

## **William Green Butler**

Helena was the county seat of Karnes County, Texas, for most of the last half of the nineteenth century. It was the self-proclaimed "toughest town on earth." The town was also the birthplace of the "Helena Duel," in which the left hands of two opponents are tied together and each fighter is given a knife with a three-inch blade. The blade was too short to reach a vital organ, the duelists would be whirled around a few times and then slash away at each other until one bled to death. Local crowds would come to watch and even bet on the outcome. Today, the town is just another Texas ghost town due to the actions of William Green Butler, the richest man of the county.

Butler was born on June 20, 1834, in Scott County, Mississippi, to Burnell and Sarah Ann (Ricks) Butler. He was eighteen years old when he moved to Karnes County, Texas, in 1852 with his parents and all twelve siblings. The trip was made before railroads were available and was made in three ox-drawn wagons. Besides the large family, the travelers included seven slaves. They reached their destination on Christmas Eve, 1852, three months after their arduous journey started. They made their home along the San Antonio River and began gathering cattle and developing land that they thought was useless at the time. Very soon William Green Butler, known as Bill or W.G., developed his own spread near Kenedy, Texas. In 1858 he married Adeline Riggs Burris and together they had nine children. Most reports say they had eight children, but they must overlook a son Marion that was born and died on November 9, 1866. The others were Newton, Helen, Lou, Emmett, S. C., T. G., Cora and William G. Jr., not necessarily in that order. The family would always make their home in Karnes County.

Before they could do all of that, the War for Southern Independence got in their way, and Butler volunteered for Confederate service and was mustered into the Escondido Rifles, a company of mounted riflemen raised in Karnes County in July 1861. Later, as a member of Franklin C. Wilkes's 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Texas Cavalry, he was transferred to the Trans-Mississippi Department for service in Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. At the Battle of Fort Hindman, also known as the Battle of Arkansas Post, 33,000 Union soldiers attacked the post containing 5,500 Confederate troops. The Confederates suffered 5,500 casualties, but 4,791 of those were troops who surrendered. When the Union forces ordered the Confederate troops to stack their rifles, William Butler and two others managed to quietly walk away. Their escape was fraught with danger but they eventually reached Confederate lines. They were sent to a refugee camp in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, before returning to service. He served until the end of the war and returned to Texas and never suffered a wound.

The following often-told story relates that coming home at the close of war he found his cattle had scattered and were suffering from thieving bands who were accustomed to go through the country and drive along all the cattle they could find. One such band he located to the Northwest of San Antonio; gathering a number of men to go with him, they set out to overtake these thieves, the leader of whom was known to him to be as bold as he was evil. Bill came on them with their big herd of cattle forty-five miles above San Antonio, they being in plain sight in a valley below, and when the thieves saw the pursuing party, they gathered in a group and stopped; the Butler party kept advancing and when not far away the leader boldly spurred his horse forward to meet Mr. Butler who had done the same and they thus came face to face, both being ready for any eventuality. The man recognized Butler and because he was known everywhere as having the courage of a lion and nerve of steel and the most unswerving honesty and justice, the meeting proved to go after this manner: "What do you want, Mr. Butler?" And the answer, "To cut my cattle from that herd," and "It is all right with me, sir," which was done. When some miles from San Antonio on the trip back, they met Buck Pettus and Tom O'Conner going to hunt for the thieves Butler had just visited. Butler was asked to go back with them and, although he was homeward bound with his own cattle and the going back was hazardous, these men were his friends and he turned and went with them, sending his own herd on with his men and the cutting procedure was performed once

again. This is but an illustration of what it meant to be Bill's friend. Bill believed in "...loyalty to a friend. If you were poor or if you were rich; if you were right or if you were wrong, and you were in trouble, he was with you and for you..."

By 1868 Green and his younger brother, Pleasant "Pleas" Burnell Butler, were driving herds of cattle to the railroad towns of Kansas. By the 1870s he owned 75,000 acres and leased another 25,000 and ran about 10,000 head of cattle. He had become one of south Texas' most important cattlemen. It is estimated that he drove over 100,000 cattle up the trails, making two or three drives per year and becoming one of, if not the, wealthiest men in Karnes County.

