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Author: Kim Allen Scott

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ANATOMY OF A LYNCHING

By Kim Allen Scott

The log crashed against the jailhouse door with a force born of hysteria, and the prisoners within watched with increasing terror as the thick planks buckled inward. Again the log battering ram smashed into the barrier, and again the angry hissing of whispered voices in the darkness outside urged the dreadful work to continue. A few more assaults and the door would be reduced to splinters, and the prisoners cowered against the far wall, screaming for help in the desperate hope that someone, somehow, would come and stop the mob before it was too late.

From his office in the McAdow building on the north side of Main Street, Gallatin County Sheriff John C. Guy heard the shouts and rushed outside to investigate. He rounded the corner and looked north along Bozeman Creek toward the little log jailhouse where a crowd of nearly a hundred men quietly watched the team working the battering ram. Guy knew he would need help to stop a crowd of that size, but his undersheriff, Charles P. Blakeley, had gone home hours before and no one could be seen loitering in front of the darkened storefronts lining the street. One block west, however, light streamed from the windows of the Northern Pacific Hotel, and the sheriff ran towards the building with hopes that a few good men could be recruited to assist in preserving the peace. When Guy arrived, he found the few citizens sitting in the hotel's dining room curiously unconcerned with his news of a mob assaulting the jail, and when he asked for help to quell the disturbance one lounger protested that none of them had guns. Guy brandished his own weapon to convince a few of the patrons to follow him into the street, and they moved stealthily east along Main, keeping the row of buildings on the north side of the street as a screen between them and the mob gathered around the jail. The precaution proved fruitless, though, because just short of the bridge which spanned Bozeman Creek, Sheriff Guy was approached by two men who had been watching from the shadows of nearby buildings. The sheriff's reluctant posse melted away as the mysterious sentinels seized Guy and relieved him of his pistol. Turning him around, they marched the officer back down Main Street to Lamme's Mercantile where they would keep him under guard until their comrades at the jail had finished their work.



The lynching of Z.A. Triplett and John W. St.Clair on February 1, 1873 is arguably the darkest episode in the history of Bozeman.

By this time, the door to the jail had broken through, and into the darkened interior rushed a few men with ropes and guns. Threatening the prisoners with instant death if they continued yelling, one of the men struck a match and examined the inmates. Illuminated in the glare of firelight, the wild-eyed stare of a

dark-skinned face shone briefly and the huddled form of a gray haired man lying helplessly on the floor could be seen. The invaders roughly jerked the old man to his feet, grabbed the dark skinned prisoner, and tied their hands behind their backs with stout cord. Two other prisoners watched the proceedings in terror, and as the bound men were shoved outside into the night one of the vigilantes turned to the remaining pair and said, "If you try to leave, you will get the same as these two."

While the mob dragged their captives east, splashing across Bozeman Creek, and headed towards the stockyard and slaughterhouse, another officer of the law decided to intervene. Judge Samuel W. Langhorne heard the commotion from his drugstore next to the Cooper Armory and knew exactly what those noises meant. Langhorne stepped out into Main Street and ran parallel to the retreating mob while calling for them to stop. The same vigilante sentinels that had prevented Sheriff Guy from interfering also stopped the Judge. Langhorne returned to his drug store and managed to convince a friend to ride to Fort Ellis, three miles distant, and fetch some soldiers for the emergency. The courier also met sentinels at the bridge who prevented him from completing his errand. It would take an hour before the Judge could dispatch another rider to the fort, and while that time passed, the mob dragged their prisoners almost all the way to the McAdow mill pond where there was a wood frame structure that served as a hoist for slaughtering cows. There they would mete out the ultimate punishment to the men they had taken from the jail, and by the time any soldiers arrived the only people remaining on the scene would be two corpses dangling from the cross beam.

The lynching of Z.A. Triplett and John W. St.Clair on February 1, 1873 is arguably the darkest episode in the history of Bozeman, and one of the more unsavory examples of vigilantism in Montana's extensive record of citizens who took the law into their own hands. As a brutal study in the application of extralegal justice, the Bozeman lynching offers details which allow an in depth examination of the incident, even though the town did its best to obfuscate the particulars as time passed. Unlike the more celebrated vigilantes of Bannack and Virginia City, no Bozeman participants stepped forward to take credit for the deed, nor wrote of it in later years with self-congratulatory accounts that justified the action taken on that terrible night. Yet even though none of the Bozeman vigilantes ever identified themselves, they did leave a record in the popular press and in several private accounts that allow contemporary researchers to study the causation of frontier vigilantism in far greater depth than most other examples that can be found in Montana's sometimes violent past. This paper will examine piecemeal those details in the context of what historians have identified as key elements in the phenomenon of vigilantism on the American frontier, and bring to light the real reasons why a crowd of angry men dragged Triplett and St. Clair to their doom on that cold February night 130 years ago.

At first glance, the town of Bozeman in 1873 presented an unlikely venue for vigilante justice. Established in 1864 as a frontier way station to serve the needs of gold seeking immigrants traveling to the Alder Gulch mines, Bozeman had been settled by farmers and merchants rather than the rough and tumble crowds who gathered at the mining camps. Instead of a temporary population that ballooned within a few short months, Bozeman grew slowly, with settlers who came to farm, establish businesses and raise families. No wave of violence like that which drove the vigilantes of Bannack and Virginia City ever occurred in Bozeman during the first nine years of its existence, and the presence of nearby Fort Ellis provided an armed government presence that precluded widespread concerns over lawlessness from either whites or Indians in the Gallatin Valley. The physical appearance of the town mirrored the solid, steady growth of its social institutions too. In the early 1870s brick buildings began to replace the wooden storefronts along the lengthy main street, and the population of approximately 500 people could boast of such amenities as several churches, two Masonic lodges, and a "Young

Men's Club" with an embryonic public library.

