

WILLIE BOY

The West's Last Famous Manhunt



WILLIE BOY—THE WEST’S LAST FAMOUS MANHUNT

By Michael T. “Doc” Johnson XNGH, HA II

Author’s Introduction

The saga of Willie Boy, a Chemehuevi Indian from what is now Billy Holcomb Country, took place in 1909, more than a century ago. The story, however, is still alive, as evidenced by the release of a new book on the subject in 2020. Head Abbot Mark German has expressed a personal interest in the story, since it unfolds in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, took place near our Clampsite, and because Willie Boy is referred to in the Clamper ceremony of receiving the ineffable Staff of Relief. In addition, it was the focus of our chapter’s 1994 HEMORRHOID Trip. I have also been interested in the story since reading Harry Lawton’s book, *Willie Boy: A Desert Manhunt*, sometime in the late 1960s. Being somewhat more naïve then than now, I took Lawton’s telling at face value. Clifton Trafzer’s 2020 book, *Willie Boy & The Last Western Manhunt*, has shed a new, more balanced light on the subject. All these things combined seem to make this a good time to present the story anew.

There is considerable confusion and controversy over the true facts of the event. Lawton states in the foreword to his book that he has written it in what he calls a “reconstructional” style, which I would call historical fiction, with which I have no problem. He says that he derived his facts “from newspaper accounts, interviews with surviving posse members and their descendants, a study of Indian Bureau records, files of law enforcement agencies and all pertinent court and municipal documents.” A glaring omission to this list, however, is any contact with or input from Willie Boy’s people, the Chemehuevi, or as they call themselves, *Nuwuvi*. Trafzer has remedied this omission by interviewing descendants of the William Mike family and other Chemehuevi elders. This took place after Trafzer was contacted by actor Jason Momoa in regard to making a movie, *The Last Manhunt*, about the saga from the Chemehuevi perspective. The movie is due out in 2024. Unlike 1969’s *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, starring Robert Redford, Robert Blake, and Katherine Ross, it is an attempt to get closer to the actual facts by incorporating the Chemehuevi viewpoint, rather than being simply an attempt to make a Hollywood blockbuster. This article is an attempt to find a sensible, logical approach to the controversy, one that is hopefully closer to history than myth, more history than Hollywood. It contains my own personal opinions, is prepared for a Clamper audience, and is not to be considered a definitive, scholarly treatment of the subject.

WILLIE BOY'S SAGA BEGINS

Little is known about Willie Boy prior to 1909, except that he was born in 1881 to Mary Snyder in an adobe house in Chemehuevi Valley, on the California shore of Lake Havasu. The area is now a part of the Chemehuevi Indian Reservation. As a young man he ventured outside his village to work as a cowboy on nearby ranches. A white rancher or miner allegedly taught him to shoot, and he developed into an exceptionally good rifle shot. He was also a Chemehuevi runner, which requires a short explanation here. In pre-historic times, the Mojaves and neighboring Chemehuevi had a tradition of endurance runners, men who were able to cross the Mojave Desert to the Pacific coast in just a few days, to trade and visit with the coastal tribes. They found their way from waterhole to waterhole by reciting what might be thought of as “map songs,” passed down orally from generation to generation, giving specific directions to guide them on their way. The Indians in question sometimes referred to this as running “in the old way” or “in the magical way.” This helps explain how he was able to stay ahead of a mounted posse while on foot.

The press played fast and loose with the facts of the case in order to “jazz up” the story to sell more newspapers, just as like the media does today. Willie Boy is sometimes referred to in the contemporary press as Billy Boy, without any basis in fact, probably just because it “had a ring to it.” Similarly, his prospective wife is sometimes referred to as Isoleta or Lolita, the latter probably to spice up the narrative by equating her with the sexually precocious character in the Vladimir Nabokov novel of the same name, published in 1955. It is clear that she was known to her own people as Carlota. In the same manner, her father, William Mike, who was an important and influential man among the Chemehuevi, is referred to as Mike Boniface, evidently in reference to the former St. Boniface Indian School in Banning. Right from the outset, the press muddied the waters to such an extent that the actual facts were practically unrecognizable, a practice that would only increase as the manhunt evolved.

