

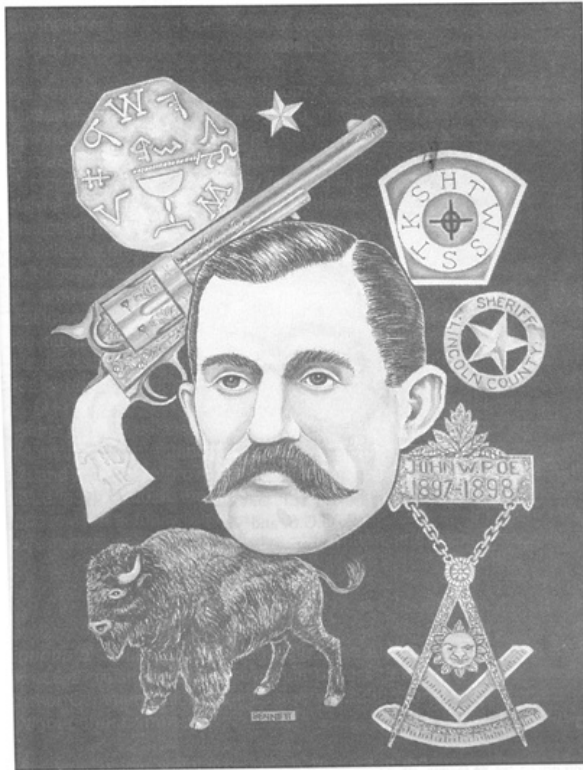
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**“The Royal Arch Mason Magazine” Vol. 21, No. 3 Fall 2003**

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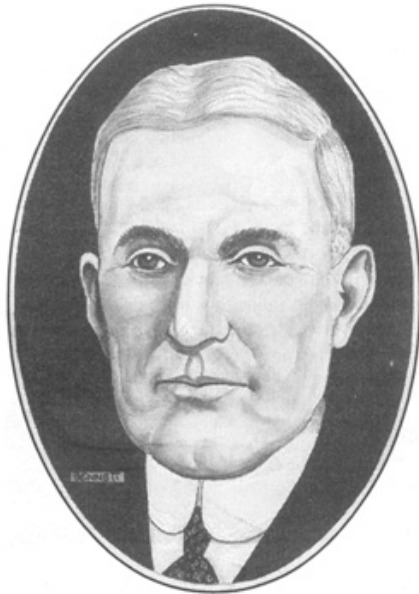
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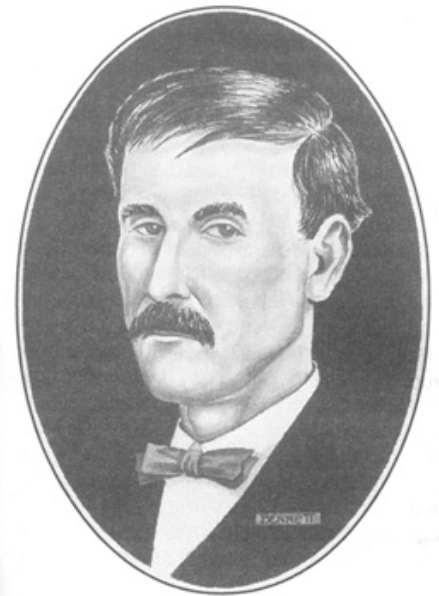


**THE OUTSIDE HUNTER**

**"John W. Poe"**  
(See page 75)



John W. Poe, circa 1920.



### ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

By Charles A. Lewis, Jr., Grand Master  
Grand Lodge of North Carolina

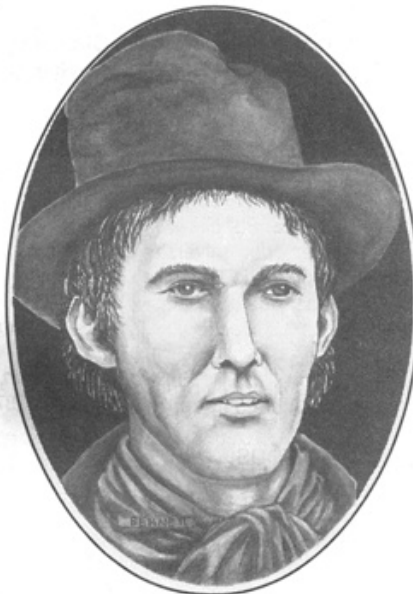
(Ed. note. The following was the keynote address at the Summer Assembly of York Rite Masons held at Maggie's Lodge, Raleigh, NC, on the permission of M. W. Bro. Lewis.)

