

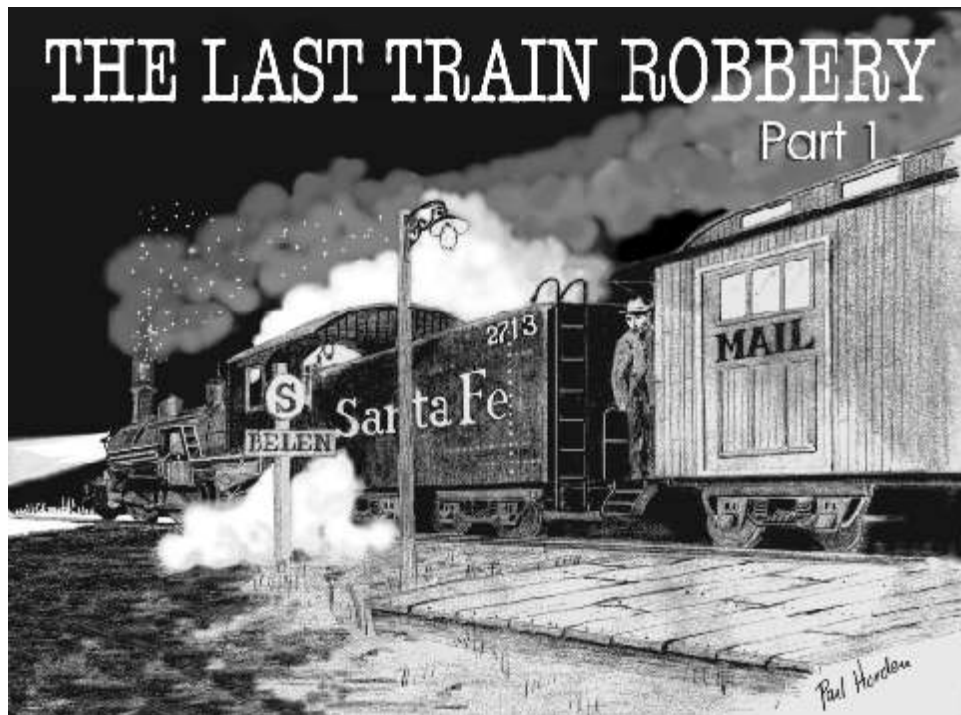
by Paul Harden

On the evening of May 22, 1898, two cowboys rode into Los Pueblitos, south of Belen. Whether by arrangement or not, they tied their horses in the rear of an adobe house and quickly disappeared into the darkness of the night. Walking north along the railroad tracks for two hours, they arrived at the Belen train station, nearly four miles distant, shortly after 1 a.m.. Hiding in the shadows of the station, it was obvious they wished to remain unnoticed.

About twenty minutes later, they watched as activity began to brew. 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. "Waaah, waaah, wa-waaah," spelling out the letter "Q" in morse code, the engineer informing the Station Master that all is OK. A minute or two later, the lamp of the engine came into view and the huff and puff of a powerful locomotive could be heard as it approached the station. Again, the whistle pierced through the silence of the night. "Waaah, wa-wa-wa," the morse code letter "B," the signal to the brakeman the engineer was stopping the train. Hot red cinders belched out of the stack and steam blew with a roar as the train slowed to a crawl. The massive engine passed the station and groaned to a stop, properly positioning the passenger cars along the loading platform.

It was 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. After about ten minutes, five short blasts from the whistle alerted the conductor it was time



to depart. The engineer leaned out of the cab, looking along the length of the train. From the rear, the conductor's lantern could be seen waving in the darkness, informing the engineer the train was ready to leave. A few seconds later, the engineer blasted the whistle one last time signalling their departure. The locomotive released a huge blast of smoke. The clank-clank-clank of the couplings echoed through the darkness as the train jerked forward. At this moment, the two cowboys leaped onto to the forward platform of the express car, the first car behind the engine.

Southbound train number twenty one had just departed Belen for Socorro,

San Marcial and eventually El Paso – exactly on time.

The two cowboys wasted no time. Once the train left the station and entered the early morning darkness, they climbed onto the coal tender car, drew their pistols, and jumped into the engine cab. The engineer and fireman had pistols pressed against their cheeks. One of the most famous train robberies in New Mexico history had begun. The two cowboys were none other than veteran outlaw and train robber William "Bronco Bill" Walters and his new partner, William "Kid" Johnson.

