

Tombstone by Tombstone

William Anthony "Billy" Old

When the Arizona Rangers were active, the Rangers came from a lot of different places. There were 107 Rangers over the nine years of the program. Forty-four of those, or just slightly over 41%, were from Texas. I am not certain how many of those 44 were former Texas Rangers, but William A. "Billy" Old is unique as the only one who served in all three of the Southwest's territorial police forces, having served for a time with the New Mexico State Police.

Billy was born in 1870 to a young couple in Morris County, Texas. He had a brother, Augustus "Augie" Old, who was four years younger. Billy worked as a cowboy until he was 27 years old. In 1898, he decided to join Augie who had been a Texas Ranger since 1896. Both brothers were a member of Company E, commanded by Captain John H. Rogers, known as one of the great four captains in the Rangers. After serving three enlistments with the company, the Texas Legislature mandated a reduction of company size from twelve to eight and Billy was released.

Billy relocated to Arizona where the brand new Arizona Rangers were organized and patterned after the Texas Rangers. But the Arizona Legislature had authorized thirteen Rangers. Billy took a job as a cowboy and waited for his opportunity. That opportunity came in 1903 when the legislature doubled the Ranger size. It was August of 1904 before he was able to pin on the badge.

In December of 1904, Billy and his partner "Chapo" Beaty captured and jailed the notorious rustler Antonio Nunez who swore he would never be taken alive. The next May the pair arrested another horse thief without firing a shot.

His boss, Captain Rynning, enjoyed telling how Billy handled a crooked judge. This justice of the peace was in cahoots with the cattle thieves and was turning them loose as fast as the Rangers were arresting them. After the judge pulled a particular raw deal, Billy decided on a plan of action and when he had everything set he sent for Rynning. Rynning said, "When I got there I found Billy had taken the Judge out where there was plenty of fresh air and solitude to talk to him about the errors of his ways. He had the honorable court anchored to a mesquite bush with a trace chain fastened around his neck by a padlock, the other end of the chain padlocked to the mesquite... Soon as I came the Judge began begging off, swearing he'd do anything we wanted if only we'd turn him loose. I told him if he would take an oath to act square when horse thieves and rustlers came before him for a hearing, instead of always turning them loose, why we would think it over and maybe give him another chance to grow up with the country. After that the outlaws... were turned over for trial and we had less trouble..."

A short while later Rynning's second in command tendered his resignation and the captain promoted Sergeant Harry Wheeler to the vacancy and Billy to fill the sergeant opening.

Billy was never quick on the trigger and there is no record of his killing anyone while he was a Ranger. But, there was never a doubt in the mind of those he captured that he would pull the trigger if necessary. One who learned this was Luis Rivera, a murderous horse thief and jail breaker from Sonora, Mexico. He had been sentenced to 15 years in a Mexican jail for murder for hire. He escaped in 1904 and, with lawmen on both sides of the border searching for him, he bragged he would not be taken alive.

On September 26, 1905, Billy and his partner got the drop on him and ordered him to throw up his hands. When Rivera told him to go ahead and shoot, Billy raised his Winchester until it was between Rivera's eyes and he was looking down the barrel. He lost all his bravado and was still trembling when Chapo put the cuffs on him.

In Kelvin, Arizona, on November 6, 1906, he took nineteen-year-old Anna B. Beck for his wife. They would have two sons during a marriage that would end in divorce sometime before 1912. In 1912 he married Ann Greenwood, a marriage that would end in tragedy.

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In 1907, Tom Rynning resigned as captain to take the position of superintendent of the Yuma Territorial Prison. Harry Wheeler was promoted as the third, and last, Captain of the Rangers. With the lieutenant position open, only two people were considered, Billy and his best friend, Jeff Kidder. Kidder had a year of seniority on Billy and was one of the greatest Rangers in the history of the program. Kidder was just a bit of a hot-head and Billy was selected because of his coolness and composure. The decision had no effect on their friendship. Billy's first son was named William Kidder Olds.

When Kidder was brutally murdered in Naco, Mexico, it has been widely reported that Billy resigned, went into Mexico and came out two years later with all three of Kidder's killers dead. He never openly admitted it, and if true, they were most likely the only people he ever killed. Ironically, Kidder's enlistment had expired just before his death and he was waiting for Wheeler to come down to Naco, Arizona, and reenlist him.

The Rangers were defunded in 1909 and Billy went to work as a "special agent" for the Southern Pacific Railroad, riding cars through New Mexico, Arizona and California. To make him eligible to make arrests, the counties that he rode through made him a deputy sheriff and New Mexico made him a State Officer, and that is how he came to be a member of all three agencies. In 1911, his old boss, Captain Wheeler was elected as sheriff of Cochise County and offered Billy a deputy's position. He was assigned to the mining town of Pearce and supplemented his income as the town constable. He moved his family to Pearce and for a time it seemed as if he had found a real home and had time for his boys.

Early in 1914, things begin to go south for him. Ann became extremely jealous and experienced periods of insanity. One night she dressed as a man and went into town with a six-shooter. As she approached him, he wheeled around with his own pistol drawn and said, "drop it." She did and only then did he get close enough to recognize that he almost killed his wife. It would be better if he had. Not long after, she used a rifle to chase him to a neighbor's house in his nightclothes.

On April 28, she told a friend she was packing up and leaving town but was going to kill Billy first. Around noon time she carried out the threat. The bullet entered the back of his left shoulder, went through both lungs and exited through his right arm at the shoulder. Passersby ran into the home and she told them it was an accident. When they asked Billy, he was unable to speak but gave them a negative nod. He died within fifteen minutes and is buried in the Pearce Cemetery.

Because of delays, she did not go to trial until two years later and was acquitted. Walking out of court a free woman, she remarried in six months. They had a son in 1917. Ann lived for sixty-seven years after she murdered her husband and died in 1981 at 94 years old.

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