

Topic Page: [Billy, the Kid](#)

Definition: **Billy the Kid (1859–1881)** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US outlaw. A leader in the 1878 Lincoln County cattle war in New Mexico, he allegedly killed his first victim at age 12 and was reputed to have killed 21 men by age 18.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Bonney moved west with his family to Kansas and then New Mexico. He was sentenced to death for murdering a sheriff, but escaped (killing two guards), and was finally shot by Sheriff Pat Garrett while trying to avoid recapture.



Image from: [Billy the Kid \(coloured engraving\)](#) in [Bridgeman Images: Peter Newark American Pictures](#)

Summary Article: **Billy the Kid**

From *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America*

Billy the Kid (1859–81) was born William Henry McCarty. The exact date and place of his birth are not known but are believed to have been sometime in 1859 in New York City, perhaps on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The family's location and living arrangements between 1865 and 1873 also remain unknown. However, in 1873, the family moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Shortly thereafter, the family moved again, this time to Silver City, New Mexico, where, upon his mother's death, McCarty was uprooted and sent to live with a foster family. He worked odd jobs in a butcher shop and a hotel but was soon arrested and jailed for petty theft. Not wanting to be in jail, he orchestrated an escape. He then returned to his foster family, who promptly put him on a train to Arizona, where his stepfather lived. Upon arrival, his stepfather refused to allow McCarty to stay because of his status as a fugitive. With no home and with little money, he was forced to accept a low-paying position as a ranch hand.

Beginnings

McCarty committed his first murder around the age of 16 during a fight at a saloon in Camp Grand, Arizona. The victim, Frank "Windy" Cahill, had bullied McCarty in the past. During this encounter, the older, physically stronger, and more experienced Cahill gained the advantage. However, during the struggle, McCarty was able to reach his gun and mortally shoot Cahill. After this incident, McCarty returned to New Mexico, where he was given the nickname "Kid" because of his young age and youthful appearance. Unable to find work, he soon joined a gang called the Boys. The Boys, operating in Lincoln County, New Mexico, were hired by rancher James Dolan. Dolan was embroiled in a bitter dispute with rival rancher John Tunstall. Eventually, this dispute became known as the Lincoln County War.

The Boys, under Dolan's direction and as a form of harassment, began to steal livestock from the Tunstall ranch. The sheriff arrested some of the gang's members, including Billy the Kid, and jailed them. When Tunstall realized that Billy the Kid was not a hard-core rustler but just a boy, he offered Billy the Kid a choice—if he would testify against the other rustlers, Tunstall would hire him to work on his ranch. Billy the Kid gladly accepted. Hopeful for a better future, Billy the Kid changed his name to William H. Bonney. His employment, however, did not last long, since Tunstall was soon murdered by members of the Boys.

An Outlaw

To avenge Tunstall's murder, Bonney and other Tunstall ranch hands banded together, creating the Regulators. Initially, the Regulators sought to use the law to their advantage but soon found it impossible to work through the existing court system. Increasingly, they took matters into their own hands, seeking vigilante justice. Eventually, they killed Bill Morton (leader of the group that had killed Tunstall), Frank Baker, and William McCloskey (a Regulator suspected of working for both sides). They also killed the sheriff and his deputy. These murders resulted in arrest warrants being issued for members of the Regulators.

Once warrants were issued, Dolan intensified his efforts to eliminate the Regulators. Soon, Dolan and his men surrounded a known Regulator hideout, trapping numerous members inside. The siege lasted for five days before Dolan ordered the house to be burned. Once the house was ablaze, Bonney took charge and had the men form two groups so that an escape could be attempted. As Bonney and the other members of the Regulators emerged, four were shot and killed. Their deaths effectively broke up the Regulators and ended the war. Once the Regulators disbanded, Billy the Kid was a fugitive on the run once again.



The only known photograph of Billy the Kid is this tintype taken around 1879 or 1880 in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, not long before the outlaw's death there on July 14, 1881.

Eventually, when Bonney learned that a new governor had assumed office in New Mexico, he sought a pardon on his murder charges. In exchange, he offered to testify against Dolan, his ranch hands, and the Boys. The governor agreed. Bonney soon surrendered himself to the proper officials and testified; yet his testimony had little effect—each person who was tried was acquitted. Since Bonney was already in custody, prosecuting attorney William Rynerson put him on trial for murder, effectively making it impossible for the governor to follow through with his promise to issue a pardon. Not trusting the authorities or the court system, Bonney again escaped custody.

Over the next two years, Bonney spent most of his time in and near Fort Sumner, New Mexico. During this time, Pat Garrett was elected sheriff of Lincoln County and accepted the task of bringing Billy the Kid to justice. Garrett was familiar with Bonney's usual hideouts and arrested him on December 23, 1880, in Stinking Springs, New Mexico. Bonney was put on trial for murder, found guilty, and sentenced to hang. After sentencing, Bonney was transported to Lincoln County to await execution. On April 28, 1881, he escaped custody yet again, killing two jail guards in the process. He then left Lincoln County and headed to Fort Sumner. Accounts of what happened next vary greatly and are difficult to confirm. Yet most accounts agree that Garrett, while searching for Bonney on July 14, 1881, stopped to ask a citizen of Fort Sumner about Bonney's whereabouts. At just that moment an unaware Bonney approached. Garrett recognized Bonney and fatally shot him in the chest. Other accounts tell of Garrett waiting in ambush style, killing Bonney as he entered a darkened room. Billy the Kid is buried at the Fort Sumner cemetery.

See Also: Arizona; Frontier Crime; History of Crime and Punishment in America: 1850–1900; New Mexico; Posses; Rural Police; Sheriffs.

Further Readings

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Caroline Forsythe
Curtis R. Blakely
Truman State University

APA


Chicago

Harvard

MLA

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