But a darker underside existed to the surface tranquility of frontier Bozeman. The same Fort Ellis garrison that provided protection and a solid economic base for agricultural produce also contributed scores of drunken celebrants patronizing the town's saloons and bordellos. The latter institutions employed indentured Chinese women plying their trade in a near hopeless attempt to buy their way out of a lifetime of virtual slavery. Shiftless pimps and tinhorn gamblers lived on the fringes of this countercultural community, living off the earnings of their women or what they could extort from soldiers who came to town on payday sprees. Adding to the unsavory mix were the frontier drifters; hide hunters, failed prospectors, and common tramps, who lived by sporadic day labor and petty thievery. To the town's upper class of large property owners like Nelson Story and successful merchants like Lester Willson, the underclass represented little more than a nuisance with the important exception of their impact on county government expenditures. As the chief taxpayers of the community, Story, Willson, and their peers resented the drain on local government finances caused by the necessary support of a legal infrastructure to deal with the myriad small crimes committed by the town's lower element.

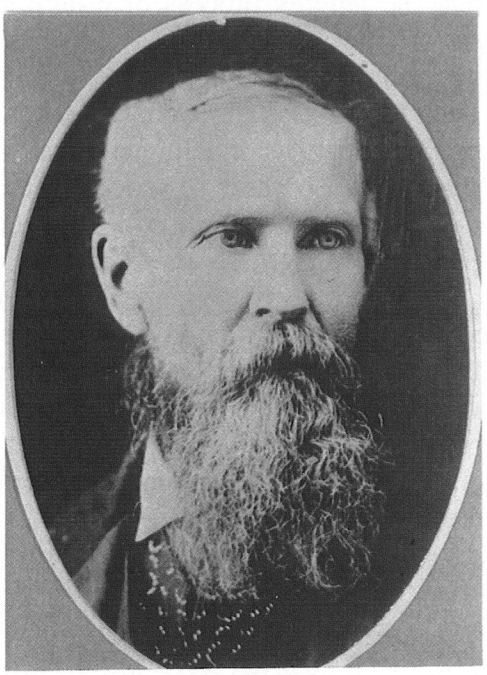
Bozeman's middle class, the small shop owners, attorneys, physicians, and tradesmen, shared the resentment over the tax burden, but also catered to the needs of the underclass as customers and clients. Their contact with the countercultural element was more intimate, and bred more visceral resentment when firewood turned up missing from a woodshed, or when laundry was stolen from an unattended clothesline. Often their anger would be directed specifically at the Chinese residents, whose seemingly bizarre habits contributed to crime and safety violations. "Celestials" and their businesses had been a source of constant complaint in the columns of the *Avant Courier*, Bozeman's only newspaper, and sometimes the editor suggested extralegal means of dealing with the foreigners. After a fire started in a Chinese laundry in August 1872, the *Courier* pointedly demanded the owners be forced to sell the building "to prevent any further chances of heavy loss by its existence and continued occupation by these careless opium devouring Mongolians."[1] Likewise the alleged lax morality of the Chinese caused many middle class residents to eye with suspicion any white men associated with the oriental population, and to also blame them for every mysterious property disappearance that occurred in the town.

Historian Richard Maxwell Brown has described an "ideology of vigilance" commonly held by those on the American frontier who resorted to extra-legal means of dealing with lawbreakers. According to Brown, "the philosophy of vigilantism had three major components: self preservation, popular sovereignty, and the right of revolution,"[2] and their acceptance allowed frontiersmen to rationalize breaking the law in order to preserve the law. That such an ideology found widespread acceptance in Bozeman is easy to demonstrate because even the most vocal critics of the 1873 lynching expressed a belief in all its tenets. Regarding the idea of communal self-preservation, Joseph Wright, the anti-vigilante publisher of the *Avant Courier*, acknowledged in an editorial that the celebrated hangings in Virginia City and Bannack nearly a decade earlier were justifiable because "no other means existed for self preservation or the punishment of wrong." [3] To preserve the very life of a community, claimed Wright in another editorial, "necessity demands that the people rise in defense of their rights and lives."[4] Closely following the idea of self defense, the concept of popular sovereignty, the will of the people to have lawless men executed, also found voice in Bruce's paper when a writer identified only as "____h" claimed, "The people are absolute in the matter, and with us, the people, the blame must rest in great measure. If we elect inefficient and corrupt officers, the fault is our own,"[5] (and so, presumably, was the remedy). That remedy involved the right of revolution, of course, and in that aspect of vigilante philosophy the same writer affirmed "we stand in need of a general

uprising of the honest portion of the community in favor of a sweeping reform . . ."[6] Even though these comments came from those critical of the Bozeman lynchings, it is significant that the writers felt compelled to acknowledge the legitimacy of the underlying justification of earlier Montana vigilante action. As one would expect, all writers sympathetic with the Bozeman executions used virtually the same language to justify their actions.

Aside from public declarations accepting the ideology of vigilance, a few of Bozeman's leading citizens were well-known veterans of the 1864 lynchings in Montana's gold camps, a movement whose notoriety by 1873 had introduced the word "vigilante" into popular American English. For example, John S. "Jack" Mendenhall, one of Bozeman's first saloon keepers and master of one of the town's Masonic lodges, had likely been present when Henry Plumer and his cohorts had been captured and hung in Bannack.[7] Another example from Bozeman's elite upper class was Nelson Story, certainly the richest man in Gallatin County and well known as a former member of the 1864 vigilantes. Even the Gallatin County sheriff himself, John C. Guy, had been a member of the Virginia City hangmen. The acceptance of vigilante justice then, along with the men who had already practiced it, were definitely in place on the eve of Bozeman's lynching.

