

WILD BILL HICKOK IN ABILENE

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"I was raised," remarked Dwight Eisenhower in a 1953 speech, "in a little town. . . called Abilene, Kansas. We had as our marshal for a long time a man named Wild Bill Hickok." The town had a code, said the President. "It was: Meet anyone face to face with whom you disagree. . . If you met him face to face and took the same risks he did, you could get away with almost anything, as long as the bullet was in front."¹ This invoking of a curious "fair play" symbol in the depths of the McCarthy era illustrates perhaps more pungently than could anything else the continuing status of James Butler Hickok (1837-1876) as a hero for Americans. Although no one has yet attempted to trace the development or assess the impact of the Hickok image, American social and literary historians have, like Eisenhower, made use of it for some time. To Vernon L. Parrington, for example, Wild Bill was a symbol of Gilded Age extravagance ("All things were held cheap, and human life the cheapest of all"),² but more recently Professor Harvey Wish utilized him, rather less metaphorically, as the epitome of the "tough, straight-shooting" peace officer who brought law and order to the West.³ As supplemented by his violent death in the Black Hills goldfields, Wild Bill's modern reputation, it seems fair to say, rests indeed on his career as city marshal of Abilene in 1871.

The questions being asked here are: How did the tradition of Hickok in Abilene arise? And as it now stands does it or does it not reflect historical reality? This study will review what seems to be the most significant Hickok literature in an effort to answer the first of these questions. Then the modern image of Wild Bill will be compared with certain documentation up to now overlooked or ignored by Hickok writers, which promises a reasonably complete and yet relatively unbiased factual picture of Abilene's marshal. The answer to the second question, so far as there can be an answer, should emerge from this comparison.

J. B. Hickok, as he referred to himself, was born in Illinois, as a teenager emigrated alone to the Kansas frontier, and shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War killed his first man in a personal skirmish at Rock Creek, Nebraska.⁴ Hickok subsequently served as a civilian scout and spy for the Federal forces. The armistice found him in Springfield, Missouri, where in the summer of 1865 he killed one Dave Tutt after a falling-out over cards

in a spectacular duel on the local courthouse square. It was here, soon after Hickok's second acquittal for homicide, that George Ward Nichols, a colonel in the Union army, provided the public with its first taste of a brand-new hero from the inexhaustible reservoir of the Great West.

Nichol's article appeared in the Harper's Monthly of February, 1867.⁵ As the Harper's lead article that month, it commenced with a full-page woodcut of Hickok with characteristic mustache and full-length hair, broad hat, frock coat, and pistols hung butts-forward on his belt. Other cuts, at least two by the famous Civil War artist A. R. Waud, illustrated the card game with Tutt, the duel, Hickok being chased by Confederate troops, being warned of danger just prior to the Rock Creek affair, and "The Struggle for Life" itself, with Wild Bill successfully defending himself from the M'Kandlas Gang. The text covered the same ground in 12 pages. The author first described "the famous Scout of the Plains, William Hitchcock [sic], called 'Wild Bill,'" of whom he had heard a great deal from the troops. He narrated the Tutt duel and an incident in Hickok's service as a spy, then described an interview with Hickok in which the scout answered some questions and related one of his adventures in espionage. Then Nichols narrated the story of Rock Creek, in which Hickok singlehandedly dispatched a 10-man gang of Confederate sympathizers with rifle, pistol, and blade. Following this grisly tale, which gave notice to Nichols of "the tiger which lay concealed beneath that gentle exterior," Hickok's superb marksmanship was described. In a final footnote Nichols reaffirmed the accuracy of his portrait.

During the interval between the interview and the publishing of this piece Wild Bill was employed as a deputy U. S. marshal with headquarters at Fort Riley, Kansas. In the summer of 1867 he served as an army scout, returning to law-enforcement duties that winter. For the better part of 1868 and early 1869 he again served as scout and courier in the field. After being wounded in March of the latter year he convalesced in Illinois, returning to western Kansas as guide for the excursion party of U. S. Senator Henry Wilson. In the fall of 1869 he acted as special policeman at Hays City, and spent 1870 in Topeka and Kansas City, gambling with other gunfighters and off-season buffalo hunters who hung around the urban centers on the border. In 1871 he was employed as city marshal of Abilene, the primary shipping point that year for cattle driven up the Chisholm Trail from Texas.

By this time Hickok was prominent in the Kansas press, which fondly documented his comings and goings,⁶ and he occasionally received even wider notice. An issue of Harper's Weekly in 1867, for instance, observed that "'Wild Bill' is at present one of General Hancock's couriers."⁷ And in the fall of 1871 the New York Post remarked: "Kansas City papers note the eccentricity of Wild Bill, who attended and paid for the funeral of a man whom he had shot."⁸

In April, 1872, Hickok again received major publicity. That month's issue of Galaxy, published in New York, carried the fourth installment of

George A. Custer's memoirs of his 1867 Indian campaigns, which included a long discussion of Wild Bill.⁹ According to Custer, Hickok was "then as now the most famous scout on the Plains." A flattering description followed, in which Hickok was termed "one of the most perfect types of physical manhood I ever saw." In his discussion Custer gave the public what was probably one of the first descriptions of the now-famous "gunfighter's code":

Wild Bill always carried two handsome ivory-handled revolvers of the large size; he was never seen without them. Where this is the common custom, brawls or personal difficulties are seldom if ever settled by blows. The quarrel is not from a word to a blow, but from a word to the revolver, and he who can draw and fire first is the best man. No civil law reaches him; none is applied for.

Custer claimed personal knowledge of the killing of at least six men by Hickok in personal combat, yet had no doubt that Wild Bill was justified in every case. In conclusion he observed that the press had lately told of Hickok's killing a man, then paying for his funeral. "What could be more thoughtful than this?" asked Custer. "Not only to send a fellow mortal out of the world, but to pay the expenses of the transit." In 1874 a number of the Custer installments, including the Hickok discussion, were published in book form.¹⁰

In 1872 Hickok deserted Kansas for Cheyenne, from where late in the following year William F. ("Buffalo Bill") Cody, an acquaintance from army days, recruited him for the cast of a frontier melodrama that toured the East. Cody, Hickok, and "Texas Jack" Omohundro were the star attractions. To enhance their impact on the urban public Cody's manager created a great deal of publicity. The show's "programme," presumably offered to the local press before each performance, gave Hickok featured billing.¹¹ "Wild Bill, Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack," read the release. "Who are they and where did they come from? History answers these questions definitely." Hickok's build-up came first:

WILD BILL,

whose civilized name is J. B. Hickock [sic], is a born plainsman. It is his natural element. In person he is about six feet one inch in height, straight as an arrow, broad shouldered, fine limbed and handsome. His blonde tresses hang in ringlets over his massive shoulders, while an elegant moustache shades his well-formed mouth. He is what might with propriety, be termed a perfect specimen of manhood. His wonderful skill with the rifle and pistol is unequalled in the west. He is not quarrelsome, but woe unto the man who offends him, or the warlike redskin who crosses his path.

The release then gave similar short descriptions of Cody and Omohundro, followed by "FACTS ABOUT THE SCOUTS." Again Hickok's data was first.

It consisted of Custer's long Galaxy description. Cody and Texas Jack were finally discussed in a short paragraph each.

Hickok served with the "Buffalo Bill Combination" through the winter of 1873-1874, then returned to Cheyenne, where he was known as a colorful member of the city's gambling fraternity. In 1876 he departed for the Black Hills, where on August 2 of that year a drunken miner walked up behind his stool as he sat at cards and shot him through the head.

Wild Bill's posthumous publicity commenced with his obituaries,¹² but strangely enough, little of the wordage inspired by Hickok's death mentioned his term as marshal of Abilene. Three years later Buffalo Bill Cody's autobiography described Hickok's life in the first expanded, chronological presentation between the covers of a book.¹³ The book failed to mention Hickok's Abilene marshalship, however, and indeed this did not begin to play a significant part in Hickok literature until publication of the first biography. J. W. Buel's Heroes of the Plains was written by a St. Louis newspaperman who had been a Kansas City reporter.¹⁴ His Hickok biography, included as the first half of the book, was based on a pamphlet sketch of Wild Bill by the same author published in 1880.¹⁵ Buel's description of Hickok in Abilene was short but colorful.

