

LAST MEAL

Based on the true story of the Bloody Benders

DR. PAUL A. IBBETSON

America's first serial killer family

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1 Present Day: The Investigation Begins

The smell of human decay hung in the air. No matter which way the wind blew the stench of death seemed to cling to every scent brought forth by the Kansas prairie. It was the first thing Detective Robert Johnson noticed as his horse began to climb what was rapidly

being called “Bender’s Mound.” Death was ahead of him, and if the reports were accurate, it would be something worse than he had ever seen in his hard fought life.

Johnson was a detective for the Clint Parker Security Agency. The man was thirty-five years old and had a muscled frame. His blond hair was complemented by a rugged face,

complete with two, thin knife scars, which ran down his left cheek. His eyes were piercingly blue and penetrating. His physical attributes highlighted his tenacious ability to finish the most daunting of tasks. Johnson was a “finisher.” He was what the esteemed Clint Parker called, “The best man to put on the trail of cold-blooded killers.” The ex-civil war soldier was fast with a gun

and deadly with a blade. More importantly, he encompassed both the deadly grit of a frontiersman with the cognitive abilities of what was being termed, “the modern day criminal investigator.” Most importantly, Johnson didn’t work for love of money. This set him apart from a great many men who carried a badge. He was not a slave to drink or any other vice, which

differentiated him from most of the rest.

Johnson, a highly effective deputy, had left a sheriff's position in Dodge City, Kansas to join Clint Parker five years previous, when the man had broken business relations with Alan Pinkerton. It was their combined, driven nature to succeed where others fail, which drew Parker and Johnson together. Clint Parker and Alan

Pinkerton together had founded the highly successful Pinkerton Detective Agency following their service together in the Union Army during the war. Both men had served as military intelligence and together they had created a special branch of spies, which collected critical intelligence on Confederate troop movements. When not in conflict with one another, they were a masterful team.

Together, they created information gathering techniques such as shadowing suspects, advanced surveillance, and working undercover using various alias names. The two had successfully thwarted an assassination attempt on President Abraham Lincoln in Baltimore, Maryland.

They had agreed that a formal organization should be created to protect

the President but it had not yet come to fruition when Lincoln was assassinated in the Ford Theatre. The President's death had strained their relationship, but it was Pinkerton's fruitless quest to kill or capture the train and bank robber Jesse James that had split their partnership.

Jesse James was an elusive rogue along with his gang of outlaws,

which required being dealt with. The Railroad was quick to hire the Pinkerton Detective agency, which was filled with former military men and had the slogan “we never sleep.” However, their usual efficiency was fruitless against a gentleman thief who had extensive ties to the local communities. James was akin to a modern day Robin Hood, and finally the Railroad stopped funding Pinkerton’s

attempts to catch the gang. Pinkerton, who was too prideful to relent, started spending company money in continued attempts to capture the robber. That was the end for Parker who took his company shares and went his own. There was no surprise that the Clink Parker Security Agency was created, or that both men would be become harsh competitors. It was in their blood. Since the split, the

battle between the two agencies had remained constant. Pinkerton had the money, the name, and the press. Parker had a handful of highly capable people, and they made a living but not much more. What the Clint Parker Security Agency needed was a golden moment, a media worthy event. Something to place them in the public consciousness. The Bender murders in Kansas could very

well be that moment. Sure, the Pinkerton Agency and every other bounty hunter for five states around would be attempting to collect the two-thousand dollar reward offered by Kansas Governor, Thomas Osborn. Notice of the reward was in the copy of the newspaper Johnson now carried, but the money wasn't all of it. If Clint Parker's men could make the capture, their

credibility would be near equal with their rival. In fact, the Pinkerton agency had made it that much easier for them.

Despite having three times as many men and extensive funds, the agency had over extended itself putting large amounts of assets into assisting the Spanish government quell a revolution in Cuba.

There was a real opportunity here, but it wouldn't last forever.

The teams of horses alongside the trail were an obvious precursor to the number of onlookers, which would be present at the top of the mound. To reach the mound itself required riding a two mile incline of dirt track commonly known as the Osage Trail. The trail, which went near the Bender Inn, was part of a much longer route. It had been used to forcibly move local Indians

south from the state to newly created Indian reservations in Oklahoma and Texas.