Good morning, Brethren. It's great to be back in Raleigh as a part of the Summer Assembly of York Rite Masons. Let's accentuate the Positive."

Most appropriate. I hope you have given some thought to you a positive person? How do you accentuate, or emphasize, the positive things? What does a positive outlook mean in your family, in your community, in your church, in your country in general?

Before you begin to answer these questions, ask yourself: Some people can't be positive if there is no connection between what they are doing; we call these motivations and actions for me? Why am I doing this? What is my Masonic motivation for me? Being positive is closely tied to our feelings and attitudes about our Masonic commitments and involvement.

William H. Bonney,  
alias Billy the Kid.



Starts on page 75

## THE OUTSIDE HUNTER JOHN W. POE (see below for brief biography of John William Poe)

By Joseph E. Bennett, 33°

The capricious hand of fate focused upon a minor incident in the life of John William Poe to mark his place in history. He was one of the lawmen present at the fatal shooting of western folklore's most celebrated outlaw, William H. Bonney, universally known as

"Billy the Kid." Intense publicity surrounding the exploits of the infamous young outlaw exposed anyone involved with him to the merciless glare of public scrutiny. Most accounts of Bonney's egregious life were inaccurate and grossly exaggerated, but they became "history," nevertheless. Endless and lurid newspaper stories, along with those of pulp-fiction magazines, created a legendary folk hero out of a rugged, amoral thief, and killer.

Poe's role in the death of Billy the Kid was a passive one, and he was always reluctant to discuss details of the event. In reality, his role in Bonney's death was only a minor incident in Poe's early life on the frontier. In the years between 1879 and 1887, he earned a lofty reputation as a premier lawman. A broader retrospective of his adult life identifies John Poe as a legendary citizen of the Territory of New Mexico, and one of the great Freemasons of the southwest. Truly, he was a pioneer of giant stature in that wild young country.

John William Poe was born October 17, 1850, on a Mason County tobacco farm near Maysville, Kentucky. He was one of eleven children born to Nathan and Louisa Poe, three of whom were sons. He was a tall, strapping youngster with admirable personal attributes; evident in his earliest years. Serious minded and sober, he was determined to live on the western frontier. He saved diligently for the day he would have enough money to finance his journey. Before he reached his late teens, Poe was an outstanding marksman with both rifle and pistol. A self-taught violinist, he added to his travel stash by playing for local dances.

By July 1, 1870, Poe had begun his journey, and was employed as a farm hand near Kansas City, Missouri. He had left home against the advice of his father and grandfather, both of whom urged him to attend college and forget the western frontier. When his funds were exhausted, Poe had to work his way westward. The spring of 1871 found him in Kansas, employed near Topeka as a section hand on the Santa Fe Railroad. During this period Poe met Dan Hudson, a young man who became a close friend. Hudson related thrilling stories of immense buffalo herds wandering the Texas plains, and how one might become rich by selling their hides. Working his way ever westward, Poe was in the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) by the fall of 1871, cutting timber and railroad ties for the Santa Fe. He had saved \$300 by the spring of 1872, and was ready to make the 250-mile journey to Fort Griffin; hub of buffalo hunting activity in the Texas panhandle.

By the time Poe purchased a horse and saddle for the trip, a mere \$80 remained to reach Texas and buy hunting equipment. Fort Griffin was a military post on the extreme outer limits of the western frontier in Texas, some 50 mile west of Fort Worth. It was an unsavory place, teeming with soldiers, buffalo hunters, brothels, saloons, and outfitting shops for the hunting trade. It was accurately termed the "Sodom of the plains" by the respectable element in Texas. The post, situated just west of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River in Shackelford County, had been established in 1867 to protect settlers on the frontier. John Poe soon learned he needed a substantial amount of money to equip himself for buffalo hunting.

