

# Midwesterner's Tenacity over Terror

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PHOTOS BY Stone Cottage Photography

"GET YOUR GUNS BOYS!



THEY'RE ROBBING THE BANK!"

## Northfield Defeats the Jesse James Gang

"Get your guns boys! They're robbing the bank!" rang the shouts of Northfield, Minnesota, merchant, J.S. Allen, upon realizing that Northfield's bank was under siege by the infamous James-Younger gang.

On September 7, 1876, eight men comprising the James-Younger Gang – wearing long white dusters astride the finest of horses – descended upon the industrious town of Northfield with the villainous intent of depleting the bank's funds. Three members of the gang entered the bank while the others remained outside to preserve their mission. Inside the bank, Northfield citizen Joseph Lee Heywood, bravely refused to open the safe for the robbers and was killed. Bank teller, Alonzo Bunker, was also injured during the robbery attempt.

Northfield citizens gathered their guns and a gun battle ensued outside the bank where an innocent

bystander – Nicolaus Gustavson, a Swedish immigrant who did not speak English – was fatally wounded after failing to understand the gang's warnings to clear the streets.

Two of the gang's members – Bill Stiles and Clell Miller – were killed during the shootout. The remaining gang members escaped, many

with gun wounds, after the townspeople of Northfield tenaciously defended their town to the surprise of the gang.

Now, the second weekend in September is reserved to celebrate Northfield's Defeat of Jesse James Days. The celebration honors the Northfield citizens who lost their lives and so bravely defended the local First National Bank and town against the James-Younger Gang.

Visitors to Defeat of Jesse James Days (DJJD) can expect an entire weekend filled with activities. The most notable being the bank raid reenactments conducted by a talented group of volunteers – *today's* James-Younger Gang.

The reenactments, led by Chip DeMann, are historically accurate accounts marking the events of that fateful day in Northfield's history. According to Hayes Scriven, Northfield Historical Society Executive Director, Chip DeMann and his group of bank raid performers "professionalized" the reenactments by carefully capturing details such as donning white linen dusters just like those worn by the James-Younger Gang in 1876 and using pistols from the period.

Three generations of DeMann men have performed in the bank raid reenactments and the DeMann family has roots in Northfield since 1855. Chip DeMann's father, Chuck, performed in reenactments as early as 1948 and now Chip, his brother Jerry, and Chip's son, Trip, ride together as part of the team that re-enacts this historic day. This is truly a family affair as Chip DeMann's wife, Jane Moline, also choreographs the riders' performances.

### Insider tip:

The James-Younger Gang performers have a camp complete with a horse corral on the bank of the Cannon River across from Carleton's stadium where event-goers can stop by and witness a true cowboy camp setting. The cowboys sing and play guitars while waiting for the next bank raid.

## Madelia townspeople take on the surviving members of the James-Younger Gang

After the drama unfolded in Northfield, Jesse James found himself shy two of his gang members – Clell Miller and Bill Stiles – and hunted by numerous posses in a manhunt that spanned miles. Wandering and bewildered after losing Minnesota native and guide, Bill Stiles, the remaining members of the James-Younger Gang separated into two groups with one group going to Madelia, Minnesota. This group consisted of the Younger brothers – Bob, Jim and Cole – and Charlie Pitts, who found themselves in Madelia on September 21, 1876. Frank and Jesse James headed west toward South Dakota.

Madelia teen, Oscar Sorbel, spotted the men passing by the Sorbel farm while he was milking cows with his father. After overcoming resistance from his father, young Sorbel rode toward Madelia to alert the authorities.

“Look out! The robbers are about!” Sorbel shouted as he passed others during his eight-mile ride to Madelia. Sorbel was later revered as a hero for keenly observing the robbers.

A local posse trapped the group in a low marshy area near the Watonwan River. A group of seven brave men – now known as Madelia’s Magnificent Seven – advanced on the gang. Another gunfight took place leaving Charlie Pitts mortally wounded and the Younger brothers badly hurt. Bob Younger, the only one able to

respond, said, “I surrender.”

Because Madelia had no jail at the time, the fugitives were taken to The Flanders House to have their wounds treated and await their fate. Expecting to be lynched, the Younger brothers expressed gratitude for the humane treatment they received. Nine weeks later, in the trial of the Younger brothers, they were found guilty and sentenced to Stillwater State Prison.

Adeline Yates, director of the Younger Brothers Capture celebration, encourages visitors to stop by the Yates Museum and the Watanwon County Historical Center to view artifacts from the capture of the Younger Brothers. The historical Christensen Building on the corner of Main Street and Benzel Avenue is painted with a mural on the west side of the building depicting the capture and a plaque is displayed nearby marking the event.

During this celebration on Saturday, September 8, 2007, the citizens of Madelia expect to draw several thousand visitors to celebrate the historic day, Yates said. *W*

### Insider tip:

Arnie Lillo, an Old West history enthusiast, created the Jesse James Theme Park. Constructing life-size metal artwork, Lillo's metal silhouettes tell the story of the events taking place in September 1876. The farm is located at 56632 177<sup>th</sup> Lane in Good Thunder, MN. Find more information at [www.mnriv.com/jesspark.com](http://www.mnriv.com/jesspark.com).

