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NMSU Library's Special Collections Holds a Treasure-Trove of Information About Billy the Kid

by Cheryl Wilson, Special Collections Librarian, NMSU Library

Billy the Kid may be considered a saint, a sinner, a folk hero, or a vengeful killer, but certainly he is New Mexico's most famous outlaw. Thousands of words have been written about him since his name first appeared in dime novels and the *Police Gazette* in 1881. Periodical articles and books, both popular and scholarly, that tell about Billy's life and death number in the hundreds. The New Mexico State University (NMSU) Library's Billy the Kid Collection, housed in Special Collections, includes several hundred items for those interested in learning more about the Kid.

Anyone doing research on the Kid will want to consult Jeff Dykes' classic *Billy the Kid, the Bibliography of a Legend*, published in 1952. Dykes identified numerous periodical articles about the Kid, including several published in the *Police Gazette* immediately following the Kid's death on July 14, 1881. One scholarly study Dykes referenced is a 1951 article in *Western Folklore* that studied the processes by which Billy became a folk hero. Articles continue to be published about the Kid in both popular and scholarly periodicals, including *True West*, *Smithsonian*, and *New Mexico Historical Review*.

Many poems and songs have been written about Billy the Kid, including N. Howard Thorp's own ballad, "Billy the Kid or William H. Bonney," which gives highlights of the Kid's career in verse. The ballad appeared in Thorp's *Song of the Cowboys*, published in 1921. Another ballad, "The Ballad of Billy the Kid" was published in *Songs of the Lost Frontier*, by Henry Herbert Knibbs. The closing stanza of this ballad reads:

"Each year of his life was a notch in his gun,
For in twenty-one years he had slain twenty-one.
His grave is unmarked and by desert sands hid,
And so ends the true story of Billy the Kid."

One of the treasures in the NMSU Library's Billy the Kid Collection is a first printing of *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid, the Noted Desperado of the Southwest, Whose Deeds of Daring and Blood Made His Name a Terror in New Mexico, Arizona and Northern Mexico* by Pat F. Garrett. While the book is credited to Sheriff Garrett, it is believed that Ash Upson, a pioneer New Mexico newspaperman, wrote the volume based on the story told by Garrett. The book, first published in 1882, was reprinted this year by the University of Oklahoma Press with notes and commentary by Frederick Nolan.

Another treasure in the collection is an original copy of *The True Life of Billy the Kid*, a dime novel that was on newsstands about six weeks after the Kid's death. Much of the story is based on newspaper accounts of the Kid's death and Billy was depicted as a cold-blooded killer. Frank Tousey published the dime novel on August 28, 1881, and issued it as number 451 in "The Five Cent Wide Awake Library" series. It was reprinted in 1945 as a Dime Novel Club facsimile reprint.



A number of movies have been made about the Kid, including the famous 1941 feature "Billy the Kid," starring Robert Taylor. A copy of this movie script is in the Billy the Kid Collection. Three other movie scripts in the collection are "Billy the Kid's Roundup," "The Law vs. Billy the Kid," and "The Kid." Buster Crabbe starred in several Billy the Kid movies including "Billy the Kid's Roundup" which was released in December 1941. The screenplay and screen story for "The Law vs. Billy the Kid" (Columbia, 1954) was credited to John T. Williams. However, the Writers' Guild of America officially corrected the writing credit for the movie when it released corrections for 23 films written or co-written by individuals who were "blacklisted" during the McCarthy era, starting in 1947 and into the 1960s. Bernard Gordon was the writer, and Williams acknowledged that he fronted for Gordon. Gore Vidal wrote the script for the 1989 made-for-television movie, "The Kid," starring Val Kilmer as Billy.

The Kid is the subject of numerous books, both fact and fiction. Noted historians Ramon Adams, Robert Utley, Paul Andrew Hutton and Philip Rasch have written books about Billy. The Kid is a character in fictional works by N. Scott Momaday, Edwin Corle, Michael Ondaatje, and Larry McMurtry. Walter Noble Burns' classic *The Saga of Billy the Kid* was first published in 1926 and has been reprinted several times, most recently in 1999. Jon Tuska has written a bio-bibliography, a handbook and a book about Billy's life and legend. *The Billy the Kid Cook: a Fanciful Look at the Recipes and Folklore from Billy the Kid Country* by Lynn Nusom includes a recipe for a "Billy Burger."

Several writers have written books that focus only on the Kid's death. Harold Edwards' book *Goodbye Billy the Kid* includes many newspaper articles about Billy's demise. Besides newspapers in the New

Mexico Territory, many others, including the New York Times, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune and San Francisco Chronicle all published stories about the Kid's death. The only fact many of the articles had in common was that the Kid had been shot dead by Sheriff Pat Garrett. Many of the papers referred to the Kid's real name as McCarthy. Billy's real name was William McCarty.

The collection includes many books that have a wealth of Billy the Kid trivia. *The Billy the Kid Quiz* written by Allen Barker in 1986 features questions and answers. One of the quiz questions is "Billy the Kid was twenty-one years old when killed. He is known to have killed at least ___ men. a) twenty-one; b) eighteen; c) twelve; d) four." The correct answer is d. Billy's documented victims are Frank (Windy) Cahill, Joe Grant, J.W. Bell, and Bob Olinger.

Keeping the legend alive, The Billy the Kid Outlaw Gang publishes a newsletter to preserve, protect and promote Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett. In addition to print sources, the World Wide Web offers anyone the opportunity to open thousands of web pages either focusing on or including information about the Kid. The possibilities for finding out more about Billy the Kid are enormous.

As the number of books and articles written about the Kid grows larger every day, Special Collections continues to collect materials for the Library's non-circulating Billy the Kid Collection. Anyone wishing to know more about the collection is welcome to call 646-6122 or to visit Special Collections on the second floor of NMSU's Branson Library. The Library is open to the public, and Special Collections hours are: 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

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