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The Mission

In his history of San Miguel, "The Lands of Mission San Miguel", author Wally Ohles lays out the historical facts of the brutal Reed Family murders at The Old Mission. No one has lived in the Old Mission rooms for many years now

As you might expect, the murders and stories of buried gold at the Old Mission have given rise to some colorful local legends, one of which is recounted at the end of this history... read it if you dare!

The Murders in the Old Mission

by Wally Ohles, Author and Historian

On the afternoon of December 4, 1848, five "white" men and one Indian arrived at Mission San Miguel, where [William] Reed and his family were living. Petronilo and his partner, William Reed, had obtained the Mission on July 4, 1846. Reed had recently returned from delivering sheep to his father-in-law; General Mariano G. Vallejo, for resale to the gold-miners of northern California.

The group which arrived on December 4th consisted of the following: Pete Raymond, a desperado who had killed a man by the name of J. R. Pfister at Murphy's Camp, but had escaped from jail, Joseph Peter Lynch, who had deserted from General Kearney's command at Fort Leavenworth, Peter Remer, who had belonged to the New York Volunteers in 1847, and Peter Quin, an Irishman who had just come to California.

These last two people were deserters from the warship Warren. The final member of the group was Sam Bernard (or Barnberry), accompanied by John, an Indian from Soledad. Lynch and Raymond had murdered two companions while on the way from the gold fields to Soledad.

At the mission, these men sold 30 ounces of gold to Reed for \$30 per ounce; they stayed there that night, and left the next morning. They went as far as San Marcos Creek, and then returned to the Mission and spent the rest of the day and part of the evening. (Some accounts have it that the group went as far south as Rancho Santa Margarita, before returning to San Miguel.)

During the evening of December 5th, they murdered everyone at the Mission. The victims included: William Reed; his wife, Maria Antonia Vallejo, who was expecting a baby; their 4-year old son; a brother-in-law; Jose Ramon Vallejo; the mid-wife, Josefa Olivera; the 15-year old daughter and the grandson of Martin Olivera; a Negro cook; an Indian sheep-herder and his grandchild. Eleven were killed in all, counting the unborn child.

The group had been warming themselves near the cooking fire, which was slowly dying. Sam Bernard (or Barnberry) offered to go outside to get some firewood. He returned with an axe hidden in the armload of wood, and struck Reed several blows with the axe; the Indian stabbed Reed with a knife. Reed was wearing his hat at the time he was killed; he had several gashes on his nose. The women must not have gotten ready for bed, because when they were found, they were still wearing day-time clothing.

Ralph J. Leonard, a retired Lieutenant-Colonel of the U. S. Army; has done an in-depth study of the murder of the Reed family; In his work entitled The San Miguel Mission Murders, he gives the details of the incident from the record of the interrogations of Joseph Lynch, Peter Quin and of Peter Remer. Lynch and Quin signed their confessions; Peter Remer used a witnessed mark for his signature.

According to Lynch, Sam Bernard (or Barnberry) and the others went to Reed's rooms and killed the women and children, and then took the bodies to the carpenter's shop. After the killings, they went to Reed's room and drank some wine; then, using an axe, opened all the chests and rifled them of their contents, taking the money and valuables. About half an hour after the murders, they left the Mission that evening, and slept the rest of the night near the house at Rancho El Paso de Robles, which was located approximately one mile south of the present-day town of Templeton.

Leon Gil, a grandson of Petronilo Rios, later stated that the night after the murders, the killers "camped at my grandfather's place at Templeton, with the intention of killing him also, if necessary; in order to secure the gold which they had expected to get at Mr. Reed's. But on account of there being so many Indians about, they were afraid to attempt it. One of the Indians went over, as Indians are apt to do, to the men's camp after they left, and there picked up an earring, which he brought to Don Petronilo. He recognized it as one that he had often seen Mrs. Reed wearing.

[This statement must have been given no earlier than 1887, because the town of Templeton did not exist prior to that time, nor was that name used prior to the arrival of the railroad.]

Catarina Avila Rios, in 1877, related that it was known that the murderers ate breakfast at Rancho El Paso de Robles, because of some cups that were found there by some Indian servants; they also found a new knife and a small box that contained some gold articles that belonged to the late Maria Antonia Reed.

The murderers spent the next night near a creek about two leagues south of Mission San Luis Obispo. [The Spanish league equaled 2.63 English miles.] At that point, the Indian left the group. It is possible that this location was the Corral de Piedra Rancho. (Leon Gil has said that years after the murders, Mariano Soberanes, of the Los Ojitos Rancho, visited at the Rios house in San Miguel. He chanced to see an old Indian who was working for Leon's Grandfather, Petronilo Rios. Soberanes recognized the Indian as the one who was with the group who murdered the Reed family.

The group then went to Rancho Los Alamos, and obtained four horses. Near Las Cruces, they spent the night. The next night was spent at Los Dos Pueblos. They passed Santa Barbara during the late evening of the next day, and camped about a mile from town. The following day, at about eleven o'clock in the morning, they stopped at Rancho Ortega, about five or six miles below Santa Barbara, and bought something to eat. They left about one o'clock and had gone no more than a mile when they were met by the posse.

Miss Ella Villa (Villavicencio) related a story to Chris Jespersen, which he included in his county history book. Ella Villa, the grand-daughter of Captain Jose Maria Villavicencio, grantee of Corral de Piedra, related the story that Senora Villavicencio said that the desperados had stopped at their rancho. The Senora thought it strange that one of the men should be wearing "the conspicuous, blue, brass-buttoned coat of 'the pilot,' as Reed was called by his friends."