About a mile south of the Belen station, the tracks turn westward for



(Left) A sketch of Bronco Bill Walters, based on his prison photo when incarcerated in Santa Fe in 1899. (Right) William "Kid" Johnson, described as having a very young face despite his mid-30s age, giving him the nickname "Kid." There is no known image of Kid Johnson.



about a mile and a half. Once the train was on this westward dog-leg and out of view from the station, the engineer was ordered to stop the train. It was likely Bronco Bill who jumped out of the engine cab and uncoupled the passenger cars from the train, since he had worked briefly for the railroad as a yardman. "Kid" Johnson kept his pistol pressed against the ribs of the engineer. Both the conductor and express guard left the train and hurried back to the Belen station to report the train had been hijacked by robbers.

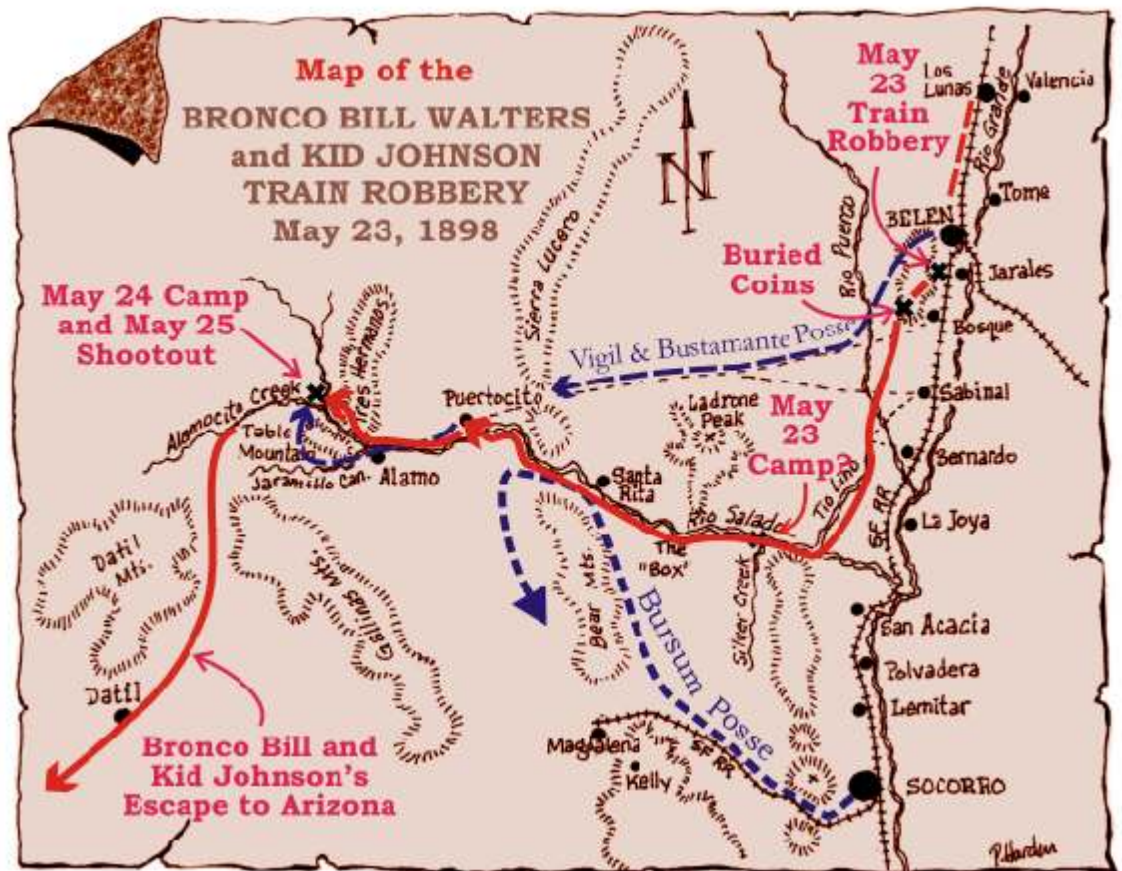
Once back in the cab, Bronco Bill ordered the train down the track, now consisting of only the engine, coal tender and the express car. About a mile and a half after the tracks

turned to the south, the engineer was ordered to again stop the train. The two robbers broke into the express car, rolled the safe out the side door onto the ground, and laced it with several sticks of dynamite. Similar to 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. Could this have been the incident that spawned that scene in the movie?

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 share, then disappeared into the darkness. The train backed up, reconnected to the passenger



The train robbery occurred on this section of track, along old Highway 85, south of Belen.



cars, and had returned to the Belen train station by about 2:45 a.m..

Unbeknownst to the train crew, Bronco Bill had ordered the train stopped just short of the adobe house where they had begun their evening in Los Pueblitos. The two walked the short distance to the adobe house, packed their horses with the booty, and rode off to the southwest. It was a well planned, well executed train robbery.

The news of the train heist quickly spread 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 estimates over the years range from \$20,000 to \$50,000.

