

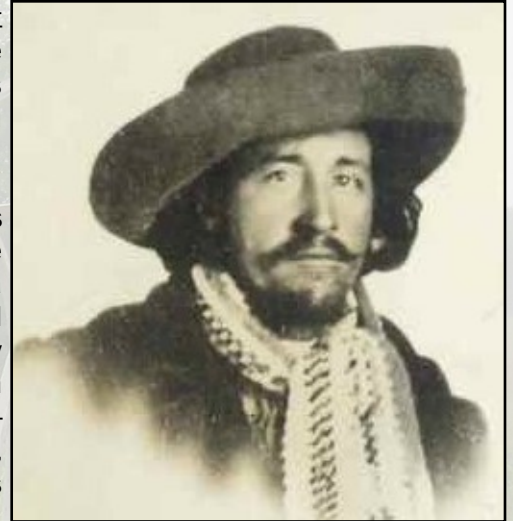
# WATAUGA COUNTY SHERIFF HEADS WEST

## The murder of David Colbert McCanles by Wild Bill Hickok

By Kelly Coffey

A few years after becoming Watauga County sheriff in 1856, David Colbert McCanles, along with his mistress Sarah Shull, embarked on an adventure in the West. Their story has elements of a classic Western tale: the Pike's Peak gold rush, the Oregon Trail, the Pony Express, Wild Bill Hickok, and the violent death of a man with a criminal past.

No one was surprised when twenty-three-year-old David Colbert McCanles declared he was running to be sheriff of Watauga County. "Cobb", as he was known, was a natural politician, with an outsized personality and a striking appearance. He looked like a lawman. With a husky, tall frame and a bushy head of black hair, he attracted attention when he walked into any gathering. He was a rough-and-tumble character, excelling in sports such as wrestling and foot racing. Cobb was a backslapping, joke-telling, never-met-a-stranger type of guy. He was also well-educated, a gifted speaker, and highly intelligent; but he didn't have an intellectual manner. He was as common as anyone in the county and a lot of fun to be around. In short, Cobb had a charisma that people found irresistible, which served him well in the political campaign.



David Cobb McCanles

Photo credit: Nebraska State Historical Society

Cobb, whose charm won him many supporters, entered the race against John Horton. However, it was during this contest that the other side of his temperament became evident. Cobb was overbearing and demanding when he couldn't have his way. His expansive, good-natured side was paired with an aggressive character equally unrestrained. Horton and McCanles attacked each other verbally and almost fought physically at times. But Cobb won out in the end and became the sheriff of seven-year-old Watauga County.



Sarah Shull

The community of Shull's Mill on the Watauga River took its name from a grist-mill built by Phillip Shull in 1835. One of his daughters, Sarah, helped operate a general store that he opened nearby in 1850. She was sixteen at the time, and known to be quiet and retiring; but not a push-over. Those who knew her spoke of her headstrong nature, self-confidence, and resolve.

Cobb's parents moved to Shull's Mill when he was a boy, and lived within a mile of Philip Shull's family. Therefore, Cobb and Sarah likely had known each other since childhood. When Cobb became sheriff, he was married with children; Sarah was still single and not courting. A relationship developed between the two, which resulted in Sarah becoming pregnant in 1855 and giving birth to a girl. As a result, the community shunned her, causing her to feel ashamed and lonely. Her misery was compounded a year later when the child died.

### Headed for the gold fields

Cobb didn't suffer like Sarah, but he began to feel dissatisfied with life in Watauga County, and started to look for a new challenge. He traveled to the West in 1858 and became excited with the news that gold had been discovered in Colorado (leading to what became known as the Pike's Peak gold rush). He came back and planned a permanent move. Cobb coaxed Sarah into running away with him the following year, which took little persuasion as she felt isolated and oppressed in Shull's Mill. In planning his move, Cobb looked for a way to finance traveling expenses

