Secret Intimacies and Mysterious Dealings: The Hidden History of California's Vigilantes

Andrew McLeod
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Dr. Brendan Lindsay
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Obscure linkages connect the San Francisco Committees of Vigilance to the Sacramento Settlers' Association and other social movements of the California Gold Rush. These connections have been covered up by apparently intentional editorial choices of eminent 19th Century historians including John Morse, Josiah Royce, Hubert Howe Bancroft and Theodore Hittell. The historiography has recovered significantly since then, but further research is badly needed.

What we know is bad enough: The 1851 and 1856 Committees each killed four men and flogged or deported many more. But tentacles emanating from these two bodies reach far and wide, grasping at spatial relationships with contemporary Vigilantes in Sacramento and other cities, as well as temporal relationships with the precursor "Hounds," the 1850s People's Party and the 1877 Committee of Safety. The Committees of Vigilance apparently retained adequate menace to discourage serious discussion of their project even a generation later. An honest discussion of how elite urban vigilantism set the stage for California's next several decades stood outside the limits of polite historiography for many years.

Nevertheless, the truth slipped through. Writers skipped a couple of years here and there, but omitted details often resurfaced later, with a general outcome that most relevant facts are accessible today if one simply reads enough 500-page histories. Understanding the facts is another matter. The Vigilantes were complicated and traumatic, so people tend to forget it. Most Californians have never heard of these troubling episodes.

Imprudent to Name Names

California suffered two major disruptions of public order during the early 1850s, with an overlapping timeline and cast of characters – most notoriously Samuel Brannan. The Sacramento Squatters' Riot and the San Francisco Committees of Vigilance, although very different, constituted the two greatest challenges to the state's emerging legal order. Both movements

involved large-scale disputes over land, on which many prominent Californians had staked much wealth. Both created many awkward dynamics throughout a vast web of relationships, resulting in a tangled and tattered historiography.

Vigilance Committee literature is full of facts, and the following essay perches on a body of research offering sometimes excruciating detail. Many writers have recounted, for example, which scoundrels were executed for what crimes on which days in 1851 and 1856 – occasionally play by play. But why these scoundrels and not others? Some historians have answered that question too – perhaps even correctly. The study at hand will attend to details that were left out, as a traumatized young state narrowly avoided civil war, then shut down discussion of the controversy.

Events unfolded roughly as follows:

California's early days were a time of turbulent government and disorder. The extent to which the state lurched from a crimeless idyll to a fight for survival is probably exaggerated, but organized gangs emerged as a significant problem in 1849. San Francisco's Hounds evidently rose as a sort of mutual aid society, which then moved into self-defense and eventually brutalizing Chileans. Sam Brannan led a successful community uprising to eject the Hounds. But unfortunately, as the city's first history recalled in 1855, the aftermath included "secret intimacies and mysterious dealings…It would be imprudent…to name names."[1] One of the Hounds later served as sheriff.[2] Law was quite different from order.

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[1] Frank Soule, John H. Gibson and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco; containing a summary of the history of the first discovery, settlement, progress, and present condition of California, and a complete history of all the important events connected with its great city: to which are added, biographical memoirs of some prominent citizens* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1855), 561

[2] Alan Valentine, *Vigilante Justice* (New York: Reynal & Company, 1956), 171.

The first great rupture came in Sacramento City on August 14, 1850. After a yearlong conflict, the Sacramento Settlers' Association lost patience with having their legal claims rebuffed by captive courts. A few dozen armed Settlers marched downtown, the mayor hastily mustered a militia, and everyone opened fire at 4th & J Streets. The next day the sheriff became the third public official casualty – joining the mayor (wounded) and the assessor (deceased). Eight people died in all – one of California's highest white-on-white body counts.

