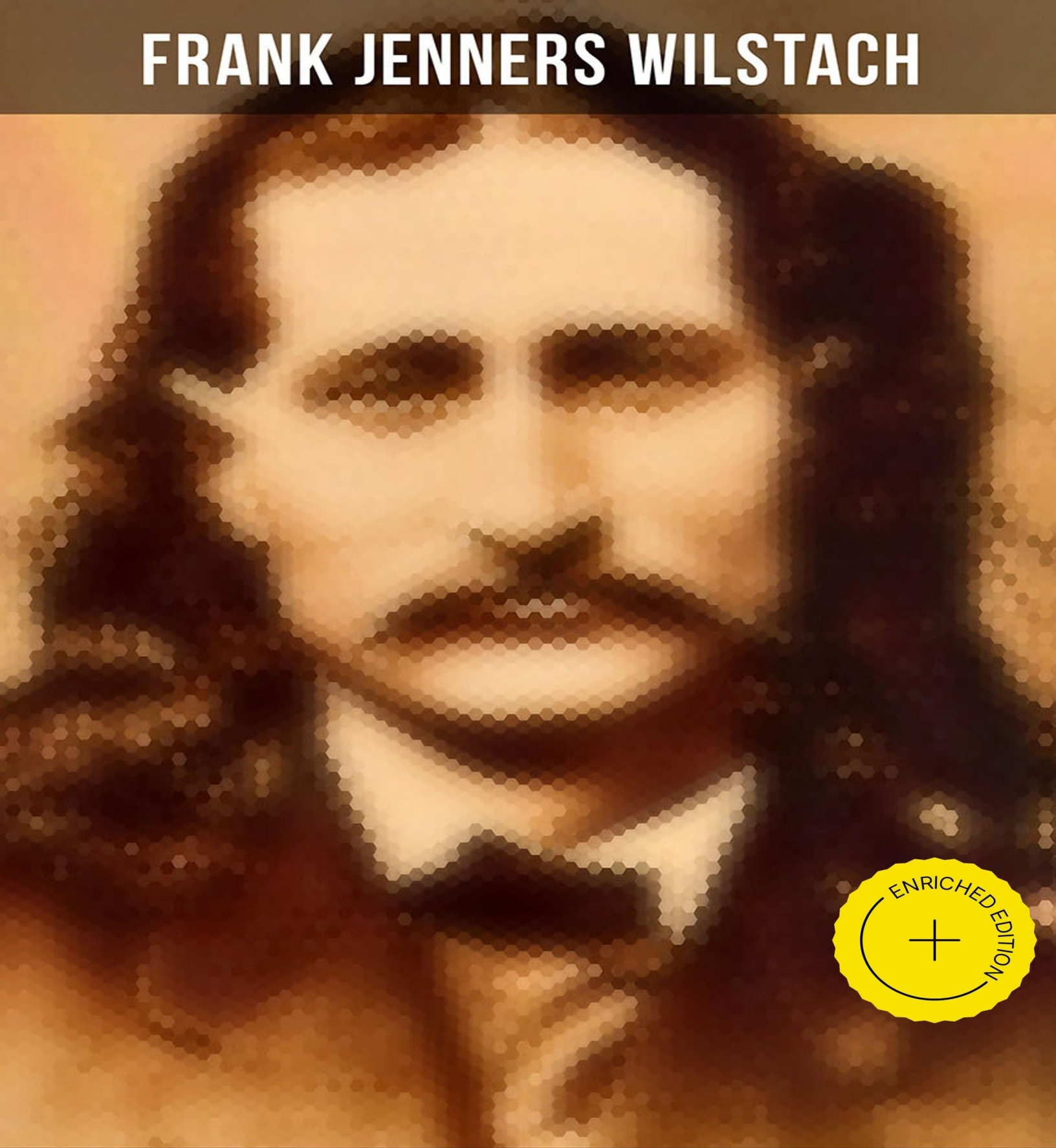
FRANK JENNERS WILSTACH



ENRICHED EDITION

THE PLAINSMAN

Frank Jenners Wilstach

The Plainsman

Enriched edition.

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FOREWORD

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It has not been the purpose of the writer to novelize Wild Bill Hickok. That has already been done, and rather effectively. So picturesque was the man, and so astounding his exploits, that it is little wonder he should have fallen into the hands of the fictioneers, who straightway made of him something of a Homeric figure. It has been my constant purpose to find out what was real, and what imaginary, in the tales about him that have been current for upward of sixty years.

