

This Day in History... May 27, 1837

Birth of “Wild Bill” Hickok

James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok was born on May 27, 1837, in Homer, Illinois (present-day Troy Grove). A soldier, scout, lawman, gambler, showman, expert marksman, and gunfighter, he was a legend in his own time.

Hickok was the fourth of six children and it’s been said that his family’s home was a station on the Underground Railroad. Hickok was recognized as an excellent marksman from a young age. He left home after a shootout in 1855, settling in Leavenworth, Kansas Territory. There he joined the Free State Army, a group of antislavery fighters. He went to serve as one of the first four constables of Monticello Township in Kansas and worked for the Russell, Majors and Waddell freight company, the parent company of the Pony Express.

Hickok went by several names in his early years. Sometimes he used his father’s name, William. Sometimes his last name was reported as Haycock. He was also nicknamed “Duck Bill” due to his long nose and protruding lips. Another nickname he once held was “Shanghai Bill,” for his tall and skinny build. In 1861, he grew a mustache and began calling himself “Wild Bill.”



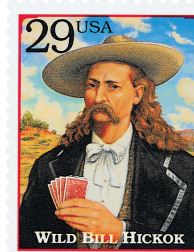
Hickok first met Cody when he was 21 and their paths crossed several times over the years.

During the Civil war, Hickok was a scout and spy for the Union Army. On July 21, 1865, he participated in what’s considered America’s first Western showdown. Hickok had previously lost a watch of great sentimental value to Davis Tutt in a poker game. He asked Tutt not to wear it in public, but he did anyway, and tensions escalated to the shootout. Tutt missed entirely, but Hickok struck Tutt in the chest, killing him. A warrant was issued for Hickok’s arrest, and he stood trial. By the law of the West, the jury believed Hickok was right to shoot Tutt and found him not guilty. When Hickok’s story was later retold in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, he became a legend in his own time.

In 1865, Hickok was recommended for deputy federal marshal of Fort Riley, Kansas. At the same time, he also served as a scout for General George A. Custer’s cavalry in the Indian Wars. That same year he also hired a group of Native Americans and cowboys to travel to Niagara Falls for his own Wild West show – The Daring Buffalo Chasers of the Plains. However, the show made little money and was a failure.

In 1869, the harassed citizens of Ellis County, Kansas, elected Hickok sheriff. Spending much of his time in Hays City, he tamed the wild frontier town. In 1871, he moved on to Abilene, Kansas, where he served as the town’s marshal. While there, he engaged in a shootout with saloon owner Phil Coe. During the fight, Hickok briefly saw someone running toward him and quickly shot and killed them. He had accidentally shot a special deputy marshal that was running to help him. Hickok was relieved of his duties after that and never participated in another gunfight, haunted by what he’d done.

After that, Hickok joined Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show, but he didn’t enjoy acting and left after a few months. In 1876, he was diagnosed with glaucoma and ophthalmia, which severely affected his marksmanship. Despite this, Hickok’s fame made him a target for anyone looking to kill him for a reputation. In 1876, he moved to the gold mining town of Deadwood hoping to strike it rich. It was there he was shot and killed by Jack McCall while playing cards in a saloon on August 2, 1876. Hickok fell to the floor, still clutching a pair of aces and a pair of eights, known ever since as the “deadman’s hand.”



From the 1994 Legends of the West sheet

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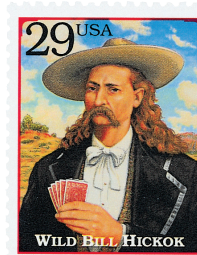
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