Now the trail was a fairly high traffic transit route for travelers moving across the state and beyond. Bender's Mound was unique for several reasons. Of course, in this area of southeast Kansas, any noticeable elevation from the common flat terrain was unique. But

this trail, which lead to Bender's Inn, was flanked on both sides by a tree row with a mix of medium sized hedge, hackberries and oaks. For the traveler moving across the state, the trees brought a welcomed bit of shade on what was mostly a tree-less Kansas plain. For Johnson, the trees had a bothersome connection to the dead bodies he was about to observe as his horse made the

apex.

At the top of the mound the road evened out, and after only a quarter mile, to the south, about one-hundred yards off the road was the Bender Inn, or at least what was left of it. Had it not been for the reports of mass murder, the farm would have looked very normal. Rest stops like these were common place. The small house was close enough for

the crudely written and misspelled sign that stated, “grocry” to be seen, clearly signifying that supplies could be acquired therein. The flip-side of the sign had the proper spelling “groceries” written in a fine hand.

Unfortunately, hundreds, no make that thousands of people now surrounded the property, including the house, which had been uprooted and moved twenty

five yards from its foundation. Pieces of the homestead had been destroyed during the move, and it was obvious to Johnson that onlookers were also starting to take pieces of the dwelling as souvenirs.

A makeshift hitching post had been set up by the local justice of the peace, George Majors. He served the nearby town of Cherryvale, which was about to be incorporated, and had a

Bender history of its own. Majors had designated the hitching post for law enforcement horses only, and a young boy was being paid to make sure nothing was stolen. The boy told Johnson that Constable Majors was in the orchard south of the home with the diggers. The “diggers” was a term that had new meaning on top of Bender’s Mound. The *Thayer Headlight* newspaper, which

was in Johnson's saddlebag, was over four days old. It stated that four bodies had been discovered in the orchard south of the main house and more digging was underway. The newspaper staff also questioned the missing status of their own editor as possibly tied to criminal events at the Bender Inn. It was in the orchard the first of the bodies had been located.

The newspaper had already identified several of the initially discovered dead. Bill McCrotty's body had been identified. The man had lived near Osage Mission and was known to a few locals, plus he had a very distinguishable tattoo on his left arm that read, "W.F. McCrotty" with a picture of the American Flag below the inscription. Ben Brown who had been in route from

Cedarvale to Chautauqua County had also been identified by family. Two additional unidentified male bodies had also been unearthed from shallow graves in the orchard and were awaiting identification.

George Majors knew Johnson was coming and met him near the orchard.

“It’s a damn mess out here.

Every day we unearth more misery.” He said as he spit a mouthful of tobacco, which shot out in a long, brown arc.

Majors was fifty-five years old and had the red nose of an enthusiastic drinker.

The summer heat was not agreeing with him and large beads of sweat poured from his beat-red face. He swabbed aggressively at his brow with a worn handkerchief.

The Constable had twenty-five men working shovels, and they were slowly expanding their perimeter in the orchard. As a crime scene, there was almost zero containment. Many of the locals were helping to keep most of the public from being directly under foot in the orchard but the Bender's farm had received national attention, and evidence was being trampled almost as soon as it

was discovered. Majors brought with him several documents, which had been wired through the Clint Parker Security Agency. Johnson would read everything his agency had amassed on the Benders from the newspaper in the town of Thayer and other sources. That was his next destination. The Bender trail was getting colder by the moment, but he had to see the crime scene, take it in, with all

his senses.

Majors advised him diggers had discovered the body of local doctor, William York. This discovery had inflamed the locals who held the doctor in high regard. Since the discovery, several lynch mobs had been formed and were already running wild in hopes of finding the killers. As bad as trigger happy farmers was the doctor's youngest

brother, Colonel Edwin York, from Ft. Scott who was on the war path for blood and had no intention of bringing the Benders to trial. Majors advised Johnson that the doctor's second brother, Alexander York, a sitting Kansas Senator had petitioned Governor Osborne to put up a bounty for the Benders. Despite giving anyone who could collect the reward a stake in

seeing the Benders brought to justice, Majors warned that the doctor's brother, Colonel Edwin York, would have no reluctance of running over anyone he felt got in the way of catching these criminals. Colonel York had also relinquished a sizable amount of his own personal fortune to hire men beyond the soldiers under his command. Johnson would soon be heading in their same

direction and he planned to arrest the Benders before Colonel York and his men could put them to a rope or worse.

