

NAPA'S DARK LEGACY:
HISTORICAL TRACES OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY
PUBLIC EXECUTION

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Introduction

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Californians had begun to view public hangings as barbaric events. Prolonged strangulations occurred because of improperly placed nooses. In addition, inexperienced executioners failing to soak ropes overnight to lessen the rebound effect would fail to break the necks of the prisoners as they fell through the trapdoor. To assuage critics, the Legislature passed an amendment on March 31, 1891 to the 1872 Penal Code statute regarding the implementation of capital punishment requiring all sentences of death to be carried out within the walls of either Folsom or San Quentin State Prison. Two years passed before an experienced hangman conducted an execution within a California state prison: San Quentin held its first execution on March 3, 1893 while Folsom Prison followed two years later on December 13, 1895. In the meantime, the old adage of “an eye for an eye” held by vengeful citizens, sheriffs, and even judges superseded the law within many county courts. Sheriffs continued to conduct their own executions within the confines of a jail yard or courthouse square, some well into the twentieth century.

Napa County conducted its last public hanging on January 15, 1897 when Sheriff George McKenzie executed William Moore Roe for first-degree murder. The case of the *People v. William Roe* is historically significant for many reasons. Aside from its local significance within Napa as the county's last public hanging, the case provides insight into the limited resources available to a small town sheriff in his capture of a murderer. Due to the close-knit atmosphere of the community, not to mention the promi-

nence of the victim, Sheriff McKenzie doggedly pursued Roe via wanted posters, delivered by train and stagecoach, and telegrams. When the Napa community clamped down on his travel expenditures months into the investigation, McKenzie reached into his own pockets to continue his pursuit of justice. After six years of viewing possible suspects and following false leads, the relentless sheriff finally caught his man and held him accountable for his crimes. The case of the *People v. William Roe* also serves as an example of how public opinion influenced the jury and judge to hand down a sentence of death. More important is the motion made by the judge to grant Sheriff McKenzie the responsibility of publicly executing Roe within the courthouse square, responding to the outcry by the Napa community despite the current stipulation of the Penal Code. Because Roe had committed his crimes within Napa, the populace believed he must die within Napa. In order to fully grasp the importance of this last execution within the county, it must be placed in the context of the technology, culture and economy of the time period, which gives the story more value, meaning and significance.

Napa County, 1848-1891

Originally called Nappa by the local Indian population, the area that would eventually become Napa City was founded in 1847 by Nathan Coombs. The parcel of land was originally part of the Rancho Entre Napa Mexican land grant awarded to Nicolás Higuera in 1836 by Governor Mariano Chico.¹ Napa County is one of the original 27 counties created on February 18, 1850 and comprised of four other incorporated cities: Yountville, St. Helena, Calistoga, and American Canyon. The City of Napa is the largest city in the county and serves as the county seat. A courthouse, complete with a small jail, was erected in 1856 to enforce law and order within the growing town. The first telegraph line from Vallejo to Napa was strung in 1858; the second was built in 1867 linking Napa to Calistoga. This was followed by telephone service in the fall of 1883. Gas was used to light Napa City in 1868 and electricity in 1890.²

By 1891, the Napa County Sheriff's Office had conducted seven legal executions via hanging. Intent on safeguarding the community against crime, local law enforcement actively pursued lawbreakers. Prostitution,

1. W. F. Wallace, *History of Napa County* (Oakland: Enquirer, 1901), 132.

2. *Napa County Record*, "Invitation Napa County," November 1962, 24.

physical assaults, arson, robbery, public drunkenness, and the occasional murder were common occurrences within the city's red light district and Chinatown. The daily newspapers of Napa County regularly reported all crimes, arrests, and trials. Despite the bucolic landscape and amenities afforded its citizens, Napa County was not free from the criminal element or racial tensions.

In 1890, the United States population census for the county recorded a population of 16,411.³ Citizens included whites of English, German, and Italian ancestry as well as people of color. The towns of Napa and St. Helena each housed small Chinatowns where the county's Chinese population congregated. Whites often frequented the bordellos, opium dens, and gambling houses of these small enclaves. A minuscule number of descendants of the native population, often referred to as Wappo Indians, remained within the county.⁴ Although discrimination against people of color occurred within Napa, as it did throughout the state and country during the nineteenth century, such individuals contributed greatly to the county's agricultural and manufacturing economies.

