Both Sides of the Border
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Jesse James, twenty-eight years old in Nebraska City, 1875
(State Historical Society of Missouri)

Jess James' grave in Mt. Olivet cemetery, in Kearney, Missouri
(State Historical Society of Missouri)
In Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Kearney, Missouri, visitors can find a gravestone bearing the name of Jesse James, the Old West’s most notorious outlaw. James, the story goes, was slain on April 3, 1882, in St. Joseph, Missouri. He had been living there with his wife and two small children while passing himself off as a cattle buyer named Thomas Howard. Unarmed, he was shot in the back of the head by Robert Ford, a young man Jesse had considered a new recruit for his robber gang. Ford himself was gunned down ten years later in Creede, Colorado.

So history records. However, from time to time people have come forward to declare that the legendary bandit was not killed after all. Even now, more than 120 years after the alleged assassination, at least two camps are claiming that Jesse didn’t die in St. Joseph that day.

Interestingly, no one at the time seemed to doubt the report of Jesse’s death. Hundreds of people, many of whom knew Jesse, streamed into St. Joseph as the news spread, and they had ample opportunity to view the body—it was packed in ice and left on public display for a few days, first in St. Joseph and then in Kearney, Jesse’s hometown.¹ Not one questioned the identification. And certainly no one seemed to doubt the identity of his family members—his mother, Zerelda Samuel; his wife, Zee; and his children, Jesse Edwards James and Mary Susan James. Indeed, the notion that Jesse survived did not come into vogue for decades.
In the meantime, the body was buried on the James farm near Kearney, and Jesse’s widow and children lived in relative poverty for a number of years. Some have claimed that the James gang possessed hidden troves of loot from their robberies. If Jesse had lived on and dug up any money, his family seems to have reaped no benefits.

Still, the Jameses got by. In 1902, after Jesse’s widow died and was buried in Kansas City, the family had both Jameses exhumed and reburied side by side in the Mount Olivet Cemetery. The outlaw’s son eventually became a successful lawyer. Jesse’s daughter married and settled into a tranquil existence in Missouri. In 1900, Jesse Edwards James married Stella Frances McGown of Kansas City. Several years later, the couple moved to Los Angeles. Stella eventually made it her mission to try to debunk anyone who sought notoriety by claiming to be the “real” Jesse James. And she found plenty of work.

Some forty years after Jesse James was presumed to have died, a raft of people suddenly started claiming to be the outlaw. On the Arts & Entertainment cable network in 1996, in a show called In Search of Jesse James, historian N. David Smith reported that as many as thirty people came forward in the 1920s and 1930s to present themselves as Jesse James. Each had a story that would “explain” how he had escaped death in St. Joseph and lived under assumed names. Most of these elderly claimants were trotted out by various promoters and displayed, for a fee, on theater stages and in sideshows.

One of the earliest known instances involved a man named John James. In late 1931, when Jesse James would have been eighty-four years old, this stranger arrived in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. He talked with a number of oldtimers who had known the James family, apparently gathering information. Then, he proclaimed himself to be the true Jesse James, and not dead after all. He was convincing enough that eighteen elderly citizens said they believed him. At least six signed affidavits to that effect. John James
maintained that the man killed in St. Joseph was not Jesse but another outlaw, Charlie Bigelow.5

At that point, Stella James got involved. When word reached her of John James’s claims, she traveled to Excelsior Springs for a showdown. In her book In the Shadow of Jesse James, she tells of the confrontation. She says she found that the chief of police was acting as John James’s promoter, and it was he who had obtained the affidavits. With several journalists present, Stella put to John James several questions that the real Jesse surely could have answered. In most cases, the claimant was unable to do so. Two significant pieces of information he lacked had to do with a raid by Pinkerton Agency detectives on the James family farmhouse in 1875. In an explosion that occurred during the attack, Jesse’s mother was injured and his half-brother killed. The claimant couldn’t say which arm Jesse’s mother had lost in the blast, nor could he give the name of the dead child.6

Stella described John James as a “pathetic figure” who fumbled question after question. Historian Milton F. Perry, who edited Stella’s book, says in a note that sixteen of the eighteen people who had endorsed John James’s claim changed their minds after Stella’s grilling of him.7

Despite this outcome, the man persisted in his impersonation, and a new promoter brought him to California. Flashing the Eureka Springs affidavits, he received considerable attention from news media. He even came to the Jesse Edwards James home and demanded admittance.8 However, this trip proved to be his undoing.