According to Buel, who claimed to write from Hickok's diary, Wild Bill found Abilene submerged "in greater wickedness than any other Kansas town." Money was abundant, therefore "gambling followed as a consequence, and, preserving the natural sequence, shooting and stabbing became of daily occurrence." Within 48 hours of his appointment Hickok and a deputy, Jim McWilliams, tangled with two desperadoes, Phil Cole, a gambler "on one of his accustomed tears," and his partner Jack Harvey. Hickok dropped both Cole and Harvey, but at the same time killed McWilliams by accident. "The killing of Cole," concluded Buel, "was regarded by the community as a 'Christian act,' because it was like ridding the country of a ferocious and destructive beast; but to make the act yet more righteous Bill raised the necessary money with which to give his victims decent burial." The only other incident of Hickok's Abilene career cited by Buel was the "Assassin Bledsoe" conspiracy in which a prominent Texas cattleman (whom Buel disguised as Assassin Bledsoe to avoid "legal perplexities") offered a group of desperadoes \$5,000 to kill the marshal and cut out his heart. The assassins became drunk, however, and revealed the plan to a friend of Hickok's. The marshal allowed the men to follow him on the evening express for Topeka, and an hour after the train was under way he forced them to jump, killing one and badly injuring three others.

Until the second quarter of the twentieth century Buel's book served as the standard Hickok biography. In the intervening years Hickok's reputation rested primarily on the Rock Creek affair, which was told and retold for national circulation in much the same form as Nichols had reported it. Wild Bill also received mention in other connections down to the turn of the cen-

ture, most notably perhaps in the Buffalo Bill-Ned Buntline outpourings,¹⁶ in the biography of Cody by his sister,¹⁷ and in the memoirs of General Custer's widow.¹⁸ But the first major publicity for his Abilene career was a piece in Everybody's Magazine by E. C. Little, a prosperous Abilene attorney who had grown up in Abilene.¹⁹

Abilene's friends [wrote Little] still fondly insist that in its Texas cattle days it was the wickedest town on earth. . . . The song of the siren, the click of the little blue chips, the white apron of the barkeeper, the flying heels of the short-gowned ladies in the theatre furnished ready entertainment, which was, however, insufficient for those convivial spirits who ran the town without a limit. Drinking, gaming, shooting through the houses, they gave themselves up to a fantastic delirium of recklessness. Young men of ambitious minds, filled up with raw whiskey, rode through town firing at anything their excitement suggested. . . . Rows were of daily, or momentary occurrence.

According to Little, the killing of Phil Coe climaxed Hickok's marshalship. Prior to departing from town after the summer's cattle season, the Texans decided to hold a last fling, "and it was generally understood that the ceremonies of the evening were to be concluded by killing Wild Bill, and, metaphorically, taking his scalp back to Texas." Coe, a crooked gambler, was picked to challenge the marshal. Early in the evening the marshal noted uneasily the crowd's growing abandon and warned the Texans against shooting within city limits. But by 10 o'clock the crowd was out of hand. Stationed near the Novelty Theater, the marshal and his deputy, Mike Williams, heard a shot near the Alamo Saloon. Hickok ordered Williams to stay at the Novelty, and entering the rear door of the Alamo asked who fired the shot. Through the open front door Coe answered that he had shot a dog. He then raised his pistol and fired in at Hickok, his bullet grazing the marshal's ribs. Hickok then drew and shot Coe twice in the abdomen. Then he turned to fire at another man bounding up to the sidewalk as if in attack, while Coe fired once more and dropped. The second victim was discovered to be Williams, who had been instantly killed. Coe died soon afterward. The fight broke up the Texans' celebration and they began to leave town never to return, as Abilene had decided to cease offering itself as a cattle market in order to remain "a law abiding city forever."

Three years later the second article giving major consideration to Hickok in Abilene appeared in Outing, a combination adventure and sports periodical. Its author was Arthur Chapman, a Denver newspaperman and freelance writer.²⁰ "No man," Chapman asserted of Hickok, has ever been his equal in handling firearms, but once the information was spread abroad that Abilene had a Marshal who was a revolver expert, there was no lack of Doubting Thomases

eager to put Wild Bill to the test. Consequently, Hickok's guns seldom saw a week of silence. Quarrels were picked with him, with the intention of encompassing his death, but he dropped his man so invariably that finally none but methods of assassination were employed.

The Phil Coe gunfight was then retold with only minor changes. After the killing Coe's mother offered a \$10,000 reward for Hickok's death. The marshal began carrying a sawed-off shotgun as an added precaution, and "he did not let this weapon out of his grasp, day or night, while he continued in Abilene. . . ." Several Texans travelled north to earn the reward. On one occasion when Hickok was on a train he noted that he was being watched by two cowboys. They followed him off the cars at Topeka, whereupon Hickok covered them with his shotgun and ordered them on again. Two new anecdotes added to Hickok's Abilene dossier depicted Hickok successfully guarding the "Abilene fair" against a raid by the Jesse James gang,²¹ and, during an altercation in the Abilene city council, bringing in on his shoulder a councilman who had refused to attend a vote on some crucial matter.

Emerson Hough, the author of popular adventure fiction and nonfiction based on cowboy life and the West, gave the next impetus to the emerging Hickok tradition. Hough's The Story of the Outlaw devoted an entire chapter to Wild Bill.²² Hough began by depicting the unruly cattle-shipping communities of the West. "To recount the history of one after another of these wild towns," observed Hough,

would be endless and perhaps wearisome. But this history has one peculiar feature not yet noted in our investigations. All these cow camps meant to be real towns some day. They meant to take the social compact. There came to each of these camps men bent upon making homes, and these men began to establish a law and order spirit and to set up a government. . . . The frontier sheriff or town marshal was there, the man for the place, as bold and hardy as the bold and hardy men he was to meet and subdue, as skilled with weapons, as willing to die; and upheld, moreover, with that sense of duty and of moral courage which is granted even to the most courageous of men when he feels that he has the sentiment of the majority of good people at his back.

To describe the life of one Western town marshal, himself the best and most picturesque of them all, is to cover all this field sufficiently. There is but one man who can thus be chosen, and that is Wild Bill Hickok, better known for a generation as "Wild Bill," and properly accorded an honorable place in American history.

Soon after his election as Abilene's marshal, wrote Hough, Hickok killed his first man there, a dangerous drunk. That same evening, however, he acci-

dentally killed his own deputy when the man walked toward him while reaching for a handkerchief. Next Hickok was obliged to kill the friend of the first victim. "By this time," asserted Hough, "Abilene respected its new marshal; indeed was rather proud of him. . . . He was generous, too, as he was deadly, . . . and he always furnished funerals for his corpses." There was another funeral to come, according to Hough. The climax of his marshalship was the incident of the reward for Hickok's heart and the assassins' leap from the train. The Texan killed in the jump, by Hough's tally, boosted Hickok's homicides to 81.

The memoirs of a 66-year-old Portland, Oregon, businessman provided the next major innovations in the tradition of Wild Bill in Abilene.²³ Harry Young claimed to have been in Abilene when Hickok arrived to take up his duties. The town, he wrote, "for two months had been in the hands of a drunken, desperate, frenzied mob." Hickok disembarked about four o'clock one afternoon.

He received a warm welcome from the law-abiding citizens. The news of his coming had preceded him, and was treated by the lawless element as a huge joke. They had had things their own way for so long without opposition, that the idea of a single man subduing them was, from their point of view, simply ridiculous. Bill commenced business immediately upon his arrival. His first order was that all men should disarm. This order was met with jeers and derision; some reaching defiantly for their guns. Bill, ever on the alert, whipped out his guns and his rapid fire quickly snuffed out the lives of eight men. . . . This was Bill's first official act in Abilene; temporarily, it had a depressing effect.

But soon the lawless met in a dancehall to concoct an assassination. The plot was overheard, however, and someone warned the marshal. "Bill went immediately to the dance-hall," reported Young,

and ordered all who were in there to back up against the wall and put their six-shooters on the floor at their feet. Meeting, as he had expected, with some opposition, and being a man who took no chances, Bill immediately began shooting, killing five before it was fully realized that he was indeed their master.

The Coe gunfight, as narrated by Young, received a new twist in that a wealthy cattleman nicknamed "Shang" paid Coe \$1,000 to kill Hickok.²⁴ Coe was the marshal's last victim. "While marshal of Abilene," Young concluded, "Bill was compelled to kill twenty-five men, but he had been successful in his mission and had transformed Abilene into a peaceful, law-abiding town."

A second full-length biography of Hickok by Frank J. Wilstach, a New York theatrical manager, was published in 1926.²⁵ Wilstach approached Hickok's Abilene marshalship with caution. "There are various conflict-

ing stories of what followed [his appointment], "Wilstach observed, "but the main outlines of how the new marshal brought order out of chaos, after, of course, Boot Hill cemetery had been considerably augmented, are the same." He added little that was new, narrating the Coe gunfight and the Assassin Bledsoe story, though tentatively labeling the latter as "a fable." Actually, Wilstach's major contribution to Hickok biography was his questioning of the traditional account of the Rock Creek affair, which had continued to appear in national-circulation media (most recently in the Saturday Evening Post),²⁶ and his introduction of a new version.²⁷ Instead of the 10-member gang of desperadoes, Hickok's victims emerged as only three, David C. McCandles and two of his ranch-hands. The gunfight itself was far from the heroic struggle of tradition, but Hickok survived Wilstach's account of it with little loss of stature.