For all of Bill's wealth he could not protect the family, especially if they went into the town of Helena, which was sometimes called the toughest town in the west. On August 4, 1879, Bill's brother, George Washington "Wash" Butler, and his friend John Cooper went to Helena looking for a little fun. After a few too many drinks in the local watering holes the two began fussin' with each other. When it got to the point where they took their fight to the street, they shot each dead.

The *San Antonio Express* called Helena a "mean little Confed town with any number of lazy vagabonds lying around, living by their wits." There was also bad blood between Bill and Karnes County Sheriff Edgar Leary. Bill accused Leary of barging into the bedroom of one of his sick daughters while he was chasing a horse thief. Bill strongly advised his sons to stay out of Helena. On the day after Christmas of 1884, Bill's 20-year-old son Emmett chose to disregard the advice and took 22-year-old ranch hand Hugh McDonald to Helena on a drinking spree. With too much to drink, a fight was picked with one of the locals and shots were fired. Sheriff Leary ran to the scene and relieved Emmett and McDonald of their Winchesters. Emmett pulled his revolver and fired at point-blank range into Leary's chest. Supposedly, Leary dropped to his knees, fired one shot and said, "He has killed me. Shoot him." Leary then dropped dead. McDonald then shouted out for Emmett to run as he had killed the sheriff. Emmett jumped on his horse, but the town folks were now firing at him. They shot his horse and then Emmett. Two shots hit him in the right leg and a third in the back of the head. He died the next morning.

The inquest confirmed that Emmett's bullet killed Sheriff Leary and that parties unknown killed Emmett. Emmett became the first burial in what would become the Butler Cemetery in Kenedy, Texas, on December 28, 1884. Sheriff Leary was succeeded by Sheriff Isham Lafayette "Fate" Elder which did nothing to relieve Bill's bad feelings. Bill suspected that Elder was one of the townfolk shooting at Emmett as he made his break. Sheriff Fate Elder then appointed his brother James J. "Bud" Elder as his deputy. Things got a bit complicated when Newton, Bill's oldest son, married Mary Elder, sister to Fate and Bud. The story is still told that Bill rode into Helena with Winchester in hand and demanding to know who shot Emmett. When no one responded, he vowed to return and kill the town. He did return some days later with a group of his armed ranch hands. The presence of the Texas Rangers prevented any bloodshed.

He did kill the town within a year and he did it without firing a shot or killing any of the locals. The San Antonio and Arkansas Pass railroad was laying tracks for Helena. The town was counting on the commercial business the railroad would bring. Bill met with the railroad officials, promised them a right-of-way through his property and a generous offer of financial assistance. The new route provided a financial gain for Karnes City which became the county seat in 1894 and Helena became a ghost town.

On September 6, 1886, there was what was known as a local option election held. The option in this case was to decide if the southern part of Karnes County would allow saloons. The Elders were among the 'dries' and Butlers were with the 'wets.' One of the voting places was a little community between Karnes City and Helena and in Fate Elder's jurisdiction. Around noon, Bill Butler arrived in a buggy that was tied up across the street from C. P. Dailey's store. With Butler were seven family members and ten ranch hands. Two of the ranch hands were Mexicans named Juan Coy and Epitacio Garza. Sheriff Elder had been searching for Coy who

had murdered a black man two weeks earlier. Fate Elder was inside Dailey's store whittling on a piece of wood.

The Thursday morning September 16, 1886 edition of the *San Antonio Daily Express* reported the events that followed on September 6<sup>th</sup> as follows:

At the request of our county attorney I furnish you with the following account of the killing at Daileyville last Monday as gathered from the evidence taken before the Jury of Inquest:

Somewhere about 12 o'clock on the 6th day of September, 1886, at Daileyville, Karnes County, Tex., where a local option election was being held for the Fourth precinct, two Mexicans, Epatallo (sic) Garza (or Garcia), and Juan Coy, came riding up to a hack that was standing about 25 or 30 steps from the southeast corner of C. P. Dailey's store, in front, where they alighted, hitched their horses and pulled from their scabbard a long barreled Winchester gun each, and walked toward and up to the hack with their guns in hand.

Someone at this time remarked that "there were two men with the longest guns he had ever seen," and someone else remarked "there were two men who were violating the law."

