

'WHAT IS A VIGILANTE MAN?'

White Violence in California History

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California's golden fields have too often been irrigated with the blood of its laborers. A notorious case in point was the great strike that spread like wildfire through the San Joaquin Valley in the fall of 1933. Protesting starvation wages that failed to fill their children's empty bellies, 12,000 defiant, mainly Mexican cotton-pickers walked off the job under the leadership of the leftwing Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union. Roving mass pickets, moving between farms in caravans of cars and trucks, soon shut down the harvest over a 300 square-mile area. The growers quickly trucked in strikebreakers from Los Angeles, but most of the scabs either deserted to the union or were scared away by the fierce, hunger-driven militancy of the strikers.

The growers, cotton ginner and chamber of commerce types then resorted to a classic tactic: arming themselves as vigilance groups to impose a reign of terror upon the cotton counties. These Farmers' Protective Leagues broke up the strikers' meetings, drove them out of their encampments and burnt their tents, beat them on the picket lines, stopped and harassed them on the roads, and threatened any merchant who extended credit to the strikers or any small farmer who refused to hire strikebreakers. When strikers complained to authorities, the local sheriffs promptly deputized the vigilantes. "We protect our farmers here in Kern County," explained one deputy sheriff, "They are our best people. .. They keep the county going ... But the Mexicans are trash. They have no standard of living. We herd them like pigs."¹

In spite of beatings, arrests and evictions, the solidarity of the strikers remained unbreakable through early October, with the growers facing the loss of their entire cotton crop. The *San Francisco Examiner* warned that the whole valley was "a smouldering volcano" ready to erupt. Concerned state officials offered a fact-finding commission, which the union readily accepted, but the vigilantes responded with murder. At a rally in

¹ Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, New York 1948, p. 175. See also Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*, Berkeley 1994, pp. 97-98.

Pixley on 10 October, union leader Pat Chambers was addressing strikers and their families when ten carloads of shotgun-wielding vigilantes abruptly arrived on the scene. Chambers, a battle-scarred veteran of California's harvest wars, sensed imminent danger and dispersed the rally, urging the strikers to take shelter in the red-brick union headquarters across the highway. Historian Cletus Daniel describes the carnage that followed.

As the group made its way toward the building one of the growers following it discharged a rifle. When a striker approached the grower and pushed the barrel of his gun downward another armed grower rushed forward and clubbed him to the ground. While he still lay on the ground the grower shot him to death. Immediately the rest of the growers opened fire on the fleeing strikers and their families. Amid the screams of those that lay wounded on the ground, growers continued to fire into the union hall until their ammunition was finally exhausted.²

The vigilantes killed two men, one of them the local representative of the Mexican consul-general, and seriously wounded at least eight other strikers, including a 50-year-old woman. As a San Francisco reporter noted, the wild fusillade also shredded the American flags draped over the union headquarters. Almost simultaneously in Arvin, sixty miles south, another band of farmer-vigilantes opened fire on picketers, killing one and injuring several. Although the workers soon returned to their picket lines, the growers threatened to drive their families out of the huge strike camp near Corcoran. Faced with yet more violence of unknown scope, the strikers reluctantly yielded to state and federal pressure and accepted a wage increase in lieu of recognition of their union.

The following year, while public attention riveted upon the epic San Francisco general strike, vigilante growers and local sheriffs tore up the Constitution across rural California and imposed what New Dealers as well as Communists would denounce as "farm fascism." One of the darkest spots was the Imperial Valley – the West's closest social and racial analogue to Mississippi - where successive lettuce, pea and melon strikes during the course of 1933-34 were broken by a total terror that included mass arrests, anti-picketing ordinances, evictions, beatings, kidnappings, deportations, and the near

² Cletus Daniel, "Labor Radicalism in Pacific Coast Agriculture," PhD History, University of Washington, Seattle 1972, p. 224.

lynching of the strikers' lawyers. While urban workers led by the new CIO unions were successfully overthrowing the open shop in San Francisco and Los Angeles, California's agricultural workers – whether their names were Maria Morales or Tom Joad – were being terrorized by bigoted deputies and raging mobs. The bitter memory of these brutal events would be woven into John Steinbeck's novels, *In Dubious Battle* and *Grapes of Wrath*, as well as recalled in Woody Guthrie's haunting "Vigilante Man:"

Oh, why does a vigilante man,
 Why does a vigilante man
 Carry that sawed-off shotgun in his hand?
 Would he shoot his brother and
 Sister down?

But this 'vigilante man' was not merely a sinister figure of the Depression decade: as I will argue in this capsule history, he has cast a permanent shadow over California from the 1850s onwards. Indeed vigilantism – ethno-racial and class violence (or threat of violence) cloaked in a pseudo-populist appeal to higher laws and sovereignties - has played a far larger role in the state's history than generally recognized. A broad rainbow of minority groups, including native Americans, Irish, Chinese, Punjabis, Japanese, Filipinos, Okies, African-Americans, and (persistently in each generation) Mexicans, as well as radicals and trade-unionists of various denominations, have been victims of vigilante repression. Organized private violence, usually in tandem with local law enforcement, has shaped the racial-caste system of California agriculture, defeated radical labor movements like the IWW, and kept the New Deal out of the state's farm counties. It has also spurred innumerable reactionary laws and reinforced both legal and de facto segregation. Moreover, the vigilante is no curio of a bad past, but a pathological type currently undergoing dramatic post-millennial revival as many Anglo-Californians panic in face of demographic decline and the perceived erosion of their racial privileges.

Today's armed and combat-camouflaged 'Minutemen' in their various factions who instigate confrontations on the border, or (in their civilian garb) harass day laborers in front of suburban Home Depots, are the latest incarnations of an old character. Their infantile strutting and posing may contrast rather comically to the authentic fascist

menace of the Associated Farmers and other Depression-era groups, but it would be foolish to discount their impact. Just as the grower vigilantes of the 1930s succeeded in militarizing rural California against the labor movement, the Minutemen have helped to radicalize debate about immigration and race within the Republican Party, contributing to the full-fledged nativist backlash against the Bush administration's proposal for a new *bracero* program. Candidates in Republican primaries in Southern California now vie with another for endorsement by the Minutemen leaders. These armed and media-savvy neo-vigilantes, by threatening to enforce the borders themselves, also spur the increasingly successful campaign to turn local law enforcement into immigration police. And as true dialecticians will concede, what begins as farce sometimes grows into something much uglier and more dangerous.

1. Pinkertons, Klansmen and Vigilantes

Americans appear responsible for developing vigilantism, the consummate expression of conservative violence

*Robert Ingalls*³

Before looking at the functions of vigilantism in California history, it is first useful to map its location within the larger history of American class and racial violence. The eminent labor historian Philip Taft once opined that the United States had the “bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrial nation in the world.” Setting European civil wars and revolutions aside, Taft is probably correct: American workers faced chronic state and employer violence against which they frequently responded in kind. Robert Goldstein in his encyclopedic study of political repression in the United States, estimates that at least 700 strikers and demonstrators were killed by police or troops between 1870 and 1937.⁴ In contrast to the more politically centralized societies of Western Europe, the worst violence (like the Ludlow and Republic Steel massacres)

³ Robert Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936*, Knoxville 1988, p. xv.

⁴ Robert Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America, from 1870 to 1976*, Boston 1978, p. 3.

usually came from local police and militias. But what truly demarcates the United States is not so much the scale or frequency of state repression, but rather the extraordinary centrality of institutionalized private violence in the reproduction of the racial and social order. No European society tolerated such a large, more or less permanent sphere of repressive activity and summary justice by non-state actors.⁵ But then again, no European society shared the recent U.S. experience of genocidal frontier violence, often organized by posses and informal groups, against native Americans, or the widespread participation of poorer Southern whites in the policing of slavery.

In effect, there were three geographically distinct, if non-exclusive systems of private repression. First, in the industrial Heartland where local government was occasionally in hands of Socialists or Democrats sympathetic to the labor movement, the biggest industrial, mining and railroad corporations, loathe to put their entire trust in the local state, deployed literal armies of armed guards, plant detectives and company police. There is little equivalent in European history for the formidable repressive role of the Pinkertons, the Sherman Corporation, the Bergoff Agency, the Baldwin Felts Detective Agency, the Pennsylvania Coal and Iron Police, or the Ford Service Department. (The Pinkertons alone reputedly outnumbered the regular U.S. Army in the early 1890s.)⁶ Nor is there any counterpart in the experience of European labor to such epic 'private' battles as Homestead in 1892 when steelworkers defeated a regiment of Pinkertons, or Blair Mountain in 1921 when ten thousand West Virginia miners battled the Baldwin Felts for more than a week.

Figure One

⁵ Partial exceptions would include landowner violence in the Mezzogiorno and employer-hired assassins in Barcelona (1917-21).

⁶ Goldstein, p. 12.

MODES OF REPRESSION

I. STATE VIOLENCE

- a. *federal*: regular army
- b. *state*: militias, national guard, state police
- c. *local*: police, sheriffs, sworn posses

II. PRIVATE OR PERI-STATE VIOLENCE

- a. *Heartland*: corporate police and private detective agencies (*Pinkertons*)
- b. *South*: organized white supremacists (*Klan*)
- c. *West*: vigilantes (*White League*)

Second, throughout the post-Reconstruction South white supremacy was routinely enforced by the noose and pyre in a continuation of the antebellum traditions of seignorial violence against slaves and the conscription of poor whites as slave hunters. Again, there is no equivalent, except episodically in the imperial Russia of the Black Hundreds, for this sustained terror by false arrest, chain gang, arson, assassination, massacre, and public lynching (3200 between 1882 and 1930).⁷ When lynching deaths were combined with legal executions, “an African-American was put to death somewhere in the South on the average of every four days.”⁸ Despite the stereotype of lynch mobs composed of shoeless illiterate whites, the violent overthrow of Reconstruction was led by regional elites, and the planter and business strata continued to condone and orchestrate racial violence whenever it was politically expedient or reinforced their economic dominance. They seldom challenged and often profited from a culture where “community justice included both statutory law and lynch law.”⁹ Indeed, cotton tenancy

⁷ In the same period, 7 Blacks were lynched in the Northeast, 79 in the Midwest, and 38 in the Far West. See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, Champaign-Urbana 1993, p. 8.

⁸ Stewart Tolnay and E. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, Urbana 1995, p. 100.

⁹ Ingalls, p. xviii.

and debt peonage, and thus the profits of landowners and merchants, were maintained through chronic racial violence and the extinction of Black civil rights.

Third, vigilantism constituted a distinctive system of locally sanctioned violence throughout the former Western frontier states, but especially in the Southwest where Anglo rule had been imposed by military conquest on native American, Hispanic and Mexican populations. In California – the state that was as epicentral to vigilantism as Mississippi was to Klan violence or Pennsylvania was to corporate repression – the domination of a conquered Spanish-speaking population intersected with the social control of immigrants from Asia. Vigilantism - often extolled from the pulpit or editorial page - policed the boundaries of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Americanism. ‘ But vigilantes, sometimes deputized as posses, also were strikebreakers of last resort as well as the popular arm of anti-radical crusades as in 1917-19 or the early 1930s.

It should be emphasized, of course, that while these three systems of peri-legal violence had strong geographical foci, there were obviously many overlaps. Blacks, for example, were murdered in the streets of Springfield (1908) and East St. Louis (1917) and lynched in Duluth (1920) as well as in the former Confederacy. Likewise the Pinkertons terrorized the IWW in Montana (the subject of Dashiell Hammet’s first novel, *Red Harvest*), and the ‘second’ Klan of the 1920s was probably most powerful in Oregon, Colorado and Indiana. Middle-class vigilantes often played auxiliary roles in the big showdowns between Midwestern labor and capital, as in Akron in 1913 or Minneapolis in 1934. Anti-union vigilantes, like the infamous Black Legion, plagued Michigan through the 1930s. The best single historical study of anti-labor vigilantism, moreover, is Robert Ingalls’ book on Tampa, Florida – a New South city - where local business elites terrorized “workers, labor organizers, immigrants, blacks, Socialists, and Communists:” a bloody history that culminated in the repression of striking Cuban cigarmakers in 1931.¹⁰

Nor, in face of the caste-like segmentation of the American working class, is it very profitable to attempt to rigorously distinguish ethno-religious and racial violence from

¹⁰ Ibid, p. xvii.

class violence. Thus the 1897 Latimer Massacre, when deputies and vigilantes murdered 21 peaceful Slavic miners protesting a newly passed ‘alien tax,’ was as much an anti-immigrant pogrom (“We’ll give you hell, not water, hunkies!” screamed the deputies) as it was class repression. Likewise many of the Black sharecroppers and independent farmers who were murdered or lynched in the South were singled out because they had defied a boss, competed with whites for land, or achieved unusual prosperity. As Stewart Tolnay and E. Beck have shown in a well-known study, Southern lynchings tended to follow the economic cycle of cotton, with “Blacks safer from mob violence when the profits from cotton were high.”¹¹ Indeed it is the fusion of racial or ethnic hatred with economic self-interest (real or perceived) that explains much of the extremity as well as the self-righteous of private violence toward subordinate groups in American history.

Why then even bother to distinguish Western ‘vigilantism’ from Southern mob violence, particularly if vigilantes were usually racists, while Southern terrorists were also apt to strike out at white radicals, Jews and civil rights supporters? Equally, isn’t it true that large-scale agriculture in the Southwest as in the Southeast was capitalized on caste discrimination, disenfranchisement, and employer violence? In *Factories in the Fields* (his non-fiction counterpart to Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*), Carey McWilliams was emphatic that California vigilantism, even if “nowadays...sophisticated by self-conscious artistry,” was built on “an anti-foreign bias” and infused by “racial feeling.”¹² So I will readily concede that any distinction between the West and the South can only be upheld within a more fundamental continuum, but California-style vigilantism nonetheless has tended to be more episodic and *ad hoc*, less firmly anchored in statutory inequality (Jim Crow laws), more pluralistic in the objects of its intolerance, but less dualistic in its legal and moral legitimation.

The Western vigilante classically claims the right to act because the state is either absent, in the hands of criminals, or in default of its fundamental obligations (for

¹¹ E. Beck and Stewart Tolnay, “The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930,” *American Sociological Review* 55 (1990), pp. 526-39; and *A Festival of Violence*, p. 251.

¹² Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, Boston 1939, p. 137.

example, to enforce immigration laws or defend private property). Thus the *Brawley News* in 1933 resorted to the following sophistry to justify a particularly brutal vigilante attack on striking Mexican farmworkers: “It was not mob violence, it was a studied organized movement of citizens seeking the only way out of difficulties threatening the community’s peace when the hands of the law are tied by the law itself.”¹³ White Southerners, on the other hand, have always asserted supreme racial prerogatives that override any state or federal statute. The Westerner defends his actions in the name of unenforced laws and the frontier principle of *posse comitatus*, while the Southerner appeals to the primal priority of race and ‘white honor.’ If the sadistic frenzy of anti-Black violence in Southern history has found few defenders outside the region, Western vigilantism – often just as racist and despicable – was praised by the likes of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Leland Stanford, and Theodore Roosevelt, and, indeed, is still celebrated today as an essentially “wholesome tradition of spontaneous communal justice,” part of a romantic heritage of frontier democracy.¹⁴

What about the social base of vigilantism? In his study of Tampa, Ingalls find a fundamental continuity of elite control: “vigilantes take the law into their own hands to reinforce existing power relationships, not to subvert them. ... Whether the particular target was a black prisoner, a union organizer, a political radical, or a common criminal, extralegal violence was supposed to preserve the status quo.”¹⁵ More ponderously, Ray Abrahams, who looks at vigilante groups as an international phenomenon, concludes that “vigilantism is rarely simply a popular response to the failure of due legal process to deal with breaches of the law. ‘The people’ and ‘the community’ are on inspection, complex concepts, and the populism of much vigilante rhetoric conceals... a self-satisfied elitism.”¹⁶ Richard Brown in an earlier study of vigilantism on the frontier argued that “again and again, it was the most eminent local community leaders who headed vigilante

¹³ Quoted in Donald Fearis, “The California Farm Worker, 1930-1945,” PhD History, U.C. Davis, 1971, p.117.

¹⁴ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Introduction,” in Brundage (ed.), *Under sentence of death: lynching in the South*, Chapel Hill 1997, p. 4.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 206.

¹⁶ Ray Abrahams, *Vigilante Citizens: Vigilantism and the State*, Cambridge 1998, p. 158.

movements... the typical vigilante leaders were ambitious young men from the old settled areas of the East. They wished to establish themselves in the upper level of the new community, at the status they held or aspired to in the place of their origin.”¹⁷

In California, however, there is a striking difference between the social roots of vigilantism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Victorian vigilantes (with the notable exceptions of the two San Francisco vigilance movements of the 1850s) tended to be workers, petty entrepreneurs, and small farmers fighting in the name of Jacksonian values to preserve a monopoly of ‘white labor’ against what they construed as elite conspiracies to flood the state with ‘coolies’ and ‘aliens.’¹⁸ From the turn of the century, however, such plebian nativism, although still present, yielded to anti-Asian and anti-radical outbursts now led by wealthier farmers, middle-class professionals and local business elites, who were as likely to be California Progressives as old-guard Republicans. In the late twentieth-century, this middle-class nativism reemerged and migrated from the farmlands to the conservative suburbs, where the specter of ‘illegal’ immigrants helps fill the aching vacuum in rightwing imagination left by the collapse of the international communist conspiracy.

