass gang scouted the town banks here on July 7, 1878, but moved on to meet disaster at Round Rock, twelve days later.

CHAPTER ONE

Cullen Baker: Mad as Hell till Death

Cullen Baker never saw the antiquated Kentucky rifle that blew his brains out. He was dozing away in the grass that Friday morning in January 1869, at the William Foster place near Brightstar, Arkansas, near the Texas line. The noise from the gun blast that killed Baker did at least rouse his last remaining gang member, Matthew “Dummy” Kirby, if only for a moment, just before his earthly journey was also ended by a rifle shot.¹

Witnesses later mentioned that the “Swamp Fox” died with a scrap of paper in his pocket, whose solemn commitments bound the oath taker to the Ku Klux Klan, one of the many secret organizations that opposed federal forces to one degree or another during Reconstruction days in northeast Texas.² Such a discovery was hardly a surprise to anyone on the Arkansas-Texas border, where Cullen Montgomery Baker made his reputation as a killer so cold-blooded that his own former neighbors executed him.

Although much that has been said about Baker’s exploits throughout the years is pure myth, he undoubtedly engendered real fear among the people of northeast Texas, particularly the new freedmen he delighted in harassing. A guidebook for Easterners emigrating to Texas in the very year of his death minimized newspaper accounts of lawlessness in Texas but admitted the depredations of Baker and two fellow Texans forever associated with him, Robert Jehu “Bob” Lee and Benjamin F. Bickerstaff.³

Baker was emblematic of the Texas Reconstruction



A barn stands on the site where Cullen Montgomery Baker was killed. (Courtesy of Donaly E. Brice)

outlaws who plagued the Lone Star State even after that movement officially became a dead letter. These outlaws robbed federal supply wagons rather than the banks and trains later raided by the likes of Jesse James and Sam Bass.

He was immortalized in Western fiction by Louis L'Amour, who idealized him as a gunfighter in *The First Fast Draw* (New York, 1959). In fact, most of his gunfights were one-sided affairs, in which Baker faced unarmed innocents or ambushed armed opponents. His modern biographers, Barry A. Crouch and Donaly E. Brice, described him as a coward, bully, and sociopath rather than the mythical figure who supposedly protected the innocent from scores of Unionists, carpetbaggers, and Federal soldiers.⁴

The infamous Swamp Fox crossed into the Great Beyond with the tools of his trade bulging out of his pockets.

His signature extra-large double-barreled shotgun was supplemented by four six-shooters, three derringers, and at least five pocket knives. He also carried a December 16, 1868, article from the Louisville *Courier Journal* reporting that Baker had left the States on an expedition to Cuba. Perhaps this report made Baker think that he might be left alone in spite of all the havoc he had created during the past fifteen years.

His partner left this world armed nearly as well as Baker. A double-barreled shotgun, two six-shooters, and a single pocket knife were found on Kirby after his death. However, his empty wallet showed that working with the Swamp Fox was hardly a road to affluence.⁵

Kirby probably had few such delusions, even if he had the sense to consider his increasingly vulnerable situation in the days just before they were ambushed. The Swamp Fox had quarreled with the rest of his crew less than thirty days ago and could only watch in silence as his principal lieutenant rode away with the bums, bandits, and ne'er-do-wells who comprised the last Baker gang—all but Dummy himself, that is. The Swamp Fox may have been a regionally famous outlaw before Jesse James entered the national spotlight, but now only Kirby remained, tied to Baker by a loyalty that reminded one observer of that shown by a dog to a kind master.⁶ Cullen Montgomery Baker was never the larger-than-life, chivalrous Southerner, the tall figure on a white horse feared in the Sulphur River country of his own time and apparently admired from afar by a surprising number of Texans and Arkansans even today. A country fair has been held in his honor at Bloomburg, Texas, in recent times, perhaps reflecting the legends about his crimes and atrocities that still abound in the tri-state area of northeast Texas, southwest Arkansas, and northwest Louisiana.

Baker's sobriquet is just as mysterious as the man. One newspaper article reported that Baker became the "Swamp

Fox of the Sulphur” in a heroic 1887 swim across the flood-swollen Black Bayou under fire from some two hundred pursuers—an amazing feat indeed when one considers that the Swamp Fox had been killed eighteen years earlier.⁷

Still, Cullen was anything but a soft-drawling patrician from *Gone with the Wind*. Instead, one contemporary described him as a chubby, red-faced alcoholic in homespun clothes who rode a black mule rather than a white horse. About two years earlier, one observer described Baker as about five feet, nine inches tall, about 160 pounds, with dark blue eyes, sandy hair, and a yellow complexion probably confirming his alcoholic tendencies.⁸

Undoubtedly, his religious parents had higher expectations. Baker was probably born June 22, 1835, the only son of John Baker and his first wife, near the Obion River in Weakley County, Tennessee, near the Kentucky border.⁹ Legendary frontiersman David Crockett lived in that county from about 1822 until his departure for Texas in 1835. John Baker and his young family of five joined the numerous Tennesseans who followed Crockett to Lone Star lands and better opportunities, settling in Red River County, which was created the next year.

