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the Oregon Trail

and of
Jefferson County

The WILD BILL - McCANLES TRAGEDY

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By CHARLES DAWSON

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The WILD BILL - McCANLES TRAGEDY

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CHARLES DAWSON.

PIONEER TALES OF THE OREGON TRAIL

and of

Jefferson County

By

CHARLES DAWSON

TOPEKA
Crane & Company
1912

THE WILD BILL-McCANLES TRAGEDY.

This tragedy is conceded to be the supreme frontier pioneer tragic drama of Jefferson county. All others become dimmed in comparison of the characters, acts and deeds of these two men, whose personnel was far above that of the average. One became the most notorious killer on the plains, the other filled an untimely grave, but no doubt, with life, he would have carved himself a name in pioneer history. This story has been told and retold, every imaginable version given, with the part of leading tragedian and hero almost unanimously accorded to Wild Bill.

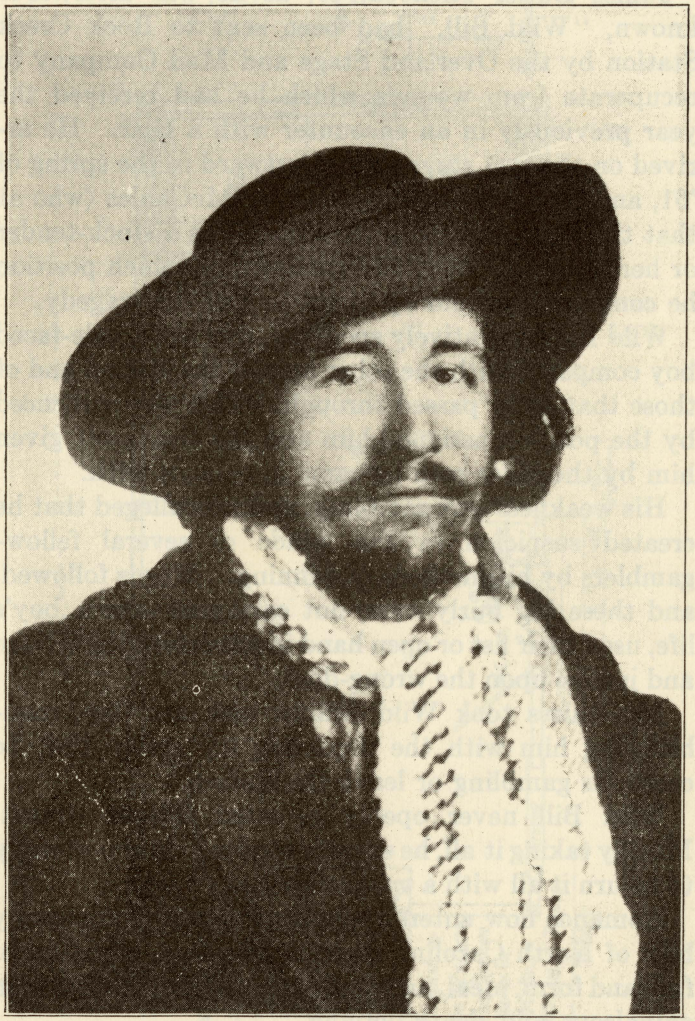
But with years tempering down the heat, personal enmities and feeling, no time is more opportune than the present to secure an accurate account of the events leading to it, and the tragedy itself. With no attempt to drag an idol from its pedestal nor to create one to supplant it, the author, guided alone by facts, gives a portrayal which was secured from court records, actual participants, eye-witnesses, and old settlers who were on the scene a few hours after the tragedy.

