March 2011

The Bad Man from Bodie: A Frontier Legend Rediscovered

By
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Bodie is a ghost town—perhaps the West's best preserved ghost town—where weather-beaten buildings stand stoically against the encroaching sagebrush. But years ago, east of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, the remote mining camp became the object of a gold rush that gave rise to one of the West's wildest boomtowns. Saloon brawls, stagecoach robberies, vigilante justice, and spontaneous eruptions of gunfire earned Bodie a reputation for violence that rivaled Tombstone, Deadwood, and Dodge City.[1] Those boomtowns are famous today, recognized largely for celebrated gunmen who stalked their streets. While Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and Wild Bill Hickok became icons of American folklore, Bodie's killers, depraved and otherwise, were quickly forgotten. Still, Bodie's penchant for trouble gave rise to one legendary figure, though his fame was short-lived.[2] Evoking peril and doom, the "Bad Man from Bodie" was a name recognized across the country. The title drew upon "bad man," a popular 19th century expression that meant "ruffian," "tough guy," "gunfighter," or "cold-blooded murderer."[3]

After prospector W.S. Body and his companions discovered gold in 1859, the Bodie Mining District (named after Body with a slight change in spelling) remained nearly unpopulated until a mine caved, exposing an ore body that inspired San Francisco speculators to finance industrial-scale mining. Their gamble paid off. In late 1877 the mine produced $784,523 in gold and silver bullion and investors received four consecutive monthly dividends. The company's good luck stunned the mining world and infected the nation's investing community with gold fever that aroused fortune hunters who headed for Bodie. As the population swelled past 1,000 restless souls, the mining outpost's startup newspaper summarized the situation.

> Gold--But a few short months ago Bodie was an insignificant little place, now she is rapidly growing in size and importance and people are crowding in upon her from far and near, and why? Because of the rich discoveries of gold—yellow, glittering, precious gold.[4]

Except for a few minor fisticuffs and knife fights, Bodie remained peaceful during the early months of the excitement. But on January 15, 1878, gunfire pierced the wintry air. In the initial moments of the exchange James Blair, age about 28, received a bullet in his left arm near the shoulder, but he continued firing until John Bresnan, age 30, lay dead. A week later doctors administered chloroform and operated on Blair's arm. They removed the shattered upper portion of his humerus bone, but the patient died 26 days after the fight.[5] Some twenty miles away in the county courthouse at Bridgeport, the recorder wrote the names Bresnan and Blair on a clean page in the spanking new *Mono County Register of Deaths*, an impressive leather-bound volume adorned with gold lettering.[6] The official record of deadly violence at Bodie had begun.

Boomtown Bodie churned with activity in Spring 1878, when newly discovered bonanzas attracted even more gold seekers, multiplying the camp's population five times over before

year's end. Spoofing the distant mining town's rough-and-tumble inhabitants, the *San Francisco Argonaut* published a tall tale by journalist and humorist E.H. Clough. Titled "The Bad Man of Bodie," the story told of Washoe Pete, a "bluffer" known for wild and amusing exaggerations. "He swaggered and boasted to his heart's content," the yarn began. Whenever Pete drew his revolver and shot out the lights, the usual results were onlooker smiles and casual remarks of "purty fair shootin'."

One day Pete entered a saloon, where he encountered a timid, peaceful mining expert.

"You are an expert, eh?" shouted Bodie's baddest bad man, eyeing the pint-size newcomer menacingly. "You're one o' them fellers as allows he knows payin' mines, are ye? Well, ye're the wust I *ever* saw."

"I don't want to quarrel with you, sir," responded the expert meekly.

"Ye'd better not, young feller, ye'd better not. I'm a whirlwind in a fight, and don't ye forget it."

"I'm a man of peace," cried the well-mannered visitor, cowering from his tormenter. "I carry no weapons, and of course I could not hope to stand before an untamed whirlwind."

Pete leaned over the stranger and shook his fist in the man's face.

"I'm bad; I'm chief in this yer camp, an' I ken lick the man who says I ain't. I'm a ragin' lion o' the plains, an' every time I hit I kill. I've got an arm like a quartz stamp, an' I crush bones when I strike."

