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SHADOWS IN THE DARK

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This episode analyzes primary source excerpts from various Kansas newspapers and a historical atlas, providing insight into frontier justice and the tumultuous early reputation of Newton, Kansas, particularly between 1872 and 1874, with a later retrospective from 1891. The sources collectively paint a vivid picture of a region grappling with lawlessness, summary justice, and the struggle of towns to establish order and a positive image.

Main Themes:

- 1. Brutal and Public Nature of Frontier Justice:** The sources vividly describe executions and mob violence, highlighting the public, often gruesome, nature of justice in this period.
- 2. Newton's Early Reputation for Violence and Vice:** Newton is consistently portrayed as a notoriously rough and lawless town, a reputation it struggled to shed.
- 3. Community Attempts to Control or Justify Lawlessness:** While some lament the violence, others express a pragmatic acceptance or even approval of harsh measures, viewing them as necessary for order.
- 4. Inter-Town Rivalry and Reputation Management:** Competing towns actively exaggerated Newton's problems, while Newton's local newspaper, *The Newton Kansan*, attempted to defend its image and highlight improvements.

Most Important Ideas/Facts & Supporting Quotes:

1. The Raw and Public Spectacle of Executions

The description of a gallows execution in "Justice at the Gallows" (April 3, 1873) emphasizes the visceral and public nature of death penalties on the frontier. The aim was to "shorten the misery – that is, to shorten the life," with the act serving as a public spectacle.

"He who has stood by a gallows tree can alone tell the nature of the moment that follows when, the clergymen gone, the imminence of death seizes one with enthralling awe."

"The crowd is wild with excitement. Necks are craned to catch a glimpse of the sight of shame, a life given for a life taken - Justice has exacted the full penalty for murder."

The detailed medical confirmation of death ("In 30 minutes, it is confirmed that the heart has stopped beating, as confirmed by physicians' reports as they stand taking turns in listening at the breast of the thing of clay") underscores the stark reality and scientific, albeit crude, methods applied to confirm the efficacy of the execution.

2. Mob Justice and Vigilantism as a Frontier Norm

Beyond formal executions, the sources illustrate instances of collective, extra-legal violence against perceived criminals, suggesting a direct, unmediated response to lawlessness.

The case of Tom Collins (October 22, 1874) exemplifies brutal mob justice: "Tom Collins was a desperado who murdered 11 old women, and drank their blood as medicine for his liver complaint. After being hunted for miles and miles, he at length was captured at Lansing, **cut in pieces by the infuriated populace, and then left hanging to a tree.**" The public interest in a "pamphlet on the life of Tom Collins" further highlights the sensational nature of such events.

The "Wholesale Hanging" incident near Caldwell (September 5, 1872) describes vigilante action against horse thieves and their associates: "At the ranch they found seven men, who were recognized as old offenders; these and the women they took a short distance from the ranch to a piece of timber, and **hung the whole gang.**" The *Newton Kansan* then draws a direct comparison, suggesting that "A little determination on the part of the people in this latitude, of a similar character if adopted long ago, **would have saved Newton such condemnation.**" This indicates a belief that such drastic measures were effective and perhaps even necessary to curb crime and improve a town's reputation.

3. Newton's Reputation as a "Rough Town" and "Bloody Epoch"

Newton's early years are consistently characterized by extreme violence, disorder, and criminal activity, leading to widespread notoriety.

"Newton by 1872 had already developed a very strongly expressed reputation for violence and vice."

A contemporary observer in 1872 recalled that "It was soon after the city cemetery was forcibly inaugurated, so to speak, when **thirty-odd men died with their boots on.**" This vivid phrase indicates numerous deaths, likely from violence, rather than natural causes.

This same observer from 1872 noted "A wild, drunken crowd had formed a circle in the street in the midst of which they had corralled another drunken wretch, with whom they were having 'a high old time.' Such howling and hooting, interspersed with an occasional 'bang' from a **promiscuous pistol**, we never heard before or since." This paints a picture of chaotic, public drunkenness and gun violence.

The Kansas Weekly Commonwealth (March 21, 1872) reported, "Twenty men have been buried at Newton, Kansas, since August last, **who died before they took sick,**" again emphasizing violent deaths.

Judge R.W.P. Muse, despite attempts to downplay reports, acknowledged "a bloody epoch" infested by "fakirs, monte men and sneak thieves, who plied their professions by day and night, without let or hindrance. They went around from place to place swindling and robbing the unsuspecting, or inducing them to enter their infamous dens for that purpose." This highlights organized crime and pervasive swindling.

4. Attempts at Reputation Management and the Shifting Narrative

The Newton Kansan, the local newspaper, actively sought to defend Newton against its negative image, often attributing blame to rival towns or emphasizing improvements.

