



A Brief History of the Pajaro Property Protective Society: Vigilantism in the Pajaro Valley During 19th Century

By Phil Reader

PART I

INTRODUCTION

"No arrests: for nobody cares."

"Horse Stealing - Hardly a night passes in Pajaro that horse thieves do not visit the ranches around and carry off horses. Saturday night last about sixty head were stolen, from various ranches - a band of forty from one. The thieves turned loose the colts and poorer horses, and decamped with the balance. No arrests; for nobody cares." So lamented the *Pajaro Times* during the spring of 1864.

On another occasion a reporter for the Times wrote, "On the same night four horses were stolen in this neighborhood - two from Mr. Millard and two from William F. White. The telegraph wires were cut that night, and its fair to presume by the thieves" "There can be no doubt of the existence of a fearless and ingenious band of horse thieves in this vicinity. One thing is certain, should any of these rascals be caught, the citizens of this place will not want for the punishment inflicted by the tardy course of law."

On September 22, 1866 in the Times again, "HORSE THIEVES - The last few weeks there had been a perfect feast of horse stealing throughout Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. No arrests have yet been made, and no jury will ever have a chance to try such culprits when arrested."

And again, "The Pajaro Valley the past week has been the theater of robberies and murder - almost every day brings to light some new crime" "In this town we have two constables and two night watchmen; and the people demand of them vigilance. Such a thing as an arrest for crime is almost unheard of here."

And so it went throughout the 1850s and 1860s.

On September 3, 1866, the strangled body of William Roach, controversial ex-sheriff of Monterey county was found stuffed into a well near his ranch at Corralitos. Then on the night of September 25, 1869, Alex Wilkins, a popular Negro barber from Watsonville, was robbed and murdered as he rode home from a Fandango hall at Whisky Hill.

Upon reporting the Wilkins killing, the *Watsonville Pajaronian* remarked, "The officers know well who the assassins are, and they will probably be caught. We are informed that there are at present quite a number of desperate characters at Whisky Hill and in the settlement at the willows, on the San Jose road. Some means should be taken to break up that settlement and Whisky Hill as well." In spite of the sensational nature of the crimes, the prominence of the victims, and the ready assurances of the newspaper reporter, no action was ever taken by the authorities on either of these murders. No arrests were made, no trials held, and no justice meted out.

The above quotes quite readily attest to the ineptness of local law enforcement during the crucial early decades following the advent of statehood in 1850. The codification of statutes and the systems of jurisprudence were still in their formative stages as was the jurisdictional boundaries of municipalities. The elective office of County Sheriff was considered one of political patronage, a plum doled out by the patriarchal leaders of the currently reigning political party. A background in law enforcement was seldom a prerequisite for nomination to the office. The duties of the sheriff, at the time, included those of tax collector. While the salary was minimal, it could be augmented by the collection of taxes and fees of varying types of which the officer was allowed to keep a percentage. This percentage, in some circumstances, ranged upwards to 50%. While reporting and auditing procedures were limited or non-existent.

In the foothill counties of California where various mining taxes, including the infamous Foreign Miner's Tax, were levied, the "collector's fees" reached staggering proportion. It was a system ripe for plunder and the foundation of many a fortune was laid by these early sheriffs. Santa Cruz and Monterey counties were no exception. The quality of men who filled the position here can be assessed by the fact that no less than eight former sheriffs from these two counties would be either jailed or substantially fined as a result of cases stemming from malfeasance while in office.

When the occasional man possessing the double virtues of honesty and bravery did manage to find his way into the sheriffalty, he was quite often rendered ineffective by a shortage of manpower to assist him in accomplishing his duties. He was usually allowed but one part-time deputy and had to rely on a volunteer citizenry to make up the posses which had to be formed from time to time. This, in addition to the wide ranging geographical isolation of the region, did indeed make the establishment of a peaceful and orderly community a practical impossibility.

Nowhere was the absence of law and order more acutely felt than in the Pajaro Valley. Distant as it was from the county seats of Santa Cruz and Monterey, it sat unprotected from the marauding bands of outlaws and horse thieves who plied their trade along a broad corridor which ran down the coast between Alameda and Santa Barbara counties. As they passed through San Juan Bautista driving their herds of stolen stock before them, it was quite easy to sneak over the hills into Pajaro and pick up a few more prized horses or cattle from the ranches there. Another attraction in the valley was the village of Whisky Hill (now Freedom) where the fandango halls and brothels always welcomed these bandits.

During this time, Watsonville was a divided community. In the town itself, the commercial and business district was experiencing a period of rapid growth. Its American born constituency was at odds with the foreign born farmers, ranchers, and stockmen that lived in the outlying areas of the valley. The division was not only cultural, but also political and religious. The farmers for the most part, were Irish Catholics, who voted Democratic as a block; while the business element was both Protestant and Republican.

The two groups took their politics quite seriously. Elections, whether local or national, were hard fought emotionally charged affairs. The Civil War years, in particular, brought a number of extremely volatile issues to the forefront - including those of states rights and slavery - and once again, the community was polarized. The majority of the townspeople supported the Union while the Irish and southern-born farmers sided with the Confederacy. Time after time these two forces clashed for control over the reins of government and, on occasion, they stood on the brink of open warfare.

THE POLITICS OF DIVISION

Abraham Lincoln carried the presidential elections of 1860 and 1864 for the newly formed Republican Party and the ensuing great Civil War appeared to vindicate his platform assuring that party's domination of the American political landscape for the next generation. These events left the Democrats hopelessly splintered, thoroughly demoralized, and bearing a taint of disloyalty. With Lincoln's assassination in 1865, reconstruction of the nation was left to the radical Republicans in the legislature who moved quickly to consolidate their power.

On a local level, the war years saw a similar shift in power. Up to this point, Santa Cruz county had been solidly Democratic, but the 1856 election marked the beginning of the erosion of its influence. With the ranker of the early 1860s, party membership was sent into a tailspin; reaching an all-time low following the war. Yet a cadre of politically active old-line Democrats continued to wield a tremendous amount of power over local voters.

Perhaps the most controversial election held in Santa Cruz during the 19th century was the poll that was taken on November 5, 1869. At issue was the presidential race between General Ulysses S. Grant, hero of the late war, nominee of the Republican Party and former New York Governor Horatio Seymour, who ran under the Democratic banner. Strategist for the Seymour campaign knew that their only hope for victory was to focus public attention on the question of money and repayment of the war debt.

During the war, Lincoln's government had issued well over \$400 million in greenbacks and, at the war's end, much of this "new" currency was withdrawn from circulation. The Democrats now proposed the reissuing the notes, thereby encouraging inflation. This idea held great appeal for farmers and ranchers with long-term mortgages, who would likely to benefit from this "softening" of money. For their part, the Republicans worked to keep the passions of war alive. In a savage campaign, they waved the "bloody shirt" alleging wartime treason by all who had supported the Democratic Party.