The new Baker estate was near Old Boston in present-day Bowie County, which had once been considered part of Arkansas and was separated from Red River County, Texas, in 1840.¹⁰ Settlement in the Bowie County area had begun by 1818 and kept pace with the development of nearby Miller County, Arkansas. Cotton was king in Bowie County, which had more black residents than white by 1850. When the Civil War erupted, Old Boston boasted a population of more than four hundred.

Feuds and violence became the order of the day the very year the Bakers arrived near Spanish Bluffs, a historic Texas site where Thomas Jefferson’s 1806 Red River expedition had been blocked by a Spanish army. The 1840 Regulator-

Moderator War, for example, was caused by a dispute over fraudulent land-sales practices along the Sabine River. Charles W. Jackson, an embittered and recently defeated political candidate, claimed he would correct these practices. Instead, he triggered a series of violent exchanges between the Regulators, who sought to expose and destroy the fraud ring, and the Moderators, who tried to restrain the reformers.¹¹

Several early biographers suggest these difficulties encouraged the Baker family to move on from Spanish Bluffs to a location some forty miles south on the Sulphur River in Cass County by 1844.¹² When the Civil War commenced, Cass County was renamed for Confederate president Jefferson Davis, then named Cass County again in 1871.

Mrs. Baker apparently died shortly after the family moved to their new home. About two years later, John returned to Weakley County and proposed to Nancy Parker, whom he married on December 7, 1846. Baker returned to Texas with his new bride and claimed land offered to early Republic of Texas settlers.¹³ Land ownership did not resolve his problems with Cullen, who had already demonstrated a propensity for trouble by age twelve. One oft-told tale relates that young Cullen stole a horse at Jefferson, Texas, then rode it to death for no reason at all, obligating his father to compensate the owner.¹⁴

Some Baker apologists relate that at about age eleven, Cullen was harassed at a gristmill for his homespun clothing, prompting him to pummel an antagonist named Atkinson (or Adkinson) and begin a life of crime.¹⁵ Whether this incident happened or not, Cullen's criminal behavior was more likely caused by his drinking and carousing habits.

One story of his boyhood may help explain the irrationality he frequently displayed throughout his life. In 1853, Baker and some friends decided to carouse in the town of Forest

Home, a community near present-day Queen City, Texas, established by South Carolinian John R. Wright and still located on a “soil-surfaced” (dirt) road about four miles west of Winnsboro in northern Wood County. There, in a barroom brawl, he fought with one Morgan Culp over some matter now long forgotten. Culp avoided Baker’s knife only by smacking him across the head with a hatchet or tomahawk, causing a concussion that disabled the young Swamp Fox for several months and perhaps accounted to some degree for his frequently displayed mental instability.¹⁶

Cullen married Mary Jane Petty of Lafayette County, Arkansas, in January 1854, only nine months before the bridegroom killed his first man. According to newspaper accounts, one Wesley Baily saw Baker whip a young orphan named Stallcup within an inch of his life at Forest Home. Baker claimed later that he feared the younger man intended to kill him.¹⁷ Baily evidently thought it was his civic duty to testify about this assault. Baker was convicted and immediately rode to the Baily homestead, where he trapped the good citizen in his own barn and blasted him with a shotgun on October 8, 1854. Baily died two or three days later.¹⁸ Baker fled to Perry County, Arkansas, where, according to 1860 census takers, he lived with his wife, daughter, and two sisters in McCool Township, perhaps for at least two years.

