

## Making Myths: Billy the Kid, George Armstrong Custer, Buffalo Bill, and the Media

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This paper examines how the media shaped the mythology of three notable historical figures: Billy the Kid, George Armstrong Custer, and Buffalo Bill. Through newspapers, paintings, or books, these men became legends. This paper seeks to understand how certain types of media and the public's demand of certain images, ultimately impacted their legacies. Buffalo Bill manipulated the media to portray himself in a certain light, while Custer and Billy the Kid did not have as great of control over their personas. In the end, the media allowed these men to become American cultural icons. However, these myths pose a potential problem for the study of history: where does the fiction stop and the facts begin?

The car was riddled with bullet holes. The tires were torn, the glass was shattered, and the steering wheel's cover was ripped to shreds. Inside the vehicle, two people were motionless – the woman was slumped over the driver, who fell to one side, and his bloodied body rested limply against the car door.<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow's crime spree was over. As the police sifted through the car's contents, they found guns and countless amounts of ammo, but they also found something else in the outlaws' car. Among their possessions was a copy of Walter Burns' *The Saga of Billy the Kid*.<sup>2</sup> Why would these criminals have a book about a young man who had died some fifty-three years earlier? Did the legend of the Kid inspire or glamorize the life of an outlaw? Perhaps Bonnie and Clyde thought that they could relate to the Kid. Maybe they felt some sense of adventure or pride in comparing their exploits with the Kid's escapades. Whatever their rationale for keeping the book with them, it shows that Billy the Kid was still affecting people many years after his death. The Kid's legend continued through the years, inspiring films, books, and other forms of media embellishment. The media gave Billy the Kid, and many other Western icons, the power to transcend their time frame and arouse public interest for years to come.

Many myths are associated with the American West. Newspapers, books, paintings, and the like – molded the mythic status of Billy the Kid, George Armstrong Custer, and Buffalo Bill. Were it not for the power of the media, these names would not be as well-known today. Yet, they are household names that people recognize instantly. By the end of the nineteenth-century, the West had already transitioned into myth; the public saw the Kid and Custer as legendary figures from a different time, and Buffalo Bill acknowledged their demand for larger-than-life heroes. The media promoted the myths that people wanted to see and the public fully endorsed them.

These men remain in the spotlight because their legends continue to ignite the imagination of the public. Billy the Kid was an enigmatic youth whose life story was shaped into a tale of independence from society's constraints. His remarkable rise to fame was fueled by the public's interest in his brief, bloody, and tragic life. George Armstrong Custer was an American legend only in his death – a product of good timing, good publicity, and the public's desire to see him as a hero. By contrast, Buffalo Bill created his own image by being the ultimate self-promoter. He allowed the public to see only what he wanted them to: a heroic and daring frontiersman and showman. Buffalo Bill's audience loved his persona, and the public demanded an entertaining presentation of Western history.

When a twenty-first century person thinks of media, one is tempted to picture films, television, or perhaps an online blog. Today, the media are all those things. However, there are also newspapers, paintings, poetry, literature, theater, and word of mouth. Especially before the advent of filmography, it is important to remember that there were multiple outlets of mass communication. The three subjects of this study – Billy the Kid, George Armstrong Custer, and Buffalo Bill – were products of this kind of attention. These public channels reflected the culture at the time. In Billy the Kid, some found a Robin Hood-like figure who fought for the greater good, while others saw a wild and adventurous man who represented everything that was dangerous in the world– his flexibility of character made him an evolving persona that fitted virtually any person's image of the "wild" West. The media also shaped Custer's legend by propagating many myths and glorified accounts of his actions. In this regard, the media impacted the way the public saw Custer. Today, he is a misunderstood historical figure surrounded by controversy. In Buffalo Bill, one found the untamed spirit of the West, a man whose ambition and self-imagining demonstrated the ideal strength of the American character. The public was drawn to his rugged frontier personage because they wanted an entertaining journey into Western history. All of these men ultimately became a part of America's history and culture. Although Custer and Billy the Kid did not exercise the same amount of control over their legends as Buffalo Bill did, the media played an important role in their legacies.

### **Billy the Kid**

Billy the Kid was the perfect icon. Even though he died young, the Kid placed his mark on the world and his legend endures today. His story and his character had certain elements which made him a legend. He became a mythologized through his own life experiences which were then reported – and oftentimes exaggerated – in newspapers, books, and later films. Billy captured the media's initial attention through his actions which set the basis for his rise to fame.

The legend of the Kid was something of an accident. There were other "Billy the Kids" running around about the same time. One of the more well-known Kids was Billy Le Roy who spent some time in southern Colorado around 1876-1881.<sup>3</sup> Another Billy robbed a bank in Arkansas and was later arrested in a Colorado Springs whorehouse; yet another Billy was involved in the O.K. Corral shootout.<sup>4</sup> However, the Billy that every person instantly recognizes is this Kid: William H. Bonney (see figure 1). This is significant because it makes one wonder how this particular Billy achieved such a large level of fame. Why this Kid? There were many others to pick from, yet the twenty-one-year-old New Mexican desperado was the most famous. He was

not the most bloodthirsty and he did not run an organized crime ring, but he gained the most notoriety, especially in the twentieth century.

Billy was unlike some of the other famous outlaws of the day. He did not rob banks or hold up trains, so he was not a professional outlaw like Jesse James; he needed just enough money to survive.<sup>5</sup> All things considered, Billy was a small fish to fry compared to some of his contemporaries. Certainly, he was dangerous with a six-shooter, but he really did not dabble in heists or killing sprees. In many ways, he was just a delinquent running around the desert. Billy's legend originated from his own appearance in the media. This Billy the Kid was chosen from a sea of other Kids because his slightly-controversial character, like Custer, had good press. The media could have chosen Billy Le Roy just as easily, but Billy became a legend because early books on him eventually inspired films which ignited a wave of Billy fandom.

