The Legacy of Wild Bill Hickok: Myth as Historical Model in the North American West

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The Legacy of Wild Bill Hickok: 
Myth as Historical Model in the North American West

Vahe Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Project

by Zachary A. Bulthuis

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The frontier is the outer edge of the wave -- the meeting point between savagery and civilization....

As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social.... The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.

--Frederick Jackson Turner, The Significance of the Frontier in American History

This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.
--film The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)

Frederick Jackson Turner's The Significance of the Frontier in American History, or "Turner Thesis," presented to the American Historical Association in 1893, laid the foundation for all later historical work on the North American West. Turner argued that:

[T]he advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history.¹

Turner credited the frontier with building and enhancing the strong sense of individualism characteristic of American society. In his work, Turner studied the interaction between white Americans and Indians, the spread of democracy, and the predominance of individualism in the West.

Turner's idea that these forces shaped the American character had been recognized by earlier historians, but through Turner's work a new analysis emerged. He was inspired by Darwin's theory of evolution in his explanation of the frontier process as an American cultural evolution. On the American frontier, without the structures of civilization, the upward
process of social evolution could be reenacted. Each time the frontier
moved west, the settlers experienced this evolution again, and each time a
more distinctively American, rather than European, culture emerged. This
was where Turner felt other historians of his day failed -- they traced
American roots to European political institutions and traditions, while
Turner argued that "'[t]he true point of view in the history of this nation
is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.'"2

According to historian Wilbur Jacobs, Turner was a historian
"preoccupied with the massing of evidence, the sifting of data to reach
objective conclusions, and the consideration of theoretical formulations
and hypotheses."3 Turner stressed intellectual ideas when considering
subjects that tend to receive romantic interpretations. To Turner,
western development was a very complex process, the details of which
needed to be closely studied. As a means of studying frontier expansion,
he amassed a "never-ending accumulation of data swel[ling from] his
wooden filing cases and cardboard 3 x 5 filing boxes." He cautioned
historian Arthur H. Buffinton, a former student, to "'[l]et the thoroughness
of detailed investigation appear clearly enough, especially in footnote
citations and illustrations, and bibliography, to make it clear that the
'grind' has preceded the grist.'"4 Yet, despite his massing of evidence,
Turner believed that developing a central idea, or connecting theme, was
vital to history, and he did so in his study of the American West.
Later generations of historians have responded to Turner by arguing both that his ideas were broad generalizations, and that his emphasis on the frontier as a process came at the expense of an understanding of the West as a place or region. Also, because he undervalued the role of community on the frontier, Turner's concept of individualism as the central theme of the frontier seems inadequate. While Turner's empirical method validates his thesis, it seems that the criticism that he over-generalized throughout his analysis is also an accurate critique. 

Current western historians critical of the Turner thesis focus on issues such as race, region, and gender in an effort to provide a new model for studying the West. These efforts are not problem-free, however. This effort to study multiple perspectives can fragment history and render impossible the development of a consistent theme. A focus on differences in geographical subregions, race, or gender can allow for great depth of knowledge, however, perspective is lost when the focus is so narrow. Of course, if one studies "the role of the U.S. military in the Southwest," one will probably not have an in-depth understanding of any of the many communities scattered across this large mass of land. Yet, one would have better perspective on the area with this type of study than if a single community is the focus. It is something of a Catch-22: studying historical themes or large areas can limit understanding of individual experiences, while focusing on the micro-level fragments historical
understanding. In the late twentieth century, pluralism has been considered the more professional historical approach, while Turner’s legacy of thematic, unifying descriptions of the West has become an important ingredient of popular history and fiction. At the root of this conflict is a power struggle. A unifying meta-narrative, while it may include many voices, is necessarily the voice of the dominant forces in a society. The approach of pluralism emphasizes that there is not one totally agreed upon story, that there is no truth with a capital “T.”

Historians must attempt to move beyond the Turner/Anti-Turner division to find a model that can embrace the stories which have been ignored, while at the same time developing a theory or theories that can make sense of historical information on a “meta” level. Just as perspective on the nation’s history must not be lost when studying a region, it is necessary to retain the perspective of seeing the West as a whole, even when studying a piece of it.

Competing claims of fiction and history, especially primary sources, will be considered to further this effort. The development of narrative formulas in the history of the West will be considered, and the predominance of these formulas will show why it is that the fiction of the West should be considered an acceptable source for the western historian.
The patterns which can be observed in the plethora of stories made available by the study of myth can give insight into social attitudes and traditions. At the same time, the tales can make it clear that there are multiple versions of historical events.

Rugged individualism as a sustaining American myth stands as a key idea to both fiction and history in the American West. By studying a specific case, Wild Bill Hickok, it will be understood how it is that the conventions of myth (such as rugged individualism) are an important part of historical narrative. The study of Hickok here will involve a focus on a historian, Frank Wilstach, whose work shows just how interrelated myth and history can be -- even when the historian is aware of this relationship. A brief consideration of Hickok's possible involvement with Calamity Jane will show how the fiction of the West not only functions as valuable information for a thematic historian such as Turner, but also for the scholar more interested in the plurality of history. A study of the relationship between the fictional and historical western narratives is necessary to begin this effort.

Proposing an Historical Use of Myth

Historian Michael McGerr's "Is There a Twentieth-Century West?" addresses myth and popular culture as valid sources for defining the West. Like Turner, McGerr sees mythic individualism as central to what is distinctively western, and argues that it is this individualism that has
shaped contemporary western political history. McGerr does not argue that the western frontier generated all American individualism. Rather, he asserts that the theme of individualism has an important role in the study of the American West because it can be found in both history and fiction.

The conception of a western tradition of individualism, McGerr argues, accounts for the success of "new conservatives" Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. These politicians stressed the independence and individualism traditionally associated with their region -- Goldwater was from Arizona and Reagan was usually associated with California. What was most remarkable was how successful their emphasis on individualism was at a time when the mold for politicians entailed "corporate liberalism." Though the theme of individualism has been claimed as part of the western tradition, the accuracy of this association has been highly contested. Families and communities were just as important to the settling of the frontier as any lone mountain men or trappers. However, there definitely is a strong theme of individualism to be found in the traditional conception of the West. Individualism is a characteristic embraced by Americans as a frontier quality.

Historian Ann Fabian addresses the problem that results from the conflict between "the scholarly and the popular, between elite interpreters and mass audiences" by asking "why reject the popular as
suspect, as dangerously anti-intellectual, when the field remains wide open for investigation of the troublesome twin births of western pasts?" The popular narrative has crossed into the realm of history, especially in the historical American West. Fabian suggestively states that "the field remains wide open for investigation." As McGerr suggests, it could be highly beneficial to give serious consideration to the mythological narrative as historical evidence.

Advocates of an empirical, scientific approach to history would be most likely to object to the inclusion of "the popular" as historical evidence. Empiricism in history involves the effort to treat history as a science -- to carefully gather evidence, which can later be analyzed. Historians can accomplish this task by seeking out primary sources, especially when studying a region surrounded with as much myth as the American West.

Instead, historians have struggled to generate evidence to dispel myths of the American West generated by novelists and Hollywood. To many, mythology is simply something to be debunked. The efforts to disprove myth result most strikingly in an inability to understand it. This is a terrible waste of a valuable resource.

Another important factor can be found in purportedly accurate historical accounts. Often, the legends historians set out to disprove turn out to have more truth in them than anticipated. For example, the number
of men killed by a given gunfighter may be inaccurate, but the frontier West really was a place where six-shooters often did settle gambling disputes. Gunfights were neither as fair nor as climactic as we have seen in film, but they did occur. Billy the Kid was no romantic cowboy, but he really was a hired killer in the Lincoln County War.¹⁰

Although the West is a virtual warehouse of fascinating actual events, it is easy to go too far in the acceptance of stories. Often, the primary sources of the American West are "first hand witnesses" -- people who have no proof they were actually at the gunfight, battle, or poker game, yet share, in great detail, the amazing facts of the event. The greatest problem in differentiating between fact and fiction seems to be the primary sources themselves.

