

EDITOR'S LETTER

The Never-Ending Death of Outlaw Jesse James

Count Hollywood among those that can't forget him

The fascination that many of us have with Jesse James borders on the insane. No, it's not the kind of insanity that was found in the late 1850s and early '60s on the bleeding border between Kansas and Missouri. Rarely does it lead to bloodshed anymore. But it still matters to some people that Jesse be viewed as a Robin Hood who believed as deeply as any true Southerner in the Lost Cause rather than as a hoodlum who believed as shallowly as any two-bit holdup man in the lining of his own pockets. Having connections—family or otherwise—with Jesse and his gang is still deemed cool in some circles. And heaven help those who still dare to challenge the traditional history that states brave Jesse James was shot from behind by cowardly Bob Ford on April 3, 1882.

James, a populist antihero if there ever was one, "remains a cultural icon," Ted P. Yeatman wrote six years ago in his well-received book *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend*. Yeatman further described him as "a creation of the mass media, whose name and (all too often fictional) deeds are recounted in song, dozens of books, television shows, and at least thirty-six motion pictures." And there have been a few "J.J." motion pictures and documentaries since then, not to mention the upcoming Brad Pitt flick *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. Yeatman, who has no complaints with such a "traditional" title, has more to say in this issue of *Wild West* about the circumstances of Jesse's death and how the Fords—that would be the coward and the coward's brother, Charlie—handled their notoriety after the dirty deed.



Jesse James in death, though at least one person contends that the dead man is actually his cousin Wood Hite.

great-grandfather J.L. Courtney, as well as that Jesse's cousin Wood Hite is buried in Jesse's grave, created unpleasant havoc in San Angelo in 2001 at the annual meeting of the modern James-Younger Gang.

Duke has been speaking out against the "tainted" DNA results since 1998 (see her Web site at www.jessejamesintexas.com) and says, "Happily, other historians and authors have now joined my efforts and the truth about Jesse James' fate will become evident." The sound you hear is not Jesse turning over (again) in his grave—it's Yeatman shaking his fact-filled head. "They say," says Duke, "all truth passes through three stages—it is ridiculed, then violently opposed, and finally it is accepted as being self-evident." Duke tells us that Brad Pitt's agent contacted her about a half dozen times but that in the end the filmmakers did not go with her version of the death story. Could anyone sell a movie called *The Assassination of Wood Hite by the Clever Robert Ford*? As for me, I find this all utterly fascinating, and I shamelessly continue to delight in Jesse James news. Insanity? Well, maybe, but believe me, I'm not the only one stuck in the nutty stage.

Gregory Lallre

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