Following the July 1860 death of his wife, Baker virtually abandoned his young daughter, leaving her with his in-laws in Lafayette County, Arkansas. He then returned to Perry County, Arkansas, where he promptly was drawn into a feud with John F. and Mary E. Warthan. The latter apparently had criticized Baker publicly, prompting him to confront her while he was intoxicated. Baker stabbed John F. Warthan to death as Baker attempted to beat her, according to anecdotes accepted by his most recent biographers.¹⁹

In July 1862, two years to the very month after the death

of his first wife, and while a twenty-seven-year-old resident of Jefferson, Texas, Cullen married fifteen-year-old Martha Foster of Brightstar, Arkansas, a burg about four miles east of the Texas line, near Atlanta, Texas. Her parents were Kentuckian William Foster and Arkansas native Elizabeth Foster, a couple whose lives would be intertwined with Baker, even after the untimely death of Martha four years later. William Foster initially welcomed Baker into his family but ultimately was instrumental in his death.²⁰

Baker had already enlisted twice in the Confederate army by the time Martha became his bride. Records show that he joined Company G, Morgan's Regimental Cavalry, at Jefferson, Texas in November 1861. He was paid for his service in August 1862 but deserted that unit by January 1863.²¹

He is also shown in Company I of the Fifteenth Texas Cavalry from February 1862 to February 1863, but he was left ill and incapacitated at the Arkansas River in August 1862. Some writers record sightings of Baker at notable battles in the region, including Wilson's Creek in August 1861 and Pea Ridge in early March 1862, although there is apparently no documentation of Baker participating as part of a regiment.²²

More certainly, by the middle of 1863, Baker's pathological hatred of blacks began to manifest itself. Stories circulating at the time indicated that, for no reason at all, he killed a black woman in Sevier County, Arkansas, and a young black man.²³

His principal modern biographers also relate stories that Baker found a unique venue to vent his racial hostilities by joining the Union army as a civilian employee, perhaps to hide from the authorities in plain sight. He obtained appointment as an overseer of black freedmen, one of whom he killed for no apparent reason, thus concluding his Federal service.²⁴

Baker also led at least two different outlaw bands during the Civil War. One such gang included the notorious

Benjamin Bickerstaff, who joined Baker by December 1864, according to one early biographer.²⁵ Some sources relate that during the conflict, Bickerstaff, Baker, and others joined forces to conduct raids on Federal outposts as far away as Louisiana.²⁶

Bickerstaff was born in 1840 near Gray Rock, Titus County, Texas, where he joined a company of local dragoons (cavalrymen) before joining Baker in guerilla operations against the Union. Sometime after December 1864, Baker, Bickerstaff, and others reportedly raided Union headquarters at Nacogdoches, Texas, and then ranged into Louisiana, challenging Federal authority.²⁷ Baker began a peaceful interlude in mid-1865, supposedly mending his outlaw ways for some six months. Reformed or not, Baker lived with his in-laws, the Fosters, from the beginning of an 1865 illness until January 1866, when he went to Line Ferry, Arkansas, to work as a ferryman.

Baker and other former Lone Star Confederates enjoyed a brief period of tranquility because the Texas Reconstruction was quite different than that experienced elsewhere in the defeated Confederacy.²⁸ Texas Reconstruction began, at least in theory, when Gen. Kirby Smith surrendered his command to Union general E. R. S. Canby on May 26, 1865. Smith was a native Floridian and devout Christian who almost resigned his commission in 1863 to become a minister. He could hardly have been more different from the Union officer who began the Texas Reconstruction effort.

Gen. Gordon Granger was a diminutive, vulgar New Yorker, considered profane even by army standards of the day. Granger was also a highly effective combat commander who proved his mettle, particularly at the Battle of Chickamauga. He informed the people of Texas on June 19, 1865, that all former slaves in the Lone Star State were free, but with strict conditions that essentially bound many blacks to their former owners, at least temporarily.²⁹

Further, military control of Texas would be necessary until a loyal (Unionist) sentiment should prevail among the citizens, at least according to Gen. George A. Custer, then stationed at Austin. Custer should have known. His responsibilities in 1865 included northeast Texas, where organized guerilla bands roamed, seemingly with no fear of Federal authorities.³⁰

This was so because Texas did not suffer serious physical destruction during the conflict, thus permitting the citizenry to enjoy a relatively stable and prosperous economy after the surrender. These conditions allowed many Texans of Confederate persuasion to maintain that they were unconquered and ready to start a “new rebellion,” according to some Reconstruction historians.³¹ Indisputably, Texas was the very last state of the old Confederacy in which the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (“Freedmen’s Bureau”) was organized. The Texas bureau was overwhelmed from the beginning by the sheer size of the state and unrelenting hostility demonstrated by much of the Lone Star citizenry.

While stationed in Austin, General Custer noted that three ruffians were the most dangerous outlaws in northeast Texas. Those would be Cullen Montgomery Baker, Benjamin Bickerstaff, and Bob Lee. These three formed a loose coalition dedicated to killing blacks and Union men, according to a Freedmen’s Bureau agent in Paris, Texas.³² Yet another outlaw who claimed to have associated with Baker was Bill Longley.³³

Bob Lee and Other Associates

Some say Bob Lee rode with Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest during the Civil War. More certainly, by the conclusion of that conflict, Lee had settled in the Corners

area of northeast Texas, where Grayson, Fannin, Collin, and Hunt counties converge.³⁴ The deep, immense forests of this area, notably the Big Thicket, provided abundant hiding places for army deserters and outlaws alike.

