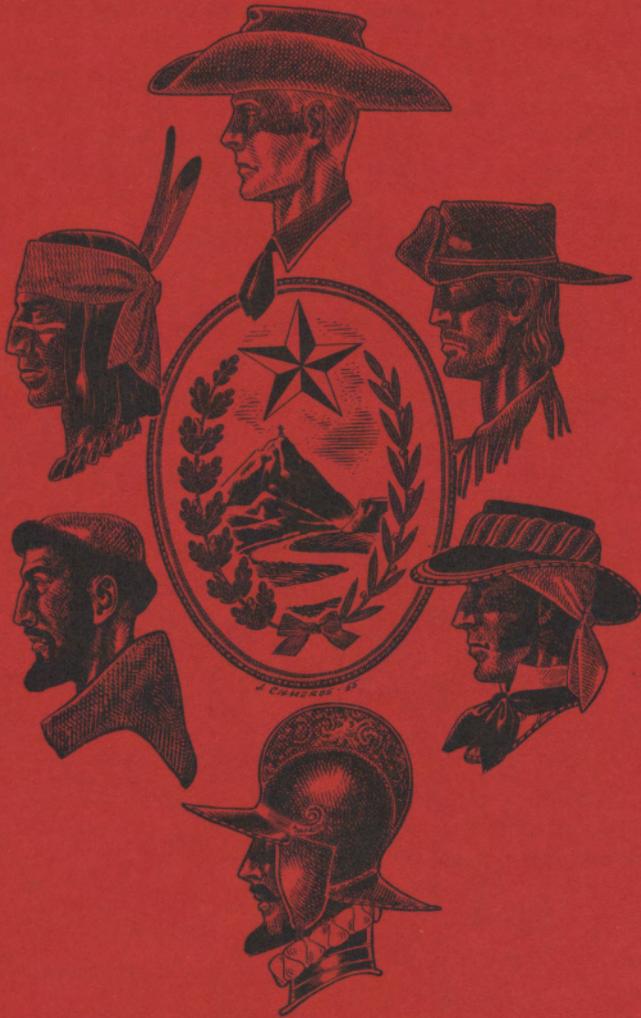


# PASSWORD



THE EL PASO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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VOL. XIV—No. 3

FALL, 1969

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Bent's Fort, originally named Fort William in honor of Colonel William Bent, was an important fur-trading post located about twelve miles northeast of the present city of Las Animas, Colorado. It was 530 miles west of Independence, Missouri, the fitting-out headquarters for caravans going to Santa Fe and to Oregon. The Santa Fe Trail split a few miles west of the present site of Dodge City, Kansas, one fork continuing up the north bank of the Arkansas River to the Fort and then south through Raton Pass to Santa Fe. The other went southwest, crossed the Cimarron River and continued to near Las Vegas, New Mexico where it joined the trail coming south. Later Fort Union was built at the converging point of the two trails. Most Santa Fe traders took the south fork.

Bent's Fort was constructed between 1829 and 1832 by the three Bent brothers, William, Charles, and George and the two French Canadian traders, Ceran and Marcelen St. Vrain.

*Published quarterly by* THE EL PASO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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It is *not* available to the general public.

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# THE LOST CONDUCTA OF THE TARAHUMARA

by RICHARD T. COPENBARGER

IN THE WESTERN PORTION of the state of Chihuahua lies the southern extension of the Rocky Mountains called by the Spaniards of ancient times "Sierra Madre Del Norte." It is a rugged land of high peaks and deep *barrancas* through which even today the economy of Mexico finds it difficult to build a road. Due to its rugged remoteness, the permanent civilizing tide brought north by the early Spaniards was forced to sweep around its borders. It was never engulfed like the southern plateau. However, within the confines lie some of the most mineralized mountains in the world and this was enough to attract the early Spanish miners who, inheriting the boldness of the *conquistadores*, came to take the exposed rare metals. The early Jesuit called the area "Tarahumara Alta," for it was the mountain homeland of the Tarahumaras, that tribe of natives who even today refuse to give up their natural heritage. They are as stubborn as the *Pueblos* in this respect.



The Christianization of the area was assigned by the King of Spain to the Jesuit order and their members entered this mountain fastness to convert the Tarahumara to the way of the cross and to fulfill within themselves that noble inner-need of a life dedicated to service. However, the Europeans were unable to adjust themselves to the mountains and the Mexican *peon* found the region unsuited for farming. Thus, as the invaders came, so in time did they retreat, leaving the mountains to these tenacious Indians.

In the Mexican *pueblos* along the periphery of this area there developed legends and *cuentos* which have passed from generation to generation among the *gente*, telling of *tesoros escondidos* of the Tarahumara. Giving substance to these stories are a few individuals in the state of Chihuahua, who very infrequently buy gold and silver from these Indians in both the dust and bullion form. However, the Tarahumaras are cautious when they sell. They sell only to persons with whom they have built a trust over the years. There are tales in the *sierras* of their being tortured in efforts to make them reveal the source of their treasure. They have an almost inborn tribal memory of the suffering this treasure has brought upon their people. The Tarahumaras have never understood the white man's fascination for these metals, which to them have little value. Since the early Spanish miners first came to this region, they have been dispossessed and enslaved to satisfy the white man's appetite for gold and silver. Even today they are constantly being cheated in their dealings with their more civilized neighbors. Greedy, fence-moving Mexican ranchers are taking their land with reckless abandon.

