

The Bronco Bill Train Robbery

Part 2

Slain Deputy Sheriff Daniel Bustamante's lonely grave at the ghost town of Riley, NM

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Updated with new information and photos

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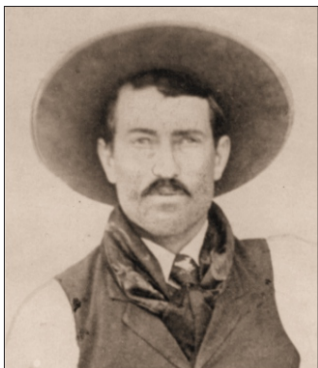
Shoot-out Kills 2 Sheriffs: Frank Vigil & Daniel Bustamante Navajo tracker slain

Outlaws Bronco Bill Walters and Kid Johnson Still at Large in Arizona

Part 1 Summary: Outlaws "Bronco Bill" Walters, "Kid" Johnson, and "Red" Pipkin robbed a Santa Fe train south of Belen on May 23, 1898. \$20,000 of Wells Fargo money was taken. Robbers Walters and Johnson were found west of the Navajo village of Alamo. On the morning of May 25, a shoot out ensued that resulted in the deaths of Deputy Sheriffs Francisco Vigil and Daniel Bustamante, and Navajo tracker Vicente Wuerro. The wounded Walters and Johnson fled to Arizona.

AFTER THE SHOOTOUT

On the morning of May 25, 1898, Socorro Sheriff **Holm O. Bursum** and U.S. Marshall **Cipriano Baca** were in Magdalena, New Mexico on posse duty. They were waiting for the arrival of the early afternoon train from Socorro to bring them fresh horses for the posse.



Courtesy Hipolito Romero

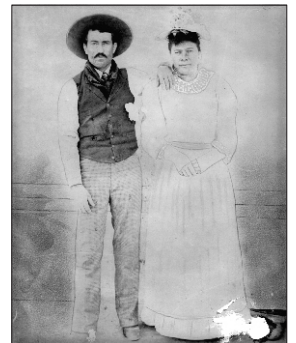


Courtesy Tibo Chaves family

Slain Valencia County Deputy Sheriffs
Daniel Bustamante (left) and Francisco Vigil

While waiting at the Magdalena train station, two Navajo men rode into town to inform Sheriff Bursum of the shootout on Alamocito Creek earlier that day in which deputies **Francisco Vigil** and **Daniel Bustamante** were killed, along with Navajo tracker **Vicente Wuerro**. When the train arrived with fresh horses, the party immediately began their 35 mile ride to the Alamo village arriving about sun down.

First thing the next morning, they rode the nine miles to Alamocito Creek. Upon arriving at the scene, Sheriff Bursum immediately recognized the slain deputies as fellow lawmen from Valencia County. He also knew that Daniel Bustamante's parents, **Jose** and **Marillita Bustamante**, lived in nearby Santa Rita. Bustamante was a blacksmith in Belen, in addition to being a deputy sheriff. He left a widow, his wife **Sabina Bustamante** and two children.



Courtesy Hipolito Romero
Daniel and Sabina Bustamante wedding photo.

Deputy Francisco Vigil was also well known and respected in Valencia County, coming from a large prominent family in Los Lunas. Vigil also left a widow and several children.

Sheriff Bursum took the bodies of Bustamante and Vigil to Santa Rita where they were buried in the church cemetery. The body of Vicente Wuerro was returned to the family in Alamo for burial.



Photo by the author

Bustamante's new grave marker, made by descendent Hipolito Romero in 2005.

Deputy Daniel Bustamante remains buried at the Santa Rita church in Riley to this day. His simple wooden cross was inscribed with the words "*Daniel Bustamante, Killed by Train Robber Bronco Bill Walters May 25, 1898.*" However, after several coats of paint on Bustamante's marker, the wording can now barely be read. In 2005, living descendent **Hipolito Romero** prepared a new marker for his great-uncle's grave.

