A Wild Time in the Old Town Tonight, 1875–1879

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In this selection, Cashion vividly describes life at Fort Griffin, a rough and rowdy settlement of saloons, dance halls, brothels, and gaming establishments. Soldiers, buffalo hunters, and cowboys populated the Northwest Texas outpost, and lawless acts were common. Still, Dr. Cashion points out, “gratuitous killings were rare and violence was never taken lightly” by local authorities.

One summer day in 1877, Charles Bain’s stage delivered the Jacksboro Frontier Echo to Fort Griffin. Between the headlines and the local news, the paper dedicated an entire page to a devastating railway strike that had left much of Pittsburgh “in ashes.” Pennsylvania militiamen, on hand to preserve the peace, instead provoked a riot by turning their rifles and Gatling guns on an

unsuspecting crowd of factory workers and curious spectators who had gathered at a railroad roundhouse. Later that day and throughout the night several thousand civilians responded by attacking the troops with any kind of weapon they could find. The mob pillaged the city and destroyed buildings, railroad cars, and other property. A month later the *Echo* reported that "forty persons killed and two-thousand six-hundred cars destroyed are among the fruits of the late strike at Pittsburgh."

About the same time as the riot, news coming out of Northwest Texas created the impression that keeping order was beyond the ability of civil authorities at Fort Griffin as well. In December 1876 the *Fort Worth Democrat* reported that vigilantes in Shackelford County had just hanged almost a dozen horse thieves, adding: "Their bodies will make good food for the vultures." And only a month earlier the *Frontier Echo* vividly recounted the brutal slayings of two freighters by a pair of outlaws who had hired their team. After departing the village, the murderers marched the drivers into the brush; one of them shot his man point-blank in the head, the other pistol-whipped his victim to death. The *Dallas Daily Herald* covered an equally violent incident. This time it was a gunfight inside a Griffin saloon, where the sheriff and county attorney left one reckless cowboy dead and another wounded. Two bystanders had also been killed—one "with his brain oozing from the hole in his forehead."

While the strikers at Pittsburgh erupted as one body protesting their intolerable conditions, Griffinites acted as individuals, seemingly resorting to violence in the normal course of their affairs. Compared with other frontier communities, Fort Griffin was a bloody boomtown, but the sensational reports emanating from the little outpost did not always paint an accurate picture. Such incidents were infrequent but widely reported, giving the impression of lawlessness out of proportion to daily life. Travelers, in fact, frequently expressed surprise at finding Fort Griffin so peaceable. Editor Robson wrote tongue-in-cheek that a number of itinerant prospectors thought they would "see nearly every citizen a walking arsenal"; they also expected to "hear of at least one man being killed here regularly each day in the week and several killed on Sunday." Wildness was nevertheless ever present in the whiskey houses and brothels lining Griffin Avenue, and the volatile environment indeed invited occasional violence.

Griffin's "heyday" began about 1875, shortly after D. M. Dowell reopened the Flat to settlement. The socially deprived enlisted men welcomed the development, and despite the efforts of everyone concerned with maintaining military discipline, the army had little success keeping the soldiers away from the rough-and-tumble little town. The fort's medical officer noted that "the habits of the men might be materially improved by the removal of a number of lewd women living in the vicinity of the post." He also complained that recently a soldier had been wounded by a "pistol ball" in one of Griffin's "drunken haunts." Inspector General N. H. Davis resigned himself to accepting the "nuisance under the bluff," remarking that "this kind of evil... will follow the troops to any locality they may go."

Colonel Buell did not surrender so easily; in February 1875 he ordered his men to stay out of the Flat. The enlisted men openly flouted him, however, and several of them even erected shacks in the village. To the colonel's consternation, the situation further degenerated. In October a dispute over sectional differences resulted in a bloody row between drunken soldiers.
and civilians. When the troops threatened to burn the settlement, the townsfolk vowed they
would march on the fort. A few weeks later the colonel removed one of the worst offenders, a
man named Krause, even though he held a legal lease for what Buell described as a "grog shop
and gambling hole." Ill feelings lingered, and in January an infantryman on sentry duty fired
a round into the Flat, mortally wounding a civilian.

When the first session of the district court met in recently organized Shackelford County
during June 1875, Judge J. P. Osterhout dealt severely with lawbreakers. In thirty-seven
cases during the five-day session he found a dozen men guilty of gambling and selling
liquor illegally, and although the fines ranged from only $10 to $15, some of the accused
faced multiple counts. Many of the same men who sold illegal spirits were also pandering
prostitutes, a more serious crime that cost the guilty parties between $100 and $150. In many
instances attorneys for the defendants got cases discharged or transferred to the more
lenient county court. The signal was nevertheless unmistakable: the legal community
would hold miscreants accountable for their actions. Many petty delinquents such as those
listed on the court docket as Banjo Bob, Curley, Smokey Joe, and Frenchy skipped town
rather than face Judge Osterhout. Among them was Doc Holliday, whose single crime at
Fort Griffin resulted in a gambling and liquor charge.

