**The History of Belle Starr**

The outlaw Belle Starr is killed when an unknown assailant fatally wounds the famous “Bandit Queen” with two shotgun blasts from behind.

As with the lives of other famous outlaws like Billy the Kid and Jesse James, fanciful accounts printed in newspapers and dime novels made Belle Starr’s harsh and violent life appear far more romantic than it actually was. Born Myra Belle Shirley on a small farm near Carthage, [Missouri](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/missouri), in 1848, she received an education in the classics and became a competent pianist. Seemingly headed for an unexciting but respectable middle-class life, her fate was changed by the outbreak of the [Civil War](https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/american-civil-war-history), which ruined her father’s business as a Carthage innkeeper and claimed the life of her brother Edwin. Devastated, the Shirley family abandoned Missouri to try to make a fresh start in [Texas](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/texas).

In Texas, Belle began her life-long pattern of associating with men of questionable character. In 1866, she met Cole Younger, a member of the James-Younger gang that was gaining notoriety for a series of daring bank and train robberies. Rumor had it that Younger fathered Belle’s first child, Pearl, though the father might have actually been another outlaw, Jim Reed. Regardless, Belle’s relationship with Younger was short-lived, and in 1866 she became Reed’s wife. Belle was apparently untroubled by her new husband’s reputation and she had become his partner in crime by 1869. She joined him in stealing cattle, horses, and money in the Dallas area. Riding her mare, Venus, and sporting velvet skirts and plumed hats, Belle played the role of a “bandit queen” for several years.

In 1874, a member of his own gang killed Reed, and Belle was suddenly on her own. Pursued by the law, she drifted into [Oklahoma](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/oklahoma) Indian Territory, where she led a band of cattle and horse thieves. There she met a handsome young Cherokee named Sam Starr, who eventually became her common-law husband and new criminal partner. The Starrs managed to elude capture for nearly a decade, but in 1883 they were arrested for horse theft and both served five months in the Detroit federal prison.

Freed from prison, the couple immediately resumed their criminal careers. In 1886, Belle again lost a husband to violent death when Sam Starr was killed in a gunfight with an old enemy. Belle wasted no time in finding a third companion, a Creek Indian named Jim July, an outlaw who was 15 years her junior. In 1889, July was arrested for robbery and summoned to Fort Smith, [Arkansas](https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/arkansas), to face charges. Belle accompanied her young lover for part of the journey but turned back before reaching Fort Smith. On her way home, someone ambushed and fatally wounded her with two shotgun blasts to her back. Jim July believed the murderer was a neighbor with whom the couple had been feuding, but no one was ever convicted of the crime.