Bustamante has the distinction of being the only sheriff killed and buried in Socorro County. Stumbling upon this grave and reading the epitaph years ago inspired the author to learn more about this story, a quest that has continued to this day.

VIGIL'S MISSING GRAVE

Both deputies killed were buried at Riley by Sheriff Bursum. Bustamante's grave is still there. Vigil's is not. The whereabouts of Vigil's grave had been a mystery for years, even to other New Mexico historians. Attempts to locate Vigil's grave have been unsuccessful. This mystery – a story in itself – was recently solved while researching for this *El Defensor Chieftain* article by the author.

Daniel Bustamante's brother, **Jorje** (George) and wife **Casimira** also lived near Riley. Their daughter, **Elvira**, married **Santiago Romero**. One of the Romero's children was **Hipolito Bustamante Romero**.



Photos by the author
Deputy Daniel Bustamante was Hipolito Romero's (left) great-uncle and Albert Bustamante was his nephew.

Hipolito and wife Susan are among the last residents of Riley as is area rancher **Albert Bustamante**. Between the two cousins (now deceased), this mystery was answered in a most qualified manner – by direct descendants of the slain deputy.

Ten days after the two deputies were buried at Santa Rita (Riley), Vigil's widow had hired two men to retrieve her husband's body and take it to the family burial plot in Albuquerque's south valley. The two men arrived with a buckboard wagon.

They exhumed the body and headed back towards the Rio Grande. Hipolito said the men covered their faces with scarfs to mask the smell, being mistaken for masked bandits. The wagon road went over a pass in the Ladrone mountains, then across the desert to Bernardo and Veguita.

Hauling Vigil's decomposing body across the New Mexico desert in the climbing temperatures of early June must have been quite a trip. It took two days to reach Los Lunas. They crossed over to the east bank of the Rio Grande at the village of Valencia, stopping for dinner. While eating their meal in a cantina, several townsfolk summoned the Catholic priest to complain about the dreadful smell from the decaying body. The priest located the two men to discuss the matter. Due to the deteriorating condition of the body, the priest refused to let the men continue on to Albuquerque. He ordered them to bury Vigil's body immediately at his church, the old Sangre de Cristo mission in Valencia, directly across the road.

Hipolito Romero said the two men stopped at the Valencia cantina where the Wecks Breakfast restaurant stands today on NM 47. The old Sangre de Cristo mission, built in 1740, is indeed directly across the street. Only a few feet from the mission doors is an old gravestone marked "*Francisco X. Vigil, died May 25, 1898*" – exactly where Hipolito said it would be.

Locating the grave solves a long mystery of "Deputy Vigil's missing body" and the circumstances of why a man from such a prominent family was buried in such an unlikely place.

The Territory of New Mexico would pay for a gravestone for a fallen lawman if interred in a public cemetery.

Vigil's widow appealed to the church to move her husband's body from the church cemetery so the Territory could pay for the gravestone. With no success, the family finally had a gravestone made and placed on Vigil's grave about 1901.

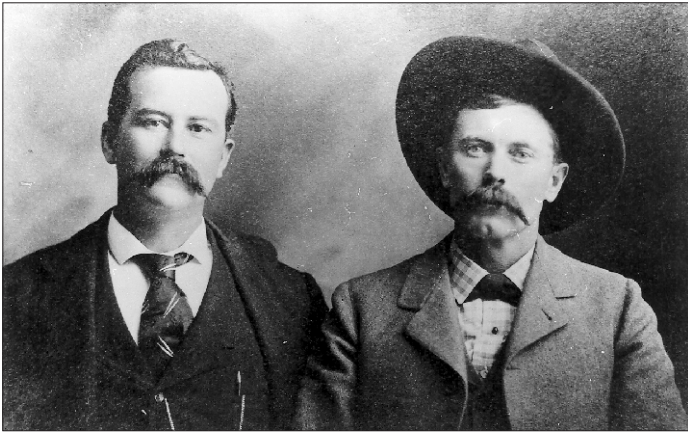


Deputy Francisco X. Vigil's grave at the Sangre de Cristo Mission in Valencia (near Los Lunas).