Osterhout also presided over more serious cases. He issued warrants for two suspected
murderers who had Fort Griffin before Sheriff Henry Jacobs could apprehend them.
Several men facing assault charges also eluded the court. W. L. Browning was not as lucky.
He was convicted of trying to murder an acquaintance, John Jackson. According to the
testimony of Jackson's sister, the two men were sharing a watermelon outside a picket resi-
dence when they suddenly began arguing. As Browning pulled a gun, Jackson hit his arm
with a shovel and then bolted indoors to get a shotgun. The defendant also ran to the
house and began shooting through a crack in the wall, firing so close to the witness that
she suffered powder burns. Browning, by then outgunned, retreated across the river. The
Court of Appeals in Austin upheld Osterhout's verdict after the defendant contested the
decision of the local jury.

Despite its earnest efforts, the court could not stem the proliferation of vice and violence at Fort
Griffin. As the activity in saloons, gambling dens, dance halls, variety theaters, and brothels grew
with the great bison hunt and cattle trail traffic, increasingly prosperous merchants and business-
men convinced officers of the court to wink at the "victimless" crimes. A more tolerant climate
indeed existed when citizens in Northwest Texas elected J. R. Fleming to the district court bench
in 1876. A resident of the frontier town of Comanche, eighty miles southeast of Fort Griffin, he
understood loose social conditions. Judge Fleming concentrated on controlling violence and let
the justices of the peace work with local people to set community standards. During two terms
that year he issued a lone indictment for "selling liquor without a license" and a single charge
against one "Swayback Mag" for prostitution. Even into the 1880s visitors who remained within
the wide latitude of acceptable behavior at the Flat could enjoy a spree without running afoul of
the law. "Old Griffin had its night life," remarked one-time resident "Jet" Kenan; "everything went
but murder, arson, and burglary."

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A ride down Griffin Avenue provided visitors an indelible impression of the little village. Smells, sounds, and sights assaulted the senses. The putrid odor from thousands of buffalo hides rotting in great stacks started many a horse to reeling. More pleasant was an impromptu concert that greeted a transient as he passed by York’s store; there he saw a black man holding the reins for a mounted fiddler grinding out “Arkansas Traveler” to the delight of a crowd. Loitering cowboys occasionally passed around Jew’s harps, and when stabler Pete Haverty got his organ, the music could be heard throughout the valley between the fort and the river. Rollie Burns described his first visit to Griffin in 1877, while on a cattle buying trip. On the main street were freighters, some unloading wagons, and others starting for Fort Worth with mountains of hides; trail outfits, too, were taking on supplies. “Alongside this busy element,” he remembered, “was another, half drunk, boisterous, and bent on raising hell.” One visitor recalled that the business district “was a Babel of boisterous talk, whoops, curses, laughter, songs and miserable music.” The passing of time no doubt sweetened the memory. Cowboy Ken Cary more accurately declared that “Fort Griffin was more disgusting, after first glance, than alluringly picturesque.”

Inside the dives lining Griffin Avenue the coarse scene of filthy transients enjoying a visit to the Flat was even more primitive. “I’ve seen men and women dancing there in the dance halls without a bit of clothing on,” remarked one visitor. Another man affirmed that indeed “the women were scarcely dressed”; they also danced with the patrons, and when the music stopped, “you belled up to the bar, took a drink and paid fifty cents for it.” Animating the drab adobe and picket hovels were women known only by names such as Polly Turnover, Slewfoot Jane, and Monkey-face Mag.

Despite the wide-open conditions, not more than a handful of saloons ever opened their doors at the same time. Many tried to enter the lucrative trade, but the few proprietors lucky enough to gain a foothold connived with the legal community to limit competition. No one was above the law. Even Frank Conrad once had to climb out of a jury box to fight a charge of “selling spirituous liquors without a license.” At the peak of the buffalo slaughter a Stribling and Kirkland circular advertised only five Griffin bars; Henry Herron later recalled that as many as five more operated for various periods. Among the lucky owners was Mike O’Brien, who came to hunt bison but quickly found serving drinks more profitable and infinitely more entertaining. Few of his former associates passed through town without stopping at the Hunters’ Retreat; Charley Meyers’s Cattle Exchange drew much of the drovers’ trade. Under one sprawling roof “Uncle Billy” Wilson ran a beer and dance hall, variety show, restaurant, and lodge called the Frontier House. A frequent patron commented that “a blueprint would have been interesting.”

None, however, was more popular than Donnelly and Carroll’s Bee Hive. The saloon gained notoriety as the scene of at least one fatal gunfight and one unprovoked murder. English drifter Jim Grahame, otherwise known as Dallas Daily Herald correspondent “Comanche Jim,” claimed credit for naming the place. He also asserted that over the entrance he painted a “rough representation of a beehive” under which he scrawled a rhyme that had the drunken inhabitants beckoning visitors to “come in and try the flavor of our honey.”