Likewise, Carlota is said to be 14 years old, adding an element of pedophilia. In reality she was 16 years old, had duly passed the tribal rites and ceremonies of womanhood, and was properly considered an adult member of the community, acceptable for marriage. What is omitted in Lawton's account, and those of the contemporary press, is that according to tribal law the couple's marriage was considered to be taboo. Powerful *Nuwuvi* cultural norms state that marriage within a certain degree of kinship is forbidden. Willie Boy and Carlota clearly fell within this range, meaning that a marriage between them would be a form of incest. They were cousins, some say first cousins, but at any rate far too closely related for marriage. Despite changing times and

an uneasy existence alongside increasing numbers of Anglos at the turn of the 20th century, the young couple were brought up in mainstream Chemehuevi culture and would have had to know, as did the whole community, that their marriage could not be condoned.

Sometime around 1900 Willie Boy moved to Victorville, where his sister was living. He is listed as a resident there in the 1900 census, which also shows him as the guardian of two young Indian orphan boys. He was a natural athlete, and in addition to being a Chemehuevi runner, he was a good baseball player. While in Victorville, Willie Boy had his first recorded brush with the law. A fistfight broke out between Indian and non-Indian baseball players, and predictably for the time, some of the Indians, including Willie Boy, were arrested. He spent approximately a month in jail, which apparently soured him on Victorville.

Despite this occurrence, Willie Boy was known locally as a good cowboy and a good worker who did not gamble or drink to excess, a crack shot and excellent hunter, and was generally considered a steady, dependable young man. After his release, he and his two young wards relocated to Twentynine Palms, known to the Indians as the Oasis of Mara. This was a place where Serranos from the San Bernardino Mountains and Chemehuevis from the desert had lived peaceably and cooperatively for over forty years. As young people like Willie Boy and his sister moved out of their villages to seek work in towns and on ranches, Chemehuevi elders abandoned their desert *rancherias* to spend their later years at the Oasis.

Willie Boy's route from Victorville to Twentynine Palms probably followed old Indian trails parallel to today's Highways 18 and 247, through Apple and Lucerne Valleys. Their route would have passed Rabbit Springs, Chimney Rock (site of a 1986 Billy Holcomb Chapter plaque), and Giant Rock near Landers. The trio skirted Ruby Mountain, which would loom large in later events. From there, the trail continued to the site of present-day Joshua Tree and on to the Oasis of Mara. The *Nuwuvi* had lived here from the 1860s, the Serranos from time immemorial. Willie Boy and the two orphan boys lodged with his grandmother, and his mother lived there from time to time, although she was never a permanent resident.

Here Willie Boy encountered his cousin Carlota, daughter of William and Maria Mike. William Mike was a shaman, a man with great spiritual power, and was the chief of the Chemehuevi at Twentynine Palm. He is said to have been an intimidating figure who kept his people under strict control and enforced close adherence to traditional *Nuwuvi* beliefs and customs. As such, he expected his children and relatives to set a good example for others. In this role, he would determine who might be a suitable match for his daughters, who were expected to marry someone of correspondingly high status.

According to Clara True, Indian Agent at the Morongo Indian Reservation, Willie Boy was "a good laborer" who did not drink or gamble. She went on to describe Carlota as "physically a splendid specimen of Indian girlhood," saying that she had been raised in

a family of leaders and had been taught well “in the ways of her primitive people.” She may have received some formal education at the St. Boniface Indian School in Banning, near the Gilman Ranch. It is said by family members that the Boniface surname was attached to the Mike family because some of their children had attended school there.

It was at Twentynine Palms that the attraction grew between Willie Boy and Carlota. They had to know that William Mike would never consent to Willie Boy as a match for his daughter: he was twelve years her senior, was not of high social standing, and most importantly, was far too closely related to marry. The couple had been exposed to new, “modern” ways of thinking in their interactions with white settlers and ranchers, and like young people of all eras, had a desire to follow new paths and leave tradition behind.

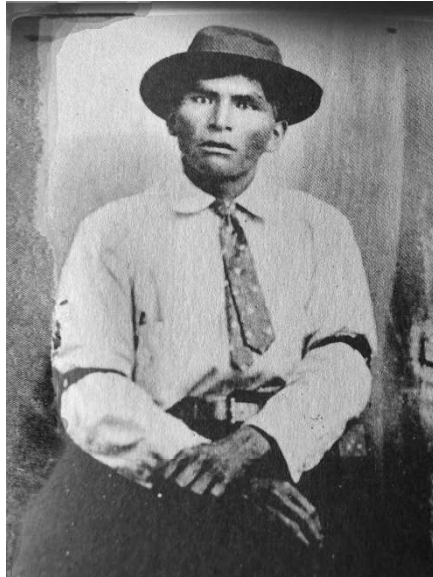
One night, as Carlota herded her father’s horses into their corral, Willie Boy approached her and proposed marriage. They decided to elope and go off together to start a new kind of life in the wider world around them. They fully understood that in doing so they were going against the traditional values of their families and turning their backs on their community and their upbringing, but they both wanted each other, and they acted on that desire.

