

Good, Old-Fashioned Storytelling

Retired lawyer Bill Neal enjoys telling real stories about real people, especially the colorful characters of the Texas frontier. And he's compiled those stories into a series of books on the law — or the lack thereof — and lawbreakers in the Old West. His most recent book, *From Guns to Gavels: How Justice Grew Up in the Outlaw West*, traces the evolution of the legal system in West Texas through the tales of dueling lawmen, the lynching of bank robbers, and sensational murder trials.

Neal, who lives in Abilene with his wife, Gayla, retired in 2003 after 40 years of practicing criminal law both as a prosecutor and defense attorney. During his many years of traveling to courthouses all over West Texas for his practice, Neal would find himself talking with locals during breaks and hearing their tales of frontier justice — about those who meted it out and those who received it. Upon his retirement, he revisited those stories and decided to write about them.

"I thought, 'Some of those tales are just too good to consign to the dustbin of time,'" said Neal.

He began researching the stories, focusing on the ones that hadn't been written up

or that were not as widely told outside the area.

"It was like being a detective on *really* cold case files," laughed Neal. "I had a lot of fun rummaging around old courthouse records and trying to solve these old mysteries."

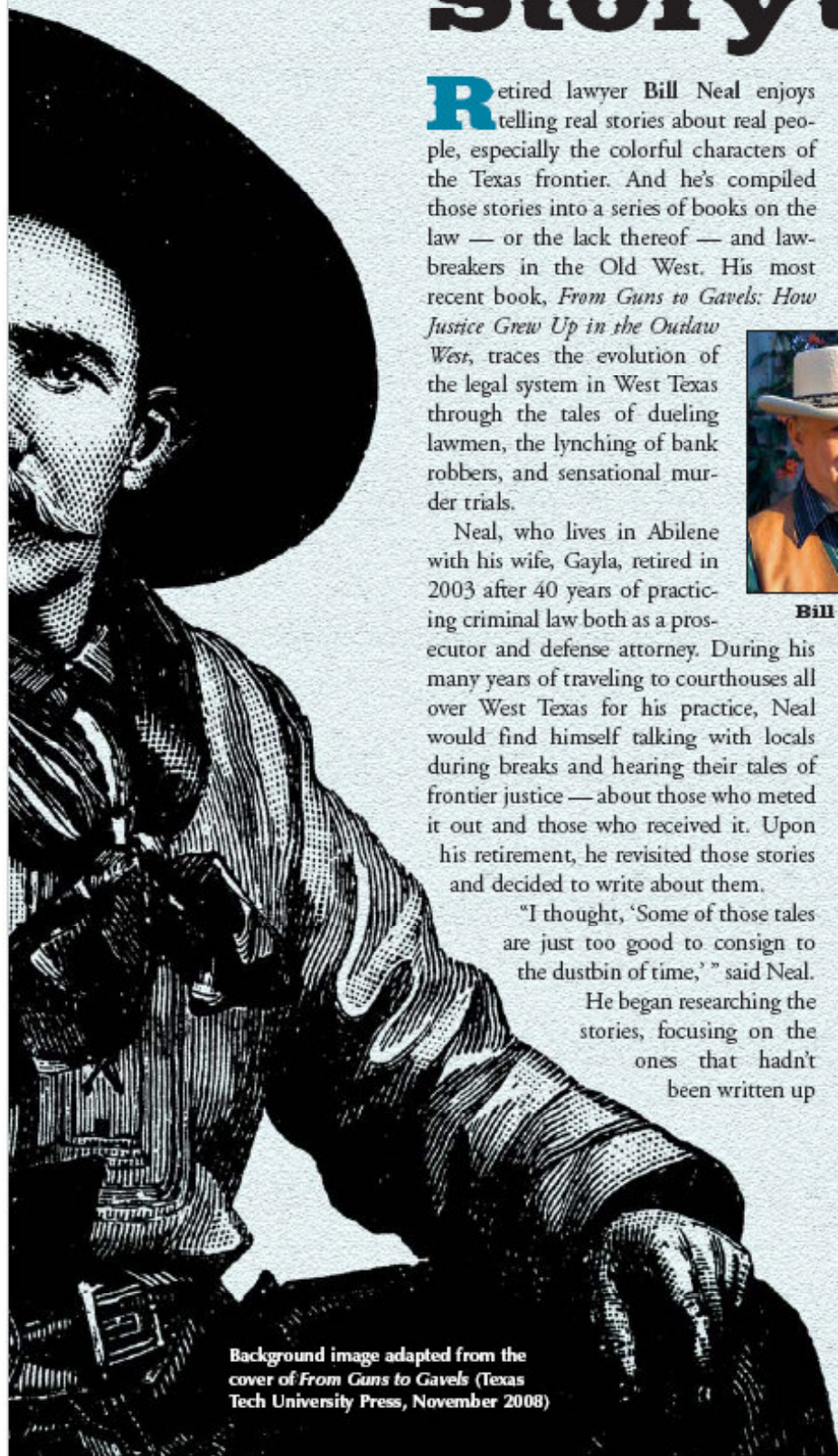
As he fleshed out the various stories, he realized he had too many for just one book. He had met Wyman Meinzer, the official photographer of the State of Texas, who said he had done a book for Texas Tech University Press and took some of Neal's stories to show the press' editors. They obviously liked what they read because, in the fall of 2006, the press published Neal's first book, *Getting Away With Murder on the Texas Frontier: Notorious Killings and Celebrated Trials*. *From Guns to Gavels* came out in 2008, and both books have received critical acclaim and accolades, including being back-to-back winners of the West Texas Historical Association's Rupert N. Richardson Award for the best non-fiction book on West Texas history. In addition, both books were selected as course books by Professor Gordon Morris Bakken, who teaches American western history at California State University, Fullerton.

Neal has finished the third book in his trilogy of Texas frontier law stories. Titled *Sex, Murder, and the Unwritten Law: Courting Judicial Mayhem, Texas Style*, the book, which focuses on early-day Texas murder trials, will be published this fall by Texas Tech University Press. It will be the cornerstone of a new series from the press, the American Liberty and Justice Series.

And Neal is already at work on a fourth book. "I've tried to combine good storytelling with being a good historian," he said. ☺



Bill Neal



Background image adapted from the cover of *From Guns to Gavels* (Texas Tech University Press, November 2008)