"Please don't joke so roughly," pleaded the helpless expert. "Let's take a drink and call it square. I'm very sorry that I have offended you."

"Ye think I'm jokin', do ye?" hollered the bad man. "Ye take me for a josh, eh? I'll show ye what I am afore I git through with ye. Ye don't play me fur no tenderfoot."

By this time a crowd filled the room; all smiling and enjoying the drama.

"This has gone on 'bout long 'nough," bellowed Bodie's bad man. "Square yerself—I'm goin' ter kick, an' a Comstock mule ain't no match for Washoe Pete—d'ye hear me?"

The bully raised his ponderous boot. But just then the little man straightened himself and his left fist struck Pete between the eyes like a locomotive piston. The blow sent the surprised bully sprawling onto the sawdust-covered floor. The expert pounced on his victim, then drew back and struck again, delivering blows that fell like thunderbolts. Pete reached for his knife and six-shooter, but the stranger flanked his moves and planted more punches on the braggart's prostrate form.

"Let up!" the tyrant howled. "I was only foolin'—can't yer take a joke, dern ye? I give in, dern ye, I give in!"

The sight was too much for the onlookers, and their laughter echoed over Bodie Bluff and the hills beyond.

"All hands to the bar for drinks," the mining expert called out, rising from his victim.

As the jovial crowd gathered for a toast, the "Bad Man of Bodie" crawled away in disgrace.

"I didn't lay out to fall up against batterin' rams," he muttered to himself.[7]

The yarn played upon Bodie's growing reputation for violence. After the *Reno Record* reported that in December 1878 a man was cut to pieces in Bodie, the *Gold Hill News* queried, "Why can't a man get along in Bodie without fighting?" Bodie's press answered whimsically, blaming the district's 8,500-foot elevation.

> Really, we can't say. It must be the altitude. There is some irresistible power in Bodie which impels us to cut and shoot each other. . . . The clashing of revolvers up and down Main street can be constantly heard, and . . . a man cannot go to his dinner without getting a

bullet hole in his hat, or the seat of his unmentionables cut away by the deadly knife of the desperado. Yes, it is sad, but only too true, that everybody must fight that comes to Bodie.[8]

The *Tybo Sun* added intrigue by reporting, "a Bodie man never has two disputes with the same man. This is explained by the fact that he kills him at the first quarrel." Another wit tendered absurdly, "the Bodie man always eats his victim after killing him."[9]

Tall tales of the West that portrayed its inhabitants as unsophisticated, ornery, and dangerous were popular across America. Even the *Boston Daily Globe* amused East Coast readers in July 1879 by describing a brute who staggered into an upscale drinking establishment.

"Everybody come up and have something to drink," demanded the newcomer as he lurched up to the bar.

He gave a furious whoop and smashed a bottle over his head. Then he performed a war dance.

"I'm a bad man," declared the intruder, "and always make it a practice to strew upon the floor the bowels of any person who declines to drink upon my invitation."

Affirming his remarks, he drew an 18-inch "Arkansas toothpick" from the back of his collar, sending patrons stampeding for the exits.

"Who is he?" muttered a terrified spectator, taking cover behind the bar, "From Bodie, I suppose."

"Bodie, hell no!" thundered the bartender. "He's from Boston. He belongs to that Sunday-school excursion."[10]

Americans have long enjoyed playful exaggeration for entertainment's sake, elevating leg pulling to a national art form. The frontier and its heroes were frequent subjects, and amusing fictional characters, such as Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, remain popular today. But when the West was wild, Bodie's bad man was an image recognized across the country, based on the remote gold town's perceived disregard for law and order. Even New York's prestigious *Engineering and Mining Journal* departed from printing mining news to disclose with touches of hyperbole and humor that, "Bodie contains about 6,000 inhabitants, who support 156 drinking places, several newspapers, and many attorneys-at-law, without a single church."[11]

Newspaper editors far and wide seemingly took pleasure in embellishing stories of deviltry and attributing them to any passing stranger who could be conveniently labeled a "Bad Man from Bodie." In a San Francisco courtroom, a defendant arrested for "vulgar language" argued that the city's press had unfairly dubbed him the Bad Man from Bodie. "I have been mortified by glaring headlines," complained W.H. Branch. "I am suspected of carrying nitroglycerine in each pocket, of having a large and ugly-shaped knife in each boot, and a brace of pistols in my belt." The accused begged for leniency, arguing that negative reporting had harmed his case. "Yes, your honor," he implored. "Despite the implication, I have never been in Bodie in my life!"[12]

The expression "Bad Man from Bodie" had become nationally recognized by 1880, when the writer who coined the term two years earlier published a second tale that appeared in Sacramento's *Daily Bee*. "Having made a close study of the peculiar class of 'bad men' generally known as Bad Men from Bodie," proclaimed E.H. Clough, "I am prepared to add my plethora of wisdom in this respect to that already extant in the world at the present time." Dropping Washoe Pete from the story, Clough spun a yarn about another improbable character.

One of the peculiarities of a Bad Man from Bodie is his profanity. A Bad Man from Bodie

> who never used an oath is as impossible as perpetual motion or an honest election in Nevada. This trait is especially noticeable whenever he kills a man or endeavors to kill one. . . . Meeting an eligible candidate for a place in the graveyard, he emits his stereotyped oath and blazes away.

The columnist claimed to have actually witnessed a Bodie bad man enter a saloon and leap upon a billiard table.

"Here I am again," the make-believe thug roared, "a mile wide and all wool. I weigh a ton and when I walk the earth shakes. Give me room and I'll whip an army. . . . I was born in a powder house and raised in a gun factory. I'm bad from the bottom up and clear grit plumb through."

From atop his commandeered podium, the bad man ranted, "I'm chief of Murdertown, and I'm dry! Whose treat is it? Don't all speak at once for I'll turn loose and scatter death and destruction Hell bent for election. Your treat, is it? Well, come up everybody. Pass the old rat poison."

Whenever a Bodie bad man visited another mining camp, according to Clough, the locals would wring their hands and say, "Recon it's goin' to liven up around here; I see the bonebreaker's in town." Meanwhile, the undertaker dusted off his hearse and groomed its black plumes; the coroner engaged a physician to carry out autopsies and convened a jury to hold inquests; the gravedigger purchased another spade; and the stonecutter would order new chisels to epitaph victims in marble.[13]

Clough's wild stories motivated other writers who drew inspiration from the bonanza town's lawless inclination. The *Stockton Mail* joined the fun with a line of clever fiction. "There is even talk in Bodie's upper circles of forming a society to exclude from high-toned gatherings everyone who has not killed his man."[14]

Another far-off columnist spun a tale about an inebriated loudmouth who entered the Fern Leaf concert hall in San Francisco.

"I'm a chip from the side of Bodie Bluff," the stranger yelled as he upset a table and jumped onto the stage, driving a terrified soloist into the corner. "I'm an old stager myself, and capture whole camps with my actin'."

The intruder pulled his gun and fired a shot, extinguishing the footlights and sending musicians and the audience fleeing toward the doors.

"This is what I call fun," proclaimed the bad man. "This old town needs shaking up a little; the boys seem to be sort o' low and need a boom."[15]

An election-day dustup in Idaho gave rise to another sighting. "A Bad Man from Bodie was present at the polls," reported the *Idaho Avalanche*, proving that the expression was popular across the West. The bully "became quite obnoxious by his overbearing demeanor and abuse of many of the peaceable citizens." His insults lasted until he singled out Jake Rubin, upon whom he "exhausted his vocabulary of vile epithets." When the troublemaker twisted Rubin's mustache, the usually even-tempered victim let go a fist that dropped the bad man to the floor "more dead than alive." That ended the fight, and the citizens of Owyhee County applauded the day's "first-class entertainment."[16]

Violent stories, both real and fabricated, gave Bodie an air of danger, an aspect of the camp's far-flung fame that delighted some but troubled others. One Bodie editor challenged the motives and accuracy of distant-city reporting.

> When the witty paragrapher of one of our metropolitan contemporaries has touched up all the live topics of the day, and still lacks a little filling of the space in his paper, he dashes off a few lines about the "bad man of Bodie," and his exploits in the way of "cleaning out" a saloon full of city loafers, blowing out lights with his revolver, or other equally improbable performances. In brief, we do not enjoy having our town pointed out either as a murderer's paradise or the chosen headquarters of the Angel of Death, because neither proposition is true. The fact is, the "bad man of Bodie" is as much a myth, and is as unreal as "the baseless fabric of a vision." He does not exist.[17]

The columnist later admitted that killings actually did take place in Bodie, but only among its rowdy citizens.

> As to the occasional homicides which occur here, there never has been yet an instance of the intentional killing of a man [that] was not a verification of the proverb that "He that liveth by the sword shall perish by the sword." As to the health of Bodie, there were about 111 deaths in this place [during 1879], out of a population varying from 5,000 to 8,000 people. A very considerable number of these were killed by accidents in mines.[18]

The *San Francisco Bulletin* summed up the situation: "The Bad Man from Bodie is a sort of a generic term for all the bad men in the State." Linking Bodie to every aggressive loudmouth, scoundrel, highwayman, and killer in California offended a local newspaperman who claimed that, "Bodie is one of the quietest, most law-abiding mining districts" in California and Nevada. He stressed that no one had been convicted of murder in Mono County during the previous year and a half, maybe two years. Although factual, his boast ignored twenty or so homicides tried in court during that time—without a single guilty verdict. Accused killers, the columnist revealed, consistently blame their dead foe for starting the fight, and juries have, "in every instance found the killing was done in self defense. No one has been punished by even so much as a day's imprisonment after trial."[19]

Bodie's press often enhanced the town's violent reputation by printing incendiary comments intended for outside consumption: "The shooting yesterday morning was very poor—no one killed." Another comment aroused images yet to be adopted by Hollywood: "The favorite style of shooting now is, to bang away with a gun in each hand."[20]

One Bodie resident sought to improve his town's image by appealing to the *San Francisco Daily Report*. "People living at a distance from our mining district often do us a gross injustice in commenting on our fighting affairs."

> [They] assume that Bodie is a terribly wicked place. . . . The "Bad Man from Bodie" has become a popular phrase and every time a fatal shooting scrape occurs in the town some paper headlines its account with "ANOTHER BODIE FIGHTER GETS HIS MAN FOR BREAKFAST."[21]

Also objecting to unflattering reports, a newsman in Bodie remarked, "But Bodie is much misunderstood by those outside. They have met with an occasional 'Bad Man from Bodie,' and have been too ready to judge the entire community from the bad man's standpoint."[22]

Joseph Wasson, elected in 1879 to represent Mono County in California's legislature, wrote to check the mining town's unruly emissary: "Bad as the place may be morally speaking,

'the Bad Man from Bodie' is very much of a myth."[23]

While law-abiding citizens strove to change outside opinion, their efforts did little good and Bodie's violent reputation did not subside until years after the boom. The town's population decreased precipitously after mid-1880, then leveled off at around 800 inhabitants, mostly wage-earning miners and their families.

As the camp matured, its once-famous Bad Man faded into the mists of forgotten folklore, overtaken by a more powerful Western legend—the cowboy. An article in the New York-based *National Police Gazette* anticipated the popularity of cowboys and compared them to the Bad Man from Bodie.

> The untamed cowboy generally sports a large six shooter, a belt, a knife, repeating rifle, and a huge pair of spurs, while the mustang which he rides is supplied with a Spanish saddle and held in check and guided by a huge Spanish bit. Herding cattle being his vocation, nothing delights him more than a wild chase after an untamed steer, and, being a splendid rider, neither an Apache nor a soldier can get the best of him on the plains. Sometimes he is an American, sometimes a Mexican, a half-breed, or Indian, but no matter what his nationality may be he is as uncivilized as a grizzly bear and reckless as a savage. . . . Quick, wiry, and intrepid, often generous and humane, he [stands apart], and many are the stories told of his bloodthirsty career. . . . He it is who does the shooting in most of our frontier towns, and is fast becoming a terror to the citizens of the region where he chooses to visit. Like "the bad man from Bodie," fear to him is an unknown quantity, and the greater the danger the more desperate he seems to become.[24]

Marking the early stages of America's fascination with cowboys, the nationally read tabloid portrayed troublesome ranch hands as equals to Bodie's hard drinking, reckless mining men. Cowboys, however, gained popularity after Wild West shows, then motion pictures, radio, and television, cast them as galloping do-gooders. Based on the entertainment value of fast-shooting buckaroos on horseback, action-packed adventures followed phony story lines and depicted cattle driving as if it were the West's highest calling. Today ranching represents America's past, suggesting that no other occupation—including gold mining—ever existed on the frontier. [25]

As cowboy heroes grew in popularity, Americans lost interest in Bodie and its bad man.[26] Over time, a few fakers claimed to be the "real" Bad Man from Bodie, but none of them found believers. [27] Cowboys have displaced the celebrated fictional character from Bodie Bluff, and now they symbolize the entire nation and the West that wasn't.

RECOMMENDED READING: *For a thoroughly researched, documented account of violence in boomtown Bodie, see, Roger D. McGrath,* Gunfighters, Highwaymen & Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier *(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 102-271.*

NOTES

[1] Several western towns (five mining towns and one cattle town) boomed almost simultaneously: Deadwood, DT, 1876; Dodge City, KS, 1876; Leadville, CO, 1878; Bodie, CA, 1878; Butte City, MT, 1880; and Tombstone, AT, 1880.

[2] Bodie's most famous inhabitant, Madame Mustache, was a professional gambler who committed suicide a mile or so south of town in September 1879. Educated, pretty, and fashionably dressed, Eleanor Dumont arrived in Nevada City, California, in 1854 at about age 20 to begin a career of dealing cards and running gambling establishments. Popular among the miners, the petite French Madame Dumont followed gold rushes and silver booms, dealing cards in mining camps for the next quarter century. Nicknamed Madame Mustache in later years because of the dark hair on her upper lip, she arrived at Bodie in May 1878 suffering from middle age, a failed marriage, and a run of bad luck. Little more than a year later, she pooled her savings with a $300 loan to open faro and twenty-one games in the Magnolia saloon on Main Street, but she went broke after a few hours. Madame Mustache penned a suicide note saying she was tired of life, then followed the road from town, stepped into the sagebrush, and swallowed a lethal dose of morphine. [*Bodie Weekly Standard* (Bodie, CA) 29 May 1878; *Daily Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 8 September 1879; *Bodie Morning News* (Bodie, CA) 9 September 1879; *The National Police Gazette* (New York, NY) 4 October 1879, 10]

[3] "Bad man" was a common expression before imaginative 20th century writers invented "gunslinger," a word unknown in the Wild West. Justifying his misadventures in Arizona and Colorado, Doc Holliday was said to have remarked, "When any of you fellows have been hunted from one end of the country to the other, as I have been, you'll understand what a bad man's reputation is built on." Writing in 1883, an observer recalled city marshal Wild Bill Hickok in Abilene: "Hickok was a bold, bad man, and had no respect whatever for human life. He could draw a revolver in less time, and fire with surer aim than any other man in the West." Wyatt Earp's 1929 obituary in the *New York Times* headlined, "End Comes to Wyatt Earp at Los Angeles After Life of Battling Bad Men." [*New York Sun* 3 June 1886 in Gary L. Roberts, *Doc Holliday: The Life and Legend* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006), 375; A.T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, IL: A.T. Andreas, 1883), 688 in Joseph G. Rosa, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man & His Myth* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 152; *The Times* (New York, NY) 14 January 1929, 23]. Also see, R.K. DeArment, "Four Awful Bad Men," *Journal of the Wild West History Association* Vol. 1, No. 4 (August 2008): 34-38, 48. After hunting big game in the West beginning in 1883, Theodore Roosevelt described "bad men" in an 1888 magazine article: "The 'bad men,' or professional fighters and man-killers, are…the men who do most of the killing in frontier communities; yet is is a noteworthy fact that the men who are killed generally deserve their fate. These men are, of course, used to brawling, and are not only sure shots, but, what is equally important, able to 'draw' their weapons with marvelous quickness. They think nothing whatever of murder, and are the dread and terror of their associates; yet they are very chary of taking the life of a man of good standing, and will often weaken and back down at once if confronted fearlessly. With many of them their courage arises from confidence in their own powers and knowledge of the fear in which they are held; and men of this type often show the white feather when they get in a tight place. Others, however, will face any odds without flinching. On the other hand, I have

