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DODGE CITY AND THE BIRTH OF THE WILD WEST



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INTRODUCTION: GETTIN' OUTTA DODGE



Dodge City's very first gunfight, so far as anyone knows, occurred in the wee hours of September 3, 1872. A fragmentary news report out of nearby Hutchison verifies the encounter.

SHOOTING AFFAIR AT DODGE.—We learn from persons who came down the road yesterday, that there was a lively shooting affray at Dodge on Tuesday, in which four or five persons were wounded, one or two perhaps fatally. We did not learn the names of any of the parties concerned.¹

Decades later a pioneer named George Brown, once the co-owner of one of the low-end saloons that hugged the riverbank in early Dodge, found himself recalling all the names and details. It started, he said, with the harassment of gambler Charley Morehouse by John Langford and two of Langford's pals. "They pulled Morehouse out of bed one night, where he was enjoyin' himself with a dance-hall girl, and made him drink with them," Brown remembered. Intent on payback, later that night as drinkers crowded the makeshift bar,

Morehouse and his bunch came into my saloon and inquired for Johnnie Langford. I told them he had just left about two minutes ago. They stepped to the front door and [spotted Langford and friends] going down the street. The Morehouse party opened fire on them. Langford returned the fire and bullets were flyin' around pretty thick.

Brown wryly itemized the fallout.

One man was shot in the heel as he was goin' out the back door. A man was on a cot near the door on the outside. Next morning they found five bullet holes through his coat, and the man wasn't touched. In all this shootin' there wasn't a man killed.

Morehouse suffered only an inconsequential wound in the arm and re-

mained a regular in Dodge City saloon life until almost the end of the year. Not so his antagonist.

Langford was shot five times, but he crawled off and hid himself in some brush down near the river. He was rescued next morning and was taken to the hospital at Fort Dodge.²

Offloaded at the fort after a five-mile wagon ride from Dodge City, the dirt- and blood-encrusted Langford might just have got lucky. Dr. William Tremaine, the post's Canadian-born physician, happened to be a pioneering American student of the "Lister system," the surgical reforms urged by the prominent Scots physician Joseph Lister. Calling for operating-room cleanliness and strict antiseptic surgical procedures, Lister's innovations failed to take hold in the United States until the 1890s. In 1882 the American Surgical Association declared them unproven at best, nonsense at worst. Hence most surgeons ignored filthy hospital conditions, failed to sterilize their instruments, and even neglected to scrub their hands before operating. Not so Dr. Tremaine, who had trained himself in the dangers of unclean equipment, dirty hospital bedding, and soil in open wounds.³

Due for leave in September 1872, Tremaine may still have been on post when Langford was brought in on the third of that month. If so, he would have directed an assistant to continuously spray the patient's wounds with an antiseptic carbolic acid solution, while he himself removed pistol slugs, dead tissue, and microbe-laden soil. Afterward Langford lay in the post infirmary "for quite a while," remembered George Brown, "and finally recovered."⁴

John Langford's name then disappears from the record. When he painfully dragged his bleeding carcass into the undergrowth he desperately feared being hunted down by Morehouse and finished off. At the military hospital, once it became clear he would recover, one can imagine a friend of Langford's stopping by to warn him that Morehouse was still around town and to give him some good advice:

"Johnnie, you better get outta Dodge."

That colorful figure of speech, however conjectural in Langford's case, is still with us. Just as "Rome wasn't built in a day," it's foolish to "carry

coals to Newcastle,” so-and-so has been “sent to Coventry” or “gone Hollywood,” and something “won’t play in Peoria,” so “get out of Dodge” is one of the rare place-name aphorisms in use among English speakers worldwide.

The Dodge City metaphor, with its echo of the Old West, dates from the Vietnam War. For young service personnel nurtured on television series featuring Dodge City—*Gunsmoke*, *Bat Masterson*, *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*—the phrase advised or described a hasty escape from some fearsomely defended enemy area or, as it came to be used, from any disagreeable situation. It remained popular among military professionals through the post-Vietnam decades.⁵

By then it had infiltrated American popular speech, movies, magazines, newspapers, and books. For instance, in tracking the appearance of words or phrases year by year in millions of publications, Google’s Ngram Viewer shows “get out of Dodge” on a steady climb from 1985 to 2008. And between 1979 and 2008 one metropolitan newspaper, the *Boston Globe*, cited metaphorical Dodge City, in one context or another, sixty-nine times. As recently as 2013 members of the New York City “Preppers Network,” readying themselves for the city’s next natural disaster, employed as one of their mantras “GOOD” (Get Out of Dodge).⁶