In Howard Bryan's book, "Robbers, Rogues and Ruffians," he identifies the conductor that evening as James Connors and the express car messenger as Edward Hickock. The passenger cars were disconnected about where today's South Belen exit on I-25 is located, and the robbery took place along the tracks just a bit south of where the National Guard Armory is located today. The old, crumbling adobe house used by the two

is still there, identified by locals living in the area.

## Escape to the West

Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson rode off to the southwest, crossing the mesa south and west of Belen. About sunrise, they stopped on the west side of the mesa and buried the heavy bags of coins atop a small hill to lighten their load. From there, they likely rode south into the Tio Lino, an arroyo leading into the Rio Salado. This was an established "road" in 1898, using the Rio Salado and Alamosa arroyos for traveling from the Rio Grande to Datil, intercepting either the Chissum or Stinson trails into Arizona.



According to oral history, this is the adobe house where the outlaws tied their horses for their quick get-away.



The miles of canyons and rough country along this route, on the south side of the Ladrones, had offered safe passage and hiding places to outlaws for years. Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson likely camped the night somewhere along the Rio Salado, such as the springs at Silver Creek. The next day, they rode past the village of Santa Rita (now Riley) and arrived at the village of Puertocito in the afternoon of May 24. They stopped at the Trading Post, purchased some food, then disappeared down the Rio Salado to the west.

## The Socorro Posse

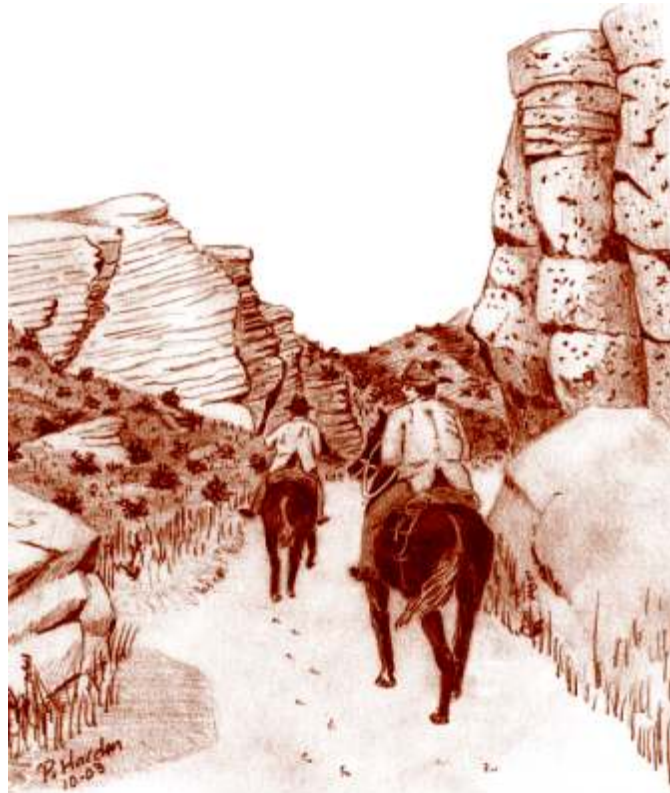
In the meantime, Socorro County Sheriff Holm O. Bursum was forming a posse with little success. Holm O. Bursum III explains that his grandfather, 31-year old Sheriff Holm Bursum at the time, had

difficulty raising a posse in Socorro. The men feared Bursum was really trying to recruit volunteers for the Spanish-American War. Much of the recruiting for this campaign was performed by the Territorial sheriffs, according to articles in 1898 "Socorro Chieftain" newspapers.

Bursum's posse was also delayed while awaiting the arrival of Cipriano Baca, a U.S. Deputy Marshall. In May 1898, Baca was serving out of El Paso. Bursum likely telegraphed Baca, asking for his help, and awaited his arrival by train.

This was a smart and prudent move by Bursum. Baca was well familiar with Bronco Bill Walters. In October 1890, Walters had a shooting spree in Separ (between Deming and Lordsburg) then fled into Mexico. Baca found Walters in March 1891, lured him out of Mexico, and promptly arrested him as soon as they stepped back onto U.S. soil. Walters was found guilty in a Silver City court and incarcerated in Santa Fe from August 1891 to April 1892 for the shootings.

Socorro was no stranger to Bronco Bill Walters either. Becoming the Sheriff in 1895, Bursum had locked up Walters in his jail twice. The first time was in early 1896 for stealing a horse in



**Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson escaping along the Rio Salado, approaching the narrow walls of "The Box," a popular passage through Socorro County.**

Mogollon (then, a part of Socorro County). On February 28, Walters and nine other prisoners escaped by digging a hole through the jail's brick wall. Bursum had recaptured most of them in short order, but Walters eluded him. Captured by a sheriff in Deming, he was returned to Bursum's care in June, found guilty of stealing the horse in Mogollon, and remained in the Socorro jail until



**Holm O. Bursum III is the grandson of the 1898 Socorro County Sheriff. Four generations of the Bursum family have lived in Socorro.**

January 1897. Being fully rehabilitated, Walters, along with outlaw Daniel "Red" Pipkin, went on to relieve a train of \$50,000 in November near Grants, and a month later reportedly robbed the train station in Steins.

