

Hanging on the Water Street Bridge: A Santa Cruz Lynching

By Geoffrey Dunn

By the time the sun rose on the morning of May 3, 1877, the two bodies dangling from the Water Street Bridge were already stiff from rigor mortis. A large crowd had gathered on the banks of the San Lorenzo River to gape at the hanging corpses, victims of an angry lynch mob the night before. It was well into midmorning before the bodies were finally cut down. The remaining spectators, including children, called out bids for pieces of the death ropes, which had been sliced into foot-long sections for souvenirs.

"Judge Lynch had evidently been holding court," the Santa Cruz *Sentinel* observed, "but who the Judge, jury or attorneys were was purely a matter of conjecture."

The bodies of two men, Francisco Arias and Jose Chamales, were taken to a local undertaker's, where five Santa Cruzans were impaneled as an impromptu coroner's jury. Their verdict was predictable: "The deceased met their end on the upper San Lorenzo Bridge at the hands of parties unknown." It's likely that at least one member of the jury had been a part of the lynch mob that hung the two men.

Arias and Chamales were of Mexican and Native American descent, and theirs was not the first lynching of Californios by Santa Cruz's growing, often racist white population in the nineteenth century. As early as 1851, vigilantes hung Mariano Hernandez after pulling him out of the local jail, and there would be numerous other lynchings of Californios here in the ensuing quarter-century.

In certain respects, however, the lynching of Arias and Chamales marked the end of an era. Such incidents had become commonplace throughout California since the early days of the Gold Rush, but the Arias-Chamales hanging, at least temporarily, signaled a brief recess to anti-Mexican hostility. For most of the next decade, Chinese laborers became the primary targets of racist vigilante violence.

The immediate events that led to the Santa Cruz lynching began on the evening of Saturday, April 29, 1877, when Henry de Forrest, aged 62 and a carpenter at the local Powder Mill, was walking home along River Street near the site of the present Farmers Exchange. De Forrest, a native of Maine, was hoping to save up enough money to send for his wife and young children who remained on the east coast.

Near eight o'clock that evening, de Forrest was approached by two assailants and shot with a large caliber revolver through the chest. His pockets were ransacked, and he was dragged some 50 feet away from the main thoroughfare. It wasn't until the following morning that his body was found by a passerby.

An investigation of the murder was immediately organized by the county sheriff. According to local newspaper reports, an unidentified Californio living in the Native American village a mile north of town had been stopped by two men, Arias



and Chamales, just prior to the murder. The alleged assailants recognized their would-be victim and allowed him to proceed.

A short time later, the Californio declared, he heard a pistol discharged from where he had been accosted by Arias and Chamales.

Arias, a native of Pescadero, was 35 years old. He had served out two sentences at San Quentin, one for robbery, the other for murdering a sheep herder. Chamales, just 21 and a native of Santa Cruz, had also served time in San Quentin on a robbery conviction. The two men were seen together at the Aptos Circus following the time of the murder, and they were said to be in possession of substantial gold and silver coinage.

Other circumstantial evidence pointed towards Arias and Chamales as the murderers, including statements made by Chamales' mother. On Monday, Sheriff's deputies tracked down the two suspects, Chamales being found in Watsonville and Arias camped out with two women on the road to San Juan Bautista.

Both men, according to the papers, admitted to the murder, though Chamales supposedly fingered Arias as the actual assailant, claiming that it was Arias who pulled the trigger and that he himself had received only \$2.50 of the \$20 in coin taken from the victim. They were placed in the jail together on Tuesday.

It is at this point where accounts of the events diverge considerably. According to the three Santa Cruz papers—the *Sentinel*, *Local Item*, and *Courier*—150 to 300 local residents descended on the jail during the night of Wednesday, May 2, and demanded the release of Arias and Chamales. From there the two prisoners were brought to the Water Street Bridge, where they were allowed a few last words (spoken in Spanish) and a final shot of whiskey. Then they were hanged.

Two other northern California papers, the *Bulletin* and the *Alta*, disputed the figures which the local weeklies attributed to the lynch mob, both claiming that the number was closer to 40 or 50 men.

They also reported that the vigilantes wore masks or blackened faces to hide their identities, facts which the local papers omitted or denied, the implication being that the lynch mob did not have the vast community support which the local papers had claimed.

In either case, the non-Santa Cruz papers were sharply critical of the lynching. "Is the taking of human life without authority of law any less a murder because it is perpetrated by many instead of one?" asked the *Alta*. "Indeed not."

All three local papers, on the other hand, defended the lynching. According to the *Courier*, the lynch party "appeared to be officered ... and showed a determination only born of mature deliberation," adding that "it would be economy to kill off a certain proportion of the criminal classes annually or else transport them."

Ironically, the *Courier* had taken the opposite view just two months earlier when there had been public sentiment aired towards lynching a white murder suspect. "Mobs are cowardly, cruel and unjust," the paper then declared, "and all who encourage or sustain this mode of correcting evils of society where the law can be enforced as it can be in Santa Cruz County, are unsafe exponents of public opinion."

Sources

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