

The Autobiography of Calamity Jane

**The story of Martha Jane Canary Burke,
in her own words.**

by Martha Jane Canary Burke, 1852-1903

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Part One

Calamity Jane by Herself.

My maiden name was Marthy⁽¹⁻¹⁾ Canary; was born in Princeton, Mo., May 1, 1852; father and mother natives of Ohio; had two brothers and three sisters, I being the oldest of the children. As a child I always had a fondness for adventure and outdoor exercise, and especial fondness for horses which I began to ride at an early age and continued to do so until I became an expert rider, being able to ride the most vicious and stubborn of horses; in fact the greater portion of my life in those early times was spent in this manner.

In 1865 we migrated by overland route to Virginia City, Mont.; took five months for this journey. While on the way the greater portion of my time was spent in hunting along with the men. In fact I was at all times along with the men when there was excitement or adventure to be had.

By the time we reached Virginia City, I was considered a remarkably good shot and a fearless rider for a girl of my age. I remember many occurrences on the journey from Missouri to Montana. Many times in crossing the mountains the trails were so bad that we had to lower wagons over the ledges by hand with ropes, for they were so rough and rugged that horses were no use.

We also had exciting times fording streams for many of the streams on our way were noted for quicksands and boggy places where, unless we were careful, we would have lost horses and all. Then we had many dangers to encounter in the way of streams swelling on account of heavy rains. On occasions of this kind the men would usually select the best places to cross streams. Myself on more than one occasion had mounted my pony and swam across the stream several times merely to amuse myself.

I had many narrow escapes from both my pony and myself being washed to certain death, but as the pioneers had plenty of courage, we overcame all obstacles and reached Virginia City in safety. Mother died at Blackfoot, Montana, 1866, where we buried her.

I left Montana in the spring of 1866 for Utah, arriving in Salt Lake City during the summer. Remained in Utah until 1867 where my father died, then went to Fort Bridger, Wyo. ... Arrived May 1, 1868. Remained around Fort Bridger during 1868, then went to Piedmont, Wyo., with the U.P. railway.

Joined Gen. Custer as a scout at Fort Russell, Wyo., in 1870 and started for Arizona for the Indian campaign.

Up to this time I had always worn the costume of my sex. When I joined Custer I donned the uniform of a soldier. It was a bit awkward at first but I soon got to be perfectly at home in men's clothes.

Was in Arizona until the winter of 1871 and during that time had a great many adventures with the Indians, for, as a scout, I had a great many dangerous missions to perform, and while I was in many close places, always succeeded in getting away safely, for by this time I was considered the most reckless and daring rider and one of the best shots in the western country.

After that campaign I returned to Fort Lander, Wyo., and remained there until the spring of 1872, when we were ordered out to the Mussel Shell or Nursey Pursey Indian outbreak. In that war Gens. Custer, Miles, Terry and Crook were all engaged. This campaign lasted until the fall of 1873.

It was during this campaign that I was christened Calamity Jane.

It was on Goose Creek, Wyo., where the town of Sheridan is now located. Captain Egan was in command of the post. We were ordered out to quell an uprising of the Indians and were out for several days and had numerous skirmishes during which six of the soldiers were killed and several severely wounded when on returning to the post, we were ambushed about a mile and a half from our destination.

When fired upon, Capt. Egan was shot. I was riding in advance, and when hearing the shot, turned in my saddle and saw the captain reeling in his saddle as though about to fall.

I turned my horse and galloped back with all haste to his side and got there in time to catch him as he was falling. I lifted him onto my horse in front of me, and succeeded in getting him safely to the fort.

Capt. Egan, on recovering, laughingly said:

„I name you »Calamity Jane«, the heroine of the plains.“

I have borne that name until the present time.

Part Two

Wild Bill Hickok and the Indians.

We were afterward ordered to Fort Custer where Custer City now stands, where we arrived in the spring of 1874. We remained at Fort Custer all summer and were ordered to Fort Russell in the fall of 1874 where we arrived until the spring of 1875. Was then ordered to the Black Hills to protect miners as that country was controlled by the Sioux Indians. The government had to send soldiers to protect the lives of miners and settlers in that sector.

Remained there until fall of 1875 and wintered at Fort Laramie. In the spring of 1876 we were ordered north with Gen. Crook to join Generals Miles, Terry, and Custer at the Big Horn river. During this march I swam the Platte River at Ft. Fetterman as I was the bearer of important dispatches. I had a ninety mile ride to make, being wet and cold. I contracted a severe illness and was sent back in Gen. Crook's ambulance to Fort Fetterman where I laid in the hospital for fourteen days.

When able to ride I started for Ft. Laramie where I met William Hickok, better known as Wild Bill and we started for Deadwood where we arrived about June.

