

[Early Days in Lincoln County]

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Sep. 30, 1937 EARLY DAYS IN LINCOLN COUNTY

Early in the spring of 1876, Frank Lesnett, and I were united in marriage in the city of Chicago Illinois, after a joyous honeymoon, my husband left me in Chicago, he came west and settled on the Ruidoso, located at the foot of the White Mountains, he bought a half interest in the Dowlin Mill, and sent for me. I came by train to LaJunta Colorado, and from there by stage to Fort Stanton, where my husband met me and we drove on to our ranch home.

When I arrived at the ranch I was happily surprised: It had every thing to do with' there was a river runing near the big two story adobe house that was called the Ruidoso, which means noisy in Spanish. There were tall pine trees and wild flowers, that were of so many varities and colors that I would not even attempt to name them, all around everywhere. The ranch was beautiful!

I was very happy in my new home, and to add to our happiness a son was born to us during the first year, whom we called Irvin. The only thing to mar my happiness was the Indians would go on the warpath, and the Lincoln County war, was brewing.

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In the spring of 1878, I took my young son and went to visit the proud grandparents of Irvin in Chicago. When I returned I found that Frank had built a general store and hotel, so that I would not get as lonesome as I seemed to before I left.

I insisted on taking charge of it myself, but my trade in the store soon grew until I had to have a helper. Most of my customers were the neighboring ranchers and Indians, but the red men were very orderly around the Mill, because they were treated with respect, they appreciated this and never harmed us in any way. Of course, the Indians were not supposed to have "firewater", but they always managed to get it in some way. There was a band of thieves who were preying upon the Indians as well as the various ranchers within a few days ride. The Indians went on the war path and were having one of their dances to ward off the evil spirits and the Chief, Augustine, came to the mill and wanted some "firewater", I told him I just couldn't give him any as I would get in trouble, but he begged so hard and said he would never tell where he got it, so I finally told him I would put it in a certain place, and he could go and get it. Augustine took the whiskey.

That night the Indians and thieves met, and cattle stealing wasn't practised quite so openly after that.

I was so scared for fear my husband would find out that I had given Augustine whiskey, but he never did. I made a loyal friend out of this Indian and he gave me many lovely presents made by his tribe, among them was beautiful buckskin suit, moccasins and beads to go with it. I took it to Chicago on my next visit and wore it to a masked ball and won the prize.

When Jennie Mae, my second child, was about nine months old, "The Kid" came to our house. He came with a boy by the name of Jess Evans, and was introduced as Billie Bonney. Could this be the notorious "Billy the Kid?" I tho'ught, surely not. He looked just like any other seventeen year old boy, and not in the least like a desperado. He was very fond of children, and liked Irvin and Jennie Mae at once. He called my little boy "Pardie"

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and always wanted to hold the baby. He would take the two of them for a ride on his gray pony. He also had a little dog which was very spirited. He would jump up on the "Kid" until he would laughingly pull his gun and begin firing into the ground, the dog would playfully follow every puff of dust, yelping joyfully. Little did he realize that if one of those pellets of lead went amiss that he would be no more, but he was perfectly safe, as "The Kid" was one of the quickest, most accurate shots in the Southwest. He often said, however, that he wished he were as accurate with a six-gun as he was with a rifle. He was good with a pistol but excellent with a rifle.

I remember soon after the battle that was fought at Blazre's Mill, that Billy came to our house and was telling me about the fight they had with Buckshot Roberts. He said he heard the shooting and walked around the corner of the house to see what it was all about. One of his men called out to him, but not in time to keep Roberts from shooting at him. The bullet took a nick out of his shirt. During the battle Dick Brewer, wondering why Roberts didn't shoot, peeked up over the wood pile and as he did so Roberts fired from the house, and Brewer fell, the top of his head shot off. Early in the battle Roberts had been shot through the abdomen and was weakening rapidly. George Coe stuck his gun up to fire and Roberts shot, taking the thumb off as cleanly as a doctor could have done with his surgical knife. I said, "Billy, don't you think that you did wrong when you killed Roberts?" "Well, I didn't start it, and I think that Brewer killed him," he answered sullenly. "But it wasn't fair, seven to one." I protested. "Well, he was spying on us." The Kid knew it wasn't fair, and he wanted to fight fair.

One incident at the close of the Lincoln County War, which was only one of the things which made it the bloodiest in the history of the West, the two sides, one for Law and the other for Lawlessness, were engaged in a war in which almost every cattleman in the county was somehow involved. Strange as it may seem, the Kid, an outlaw joined the forces for law and order.

