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## Illinois: Birthplace of the Wild West

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**W**ild West. What comes to mind with these words? Indians? Gunfighters? Illinois?

Illinois? During the 1840's and 1850's Illinois was the western edge of "civilized" society. Easterners flooded into the void left by Chief Black Hawk and his Sauk tribe. Among them were three families: the Hickoks, the Earps and the Mastersons. They had sons who would apply the lessons taught by Illinois prairie life to the problems of the Great Plains of the 1870's.

The Hickoks came from Ireland to Connecticut County, Vermont in the late 1700's. Grandfather Otis started a family tradition of honorable service at the War of 1812 siege of Plattsburg, New York.

Like father, like son, William Hickok put equal effort into his pursuits of Polly Butler and a seminary education. Polly's heroic background matched the Hickoks'. Her father fought with Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys during the Revolution. A nephew, Benjamin, would make general in the Union Army. William and Polly's marriage lasted twenty-five years and produced a son, James, also known as "Wild Bill," and five other children.

William's education continued until he contracted typhus. The pressures of trying to keep up with his studies while convalescing led him to a nervous breakdown, and he withdrew from the seminary.

He turned to storekeeping to support his family. He honed his skills in Broome County, New York and Bailey's Point, Illinois before settling in Homer in 1837. Years later, the community would

change its name to Troy Grove after residents learned about a larger Illinois town sharing the same name.

The Wixom family founded this settlement along the Little Vermilion River at the end of the Black Hawk War. In those first years, people put a steady demand on both the town lots and surrounding farmlands. Among them were Nahum Gould and William Dewey, two of William Hickok's seminary colleagues.

The Hickoks bought a two-story frame house. They accepted a ground-floor room in Levi Brown's Green Mountain Inn stagestop for a store. William helped Gould and Dewey organize a Presbyterian church.

The Panic of 1837, hitting just after their son's birth, claimed the Hickoks' house and their business but they were able to obtain a farm just outside town.

The rural environment gave James room to develop his marksmanship. He bought his first gun, a flintlock pistol, at eight years old with money earned doing odd jobs on neighboring farms. His practice soon supplied squirrels, rabbits, deer and prairie chickens to the family menu.

At twelve, he traded some pelts for a rifle and Colt revolver. He used these to win the reputation as one of the best shots in northern Illinois.

He also used them to help Homer when gray wolves roamed the region. To encourage hunters to go after the packs, the State placed a bounty on the animals. Each wolf James killed made the town safer. It also improved the Hickoks' finances. Though the family disliked his hunting,



Wild Bill Hickok



Virgil and Morgan Earp, also active as Western lawmen.



he was rewarded with a new rifle.

Because of his own efforts at obtaining higher education, William insisted his children attend school. He expected success. His brother, Horace, credited James with always staying up with the other students in his lessons despite his hunting. His later letters and soft-spoken speech bear witness to it.

Two older brothers, Oliver and Lorenzo, brought home tales of their western adventures. *The Trapper's Guide* and *The Life of Kit Carson* added to James' fascination with the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. He declared he would one day surpass Carson's exploits.

William's lessons also came from his actions. He allowed Gould and the local Quakers to use his home as a station on the Underground Railroad. James learned devotion to what he thought was right. The bullets that peppered his path to Pantons Mill on slave runs began turning his violence from animals to humans.

Along with all this, James found time to enjoy the same activities other prairie boys did. He raced across the fields. He explored the creek bottoms. He swam and fished in the Little Vermillion.

When William died in 1852, the family moved back into Homer. The confinement stifled the fifteen year old. The setting sun beckoned him.

His mother and sisters convinced

him to wait at least a year before tempting wilderness's fate. They suggested he get a job for the money and experience they felt he would need.

He travelled to Utica where the State of Illinois was building the Illinois-Michigan Canal. He was hired as a mule driver. The canal attracted a variety of rowdies. The drivers' foreman, Charles Hudson, was one. He aimed to lower the young man's high goals.

Horace Hickok said James never started a fight but he always finished one. One day, along the canal, Hudson pushed the issue. A crowd quickly collected. The fighters eventually fell into the water. Hitting turned into attempts to drown each other. Hudson went limp first.

The onlookers proclaimed him dead as they pulled the unconscious foreman ashore. James panicked. He threw his few possessions together and hurried to the shelter of the West's vast plains.

One day word reached him that someone revived Hudson. He visited Homer only once more in 1869 to see his ailing mother.

While James was growing into "Wild Bill," another family worked its way to Illinois. They shared interests in civic duty and education with the Hickoks.

James Earp landed in Fairfax County, Virginia in the late 1600's. Half a dozen Earps served in the colonial ar-

mies during the French and Indian War and the Revolution. One family member received land near Wheeling (today in West Virginia) as a reward for his military service.

