

Jesse James and Me

As a boy, I played the outlaw.
Now I know what he really was

BY JAMES RESTON JR.

IN AN OPEN FIELD down the road from our Virginia cabin, a single stone chimney stands like an aging sentry amid grazing Black Angus cattle. Since my parents bought the 11-acre retreat in 1948—called Fiery Run for the rainwater that rushes down from Rattlesnake Mountain to the north—I lived in certainty about what that chimney signified. The citation of the old Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission that rests on our cabin mantel confirmed it: this was the house where Robert Ford, Jesse James' confederate and assassin, grew up in the 1860s. As a boy, I acted out parts of Jesse's legend on our lawn with glee.

In the mid-19th century, the community gristmill was on our property. The solid, three-story miller's house stands there still, and the mill, though now a ruin, was still standing when I was recuperating at the cabin after being hit by a Washington, D.C. bus in 1948—and two years later, when, quarantined after being exposed to polio, I lived there with my grandfather.

In the 1860s, the miller was a man named

Sims, and the mantelpiece citation identifies him, without a first name, as Jesse James' father-in-law. When, in 1882, news reached these parts that Ford had shot James in the back to collect a \$10,000 reward, our stouthearted miller mounted up, rode west to Kansas and killed Ford in righteous revenge. Or so I was led to believe.

To a young boy, this was heady stuff. Jesse James was America's Robin Hood; Theodore Roosevelt himself had proclaimed him such. James robbed from the rich—from flush banks and flourishing railroads—and gave to the poor. He was dashing and daring, with slicked-



The chimney (above) is all that's left of Robert Ford's Virginia home, near the author's. Ford shot James in Missouri in 1882 (left, a 19th-century engraving of the act).





After James died, his body lay in honor, and hundreds came to see it. But his killer collected only some of the bounty.

back hair, slouch hats, high leather boots, three-piece suits and fast stallions. As a teenager, I read comic books that had Jesse riding out of town, pistols blazing, as he rescued some damsel in distress.

In 1939, Tyrone Power, the handsomest of leading men, played him in *Jesse James*—"The epic story of the most colorful outlaw who ever lived." Even now, having seen the movie in rerelease in the '50s, I recall vividly the scene when Jesse, having put down his pistols, straightened his dear wife's framed needlepoint—askew on the wall—as the long barrel of Ford's revolver slid slowly, evilly through the doorway and exploded. Jesse turned and tumbled backward and died in that clean, tasteful way that heroes did in movies when I was growing up.

I listened to the ballad "Jesse James," the folk song that came into existence not long after James died and, it was said, contributed mightily to his legend. The verse about my perfidious neighbor went like this:

*It was Robert Ford, that dirty little
coward,*

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Brad Pitt, in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, is the latest leading man to portray James.

*I wonder how he does feel,
For he ate of Jesse's bread and he slept in
Jesse's bed,
Then laid poor Jesse in his grave.*

And then the refrain, which invokes the pseudonym, Thomas Howard, that James adopted after he had supposedly given up his criminal ways and was living peaceably in St. Joseph, Missouri:

*Poor Jesse had a wife to mourn
for his life,
Three children they were brave;
But that dirty little coward that shot
Mister Howard
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave.*

As James' legend grew, so too did the dimensions of Ford's treachery and betrayal. The needlepoint became a portrait of James' dear mother, Zerelda. Bobby Ford became James' cousin—in fact, Ford posed as such—making the murder not only intra-gang but also intra-family. And then, in the 1930s, Woody Guthrie came along, revised the ballad, and deepened Ford's infamy by making Jesse a cuckold:

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Casey Affleck plays Robert Ford as a picked-on teenager who betrays his hero more out of fear than greed.

*Now a bastard and coward called little
Robert Ford*

*He claimed he was Frank and Jesse's
friend*

*He made love to Jesse's wife and he took
his life,*

And he laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Last month, Hollywood returned to this ripe old chestnut, with the release of *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, starring Brad Pitt, Casey Affleck and Sam Shepard and produced by that great warper of historical epic, Ridley Scott. (Remember Scott's 2005 take on the Crusades?) One might have expected an orgy of violence in this latest retelling of this most violent of American stories, but it's surprisingly subdued. The menace is psychological, subtle . . . and effective. The film is exquisitely photographed by a Hollywood master, Roger Deakins, and its period dialogue, written by the director, Andrew Dominik, and based on the novel by Ron Hansen, draws the viewer into 19th-century America. To my delight, Casey Affleck's Robert Ford steals the show as the hero-worshipping, picked-on, psychologically benumbed teenager who betrays his hero more out of fear than greed.



After killing James, Ford (c. 1885) was convicted of murder but pardoned. He then made a living by telling his story.

WAS JESSE JAMES really dashing and heroic? Was he contemptuous of the rich and charitable toward the poor? And was Robert Ford so horribly villainous? What is the real story?

My first dip into the history—in forays to my county historical society and in T. J. Stiles' excellent biography of James—revealed that the citation over my mantel is woefully wrong. Robert Ford grew up in the house with the chimney near ours, all right, and, yes, he killed Jesse James. But James himself had no Virginia roots and no Virginia father-in-law; he was born and raised in Missouri and spent most of his life there. (And no, he and Ford were not kin.) Ford, greedy for blood money, came late to the gang, as James and company were planning to rob a bank in Platte City, Missouri. Stiles does not tell us whether Ford slept with James' wife, but he certainly ate of Jesse's bread before he shot him, not in the back but behind the ear, on April 3, 1882.