Billy's origins are debated, and there are many conflicting stories as to his family and birth. Most people agree that he was born sometime in 1859 in New York; in his 1882 biography, *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid*, his birthdate was given as November 23, but people who knew Billy stated that the date was incorrect, although they did not remember the real date.<sup>6</sup> It is a dilemma which has frustrated historians researching Billy's life; in the mid-nineteenth century, birth certificates were not required, so historians have done their best to fill in the gaps.<sup>7</sup> What is certain was that his real name was Henry McCarty, and that he also used his step-father's last name of Antrim – however, he was more well-known as William H. Bonney, or just Billy.<sup>8</sup> He was not known officially as "Billy the Kid" until the last six months of his life.<sup>9</sup> His mysterious origins have drawn people to his character. He did not have a set-in-stone story about his early years, so he could be wherever and whoever people wanted. This made him perfect for the creative story teller or screenplay author. He inadvertently gave the press the option to use a creative license to fill in the gaps. With some research, historians can find the truth among the make-believe news or novel stories, but records simply do not exist to give people the real



**Figure 1.** William H. Bonney, also known as Billy the Kid. Source: Utely, Robert Marshall. *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

picture of his early years. There is no autobiography of Billy lying around.<sup>10</sup> Billy's mysterious origins made him everyone's personal character.

He lived long enough to see the beginnings of the media's distortion of the facts. Billy read newspapers, and was surprised by what was printed about him. One article reported that he was in charge of a "notorious gang of outlaws, composed of about 25 men."<sup>11</sup> Similar articles appeared in New Mexican newspapers, and Billy reported the gross inaccuracies. In a letter to Governor Lew Wallace, Billy assured him that he was not in charge of such a large number of men; in regards to the author of the article, Billy stated that "the Gentlemen must have drawn very heavily on his imagination."<sup>12</sup> Instead of boasting that he was in fact in charge of so many men, he flatly denied such a claim. Billy went out of his way to alert the Governor of this problem. He could have scared the Governor into thinking that he ran a large crime ring. The media was already running away with Billy's legend and he saw this impact on his affairs. The stories in the papers made him appear as a cold-blooded terror. Those images left impressions that Billy did not want associated with him.

At the time of the article and the letter, Billy was petitioning Wallace for a pardon. In exchange for testifying in court against several wanted men, Wallace promised Billy a pardon for his past crimes.<sup>13</sup> Billy continued to remind the Governor of his promise, but Wallace ignored him and issued a \$500 reward for his capture.<sup>14</sup> The letter may have been written as another attempt to get Wallace to uphold his end of the bargain. He knew he needed the Governor to believe that he was worthy of the pardon, even if he may have been flattered with his growing fame. Some have argued that it was Billy who started the rumor that he killed twenty-one men, and that anything he wrote to the Governor was only to get him out of difficult situations, not to actually clear his name of wrong-doing.<sup>15</sup> He saw his name printed again and again in newspapers; with each article, his fame, and possibly his ego, grew. He may have been encouraged by reports to lay a few false trails about himself and his exploits. One scholar suggests that "it would have been entirely in character for him to have done this."<sup>16</sup> The media made him seem more notorious than he actually was and his legend grew – however, part of the mythology was generated by his actions in the Lincoln County War.

Billy was relatively unknown before he came to Lincoln, New Mexico, but he soon turned into the man that people remember today. Billy's rise to fame happened in three parts: his role in the Lincoln County War, his famous escape from the Lincoln jail, and his death. The latter two instances were more significant in creating his legend, but his involvement in the War created a name for Billy and it defined his character. The combination of these three events gave the media the power to make Billy the Kid an immortal figure.

Picture a small town nestled in a desert valley: a place controlled by a monopolizing merchant company which bullied ranchers and farmers, a corrupt law force, and a secret cattle-rustling empire. It was not so much a script for a *Lone Ranger* episode as it was the setting for the Lincoln County War. The 1878 conflict was caused by the rivalry between the established monopoly J.J. Dolan and Company and the newcomer John Henry Tunstall.<sup>17</sup> Tunstall, an Englishman, came to Lincoln in 1877 to start a ranch and open a mercantile operation – the Tunstall store just happened to create competition for the powerful J.J. Dolan and Company (also

known as the Murphy-Dolan Store Company), which had long been the only big game in town.<sup>18</sup> The Murphy-Dolan Store was reported to fix prices, threaten ranchers, and dabble in the stolen cattle business.<sup>19</sup> Men acting under the authority of the Sheriff killed Tunstall in 1878 and the tensions which had been bubbling under the surface for several months exploded into war.<sup>20</sup> Billy had only known Tunstall a few months, but he liked him and wanted to get revenge for his death, swearing that he would “get some of [Tunstall’s murderers] before I die.”<sup>21</sup> During the various conflicts between the two sides, Billy proved that he was brave, daring, and was handy with a gun. He gained a small following of his fellow fighters during the conflict and he showed the potential for being a competent leader and a dangerous foe. Between his earlier crimes and his actions during the War, he only ranked fourteenth on the Governor’s most wanted list, but he did start to make a name for himself.<sup>22</sup> On the foundation of the War, Billy began to gain notoriety as his exploits continued throughout the territory. The media took notice and the outlaw’s legend began to spread.

More significant in creating his legend was his escape from the Lincoln jail. This instance demonstrated that Billy was more than an average hooligan. He was clever and had an almost supernatural ability to survive. Billy was sentenced to hang – when he escaped his fate, it was as though he had cheated death. In April 1881, Billy was shackled and handcuffed, but he managed to wrestle a pistol from one of his guards, killing him; he then grabbed a shot gun which belonged to one of the other guards. When the man came to investigate the first shots, Billy emptied around 36 heavy buckshot (roughly a quarter pound of lead) into his guard’s head and chest.<sup>23</sup> With two more deaths added to his list of killings, Billy rode off into the desert. According to writer N. Scott Momaday, “as [Billy] goes out of sight, he passes into legend... the story will never be the same after that.”<sup>24</sup> No one fully expected Billy to escape, at least not in the way he did. It was sensational that this young man, so certain to die, got away. His escape was very dramatic and, if he was not well-known before that, he gained notoriety then. This is also a popular story told by the media because it needs no fictional additions to make it spectacular. No story of Billy is complete without a full account of his breakout.

The third event which made Billy a legend was his death. On a July evening in Fort Sumner New Mexico, only a few months after his famous escape from Lincoln’s jail, Billy was shot near the heart by Sheriff Pat Garrett.<sup>25</sup> From the moment his body hit the floor, his death has been a source of controversy. Did Garrett really kill him? Was Billy armed with a six-shooter? Could his death have been so easy? It was a shock to many – both the locals and to the law enforcement. He escaped death in Lincoln, but this time he did not. Many people were surprised that the Kid was finally dead. At first, Garrett was seen as a hero and newspapers praised him for ridding the community of the Kid’s “worse than worthless life.”<sup>26</sup>

Garrett was indeed the man of the hour. But, he was only praised for his deed for a short time. There were many questions surrounding the Kid’s death, and Billy went from being a hated murderer to being a sympathetic character in the eyes of the public. He was, after all, just twenty-one. Billy also did not know who killed him. He did not face Garrett in a showdown on the main street of town. It was a shot in a dark bedroom, something that almost occurred by chance. He had not had the opportunity to defend himself. He looked less like a wanted criminal on the run

and more like an innocent bystander. Older people saw Billy as a child, and a younger audience saw him as a peer. His made him memorable.

