

The Bad Guys of the San Luis Valley – The Choices You Make



My wife is a counselor and she often hears tales of woe from her patients. After talking with them it often becomes clear that they arrive where they're at through a series of bad choices.

She often ends up telling them, "You live with the choices you make."

Choices often lead to a nightmare, and this one starts with what the *Chaffee County Republican* printed on September 15, 1884: "**Fifteen years ago:** William Morgan and Charles Crisp exchanged shots at Northrup, the latter receiving a bullet through the neck. The troubles arose over the efforts of Crisp to prevent his daughter's marriage to Morgan."

That's it. If there was a big front-page story to this, I couldn't find it. Just a small blurb about an incident some years before saying two men had a disagreement which ended in bloodshed. It sounds almost like something the Bard may have

written. Dad objects to son-in-law to be. Son-in-law kills Dad. Not the best way to endear yourself to your bride!

But it does introduce us to the man who set the events in motion, and that's William Morgan. He made a choice to kill a man and before it would be said and done, several more people would die.

But that's just the beginning of the story.

Let's fast forward to a few short weeks after the killing and allow me to introduce you to another of our chief players in this little drama. His name is John Van Pelt and he was a cowboy. Alamosa, Colorado was his home base, and according to all accounts he was a hard worker. He was known to have a good time, but there was nothing sinister about him. Just a hard-working cowboy with a friend in jail.

I couldn't find any information on how Van Pelt and Morgan knew one another. Maybe they'd been raised together and were like brothers. Maybe they'd ridden together which in the case of a cowboy is as good as being brothers. Speculation of why he rode the better part of a hundred miles to break a friend out of jail and entwine their fates is almost fruitless.

The book *Hands Up; or Thirty-Five Years of Detective Life in the Mountains and on the Plains*, by D. J. Cook uses an interesting choice of words to describe Van Pelt and Morgan. Cook describes them as "the precious pair." Draw what conclusion you wish from that wording, but it may also be a powerful explanation of how this mess started to begin with, and why Van Pelt did what he did.

What we do know for sure is that Morgan was sitting in the Buena Vista jail. Somehow, he got word to his old friend John Van Pelt of his situation and asked if he could help him escape.

Van Pelt quit his job, got a couple of horses, and rode to Buena Vista in the middle of winter. He busted Morgan out, and the two began riding south with the idea of disappearing into old Mexico.

They were young, and it becomes clear they hadn't thought everything out. For openers, they needed money to get to Mexico, and that seemed in short supply for the two of them.

So, they rode till they reached a ranch belonging to Hank Dorris which was some fourteen miles north of Alamosa. Van Pelt had worked once for Dorris and they were friends. The plan was to borrow money from him to help in their journeys.

But the best laid plans of men often times don't work out as expected. Hank wasn't home. He had several business interests and spent as much time in Alamosa as at his ranch.

So, they waited for three days.

Enter another of our players. Frank Hyatt met before when he was a Deputy Sheriff in Conejos County. In our first meeting he chased a fallen lawman and a couple of other outlaws into New Mexico where he apprehended them. In the time since we saw him last, Alamosa is no longer part of Conejos County. Indeed, it's spun off to become its own county.

Since Frank and his family lived in Alamosa, it made sense for him to stay. Now he was town marshal.

On or about the 9th of February, he received a telegram from Sheriff J. J. Salla of Buena Vista. The telegram explained what had happened, who the principals were, and offered a reward of fifty dollars for the arrest of Morgan and Van Pelt. He finished by letting Marshal Hyatt know they believed the men were heading his way.

He kept an eye open for them and after a couple of days ran into an old friend of his, Hank Dorris. Hank had been one of the men who rode into New Mexico with him not long before. They always had each other's back.

"Hank, you know John Van Pelt?" Frank might have asked.

"Yes. He worked for me. Good worker. Why?"

"He's wanted."

"What? I find that hard to swallow. What did he do?"

"Helped break a guy named Morgan out of jail in Buena Vista. They're supposed to be around."

Hank must of shaken his head. "Guess you just never know people. But, Frank, he is here. He's out at my place wanting to see me."

"I'll be."

"Come on. Let's go talk to him," Hank said.

Frank knew if Van Pelt was there, Hank would have him covered.

