



Dakota Images

Fact and fiction merge in the controversial figure of Martha Jane Canary, better known as Calamity Jane. Working as a prostitute, wearing men's clothes, drinking, swearing, gambling, and wandering—she led an unconventional life. Thanks to her own tall tales and a dearth of hard facts, she has become a legendary figure of the West.

According to her highly embellished autobiography, "Marthy Cannary" was born in Princeton, Missouri, in 1852 and moved with her family to Montana, where her mother died in 1866. It is likely that soon after her father's death the next year she began following the camps of miners, railroad workers, and soldiers to work as a prostitute. Her claims of serving as an army scout and dispatch carrier during various Indian wars are fabricated, but she appears to have been part of the Crook Expedition of 1876 and possibly the Jenney Expedition into the Black Hills in 1875, although in what capacity, no one knows. She lived in the Black Hills during the gold rush from 1876 to 1880 and is remembered there for nursing the sick in Deadwood during the 1878 smallpox epidemic. She later worked for a short time as a bull-whacker on the Fort Pierre-Deadwood Trail.

Somewhere in her travels she met a man named Burke, and although no formal marriage was recorded, she assumed the name of Mrs. M. E. Burke, which is carved on her tombstone. Even though no evidence exists of a relationship between Calamity Jane and James Butler ("Wild Bill") Hickok, the legend that the two Deadwood personalities were secretly married and produced a child still persists. Most likely, Calamity Jane had a number of common-law husbands with whom she may have had children.

She possessed a talent for showmanship and once rode a bull through the streets of Rapid City. Dressed in buckskins, she appeared with the amusement firm of Kohl and Middleton in Minneapolis in 1896 and took part in the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, in 1901. She continually boasted of her exploits, exaggerating them with each repetition, and peddled her autobiography for a few cents wherever she went.

Calamity Jane died 1 August 1903 and was buried next to Wild Bill Hickok in Mount Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood.

by JOAN ANDERSON

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