Even avoiding thematic generalizations and historical assumptions, one must question which events are truly important to a "factual" understanding of history. Various historians will disagree about which events are pivotal, and which sources are believable. The discipline, approach, or philosophy of a historian dictates which details are important, and the degree of light to be shed on them. For example, these differences result in varying opinions on the causes, impact, justification, and blame for events such as Indian removal or the Mexican War.

Without enough perspective to recognize that one's underlying approach shapes the use and interpretation of evidence, one is in danger of
placing too much faith in the solidity of potentially unreliable information. Because the community of scientists set their own criteria for what is considered to be valid evidence, total objectivity is an impossible goal. Turner freely admitted this, and even taught his students that the choice of which evidence to use is central to producing historical work.11 Perhaps Turner's ability to recognize this gave him his successful legacy. The American West provides a historical field in which the positivist reliance on concrete “facts” could be a disastrous mistake. Historians in general, and historians of the American West specifically, must keep their sources, and their own opinions and prejudices, in perspective if their accounts are to be acceptable.

The Close Relationship Between the “Factual” and Mythic Narratives

The fiction of the West has provided a setting remarkably similar to Turner's understanding of the frontier process. This is not to say that Turner was convinced that the West consisted of heroic individuals storming into dusty towns with blazing six-guns. Rather, the themes which Turner drew from his study of the West as process can be found in the fictional West. The gunman pacifying a wild town fills the same role as the pioneers civilizing the wilderness in Turner's vision of the frontier.

It is well known that life in the American West of reality often differed from that created by popular fictions. As Richard Slotkin wrote, "mythic constructions of the frontier have been used to explain the
glories of white expansion -- to justify conquest, genocide, and environmental destruction." Efforts to understand events such as the deaths of thousands of Indians, a war as questionable as that fought with Mexico, or the related expansion into formerly Spanish, French, Mexican, or Indian land, factor into the telling of American history. Because of a cultural need to explain, and even justify, American expansion, the heroic figures of dime novels and Hollywood westerns were not completely consistent with the historical West. As Fabian wrote, the "facts of the real west gave us cowboys who were overworked drovers, prosaic ranch hands, and active union members confronting the power and wealth of agribusiness," rather than romantic figures riding into the sunset. However, some of the fictional heroes of mythic proportion were actual people, such as Wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp. Perhaps they were not as heroic in reality as their legends may suggest, yet their fictionalized representations emerged from factual events. In fact, range wars and the confrontation with the "power and wealth of agribusiness" generated many of the conflicts found in western literature and film. There certainly is a connection between the fiction of the West and the historical reality of the frontier. In fact, it can be difficult at times to tell whether historical events inspired frontier legends, or vice versa.

What is Western?

The strongest man is he who stands alone. Flint knew he need expect no help from
anyone, but then he had never expected help.

From expecting death he had come to want life, and during these past months he had come to a new appreciation of all that was about him, the vast breadth of the Western sky, the warmth of the sun, drifting clouds, the gracefulness of a moving horse....

Life, he decided, was never a question of accumulating material things, nor in the struggle for reputation, but in the widening and deepening of perception, increasing the sensitivity of the faculties, of an awareness of the world in which one lives.

--Louis L’Amour, Flint

The heroic figure of the American West has been perpetuated, and often created, by fiction-writers like the prolific western author Louis L’Amour. In Jane Tompkins’ West of Everything, the author explores the films and novels of the West and considers how they have helped shape the self-conception of people in our time. In her discourse, Tompkins considers the figure of the male protagonist found in western literature and film. The man of the western is an epic being, a mythical hero for the American psyche. He is the rugged individual, and fits within the traditional grandiose (and popular) conception of history, where bold men act, and it is their tales which are of importance -- not the stories of the common people. Tompkins, in a consideration of L’Amour’s work, writes:

‘He walked upon a mountain’ has that world-historical feeling you get from history books that talk about men who helped to ‘build a nation,’ and it has the epic note L’Amour strikes when writing about his fiction.... This man, the epic-historical man, the man of the sentence who controls the world he beholds, is the man, the one who stands for all.

When you read a L’Amour novel, you step into this man’s shoes.

It is this “epic-historical” man, the American rugged individual, who is created by the Western.
"The man" described by Tompkins is exemplified by the western gunfighter. Historian Joseph Rosa elaborates on his central qualities:

In a Western movie or book all manner of injustices are put right by the gunfighter hero, a two-gun Galahad whose pistols are always at the service of those in trouble.... Since it is essential that the gunfighter's pistol prowess be beyond reproach, he is gifted with phenomenal reflexes which enable him to draw and fire a revolver with incredible speed and accuracy. There is no room for any weakness in his legend.16

With the predominance of a figure such as this in the western narrative, "rugged individualism" became central to the American understanding of the frontier.

Given the importance of this towering legendary figure, it is crucial to understand how the story of the frontier became one of individuals rather than communities. Tompkins writes that "[f]ear of losing his identity drives a man west, where the harsh conditions of life force his manhood into being," and this concept is validated when one considers how fiction and reality have reinforced each other to promote narratives consistent with the theme of rugged individualism.17

Some western fiction was generated by people who took in the western frontier experience first hand. Owen Wister, whose novel The Virginian is often considered a prototype for the Westerns which followed, experienced a rebirth on the frontier when he traveled west for health reasons. It was a chance for him to escape his intimidating, controlling parents and the eastern culture which they represented. Tompkins notes that:
For Wister, the West was the site of physical well-being and emotional rebirth, a place where it was possible to heal old wounds, forget old wrongs, recover strength, and start again. Better yet, it was a place where one could swear and drink and know good and evil, free from the sharp surveillance of one's elders, a place where those who had remained boys... could become men. Above all, it was a place for self-transformation, for a second chance.

Though it was the physical nature of the West that seemed to make it different from the East, the transformation described by Tompkins has metaphysical aspects as well. The frontier setting allowing one to “know good and evil” is reminiscent of the Biblical Garden of Eden. Through the loss of innocence, manhood is found, and it is this metamorphosis that Wister understood as a background for his famous novel. The experience of the West shaped Wister's reality, and the Western has become an influence in shaping the American psyche. The Western provides an atmosphere where this shaping is possible.

The man in the wilderness must confront his own existence, for in the consciousness promoted by the Western, the land is not full of Spaniards or Indians. It is “empty.” In Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, a novel set in mid-nineteenth century Mexico and the Southwestern U.S., the author described the emptiness of the frontier through the voice of his character “the Judge”: “[t]his desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone.” The individual must either be strong or become strong to survive this setting. It is unclear
whether the land is to be drawn upon as the source of manhood or the emptiness of the setting makes it necessary for an individual to confront himself, as a case can be made for either depending on the accounts considered. Either way, history and fiction both make the claim that the West allows for the genesis of true manhood.

Tompkins explains the Western as a place where traditional social boundaries are transcended. The presence of the Western in American culture presents the idea that Americans have individual choice and responsibility in the life experience. Whether it is a statement about what is western, what is American, or what is human, acceptance of the Western forces an acceptance of responsibility for being -- even if our world has the social limitations which the Western transcends. Tompkins addresses this responsibility, arguing: "[t]here are two choices: either you can remain in a world of illusions, by which is understood religion, culture, and class distinctions... or you can face life as it really is -- blood, death, a cold wind blowing, and a gun in the hand."20 This blast of responsibility, this declaration that we can face either the "world of illusions" or the blood and death of "life as it really is" hits as hard as the stark landscape of the classic Western.

It is difficult to conceive of a better way to explain the harsh truths of human existence than through stories which make mortality an eminent issue. The gunfighter, who faces death on a daily basis, cares little for
“culture... and class distinctions,” or other seemingly frivolous social constructs. When each day may be your last, life is stripped bare to its essential qualities. In contrast, the culture of the East offers social events, fashion crazes, and paper-pushing employment to distract from the inevitabilities of life.

The stark reality of the Western is where it generates its concept of truth. This is part of the appeal of the Western to the American mind -- it provides a world view that rejects democracy and Christianity as sources of truth. Tompkins explains that in the Western, “truth is flesh, raw and quivering, with the hide peeled back. All else is nonsense.” Not only does the Western celebrate the physical, but truth itself is found in the present, dangerous, “raw and quivering” reality the mythical cowboy faces daily. Truth is found only through being; that which is constructed beyond what is physically known not only cannot be trusted, but should be disdained. The western myth makes the claim that the existence it describes is more real than any of the social constructs, such as politics or religion, traditionally accepted as historical material. The self-reliance of the Western is markedly similar to the strong individualism necessary for Turner's cultural evolution.

