

The Bronco Bill Train Robbery

Part 1



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Updated with new information and photos

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Outlaws Bronco Bill Walters and Kid Johnson rob train south of Belen

Shoot-out Kills 2 Sheriffs: Frank Vigil & Daniel Bustamante Navajo tracker slain

Robbers Flee to Arizona

Sunday evening about midnight, May 22, 1898, three men in cowboy attire rode towards Belen, New Mexico. The cowboys were seasoned train robbers **William “Bronco Bill” Walters**, **Bill “Kid” Johnson** and **Daniel “Red” Pipkin**. Arriving at the Santa Fe Railroad station in Belen about 1:00 a.m., Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson dismounted their horses near the station and gave Red Pipkin a quick wave goodbye. Hiding in the shadows of the station, it was obvious the two wished to remain unnoticed. Pipkin rode off, leading the two now riderless horses of Walters and Johnson with him into the darkness. Pipkin rode off to an old adobe house in the village of Pueblitos, about four miles south of Belen, to rest the horses. By arrangement, this would be the location of the train robbery. By the time the train would arrive, the horses would be rested and fed, ready to make a quick getaway following the robbery.

Bronco Bill and Johnson watched as activity began to brew at the Belen train station.

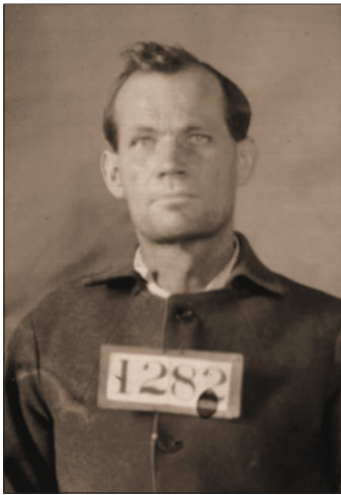
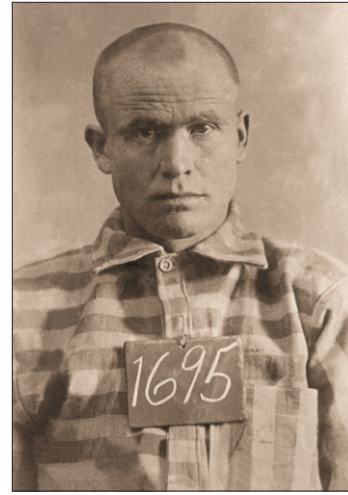
The Station Master walked outside and lit several gas lamps to illuminate the platform. Several hand carts of luggage and mail were brought out and positioned along the tracks. Men and women, wearing their Sunday best, began aggregating on the passenger platform. Suddenly, the screech of a distant train whistle cut through the darkness to announce its arrival. Hot red cinders belched out of the stack and steam blew with a roar as the train arrived and slowed to a crawl, properly positioning the passenger cars along the loading platform.

It was early Monday morning, May 23, 1898, 1:45 a.m.. Santa Fe passenger and express train number twenty one had just arrived at Belen from Albuquerque - exactly on time.

While the passengers boarded the train, mail and packages loaded into the express car, and the engine took on water, the two cowboys walked through the shadows opposite the station towards the engine. As soon as Walters observed all passengers were loaded, the two climbed into the locomotive, pistols in hand, and ordered engineer **Tate** to go ... now! The engineer obeyed by immediately advancing the throttle, causing the train to begin moving with a heavy jolt. This was actually a smart move by the engineer.

When a train is stopped at a station, the conductor controls the train. An engineer never moves the train from a stop without the conductor's permission. While the passengers likely did not notice the violation of protocol, conductor **James Connors** certainly did. It alerted him that something was very wrong.

The clank-clank-clank of the couplings echoed through the darkness as the train jerked forward

**"Bronco Bill" Walters****Bill "Kid" Johnson****Daniel "Red" Pipkin**

and built up speed. Soon the train was traveling at track speed, about 40 miles per hour, quickly leaving the station behind. One of the most famous train robberies in New Mexico history had begun.

After a few minutes, the engineer was ordered to stop the train. "Kid" Johnson kept his pistol pressed against the ribs of the engineer while Bronco Bill jumped out of the engine cab and uncoupled the passenger cars from the train. He had once worked briefly for a railroad as a yardman in Texas. Once back in the cab, Bronco Bill ordered the train down the track again, now consisting of only the engine, coal tender and the express car. The passenger cars were left stranded on the tracks, about two miles south of the Belen station. The robbers knew it would take over an hour for the conductor and a few passengers to walk back to the station in the dark to report the incident, giving the robbers plenty of time to rob the express car and make a clean get away.