Regarding a reported pocket-picking incident, *The Newton Kansan* (September 19, 1872) complains that the *Emporia News* "takes pleasure in noticing that a man of that city had his pockets picked in Newton recently. It doesn't say whether he was drunk or sober at the time, or with what kind of company... **It is apparently a matter of much relief and satisfaction to that paper as well as some others to make such notices without explanation, and to slander Newton as often and as much as occasion will permit.**" This shows acute awareness of inter-town rivalry in shaping public perception.

A later report (October 31, 1872) signals a turning point: "Business at Newton is improving, and the town is gradually outgrowing the evil reputation of its early days. The morals of the place are improving most decidedly, and in consequence good families are locating in and around the city. – *The Wichita Eagle*. **And nearly all of the hard cases have migrated to Wichita. Fact.**" This self-congratulatory postscript by *The Newton Kansan* not only claims improvement but also attempts to shift the "hard cases" problem onto a rival town.

5. Local Law Enforcement and the Calaboose

While mob justice was prevalent, there was also a formal, albeit harsh, system for dealing with minor infractions like public drunkenness.

"Some fellow having mustered up courage enough to get drunk last Friday, allowed his countenance to shine in upon the 100* in the shade calaboose, and that precinct had music." (August 29, 1872). The "calaboose" (jail) is described as an extremely uncomfortable, hot place, implying that the punishment itself was the harsh conditions, almost "nearly death to suffering humanity."

Conclusion:

These sources provide a compelling snapshot of frontier life in Kansas during the 1870s, where violence was common, justice was often swift and brutal (whether formal or informal), and towns actively competed to define their public image amidst the chaos. Newton, in particular, serves as a case study for a boomtown struggling to transition from a lawless frontier outpost to a more settled community, with its reputation being a constant point of contention and

discussion. The shift towards claiming improved "morals" and the exodus of "hard cases" to other towns indicates a desire for growth and a more respectable future.

Thought-Starters

1. What was the general reputation of Newton, Kansas, in the early 1870s?

Newton, Kansas, in the early 1870s, had a deeply ingrained and widely acknowledged reputation as a violent and vice-ridden frontier town. Contemporary accounts frequently highlight its lawlessness, with one editor even noting the "forcibly inaugurated" city cemetery, where "thirty-odd men died with their boots on" in a short period in 1872. Other reports describe "wild, drunken crowd[s]" engaging in public disturbances with "howling and hooting, interspersed with an occasional 'bang' from a promiscuous pistol." The town was also known to be a haven for "fakirs, monte men and sneak thieves" who swindled and robbed residents and visitors. While some local newspapers, like *The Newton Kansan*, attempted to downplay or dispute these reports, even acknowledging "competing towns reveled in exaggerating Newton's evils," there was "no doubt, however, that Newton had earned its reputation as a rough town on the Kansas frontier."

2. How did local newspapers, particularly *The Newton Kansan*, address the negative perception of Newton?

Local newspapers, specifically *The Newton Kansan*, adopted a defensive and somewhat indignant stance regarding Newton's notorious reputation. They would often publish articles that either directly refuted or sarcastically commented on the negative portrayals coming from other towns. For instance, in response to *The Emporia News* reporting a pickpocketing incident in Newton, *The Newton Kansan* questioned whether the victim was drunk or in bad company, suggesting he "might have received the same kind of treatment in that city." They viewed these reports as "slander[ous]" attempts by rival towns to undermine Newton. Despite the attempts to defend Newton, *The Kansan* did occasionally acknowledge the shift of "hard cases" to other towns as Newton's "morals" improved, indicating an underlying awareness of the problem.

3. What were some specific examples of violent or unruly behavior reported in early Newton?

Early Newton was plagued by various forms of violent and unruly behavior. Reports indicate a significant number of deaths from violence, with "twenty men... buried at Newton... since August last, who died before they took sick." Public drunken brawls were common, described as "wild, drunken crowd[s]" making a "high old time" with "howling and hooting" and "promiscuous pistol" shots. The town also harbored professional criminals, including "fakirs, monte men and sneak thieves," who engaged in swindling and robbery. Beyond individual acts, there's even a suggestion of a more widespread problem in a *Kansan* article about a "Wholesale Hanging" in Caldwell, which implied that "a little determination on the part of the people in this latitude, of a similar character if adopted long ago, would have saved Newton such condemnation."

4. How was justice administered in the frontier towns described in the sources?

Justice in the frontier towns, as depicted in the sources, varied between formal legal executions and more immediate, often brutal, vigilante actions. Formal justice involved public hangings, as detailed in the execution of an unnamed criminal in April 1873. This process was a public spectacle, carried out with a degree of ceremony involving clergymen, physicians, and a large, "wild with excitement" crowd. The condemned endured "misery" before a swift, violent end. However, vigilante justice was also prevalent. Tom Collins, a "desperado" who murdered and drank the blood of 11 women, was "captured at Lansing, cut in pieces by the infuriated populace, and then left hanging to a tree." Similarly, in Caldwell, "a party of men" took justice into their own hands, hanging "the whole gang" of horse thieves and four women who harbored them. This suggests a blend of established legal procedures and a pervasive willingness for citizens to mete out immediate, extra-legal punishment.

