

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future: Of Ghosts and Gold: Mission San Miguel



By Mark James Miller, October 14, 2018

It was a crime scene of horrific proportions. Ten people, including several children and a pregnant woman, had been brutally murdered on the night of Dec. 5, 1848, at the Mission San Miguel.

With their bloody work complete, the killers — there were six of them — ransacked the mission, going from room to room searching for the fortune in gold they believed was hidden there. Finding none, they took whatever appeared to be of value and fled into the night.

The mission had recently been converted to an inn by an enterprising Englishman named William Reed. Realizing the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill earlier in the year would bring about an enormous increase in the traffic on the El Camino Real, upon which the mission was conveniently located, Reed purchased it for \$250.

Reed may have been enterprising, but he was also indiscreet. He enjoyed bragging about how much gold he had stashed on his property. With California not yet a state and with no official currency in use, he accepted only gold as payment for staying at his inn. While this may have been a wise business practice, boasting about his wealth was not, especially when done in front of the six men who arrived on Dec. 4.

One was a murderer on the run after stabbing a man to death in a drunken fight near Sutter's Mill. Another had just killed two men and taken their gold. Two were deserters from the U.S. Navy sloop Warren, and the remaining two would soon prove to be as ruthless as the others, for they all took part in the murders.

Gold has been called man's greatest obsession, and it is hard to think of a mineral that has had more impact on human history. An anonymous wit once observed, "The golden rule: He who has the gold makes the rules."

"Get gold," King Ferdinand of Spain said to the Conquistadores when they set off for the New World. "Humanely if possible, but at all hazards, get gold."

The discovery of gold in California set off the biggest gold rush in history and had a profound impact on the settlement of the American West. Try to imagine what California might be like if not for the Gold Rush.

When General Custer rode to his death at the Little Big Horn he was violating yet another treaty with the Native Americans because gold had been discovered in the Black Hills. The gold fields of South Africa set off the Boer War of 1899-1902. "Where gold speaks," says an Italian proverb, "every tongue is silent."

Justice came swiftly to the gang that massacred the people at Mission San Miguel. A posse caught up with them in what is today Summerland only five days after the murders, and in the shootout that followed two of the desperados were killed. The remaining three murderers — the sixth had left the gang a few days before — were shot by firing squad on Dec. 28.

The gold Reed boasted of was never found. Some believe it still may be buried on the mission grounds. But the horror of that night may linger on. Over the years people have reported hearing screams at night and the sound of gunshots. Others claim to have seen a man in a navy peacoat — the kind Reed wore — stepping out of a wall, and a child with a wound on his neck. Worst of all is the sighting of a woman in a bloody nightgown, the spirit of Mrs. Reed, who was carrying an unborn child when she was slain.

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