But in order for self-righteous hangmen, fired with the zeal of revolution and community self preservation to act on their impulses, both crime and the perceived impotence of institutions to deal with crime, must be present. In Bozeman, both of those elements took place over a period of months starting in the summer of 1872. In July of that year the petty larceny and rowdiness of the town's underclass were briefly overshadowed by the excitement surrounding a much more serious rural infraction. A rash of horse thefts in the county surrounding the town culminated with a successful pursuit of the criminals by a posse led by Sheriff Guy. After a fierce gunfight at the outlaw's camp in the mountains twelve miles southwest of Henry's Lake, three of the thieves were killed and two captured. The prisoners, Gus Callahan and George Clark (alias "Piute Jack"), both hailed from Bozeman, and Callahan's parents had been among the original settlers of the town.[8] Ironically, Callahan had achieved local fame the previous spring for gunning down a Bannock Indian accused of stealing horses from the Crow Agency, but now Sheriff Guy brought Gus back to town as a prisoner for the same crime.[9] Once Callahan and "Piute Jack" were locked away in the log jail just west of Bozeman Creek the resentment against Bozeman's underclass smouldered, but more level-headed residents still had faith that the prisoners would be properly punished. Lester Willson's store clerk, Peter Koch, wrote to his fiancee, "All the thieves were boys well known around Bozeman, some of them well liked; but no mercy is shown a horse thief in this country."[10]



John C. Guy

Contrary to Koch's declaration, one of the captured thieves did receive a mercy of sorts. Gus Callahan had been behind bars no more than a day when he asked Undersheriff Charles Blakeley to let him out "to attend some business." Incredible as it may seem, Blakeley not only let Callahan out, but he asked Paul McCormick, a man who had ridden with Sheriff Guy's posse, to accompany Callahan on his errands while Blakeley attended to other business of his own. Perhaps Callahan's status as the son of an old time settler and killer of an Indian horse thief explains the preferential treatment, but the leniency had disastrous results. McCormick escorted

Callahan around town for most of the afternoon and prepared to return him to jail when the prisoner asked to step into the Kiyus Saloon for a final drink. As soon as Callahan entered the building an unidentified man, perhaps a friend of the prisoner, distracted McCormick for a moment outside the front door. By the time McCormick entered the saloon himself, Callahan had run to the back door and bolted out into the brush growing along Bozeman Creek. Although a search immediately commenced, Callahan was never seen again.[11] After this incident even those few who felt disposed to trust the official justice system had ample cause to reexamine their support.

One of the horse thieves remained safely in the jail. "Piute Jack" tried to negotiate his own release by turning state's evidence, and had his attorney ask for bail, but Judge Samuel W. Langhorne refused. As a result, "Piute Jack" had no choice but to bide his time while waiting for the November term of the district court, and in late October another serious criminal joined him at the jail. Z.A. Triplett, a sixty-three year old trapper who had taken to dealing in Yellowstone River fish for his living, came to Bozeman to sell his catch and spend his earnings on whiskey. On the night of October 25, he had a late dinner at a lunchroom on Main Street with some friends who had also been drinking heavily. When time came to settle the bill, the manager, a Swiss immigrant named Gempler, demanded payment and began quarreling over the price with his drunken customers. After Triplett refused to pay, Gempler took the old man's overcoat as collateral and summarily pushed him out into the cold night, turning to continue his argument with the other drunks. Triplett waited outside the door, and when Gempler tossed out the second man, the old trapper plunged a knife into the restaurateur's abdomen. Gempler lingered until six o'clock the next morning before he died, and Triplett promptly surrendered to Sheriff Guy.[12] Now the county jail had two long term prisoners to feed and house in addition to the more rapid turnover of drunks and rowdies who were lodged in the facility on any given night, a fact which angered more than a few of Bozeman's taxpayers.

According to Richard Brown's study of frontier vigilantism, an underlying economic rationale accompanied the philosophy of extra-legal executions in the American west. Even though vigilantes espoused the virtues of popular sovereignty and democratic principles to justify their actions, the actual operation of the process "was firmly in the hands of the local elite."[13] Vigilante justice was cheaper, swifter, and more sure than the lengthy process of established courtroom procedures, and for the major taxpayers of any frontier community the benefits of quickly disposing of criminals had great appeal. This situation in Bozeman during the winter of 1872-73 is a good example of the conditions that fueled such ideas. Gallatin County's tax base consisted entirely of property owners, and the fact that many payments were delinquent that year is a matter of pubic record. The problem of collecting property taxes became so serious by early 1873 that the Gallatin County Board of Commissioners petitioned the governor to convene a special session of the territorial legislature to confirm the county's right to assess and collect taxes from citizens who resisted their authority to do so.[14] The result of delinquent payments had disastrous effects that winter, as Charles Blakeley recalled many years later. "As a matter of fact our county was almost bankrupt," he wrote, "County warrants had been as low as 25 cents on the dollar, but at this time was worth about 40 or 50 cents."[15] In such an economic situation, even the most trivial government expenses seemed enormous. Accordingly, when a number of lesser criminals came to share the jail with Triplett and "Piute Jack," their care and feeding represented a serious drain on a limited treasury. To those few who paid the bulk of the taxes, the town's upper class, the continued maintenance of prisoners at a substandard jail seemed a perfect example of wasteful spending on an inefficient and corrupt legal system.

