

THE LEGEND LIVES ON

EMF Company offers a tribute to Gene Barry's portrayal of Bat Masterson.

BY DENNIS ADLER

Back in the days of black-and-white television, our heroes were larger than life, despite being confined to the small screen. In our house, our TV was a Packard Bell in a mahogany cabinet. It was a handsome-looking time machine that could, on a given night, travel back to Dodge City and follow the exploits of a man who represented law and order in a lawless town—Bat Masterson.

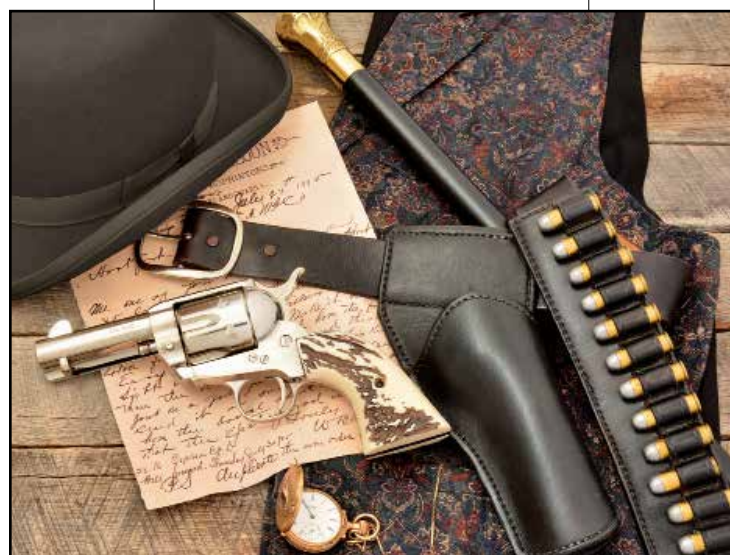
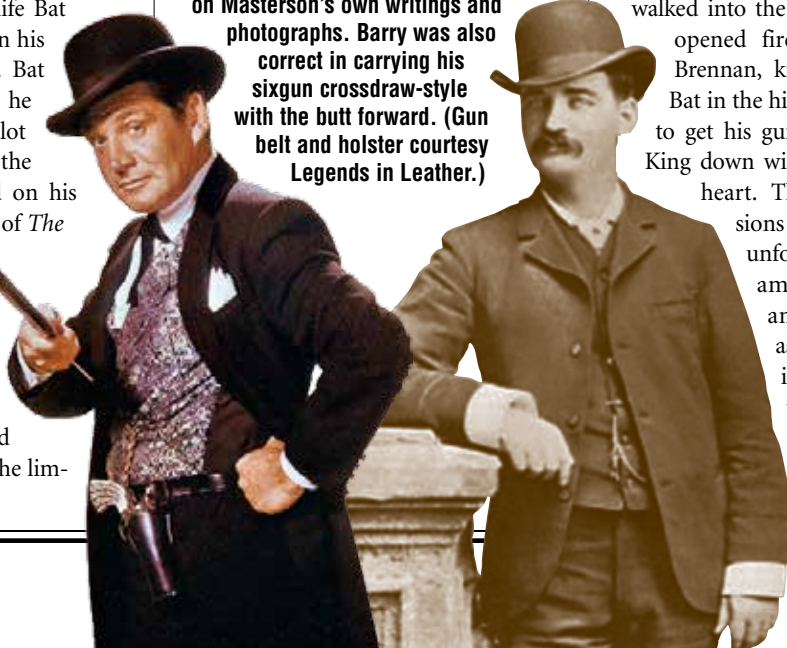
The real William Barclay “Bat” Masterson was a gentleman honed from frontier life as a roughneck, buckskin-clad buffalo hunter, skinner and cavalry scout—a life Masterson lived long before his days as sheriff in the Queen of Cowtowns. The Bat Masterson of TV fame was a song-and-dance man named Gene Barry who had the look, demeanor and style that the real-life Bat Masterson had publicized in his photographs and writings. Bat became a journalist after he hung up his sixguns, and a lot of what was portrayed on the television series was based on his real life. The same was true of *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, starring Hugh O’Brian as Earp. The stories were based on his real life, or his life as written by Stuart Lake. Both shows depicted the Old West as they could within the lim-

