

James Cooney

James was a red-head of Irish parentage and born in Canada in 1840. Just a few years before the start of the Civil War he moved to the United States and settled in Chicago, Illinois. When the call came for volunteers, Cooney enlisted in the Eighth Regiment, United States Cavalry and became the quartermaster sergeant for the regiment.

After the war the Eighth Regiment was transferred to Fort Bayard, New Mexico, for the purpose of protecting settlers in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona from the Apache Indians. Despite their best efforts, many settlers and soldiers lost their lives to Apache bands led by Victorio and Geronimo. Cooney had many running fights with the Apaches, and because he always wore a big, broad brimmed hat, the Apaches gave him the name "Big Hat."

Before his enlistment with the Army was over, Cooney was sent in command of a detachment to Fort Tularosa, New Mexico, at the headwaters of the Gila River. While out on a scout in the Mogollon (Muggy-own) Mountains, Cooney discovered some high grade gold- and silver-bearing veins. He kept quiet about it until after his discharge in 1876 and he returned with several companions. Cooney and a fellow named Harry McAllister founded the Fanny Mine and it produced many thousands of dollars in gold and silver ore. In 1878, Cooney was one of the leaders in forming the Mogollon Mining District. Two towns sprang up, Alma and Mogollon. They are about eight miles apart and virtually deserted today. Alma is on the U.S. highway 180 and was once a hideout for outlaw gangs, including Butch Cassidy. Mogollon is a delightful, well-preserved ghost town high up in the mountains on a safe-to-travel, but scary road.

In April of 1880, the Apaches had a big war party out under Victorio. It was estimated to be between 400 to 600 warriors. They had the town of Alma completely surrounded and their intent was total destruction. Up in the mountains, Mogollon was left alone. The folks were holed up in the stockade, but there was

no sign of any Indians. On April 29, 1880, Cooney and a man named "Chick" went out on a scouting trip hoping to find out what were the conditions in Alma.

They had gone about three-quarters of a mile when they ran into an Indian ambush. When their bodies were discovered it appeared that Cooney had been shot in the thigh on the first attack and managed to drag himself to a protective tree where his body was found riddled by many bullets. Empty casings from his gun were strewn around the area indicating that he had put up a fight. Chick's body was found about 200 feet down the creek. Both bodies were stripped and scalped. There must have been great joy and celebration for the Apaches to know they had lifted the hair of Big Hat. All the Indians scattered when they heard troops from Fort Bayard were fast approaching and the siege of Alma was ended.

Some years after the death of Cooney, his older brother Captain Michael Cooney who had come to the Mogollon Mountains to take over for James, located a huge boulder near the mine. He conceived the idea that it would make an excellent mausoleum for James' remains. He had two of his best miners hollow out the boulder. He had James' remains brought there and reburied. He also had the remains of a nephew and a grandnephew placed inside the boulder. It was then sealed up using ore from the mine. There are also a few graves directly behind Cooney's Mausoleum.



Source: Old West Magazine, Summer 1970 reprint of a 1931 Frontier Times story, *Captain Cooney's Fate* by James H. Lycons