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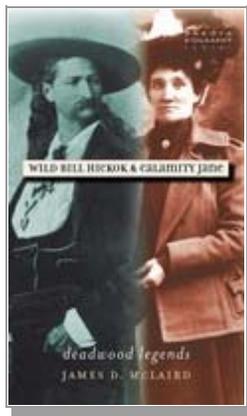
Bill and Jane: The stuff of legends

Mari Olson The Daily Republic
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Sometimes when the stuff of legends meets history, a new story is born.

Jim McLaird, of Mitchell, has spent the better part of his free time for the past 15 to 20 years researching the life of Calamity Jane, and consequently the ins and outs of her mythical relationship with Wild Bill Hickok. McLaird has found that most of what people think they know about both characters is merely the remnants of well-told Western fairy tales, and the interesting part is really how those tales began.

"What we've forgotten today is that most of that fame was media created and the events they were supposed to have participated in were either highly exaggerated or never happened," he explains.



Submitted Photo/ jim McLaird, professor emeritus of history at Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell, recently released "Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends."

McLaird, professor emeritus of history at Dakota Wesleyan University, first published "Calamity Jane: The Woman And The Legend," and was asked by the South Dakota State Historical Society to compile a piece on Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane. "Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends," has recently been released by the South Dakota State Historical Society Press and McLaird will be at DWU for a reading and book signing Wednesday.

"The major changes that I'm finding are how and why their stories were created," McLaird said about researching the legends of both people. "Where and when did those legends come from and why is it that even though we know they're not true ... people still believe them? Why is it that thousands of people still visit (their graves)?"

According to McLaird's findings, many of

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the great confrontations by Wild Bill were either entirely fabricated or exaggerated, and in some cases, twisted to make him the hero. For instance, a story about Wild Bill fighting a gang of Confederate sympathizers in Nebraska was not the life-and-death struggle of good verses

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evil that it was made out to be.

"It turned out it was a rather brutal murder where one was shot and one hacked to death ... probably both (of two of the men involved, as opposed to an entire gang) were unarmed, and there was a 12-year-boy there who ran home and told his mother who ran back to see if she could save the day ... and that was turned into this terrible fight between Wild Bill Hickok and a gang of Confederate sympathizers," he added.

Among the things McLaird discusses is how Calamity Jane hadn't really been a scout or stage coach driver and probably never had a romantic relationship with Wild Bill.

Both people's fame really didn't begin with great adventures or heroic occasions, McLaird said. Both were made famous by writers.

McLaird compares Calamity Jane to Paris Hilton: "They're media-created celebrities. It's a matter that media has changed. Today's is television and movies and so on; in the 19th century it was dime novels and stories that circulated."

Both Wild Bill and Calamity Jane existed and knew each other and both probably lived pretty rough lives, but the stories told about them just aren't entirely factual. Hickok's fame began when he met a writer from Harpers Monthly magazine who began retelling — with exaggeration and sometimes fabrication — the stories of the great Wild Bill Hickok of the West. Calamity Jane was what McLaird describes as a "dime-novel heroine."

McLaird's explanation for why writers would go to such lengths to create heroes was that there was a great need for them. The West was opening for settlement, settlers were afraid and there was a "need to tame the West." People wanted and needed heroes, and writers wanted to make a name for themselves, and possibly a buck on the side.

The question remains, though, that if people knew the truth — and many have for years, according to McLaird, based on his research and other previous biographies — why the need to keep alive a false idea?

Perhaps that question will never truly be answered. Maybe there is still a sense of safety in those Western heroes of yore. Maybe that's why historians and tourists alike are still fascinated by Bill and Jane — two of America's first pop culture icons, and they didn't even need rich parents or a Chihuahua to do it.

Let's see if Paris Hilton lasts this long.



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