After he had been briefed by the constable, and collected all the teletype communications, Johnson did what made him better than most detectives of the age; he stood back and fully observed the scene. He walked by the open graves and scrutinized the corpses despite some

hard looks from the crowd. He walked the Bender house, he checked the shed and barn, and did a cursory observation of a tunnel system below the house's foundation. Then, from different vantage points, he observed the farm from atop Bender's Mound. Everything he observed would be written down and he would refer to his notes again and again over the course of the investigation. One

thing became readily apparent. The Bender farm had been created to be a highly effective kill zone. As he had noticed from his approach to Bender's Mound, one could not see any activity from a distance. Even the hordes of people and the grave diggers were obscured by the apple orchard. Was this simply fortuitous for the Benders, or had they planted the orchard themselves?

Next, was this section of the Osage Trail. Because of the tree row, anyone coming through the trail from either direction north or south toward the Bender Inn would be blocked from seeing activity on the property until less than a quarter mile away. However, from the high ground of Bender mound, and Johnson had confirmed this on both sides of the property, one could see anyone

approaching from over five miles away. His military instincts began to kick in, and the value of this high ground had to have played a part in what happened here. He hoped the documents he carried would confirm the theories that were building in his mind.

Back toward the orchard screams arose, which tore Johnson from his thoughts. The screams came from

women and were followed by the shouting of men. The crowd, which had migrated to the trail side of the property started moving back towards the orchard. Something was going on.

Johnson followed behind the main surge of people and observed what was happening without being knocked about by the crowd. There were several rounds of wailing from the crowd, which

seemed to carry on the wind like a dark cloud. Whatever it was that had been discovered, it appeared to be the worst yet. Soon Johnson quietly made his way to the point of interest.

The disturbance was brought about by a newly discovered grave that held two bodies. The Loncher family, who had come in from out of state, were present, as were almost anyone who had

missing family members or friends from the last three years. The Loncher family identified the bodies immediately as George Loncher and his seven year-old daughter Mary Ann. George Loncher's body had been stripped, and he had been stabbed several times. Whatever had happened to him, it had been violent and more so than any of the discovered bodies so far. Until now, all the victims

had been adult males. All had skulls which had been crushed, and in the case where the bodies were well enough intact to properly view, all had had their throats slashed. Until the discovery of George Loncher, none of the victims had been stabbed.

Now the depths of the Bender atrocities would reach new heights—the killing of a child. By God's grace the

young girl had not been stripped, and she still wore a light blue dress and white stockings. A single black slipper was on her left foot, the other presumably still somewhere in the shallow grave. Her skin was porcelain white, and combined with her blonde hair, which still shined, seemed to take on the quality of a doll.

Johnson wondered if this was simply his mind trying to reject the reality of what

had been done to such an innocent. He quickly cleared his thoughts and observed the scene as an investigator.

The back of the girl's head had not been smashed and her throat had not been cut.

In fact, there were no visible marks upon her body from a cursory inspection.

Whatever had happened to this child was brought about by a process different from the others. However, the end result

had been the same, death and burial in a shallow grave. The Harmony Grove church attendees, who had been singing hymns all afternoon, had been on break but the new discovery brought them back with a new round of “Safe in the arms of Jesus.” Johnson had heard loose talk in the crowd earlier that day that Kate and her brother John Bender had been regular attendees to the church and that

Kate may have even taught Sunday school. The grand parents of the dead child soon made their way to the grave, and a new round of wailing began.

Johnson had seen enough.

The detective mounted his horse and prepared to go north to Thayer, when again another ruckus arose from behind him. Now, a body was being pulled from the property's well. He had

walked by the well several times without thinking about anything out of the ordinary. The boy who had been watching his horse had seen an object shining deep in the water and had gotten the attention of two nearby citizens who had hooked the body of a full grown male. From the greyish color of the man's skin and the bloated nature of his body, he had been partially submerged in

the water for most likely near on a month. The man's clothes were fancy and he was obviously someone of means, but in his state identification could take some time. A wave of vomiting swept through the crowd as the thick, putrid smell of rotting flesh hit the wind. More than a small number of onlookers had drunk from the water of the well throughout the day, which

brought more vomiting and renewed wailing.

My God, what really happened here? Johnson thought to himself as he left the newest revelation of carnage behind him for the trail.

2 The Train Robbery

The sun was starting to set and

normally he would have stopped for the night, had a meal, and waited until morning to continue. Travelling at night was a dangerous and often fool hardy action on the Kansas plains. While the threat was no longer Indian attacks, any injury could mean death, and the open prairie left most travelers on their own to fend for themselves. Johnson shook his head. This was exactly what made so

many people easy prey for the Benders. This family offered food and a few hours rest, shelter from the rain, security from unknown dangers. Stopping at the Bender Inn was akin to doing everything rational a person on the trail was taught to do.