At the time, Deputy Sheriff Jack Bailey stepped out of the front door of the store and walked towards the hack where the Mexicans were, and met Newton Butler, where the two, Bailey and Butler, stood in conversation.

Sheriff I. L. Elder was then seen walking rapidly towards the hack, whittling with his knife, which he had in his hand. When near the hack, one of the Mexicans threw up his gun and fired at Sheriff Elder, missing him.

Then Sheriff Elder drew his pistol and tried to fire, but it snapped. Another shot then came from the Mexicans, after which Sheriff Elder staggered. In the next instant Sykes Butler, who had advanced immediately to the rear and a little to the right of Elder, placed his pistol within about four or five inches of the right side of the back part of Sheriff Elder's head and fired, when he (Elder) instantly fell and expired.

The Mexicans and others then began firing rapidly towards the door of the store where J. J. Elder, Deputy Sheriff, is said to have come out. When J. J. Elder came to the door he saw Wm. G. Butler coming out of a gate towards the front of the store very near him, when he (Elder) opened fire on Butler, shooting at him twice before Butler got in any shots; after which Elder and Butler advanced close upon each other and exchanged several shots between them.

Elder was killed and Butler was shot in one ear. Both had their faces powder burnt. Butler fired four or five shots, and Elder emptied his pistol.

Elder had six or eight balls to penetrate his person and two, which glanced (sic) his body, made deep furrows. It is the general supposition that Elder received a fatal wound from the volley fired on him from near the hack before he encountered Butler, as he was known to be a good shot with his pistol and in good practice; hence his bad shooting.

J. J. Elder fought to his death. After he was shot to his knees he still tried to work his pistol, although all the loads were gone, and he died with his pistol cocked and his finger on the trigger.

Poor Jack Bailey took no part in the shooting, for he at once saw that the officers were overpowered and had no earthly chance, as it is said at least 15 or 20 were shooting. He therefore retired to the yard, where some unknown person willfully and most cruelly shot him down, and, although he called out after being shot down, "Don't shoot me again. I don't want to hurt anyone," the murderer cruelly shot him again, from the effect of which wounds he died the next day.

Some have tried to create the impression that Jack Bailey was killed accidentally by a ball from J. J. Elder's pistol, but there is the most unimpeachable evidence that neither Jack Bailey nor Hiram Pullin were in range of Elder's pistol. Henry and Hiram Pullin are supposed to have been killed accidentally, but some persons question that fact. The following is the verdict of the jury of inquest over the bodies of the three men shot dead:

"We, the jury empanelled and sworn to inquire into the cause, manner, etc., of the death of I. L. Elder, Bud Elder and Henry Pullin, find that Henry Pullin came to his death by gun shot fired by someone, striking him accidentally; that I. L. Elder came to his death by gun and pistol shot wounds fired by Epotatio Garza and John or Juan Coy, (called by some Beohola) and Sykes Butler; that Bud Elder came to his death by gun or pistol shot wounds inflicted by a gun or pistol fired by Wm. G. Butler."

(Signed) J. M. Choate, J. A. Martin, John S. Wycar, J. H. Little, J. W. Rutledge, C. A. Conway.

**D. B. Butler, JP Precinct No. 1, Karnes County**

**A side note:** In the crowd of onlookers in Daileyville on that fateful day was Thomas Nolan Pullin who saw the killing of his father Hiram Pullin and uncle Henry Pullin . On January 32, 1947, Thomas became the great grandfather of Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan.

Bill and Sykes were brought to trial for the murders. A series of changes of venue moved the trials from Karnes County to Wilson County in October 1886 and then to DeWitt County in March of 1887.

In January, 1888, a jury found Bill not guilty by reason of self-defense after witnesses stated that the Elder shot first. He was fined \$25.00 for carrying a weapon on election day. After a five-day trial in December 1888, Sykes was also acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. Coy was also charged with murder, but he fled to California where a saloonkeeper shot him dead in 1892.

Supposedly, William Green Butler was indicted for murder twenty times in his lifetime and each time he was acquitted for self-defense. Like many other Old West stories, that is probably an exaggeration on the part of some historian(s).

Adeline died on April 7, 1908 and Bill followed her four years later on June 14, 1912. They are buried next to each other in the family cemetery which is located on the ranch property. It is open to the public.