The Mediterranean climate of the valley provided local farmers the conditions necessary for success. Wheat was the primary crop throughout the mid-nineteenth century and was responsible for the valley's wealth as over ten percent of all grain in the United States came from Napa County. As improvements were made in transportation, it became easier for farmers to transfer grain to nationwide markets. When wheat prices began to decline in the 1870s due to overproduction, apples and peaches became the major crops grown throughout the county. By 1890, 300,000 fruit trees had been planted. Grapes had also become a lucrative crop by this time due to the phylloxera infestation that had destroyed the vineyards of France.⁵ Napa County was also ideal for breeding and raising livestock as the valley floor provided a vegetation of natural grasses for herds of cattle and sheep. Ranchers supplied hides the local tanning industry processed into leather. Steamboats traveled up the Napa River to the tanneries in the city district of Napa to pick up cargo, which they then carried out to the San Pablo Bay

3. Bay Area Census, "City of Napa, Napa County," <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Napa50.htm#1940>.

4. Lyman Palmer, *History of Napa and Lake Counties, California* (San Francisco: Slocum, Bowen & Co., 1881), 143-148.

5. Denzil Verardo and Jennie Dennis Verardo, *Napa Valley: From Golden Fields to Purple Harvest* (Northridge: Windsor Publications, 1986), 42-43.

for eventual distribution to San Francisco. Construction of the Napa Valley Railroad in 1864, and its eventual linkage to the Southern Pacific Railroad system in 1898, improved the distribution of Napa goods.⁶

During the mid-nineteenth century, as word spread of the affordable land in Napa County, the population steadily increased. Attracted to the rolling green fields of Napa, sea captain John Quinton Greenwood began purchasing property in the southern part of the county during the mid-1860s as he prepared for his retirement. Born near Calais in Washington County, Maine, on October 21, 1830, John Greenwood had followed the example set by his father and brother by becoming a sailor at the age of nineteen. After a career aboard trade ships traversing Cape Horn, Greenwood built a schooner and, for several years, engaged in trade at the Port of Stockton located on the San Joaquin River and at the Port of Sacramento. It was during his time in California that he met his future wife, Lucina Larabee.

Shortly after her birth in 1845, Lucina and her family left her native Michigan for Iowa. By the age of 17, she had settled with her family in Contra Costa County, California, where she met and married Greenwood in 1861.⁷ Lucina's Napa neighbors would later describe her as an intuitive, gentle woman who was always willing to help a friend. She was an elegant woman who wore high-collared dresses stylish for the period and her long hair piled into a bun atop her head.⁸ Greenwood and Lucina never had children.

The Greenwood Ranch occupied a parcel of land that had formerly belonged to General Mariano Vallejo's Suscol Rancho land grant. Located in the southern part of the county, the property was nine and one-quarter miles from the city of Napa. After borrowing \$5,500 from San Francisco's Savings and Loan Society, Greenwood built a two-story house in the Italianate style that had become popular in the 1860s.⁹ The residence was

6. Denzil Verardo and Jennie Dennis Verardo, *Napa Valley: From Golden Fields to Purple Harvest* (Northridge: Windsor Publications, 1986), 87-89.

7. ktaadnpb [pseud.], "John Quinton Greenwood," posting to the "Greenwood, John Quinton, born near Calais, Maine 1830; died Soscol, Napa, California 1912," public family tree, May 13, 2011, <http://community.ancestry.com/profile.aspx?mba=004a477f-0003-0000-0000-000000000000>.

8. *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Moore on Trial for His Life," November 12, 1896.

9. Napa County Recorder-County Clerk, *Index to Deeds, Grantors, vol. 1*, "John Thomas to John Q. Greenwood, 10 April 1867" (Napa: Napa County Recorder-County Clerk), 65.

constructed atop a gently sloping hill that overlooked the county road. Greenwood constructed a widow's walk atop the roof where he could stare out across his lush fields to the San Pablo Bay, reminiscing of his younger days as a sea captain.¹⁰ He raised large crops of grain and rented pastureland to fellow ranchers in need of grazing land for cattle. Lucina enjoyed spending her days visiting with neighbors or tending to her flowerbeds.¹¹

The Napa Crime

Monday, February 9, 1891 began just like any other weekday for retired sea captain John Greenwood and his wife, Lucina. After their noon meal, Greenwood ventured outside to repair a section of fencing on his 386-acre parcel while Lucina drove her horse and buggy to a neighbor's house to retrieve the daily newspaper and flowers for a funeral wreath she was making for the coffin of a recently deceased friend. On her way to the residence of Mrs. Hannah Moore, Lucina happened upon two men walking along the road. The men asked Lucina for a ride, to which she replied she was only going a short distance to the next house down the road. Upon her arrival at the Moore residence, she related the incident to her friend. Though the men were both well dressed, Lucina explained, their presence in the area disturbed her. Hannah Moore would later recall to a reporter for *The Napa Register* that Lucina had told her that "she never had such a foreboding of impending danger come over her," and she wanted to return to the safety of her home immediately.¹² In less than an hour, Lucina Greenwood would discover her initial perception of the two men had been correct.

The Strangers

One of the men, William Moore Roe, was a seasoned criminal with a penchant for armed robbery and murder. Born in Ohio during the year of 1852, Roe soon discovered how disappointing and dangerous life could be. Shortly after the birth of his son, his father left the family with relatives and headed out west to seek his fortune during California's Gold Rush. Within weeks of his arrival, the family received word he had died.

10. Napa Landmarks, "Napa County Historical Resources," vol. 2 (Napa: Napa Landmarks, 1978), 70-71.

11. Napa County Landmarks, "Greenwood House," in *Historic Resources Survey*, vol. 2 (Napa: Napa County Landmarks, 1978), 70-71.

