

'By Parties Unknown'

Tarpy Hanged From a Tree

"The verdict rendered by the coroner was, that Tarpy was on the 17th day of March hanged by the neck to a tree three miles from Monterey by parties unknown."

The succinct final paragraph from the files of the Pajaronian for March 20, 1873, wrote the end to four days of terror and mob violence unsurpassed in the history of the Pajaro valley.

In those four days a woman was slain and a man was lynched. A mass meeting, called for punishment of the slayer, was held in Watsonville. The sheriff of Monterey county was overwhelmed by a mob and tied up, and his jail doors battered down.

The drama started on the San Juan road, seven miles out of Watsonville on the evening of March 13, 1873.

Matt Tarpy had moved a frame house onto a corner of land claimed by Murdock Nicholson. Tarpy had gone farther, and leased the land to a German named Peterson.

Nicholson was away at the time. His wife Sarah was advised by attorney J. A. Burham to take possession of the house, since neither Tarpy nor Peterson

had any right to the land. The disputed corner adjoined Tarpy's own property on San Juan road.

So that Thursday, Mrs. Nicholson moved into the house, along with the farm boy and a young friend named O'Neil.

When Peterson showed up later in the day, he naturally demanded to know what Mrs. Nicholson was doing in his house. She told him. The matter, she said, was between him and Tarpy. This was Nicholson land.

When he heard about it, Tarpy strapped on his six-shooter, grabbed his rifle and on the way out of town picked up a shotgun. By the early hours of Friday morning he had barricaded himself behind a huge log across the road from the little frame house.

At one point in his lonely vigil, Tarpy sent a half-dozen rifle shots crashing into the home.

Mrs. Nicholson, O'Neil and the farm boy fled in terror back to the Nicholson house, a quarter of a mile away.

At dawn Mrs. Nicholson led the others back to the frame house to see what damage had been done. Then she was going into town to get some protection.

They never made it. As they neared his ambush, Tarpy rose and took aim with his shotgun. It misfired twice, while Mrs. Nicholson pleaded with Tarpy not to shoot. As she turned and ran, Tarpy fired again. The gun roared, Mrs. Nicholson screamed, and fell with 11 slugs in her body. She was killed instantly.

Tarpy sent another shot after the fleeing farm boy and O'Neil, then walked into town and gave himself up to Pajaro constable Shade.

Shade seems to have taken his time about locking Tarpy up. Accounts state the constable and Tarpy walked down Main street, the six-shooter still on Tarpy's hip, to a barber shop, where Tarpy got a shave. Then they left in

a buggy for Salinas, being joined en route by sheriff Wasson.

A crowd followed the buggy out of town to see that Tarpy did not escape.

The town boiled. Saturday night there was a mass meeting, attended by many of the leading citizens. They vigorously condemned the killing and resolved to see that Tarpy was brought to justice.

Tarpy meanwhile had waived examination in Salinas, and was taken to jail in Monterey.

Throughout the crisis, Tarpy maintained O'Neil had "applied abusive language" to him on that fatal morning, and that O'Neil had drawn a pistol. Tarpy claimed he fired in self defense, and shot Mrs. Nicholson by mistake.

Word got around Monday that he was to be returned to Salinas and that town filled up ominously, lathered and dusty horses from as far away as Gilroy showing up and the crowd gathering in front of the telegraph office to catch any late word.

Meanwhile, rumors had also started that Tarpy was to be spirited away from Monterey until public feeling died down. A crowd of Watsonville men took off for Monterey, where they were joined by others.

A picket line of sheriff's deputies stopped the cavalcade of riders outside town. One man was sent in to dicker with Wasson. The messenger said the group would offer no violence, in fact would help Wasson guard his prisoner if the sheriff would guarantee Tarpy would be delivered to Salinas for trial.

Wasson was willing but Monterey judges kept changing their minds throughout the day. Word began to circulate that soldiers were coming down from San Francisco and a warship was headed for Monterey bay to keep order.

The crowds demanded action from Wasson. Unable to keep his agreement that Tarpy would be taken to Salinas, unable to match the force of the crowd, the sheriff gave in.

But Wasson had secretly given his jail keys to deputy Mike Noon. The baffled mob stormed down the street to a blacksmith's shop, seized all the available hammers, and returned to action.

Wasson was tied up. The mob battered its way through three doors in the Monterey jail and dragged out Tarpy. The prisoner said goodbye to his wife and child outside the jail. The mob headed out of town, more than 400 horses, wagons and thrill seekers kicking up a dust cloud that halted and settled three miles out.

Under a tree that arched over the road Tarpy talked and prayed for over an hour. Witnesses said he showed no cowardice, and made no pleas for mercy. He made an oral will — including \$1,000 to Nicholson for 400 cords of wood Tarpy admitted cutting off his property more than a year before.

This "will" was later declared illegal. Tarpy's estate was valued at \$65,000 when his real will was filed for probate ten days later.

At Tarpy's request, Nicholson placed his hands on the murderer's head and forgave him.

Then Tarpy's eyes were bandaged. The blindfold was loosened while he made a last request, that his body be taken to Monterey.

Then he was hanged.

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