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Origins of a Legend: Wild Bill's Gunfight at Rock Creek Station

On 25 July 1861, the *Brownville (Nebr.) Advertiser* reported having received word "from a reliable and well informed friend" who lived along the Big Blue River that three men had been killed in a fight thirty to thirty-five miles west of town. "Three wagon loads of arms and ammunition passed through the neighborhood below here last week, going westward," recalled the editor, who believed the conflict had something to do with the distribution of the contents of one of those wagons. During a quarrel, he wrote, "some secessionists put a rope around a Union Man's neck, and dragged him some distance toward a tree with the avowed purpose of hanging him." Somehow, the intended victim managed to escape. Later, when five of the attackers stopped at the man's house, "he commenced firing upon them and killed three out of the five; the other two making a hasty retreat."[1] This brief notice is the only contemporary account of the fight at Rock Creek Station in southeastern Nebraska in which James Butler Hickok shot three men. As James G. Rosa has asserted, the incident became one of the most controversial gunfights in the history of the American West and Rock Creek Station the place where "Hickok's legend really started."[2]

The Rock Creek Station fight, which occurred on 12 July 1861, gained some attention but escaped national notice until an article by George Ward Nichols entitled "Wild Bill" appeared in the February 1867 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.[3] Nichols claimed to have first heard about the struggle from an army officer who arrived on the scene

1. Quoted in George W. Hansen, "True Story of Wild Bill-McCanles Affray in Jefferson County, Nebraska, July 12, 1861," *Nebraska History* 49 (Spring 1968): 26.

2. Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill: The Life and Adventures of James Butler Hickok* (1964; reprint ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), p. 34.

3. Ibid., p. 37; Nichols, "Wild Bill," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 34 (Feb. 1867): 273–85. *See also* Joseph G. Rosa, "George Ward Nichols and the Legend of Wild Bill Hickok," *Arizona and the West* 19 (Summer 1977): 135–62.

an hour later. There, the officer said, he saw Hickok and "ten dead men—some killed with bullets, others hacked and slashed to death with a knife."[4] Already, the story was assuming legendary proportions.

When Nichols interviewed Hickok in 1865, the frontiersman supposedly responded: "'I don't like to talk about that M'Kandlas affair. . . . It gives me a queer shiver whenever I think of it, and sometimes I dream about it, and wake up in cold sweat.'"[5] Nevertheless, he provided a detailed rendition. According to Nichols, Hickok stopped at Rock Creek Station to visit "an old friend," a Mrs. Waltman, while guiding a detachment of cavalry through southern Nebraska. Not anticipating any trouble, he carried only a revolver. As he greeted Waltman, however, she "turned white as a sheet," and cried out: "'Is that you, Bill? Oh, my God! They will kill you! Run! Run! They will kill you!'"[6] She explained that the McCanles gang, composed of ten men, had just left but planned to return. "'M'Kandlas knows yer bringin in that party of Yankee cavalry, and he swears he'll cut yer heart out. Run, Bill, run!,'" she exclaimed, adding, "'But it is too late; they're comin up the lane!'"[7]

"'M'Kandlas,'" Hickok explained to Nichols, was "'the Captain of a gang of desperadoes, horse-thieves, murderers, regular cut-throats, . . . the terror of every body on the border,'" and wanted revenge against Hickok for besting him in a wrestling and shooting match.[8] "M'Kandlas and his gang" had been "border-ruffians in the Kansas row," and were now Confederate sympathizers. According to Waltman, just moments before Hickok arrived, McCanles had been "draggin poor Parson Shipley," a Union man, "on the ground with a lariat round his neck."[9]

Augmenting his meager firepower with lead, powder, and a loaded rifle he found in the cabin, Hickok awaited the gang. Shortly, McCanles "poked his head inside the doorway" but retreated when he spotted Hickok. Only when the latter yelled, "'Come in here, you cowardly dog.

4. Nichols, "Wild Bill," p. 282.

5. Ibid. The McCanles name has been spelled various ways in various sources, but Rosa insists "McCanles" is correct. Rosa speculates that "Nichols' version appears to be phonetic" (Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, p. 38).

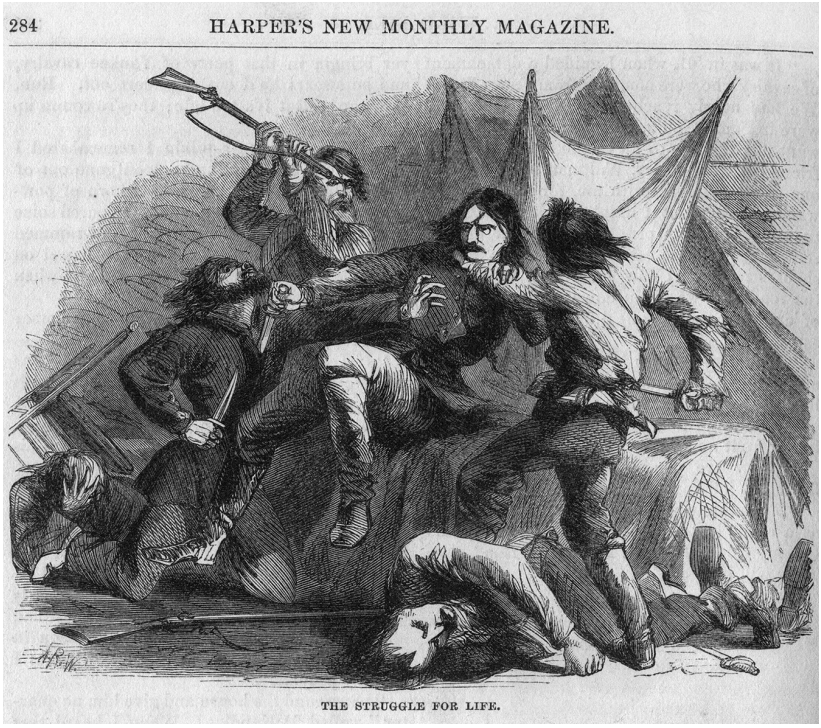
6. Nichols, "Wild Bill," p. 282.

7. Ibid., p. 283.

8. Ibid., p. 282.

9. Ibid., p. 283.

. . . Come in here, and fight me!'" did McCanles charge into the room. He had "his gun leveled," but "was not quick enough," and Hickok shot him in the heart. That still left nine foes, and Hickok had only six shots in his revolver. "There was a few seconds of that awful stillness," Nichols reported, "and then the ruffians came rushing in at both doors. How wild they looked with their red, drunken faces and inflamed eyes, shouting and cussin!" Although Hickok killed four of them in the initial charge, two managed to wound him with their "bird-guns." In the ensuing fight, he stopped another member of the gang with his fists and shot yet another with his pistol. The three remaining men managed to push him onto the bed, and one man, Hickok said, "'had his fingers round my throat.'" Hickok broke the man's arm, but another desperado struck him "across the breast with the stock of a rifle," causing



George Ward Nichols's story for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1867 included this depiction of his version of the Rock Creek Station fight.

blood to rush from his nose and mouth. "'Then I got ugly,'" Hickok said, "'and I remember that I got hold of a knife, and then it was all cloudy like, and I was wild, and I struck savage blows, following the devils up from one side to the other of the room and into the corners, striking and slashing until I knew that every one was dead.'" After the fight, he struggled outdoors and collapsed near the well, his body bearing eleven buckshot wounds and thirteen knife slashes, "each enough to kill an ordinary man." Fortunately, said Hickok, "'that blessed Dr. Mills pulled me save through it, after a bed siege of many a long week.'"[10]

The story seemed so fantastic, said Nichols, that he thought there was an "extreme improbability" the events had actually occurred. Because Hickok was such a "magnificent example of human strength and daring," reminding Nichols of classical heroes such as Samson and Hercules, however, he could not "place any limit upon his achievements." Nichols also admitted being in a "'receptive' mood," having just lived "for four years in the presence of such great heroism and deeds of prowess as were seen during the war." Thus, he "believed then every word Wild Bill uttered, and I believe it today."[11]

Regional newspaper editors were less enthusiastic. "We are sorry to say," stated the *Springfield Missouri Weekly Patriot* on 31 January 1867, "that the graphic account of the terrible fight at Mrs. Waltman's, in which Bill killed, solitary and alone, 'the guerrilla McKandlas and ten of his men' . . . is not reliable." The editor conceded that "Wild Bill did fight and kill one McCandlas and two other men, who attacked him simultaneously," but "Bill never was in the tight place narrated." A woodcut illustration accompanying the story was also patently false. It depicted Hickok "half down on the edge of Mrs. Waltman's bed, with his bowie-knife up to the hilt in one bushwhacker's heart, with half a dozen dead men upon the floor in picturesque attitudes; two of the three remaining desperadoes have their knives puncturing his westcoat, and the final one of the ten is leveling terrific blows at his head with a clubbed musket."[12]

10. Ibid., p. 284.

11. Ibid., p. 282.

12. Quoted in Nyle H. Miller and Joseph W. Snell, *Why the West Was Wild: A Contemporary Look at the Antics of Some Highly Publicized Kansas Cowtown Personalities* (1963; reprint ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), p. 180.

Five days later, the *Atchison (Kans.) Daily Champion* similarly cautioned, "The McKandlas gang consisted of only the leader and three others, and not of fourteen as stated in the magazine." When they attacked, Hickok "shot McKandlas through the heart with a rifle, and then stepping out of doors, revolver in hand, shot another of the gang dead." A third man was wounded and died in a ravine nearby, and a fourth, who suffered minor wounds, "ran away and was not heard of afterwards." Finally, added the editor, "There was no grudge existing between the McKandles gang and 'Wild Bill,' but the former had a quarrel with the Stage Company, and had come to burn the station 'Bill' was in charge of." Afterwards, "the Company rewarded him very handsomely for defending their property."[13]

J. W. Buel, a Saint Louis newspaperman, colorfully expanded on Nichols's already greatly exaggerated tale. Buel's book, *The Life and Marvelous Adventures of Wild Bill* appeared in 1880. When it quickly sold out, he doubled down, publishing his *Heroes of the Plains* a year later.[14] The story of "one man fairly whipping ten acknowledged desperadoes," wrote Buel, "has no parallel, I make bold to say, in any authentic history." He discounted the versions related in newspapers and periodicals as inaccurate and promoted his account as "unquestionably correct," citing as his source Captain E. W. Kingsbury, a Kansas City merchant "who heard Bill's first recital of the facts right on the battle-ground." Kingsbury, Buel said, was one of six passengers to arrive at Rock Creek Station only an hour after the fight. Supposedly, Buel also interviewed "Jolly, the man who escaped but died a few days afterward," and Dr. Joshua Thorne of Kansas City, "one of Bill's confidantes."[15] Buel claimed Hickok had also described his various adventures to him personally, and that his widow, Agnes Lake Hickok, had provided him with Wild Bill's diary, which included an account of the fight.[16]

13. *Atchison (Kans.) Daily Champion,* 5 Feb. 1867, quoted ibid., pp. 181–82.

14. James D. McLaird, *Wild Bill Hickok & Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2008), pp. 110–11.

15. J. W. Buel, *Heroes of the Plains; or, Lives and Wonderful Adventures of Wild Bill, Kit Carson, Capt. Payne, Capt. Jack, Texas Jack, California Joe, and Other Celebrated Indian Fighters, Scouts, Hunters and Guides* (St. Louis, Mo.: Historical Publishing Co., 1881), p. 50.

