

# The Bad Guys of the San Luis Valley Part 8 – Bad Billy LeRoy, His Brother Sam, and a Date with a Tree

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Date: [December 20, 2020](#) Author: [williamrablan2](#) [Comments](#)— [Edit](#)

**PERSONAL NOTE:** When I first heard of this, I was stunned. I'd lived in [Del Norte](#) for eight years, and never once heard the story. I guess the nice, quiet little town, where my kids played in the street, and where you could sleep with your door unlocked, wasn't so quiet once. Like a lot of things, I've gotten a more than passing interest in this now, and as I learn more details, I'll pass them on.

Please note that I've taken a little dramatic license with dialogue to keep the story interesting, but it reflects what was printed in the *Del Norte Prospector*.

Picture it. May 23, 1881. A charming old west town called Del Norte, Colorado. Two men are sitting in the Del Norte jail. Like a lot of old west types, they're there for robbing a stagecoach. The Sheriff and a couple of men guard them.

It wasn't enough. A mob of 40 men with their faces hidden by hoods came bursting into the jail. They were well armed and quickly subdued the Sheriff and his deputies. They took the men from the cells and led them to a tree.

One of the men was Billy LeRoy. That's not his real name. Like so many wanted men in the old west, he adopted another alias. His real name was Arthur Pond. The other, was a man who called himself Samuel Potter. He was Billy's brother, Sam. Samuel is supposed to have confessed this was his first stage robbery. As it turns out, he was in the wrong line of work.

Parker's First Law states that, "We catch criminals because they don't plan on getting caught. If they had, they probably would have run the worst-case scenario and not done it."

I wonder if these two men reflected on that as the mob put the nooses around their necks.

### **The first novel in the Lawman series**

Let's bounce back a couple of days before this event.

This story begins with a stage robbery some six miles east of the Clear Creek Station. This would place the event between modern day Creede and Lake City.

The story published in the *Del Norte Prospector* makes for some interesting reading. According the *Prospector*, at about 8 AM (no date given) the stage was fired upon by three men who stepped onto the road. A rifle bullet caught the man riding shotgun in the thigh. The robbers assumed he was a "messenger" carrying gold or silver. He wasn't a messenger, but Frank Bartlett, a survey engineer for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad who was riding topside.

When told to stop, the driver, Joseph McCormick, did. The smallest of the bandits climbed up on the stage, and kept the gun to Bartlett's head, while he hunted for "Sugar." I tried to find a translation for the slang from bygone days, but didn't find anything. Here, I suspect it meant silver or gold but might mean any kind of valuable (perhaps one of my readers might have a good definition of it).



**Stage similar to the one robbed. Notice that it's a "little" overloaded. Gives a new meaning to "flying coach." I wonder if anyone ever fell off?**

Searching Bartlett, the robber took a gold pocket watch, laughed and said, "This will tell us when to rob the next stage." He also found a roll of money, about \$110.00 in bills. An additional \$10.00 in silver was also found and taken.

When the bandit asked McCormick what he had, McCormick said all he had was a pistol. When he reached to hand it over, the robber stopped him saying, "I'll wait on myself," and took the gun.

They then got the mail and told the driver to move on. The driver did as instructed, no doubt fearing a bullet in the back for some distance.

