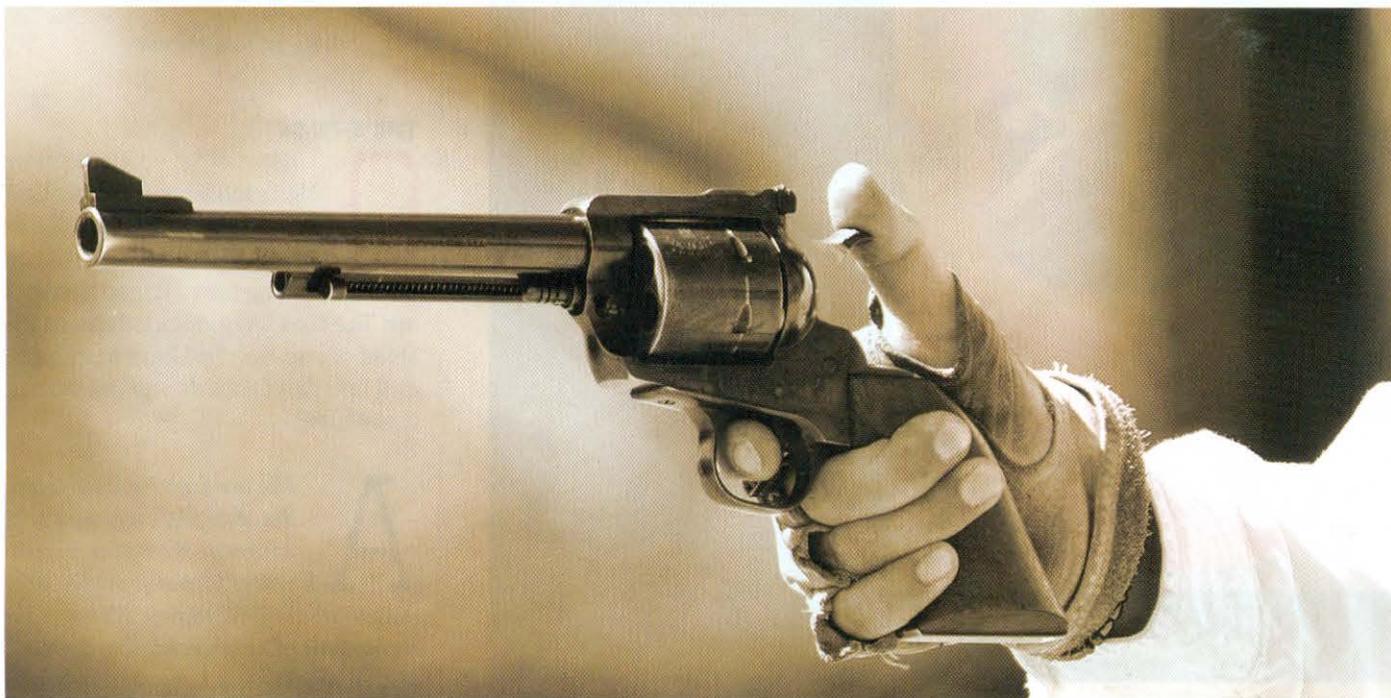


## AZ Fun Facts

## Russian Bill

By MARSHALL TRIMBLE, *Official Arizona State Historian*

**Dime novels of the nineteenth** century romanticized outlaws of the Old West as noble, free-spirited rogues who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. Common sense tells us the reason they didn't steal from the poor was that there was nothing to steal, and they didn't share their ill-gotten wealth with them, either.

Dime novels were read voraciously not only by easterners but by foreigners as well. These books even inspired a few wannabes to go west and become outlaws. For some, it was a bad business decision. For example, one of Arizona's most exotic outlaw wannabes was William Tattenbaum, a young Russian officer in the czar's army. He eagerly devoured these lurid tales from afar and became so enamored of the outlaws of the Old West that he deserted the army and came to America to become an outlaw.

He arrived in Tombstone, Arizona, in 1881, all decked out in new cowboy clothes. He'd even carved four notches on the handle of his six-shooter to show he'd killed men in battle. When they asked his name, the young man answered in his best tight-lipped cowboy dime-novel drawl, "They call me Russian Bill."

Russian Bill was quite a novelty in Tombstone. Although he tried to act like an outlaw, he was much too refined to be taken seriously. The tall, handsome, curly-headed blond spoke several languages fluently and was quite intelligent. Quoting Greek and Latin, he

charmed the shady ladies of Tombstone and Galeyville. Curly Bill and the other outlaws were amused and even let the Russian join their gang.

Still, Russian Bill felt like a phony. He was hanging out with some of the most notorious outlaws in the West, yet he'd never committed a crime.

So, to certify his claim, he rustled a few cows. It was the work of an amateur, and Bill was quickly captured and thrown into the pokey at Shakespeare, New Mexico. There he was reunited with a cohort from Tombstone named Sandy King.

The locals apparently hadn't read the glorified accounts in dime novels of outlaws who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. A vigilance committee convened and sentenced the two to hang, calling one an outlaw and the other a "damned nuisance."

Bill and Sandy were placed on their horses and hanged from the rafters of the dining hall at the Grant Hotel. The next morning, when the stage arrived, the passengers disembarked and went in for breakfast, the two were still dangling from the beams.

An enduring legend along the Mexican border says that when Bill's mother, the Countess Telfrin in Moscow, inquired as to the circumstances surrounding her son's death, she was told he died of a shortage of breathing—while at a high altitude. **RM**

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