Meanwhile, on the evening of December 5th, James E Beckwourth was carrying the mail from Captain William Dana's Rancho at Nipomo to Monterey; He discovered the bodies, and rode with the news to the nearest ranch, that of Petronilo Rios, southeast of San Miguel, and probably five or six miles away. Beckwourth then continued his ride to Monterey.

There, he would deliver the mail and also inform the military governor, Colonel Richard B. Mason, of the murders.

It should be noted that at the time of the murders Petronilo Rios must not have been living at the Caledonia adobe, which is located one-half mile south of the Mission; he was living at La Estrella. One reason for making this deduction is that the distance five or six miles is not far enough to refer to the Ranch El Paso de Robles, located south of Templeton, all owned by Rios. This site is approximately fourteen miles from Mission San Miguel. Petronilo Rios and his family must have been living at the adobe on the Estrella River, southeast of San Miguel, and a distance of approximately six miles.

On December 6th, John M. Price, alcalde of San Luis Obispo, also discovered the bodies at Mission San Miguel. (An alcalde was an office which was a combination of mayor and justice of the peace.) On the 7th of December, Price signed a document as Jugsado of San Luis Obispo, and designated Trifon Garcia as his representative to take all measures necessary to apprehend the murderers. Trifon Garcia was a son of Ynocente Garcia, and the owner of Rancho Atascadero.

Petronilo Rios helped bury his partner, and the other victims of the crime, in the cemetery of Missio San Miguel. According to Eva C. Iversen, "Just outside the rear door of the sacristy; a little to the southwest and near the old first church wall, the bodies of the slain were all buried in one grave."

According to Catarina Avila Rios, her husband "returned to bury the family; consequently he ordered two tombs opened in which they were all buried gathering all of the remains that had been left." Thomas Savage provides this quote from the Recuerdos of Mrs. Rios, which were furnished to Vicente P Gomez on June 20, 1877, in Santa Clara.

The action taken by citizens of Santa Barbara commenced on December 10, 1848, when Cesario Latillade requested the formation of a posse. This became a 37-member semi-vigilante group which caught up with the murderers on the crown of Ortega Hill, overlooking the present town of Summerland. Cesario Latillade was the vice-consul of Spain at Monterey since 1847, and was allowed to reside at Santa Barbara. He accidentally shot and killed himself at Santa Barbara in 1849.

Sam Bernard (or Barnberry) was mortally wounded by Ramon Rodriguez, who was, in turn, killed by a bullet from that bandit's gun. Pete Raymond jumped into the surf, in an escape and Peter Remer was captured. Peter Quin was wounded and captured; Joseph Lynch and Peter Remer were also captured, and later gave their confessions.

A temporary court sentenced the murderers to be hanged. From the time of the Mexican surrender in January of 1847 until statehood in September of 1850, California was a military territory of the United States. Mexican Santa Barbara had some question about the authority of the temporary court, so its findings were presented to Colonel Mason in Monterey; His response was to send Lieutenant Edward O. C. Ord, of the Third Artillery; and nine soldiers to Santa Barbara as a firing squad.

Joseph Lynch, Peter Remer and Peter Quin were executed by firing squad, in Santa Barbara, on December 28, 1848, near the corner of De la Guerra and Chapala Streets. They were buried in the cemetery of Mission Santa Barbara.

The Santa Barbara historian, Walker A Tompkins, in a November 28, 1963 letter to the San Miguel Banner, states that "The executed men received the last rites of the Church and were buried in the campo santo at Santa Barbara Mission." (Hubert Howe Bancroft believed that Peter Remer and Peter Raymond were the same person.)

An inventory of gold dust and silver seized from the prisoners lists the following: a stocking containing 80 pesos in silver; another stocking with 82 pesos T in silver; a kerchief containing 100 pesos 2 reales in silver and one ounce of gold; another kerchief containing one gram of gold and a paper with 7 pesos 5 reales in silver.

Petronilo Rios, William Reed's partner, sent word to Pablo de la Guerra that all recovered money should be given to the widow of the man in the posse who was killed by the murderers. This item of information came from the interview; already mentioned, that was given by Catarina Avila Rios, in 1877. This interview was by Vincent E Gomez, who was collecting historical information for Hubert Howe Bancroft.

This excerpt was used with Author's permission from:

The Lands of Mission San Miguel

by Wallace V. Ohles

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A copy of this book may be obtained from the Mission Gift Shop (805) 467 3256.

The Legend of the Ghosts of Mission San Miguel

Old timers say the legend goes that the Reed family was murdered for a fortune of gold said to be hidden in the Old Mission. Mr. Reed was said to have made the mistake of telling the murderers about the treasure, and bragging that he knew where the treasure was.

The gold was never found.

The old timers say that if by chance on certain dark nights, you are unfortunate or foolish enough to find yourself alone in the rooms of the oldest part the Mission you will hear the muffled screams of a young woman followed by noises of the ghosts of the murderers running and rummaging through the old Mission forever doomed to search for the hidden gold.

The old timers warn ...if your legs can move... you must run as fast as you can out of the old Mission, but beware! Because outside the Mission, the ghostly white figure of Mrs Reed covered in blood wanders the old Mission grounds, crying and seraching for her murdered children.

Anyway... that's what the old timers say. Me?, Heck, I don't believe in ghosts, but then again, I don't think I'd want stay around alone at night to check it out ... Would you?

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