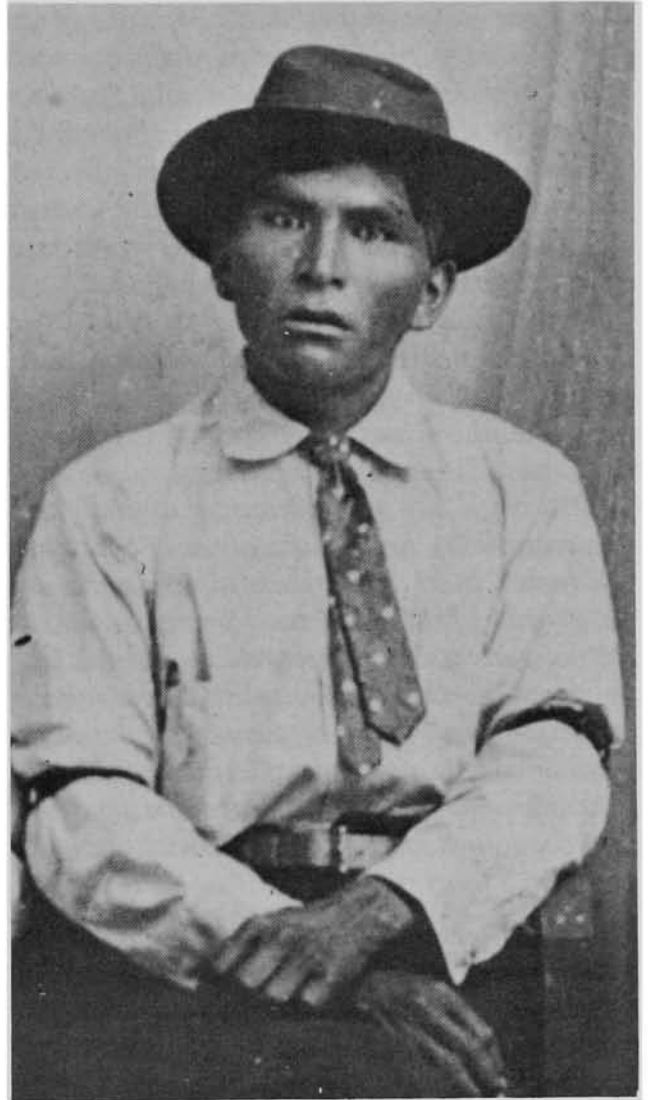


The Willie Boy Case and Attendant Circumstances

CLARA TRUE

NOTE: Few manhunts in the history of the West have been written about by so many authors—both scholarly and popular writers—as the Willie Boy chase of 1909 in Southern California. The fascination of this manhunt seems to lie in the fact that it was the last truly western chase on horses—before the automobile joined the field of law enforcement—and that its Southern Paiute protagonist managed to elude posse after posse of expert horsemen over more than 500 miles of desert for almost two weeks before taking his life when surrounded. The Willie Boy manhunt was the subject of my non-fiction novel, Willie Boy: A Desert Manhunt (1960) and the Universal Studios motion picture Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here (1970). An Indian account of the manhunt by Chona Dominguez, a Cahuilla woman, may be found in Seiler (1968). A bibliography of the manhunt is presented in Wilson (1970).

Two contemporary documents record the manhunt. One is Sheriff Frank Wilson's report to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors of November 2, 1909, which has been previously published (Wilson 1970). The document presented here is Indian Agent Clara True's report to her superiors in Washington, D. C. At the time of the Willie Boy manhunt, Indian Agent True was in charge of the Malki Indian Agency at Morongo Indian Reservation, Banning, California, and responsible for four other reservations in the area: Torres-Martinez in



Willie Boy. Courtesy of the Special Collections Department, General Library, University of California, Riverside.