For more information about these events or the history of the James-Younger Gang, go to [www.djjd.org](http://www.djjd.org), [www.madeliamn.com](http://www.madeliamn.com), or [NHS.org](http://NHS.org).

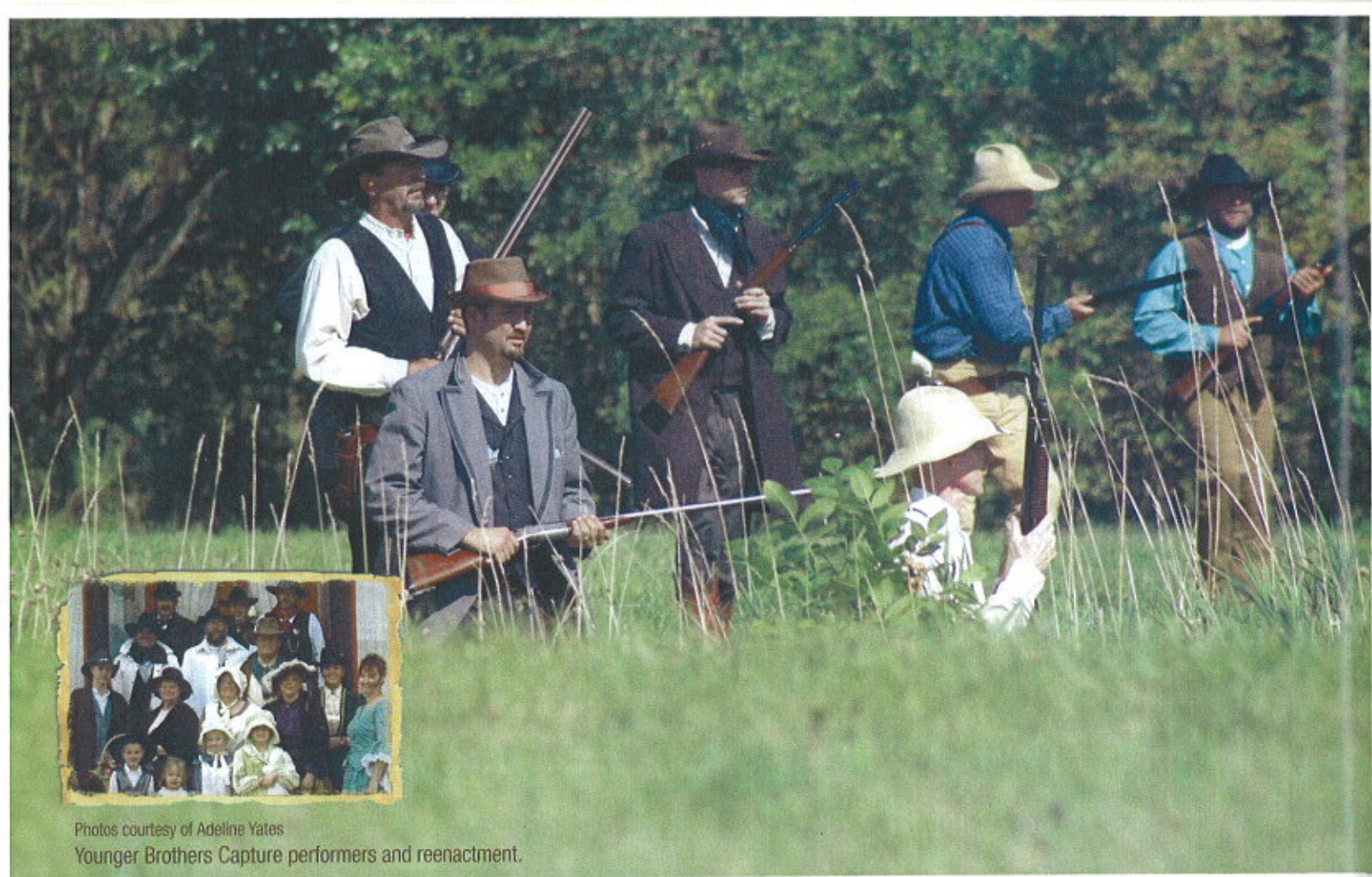
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Photos courtesy of Adeline Yates  
Younger Brothers Capture performers and reenactment.

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"There is something new and really exciting this year," DeMann said. "We're adding two Friday evening performances." DeMann also pointed out that they perform the reenactments at the actual location and in the original bank building where the original raid took place.

Chip DeMann is the chair of the James-Younger performers and will this year be awarded the Joseph Lee Heywood Award – an award honoring those who show a commitment to volunteerism. DeMann attributes his strong volunteer ethic to his father, Chuck DeMann, who instilled in his children the need to do their civic duty, or "civic rent" as he called it.

"This is the largest all-volunteer festival in Minnesota," Hayes Scriven of the Northfield Historical Society said. And, according to the DJJD General Chairman Brad Ness, the popularity of this four-day event is expected to reach over 150,000 this year. Ness also plays a role in the reenactments as J.S. Allen who was one of the first to alert the other citizens to the impending danger and attempted robbery.

"We have something for everyone," Ness said of the DJJD celebration. ▶

**Insider tip:**

Arrive at least 30 min. early to the scheduled re-enactments to get a good view. It's also a good idea to read up on the history of this event to better understand who all the actors are playing.

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