The rugged individualism which Turner saw growing out of the western experience is often considered the quintessential American trait. The western individual, the man acting outside of traditional social
restraints on the frontier, surviving the life-threatening setting, is part of what makes America unique. The westerner becomes a bigger-than-life figure in the American psyche. Addressing this issue, Slotkin wrote: 

"When history is translated into myth, the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or 'heroes'."22 Because of the predominance of the concept of individualism traditionally associated with the American West, the representative figures of this portion of American history have become heroes within the American psyche. The gunfighters and cowboys of fact are not as important, in this consideration, as how they have been preserved in legend. The mythology of the cowboy is what defines him as a me-against-the-world individual, and it is this image which has had lasting impact.

The American belief in rugged individualism has sunk deep enough to have made its presence known in recent years. According to McGerr, by reviving the tradition, Goldwater and Reagan became the representative individuals, even heroes, of the political West. The mythical cowboy survives, despite evidence showing his life to be other than that proposed in film and literature, because he has become a representative individual in the American consciousness. It seems logical to question how much of "American individualism" has been generated by the legendary West, as opposed to western myth being embraced because it fits so well with a
preexisting notion of American individualism. This presents a problem common to the study of mythology. The roots of legend are often intertwined with the foundations of a culture with such complexity that it is difficult to discern which perpetuates which.\textsuperscript{23} Certainly, some preexisting notions of what constitutes the American self have helped shape the narrative traditions of the West. At the same time, this narration has had impact on how Americans view themselves. Understanding this crossroads of history and story-telling is a big endeavor, which may be better accomplished by attempting to understand individual cases where myth and fact become blurred.

\textbf{Pick Your Cowboy: Wild Bill Hickok}

Some would argue that the historical figure who came closest to living his legend was James Butler Hickok, or Wild Bill. In Wilstach's \textit{Wild Bill Hickok}, the author wrote: "[s]o picturesque was the man, and so astounding his exploits, that it is little wonder he should have fallen into the hands of fictioneers, who straightway [sic] made of him something of a Homeric figure."\textsuperscript{24} Wilstach pointed out that many of the stories he has been told about Wild Bill \textit{must} have been fabricated, yet he consistently intermingled these stories with others, just as fantastic, which he took as fact. True, he did attempt to confirm his "facts" by collecting as many similar versions of a story as he possibly could. However, why does the line between myth and history which seemed so clear to Wilstach appear
so fuzzy to the present day reader? Wilstach considered some primary sources as untrustworthy, while others are accepted as reliable -- and the line seems to be drawn arbitrarily. Because he acknowledged the problems inherent to researching a figure such as Hickok, Wilstach seems a valuable source for closer consideration. Wilstach's awareness of the situation did not necessarily free him from doing a little "fictioneering" of his own, but the fact that he pointed out the fictions involved in telling the West lends value to his account.

Even though he claimed to separate the real from the imaginary, consider how Wilstach described Hickok. Wild Bill was "picturesque," and his exploits were "astounding." It seems that to Wilstach, and to those who told him the stories which make up his work, something about Hickok was in reality a bigger than life figure. This is not to say that all of the amazing stories about Wild Bill Hickok were not true. However, the line between acceptable facts and unbelievable stories seems much more fine than a scientific historian may have hoped. This can be related to the craft of historians as a whole -- just how subjective is the decision of which stories and sources to use, and which to discard as meaningless or outright false? This points to the necessity of understanding the relationship, often a close one, between myth and fact. Surely, Hickok was a rare man. Many other people have been fascinating individuals as well. Yet, not every historical figure has enough fiction generated about them so as to become a legend. Even if Hickok was an amazing person, his
stories have become bigger than he could possibly have been. The deeply ingrained American cultural beliefs about what makes a man so special as to become legendary can be seen in the expansion and elaboration of the character of Wild Bill. What traits did Hickok have, or was purported to have, that made him so much larger than life? By understanding why Hickok became legendary, we will better understand the American mind and our own understanding of our history. By insisting that only the traditional data is empirical evidence, we will be ignoring a hugely important part of American history -- the American conception of self. It seems logical here to study legend as it rests alongside of history.

This is by no means an attempt to retell the entire legend of Wild Bill Hickok. That has been done. Rather, a close look at some of the stories of Hickok's life, keeping the sources in perspective, seems a valuable model for studying the role of myth as a legitimate source for historical realities. The tales considered should illustrate how the nature of the West calls for certain patterns in its telling -- patterns which can confuse the line between reality and fiction. Hickok can be seen as an example of Tompkins' "epic-historical man" of both history and legend. It must be kept in mind that Tompkins' man is a figure generated and preserved by not only film and literature, but also through American self-conception.

Taking note of a specific few of Hickok's characteristics would simplify this effort. As discussed above, an important aspect of the
western narrative is the struggle for survival. How the individual confronts death shapes the audience's reaction to the character, and it is he who overcomes the life-threatening challenges of the frontier who becomes legendary. Rosa wrote of Hickok that "[i]t was generally believed that in a fight to the finish Hickok was in a class by himself, gifted as he was with the cold-blooded nerve essential to the man who could shoot while being shot at." Hickok exemplifies the rugged individual not just because he faced danger, but because he survived.

A closely related attribute of Hickok was his skill with pistols. As Rosa wrote, "[t]he instrument of a gunfighter's appeal is his pistol. Without it he is meaningless, for the gun signifies his strength and purpose. In his hands it is the tool of justice or destruction...." Hickok's marksmanship was legendary. He is rarely, if ever, recorded as missing his mark in a fight; and rarely acknowledged to have missed when shooting at targets.

A final characteristic which is vital to keep in mind was Hickok's apparent invincibility, beyond his being "in a class by himself" in a "fight to the finish." As mentioned above, there is no room for weakness in the archetypical gunfighter. Wilstach's record of Hickok fit this mold well. There is no vulnerability exposed until the very end of Hickok's life, and then it is his interest in the opposite sex and physical imperfections that explain how he could possibly have been killed.
The Mythic Tradition of Rugged Individualism: The Life of Wild Bill Hickok

The blurring of myth and fact throughout the telling of Hickok’s life may be due in great part to his relationship with Buffalo Bill Cody. The legendary performer and generator of Western myth claimed Hickok as “a life-long and intimate friend....”27 Cody’s telling of his own tale has been questioned in many corners, and one can only imagine how far he went to exaggerate Hickok’s exploits, as the two were friends. As an introduction to Wild Bill in his autobiography, The Life of Buffalo Bill, Cody wrote:

‘[H]e was one of the most perfect types of physical manhood I ever saw. Of his courage there could be no question.... His skill in the use of the pistol and rifle was unerring; while his deportment... was entirely free from all bluster or bravado....’ Such is the faithful picture of Wild Bill as drawn by General Custer... under whom Bill served as a scout.28

Wilstach, when discussing Hickok’s “death toll,” claimed that according to most counts, Wild Bill killed between fifteen and seventy-five people, not including those he killed during the Civil War. However, he wrote of Cody:

Buffalo Bill used to count off thirty-five killings on his fingers; but it should be remembered that he never leaned the truth as to the “McCanles gang massacre,” when three men were killed instead of the ten he tallied. Some fearsome fabricating, indeed, has gone on.29

There is little doubt that Cody and Bill did in fact know each other, and may indeed have been good friends. However, Cody’s account of their exploits together is riddled with holes.

