

Matt Dillon eased out his Colt's and took a step forward. Pilcher, reaching for the latch to swing the door closed, caught Matt's movement in the darkness. He straightened and reached for his own gun.

"Hold it!" Matt said.

Pilcher froze. He peered at the figure before the door, still partly in the dark. Matt took another step and stood full in the beam of light from the doorway. He let Pilcher get a good look at the gun he was holding.

"Well, Marshal, I *wanted* to see you again before I left," Pilcher said.

"Daggett told me that," Matt said.

"That murderin' sidewinder!" Pilcher's voice rose. "He killed the best friend I ever had!"

Matt saw that Pilcher was working himself up to the point where he might make a desperate try for his gun. "Don't make a fool play!" he warned.

Pilcher's hand flashed to his gun and up. He was fast, terribly fast. . . .

—One brief, pungent scene from the scores in this adaptation of CBS' great TV show:

G U N S M O K E

Don Ward

10 Short Stories Based on the CBS TV Program

GUNSMOKE

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Contents

Introduction: "The Wickedest Little City in America"	7
Reunion '78	9
Road Ranch	25
Grass	40
Gone Straight	54
Jayhawkers	71
Hot Spell	84
Overland Express	100
There Never Was a Horse	116
The Pesthole	130
Hickok	146

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INTRODUCTION

“The Wickedest Little City in America”

Whether Dodge City actually rated that appellation or not, it very probably was the most colorfully uproarious of all the famous frontier towns. The little community on the north bank of the Arkansas River, situated on the Old Santa Fe Trail, saw its share or more of bullwhackers and mule-skinners. Five miles from Fort Dodge, it provided a place for soldiers on pass to spend their pay and have themselves a time. As “Buffalo City,” it was the capital of the hide hunters who worked the plenty-buffalo area where the grazing grounds of the great Arkansas and Texas herds overlapped. The hide hunters liked their fun on the rough side, too, and they found it in the town that was renamed Dodge City, after the near-by fort, when the railroad came in, in 1872.

It was in that year that the first big herd of longhorns—two thousand head—was driven to Dodge. There were as yet no loading pens, so that herd kept going until it got to Great Bend. 1875 was the first year to see cattle shipped regularly from Dodge; from then until 1885 Dodge City was, veritably, the Cowboy Capital. In that period, this town of about one thousand permanent inhabitants saw its population swell during the April-September shipping season every year with the addition of one to two thousand cowboys, many of whom hung around for several weeks, getting rid of six months', or even perhaps a year's, pay.

They had no trouble getting rid of it. They spent some of it on clothing and equipment; the saloonkeepers, the gamblers, and the girls were ready, willing and able to relieve them of the rest. After a fall and winter in Texas, and then months on the trail, during which they might average sixteen

or more hours in the saddle daily, they were bent on excitement. They got it. Sometimes they created it, by their own riotous behavior. "It was their dream," Stanley Vestal has said, "to hurrah the town, to kill the Marshal or run him out of town, to 'tree' the camp, and then, with DODGE painted on the canvas cover of their chuckwagon, to ride home to Texas and declare, 'We taken Dodge.'"

Well, there had to be someone to handle such young men as these, problem children the like of which America will never see again. To do this job, a succession of peace officers served Dodge City whose names include the illustrious ones of Bat Masterson and his brothers, Wyatt Earp, and Bill Tilghman; and lesser known ones like Billy Rivers, Jack Allen, Luke Short, and Neal Brown. Taken together, they made up a formidable company. In spite of all the lore, though, the number of killings recorded by these Dodge City lawmen was not high. Earp and Bat Masterson, for example, hung up only one each during their terms of service. They were more likely to disarm and arrest a man, or subdue him with a pistol-whipping, or, often, establish order out of turbulence by the sheer force of their arrival and presence on the scene. They were ready to sling lead if they had to. Generally, they didn't have to.

Of such man-stuff, largely, is television's Marshal Matt Dillon. More on the thoughtful side, maybe. More concerned with the why's of men's actions, more aware of the limitations that beset human beings. More keenly alive to moral as well as legal responsibilities, perhaps.

And perhaps that is why he is so popular.