The people at Twentynine Palms were aghast at this behavior, deeming it at the very least irresponsible, and at worst a reprehensible attack on the ethical values of the entire Southern Piute people, especially the Chemehuevi, the southernmost members of this larger group. This sense of great harm being done to the community still exists today among contemporary Southern Piutes, and the tragic story is still known. A contemporary Chemehuevi elder summed it all up by saying “they wanted it, but the families couldn’t let it happen.”

As soon as the deed was discovered, Carlota’s and Willie Boy’s families organized a pursuit to find the couple and bring them home. The hunt was led by Segundo Chino, a Pass Cahuilla Indian who was also part Chemehuevi. As a person related to Willie Boy, it would have been his familial duty and spiritual obligation to bring back the couple, who had broken so many tribal traditions. He would later play a major part in the hunt for Willie Boy.

The wayward couple was soon discovered “somewhere in the Mojave Desert” and brought back to the Oasis of Mara. They were separated by the tribal elders, and Willie Boy was severely reprimanded for his bad behavior. He was told, in the strongest terms, “not to look at her again.” Tribal members, including his own family, banished him from Twentynine Palms. This did not dampen his ardor for Carlota, but made Willie Boy realize that William Mike was a powerful person, both physically and spiritually, and he was understandably afraid of the older man. Bowing to the inevitable, he left the Oasis, probably in a resentful mood.

After his expulsion, Willie Boy drifted south to the Coachella Valley and vicinity in search of work, eventually landing in Banning. He earned a reputation as an intelligent and productive worker who showed up on time and didn’t drink or gamble. During this



Picture of Willie Boy taken at Banning a few days before William Mike's death

period he is said to have worked as a cowboy, hay baler, woodcutter, and brickmaker. He eventually wound up at the Gilman Ranch, near Highland Springs, north of Banning. During that summer of 1909 he became friendly with the Gilman family, even rooming with their son Arthur.

While he was forging a good reputation at the Gilman Ranch, Carlota's life at Twentynine Palms followed a more restricted course. She moved in with her "auntie and uncle," Jim and Matilda Pine, who were leaders of the Serrano people at the Oasis. They, along with *Nuwuvi* women living there, undertook to impress on her that a young, unmarried Chemehuevi woman had a duty to be obedient to her parents, especially in such important matters as marriage and sexual relations with her cousin. She remained at the Oasis until late spring of 1909, when the Mike family prepared to travel to the Gilman Ranch, where they traditionally worked during the summer and fall. They picked fruit, cut and baled hay, tended the livestock, and performed many other tasks. Their wages were used to buy clothing, axes, shovels, tools, guns and ammunition, sugar, shoes, coffee, etc., which also provided a welcome boom for local merchants.

The night before their departure there was a violent thunderstorm, accompanied by torrential rain. The water flowed from the mountains down toward the Oasis. When the flood arrived, sinkholes opened up and the water disappeared into the earth. William Mike, probably already distressed due to recent events, took this as a bad omen, and felt that dangerous times lay ahead.

During this annual migration, most of the inhabitants of the Oasis of Mara would trek for several days across the desert to the Gilman Ranch, while the older people, including Willie Boy's grandmother and aunts, stayed at the Oasis to watch over things while the others were away. Also staying behind was his mother, who was not known as such to people outside of the Indian community.

The little caravan largely followed the route of today's Highway 62 past the sites of Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, and Morongo Valley, which did not exist at the time. They

descended southward to the edge of the Coachella Valley, probably via Big Morongo Canyon, and camped on the Whitewater River north of Palm Springs. Relations were friendly between the Indians and the Gilmans, and with William Mike as the Indian foreman, work crews were quickly established and tasks assigned.

