



GREENWOOD CENTER FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE

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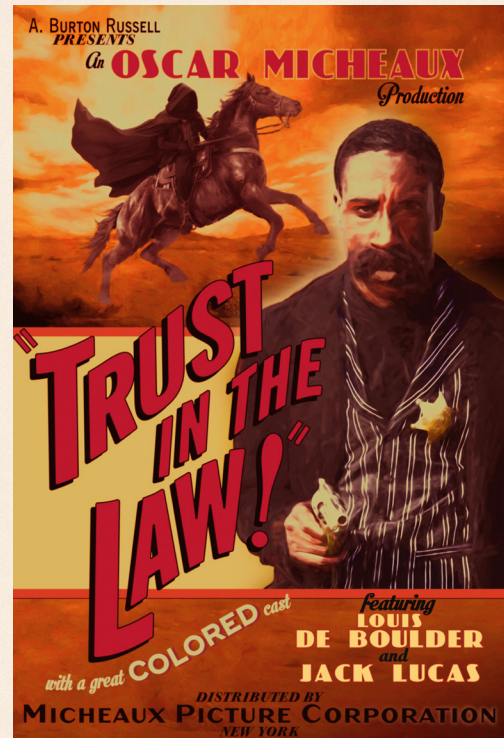
TALES OF THE BLACK MARSHAL

By Marcus Long, Lead Art Curator

A man in white is chased by a man in black across the Oklahoma plain in the opening scene of *Trust In The Law!*, the fifth feature directed by the pioneering Oscar Micheaux. The symbolism suggests a story about good and evil we've seen countless times, a narrative that was already a cliché to the film's first audience in the early days of nickelodeons and movie palaces. The white hat is our hero, the black hat is our villain. Quickly, though, expectations are subverted. The man in white is a corrupt sheriff, and the hooded figure lassoing him off his high horse is someone even more surprising, a black man with a badge.

For the African American filmgoer of 1921, *Trust In The Law!* was their *American Hero Story*, a chronicle of a historical do-gooder that sought to entertain and provoke in equal measure, from a storyteller committed to representing their interests and dreams on screen when no one else would. Once thought lost, this masterpiece of silent cinema returns to us in restored form. The Greenwood Center for Cultural Heritage is proud to open the Greenwood Historic District Film Festival with *Trust In The Law!*, set to a new recording of the original score performed by the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra. The 72-minute movie will screen four times daily in GCCH's Legacy Theater with state-of-the-art, FDTA-approved projection technology made possible by a grant from Trieu Industries. Tickets are free, but seating is limited.

The *Trust In The Law!* exhibition provides an opportunity for Tulsans to learn about a forgotten legend of pre-statehood Oklahoma. Born into slavery in Arkansas in 1838, Bass Reeves escaped his owner, a Confederate colonel, during the chaos of The Civil War and put down roots in the 75,000 square mile expanse of vast and lawless land called Indian Territory. He became a farmer and lived among the Creek people and other tribes, and in the process, Reeves picked up their languages and customs and earned their respect and trust. It was because of his familiarity with the region's diverse population that, in 1875, Reeves was recruited into the marshal service by "Hanging Judge" Isaac C. Parker, becoming the first black deputy west of the Mississippi. Empowered with a 'dead or alive' mandate





and paid by the bounty, Reeves apprehended more than 3000 people over 32 years—murderers, stagecoach robbers, horse thieves, bootleggers, counterfeiters—and killed at least 14 of them in the line of duty. He died in 1910 at age 71 in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Reeves had unique panache—he was noted for his dapper fashion, gentlemanly manner, and sense of humor—and employed novel techniques that are now standard practice in law enforcement. Reeves used a variety of disguises and personas in the execution of his work, from posing as a tramp to wearing hoods and masks as a means of protection and intimidation. He was renowned for having the best marksmanship of any armed lawman of his time, and, according to folk lore, he possessed herculean strength. His morality was informed by Christian convictions: he was known to evangelize with fire-and-brimstone fervor to his captives during their hundred-mile treks to prison at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Because he took on Native American guides as partners and known to people by a sobriquet that sounds like a superhero codename, “The Black Marshal,” some cultural historians have speculated that the adventures of Bass Reeves might have inspired The Lone Ranger, a popular character of Depression-era radio serials and dime novels. How strange that a century later, a land once policed by man who inspired the masked avengers of fiction should now be patrolled by police officers dressed like them.

