

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Summer 2008

## Review of *Ballots and Bullets: The Bloody County Seat Wars of Kansas* By Robert K. DeArment

Christopher Lovett

Emporia State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Lovett, Christopher, "Review of *Ballots and Bullets: The Bloody County Seat Wars of Kansas* By Robert K. DeArment" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1365.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1365>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Ballots and Bullets: The Bloody County Seat Wars of Kansas.* By Robert K. DeArment. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. xiii + 226 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Kansas's long and distinguished history often has been soaked in the blood of border ruffians, abolitionists, and common criminals. In many respects Kansas is a land of extremes, and a review of the county seat wars in the late nineteenth century dramatizes that point. Robert DeArment, a respected western historian, has examined the violence in western Kansas during the effort to organize the state's western counties in the 1880s. The heart of the matter, according to DeArment, was a problem universally evident during the Gilded Age: uncontrollable greed and the desire to make a financial killing. In Kansas, the speculators were closely linked to the railroads and sought to gain control of a local county seat in order to reap the financial windfall sure to follow. DeArment notes that competing towns in some counties that lost county seat elections actually abided by the will of the majority; however, many others contested the vote and took their cases to the courts. If that failed, competing towns and town organizers turned to hired guns to intimidate voters and settle old scores. Losing the battle for a county seat was a death sentence for a small town.

Although the Kansas county seat wars are remarkably similar to one another, DeArment's achievement is his bringing the key players alive through newspaper accounts and court records. DeArment includes such legendary gunslingers as Bat Masterson and Bill Tilghman, who played roles in the brutality that plagued western Kansas, but his research is more detailed than a rehash of the traditional blood and gore associated with Kansas outlaws. Through his analysis of many of the key players, such as Charles Coulter, a former guerrilla who fought with William Clarke Quantrill and was gunned down in Wichita County, and "Dirty Sam Wood," a leading Kansas politician who managed to fan the flames of violence between Hugoton and Woodsdale, DeArment creates a landmark study. The strength of *Ballots and Bullets* is the author's vivid portrayal of the life-and-death struggle

between communities that sought to survive in the cruel world of the Kansas prairie. Today, no one remembers the towns of Boston, Voorhees, Appomattox, and Woodsdale, which perished as the losing contenders in the county seat wars. If readers seek to comprehend the Darwinian atmosphere of the High Plains in the late nineteenth century, Robert DeArment's *Ballots and Bullets* is the best book available for reviewing this tragic period of the West.

CHRISTOPHER C. LOVETT  
Department of Social Sciences  
Emporia State University