The second crisis began with more rumble than bang. The San Francisco Committee of Vigilance is generally dated from June of 1851. But its roots reach back to February 25, when Sacramento City lynched Frederick Rowe for murdering a bystander who intervened in his drunken assault upon a fellow gambler. Although this was just the sort of picturesque strangle one might expect from the Wild West, it was no ordinary hanging. Rowe's death shook California for decades, climaxing in 1856 when the governor proclaimed an insurrection that he proved utterly powerless to stop. And with the encore 1877 Committee of Safety, Vigilante chief William Tell Coleman dispatched his pick-handle brigades to crush an anti-Chinese workingman revolt.

Unfortunately, the greater Vigilance movement has remained outside the scope of most modern research despite impacting most of California and lasting nearly three decades. But there have been some excellent modern exceptions. Mark Eifler's *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* explores how the Squatter's Riot connected to overlapping groups defined by two core strategies – settler and speculator.[3] But he stops short of the bigger story. Fortunately, Nancy Taniguchi connects the Vigilantes' dark work with their real estate entanglements. *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee*

[3] Mark A. Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 94.

includes a superb historiography illuminating how historians like Hittell "carefully separated information on the two related topics."[4]

Eifler and Taniguchi patched some gaping holes, but much repair is still needed as contortions, omissions and fabrications still propagate through California's historiography. While the Settlers and Vigilantes were typically included in the works of 19th century historians (occasionally for hundreds of pages), books *about* these uprisings were rare, leaving these crucial episodes embedded in larger texts in which they are not particularly welcome. Historians rarely discuss the matter worthiest of discussion among any episode in early California.

This was no accident. Ronald A Wells' 2002 foreword to Royce's *California* proclaims a "cover up" – twice on one page![5] He is apparently correct, but the good news is that raw facts surrounding the Vigilantes have been largely exhumed since the 1880s. Alas, the Squatters' Riot has been reduced to two days of small-scale combat, while the Settlers' persistent political organizing is generally forgotten along with any connection to Vigilante adversaries.[6] This mass of detail lacks proper structure.

But One Sentiment is Known at This Time

The first wave of this flawed historiography came too soon. Initial histories preceded the 1856 Committee – which probably prompted authors to review what they had written of 1851. *Sacramento Union* founder John Morse was safe; his 1853 *History of Sacramento*, offers little about California's first upheaval just two years prior, relying on reprinted newspaper coverage. One clipping contains an alarming mention that dissidents "have prudently desisted from their

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[4] Nancy J. Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 234.

[5] Ronald A. Wells, foreword to *California: A Study of American Character*, by Josiah Royce (reprint, Santa Clara, CA: Santa Clara University, 2002), xii.

[6] Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of California,* Vol. 6 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1888), 334-5.

course, and but one sentiment is known at this time among the entire community."[7] And upon the rise of lynch law, Morse shifts to outright disinformation: Calling early 1851 "delightful," he rattles off a list of assorted news clippings. Oddly enough, he skips to April, reporting "Green peas in market" – thereby avoiding comment upon the Rowe incident.[8]

Two years later, G.H. Baker and E.L. Barber had little to add about Sacramento's dark winter of 1851 in *Sacramento Illustrated* – save a little "transposition" of Morse to really emphasize just how pleasant the weather had been.[9]

Meanwhile, *California Chronicle* publisher Frank Soule, with John Gibson and James Nisbet, produced the *Annals of San Francisco,* wherein they had the nerve to recall the closer relationships between the Hounds and the Brannan-led elite who expelled them in 1849. But who enabled a gang whose members would later serve as both sheriff and Vigilante? "It would be imprudent," they wrote, "to name names."[10] Even worse, the book has a chronological structure *except for lynch law.* That dirty topic was relegated to a pair of chapters in the back, fenced off from respectable history. The authors presumably hoped most readers wouldn't make it that far.

