

**THE PLAINSMAN,
WILD BILL HICKOK**

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The Plainsman, Wild Bill Hickok by Frank J. Wilstach

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BY
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*The life story of the deadliest and toughest frontier
sheriff the West ever knew*



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TO
JOHN WILSTACH

FOREWORD

IT HAS not been the purpose of the writer to novelize Wild Bill Hickok. That has already been done, and rather effectively. So picturesque was the man, and so astounding his exploits, that it is little wonder he should have fallen into the hands of the fictioneers, who straightway made of him something of a Homeric figure. It has been my constant purpose to find out what was real, and what imaginary, in the tales about him that have been current for upward of sixty years.

Wild Bill was a fascinating personality to all who knew him. The mere mention of his name never failed to bring a crash of brasses from the orchestra. His friends never ceased to chant his praises as an honest man, an incredibly accurate pistol shot, and an individual who was without fear in the presence of danger. This is

a good deal to say of any man, but it must be admitted that these encomiums have a solid basis of fact.

Wild Bill was no common gun-toter. He was not a bad-man, as the West defined the term in the '60's and '70's. That fact should be steadily borne in mind. It may be stated also that despite the implication of his pseudonym Bill never indulged in profane language—although he had a fine voice for it. In the opinion of the great marshals, peace officers, and fighting men of the West—men such as Bat Masterson, Bill Tilghman, and Buffalo Bill Cody, themselves renowned—Wild Bill was the greatest gun fighter and the most famous peace officer of the frontier.

When Sir Robert Walpole said all history is a lie he must have had prescience of certain pioneers who have published recollections of Wild Bill. If Hickok had known intimately all the illuminati of the last frontier who have written intimately of him, he must have had a very varied acquaintanceship. Curiously, writers

now so young they must have been in their swaddling clothes while Bill lived, have reported astounding interviews they had with him—interviews which must have taken place at the cradle side.

A number of border scribes have claimed to have known him at Dodge City—even to have seen him blot out several “six-shooter sharps” in that hamlet. Now, it is more than likely that he was never in Dodge City at all. He visited the locality as a scout when the only inhabitants were prairie dogs and coyotes, but the town of Dodge was founded only three years before Bill was assassinated, and his goings and comings during this period are accurately accounted for.

Recently, a pioneer furnished the writer with a minute account of how Bill, at crime-wrung Deadwood, sent four desperadoes to their homes on high with two shots each from his brace of pistols—and three of the men named as victims actually served as pallbearers at his funeral! I have sought to expose such legends as these in their proper places. However, all such flights of

fancy emphasize a fact not to be overlooked: if a bad man was looking for trouble at all times Bill was (as Henry James said of that voluptuous little ink-lady George Sand) remarkably accessible.

How many men did Wild Bill kill? Aside from Indians, the estimated number has ranged all the way from fifteen to seventy-five. This does not include the soldiers he slew as a sharpshooter during the Civil War.

The writer would not care to be pinned down to a definite figure. The reason is that, after the computation has passed, say, a dozen, you come upon perturbing doubts and insistent questionings. Buffalo Bill used to count off thirty-five killings on his fingers; but it should be remembered that he never learned the truth as to the "McCanles gang massacre," when three men were killed instead of the ten he tallied. Some fearsome fabricating, indeed, has gone on.

It has, in truth, been found impossible to investigate successfully all the reports of Bill's powder-and-shot activities. There is a legend,