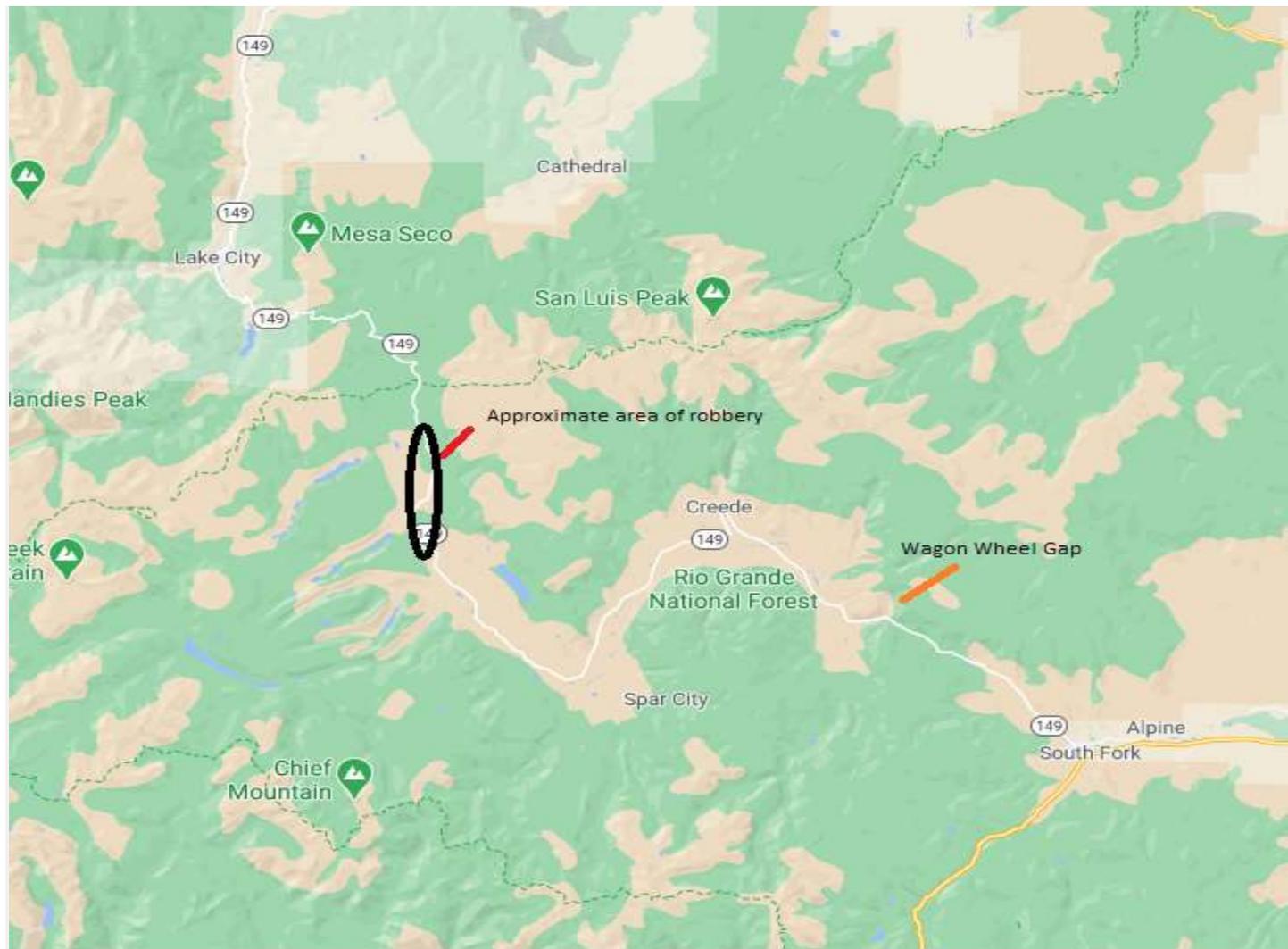
The bandits took the mail bags about a mile down the road where they cut them open and rifled the contents. According to the paper, there was an additional \$45.00

cash and over \$1200.00 in banks drafts taken. Assuming the bank drafts (think checks) were useless to them, but again, they might not have been, their take that day was \$165.00. In today's terms that would be about \$4200.00 dollars.

Not a bad day's work for three men.

But the Bible cautions us in Romans 6:23 that "The Wages of sin is death." LeRoy and Potter had just turned in their timecards for payment.

When the stage reached Lake City, the news of the robbery was telegraphed to Del Norte. The citizens immediately had a town meeting. In this they raised money to defray the cost of a posse (something you don't often see in a movie), and a liberal reward was offered for their arrest.



