



Billy the Kid | Biography, Death, & Facts

Billy the Kid Summary

Billy the Kid was a notorious criminal of the **American Wild West**, but his legend often overshadows the complexities of his brief life. When wrapped in the confines of history, a life of crime may seem fashionable, but beyond the glamour, drama, and theatrics of macho tales, there is a sea of despair, vulnerability, and desperation. Billy the Kid was no exception to this rule.

Billy the Kid was not seduced by the allure of the criminal lifestyle but was forced into it by his immediate environment and the events surrounding his innocent childhood. It can be said that crime was chosen for him, not the other way around. Born from a tragedy, he soon became its harbinger. Billy the Kid is symbolic of the [history](#) of the American Wild West: a charming, complicated, misunderstood tale that often forgoes ground realities for a simplified yarn. Marred by stereotypical images of John Wayne waving his gun or Clint Eastwood's silent mannerisms, the weaving narrative of human life is reduced to an anecdote. Here, we will attempt to reject this mythological premise and opt for a grounded perspective.



Billy the Kid, a gunfighter of the American Old West



Born:	23 Nov 1859 New York, U.S
Died:	14 July 1881 (aged 21) Fort Sumner, New Mexico Territory
Death	Death Reason: Gunshot Wound
Also Known as:	William H. Bonney, Henry McCarty, Brushy Bill

Who was Billy the Kid

Billy the kid childhood the teenager who went on to become one of the most iconic criminals in [American history](#) had very humble beginnings. He grew up in dismal poverty in the bleak slums of **New York City**. Born in an **Irish family**, he was no stranger to social challenges since New York looked down on Irish immigrants in the 1860s and 70s.

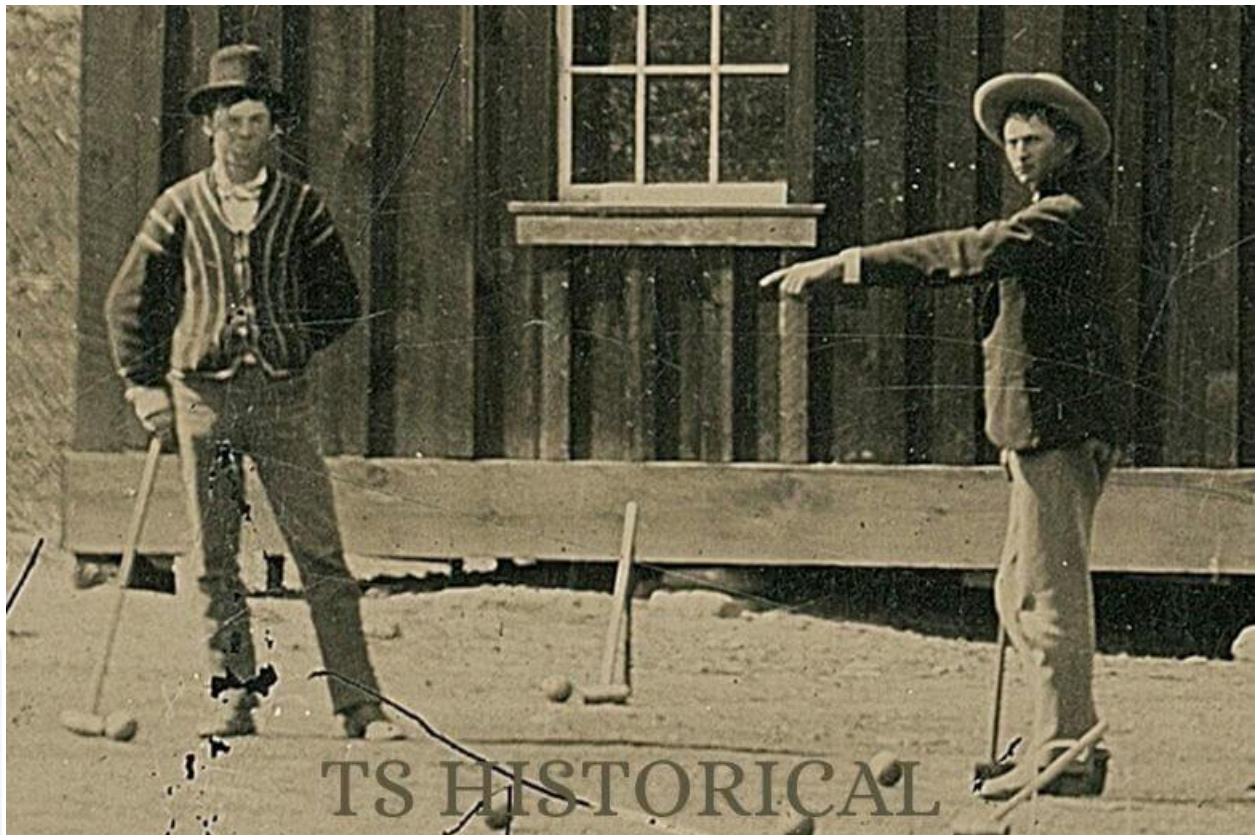
At the time, the living conditions in the slums of New York were almost inhumane: crammed families, piles of filth, and no access to sanitation. As an oppressed minority at the time, it is not surprising that many Irish immigrants turned to criminal activities. He was born **Henry McCarthy** in 1859, and his brother, **Joseph**, was born in 1963. From this point onward, calamities would take refuge in **Henry's life**. In the 1860s, his father **Patrick McCarty** died or left the family – sources differ.