McCanles was a broad-minded but restless man, not easily confined to one place or vicinity or business for any length of time. Being of Scotch-Irish descent, he was naturally a fighting man, shrewd and calculating. He might be termed "The High Financier" of this period, and organizer of men and systems. Neither history nor tradition reveals a really criminal act committed by him, which is something we cannot say of

our "Kings of High Finance" at the present time. His main business was the running of ranches at Rock Creek and Little Sandy, operating a toll-bridge at the former place, which brought him quite a revenue; dealing in horses, mules and oxen, grains, hay and other supplies that overland travelers required. This was about the only business at that time, and was very remunerative. Tiring of his environments, or perhaps feeling the coursing of patriotic blood and desiring an opportunity to defend the firesides of his own Southland, he commenced to convert his belongings into money in the early part of 1861, selling the Little Sandy Ranch and moving his family to the mouth of Rock creek, a more protected and settled community. Then he disposed of the East Rock Creek Ranch buildings to the Overland Stage and Mail Company for a certain sum of money to be paid in several payments at stated times, having previously sold the ranch buildings of West Rock Creek to Hagenstein & Wolf.

The Overland Stage and Mail Company, which was then owned by Ben Holladay, hired Horace Wellman, who had previously worked at the Big Sandy Station, to run this ranch, and he with his common-law wife took possession during the first days of May, 1861. Wellman was to make these payments for the Company to McCanles, but for reasons never fully known, he failed to make the second and third payments as they fell due, alleging that he had not received the sums from his employer.

McCanles, believing otherwise, took this as sufficient grounds for investigation, and trouble arose between the parties concerned.



D. C. McCanles.

James Butler Hickock, or, as he was afterwards known, "Wild Bill," had been sent to Rock Creek Station by the Overland Stage and Mail Company to recuperate from wounds which he had received the year previously in an encounter with a bear. He arrived on the first stage going westward in the spring of '61, and was given employment by McCanles (who at that time was operating the station) as a stock-tender or herder of the stage and mail horses, which position he continued to hold up to the day of the tragedy.

Wild Bill, figuratively speaking, was but a pale-faced boy compared with the other men of the station and of those that daily passed through. This was evidenced by the position assigned him and the treatment given him by the older men he came in contact with.

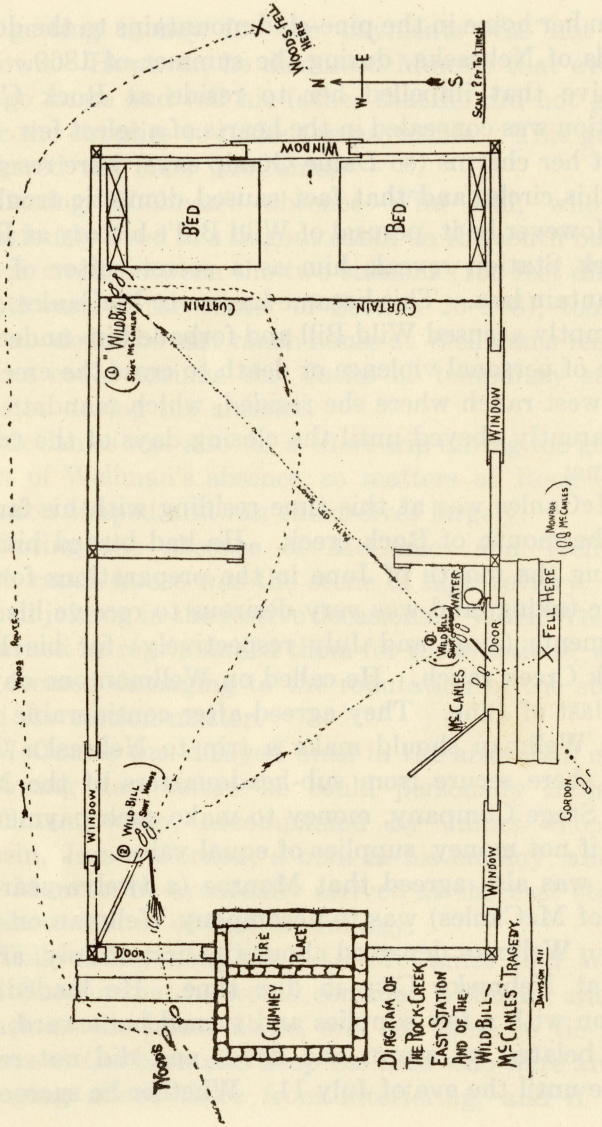
His weakness was gambling, and it is alleged that he created suspicion in the minds of several fellow-gamblers by his methods of winning. Words followed, and these big burly men, not caring to take a boy's life, used their fist or open hand in administering rebuke and justice upon the wrong-doer.

