



EL NEGRO BACA



Against All Odds

The histories of Colorado and New Mexico are inexorably linked. Both had been a Spanish territory since 1550. Together they were part of the Republic of Mexico, then the Republic of Texas. Colorado owed its first permanent non-Indian settlements to New Mexicans, when in 1851 Spanish-speaking residents of Taos and Santa Fe established communities just north of the present-day state border. In those years a good portion of southern Colorado was within New Mexico Territory.

Wild Bill Hickok, a man who by various accounts killed between 30 and 85 men, greatly enhanced his reputation by killing not a man, but a grizzly bear. It happened on Raton Pass, on the Colorado-New Mexico border. The year was 1860, and Hickok was driving stagecoaches over the Santa Fe Trail. He is reputed to have fought and killed a frothing grizzly on top of Raton Pass, armed only with a knife. In subsequent years Hickok would drift through New Mexico and Colorado Territories several times before his dramatic assassination in Deadwood, Dakota Territory, in 1876 (see my *Black Hills Believables* for strange details of Hickok's death).

But the Wild West's most heroic defense against the odds wasn't by a familiar white figure such as Hickok, Wyatt Earp, or Buffalo Bill. No partner, this title belongs to a largely forgotten Hispanic deputy sheriff named Elfego Baca. In 1884, Baca had volunteered to disperse a gang of unruly cowboys from Texas, New Mexico and Colorado who were shooting up the little town of Frisco, New Mexico Territory. What he didn't expect to find was 80 heavily armed and ill-tempered cowpokes who eventually cornered Baca in a tiny adobe hut. During a period of 38 hours spanning parts of three days, his 80 assailants fired an estimated 4,000 rounds in Baca's direction. When finally rescued by fellow lawmen, Baca had survived without a scratch—and by some accounts had managed to kill four of his assailants while wounding eight others.

Once on safe ground, Baca had some explaining to do. He was accused of not being a duly sworn deputy sheriff, but instead acting on his own initiative and authority. His sheriff's "badge" was only a crude facsimile.

Was Elfego Baca a "good guy" or a "bad guy?" A court proceeding would decide. One cowboy testified at trial that if he took a Colt .45 pistol, aimed it directly at Baca's chest from a foot away and fired, there would be absolutely no effect, as he believed that Baca was possessed of something "... from God or the devil." Maybe so. The door to the besieged adobe hut was taken into court as evidence, and that door alone contained 367 bullet holes! Baca was acquitted on grounds of self-defense.