Walter Earp settled on that land after getting a law degree. His son, Nicholas, learned to be a farmer and a cooper while the Earps lived there.

Walter and his family followed the migration of his perspective clients into Kentucky. At Hartford, Nicholas ran a farm for himself and one for his father. In return, Walter tutored his son in law.

In spite of all this work, Nick found time to marry twice. His first wife died shortly after the birth of a son, Newton. On July 30, 1840, he married Ann Cooksey, who also grew up in Virginia.

The boom of 1843 brought land speculators. Another of Walter's sons, Lorenzo, had been sending them reports about the richness of Illinois's soil. The Earps decided to take advantage of those conditions and headed west again.

The woods around Monmouth provided a quick dollar to absentee landlords back east. Men, exhausted from logging, built only one-room cabins to shelter themselves and their families. They had no time to improve the deer-paths they used as streets.

They made plenty of money, though. That bought fast relief for



Wyatt Earp



Bat Masterson

fatigue and routine boredom in the form of liquor. Drinking was a favorite pastime for people of all ages, even eight and nine years old.

Being only eighteen miles east of the Mississippi River created another problem. Monmouth was a convenient rest stop for renegades and rustlers from the territories.

Nick settled the Earps on a farm on the edge of town. He and Walter used every means available to defend their property from outlaws and vandals. Their success helped the entire area. Their neighbors rewarded them by electing Walter to the Illinois Circuit Court and making Nick a deputy sheriff.

When the United States went to war with Mexico, Nick sold the farm and got his family a house on South Third Street in Monmouth. He joined a group of local volunteers heading for the fight. He returned within months. A mule kick had earned him a medical discharge.

He recovered from his injuries enough to become a father on March 19, 1848. He named his son after a former commander, Wyatt Berry Stapp.

Wyatt later wrote about the lessons he had learned from his father:

"Father's love for the soil and making things grow was fanatical. Even when he made our home in town, he would have 40, 80 or 160 acres under

cultivation somewhere outside. He never rented, always owned; and he never sold a farm that was not improved over the condition in which it had been acquired.

"One reason for his success with farms was a belief that he was under personal obligation to every living, growing thing. To this he added practical experience and as much theory as he could get from papers of the day.

". . . With all the roaming my brothers and I did, we were forever acquiring real estate—farms, cattle ranches, mining claims and town lots.

"Father's regard for the land was equalled by his respect for the law and his detestation for the lawless element so prevalent in the West. I have heard him say many times that, while the law might not be entirely just, it generally expressed the will of the decent folks who were trying to build up the country, and that until someone could offer a better safeguard for a man's rights, enforcement of the law was the duty of every man who asked for its protection in anyway."

Wyatt's writing shows the importance of education in the Earp home in two ways. Many people could not read books to improve their farming. Often those who could did not believe words could help actions. Also uncommon is the fact that Wyatt could support himself in his later years by writing.

Wyatt also learned to handle a gun

at a young age. Like James Hickok, he earned extra money by hunting.

Monmouth settled into the peaceful pattern of "civilized" society. Nicholas and his family left Walter behind in their pursuit of the "Wild West's" challenge.

Wyatt returned in 1869 to study law under his grandfather. He married the daughter of Walter's neighbor. She died shortly afterward of typhus. Wyatt retreated to the demands of Kansas to bury his grief.

A question surrounds the birth of William Masterson, better known as Bat. The Masterson family travelled from Quebec, Canada to St. Lawrence County, New York during the early 1850's. They heard about the opportunities in the American West. They headed to Illinois.

A 1907 *Human Life* article placed Bat's birthplace in Iroquois County during 1854. In a 1921 interview, Skater Reynolds, a family friend, put the site somewhere near Momence. A younger brother, Thomas Junior, told a biographer in the 1940's that Bat was born on a farm outside Fairfield on May 24, 1853. Land titles show that the Mastersons spent time on both locations around that time period.

A recent discovery in the baptismal records in St. George Parish, Henryville, Quebec suggests that Bat may have been born there. The birth of a son was registered by a Thomas and Catherine Masterson on November 26, 1853. They named him Bartholomew. Bat's father, Thomas, often referred to him as Bartholomew, an Anglicized version of the name. It also accounts for his nickname.

Little is known of Bat Masterson's early life. He did attend school regularly, and his letters reflect that he was an attentive student. People who knew him as an adult said he enjoyed reading. After a life of fighting Indians and serving terms as sheriff and U.S. Marshal in western frontier towns, he retired to New York City in 1902 to become a sports writer and to edit the *Morning Telegraph*.

Though these three families probably never met, they raised their sons in similar ways. They stressed book education while seeing that the boys knew how to survive in the school of hard knocks. They gave examples of duty and honor to follow. Perhaps that is why "Wild Bill" Hickok, Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson became famous. In Illinois, they met the world of their day and the day to come. ■