

# DISCOVER THE REAL STORIES BEHIND THE REBELS, ROBBERS, AND RUSTLERS OF THE WILD WEST

The vicious bad guys and bandits of the American West have always made for thrilling tales of gunfights, heists, and outlaws. From the beginning, penny dreadfuls, Wild West shows, dime novels, and urban legends romanticized and magnified these renegades and their wild frontier spirit. We still get chills down our spines from these tales, which are more fiction than fact.

*"They tell a lot of lies about me. They say I killed six or seven men for snoring. Well, it ain't true. I only killed one man for snoring."* – John Wesley Hardin

*"I am a friend to any brave and gallant outlaw."* – Belle Starr,  
told to the *Dallas Morning News* in 1886.

Cherokee Bill, while on the gallows, was asked if he had any final words.

*"I came here to die, not make a speech,"* he said.

*The Real Dirt on America's Frontier Outlaws* separates myth from truth, showing the legends and the evidence side by side to give readers the real story of the Wild West and the dangerous figures who immortalized it. Learn the facts about Billy the Kid, Black Bart, John Wesley Hardin, Jesse James, and Butch Cassidy as well as some lesser known evildoers, such as Isom Dart, Cherokee Bill, The Bloody Espinosas, and Hoodoo Brown.

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**REAL DIRT**  
ON AMERICA'S  
FRONTIER OUTLAWS

