

# Great American Lives

## of Nineteenth Century Missouri

# Jesse James

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Most people think of Jesse James as an outlaw who robbed and murdered. And while that's certainly an accurate description, Jesse James was also a Confederate **partisan** who became a **folk hero** after his death.

Because of the time period he lived in and his daring **exploits**, Jesse James will forever be associated with the gun-slinging Wild West that's often glorified in movies. But in reality, he was a dangerous **criminal** whose life ended abruptly in a small house while he straightened a picture on the wall.

The son of a Baptist minister, Jesse James was born in 1847 in Kearney, Mo., and grew up on a small farm. His father died when he was a boy, and he and his brother, Frank, were raised by their mother and stepfather. Although people living in frontier Missouri at the time were typically poor, the James family was actually well off. They even owned a few African-American slaves to help with the work.

As a teen, Jesse fought in the Civil War with the Confederate **guerrillas**, a group of soldiers who staged small attacks on Union soldiers and sympathizers. Jesse and Frank were infamous for their **brutality**, murdering prisoners and anyone who stood in their way.

After the Civil War, Jesse and Frank became leaders of a gang that robbed banks, trains and **stagecoaches**. Jesse often targeted men who had supported the Union during the war, and his violent political grudges were supported by some Missourians who believed he was continuing the Confederate cause.

Jesse and his gang were a popular topic for **journalists**, and the **exaggerated** stories they sold to **Easterners** are probably where his image as a folk hero originates. Some of these

stories compared him to Robin Hood, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. But the real Jesse James was a cold-blooded killer.

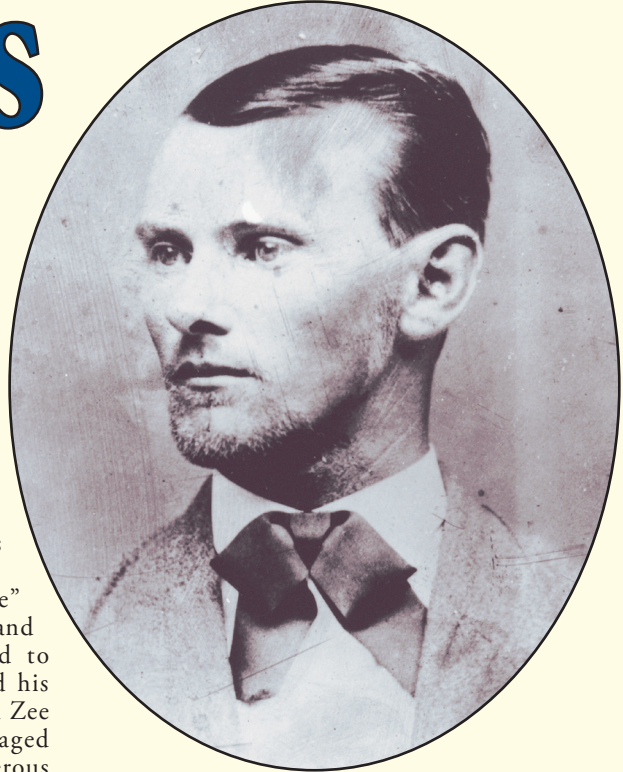
In 1866, Jesse robbed his first bank in Liberty, Mo., in broad daylight, and in 1873, he began robbing trains as well. Marriage and family didn't change his behavior either.

Jesse married Zerelda "Zee" Mimms in 1874 and had a son and a daughter. The family moved to St. Joseph, where Jesse changed his name to Tom Howard. Although Zee and Frank James' wife encouraged the brothers to live a less dangerous lifestyle, the gang continued their crimes.

In September 1876, Jesse's gang attempted to rob a bank in Northfield, Minn. The bank was targeted partly because its owners had been Union officers. The robbery went sour, however, when the townspeople unexpectedly returned fire. During the violence, most of Jesse's gang was killed, injured or captured. Jesse and Frank managed to escape, riding hundreds of miles on horseback into the Dakotas, and later back to Missouri.

Jesse's life of crime finally caught up with him, however. On April 3, 1882, he was adjusting a picture frame in his house when a visitor, fellow outlaw Robert Ford, shot him in the back of the head. Unknown to Jesse, Ford had been working with the government and had plans to collect \$10,000 – a huge sum of money for the time – that had been offered for Jesse's capture by Missouri governor Thomas Crittenden.

Ford was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, but was later pardoned by Crittenden and given the reward money.



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## Menace or Hero?

After reading the text about Jesse James, write an explanation that states whether you think he was a hero, or a menace to society. Support your thoughts with details from the text. Discuss your reasoning with the class.



## Vocabulary

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

- \_\_\_ Guerrillas
- \_\_\_ Stagecoach
- \_\_\_ Journalist
- \_\_\_ Exaggerate
- \_\_\_ Easterner
- \_\_\_ Criminal
- \_\_\_ Exploit
- \_\_\_ Folk hero
- \_\_\_ Partisan
- \_\_\_ Brutality

- A – A zealous, sometimes violent, supporter of a party or cause
- B – A person who writes stories for a living
- C – Groups of men who fought the enemy by small, surprise attacks and raids
- D – A deed that is striking or notable
- E – Horse-drawn carriage that was a popular mode of transportation in the 1800s
- F – To overstate the facts
- G – An average person who is transformed into someone extraordinary by his rebellion against oppression in his life
- H – Savageness or viciousness
- I – A person who lives in the East  
At that time, Easterners relied heavily on newspaper stories to find out what happened in other parts of the country
- J – A person who commits crimes