About another two miles down the track, Bronco Bill spotted Pipkin's signal and ordered the train stopped. The hijacked train came to rest exactly as planned, where accomplice Red Pipkin was waiting with the horses.



Locals identify this adobe house where Red Pipkin waited with the horses adjacent to the train tracks. The structure has since collapsed and been razed.

Joining Bronco Bill and Johnson, the three robbers ordered the express agent, **Edward Hickock**, to open the doors. After some confrontation, they broke into the express car, rolled the safe out the side door onto the ground, and laced it with several sticks of dynamite. Exactly like the scene from the classic movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the explosion ripped one side completely off the Wells Fargo safe and blew hundreds of bills into the air, falling to the ground like snow.

New Mexico was plagued with train robberies in the 1890s. Wells Fargo was losing a lot of money along with their credibility, and passengers were losing confidence of safe travel on the railroads. Apprehending train robbers had become a law enforcement priority in New Mexico. In 1897, the legislature passed a law demanding the death sentence to any robber found guilty of assault to any passenger or railroad employee.



The train robbery took place near the junction of today's NM-116 and Estevan Lopez road south of Belen. In the 1920s, a nearby farmer found a sizeable piece of the safe while plowing his field.

After collecting all the bills and coinage they could carry, the robbers tossed a bag of coins into the cab for the engineer and fireman to prove they didn't harm the crew. It was a well planned, well executed train robbery.

Once the robbery was reported to the Belen station, railroad telegraphers quickly spread the news of the train heist up and down the Rio Grande. Wells Fargo reported the robbery yielded \$250, a standard practice at the time, even though the bag of coins tossed to the engineer contained over \$500 alone. The exact amount of the theft has never been determined, but estimated at \$20,000 or more. That would be about \$700,000 today.

THE ROBBER'S ESCAPE (The Flight to Arizona)

After the early morning train robbery, the trio disappeared with their loot into the early morning darkness. They rode to the southwest to skirt the mesa west of Belen. As the sun rose that Monday morning, they stopped on the east side of the mesa and buried two heavy bags of coins atop a hill to lighten their load – no doubt intending to retrieve them at a later time. The coins in the third sack remained in their saddle bags. At the southern end of the mesa, they intercepted the trail to the villages of Santa Rita (Riley) and Puertocito, a distance of about 40 miles.

A person on horseback covers about four miles an hour at an easy pace. At this rate, the outlaws would have reached Ladron Peak by day's end where they likely camped for the night, taking refuge in one of the peak's rugged canyons.

The solitary Ladron Peak, meaning *thieves* in Spanish, sits alone on the desert floor with a long storied history as a hide out for thieves, bandits and outlaws.



The next day about noon on Tuesday, May 24, Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson had reached the small village of Puertocito on the Rio Salado – minus Red Pipkin. This is an important clue to the story, as most accounts seldom mention Pipkin's involvement. The engineer, fireman and express car agent clearly reported three men involved in the heist.



Anastacio Baca's Puertocito Trading Post, built ca. 1890.

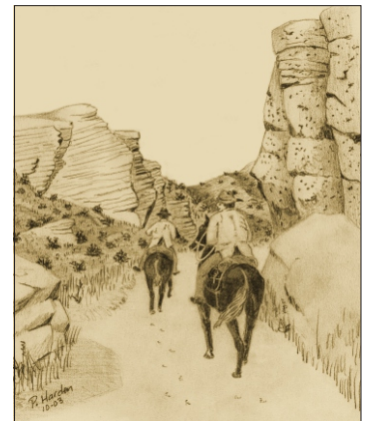


Puertocito Trading Post today (left) and the Baca homestead (right).

Somewhere along the trail to Puertocito, or perhaps when they broke camp on Ladron Peak, Pipkin received his share of the booty and took off to his family ranch in Ramah, New Mexico.

Bronco Bill and Johnson entered the Puertocito Trading Post, operated by **Anistacio Baca**, and purchased some sardines, crackers, wine and feed for their horses. Anastacio and his daughter, **Juanita**, were in the store. They later recalled to the posse and sheriffs the two cowboys seemed nervous, taking turns looking out the windows and doorway as if they were being chased. And, they were. Though the posse was many hours behind.

From Puertocito, Bronco Bill and Johnson rode along the Rio Salado towards the Navajo village of Alamo. The Rio Salado canyon with its sandy bottom was a favored east-west trail for both horseback and wagon travel.