12. *Napa Register*, "The Murderers," February 27, 1891.

Nine years later, Roe's mother absolved herself of all parental responsibility by leaving her nine-year-old son with relatives when she remarried. She would eventually give birth to six children with her new husband as well as raise five of his children from a previous marriage. Roe must have been devastated to see his mother care for another man's children and yet ignore her firstborn. Since these were Roe's formative years, such an act of parental neglect would have left painful psychological scars on his young psyche. As an adult, he would reveal his resentment towards his mother by falsely claiming she was deceased.

Roe experienced further heartbreak at the age of fourteen when his adoptive mother passed away. Shortly thereafter, his adoptive father remarried. Roe's new stepmother was instantly jealous of his status as the only living heir to his adoptive father and began plotting the boy's death. She first attempted to poison him, but Roe saved his own life by running to the local doctor to have his stomach pumped. One month later, his stepmother enlisted a local man to shoot Roe through his bedroom window while he slept. A neighbor witnessed the attempted murder and shot the unsuccessful assassin. Aware that his life was in danger, Roe began sleeping with a pistol under his pillow. When his stepmother asked her teenage son to attack Roe with an axe while he slept, Roe shot and killed the boy. Roe was acquitted of manslaughter after it was proven he acted in self-defense while his stepmother was taken to an asylum in Dayton, Ohio.

At the age of eighteen, Roe inherited a plot of land from his maternal grandmother. He soon experienced another loss when the mother of his former paramour killed his fiancé. As Roe would later explain, "after that I went to hell altogether."¹³ He abandoned his property and embarked on a life of crime. He traveled throughout Ohio and West Virginia, stealing horses and committing robberies. During the early 1870s, Roe was involved in several gunfights resulting in the death of his opponent. He eventually hopped a train and made his way out west to California where he resumed his career as a robber. In the mining camps, he supplemented his stolen income with gambling.¹⁴

Always one-step ahead of the law, Roe eventually landed in Napa

13. *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Roe Talks of his Life," November 22, 1896.

14. N. W. Collins, Napa County Clerk, "The People of the State of California vs. William Rowe, Confession, Plaintiff Exhibit N," filed November 13, 1896, in the possession of the Napa County Sheriff's Office Museum, 17-19.

County where he found employment as a farmhand. He worked for Peter Lynch, a neighbor of the Greenwoods, from September 1889 to January 1891. While employed by Lynch, Roe became enamored with Greenwood's young wife, Lucina. It was during this time he somehow concluded Greenwood kept a large amount of money hidden within his home. Angry over a reprimand he had received from the older man, Roe conceived a plan to return to Napa and rob Greenwood of his money. Roe also planned to rob the Bank of Napa.¹⁵

While aboard the ferry from San Francisco to Vallejo, Roe met Carl Schmidt, a recent German immigrant. He enticed Schmidt to accompany him to Napa with the false promise of employing the man on his ranch. During their walk from Vallejo, Roe persuaded the destitute Schmidt to aid him in the commissions of his crimes. Unbeknownst to Schmidt, Roe also planned to kill his accomplice once they completed the robberies.

Unlike Roe, Charles "Carl" Schmidt was not a criminal. At 37, Schmidt had left a wife and two children in his native Breslau, Germany. He planned to send for his family once he found steady employment and could pay for their voyage. Since his arrival in the United States in 1884, he had worked as a ranch hand in Pennsylvania and Minnesota and later as a railroad section hand in Utah. In 1890, he left Ogden, Utah for California. In December of that year, he found work in Folsom pruning grapevines. After forty days, he stowed away on a train. On February 1, he arrived in San Francisco, and a week later, he met William Roe while aboard the *Amador* as it crossed the bay towards Vallejo.¹⁶

Home Invasion Turned Murder

At five o'clock, the men reached the Greenwood Ranch. Roe and Schmidt accosted Greenwood as he walked the 75 yards from the barn to the house. Both men drew their pistols on the unsuspecting rancher as Roe hollered, "Throw up your hands!"¹⁷ Greenwood did as he was told. Roe then ordered the older man to unlock his residence. Both men kept their guns pointed at Greenwood as they followed him across the yard towards the house.

15. *Napa Register*, "Roe Held," October 9, 1896.

16. D. Shakespear, Napa County Clerk, "The People of the State of California vs. Charles Schmidt, Confession," filed May 24, 1892, in the possession of the Napa County Sheriff's Office Museum, 1-4.

17. *Napa Register*, "Murder!," February 13, 1891.

The three men walked up the front steps, across the large wrap-around porch of the Greenwood residence and into the kitchen. Roe pulled two separate lengths of bale rope from his pocket and ordered Schmidt to bind the older man's hands and feet. In a rather aggressive manner, Schmidt replied Roe should perform the task himself as he did not know how to bind a person. Roe, clearly agitated by Schmidt's sudden assertiveness, viciously told him if he ever spoke to him in that manner again, he would "kill [him] on the spot."¹⁸ Like a whipped dog, Schmidt took the bale rope from Roe and attempted to bind Greenwood's hands and feet.