In tracing the imposter’s family history, Stella had found John’s sister, Dr. Bessie James Garver, living in Los Angeles. Dr. Garver gave an affidavit declaring that John was not Jesse, and she succeeded in having her brother committed to a mental institution.9

However, another character, J. Frank Dalton, soon began receiving attention as he toured the country declaring that he was Jesse James. Dalton apparently had devoted his life to portraying
various Western characters. He once toured as one of the outlaw Dalton brothers, until the real Emmett Dalton called his bluff.\textsuperscript{10} Other times he presented himself as “Capt. Kit Dalton,” a Confederate guerilla fighter who had served (as Jesse James had) with Quantrill’s Raiders and Bloody Bill Anderson.\textsuperscript{11}

At least two promoters were affiliated with Dalton at various times during his “Jesse James” period. In the late 1940s, under the care of a man named Orvus Lee Houk (sometimes spelled \textit{Howk}), the decrepit old man said he was over one hundred years old, as the real Jesse James would have been by that time. Sometimes the story went that Dalton had employed a stand-in to die for him in St. Joseph.\textsuperscript{12} Just what prompted the substitute to accept this dubious honor is not explained.

Other times Dalton claimed the man killed was not he but Charlie Bigelow, the same name dropped by John James. In the latter telling, Dalton said it was Bigelow living with his own family in the St. Joseph house and using the Thomas Howard alias. Dalton personally shot the man, he explained, to provide the corpse needed for his cover story. Bigelow, Dalton reasoned, had been posing as Jesse James when he robbed people, so the rascal had it coming.\textsuperscript{13} This is the version given in a remarkable 1975 book entitled \textit{Jesse James Was One of His Names}. The book was written by Del Schrader “with Jesse James III,” the name promoter Houk sometimes used. Houk, who declared that he was Dalton’s grandson, was the source for much of the information in Schrader’s book.\textsuperscript{14}

Schrader reports that Dalton used at least seventy-two aliases in his nearly seventy years of living undercover. He also mastered the occult arts, so that he was able to travel freely all over the world, using astral projection (4–8). The author reported that Dalton made numerous fortunes, and that he served in the U.S. Senate under the name of William A. Clark, described as a Montana “copper king” (111).

Dalton also asserted that he was not the only legendary character whose death was erroneously reported. On the list were John
Wilkes Booth, whom Jesse finally had to poison in 1903 (Schrader 138–40); Billy the Kid (228); Butch Cassidy (218–19); and even Bob Ford. Dalton announced that Ford was not murdered in Colorado but had lived to be “my comptroller . . . when I was copper king of the world” (qtd. in Schrader 113).

And Cole Younger, Dalton claimed, never served a day of prison after the James-Younger Gang’s disastrous attempt to rob banks in Northfield, Minnesota, even though history says he and his two brothers were captured and spent long stretches in the Stillwater, Minnesota, penitentiary. Cole also lived to a ripe old age, said Dalton, despite the official record that shows he died in 1916 at the age of seventy-two. As Schrader tells it, however, Younger and Dalton last met in 1950, when Cole was 127 years old (264). Wild Bill Hickok, on the other hand, really was killed at the time and place reported—only it was Dalton who shot him (143).

When the Dalton show came to Los Angeles in 1949, Stella Frances James secretly attended a performance. She found that the old man was using the same discredited affidavits originally collected by John James (103).

Dalton also spent time under the wing of Rudy Turilli, who had an interest in the Meramec Caverns tourist attraction in Missouri. Turilli apparently was always on the lookout for ways to publicize this enterprise. The best story I’ve run across regarding Turilli’s promotional tactics comes from historian Perry. In Stella James’s book, he says that Turilli “once tried to climb the Empire State Building in a tiger suit.”15 Steve Eng gives a more likely account in the magazine True West. He reports that Turilli, to draw attention to the caverns, put on a leopard-skin “cave man” costume and streaked up several steps of the Empire State Building. He might have made it all the way to the top had not the police interrupted his progress (19). This promoter also made good use of Dalton, having the old man testify that the James gang often had used Meramec Caverns as a hideout. At one point Turilli sought to have a Missouri court “restore” the name “Jesse James” Who Is Buried in Jesse James’ Grave? 123
to Dalton, but the presiding judge would have no part of it.16 Still, sometime after Dalton died in 1951 and was laid to rest at the alleged age of 107 in Granbury, Texas, a tombstone was placed over his grave bearing the legend “Jesse Woodson James.”