Not only have that, but many felt his untimely death was partially dishonest and hinted to a corrupt government. The Governor promised Billy a pardon which never appeared – it was an empty promise that Wallace never fully acknowledged. Billy put his life on the line in order to receive the pardon from Wallace; the men Billy testified against certainly had the means kill Billy. He still hoped that the Governor would make good on his end of the deal, but Wallace never intended to. When a reporter from the *Las Vegas Gazette* commented that Billy looked to Wallace to help him, the Governor responded, “...I can’t see how a fellow like him should expect any clemency from me,”<sup>27</sup> Billy was the outlaw, but it was the Governor who ultimately went back on his word. In many ways, Wallace knowingly led Billy to the slaughterhouse. Billy saw it as a betrayal. As the Kid gained popularity through the twentieth century, his followers also viewed Wallace’s half-hearted promise as a reflection of a corrupt New Mexican government that had intentionally committed murder. Billy looked to Wallace, a man of great influence and power, to be good on his word. Betrayed and forgotten by the Governor, and not knowing where death awaited him, Billy had no choice but to run away as a fugitive.

Billy did not try to flee the country when he knew that he would be pursued by the law. Why? He could have easily run away to Mexico. Yet, he stayed in the territory, still a wanted man. The answer to this is one that the media loved: he had a girlfriend. Paulita Maxwell (Billy was killed in her house) was the reason Billy went to Fort Sumner instead of running to Mexico.<sup>28</sup> She might have married the Kid, she admitted later in life, if he had asked.<sup>29</sup> If Billy had intended to marry her, he never got the chance. The fact that Billy stayed in New Mexico, most likely for his girl, was a popular concept that the public embraced. He was not a cold-blooded killer to the core. Billy had something of a family in Fort Sumner. He was not just hiding out there: he was home. He had people who loved him and he saw them as his family. Billy had all the elements for being a legendary figure. He was brave and loyal, he was clever and resourceful, and he was a lover. The public saw him as a multi-faceted person and empathized with him. Billy was not all bad, but that somehow made him appear all good in the eyes of many people. Many books or films played up his romantic side, and others promoted outlandish fictional adventures, such as Garrett’s version of Billy’s life.

About a year after Billy’s death, Garrett and journalist Ash Upson published Billy’s biography. The goal of the text was two-fold. One, Garrett wanted to dispel some of the rumors about the Kid’s death and his role in it. “I have been portrayed in print and illustrations, as shooting the Kid from behind a bed, from under a bed, and from other places of concealment.”<sup>30</sup> Even in 1882, Garrett had problems with people thinking that he did not kill the Kid. Many people questioned him. The other goal of the biography was that both Garrett and Upson needed money. Garrett asked his readers, “what the Hades else do you suppose my object could be?”<sup>31</sup> Despite claiming to be the *Authentic Life of Billy the Kid*, the biography propagated many myths. Garrett and Upson mixed the real stories with fictionalized accounts. They did this to sell copies. Garrett did not necessarily want to make the Kid an immortal figure, but he did not want to defame him, either. By adding fantastic stories to his account, Garrett had a better chance at making money. Whether or not readers bought into all the stories detracted from the book’s ultimate effect.

According to one researcher, “more than any other single influence, the Garrett-Upson book fed the legend of Billy the Kid.”<sup>32</sup> If anyone had Billy’s real story, it might as well be the man who killed him. There were people who looked to Garrett for the facts; his authenticity as a sheriff and as Billy’s killer allowed readers to at least partly believe him. And so, Billy’s myth took root into the public sphere after his dramatic demise.

His story settled down for a few years, but it gained new life in the twentieth-century. In 1926, the Book of the Month Club began. Walter Burns’ *The Saga of Billy the Kid* was the first book featured in the club.<sup>33</sup> This renewed people’s interest in Billy. It was later adapted into a movie in the 1930s, and the book justified Billy’s murderous actions, casting him as Robin Hood to the law’s Sheriff of Nottingham.<sup>34</sup> Billy’s story had many symbolic elements which transcended his own time frame. He had a spirit of freedom and vibrancy which shone through in the dark times of the 1930s. It was Burns’ book that snowballed into a new wave of Billy fandom. People wanted Billy and their demands were met with more books and films. People wanted to see his softer side as well, and he was no longer portrayed as a heartless villain. Whether or not he deserved the title, Billy became an American hero.

Billy the Kid was not a train-robber that typically fit into the image of the Western outlaw. He was a daring youth killed tragically in his prime. He morphed into a hero after his death with the assistance of the media. From books to eventual films, Billy was the embodiment of the American spirit of adventure. He was a person whose life story and character fit perfectly into the media’s interests. On that day he was killed, “it was Henry McCarty that died, it was Billy Bonney that died, Billy the Kid rode on, and he rides on forever.”<sup>35</sup> Billy did many things in his life that were interesting and adventurous, but without the attention of newspapers or books, Billy’s exploits would fade from memory.

### **George Armstrong Custer**

Similar to Billy the Kid, George Armstrong Custer began as an unlikely legend and achieved his greatest measure of fame after his death. He was known for many things, but none of them were very flattering. Not only did Custer amass hundreds of demerits while he was at West Point, but he also graduated last in his class.<sup>36</sup> Custer also had the rare distinction of having the highest casualty rate of all the Union division commanders in the Civil War.<sup>37</sup> Custer dressed flamboyantly; according to one soldier, “he looked like a circus rider gone mad.”<sup>38</sup> He earned a special place in the hearts of his men as “an object of ridicule and hatred.”<sup>39</sup> As such, his men gave him several notable nicknames including, “Hard Ass,” “Ringlets,” and, most charmingly, “Iron Butt.”<sup>40</sup> He sounded like a poor candidate for a hero. Why, then, is he one of the most well-known identities in American history, and why are people so fixated on his image?

