

Great American Lives

of Nineteenth Century Missouri

Belle Starr

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Missouri was the scene of lawlessness and violence during the Civil War and for years thereafter. The **frontier** was still largely untamed, and the passions that had led to war had yet to die. It was within this climate that female outlaw Belle Starr came of age.

Born near Carthage, Mo., in 1848, Myra Maybelle Shirley was the daughter of John Shirley, a **prosperous** southwest Missouri farmer. Her family sold their land and set up shop in Carthage, where John Shirley operated an inn, tavern and blacksmith shop.

Belle attended the Carthage Female Academy, received a proper education and was a noted piano player. She also enjoyed the outdoors, where her older brother, Bud, taught her how to ride and shoot. But the violence of the Civil War interrupted Belle's respectable life.

Belle's family was devoted to the Confederate cause. Her brother, Bud, joined a band of **Confederate** Bushwhackers, **guerillas** who fought the **Union** by surprise raids and attacks. Through Bud, Belle met and associated with other **notorious** Bushwhackers such as William Clarke Quantrell, Frank and Jesse James, and Cole Younger.

But when Bud was killed trying to escape a house in Sarcoxie that had been surrounded by Union troops, the Shirley family was devastated. His son gone and his businesses ruined by the war, John Shirley resettled his family in Scyene, Texas. While there, Belle married Jim Reed, a former guerilla whose decline into crime was just beginning.

ON THE LAM FROM THE LAW

During her marriage to Reed, Belle had a daughter, nicknamed Pearl, and a son, James. The couple settled on a farm in Missouri, but actually spent much of their marriage running from authorities

who pursued Reed for crimes ranging from robbery to murder. He was gunned down in Texas in 1874.

In 1880, Belle married Sam Starr, the son of the notorious Tom Starr, a whiskey-selling, cattle-rustling Cherokee. The couple settled into a cabin in Indian Territory southwest of Fort Smith, Ark. They spent their marriage immersed in illegal activity such as **harboring** fugitives and horse thievery, for which they served nine months in prison. But Belle was **unrepentant**, commenting to one newspaper reporter: "I am a friend to any brave and gallant **outlaw**."

In 1886, Belle was accused of robbing several area farm settlements with two other bandits. According to witnesses, the third bandit was a woman dressed as a man. Belle pleaded not guilty to the charges and was **acquitted** when no one could positively identify her.

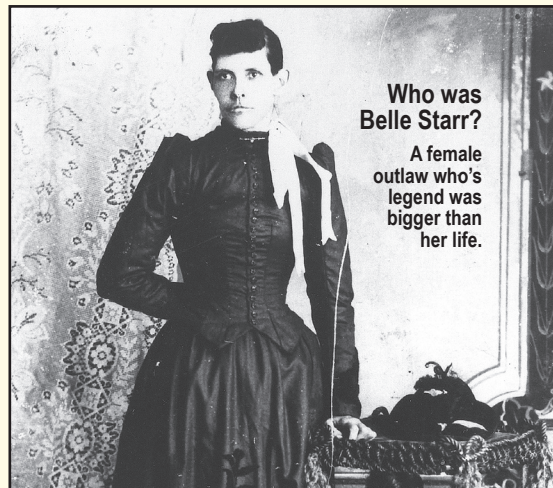
When Sam Starr was killed by a long-time foe in 1886, Belle almost lost her claim to her late husband's land. She solved the problem by marrying back into the family, however, and became the wife of Bill July, the adopted son of Tom Starr.

VIOLENT ENDING

In February 1889, Belle Starr's life came to a violent end. While on horseback headed to her home, a shotgun blast threw her from her saddle. Although there were several suspects in the case – as Belle had made numerous enemies during her life – her killer was never identified.

Belle Starr was a few days shy of her 41st birthday when she was buried in front of her cabin. Engraved on her tombstone was a horse, a bell and a star, along with this **epitaph** written by her daughter, Pearl:

"Shed not for her the bitter tear
Nor give the heart to vain regret
Tis but the casket that lies here
The gem that filled it sparkles yet."



Who was Belle Starr?

A female outlaw who's legend was bigger than her life.

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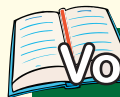
THE WOMAN AND THE LEGEND

After her death, novelists began to portray Belle Starr as a glamorous female "Bandit Queen." Dime novels, a popular form of literature that specialized in sensationalism, made Starr into the Wild West's most notorious woman – a fantastic and daring outlaw who was also beautiful.

Most of the stories in these novels were exaggerated or made up entirely. This fictional Starr has also appeared in several Hollywood movies.

For Discussion

- Was Belle Starr a victim of her circumstances, or was she responsible for the troubles in her life?
- Why is the fictional Belle Starr better-known than the real one?
- Was Belle Starr a hero or a villain?
- What does Belle Starr's life tell you about the times in which she lived?



Vocabulary

Match the vocabulary word with the correct definition, then write a sentence using each word.

- ___ Frontier
- ___ Outlaw
- ___ Prosperous
- ___ Confederate
- ___ Union
- ___ Notorious
- ___ Harboring
- ___ Acquitted
- ___ Epitaph
- ___ Guerillas
- ___ Unrepentant

- A – The name for those who fought for the South during the Civil War
- B – Protecting or shielding from harm
- C – Not sorry
- D – Famous in a bad or negative way
- E – A person habitually involved in committing crime
- F – Gangs of unofficial soldiers who fought the enemy by small, surprise raids and attacks
- G – The part of a country which forms the border of its settled or inhabited regions
- H – The alliance of Northern states that fought to keep the Southern states from forming an independent, slave-owning nation during the Civil War
- I – Released or let go
- J – An inscription on a grave stone or tomb
- K – Successful or well-to-do