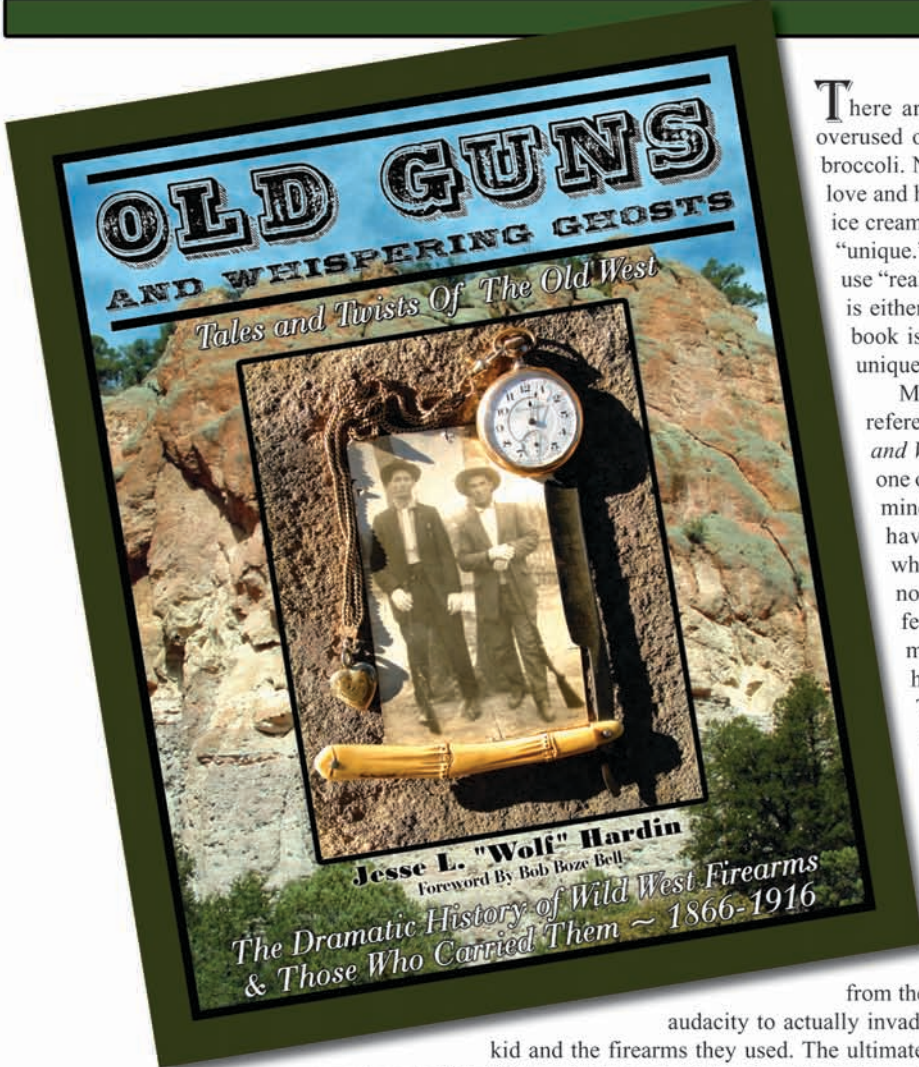


# OLD GUNS AND WHISPERING GHOSTS

By: Jesse Hardin

Book Review by John Taffin



There are many words in the English language that are either overused or misused. For example, I LOVE ice cream or I HATE broccoli. Now, I really like ice cream and I can't stand broccoli, but love and hate are emotions that are much too strong to be wasted on ice cream and broccoli. Certainly one of the most misused words is "unique." Now, unique means one-of-a-kind, so it is improper to use "really unique" or "most unique" or "quite unique." Something is either unique or it isn't. Even though I am tempted to say this book is really "quite unique," I won't. It is, however, definitely unique because it is one-of-a-kind.

