

# One shove destroyed original Vacaville jail

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Last in a series

Dating back to at least 1879, one of the jobs of Dixon's marshal was the collection of town taxes and license fees from the hotels and saloons. The marshal then billed the city a percentage. This was a practice in all towns. Oftentimes, there would be a bit of a squabble between the various lawmen - sheriff, constables and marshals - to see who would collect these fees.

In 1883, it was agreed that Vacaville needed a jail, and a frame structure was built on the banks of the Ulatis Creek across from Andrews Park. It wasn't much of a structure. A person could easily escape or be taken out by vigilantes and, consequently, the jail was condemned a number of times by the county grand jury. But it served to hold hobos and drunks and those who committed minor offenses, so it remained. If someone committed a serious crime, they were carted off to the county jail in Fairfield.

In the days before fingerprinting, prisoners were identified by measurements. Wanted posters of the day included the width between the eyebrows, the temples, width of the hand at the knuckles, girth of the head, and lengths of the nose, middle finger and forearm.

"Posters" were note-sized paper with a photo of the criminal. Later, postcards were sometimes used. In 1884, a postcard was issued from Solano County offering a \$25 reward for the capture of James Kirby, accused of stealing a slightly lame gray mare, a harness, a buggy and two nearly new blankets and a quilt. Kirby was described as wearing red overalls, a flannel shirt, a straw hat and as having a "twitching motion when talking."

The town of Dixon built a two-story brick jail that featured two cells with iron doors 4 inches thick. Someone noted after the fact that prisoners would be unable to breathe in such an environment. Perforations were hastily made in the doors.

Dixon had its own way of dealing with town scuffles. In 1890, there was a shooting "scrap" in a saloon. The paper reported, "No one knows anything about it. In fact, there are more know-nothings in town than is necessarily required in a law-abiding city anyway."

Whether a constable carried a gun was a matter of personal choice. Joseph Stadfeld,

who was Vacaville's constable from 1889 to 1933, did not carry a gun in a holster - perhaps in a coat pocket. His 6-foot-5 frame made him an imposing figure that was enhanced by the dress of the day for constables - a large-brimmed black hat and a long black overcoat. Having been a sparring partner for "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, Stadfeld was known for using his might rather than a gun.

The office of town marshal was in place when a town was incorporated. The city of Vacaville was incorporated in 1892 and C.D. Bradley was voted in as marshal. It appears that, as was the case with the constables, the marshals worked for the big taxpayers in the town. When the wealthy fruit growers in Vacaville wanted to get something done, they would send for Bradley. Some maintain the peace officer was basically their employee.

In 1899, it was noted that because there were only 10 prisoners in the county jail, the rock-breaking industry was going to suffer. There was a rock pile along Washington Street and the inmates broke the large rocks into smaller ones. This was done by a chain gang, the inmates attired in striped suits.

In 1890, Harry Stoyell was the appointed master of the chain gang. The inmates also did the gardening in front of the county buildings. If they escaped, they had to wear a ball and chain.

In 1903, a California law was enacted that stated prisoners at the county jails could only be released on Mondays.

Into the first few days of 1900, it was noted that if the New Year continued as it began, the justice of the peace would have little time to spare. Three hobos had been sentenced to prison for vagrancy and one for peddling without a license.

In 1906, "disaster struck" the poorly built Vacaville jail. It was totally demolished when it was shoved into the creek by "unknowns."

Rumor spread that the deed was accomplished by the Women's Improvement Club. Scandalized, the matrons emphatically denied this. Voters approved building a new jail and when the Town Hall was constructed in 1907, jail quarters were located on the lower floor.

Constable Joe Stadfeld was elected marshal, holding both positions concurrently until W.F. Hughes was elected marshal in 1918.

Hughes, a native of New York state, had been stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco during the 1906 earthquake and was later a guard at San Quentin. It was

there where he stepped on a hot electrical line, causing his right hand to fuse and knocking the toes off one foot. Sometime after that he moved to Vacaville where he met his wife, Matilda Schmidt.

Schmidt was born in Russia in 1887 and emigrated to Vacaville with her family in 1897.

She had an early run-in with the law. A tomboy, she loved playing baseball and other sports with the boys and was not at all reluctant to get into fights with them. Constable Stadfeld brought her home one day after she broke a boy's nose. She recalled that Stadfeld communicated with her mother in German.

As marshal, the biggest problem facing Hughes was the Tong family, according to his grandson. Hughes supposedly shot seven or nine Tongs, but this is apparently unrecorded and so it is not known whether these shootings were fatal.

In 1927, it was determined that the city of Vacaville would appoint its law enforcement officials instead of having them elected. Hughes continued as the local official, but the position was now chief of police and he was appointed by the city. He held this position until 1933.

Bird's Landing was the site of some rum-running action during Prohibition. Apparently this port was used by Fred Bettoni and his associate, Paul Rubio Pane. Bettoni owned the rum boat - the Hawk - and had a \$920 interest in Pane's boat, the Elma. The populace at Bird's Landing became fed up with this activity on their shores and seized the Hawk one evening. The crew unloaded 500 cases of liquor and then the Hawk was burned. The Elma appeared on the scene momentarily but, seeing what befell the Hawk, made a hasty departure. She was later captured at Pittsburg by the Feds.

O.E. Alley came on the Vacaville scene in 1932 as the new chief of police, a position he held until 1947. Stadfeld was still constable, though he was a man in his 70s by then. It was at this time that he was sent to help with a labor incident. There he was hit on the head with a brick and had his ear almost torn off. Talk was that the injury somewhat affected him for the rest of his life. He retired in 1933 and died in late 1940s.

O.E. Alley was often referred to by retired Judge Walter Weir as the "last of the great police chiefs."

According to his son, the major incident in Alley's career occurred right when he took office.

This was at the time the local laborers were trying to organize a union. It was called a communist plot, though that was never proved and many believe it was a false rumor to

incite anger against the strikers. In response, a half-dozen of the organizers were locked up in the jail.

Somehow, somebody got the key. There a some story about a sleepy jailer, but the fact is the organizers were handed over to the mob. The prisoners were driven out to Elmira and once there, the organizers were stripped naked and their heads and private parts painted red. This episode caused a great deal of criticism to fall on the city, the mayor and Chief of Police Alley.

An incident that leaves yet another blot on Vacaville's history was recounted by Alley's son to Gary Tatum, the most recently retired chief of police.

Supposedly, a local spinster who was well-liked in the community was raped and she accused a black man, one of the few black people living in the area at time. Alley's son, who was a youngster at the time, remembered that night when hooded men came to their home and forced his father to give them the key to the jail. The hooded group proceeded to the jail and took the prisoner out to Elmira, where he was hanged.

In telling this story, Alley's son acknowledged that his father never kept serious offenders in lockup here, but rather sent them to Fairfield. For whatever reason, in this case he saw fit to leave the accused in town.

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