

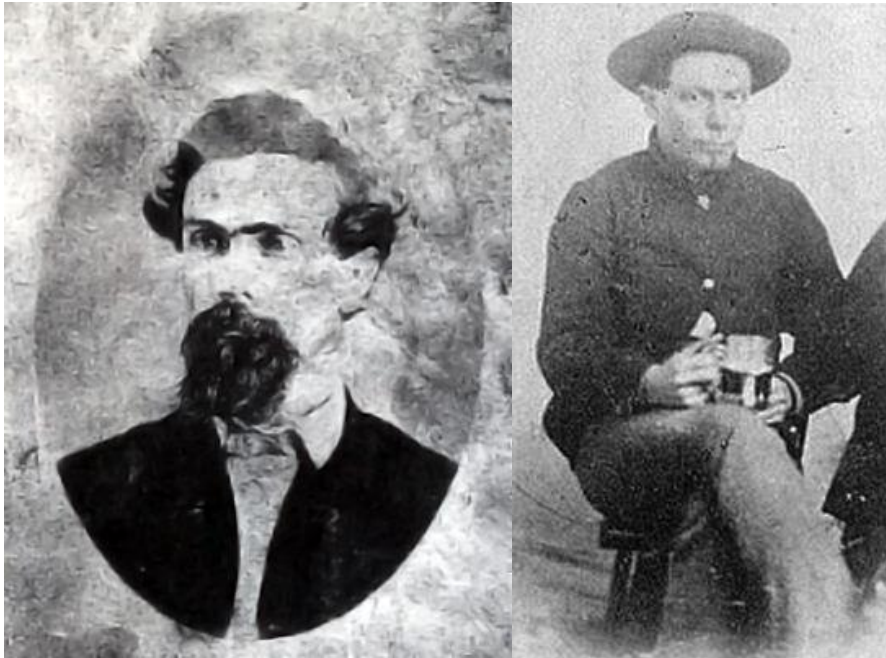
# OLD WEST STORIES

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## Reno Gang

Southern Indiana during the second half of the 1860s might not have been considered the Wild West, but it is doubtful that a California gold field or Kansas cow town could be found that was as woolly as Seymour, in Jackson County, Indiana, after the close of the Civil War. In this area arose a band of outlaws, the Reno Gang, that terrorized the Midwest and was believed to have committed the world's first peacetime train robbery. The robbery occurred on October 6, 1866, nearly seven years before the James-Younger Gang held up its first train at Adair, Iowa. The story of the Hoosier train-robbing brothers features brazen acts and international intrigue and has a grisly ending.

Renos had been in Indiana since 1813. That year, James Reno moved his family, including son Wilkinson, from the Salt River area of Kentucky to Jackson County. They settled on a farm near Rockford, just north of present-day Seymour. In 1835 Wilkinson took a wife, Julia Ann, and began raising a family on the 1,200-acre property. In 1837 his first son, Frank, was born, followed by John in 1838, Simeon ('Sim') in 1843, Clinton in 1847, William in 1848 and finally a daughter, Laura, in 1851.



**L to R: Frank Reno and John Reno**

As youths, the older Reno boys disliked school and resented their strict religious upbringing, which required hours of Bible study on Sundays. John Reno claimed in an 1879 autobiography that his criminal career began early when he and older brother Frank played crooked card games to bilk travelers passing on the road by their farm. John left home at age 11, stole a horse and headed for Louisville, Ky., and then on to New Orleans. He returned home a year later, but soon misappropriated some money from his parents and left the farm again for a short time.

Beginning in 1851, a series of mysterious fires began to break out in Rockford. Businesses and homes were set ablaze at night and sometimes even in broad daylight. During a seven-year period, almost the entire town was burned down, partially rebuilt and then burned again. No one ever discovered the identity of the arsonists, but popular rumor suggested that the Renos were involved. They had burned the town, the story went, so that they could buy the land at a reduced price and add to their holdings. These incinerations also helped the growing town of Seymour, founded in 1852 by Meedy W.