The local press - consisting of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, the *Santa Cruz Weekly Times*, and the *Watsonville Pajaronian* - were all staunch Republican periodicals and, in a rare display of unity, they launched a series of scathing, well-orchestrated, emotionally based attacks upon the character of all local, state, and national Democratic candidates. One common ploy was to call into question the patriotism and loyalty of anyone supporting the opposition. These personal antagonisms bordered on slander and were the cause of a number of violent incidents, the foremost of which took place August 28, 1868 on Main Street in Watsonville.

For several months, Charles Cottle, editor of the *Pajaronian*, had been taking editorial pot-shots at Rev. O.P. Fitzgerald, the popular Democratic State Schools Superintendent. In mid-August, Fitzgerald arrived at Watsonville to attend the Teacher's Institute. At the conclusion of the meeting, "Old Fitz" adjointed to a nearby saloon for a round of drinks before catching a late train. Upon hearing of the superintendent's "indiscretion",

Cottle dashed off an editorial accusing Fitzgerald of "provoking the contempt of every decent man" for going "into a certain rum-hole in this town with a crowd of men and with them drink at the bar!" ... "this for a Methodist minister and a man who holds the position he does in our educational department."

"Think of this man, who has the education of the children of this great State in charge, lending his influence to the side of drunkenness, gambling, and of everything which whisky leads to! Spot him, good men! Watch him, fathers! Keep a firm eye on him, mothers! Pray for him, Christian associations!" the editor concluded his mocking treatise.

The "rum-hole" to which he was referring was the Temple Saloon, located in the Hildreth building on the corner of Main and Maple streets; its owner was Charlie O'Neal, a long time Watsonville resident and a functionary in the Democratic Party. O'Neal took great exception to the way Mr. Cottle had characterized his establishment, as well as the personal smears upon Fitzgerald.

A few days later, he caught the unsuspecting editor out on Main Street and decided to treat the miscreant to a dose of his own medicine - southern style. The barkeep administered such a sound thrashing to the wayward journalist that it became necessary for him to spend a few days in bed, far away from the rigorous demands of his lofty editorial post. This incident was, of course, widely reported and was most frequently alluded to as the extreme to which a Democrat would go to "force his mongrel political ideals upon his fellow man."

Another strategy employed by the Republicans on the local as well as national level was to accuse the Democrats of the wholesale issuing of forged naturalization papers to many of the new Irish and German immigrants who were flooding into the country during this time period. These bogus documents would allow the newcomers to register to vote in the presidential election. And, in spite of the fact that Grant and the Republicans were swept into office during the November balloting, many states and counties pressed on with their investigations into the alleged voter frauds. In Santa Cruz, twenty-three people were indicted by the Grand Jury on charges of naturalization fraud. One of these was Matt Tarpy, a rancher, and another leader in the local Democratic Party.

Their trials were held during the month of February, 1869, at the United States District Court in San Francisco with Judge Ogden Hoffman presiding. Tarpy's hearing became a show trial which made headlines all across the nation. Testimony, which the prosecution attempted to suppress, brought out the fact that "a \$5,000 fund had been collected by prominent Watsonville Republicans to insure that Tarpy was convicted." One witness, Mr. Thomas Monahan, stated under oath that he had been offered money to change his testimony.

The next day, the jury returned a verdict of innocent in the Tarpy case, this very same judgement would be rendered in all of the subsequent hearings. The one exception being the case against Isidore Morris, who was found guilty. But even that verdict was overturned upon appeal.

In all, the 1868 election, marked as it was with violence, bitterness, and deception, only served to heighten the division that already existed between the two groups. The Democrats emerged from another defeat, smarting and resentful of the vicious tactics which had been employed against them. And in the Pajaro Valley the farmers and stockmen, now led by Matt Tarpy, still faced the almost nightly onslaught of horse thieves and cattle rustlers. Alienated as they felt they were from the established legal and governmental resources, and disillusioned by the ineptness and corruption of law enforcement officials, they decided to take matters into their own hands.

PART II

MATT TARPY AND THE FOUNDING OF THE PAJARO PROPERTY PROTECTIVE SOCIETY

Matt Tarpy was born in 1826 to Patrick and Bridget Tarpy in the poverty-stricken bogs of County Mayo, Ireland. The great famine of the late 1840s left young Tarpy with no other choice but to abandon his homeland in favor of the gold fields of California. In the company of three of his brothers - Martin, David and John - he arrived in San Francisco during the fall of 1851 amid the excitement caused by the newly created Committee of Vigilance. The vigilantes were in the process of ridding the city of two organized gangs of hooligans known as the "Hounds", made up almost entirely of retired soldiers of Stevenson's New York Battalion, and the "Sidney Ducks", a band of criminals recently deported from Australia. This type of concerted action, in the face of an inept and anemic police department, made a lasting impression on the young Irishman.

After a few months in the northern mines, during which he managed to accumulate a small stake, Tarpy returned to San Francisco where he spent the following year as a produce broker in the Market Street district. In 1854, the brothers moved south to Santa Cruz county where they took up a pre-emption claim of 160 acres of land that was a part of the Rincon Rancho. They set up a lime quarrying operation which proved to be extremely successful, but trouble was quick to plague the Tarpy boys.

Their title to the land was challenged in a law suit which was to languish in the courts until July of 1875, when in a landmark decision, the judge ruled against the Tarpys. His finding nullified their pre-emption in favor of a claim filed by the former owners of the land who had been granted the rancho during the Mexican era. About the same time, an unfortunate shooting incident occurred at the quarry in which John and David Tarpy killed a tough ex-convict named William O'Hara in a gunfight. In spite of the fact that they were acquitted of any wrongdoing, this, and the loss of their land sent three of the brothers back to San Francisco. Only Matt was to remain in Santa Cruz county.

Undaunted, he began to buy up land in Rancho Carneros along the San Juan Road near San Miguel Canyon in the hills above the Pajaro Valley, where he established a large farm and cattle ranch. He then married Winifred Conway, also an Irish immigrant, whom he had met during his San Francisco days. Soon he had a family consisting of a wife and three young daughters. Tarpy, always politically active, involved himself in community affairs and gained a reputation as a well-known and fiery supporter of the Democratic Party.

Because his spread and those of his neighbors were so isolated, they became a favorite target for the gangs of horse thieves and cattle rustlers who infested the area, bivouacking in the nearby mountains. This harassment became so constant that the County Sheriff and Township Constables seldom bothered to investigate the steady stream of crime reports which flowed into their offices. Some of the ranchers began to accept the presence of these outlaws on the fringes of their land as an unavoidable evil which they would have to endure; but not so Matt Tarpy.

Boisterously decrying the incompetency of local law enforcement agents, he would outfit himself and brazenly follow these desperados into their mountain hideouts. His rate of success in retrieving stolen cattle and horses was so high that his fellow ranchers began to turn to him for protection in lieu of more legal authority. The local press, especially the *Pajaro Times*, praised him warmly for his efforts on behalf of the beleaguered ranchers.