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The seasonal nature of hunting and trailing also drew professional gamblers who made Fort Griffin an important stop on their “circuit.” Reportedly, a game could be found in the back room of any saloon. The weakly regulated activity invited the use of marked decks, loaded dice, and other aids. “The ordinary fellow did not have the ghost of a show,” commented Henry Herron. “I saw a buffalo hunter come to town one day and market his season’s kill for $1,500.00,” he continued. “The next morning he had to borrow money for his breakfast. The gamblers had gotten all of it.”

Prostitutes also scrambled for the money of free-spending transients. In 1877 the *Dallas Daily Herald* reported that “Griffin, which has long been the roost of a large quantity of ‘soiled doves,’ can now boast of a larger flock than any other town on the frontier.” According to Jet Kenan, “Fort Griffin would not have been Fort Griffin” without its “red light district.” For about two blocks the brothels extended in a broken line down each side of the main street near the river. The women worked with the blessings of saloon keepers and merchants alike. During the day prostitutes “boldly and openly took their ‘friends’ around from bar to bar and store to store”; together with the shopkeepers, Kenan claimed, they would “bleed them of every possible dollar in every conceivable manner.” At night women worked the saloons, “drinking, cursing, smoking, and contributing greatly to the loud hilarity.”

The prostitutes, who added so much color to the stories that men told, led anything but glamorous lives. Low pay and high expenses kept them in poverty. Their fondness for gaudy clothes, material possessions, and alcohol and drugs further drained their earnings. The degrading conditions of prostitution, moreover, elicited the most wretched of human qualities, producing hardened, cynical, grasping women. Among themselves, any number of negative forces—competition, suspicion, jealousy, and petty incidents—checked the bonds that mutual privation might have formed. And because their profession rested outside the law, they were at the mercy of the legal system. The justice of the peace set the rules for the illicit trade, and the women normally observed them. The local court, they knew, provided their only protection against the abuses of an uncaring and often hostile society. For example, Griffin’s justice of the peace, who usually ignored petty crimes in the black community, came to the defense of some African American prostitutes harassed by a group of drunken black cowboys. He promptly had the men arrested for brandishing their weapons “in a private house” and fined each of them. Rarely did the county and district courts become involved in the prostitutes’ affairs.

The profiles and experiences of prostitutes along Griffin Avenue were neither flattering nor heartening. Although many were youthful, some stayed in the profession long after their looks had faded. Two of the nine women who listed their occupation as “courtesan” for the 1880 census were in their mid- to late thirties; others, who had been teenagers during the town’s heyday, had reached their early twenties and looked forward to middle age with few prospects for improving their social condition. Some were married, such as Minnie Delno, who got the sobriquet “Hurricane Minnie” for her forced union with “Hurricane Bill” Martin. But marriage did not add stability to their lives; instead, it made them even more disreputable. A society that already frowned on the trade held a special contempt for a married prostitute. Their husbands, moreover,
represented the dregs of society, assuring that the women would remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Bill Martin, for example, became legendary for his frequent brushes with the law. Few women escaped this miserable environment. Griffin resident George Newcomb claimed that a local man had once tried to marry a particularly striking young prostitute—“white and fair”—but authorities supposedly refused him a license because she “had some Negro blood.” The sorry legacy of a broken life was often passed down to the children of prostitutes as well. In the same house that Sarah Dickinson operated, her twelve-year-old daughter also entered the profession.

Beyond Griffin Avenue was a more conservative society that frowned on the dissolute lifestyles of its neighbors. The occasional trial for adultery and the formation of a temperance union in 1875 demonstrated the rigid moral standards that governed the rest of the community. Only the economic force behind the vices of prostitution, gambling, and unbroken revelry kept the local dives in business. Early in 1876 the Dallas Daily Herald reported that some upset citizens chased several of the most disreputable prostitutes out of town, “this done on the principle that bad meat draws flies.” In June, when several more arrived to take their places, townsmen threatened them too. A prominently posted notice, signed “Vigilance,” read: “Leave or you are doomed.” Evidently merchants checked their zealous neighbors; in September, a docile Griffinite registered a complaint in the Fort Worth Democrat, feebly pleading with the sheriff to appoint a deputy to control the rampant vice.

The “hard-visaged,” part-Indian Kate Gamel was certainly not intimidated by hollow threats. At her cramped adobe brothel that Henry Herron called “a known rendezvous for criminals,” officers laid an ambush one dark evening. The outlaws reportedly escaped by spurring their horses over the bluff and into the swollen Collins Creek.