My library contains well over 1,000 volumes. Many are reference books and some are read for pure pleasure. *Old Guns and Whispering Ghosts* falls into the latter category. It is in fact one of most pleasurable books I have ever read. It stirs the heart, mind, soul, and spirit of this old sixgunner as few books ever have. Jesse Hardin really does understand old guns and whispering ghosts. He knows guns, especially old guns, are not mere tools, but works of art that fill us with definite feelings. Even though he is somewhat younger than I am, he mentions the same writers who inspired me also inspired him: Frank Dobie, Ernest Hemingway, Elmer Keith, Theodore Roosevelt, and Robert Ruark were all my favorites in high school, and then just to show he is younger than I am he throws in another favorite who did not come along until I was well out of high school, Skeeter Skelton. We definitely have the same tastes when it comes to the old school writers. Then to show how really smart he is he mentions two of my favorite writers among the current crop, Mike Venturino and John Taffin. John Taffin?

What makes this book unique is the fact that it not only contains a history of many firearms and their uses

from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until Pancho Villa had the

audacity to actually invade America, but between we find people I read about as a

kid and the firearms they used. The ultimate hunter, Ben Lilly, who was consumed by the passion to

spend most of his life hunting bears, both black and grizzly, and mountain lions; my all time hero, Theodore Roosevelt, is

found here packing his 1876 Winchester and Colt Frontier six shooter; Elfege Baco, who we learned about as the man with nine lives when

Walt Disney still meant quality productions; and who can forget Little Sure Shot, Annie Oakley, who could outshoot any man.

He understands and passes onto us the glories of nature, the planned destruction of the red man, the driving forces behind Buffalo Bill, the deadly shootist skills of John Wesley Hardin, the terrible life of the Fallen Angels. There's more. We've all said at one time or another, if only this gun could speak. Hardin makes them speak. He shares with us many of the best firearms ever made. We find the first .45-70 lever gun, no it wasn't a Winchester, the lever guns of the Indians and their last-ditch effort to survive; the long-range efficiency of the buffalo guns wiping out millions upon millions of buffalo in less than a decade; the awesome persuasion of the firearms used by the man who rode shotgun; the pocket guns and the lives they saved; and everyone's favorite, the first metallic cartridge, the .22. With every one of these topics, Jesse Hardin paints pictures that not only appeal to our heart, mind, soul, and spirit, they also give us a good picture of the heart, mind, soul, and spirit of Jesse Hardin. He does this not just with words but also with many period photographs of people, places, and things. Let's listen to just a little of what he has to say. If this very small peek at *Old Guns and Whispering Ghosts* doesn't make you want to grab a copy, I will question your heart, mind, soul, and spirit!

"Listen! You can almost hear it, the approach of galloping horses, the distant ring of gunfire. And the whispers rising from the abandoned fort, the quiet field, along the empty hunting camp." If you can read this book and not hear these, you are in sad shape my friend. Of the coming of the railroad Jesse speaks thusly, "Now imagine yourself as an Indian woman peeking from behind a hidden knoll, trying to calm your panicking pony even as you reach to pat your growing belly. What could such a terrible vintage portent? What kind of omen could this be, and what could it mean for the future of your unborn child? Or, picture yourself a bare skinned brave observing from high atop a crimson cliff as the first steam locomotive roars your way—the ominous black metal of a gnashing dragon such as you have never seen before, the tortured smoke and swirl of sorcerer's sparks. And oh,

that unbearable sound, the grating screams of iron grinding against iron, the beastly roar of an engine that keeps getting louder, and louder, and louder..."

Speaking of firearms, "While appearance is one major aspect, others include the degree of precision in their machining and the subtleties of their engineering. It's to be found in sure movements of a classic bolt-action, in the sound of the spinning cylinder and its slow return to battery, the balance of a Colt Single Action and the heft and fit of a double by the likes of a Parker, Fox, or Man. While we men and women are thinkers, the quality I am attempting to describe is more readily ascertained through feeling." BINGO! To some folks firearms are only tools, like chainsaws, claw hammers, and yes, computers. I feel sorry for anyone who cannot "feel" great firearms.

Jesse catches the heart of the hunter, "You stand still for a minute or two, giddy with the feeling of being awash in millions of acres of national forest, in a county with less than five percent private land. On either side of you orange and purple volcanic mountains thrust upwards from a primeval seabed studded with prehistoric shells and mysterious fossils. Climbing upwards again, the cactus and sage slowly transition to pinion, oak, and juniper, which in turn give way to lofty ponderosa pines and then shimmering white barked aspen. It's here, between 5,000 and 10,000 feet, that you know the giant deer reside, resting atop the ridges during the day where they can see in all directions, coming down to the river to feed and drink at night. You angle up trails where drumming of elk hooves have marked the land and bend to check the freshness of the marble sized scat spread upon the sand. The hunt is on!