Indio, Agua Caliente in Palm Springs, Mission Creek in the hills east of Banning, and Twenty-nine Palms on the Mojave Desert. True (1909) presents an account of her experiences as a

woman Indian agent. Her report on the Willie Boy manhunt, titled "The Willie Boy Case and Attendant Circumstances," was discovered in 1958 in the U. S. National Archives by Congressman Dalip Singh Saund, who passed it on to me. While the report adds little that is new to what is already known about the manhunt, it does present one of the few descriptions of the Indian village of Twentynine Palms, which was inhabited by Chemehuevi and Serrano. Soon after the Willie Boy manhunt ended, the majority of the inhabitants—believing their oasis to be haunted—moved to Torres-Martinez Reservation. Chase (1919) provides an account of the abandoned village and some additional information on its capitan, Jim Pine. Miss True's statements about the manhunt are based on hearsay from her Indian policemen, other posse members, and contemporary newspaper accounts. Some of her statements do not accord with my interpretation of the facts (Lawton 1960), based on analysis of a number of sources, but I doubt that any purpose would be served by footnoting such inconsistencies in her narrative. Her reference to a written language of the Chemehuevis is the most serious error and can be traced to a newspaperman's hoax in the Los Angeles Examiner, where a drawing appeared showing the message supposedly scrawled by Lolita on the sands of the desert.

HARRY LAWTON

THE WILLIE BOY CASE AND ATTENDANT CIRCUMSTANCES

Banning, Calif.,
Oct. 20, 1909.

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

Sunday night September twenty-sixth Mike Boniface was shot through the head by Willie Boy. Both were members of the Twenty Nine

Palms band of Mission Indians. Willie Boy had become infatuated with Lolita, Mike's sixteen year old daughter. Mike objected to Willie Boy, giving the reason the youth of the girl and Willie Boy's having a wife. Willie Boy took his wife across the desert to some other band of Indians and left her. This desertion occurred in June. Willie Boy returned to Twenty Nine Palms and one night intercepted Lolita as she was returning from looking after the grazing ponies and kept her out all night. Upon her return she took refuge in the house of the captain of the band, Jim Pine. Willie Boy went away to Coachella to work and did not return to the reservation. Mike and his family came out of the desert country in July to work in the orchards in Banning. Lolita had a wish to go to school somewhere and was saving money to buy some pretty clothes. She had never had any advantages of civilized life but she was a girl of unusual mentality. She was physically a splendid specimen of Indian girlhood. I did not comment upon the school idea but watched the development of it with interest. She was well taught in the ways of her primitive desert people. I did not know whether going to school would make a girl of her age happier.

The family lived a patriarchal life very happily. I once offered old Mike a home at Malki, near Banning. He replied that the noise and the strife of towns disturbed him so much that he could not be happy. He was gentle with his family, honest, industrious and devout in his own primitive fashion. I visited the reservation in May with Special Officer Johnson. We remarked upon the good health and the happiness of this small desert band notwithstanding their hard life. Mike was with us for several days. We showed him his reservation boundaries and with him planned for water development for the place. We became much attached to him for his unflinching cheerfulness and his devotion to his family.

After Mike's family came to Banning to

work, Willie Boy came up from Coachella and secured work on the Gilman ranch not far from where Mike's people were employed. Apparently there was no effort on the part of Willie Boy to pay attention to Lolita. Willie Boy was rated a good laborer. He was well dressed, did not drink in any noticeable quantity and did not gamble. He was merely an unostentatious Indian laborer. He roomed with a white boy employed on the same ranch. This boy seems to have become quite friendly with the Indian. Circus night in a neighboring town the white boy is said to have secured liquor. He brought it home to the ranch and because Willie Boy was his friend, gave him two bottles of whiskey.

About midnight Willie Boy went to the camp where Mike was sleeping with nine of his family and shot the old man. Willie Boy terrorized the camp with threats of killing anybody who made objection to his movements. Mike's wife tried to take the gun from Willie Boy but he was too strong for her to manage. At the point of the gun he compelled Lolita to get up and follow him. Mike's family ran to the foothills frantic with fear and remained till nearly dawn. They then returned and gave the alarm. It was thought the murderer might be in hiding upon the Malki reservation which covers a large mountainous area, or that the couple would go the shortest route to Twenty Nine Palms. The Indian police took up the trail from Banning, with the constable and a party of white men. This was Monday morning about six o'clock. The pursuit lasted practically seventeen days. It covered about five hundred miles of the worst country in the world. At times fifty men were after the boy. Three times the Indian police came in for fresh horses and food supplies. Part of the time they were almost in the act of taking him at the Twenty Nine Palms reservation but with the assistance of his two old aunts and a little brother, Willie Boy escaped from that reservation. There was no predicting his next move.