The Gilmans knew nothing of Willie Boy's and Carlota's history, and it is not known if the young couple were even aware that they would see each other again at the ranch. At any rate, the two reconnected, flirted with each other, and likely discussed eloping again. This time Carlota spoke out against such drastic action, and insisted on obtaining her father's blessing. Willie Boy, perhaps out of respect for Carlota and/or fear of William Mike's retribution, agreed to speak with him, knowing all the while that he could not give his blessing. Being so much in love, however, they might have thought that William Mike could be talked around to it. This was a clash between the age-old culture of the Southern Piutes and the desire of the young people to throw off the old ways and make their own way in a new and changing world.

Probably to give himself more confidence in confronting Carlota's father, Willie Boy took Arthur Gilman's loaded .30-30 rifle, and at around 9 p.m. went to William Mike's tent. Opinions vary as to what took place, but somehow the rifle discharged, hitting Carlota's father near the left eye, killing him instantly. As there were no witnesses to the event, speculation was rampant as to exactly what happened and what motives were present.

Almost all Chemehuevis felt that Willie Boy did not have any intent to murder his prospective father-in-law. They were shocked by events, feeling that the couple had been permanently separated after their elopement, and surprised that they were again making plans. They claimed that William Mike was taken aback to see Willy Boy in his tent, got mad, and a struggle over the gun ensued. It seems most likely to them that William Mike grabbed the barrel of the rifle, causing it to fire. There were powder burns on his face, indicating that it had discharged at very close range.

Contemporary newspaper articles wrote that Willie Boy had murdered William Mike in cold blood, shooting him while he was sleeping, in order to kidnap his daughter. Just as today, the media of the time reveled in blood, gore, and lurid depictions of depraved behavior, with maybe a little sex thrown in. Without the slightest shred of evidence, reporters stated that Willie Boy murdered Mike, threatened to kill the entire Mike family, and forcibly took Carlota against her will, leading her into the desert where she was repeatedly raped, tortured, and eventually killed when she could no longer keep up. There is no history of any violence of this sort on Willie Boy's part before this, his worst known crime being a fistfight between opposing baseball teams. It really is quite amazing to a modern reader, even given the state of news "reporting" in 2022, how a whole story, which continued to grow each passing day, was created so readily out of thin air. Newspaper sales increased, the equivalent of ratings or poll numbers going up today.

Whatever the means or the motive, William Mike was dead from a shot fired from Willie Boy's rifle. At this point there was no going back. Willie Boy wanted Carlota to go with him, and she did. Even though her father had been killed, she had wanted all along to be Willie Boy's wife. They left, headed southeast toward Whitewater, undoubtedly eager to put some distance between themselves and the ranch. Once again, the young couple had flaunted tribal mores and traditions, and were again on the run. Even worse, this time a man had been killed and the white legal establishment would soon be involved. It was clear to all that great spiritual damage had been done to the community as a whole, and that there could be no good outcome.

The papers said that Willie Boy threatened the Mike family, which Indian sources dispute, but nonetheless, Matilda Mike took her family into the nearby hills and spent the night there. In the morning, the Indian Police from Morongo Reservation were called, including Segundo Chino, against whom Willie Boy might have had bad blood dating from his previous elopement with Carlota. The Gilmans called Riverside County Sheriff's Deputies in Banning, thus bringing county law enforcement into the picture.

Right from the start, the press got things wrong. They stated that an Indian named Billy Boy had killed Mike Boniface and had fled with his 14-year-old daughter, that he had crept up on the old man while sleeping and killed him with a shotgun, and then forced Carlota to run away with him. Willie Boy was portrayed as a drunken fiend, when there was ample evidence to the contrary. The fact that the couple was deeply in love and that Carlota went willingly just did not seem to make sense to white readers. At any rate, they fled the ranch and traveled to the Whitewater River near Palm Springs. There, they decided to head for the Mojave Desert, as Willie Boy was desert-wise and knew its trails, waterholes, and food sources. They apparently ascended Big Morongo Canyon, just east of today's Highway 62, into Morongo Basin, then went north to Pipes Canyon, near present-day Pioneertown. They were on foot, but moving fast, putting distance between them and the posse that had been formed in Banning the day after William Mike was killed.

The posse tracked them to The Pipes, near Pioneertown. There are petroglyphs in the canyon here, and the preposterous claim was made by a posse member that some of these were messages left by Carlota to help them find and rescue her from her captivity. It was also stated that she drew symbols in the dirt that said "My heart is gone. I will be dead soon," or words to that effect. The inconvenient fact that the Chemehuevi had no form of written signs or language at this time was not mentioned.