In the old days, the land of the Tarahumara reached to the city of Chihuahua. However, the European flood has pushed the Indians westward until all they may now claim are the peaks and *barrancas* of the western Sierra Madre. These they know far more intimately than any Spanish or modern geologist ever could. Also, the Mexican *gente*, knowing by tradition the history and lore of these mountains, are certain that the Tarahumaras have a tribal secret of Lost Treasure.

Going back in time to the dawn of the 19th century, when all the activity was going on which generated these legends, the war with Spain was over and the northern frontier was left defenseless, a condition the Apache and Comanche were quick to seize upon. The Chiracahua and Membrano bands of the Apache swept out of the north and began devastating the whole of western Chihuahua and eastern Sonora down to and including the northern end of Tarahumara Alta. The Mescalero and Lipan bands of the same tribe began raiding from New Mexico to Coahuila. Cattle were stolen and travelers were robbed and killed within a league of the City of Chihuahua. The southern Comanche, master of

them all, using their home on the *Llano Estacado* as a base of operations, were entering Mexico at Presidio Del Norte and raiding south to the very gates of Zacatecas. Nothing could stop them; northern Mexico was a battle ground.

It was during this period that a very rich bonanza was discovered at Jesus Maria (modern Ocampo) in the heart of upper Tarahumara Alta. This area was so isolated that the only contact the miners had with the outside world was over the tortuous Sonora trail eastward to Chihuahua. This was a distance of over three hundred miles by mule path, the greater part of which passed through the heart of mountainous Tarahumara Alta.

The exploiters of Jesus Maria were not too worried about the Indian problem, for while chaos was in progress to the north and east, the Tarahumaras were at peace. They had not revolted for more than a century. However, to insure protection, the miners took a page from the old Spanish plate fleet and sent their bullion trains eastward only two or three times a year. More *arrieros* and guards were hired than usually accompanied a *conducta de carga*.

And so, as surely as corn planted in warm soil in early spring with gentle rain begins the cycle of new growth, so also were these conditions to produce among the *gente* a legend of a lost *tesoro*, for there was one year when a *conducta* with a *carga de oro* failed to reach the mint at Chihuahua. That it left Jesus Maria is certain. The last human eyes to see this pack train were those of an old *lenero* as it passed his *jacal* about twelve leagues down the trail. The trail, after leaving the wood cutter's hut, descended into a deep *barranca* which normally required two days to pass. At its eastern end the canyon was known from old as the *barranca del diablo*. The canyon at this point became very narrow and ominous; its floor was strewn with great boulders and rocks making passage very difficult and slow. The walls looked as if they had been constructed by someone who had intended to strike fear in the heart of anyone traveling the floor below. Huge boulders were perched on canyon pinacles, giving the appearance of being ready to fall. No pack train ever made this canyon passage without first stopping at its entrance and requesting the aid of the saints. The *conductas* would enter the canyon to the whispers of the rosary. The Tarahumaras generally avoided this area. Each *conducta* tried to make this passage in one day; but nearly always they failed and darkness would force them to halt somewhere along its tortuous path. A night spent in this *barranca* was something *arrieros* never forgot. If fear did not drive sleep from their eyes, they would be required to spend the night trying to pacify mules that were terrified. The terror of the mules only served to heighten the fear of the *arrieros*. Had it not been

said among them that mules have the ability to detect the presence of a *mala sombra*? Rocks would be heard falling from the canyon walls. Very strange noises were said to be heard, of what origin no one dared to guess. The muleteers would truly spend the night with the name of the Holy Virgin on their lips, for they reasoned that these things were not of this world.

This canyon must indeed have been a very strange geological formation. The pragmatic North American of today, if he were able to observe such a phenomenon, would probably say that the rocks, having certain characteristics, were falling because of thermal expansion and contraction due to the extreme temperature between night and day in this higher elevation. The noises would be relegated to someone's fantasy. However, these early packers had no such educated reasoning to fall back on. Events were caused either through an agency of God or of the Devil. Had not the holy padres said that this was so?

Every *conducta* that made this Passage of Terror saw its human element swear they would never enter the *barranca* again. However, time and space would dull the memory before another passage was required and most *arrieros* knew they had sworn oaths before.

It was in this terrible *barranca* that, according to legend, the *conducta de oro* disappeared. When the expected cargo failed to reach Chihuahua, investigators were dispatched to find out why. Returning by the same trail to Jesus Maria, they could find nothing which caused concern until they reached this Canyon of the Devil. There, they were met by a scene which caused both dismay and wonder. One wall of the *barranca* appeared as though a giant hand had scraped it off into the floor below. The trail was obliterated for a distance of about five hundred yards. Upon first observation, the searchers were certain the *conducta* was buried below the debris, but after searching for hours they found nothing, not even a small piece of an *aparejo*.