Prior to his reaching his relations at

Twenty Nine Palms, Lolita had yielded to the fatigues of the desert and to abuse too horrible to describe. She was compelled to carry the burdens, including Willie Boy's coat. He carried only the rifle he had taken from Banning. This he had stolen from the ranch house. When Lolita fell wholly exhausted, face downward, Willie Boy was almost within the clutches of the pursuing party. He paused long enough to send a shot through the girl. It entered the back and came out through the breast. She attempted to stop the blood with a bandana handkerchief which she was holding clutched in her hand, against her chest when found. Willie Boy did not stop long enough to pick up his coat from her arm, nor to take the provisions and the canteen of water.

The country was so rough that the pursuers were afoot when they came upon the body of the girl. They had to dispose of her body as a coyote had been following for hours and to leave the child meant that she would be eaten speedily. One of the Indians carried the body on his shoulder, horseback. It had to be taken thirty miles to a wagon. The wagon trip in was about as far. This disposition of the body occupied the pursuers several days. Meantime they recruited fresh horses and additional food. On the second trip out, a fight with Willie Boy occurred. Five men were scouting for him. He skillfully led them into a regular death trap in the rough country and picked off their horses. One man was shot through the hip. The place afforded almost no protection for the pursuers. Segundo Chino, the policeman most prominent in the hunt, found a little boulder large enough to protect his head. When he lifted his head to look about, Willie Boy took a shot at the head, which fanned Segundo's hair. Segundo and the other men were unable to locate Willie Boy though they could hear his voice once calling, "Come up here, boys. I am lonely. You are not afraid of me, are you?" The place was one where echoes were several times repeated. Segundo Chino watched for a puff of

smoke from Willie Boy's gun, but could not see anything. John Hyde, one of the trailers hired by the county, from this reservation, who had gotten behind a little clump of greasewood when the shooting occurred, finally got near enough to Reche, the wounded man, to ask if he were badly hurt. Reche was able to answer no, but did not move. After some conversation, John decided that the best course for him was to take news of the situation to another band of men scouting for Willie Boy and get a conveyance for Reche's relief. The men were all afoot, with no food, worn out already, and Willie Boy taking shots at every move. It was about thirty miles to the nearest ranch and twenty to the camp where the other pursuers were located. John is a Yaqui descended Indian, experienced in guerrilla ways. He has been blamed by the newspapers for leaving the wounded man, but there could have been no possible good in his staying. His idea was to bring re-inforcements. He could not carry Reche in his arms twenty miles to the camp, and there was nothing to do but go for assistance. John jumped from his cover as soon as his mind was made up, he darted across the open in range of Willie Boy's gun, narrowly escaping two shots by doubling up and jumping sidewise as only an Indian knows how to do.

When John Hyde reached the camp, the party of men there at once started out to the rescue. They were poorly equipped and the horses were worn out. John came on in as quickly as possible to Banning as a courier. He came the last thirty miles horseback as he procured an old pony at Warren's ranch. He brought the only news we had received for several days. He did not expect to see the Indian police again alive as he had left Segundo Chino in a very dangerous situation practically at Willie Boy's mercy.

I had an automobile on the road in a short time, loaded with food, ammunition and emergency remedies in case the police had been wounded. This machine was the only one