It was 2:00 a.m. when Johnson's horse trotted into Thayer. The man's muscles were tired and he had a slight

headache. It wasn't a surprise. For the last day and a half he had been on a train and horse, with only a few hours on foot, and that was spent at the gruesome Bender farm. He hoped to get a solid meal before taking what would most likely be another train ride to Humboldt, Kansas. The Bender's wagon and half-starved horses had been confirmed abandoned just outside of the city of

Thayer. Meeting him at the town's train station was Jim Snoddy, a marshall from Ft. Scott, and Colonel C.J. Peckham. The two had collected the ticket agent's initial accounts of the Bender family boarding the Thayer train with tickets on the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston Railroad bound for [Humboldt](#). Johnson would interview ticket agent Jon Tinsdale who took the

Bender's fare and watched them board. If his story appeared valid, he would move onto the next leg of the quest—to find the Benders in Humboldt. It wouldn't take long for all the potential witness accounts to dry up, and then Johnson would be on his own. On most occasions, he worked best that way.

As happened often in high profile cases, witnesses were unreliable. The

Bender murders were now at the apex of its notoriety. Some would be attempting to profit from it and in the end, as was the case with Lincoln's murderer, if the Benders stayed on the run long, anyone seen near them would feel the pressure to forget what they saw. Thus was the case with Jon Tinsdale. The man had been interviewed many times, with the last being by the rabid Colonel Edwin

York and his growing posse, now numbering over seventy-five men. Had it not been for the marshall and Peckham, the colonel's lynch mob might have beaten the fifty-year-old train agent to death. As it was, the bruises on his cheeks and head were still swollen from the knocks he had taken three days previous. Tinsdale was just starting his day when he saw the three men waiting

for him inside the ticket office. His head sagged as he prepared himself for another grilling. This is how it often was. Any notoriety he might have felt early on was gone and now the man was most likely wishing he had never gotten involved at all. Johnson could read people instantly, and, more importantly, he knew how to deal with the people he read. Quietly, he sent the two other men

to the café and said he would meet with them shortly. Walking up slowly to Tinsdale, he extended his hand to the man and spoke in a kind voice.

“Mr. Tinsdale, I just want to thank you for doing your civic duty. I’m sorry if everyone doesn’t know and appreciate how important it is to get the facts on this killing in our state.”

The man was taken back by the

Johnson's words and his demeanor softened. Quietly and without aggression, Johnson had the ticket agent walk him through the description of the group who boarded the train to Humboldt. There was a strong, stocky man with black hair in his fifties. This had to be Pa Bender. He described a short, thick, woman of the same age with black hair and a sour disposition, no

doubt Ma Bender. Then there was a young man, maybe twenty-five years old with a light frame, brown hair, and child-like eyes. This was the description of John Bender Jr. Lastly, was Kate Bender. She was described as in her early twenties, pretty, and having a lovely smile. Johnson had no doubt it was the Benders who entered the train. Tinsdale swore their tickets were bound

for Humboldt. Where would they go from there, he would have to find out for himself.

It was here Johnson showed, once again, his advanced skills as an investigator. Having built a level of trust with the witness, he dug deeper. First, he asked Tinsdale what additional information Colonel York had asked during his interview, the interview that

had left him with bruises and cuts on his face.

“Not a blasted thing!” Tinsdale exclaimed, tentatively touching his swollen cheek before continuing, “That’s the whole messy thing of it. I would have told him anything he wanted to know and he wouldn’t have had to knock the tar out of me to get it! The man’s uncorked! His chickens have flown the coup! He just

wanted to know where them Benders was off to, and he was going to beat me a little no matter what!”

Johnson gave the man a dollar to get some salve for his face from the mercantile. Tinsdale’s face beamed with appreciation. Now it was time to attempt to gather information that maybe no one had collected.

In the same non-threatening tone,

Johnson inquired, “Mr. Tinsdale, clear your mind if you will, and think back to that day. Please tell me anything you saw, heard, heck even smelled with these folks. Tell me anything that may have seemed odd in any way.”

Tinsdale did what he was asked and soon the two men were talking again. This time Johnson was taking notes. When they were done, they shook

hands and the detective bought his own train ticket to Humboldt and collected a new set of messages from the teletype office. The detective met quickly with Snoddy and Peckham. They promised to keep an eye on Tinsdale and to do their best to look out for his welfare. The detective told them the ticket agent might very well end up being an important witness in the Bender's murder trial

should it someday take place.