In this pitiable environment Charlotte Tompkins briefly enjoyed part control of a boarding house, the Gus, as well as a saloon. But even though she transcended the normal sphere of her gender, Tompkins could not escape the degrading consequences that attended a woman’s entry into this male-dominated environment. More widely known as “the poker queen” Lottie Deno, she gained a reputation for her ladylike dress and the cool manner in which she relieved her rough patrons of their money. Yet just as men mistakenly attributed the raucous gaiety of prostitutes’ lives for insouciance, they also misinterpreted Tompkins’s aloof demeanor. She certainly shared the desperation of other women who worked on Griffin Avenue. Whether by dint of business acumen or simply because she had accumulated some working capital, Tompkins managed outwardly to earn a more honorable living. But where other saloon owners such as Hank Smith, Owen Donnelly, and Charley Meyers were accepted socially, Griffinites shunned Charlotte Tompkins. On one occasion she registered her defiance by staging a “masque ball” while other townspeople gathered at a nearby hotel for a dance. Several old-timers nevertheless asserted that such strength of character was only superficial.

The tragic and impenetrable life of Tompkins invited speculation. Former sheriff John Jacobs called her “unapproachable” and claimed that “she had nothing to do with the common prostitutes.” Just before she arrived at the Flat, however, a Jacksboro court had fined her $100 and costs for running a brothel. Supposedly she had worked other “fort towns” on the Texas frontier as well. Her circumstances at Griffin began to sour about the same time as the apparent murder of a tawdry young drifter, Johnnie Golden. Henry Herron commented that Golden was a “nice
looking boy, had a little money to spend, and spent it freely.” And although little evidence supported his claim, Herron asserted that “Lottie fell for him.” Equally dubious was a rumor that she was the unwilling paramour of saloon keeper Dick Shaughnesssey. Old-timers nevertheless asserted that the whiskey peddler became jealous and paid Constable Bill Gilson and an accomplice, Dan Draper, $250 to kill his supposed rival. The circumstances of Golden’s death certainly implicated them. The pair claimed that they had served him an arrest warrant and were taking him to the post guardhouse, even though the local “calaboose” was only twenty yards away. Gilson and Draper further maintained that Golden’s death came at the hands of “rescuers” who fired on them from a ravine; the powder burns on the dead man’s body, however, cast doubt on the alibi. In any event, the citizens of Shackelford County “ran Gilson off” after a brief inquest.

Shortly afterward, Tompkins’s business situation also deteriorated, forcing her hasty departure from Fort Griffin. For a woman to obtain a mortgage on a bar or brothel was really not so unusual, and neither were the consequences when she could not meet her financial obligations. Typically, courts in tolerant frontier towns overlooked illegal activities as long as participants squared their own affairs discreetly. But in January 1878, shortly after George Matthews brought suit against Tompkins for a $290 debt, she found herself fighting a second charge of “keeping a disorderly house.” At first she refused to acknowledge the local court. Her stubbornness cost Owen Donnelly and Charley Meyers five hundred dollars—the price of her forfeited bail. An arrest warrant soon compelled her to appear for trial, where a jury found her guilty on both counts. Tompkins appealed the pandering charge, but mounting attorneys’ fees and the considerable sum that she still owed to her former confederates prompted her to take expedient measures. Rather than wait for the outcome of the new trial—which, ironically, cleared her—she simply fled.

Stribling and Kirkland, representing George Matthews, later traced Tompkins to Bracketville, adjoining Fort Clark. Unknowing sympathizers believed that Tompkins, still grieving over Johnny Golden, had finally had enough of Fort Griffin. Although the sketchy details surrounding her life as Lottie Deno eventually grew to mythical proportions, her departure was no more mysterious than that of any number of men and women who left town owing money or evading the justice system.

Just as the so-called “lady gambler” inspired exaggerations and even outright fabrications, other dubious tales circulated that probably had just enough basis in fact to seed Griffin’s reputation for unequaled violence. Gunman Jeff Milton claimed that as he tried to break up a bar fight between two buffalo hunters, one of them shot the other, splattering Milton with “blood and brains.” Jeff, according to his biographer, “learned right there the importance of tending to his own business.” On another occasion, an inebriated “tough” supposedly killed a Tonkawa Indian and was simply thrown in the calaboose “until he sobered up.” Another time a drunken Lipan Apache was said to have stumbled into a Griffin hotel, where a woman killed him for his disruptive behavior. And when a partially deaf man refused to acknowledge a deputy’s order to halt, the lawman reportedly emptied his pistol into the man and then offered to bet that he could cover the bullet holes with a silver dollar. Soldiers also contributed to the list of unprovoked and uncorroborated killings: a post guard murdered a buffalo hunter; a lieutenant, who had lost all his poker money to an enlisted man, shot him in the back; and a
recently discharged "Scotty" killed a soldier even as the victim's wife fell to her knees, begging him not to shoot. In each case nobody seemed particularly interested in bringing the killers to justice, nor did anyone mention that any of them ever served a day in jail.