Here, near The Pipes, the posse claimed to have discovered the body of Carlota, lying face down in the rocks, dead of a gunshot wound in the back. They claimed that Willie Boy had killed her when she could no longer keep up. Now Willie Boy was portrayed as a double murderer, and once again the press had a field day, portraying him as a crazed, demented Indian and a sexual abuser.

The Chemehuevi have a different view of events, one that seems to make more sense to the author of this article. According to them, Willie Boy left Carlota in a safe spot in the rocks and went to forage for food. He left her a goatskin water bag and his coat to keep her warm. She was found wearing the coat, which was tailored and fur-lined, a high-quality piece of clothing. One of the posse members spotted movement in the rocks, saw the familiar leather coat, and fired, thinking it was Willie Boy. Carlota was only about two inches shorter than Willie Boy and perhaps 20 to 30 pounds lighter, with the same dark hair. It seems entirely likely that, at a distance, she could be mistaken for him from behind.

Having mistakenly shot the person they were trying to rescue, the posse needed to place the blame elsewhere. They later claimed that they were so close they could hear the couple talking, that Carlota sounded “near exhaustion,” and was crying and pleading with her captor in “entreating tones.” It was also reported that she was barefoot, with bloody feet, and was “scantily clothed,” even though she was wearing Willie Boy’s coat, and that she had been driven at the point of a gun until she was killed because she could no longer travel quickly. One report said that she was wearing “high heels,” while she was simultaneously being described as barefoot! It seems that nothing was too ludicrous for the sensationalist press.

One must remember that this was a girl that Willie Boy loved and wanted to marry. It makes no sense whatsoever that he would hurt, rape, or kill her. A coroner’s inquest in Banning later determined that the bullet wound was consistent with a long-range, plunging shot fired from a higher elevation, not what would be expected if she was killed at close range. The posse, even though allegedly within earshot of their quarry, abandoned the chase to return Carlota’s body to Banning, leaving Willie Boy free to escape. Their account seems not to ring true on many different levels.

The press lapped all of this up, building a story worthy of the *National Enquirer*. Willie Boy was claimed to have killed several other victims, and sightings were reported at Needles, Goffs, Manvel, the Salton Sea, Arizona, Nevada, etc., etc. Not a single bit of this was substantiated, but excitement grew, as did newspaper sales. It was even reported that “Chief Willie Boy” was raising an army of Indians to massacre white inhabitants. There was concern that President Taft, who was on a political tour of southern California and was staying at Glenwood Mission Inn (now the Mission Inn Hotel and Spa) in Riverside, might have to be whisked away before he became a victim of the Indian uprising.

When Willie Boy returned to where he had left Carlota, she was gone. He found the blood on the rocks, but couldn’t know for sure what had taken place. He did know, however, that any chance of him being with Carlota had now evaporated. He surely would have assumed the posse to be hot on his trail, and their retreat to Banning left him some unexpected breathing room, time to think and to plan. Previous writers, including Lawton, have claimed that during this time Willie Boy traveled widely across the Mojave Desert. Lawton places him at Surprise Spring, Deadman Dry Lake, and the Bullion Mountains, all

now within the boundaries of the Twentynine Palms Marine Base, as well as at Twentynine Palms. All of this traveling around makes no sense, especially since there was no posse tracking him at this time.

Once again, the Chemehuevis have a simpler answer. Knowing that the posse would come back to pick up his trail, Willie Boy remained in the area of The Pipes to await their return. The *Nuwuvi* say that if he had headed to the Colorado River or to southern Nevada, as many claimed, he would have remained there with his people, and not doubled back to an area that he knew would be dangerous for him. At this point, he was not trying to escape, but to dole out retribution to the posse.

It is not known how or when, but it seems that Willie Boy had somehow learned of Carlota's death. The Chemehuevi say that Willie Boy purposefully left a plain trail for the posse to follow, while carefully choosing a site to ambush them on their return. He was apparently looking forward to confronting them, and although it is said that he raided isolated miners' shacks for food, supplies, and ammunition, he was perfectly capable of subsisting in the desert on his own. The spot he chose for this encounter was Ruby Mountain, west of present-day Landers.

