

# James Butler Hickok

## "Wild Bill"



Born in rural Illinois, JAMES BUTLER "Wild Bill" HICKOK developed extraordinary shooting skills in an otherwise unremarkable childhood. He left home when he was 18 and travelled west, working irregularly as a farmhand, hired gun and then as a driver for the Overland Stage Line. Hickok cast a striking figure, with his satin lapels, tailored suits, and golden past-shoulder-length hair that he kept in ringlets with oil. At the Rock Creek Station in Nebraska Territory he and James "Dock" Brink, another driver for the Overland, had a bloody shoot-out with the McCandless gang, in which five of them were killed. There was no better marksman on the frontier than Wild Bill.

During the Civil War he worked as a renowned Army scout. And he was among the deadliest of gunmen in the West: he'd boasted of killing over 100 men. One story has "Buffalo Bill" Cody challenging him to shoot his hat in mid-air more than once: Hickok shot a row of evenly-spaced holes in the brim. Hickok was also a notorious gambler and drinker, and spent much of his time in the red-light districts of the towns he was ostensibly protecting.

After the war, he served as marshall in several rough frontier towns, and as a cavalryman in the "Indian Wars." Over the years, his gunfighting and gambling prowess became the stuff of "wild west" lore, exaggerated, embellished and celebrated in contemporary pulp fiction. Among his legendary exploits, he reportedly killed a bear in hand-to-hand combat armed with only a bowie knife. His romance with Martha Jane Burke, aka "Calamity Jane," similarly provided material for dime novelists.

Hickok soon parlayed his status as pop culture icon into a new career. He starred as "Wild Bill" in the play Scouts of the Prairies, and toured with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show in 1872-73. Eventually he returned to the frontier and resumed gambling. On Aug. 2, 1876, Wild Bill was shot from behind and killed while playing poker in Saloon #10 in Deadwood, Dakota Territory. Legend has it that he died with a poker hand consisting of a pair of aces and a pair of eights -- known thereafter as the "dead man's hand." "The old duffer -- he broke me on the hand" were the last words Hickok spoke in reference to fellow gambler Captain Massie.



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