Reeves couldn’t have had a better mythologizer in the early twenties than Micheaux, a Pullman porter-turned-movie mogul and considered to be the first professional African American filmmaker. There are no records to explain his interest in making *Trust In The Law!* Researchers at GCCH have yet to find any reviews of the film, and it was never given a wide national release. But we do know when and where *Trust In The Law!* had its world premiere: Wednesday, May 25, 1921, at the Williams’ Dreamland Theater in old Greenwood, just one week before the start of Tulsa Massacre that razed the community to the ground.

Over a span of nearly 30 years, Micheaux wrote, directed, and produced 26 silent features and 18 talkies, many financed and distributed through his own company, making him, like Reeves, a proverbial lone ranger in his chosen field. Micheaux quested to create entertainments that offered bracing and aspirational stories for black audiences, with characters that were more admirable and human than the degrading caricatures and stereotypes found in amusements that catered to white audiences. The Bass Reeves of *Trust In The Law!*—played by Louis De Boulder in a charismatic and touching performance—represents an attempt to give his viewers their own cowboy hero like the ones played by Max Aronson, a white superstar of silent cinema. Micheaux also drew upon another influence, this one less familiar to audiences, regardless of color: the first pulp serials, made in France, most notably, *Judex*, a righteous avenger reminiscent of another relic of the thirties pop culture, *The Shadow*, and, of course, *Hooded Justice*, *Nite Owl*, and other real-life figures from the mid-century fad of costumed adventurers.



And so *Trust In The Law!* isn't a conventional biopic. It's a greatest hits collection—a string of six finely-honed vignettes taken from the wealth of Reeves lore and augmented with dramatic license. A seventh tale provides a framing device and imbues the whole of the experience with poignant emotional power: it tells of the time, very late in his career, when Reeves was tasked with hunting and arresting one of his many children, his son Benjamin, who was wanted for murdering his wife. Micheaux also chose tales that made for the most visceral cinema. There's a clear aversion to proscenium-style aesthetics; whenever Micheaux can liberate his camera and move freely with his characters, he does, whether it's tracking a galloping horse chase or dancing with Reeves as he battles three horse thieves in close quarters in a well-choreographed, single-shot fight scene.

Like Micheaux's earlier film *Within Our Gates*, a melodrama about race in Jim Crow America from a black perspective, *Trust In The Law!* represents a retort to *Birth of a Nation*, a vile glorification of white supremacy that depicted the Ku Klux Klan as American heroes and black Americans as subhuman degenerates. Consider again the opening sequence, with Reeves—caped, hooded, black—chasing after a man clad in Klansman white. The scene continues in a way that takes direct aim at Griffith's toxic opus at time when his film was inspiring people to join the KKK and commit acts of racist violence. A congregation of white churchgoers witnesses the black-on-white altercation between Reeves and the sheriff. They initially respond with expected shock, but then a freckled-face white boy recognizes The Black Marshal of Oklahoma—and idolizes him. The townsfolk are equally star-struck, so much so that when they exhort Reeves to hang the dirty sheriff on the spot, he is the one who must gently chastise their thirst for “mob justice.”

Trust In The Law! must have been a complicated experience for black moviegoers suffering increased persecution and torn between untenable choices: turn the other cheek and do nothing in the face of white oppression or fight back and risk destruction. The fact that this was the film playing at the Dreamland as Tulsa burned in 1921 illustrated the sharp divide between fiction and reality. The title might have struck some as an ironic joke. How could they trust in the law when it was continually used to deny them the most fundamental of human rights? Yet it's hard to imagine them not being moved by Micheaux's Bass Reeves, a wish-fulfillment ideal of the way things ought to be, where there's liberty, justice and opportunity for all, where respect exists for people of all colors and creeds. For them, The Black Marshal of the silver screen wasn't representative of the law.

He was the redemption of it.