**A map of the area where our story occurs.**

Things had already turned against the robbers. A survey team led by W. H. Cochran was camped in the area. They'd been out surveying government land when that morning, three men were seen riding near the camp. Realizing they'd been seen; the three men turned and approached the camp. They asked for breakfast and it was provided. When one of the surveyors said it was almost time to go get the mail, the leader of the group seemed to become a little agitated and took his men out of camp.

Before going, they tried to buy a rifle from the men in survey team, but they didn't have one to sell.

They left camp by the old Ute trail and had gone only a short distance when they were seen by a hunter. They'd stopped and were splitting up the loot, when they also saw the hunter. Determined to add another rifle to their arsenal, they attempted to surround the hunter, but realizing they were up to no good, he was successful in eluding them.

Finding out from the hunter of the incident, Cochran sent a courier into Powder Horn to report what had happened and to send additional help just in case.

Leroy and the party saw the courier from a distance and decided their best bet was to hold up in the mountains.

Now, keep in mind when you read the account from the newspaper, this is 1881. The paper makes it sound like everyone showed up at more or less the same time. Remember the fastest means of travel here was by horse, and it took time to get everyone into the area. I'd say at least a day, possibly more passed before the story continued.

When that help arrived, Capt. Burros leading a team of three went on the trail hunting the men, and realized they were hiding on the mountain. He'd sent a courier to J.P. Galloway (Justice of the Peace) and Sheriff Armstrong to come at once since the robbers were "tree'd up in the mountains."

As Galloway and the Sheriff arrived, so did two other men—M. G. Frost, a detective for the coach line, and Dan Soward, an early homesteader in the area. They were shown where the trail had started and the men began following it. After traveling about two miles into the wood line, they encountered a man holding a rifle.

From the description given by the survey team, they knew this was one of the men they were looking for.

“Drop the rifle and put up your hands!” Sheriff Armstrong ordered. Looking down the business end of two pistols, the man did as instructed.

He ended up confessing to the robbery, and when asked where everyone else was, he said one of the men had gone into Lake City to get food, while the other had gone down to a toll road. Soward and Frost took charge of the man, while Armstrong and Galloway watched for the return of the others.

Before long, they saw one of the men coming down the road. Unfortunately, he saw them and drew his weapon. But he was a good hundred and thirty yards away. Armstrong and Galloway had a rifle, and he was outclassed.

He tried to dive into some bushes to hide, but as he turned, the Sheriff fired. The bullet caught him in the upper leg and knocked him into the bushes. He was trapped in there.

“Come out,” the Sheriff ordered.

“I can’t. I’ve been shot!”

“Then crawl out!”

He did, and the Sheriff and Galloway approached him. “Sorry, I had to shoot you,” Armstrong said.

“I wish you’d killed me,” the man answered.

“Why?”

"I'm already sentenced to ten years in the House of Corrections in Detroit. They'll want me."

"Then who are you?"

"I am Billy LeRoy! Road Agent and Desperado!"

He then confessed to his robbing the stage near Clear Creek.

The prisoners were then taken to the Clear Creek Station while Galloway and Frost waited for the return of the third man. They stayed hidden at the camp all night, but the third robber never returned.

The prisoners were taken down to Wagon Wheel Gap where they encountered a few more men who had come up from Del Norte. They brought some bad news for the Sheriff. Several people in town were talking about taking the prisoners and lynching them.

Billy and his friend then requested the Sheriff at least give them the means to defend themselves. They understood trouble awaited them. But Sheriff Armstrong wasn't about to give two desperados a handgun.

The Sheriff then deputized J. L. Jordan and others to help escort the men to the Del Norte Jail. He figured the best time to do this would be at night, and to come into town along a roundabout road.



The historic [Windsor Hotel](#), once one of the nicest places to stay, is such again. It has a first-class restaurant. In Del Norte? Check it out. Tell Cody that Wild Bill Ablan sent you.

His plan to get into town worked perfectly. There, he deputized additional men to help guard the prisoners. He placed the men and guards inside the jail while he kept an eye outside.