5. What was the public's reaction to executions and vigilante justice?

The public's reaction to both formal executions and vigilante justice was characterized by intense interest and excitement. At formal hangings, the crowd was "wild with excitement," craning "necks to catch a glimpse of the sight of shame," seeing it as "Justice exact[ing] the full penalty for murder." This indicates a sense of collective satisfaction and perhaps a macabre fascination with the spectacle of death as a form of retribution. In the case of Tom Collins, after his brutal vigilante killing, people "stopped by to look at the tree where they hung him, and asked the train boys if they had a pamphlet on the life of Tom Collins with further particulars." This suggests a morbid curiosity and a desire for more details about the lives of criminals and the acts of justice (or vengeance) against them.

6. What efforts were made to improve Newton's image and living conditions?

Efforts were made to improve Newton's image and living conditions, although the sources indicate a struggle against the deeply entrenched reputation. Judge Muse and others actively tried to "downplay such reports" of violence and vice, likely through their influence and statements. While not explicitly detailed, the mention of "the morals of the place are improving most decidedly, and in consequence good families are locating in and around the city" suggests that community leaders and respectable citizens were working to establish a more orderly and attractive environment. This improvement was also linked to "nearly all of the hard cases hav[ing] migrated to Wichita," indicating a desire to rid the town of its criminal element. The contrast with "Peace City," a Quaker settlement thirty miles west, further highlights the aspiration for a more peaceful existence in Newton.

7. How did other towns or publications view Newton?

Other towns and publications generally viewed Newton with a mix of disdain, schadenfreude, and sometimes a sense of moral superiority. They "reveled in exaggerating Newton's evils," often publishing reports of crimes or disturbances to highlight Newton's notorious reputation. *The White Cloud Chief* sarcastically noted that the Quaker settlement "Peace City" "ought to be at least that far from Newton," clearly implying Newton's lack of peace. *The Emporia News* took "pleasure in noticing that a man of that city had his pockets picked in Newton." *The Kansas*

Weekly Commonwealth simply stated, without elaboration, the high number of violent deaths in Newton. This suggests that for many, Newton served as an example of frontier lawlessness and a convenient target for negative press.

8. Was Newton successful in shedding its early reputation?

By late 1872, there were signs that Newton was beginning to shed its early, notorious reputation, although the process was ongoing. *The Wichita Eagle*, reprinted in *The Newton Kansan* in October 1872, stated, "Business at Newton is improving, and the town is gradually outgrowing the evil reputation of its early days. The morals of the place are improving most decidedly, and in consequence good families are locating in and around the city." *The Newton Kansan* affirmed this with the addition, "And nearly all of the hard cases have migrated to Wichita. Fact." This indicates a conscious effort and some success in improving the town's character by expelling criminal elements and attracting more respectable residents, suggesting a gradual shift away from its turbulent beginnings.

Law and Disorder on the Kansas Frontier: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. Describe the atmosphere and events surrounding a public execution as detailed in "Justice at the Gallows."
2. What unique and gruesome details are provided about the criminal Tom Collins and his fate?
3. How did Newton's reputation for violence and vice manifest itself in the early 1870s?
4. According to E.H. Hoch's account, what specific events led to the "forcibly inaugurated" city cemetery in Newton in the spring of 1872?
5. Beyond violent encounters, what other types of "lawless characters" were said to infest Newton, and what were their primary activities?
6. How did competing towns and newspapers contribute to or exaggerate Newton's negative reputation? Provide an example.
7. What does the anecdote about the "sweat in the 100* in the shade calaboose" reveal about the conditions of law enforcement or incarceration in Newton?
8. Explain the "Wholesale Hanging" incident in Caldwell. How did *The Newton Kansan* relate this incident to Newton's situation?
9. By late 1872, what was the perceived status of Newton's "evil reputation" and morals, according to *The Wichita Eagle* and *The Newton Kansan*?
10. What does the "Upstairs, Downstairs" anecdote suggest about the nature of disputes or encounters in Newton's public spaces?

