



## WHIPPED WITH HIS OWN PISTOL

State Historian **Marshall Trimble** tells us the story of one of Old Arizona's more notorious characters, Bill Downing.

**BILL DOWNING WAS** one of the most disliked fellows in Old Arizona. He was moody, morose, bad-tempered, sullen, and surly. And that was when he was sober. He got downright mean and ugly when he was drinking.

Bill was so unlikeable that even members of his gang couldn't stand him. He was a member of the Burt Alvord gang around Willcox, and he spent a few years in the notorious Yuma Territorial Prison after his capture for train robbery.

After his release in 1907, he returned to Willcox and opened a saloon called the Free and Easy. It soon became a hangout for all the nefarious rascals in that part of Cochise

County. That same year, the Arizona Territory had passed a law banning women from "loitering" in saloons, but that didn't stop Bill. He employed an assortment of shady ladies to drink with the customers. He also trained them each to be highly skilled pickpockets, a trade he'd learned in prison.

Their victims were always reluctant to complain because of Bill's reputation as a gunslinger. The law was chomping at the bit to arrest him, but the folks around Willcox were so terrorized that none would come forward and press charges. That changed, however, when he beat up one of the girls, Cuco Leal, and she complained to the town marshal, who issued a warrant for his arrest.

The best time to serve a warrant to a rascal like Bill was early in the morning while he was still groggy from the previous evening's imbibing. Arizona Ranger Billy Speed

just happened to be passing through Willcox, and the marshal enlisted his help in making the arrest. On the morning of August 5, 1908, the two lawmen stood in front of the Free and Easy Saloon and called on the old outlaw to step outside.

He'd just bellied up to the bar demanding more of the "hair of the dog that bit him" from the night before and ignored the lawmen. After Ranger Speed called a second time, Bill emptied his glass, turned, and headed for the back door. He was going to come around from behind the saloon and get the drop on the two lawmen. Billy Speed anticipated his move, and armed with his .30-40 Winchester, he headed in the same direction. The two turned the corner at the same time and faced each other in the

classic Old West confrontation. Bill reached for his pistol. The Ranger, seeing the outlaw's hand go toward his hip, raised his rifle and fired. Much to Bill's surprise and chagrin, his holster was empty. Somebody had beaten him to the draw a

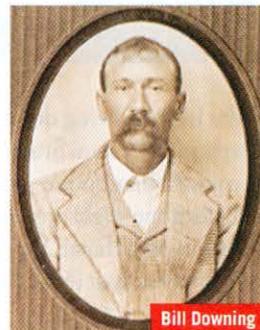
few moments before the fight.

A coroner's verdict ruled the killing justified, and locals cheered Bill's demise.

What had happened was this: Bill had bullied those folks so

many times that they were just waiting for a chance to turn the tables on him. So while he was leaving the bar, someone slyly picked his pocket—er, holster.

The incident was the inspiration for an axiom that still holds true—don't reach for your six-shooter unless you know it's there. **NV**



Bill Downing