Wild Bill was a fascinating personality to all who knew him. The mere mention of his name never failed to bring a crash of brasses from the orchestra. His friends never ceased to chant his praises as an honest man, an incredibly accurate pistol shot, and an individual who was without fear in the presence of danger. This is a good deal to say of any man, but it must be admitted that these encomiums have a solid basis of fact.

Wild Bill was no common gun-toter. He was not a bad-man, as the West defined the term in the ’60’s and ’70’s. That fact should be steadily borne in mind. It may be stated also that despite the implication of his pseudonym Bill never indulged in profane language—although he had a fine voice for it. In the opinion of the great marshals, peace officers, and fighting men of the West—men such as Bat Masterson, Bill Tilghman, and Buffalo Bill Cody, themselves renowned—Wild Bill was the greatest gun fighter and the most famous peace officer of the frontier.

When Sir Robert Walpole said all history is a lie he must have had prescience of certain pioneers who have published

recollections of Wild Bill. If Hickok had known intimately all the illuminati of the last frontier who have written intimately of him, he must have had a very varied acquaintanceship. Curiously, writers now so young they must have been in their swaddling clothes while Bill lived, have reported astounding interviews they had with him—interviews which must have taken place at the cradle side.

A number of border scriveners have claimed to have known him at Dodge City—even to have seen him blot out several “six-shooter sharps" in that hamlet. Now, it is more than likely that he was never in Dodge City at all. He visited the locality as a scout when the only inhabitants were prairie dogs and coyotes, but the town of Dodge was founded only three years before Bill was assassinated, and his goings and comings during this period are accurately accounted for.

Recently, a pioneer furnished the writer with a minute account of how Bill, at crime-wrung Deadwood, sent four desperadoes to their homes on high with two shots each from his brace of pistols—and three of the men named as victims actually served as pallbearers at his funeral! I have sought to expose such legends as these in their proper places. However, all such flights of fancy emphasize a fact not to be overlooked: if a bad man was looking for trouble at all times Bill was (as Henry James said of that voluptuous little ink-lady George Sand) remarkably accessible.

How many men did Wild Bill kill? Aside from Indians, the estimated number has ranged all the way from fifteen to seventy-five. This does not include the soldiers he slew as a sharpshooter during the Civil War.

The writer would not care to be pinned down to a definite figure. The reason is that, after the computation has passed, say, a dozen, you come upon perturbing doubts and

insistent questionings. Buffalo Bill used to count off thirty-five killings on his fingers; but it should be remembered that he never learned the truth as to the “McCanles gang massacre,” when three men were killed instead of the ten he tallied. Some fearsome fabricating, indeed, has gone on.

It has, in truth, been found impossible to investigate successfully all the reports of Bill’s powder-and-shot activities. There is a legend, for example, coming from Julesberg, Colorado, which sets forth that he bumped off a “sharp” on the field of picture-card finance; but no verification could be discovered. There is a tale, long afoot, of his having shot a whisky glass out of a man’s hand who referred to him, in a factious and familiar way, as Wild Bill. “Mr. Hickok” was the proper and organized custom of addressing him. And, too, a war-jig with guns is reported from Denver, but no facts could be discovered that verify that tragedy. Likewise, an incarnadine affair in a hotel at Leavenworth, when Bill spilled enough blood to paint a buggy. He may have engaged in all these six-shooter stampedes; but, on investigation, they all seem to be little else than skilfully varnished inventions.

It will readily be divined, however, that for a festively disposed individual—one, for example, who couldn’t hit a flying haystack with a ten-bore bird gun—to make Bill a target for pistol practice was downright suicide. And that, it appears, is what happened on numerous occasions; but as to Bill himself, he never missed the vital spot. Luck is enamoured of efficiency, even with pistols.

While Wild Bill was singularly free from those sins of the spirit, vanity and boastfulness, it must be admitted that, in the matter of dress, he had a flair for the bizarre. And, what was not altogether a general virtue of the time, he had an attachment for soap and water. Furthermore, he delighted in

broadcloth and fine linen. Yet he dressed according to the mode of the border, not after the fashion and frumperies of the “besotted East.” All those who took notice of his attire observed that his shoe leather was ever of the best quality of French calf. But on the plains he laid aside these niceties and invariably wore a buckskin suit and moccasins.

Edward F. Colborn, of Salt Lake City, Utah, lived on the border a good part of the vermilion days that knew Wild Bill. Lately, the writer asked Mr. Colborn for his recollections of Bill’s everyday appearance.

