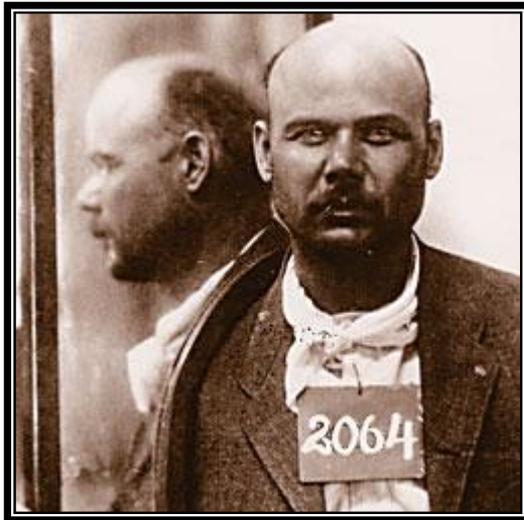


Sneaks, Snafu's,
and
Snitches

The Story of Burt Alvord
Lawman, Brawler, Felon, & Fugitive



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Much of this material came from "The Odyssey of Burt Alvord" by Don Chaput. If you are interested in this story, you may want to try reading Chaput's book. It is a thoroughly researched and extremely well written account of Alvord's life, giving much more detail and insight than is presented in this short piece.

Additional material from the Tombstone Epitaph and other period newspapers.

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Cover photograph: Burt Alvord at his entrance to the Yuma Penitentiary
Courtesy of Chris Reid at the Pinal County Historical Society

A unnamed Mexican man walked into Benson Constable Shilliam's office on April 26, 1900, and handed over the keys to the Tombstone County Jail. Along with the keys was a note from Burt Alvord and his cronies, who had recently escaped that institution. The humorous note read:

On the road
Friday, April 20, 1900
Scott White, Esq. – We send you the keys. We would have given them to [jailor] Sid Mullen but he was too fast for us. We could not overtake him. We met the Mexicans that killed that gambler in Johnson Camp, but as we had no warrants we did not arrest them – and then we were afraid they would shoot and we had no warrant as we were afraid that we couldn't collect the mileage. Tell the boys that we are well and eating regular. Tell the man that I got the Studebaker saddle from, will send it home soon.

Yours truly,
Juan Bravo
Stiles
Alvord

Burt Alvord was one of the most wanted and hunted men in the Arizona Territory. It was not because he was a wanton killer, an assassin, or even a crazy man. In large part, it was because his escapades and escapes had embarrassed law enforcement officials throughout the territory and in Mexico as well.

Alvord was born in 1867 and moved with his family to Tombstone when he was twelve. His father, Charles, had been a miner, a mechanic, and a justice of the peace, raising a family and earning an accurate reputation as a productive and law-abiding citizen. Young Burt was reported to have witnessed the famous "Gunfight at the OK Corral" when he was 13, but that story is largely unsubstantiated. No doubt, however, he was on hand to witness the lynching of John Heath in late 1883 and the legal hanging of Heath's gang three months later.

As a teenager, Burt had a job working at the OK Corral, where he got to know most everybody who came into town. In addition, he learned much about the geography and the roads throughout Cochise

County. He'd also learned the skills of mechanic and leather worker from his father.

Never much one for formal schooling, young Burt's classrooms were the billiard halls, saloons, and gaming tables along Allen Street in Tombstone. These were the places where he hung out and spent most of his free time. He quickly became known as a young man always ready for a brawl, and once the fighting commenced, he was brutal and always victorious. There is some speculation that he learned an important and formative lesson from the famous Earp family...that the ones who carry the badges, gets to make the rules. If he did not learn that from the Earps, he certainly learned that lesson from someone...and learned it well.

Not quite twenty years old, Alvord was hired as a deputy by Cochise County's legendary Sheriff John Slaughter. Slaughter found Burt to be a ready, if thuggish, ally. Slaughter's reputation for bringing in fugitives draped over their saddles was earned, many times, in the company of his favorite "enforcer," Burt Alvord. In one fairly typical encounter, Slaughter and Alvord came upon some train robbers in the Whetstone mountains, as they were sleeping under their blankets. Surprising the outlaws, Slaughter turned his shotgun upon them and fired as they stood, while Alvord chased the lone escapee down a canyon. The fact that it would have no doubt been possible to apprehend these bandits without killing them was beside the point. The ones who wear the badges get to make the rules. When Slaughter left the office of Sheriff, Alvord tried his hand at other things. After several years working in the stables, as a rancher, a wood-cutter, and a stage driver, Burt was again hired, this time by Sheriff C. S. Fly, as his enforcer deputy.

