



Historian Skip Sommer has restored many historic properties in Marin and Sonoma Counties including The Great Petaluma Mill, The Riverhouse Restaurant and Larkspur's famed Lark Creek Inn. Skip is an honorary member of Heritage Homes of Petaluma and has been the History Editor of The Petaluma Post for 20 years. He is a Realtor with CPS/Golden Land Realty in Petaluma. E-mail Skip at skip-sommer@hotmail.com

San Francisco was a wild place in 1851. The gold rush had brought thousands of unruly and violent men to California and the city had grown from less than 1,000 to over 200,000 in just a few short years. Law enforcement was so overwhelmed, there was virtually no protection for citizens. Many of the bad guys came from Australia, which was very happy to get rid of them. They happened to be mostly of Irish Catholic birth. When gold fever had struck, the thought of an easy and quick way to riches was a giant magnet. These men robbed, beat, killed and bragged about it, without punishment. More than 100 murders were committed within four months in 1851 alone and no criminals were caught or prosecuted.

Later that year, 200 San Francisco citizens organized a vigilante committee to take the law into their own hands. Most of these men were merchants and they set up an old liquor warehouse on Battery Street, where they could temporarily imprison these criminals. They piled bags of sand around the building and called it "Fort Gunnybags." Then they mounted the City's fire bell on top to summon their forces to action. This bell became known as the notorious Vigilante Bell, due to the fact that several of the bad guys were tried and hung via the improvised group action.

The Vigilante committee actually kidnapped, jailed and deported hundreds of men and lynched more than eight of them. Their motto was to "preserve the lives and property of San Francisco and to restore peace and good

order." They said: "no thief, burglar, incendiary or assassin shall escape punishment, either by the quibbles of the law or the insecurity of prisons". The Vigilantes were aiming directly at corruption in the police department, which was mainly composed of Irish Catholic men, at that time.

The committee proclaimed that it "shall be the duty of any member to cause a call to be made of two strokes upon the bell, which shall be repeated with a pause of one minute between each alarm. The alarm to be struck until ordered to be stopped." Thus, the Vigilante Bell became an infamous symbol of a hanging to occur in San Francisco. Two Vigilante Committees were in operation over the period of 1851 through 1856 and disbanded for the last time in '56, as genuine law and order were reestablished. The Protestant faction had gained power over the Irish in city government and this seemed to be the solution at the time. The vigilante thrust had not started out to be centered as anti-Catholic, but it did evolve that way, as it was noted early on that almost all of the trouble was coming from the local Irish Catholics. Many of the Catholic leaders were forced to leave San Francisco, as a result.

Stephen Payran served as President of the Vigilantes in 1851. He moved to Petaluma in 1853 and saw that this community, also, was grappling with corruption and crime. The police here, at the time, were alright in so far as they could enforce the law, but justice wasn't rigorous enough, there were too few enforcers, and jailhouse security was a

STORIES FROM THE PAST

San Francisco's Vigilante Bell Came To Petaluma

by History Editor Skip Sommer

joke. It was said that bribery of officials, juries, and even judges was common. Petaluma was a frontier town and was still seven years away from becoming a city.

In 1856, it was speculated that "the work of vigilantes" may have been involved in the hanging of a man from a well scaffolding on Main Street. (This was never proven, however). But, in 1857, a group of ranchers actually did organize a vigilante committee here "for the detection of thieves and recovery of stolen property." Petaluma was inspired to follow in the direction that their new citizen, Payran (after whom Payran Street was named), had set in San Francisco. So, it wasn't very surprising that the infamous Vigilante Bell wound up in Petaluma. Petaluman Manville Doyle (founder of The Exchange Bank) discovered the bell in 1857 in a San Francisco scrap yard, bought it for \$550, and brought it to Petaluma via river steamer. The bell weighed over a thousand pounds and was quite awkward to remove from the ship to the First Baptist Church, in which it was hoisted, by block and tackle, into the belfry. The bell rang out the church services merrily for seven years. But in 1864, during the final battles of the American Civil War, the Union sympathizers in the church commenced to ring the bell upon all Union victories. This totally incensed parishioner Doyle, who was in sympathy with the confederates. Doyle and some other secessionists had been asked to leave the church and Doyle, in particular, was ticked because it was he who had popped for the \$550 to buy the bell in the first place. Doyle's comment was that his church had become "a damned abolitionist congregation."

So, the story goes that in early April 1864, Doyle and some of his cronies went to the church, rigged the block and tackle again, and took back the bell to stash it in a warehouse at the foot of B Street. It has never been historically nailed down, but I believe that warehouse was what is now the SE corner of the Great Petaluma Mill, as this was the only warehouse in that location in 1864. This is now the location of The Apple Box.

The Doyle group weren't done yet. They went back to the church, nailed the windows shut and padlocked the front door. This action caused a group of Baptist parishioners to take a wagon, drape it in the Union Flag, retrieve the bell and restore it once more in the

church, where they rang it a lot and even sang Union Army songs at services.

By this time, the bell had become cracked. No one knows how that occurred, but some speculation is that Mr. Doyle, or one of his supporters, climbed back into the belfry and hit the bell with a sledge hammer to silence it. It didn't work, however, because later, on April 15, the Vigilante Bell was rung in slow cadence to announce to Petaluma the sad news of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

The old bell's history beyond that date is murky and speculative. Some have said that a local man secreted the bell in his barn, never more to be seen. But no one knows for sure.

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