¹⁷ Richard Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*, New York 1975, pp. 97 and 111.

¹⁸ It is important to emphasize, however, that a similar strain of plebian self-interest was evident in parts of the South where “land-hungry white farmers also adopted terrorist methods as a means to shore up their increasingly vulnerable economic status. ... By driving away black tenants [through lynchings and terror] and ostracizing the white farmers who rented to them, they hoped to create a labor shortage and force white landowners to employ only whites.” (Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, p. 24.)

2. *White Savages*

The vigilantes' first act was to erect a makeshift gallows and hang Joaquin Valenzuela before the entire population of San Luis Obispo. The unfortunate Valenzuela was probably innocent of the most recent murders.

*John Boessenecker*¹⁹

The brief campaigns and little battles in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas that constituted the 1846-47 war of conquest in California were but a prelude to the protracted, incomparably more violent predations of Anglo gangs, filibusters and vigilantes who expropriated native land and labor during the 1850s. The 'border,' in the first instance, was not the line drawn by the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers in the aftermath of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but the genocidal violence that Jacksonian democracy unleashed on the Southwest. This Ur-violence of the border in the era of what Marx would have called "primitive accumulation" is the subject of Cormac McCarthy's epic *Blood Meridian* – a hallucinatory but historically accurate recounting of the Glanton gang who murdered and scalped their way from Chihuahua to San Diego. For white savages like Glanton, Manifest Destiny was a godlike license – "a personal imperialism" – to kill and plunder as they marauded through Indian camps and adobe villages.²⁰

Native Californians were the first victims of the Anglo conquest. The instant society of white males created by the California Gold Rush had an insatiable hunger for sexual objects and servile domestic labor. The early Legislature accommodated this demand with indenture laws that essentially enslaved Indian women and children to white

¹⁹ John Boessenecker, *Gold Dust and Gunsmoke*, New York 1999, p. 113.

²⁰ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West*, New York, 1985. See the important discussion by Neil Campbell, "Liberty beyond its proper bounds; Cormac McCarthy's history of the West in *Blood Meridian*," in Rick Wallach (ed.), *Myth, legend, dust*, Manchester 2000.

masters. Bands of 'squawmen,' led by Glanton counterparts like Robert 'Growling' Smith, fanned out through the Napa and Sacramento Valleys, kidnapping Indian slaves and killing all who resisted. "You may hear them talk of the operation of cutting to pieces an Indian squaw in their discriminate raids for babies as 'like slicing old cheese,'" wrote the *Sacramento Union* in 1862. "The baby hunters sneak up to a *rancheria*, kill the bucks, pick out the best looking squaws, ravish them, and make off with their young ones."²¹

The abduction or murder of Indians was subsidized by the state government which issued bonds to pay volunteer companies – shades of Glanton's scalp hunters - to exterminate California's first peoples. Out of an estimated Indian population of 150,000 in 1846 (already reduced by half from pre-Spanish levels), only 30,000 survived by 1870. Bret Harte, together with Mark Twain, the premier chronicler of the Gold Rush era, described an atrocity he encountered in an Indian village attacked by vigilantes along the Redwood coast in 1860. "The wounded, dead, and dying were found all around, and in every lodge the skulls and frames of women and children cleft with axes and hatchets, and stabbed with knives, and the brains of an infant oozing from its broken head to the ground."²²

In the gold camps themselves, vigilantes fulfilled their stereotypical role of administrating rough frontier justice from a tree limb to rustlers and dry-gulchers, but they also frequently acted as an ethnic militia to forcibly evict the Spanish-speaking miners who had arrived earliest in the Mother Lode country. If the goldfields were briefly the closest approximation to the Jacksonian utopia of a 'republic of fortune' where independent and formally equal producers dug for gold, it was also a closed, Anglo-Saxon democracy that excluded the 'greasers,' construed as all 'Latin or half-breed races,' often including the French. The punitive foreign miners' license tax passed by the first Legislature in 1850 provided a pretext for armed vigilance groups to expel Mexican and Chilean miners from their claims. When Latino miners resisted, they were

²¹ Richard Street, *Beasts of the Field*, Stanford 2004, p. 148.

²² Quoted in James Rawls and Walton Bean, *California: An Interpretative History*, Boston 2003, p. 153

punctually lynched, as in the case of 16 *chileanos* in the Calaveras district or the “beautiful, spirited pregnant Mexican woman by the name of Josefa” in Placer County who had shot an American miner after he called her a ‘whore’.²³

In the mining region around Sonora, defiant Mexican and European miners, led by French and German revolutionary exiles of 1848, resisted Anglo intimidation in a series of confrontations that came close to civil war. In one famous incident, Leonard Pitt relates, “into the diggings marched four hundred Americans – a ‘moving engine of terror’ – heading for Columbia Camp, the foreigners’ headquarters.

They collected tax money from a few affluent aliens and chased the rest away, with a warning to vacate the mines. One trooper recalls seeing ‘men, women and children – all packed up and moving, bag and baggage. Tents were being pulled down, houses and hovels gutted of their contents ... the posse finally arrested the two “hot-headed Frenchmen ... of the red republican order” ... The men liquored up for the road, hoisted the Stars and Stripes to the top of a pine tree, fired off a salute, and headed for home.’²⁴

The ‘red republicans’ quickly organized their own column and stormed the town of Sonora, but ultimately the weight of American numbers and the presence of the regular army led to a ‘foreign’ exodus from the gold fields. Many of the Sonorans were then robbed of their mules and horses by the California militia when they tried to cross the Colorado River at Yuma on their way home.

Meanwhile in the southern ‘cow’ counties and along the central coast, the poorer Mexican and Mission Indian (neophyte) populations fought a bitter rearguard action against Anglo usurpers. Traditionally characterized as mere desperados, Tiburcio Vasquez, Pio Linares, Juan Flores, and the semi-mythic Joaquin Marietta were, in fact,

²³ Kevin Starr, *California: A History*, New York 2005, pp. 86-87.

²⁴ Leonard Pitt, “‘Greasers’ in the Diggings,” in Roger Daniels and Spencer Olin (eds.), *Racism in California: A Reader in the History of Oppression*, New York 1972, pp. 195-97.

social bandits or even guerrilla chieftains in a grim conflict that pitted vigilante posses, composed of demobilized soldiers and Indian killers, against the dispossessed *gente de razon*. In the south, the larger *Californio* landowners like the Sepulvedas and Picos usually supported the vigilantes, but in the north some of the great dynasties, like the Berreyesa clan which had six members murdered, were driven into extinction or exile by chronic conflict with the Anglos.²⁵

One of the biggest vigilance movements – indeed, “one of the most violent events of the Gold Rush” – was the campaign organized in Los Angeles to defeat the so-called ‘Flores Revolution’ led by Juan Flores and Pancho Daniel. Arrested by Anglos in 1855, Flores soon escaped from San Quentin to join forces with Daniel, a *companero* of Joaquin Murietta, and a dozen other ranch hands and miners. In January 1857 while visiting his young Indian lover, Chola Martina, at San Juan Capistrano, Flores killed sheriff Barton and three members of his posse. Vigilantes, including Mexican-hating Texans known as the ‘El Monte Boys,’ eventually captured Flores after several battles and escapes; he was lynched before a large crowd at the foot of Fort Hill in today’s downtown Los Angeles. Other *Californios* died more anonymously. “Juan Flores was the twelfth man slain by Los Angeles vigilantes,” historian John Boessenecker explains. “Ten suspects had been hanged and two shot to death. Of those, only four were definitely connected to the Flores-Daniel band.”²⁶

Boessenecker sees these incidents as part of a larger race war that raged along the El Camino Real in the middle 1850s, with the San Luis Obispo area as a second epicenter. Here the band of Pio Linares, joined by Joaquin Valenzuela and the Irishman Jack Powers, preyed upon Anglo ranchers and travelers, while Anglo vigilantes in turn terrorized the local *Californios*. It was a war without pity on either side. Before the vigilantes were through, they had killed Linares in a famous gun battle and lynched seven of his companions, including Valenzuela (for murder he most likely didn’t

²⁵ Boessenecker, pp. 68-69.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 130. Boessenecker, a defender of the Anglo version of these events, is dogmatic that Flores, Daniels and others were “pillagers, not patriots.” (p. 133)

commit). Around the same time, 200 vigilantes broke into the Los Angeles jail, dragged Pancho Daniel, the surviving leader of the Flores band, out of his cell, and strung him up from a nearby gate. The contemporary San Francisco *Bulletin* contrasted the difference in attitudes between the “lower class of Californians, or Sonorans” who vowed to avenge the heroic Daniels, and the “the respectable portion” who supported his Anglo executioners.²⁷

Although the principal axis of social violence in Gold Rush California was this conflict between plebian *Californios* and Indians, on one hand, and the sons of Manifest Destiny on the other, the most famous vigilantes were the San Francisco businessmen and politicians who comprised the two Vigilance Committees of 1851 and 1855. The first Committee emerged in public view in June 1851 when under the histrionic urgings of Sam Brannan – the notorious Mormon filibuster and land speculator who had been the original publicist of the gold discoveries in 1849 – an Australian thief named John Jenkins was lynched from the old customs house in Portsmouth Square. When the mayor tried to persuade the vigilantes to leave justice to the courts, Brannan thundered: “To hell with your courts! We are the courts! And the hangman!”²⁸ Several other ‘Sidney Ducks’ - mainly Irish Australians blamed for arson and crime in San Francisco - soon followed Jenkins to the noose, while two others were stomped to death in the street. “As foreigners in California,” writes Robert Senkewicz in his history of the incident, “the Australians were regarded as poachers in the Garden of Eden.” The vigilantes – largely merchants, importers, bankers and lawyers – closed down shop after most of the Australians fled the city.²⁹

They reopened on an expanded scale in 1856 to deal with the challenge of the Tammany Hall-type political machine that the charismatic David Broderick (a former ‘Locofoco’ from New York City) and his largely Irish and Catholic supporters were building in San Francisco. The immediate pretext was the recent deaths of two prominent anti-Broderick

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 131.

²⁸ Arthur Quinn, *Rivals: William Gwin, David Broderick, and the Birth of California*, New York 1994, p. 108.

²⁹ Robert Senkewicz, *Vigilantes in Gold Rush San Francisco*, Stanford 1985, p. 80.

leaders, William Richardson (a U.S. marshal) and James King (a newspaper editor), in separate confrontations with erstwhile Broderick supporters Charles Cora (an Italian gambler) and James Casey (a Democratic county supervisor). But the lynching of Cora and Casey in May 1856 by the Second Vigilance Committee, headed by William Tell Coleman, a pro-slavery Democrat from Kentucky, had less to do with criminal justice than the attempt by Protestant merchants, Know-Nothings, and anti-Catholics to arrest the growth of Broderick's power and intimidate his Irish supporters.

The vigilantes, in effect, were upper-class insurrectionists embarked on a sweeping purge of Irish political power. "Casey and Cora out of the way," writes Father Senkewica, "the committee swiftly turned to its important task. In short order, a number of Broderick's political operatives found themselves surrounded on the streets by squads of armed vigilantes and hustled to the waiting executive committee. They were tried for a variety of offenses, mostly relating to political fraud and ballot box stuffing. After conviction, which was virtually automatic, they were hurried off for deportation on ships that were already in the process of clearing the harbor."³⁰ Democratic elected officials who survived deportation were coerced into resigning; they were replaced in the next election by candidates endorsed by Coleman, the city's temporary dictator, and the vigilantes. The so-called 'Peoples' Party' of the second Vigilance Committee soon merged with the new Republican Party and ruled San Francisco until 1867. The destruction of his urban political machine, however, had the ironical result of refocusing Broderick's ambitions on state politics where he quickly was elected by the legislature to the U.S. Senate. (Senator Broderick, the Free Soil Democrat, was killed in a famous duel in 1859 with California supreme court chief justice David Terry, a rabid supporter of slavery.)

One of the contemporary opponents of the vigilantes, William Tecumseh Sherman (then a San Francisco banker), pointed out that "as they controlled the press, they wrote their own history." Indeed, the San Francisco vigilance committees later became apotheosized by philosopher Josiah Royce (in his 1886 book, *California*) and historian Humbert Howe Bancroft (in his 1887 *Popular Tribunals*) as paragons of liberty and civic

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 172-73.

virtue. This image of the heroic bourgeois vigilante who episodically buckles on his six-gun to restore law and order to a society over-run by criminal immigrants and their corrupt politicians would be an enduring California myth, inspiring anti-Asian Progressives in the 1910s and 1920s as well as suburban nativists in 2000s.

3. *The Yellow Peril*

To an American, death is preferable to life on a par
with a Chinaman.

*Dennis Kearney (1877)*³¹

The *Times* of London was, of course, the journal of record for the nineteenth century, and the first entry indexed for ‘Los Angeles’ is ‘Chinese massacre, 24 October 1871.’ Following the shooting of a sheriff (shades of Juan Flores), a vigilante mob of 500 Anglos had swept through ‘Nigger Alley’ (near present-day Union Station) slaughtering male Chinese, boys as well as men, on sight. The official death toll was nineteen (almost ten percent of the local Chinese population), but contemporary observers thought the actual number was likely much higher. In a modern reflection on the incident, the historian William Locklear argued that two decades of Anglo vigilantism and race hatred in Los Angeles had created “a fertile ground” for the worst pogrom (Indian massacres aside) in California history.³²

The Chinese (in 1860 about one-fifth of the state’s labor-force) had often been victimized during the Gold Rush era, when they were generally allowed to work only abandoned and low-grade claims, but persecution began on a systematic scale during the regional economic downturn of 1869-70. Through the continuing depression of the 1870s, the Chinese became the scapegoats for a disintegrating California dream, as the utopian

³¹ Royce Delmatier, et al., *The Rumble of California Politics, 1848-1970*, New York 1970, p. 77.

³² William Locklear, “The Celestials and the Angels: A Study of the Anti-Chinese Movement in Los Angeles to 1882,” *Southern California Quarterly* 42 (September 1960), pp. 239-54.

hopes of the former 49ers were dashed against the realities of concentrated economic power, the scarcity of homestead land, falling wages, and rampant unemployment. If for a few years in the early 1850s the goldfields had been a producers' democracy, where white men of different class backgrounds toiled side by side; by the end of the decade, monopoly had become firmly entrenched in land, commerce and mining. The rise of the Central Pacific (later Southern Pacific) Railroad and its ruling 'Big Four' during the 1860s established semi-feudal baronies upon the ruins of Jacksonian equality; while the long economic crisis of the 1870s ruined thousands of small farmers, self-employed teamsters, ambitious young professionals, and miscellaneous entrepreneurs. Their petty-bourgeois hysteria grew into hallucinatory rage against a fictitious 'Yellow Peril' which demagogues like Dennis Kearney (former seaman turned prosperous businessman) then spread throughout the San Francisco and California labor movements, where it metastasized into an incurable obsession for the next fifty years.

In his *Indispensable Enemy*, a pathbreaking analysis of working-class 'false consciousness,' Alexander Saxton explains how an exclusionist, anti-Asian populism, rooted in the contradictions of Jacksonian producerist ideology, preempted the moral universe of California labor. Instead of making common cause with Chinese workers, Kearney's Workingman's Union of San Francisco, and its offshoot, the Workingmen's Party of California, screamed "Chinese Must Go!" and demanded the abrogation of the 1868 Burlingame Treaty that had normalized Chinese emigration to the United States. Their huge bonfire processions spilled over into rioting and the destruction of Chinese businesses. The economic crisis was attributed by Kearney and other Workingman leaders to a demonic conspiracy of coolies and monopolists, whose ultimate aim was nothing less than the destruction of the American white republic.³³

Indeed, in his pro-Workingmen's novel *The Last Days of the Republic* (1880), the Kearneyite Pierton Dooner described how the desperate efforts of San Francisco's white workers to massacre the Chinese are thwarted by the capitalist militia, leading to the

³³ Alexander Saxton, *Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Rise of the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, Berkeley 1971.

enfranchisement of the Chinese and, ultimately, their conquest of North America. “The Temple of Liberty had crumbled; and above its ruins was reared the colossal fabric of barbaric splendor known as the Western Empire of His August Majesty, the Emperor of China ... The very name of the United States was thus blotted from the record of nations.”³⁴

Dooner’s novel was the ancestor of scores of Yellow Peril and White-Civilization-in-Danger screeds. (Its contemporary descendants include the immigration apocalypses and ‘brown perils’ retailed in recent books by Victor Davis Hanson, Daniel Sheehy, Tom Tancredo, and other xenophobes.)³⁵ His advocacy of preemptive massacre a la Los Angeles also made *The Last Days of the Republic* a kind of *Turner Diaries* for members of the Workingmen’s movement and their rural allies. If the 1877 attacks on the Chinese in San Francisco were quelled by bourgeois vigilantes (a Committee of Public Safety drilled by the venerable William Tell Coleman) and the timely arrival of U.S. warships, anti-coolie violence became chronic in the California countryside where many Chinese ex-railroad workers had sought employment as field hands and harvest workers.