16. Ibid., p. 10.

According to Buel, the freight and stage company of Russell, Majors and Waddell had employed Hickok as a stage driver in the late 1850s, and while driving through the New Mexico region, he was severely mauled by a cinnamon bear.[17] Joseph Rosa says this story of Hickok's encounter with a bear is unlikely but notes that Hickok "was suffering from injuries of some sort" by early 1861.[18] Whatever the case, Hickok, needing less strenuous employment during his long recovery, took a job as "watchman and hostler," Buel said, with the Overland Stage Company at Rock Creek Station. There, he lived in a small dugout with his assistant, a young Irishman named Doc Mills. Hickok's primary duty was to protect the station's horses.[19]

Of particular concern were Jack and Jim McCanles, who had a ranch about thirteen miles west of the station and had "killed more innocent men and stolen a greater number of fine horses than any other two thieving cut-throats that ever figured in the annals of Western outlawry."[20] About a dozen "equally desperate horse-thieves" worked for them, making the gang so powerful "that no attempt was ever made to arrest them, the officers of the several adjoining counties fairly standing in awe of the McCandlas name."[21] Worse, the horses the outlaws stole were destined for the Confederacy. Indeed, Buel related that on 16 December 1861, Hickok had met the gang leading a man named Parson Shapley down the road with a rope around his neck because he had professed strong pro-Union feelings.[22] Jim McCanles had even tried to persuade Hickok to join his gang. Hickok, who had grown up in an abolitionist household and whose family farm home sheltered those traveling the Underground Railroad,[23] told him to "go to h—l!," adding that if McCanles wanted the company's horses, he knew where to find him.[24]

The day McCanles and his gang arrived, said Buel, Mills was absent, and Hickok had to defend the place alone. He had a rifle, two

17. Ibid., pp. 36–38.
18. Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, p. 33.
19. Buel, *Heroes of the Plains*, pp. 38, 41.
20. Ibid., pp. 41–42.
21. Ibid., p. 42.
22. Ibid., p. 43.
23. Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, pp. 14–15.
24. Buel, *Heroes of the Plains*, p. 43.

revolvers, and two bowie knives. As they had promised, the brothers and eight henchmen arrived at three o'clock in the afternoon. Hickok, Buel said, warned that "he would shoot the first man who attempted to open a stable door," a prospect the gang welcomed because they "wanted to kill somebody in addition to increasing their horse corral, and Bill, single handed, would make such an easy and choice victim!" Soon, the thieves battered down the cabin door with a log and charged in.[25] Hickok killed Jim McCanles with a rifle shot to the heart and stopped three more men with pistol shots. The remaining six continued firing, and one "struck Bill over the head and knocked him backward across the table." Jack McCanles leaped onto the wounded Hickok, intending to kill him with his knife, "but ere the thrust was accomplished Bill shoved his pistol into McCandlas' breast and fired." Hickok then grabbed his own Bowie knife and, thrusting it into each of his attackers, caused "great fountains of blood" to spurt "until the floor was fairly flooded."[26] As the four remaining gang members fled, Hickok killed one more using a gun belonging to Doc Mills, who had just arrived. Another attacker died later from his wounds.[27]

Captain Kingsbury provided Buel with a detailed description of Hickok's injuries: "A fracture of the skull—the frontal bone; three terrible gashes in the breast; his left forearm cut through to the bone; four bullets in his body, one in his hip and two through the fleshy part of his right leg; his right cheek cut open, and the skin of his forehead cut so deeply that a large portion of the scalp dropped down so far over his eyes as to almost blind him." After a surgeon dealt with his wounds, a Mrs. Watkins cared for Hickok during his long recovery. Unable to walk until June, Hickok was then moved to Denver, where he fully recovered in less than a year. Although the Overland Stage Company "paid all his expenses during the period of his confinement, they never otherwise recognized his faithfulness in defending their property." Hickok did, however, receive another kind of recognition, Buel said: "From that moment he was given the name of 'Wild Bill.'"[28]

Numerous writers repeated the tales of Nichols and Buel over the

25. Ibid., p. 44.
26. Ibid., p. 47.
27. Ibid., p. 48.
28. Ibid., pp. 49–50.

next fifty years, occasionally adding new twists. In *The Story of the Outlaw*, Emerson Hough claimed the event was part of the "killing, burning, and pillaging" that went on in Kansas before and during the Civil War. The McCanles brothers arrived with ten men rather than eight, and in the fight that ensued in Hickok's dugout, the hero killed four men "in less than that many seconds." It was a miracle that Hickok survived, he added, because the remaining six gang members were "all firing at him at a range of three feet." Similar to Buel's version, Jack McCanles struck Hickok over the head with his rifle and sprang upon him with a knife only to be killed by Hickok's six-shooter. Eight gang members died, and the two who fled may never have been in the dugout at all, Hough concluded, "for it was hardly large enough to hold another man had any wanted to get in." Afterwards, Hickok became known as "Wild Bill," said Hough, "and he had earned the name."[29]

Nichols, Buel, Hough, and other popular writers seem to have been unaware of the contemporary article in the *Brownville Advertiser* reporting that three men, not ten, were killed. They also did not acknowledge the negative reviews of Nichols's article published in the *Springfield Missouri Weekly Patriot* and the *Atchison Daily Champion* correcting his misinformation.[30] Indeed, not until 1912 did a more careful reconstruction of events appear. In that year, longtime Nebraska resident Charles Dawson provided a detailed description of the shootings at Rock Creek Station in his *Pioneer Tales of the Oregon Trail and of Jefferson County*. Dawson interviewed local residents who were familiar with the participants and who had arrived shortly after the killings and helped bury the dead. In his book, Dawson included lengthy descriptions of the main participants and the "tragedy" at Rock Creek Station, strongly contradicting the colorful versions earlier writers related.[31]

Dawson made clear that his purpose was not "to drag an idol from

29. Hough, *The Story of The Outlaw: A Study of the Western Desperado* (New York: A. L. Burt Company, 1905), pp. 171–73. Hough misspells McCanles as "McCandlas" throughout.

30. Miller and Snell, *Why the West Was Wild*, pp. 180–82; McLaird, *Wild Bill Hickok & Calamity Jane*, pp. 22, 136nn32–33.

31. Dawson, *Pioneer Tales of the Oregon Trail and of Jefferson County* (1912; reprint ed., Fairbury, Nebr.: Holloway Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 216–17. *See also* Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, p. 46.

A photographer recorded this image of Rock Creek Station, located along the Oregon Trail southeast of Fort Kearney, between 1858 and 1860.

its pedestal nor to create one to supplant it." In fact, he accepted a number of the tales about Hickok, such as his fighting a cinnamon bear and being sent to Rock Creek Station to recuperate from his injuries. He also believed assertions that Hickok's Civil War record was perhaps "unequaled in the annals of the Army of the West." In the numerous retellings of the Rock Creek Station fight, however, "the part of leading tragedian and hero" had been "almost unanimously accorded to Wild Bill." Now, "with years tempering down the heat, personal enmities and feeling," Dawson wrote, no time was better "to secure an accurate account" of the fight and events leading to it. He intended to be "guided only by facts . . . secured from court records, actual participants, eye-witnesses, and old settlers who were at the scene a few hours after the tragedy."[32]

32. Dawson, *Pioneer Tales*, p. 209.

First, Dawson compiled a biography of McCanles. Earlier writers had not researched his background, misidentifying him as "Bill," or calling the brothers "Jim" and "Jack." Dawson learned that the brother identified as either "Bill" or "Jack" was actually named David C. McCanles, born in Watauga County, North Carolina, in 1828. The county's voters elected him sheriff at the age of twenty-one, but in spring 1859, he joined the stampede west toward Pike's Peak.[33] Discovering that the Colorado gold rush was a bust, he decided to purchase Rock Creek Station in Nebraska. Initially, he bought West Rock Creek station from local resident Newton Glenn. McCanles then added East Rock Creek station, also called Elkhorn Station for the large pair of elk antlers he hung over the front or south door of the building, constructing a toll bridge across the stream and charging travelers along the Oregon Trail a fee to cross. This arrangement made him a good living, but he also raised livestock, grain, and hay. That fall, his brother, James Leroy McCanles, arrived from North Carolina, bringing along both his family and David's wife and children. David had married Mary Green, and by 1859 the couple had four children: Monroe, Julius, Clingman, and Elizabeth. En route to Rock Creek, his wife gave birth to another son, Charles; later, a daughter, Jennie, was born in Nebraska. Mary remained in the Rock Creek area for many years after David's death, eventually moving to Colorado where she died in 1904.[34]

"Some men are born leaders and masters of men," wrote Dawson, and "McCanles was such a man." About thirty years old when he arrived in Jefferson County, he was powerfully built and had an "utter disregard of danger in any form." He was a popular orator and musician, had a love for excitement, and despised liars and thieves. He also had "original ideas of fun," said Dawson, and a "peculiar code of honor and manhood."[35] Although early writers alleged that McCanles had created an organization to recruit men and gather material for the

33. Ibid., p. 207. Rosa claims McCanles was born in Iredell County, North Carolina, and that the family moved to Watauga County sometime after his birth. He also believes that, after deciding against going to Pikes Peak, McCanles determined to go to Oregon but, along the way, bought the place at Rock Creek and settled there. *They Called Him Wild Bill*, pp. 38, 40.

34. Dawson, *Pioneer Tales*, pp. 185–88.

35. Ibid., pp. 189–90.

southern cause, Dawson discounted such claims. McCanles, he said, was not an outlaw or a desperado, although he admitted that rumors suggesting McCanles had a mistress, Kate Schell, were probably true.[36]

Dawson related several stories told by neighbors that characterized the man. In one, Harry Goff, who worked for McCanles, was left in charge of the station during his boss's absence. When McCanles returned and found Goff in a drunken stupor, he poured gunpowder on his beard and lit it, scorching Goff's face and clothing. To save him from further injury, other employees threw Goff into the water trough. Afterwards, Goff threatened McCanles, who responded by tying him to an unbroken horse and giving him a rough ride. Later, however, McCanles restored Goff to his job and, said Dawson, Goff rarely got drunk again.[37]

Another story involved a man named Holmes who stole some clothing from one of McCanles's men. He was lassoed, led to the station, and repeatedly hoisted to the roof and dropped. Worse, McCanles forced him to climb a honey locust tree, resulting in "swollen and festered" wounds from the thorns. Once again, however, after the man recovered, "McCanles made amends."[38]

Other tales involved less violence. Once, a preacher traveling with a wagon train held religious services at a nearby ranch house. During devotions, McCanles filled the preacher's water glass with whiskey, causing the minister to cough when he drank. Rather than reacting angrily, the preacher requested a glass of real water as a "chaser." McCanles, appreciating the minister's sense of humor, afterwards discussed the Bible with him. Other neighbors recalled McCanles betting considerable sums of money on his fighting bulldog that usually won dogfighting contests.[39]

In early spring 1861, McCanles employed Hickok as a stock tender at the station. According to Dawson, considerable animosity existed between the two men. One quarrel stemmed from Hickok's gambling and McCanles's belief that he might be cheating. "McCanles took

36. Ibid., pp. 194–96.
37. Ibid., pp. 200–201.
38. Ibid., p. 201.
39. Ibid., pp. 203–6.

David C. McCanles owned and operated the Rock Creek Station where he was killed in 1861.

