

Reader Publishing Group

Let There Be Books

Outlaws and Aliens – Stories of the American West

By Ken Cable

It came to pass in late September a few years ago that my wife Dorothy and I set out on a drive around the Southwest. Our route took us first to Dallas, Texas, then to Ruidoso Downs, New Mexico and finally Bullhead City, Arizona. This narrative begins as we left Roswell, New Mexico, westward along Highway 380 toward the little mountain town of Ruidoso Downs.

No one knows how he got the gun in his cell.

Before I tell you about our New Mexico destination, a word about Roswell. In 1947, an alien spacecraft that had been zipping around planet earth developed engine trouble over Roswell and crashed on a ranch outside of town. The rancher, as well as other locals, and eventually the military, rushed to the crash site to discover several dead ‘aliens’ in the debris. The military issued a press release announcing to the world that an alien space craft had crashed near Roswell and before they could retract that statement and call it a weather balloon, the world was agog.

Once or twice each year (maybe more often than that) the History Channel and others, run stories about the search for UFOs. Roswell is always central to the story.

You CANNOT overlook the alien issue when visiting, or just passing through Roswell, New Mexico. It is not allowed. Oh, it isn’t that city fathers and mothers stand at intersections and pass out alien crash flyers – they don’t need to. There are enough signs, billboards, a museum and other UFO stuff to attract your attention to the world’s most famous alien encounter site. What do *I* believe? Well, I witnessed a spacecraft land in a remote desert in California – and have listened to their occupants talk. So, maybe...



What is not in dispute is that he used it to escape from jail where he was waiting to be hanged for murder.

I digress. U.S. 380 stretches west from Roswell toward Ruidoso Downs, New Mexico. At the little settlement of Hondo it bifurcates and the left fork becomes solely Highway 70 leading to our destination. Highway 380 continues northwest toward Lincoln. Along Hwy 70, the landscape rolls by serrating into gulches, gullies and canyons as it gently climbs to the highlands that embrace the twin towns of Ruidoso and Ruidoso Downs.

During his escape he killed two deputies with the smuggled gun.

Ruidoso Downs was so named for its proximity to Ruidoso – and because it is the home of perhaps the largest race track in the Southwest. The track, opened in 1947, features world-class thoroughbred and quarter horse races. The track season at Ruidoso Downs extends from Memorial Day to Labor Day and is a favorite destination for “Sport of Kings” fans from all over the Southwest. It is also near the center of the infamous Lincoln County War in 1878 that starred merchants, cattlemen and a number of gun hands. In this war for the economic dominance of that part of New Mexico, nineteen people died in gun battles between factions.

He was killed by the Sheriff of Lincoln County just a few months after escaping the Lincoln County Courthouse jail.

When we were kids my friends and I would ride our stick horses over the prairies of our imaginations chasing bad guys and Indians at a full gallop. We believed there really was a Lone Ranger in the Old West and that Red Ryder rode Thunder into Pagosa Springs everyday with Little Beaver close behind on Papoose. We knew who Jesse James and Wyatt Earp were... and, of course, everybody knew about maybe the most notorious outlaw of all, Billy the Kid.

William H. Bonney, also known as Billy the Kid, is probably the most famous outlaw chronicled in the annals of the Old West. From dozens of writers and film makers mixing fact and fiction, Billy the Kid emerges as everything from a misanthropic murderer to a star crossed victim of circumstance, i.e. he didn't really want to rustle all those cattle and kill all those people, both of which he did fairly frequently in his 22 or 23 years above ground. Of his notoriety, no other character out of our Wild West culture has starred in so many Hollywood films. Fifty-one movies were made based on the real and imagined exploits of this infamous young outlaw, not to mention his roles in countless plays, songs, books and poems.

There was nothing poetic about his death at 23 years of age. After killing the two deputies during his escape from jail in Lincoln in April, 1881, Billy continued to evade capture. Then one evening in July he visited a girlfriend in nearby Fort Sumner where he was ambushed and killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett. To many, the “bushwacking” of Billy in a darkened bedroom left a stain on the reputation of Sheriff Garrett, a smudge that remains to this day.

Billy the Kid is buried inside a fenced plot in Fort Sumner, New Mexico – or is he?

Over the years there have been a number of characters who claimed that Billy the Kid did not die in that bedroom, and some of them even claimed to be the famous outlaw gone into hiding. Few believed these stories and historians remain confident that the bones in the grave in Fort Sumner are indeed those of the Kid.



Billy the Kid is a much larger character in death than he was in life. In Lincoln County, his gravesite may well be the number one tourist attraction in New Mexico. The towns of Lincoln, Fort Sumner, Fort Stanton and the Ruidoso twins have embraced this legend in many ways. The Ruidoso Downs race track boasts a Billy the Kid Casino. Nearby is the Billy the Kid Visitor Center, and a fairly new reminder to travelers entering Billy the Kid country is a series of signs along Highway 70 leading into town proclaiming it is now the Billy the Kid Byway.

Today, this famous boy-bandit is ‘giving back’ to New Mexico in ways he never could have imagined. His star status as a Wild West bad man is well-established and those things that are myth mingle well with his reality creating a long-lasting presence in American folklore. And now, in addition to a namesake casino and visitor center he has his own Byway. Not bad for a kid whose main claim to fame in history are the bodies he left in his wake.

The spacecraft I saw land in the desert? It was NASA’s space shuttle and the space travelers occupying it were interviewed extensively on television. This happens every now-and-then.