McCanless took Wild Bill to task one day, manhandling him with the departing injunction that he cease his gambling or leave the station.

Wild Bill never openly resented this treatment. Meekly taking it all, he silently awaited his opportunity to return it all with a vengeance many fold.

Romance now enters the story. Back in the sunny hills of North Carolina there lived a lass, beautiful of face and form, ideal, and embodying all that makes man chivalrous and death-defying.

Kate Schell, as she was commonly known, journeyed



from her home in the pine-clad mountains to the desert wilds of Nebraska, during the summer of 1860. The motive that impelled her to reside at Rock Creek Station was concealed in the hearts of a select few. At least her charms (so Dame Gossip says) were reserved to this circle, and that fact caused domestic troubles.

However be it, perusal of Wild Bill's history at Rock Creek Station reveals him as a secret suitor of this mountain lass. This became known to McCanles, who promptly accused Wild Bill and forbade him under the pain of personal violence or death to cross the creek to the west ranch where she resided, which mandate was apparently obeyed until the closing days of the tragic drama.

McCanles was at this time residing with his family at the mouth of Rock creek. He had busied himself during the month of June in the preparations for his leave-taking, and was very desirous to receive his last payments (June and July respectively) for his East Rock Creek ranch. He called on Wellman one day in the last of June. They agreed after considerable talk that Wellman should make a trip to Nebraska City and there secure from sub-headquarters of the Mail and Stage Company, money to make such payments; and if not money, supplies of equal value.

It was also agreed that Monroe (a twelve-year-old son of McCanles) was to accompany Wellman on this trip. Wellman departed about the first of July, arriving at Nebraska City in due time. He loaded his wagon with a few supplies and turned homeward, but was belated by storm and flood, and did not reach home until the eve of July 11. Whether he succeeded

in getting money for the payments was not then known. However, he dismissed Monroe that evening to go home and tell his father that he did not get it, nor the supplies to make the payments. This greatly angered the elder McCanles.

During Wellman's absence Wild Bill, who had previously lived in a dugout cabin on the south bank of Rock creek between the two stations (150 feet directly southwest of the center of Section 26–2–3), took up his abode in the east ranch house at Wellman's request, so he could assume the duties of temporary station master during his absence.

McCanles was also on a short trip during the greater part of Wellman's absence, so matters at Rock Creek Station shaped and ran themselves largely.

During the absence of McCanles and Wellman, each ranch house was the scene of high revelry, Kate Schell joining in the festive occasions. When Wellman returned he reprimanded them for these actions, which he deemed damaging to the reputation of the station and its station-master.

McCanles was delayed until in the afternoon of the following day before he could personally interview Wellman, when, accompanied by James Wood, a cousin, James Gordon, a man in his employ, and his son Monroe, he eventually arrived at the east station at about 4 P. M. of that fateful day.

While riding along the road McCanles told Woods and Gordon that he would confront Wellman, and the bunch at the house alone, and for them to tie their horses at the barn and keep the men who were always lounging about there from interfering, and if they

noticed serious trouble at the house to come immediately to his assistance.

McCanles had a short double-barreled shotgun strapped on his saddle, and, as was customary in that day, the others had pistols in their holsters, strapped around their bodies.

