

# Other Forms of Conflict in the West – Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War 1878

## Lesson Objectives:

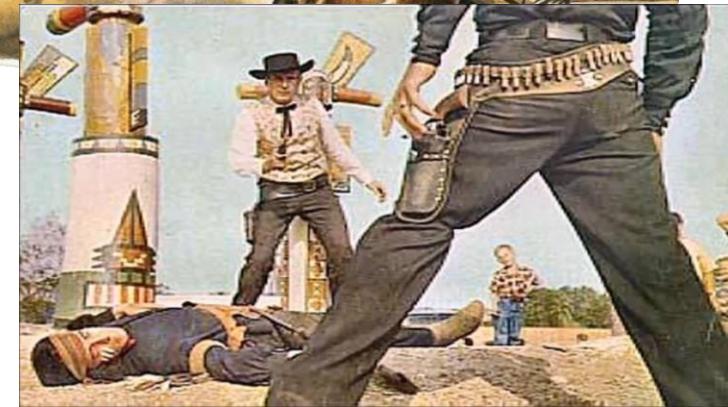
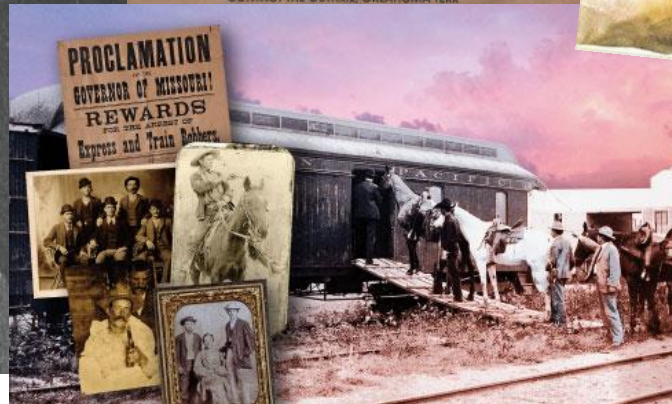
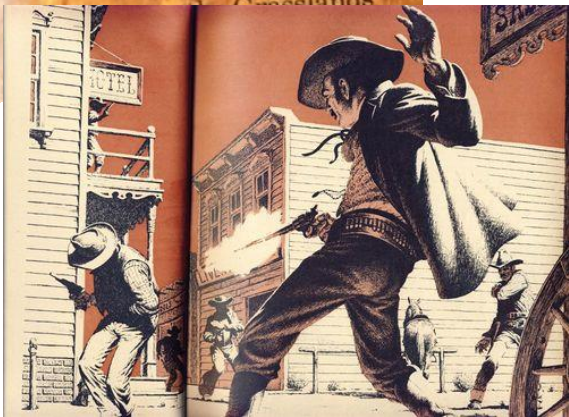
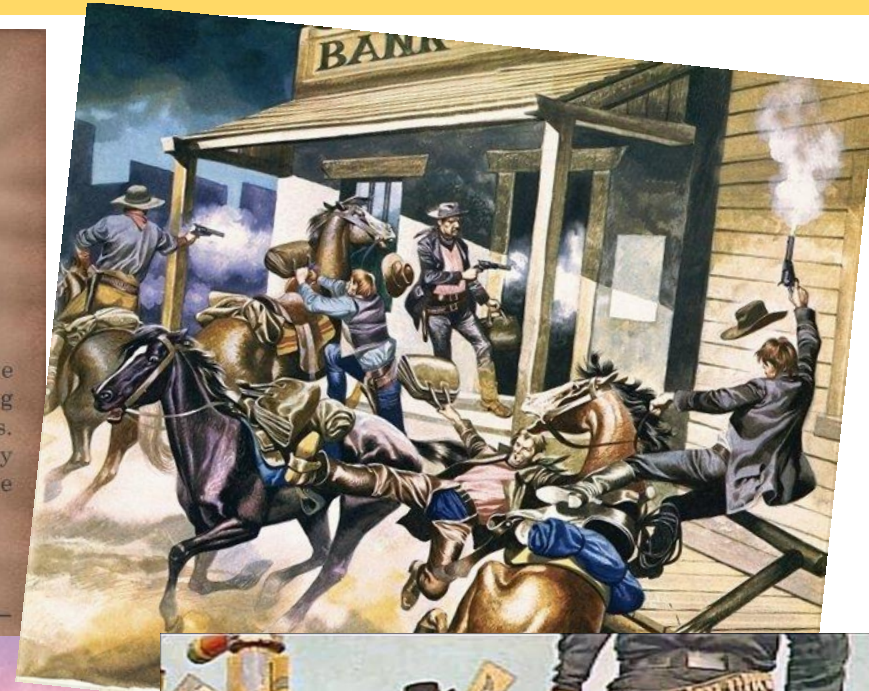
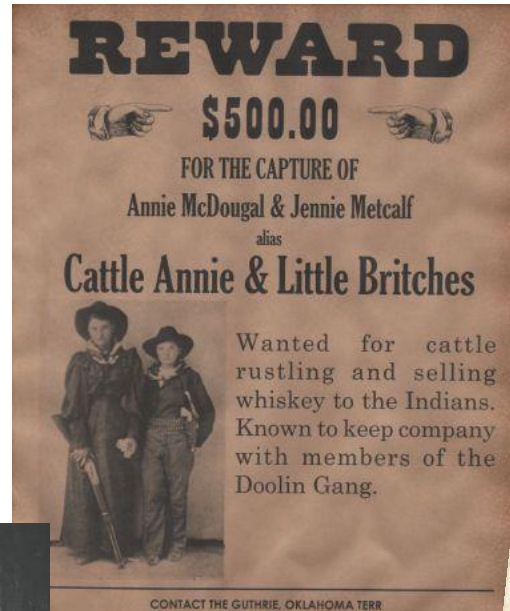
- To understand how the expansion of the West caused other forms of tension **between** settlers, not just conflict between white Americans and Plains Indians.
- To explain the significance of the **Lincoln County War** in understanding other types of conflict.
- To assess the significance of **Billy the Kid** and what his story tells us about law and order.

