

Pick and Sledge

Curious Stories from the American West

100 Years Ago Today: Wealthy Rancher Murdered, Buried Under Manure

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The mystery surrounding the disappearance of John Breuss, 58, wealthy Garfield county rancher, last November, was solved when his body was discovered buried four feet beneath a manure pile on his farm. Three Mexicans of the Silt district are in jail at Glenwood Springs charged with the man's murder.

John Breuss went missing from his Silt, Colorado ranch home on November 18, 1918. By late December of that year, Sheriff Charles W. Fravert of Garfield County, on suspicion that Breuss was dead, offered a \$250 reward for the

recovery of Breuss' body, and another \$250 for any information leading to the arrest of the recovery of Breuss' body, and another \$250 for any information leading to the arrest of the perpetrators of the alleged murder.

Breuss was known as one of the wealthiest ranchers in Garfield County at the time, and his murder made newspaper headlines. However, police were not making any headway in the case until a local Glenwood Springs jeweler named Tom Dever stepped in and cracked it wide open.

Dever had been asked to repair a 21-jewel Hamilton movement watch by Joe Sessions. When Sessions came to pick up the watch, Dever questioned him about its origin. Sessions told Dever that when he was working down in Silt, he traded Cruz(e) Romero a watch and a pair of gloves for the jeweled Hamilton watch. Hamilton watches were renown as 'The Watch of Railroad Accuracy', and they were famous for being the official wristwatch of the U.S. Army, as well as being used in the first ever American airmail service between Washington D.C. and New York.

The jeweler, Dever, suddenly realized that he had worked on the watch before. He checked his records and saw that he'd repaired it for the now-missing John Breuss in 1914. Dever and Sessions took the information to Sheriff Fravert who arrested Cruz Romero and his former roommate and coworker, Lee Martinez, the very next day.

Sheriff Fravert then rounded up Lee Martinez's brother, Tonio, from Monte Vista, CO, and questioned the three suspects. The Sheriff had also gathered information that Lee Martinez's young son was telling people that his father did not kill Breuss, but rather it was Cruz Romero who beat the 58-year-old rancher to death. During questioning, Fravert and Deputy W. G. Cardnell sweated Lee Martinez until he cracked. Martinez revealed that Romero killed Breuss and they buried the rancher beneath a pile of manure near his barn.

Sheriff Fravert and Deputy Cardnell then went out the Silt ranch and found Breuss' badly decomposed body right where Martinez said, buried beneath four feet of manure. The body was brought to a coroner's jury which ruled that Breuss was killed by Romero and the Martinez brothers.

Romero confessed that he had beaten Breuss to death, but he said he only did it out of self-defense after a fight over a horse trade. Lee Martinez admitted to helping Romero bury the body with manure. On March 8, 1919, Cruz Romero was found guilty and sentenced to death for the killing of John Breuss. Lee Martinez (whose surname in some articles is Martini), was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the murder. There is no mention of his brother, Tonio.

In June of 1919, Cruz Romero was given a 30-day stay of execution while Governor Shoup reviewed his case. Then, in August of the same year, Shoup commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.