Bob Lee's Reconstruction difficulties stemmed from his differences with Lewis Peacock, a prosperous farmer who developed Unionist sympathies for commercial or other reasons. The conflict erupted in April 1868, engulfing both men. Lee was killed in late May 1869, and Peacock about two years later.

While Bickerstaff and Lee ordinarily were committed to partisan warfare against Federal soldiers, both before and after the conclusion of hostilities, Baker focused primarily on attacking Unionist civilians and blacks. While periodically participating in such raids in coordination with others or alone, Baker soon confronted an immense personal tragedy.

The death of his young wife, Martha, in March 1866 left the cold-blooded killer inconsolable and even more mentally imbalanced than usual.³⁵ Some say he built and conversed with a fully dressed effigy of Martha. Eventually, however, he recovered from his grief and proposed to her young sister Belle, who rejected him outright, most likely with the encouragement of Baker's former in-laws, the Fosters.

This rejection became the focus of Baker's remaining years. Thomas Orr, a schoolteacher of Unionist sentiment, courted and eventually married young Belle and thus became Baker's enemy. Orr was born in 1844 in Henry County, Georgia, and moved to the Arkansas-Texas border by June 1866, where he initially boarded with Baker's former in-laws.³⁶ He became a subscription schoolteacher near Bloomburg, Texas, where the annual Cullen Baker Country Fair is held to this day. Although Orr and Baker were initially friendly, that all changed when their competition for the hand of young Belle began.

Their personalities could not have been more different. Orr was an inveterate joiner who eventually became a judge. Despite their earlier friendship, after being jilted by young Belle, Baker picked a fight with Orr at Line Ferry, a Sulphur River crossing about seven miles from Texas where Baker was working as a ferryman. The Swamp Fox offered the abstinent Georgian a drink, which he surely knew Orr would decline, in spite of the insult that such a refusal represented at that place and time.

During the ensuing fistfight, Baker had no problem at all pummeling Orr, who had a crippled right arm due to rheumatism.³⁷ Later, Baker appeared at Orr's schoolhouse, demanding the ferry fee that the inconsiderate Orr forgot to pay during the June 2, 1866, fistfight. After collecting the fee, Baker did his level best to run off every single student in Orr's privately run school.

This and other incidents caused Baker's neighbors to meet and consider their options. One William Foster (no relation to Baker's former father-in-law) dissuaded the others from killing Baker, only to be killed later himself by the Swamp Fox, according to one story.³⁸ Baker was confronted by this concerned citizenry and responded with one of the strangest series of letters in the history of the West.

Baker warned Orr by a letter dated July 20, 1866, not to be absent from his school teachings, then described himself as "*Mad as Hell till Death.*" Nine days later, after neighbors intervened in this feud, Baker wrote a remorseful letter to his former father-in-law, admitting that he was a "liar, drunkard and a devil." In an empty gesture of goodwill, Baker promised to defer his revenge against Orr until the end of the school term in deference to the feelings of his neighbors.³⁹

Further correspondence between Orr and Baker culminated in a final, public effort by Orr to reconcile their differences. Orr published a letter in the quaintly named

Jefferson Jimplecute on April 27, 1867, offering to settle the dispute. Baker answered with a bizarre series of raids in which he killed several neighborhoods dogs.⁴⁰

Finally, on June 1, 1867, he demanded and received free food at a grocery store while the proprietor, a Mr. Rowden, was away. Nine days later, Baker returned and murdered Rowden, who had complained loudly about the robbery.⁴¹

Coincidentally, more assertive Reconstruction efforts began that very month in northeast Texas with the arrival in Bowie County of former Union soldier William Kirkman, newly appointed as bureau agent for the Fifty-Eighth Subdistrict of the Freedmen's Bureau. Kirkman made his headquarters at Boston.⁴² He was responsible for enforcing the Reconstruction program in an 1,800-square-mile area with nine federal soldiers.

Kirkman could hardly have been assigned to a locale more hostile to Unionist sentiment. The 1861 Ordinance of Secession was supported by all but 15 of the 223 voters in Bowie County. Although Bowie County largely escaped physical destruction during the war years, about 65 percent of the tax base disappeared when emancipation was implemented, undoubtedly an irritant that contributed to animosity against Kirkman and other Unionists.