As a matter of fact, a reaction against the heroic Hickok had already begun in some quarters.²⁸ In 1927 an entire issue of the Nebraska History Magazine was given over to the "Wild Bill-McCandles Tragedy (Illustrated)," with the featured article by George W. Hansen, an amateur historian of Fairbury, Nebraska.²⁹ Hansen's piece dealt severely with Hickok's actions and motives in the fight. It was established, for example, that Hickok shot McCandles from concealment, and that his victim may have been unarmed. In summarizing his impressions of the Rock Creek affair Hansen discredited the entire Hickok image:

On this occasion... Hickok decided on a course which in this case was so successful that he followed it to the remainder of his life on the frontier. It was to shoot to kill on his first suspicion of a physical encounter or personal danger. From all accounts of killings in which Hickok subsequently took part, I have been unable to find one single authentic instance in which he fought a fair fight. To him no human life was sacred. He was a cold-blooded killer without heart or conscience. The moment he scented a fight he pulled his gun and shot to kill. So great was his fear of personal harm, and so quick was he to pull the trigger that on one occasion, at Abilene, Kansas, he killed Mike McWilliams, his most intimate friend, before he recognized him.

Concluded Hansen: "The mythical Hickok, the gentlemanly gunman, still lives in fiction and on the screen, an incitement to the youth of the country for lives of crime."

Hansen's article provoked a furious rebuttal by the secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, William Elsey Connelley, a wealthy, self-educated businessman.³⁰ Basing his remarks on over 40 years of Hickok research, he lashed Hansen for having "abandoned" truth in his discussion of the Rock Creek fight. Although accepting the new account of the killings, Connelley vigorously defended Hickok's actions and the version of events

depicting Hickok most favorably. In conclusion he affirmed the truth of the traditional image of Wild Bill, listing his convictions

That Hickok was a man of peace.

That he never sought a quarrel. . . .

That he killed when he was compelled to kill in the line of duty. . . .

That he protected the weak and helpless.

That he was faithful to every trust.

That he contributed more than any other man to making the

West a place for decent men and women to live in--a

place in which they could have homes and cities and

farms and churches and schools.

But the spell had been broken so far as the Rock Creek affair was concerned. No longer could it serve as the basis for Wild Bill's reputation as a fighter for law and order. Hickok's Abilene marshalship now had undisputed title to that function.

In 1923 Emerson Hough, who earlier had depicted Hickok's career in nonfiction, published his last novel, which included a highly-glamorized description of Abilene as a cattle center and of its Texas transients.³¹ In The Literary Digest Stuart Henry, a New York business executive and author who had grown up in Abilene, denounced the book as reflecting a flight from past reality.³² Henry then found himself the target of counter-criticism by the Trail Drivers' Association of Texas, the Saturday Evening Post,³³ and Walter Prescott Webb. Most of the clamor was just Texas xenophobia, but antique residents of Abilene also waged war in print over what the oldtime cowtown had really been like.³⁴

Henry's own version of Abilene and its cattle trade appeared in 1930. As part of his effort to de-glamorize the cowtown he included a chapter on Wild Bill.³⁵ According to Henry, Hickok was marshal of Abilene for eight months in 1871. His description of Hickok differed sharply from the traditional. In the first place, asserted Henry, Abilene in 1871 was hardly the citadel of crime and disorder that earlier writers described it; gunfights and other traditional violence actually were the exception rather than the rule. Second, Hickok killed only two men during his marshalship. And this was in but a single gunfight, occurring on October 5--the killing of Coe, the gambler, and Mike Williams, a guard employed by the Novelty Theater. Third, and most important, Hickok was far from a model peace officer at Abilene:

Wild Bill's headquarters were in the palatial Alamo saloon, only a block from our house. He gambled there as one visible means of support. The town trustees appointed him marshal since there came forward no one else who might be equal to the job or who, at any rate, showed a skilled fearlessness. . . . The choice did not prove very satisfactory to the citizens. . . . Grave misgivings did they feel, for Bill consorted entirely with criminals or the lawless. Cheek by jowl with the Texans and "bad

men," he lived outside the civic life. The Abilene civilians regarded him as a desperado and argued whether he or Texas Jack surpassed as a "bad man," efficient in shooting white men. Why could or would Hickok establish respectable peace while encouraging the very difficulties he should surmount?

These fears, wrote Henry, proved true. Hickok failed to enforce the city ordinance against carrying firearms, for example. He did not patrol the streets, but employed deputies for this task while he himself played poker at the Alamo. He was fairly effective in preventing destruction of life and property through inspiring respect for his fast draw and deadly aim, yet this invitation to gunplay was also generally condemned:

Such a policy of taking over justice into his own hands exemplified, of course, but a form of lawlessness. Conceptions of courts, the right of trial by jury with safety meanwhile for the accused, appeared in Abilene to lie beyond his experience or conscience. . . . Unwilling to understand the full nature of his official calling, and shunning civilian influences for criminal, he seemed heedless of the hushed yet troubled state of feelings in his employers, though thankful were they that he kept the top of the town from blowing off.

A third full-length Hickok biography appeared in 1931.³⁶ Written by an elderly resident of Denver, the book followed the Buel biography almost exclusively. The author's only contribution to the literature of Hickok in Abilene was in printing the testimony of an oldtimer who had been city jailer at Abilene in 1871, who described Hickok under severe nervous strain:

Probably no man was ever more hated by cowboys and desperadoes generally than was Bill. They made numerous attempts to kill him, even shooting through his sleeping quarters back of the Elk Horn saloon. His suspicious nature was so aggravated by the constant threats against his life that at times he became tyrannical and overbearing and nearly lost confidence in his best friends.

When expecting serious trouble, he always carried a sawed-off shotgun; and it was a very common sight in Abilene in those days to see Wild Bill sitting in a barber's chair getting shaved, with his shotgun in hand and his eyes open.

A fourth biography was published in 1933. William Elsey Connelley had died in 1930, leaving behind a massive Hickok manuscript which was doggedly edited for publication by his daughter. Working in the vast archives of the Kansas Historical Society, Connelley was fairly successful in carving out a useful chronology for Hickok's career. Yet his chapter on Hickok in Abilene was slender.³⁷ "The record of his [Hickok's] administration was but poorly kept," Connelley complained. "The newspaper of the town was hostile to the Texas cattle business and gave it scant mention. . . . This failure of record

makes it difficult properly to treat the administration of Wild Bill as marshal. . . ." Having discarded the possibility of bedrock documentation, Connelley rebuilt the story of Abilene's marshal on traditional lines:

The people--the good man and the bad man--quickly learned that he stood solely for order. The business man felt secure with him on guard. The bad man knew that a single break meant death. It was a situation which never before existed in any town in America. It was the iron will of one man holding at bay the malice, crime, and recklessness of the wickedest town on the frontier.

Connelley's account added nothing new except for a cautious exploration of Hickok's love life. According to Connelley, Hickok occupied a cottage in Abilene with a girl he had known during the war. Apparently more respectable was his romance with Mrs. Agnes Lake, proprietor of a circus which played Abilene in 1871. Mrs. Lake, according to Connelley, wanted to marry Hickok, but the marshal had a friend tell her he was already married. (But in 1876 Hickok finally did wed her after a brief courtship in Cheyenne.)

The last major contribution to the saga of Abilene's Hickok appeared two years later.³⁸ Thomas Ripley's book was mainly a biography of John Wesley Hardin, an oldtime Texas gunman, and was based on Hardin's 1896 autobiography.³⁹ Hardin, at age 18, had spent several weeks in Abilene. The author utilized for this section, besides Hardin's own testimony, a biography of Ben Thompson written shortly before the Texas gunfighter's death.⁴⁰ Until Ripley resurrected it for a national reading audience, this Texas-published biography, like Hardin's autobiography, had been obscure. In the spring of 1871 Thompson and the ill-fated Phil Coe were owners of the Bull's Head saloon in Abilene. For their version of Hickok in Abilene Ripley quoted Thompson's biographer:

It is necessary to take a bird's-eye view of the then situation at Abilene as to its people, officers, and condition of business. . . . Wild Bill, a noted character, was marshal of the city. About him, around him, with him were associated and congregated the worst set of men that ever lived. He and the city authorities were in colleague, and in all things acted together--whether in the murder of a man for money or picking the pocket of a sick stranger. The sure-thing men, three-card-monte boys, top-and-bottom scoundrels, red-and-black devils, dollar store thieves, confidence gentlemen, pocketbook grabbers, and ropers-in were intimate friends and shared their plunder with Wild Bill, he doing his part by protecting men from the fangs of the law. Wild Bill was the middle man, connected below with the demons already named, and above with those who sat on the bench and dispensed justice, or rather diverted justice from those who came before them--for a consideration--Wild Bill

getting his part and liberally dividing it with lower pals. . . . Such was the situation when Ben and Phil went into business. They succeeded; that is, they made money rapidly, unprecedentedly so for them; but there was a drawback, and a deadly one.

