



Episode 701, Story 3: Pancho Villa Watch Fob

Eduardo Pagan: Our final story investigates the connection between a souvenir watch fob and an old man's tale of escaping Pancho Villa's bloody raid on Columbus, New Mexico. In the early hours of March 9th, 1916, 300 residents of the border town of Columbus, New Mexico, wake to find their town under siege. For six years the bitter conflict of the Mexican Revolution has boiled close by. But on that night – despite the protection of US troops stationed nearby, Pancho Villa and a band of 400 men slip into town. Historians still debate Villa's motivation, but the death and destruction of that night leave indelible scars. Nearly a century later, Dedra Kolste of Bremerton, Washington holds a tiny medallion that may be linked to a survivor of the Columbus raid.

Dedra: It wasn't just an object to him, it was a memory.

Eduardo: I'm Eduardo Pagan. I'm a professor of history of the American Southwest. On my mother's side we have a personal connection to Pancho Villa's history so I'm very interested to see what Dedra has to show me. Dedra?

Dedra: Yes

Eduardo: Hi, I'm Eduardo. So, why have you invited me here?

Dedra: I have a watch fob.

Eduardo: Ah, these are medallions that would sit at the end of a gentleman's chain and they would put a watch in their vest pocket and they would use these fobs to help pull them. What is it about this particular fob that caught your attention?

Dedra: Its inscription.

Eduardo: Let's take a look at that.



Dedra: "Souvenir of Villa raid, on Columbus New Mexico, March 9, 1916." On the back it says, "Nine citizens and seven soldiers of the 13th cavalry killed, town looted and burned, raiders driven into Mexico after two hours, fight leaving more than 80 dead."

Eduardo: How did you come into possession of this fob?

Dedra: It was given to us by our neighbor Lin Burkhead.

Eduardo: Dedra tells me Lin died in 1993 and they put the fob away for safe keeping. So what made you think about it after all that time?

Dedra: We were watching our favorite program "History Detectives"...

Eduardo: In that episode, Wes Cowan investigated a mysterious poster promoting news reels of the Mexican Revolution.

Wes: Robert points out a picture of the rebel leader, Pancho Villa.

Eduardo: As she watched Dedra's mind kept going back to their long-ago gift.

Eduardo: Did your neighbor Lin tell you anything about the souvenir?

Dedra: He told us that he was actually there at the raid. His father worked for the railroad. They heard a loud noise so they ran to the railroad tracks. They found a culvert where they could hide and they followed the railroad out of town.

Eduardo: So what did you think of this story?

Dedra: Well, I thought he was kidding actually. So many movies have been made about Pancho Villa and I thought, oh sure.

Eduardo: I have to tell you, I have kind of a personal connection to this. My great grandfather and his son rode with Pancho Villa.



Dedra: really?

Eduardo: Oddly enough, Villa wasn't spoken about much in my family – but as an historian, I've spent many hours researching his life and impact. So what can I find out for you about this?

Dedra: I would like to know when it was made and more of the details of his survival story. I just couldn't believe that he was actually there.

Eduardo: I will see what I can find out about this, I'm going to have to take this with me but I will take very good care of it.

Dedra: I'm anxious to hear what you find out.

Eduardo: Let's take a good close look at this. It has enough detail on it to look like a topographical map of the state of New Mexico. In fact I can see the name of several cities and towns in New Mexico. In the early 20th century Pancho Villa's fight for landless peasants during the Mexican revolution earned him a place of honor in national folklore. And many Americans north of the border also identified with his Robin Hood-like exploits. But everything changed when Villa crossed the American border and attacked Columbus, New Mexico. For many in the United States, Villa went from hero to villain overnight. The raid on Columbus was a watershed moment in American history. Could it have been a defining moment in Lin Burkhead's story too? I'm not familiar with all the details on the raid, but I know where I need to start... Columbus, New Mexico. At the Pancho Villa state park in Columbus, a bullet strewn car illustrates the horror that night. The town has attempted to memorialize every object and story connected to the raid. Sylvia Brenner is the heritage educator. Have you ever seen this fob before?

Sylvia: No, here in our archives we have nothing like that.

Eduardo: She's never heard of the Burkhead family even though she has researched the oral histories of those who fled the raid and those who didn't get away. Many of those stories are horrific.



