

Belle Starr—The Bandit Queen

Nancy Wolf

Myra Belle Shirley, later known as Belle Starr, was born in 1848 to John and Eliza Shirley on a farm near Carthage, Missouri. Missouri had become the 24th state of the United States in 1821. When Belle was still young, her family moved into the town of Carthage, and her father started several successful businesses there.

From the beginning, Belle enjoyed a better life than many. She seldom went without things she needed or wanted. She attended the Carthage Female Academy, where she received a good education. She loved playing the piano and being the center of attention.

She also loved her older brother, Bud. Together they spent many days outdoors, where Bud taught her to ride horses, shoot rifles and pistols, and handle a knife. With him, she could speak roughly and display her wild, bad-tempered side. Sometimes this behavior showed up indoors instead of outdoors, which created problems for her. Once in a while she picked fights with classmates at her school, and other times she showed how nice she could be.

In 1861 a civil war broke out between the Northern states (Union) and the Southern states (Confederates). The Union wanted to get rid of slavery in the country. The Confederates lived a life in the South that depended on slave labor and wanted it to remain.

The state of Missouri was not considered either Northern or Southern, so as a state, it decided not to pick sides. However, people in the state certainly had their own opinions. Belle's family agreed with the Confederates in this war.

In fact, Bud and his friends started a gang that terrorized the people who sided with the Union. They would steal weapons, horses, and supplies from people who supported the North and give them to the Southern troops. Because Bud was Belle's hero, she often spied for him, passed messages, and helped whenever she could. She even rescued him once when he was captured by Union soldiers.

In June of 1864, Bud was killed in a raid against the Union in Sarcoxie, Missouri. That broke Belle's heart and broke her father's spirit. The family packed up and moved to Scyene, Texas, a few miles outside of Dallas.

After the war, several other raiding gangs could not seem to stop what they were doing. They continued to steal horses and other things. One such group included Jesse and Frank James and Cole Younger, all from Missouri. After robbing a bank in Liberty, Missouri, they fled to Texas. Somehow, they connected with Belle's family and even stayed in their home for a while. Cole became Belle's first love, but he didn't stay around very long.

Other outlaw bands soon started seeking shelter in Belle's family home. Having these raiders in her home probably reminded her of her brother and the times they spent outdoors being wild and free.

She soon chose another young gang member, Jim Reed, to be her husband. He was an old family friend from Missouri who had a bit of a wild streak, just like her brother. They said their wedding vows while sitting on horses.

Three weeks later, the state of Texas declared Jim Reed an outlaw of the state and offered a large reward for his arrest. Jim and Belle took off for Missouri. There he was soon wanted for murder, so they began the life of trying to outrun the law.

That kind of sealed the fate of Myra Belle Shirley Reed. She would never be the spoiled, rich woman of Scyene, Texas, who loved to play the piano and run in social circles. Instead, she abandoned the possibility of that life and ran with her husband. The nice girl disappeared, and the wild, quick-tempered, bad-mouthed girl took over.

The legend of Belle Starr tells of many terrible deeds. At 18 years old, Belle rode with outlaws and helped organize daring attacks. Penny novels of the day glamorized her activities as a horse and cattle thief, a blackmailer, a protector of all outlaws, and even a murderer. She was said to have robbed trains, banks, and stagecoaches. She rode untamed horses that no man would dare to get on. She handled pistols, rifles, ropes, knives, and men expertly. But, at the same time, she continued to enjoy the piano and read books as often as she could.

Legend tells of the time in 1869 when Belle, Jim Reed, and two other outlaws rode to the North Canadian River country in Oklahoma Territory. There they found an old Native American who had hidden away \$30,000 in gold. There are two different stories about this. One says that the gang divided up the money and split up. Another one says that they split up after the robbery and that Jim and Belle never got their share of the gold.

The men in Belle's life did not live for very long. In August of 1874, Jim Reed was killed in a gunfight by a member of his own gang. A U.S. Marshal killed two others not long after.

Less than a year later, Belle married Sam Starr, a full-blooded Cherokee Native American. He owned 62 acres of land along the Canadian River in Oklahoma Territory. Together they built Younger's Bend, which was a secure place where outlaws could hide from the law. The only entrance was through a narrow canyon guarded by men with guns.

From 1875 to 1880, Belle Starr was at her wildest. She was the leader of a band of cattle and horse thieves. She served jail time only once, when she was caught red-handed trying to steal a horse. Judge Parker, from Fort Smith, sent her to jail for nine months. The law never convicted her of any of the other crimes the penny novels and legends say she committed. There was just no evidence. Shortly after she was released from jail, Sam Starr was killed in a shootout.

Belle married one more time, to a much younger man named Jim July. However, they never really got along. He was a very jealous man, and they had terrible fights.

It was reported that Jim July offered someone \$200 to kill Belle. The offer was rejected. However, a few days later, on February 3, 1889, Belle was riding on a country road all alone. Someone was hiding near the road, and when she passed by, the person shot her in the back and killed her. She was 41 years old.

Jim July became the number one suspect. There were others on the list of possible killers, including a neighbor who was angry with Belle and a man whose brother had been killed by someone in her gang. The list even included her son, Ed, and her daughter, Pearl, as possible killers. They never solved the murder. Belle was buried at Younger's Bend.

Belle may have had some regrets about the life she chose over the other life she might have had. She tried to direct her son, Ed, to take a different path than she had. She tried to help him control his wild side and teach him a different way of life. All of her efforts failed, for at age 22 Ed died in a gunfight.

Belle also attempted to direct her daughter, Pearl, toward a different life. She wanted her to become a child star on the stage. Belle took her to auditions, and at age 14 Pearl made her stage debut. That may have been more because of the pistols riding on her mother's hip than on any talent she may have had. Pearl never lived the kind of life Belle wanted for her, but at least she died of natural causes in 1925, at the ripe old age of 58.

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