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Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography, Three Volume Set on CD-ROM. University of Nebraska Press.

The Encyclopedia of Western Lawmen and Outlaws on CD-ROM. ZCI Publishing.

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Having examined more than fifty CD-ROMs in the past year, I had nearly despaired of the marketplace ever yielding anything of interest or value to the historian. My despair is not unique. According to a recent survey, consumers return one-third of CD-ROMs simply because they won't run properly. Glorified arcade games and "shovelware"–vast, unfocused, miscellaneous collections of the inconsequential–still dominate the CD-ROM genre. Things finally seem to be improving. <p> Western historians long have depended upon Dan L. Thrapp's four-volume <cite>Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography</cite> (hereafter EFB) for basic biographical information. Adapting with the times, the University of Nebraska Press has issued this immensely useful resource in CD-ROM format. The quick, elegantly clear search interface means that one need not be a computing guru to use this reference. <p> The beauty of CD-ROM technology is that it offers multiple research avenues into a data set. With the EFB CD-ROM, you can conduct keyword searches using Boolean operators. Such searches locate your term(s) anywhere in the text of 5,700 entries. A name index provides another quick search strategy. Can't remember whether it's Doc Holladay or Holliday? Ben Holladay or Ben Holliday? Just type in Holl and you get a screenful of alphabetical entries. You can quickly scroll to the appropriate spelling (Doc Holladay and Ben Holliday). <p> The encyclopedia also offers a set of twenty-two special topical lists on women, Native Americans, outlaws, cowboys, etc. The disc includes portraits of 270 figures but does not include sound or video. <p> Michael Jensen and Annie Shahan designed the clear, usable screens utilizing the HyperTies interface from Cognetics Corp. A novice tutorial mode leads the new user through the procedures. An expert mode permits quick, efficient searching. You may navigate about using a mouse or by pressing the TAB and arrow keys. Online help is clear but concise. My only quibble is that important function key assignments do not appear onscreen after one accesses an entry. You must remember the function key assignments or call up a help screen. This is a minor point, because after a few times using the EFB, you remember that F1 is help, F2 brings up the search screen, F3 exports the entry to a disk file, F6 provides a search history in case you wish to backtrack, and F7 sends the entry to your printer. <p> For the technically minded, here are a few specifics on the program. The disc totals about 38 megabytes of data, in 381 PCX files. Full installation requires about 2.7 megabytes of hard disk storage. The disc is DOS-based and requires 580K of available RAM. You can also create an icon and access the encyclopedia from Windows. The small twenty-three-page manual explains all necessary program operations. <p> Some users might run into a technical problem. All 381 files reside in a single directory on the CD-ROM. Earlier versions of DOS may not accommodate such a large number of files in a single subdirectory. In future versions, the many files should be relocated to several appropriate subdirectories. <p> For preparing classroom or public lectures and for basic biographical information on westerners, this CD-ROM is well worth the price. You will save time, and you will find nuggets and tidbits that you would never uncover browsing a printed volume. The University of Nebraska should be commended for this innovative publishing effort. Let's hope that other basic reference historical works migrate to the new medium. <p> <cite>The Encyclopedia of Western Lawmen & Outlaws</cite> <p> Can computer technology breathe new life into the Old West? I think so. In this encyclopedia, for the price of one regular book, you can get 4,000 pages (each page is a computer screen) with six hundred profiles, eight hundred photographs, a glossary and a one hundred question exam about western bad men, women, and lawmen on a single CD-ROM. If that's not enough, this book even reads itself to you! <p> This fascinating collection provides excellent reference material for aficionados of old-time crooks, marshals, and more. When you "open the book" a voice reads an "overture," a brief, general introduction to the topic of western outlaws and

crime. <p> The author and narrator of this electronic book is Jay Robert Nash, the prolific author of many books on crime and criminals. The text and photos come from his <cite>Encyclopedia of World Crime</cite> (CrimeBooks, Inc., 1990, 1992). Nash has a tendency to state as certainty things that remains conjectural. Other than that, the text is factual, complete, and very useful, as is the extensive bibliography. I checked dozens of picky historical points, and this encyclopedia rarely let me down. <p> The real power of a computerized book, however, is extensive search capability. You can enter a keyword and in seconds have a list of all articles where your term appears. Hypertext links let you jump in midstream to any word or phrase highlighted in the article you are reading. You can jump about hypertext fashion by clicking on blue text. Terms highlighted in green are defined in a terse glossary. You can print out material or save it to a disk file. You can even test your history knowledge against a computer bank of exam questions. <p> If you don't have a specific topic in mind, you can browse through the articles, just as you might a regular book. If you decide you need to back up to something you read before, the program saves your last ten references. <p> PowerCD, the "engine" that drives this program, requires no hard disk space. Compared with other search engines, however, this one is on the slow side. It takes several seconds to move from one file to another or from one mode to another. By comparison, the Thrapp encyclopedia from Nebraska is lightning quick. Part of the slowness is attributable to the inherently clunky nature of CD-ROMS. The medium simply isn't as quick to respond as a hard drive. On the plus side, the program requires no hard disk installation space. If you tire of dragging a mouse around, you can speed things up by using special "speed key" single letter commands. <p> A second shortcoming is the failure to exploit fully the computer's multimedia capabilities. The encyclopedia does include many scanned still photographs. On the minus side, it includes no video, animation, or maps. The text discusses how outlaws have been portrayed in movies. Wouldn't it be great to be able to view a few classic film clips? Of course, such enhancements would add significantly to the disc's price and complexity. <p> Despite these problems, ZCI Publications has produced an accurate, useful, entertaining, intelligent "talking computer book." The same publisher has similar volumes dealing with related topics in the history of crime and law enforcement, art, and music. <p>

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