Wild Bill and Bill Cody both fought on the side of the Union in the Civil War. At one point, Cody recounted a tale of how, while acting as a
scout and spy for the Union, he stumbled across Wild Bill. Dressed as a Confederate soldier, Cody walked into a farm-house behind enemy lines only to find Hickok, in the guise of a Confederate officer, sitting at the table enjoying breakfast. He described the event in great detail, and claimed that Hickok gave him some letters to deliver to Union General McNiel, for whom Cody claimed to be scouting. They then parted ways.30

Later, during a skirmish with a large company of Confederate soldiers, two riders, one of whom was shot down, broke through the Southern lines. The one who stayed on his horse rode over to the Union troops. The gray-clad man turned out to be Wild Bill. He carried important information: the Confederate company with whom McNiel's army was engaged was only a front, as Confederate General Price needed to make his army seem larger than it was to buy time for a stream-crossing behind the lines. The new information led to a Union charge and victory for the day.31 Wilstach's account does not place Cody at this scene, but does describe Hickok's efforts in more detail. According to Wilstach, Hickok was able to meet with "high favour in the Confederate ranks" while posing as a southern soldier. After receiving some vital orders from General Price to be delivered to General Shelby, Hickok carried out a daring escape back to the Union forces. Bill challenged a Confederate named Jake Lawson to a contest to see who could ride closer to the Union forces without being shot down. Bill, of course, rode far
closer, shot Lawson once the Southerner realized what was going on, and rejoined the Union forces.\textsuperscript{32}

Cody’s version confirms at least part of this adventure, as he described two soldiers, one of whom was taken down during the flight. Records show that James Butler Hickok was, in fact, known throughout parts of Missouri and Arkansas as Wild Bill (one possibility of where he gained his name) when he worked in the area as a Union scout and spy. However, according to official records, Cody was on the regimental roll only as a private -- not a scout or spy -- until his discharge on September 29, 1865. Cody probably based his story on what he had been told of Hickok’s exploits, and he may even have been present for Hickok’s return. However, it is highly unlikely that Cody, disguised as a Confederate soldier, met Hickok behind enemy lines.\textsuperscript{33}

Cody and Hickok knew each other before the Civil War, and the questionable nature of Cody’s account begins right from the start, with his story of how he and Hickok met each other. According to Cody, both were on Lew Simpson’s wagon train in October of 1857, and Hickok stood up for the young Cody when another member of the train was picking on him.\textsuperscript{34} However, according to records, in October of 1857 Cody was at home in Leavenworth, Kansas and Hickok was the constable of Monticello Township, Johnson County, Kansas.\textsuperscript{35} At one point, Wilstach supported the
records showing that Hickok was employed at Monticello at the time of Cody's story. Yet, later in his book, Wilstach repeated the Cody version of his meeting with Hickok as fact. This is a case where Wilstach accepted a questionable source even though his data conflicted.

It may have been possible for Hickok and Cody to have met when Hickok lived near Leavenworth for a few months in 1855 or '56 when he joined Jim Lane's famous guerrilla cavalry troop known as the Red Legs. This would have been before the initial meeting Cody described in his autobiography, but it is the more likely event. However the initial meeting actually occurred, it is known that by 1859 Hickok had become a regular visitor to the Cody home.

Hickok began his adventures in the West in 1855, when he left his home of Troy Grove, Illinois for St. Louis. He was 18 years old at the time. His father, William Alonzo Hickok, "a deacon in the Presbyterian Church, a worthy man of Scotch-Irish ancestry," had died in 1852. He soon left St. Louis for Leavenworth and the Red Legs. How Hickok came to join the Red Legs -- whether fictional or by his actual doing -- is a striking moment in his legend. The Red Legs were an unofficial military company, led by Jim Lane, which was formed to resist any invasion of Kansas by armed bands raiding from pro-slavery Missouri. Hickok was initially refused membership, as he did not have the funding to properly outfit himself and purchase his horse. Then a story right out of the mythology of England
unfolded to help shape the Hickok legend.39

The Red Legs were out shooting with rifles and pistols for prizes, and the young Hickok laughed loudly whenever any of them did not “drive the bull’s eye.” One of the Red Legs, a “Shanghai Bill,” took offense to the laughter and challenged Bill to do better. The prizes for winning the contest basically consisted of the horse and gear Hickok would need to join the Red Legs. Shanghai Bill let Hickok know that if he failed to outshoot him, “‘ther boys... ’Il all see me larrup you.” Of course, Hickok scored six perfect shots in a row. He then needed to hit a moving wheel-like target from a hundred yards off. Wilstach wrote:

‘Just as the man started it in motion, a crow flew over the field above the heads of the crowd, and instantly raising his rifle [Hickok] fired and brought it down. He then seized the weapon held by Shanghai Bill and throwing it to a level sent a bullet through the red wheel ere it had stopped rolling.’40

Properly outfitted, Hickok was then able to join the company. Though Wilstach credited Prentiss Ingraham with this story, he wrote:

This sounds almost too good, but the same story has come from various sources much after the same fashion. Indeed, if there was not a conspiracy of the time to hoist Wild Bill on to a purple throne of shining glory as a pistoleer, we may safely accept it as a fact.41

Hickok was with the Red Legs for several months and was recognized by Lane to be “the most effective man in his command.”42 Perhaps Hickok really did win his membership with an impressive display of marksmanship. Whether a true story or not, it is easy to see how this type
of adventure could impress the "city-folk" of the East.

Hickok's election to constable of Monticello Township in 1857 was his first post as a peace officer. It was during this time that tradition has him getting acquainted with the Shawnee Tribe of that area. It was rumored that Hickok married a young Shawnee woman in "Indian fashion" while in this area. This type of marriage was not considered binding to whites. Wilstach questioned the validity of this "rumor," and given the non-binding nature of such a marriage, whether it occurred or not, Hickok was free to move on, which he soon did. Although Wilstach credited Wild Bill with keeping the peace in Monticello, he recounted the burning down of Hickok's home, by "Border Ruffians of Missouri," on several occasions. Apparently, because of this, "Wild Bill now decided that he had enough of Johnson County, Kansas," and he became a driver for the Overland Stage Company.\(^43\) If there was, in fact, a Shawnee wife for Hickok, apparently the marriage was not binding at all.

One episode from Hickok's legend which helps illustrate the blurred line between history and fiction in the Wild West is the famous "duel with David Tutt," which, by all available accounts, occurred in Springfield, Missouri. As Wilstach wrote, "[s]ome would have it that the shooting was an out-and-out murder; others... interpret the affair as a deliberate challenge and a formal, if unconventional, duel."\(^44\) Wilstach compared several versions of the event.
George Ward Nichols’s article in the February, 1867 *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* is the first source Wilstach considered. Nichols claimed that he received his detailed account from a “Captain Honesty,” who supposedly witnessed the incident. According to Nichols, Hickok and Tutt had an altercation over some gambling debts which Hickok had not paid. Tutt pushed the issue, as “Bill was a scout on our side durin’ the war and Tutt was a reb scout. Bill had killed Tutt’s mate and atween one thing and another, there was an unusual hard feelin' atwixt ’em.” Tutt wound up taking Hickok’s watch as collateral, and then boldly announced that he would walk across the town square, sporting Hickok’s watch. Nichols reported that Tutt showed his gun to Hickok at the square several days later, and Hickok won the ensuing shoot-out fairly. He even “delivered himself up” to the authorities to clear himself on grounds of self defense. Nichols then quotes Honesty as saying that “thar [sic] was an undercurrent of a woman in that fight.” No details are given to clarify this “undercurrent.”

