

Historical Ramblings

The elaborately carved white marble gravestone in Lompoc's Evergreen Cemetery simply states, "Mary L. Sargent – Murdered by Indians, April 2, 1881." The epitaph stirs images from western movies of bands of Indians decimating entire pioneer settlements. Such is not the case, however, with the tale of Mary Sargent.



Mary Louise Kelley Sargent, her husband Jack and two small daughters lived in the rural Santa Rita District (the area midway between Lompoc and Buellton). The twenty-one year old woman had left her home on horseback early in the day to buy eggs from the neighboring Drumm ranch. Later that evening, when her horse returned home alone, Mr. Sargent mounted the steed and rode to the Drumm ranch, discovering that Mrs. Sargent had never arrived for her egg purchase. A search party was formed, scouring the hills until midnight, until the search was suspended. At first light of dawn, the hills were again covered with men and boys searching in every direction. At mid-day, it was discovered that there had been a struggle near a sheep camp on J.W. Cooper's Santa Rosa Ranch. The search soon ended in a narrow ravine, where the bruised body of Mary Sargent was found buried face down, covered with a few inches of sand. She had apparently been dragged by the neck with a rope and beaten on the side of the head with a blunt club, resulting in a fractured skull. Her wrists had been tied and her neck was broken.

The search party returned to the sheep camp, confronting a young Indian boy, who they suspected of the crime. Alfred Lansdell, Justice of the Peace was summoned and held an inquest on site. At the conclusion of the investigation, the crowd convinced the officer to go home. The boy first said he knew nothing about the crime. Adopting a more persuasive policy, the assemblage placed a rope around his neck, threw it over a limb, pulled him up for about 40 seconds, then lowered him. Now more willing to talk, he admitted witnessing another man commit the murder. Out of pity for Mrs. Sargent, the young man dragged her body to the ravine and buried it. He led the group to the location where a dry live oak limb was produced, covered in blood with strands of long hair attached. He then showed where her hat, purse and egg pail were buried. The purse, which had contained five dollars, was empty. The boy offered to give five dollars to Mr. Sargent, thinking that he would then be released. When he realized his fate was sealed, he refused to hand over the money. His clothing, which had been hastily washed, had traces of blood on them. His lariat was bloody, and tracks near the buried body matched those made by his shoes and his horse.

There were over one hundred men present who were unanimous in the opinion that the Indian boy either killed Mrs. Sargent or assisted in the crime. They tied his hands behind him and tied a rope around his neck and then over an oak tree limb, awaiting further confession. At that point, the boy told Mr. Wilson, Santa Rosa Ranch Superintendent, to give his home and what money due him to his sisters who lived near the Santa Ynez Mission.

One woman had remained with the vigilance committee of men. When the boy refused to talk further, she said "Gentlemen, don't wait any longer for my sake. Hang him." A local newspaper reported: "The rascal swung between heaven and earth, unfit for either." He was left alone all night - hanging.

The newspaper obituary stated: "The funeral of Mrs. Sargent took place at 2 o'clock this afternoon (Monday). All the business houses in Lompoc were closed, and everybody turned out to pay the last tribute of respect to the remains of the estimable lady."