William Kirkman had been raised by relatives in obscure circumstances after his mentally unstable father had killed his wife. Eventually, William became a telegraph operator and then enlisted in the Thirty-ninth Regiment of Illinois Infantry for a three-year stint before joining the Freedman's Bureau, perhaps with the encouragement of his older brother Joel, who preceded William into Bureau service.

The Swamp Fox came to Kirkman's attention soon after the young agent arrived in northeast Texas. According to Kirkman, Baker killed an area freedman for working his own farm.

The Bureau responded swiftly. Kirkman, three Union

cavalrymen, and others traveled to a location in Cass County, Texas about seven miles from the Sulphur River to arrest Baker and his associate L. R. Rollins, nominally on robbery charges. Kirkman searched throughout the area without finding Baker, who according to folklore actually was close enough to the Bureau representatives to eavesdrop on their conversations. Open hostilities began the next day, when Baker focused harassing gunfire on the Unionists, then followed them into Boston. There, he boldly called for refreshments in a grocery store before a gunfight erupted.

Baker was in a bowling alley adjacent to the grocery store when he was fired upon by federal forces. He promptly returned fire, killing Albert E. Titus, a twenty-two-year-old veteran of the famed Twentieth Maine, commanded at Gettysburg by Medal of Honor-winner Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Baker was nearly killed himself, losing his hat to a gun blast, but escaped. Kirkman asked that a \$2,500 reward be placed on Baker, but authorities lowered the offer to \$1,000.⁴³

The threat did not slow Baker down at all. On October 6, 1867, Baker ambushed and killed a soldier and teamster transporting Bureau supplies, then reportedly distributed the goods among his own friends and neighbors.⁴⁴ His gang at that time may have consisted of as many as fifteen men, including Ben Griffith, Matthew “Dummy” Kirby, and “Wild Bill” Longley, who later became a notorious killer in his own right. Eventually, federal authorities ransacked Baker’s home and rifled through his dead wife’s possessions, inciting Baker to even worse banditry, or so the story goes.⁴⁵

Kirkman now joined forces with Hiram F. Willis, an Arkansas Freedmen’s Bureau agent. The pair searched the tristate region for Baker without success, impeded and frustrated by bureaucratic conflicts and army ineptitude. Baker, in the meantime, continued to run wild.

Christmas evening 1867 found Baker and some associates

back in Brightstar, where they bought some whiskey, then proceeded to the residence of Howell Smith, who lived near William Foster. Neighborhood stories claimed that Smith harbored freedmen in his home and even slept with a black woman.⁴⁶ Whatever the motivation, Baker and sixteen others attacked the South Carolinian's home, according to official government reports. Firing into the residence some thirty times, they killed two black occupants and wounded others in the initial attack.⁴⁷

Then the home invasion began. Baker himself attacked Smith and stabbed Smith's two daughters as they attempted to defend their father. The raid ended with an unsuccessful effort to torch the house. Baker confirmed his role in the crime while being treated nearby by his former father-in-law William Foster. Smith reportedly died of his injuries.⁴⁸

Army captain N. B. McLaughlin learned of the attack three days later, then rode with a twenty-man contingent to the Smith house for firsthand information. He then pursued the gang to a camp about eight miles away. The soldiers surrounded the camp, only to learn that the gang had departed earlier. McLaughlin returned to the Smith neighborhood and persuaded residents to accompany him in further pursuit of the gang.

They found a second camp about three miles away from the first and fared better with a second attack, capturing Meredith McAdams as well as weapons, munitions, and provisions. McAdams was persuaded to name names, fingering Baker, his principal lieutenant Lee Rames (Raines), his younger brother John Howard "Seth" Rames, John Courtney, John Kennedy, and the Nichols brothers, John and Henry.

Buoyed by these successes, McLaughlin persuaded Smith's neighbors to continue the pursuit of Baker. Preston R. Scott formed a group of irregulars for that purpose called "Scott's Company."⁴⁹ This outfit meant business.

The vigilante leadership, later known as the “Famous Six,” consisted of John S. Jackson, John Williams, Bill Dunlop, Green Allen, Peyton Murph, and John Salmon.

First the “Company” cornered and captured Matthew Kirby, who they learned had been far too drunk to participate in the attack on Smith, then inexplicably released him. They then turned their attention to fifteen-year-old Seth Rames, a more manageable target. The Six killed young Seth, torturing the young man before doing so, according to one of Baker’s more partisan biographers.⁵⁰

These developments apparently convinced Baker to seek opportunities elsewhere. He simply disappeared from the Arkansas-Texas border for several months, reportedly taking refuge in Hot Springs or perhaps Perry County, Arkansas, as he recovered from an injury to his right thigh sustained during the Smith raid.⁵¹ Whatever the location, Baker remained secluded, even as violence provoked by the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations began to rise across the South.