Quiz Answer Key

1. A public execution was a moment of enthralling awe, with seconds seeming like minutes to onlookers. The process was expedited to shorten the condemned's misery, involving a black cap, a sudden drop, and initial nervous body motions before stillness. The crowd was "wild with excitement," viewing it as justice for a life taken.
2. Tom Collins was described as a desperado who murdered 11 old women and reportedly drank their blood as medicine for a liver complaint. After being captured, he was brutally "cut in pieces by the infuriated populace, and then left hanging to a tree," becoming a morbid curiosity for passersby.
3. Newton's reputation for violence and vice in the early 1870s was evident in frequent "bangs" from promiscuous pistols, drunken brawls, and a high death toll ("thirty-odd men died with their boots on"). The town was also infested with "fakirs, monte men and sneak thieves" who swindled and robbed.
4. E.H. Hoch states that the city cemetery was "forcibly inaugurated" in the spring of 1872 due to the deaths of "thirty-odd men who died with their boots on." This implies that a significant number of violent deaths occurred, necessitating the establishment or expansion of the cemetery.
5. Beyond violent characters, Newton was also infested with "fakirs, monte men and sneak thieves." These individuals plied their professions by day and night, swindling and robbing the unsuspecting, or inducing them to enter "infamous dens" for dishonest purposes.
6. Competing towns and newspapers actively contributed to Newton's negative reputation by exaggerating its evils. For instance, *The Emporia News* "took pleasure in noticing that a man of that city had his pockets picked in Newton recently," without providing context, which *The Newton Kansan* criticized as slandering Newton.
7. The anecdote about the "sweat in the 100* in the shade calaboose" suggests that the calaboose (jail) in Newton was an extremely harsh and potentially life-threatening place, especially in hot weather. It implies that conditions were so severe they would "deter the devil from ways that are dark," serving as a form of "terrors of the law."
8. The "Wholesale Hanging" in Caldwell involved a group of vigilantes hanging four women (who operated a rendezvous for horse thieves) and seven recognized male offenders near a ranch. *The Newton Kansan* commented that "a little determination" of a similar "character if adopted long ago, would have saved Newton such condemnation," suggesting direct action might have prevented Newton's bad reputation.
9. By October 1872, *The Wichita Eagle* claimed that Newton's business was improving, and the town was "gradually outgrowing the evil reputation of its early days," with morals "improving most decidedly." *The Newton Kansan* added that "nearly all of the hard cases have migrated to Wichita."

10. The "Upstairs, Downstairs" anecdote describes a physical confrontation where two men, to avoid a fight, took an unusual escape route involving passing through a knot hole, descending stairs "a la kangaroo," and running over a drug store. This suggests that disputes could quickly escalate and lead to chaotic, somewhat comical, and public evasions.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the role of contemporary newspaper reporting in shaping and reflecting Newton's reputation during the early 1870s. How did local and competing papers present the town, and what editorial stances are discernible?
2. Compare and contrast the descriptions of official justice (e.g., public execution) with forms of unofficial justice or lawlessness (e.g., lynching, "dying with their boots on," vigilantism) depicted in the provided texts. What do these different forms of "justice" reveal about frontier society?
3. Discuss the various challenges faced by those attempting to establish law, order, and a positive reputation in Newton during its early days. Refer to specific instances of violence, vice, and public disorder.
4. To what extent does the source material support the idea that Newton was a quintessential "rough town" on the Kansas frontier? Provide specific examples of behaviors, incidents, and character types that contribute to this image.
5. Trace the perceived evolution of Newton's reputation from early 1872 to late 1872 as presented in the excerpts. What factors contributed to the initial negative perception, and what evidence is there of a potential shift by the end of the year?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Calaboose:** An old term for a jail or prison. In the context of the text, it implies a harsh and hot confinement.
- **Clay/Thing of Clay:** A metaphorical term for the human body, especially after death, emphasizing its mortal and earthly nature.
- **Desperado:** A bold and reckless criminal, often associated with the American Old West.
- **Died with their boots on:** An idiom indicating that someone died a violent or sudden death, often in a gunfight or brawl, rather than from illness or old age.
- **Fakirs:** In this context, individuals who practice deception or fraud, often for financial gain; con artists.
- **Frontier:** A region marking the boundary between settled and unsettled territory, often characterized by a lack of established law and order and a mix of different populations.
- **Gallows Tree:** A structure, typically a wooden frame, used for hanging criminals.

- **Hard cases:** Individuals who are troublemakers, criminals, or generally difficult and unruly persons.
- **Monte men:** Operators of the card game "Monte," a popular gambling game on the frontier, often associated with cheating and swindling.
- **Promiscuous pistol:** A pistol fired indiscriminately or without specific aim, often indicating a chaotic and uncontrolled environment.
- **Rendezvous:** A pre-arranged meeting place, often used for illicit or secret purposes in the context of the text.
- **Sneak thieves:** Individuals who commit theft by stealth or trickery, without direct confrontation.
- **Tottering clay:** Refers to a person's body that is unsteady or weak, particularly in the face of imminent death.
- **Train boys:** Likely refers to young men or porters working on trains who would interact with passengers, possibly selling newspapers or pamphlets.
- **Writhe/Writing motions:** Twisting or contorted body movements, often in response to pain or a dying struggle.

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