its of television censorship and guidelines, meaning rarely did anyone bleed when shot, no one ever swore, and the seedier side of life was portrayed by manner-less characters planning unscrupulous crimes

to rob banks, hold up stagecoaches, rustle cattle, steal land, embezzle and, of course, cheat at cards. The bad guys were thwarted each week by Bat’s cane, pistol, fists or wits. Buffalo Bill himself probably would have called it good theater of the West.

The real-life Bat Masterson had proven himself with both the Sharps rifle as a hunter and the Colt revolver as a U.S. cavalry scout hired in 1874 by Col. Nelson A. Miles. Masterson scouted for the cavalry until the spring of 1875, when he returned briefly to buffalo hunting. A year later, he was involved in his first shootout in Sweetwater, Texas, with a cavalry sergeant named Melvin A. King. The fight was over a woman named Mollie Brennan, and as Wyatt Earp wrote of the event, King walked into the Lady Gay saloon and opened fire on Masterson and Brennan, killing her and hitting Bat in the hip. Masterson managed to get his gun into action and cut King down with a clean shot to the heart. There are several versions of how the shootout unfolded, some with King ambushing Masterson and Brennan, others as a standup gunfight in the Lady Gay, but they all end the same, with Mollie Brennan killed, Bat severely

Gene Barry (below left) based his portrayal of Bat Masterson (below right) on Masterson’s own writings and photographs. Barry was also correct in carrying his sixgun crossdraw-style with the butt forward. (Gun belt and holster courtesy Legends in Leather.)



wounded and King dead. The injury left Masterson with a permanent limp and thus the need for what would become his trademark cane.

Taming Dodge City

When Bat returned to Dodge City in the late spring of 1876, he found an unruly town with little law enforcement, a town that the *Hays City Sentinel* had christened “the Deadwood of Kansas...Her corporate limits are the rendezvous of all the unemployed scally-wagism in seven states. Her principal is polygamy, her code of honor is the morals of thieves, and decency she knows not.” The *Kinsley Graphic* newspaper was somewhat less kind, naming Dodge the “Beautiful, Bibulous Babylon of the frontier.” And it was in Dodge City where Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp, Charlie Bassett and Bat’s younger brother, Ed, would earn their early reputations as lawmen by settling this untamed berg.

During his tenure in Dodge City, which was also the county seat and home to the Ford County Sheriff’s Office, Bat appointed many of his old associates as special deputies when situations became thorny. Ford County encompassed some 9,500 square miles, a large portion of southwestern Kansas—a lot of territory into which outlaws could quickly vanish. In their pursuit, Bat called upon Wyatt Earp and appointed his younger brother, James, and friend Bill Tilghman as deputy sheriffs. Bat’s other brother, Ed, had been appointed city marshal.



Here you can see one of Masterson’s eight known Colt Peacemakers (top) as it compares to the Pietta-made model (bottom) designed after Gene Barry’s TV persona.

In the TV series, Bat kept this all in check, dealing out law and order, which had been quite a bit more difficult in the Dodge City, Kansas, of the 1870s. On TV, he faced down countless cow-

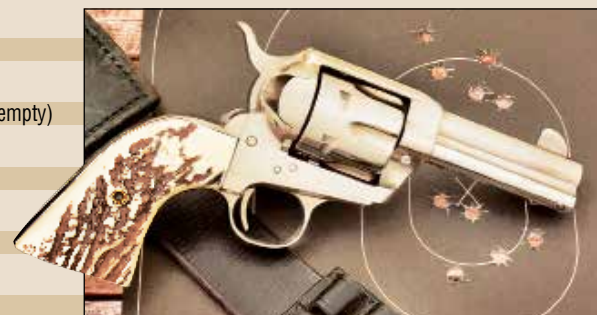
boys on rampages through Dodge and pursued murderers, bank robbers, cattle rustlers and thieves, and like the real-life Bat Masterson, Gene Barry’s Bat never killed anyone he apprehended. Many were wounded, but none were shot dead. His reputation for having killed 27 men as a peace officer was all legend. The real Bat Masterson had been wise enough to let the tales stand, as fear of his gun was as effective a weapon as the gun itself. Bat only killed one man in a shootout: Melvin A. King.