The Order of Caucasians was the rural equivalent to San Francisco’s Workingmen’s anti-coolie clubs with a rapidly growing membership in the Sacramento Valley. In 1877, at the height of unrest in San Francisco, unemployed members of the Order attacked Chinese camps throughout the Valley: burning bunkhouses, beating field hands, and in March near Chico, murdering four Chinese workers. That summer the violence spread to the Great Gospel Swamp near Anaheim in Southern California, where vigilantes belonging to the Order attacked Chinese hop pickers. The following year the powerful state Grange endorsed Kearney’s call for an all-out crusade against the “long-tailed lepers from Asian,” declaring that the Chinese were an “overshadowing curse which are sapping the foundation of our prosperity, the dignity of labor, and the glory of the State.”³⁶

³⁴ Pierton Dooner, *The Last Days of the Republic*, San Francisco 1880, p. 257.

³⁵ Cf. Victor Davis Hanson, *Mexifornia*; Daniel Sheehy, *Fighting Immigration Anarchy*; and Tom Tancredo and Jon Dougherty, *In Mortal Danger* 2006.

³⁶ Street, pp. 311 and 319.

Vigilantism, of course, was also political theater with the chief aim of scaring politicians into passing vigorous anti-Chinese legislation. In 1879, while tramps continued to assail Chinese in the rural valleys, a new state constitution was hammered out in Sacramento under the influence of delegates from the Workingmen's Party and the Grange. In anticipation of later Jim Crow constitutions in the Deep South, it mandated segregated schools for 'Mongolians,' barred them from public employment, and allowed incorporated communities to segregate them in Chinatowns (the artifacts of prejudice not collective choice). Soon afterwards, 94 per cent of California voters endorsed a referendum to exclude further Chinese immigrants. 'California's Karl Marx,' the land reformer Henry George, protested that white hysteria over the Chinese was squandering a historic opportunity for radical reform of the state's economic system. (George, earlier an anti-Chinese zealot, now distanced himself from the racist demagoguery of the Kearneyites.)³⁷

Nor did the 'monopolists,' allegedly the sponsors of the 'coolie menace,' defend the Chinese with much ardor. As Richard Street explains in his history of nineteenth-century California farm labor, when Chinese harvest hands in the 1870s and early 1880s began to organize and even strike, many of their employers suddenly lost enthusiasm for the Burlingame Treaty. With white Californians now so powerfully united against Chinese immigration, President Chester Arthur ignored the protests of Beijing and signed the Chinese Exclusion Act in May 1882.³⁸

But the termination of immigration only increased pressure to expel the Chinese from the fields. Local Anti-Coolie Leagues and Anti-Chinese Associations organized boycotts of ranchers who employed Chinese laborer, including death threats and arson against the huge Bidwell ranch. In February 1882, vigilantes drove Chinese workers out of the hop fields north of Sacramento and burnt down their bunkhouses near Wheatland. A month later at a huge anti-Chinese convention in Sacramento, lawyer Grover Johnson, the father

³⁷ Saxton, p. 264.

³⁸ Ibid.

of future Progressive governor and senator Hiram, keynoted the call to kick the Chinese out of the state.³⁹

Then in September 1885 the massacre of 28 Chinese miners by white Knights of Labor in Rock Springs, Wyoming (which forced President Cleveland to send federal troops to protect the survivors), detonated pogroms across the Far West. As Alexander Saxton put it, “the fund of anger and discontent building up among workingmen [in the bad economy of 1884-86], by a kind of Gresham’s law, converted itself into the cheaper currency of anticolonialism.” In the first half of 1886, vigilance committees to “abate” and remove the Chinese emerged in 35 California towns, including Pasadena, Arroyo Grande, Stockton, Merced, and Truckee. This was ethnic cleansing on an unprecedented scale and thousands of Chinese were expelled from these smaller cities and towns. Most of them fled to San Francisco’s heavily fortified Chinatown, where they were reduced to “fighting in the alleys for garbage and rotten fish,” while growers complained bitterly about the shortage of cheap farm labor.⁴⁰

For the next few years, anti-Chinese agitation simmered just below the boiling point, until the Depression of 1893 ignited yet another wave of white chauvinism and mob violence. In the Napa Valley, the White Labor Union organized to drive the Chinese from the vineyards, while other vigilantes attacked Chinese in Selma and murdered two field hands near Kingsburg. Vigilantism also spread to Southern California’s orange groves as hundreds of whites drove Chinese out of the wealthy citrus town of Redlands in “a blaze of gunshots.” Thanks to Representative Geary from Sonoma County, Congress had just legislated that Chinese be required to obtain certificates of residence – creating, as Street points out, “America’s first internal passport system.” The ‘Redlands Plan,’ popularized by a local sheriff, used the Geary Act to legalize the expulsion of local Chinese who failed to register. But in many citrus towns – including Anaheim, Compton

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 348-51.

⁴⁰ Saxton, p. 205. On the formidable defenses of Chinatown, see p. 149.

and Rivera – unemployed whites didn't bother with legalisms; they simply formed mobs and attacked the Chinese in their camps.⁴¹

As the depression deepened, vigilantism continued to flare through the winter and into the spring and summer of 1894. Growers gradually conceded to the terror, hiring white tramps and urban unemployed in the place of a rapidly aging, bachelor Chinese workforce whose ranks were in any event being rapidly depleted by the Exclusion Act and its amendments. For a half century the Chinese had given their sweat and blood to build the state: now they were simply pushed aside. New generations would have little inkling of the irreplaceable role that Chinese labor had played in building the infrastructure (roads, railroads, aqueducts, fields and fruit orchards) of modern California life⁴².

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 377-86.

⁴² As one Hayward grower observed during the debate on exclusion: "Our orchards and vineyards are the product of Chinese labor. Had not such labor been at our command, there would not now be one fruit tree or grapevine in the state. ... there would have no fruit or canning factories, nor any immense wineries." (Quoted in Donald Fearis, "The California Farm Worker, 1930-1942," PhD dissertation, History, U.C. Davis, 1971, pp. 51-52.

4. 'Swat a Jap'

Underlying this Japanese problem is the fundamental proposition that this is a white man's country – and will remain so.

Asiatic Exclusion League (1909)⁴³

The first significant stream of Japanese immigrants to California came from Hawaii: plantation laborers escaping the hellish conditions and coolie wages in the cane fields. After the islands' annexation in 1898, migration to the mainland, as well direct immigration from Japan, became easier. Japanese laborers soon replaced the Chinese in the beet fields and orchards, and immediately inherited their pariah status. As early as 1892, when the state's Japanese population was still negligible, that tireless bigot, Dennis Kearney, was already screaming that the "Japs Must Go!," although as historian Roger Daniels emphasizes, prejudice toward the Japanese was still "mainly a tail to the anti-Chinese kite." By the eve of the San Francisco Earthquake, however, the Japanese were a significant segment of the agricultural workforce with a growing reputation for standing up for their rights. Indeed they were the early-twentieth-century pioneers of agricultural unionism and organized an impressive strike with Mexican co-workers in the beet fields of Oxnard as early as 1903. But the powerful San Francisco unions spurned the new immigrants and instead organized the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League in May 1905 (partly, Saxton argues, to distract attention from scandals within Union-Labor Party).⁴⁴ As the geriatric Chinese population declined, the younger, economically dynamic Japanese became the new incarnation of the Yellow Peril.

In San Francisco, petty violence toward Japanese residents became a chronic problem, with particularly brazen incidents during and after the earthquake in April 1906.

⁴³ Quoted in Thomas Walls, "A Theoretical View of Race, Class and the Rise of Anti-Japanese Agitation in California," PhD dissertation, History, University of Texas, Austin 1989 p. 215.

⁴⁴ Saxton, pp. 251-52.

“Nineteen cases of assault against Japanese residents... were reported, despite the fact that the Japanese government had sent funds to aid the stricken city.” When the world-renown Tokyo seismologist Professor Fusakichi Omori arrived with the gift of a new seismograph for the University of California, he and his colleagues were slugged and stoned on Mission Street by a gang of youths and men. The hooligans were later consecrated by the local press as popular heroes.⁴⁵

That fall, moreover, Japanese kids were kicked out of white schools and segregated with the Chinese – an insult that soon became a major diplomatic incident. In contrast to China in the 1870s and 1880s, Japan was an emergent great power that had just achieved a stunning military victory over Czarist Russia, and Theodore Roosevelt became the first in a series of American presidents forced to balance rational foreign policy against implacable anti-Japanese hysteria on the West Coast. A temporary palliative – which did little to assuage either Japanese or California public opinion - was the 1908 Gentleman’s Agreement that halted the immigration of laborers, while allowing a trickle of ‘picture brides.’

But by 1908 the social base of anti-Japanese agitation was changing from the urban labor movement to the rural and urban middle-classes. Through extraordinary hard work and community solidarity, the Issei (first-generation immigrants) and their children were saving their wages and buying or leasing land. California’s growers and wealthy orchardists, like the Hawaiian sugar barons before them, were shocked by gritty determination of the Japanese to become their own masters, “competitors rather than employees.” As Carey McWilliams explained, the large shipper-growers opposed Japanese land ownership because “it threatened the continued existence of large units of production and it decreased the supply of farm labor.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, New York 2002, p. 43; and Philip Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906*, Berkeley 2005, pp. 297-98.

⁴⁶ McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, p. 112.

As the Issei began to find dynamic niches in suburban truck farming, berry and flower growing, nurseries, and urban landscaping, they also encountered the wrath of small farmers who resented the Japanese immigrants' skilled, intensive methods of cultivation that tended to raise the value of land and the cost of farm leases.⁴⁷ Middle-class Progressives, generally obsessed with social-darwinist notions of racial competition, embraced the defence of 'Anglo-Saxon agriculture' and took up the mantle of "keeping California white." Although labor-supported Democrats as well as the Hearst press continued to fulminate about the dangers of miscegenation and the necessity of school segregation, Progressives emphasized the Japanese as relentless agricultural competitors and sponsored legislation to prevent them from acquiring more farm land. Already ineligible for U.S. citizenship thanks to previous exclusionist laws, the Issei generation would now be forbidden to own land.

The proposed Alien Land Law, however, was immediately and forcibly contested by European rentiers, especially the Dutch and British, who had long owned vast tracts of prime California agricultural land. The Progressive-dominated legislature quickly obliged with new wording that exempted these powerful interests while focusing the bill even more narrowly on the hardworking Issei.⁴⁸ The act's passage in 1913, after a few cosmetic changes to appease alarmed Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, sparked mass protests in Japan and new demands to send the Imperial Fleet to California. As Kevin Starr explains, California's Progressives irreparably poisoned public opinion in Japan and thus helped make a Pacific war virtually inevitable.

During the agitation leading to the Alien Land Law of 1913, a war party, stung by the insult being offered in California, surfaced in the Japanese government, and representatives of this group began to scout the possibilities of a loan to finance a war against the United States. Eighteen years before Pearl Harbor, in other words, and well before the seizure of power by the fascist clique in the Japanese cabinet, the Keep California White! Campaign had succeeded in provoking a number of highly placed people in the Japanese government to view war with the United States as the only adequate response to the racial insults that were being offered. It was even suggested at

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 113-14.

⁴⁸ George Mowry, *The California Progressives*, Berkeley 1951, p. 155.

the time that Japan declare war only on California and not the rest of the United States.⁴⁹

The legislation may have inflamed Tokyo, but it did not prevent the Issei from holding land in the name of their U.S.-born children (the Nisei) or leasing more from avaricious white landowners. Further confrontation with white California, however, was temporarily postponed by the soaring wartime demand for agricultural products, which ensured high profits for all farm producers and temporarily abated racial agitation. But demagogic nativism returned with a vengeance during the sharp postwar recession in 1919 and then persisted in various violent and malignant incarnations throughout the 1920s.

This new wave of anti-Japanese activism addressed both the continuing success of Issei as farmers as well as the efforts of their English-speaking, citizen children to integrate themselves into ordinary California life. Under the generalship of two venerable Progressives – U.S. Senator (and former governor) Hiram Johnson and retired Sacramento *Bee* publisher V.S. McClatchy – a broad nativist coalition, including the Native Sons of the Golden West, the American Legion, the State Federation of Labor, the Grange, the Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Loyal Order of Moose, pushed a new, tougher alien land act through the California Legislature in 1920, then moved on to Washington D.C. to lobby for a total ban on Japanese immigration.

While Congress debated the proposed Johnson-Reed (or Quota Immigration) Act, the xenophobic Native Sons pressured colleges to fire their “pro-Japanese” professors and warned parents of the dangerous sexual predilections of the Nisei (“Would you like your daughter to marry a Japanese?”). A common nativist demand (resurrected in 2005 by anti-immigrant Republicans) was an amendment to deny citizenship to children born in the United States of alien parents. Meanwhile, anti-Japanese groups in the Los Angeles area, including the Native Sons and the Ku Klux Klan as well as local homeowner

⁴⁹ Starr, *Embattled Dreams*, p. 49.

associations, organized a vigilante movement “designed to make life miserable for all Japanese residing there.” This 1922-23 “Swat the Jap” campaign involved everything from billboards and boycotts to spitting on Japanese pedestrians to assault and battery, with dark threats of more serious violence if Nisei persisted in moving into ‘white’ neighborhoods and acting like entitled U.S. citizens.

‘Swat the Jap’, with its emphasis on ritual public humiliation, was an eerie prefiguration of the treatment of Jews in early Nazi Germany; but – as one anti-Japanese leaflet reprinted by Daniels makes clear - it also has considerable resonance with contemporary screeds against Latino immigrants.

You came to care for lawns,
 We stood for it
 You came to work in truck gardens,
 We stood for it
 You moved your children to our public schools
 We stood for it

 You proposed to build a church in our neighborhood
 BUT
 We DIDN'T and WE WON'T STAND FOR IT

 WE DON'T WANT YOU WITH US
 SO GET BUSY, JAPS, AND
 GET OUT OF HOLLYWOOD⁵⁰

Congress, under intense lobbying from Johnson and other Western representatives and senators, passed the Johnson-Reed bill in 1924 and banned all further immigration from Japan. But alien land laws and immigration bans still failed to evict the Japanese from their farms and businesses. Ultimately, Johnson and his supporters would see their life's work crowned with Executive Order 9102 (18 March 1942), interning California's Japanese-Americans in desert concentration camps. As Daniels points out, “Mazanar,

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 97

Gila River, Tule Lake, White Mountain and the other relocation camps are the last monuments to their patriotic zeal.”⁵¹

5. The Anti-Filipino Riots

I shall never forget what I have suffered in this country because of racial prejudice.

*Carlos Bulosan (1937)*⁵²

The victories of the anti-Japanese exclusionists in 1920 and 1924 reinforced an endemic shortage of cheap agricultural labor that the big growers attempted to remedy by importing Mexican and Filipino workers. If California history often seems like a relentless conveyor belt delivering one immigrant group after another to the same cauldron of exploitation and prejudice, the Filipino position was perhaps the most paradoxical. As citizens of an American colony until 1934, the Filipinos were not technically ‘aliens’ and thus not excluded by the 1924 quota system; but unlike Mexicans or Japanese, they lacked the protection of a sovereign mother country and were more nakedly at the mercy of California’s racist Legislature and local governments. The Filipino labor migration of the 1920s, moreover, consisted almost entirely of young, single men whose natural gravitation to dance halls and red-light districts provoked racial-sexual hysteria amongst whites of such berserk intensity that it invites comparison with the Faulknerian South.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 105.

⁵² Quoted in H. Brett Melendy, “California’s Discrimination Against Filipinos, 1927-1935,” in Daniels and Olin, p. 141.

⁵³ Virtually all subaltern laboring groups in California have been victims of sexualized calumnies at one time or another. Carey McWilliams, for example, cites the case of Punjabi farmworkers in Live Oak in 1908 who were beaten and driven from their camp by local vigilantes for the supposed offense of “indecent exposure. The Chinese, Japanese, Armenians, IWWs, Okies, African-Americans, Arabs, and Mexicans were all portrayed by their enemies as “sexually depraved.” See *Factories in the Field*, pp. 139-40.

No one fretted more about the honor of white girls or the dangers of “mongrelization” than V.S. McClatchy, who was again seconded in his racial phobias by Senators Hiram Johnson and Samuel Shortridge, ex-Senator James Pheland, and Governor Friend Richardson, as well as by the reactionary ‘Chandler-Cameron-Knowland’ axis of newspaper publishers in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Oakland. This powerful alliance, whose prejudices continued to be endorsed by rightwing AFL unions, hammered away at the Filipinos as representing (in the words of a Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce official) “the most worthless, unscrupulous, shiftless, diseased, semi-barbarians that ever came to our shores.”⁵⁴ Filipinos, whose recreational interests were no different from tens of thousands of single, white sailors, day laborers and hoboes who flocked to Los Angeles’ Main Street or San Francisco’s Tenderloin, were depicted (again, in images that prefigured Nazi calumnies) as obsessed, serial miscegenators,

Anti-Filipino agitation, however, also had a functional, economic dimension: the ferocity of the appeal to white sexual fear was generally synchronized to labor market conditions as well as the militancy of Filipinos in defending their rights. By the late 1920s, Carey McWilliams claimed, “the feeling against the Filipino [had] been intensified by reason of the desire of the large growers to get rid of him as a worker.” As one contemporary agribusiness leader complained: “It costs \$100 per head to bring the Filipino in. And we cannot handle him like we can the Mexican: the Mexican can be deported.” Moreover, adds McWilliams, “Filipinos no longer scab on their fellow workers, and they no longer underbid for work. ... The Filipino is a real fighter and his strikes have been dangerous.”⁵⁵ It was precisely this economic ‘danger’ that the class enemies of the Filipinos transmuted into a legend of sexual danger.