Wild Bill and his gang were unrestrained in their impositions. Ben Thompson cared little for the world at large, nor did Phil Coe, but they did deem it their duty to protect Texans, as far as they could, from the well-nigh highway robbery that was practised on them by the associated Abilene authorities. More than once--yes, more than a dozen times--Ben or Phil intervened to prevent bare-faced robbery. The first time Wild Bill looked astonished; the second time he gritted his teeth and cursed; the third time he swore he would put out of the way those who dared thus to interpose to prevent him from doing his duty.

According to Hardin, Thompson tried to entice him into a fight with the marshal, but Hickok proved friendly, even promising to ignore a "wanted" flyer issued for Hardin by the State of Texas. But their friendship was beset by crises, first when Hardin objected to being arrested for making a disturbance and temporarily "got the drop" on the marshal, and second when he shot a man in a cafe and fled town to escape punishment. Two weeks later he was back, however, a hero for having tracked down and exterminated a Mexican murder suspect. He received Hickok's dispensation and was allowed to stay. But a third crisis developed when Hardin demanded that his cousin, who was being held for killing another cowboy, be released from the Abilene jail. Hickok grudgingly consented, evidently because he realized he would be killed if he refused. Perhaps in frustration the same night he gave one of his deputies, Tom Carson, a severe beating after learning Carson had jailed a girlfriend. Shortly after this incident Hardin fled town for good, having killed a man in a hotel. Hardin termed this victim a burglar; Ripley transformed him into an assassin hired by Hickok.⁴¹

With Hardin temporarily from view, Ripley described the Coe killing as given by Thompson's biographer. Besides the earlier enmity between Hickok and Coe, Hickok desired Coe's girlfriend. The fight was a cowardly affair in which Hickok drew two derringers when Coe's eyes were averted, shoved them against the gambler's chest, and fired without warning. Thus ended Ripley's devastating description of Hickok in Abilene.

Ripley's retelling of events was never directly challenged. Not that subsequent writers completely accepted his revision; it was simply that the great age of the Hickok writers--those Midwesterners with an orientation toward the businessman's ethic who built and defended the image of the Great Lawman--was over. For all practical purposes what was to be said of Hickok in Abilene had been said. What was to follow was to be picking and choos-

ing from established Hickok literature. Some like Eisenhower might cite the traditional image, but there are now many who contest this unsophisticated approach--as proved by the volume of protests that flooded the White House following the Wild Bill Hickok speech.⁴² Some have sought completely to destroy tradition by means of an aggressive iconoclasm. Hickok wore a corset, a magazine writer gleefully quoted an informant;⁴³ others merely emphasize such tradition-damaging evidence as the correct version of the Rock Creek affair. Writers striving for a balanced view in the face of conflicting accounts usually emerge from the dilemma with a kind of modified traditional image. Professor Wish reflects this precisely in his concise references to Hickok: "It was here [in Abilene] that Wild Bill Hickok won his awesome reputation as a swift, straight-shooting federal marshal who subdued his foes and carried on a feud or two on the side," and "Tough, straight-shooting sheriffs and marshals like Wild Bill Hickok could subdue an unruly town, but even this law man of Abilene had to be dismissed for killing a man in a feud on his own spare time."⁴⁴ The traditional view of Hickok in Abilene--the grim, vigilant peace officer who single-handedly imposed a cast-iron rule on the worst of tempestuous frontier towns, but who had to kill frequently in doing it--lives on in formal American social history as well as in media where in one more readily expects to find it: television, motion pictures, and children's literature.⁴⁵

What are the facts? In what ways does the traditional image, as well as the image modifications, reflect them? Municipal records have survived. Consisting of the City of Abilene Minute Book and the City of Abilene Ordinance Book, they contain, respectively, the minutes of the Abilene city council which met in regular session one or two evenings a week, and the texts of city ordinances passed and revised by the council.⁴⁶ Together they record an official view of Hickok's marshalship.

Wild Bill's name appears first in the minutes of the meeting of April 15, 1871: "J. B. Hicocks appointed by the Mayor as Marshall. Unanimously confirmed[.]" Four days later a section of an ordinance was unanimously approved in an otherwise stormy session which set Hickok's salary at \$150 per month, plus 25 per cent of fines against violators arrested by himself. At the meeting of April 21 his bond was set at \$1,000 and section five of a new ordinance laid out his duties:

The marshal shall be industrious & vigilant, not only in preventing any infraction of the ordinances of said city, and bring[ing] offenders against them to justice, but also in causing the prosecution or punishment of offences against the penal laws of the State of Kansas committed within said City, and in suppressing disturbances, affrays, riots, and other breaches of the peace therein. He shall keep an account of all moneys received by him for the use of said City, and pay the same to the treasurer thereof on the first Saturday of every month and

take his receipt therefor, and do & perform all such other duties as are now or hereafter may be required of him by said Council.

By April 24 the new marshal was at work. "Resolution instructing marshal to procure balls and chains for prisoners offered by mayor and unanimously adopted" was recorded that date, along with a directive to make improvements in the jail "under instruction" of Councilman Boudinot. A bill of \$42.96, evidently for this work, was presented by Hickok and allowed on May 1. The absconding councilman incident was documented at the May 8 session:

1. S A Burroughs left the council without permission and on motion of Mr Brinkman the Marshal was instructed to compel his attendance. Mr Burroughs brought in by the marshal and immediately left the council. On motion of G L Brinkman the marshal was instructed to again bring Mr Burroughs back which order was executed.

On May 24 all municipal salaries but Hickok's were altered downward, and on June 3 he applied and received approval for his pay. In a couple of meetings in mid-June the police judge was instructed to pay a quarter of the fines to the arresting officer, and Hickok was ordered to have printed and to post the liquor license regulations and an ordinance relating to brothels. The brothel ordinance specified that "It shall be the duty of the City Marshall to make such detail of assistant marshals or police as may be provided him so as to rigidly enforce this ordinance," and Thomas Carson, James Gainsford,⁴⁷ and J. H. McDonald were subsequently appointed as policemen and approved by the council.

June 24 witnessed a new "Miscellaneous Ordinance" which made the carrying and discharge of firearms within city limits, as well as the carrying of dirks and bowie knives, a crime. The same document reaffirmed the compensation schedule for the marshal, but in addition made him street commissioner at no additional pay. In this capacity Hickok was delegated to investigate complaints about street obstructions and nuisances, to have the same removed by employing prisoners from the jail or hired laborers, and in general to "see that all laws, ordinances[,] Resolutions, and contracts passed or entered into by said Council and regulating or in any way referring to the streets, alleys, sidewalks[,] gutters[,] conduits or bridges of said city be strictly enforced." Later in the summer the commissioner also was made responsible for hiring surveyors for proposed thoroughfares, initiating the submission of labor cost estimates for street improvements, and for hiring and supervising labor for certain small jobs authorized by the council.

At the regular meeting of June 28 the marshal was authorized payment of 50 cents "for killing each and every dog not properly registered as required by ordinance." Later that evening the council was called into special session to investigate promptly "a certain affray" occurring that day between two of Hickok's policemen, Carson and McDonald. The offenders were reprimanded

by the council and given another chance. Four days later a new ordinance specified that hogs found running at large would be "taken up and impounded by the marshall and shall by the Marshall be advertised for the period of three days, and if not called for by the owners, before or at the expiration of said three days, the Marshall shall proceed to sell the same at public auction."

Soon the council started getting specific. On July 8 Councilman Smith was appointed "to confer with the City Marshall, defining him certain duties to be performed." The council then ordered that "A" Street be cleared of obstructions. A week later Hickok was ordered "to stop dance houses and the [presumably unlicensed] vending of Whiskeys[,] Brandies &c in McCoy's Addition," the brothel district southeast of town. On July 22 he was directed "to close up all dead & Brace Gambling Games and to arrest all Cappers for the aforesaid Games"--that is, to suppress crooked gambling.

On August 2 the council received citizens' petitions asking that the four-man police force be reduced by half. At the same meeting "the looseing of twenty Dollars in controversy between Wm Hickok and J. H. McDonald" was referred to a committee.⁴⁸ Soon after this date a special session of the council convened to consider reducing the police force, but the matter was postponed. On August 10 a new ordinance lowered Hickok's compensation to \$100 per month and \$2 for each arrest, his three policemen to receive \$75 per month plus the arrest fee.⁴⁹ On August 16 a vote on reducing the force was taken, but resulted in a tie. Finally on September 2 McDonald and Gainsford were discharged from the force to reduce it by half. Hickok was ordered paid for his last month's services, and was instructed "to suppress all Dance Houses and to arrest the Propri[e]tors if they persist after the Notification[.]" Four days later he was directed "to inform the proprietor of the Abilene House to expell the prostitute from his premises, under the pain and penalties of prosecution." At the end of the month his salary was approved, and on October 11 he and the surviving policeman were allowed \$3 per arrest upon conviction. On November 4 Hickok was allowed one month's pay of \$150, and Carson and J. W. ("Brocky Jack") Norton, a new policeman apparently appointed by Hickok under the terms of the June brothel ordinance, were allowed pay of \$50 each. In addition, "the City Clerk was instructed to draw an order on the Treasurer, Payable to J. B. Hickok, for the purpose of sending R. E. McCoy, wife & child who were paupers, to Kansas City[.]"