Wilstach next considered Buel’s *Heroes of the Plains*, which was written fifteen years after Nichols’s account. Supposedly, Buel heard the story from Hickok himself. Buel placed the date of the event on September 14, 1867, while Nichols put it on July 20, 1865. Buel stated that Tutt had gone to Springfield “for the express purpose of killing Bill. Poker merely afforded an excuse for a quarrel.” Buel’s account of the poker game varied
from Nichols', but with the same result of Tutt taking Hickok's watch. While Nichols had Tutt holding the watch several days, Buel reported Tutt stating, as he left the poker room: "I'll just keep the watch all the same, and if you want it bad enough you can meet me in the public square tomorrow [sic] morning at nine o'clock, for I intend to carry it across the square at that hour." To this, Bill replied "'You'll never get across that place with my watch unless dead men can walk."47 The duel was described just as Nichols put it, but Buel had nothing to say of a woman involved in the matter.48

Wilstach, in his efforts to avoid "novelizing" Hickok, continued his search by asking his friend Frank J. Price of Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania, who lived in Springfield when the duel took place, what he recalled of the event. Mr. Price stated that "'Father always looked upon that killing as a cold-blooded murder.'" This was a rare find -- an account where a Hickok gunfight was seen as a murder. However, this was not the majority's opinion, as "Mr. price add[ed]: 'However, Wild Bill was cleared by the jury.'"49

Another account that did not show Hickok in the best light was found in "The History of Greene County, Missouri," which was published in 1883, two years after Buel's efforts. The writer described Hickok as a ruffian and desperado, to which Wilstach predictably responded: "This, of course, is mere imagination, for Wild Bill was neither a ruffian nor a desperado in
any sense of the terms."50 The county analyst was consistent with the other stories in having Hickok owe Tutt a gambling debt, but he added a diamond pin and ring to the fore-mentioned watch. Wilstach noted this was the first report of Hickok wearing "jewellery" [sic].51 The local historian wrote that "Wild Bill and Dave Tutt fought their duel simply because the latter persisted in wearing [Hickok's] watch on the street, and thus disclosing the fact that Wild Bill 'had got busted in a poker game.'"52 The county historian went on to say that Bill's was a chance shot, and added that "when Bill was here he was not considered a fine shot at all." Wilstach saw this probable misconception as an explanation for Tutt's boisterous manner.53

While neither Nichols nor Buel described the court proceedings, the county historian recounted the event. The empty chamber in Tutt's revolver and the testimony of witnesses that two shots were fired were enough evidence to clear Hickok, though there were some who argued that he was found innocent because he was a former Union soldier and Tutt was a former Confederate. Wilstach admitted that the whole incident seems "piffling in the extreme," but he reminded his readers to "take into account that the frontier code was not like ours, and for Tutt to carry Wild Bill's watch was a slur on the ability of the latter which would destroy his prestige in the community."54
It is interesting to note that in Cody's account of the story, the watch actually belonged to Tutt, and Bill won it during the poker game. Tutt refused to give up what he had lost, and the quarrel ensued. Then Cody had Tutt firing at Hickok, only after which did Hickok draw his own gun and kill Tutt. Cody concluded the story by writing that "[n]othing of course was ever done to Bill for the killing of Tutt." No description of the trial was given, but his conclusion was consistent nonetheless.55

Here is an account of a gunfight which was confirmed, to various degrees, by multiple sources. Is it possible that the event never even occurred? Certainly, but given the multitude of sources, the duel most likely did take place. However, finding a sufficient degree of confirmation is difficult when dealing with both the historians and the primary sources of the frontier. Popular narrative is often so powerful that it encourages formulas in its telling. It is not only the historians who have been inclined to follow a formula -- the primary sources themselves have attempted to sculpt their accounts into what seems an acceptable western tale. Nichols described a "Captain Honesty," disclaimed by Wilstach as "probably a euphemistic name hit upon by Nichols," who supposedly was a witness to the duel. Buel claimed to have heard his version of the story from Hickok himself. Even if this was true, Buel's account is still shaky when one considers that Hickok partook in a stage career nearly totally dependent on his fame. Cody was notorious for
embellishing the truth, and a local historian would love to have a juicy story to pique interest in his topic. Even with its mix of unreliable sources, the history of this duel bears striking similarities to, and is consistent with, many fictional Westerns.56

Perhaps the consistencies are a result of the telling -- the embellishing of one tale leads to an acceptance of narrative style by the tellers of other tales. Maybe the duels and other "adventurous" happenings of the West actually had characteristics similar to what is usually considered fictional. Most likely, both are factors: while there is more factual substance to the adventure of the American frontier than often acknowledged, narrative traditions have developed over the years and have had an impact on historians and "fictioneers" alike.

Action was never hard to find for Hickok, or at least for the narrators of Hickok's legend. On March 5, 1868, a group of soldiers deserted Fort Hays, stealing several mules in the process. Hickok and Cody (who was buffalo hunting and a part-time "government detective" at the time) were called on to pursue the deserters. Some records claim that Hickok was the marshal of Hays City at the time, though he is generally thought to have not taken this post until the following year. Hickok and Cody's efforts led to the arrest of the deserters, referred to as "horse thieves" on the record. On March 28, Hickok requested a military escort from Fort Hays to Topeka. Accompanied by six soldiers, Hickok and Cody
transported the prisoners by rail and secured them in jail.\footnote{57}

By August of 1868, Cody and Hickok were both employed by the Tenth Cavalry as scouts. This unit was engaged in maneuvers against Indians, and this position afforded Hickok another opportunity to show his skills as a frontiersman. Major George Armes wrote in his journal on August 21st that his "bitter enemy, Major M. H. Kidd...", had "failed to pay attention to the advice of Wild Bill our scout and guide, in regard to the course we should take when we left camp yesterday, he appearing to know more about the country than those who had lived here for years." Because of his failure to listen to Hickok, "Kidd found himself ten miles off course with no sign of Indians."\footnote{58}

In the winter, during that same campaign, Hickok was in Captain William H. Penrose's command, as was the "celebrated Autobees family." The outfit was snowed in and lost. According to Cody, he was not with Hickok, rather, he was with Major General Eugene Carr's command, searching for the lost command of Penrose.\footnote{59} In Wilstach's discrediting of a purported fight between Hickok and the Indian warrior Black Kettle (a battle reported by both Buel and Kelsey), he confirmed Penrose's snowbound state on the Canadian River, while the Black Kettle incident supposedly occurred with Custer's group on the Washita River.\footnote{60} What Wilstach did not write about this event was that when Penrose's outfit
was found by General Carr’s command, the men were starving, and many of
the horses and mules were dead. The situation was not helped at all when
“Cody and Hickok hijacked a beer train, leading to a drunken brawl, during
which Hickok soundly thrashed Mariano Autobees.”61 Cody referred to
this incident as “one of the biggest beer jollifications I ever had the
misfortune to attend,” and does not make reference to Hickok’s scuffle
with Autobees.62 Carr saw to it they both were soon employed elsewhere.
According to Cody’s record he left Carr’s command because he was
incredibly busy running scouting errands all over the West, for various
officers, after these events.63

News of Hickok’s military exploits spread quickly. His career as an
Indian scout was featured in an issue of Harper’s New Monthly, bringing
his story to a wider audience. However, it was Hickok’s achievements as a
lawman which really stimulated the growth of his legend. He allowed his
enlistment as a scout to expire on February 28, 1869, and then he returned
to Kansas.64

Soon after his return, Hickok was elected marshal of Hays City,
Kansas. Wilstach records this date as September 8, 1869.65 Here, Hickok
accomplished what the late 20th century views as the usual western
heroics, turning a few desperadoes out, killing a few others, and generally
pacifying the town. As a lawman, Hickok is historically recorded as an
individual struggling against a hostile environment in the effort to civilize the frontier. Heroic western figures are generally dismissed as either mythical in substance or having little to do with a real scholarly understanding of the region. Yet, the adventures of Hickok seem to provide evidence that there is real substance to both the popular conception of the West and Turner's thesis. Hickok is a historical figure who accomplished both the adventures of the Western and the civilizing efforts of Turner. Using myth as a model for studying the frontier is illuminating when applying this perspective to a legendary figure of the West -- notably, Wild Bill Hickok.

Hickok's adventures as a lawman, first in Fort Hays, provide cases to consider in this discourse. In one incident, Bill Mulvey, "a notorious thug of St. Joseph, wandered into town." Mulvey was wreaking havoc in a drunken rage. Though both of Mulvey's guns were drawn, Hickok "approached him quietly and informed him he was under arrest for disorderly conduct." With both revolvers now in his face, Hickok reportedly stated "I can't beat that pair."66 Though in most stories Hickok won his gunfights without any trickery, an interesting turn took place here. Wilstach wrote:

With two guns thrust in his face and a desperado behind them quite willing to shoot, Wild Bill employed a stratagem which has since become famous. He backed off two or three steps and raised his hand protestingly. "Don't shoot him -- he's only in fun!" he called out. Mulvey turned, expecting to confront a deputy.... In the instant that his attention was distracted Bill snatched out a revolver and dropped him with a bullet in the
Hickok’s exploits here are numerous. As with most of his undertakings, he was quite successful, as “Hickok had pacified a town with twenty-two saloons and one grocery....” It is difficult to avoid comparing Hickok’s efforts as a lawman to Turner’s pioneers. In the social evolution of the frontier, the chaotic wilderness is sculpted by the brave frontiersman into a place where Euro-American civilization can thrive. In the Western, the wild and deadly town is pacified and made habitable by the courage of the gunfighting hero. Hickok functions both as the legendary lawman and the historical tamer of the frontier. Either way, civilization is brought forth from the wilderness.

