

[REDACTED]

In 1902, the notorious outlaw Frank James (at that time living a quiet life) sued to stop the performance of a play portraying him and his brother in their earlier years, saying that it "glorifies these outlaws and makes heroes of them ... It's injurious to the youth of the country. What will be the effect upon these young men to see the acts of a train robber and outlaw glorified?"¹ Had James known that by 1957 twenty-nine movies would have been made memorializing his exploits, not to mention the countless books, comics and newspaper articles that have been produced since the start of his career, he might have been horrified.²

What is it that makes the James-Younger gang so irresistible to the American public? Love them or hate them, Jesse James and friends have always been interesting to us. Their initial popularity derived from a unique blend of cultural forces that happened to diverge in their home state of Missouri just at the time the James boys came on the scene. Once they had begun their careers, popular support for these men-outside-the-law was fed by the national media, and the sensationalism of their actions came at a volatile moment in American history. Without the combined influence of the Civil War's aftermath, agrarian discontent, the closure of the Final Frontier, and the basic human desire for exciting stories and personalities to read about in the newspapers, the James gang would probably have gone down in history as a bunch of little-known thieves, rather than as America's own celebrated Robin Hood figures.

Interest in the James-Younger gang did not die with the gang members. On the contrary, it seems that even today just about every person in America (and many in other nations as well) has heard of Jesse James in some form or another. Jesse's popularity with local farmers while he

¹ William A. Settle, Jr., *Jesse James Was His Name: or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri* (Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 1966), 176.

² Christopher Anderson, "Jesse James, the Bourgeois Bandit: The Transformation of a Popular Hero," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Autumn 1986): 43-64. JSTOR, www.jstor.org. (accessed April 12, 2007)

was alive has been exceeded by his fame all across the globe since his death, and much of this can be attributed to the movies that have been made portraying him. The first movie about Jesse was made so soon after the death of the outlaw that his own son was able to star in the title role.³ Not all of these movies have been flattering, as Christopher Anderson points out: "At the beginning of any single James film ... one can never be certain in which direction the balance will tilt, whether Jesse will be a compassionate man driven into a life of crime ... or a brutal criminal who enjoys thievery."⁴ Either way, movies made about Jesse and the James-Younger gang serve to keep the fame – and the legend – of these men alive for each successive generation.

For today's young people, Jesse James came in the form of Irish actor Colin Farrell in the movie "American Outlaws," which was released in 2001. Movie theatre trailers for this summer blockbuster proclaimed: "Bad is Good ... Again." "American Outlaws" put a modern spin on the tale with an energized score, beautiful stars, and an easy-to-follow plot complete with a railroad president "bad guy", a noble adversary for Jesse in the form of the head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, a clear injustice to fight against, and, of course, a love story. This version of the legend clearly fell on the "compassionate man driven into a life of crime" side of the movie division, although filmmakers did make some attempts to show that a life of crime does not always pay. According to "American Outlaws" director Les Mayfield, Jesse James was more of an inspiration for them than a historical figure, and since even among historians there is much confusion about what Jesse was really like there was freedom to tell the story as they saw it.

³ Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, 117.

⁴ Anderson, "Jesse James, the Bourgeois Bandit," 61.

“Everyone has their own story of who he was. We’re adding to the myth ... Who’s to tell us if we’re right or if we’re wrong?”⁵

Jesse James and his brother Frank were born the sons of a pastor and a good ole Southern gal, and their early years apparently gave no indication of their outlaw tendencies. The main difficulty of their childhood came while they were still very young, when their father went west to mine and there became ill and died. Zerelda James, their mother, married twice after her husband’s death and the James boys ended up with Doctor Samuels for a stepfather. Samuels was by all accounts a kind man who also gave Jesse and Frank a half brother, Archie. However, the James/Samuels family did have the misfortune to reside in one of the most tempestuous regions of the nation at that time, the Missouri/Kansas border. Tensions between proponents and opposers of slavery created a virtual war zone in this area even before the Civil War officially broke out. When it did, Frank enlisted as a Confederate soldier and after his unit surrendered, joined the cause again as a guerilla fighter with Quantrill’s Raiders.

“American Outlaws” opens with a scene from one of the final skirmishes of the Civil War, and shows both Frank and Jesse fighting heroically against Union soldiers. The movie does not give any background information for the boys before this point, except for a later scene in which Jesse tells his future wife, Zee, that when he was a boy he dreamed of becoming a river pirate. After the boys defeat the Union soldiers, they find that the war has ended and are excited to return home to their farms. Upon returning home, they find that Union soldiers have occupied their town and hung one of their friends for fighting in a similar unit to theirs. This injustice pushes them towards their decision to become outlaws.

⁵“American Outlaws,” produced by Jonathan A. Zimbert, Bill Gerber and James G. Robinson, 94 minutes, 2001, DVD.

