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CULTURE

Belle Star

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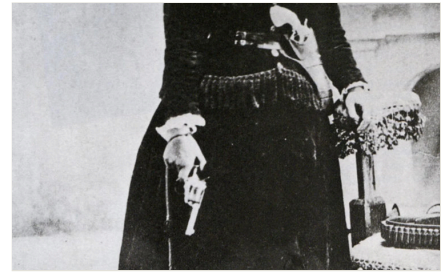


From Piano Keys to Pistol Shots

THE UNRULY LIFE OF BELLE STARR

When a daughter is born into a wealthy family, receives a higher education, and learns to play the piano, one might expect her to enjoy a well-ordered life. However, Myra Belle Shirley's life took a different path. Born in Missouri in 1848, she spent a carefree and spoiled youth, during which her brother Bud taught her horse riding and even shooting. And then her fate took a wild twist. Bud joined the Confederate guerrillas when the preliminary skirmishes of the Civil War broke out - and was killed. Her hometown, Carthage¹, was burned to the ground in 1863. Thus, Belle and her family fled to Texas, and here she began her transformation from a Southern girl to an outlaw legend.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carthage,_Missouri



Texas was full of ex-soldiers and bandits, and Belle found herself in their company, increasingly drawn into their world. Men like Jesse James² and the Younger brothers³—already famous names at the time—often sought refuge in the Shirleys' home. Belle didn't just stand by and watch. She fell in love with Jim Reed⁴, a charming outlaw and former guerrilla fighter, and the two married in 1866. After that, they rode together across the dusty trails of Texas, and Belle began to build her image. She wasn't just a bandit's wife—she developed into the Bandit Queen. She wore velvet and feathers or buckskin and moccasins, rode a fast mare named Venus, and carried a pistol on her hip.

In 1874, Jim Reed - meanwhile, a two-fold father and a wanted murderer - was killed in a gunfight. But Belle didn't retreat; she even headed deeper into the outlaw country. She left her and Jim's children in the care of their grandmother and enjoyed her lawless life, including amorous affairs.

In Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), Belle married Sam Starr, a Cherokee with a long rap sheet, in 1880. They set up their ranch, Younger's Bend, as a hideout for criminals. Outlaws came and went. Horses disappeared. Whiskey flowed. Belle ruled the scene. One story claims she played poker in Dallas saloons, drank with cowboys, and shot into the air just for fun.

But in 1883, the law struck. Belle and Sam were convicted of horse theft. They served nine months in federal prison in Detroit. But prison didn't change Belle. After Sam was killed in a gunfight in 1887, Belle took a new lover and returned to Younger's Bend. She was still a force—independent, stylish and mysterious.

Her life was wild and surprising, and her death was no exception. On February 3, 1889, just two days before her 41st birthday, she was shot in the back near her ranch. Her killer? Unknown! The murderer was never found. The suspects were a bitter neighbor, her lover, and even her children. There was never a trial.

Belle Starr became a legend. Just months after her death, a lurid biography titled "*Belle Starr, the Bandit Queen, or The Female Jesse James*" was published in the National Police Gazette⁵, turning her into a Wild West icon. With her feathered hats, pistols, and defiant spirit, Belle Starr galloped straight into American folklore, made it into a Lucky Luke comic book, and was immortalized in numerous movies like „*The Bandit Queen*“ and "*Montana Belle*".

Sources:

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²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_James

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James-Younger_Gang

⁴[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Reed_\(outlaw\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Reed_(outlaw))

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⁷<https://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-bellestarr/>

⁸<https://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2012/10/belle-starr.html>