

HELL'S BELLE STARR

Deadly and Dainty Girl Bandit

a library of about 100 books and was supposed to have read them all. The Shirley tavern was a high-grade resort according to frontier standards.

The social and entertainment life of the town centered there, and Belle, who grew up as a typical hotel child, always ready to show off before strangers, frequently recited and played the piano to amuse the guests.

Belle was 15 years old when the Civil war began. Sympathy for the Confederate cause ran high in that region, and her elder brother Ed became a leader in Quantrill's guerrillas. She could ride as well as any man, although she always used a sidesaddle, and her hoydenish spirit and taste for adventure made her a valuable auxiliary in the partisan warfare that Quantrill conducted. She was under loyalist suspicion as a spy, of course, but she was too smart to be caught carrying incriminating messages.

In the winter of 1862 she was arrested by federal cavalry at Newtonia, a village thirty-five miles from Carthage, and taken to the home of a certain Judge Ritchey for questioning by a Major Enos. He got nothing out of her but a concert of Confederate songs, defiantly hammered out on the piano in Judge Ritchey's parlor. After she had been held for several hours she was released by Major Enos with the remark:

"You'll meet your brother Ed on the road home, coming here under arrest and due for a hanging."

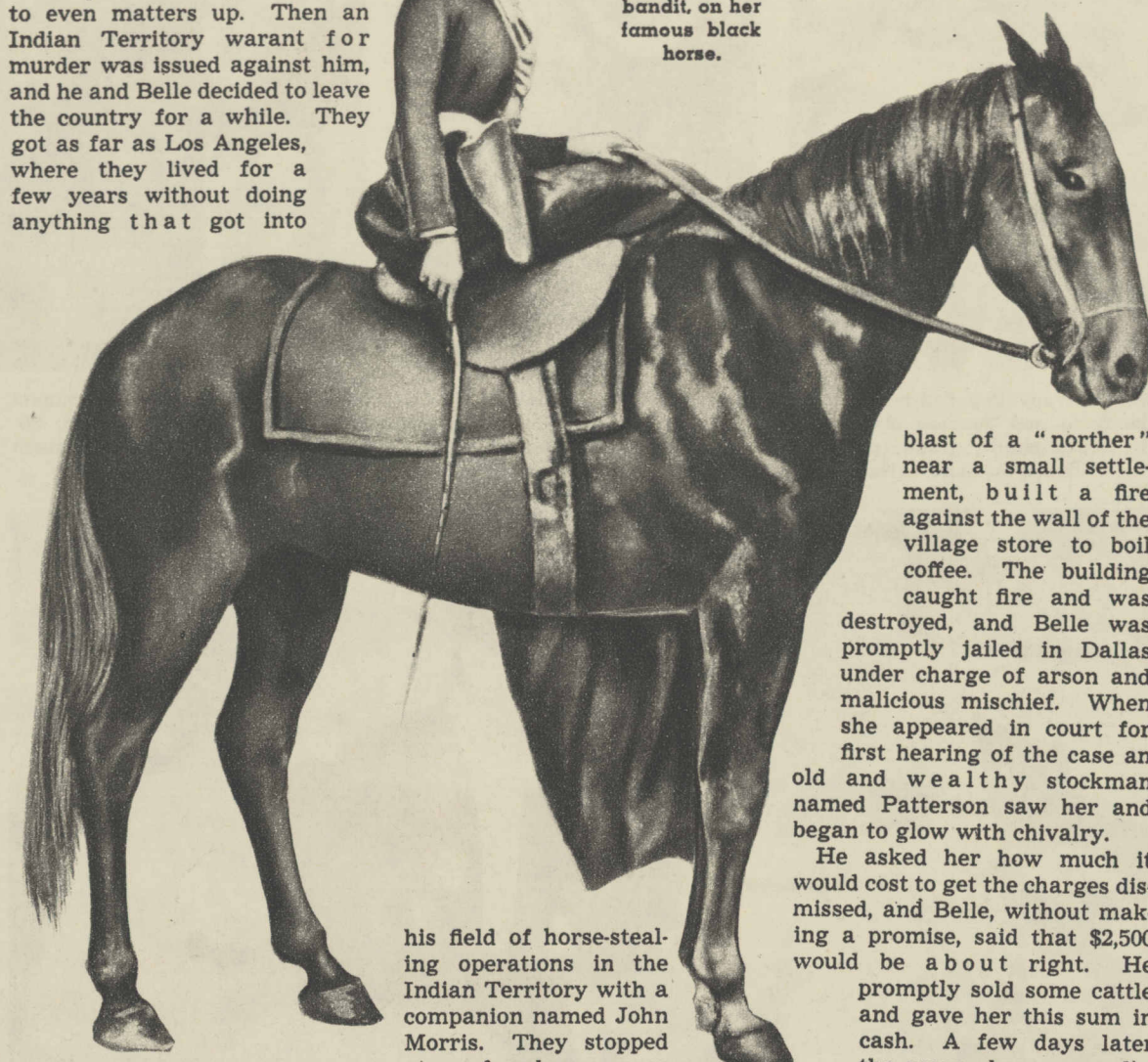
Belle rode back to Carthage at a furious pace, taking side roads and cross-cuts that were unknown to the Union soldiers.