Despite his apparent success, Hickok was forced to leave town after a serious brawl with a group of trouble-causing soldiers from nearby Fort Hays. Supposedly, General Sheridan issued an order for Wild Bill’s arrest, “dead or alive.” Surprisingly, Hickok’s military service brought him no leverage in this situation.

In 1871, Hickok took on the challenge for which he may best be known -- as Marshall of Abilene. His predecessor, Tom Smith, had enforced a no-gun law in this notorious town, only to be murdered by two Kansan homesteaders. Apparently, General Sheridan and the Seventh Cavalry had left Hays City, and Bill stopped off at Abilene on his return to his former post. In Abilene he found “a town in far more urgent need of
toning down and pacification than was Hays City.” Note that the settlers of towns like Abilene in the popular historical/fictional discourse of the frontier were not able to bring civilization to their frontier homes without the help of a daring individual who could overcome alone what they could not do together. It is unlikely that the people of frontier towns did not have an important role to play in the civilizing of the “Wild West,” but the telling of the tales of individuals connects well with Turner -- these recognizable individuals personified the forces of westward movement. In his discourse on myth, Slotkin further develops the idea of representative figures. He writes that the “complexities of social and historical experiences,” or the thousands of people and events which collectively allowed for civilization to move west, “are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or ‘heroes’.” Historical figures like Hickok have had their lives become legends because they, with their stories, represent the complex collective of events which make up the history of the region.

According to tradition, Hickok was very much up to his new challenge, and he was able to pacify Abilene the same way he took control of Hays City. “Sure glad to see you,’ Wild Bill would greet the cowboys,” wrote historian Bart McDowell, “but hand me those guns.’ One man balked, and Bill killed him.” Hickok’s headquarters were at the Alamo Saloon, and it is here that we first hear of Hickok’s habit of always
keeping his back to a wall. According to one source, not one holdup occurred during Hickok’s nine months in office. However, whether or not there were any holdups, Wilstach recounts multiple fatal disturbances of the peace during Hickok’s time in Abilene.

One of these events, if true, provides some insight into Wild Bill’s character. In September of 1871, “a few of the boisterous cowboys [in town for the Dickinson County Fair] drew lots as to who was to have the honour of taking Bill’s scalp, and... Phil Coe drew the short straw.” The cowboys, on the evening of the last day of the fair, were wandering around the town, causing trouble in their drunken state.

Just as the streets clear in a Hollywood western before the trouble starts, “[e]verybody in the town who had any regard for his skin had by this time hunted cover.” A shot rang out in the direction of the Alamo, despite the ordinance against firing guns in the town. Bill ordered his deputy, Jim Williams, to stay put while he went to investigate. Hickok found Coe in front of the Alamo with his revolver drawn. He admitted to firing the shot, and then he fired again, grazing Bill’s side. Hickok then “whipped out his ivory-handled revolvers and fired both simultaneously. Coe was hit in the abdomen. This was unusual for Wild Bill, who customarily shot for the head.” Hickok turned to defend himself from any of Coe’s friends who decided to join the fight, and “with a single shot” he dropped a man who was running at him “with a pistol in each hand.” He
was horrified to discover that it was his deputy, Williams. By Wilstach’s account, “history has it that this was the last time that Bill took a human life.”75 This remark by Wilstach is the first sign of a shift in the Hickok legend which will be further considered later. However, at least one other story has Hickok later causing a man’s death.

Wilstach mentions a wealthy Texan who hired several killers to repay Bill for having him arrested and thrown in jail. However, another account held that the reported $10,000 price offered on his head was offered by a Texas family, to avenge their son’s death at Hickok’s hands. According to McDowell, this was an important part of Hickok’s decision to leave Abilene.76 Whatever the reason for the hired killers, Wilstach reported that eight men boarded a train which Hickok was riding to Topeka.

Hickok knew of the killers’ presence and their intent, so he took the initiative and went to their car. With guns drawn, he took them by surprise and forced them to jump off the train -- and at least one of them was killed. Wilstach concludes the story by writing “that the cattle-man in far-off Texas spent the remainder of his days in mortal fear lest Wild Bill might seek him out and kill him.” Whether his accidental killing of Williams, the supposed price on his head, or something entirely different was the reason, Hickok left Abilene to once again be the Marshall of Hays City before the end of 1871.77 Hickok’s second stint in Hays City was
relatively uneventful. However, through his friendship with Cody and the entertainment industry of “Wild West Shows,” it is possible to observe a direct confrontation between Hickok and his legend.

Although Hickok’s relationship with Cody, as mentioned above, shrouds much of his story in hyperbole and uncertainty, it certainly did not hurt the spread of his fame. Cody’s accounts make it clear that he was proud to claim Hickok as a friend; and many of his stories, both written and shared in his “Wild West Show,” involved Wild Bill. Wilstach, once again jumping on Hickok’s bandwagon, wrote that “[t]he original conception of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, as well as all other Wild West shows since that time, was undoubtedly born in the brain of Wild Bill in 1870.” Wilstach then explained how Hickok, between his first stint in Hays City and his work in Abilene, put on a disastrous Wild West show in Niagara Falls on June 22, 1870. For this show, Hickok hired a group of Comanche Indians and captured a handful of buffalo. 78

Not surprisingly, Cody’s account contradicts this information. According to Cody, he and “Texas Jack” talked Hickok into joining their “Scouts of the Plains” company in 1873, in part because “[Hickok] had never been East.” Either Cody did not know about Hickok’s previous attempt at a “Wild West Show” or Wilstach’s report was completely inaccurate. Hickok warned Cody that he “could never make an actor out of him.” 79 Hickok struggled with his role from the start. Cody wrote that:
Although [Hickok] had a fine stage appearance and was a handsome fellow, and possessed a good strong voice, yet when he went upon the stage before an audience, it was almost impossible for him to utter a word. He insisted that we were making fools of ourselves, and that we were the laughing-stock of the people. I replied that I did not care for that, as long as they came and bought tickets to see us.\(^{80}\)

Hickok was said to have enjoyed shooting blanks near the bare legs of extras playing Indians in the performances -- Indians who were supposed to be "dead." Of course, the actors would leap up from the ground, howling in pain. Mrs. William F. Cody wrote of Hickok's acting that "'Wild Bill may have been wonderful with a revolver, but he was hardly meant for an actor.'" It is unclear whether Hickok's discomfort with the Wild West show was due to stage fright or a disliking of the sham heroics.\(^{81}\) At any rate, self-promotion never seemed to be the issue for Hickok that it was for Cody.

Although Wilstach acknowledged the disappointing nature of Hickok's acting career, he described Hickok's premier in glowing terms:

Wild Bill's opening scene in this blood-curdling drama was a gorgeous uproar! A band of Indian warriors had stolen a pale-face maiden and run off with her. Then came Wild Bill to the rescue. On dashed Bill, dressed up in buckskins and ample Stetson, and began blazing away. At every bark of the pistol there dropped a redskin, and so the house bellowed its delight. Bill then struck an heroic attitude.... There must have been something fascinatingly romantic about Wild Bill Hickok.\(^{82}\)

Wilstach was unable to show Hickok in a bad light, even in this venture in which he clearly failed. In March of 1874, when the company was in
Rochester, New York, Hickok quit.\(^{83}\) Although it may not have been Wilstach's purpose to "novelize" Hickok's life, he seemed incapable of doing otherwise.