In contrast, no one could miss the point of Frank Fargo's *True and Minute History of the Assassination of James King of William and the Execution of Casey and Cora by the Vigilance Committee.* Writing the same year as the revolution sparked by that firebrand editor's death, Fargo reveals statewide convulsions missed by most historians: In Sacramento, he reports, "the excitement is even greater than here." Meanwhile, "large delegations" converged on San

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[7] John F. Morse, "History of Sacramento," in *1853-54 Sacramento Directory,* ed. Mead B. Kibbey (Sacramento: California State Library Foundation, 1997), 62.

[8] Ibid., 70.

[9] E.L. Barber and G.H. Baker, *Sacramento Illustrated* (Sacramento: Barber and Baker, 1855), 18-9.

[10] Soule, Gibson and Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco*, 581.

Francisco while the state's military capabilities collapsed, and federal forces stood aside.[11] His account ends with the stark image of bodies being removed from the gallows.[12]

After Fargo's candor, it would be another decade before Frank Tuthill's *History of California.* Prudence apparently made a comeback in the wake of the Civil War and the U.S. Supreme Court's 1864 Sutter ruling. Tuthill fretted that, "in the great events that have lately convulsed our country, these local matters, that used to hold the peaceful, law-abiding world breathless, will be forgotten, if the record is much longer delayed."[13] Tuthill explicitly called attention to a culture of omission, which had borne fruit by Morse, Baker and Barber, Soule and company. But despite Tuthill's call for breaking historic secrecy, he omits almost everything that happened in Sacramento. The Squatter's Riot decapitation of city leadership is reduced to a single paragraph acknowledging only that loyalist forces suffered merely "one killed and others wounded."[14] This is accurate if we exclude the next day's posse in which the sheriff met his demise.

Feared By Scoundrels of All Classes

By the 1880s, aging pioneers' nostalgia was big business for the history industry. High-budget operations depended upon wealthy antiquarians – who often paid extra for complimentary coverage and handsome depictions of their properties and persons. Revolutionary tumult didn't sell such a product, so the Vigilantes required reframing. Some works defied this pattern, but the overall mass of verbiage – and it was truly massive – yielded a narrative sanitary enough for coffee tables in the state's most pristine parlors.

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[11] Frank F. Fargo, *A True and Minute History of the Assassination of James King of William and the Execution of Casey and Cora by the Vigilance Committee* (San Francisco: Whitton Towne Printers, 1856), 11-12.

[12] Ibid., 76.

[13] Franklin Tuthill, *The History of California* (San Francisco: H.H. Bancroft & Company, 1866), 517.

[14] Ibid., 336-7.

Thomas Thompson & Albert West were prominent purveyors, whose *History of Sacramento County, California* was a prototype for the business model perfected by Bancroft. Later commercial histories tended to minimize episodes likely to provoke unease among well-heeled subscribers, but in 1880 one could still find accounts of severe social turmoil facing attractive oversize drawings of idyllic farmsteads – with a separate index to help the reader find a friend's particular vista.

Thompson & West's unwieldy production at least included a clearly titled chapter about the Squatter's Riot (albeit following Morse's lead by mainly reproducing earlier accounts).[15] But taking after the *Annals of San Francisco,* the authors tucked discussion of vigilantism into a topical chapter in the back of the book; as it happens, "Crime and Punishments" follows "Amusements." Regardless, this buried chapter recalled underappreciated moments in Sacramento's struggle for order: After an 1849 murder at Sutter's Fort, various authorities resigned to avoid dispensing justice, leaving it to the ever-helpful Brannan to organize a trial whose attendees reportedly included – of all people – James King of William.[16]

And with the Rowe affair of 1851, the authors recall, "the better class of citizens finally rose, and for the succeeding two or three years made themselves feared by scoundrels of all classes."[17] Yet full relief took some time, judging from the April assault on Lawrence of the *Placer Times.* And a summer triple-hanging by Sacramento's Committee of Vigilance is followed by a list of murders and trials with minimal distinction between legal proceeding and lynchings. It seems that untangling Sacramento's troubled relationship with justice was insufficiently profitable.

