

Legendary Lampião

Lampião was born June 7, 1897 on a small farm in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil. Lampião worked herding his father's few animals. As he got older, he became a skilled vaqueiro or cowboy and knew how to work and craft leather. He later became a popular outlaw or cangaceiro of the early 20th century.

The sertão, or backlands of Brazil were not a place of "law and order;" the rich, corrupt landowners prospered on the backs of the landless poor. The few police that were in this vast countryside protected the rich. Most of the poor preferred the bandits to the mistreatment of the police.

One story of Lampião's band is their descent on the small town of Queimadas in Bahia, December 1929. His band entered the town, and immediately shut down the telegraph office to stop news from spreading. All seven of the town's policemen and their sergeant were shut in the jail, while Lampião's band set free everyone who had been in jail. They took money from the town's wealthiest citizens. The bandits, however, paid for items like soap, food, and perfume, taken from the town's shops. During the evening Lampião organized a dance for the townspeople and his cangaceiros. He also ordered a cinema show to be presented. The bandits were under strict orders from Lampião to treat the townspeople with respect, which they did. The bandits left the town at 4:00 in the morning; Lampião rode away on a borrowed mule, which he later returned to its owner.

Traveling on horseback or by foot, his heavily armed band roamed the sertão engaging in criminal activity for 16 years. They are the subjects of many folk stories, comic books, songs, movies and popular pamphlets called literatura de cordel, small books of poetry that hang clipped for sale in the markets and fairs today.

Was Lampião a bandit or hero? What do you think?