Baker joined the New Rebellion in mid-1868, conducting a series of raids in the tristate area. He may have begun as one of several Reconstruction rebels who pursued and killed a Unionist in Bonham, Texas, in late May. The suspected killers were Cullen Baker, Bob Lee, Benjamin Bickerstaff, Simp Dixon, and his half-brother Dick Johnson, according to one researcher.⁵² Other depredations attributed to Baker by his contemporaries suggest coordination of some kind with the Ku Klux Klan, whose oath of membership was found later on his dead body. Baker had also gained a reputation among his neighbors as a free-lance enforcer of sorts for white employers seeking to rigorously control their former slaves.⁵³

The next month, Reconstruction outlaw Ben Griffith was killed near Clarksville, Texas, by Freedmen’s Bureau official Charles Rand, in the opening salvo of federal efforts to terminate the New Rebellion in the Lone Star State.

Griffith had enjoyed one last act of bravado just before his death. He rode into town, armed with three revolvers and a cocked shotgun across his saddle, then made a speech from his horse about a recent wagon-train ambush. After mentioning that Bob Lee, Baker, and Jack English were waiting nearby, he robbed one freedman in town and was about to kill another on the Boston road outside of town when Rand's posse shot him out of the saddle. Lee, Baker, and Bickerstaff supposedly disappeared after watching the whole episode from a hiding place.⁵⁴

The federal authorities offered "dead or alive" rewards for Baker and conducted intensified cavalry raids into targeted counties during September 1868.⁵⁵ Unfazed, Baker immediately posted reward posters offering \$5,000 (\$69,000 today) for the delivery of Arkansas governor Powell Clayton himself, dead or alive.⁵⁶

Fortunately for Baker and other guerillas, only about six thousand federal soldiers were now in Texas, mostly stationed along the western frontier.⁵⁷ Even so, the salad days of Baker and his colleagues, such as Elisha P. Guest, John Pomp Duty, and Indian Bill English, were gradually coming to a close. Such partisans had worn out their welcome, even among natural allies in the region. Worse still for the desperadoes, federal forces carefully avoided the misconduct that had alienated potential allies among Missourians of culturally similar backgrounds at the beginning of the Civil War. Eventually, the success of these forces spelled the end of Benjamin Bickerstaff.

Death Comes for Kirkman

That said, physically isolated federal officials, such as Bureau agent William Kirkman in Boston, Texas, were confronted in the fall of 1868 with one starkly immediate

local reality. Reconstruction efforts in northeast Texas were diminishing in the face of increased violence perpetuated by Baker and like-minded outlaws as well as general hostility against Bureau agents.

Kirkman, for example, had only recently extracted himself from murder charges related to the death of John Richardson, a prisoner in his custody. Richardson had instigated a riot against the Orton Circus, rumored to be staffed by Yankees, when it arrived in Boston, Texas and was arrested on November 21, 1867. He was killed by a corporal as he and an accomplice attempted to escape, using guns that had been smuggled into the jail seven days before Christmas. Kirkman was indicted in the death of Richardson, although he never fired a shot.⁵⁸

Kirkman was cleared of the murder charges, but his problems had only begun. He was discharged from his position with the Freedmen's Bureau. While finishing his duties in the early morning hours of October 7, 1868, he heard a noise outside his window. When Kirkman went to investigate, he was cut down by sixteen rounds, one of which was immediately fatal. After the Bureau agent fell to the ground, a voice in the darkness derisively cried, "All is well." Cullen Baker was among the chief suspects at the time but was never charged.⁵⁹

Nine days later, 2nd Lt. Hiram F. Willis, who had served as a Freedmen's Bureau agent in Arkansas for about two years, traveled to the Porter J. Andrews farm with Little River County, Arkansas sheriff Richard H. Standel to negotiate a settlement with Andrews black workers. Rounding a corner on the road, the officials were confronted by six men, presumably led by Cullen Montgomery Baker. Willis barely had time to draw his pistol before he was cut down with Andrews and the black buggy driver. Sheriff Standel ran for the woods. Later, an eyewitness stated that he observed Cullen Montgomery Baker leading three horses, presumably

from the buggy, along the Red River bottoms.⁶⁰ Ben Griffith's brother Bud and two associates were eventually hanged at Rocky Comfort, Arkansas, for the murders.

