

Why is Jesse James the Hero?

If the place sounds cliché-ish, you can't blame Garretson, because not every Siouxland burg is blessed with a built-in tourist trap. Seriously, Garretson has a brand—"Jesse James was there." He *was*. Not some lousy impersonator. The. Real. Jesse James. And there lies the tale.

"Devil's Gulch," someone once called it, like something out of John Wayne-- "the dust in Devil's Gulch was thick as hide on a buffalo hump." You know.

But Garretson's not only got a star, they've also got a story; and the story's not moving. It'll be there tomorrow, if you've never checked it out. It's carved treacherously into the Sioux quartzite, a 20-foot-wide gash that Jesse James and his horse, on the run from the biggest posse in American history, took a flying leap over and made it, escaped to rob more banks and trains.

Garretson, South Dakota celebrates that jump.

You're may be wondering what the Sam Hell Jesse James was doing in Northfield, Minnesota in September of 1876. What drew him was a bank, 500 miles north from his Missouri home. He and his gang figured to knock off the local bank and high-tail it back south. Just that simple.

But why that far north?

He wanted a piece of the guy with the namby-pamby name of Adelbert Ames, a Yankee Civil War hero, who'd taken up residence in Northfield, where his father owned a mill.

No two-peas-in-a-pod here. Jesse was a criminal. Adelbert had served in his country in war and peace, during "Reconstruction," when he served as Governor of Louisiana. By Southern measure, he was a lousy carpetbagger,

trying to impose Yankee justice on Rebs who'd just coughed up a surrender at Appomattox.

Adelbert won the war but lost just about every battle thereafter. When he left Louisiana, he was burned out mentally and emotionally, having taken on a task no one could accomplish. With malice towards none, he'd defended the black folks of Louisiana against the KKK, who had a thing for hangings.

What he discovered was that moral courage didn't stand a chance against brutality. Adelbert Ames intended "to buckle on my armor anew," he said, "that I may better fight the battle of the poor and oppressed colored man."

At that mission, he'd lost, big time.

Jesse James was well-read criminal. He wanted to take Adelbert Ames' carpetbagging money. That yankee's money was worth a trip all the way up to Northfield. This was no run-of-the-mill bank heist. The whole deal was personal and political.

And it went bust, bloody bust. Jesse James might have been well-read, but when he and the gang rode into town, they looked like no one else on the sidewalk. Townspeople knew they were bank robbers long before they'd gone in the front door--they just looked like trouble.

So when they hit the bank, no one was surprised. What happened inside and out wasn't pretty. People were shot and killed. Even the Governor weighed in with a \$5000 reward for the James gang, dead or alive.

Hence, the biggest posse in American history was chasing Jesse James into a little town not far from here, a town named Garretson, where, on his horse, Jesse came up to a chasm called Devil's Gulch, turned around and then spurred that mount on to jump 20 feet and escape the crowd coming after him and the five grand that came with his scalp.

You can visit Devil's Gulch. Judge for yourself whether any man and beast could ever make that leap. Myths are born in those places where we'd like to believe things true.

You can read up on the story right there, even buy a Devil's Gulch t-shirt.

But you'll see no mention of Adelbert Ames, and I think that's a crime. I can't help thinking he's the hero, not Jesse the thug. Adelbert served his country in war and peace. Jesse blew a bank heist that left blood on Northfield's streets.

Visit sometime. It's a heckuva leap. Make your own judgment.

But pick up a t-shirt because you'll want to remember at least some of the good stuff we've all but forgotten.