SEARCH FOR THE BANDITS

After the shootout on Alamocito Creek, Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson had survived, but found themselves wounded with no horses and stranded. They walked some 20 miles to the village of Datil where they secured horses from local rancher **Ray Morely**. From there, the two train robbers, now murderers, rode west and disappeared into the White Mountains of the Arizona wilderness.

Their trail went pretty cold pretty fast. The only ones left hunting down the two were the team of Wells Fargo detective **Jeff Milton** and U.S. Marshal **George Scarborough**.



Wells Fargo detective Jeff Milton (left) and U.S. Marshal George Scarborough were determined and relentless to capture the train robbers and recover the stolen money.

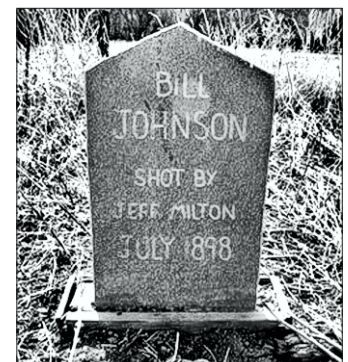
Poking around Solomonville, Arizona in mid-July, they had heard stories of two cowboys from the Double Circle Ranch that had raised a ruckus at a dance, purchased new clothes, and seemed to brag about their money roll containing \$7,000. The two detectives rode north into the White Mountains in search of the two. Looking for outlaws on the remote ranches was a good bet. Many worked as cow hands while "laying low" evading the law.

On July 29, 1898, Milton and Scarborough arrived at a line camp of the Double Circle Ranch on the Black River and camped the night. The next morning, July 30, three men rode towards the camp. Milton and Scarborough recognized them immediately as Bronco Bill, Kid Johnson and accomplice Red Pipkin. Upon noticing the strangers, Bronco Bill turned his horse and began shooting. The nearby ranch hands dove for cover as Milton and Scarborough quickly returned fire. The gun battle was on. Bronco Bill was struck, shattering his right arm and shoulder. Johnson took a bullet deep through his hip, tearing through his liver and a kidney. Both fell from their horses to the ground.



Pipkin quickly checked on nearby Johnson and realized he was a goner. A glance towards Bronco Bill coughing up blood told him the same. It was reported he took Johnson's money belt, got off a couple more shots, then drove his horse hard into the thick brush along the river, never to be seen again. Though bullets whizzed by the lawmen's ears and kicked up dirt by their feet, Milton and Scarborough found themselves unscathed when the smoke cleared. They cautiously approached the two downed men. Scarborough grabbed Bronco Bill by the boots to drag the dying train robber away from the river. In a strange twist of fate, this action cleared the blood in Bronco's throat, allowing him to breathe and groan in pain. The U.S. Marshall unexpectedly saved Bronco Bill's life.

Kid Johnson lay mortally wounded where he fell with a bullet through the chest and hips. Pipkin was right. Johnson was a goner. He died that evening and was buried at the remote mountain camp next to the river. Years later, his family in Luna, New Mexico added a more permanent headstone.

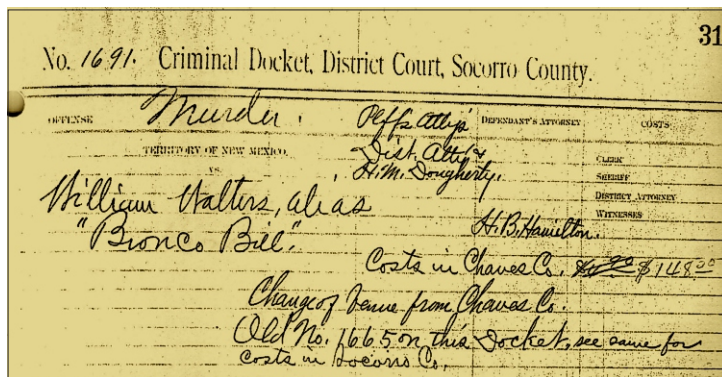


Courtesy John Tanner
Grave of Bill "Kid" Johnson where shot by Jeff Milton.