Baker was also suspected in a murder that had occurred in the early hours of that same day. James Salmon was one of the "Famous Six" who had allegedly tortured and killed young Seth Rames. The Swamp Fox and his gang had appeared at Salmon's home, about five and one-half miles east of Atlanta, Texas, between two and four o'clock on the morning of October 24, 1868. Posing as federal officials, they insisted that Salmon come out for a discussion. The victim apparently had no illusions about the identity of the group. Despite the pleas of Mrs. Salmon, the gang marched him about a quarter of a mile from his home, then riddled him with bullets.⁶¹

Prominent farmer D. F. "Frank" Scarborough was the next target about six days later. The gang announced their arrival by killing two freedmen, then insisted that Scarborough serve as the Baker emissary in discussions with vigilante leader Preston R. Scott, according to one source.⁶² These efforts were confirmed in the memoirs of Thomas Orr, who suggested that Baker wanted revenge against the "Famous Six" who killed Seth Rames, and peace with everyone else.⁶³

These diplomatic efforts resulted in the "Treaty of Scott's Mill," supposedly concluded in Davis County, Texas on November 3, 1868. Baker sent a delegate who insisted that Baker would cease hostilities against everyone, black and white alike, save John Williams, John S. Jackson, and Bill Dunlop, "Famous Six" members still residing in the area. During the past few years, the Swamp Fox was just what his sobriquet described, a bum who lived in the woods near Forest Home, Texas. Yet, during the "treaty" discussions, mentally unstable Baker boasted that he would post a \$200,000 bond in Bowie County, to ensure his good conduct.

The surviving trio of the "Famous Six" fled the area, not to be heard of again, or so the story goes.⁶⁴ Baker's charm

initiative did not deter Arkansas governor Powell Clayton, who was still the target of “wanted dead or alive” circulars Baker had posted in the tristate area. The governor sent Brig. Gen. R. F. Catterson and 500 troops to pacify Sevier (now Howard) County, then in the control of Baker’s “perfect Ku Klux Klan organization.” According to Catterson, Baker commanded a band of 150 men.

The Swamp Fox was defeated at a largely bloodless confrontation at Centre Point, according to one account, proving once again that Baker succeeded only by trick or artifice rather than personal bravery.⁶⁵

Reeling from this reversal, Baker launched a media campaign for public support. Functionally illiterate himself, Baker procured a ghostwriter and submitted to several tristate newspapers a lengthy letter to local citizenry. The letter was dated November 14, 1868, perhaps the very day Baker met with former Confederate colonel R. Phillip Crump and other citizens concerned about continuing violence. The missive appeared in the *Texas Republican* thirteen days later.

Baker claimed that many acts of lawlessness attributed to him were actually committed by others and even provided an example. Further, he promised to leave black and white citizens alone, with the proviso that he be treated accordingly. Several citizens endorsed these statements, asserting their belief that Baker would abide by his promises.⁶⁶ The letter may have resulted from negotiations Baker personally conducted with leading citizens of the area after the Centre Point debacle.⁶⁷

Former slave Jerry Sheffield (Sherfeld) apparently believed that there would be no more trouble with the Baker gang as a result of the agreement, but probably was not told about the proviso in the fine print. Sheffield boasted to anyone who would listen that he knew where Baker could be found and would lead anyone there for five

dollars (seventy dollars today). He was shot to pieces on Sunday, December 6, 1868, about two miles east of Queen City, Texas, and was nearly unrecognizable when found.⁶⁸

This episode set the stage for Baker's last significant raids, which began later that day. After murdering Sheffield, the Swamp Fox began to pursue his other enemies. First on the list was Robert Spell, a local citizen who had apparently been among the vigilantes who searched for Baker the prior year. When Spell could not be located, Baker settled for an interview with George W. Barron, who had a minor part in the schoolhouse controversy between Orr and Baker. Soon, Barron found himself swinging from a beam across his own gate. He was saved only by the intervention of Lee Rames, who cut him down as the gang left to find Charles Johnson and "Famous Six" leader John S. Jackson.

Since neither gentleman was available, Baker then had to settle on a series of home invasions. First, he led the gang to the home of I. M. Dempsey, where he burst into the house and proved his identity to Mrs. Dempsey by showing her the wounds he had sustained during the Howell Smith episode. Then he rode to the home of the Dempseys' son, where the gang killed a dog for no more reason than intimidation.⁶⁹

The next night, Baker conducted his final significant raid. About ten o'clock, the gang surrounded the home of William Foster near Brightstar and demanded the surrender of Thomas Orr, who had earlier married young Belle Foster after she rejected Baker. Orr complied, gullibly relying on Baker's word that he would not be harmed. Baker, having no plans to honor this deal, sent several gang members after Joe Davis for a double hanging. First, Orr was hanged from a dogwood tree. When Baker supposed he was dead, he ordered Orr cut down so that Davis could be hanged with the same rope, and so he was, if only for a few minutes. Through the apparent intervention of Lee Rames, both survived the lynching to tell the tale.⁷⁰