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[15] Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West, *History of Sacramento County California,* (1880. Reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 50-6.

[16] Ibid., 124.

[17] Ibid., 125.

Josiah Royce's *California: A Study of American Character* kicked off a few years of relatively close attention to the Vigilantes. Royce's 1886 work offers a different flavor of history than the thick, dusty volumes that lined the state's fancier bookcases. A California kid turned Harvard philosopher, Royce crafted a thoughtful and sometimes even accurate account of his home state's struggle to establish order. Not one to let facts get in the way of analysis, Royce conflates spontaneous backwoods mining camp executions with the elite cabal that ruled the Pacific coast's metropolis for years.

More troubling, Royce sets his story's margins quite selectively, and the most obvious examples suggest that other omissions lurk throughout the text. Despite proclaiming a focus on "the popular character and the play of social forces," he promptly claims that "after (the Committee's) first formation, its history shows little further that is novel in the way of socially important undertakings."[18] And rather than examining the aftermath of the first Committee and its role as the foundation for the vastly larger and more powerful "Great Committee" that followed, all he offers is that 1852 and 1853 were "years of rapid growth and of great general prosperity."[19] He leaves unexamined why, after their first overthrow of government, the people of San Francisco were apparently eager to join a second. His silence is thunderous.

Offering a different view in 1887, journalist James O'Meara penned *The Vigilance Committee of 1856* – a slender pamphlet of only a few dozen pages. He opens with a complaint that the Vigilante historiography was thus far entirely "from the pen of members of that organization, or else from persons who favored it."[20] O'Meara admits his own social entanglements with individuals on both sides of the conflict. And he flatly declares the

[18] Josiah Royce, *California: A Study of American Character* (1886. Reprint, Santa Clara, CA: Santa Clara University, 2002), 328.

[19] Ibid., 333.

[20] James O'Meara, *The Vigilance Committee of 1856* (San Francisco: James H. Barry, 1887), 3.

Committee's rationale flawed: "It was not true that the Courts were corrupt, neglectful or remiss."[21]

But O'Meara was no match for the bulk production of California's history juggernaut. Despite his earnest effort, the historiography continued to decline with the bloated contortions of Bancroft's History Company. *Popular Tribunals* is a thick two-volume obfuscation – devoid of footnotes, oddly enough. Herein, Bancroft hides the 1851 Committee behind a series of chapter titles perceptible only to those already familiar with the businessmen's revolution – beginning with "The Berdue-Stuart Affair."[22] In sharp and strange contrast, his second volume opens with a dedication to Vigilante mastermind Coleman, followed by an assertion that the entire text is "dedicated" to the Committee of 1856. And nearly 700 pages later, it ends with cryptic menace:

> "What has become of your Vigilance Committee?" asked a stranger of a citizen of San Francisco as late as 1859.
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> "Toll the bell, sir, and you will see," was the reply.

Indeed, this was not the end of the story. Despite professing his entire focus on the second Committee, Bancroft tacked on a final chapter about "The Labor Agitation of 1877-8" – that is, the Vigilante aftershock known as the Committee of Safety. In this coda he warns of "disintegration and death, if the diseases of demagogy, intellectual prostitution, unjust monopoly and political and social corruption is not checked."[23] Presumably he was more concerned about unruly workers than dapper Vigilantes.

Bancroft sometimes simply omitted information about troublesome rebels. Or at least he tried. The sixth volume of his enormous *History of California* devotes a single garbled page (out of thousands) to the Squatters' Riot – one of the state's most impactful and picturesque moments.

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[21] Ibid., 8.
[22] Hubert H. Bancroft, *Popular Tribunals* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1887), 1:179.
[23]Ibid., 2:748.

