

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY
19th CENTURY OUTLAW - LAWMAN HISTORY
[1848-1899]



- 1848 [October] the nine-member Reed family is murdered at Mission San Miguel by a group of sailors who deserted from a U.S. warship in Monterey. Ranchers John M. Price and Francisco Z. Branch discover the crime and notify Santa Barbara County authorities. A posse tracks down and shoots the murderers near present-day Carpinteria, CA. [1, 2]
- 1850 [Feb] San Luis Obispo County is formed by legislative act and becomes one of the original 27 California Counties. El Camino Real soon develops the reputation as "The most lawless trail in the West." [1]
- 1850 [April] Prominent S.L.O. county rancher Henry J. Dalley is elected as San Luis Obispo County's first Sheriff. He receives \$20. a month and establishes offices in Mission San Luis Obispo. One year later he resigns the position stating the job is "too dangerous." [4]
- 1850 [Sept] California is admitted to the Union, becoming the 31st State.
- 1852 Californio bandit Joaquin Murrieta forms band of robbers and murderers.
- 1853 [April] Bowing to public pressure, California Governor John Bigler passes The Ranger Act authorizing a company of mounted rangers to kill or capture the bandits known as "The Five Joaquins" who are terrorizing California. Foremost among these men is the now infamous outlaw Joaquin Murrieta. [1, 2]

- 1853 [June] The Murrieta Gang visits San Luis Obispo. The *Sacramento Union* reports that Murrieta sent word ahead announcing his arrival and intention to rest there. He warns they will sack the town if molested. They camp in the Mission gardens, robbing a gambler as they leave town a few days later. [1, 2]
- 1853 [July] California Rangers, led by Captain Harry Love, surprise Murrieta and his gang while encamped at the Arroyo Cantua near present day Coalinga, CA. Murrieta is killed and beheaded. His head is publicly displayed at the Stockton House.
- 1853 [Oct] A party of eight or ten "bad men" passes through San Luis Obispo County. Before leaving the county they kill a peddler and steal horses. They are followed to Los Angeles where three are arrested, put aboard a boat and returned to San Luis Obispo County. They are received at Port Harford [Avila Beach] and are promptly hanged. [2]
- 1853 [Nov] San Luis Obispo County experiences the beginning of "A chapter of crime unparalleled." Scarcely a month passes without the disappearance of a traveler or the finding of bodies or skeletons along the roads leading out of town. Together with bandits Pio Linares and Joaquin Valenzuela, a gambler and ex-soldier named Jack Powers has formed a secret gang and begins to prey upon the citizenry. The gang adopts the Pirate motto "Dead Men Tell No Tales!"

The 1850's in San Luis Obispo County will come to be known by the locals as "The Bloody Fifties" due to the many robberies, murders and other atrocities being committed against the citizenry by bandits during that decade.

Among the crimes committed by the Powers gang is a nighttime attack upon the Dana family rancho after learning the Dana's had sold 300 head of cattle. On the evening in question [date unknown], the Dana's had given shelter to a Yacqui Indian who had stopped by the rancho. The Indian was lodged in a storage shed adjacent to the main house.

Upon approaching the Dana adobe, the gang's presence was revealed and the household alerted when the Indian heard noises and peered out of the cabin door. One of the gang made an unsuccessful grab for him, causing a noisy disturbance. The gang then opened fire upon the house when a servant looked out of the doorway.