In 1896, the town of Pearce, Arizona, became the focus of a wild gold rush. Within months, Alvord had moved there and become the constable of Pearce, and was widely known as keeping the order in that town, accomplished with a very heavy hand. He bought ranch property near Pearce, and so was able to connect with both the miners and the ranch-



Jail Door at Pearce

ers, which was a rarity. After less than a year, Alvord had moved again, this time to Willcox, a booming ranch town on the Southern Pacific railroad. He was elected constable there, and while Cochise County Sheriff Scott White didn't like him much, White saw the need for a strong arm to keep the cowboys of Willcox under control, and so made Alvord his deputy there as well. It was in Willcox that Burt Alvord finally turned to the other side of the law.

Pearce was a booming mining town, with heavy payrolls coming in from the east for the miners there. Those trains rolled through Willcox before the gold was offloaded and brought into Pearce. When he got to Willcox, Alvord watched train after train pass through town with thousands of payroll dollars locked in their express cars. A holdup by the Grant Wheeler gang in 1895 which netted them over \$10,000 no doubt whetted Alvord's appetite to get into the robbery game. Closer to home, in November of 1898, an attempted train robbery happened just west of Willcox, and Constable Alvord chased and caught the would-be robbers, throwing them in jail. Along the way, he learned a thing or two about the payrolls, the trains, and their security. By July of 1899, he had put together a gang of his own, and devised a plan which worked to perfection...almost.

The plan was simple and was based on the idea that the ones who wear the badges get to make the rules...and chase the outlaws. Alvord had information that a big mine payroll was going to Pearce on September 9, 1899. He gathered his buddies (and occasional fellow deputies) Billy Stiles, Matt Burts, and Bill Downing, and arranged for Stiles and Burts to hold up the train when it stopped in the tiny town of Cochise. Detaching the express cars, the duo moved them about a mile west, where they blew up the safe and grabbed the cash. Then they disappeared into the desert where Downing had some horses waiting for them. Unfortunately, Alvord's information had been faulty. There was no Pearce payroll on this particular train. All their work gained them only about \$2,500, a moderate sum, but nowhere near what they were expecting.



Bill Downing

The three bandits then rode their horses back into Willcox, and deposited the loot at Burt Alvord's house.

Alvord, in the meantime, was very publicly drinking a few beers and patronizing the new bowling alley at a saloon in Willcox. When news of the robbery came, he organized a posse...which included the three train robbers themselves...and lit out in search of the perpetrators. Needless to say, they never found themselves. The plan, and its execution, were nearly perfect. The only hitch was that the payoff was not as much they'd been expecting.

The successful, if disappointing, robbery at Cochise led Alvord to devise another, more ambitious plan. This one involved holding up the train at the town of Fairbank, on the other side of Tombstone. This time, both Alvord and Stiles ran the show from a distance, but Burts and Downing were not part of this second adventure. Instead, they got five others to do the dirty work. "Three-Fingered-Jack" Dunlap, George and Lewis Owens, Bob Brown and "Bravo Juan" made up the attackers, while Alvord and Stiles would sit safely back and pull the strings.

Fairbank was the nearest railroad to Tombstone, and brought in carloads of supplies, money, and other valuables on trains coming from the east. Furthermore, the payroll for the soldiers at nearby Fort Huachuca came on those trains. In addition, the northbound trains from Mexico passed through Fairbank, containing considerable Mexican gold bullion and gold coins. It was this northbound train that became the target of the second plan.

The only concern the group had was a railroad guard named Jeff Milton. Milton had been a Texas Ranger, a deputy in several Arizona counties, a Wells Fargo messenger, and a very experienced guard. He was also known to be a fearless man with a cool head and a steady aim. Nobody wanted to go up against Jeff Milton if he were guarding that train. So a scheme was devised to send Stiles to Nogales, where he would meet with Milton and engage him in some mining exploration, thus ensuring Milton would not be on the targeted train. Unfortunately, a sick replacement guard caused Milton to change his plans and get on the train, unbeknownst to the Alvord gang. This proved to be their downfall.