In 1863, it was Tarpy, not the sheriff, who captured the two Indians who had brutally murdered Frank Williams, the landlord of the Mariposa House in Watsonville. When the Minor Gang rode into town and peddled a string of stolen horses to local farmers and businessmen, it was he and school teacher Seneca Carroll, who trailed them to Santa Clara county where they finally ran them to the ground. He captured the horse thief Francis Hedden and refused to accept the reward which was offered for his apprehension.

And so it went through the years, time and time again, Tarpy put his life on the line to protect himself and his neighbors from chicanery. Even a rough and tumble lawman like Sheriff Charlie Lincoln had to give Tarpy the due for his courage and bravery.

On the morning of February 10, 1870, Matt Tarpy awakened to find that during the night his remuda had been raided and several of his finest horses stolen. Within a matter of a few minutes, he armed himself and was on the trail of the missing animals, while their tracks were still fresh. This was by no means the first time that he had lost stock to horse thieves and it was certainly not the first time that he had set out in pursuit.

He followed the trail south through San Juan and Hollister, where at Paicines it joined the road to the New Idria Quicksilver Mine in southern San Benito county. It was a road that Tarpy knew well, for it led to the isolated Panoche and Vallecitos region where the outlaw gangs maintained their headquarters.

Upon reaching the Panoche, he came across the horses tied up in front of a small adobe near Panoche Creek. Several Mexicans, who sat quietly on the porch, bolted upright when Tarpy rode into view. They scattered into the rocks nearby and began shooting at him. He dove from his horse and opened fire with his Henry rifle. During the melee that followed one of the thieves was killed and two wounded. Several others succeeded in making their escape.

Tarpy, who emerged unscathed in the fight, gathered up all of the horses and rode back to Hollister bringing with him the body of the dead bandit. While relating his adventures to a gathered crowd, he recognized one among them as a member of the gang of horse thieves from the shoot-out. He went before a local Justice of the Peace, swore out a warrant for the fellows arrest and took his prisoner back to Pajaro for trial. Much to Tarpy's chagrin, the outlaw was released the following day for lack of evidence.

Cursing the state of affairs as they existed in the area, he rode into Watsonville to seek the counsel of his friend Justice Lucius Holbrook. The two men adjourned to the Temple Saloon and held an impromptu conference with owner Charlie O'Neal, who also had a ranch in the Pajaro Valley. It was decided that since they could no longer count on the Sheriff or the courts for protection against the lawlessness that prevailed in the region, it was high time for the farmers and stockmen to take some action of their own.

They placed a note in the Pajaronian advising the citizenry of a public meeting to be held on February 26, 1870 in the office of Justice Holbrook for the purpose of discussing the best means of assuring security against depredations which were becoming so commonplace. Much to everyone's surprise, upwards to one hundred people attended the meeting and even the newspapers sent reporters to cover the event.

It was decided by the majority present that a society for mutual protection and safety be founded to "restore peace and tranquility to this section of the state." It was to be called The Pajaro Property Protective Society. A Preamble stating the given purpose of the society was written as was a Constitution and By-laws.

Officers of the organization were to consist of a President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Door-keeper. There were sections in the by-laws dealing with membership eligibility which insisted as a prerequisite a potential member

be "reputed of good moral character, sober of habits, and a honorable calling or profession to obtain a living." Another article stated that any member suspected of being a spy for friend of the thieves "may be summarily dealt with."

Of the utmost importance was Section 4, detailing the "outside officers" of the association. This group consisted of a Captain and four Lieutenants, whose duty it was to capture, if possible, all persons stealing stock from any member of the society. It was these men who would voluntarily go into the field and, in the name of the society, do the actual fighting. Naturally enough, Matt Tarpy was appointed Captain and among his Lieutenants were Charlie O'Neal and Seneca Carroll, whose parents owned a large farm in San Miguel Canyon.

In all, eighty-three members were enrolled into the Society at this initial meeting. They included most of the farmers in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. Paramount among them were the Driscoll brothers, the Sheehy brothers, Edward Breen, William Casey, William F. White, Fred Therwachter, the Bothwell brothers, J.B.H. Cooper and Danny McCusker. This list proved that the farmer/rancher block in both counties were in solid support of the action taken by the society.

The *Watsonville Pajaronian* published a formal announcement of the creation of the society as well as excerpts from the constitution and by-laws. In reporting on the meeting, the editor issued a challenge to all community residents to become involved in the association stating that "we have reason to believe and expect that this is no wild mob, who will disgrace themselves and this locality by their accesses." Also published in the same issue was a long letter written by Matt Tarpy, as a member of the society, giving a history of the vigilante movement in California and stating the reasons for the creation of such an organization in the Monterey Bay region.

Reaction to the establishment of the Pajaro Property Protective Society was swift in coming. The local businessmen of the community clamored for the sheriff to take some action against Tarpy and the farmers before something "scandalous" happened. From north county, the editor of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* loudly lamented the fact that its neighbor to the south would deem it necessary to take such potentially illegal action in the name of self-protection. Meanwhile, around the bay at Monterey, the Monterey Republican chastised the people of the Pajaro Valley for allowing mob rule. Tarpy responded quickly to the condemnation, retorting that in the light of recent history, it was difficult for the Pajaro Property Protective Society to understand all of the criticism that was being leveled at them. He dismissed their critics as "as a bunch of hypocrites" and, in a long rambling letter to the editor of the *Castroville Argus*, he described the history of a number of movements which he labeled "precursors" of the Property Protection Society.

EARLY VIGILANTE ACTIVITIES IN THE MONTEREY BAY AREA

The cities existing along the shores of the Bay of Monterey had a long, although somewhat dubious, flirtation with vigilantism which dated back to the advent of American rule. Under Spain and Mexico, the region was nearly crime free. Murder was almost unheard of, with the obvious exception of the killing of Padre Andreas Quintana by a group of Indians in 1812; and even this was a reaction to the friar's innate cruelty. The gregarious and open lifestyle of the leisure-loving peoples of Alta California so typified by the code of hospitality almost eliminated crimes against person and property, although there was the occasional theft of a horse or steer.

With the arrival of Americans and Europeans, the instances of violence and other forms of criminality suddenly soared. After statehood, homicide, robbery, and grand larceny became quite commonplace. Between 1850 and 1853, there were more than forty unsolved murders in the area and this fact alone should be enough to exemplify the hapless state of affairs which existed locally. But when you add to this the fact that the first two sheriffs and one former county judge were indicted by the Grand Jury for crimes ranging from robbery to grand larceny, the situation reaches a critical stage. This set of circumstances gave rise to a vigilance committee which pre-dates, by a few months, the much publicized committee in San Francisco.

