

Understanding Billy the Kid:  
An in-depth look at the famous outlaw

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Henry McCarty, more commonly known by his outlaw name, Billy the Kid, was an outlaw and a fugitive. He grew in infamy for his crimes and his ability to evade the law. He allegedly escaped from jail on multiple occasions and killed several men, including Lincoln County Sheriff William Brady.<sup>1</sup> However, Billy the Kid is touted as both a hero and a villain because, while his crimes were numerous, they were thought by some to be justified.

Billy the Kid, also referred to as William H. Bonney, was born on September 17, 1859, in New York City. Shortly after McCarty's mother married William Henry Harrison Antrim, the family relocated to Silver City, New Mexico.<sup>2</sup> After the passing of his mother, McCarty found work at a boardinghouse. After a year under this arrangement, he left, and it was then that Billy the Kid began his criminal ways. He was arrested for stealing clothing and guns but escaped two days later.

After his first escape from prison, McCarty fled to Arizona Territory. In 1877, McCarty shot Francis "Windy" Cahill after a heated argument.<sup>3</sup> Cahill was known to speak in a demeaning manner to McCarty, and on this particular day, a fight ensued. In the midst of the brawl, McCarty and Cahill struggled for Cahill's gun, which went off in Cahill's direction. McCarty was again arrested for his crimes. He escaped imprisonment, stole a horse, and fled.

McCarty then found work with John Tunstall as a cowboy. Tunstall and a local lawyer, Alexander McSween, opposed the economic and political power held over Lincoln County by a trio of firearm-wielding businessmen. This began the Lincoln County War. McCarty joined the

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<sup>1</sup> "Billy the Kid born," *History*, accessed April 25, 2019. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/billy-the-kid-born>.

<sup>2</sup> Marcelle Brothers, "Summary of the Life of Billy the Kid," *About Billy the Kid*, last modified October 13 2015, <http://www.aboutbillythekid.com/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> John LeMay, *Tall Tales & Half Truths of Billy the Kid* (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing & The History Press, 2015).

Lincoln County Regulators, a posse that banded together during the Lincoln County War to disband the trio of businessmen and avenge the murder of John Tunstall. The Regulators were indicted for the murder of Morris Bernstein, making them outlaws.

McCarty, or Billy the Kid, was finally caught and subsequently killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett, a man with a few stories of his own.<sup>4</sup> Garrett found McCarty attempting to flee and shot him. Billy the Kid is a legend known by many, but few actually know the true story. He is most often villainized for his crimes and his ability to elude punishment for those crimes, but the few who have studied and know his history consider him to be a hero in disguise.

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<sup>4</sup> John LeMay, *Tall Tales & Half Truths of Pat Garrett* (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing & The History Press, 2015).

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