His name is forever attached to his defeat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. On June 25, 1876, Custer and his 7th Cavalry were preparing to attack a group of Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapahoe, and Lakota Indians, but the number of Indians far exceeded Custer’s estimation of their force.<sup>41</sup> The Indian warriors killed Custer and all of his men. It was a victory for the Indians, but it catapulted Custer into legend. Custer’s infamous “Last Stand” has been made the subject of films, novels, poems, and numerous paintings. In 1978, one historian identified no less than 1,327 graphic

depictions of the battle.<sup>42</sup> Between the timing of his death, the political landscape, and the media attention, Custer was launched into American memory as a legend.

In Custer's case, the timing of his death assisted in his rise to legendary status. In 1876, Philadelphia was hosting a Centennial Exhibition; this was the first major World's Fair to be held in the United States.<sup>43</sup> The Exposition wanted to introduce America as a center of industry on a global scale, "the Centennial ushered in an unprecedented era of invention as America moved from the age of steam to the age of electricity and the internal combustion engine."<sup>44</sup> To many people, excited for the new technologies introduced at the fair, the West was already fading from center stage as the next place for America to claim. The Battle of the Little Big Horn, in 1876, was already "an anachronism."<sup>45</sup> The West was a place of nostalgia and many people connected with the images that came with an Indian battle on the plains. One historian estimated the battle's influence on the public: "to the average American, the Battle of the Little Big Horn was as unreal as Thermopylae" and names like Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse were as exotic as, "Leonidas and Xerxes."<sup>46</sup> As America transitioned into an industrial society, the battle stirred sentiment in people. It reminded them that the West was still untamed which made the battle seem more thrilling or fantastic.

The battle also occurred at an opportune time for American politics because it occurred during an election year. The Democrats had been out of power since 1861 and they used Custer's death to criticize the Republicans in office.<sup>47</sup> The deaths of Custer and his men occurred on the Republican's watch, thus the government was held responsible for it. The Democratic press aimed all its power at blaming the administration and attacking its Indian Peace Policy.<sup>48</sup> They used headlines such as, "The Custer Massacre —The Administration Responsible" and "Grant, the Murderer of Custer."<sup>49</sup> The articles were less about the battle and more about assigning blame to get ahead in the political game. The *New York Times* responded to these claims and it admonished the Democratic press' use of Custer's image. In regards to his demise, the Times asked its readers sarcastically, "how can this be made to help in the election?"<sup>50</sup> It also called upon the public to not tolerate "criticism and partisan malice" to ruin Custer's memory.<sup>51</sup> With each headline and political squabble, Custer's name grew increasingly wide spread. His legendary status was aided by the political scene as Democrats used his image to advance their own goal of returning to power. Custer's postmortem role in the political campaign was important because it depicted him as an American hero, if only to make the Republicans look bad. The political press was just part of his much larger presence in the media which persisted for years after the 1876 election.

Newspapers also supported the creation of the Custer mythology. The Battle of the Little Big Horn was, according to the *New York Times*, "the most serious disaster which has befallen the United States Army in this description of warfare for many years."<sup>52</sup> News spread fast, and soon everyone had known that an army of white soldiers had fallen to the hands of blood-thirsty savages. "There is, indeed," stated an article in the *Times*, "little to admire in the Indian, even at his best."<sup>53</sup> Custer's murderers were portrayed in a very negative light in many newspaper articles. The Times also ran a piece several years later on Rain-in-the-Face and described him as having a "demonic sneer" when he saw a picture of the dead General.<sup>54</sup> While some papers lacked glowing reviews of Custer, they filled in the gaps with less-than-flattering images of

Indians. The newspapers turned Custer into a victim. The papers do not, interestingly, say that Custer was not at fault. Many papers simply omitted details of his movements and shook their fingers at the Indians instead. This impacted the way the battle was recorded in history.

Language is a powerful tool; by focusing on the Indians and describing them in a certain way, one saw a different impression of Custer and the battle. The papers made it seem as though it was all the Indians' fault – they were the “bad guys” and Custer was murdered in cold blood. In the most generalized version of the legend, he and his men were mercilessly massacred. The papers contributed to that image. Custer was an accidental hero. The American public read the reports about this soldier killed in the line of duty. It was as though he made a sacrifice to America's continued progress. This further escalated his status as a hero and his image made an easy transition into literature.

Custer's death inspired poems. Poets have the power to create a legend. They made choices in their narratives that emphasized, “conflict, suspense, [and] irony.”<sup>55</sup> Of course, a few fictional elements were sometimes included to spice up the tale; it all had to do with who the audience was, who the author was, and what that author wanted people to get out of a story. The story, in essence, became the author's version of history. The soldiers' deaths were tragic, but it also inspired heroic admiration in people – this combination of sorrow and heroism created a large range of sonnets, songs, and dirges about battle.<sup>56</sup> Poets waxed eloquently about Custer's accomplishments and testified to his lasting memory:

*Brave Custer! Fame's trumpet resounding  
Throughout every nation and clime  
Shall not oft sound a name  
More worthy of fame,  
Through the echoing ages of time*<sup>57</sup>

Even the famous poet, Walt Whitman, offered homage to Custer. He commented on Custer's “desperate and glorious” defeat and how he left behind a “memory sweet to soldiers.”<sup>58</sup> Many poets put Custer and the battle on a golden pedestal. Their creative words and flowing imagery contributed to Custer's myth making. The poems made him a kind of epic hero. The poets “proceeded to transform unadorned fact into a glorious myth.”<sup>59</sup> Poetry was an important form of media for Custer because of the way poems were composed. Every poem has a rhyme or verse or some form of structure that rolls off the tongue. Similar to a song, a poem's lines stuck to one's mind. People remembered these phrases and are able to pass them down through the generations. Poems were mnemonics for remembering Custer as a hero and what occurred at the Little Big Horn.

Custer had his image stamped on all kinds of earlier media – he was one of the most frequently depicted figures in American history.<sup>60</sup> Many painters seemed to have the same mental picture of Custer. He was usually the only white man standing among his dead soldiers and he was surrounded by an ocean of Indian warriors coming at him on foot and on horseback. He stood with his chest out, ready to fight. Custer looked as though he was ready to accept his fate. Even though most people understand that the battle probably did not look that way, the mental image

is hard to change. It was the most recognizable example of Custer's infamous Last Stand. The standard mental image, for example, is a lithograph from Anheuser Busch.



**Figure 2.** “Custer’s Last Fight.” Source: *Custer’s Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* by Brian W. Dippie (Missoula: University of Montana, 1976), figure 8.