After patching up Bronco Bill as best they could, they embarked on the 40 mile mountainous trip back to Solomonville. Here they caught the train, transferred to the Santa Fe Railroad line at Lordsburg, and arrived in Santa Fe on August 6. Somewhere along the way, they picked up U.S. Marshal **Cipriano Baca**, as he was one of the escorts delivering Bronco Bill to the Territorial Prison in Santa Fe.

BRONCO BILL'S TRIAL

Historical accounts, derived from Albuquerque and Santa Fe newspapers, describe how Bronco Bill was returned to Socorro for trial, and found guilty of murder. Bronco Bill never saw a Socorro County courtroom. Bronco Bill was transferred to Roswell, New Mexico, county seat of Chaves County, in early 1899. The Socorro County docket clearly shows Bronco Bill's murder indictment was transferred to Chaves County in early March, 1899.



Courtesy Socorro County Courthouse, Clerk's office

Socorro County docket charging "Bronco Bill" with murder and change of venue to Chaves County.

The first public mention appears in the March 3, 1899 issue of The Socorro Chieftain newspaper:

"Dr. C. F. Blackington returned Tuesday from an extensive tour through the western part of the county, subpoenaing (sic) witnesses in the case of the Territory vs. William Walters, alias Broncho Bill (sic), whose trial is set for next week at Roswell, in Eddy County."

(Roswell is in Chaves County, not Eddy County)

Charles. F. Blackington, cited above, was the new Socorro County Sheriff, replacing **Holm Bursum** at the beginning of 1899 when Bursum was appointed warden of the New Mexico Territorial Penitentiary. This was Blackington's first major job as sheriff collecting evidence and witnesses for the Bronco Bill trial. It is also interesting how the spelling "Broncho Bill" was used consistently in all Socorro newspaper accounts of the time.

The following week, March 10, The Chieftain continued the explanation:

"Chavez County is the only county in the Fifth judicial district in which there will be held a spring term of the district court. In this county the court fund is \$2,000 in debt; Lincoln County \$1,100. In Chavez County there is about \$1,500 which will enable them to have about a two weeks term of court. The Broncho Bill case will probably be tried there at this time."

Socorro County was broke, the reason Judge Leland sent the trial to Roswell. He refused to hold court in Socorro as he did not want to seat a jury with no assurances he could pay them for their services on such a high profile case.

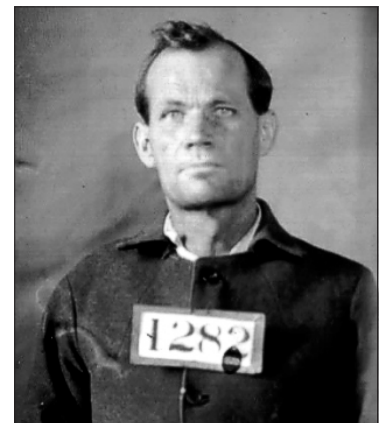
LIFE SENTENCE

Bronco Bill was held in the Chavez County jail from at least March through November, 1899. Finally, The Chieftain, in their Friday, November 24 issue reported "Broncho Bill Walters pleaded guilty to murder in the second degree and was given a life sentence."

Bronco Bill Walters was transferred from Roswell to the prison in Santa Fe by train and began serving his life sentence on December 14, 1899 as prisoner number 1282. The new warden, former Socorro County Sheriff Holm Bursum, welcomed his former adversary to "his prison." By 1899, quite a few of New Mexico's outlaws were now incarcerated. What face-to-face conversations they must have had.