At the meeting of November 27 Hickok was ordered to discharge Carson and Norton from the force, and on December 12 three members of the council petitioned the mayor to convene a special session "for the purpose of discharging the Marshall of the City of Abilene[.]" Hickok apparently had not reduced his force as the council directed, but whether this was a factor in his own discharge does not appear in the minutes of the special meeting:

Council Met at their Council Chamber at the regular Time....
 Be it resolved by Mayor & Council of City of Abilene That J B
 Hickok be discharged from his official position as City Mar-
 shall for the reason that the City is no longer in need of his
 services and that the date of his discharge take place from and
 after this 13th day of December A D 1871. Also that all of his
 Deputies be stopped from doing duty. On Motion... that Jas.
 A. Gauthie [a councilman] be appointed City Marshall of the
 City of Abilene.. at a Salary of \$50.00[.] On Motion the same
 be put to vote, carried by unanimous vote of Council[.]

But the matter was not quite closed, according to the minutes of December
 20:

On Motion the claim of J. B. Hickok amounting to \$150.00...
 be referred to City Clerk, and that said Clerk produce to City
 Council at next regular meeting an itemized statement of the
 time J. B. Hickok commenced to render services for the City
 of Abilene as City Marshall, together with the amount of moneys
 received by said J. B. Hickok proceeding from "Orders" is-
 sued by order of City Council.

Ten days later "a Statement was presented to Council by City Clerk detailing
 the time when J B Hickok commenced services as City Marshall and the
 amount paid for his services and the time which he worked which was on Mo-
 tion accepted." No further mention of Wild Bill appears in the municipal
 records.

The files of the weekly Abilene Chronicle for 1871, marred by only oc-
 casional missing issues, provide, despite Connelley's ruling them out as a
 source, an insight into the local attitude toward Wild Bill--that is, the public
 view of his marshalship. No issues of the paper survive covering the date
 Hickok was sworn in; the first mention of the new marshal is in the edition of
 May 18, wherein the mayor was criticized for his handling of the absconding
 councilman affair. "The councilman was arrested and carried into the room
 by the Marshal," noted the editor. "There was not the least shadow of law
 for such a proceeding, there being no ordinance to compel the attendance of
 councilmen. Of course the Marshal simply obeyed orders--whether legal or
 not--and is not to blame." The editor was especially angry that Mayor McCoy
 as a joke had an engraving made in Topeka of Wild Bill carrying the council-
 man on his shoulder over the title "Who's Mayor Now?" The same edition,
 which printed several anti-McCoy items, carried a signed statement by two
 councilmen that the mayor had tried to influence their voting on a controver-
 sial saloon tax issue. The two councilmen stood for a high tax, the mayor
 for a low one. The difference, McCoy was alleged to have said, would be
 made up by having Hickok, "(who Mr. McCoy said would do anything he wanted,) when the gamblers and bad women came into the city, collect fines from them

...and no one wo'd be the wiser for it." The editor endorsed this laying bare of the scheme, but did not comment on the marshal's proposed role in it.

On June 8 the paper noted with pleasure that Hickok "has posted up printed notices, informing all persons that the ordinance against carrying fire arms or other weapons in Abilene, will be enforced." Throughout the summer the paper documented the city council's campaign against organized sin in Abilene, but made no mention of Hickok's part in it. The July 13 Chronicle criticized policeman McDonald who "under orders" arrested a stranger for gambling after he had lost \$1,025, but who ignored the professional gambler taking the money. Apparently the marshal did not figure in the incident. The issue of August 3 noted that Lake's Circus had exhibited in Abilene, but no specific mention was made of the future Mrs. Hickok.

The first mention of the marshal since early June, and the first extensive notice of his activities, occurred with the October 12 writeup of the Coe-Hickok gunfight:

SHOOTING AFFRAY.

Two Men Killed.

On last Thursday evening a number of men got on a "spree," and compelled several citizens and others to "stand 'treat," catching them on the street and carrying them upon their shoulders into the saloons. The crowd served the Marshal, commonly called "Wild Bill," in this manner. He treated, but told them that they must keep within the bounds of order or he would stop them. They kept on, until finally one of the crowd, named Phil. Coe, fired a revolver. The Marshal heard the report and knew at once that the leading spirits in the crowd, numbering probably fifty men, intended to get up a "fight." He immediately started to quell the affair and when he reached the Alamo saloon, in front of which the crowd had gathered, he was confronted by Coe, who said that he had fired the shot at a dog. Coe had his revolver in his hand, as had also other parties in the crowd. As quick as thought the Marshal drew two revolvers and both men fired almost simultaneously. Several shots were fired, during which Mike Williams, a policemen [sic], came around the corner for the purpose of assisting the Marshal, and rushing between him and Coe received two of the shots intended for Coe. The whole affair was the work of an instant. The Marshal, surrounded by the crowd, and standing in the light, did not recognize Williams whose death he deeply regrets. Coe was shot through the stomach, the ball coming out through his back; he lived in great agony until Sunday evening; he was a gambler, but a man of natural good impulses in his better moments. It is said that he had a spite at Wild Bill and had threatened to kill

him--which Bill believed he would do if he gave him the opportunity. One of Coe's shots went through Bill's coat and another passed between his legs striking the floor behind him. The fact is Wild Bill's escape was truly marvelous. The two men were not over eight feet apart, and both of them large, stout men. One or two others in the crowd were hit, but none seriously.

We had hoped that the season would pass without any row. The Marshal has, with his assistants, maintained quietness and good order--and this in face of the fact that at one time during the season there was a larger number of cut-throats and desperadoes in Abilene than in any other town of its size on the continent. Most of them were from Kansas City, St. Louis, New Orleans, Chicago, and from the Mountains.

We hope no further disturbances will take place. There is no use in trying to override Wild Bill, the Marshal. His arrangements for policeing [sic] the city are complete, and attempts to kill police officers or in any way create disturbance, must result in loss of life on the part of violators of the law. We hope that all, strangers as well as citizens, will aid by word and deed in maintaining peace and quietness.⁵⁰

Hickok's second major notice, and his last in the files of the Chronicle, for 1871, appeared in the issue of November 30:

ATTEMPT TO KILL MARSHAL HICKOK .

He Circumvents the Parties.

Previous to the inauguration of the present municipal authorities of Abilene, every principle of right and justice was at a discount. No man's life or property was safe from the murderous intent and lawless invasions of Texans. The state of affairs was very similar to that of Newton during the last season. The law-abiding citizens decided upon a change, and it was thought best to fight the devil with his own weapons. Accordingly Marshal Hickok, popularly known as "Wild Bill," was elected marshal. He appointed his men, tried and true, as his assistants. Without tracing the history of the great cattle market, it will suffice to say that during the past season there has been order in Abilene. The Texans have kept remarkably quiet, and, as we learn from several citizens of the place, simply for fear of Marshal Hickok and his posse. The Texans, however, viewed him with a jealous eye. Several attempts have been made to kill him, but all in vain. He has from time to time during the last summer received letters from Austin, Texas, warning him of a combination of rangers who had sworn to kill him. Lately,

a letter came saying that a purse of \$11,000 had been made up and five men were on their way to Abilene to take his life. They arrived in Abilene, but for five days they kept hid, and the marshal, although knowing their presence, was unable to find them. At last wearied with watching and sleepless nights and having some business in Topeka, he concluded to come here and take a rest. As he stood on the platform of the depot at Abilene he noticed four desperate looking fellows headed by a desperado about six feet four inches high. They made no special demonstrations, but when the marshal was about to get on the train, a friend who was with him overheard the big Texan say, "Wild Bill is going on the train." He was informed of this remark and kept a watch upon the party. They got on the same train and took seats immediately behind the marshal. In a short time, he got up and took his seat behind them. One of the party glanced around and saw the situation, whereupon they left the car and went into the forward car. The marshal and his friend, then, to be sure that they were after him, went to the rear end of the rear car. The marshal being very tired, sought rest in sleep, while his friend kept watch. Soon the Texans came into the car, and while four of them stood in the aisle, the leader took a position behind the marshal, and a lady who was sitting near, and knew the marshal, saw the Texan grasping a revolver between his overcoat and dress coat. The marshal's friend, who had been a close observer of the party, went to him and told him not to go to sleep. This occurred about ten miles west of Topeka. When the train arrived at Topeka, the marshal saw his friend safely on the 'bus and reentered the car. The party of Texans were just coming out of the door, when the marshal asked them where they were going. They replied, "We propose to stop in Topeka." The marshal then said, "I am satisfied that you are hounding me, and as I intend to stop in Topeka, you can't stop here." They began to object to his restrictions, but a pair of 'em convinced the murderous Texans that they had better go on, which they did. While we cannot justify lawlessness or recklessness of any kind, yet we think the marshal wholly justifiable in his conduct toward such a party. Furthermore, we think he is entitled to the thanks of law-abiding citizens throughout the State for the safety of life and property at Abilene, which has been secured, more through his daring, than any other agency.