Association with white women thus provided the pretext for a small riot in Stockton on New Year’s Eve 1926, and then full-scale vigilantism organized by the American Legion against Filipino farmworkers in the Tulare County town of Dinuba in August 1926 after

⁵⁴ Melendy, pp. 144-45.

⁵⁵ McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, pp. 133 & 138.

“the fruit pickers insist[ed] on their rights to attend dances and escort white girls around the city.”⁵⁶ The onset of the Depression ignited white resentment already made highly inflammable by the ceaseless, lurid innuendo of nativist groups like the Native Sons and the Legion. On 24 October 1929, the day of the Wall Street Crash,” writes Richard Meynell in his “Little Brown Brothers, Little White Girls,” “Filipinos were shot with rubber bands as they escorted white girls at a street carnival in Exeter, southeast of Fresno. A fight broke out, a white man was stabbed, and a riot ensued in which vigilante whites, led by Chief of Police. C. E. Joyner, beat and stoned Filipinos in the fields.” Three hundred vigilantes burnt down the Filipino labor camp on the nearby Firebaugh ranch.⁵⁷

Six weeks later, Watsonville police discovered two under-age white girls in the room of a 25-year-old Filipino worker; it was soon revealed that the girls’ parents were themselves prostituting the older child. White rage crystallized around the lurid accounts of the affair in the local paper, including a provocative photo of the older girl in the embrace of the young worker, Judge D. Rohrback, the shrill voice of race hatred in the Pajaro Valley, warned that “...if the present state of affairs continues...there will be 40,000 half-breeds in the State of California before ten years have passed.” But, as Howard DeWitt has shown in an important study, violent attitudes toward local Filipinos were also shaped by the fact that they worked on large lettuce farms, controlled by out-of-town corporations, that had marginalized local farmers and white workers.⁵⁸ In his incessant incitements to vigilantism, Judge Rohrback emphasized the equation between miscegenation and economic displacement. “He [the Filipino] gives them silk underwear and makes them pregnant and crowds whites out of jobs in the bargain.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Quoted in Richard Meynell, from “Little Brown Brothers, Little White Girls: The Anti-filipino Hysteria of 1930 and the Watsonville Riots,” *Passports* 22 (1998) (excerpts at www.modelminority.com/article232.html), n.p.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Howard DeWitt, *Anti-Filipino Movements in California*, San Francisco 1976, p. 48.

⁵⁹ Meynell, *ibid.*

The local paper, the *Pajaronian*, which printed Rohrback's fulminations as well as vicious, distorted accounts of relations between Filipinos and white girls, publicized the opening on 11 January of a taxi dancehall catering to Filipinos in Palm Beach, 20 minutes southwest of Watsonville. It soon became the rallying-point for angry white youth and unemployed men, spurred on by the *Pajaronian's* calls to vigilantism ("State Organizations Will Fight Filipino Influx into Country"). On the weekend of 18-19 January, whites made repeated, unsuccessful attempts to disrupt the dances in Palm Beach followed by rock-throwing in downtown Watsonville. "Whites," writes Meynell, "then formed 'hunting parties' ... after an 'indignation meeting' at a local pool hall." While hundreds of spectators watched from the nearby highway, the mob tried to sack the dancehall but were drive off by buckshot and teargas. The next day vigilantes took their revenge.

On Wednesday, 22 January, the riot reached its peak with mobs of hundreds dragging Filipinos out of their homes, whipping and beating them, and throwing them off the Pajaro River bridge. The mobs ranged up the San Juan road, attacking Filipinos at the Storm and Detlefsen ranches;... At Riberal's labor camp, 22 Filipinos were dragged out and beaten. This time mob had leaders and organization – it moved 'military-like' and responded to orders to attack or withdraw.

Early the next morning (the 23rd) bullets were fired into a bunkhouse on the Murphy ranch on the San Juan Road. Elevent Filipinos huddled in a closet to escape the fusillade. At dawn they discovered that a twelfth, Fermin Tobera, Had been shot through the heart.⁶⁰

DeWitt explains that the vigilantes who killed 22-year-old Tobera were in fact youths "from well-to-do families," not jobless tramps as later portrayed.⁶¹ Although Watsonville authorities deputized American Legionnaires (some of them probably vigilantes) to restore order, the pogrom in the Pajaro Valley had immediate aftershocks in Stockton, where a Filipino club was dynamited; Gilroy, where Filipinos were driven out of town; and San Jose and San Francisco, where Anglos attacked Filipinos on the street.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ DeWitt, pp. 49-51.

Filipino bunkhouses were dynamited near Reedley in August and in El Centro in December. In 1933 the Legislature bowed to nativist pressure and amended the state's 1901 miscegenation law, which already banned the marriage of whites with "Negroes, Mongolians, or mulattoes" –to include "members of the Malay race" as well.

Meanwhile, as tens of thousands of Mexican residents were being coercively "repatriated" across the border in 1933-34, pressure increased to deport Filipinos as well. As the flood of white Dust Bowl refugees began to arrive in California's valleys, growers had less need of the two groups who had demonstrated such audacity and fortitude in recent agricultural strikes. In August 1934, for example, 3000 striking Filipinos had managed to win a wage increase from Salinas lettuce growers, an almost unprecedented victory in the violent early Depression years. But the following month armed farmer-vigilantes attacked the Filipino camps, nearly beating one worker to death, and forcing 800 of the former strikers to flee the county. When the expelled workers tried to find work in the Modesto-Turlock area, they were turned back by other vigilantes. Although transformed into unemployed pariahs, hunted by vigilantes and vilified by the press, California's young Filipinos overwhelmingly rejected the "free boat ride home" offered in repatriation legislation sponsored by exclusionists.⁶² Indeed some would stay in the fields, where thirty years later they would reemerge in struggle as the earliest and most fervent supporters of the United Farm Workers union.

⁶² Melendy, pp. 148-51.

6. The IWW versus the KKK

During the visit of the Industrial Workers of the World they will be accorded a night and day guard of honor, composed of citizens armed with rifles. The Coroner will be in attendance at his office every day.

*Harrison Gray Otis (1912)*⁶³

As in other Western states, the Industrial Workers of the World in California were the favorite target of California vigilantes. The Wobblies' original sin, even more than their declared aim of overthrowing the wage system, was their willingness to organize all the pariah laborers – white tramps, Mexicans, Japanese, and Filipinos – whom the conservative AFL unions spurned. Between 1906 and 1921, the radical egalitarianism and rebel spirit of the IWW spread with evangelical velocity through the state's harvest camps, railroad bunkhouses, hobo colonies, and skidrows. The Wobblies championed the cause of oppressed workers regardless of ethnicity, and rejected the wages of whiteness in favor of 'solidarity forever.' In contrast to some AFL unions whom secretly sanctioned dynamite sabotage, the IWW was unwavering in its commitment to non-violent resistance. Yet no other group, not even the Communist Party in the 1930s or 1950s, managed to so enrage employers, or aroused more hysteria amongst the conservative middle classes, than the IWW in its heyday; but, then again, no other group ever fomented such courageous or far-reaching rebellion in the lower depths of California society.

The first large-scale tests of strength between the IWW (organized in 1905) and the vigilantes occurred in Fresno in 1910 and San Diego in 1912. Local 66 in Fresno, like other IWW branches, used downtown street meetings to dramatize its presence and preach the creed of One Big Union to local laborers ('home guards' in Wobbly parlance)

⁶³ Quoted in Philip Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917*, New York 1965, p. 191.

as well as the migrant farm and construction workers who constantly streamed through the San Joaquin Valley city. Within a year it had organized the Mexican laborers at a nearby dam and led a group of Santa Fe Railroad workers on strike. Alarmed employers pressured the police chief to revoke Local 66's speaking permit and jail its organizers. Frank Little, the one-eyed, part Indian hero of an earlier IWW free-speech battle in Spokane, arrived in Fresno to lead the struggle. Little and the Wobblies defied the ban and packed the local jail with scores of spirited fellow workers. When their landlord evicted them from their skidrow headquarters, they erected a large tent on a lot rented from a sympathizer and called for IWWs from all over the West to hop the next freight to Fresno. Faced with an inundation of his jail by out-of-town radicals, Chief of Police Shaw, as Philip Foner explains in his history of the IWW, abdicated to vigilantes.

On December 9, a mob of over 1,000 vigilantes attacked and severely beat a number of IWW men who sought to speak on the streets, then advanced on the IWW tent headquarters, burned the camp and all the supplies, marched to the county jail and threatened to break into the jail and lynch the Wobbly prisoners. The mob had been encouraged by a statement by Police Chief Shaw that "if the citizens wished to act they might and he would not interfere." Shaw's statement followed the discovery that the city of Fresno had no ordinance prohibiting speaking on the streets, and that the actions of the police were entirely without authority.⁶⁴

To the astonishment of the vigilantes and police, the Wobblies, stiffened by the calm courage of Frank Little, refused to abandon the fight. The 150 prisoners in Fresno jail held out for weeks in face of a sadistic regime of beatings, fire hoses, and bread-and-water diets. With 'armies' of hundreds fresh IWW volunteers on their way to join the fight from all corners of California and the Northwest, Fresno authorities reluctantly rescinded the ban and gave the street corners back to free speech.

If Fresno was an inspiring if hardwon victory for the IWW; their bitter experience in San Diego in 1912 forewarned of the pitiless repression and vigilante terror that Wobblies and

⁶⁴ Foner, p. 186.

other California radicals would face from 1917 onwards. In San Diego, the courage of the IWW free-speech fighters collided with a granite wall of reaction erected by two powerful and uncompromising robber barons: General Harrison Gray Otis, proprietor of the Los Angeles *Times* and chief architect of the open shop, and John D. Spreckels, the publisher of the San Diego *Union* and *Tribune* and owner of almost anything of value in the city of San Diego.

Since the bombing of the *Times* by AFL unionists in 1910, Otis had stumped the Pacific Coast cajoling fellow capitalists to militarize local industrial relations along the lines of Los Angeles's Merchants and Manufacturers' Association (which he had founded). Otis, one of the most rabid union-haters in American history, advocated an "industrial freedom" (masthead slogan of the *Times*) that left no room for soapboxes, picket lines or unions. In December 1911, he met confidentially with San Diego business leaders at the U.S. Grant Hotel, urging them to crush the IWW by adopting Los Angeles's draconian bans on street-speaking and picketing. The city's foremost capitalist, John D. Spreckels, needed little convincing. His morning and afternoon papers had been regularly blasting the Wobblies ever since they participated in a brief revolutionary invasion of Baja California in 1911 (supporting the anarchist Liberal Party of Ricardo Flores Magon), and more recently Spreckels had been outraged to discover that the San Diego Local 13 was trying to organize the employees of his street railroad. Although there was little love lost between the rival publishers, Spreckels enthusiastically endorsed the extermination of the IWW and soon brought a captive city council and the rest of the business class to the same point of view.

As in Fresno, the Free Speech fight started one-sidedly in February 1912 with a repressive ordinance, mass arrests, fire hoses, and brutal jail conditions while the Spreckels' papers doled out murderous bile that gourmets of innuendo compared to the very best of the Los Angeles *Times*:

Hanging is too good for them [editorialized the *San Diego Tribune*] and they would be much better dead; for they are absolutely useless in the human economy; they are waste material of creation and should be drained off in the sewer of oblivion there to rot in cold obstruction like any other excrement.⁶⁵

The *Tribune* recommended shooting the IWWs in jail, while the more moderate *Union* was content with beatings and deportation. In the meantime, hundreds of Wobblies, with a fearlessness and daring that only further enraged their persecutors, continued to pour into 'Spreckelstown' by freight car and shank's mare. This time, however, they discovered that the vigilantes were more than a one-act show. With a *Union* reporter amongst the identified ringleaders, a heavily-armed force of several hundred vigilantes, some of them obviously seconded by their employers, maintained an unprecedented reign of terror for three months. One contingent acted as an *ad hoc* border patrol, camped at the county line at San Onofre to intercept Wobblies headed south; another gang worked with brutal Police Chief Wilson to terrorize prisoners - often driving them out to the Imperial desert where they were beaten and abandoned to the cactus and rattlesnakes.⁶⁶

One IWW, kicked mercilessly in the testicles by his jailers, died, and then the mourners in his funeral procession were clubbed. Several other free-speech fighters were maimed and hundreds were savagely beaten. Al Tucker, a salty member from Victorville, sent IWW Secretary-Treasurer Vincent St. John an account of the typical treatment dealt out by the vigilante reception committee.

It was then about 1 o'clock AM. The train slowed down and we were between two lines of something like 400 men armed to the teeth with rifles, pistols and clubs of all kinds. The moon was shining dimly through the clouds and I could see pick handles, axe handles, wagon spokes and every kind of a club imaginable swinging from the wrists of all of them while they also had their rifles leveled at us. .. We were ordered to unload and we refused. Then they closed in around the flat car which we were on and began clubbing and knocking and pulling men off by their heels, so inside of a half hour they had us all off the train and then bruised

⁶⁵ McWilliams, p. 157.

⁶⁶ The best short account of the San Diego Free Speech Fight is in Jim Miller, "Just Another Day in Paradise?", in Mike Davis, Kelly Mayhew and Jim Miller, *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See*, New York 2003.

and bleeding we were lined up and marched into the cattle corral... now and then picking out a man they thought was a leader and giving him an extra beating. Several men were carried out unconscious and I believed there were some killed, for afterwards there were a lot of our men unaccounted for and never have been heard from since. The vigilantes all wore constable badges and white handkerchief around their left arms. They were all drunk and hollering and cursing the rest of the night. In the morning they took us our four or five at a time and marched us up the track to the county line.. where we were forced to kiss the flag and then run a gauntlet of 106 men, every one of which was striking at us as hard as they could with their pick axe handles. They broke one man's leg, and every one was beaten black and blue, and was bleeding from a dozen wounds.⁶⁷

Kevin Starr has written that “the San Diego free speech battle revealed the depths of reaction possible in the threatened middle- and lower-middle classes of California.” He argues, however, that vigilantes were recruited from an anxious petty bourgeois, “who were uncertain and insecure in what they had gained or thought they had gained by coming to California.” As in late Weimar Germany, “the oligarchy, which is to say, the upper-middle and upper classes, loathed and feared the IWW; but oligarchs did not take to the streets as vigilantes. They did, however, encourage the lower-middle-classes to do such work.”⁶⁸

But according to a key eyewitness, Starr is wrong: the ‘oligarchy’ both instigated and physically participated in San Diego’s festival of vigilante violence. Abram Sauer was the editor of a little weekly paper called the *Herald* which alone supported the free speech movement. He was kidnapped, threatened with lynching, and told to leave town (later his press was damaged). Sauer, however, courageously refused to run away and instead published an article about his kidnapping which identified the vigilantes as prominent bankers and merchants as well as “leading Church members and bartenders, Chamber of Commerce and Real Estate Board ... as well as members of the grand jury.”⁶⁹ Although Starr’s theory of vigilantism may have applied in other historical situations, San Diego’s anti-radicals (bartenders aside) seemed to have been a cut above

⁶⁷ Philip Foner (ed.), *Fellow Workers and Friends: IWW Free-Speech Fights as Told by Participants*, Westport 1981, pp. 140-41.

⁶⁸ Starr, p. 38.

⁶⁹ Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World*, p. 198.

the “shopkeepers, the small-scale realtors, the upper-level clerks and first-level supervisors” whom he identifies as core social stratum.⁷⁰

The ordinary middle class, however, was subject to considerable pressure to choose sides. In an anticipation of witch hunts yet to come, the Spreckels’ press cajoled San Diegans to monitor each other’s ‘loyalty.’ So “his neighbors will know just where he stands on a question that just now is of vital important to San Diego,” the *Union* advised loyal citizens to wear little American flags on their lapels, with the sinister implication that those who refused to display their patriotism or gave undue consideration to the Bill of Rights might think about relocation.⁷¹

A famous lynching was narrowly averted in mid-May when America’s most celebrated anarchist, Emma Goldman, arrived in San Diego ostensibly to lecture on Ibsen, but obviously to show her defiance of vigilante rule. Goldman’s steel nerves were legendary and she didn’t flinch in face of the bloodthirsty mob outside her hotel room chanting: “Give us that anarchist; we will strip her naked; we will tear out her guts.” But her lover and manager, Ben Reitman (also a sex education pioneer and author of *Boxcar Bertha*) was kidnapped and rather gruesomely tortured. His abductors (“leading Church members and bartenders...”) took him to remote mesa where they urinated on him, stripped him, hit and kicked him. Then “with a lighted cigar,” Reitman later told reporters in Los Angeles, “they burned the letters IWW in my buttocks... they poured a can of tar over my head and, in the absence of feathers, rubbed sagebrush on my body. One of them attempted to push a cane into my rectum. Another twisted my testicles. They forced me to kiss the flag and sing “The Star Spangled Banner.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Starr, *ibid.*

⁷¹ John Townsend, *Running the Gauntlet: Cultural Sources of Violence Against the IWW*, New York 1986, pp. 50-51.

