

The city police and the calaboose

By BETTY LEWIS

"Let us have a calaboose — strange as it may seem, it is nevertheless true that petty offenders are let run at large for want of some place of confinement, and drunken travelers, for the same reason, exercise undue license in disturbing the quiet of the village."

—Pajaro Times, April 28, 1866

Back in those wild and woolly days when Watsonville was going through its birthing pains, enforcement of the law was often a haphazard business at best. There were no calaboses (jails), and prisoners, if they had escaped the hangman's noose, were tied to a tree or housed in a hotel room with a guard standing by until the local judge or a circuit judge could preside over a trial. According to the *Pacific Sentinel* (Watsonville had no paper at the time), in 1856 the citizens of our town raised enough money through public subscription to build a calaboose "for the purpose of punishing the vagrants that infest the place."

Just what happened to that jail is unknown, but in 1869 a new calaboose was built under the supervision of one G.T. Grow for the sum of \$445 in gold coin. The building measured 16 by 24 feet and was divided into three rooms, built high off the ground, and had windows installed for "good ventilation."

"No more will boozy individuals be obliged to stretch their trembling limbs in the cold, cold gutter, but lodgings will hereafter be furnished them. There is only one drawback to the place. Those who patronize the institution are obliged to pay an outrageous price for their lodgings. But there are no sweets without the bitter."

—Pajaronian, July 22, 1869

In January of 1877, at 2 o'clock in the morning, the fire bell sounded; someone had set fire to the calaboose, using coal oil to fan the flames. Due to a lack of water, not only the jail burned down, but also a nearby barn, making for a total loss of \$900. A \$200 reward was offered for the arrest and conviction of the "party or parties" responsible, but they were never caught.

James Waters, one of the town's trustees, was the architect for a new calaboose while Gaddie & Wood were the contractors.

"The Calaboose is progressing rapidly toward completion, and those who have been acting slightly 'off' since the old one burned down, are bracing up. About forty men and boys sit around everyday to watch proceedings."

—Pajaronian, Feb. 22, 1877

A. Lewis & Company, then located on the northwest corner of Second and Main, provided the blankets for the new facility at a cost of \$12.00. The calaboose was located behind the old fire engine house when it stood on Main Street. That same year the following appeared in the local newspaper:

"Sunday evening last three Spanish citizens from Monterey County, who had been herding sheep, came into town, and making a mistake in the amount of whiskey they put in their water, became very playful, and had considerable fun in racing horses up and down the street. At length, about the time the fast driving ordinance was badly shattered and outraged, Marshal Knevels captured one of the jolly racers, and soon another was thrown from his horse and he was placed in durance vile. The other had business out of town and escaped the strong clutches of a rather heated officer. Judge Holbrook, the next morning, politely received a donation of \$7 from each, when they were allowed to part with smaller purses but larger experience of the laws of the town of Watsonville."

—Pajaronian, Sept. 20, 1877

In 1878, at a special meeting of the Town Trustees, an ordinance was drafted providing for a chain gang:

"All criminals sentenced to the calaboose will have to work out their sentences in the chain gang. This is a good move, and plenty of work can be found on the streets for all dwellers of the

Hotel de Knevels (Marshal)."

—Pajaronian, Aug. 1, 1878

This facility served (more or less) until 1913 when the Board of Aldermen voted to abandon the site and build a new facility on Rodriguez Street behind the recently constructed Apple Annual Building.

"Thanksgiving day will see the official opening of a new calaboose. Tomorrow morning Jailer John Corr, Warden Sylvester Whitsett, guards Whalen and Zimmer and Turnkeys Mann and Sandberg will officially open the new city jail on Rodriguez street and all convicts and criminals will be invited to inspect their future home. A neat office which has been equipped with a stove, writing desk, telephone and other conveniences, has been built adjoining the jail and the interior of the calaboose has been fixed up with new cots, new blankets, a stove and other modern improvements for the comfort of the inmates..."

—Evening Pajaronian, Nov. 26, 1913

The building is still standing on Rodriguez Street.

On the night of October 25, 1920, the body of Officer John Whalen was found on the city lot near the jail; he had been shot five times. Earlier, Whalen had arrested a man by the name of Fred Pena, who was drunk and disturbing the peace in front of the California Restaurant, 259 Main Street. The officer and the accused walked off towards the jail, and soon gun shots were heard and reported to the authorities by a man who had witnessed the arrest of Pena.

Sheriff Trafton, Chief of Police Whitsitt and Constable Devin, after finding Whalen's body, went out looking for the prisoner and found him at a home up on Watsonville Heights where he was then taken into custody. Pena claimed he was not guilty and had gone to bed early that evening. A few days later he confessed to the crime over at the county jail, saying he and Whalen had known each other for years but there had been bad feelings between them for some time. He was sentenced

to 25 years at San Quentin prison, and, after serving his time, he returned to Watsonville for a short period and then moved to on to Fresno, where he died.

Tim Arano, who was hauling sugar beets at the time of the killing of Whalen, tells of stopping at Sambo's Cafe on West Beach Street for breakfast, hearing of the shooting and then going down the street to view the scene of the tragedy. Officer Whalen was 70 years old at the time of his death;

REFERENCE



Members of the Watsonville police force posed for this group portrait in 1953, just six years before the city disposed of its last paddy wagon. Pictured above, from left to right, are Vernon Dietz, Roy Ingersoll, and Ned Gluhan, top row; James Brandon, Russell Mock, Clifford Jackson and Jim

Cunningham, second row; John Wright, Wally Jessup, Jess Ojeda, George Tapiz, Charles Jack, Lloyd Peabody, and Charles Lettunich, third row; Fred Ensminger, Ben Jacobsen, Kathryn Patrick, Milo Cooper, Everett Dicks, Kathryn Johnson and John Miljanich, front row.

Photo courtesy of Roy Ingersoll

he had moved to Watsonville from Castroville in 1905, and in those last 15 years had become very well liked in the Pajaro Valley. His killer came very close to being strung up to the nearest tree before being taken away to jail.

The present police station was built in 1937:

"A resolution has passed accepting the deed to the property in the rear of the city hall, on which the new jail will be built coincident with the payment of \$5,400 by the city to the Foresters of America to clear up the existing mortgage on the site."

—Register-Pajaronian, July 7, 1937

Contractors for the new structure were Friend & Resh, whose low bid of \$14,797 won them the job; the architect was A.W. Story. Very soon a new facility will be finished with all the modern conveniences available — a far cry from those first calaboooses where desperadoes feared to tread.

"City to sell paddy wagon

— The paddy wagon is going to be a thing of the past in Watsonville. Watsonville aldermen have authorized police chief Frank Osmer to bargain with the county for its purchase. Osmer said the county had indicated interest in it. The chief said the city no longer has use for the 'black maria' since prisoners are being transferred by patrol cars and recently there have not been the large number of city jail prisoners that originally called for its purchase. . ."

—Register-Pajaronian, 1958