A third source of information offers an insight into the private life of Abilene's marshal. While gathering materials on local history, J. B. Edwards, an Abilene businessman and antiquarian,⁵¹ gained contact in the 1920's with one Charles F. Gross of Chicago. Gross, a native Illinoisian,

had been brought to Abilene as a young man by Joseph McCoy. In a series of letters, which on Edwards' death were obtained by the Kansas Historical Society, Gross proved an amazingly uninhibited informant, with a memory for detail balanced by a fondness for piquant generalization. Evidently writing in answer to detailed questioning by Edwards, he mentioned Wild Bill from time to time. He had, he wrote, first met Hickok in Illinois in 1859, met him again in Kansas in the late 1860's, and on McCoy's orders brought him back from Fort Harker as the prospective new marshal for Abilene.⁵² He then apparently became Hickok's close friend and confidant. Judging from the kind of compassionate realism that is the tone of his letters, the fact that Gross requested Edwards to refrain from publishing much of what he wrote, that his characterizations of people like McCoy seem fair but intelligently perceptive, and that, rather surprisingly, obscure events and facts that can be checked against other historical data do, in fact, check, the role of Gross as an uncommonly honest informant is imposing. In assessing the one letter dealing entirely with answers to questions about Hickok in Abilene, a letter displaying such intimate knowledge of Hickok that there are few known facts against which to test it, this apparent veracity of Gross should be remembered. The letter, 11 pages in manuscript and marked "Not for the Public to read" in another hand presumably because of its single pungent obscenity, reads as follows:

1542 East 67th Place

Ch[ica]go

June 15th/25

Dear Friend Edwards.

You have asked me a question that I can only answer by giving an Opinion. [In] The many talks I had with Bill I do not now recall any remark, or refference to any Woman other than those he made to the One he lived with in the Small house & he did not Ever show bifore me any Especial affection for her-- What he called her I do not recall but I do Know he was on Guard Even against her[.] I was there alone with the two Many times but I was Very carefull never to go unless I knew Bill was Home & always there was good reason for my going. Having to go Early one morning Bill was still in Bed & when I went to the door and the woman came to let me in she saw through the window who I was. --she was only just up & was still in night dress[.] Bill said "let him in; you dont give a Dam for Gross seeing you"; but she did and showed it in looks. she went into the next room & Bill got up leasurly and as he sat side ways on the Bed I saw he had his 6 shooter in his right hand and on the Bed spread lay a sawed off shot Gun (Double Barreled) with a strap on it so he could swing it over his shoulder and Carry it under his Coat out of sight[.] I dont think the Barrell was More than a 1-1/2 feet

long--to my surprise as soon as Bill was dressed, all but Coat & Hat--he went carefully to the door[,] looked all arround for several mts & then Emptied one 6 shooter. He had the one in Each hand, returned to the room[,] cleaned & reloaded it, then went to the door & Empt[i]ed the Other one & reload[e]d it the same way. Bill used powder & Ball--We had pistols then with Metal Ca[r]tridges but Bill would not use them[.] he used powder & Ball, moulded his own bullets & primed Each tube using a pin to push the powder in so he was sure of powder Contact and before putting on the Cap he looked at the interior of Each Cap[.] now this [was] all strange to me & new too, for I had roomed & slept with Bill all [the] time he was at the [Drovers] Cottage (2 months or more) & he never did it there, so I said, did you get your Guns damp yesterday Bill? he said "no, but I aint ready to go yet & I am not taking any chances, when I draw & pull I must be sure. You are the Only person in Abilene I will go to sleep with in the same room that I do not make things as sure as I Know how when I awake." I went fishing with Bill once at Hoffmans Dam & when we got in the Buggie Bill threw on 2 extra pistols and on our way home we stopped at a clear spot by some Cotto[n] woods & he & [I] put up a piece of paper on a tree as near the size of a mans body as we could guess & about the h[e]ight of Navel--(a 6 foot man)[.] the paper was about 6 in long with a spot in the Center half way. We stepped off 20 feet & he asked me to "wait a few moments," he Kind of slouched and did not appe[a]r to be looking at anything[.] he said "Keep talking & then suddenly without any hesitation in your talk, say Draw (Kinder qu[i]ck)"[.]

He shot six times so quick it startled me, for his 6 was in his Holster when I said "Draw"[.] I was looking directly at him and only saw a Motion & he was firing. No use to ask how he drew[.] I dont Know[.] I only saw his arm was not straight & stiff[.] there was a precipitable Curve to his arm, but very slight--Every shot was in the paper and two in the spot, but all of them within one inch of an up & down line like this.

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hand We put up another paper and Bill tried his left hand with the result that all were in the paper but none in the spot but all of them [on] the up and down line, Each almost over the other or in the same hole. I said Not quite so good Bill--He said "I never shot a man with my left hand Except the time when some drunken Soldiers had me down on the floor & were trampling me & then I used both hands.⁵³ I do not recall that I ever heard Bill say "Killed"[.] He always said "shot"[.] I have wandered away from Your question & I

will now return to it only pausing to say, Bill said "Charlie I hope you never have to shoot any man, but if you do[,] shoot him in the Guts near the Navel. you may not make a fatal shot, but he will get a shock that will paralyze his brain and arm so much that the fight is all over--

Now Edwards I dont think Bill Ever was married[.] if he did it was before the War & back in Ills. he came from Tiskilwa[,] Bureau Co. Ills or near there. Some old settler there may know, or some of his family may be there-- He always had a Mistress[.] I Knew two or three of them[.] one[,] a former mistress of his was an inmate of a cottage in McCoys addition. Bill asked me to go with him to see her to be a witness in an interview. I believe she was a Red Head but am not sure. She came to Abilene to try & make up with Bill. He gave her \$25.00 & made her move on. There was no Row but Bill told her he was through with her. She moved On.

When Mrs Lake the Widow of "Old Lake["] of Circus fame Came to Abilene she set up her tent Just West of the D[rovers] Cottage on the Vacant ground[.] Bill was on hand to Keep order. Bill was a Handsome man as you Know & she fell for him hard, fell all the way Clear to the Basement, tried her best to get him to marry her & run the Circus[.] Bill told me all about it. I said why dont you do it-- He said "I Know she has a good show, but when she is done in the West, she will go East & I dont want any paper collar on, & its me for the West. I would be lost back in the States, and she has a [obscenity deleted] like a Horse Collar anyway-- No it wont do."-- Now that one remark of Bills indicates to me that there was no Legal reason for his refusal to Marry Mrs Lake. I Know she was Keene for it (wonder if her name was Agnes ?)[.] she wrote to him after leaving Abilene I know[,] for the letters came to my care under seal to the Cottage. Now Edwards I have written a Rambling sort of letter & I Know you wont read it to the Ladies Club, or incorporate [it] in your History of Abilene without selecting the part you will mention in print. Its not refined but neither were the people I am talking of, they were all tough, and my own inate refinement was sort of laying low. it took me some time after leaving the Border to gather myself together and fall into line with thought & action, with the Environment that I had been born & Educated to and forget as much as possible that I had Ever been in any way Connected with people who were not Clean in thought & action. My West Expierence made me a very Suspicious sort of person both of the male & female Human. But I believe in Evolution in this

respect, for I Know that the Gross of the Early 70['s] is not the Gross of today in thought or Action. Am glad C. A. H. is once more himself. make my Kindest regards to him & his Charming wife & may you & yours be well and happy for a long time yet. Tell Everybody in Abilene Good Luck[.] Yours the Same[.]

C. F. Gross

How does the folk-image of Hickok in Abilene contrast with available documentation? The official records of Abilene in 1871 show Hickok, as city marshal and street commissioner, to have been an essential cog in the routine of municipal management, with an especially important role to play as marshal in the city council's campaign against prostitution, crooked gambling, and illegal liquor-retailing. As street commissioner his duties were also important, yet whether these duties actually occupied his time to any extent is problematical; they of course are not part of the traditional image. There was one recorded case of friction between Hickok and one of his deputies, which tends to verify Hardin's description of Hickok's fight with Carson and, with the recorded conflict between Carson and McDonald, creates a picture of an aggressive, high-strung police force that occasionally relieved tension by quarrelling. Some of the modifications of the Hickok image imply similar friction between Wild Bill and the city government, and indeed it does seem to have existed at the end of his term, apparently involving his retention of two deputies the council wanted released and a final salary payment which was tendered to the departing marshal reluctantly if at all. Perhaps more important, the traditional Wild Bill seems to be in a sort of free-agent status as marshal, motivated only by a kind of personal commitment against lawlessness, completely divorced from the prosaic duties of the modern police officer or the discipline and direction of a municipal employer. Modification of the traditional image seems in order on this perhaps subtle but important point.