As noted by TV Western authorities Doug Abbott and Ronald Jackson, between 1949 and the end of the 20th century, there were more than 145 shows either based in the Old West, about the Old West or modernized to the present day but still Westerns at heart. The show *Bat Masterson*

SPECIFICATIONS:

EMF GREAT WESTERN II BAT MASTERSON

- **Caliber:** .45 Colt
- **Barrel:** 3½ inches
- **OA Length:** 9 inches
- **Weight:** 34 ounces (empty)
- **Grips:** Imitation stag
- **Sights:** Fixed
- **Action:** SA
- **Finish:** Nickel
- **Capacity:** 6
- **MSRP:** \$705



The Legend Lives On



Wyatt Earp (seated second from left) and Bat Masterson (back row, third from left) pose for a photograph—known as the “Dodge City Peace Commission”—around June 10, 1883, with others who helped Luke Short resume ownership of the Long Branch Saloon.

lasted for 108 episodes (which would be anywhere from eight to 10 seasons by today’s standards), but only aired from October 8, 1959, to September 21, 1961.

Bat Gets His Gun

It’s a shame that with so much documented history on Bat Masterson and his choice in firearms, no one writing, producing or directing the TV series was able to get it right when choosing a gun and holster for Gene Barry’s portrayal of Masterson. The real Dodge City lawman carried nickel-plated, 5½-inch-barreled Colts and favored drop-loop holsters with deep recurved throats for a quicker draw. And Masterson always wore his holster

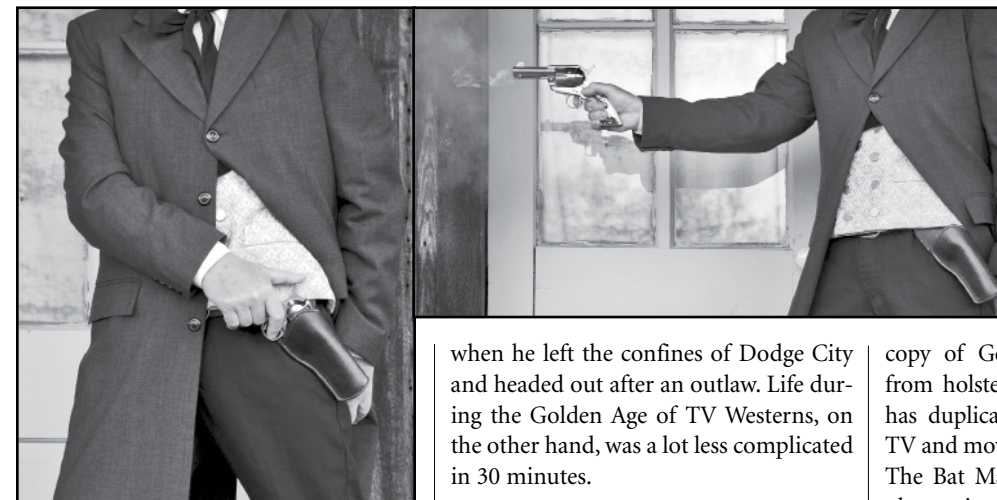
crossdraw style. That was the only fact that the TV series got right.