She arrived before the troop of cavalry which had been sent to arrest her brother, and greeted them on the doorstep of the

over before Jim Reed became involved in a feud; a band of similar graduates of the frontier school of anarchy called the Shannon boys killed his brother, Scott Reed, by mistake; and Jim felt impelled to slay a Shannon to even matters up. Then an Indian Territory warrant for murder was issued against him, and he and Belle decided to leave the country for a while. They got as far as Los Angeles, where they lived for a few years without doing anything that got into

(Photos from N. H. Rose collection.)

Belle Starr, a lady and a bandit, on her famous black horse.



his field of horse-stealing operations in the Indian Territory with a companion named John Morris. They stopped at a farmhouse near McKinney, Tex., for dinner, and Morris told Reed that the owner of the premises was an eccentric old puritan who would object if they entered the house carrying Winchester rifles and side arms.

Reed accordingly left his shooting irons on the porch; Morris did likewise. When they were at table Morris excused himself to go to the pump in the yard and fill a pitcher. He returned carrying his own revolver and emptied it into the unsuspecting Jim Reed.

This assassination failed to earn any of the rewards offered for Reed because of Belle's self-control. For collection an identification of the body was necessary, and it had to be prompt because of the heat of summer in Texas. Belle was summoned from Dallas to view the remains before a group of witnesses. She looked at Jim calmly and dryly and then said to his murderer in a light, Dallas society manner:

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Morris, but this is not Jim Reed. You killed the wrong man. If you want a reward for Jim Reed's body you will have to find him and try your cowardly trick all over again."

Belle's widowhood would have freed her from criminal associations if her inclinations had run that way, but it had the opposite effect and she drifted deeper into outlawry. She absented herself from her Dallas livery stable for long, mysterious expeditions over the prairies, and her neighbors believed, with good cause, that she was meeting bands of horse thieves. She finally abandoned the livery business, and still seemed to be plentifully provided with cash. In 1877 she figured in an escapade which

smirched her reputation, perhaps unjustly, more seriously than her dealings in stolen horses.

She and a tomboy named Emma Jones, caught in the cold

blast of a "norther" near a small settlement, built a fire against the wall of the village store to boil coffee. The building caught fire and was destroyed, and Belle was promptly jailed in Dallas under charge of arson and malicious mischief. When she appeared in court for first hearing of the case an old and wealthy stockman named Patterson saw her and began to glow with chivalry.

He asked her how much it would cost to get the charges dismissed, and Belle, without making a promise, said that \$2,500 would be about right. He promptly sold some cattle and gave her this sum in cash. A few days later the arson charge was dismissed, without bribery, and Belle was sentenced to pay a nominal fine for malicious mischief. This left her with a net profit of \$2,490.

The ardent rancher bought her a dinner or two in the hotel, but found that his suit for her favors was making no headway. He asked for a refund on the money advanced, but Belle alleged enormous legal expenses and would not return a dime. His friends then urged him to sue her for fraud, but he refused with the noble remark:

"Hell, let her keep it! I reckon, after what she's had to put up with, she's earned every cent of it."

The good folk of Dallas promptly ostracized Belle, but she brazened it out with a display of new horses and stylish riding habits. In 1878 she found herself in jail again, on a horse stealing charge. She charmed a deputy jailer into releasing her and eloping with her. He returned to Dallas a month later with a handbag full of cash, confessing that he had been working like a slave for the woman—cooking, horse wrangling, fetching and carrying—at the muzzle of his own gun, which she had plucked from his holster.

The widow of Jim Reed was now ready to transform herself into Belle Starr, a completely initiated female bandit. During the next year and a half she rode the ranges of the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles with a gang of desperadoes led by three public enemies known as Jim French, Jack Spaniard, and the Blue Duck. They stole cattle and horses, raided village banks, and held up stagecoaches. Belle was ver-

Never Forgot She Was a Lady

itably the queen of the gang—strong in council and tyrannical in enforcing her own code of manners. Once the Blue Duck forgot that she was a lady, when her hat blew off, and failed to make the proper gesture of courtesy. She pulled a gun on him and compelled him to do his duty as a gentleman and pick up her hat.