⁷² Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World*, p. 202. The psycho-sexual vigilantes’ treatment of Reitman, needless to say, has an eerie similarity to the practices inside Abu Graib ninety years later.

In face of such sadism, the Wobblies, incredibly, continued their fight, supported by Socialists and eventually by AFL unionists and some Progressives. But the toll of terror was overwhelming. Even the lawyers who attempted to represent the IWW were jailed and when other jurists protest to Governor Hiram Johnson, the champion of the Progressives, he retorted “the anarchy of the IWW and their brutality are worse than the anarchy of the vigilantes.” When Goldman and Reitman tried to return a year later, they were again almost lynched and had to flee to Los Angeles. Although the City Council eventually rescinded the anti-open-meeting ordinance and free speech returned to the street corners of downtown San Diego, it was a pyrrhic victory for the IWW. As Philip Foner points out, some leading IWWs began to object to the huge human and organization cost of such ordeals; while many rank-and-file members heartily agreed with the battered Al Tucker who swore that if he ever took part in another free speech fight “it will be with machine guns or aerial bombs.”⁷³

In the end, however, the IWW continued its defiant but nonviolent campaign to organize harvest tramps, garment workers, construction crews, sailors, and the unemployed. The Wobblies posed the greatest threat in the Central Valley where each attempt to destroy their leadership – such as the framing of ‘Blackie’ Ford and Herman Suhr following the so-called Wheatland Riot in 1914 when deputized vigilantes fired upon a mass meeting – was countered by the emergence of a new cadre of ‘camp delegates’ and itinerant organizers. Although the IWW failed to build durable locals, its agricultural nucleus remained intact, threatening to fan any spark of discontent into strike action. Growers agreed with General Otis and other open-shop leaders: selective repression of the IWW’s leadership was ineffective and the organization would only be finally defeated by the application of San Diego-type methods on a statewide scale.

The First World War provided the patriotic pretext for such a crusade. Nationally, the American Protective League (APL), which eventually counted 350,000 members, became a “largely out-of-control quasi-governmental, quasi-vigilante agency which established a massive spy network across the land,” with the approval of the Department of Justice. In

⁷³ Ibid, p. 211; and Foner (ed.), *Fellow Workers*, p. 141.

California as elsewhere, the APL focused on ‘disloyal’ Wobblies and Socialists, as did the editorial page of every paper in California. Mobs sacked the IWW offices in Oakland and Los Angeles in August 1917, and in September, the National Guard was sent to crush an IWW-led cannery strike in San Jose. Federal and local officials raided Wobbly offices throughout Central California and arrested scores of activists. Forty-six were jailed in Sacramento where “editorials in the *Sacramento Bee* advocated lynching the prisoners, and rumors of wholesale lynchings filled the air.”⁷⁴ The IWW was effectively made an illegal organization and assaults on its facilities and members were applauded as admirable patriotism.

The end of the war brought no respite. 1919 was the year of great strikes as well as the Palmer Raids and the mass deportation of ‘alien radicals.’ Against the background of a general strike in Seattle which for the first time allied AFL unionists with the IWW, the California Legislature passed a ‘criminal syndicalism’ law, crafted by the Los Angeles M&M and the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, that allowed authorities to send dozens of Wobblies to San Quentin simply for their stubborn belief, to quote the IWW Preamble, that “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common.”⁷⁵

A few months later the *Los Angeles Times* - the Wobblies called it the ‘Los Angeles Crimes’ - published a series urging renewed vigilantism against the IWW. Citrus growers in the San Gabriel and Pomona Valleys had already obliged: raiding and deporting IWW orchard strikers. Then a mob of soldiers and civilians attacked a Los Angeles IWW meeting in November, wrecking the hall and seriously injuring four people while the police arrested the rest of the victims for “inciting a riot.”⁷⁶ According to Philip Foner, the American Legion in Los Angeles had organized a paramilitary wing “which specialized in raiding radical bookstores, beating up Wobblies, and harassing the landlord of their meeting hall.”⁷⁷ IWW meetings of any kind in Los Angeles were then

⁷⁴ Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW*, New York 1969, p. 439.

⁷⁵ See discussion of Act’s origins in Hyman Weintraub, “The IWW in California: 1905-1931,” MA thesis, UCLA History, 1947, pp. 162-64.

⁷⁶ Weintraub, p. 168.

⁷⁷ Philip Foner, *The T.U.E.L. to the End of the Gompers Era*, New York 1991, p. 32.

banned for the superbly Kafkaesque reason “that public sentiment made it ‘unsafe for enemies of peace and government to gather in public.’”⁷⁸

Yet in the very maw of such terror, the Wobblies began to grow again. Labor had lost all the big battles of 1919, leaving many AFL unions broken and the Open Shop enshrined everywhere on the Pacific Slope, even in San Francisco. The most militant elements of the labor movement blamed this epic defeat on narrow craft unionism and the rightwing AFL leadership. The Wobblies, with their dogged, no-surrender devotion to class struggle and their religious advocacy of industrial unionism, suddenly became an attractive alternative, and the IWW won impressive numbers of new adherents, especially on the strife-torn California waterfronts, where the IWW Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union (MTWIU) led resistance to the open shop. Despite the widespread myth that the Wobblies had died in 1918 when the federal government jailed its national leadership, the actual ‘final conflict,’ at least on the West Coast was the bold, if quixotic ‘general strike to free class war prisoners’ that the IWW launched on 25 April 1923.

Although the strike affected both coasts, and indeed was echoed by solidarity actions across the world, its principal arena was San Pedro where MTWIU seamen and longshoremen, supported by sympathetic oil workers, shut down the Los Angeles harbor to the complete surprise of employers and AFL unions alike. While ninety ships lay idle, “a red painted airplane flew over the docks and the oil fields, dropping leaflets, while a red painted automobile, called ‘Spark Plug,’ drove around the city bringing speakers to address thousands of workers at open air meetings.”⁷⁹ In Los Angeles, at least, the IWW was alive and kicking back.

Indeed the strike turned into an extraordinary and protracted test of strength between the harbor area working class, supported by Los Angeles trade-unionists and Socialists, and their employers (especially the arch-reactionary Hammond Lumber Company) backed by the Los Angeles Times (now generated by Otis’s son-in-law, Harry Chandler), the M&M,

⁷⁸ Goldstein, p. 156.

⁷⁹ Weintraub, pp. 228.

and the M&M's 'military wing,' the Los Angeles Police Department. The LAPD, proclaiming that strike rallies and meetings had "grown incompatible with public security," arrested so many IWWs and their supporters that the city was forced to construct a special stockade in Griffith Park to hand the overflow. A local sympathizer, Mrs. Minnie Davis, then allowed the Wobblies to meet on a spectacular knoll which she owned, soon christened 'Liberty Hill' by the strikers.

Rising two hundred feet above the level of Third Street, Liberty Hill had several flights of stone steps leading up to it. At its top were handmade wooden benches seating about 800 people, a small platform, six by nine feet, and standing room for several thousand. There, on the hill, the IWW held five meetings each week, with the meetings in English usually attended by between 1000-3000 people and those in Spanish by from 500-800.⁸⁰

LAPD chief Louis Oakes responded to Liberty Hill with totally illegal mass arrests, warning that "all idle men at the harbor must explain their loafing and show that they are not IWW's or go to jail." Pasadena's most famous resident, the muckracker and novelist Upton Sinclair, promptly challenged the chief, whom he described as a stooge for the M&M, to a constitutional duel, and was arrested while reading from the U.S. Constitution. But the jailing of Sinclair only enraged a wider radius of progressive opinion and brought 5000 people to Liberty Hill a few days later. At this point, with the police failing to break the strike with arrests alone, vigilantes in white hoods suddenly appeared – the open shop's *deus ex machina*.⁸¹

In previous postwar confrontations, the American Legion had been the reliable source of anti-radical mobs, but by early 1924 the Ku Klux Klan had grown astronomically throughout California and was rumored to control the electoral balance of power in Los Angeles. Exactly how or by whom the Klan was conscripted to fight the harbor workers is unclear, but presumably the motive was nativism as well as anti-radicalism, since the IWW had a large Mexican membership in the harbor area, and many of waterfront workers spoke with Slav, Italian or Scandinavian accents. In any event, the cooperation

⁸⁰ Foner, *The T.U.E.L.*, p. 38.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, pp. 39-50.

of the LAPD with hooded terror was arrogantly blatant and obviously authorized by the M&M.

The KKK made its debut on the evening of a March 1924 when several thousand hooded visitors encircled the IWW hall in San Pedro; two weeks later, police broke into a meeting of the Oil Workers Industrial Union, arrested several leaders, and then evicted the rest of the unionists, while several dozen KKK members set to work completely wrecking the hall.⁸² On 14 June, following bogus rumors that the IWW members had rejoiced after hearing news of a deadly explosion aboard the USS Mississippi, the 150 vigilantes, KKKs and probably off-duty cops as well, again attacked the IWW hall at Twelfth and Center streets.

Three hundred men, women and children were in the hall attending a benefit for several members who had died in a recent railroad accident. The vigilantes viciously sapped down the surprised men and women, then turned their fury upon the terrified IWW kids, some of them barely more than toddlers.

They seemed to take a special delight in dipping the children into the urn of boiling coffee. This treatment was given to Lena Milos, age 10, known as the ‘Wobbly song bird,’ Lillian Sunsted, age 8, May Sunsted, age 13, John Rodin, age 5, Andrew Kulgis, age 12, and Joyce Rodilda, age 4. Andrew Kulgis received an additional ‘hot grease’ application from one of the sadists in the mob. All The children received beatings as well.⁸³

Young Andrew Kulgis was nearly scalded to death, while the other children suffered severe burns. Meanwhile, seven of the men had been kidnapped and taken to a remote spot in Santa Ana Canyon, where they were savagely beaten, then tarred and feathered. The vigilantes were never prosecuted (indeed they were praised by the *Times*), but when several ACLU lawyers attempted to speak at a rally in downtown San Pedro protesting the atrocity, they were punctually jailed. By the end of 1924, the dynamic San Pedro

⁸² Ibid, p. 236.

⁸³ Louis Perry and Richard Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941*, Berkeley 1963, pp. 190-91.

affiliate of the MTWIU was in its death throes, the most dedicated IWW organizers, convicted of Criminal Syndicalism, were leading strikes inside of San Quentin, and Harry Chandler's Los Angeles *Times* was declaring victory in the "thirty years' war between labor and capital."

7. In Dubious Battle

"You red son of a bitch," Livingston hollered, "arguing constitutional law. We'll give you a taste of our constitutional law!"

*vigilante in El Centro (1934)*⁸⁴

On the eve of the Great Depression, California might have been a middle-class "paradise to live in or see," as Woody Guthrie put it, but for those without the "do re me" – farm workers and labor radicals, especially - it was a semi-fascist, closed society whose employing classes, especially in the Central Valley and Southern California, were habituated to vigilante violence as a normal mode of industrial relations. The crusade against the IWW had reinforced the already widespread belief that subversives had no consequent civil liberties and that the bourgeois citizenry was perfectly entitled to brandish shotguns, parade in hoods and smash up union halls. The great battles of the 1930s would leave an ambiguous legacy: the urban labor movement, led by new CIO unions like the ILWU and UAW, would overthrow the open shop and put a union label on wartime mass production; in the valleys, however, the militarized Associated Farmers, together with Sunkist (the citrus growers), would beat down every attempt to establish durable agricultural unionism. In defense of California's system of corporate farming and huge family latifundia, vigilantism would soar to a level not seen since the bloody 1850s.

⁸⁴ Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*, New York 1996, p. 159.

After the final defeat of the IWW's locals in the Central Valley in 1917-19, growers began to replace white harvest tramps or 'bindlestiffs' with Mexican family labor. As with the ethnic groups like the Chinese and Japanese who had previously occupied the niche of agricultural helots, the Mexicans were first extolled by the growers as paragons of hardwork and docility, then excoriated as riff-raff and a racial menace when they began to organize and strike. Despite efforts by local Mexican consuls to promote exclusive ethnic unions (which often, as Gilbert Gonzalez emphasizes, were little more than company unions), the *campesinos* in the fields united with other groups, including whites, African-Americans, and especially the militant Filipinos, to stage some 49 different walkouts in 1933-34, involving almost 70,000 farm and cannery workers.⁸⁵

The most important of these battles – including the epic 1933 cotton strike and the 1933-34 struggles in the Imperial Valley – were fought under the banner of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU), one of the Communist 'Third Period' unions established after 1928. To the growers, CAWIU was a tentacle of a vast red conspiracy: an ultimate menace to be expunged by any means necessary. In fact, the union was a shoestring operation, financed not by Moscow gold but by members' 50 cent dues and the extraordinary dedication of a handful of organizers. In contrast to the rightwing myth of a carefully prepared plan of subversion, hammered out by William Z. Foster and his underlings in their Union Square offices, the CAWIU was a little red fire brigade that responded to spontaneous rebellions in the fields, helping shape them into sustained campaigns and organized strikes. It possessed scant resources – just a few automobiles, mimeograph machines and *pro bono* leftwing lawyers – but they sufficed to galvanize the struggle of fieldworkers who owned virtually nothing except the tattered clothes on their backs and their children's hunger.

The real threat of the CAWIU, as some growers acknowledged, was that it represented a supercharged version of the IWW, with a liberal urban support base that the Wobblies lacked. Indeed, the senior organizer, Pat Chambers, was a tough ex-Wobbly, and the

⁸⁵ Fearis, p. 85; and Gilbert Gonzalez, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing*, Austin 1999.

CAWIU retained the IWW's participatory organizing model: "each member as he joined became an organizer. ..with strike leaders and committee chairmen elected by the workers and all major decisions put to a vote. The union carefully limited strike demands to those desired by the workers." Moreover the CAWIU, in contrast to white supremacist AFL unions, preached a gospel of inter-ethnic solidarity and anti-discrimination, which it backed up with the consistent courage and sacrifice of its organizers.⁸⁶ ("Only fanatics," cynically observed an AFL leader, "are willing to live in shacks or tents and get their heads broken in the interests of migratory laborers.")⁸⁷

The CAWIU's (originally the Agricultural Workers Industrial League) baptism in fire was the 1930 lettuce strike in the Imperial Valley. The Trade Union Unity League, the parent of the AFIL/CAWIU, sent some of its most experienced organizers to help build this strike of Mexican and Filipino field hands, but the Communists became targets of Criminal Syndicalism prosecutions that ultimately sent six of them to San Quentin. A year later, Communists helped lead a big cannery walkout in the Santa Clara Valley that was quickly crushed by the police and deputized American Legionnaires ('vigilantes with badges'), despite supporting protests by the unemployed in San Jose. The first half of 1932 was equally grim. In May, a desperate CAWIU-led uprising of pea-pickers near Half Moon Bay in May 1932 was efficiently broken by the now standard deployment of police and deputized farmers. In June, one of the CAWIU's veteran organizers, Pat Callahan, was almost beaten to death by deputized goons during a hopeless strike of cherry pickers in the Santa Clara Valley.⁸⁸

The CAWIU regrouped in September around a series of walkouts that followed the itinerary of the grape harvest northward in the San Joaquin Valley. Although a strike in the Fresno area was quickly broken, 4000 grape pickers in the Lodi vineyards showed impressive grit in face of the usual wave of arrests and beatings. The growers, in turn, mobilized their own army. "Scores of growers, local businessmen, and American

⁸⁶ Fearis, pp. 95-97.

⁸⁷ Paul Scharrenberg quoted in Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, New Brunswick 1996, p. 124.

⁸⁸ Daniel, pp. 135-36 and Starr, p. 70.

Legionnaires,” writes Cletus Daniel, “were deputized as soon as the strike call was issued, and placed under the command of Colonel Walter E. Garrison, a leading farm employer and retired military man. Once this special strikebreaking force was formed, duly constituted law enforcement officials in the region faded into the background.” Garrison’s vigilantes went after the strike leadership, jailing 30 CAWIU organizers and picket captains. They also forced relief agencies to cut off aid to the strikers’ families and blocked every attempt to hold strike meetings or rallies. But the CAWIU responded inventively with guerrilla tactics, using “hit and run” pickets that stymied the introduction of scabs and forced several growers to accede to strike demands. The growers, in turn, appealed to mob violence.

On the evening of October 2, approximately 1500 vineyardists, businessmen, American Legionnaires, and other Lodi residents met in a local theater to perfect plans to end the strike without further delay. After much debate, a “Committee of 1500” was established to drive strikers out of the area on the following morning. ...