During the month of June, I acted as a pony express rider carrying the U.S. mail between Deadwood and Custer over one of the roughest trails in the Black Hills country. Many riders before me had been held up and robbed of their

packages, mail and money that they carried for that was the only means of getting mail and money between these points. It was considered the most dangerous route in the Black Hills but as my reputation as a rider and quick shot was well known I was molested very little, for the toll gatherers looked on me as a good fellow and they knew I never missed my mark.

I made the round trip every two days, which was considered pretty good riding in that country.

I remained around Deadwood that summer, visiting all the camps within an area of 100 miles. My friend Wild Bill remained in Deadwood during the summer with the exception of occasional visits to the camps.

On the second of August, while sitting at a gambling table in the Bella Union saloon in Deadwood, he was shot in the back of the head by the notorious Jack McCall, a desperado.⁽²⁻²⁾

I was in Deadwood at the time and on hearing of the killing made my way to the scene of the shooting and found that my friend had been killed by McCall.

I at once started to look for the assassin and found him at Shurdy's butcher shop and grabbed a meat cleaver and made him throw up his hands, because through the excitement of hearing of Bill's death having left my weapons on the post of my bed. He was then taken to a log cabin and locked up, well secured as every one thought. But he got away and was afterwards caught at Fagan's ranch on Horse Creek on the old Cheyenne road and was then taken to Yankton where he was tried, sentenced, and hanged.

I remained around Deadwood, locating claims and going from camp to camp until the spring of 1877 when, one morning, I saddled my horse and rode to Crook City.

I had gone about twelve miles from Deadwood at the south of Whitewood creek when I met the overland mail running from Cheyenne to Deadwood. ... the horses on the run, about 200 yards from the station. Upon looking closely I saw they were pursued by Indians. As the horses stopped, I rode alongside the coach and found the driver, John Slaughter, lying face downwards in the boot of the stage, he having been shot by the Indians.

When the stage got to the station, the Indians hid in the bushes. I hurriedly removed all the baggage from the coach except the mail. I then took the driver's seat and, with all haste, drove to Deadwood carrying the six passengers and the dead driver.

Part Three

El Paso, Texas, and a daughter.

I left Deadwood in the fall of 1877 and went to Bear Butte Creek with the Seventh Cavalry. During the fall and winter we built Fort Meade and the town of Sturgis. In 1878 I left there and went to Rapid City where I put in a year prospecting.

In 1879 I went to Fort Pierre and drove teams from Rapid City to Pierre for Frank Witsche and then from Fort Pierre to Sturgis for Fred Evans. This teaming was done with oxen as they were better fitted for the work than horses owing to the rough nature of the country.

In 1881 I went to Wyoming and retired in 1882 to Miles City and took up a ranch on the Yellowstone raising stock and cattle—also kept a wayside inn where the weary traveler could be accommodated with food, drink or trouble if he looked for it.

Left the ranch in 1883 and went to California through the states and territories. Reached Oregon the latter part of 1883 and San Francisco in the summer of 1884. Then left for Texas stopping at Ft. Yuma, the hottest point in the U.S. Stopped at all points of interest until reached El Paso in the fall.

When in El Paso I met Mr. Clinton Burke, a native of Texas who I married in 1885, as I thought I had traveled through life long enough alone and thought it was about time to take a partner for the rest of my days.

We remained in Texas leading a quiet life until 1889. On Oct. 28, 1887, I became the mother of a baby girl, the very image of its father, at least that's what they said, but who had the temper of its mother.

When we left Texas, we went to Boulder, Colo., where we kept a hotel until 1893, after which we traveled through Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, then back to Montana and then to Dakota, arriving in Deadwood, Oct. 9, 1895 after an absence of seventeen years.

My arrival after an absence of so many years created quite an exciting time among my many friends of the past to such an extent that a vast number of citizens who had come to Deadwood during my absence, who had heard so much of Calamity Jane and her many adventures in former years, were anxious to see me.

Among the many whom I met were several gentlemen from Eastern cities who advised me to allow myself to be placed before the public in such a manner as to give the Eastern cities an opportunity of seeing the Woman Scout who was made so famous during her daring career in the West and Black Hills countries.

An agent of Kohl and Middleton, the celebrated museum men, came to Deadwood through the solicitation of the gentlemen I had met there. And arrangements were made to place me before the public in this manner.

My first engagement began at the Palace Museum, Minneapolis, Jan. 20, 1896.

Hoping that this little history of my life may interest all readers, I remain, as in the early days.

Yours, Mrs. M. Burke.



(1-1) Spelled incorrectly as *Marthy*.

(2-2) Original editor's note: Will Bill was not killed in the Bella Union.