The household's firearms were locked in a room on the south side of the casa. Powers knew this and had taken special care to guard the room. When no one went for ammunition, Powers probably thought they had sufficient ammunition for a fight and decided to call off the attack. Years later, the details of the assault on the Casa de Dana were revealed when Vigilante's captured and tried some of the Powers gang in San Luis Obispo. [1,2, 5]

- 1855 [Nov] Monterey county executive officers Isaac B. Wall and T.B. Williamson are murdered on the "dark and bloody ground" of the Nacimiento while traveling to San Luis Obispo. No direct trace of the murderers is ever found. [2]
- 1856 [July] Artist/Journalist Henry Miller passes through S.L.O. County. Miller observes several macabre scenes including a skeleton tied to a tree. [5]
- 1856 San Francisco businessman George Fearless visits S.L.O. County carrying \$2,000.00 on his person. He enters into a ranching enterprise with Jesus Luna, a pal of bandit Pio Linares, and then disappears. Three months pass before Fearless's body is found near a deserted rancho. [1, 2]
- 1857 [Dec] Two French cattle buyers, Pedro Obiesa and Graciano, are befriended by Nieves Robles, another member of the Jack Powers Gang. While encamped near the Nacimiento, several of their horses go missing. The Frenchmen go looking for the horses but never return. Weeks later one of the men is found, his body riddled with bullets. The other man is never found. Nieves Robles is arrested and tried for the murders. A jury of Californio's acquits Robles stating the Frenchmen had received stolen cattle and "deserved killing." [1, 2]
- 1858 "Light dawning": Local citizens begin to suspect that "an organized band of spies and murderers" may exist among them. Lawyer Walter Murray helps organize "The Vigilance Committee of 1858" to deal with the rising tide of violent crimes within the county [1]

1858

[May] A group of eight bandits visit Frenchmen Bartolo Baratie and M. J. Borel at the Rancho San Juan Capistrano, 45 miles north of San Luis Obispo. They receive shelter for the night and leave the following morning. Bandit Miguel Blanco later returns to the ranch and shoots Borel. Assisted by bandit Huero Rafael, he binds the servants and threatens Bartolo Baratie and his wife. Under threat of death, Baratie shows the bandits the location of \$2,700.00 hidden in a trunk. They then murder Baratie and kidnap his wife.

During this time two other bandits, Luciano "El Mesteno" Tapia and Desiderio Grijalva, return to a nearby cabin belonging to a hunter named Jack Gilkey. They shoot Gilkey, killing him for no apparent reason. The gang travels to San Juan Bautista where they release Madame Baratie who takes a stage to join her family in Oakland.

Following the slaying of their master, Baratie's servants, Luis Morillo and Ysidro Silvas, make their way to the Paso Robles rancho of Captain David Mallagh. Captain Mallagh escorts the servants to San Luis Obispo where they report the crime. "John Doe" Warrants are sworn out for the killers and Capt. Mallagh and Sheriff Francisco Castro walk through town with Silvas in an attempt to identify the murderers. Silvas recognizes Santos Peralta who is arrested and jailed. That night, a lynch mob of enraged citizens takes Peralta from the jail and hangs him.

For the next week, Sheriff Castro leads a posse in search of the remaining bandits. They find Joaquin Valenzuela at a local ranch and identify him as one of "The Five Joaquin's" Capt. Love's Rangers were sent to capture. They arrest and promptly hang him. Before his death, Valenzuela confesses his crimes and identifies Jack Powers as the gang leader. Bandit Luciano Tapia is captured while returning from San Juan and is also hanged. Madame Baratie returns from Oakland and gives testimony regarding the case. [1, 2]

1858

[June] The beginning of the end for the Jack Powers Gang: Outlaw Jose Antonio Garcia is arrested and confesses to participating in the murders of French cattlemen Obiesa and Graciano in December 1857. Garcia identifies Jack Powers, Pio Linares and Huero Rafael [Herrado] as co-confederates in the murders. Garcia is then hung.

June 1858, continued:

Ten vigilantes set out for the Mission La Purisima where the remaining bandits are said to be hiding. In fact, the outlaws have trekked to Captain Juan Wilson's Rancho La Canada de los Osos where they have concealed themselves in a willow thicket. Their whereabouts is learned on June 10, 1858 they approach a shepherd to purchase food. Thirty vigilantes respond but cannot penetrate the thick brush on horseback. Fifteen men enter the woods on foot and discover horses, saddles and provisions. As night is falling they withdraw and picket the woods until the following morning. One of the sentries receives a ball through the instep during the night.