By the spring of 1851, organized gangs of horse thieves and cattle rustlers had stationed themselves in the hills around Monterey and the bordering Salinas Valley. They were carrying off almost one hundred head of stock per night and were never reticent about robbing and killing a traveler in this isolated region. The predicament was such that the citizenry petitioned the California legislature to take some action to relieve them from this virtual state of siege.

To this end, the government authorized \$9,000 to mount and arm a company of men to clean out the nests of these desperados. Selim E. Woodworth, former State Senator from Monterey was appointed as commander of the group which was called the California Guards. In early April, 1851, they took to the field on a march that carried them north as far as Martinez and to Tulare Lake in the south. But their adventure proved worthless, resulting in only three arrests and one conviction. The company was quickly disbanded amid accusations that Woodworth had managed to pocket most of the state's money.

During this time, however, robberies and killings continued on at the same unabated pace. On June 8, 1851, John Caldwell, the highly esteemed mail rider, who carried the express between Monterey and Los Angeles, was brutally murdered at a point in the lower Salinas Valley. The nature of the crime so infuriated the citizenry that a party of volunteers set out in pursuit of the murderers, who were believed to be part of a gang who had been terrorizing the region. Near San Luis Obispo, they captured a group of desperados that included Solomon Pico, brother of Andreas Pico, Domingo Hernandez, Cecilia Masa, and William Otis Hall, an American.

They were tried at a "people's court" and were sentenced to be hung. However, before the wishes of the court could be carried out, the civil authorities came forward and rescued the prisoners. Masa was discharged, and Pico, because of his brother's standing in the community, was freed on bail and quickly fled the country. Domingo Hernandez was released upon the intercession of a priest, so that only Otis Hall remained in custody.

The actions of the authorities so angered the people, that on the night of August 9th, a group of them, wearing masks and cloaks, broke into the jail, bound up the jailer and proceeded to drag the prisoner from his cell. They tied a rope around his neck and looped the end of it around the bars of the jailhouse door. Pulling up on the rope, they drew him hard up to the door until he died of strangulation. In this manner, William Otis Hall became the first known victim of a lynch mob in the central coast region.

A flurry of such activities was quick to follow, including, in 1856, the hanging of three Indians who were suspects in the murders of Francois Picart and A. Mellon in the Carmel Valley. Also in 1856, two brothers, Juan and Jose Alvitre, both hard cases who had served time at San Quentin, died at the hands of the vigilance committee in Monterey. The following year, the infamous Anastacio Garcia was found hanging from the beams in the same cell where Otis Hall had met his fate five years earlier. The lynchings continued on into the next decade with the executions of Carmel Indian Gregoria, who admitted shooting John Martin in the valley

on January 6, 1864, and Juan Valenzuela for the murder of Natividad store keeper Frank Johnson during the month of September, 1866.

Meanwhile, the people of Santa Cruz were busy enforcing the code of "Judge Lynch" in that once placid community. The first to fall to the vigilante's rope was none other than Domingo Hernandez, the bandido who had managed to escape a similar fate in Monterey. Hernandez and a notorious character named Capistrano Lopez, together with a third Mexican, were caught in the possession of stolen horses and clapped into the jail on Mission Hill. On the night of July 20, 1852, a group of thirty men took them from their hapless jailer and hung them up before an approving citizenry.

The vigilance committee next marched on the afternoon of August 17, 1853. Their victim on this occasion was John Clare, who admitted ambushing Hungarian fisherman Andrew Cracovich the previous day in petty dispute over ownership of some fishing nets. Once again the mob smashed their way into the jail and unceremoniously lynched Clare on a makeshift gallows which they had hastily built on the very spot where the murder had occurred.

Sometime later a group ambiguously labeling itself the "Settlers' League" sprang into existence. Among its leaders were William Blackburn and Andrew Jackson Sloan, both known to have been active participants in the Santa Cruz lynchings. Although the group vehemently denied being a vigilance committee, there were those, including law enforcement officials, who expressed grave doubts as to the veracity of their claim.

After this the center of vigilante activities shifted to Watsonville, a community already racked by dissension and division. Tension between the native Spanish and the newly arrived Americans had always ran high and the presence of the bandido stronghold at Whisky Hill just two miles from the center of town kept both sides on edge. Into this star-crossed scene came a shadowy figure by the name of Arnold Theilheaver and following in his wake was violence and death.

Theilheaver, a native of Georgia, appeared in Watsonville in 1853 from El Dorado County, where he had taken part in numerous lynchings around the northern mines. He was an avowed racist who had developed a particular hatred for "greasers and Indians." Upon arriving in the Pajaro Valley, he opened a saloon and trading goods store on Main Street (then called Pajaro Street). He managed to get himself appointed postmaster and immediately got into trouble with the postal department by destroying all abolitionist literature and newspapers that crossed his desk. His saloon became the gathering place for a group of transient toughs which formed the nucleus of a local vigilance committee.

They began their work on the night of June 14, 1856 with an unnamed Indian who was accused of killing a Mexican during a drunken fight in a dive on the Monterey side of the river. The terrified prisoner was dragged out of the hotel room where he was being kept and within minutes, the mob left his lifeless body hanging from a strut on the old Pajaro bridge.

At the time, the village of Pajaro consisted of a motley collection of makeshift shacks located among the willows on the sandy banks of the river. In reality they were saloons and brothels which pandered to the Indians of the Pajaro rancheria and the vaqueros from the Bolsa and Carneros ranchos.

Living in one of these hovels was a ruffian named Juan Salazar, who was formerly a member of the outlaw gang led by the legendary Joaquin Murrieta, the scourge of the mother lode. Salazar was not the leader of his own band of horse thieves who, when they were not out on the trail, could be found drinking and gambling in

the taverns of Pajaro and Whisky Hill. On July 6, 1856, a row took place between a group Indians and Salazar's gang. During the fighting, no less than six or seven of the combatants were injured, and one, Sacramento Valenzuela, died of stab wounds inflicted by Juan Salazar. By the time word of the melee reached Watsonville and Theilheaver could assemble his hooligans to march on Pajaro, Salazar and his band were safely hidden away in a camp further up the river.

The rest of the summer passed quietly enough as an uneasy peace settled over the valley, broken only occasionally by the report of a stray pistol shot resounding from Whisky Hill. The only cause for excitement was in politics with a hotly contested presidential race between Buchanan, Fremont, and Fillmore which featured the rise of the American Party. The "Know-Nothings", as they were called, found willing converts among the whites in Watsonville, including Theilheaver and his group. But in October, just a few days before the election, all hell broke loose and there occurred one of the most violent incidents in the history of Watsonville.

It began on October 7th, when a number of horses were plundered from the ranch of Isaac and Charles Williams which was located on the Pajaro. Rounding up a number of others, including vigilante leader Theilheaver, they set out in pursuit, following a trail that the outlaws left behind in the mud. Upon arriving at a ranch beyond San Luis Obispo, they found the horses in the possession of a farmer, who said that he had bought them from a party of Spaniards led by none other than Juan Salazar.