Early advertisements for Anheuser Busch “[were] done either by word-of-mouth through the company’s traveling salesmen or “beer drummers,” or through point-of-sale items, such as wall hangings and beer trays displayed in local taverns.”<sup>61</sup> Custer’s image was used as one of these point-of-sale items and was displayed in saloons and delicatessens since 1896, making it one of Anheuser Busch’s most popular advertisements.<sup>62</sup> Why did Adolphus Busch, part-owner of the company, choose Custer as the focus for his advertisement? The image and the company it was promoting did not seem connected. Busch was a supporter of Westward Expansion and he was already familiar with the popularity of Custer’s image; he hoped that the public’s fascination with Custer would make his advertisement popular.<sup>63</sup> This image was similar to other depictions of the battle, but this advertisement was the quintessential representation of Custer’s myth.

In the advertisement, Custer was not drawn much larger than anyone else, but he was clearly the focus. He was curiously shown out of uniform: dressed in buckskin, which made him seem somehow more rugged. Apparently, in order to fight Indians, one needed to dress like them. He was also wielding a saber, charging forward despite the impossible odds. He was holding a

backwards pistol in his other hand and was not using it to any clear advantage. Then, there was a hoard of mounted Indians riding into the scene, even though Custer was the only soldier left. One interpretation is that Custer was such a good warrior that the Indians had to summon all their best fighters to take him down.

This picture essentially summarizes every other image of the Last Stand. Artists frequently copied one another and made their own variations of Custer's fight.<sup>64</sup> The similar paintings only reinforced his myth. Interestingly, artists frequently depicted Custer on foot. This made his situation seem more hopeless as all chance of advance or retreat was cut off.<sup>65</sup> Despite many of the Indians on horseback, Custer remained steadfast and he appeared to be an uncommonly strong soldier. These elements came together to make him appear as though he was superhuman. He was Custer, a god-like figure who fought despite all odds. Paintings helped to create his legend because the pictures attached into people's imaginations. Additionally, because artists inspired one another and the paintings had similar themes, this reinforced Custer's authenticity as a hero. Many paintings appeared to agree on how the battle looked and what role Custer played. These images and their elements are linked forever to the public consciousness as Custer's Last Stand. Custer was depicted as a hero.

Theater productions played a part in creating Custer's myth. Buffalo Bill incorporated the Last Stand in his Wild West and in earlier shows. He frequently reenacted the battle and included himself as the almost-rescuer of Custer; the first of Buffalo Bill's Custer performances occurred in the fall of 1876.<sup>66</sup> In this first show, he displayed the scalp of the Cheyenne warrior Yellow Hand (also known as Yellow Hair) and he claimed that it was the first scalp taken in revenge for the General.<sup>67</sup> While paintings brought a visual picture of the battle, theater breathed life to the scene. By performing the battle, one was more engaged to the emotions; it was almost as though a person had been there, standing next to Custer. The performance made history an active experience and the audience walked away with vivid images in their heads. The technical details of the battle and of the people involved were unimportant: the audience had seen Custer's Last Stand with their own eyes.

Custer's widow, Elizabeth, wrote to Buffalo Bill and thanked him for keeping her husband's memory fresh in his show, "you have done so much to make him an idol among children and young people."<sup>68</sup> Certainly, seeing Custer on stage seemed to glorify his actions. Custer's stage representation was vital to his legend because his story was portrayed in a way that emphasized its dramatic effect and downplayed his negative attributes. People came to see Buffalo Bill's show to be entertained with riveting gun fights and Indian battles in a historic backdrop. They did not come to analyze Custer's true nature or ponder over whether or not he deserved his legendary distinction.

Custer's legendary status was a combination of good timing and good publicity. It does not matter if he was depicted as a hero or a "genocidal nut" because he still manages to be the focus.<sup>69</sup> His image was flexible. For some, he was the quintessential hero or he was a villain. The media shaped his legend – Custer's story was marketable and it sold. Custer brought people to the box office and drew them in to one of Buffalo Bill's performances. It was the exaggerated,

dramatic portrayals of him in the media that captivated the public and ensured his legend for years to come.

## **Buffalo Bill**

Buffalo Bill may have played a large part in creating Custer's legend, but Buffalo Bill also shaped his own legacy; he had full control over his public image and invested in his own legend. The name "Buffalo Bill" conjured images of the West: Indian battles, vast herds of bison, and cowboys riding on horses across the plains. In fact, many of the classic images of this time and place originated with Buffalo Bill. He was a major driving force behind the idea of the violent West. Born in Iowa in 1846, William F. Cody used the media to shape his persona around the idea of a Western hero.<sup>70</sup> Buffalo Bill was best known and remembered as a showman, although he did have experience as a Pony Express rider and a scout for the Fifth Cavalry before he made his debut on stage.<sup>71</sup> As such, Buffalo Bill combined his own experiences on the frontier with theatrical flair. This made his shows a complicated combination of fiction and fact – he blurred the lines of reality and it was easy to confuse his embellishment with the historical truth of the West. Before Cody transitioned to the worldwide stage, he starred in novels and small theater productions.

Buffalo Bill owed his start to Ned Buntline, a professional writer and veteran Union soldier, who met Cody in 1869 and included him as the hero in his dime novel.<sup>72</sup> From there, Buffalo Bill's presence expanded into more dime novels before he transitioned his efforts to the stage. He used his autobiography to take hold of his image and he carved out his public presence. He used illustrations for his autobiography and his show that portrayed a certain vision of Buffalo Bill and the West. His desire to bring authenticity and excitement to his Wild West via clever media tactics ended up creating a whole new American experience.

Once Cody appeared in Buntline's dime novel, "Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men," his career as an icon and showman began to take shape. Dime novel Buffalo Bill was similar in character to many other dime novel heroes of the day. He was a loving son, a loyal friend, and a strong fighter.<sup>73</sup> The plot was nothing new, either. Buffalo Bill fought villains, rescued helpless victims, and he killed a few Indians here and there; the novel showed Cody as a personality, but "it did not distinguish him from a horde of other dime-novel figures."<sup>74</sup> Still, the novel began to open doors for future opportunity. More dime novels starring Buffalo Bill followed. They were fairly popular and the *New York Times* ran an advertisement for a new novel that ran for three consecutive days.<sup>75</sup> Dime novels helped to shape Cody's image in the public's mind. The novels cast him as a dashing American frontiersman who performed amazing feats of heroism. In many ways, the books set the foundation for his myth. Dime novels were an important form of media in the nineteenth-century because they were accessible to a broader audience than just the rich elite; they were relatively inexpensive (hence the name) thus, most people could afford to read them. Some were similar to comic books or romance novels today, and they sold to a wide audience. Buffalo Bill accessed the masses by using this network of dime novel readers, who continued to read about his fictional exploits. Using the novels as a basis, Cody made his debut on stage.