Sarah Shull Photo credit: Appalachian State University

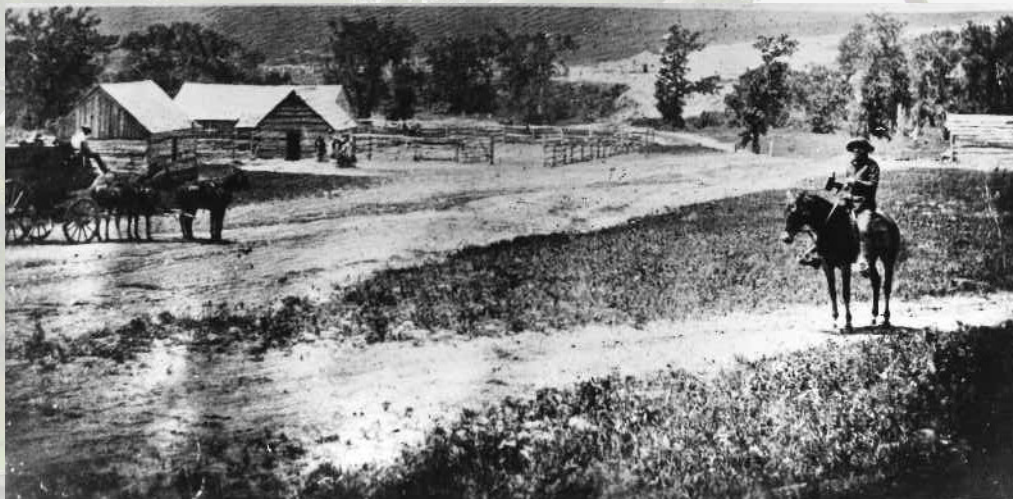


and the cost of becoming established at a new location. In those days, the sheriff was also the County tax collector, so Cobb had Watauga County's tax revenues in his possession. When he left with Sarah, he took the County funds with him.

The pair made their way across the state line to Johnson City, Tennessee. There they boarded a train and traveled to St. Louis, where they took a steamboat up the Missouri River to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. With plenty of money to spend, Cobb put together one of the best outfits heading west- a wagon, oxen, and a generous load of supplies- and proceeded with Sarah toward the Rocky Mountains. However, they were met by many miners returning east, telling of their difficulty in finding a substantial amount of gold in Colorado. Discouraged by such reports, Cobb and Sarah decided to halt at Rock Creek Station in Nebraska, a stopover point for emigrants, freight wagons, and stagecoaches on the eastern edge of the Great Plains.

### A lucrative investment

Rock Creek Station was hardly an isolated frontier outpost. It was located on the Oregon Trail, the major route for emigrants on their way to Oregon, California, and other points west. Thousands traveled the trail every year at its peak between 1846 and 1869. Rock Creek Station offered supplies for the travelers, who often camped at the site before moving on.



Rock Creek Station. The figure on the right is thought to be McCanles. Note stagecoach on left.

Photo credit: Nebraska State Historical Society

Since the gold prospect didn't pan out, Cobb saw a different opportunity to strike it rich. He bought the station with Watauga County's tax money. The investment paid off significantly and turned out to be good as gold. Rock Creek was one of the most difficult crossings on the Oregon Trail, as it was not deep enough to float a wagon over on a raft, yet it had steep banks that were challenging for draft animals to climb while pulling a wagon. Cobb solved the problem by building a bridge over the stream. He charged a toll for its use, which brought him an incredibly large income, considering the high number of travelers who passed through the site. In addition, with so many horses and oxen on the trail, he made a profit growing and selling hay, along with other supplies. His operation employed around 20 people, including Sarah, who worked as a bookkeeper. Within only a couple of years after arriving at Rock Creek Station, Cobb established himself as a successful and prosperous entrepreneur.



Mary McCanles

Photo credit: Nebraska State Historical Society

Only a few months after Cobb was settled, his wife Mary and their children- despite knowing he left with Sarah- made their way to Nebraska, along with his brother James and a cousin named James Woods. Unfazed by her arrival, Cobb continued his relationship with Sarah, which infuriated Mary. Cobb forced them to be civil to one another, however, and apparently they managed to get along. Sarah later said that his "wife was a nice woman, and they had a nice family."

