**Law and Order**

San Francisco had a police force, but when gold was discovered, the policemen took off for the hills to try and get rich like so many others! By the early 1850s, the Gold Rush had attracted a less desirable crowd. Crooks, bandits, claim jumpers, professional gamblers and others came to take advantage of the wealth in California. There was less gold at this time, yet more people, and more crime.

When the United States received California from Mexico after the Mexican/American war, the U.S. Congress worked very quickly to grant California statehood. Leaders in California wrote a state Constitution with laws, but they were not effective. With crime and disorder getting worse, citizens took the law into their own hands.

Vigilante Committees were set up their own idea of law, order and justice. These committees were the judge, jury and executioners. There were not laws about mining, so miners created Claim Laws. Sometimes the laws were different in each camp. In some camps, a claim was on 10 square feet, and each person was allowed one claim.

Taking someone else's claim, or "claim jumping," was common. Swindlers would also "salt" the ground, scattering a little gold on the ground and then selling the land for lots of money, as if it were full of gold! Violence and crime were on the rise. The ‘49ers did not do well with law and order in the hands of the people.

Punishment for crimes was often fast and simple. A person accused of a small crime was often flogged with a whip. For more serious crimes, such as robbery and murder, the punishment was hanging. Lynchings were also common; this was when mobs got out of control; they would hang someone without a trial.

**San Francisco vigilantes hang a murderer,**

**December 1852**

On the American River, a Californio by the name of Antonio Coronel traveled from Los Angeles to try his luck at the mines. He found a rich claim! When strangers came he pretended there was no gold, but within a week a man working with him was at a bar at at Sutter's Mill and bragged about it. One hundred armed Americans invaded the claim and announced the gold was theirs. Coronel decided his life was worth more than gold. He rode home to Los Angeles in the spring of 1849. He was done with the gold rush long before many miners from the East Coast had even reached California.

Louisa Clapp wrote a letter home to her sister describing how the mining community established its own form of law and order, or Vigilante Justice. She told of a case where two men were arrested by their partners on suspicion of having stolen $1,800 in gold dust. They were not convicted after being tried before a meeting of the miners. However, they still believed that they were guilty and…”fancied that the gold was hidden in a coyote-hole near the camp”. They watched the place carefully, and placed rocks in front of it, so they would be able to tell if someone had been there. One day they found a money belt which had been cut open and left in front of the coyote-hole, where the rocks had been moved.

One of the men who was accused of taking the money was found in the bar, and his partners accused him of having the gold. He did not attempt to deny it, but said that if they would not bring him to a trial, he would give it up immediately. He told them where to find it, beneath the blankets of his bunk. Sure enough, there was six hundred dollars of the missing money; the thief claimed that his partner had taken the rest.

A meeting of the miners was called and the “unhappy man” was taken into custody, a jury chosen, and a judge and lawyer were chosen. By one o’clock that afternoon the trial was conducted, and the judge told the jury that they must have a verdict of guilty and a sentence of *death!*

The twelve jurors returned, and the foreman handed the judge their verdict, “That William Brown, convicted of stealing, etc., should, in one hour from that time, be hung by the neck until he was dead.”

* Stephen Chapin David, California gold rush merchant; the journal of Stephen Chapin David (Huntington Library, 1956).
* [Leonard L. Richards](https://historyengine.richmond.edu/search/citation/53594), [*The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War*](https://historyengine.richmond.edu/search/citation/53595) (New York: Random House Inc., 2007), 67-69.
* Adapted from  Clappe, Louise Amelia Knapp Smith, The Shirley Letters from California Mines in 1851-52, ed. by Thomas C. Russell (1922)
* http://explore.museumca.org/goldrush/fever16.html

http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/vigilante.htm

http://www.kidport.com/RefLib/UsaHistory/CalGoldRush/LawAndOrder.htm