Once behind bars, Bronco became a model prisoner. Once, after 12 years in prison, he escaped in 1911 with \$40 in his pocket and walked south, making it to Albuquerque and Isleta pueblo before he was spotted and apprehended without incident. He told the warden he just wanted a good meal, a nice hotel bed to sleep in, and a couple of beers.

Due to his good behavior and his failing health, he was released from prison in April, 1917, at the age of 48. Recall he had a unusable lame right arm from the shootout in Arizona.



**Convicted murderer
"Bronco Bill" Walters**

BRONCO BILL'S RETURN TO SOCORRO

Interviewing life long Socorro County rancher **Fred Martin** many years ago, and his son, **Fred "Boog" Martin Jr.**, they remembered Bronco Bill well. Between the two generations, they ran the 40-section "Martin Ranch," west of Alamo into the



Rancher Fred Martin, Sr.

1980's. Fred Martin Sr. stated, "I hired a ranch hand named **William Brown** right out of prison. 1918 it was." Martin befriended Brown, and later learned he was **Bronco Bill Walters**. Martin told how he helped "Brown" search for the money he had buried after the 1898 train robbery. Martin took him down to Alamocito Creek to the site of the shootout, which Bronco Bill recognized immediately. Climbing up a nearby rock outcrop, he turned around and told Martin, "It's gone. Somebody got it."

They then traveled down Jaramillo Canyon to a natural spring on the south side of Table Mountain and dug a hole behind a couple of cottonwood trees. Again he declared the money was gone. He told Martin they had two saddlebags of cash totaling about \$25,000 each, burying about \$10,000 at the springs in case a posse was close at hand, about \$20,000 following the shootout, and carrying out about \$10,000 each. If true, the money buried at the springs has never before been reported and suggests the robbery yielded far more than the \$20,000 often cited.

During the interview and escort to the shootout site, Fred Martin stated how he was struck at how Bronco Bill, in both cases, seemed to know exactly where to go for the money. For this reason, Martin was convinced the man was truly Bronco Bill Walters.

Finding none of his buried loot, Bronco Bill quit the Martin Ranch and returned to his old stomping grounds on the Diamond A Ranch near Hachita. Many former outlaws released from prison in this era did the same.



Bronco Bill hid the saddle bag of silver dollars behind a crevice in this rock outcrop on Alamocito Creek.

Imagine being incarcerated in the 1890s and released in the 1920s with electricity, telephones, automobiles and airplanes. It was a new world they did not know. Riding horseback as a ranch hand was the only life they knew.

BRONCO BILL'S LAST DAYS

Still going by the name William Brown on the Diamond A ranch, he was prodded by his fellow ranch hands about the locations of his buried loot. After all, there was still the matter of the unrecovered \$50,000 Bronco Bill and Red Pitkin (who was still in prison) had stolen from a train near Grants in 1897. However, it seems the rehabilitated train robber never spoke of his wilder days again.

Or, perhaps his unsuccessful search for the buried loot near Alamo verified the money was gone. At least from the Belen train robbery.

On the Diamond A ranch, Bronco Bill, due to his lame right arm and shoulder, was limited to light maintenance tasks. On June 16, 1921, he was climbing windmills with his one good arm to grease the gear boxes and water pump spindles on the ranch's numerous windmills. Working atop one windmill, he was suddenly blown off the top by a dust devil, breaking his neck when he struck the ground. He was surrounded all night by his fellow concerned ranch hands. Or, were they waiting for a dying outlaw legend to give up his secrets? Bronco Bill died quietly that evening at age 52, giving no death bed confessions. He was buried in the nearby Hachita cemetery with a simple head stone made by his fellow ranch hands.



Courtesy John Tanner

Bronco Bill Walter's "cowboy" grave in the Hachita, New Mexico cemetery.