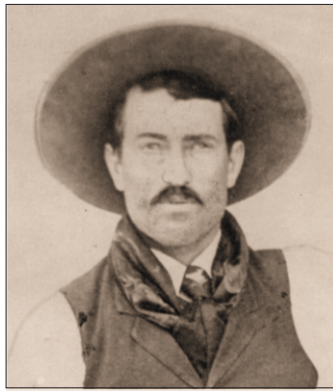
Not wanting to be seen or later identified, they drew little attention around Alamo, leaving

From Puertocito, Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson rode west along the Rio Salado arroyo (dry river bed).

the Rio Salado and following another arroyo around Tres Hermanos and Table Mountain mesas. By sundown, now 60 miles from the train robbery site, they made camp in Alamocito Creek west of the Alamo village. It was a good tactical position in a wide portion of the arroyo. Any person seen approaching would easily be within rifle range. For two days they had not seen a sign of a pursuing posse. They must have felt confident they would elude the law for a safe escape to Arizona. A New Mexico Sheriff's posse has no jurisdiction in the Arizona Territory.



Courtesy Tibo Chaves family
**Deputy Sheriff
Francisco X. Vigil**



Courtesy Hipolito Romero
**Deputy Sheriff
Daniel Bustamante**

The Valencia County Posse

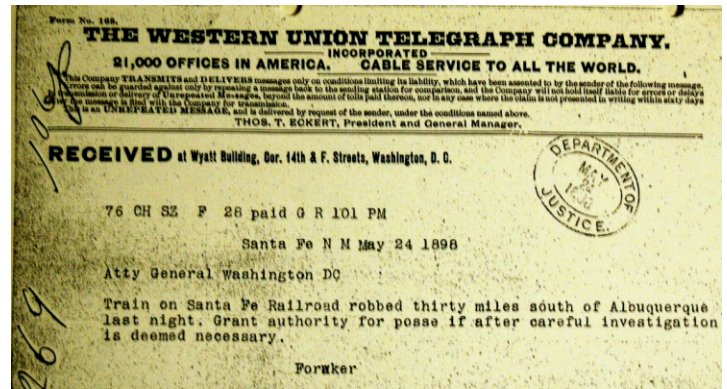
In the morning following the robbery, Valencia County Deputy Sheriffs **Francisco Vigil** and **Daniel Bustamante** organized a posse, recruiting a few men from the villages of Peralta and Las Lunas, north of Belen. By mid-morning, they were in the saddle and on the trail to Puertocito – the believed route of the bandits.

Family aural history reports that once on the trail, the posse stopped to rest the horses. The usual pay for a posse member was \$2-\$3 per day. Inquiring what their pay would be, it was learned Deputy Vigil had formed the posse without U.S. Marshal **Creighton Foraker's** permission or pay authorization, but was sure it would be approved. This did not sit well with the men and the posse turned around and returned home. Some historians have discounted this claim.

As per protocol, the Valencia County Sheriff, **Carlos Baca**, notified New Mexico U.S. Marshall Foraker in Albuquerque, of the train robbery. Foraker, in turn, telegraphed the U.S. Attorney General for permission to authorize a Federal Marshall's posse. John Tanner, author of *The Bronco Bill Gang*, was able to obtain copies of some of these telegrams at the National Archives and Western Union. Foraker's telegram requesting the formation of a federal posse was sent to Washinton D.C. at 1 p.m., several hours *after* the Sheriff's posse was on the trail. It appears the claim the posse was not yet approved was true.

Regardless, the loyalty to their job caused the two remaining deputies to press on without a posse. Vigil and Bustamante arrived at the Puertocito Trading Post later that afternoon. Owner Anastacio Baca told the lawmen about the two men who had been there a few hours earlier.

Baca described how the men appeared



Courtesy John Tanner
U.S. Marshal Foraker's telegram requesting authority for a posse, sent at 1:01 p.m., after the posse departed.