Bancroft thereby reduces a sophisticated insurgency to "men from the Missouri border, who had no knowledge of Spanish grants."[24] This was nonsense, and a rebel copywriter saw fit to add "an account condensed in the form of a note" – covering most of seven pages! The typesetters must have toiled for hours. This was a leak of suppressed truth by disgruntled workers, and it is excellent work: After a detailed and richly sourced account of the Sacramento insurgency, the footnote describes ongoing "trouble" commencing in San Francisco the same month as the first mobs laid the groundwork for the Committee's formal founding. The note ends with "squatter sentiment" persisting into 1858.[25]

Notwithstanding, the history machine ground on in 1890. The bulk of Winfield Davis' *Illustrated History of Sacramento County, California* is biographical sketches and portraits. And although Davis does devote a full chapter to the Squatters' Riot, he declares the Settler land claims baseless and mostly repeats Morse (leaving out the uncomfortable coverage of "prudent" dissenters being silenced).[26] On the other hand, he casually starts his "Criminals" chapter with a grim tally of "twenty-four execution of criminals, sixteen of which were according to the forms of law."[27] That is, one third of executions over Sacramento's first four decades were extralegal – a shocking statistic if true.

Theodore Hittell's Vigilance boosterism was not quite as enthusiastic as Bancroft's. But as Taniguchi puts it, he uses "organizational techniques to obscure important connections" across four volumes and thousands of pages of his *History of California*.[28] Deep into the second volume, Hittell offers a short account of the Hounds. But hundreds of pages pass before he

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[24] Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1887), 6:328.
[25] Ibid., 6:334-5.
[26] Winfield J. Davis, *An Illustrated History of Sacramento County, California* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1890), 30-1.
[27] Ibid., 61.
[28] Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds,* 8.

circles back to the Vigilance Committee of 1851, on which he spends a respectable chapter in volume 3. He then loops back through a leisurely overview of urban development before finally reaching the 1856 outbreak – blamed on "unparalleled political degeneration."[29]

However, Hittell admits connections that undermine the common understanding of lynch law as a generally apolitical response to local criminal phenomena: The committees were founded statewide and "immediately opened communication and affiliated."[30] What's more, the root committee never really dissolved, even if the poor Vigilantes did finally reach the end of "the straggling annoyances which followed the most remarkable municipal reform ever known in the country."[31] Furthermore, Hittell notes,

> "it was perfectly well understood that its members, while willing to leave the further administration of criminal justice in the hands of the regular authorities unless found entirely deficient in honesty and efficiency, were nevertheless ready at any time, if public necessity required, to return to their vacated rooms, form again into ranks of citizen soldiery and organize anew their tribunals that recognized no technicalities, allowed no delays and knew no fear nor favor."[32]

Further illumination of this dormant and shadowy mob would have to wait for the academics of the next century.

Why Did Such Men Do Such Things?

In 1905, the University of California acquired the fabulous Bancroft archives, and immediately set out to organize and publish the *Papers of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851*. A grad student named Mary Floyd Williams was assigned to the project. After years of labor, she finally released the trove in 1919, then interwove this extraordinary collection into a dissertation, with contemporaneous news and other primary sources. And in 1921, her

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[29] Theodore H. Hittell, *History of California* (San Francisco: N.J. Stone and Co., 1897), 3:460.
[30] Ibid., 3:330
[31] Ibid., 3:649.
[32] Ibid., 3:331.

work was republished as a hefty book by the university's press. *History of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance: A Study of Social Control on the California Frontier in the Days of the Gold Rush* is as challenging as its subtitle suggests. She promptly bemoans a stagnant historiography, in which "little real progress has been made during the last thirty years" because writers were "content to reassemble material already in print."[33]

Williams asks a blunt question of a respectable urban elite with bloody hands: "Why did such men do such things?"[34] In brief, she finds that the frontier was "the laboratory of American democracy," in which sequential compacts created (generally) increasing order.[35] Williams recognizes that the Vigilantes "became a menace to orderly society." But they were sincere in their efforts and so she blames "the structural weakness and consequent breakdown of a social system rather than on the errors of those who experimented with readjustment."[36] Although painfully flawed by an acceptance of Lost Cause mythology that allowed equation of her topic with the racial terror campaign following Reconstruction, Williams' work remains a towering landmark on the path to recovering the truth underlying her inquiry.