Cody's early stage efforts were not quite Broadway material. Cody's first theatrical experience was in "The Scouts of the Prairie," a Buffalo Bill dime novel on a stage.<sup>76</sup> The play was campy and Cody had trouble with his lines, but it achieved a measure of popularity not because of the writing or the special effects, but because of Cody himself.<sup>77</sup> He cut a handsome figure, with his long hair and his neat mustache and beard. He had a certain charm and appeal that captured audiences' attentions for years to come. He had all the elements for a Western hero and the people loved it. With all the images of the novel version of Buffalo Bill, audiences had certain expectations and were curious to see what the real Indian fighter looked like. Cody's debut as Buffalo Bill was important to developing his legend because it put a flesh-and-blood person in the fictional Bill's place. This helped to cement the link between Cody and Buffalo Bill so that the two identities became perfectly interchangeable. It also meant that Buffalo Bill was no longer just one of Buntline's characters. He was a real person and the media treated him like it.

Buffalo Bill was a popular figure in newspapers. Although written in 1891, well after Cody became known for his Wild West show, his image remained very theatrical. An article reprinted in the *Fort Collins Courier* described how Buffalo Bill got his start. The article read more like it came from one of Buntline's dime novels describing how Buffalo Bill was suddenly attacked by a hundred Indians as he hunted a herd of bison. Buffalo Bill charged ahead and defeated the Indians; he then drove ten head of bison into his camp and killed them as though "nothing had happened."<sup>78</sup> It was this heroic feat, according to the paper, that earned him the moniker Buffalo Bill.

Clearly exaggerated, yet article clearly stated that Buffalo Bill "owes his name, fame and fortune to the newspapers."<sup>79</sup> Similar to books, newspapers were widely read and distributed. Cody had good press, which helped to reinforce his persona. Even if the article was just a snippet or an advertisement, any mention of his name continued to put him in public light. Dime novels, newspapers, and his early stage work contributed to the Buffalo Bill legend, but it was ultimately Cody who planned Buffalo Bill's myth.

Cody published his autobiography in 1879, a few years before he started his famous Wild West show.<sup>80</sup> He used his memoir to create his own legend. He mixed truth in his narrative with some dime novel-like elements, but he did so to "take full possession of his own frontier persona."<sup>81</sup> After all, Buffalo Bill had a reputation to uphold. He included stories such as how he kept a horse from running away by tying its bridle to his belt with a lariat.<sup>82</sup> It might not have been necessarily true for William Cody, but it was true for Buffalo Bill. He also threw in some humor as he described his early stage experience. When the director told him to stay on cue, Buffalo Bill slyly remarked, "I never saw a cue except in a billiard room."<sup>83</sup> He helped to shape Buffalo Bill in the first decade of his dime novel and early theater days, but his autobiography was one of his ultimate conquests. It was here that Cody clearly took full responsibility for the Buffalo Bill legend. He was always associated with the identity from the moment the first dime novels were published and he maintained that dual identity, but the autobiography really positioned Cody as Buffalo Bill. He was no longer just playing a character loosely based on himself – he was Buffalo Bill.

His autobiography's influence expanded as it served as a basis for biographies. In 1893, biographer John Burke used passages which were similar to the autobiography; he also used them in a way that fit better into the myth of the American hero such as describing Buffalo Bill's humble beginnings.<sup>84</sup> Cody's version of himself inspired other similar versions until it became accepted – myths and all. Those accepted myths made their way into other biographies and it contributed to his legend. This seemed to authenticate all of the reports in the various books. Not only did Cody create his own myth, he indirectly made his exploits more believable as the biographies took his stories and repeated them as fact, reaching new readers with every printing.

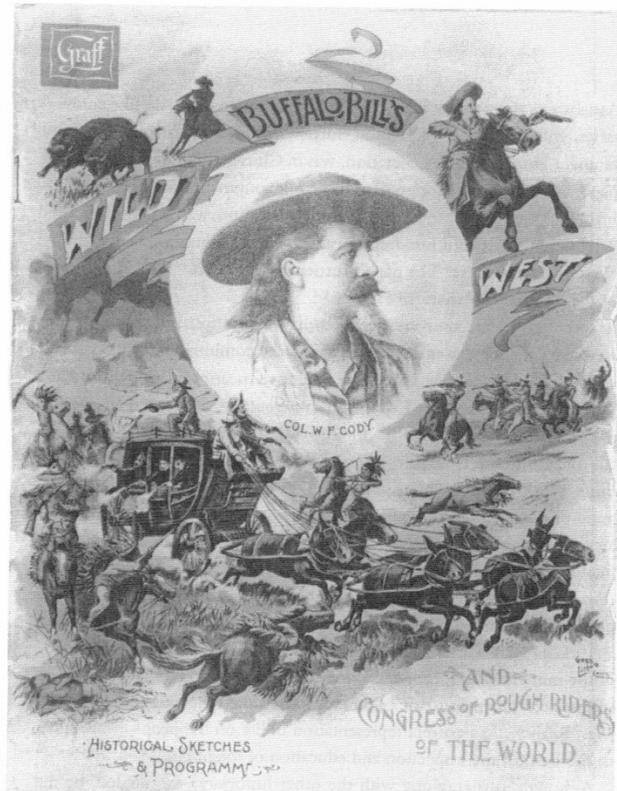
Similar to the tales in his autobiography and subsequent biographies, Cody expertly presented himself through illustrations. His autobiography used eighty images from various artists; some of the pictures were general and serene, such as horsemen on a hill, but others were action oriented via depicting a battle with Indians.<sup>85</sup> He captured the dual personality of the West. On the one hand, it was wide and open where men could wander from hillside to hillside on horseback, but it was also a violent place where Indians hid behind every rock. One of the most significant illustrations was True Williams' depiction of Buffalo Bill's duel with Yellow Hand (see figure 3). This image was important because it was one of Cody's many attempts to blur the lines of reality. Cody said he had taken the scalp of the Cheyenne warrior in revenge for Custer, and then he turned the incident into a theatrical display.<sup>86</sup> The image was dramatic. Buffalo Bill stood holding the scalp in the air as a group of Indians rode toward him in the background. However, he blended the factual Yellow Hand with a theatrical twist and this added to Cody's authenticity overall, even if he probably did not scalp Yellow Hand. Every real encounter Cody included was just dramatic enough to match with the fabricated additions. He "frequently confounds easy distinctions between fact and fiction."<sup>87</sup> Cody made his legend through these dramatic illustrations. A picture was worth a thousand words, and Cody had more than a few images.