## Starter Questions:

- 1) We have many examples of how the expansion into the West caused conflict with Plains Indians – can you list three examples of conflict and what the cause was in each case?
- 2) Can you think of any other groups that may have got into conflict with each other as people expanded west and any reasons why?
- 3) Why was law and order such a problem in new communities being established in the West? Why was it so hard to stop violence and crime?



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### **Poverty**

Most people struggled to make a living. Stealing was hard to resist.

### **Geography**

Territories were large areas with lots of places for gangs to hide from justice.

### **Weak Justice System**

Governors and law enforcement officers were often in the pay of local gangs; they were corrupt. Juries were easily influenced by local loyalties.

### **Conflict over Resources**

There was conflict between cattle ranchers and homesteaders, big ranchers and small ranchers, settlers and Plains Indians.

## **Causes of lawlessness in the West from the 1870s onwards**

### **Problematic Lawmen**

There was a shortage of reliable men to act as sheriffs and marshals. Lawmen were often former outlaws themselves.

### **Fear and Intimidation**

Some powerful gangs had formed, people were afraid to act against them; whether they were gangs of criminals or of powerful businessmen.

### **Independent Attitudes**

Men were expected to sort out their own problems, using violence if necessary. Killing in self-defence was accepted by law.

### **Vigilantes**

Often justice was not carried out or seen to be working as suspected criminals were often taken from lawmen and lynched before a trial could occur.

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### Conflict

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### Fear and Intimidation

Some people  
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Which of these played  
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Who was Billy the Kid? What does Wikipedia say?!

The **legend of Billy the Kid** has acquired iconic status in American folklore, yet the outlaw himself, also known as William Bonney, had minimal impact on historical events in [New Mexico Territory](#) of the late 1800s. More has been written about [Billy the Kid](#) than any other [gunslinger](#) in the history of the American West, while hundreds of books, motion pictures, radio and television programs and even a ballet have been inspired by his legend. When he was still alive, "Billy the Kid" had already become a nationally known figure whose exploits, real and imaginary, were reported in the [National Police Gazette](#) and the large newspapers of the eastern United States. After his death on July 14, 1881, all of New York City's papers ran his obituary, and within days, newspapers around the United States were printing exaggerated and romanticized accounts of Billy the Kid's short career. In the fifteen or so [dime novels](#) about his criminal career published between 1881 and 1906, the Kid was an outlaw antihero, customarily depicted as a bad man with superior gunslinging skills, or even as a demonic agent of [Satan](#) who delighted in murder.



