



Billy the Kid: More than a Legend



The history of the American Southwest is chock full of legends and stories that truly live up to the epithet of the Wild West. The embellishment of these stories has allowed for the development of numerous movies and books but the true facts of these accounts are more interesting than any tall tale.

Yes, the West really was wild! William Henry McCarthy, otherwise known as Billy the Kid, is a perfect example of how untamed the now tranquil towns of New Mexico used to be. It was no secret that Billy had a rough past. His mother died of tuberculosis while he was just a young boy and he had a history of working odd jobs in combination with a few illegal activities.

The real beginning of Billy's career as an infamous gunman, however, began in 1878 after he met a young Englishman named John Tunstall. That year saw the beginning of the Lincoln County Wars—a series of violent confrontations resulting from conflict between two groups of businessmen: L.G. Murphy and James Dolan versus the newcomer Tunstall, attorney Alexander McSween, and cattle baron John Chisum.

Like most monopolized towns, Murphy and crew had the law on their side—Sheriff William Brady. Murphy also had the infamous Jesse Evans gang to take care of any “problems” that might arise. In this case, that problem was Tunstall and McSween, who wanted to establish their own business in Lincoln County. Billy was hired by Tunstall as a ranch hand and became one of the Regulators, a posse formed to support Tunstall and McSween. As tensions escalated, Murphy had Jesse Evans and his men go

after Tunstall. According to most accounts, he was shot unarmed which was against “the code of the West.” After Tunstall's murder, Billy and the Regulators swore vengeance on Jesse Evans and his crew.

As a result of one of the many skirmishes, Sheriff William Brady was killed, putting Billy in the hot seat as a murderer and sending him on the run. After many daring escapes, the new sheriff, Pat Garrett, was finally successful in arresting Billy. Not to be outdone, Billy made a grand escape from the second floor of the Lincoln County courthouse, killing Deputies J.W. Bell and Bob Olinger as he fled. Many speculate as to how he accomplished such a feat but it is fair to say that “the Kid” seemed to have his share of luck. That luck ran out on July 14, 1881 when Garrett caught up to the legendary outlaw at the home of Pete Maxwell and killed him.

With so many versions of what really happened during the Lincoln County Wars, it is hard to tell fact from fiction. Historians and fans still debate the detail of a man whose legend continues to live-on in our imaginations. There's no telling just how far Billy wandered—did he hide between the white dunes of the Tularosa Basin? His presence still lingers in the state of New Mexico, from Santa Fe and to Old Mesilla to Lincoln County. There is no

doubt he and other renowned characters of the time came across the largest gypsum dunefield in the world as they traveled. Who knows what evidence of their passage these ever-shifting dunes might be hiding.

—Sandra Flickinger, Student-Intern



Billy the Kid