This same Blue Duck borrowed \$2,000 from the gang's treasury and lost it all in a night's sitting in a gambling house at Fort Dodge. Belle rode to that town the next day, walked into the resort with a gun in each hand, and lifted the entire bank roll, amounting to \$7,000.

When the law began to close in on Messrs. French, Spaniard, and Blue Duck, Belle withdrew to the Starr ranch in the Cherokee reservation, where she and Jim Reed had spent many happy days. There she found her young admirer and former guide, Sam Starr, a half-breed, who could neither read nor write. They went off on a cattle-rustling expedition around Ogallala, Neb., and when they returned to the Starr ranch a year and a half later, driving a large herd of kine, they announced they were husband and wife.

This marriage to a ward of the government gave Belle a right to claim a land grant. She and Sam settled on a 1,000-acre claim on the Canadian river



Ed Reed, one of the clan from which came Belle's first husband.

near Eufaula and built themselves a cabin which was the wonder of the region because of its touches of civilized luxury. Belle's daughter, Pearl, joined them, and the Starrs, contemplating their herds and their fertile acres, were a happy family.

In 1883 Belle and Sam Starr fell into the hands of the law because of the minor matter of a stolen colt found in their possession. It was a federal charge, and they were given short sentences in the Detroit house of correction, which they served.

Belle comforted her daughter in their absence with gracefully written letters, in one of which she said:

"You must not think of mamma being shut up in a gloomy prison. It is said to be one of the finest institutions in the United States. Here I can have my education renewed.



William Clarke Quantrill, infamous Civil war guerrilla.

Sam will have to attend school, and I think it will be the best thing that ever happened to him."

After this prison experience Sam Starr returned to outlawry on a larger scale than stolen colts. He was compelled to spend most of the year 1885 in New Mexico, evading warrants for a postoffice robbery. On his return he was wounded by a posse, placed under arrest, and released on bail. The next day he was killed—in a drinking bout with a sheriff's officer, say some; in a dance hall quarrel over the ownership of his horse, say others.

Later that year, after being acquitted on a horse-stealing charge, Belle Starr helped to organize and direct a wild west show at Fort Smith, Ark. This exhibition included a mimic stagecoach holdup by Belle and others in which the local judge and prosecuting attorney were cast as passengers. The attorney was kept at home by illness in the family. Belle told him afterward that she intended to slip a loaded cartridge into her gun and kill him during the mellee, because of an old grudge against him.

She continued to live on her ranch, mourning for Sam and watching over her daughter, until 1889. A stranger named Watson settled near by, and Belle's contacts with the "grapevine" communication system of criminal life informed her that he was wanted for murder in Florida.

They got into an argument over a lease on a strip of land, and Watson said something sarcastic about Belle's bad reputation among federal officers. Belle retorted:

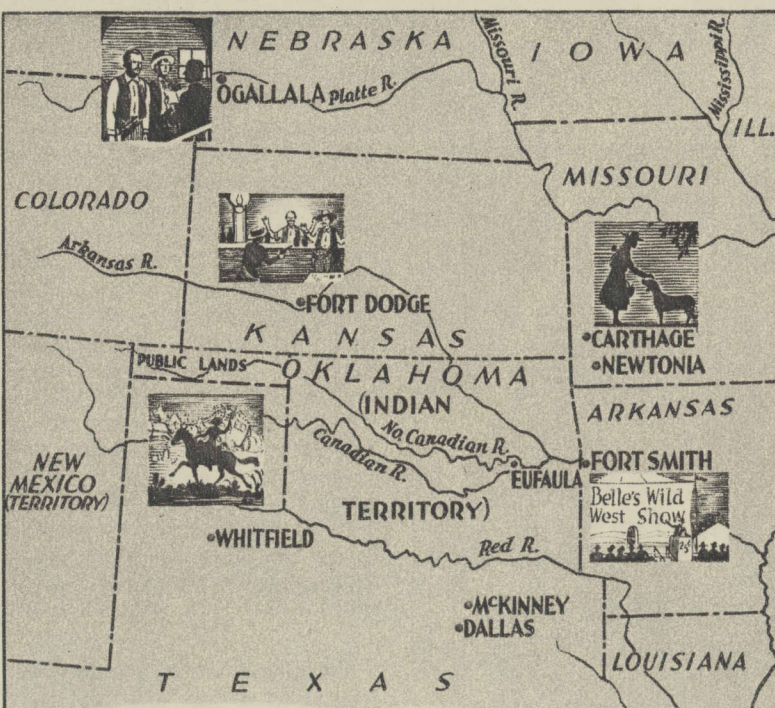
"Maybe the Florida sheriffs would like to know where you are."