In contrast to these doubtful reports, the court strove assiduously—but seldom satisfactorily—to bring murderers to justice. Between 1875 and 1881 the 12th District Court, which included the counties administratively attached to Shackelford, issued eleven warrants for suspected killers. No case better illustrated the court's persistence than a bill against J. E. Kennedy, who was jailed at Fort Griffin for the 1877 killing of a man on the buffalo range. When he escaped, Texas Rangers recaptured him. After a mistrial, a new jury sentenced him to hang; upon appeal he won a new trial and a change of venue. Finally, after two years of legal maneuvering, he received a sentence of ninety-nine years.

Some other cases, although ending badly, still merited the earnest attention of the court. When a man fired a shot through a saloon window, killing Thorndale man Andrew Brownlee, a coroner's inquest swiftly rounded up witnesses and conducted a thorough interrogation. Narrowing their list of suspects to drifter James Oglesby, a posse combed the town and surrounding area for him. Soon the pitch blackness of night ended the search, and Oglesby escaped, leaving a fugitive warrant on the docket along with an underlined notation left by the court's transcriber—MURDER!

Three years later the court was again unsuccessful when it tried Henry Cruger for killing quartermaster clerk June Leach. The case dragged on for more than a year before jurors finally issued a verdict of not guilty. The slaying evolved out of an argument at a billiard table when Leach accidentally stepped on Cruger, who rebuffed an apology with the admonition that he would "whip him" if it happened again. To the good fortune of the accused murderer, testimony conflicted about what happened next, but witnesses—subpoenaed from as far away as Mason County—agreed that after a brief fight Leach fell dead from Cruger's gunshot.

Even after the Flat's heyday waned, the court still had trouble securing murder convictions. The shooting of Jewish merchant "Cheap John" Marks in 1879 nevertheless stirred the court to conduct a scrupulous investigation. The "pesky drummer," as editor Robson once called him, had left town for the Panhandle owing money to Griffinite Frank Schmidt. Special deputy William King, accompanied by the creditor, went after Marks, and upon apprehending him about fifty miles from town, camped for the night. Schmidt claimed that while King was hunting turkey for their dinner, Marks had somehow secured a gun. When Schmidt supposedly attempted to seize the weapon, it discharged, fatally wounding Cheap John in the back. Hearing the shot, King raced back to camp. Skeptical of Schmidt's story, he left him to care for the unconscious and dying man and then went on to Fort Griffin, where he notified Texas Rangers. After Marks died, four Griffin-bound waggoners happened upon the scene and helped bury him, then carried Schmidt with them. A jury—after hearing the testimony and cross-examination of both Schmidt and King, as well as the statements of the four travelers—returned the supposed murderer his $5,000 bail and set him free.
Contrary to the perception of the Northwest Texas frontier as a place where violent acts were accepted casually, gratuitous killings were rare and violence was never taken lightly. For example, Griffinites held a public meeting in January 1877 to express sympathy to the families of two bystanders who were killed in a senseless crossfire. Several months later, at isolated Rath City, hunter Tom Lumpkins shot an unarmed man who had taken exception to his constant carping. As another man tried to subdue Lumpkins, bartender “Lumpy Jim” Smith ran up and jerked him aside and then shot Lumpkins point-blank. The surly hunter, still firing, stumbled backwards out of the saloon, followed by Smith, who reportedly kept a stream of bullets flying as he came. At the bartender’s insistence a group of men accompanied him to Fort Griffin, where he surrendered himself to authorities. With the sympathetic testimony of the other hunters, a grand jury decided not to prosecute.

While assiduously attempting to bring “deserving” killers to justice, local courts did not overlook the petty crimes that plagued the unstable frontier society. Many were the reports of minor thefts and the records of prosecutions. During the hot summer of 1875, for example, traveler Billy Smith, overcome by heat, awoke to discover that someone had gone through his pockets, robbing him of a lottery ticket, some tobacco, and his keys. County Clerk J. N. Masterson recounted another typical incident, complaining that a thief had broken into his office and stolen $4 in change. Another time a man named Christianson was arrested for breaking into the home of Mrs. Mary Mitchell and taking $165 in greenbacks and some silver. The court at all levels—justice of the peace, county, and district—prosecuted such indignities zealously. Thieves seemed always to be sitting in jails at Griffin and Albany or working on roads between the two towns. County Judge W. H. Ledbetter normally assessed sixty days to nine months for petty thefts. Judge Fleming was even harsher. In 1876 he sentenced one George Robinson to two years at hard labor in the state penitentiary for taking clothing valued at $49. The next year he meted out the same punishment to a man for stealing almost $500 and a butcher knife. Fleming prosecuted cases of swindling, forgery, and other non-violent crimes as well.