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Shields, a landowner who managed to convince the Ohio & Mississippi (O&M) Railroad to cross his property and intersect with the Jeffersonville, Madison & Indianapolis (JM&I) Railroad, thereby creating both a town and a railroad center.

Considered wealthy for the time, the Reno clan had both money and property, but that was not enough to hold the family together. In 1858 Wilkinson and Julia separated. Julia stayed on the farm with Simeon and Laura, while the elder Reno moved into Seymour. Ten years later, in early September, Julia died, willing her estate to Clinton and Laura. Wilkinson lived until 1877. John Reno later cited his parents' separation as the reason for his criminal behavior.

Shortly after the Civil War began, Frank Reno and his friend Frank Sparks (Photo at right) joined the Jackson County Volunteers. The oldest Reno boy was honorably mustered out in August 1861. In June 1861, John enlisted in the Indianapolis Grays, but deserted before the end of his enlistment and roamed the countryside for a time. William Reno's grave in the old city cemetery in Seymour has a soldier's marker showing he served in Company K, 140th Indiana Regiment, but no record has been found of his service. Frank and John — and perhaps Simeon, too — discovered that there was money to be made in a scheme called 'bounty jumping.' Prosperous draftees who wanted to avoid the war could hire someone else to go in their place. The Reno boys would accept the bounty and enlist in another's stead, only to desert later and repeat the process using another name. They would also act as brokers for others looking to avoid the draft and would collect a finder's fee for providing a replacement.



The Civil War was not yet over when John and Frank Reno returned to Rockford in 1864. Former bounty jumpers recruited by the Renos began to migrate into Jackson County along with other miscreants enlisted by John in his travels after deserting from the Federal Army. Assorted counterfeiters, thieves and robbers formed a criminal confederation under the leadership of the eldest Reno brothers, Frank and John. Sim eventually joined the gang, as did William, who was still a teenager. The second youngest brother, Clinton, and his sister, Laura, apparently never entered into the illegal activities of their siblings. 'Honest Clint,' as he was called, stayed in Jackson County while the Reno Gang operated. Circuit court records show he was arraigned in February 1880 for 'keeping a gaming house,' but there is no disposition listed for the case. He may have later migrated to Iowa and died there. Laura may not have broken the law, but she always stuck by her brothers. The Renos and their confederates made their headquarters in the burned-out buildings of Rockford and hid out in the dense thickets along the White River north of town. In late 1864, Frank and two gang members — Grant Wilson and a man named Dixon — robbed the post office and Gilbert's Store in nearby Jonesville and were shortly apprehended by U.S. marshals. They were arraigned, posted bond and were released with a trial date pending.

Things began to heat up in Jackson County in 1865 as post office robberies took place in Dudleytown and Seymour, along with several burglaries of businesses and a home invasion involving the wife of a Union soldier still off to war. Wilson, arrested for the Jonesville robberies, turned state's evidence, implicating Frank Reno. But he was murdered before he could testify, and Frank was later acquitted. A hotel in Seymour, the Rader House, became a haven for the Reno brothers and their henchmen, and many travelers who stayed there left penniless, their rooms burglarized. The July 27, 1865, issue of the Seymour Times issued a warning to visitors of the area to 'be wary of thieves and assassins that infest the place.' On August 3, the same paper ran an editorial that

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condemned lawlessness in Jackson County and called for vigilante action to restore order. 'Nothing but Lynch law will save the reputation of this place and its citizens,' declared editor Dr. J.R. Monroe.

The year 1866 began with the murder of a Rader House guest whose beheaded body was found floating in the White River. The Cortland post office was held up on January 11, and more murders followed, one each in February and July. In the months after the Civil War, southern Indiana had become a hotbed for Copperheads, Southern sympathizers who supported the reconstruction of the South. State elections were coming up on October 9, and anger against the Reno Gang was replaced by hatred for the Copperheads, who were thought to be importing voters from nearby Kentucky to help elect pro-South legislators. The time was ripe for a new depredation by the Renos, and they obliged. Their next crime was said to be unprecedented — the first peacetime express car robbery — although an argument can be made for an Ohio & Mississippi train robbery at North Bend, Ohio, on May 5, 1865, less than a month after Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House. Exactly who was responsible for that holdup has never been determined. In any case, the Reno brothers are generally credited with opening the door to the train robbery era, which featured Jesse and Frank James and later Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

