

“Wild Bill” Hickok

For readers who are fascinated by stories of the Old West – and count me among them – today has special significance in history. On August 2, 1876, “Wild Bill” Hickok, one of the greatest gunfighters of the American West, was murdered in Deadwood, South Dakota. The History Channel provides information about this well-known character of yesteryear.

Born in Illinois in 1837, James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok first gained notoriety as a gunfighter in 1861 when he coolly shot three men who were trying to kill him. A highly sensationalized account of the gunfight appeared six years later in the popular periodical, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, sparking Hickok’s rise to national fame. Other articles and books followed, and though his prowess was often exaggerated, Hickok did earn his reputation with a string of impressive gunfights.

After accidentally killing his deputy during an 1871 shootout in Abilene, Texas, Hickok never fought another gun battle. For the next several years, he lived off his famous reputation, appearing as himself in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show. Occasionally, he worked as a guide for wealthy hunters. His renowned eyesight began to fail, and for a time he was reduced to wandering the West trying to make a living as a gambler. Several times he was arrested for vagrancy.

In the spring of 1876, Hickok arrived in the Black Hills mining town of Deadwood, South Dakota. There he became a regular at the poker tables of the No. 10 Saloon, eking out a meager existence as a card player. On August 2, 1876, Hickok was playing cards with his back to the saloon door. At 4:15 in the afternoon, a young gunslinger named Jack McCall walked into the saloon, approached Hickok from behind, and shot him in the back of the head. Hickok died immediately. McCall tried to shoot others in the crowd, but amazingly, all of the remaining cartridges in his pistol were duds. McCall was later tried, convicted and hanged.

Hickok was only 39 years old when he died. The most famous gunfighter in the history of the West died with his Smith & Wesson revolver in his holster, never having seen his murderer. According to legend, Hickok held a pair of black aces and black eights when he died, a combination that has since been known as the Dead Man’s Hand.

What do we learn from the life of “Wild Bill” Hickok? All of our residents that we serve – in Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home – have influenced history to one degree or another, large or small, throughout the course of their lives. They have seen good times and bad ones, happiness and sadness, success and disappointments along the way.

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But we also come to understand that the acclaim of the world – celebrity status that is earned or bestowed – means little at the end of one's journey. Service to others, helping enrich the experiences of other human beings, brings real reward, an inner peace and satisfaction.

--Beecher Hunter