

THE SAN FRANCISCO VIGILANTES

A First Hand Story of the Most Dramatic Event of the Early West.

One of the most interesting chapters in the history of the west is pertaining to the period when the primitive law machinery broke down, or proved ineffective, and the Vigilantes took the law into their own hands. There are many sections of the west where vigilance committees were formed, Unatilla county being in the list.

But the original Vigilantes of the west operated in San Francisco shortly after the great gold rush of 49. That was the first great migration to the west. Along with the honest gold seekers there came gamblers, robbers and murderers of every hue. It was not long until they made life intolerable to law abiding men and steps were taken to restore order and decency.

Edward P. Flint of San Francisco was the youngest member of the Vigilantes of 1851 and he is said to be the present sole survivor of that organization. He recently wrote a story telling of the work of the committee and it appeared in a San Francisco publication. The story in full follows:

San Francisco has experienced many unusual happenings, such events as try men's souls, and in every instance there have been found men capable of coping with each situation, regardless of how trying it may have been and notwithstanding the dangers to which the individual may have been exposed. The citizenry of San Francisco truly have been tested with fire, and sword, and have emerged unscathed by the daring of their deeds, their calm consideration in the most trying circumstances, their deep sense of justice and firm unflinching judgment. After fifty-eight years I recall vividly the minutest details of one of the most strenuous epochs in the history of this throbbing city on the shores of the Pacific, a period when men strong and stern were required to save the city from the threatening dominance of organized and thoroughly entrenched bands of criminals. I am the only survivor of the Executive Committee of the Vigilance Committee of 1851 and was its youngest member, and by reason of my membership played a part demanded by duty and by every sense of justice in the momentous happenings of those days, especially the trials and executions of Cora and Casey and the arrest and imprisonment of the Hon. David S. Terry, chief justice of the supreme court of California.

On two occasions it became necessary for the people of San Francisco, through the Vigilance Committee, to take charge of the administration of justice, to strike terror to the hearts of evildoers, and to encourage and assist all who desired good government. The affairs of the municipality

were in the control of corruptionists, and these conscienceless characters surrounded themselves with an even more criminal class, many of them ex-convicts, and continued to control by intimidation and ballot-box stuffing.

The vigilance committee of 1851 was called into being by a condition of lawlessness and violence which had grown out of the influx of bad men attracted to California from all parts of the world by the opportunity offered literally to pick up gold in our mountains and valleys. While the immigration of 1850 largely was of business men and mechanics from the Eastern and Middle states of our country, and the better class of foreigners, very many never visited the mines but settled in San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton and Marysville. In 1851 those who were in San Francisco were too much absorbed in other activities to give attention to the city government, and it fell into the hands of inferior and often bad men. In the winter of 1850-51 many men of the depraved and criminal class were drawn from the mines to San Francisco, where gambling-houses were running day and night, and all kinds of vicious indulgence were carried on openly. There also arrived many former convicts from Sydney, Australia, which was the penal colony of Great Britain, and many acts of violence were laid to these "Sydney Ducks," as we called them. One morning in February, 1851, the community was shocked to learn that a murderous attack had been made during the night on a merchant named Jansen in his store in Jackson street. He had been left for dead, but his injuries proved less serious than at first supposed. An ex-convict was arrested on suspicion of the crime and although there was great excitement about his trial he proved an alibi and was released. May 3, 1851, there was a fire which destroyed nearly the entire city, and it was believed generally the conflagration was of incendiary origin. A bitter feeling existed toward the class of men naturally suspected of the deed and, when another fire followed in June, mass meetings were held, and a Committee of Vigilance was organized. William T. Coleman, a prominent merchant, was chosen president and executive officer of the committee. He was a born leader, brave in confronting evil at peril of life, bold in deciding a course of action, and prompt in carrying it out. Within thirty days four men were hanged at night in Battery street, which was on the water front, about twenty bad characters were banished, and a large number fled the city. Such swift justice had a salutary effect, but again the people became lax in their consideration of municipal affairs, and

in the year 1855 "a man for breakfast" was the usual order of things. Crime was rampant. James King of William, a prominent citizen, established the Evening Bulletin, with the avowed purpose of exposing the conditions that existed, and so vigorous were its attacks and so denunciations that the paper was read universally, and, naturally, its editor incurred the ill-will of the criminal class.

In November, 1855, United States Marshal Richardson was killed by Charles Cora, a gambler and notorious character, in Clay street, near Leidsdorff. Cora was arrested near the scene of the murder, and taken to the county jail. When he was brought to trial in the district court I was a member of the jury impaneled to try the case. Owing to the intense feeling throughout the city, Judge Norton ordered that the jury be kept together during the trial, and consequently we were boarded at a hotel and kept away from our families for eleven days. The jury disagreed, all but one voting "Guilty of Murder in the First Degree." We were all aware that the one who held out had been bribed. In commenting on this miscarriage of justice the Bulletin said it was not unexpected, a criticism we felt keenly, for the jury was composed, with one exception, of some of the foremost business men of the city.

With renewed vigor Mr. King denounced the negligent officers of the law and the ballot box stuffers. At the previous election James P. Casey had been chosen supervisor with the aid of the criminal element and the manipulation of the ballot boxes, which were provided with false sides and bottoms, as we afterward learned. The Bulletin of May 14, 1856, published Casey's record as an ex-convict from the New York state prison. Casey went to the Bulletin office and demanded of King the reason for attacking him, to which King replied: "Is it not true?"