Once Greenwood was restrained, Roe reached into his pocket and produced a small square bottle. Obtained in San Francisco, the bottle contained an opiate with the purpose of inducing sleep. Roe was quite familiar with its effects as he nightly relied upon the mixture to silence his demons and lull himself to sleep. He poured a few drops from the bottle into a cup half-full of water and shoved the mixture towards his captive. Though Greenwood explained to Roe he suffered from heart trouble, Roe ignored his protests. At gunpoint, Roe forced the older man to swallow the liquid.

Roe impatiently paced back and forth as he waited for the drug to take effect. He repeatedly demanded Greenwood to tell him where he had stashed his money within the house. Each time Greenwood honestly told him he did not keep large amounts of money in his home, and he had already given Roe the few dollars he had. After several minutes of watching Greenwood remain unaffected by the opiate, an irate Roe told him, "It takes a longer time for this stuff to act on you than any man I ever gave it to."¹⁹

Thirty minutes after Greenwood's initial confrontation by Roe and Schmidt, Lucina returned to her residence. She left her horse harnessed to her buggy and walked up the side of the porch. Just as she reached the door leading into the kitchen, Roe flung it open. Frightened by the stranger's presence in her home, Lucina dropped the pan of flowers she was carrying. Roe lunged toward her. Startled, Lucina quickly stepped back to flee the stranger's threatening grasp, but as she struggled to free herself, she lost her footing and fell backwards over the porch railing. Roe had managed to grab a hold of Lucina just as she lost her balance, and since Roe never loosened his grip on the startled woman, he too fell backwards over the porch rail-

18. *Napa Register*, "His Confession," January 8, 1892.

19. *Napa Register*, "Arsenic Found," February 27, 1891.

ing, falling four feet into the flowerbed below. Lucina landed on her back, cushioning the fall of her attacker. Though injured and frightened, Lucina bravely fought her assailant as he quickly pulled her to her feet and dragged her up the porch steps.²⁰

As Roe pushed Lucina into the kitchen, a drowsy Greenwood asked his wife if she was hurt, to which she answered, "Yes, I am hurt badly." After sitting Lucina in a chair and demanding her money, to which she replied she only had \$2.50 in her purse, Schmidt proceeded to bind her hands and feet with a window cord. As Roe reached into his pocket and retrieved his opiate bottle, he told the frightened woman he was going to "put her to sleep."²¹

After forcing Lucina to swallow a cup full of opiate-laced water, Roe turned his attention back to Greenwood. He wanted to make sure the woman's husband was securely bound before he commenced his assault on her. As he tightened the ropes that bound Greenwood's hands and feet, he cursed Schmidt's inadequate work. Roe's aggravation intensified as Greenwood remained conscious. He then decided to administer a dose of something more lethal to incapacitate the man. Roe reached into his pocket and pulled out another bottle. This second liquid, which Greenwood would later recall as being "sweet tasting," was chloroform.²²

As Greenwood nodded off into unconsciousness, Roe ordered Schmidt to stand watch over Greenwood as he took Lucina into a nearby bedroom. When Roe attempted to take her watch, Lucina adamantly stated she would rather die than hand it over to him. When her body was discovered the following day, her watch remained on her person, but it was without its fob.²³

Greenwood, still bound in the kitchen, could hear Roe talking in a rough manner towards his wife and voiced his objections. Roe called the older man a few foul names and ordered Schmidt to bring Greenwood into the front hall where he gagged him with a makeshift gag from a small piece of broken broom handle and a piece of fabric he had torn from one of Lucina's white skirts. Roe then returned to the front bedroom where Lucina lay helpless on the bed. Concealed behind the bedroom door, Roe manually

20. *Napa Register*, "Murder!" February 13, 1891.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

strangled Lucina with a window cord until all signs of life vanished from her body.²⁴

After ransacking the residence, Roe came away from the crime with only \$4.00 (\$1.50 Greenwood had in the house and \$2.50 from Lucina's purse). Roe also stole a gold breast pin set with emeralds, a pair of matching earrings belonging to Lucina, and Greenwood's checkbook and bankbook from the James H. Goodman & Co. Bank of Napa. Unable to find anything else of value in the Greenwood residence, Roe decided it was time to enact the second part of his plan – rob the Bank of Napa.²⁵

From the front hall, where he lay bound and gagged, Greenwood heard the men depart in his wife's buggy. He summoned the strength necessary to loosen the ropes that bound his feet with his hands still tied behind his back. Greenwood entered the bedroom and found his wife unconscious on the bed. As his hands were bound, John used his teeth to grab a hold of Lucina's clothes to pull her towards him. Before he could administer any aid to Lucina, he again passed into unconsciousness.²⁶

After stealing Lucina's horse and buggy, Roe and Schmidt made their way through the dark wintry night toward the city of Napa. They had a drink in the saloon opposite the courthouse on Brown Street, a mere six hundred feet from the Bank of Napa. After a conversation with the bartender and patrons that confirmed Greenwood was a wealthy man, Roe abandoned his plan to rob the bank to return to the Greenwood ranch for a second ransacking.