WHAT ABOUT "RED" PIPKIN?

Belen train robbers Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson were captured in Arizona in the July 1899 shootout. Accomplice Daniel "Red" Pipkin eluded Milton and Scarborough that day. He was later arrested for larceny in Arizona for stealing horses not related to the Belen train heist. He was found guilty of the larceny charge and incarcerated from 1900-1907 in the Arizona Territorial Prison in Yuma.

Upon his release, Pipkin worked odd jobs in Arizona for several years and moved to Gallup, New Mexico in 1919. There he worked as a security guard for a couple of coal mining companies, eventually becoming a Deputy Sheriff of McKinley County. Attempting to stop a gun-toting street brawl, he shot another lawman and charged with armed assault with intent to kill. In the trial, it was shown the shooting was an accident, a wild bullet from Pipkin's carelessly aimed pistol. He was sentenced to prison in 1919 but released with a full pardon in November 1920. He returned to work at the Gallup American Coal mine as a guard and watchman.

Pipkin contracted mouth and throat cancer in 1937, making it difficult to drink and eat. On July 6, 1938, at 60 years of age, he was found dead in his boarding house with a bullet to the head. Officials ruled his death a suicide. Newspapers referred to Pipkin as one of the last of the 19th century outlaws, and certainly the last of the Bronco Bill gang. Daniel "Red" Pipkin is buried in Gallup's Hillcrest Cemetery.



In 1919, Red Pipkin in later years in jail again for attempted murder, but released the following year.



Courtesy John Tanner
Daniel "Red" Pipkin's grave in Gallup, New Mexico

BURIED LOOT: FACT OR FICTION?

New Mexico is filled with stories of buried treasures. The stories of Bronco Bill's buried loot has slipped from legend into fictitious lore according to some. However, all of that changed when the stash of coins buried southwest of Belen was found in the 1990s. The story was first reported in the March/April 1997 issue of "Gold & Treasure Hunter" magazine by New Mexico author **Ken Weinman**.

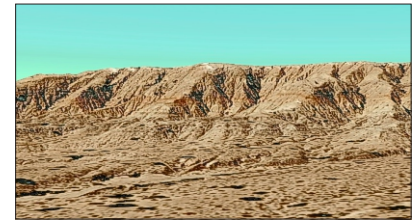
Two treasure hunters from El Paso, Texas, **Carl Rison** and **Bill Withers**, searched the West Mesa between Belen and Sabinal for many weekends looking for the hill that Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson buried three sacks of coins and finding nothing. Searching further south, their metal detectors signaled something metallic on one of the hills.

After a short dig, they found a single 1880 silver dollar. They extended their search area over the remainder of the hill until their metal detectors began to sing loudly. Digging about a foot deep, they hit a layer of coins. By the end of the day, 332 coins had been recovered. They were all Morgan silver dollars, dating from 1878, the first year the Morgan's were minted, to 1898, the year of the train robbery. This leaves little doubt that these coins indeed were those buried by Bronco Bill Walters and Kid Johnson.

Suffering no corrosion, they were cleaned and classified by coin dealers as in "extra fine" condition. The two have given away some of the coins to friends and sold others to history buffs over the years.

Interestingly, the coins were found by Rison and Withers where Bronco Bill told rancher Fred Martin they'd be in 1918. Bronco recalled they buried three sacks of coins – "*towards the southern end of the mesa.*" He did not mention "*west of Sabinal,*" the traditional belief. This is where he and Martin searched in 1919, but after 22 years in prison, Bronco Bill could not recognize the country or the exact hill and nothing was found.

Did the two treasure hunters find it all? The 332 recovered coins would account for perhaps one sack of Morgan silver dollars. Never mind Bronco Bill told Martin that two of the sacks were gold coins. After all, a thousand silver coins (perhaps gold), and at least \$30,000 in cash, still remain unaccounted for according to Bronco Bill's story – and still somewhere in Socorro County. Over a century later, the famous Bronco Bill train robbery still lives on.