"Every opening in the brush becomes a doorway through which we can enter a world of wonder and possibility. Every turn in the trail is the turning of the page. We come to see the universe is as rich with impressions, imbued with not only lyric beauty but a message, a moral, a purpose. While we don't always catch up to what we're following, in the process we're given the opportunities to find ourselves. Hunting is a primitive art of paying attention, for which even the unsuccessful hunter is immediately rewarded—with increased sensitivity, lush sensory engagement and deepened response. Getting home from a day on the trail, one can't help but notice how much sweeter the jazz or bluegrass sounds, how much more complex each meal tastes. Eyes taught to discern the minutiae of sign, are better able to discern the nuances of color and form in an otherwise familiar painting. Hearts opened wider by the beauty, compassion, and mortality of the hunter's trail, return more open to home and family, more intent on what we need to do."

You really think you want to restore that firearm? "Like wrinkles on a woman or man, like the water marks on canyon walls, like the windblown tracks of a passing animal, the wear on a firearm paints a chronicle of feelings as well as events; successes and failures on the field of battle, or while chasing wild meat year after year, episodes of violence and virtue, avarice and justice, tragedy and tenderness, resistance and rescue, damage and repair. Our physical and emotional scars describe not only what we suffered, but also what we've survived,

and what we've accomplished as well as endured. The absence of such marks of significance and experience suggests a person too young, protected or divorced from reality to be counted on for insight, wisdom, or judgment. Such a person likely has a potential to express, but not much of a story to tell.

"Likewise, the new gun hasn't had a life yet, and a valuable arm that's been maintained in perfect condition for 100 or more years makes for a boring tale. Its history is one of cardboard boxes or wooden presentation cases, of bank vaults and gun safes, closets and attics...instead of struggling wagon trains, gunfights, and buffalo herds. Beautiful as such rifles, pistols, and shotguns can be, they've had to sacrifice the scent of crisp outdoor mornings and saddle leather for the smell of dehumidifying crystals or protective cosmoline. Saved from the so-called ravages of age, they've also been deprived of the chance to fulfill their intended function as firearms, to prove their mettle under pressure, to be held in the hands of man or women as they faced the serious moral and existential choices in their very real lives. A gun with wear is personalized-and that's particularly revealing."

One final quote and I've either sold you on this book or I haven't. If I haven't, it's a pity and your heart, mind, soul, and spirit will be less for it. "The characters of the Wild West deserve neither our sympathy nor adulation, but rather our empathy: putting ourselves in their shoes for a spell, to understand what their lives were like, what they went through, sustained, and endured. Their trials and tribulations, minor accomplishments and major satisfactions, their habits and traits, peculiarities and mannerisms, their fears and hopes, needs and desires, the anger that fired their soul's furnace, the love that quenched and sated; the countryside and weather that drew a knife down them like a sculptor and lifted them up straight as corn, tall as a ponderosa pine lining the nearby ridge, the townsfolk that influenced their behavior, the newspaper stories that influenced their opinions and inflamed their prejudices, the dreams that they lived and sometimes died for. We can know their truth best by holding at once both the extremes of pain and bliss as they did by our willingness to feel...and deal. We know it when we ache for the old ways and vanished wildlands..."

I try not to be the jealous type, especially when it comes to what other writers do. However, Jesse Hardin goes too far. I am an artist at heart. I started school the year after World War II ended and most of my grade school days were spent drawing pictures related to the War. In high school I switched to sixguns and the outdoors. I'm really not what one would call a good artist, however, I have had my moments. Jesse Hardin has had a lot of artistic moments and he not only manages to paint word pictures, he also fills this volume with scores of his excellent drawings. It is hard to beat the combination of a man who can paint pictures both ways.

*Old Guns and Whispering Ghosts* is being published by Shoot Magazine Corp. If you are interested in purchasing the book, please call (800) 342-0904 or log on to our web-site at [www.shootmercantile.com](http://www.shootmercantile.com). We are currently taking pre-orders. The book is scheduled to be printed in the Spring of 2006.




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