Upon entering the Greenwood residence, Roe erupted into a fit of rage at seeing Greenwood alive. He grabbed the older man and dragged him back into the hallway where he fired two .44 caliber shots, at close range, into the left side of Greenwood's head. One bullet passed downward into Greenwood's mouth, dislodging a tooth that he spit out onto the hall floor. A third shot was then fired. It ranged upwards and imbedded itself in his skull. Greenwood feigned death to prevent further injury. Roe then entered the bedroom where Lucina lay dead and fired a bullet into her skull as he stood over her.²⁷

Before leaving the house, Roe exchanged his shoes for a worn pair

24. *Napa Daily Journal*, "Carl Schmidt's Trial," May 21, 1892.

25. *Napa Register*, "Murder!" February 13, 1891.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Napa Daily Journal*, "Carl Schmidt's Trial," May 21, 1892.

of Greenwood's split-leather kip boots. He left his own blood spattered shoes behind, along with his soiled underclothes. Roe also stole a black overcoat belonging to Greenwood and some food from the kitchen pantry. After extinguishing the house lights and leaving the front door open behind them, the thieves made their final getaway via Lucina's horse and buggy.

Six years later, after his capture, Roe would reveal how he had initially planned to kill Schmidt upon their return to the Greenwood residence. He was going to remove the restraints from Lucina and Greenwood's hands and feet, and plant a pistol next to each man's dead body in an attempt to make it appear as if they had shot each other. For some unknown reason, Roe decided to spare the life of his accomplice.

The Getaway

The two men traveled together along the road leading to Sacramento. In Cordelia, they found a grove of trees where they slept undetected. Both men agreed to part ways in the morning and meet back up in Denver, Colorado later. The choice of Denver as a rendezvous point was most likely due to the city's notorious reputation. Due to a silver boom in the 1880s, the city had become a den of sin. As Clark Secrest states in his book, *Hell's Belles: Prostitution, Vice, and Crime*, Denver's vice district ranked only slightly behind San Francisco's Barbary Coast.

At 7 a.m. the following morning, Tuesday, February 10, 1891, Greenwood summoned every ounce of strength remaining in his drug-addled body as he unbound his feet and crawled from his home in search of help. He made his way down the dirt road until he reached the front gate of his property, a total of 100 yards. His neighbor, Hugh Kelly, eventually found him. Once Kelly removed the crude gag from Greenwood's mouth, the injured man, his face covered in gunpowder and dried blood, told of the atrocities that had occurred the previous night.

The two men returned to the Greenwood house. Kelly stepped into the bedroom and viewed the deceased Lucina. He told Greenwood to stay put; he would ride into Napa City, alert the county sheriff to the crime, and summon a doctor. Sheriff George S. McKenzie, accompanied by a representative of the *Napa Register*, was the first to arrive at the crime scene.

Greenwood divulged every detail of the crime, which had befallen him and his wife the previous night, to Sheriff McKenzie as a doctor dressed his wounds. The Greenwood's neighbor, Mrs. Hannah Moore, arrived to inform Sheriff McKenzie of the two mysterious men Lucina had

seen on her way to the Moore residence the previous afternoon. She recalled Lucina's detailed descriptions of the two strangers and their clothing. Other residents of the Suscol area who had seen the two strangers in the vicinity also came forward to contribute information of the men's physical descriptions. Telegraphed to law enforcement agencies and newspapers throughout the state, the descriptions read as follow:

The American is about 5 feet 9 inches in height, between 30 and 40 years of age, high cheekbones, rather narrow chin, slim build, wrinkles on his neck, dark complexion, looks like a drinking man, dark brown hair and dark mustache. He wore a gold chain with a broad, flat fob attached; also, a full suit of brown, a sack coat, black slouch felt hat with a rather high crown, and a light-colored overcoat. He is supposed to wear a ring on the third finger of the right hand, with a dark stone setting in the same. He took a pair of kip boots, well worn, No. 7, with split-leather back, and backs rough, as is often the case with split leather. He wore red socks.

The other man, who is supposed to be a Swede or German, is about 5 feet 10 inches high, 25 or 30 years old, square build, round face, small eyes, light complexion, light hair and mustache. He wore a dark-blue suit, white shirt, felt hat with low crown and round top brim, which is broad and inclined to be flat.²⁸

Law enforcement was still in its early stages in 1891, and, coupled with the limitations of sending messages via the postal service or telegraph, Sheriff McKenzie was hampered by the time it would take to alert authorities to the fleeing suspects.

On February 10, 1891, the morning following the crime, Lucina's horse was found standing at the barn door. From Cordelia, Roe had ridden the horse to the ferry launch in Vallejo where he then abandoned the animal. He took the *Solano* across the bay to San Francisco. He checked in as William Smith at the California Hotel (as discovered later by Sheriff McKenzie), shaved and changed his clothes, and then disappeared into the city.

28. *San Francisco Chronicle*, "The Napa Tragedy," February 17, 1891; *Napa Register*, "The Latest Description," February 20, 1891.

