

# The Real Jesse James



Jesse James is often pictured as a kind of modern-day Robin Hood. People talk about how he stole from the rich and gave to the poor. There have been songs, books, and movies about his heroic nature. But the real Jesse James was no hero. He was nothing but a thief and a killer.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Woodson James was born near Kearny, Missouri, in 1847. At the age of 15, he went to war. He fought on the side of the South in the Civil War. He was not, however, a regular soldier. Jesse joined a gang of raiders led by the cruel William Quantrill.

*All of these men appear to be upstanding citizens. However, looks can be deceiving. This is the James gang, a group of notorious bandits and killers in the Old West.*

They attacked and burned the homes of people who sided with the North. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the raiders broke up. Jesse and his older brother, Frank, went back to their farms.

<sup>3</sup> No one knows for sure why Jesse and Frank turned to a life of crime. But they did. Maybe, after the thrill of war, farming seemed pretty dull. Jesse himself later blamed Northerners. He claimed Northerners who had taken over local banks refused to give loans to Southern farmers like himself. "We were driven to it," Jesse said. But that was a weak excuse. Jesse James didn't care about the fate of Southern farmers. After all, most of the people whom he robbed and killed were Southerners. There is no evidence that he ever gave a dime of stolen money to the poor—or to anyone else.

<sup>4</sup> Early in 1866, Jesse became a member of an outlaw gang. His brother Frank was in the gang. So were several other old Quantrell raiders. On February 13, 1866, the gang robbed its first bank. The outlaws rode into Liberty, Missouri, in the middle of the day. A few went into the bank. They

threatened to blow the bank teller's head off unless he gave them all the money.

<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the other gang members kept watch outside. After the robbery, the outlaws jumped on their horses and headed out of town. In the street, they passed a college student named George Wymore. He was on his way to class. Seeing the riders thundering down the street, Wymore ran for cover. One of the gang members shot him in the back. He died instantly. It was the first of many times an innocent person was gunned down by this gang. Jesse soon showed he was the most daring of the gang members and the most willing to kill. People began to think of him as the gang's leader.

<sup>6</sup> After each bank robbery, Jesse and the rest of the gang went into hiding. They waited for the public outrage to die down. It was usually many months before they hit another bank. Sometimes they passed the time by ambushing stagecoaches and robbing the passengers. Then, in 1873, the James gang found a much richer target—trains. That year they planned

their first train robbery. They picked the Rock Island Express in Adair, Iowa. Jesse and the other men stopped the train by taking away a piece of the track. When engineer John Rafferty saw the broken track, he threw his engine into reverse. It was too late. The train crashed onto its side, killing Rafferty. James and his gang made off with about \$2,000.

<sup>7</sup> By 1874 Jesse James was world famous. He added to his fame with the boldest train robbery up to that time. It took place in the small town of Gad's Hill, Missouri. Not only did Jesse's gang steal all the train's money, but they robbed everyone on board as well. The outlaws loved every minute of it. One grabbed the hat off a passenger's head. Another laughingly told a minister on board to pray for them. Jesse even wrote his own news story about the crime. He left it with a passenger, saying, "Give that to the editor of the *St. Louis Dispatch*." Since he hadn't counted the money yet, Jesse left a blank space for the amount of money stolen.

<sup>8</sup> Jesse planned each raid carefully. He and his men struck by surprise.

Often they met little or no resistance. That was because these former Civil War raiders knew how to terrorize people. Still, that did not always work. Sometimes the townspeople fought back. One day the gang tried to rob a bank in Savannah, Missouri. Led by a local judge, the citizens drove them away before the outlaws got a nickel. The gang later robbed a bank in Richmond, Missouri. The citizens there formed a posse to chase them. The posse caught three of the robbers and lynched them from a nearby tree.

<sup>9</sup> In 1876 the gang was nearly destroyed when the members tried to rob a bank in Northfield, Minnesota. Again they ran into some tough townsfolk. The outlaws tried to scare people by firing shots in the air. They hoped to stir up enough panic so they could make a clean getaway. But the townspeople knew what the gunshots meant. The bank was being robbed! Several citizens sprang into action. They grabbed their guns and took off after the gang. Only Jesse and

Frank managed to escape. All the rest of the gang members were captured or killed.

<sup>10</sup> Shaken, Jesse and Frank went into hiding. For weeks they dared travel only at night. They slept in barns and stayed alive by eating raw vegetables from the fields. For three years they kept a low profile. They waited for a chance to resume their life of crime.

<sup>11</sup> At last, in 1879, Jesse put together a new gang. The robbing and killing began all over again. By this time, many people had had enough of Jesse. The reward for his capture or death kept mounting. Lots of people wanted to collect the reward. Jesse knew he had to be extra careful now.

<sup>12</sup> Every member of the gang felt the pressure. Lawmen might be lurking behind any tree. They might be waiting around any corner. One gang member, Ed Miller, asked Jesse to give up. Jesse responded by shooting him. As it turned out, Jesse killed the wrong man. It was gang member Bob Ford who soon turned against Jesse. Ford went to see

the governor of Missouri. No one ever found out what the governor promised him, but it must have been good. On April 3, 1882, Ford went to see Jesse at his cabin near St. Joseph, Missouri. While Jesse's back was turned, Ford pulled out his gun. He shot Jesse James in the back of the head. Some people were saddened by Jesse's death. But others were pleased to see the end of America's most famous outlaw.



