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words

CALAMITY JANE

Calamity Jane lived in the west when it was newly settled country. There were many hardships for the people. Gold discoveries made pioneer life exciting. Indian wars sometimes made it dangerous. There was much hostility from the Indians to whom the white settlers were intruders. On both sides there was bravery and courage. Long afterward these became the basis of frontier stories.

Many stories have been told about Calamity Jane. Not all of them are true. But even those that are legends tell us something of her adventurous life on the frontier.

Martha Jane Canary, born in Princeton, Missouri, May 1, 1852, was the oldest of seven children of whom five were girls and two boys. She was fond of adventure and liked to ride horses from the time she was able to walk. People called her a tomboy.

When she was 13 years old the family moved to Montana. They came in a covered wagon from Missouri to Virginia City. The journey took five months. There were many other people traveling in wagons to the rich mining fields, and they banded together to help one another over the rough roads and bridgeless rivers. In this way they were also safer from hostile Indians who often attacked small parties, but were less likely to attack large parties.

During the long journey Martha Jane rode ahead with the men. She helped them keep a sharp watch for Indians, and shot deer, elk, and buffalo for fresh meat. The men discovered that she was a good shot, and one of the best riders in the wagon train.

Martha Jane's mother died in the mining camp of Blackfoot a

year after the family arrived in Montana. Soon after, they left for Utah, where they lived for a year, until the death of Martha Jane's father. The children went to Fort Bridger, Wyoming, and found work along the Union Pacific Railroad, then under construction.

Most of Martha Jane's life from this time on was spent in adventures of a rough and tumble type that women seldom have. Many of the stories about Martha Jane deal with her life in the army. One of these explains how she came to be called "Calamity."

In 1870 Jane joined the Seventh Cavalry, under General George A. Custer, at Fort Russell, Wyoming. She was only 18 years old, but so good a shot with a rifle and revolver, so good a rider, and so brave that General Custer made her a scout. Her job was to ride ahead, or to one side of the troops, and watch for danger. She had to search for places to cross rivers and rough country.

After a campaign against the Indians in Arizona, she came north with General Custer. The Northern Pacific Railway was surveying a route through the Sioux country at this time, but Chief Red Cloud and his people did not want the railroad built. They knew that white people would settle on the land, plow the grass under and kill the game. Red Cloud and the Sioux took the warpath against the whites. There were several small battles; six soldiers were killed and a number severely wounded.

One hot summer afternoon in 1872 Martha Canary rode a sweaty horse down into the Goose Creek bottoms, near the present site of Sheridan, Wyoming. She was dressed as a man, in the blue uniform of the U. S. Cavalry. For several days she had been riding hard, with scarcely enough time out of the saddle to sleep. About half

a mile behind her was a cloud of dust raised by the soldiers under Captain Egan, the commander of the army post on Goose Creek. They had been looking for Indians who had struggled against the white people's coming.

As she rode wearily along, Jane suddenly heard behind her the sound of guns. At the first shot her pony raised its ears. Other shots followed rapidly, and then the distant war whoop of the Sioux. A war party had hidden in the willows and brush along Goose Creek only two miles from the Army Post. Nobody expected them to be so near. The soldiers rode off the hills and along the bottom land, into the trap set for them by the Sioux, whose bullets caught them unprepared.

The young scout whirled her horse and raced back to the command. This ambush was her fault, she thought, since she had not discovered the Sioux and warned the soldiers. But who would expect Indians within two miles of the fort?

With no cover from which to fight, the soldiers began to retreat. Several were killed or wounded. Captain Egan himself was hit, and swayed in the saddle, so weak that in another minute he would fall. The Indians rushed forward to capture him. Horses snorted and squealed. Men shouted.

The soldiers tried to escape toward the fort, not certain how many Sioux had attacked them. The young scout clenched her teeth. Somebody had to help the captain. Jane urged her horse forward.

She reached Captain Egan just as he fell from the saddle. She lifted him to her horse, and spurred ahead. The Sioux were very close, yelling savagely. Bullets cut through her clothing and whizzed by her head, but Jane was unable to fire back because

it took both her hands to hold the captain in the saddle. She could only grit her teeth and spur her horse. Heading for the fort, she managed to get beyond range of the Sioux bullets. Soon she had the captain safe inside the post.

For several days Captain Egan was confined to his bed. The army surgeon cared for his wounds and nursed him back to health. When the scout who had saved his life entered his room, the captain held out his hand.

"Calamity Jane, the heroine of the plains," he said, laughing. "Wherever there is calamity or danger to face, that is where you always ride."

The soldiers remembered that name, and often retold the story of Jane's courage. All through the West--especially in Wyoming, South Dakota, and Montana, where she lived at various times--people talked of the girl who scouted for the army. Everyone called her calamity Jane, and the papers in the East and in foreign countries printed stories of her bravery, mingling ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~legendary~~ with ~~what~~ ^{truth}. ~~was already historic.~~