Could the Apaches, they wondered, have done this? If so, how could they have caused a destruction of this magnitude? Anyway, they were not raiding this far south, or were they? The awful Comanches were far to the east and the Tarahumaras to whom this country really belonged had been peaceful for decades.

After further inquiry established that the *conducta* had reached this canyon, another search was made into the rubble; but the investigators found nothing. Nor could they prove that this catastrophe was of human origin. The gold train had entered this *barranca*, something had happened in this canyon and the *conducta de oro* had disappeared. It was as though the *conducta* had passed from this *barranca* through the gates of eternity. Local inquiry among the Tarahumaras produced only those

negative replies which Indians alone are capable of giving. The searchers finally gave up and another legend of the Sierra Madre was born.

For a number of years, no mayor-domo would permit his *conducta* to pass thru this *barranca*. A by-pass was found to the north, which required another week of travel. However, the new route brought the trains under direct threat of the raiding Apache. Later, when the Apache fury was reaching one of its peaks and the *arriero's* fear of the Apache was greater than their fear of the *barranca*, another passage was attempted. They were surprised. The feeling of evil foreboding was gone. The rocks had quit falling and strange noises were no longer heard. It was said that the *Diablo* who once had this canyon under his power had become satisfied and departed.

Many years later travelers along this trail, knowing the legend, would stop to probe into the slide. It wasn't deep. They were rewarded with no more for their efforts than were the original searchers.

For generations the *arrieros* of Northern Mexico have speculated around camp fires about what could have happened to this lost *conducta de oro*. Some said it was an act of the Devil while others swore that it was the doings of the mysterious Tarahumaras. If only a way could be found to make them talk!

From time to time events occur which substantiate the reality of the legend in the minds of the *gente*. People are encountered who have talked with someone who can swear for a certainty that he has seen some of the gold. A *compadre* has intimate knowledge that he obtained from an Indian and so forth! With each new event or relating of the tales, hope springs anew in the hearts of the *gente*. Is there not a possibility that I may find this *tesoro*? *Si es posible—como no?*

In southern Sonora there lives today a Mexicanized Tarahumara, who works for a mining company. He states that in the upper reaches of Tarahumara Alta, there are some caves which, according to the legends of his people, hold the treasure of an old bullion train. He also says that even under the pain of death, he would not reveal their locations for, already three persons who came too close to discovering the secret are now dead.

In western Chihuahua, there also lives today a Mennonite who says that he has seen and felt of a gold bullion bar that was bought from a Tarahumara. His descriptions of the stamps on this bar would place its origin at Old Jesus Maria.

Probably unknown to this writer there are other tales and circumstances which keep feeding fuel to the fires of the legend of the lost *conducta* of the Tarahumaras.

## THE BOWMAN BANK ROBBERY

by JACK F. FINDLAY

LAS CRUCES, NEW MEXICO, when I first knew it in 1898,<sup>1</sup> was the seat of Doña Ana County, as it is today. At that time, however, Doña Ana comprised not only its present area but also the area now included in Luna County, named for Captain Sol Luna of Rough Rider fame, and Otero County, so called to honor the then governor of the Territory, Miguel A. Otero. Las Cruces itself was a far cry from the beautiful modern city it is today. Main Street, then as now the city's principal thoroughfare, was unpaved and the passage of horsemen, wagons and buggies kept its surface deep in dust and full of "chuck-holes." Across the southern end of Main Street and facing North was Loretto Academy for Girls, usually referred to as "the convent." At the time of which I write it was supervised by a very competent and talented Mother Superior, Sister Mary Inez. Walking northward from the convent one noticed rows of one-story, flat-roofed adobe buildings, interspersed with a few two-story edifices. Most of them were fronted by badly kept, high wooden sidewalks and, of course, the inevitable hitching rail.

The larger buildings, I recall, were Bob Haltons Río Grande Hotel and an adjoining store building. On the east side was a saloon whose operator's modest sign read: "The only second-class saloon in the United States—John A. Shryock, Prop." Above the saloon were the law offices of Jetton and Fall, the latter of whom later gained prominence on the national scene.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing northward one came to the parish church of Santa Geneveva, then guided by the firm hand of the Reverend Pedro Sassaigne, mentioned in a recent issue of *PASSWORD*.<sup>3</sup> From the church, Main Street winded its dusty way to a junction with a dirt road which connected the valley with the little mining town of Organ.

The banking needs of Las Cruces and vicinity were provided by a small institution owned by George D. Bowman and his son Henry. At that time the bank was operated by the son. Its staff included Jim Freeman, who served as cashier, and Henry's sister-in-law, Miss Maude Otto, who worked as a part-time clerk.

I am not positive of the exact date but believe it was on a Fall day in 1899 that Colonel Eugene Van Patten,<sup>4</sup> a veteran of the Civil War and well-known throughout the Territory of New Mexico, was strolling along the high board side-walk of the block in which the one-story bank was located. The street was practically deserted since most of the local citizens were having their noon meal and, so far as possible, keeping out of the mid-day heat.