At about 6:30 p.m. on October 6, 1866, an Ohio & Mississippi train left the depot at Seymour, slowly traveling east out of town. Three Reno Gang members — most likely John and Sim Reno, along with Frank Sparks — had boarded the train at the station. Once the train was a few miles out of town, the trio of men made their way from the coach, across the platform to the Adams Express Co. car, and forced their way inside. Messenger Elam Miller gave up his keys at gunpoint. The masked robbers opened the small local depot safe, which contained the packages picked up at the various stations en-route. They obtained, according to Jackson County Court records, 'one safe the value of Thirty Dollars, Three Canvas Bags of the value of One Dollar Each, Ten Thousand Dollars in Gold Coin and Thirty-Three Dollars in Bank Notes.' They attempted to open the larger through safe, containing valuables shipped from St. Louis, but failed, and the terrified messenger told the outlaws that he was unable to open it. The robbers slugged the messenger and then rolled the large safe to the door of the express car.

One of the gang then pulled the bell rope to signal the engineer to stop the train. As the train slowed, the gang rolled the Adams Express safe out the door, and shortly thereafter the robbers also stepped off the train. According to John Reno's autobiography, someone then yelled 'All right!' to the engineer, and the train picked up speed. The men backtracked to where they had left the safe and met with Frank Reno, William Reno and some other gang members who were holding the getaway horses. Try as they might, the gang could not pry open the larger safe, which some sources say held up to \$35,000 in gold.

The O&M route agent happened to be aboard the train. Alerted to the robbery, he stopped the train a short distance up the tracks from the crime site. As the train was not far from Seymour, the route agent returned to town and brought back some men aboard handcars; this prompted the gang to abandon the safe, which authorities later recovered. A passenger on the train, George Kinney, was a witness to the robbery that fateful night. He told officers that he could identify at least two of the 'holdups,' both suspects being members of the Reno Gang.

Unknown to the Renos, the Adams Express Co. was under the protection of the Pinkerton Detective Agency in Chicago. Shortly after the robbery, Allan Pinkerton was on the case and installed operatives in a Seymour saloon near the Rader House. Local officers arrested John and Sim Reno, along with Frank Sparks, for the train robbery, but on

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October 11 the accused made bail and were released. Shortly thereafter, robbery witness Kinney, a local resident, was cut down by gunfire when he answered a late-night knock at his door. Officers soon realized that without their eyewitness, the case they had against the Reno Gang would never hold up in court, and they dismissed the charges.

The year 1866 ended with the December 29 robbery, rape and murder of Marian Cutlor, who lived alone near the village of Clearspring, in western Jackson County. Three men, John Brooks, Jack Eastin and John Talley, were indicted for the heinous crime, arrested and remanded to the county jail in Brownstown. Brooks later confessed that he and Talley were the murderers. That crime, along with the freeing of the Reno Gang after the train robbery and the seeming inability of local lawmen to make cases against the Rockford-based criminals, had Jackson County residents in an uproar.

On the night of March 30, 1867, an event occurred that held forebodings for the future. In a clearing about a mile east of Brownstown, 250 to 300 men gathered to make sure the murderers of Marian Cutlor did not gain their freedom. They organized into an almost military like unit and rode into Brownstown in a column of twos, stopping in front of the county jail. Several men dismounted and battered down the jailhouse door with sledgehammers, and then a large group rushed into the jail. The mob took Brooks and Talley to a large tree on the courthouse lawn and hanged them from a stout limb. Lynch law had come to Jackson County, and the vigilantes clearly meant business.