The next day was Belle's birthday, but its omens were not propitious. The fugitive murderer, fearing that she intended to betray him to the police, ambushed her from behind a fence with a shotgun. She fell from her horse unconscious; then he walked up to her and shot her twice with her own pistol.

Thus Belle Starr died at the age of 43. Her gravestone does not mention her name, but bears this inscription:

BORN FEB. 3, 1846
DIED FEB. 3, 1889

Shed not for me one bitter tear,
Nor give the heart to vain regret.
'Tis but the casket that lies here,
The gem that filled it sparkles yet.



Map of Belle Starr's "range."

tic color. She was not a mean, low-down gunwoman with the soul of a prairie wolf; there was a certain charm and Victorian spirit in her character. Sir Walter Scott would have regarded her as worthy material for a romantic tale of lawbreaking gallantry.

The backwash of the Civil war in the distracted state of Missouri conditioned Belle Starr's life. From the age of 15 to 20 she lived in the atmosphere of guerrilla warfare, serving as a spy, scout, and confidante of the marauding bands led by William Clarke Quantrill of the Confederacy, whose needless lootings, burnings, and slayings have become a tradition of military infamy. But for these associations her flamboyant temperament might have found civilized expression as an actress, since she had a gift for declamation and was admired by her neighbors for "speaking pieces" at community entertainments.

She was born on Feb. 3, 1846, in Carthage, Mo., where her parents were tavernkeepers. Her maiden name was Myra Belle Shirley; her father, John Shirley, bore the courtesy title of Judge, because he had assembled

Shirley tavern with the remark: "If you've come for Ed, you're ten minutes too late."

After the war John Shirley abandoned his tavern and moved his family to a farm near McKinney, Tex., a two hours' horseback ride from Dallas. In 1866 a young ex-guerrilla of Quantrill's command named Jim Reed arrived there, a hardened bushwhacker without any possessions beyond his horse and his gun. He was given hospitality as one of Brother Ed's comrades in arms, and within twenty-four hours Belle had promised to marry him.

"Judge" Shirley objected violently to the match, so Belle and Jim eloped and were married. A few days later Jim fitted to the Indian Territory to evade a warrant which was pursuing him, and the "judge" locked Belle up in her room. Four months later Reed came riding out of the west like Young Lochinvar and abducted her. The "judge" bided his time and presently stole Belle back again. Jim returned by night and carried off his bride for a second time amid a shower of pellets from the "judge's" bird gun. The honeymoon was hardly

over before Jim Reed became involved in a feud; a band of similar graduates of the frontier school of anarchy called the Shannon boys killed his brother, Scott Reed, by mistake; and Jim felt impelled to slay a Shannon to even matters up. Then an Indian Territory warrant for murder was issued against him, and he and Belle decided to leave the country for a while. They got as far as Los Angeles, where they lived for a few years without doing anything that got into

the criminal records. They returned to Texas in 1872 with two infant children, a son and a daughter, to call "Judge" Shirley "grandpappy." Belle's father forgave her and helped the young couple to establish themselves on a small ranch nine miles from the Shirley place. There Belle settled down to rear and educate her children, but Jim was often absent on journeys into northern Texas and the Indian Territory, buying and selling stolen horses. Belle sometimes rode with him into the Cherokee Strip, and there she met a half-breed named Tom Starr, whose son Sam, handsome, quiet, and companionable, was destined to become an important character in her saga.

The Starr family had a reputation for outlawry which continued until in 1921, when the last of the Starrs, Henry, died of wounds received in an attempted bank holdup at Harrison, Ark.

In the summer of 1875 Reed was returning from Dallas to

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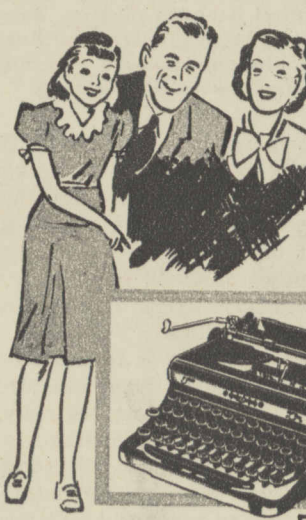
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