Those perceptions of wasteful spending received reinforcement on November 3, when the Hon. F. G. Servis, the newly appointed Judge for the First Judicial District, arrived in Bozeman

and heard the report of a grand jury who asserted "the jail was not safe and recommend the employment of a guard until the sentence of the prisoners."[16] Joseph Wright of the *Courier* felt compelled to acknowledge the expense of regular justice even while he defended the efficacy of the legal system to his readers:

> *It is a matter of congratulation to the tax payers of this county that Judge Servis had exhibited such commendable promptitude in the matter of holding a court immediately upon his arrival in the territory. There are three criminal cases on the docket, and had the term lapsed it would have taxed our people with an additional cost of several thousand dollars.*[17]

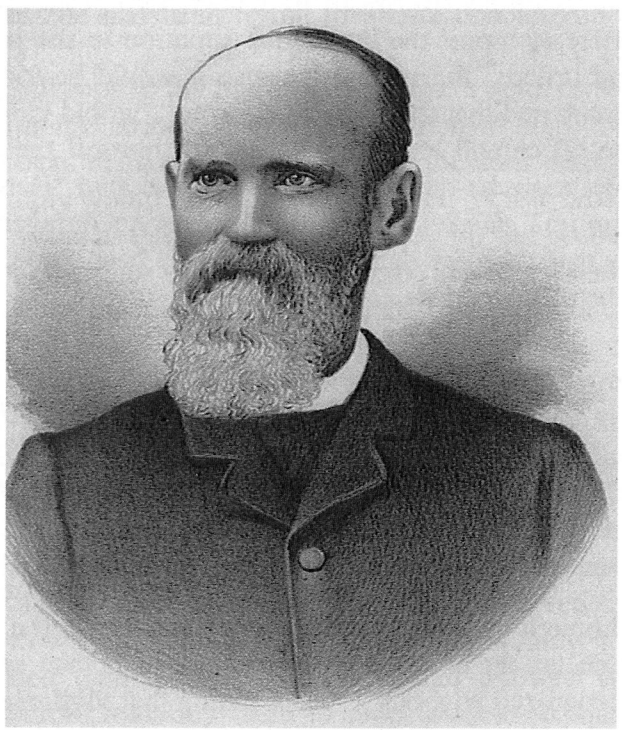
No one conversant with the facts would be soothed by Wright's assurances, even though "Piute Jack" had been duly sentenced to a year in the territorial penitentiary and no longer consumed groceries in the local jail. The town's citizens knew that in addition to publishing the local newspaper, Joseph Wright was Z.A. Triplett's attorney, a job he performed so well that when the Judge left at the end of the week Triplett's case was held over until the court's next term on the first Monday of March, 1873.[18]

While Triplett languished in jail and winter closed in on the little town, Bozeman resumed its surface tranquility. If anyone begrudged the expenditures for cordwood to heat the jail or meals to feed the old man imprisoned there they did not write letters to the newspaper about the matter. However, indirect evidence suggests that at least some grumbling about the merits of swift capital punishment for cases like Triplett's reached Joseph Wright's ear. On January 24, 1873 he chose as a filler for the front page of the *Courier* a story entitled "Is Hanging a Cruelty?" Quoting the scientific research of Dr. Paul F. Eve of Louisville, Kentucky, Wright asserted:

> *Hanging is a beastly way of killing a criminal, even when artistically done by a sheriff who understands his business and never loses his presence of mind. But when the job is bungled, as it is three times out of five, hanging is horrible, inhuman, and disgusting . . . best of all would be the abolition of the death penalty in all its forms.*[19]

That many readers completely disagreed with the editor would be demonstrated all too soon as the final series of events galvanized the men of Bozeman to act.

All the essential elements necessary for vigilante action in a frontier town were definitely in place during the opening weeks of 1873. A widespread acceptance of the philosophy of vigilantism among the elite and middle class, a troublesome underclass that continued to be seen as a safety threat, and an economic situation that exacerbated



Samuel Langhorne

the impatience with regular justice all existed in Bozeman that winter. One more aspect of extra-legal justice, that of racism, has been alluded to in the general perception of Chinese residents by the white majority, but racial considerations became an even more important element when considering the final event that brought about the town's lynching.

John W. St. Clair, popularly known as "Steamboat Bill," was a mulatto pimp who had lived in Bozeman for most of 1872, "living by imposing upon Chinamen, demanding his meals from them and extorting money from them by threats with his revolver."[20] Even Joseph Wright, whom "Steamboat Bill" also retained as his attorney, described him as "a hybrid of some kind, in whom Negro blood predominated. A young man of low instincts, without character, and whose life, so far as known, was passed in the haunts of vice and the purlieus of profligacy."[21] Bill had several minor scrapes with the law during his residence in Bozeman, including one incident when he threw a lit kerosene lamp at his woman, ignited the wallpaper in the room, and nearly burned down the house.[22] On Thursday afternoon, January 30, 1873, Bill offered to treat a friend to a cigar and then went to the room of the Chinese prostitute he lived with to get the needed fifty cents. The woman refused, and Bill drew his revolver and pointed it at the woman's head to threaten her. Intentionally or by accident, the gun went off inches from her face and instantly killed her.

Sheriff Guy promptly arrested Bill and took him to jail where he remained overnight. The next day, Friday January 31, Judge Langhorne came to the sheriff's office to hold a formal hearing to register the charge against the prisoner. However, after considering an argument made by Bill's attorney, Joseph Wright, Langhorne made a curious decision that would have dire consequences. According to Wright, his client had shot a woman whom he depended on for his living, a fact that gave credibility to Bill's claim the gun had gone off accidentally. Apparently the judge did not consider the crime of accidentally killing a Chinese "frail sister" as serious as stealing a horse or stabbing a white restaurant owner and Langhorne decided to release Bill on his own recognizance until Judge Servis returned to hold the district court in March.