Hank got on his horse, and as Frank had went to get his, John Van Pelt rode up. John had gotten tired of waiting and had gone looking for Dorris.

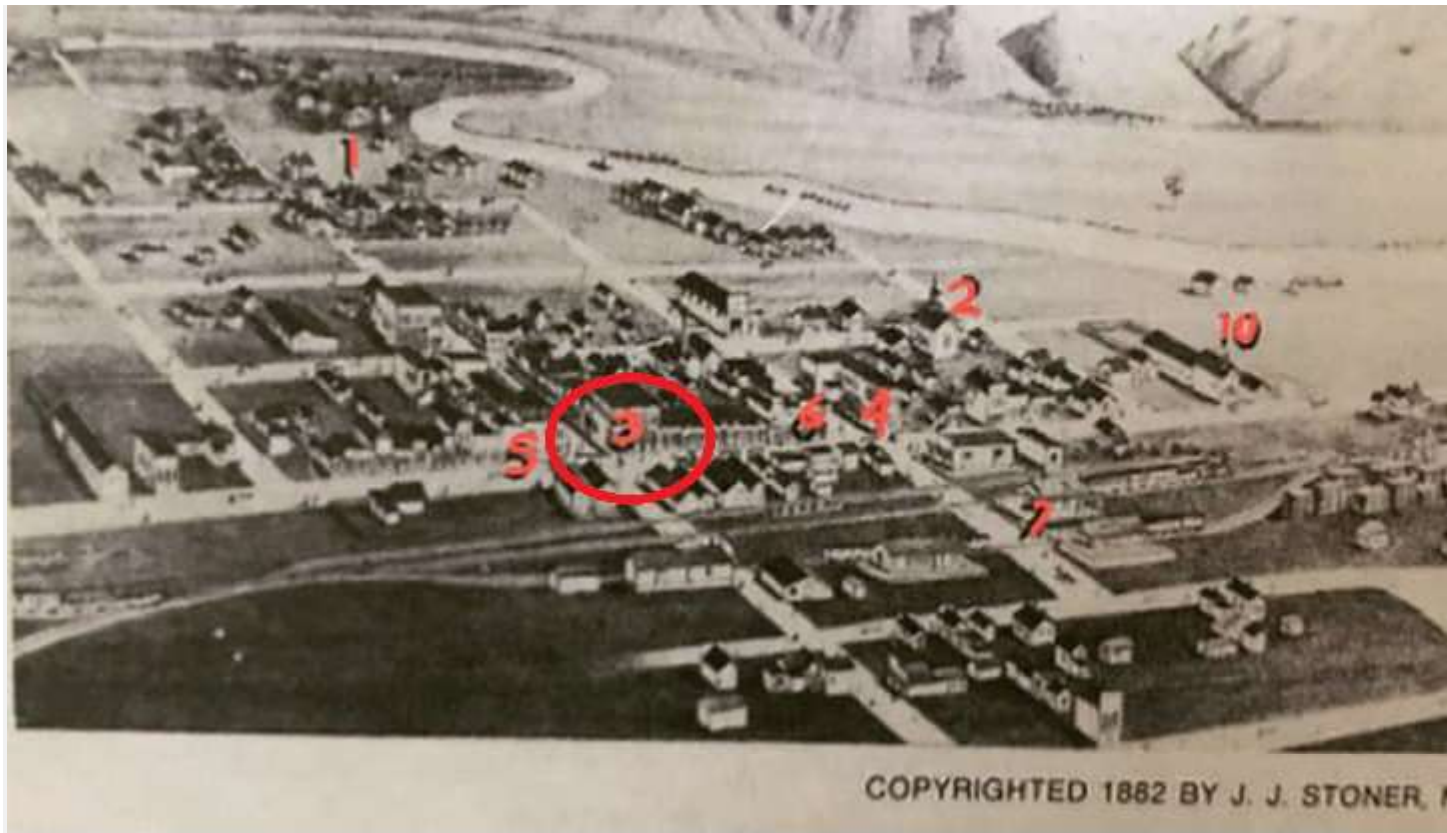
Van Pelt dismounted and tied his horse to a pole in front of the Post Office. He approached Frank and Hank and spoke to them. He even shook Frank's hand.

When he did, Frank said, "Johnny, I'm going to have to hold you for a while."