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, as the drug wars heated up, frontier Dodge City carried the figurative burden for urban violence. Those who spoke for metropolitan areas with the highest homicide rates felt called on to deny the trope’s applicability. The president of the Dade County Crime Watch insisted that “Miami is not Dodge City, U.S.A.” The beleaguered mayor of the nation’s capital strongly asserted that “Washington is not Dodge City.” And New York’s chief executive growled that “things are not out of control [here], and this is not Dodge City.”⁷

Overseas journalists soon weighed in. A Welsh commentator described a “showdown with guns that would not have been out of place in Dodge City.” An Australian newsman probing Melbourne’s drinking culture concluded that his town was “like Dodge City on a bad night.” A Glasgow writer disputed the belief that he and his neighbors lived in a civilized place. “This is Dodge City, Scotland,” he glumly remarked. A British editor summarized crime data from Nottingham with a headline that said it all: “NOT DODGE CITY.”⁸

Neither was the metaphor limited to the Anglo-American world when

it came to shorthand assessments of nasty or violent settings. “Life in Jaffna,” wrote a reporter from Sri Lanka, “is like Dodge City without the sheriff.” In one war-ravaged Serbian town in 1997 a foreign correspondent noted that its most flourishing business was prostitution. “Dodge City,” muttered a citizen. A senior American commander in Iraq, downplaying concern about Baghdad’s 2003 crime rate, said that it was no worse than that of any major city in America. “Maybe *Dodge City*,” sniffed an Iraqi businessman. And at the height of the occupation a journalist at the Cannes Film Festival overheard two French couples joke about “Cowboy George” Bush and term the United States “*un grand Dodge City*.”⁹



Interestingly, the history behind the trope seems little known. In 1999 the Random House website advised a baffled reader that the word “dodge” in the phrase “get the hell out of Dodge” should be capitalized, because it “is a reference to Dodge City, Kansas.” Other sites posted similar information in 2005 and 2006. And the following year a discussion of “get out of Dodge” erupted on forum.wordreference.com with postings from Canada, Argentina, Ireland, and Switzerland, as well as from Pennsylvania, California, and Maine. An Oregonian finally cut through the puzzlement by noting that “Dodge City is very real and has a very real history apart from the glamorization in films.”¹⁰



Books have explored that history with varying degrees of success. *Dodge City: The Cowboy Capital* (1913) is a pioneer memoir to which all subsequent works are indebted. General treatments by academics appeared in 1952 and 1977, followed by four books on special aspects of the town’s frontier experience written by a Kansas scholar. Dodge City’s own resident historian offered lively and informative works in 1972 and 2009. The latter year also saw publication of an encyclopedic book by a retired businessman residing in Arizona.¹¹

Any number of fictional treatments of Dodge in its legendary era have emerged over the years, but historical novelist Mary Doria Russell’s *Doc*, released by Random House in 2011, turned out to be a surprise addition to this ten- or twenty-foot shelf. The best-selling novel informs readers

that frontier Dodge City's cast of complex and varied characters proved far larger than its few celebrity gunfighters, who still bestride the Old West of the imagination.¹²

Dodge City was not the Old West's only notorious "border town" by any stretch of the imagination. But its frontier era lasted for almost fifteen years, a longer span than enjoyed (or suffered) by many such settlements. And from the first Dodge seemed to attract more than its share of media attention, probably because of journalists' and tourists' easy access to it by rail—in contrast to its two main competitors in the popular notoriety sweepstakes, Deadwood and Tombstone, both of them remote mining villages. Of these three most famous western towns only Dodge City came to possess a distinct metaphorical existence.

In the final ten years of its adolescence Dodge flourished as a nationally prominent cattle-trading center. Three other Kansas settlements similarly, but only briefly, existed as major cattle towns. The onslaught of rural settlement wiped out the cattle trade at Abilene (in 1871), Ellsworth (in 1874), and Wichita (in 1875) by overrunning grazing lands and cutting off the trails. Consequently, between 1876 and 1879 Dodge held a virtual monopoly on the Texas cattle business, broken only by a late-comer, Caldwell, in 1880; both settlements flourished as cattle towns through the last five shipping seasons.¹³

The economic structure and social experience of the Kansas cattle centers differed little, yet Dodge City's four years as a major point for shipping buffalo hides, followed by its unique longevity as a cattle town, made it far more vulnerable than the others to media exploitation. Garnished by fourteen years of publicized violence and disorder, real and imagined, the Dodge City of old gave birth to, and remains, a cultural metaphor grounded in a reality all its own. It deploys images of violence and civic anarchy in a legendary West that still engages deeply held imaginings of belligerent individualism and freedom from social restraint.

This book examines the discursive space between historical Dodge City and these metaphors, exploring how the settlement became a setting for symbol, for public memory, and for instructed fantasy—for good or ill an important item in the nation's presentation of itself.