At six o’clock the following morning several hundred vigilantes armed with a variety of clubs and firearms gathered in the center of Lodi to carry out their plan. When a group of about 100 strikers assembled in front of the CAWIU headquarters to plan the day’s picketing activities the storm broke. Abandoning their pledge of nonviolence, vigilantes led by a small group of local cowboys charged into the strikers’ midst with clubs and fists flailing. As vigilantes drove the frightened and battered strikers toward the edge of town, strikers offered no resistance. However, when a few strikers sought to defend themselves against their attackers, the police intervened to arrest them for “resisting an officer” or “rioting.” Assaults continued throughout the morning as vigilantes cruised the area in automobiles routing strikers from their camps. Later in the day when strikers attempted to regroup they were attacked by vigilantes and local authorities using fire hoses and tear gas bombs.⁸⁹

The defeat of the grape strike fed an already intense debate amongst Communists about the need to prioritize organizing targets rather than just chasing spontaneous strikes around the state. In November, after careful preparation, the CAWIU dug in its heels in Vacaville where 400 fruit-pickers – Mexican, Filipino, Japanese and Anglo - walked out in a pre-arranged protest against wage cuts. The response was predictably brutal and

⁸⁹ Daniels, p. 210.

followed the same tactics of the San Diego vigilantes a generation earlier “In the first week of December,” wrote Orrick Johns, “when the strike was a few weeks old, a masked mob of forty men in a score of cars, took six strike leaders out of the Vacaville Jail, drove them twenty miles from town, flogged them with tug straps, clipped their heads with sheep clippers, and poured red enamel over them.” Yet the striking orchard workers held out for two months against overwhelming odds and in the face of betrayal by AFL officials who came to Vacaville to denounce them. In the end, the “pinch of hunger’ and death threats against Filipinos in particular forced a return to work, but CAWIU organizers were encouraged by the strikers’ solidarity and heroic stamina. Perhaps farm fascism might be defeated after all, if such fearlessness could be alloyed with efficient organization and – most importantly – sympathetic publicity about the strikers’ conditions and grievances.

In the event, the great agricultural strike wave of 1933, in the very nadir of the Depression, caught growers and trade unionists alike by surprise. Agribusiness, according to Donald Fearis, believed that Spanish-speaking farm workers were too terrified by the mass deportations of Mexican nationals (and their citizen children) then taking place in Los Angeles and other areas to stick their necks out in a strike.⁹⁰ But in the event, La Raza was enraged, not intimidated. The cotton walkout was the largest agricultural strike in American history, and, as we saw earlier, was a partial success: failing to win union recognition but overcoming the growers’ vow never to yield to strikers’ wage demands.

The fighting spirit of the field workers of all races was magnificent, but it was virtually impossible to defeat the growers as long as local courts and sheriffs were firmly aligned with the vigilantes, while the state and federal governments stood on the sidelines. Despite innumerable protests to Governor Rolph about the terror in the cotton counties, he refused to order California’s state police, the Highway Patrol, to protect strikers’ civil liberties and lives. Both Sacramento and Washington, to be sure, sent fact-finders and official emissaries to the agricultural battlefields, most of whom corroborated the

⁹⁰ Fearis, p. 105.

grievances of workers struggling to survive in face of vicious wage cuts while growers were being bailed out by new federal agricultural subsidies. But fact-finding alone could not remove the iron heel from the neck of farm labor.

Moreover, the growers were not tempered by the unexpected tempest in the fields. In the Imperial Valley, where the CAWIU rallied in fall 1933 to support a new struggle of the lettuce workers, farm fascism assumed its definitive form. Whereas in previous struggles, the vigilantes tended to be large posses, 40 to 150 strong, of farmers, ranch foremen and local businessmen with personal stakes in the strike, the big grower-shippers in El Centro sought complete militarization of the Valley's middle- and skilled working classes.

The Imperial Valley Anti-Communist Association, formed in March 1934, refused to tolerate neutrality in the class struggle. "Operating on the coercive principle that anyone not willing to join the association was almost by definition a Communist or communist sympathizer, the group's leaders reported that within a little more than a week of its founding the association had between 7,000 and 10,000 members in the Imperial Valley."⁹¹ Newspaper reporters were soon calling the Valley "California's Harlan County" in reference to the notorious Kentucky mining county where free speech had been extinguished by company gunmen.⁹²

Indeed the CAWIU soon lost any vestige of protected legal or public space in which to operate. "Officials announced that no meetings of any kind, anywhere, would be allowed in the Valley," A.L. Wirin, the chief counsel of the Southern California ACLU, told his members. "... Meetings on a private lot, or in a private meeting hall have come under the ban. Half a dozen Mexican workers chatting on a street are a 'public meeting' and dispersed by the police."⁹³ When attorney Grover Johnson arrived in El Centro to file a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of jailed strike leaders, he and his wife were attacked and

⁹¹ Daniel, p. 272.

⁹² UP reporter quoted in Gilbert Gonzalez, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing*, Austin 1999, p. 174.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 178.

beaten in the street by the Anti-Communists and then nearly lynched after seeking refuge in the jail. Public beatings were also administered to two other out-of-town lawyers, and Wirin, one of the most prominent civil libertarians in the state, was kidnapped by vigilantes (“one of whom he later claimed was a state highway patrolman in full uniform”), roughed up, robbed, threatened with death, and abandoned barefoot in the desert. Even Pelham Glassford, an anti-Communist military officer who was the personal representative of Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, was received with hostility and treated to anonymous death threats. As a Highway Patrol captain told two agents of the State Labor Commissioner after they had been detained and interrogated by vigilantes, “You men get out of here. You are hurting our work. We don’t want conciliation. We know how to handle these people and where we find trouble makers we will drive them out if we have to ‘sap’ them.”⁹⁴

8. Thank the Vigilantes

The California farm workers emerged from the 1930s as political “forgotten men.” They could not count on any of the protections afforded their industrial co-workers, neither the assurance of minimal economic security nor the guaranteed right to help themselves through collective action.

*Donald Fearis*⁹⁵

In the summer of 1934, the San Francisco Embarcadero was the scene of the most important labor struggle in California history. It took the form of a three-act drama commencing with a longshoremen’s revolt that quickly grew into a maritime strike that closed every port on the Pacific Coast, then, finally, became a three-day-long San Francisco general strike. A fourth, Armageddon-like act was only narrowly averted. With employers screaming that a “red insurrection” was in progress, Governor Frank Merriam sent 4500 heavily armed National Guard troops to San Francisco under the

⁹⁴ Ibid, 263

⁹⁵ Fearis, p. 238.

command of “outspokenly anti-Communist” Major General David Barrows, whose military *vitae*, as Kevin Starr points out, included “the American Expeditionary Force sent to assist the White Russians in their counter-revolution against the Bolsheviks.”⁹⁶

The entire country watched in anxious suspense to see if General Barrows, as many conservatives hoped, would order his machine-gunners to massacre the local “Bolsheviks” on the waterfront. In the event, the maritime strikers, backed by a general strike representing the entire family of San Francisco labor, calmly crossed their arms and refused to back down, even after a major raid on the headquarters of the Marine Workers Industrial Union. But if a bloody showdown between the troops and strikers was averted, the Industrial Association, representing the city’s largest employers, used the military occupation to unleash goon squads masquerading as ‘irate citizen vigilantes’ upon the local Communist Party and other progressive groups, including Upton Sinclair’s Epic (‘End Poverty in California’) movement, whom it blamed for instigating and supporting the strike. In *The Big Strike*, radical journalist Mike Quinn recalled the notorious, weeklong ‘anti-Red’ raids that began on 17 July.

The plan of attack was identical in every instance. A caravan of automobiles containing a gang of men in leather jackets, whom newspapers referred to as ‘citizen vigilantes,’ would draw up to the curb in front of the building. They would let fly a hail of bricks, smashing all windows, and then crash into the place, beating up anyone they found, wrecking all furniture, hacking pianos to pieces with axes, throwing typewriters out of windows, and leaving the place a shambles.

Then they would get back into their cars and drive off. The police would arrive immediately, arrest the men who had been beaten up, and take command of the situation.⁹⁷

With the complicity or participation of the San Francisco police, the vigilantes smashed up the offices of the *Western Worker*, beat three men senseless at the Workers’ Open Forum, wrecked the Mission Workers’ Neighborhood House, and were in the process of

⁹⁶ Starr, p. 109.

⁹⁷ Mike Quin, *The Big Strike*, Olema 1949, p. 160.

demolishing the interior of the Workers' School when they encountered unexpected resistance.

Here [Workers' School] the vigilantes wrought havoc on the first floor, but when they attempted to mount the narrow staircase leading to the upper stories they were confronted by the huge bulk of David Merihew, an ex-serviceman who worked as a caretaker in the building. Merihew brandished an old cavalry saber in one hand and a bayonet in the other. Flourishing his weapons he beckoned to them to come ahead. They took a few steps forward and he slashed out with his saber, taking a huge chip out of the banister. The raiders discreetly retired and left the field to the police, to whom Merihew surrendered after striking a bargain with them not to turn him over to the vigilantes if he yielded his weapons.⁹⁸

While Captain Joseph O'Meara of the San Francisco 'red squad,' was boasting that "the Communist Party is through in San Francisco – the organization can't face such adverse public sentiment," other communities were panicking at the specter of further general strikes and "Communist invasions" as luridly predicted by the press.⁹⁹ Employer groups in the East Bay and other areas sponsored "Leagues Against Communism" and debated how to combat the Red Menace.

Vehement demands were made that public libraries be 'purged' of all allegedly Red books. Other patriots wanted to reorganize the public school system on a basis of rigid censorship to make certain that no Red ideas were lurking in the primers. Some urged the institution of concentration camps, either in Alaska or on the peninsula of Lower California, to which all communists would be exiled.¹⁰⁰

For veteran labor activists, of course, the new vigilantism was *deja vu*, recalling the Free Speech Fights of 1910-12, the patriotic pogroms in fall 1917, and the attacks on the IWW in 1919 and 1923. But the outcome, this time around, was radically different: despite the threat of injunctions, machine guns, and vigilantes, the maritime core of the upheaval remained impregnable in the face of repression. To the surprise and consternation of

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 161.

⁹⁹ Urban vigilantes were also an integral part of the violent response to the great Teamsters' struggle in Minneapolis in 1934. For a magnificent account, see Charles Rumford Walker, *American City: A Rank-and-File History*, New York 1937.

¹⁰⁰ Quin, p. 169.

employers across the country, the rank-and-file longshoremen led by Australian immigrant Harry Bridges won a spectacular victory over the shipping magnates and opened the door to new industrial unions. Within the next five years, this urban labor insurgency would sweep away most of the repressive apparatus of the Open Shop, including the shadowy urban vigilantes, the unconstitutional anti-picketing laws, even the red squads and labor spies.

But rural California was a different story. Here, to borrow an expression of Regis Debray's from the context of Latin America in the 1960s, the "revolution revolutionized the counter-revolution." What was universally perceived by agricultural elites as the 'Communist victory' in San Francisco massively reinforced local state terrorism as well as the resort to vigilantism and extra-legal violence. Private violence became better organized, but also more centralized, than ever before in California history.

Camouflaged by the hysteria surrounding the general strike, Sacramento police - advised by William Hynes, former chief of the LAPD's infamous Red Squad - raided the state headquarters of the CAWIU, arresting veteran leader Pat Chambers, 21-year-old Caroline Decker ("La Pasionaira of the cotton strike" according to Kevin Starr), and more than a dozen others. Eventually 18 organizers would be indicted under the Criminal Syndicalism Act and eight convicted and imprisoned after the longest trial in state history. The CAWIU was forced to divert its resources from organizing in the fields to a desperate defense of its key personnel. Later their sentences would be reversed on appeal, but this "anti-Red carnival," as McWilliams called it, "crippled and destroyed the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union. Their leadership in prison, the workers were momentarily demoralized, and the great wave of strikes subsided."¹⁰¹

Meanwhile a sinister new organization had emerged to regionally coordinate the struggle against striking farm workers and their embryonic unions. After defeating the CAWIU's last stand in the melon fields in spring 1933, the Imperial Valley growers decided to franchise their strikebreaking methods and militant anti-radicalism to the rest of the state.

¹⁰¹ McWilliams, p. 228.

The Associated Farmers of California – also inspired by Los Angeles’ Merchants’ and Manufacturers’ Association and its statewide offspring, the Industrial Association - were “pledged to help one another in case of emergency. They agreed to cooperate to harvest crops in case of strikes and to offer their services to the local sheriff immediately as special deputies in the event of disorders arising out of picketing and sabotage.”¹⁰²

Although the roots of the organization were in the American Legion halls of El Centro, the Associated Farmers – as Carey McWilliams emphasized - only became a statewide power because California’s largest corporations (as well as reactionary newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times*) favored the institutionalization of the vigilante movement.

The initial funds were, in fact, raised by Mr. Earl Fisher, of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, and Mr. Leonard Wood, of the California Packing Company. At this meeting [founding convention in May 1934], it was decided that farmers should ‘front’ the organization, although the utility companies and banks would exercise ultimate control. ... When one realizes that approximately 50 percent of the farm lands in Central and Northern California are controlled by one institution – the Bank of America – the irony of these ‘embittered’ farmers defending their ‘homes’ against strikers becomes apparent.¹⁰³

Associated Farmers provided a Pinkerton-like infrastructure of industrial espionage and employee blacklists to local growers, as well as acting as a powerful legislative lobby in all matters concerning farm labor. The organization opposed not only radical unionism, but collective bargaining and industrial mediation for urban workers as well as field hands. They stood, in short, for the untrammelled despotism of agribusiness over its workforce. With the Bank of America, Calpack and the Southern Pacific Railroad as its ultimate ventriloquists, the organization asserted the hegemony of larger, labor-hating growers over the smaller farmers, Grangers, and businessmen who might incline toward negotiation or settlement with the unions. Philip Bancroft, the folksy grower son of the famous nineteenth-century historian who had mythologized the original vigilance committees, impersonated the “voice of the small farmer” when circumstances demanded

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 231.

¹⁰³ Ibid, pp. 232-33.

nostalgic appeals to agrarian mythology, but the real decisions were made in bank chambers and corporate boardrooms.

One of the Associated Farmers' first projects was hiring William Hynes and Imperial County DA Elmer Heald to assist Sacramento authorities in the aggressive prosecution of the CAWIU defendants. Indeed, the extensive application of the Criminal Syndicalism Act to destroy the left wing of the labor movement was one of its principal aims, and it also pledged each member as a special deputy to help quell organizing campaigns and strikes.¹⁰⁴ More ambitiously, it urged the mobilization of anti-labor 'citizen armies' along the lines of the Imperial Valley's Anti-Communist League. Across the state, these so-called 'California Cavaliers' or 'Crusaders' (with the American Legion halls as their recruiting depots) began to arm and drill. Meanwhile, with the Associated Farmers warning that the "Reds would be back," county supervisors passed anti-picketing ordinances; spies infiltrated harvest crews; ranchers strung barbed wire, even dug moats; and local sheriffs stocked tear gas and built stockades for the expected overflow of prisoners.

The militarized Associated Farmers did not wait for strikes to come to them; they proposed to preempt through "systematic terrorization of workers in the rural areas" the very capacity for sustained class struggle. "We aren't going to stand for any more of these organizers from now on," boasted one grower, "anyone who peeps about higher wages will wish he hadn't." Another leader of the Associated Farmers returned from Germany full of praise for the Adolf Hitler ("has done more for democracy than any man before him") and the admirable Nazi definition of citizenship: "you simply say that anybody who agrees with you is a citizen of the first class and anybody who does not agree with you is a non-voting citizen."¹⁰⁵ Fascism had become the explicit model for agricultural labor relations in California, and as the 1935 summer harvest season began,

¹⁰⁴ David Selvin, *Sky Full of Storm: A Brief History of California Labor*, Berkeley 1966, pp. 62-63.

¹⁰⁵ McWilliams, p. 234.

crosses burnt on hillsides across the state, warning field hands that vigilantes were near by and watching.

In Orange County, several hundred Mexican citrus strikers were rounded up by a small army of what radical journalist Carey McWilliams described as “special armed guards, under the command of former ‘football heroes’ of the University of Southern California masquerading as amateur storm troopers.” Growers’ sons were cheerfully advised by the Orange County sheriff to “shoot to kill” if necessary, and strikers camps and meetings were teargassed. A few months later, a mob of Cavaliers in Santa Rosa seized five pro-labor ‘radicals’ whom they paraded through the streets before forcing them to kneel and kiss the American flag on the courthouse steps. When two refused to agree to leave town, they were beaten, tarred and feather, all to the editorial delight of the Hearst papers in San Francisco and Los Angeles.¹⁰⁶

By 1936 the Associated Farmers had consolidated an unprecedented domination over every aspect of life in rural California. “There is no parallel,” McWilliams wrote, “in any state for this interlocking network of farm employer organizations which represents a most unique combination of social, economic and political power.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover the organization was flush with cash from “a list of major backers reading like a Who’s Who of California enterprise,” and the arrival of a huge labor surplus of desperate Dust Bowl refugees made it easier than ever to find replacements for striking field hands or cannery workers.¹⁰⁸

1936’s most dramatic, if completely one-sided, battle took place in the lettuce-growing Salinas Valley, classical Steinbeck country, where the Vegetable Packers Association – which followed its seasonal workforce from the Imperial Valley to the Salinas Valley and back each year - was the only agricultural union still active in the state. A whites-only affiliate of the AFL, it represented the largely Texan and Okie workforce in the packing

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 240-42 and 249-53.

¹⁰⁷ Carey McWilliams, *California: the Great Exception*, New York 1949, p. 163.

