Like a number of frontier folk heroes, it is difficult to distinguish fact from fiction when it comes to stories about Calamity Jane.

WILD WEST

Women

by Marcia Amidon Lusted

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody believed that women should have the same freedoms and privileges that men had. He stated that women should be permitted to "do any kind of work that they see fit, and if they do it as well as men give them the same pay." Perhaps his role working alongside women in Wild West shows helped him develop that sentiment as well as support women's suffrage. Sharpshooter Annie Oakley was not the only woman to earn fame and a little fortune for doing the same kinds of tricks and stunts that the men performers did in shows. Here are a few other female stars.
Lillian Frances Smith was only 15 years old when she began performing in Wild West shows. Nicknamed "the California Girl," she started riding as soon as she could sit in a saddle and was shooting by the age of seven. Her act included hitting a plate 30 times in 15 seconds, breaking 10 glass balls hung from strings swinging around a pole, and breaking glass balls that were tossed into the air. One time, she shattered two balls with a single shot as they passed each other in midair.

A frontierswoman who often dressed like a man, Martha Jane Canary became known as Calamity Jane. She was an excellent horsewoman and a good shot—as good as any man. Many stories existed about Calamity Jane, but she may have made up most of them, including that she was secretly married to James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok, had fought alongside Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer, and had saved a stagecoach from a Native American attack. She never performed in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, but she did become the subject of many sensational dime novels.

Lulu Bell Parr did trick riding and shooting, but she was best known for her ability to ride bucking broncos. She once received the title of "Champion Lady Bucking Horse Rider of the World." Parr's ability to stay on a bucking horse made her one of Cody's favorite performers. Cody even gave her an ivory-handled Colt revolver, engraved with the words "Buffalo Bill Cody to Lulu Parr—1911."

Mary E. "May" Lillie was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but her marriage to Gordon W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill) forever connected her name to the West. As a wedding gift in 1886, Gordon gave May a pony and a rifle. May began touring with her husband in his shows in the late 1880s. She excelled as an equestrian and as a sharpshooter.

A few other women performers known for their roles in Wild West shows included Della Farr, Bessie Farr, Georgia Duffy, and "Ma" Whittaker. The two Ferrells and Duffy were cowgirls who performed riding and rope tricks. Whittaker played the part of a pioneer woman in an act showing an attack on a settler's cabin.

Marcia Amidon Lustig has written more than 100 books for young readers. Her great-grandfather met Buffalo Bill several times when Cody's show performed in Worcester, Massachusetts.

DID YOU KNOW? 

Gordon W. and May Lillie's ranch in Pawnee, Oklahoma, has been preserved by the Oklahoma Historical Society as the Pawnee Bill Ranch. Visitors can tour the handcrafted home, barn, and other structures that the Lillies built. The site tells the story of the American West, the Plains Indian culture, and the American bison.