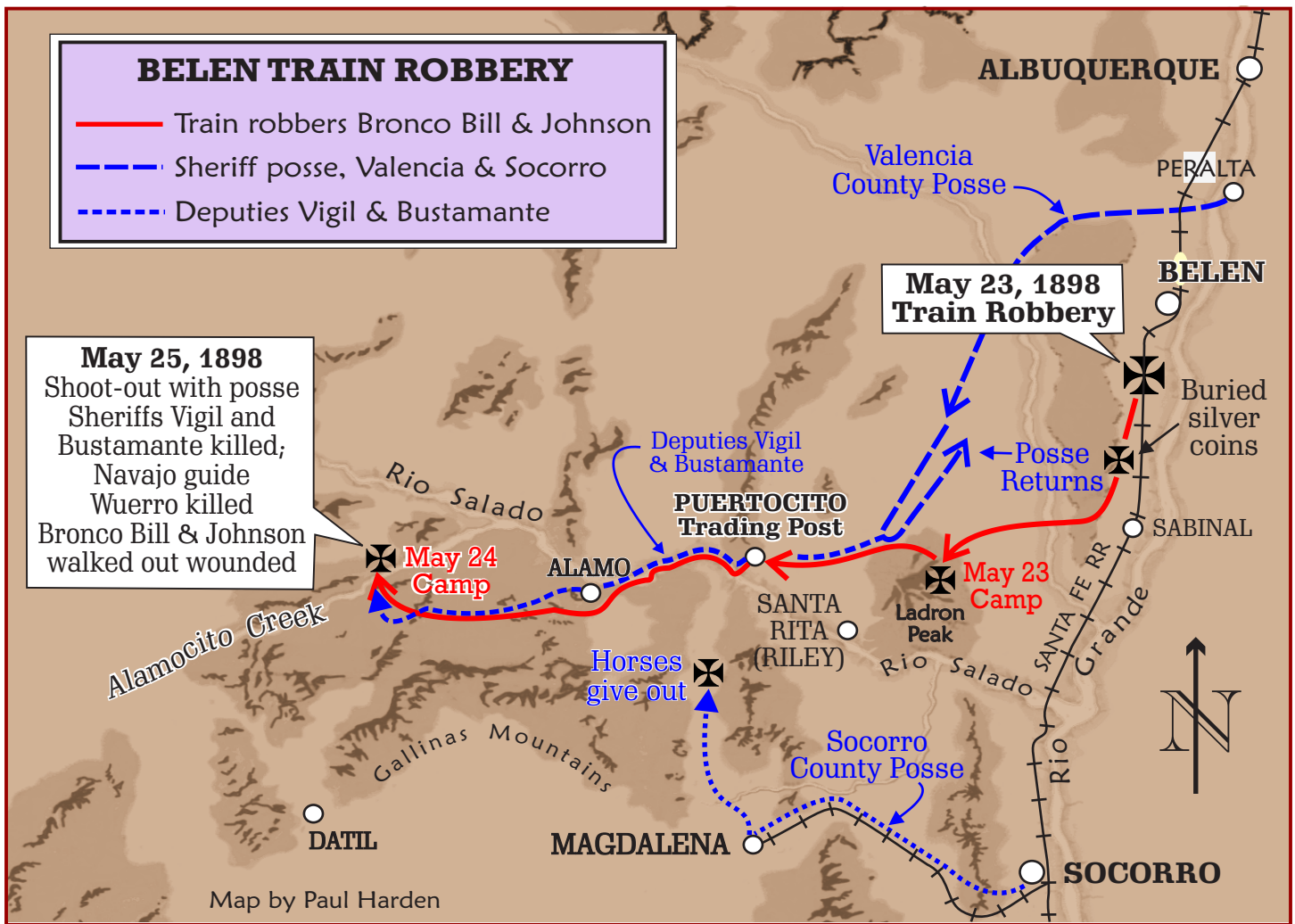
suspicious and nervously looking about while they ate their sardines and fed their horses. The two Valencia County lawmen were convinced the description matched that of Bronco Bill and Johnson and they were closing in on their trail.

Vigil and Bustamante rode the seven miles to the Alamo Navajo community where they recruited a few men for their posse. The Navajo also told them two men were seen camping west of Alamo by sheepherders on the Angelita Ranch. Their tracker, **Vicente Wuerro** (the Navajo name Guerro was spelled Wuerro at this time) found the camp and returned by nightfall to report his findings to Vigil and Bustamante. He described the two men, their two horses with bulging saddle bags, and the location of the camp on Alamocito Creek.

According to descendents of tracker Vicente Wuerro, they rode westward through Jaramillo Canyon, camping at the west end of Table Mountain. Early Wednesday morning, May 25, the posse broke camp and arrived at Alamocito Creek by sunrise. They positioned themselves on a ridge overlooking the camp, less than a hundred yards away, hoping to take them by surprise.



Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson's camp on Alamocito Creek as seen from the deputies viewpoint.



One of the Navajos dropped down the ridge, taking the outlaws horses. Before long, Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson awoke and quickly started to break camp. Wasting no time, Deputy Vigil stood atop the ridge and yelled down at the fellas, "*Raise your hands. I have a warrant for your arrest*" as he waved the papers above his head.

Shootout on Alamocito Creek

The two startled outlaws froze for a moment to analyze the situation. Realizing their horses were gone, they grabbed their rifles, dove behind a downed cottonwood tree, and opened fire on the lawmen.