MOTAVALLI

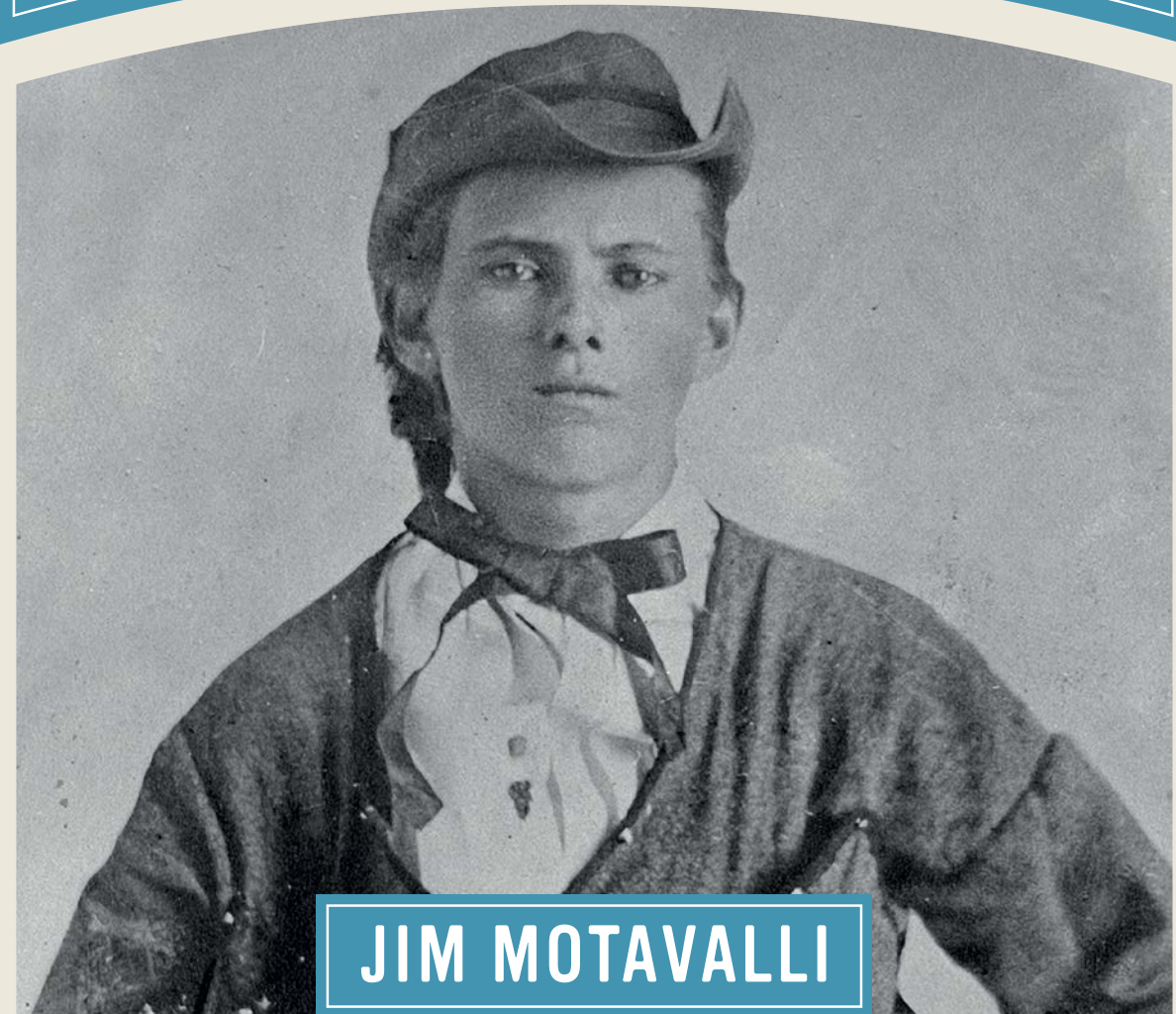


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# REAL DIRT

ON AMERICA'S FRONTIER OUTLAWS




JIM MOTAVALLI





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*Front cover: A young Jesse James*

*The James Gang in full regalia, circa 1870, showing Frank and Jesse James, and Cole and Bob Younger.  
(Lordprice Collection/Alamy Stock Photo)*





# BILLY THE KID (1859-1881) (AKA WILLIAM H. BONNEY AND HENRY MCCARTY, JR.)



*Billy the Kid, (aka William Bonney, aka Henry McCarty) (Wikipedia)*

## THE LEGEND

As the deadliest outlaw the Old West ever produced, Billy the Kid had twenty-one notches in his pistol grip, one for each of the years he'd been alive. His first murder was at age twelve. Although a killer and a thief, the boyish Billy was personally friendly and likable, with a deep immersion in Mexican culture, which produced his girlfriend. There was a streak of good in him, and many of the verified killings occurred in the context of self-defense. He was a legendary escape artist and a deadly shot. He escaped the gallows, only to be shot during a cowardly ambush by Sheriff Pat Garrett in 1881. Things were changing in the West, and the people who made it colorful had to go.

## HOW THEY GET IT WRONG

The Kid is remembered because he was a baby-faced teenager when he committed most of his crimes, and he died at age twenty-one, leaving few facts and a blank canvas on which to create a legend. His corpse wasn't even cold before the first biographies were published, with even the accounts based on eyewitness testimony filled with conjecture and made-up "facts."

Billy was shot on July 14, 1881, and by August 29, the Wide Awake Library had *The True Life of Billy the Kid* out for five cents. It manages to make errors in its second paragraph, proclaiming his actual name to have been "William McCarthy." It proclaims that "some have located his birthplace as the City of New York [where it actually did occur] but this is doubtless a mistake."

*The True Life* goes on to inform us that Billy's father brought the family to New Mexico, but dad was out of the picture early on. It was actually Billy's widowed mother who moved the family out West. They first lived in Indianapolis in the late 1860s, then went on to Wichita, Denver, Santa Fe (where she remarried), and then Silver City, where she died, leaving him an orphan at age fourteen.

*The True Life* has copious amounts of colorful Billy the Kid dialogue, no doubt mostly made up from whole cloth by the dime novel wordsmiths in New York. It states with full confidence that the Kid committed his first murder in Arizona at around seventeen, gunning down Frank Douglass, his rival for the hand of the fair Senorita Quiseta. In reality, love was not at issue, and the person the Kid shot to death in 1877 was Frank "Windy" Cahill.

All of this is only on the first two pages of *The True Life*. Pat Garrett's name is misspelled as "Garret," though Billy's bloody escape from his custody in Lincoln—the most famous moment in Kid lore, besides the death scene—is rendered with fair accuracy. And speaking of that death scene ("Crack, went Pat Garrett's rifle"), the book has it occurring on August 14 instead of July 14, possibly to make *The True Life's* account seem more current. The book concludes, "Thus died the youngest and greatest desperado ever known in the world's history." That seems a bit thick. What about Genghis Khan?

One of the most interesting Billy the Kid books is Charles A. Siringo's *History of Billy the Kid*. Although not published until 1920, the book has some claim to authority on the subject. Siringo writes that he was "personally acquainted with [Billy], and assisted in his capture by furnishing Sheriff Pat Garrett with three of his fighting cowboys."

This book also claims that Billy was an outlaw "whose youthful daring has never been equaled in the annals of criminal history." It repeats the oft-cited myth that Billy "killed 21 men." But it adds, "Indians not included." Why not? The author quotes Billy as saying they "didn't count as human beings." *History* portrays Billy as a horrible racist, though it's difficult to separate his supposed sentiments from the tenor of the times.

