

Born of Irish immigrants in New York City, Henry McCarty, age 14, ends up in Silver City, N.M. Both he and a younger brother were left fending for themselves when their mother died of “consumption.” Now working for a local hotel, Henry’s first encounter with the law involves the theft of several pounds of butter. A local sheriff takes pity on the ragged youth and simply gives him a “good talking to.” Apparently, this is ineffective. Shortly thereafter Henry is charged, along with an accomplice named Sombrero Jack, with stealing clothes from a nearby Chinese laundry. (Why was he called Sombrero Jack? You can figure this one out yourself.) This time Henry is arrested and jailed. The sheriff still has some sympathy for the young boy and locks him up in the hallway of the local jail. A skinny kid, who some describe as “girl-ish,” Henry escapes by crawling up the inside of the chimney. There is no record of whatever happens to Sombrero Jack.

Later, a local bully named Windy Bill takes great pleasure in insulting and slapping around young Henry. On one occasion, while being beaten, he wrestles away Windy Bill’s revolver and promptly ends the one-sided altercation. An obvious case of self-defense, Henry does not wait around to face charges. This is the first documented homicide attributed to Henry McCarty, also known as William H. Bonney, and later called “the Kid.” Billy the Kid. There will be many more.

The Kid is a dancing fool. In fact, before his future executioner becomes Lincoln County sheriff, Billy dances at Pat Garrett’s wedding. The two know each other, but are not friends. Billy’s favorite song? “Turkey in the Straw.” As somewhat of an omen of things to come, Pat’s teenage Hispanic bride collapses during the festivities and dies a short time later. (Not easily discouraged, Pat Garrett marries another teenage Mexican girl after a brief mourning period. This next marriage is more successful—resulting in eight children.) Billy can also sing, speaks fluent Spanish...and does not drink.

Women, especially Hispanic women, love the young Billy. At five feet seven inches tall and 130 pounds he has buck teeth and piercing Irish blue eyes. Older women want to “mother” him. Possessing an upbeat person-

Billy the Kid

Henry McCarty’s short and violent life.

By Bill Jones



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ality and a certain zest for life, most people like him. At least the ones he does not eventually kill. During his short life he acquires many loyal friends. Younger women are seemingly mesmerized by his effervescent charm and “bad boy” reputation. It is rumored he fathers several children by some local teenage girls. His descendants, no doubt, roam southern New Mexico to this day.

While working for a nearby ranch, the Kid develops into an expert horseman and excel-

lent pistol and rifle shot. Riding a horse at a dead run he can snatch a handkerchief off the ground. A revolver in both hands, he can twirl them both at the same time—in opposite directions. In the style of an Apache warrior, he can expertly fire a weapon from beneath a running horse. When not stealing horses, cattle or dealing three-card monte in a local saloon, Billy spends hours perfecting his marksmanship skills with both revolver and Winchester rifle.

During the infamous Lincoln County War approximately 200 people are murdered. This “range war,” like all wars, is about land, money, power, greed...and revenge. The Kid chooses sides early as a member of a group called “the regulators.” The county sheriff at the time chooses the opposing and more powerful side—the one with considerably more money. The sheriff, along with a deputy, is killed during the dispute and Billy is later charged. Newly elected Sheriff Pat Garrett is tasked with bringing him to justice. Billy only surrenders—after an extended and classic several days’ long gun battle—when his dead horse blocks the getaway door of the cabin. He is found guilty of murder in a court of law. The judge at the trial sentences the Kid to “hang by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead.”

Billy’s response? “Judge, you can go straight to hell, hell, hell!”

There is considerably more to the story. Billy escapes prior to his execution date and kills two of Pat Garrett’s deputies in the process—despite Garrett’s warning to “watch him close as he will kill you at his first opportunity.” Described as ruthless and totally without fear, Billy’s bold and daring jail escape is the stuff of legends....

Pat Garrett kills Billy at his own “first opportunity.” As Billy hides out on a mutual friend’s ranch, Garrett shoots Billy in the heart from the safety of a darkly lit bedroom without even identifying himself. Billy—the “Kid”—is 21 years old. ■

Bill Jones, a regular RANGE contributor, has always been fascinated with the history of the settling of the American West. “Truth,” he maintains, “is far more intriguing than any fiction. You simply cannot make this stuff up.”