After the first couple of cracks from their rifles, Deputy Sheriff Francisco Vigil fell dead. Bustamante rose and got a couple of shots off from his pistol, striking Kid Johnson in the neck, before another crack from Bronco Bill's rifle felled the second deputy. With the two sheriffs laying dead, Bronco Bill turned to tend to his fallen friend, when Vicente Wuerro fired off several shots, striking Bronco Bill in the hip and shoulder.



Manuel Guerra of Alamo is a descendent of slain Navajo tracker Vicente.

In spite of his wounds, Bronco Bill spun around and shot Wuerro through the forehead.

Bronco Bill was known to be a very good shot, which he proved that morning with deadly accuracy. The other Navajo men laid low, only one of them having a pistol. Not far away shepherd **Jose Jaramillo** heard the shots as well. Carefully walking to the edge of the mesa, he spotted the wounded men and fallen lawmen below.

Jaramillo, atop the mesa, and the Navajos down below, watched as the two wounded men stuffed money from their saddle bags into their canvass coats and hid another saddle bag in a nearby rock outcrop. Later, the Navajo recovered the silver dollars hid in the rocks. The wounded outlaws began limping down Alamocito Creek on foot towards Datil, some twenty miles away.

The Socorro County Posse

Valencia County's neighbor to the south also responded to the train robbery. Socorro County Sheriff **Holm O. Bursum** formed a small posse, though delayed a day awaiting the arrival by train of U.S. Marshall **Cipriano Baca**. This was a smart and prudent move by Bursum as federal marshal Baca was well familiar with Bronco Bill and Bursum was well familiar with Socorro County. Bronco Bill had spent time in Bursum's jail twice before so problem with recognition.



Photo Bursum family collection

**Socorro County Sheriff
Holm O. Bursum**



Photo Chuck Hornung collection

**U.S. Marshal
Cipriano Baca**

On the morning of May 24, Sheriff Bursum and Marshal Baca left Socorro with two other men to pursue the Belen train robbers. They rode hard on the way to Puertocito in the hopes of intercepting Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson on the trail. The time line shows they weren't far behind. By mid-afternoon, only miles from Puertocito, their horses gave out. The posse turned around and headed for Magdalena at an easy pace, where they hoped to have fresh horses sent up from Socorro by train. The next train was not due until the next day. Waiting in Magdalena on May 25, the posse was unaware that the outlaws had just killed three lawmen on Alamocito Creek.

While waiting for the train, two Navajo men rode into Magdalena on the horses they took from the outlaws and informed the town marshal of the gunfight. The town marshal took the Navajos over to where Sheriff Bursum was waiting for the train. They reported the killings. When the train arrived with the fresh horses, Bursum and a posse member rode back to Alamo with the Navajos. Cipriano Baca and the other posse member returned to Socorro byway of the train. U.S. Marshal Baca had no further business in Magdalena, now focused on capturing the train robbers turned murderers fleeing to Arizona. Sheriff Bursum had the responsibility of properly retrieving the bodies of his fellow lawmen.

The wounded Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson escaped with an estimated \$7,000 each of their \$20,000 take, bought a couple of horses once

reaching Datil, then disappeared with fresh horses into the White Mountains of Arizona. In 1898, Socorro County extended to the Arizona border to include today's Catron County. There was nothing Sheriff Bursum could do once the murderous thieves had left his jurisdiction. However, Wells

Fargo was not limited by such restrictions. They had sent their top detective, Jeff Milton and U.S. Marshall George Scarborough into Arizona to track down the murderous duo.

Sheriff Bursum had the bodies of Deputies Daniel Bustamante and

Francisco Vigil buried at the Santa Rita Catholic church in Riley. Vicente Wuerro was buried near Alamo by his family.

Part 2 covers the search and capture of Bronco Bill, his trial and imprisonment, attempts to find the buried money, and how the great Belen train robbery lives on.



All photos, illustrations and graphics by Paul Harden unless otherwise indicated.

References used for this story: Field work by the author; "Robbers, Rogues and Ruffians" and "True Tales of the American Southwest," both by Howard Bryan; "The Bronco Bill Gang" by John and Karen Tanner; articles in 1898-1899 "Socorro Chieftain," newspaper and the March/April 1997 "Gold and Treasure Hunter" magazine; interviews with Holm O. Bursum III, Manuel Guerro, Virgil Sandoval, Hipolito Romero and Fred Martin, original Homestead Certificates and Land Deeds courtesy Chuck Headen, Security Title Co., and Socorro County Clerks Office; historic documents courtesy John Tanner.