The public view in Abilene of Wild Bill was evidently unqualified approval--if the Chronicle does accurately reflect, as it seems to do, the view of Abilene at large. The paper was, however, increasingly anti-council as the year wore on (efforts against organized sin were not stringent enough for the editor), and it may have tended to speak favorably of the marshal as a way of belittling the council's broad effort to suppress disorder. The public movement to halve the police force was not mentioned by the paper, and anyway apparently represented simply a call for economy in government rather than a reflection on Hickok--even though the marshal obviously opposed the move to cut his staff. As Connelley pointed out, the paper hardly mentioned Hickok at all. But when it did the paper mentioned him favorably, even when--as in the covert tax-scheme revelation in May or the accidental killing of Mike Williams in October--it could well have been quite critical. The editor seems to have known little about routine activity in the disreputable part of

town, "Texan" Abilene below the railroad tracks, and this seems to portray the same lack of knowledge by "respectable" Abilene. In short, the majority of the public, like the newspaper, never was well acquainted with Marshal Hickok, but it had the impression that he was a conscientious, nearly single-handed mainstay of law and order in that unstable, dangerous section of town seemingly inhabited by a criminally-oriented population. In this way, despite Stuart Henry's assertions otherwise, Abilene citizens apparently took a view of Hickok that conforms rather closely to the Hickok image that is with us today.

The C. F. Gross letter, finally, reveals a Wild Bill far from the controlled, inflexibly fearless traditional type. On the contrary, Hickok appears greatly, perhaps morbidly, fearful of assassination. What occurred, especially after his gunfight with Coe, may have been a kind of occupational paranoia, and the seemingly far-fetched incident of the Texans on the train to Topeka, though documented in the paper, possibly represented a disturbed state of nerves on Hickok's part rather than his response to a real conspiracy. Of course, the picture of Wild Bill's pervasive and somewhat unorthodox sex life is most destructive of tradition, with the cruelly offhand remark concerning the woman he was later to court and marry especially damaging. In general, Hickok emerges from the Gross letter as a human being (if of an irritatingly male variety), displaying all the stresses and strains many men would have, given the ordeal of his official position.

One important modification of the tradition, however, remains unverified. This is the assertion that Hickok was willing to stretch the law he was hired to uphold. According to the Thompson biography, Hickok was involved with Abilene's authorities in robbing the town's transients. This smacks of the scheme exposed in the Chronicle as having been proposed by Mayor McCoy; as a matter of fact, raising civic revenue by regular "fines" levied on semi-legal or illegal elements was commonly done in the Kansas cowtowns, sometimes quite overtly.⁵⁴ Hickok may indeed have been party to such a program in Abilene. Hardin maintained that Hickok also modified the letter of the law in several specific incidents. It is also not improbable that this was the fact, but documentation is lacking.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the traditional image of the Great Lawman diverges in certain fundamental ways from what was probably the real Wild Bill Hickok in Abilene. Perhaps it is fair therefore to speak of a "Hickok Legend," even though from Buel through Ripley the accounts of Abilene's marshal have been entwined more or less with the essential facts. In any event it seems most useful to view the 90 years of Hickok literature as a study in the materials of hero-making. What the heroic, larger-than-life image exactly signifies in American civilization is beyond the scope of this study; that it exists should no longer be subject to question.

Footnotes:

¹ Des Moines Sunday Register, Dec. 27, 1953.

² Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (3 vols., New York, 1927-1930), III, 15-16.

³ Harvey Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America (2 vols., New York, 1950-1952), II, 85.

⁴ The most useful summary of Hickok's career is the article by William Elsey Connelley in the Dictionary of American Biography (22 vols., New York, 1928-1958), IX, 4-5, from which most of the general biographical data presented here was drawn.

⁵ G[eorge] W[ard] N[ichols], "Wild Bill," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, XXXIV (Feb., 1867), 273-285. This article has been reprinted most recently in Horace Knowles (ed.), Gentlemen, Scholars and Scoundrels (New York, 1959), 319-337.

⁶ For good examples of Hickok's local press see the Junction City Weekly Union, Oct. 2, 1869, which reports his killing a man in Hays City, the Topeka Commonwealth, Nov. 8, 1869, which notes his visit to that city, and the Ellsworth Reporter, March 28, 1872, which declares that Hickok intends to return to Ellsworth in the near future and make it his home.

⁷ Harper's Weekly, June 29, 1867, 406.

⁸ Quoted in the Junction City Weekly Union, Nov. 11, 1871.

⁹ G. A. Custer, "My Life on the Plains," The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading, XII (April, 1872), 471-479. The description of Hickok is in pp. 473-474.

¹⁰ George Armstrong Custer, My Life on the Plains (New York, 1874). The book was later republished as Wild Life on the Plains and Horrors of Indian Warfare (St. Louis [c. 1891]).

¹¹ The Ellsworth Reporter, April 23, 1874, reprinted the release in full, having received it with a letter from S. C. Lane of Bridgeport, Conn., a former Ellsworth resident. The paper published the programme because, noted the editor, "it will interest many who are familiar with his [Hickok's] history in Western Kansas."

¹² The Cheyenne Daily Leader, August 12; the Denver Rocky Mountain News and the Louisville Courier-Journal, August 13; the Chicago Inter Ocean, August 14. Three days later the Courier-Journal and Inter Ocean published detailed reports of the affair from their respective correspondents in the Hills. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat and other urban newspapers soon followed suit: the St. Joseph Gazette, August 24; the Chicago Tribune, August 25. Among smaller papers, see the Hays City Sentinel of August 16; the Council Bluffs Nonpareil, August 27.

¹³ [William F. Cody,] The Life of Hon. William F. Cody known as Buffalo Bill (Hartford, 1879). It is probable that the prewar association with Hickok described by Cody is pure fiction.

¹⁴ J. W. Buel, Heroes of the Plains or Lives and Wonderful Adventures of Wild Bill...and other Celebrated Indian Fighters, Scouts, Hunters and Guides (New York, 1882), 19-221. Hickok's career in Abilene is covered in 133-137, 140-145. Subsequent editions of the book were published in 1883 and 1884. Buel was born in Illinois in 1849 and was educated at the University of Illinois. From 1873 to 1878 he was a reporter in Kansas City

and St. Louis, and in 1879 began writing popular nonfiction. He traveled through Siberia in 1882, which resulted in the first of a series of travel narratives. He subsequently wrote many other works--on history, biography, the great operas, and other subjects--including Buel's Manual of Self Help. In later life he settled in Philadelphia, dying in 1920. Who's Who in America (30 vols., Chicago, 1899-1958), I, 96. (The dates of death of Buel and other Hickok writers noted below are all taken from their entries in the Library of Congress Catalogue of Printed Cards.)

15 Entitled Life and Marvelous Adventures of Wild Bill, the Scout (Chicago, 1880); recently reprinted as The True Story of "Wild Bill" Hickok (New York [1946]).

16 See for examples Ned Buntline, Buffalo Bill and his Adventures in the West (New York, 1886), and [William F. Cody?], Buffalo Bill (Hon. Wm. F. Cody) and His Wild West Companions (Chicago [1893?]).

17 Helen Cody Wetmore, Last of the Great Scouts (Buffalo Bill) (Duluth, 1899); subsequently republished in New York (1900, 1918).

18 See especially Elizabeth B. Custer's Following the Guidon (New York, 1890), which contains a famous description of Hickok, 161.

19 E. C. Little, "A Son of the Border," Everybody's Magazine, IV (June, 1901), 578-587. Little was born in Ohio in 1858. He received his LL.B. and A.M. degrees at the University of Kansas. He practiced law in Kansas, and in 1890 became a general attorney for various business enterprises at Abilene. After serving with distinction in the Philippine Insurrection he removed to Kansas City (1908), where he became "identified with much important litigation in Kans[as]." Who's Who, VI, 1164. Little died in the 1920's while serving a term in Congress. See Stuart Henry, Conquering Our Great American Plains: A Historical Development (New York, 1930), 365.

20 Arthur Chapman, "The Men Who Tamed the Cow-Towns," Outing, XLV (Nov., 1904), 131-139. Chapman was born in Illinois in 1873, was a Chicago reporter, and then reporter for a Denver paper from 1898 to 1913 and its mining editor from 1916 to 1919. He later became a special writer for the New York Herald Tribune. He was the author of several books (fiction and nonfiction) about the Old West, as well as a contributor to popular magazines. He died in 1935. Who's Who, XV, 474.

