Jesse James Train Robbery and Creation of a Myth

For the record, the Rock Island Express the boys hit that night was eight cars long--four coaches, two sleepers, and two baggage and express cars. It left Council Bluffs at five, on a run to Chicago. Oddly enough, the last sleeper was full of Chinese students on their way to colleges out east. The date was July 21, 1873.

The thing is, no one imagined that a bunch of galoots could stop a train, stop it in its tracks, then shoot up a storm, get on board, and go from seat to seat demanding cash and whatever valuables they spotted. What happened that night, 65 miles west of Des Moines, two hours south and east of was the very first train robbery in American history; and it happened just outside of Adair, Iowa, at a spot you can visit yet today, a place where an immense railroad engine wheel is set in the earth in memory of a wild and nasty robbery that happened right there that night.

The sun's going down at 8:30, but there's plenty enough light for an engineer with his wits about him to spot a line of track that's bent out of shape by someone or something. When John Rafferty saw trouble coming, he threw that monster engine into reverse and stopped that iron horse fast as he could, thereby playing into the dastardly hands of the James boys.

Just one word explains a scrapbook full of wild west 19th century behavior. It's only four letters long, a bright and shiny object that stole a nation's senses every time anyone saw a fingernail's worth in the bottom of the pan--gold. Frank and Jesse James got the word that the Rock Island was carrying lots of gold from Colorado. Gold is what they were after.

But it was coming later. Wrong time. Wrong train. No gold.
No matter. That train heist, right down the road from here, stunned locals and shocked the entire nation. Who would have believed "six large, athletic men dressed in KuKlux style" could bring a monster railroad to a stop, rob the passengers blind, and kill good, decent men?--but it happened. Engineer Rafferty was killed, that night, thrown out of the train when the engine ran into a bank and flipped.

There was no gold, but when the James gang tallied the loot, they'd still grabbed a couple thousand and change, not bad for fifteen minutes of banditry. And they'd made history, put "the James Gang," all upper case, across the nation's newspapers and, eventually, the colorful covers of a dozen dime novels. Stopping that Rock Island Express put the James boys on a fast track to mythic glory, Robin Hood and a prairie band of merry men.

But there's more to the story. Jesse James was still learning to shave when Bloody Bill Anderson's gang of Confederate guerrillas committed unspeakable atrocities in western Missouri—and the boy, Jesse, was of one of 'em. He was in it when Bloody Bill's gang slaughtered Union soldiers and sliced them up like so much meat. Little Jesse James was a bushwhacker. He carried out horrendous atrocities in a place where the Civil War created conflicts that cast neighbor against neighbor.

Jesse James was sired in conflict, reared by war. He was raised bloody. He'd learned to rob trains long before even he had the idea. When he should have been in Sunday School, he was scalping the enemy.

For years the famous Jesse James got more ink than almost anyone, but people rarely knew the whole story. Jesse James had other people's blood in his heart and soul long before he was old enough to vote.

Once Robert E. Lee handed his sword to General Grant at Appomattox, the war finally ended, but not the violence. Some seeped out even here, just
outside of Adair, in July of 1883, eighteen years later, when a gang of thugs who learned their craft during the war, stung the east-bound Rock Island Express, the very first train heist in the U. S. A.

It was a new crime that begat a brand new American myth by an aging practiced criminal.