While Dan Hudson remained in Fort Griffin, enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, Poe turned his attention to earning money. He had no interest in whiskey or women, and refused to be deterred from his primary goal. He worked as a ranch hand and wolf hunter for several months, earning some \$500 in the process, primarily from selling wolf skins to collect the bounty. Poe was a fabulous marksman, a prime requisite for a buffalo hunter. However, his most profitable venture in 1873 was to fulfill a contract he landed with the military commander at Fort Griffin, to provide fire wood for one dollar per cord. Those activities took Poe far into Indian country, where he was always at risk from Comanche incursions.

By the fall of 1873, Poe had enough money to equip himself for hunting buffalo. With his newest friend, John Jacobs, as a partner, they purchased a wagon, camp equipment, powder, shooting supplies, and hired a skilled skinner, in the person of Joe McCombs. One of the most essential tools of the trade was the legendary .50 caliber "big bore" Sharps rifle. The hunting party of three departed Fort Griffin in mid September to spend the winter far out on the Staked Plains of the Texas Panhandle, in the heart of Comanche country. Only the heartiest souls ventured so far from civilization. They were known as "outside hunters", and John Poe proved to be one of the greatest. By the spring of 1879, Poe and Jacobs had hauled 20,000 buffalo hides to Fort Griffin to sell for as much as \$3.00 each. It was hazardous, hard work, but the dividends were obvious.

Buffalo hunting was regarded differently by white men and Comanche. Texans considered the beast as making the range unfit for grazing cattle, thus impeding ranching activity in the Panhandle. The Indians regarded the buffalo as a sacred animal, providing food and many essentials of life from its hide, carcass, and skeleton. They bitterly opposed the hunters, and killed many of them in the process. However, the Comanche feared the great Sharps buffalo gun for its long range and the skill of its owner. One young chief offered his opinion of the Sharps by commenting, "Him shoot today, kill tomorrow."

John Poe became a Freemason at Fort Griffin in the winter of 1878-79. He petitioned Fort Griffin Lodge No. 486, U.D., on September 25, 1878, and received his EA Degree on November 9th, the same year. The FC Degree was conferred on January 4, 1879, and he was raised on February 1st, the next month. That marked the beginning of an exemplary Masonic career, which will be detailed in more length in subsequent pages.

By the spring of 1879, Poe realized that buffalo hunting was on the wane and they would soon be gone. The herds were thinning rapidly, and it was time to seek another line of work. Poe accepted the position of town marshal at Fort Griffin, and soon afterward added the title of Deputy U.S. Marshal to his credentials. The ex-hunter made an outstanding lawman in the turbulent border town. He established order with a minimum of gun play. Always cool headed, Poe avoided using his gun in almost every instant. He was physically equipped to handle most lawbreakers without shooting them, proving his theory both humane and successful. He enjoyed law enforcement work, and decided to invest his earnings from buffalo hunting as a silent partner in a sheep venture. Unfortunately, Poe and his partner, John Jacobs, lost their entire investment in a herd of 1,400 sheep which perished during the severe winter of 1879-1880.

In the fall of 1879, Poe accepted the post as city marshal at Fort Elliott, near the town of Mobeetie in Wheeler County. He also filled the role of deputy sheriff for the county. His most impressive accomplishment was breaking up a local cattle-rustling operation headed by one John Larn, an ex-sheriff of the county. After taking Larn into custody, a band of vigilantes overpowered Poe and another deputy, and shot Larn to death while the lawmen watched helplessly. Nevertheless, Poe was persuaded to run for sheriff of Wheeler County in the next election. He lost the election when many of his supporters failed to cast a ballot. They considered Poe a "shoo-in," and decided it unnecessary to make the effort to vote. Their apathy cost Poe the election. He quickly accepted another job offer, and left Wheeler County.