According to history, Jesse's hatred towards Union soldiers probably began in 1863, while Frank was riding with the Raiders. Soldiers came to the Samuels family farm to extract information on the guerilla band's whereabouts, and in order to do so they strung up Dr. Samuel from a tree (he was unhurt), put Jesse's pregnant mother in jail, and beat the then 14-year old Jesse with rope.⁶ Not everyone agrees that this event actually occurred, however, as evidenced by this statement from historian Kent L. Steckmesser: "There is no record of the mistreatment of Jesse's father (Dr. Samuel), of the retention of his mother in jail, or of the attack on Jesse himself."⁷ Regardless of the historical veracity of the occurrence the story lives on and, if true, does provide a glimpse into the psyche of Jesse. The story also provided inspiration to the makers of "American Outlaws," according to screenwriter John Rogers.⁸

A few years later, Jesse would join Frank in the fight against the North, and both brothers saw action on numerous occasions. Their home in Missouri did not survive the war unscathed, however, as the Union government evicted three counties deemed to be full of guerilla supporters. The Samuels had to relocate to Nebraska, a move which no doubt did nothing to promote kind feelings from the family towards the North.⁹

History again differs with "American Outlaws" on the matter of a wound that Jesse received to his shoulder. According to the stories that have been handed down, in 1865 Jesse rode into Lexington with his company, under a white flag, to lay down their arms and surrender. Union soldiers then fired on the group and Jesse was severely wounded.¹⁰ In the course of his recovery, he stayed with his cousin Zerelda Mimms and her family, and by the time he left Jesse

⁶ Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, 26

⁷ Kent L. Steckmesser, "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol., 79, No. 312 (Apr. – Jun., 1966), 348-355. JSTOR, www.jstor.org. (accessed April 12, 2007)

⁸ "American Outlaws"

⁹ Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

and Zee, as she was known, were engaged. They were to marry nine years later.

The movie version of this story is, of course, much more romantic. "American Outlaws" portrays Jesse as leading a daring attempt to rescue Cole Younger, a real-life gang member, from an unjust hanging which had been arranged by railroad executives in order to scare the farmers into selling their land to the railroads. The rescue is successful, but Jesse is shot and wounded by Detective Pinkerton. His recovery takes place in the house of "Doc Mimms" and his daughter Zee, whose quick thinking saves Jesse from capture. The movie then shows the Pinkertons blowing up the Younger and James farms, which results in the death of Jesse and Frank's mother. Screenwriter John Rogers admitted that this part of the movie is quite contrary to history – in fact, Dr. and Mrs. Samuels and their son, Archie, were at home when Pinkertons threw an explosive device into their house. Archie was killed and Mrs. Samuel's arm had to be amputated, but Rogers explains that when moviemakers tried to include this real-life tragedy in the script, the audiences they tested it on did not believe that this scenario had actually happened!¹¹ In any event, the movie version of the story uses the death of the James's mother to explain their desire for revenge and turn towards thievery. Their enemy is, clearly, the railroads; and the Youngers and James's join forces in order to take away the money and supplies of their enemy. Bank and train robberies are, therefore, their only recourse, since the railroad barons will not be charged with any crimes: as Jesse says to Zee, "Laws don't touch men like Thaddeus Raines [Railroad Executive]. Only justice does."¹²

History is not nearly so clear on the reasoning behind the James boys' choice of profession. It is not even known exactly when the first Jesse James robbery took place, only that in 1869 Frank and Jesse were implicated in a bank robbery and forced to flee in order to avoid

¹¹ "American Outlaws" ✓

¹² Ibid.

[REDACTED]

arrest (and, possibly, an unfair trial by their former Northern adversaries).¹³ Shortly after their flight, Jesse sent a letter to a newspaper explaining that they had been falsely accused. This was to be the first of many letters claiming innocence, a tactic which surely earned Jesse lots of good publicity. Later letters from the gang claimed that they only killed in self-defense,¹⁴ and some newspaper editorials began declaring that the boys should be “admired.”¹⁵ Clearly, loyalty among the Southerners ran deep, and amid an atmosphere of Kangaroo Courts and lynchings, Jesse’s claim of innocence may well have been extremely believable to his neighbors. In contrast, Missouri’s long-time foes, the people of Kansas, had a differing opinion of the gang: statements from newspapers such as “No one but Missourians could have committed this crime!”¹⁶ paint a picture of a region still very much divided.

“American Outlaws” adheres to the tradition of portraying the James-Younger gang as being polite while robbing, and of avoiding common citizens in their hold-ups. Tradition has it that the gang did not rob working men, and according to some versions of the tale the boys also did not rob widows, orphans or clergymen. Their targeting of those enemies of farmers, the railroads, earned the gang the support of the agrarian population, and support also came from “neighbors and the ex-Confederate guerillas who had ridden with them in the Civil War,” according to New West historian Richard White.¹⁷ White also points out that “Such sympathy seems an unlikely product of fear, and there is little evidence for the reign of terror by these gangs reported by outside newspapers”¹⁸ – so the support of their neighbors was most likely genuinely heartfelt.