Still, the legal community was sometimes frustrated. Hurricane Bill Martin, for example, was a one-man crime wave. He constantly sparred with the courts but was seldom held accountable for his many illicit activities. He reportedly loaded wagons with buffalo hides from stacks lining the river bottom, then rode into town and sold them to the very men whom he had “fleeced.” He was also believed to have been the leader of a gang of horse thieves, and ironically he was the only one who survived a vigilante roundup. A deposition recorded that after Sam Stinson accused him of stealing a watch and chain, Martin pulled out his army Colt and “dropped it down on his [Stinson’s] head saying, ‘You can’t give me any such game.’” Somehow Martin was again found innocent. Extemating circumstances in another case forced the court to try him for “discharging a firearm” instead of attempted murder. In several other cases he was charged with assault, forfeiting bonds, and trying to enter the underworld of gambling, liquor, and prostitution.

While the resolute efforts of the court faded in the minds of former Griffinites, memories of killings and the tales of men such as Hurricane Bill seemed to grow. One-time sheriff John Jacobs related to fellow officer Henry Herron that “conditions got so bad . . . he could not feel
easy sleeping in the same place two nights in succession.” Fort Griffin was “a veritable robber’s hole,” according to rancher Emmett Roberts. “They would throw a blanket over your head and take your money in a flash.” A surveyor, C. U. Connellee, recalled that “of all the places I have ever been, that was the worst.” Long familiar with the frontier, he asserted that “men who had committed crimes, and fleeing from the law often went as far as they could from civilization, and that was the end.”

Nothing did more to burn indelibly the image of Fort Griffin as a violent frontier town than a fatal gunfight at Donnelly and Carroll’s saloon. The “Shooting Bee,” as the spontaneous incident came to be known, emanated from a poorly handled confrontation between Griffin authorities and local ranch hands Billy Bland and Charley Reed. Befitting the image of drunken cowboys, the pair raced their horses down Griffin Avenue, guns ablazing. Entering the Bee Hive, they interrupted the festivities by trying to shoot out the lights. As Bland was taking aim on another fixture, Deputy Bill Cruger, accompanied by County Attorney Robert Jeffries, barged into the saloon and demanded that the revelers “put up their hands.” The abrupt order provoked Bland into wheeling around and firing in the deputy’s direction. When Cruger started shooting, both Jeffries and Reed joined the sharpshooting. The lawman and attorney sustained minor wounds; two bystanders were less fortunate. Newlywed Dan Barrow, shot through the forehead, died instantly. As a Lieutenant Myers tried to flee, he suffered a mortal wound in the back. As for the instigator, Billy Bland, a bullet passed completely through his body, leaving him writhing on the floor. Some men took him to the Occidental Hotel, where “Aunt Hank” Smith said “the poor fellow begged to be killed.” According to Phin Reynolds, “Reed left the country that night.”

For such a wide-open town, the legal system generally executed its duties in a credible manner. Few times did peace officers experience such mortal tumults as did Deputy Cruger. In fact, a former Griffinite recalled that “no man ever became so bad but that he might land in the ‘calaboose’ if the marshal so decided.” Zeno Hemphill, a would-be badman, might have agreed. In 1878 he and some other cowboys had reportedly planned to kill special deputies Henry Herron and Dave Barker for nothing more than the notoriety. The two officers, appointed to help keep order during a meeting of the Northwest Cattle Raisers’ Association, learned of the plot and waited in a crowded saloon for their supposed executioners. When Hemphill knocked a woman backward with the intention of starting a brawl, Herron grabbed the man’s six-shooter and “whacked him over the head.” Barker then pulled his own gun and covered the crowd while Herron hustled Hemphill off to jail.

Henry Herron, reflecting on his Griffin days, remarked that the calaboose was always occupied. “They were in there for every kind of offense, ranging from fighting to horse stealing and murder, but not many for murder.” A jailer normally escorted prisoners to a blacksmith, who fit them for shackles; at night they were chained to the wall. If assaults were common, so were assault charges. The justice of the peace did not keep records, but the district court issued twenty-four warrants for such crimes between 1875 and 1880. Many of the accused simply fled town, and the legal community was probably satisfied to be rid of them. And while a few fought the charges and won, most lost and faced fifty-dollar to one-hundred-dollar fines. Still others
earned jail time. Robert Brown, for example, was sentenced to two years' hard labor at the state penitentiary for "assault with intent to kill."

Despite a generally credible record, the law at times was ineffective. Vigilantes, composed of both court-appointed officials and respected citizens, ran amok during 1876, executing almost a score of suspected horse and cattle thieves. A succession of sheriffs, responsible for the entire county, did not often have the time nor the inclination to concentrate on controlling Griffin's transient revelers. Townspeople begged in vain for the court to appoint a deputy to control the gangs of raucous buffalo hunters and trail drivers, but finally had to hire a local officer at their own expense. Jet Kenan remarked that even then "a man had to act very, very badly to be molested by the 'marshal.'" Certainly the violent death of Johnny Golden undermined the reputation of the local legal community. His killers were never brought to trial. The elaborate story that Gilson and Draper told of a "lost" warrant and a three-o'clock-in-the-morning shootout kept the officers out of jail, but also made the court appear indifferent.

