

*The*  
*Historical Society of Southern California*

# QUARTERLY



FOUNDED 1883

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Volume XXXI

**DECEMBER, 1949**

Number 4

# The San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1856

*An Estimate of A Private Citizen*

*Foreword By Robert Glass Cleland*

**T**HE turbulence and ferment of California society that began with the Gold Rush of 1849 continued long after the era of the great bonanzas. In the mid-fifties, lawlessness was endemic throughout the state—on the cattle ranges of the south as well as in the mining regions of the Sierra, in “Nigger Alley” of Los Angeles fully as much as in the gambling saloons and brothels of the northern cities.

But the lawlessness of the cattle range, the mine, the adobe pueblo was of one order; the lawlessness of the huge, boisterous, rich, undisciplined, cosmopolitan city of San Francisco, was of another. Crimes of violence—murder, robbery, arson, and their fellows—were common enough elsewhere in the state, but in San Francisco the alliance between the criminal and the politician made the situation infinitely worse.

During those years the curve of the city’s lawlessness followed a fairly consistent pattern. For a time it rose unchecked, while the law enforcement officers either openly conspired with the criminals or at best made no effective efforts to suppress them. Then, when at last the situation had become intolerable, the outraged citizens took matters into their own hands, organized a law enforcement program of their own, hanged, flogged, or banished the most notorious criminals and frightened others out of the state. Action of this kind was first taken against a lawless group known as the Hounds or Regulators in July, 1849. Two years later a large number of responsible citizens formed the effective, well-organized body that came to be known as the First Com-

mittee of Vigilance. This Committee hanged four criminals, whipped one, deported fourteen, ordered fourteen more to leave the state, and turned fifteen others over to the legal authorities for trial.

By 1856, conditions in San Francisco had again come to such a pass that, according to William H. Brewer, the city's fame "for murder and robbery and violence" was known throughout the world. Its government was in the hands of criminals and corrupt politicians who managed the elections, stuffed the ballot boxes, and controlled all public offices. "Robbers were policemen and murderers were judges," Brewer added. "The life of any respectable man who dared raise his voice against the iniquities of the officers was endangered, and from the corruptions of the courts there was no redress. The most prominent citizens were shot in the streets."

The murder of James King, the editor of the *Daily Evening Bulletin*, by an ex-convict and notorious gambler named James P. Casey brought matters to a crisis. Again the responsible citizens, under the leadership of William T. Coleman, formed themselves into a Committee of Vigilance and proceeded to take over the enforcement of the law.

The following letter from an unknown resident of San Francisco named Minor King describes the actions and accomplishments of this Committee. Though adding little to our factual knowledge of the subject, the letter has both historical and human interest value. It gives the reaction of a typical citizen, a man apparently of ordinary financial and social status, to the actions of the Committee and to the counter-measures taken by the opposition.

Minor King thus represented a cross section of the great body of his fellow citizens of San Francisco and voiced the public opinion that alone made possible the remarkable success of the Committee of Vigilance of 1856.

The letter is an uncatalogued item in the California manuscripts of the Huntington Library and Art Gallery.

Robert G. Cleland.

*Minor King to Minor Mecher, August 2, 1846, San Francisco.*

"My Dear Cousin

"I am very happy to know you Sympathise with the *Free Men and Women* of Kansas, on that Subject I will Join you heart and hand as I am determined to Oppose the further Extension of Slavery while I live, believing it to be one of the greatest Evils that a State or Nation was ever cursed with, and I further believe if we had an honest white man for President the troubles in Kansas would not have taken place but as it is I have only to rejoice that his Political days are numbered, that he has done about all the Evil he can do, and is about to retire from that Seat which he has so much disgraced into a State of retireacy that Knows no Resurrection & despised by all good men.<sup>1</sup> I will just tell you what our Motto is in California, *Free Speech, Free Men, Free Territory, Free Mont*, and the *Pacific Rail Road*, with these great principals we have thrown our Banner to the Breeze, and Expect to triumph in November next—you have no doubt ere this heard of the verry Exciting times we have had in this City for the last two months, the fact is San Francisco is undergoing a purification, And is now in a measure regulated, the work is still going on but when the End will be no one can tell—For a long time the City has ben under the controle of the Vilest of Creation, desperadoes of every caste, the gambler, the thief, the Murderer and Assissin have ben our rulers, from the Judge on the bench to the Smallest Police Officer. All have pandered to their influence and obtained their positions through it—A good citizen has stood no chance whatever he has not dared to Speak his Sentiments, lest some Shoulder Striker<sup>2</sup> at his Elbow Should check him with Pistol or Knife—but a change has taken place, retribution has come upon them at last, and thus far it has ben fearful—

