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## Another Billy the Kid?



**Above appears the famous tintype of Billy the Kid on the left, with a photo of claimant John Miller on the far right. In the middle, Miller's image is superimposed over the Kid's. This originally appeared in *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1991.**

In conjunction with my presentation of the facts regarding Billy the Kid claimant Brushy Bill Roberts, I decided to do the same for a lesser known claimant, John Miller. Due to the fact that Miller never obtained the fame of Roberts, he has not been as deeply researched, and therefore his life is even more mysterious and cloudy than Brushy's. Another thing that makes Miller unique as a claimant is that he never told his story publicly. Rather, his claim only began to receive recognition when his various friends and associates began to propagate it after his death. Since Miller never publicly spoke of his claim, all that we know of it is based on second-hand information, making it almost a claim of a claim. Below is a synopsis of what we *do* know of Miller's life.

John Miller first comes into historical record on Aug. 8, 1881, when he was married to a Mexican girl named Isadora at Las Vegas, New Mexico Territory. At the quick wedding ceremony, Miller was reported to be wearing a pistol on his hip and to have appeared weak with a relatively fresh bullet wound easily visible through his shirt. Shortly after they were wed, Miller and his new bride left Vegas for the west, with Isadora driving a fully-loaded wagon and Miller riding a horse in front with a herd of seven head of cattle. Apparently traveling at night and sleeping during the day, the couple eventually made it to Albuquerque, and from there continued on west until they arrived at El Morro. There they stayed for a few days before moving on to Reserve, a mining town, where they remained until Miller recovered from his chest wound. When better fit to travel, the Millers moved on to the Quemado area, where Miller acquired a job as a cook on the cattle company known as Nation's Ranch. Soon after, Miller became engaged in a gunfight with a Mexican ranchhand. Although neither Miller nor the ranchhand were wounded in the fight, the incident cost Miller his job and he and Isadora were again forced to flee, this time back to El Morro, and from there to the Zuni Mountains, in north-central New Mexico Territory. Along the way, the Millers met prominent cattleman and rancher Jesus Eriacho, who hired Miller to look after a section of his large herd for the next five years. When the five years were over, Eriacho promised Miller he could have half of the new cattle that would be born over that span. Throughout the five years, the Millers lived in caves and abandoned cabins, and kept mostly to themselves. When Miller's job was completed, Eriacho fulfilled his promise to him and Miller soon after built a house and ranch for himself on a hillside south of Ramah and near Ojo Pescado, a site that would later be known as Miller's Canyon.

Over the next several years, Miller established himself as a talented horseman and prominent rancher and continually added to his house. He and Isadora made many friends in Ramah-Zuni community and were generally well-liked by all. The couple even managed to gain something of a "good Samaritan" reputation for housing and feeding travelers and helping out their neighbors when they were down on their luck. However, Miller also apparently had the visage of a fugitive from the law, always wearing a pistol and having a ready rifle by the door of his house. Miller frequently delighted in displaying his incredible skill with a pistol, and enjoyed teaching some of his tricks to his younger friends. His friends later reported that Miller loved to tell stories of Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War and often displayed numerous bullet scars on his body. Another favorite trick of his was to have someone tie a rope around his wrists as tight as they could, then merely slip his hands out with the greatest of ease. However, Miller always made it a point to not come out and actually say that he was Billy the Kid. Nevertheless, nearly all who he told his stories to connected the dots and believed that he truly was the famous outlaw. On a few rare occasions though, Miller would confide in a few friends that he deeply trusted that he was the Kid. In equally rare instances when Miller would get drunk, he would also blurt out that he was the Kid, only to renege on the claim when he'd sobered up. Isadora, however, who only spoke Spanish, was far more open in admitting that Miller and the Kid were one and the same. Friends also noted that the couple kept a large trunk with them that was seemingly their most important possession, and that they always kept locked, leading many to believe that the trunk's contents were artifacts from Miller's life as the Kid. Despite the fact that his neighbors believed Miller was the Kid, none of them apparently

thought much of it or thought any less of him as a person.

In the late 1890s or early 1900s, Miller and his wife adopted a two-year-old Navajo boy who apparently was unwanted by his mother. The Millers named the child Max and raised him as their son, never having offspring of their own. Meanwhile, as the Ramah-Zuni area was plagued by horse thieves and cattle rustlers, Miller found himself often acting as an intermediary of sorts between his neighboring ranchers and the outlaws. Miller was friendly with the rustlers, often feeding and sheltering them, and would bargain with them for the return of his neighbors' animals. His connection with the outlaws, his neighbors believed, stemmed from his life as Billy the Kid. One of his friends would later claim that in 1902 Miller traveled to Montana with six other outlaws and there robbed a bank of \$8,000, which Miller would later use to support himself in times of financial struggle.

By 1918, the Millers' fortunes had turned for the worse. Severe drought and pestilence had ruined their ranch, Isadora was losing her eyesight and had a useless hand due to it being caught in a gopher trap, and Miller himself was suffering from rheumatism. To cap it all off, Max Miller, who had enlisted in the U.S. Army and was fighting in World War I, was reported missing-in-action in Germany. Deciding it was time to move on, the Millers gathered their belongings, left their ranch, and headed towards Arizona. Upon arrival in Arizona, they settled in the small town of San Simon, on the border of Mexico. Their luck took a brief upturn there when they were visited by their son Max, who had not died in WWI and had been discharged from service. Hearing of the mineral springs in the town of Buckeye that may help his rheumatism, Miller and his wife moved there in 1920. Miller soon got a job as a horse trainer on a nearby ranch, and after he saved up enough money, he built another ranch of his own near the town of Liberty, not far from Buckeye. As in the Ramah-Zuni area, Miller made himself quite popular with his neighbors, many of whom also began to believe that he was Billy the Kid. Miller was also known to listen to a radio program about Billy the Kid and get furious when it would report historical inaccuracies over the Kid's life.

Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the Miller house caught fire, with Isadora inside. Miller and friends managed to pull her out of the building before it was entirely consumed, but she was already dead, most likely from smoke inhalation. Following Isadora's death, Miller's physical and mental health quickly began to decline. When he fell off a roof he was repairing, his son Max decided it was finally time he be taken to a retirement home. On Mar. 12, 1937, Miller was admitted into the Pioneer Home in Prescott, Arizona. Throughout the next few months, Miller made repeated attempts to get a friend of his or his son to visit him, so that he could finally "set the record straight." However, all his friends and his son were too busy to reach him in time, and he died on Nov. 7, 1937. He was buried in the Pioneer Home Cemetery, with a memorial plaque bearing his name along with the names of several other pioneers buried within the cemetery.

Following his death, the trunk he and Isadora owned wound up as property of the courts in Phoenix. A court representative took the trunk with him to Ramah, looking for Miller's heir. While interviewing Miller's old friends, the representative reportedly told them that the contents of the trunk proved Miller was the Kid. Nevertheless, no heir was able to be located and the current whereabouts of the trunk are unknown.

Below are lists giving the evidence that supports Miller's claim, disputes it, and several unanswered questions. In order to first read the details of differing accounts in regards to the night of July 14, 1881, [click here](#). Also, read the various discrepancies and questions surrounding all the accounts of the shooting by [clicking here](#).

Lastly, to see more photos of John Miller, [click here](#).

## Evidence for John Miller as Billy the Kid

- John Miller closely resembled Billy the Kid physically, having similar sloping shoulders, buck-teeth, out-turned thumbs, heavy brow, small hands, big ears, blue eyes, and numerous bullet wounds on his body. He also resembled him in other characteristics, such as being fluent in Spanish, incredibly dexterous with pistols and rifles, having a penchant for making friends of just about everyone he knew, having a quick-temper and equally quick sense of humor, and being very generous.
- According to his friends, Miller knew a tremendous amount about the life of Billy the Kid and the events of the Lincoln County War.
- Miller reportedly was always on guard, and acted like a man being hunted by the law. He seldom discussed his past openly, indicating he was hiding something.
- Also according to his friends, Miller an honest and trustworthy individual, not the type to lie. Therefore, when he confided in a select few that he was truly Billy the Kid, he was believed without question.
- Miller was known to have a good rapport with cattle and horse thieves, which possibly stemmed from his time as Billy the Kid.
- So far, no record of John Miller has been discovered before Aug. 8, 1881, less than a month after Billy the Kid was allegedly killed by Pat Garrett.

## Evidence against John Miller as Billy the Kid

- John Miller never told his story officially and the vast majority of his claim is based around second-hand information and speculation from those who knew him.
- In a 1900 census report, Miller stated he was born in 1857. In a 1910 report, he claimed he was born in 1852. On the memorial plaque at the Pioneer Home Cemetery where Miller is buried, his birthdate is listed as 1850. All three of these dates would make Miller older than Billy the Kid. Although it's possible Miller would lie about his age to throw off potential pursuers, it's not likely he would make himself older, but younger, since the Kid was known to look far younger than he actually was.
- Miller himself told several friends that he only knew Billy the Kid, and worked as a ranchhand for the Chisum brothers.
- Miller owned a .45 pistol with an extra-long barrel that he claimed he used as Billy the Kid. However, Billy was known to use .44s with normal sized barrels, or the smaller .41s. Furthermore, Miller's pistol had several notches on it, which he claimed were for the men he killed. Billy did not have such notches on his pistols, and it's doubtful that any other gunfighter did either.

## Unanswered questions

- If John Miller was the Kid, how did he escape from Pat Garrett at Fort Sumner? Apparently, Miller told different versions of this to different friends. One version is that he was shot in the chest a week or so before July 14, and that Isadora was nursing him back to health when Garrett accidentally killed a Mexican sheep-herder in the Maxwell house. Another version is that Miller was himself shot

by Garrett in the Maxwell house, and played dead while Garrett quickly inspected him. When Miller was then carried away by his Mexican friends to be prepared for burial, he showed signs of life and was hidden by Isadora. Meanwhile, a Mexican who died a day earlier was placed in the casket meant for Billy and buried. In this latter scenario, Garrett never learned that Billy was not killed.

- If Miller was the Kid, how did he come by the wagon, provisions, and small herd of cattle that he and Isadora had in their possession when they arrived in Las Vegas on Aug. 8, 1881?
- Who was Isadora really? She claimed she lived at Fort Sumner when her husband (as Billy the Kid) was allegedly killed by Garrett, but no record exists showing an Isadora living in Sumner in 1881. It has been theorized that she was really Manuela Bowdre, the widow of Charlie Bowdre, but there seems to be evidence that Manuela married someone else after Charlie's death. Also, if Miller wasn't Billy the Kid, why did Manuela go along with the story that he was? Surely she would have known for sure whether he was or not.
- What were the contents of Miller's mysterious trunk that allegedly proved he was the Kid? Furthermore, where is the trunk today?