**Figure 3.** "Buffalo Bill's Duel with Yellow Hand." Source: *The Frontier in American Culture* by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 70, plate 3.

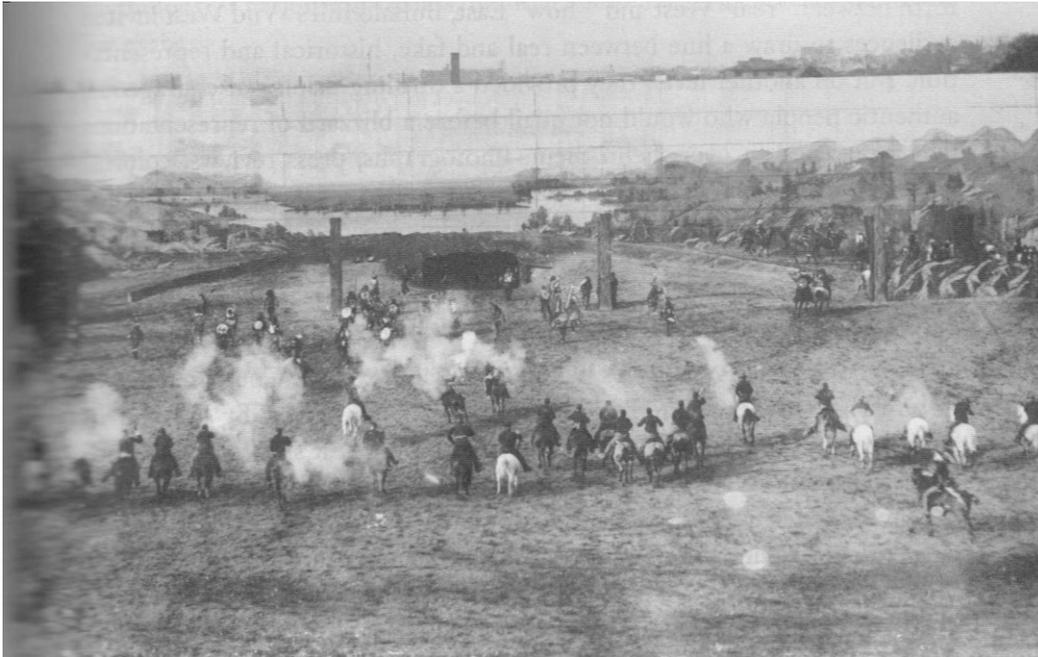
The themes of the illustrations included in his autobiography were also used for publicity posters for his show. Virtually every promotional ad for Buffalo Bill's Wild West was similar. All of them had the same theme: violence. In one promotional advertisement, a bust of Cody was surrounded by several dramatic fighting scenes (see figure 4). As Cody looked off to one side of the poster, he was framed by a buffalo hunt, a man brandishing a pistol on a leaping horse, a group of Indians robbing a stagecoach, and several men on galloping horses taking aim with their rifles. Cody, apparently, was constantly kept busy on the frontier fighting, hunting, and saving a few coach passengers. The programs showed the West as a "green and leafy world of colorful Indians, plentiful buffalo, and a handsome scout on a spirited horse."<sup>88</sup> Like many of the thrilling images in his autobiography, Buffalo Bill's posters depicted a dangerous, violent world. Yet for all the blood and gunfire, Cody was the man who had tamed the West. He was in the center of the image, gazing out with a calm look on his face. It was as though he was looking back at the West in his memory. In many ways, images like these showed Cody as a "performer in his own life story."<sup>89</sup> With a few carefully chosen images, Cody morphed a popular picture of the West and himself that was uniquely his own legend, and he continued to use pictures and images throughout his career.

Cody used images to influence his audiences in his Wild West show. He used imagery to trick the human eye so that the line between reality and dramatization was virtually erased. This photograph from one of the shows demonstrates how this was achieved (see figure 5). Upon first glance, it is hard to tell where the stage ends. If it were not for a city skyline peeking up over the top, one may think the scene goes on forever. This is a panorama – a kind of virtual journey into the West through a painting.<sup>90</sup> Paintings like this one were used in theater for many years, and Cody incorporated them as an extension of the scene by placing plants and animals in the foreground of the image.<sup>91</sup> The actors themselves could disappear into the painting, as entryways were constructed in the panorama so that the performers could transition from the painting into reality.<sup>92</sup> This added another dimension to Cody's show, not only because the paintings reflected the image of the West, but because "it seemed to merge into the space of the arena."<sup>93</sup> It made it seem as though Buffalo Bill had enough power and control over the whole West to be able to condense it to a stage. To audiences,



**Figure 4.** "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World: Historical Sketches and Programme." Source: *The Frontier in American Culture* by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 8, figure 1.

it was probably a little magical and it kept them coming to his arena. Cody's ability to bend space and capture the vastness of the West on a stage made him a legendary figure. By placing the picture as a backdrop, Cody went a step further in his craft: he had brought the West to the public. Audiences wanted a spectacular show. They came to his performances to see the West come to life both in terms of historical fact and entertainment.



**Figure 5.** “Trick of the Eye.” Source: *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* by Louis S. Warren (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 261.

Cody also used photography to alter his public image. One of the ways he used photography was to link himself to other legendary figures. In this picture in particular, Cody was standing next to Custer and the Grand Duke Alexis (see figure 6). Or was he? This image was not what it appeared to be at first glance. Custer and Alexis looked as though they belong in the same picture, but Buffalo Bill appeared painted on. In a way, he was. In this nineteenth-century version of photo-editing technology, two studio portraits were merged in order to make it look like Buffalo Bill was in the same photograph as the two other men.<sup>94</sup> Cody frequently made associations between himself and Custer for the rest of his career.<sup>95</sup> They were both men of the frontier, after all. After Custer's death, Buffalo Bill continued to connect the two men together. Cody and Custer, both American legends in their own right, formed a kind of dynamic duo as Cody incorporated him into his publicity and performances. Photography made Cody look like he was associated to other famous people of the West. Just the association of Buffalo Bill and the other men helped to further his legend. The public probably liked seeing these men together. Standing side-by-side, they were a powerhouse of American icons. Custer was the brave General who died in the line of duty, and Cody was the man who claimed the West. It made a great promotional image for his shows. He tied his image to other American legends, and presented himself as he wanted to be remembered for all time.