Wild Bill to task one day," wrote Dawson, "man-handling him with the departing injunction that he cease his gambling or leave the station." Although Hickok seemed to accept the criticism "meekly," Dawson believed he merely "awaited his opportunity to return it all with a vengeance manifold."[40]

Another dispute stemmed from Hickok's attentions to Kate Schell, purportedly McCanles's mistress. Neighbors believed Hickok became her "secret suitor," and McCanles forbade him from visiting her.[41] Although Dawson rarely identified the sources for his information, it is clear that Frank Helvey, one of the first neighbors to arrive at Rock Creek station after the shootings, provided him with considerable information.[42] "I have given the author of this book my version of these

40. Ibid., p. 212.

41. Ibid., p. 214.

42. [Helvey], "Frank Helvey's Life and Experiences on the Frontier," in Dawson, *Pioneer Tales*, p. 98.

two men and of the affair between them," Helvey remarked, "and after carefully reading the articles as written given them my full approval, believing that the truth has been brought out in the best manner possible under all circumstances."[43]

Born in Indiana in July 1841, Frank Helvey traveled west with his parents in 1846; in 1854, the family once again moved, this time to Nebraska. In fall 1858, they joined others pulling up stakes for Pike's Peak but returned after learning it was a "bust." Afterwards, they settled along the Little Sandy River, and, besides farming, hauled freight.[44] For nearly nine years, Helvey made two trips a year from Atchison to Denver or Fort Laramie. He also worked as a substitute stage driver and Pony Express rider and recalled meeting, "at some time or another nearly every noted character or 'bad man' that passed up or down the Trail." Helvey met Hickok shortly after he arrived at Rock Creek ranch. He also was well acquainted with McCanles, "and can say that a very wrongful impression was given of him, and of the affair between him and Wild Bill, who I also believe was much maligned." Regarding Hickok, Helvey concluded he "was a remarkable man in many ways, almost ideal of build, unexcelled as a shot, quiet of manner, hard to get acquainted with or talk with; was quick to take offense, and quicker to take action in retaliation."[45]

Besides using local informants to characterize Hickok and McCanles, Dawson carefully reconstructed the setting. Buel's error-ridden account had located Rock Springs (as opposed to Rock Creek) "on the Old Platte route fifty miles west of Topeka."[46] Rock Creek Station was actually located on the Oregon Trail in southeastern Nebraska, a hundred miles from Topeka. Nowhere else, said Dawson, was there "a more suitable crossing, nor one with fuel, grass, and water so accessible." There, travelers beheld "perhaps the most picturesque scenery in Jefferson County," including "rock-browed hills, cut and intersticed [*sic*] with deep, irregular gorges and canyons, through which flow crystal streams," with "giant oaks, elms and cottonwoods" along the banks.[47]

43. Ibid., pp. 105–6.
44. Ibid., pp. 98–104.
45. Ibid., pp. 105–7.
46. Buel, *Heroes of the Plains*, p. 38.
47. Dawson, *Pioneer Tales*, p. 90.

The buildings at Rock Creek Station, Dawson said, were generally similar to those at other trail stops. McCanles, who constructed Elkhorn Station on the east side of Rock Creek, used hewn logs to build the structure, which was thirty-six feet long, sixteen feet wide, and about eight feet high at the eaves. The roof sloped in both directions, with an attic above the main rooms. A large stone fireplace took up much of the west wall, and a square rock chimney stood outside. Sawed timber was used for woodwork, and there were windows, each with eight panes of glass. The ceiling had pegs for hanging "guns, meats and other sundry articles." In some stations, boards were used to partition the rooms, but at East Rock Creek station a muslin sheet suspended from the ceiling served the purpose. Furniture was "crude" and "home-made." About forty feet northwest of the station house, there was a rock-walled well with an oaken bucket. Nearby stood a watering trough for animals, hollowed from a cottonwood log, and about seventy-five feet southwest of the house stood a large barn, about eighty feet long and twenty feet wide, with walls made of eight-foot logs and a pole roof covered with brush, sod, and grasses. There was also a corral for livestock.[48]

The station on the west side of Rock Creek was similar to that on the east, but more primitive, having a mud-and-stick chimney and roughly hewn logs. There was no well, and residents instead used water from the spring. Next to the ranch house was a store where travelers could purchase whiskey, tobacco, flour, sugar, salt, pork, coffee, tea, and other needed items. The barn also had a blacksmith's shop with forge and equipment for shoeing horses, oxen, and mules. Nearby, hay and corn were stacked for sale.[49]

For some reason, said Dawson, McCanles began selling his lands in 1861. He may simply have become restless and decided to move or was considering joining the Confederacy. McCanles sold the West Ranch to the freighters Hagenstein & Wolf, with payments due within a few years, and the East Ranch to the Overland Stage Company. The latter paid one-half down, with the remainder due in installments over the next three months. When the company failed to make its June payment, McCanles confronted stationmaster Horace Wellman and,

48. Ibid., pp. 92–94.
49. Ibid., pp. 94–95.

after another missed payment, evidently persuaded him to travel to the company's regional office to secure the money. Wellman returned from Brownville on the evening of 11 July.[50] During his absence, Hickok had served as temporary station manager, and Dawson wrote that "the ranch house was the scene of high revelry, Kate Schell joining in the festive occasions." Upon returning, Wellman "reprimanded them for these actions, which he deemed damaging to the reputation of the station and the station master."[51]

About 4:00 P.M. on 12 July, McCanles went to the station to collect the overdue payments. His twelve-year-old son Monroe, his cousin James Woods, and an employee named James Gordon accompanied him. According to Dawson, McCanles sent Gordon and Woods to the barn to prevent the men working there from interfering during his meeting with Wellman. All were armed, said Dawson, McCanles having a shotgun and the other two men carrying pistols.[52] McCanles confronted Wellman, who responded that he had been unable to "secure the promised sum" and retreated into the house. Horace Wellman's wife, Jane, then came to the door and "commenced to volley forth vituperative abuse of McCanles." McCanles informed her that he "had come to settle with Wellman personally, and that his business was with men, not women." To McCanles's surprise, Hickok pushed Jane Wellman aside and confronted him. "'What in the h—, Bill, have you got to do with this?,'" McCanles said. "'My business is with Wellman, not you, and if you want to take a hand in it, come on out here, and we will settle it like men.'" He also asked Hickok if they were not friends, and when Hickok responded, "'I guess so,'" McCanles told him to "'send Wellman out here, so I can settle with him, or I am coming in to get him.'"[53]

After Hickok retreated into the curtained area of the room, McCanles overheard the men talking. According to Dawson, two women, Kate Schell and Sarah Kelsey, were also in the room and would have been in McCanles's way if he fired his gun; he therefore moved to the other door, where he asked Hickok for water. Hickok handed him a drinking gourd and once again retreated to the curtained area. McCanles "real-

50. Ibid., pp. 210–14.
51. Ibid., p. 215.
52. Ibid., pp. 215–16.
53. Ibid., pp. 216–17.

ized his danger instantly," and demanded that Hickok come out from behind the curtain or "he would come in and drag him out." Hickok responded, "'There'll be one less—when you try that.'" Suddenly, a gun fired, and McCanles, struck in the heart by a bullet, fell dead.[54]

Upon hearing the shot, Woods and Gordon raced to the house. As Woods entered the kitchen door, Hickok fired twice, mortally wounding him. Gordon, who was near the front door, turned and ran, but Hickok severely wounded him as well. Still, Gordon managed to reach the brush along the creek. Meanwhile, Woods, who had fallen in the weeds back of the house, was hacked to death with a hoe. Dawson implies that Jane Wellman, who was screaming, "Kill them all," was the culprit. Young Monroe McCanles had been standing near his father's body but now raced for home. Monroe, said Dawson, "owed his life to the fact that Wild Bill was unable to fire on account of being engaged in reloading." By the time Hickok was ready to fire, Monroe was far enough away that "the bullets . . . missed their intended victim."[55]

Doc Brink, a Pony Express rider, and George Hulbert, a stage driver, both of whom had been at the barn, now made their way to the house, as did John Hughes, a neighbor who happened to be hunting in the area. When they arrived, Hickok accused Joe Baker, also present, of being one of McCanles's friends and cocked his gun, intending to shoot him. Sarah Kelsey, Baker's stepdaughter, pleaded for his life, however, and Hickok finally relented, but not before he first clubbed Baker into unconsciousness with the butt of his pistol. Then, using a bloodhound, Hickok and others followed Gordon's trail.[56] When they located him, Hickok handed a shotgun to "one of the party," and ordered him to shoot Gordon to prove he was not a member of the "McCanles gang."[57] The man did as instructed, and killed Gordon, who was pleading for his life.[58]

"The whole country was full of excitement," wrote Dawson. "Settlers from far and near came that evening and the next day."[59] McCanles and

54. Ibid., pp. 217–18.
55. Ibid., pp. 218–19.
56. Ibid., pp. 219–20.
57. Ibid., p. 220.
58. Ibid., pp. 220–21.
59. Ibid., p. 221.

Woods were interred in a small plot near the station, and Gordon's body was buried in an unmarked grave at the site of his death. According to Dawson, Kate Schell left on the stage the next morning; he believed she went on to become a colorful character in the Black Hills. Meanwhile, Hickok and his associates were arrested on the charge of manslaughter, but after pleading self-defense, they were freed. Feelings "ran high" in the neighborhood, "and sentiment was somewhat divided," said Dawson, noting that "Wild Bill left Jones county [*sic*] soon after his acquittal." Assertions by romance writers that Hickok later sent money to support McCanles's widow, Dawson added, were not true.[60]

Dawson's account of the Rock Creek Station shootings provided an important corrective to the inaccurate information Nichols, Buel, and Hough related, but his work reached only a small, local audience. Interestingly, residents in Watauga County, North Carolina, where David McCanles had resided before going to Nebraska, evidently first learned about the Rock Creek fight from a popular account derived from Buel.[61] D. M. Kelsey's *History of Our Wild West and Stories of Pioneer Life* (1901), related that two brothers, Jim and Jack McCanles, pretended to be "commissioned to collect horses and enlist recruits for the Confederate army."[62] However, they were primarily horse thieves. After an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Hickok to work with their gang, they decided to take the horses from the station by force. In Kelsey's account, Hickok managed to kill most of the ten men and afterwards was christened "Shanghai Bill." What the residents of Watauga County thought about the tale is unknown.[63]

When Hickok biographer Frank J. Wilstach began researching his 1926 biography, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Prince of Pistoleers*, Dawson's account caused him considerable consternation.[64] Although Wilstach declared his intent "to find out what was real, and what was imaginary,

60. Ibid., p. 221–22.

61. John Preston Arthur, *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina. With Sketches of Prominent Families* (Richmond, Va.: Everett Waddey Co., 1915), p. 196.

62. Kelsey, *History of Our Wild West and Stories of Pioneer Life* (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas Language, 1901), p. 362.