The Manhunt

Two days after his wife's death, Greenwood authorized Sheriff McKenzie to offer a reward of \$1,000 for the arrest of Lucina Greenwood's murderers. Sheriff McKenzie also contributed monies, and California governor Henry Markham donated \$300 from the state coffers.²⁹

In Napa, on Wednesday, February 11, 1891, Coroner George W. Lawrence summoned a jury and held an inquest into Lucina's death. Composed of nine prominent male Napa citizens, the Coroner's Jury ruled the cause of death as a gunshot wound to the left side of the head which occurred "about half-past 11 o'clock p.m., February 9, 1891, at her residence in Napa County."³⁰ Local physician, Dr. Edgar Haun, tested the chemicals used to drug the Greenwoods and determined them to be chloroform and arsenic. The large amount found in Lucina's stomach was enough to have killed three people, explained Dr. Haun, and Greenwood would have died if he had not vomited at some point that evening.³¹

Sheriff McKenzie alerted San Francisco Chief of Police Patrick Crowley on February 12, 1891 to the possibility the murderers of Lucina Greenwood may be in the city waiting to make their getaway on one of the many ships that daily passed in and out of the city's port. Chief Crowley also ordered his men to search every ship bound for a foreign destination before it was allowed to leave the Port of San Francisco. Within days, Sheriff McKenzie arrived in the city to conduct his own search. He firmly believed the unnamed murderers were hiding out in San Francisco and would eventually emerge to make their escape once the presence of law enforcement dissipated. McKenzie met with Captain Isaiah W. Lees of the San Francisco Police Department who supported his theory.³² Lees would eventually gain an international reputation as one of the world's leading detectives.³³ For two nights, several detectives and police officers assisted McKenzie and Lees as they searched areas of the city notorious for harbor-

29. *San Francisco Chronicle*, "The Napa Tragedy," February 17, 1891.

30. *Napa Register*, "Murder," February 13, 1891.

31. *Napa Register*, "Arsenic Found," February 27, 1891.

32. *Napa Register*, "Many Arrests," February 20, 1891.

33. William B. Secrest, *Dark and Tangled Threads of Crime: San Francisco's Famous Police Detective Isaiah W. Lees* (Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press, 2004), 320.

ing criminals but were unsuccessful in locating the murderers.³⁴

While Sheriff McKenzie searched San Francisco, male citizens of Napa were keeping an attentive watch over the county. Men carried pistols and shotguns as they traveled the desolate country roads, intent on bringing the murderers to justice. Four days after the crime, the *Napa Register* reported the entire community was willing to lynch the men who had killed Lucina Greenwood. Citizens also voice their disappointment in a criminal justice system they felt was too lenient in its punishment of thieves and murderers.³⁵

As the details of the severity of the Greenwood tragedy spread throughout the state, law enforcement officers became overzealous in their attempts at arresting the murderers. Events surrounding the Greenwood tragedy had saturated the California press and with each announcement of an increase in reward, more false sightings and arrests occurred. The Napa Sheriff's Office was besieged by telegrams, letters, and visiting sheriffs with reports of suspicious men locked in county jails throughout California.

On February 20, 1891, the day after Lucina Greenwood's funeral, the reward for the capture of her killers was raised to \$2,000. The amount included contributions from John Greenwood (\$1,200), Napa citizen Levi George (\$250), Sheriff McKenzie (\$250), and the State of California (\$300).³⁶ California Governor Markham later "signed a bill offering a reward of \$2,500."³⁷ Napa residents would continue to contribute to the reward. By May, the reward stood at the hefty sum of \$4,500.

Despite the horrific events that had transpired within his home, Greenwood continued to live there. He occasionally traveled to Napa City when officers from other counties arrived at the Sheriff's Office with photographs of possible suspects. Once his gunshot wounds healed, he began traveling to various jails in California to identify possible suspects when telegraphs arrived at the Napa County Sheriff's Office. However, all attempts proved unsuccessful.

In the months following the crime, Sheriff McKenzie's pursuit of the murderers never waned. He followed every lead that came to his atten-

34. *Napa Register*, "Many Arrests," February 20, 1891.

35. *Napa Register*, "The Verdict," February 13, 1891.

36. *Napa Register*, "\$2,000 Reward," February 20, 1891.

37. *Napa Register*, "Local Brevities," February 20, 1891.

tion, despite the opposition he endured from local officers and political officials. Many leading officers of California dismissed McKenzie's theory the murderers were now outside of the state. Although these men did not agree with McKenzie's theories, they continued to extend their services to him when he passed through their jurisdictions. When Napa residents became concerned about the funds that continued to go towards the investigation, McKenzie began paying his own travel expenses.