After taking possession of the stock, they turned homeward, stopping for the night at Soledad. In the morning, they were informed that the Salazar gang had stolen some horses in that vicinity and were last seen heading up the road to Pajaro. Back in Watsonville, they met a group of men who were on their way to round up a group of horse thieves who were seen sneaking into the valley earlier that day.

Joining forces, the men rode out to the bandit's camp which was located on the river a couple of miles south of town. It was 2 o'clock in the morning when they arrived at the camp and quickly surrounded the cabin where the outlaws were holed up. Upon entering, they found three men hiding therein, one of them was Juan Salazar. All three were taken prisoner and marched back toward Watsonville. As they were crossing the river, one of the men broke away and made a dash for the willows. The vigilantes opened fire on him and heard him splash in the water - taking him for dead, they pressed on. A little further along, near the Harrison ranch, a second prisoner, Juan Salazar, made a break for freedom by dropping into a patch of mustard weed and scurried away. He, too, was shot down.

Fearing a third attempted escape, they lashed the remaining captive to his saddle and blindfolded him while one of the vigilantes led his horse. In this manner, they continued on until they reached the outskirts of town where the group stopped to water their horses. While doing so, the third man loosened his bonds and slid into the water in an escape attempt. He was immediately caught in a deadly hail of gunfire and floated off down the river. Afterwards, the mob proceeded to Watsonville and set up a temporary headquarters at the Bowling Alley where they spent the remainder of the night.

About six o'clock, the following morning a lookout spotted a number of Spanish Californios riding through town, passing along Main Street. The Americans surrounded them with guns drawn and ordered them to stop.

Suddenly a running battle broke out between the two groups with a couple of dozen shots being exchanged. The Californians split up, with some retreating back into Pajaro, while others, including a couple who were wounded, galloped on down the road leading to Santa Cruz. The vigilantes mounted up and followed after

those who had fled across the river in the direction of Monterey. After an unsuccessful chase of several miles, they turned back to Watsonville empty handed.

Along the way, they met three Spaniards and, considering them suspicious looking, placed them under arrest and brought them into town under guard. After a close examination, the three were released because no one would prefer charges against them.

The mob now turned their attention toward the two Californios who had taken the Santa Cruz road. A couple of miles out of town, they came to a small shanty at the edge of a gully on the San Andreas ranch. Tied to a tree out front was a horse still saddled up and slick with sweat. The animal was bleeding from a wound near the top of its neck.

Drawing their firearms, the men surrounded the house and broke through the front door. Inside, they found a lone man crouching in the shadow of the fireplace. He was tied up securely and the shack was searched for weapons. A pistol and a knife were discovered hidden under a pile of blankets. Upon examination, it was found that the revolver had recently been fired. When questioned, the prisoner, who gave his name as Castro, said that he had spent three shots from the weapon while out hunting for game earlier that morning. A rope was knotted around the man's neck and he was forced to march to Watsonville. When they arrived, the prisoner was taken to the plaza, bound to the liberty pole, and word was sent out for a number of citizens to be impaneled as a jury.

The "trial" was convened in a room at the Bowling Alley and as the proceedings went on, a group of prominent local Spaniards came in to observe the hearing. Suddenly Dr. H. G. Whitlock, a visitor from San Juan Bautista, stood up and assailed the "court", calling the whole trial a farce. He questioned the jury's ability to try the case in an impartial manner and began to argue with the mob leaders. One of the town constables, who had been standing in the back of the room, took advantage of the interruption and seized Castro, marching him away to jail.

The following morning, he was released because no proof could be offered tying him to any crime. But the mob, which was still milling around the streets of Watsonville, captured him again and quickly convened another trial. Upon hearing this, a group of Spaniards assembled in front of the Bowling Alley and threatened action.

All of the sudden, Castro bolted from the room and ran out into a field where the Spaniards stood. The Americans followed after him with their guns drawn. During the ensuing pitched battle, over one hundred shots were exchanged by the two opposing groups as they surged back and forth across the field, grappling for the prisoner. Finally, the Americans managed to recapture Castro and hustled him down to the river. After allowing him a minute to smoke a cigarette, they tied a noose around his neck and hanged him from a branch of a nearby tree as a deputy sheriff and two constables looked on.

In spite of the fact that the names of the leaders were well known, no action was ever taken against any member of the lynch mob. Such was the temper of the times.

For the next several months, the vigilantes continued their stranglehold over the valley and proceeded to bully and terrorize any Californio or Indian who happened to blunder into their sights, and it appears that they did so with the tacit approval of the law. But in the spring of 1857, Arnold Theilheaver and his mob crossed over the line of acceptance by lynching an American.

It had long been a practice of the poor Spaniards of Pajaro village to do their laundry by setting up a washing platform among the rocks in the swift running river. Afterwards, they would stretch their clean clothing on drying lines attached to posts which were placed in the side of the sandy embankment. Each family staked out its section of the stream and was expected to honor the territory of his neighbors.

That spring, there appeared a new face among the inhabitants of the little shantytown. He was an American and was known simply as Dean. It was said that he was the rebel son of a well-known preacher in the Los Angeles area and he brought with him an Indian squaw, who lived with him as his wife. In due time, Dean set up a washing platform for her amid those of the others.

On May 14, 1857, the woman set out to do her laundry. Upon reaching the river, she noticed that someone had placed their clothing on her line to dry. She carefully folded the intruder's washing and set them aside in a pile. Before long, the owner of the clothing, Mrs. Manuel Pombar, returned and a quarrel ensued. As fate would have it, both women appealed to their husbands and friends to help decide the dispute.

The following morning Dean met with a party of four or five Spaniards from the Pombar family and angry words quickly turned into violence. One of the Pombars attempted to lasso Dean, who managed to escape. He went into town and borrowed a shotgun vowing to "clean out the Greasers."

The next morning found him back down at the river attempting to parley with the elder members of the clan. Once again he was attacked with a lariat in the hands of Manuel Pombar. Both men were armed and both went for their guns. Several shots were exchanged with one passing through Pombar's body, while Dean was hit in the arm and side. The American's wounds were superficial, while Pombar's was more serious and for a time it, was not known whether he would survive.

Dean retreated to Watsonville where he was later arrested and placed in jail, pending an investigation. At a hearing on the incident, a coroner's jury bound Dean over for trial on a charge of assault to commit murder, while they kept an eye on Pombar's condition.

Meanwhile, a group of Spaniards taunted Theilheaver and his men, saying that if it was one of their countrymen who had shot an American, the vigilantes would have immediately lynched the miscreant, but since it was a yankee who did the shooting, they let him go.