When Baker learned that Orr had survived, he swore vengeance on any of his gang members who had conspired to save Orr. Lee Rames quickly identified himself as the culprit, drew his own pistols, then rode off with the entire gang, leaving the Irishman Matthew “Dummy” Kirby behind as Baker’s sole companion. Rames, so it seems, escaped with the others to obscurity.⁷¹ About a week after the gang apparently disbanded, the Fourth U.S. Cavalry dispatched federal forces to two Cass and Bowie counties, but in the end, Baker’s neighbors did him in.

A cabal evolved from discussions among neighbors in the Brightstar area in early January 1869 as to how the community could be saved from further harm. Eventually, a welcoming committee of sorts was formed. The group consisted of six men. John Chamblee had visited Gen. George P. Buell on Christmas Eve at Jefferson, Texas, seeking assistance from the federal army, but was unable to get Buell’s agreement on a specific course of action. Apparently, Chamblee was now ready to take action himself. William Foster, Robert Spell, and I. M. Dempsey had all been threatened by Baker, while Joe Davis and Thomas Orr had actually been hanged by the Swamp Fox. This group decided upon a general course of action on that inevitable day when Baker would again appear in Brightstar.

That day came on January 6, 1869, when Baker and Kirby suddenly appeared at the Lamar residence, less than a mile away from the William Foster place near present-day Doddridge, Arkansas. A new group carried out the actual execution. William Foster, Joe Davis, Frank Davis (no relation), Leonard Spivey, and Howell Smith’s son Billy Smith assisted Orr with the killings.

Foster had the most critical and dangerous assignment. First he brought whiskey for both desperadoes and spareribs for Kirby. While Baker and Kirby were sleeping, Foster carefully pulled Baker’s shotgun out of his reach. About an

hour before noon, while Baker slept, Joe Davis shot him just before Billy Smith killed Kirby.

The rest of the story emerged fifty-seven years later when Foster's son Hubbard revealed what he learned as a young boy on the day of the ambush. William Foster had added a heavy dose of strychnine, a poison normally used for pest control, to the whiskey supplied to the bandits. He had done so during visits in previous weeks, to keep them quiet and subdued.

Now the easy part began. The bodies were loaded in a wagon, covered with cornstalks, and transported to the authorities to claim state and federal reward money. Along the way, the bodies were carefully examined by Edward Stevenson, a commercial ferryman and longtime acquaintance of both Baker and Kirby.⁷²

Stevenson and others who actually knew them were quite certain that Cullen Baker was dead, dead, dead. Nevertheless, thirteen years before Billy the Kid and Jesse James supposedly survived their own deaths, the Swamp Fox apparently became the first American outlaw whose demise was staged, if only in the minds of conspiracy theorists in the tristate area.

In the meantime, the good citizens of Brightstar had more interest in collecting reward money than spinning conspiracy theories. Gen. George P. Buell, serving as the commander of Union forces at Jefferson, Texas, methodically approached the issue, gathering affidavits in order to confirm that the dead men were in fact Baker and Kirby.

Eventually, a \$2,000 federal reward was collected by John Chamblee and Thomas Orr, who had apparently been designated as the recipients for the benefit of the vigilantes who had at last wiped out what was left of the Baker gang. The state reward was never collected, although affidavits claiming that Orr rather than Joe Davis killed Baker were submitted to the authorities.⁷³

The War of Reconstruction in Texas continued long after Cullen Baker was killed that January morning in 1869, even though the program itself was soon a dead letter in the Lone Star State. Baker's associate Frank Rollins was eventually jailed, while Bill Gray, another associate supposedly responsible for some twenty-five murders, was himself killed by the army in late 1869.

Bickerstaff was killed in Alvarado, Texas, the evening of April 5, 1869, with an associate named Thompson. The pair was ambushed by federal forces as they approached a horse rack and prepared to dismount for a night of revelry in nearby saloons. Bob Lee was killed May 24, 1869, by Bill Boren and other Texas Unionists.

As we shall see, the two most famous Reconstruction outlaws both outlived Baker by years. Wild Bill Longley rode on until he was hanged at Giddings, Texas, in 1878, while the legendary John Wesley Hardin managed to outlive Baker by twenty-six years. The world was well rid of Cullen Montgomery Baker. Thomas Orr, on the other hand, eventually served as the first mayor of Texarkana, Arkansas, and died peacefully in 1904.