



Old West tales liven up small town histories

The days of the old West are long gone, but not forgotten, in the small towns of Nebraska. Gunfighters, outlaws and lawmen once vied for supremacy in the wild Nebraska territory, and several of them went on to become Old West legends.

James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickock

On August 2, 1876, a young gunfighter named Jack McCall entered the No. 10 Saloon in Deadwood, S.D. He sauntered up to the bar, said hello to the bartender, and walked over to a table where four men were playing poker. McCall pulled his pistol and shot James Butler Hickock in the back of the head, killing him instantly.

So ended the 39-year life of one of the West's most famed gunfighters. "Wild Bill" Hickock never got a chance to draw his poker hand; a pair of aces, a pair of eights and a queen kicker. That poker hand would be known from then on as the "dead man's hand."

Hickock was credited with killing more than 80 men. Hickock was a colorful figure — a peace officer, gambler, Indian fighter. He wore silk-lined capes, shoulder-length hair and a stallion-tailed mustache in his later years.

Back in 1861, Hickock was just a young stock tender at the Rock Creek station, an important Oregon Trail and Pony Express stopover near the present-day city of Fairbury.

The Rock Creek station consisted of two ranch houses, one on either side of Rock Creek. A stagecoach operated the station, and recently had bought the buildings on the east side from David C. McCandles. McCandles was unhappy because the stage company wasn't making payments as quickly as he wished. A burly man with a hot temper, McCandles threatened the company's agent, Horace Wellman, several times and repeatedly bullied young Hickock.

On a hot day in July, McCandles and some of his men stood on Wellman's doorstep. Wellman and his wife, Hickock, and stable hand "Doc" Brink were inside the house. McCandles yelled for Hickock and Wellman to come out and fight. When they failed to answer his challenge, he stepped through the front door.

Hickock, hiding behind a curtain, fired a rifle bullet through McCandles' heart. The big man fell, dead. Thinking McCandles had killed someone, his men rushed inside the cabin. Hickock shot and wounded three, and only a 12-year-old boy escaped. The wounded men tried to run away, but Hickock and his companions killed and quickly buried them.

Three days later, Hickock, Wellman and Brink were arrested and taken to Beatrice — where a judge acquitted them. The only eyewitness on the opposing side, the boy, was not allowed to testify because of his age.

Some say Hickock got his "Wild Bill" nickname from the Rock Creek incident.

The old Rock Creek station site, six miles east of Fairbury, is now a state historical park. Partially sponsored by Burlington Northern railroad, a large visitor center commemorates the station and the shooting incident.

The Rock Creek incident is known to many Fairbury residents, but the town shows no evidence of the Hickock legend. Cheryl Seachord, executive secretary of Fairbury's Chamber of Commerce, said the town sponsored a pageant depicting the shooting a few years ago. Some people in Fairbury talked about "playing up" the Hickock affair. But a few of McCandles' descendants still live in the area, and they weren't too crazy about the idea, Seachord said.

McCandles' great-great-grandson, Bruce McCandles, Jr., is a space shuttle astronaut. McCandles was present at the dedication of the visitor center.

James M. Riley, alias Doc Middleton

On Jan. 13, 1877, a young freight worker killed a U.S. soldier in a saloon in Sidney, a small town in western Nebraska. The young man, "Doc Middleton," fled Sidney in the confusion following the shooting. Middleton would become one of Nebraska's most colorful outlaws.

Middleton's real name was James M. Riley. He came to Nebraska to seek his fortune after spending several years as a cattle driver and horse-stealer in his native Texas. Constantly in trouble in Texas, Middleton didn't take long to find himself in trouble again in Nebraska. The soldier he shot had been jealous because a girl in the saloon had shown Middleton a little attention. The soldier and his comrades were giving Middleton a beating when Middleton shot the young private.

Middleton dashed out of town and grabbed a stage at the next stop north. Middleton roamed northern Nebraska for many years. One of the most famous horse-thieves in history, the crafty outlaw pilfered many an Indian pony during his career. Middleton was so famous that part of the state was known as "Doc Middleton Country." The region generally consisted of five present-day counties: Boyd, Brown, Holt, Keya Paha and Rock.

Middleton and his gang were successful businessmen, stealing from the Sioux. Middleton sold the stolen horses only to people traveling east, away from the Sioux, who would be sure to spot their property and trace it to the outlaw.

Troubles with the law were few, since the northwestern third of the state was largely unsettled in the late 1870s. But eventually, the law caught up with Middleton. Tricked by lawman W.H.H. Llewellyn, Middleton rode into an ambush in July, 1879 on the Niobrara River north of Atkinson. Two gunmen succeeded in wounding Middleton, but he managed to get away. Llewellyn and his men captured the ailing horse thief a few days later. Middleton received a five-year sentence in the Nebraska State Penitentiary. He served three and a half years before he was paroled.

Middleton gave up horse stealing. But he was always watching for an opportunity to make an easy buck. He ran a saloon in Gordon for several years in the late 1880s. He lived in Gordon with his wife Rene, and the couple had several children. Middleton kept busy by gambling, sel-

ling whiskey to the Indians, and getting into an occasional scrape. He even served as a deputy sheriff in Gordon for a few years.