In the 1860s, his father **Patrick McCarthy** died or left the family – sources differ. His mother up and left New York with her two boys and headed to Indianapolis. After meeting a gentleman named William Henry Harrison Antrim, his mother, Catherine, left Indianapolis and arrived in Kansas, a city ravaged by the [American Civil War](#).



Henry and Joseph settled in with their mother and William in Wichita, Kansas. Henry, the future gunslinger, was a good, quiet, and courteous student who loved to read.

The two siblings would play “**Cops and Robbers**” and “**Cowboys and Indians**” in the afternoons with boys from all over town. Little did Henry know that the game would soon bleed into his real life in the most shocking way. When Henry was 14 years old, a doctor diagnosed Catherine with tuberculosis.



Knowing that she had little time left to live, she heeded the doctor’s advice and moved her family south. Getting away from the winters may have prolonged her life, but it also uprooted the lives of her children, who were used to the quiet and pleasant comforts of



Wichita. After arriving in Santa Fe, New Mexico, William, and Catherine decided to get married. As his mother's health dwindled every day, Henry had a lot on his mind.

How did Henry McCarty get the name Billy the kid



Childhood Photo of Billy the Kid

The thought of William as his stepfather did not help matters either. Shortly afterward, the family moved to Silver City. As the name suggests, the city witnessed a boom after silver had been discovered in the nearby landscape. The city did not have much in the way of buildings or infrastructure, and this is where the defining moments of Henry's life would occur.

When Catherine died, William left the boys and went away. In the squalor of the lawless city, the two boys were helpless; Silver City was no place for a couple of orphans. Nevertheless, at different points in their early teenage years, some families took the orphans in, but Henry never managed to stay with one family for very long. Having grown up enough to earn a wage, Henry started working in a hotel.



One day, Billy the Kid was left alone with several pounds of butter. He knew it was fairly expensive and decided to capitalize on the opportunity. He stole the butter, which – ironically – sent him down a very slippery slope. Having stolen the butter, Henry was caught, and the locals called the sheriff to handle the situation. The sheriff could not bring himself to punish the boy, letting him go with only a stern warning. In the years living in Silver City, Henry had befriended a man named Sombrero Jack.

Jack was a thief and might have seen the boy as an easy mark. One day in 1875, Jack called upon the teenager for help. He had robbed a laundry place and wanted a place to hide the things. Henry took the clothes and hid them. Unfortunately, he was caught with the clothes, prompting another run-in with the sheriff. The sheriff was still affectionate towards the boy, but he could not let a criminal roam free. So, he kept the boy in the hallway of the jail cells – keeping him away from hard-and-fast criminals in the process.