“I can see Bill,” was the reply, “through the eyes of memory. Tall, erect, with long brown hair that swept in profusion to his shoulders: aquiline nose, high cheek bones, high forehead. His attire was generally that of the Mississippi steamboat gambler—a long-tailed cutaway coat of dark cloth; wide blue trousers, narrow at the bottom; a fancy vest; high-heeled boots with taps under the trousers; a leather belt with two white-handled ‘cap-and-ball’ Colts[1]; a white shirt, a string tie, a graceful carriage, a moustache that drooped a little, and a poise and calm confidence that only good ancestral blood could give. He was to that country, the great plains, what John Oakhurst was to the Mother Lode in California in the ’50’s.”

Believing, doubtless, that this might be misleading, Colborn added, “I don’t think that Bill ever did a crooked thing in gambling or anything else. Everybody in those days gambled; so did Bill. Poker and faro-bank were the games, and with the cattle trade in ’73 came hazard, Mexican monte, and chuckaluck. There were gamblers by profession, but Bill was not of them. He was a man of little speech. Modesty of manner and avoidance of the limelight were among Wild Bill Hickok’s chief characteristics.”

Considering the admirable work of the photographers, it might seem unnecessary to have devoted so much space to what his contemporaries remember of his appearance. Yet while the photography is admirable—and Bill was neither gun nor camera shy—what General Custer, General Miles, Henry M. Stanley, and others had to say of him is illuminating. It may be as well, at this place, to add an interesting sidelight. The writer lately asked Gilbert S. Robinson, who married Bill's step-daughter, what impression Hickok made on him at their first meeting.

"When he came to my home in Cincinnati," replied Mr. Robinson, "and I first laid eyes on the world's greatest pistol-fighter—with his long frock coat and high hat—I thought he was a preacher!"

What the writer's investigations have been able to add to the store of fact regarding Wild Bill is disclosed in these pages. The most difficult problem encountered was the famous fight with the "McCanles gang of horse-thieves," which took place on the afternoon of July 12, 1861.

It is the opinion of the writer that the mystery of that "renowned slaughter" has at last been cleared up as effectively as it ever will be. The enigma will never, I believe, be wholly solved. When David C. McCanles's own son, Monroe—who, as a twelve-year-old boy, was an eye-witness of the tragedy—is unable or unwilling to give a plausible account of the happening, then one can do no more than make deductions from what facts can be verified. But in checking up Wild Bill's activities other perplexities were encountered—notably how James Butler Hickok came to be called Wild Bill, and the canard that Calamity Jane was his sweetheart. These have been satisfactorily settled. Other facts and fictions have been looked into and suitably classified.

Frank J. Wilstach.

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CHAPTER I
THE PRINCE OF PISTOLEERS

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For the past sixty years Wild Bill Hickok has been accepted on the last frontier as having been the greatest of all pistol shots. For speed in drawing and accuracy in firing, he had no equal**[1q]**. Buffalo Bill, speaking of his friend with whose pistol practice he was through their long association quite familiar, said in his memoirs that “he was the most deadly shot with rifle and pistols that ever lived.”

He began the use of firearms when he was a mere lad and it is certain that during the last twenty years of his life there was never a moment when either a pistol or rifle was not within reach of his hands. George Ward Nichols asked him in 1865 where he learned to shoot so perfectly, and he replied:

“I always shot well, but I came to be perfect in the mountains by shooting at a dime for a mark, at bets of half a dollar a shot.”

Nichols, desirous of having this famous marksman give him an example of his ability, told him that he would like to see him shoot. Wild Bill drew one of his revolvers and pointed to a letter O in a signboard which was affixed to the stone wall of a building on the opposite side of the way.

“That sign is more than fifty yards away,” Bill remarked. “Pll put six shots into the inside of the circle, which isn’t bigger than a man’s heart.”

And then it was that Bill, without raising his pistol to sight it with his eye, discharged six shots at the mark. It was

found upon examination that all six had perforated the circle.

This story by Nichols is ample evidence that it was thus early in life that Bill had perfected his accurate aiming from the hip, which was the wonder of all who witnessed his marksmanship.