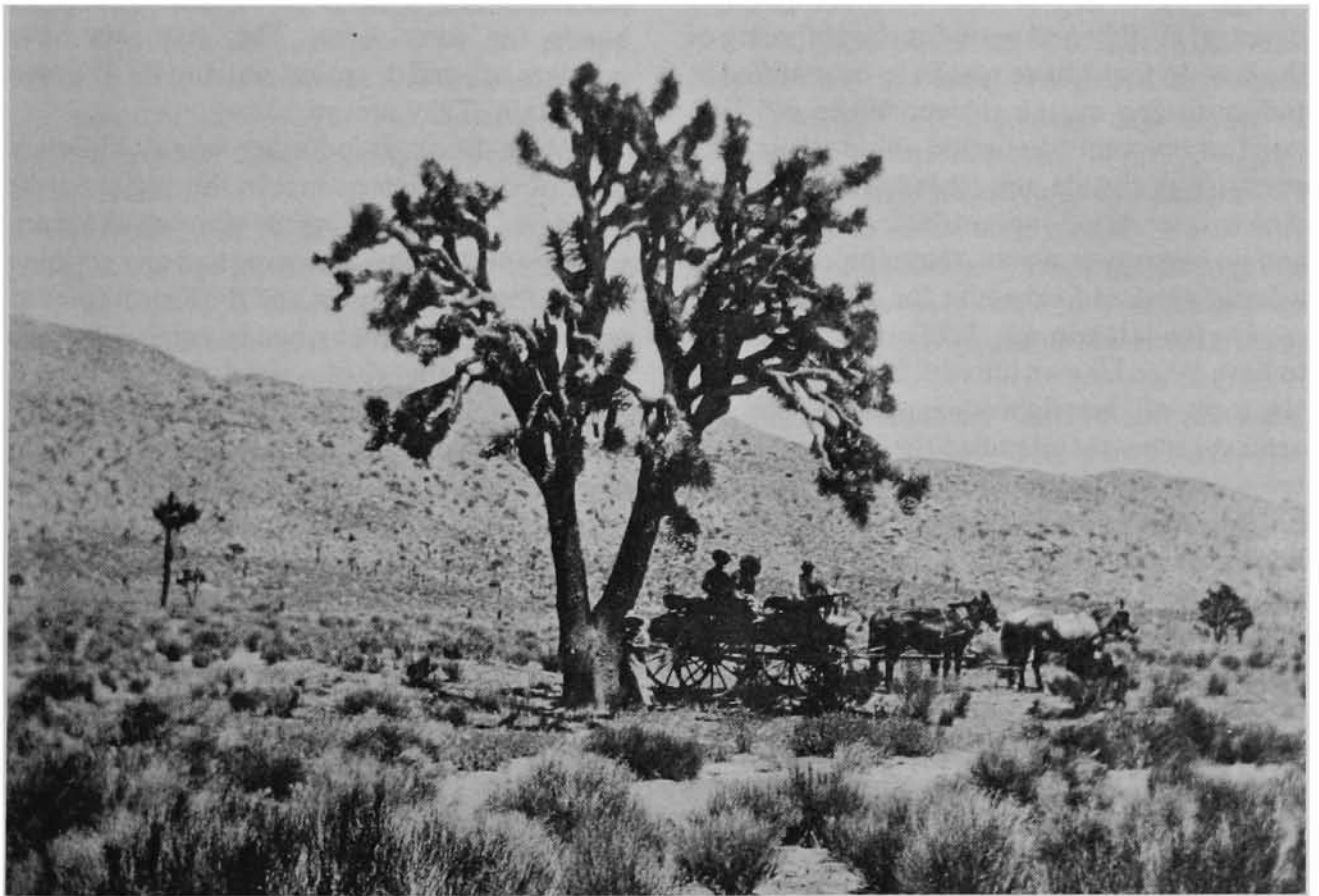
which proved of any use in getting through the sand. The sharpshooters from the towns several hours after I had dispatched our machine chartered one to go to the rescue of the white men but this machine proved useless a few miles out of Banning, where the desert begins. I started three horses immediately upon receipt of the news of the shooting so that the police might be able to continue the case, if the police had not been killed.

The white officers in the case after relieving Reche by getting him to camp and later a day's trip in a wagon to the railroad, thought it best to stop the hunt for the time. The Indian police with some reluctance came in with the automobile. It was a case where the reservation and the local authorities had to act together and the police always yielded to the judgement of the white men. I do not believe this was best. The sheriff of Riverside county is a good man in town, but when he got into the real desert in the Twenty Nine Palms country, he was not at home. The sheriff of San Bernardino County who also joined the case grew ill from fatigue and desert water. The country to be traversed is about as unknown as the Sahara, and probably as bad. The officers had sometimes only one meal a day. They were worn out and perhaps it was quite as well that they ordered the men in after the fight.

After a resting and recruiting spell, all hands finally took the field again, the police in the sheriff's party as scouts. The captain of the Twenty Nine Palms band, old Jim Pine, with another Indian, Will Pablo, whom Mr. Johnson made a Special Deputy a year ago, went ahead with B. B. DeCrevecoeur to the Palms country to scout and to prevent the relations of Willie Boy from giving subsistence and clothes to the fugitive, as they had previously done. The little brother of Willie Boy had put on his shoes and made tracks all over the country, deceiving the tracking party while Willie Boy got out of the reservation. Meantime we had succeeded in getting in to Banning the old mother of Mike



Sheriff Frank Wilson's posse posed outside Indian dwellings at the village of Twentynine Palms. Photograph by Randolph W. Madison. Courtesy of Special Collections, General Library, University of California, Riverside.