On September 28, 1867, another O&M train was held up at almost the exact site as the first robbery. This copycat holdup at Seymour was at first thought to be the work of the Reno brothers but was later attributed to two local men, Walker (often seen as Walter) Hammond and Michael Colleran. They pulled off the heist without any great difficulty and escaped with as much as \$8,000. But then came plenty of trouble. Hammond apparently had eyes for a woman named Lettie Neyland, who John Reno claimed was his girl. The hot-tempered Reno tracked down Hammond, who was in Seymour trying to persuade the woman to leave the area with him and his newfound wealth. Reno gave Hammond a severe beating and then turned him over to the sheriff, telling the officer how Hammond had recently robbed the Adams Express car. In February 1868, Hammond and Colleran, a former O&M newspaper vendor, were indicted for robbery.

While the pair was lodged in the county jail at Brownstown, members of the Jackson County (or Southern Indiana) Vigilance Committee, also known as the Scarlet Mask Society because of the long red bandannas they wore, tried to break in, but they were kept at bay by the sheriff. Later, both train robbers were convicted and sent to the Indiana State Prison at Jeffersonville — Colleran for five years and Hammond for six.

Frank and John Reno decided it would be safer to make their next foray out of state. They headed to Missouri. On November 17, 1864, several gang members raided the treasurer's office at the Daviess County Courthouse, in Gallatin, Mo., and made off with some \$23,618 in cash and bonds. John Reno was positively identified as one of the robbers, and the Pinkertons were hot on his trail. On December 4, when John went to the Seymour railroad station, a half-dozen Pinkerton men reportedly hopped off a train and arrested him with the help of the Daviess County sheriff. However, the December 19 issue of the North Missourian said that Reno was arrested by 'Capt. Ballinger and Woodruff' of Daviess County in Indianapolis. In any case, once Reno was approached, officers whisked him off to Gallatin, where he stood trial for the treasury job. He pleaded guilty on January 18, 1868, as a lynch mob formed outside the courthouse. John Reno was sentenced to 25 years at the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. He had been the leader and brains of the Reno Gang, but older brother Frank and the others carried on without him. John would get out of prison in February 1878 and return to Seymour. By then, all his criminal brothers were dead. Seven years later he would be sentenced to three years in

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the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City for passing counterfeit bills. John Reno would die at his home in Seymour on January 31, 1895.

When Frank Reno took control of the gang after John was sent to prison in 1868, he figured it would be safer to strike out of state again, so he brought the boys west to Iowa. On February 18, 1868, the band robbed the Harrison County treasury office in Magnolia of at least \$14,000. During the following week, Frank and company looted the Louisa County and the Mills County treasury safes for a total of close to \$18,000. They collected another \$18,000 in late March from the Howard County treasury. Following this last success, Frank Reno and gang members Albert Perkins and Miles Ogle hid out in Council Bluffs, Iowa, at the home of a former outlaw, Michael Rogers. The Pinkertons traced the gang there, and Allan Pinkerton's brother William led a raid on the house, where the detectives recovered about \$14,000, which the outlaws had been trying to burn in a stove, and arrested the quartet. Incarcerated in the Sidney jail, Frank and the others broke a hole in the cell wall and escaped on April 1, 1868. Over the hole in the wall, written in chalk, were the words 'April Fool.' Shortly thereafter, Frank was back in Seymour and planning something even bigger.

The Reno Gang struck another train on May 22, 1868, this time in Marshfield, Ind., some 17 miles south of Seymour. The May 23 edition of the New Albany Ledger reported: 'The last train of the night on the Jefferson, Madison & Indianapolis Railroad left Jeffersonville, Indiana at 9:30 p.m. and proceeded north. The train stopped at a refueling station in Marshfield [near present-day Scottsburg] at about 11:00 p.m. to take on water and wood. As the engineer and fireman were seeing about the locomotive, they were waylaid by a gang of twelve men who moved out of the darkness of the densely wooded, swampy area. The railroad men were quickly overpowered, and the engine and Adams Express car uncoupled from the rest of the train and taken at full steam toward Seymour. Four of the robbers broke into the express car and were fired upon by the messenger. His shots were ineffective and he was badly beaten with pistols and crowbars, then thrown from the door of the car. He was found the next morning on the rail embankment barely alive.'

