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Calamity Jane



Martha Jane Canary

1852 - 1903





Controversy and speculation have always centered on the life and times of the Old West legend, Calamity Jane. Stories told about Calamity Jane range from the verifiable to far-fetched fabrications. Calamity Jane added to the speculation with her

own admissions in a somewhat dubious autobiography. The truth of this Deadwood legend may never be known, but many historians agree upon some facts.

Calamity Jane was born Martha Jane Cannary on May 1, 1852, in Princeton, Missouri. Little is known about her family, but it has been written that she was the eldest of two brothers and three sisters. The family moved to Virginia City, Montana, in 1865. During this time Jane developed skills that would enhance her reputation: excellent horsemanship and marksmanship. After the move to Montana, Jane's parents are said to have passed away in 1866 and 1868, leaving a young Jane to set out to make history.

At an age when most young women were getting married, Calamity Jane set out on the road of an independent woman. Although somewhat attractive when well dressed, Calamity Jane was rather plain looking with very rugged features. Accounts say that she stood around six-feet tall, with brown hair and had a heavy bone structure. Calamity Jane preferred a more rugged dress style, which added to her masculine appearance.

These physical traits helped her find employment as a bullwacker and scout. She was employed as a bullwacker between Rapid City, Fort Pierre, and Pierre, Dakota Territory in 1879. This work involved cracking a whip over the bulls in order to get them to move, or move faster, in bull trains. She was said to be an expert at bullwacking. There is little information about her travels as a scout. Most accounts, such as the time she spent with George Custer, have been proven false. He was not in the area she claimed he was at the time, and there are no known records showing

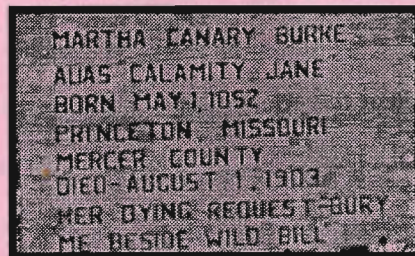
payment for her scouting skills. Despite her skills on the open range, she also is said to have found employment in houses of ill repute. Many speculate that Calamity Jane worked as a laborer, not as a prostitute, in these houses.

Calamity Jane was a woman ahead of her time; however, she had many unfortunate faults. She was an accomplished storyteller. In her own account, she has Captain Egan proclaim at Goose Creek, Wyoming, "I name you Calamity Jane, heroine of the Plains!" There is no evidence to support her account of receiving the nickname, and it is unlikely the real story will ever be known.

A possible explanation for Calamity Jane's fanciful yarns was that she drank excessively. She is said to have been intoxicated for most of her adult life.

Calamity Jane, when not on the open road, could be found at the local saloons drinking, chewing tobacco, and being the boisterous life of the party. By many accounts, this hard life of adventure on the open road contributed to Calamity Jane's alcoholism.

The love life of Calamity Jane is yet another topic of heated discussion. Many tales of husbands and companions have appeared in many books. The most popular of the tales is the relationship with Wild Bill Hickok. Their relationship was one of brief acquaintanceship. Calamity Jane herself added to the speculation by telling stories of a romance with him, and moments before her death she allegedly requested to be buried next to Wild Bill. Stories of a brief marriage and children between the two legends have been told; nevertheless, all stories have proven to be unfounded. Another alleged marriage to Clinton Burke (Burk) took place in 1891, in El Paso, TX. The union is said to have produced one daughter; however, many historians believe the daughter was Clinton's from a previous relationship. They eventually returned to Deadwood, and he was soon found embezzling money from his employer. The marriage



was doomed; he left the hard living Calamity Jane, who once again found herself a single woman living alone.

A story is told of Calamity Jane bringing a young girl to Deadwood around 1895, claiming the youth was her daughter. Calamity wanted to enroll her at St. Martin's Convent in Sturgis to further her education, but she did not have the money to do so. Her friends organized a benefit ball held at the notorious Green Front Theater to raise the money for the tuition. It was a successful night of fundraising, until a drunken Calamity Jane spent all the money that same night on drinks for the crowd. Fortunately, the girl was eventually placed in the convent, but her whereabouts thereafter are unknown.

Calamity Jane also had a good-hearted and caring side not often seen by the general public. She often tried to help people in need. When the small pox epidemic hit the Black Hills and Deadwood, Calamity was the first in line to help people with the illness. She worked feverishly through the epidemic, nursing people without concern for her own well-being. Miraculously, Calamity Jane never contracted the disease, and some at the time speculated that the alcohol in her body ward off the disease.

Calamity Jane's rough life of adventure ended at age 53. Weary and ailing, Jane entered a train headed for Terry, South Dakota. Upon arrival, she rented a room at the Calloway Hotel and died on August 1, 1903.

Aged beyond her years, she died of a combination of inflammation of the bowels and pneumonia. She is buried in Mt. Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood, South Dakota. Her dying wish, allegedly, was to be laid to rest by Wild Bill Hickok. And there she rests, an official Deadwood legend.



T –May 1, 1852 - Martha Jane Canary is born in or near Princeton, Missouri. She was the eldest of two brothers and three sisters.

I –1865 - Jane moves with her family to Virginia City, Montana, where she becomes an expert marksman.

M – April 9, 1865 -The Civil War ends with the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, VA.

E – 1868 - Jane arrives in the Wyoming Territory and begins exploration within the area.

– 1873 - Captain Egan allegedly christens Jane with the nickname “Calamity Jane” after she saved his life during an Indian campaign in Goose Creek, Wyoming.

– 1875 - Gold discovered in Deadwood Gulch.

– June 1876 - Calamity Jane leaves Fort Laramie and heads for the Black Hills with many famous Deadwood legends, including Wild Bill Hickok and Colorado Charlie Utter.

– August 2, 1876 - Wild Bill Hickok is murdered by Jack McCall in the No. 10 Saloon.

– 1878 - Calamity Jane nurses many people when the small pox epidemic hits the Black Hills.

– 1879 - Jane works as a bullwacker, driving teams between Pierre, Fort Pierre and Rapid City.

L – 1890 - Wyoming enters the Union and is the first state to give women the right to vote.

– 1891 - Calamity Jane marries Clinton Burke (Burk), a hack driver in El Paso, Texas.

I – 1896 - She begins touring with Kohl & Middleton throughout the United States.

– 1896 - An autobiography is written entitled The Life and Adventures of Calamity Jane by Herself. Many speculate that it was written by a ghostwriter, and not very accurately at that.

N – 1901 - Calamity Jane performs in the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York.

E – August 1, 1903 - Calamity Jane dies in Terry, South Dakota, at the Calloway Hotel. She is laid to rest next to her “friend” Wild Bill Hickok at Mt. Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood, South Dakota.

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Brochure design and layout by Nicola Mohr
Printed by Dakota Graphics, Deadwood, SD – Produced 2001