The train left Thayer at 8:00 a.m. and began its steady trek to Humboldt. Johnson walked all the public cars and even looked through the storage compartments to see if any clues to the Benders might have been left behind. When nothing of importance was found, he spoke to the workers from the conductor to the line hands, and no one

remembered the Bender family. More than likely the family had stayed in a private car, away from the public.

Certainly their train ticket afforded them this option. One of the bits of private information Tinsdale had passed on was that the family that took this train were very wealthy. The ticket master said that the older man who purchased their tickets had a money roll he guessed had

to contain several thousands of dollars. Furthermore, being an employee that was accustomed to observing travelers carrying money said, the young man in the group had two front pockets full of what, in his experience, were most likely large cash rolls.

“Not safe traveling like that, but people do it all the time,” Tinsdale had told Johnson privately.

The detective had given Tinsdale another dollar to keep their private talk quiet should he be asked the same questions again. It appeared the Bender family had the means to go anywhere they wanted. He would have to be careful to consider all possible means of transportation open to these killers.

Heaven help any half-cocked bandit who attempted to take the Bender's money.

In the privacy of his own sleeper car, Johnson spread out the teletypes and other information he had collected on the Bender's background from the agency. He had been dispatched from Dodge City to the southeast portion of the state, and the Benders had been gone from the inn for at least two weeks. They could be on the other side of the planet by now. Time was a factor, to say the least. Many

were attempting to collect the Governor's reward, a bounty initiated by Dr. York's second brother, Alexander M. York, who served as a Kansas Senator.

The truth would be that few would actually examine the small details, which would inevitably lead to the Bender's capture. Johnson wanted to know as much about the family as possible. As he physically tracked them,

four additional men from the agency were collecting background information from places as close to the crime scene as Cherryvale, Kansas to as far as New York City, where at least a portion of the family may have come from.

Thumbing through the messages sent from his agency, it showed that on September 19, 1869 John Bender Sr. had purchased a 160 acre plot on the

northeast corner of section thirteen, range seventeen. Johnson looked at the plot on the county map. Next, John Bender Jr. purchased a 160 acre plot but chose not to get a normal rectangular plot next to his father. Instead, he chose an irregular plot one eighth of a mile wide and a mile long, all of it to the north of John Bender Sr.'s claim. Again, Johnson viewed it on the map, and an

idea formed in his mind. Was the unusual land plot for John Bender Jr.'s claim solely for the purpose of keeping new settlements from getting too close to where Bender Inn would be built and operated? What he did know was the closest neighbors on the county map were the Toll brothers' property three-quarters of a mile to the north, the Tyke cabin a mile to the south, and the

Brockman Trading post on the other side of the hill. Only two of the rooftops of the three structures from the neighboring properties could be seen from the heights of Bender mound. Johnson had to believe that the Benders had factored in their activities' visibility to their neighbors when they built their homestead.

Then there was the home itself.

Though the documentation was sparse here, it did appear that John Bender Sr. and John Bender Jr. made the first journey to Kansas without the wife and daughter. Johnson thumbed through the stack of papers to attempt to pin down the specifics but did not find anything other than receipts for the wood purchases made by the men at the Cherryvale Lumberyard. In hand written

notes the clerk at the lumberyard stated the men worked for months on the home, and they were on the land parcels well before the women arrived. It wasn't that strange for men to precede the women when families moved across the country but with the activities of the Benders', the detective didn't want to take anything for granted.

The father and son also made

several purchases from the Brockman Trading Post. Johnson scrutinized the receipts and a series of purchases caught his eye. The receipts of interest were several purchases for quick seeds. These were apple tree seeds, which grew and matured faster than traditional seeds.

Both apple trees and other fruit seedlings and seeds were purchase at a large rate and almost immediately from

the time the Bender men arrived. They had either created, or greatly bolstered, the orchard found near the Bender Inn. The seeds were very expensive and probably special ordered. Johnson took down some notes to send off in his next teletype to the agency for them to inquire if the men had also planted an orchard on John Bender Jr.'s property. It was probably nothing, but he included in his

teletype message for someone to scout the John Bender Jr. claim on the outside chance criminal activity may have taken place there. Johnson did not like to leave any stone unturned.