McCanles dismounted at the well, where the horses were given a drink, and, accompanied by Monroe, he walked toward the house, meeting Wellman on the west doorsteps.

McCanles immediately charged Wellman with duplicity, and demanded prompt payment or possession of the premises. Wellman again reiterated statements of his inability to secure the promised sum. Angry words followed, and Wellman, fearing McCanles, retreated into the house. Mrs. Wellman took his place in the doorway and commenced to volley forth vituperative abuse of McCanles, who attempted to ignore her remarks, stating that he had come to settle with Wellman personally, and that his business was with men, not women.

Thereupon Wild Bill pushed the woman aside and confronted McCanles, who was somewhat surprised at his appearance on the scene, but proceeded to question him with "What in the h—, Bill, have you got to do with this? My business is with Wellman, not you, and if you want to take a hand in it, come on out here, and we will settle it like men."

"Wild Bill" sulkily answered, "Perhaps 'tis or taint." "Well, then," said McCanles, "Bill, we are friends, ain't we? I want to know. We have been, ain't we, Bill?" "I guess so," Bill replied. "Then."

said McCanles, "send Wellman out here, so I can settle with him, or I am coming to get him." But each knew of the deadly enmity that existed between them, which was covered up only by a thin veneer. Seemingly in compliance to the request, Wild Bill stepped back into the room, but McCanles grew suspicious on hearing parts of conversations between Wellman and Wild Bill, and as Kate Schell and a young girl, Sarah Kelsey, a stepdaughter of Joe Baker, one of McCanles's old employees, were in the kitchen and would be within the range of fire from that door, McCanles decided to go around to the south, or front door, from which he could command a view of the entire house, excepting behind a curtain that hung across the east end, screening the bed from the rest of the house. Stepping into the doorway, McCanles observed Wellman and Wild Bill in earnest conversation, and perhaps to attract their attention to his presence, he asked for a drink of water. Complying with the request, Wild Bill stepped to the right of the door, and from a bucket of water secured a gourd-dipper full, which he handed to McCanles. As McCanles was in the act of drinking, he noticed Wild Bill stepping stealthily back towards the curtain. Instantly he dropped the dipper, and called upon Wild Bill to halt. But he was too late, for Wild Bill had reached a vantage point from which he could do deadly execution and be comparatively safe himself, for the curtain screened him from without, while he could see figures outside, enabling him to take definite aim.

McCanles realized his danger instantly, and called upon Wild Bill to come out from behind the curtain

and fight fair, adding that if he did not he would come in and drag him out. Wild Bill's answer was "There'll be one less —— when you try that."

Whether McCanles started to carry out his threat or to step out of the door, no one will ever know, but the next act was the firing of a rifle from behind the curtains, and McCanles, mortally wounded with a bullet through the heart, staggered and fell backward upon the door-steps. Notwithstanding this mortal wound, McCanles attempted to raise himself to a sitting position, aided by his son Monroe, who had run to his assistance. But the stupor of death fast possessed McCanles, and with inarticulate words forming on his lips, and eyes set, he slipped down through his son's helping arms and lay limp upon the broad doorstep.

Woods and Gordon, hearing the shot, and seeing McCanles fall, ran with all speed to the house, Woods seeking to enter the kitchen door while Gordon guarded the front door. As Woods stepped upon the threshold Wild Bill, from a concealed position, shot him twice with a pistol. Mortally wounded, he ran around the north side of the house and fell at the east end in a clump of weeds. Gordon, running behind Woods, reached the vicinity of the front door somewhat later, just in time to note Wild Bill's advantage of ambuscade and the effects of his deadly fire at Woods. As he turned, Wild Bill discharged a pistol point-blank at him. Mortally wounded, Gordon ran toward the barn with the intention of securing his horse, and as he ran down the path, Wild Bill shot him again, in the back. Gordon noting the hostile attitude of the men about the barn, now turned and fled for his life, down the

creek through the underbrush. Wild Bill pursued him for some distance, emptying the chambers of his pistols, and then returned to the house for ammunition.