¹⁰⁸ Fearis, p. 133.

sheds (the field hands, ineligible to join the Association, were largely Mexican and Filipino). The Associated Farmers of Monterey County, operating through a well-financed front group, the Citizens Association of the Salinas Valley, decided to lock out and destroy the union, replacing its core membership and ‘troublers’ with more docile workers.

The murder of the Vegetable Packers’ union was planned with such meticulous precision, and involved such overwhelming superiority of firepower and legal resources, that it recalls the monstrous massacre of poor immigrants by millionaire ranchers chronicled in Michael Cimino’s epic 1980 film, *Heaven’s Gate* (a loose retelling of Wyoming’s Johnson County Land War). To assure complete coordination between growers, police agencies and citizen vigilantes, the Associated Farmers persuaded state officials to let Colonel Henry Sanborn, a notorious anti-Communist who had trained vigilantes (called the ‘Nationals’) during the 1934 San Francisco general strike, go to Salinas as generalissimo of all the anti-union forces. In that role he stockpiled teargas, installed machine guns in packing plants, and coordinated a “regular army” of local sheriffs and 140 Highway Patrol officers whom Sacramento officials had placed at his disposal.

Sanborn also conscripted a vigilante militia, Imperial Valley-style. “On September 19th,” writes Carey McWilliams, “the Sheriff emerged from his temporary retirement, and ordered a general mobilization of all male residents of Salinas between the ages of 18 and 45, and threatened to arrest any resident who failed to respond. In this manner the celebrated ‘Citizens’ Army’ of Salinas was recruited.” In Sanborn’s view, no one was too young to help defend white civilization in Salinas: the Boy Scouts were also conscripted while the woodshop students in Salinas High School manufactured heavy clubs for bashing strikers. At one point, the town was barricaded and all highway movement subject to a strict dragnet: pedestrians and motorists wearing Roosevelt campaign buttons (it was an election year) had them ripped from their lapels.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ McWilliams, pp. 256-58; and Starr, p. 183 (Boy Scouts).

Not surprisingly, the lettuce lockout unfolded as a hyperbolic show of force tending toward atrocity. Chemical warfare was the order of the day and no privilege attached to the workers' white skins. Police used copious quantities of tear gas and vomiting gas to disperse picket lines, then chased unionists down and savagely beat them. When 800 frightened people took refuge in the Salinas Labor Temple, "the police, deputies and highway patrolmen bombarded the Temple with tear gas, then, under protection of this barrage, moved in closer to toss tear and nausea gas and sulphur into the union headquarters. Hundreds of strikers fled the building, only to be met by police with even more tear gas bombs or deputized vigilantes wielding axe handles and clubs."¹¹⁰

The editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Paul Smith, visited Salinas after two of his reporters had been seriously injured and threatened with lynching by vigilantes. He was incredulous to discover that the Governor and Attorney General of California, along with local officials, had willingly ceded the state's monopoly of legitimate violence to the fanatic Colonel Sanborn and the Associated Farmers. "For a full fortnight," he wrote, "the 'constituted authorities' of Salinas have been but the helpless pawns of sinister fascist forces which have operated from a barricaded hotel floor in the center of town."¹¹¹

For the Okies, meanwhile, the lockout was a brutal mirror that reflected back not their traditional self-image as rugged white pioneer folk, but the growers' contempt for them as a "white trash" caste. They discovered that there were no exemptions, even for ancient Anglo-Saxons, from the racialized stereotypes structurally associated with farm labor in California. "I can remember," recalls one organizer, "the biggest impression I had of those days was watching those white people coming in from Oklahoma and Arkansas and Texas, coming in with their ingrown prejudices and hatred, and learning in the course of the strike that they had more in common with that worker with the brown skin and black

¹¹⁰ Starr, p. 187-88

¹¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*

skin than they had with the vigilantes with the white skin who were beating everybody up.”¹¹²

The Salinas lockout, whether as a preemptive strike against the AFL’s involvement in agricultural unionism or as a dead-serious rehearsal for American fascism, was a decisive victory for the Associated Farmers. It also inspired the blitzkrieg tactics used the following year when another AFL affiliate, the Cannery Workers Union, attempted to strike the Stockton Food Products Company. “Instantly the call went forth for the usual ‘citizens’ army’,” writes McWilliams, and 1500 loyal burghers, armed with shotguns and axe-handles, punctually responded. Colonel Garrison, the hero of the El Centro vigilantes, was now President of Associated Farmers, and he personally led the attack on the picket lines on 24 April. “For over an hour, 300 pickets continued to fight ‘coughing and choking,’ as ‘vigilantes’ and ‘special deputies’ poured round after round of tear-gas bombs at them.” When tear gas proved ineffective, Garrison’s troops ussed buckshot, seriously injuring 50 workers.¹¹³

Kevin Starr observes that when some Stockton businessmen, supported by the local DA, realized that they lived in a occupied city subject to the whim of the Associated Farmers, they protested to Sacramento, asking that the National Guard be sent to restore order. “As in the case of Salinas, [Governor] Merriam refused; and Colonel Garrison and his army remained the preeminent force in the area.” The Governor, in other words, ratified the vigilantes as a legitimate authority: a dangerous recipe, shades of shirts brown and black, for ceding all power to the growers and cannery owners.¹¹⁴

But it was hard to argue with success: in California’s cities, as in the rest of the country, 1938 was a legendary year of sit-down strikes, mass pickets, and CIO fever, yet the fields and packing sheds were eerily quiet (a dozen small strikes involving less than 5000 workers, a bare fraction of the 1933-34 turnout). Nor did New Deal victories in

¹¹² Dorothy Ray (Healy) quoted in Susan Ferris and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*, San Diego 1997, p. 31.

¹¹³ McWilliams, pp. 259-60.

¹¹⁴ Starr, p. 190.

Washington and Sacramento translate into any fundamental amelioration for farm laborers, who were excluded from the coverage of both the Wagner (NLRA) and Social Security Acts. The election of Democrat Culbert Olson as Governor in 1938 may have been a victory for city unions (his first act in office was to pardon Tom Mooney), but the Democrat Speaker was a wealthy grower, and legislative initiatives to help farm labor – even measures as seemingly non-controversial as forbidding the Highway Patrol from taking sides in labor disputes or assuring that relief was provided “solely on the basis of need” – were easily shot down by rural representatives.¹¹⁵

Although two union movements, the AFL’s ‘federal’ locals and the CIO-chartered United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), were now active in California agriculture, they shied away from apocalyptic confrontations in the fields, preferring to concentrate on the organization (successful in Northern California) of town-based food-processing workers whose bargaining power was leveraged by the clout of powerful allies like the Teamsters and the ILWU.

If there was any doubt about the fundamental role played by private and state repression in turning field workers into the New Deal’s pariahs – without a home in social programs or the organized labor movement - it should have been dispelled by the fate of the strikes in the Marysville area, north of Sacramento, during the spring and summer of 1939. Here the fruit workers who lived in “Okieville” faced off against Earl Fruit, a subsidiary of the General Motors of California agriculture, the giant DiGiorgio empire. In the Marysville area, only a minority of the Associated Farmers were actually farmers; the rest were realtors, publishers, mayors, and cops, including the Marysville police chief and the local Highway Patrol commander. Earl Fruit’s bullying owner, Joseph DiGiorgio, could count on a vigilant, fully mobilized local ruling class to back up his ranch foremen and armed guards.

¹¹⁵ Fearis, p. 111 – also see entirety of chapter VI (“The Farm Workers and the Government”), an unexcelled analysis of how farm labor was politically marginalized in the 1930s.

The first dispute broke out in the spring when, according to historian Donald Fearis, a popular foreman quit in protest over the company spies (a major Associated Farmers' initiative) that now infested every level of agricultural production. Earl lured striking crews back to work with the promise of higher wages and no sanction against strike leaders; when retaliatory layoffs quickly followed, angry workers called in the CIO, and by the beginning of the pear harvest in early July Local 197 of UCAPAWA had put up picket lines around the orchards. The Sutter-Yuba Counties Associated Farmers immediately responded with the usual arrests, beatings and death threats; the growers had earlier weighed the idea of a 'citizens' army,' but preferred the selective deputization of foremen and ranchers. They were temporarily foiled, however, when Okie women began to replace their arrested fathers and husbands on the picket lines. "The tenacity of the women and the supplying of food by friendly farmers and state agencies," writes Fearis, "momentarily kept the strike alive." But a raid on the union headquarters soon lopped the head off the strike and forced the workers either to return to work or leave the area.¹¹⁶

The Marysville strike was a last gasp: UCAPAWA soon abdicated field organizing, while the Okies eventually found their way into supervisory jobs or moved to the cities to work in war plants. Their place was soon taken by Mexican *braceros* and the racial caste system in California agriculture was restored under the aegis of an international treaty. Vigilantism, raised to the level of a science by the Associated Farmers, had inflicted a historic defeat not just on the super-exploited field work force, but upon the entire project of progressive labor and New Deal reform in California. The U.S. Senate committee chaired by Robert LaFollette (Wisconsin), which investigated labor relations in California agriculture in 1939-40, would later conclude that the Associated Farmers had organized a conspiracy "designed to prevent the exercise of their civil liberties by oppressed wage laborers in agriculture, [which] was executed ruthlessly with every device of repression that anti-unionism could muster." Moreover, when the employers' "complete monopoly in controlling labor relations" – a euphemism for monopoly of

¹¹⁶ Fearis, pp. 271-74.

violence – was combined with the workers’ equally complete lack of political clout or legal status, “local fascism was the result.”¹¹⁷

9. *The Zoot-Suit Wars*

Let’s get ‘em! Let’s get the chili-eating bastards!

Anglo mob (Santa Monica, 1943)

Pear Harbor gave California’s anti-Japanese forces the license to execute the ethnic cleansing that had been their chief goal for more than a generation. No one argued more fiercely for the removal of the Nisei and their parents than state Attorney General Earl Warren, a longtime member of the Native Sons of the Golden West and political protégé of chief ‘Jap-swatter’ V.S. McClatchy. Describing Japanese-Californians as a “Fifth Column” and an “Achilles heel,” he convened a conference of state law enforcement officers in early February 1942 to demand their relocation and internment. When it was pointed out that not a single instance of treason or sabotage had been attributed to the group, Warren responded that this was simply “ominous” proof of the Japanese refusal to report disloyalty.¹¹⁸

Meanwhile self-appointed vigilantes were throwing rocks through the windows of Japanese-owned stores and attacking Nisei teenagers in the streets, with warnings of greater violence to come. The campaign of intimidation was most serious in rural counties, as testified by state Department of Agriculture field staff in a memo sent to Sacramento in early January 1942. “They [Japanese-Americans] do not leave their homes at night ... The police authorities are probably not sympathetic to the Japanese and are

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Goldstein, pp. 223-24.

¹¹⁸ G. Edward White, *Earl Warren: A Public Life*, New York 1982, pp. 69-74.

giving them only the minimum protection. Investigation of actual attacks on Japanese have been merely perfunctory and no prosecutions have been initiated.”¹¹⁹

In testimony before Congress, Earl Warren invoked these attacks as an argument for internment, warning that widespread and uncontrollable vigilantism would be inevitable if President Roosevelt failed to sign Executive Order 9066, deporting the Japanese from the Coast. California’s chief law enforcement officer made it clear that he was completely sympathetic to the vigilante instinct. “My own belief concerning vigilantism is that the people do not engage in vigilante activities so long as they believe that their Government through its agencies is taking care of their most serious problems.”¹²⁰

German- and Italian-Americans, of course, were not interned on the West Coast, nor did Westerners seem to find anything unusual in the spectacle, common by late 1943, of Italian and German prisoners of war picking fruit and working on local farms. The real menace of the Nisei had been their economic success, and their internment forced a fire sale of their hard-earned assets, including farmland strategically sited in areas already targeted for postwar residential development, like West Los Angeles. In the name of patriotism, their enemies were able to cherry pick the fruits of two generations of diligent labor. Although some Nisei would return to farming after the war, they would never regain the influential position in California agriculture they had occupied in 1941.¹²¹

With the internment of the Japanese, bigotry took no rest. But the once despised Okies were now white citizens again, usefully toiling in aircraft plants or fighting with the

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*, New York 1993, p. 36.

¹²⁰ U.S. Congress, House, *Hearings before the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration* (Part 29: San Francisco Hearings, 21 February 1942), Washington D.C. 1942, pp. 11017-18.

¹²¹ “No one knows the real worth of the property lost by the Japanese-Americans. As economists have pointed out, the true losses should take into account not just the 1942 value of the property but also the lost economic opportunities in a time when most Americans were enjoying wartime prosperity, and the tremendous increase in land values on the Pacific Coast.” Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, pp. 89-90.

Marines at Guadalcanal, and the “heroic” Chinese and Filipinos were temporarily exempted from the Yellow Peril while it suited wartime propaganda purposes. Instead, the brunt of wartime racial prejudice and mob or vigilante violence, especially in the Los Angeles area, was directed against Mexican- and African-Americans. The vigilante movement - deliberately instigated by the Los Angeles press- that is customarily recalled as the “Zoot-Suit Riots,” was, of course, only the local franchise of a nationwide outburst of white violence during 1943’s “summer of hate.” In this larger context, two distinct species of white grievances – one rooted in workplace white privilege, the other in the social imaginary – violently coalesced in different combinations in different cities.

First was the backlash of rank-and-file white war workers against the Fair Employment Practices Commission that Roosevelt had established in face of threats by Black leaders to lead a March on Washington in 1941. By 1943 some real progress was finally being achieved in integrating shipyards, aircraft plants and urban transit despite protests by segregated AFL locals and local demagogues. In defense boomtowns on the West Coast or in the Midwest, incoming streams of white and Black labor migrants from the Mason-Dixon states were competing over housing and services as well as seniority and skills. As a *Life* warned in a 1942 headline, “Detroit is Dynamite. It can either blow up Hitler or blow up the U.S.”¹²² Both Oakland and Los Angeles (where 10,000 Black in-migrants from Oklahoma and Texas arrived every month during 1943)¹²³ were almost as volatile.

Urban public space was the other arena where racist agitation sowed seeds of violence in different North American cities. Thanks in large part to reactionary newspaper campaigns, the ‘Swing kid’ subculture of the early 1940s, with its jive talk and ‘zoot suit’ attire, had been conflated with a racialized and almost entirely imaginary menace of teenage gangsters and draft dodgers. Unlike the anti-Black backlash in the war plants, hysteria about ‘zooters’ targeted different ethnic groups. In wartime Montreal, which had its own ‘zoot suit’ riot in June 1944, the English-language press incited soldiers to violence against supposedly ‘anti-patriotic’ Francophone youth who hung out (and

¹²² Cited in Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Princeton 1996, p. 29.

¹²³ David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, New York 2005, p. 768.

competed for the attention of young females) in the same clubs and dancehalls as the military.¹²⁴ In New York, despite hordes of similarly attired white youth, the problem ‘zooters’ were largely identified as Black delinquents, and in Los Angeles, as Blacks and especially Chicanos.

The roots of the wartime zoot suit obsession go back to the national economic recovery in 1940-41 when newspaper editors, police chiefs, and ministers across the country began to complain about the rise of a flamboyant, anti-authoritarian youth culture based on the fashions of big-band swing and showing its most dangerous inclinations among minority youth – Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and, in Canada, Quebecois. The chief complaint was a new racial pride and generational insolence that no longer acknowledged traditional color lines or segregated ethnic boundaries in public spaces like amusement parks, theaters and transportation. (We have already seen, of course, a preview of this in the case of the proud and unsubmitive young Filipinos who collided with white supremacy in rural California dancehalls and honky-tonks in the late 1920s.) As Spike Lee portrays in the vivid, opening scenes of his *Malcolm X*, the uninhibited exuberance of the zooters represented both embryonic cultural nationalism as well as the stirrings of an inter-racial youth culture. In response, a truly extraordinary amount of newsprint was expended in stern laments about declining social control of youth and wrathful tirades against the “new delinquency.” In the opinion of local authorities, the children of color were out of control.¹²⁵

The death of a Chicano teenager under confused circumstances near a ranch pond (‘Sleepy Lagoon’) in August 1942 provided the pretext for a sustained campaign by the Los Angeles daily press –especially the Hearst papers and the *Los Angeles Times* – against Chicano gangsters, *pachucos* and zooters. Although the alleged crime wave was

¹²⁴ See Serge Durlinger, “The Montreal and Verdun Zoot-Suit Disturbances of June 1944,” in Serge Bernier (ed.), *L’Impact de la Deuxieme Guerre mondiale sur les societes canadienne et quebecoise*, Ottawa 1998.