**Figure 6.** “George Armstrong Custer, Grand Duke Alexis, Buffalo Bill.”  
Source: *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* by Joy S. Kasson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 37.

Buffalo Bill was one of the big names in the history of the American West. His Wild West stood for many things. Cody tried to recapture the Western spirit.<sup>96</sup> Instead of just telling a story, Buffalo Bill’s version of the West became a story in and of itself. The “West” countless people saw before them on the stage was Cody’s own depiction of the West. His West was a uniquely American idea. Cody was not just a showman or a famous scout; it was as though he was an extension of the West itself.

Cody’s use of media such as his autobiography, images, dime novels, and photographs shaped his legend. According to Warren, Cody’s “vision, talents, and burning ambition played the largest role” in crafting his fame.<sup>97</sup> Ironically, as time went on and as Buffalo Bill souvenirs were sold through the early twentieth century, his image became distorted and he lost some of his authenticity.<sup>98</sup> In an attempt to bring Buffalo Bill to the world as a real person, Cody instead became reduced to a near-fictional character as his souvenir mugs, toys, and games blurred his real identity.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, Cody captured a spirit of the West that is still engrained in twenty-first century culture. He was one of the ultimate self-made personalities of American history and became a legend through his own acts of mass self-promotion.

### **Media Creates Legends**

Through the power of the media, real people became legends. They existed in a historical space, but they somehow managed to break the bonds of their own time period to become interwoven in modern American culture. The American West was a place that has produced many legends and spawned countless books, films, and pictures. Frontier figures of the West, mysterious and intriguing, remain popular. The frontier was “a space less defined by maps and surveys than by myths and illusions, projective fantasies, wild anticipations [and] extravagant expectations.”<sup>100</sup> While historians place people such as Buffalo Bill, George Armstrong Custer, and Billy the Kid within a factual framework, their myths and legends still persist. They are cultural creations propagated by the media’s involvement in telling their stories.

Buffalo Bill manufactured his own legend from the ground up using the media’s power to do so. Paintings, books, and theater ensured Custer’s memory for years to come. His death occurred at an opportune time in America’s progress and political scene, and he posthumously morphed into an enduring legend. Billy the Kid saw the influence that newspapers had on his story. He did many things in his life to perhaps deserve the attention he received, but it was only through the media’s exaggerated portrayals of him that imprinted his memory on the public. The people demanded more of these depictions which created a cycle of myth making in order to meet the needs of a consuming public.

Every culture has legends and stories that were passed down from generation to generation. Not many people were overly concerned with maintaining the historical integrity of the characters involved. People embraced myths and turned people into legends in order to make sense of the past and explain the future. People reiterated stories told by their elders and tried to obtain some kind of value from history. Perhaps the story of Billy the Kid could be used to comment on helping the poor and rejecting the corrupt corporations of law and government. Perhaps the story of Custer could be used to show the error of cultural warfare or comment on the duty of a soldier. It all depended on who was telling the story and what they wanted others to get out of it.

Media is part popular culture and part fact initiated by the desires of the public. The media created the legends and stories that people still listen to today. In fact, it is frequently the legends themselves that attract people to the study of history. They ignite a certain curiosity in people and many are drawn to historical figures in order to understand them further. If one endorses the person, and not the myth, and encourages the comprehension of a historical figure’s true persona, one finds a renewed insight to the past that captures both the excitement of the legend and the reality of history.

### Notes

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2. Mark Lee Gardner, telephone interview by the author, January 18, 2012.
3. Donald Cline, *Alias Billy the Kid: The Man Behind the Legend* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 1986), 122.
4. *Ibid.*, 121.

5. Gardner interview.
6. Cline, 13.
7. Mark Lee Gardner, *To Hell on a Fast Horse: The Untold Story of Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett* (New York: Harper, 2010) 36.
8. Cline, 11.
9. Gardner, 35.
10. Gardner interview.
11. "Western Outlaws Arrested," *New York Times*, December 28, 1880.
12. "Billy the Kid's Letters to Governor Lew Wallace," *Billy the Kid Unmasked*, <http://www.bakerandhill.com/work/billy/letters.html>.
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14. *Ibid.*, 251.
15. John P. Wilson, "Building His own Legend: Billy the Kid and the Media," *New Mexico Historical Review* 82 (Spring 2007): 221-235, 223.
16. *Ibid.*, 229.
17. Miguel Antonio Otero Jr., *The Real Billy the Kid* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1998), 25.
18. *Ibid.*, 25.
19. "Lincoln County War," *Billy the Kid Territory*. [http://www.newmexico.org/billythekid/billypages/lincoln\\_county\\_war.php](http://www.newmexico.org/billythekid/billypages/lincoln_county_war.php).
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21. Gardner, 64.
22. Cline, 69.
23. Gardner, 146.
24. *Billy the Kid* (2012), DVD, Directed by John Maggio (PBS).
25. Robert M. Utley, *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 194.
26. "Billy the Kid's Life and Death," *New York Times*, July 31, 1881.
27. Gardner, 23.
28. *Ibid.*, 159.
29. *Ibid.*, 159.
30. Pat F. Garrett, *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011), 132.
31. *Ibid.*, 135.
32. Utley, 199.
33. Gardner interview.
34. Wilson, 233.

35. *Billy the Kid*, documentary.
36. James Welch, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994), 57.
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38. *Ibid.*, 57.
39. *Ibid.*, 60.
40. *Ibid.*, 60.
41. *Ibid.*, 21.
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46. *Ibid.*, 7.
47. *Ibid.*, 10.
48. *Ibid.*, 11.
49. *Ibid.*, 11.
50. "Politics Run Mad," *New York Times*, July 8, 1876.
51. *Ibid.*
52. "The Defeat of Gen. Custer," *New York Times*, July 21, 1876.
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54. "Gen. Custer's Murderer," *New York Times*, February 12, 1881.
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56. Dippie, 24.
57. "Custer's Last Battle," *Cincinnati Commercial*, July 19, 1876, 5.
58. Walt Whitman, "Death-Sonnet for Custer," *New York Daily Tribune*, July 10, 1876, 5.
59. Dippie, 29.
60. Slotkin, 14.
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88. Ibid., 57.
89. Ibid., 41.
90. Warren, 257.
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92. Ibid., 260.
93. Ibid., 262.
94. Kasson, 38.
95. Ibid., 37.
96. Warren, 548.
97. Ibid., 543.
98. Ibid., 542.
99. Ibid., 543.
100. Slotkin, 11.

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