Arrest and Conviction of Carl Schmidt

After eleven months of false arrests, false confessions, and no leads as to the whereabouts or identities of the men who committed the Greenwood murder, the first real break in the case finally came. On Friday, January 1, 1892, while walking past a Lawrence Street saloon at 4:30 in the afternoon, Detective William Ustick of Denver, Colorado overheard a man drunkenly brag to the saloonkeeper of his participation in a murder. Detective Ustick entered the saloon and began questioning the man. The man revealed his identity as Carl Schmidt and that he had helped another man rob and murder Greenwood and his wife in Napa. He then proceeded to describe how he and his accomplice had bound and gagged the couple. The detective patiently waited while Schmidt finished his drunken confession and then placed him under arrest. After securing his prisoner in a cell of the Denver County Jail, Detective Ustick wired a telegram to the Napa Sheriff's Office. Detective Ustick later reported shortly thereafter Carl Schmidt "went violently insane" within the confines of his jail cell.³⁸

On Wednesday, January 6, after reviewing the information Detective Ustick provided in his telegram, Sheriff McKenzie requested requisition papers from Governor Markham to bring Schmidt to Napa. Assistant District Attorney Robert K. Thompson and Sheriff McKenzie arrived in Denver a week later on January 13. From within the confines of his jail cell, Schmidt made a complete confession to Sheriff McKenzie as District Attorney Thompson recorded the confession on stationary provided by the Denver sheriff.³⁹ The confession would later prove to be only half of the story as Schmidt had yet to identify his accomplice. On Saturday, January 16, 1892, with Schmidt's confession in hand, Sheriff McKenzie and District Attorney Thompson secured their prisoner and boarded the Union

38. *Napa Register*, "A Confession," January 8, 1892.

39. *Napa Register*, "He is the Man," January 15, 1892.

Pacific for their return to Napa.

The following morning, Sunday, January 17, Greenwood arrived at the Napa County Courthouse to view the latest suspect in his wife's murder. Earlier that morning, a large crowd had begun to gather in the hallway of the courthouse to catch a peak at Schmidt as he was marched through the building and into the Sheriff's Office. A reporter for the *Napa Register* would later recall how Schmidt's face "gives one the idea that he is not overbright [*sic*], in fact, that he is rather stupid."⁴⁰ In the presence of Under-sheriff George Gardner and a representative from the *Napa Register*, Sheriff McKenzie asked Schmidt to identify John Greenwood out of a group of fifteen men. He correctly identified his victim. Greenwood then positively identified Carl Schmidt as one of the men who had been present the night his wife was killed.

Schmidt was arraigned the following afternoon, Monday, January 18, 1892. His preliminary examination began that Friday morning in Justice Wilkins' court. District Attorney Henry C. Gesford represented the people. Despite his initial request to represent himself, Schmidt was appointed a defense team. The high profile case had attracted so many spectators, including citizens of neighboring counties, that many were forced to stand in the hall as the courtroom quickly became crowded.

On the morning of Friday, May 20, after twelve jurors had been chosen, the *People v. Carl Schmidt* began in Napa's Superior Court. Supreme Court Judge Daniel J. Murphy of San Francisco was chosen to preside in the case. At his trial, Schmidt admitted his participation in the robbery of the Greenwood residence but maintained his innocence in relation to the poisoning of John and Lucina Greenwood as well as the shootings. His accomplice was solely to blame for the death of Lucina and the injuries inflicted upon John, he explained, and his name was William Moore. Schmidt then requested he receive the reward once Moore was captured so that he could send it to his family in Germany. His request was denied.

Five minutes before six o'clock, on the afternoon of Saturday, May 28, 1892, the courthouse bell rang signifying the jury had reached a verdict. Carl Schmidt was found guilty of murder in the first-degree and sentenced to life imprisonment.⁴¹ A judgment of life imprisonment at San Quentin

40. *Napa Register*, "Schmidt the Man," January 22, 1892.

41. *Daily Nevada State Journal*, "The Greenwood Murderer Convicted," May 29, 1892; *Napa Daily Journal*, "Schmidt Guilty," May 29, 1892.

State Prison in Marin County, California was rendered on Thursday, June 2, 1892. The following morning, Sheriff McKenzie escorted Carl Schmidt to San Quentin where he was placed on Crank's Alley, the prison ward devoted to the mentally insane.

Arrest and Conviction of William Moore Roe

Though the arrest of William Moore Roe seemed less likely with each passing year, Sheriff McKenzie continued to pursue every lead no matter how improbable it seemed. His luck finally turned in September 1896, almost six years after the Napa tragedy. Just as his accomplice Carl Schmidt had done in Colorado, William Roe had confessed to William B. Shaug, a saloon keeper in the San Fernando Valley, he was the murderer of Lucina Greenwood and there was a reward for his arrest. Under the direction of Los Angeles County Sheriff John Burr, the saloonkeeper plied Roe with copious amounts of whiskey in order to draw more information from him. For twelve days, Shaug listened to the self-professed murderer's drunken confessions.⁴² After the deranged man left his saloon each night, Shaug would write down what he remembered from their conversations. Satisfied that Roe's confession was legitimate, Sheriff Burr sent a telegraph to Napa on Monday, September 14, 1896 informing Sheriff McKenzie that his fugitive was in Los Angeles. In his initial telegraph to Napa, Burr also asked if the reward was still available for the capture of Roe. Sheriff McKenzie promptly replied to Burr's telegram. He verified the reward was still available and gave Sheriff Burr the go-ahead to arrest the suspect at once.⁴³