# The Lincoln County Wars and Billy the Kid's Involvement

## Early Life of Billy the Kid

- Born 1859, probably in New York.
- Spent most of early life in mining camps towns in New Mexico territory. Was jailed for theft whilst still a teenager.
- More thefts followed as he got involved in cattle rustling and horse stealing.
- Alleged to have killed a man (some accounts say several) whilst still a teenager.
- Became notorious for being able to escape from jails
- Gained a local reputation as a top gunfighter in the **Lincoln County War**, July 1878



## What was the war in Lincoln County about? Who was fighting it?

1) A businessman and store owner **Lawrence Murphy** and partners dominated the town and county of Lincoln, New Mexico. They ran the main store '**The House**'. Through their political connections they controlled the forces of law and order and made money by being the sole traders in the area. They also rustled cattle from cattle baron **John Chisum** and then sold the cattle on to the US government to supply the nearby Indian Reservation and army forts

V.

2) In 1876 an Englishman, **John Tunstall**, arrived in Lincoln and set up a rival business with **John Chisum** and a lawyer, **Alexander McSween**. Tunstall had the support of the smaller ranchers and farmers in the county, many of them Mexican Americans.



# The Narrative of Events

**Tunstall** hoped to displace **the House** and create his own business empire in Lincoln County. He hired a number of tough cowboys to run his ranch, including Billy the Kid.

War was sparked by the murder of Tunstall by **House** gunmen on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1878. Tunstall's cowboys, calling themselves 'The Regulators' set out to avenge him. Billy the Kid played a key part in this. Killings and counter killings continued throughout Lincoln County with law officers involved on both sides. It culminated in a five day battle in the town of Lincoln itself, from the 15<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> July 1878, which ended in the burning down of Tunstall's store, McSween's death and the triumph of **the House** gunmen.

Billy the Kid had sworn to kill everyone responsible for the death of Tunstall of whom he had seemed to be uncharacteristically fond. He and his gang had many hideouts around the county and a lot of support from local people who saw him as one of their own – a little guy, taking on the big guns. He and his gang killed a law enforcement officer, Sheriff Brady and his deputy.

More than 30 people were killed in this conflict known as the Lincoln County War. **The House** still continued to dominate and influence the political and economic life of the area. Lawrence Murphy was eventually charged with the murder of Tunstall, but was acquitted, showing the power big businessmen like him had.

Billy the Kid went on the run. He was arrested and later killed two people while escaping from Lincoln County jail. A price was put on his head in 1881 and a new sheriff, Pat Garrett, who had been hired to track him down, found him and shot him dead, believing the justice system to be too weak to deal with him. He was 21 years old.

**Task: Read carefully through the events of the Lincoln County war again, making sure you have understood key characters and the role they had. Then complete the relevant part of the table below**

	Causes	Events	Results
Lincoln County War			
Gun fight at the Old Corral			
Tensions between homesteaders and cattle ranchers			
Johnson County War			

We will complete the other sections next lesson



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part in the story of Billy  
the Kid? Number them in  
order of significance and  
relevance in his story

## What is important about Billy the Kid? What does his story tell us about Law and Order?

The fact so many people saw Billy as a hero is important. These people were generally the poor, ethnic minorities and Mexican immigrants, small homesteaders and ranchers. They resented the way big northern businessmen were dividing up America for themselves and wielding so much power. Although Billy was a thief and a murderer, they felt he was on their side against those with too much power.

His role as a hired gun between cattle barons and other powerful businessmen shows how above the law they felt themselves to be, hiring gangs and criminals to do their dirty work without any real fear of reprisals.

Billy the Kid's story also illustrates how poor the justice system was. It was too corrupt and weak to deal with him and his gang. He kept escaping and in the end was shot dead; the Sheriff Pat Garrett not risking arresting and imprisoning him again.



**Task: Using your copy of Billy, give him speech bubbles, explaining his significance, using the information above.**





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