*If you have been timed while reading this article enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words-per-Minute Table on page 101 and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on page 102.*

**Reading Time: Lesson 6**

Minutes \_\_\_\_\_

Seconds \_\_\_\_\_

**A Finding the Main Idea**

One statement below expresses the main idea of the article. One statement is too general, or too broad. The other statement explains only part of the article; it is too narrow. Label the statements using the following key:

M—Main Idea    B—Too Broad    N—Too Narrow

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Jesse James was a clever but heartless killer who led gangs in bank and train robberies until he was killed by one of his own men for a reward.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Jesse James, a famous outlaw, was one of the many lawless men who roamed the American West after the Civil War.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. After most of his gang was caught or killed following an 1876 bank robbery, Jesse James hid for three years before resuming his life of crime.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 15 points for a correct M answer.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Score 5 points for each correct B or N answer.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Total Score: Finding the Main Idea

**B Recalling Facts**

How well do you remember the facts in the article? Put an X in the box next to the answer that correctly completes each statement about the article.

1. During the Civil War, Jesse James fought
  - a. in the infantry of the Union army.
  - b. in the Confederate cavalry, under Sherman.
  - c. for the South, with Quantill's raiders.
2. Jesse's gang began by robbing
  - a. stagecoaches.
  - b. trains.
  - c. banks.
3. In the James gang's first train robbery, the engineer was killed
  - a. in the train wreck that the gang caused.
  - b. by gunfire when the gang attacked.
  - c. when he refused to cooperate.
4. When the James gang left the Missouri area to rob a bank in Minnesota, the Minnesota townspeople
  - a. caught or killed all but the James brothers.
  - b. were too frightened to resist.
  - c. were happy to have a famous outlaw visit.
5. Jesse died
  - a. while running from a bungled bank job.
  - b. while at home in Missouri.
  - c. by hanging after a short trial.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 5 points for each correct answer.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Total Score: Recalling Facts

**C Making Inferences**

When you combine your own experience and information from a text to draw a conclusion that is not directly stated in that text, you are making an inference. Below are five statements that may or may not be inferences based on information in the article. Label the statements using the following key:

C—Correct Inference      F—Faulty Inference

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Many legends about so-called heroes of the American West have little connection with the facts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. After the Civil War, most former Confederate soldiers turned to lives of crime.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Jesse James and his gang enjoyed getting publicity for their crimes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In small towns of the late 1800s, citizens relied entirely on their police forces to maintain order.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Some members of Jesse's second, or new, gang did not really respect or admire Jesse.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Score: Making Inferences**

**D Using Words Precisely**

Each numbered sentence below contains an underlined word or phrase from the article. Following the sentence are three definitions. One definition is closest to the meaning of the underlined word. One definition is opposite or nearly opposite. Label those two definitions using the following key; do not label the remaining definition.

C—Closest      O—Opposite or Nearly Opposite

1. There have been songs, books, and movies about his heroic nature.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. brave and noble
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. cowardly
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. stylish
2. For three years they kept a low profile.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. showed off
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. behaved quietly so as to avoid notice
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. stayed on a diet
3. The reward for his capture or death kept mounting.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. calling
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. falling
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. rising
4. He and his men struck by surprise. Often they met little or no resistance.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. giving in
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. ability
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. opposition

5. They hoped to stir up enough panic so they could make a clean getaway.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. interest
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. sudden, widespread terror
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. calmness

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 3 points for each correct C answer.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Score 2 points for each correct O answer.  
\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Score: Using Words Precisely**

Enter the four total scores in the spaces below, and add them together to find your Reading Comprehension Score. Then record your score on the graph on page 103.

Score	Question Type	Lesson 6
_____	Finding the Main Idea	
_____	Recalling Facts	
_____	Making Inferences	
_____	Using Words Precisely	
_____	<b>Reading Comprehension Score</b>	

### Author's Approach

Put an X in the box next to the correct answer.

1. The main purpose of the first paragraph is to
  - a. explain why Jesse James is famous.
  - b. reveal Jesse James's true nature.
  - c. describe the way Jesse James robbed from the rich and gave to the poor.
2. Which of the following statements from the article best describes the way Jesse James committed his crimes?
  - a. Early in 1866, Jesse became a member of an outlaw gang.
  - b. He [Jesse] fought on the side of the South in the Civil War.
  - c. Jesse planned each raid carefully. He and his men struck by surprise.
3. Choose the statement below that best explains how the authors address the opposing point of view in the article.
  - a. The authors point out that some people picture Jesse James as a hero.
  - b. The authors explain that Jesse James blamed Northerners for his life of crime.
  - c. The authors point out that Jesse James was shot in the back by one of his own men.

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of correct answers

Record your personal assessment of your work on the Critical Thinking Chart on page 103.