"Wild Bill" Hickok was a stagecoach driver, a spy, a gambler, a law enforcer, an actor, and a gunfighter. No wonder he's a legend!
He was a spy, a lawman, and a gambler. But James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok probably was most famous for his gunslinging and marksmanship, and his real-life experiences on America’s frontier were full of drama. Similar to the stories about William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, the stories that followed Hickok’s trail across the West fascinated Americans back East.

Hickok was born on May 27, 1837, in present-day Troy Grove, Illinois. In 1856, Hickok and his brother Lorenzo traveled to Kansas Territory to try homesteading, but his attempts to settle down were unsuccessful. He found employment as a constable in Monticello, Kansas, and worked as a freighter where he first met Cody.

On July 12, 1861, Hickok participated in a shootout at the Pony Express’s Rock Creek Station, Nebraska Territory. While the exact details of the fight were unclear, he got involved in a dispute between the station managers and the station owner, David C. McCandles (also spelled “McCandless”). Hickok was believed to have killed McCandles and two of his employees. The shootout was the first of many gunfights that eventually established Hickok’s reputation as a gunslinger.

During the Civil War (1861–1865), Hickok earned the nickname “Wild Bill” as a result of his exploits as a Union spy and scout. After the war, he spent time playing cards in saloons and gambling halls. In Springfield, Missouri, he participated in—and won—what was considered the first gunfight, in which he and his opponent faced each other in the street, drew their pistols, and fired.

Hickok was involved in several shootouts before becoming the marshal of Abilene, Kansas, in 1871. He reined in the wild behavior of the Texas cowboys who rode into town after long cattle drives. On October 5, 1871, he shot and killed a gambler named Phil Coe and held back a mob of Texas cowboys who were Coe’s friends. But he also accidentally shot and killed Mike Williams. Williams, the town jailer and Hickok’s friend, had started to run to Hickok’s aid after Coe fell.

After that, Hickok spent time gambling. He also hosted a mock buffalo hunt. In 1873, Hickok toured the East with Cody, portraying himself on stage. But he became tired of acting after a year and returned to gambling. He was playing poker in Deadwood, in present-day South Dakota, when Jack McCall shot him on August 2, 1876. The legend is that Hickok was holding a pair of black aces and a pair of black eights when he died. It has become known as the “dead man’s hand.”

Stories of Hickok’s death while playing cards has led to this hand becoming known as the “dead man’s hand.”

DID YOU KNOW?

Stories about James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok had motivated writer Ned Buntline to travel west to meet him in the mid-1800s. Buntline hoped to use Hickok as the subject of a dime novel. When Buntline met William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody on the trip, he decided to base his stories on Cody instead!