The sheriff might have taken a liking to the boy, but the opposite was not true. Henry viewed the sheriff as a threat to his freedom. Still, he remained courteous with the sheriff, as he did with everyone at that point in his life. After two days in captivity, he was fed up. He was a nimble and agile boy and was often ridiculed for his skinny frame.

So, he climbed into the fireplace, shimmied up the chimney, and reached the jailhouse roof. As soon as he jumped on the ground outside the jailhouse, his life changed. He had been bullied, abused, refrained, and overworked, but now his agility had overpowered the devious tactics of his oppressors. He had finally come into his own – he may have a boy, but he was starting to think like a man. By escaping captivity, he earned the nickname “**the Kid**,” a moniker that would follow him for the rest of his short life.

Billy the Kid in New Mexico

Instead of being the teacher’s pet, who liked to read, he was now a hardened, toughened boy who was willing to please his urges at the behest of others and with no regard for the consequences. Now, he headed southeast, deeper into the territory of Arizona. He was fifteen or sixteen at the time and fell under the wing of Henry Hooker. Hooker was a businessman and an upstanding citizen of the community.



He even knew the most famous lawman in the lore of the Old West: Wyatt Earp. Here, Henry started to steal horses from a nearby army camp with some other friends around the ranch. Stealing horses was not an easy task, but Henry took to it well. One fateful day, he drew his gun after being attacked by a blacksmith in a bar – this was the first time he spilled blood.

The arrest orders showed that the Kid had committed murder and would be hanged for it. He panicked because escaping from the area was not easy. Still, one night, when the jail personnel had gone off to attend a dance, the Kid escaped again. Nobody knows how he managed to pull this off, but when the locals returned from the dance, the shackles were gone, and the cell was empty! He had taken a horse and headed back to **Silver City**.

The Apache roamed this region, and it was known to be incredibly dangerous to traverse the area without the army's backing. The Indians caught up with him, threw him to the ground, stole his horse, and left him lying in the desert. Amazingly, the Kid dragged himself to Dona Ana County, **New Mexico**, where he met an old friend – another outlaw named John Jones – whose mother nursed him back to health. Still, He was on the run and could not stay in one place for too long, so he left and ended up in the town of Apache Tejo in Lincoln County. By this time, he had accepted that a simple life was not for him. In **Lincoln County**, he fell back into the habit of stealing horses with some accomplices.



John Tunstall



Billy the Kid had grown in notoriety since his adventures in Mexico City and Arizona. He quickly impressed his new friends, and his fame continued to grow. He stopped using his original name because it was dangerous – even Kid Antrim would not do. So, he decided to use his stepfather's name – and his mother's maiden name (Bonney) as his new moniker: William Henry Bonney.

In 1877, Billy the Kid stole some horses from John Henry Tunstall, a wealthy English businessman, and rancher. Tunstall had Billy the Kid arrested and charged with theft; however, as a young bachelor himself, he understood the glint in the teenager's eyes. He was won over by the boy's charm and decided to hire him as a cowboy and a gunman on the ranch he and his lawyer, Alexander McSween, owned.

Billy the Kid worked at the ranch for the entire winter. He had begun settling into a routine at Tunstall's ranch, but his dream of a simple life would be shattered in the coming days. A local group of three Irish Americans (Murphy, Dolan, and Riley) were monopolizing the cattle industry in the area. They wanted to run the Englishman out of



business – and out of the territory. Since McSween owed Dolan a debt of \$8,000, the three men persuaded the local sheriff, William Brady, to seize Tunstall's land and cattle as payment – but Tunstall discovered the plan.

Sheriff Brady knew Tunstall wouldn't let his ranch go without a fight, so he sent a posse formed from known outlaws. When they arrived, John Henry rode out to meet them and, during a brief scuffle, was shot in the chest and head. Thus began the Lincoln County Wars. Deeply bereaved, the Kid went looking for retribution. Sheriff Brady's posse of outlaws was a great concern for the local justice of the peace, John Wilson, who deputized the Kid and others, calling this new group "**The Regulators.**" Wilson sent his new group after Sheriff Brady and his outlaw posse. Billy the Kid wasn't as interested in the Regulators' other agendas; he was focused on finding Tunstall's killers and bringing them to justice – and he did so, in his own style.