63. Ibid., p. 364.

64. Kent Ladd Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 154.

in the tales" about Hickok, he found the Hickok legend strongly captivating.[65] "If greatness consists of an unswerving courage, an unquestioned honesty, a gentle and generous spirit, as well as a willingness at all times to endanger one's life for the sake of public order or to save a friend, then Wild Bill Hickok has a considerable claim to greatness," he asserted.[66]

Wilstach therefore faced a daunting task when he attempted to reconcile Dawson's information about the Rock Creek shootings and his heroic image of Hickok. "The inscrutable enigma in Wild Bill's life is the astounding tale in which it has been set forth, time and again, in innumerable publications, that single-handed he snuffed out the lives of the outlaw, David C. McCanles, and nine of his gang," wrote Wilstach.[67] "A little investigation," he admitted, showed that McCanles, "the bad man of the myth, has been fantastically, even preposterously maligned by border historians," and "the accusations that he was a common horse-thief, desperado, and murderer seem to have no basis in fact."[68]

Wilstach decided it was unlikely that Hickok, who, in his view, was always truthful, had ever related the fanciful tale to Nichols. Although it was possible "Wild Bill was spoofing the Boston man,"[69] he believed the entire story had come from Captain Kingsbury.[70] "Doctor Thorne," he thought, was "an ally of the Captain in perpetuating the hoax."[71]

Having exonerated Hickok of the crime of exaggeration, Wilstach next attempted to reconstruct the events at Rock Creek. In a chapter titled "The McCanles Mystery Solved," he combined Dawson's information with his own new evidence. In his final assessment, Wilstach dismissed assertions that overdue payments had caused the fight. Instead, he decided that McCanles was indeed a Southern sympathizer who recruited men for guerrilla warfare, causing Hickok, an intensely

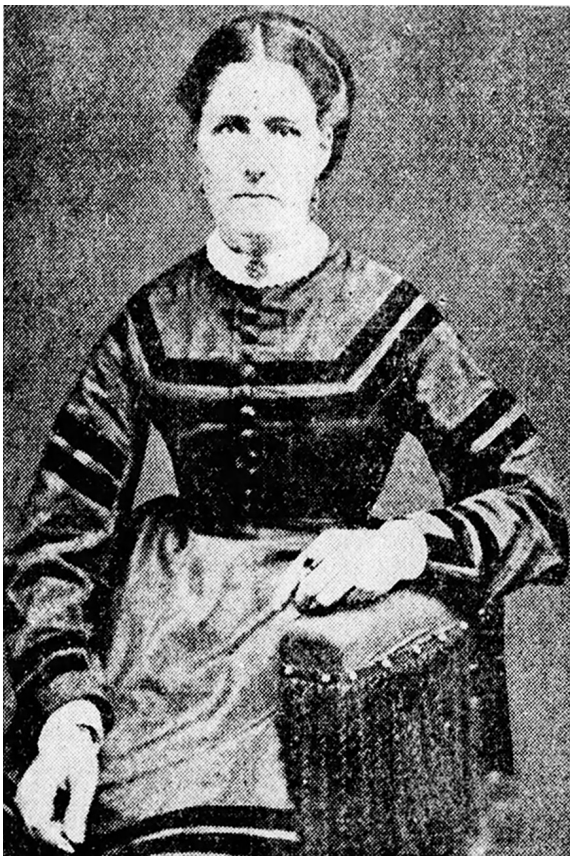
65. Wilstach, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Prince of the Pistoleers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1926), p. vii.
66. Ibid., p. 15.
67. Ibid., p. 40.
68. Ibid., p. 59.
69. Ibid., p. 51.
70. Ibid., pp. 56–57.
71. Ibid., p. 58.

loyal Union man, to oppose him. In addition, he said, the two men had a personal quarrel.[72] "For sixty years this motive for the shooting has been concealed," wrote Wilstach,[73] referring to the dispute between Hickok and McCanles for the affections of Kate Schell, whose real name was Sarah Shull. Indeed, Wilstach located Shull, then ninety-three years old, and she reluctantly responded to his questions.[74]

Shull, who had left Rock Creek Station by stagecoach the morning after the fight, denied that late payments were the cause and insisted that Hickok shot McCanles in self-defense. She did not, however, witness the altercation. According to Shull, McCanles had told her of his intent to "clean up the people at the station" and steal horses for the Confederacy.[75] The rivalry between Hickok and McCanles over Shull's attentions clearly added fuel to the fire.[76] Thus, concluded Wilstach, "the testimony of Sarah Shull, and the fact that the McCanles family did not press the case before Judge Towle, make it probable that Bill did not commit cold-blooded murder, but shot in self-defense."[77]

Wilstach's defense of Hickok was soon followed by an even more strident attack on Hickok's actions at Rock Creek Station: George W. Hansen's "Wild Bill—McCanles Tragedy, A Much Misrepresented Event in Nebraska History," which appeared in *Nebraska History* in 1927 and was retitled and reprinted in 1968. Although Hansen, a banker and pioneer from Fairbury, Nebraska, agreed that Wilstach had made "a painstaking effort . . . to obtain the true character of David C. McCanles" and credited him for noting that the stories by Nichols, Buel, and Hough were "fables," he believed Wilstach made several "errors of deduction." Thus, like "all Hickok's admiring biographers," Wilstach continued to "justify the cowardly shooting of McCanles and the butchery of Woods and Gordon." Hansen contended, for example, that Wilstach mistakenly placed Shull at the heart of the quarrel and wrongly concluded that McCanles attempted to take horses for the Confederacy.

72. Ibid., pp. 64–65; Steckmesser, *Western Hero*, p. 154.
73. Wilstach, *Wild Bill Hickok*, p. 65.
74. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
75. Ibid., pp. 69–70.
76. Ibid., p. 72.
77. Ibid., p. 77.



Many historians place Sarah Shull at the center of the controversy surrounding the Rock Creek Station fight.

Indeed, Hansen claimed to have discovered "documentary evidence" that Wilstach had missed what revealed the real motive for the shooting.[78]

Where Dawson had striven for a more accurate accounting of David McCanles and his actions, Hansen painted a glowing portrait of McCanles, omitting objectionable qualities both Wilstach and Dawson had mentioned. In North Carolina, Hansen noted, McCanles had taken "a six-year course in military training and tactics" at an Episcopal

78. Hansen, "True Story of Wild Bill-McCanles Affray," pp. 34–36.

Academy (an accompanying illustration showed McCanles wearing the uniform of an officer in the North Carolina militia). At the age of twenty-three, he became sheriff of Watauga County, North Carolina, and was reelected for four successive terms. Moreover, he ran for office on the Whig ticket, the political party that opposed secession even in North Carolina.[79]

McCanles, said Hansen, left to join the gold rush to Colorado early in May 1859 with his cousin, James Woods. He omitted mentioning that Sarah Shull accompanied him. While on the Oregon Trail west of Leavenworth, Kansas, McCanles met disappointed parties returning from Pike's Peak and decided to purchase the log cabin, stables, and corrals at Rock Creek from owner Newton Glenn.[80] The land was in Jones County (later renamed Jefferson County), and McCanles, after ordering a plow from Leavenworth, "broke the first sod, turned the first furrow, and with unbounded faith in its ultimate success made the first experiment in farming in what is now one of the richest agricultural counties in the middle west."[81]

Because Rock Creek, "with its steep and rocky banks," was difficult to cross, McCanles built a toll bridge, charging a fee for each wagon that crossed. He also provided supplies and meals for the Overland Stage Company and Pony Express.[82] During evenings, he played the fiddle for travelers who listened or danced, and at other times he attended religious services, delighting "in debates and arguments with ministers of different denominations on questions of dogma and creed." In addition to being "familiar with scripture and the poems of Shakespeare and Burns," McCanles also excelled in "hard riding, horse racing, wrestling, and all the rude sports of the frontier, calling for tests of strength and character."[83]

Once settled, he wrote to his brother, James Alexander Leroy McCanles, urging him to move west. Soon, James and his family, accompanied by David's wife and children and an orphan named Billie Hughes,

79. Ibid., p. 5.
80. Ibid., pp. 5–7.
81. Ibid., p. 7.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., p. 9.

left North Carolina, reaching Rock Creek on 20 September 1859. "In the meantime," Hansen wrote, "David had, with his own hands, built a log cabin on the east bank of the creek, as a home for his brother James and family."[84] The next spring, James relocated to Little Blue River at the mouth of Rock Creek. Drought, however, prompted him to move to Johnson County, about fifty miles east of Rock Creek, and David took over his farm on the Little Blue River. There, said Hansen, he founded a school and hired a teacher using his own funds.[85]

In spring 1861, the twenty-three-year-old Hickok worked for David McCanles as assistant stock tender. For some reason, animosity developed between the two men.[86] "On account of some peculiarity of Hickok's nose and prominent upper lip," said Hansen, "McCanles dubbed him 'Duck Bill,'" a nickname that "irritated and exasperated him. This nickname was sometimes perverted to Dutch Bill."[87] Hansen barely mentioned Sarah Shull, dismissing Wilstach's claim that a rivalry between McCanles and Hickok over Sarah was one of the motivations for their confrontation. "It is unfortunate that Sarah Shull should be injected into this story," he said, adding that Wilstach's references to her "make most unsavory reading, and pictures her as a degraded character."[88]

Meanwhile, the Overland Stage Company changed its stage, mail, and passenger service from semi-weekly to daily and negotiated with McCanles to buy the buildings at East Rock Creek Station. In their agreement dated April 1861, they were to pay about one-third down and "the balance in two or three equal monthly payments. The deferred payments were to be made thru Mr. Wellman, the Station Keeper and agent of the company." Until these payments were made, McCanles held title to the property. Unfortunately, the company was "irretrievably in debt" and five months later lost all of its property through foreclosure.[89]

84. Ibid., pp. 9–10.
85. Ibid., pp. 10–12.
86. Ibid., pp. 12–13.
87. Ibid., p. 13.
88. Ibid., p. 36.
89. Ibid., p. 13.

McCanles called at the station when the first payment fell due, only to be told that the money had not yet arrived. He did so again on 1 July, this time demanding settlement or possession of the station. Wellman agreed to try to collect McCanles's money for him at the company's regional headquarters during a trip for supplies. Monroe McCanles, David's twelve-year-old son, accompanied him.[90] The two left the next day, "Monroe with his child's shot gun picking off game along the road, making a perfect holiday of the trip, never dreaming of the terrible tragedy with which it would close." Having been delayed by high water, they were absent about ten days and did not return until about

90. Ibid., pp. 14–15

Monroe McCanles witnessed his father's death during the Rock Creek fight at the age of twelve.

4:00 P.M. on 12 July. McCanles had called at the station several times during their prolonged absence.[91]

As the pair arrived, Monroe spotted the family's horses at Jack Ney's ranch a short distance southeast of the station, and ran to greet his father. According to Monroe, "his father appeared worried by the fact that Wellman had apparently not been successful in obtaining the money due him" and immediately went to the stage station. Monroe, James Woods, and James Gordon accompanied him. "These three farmers and the 12 year old boy," wrote Hansen, "constitute the entire posse of that notorious 'McCanles gang' imposed on a gullible public during the last 60 years by sensation scribblers as a band of cut-throats, murderers and horse thieves."[92] In addition, Hansen asserted, "There is no reliable evidence that any of these men were armed."[93]

While Woods and Gordon went to the barn, McCanles, with his son, proceeded to the kitchen door on the west side of the house. There, McCanles asked Jane Wellman, who answered the door, if he could talk to her husband. When she responded that he would not come out, McCanles exclaimed that "he would go in and drag him out." When Hickok suddenly appeared at the door, McCanles became "somewhat disconcerted," not knowing why Hickok would take part "in a matter in which he had no personal interest, while Wellman himself remained out of sight." According to Hansen, McCanles "evidently believed that either the Stage Company was bankrupt and could not pay the money owed to him, or that Wellman had collected it and was planning to trick him out of it."[94]

Perhaps attempting to defuse the situation, McCanles asked Hickok whether "they were not still friendly, and being assured that such was the case," requested a drink of water. Hansen believed McCanles may also have "sensed the fact that he was in a rather precarious position," and wanted to "survey the situation." After returning the dipper to Hickok, he moved to the other door of the station for a better view. As he did so, Hickok went behind the curtain dividing the rooms,

91. Ibid., p. 15.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., p. 16.
94. Ibid.

prompting McCanles to ask him "to come out and if he had anything against him to fight it out square."[95]

Without warning, Hickok shot McCanles from a "concealed position behind the curtain," ironically using a rifle McCanles had left at the station. Hickok's shot "was not fired in the heat of conflict or in self defense," asserted Hansen, "but was deliberate and calculated and well aimed and pierced McCanles in the heart." This act, Hansen added, was typical of Hickok's future career: "From all accounts of killings in which Hickok subsequently took part, I have been unable to find one single authentic instance in which he fought a fair fight. To him no human life was sacred. He was a cold blooded killer without heart or conscience."[96]