In the meantime, Woods had been located in the weed-patch, and tradition says that his sufferings were ended with a grubbing-hoe in the hands of a woman. Anyway, a woman immediately afterward ran around the house brandishing this bloody instrument of death, crying out to Wild Bill, who had by this time returned and was reloading his guns, "Come, let's kill all of the ——," meaning to kill the boy, young Monroe, who was still bent over the dead body of his father and who had not yet realized his dangerous position. The boy had been dazed by the suddenness and horror of it all, but as he noted the woman coming toward him with the uplifted hoe, dripping with the blood of Woods, and seeing Wild Bill returning, he suddenly aroused himself, leaped to his feet and dashed away with fear lending speed to his limbs. He ran at the pace of the deer over the hills down to his home near the mouth of Rock creek, about three miles distant. Monroe owed his life to the fact that Wild Bill was unable to fire on account of being engaged in reloading his pistols until he was almost out of range, and the bullets that were sent after him fortunately missed their intended victim.

The firing attracted other men to the scene. Doc. Brink, a pony-express rider, and George Hulbert, a stage-driver, who were located at the West Ranch, hurried across the creek, and John Hughes, a half-hearted friend of both McCanles and Wild Bill, who had been hunting along the creek, also arrived on the scene at this time. Wild Bill now called Joe Baker,

one of the stock-tenders at the barn, and accused him of being a friend, or one of the McCanles gang. This Baker denied, but Wild Bill, with cocked pistol threatened to kill him also, and was only prevented by the latter's stepdaughter, who threw her arms about her stepfather and pleaded with Wild Bill for his life. This act caused Wild Bill to relent in a degree, and he proceeded instead to club Baker into insensibility with the butt of his pistol, saying, "Well, you've got to take that anyhow."

With all disposed of excepting Gordon, attention was now turned as to his whereabouts. Wild Bill, with the others accompanying him, secured McCanles's bloodhound and set him on Gordon's bloody trail that ran through the underbrush alongside of Rock creek. The dog soon found the victim, and when Wild Bill and the others reached the spot they beheld a pitiable spectacle. Gordon with his back to a small tree, his garments sodden with blood from his wounds, was fighting off the attacks of the dog that was leaping at his throat to throttle him. As the band of men watched this struggle between man and beast, Gordon, by a lucky stroke of his knife, was finally successful in killing the dog. Gordon, slipping down on bended knees, with his arms extended, beseeching piteously, appealed for his life. But this availed him nothing but curses and denunciations. Wild Bill turned to one of the party and handed him a shot-gun loaded with buckshot with the command, "Put that fellow out of misery. That'll show me that you don't belong to the McCanles gang." With fear in the heart, the command was obeyed, and

Gordon crumpled up at the base of the tree, literally riddled with buckshot.

The whole country was full of excitement. Settlers from far and near came that evening and the next day. Rude board coffins were constructed, and McCanles, with his cousin, Woods, were buried on the top of Soldiers' Hill, where they rested until the Burlington Railroad proceeded to lay its tracks directly through the hill at this point. This caused the reinterment of the bodies in the Fairbury cemetery, in 1880. Gordon's body lies where he fell, in an unmarked grave on a little knoll 100 feet south of the center of Section 26–2–3.

Kate Schell was put aboard a west-bound stage early next morning, and became a noted character of the early Black Hills history.

Hickock with others was arrested for manslaughter, and after a short trial was declared not guilty, upon the plea of self-defense. (NOTE.—General index, District Court of Jones County, Nebraska, transcript book, page 4; State of Nebraska, plaintiff, William B. Hickock, J. W. Brink and Horace Wellman, defendants. July 18, 1861.)

David Butler, afterwards Governor of the State of Nebraska, was prosecuting attorney and Judge O. M. Mason the presiding judge.

