



A BRIEF HISTORY OF "THE BLOODY '50'S" & SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY LAW ENFORCEMENT

San Luis Obispo County has a rich law enforcement history that is as old as the State of California itself. S.L.O. County was one of the original 27 counties established by legislative act on February 18, 1850. The first S.L.O. County Sheriff was Henry J. Dalley. Elected in April 1850, Sheriff Dalley resigned one year later, stating the job was "too dangerous!" The original San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Office was established in three rented rooms inside Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa. One room served as an office, one as a courtroom and one as a jail.

During "The Bloody 1850's" as they were called, some of the most notorious Bandits and Outlaw Gangs of the period passed through San Luis Obispo County. Skeletal remains of robbery victims were a common sight for persons traveling along El Camino Real.

However, the Bandits that gave S.L.O. County the most problems were the infamous Jack Powers Gang. Jack Powers was a Mexican War veteran, an expert horseman, and a gambler who turned to crime. Pio Linares, a San Luis Obispo resident, was his Lieutenant. Their gang adopted the pirate motto "DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES!" and killed their victims to keep them from revealing their identities. They were so active that the volume of violent crime that was taking place soon overwhelmed San Luis Obispo Sheriff Francisco Castro.

S.L.O. County Lawman History, continued:

Finally, in 1858, the San Luis Obispo Committee of Vigilance was formed. Numbering about 100 to 150 members, the Vigilantes swore an oath to rid the county of bandits. On June 13, 1858, the vigilantes cornered Pio Linares and two confederates in a willow thicket on Captain Juan Wilson's Canada de Los Osos Rancho.

Vigilante Walter Murray was wounded in the arm during the initial skirmish. The following morning 25 men crawled into the dark thicket. A shot rang out and vigilante John Matlock fell dead. Seeing the flash of the bandit's weapon, they immediately returned fire and killed Pio Linares. His companions were captured, tried and hanged the following day! Their leader, Jack Powers, allegedly fled to Old Mexico where he was killed in 1860. Thus ended "a chapter of crime unparalleled."

Prepared by Manny Silva, 2006. Sources: "1883 history of San Luis Obispo" by Myron Angel and "Journey of Justice" by Gary Hoving.