The haranguing had the desired effect because that night around midnight, about twenty men, masked and fully armed, broke open the room where Dean was being held and took him from the Constables who were on guard. They dragged the poor wretch down Main Street and hung him from a sign post which extended across the alley from Theilheaver's saloon.

The death of young Dean disgusted the majority of the townspeople and they loudly repudiated the action. The next day it was learned that Manuel Pombar's wound was not as serious as first thought and the doctors attending him stated that his recovery should be quick.

This development made the rash act of the vigilantes even more revolting, and coupling this with the fact that it was an American who had been lynched prompted the citizenry into taking action themselves. A large body of men marched on Theilheaver's barroom, put it to the torch and stood by watching as it burned to the ground, all the while preventing anyone from attempting to extinguish the flames. Declaring that it was time to "clean out the nest of varmints," they sent word to Theilheaver that he was no longer welcome in the Pajaro Valley.

Quick to take a hint, the Georgian sifted through the ashes of his ruined business, loaded up what little remained, and disappeared from California. He would later surface as a line officer with a Confederate cavalry unit during the Civil War.

For a short time, peace reigned in the valley, but by the early 1860s, the marauding bands of rustlers and horse thieves had returned to plague the ranchers and farmers of the area. It is estimated that no less than \$20,000 worth of stock had been pilfered during the first three years of the decade. The local press began to call for the organization of a self-protection society to do battle with these outlaws.

In December of 1863, such a society was formed, adopting the motto, "The rifle the judge, the ball the decision", but it died abornin' and took no action to stop the depredations. The following February, farmer Peter Zills and shopkeeper Moses Morris organized the "Whisky Hill Citizens Protection Committee" in an attempt to uphold law and order in that beleaguered community, but it too came to naught.

Following the Civil War crimes continued unabated and homicide became quite commonplace. Although the murders of William Roach and Alex Wilkins shocked the community to its foundations, the law proved unable, and on some occasions, unwilling to effectively deal with the situation. The mountains around the Pajaro Valley were again infested with horse thieves and no one dared enter Whisky Hill unless they were heavily armed. Since the residents of the outlying areas lived beyond the reach of the law, they faced the same old predicament of having to go it alone.

PART III

THE ACTIONS OF THE PAJARO PROPERTY PROTECTIVE SOCIETY

The advent of the Pajaro Property Protective Society on February 26, 1870, marked the beginning of a year long frenzy of vigilante activity, which was to shock and outrage that section of the citizenry which dwelt in the town of Watsonville. But to the hardworking ranchers and stockmen of the valley, it gave the cause for rejoicing because it relieved them of the constant fear for their safety, the safety of their families, and that of their livestock. For Matt Tarpy, Charlie O'Neal and the others, however, it was a troubled time that found them tired and weary from untold hours in the saddle defending the interests of the society's members from the depredations of one outlaw or another. Both men proved themselves worthy of the trust which had been placed in them and exhibited nothing but bravery and valor under fire.

It began interestingly enough on the very night that most of the farmers were in Watsonville attending the organizational meeting. While they voted on the constitution and by-laws of the protective society, a bandido named Francisco Redondo was busily helping himself to several prize horses from the corral on a small spread in the southern end of the valley. As it turned out the ranch belonged to none other than Charlie O'Neal, who would emerge as one of the Lieutenants under Matt Tarpy, who was charged with apprehending those desperados who ventured into the area.

Redondo, who had already served a term at San Quentin for rustling cattle in Tuolumne county, took three horses from O'Neal's and several from other ranches and drove them down to San Luis Obispo where he sold them off. The rancher who had bought them became suspicious of the transaction and wired Watsonville with a description of the animals. Before long O'Neal, Tarpy and four other men were on their way south to reclaim

the horses. They got a detailed description of the miscreant and set off back to Watsonville scouring the hills along the way.

The party overtook Redondo at an isolated spot in San Miguel Canyon and ordered him to dismount. Matt Tarpy rode up to take hold of the reins on the Mexican's horse, but as he did so, the thief drew his revolver and aimed it at his head. Tarpy was able to deflect the shot, but took the full force of the gun's stock on the side of his head and was knocked to the ground. Redondo turned his horse and attempted to escape only to be cut down by fire from the rest of his pursuers.

After returning the stolen horses to their rightful owners, the vigilantes took the body of the slain outlaw to the office of Justice T. S. Roberts, where it lay on exhibit until an inquest could be held the following day. A coroner's jury found that Redondo had been killed in self-defense.

Two weeks later, on March 15, 1870, Tarpy and O'Neal were called on again to trail a horse thief, this time up the Pajaro River and into the Gilroy area. They found the missing stock in a crudely constructed corral near the summit of Pacheco Pass. They captured a Mexican who was camped nearby and brought him to Watsonville where they gave him over to the custody of Constable Dick Barham. Barham brought the suspect before Justice Roberts who bound him over for trial on a charge of grand larceny. Afterwards, he was put in the calaboose over night for safe keeping before he was to be taken to Santa Cruz to await the next session of the County Court.

However, this was not meant to be, because when Barham went to the jail the next morning to fetch his prisoner, he found that the door had been broken open with a crow-bar and the Mexican gone. There were various rumors circulating around town as to the manner of his departure, the most common of which was that he had been taken out, lynched and the body buried. But no one seemed to know anything for certain. Not even the name of the unfortunate man.

Removing a suspected horse thief by force from the the jail and quickly disposing of him was to become a familiar pattern in Watsonville during the year of 1870. It was to be repeated no less then nine times. Tarpy and his men would bring them in and turn them over to the law, then they would mysteriously disappear. Only on two occasions would the bodies of these unfortunates be found and these cases were so sensational that they made their way into newspapers columns all across the state.

The first occurred on the night of Tuesday, May 17. Several days earlier, the corpse of Antonio Guerrero, commonly known as Indian Bill, was found in his cabin a few miles below town. His skull had been crushed, and he had been both stabbed and shot. Suspicion for the crime pointed to a Mexican named Valentine Varaga, who had been living with the murdered man. Constable Barham rode out to Whisky Hill, where Varaga could usually be found and arrested him. He delivered the suspect for questioning at a Coronor's inquest. Since his testimony was undisputed at the time, he was freed and allowed to return to Whisky Hill.

This action so incensed the people that they sent Justice Roberts to ask the Pajaro Property Protective Society to look into the matter. The Society ordered Tarpy and his men into the field to investigate. After interviewing several of Indian Bill's neighbors, suspicion again fell on Varaga who they said habitually quarreled with Bill. When the vigilantes arrived at Whisky Hill, they learned that Varaga had just left, riding north towards Santa Cruz. They overtook him near the five-mile house and brought him back to Watsonville for more extensive interrogation.

Tarpy was able to extract a confession of guilt from Varaga who admitted that he had participated in the murder. He said that he had knocked the man down with the barrel of his pistol, but that it was two brothers, Gregorio and Jesus Gomez who had finished the bloody work by stabbing and shooting the victim. He was killed because he knew too much about a robbery which the three had committed, and they feared that he might inform on them.