Emerson Hough, in his novel, “North of 36,” tells of a similar incident occurring while Wild Bill was marshal of Abilene. Mr. Hough, in this narrative, says that “all the army men rated Hickok as the best shot with rifle and revolver that the West ever saw.” Yet, he oddly states that while Bill was engaged in spotting the letter O he “ raised one of his weapons to a high level and fired.” All who have seen his pistol work declared that he fired from the hip. Although Bill was the least boastful of men, he has frequently been heard to say that he never missed a mark. Of course, one should always take with ample sprinkling of salt all such statements reported as coming from him, but it may be that he was amazingly self-assured regarding his pistolry.

When it came to shooting at a human mark, Bill’s many pistol battles are sufficient evidence that he was highly proficient—marvellously so. He is credited with killing from fifteen to seventy-five men, but this latter figure would naturally include his slayings, as a sharp-shooter, in General Price’s army, as well as his Indian killings.

Outside of his wolf-hunting exploits near his home at Troy Grove, Illinois, where he achieved considerable local fame on account of the accuracy of his marksmanship, the first public test of his ability came when he applied to General Jim Lane for membership in his famous Red Legs**[2]** at Leavenworth, Kansas. The Red Legs were an unofficially organized troop of guerrilla cavalry enlisted on the abolitionist side to resist by force any invasion of Kansas by

armed bands raiding from pro-slavery Missouri. Prentiss Ingraham gives a detailed account of this incident:

“Failing in an effort to secure employment at once in Kansas, whither he had gone in search of adventure, Hickok sought to enlist with the Red Legs. This aggregation numbered some three hundred men, all thoroughly armed and mounted but not having the wherewithal to purchase a horse and complete outfit, he was, greatly to his distress, refused as a Red Leg Ranger.

“A few days after this the Red Legs went out on the commons to shoot with rifles and pistols for prizes, and our youth determined to get into the ring if possible. To attract attention when any one shot and did not drive the bull’s eye he laughed in a satirical way, till at last one of the Red Legs turned fiercely upon him and said:

“‘Look a hyar, boy, you has too much laugh—as if you c’u’d do better, and dern my skins even ef yer haint a Red Leg I’ll give you a chance to shoot. Ef yer takes ther prize, I’ll pay yer put-up dust, an’ef yer don’t, I’ll take the hickory ramrod o’ my rifle an’ welt yer nigh to death. Does yer shoot on my terms?’

“'I will, and beat you, too,’ was the quiet response.

“All eyes were now turned on the tall, handsome youth before them, for several had determined to try his mettle after the shooting for having laughed at them, and now they gazed on him with increased interest. There were three prizes, viz.: a fine horse, a saddle and bridle for the first; a rifle and belt, with two revolvers and a bowie-knife for the second, and a purse of one hundred dollars for the third. He had some little money and said quietly: ‘Til pay the fees, for I want no man to give me money.’

“‘Then shell out,’ the stranger remarked. ‘It’s fifteen fer the first, ten fer the second, and five dollars fer the third

prize, an’ ther boys hes all chipped in, an’ ef yer don’t win, boy, they’ll all see me larrup you.’

“All knew and greatly feared the speaker, Shanghai Bill, for he was a desperado of the worst type, a giant in size and of enormous strength and ever ready to get into a brawl. The boy smiled at his words, paid his thirty dollars, which left him with three in his pocket, and after the Red Legs had shot, took his stand and raising his rifle quickly fired. The first to start the cheering was Jim Lane himself, who cried out:

“‘By heaven! The best shot in three hundred.’

“‘It’s a accident; besides, Gineral, ther’s two more to be shooted,’ growled Shanghai Bill.

“The two more were then shot in the same quiet way as before and the bullets went dead centre.

“‘I’ve got the horse, saddle and bridle toward becoming a Red Leg, General,’ said the boy quietly, addressing Lane.

“‘You have, indeed. Now see if you can win the arms. I believe you can,’ was Lane’s reply. These were to be shot with pistols and at twenty paces, the best two in three shots, and once more three dead-centre bull’s eyes were scored by Wild Bill. The men now became deeply interested in the youth and watched eagerly for him to come to his third trial, which was to be with a rifle at a moving object a hundred yards off. This object was a round piece of wood painted red, which was to be rolled like a wheel along the ground, and at this three shots were allowed. Just as the man started it in motion, a crow flew over the field above the heads of the crowd, and instantly raising his rifle he fired and brought it down. He then seized the weapon held by Shanghai Bill and throwing it to a level sent a bullet through the red wheel ere it had stopped rolling.”

