

The Ballad of JESSE JAMES

from "A Clipping from My Jesse James Scrapbook"
by Thurston James

The Ballad of Jesse James was composed by an unknown author. The date of its first release, is also unknown, but as it was performed on the streets, it became an immediate success. The song's popularity played a significant part in perpetuating the legend of Jesse James and his role as a Robin Hood.

There is no authentic version. At first, the song was passed on in an oral tradition it was not set down on paper for many years. New singers could, and did, add verses at will and the original, what ever that might have been, has evolved. The number of verses grew to a point where one commentator described the work as 'a ten foot poem'.

The fragments that have been collected for this reading are combined and arranged in an order that seems to be logical.

But, whatever the version you choose to sing, the chorus will agree that Jesse's wife 'mourned', his children were 'brave', and that Bob Ford was 'dirty' and 'little' and 'a coward'.

The Ballad of Jesse James

Jesse James was a lad that killed many a man.
He robbed the Danville train.
He stole from the rich and he gave to the poor
He'd a hand, a heart, and a brain.

It was Robert Ford, that dirty little coward
I wonder how he does feel
For he ate Jesse's bread and he slept in Jesse's bed,
And he laid Jesse James in his grave.

Jesse was a man, a friend to the poor,
He couldn't see a brother suffer pain
And with his brother Frank he robbed the Springfield bank
And he stopped the Glendale train

It was with his brother Frank he robbed the Gallatin Bank
And carried the money from the town
It was in this very place they had a little chase
And they shot Captain Sheets to the ground.

CHORUS

Jesse leaves a wife, that'll mourn all her life
His three children they were brave
For that dirty little coward, he shot Mr. Howard
And lay poor Jesse in his grave

It was on a Wednesday night the moon was shining bright
They robbed the Danville train.
The people they did say for many miles away
It was robbed by Frank and Jesse James

It was on a Friday night when the moon was shining bright
 They robbed the Glendale train
 For the agent on his knees, delivered up the keys
 To the outlaws Frank and Jesse James

Twos on a Saturday night and Jesse was at home
 A-talking to his family so brave
 Bob Ford came along like a thief in the night
 And laid Jesse James in his grave.

CHORUS (alternate)

Oh, they laid poor Jesse in his grave, yes lord
 They laid Jesse James in his grave.
 Oh, he took from the rich and
 he gave to the poor
 But, they laid Jesse James in his grave

The people held their breath when they heard of Jesse's death
 And wondered how he came to die
 For the big reward, Little Robert Ford
 Shot Jesse James on the sly

Jesse went to rest with his hand on his breast
 And there are many who never saw his face
 He was born one day in the county of Clay
 And he came from a solitary race.

CHORUS (alternate)

Jesse leaves a wife, that'll moan all her life
 The children that he left will pray
 For Robert Ford the coward that shot Mr. Howard
 And lay poor Jesse in his grave

Now men, when you go out into the west,
 Never be afraid to die
 They had the law in their hands
 but they didn't have the sand
 To take Jesse James alive.

This song was made by Billy Gashade
 As soon as the news did arrive
 He said there's no man with the law in his hand
 Can take Jesse James alive

The Billy Gashade mentioned in the last verse, was a friend of the James Family, and a printer with the Liberty, Missouri newspaper. This last verse claims that he wrote the song. Maybe, maybe not -- to confuse this issue is the fact that some respected authorities render this name as Lashade. Another story has it that a black convict wrote this verse while in jail

In his book, "Jesse James Was His Name", William Settle Jr. used some of the lyrics from "The Ballad of Jesse James" as chapter headings. His book is broken into fifteen chapters, and each chapter begins with a fragment of a verse, each of a size and content that would best serve for one of his chapter headings.

In the movie "The Last Days of Frank and Jesse James," Kris Kristopherson sings a version of 'The Legend of Jesse James' over the opening titles, then, at the end of the film, as Bob Ford gets shot, this verse is sung over the closing credits.....

And then one day The papers did say,
 Bob Ford got his rewarding

A cowboy drunk His heart did plunk
'As you do, you'll get according.'

Authorities tell us these verses are from a different song. It is being included here because both William Settle and Kris Kristopherson make use of these words.

Jesse James was one of his names
Another it was Howard
He robbed the rich of every stitch.
You bet he was no coward.

His mother she was elderly
His father was a preacher
Though some do say, I can't gainsay,
His mother was his teacher.

Her strong right arm, it came to harm.
Detectives blew it off, sir,
And killed her son, the youngest one.
No wonder such she'd scoff, sir.

7.

My Jesse dear, your mother here
Has taught more than she ought ter,
For Robert Ford, I pledge my word,
Has marked you for his slaughter.

For robbing trains Bob had no brains
Unless Jess plainly showed him.
Our governor for peace or war
Explained this for to goad him.

So Robert Ford he scratched his gourd
And then he said, "I'll go you,
Give me a price that's something nice,
And then by gee I'll show you!"

Then Governor C. he laughed with glee
And fixed a price to suit him.
And Bob agreed, with ready speed,
To find Jesse James and shoot him.

And then he did as he was bid
And shot Jess in the back, sir,
Then ran away on that same day,
For cash he did not lack, sir.

He did his best to live out west,
But no one was his friend there.
"You've killed your cousin," they went buzzin',
However free he'd spend there.

And then one day, the papers say,
Bob Ford got his rewarding:
A cowboy drunk, his heart did plunk.
As you do you'll git according.

Maybe it is a different song but Kristopherson makes it fit the tune that we all know so well.

Bibliography for the Ballad of Jesse James

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