"The last feather that broke the Cammels back was added when James King of Wm was shot down in Broad day light in the Open Street.<sup>3</sup> King was the Editor of the Evening Bulletin and in his paper has ben most fearless and Energetic in denounceing these Scoundrels, his Assassin was J. P. Casey a Man who from '49 to 51 was a convict in Sing Sing Prison N. Y.<sup>4</sup> immediately after his release, he came to this country where it did not take him long to obtain a controleing influence among his class. It is said

he had amassed quite a fortune and has never been known to do an honest day's work since he came here.

"As soon as he had committed the awful deed he was hurried off to Jail by several policemen who seemed to (be) conveniently by and who it is believed were previously aware of his intentions<sup>5</sup>—Soon the citizens began to assemble in the vicinity of the Jail, Such an intensely exciting crowd was never seen before, Some urging an immediate attack on the Jail, and some demanding the Prisoner (be) brought forth and delivered to the People Some Counselling one thing and some another, In the meantime the Sheriff (himself a noted Irish Gambler) had Organized a Strong force of gamblers and Shoulder Strikers within the Jail, and had called on the Military Companies to assist him in securing the Prisoner against harm.<sup>6</sup> After a while the People or at least the great mass of them left the ground leaving a Strong Guard to watch the Jail lest the Sheriff should take him out and secrete him in some other place, this was on Wednesday Evening on the next morning the honest Citizens began to organize a Vigilance Committee, After Enrolling about 3,000 Men and fully equipping them (which took them three days) they marched up to the jail surrounded the same planted a nine pounder cannon in front of the main Door loaded the same with double shot then demanded the Prisoner Casey the Murderer of King and the Prisoner Cora<sup>7</sup> the Murderer of Gen Richardson the United States Marshal of this District the Murder was Committed last November the Prisoner was tried, but the Jury failed to agree & he was in Jail awaiting another trial which we all knew would be but a mere farce, for Cora was one of the first gamblers in the place, I will here state there has (been) 76 Cold Blooded Murders committed in this City within the last two years and only one man executed, and he the poor dog had no money or he would have gone clear.<sup>8</sup> After a Short Consultation the Sheriff thought it wise to bring out the Prisoners, they were taken to the Committment rooms had a fair trial, they were both convicted and executed, these proceedings so enraged the gamblers they called on the Gov for help who by the by is a miserable apology for a Governor, he Orders out the Military of the whole State to put down the Good Citizens of San Francisco, the Call was disregarded by all good respectable people, and was only Obeyed by *Gamblers, Murderers* some *Lawyers, Judges,* and *Thieves* of every grade they assembled in this City and hired rooms in different parts of the Town where