After the vigilantes deposited their prisoner with Constable Barham, they set out after the Gomez brothers who Varaga had told them were hiding at the New Almaden Mines over in the mountains of Santa Clara county. The New Almaden area was a wild untamed region inhabited by Mexican and Californio quicksilver miners, who made it a practice to shelter the numerous bandidos of their own race who hid out in their midst. Showing no fear, the group of Americans led by Matt Tarpy rode boldly into Spanishtown at New Almaden and captured the brothers in the saloon where they were drinking. When back at Watsonville, they were turned over to Barham and the saddle-weary vigilantes now returned to their prospective homes.

The following Monday, the three desperados were tried in the courtroom of Justice Roberts of Pajaro Township. At the hearing, Valentine Varaga and Jesus Gomez admitted their guilt, implicating the other Gomez brother who had steadfastly declared his innocence. The three were returned to their cells for safekeeping and two armed guards were placed at the door, while Barham made arrangements for their transfer to Santa Cruz.

That night about 12 o'clock, thirty or forty men made their appearance and compelled the guard to hand over the keys to the jail. The prisoners were removed and the guard ordered into the cell. Then the mob disappeared into the night with their captives in tow.

At daybreak the next morning, the citizens of Watsonville were treated to the revolting sight of the lifeless bodies of Varaga and the Gomez brothers dangling from the top of the Pajaro bridge. Among those to glimpse this scene was the sister of one of the men who stood on the bridge wailing aloud as the dead men were being pulled up. She was so overcome with grief that when, at last, the onlookers succeeded in getting one of the bodies up to the railing, she rushed upon it, almost knocking one of the workers over the side of the bridge. This caused her forced removal from the area. Afterwards the gruesome task was done, the three bodies were placed in a mortician's wagon and taken to Whisky Hill for burial.

When word of the lynchings found its way into print across the state, the citizens of Watsonville were subjected to a constant bombardment of criticism from all sides. It became the thankless task of the Watsonville Pajaronian to act as apologist for the city. And for this, they too, were taken to task in the most virulent manner.

In reaction, citizen turned against citizen and group against group. The most vocal of which was a clique of businessmen led by John T. Porter, who pointed the finger of suspicion at The Pajaro Property Protective Society and most particularly at Matt Tarpy with whom he had a long-standing feud dating back to 1868 and the fraudulent naturalization charge.

This attacked forced Tarpy to defend himself and the Protective Society in a long "open letter" which appeared in the Pajaronian on May 27, 1870. In it, he disputed the accusations, deferring to the fact that it was he and his men who had pursued and captured the desperados at their own expense and at great personal risk; also they had voluntarily turned the prisoners over to the law. If they had wanted to lynch the men, he said, they could have accomplished that long before returning them to Watsonville. Besides on the

day of the hanging, he, himself was up in San Francisco on business. If anyone was to blame, he finished, it was the town marshal and the constables, who had long and dismal recording of enforcing the law and insuring the safety of the prisoners.

The last known lynching in the Pajaro Valley took place several months later on the night of Monday, September 26, 1870, and it followed the same old pattern. Horse thief Sacramento Duarte, a three term veteran of San Quentin prison, was caught at Whisky Hill with five stolen horses in his possession. He was tried in Justice Lucius Holbrook's court and found guilty of Grand Larceny.

Constable Dick Barham lodged him in the Watsonville jail and sat up all night guarding the fellow. The following morning, he was called away to San Juan in a vain attempt to capture a suspect in a murder case. He returned to town dirty and tired after the all day chase. Because he had not slept in almost 36 hours, he decided to just go home and sleep before checking in on this prisoner.

At dawn, the constable went to the calaboose and noticed that the door had been pulled off of its hinges. Upon entering, he found what he had suspected, Duarte hanging by the neck. At a Coroner's inquest, the jury rendered the standard verdict which was issued in these cases - "The prisoner died from strangulation, caused by some person or persons unknown." This was the last time that the Watsonville jail was ever used.

For several days the usual amount of rumors flew around the valley as the townspeople and the ranchers squared off again. Porter and his group blamed the Protective Society and Tarpy responded by condemning the breakdown of law and order in the region. But soon the arguments died down and the year ended quietly enough with a final body count of fourteen known lynchings.

Meanwhile, the outside committee of the Pajaro Property Protective Society, headed by Matt Tarpy, had been quietly going about collecting intelligence on the outlaw gangs who were operating in the area. By now most of them were fluent in Spanish and they were adroit in the use of various disguises. They traveled throughout the district becoming familiar with the hideouts and routes used by these horse thieves. Some would actually make their way into the bandits camps, and, through the use of deception and bribery, learn the names and methods used by the desperados.

In a newspaper interview, Tarpy estimated that there were no less than three hundred men in the central coast area who were in some way connected with the gangs. The committee compiled a "hit-list" containing the names of thirty of the most daring law breakers. It included the infamous Tiburico Vasquez, "Charole" Lorenzana, the Rodriguez brothers of Branciforte and from Monterey, the three Rankel brothers. They published parts of the list in the Pajaronian together with a warning to the ranchers of the vicinity to keep a watch out for them.

During the fall of 1871 after Vasquez and the Rodriguez brothers went on a larcenous spree in the San Juan area, which included the holdup of the Visalia-bound stage and the robbery Protective Society member Tom McMahon, the committee went back into the field again. They were so persistent in their pursuit of the bandits, that even Vasquez himself, in a later newspaper interview, had to give Tarpy and his men credit for their tenacity. In fact, it was their tip as to the location of the hiding place of the gang in the Santa Cruz mountains which allowed Deputy Sheriff Charlie Lincoln to lead a sneak raid on the Lorenzana ranch which eventually brought an end to their activities in the area.

Also in 1871 and 1872, they helped solve the earlier murders of William Roach and Alex Wilkins. Tarpy turned the names of those suspected of involvement in these crimes over the authorities in Watsonville. But in spite of all of their hard work, it appears that no one ever acted upon these leads.

By the spring of 1872, Tiburcio Vasquez felt safe enough to go back into business. And so along with Jose Castro and another road agent, he robbed the San Benito Stage near the Pinnacles Road and escaped with several hundred dollars. One of the passengers on the coach recognized Castro as a member of the gang. A few nights later, Castro was visited at his home by a vigilante mob, who hanged him from a tree in his own front yard. This too was laid, by some, at the door of the Pajaro Property Protective Society.

There were those in Watsonville who had long waited for the opportunity to rid the area of the influence of the farmer/rancher block, the Protective Society, and Matt Tarpy in particular. On March 15, 1873, Tarpy, himself, handed them this opportunity. It was one of those exciting, controversial, and historically important events which has become so confused that the genuine facts may never be known.