The second phase of the manhunt began in October, when the posse again left Banning, where they had been enjoying the attention and notoriety of being part of the chase. A second posse was sent to the Oasis of Mara to round up the Chemehuevis and Serranos living there, along with their horses, to prevent them from giving aid to the fugitive. They were forcibly removed to Banning for a few days, then released to return to their homes. Ironically, many of the residents there were not sympathetic to Willie Boy, feeling that he had disgraced their people.

Meanwhile, Willie Boy gathered stones and built a small but sturdy breastwork from which to spring his ambush. It was low and inconspicuous, yet provided good cover and concealment from which to fight. If worse came to worst, he could retreat over the top of the mountain behind him.

The posse picked up Willie Boy's old trail at The Pipes, then followed the new tracks north to Ruby Mountain. From his vantage point, Willie Boy could easily see the dust being raised as the posse advanced toward him. When they got very close, within 30 yards or so, he opened fire. Indian accounts state that he was not trying to kill the posse members, but only to set them afoot in the middle of the desert, as he quickly killed three horses and wounded a fourth without harming any of the posse members. This alarmed the other horses, which became hard to control, and all the movement might have caused him to miss his aim and hit one of the riders, Charlie Reche. The bullet hit a pair of handcuffs he was wearing on his belt and was deflected, perhaps saving his life. The other deputies ran for cover, and Willie Boy made no attempt to shoot them.

In a short while, all the saddle horses were down and the men were afoot. Segundo Chino, Willie Boy's relative and also a crack shot, repeatedly edged off to the side to try to get a better shot, but Willie Boy kept him at bay. Anytime one of the posse made a

move, Willie Boy pinned them down with gunfire. Reche was lying in the open, in considerable pain, but he made no move to kill him. Anyone who tried to approach Reche, however, was driven back by a shot from Willie Boy's .30-30. One of the men, Indian tracker John Hyde, left on foot to get help, and although Willie Boy fired several shots in his direction, he was allowed to get away. He eventually traveled an incredible 35 miles on foot in one afternoon and evening to reach the posse's base camp and spread word of the ambush and Reche's wounding.

From about 2 p.m. to sunset, Willie Boy kept the posse pinned down. This was a far cry from newspaper reports that they had him surrounded. Indian Agent Clara True, evidently quoting one of the posse members, later stated that Willie Boy yelled to the posse to "Come up here boys, I am lonely. You are not afraid of me, are you?" Under the cover of darkness, the men recovered their gear from the dead horses. They then loaded Reche, who would survive his wound and live to a ripe old age, into their wagon, and abandoned the scene of the battle. Citing the lack of saddle horses, Reche's wound, and their physical exhaustion, the posse "gave up all hope of taking the man alive" and returned to Banning.

Once more, the posse had failed, and had been badly humiliated by Willie Boy in the process. They needed a good explanation for this sorry situation, and it appears that the spin machine was once again set in motion. After resting and recuperating in Banning for several days, a new story surfaced. Although they had not done so upon their arrival, the posse now claimed that as they rode away from Ruby Mountain in the darkness, they heard a single muffled shot. They were sure that Willie Boy had committed suicide (which would be considered a cowardly act by Chemehuevis), and that his decomposing body was still at the site of the ambush. One wonders why this alleged fact, which would have made a sensational headline, was not immediately reported.

The posse members had enjoyed several days of media attention and adulation as Western heroes and avengers, and probably felt pressured by public sentiment to bring in Willie Boy "dead or alive" and bring the manhunt to a close. This was undoubtedly tempered by their own reluctance to go head-to-head with him again, having barely escaped with their lives. The official party line now was that Willie Boy was dead and that the solitary shot marked the end of the pursuit. Although posse members reported that they were sure that Willie Boy had died by his own hand, using his last cartridge (also no proof provided), they did not make any effort to verify this. Apparently they were "sure," but not sure enough to risk getting themselves shot. Further confusing the issue, cowboy Will Talmadge, who happens to be related to the Kemper family, our hosts at Hamilton Ranch, stated in an October 15, 1909 newspaper report that he was scouting the Ruby



Posse standing over Willie Boy's purported body at Ruby Mountain

Mountain area for grazing land and maverick cows. Having heard of the gunfight, he rode to the spot of the gun battle and found no body and no sign of Willie Boy.