News of Bill's release spread quickly through the little town that afternoon, and the angry conversations overheard by Undersheriff Charles Blakeley caused him to hurry to the sheriff's office to report the dangerous situation to the judge. Langhorne explained to Blakeley that he had ordered the release because it would be too expensive to keep Bill in the jail for a whole month and that the town's taxpayers "would kick if he made cost." However, after the judge left the office and had time to hear for himself the dark rumors circulating along Main Street that afternoon, he returned with a writ and said "Here is a mittimus. Arrest Steamboat Bill and lock him up." Blakeley needed no further encouragement and quickly got Bill into the jail again, but by that time the damage had already been done. "That evening I sat up till a rather late hour," Blakeley recalled:

> *and [I] got . . . A.D. McPherson, who was night watchman at that time, to watch the hall a number of our townspeople seemed to be congregating in and report to me any action taken by the meeting. Near 11:00 o'clock McPherson reported to me that the meeting had broken up and disbanded and the men had gone to their homes. I thought that the excitement had blown over, but not so.*[23]

No one knows exactly who called the meeting at O'Dell's Hall that Friday night, although as Peter Koch wrote to his uncle, the meeting consisted "generally of our very best men, as far as known, for nobody of course speaks of having a share in it or admits that he recognized anybody."[24] Assuming that vigilante action usually took place under the direction of a frontier community's elite citizens, it is reasonable to account for the whereabouts of

Bozeman's upperclass men on that night. From specific mention within stories printed in the *Avant Courier*, three of the town's leading citizens can be definitely placed in Bozeman at the time: Lester Willson (Koch's employer), Nelson Story, and John S. Mendenhall, but others, like Mendenhall's business partner Dr. Achilles Lamme can only be considered as likely to have been in town when the meeting took place. Regardless of who among Bozeman's male population actually organized the "Committee Three Hundred" they certainly decided to take no action that Friday night and simply agreed on what needed to be done, agreed on a time for doing it the next night, and then dispersed.

February 1, 1873 started as a normal day in Bozeman with the standard Saturday business traffic making the streets a bustling mixture of farmers who had come to town to buy supplies, soldiers who had come to indulge in the town's fleshpots, and merchants who busily tended their stores. Many of those shopkeepers had a secret resolve for later activity but some, like Peter Koch, simply tried to mind their own business. "I knew nothing at all of the intention of the vigilantes until about two o'clock [Saturday morning]," he wrote his uncle. " It was pretty generally known however, what would be done; but I had been busy all day and heard very little of what was going on."[25] If Charles Blakeley had been aware of what would be done that evening he deliberately chose to ignore it and, towards sundown, he left the sheriff's office to walk home to his cabin about a half mile south along Bozeman Creek. About ten o'clock that evening in the back of Lester Willson's store on Main Street, Peter Koch had just finished recording the day's transactions and decided to relax a few moments before retiring to his room at the Laclede Hotel. "While I was sitting in the office reading," said Koch,

> *a man came in through the back door and asked me to let him have thirty feet of rope. I got up to cut it off for him, but he acted so strangely, that although I had no inkling of what was going on, it struck me all at once what he wanted it for, and I told him, that I didn't think I wanted to sell him any rope that night. He took my refusal very quietly and walked out.*[26]

Koch realized all too well that the threats he had been trying to ignore that afternoon were about to come true.

At about the same time Koch refused to sell rope to his mysterious visitor, a quiet crowd of about a hundred men gathered around the jailhouse according to their prearranged plan. No one had keys to the padlock so one of the men began methodically chopping at the door with an ax, but the stout planks and heavy iron hinges simply would not yield to his blows. A few others ran to the nearby creek where a log footbridge spanned the watercourse, picked up the timber, and hauled it back to the axeman hacking away at the door's hinges. While the prisoners inside the jail began screaming for help, and Sheriff Guy ran off looking for some men to deputize for a rescue, a team of vigilantes hoisted the heavy log and began to steadily smash it against the door.

Since no one recorded the particulars of what exactly happened during the somber march of the prisoners to the stockyard east of town we will never know if the vigilantes indulged in the semblance of a trial. It is a matter of record that other frontier incidents frequently included this ritual before the condemned were led to the noose, and it is reasonable to assume that the Bozeman committee briefly observed the rites of the courtroom before standing Triplett and "Steamboat Bill" under the framework of the slaughterhouse "beef swing" and placed the ropes around their necks. However, instead of using the windlass hoist that would have allowed the vigilantes to winch the men off the ground and slowly strangle them, the executioners threw the ropes over the front beam of the structure, tied them securely in place, and allowed the condemned men to be supported momentarily before releasing them to drop to their deaths.[27]

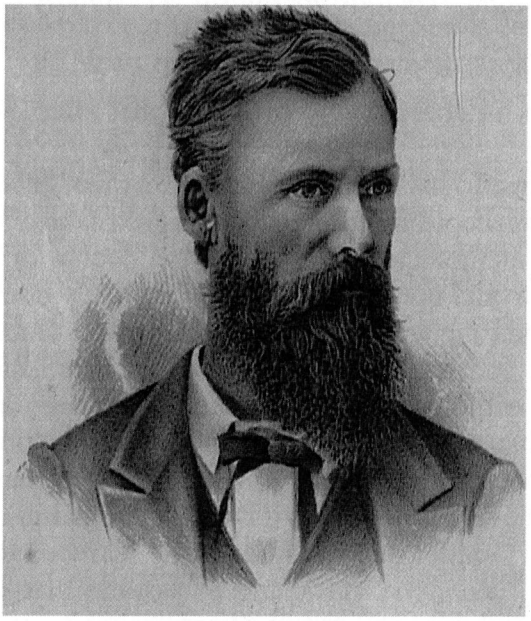
After completing the grisly work, the crowd quickly melted away and only the dead bodies swinging in the moonlight remained when Lt. Samuel T. Hamilton arrived after midnight with his cavalry troopers. After a brief consultation with Sheriff Guy, Hamilton led his men back to Fort Ellis and Guy returned to his home.