The leadership and charisma that got Cobb elected sheriff in Watauga County was on display in Nebraska as well. He organized civic meetings and gave an oration at an Independence Day gathering. He was often seen carousing with trail travelers around the campfires, singing and playing his fiddle. Though not religious himself, he engaged in theological arguments with ministers, just for the challenge of winning a debate.



Cobb's mean streak, however, was on display too. He was often brutal and unforgiving. Once, one of his employees got drunk while in charge of the business when Cobb was away. When he returned, he poured gunpowder on the man's beard and set it on fire, then tied him on an unbroken horse and turned it loose to buck until it gave out. Similar other stories of his cruelty have been told.

### Hickok arrives

Soon after buying the station, Cobb rented part of it to the Overland Stage Company to be used as a relay station for the Pony Express. The Pony Express was an ambitious project to regularly deliver mail from Missouri to California (a distance of over 1,800 miles) in ten days using young riders on horseback. Its success, an astonishing feat, created a sensation across the country.

In early 1861, twenty-three year old James Butler Hickok came to the station and took a job as assistant stock tender for the company. At the time, Hickok had an injured left arm. Cobb often made fun of his handicap and would force Hickok into contrived wrestling matches that always ended with Hickok being thrown to the ground. In addition to this abuse, Cobb called him "Duck Bill" in reference to his prominent upper lip. Hickok was a gambler, and often was accused of cheating. As a result, Cobb handled him roughly once and told him to quit gambling or he would run him off the station. With a useless arm, Hickok was in no condition to fight back at these mistreatments, but Sarah saw something in him that portended bad news for Cobb. Years later, she told a friend, "Hickok had steel-blue eyes that were beautiful and gentle but could change in a second and look dangerous. You had better watch his eyes; he wasn't one to run from a fight."



Hickok around the time of the Rock Creek Station incident Photo credit: Public domain



Monroe McCanles

Photo credit: Nebraska State Historical Society

Living in the shadow of the ever-rambunctious Cobb, Sarah went about her work quietly and drew little attention from most people, with one exception- James Butler Hickok. The two were apparently eyeing one another, as Sarah later confided that she "came close to having an affair with Hickok." There's little evidence this attraction was a major factor in the violence that soon followed, but it does suggest that Hickok might have envied Cobb's relationship with Sarah.

### The murder

In April 1861, Cobb decided to sell to the Overland Stage Company the part of the station it was renting, in a deal where the company would pay in monthly installments. While the Pony Express was successful in delivering the mail in record time, it never made a profit for the business. Consequently, the company was near failure and unable to make the payments. On July 12, 1861, Cobb went to the house of company representative Horace Wellman with his 12-year-old son, Monroe, his cousin, James Woods, and one of his employees named James Gordon. All four were unarmed. Sarah and a woman named Sarah Kelsey happened to be in the house, visiting Wellman's wife. Woods and Gordon waited at a nearby barn while Cobb, with Monroe, went to the front of the house and demanded payment from Wellman. The two argued for a while, then Wellman went back inside. Cobb was threatening to go in and drag Wellman out when Hickok appeared in the doorway. Cobb said to Hickok that he had no quarrel with him, and told him to go back in and send Wellman out again. Hickok went back inside, while Cobb continued to shout and make threats. Soon Hickok fired a shot from inside the house, which hit Cobb in the heart and knocked him to the ground, where he died instantly.





Hearing the sound of the gun, Woods and Gordon ran up and were shot immediately. Woods collapsed on the door of a root cellar, while Gordon fled. Hickok took off after Gordon and finished him off with another shot. Wellman grabbed a hoe and beat Woods until he was dead. After the shooting started, the two Sarahs had hid in the root cellar. While Wellman was bludgeoning Woods, his blood dripped through the cracks onto Sarah Shull's head. Wellman then turned on Monroe, who was at his father's side, and said, "Let's kill them all!" He swung at the boy, but Monroe dodged and ran away.

The next day, employees of the Overland Stage Company hustled Sarah out of the station and onto a westbound stagecoach, presumably to prevent her from giving testimony that would be damaging to Hickok and Wellman.