¹³ Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, 38.

¹⁴ Kent L. Steckmesser, “Robin Hood and the American Outlaw,” 352.

¹⁵ Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷ Richard White, “Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits,” *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), 387-408. JSTOR, www.jstor.org (accessed April 12, 2007)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 392.

Another area of historical fact which the movie did attempt to portray correctly was that of the antagonism between Jesse and Cole Younger. In "American Outlaws," Cole's youngest brother Jim is fatally shot, and the death serves as a wake-up call for Jesse. The James brothers leave the gang, and Jesse is reunited with Zee. According to history, the split in the gang actually occurred because of the death of Cole's brother Bob after the ill-fate Northfield, MN robbery in which most of the gang was killed or captured. Regardless, after the gang split, both history and movie correctly show Jesse hiding out for awhile – until "American Outlaws" portrays him as being captured by his nemesis, Pinkerton, and shipped back East by train on the order of the "bad guy," Thaddeus Raines. Jesse then has to fight his way out of this captivity, with a little help from Zee and the rest of the gang, and in a final act of irony shoots the symbol of Northern wealth and order – Raines' watch. Pinkerton then tells Jesse to head for Tennessee, where the railroads have no interest and therefore no need to send Pinkerton after Jesse – and Jesse and Zee ride off into the sunset.

According to tales of Jesse passed down through the generations, Jesse did have a lot of encounters with gold watches. It is unclear whether the screenwriters of "American Outlaws" were aware of this fact when they wrote that scene into the script, but either way it is a nice touch in the re-telling of Jesse's life. The movie makers also wrestled with the idea of revealing to the audience the true fate of Jesse James, but decided to leave the movie with a happier ending.¹⁹ History, however, does not always believe in happy endings. On April 3, 1882, Jesse was shot in the back of the head while straightening a picture hanging on his living room wall. The assassin was a new member of his gang, a fact which further relegated Jesse to the "Outlaw Hall of Fame," according to Steckmesser: "death by treachery rather than by 'fair' means serves

¹⁹ "American Outlaws"

as the justification of the hero.”²⁰ Even Jesse’s detractors decried the outlaw’s means of execution, especially since it was apparent that the governor of Missouri was an accessory to the assassination. Just a few months after Jesse’s death, Frank James turned himself in to the governor amid a blaze of publicity and was declared “Not Guilty” in every trial thereafter. He was to live out the rest of his life quietly, but Jesse did not have as peaceful a retirement. Almost immediately after his murder, imposters began to claim they were the real Jesse – Jesse’s son said that he knew of 26 such pretenders.²¹ Controversy continues to swirl over Jesse James to this day, thanks to DNA testing that can now be performed on the bodies of all those Jesse’s.

So what is it that really makes Jesse so interesting to America? One does not have to read very many history books to realize that the James-Younger gang was not forced into a life of crime, they chose it. They may have been polite and had a charismatic leader, but they also stole a lot of money and there is little evidence that those funds truly found their way into the hands of the poor and needy people of Missouri. Nevertheless, the gang was able to operate without capture for more than a decade; had articles written in their praise; saw comic books published which glorified them and made them out to be Robin Hoods for an oppressed region. Perhaps it was the allegiance from former comrades-in-arms that swung the tide of public opinion towards them. Perhaps it was that Jesse James was a brave and daring icon in an age that was seeing the end of their ideal West, with all its freedom and individuality. Perhaps it was that Jesse James really did have some great characteristics and has since been portrayed as worse than he really was – it is impossible to know for sure. As Christopher Anderson points out: “articulation of the James story cannot be unraveled easily from the cultural process within

²⁰ Kent L. Steckmesser, “Robin Hood and the American Outlaw,” 353.

²¹ Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, 171.

which it was produced."²² Many of the historical documents available regarding the gang are just as tainted as "American Outlaws," because they are also products of the cultural environment in which they were written. Regardless of the lack of clarity in the story of Jesse James, one fact remains: his story will most likely remain fascinating for generations to come! ✓

²² Anderson, "Jesse James, the Bourgeois Bandit," 44. ✓

Bibliography

"American Outlaws," produced by Jonathan A. Zimbert, Bill Gerber and James G. Robinson, 94 minutes, 2001, DVD.

Anderson, Christopher. "Jesse James, the Bourgeois Bandit: The Transformation of a Popular Hero," Cinema Journal, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Autumn 1986): 43-64, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/.

Settle, Jr., William A. *Jesse James Was His Name: or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri*. Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 1966.

Steckmesser, Kent L. "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore," The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 79, No. 312 (Apr. - Jun., 1966), 348-355, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/.

White, Richard. "Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits," The Western Historical Quarterly, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), 387-408, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/.