Poe was enlisted by the Canadian River Cattlemen's Association as a stock detective, with the primary assignment to break up rustling activity rampant in the northern Panhandle. A large part of the rustling was conducted by gangs headed by Billy the Kid, and another led by Pat Coghlin, "The King of the Tularosa." Both gangs operated out of White Oaks in Lincoln County, New Mexico Territory, across the border from the Texas Panhandle. Poe first turned his attention to Pat Coghlin at White Oaks. He carried a letter from the Canadian River Association, signed by Charles Goodnight, the president. It requested all assistance possible be rendered John Poe by Sheriff Pat Garrett of Lincoln County.

A subsequent meeting between the two lawmen resulted in a pledge to cooperate in ending the rustling problems for both parties. Poe first initiated a methodical investigation of Coghlin's rustling enterprise, and was successful in having him indicted by a grand jury at Lincoln County in December, 1880. That effectively halted the lawless career of "The King of the Tularosa," and Poe was commended for ending rustling activity in the Canadian River country of Texas. A little later, in April, 1881, Sheriff Pat Garrett came to White Oaks, New Mexico, to request assistance from John Poe in investigating several members of Billy the Kid's gang, reported to have fled to the Arizona Territory. Garrett was occupied by the trial of William H. Bonney (a.k.a. Billy the Kid and William Antrim), who had just been captured. The trip to Arizona consumed two weeks.

When Poe returned, he learned that Billy the Kid had escaped from custody during a bloody shootout on April 28, 1881. Sentenced to hang for murdering Sheriff William Brady during the recent Lincoln County Cattle War, Bonney had escaped the gallows by killing two deputies guarding him at the courthouse in the town of Lincoln. He successfully eluded Sheriff Garrett for several months, and was widely believed to have escaped to Mexico. Garrett was convinced he had.

An informer sought out John Poe at White Oaks, early in July, 1881. He claimed Billy the Kid was hiding in Fort Sumner, north of Roswell, Mexico, and was being sheltered by Mexican friends in the town. Poe trusted the informer and insisted the information was valid. Garrett did not. He finally agreed to travel to Fort Sumner with John Poe to make an investigation. Poe made inquiries around Fort Sumner while Garrett and Deputy

Thomas L. "Kip" McKinney remained out of sight. Still unconvinced, as the evening waned, Sheriff Garrett agreed to talk with a respected resident of Fort Sumner, Lucien "Pete" Maxwell, who lived in the old officers' quarters at the fort. Poe and Kip McKinney were posted outside the gate of Maxwell's residence. A silent barefoot figure walked unrecognized past the deputies in the darkness, startled at meeting Poe and McKinney. He continued into Maxwell's house, and entered his bedroom to inquire about the men outside. When he spoke, a shot rang out in the dark room, and the intruder fell to the floor with a bullet in his heart. The nocturnal visitor was William H. Bonney, Billy the Kid. An unfired revolver was clutched in his right hand. Sheriff Pat Garrett, sitting on the side of Maxwell's bed when Bonney entered the room, had fired the fatal shot which ended the career of the infamous Billy the Kid. It was just before midnight on July 14, 1881. Although John Poe had never seen Bonney before, he gained everlasting fame as one of the lawmen who had been on the scene when the outlaw fell.

John Poe never returned to Texas after the death of Billy the Kid. He remained in Lincoln County, New Mexico, working as their new sheriff, following the resignation of Pat Garrett. Lincoln County in 1882 encompassed an area larger than the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts combined. Constant travel was required to cover the sheriff's area of responsibility. Poe was frequently in the town of Roswell, where he met Sophie Alberding in May, 1882. The young California native was visiting Captain J. C. Lea, a relative living in Roswell. The captain was a prominent business figure and community leader in the town, and well acquainted with John Poe. Lea was also a close friend of ex-Sheriff Pat Garrett.

Captain Lea and Garrett acted as matchmakers to encourage a romance between Poe, a 32-year-old confirmed bachelor, and the winsome Sophie Alberding, a maiden of nineteen. Their efforts were successful, and Sophie became Mrs. John W. Poe on Saturday, May 5, 1883. The bridegroom had been elected Sheriff of Lincoln County, assuming the office in January, 1882. He was provided an apartment by the county, in the courthouse at Lincoln. Their bedroom was the place where Billy the Kid was held prisoner in April, 1881, when he shot his way out of captivity.