This sounds almost too good, but the same story has come from various sources much after the same fashion. Indeed, if there was not a conspiracy of the time to hoist Wild Bill on to a purple throne of shining glory as a pistoleer, we may safely accept it as a fact. Buffalo Bill in rating him above Doctor Carver, whom I used to see perform marvels with firearms, gives him the topmost place among pistol shooters. Any man who could out-shoot Carver was indeed a miracle-worker with powder and balls, and Buffalo Bill made this statement at the time when the redoubtable doctor (who was a dentist) was in his employ and likely to take umbrage if he did not agree with Buffalo Bill. And Carver was no patient violet when his own prowess was put in question. He had a high estimate of his own importance as a pistol and rifle shot, and justly so.

There are, however, stories that gained general currency that are too tall for acceptance. One of these is to the effect that Wild Bill and Charles Utter—known as Colorado Charlie—were once freighting supplies out of Wichita. Utter, somewhat of a wag, had riled a teamster to such a pitch that the angry man hurled a big stone at him, which would have killed him had it hit its mark. But, the story goes, as the missile left the teamster's hand Wild Bill's gun flashed. The bullet struck the stone, and turned it from its course. It was a masterly shot and won the applause of all.

No wonder!

And yet Bill made shots only a little less phenomenal. The late Joseph Wheelock, the actor, once told the writer that when he was a young man he had seen Wild Bill stand between telegraph poles and fire simultaneously with a revolver in each hand, hitting both poles. Another of Bill's feats was to cut a chicken's throat with a bullet from a distance of thirty paces, without breaking its neck or

touching the head or body. He was also wont to amuse his friends by driving the cork into a bottle without breaking the bottle-neck. He was able to hit a dime at fifty paces nine times out of ten. These feats are all the more remarkable when it is taken into account that he fired from the hip without taking deliberate aim.

The old residents of Hays City teem with stories of Bill's pistolry. One day he was walking along the street when he observed a ripe apple hanging on a tree. Pulling two revolvers from their holsters, he shot with his left hand and nipped the stem. As the apple fell his right-hand revolver pierced it with a bullet. On another occasion he was riding in from the fort with General Custer. Bill pointed out a knot on a telegraph pole, remarking that he wanted to see how many bullets he could put in it as he rode by at a gallop. He fired all six chambers of his revolver, and every bullet hit the knot. This telegraph pole was pointed out for many years by the residents of Hays City as an example of Bill's remarkable marksmanship.

During the last years of his life, according to Ellis T. Peirce, Bill used two Colt's-45 calibre cap-and-ball revolvers without triggers. He was a pulse shot. When he grasped the butt of his revolver his thumb would rest on the hammer, and the instant he had drawn the weapon clear of the holster its own weight would cock it. Bill had only to lift his thumb—and there was another death to record. The hammers were ground smooth so they would slip easily under the thumb when pressure was removed.

Both of these famous guns have disappeared. Wild Bill was wearing a new revolver when killed at Deadwood, a large Smith &Wesson. The ivory-handled gun found on his body was taken by Charlie Storm, a Jewish gun-fighter of Deadwood, when the latter went south to fight Luke Short.

But Short was too quick on the draw, and Storm is still down there! Charlie Utter, Wild Bill's companion in Deadwood, took the Smith &Wesson for a keepsake, and Wild Bill's Sharps rifle was buried beside him.

CHAPTER II
ANCESTRY AND EARLY MANHOOD

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Ames Butler Hickok, known to fame as Wild Bill, did not indite sonnets**[2q]**. His penchant did not lie in that direction. His conversation, so far as is known, was not a Kimberley which flashed epigrammatic diamonds. He was withal a reticent man. As for letters, there are but few extant. Yet his fame, after his body has rested for nearly fifty years in the little cemetery at Deadwood, South Dakota**[3]**, is as glowing as on the day he was lowered into the grave by a few devoted friends. And when the history of those lurid times finally is written, Wild Bill and his forthright pistols will supply material for many a thrilling and astounding page.

Fully to understand such a character, it is necessary to be acquainted somewhat with the environment in which he was born. In the middie of the 19th Century, that vast territory comprising hundreds of thousands of square miles, extending westward from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains, from the Mexican border on the south to the Canadian line on the north was, in the language of the times, a howling wilderness. The howling was done, in the main, by prowling Indians, ravenous wild animals and their victims. It has been computed that, as late as 1869, there were ten million roving buffalo as well as sixty thousand hostile Indians on the plains. For a white man to venture alone into that vast area was a perilous adventure.