But the path is long, and Williams is curiously quiet about land struggles. She neglects to mention the hanging of Frederick Rowe, as well as the Squatters' Riot – an upheaval that was the greatest single threat to the dominant order, and at least as germane as the various page-long tales she tells elsewhere. The Settlers offered a stern test of California's social organization, and the spotty historic record suggests failure. Her lack of comment is strange. To be fair, the Settlers' Association possessed distinctly revolutionary elements. This must have given pause to a woman

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[33] Mary Floyd Williams, *History of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851: A Study of Social Control on the California Frontier in the Days of the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1921), 1.
[34] Ibid., 5.
[35] Ibid., 8.
[36] Ibid., 439.

striking out in a man's world that was haunted by an unmanly fear of Bolsheviks. We should not take Williams' omission of a topic as a sign of resolution. She was just scratching the surface.

Fortunately, the pioneer centennial wave of publishing revealed a historiography that had healed some of its more gaping wounds. This anniversary coincided with the McCarthy era, which Alan Valentine's *Vigilante Justice* leaves unnamed but coyly describes as "methods less drastic but perhaps no less questionable."[37] His tact recalls his subject matter, and Valentine regurgitates what seems to be a ridiculous defense testimony argument that "Vigilante troops happened to" be out sailing when they interdicted three different government arms shipments on two days of June, 1856. The incident led to the arrest of a state supreme court justice. The seizure was furthermore the subject of a federal piracy trial. It was not just "some coincidence" that accidentally disarmed the state at the pivotal moment.[38]

But overall, midcentury writers capture the severity of the situation. George Stewart recognized "the real power in the whole state of California" with his *Committee of Vigilance: Revolution in San Francisco, 1851.*[39] And in 1966, John Myers Myers left little room for misunderstanding his opinion of *San Francisco's Reign of Terror,* during which the Vigilantes "patented the whole bag of totalitarian tricks" later employed by European police states.[40] And Myers recalls that "that sort of thing went on for decades."[41]

After Myers' jeremiad, the 20th century passed without another Vigilance monograph. And these quiet decades were interrupted mainly by a 1978 historical society pamphlet, "Sacramento Vigilantes August 1851." The unnamed author acknowledges the influence of the

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[37] Valentine, *Vigilante Justice,* viii.
[38] Ibid., 148.
[39] George R. Stewart, *Committee of Vigilance: Revolution in San Francisco, 1851* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), 207.
[40] John Myers Myers, *San Francisco's Reign of Terror* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 2.
[41] Ibid., 263.

Vigilantes and notes Lawrence being "threatened" (but not assaulted!).[42] But despite its useful recall of facts, it ends with an unfortunately presentist apology for vigilantism. Ignoring the Committee's significant if outgunned opposition by governments of the time, the author asks rhetorically if "facets of justice" were then "known and realized."[43]

In 2002 Mark Eifler laid to rest the idea that nobody thought to oppose the Vigilantes, revealing the "squatters" as an increasingly powerful opponent to Brannan and his ilk. *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* primarily recalls the land struggles leading up to the "riot." But Eifler includes an incongruent chapter about Rowe's hanging – an event which both set lynch law in motion and further chilled political discourse.

While Sacramentans ordinarily wrote prolifically about all topics, a conspicuous lack of comment surrounds one of the Gold Rush's most remarkable events. Eifler recalls, "The silence of that night remained nearly unbroken." A single account survived, written by a journalist who briefly sat on the "jury" before stepping back to tell the tale.[44] Other newspapers just disappeared. The anomalous silence of a rebellious city quite likely stemmed from an understanding to prudently desist from speaking. But how was this imposed, and by whom?