## IRISH ROOTS

Other bad actors with Irish roots include James "Whitey" Bulger, the Boston mobster (up to fifty dead in a long career); Emmett Dalton, of the train-robbing family, (see page xx)—he was the only survivor of the famous Coffeyville shootout in 1892; Jack "Legs" Diamond (originally Jack Moran, he was a noted bootlegger during Prohibition who survived a number of attempted hits); Owney "The Killer" Madden (another Prohibition-era New York gangster and onetime proprietor of the Cotton Club); and Charles Dean O'Banion (a rival of Al Capone).

And let's not forget, closer to the time under study, James Kirker, a fur trader born in County Antrim. A noted bigamist, he fought the Apaches for the bounty (\$200 for men, \$50 for women, \$25 for children) and was allegedly responsible for taking the scalps of 500. Much of his bloody work was in Mexico and, before he was declared *persona non grata* there, collaborated with some local thugs to murder 130 law-abiding Apaches in Chihuahua. Kirker Pass in Contra Costa County, California, is named after him. Kirker died in 1852.

Myles Dungan, author of *How the Irish Won the West*, argues that Kirker would today be accused of "genocide or, at the very least, ethnic cleansing." Dungan asserts in his book that it was a man from Dublin who first raised the idea of cannibalism having taken place among the Donner Party, and that South Pass may have been discovered not by the famous American, Jedediah Smith, but rather by his lieutenant Thomas Fitzpatrick (born in County Cavan). Irish accents were definitely heard on the frontier.



Is this Billy the Kid at 18? Probably not, but it does kind of look like him. (Wikipedia)





Frederick Wadsworth Loring was no Billy the Kid. (Wikipedia)

## BILLY IN STORY AND SONG

Billy the Kid is depicted in countless biographies, comic books, movies, and TV shows, with most of them being very inaccurate. He has been depicted on screen by Paul Newman, Kris Kristofferson, World War II hero Audie Murphy, Michael J. Pollard, Val Kilmer, and Emilio Estevez. Jane Russell played his fictional girlfriend in Howard Hughes' 1943 *The Outlaw*. The first Billy the Kid film was made in 1911, and there have been fifty since—most recently, *The Kid* (2019), with Dane DeHaan offering up a very plausible Billy. He's usually portrayed by much older actors.

At least they get it correct with the music, right? Wrong! "Ballad of Billy the Kid" by Billy Joel, on the *Piano Man* album, has an amazing number of inaccuracies (not to mention equine sound effects worthy of Ferde Grofé's "On the Trail"). The

Kid wasn't born in Wheeling, West Virginia, he never robbed a bank (in Colorado or anywhere else), he actually had a sweetheart, and he most definitely didn't always ride alone—he was, on several occasions, a gang member.

Woody Guthrie's "Billy the Kid" (later also recorded by Ry Cooder) calls him "the boy bandit king," and repeats the idea of him killing twenty-one men—the first at twelve. "Sheriff Pat Garrett will make 22," it said. But at least the song doesn't glorify and excuse a vicious outlaw, as Guthrie did with his "Pretty Boy Floyd." Aaron Copland's ballet "Billy the Kid" has our hero turning into an outlaw after his mother is killed by a stray bullet during a gunfight. He stabs the murderer, then—a tragic figure—goes on the lam.

## WHAT WE ACTUALLY KNOW

The evidence suggests that Henry McCarty was born in an Irish neighborhood in Manhattan around 1859. Records on file at Saint Peter's Church, in what is now the Financial District of Manhattan, reflect the baptism of someone by that name, born September 17 as the son of Patrick (or Michael) McCarty and Catherine Devine McCarty, on September 28, 1859. The parents, reportedly refugees from the Irish potato famine, were also married in the church in 1851. McCarty may not have been young Henry's father.

Very little is known about young Henry's early years. He may well have learned Irish along with English, as his neighborhood would have been intensely Irish, with many



George Catlin's painting "Five Points" from 1827 depicts a neighborhood, home to many Irish-Americans, that the *New York Herald* said in 1858 was a "nest of drunkenness, roguery, debauchery, vice, and pestilence." (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Wikipedia Commons)

## BILLY AND JESSE?

Also in dispute is whether, around this time in 1879, Billy the Kid met Jesse James. The claim is made in a 1920s book, *A Frontier Doctor*, by Dr. Henry F. Hoyt, who knew Bonney and worked at the Exchange Hotel in Las Vegas, New Mexico, that year. James claimed to be “Mr. Howard from Tennessee,” and Billy said he was offered a job as a train robber, but declined because it wasn’t his form of criminal endeavor.

A photo supposedly taken in Las Vegas that year is purported to show young Billy with Jesse James and Doc Holliday, but its provenance is weak. The men in the photo are not wearing their six-guns.