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The lawless led by Morton, had driven the Kid and his band into the McSween home in Lincoln, the Kid having his forces organized, arranged the McSween home with loop holes, as he talked to McSween, who was very religious and always carried a Bible with him, he held out a gun toward him. McSween indignately pushed it away, saying, "I trust in the Lord, I know He will help /me —bring me safely thro'ugh," "all right, you trust in your Bible, but I trust in my six-gun," replied The Kid cheerfully, patting it.

The McSween home was soon surrounded by the Murphy gang, and firing became very heavy, knowing that all the men would go down fighting, Mrs. McSween, decided to go to a troop of soldiers that she knew was near. She got out of the house, but when she arrived, the soldiers firmly refused to help to help her. Her journey had been in vain! But the soldiers did take an interest in the battle, and decided to go to Lincoln, to see the fight, Mrs. McSween seeing them, and thinking that they had changed their minds and had come to stop the fight, went out to meet them. After looking things over they decided that there was nothing they could do and retreated out of range of the bullets and watched the fight continue. Murphy's men knew that they would never get The Kid and his band unless they could drive them out of the house.

So they soaked a barrel with coal-oil and rolled it down the hill to set the house afire. The house began to burn, but the battle did not stop. The Kid kept moving his men from room to room until they reached the last room. He knew that they would have to take a desperate chance for their freedom. The only escape was to run across a thirty foot space behind the house, roll under the fence and go along the bed of the Bonito River.

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He called his men to the back door and explained the plan to them. One by one they started for the fence, and one by one they fell, either dead or mortally wounded. At last McSween was to go.

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“Run out of that door like a streak of greased lightning, roll under the fence and hit for the Bonita River, they you'll see Mrs. McSween in the morning.”

As McSween reached the door he drew himself up every inch of his height, and stepped dignitly onto the steps.

“Here I am-I'm McSween,” he called in a listless voice, he knew what would follow.

Fifty shots answered him— and his body was riddled with holes. Then there was a lull in the fray. They knew who was coming next. The Kid hitched his belt a little tighter, inspected his guns, and with one in each hand ran thro'ugh the blazing door. Immediately he was a target for every man in Murphy's gang, as someone yelled, “Here comes the Kid.”

Many bullets were wasted for the Kid, jumping from side to side as he ran, was a very illusive target. Each gun was aimed with care and each bullet winged with hatred as it sought to find a way to his heart as he crossed that space of thirty feet.

But not one touched his body, tho'ugh they ripped his clothes to shreds. His score was one dead and two marked for life—one shot thro'ugh the jaws and the other lost the lobe of his left ear.

As he rolled under the fence a mocking laugh floated back to them. It is impossible to describe the horror of the deeds that were committed during the Lincoln County War.

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Many unknown graves dot the surrounding country and many human bones lie bleaching in the sun for they carried on guerrilla warfare. When one party met the other while riding thro'ugh the hills they just opened fire, either pushing forward or retreating as luck chanced to given them opportunity to do. If all the men were accounted for their graves might reach from Roswell to White Oaks. One evening when it was peaceful and quite on the ranch

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and all retired, the silence was broken by a series of shots in quick succession. I snatched Jennie Mae and Irvin from their beds and ran towards the river. As I approached the great triangle used to call the cowboys to meals, I paused to give it several strikes, but this was not necessary for the men were already on their stomachs working their way toward the house.

Thinking that Indians has attacked, they had hardly started toward the house, when the firing ceased as quickly as it has began. When the men got into the house and looked around, they found that a box of cartridges that had been on top of the mantle had been knocked by something into the fire. When I told the Kid about this he asked me if I had a gun.

“Heavens, no,” I replied laughing, “I wouldn't know how to shoot even if I had one. “Take this one,” he said, holding one of his guns / out to me, “ and I'll teach you to shoot when I come back.” Poor boy never came back to our house, the next time I saw him he was a prisoner, guarded by Bell and Olinger. Olinger knowing that I liked The Kid, gleefully invited me to the hanging, I turned my head and blinked fast to keep back the tears. Suddenly The Kid turned to me and said “Mrs. Lesnett they can't hang me if I'm not there, can they?” I straightened and turned.

“Of course they can't, Billy,” I said and it seemed to encourage him.

It was just a few days after this that The Kid killed his two guards at Lincoln, and made his escape.

His freedom was not to last very long. Pat Garrett killed him at Fort 7 Sumner, about two months later.

Narrator: Mrs. A. E. Lesnett, Age 82, Carrizozo, New Mexico