As interesting as the Bender's purchases were, so was what they bought very little of, crop seed. They had three-hundred and sixty acres between the two men, and they had

purchased only enough seed to plant about forty acres. From the Independence cattle auction receipts it showed they originally owned eight head of cattle: three Holstein milk cows, an Angus bull and four Angus cows. They later enlarged their herd by four heifers and most likely had lost two calves during the blizzard of '69. No matter how a person figured it, they had not

used the majority of their land for either farming or for cattle. This lack of land use should have caught people's attention. Had anyone ever inquired about this? Johnson wrote in his notes to follow up on this.

The train hit a bump which sent several papers that were in the detective's lap tumbling to the ground. He gathered them and then decided to

take a short break. His eye's burned, and his body was ready for a reprieve. After exiting the sleeper car he made his way to the train's bar and ordered himself a whiskey. The warm liquid burned its way down his throat. He was willing to allow himself one, maybe two more shots, but that was his limit. While a few drinks would loosen his tired muscles, he never allowed liquor to weaken his

mind or reflexes.

Some were saying the Benders were already out of the country. Johnson thought this to be unlikely. No, he couldn't rule anything out, but the evidence wasn't creating a picture that fit with a bunch that would cut and run quickly from a country as vast as America, and why would they? For all intents and purposes, they had collected

big in Kansas.

Tracing their expenditures and Johnson's own observations, Tinsdale's statement of the Benders being flush with cash made logical sense. Majors, the local constable from Cherryvale, had told the detective there were no horses left in the stable when the Benders departed. Even with the number of bodies that had been discovered so far,

the horses, wagons, and personal effects of the dead including cash would have been sizable. It just seemed they were too good at what they did to flee the country completely, unless retirement was their plan. Did killers ever retire?

In retrospect, the Benders really didn't need to farm to survive; killing people was bringing in more than enough revenue. Had their entire appearance as

an immigrant farm family making a few extra dollars with a makeshift inn been a full-fledged criminal front? It could not be ruled out.

Johnson had noted the Bender Inn was unusually sparse. Even though the house had been moved, it was basically intact when Johnson got on the scene and he looked it over carefully. There was a complete lack of hominess. It was as if

the family had never truly shared any normal experiences of day-to-day life there. It was a very cold place to walk through. No pictures on the walls, no books, nothing that showed the place to be more than a sparse location of business, or, maybe more aptly, a kill zone. Only one rug was present in the house and that one was completely utilitarian to cover a trap door under the

kitchen table. The full reasons behind the kitchen's trap door were still unknown but Johnson had his speculations, and they weren't pretty.

Johnson read through all the teletypes and the large stack of papers Constable Majors had provided. Using the abilities acquired from his training through the Clint Parker Security Agency he began to create a profile on John

Bender Sr. He would create a profile for each member of the family though it would be easier when he got more information on the men. After all, they were the leaders of the family, and were presumptively thought by everyone to be the actual killers. Now, there was no doubt that Ma Bender and her daughter Kate would also hang as accomplices if the group was caught, but that would be

mostly for shunning their Christian duty to expose the Bender men for their deeds. Even though no one had yet to prove in a court of law what had really transpired at the Bender Inn, Johnson was no fool. The women had to know what was happening around them and whether it was out of fear, or something else, they had remained silent. They were also as guilty as sin.

The train made a short stop in Humboldt, and here the decision of where to go next became more difficult. The detective contacted the train conductor and through talk and money convinced him to hold the train that would have left the station after a mere fifteen minutes.

First, he sent a lengthy message by way of the telegraph office, to Clint

Parker himself, the owner of the detective agency in New York. Johnson sent in his observations so far and requested information be collected through Majors in Cherryvale about any strange deaths in southeast Kansas before the Bender Inn was constructed. He also asked for the last location of the Bender family before arriving in Kansas. In addition, he asked about an orchard

being present on the John Bender Jr. property. From what he understood, no crops or cattle were present on the property and he had a theory that was growing about why that was, but it was something he was not ready to share yet.

Two ticket clerks claimed to have seen the Bender family at the Humboldt station. Ticket clerk, Ron Sparks, stated the family split into two

groups, with John Bender Jr. and Kate taking the [MK&T](#) train south to the terminus in [Red River County](#) near [Denison, Texas](#). John Bender Sr. and Ma Bender where reported to have bought the extension trip and stayed on the Humboldt train to Kansas City. Conversely, Harry Odelly said the entire family boarded the train south to Texas. The documentation was

inconclusive as four tickets had been purchased for trips in both directions.

