

The Nun Who Took on Billy the Kid

by Katie O'Brien

Did you know that one of the most dangerous outlaws of the West was convinced not to murder four doctors by none other than a Catholic nun? Did you know that the same nun prevented the lynching of a man by a huge town mob?



The story of this great Catholic sister begins on January 23, 1850, when Rose Maria Segale was born in the small Italian village of Cicagna. When she was four years old, she and her family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Throughout her early years she knew she wanted to become a nun and told her father that as soon as she was old enough she would like to join the Sisters of Charity. At age sixteen she entered the novitiate, becoming Sister Blandina. Her sister Maria Maddelena refused several marriage proposals and decided to follow in the footsteps of her younger sister, and became Sister Justina.

She was assigned to teach in Steubenville and Dayton, Ohio for a short time when in 1872 she received word from the Motherhouse that she was to proceed to Trinidad for missionary work. Sister Blandina was thrilled at this opportunity to work somewhere, she thought, on an island off the coast of Venezuela or near Cuba somewhere. But when Sister Blandina boarded the train she realized that the Trinidad to which she was going was out in the western part of the United States in Colorado and not a tropical island.

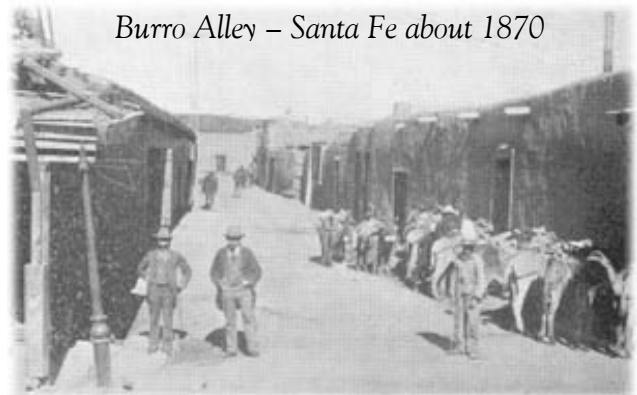
She traveled alone and reached her destination on December 9, 1872. She was only twenty-two years old. What she found when she got to Trinidad was a town that was often frequented by outlaws. Lynching was a common practice, and law was often determined not by the sheriff but by the mob. In one such instance, a man had shot another man, fatally wounding him. The mob had gathered around the house of the wounded man and as soon as he died, they were planning on going to the jailhouse where the man who shot him was being kept, drag him from the cell, and lynch him. The prisoner's son was the father of one of Sister Blandina's students. He ran up to her and

told her what was going to happen. She was appalled and decided to do something about it. She went to the bed of the wounded man and asked him if he would forgive the man who shot him and let the law, rather than the mob, decide what punishment he should receive. He agreed. Sister Blandina told the sheriff that she would like to have the prisoner walk to the bedside of the wounded man for forgiveness. The sheriff thought she was crazy, that at any time walking along the street, the mob would snatch the man away and lynch him right away. She told him not to worry.

The prisoner was very nervous as he walked down the street between the sheriff and Sister Blandina. Dozens of angry men stared at the three as they walked to the wounded man's house. The three went in, the man forgave the prisoner, and they walked back to the jail without any trouble from the mob. The mob broke up, and the court decided the fate of the man.

Throughout Sister Blandina's years in the wild western town of Trinidad, she had heard many stories of the murders committed by well-known and feared outlaws. One outlaw that she had heard so much about was "Billy the Kid", whom she was soon to meet in person. One day a student of Sister Blandina's told her that one of Billy's gang members had been accidentally shot by a fellow gang member and was left to die in an adobe hut near-by. Sister Blandina immediately went over to the man and began caring for him; bringing him food and drink and answering his questions about God and religion.

One day he told Sister Blandina that Billy and the gang would be arriving in Trinidad at 2 p.m. on Saturday to scalp the four doctors in the town that refused to treat his injury, just because he was an outlaw. Sister Blandina decided that no such thing was going to happen. On that Saturday at 2 p.m., Sister Blandina was waiting to meet one of the most feared murderers in the West. He arrived on schedule, and he greeted her kindly, as he had been told of all of the help she had given his fellow gang member. He said to her, "We are all glad to see you, Sister, and I want to say, it would give me pleasure to be able to do you any favor." At that offer Sister Blandina told him that she did have a favor to ask of him. He replied, "The favor is granted." She took his hand and said, "I understand you have come to scalp our Trinidad physicians, which act I ask you to cancel." Billy was a bit upset and surprised that Sister Blandina had known what their purpose was for visiting. Reluctantly he agreed



Burro Alley - Santa Fe about 1870

and the four doctors' lives were saved.

Later on, Sister Blandina was transferred to Santa Fe where she also set up a school, a hospital, and helped many other people. While there she visited her old acquaintance "Billy the Kid" who had been captured and put in jail, only to escape shortly after. On one of her trips in a stagecoach, her companions had heard that Billy was nearby, and had been robbing many people traveling in coaches. Her companions were very nervous, and she continued to "pray her beads." Suddenly, the driver yelled that someone was approaching the stagecoach. The men got out their guns, but Sister told them to put them away immediately. The man on horseback approached and rode along side the stagecoach. He looked at the passengers and Sister Blandina shifted her bonnet to catch a glimpse of the man. Their eyes met, the man raised his hat and bowed as if to greet Sister Blandina, and rode away. The men believed he was just a cowboy riding on the plains, but Sister Blandina knew better, it was "Billy the Kid."



Sister Blandina continued her work out west for twenty-one years before returning to Cincinnati where she and her sister, Sister Justina, set up an Italian Welfare Center for the poor in the city. Sister Blandina learned that "Billy the Kid" had been killed by Sheriff Patrick F. Garrett, and she often wondered if someone had gotten to "Billy the Kid", or William H. Bonney as was his real name, and instilled in him some religious beliefs and told him about Jesus and God, that maybe he would not have led a life of killing and robbery. He had, however, shown respect for the religious, probably because of the kindness that he had seen from Sister Blandina.

Although never mentioned in American history books, Sister Blandina Segale is an example of a Catholic in America who lived her faith. She saved the lives of four doctors, performed every spiritual and corporal work of mercy to the people along the Santa Fe Trail, and proved that

she was never afraid to do what was right, even if it meant standing up to a mob or to one of the most feared outlaws in the West.