A brilliant sun greeted the day on Sunday, February 2, and Undersheriff Blakeley prepared to leave his home on south Bozeman Creek. "I started to walk down to town but soon after leaving the house a man rode up on horseback and asked me if I had heard the news," he remembered, "I inquired what it was. He pointed over toward McAdow's mill pond. I looked up and could see two men hanging . . ."[28] Apparently neither Sheriff Guy nor Lt. Hamilton had considered it worthwhile to cut down the bodies and prepare them for burial and they presented a ghastly sight twisting slowly in the Sabbath morning sunlight. "Triplett's death must have been a painless one," reported Joseph Wright:

> *. . . his features were natural, calm, and strange as it may appear, bore the semblance of a smile, while the other, we think, suffered much agony. The tongue was swollen and reached through the lips, the features distorted, and the left hand firmly grasping the pantaloons, a hold broken with difficulty when preparing the body for the grave.*[29]

The bodies remained hanging until Joshua Crissman, a local photographer who had spent the previous summer making stereoviews of Yellowstone National Park, could set up his tripod and take an image of the vigilance committee's handiwork.

The violence had not finished for the little town. Another Chinese prostitute named Annie Lincum who had also depended on "Steamboat Bill's" protection, became aware that morning that her own life was now in danger. Realizing that the male Chinese community had long resented her status as a woman beyond their control, Annie tried to turn to the white community for help. On Sunday afternoon, she went to the home of Mrs. Susan Hunter, a two-story log cabin just southeast of the jail, and pleaded for asylum. After trying to explain her predicament, Annie said "Me go home and getee killed,"[30] but Mrs. Hunter may have mistaken the woman's garbled English to refer to "Steamboat Bill," who obviously was no longer a danger to anyone. Regardless of the reason, Mrs. Hunter "just laughed and said he wouldn't kill her," before sending the distraught Annie on her way.[31] Later that afternoon the prostitute was found inside her home strangled with a rope.



Charles Blakeley

At about the same time Annie met her death, Judge Samuel W. Langhorne held a coroner's court over the bodies of Triplett and "Steamboat Bill." The jury, consisting of men from the town's middle class, heard all the evidence and simply pronounced that the prisoners were "unlawfully hung by the neck until they were dead by some party or parties to us unknown."[32] In spite of the outrage of Joseph Wright over the murder of his clients, no one seemed to be able to identify anyone who had taken part in the lynching, and even Sheriff Guy had trouble remembering the identity of the two men who

forced him to wait in Lamme's store until the executions were completed.

On Monday after the body of Annie had been discovered, Judge Langhorne held another coroner's inquest, and suddenly the memory of Bozeman's citizens dramatically improved. Mrs. Hunter reported Annie's final words, and someone else recalled that a Chinese man named Ah Moi had attempted to buy rope the night before. In a circumstance peculiarly similar to Peter Koch's refusal to sell rope to his late night visitor at Willson's store, the witness claimed Ah Moi had been denied the purchase based on implied threats to "hang some person."[33] The coroner's jury ruled Annie's death had been caused by three Chinese men, Ah Moi, "Joe" and "Susan's Man," and Sheriff Guy managed to get two of them immediately into custody. However, Guy had no place to keep his suspects. The jail had been severely damaged in the vigilante attack on Saturday night and the remaining two prisoners spared by the vigilance committee had sat terrified in the building all Saturday night with the door wide open. Today they still showed no inclination to voluntarily leave the building, but now that they would have to share the cabin with two Chinese suspects, the danger of another vigilance committee visitation seemed likely. Accordingly, Sheriff Guy and Undersheriff Blakeley took all four men out to Fort Ellis for safekeeping, at least until the jail could be made secure again.

The vigilante action in Bozeman was over. A few days later Judge Langhorne held a preliminary examination of the evidence against the Chinese men and found it insufficient to hold them for trial.[34] On their release, apparently no one seemed particularly outraged at the failure of the courts to bring anyone to justice for the murder of Annie Lincum, and it remained for Joseph Wright alone to express any sort of indignation regarding her death. "The danger of bad example cannot be too forcibly stated or sufficiently guarded against," Wright lectured his readers regarding the prostitute's murder, but after the release of her accused killers the *Avant Courier* had nothing more to say of the incident.[35]

The vigilante action against Triplett and "Steamboat Bill" continued to spark a great deal of discussion in the newspaper, especially after an anonymous note arrived at Wright's office on the afternoon of February 1:

Editor Avant Courier
Dear Sir:
Permit us to inform the good people of Gallatin County through the columns of your noble paper, that all action of desperados, such as garotting soldiers, shooting and stabbing white men or Chinese, is now and forever played out in this community. So mote it be.
COMMITTEE THREE HUNDRED [36]