**Closing of the Frontier: The End of Hickok**

Between the time that Hickok quit the stage and his arrival in Deadwood, South Dakota in 1876, his activity is not very clearly recorded. Wilstach seemed very suspicious of the credibility of any of the stories taking place at this time. He wrote that "[v]arious narratives of his goings and comings at this time have found their way into print, but such of his old friends as are still alive have conflicting stories to tell. In this instance, it seems pretty much a matter of paying your money and taking your choice." However, Wilstach noted that the stories of Alfred Henry Lewis and J.W. Buel both had Hickok traveling from the East to Kansas City, and from there to Cheyenne.\(^ {84}\)

At this time a change, perhaps first noticeable at the time Hickok accidentally killed his partner Williams, began to occur. This change marked a fundamental shift in the Hickok legend -- Wild Bill began to seem vulnerable. It seems that for Hickok's later murder to be acceptable, something about his character had to change. It is not possible for the honorable Hickok, who can take on gangs of ruffians and is a perfect shot with a pistol, to be murdered without a tragic weakness to blame. It was Hickok's rumored loss of eyesight which marked his growing vulnerability.
This change was something beyond his control -- a rarity in the Hickok legend -- and it rendered him less able to control his physical surroundings. He could no longer master the frontier if he could not see it.

Wilstach, while relating the onset of Hickok's vision problems, describes an eerie entrance into Cheyenne. He wrote:

So it was that when Bill arrived at Cheyenne he was wearing goggles of smoked glass, and for some reason or other it was his purpose to enter Cheyenne unobserved. With his flowing hair tucked under his hat, and with the goggles shielding his eyes, he was provided with an effective disguise. Whether this was intentional or not cannot be said. As Bill knew no fear, and as there was no cause for trouble, the writer ventures the belief that the hidden hair and the goggles were merely accidental.... At this period, it should be said, he carried a stout cane made of the end of a billiard cue.85

By describing Hickok's outfit as "accidental," Wilstach probably meant only to be sure that the reader did not think that Hickok would be afraid to make himself known. "As Bill knew no fear," Hickok's disguise needed another explanation.

Here, Hickok's historian begins to sound more like a novelist. Hickok's shift in attitude actually foreshadows his death. For the first time in his book, Wilstach went into an explanation of how Hickok's "reputation of being a man-killer was not relished by him at this time. He had become self-conscious on the matter.... [D]espite the number of notches on his guns, there was not one there through his initial fault."86

When meeting a Mrs. Annie D. Tallent, "the first white woman to visit the Black Hills," Hickok appeared without guns and attempted to remove
himself from his reputation. He supposedly explained his fame to Tallent in what reads like a monologue:

"I suppose I am called a red-handed murderer, which I deny. That I have killed men I admit, but never unless in absolute self-defence, or in the performance of an official duty. I never, in my life, took any mean advantage of an enemy. Yet, understand... I never allow a man to get the drop on me. But I may yet die with my boots on," he said, his face softening a little.87

Hickok's larger-than-life, invincible man in the wilderness image begins to soften just before his death. The historians could have been foreshadowing his death, like novelists. His worsening eyesight may have changed his demeanor. Another influence which may have acted as a catalyst for change in the Hickok legend was the introduction of a pair of important female characters. Rosa wrote that:

In many... Westerns the hero appears to have little or no interest in the opposite sex. Most of the time he leans against a post outside the marshal's office or perches on the hitching rail alongside the saloon, watching all that goes on.88

The increased interaction with female characters towards the end of Hickok's life is a further sign of his separation from the invincible gunslinger of legend -- he no longer is the lone individual on the frontier. In a way, he is living out Turner's conception of the closing of the frontier. The civilization he fought to secure (civilization both in his personal life and surroundings) weakened his "rugged individualism" -- how can the frontiersman qualities survive without a frontier?

Many rumors have had Hickok involved with the famous Calamity
Jane at the time of his death in 1876, but another woman preceded her in the Hickok story. Also introduced late in Hickok's life was Agnes Lake, who he married in February of 1876. According to Wilstach, the pair met in 1871 when Lake's Circus came to Hays City. He wrote that "[a]lthough Mr.s Lake was then in her forty-fifth year and eleven years older than himself, Bill fell violently in love with her. Hickok supposedly proposed when he next saw Lake, on tour in New York in 1874. She insisted on two years to settle her affairs, and claimed to be unsure that it would be "proper" to marry again. When the two happened to run into each other in Cheyenne when Hickok was on his way to the Black Hills in 1876, he pressed the suit and they were married.89 Though Wilstach described this whole situation as something of a romantic tale, Hickok left town only two months after the wedding to seek a fortune in the notoriously dangerous Black Hills of the Sioux Territory. Though his character had changed enough to accept the social conventions of traditional love and marriage, it had not shifted from its fundamental focus on adventure.

On April 12, 1876 Hickok and Charlie Utter, or Colorado Charlie, left Cheyenne for Deadwood, Sioux Territory (in what is now South Dakota).90 Apparently, quite a crowd formed in Deadwood when word spread that the famous Wild Bill Hickok was in the booming gold-mining town. Wilstach provided a letter from Hickok to his wife, Agnes, in which he mentioned prospecting, though there has been contention as to whether Hickok was in
Continuing to set up Hickok's death like a novelist, Wilstach claimed that on the evening before he was killed, Hickok responded to a question regarding his downcast appearance by saying, "I have a presentiment that my time is up and that I am soon going to be killed." Wilstach provided another letter from Wild Bill to Agnes, this one supposedly written the night before the murder:

Agnes Darling:

If such should be we never meet again, while firing my last shot, I will gently breathe the name of my wife -- Agnes -- and with wishes ever for my enemies I will make the plunge and try to swim to the other shore.

J.B. Hickok

If Hickok indeed sensed his approaching death, his life is even more closely tied to the traditions of fiction than previously thought. Whether his changed attitude, premonitory statements, and letters were fictional or not, Hickok was soon murdered.

James Butler Hickok was killed on August 2, 1876 in Deadwood when shot in the back during a card game. He was sitting at the table with three others, and Wilstach describes this as "the first time known" that "Wild Bill was sitting with his back to a door." Jack McCall was arrested and hung for the crime.

McCall was described as "a man not yet twenty-five years of age, and one with whom [Hickok] had engaged in a friendly game of cards"
earlier on that fatal afternoon." Wilstach claimed that McCall was paid by a pair of "no-goods" who did not want to see Hickok made marshal of Deadwood. As mentioned above, McCall was caught, tried by the community, and hung.

Cody described Bill's death in his autobiography:

Poor Bill was afterwards killed at Deadwood, in the Black Hills, in a cowardly manner, by a desperado who sneaked up behind him while he was playing a game of cards in a saloon, and shot him through the back of the head, without the least provocation. The murderer, Jack McCall, was tried and hung at Yankton, Dakota, for the crime. Thus ended the career of a life-long friend of mine who, in spite of his many faults, was a noble man, ever brave and generous hearted.

It is interesting that Cody mentions Hickok's "many faults." Perhaps the snow-bound beer "jollifications" and failure as an actor were indicators of other "imperfections" in Hickok's character.

The premonitions and softening of Hickok's invincible character, which preceded his murder, seem to be the way that the narrators of Hickok's legend have made it possible for Hickok's death to have occurred. It is as if Hickok was a character in a story rather than a historical figure. The vulnerability he began to show at the end of his tale seems as much out of a novel as the timing of his death. That is, though his eyesight was supposedly waning, Hickok died before he grew too old -- before his legend collapsed. Perhaps it was his death that most powerfully muddies the line between life and legend.

Although it is not clear whether fiction shapes social perceptions or
expectations influence fiction (most likely, of course, a little of each),
there is no doubt that social attitudes and perceptions have left their
mark on history. Popular histories and fictional accounts of the West,
deeply embedded in the gender norms of their day, whether in 1890 or
1990, can be studied to understand what women represent in the construct
of the historical West. Here myth can be used as the model for studying an
oppositional narrative in the history of the American West. That is,
though to this point myth has been used to interpret thematic explanations
of the West, such as the Turner Thesis, it can also be used to better
understand a more specific field -- such as women's history.