"What has that to do with it?" hotly rejoined Casey; but Editor King would not argue the matter with him and showed him the door, Casey departing in a rage. An hour or so later King left the Bulletin office in Montgomery street, between Clay and Merchant, and was proceeding toward his residence when Casey encountered him near the corner of Washington street, and without warning drew a pistol and shot King in the breast. Some of King's friends, who had feared violence at the hands of Casey, heard the shot and hurried to King's assistance. Casey evaded them and ran up Merchant street toward the city hall, at Kearny and Merchant streets, where a hack was waiting for him, and in a few minutes he had taken refuge in the county jail, the officers of which were his friends. The news of the shooting of King spread like wild-fire, and in a very short time a large crowd had assembled around the jail and appointed a guard to prevent the escape of Casey. The sheriff also summoned all his available force to protect the jail from possible assault. The multitude became greatly excited, and bold proposals were made to storm the jail and take Casey out and hang him. Mayor Van Ness appeared and addressed the people, counseling peace, but the crowd was yet mindful of the killing of Marshal Richardson by Cora, and the failure of justice in that instance.

"There are too many hung juries and too few hung men!" the crowd shouted.

In the meantime some of the members of the Pioneer Society had met in their rooms on the corner of Washington and Kearny streets, and in less than an hour a large concourse was on hand to discuss the situation. It was not long before it was decided to form a Vigilance Committee, and Mr. Coleman, president of the Committee of 1851, was summoned to be its executive officer. The agreement that was drawn up pledged each signed to stand by the others. News of the formation of the committee spread with amazing rapidity, and men literally streamed into the headquarters to sign their names to the roll. It was some time before I learned of the existence of the committee, and I was No. 750 on the roll. The following day the list contained several thousand names.

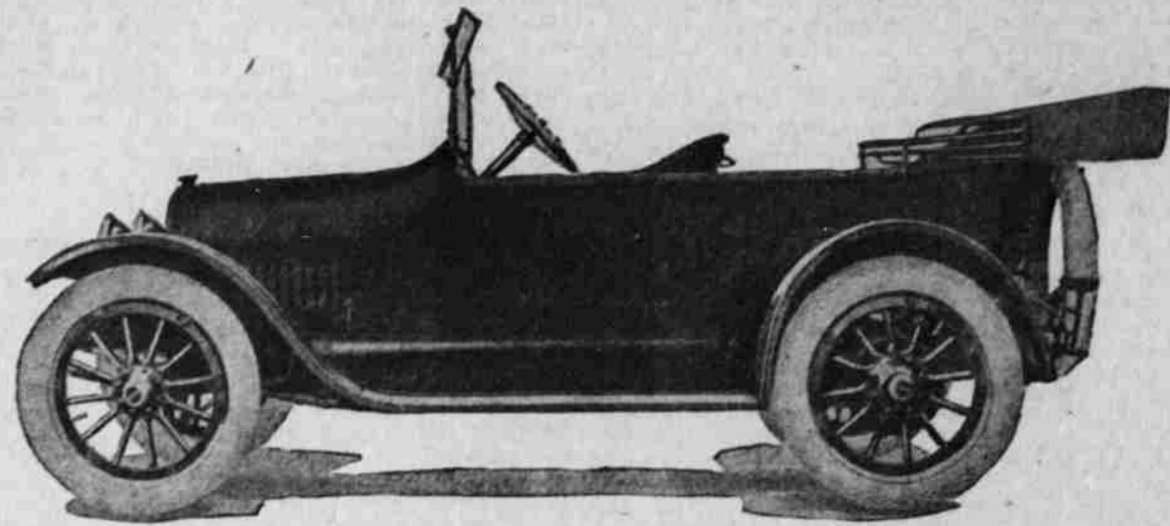
Anticipating strong opposition to the committee, it was decided to arm a select lot of members, including a majority of the military companies, whose members had almost universally joined the committee, and within forty-eight hours after the shooting of Editor King there were two thousand five hundred armed men, drilling, principally at night, in the vicinity of the committee's headquarters, which had been established in Sacramento street, below Front street, where cells had been prepared for the confinement of prisoners. The entrance to the building was protected by bags filled with sand piled in a semi-circle six feet high, which gave it the name of Fort Gunny Bags, and it was here that the most tragic events in the existence of the committee were staged. The old bell on top of the building was there to summon the good citizenship of the city at its very first clang; all were prepared, lest its ringing be the sounding of a death-knell.

As the life of King hung in the balance, the indignation and determination of the people to right their wrong grew apace, but they were restrained from drastic action by the assurance that Casey would be taken from the custody of the sheriff and by the committee.

Those opposed to the Vigilance Committee, and there were many highly respected citizens who did not accord with the views of our organization, met and called themselves the Law and Order Party, and, of course,

(Continued on Page Fourteen)

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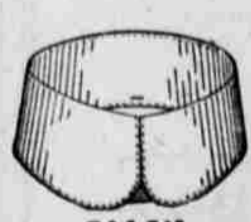


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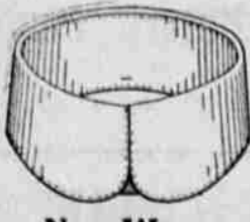
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