The outlaws on board took their time opening the Adams Express safes and were rewarded with an estimated \$96,000 in government bonds, cash and currency notes. They ordered the train halted about six miles south of Seymour, in the Muscatatuck River bottom, where the rest of the gang waited with horses to make good their escape. The loot was divided, and then the gang went into hiding. Frank Reno, Charlie Anderson, Albert Perkins, Michael Rogers and Miles Ogle headed for Windsor, Canada, just across the border from Detroit. Sim Reno and William Reno hid out in Indianapolis, where they liked to gamble.

The Renos were not involved when other members of their gang — John Moore, Henry Jerrell, Frank Sparks, Val (or Volney) Elliott, Charlie Roseberry and Theodore Clifton — held up an O&M train near Brownstown, early on July 10, 1868. Moore, a former railroad engineer, made a deal with O&M engineer James Flanders to assist the robbers for a share of the loot. The eastbound O&M train left Brownstown en-route to Seymour early that morning, having made an unscheduled stop there to take on water. Flanders, as instructed by Moore, had made sure the train stopped in Brownstown. Five robbers had boarded the train at the depot, and one now waited down the line with the horses. As planned, Moore replaced Flanders as engineer, and about 1 1/2 miles east of Brownstown, he stopped the train and uncoupled the locomotive and the Adams Express car from the rest of the train.

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Moore, Jerrell, Sparks, Elliott and Roseberry then forced their way into the express car, but unknown to them Flanders had informed railroad officials of the deal, and a trap had been set by the Pinkertons. A wild shootout ensued inside the express car, and all the gang members except Roseberry were wounded. The five shot-up bandits leaped from the train to hook up with Clifton, who held the horses. They all got away except for Elliott, who was slowed by his wounds and captured. While in jail, Elliott provided information that would lead lawmen to his partners. The next day, Clifton and Roseberry were arrested near Rockford and taken to the Seymour jail. On the night of July 20, all three bandits were taken by officers aboard an O&M train for a trip to the county jail in Brownstown. A man waving a red lantern stopped the train about three miles west of Seymour, and it was immediately surrounded by a large mob wearing scarlet masks. These Jackson County Vigilance Committee members seized the prisoners from their guards and hanged the trio from the same sturdy limb of a nearby beech.

The authorities traced Jerrell, Moore and Sparks to Coles County, where they were captured the day after their three comrades were lynched. They too were brought to Seymour by train, but the Pinkertons were afraid the same fate would befall the prisoners as the others and decided to move them in secret, by wagon, to Brownstown on the night of July 25. As the wagon and its passengers came near the same crossing where the O&M train had been stopped, it too was accosted by a large, red-masked group, and all three suspected robbers met 'Judge Lynch' on the limb of the same large beech tree. That spot is well known to this very day as 'Hangman's Crossing,' though the beech is no longer there. The two lynchings meant there was no need for a trial and no chance that the train robbers might get off lightly. Some people have suggested that Allan Pinkerton welcomed the lynchings, but whether he did or not, he knew his work wasn't done. The Renos must be punished. On July 27, the Pinkertons announced that they had located and arrested William and Sim Reno in their Indianapolis hideout. The two Renos were given a preliminary hearing in the Scott County seat of Lexington, where the militia was called out to prevent mob action after Laura Reno begged Indiana Governor Conrad Baker to protect her brothers. Afterward, Sim and William were taken 30 miles to the newer, sturdier jail in New Albany, Floyd County, Ind., to await trial.

Meanwhile, Frank Reno, Charlie Anderson and Albert Perkins were located by the Pinkertons in Windsor, a rough-and-tumble Canadian border town. Pinkerton operatives identified a saloon that was used as a gang hangout and eventually prevailed upon the Windsor police to arrest the three fugitives in early August 1868. When the extradition papers failed to appear, the men were released, but Reno and Anderson were again arrested in Canada on August 8. Allan Pinkerton and the Indiana authorities attempted to gain the extradition of the fugitive pair, and an international drama ensued. Pinkerton sent a formal letter, arrest warrants and descriptions of the gang's crimes to U.S. Secretary of State William Seward, whom Pinkerton knew from his Civil War days. Letters passed from the United States to Canada and Great Britain and back. When it seemed that Canadian Governor-General Viscount Monck was ready to give in and deliver the two outlaws, the Queen's Council demanded a letter of assurance from U.S. President Andrew Johnson that the gang members would receive protection from Indiana lynching parties. Finally, in October 1868, Frank Reno and Charlie Anderson were released to the custody of Allan Pinkerton.