Wild Bill left Jones county soon after his acquittal Feeling ran high, and sentiment was somewhat divided. His version of the affair and that of his friends given at the trial gave him the name of "Wild Bill," which he ever afterward carried.

Many other versions give a larger number of men participating and being killed in this affair, and that Wild Bill contributed to the support of the McCanles widow for years afterward. There is no truth to such assertions, and the foregoing gives as complete and authentic account as possible.

Emerson Hough's account of this affair is given to show the wide variance between truth and fiction. Hough wrote this story some forty years ago, securing the data many times at second-hand without personal investigation. It is indeed unfortunate that Hough gave to the world such an erroneous history of this affair.

"HOW WILD BILL GOT HIS NAME."

(Emerson Hough: "The Story of the Outlaw."

The real name of Wild Bill was James Butler Hickock. He was 18 years old when he first saw the West as a fighting man under Jim Lane, finally in the year 1861 settling down as station agent for the Overland at Rock Creek Station, about fifty miles west of Topeka. He was really there for a guard for the horse band, for all that region was full of horse-thieves and cut-throats. It was here that occurred his greatest fight, the greatest fight of one man against odds at close range that is mentioned in any history of any part of the world.

Two border outlaws by the name of the McCanles boys, leading a gang of hard men, intended to run off with the stage company's horses. When they found that they could not seduce Bill to join their number, he told them to come and take the horses if they could; and on the afternoon of December 16, 1861, ten of them rode to his dugout to do so. Bill was alone, his stableman being away hunting. He rushed into the

dark interior of his dugout and got ready his weapons—a rifle, two six-shooters, and a knife.

The assailants proceeded to batter in the door with a log, and as it fell in, Jim McCanles, who must have been a brave man to undertake so foolhardy a thing against a man already known as a killer, sprang in at the opening. He of course was killed at once. This exhausted the rifle, and Bill picked up the six-shooters from the table and in three quick shots killed three more of the gang as they rushed in at the door. Four men were dead in less than that many seconds; but there were still six others left, all inside the dugout now, and all firing at him at a range of three feet. It was almost a miracle that under such surroundings the man was not killed. Bill was now crowded too much to use his firearms and took to the bowie, thrusting at one man and another as best he might. It must have been several minutes that all seven of them were mixed in a mass of shooting, thrusting, panting and gasping humanity. Then Jack McCanles swung his rifle barrel and struck Bill over the head, springing upon him with his knife as well. Bill got his hand on a six-shooter and killed McCanles just as he would have struck.

After that no one knows what happened, not even Bill himself. "I just got sort of wild," Bill said when describing it. "I thought my heart was on fire." I went out to the pump then to get a drink, and I was all cut and shot to pieces."

They called him Wild Bill after that, and he had earned the name. There were six dead men on the floor of the dugout. He had fairly whipped the ten of them, and the remaining had enough and fled from that awful hole in the ground. Bill followed them to the door. His own weapons were exhausted or not at hand by this time, but his stableman came up just then with a rifle in his hands. Bill caught it from him, and, cut as he was, fired and killed one of the

desperadoes as he tried to mount his horse. The other wounded man later died of his wounds. Eight men were killed by the one. It took Bill a year to recover from his wounds."

Letter from Monroe McCanles, the only surviving participant of Wild Bill-McCanles tragedy:

KANSAS CITY, MO., Jan. 8, 1912.

CHAS. DAWSON:—I received your write-up of the tragedy, and I want to compliment you upon your effort. You certainly have done well with the material you had to start with. I believe with a few corrections you will have the only true story ever written of this affair.

The account written by Emerson Hough in my opinion is the worst misrepresentation of all the versions written of this affair. I am sending inclosed a small picture of myself that was taken when I was only seven years old, which you may be glad to use for an illustration. Hoping you success,

I am, as ever,

W. M. MCCANLES.

Letters of approval were received from other unquestioned authorities.