Where African Americans were concerned, the law also broke down, but only because it reflected the attitude of the Anglo-dominated society. Joe McCombs claimed that a drunk hunter once burst into the mess hall at the post and fired over the heads of some buffalo soldiers, prompting them to flee. When troops cornered the hunter, Sheriff John Lann convinced the commander to release the man into his custody and afterward let him go. Another time, when a black soldier full of "tarantula juice" shot his gun in the street and declared that he could "smash any 'white descendant of a female canine' in town," officers allowed some irate townspeople to take care of the matter. In buoyant prose a correspondent for the Fort Worth Daily Democrat wrote that "by careful maneuvering he at length succeeded in acquiring a 'head' of gigantic dimensions, and was forced to make a retrograde movement on the Fort." The dispatch ended with the comment: "No arrests."

Regarding violence that occurred entirely among African Americans, local authorities throughout Texas routinely turned their backs. Fort Griffin was no exception. For example, an exchange of gunfire between two black men at the Clear Fork crossing went unaddressed, even though one of them, Joe Brandt, was gravely wounded.

Another racial incident, although it occurred after Griffin's wildest days had passed, demonstrated both the court's insistance on following "proper legal procedure" and its attitude toward African Americans. In 1879, Captain S. H. Lincoln, on the eve of his transfer to another post, shot and killed black infantryman Charles McCafferty. The private had escaped the guardhouse, where he had been confined for habitual drunkenness, and headed for town. He promptly became inebriated again, and upon spotting the captain at Conrad and Rath's, he unleashed a verbal assault that ended when the army officer physically removed him from the store. The drunken soldier—in front of everybody in town—then knocked the officer off the sidewalk with a roundhouse punch to the jaw. The ignominious blow prompted Lincoln to draw his pistol and shoot the impudent McCafferty, who died the next day. Despite being released on a two-thousand-dollar bond, the captain left Fort Griffin for his new assignment, forcing Texas Rangers to bring him in. A preliminary hearing bound him over for the "felonious" murder of Charles McCafferty, but in
the civil trial Judge Fleming reminded the jury that murder was distinguished from manslaughter by "malice aforethought." The lesser charge, he advised, could also be mitigated by "provocation." In his own defense, Lincoln reportedly declared that his action was "the only dignified course to pursue." Evidently, the jury agreed and found the captain "not guilty."

Certainly, violence and any number of petty crimes and vices underscored the instability of Fort Griffin’s boontown environment. Nevertheless, rough but otherwise unmenacing people and a lighter side of life also represented "wildness" in this frontier society. Buffalo hunters and cattle drivers, little concerned about manners and morals, descended in raucous packs upon Fort Griffin after long periods with little human contact. More frolicsome than reckless, they typically spent a few harmless days and nights of unbridled revelry before resuming their monotonous routines. Skinners and nonprofessionals among the hunters and a handful of "maverick" drovers caused most of the trouble that gave the two groups their undeserved reputation for violence. Rootless opportunists, itinerant pioneers, and people from the interior who ached for a little excitement and some quick money also contributed to occasional lawlessness. Yet even among these largely anonymous men and women, very few came West intending to launch a career outside of the law.

Typical of many buffalo hunters was "Charlie," who traveled to Griffin at the head of his crew when the season ended in 1875. After cashing a large check at Conrad’s store, he paid his men, and they camped with about thirty other outfits under the big pecan trees lining the Clear Fork. "I never intended to get drunk," he said, "but what could a fellow do?" According to a friend, Charlie "had a glorious spree"—twenty-one days long, in fact. Once, after he had passed out, some of his men set a stuffed panther over him. When the hunter awoke and saw the beast staring down at him he lurched backward into the river and had to be "fished out."

Cowboys had their fun, too. Frontiersman Jim Gordon recounted that a pretentious Englishman once arrived at Griffin and hired two men to escort him to the ranch of a countryman. Word reached some herdsmen farther up the trail, who prepared a reception as the "lord" and his guides made camp for the evening. With whoops and gunshots, the cowboys pulled the Englishman’s well-appointed wagon into a creek. Boldly he emerged in cap and gown, brandishing a small pistol, only to face a dozen gun-wielding “desperadoes” trying hard to suppress an explosion of laughter. After reaching his destination, the Englishman endured further indignities such as affectedly rough language and manners and the sight of the cook dishing out supper in a pair of the visitor’s own kneepants. "He was mad as a hornet," Gordon recalled fondly. "Many were the tricks we played on him but eventually he came to be naturalized and proved a jolly good fellow."