THE LYNCHING OF MATT TARPY

Over the years, Matt Tarpy had enlarged his holding in the mountains above the Pajaro Valley to well over 1500 acres. In 1868, he sold 400 of these acres to Murdock and Sarah Nicholson. The boundaries to this parcel of land were never clearly defined and a dispute broke out between Tarpy and the Nicholsons, with each declaring that they were the true owners of a wooded section which lay along San Juan Road. Litigation was filed with the court, but no action was taken on the case for a number of years.

Late in February, 1873, Tarpy began to harvest wood on the disputed land. Murdock Nicholson rode out to protect his interest and an argument ensued during which both men threatened each other. A few weeks later, Nicholson was called away to San Francisco on business and while he was gone, Tarpy moved a cabin onto the property which he proceeded to rent to the hired man who tended his ranch.

On March 14, the man collected his belongings and began to move into the cabin, but upon arriving, he found Sarah Nicholson and two young men, John O'Neil and John Smith, already therein. They said that they were there at the advice of their lawyer and that they intended to stay. The hired man rode into Watsonville and reported these events to his boss.

Tarpy immediately mounted up and headed off towards the cabin, carrying a pistol and his Henry rifle. When he reached the ranch, it was already dark and he positioned himself across the road from the building. The windows were lit up and voices could be heard coming from within. He fired several shots into the roof of the cabin and ordered everyone out, shouting that they were trespassing on private property. The shots alarmed Mrs. Nicholson and she and the two men fled out the back door under cover of the darkness.

The following morning, she returned to the cabin at first light to see what damage had been done. As she and O'Neil approached, Tarpy emerged from the roadside and seeing that the man was armed, Tarpy leveled his rifle. What happened next has been the subject of controversy for the last one hundred and twenty years.

There are two versions, one told by the Tarpy family which said that O'Neil went for his pistol and Tarpy fired in self-defense. As he did so, Mrs. Nicholson stepped in between the two men to prevent any blood shed and she took the full load of buckshot into her midsection. The Nicholson version had Tarpy killing the woman in

cold blood after shouting, "I'll kill you, you God Damned bitch." No matter which account is correct, the results were the same, Mrs. Sarah Nicholson lay dead in the middle of San Juan Road after one of the shots passed completely through her heart.

O'Neil bolted and disappeared into the woods. Soon afterwards, Tarpy rode into Watsonville and surrendered himself to Constable Schade of Pajaro. He was then taken to Salinas City and turned over to Sheriff Andrew Wasson. The following day, Judge James Breen commenced a hearing on the matter after which Tarpy was bound over to Superior Court for trial. Afterward, the lawmen took him to Monterey where he was placed in the county jail.

Word of Mrs. Nicholson's killing swept like wildfire through the Pajaro Valley and the telegraphs hummed carrying dispatches to every corner of the state. That night a large public meeting, under the direction of John T. Porter, was held in Watsonville to discuss what should be done about the situation.

At this gathering, a resolution was passed condemning the shooting and demanding swift action be taken against Tarpy. An angry mob milled around the streets all through the night and into the next day.

That afternoon, two men, Melvin Gilkey and George Slankard, both of whom were sworn enemies of Matt Tarpy, led the mob, now over 250 strong, on a march to Monterey. As they proceeded along the route, their number swelled to about 400. By the morning of the 17th, this unruly crowd reached their goal and surged through town demanding Tarpy.

When the mob later reached the jailhouse, it was learned that Sheriff Wasson was on guard, so several of them quickly captured and bound the Sheriff while others hammered their way into Tarpy's cell. When they emerged with the hapless prisoner, they were greeted by a loud cheer after which he was placed on a wagon and driven away.

As they wound their way through the old California capital, there occurred a most pathetic and heart wrenching scene. Moving up the street in the direction of the jail were Tarpy's wife, Winifred, his aged mother Bridget, and 7 year old daughter Mary, accompanied by Padre Angelo Casanova of Carmel Mission. The women of the horrified little party pleaded for one last opportunity to embrace their loved one, but the angry crowd rudely shoved them aside and continued on their way. They followed along behind wailing and pleading, but were quickly out distanced.

About four miles south of town, near the site of the present airport, the mob came to a stop under a tall pine tree. After allowing Tarpy a few minutes to speak, they quickly carried out the execution.

During the next few weeks, the Tarpy lynching was the subject of many lurid headlines across the state as story after story rolled off of the presses. They soon became so exaggerated and distorted that Tarpy's friends found it necessary to write a long "open letter" to Governor Newton Booth explaining their side of the story and asking him to investigate the events surrounding the shooting and lynching. But for political reasons, their request came to naught and no investigation into the death of Matt Tarpy was ever made. So in time, the Nicholson version of the controversy became a part of local history.

In later years, the descendants of both Tarpy and Nicholson were locked in a legal battle over the disputed land which was not resolved until 1916, when the courts ruled in favor of Murdock Nicholson. Winifred Tarpy and her three daughters blamed the lynching on Tarpy's old enemy John T. Porter, saying that he had organized and financed the mob in response to the fact that Tarpy had exposed Porter for some of his crooked

dealings in the 1860s. There is some proof to substantiate this argument. But as time passed, the excitement over the shooting and lynching faded slowly away.

With the death of Matt Tarpy, the history of the Pajaro Property Protective Society draws to a close. That it was effective in achieving its published goals is beyond question. The gangs of rustlers and horse thieves which for so long plagued the area were either broken up or forced to move their activities to other locations. Many of their leaders were identified and killed outright or put in prison. The greatest of them all, Tiburcio Vasquez, was on the run and would be captured and executed in 1874. Two of the Rodriguez boys were dead, as was "Charole" Lorenzana. Jose Rodriguez was operating in San Mateo county and Ignacio Rankel sat in San Quentin along with Procopio, the nephew of Joaquin Murrieta.

EPILOGUE

The very existence of the Protective Society pointed out the many weaknesses of local law enforcement during this early period. The sheriff's office needed to fund the recruitment of more full-time deputies to be stationed in the Watsonville area, and the power of city marshals and township constables needed to be extended. The next few years would witness these changes as well as the realignment of the judicial system all across California. This strengthening of legal recourse and procedures would in turn inspire more confidence among the citizenry and they would be less likely to consider taking matters into their own hands. By 1880, following years when Robert Orton and Elmer Dakan established themselves in the sheriffalty, law and order was to come to the Pajaro Valley, and its citizens could, at last, go about their business without fear.

But the cost of bringing about these changes had been fearfully high in economic and human terms. It would require the passing of a whole generation to eliminate the tensions, both racial and political, which had given birth to the years of vigilante activities. The families of Matt Tarpy, Murdock Nicholson and the countless Spanish and Indian victims of this "local inquisition" paid a staggering personal price too - the loss of a loved one. In looking back on this era it is quite easy to romanticize these events and put them in the category of "stories" and "tales". In the long run, however, it is perhaps where they best belong.

Source

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