they met for drill the Gov Sending them arms and ammunition to shoot down the best Citizens of the place, the Law and Murder Party now amounted to about 500 all told and now quite sure they were able to put down the Mob as they were pleased to call it<sup>9</sup>—but the Peoples Committee have not been Idle they having fortified their rooms and increased their Numbers to 6,000 good Able bodied men well armed they paid no attention to the Govs troops, but were pushing on the good work of purification, by arresting some of the worst characters in Town, such as Ballet Box Stuffers and Robbers Thieves and Shoulder Strikers and Confining them in their rooms and giving them a trial and if found guilty banish them out of Country, One of Our Supreme Court Judges by the name of David S. Terry<sup>10</sup> came down from the Capital (Sacramento) and joined himself to the Law and Murder Party armed with double barrel gun revolver and Bowie Knife thus Equipt he paraded our Street to protect his Brother gambler, while one of the Vigilance Police by the name of Hopkins<sup>11</sup> was about to arrest one of the worst Scoundrels in Town by the name of Malony, Judge Terry presented his gun to Hopkins breast, Hopkins Says Judge I have nothing to do with you at the same time caught the gun by the muzzle and jerked it out of his hands, the rowdy Judge now draws his Knife and plunges it into Hopkins neck and left him for dead, and fled to one of the armories of the Murder Party for Protection, the alarm was given at the Vigilants rooms, the Bell rung and in less than 15 minutes 5,000 Infantry 200 Cavalry all well armed with guns & Bayonets Cutlasses and four pieces Brass Cannon were surrounding the different armories of the Murderers. I assure you it was not long before his Judge Ship and Compatriots in arms were on their way to the Committees rooms, after the Vigilants had Surrounded the Buildings in which the Govs troops were or at least a portion of them they were ordered to surrender and were given 5 minutes to do it in. I tell you there was no use Parlying, the different garrisons surrendered and lay down their arms without firing a shot the People triumphed Victory Perched upon their Banner and the result was that the Vigilants took 150 Prisoners, 500 Rifles and Muskets, about 100 Cutlasses, one Gen two Majors and a Supreme Court Judge. Such a lot of cut throats you never saw together as was in the Citizens Prison that Night, they were taken about 5 Oclk in the afternoon put in Irons and Keapt prisoners of War until next day about 10 Oclk

when that wer willing to take an oath not to take up arms again against the Committe were set at liberty, with the exception of Judge Terry, Dave Maloney & Some 15 or 20 others who were detained to be tried for different crimes. I believe all but Terry have ben acquitted or shipt out of the Country, Terry has now ben confined about six weeks awaiting the result of Hopkins wound but astonishing to say he is now nearly well, had he died Judge Terry would have pulled hemp no mistake, as it is he will be Banished from this State under the Penalety of Death if he has the audacity to return, I think his Banishment will take place next Tuesday as two Ships leave this City for forren Ports on that day, and I have no doubt that one of them will bear the Scoundrel to some more Cengenal clime than California—<sup>12</sup> The Committe are still at work cleaning out the hounds, and all the good People of this City and throughout the entire State are with them and on their side, they not only support them with their arms but with their Treasure also, one of our Citizens contributed 10,000 Dolls and another \$5,000 for their Suport So you se it is not the miserable loafer and Vagabond that is engaged with and for the Committe no, but the best and worthyest Citizens we have—last Tuesday the Committe Hung two more, one by the name of Brace for the Killing of a Capt West, and the other by the name of Hetherington for the Murder of Docts Baldwin and Randal, he was tried and acquitted by a gambling Jury for the murder of Old Doct Baldwin some 3 years ago and has ben liveing in this City ever since and was said to have accumulated a fortune by gambling & otherwise to the amount of some 70 or 80,000 Dollars, last week he went into one of our Hotels and attacked Doct Randal and shot him dead, I happined to be passing the door at the time, I assure you it was not more than one minuit from the time he fired the fatal shot before he was in the Street and on his way to the Committes Rooms, the Papers I send you will give the particulars—Since the Surrender of Governor Johnsons Troops the Committee have had things their own way and for the first time in this City for three years past have I felt that there was any Safety for Person or Property, Ladies can now walk the Streets with their Husbands without the fear of being insulted by a gang of Loaffers at every corner of the Streets, the Committee have hung four, the notorious Yankey Sullivan<sup>13</sup> committed Suicide in his cell they have banished 20 or more and have frightened more than one hundred from the City, Conse-