The following morning a decision is made to withdraw and permit the bandits to leave the woods so they can be tracked. Twenty men insist on entering the thicket and discover Linares's saddlebags. A brief gunfight takes place in which a vigilante receives a ball through the arm and Linares is wounded in a leg. The vigilantes withdraw and unsuccessfully attempt to set fire to the woods. Couriers are sent for help and the woods are picketed for a second night.

On the third morning [June 12, 1858] twenty-four men led by Captain Mallagh crawl into the willow thicket on their bellies. Within fifteen minutes a gunfight occurs during which bandit Pio Linares and vigilante John Matlock are killed and two other vigilantes wounded. Linares's confederates, Blanco and Grijalva, are captured and taken to San Luis Obispo where they are hanged on Monday, June 14, 1858.

Of the eight participants in the Rancho San Juan Capistrano murders, five [Santo Peralta, Luciano Tapia, Pio Linares, Miguel Blanco and Desiderio Grijalva] were killed by "rope or pistol" and three escaped capture [[Rafael Herrada, Jesus Valenzuel, and Froilan Servin].

Of the Nacimiento murders, two [Linares and Jose Antonio Garcia] were killed and four remained at large [Nieves Robles, Eduviquez, Huero Rafael Herrada and gang leader Jack Powers]. Jack Powers was rumored to have fled to Old Mexico where he was reputed to have been killed by bandits. [1, 2]

1859 [Aug] Luis Carziza is hanged for the murder of Francisco Alviso. Sheriff Francisco Castro carries out the sentence, San Luis Obispo county's only legal execution, for which he is paid \$20. [4]

- 1868 [Sept] A posse led by San Luis Obispo County Deputy Sheriff Juan V. Avila attempts to arrest three horse thieves near Arroyo Grande. A gunfight ensues, during which posse member Bonifacio Manchega and one of the horse thieves trade bullets. Manchega is mortally wounded when he takes a ball to the stomach. He succumbs to his wound the next day. [4]
- 1869 [Aug] Michael Ruick becomes involved in an argument with N.C. Gilbert over his hunting on Ruick's Los Osos rancho. Using a shotgun, Gilbert kills both Ruick and his wife. He is arrested by Deputy Sheriff Morriss, tried and found guilty of 2nd degree murder, for which he serves eleven years in state prison. [4]
- 1870 [June 21st] Zenobio Valenzuela is shot and killed by an unidentified assassin in San Luis Obispo. A young boy named Arcia was struck by a stray round and badly injured. Justice J.J. Simmler investigates but is unsuccessful in identifying the culprit. [1]
- 1871 [January 21st] Vicente' Arias is convicted of second degree murder for the murder-robbery of an old man for "the paltry booty of a saddle, a pair of spurs, knife, pistol, belt, pair of pantaloons and a coat." Arias is sent to San Quentin for the rest of his natural life. [1]
- 1871 On February 17th, assessor and tax collector O.K. Smith vanishes while traveling from his ranch in Cambria to San Luis Obispo. Smith was last seen alive that day at a roadhouse located at the intersection of Old Creek road and the Coast road. A wagon thought to be Smith's, was found on the beach near Morro Rock. Smith's body was never found. It was rumored he had been carrying nearly \$600.00 in tax monies for which he was murdered. [2]
- 1871 [March] "Doc Stewart" , described as a "one of the worst rascals that San Luis Obispo was unfortunate enough to have had in its community" is convicted of grand larceny, jail escape and horse theft. He is sentenced to serve three years in the State Prison. [1]
- 1871 [August 24] While en route to Santa Margarita from San Luis Obispo, Messrs. Carroll and Tanner discover a man named Francisco Guerra laying in the middle of the road. Upon closer inspection they discover that he has a bullet hole in his back, the apparent victim of a robbery-murder. [1]