Such earthy amusements were typical in an environment where large numbers of unattached men did "manly" things together. Few places gained a greater reputation than Fort Griffin as an oasis where frontiersmen could enjoy themselves unencumbered by conventional social pressures. And not all the fun was just drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Jet Kenan recalled that "many times saloons sent for me to participate in boxing matches ... or to preside over a ‘Kangaroo Court.’"
Dancing and “varieties” were more common forms of entertainment. “Frank Smith & Co. have completed their music hall in Fort Griffin and have secured the services of ten or twelve well known artistes,” the *Echo* reported in 1876. “They are performing nightly to crowded and delighted audiences.”

Concerning a prominent local merchant, Captain Robson chided: “We noticed Caleb Cupp one day this week amusing himself by holding two Tom-cats up by their tails, while the cats amused themselves by picking fur from each other.” Pitting animals against each other was always a crowd pleaser. Another time the editor noted that “next Saturday there will be a fight at this place, between a young black bear and Hemphill’s two bull dogs, for $50 a side.” He did not follow up the report, but presumably the dogs won. A few weeks later the *Echo* reported that Mr. Chislet, the local tailor, “has a bear skin robe which is a beauty.”

Another favorite diversion was horse racing. Stabler Pete Haverty often staged contests at a track across the river. Like many of his patrons, however, he was often in debt because of his losses. In the fall of 1876 the *Fort Worth Daily Democrat* reported that local tough John Selman and bootlegger Jack Greathouse had declared John Larn the winner in a close race—by precisely three inches. “Some dissatisfaction was manifested at the decision,” reported the correspondent, adding that bettors were incredulous at the judges’ “being endowed with vision of such mathematical nicety, as to be able to determine the exact number of inches the winning horse was ahead at the string.”

Like the cowboys who found sport in the Englishman’s misery, men who idled countless hours at Fort Griffin found that a ruse or practical joke could provide an amusement that demanded repeated tellings long after the event. “Uncle Billy” Wilson seemed always to be working on a scheme. Jet Kenan claimed that Wilson once concocted a “wonder cement” that he matched against all comers—“Old Hickory, Spauldings, and others.” He appeared to patch up some broken dishes with the competing glues and then dropped them all into boiling water. Soon every dish had come apart—except those mended with Uncle Billy’s secret compound. According to Kenan the trick was that a friend of Wilson, an accomplished engraver, had etched matching lines on the top and bottom of some china that looked remarkably like cracks. Since few people washed china in boiling water, his scheme worked.

On another occasion Edgar Rye, editor of the *Albany Tomahawk*, fell for a practical joke that Captain Robson could not resist reporting. Rye, upon learning that a woman from Fort Worth had just arrived in town searching for another woman’s husband, wrote a few indignant lines, ending with the demand, “Explain!” A few days later the supposed out-of-towner confronted Rye, demanding that he explain. As the editor rose to offer an alibi, he looked up into the muzzle of a gun. Aghast, the floundering Rye lost his hat and glasses, then tripped over his stool. Rising to his knees, he begged her not to shoot. Suddenly the “woman” and a group of men standing at the window burst into laughter. His antagonist, it turned out, was a townsman “in drag.”

As Rye could attest, Fort Griffin was not the only Texas frontier town to see bawdy action, and neither did it have a corner on lawlessness. Pranksters at the county seat exploded a barber pole with gunpowder, to which Captain Robson lamented: “the old striped sign is seen no
more in the land.” And, as Albany began to intercept some of the trailing business in the spring of 1879, it also reaped some of the unpleasantries. “Every day or two,” the Echo reported, fist-fights had erupted. “Someone would appear on the streets with a black eye or banged up nose,” but as in Fort Griffin the law swiftly put an end to it.

Ironically, Frank Conrad’s daughter had left the county before she became a crime victim. Between Fort Worth and Weatherford stage robbers relieved her of one hundred dollars. Virtually every edition of the Echo, the Fort Worth Daily Democrat, and the Dallas Daily Herald carried stories from around the state that comprised a woeful record of crime. Robson complained that Northerners viewed Texas as a “community of murderers and robbers.” Blaming frontier conditions and the ubiquitous carrying of weapons, he admitted that his fellow citizens were a law-breaking people “to a fearful extent.” B. B. Paddock of the Democrat was more defensive, asserting that Texas was not alone in experiencing violent acts. Economic times, he declared, had “thrown upon the country hundreds and thousands of men who, having no families or homes, become reckless and careless, and are wandering over the country depredating upon the rights of others and committing acts of violence.”

In the public perception, as in fact, Fort Griffin was nevertheless among the toughest spots on a tough frontier. To contemporaries, distance and unfamiliarity no doubt caused imaginations to magnify the image of lawlessness. The tunnel of memory likewise inflated the level of violence, the colorful descriptions, and fond reminiscences of an otherwise bleak and harsh environment. Fort Griffin in part earned its reputation; violence touched nearly every segment of society, and when trailers hit town, no one could avoid hearing hoots, hollers, and gunfire as they spurred their frenzied horses up and down Griffin Avenue. But revelers most often knew how far they could push local authorities, and more violent offenders knew that when they acted, consequences would surely follow.