J. Frank Dalton’s story did not end with his death, however. In fact, it has continued into the present. In the late 1960s, Turilli promised to give $10,000 to anyone who could discredit Dalton’s claim. Stella James and her two daughters accepted the challenge, and the case ultimately had to be settled in court. A Missouri jury found in favor of the James women, and an appellate court upheld the judgment.17

More recently, other defenders of Dalton’s claim have come forward. Houk had claimed to be J. Frank’s grandson, and Houk’s son now declares himself to be Jesse IV (In Search). In the spring of 2000, a faction claiming kinship to Jesse James through Dalton obtained a court order to have the old man’s grave exhumed for the purpose of DNA testing. To this group’s dismay, however, the body unearthed turned out to be that of a one-armed man, and Dalton was known to possess both his upper appendages.18 Where this inquiry goes next is anyone’s guess.

One might think it too late, well over a century after Jesse’s presumed death, for any new claimants to come forward. One would be mistaken. In her 1998 book, Jesse James Lived and Died in Texas, Betty Dorsett Duke of Liberty Hill, Texas, presents her great-grandfather, James Lafayette Courtney, as the true Jesse James. Duke bases her claim on family stories, genealogical research, a comparison of photographs of Courtney and his kin with James family pictures, and the fact that Courtney, in his diary, once signed his name “J. James.”19 Duke uses a great deal of circumstantial evidence and conjecture in making her case.

Courtney, she says, moved to Texas in 1871 and bought a farm thirty miles south of Waco in the Blevins community (53–54). He married, had children, and lived under the Courtney identity up to his death in 1943 at age ninety-six (ix).
The supposed death of Jesse in 1882, according to Duke, was actually a cover-up, and the body buried as the outlaw was that of James’s cousin, Wood Hite (47). The wife and children at the scene, she believes, were actually Hite’s family, and Zee was married to Hite, not Jesse (71). This conclusion protects Courtney, if he was Jesse, from being accused of family abandonment and bigamy. Duke also disputes the DNA evidence from a 1995 exhumation of the supposed Jesse James grave. Experts at the time declared it “99.7 percent” certain that the remains in the Missouri grave are those of the outlaw (In Search). Duke, however, suggests that those results came from tests on a tooth that did not actually come from the grave (43–44).

Despite Duke’s arguments, some members of the Courtney family do not believe their forebear was Jesse James, and they have challenged Duke’s genealogical interpretations and photographic evidence. They also cite documents that indicate Courtney, as a veteran of the Civil War, received a government pension for his Union army service. That Jesse’s sympathies lay with the Confederacy is well established. Duke dismisses this fact as just one more instance of Jesse “duping the Yankees” (59).

The other family faction also has had some DNA testing done. It seems to indicate that known descendants of Courtney were related to earlier Courtneys, a finding that calls into question Duke’s genealogical research. This testing did not involve the remains of James Lafayette Courtney, however, and Duke believes an exhumation of his grave would be in order so that definitive DNA testing could be done.

In my research, I have found what seem to be two serious problems with Duke’s position. Both involve Courtney’s daily diaries, portions of which Duke presents in her book. For one thing, although Duke makes reference to the Gad’s Hill train robbery in Missouri as a Jesse James holdup (70), the diary places Courtney in Texas the day before and the day after that January 31, 1874, event (157).
Even more troublesome is that Courtney, by his own account, stayed “at home” on September 7, 1876, presumably in Texas, and “worked on . . . seed” (194). Yet it was on that date, historians believe, that Jesse James participated in the single most significant event in the story of the James-Younger gang, the ill-fated raid on Northfield, Minnesota. All participants except the James brothers were killed or captured. Was that some other Jesse James, then, who barely escaped with his life in the bloody shootout? Or was the robbery attempt simply erroneously credited to the fabled outlaw?

Missouri researcher Linda Snyder has looked into the controversy aroused by Duke’s book and has put many of her findings on an Internet website. She has posted some fascinating information comparing the traditional story of Jesse James with Duke’s version. The comparison seems to favor the historical account. Interested parties definitely should check out this website. Here is the address: http://home.earthlink.net/~ariannayoungblood.

Another worthwhile website that follows the continuing debate is called the “Jesse James Discussion Site Forum.” It may be found here: www.delphiforums.com.

So the question of who is buried in Jesse James’s Missouri grave, not to mention two more graves in Texas, remains unanswered—or at least it has not been answered to everyone’s satisfaction. Perhaps more exhumations and further DNA testing will resolve the issue, but I doubt it. The concerned parties in this highly emotional debate—the Jameses, the Daltons, and the Courtneys—are defending what they believe is their birthright, a substantial part of their very identities. It is unlikely that mere facts can ever change their minds, nor extinguish the fiery longing in their blood.
ENDNOTES


5. Brant, 263.


8. James, 103.

9. Ibid.


15. James, 139.


17. James, 139; Brant, 264–65.


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