The letter, intended to supplement the graphic public display of the executed men which greeted Bozeman's citizens on that bright Sunday morning, contained two significant clues to the identity of the vigilantes. The entire population of Bozeman in 1873 could not have been much over 500, with a small minority of women and children. The allusion to a committee consisting of 300 members would imply that just about every adult male property owner in the town had been a subscriber to the actions taken against Triplett and "Steamboat Bill." A far less likely explanation for the number 300 would be some sort of intended coded message to other community malefactors. Like their predecessors in Virginia City and Bannack, the Bozeman vigilantes did *not* use "3-7-77" in their publicized messages, and there is no more reason to suspect a secret meaning to the number 300 than the folklore speculating the origins of "3-7-77."[37] But there is an important significance to the closing salutation of the Bozeman notice, "So mote it be," which is one of the only uniquely Masonic phrases that had gained almost universal recognition by the 1870s. Used by the fraternity as the closing words to a prayer, the

use of the phrase in a published letter suggests that the writer intentionally tried to make a connection between the vigilance committee and the lodge.

The connection between Freemasonry and vigilantism on the American frontier, and Montana specifically, has been investigated by historians. Richard Brown summarizes their findings by stating, "The same impulse—desire to participate in the upper level dominance of the community—often caused the same person to join the Masonic lodge (usually an elite social organization) and enlist in a vigilante movement."[38] The same infrastructure of the lodge, including passwords, signs of recognition, and oaths of secrecy, made the basic structure of Freemasonry an ideal framework for vigilante organization. Again, the leading male citizens of Bozeman, including Lester Willson, Jack Mendenhall, Charles Rich, Sheriff John C. Guy, Judge Samuel W. Langhorne, and even the night watchman on the eve of the lynchings, A.D. McPherson, were all members of the fraternity, as were many of the middle class merchants and professionals. Interestingly, Joseph Wright, the only member of the community who publicly spoke out against the vigilantes, was not a member of the lodge.

Wright's condemnation of the lynchings could not be misinterpreted. In words remarkable in their stridence against the town's majority he wrote that "the dark, despicable and bloody aspect that crimsons this proceeding with reprobation and reproach, is found in the idle gloat of some who, if they did not participate in the nefarious act, at least with vulgar gusto approved of it," and he mocked the idea that the vigilantes could have resisted Lt. Hamilton's soldiers had they arrived in time to prevent the lynchings.[39] A few others agreed with Wright, even though the vigilantes did their best to suppress dissent. "Several letters have been sent by the vigilantes to persons who expressed their opinion freely, that they had better keep more quiet," wrote Peter Koch to his fiancee Laurentze, "but their threats are simply contemptible. I have halfway expected one myself, as I have spoken my sentiments pretty freely; but I rather think they won't dare to address any but people with a questionable standing in the community."[40]

Since Wright did not seem disposed to publish any letters defending the lynchings, committee members wrote to newspapers in Helena and Virginia City, where editors looked more sympathetically at the incident. "While I do not propose to advocate or justify any such course of proceeding," wrote a man identified only as "one of the most influential citizens" of Bozeman to the Virginia City *Montanian*, "it certainly seems due to a community that has established and supported a newspaper, that in a two column article of the same, pouring out its vial of wrath and indignation upon them, that it should, at least have given some of the palliating circumstances connected with the facts and causes out of which resulted the hanging . . ." The writer went on to describe the crimes of the two executed men and claimed that on the morning following the lynching a homemade club was found concealed in some bedding inside the jail "doubtless intended to be used on the jailor as a means of escape."[41] Another writer, identified only as "G," frankly admitted to the readers of the *Helena Herald* that the criminals had to be lynched because they "would doubtless have been cleared upon trial, costing the county thousands of dollars, and yet not worth to the community the price of the rope they were hanged with." He went on to accuse Joseph Wright's outrage over the lynchings as having "a pecuniary origin, as it is generally understood that he was employed to defend them in court; so it is highly probably that the flight of Sheriff Guy's jail birds may have interfered with the gentleman's bread and butter."[42]

Several members of Bozeman's underclass left town after the lynchings, and eventually the town returned to a semblance of normalcy. "No one was ever prosecuted for the lynching and but feeble effort, if any, was ever made to find the guilty parties," recalled Charles Blakeley.[43] The few "gentlemen of somewhat questionable honesty" who remained in Bozeman

over the winter were reported to have "ceased their blatant tones, and smile with sweet grimace to every passer by."[44] Never again would the citizens of the little town resort to vigilante action, and aside from Joshua Crissman's graphic stereoview which circulated as a memento of the lynchings, the actions of the "Committee Three Hundred" quietly faded from the public consciousness.

As an example of frontier vigilante justice, the lynching of Z.A. Triplett and John W. St.Clair present a textbook rendering of commonly identified traits. The articulation of all three tenets of the philosophy of vigilantism; self defense, popular sovereignty, and the right of revolution, were neatly summarized by "G" in his letter to the *Helena Herald.* ". . . any community, be they ever so law abiding, after having borne until forbearance ceases to be a virtue, they will, if they possess the spirit of freemen, rise in their might and punish such wretches as their crimes deserve," wrote "G," "though in meting out that punishment as citizens they will be as conscientious as if sworn jurors in a court of law."[45] The economic underpinnings of vigilante action can be seen in Gallatin County's dire financial condition on the eve of the lynching and the expressed resentment of the town's upper class taxpayers in supporting a legal system perceived as too slow and too costly to deal with crime. And the ugly suggestion of racism as a motivation for the vigilante's action can be inferred by the repeated reference to "Steamboat Bill" as a man of "negro extraction" from a town population heavily represented by former southerners. For a compelling example of the depth of southern identity embraced by some residents, one might consider that Sheriff Guy had named his own son after Jefferson Davis, and all the children of Mrs. Susan Hunter, male and female, had been named after Confederate generals. The fact that no vigilante action followed the release of Annie Lincum's accused murders also suggests that the death of a Chinese prostitute at the hands of her fellow countrymen failed to upset Bozeman's sense of justice as much as the shooting of another by a mulatto.