At the time, James was reputed to be the most dangerous man in America. He had intimidated legions of sheriffs and soldiers for 15 years. Said to have had magical powers of premonition, especially with regard to danger, he had outlived countless attempts on his life and had survived

two terrible bullet wounds to his body. His ability to escape harm, arrest and death had taken on fabled proportions. In April 1882, he had scarcely put himself out to pasture, as Tyrone Power had led me to believe. And whatever Ford's other qualities may have been, and whatever the exact circumstances of the shooting, it seems to me that he was no coward.

Robert Ford collected only a fraction of Missouri governor Thomas Crittenden's blood money—the governor decided to split it five ways, according to news reports that Stiles cites, among an assortment of lawmen and other James betrayers, including Ford's brother, Charley.

Ford was convicted of murdering James, but the trial was a sham and Crittenden pardoned him immediately. Thereafter, my neighbor made his living telling and retelling the heroic tale of how he shot Jesse James, at dime museums and the like.

I regret to say there is no basis for casting my miller, Sims, as an avenging angel. (True, Zerelda James' second husband was one Benjamin Simms, but he has no part in the James legend.) A man named Ed O'Kelley killed Ford, not in Kansas, but in Creede, Colorado, during a barroom brawl. And it happened not soon after the news of James' death reached Virginia, but ten years later, in 1892. So much for the citation from the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission (which is now known as the Virginia Department of Historic Resources).

To many in Missouri, the killing of Jesse James was a dastardly act. After the bandit's body was taken to the town of Kearney, it lay in state (or, more accurately, "in honor," since James was most definitely not a public servant and was therefore not entitled to the "state" designation). Two weeks after the killing, Oscar Wilde stopped in St. Joseph on a celebrated lecture tour. "The Americans are certainly great hero worshippers," he wrote home on April 19, 1882, adding, in an allusion to James, "and always take their heroes from the criminal classes."

Hundreds of the curious and the admiring filed past James' casket. But James was no Robin Hood; he and his men split their loot in the woods, and it is doubtful they gave any of it away. As Stiles notes, James was a blatant racist, an unreconstructed, angry and violent secessionist who operated in a Union-controlled border state where sympathy for the Confederacy lingered after the Civil War. His passion was to undercut the war's final resolution and to maintain Southern antebellum values, including slavery, in his home state. His mother kept her former slaves, under the same conditions, into the 1880s. She was unfailingly proud of her offspring to the end.

A teenager at war's end, James watched enviously as his brother Frank joined in the blood-soaked actions of the infamous Quantrill gang. The motive of these bushwhackers was to scuttle Unionist control of Missouri, especially in the swath of slaveholding counties known as Little Dixie along the Missouri River. The gang is best known for its 1863 raid on the abolitionist town of Lawrence, Kansas, where scores of unarmed men and boys were gunned down in the streets. James later joined Bloody Bill Anderson's gang; Anderson's notoriety, apart from his penchant for scalping and otherwise maiming his victims, came from an equally atrocious incident known as the Centralia massacre, in which another Missouri town was robbed, terrorized and burned before dozens of innocents were clubbed, slaughtered and mutilated.

After the war, the James boys joined Cole Younger and his brothers to build on this bloody legacy, as Southern sympathizers glorified Jesse's derring-do and "chivalry" and ignored his killing of innocents. By cooking up the story of his altruism, they transformed a folk demon into a folk hero—a thrilling desperado with a cause. Much attuned to his standing with Southern sentimentalists, James had some success in cloaking his crimes with a higher purpose.

We get none of this in the new movie.

Jesse James fits our post-9/11 definition of a terrorist. His legend-building had some success in sabotaging Reconstruction in Missouri, effectively delaying implementation of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, which, respectively, prohibited slavery and guaranteed due process and the right to vote regardless of race. He was a bloodthirsty insurgent of the old order, cloaking his mayhem in the illusion of a crusade against the new order. And, mildly literate for a gangster, he was what we would today call media-savvy, using sympathetic newspaper editors to advance his reputation.

"Some editors call us thieves," he wrote to the *Kansas City Times*. "We are not thieves—we are bold robbers. . . . I am proud of the name, for Alexander the Great was a bold robber, and Julius Caesar, and Napoleon Bonaparte."

IF IT IS TRUE that every generation reinterprets history in the light of its experience, it is also true that individuals reinterpret the myths of their youth in later life. So, in turn, do they change their attitude toward the landmarks that memorialize those myths. Despite the considerable efforts of Brad Pitt, it is a stretch to make Jesse James into a hero. And just as hard to make Robert Ford into a coward. He is merely a gangland killer.

Are lost myths akin to lost loves? I wonder. I won't be romping as Jesse James on the lawn anymore. Since the new movie gets an R rating for "strong violence and brief sexual references," not many 8-year-olds will do so, either. If one little crook kills a master criminal who is a scourge on society, why should we care, any more than if a Mafia stoolie kills his don? What code of honor is at work here?

And still, despite all I now know about this story, I look at that lone chimney in that Virginia field with wistful pleasure every time I drive by it, and I mourn each new lost stone. ○

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