Sylvia: Bessie James, pregnant, fleeing for her life, headed for that Hoover hotel, was shot as she got to the doorway. Other casualty was the grocer James Dean; he was mowed down in the middle of the street.

Eduardo: Two hours later – scores lay dead, including civilians, soldiers, and many rebels. Was Lin a witness? Sylvia suggests that I speak with military historian John Hamilton. He's studied Villa's movements that night, and can confirm if Linn's family's escape route was possible. We're meeting at Coote's Hill, the highest point in Columbus with a view of the town and its border with Mexico. So John, how did this raid all play out?

John: Well, Villa and his force had moved up from the south behind the Sierra Prietas, the low hills there on the horizon, you could hide back there and you couldn't be seen. And then after night fell Villa was able to feed groups of his soldiers through, just short of his objective which was the camp at Columbus.

Eduardo: Instead of acting as a deterrent, John says the U.S. Cavalry Camp in Columbus was a critical draw for Villa. They had exactly what he needed; horses, supplies, and machine guns. So when the Villistas swept passed here, how did they proceed into town?

John: Let's look at the map.

Eduardo: John explains that the Villistas broke into four divisions and enveloped the unsuspecting town. Two groups used the railroad track as a guide to attack the barracks and the stables. Just after 4am, the invaders struck. As the U.S. Cavalry scrambled to overcome the surprise the downtown became a deadly shooting gallery. What turned things around for the American military?

John: The real blunder was when the Villa forces set fire to the commercial hotel and essentially that allowed them to be silhouetted against the fire as targets for the riflemen and machine gunners in the cavalry regiment.

Eduardo: At sunrise, the cavalry drove the raiders back over the border. In the end, Villa lost between 75 and 100 men. And the raid was forever etched in the town's history. John has never



seen anything like our fob before. Well the story is that the owner of this particular watch fob escaped with his family by hiding along a culvert that ran along the railroad. Do you know if that story is even possible?

John: Well, the culvert and the ditch are still here and why don't we go down there and take a look.

Eduardo: John explains that the family may have been extremely lucky. At 4:00 am, one group of Villistas had entered the town along the railroad tracks.

John: This is the drainage ditch that ran north and south and the culvert that ran under the railroad that was here in 1916.

Eduardo: The Burkheads claim they fled along the same tracks in the opposite direction. That means they may have missed the bandits by mere minutes. So do you think it's possible that a family could have used this route to escape from the Villistas?

John: Certainly this was a way to get away from the commotion in town, someone who knew the railroad, who knew the town could have used this as a way to escape.

Eduardo: Lin had told Dedra his father had worked for the railroad. So I'm heading to the Railroad and Transportation Museum in nearby El Paso, across the Texas border, to see what records they may have held on to. Prince McKenzie is director of the museum. I'm investigating the history of this watch fob. The story is the original owner survived the raid on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916. His father may have worked for the railroad.

Prince: He had to have worked for the El Paso and Southwestern railroad which ran through Columbus. And this locomotive actually ran on that line, in 1924 it became part of the Southern Pacific. In these time books we have seniority tables at the front and the back and these lists tell us who worked for the railroads at the time. Every man had to carry a time book with him when he was on the train. Here's another one here.



Eduardo: Thank you. B-a, b-e, let's keep going... I'm not finding any Burkhead's here, are you having any luck?

Prince: I don't see any here.

Eduardo: I'm headed back to New Mexico, to meet Richard Dean, President of the Columbus Historical Society. He has asked to meet me at the old Luna County Courthouse in Deming. Hi Richard.

Richard: How do you do, nice to meet you.

Eduardo: Nice to meet you too. So why have you brought me here?

Richard: Well we are right at the moment in the courtroom that was where the trial was held for the seven Villistas that were convicted of murder in the Pancho Villa raid.

Eduardo: Richard tells me that even though none of the witnesses for the state could place these men at the scene, they were convicted and shortly after, six of the rebels were hanged in the courtyard. I'm searching for documentation on the Burkhead family; their story is that they were in Columbus on the night of the raid. I sent you a picture of this watch fob that the son kept as a souvenir.

Richard: Oh I was totally amazed when you sent me that photo because there is another one that I think is identical. To my knowledge this was the only one I knew of, so now I've seen two of them.