Sophie gave birth to their only child on February 4, 1884. Their infant son survived only a few hours. She had gone to Roswell during the latter stage of her pregnancy, to be with relatives. Sophie nearly died during the difficult delivery, and was never able to bear children after that ordeal. Poe carried her home to Lincoln in a spring wagon, equipped as an improvised ambulance, the first week in March.

A year later Poe purchased a ranch 15 miles southwest of Fort Stanton, a property he christened the "VV". The dwelling was a comfortable three room cabin, in which Sophie and John made their home until 1885. He sold the VV Ranch in 1885 to a Scottish buyer named Cree, partially because of the isolation and loneliness Sophie was obliged to endure during Poe's enforced absences.

Soon after selling the VV Ranch, Poe resigned as Sheriff of Lincoln County. He decided to end his career as a lawman, and turn his attention to agrarian pursuits full time. By the

end of 1886, he had formulated plans with his friend, Smith Lea, to travel to South America and explore the feasibility of buying land in Argentina, and to study their irrigation projects. They departed in January, 1887, and spent several months in Argentina, before returning to Lincoln County. Rather than relocate to Argentina, Poe decided to live near Roswell. He purchased a tract southeast of the town, and made preparations for launching a system of raising stock "under fence." He planned to raise alfalfa to feed his cattle, a herd of 350 purebred beef stock. He also purchased 150 head of blooded brood mares to breed mules. Poe employed modern irrigation methods in his agricultural projects. It was an exceedingly well planned venture, and immediately profitable.

At this juncture, it is chronologically correct to include the balance of John Poe's distinguished Masonic record. He affiliated by demit with Roswell Lodge No. 18 on April 3, 1889, as a charter member. He became active immediately in the officer line, and presided as Worshipful Master in 1891-1892. Poe's York Rite memberships began soon after those in Roswell Lodge. He was the first Mason in Roswell to receive both the Royal Arch and Knight Templar Degrees there. He ultimately presided as High Priest of Columbia Chapter NO.7 in 1896, and as Eminent Commander of Rio Hondo Commandery NO.6 in 1898-99. Poe served as Grand Master of Masons in New Mexico in 1897-1898, as Grand High Priest in 1898-1899, and as Grand Commander of Knights Templar in 1910-1911. Poe was coroneted a 33° at Topeka, Kansas on December 23, 1907, later affiliating with the Valley of Santa Fe, AASR, on December 21, 1909.

After nine years of hard work at his Roswell stock ranch, Poe sold his entire venture in 1893, and decided to invest his wealth in a banking enterprise. He purchased controlling stock in the Bank of Roswell, and became president that year. He held that post until he sold his stock in 1899.

In October, 1895, Poe built Sophie a handsome new home in the center of Roswell. For many years it was identified as "the most beautiful home in Roswell" Poe was recognized as a powerful and distinguished business man and citizen by 1895. Governor Miguel A. Otero appointed him to the Territorial

Board of Equalization in 1889, a board created to distribute taxation equitably throughout the Territory of New Mexico. Poe's reputation for impeccable honesty and high ethics earned that preferment.

John Poe re-entered the financial field in 1900 by forming another bank. It was the Citizens' Bank of Roswell. In 1921, his new bank absorbed the American National Bank in the city. He christened the new combined venture, "The Citizens' National Bank." In his final banking enterprise, Poe served as president until his death.

By the time New Mexico was granted statehood on January 6, 1912, John Poe was universally recognized as one of its most distinguished elder statesmen. Continuously singled out for high public office, he served as President of the State Tax Commission in New Mexico from 1915-1917. With the advent of World War I, Poe was selected to be



Fuel Administrator for New Mexico. All the positions mentioned were served with distinction and success. He was as enthusiastic and dedicated to his duties in the role of a sinecur, as he was in a profitable private venture.

A man of substantial wealth after the turn of the century, Poe and Sophie allotted time for travel and relaxation. A high point for both of them was a leisurely trip around the world in 1913. The old buffalo hunter from Fort Griffin was dedicated to giving his beloved Sophie an ample serving of "Ia vida loca," the good life. She was the light of Poe's life, and he was dedicated to providing her with golden memories. In that goal, he succeeded admirably.