Clara True with William "Pussyfoot" Johnson (later to become well-known as a prohibition control officer) and two unidentified companions on their way to Twentynine Palms in 1909. Courtesy of Special Collections, General Library, University of California, Riverside.

Boniface who was terrified at her lonely condition and Willie Boy's proximity. The other old women were in sympathy with the boy and as yet have not been found, nor has the little boy. They disappeared from the Palms apparently without leaving even tracks. It is more than probable that they were hidden by an old prospector. I must send out to locate them very soon as Willie Boy was their only means of support and they will literally starve if left alone out there. I had the horses gathered up from the Palms and taken to a ranch some thirty miles away to prevent the use of the ponies by Willie Boy or his sympathizers. These horses will be returned to the reservation as soon as possible. The captain of the band, Jim Pine, assisted in bringing in the horses and though he is not a man of great physical courage, he did good work for the enforcing of the law. In fact I have reason to be gratified at Indian feeling on the subject. When old Jim, terrified by events, hesitated about joining the pursuers as a guide, the other Indians told him if he as reservation captain declined to go along and do his duty as a man, they would tie him to a horse's tail and take him for an example.

On the last trip out, Willie Boy was found to have taken his own life with his last cartridge. He took off his right shoe, placed the gun against his heart and pulled the trigger with his toe. Plenty of food was found beside him. Had not his ammunition given out, he could have gone for weeks longer. He did not need to carry food as his people have acorns, pinon nuts and mesquite beans stored up in the hunting places so that they can hunt for deer without carrying provisions. Willie Boy knew the places. He had once helped to kill one of his own band in the same locality for girl stealing. The white people never heard of the affair till now. There is hardly any calculating what has occurred among this little known people. Until recently, since I became superintendent, no Indian agent ever visited the place.

Old maps locate a large Indian country out

there, but no reservation was established until a few years ago. The reservation does not happen to be where the Indians are really located. I have had surveys made and land withdrawn as far as possible where the Indians are occupying the land. Indian history has it that the Palms region was once the headquarters of the Colorado desert bands. I presume this is true. The location would be ideal, inaccessible to the white man of the time, supplied with rabbits, deer, mountain sheep, acorns, pinons and mesquite beans, with grass for ponies and some water. It is yet a good cattle range, in little watered spots in the canons. There are yet bands of Indians who frequent the places which bands are as little known as the Thibetans. Special Agent Kelsey has been trying to get in touch with one of these bands for some time. The members have quarters around a spring out in Old Woman Mountain. They are migratory.

Willie Boy's grandfather was doubtless a chief of some consequence in this region in the old days. Willie Boy grew up a desert man, sinewy and healthy. He never had any training except that of the desert and the little he picked up at infrequent times when he came in toward the towns and worked a short time for wages. He spoke English rather well but had never associated with the Spanish population enough to acquire Spanish. His aunts now say that he once killed a white man. He had a gunshot scar under his chin. While he was out on the flight he unaccountably provided himself with a coat and a canteen. The coat was of good quality, tailored, and I fear Willie Boy came upon some lone prospector and killed him, taking the coat and whatever stores were needed by the Indian. The coat has no identifying mark.

Several times people interested in Indians have recommended that Twenty Nine Palms be abolished as a reservation on account of its isolation. I have declined to advise the Indians to come in nearer civilization and other Indians as there is no trace of tuberculosis nor any

other disease among the band. The members of it have no taste for liquor. Their dead are buried near their homes and with these people the graveyards play an important part in their religion. The captain of the band has fourteen little children buried near his house. He has no living children. He and his wife tend the little graves as carefully as white people might. The graves are decorated with bright colored stones. The captain and his wife are to me very beautiful examples of true comradeship in marriage. They are old, probably seventy, but I have seen them going about hand in hand. Because I hesitated to break up homes and because I did not believe it best to bring the Palms band into closer contact with tuberculosis, I have offered no advice to the Indians on the subject of moving. The physical condition of Willie Boy demonstrated by his escape, when he tired down horses and the best men of the country shows that the isolated desert Indian has the best of environment for his peculiar needs.