21 For possible antecedents of this story see fn. 52 below.

22 Emerson Hough, The Story of the Outlaw: A Study of the Western Desperado (New York, 1907), Chapter XII. Hough was born in Iowa in 1857, was educated at the University of Iowa, and traveled extensively in the West. His first book was published in 1895, with his first really successful book, The Story of the Cowboy, appearing two years later. He finally settled in Chicago, and died in 1923. Who's Who, XII, 1577-1578.

23 Harry (Sam) Young, Hard Knocks: A Life Story of the Vanishing West (Chicago, 1915). Hickok's Abilene career is discussed in 48-51. Although Young's book appears to include much that is merely fanciful about Hickok, at least his eyewitness account of Hickok's assassination at Deadwood is supported by the fact that he testified at the trial of Hickok's killer. See the Chicago Inter Ocean, Aug. 14, 1876.

24 Young is here obviously referring to the prominent Texas cattleman, A. H. ("Shanghai") Pierce. See Joseph G. McCoy, Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest (Kansas City, 1874), 142.

25 Frank J. Wilstach, Wild Bill Hickok, The Prince of Pistoleers (New York, 1926). Hickok's Abilene career is discussed in 175-188. Wilstach was born in Indiana in 1865 and educated at Purdue and Seton Hall universities. From 1889 to 1923 he was an independent theatrical manager in New York, and in 1924 became general press representative for Sam H. Harris, prominent Broadway manager. He died in 1933. Who's Who, XIII, 3466.

26 See Fred E. Sutton and A. B. MacDonald, "Fill Your Hand," Saturday Evening Post, April 10, 1926, 14.

27 Wilstach, Wild Bill Hickok, Chapter IV.

28 See the Hickok debate between J. S. McClintock of Deadwood, S. D., and the Chicago journalist and Western author Walter Noble Burns in the Deadwood Daily Telegram, Jan. 10, 1923.

29 George W. Hansen, "True Story of Wild Bill-McCandles Affray in Jefferson County, Nebraska, July 12, 1861," Nebraska History Magazine, X (April-June, 1927), 71-112.

30 William E. Connelley, "Wild Bill--James Butler Hickok," Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, XVII (1926-1928), 1-27. Connelley was born in Kentucky in 1855, taught school in rural Kansas and served as a county clerk, then went into the lumber business in Springfield, Mo. By 1892 he was connected with banking interests in Kansas, and in 1905 he helped organize the Kansas Oil Producers' Association. He began publishing the results of his historical and ethnological researches in 1899, and after retirement from business in the 1920's became head of the Kansas Historical Society. He died in 1930. Who's Who, XV, 534.

31 Emerson Hough, North of 36 (New York, 1923). The novel ran in the Saturday Evening Post from April 7 through May 26, 1923. It was published as a paperback in 1947 and 1956.

32 The Literary Digest, Nov. 10, 1923, 54-55, 57. For Henry's biographical data see Who's Who, XV, 1016.

33 "Texas Versus Henry," Saturday Evening Post, June 7, 1924, 34.

34 See summary of the furor over North of 36 in Henry's Conquering Our Great American Plains, Appendix.

35 Henry, Conquering Our Great American Plains, Chapter XXI.

36 Wilbert Edwin Eisele, The Real Wild Bill Hickok, Famous Scout and Knight Chivalric of the Plains--A True Story of Pioneer Life in the Far West (Denver, 1931). The discussion of Hickok in Abilene is in 179-201.

37 William Elsey Connelley, Wild Bill and His Era: The Life & Adventures of James Butler Hickok (New York, 1933), Chapter XXIII.

38 Thomas Ripley, They Died With Their Boots On (New York, 1935). The book was republished in 1937, and printed as a paperback in 1949. The activities of Hardin, Thompson, and Coe in Abilene are discussed in Chapters VIII through XI.

39 John Wesley Hardin, The Life of John Wesley Hardin... as Written by Himself (Seguin, Texas, 1896). The autobiography was posthumously published, Hardin having been shot and killed the previous year.

40 W. M. Walton, Life and Adventures of Ben Thompson, the Famous Texan (Austin, 1884); recently republished (Houston, 1954).

41 Lending support to Hardin's testimony about Hickok is the fact that the outline of his Abilene narrative is supported by newspaper documenta-

tion, although the young outlaw was never mentioned by name. The herd of Columbus Carroll, with which Hardin claimed to have traveled north from Texas, arrived at Abilene early in May, as Hardin stated. See report of an Abilene correspondent in the Topeka Commonwealth, May 11, 1871. William Cohron (Hardin called him "Corans") was murdered on July 5 by a Mexican near Abilene. The killer "was pursued by two cow boys, who overtook him 250 miles south of Abilene and shot him dead as he was rising from dinner." See Abilene Chronicle, July 13, 1871. On August 6 the killer of the Mexican [Hardin] shot and killed one Charles Cougar in Abilene. See Abilene Chronicle, Aug. 17, 1871. This evidently refers to Hardin's last killing in Abilene before fleeing town; he said it took place on July 7, but his chronology is consistently "slow" throughout his account. There is evidence, however, that this August 6 killing was of a sleeper in the hotel room adjoining Hardin's rather than either a burglar or an assassin. See my "Exit John Wesley Hardin," The [Los Angeles] Westerners Brand Book, VI (1956), 123-129.

⁴² Des Moines Sunday Register, Dec. 27, 1953.

⁴³ Edwin V. Burkholder, "The Truth About 'Wild Bill' Hickok," True, the Man's Magazine, XXXIV (June, 1954), 77.

⁴⁴ Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America, II, 73-74, 85. For the most recent full-length "popular" treatment of Hickok in this modified traditional vein see Richard O'Connor, Wild Bill Hickok (New York, 1959).

⁴⁵ Hickok had been established as a hero for children by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. See for example Charles H. L. Johnson, Famous Scouts, Including Trappers, Pioneers, and Soldiers of the Frontier (Boston, 1910), Chapter XI. For recent examples see A. M. Anderson, Wild Bill Hickok (Chicago, 1947), and Stewart Holbrook, Wild Bill Hickok Tames the West (New York [1952]).

⁴⁶ Both of these documents have been microfilmed by the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka. Specific pages used for this review are as follows: City of Abilene Minute Book, 1870-1876, 55, 58, 61, 63-64, 68-71, 73-74, 77, 79, 81, 83-88, 95, 99, 105, 107-110; City of Abilene Ordinance Book, 1869-1874, 17-22, 30, 32, 34, 54, 57, 62-64, 67, 69-73.

⁴⁷ Gainsford was already the local deputy U. S. marshal, a designation now often mistakenly applied to Hickok in this period. See Abilene Chronicle, July 13, 1871.

⁴⁸ The Minute Book incorrectly gives July 2 as the date of this session, but the meeting sequence and the note that the meeting was to occur on a Wednesday evening indicate the correct date.

⁴⁹ This document does not appear in the Ordinance Book, but was printed in full as a matter of routine in the Abilene Chronicle, Aug. 17, 1871. It may never have gone into effect, however, since Hickok's salary seems to have remained at \$150 per month. The August 10 ordinance was specifically repealed by the city council on May 24, 1872. See Ordinance Book, 91.

⁵⁰ See also the report of the gunfight in the Junction City Weekly Union, Oct. 7, 1871. There are no essential differences. Other more distant newspapers carried garbled versions of the affair. See for example the Leavenworth Daily Times, Oct. 8, 1871.

⁵¹ Edwards, an oldtime resident of Abilene, began describing the town's days as a great cattle center in the local press in 1896; these articles

were subsequently published in pamphlet form as Early Days in Abilene ([Abilene, 1940]). From E. C. Little to Stuart Henry, most of the Hickok writers owe a great deal to Edwards' Abilene researches.

⁵² C. F. Gross to J. B. Edwards, April 13, 1922, Nov. 18, 1925, J. B. Edwards Papers, Kansas State Historical Society. Also in two letters Gross revealed that the outlaws Jesse and Frank James and Cole Younger visited Abilene during the time the circus was playing there (late July or early August, 1871?), and that Hickok knew of their presence but did not attempt to apprehend them. Gross told Edwards of this, but then seemed sorry he had revealed the incident. Gross, who in later years was employed in penal administration, considered himself a party to this miscarriage of justice and cautioned Edwards not to publish the information. See Gross to Edwards, April 20 ("private" letter) and April 26, 1922. The incident related by Arthur Chapman about the James gang's plan to rob the "Abilene fair" may reflect a distorted version of the incident from some other source.

⁵³ This passage clearly refers to Hickok's fight with three off-duty cavalrymen at Hays City in 1869, which was described perhaps most authoritatively in Mrs. Custer's Following the Guidon, 163-164.

⁵⁴ For the example of Ellsworth see the Topeka Commonwealth, July 1, 1873.