¹²⁵ I generalize here from readings of contemporary New York, Chicago and Los Angeles newspapers in the course of research on street gangs. Authorities’ perception of a new kind of minority youth problem in the 1939-41 period deserves a serious exploration.

largely an editorial fabrication, it provided a lurid core for the coalescence of all kinds of wild allegations, including claims that Eastside youth were being groomed into a Fifth Column by the shadowy Sinarquista movement (a Mexican fascist group with only a handful of actual members in Southern California) and that “the Japanese, upon being evacuated, had incited the Mexican population of Los Angeles to violence.” Such calumnies, of course, were nonsense, even obscene in the face of the number of posthumous Congressional Medals of Honor and Navy Crosses being awarded to Chicano youth in the Pacific. But as Carey McWilliams, the chair of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, emphasized, the Mexican-American contribution to the war effort was obscured by the incessant front page equation of Mexicans with crime. “Every Mexican youngster arrested, no matter how trivial the offense and regardless of his ultimate guilt or innocence, was photographed with some such caption as “Pachuco Gangster” or “Zoot-suit Hoodlum.”¹²⁶

By the spring of 1943, Los Angeles public opinion had been persuaded that gang violence was raging almost uncontrolled in the ‘disloyal’ neighborhoods around downtown and east of the river. At the same time, Black-white workplace tensions were peaking over the impending federal integration of Los Angeles street car crews: a conflict that would eventually involve Army intervention to prevent mob violence. Added to this fraught mix was the chronic and unavoidable friction between different groups of young men – sailors, Marines, war workers, neighborhood youth – as they competed for fun and female attention in crowded entertainment districts downtown, in Hollywood and at the beach. What might have been, at most, minor scuffles or small riots between white sailors and Chicano and Black youth were magnified by newspaper hysteria and police complicity into a large-scale, if short-lived vigilante campaign against Los Angeles’ youth of color.

¹²⁶ McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, p. 215.

The foreshock was a riot at Venice Pier in mid-May. According to historian Eduardo Pagan, a false rumor that Chicanos had stabbed a sailor incited a mob hunt for revenge at the Aragon ballroom.

As one eyewitness later said “They didn’t care whether the Mexican kids wore zoot suits or not, and for that matter most of the kids dancing were not in drapes – they just wanted Mexicans.” When the dance ended and the Mexican American teenagers started to leave the ballroom, a crowd of about five hundred sailors and civilians began to chase them down the boardwalk. “Let’s get ‘em” the mob shouted as they ran past the bingo parlors and concession stands. “Let’s get the chili-eating bastards!”¹²⁷

Several weeks later, following further small-scale confrontations between sailors and Chicano youth, a group of sailors returning to the Naval Armory in Elysian Park claimed they were attacked by zootsuited youth from a nearby slum neighborhood. When the assault was reported to the LAPD, the cops formed a “Vengeance Squad,” as they called it, but were unable to find the supposed assailants. As McWilliams points out, “the raid accomplished nothing except to get the names of the raiding officers in the newspapers and to whip up the anger of the community against the Mexican population, which may, perhaps, have been the reason for the raid.” The next night several hundred sailors in a fleet of 20 taxicabs cruised downtown and the eastside beating up any zootsuited Mexican youth they encountered; a ritual that was repeated for the next two nights without interference from the police who, instead, “mopped up” after the military vigilantes by arresting any zooters or neighborhood youth they encountered.¹²⁸

Egged by the press, who warned “Zoot Suit Chiefs Girding for War on Navy” (*Daily News*), thousands of white servicemen and civilian youth, unimpeded by the police, gathered downtown on Monday, 7 June, for a night of infamy. Any young Chicano was fair game.

¹²⁷ Eduardo Pagan, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon*, Chapel Hill 2003, p. 163.

¹²⁸ McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, p. 221.

Pushing its way into the important motion picture theaters, the mob ordered the management to turn on the house lights and then ranged up and down the aisles dragging Mexicans out of their seats. Street cars were halted while Mexicans, and some Filipinos and Negroes, were jerked out of their seats, pushed into the streets, and beaten with sadistic frenzy. If the victims wore zoot-suits, they were stripped of their clothing and left naked or half-naked on the streets, bleeding and bruised. Proceeding down Main Street from First to Twelfth, the mob stopped on the edge of the Negro district. Learning that the Negroes planned a warm reception for them, the mobsters turned back and marched through the Mexican east side spreading panic and terror.¹²⁹

Although the servicemen wisely decided not to attack the Central Avenue ghetto, a Black war worker was pulled off a street car and one of his eyes gouged out. McWilliams, a lawyer as well as journalist and civil-rights activist, took affidavits from many of the victims, not more half of whom, he said, were actually wearing zootsuits. Like a disease outbreak that continues to spread and becomes a national epidemic, the Los Angeles was immediately followed by other race riots and attacks on people of color, finally culminating in the terrifying Detroit events of 20-21 June, which took the lives of 29 people. McWilliams, whose contemporary articles were unsurpassed in their honesty and passion, claimed that the riots had exposed “the rotten foundations upon which the City of Los Angeles had built a paper-mache façade of “Inter-American Good Will.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 224.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 231.

10. *Beating the UFW*

It was like being in a war. They arrested farmworkers; they hit them with sticks. Everywhere you looked there were Teamsters. If the truckers saw that you had eagles on your car, they would stop you and break your windshield.

*UFW supporter (1973)*¹³¹

As the war ended, sporadic racist attacks continued – terrorism against returning Nisei, arson against Blacks attempting to buy homes in white neighborhoods, and so on – but vigilantism appeared to have been put in mothballs. Its major constituency, the Associated Farmers, no longer had to mobilize shotgun-wielding ‘citizen armies’ when they could manipulate the *bracero* program to import strike-breaking labor, then, if the *braceros* themselves organized, call upon the Border Patrol to deport them. Indeed, the Border Patrol now became integral to the repressive relations of production in California agriculture: vigilante violence seemed less necessary when deportation could so easily dispose of impudent strikers.

Postwar attempts to organize farm labor, like an October 1947 strike against giant DiGiorgio in Kern County, were thus efficiently repulsed by the use of imported strike breakers, mass arrests, selective deportations, evictions of strikers’ families, red-baiting by the California House Committee on Un-American Activities, and employer terrorism (one strike leader was shot in the head). The Associated Farmers also organized a “Citizens’ Committee” in support of DiGiorgio but felt no need to arm them with axe handles or send them out to storm workers’ camps. After the defeat of the DiGiorgio strikers and a massive purge of the pro-union labor-force in the Imperial Valley, any further attempt to bring collective bargaining to California agriculture seemed fruitless.

¹³¹ Clementina Olloqui quoted in Susan Ferris and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields*, San Diego 1997, p. 182.

But the ending of the *bracero* program in 1964 and the re-emergence of a settled, family workforce made possible the new revolt in the fields led by the National Farm Workers' Association. The great Delano Grape Strike that began in 1965 was as unexpected as the 1933 cotton uprising and mobilized equal passion and commitment from an exploited workforce. The extraordinary endurance of the strikers and the charisma of the new union, with its appeal to both class and ethnic pride, shook the growers' belief in their own omnipotence. The strike faced the classical repertoire of intimidation by ranch foremen and security guards, who turned dogs on them, ran them down in their pickup trucks, shoved shotguns in their bellies, and beat them with near impunity; yet such tactics only seemed to infuse *La Huelga* with more energy. Eventually, agribusiness with the biggest corporations like United Fruit and DiGiorgio in the fore decided to resurrect the darkest figures of the Depression era. The vigilantes this time around, however, weren't growers' sons or American Legionnaires, but, more odiously, highly paid members of the Teamsters' Union, imported by the hundreds to intimidate, beat and drive away NFWA (later UFWOC) strikers.

By 1967, major employers had decided to sign sweetheart contracts with the Teamsters in order to preclude and sabotage organization by the Farm Workers. The contracts typically provided almost no benefits nor did they allow workers to vote over their representation. Moreover, the Teamsters made little effort to conceal their disdain for their new, involuntarily conscripted members: "I am not sure," said Einar Mohn, head of the powerful Western Conference of Teamsters, "how effective a union can be when it is composed of Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals with temporary visas."¹³² And the Teamsters immediately enforced their scab agreements with such pervasive strong-arm tactics that Chavez had the great difficulty preventing his own outraged members from retaliating in kind. Confrontations in 1970 between the Salinas area Grower-

¹³² Ibid, p. 186.

Shipper Association and the Teamsters, on one side, and the UFWOC, on the other, evoked the worst memories of the 1936 lockout.

Growers hired guards armed with shotguns to patrol their property, and Teamsters sent in thugs wielding baseball bats to frighten off the *Chavistas*. One of the most infamous of these goons... was Ted 'Speedy' Gonsalves, who wore black-and-white pinstriped suits and drove an armored limousine. ... The imported thugs menaced pickets, pounded on the walls of rooms where UFWOC negotiators were meeting, and knocked over coffee cups and cursed at UFWOC members whom they encountered in restaurants.¹³³

The terror was meant to remind farm workers that growers and their vigilante henchmen were still the kings of the valley. The UFWOC attorney, for instance, was hospitalized after being beaten unconscious by Teamster goon; meanwhile, a foreman ran his tractor into pickets and the UFWOC (soon to be the UFW) office in Hollister was dynamited. Cesar Chavez was jailed for refusing to comply with a one-sided court injunction to stop the boycott of scab lettuce. When Ethel Kennedy (RFK's widow) came to visit him in the Salinas jail, she was mobbed by several hundred opponents of the strike and members of the John Birch Society who tried to physically assault her.

The growers' deployment of Teamsters as vigilantes and goons came to a climax during the brutal spring and summer of 1973, when UFW strikers attempted to picket the grape harvest as it moved from the Coachella Valley near Palm Springs to the San Joaquin Valley. Under the 'mobbed-up' leadership of Frank Fitzsimmons, the Teamsters had become major supporters of President Nixon, supplying massive donations, even physical muscle to his notorious reelection campaign in 1972. Now the Nixon White House via Chief Counsel Charles Colson (later to be hired by the Teamsters) ordered the Justice Department and the National Labor Relations Board to side with Fitzsimmons and the growers against Cesar Chavez's strikers. As federal officials looked the other way, hundreds of Teamster goons, paid \$70 per day and wielding tire irons, terrorized the picketlines, beating up scores of strikers and their sympathizers, including a Catholic priest. When FBI agents learned from one of their informants that the Teamster

¹³³ Ibid, p.170.

leadership had ordered their beer-bellied thugs to “escalate the violence” by singling out strike leaders and picket captains for vicious hit-and-run attacks, the Justice Department did nothing to warn or protect the victims.

In Coachella, at least, the Riverside County Sheriffs maintained neutrality and occasionally came to the aid of the UFW, but when the picket lines moved north to the San Joaquin, the strikers faced the wrath of the Teamsters plus hired guards and local sheriffs who sided as shamelessly with the growers just as had their fathers’ in 1933. Almost 3500 strikers were arrested and two were murdered. Twenty-four year-old Nagi Daifullah, a Yemeni immigrant and UFW picket captain, was clubbed to death by a Fresno County deputy in August, and soon afterwards Juan de la Cruz was shot to death on a picket line near Arvin, not far from where one of the cotton strikers had been killed in 1933.

But 1973 was not 1933, and the UFW rank and file were eager to move toward a more active self-defense. In contrast to the situation 40 years before, there was now a militant Chicano power movement in the cities that was ready to aid, and if necessary, to raise hell on behalf of the struggle in the fields. Precisely because he feared such counter-violence and likely radicalization, Cesar Chavez made a fateful decision to shift the union’s scarce resources away from the primary strike toward support of the grape boycott. The union’s sympathizers across the world, rather than its own rank and file in the fields, became the key actors in a struggle that was increasingly centralized and led by a small clique around Chavez. Although this strategy preserved nonviolence and generated huge publicity, some which was used to pass the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1976 which finally provided farm labor with a modicum of rights, the boycott was subsidized by atrophy of membership involvement at the base. Despite an eventual peace treaty with the Teamsters (who promptly lost interest in agricultural labor), the union was unable to consolidate its gains or hold the ground it had won by heroic mass struggle.

By Chavez’s death in 1993, he had become an American saint and the UFW, a beloved liberal cause, yet paradoxically most farm workers remained unorganized, desperately

poor, and largely invisible. In those heartlands of traditional farm fascism - the Salinas, San Joaquin, and Coachella-Imperial valleys – indigenous immigrants from Mexico, Mixtecs especially, labor under conditions little different from those that the IWW protested in 1914 or the CAWIU in 1933. Indeed, looking back on the 1970s, it is hard not to conclude that once again, vigilantism and private violence, allied with local law enforcement and a tolerant federal government, had defeated an epic uprising of farm labor.

11. The Last Vigilantes?

Americans Doing the Job Government Won't Do.

Slogan of the Minuteman Project

There is extraordinary consistency in white prejudice over the last 150 years of California history. The wrath of nativists and vigilantes has always been focused on the poorest, most powerless, and hardest-working segment of the population: recent arrivals from Donegal, Guangdong, Hokkaido, Luzon, Oklahoma and now Oaxaca. And the rant, as broadcast daily on dozens of AM hate radio programs in California and the Southwest, is still the same as described by Steinbeck: “Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry... They said, ‘These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything. They’ve got no sense of property rights.’”¹³⁴

The most publicized of today’s neo-vigilantes are the so-called Minutemen (actually a fissiparous miscellany of grouplets and leaders) who began their armed patrol of the Arizona-Mexico border, appropriately, on April Fools Day 2005. The media-oriented, Tombstone-based movement was the latest incarnation of anti-immigrant patrols that have plagued the borderlands for more than a decade. Vowing to defend national sovereignty against the Brown Peril, a series of shadowy paramilitary groups, led by

¹³⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. .

racist ranchers and self-declared ‘Aryan warriors,’ and egged on by right-wing radio jocks, have harassed, illegally detained, beaten and perhaps murdered immigrants crossing through the boiling cauldrons of the Arizona and California desert.

The Minuteman Project was a theater of the absurd as well as a canny attempt to move vigilantism back into the mainstream of conservative politics. The Tombstone organizers – a retired accountant and a former kindergarten teacher, both from Southern California – mesmerized the press with their promise of 1000 heavily armed super-patriots bravely confronting the Mexican hordes along the international border in Cochise County. In the event, they turned out 150 sorry-ass gun freaks and sociopaths who spent a few days in law chairs cleaning their guns, jabbering to the press, and peering through military binoculars at the Saguaro-covered mountains where several hundred immigrants perish each year from heatstroke and thirst. Armageddon on the border that April was never very likely, if only because undocumented immigrants read or hear the news like everyone else. Confronted with the Minutemen and the hundreds of extra Border Patrol sent to keep them out of trouble, *campesinos* simply waited patiently on the Sonora side for the vigilantes to get sunburned, bored and go home.

Yet, it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact of the fanatics in camouflage suits: their successive farces in the desert (different Minutemen factions attempted a repeat of their border patrol near San Diego in 2006) have had an electrifying impact on the conservative grassroots. For the first time, the Bush administration has felt seriously embattled – not by Democrats (they would never be so impolite) – but by the anti-immigrant rebellion on its own flanks. In the fervid world of suburban Republican politics, the Minutemen have become super-heroes fighting a criminal conspiracy (shades of the original Yellow Peril) to flood the country with brown-skinned welfare cheats and future street gang members. The contradiction between shabby demagogues passing as vigilante warriors and their larger-than-life image in right-wing rhetoric, of course, is no greater than the contradiction between the Republican *herrenvolk*’s abhorrence of illegal immigration and their personal dependence upon Spanish-speaking slaves to blow-dry their lawns and wipe their babies behinds.

The roots of neo-vigilantism go back to the polarizing debate about Proposition 187 in 1996. The anti-Latino backlash, which that evil sorcerer, former California governor Pete Wilson, helped summon to life, has failed to quietly die away as Karl Rove and other White House strategists might have wished. Over the last decade, instead, the campaigns against immigrant social rights and the use of Spanish in the schools which originated in California have been exported to Arizona, Colorado and several Southern states with growing Latin American populations. Like earlier anti-abortion protests (which culminated in rightwing terrorism), the vigilante movement offers a dramatic tactic for capturing press attention, galvanizing opposition to immigration, and shifting the balance of power within the Republican Party.

Moreover, to the discomfort of the White House, the Minutemen found an ardent (if inarticulate) admirer in California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger: “I think they’ve done a terrific job. They’ve cut down the crossing of illegal immigrants a huge percentage. So it just shows that it works when you go and make an effort and when you work hard. It’s a do-able thing.” Later, after furious Latino leaders accused him of “scapegoating and immigrant bashing,” and even after President Bush had characterized the group as “vigilantes” Schwarzenegger defiantly reiterated that he would welcome the help of the Minutemen on the California border. (As he so often does, the ‘Governator’ followed this with the non sequitur reassurance that he was a “champion of immigrants.”)¹³⁵

Veteran political observers who thought this was all just a tempest in a teapot were subsequently stunned in November 2005 when one of the founders of the Minuteman Project, Jim Gilchrist, running as a Third Party candidate (but with the endorsement of the Border Patrol union) won almost as many votes as the Democratic candidate in an Orange County congressional race. In subsequent Southern California races, like the 2006 special election for a successor to the disgraced crook ‘Duke’ Cunningham, Republicans have competed for endorsements from prominent vigilantes and Brown Peril

¹³⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, 29 April 2005.

demagogues. Meanwhile Gilchrist and his supporters have made Costa Mesa, an Orange County town with a large Latino minority, a showpiece for their policies, especially the deployment of local police to enforce immigration status. In their Manichaeian worldview, you're either part of the border patrol or a felonious alien.

Such bigotry in a state with a rapidly emerging Latino majority might seem like the last gasp of a dying culture, but for the moment at least, the neo-vigilantes are high in the saddle, their eyes firmly turned backward to that glorious past exemplified by the Glanton gang, the Order of Caucasians, the Native Sons of the Golden West, the American Protective League, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Associated Farmers.