Johnson used his conversation and observational abilities to make a critical decision. At the onset he learned that Colonel York had already interviewed both men and himself had gone towards Kansas City where John Bender Sr. and his wife were reported to have headed. With his posse now at numbers growing

every day, he had sent fifty men south toward Texas. These men would be on horseback and would no doubt take shortcuts from the train's full route to hit the station stops as quickly as possible. It's what most lawmen would do but most men weren't Robert Johnson. What Colonel York and his men didn't allow for was seeing any locations where the Benders might jump from the train.

Johnson would take the train ride now, no matter which direction he chose to go later, in an attempt to follow the Benders along their actual journey.

In Humboldt Johnson observed the Bender's use of money to attempt to misdirect some of the followers from their trail. For the tickets collectors, having been grilled over their story several times, along with the conflicts in

their tales, had created a personal animosity between the two and they couldn't even stay in the same room with each other. Both men said they had clearly seen what happened, and the other one was a liar.

Harry Odelly was a seventy-five-year-old Irishman and had worked for the railroad for twenty-nine years. Whether he was concerned about losing

his job at his advanced age or had a pre-existing heart condition, the man sweated profusely while being interviewed and was tremendously agitated. Johnson could only presume his tension level while in the presence of Colonel York and his thugs. On the other hand, Ron Sparks, a young man of about twenty years was excited about the investigation and very engaging.

Johnson utilized his detecting skills and observed the young man carefully before talking to him. Sparks was an orphan who at eighteen was given a job by the railroad partly because he had been abandoned on the train as a newborn and several of trainmen had an affinity for the then baby, now a young man in pursuit of employment. In addition, Sparks had lots

of energy and worked for the railroad's meager entrance wage. One thing was for sure, a person of his station could not afford the new outfit his employer stated he now wore to work. Even today, the young man while in average clothes wore a three-dollar hat, new boots, and from the smell of the face cologne that still lingered near his person, had received a high-end shave that morning

which often ran as much as thirty-five cents. Johnson surmised as a first level train employee, he probably made not a penny past twenty-five dollars a month. Sparks had recently come into money and it wasn't an inheritance.

Johnson separated the boy from his employer and interrogated the young man for three hours. He was using precious time he didn't have, but finding

the truth of whether or not the Benders had run in different directions was critical. The detective knew the questions he had to ask, and more importantly, how to ask them. Not once did he threaten violence, an obvious tactic that had been implemented by Colonel York, and one that was usually short sighted. From his knowledge in the field, he had learned people seldom

gave reliable information when being tortured. Smart men used facts and evidence to catch people in lies and break them without ever leaving a physical mark.

After three hours, Sparks had been forced to the truth. His new money had indeed been collected from a bribe of seventy-five dollars from John Bender Sr. He was instructed to tell

authorities the Benders had taken two trains when in fact the family had stayed together and were headed for Texas. The bribe was a literal fortune, but as he spoke, it appeared that the boy may have been influenced by the reported beauty of Kate Bender. It was clear by his testimony Sparks had instantly fallen in love with the girl, who promised to come back for him in a month if he held

up his part of the deal.

Sparks's deception was serious business and could be construed as aiding and abetting. To the crimes now attributed to the Benders, the young ticket agent could easily hang. This did not sit well with the detective. He was adept at judging people's character and Sparks was simply a love struck kid who had come across the wrong people

at the wrong time. The detective made a deal with the ticket agent, which he felt was both ethical and practical. He would not tell local law enforcement about the boy's false statements and after a month, the boy would contact both Jim Snoddy and Colonel C.J. Peckham and alter his account. He would say that after reflecting on the incident, he did not feel certain his recollection was

accurate. Johnson walked him through how to explain how the excitement over the incident had temporarily overwhelmed him. The boy was made to repeat every word. If done correctly, Sparks would avoid a hangman's noose, regardless if the Benders were, or were not, caught. In addition, Sparks agreed to anonymously send the other ticket agent, Harry Odelly, half of the remaining

Bender payoff money. This equaled twenty-five dollars and would go a long way to reduce the old man's tension over his ordeals of the past few weeks. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Johnson told the local authorities his interview with Sparks failed to turn up anything new and his decision to take the next train to Terminus in [Red River County](#) near [Denison, Texas](#) was just a

random choice.

The ticket for the MK&T, which was part of the Union Pacific Railroad was not cheap, but unlike half of Colonel York's men. Johnson was on the right trail. The train pulled out promptly at 2:30 p.m. and would work its way into Oklahoma by late that evening. Johnson would get at least three hours sleep in his private car before the evening meal.