Hickok, Hansen said, also shot Woods and Gordon without provocation, and their murders were particularly brutal. After Hickok wounded Woods, Wellman crushed his skull with a heavy hoe and then ran around the house to attack Monroe, who "was kneeling over his father, stupefied at the awful horror of the things taking place around him." Monroe managed to dodge the blow and run away. With Jane Wellman screaming, "Kill 'em all, kill 'em all," the "Hickok crowd" followed the trail of the badly wounded Gordon into the brush. Although "he begged for his life," they finished him off "with a load of buckshot fired from Brink's shot gun, thus completing the triple murder by the butchery of two of the wounded victims."[97]

Hansen insisted that all of the victims were unarmed. McCanles, he noted, "would never have taken his twelve year old son, Monroe, to the door or to the cabin with him had he expected any gun play." Furthermore, "he had never in his life on the frontier used a gun nor threatened to use a gun on any man." When he fought, he used "his bare fists."[98] Hansen advanced as proof that "not a shot was fired by either McCanles, Woods or Gordon, and without any means of defense they were shot down like brutes." After Monroe ran the three miles home and told his mother what had happened, she determined "to go

95. Ibid., p. 17.
96. Ibid., p. 18.
97. Ibid., p. 19.
98. Ibid., p. 18.

to the Rock Creek Station and face the three murderers, hoping some spark of life might still remain in the bodies of her husband and friends and that they might be nursed back to health. But her errand was only a horror, and all in vain." She immediately sent a messenger to James McCanles, who, upon receiving the news, "saddled David's favorite and fastest horse and made the journey of fifty miles during the night and early morning of the next day."[99]

As reports of the shootings spread, neighbors hurried to the site. By morning, Frank, Thomas, and Jasper Helvey had arrived, gathered the bodies, and buried them. According to Frank Helvey, "they found the body of McCanles lying on the ground where he fell backwards from the doorstep; Woods around the corner of the cabin with pistol shots in his body and head crushed with a heavy instrument, and Gordon about 80 rods south of the Station, filled with buckshot, and no guns near any of them." Helvey's statement corroborated Monroe's account "that there was no fight either in the cabin or outside, and that three unarmed men, (not ten) were killed."[100]

Several neighbors joined the McCanles family for the funerals the next day, including Frank Helvey, Thomas Helvey, Jasper Helvey, George Weisel, David C. Jenkins, James Blair, William Babcock, and John Hughes. Hansen said he was well acquainted with all of the men and that "they all told the same story—that three men were killed; their bodies laid on the ground where they fell, and no guns near them; that four people were implicated in the affair—Hickok, Brink, Mr. and Mrs. Wellman; [and] that none of these persons showed a scratch or a scar as a result of the controversy."[101]

Meanwhile, James McCanles had traveled to Beatrice, the county seat, to have the three men charged with murder. According to Hansen, Monroe McCanles told him that a trial had been held "in the cabin of 'Pap' Towle at Beatrice before a justice of the peace, after which the accused men were turned loose." No trial took place in district court, and "his Uncle James, who was the complaining witness, always claimed the trial before the justice was a sham."[102] After searching dil-

99. Ibid., pp. 19–20.
100. Ibid., p. 20.
101. Ibid., p. 21.
102. Ibid.

igently for the long-missing court records, Hansen finally found them on 2 June 1926, in Beatrice. The documents, "In an envelope yellowed with age, which probably had not seen the light of day for sixty years," indicated T. M. Coulter, a justice of the peace for Gage County, had held a preliminary examination.[103]

The court documents initially identified the accused men as "Duch Bill, Dock, and Wellman" and later more formally as Wm. B. Hickok, J. W. Brink, and Horace G. Wellman.[104] On 13 July 1861 at 2:00 P.M., officials issued a warrant for their arrest, and E. B. Hendee, sheriff of Gage County, brought the prisoners to Beatrice on 15 July. The documents suggest no attorneys were present at the hearing. Instead, Coulter "acted for both parties, especially for the defendants." Although Monroe McCanles was present, the justice of the peace did not ask him to testify. In fact, he was "excluded from the room during the entire time they were examined." However, said Hansen, Coulter asked Jane Wellman to testify "in favor of the Territory," a move Hansen deemed improper because she was "an actual accomplice and wife of one of the defendants." Jane Wellman went on to testify that "the defendants were attacked and the killing was done in self defense." Based on this action, said Hansen, the trial was a "sham."[105] Hansen also implied that Coulter might have been biased, given that "the defendants were employees of the Overland Stage Company, the most influential corporation west of the Missouri river and many of its stage and freight drivers were present at the trial." Moreover, said Hansen, Coulter's later arrest for embezzlement proved him "unworthy to serve as a public official."[106]

Hansen was convinced that Hickok and Wellman were responsible for the claim that secessionists attacked them at Rock Creek and that the story published in the *Brownville Advertiser* on 25 July 1861 probably originated with them.[107] Hansen also noted that Nichols identi-

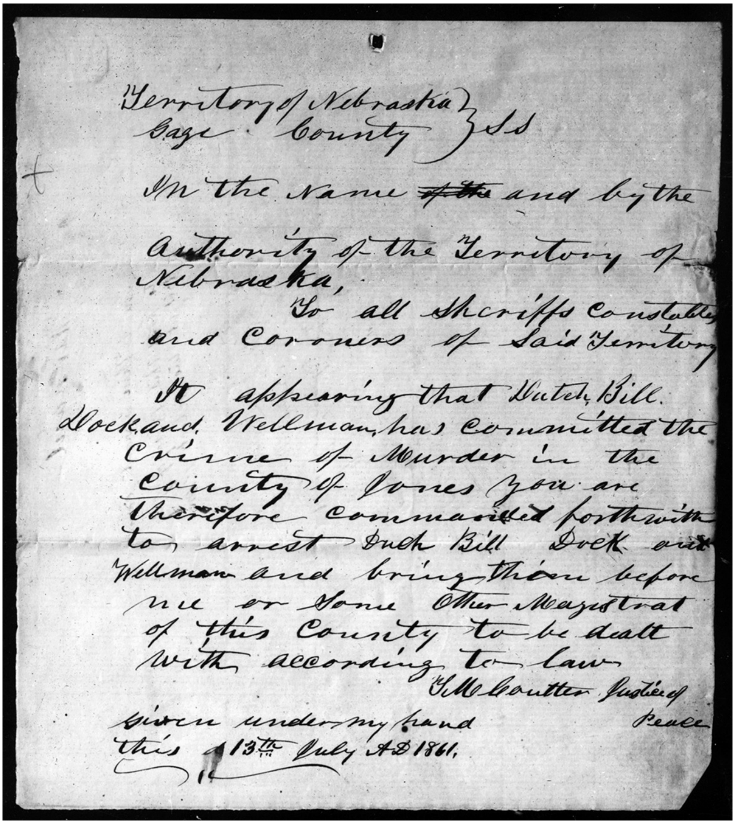
103. Ibid., p. 22.

104. Ibid., p. 23. According to Rosa, the arrest papers referred to Hickok as "Dutch Bill" in some places and "Duch Bill" in others, leading to speculation that McCanles had given Hickok the name "Duck Bill" to taunt him for his thin lips. *See* Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, p. 51.

105. Hansen, "True Story of Wild Bill-McCanles Affray," pp. 23–24.

106. Ibid., p. 25.

107. Ibid., pp. 26–27.



Territory of Nebraska
Gage County } ss

In the Name ~~of the~~ and by the
authority of the Territory of
Nebraska,
To all Sheriffs Constables
and Coroners of Said Territory

It appearing that Dutch Bill.
Dock and Wellman has committed the
Crime of Murder in the
County of Jones you are
therefore commanded forthwith
to arrest Dutch Bill Dock and
Wellman and bring them before
me or Some Other Magistrat
of this County to be dealt
with according to law
T M Coulter Justice of Peace
Given under my hand
this 13th July AD 1861.

The Gage County sheriff issued this arrest warrant for Hickok and Howard Wellman on 13 July 1861.

fied Hickok as the source for his *Harper's* article, which included "lurid stories glorifying Hickok and slandering David and James McCanles" while failing to mention Brink and Wellman.[108] Claims that McCanles was a southern sympathizer were ridiculous, said Hansen, adding, "at a Fourth of July celebration held at Big Sandy Station in 1861, eight days before the death of McCanles," local residents "selected him as orator of the day, and he delivered a patriotic address on that occasion."[109]

Hansen was especially perturbed that distorted versions of the Rock

108. Ibid., p. 32
109. Ibid., p. 28.

Creek fight continued to appear in popular works. Emerson Hough's *The Story of the Outlaw*, for example, promoted Hickok from stable hand to station agent, had him fight in a dark dugout, and changed the time of the fight from July to December. Hough went so far as to include James McCanles as one of the outlaws, Hansen noted, even though James had not been present at the Rock Creek fight. Indeed, James went on to have a distinguished career, moving to Colorado in 1864, where he "laid out the town of Florence," established the Bank of Florence, and won election to the Colorado House of Representatives in 1880 as a Republican and the Colorado Senate in 1886 and 1888. Despite these distortions, Hough's popularity as a writer garnered his version of events "greater publicity than any other modern story of crime has ever received."[110]

Hickok's defenders were quick to denounce Hansen's strong defense of David McCanles. William E. Connelley, secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society, published a scathing response in the 1926–1928 volume of *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society*. His rebuttal was "made necessary," he said, "by the preposterous account recently published on that subject."[111] Connelley described Hansen as "one of those writers who makes a case for his favorite by attacking those opposed to him,"[112] adding, "Kansas reveres and honors her heroic pioneers. And James Butler Hickok was one of the greatest of these."[113]

Connelley disagreed with Hansen that David McCanles was well educated. McCanles had "an elementary but superficial education," said Connelley, and as a young man engaged in activities like "horse racing, cockfighting, foot racing, wrestling, shooting matches, rough dancing in the mountain cabins, and fist-and-skull fighting." He also "had an imperious temper," and "would brook no restraint or interference in any of his plans, his inclinations, or his desires." Weighing more than two hundred pounds, McCanles "came to regard himself as invincible." His attentions focused on "fallen women, horse racing, gambling, wrestling, boxing, rough-and-tumble fighting, dog fighting,

110. Ibid., pp. 32–33.
111. Connelley, "Preface," *Kansas State Historical Collections* 17 (1926–1928): xi.
112. Connelley, "Wild Bill—James Butler Hickok," ibid., p. 20.
113. Connelley, "Preface," p. xi.

and drinking." In other words, Connelley concluded, McCanles was "'a rough customer.'"[114]

Connelley also disputed Hansen's claim that McCanles served as sheriff for four successive terms, insisting that Jack Horton was sheriff between 1852 and 1856. McCanles was only his deputy, and when he finally won election in 1856, it was "in violation of his word to Horton, and resulted in fierce personal physical encounters and terrific struggles between the two men."[115] Worse, his official duties included collecting taxes, and he used this position to enrich himself at other people's expense. Connelley learned from John Preston Arthur's *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina*, that McCanles was "a strikingly handsome man and a well-behaved, useful citizen till he became involved with a woman not his wife, after which he fell into evil courses." In January 1859, having engaged in tax and real estate shenanigans, McCanles went to Shull's Mills, "where he was joined by a woman" and left by train for the West.[116] Connelley identified this woman as Sarah Shull, sometimes called Kate Schell.[117]

After reaching Saint Louis, McCanles and Shull took a steamboat to Leavenworth, Kansas, where McCanles purchased wagons and supplies. Similar to the other accounts, the couple met discouraged parties returning from Pike's Peak as they crossed the plains. Thus, McCanles decided to purchase a ranch that had been built on the west side of Rock Creek. Finding the water supply insufficient, he built a second ranch, Elkhorn Station, on the east side, where he dug a well.[118]

Connelley was certain the relationship between McCanles and Shull was the central issue leading to the shootings at Rock Creek. The twenty-six-year-old woman "was voluptuous and beautiful," he said. "She was always neat and tidy, well dressed, and her conduct would not have been suspected from her manners, for she was reserved and somewhat shy in company." Shull was also "steadfast in her devotion

114. Connelley, "Wild Bill," p. 1.

115. Ibid., pp. 2–3. Connelley cited Arthur, *History of Watauga County, North Carolina* in his reconstruction. *See* Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, p. 39.

