

## The Killing of "Wild Bill" Hickok On the 135<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of His Death

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1876 General George Armstrong Custer's 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry was badly defeated by a joint force of Cheyenne, Lakota Sioux, and Arapaho Indians in the *Battle of the Little Bighorn*. This brought further prominence to the Black Hills area of the Dakota Territory where gold had been discovered in 1874. Illinois native James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok was known as a frontiersman, Indian fighter, buffalo hunter, tracker, and sheriff of several rough western towns with a somewhat self-glorified image of himself. In fact, he had at one-time wowed audiences in "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Shows with his shooting prowess. Also, he had been an excellent Army scout and the Marshall of Abilene, Kansas. Many admired him, but along the way he made many enemies, as well as those who wanted to challenge him to bolster their own reputations.

After several controversial shootings in his official capacity, he left Kansas joining his good friend Charlie Utter's wagon train for the Black Hills gold fields of the Dakota Territory. Like many others he planned on getting rich by mining Black Hill's gold. However, like many, this did not work out. At age 39, and with diagnosed vision problems, Bill was trying to support himself by playing poker on a daily basis.

In the evening of August 2nd, 1876, "Wild Bill" Hickok entered Nuttall and Mann's #10 Saloon on the main street of the Deadwood mining camp to join a poker game. His usual habit was to sit with his back against the wall so he could watch any approaching adversary or enemy that might wish to harm or kill him. He was even known to play cards with his left hand so that his right hand (gun hand) would always be able to defend himself. When he approached the poker table a fellow Deadwood resident, Charlie Rich, was seated in Bill's preferred seat against the wall. Bill asked him to give up his seat so he could take it but Mr. Rich refused. Bill reluctantly took a seat at the side of the table where he could still have a good view of the front door.

However, the saloon also had a side entrance that was to Bill's back.

In a rather heated poker game the night before, a "cross-eyed" drifter named Jack McCall, had lost all his money to Bill and the other players in the game. McCall should not have even been in this game as he could not afford to lose his money like the more professional players in the game. Bill gave him money for breakfast afterwards and reportedly told him not to come back and play again until he could afford to lose. This reportedly enraged McCall and he vowed revenge, although no one took his threat seriously.

As Bill was playing the next evening, Jack McCall snuck in through the side door, behind Bill, with his six-shot revolver drawn, and reportedly shouted "take that" and shot him once in the back of the head. Bill fell dead instantly as the bullet passed through Bill's brain, came out his cheek, and lodged in the left wrist of Captain Massie seated across from him. Immediately saloon patrons and townspeople chased after McCall. They caught up to him rather quickly on a back street of the mining camp. McCall reportedly turned and fired four different shots at them at point blank range, and amazingly his gun either jammed or his bullets were duds. He made it to a horse that was tied to a hitching post. He took off, but the cinch on the saddle had reportedly been loosened and he fell to the ground. This allowed his pursuers to catch him without further incident. Within days a miner's trial was convened in downtown Deadwood. This was the miners and other residents' only course of legal action since the Deadwood mining camp was not yet recognized by the Dakota Territory as a village or town, since it was located on Indian Lands. Amazingly the 12 man jury unanimously acquitted Jack McCall of Hickok's murder, despite the testimony of Massie and several of the fellow players in the poker game. McCall gratefully, and by the next day, quickly left Deadwood for good. However, he chose to travel to the South Dakota Territorial Capital of Yankton, where he was quickly arrested. At the second trial he was subsequently convicted and sentenced to hang for Hickok's murder. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1877 his sentence was carried out as he was buried with the noose still around his neck. Bill was buried in nearby Ingelside Cemetery with the entire town in attendance for his funeral. His good friend,

Charlie Utter made a hand-made monument that was originally placed on his grave. On the third anniversary of Bill's death in 1879, his body was moved to his final and present-day resting place in the town's new cemetery, Mount Moriah.

It was said that Bill's hand contained two black aces and two black eights. This has forever become known as "the dead man's hand." Two days later, the residents of Deadwood, being fed-up with the lawlessness of the area, hired the co-owner of Starr and Bullock's Hardware Store, Seth Bullock as the town's first Sheriff.

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