About midnight, an armed party came in and overpowered the sheriff. They got the keys, and went to the cells. When they were opening the cell, one of the guard's asked, "Who's there?"

"Lew," (first name of the Sheriff) was the answer.

When the door flew open, the masked men rushed in. According to the the paper, the guards put up a good struggle in an effort to protect their charges. But outnumbered, it wasn't long before they were overpowered and like the sheriff, tied up.

The masked men then opened the cell holding the two robbers, and told them to get up. The paper says the men got up, and went with them with no fear or trembling. The only words spoken were by LeRoy who is reported to have said, "You god damned sons of bitches!"

The men were put into the back of a wagon, and taken to a tree next to a structure called the Pest House. There, the nooses were put around their necks and without another word or request to pray, both were hung.

A note was pinned to Leroy's body with a dark warning to Law Breakers. It read:

**Road Agents, Bunko Steerers  
And Horse-Thieves,  
BEWARE**

When the bodies were cut down, they were taken back to the jail where the coroner examined the bodies. I've made no effort to clean it up his report in any way, He rendered the following:

*At an inquisition holden at Del Norte, in the said county and state aforesaid, on the 23d day of May, A.D. 1881, before L.T. Holland, Coroner, upon the bodies of Arthur Pond, alias Billy LeRoy, and Sam. Potter, (upon whose right arm was tattooed the letters "S.P.," from which, and the great resemblance between the two men, the jury believe them to be brothers,) there lying dead, by the persons whose names are hereunto subscribed, and said jurors, upon their oaths, do say, that said persons above named and described, came to their death by hanging, at the hands of a large party of masked and disguised men, who kidnapped and confined L.M. Armstrong, Sheriff of said county and Deputy U.S. Marshal, and who also overpowered the guards in the jail, after having taken by force from said Deputy U.S. Marshal the keys of the jail and cells. Said party of disguised men the jury are unable to identify from the evidence or otherwise. We, the jury, further find that no blame whatever attaches to Mr. Armstrong or any of the guards who were in immediate charge of said prisoners. The jail referred to in this verdict is the jail of Rio grande county, Colorado, or the building used for that purpose. {signed,} Thos. M Bowen, Foreman.*

The paper says that the next day, the corpses were taken outside and propped up in front of the jail where a local photographer took pictures of the bodies and sold them as postcards. I did find a picture of them. Sorry, but it's a little gruesome.



Billy and Samuel the day

after being hung.

Bill Leroy and Sam are buried in the Del Norte Cemetery in an [unmarked grave](#).

There were lot's of rumors who the men in the vigilante group were, but near as a I know, their identities were taken to the grave.

While traveling to Del Norte, Leroy said the third man in the robbery was a man he called the Old Californian. History identifies this man as [Bill Miner](#), a well known robber from California. He was often times called "The Grey Fox" and is said to have had good manners while robbing someone.

But he's a another story!

**NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:** Like my blog and stories, check out my novels available on Amazon. I have two out right now, [The Cross and the Badge](#), and [Against Flesh and Blood](#). A third novel, *The Judas Tree* will be coming out soon. Click on the novel names, or the pictures of the covers above to be taken straight to them. As always, thanks for dropping by and for your support. God Bless.

**Research:**

<https://www.chieftain.com/article/20080907/LIFESTYLE/309079884>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill\\_Miner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Miner)

<https://books.google.com/books?id=dz4SMxs0AJQC&pg=PA42&lpg=PA42&dq=billy+leroy+stagecoach&source=bl&ots=yYFgU0yTz1&sig=ACfU3U0Lr80QuBJGAoKvQa1S3Gi6klz-pg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjI5IDv7tDtAhVbK80KHWP4APY4FBDoATAEegQIAxAC#v=onepage&q=billy%20leroy%20stagecoach&f=false>

<http://iagenweb.org/muscatine/articles/Pondbros.htm>

Click [Here](#) to read the text from the *Del Norte Prospector*.