116. Arthur, *History of Watauga County, North Carolina*, quoted in Connelley, "Wild Bill," pp. 2–3.

117. Ibid., p. 5.

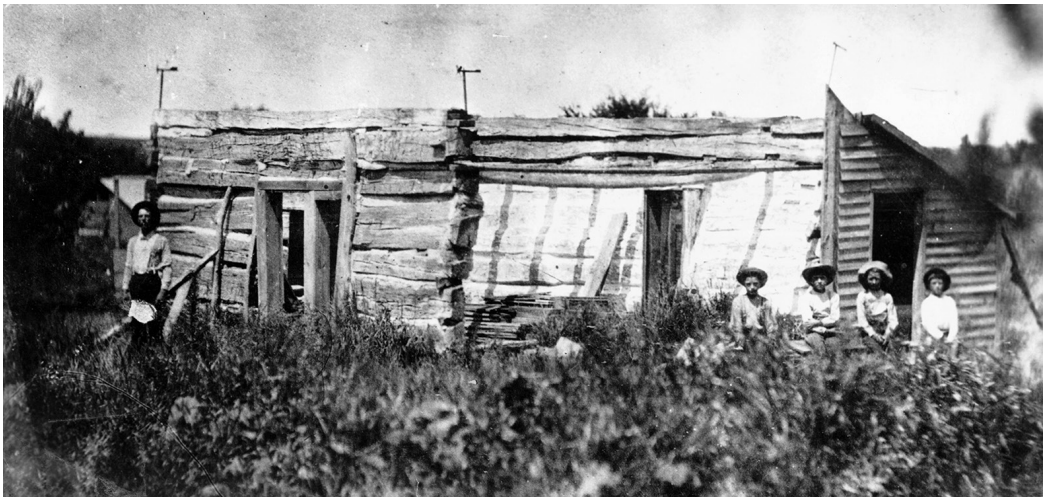
118. Ibid., p. 5.

to McCanles" until she learned that his family was due to arrive. Then, "fury ran riot through her soul" leading to "her first serious break with McCanles."[119]

McCanles's family arrived on 20 September 1859 and moved into the east ranch house, while Shull resided in the west ranch house. "McCanles found some difficulty in maintaining his dual relations," Connelley said. His wife "was in a rage" when she learned about Shull's presence. Still, McCanles managed to persuade the two women to act friendly whenever they met, and even to entertain each other "at dinners back and forth." Eventually, however, Mrs. McCanles forced her husband to end the relationship with his mistress, or at least pretend to, causing Shull to experience "the anguish of a woman scorned."[120]

Meanwhile, McCanles's business enterprises prospered.[121] Connelley reported his total income as one thousand dollars a month and noted that he had "a band of devoted followers," some of whom worked at the ranch. Many of these "voluntary outlaws" had spent years in the Rocky Mountains after fleeing points farther east. "To them human life

119. Ibid.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid.



In this photograph from the 1880s, unidentified individuals pose in front of the McCanles ranch house.

had no value," wrote Connelley, "and as for sympathy or kindness, all such sentiments had been burned out of them long ago. . . . Some of them had seen many a man strung up to a limb for no other reason than that he owned a good horse, or a fine gun, or a bag of gold dust."[122] In addition, McCanles and most of his associates were inclined "to join the South." Connelley indicated that McCanles had connections to the town of Palmetto, Kansas, founded in 1856 "by border ruffians from the South, mostly from South Carolina." One of Palmetto's founders, Dr. Albert Morrall, told Connelley that McCanles "often visited Palmetto to fraternize with the Carolinians and other southern men then known as border ruffians." Indeed, they "considered McCanles one of their number."[123]

Connelley also consulted *Andreas' History of the State of Nebraska*, which stated that S. J. Alexander, a future secretary of state for Nebraska, and D. C. Jenkins arrived at Rock Creek Station by stage within two hours of the fight. They agreed that McCanles was a southern sympathizer and had attempted to persuade Hickok to join his company. When Hickok refused, McCanles threatened to kill him. "So there is no doubt left that McCanles did make a demand on Wild Bill in the forenoon of the 12th for the stock and Station," Connelley concluded, and after Hickok and Wellman refused to cooperate, McCanles "gathered his immediate retainers for the final assault in the afternoon."[124]

Connelley disagreed with Hansen's assertion that the name "Duck Bill" was based on Hickok's appearance, but even so, he said, court documents clearly showed that McCanles and others referred to Hickok with "repulsive nicknames," such as "Dutch Bill." "To irritate and exasperate a man is to humiliate and assault him," Connelley stated. Such behavior "was in keeping with the character and known custom of McCanles." Connelley believed McCanles "became reckless and violent at Rock Creek, regarding the rights or feelings of no man. If ever a man deserved killing," he continued, "it was McCanles at Rock Creek Station."[125]

122. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
123. Ibid., pp. 10–11.
124. Ibid., pp. 23–24.
125. Ibid., p. 21.

Although Connelley credited Hansen for locating the long-missing court records, he found them a disappointment, noting, "They throw little or no light on what happened at Rock Creek."[126] Further, he added, Hansen failed to mention that McCanles terrorized Jane Wellman during her husband's absence and largely ignored Sarah Shull as a factor in the dispute. Connelley also questioned Hansen's conclusion that McCanles and his men were unarmed.[127] "In that country at that time every man was always armed," he said.[128]

Finally, Connelley belittled Hansen for concluding that Hickok was responsible for the misinformation in Nichols's *Harper's* magazine article. "Did he make any effort to find out whether Wild Bill gave Nichols such an account as he published?" Connelley queried. Connelley located two men, Theodore Bartles and Colonel H. C. Lindsay, who had discussed Nichols's article with Hickok at "great length," and although Hickok "admitted that he had various interviews with G. W. Nichols," they were done "in the summer of 1865." By February 1867, when the article appeared in print, "the various adventures of Wild Bill became confused in the mind of Nichols," and Hickok "disclaimed any such actions as were attributed to him."[129]

Unfortunately, Connelley's account included many tall tales. For example, he claimed Hickok was sent to Rock Creek in March 1861 to recover from wounds suffered in a fight with a bear, and "was not expected to do any work" because his wounds were not yet healed. For some reason, McCanles took a dislike to Hickok, referring to him as "Dutch Bill" and wrestling the disabled man to the ground. Although McCanles pretended he was doing it for fun, "there was malice back of every movement," and he "continued this course to within a few days of his death."[130]

In his concluding remarks, Connelley informed readers that he was completing a thorough biography of Hickok. In it, they would learn, "That Hickok was a man of peace." He "never sought a quarrel, . . . nev-

126. Ibid., p. 25.
127. Ibid., p. 22–23.
128. Ibid., p. 23.
129. Ibid., p. 25.
130. Ibid., p. 11.

er boasted; rarely talked; always attended to his own affairs, . . . did his duty, . . . killed when he was compelled in the line of duty, . . . loved children and they loved him, . . . protected the weak and helpless, . . . was faithful to every trust, . . . [and] contributed more than any other man to making the West a place for decent men and women to live in—a place in which they could have homes and cities and farms and churches and schools."[131]

Although Connelley's biography, *Wild Bill and His Era: The Life and Times of James Butler Hickok*, remained incomplete when he died, his daughter finished it for publication.[132] It repeated earlier information but included some new details. Connelley blamed the defaulted payments in June and July on the "inattention, or neglect" of Ben Ficklin, superintendent for the Overland Stage Company. McCanles overreacted, however, and unfairly blamed Wellman. "Impatient and anxious to leave," McCanles "interviewed Wellman daily to see if the payments had arrived," Connelley wrote. "Toward the last of June he had an extended and excited conversation with Wellman, who was only the agent and not responsible for the defaults." In addition, McCanles became aware that the "real settlers" in the area had developed "an antagonistic feeling" toward him and knew "that many persons whom he had mistreated there would welcome his downfall."[133]

Meanwhile, Sarah Shull, who wanted "supremacy in his heart," worried that his wife was gaining influence over him. As a result, she allowed Hickok to make "progress himself in [her] good graces." McCanles became extremely jealous and warned Hickok to stay away from the West Rock Creek Ranch "under pain of death." Shull had other plans, however, and joyfully inflicted on McCanles "torments such as hell would not employ against the damned." Thus, while McCanles suffered, Sarah "fascinated Hickok with the witcheries of her charms and drew him to her side with a power he could not resist." Hickok, who "walked . . . in a sort of wandering delirium," later told friends that he "never loved another woman. To the end of his life there was no room

131. Ibid., p. 27.

132. William Elsey Connelley, *Wild Bill and His Era: The Life & Adventures of James Butler Hickok* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1933).

133. Connelley, "Wild Bill," p. 12.

in his heart for any other than Sarah Shull." She, on the other hand, probably "never gave Wild Bill another thought," said Connelley, adding, "Women are created that way—most of them."[134]

The day after Horace Wellman left for Brownville, McCanles went to the station house and quarreled with Jane Wellman. Hickok, who had been placed in charge of the station temporarily, was there, as was Shull, who was to provide companionship for Jane Wellman. During his visit, McCanles "in sport, as he said, . . . roughly mishandled Hickok, who did not resist, nor did he then show any resentment."[135]

When McCanles again visited the station on 12 July, accompanied by Monroe as well as Woods and Gordon, he instructed the two men to go to the barn to keep the men there from interfering in his business with Wellman. McCanles carried a "short double-barreled shotgun" on his saddle and had "at least two revolvers and perhaps a bowie knife." Connelley insisted that McCanles was responsible for the events that transpired. "And why should he want trouble with Wellman? He was only an agent," Connelley asked rhetorically. "The debt was not his affair." The primary reason for McCanles's action, Connelley insisted, was that he was upset about Hickok's relationship with Sarah Shull. "Aside from that, his dissatisfaction with the Overland companies, and his anxiety to be on his way to the West on the business he had planned, remain the only reasons for his rash and unfortunate action."[136]

Nevertheless, McCanles went on a tirade against Wellman, demanding payment or possession of the premises. When Wellman responded that he could neither pay nor give up possession, McCanles "became abusive." Fearing for his life, Wellman went inside, and his wife, "exasperated beyond endurance," came to the door and began her own "diatribe of vituperation." Hickok next confronted McCanles, who had not expected him to have "the courage to stand and defy him." For the first time, wrote Connelley, he realized "the extent of that deadly enmity which existed between Hickok and himself."[137]

Sarah Shull and Sarah Kelsey were also in the kitchen, said Connel-

134. Ibid., p. 13.
135. Ibid., p. 14.
136. Ibid., p. 15.
137. Ibid., pp. 15–16.

ley, and McCanles evidently moved to a different door so the women would be out of his line of fire, suggesting that he intended to shoot. Once McCanles told Hickok to "come out from behind the curtain and fight fair," or "he would come in and drag him out," Hickok's "spirit of aggressive manhood" kicked in. "Becoming more confident every minute," Hickok told McCanles "that if he came in to drag him out, 'There will be one less —— when you try that.'" Then, a shot rang out, striking McCanles in the heart.[138]