Pinkerton brought his prisoners by steamer to Cleveland. From there, they took a train to Cincinnati and a steamer to Louisville, Ky. Next, Reno and Anderson were ferried across the Ohio River to New Albany on October 29. Floyd County Sheriff Thomas J. Fullenlove took custody of the pair and put them in jail with the other gang members. Each of them occupied an individual cell in the big stone jail, considered the strongest in

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southern Indiana. Now it remained to be seen whether the Reno Gang would face a lynch mob. 'We do not believe that there is any danger of the Jackson County Vigilance Committee extending their visit to New Albany,' said Sheriff Fullenlove. 'They will be sure to meet a hot reception.... These men were sent here for safekeeping and they will be safely kept if it is in the power of the authorities to do so.'

On the night of December 11, 1868, however, the vigilantes in their scarlet masks went into action. A Jefferson, Madison & Indianapolis train chugged out of the Seymour depot without lights shining or its bell and whistle sounding. The train carried a large group of vigilantes to Jeffersonville, arriving there after midnight. The vigilantes then commandeered another small train, which brought them to the Pearl Street Station in New Albany at about 3 a.m. on December 12.

The masked men, about 100 of them, formed into columns, led by squad leaders with coats turned inside out and numbers chalked on their backs. A man referred to as Number One started the march to the jail with the words 'Salus Populi Suprema Lex' ('The Wish of the People is the Supreme Law'). When the vigilantes, armed with revolvers and clubs, arrived at the jail, the leader pounded on the door. Jailer Luther Whitten opened the door, and he was quickly overpowered by the mob. Whitten managed to sound the alarm, waking Sheriff Fullenlove in the next room. Fullenlove tried to go for help but was shot in the arm by one of the mob. Two Floyd County commissioners, who were also spending the night in the jailhouse, were taken into custody along with the sheriff and his wife. Fullenlove refused to hand over the keys to the cells, but, after a detailed search, a member of the mob found the keys in the drawer of a washstand.

The vigilantes hurried to the iron door that led to the cellblock and there encountered another jailer, Thomas Matthews. After these men on a mission threatened to hang him with the prisoners, Matthews opened the door. One by one, the doors to the individual cells were opened and the terrified prisoners extracted. Frank Reno was first on the death list. A preknotted noose or halter was placed over his head, then secured to an iron pillar near the stairwell leading to the second-floor cells. The oldest Reno brother was then pushed from the landing. William, the youngest of the brothers, was next, and he was hanged beside Frank. When the vigilantes entered the cell of Sim Reno, he fought madly, but they overpowered him and strung him up in the southwest corner of the jail, his feet barely grazing the ground. It took him almost half an hour to strangle to death. Last was Charlie Anderson, who had to be hanged twice, as the first rope broke. The grisly action unfolded quickly, and the vigilantes left the jail by 5 a.m., taking one of the commissioners as a hostage. They reboarded the train at the foot of State Street and returned to Jeffersonville, then back to Seymour. The bodies of the three Reno brothers were turned over to their sister, Laura, and Frank Reno's widow, Sarah, and they were buried in Seymour.

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Reno supporters in Rockford threatened retaliation for the lynchings, and the triangular sign of the vigilantes was seen throughout Jackson County. But notices posted by the Southern Indiana Vigilance Committee, dated December 21, 1868, promising ‘a short shift and a hempen collar’ to those who would defy them, were taken to heart by outlaws. The blackest days in southern Indiana history finally came to an end. No vigilantes were ever identified. As for the bad Reno brothers — Frank, John, Simeon and William — they were later overshadowed by the James brothers and others, but they had left their mark on outlaw and railroad history.

This article was written by William Bell and originally appeared in the February 2004 issue of *Wild West*. For more great articles be sure to subscribe to *Wild West* magazine today!