In Fort Sumner on January 10, 1880, the Kid got into an altercation in Bob Hargrove’s saloon with a reportedly obnoxious fellow who went by the name of “Texas Red” Joe Grant, who’d been bragging around town that he was tougher than the famous and very much wanted Bonney. After Red reportedly tried to kill him, Bonney dispatched the upstart with a bullet in the face.

This one’s a bit fuzzy, but it is popularly believed to be murder number six. Reports *True West*, “Some scholars debate whether the Grant fight actually took place...[T]he details of the shooting became part of the folklore around Fort Sumner and the ‘facts’ in the case are mighty slim. Still, the fight has the ring of truth to many Billy scholars and is generally accepted as being a bona fide event.”

Fuzziness was Billy’s stock in trade. Also, in 1880, according to Mark Lee Gardner’s *To Hell on a Fast Horse*, he told census taker Lorenzo Labadie that his real name was William Bonney, and that he was twenty-five years old (giving him an 1855 birth date). He also said he was born in Missouri to parents who were also born there. It’s unlikely he was ashamed of his Irish roots; more likely he was trying to cover up his trail of crime.

Pat Garrett was getting more interested in capturing Billy the Kid. The pair knew each other and possibly posed together in a recently unearthed photograph. Accounts differ as to whether they knew each other well, but some say they had been frequent gambling buddies. Garrett became the Lincoln County sheriff in 1880. His first order of business: capturing the Kid, who had a five hundred dollar reward on his head.

The Kid could claim to have been acting out of self-defense, loyalty, or friendship in some of his crimes, but he degenerated into a common horse and cattle thief, working with a gang known as “The Rustlers.” The Kid’s gang again got surrounded by a force led by deputy Will Hudgens, but once again escaped in a melee that cost the life of Jimmy Carlyle, a well-respected figure. The Kid didn’t shoot him, but he got blamed for it.

Now the public really wanted the Kid’s blood, and Garrett was on his trail. This was bad. Michael Ondaatje, in his imagined life of Bonney, has him saying of Pat Garrett, “[He] had the ability to kill someone on the street, walk back and finish a joke.” The sheriff succeeded in making it hot for him, killing one gang member, Tom O’Folliard, and then trapping the gang in an old stone building. After he surrendered, the Kid told the *Las Vegas Gazette* that if they’d continued the siege they’d have eventually starved to death. “I thought it was better to come out and get a good square meal, he said.



Top: Did Billy the Kid play croquet? Apparently so. This photograph (\$2 at a flea market in 2010) was authenticated by National Geographic, and is reported to show the entire Regulators, at the 1878 wedding of one of their number, Charlie Bowdre. (Courtesy Randy Guijarro)

Bottom: The uncropped wedding photograph, showing the Regulators at play. (Courtesy Randy Guijarro)





*Brushy Bill Roberts came forward claiming to be Billy the Kid. Tests were inconclusive, and the governor of New Mexico rejected the claim at Roberts' death in 1950. (Wikipedia)*

## BILLY THE KID MYSTERIES

Given the Kid's notoriety, it's not surprising that claims of his survival into old age would be made. In 1948, a paralegal named William V. Morrison heard that an elderly gentleman named Ollie "Brushy Bill" Roberts in Hico, Texas, claimed to have been William Bonney—and still wanted that official pardon. Morrison met Roberts and filed a petition on his behalf, but Roberts died just a month later.

Another claimant was John Miller, who died in 1937 and is buried in Prescott, Arizona. To help settle these claims, around 2003 there was a groundswell of interest in digging up the Kid's remains and DNA testing them. It didn't happen. The course of action was to test Brushy Bill's body and that of the body in the Kid's New Mexico grave against the remains of Catherine Antrim, the Kid's mother. But all the grave markers in the Fort Sumner cemetery disappeared in a 1904 flood. The whereabouts of the Kid's actual remains, and that of his mother, are unknown.

The only other mystery is that of the photographs. For ages, it was believed that only one image existed. But a second photo, which shows William Bonney, in a distinctive hat, and

his Regulator friends playing croquet after a wedding in New Mexico in 1878, was valued at \$5 million in 2015. It was found in a cardboard box with other photos in a junk shop in Fresno, California, in 2010. Collector Randy Guijarro paid \$2 for it.

The third photo is a tintype of five men in western garb, dug up at a flea market in 2011 by North Carolina lawyer Frank Abrams (who paid \$10 for it). It is believed to have been taken between 1875 and 1880 and shows both Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett. This reinforces the idea that they were gambling friends, known as "Big Casino" and "Little Casino."



*Brushy Roberts' gravesite certainly makes the case that the man was Billy the Kid. (Wikipedia)*