Three days later, Hickok and Wellman were arrested and brought before a justice of the peace. After a brief hearing, the justice freed them. His decision was based on several factors that worked in favor of the defendants. The next term of district court was two years away. The County was new, with no jail to house the prisoners and very little money to guard and feed them. Because settlers were few, finding men to act even as temporary guards had been a challenge. Convicting the two in court would have been difficult anyway, as Sarah Shull and Sarah Kelsey were not summoned as witnesses, and Monroe was kept from testifying. The only other witness was Wellman's wife, who said that the men acted in self-defense.

### Sarah moves on

After Cobb's death, Sarah settled Colorado, where the couple had originally planned to go. There she met and married a music teacher named Philip DeVald in 1863. For the next several years, the two lived at various locations in the nation. Unfortunately for Sarah, DeVald was a philanderer who often had affairs with his students. Sarah and Philip divorced in 1896 after he ran off, at age 58, with one of his 16-year-old music students.

About 1900, at age 66, Sarah returned to Watauga County, 40 years after leaving. After all those years, she was not welcomed by many who were old enough to remember that she had left with a married man. She lived in a one-room cabin and worked odd jobs to support herself. Rumor spread that she came back with a large amount of the Watauga County

tax money Cobb had stolen, which was certainly not true, as she lived in near poverty. Sarah died in 1932 at age 98. She is buried in Shull's Mill.

### McCaules' legacy

Cobb had good qualities that made him admirable in the eyes of many people, but he was also an adulterer, a thief, and a bully. He was a colorful, but seriously flawed character. Hickok no doubt despised Cobb for the abuse and humiliation he endured. Yet Cobb's misdeeds, bad as they were, didn't seem to justify his death from a cowardly act. At Wellman's house, Cobb was belligerent and making threats to use physical force, but he was outside the house and unarmed. Wellman and Hickok were in no immediate danger at the time Hickok fired the rifle. The incident was essentially murder.



The McCanles killing, Hickok's first of many, was the precipitating event that set Hickok on a course to become the prototypical Western gunfighter (see side story). He became famous and a hero to much of the country. But his action at Rock Creek Station was hardly a valiant deed.

Cobb and Sarah participated in events that helped define America's image of the West. Watauga County's tax money underwrote the adventure of these Watauga natives, and Cobb's demise helped create the legend of Wild Bill Hickok. The tale of Cobb McCanles and Sarah Shull is a remarkable story, and Watauga County's bit part in the history of the West.



Photo credit: Public domain

#### WILD BILL HICKOK

James Butler Hickok, known as "Wild Bill", began his adult life in Kansas in 1858, where he took a job as teamster for the Overland Stage Company. After his time at Rock Creek Station and the beginning of the Civil War, he joined the Union Army and worked as a wagon master, sniper, and spy. In these capacities, he gained a reputation as an adventurer, and many tales were told of his exploits. His killing of a man who offended him in Missouri set the standard for the classic, showdown pistol duel. Such incidents led to an article in a nationwide publication on his feats, which fascinated the American people. His celebrity status earned him a role in the theater in the East, playing himself in a Western show. After the war, he continued to scout, was wounded by Indians, guided tourists, and found work as a lawman in various locales. Hickok was something of a professional gunfighter, as he supposedly found it necessary to kill a number of men in what he felt were threatening situations. However, he has been criticized for being too quick to shoot, as illustrated in his murder of McCanles, the first man he killed. He even accidentally shot and killed his own deputy and best friend when he fired his pistol in a disturbance without clearly identifying the target. As he aged, Hickok's eyesight faded, which diminished his expert marksmanship. He was assassinated in Deadwood, South Dakota in 1876 by a man who claimed that he had killed his brother in Kansas. But his legend lived on and he remained the quintessential man-of-the-West.

### Additional Photos on the Following Page

#### Sources

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Sarah Kelsey

Photo credit Kelly Coffey; on display at Rock Creek Station State Park, Nebraska



Sarah Shull's grave in Shull's Mill

Photo credit: Kelly Coffey



McCanles and Woods were buried in the same grave

Photo credit: Kelly Coffey



Reconstructed Rock Creek Station at the modern-day state park in Nebraska

Photo credit: Kelly Coffey