The rugged Belen "West Mesa" where treasure hunters Rison and Withers found the coins.



Courtesy David Weber

Two of the Bronco Bill Morgan silver dollars recovered by treasure hunters Carl Rison and Bill Withers.

THE ALAMO NAVAJO CONNECTION

The first coins from the train robbery were not found by treasure hunters, but recovered by the Navajo at Alamo village – an almost unknown story until recently revealed to the author.

Recall that sheep herder **Jose Jaramillo** and several Navajo men witnessed the 1898 shootout on Alamocito Creek from atop the mesa. After Deputies Vigil and Bustamante were killed, they also watched as Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson hid a saddlebag in a rocky crevice. In 1918, with rancher Martin, Bronco Bill found that crevice and declared, “*Somebody got it.*” That somebody were the Navajo.

Shortly after the shootout, two Navajo guides recovered the saddlebag containing “several hundred coins” and took it to Alamo.

The tribal elders told the men to never spend any of the money outside of Alamo for fear they would be found implicit in the train robbery. The reason for the secrecy. The Navajo spent some at the nearby Puertocito Trading Post and used most of the rest as poker chips.

Over the years, about every family had several of Bronco Bill’s silver dollars. Today, these coins are prized possessions of the Alamo families, a piece of history passed down from one generation to the next, and coins once held by their ancestors.



Lee Ganadonegro with his Bronco Bill Morgan silver dollar – a proud possession.

TV DOCUMENTARY

In 2009, Albuquerque television station KRQE prepared a documentary on the Belen train robbery. Their investigative reporter and helicopter pilot, **Bob Martin**, asked author **Paul Harden** to assist with visits to Alamo community, and to the lesser known locations of the Puertocito Trading Post and the Alamocito Creek shootout site.

While at Alamo, Harden arranged an interview with Alamo resident **Lee Ganadonegro**. His family is one of many in possession of the Bronco Bill silver dollars. Many Alamo residents are knowledgeable on the history of the 1898 shootout, recovery of the coins, and the Alamo connection.

Alamo has a unique history of its own. In 1864, Col. Kit Carson forced thousands of Navajo to relocate to Ft. Sumner in eastern New Mexico, called “The Long Walk.” A handful of Navajo families escaped Arizona’s Canyon de Chelly and settled in remote country along the Rio Salado, virtually unknown for 50 years. They were not officially “discovered” until the 1910 pre-statehood census. Rather than relocate the tribe to the Navajo Nation reservations, they were allowed to remain where they had lived peacefully for years. After 1912 statehood, the “Lost Tribe” became the “Alamo Navajo Indian Reservation.” Today, it is Socorro County’s second largest community with a population about 1,200 people and a mix of both Navajo and Apache families that strongly adhere to their native culture, language, and traditions.



Filming Lee Ganadonegro’s Bronco Bill silver dollar.



The KRQE helicopter on the Ganadonegro ranch.



Bob Martin lands the KRQE helicopter in Alamocito creek



Helicopter view of the 1898 shootout site.

All photos and graphics by Paul Harden unless otherwise indicated.

References used in this article:

“Robbers, Rogues and Ruffians” and *“True Tales of the American Southwest,”* both by Howard Bryan; *“The Bronco Bill Gang”* by John and Karen Tanner; *“Gold and Treasure Hunter Magazine”* March/April 1997; local interviews with Fred Martin Sr., Fred Martin Jr., Claude Ramzel, Wanda Ramzel, Hipolito Romero, Vicente Guerro, Manuel Guerro, Virgil Sandoval, Lee Ganadanegro, Holm Bursum III, Sonny Baca, David Weber and Helen Dennis; articles in various 1898-1899 *Socorro Chieftain* and *El Defensor* newspapers.