In early March of 1878, Henry and a few other Regulators located and attempted to capture Frank Banker and William Morton – both accused of murdering Tunstall. As the story goes, both men were killed as they were trying to escape. A few weeks later, on April 1, 1878, the Regulators ambushed and killed Sheriff Brady and his deputy Sheriff, George Hindman. Four days later, the Kid and his group killed two more members of the outlaw posse, and He was wounded in the leg. Participants on both sides were charged with murder, including Henry, who was accused of killing Brady and Hindman.

Aware they must run, McSween and the Regulators left for Lincoln, New Mexico, stationing themselves in McSween's home and nearby buildings; they knew they were being hunted by a new lawman: George Peppin. Surrounded by sharpshooters, the Regulators fought bravely, but many were killed, including McSween. Peppin's group set fire to McSween's home to smoke out the remaining Regulators, and He escaped – but not before shooting and killing McSween's murderer, Robert Beckwith. With warrants issued for his arrest, He did what he had been doing all his life: he ran.

Alongside him were three other Regulators. Within a few weeks, the group ended up near Mescalero, where a bookkeeper for the Mescalero Indian Agency was killed. Despite conflicting evidence that Constable Atanacio Martinez murdered the bookkeeper, Henry and his Regulators were indicted. Later, all indictments were quashed – except for Billy's. Later in 1879, Territorial Governor, Lew Wallace,



proclaimed amnesty to all participants of the Lincoln County Wars, except for those who had been convicted of – or indicted – for a crime.

Billy the Kid Death



Billy the Kid Death

This excluded Billy the Kid from amnesty. Just a few months in February of 1879, he and a friend, **Tom**, were forced at gunpoint by Jesse Evans to watch as an attorney, **Huston Chapman**, was shot and burned. Witnesses even testified that he and his friend were only **bystanders**, but he was –once again –again on the run. In March, he wrote Governor Wallace, claiming his innocence in the Chapman murder and his willingness to provide information about it in exchange for amnesty.

The governor agreed. A meeting was set up, promises were made, and Henry did testify, but those promises were broken when the local district attorney refused to set him free and instead put him in jail. Three months later, He escaped again and ran to Fort Sumner.

He was still only 21 – and have gotten accustomed to a life of crime, he killed a man in a bar scuffle and was caught by the law. After being moved to a jail in Santa Fe, he faced trial for the murder of **Sheriff Brady** and the other Lincoln Wars victims, where he was found guilty and sentenced to hang on May 13th, 1881. After the hearing, he was



moved back to Lincoln, where he escaped once again, killing two deputies in the process. Bounties were placed on the Kid's head.

Billy the Kid had returned to Fort Sumner, where he was staying with his friend, Pete Maxwell. Sheriff Pat Garrett heard of Billy's whereabouts and tracked him there. On July 14, 1881, Garrett met with Maxwell at his home to discuss capturing the Kid. Apparently, He entered unexpectedly around midnight, Garrett shot him in the chest, and he was not actually killed, but **Pat Garrett** – out of friendship – concocted the story so he could go free. Many men have since claimed to be William Bonney; two have been of particular interest. Texas's Ollie P. Roberts made his claim, asking New Mexico's governor to pardon him.

The governor dismissed his claim, and **Roberts died** shortly afterward. The other man of interest, John Miller, hailed from Arizona. His family didn't support his claims, but in May of 2005, his bones were exhumed (without the state's permission), and DNA samples were sent to a Dallas lab – but proved nothing conclusive. In 2010, New Mexico's governor, Bill Richardson, refused to pardon Billy the Kid posthumously for Sheriff Brady's murder. Thus, over 1300 years after his "death," **William Bonney's** story continues.

People Also Ask?

Why is Billy the Kid so famous?

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Why do they call him Billy the Kid?



He had finally come into his own – he may have a boy, but he was starting to think like a man. By escaping captivity, he earned the nickname “**the Kid**,” a moniker that would follow him for the rest of his short life.

Who shot Billy the Kid?

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