Martha Jane Canary, or “Calamity Jane,” is as prominent a female
figure as can be found in the Wild West. Calamity Jane was famous for
dressing as a man, working both as a scout for General Custer and as a
Pony Express rider, performing in Wild West shows, appearing in dime
novels, and being an “all around woman of the plains.”97 Canary was, by
most accounts, a rule-breaker. Doane Robinson, formerly the Secretary of
the Department of History of South Dakota, who knew her personally,
wrote of Jane:

‘In appearance [Calamity Jane] was large and thick, she wore men’s clothing, chewed
tobacco, and was among the lowest of harlots, without a trace of refinement. Her temper
was violent.... In the writings her good qualities have been magnified and her worst
never disclosed. It was her boast that she never went to bed sober or with a penny in her
pocket.’98

The paths of Wild Bill and Calamity Jane crossed near the end of Hickok’s
Wilstach doubted the truth to the rumors that Hickok and Canary had an affair, arguing that Hickok never needed a wide range of women in his life, and that he was deeply in love with his wife. Calamity Jane had a sketchy public image and was rumored to have had between three and twelve different husbands during her life. Doc Pierce, who knew both Hickok and Canary, told Wilstach that "[b]y no means was Calamity Jane a paramour of Bill’s. He was a married man and seemed to think much of his wife, and I never saw him associated with lewd women." Though this is more often than not the perception of Hickok, rumors of their involvement with each other have persisted.

In response to Calamity Jane’s request to be buried next to Hickok in Deadwood, Pierce claimed that Jane wanted to bask in Hickok’s glory because she was “great for notoriety.” Because he knew Calamity’s public image, Pierce felt that he understood why she would make this request. However, there are details which make it seem plausible that Calamity Jane, like many women of her time, shielded much of her personal life from the public -- including a possible affair with Hickok. Canary was in Deadwood at the time of Hickok’s death. Some accounts have the two arriving together, others claim the mutual presence was coincidence.

In her short autobiography, published for profit, Canary claimed Hickok as nothing more than a friend. However, in letters that she wrote
to her daughter, Jane claimed to have not only been involved with Wild Bill, but that they were actually married and that he was the legitimate father of the daughter to whom she was writing. The problem of how this could be possible given Hickok's marriage to another so soon before his death casts much doubt on the truth of Canary's letters. However, Jane seems to have felt that it was important to provide legitimacy to her daughter by producing a concrete, respectable father. Even if there was no truth to her letters, by claiming Hickok as her husband, Canary was denying her true past and its rule-breaking nature as a means of establishing a socially acceptable status in the mind of her daughter. How interesting that a woman breaking as many social rules as Calamity Jane would feel it necessary to do this. Even if the association was true, she was avoiding the controversy a public pronouncement would make. If this was the case, Jane was bowing to the gender expectations squelching women's voices in public life.

To understand the importance of female characters in the Hickok narrative, it is necessary to return to a consideration of the western myth. The fictional tradition of the American West places the individual in a place that is separate from specific social circumstances. As discussed earlier, this separation is often viewed as vital to either the development of American civilization (consider Turner), or the shaping of the myth of the West, seen by some as an important model for
understanding the American consciousness (consider Slotkin or McGerr).

However, within this realm of the individual acting separately from social forces, the traditional place of the woman is to passively support the male. The male separation from society, whether he is a character in a L’Amour novel, Hickok fighting Indians, or Goldwater defining himself as a rugged individual, is an effort to let “the harsh conditions of life force his manhood into being,” out of “[f]ear of losing his identity.”

The central aspect of the myth of the American West is the individual action outside of social restraints, yet within this construct women are subjected to traditional, limiting social forces. Slotkin wrote that:

Myths are stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness -- with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain.

It is the place of women within the western myth where the most obvious “complexity or contradiction” occurs. Women’s assigned role of passivity within the western myth constitutes the same social restrictions from which the frontier is supposedly removed. This makes gender a topic where the western narrative struggles to find consistency. Perhaps the supporting presence of women can be interpreted as symbolic of what Turner saw as the development of civilization in the wilderness. However, this presence terminates the setting, devoid of social constructs, which is the necessary setting for the western myth -- and
the development of rugged individualism. The presence of women on the frontier complicates the scene and causes something of a breakdown -- where civilization grows, the frontier fades.

Hickok's sudden development of a marriage, and rumored affair, at the end of his narrative coincides with a perceived weakening of his formerly invincible character. When, within his narrative, he accepts the love and construct of support from a woman, he also loses his eyesight, and soon after, his life. Hickok's pacifying presence in the cattle-towns of Kansas, as it represented the individual conquering the wilderness and developing American civilization, can be seen as a threat to the frontier. It is the hero of the wilderness that makes it possible for civilization to grow -- and the wilderness to die. The fruits of the endeavors of the individual in the West -- thriving civilization -- destroyed the tumultuous setting which gave him the strength to achieve them.

Turner seemed to understand how the efforts of the individual to conquer the frontier destroyed the setting which forced him to be strong enough to survive. In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, he addressed what he perceived as the closing of the frontier. He wrote:

> For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant.... What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely. And now, four centuries from the discovery of
America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has
gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.¹⁰⁵
What would become of the American psyche without the presence of a
physical frontier can now be observed in American perceptions of the
West this century, as seen through writing, film, politics, and the like.
Through these mediums, the shaping forces of the frontier have lived more
clearly, and perhaps closer to Turner's vision, in the American mind this
century than ever before. Although the physical frontier is gone, the
shaping forces are perpetuated through not only the fictions functioning
here as myth, but also through history.

It must be remembered that Hickok's death as a result of
domesticating forces is only one story. The gender roles of the Western
are the result of the dominant narrative. This is where careful
consideration of traditional primary sources and mythology can be most
enlightening -- it is clear that more than one version exists of nearly any
story. If connecting patterns can be observed amongst the various
versions of a story, much can be learned about social attitudes. More
importantly, the study of myth can help historians see that multiple
versions of events do exist -- and the dominant narrative is not the only
narrative.
Citations


4. Jacobs, Ibid., 18-19


8. McGerr, Ibid., 254

9. Fabian, Ibid., 225-26


11. Jacobs; Ibid., 18-19

12. Fabian, Ibid., 234

13. Fabian, Ibid., 231


17 Tompkins, Ibid., 47

18 Tompkins, Ibid., 137


20 Tompkins, Ibid., 48

21 Tompkins, Ibid., 48


25 Rosa, Ibid., 180

26 Rosa, Ibid., 5

27 William Cody, *The Life of Buffalo Bill*, (Hartford, CN: Frank E. Bliss, 1879), 69

28 Cody, Ibid., 70-71

29 Wilstach, x

30 Cody, Ibid., 136-37

31 Cody, Ibid., 139-40

32 Wilstach, Ibid., 82-86

34 Cody, Ibid., 69-72
35 Rosa & May, Ibid., 5 and Wilstach, Ibid., 26
36 Wilstach, Ibid., 37
37 Rosa & May, Ibid., 5 and Wilstach, Ibid., 25-26
38 Rosa & May, Ibid., 5
39 Wilstach, Ibid., 16-18, 25-26, 4-5
40 Wilstach, Ibid., 4-7
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42 Wilstach, Ibid., 26
43 Wilstach, Ibid., 26-28
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47 Wilstach, Ibid., 130
48 Wilstach, Ibid., 127-30
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51 Wilstach, Ibid., 132
52 Wilstach, Ibid., 132-33


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55 Cody, Ibid., 132-33

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57 Rosa & May, Ibid., 18 and Wilstach, Ibid., 159

58 Rosa & May, 20

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64 McDowell, The American Cowboy in Life and Legend, (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1972), 156 and Rosa & May, Ibid., 49-51

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69 Wilstach, Ibid., 173

70 McDowell, Ibid., 156 and Wilstach, Ibid., 174

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73 Wilstach, Ibid., 174-182
74 Wilstach, Ibid., 176
75 Wilstach, Ibid., 178-180
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77 Wilstach, Ibid., 181-82
78 Wilstach, Ibid., 189-93
79 Cody, Ibid., 329 and Rosa & May, Ibid., 51
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88 Rosa, Ibid., 6
89 Wilstach, Ibid., 243-52
90 Wilstach, Ibid., 269
91 Wilstach, Ibid., 273-74
92 Wilstach, Ibid., 281
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94 McDowell, Ibid., 156 and Wilstach, Ibid., 282-83
95 Wilstach, Ibid., 295-96
96 Cody, Ibid., 336
97 Wilstach, Ibid., 263
98 Wilstach, Ibid., 263-64
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102 Russel, Ibid., 26
103 Tompkins, Ibid., 47
104 Slotkin, Ibid., 5
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