

## Williams Wyatt

Williams “William or Billy” Wyatt was born about 1853 in Missouri. He was the ninth of ten children of John Lewis Wyatt and Esther Williams. In 1860, the family was living in Oxford, Johnson, Kansas Territory.<sup>1</sup> The family moved to Johnson, Stanton, Kansas, where Billy’s mother died from childbirth when Billy was nine years old. His father remarried, adding a step sibling to the family. On the 1865 and 1870 censuses, this blended family was living in Shawnee, Johnson, Kansas.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing is known of Billy’s life for the next decade. In 1882, we find Billy as the proprietor of the Metropolitan Dance Hall on Main Street in Silver Reef, Washington, Utah Territory.<sup>3</sup> He advertized his business as a palace of amusement with excellent taste, perfect decorum, staffed with genteel attendants and bright-eyed partners, while serving first class liquid refreshments.<sup>4</sup> He had “imported a half dozen very good-looking girls from Salt Lake, and holds forth nightly to the admiration of boozy crowds of men, and to the filling of his own purse, as we learn the receipts for the first night were about \$400; and the house still draws, regardless of a few quarrels and stray bullets occasionally”.<sup>5</sup>

The women were referred to as “hurdy girls” and the dance hall as a “hurdy house”. Hurdy girls were hired as dance hostesses to entertain miners, sailors or cowmen in a saloon or dance hall. These men would spend a lot of money to see a pretty lady, and the practice of young women playing a hurdy-gurdy and singing was found all over Europe, Australia, and North America. Generally, at least at first, prostitution was not involved. The hurdy girls danced with the men and cajoled them to spend money on drinks, often receiving a commission. Many of them found husbands and made a good home for themselves and their new families.



A hurdy-gurdy<sup>6</sup> is played by hand cranking a rosined wheel against the strings and sounds similar to a bagpipe (image from [historyimagined.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/hurdy-gurdy-girls](http://historyimagined.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/hurdy-gurdy-girls))

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census, 1860.

<sup>2</sup> Kansas State Census, 1865; United States Census, 1870.

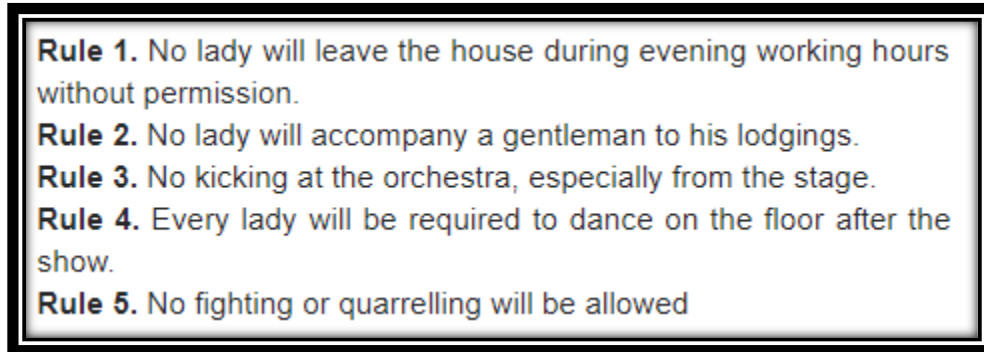
<sup>3</sup> *Silver Reef Miner*, 4 February 1882; *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 17 February 1882, p. 3; *The Utonian*, 20 May 1882, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Silver Reef Miner*, 4 February 1882.

<sup>5</sup> *Silver Reef Miner*, 7 February 1882.

<sup>6</sup> To hear a hurdy-gurdy, visit: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HurdySample.ogg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HurdySample.ogg)

Hurdy gurdy girls were considered "good women" by men, but usually not by "respectable" ladies such as the schoolmarm or banker's wife. Arrayed in their scandalous calf-length skirts, they wore stockings held up by garters and their shirts showed some cleavage. They wore make-up and often dyed their hair. Because the dance hall owners had to make sure the girls were safe, patrons were expected to follow rules.<sup>7</sup>



Dance Hall rules posted at the Alhambra Dance Hall in Silverton, Colorado.

On the evening<sup>8</sup> of Sunday, 12 February 1882,<sup>9</sup> William and one of his girls, Belle Reder, were approaching the entrance of the dance hall. At the door, William was accosted by Harry Mix and Ike Van Zant,<sup>10</sup> professional jockeys.<sup>11</sup> Mix insisted upon settlement of a gambling bet on the spot and caught hold of Wyatt and would not permit him to go into the hall. William warned him to let go, or he would hurt him, and called on Van Zant to take him away.<sup>12</sup>

Wyatt then drew his revolver and struck the unarmed Mix on the head, knocking him down and inflicting a severe scalp wound.<sup>13</sup> He then struck Mix a second time, and retreated into the Dance Hall, firing again as he entered the door.<sup>14</sup> Van Zant opened then fire on William,<sup>15</sup> who fired again from the inside. In total, six or seven shots were exchanged between William and Van Zant; one of the balls struck William in the abdomen about three inches to the right of his naval.<sup>16</sup>

The wound was certainly fatal, but reports differ for the time of death, spanning from Monday evening to Wednesday afternoon.<sup>17</sup> William was quietly buried, attended by very few. It was assumed that he

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<sup>7</sup> [revisionist.net/hurdy-gurdy.html](http://revisionist.net/hurdy-gurdy.html); <http://unusualhistoricals.blogspot.com/2011/06/entertainers-hurdy-gurdy-girls.html>; [historyimagined.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/hurdy-gurdy-girls/](http://historyimagined.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/hurdy-gurdy-girls/)

<sup>8</sup> One source says they had just finished lunch; others report the shooting on Sunday morning or Sunday evening between 8pm and midnight.