Woods and Gordon raced toward the house, and Hickok fired twice, mortally wounding Woods. When Gordon turned to escape, Hickok also shot and mortally wounded him and continued firing until his revolvers were empty. Jane Wellman finished off Woods with a hoe, Connelley said, although he admitted that Horace Wellman may have been the one responsible.[139] In any event, Jane Wellman was yelling "Come, let's kill all of the ——." At this point, Connelley added a startling new detail that presented Hickok in an even more positive light. As Monroe, who stood frozen near his father's body in response to what he just witnessed, was being threatened, wrote Connelley, a "horror-stricken" Hickok seized the hoe, allowing the young McCanles to escape.[140]

Connelley also included the story of Hickok's accusing Joe Baker, one of the stock tenders at the barn, of being one of McCanles's associates and that Hickok "cocked his pistol with the intention of killing him." When Baker's stepdaughter pleaded for his life, Hickok refrained from shooting him but went on "to club Baker into insensibility with the butt of his pistol." Afterwards, he and the others followed Gordon's trail with a bloodhound. When they located him, Hickok handed McCanles's shotgun to one of the men, commanding him to "'put that fellow out of his misery. That will show me that you don't belong to the McCanles gang.' The man was afraid to disobey Hickok and shot Gordon."[141]

The next morning, neighbors buried McCanles, Woods, and Gordon, and Sarah Shull left by stage to be "swallowed up by the vast and

138. Ibid., p. 17.
139. Ibid., p. 18; Connelley, *Wild Bill and His Era*, pp. 41–42.
140. Connelley, *Wild Bill and His Era*, p. 42.
141. Connelley, "Wild Bill," pp. 18–19.

indefinite frontier." She reemerged only recently, wrote Connelley, and had "no story of consequence to tell." On 15 July, Hickok, Brink, and Wellman were arrested, and a preliminary trial was held before Justice Coulter. "No motive for the crime was shown, so it remained a matter of self-defense," Connelley stated. "The accused contended they were defending government property; that is, wagons, horses, stages and other appliances used in carrying the mails of the United States." Although Monore McCanles was summoned as a witness, he "was not placed on the stand by the prosecution, which had already collapsed before the trial. Public sentiment had acquitted the defendants, and witnesses could do the prosecution no good."[142]

Several years later, another pro-McCanles version of events appeared to contradict Connelley's account. In *Rock Creek Station: The Scene of the "Wild Bill" Hickok—McCanles Killing*, Nebraska writer Levi Bloyd utilized information from David McCanles's descendants. "It was not until the 1930s, some 70 years after the tragedy, that the McCanles family started collecting data in an endeavor to stop the fictitious stories," he said. Bruce McCandless, great-grandson of David McCanles, "'got fed up' with stories appearing in the eastern papers while he was taking [a] post graduate course in communications at Annapolis, Maryland," and wrote his father, Byron, for "the truth about the tragedy." Byron's father, Julius, was David McCanles's son. Attorney Wendell McCanles, the son of Monroe McCanles, also helped.[143]

Although Bloyd mostly repeated information from the Dawson and Hansen accounts, he highlighted one incident preceding the shooting that may have contributed significantly to the conflict. According to Bloyd, a man named Holmes, who lived in the area, "ran off with a team, wagon, and several farm implements of David McCanles." Holmes, said Bloyd, was Jane Wellman's father. While Wellman and young Monroe trekked to Brownville in early July 1861, David McCanles pursued Holmes, finally capturing him "below Marysville" about 5 July. After bringing Holmes and the stolen equipment back, McCanles, as was his practice, "dealt roughly" with his prisoner. Jane Wellman ev-

142. Ibid., p. 19.

143. Bloyd, comp., *Rock Creek Station: The Scene of the "Wild Bill"—McCanles Killing*, Jefferson County History series (Fairbury, Nebr.: Holloway Printing Co., [1932?]), n. p.

identely witnessed the punishment, which undoubtedly "festered the feeling between McCanles and the Wellmans."[144]

Contributing new information about Mary McCanles, Bloyd called her "a courageous woman" who, after David's death, continued living in the area with her five children: Monroe, Julius, Cling, Lizza, and Charles, ranging from two to twelve years of age. Later, she married John Hughes, one of the neighbors who had arrived at Rock Creek Station shortly after the shooting. The couple had two children, Jimmy, who died at ten months, and Janie Compton, still living in the region when Bloyd compiled his book. Mary McCanles and Holmes divorced in 1870.[145]

Not surprisingly, given the accounts by Dawson, Hansen, and Bloyd, Nebraska historians have not regarded Hickok highly. In *Roundup: A Nebraska Reader*, editor Virginia Faulkner included Carl Uhlarik's "The Myth of Wild Bill Hickok" from the Summer 1951 issue of *Prairie Schooner*. In the article, Uhlarik takes the opportunity to belittle Hickok's perceived heroism in "what for ninety-five years has been regarded as the greatest single-handed fight in American history." Clearly, Uhlarik wrote, "Hickok had no motive for killing McCanles." If indeed, it was Wild Bill who pulled the trigger of the Hawkins rifle, then he was guilty of the basest treachery."[146] Historian James C. Olsen went a step farther, excluding the Rock Creek fight entirely in his highly regarded *History of Nebraska*.[147]

Biographer Joseph G. Rosa faced a daunting task when he began sifting through these contradictory conclusions about Hickok. It was at Rock Creek Station "that James Butler Hickok's legend really started," he declared.[148] "Even before the *Harper's* story came out, the incident was already well known in the West."[149] Indeed, Rosa considered this incident to be one of the great epic struggles in the West. "No single gunfight," he said, "with the possible exception of the Earp-Clanton

144. Ibid., n. p.
145. Ibid., n. p.
146. Ibid., p. 32.
147. Olsen, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).
148. Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, p. 34.
149. Ibid., p. 37.

fight in October, 1881, in Tombstone, Arizona, has caused so much controversy as the Hickok-McCanles affair at Rock Creek on the afternoon of Friday, July 12, 1861."[150]

Nevertheless, Rosa faced the same difficulty other writers had in reconstructing events: McCanles, Woods, and Gordon were all killed; Horace and Jane Wellman left no accounts of the shootings; Sarah Shull gave only fragmentary responses to questions posed more than fifty years later; and Monroe McCanles, only twelve years old at the time of his father's death, did not provide testimony until the 1920s. Although George Ward Nichols claimed Hickok provided him with an account of the fight, his tale in *Harper's* magazine is so far-fetched as to be almost useless. As Rosa also notes, "What has never been satisfactorily resolved is how much Hickok actually said to Nichols and how much he got from others."[151]

Given his pro-Hickok inclinations, Rosa naturally emphasized McCanles's shady background in North Carolina, where he absconded with funds and left with his mistress, Sarah Shull. When McCanles's wife and children arrived in Nebraska with his brother James on 20 September 1859, there were, asserts Rosa, many quarrels between David and Mary McCanles concerning Shull. In addition, David McCanles was a "local bully" and a "noted border ruffian."[152] Although Rosa dismissed Buel's tale about Hickok being mauled by a cinnamon bear, he nevertheless believed Hickok had somehow been badly injured before he arrived at Rock Creek station, asserting, "The effects of his recent battle showed in the clumsy way he walked, and his left arm was still useless."[153] McCanles, said Rosa, took advantage of this situation, repeatedly throwing Hickok to the ground. In addition, Rosa highlighted other reasons for the shootings, including the overdue payments for the station and McCanles's pursuit and punishment of Holmes, the father of Jane Wellman, who had stolen one of his teams and a wagon.[154]

150. Ibid., p. 34.
151. Ibid., p. 37.
152. Ibid., p. 41.
153. Ibid., p. 42.
154. Ibid., pp. 33, 42–43.

Most importantly, Rosa provided a unique conclusion concerning Hickok's guilt: "There was a fight at Rock Creek, and it is true that only three men died, but after sifting through all the evidence, I suggest that possibly Hickok did not kill McCanles after all."[155] Instead, Rosa decided that Horace Wellman might have fired the shot from behind the curtain. Wellman and Monroe returned on 11 July without the money owed to McCanles, Rosa asserts, and the next day McCanles came to the station carrying a shotgun and "launched into a tirade of abuse" against Wellman.[156] Jane Wellman responded in kind, and Hickok joined the dispute. Soon, however, he disappeared behind the curtain dividing the rooms, from which Wellman, who was also there, shot and killed McCanles. When Woods and Gordon raced to the house, Hickok shot and badly wounded Woods. Although Gordon retreated, Hickok managed to wound him as well. Meanwhile, Jane Wellman was yelling "Kill them all," and soon Woods was hacked to death with a hoe.[157] In Rosa's opinion, Hickok's defensive actions were justified.

Little new evidence has surfaced since Rosa wrote his definitive biography of Hickok. Author Mark Dugan, however, discovered some additional information concerning the relationship between McCanles and Sarah Shull. In *Tales Never Told Around the Campfire: True Stories of Frontier America*, Dugan argues that Shull "held the key to what happened" at Rock Creek in 1861. Amazingly, Dugan located Jessie Williams, of Foscoe, North Carolina, who had been a good friend of Shull in the 1920s. Although Williams's testimony is secondhand, she had an "exceptional memory," said Dugan, and "graciously related Sarah's story to the author." Her testimony, along with other documentary evidence, allowed Dugan to resolve several controversies.[158]

Sarah, he learned, was born on 3 October 1833 at Shull's Mill in North Carolina, one of thirteen children of Philip and Phoebe Shull. Her father ran a grist mill in the 1850s and established Shull's Mill Store. Sarah, who could read and write well, probably kept books for

155. Ibid., pp. 37–38.
156. Ibid., p. 45.
157. Ibid., pp. 46–47.
158. Dugan, *Tales Never Told Around the Campfire: True Stories of Frontier America* (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1992), pp. 29–30.

her father.[159] In addition, said Dugan, Sarah "had that rare, indescribable quality that attracts men, and throughout her life, her major fault would be her choice of men." In 1855, David McCanles and Sarah, then twenty-one, began the association that altered "the course of both their lives."[160]

Dugan considered David Colbert McCanles "a controversial figure to say the least, much like the fabled Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Born in 1828, he was the third of five children of James and Rachel Salina Alexander McCanles. The family lived within a mile of Shull's Mill in the 1830s. David's father was "an educated man, an expert cabinetmaker, and fine fiddler who also taught school near Shulls Mill" and after 1849 served as justice of the peace. David attended Episcopal Academy for six years, excelling in military training, and in 1848 married Mary Green, the "daughter of prominent resident Joseph Green." Their son, William Monroe, was born in 1849, followed by Julius C., in 1852, Clingman in 1854, and Elizabeth in 1856.[161]

David McCanles ran for sheriff of Watauga County in 1852, in a "bitter race" against John Horton of Cove Creek. During one especially heated debate, the two men charged one another with participating in the counterfeiting business. "In the end," wrote Dugan, "the oratory powers of McCanles overcame his reticent opponent, and [he] became the first elected Sheriff of Watauga County." His first term lasted four years. One author, according to Dugan, mistakenly listed Horton as sheriff, but an 1852 tax receipt indicates that McCanles was in fact sheriff. Local resident Howard Bingham described McCanles as having "a warm and generous heart full of love and sympathy" as well as being an "astute electioneer." McCanles defeated Horton a second time in the sheriff's race in 1856, and despite Connelley's assertion, Dugan stated that "neither man held a grudge."[162]

In a story that appeared in the *Watauga Democrat* on 15 February 1894, Howard Bingham asserted that McCanles "became the devotee

159. Ibid., p. 30.

160. Ibid., pp. 31–32. Shulls Mill and Shull's Mill appear variously in the historical and contemporary record. For consistency, Shull's Mill is used here.