When the gang assaulted the train in Fairbank, it was the dreaded Jeff Milton who opened the express car door. In the ensuing firefight, Milton's left arm was shattered, but he managed to still fire at the robbers, mortally wounding "Three-Fingered-Jack" and hitting not-so-Bravo-Juan in the backside as he ran away. The bandits escaped with a grand total of \$42, five desperate men riding off into the desert after this epic snafu. The Owens brothers split off to their ranch near Pearce, and Bravo Juan limped into Mexico. That left Bob Brown and "Three-Fingered-Jack" Dunlap on their own...which didn't last long. Dunlap could barely stay on his horse, and Brown didn't much like the odds, so he took off.

Dunlap was soon captured, and before he died, he spilled the beans on the whole operation, cursing the men who had left him to die in the desert. It was not long before the whole gang was rounded up. It didn't take Stiles long to turn snitch either, offering up the details of the unsolved train robbery at Cochise as well, in order to strike a better deal for himself.

Alvord, Bravo Juan, Burts, Downing, and the Owens brothers were all quickly put in jail in Tombstone, while Billy Stiles wandered around town having a grand old time. Brown was in Texas and "Three-Fingered-Jack" was dead and buried in Tombstone's famous "Boot Hill" cemetery. On April 8, the day of the trial, Stiles came into the jail and asked to speak with Burt Alvord. This was allowed, against the better judgment of the jailor, and after the meeting, as Alvord was being led back to his cell, Stiles pulled a gun, got the keys, and opened all the cell doors. Alvord, Stiles, and Bravo Juan all headed out, taking the keys with them. Interestingly, all of the other 30 jail prisoners, including Downing and the Owens brothers, decided to stay.



The three fugitives headed out to the Dragoon mountains, where they hid out for a while, moving between Cochise at the northern tip down past Pearce to Turquoise (now Gleeson), which marked the southern tip of the Dragoons. Alvord's previous experience and familiarity with the geography and back-roads of Cochise County served the three fugitives well. Eventually they made their way west to the Rincon

Mountains near Tucson, where they met with a negotiator. Afterward, Stiles went back north to his family home in Casa Grande, where he later surrendered. Alvord and Bravo Juan skipped into Mexico for a few years. In 1901, they sneaked back into Cochise County, ostensibly to get some loot and horses at Alvord's ranch near Pearce.

Bravo Juan eventually died "of fever" in Mexico. The Owens brothers, Bill Dowling, Matt Burts, and Bob Brown all served time in Yuma and elsewhere.

Alvord, in the meantime, was not yet done. From Mexico, he struck a deal with U.S. lawmen to assist in the capture of notorious killer Augustine Chacon in return for the dropping of most charges. In 1902, the jury trying him on territorial charges relating to the holdups could not come to a decision, and so the trial was postponed. Meanwhile, he was still under indictment on federal charges. When he couldn't make bail, Alvord was again incarcerated (along with Stiles) in the Tombstone jail. In December of 1902, he changed his plea to "guilty" and was sentenced to two years at Yuma. He and Stiles, however, decided on a different plan.

Using smuggled saws and other equipment, they cut the bars on their cells and then dug a hole through the jail wall and made their escape, along with several other prisoners. The pair managed to evade scores of pursuers on both the U.S. and Mexican side of the border for a period of two months. Finally, a group of Arizona Rangers, in cooperation with Mexican Rurales, caught up with them near Naco, on the Mexican side of the border. Alvord was wounded in the fight, while Stiles escaped. Stiles never did any real time in prison. The best evidence says he changed his name to Larkin and moved to Nevada, where he was killed in a shootout.

The wounded Alvord was finally sent to prison at Yuma, where he served his two years. Released a few days early, he traveled to Los Angeles, where he stayed with his sister. When news reached him that a group of embarrassed and angry lawmen were gearing up to re-arrest him on the federal charges, Alvord disappeared and was not seen again. There is some evidence that he spent time working in Canada, and his family maintains (with some corroborating evidence) that he went to Central America and eventually died, in 1910, on the island of Barbados.