<sup>9</sup> *Deseret News*, 16 February 1882, p. 3; 22 February 1882, p. 8; *Salt Lake Herald*, 14 February 1882, p. 3; 16 February 1882, p. 1; 17 February 1882, p. 8; *Pioche Record*, 18 February 1882; *Deseret News*, 22 February 1882, p. 1; *The Utonian*, 20 May 1882, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Surname variously reported as Van Tonks, Van Stanz, Van Stunz, Van Tunks, Van Tuuks.

<sup>11</sup> *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 17 February 1882, p. 3; *Salt Lake Herald*, 14 February 1882, p. 3; 1 March 1882, p. 5; *Pioche Record*, 18 February 1882; *Deseret News*, 22 February 1882, p. 1; *The Park Record*, 18 February 1882, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Pioche Record*, 25 February 1882; *The Utonian*, 20 May 1882, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 17 February 1882, p. 3; *Salt Lake Herald*, 14 February 1882, p. 3; 17 February 1882, p. 8; *Pioche Record*, 18 February 1882; 25 February 1882; *Deseret News*, 22 February 1882, p. 1; *The Park Record*, 18 February 1882, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Pioche Record*, 25 February 1882; *The Utonian*, 20 May 1882, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Another source states that Van Zant started the shooting and Wyatt returned fire in self-defense.

<sup>16</sup> *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 17 February 1882, p. 3; *Salt Lake Herald*, 14 February 1882, p. 3; 17 February 1882, p. 8; *Pioche Record*, 18 February 1882; 25 February 1882; *Deseret News*, 22 February 1882, p. 1; *The Park Record*, 18 February 1882, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 17 February 1882, p. 3; *Deseret News*, 16 February 1882, p. 3; 22 February 1882, p. 8; *Salt Lake Herald*, 16 February 1882, p. 1; 1 March 1882, p. 5; *Pioche Record*, 25 February 1882.

left several thousand dollars, but at the last moment, contributions had to be taken to pay for the funeral expenses.<sup>18</sup>

Mix and Van Zant were both arrested on charges of murder, and after two days' examination, were remanded to custody to await the action of the grand jury.<sup>19</sup> The trial of Van Zant commenced in the Second District Court in Beaver. There was great difficulty in obtaining a suitable jury. Two witnesses were called, Belle Reder, who was in Wyatt's company at the time of the assault, and a man who hung around town named Clark.<sup>20</sup>

The prosecution argued that Mix and Van Zant had conspired to commit the crime; the defense pointed out that they were not the aggressive party and that Van Zant fired in self-defense. In addition, the deceased operated a hurdy house and was a disreputable man generally. As the case went to jury, opinions seemed to be equally divided. The jury shortly returned with a verdict of not guilty and Van Zant was discharged. The trial of Harry Mix was carried over to the September term, bail being fixed at \$4000. He failed to pay the \$2000 bond and was taken to the penitentiary.<sup>21</sup>

**Postscript:** Mark A. Pendleton, who was a boy in the waning days of Silver Reef, tells the following story: "One Sunday evening there was a wild time in the hurdy house or dance hall, when a woman, crazed by drink, shot the proprietor, who died the following morning. His money could not be found. The women who frequented this notorious dance hall departed and the building was occupied as a store until James N. Louder moved his goods to Beaver and sold the building to Peter Anderson, who was developing a ranch near Toquerville. When Anderson was removing the mopboard from the south wall he found a leather sack containing about \$2000 in gold coin."<sup>22</sup>

This memory of a young boy sounds mighty similar to the shooting tale and missing money of William Wyatt. You may decide if these parallel stories are related...

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<sup>18</sup> *Salt Lake Herald*, 1 March 1882, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Deseret News*, 16 February 1882, p. 3; 22 February 1882, pp. 1,8; *Salt Lake Herald*, 14 February 1882, p. 3; 17 February 1882, p. 8; 1 March 1882, p. 5; *Pioche Record*, 18 February 1882; *The Park Record*, 18 February 1882, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *The Utonian*, 20 May 1882, p. 3; *Pioche Record*, 25 February 1882; *Salt Lake Herald*, 16 February 1882, p. 1; *The Park Record*, 18 February 1882, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *The Utonian*, 20 May 1882, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Memories of Silver Reef*, by Mark A. Pendleton, in *Utah Historical Quarterly* 3:4, October 1930, p. 103.

**The Attraction!**

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**Metropolitan Dance Hall**

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**New Features to be Introduced at  
this Palace of Amusement.**

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Excellent music, perfect decorum, genteel  
attendants and bright-eyed partners  
constitute the main features.

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**First-class Liquid Refreshments at  
the Bar.**

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☞ The amusement-loving public are re-  
spectfully invited to call in.

WILLIAM WYATT.

(Image from *The Silver Reef Miner*, 4 February 1882)