

City Business
“Why Billy the Kid and Hico?”
by Michael Leamons

The short answer is tourism. For those with historical curiosity, Billy the Kid dying as a 90 year old man in Hico, Texas is a good drawing card. Businesses are suffering across the country, and Hico is no exception. Focusing attention on Billy the Kid/ “Brushy Bill” Roberts connection should bring more visitors to Hico. Those visitors might buy a gift or souvenir, refuel their vehicles, eat a meal or possibly even seek lodging while here. Sales keep our merchants in business, provide jobs for their employees and bring revenue into city and county coffers.

Being new to Hico and as a 6th generation Texan with blood ties to John Chisum of New Mexico fame, I’m interested in the historical aspects of Brushy Bill’s claims. This past week, I read Billy the Kid: “Killed” in New Mexico---Died in Texas by Dr. Jannay Valdez and Judge Bobby Hefner and The Return of the Outlaw Billy the Kid by W.C. Jameson (source of the quotes cited herein unless otherwise noted). For those unfamiliar with the claims and not having access to the above books, the following websites offer abbreviated accounts of the matter at hand:

<http://www.angelfire.com/mi2/billythekid/brushy.html>

<http://www.musicplay.com/Brushy/Story.html>

Brushy Bill’s claims weren’t publicized until the last year and a half of his life, only after Attorney William V. Morrison, while working in Florida, met an elderly gentleman claiming to have been a participant in the Lincoln County War. The gentleman piqued Morrison’s curiosity when he asserted Garrett didn’t kill Billy the Kid, and that the Kid was living in Texas. The old man wouldn’t reveal the name or whereabouts of the Kid or of another Lincoln County War participant he claimed was living in California.

Morrison eventually tracked down Brushy Bill, who initially denied being the Kid, but later owned up to the claim. As Jameson related, “Sobbing, he told Morrison of a life of running and hiding and constantly in fear of being recognized by longtime enemies and gunned down or arrested. When he finished, he wiped the tears from his face, and looked up at Morrison, and asked him if he could help clear his name.”

Let’s cut to the chase. Why should anyone believe Brushy Bill’s claim?

1. In the Old West, dead outlaws were to lawmen what trophy bucks are to hunting enthusiasts. Photos of the prize kill were the order of the day. There aren’t any photos of a dead Billy the Kid. None whatsoever! Previously, in his zeal to take out Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett had killed the wrong man. On Dec. 19, 1880 amidst snow and darkness, Garrett and company ambushed and killed Tom O’Folliard; two days later, the same gang thinking they had Billy, in the dark shot and killed Charlie Bowdre. On the night of July 14, 1881 according to Brushy, Garrett once again employed his “shoot first and ask questions later” tactic. Again, from an ambush in the dark, Pat Garrett, thinking he was about to rid the world of Billy the Kid, instead is alleged to have gunned down an unarmed Billy Barlow. An area newspaper reporter described the body of Garrett’s victim as being dark skinned and having a beard. A year and a half before, another reporter had described Billy as looking like “...a mere boy...with...silky fuzz on his upper lip; clear blue eyes...(having) light hair and complexion.”

2. A number of people personally acquainted with Billy provided sworn affidavits affirming Brushy Bill was indeed the Kid. Mrs. Martile Able, widow of John C. Able, "...swore that she and her husband both knew Billy the Kid (as William Bonney) very well **before and after** he was supposedly killed by Pat Garrett...She stated Billy the Kid visited with them at their home after July 14, 1881---they didn't see him again until 1902...She swore that it was generally known among friends that Billy the Kid was not killed by Pat Garrett, but escaped into Mexico...(on July 1, 1950, she visited with)...Brushy Bill Roberts (who) was the Billy the Kid that she knew in 1880..." (Valdez & Hefner) "Able further contended...that Roberts 'laughs much the same [as Billy the Kid], has the same keen blue eyes, long nose, large ears, small feet, small hands with unusually large wrists, stands and walks as straight as ever with a lively step..."
3. Brushy shared several of the Kid's physical characteristics. According to Morrison, his body bore multiple bullet and knife wounds corresponding to those known to have been inflicted on the Kid. Additionally, Billy could make his hands smaller than his wrists and slip out of hand cuffs. When Morrison mentioned this to Brushy, he "...unhesitatingly held out his hands and, in a kind of double-jointed move, tucked each thumb inside his palms making his hands narrower than his wrists." Like the Kid, Brushy was also ambidextrous. And, there are the similarities noted above by Martile Able.
4. Brushy's alleged birth in the Buffalo Gap area of Taylor County, Texas and upbringing on the Texas frontier are more consistent with Billy's skills as a gunfighter and cowboy than the New York City origins set forth in Pat Garrett's book.
5. Brushy was intimately acquainted with details of the life of the Kid known only to a few, i.e., the fact that black soldiers were on duty at the McSween standoff, details of the McSween house (which burned down in 1878) floor plan, and details of the Lincoln County Courthouse prior to its being remodeled. Brushy didn't offer just a rote recital of accepted history. His narrative differed in some areas, but the differences were consistent with his version of the events, at times making more sense than previously accepted ones.
6. A genealogy taken from the Bible of Martha Vada Roberts Heath, Brushy's double first cousin, sets forth origins of names associated with the Kid (Bonney, McCarty and Antrim), with the Bonney name previously having been unexplained. According to Brushy's account he was raised by his mother's half sister, Catherine Bonney. The Robert's genealogy corroborates Brushy's assertion and indicates Catherine Bonney first married Michael McCarty, who died in the Civil War, and then married William Antrim.
7. In 1990 the historic tintype of the Kid at age 19 was compared against photos of Brushy Bill at UT's Laboratory for Vision Systems and Advanced Graphic Laboratory, using techniques employed in the identification of criminals. The results of the comparison indicate, according to Jameson, "...a very close match...the similarity between the two is 'amazing'".

The case for Brushy Bill being the Kid isn't ironclad, but the above points along with many others raised in the books referenced above should at least give one pause to consider. As the historian C. L. Sonnichsen wrote at the end of his book, Alias Billy the Kid, "If Brushy Bill was not Billy the Kid, who was he?"

May God bless the City of Hico.