Middleton moved to Chadron in 1892, and usually stayed out of trouble. In 1893, he entered the Chadron to Chicago 1,000-mile horse race, which received national publicity. The race started from Chadron's Blaine Hotel on June 13, with nine riders entered.

Each rider had two horses for the trip. Riders would have to average 60 miles a day. A group of backers from Chadron put up \$1,000 in prize money. "Buffalo Bill" William Cody offered an additional \$500 — providing the race ended at his Wild West Show, which was playing at the Chicago World's Fair.

The riders were met by large crowds at each checkpoint on their trip, through northern Nebraska into Iowa and finally to Illinois. The 43-year-old Middleton was favored, but dropped out of the race in Iowa because his horses were unable to finish. But he took the train to Chicago and was received royally by Cody.

Doc Middleton and his fellow contestants in the Chadron-to-Chicago race will be remembered in 1985. As part of the Chadron Centennial, members of the Chadron Saddle Club plan to re-enact the famous ride. Byron "Rip" Radcliffe, one of the race organizers, said the re-enactment won't be as grueling as the original race.

"We'll travel to Chicago in a caravan," Radcliffe said. "The horses will be in trailers and we'll have campers and mobile radio units."

The "ham" radios will be used to relay up-to-the-minute reports to the Chadron radio station and amateur radio buffs, Radcliffe said.

The caravan will stop at every one of the original race checkpoints on the way back from Chicago, Radcliffe said. The riders will probably unload their horses a few miles from each town and ride in.

Sam Bass

On the night of Sept. 18, 1877, railroad agent George Barnhardt was reading, by himself, in the lonely Big Springs station of the Union Pacific Railroad. The central Nebraska watering stop was usually quiet. When Barnhardt heard the door open, he thought nothing of it. He assumed one of the section hands had come in to watch the train, which was expected within minutes.

Barnhardt heard a step right next to him, so he looked up. Six masked men were standing there, and each had a pistol pointed at his head. They made their intentions plain. They had come to rob No. 4, the Union Pacific express.

After dismantling the telegraph instruments, the men forced Barnhardt to hang out a red signal, indicating to the train engineer that mail needed to be picked up.

When the train rolled to a stop, the robbers sprang into action. Soon the engineer, fireman and conductor had been rounded up under gunpoint. The bandits collected \$60,000 in gold coins, \$1,300 in cash and four gold watches. They doused the locomotive's fire and rode off.

Search parties were organized within hours.

The railroad offered \$10,000 reward the next day for the capture of the robbers and return of the money.

Posses scoured the countryside. No one suspected an innocent-looking group of cowboys camped near Ogallala on the South Platte River. But those "cowboys" were the train robbers.

One was Sam Bass, who at 25 had just robbed his first train. He would rob many more before his short life ended.

Bass was joined by four outlaws, including Jim Berry, a tough character from Missouri. The men had camped on the river for several days before the shooting and were now relaxing as if nothing had happened. Berry had even ridden into Ogallala and volunteered to join one of the posses.

The robbers probably would have gotten away with the Big Springs robbery if not for the Sherlock-Holmesian skills of M.F. Leech, an Ogallala storekeeper. When Leech inspected the robbery site thoroughly, he spied a small piece of red cloth. He recognized it. He had sold six handkerchiefs that matched its pattern just a few days before — to Jim Berry, whom he knew well.

Meech raced back to Ogallala. He went to the campsite, but the robbers were gone. But Leech found what he was looking for — another piece of handkerchief. He held the pieces up to each other. They matched.

Meech tracked the outlaws for several days before he finally caught up to them. One night, he got close enough to their camp to hear what they were saying. They were splitting up the booty and planning to leave the state. Berry said he was going to ride east to Missouri.

Leech followed Berry and notified authorities about the robbers.

Only Sam Bass and one other escaped. Berry was shot near his home in Missouri.

The train robbery at Big Springs is the small community's biggest claim to Old West fame. A state historical marker stands near the railroad, facing U.S. Highway 138. The town's marker commemorates a lone tree under which the outlaws are said to have split up the gold.

"Old timers say there was a big tree, the only one at Big Springs, down the river," said Joe Van Cura, president of the Big Springs Historical Society. "They split the loot up there."

The original tree had long since died when the marker was built around another big tree in Big Springs, Van Cura said. That tree also died, so Van Cura restored the marker, which tells of the exploits of Bass and his companions on that night 107 years ago.

Bass, Middleton and Hickock were three of Nebraska's most colorful Old West adventurers, but there have been many more. Bat Masterson, the famous lawman, gunfighter and gambler, once rescued a friend from a possible lynching in Ogallala.

And Jesse James, perhaps the most famed of western outlaws, is said to have robbed a bank in Humboldt, wounded at Peru and bought a farm in Franklin. Some say James hid gold in the northeastern Nebraska hills known as the Devil's Nest.

—Jim Rasmussen