

William Milton "Billy" Breckenridge

Billy's Tombstone in the Evergreen Cemetery in Tucson, Arizona, has his name spelled as Breckenridge. That is virtually the only place where it is found to be spelled that way. In his seventies, the former lawman began to write his memoirs. In 1928, they were published as his autobiography under the title: Helldorado: Bringing the Law to the Mesquite and the author is William M. Breckenridge. Billy died three years later on January 31, 1931, of a heart attack, in Tucson, Arizona.

Billy was born in Watertown, Wisconsin, on Christmas day of 1846. In the coming years he would earn a living in a variety of ways; driving a freight wagon, telegraph messenger, soldier, storekeeper, prospector, lumberman, lawman and a surveyor. At 15 he would leave home to join an older brother in Colorado. Three years later he would join Colonel John Chivington's Colorado Cavalry and participate in the infamous Sand Creek Massacre, where it is said he killed one Indian.

By the time he arrived in Arizona in 1876 he was certainly no longer a tenderfoot. He served as deputy sheriff of Phoenix before moving to Tombstone in 1879. Cochise County's first sheriff, John Behan made him a deputy sheriff and in the same year he was appointed as a deputy US Marshal.



William Milton Breckenridge

Billy was known as one of the most courteous and modest peace officers who ever worked in the lawless town of Tombstone. However, he was not to be trifled with. He used a gun only as a last resort. But, when necessary, use it he would, in a fast and accurate manner.

He was present in Tombstone during the famous Gunfight at the OK Corral. He was said to have been on friendly terms with the Clantons, and of course, working under Johnny Behan, is generally perceived to have sided with those opposing the Earps. Many years later, when he wrote his memoirs, he would say that Wyatt Earp was a desperate character.

On March 26, 1882, he was involved in a shootout where he shot the only man he is known for sure to have killed. The night before, two men by the names of Zwing Hunt and Billy Grounds attempted a robbery in which they shot and killed a man before panicking and taking off without a dime. Billy deputized three men to ride with him in a posse and they began to track the two killers. Finding them at the Jack Chandler Ranch near Tombstone, a

gunfight ensued. Though it lasted only seconds, when the smoke cleared, Billy had killed Grounds, and Hunt had been wounded. Unfortunately, one of the deputized men, John Gillespie, was also dead. The other two posse members were wounded but would recover. Hunt would also recover and escape, but was killed by Apache Indians a short time later.

After completing his term of deputy sheriff of Cochise County, Billy returned to Phoenix and served as a deputy U.S. Marshal.

In 1888, Billy accepted a position as a surveyor for Maricopa County. In this capacity, he was soon tasked with surveying the Salt River for potential dam sites. After examining several sites, he chose a site near the confluence of Tonto Creek and the Salt River. Billy insisted that would be the best place for a dam, but it would be more than a decade before construction of the Roosevelt Dam would start in September, 1906, and it would not be completed until 1911.

Billy then accepted an appointment as a railroad detective for Southern Pacific. This resulted in one of his greatest challenges as a lawman. On the night of January 30, 1895, the train was stopped and robbed just outside of Wilcox, Arizona. Billy was dispatched to investigate. The press estimated the loot as \$40,000, but the exact amount was never revealed. Within two days the press had identified five unemployed cowboys as the robbers. By February 7th, it was determined that of the five, only Grant Wheeler and Joe George had any involvement. Several posses were formed to pursue the bandits without success. On February 4th, the pair robbed the same train, but just outside Stein's Pass, New Mexico. This time a wise trainman fooled the pair. When told to disconnect the train from the express car he disconnected all of the train. When the train was three miles down the track where the bandits had hidden their horses, the bandits were shocked to discover the train consisted only of the engine and tender. The bandits did not make an issue of being outwitted. They simply got on their horses and rode away. Again the chase was on, and with the same results. Billy obtained a photo of Wheeler and he distributed it widely. Soon reports of Wheeler being spotted began to roll in.

On April 28th, it was finally determined Wheeler was camped out near Mancos, Colorado. Billy formed a posse and trapped Wheeler in a small ravine. When told to come out, he fired a shot. After a long period of silence, it was found he had shot himself rather than be arrested. George was not with him and apparently had the money. Neither George nor the money was ever found.



Billy's Tombstone in Tucson's Evergreen Cemetery

Sources: Old West Magazine, Summer 1993 article, *A Challenge for Billy Breckenridge*, by Harold L. Edwards; and Old West Legends: William Breckenridge—Lawman, Surveyor, Author