quently the gambling houses are shut up and forsaken and a degree of quietness reigns throughout the entire City. Just to show you what a set of Scoundrels we have had in Office I will name two or three, Casey the Assassin of King was declared Elected Supervisor last year and his name was not on a ticket and no one knew he was a Candidate until he was declared Elected by the Inspectors and the Scoundrel took his seat in the board of Supervisors—Another Villain a partner of the Corrinor (coroner. The margin of the letter bears a notation, the "Corrinors name is Whaling.") by the name of Cuningham who, after the Coriner his Partner had held an Inquest over the body of a man found Drowned and had the body Buried, would go in the night disinter the same body bring it in Town and dump it off the Dock next morning another man found Drowned, another Inquest held and so on for as long as the Subject would hold together. Since the Committe was formed and Cuningham banished from the Country the Corinor has not avaredged one inquest a week wheréas before he would average from 10 to 14 per week at a cost of from 45 to 75 Dollars apiece. I tell you Sir this City has been Robbed of Millions by these imps of Hell, the honest Business man has borne with these Scamps until forbareance had ceased to be a Virtue and have ben compelled to take the Law into their own hands and administer it in the way it was intended, which was to convict the guilty and protect the inocent, We understand the Governor has sent on to President Pierce for troops, Should he se fit and think best to comply with the Gov request his troops will meet a warmer reception in San Francisco then they did in Kansas, for we have the simpathy of 9,10th of all the men women & children in the entire State.

"I must now draw my letter to a close as I may weary your patience by so long account of our troubles, you will please give my Kind regards to all My Cousins in your place

"And accept for yourself and Family My best Wishes

"I am with much respect

Your Affectionate Cousin

M. Meeker Esq.

Minor King.

P. S. I will just say when the Gov ordered out the Military all our Indipendant Companies disbanded and Joined the Vigilants, the Committe have now all the States Arms in their possession, and will return them again when their work is completed, and not before.

## NOTES

1. The writer is evidently an ardent anti-slavery member of the newly formed Republican party. Franklin Pierce, in King's mind the direct antithesis of "an honest white man," was elected President on the Democratic ticket in 1852. Buchanan rather than "Free Mont" succeeded Pierce.
2. Shoulder Striker: The term, an obsolete colloquialism, was applied to one who hit or struck "straight from the shoulder." It was equivalent to our word thug.
3. "The gadfly of San Francisco." King had been a member of the First Committee of Vigilance and became editor of the *Daily Evening Bulletin* on October 8, 1855. He attacked the members of the powerful firm of Palmer, Cook and Company, whom he called the "Uriah Heaps of San Francisco bankers" as well as the gamblers, grafters, and politicians.
4. King had denounced Casey, then a San Francisco Supervisor, as a former inmate of Sing Sing Prison. He later ignored both a challenge to a duel and Casey's threats against his life. The evidence seems to support the contemporary opinion that Casey shot King in cold blood.
5. The grand jury indicated Casey, Peter Wightman, a butcher, and Edward McGowan for the murder. In 1857, McGowan, or "Ned, the Ubiquitous," published a lurid volume entitled *Narrative of Edward McGowan*, including a Full Account of the Author's Adventures and Perils while Persecuted by the San Francisco Vigilance Committee of 1852.
6. The Sheriff was David Scannell.
7. Charles Cora, a notorious Italian gambler, had become involved in a quarrel with William Richardson, the United States marshall. The quarrel was apparently settled but as the two stood talking on Montgomery Street near Clay, Cora seized Richardson by the lapel of the coat and shot him with a Derringer. It was said that Richardson was unarmed at the time.
8. One writer asserted that there had been 1000 murders between 1849 and 1856 with only one conviction.
9. The Law and Order Party was supported by Governor J. Neely Johnson and had William Tecumseh Sherman and later General Volney Howard as its leader.
10. David S. Terry was one of the most controversial figures in the stormy political life of early California. In 1859, in the most famous duel ever fought in California, he shot and killed Senator David C. Broderick. He himself was shot and killed in 1889 by a bodyguard of Justice Stephen J. Field. Terry was an able and fearless judge and history may some day modify its present harsh estimate of his character.
11. Sterling A. Hopkins was chosen by the Committee to carry out the actual execution of Casey and Cora.
12. Terry was set free, perhaps because the Committee feared the intervention of the Federal or State government, when Hopkins' recovery was assured.
13. "Yankey" Sullivan was an ex-English prize fighter who had escaped to New Zealand from the penal colony at Sidney and later came to San Francisco. The Committee had no intention of hanging him, but the poor wretch, who usually had fifty or sixty drinks a day, was deprived of liquor while in prison and probably killed himself in a fit of delirium tremens.