- 1874 [April 13th] An Indian named Romualdo Dominguez is found guilty of second degree murder and sentenced to State Prison for ten years. [1]
- 1874 [May 19th] "A Fiendish Crime": In an attempt to spite an unfaithful lover, A Mexican woman named Jesus Alibez administers strychnine to her three infant children, then herself swallows a dose. Dr. W. W. Hays saves the woman. She is tried and convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.
- 1875 [May] Stage robber S.A. Allen holds up the Salinas stage on May 29th near the Monterey/San Luis Obispo county line. Allen is later arrested and jailed in San Luis Obispo. Allen clubs the jailor over the head and escapes. He is later arrested in Jackson, CA by Wells-Fargo Detectives. [3]
- 1875 [Aug] On August 28th, a Chinaman known as "Captain Jack" was found to have been murdered in his home, where he operated a mercantile. Three Chinamen are later arrested and convicted for the murder. [2]
- 1875 [Sept] On Tuesday, September 4th, a lone bandit robbed the stage about one mile from Lowes station and about 300' below the foot of the grade. The Wells-Fargo box, containing \$1,000.00 was taken in the holdup. [2]
- 1875 [Oct] On Tuesday, October 7th, three masked bandits held up the stage while stopped at the Last Chance station. The Monterey county Sheriff had just dismounted from the stage and saw the robbery-taking place. He shot at the robbers who dropped the strong box and fled. The Sheriff seated himself next to the driver and the stage resumed its journey. About a mile further on, three shots were fired at the Sheriff. [2]
- 1876 [July 13th] Returning home from his store, Mr. H. M. Osgood is waylaid and attacked with a club by his son-in-law Miller. Miller is later captured, tried and sentenced to two years in State Prison.
- 1878 [September 8th] An Indian herder named Carlos and his wife are found murdered in their cabin at the Paletta Rancho in the southeast corner of S.L.O. county. No clue to the murders could be obtained. [1]

- 1881 July 19th] The San Luis Obispo stagecoach is held up by a lone robber. [2]
- 1881 [August] Stage robber Dick Fellows commits the first of a series of six hold-ups against the San Luis Obispo coach. He robs the stage twice in December 1881, and again on January 2nd, 8th and 13th, 1882. Fellows is arrested in Santa Clara county. Fellows admits to all but the previously mentioned July 19, 1881 stage robbery and is sentenced to state prison. He was pardoned by the California Governor on March 8, 1908. [3]
- 1885 [July 7th] "A shooting affray on the Estrella": Two men are killed and one crippled following an argument between a school teacher and a group of men hunting near the Old Adobe Church [built 1878]. The gunfight give rise to a feud that will last for years.
- 1886 [April 1] Vigilantes remove Julius and Peter Hemmi from the Arroyo Grande jail and hang them from the Southern Pacific Railroad Bridge. Both men had been arrested for allegedly shooting and killing their neighbor Eugene Walker. [7]
- 1892 [Aug] San Luis Obispo Constable Peter Banks arrests a horse thief named Dunn near Paso Robles. Dunn offers information on a series of crimes being planned by him and three outlaws named Isom, Goss and Bill Brown. One of the offenses is to be a nighttime robbery of the Cayucos bank.
- On the night of August 30th, 1892, Cst. Banks, three other peace officers and citizen James Cass stakeout the bank. They surprise the robbers and a shootout ensues. A deputy is wounded in the fight. Bandit Bill Brown is mortally wounded and dies the following day. Robbers Isom and Goss escape. Caught several years later, they are sentenced to ten years in prison. [2]
- 1899 [Nov] While delivering a prisoner to San Quentin State Prison, San Diego County Deputy Sheriff Will J. Ward is fatally injured during a prisoner escape attempt aboard a steamship stopover at Port Hartford. The prisoner, a Bert Ross, struck Dep. Ward over the head with a water bottle and then jumped overboard into the harbor. Ross was recaptured by Santa Barbara Sheriff Stewart who was on a nearby ship. Ross was convicted of the murder and hanged the following year. Deputy Ward was the first peace officer to be killed in the line of duty in San Luis Obispo County. [4]

- SOURCES -

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