161. Ibid., p. 32.

162. Ibid., pp. 32–33.

of wine and women and plunged into the deepest vortex of dissipation and debauchery," finally fleeing the state with a "beautiful mountain girl whom he had won and ruined."[163] Evidently, McCanles had become involved with Sarah Shull in 1854 or 1855, and she was soon pregnant. Word spread quickly throughout the small, isolated community of Shull's Mill, whose "residents reacted with caustic comments and shunned the fallen woman." The child, Martha Allice Shull, was born 4 May 1856 but died fourteen months later on 2 July 1857. "Although there is no documentation to prove that McCanles was the father, circumstantial evidence confirms it," Dugan asserts.[164]

Dugan carefully examined evidence presented in John Arthur Preston's *A History of Watauga County* to determine whether McCanles absconded with tax money. Documentation was almost impossible to find because the courthouse had burned, but Dugan concluded that McCanles was indeed guilty. Shull had "told at least two people that McCanles did take the tax money when she went west with him," and, in fact, he left "because of trouble with the law."[165]

McCanles and Shull departed on or about 9 February 1859. The fact that David sold his property in Watauga County to his brother James indicates that this trip was "not a spur of the moment decision but a well-executed plan of action." McCanles's parents and other relatives also left North Carolina in February 1859, moving to Duggar's Ferry in Carter County, Tennessee. Dugan believed that both David's scandal and the family's Unionist sympathies prior to the Civil War contributed to their leaving North Carolina. Since David had sold much of his property to his brother and his family followed him a few months later, Dugan argues, "McCanles' immediate family and his brother undoubtedly had prior knowledge of his plans to leave Watauga County."[166]

According to Dugan, McCanles "installed Sarah Shull as housekeeper of the westside ranch," making her "the first white woman to live in what is now Jefferson County, Nebraska." In August 1859, brother James Leroy McCanles followed David to Nebraska and brought along both families. They arrived at Rock Creek station on 20 September

163. Ibid., p. 35.
164. Ibid., p. 34.
165. Ibid., pp. 38–39.
166. Ibid., p. 40.

1859 and lived temporarily at the East Rock Creek Ranch. When Mary McCanles came to Nebraska, she was fully aware that her husband had left North Carolina with Shull, and "the two women lived within walking distance of each other for more than one and a half years without any report of dissension." Indeed, according to an acquaintance of Shull, she never had trouble with Mary McCanles. Shull insisted that "McCanles' wife was a nice woman, and they had a nice family." Dugan also found that Shull "was listed as a domestic in the household of D. C. McCanles in the 1860 Territory of Nebraska census," proving "that Sarah's association with McCanles was, at least in part, on a business level." At his death, she had two I.O.U. notes for $240 "for value received" that James McCanles later paid.[167]

In May 1861, David McCanles built a schoolhouse on his ranch and hired the first schoolteacher at his own expense. He was a popular orator and often played violin for gatherings, indicating he was well known and respected in the community. McCanles was also prosperous, perhaps employing up to twenty men. Still, he had a "dark side." Dugan related a vicious property fight between McCanles and John P. Shumway and noted McCanles's rough treatment of Jane Wellman's father, Joseph Holmes.[168] Given these incidents, says Dugan, "there is no doubt that McCanles was a rough customer." Dugan, however, found claims that McCanles was a Confederate sympathizer "ludicrous," because "the entire McCanles family were staunch Whigs and later Republicans." Indeed, in 1861, "all of the residents in Jones County, Nebraska, were Republicans, and for the Fourth of July celebration that year, McCanles was selected orator and patriotically spoke against secession."[169] It is unlikely that McCanles intended to leave the country soon, as some writers suggest, because he sold the West Rock Creek Ranch to Wolfe and Hagenstein on 22 April, and payment was due a year later, suggesting he meant to remain in the region at least that long.[170]

Although Dugan's recounting of the events of 12 July 1861 is generally similar to those of Dawson, Hansen, and Rosa, he emphasizes the impact McCanles's punishment of Joseph Holmes had on subsequent

167. Ibid., pp. 41–43.
168. Ibid., pp. 43, 44–46.
169. Ibid., p. 44.
170. Ibid., pp. 48, 50.

The large boulder at the rear in this view, recorded in the 1920s, is said to mark the spot where David McCanles died.

events. If reported accurately, this incident might well have been a precipitating cause of the shooting.[171] Dugan doubted that McCanles was armed, however, because he "had never resorted to the use of weapons and always settled his disputes with his fists."[172] Further, because he was there to collect the money due him, it is unlikely that quarrels over the attentions of Sarah Shull precipitated the shooting. Indeed, Dugan observed, Shull did not witness the shooting; initially, the curtain obscured her view, and later, she and the other women were sent into a root cellar.[173]

Dugan also learned that Shull did not depart on the stage the morning after the shootings as other writers have maintained. Indeed, she remained in Nebraska for at least a month. After David's death, Mary and the children moved to James's home in Johnson County, where they stayed until the next spring before returning to the ranch that David had constructed on the Little Blue River. Sarah appears to have resided with the family at James's home. On 12 August, he paid Sarah the

171. Ibid., p. 49.
172. Ibid., p. 51.
173. Ibid., pp. 52–53.

$480 David owed her, and she signed the I.O.U.s, indicating she had received payment. She then traveled to Denver, evidently working as a domestic, and in 1863 married Philip Theodore DeVald, a music teacher serving in the First Colorado Infantry. They subsequently moved to Duluth, Minnesota, to Iowa, and to Florida, before Philip, at the age of fifty-eight, ran off with a sixteen-year-old music student. Sarah and Philip divorced in 1896. In late 1899 or early 1900, Sarah returned to Shull's Mill, where she worked at odd jobs and probably lived for a time with her brother Joseph. There, Jessie Williams, who moved to Shull's Mill in 1920, got to know her quite well. Sarah Shull died on 1 June 1932.[174]

Given all these conflicting interpretations and sparse documentary evidence, what can a contemporary researcher conclude regarding the events at Rock Creek Station? Clearly, Russell, Majors, and Waddell employed Hickok in March 1861 as assistant stock tender at Rock Creek Station. Suggestions that he was sent there, however, to recover from wounds suffered in a fight with a bear are fanciful. There is also little evidence that Hickok and David McCanles were ever involved in a quarrel serious enough to precipitate a shooting. Instead, the fatal shootings resulted from a confrontation between McCanles and Wellman, the station agent, concerning overdue payments for Rock Creek Station. For some reason, Hickok sided with Wellman, and both men apparently believed their lives were endangered.

Had cooler heads prevailed, it seems likely the situation could have been resolved without violence. Instead, three men were killed, causing speculation that more was at stake than unpaid bills. McCanles's defenders depict Hickok as a ruthless murderer, whereas Hickok's advocates suggest that McCanles was a Confederate sympathizer and the leader of a gang of desperadoes. Personal quarrels between the two men have also been cited to explain hostilities, including accusations that McCanles berated Hickok for cheating at cards, that McCanles wrestled Hickok while he suffered from injuries and derogatorily referred to him as "Duck Bill," and that McCanles and Hickok were rivals for the affection of Sarah Shull.

174. Ibid., pp. 54–60.

When McCanles confronted the men at the station, he seemed unaware that they might resort to violence or he would not have stood openly in the doorway with his son. Although Rosa suggests that Wellman, not Hickok, might have fired the shot that killed McCanles, this scenario seems highly unlikely. After McCanles was shot and his two companions, Woods and Gordon, raced to the house, it was Hickok who shot them, whereas Wellman finished off Woods with a hoe rather than a gun.

The central question, then, seems to be what motivated Hickok and the Wellmans to act as they did. Although evidence suggests that McCanles was not a Confederate sympathizer, it is possible that Hickok and Wellman perceived him as a pro-slavery border ruffian. Both men had arrived at Rock Creek only a short time before the incident, and neither saw McCanles as a community leader, building the station and establishing a schoolhouse. Instead, they saw him attempting to take the station away from their employer, the Overland Stage Company. It may never have occurred to them that McCanles had a legitimate claim.

George Hansen said that when Frank J. Wilstach queried in 1926 whether McCanles had been stealing horses from the stage company for the Confederate cavalry, he replied, "'To do this, McCanles, his twelve year old son, Monroe, his young cousin Woods and hired hand Gordon would have to hold up the loyal and fearless riders of the Pony Express, the four horse Stages that thundered over the Oregon Trail and thru Rock Creek Station daily, the heavy freight wagons that lined this highway,'" and drive the horses through Kansas and Missouri without encountering Union forces. "'This is ridiculous stuff,'" he said, "'and any one endeavoring to put out such a story as anything more than a drunken dream would be the laughing stock of the public.'" Nevertheless, Hansen understood how these fantasies arose. "David and James McCanles came from North Carolina, a southern state, less than two years before the Civil War. It is not strange that some, even an old settler, . . . should believe them Southern sympathizers, and thru the years build up a story as ridiculous as the discredited ones."[175]

175. Hansen, "True Story of Wild Bill-McCanles Affray," pp. 36–37.

Hickok, only twenty-two years old, had just spent several years in Kansas where the national dispute over the expansion of slavery had erupted into violence. Evidence suggests that Hickok participated in the fighting in Kansas, and he certainly identified with anti-slavery factions.[176] Thus, Hickok and Wellman may well have perceived McCanles as a member of the proslavery faction. They also may have considered McCanles's treatment of Jane Wellman's father, Holmes, as an attack on a Union man. If Hickok misinterpreted McCanles's actions as being similar to those of proslavery men in Kansas, his shooting becomes more understandable. Perception is every bit as important as reality.

These views help to explain the assertions in the 1861 *Brownville Advertiser*. The writer claimed that a pro-southern man had dragged a Union man with a rope, perhaps referring to Jane Wellman's father. It also interprets the killing of McCanles as an effort to prevent him from taking supplies from the stage company for the South. These suggestions may have come directly or indirectly from Hickok or Wellman, or from neighbors who shared these views. Hickok further expanded on this theme when retelling the story to George Ward Nichols.

Had they not felt threatened, Hickok and Wellman, rather than shooting McCanles, could easily have confronted him with rifle and revolvers and demanded that he leave. They were in a far more secure location than he was. Because McCanles brought his young son with him to the station, it is unlikely he thought there would be violence. The shooting of Woods and Gordon, and their murders after being wounded, are also incomprehensible unless the people at the station felt threatened. If, as many writers claim, Hickok was a man of law and order, why did he not attempt to prevent the killing of Woods and Gordon? Instead, it seems he was an active participant. According to several accounts, he also shot at young Monroe as he fled the scene and threatened to kill Joe Baker for being McCanles's friend. Hickok, Horace and Jane Wellman, and Doc Brink all seem to have become caught up in a frenzy of killing, perhaps motivated by misperceptions

176. *See* Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill*, pp. 14–15, and Joseph G. Rosa, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Man and His Myth* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), pp. 31–50.

of McCanles and his intentions. It seems that cooler heads could have defused this situation.

Instead, the killings appear to have been unplanned, occurring in a moment of intense passion. There is no evidence that anyone, including Hickok, attempted to resolve the issues peaceably. Indeed, Monroe McCanles recalled that after Horace Wellman killed Woods with the hoe and came after him, "Mrs. Wellman stood in the door clapping her hands and yelling 'kill him, kill him, kill him.'"[177] If McCanles made a mistake by threatening action, the Wellmans and Hickok similarly overreacted. What was needed was a mediator, a voice of moderation. It is difficult, then, not to blame Hickok for the deaths of these three men. It seems that in most courts of law, Hickok would have been convicted of murder.

177. William Monroe McCanles, "The Only Living Eye Witness," *Nebraska History* 49 (Spring 1968): 49.

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On the covers: James Butler ("Wild Bill") Hickok (front) was a legend in his own time, and his reputation as a gunfighter, lawman, and gambler grew to epic proportions after his murder at a poker table in Deadwood in 1876 (back). In this issue, the late James D. McLaird looks at Hickok's life, sifting fact from fiction and tracing how the Hickok legend has evolved.