Poe was active and healthy until the last few months of his life. He lived as always, a quiet, unassuming man, who placed honor and ethics above all personal attributes. Throughout his life, he practiced kindness to his fellow man, and abhorred the use of force in any circumstance unless there was no other remedy.

One of the countless legends about John Poe's deadly skill with the sixshooter began with a prisoner he was transporting from Fort Union, New Mexico to Lincoln. During the 200 mile journey, a passenger in the buckboard asked Poe if he could shoot a hawk flying overhead. Instantly, the sheriff snapped off a shot and the bird tumbled to the ground. Later, in prison, the man was asked why he didn't attempt an escape during the long lonely ride. He replied, ". . . I seen him shoot one hawk on the wing." More than a deadly shot, Poe was endowed with nerves of steel and great personal bravery. A number of times during his long career in law enforcement, Poe stared down a man with a gun, disarming the culprit without drawing his own weapon. Those incidents were recalled by spectators, never by John Poe.

In the final months of his life, Poe traveled to Battle Creek, Michigan where he entered a sanitarium for treatment. After a rather brief stay as a patient, he expired suddenly on July 17, 1923 from congestive heart failure. Sophie Poe had been summoned to Michigan as his condition worsened, but was still en route when her husband died, in his 73rd year.

The city of Roswell and all of New Mexico were shocked by the news of Poe's sudden passing. Typical of the outcry of sympathy and mourning for their distinguished citizen were the comments in the Roswell Evening News on Wednesday, July 18, 1923. The newspaper devoted an entire front page to a recitation of Poe's accomplishments, from his earliest years. They told of his public offices and of the great achievements in many fields of endeavor. His litany of Masonic honors was recited in its entirety. The publication summed up the sentiments of the New Mexico population when they ended their documentary by christening John William Poe as "A friend of Man."

A long line of Freemasons have achieved high honors for service to God, country, and their Fraternity. The benchmark for a good man and true was established in ages past by departed brethren whose names are inscribed on the honor roll of our ancient Craft. None has bequeathed a greater legacy to his brethren, nor more handsomely fulfilled the qualifications we diligently seek, than John William Poe. When the Grand lodge of New

Mexico conducted the funerary obsequies over his mortal remains, they echoed the sentiments of every Mason born before and after that somber July day.

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Excerpts from the Roswell Evening News, July 18, 1923.

### **John William Poe**

[http://elibrary.unm.edu/oanm/NmU/nmu1%23mss95sc/nmu1%23mss95sc\\_m4.html](http://elibrary.unm.edu/oanm/NmU/nmu1%23mss95sc/nmu1%23mss95sc_m4.html)

### **Biography**

**John William Poe** was born on October 17, 1850 and was raised on his grandfather's farm in Maysville, Mays County, Kentucky\*. By the age of 15, he had developed a yearning to go West and his travels took him to Missouri, Kansas, Texas, and eventually the New Mexico territory. He was a buffalo hunter, cattleman, stock detective for Charles Goodnight, lawman in Texas and New Mexico, and banker. John William Poe married Sophie Alberding on May 5,

1883. Their only child lived a few hours. The home of John William and Sophie Poe is located at 311 West Seventh in Roswell and is known as the Poe-Mossman house in the National Register of Historic Buildings.

While serving as Sheriff of Lincoln County, Poe became friends with Pat Garrett and John Chisum. His most famous experience occurred when he accompanied Garrett to Pete Maxwell's ranch near Fort Sumner. Garrett went inside. Waiting outside, Poe saw William Bonney (Billy the Kid) enter the ranch house, though he did not recognize him. He heard the gunfire when Billy the Kid was shot and killed by Pat Garrett. He wrote several articles for newspapers and books about the death of Billy the Kid. After retiring as a lawman, John William Poe and his wife settled in Roswell where he was one of the organizers of the Bank of Roswell. He was later President of the Citizen's Bank of Roswell. He died on July 17, 1923. Sophie Alberding Poe commemorated his life in a biography, Buckboard Days.

**\* The city of Maysville, Kentucky is in Mason County.**