Eduardo: That is amazing.

Richard: Isn't that amazing? This watch fob is attached to a watch that my great grandfather James T. Dean was carrying when he was killed in the Villistas raid.

Eduardo: Dean was the grocer who died trying to defend the businesses in the downtown area.



Richard: That's true.

Eduardo: Richard points out that the watch fobs were made from two different metals: his is bronze, while Dedra's was cast in silver. The imprints and every other detail are identical.

Eduardo: Do you know where these watch fobs came from?

Richard: Let's go down to the archive.

Eduardo: Incredibly, the archives today are housed in the old jail cells, directly above those where Villa's men had been incarcerated.

Richard: One of the first items I'd like to show you is a newspaper article that was put in the Columbus courier newspaper in July of 1916. Read that.

Eduardo: "Mr. L. L. Burkhead has gotten out a really beautiful souvenir of the Villa raid on Columbus, which in addition to being a handsome reminder of the tragedy is a practical watch fob..."

Richard: The fact that you came up with one is just outstanding.

Eduardo: And Richard has another surprise.

Richard: I have a photograph here of a dinner that was held at my relatives' house as a matter of fact. And here is Mrs. Burkhead and this is Mr. Burkhead, Mr. L. L. Burkhead and these other people this is my great grandmother.

Eduardo: Richard says the Deans and the Burkheads moved in the same social circles. He knows that L.L. and Anna Burkhead had a son named Lingurn, Dedra's neighbor Lin! Now do we know they were there on the night of the raid?

Richard: I think we can clear that little item up.



Eduardo: "Investigation of Mexican affairs..." The hearings were held in 1919 and 1920 to establish a legal case against the Mexican government for damages they caused in the U.S. border areas.

Richard: You're going to love this.

Eduardo: In these federal documents, almost a century old, we make a discovery that will certainly interest Dedra. Dedra first I want to thank you for inviting me to be a part of this investigation. It's been a very fascinating journey.

I tell Dedra about Richard's' discovery in a Columbus newspaper showing that Lin's father had made the fob.

Dedra: That is really amazing! And I really like this last statement, "this little memorial will doubtless be much appreciated by those who love the town of tragic history".

Eduardo: But had Lin been there that night, and fled Villa's troops as he had told his neighbors? Richard's close reading of the government investigation into the Columbus raid turned up a startling piece of information. L.L. Burkhead was called to testify. Postmaster! No wonder why we couldn't find him in the railroad records. Lin's family had lived in Columbus during the raid and we can read about their escape in his father's own words.

Richard: "As soon as we found out from the hollering and the breaking of windows over in the corner drug store, which is just a block from me, I took my wife and boy..." there he has a son... "And went out over the back fence and got down in a ditch by the railroad embankment".

Dedra: "Oh now I can see it more clearly, I could just visualize what he said "followed that until we got up into a freight train, a freight train!"

Eduardo: There's one last piece that I want you to read about what happened, right here...



Dedra: "We remained in the caboose of the train until morning ...we could see in the dim light – the sun had gotten up –we could see the dust of the soldiers chasing the bandits down into Mexico." They actually saw the bandits!

Eduardo: So your neighbor was a witness to history, how does that make you feel about this watch fob now?"

Dedra: Ah it even holds more value to us, it's even more precious.

Eduardo: I want to thank you for asking me to be part of this investigation; it has been a wonderful experience.

Dedra: Really thank you for all the documentation that makes the story so real, this part of history that he actually lived. Thank you.

Eduardo: Immediately after the raid on Columbus, President Woodrow Wilson sent General Black Jack Pershing in search of Villa. The so called punitive expedition included the first use of U.S. air power and motorized vehicles, and jump started the career of a brilliant young lieutenant, George S. Patton. But Pershing and Patton could not find Villa. Many Mexicans saw Pershing as an invader, and helped the Villistas evade capture. Pershing was ordered back to Columbus in January of 1917, empty handed. Pancho Villa was assassinated in Mexico in July 1923. The chaos of coup attempts and uprisings that characterized the Mexican Revolution would continue for many more years. The six Villistas who were convicted and hung for the raid on Columbus are believed buried in unmarked graves on the outskirts of town.