Nancy Taniguchi hinted at the answer in 2016, with the first focused Vigilante monograph in 50 years. While *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee* uncovers no similar collective silence, one chapter-ending remark on the Vigilantes' final lynching provides a chilling bracket to Rowe's muffled demise: "Effusive diarist Hugh Breen, who had been pouring out his heart daily, scratched only this on July 29:

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[42] Sacramento County Historical Society, "Sacramento Vigilantes August 1851," *Golden Notes* 24, no. 1 (April 1978): 3.

[43] Ibid., 7.

[44] Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists*, 188.

'Hetherington and Brace was Executed this evening at 6 o'clock.' He never wrote another entry."[45]

Taniguchi's groundbreaking research stemmed from her discovery of the 1856 minutes in Hittell's papers at the state's Sutro Library, right in San Francisco. They were available to public researchers for a half-century but apparently nobody had ever checked them out. Although Taniguchi frames Hittell as a Vigilante apologist, she also notes that he took to carrying a gun and a knife while researching the Committees.[46] He must have found something hot, which nobody has attempted to pick it up since. Peter J. Blodgett's 2018 review calls Taniguchi's discovery "terrific" – an understatement that is made even more unfortunate by a general lack of response to Taniguchi's monumental discovery and connection of this source to the "relentless shuffling of questionable land titles."[47]

The trail grows ever colder. The historic resonance grows stronger by the day. We need to follow Taniguchi into the historic thicket that has grown up around the Vigilance Committees. Nearly a decade has passed since Taniguchi's excavation. Eifler's excellent but incomplete analysis approaches a quarter-century of age. The awkward silence is perhaps reminiscent of that which met Willams' heroic recovery and interpretation of the 1851 minutes.

Conclusion: Disarming History

This was dangerous history. Theodore Hittell literally armed himself for research. And one requires only modest conjecture to conclude that Royce was pressured to follow the false lead of Bancroft and Hittell when he knew it was false. This tells us that the story was still too

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[45] Taniguchi, *Dirty Deeds,* 156.
[46] Ibid., xiv.
[47] Peter J. Blodgett, review of *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence, and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee,* by Nancy J. Taniguchi, *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 558.

warm a generation later. Vigilantes were still around, now respected elders with youthful adventures safely siloed in dusty gold rush lore.

No profit would come of recalling who did exactly what.

Even Mary Floyd Williams may have been deterred. She was one of two readers at the grand opening of the Huntington Library – as well as the first student registered to do research at its new location. But her academic career took a turn; she "traveled extensively in Asia, leaving a collection of her lantern slides taken there to UC Berkeley."[48] Although her academic realignment may be entirely innocent, we should nevertheless wonder – and investigate – what sort of pushback she encountered, or whether she was simply frustrated by her male colleagues' general lack of response to her historiographic breakthrough. After a spectacular contribution to California's historiography, Williams thought better and focused on Asian scenery.

Someone is hopefully already picking up her lead for future publication. But for now, Taniguchi may be suffering her own silent treatment, suggesting that California is still not ready for women to remind us of what our best men did in the early days. An embarrassment riches await researchers, revisiting old primary sources with an eye to their silences. Quiet, subtle and previously unclear statements may illuminate new vistas through the gaping holes of Vigilante historiography.

The Gold Rush people's uprising was crushed and forgotten. The resultant crackdown was sanitized and put on a shelf with the other annals. Some truth has since been excavated, but much work remains. We are headed into an analogous patch of history and should learn what we can from whatever happened here in the 1850s. California is still haunted by the Vigilante spirit.

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[48] Clay Stalls, "First Readers at The Huntington," Verso, The Huntington Library, March 4, 2020. https://huntington.org/verso/2020/03/first-readers-huntington.

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