Despite assertions of his death, the public began to clamor for some concrete proof. On October 15 the posse left Banning for a third time, bound for Ruby Mountain. They claimed that when they reached the scene of the gunfight, they found Willie Boy dead, his body in the shade of a large rock. (This was the same spot that Will Talmadge had just visited, finding no evidence of Willie Boy). They took a photograph, which showed an apparent corpse lying face up with a black cloth covering its features. They claimed this was due to the fact that a coyote had gnawed on the nose and face. The body is indeed lying in the shade of a large rock, and not in the stone breastwork that Willie Boy had constructed.

The body appears to be that of a large man, not a person of slight build like Willie Boy. The posse hadn't been able to capture or kill the fugitive, but had at least discovered his body, bringing the saga to a close. They said they piled brush over the body, burned it, and buried the remains. San Bernardino County Sheriff Ralph Wilson took the "last cartridge" shell casing from the alleged fatal shot, and had it engraved with "Willie Boy, October 15, 1909." He carried the souvenir as a watch fob for many years.

These accounts seem "fishy" on many levels. It was common practice in the era to take pictures of dead desperados, sometimes propping them up in their coffins for public viewing. It also was usual to bring in a body for identification, or even cut off the head and exhibit it as proof of death. None of these things were done. There are many theories and stories, but in the author's opinion there are just too many inconsistencies to believe contemporary newspaper accounts of Willie Boy's death.

So ended "The Last Great Western Manhunt." Recognizing a good opportunity when they saw one, a theatrical troupe in Riverside staged a melodrama about the Willie Boy story. It is reported that while customers were waiting outside to enter the theater, someone uttered "a blood-curdling Indian cry," causing panic in the crowd. After a three-

day run, it was felt that the play presented the lawmen in an unfavorable light, and pressure was quietly brought to end the show. It is both comical and tragic that the newspapers could have created such a series of sensational headlines out of thin air, without the slightest evidence to back them up. Even to 21st century observers inured to internet hoaxes and “fake news,” these reports serve as a monument both to the gullibility of the American public and the ability of the media to “spin” a story into something that bears only the faintest resemblance to the facts.

Current Chemehuevi elders state unequivocally that Willie Boy survived the shootout at Ruby Mountain, and many Native American families today say that their relatives saw Willie Boy after 1909. They state that Willie Boy, unaware of his presumed suicide, had holed up for a while in the Bullion Mountains to see if he was still being pursued, then returned to his village at Twentynine Palms to visit his grandmother and his aunts. There he was severely chastised by his relatives for his actions, especially by his



Author's 2022 photograph of same site



Close-up view of alleged body

grandmother. She took his gun and ammunition belt and threw them into a pond at the Oasis, making Willie Boy mad. He reacted angrily, violently shaking her (some say hitting her) for destroying his weapons, apparently resulting in the death of the old lady shortly thereafter. He fled the Oasis in the aftermath of the confrontation, headed for Pahrump, Nevada to live among his Southern Piute relatives. According to tribal history, he there sought to atone for his actions and to regain his spiritual well-being, and lived peaceably for many years. He is said to have died of tuberculosis in Pahrump sometime in the 1930s, although no one actually knows his fate.

In 1958, Harry Lawton and others, including descendants of Charlie Reche, rediscovered the alleged burial site. They dug up metal parts of suspenders and of a shoe, claimed to be Willie Boy's, but no skeletal remains. Given that even professional cremations leave remnants of bone, it seems highly unlikely that a funeral pyre of desert brush could have fully consumed a human body. This, along with the lack of definitive proof that the alleged body at Ruby Mountain was indeed Willie Boy, and the many common-sense discrepancies in previous writings, makes the traditional Anglo history, as represented by Lawton, suspect. Clifford Trafzer's recent book is the first telling of the tale that includes significant input from the *Nuwuvi* point of view, coming direct from descendants who might be considered to be the experts on the subject. In the author's opinion, it provides the most logical, sensible, and likely scenario of the Willie Boy saga, and is highly recommended for anyone wanting to learn more on the subject.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burgess, Larry E. and James A. Sandos, The Hunt for Willie Boy: Indian-Hating and Popular Culture. University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

Lawton, Harry, Willie Boy: A Desert Manhunt. Second edition. Malki Museum Press/Rubidoux Printing Co., Riverside, CA 1960.

Trafzer, Clifford E., Willie Boy and the Last Western Manhunt. Coyote Hill Press, Camano Island, WA 2020.



Mike "Doc" Johnson, XNGH, Clamphistorian Extraordinaire
Noted author & historian for Billy Holcomb & Lost Dutchman Chapters
of the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus