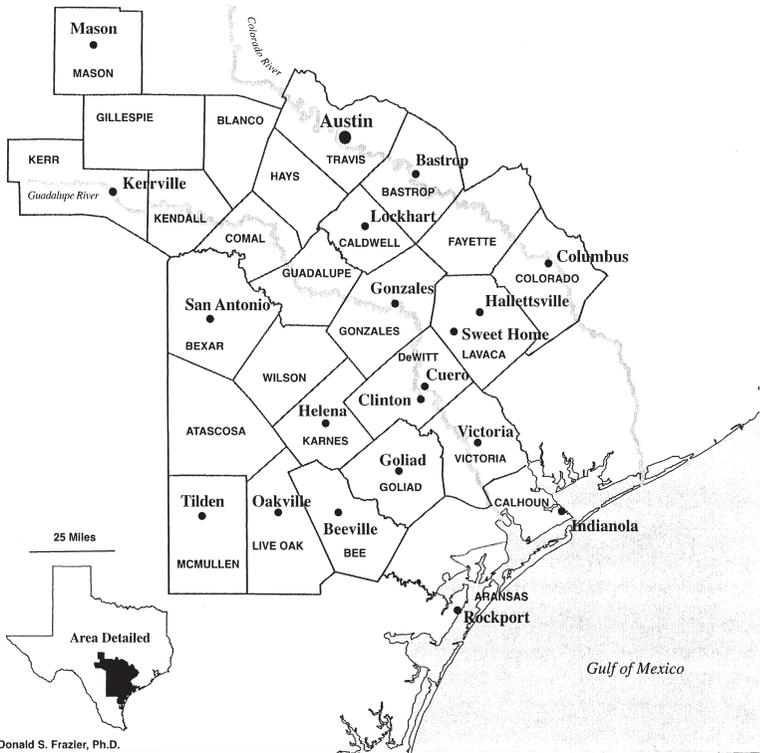


The Sutton-Taylor Feud



Donald S. Frazier, Ph.D.

The area of Texas where the Sutton-Taylor Feud was hottest. *Map courtesy Donald S. Frazier.*

THE SUTTON-TAYLOR FEUD:

The Deadliest Blood Feud in Texas

by Chuck Parsons

Number 7 in the A.C. Greene Series

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And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

—SHYLOCK TO SALERIO, 3:1, 61–62

from *The Merchant of Venice*

William Shakespeare: The Complete Works

General Eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor

Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988 Compact Edition

*Dedicated to Pat, for her continued assistance,
love and support.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Sutton-Taylor Feud

Bill Sutton stepped down from the hack first, and then helped his pregnant wife Laura, holding her arm gently. She was now in her early months, strong, smiling, and confident, but to loving husband Bill she was delicate and fragile, and he was more than ordinarily concerned about her. Good friend Gabe Slaughter, fellow cattleman and friend John N. Keeran, and Ed McDonough also descended from the conveyance, glad to have their feet back on the ground. Then the group walked together up the gangplank. Before them in Lavaca Bay, the steamer *Clinton* gently rocked in the waters.

Bill Sutton had grown weary of always watching his back trail; he was tired of being a target for the Taylors and their friends. Too many men had been shot down or strung up to dangle on a tree limb until death stopped their struggles. Brother Jim Sutton had already left the country, maybe even had already forgotten about the violence of the feud with the Taylors. Bill now wondered why he had not left as well.

With Laura four months pregnant, he now had no real reason not to leave. A trip from Indianola to New Orleans, up the river and then another leg across Missouri to Kansas City would be what he needed to get his mind off the feud. As a cattleman, he had already hired good men to drive his herds up the trail overland. He would meet them in Kansas, settle accounts, and possibly consider remaining there away from

the Texas troubles. Life was good. Laura was radiant, and their first child was less than five months away. Would it be a girl or a boy?

But in spite of his careful planning for Laura, his friends, and his herds, there were others who intended to destroy the idyllic dream. Jim Taylor and his friends wanted Bill Sutton dead, and on this day, the eleventh of March 1874, at Indianola, Texas, their dream was about to come true. Jim Taylor, with cousin Bill Taylor, now stalked up the same *Clinton* gangplank and approached the Sutton group. Their pistols were already in their hands, cocked, and ready to fire.

Moments later, the smoke had wafted away and the echoes of the gunshots were no longer heard. But Laura Sutton's screams still rang loudly over the rippling waters of Lavaca Bay.



The double killing of William E. Sutton and Gabriel Webster Slaughter on the deck of the steamer *Clinton* on March 11, 1874, in front of numerous witnesses including Mrs. Sutton, was the apex of the Sutton-Taylor blood feud. The years of bloodshed beginning in the late 1860s reached what now could be the terminating factor: the death of William E. Sutton. He had been the target of several assassination attempts, and with his body growing cold the Taylors believed themselves the victors. Jim Taylor had achieved his goal of slaying the man he held responsible for the death of his father and other kinfolk, and no doubt he felt that blood had answered blood. After all, the family motto of "Who sheds a Taylor's blood, by a Taylor's hand must fall" was now satisfied. After Sutton's killing of Charley Taylor in Bastrop back in 1868, and then his killing of Buck Taylor in Clinton that Christmas, avenging their deaths became an imperative to Jim Taylor. In another time and place, attorneys might have settled matters in a court room, but in the tumultuous days of Reconstruction in Texas, the more common means of settling disputes was with a gun.

The early Taylor killings led to two groups of people, both having sided with the Confederacy, now taking arms against each other, swearing death to the other. Of the multitudinous conflicts in Texas history, the violence acted out between the followers of William E. Sutton and the Taylor faction became the epitome of the blood feud.

The troubles began during the tragic period known as Reconstruction. Many small conflicts between neighbors and groups of people, united by ethnic background or race or family ties, began during that nine-year period of civil tumult. In the decades prior to the war the greatest threat had been from the displaced Native Americans who were forced to move farther west, fighting against the white invaders every step of the way. Now after the war between North and South was over, Central and East Texas were safe. Men no longer feared Comanche or Kiowa raiding parties, but nevertheless continued to keep their weapons close, and loaded. The legal system could not catch up with the societal changes wrought by the Civil War. Many men who had lost much or everything in the war, now with only themselves to deal with their problems, found recourse in violence. Now the residents of DeWitt, Gonzales, Karnes, and Bastrop counties—the heartland of the feud—could only focus partially on establishing homes in the land, tending their cattle herds to drive to northern markets, or merely raising their families. But Reconstruction spread its own problems and for many the period of blood feuds began.

The Taylors were descendants of Virginia-born Josiah and Hephzibeth Taylor. Sons William Riley, Creed, Josiah Jr., Rufus P., Pitkin, their sons and nephews and other in-laws and friends, became the Taylor party, or faction.

The initial problems began when Creed Taylor's sons Hays and Doboy killed two Union soldiers in Mason County. Then William E. Sutton, believing Charley Taylor and a friend were guilty of theft, pursued them into Bastrop County with a posse.

Taylor was killed first, shot down on a street in Bastrop. Then his friend was taken, then shot down on a road in neighboring Caldwell County, vigilante style. Before many months passed Sutton was responsible for the killing of two more Taylors, William P. "Buck" and his cousin Richard Chisholm. One must consider these events as the beginnings of what has become the Sutton-Taylor Blood Feud which lasted into the next decade. The conflict was long and bloody. It cost more lives than any other Texas feud.

Some of the Sutton faction, those associated with William E. Sutton although no others of that name were involved, were members of the State Police and several became deputy sheriffs, thus giving them legal sanction. Although not criminals, the Taylors did not choose to become deputies or policemen, which may have been a costly misjudgment on their part.

A period of vigilantism became common during the late '60s and '70s, and many men associated with the Taylors, or related to them, were accused of theft and then murdered, the excuse being "killed while attempting to escape." The decade of the 1870s witnessed the double murder of the Kelly brothers, sons-in-law of Pitkin Taylor; the murder of Martin Taylor and father-in-law Dave Morris, the double murder of John Choate and his cousin Crockett Choate, and many others, all connected to the Taylor faction by blood or marriage or friendship.

The Taylors did not sit idly by and allow their ranks to be thinned without retaliation. One-time DeWitt County Sheriff Jack Helm was gunned down by Jim Taylor and John Wesley Hardin. Then Jim Cox and Jake Christman fell before Taylor guns in a well-planned ambush. The Taylors several times laid ambushes to get Bill Sutton, but he managed to escape. Pitkin Taylor himself was lured from his home during the night and shot to death. Finally Jim Taylor's plans to kill Sutton and possibly end the feud were realized on the deck of the *Clinton*.

Even after Sutton's death, his followers chose to carry on the violence. After the Sutton killing, cousins Bill Taylor and Jim Taylor became fugitives. Jim joined forces with John Wesley Hardin and the pair left the area, gathering their cattle for a drive to Kansas markets. Cousin Bill Taylor remained in DeWitt County. He should have left with Jim and Wes, but he did not. He was arrested and jailed, but eventually escaped and did leave the area, but only after killing Reuben H. Brown, the new leader of the Sutton faction. Meanwhile a Brown County deputy sheriff attempted to arrest, or kill, Wes Hardin, but he himself was gunned down. In the aftermath, Hardin's brother and two cousins were arrested. Mobs formed and deemed their vigilante justice was supreme: brother Joe Hardin and the two Dixon brothers were taken out and lynched; two other cousins of Hardin were shot to death. Other associates of Hardin were captured, turned over to a DeWitt County mob and lynched. The "crimes" of these eight men were nothing more than being associates of Jim Taylor and John Wesley Hardin.

The bloody year of 1874, with the death of Sutton and Slaughter and the increased vigilante activity above mentioned, resulted in Captain McNelly and his Texas Rangers being sent to DeWitt County. His constant patrolling throughout the "battlefield" of DeWitt County caused the feudists to reduce their vigilante work, but violence resumed when he was sent to the Rio Grande frontier. Certainly the feudists could control their passions, but apparently only when McNelly and his squads kept a close damper on their activities.

In December of 1875 the Sutton group surrounded Jim Taylor and two friends and shot them down on the streets of Clinton. This battle ought to have ended the feud, as William E. Sutton and the leaders of the Taylor faction now were either dead or out of the country. But the subsequent killings belied this assumption. The most noted killing was the double murder of

Doctor Brassell and his son George, taken from their home in the middle of the night and shot to death. The Texas Rangers were called in again under Lieutenant Hall. Hall arrested the suspected murderers and with the court system finally taking charge the shooting phase of the feud ended. Trials of those charged with the Brassell murders were costly in time and money, but eventually only one man was convicted of murder. He was quickly pardoned. From the initial killings until the pardon of Dave Augustine, some three decades elapsed. The blood feud had cost the lives of some eighty individuals.

Among those four score men shot or lynched during the feud, the best known is one-time State Police Captain Jack Helm, shot to death in 1873 by Jim Taylor and John Wesley Hardin. Hatred for Helm was deeply ingrained in the Taylor men as he was, or so it was believed, responsible for the deaths of many innocent men, among them numerous Taylor friends or relatives. Hardin, in his self-serving autobiography written years later, still felt remorse over the vigilante action that cost the lives of his brother, cousins, and friends. The year of 1874 was perhaps the bloodiest year with more mob activity than any previous year in Texas history. Hardin believed that mobs had become the law in Texas that year, although he himself did not realize the irony of the situation with his organizing successful ambushes resulting in the deaths of various Sutton followers.

The men who participated in the Sutton-Taylor Feud were neither soldiers carrying on a lost cause nor a group of outlaws acting against legitimate authority, but men who believed that they had been wronged and that the legal system was inadequate to provide justice. Thus they had to take its place with the gun and the rope. They believed their extra-legal means of righting the wrongs was totally acceptable. Captain McNelly expressed it best when he wrote his superior in Austin that the leaders of the Suttons and the Taylors, meaning the leaders of both factions, were “long accustomed to doing as they pleased” and had “never experienced restraint upon their

movements. ...” The Sutton-Taylor conflict that originated in DeWitt County was not a crime wave led by the Taylors, but an authentic blood feud with two families each swearing to eradicate the other.

Although only one man named Sutton was involved, his friends and followers were collectively called the Sutton Party. This terminology, identifying the collective shootings and lynchings as the Sutton-Taylor Feud, or vice versa, the Taylor-Sutton Feud, was recognized and accepted during the 1870s by Texas Rangers as well as by newspaper reporters and participants who themselves realized completely that the actions they took to eradicate their enemies were for revenge. Their actions were not to enrich themselves, although there may have been cattle theft at times during the feud. Their actions were not for sociopathic pleasure, although there may have been murderous sociopaths on each side. The troubles, the difficulties, the killings of DeWitt County that poured over into numerous other counties of Texas, became the archetype of what a blood feud was, a model for other groups to follow. Texas men who carried on a feud did not have to have a model to follow; carrying on a blood feud came naturally to those who believed revenge was obligatory.

It was natural in DeWitt County and natural for the men of Mason County several years after Hays and Doboy Taylor killed the Union soldiers. There, the animosity that led to what is commonly called the “Hoo Doo” War of 1875 tended to pit Anglos against men of Germanic extraction. A corrupt sheriff, the accusation of cattle theft and revenge killings made the violence of Mason County almost a mirror image of the vendetta in DeWitt County, although more lives were taken in the latter feud. The men of Mason County, like those of DeWitt, had no need for training in feud activity.

In frontier Lampasas County, northwest of DeWitt County and close to Mason County, Pink Higgins took the law into his own hands. He certainly was aware of the DeWitt County

troubles, and shooting a man he *believed* was a cow thief certainly was a natural reaction when he found the legal system had failed. He shot to death Merritt Horrell, the *alleged* cow thief. This started the Horrell-Higgins feud, which cost several lives and ended only when Texas Rangers convinced the leaders of both sides that the continued killing was senseless. The leaders signed an agreement to cease and desist their animosity, which effectively ended the feud, although there followed a vigilante action of shooting to death two Horrell brothers in a jail cell in Bosque County.

When the feudists in Lampasas County signed a treaty of peace, they kept it. In contrast the Suttons and the Taylors signed treaties, and then for a real or imagined infraction resumed their feuding. It was as if not quite enough blood had yet been spilled. The Horrell men of Lampasas County would have felt at home either in Mason or DeWitt counties, as they too were among rough men who believed in handling their own problems in their fashion. Pink Higgins' shooting a suspected thief was hardly different from William Sutton believing Charley Taylor had stolen his stock, and shooting him and a companion to death, nearly a decade before.

There were no treaties of peace in the Mason County troubles, however. The treaties between the Suttons and the Taylors amounted to nothing more than a waste of pen and ink. Feuding blood ran hotter in their veins.



William E. "Bill" Sutton and wife Laura Eudora McDonald Sutton, possibly their wedding photograph. *Courtesy Robert W. Shook.*