

Historical Ramblings

Legends of bandits and thieves lend an aura of romance and intrigue to early California history. The Lompoc Valley played its part as a hideout for one of California's notorious outlaws.

Jack Powers was an Irishman who came to Santa Barbara in 1847 with his military regiment, the New York Volunteers. When the soldiers were disbanded at the pueblo, Powers began a career of crime at the young age of 25. His reign of terror extended through the San Julian, Santa Rita and Lompoc Valleys.

Powers and his band of marauders laid in wait for cattle buyers who were forced by local geography to pass through these valleys. Advance lookouts reported the approach of potential victims to Powers' gang. The bandits would descend upon the travelers, shoot them and take their money and cattle. It is probable that the vaqueros of the cattle buyers troupe were part of Powers' band. These vaqueros would stampede the cattle at night creating confusion so that Powers and his men could ride in and shoot the unsuspecting cattle owners.

At the height of his career, Powers had eighty men in his organization. Some were incorrigible criminals, while others were undercover men who reported likely prospects secretly to Powers. Their identity was unknown, operating under the guise of respectability.

The Powers organization kept horses saddled and at the ready 24 hours a day at strategic points for a distance of hundreds of miles for the inevitable "fast getaway."

One day, as two Basque cattlemen and their herd reached the expanse of the Burton Mesa, they were confronted by Powers and his followers, posing as a sheriff and posse. The Basques were ordered to drop their weapons and were accused of cattle stealing. One of the Basques shot Powers in the leg and killed his horse. The Basques then fled through Pine Canyon toward Rancho La Purisima, but were stopped by the bandits at the Santa Ynez River and killed.

Later in the evening a messenger galloped into the Dos Pueblos Rancho to fetch a Doctor to administer aid to Powers. The physician was brought to Powers and treated what was explained to be a badly infected boil. After the Doctor had returned south the next day, news of the Basque murders reached Santa Barbara. Enraged, the local citizens raided the known Powers strongholds, killing and hanging the gang members. Powers and his close friend Monea had meanwhile fled to Mexico using the hidden relay of horses. They traveled at a full gallop, covering the 300 miles in 3 days. The California criminal career of Jack Powers ended on that day in 1857.

It was later reported that Jack Powers and Monea had killed one another in a knife fight over the affections of a Spanish Senorita.

Thus ended the story of one of California's most bloodthirsty bandits.