

# Constable Joe - Two Fists and Compassion

By John Rico

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LAW AND ORDER WITHOUT A GUN - "He knew no race nor creed. His hand was extended in friendship to all and clung to by those in sorrow or in need for he failed no one."

With the world shocked by the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul, those few words would appropriately reflect the admiration for the Pontiff by people in every corner of the world. But, these few words are an excerpt from an eulogy delivered at services for a man who had endeared himself to all of the people of the small town of Vacaville. His name was Joseph Stadtfeld.

A few days ago, while in a conversation with long-time Vacaville resident Ernie Cresswell, he suggested that I do an article on the late Joe Stadtfeld, who had served the community and surrounding area as constable for 43 years. Cresswell, a resident of Vacaville intermittently for 79 years, was well versed with the activities of the late Constable Stadtfeld.

The history of Vacaville recently published, reveals some of the background of the man who preserved law and order here for nearly half a century. Having known Stadtfeld, I will reserve my writings to some of the unpublished episodes in the life of this man.

Joseph Stadtfeld, a native of San Francisco, came to Vacaville as a young man of 16 years, bent on becoming a farmer. Before he had passed away Dec. 10, 1951, he had spent 73 years here, 43 of those years as constable.

Stadtfeld's appearance could fittingly place him into the atmosphere of Dodge City, Tombstone, Cheyenne, and many of the other wild west towns of yesteryear. His long black overcoat covered his six foot four-inch frame, his broad-rimmed black hat, gave him the appearance of a man who could stand his ground under any circumstances. Although he carried a gun, it was not visible. What he did carry, and both quite visible, were two fists and a lightning quick reflect which gave him the potential to become a successful prizefighter. In fact, he did pursue the pugilistic route for many years, and had trained with heavyweight champion Jim Corbett. During his many years as constable those fists were his persuaders, and many a man, especially drunks, knew that to argue with him was a fruitless endeavor.

Stadtfeld retired from his position as constable in 1936, and although no medical

records will Substantiate the facts, there is every indication his compassion can be attributed to his death in 1951.

In late 1932 and early 1933, ranch laborers and orchard owners were locked in a bitter wage dispute. History will record the event as the most unfortunate period ever experienced by this peaceful community. Confrontations between laborers and law enforcement officials were numerous, and it was during one of these melees that Stadtfeld was struck on the head with a pruning shear. Later he was to stumble and fracture a hip, which hospitalized him for months, and it was this succession of injuries which contributed to his death.

It is difficult to make a comparison of the moods and traits of the people today with those of the Stadtfeld days. The widespread use of narcotics; the compulsion of rape, were to come upon the scene in recent years. The advent of prohibition in 1919 did pose a problem for law enforcement officials.

As the saying goes, kids will be kids Youngsters in Stadtfeld's day were equally as mischievous as those of today, but yesteryear's "pranks" were remote from the problems faced by law enforcement officials today.

To pacify his continuing energies, Stadtfeld took a keen interest in training horses for harness racing. Many were the days that he could be seen on Main Street, driving one of his prized animals.

Without mentioning names, some living, some deceased, the pranksters who continually harassed Stadtfeld came from all walks of life. There was never a Halloween to go by, that Vacaville's Main Street was lined with outhouses. There was the day when young men disassembled a buggy, coaxed a horse to climb the wooden steps of old Vaca High, and then reassembled the buggy, hitched the horse. The display was to be found in the hallway of the school.

For many years the barrel of an old canon, resembling a relic from one of the fighting ships which tossed canon balls, was a part of the landscape at Vaca High. When you have a canon convenient, there is the incentive to put it to use. That's just what a group of young men did one night.

Placing black powder, then a quantity of large rocks, a long fuse was ignited, with the intended victims selected being merchants of Vacaville's Japanese and Chinese sections, a few blocks from the school. The blast shook the area; there was no damage anywhere except that every window in the two-story frame high school was shattered.

These are only a few of the episodes confronted by Constable Stadtfeld, and although

without a doubt he knew who the perpetrators were, it was not his desire to apprehend any of these residents.

Stadtfeld had a persuasive manner for handling drunks. He could take the most persistent objector by the back of the neck and lead him to the city jail on East Main Street, with the advice "sleep it off." Never in his 43 years of service did Constable Stadtfeld fire his gun to preserve law and order.

Stadtfeld was a master of persuasion:

Any thought of reprimanding a youngster and turning him over to high officials for confinement to reform schools or jail was not a part of his beliefs. He would calmly walk up to an offender, politely issue a warning, and prominently display, his sledgehammer fists. That proved the medicine' which usually brought results.

History shows the death of Stadtfeld on Dec. 10, 1951, and it also records the passing of Vacaville's Chief of Police Orner E. Alley three days later, Dec. 13. Alley had served the community as traffic officer and police chief for 19 years. He had succeeded town marshal W. F. Hughes.

Vacaville has grown throughout the years. The moods of the people have also changed, the law enforcement techniques have changed to meet present-day challenges.

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