known of these men fighting, when mortally wounded, with a cool, ferocious despair that was terrible…. These desperadoes always try to 'get the drop' on a foe—that is, to take him at a disadvantage before he can use his own weapon. I have known more men killed in this way, when the affair was wholly one-sided, than I have known to be shot in fair fight; and I have known fully as many who were shot by accident. It is wonderful, in the event of a street fight, how few bullets seem to hit the men they are aimed at." [Theodore Roosevelt, "Ranch Life in the Far West," *The Century Magazine*, February 1888, 504-505.]

[4] *Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 7 November 1877.

[5] *Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 23 January; 6 February; 13 February 1878; *Daily Alta California* 18 January 1878.

[6] *Register of Death of Mono County* in Maxine Chappell, "Bodie and the Bad Man: Historical Roots of a Legend" (Master's thesis, University of California, 1947), 39-40.

[7] E. H. Clough, "The Bad Man of Bodie," *The Argonaut* (San Francisco, CA) 1 June 1878, 7; *Bodie Weekly Standard* (Bodie, CA) 28 August 1878. Born at Sonora, California, in 1854, Edwin H. Clough became a journalist and editor for several Bay Area newspapers including the *Chronicle*, *Call*, and *Evening Post*. He later served on the staffs of the Sacramento *Daily Bee*, Sonora *Union Democrat*, and the Stockton *Independent*. Although an accomplished newsman during the 1870s and 1880s, he is best remembered for his satirical short stories, including two about the Bad Man from Bodie. [Herbert O. Lang, *A History of Tuolumne County, California* (San Francisco, CA: B.F. Alley, 1882), 341]

[8] *Weekly Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 25 December 1878 in Chappell 1947, 49-50.

[9] *Weekly Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 5 April 1879.

[10] *Boston Daily Globe* (Boston, MA) 7 July 1879.

[11] *Engineering and Mining Journal* (New York, NY) 31 January 1880, 86.

[12] *San Francisco Daily Stock Report* in *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 2 June 1880.

[13] E.H. Clough, "Bad Men from Bodie," *The Daily Bee* (Sacramento, CA) 12 October 1880, 1.

[14] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 22 October 1880.

[15] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 6 January 1881.

[16] *Idaho Avalanche* (Silver City, ID) 8 November 1884.

[17] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 7 January 1880.

[18] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 7 January 1880.

[19] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 10 October 1880; Roger D. McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen & Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 256-257.

[20] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 16 July 1880.

[21] *Daily Free Press* (Bodie, CA) 17 June 1881.

[22] *Weekly Standard-News* (Bodie, CA) 26 October 1881.

[23] *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, CA) 29 November 1879.

[24] *National Police Gazette* (New York, NY) 27 August 1881, 7. Another period tabloid also disparaged cowboys, demonstrating that drovers held little appeal: "Morally, as a class, they are foul-mouthed, blasphemous, drunken, lecherous, utterly corrupt." [*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY) 1 December 1883, 229]

