

Dodge City and the Birth of the Wild West

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Midwesterners dominated the ranks of most units in the Union's western armies and constituted 77.7 percent of the 410 officers included in this study. Several were from Iowa, including Col. John Edwards of the Eighteenth Iowa Infantry, who in August 1862 secured the assistance of Governor Samuel Kirkwood in his efforts to remove his unit from the authority of Missouri militiamen, who insisted that they expel fugitive slaves from their camp. Capt. George C. Burmeister, Thirty-fifth Iowa Infantry, whose diary is housed in the U.S. Army Military History Institute (Carlisle, Pennsylvania), also features prominently in Teters's analysis. Perhaps most poignant were the experiences of Dr. William Vermilion, an officer in the Thirty-sixth Iowa. A self-described abolitionist, his published letters to his wife indicate that his father and brothers ostracized him for his beliefs. Lamented a rueful Vermilion, "They don't want to correspond with an Abolitionist I suppose" (69).

Dodge City and the Birth of the Wild West, by Robert R. Dykstra and Jo Ann Manfra. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017. 236 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$22.95 paperback.

Reviewer Mark R. Ellis is professor of history and chair of the History Department at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He is the author of *Law and Order in Buffalo Bill's Country: Legal Culture and Community on the Great Plains, 1867-1910* (2007).

When Americans think of Dodge City, a number of images come to mind. Some might remember fictionalized television characters from the long-running television series *Gunslinger*: Marshal Matt Dillon, Miss Kitty, and Festus. Others might think of historical figures who have become entwined in American popular culture such as Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson who, during brief periods of their careers, policed the streets and vice industries of Dodge City. The iconic image of "Boothill," where victims of gun violence and vigilantes reportedly lay buried with their boots on is a popular frontier image and one closely associated with Dodge City. Most Americans have heard and perhaps used the phrase, "Get outta Dodge," which refers to a speedy escape from a dangerous place or situation. In *Dodge City and the Birth of the Wild West*, authors Robert Dykstra and Jo Ann Manfra explore this popular cultural fascination with Dodge City and its purported disorderly frontier period.

Dykstra is an expert on frontier communities. His influential book *The Cattle Towns*, published 50 years ago, forced historians to rethink the nature of personal and extralegal violence in frontier America. For decades he has used his research on frontier-era Dodge City and other

Kansas cattle towns to challenge scholars who cling to an image of an American frontier plagued by violence and disorder. Dykstra is joined by Jo Ann Manfra, with whom he coauthored *The Gilded Age: Industrial Capitalism and its Discontents*. They have produced a lively story of historical Dodge City but also a well-argued account of Dodge City in popular myth and historical memory.

The authors' primary purpose is to explore how and why Dodge City continues to be associated with frontier violence and disorder. To do that, they return to the town's origins, when it was nothing more than a pre-emption claim along the Arkansas River near Fort Dodge. During its first year of existence (June 1872 to July 1873) Dodge City was very much the violent frontier community depicted in fiction and Hollywood movies. It might have been good advice to "Get outta Dodge" during that violent period. The authors use a host of local, regional, and national newspapers to recapture the violent episodes of that first year.

Several chapters highlight how sensational or fictionalized accounts of Dodge City helped perpetuate the image of a violent frontier community. Kansas newspapers such as the *Topeka Commonwealth*, sensationalized publications such as the *National Police Gazette*, and books such as Andy Adams's *Log of a Cowboy* and Stuart Lake's biography of Wyatt Earp kept Dodge City in the public eye through exaggerated stories of gunfights, vigilantes, and disorderly behavior. The authors skillfully dissect these historically questionable accounts to explain why a violent Dodge City is still engrained in the popular conscience, and why Dodge Citians, many scholars, and the public in general cling to such an image.

Dodge City and the Birth of the Wild West is thoroughly researched, relying heavily on the colorful language of contemporary local, state, and national publications. Much of what appears in this book is derived from Dykstra's previous works, but the final chapter, "Contesting Boot Hill," carries Dodge City's story beyond the frontier period into the twentieth century. In it the authors outline how Dodge City itself has struggled with its reputation as a violent frontier town. The chapter highlights how the people of Dodge have argued over whether to retain such an image for tourist purposes or to shed the image all together.

This is a timely book, given the nation's heated debate over gun rights and the Second Amendment. While not explicitly stated, it is clear that effective law enforcement, gun control, and civic interest in community brought an end to deadly violence in Dodge City. There is nothing specific about Iowa history in this book, but those with an interest in the American frontier, colorful frontier figures, or studies of historical myth and memory will find much to appreciate.