Gene Barry’s Bat Masterson, properly dressed with his cane and derby hat, was armed with a nickel-plated, 3½- or 4-inch-barreled Colt throughout the show’s 108 episodes. And adding insult to injury, rather than Colt’s handsome, black rubber Eagle grips, or Bat’s occasional preference for mother-of-pearl grips, the plain nickel-plated TV gun used stag grips. The latter was one of the most popular features of a hero’s gun during the great era of TV Westerns of the 1950s and 1960s.

Gene Barry’s nickel-plated Peacemakers were actually fitted with Franzite (molded plastic) stag-pattern grips that

were durable, inexpensive and easy to replace if damaged. Franzite grips were hollow, which made them light and easy to break if the gun got dropped hard. But they were inexpensive, and an extra pair was always on hand for the prop man to replace. Of course, stag grips weren’t really used on Colt revolvers back in Bat Masterson’s day—they were either walnut, ebony, mother of pearl, hand-carved ivory or the latest Colt hard rubber Eagle and shield grips, introduced in 1882 and offered by Colt up to 1896.

More to the point, the characters in Western movies and TV shows were just that—characters—even the ones who were once real people like Bat Masterson



The author draws the EMF Bat Masterson single action from the replica of Gene Barry’s holster crafted by Jim Lockwood of Legends in Leather.

MASTERSON” engraved on the backstrap.

To test the new revolver, I borrowed an exact

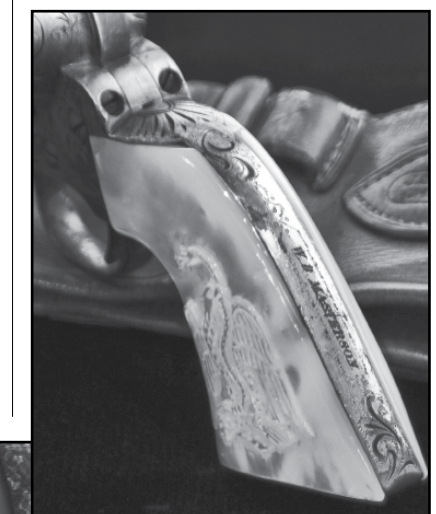
copy of Gene Barry’s holster and belt from holster-maker Jim Lockwood, who has duplicated nearly all of the famous TV and movie Western rigs over the years. The Bat Masterson rig, as shown in the photos, is much like the one Gene Barry wore on the TV series. The 3½-inch-barreled revolver was a perfect fit—quick on the draw and easy to reholster.

The Great Western II’s construction is excellent, and it comes right out of the box with a tuned action. At the range, the hammer draw averaged a genteel 4.23 pounds with an average trigger pull of 4.53 pounds. The hammer offers four “clicks” when you thumb it back, just like a Colt Peacemaker, and the sights are as true as any short-barreled SAA, meaning the gun shoots a little low. There were no windage issues with the gun, and once I got a handle on the aiming correction, which was 6 inches above where I wanted the rounds to hit, (short of filing down the sight) the gun delivered very predictable accuracy with consistent five-shot groups measuring 1.75 to 2 inches.

I shot the entire test using Ten-X’s 165-grain, hollow-base, flat-point (HBFP) smokeless-powder cartridges. These are lightweight rounds suitable for Cowboy Action competitions or just plain plinking. I fired all of the groups one-handed, and despite the short barrel and rudimentary SAA sights, nine out of 10 rounds were in the 10 and “X” rings. This isn’t a target pistol, but at 10 paces (between 25 and 30 feet) it gets the job done, just like short-barreled Colt Peacemakers did back in Bat Masterson’s day. For more information, visit emf-company.com or call 800-430-1310.

EMF’s Edition

If you’re looking for a revolver like the one Gene Barry uses in *Bat Masterson*, EMF Company is now offering a “Bat Masterson” version of its Great Western II built by Pietta in Italy. Available for \$705, the revolver comes with imitation stag grips, a 3½-inch barrel, a full-length ejector and a bright nickel finish with “W.B.



Bat Masterson had his name engraved on the backstraps of his guns (above), and Pietta copied this detail for the EMF gun.