[25] America's western heroes were not always cowboys. During Bodie's boom, nobody thought drovers were especially interesting given that people had been driving animals to market for thousands of years without fanfare. Instead of cowhands, the country idolized Indian-fighting frontiersmen from a bygone era. Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and John C. Fremont embodied skill, bravery, and values necessary to survive in the wilderness beyond the borders of civilization, and their buckskin garb was deemed the definitive frontier attire. In 1860, P.T. Barnum's traveling menagerie starred Grizzly Adams, a performer whose buckskin coat conveyed a true westerner's image. Years later, showmen Buffalo Bill Cody, Texas Jack Omohundro, and Pawnee Bill marketed themselves as Indian-fighting "scouts" (not cowboys) and donned stage costumes made of fringed buckskin to evoke their frontiersman-like experiences. Other self-promoting cavaliers of frontier melodrama, particularly Wild Bill Hickok, George A. Custer, Ned Buntline, and Calamity Jane, groomed their public personas during the 1870s by sporting buckskins, a throwback to famous trailblazers. Another decade would pass before cowboys and their distinctive manner of dress became popular. Wild West shows probably did the most to transform America's favorite folk heroes from wilderness explorers to cattle herders by featuring actual ranch hands, beginning in 1883. Recognizing the drawing power of rope tricks and horsemanship, Cody and other showmen aggressively burnished the cowboy's mix-raced, shiftless, thieving, troublemaking image into that of noble white heirs to the frontiersman's legacy. At the same time, Theodore Roosevelt bought a cattle ranch in Dakota Territory and wrote a series of magazine articles in 1888 that romanticized cowhands. Throughout the next century, creative fiction and imaginative screenplays portrayed drovers as armed moral crusaders on horseback who lived by an imaginary "Code of the West" and never cussed, smoked, gambled, got drunk, or visited brothels. Celluloid cowboys now symbolize frontier America and stylized buckaroo garb has become so fashionable that people around the world indulge their historical fantasies by wearing "western apparel," making it difficult to believe that most famous Old Westerners did not earn their livings by herding beef.

[26] Recalling the phrase, "I'm a BAD man from Bodie!" in 1915, a reporter provided an early 20th century interpretation of the Bad Man from Bodie. "The sentence found its way into California slang, where it had a great vogue thirty years ago. . . . Variety-hall performers, soon to call themselves vaudeville artists, used it to get a laugh and labeled it 'hokum.' Schoolboys about to fight bolstered up their courage by asserting that they were bad men from Bodie. Newspaper paragraphers made much of the catchword and it survives to this

day." [Charles E. Van Loan, "Ghost Cities of the West: Bad, B-a-d Bodie," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 25 September 1915, 18-19, 55]

[27] In 1939 veterans of Bodie's gold mining excitement remembered the Bad Man through letters to the San Francisco *Chronicle*:
"Editor: In your recent editorial . . . you mention the town's leading citizen, the celebrated Bad Man from Bodie. On inquiring about I have found that while everyone has heard of this eminent Californian, no one seems to known who he was. I wonder if any of your readers can tell me who was the great Bad Man and what did he do that was so bad?" William Harrison [*The Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA) 5 October 1939]
"Editor: My boyhood was spent in Bodie. A long time ago my father was sheriff of Mono County, in which Bodie is situated. . . . Bodie was, in its flowering days, known as the wickedest mining camp in the world. It lay there in the Sierra, on the Nevada side, in a desolate, forbidding land, remote from what even then was pleasantly called civilization. Some of the ore from its mines was fabulously rich and the camp's fame attracted lawless men from near and far places. Passions flamed high and quickly on little provocation, and many men died swiftly. It was the deadliest camp in the West. So, its notoriety as a killer camp took form in that phrase, 'A Bad Man from Bodie,' a phrase which literally traveled around the world. The phrase did not apply to any one man, no matter how many notches might be on his gun. It was a general term. Automatically, any boy or man who lived in that camp, whose sagebrush graveyard was populous with men who had died when guns had flashed, became a Bad Man from Bodie. Just living there, just being a resident of that camp that was so deadly, gave to every Bodie man the right to be known as the Bad Man of Bodie. . . . I am quite sure those who made Bodie their home in those long-ago years will agree with me when I say that the title in question was general, instead of being the tag of some one individual, no matter how many men he happened to shoot up before breakfast." Oscar Morgan [*The Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA) 11 October 1939]
"Editor: Mr. Morgan corrects the impression many might have acquired of the actual existence of a 'Bad Man from Bodie.' As a resident of Bodie in '79, I agree with Mr. Morgan. There were bad men in Bodie and bad whisky, and there were lawless killings and mass killings in mine accidents, but the 'Bad Man from Bodie' was a gag." J. Cassidy. [*The Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA) 17 October 1939]