The first full stop would be in Vinita, Oklahoma, and while the town was not much to look at, it had a teletype office where the detective hoped to get more information pertinent to the investigation. Traveling from one state to another was like entering a new world. The United States was getting smaller, and communications faster, but in Oklahoma most citizens and great

number of law enforcement wouldn't know much of anything about the Kansas murders. The further south they went, it would be more of the same.

Johnson took the downtime on the train to clean his weapons. He had acquired his Sharps rifle in 1862 when his skill as a sharp shooter was recognized by the Union Army. His aim was deadly and the Sharps rifle, which

held a .50 caliber 475 grain projectile, could drop a buffalo as effectively as it could a confederate soldier. The Civil War seemed to never leave Johnson's mind as it was here he learned the secret trade of observation, concealment and when need be, killing. These were skills that would later be further developed by the detective agency for the purpose of law enforcement. His rifle was a

weapon from the war but his revolver was a weapon of the future. He carried the new Colt Peacemaker. It was a .45 caliber single shot pistol that would become the official sidearm of the U.S. Army next year. His ability to procure this masterful piece of technology was a byproduct of his employer Clint Parker's past affiliation with the Army, and the usefulness of the agency in government

matters. Lastly, Johnson cleaned his bowie knife, which he had used twice in brawls in Dodge City. While the detective was deadly at long distances with the rifle, if need be, he could do the same at close range.

Johnson was dismayed to see there were no communications for him to receive at the Vinita office, other than additional money which he received

gratefully. He carried an unhealthy amount of cash with him at all times. The agency had long since trained their detectives that more information could be obtained through carefully crafted bribes and opportunistic purchases than through violence.

In McAlester and Atoka Johnson temporarily left the train and made casual inquiries in town. No one

matching the Bender's descriptions had acquired supplies of any kind from the locals. In fact, no one had seen them at all. Johnson had to keep looking.

Somewhere there had to be a person who held that special bit of information that would help him narrow in his search.

By 9:00 a.m. on the third day he had almost traversed the state of

Oklahoma. Johnson was asleep in his private car when the sound of gun fire made him jump from his fold-out bed. At first the shots sounded like hail hitting a metal roof top. It was nothing more than a *ting! ting! ting!* sound, which moved closer quickly until two bullets came crashing through the shuttered main window of the sleeper cab. The rounds landed three feet from Johnson, who

already had his hands on the Sharps rifle. The bullets entered the cab through the shutters, and along with the commotion taking place outside made it evident that some sort of siege was taking place. At least twenty-five men on horseback were racing toward the moving train. They all had rifles in hand, and all but two wore bandanas covering their faces. Johnson, who made it his

business to know all the outlaws who currently had bounties on their heads, quickly recognized the outlaws John Kenny and Don “cold-hand” Frange. The gang belonged to Kenny and they were also known as the Rio Grande Posse. Despite being only the second in command, Frange had actually killed three times as many men. The group was notorious as train robbers and cattle

rustlers in New Mexico, and their presence this far east was strange.

Johnson took aim from his sleeper car and shot a single rider, who was trailing the main group, off his horse. The action was moving quickly to the center of the train.

As was the case with long distance railroad travel, the mail cars were usually placed in the center of the

train. The passenger cars were toward the rear, followed by supply cars, which would carry lumber and cattle with the mail cars in the center with everything from letters to steam trunks of clothing all the way to the more precious items such as company payroll, and bank transfers of gold and coin. Coal cars would be near the main engine to fuel the entire system. Trains such as these

would have up to three large, steel safes, which could, at times, be stuffed to the brim with payroll currency of every sort.

In the heyday of Pinkerton's contract with the railroad the detective agency had utilized a myriad of crafty plans to thwart train robberies. They had mounted Gatling guns inside the mail cars, which could belch a deadly stream of bullets in seconds. They had filled

cattle cars full of armed detectives on horseback, and through this ingenuity had wiped out entire gangs at a time. Had it not been for the exorbitant amount of money Alan Pinkerton had managed to receive in contract to catch or kill the members of the James and Younger gang and his inability to deliver after being paid, this train might also have been armed with a Pinkerton defense.

Instead, the train had a meager response ready for such an attack. Johnson had noted four armed men, possibly ex-army, but most likely just railroad labor hands that had been handed a pistol or a rifle, who would ride with the money within the mail cars. There were probably two more men either deputized as “train police” or hired muscle somewhere on the train.

All-in-all it would be far from what was needed to stop the robbery.

End of this sample Kindle book.

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