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Article Summary: Sheldon explains the need for a special issue of *Nebraska History* devoted to the fight that was the starting point of Wild Bill Hickok's career. The fight has often been misrepresented.

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Rock Creek Ranch Fight

An Introduction

By Addison E. Sheldon

On July 12, 1861, at Rock Creek Ranch on the Oregon Trail, in what is now Jefferson county, Nebraska, occurred an affray in which three men were killed. The principal character in the affray was James B. Hickok, otherwise known as "Wild Bill." This fight was the starting point in a career which lasted until July 4, 1876, and made the name "Wild Bill" one of the most noted in the annals of the frontier West. This Nebraska history theme has been the subject of more misrepresentation than any other frontier incident. The restoration of the historical truth regarding it is the main purpose of this magazine issue.

The first time I ever heard of Wild Bill was harvest time, in the summer of 1872, on the old Seward County, Nebraska, homestead. We were cutting a wheat field with a Buckeye Dropper, a machine which caught the wheat, as it was cut by the sickle, upon a latticework platform. At intervals the driver of the machine pressed his foot upon a pedal, dropping the wheat directly in the rear of the sickle-bar as it sped along. Six stalwart binders followed the Buckeye Dropper, gathering the spread-out sheaf into a compact mass, swiftly binding it with a straw band and tossing it out of the way of the horses as the machine came about the field for the next round. It required fast work for six binders to keep the grain out of the way of the

machine and horses and the dropper was then being fast superseded by the self rake reaper which swept the sheaf of grain out of the way of the next round, avoiding the holdup which sometimes happened when a binder was not fast enough to "keep up his station."

I was a boy, carrying water to the binders in a jug from the big spring, and incidentally setting up the wheat into shocks so that I would have no time to fool away. Among the splendid stalwart fellows who were binding the wheat were two who had recently come from Kansas. They were full of the topic of "Wild Bill". It was about the time that he was city marshal at Hays City and Abilene. These young harvest hands fairly swept me off my boyish feet with their tales of Wild Bill walking single-handed into a band of desperadoes and shooting them into a state of subjection. It was a wonderful theme and the boy with the water jug never tired of calling for more of them. Wild Bill seemed the most splendid realization of a fighting hero I had ever dreamed of.

From time to time after that wheat harvest fresh tales of Wild Bill reached our homestead. I eagerly read every scrap of printed matter about him. It was in the first flood of migration which filled Southern Nebraska to the furthest border of the Republican valley. Past our house from time to time were white-topped wagons coming and going. Their camps were pitched upon the West Blue river near by and many times I listened round the campfire to the groups of men tell stories of the border land west of us. Commonly the young men in such camps wore a leather belt with a holster carrying a six shooter. Many farm boys' imagination kindled at the vision of these young fighters and their stories of skirmish line where buffalo, wild Indians and border heroes mingled.

I remember the stunning astonishment which swept our community four years later with the first news of the complete destruction of General Custer and his Seventh Cavalry command far away in the Big Horn region. Faintly I recall a few days later the word passed around the settlement that



Chimney Cliff near Rock Creek Ranch with the names of Kit Carson and John C. Fremont. From a 1922 photo by A. E. Sheldon.



Wild Bill had been shot at Deadwood. But the overwhelming Custer disaster a few days before made the killing of Wild Bill a minor incident.

During the past twenty years I have visited several times the Rock Creek Ranch near Endicott in Jefferson county. I have photographed the fast disappearing evidence of the Oregon Trail at that point and the carved inscriptions on the rock ledges in the vicinity. I have listened to the fast-fading stories of the old days along the Oregon Trail by the few survivors of the early border. I have read with increasing interest the literature of that time, especially as it relates to Nebraska.

Prominent among the survivors of the pioneer settlement of Jefferson county since statehood is Mr. George W. Hansen of Fairbury. His intelligent interest in recording history has been a source of great strength to the Nebraska State Historical Society in its work. When he proposed some months ago the preparation of an article which should assemble the truth respecting the Rock Creek Ranch tragedy it received my cordial welcome. Out of his studies and talks with him has grown the proposition of putting into printed form the authentic facts upon this subject. The results are found in this issue of the Nebraska History Magazine.

The primary purpose at the start was the true history of the Rock Creek Ranch tragedy. The surprising discovery by Mr. Hansen of the original court records in the case which followed, revealing important facts which have slept unknown for sixty years, has greatly stimulated interest in the work.

Mr. Hansen's original purpose was to tell the truth and incidentally properly establish the good name of the McCandles family, members of which he has known for many years. This work has led to a study of the career of Wild Bill. It is not the purpose of this publication to give a history of Wild Bill. That has recently been done by Mr. Frank J. Wilstach of New York, who has had the advantage

of going over Wild Bill literature, contact with a number of living persons who knew Wild Bill, and made special research for his book.

Our primary object has been the restoration and correction of Nebraska history in one of its important pioneer episodes. Since this episode has been most extravagantly misrepresented through many years its study has raised the query whether other events in the career of Wild Bill have also been misrepresented. The editor of this magazine raises the query. He does not attempt to answer it, since that would lead him too far afield and would require more time and space than is at his disposal. It has seemed desirable to assemble a bibliography of Wild Bill literature and to give some of the judgments made upon him by persons qualified. It will be noticed that many of these judgments are very generous and kind with reference to this remarkable frontier character.

How did the extraordinary falsehoods with reference to the Rock Creek Ranch fight gain such credence during the life of Wild Bill and since? Was he responsible for their origin, as stated in the Harper's Magazine story of 1867? Or did he simply acquiesce in them since they were to his advantage?

Mr. Hansen has rendered an important service to pioneer history by securing the material which appears in this issue of the magazine and especially by finding the original documents whose photographs appear with the text of this issue of the Nebraska History Magazine.



George W. Hansen