

The real jesse james history essay



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Rough and tumble, the outlaw Jesse James has become a glamorized figure of American history. Jesse James is a controversial figure, with some believing history wrongly romanticizes a ruthless criminal who burglarized, murdered, and terrorized innocent citizens. The life of Jesse James is not one of cowboy fantasy, like the life communities such as present day Saint Joseph, Missouri promote, but one of a monster on a hateful mission of revenge. However, to Jesse's credit, he was born into a perfect storm for such an abnormal life.

James was born to great parents on a farm near present day Kearney, Missouri. His father was a Baptist Pastor and farmer. James' life seemed to be heading in the right direction, with loving parents and a solid foundation on the farm; nothing seemed a problem, until tragedy struck. Being a Pastor, Jesse's father felt a calling from God that he needed to head to California to spread God's word to the gold miners. Jesse's father, however, never returned home, having died while in California. Traumatized was the three-year-old Jesse James, who lived in a close knit farm family. His whole life had been turned upside down, but this would be the story of Jesse's life. Jesse James' mother brought her children into two other marriages, it being necessary for a farm wife in those days to have a husband.

Clay County Missouri in the 1850's had tremendous ties to the South. In fact, over seventy percent of the counties residents had migrated north from southern states, bringing their southern culture and, of course, slaves. Civil unrest was building in the nation between two major cultures. The progressive, northern culture was becoming upset with the conservative, southern culture on humanitarian issues over slavery. Even so, Missouri was

a border state, a state with about half rebel support and half union support, but Clay County was overwhelmingly Rebel. The fact was that Clay County was in a region of Missouri called “ Little Dixie,” which was as southern in heritage as the deepest parts of Georgia. For the young Jesse James, whose life up to the point before the Civil War, had been one of tremendous instability, a conflict on such a scale as the Civil War would obliterate any foundation he had. Some people argue that Jesse’s life was already laid out for him, that he had little power of what he became.

With the Civil war raging in every corner of the nation, a sixteen year old Jesse James joined a Confederate posse that fought on horseback under the command of “ Bloody” Bill Anderson. The men of the posse road all over the Midwest and South to fight a gorilla/raider style warfare against the Union Armies. Jesse’s posse was made up of cutthroat criminals, who robbed and murdered families all over the countryside. Their influence rubbed off on Jesse, who was very impressionable, being in his mid teens. Every criminal has a determining factor in what makes them so different in their personality makeup. Many believe that Jesse’s major setback was the lack of a father, which left Jesse vulnerable to manipulation by the older men. Jesse James seen his comrades as brothers, and some, such as Bloody Bill (not only his leader but a much older man), as father figures, whom Jesse attracted towards. Whatever they commanded, Jesse would do, trying to impress the rest of the posse. However, being so bold cost Jesse James near the end of the war, when he found himself outnumbered by Union forces. Attempting to surrender, Jesse was shot in the chest by a Yankee officer, nearly killing him.

What would history have been like if Jesse had indeed died from his wounds?

The answer is that a lot of heart ache and sorrow would have been spared, and this nation would have never had to deal with a true outlaw such as Jesse James. After the war, Jesse was growing anxious while healing from his wounds. Jesse wanted to round up his old posse and get revenge on people he thought had harmed his posse or the rebel cause. In fact, most of the bank robberies and murders that Jesse and his gang committed were not primarily for money, but for revenge. Jesse James's former commander "Bloody" Bill Anderson had been killed by a man that the gang thought was a cashier in Daviess County Missouri, near the city of Gallatin. Jesse's posse rode up to the bank in Daviess County (not more than eighty miles from where Jesse grew up), robbed the bank, and killed the cashier. The robbery netted little money for the gang, which further drives home the theory of revenge. The bank robbery/murder was the most famous in Daviess County history, partly because the man that was murdered was mistaken for the culprit who killed Bloody Bill, which in reality, the victim was innocent. After this, Jesse repeatedly robbed banks all over the Midwest and South, killing anyone who got in his way. One such bank that Jesse James had tremendous trouble with was a small bank in Northfield, Minnesota. The primary reason that Jesse wanted to rob this particular bank was because he believed it was linked to a very influential Republican (Republicans were anti-slavery, Jesse, needless to say, was a pro-slavery Democrat). However, this turned out not to be the case. While attempting to break into the well guarded bank, two members of the gang were killed as nearly the whole town opened fire upon the posse. Jesse and the rest of the group escaped without any money. After the Northfield attempt, Jesse went underground for a while trying to hide his

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identity, before trying to reorganize a new gang. The new gang did not last very long, mostly because Jesse James became very paranoid that one of his gang members would kill him in response to the large reward that the railroads had put out for him.

Deciding to end the gangster lifestyle, at least for the time being, Jesse James decided to move to St. Joseph, Missouri, where he rented a house with his wife and two young children. St. Joseph was a perfect place for Jesse because it was near his family farm in Kearney, Missouri, and he had two friends there which he trusted his life with. They were two brothers by the name of Robert and Charley Ford, which acted as body guards to Jesse, and often spent the night with his family. Unknown to Jesse however, Robert Ford was working with the Missouri Governor to bring Jesse in dead or alive. One day, while in the James' household, Jesse was having a conversation with Robert Ford. Robert had been looking for the perfect opportunity to take down James, as he wanted the large reward from the railroad companies. As Jesse was dusting a picture, Robert took aim with his revolver, shooting Jesse James in the back of the head.

How could a ruthless bandit become a national hero of sorts? People remember him as modest and effective bandit. Using words such as bandit almost romanticizes the fact that Jesse James was, in reality, a horrible man. A man who killed, robbed, and hurt innocent people. People that were hard working individuals who never deserved to have their lives uprooted by a man who believed he was above the law. St. Joseph, Missouri is a city that is proud to be the death place of such a ruthless criminal. Most cities in the world are not proud of murdering thieves but try to put them out of memory.

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, St. Joseph, however, promotes the fact that Jesse James was here, in a way that glorifies him as an American hero of the past. If one were to ask people across the nation about St. Joseph, Missouri, the first image that would pop into most people's minds is the Outlaw Jesse James in all his glory. However, I believe it is a disgrace to the memory of those harmed by Jesse James to glorify such a horrible person. If Jesse James committed these acts of violence and crime today, no one would look at him as some kind of hero, but rather as a terrorist. Idolizing Jesse James is comparable to idolizing someone of the likes of Osama Bin Laden. Both use terror and violence in the name of a cause in which they believe worthy even though it goes against society's laws. Making movies, having festivals, and promoting the fact that your city had a famous outlaw in its past is all wrong in my opinion, but no one can deny Jesse James was famous figure. After his death, people looked at Jesse James as America's Robin Hood, standing up for the little person against big business. My hope is that people can remember Jesse James as a part of history, but also come to realize that he was not all sunshine and daisies. But rather that he was a cutthroat criminal who was in life for himself and not for a cause as he would like to say.