The counties will stand for most of the expense of the hunt. The purely reservation part of it, which could not be put upon the counties I have forwarded for approval in the form of requests for authority to settle indebtedness. The counties will replace the Indian horses.

The case presented some mixed features involving questions of county and reservation authority, but everybody was a unit in waiving technicalities and getting the man. The Indian police had to act, as the preventative work upon the reservations could only be done by the Indian police. Malki, Mission Creek and Twenty Nine Palms were all involved to some extent.

Another reason for my acting promptly and thoroughly was that a wavering would have permitted a good many doubtful Indians to settle their sympathies upon the side of Willie Boy and in that case there would have been possibilities of much bloodshed. Willie

Boy alone was bad enough, but had he been joined by some men I really expected would disappear and join him, there would have been a time of lawlessness and another "Indian outbreak" to handle. I gathered up all the saddle horses here and had them hired to the county for pursuit before the Indians realized what had happened. There would have been no way for a man to get out to Willie Boy had the situation become acute. I am convinced that prompt measures kept some bad men out of the case.

The Indians here, the questionable part at least, are much like bad boys. If one keeps them busy doing good, they would about as soon do good as evil. We kept them keyed up giving assistance and they gave us no real trouble.

That there was communication with Willie Boy there is no doubt. His movements would be known to the Indians two days before we had authentic information. When it became known that there had been a fight and that the police and white officers had the worst of it, there was an all night meeting, singing and dancing. As yet I do not know whether it was out of sympathy with the police or with Willie Boy.

The police deserve much credit for determination and courage. They were always at the front and took risks cheerfully, even playfully. Both men were accorded the warm praise of the officers of the counties.

Our government horses were given hard service, but were not killed as reported. By accident the police happened the day of the fight to be riding their own horses. One of our team was used up so that she will not be serviceable again for a long time, if ever, but the promptness of the Indian Office in granting me authority to purchase another enabled me to keep a team in the field. This had to be done for safety of the men as well as for transportation of supplies and of the old women in case they should have to be dealt with summarily. Our

team covered about two hundred miles on the last trip out.

In the last analysis the Willie Boy episode was an Indian feud. Some time ago one of Mike Boniface's family stole one of the women of Willie Boy's family. Willie Boy stole Mike's girl in return and no doubt knew that he would at some time be killed in the desert by Mike's people. It is difficult for white people to understand affairs of the kind. The girl was recovered once and I believe Mike's family only waited a time of vengeance. This likely made Willie Boy more desperate than white people would understand. He killed Mike in all probability because Willie Boy was marked for death when the band went back to the desert after the fruit picking season.

The written language of the Indians came to light in this pursuit. Lolita Boniface left messages in the sand for the pursuers to read. At least two of the Indians understood perfectly. I find that the symbol language is recorded in the rocks in the canons of the desert. I have taken steps to secure enough of the symbols with the interpretation for scientific purposes.

Old Mike and his daughter are buried at Malki. I called a meeting of the Indians to provide for the family temporarily. The Indians responded very readily and twenty dollars cash was collected and delivered to the widow. The sons after a few days resumed work and the mother is working in the orchards in Banning. The old woman, Mike's mother, whom we brought in from the reservation for safety, is apparently well and comfortable. In a short

time the family will return to the Palms for the celebration of the tribal funeral rites. After that I believe the Bonifaces will come in to live at Malki. They seem terrified and will probably be afraid to remain at the old desert home. Jim Pine, the captain of the band, thinks of coming in from the desert also. Mike was his life-time friend and Jim seems quite unnerved by recent events.

Very respectfully,

/s/ Clara D. True
Supt.

REFERENCES

- Chase, J. Smeaton
1919 California Desert Trails. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lawton, Harry
1960 Willie Boy: A Desert Manhunt. Balboa Island: Paisano Press [Reprinted 1977 by Malki Museum Press.]
- Seiler, Hansjakob
1968 Willie Boy: A Western Drama. The Indian Historian 1:26-27.
- True, Clara
1909 The Experiences of a Woman Indian Agent. New Outlook 92:331-336.
- Wilson, Frank
1970 The Last Western Manhunt: Riverside County Sheriff Frank Wilson's Official Report on the Willie Boy Manhunt of 1909. Ramona: Acoma Books.