New Mexico was plagued with train robberies from 1896 through 1898. 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. (In fact, this is why some train robbers, such as Bronco Bill, would give some of their plunder to the engineer or conductor following a

robbery - to prove they did not assault any of the crew!)

On the morning of May 24, Socorro Sheriff Holm Bursum, and Deputy Cipriano Baca of the U.S. Federal Marshals office, left with two other men from Socorro to pursue the two Belen train robbers. They rode hard on the way to Puertocito in the hopes of intercepting Bronco Bill and Kid Johnson. By mid-afternoon, only miles from Puertocito, the horses gave out on the Socorro posse. They turned around and headed for Magdalena, where they hoped to have fresh horses sent up from Socorro by train.

Two other sheriffs also in pursuit, Valencia County Deputies Francisco X. Vigil and Daniel Bustamante, had slightly better luck. They arrived in Puertocito later that afternoon. They had hoped to raise volunteers for a posse in Puertocito, but suffered the same fate as Socorro Sheriff Bursum. The men disappeared fearing they were being recruited for the Spanish-American War as well.

The owner of the Puertocito Trading Post and Post Office, Anastacio Baca, told the lawmen about the two men, dressed in cowboy garb, who had been there a few hours earlier. Baca described



**The remains of the Trading Post and Post Office (left) and Anastacio Baca's house (right) at Puertocito, as it appears today.**

how one of the men purchased some sardines, crackers and wine, while the other remained outside with the horses, nervously looking about. They both appeared suspicious to Baca, and the two Valencia County lawmen were convinced they were closing in on the robbers.

Vigil and Bustamante rode on to the Alamo Indian community, where they did manage to recruit a few Navajos for their posse. The Navajo's also told them two men were seen camping west of Alamo by sheepherders on the Angelita Ranch (now the D Cross 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 near the confluence of Alamocito Creek and the Rio Salado.

## Vigil's Posse Closes In

Vigil and Bustamante decided to move the posse to reach the camp by sunrise. This was a common tactic used in those days, catching the men by surprise as they awoke and were the most vulnerable.

According to decedents of the tracker Wuerro, they rode to the west through Jaramillo Canyon, camping at the west end of Table Mountain for the night. Early on May 25, the posse broke camp, arriving at the outlaws camp by

sunrise. They positioned themselves on a ridge overlooking the camp, less than a hundred yards away. One of the Navajos dropped down the ridge, taking the horses tied to a nearby tree. 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. The two startled outlaws froze for a moment to appraise the situation. Realizing their horses were gone, they quickly grabbed their rifles, and opened fire on the lawmen. After the first couple of cracks from their rifles, Deputy Sheriff Francisco Vigil fell over dead. Bustamante rose and managed to get a couple of shots off from his pistol, striking Kid Johnson in the neck, before another crack from Bronco Bills rifle felled the sheriff. 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. In spite his wounds, he 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 Navajos in the posse 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, buried the saddlebags on the side of the arroyo, grabbed their rifles, and began limping down the Alamocito Creek towards Datil, twenty five miles away.

Once out of sight, the Navajos returned to Alamo. Two of them rode into Magdalena on the horses they took from the outlaws. About three hours later, they arrived in Magdalena and informed the town marshal of the gunfight. The marshal took the Navajos over to the train station, where Sheriff Bursum was waiting. When the train arrived with the fresh horses for the posse, two men rode back to Alamo with the Navajos and the other two posse members returned to Socorro byway of the train. It is not known with certainty who went where, but it seems Deputy Marshall Cipriano Baca and a posseman probably returned to Socorro, while Bursum and a posseman returned with the Navajos. Marshal Baca really had no further business with the affair, while Sheriff Bursum certainly 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 of their \$40,000 take, secured a couple of horses once reaching Datil, then disappeared into the White Mountains of Arizona. Sheriff Bursum had the bodies of Deputies Daniel Bustamante and Francisco Vigil buried at the Catholic church in Santa Rita. Vicente Wuerro was buried near Alamo by his family.

Unfortunately, there was nothing Sheriff Bursum could do once the thieves and murderers had left his jurisdiction. However, Wells Fargo was not limited by such restrictions. They had sent their top detectives, Jeff Milton and George Scarborough, into Arizona to track down the murdering duo.

In Part 2, we'll cover their eventual capture, the trial and imprisonment of Bronco Bill, his temporary return to Socorro, attempts to find his buried money, and other incidents as told by local decedents.