On the American frontier, vigilante action taken by middle class men under the direction and urging of the social elite had the effect of keeping the lower classes from challenging the status quo. "Gentlemen of questionable honesty" had the choice of voluntary exile or complacent acceptance of order imposed by the hangman's rope. In Bozeman, those who chose the latter course quietly acquiesced in the aftermath of the lynching, although one friend of Triplett anonymously submitted his thoughts to the *Avant Courier* with the hopes it would "soften the hearts of some men a little." Joseph Wright published it on the front page, although he mockingly preserved and commented on the crude spelling of the author, perhaps as his own subtle way of accepting the inevitable aftermath of Bozeman's sole experience with vigilante justice:



Lester S. Willson

Old Man Trip
A Sufferer
By M.L.

Old man trip
that good old man
was over sixty three
he never did no harm
to neather you or me

he kiled A lo down man
for steeling his over cote
and hoo A moung that mid night band
would not fight for that he bought

old man trip
would never let
no boddy live in kneed
if he cold give them any help

he made his mony by wirking hard
and made it honest too
and all ways gave A helping hand
to any one poor he knew

poor old man trip is to day
laying cold beneath the sod
and many A harden sinner they
are tramping the path he has trod

and bozeman City has lost its charm
to foran and esteren men
becaus poor old gray haird man
must hang by the slater pen

that knoble ban they looked
so brave and marched up to the door
and A lass they all took
that poor old man from the floor

old man trip was very mad
and intoxicated too
or he never would do harm
to any man he knew

and now good by to that old man
God rest his poor old sole
and tak him to that good land
whare the help les ought to go[46]

Notes

[1]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), August 8, 1872.

[2]Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 115.

[3]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[4]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 28, 1873.

[5]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[6]Ibid.

[7]A letter written to Mendenhall from a former Virginia City resident Charles Ohle hints that Mendenhall had first hand knowledge of the vigilantes and the executions of Plummer's gang. Charles Ohle, letter to John S. "Jack" Mendenhall, March 24, 1864. John S. Mendenhall papers, 1857-1883, Collection 925, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman, Montana.

[8]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), August 8, 1872.

[9]Michael A. Leeson, *History of Montana. 1739-1885. A history of its discovery and settlement, social and commercial progress, mines and miners, agriculture and stock-growing, churches, schools and societies, Indians and Indian wars, vigilantes, courts of justice, newspaper press, navigation, railroads and statistics, with histories of counties, cities, villages and mining camps* (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Co., 1885), 177.

[10]Peter Koch, letter to Christian D. Koch, August 3, 1872. Christian D. Koch Family Papers, 1829-1912 (bulk 1845-1900), Collection 202, Special Collections, Louisiana State University Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

[11]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), August 8, 1872.

[12]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), October 31, 1872.

[13]Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 117.

[14]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), March 7, 1873.

[15]Charles P. Blakeley, "A Sketch of the Life of Charles Preston Blakeley as Told by Himself," Charles P. Blakeley papers, 1858-1912, Collection 2440, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana.

[16]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), November 14, 1872.

[17]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), November 7, 1872.

[18]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), November 14, 1872.

[19]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), January 24, 1873.

[20]*Madisonian* (Virginia City, Mont.), February 13, 1873.

[21]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[22]*Madisonian* (Virginia City, Mont.), February 13, 1873.

[23]Charles P. Blakeley, "A Sketch of the Life, " Blakeley Papers.

[24] Peter Koch, letter to Christian D. Koch, February 3, 1873, Koch Family Papers.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27] This theoretical assertion is based on an examination of Joshua Crissman's photograph of the executed men, which shows the ropes tied as described. However, the legs of both men are bound in the photograph, which would indicate that they could not have easily been mounted on horses for support before the "drop."

[28]Charles P. Blakeley, "A Sketch of the Life," Blakeley Papers.

[29]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[30]Ibid.

[31] Hazel Hardie, "The Early Main Street of Bozeman, Told By Mrs. Mary Doane." Merrill G. Burlingame Papers, 1880-1990, Collection 2245, Box 9, folder 24, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman.

[32]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[33]Ibid.

[34]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 14, 1873.

[35]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[36]Ibid.

[37] Frederick Allen, "Montana Vigilantes and the Origins of 3-7-77," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 51, 1 (Spring 2001), 2-19.

[38]Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 106.

[39]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 7, 1873.

[40] Peter Koch, letter to Laurentze Koch, February 7, 1873. Koch Family Papers.

[41]*Montanian,* (Virginia City, Mont.), February 13, 1873.
[42]*Helena Herald* (Helena, Mont.), February 20, 1873.
[43]Charles P. Blakeley, "A Sketch of the Life," Blakeley Papers.
[44]*Helena Herald* (Helena, Mont.), February 20, 1873.
[45]Ibid.
[46]*Avant Courier* (Bozeman, Mont.), February 21, 1873.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Allen Scott is an associate professor and special collections librarian at the Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman. He holds a masters degree in American history from the University of Arkansas and a masters of library science degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Scott has lived in Bozeman since 1994, having previously worked for the Special Collections Division of the University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. His publications include numerous articles on Montana history and the Civil War in the Trans-Mississippi, including Loyalty on the Frontier, an edited reminiscence of an Arkansas Union Army officer, Albert Webb Bishop, published by the University of Arkansas Press, 2003.