Johnny's smile vanished, and he jerked his hand away. What had been a friendly encounter had gone deadly serious with just a few words.

Johnny jumped back like he'd almost stepped on a snake and pulled out his gun. He leveled it at Frank's chest.

Frank knew better than try to pull on a man who had the drop on him. He causally held up his hands in front of him and calmly said, "John. Calm down. It's nothing so bad you'd want to shoot me over it."



An 1882 drawing of the City of Alamosa. The circled structure was the old post office and is about where the altercation occurred.

Something in his words got through. John started backing away, but he didn't lower the gun either. He backed towards his horse, watching Frank closely.

He was so intent on Frank; he hadn't noticed Hank Dorris had slipped off his horse and had come up behind him.

Dorris grabbed Van Pelt from behind, intent on wrestling him down to the ground. As he did, he tried for the gun hand, but Van Pelt jerked free, and spun, his gun coming around.

"No!" screamed Frank as he desperately tore his coat open to get his pistol out.

Dorris had already let go of Van Pelt and was rolling away from him. He knew there was little chance of Van Pelt missing at that range, and all he could do was prepare himself for the feeling of the bullet ripping into his body.

There was a crack as the hammer on the gun fell on the cartridge, and a puff of acrid smoke as Van Pelt's pistol fired. Dorris was still spinning away from him, a maneuver that probably saved his life. The bullet went through his coat, barely missing him, but cutting a cigar in half that he had in his pocket.

Frank had his pistol out by now, and Van Pelt turned and engaged him but his shot went wide. Smoke and the loud reports of the pistols echoed through the streets. Some people turned to look. Others already knew what was going on and were scurrying to get out of the zone of fire.

Dorris had drawn his weapon, and with a pull of the trigger on his pistol and more smoke, this evolved quickly into a three-point gun battle. Van Pelt was still backing towards his horse and engaging the two men as he went.



John Van Pelt fights Marshal Frank Hyatt and Hank Dorris in the streets of Alamosa. Print from the book, Hands Up.

They taught us in the police academy that most gunfights happen within about seven yards, and this one was certainly no exception to that rule. This gun battle

also puts to rest the myth of the deadly accuracy of a gun fight. These men are almost muzzle to muzzle, and so far, no one has been hit.

Van Pelt had tied his horse to the telegraph pole, and now he took cover behind the pole. As he tried to untie the animal with his left hand, he kept firing at the officers with the right. It didn't work too well.

Frank and Hank, still advancing, both fired at the same time on Van Pelt.

Both bullets struck home. One bullet shattered Van Pelt's hip. The other entered his chest.

With a cry of pain, Van Pelt crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut. As he lay on the ground with his horse dancing nervously away from him, he looked up at the two lawmen. As if he couldn't believe it himself, he said, "You killed me."

He bled out within minutes. By now, the coroner had arrived and pronounced him dead.

Leaving the coroner in charge, Frank and Dorris mounted up and rode quickly out to Dorris' ranch.

There, they found Morgan busy cooking supper. Feeling secure, he'd taken off his gun belt and left it and his weapon on a chair.

Frank and Dorris burst into the house, and Frank ordered him to surrender.

Morgan put up his hands.

Minutes later, Hyatt and Dorris were riding back to Alamosa with their prisoner.

The coroner's inquest deemed the killing of Van Pelt as what we would call today, "A good shooting." The officers defended themselves and used the amount of force necessary.

There was one civilian casualty. Thomas O'Conner, a local shoemaker, had looked out his shop door to see what was going on, and was hit in the cheek by a bullet. The injury was reported as to not be all that bad (really).

Morgan was taken back to Buena Vista and tried for the murder of his father-in-law and sentenced to eight years in the state penal system.

His mother-in-law died of grief.

Since he'd caused at least three deaths, either directly or indirectly, most of the locals felt he should have been hung. They considered the eight years a mere slap on the wrist.

Sheriff Salla gave Marshal Frank Hyatt the bounty.

Word has it that Frank tossed the money in the mud.

RESEARCH:

"Hands Up; or Thirty-Five Years of Detective Life in the Mountains and on the Plains" by D. J. Cook

[The Silver Plume Coloradoan, Volume 3, Number 20, February 16, 1884](#)

[Montezuma Millrun, February 16, 1884](#)