On Monday, September 21, 1896, Sheriff Burr and a deputy traveled to San Fernando Valley and placed William Roe under arrest for the murder of Lucina Greenwood. Upon searching his prisoner, Sheriff Burr found a small bottle of poison and a sharpened butcher knife. Roe was taken to the Los Angeles County Jail where Sheriff Burr secured a 15-page handwritten confession in which Roe freely admitted to being solely responsible for the Greenwood murder and his accomplice, Carl Schmidt, was innocent. He revealed his identity, William Moore Roe, as well as several aliases. Roe also admitted to having killed eleven people in his lifetime; his first murder committed at the age of fourteen. Almost as an afterthought, he added to his death toll by admitting his involvement in the

42. *Los Angeles Times*, "Killed Many Men," September 23, 1896.

43. *Ibid.*

murders of fourteen Indians near the Payette River in southwestern Idaho during the Bannock Indian War of 1878.⁴⁴

On Wednesday, September 23, 1896, Sheriff Burr and William Shaug escorted their prisoner to Fresno where they met Sheriff McKenzie and Deputy Sheriff Robert Brownlee. Burr and Shaug continued on to Napa as further security. Word had begun to spread around the counties of Napa and Solano that citizens, especially the neighbors of the Greenwoods, were prepared to lynch Roe if given the chance. The party safely arrived in Napa where over one hundred Napa residents had gathered outside the courthouse in anticipation of seeing the elusive murderer. The following day, before a packed courtroom, Justice Bradford arraigned Roe.⁴⁵

Word of Roe's arrest and his lengthy criminal career spread from state to state as he awaited his trial. His family attempted to contact him after news of his arrest reached Ohio. On Wednesday, November 18, 1896, Sheriff McKenzie received a letter from Roe's estranged mother. She gave a detailed description of her son and asked Sheriff McKenzie for written verification the man imprisoned in his jail was indeed her son. She revealed she had not seen her son since he left home eighteen years ago, and she knew of two murders in Washington County, Ohio attributed to him.⁴⁶

On, Tuesday, November 10, 1896, the trial of the *People v. William Roe* commenced with Judge Murphy of San Francisco presiding. Roe admitted to the crimes he had committed against the Greenwoods and even disclosed how he had followed the investigation and the trial of Carl Schmidt in the newspapers. He openly discussed his dependency on alcohol and opiates and explained how he had suffered from insomnia for the past fourteen years. In a somber tone, Roe told the packed courtroom he wished to be hanged so he would no longer have to live with the knowledge of his crimes. Since committing his first murder at the age of fourteen, he explained, he knew something was wrong with him. He wished to have his body given over to science, and he believed a scientific investigation of his corpse would reveal abnormalities that would account for his criminal behavior.

After two weeks of trial proceedings, the jury found Roe guilty of

44. Ibid.

45. *Napa Daily Journal*, "The Right Man," September 25, 1896.

46. *Marietta Daily Leader*, "A Splendid Liar," November 16, 1896; *Napa Register*, "Thinks Moore Her Son," November 20, 1896.

murder in the first-degree on Tuesday, November 24, 1896. Defense Attorney Charles J. Beerstecher moved for a new trial on the following grounds. First, the court erred in its decisions of law arising during the course of the trial. Second, the court misdirected the jury in matters of the law. Third, the verdict was contrary to law. Fourth, the verdict was contrary to the evidence. Satisfied there had been no error committed by the court, Judge Murphy denied the motion. Before the judgment was pronounced, Roe was allowed to address the court. He commended the court on the fair trial he was granted and agreed the jury was correct in returning a guilty verdict. People were surprised both by how intelligently Roe addressed the court and by his mellifluous voice. Reporters later commented his calm demeanor, respectable attire, and ability to recite poetry by Keats proved he was not an ordinary criminal.

Despite the overwhelming consensus among the community of Napa that Roe should pay for his crimes with his life, the twelve-man jury waived its right to impose a sentence. As the current law designated, a conviction of first-degree murder was punishable by either death or life imprisonment. Newspaper reporters theorized Roe would be hanged at San Quentin State Prison, as outlined in the Penal Code. Due to the overwhelming outcry for vengeance by the Napa community and the notoriety of the case throughout the West, explained Judge Murphy, Sheriff McKenzie would be granted the responsibility of executing Roe within the walls or yard of the county jail. He then signed the death warrant, fixing the date and time of execution for Friday, January 15, 1897 at 11 a.m. As it would be Sheriff McKenzie's first execution, he took every precaution to ensure an expedient and successful hanging.⁴⁷

While awaiting his execution, Roe devised various ways to escape his fate. First, he somehow managed to steal the cell keys from prisoner guard Wall Kennedy but was quickly thwarted by another inmate who revealed the theft. Shortly thereafter Roe asked an inmate, who had been entrusted to deliver meals to the jail from the restaurant across the street, to smuggle in a pistol from Sheriff McKenzie's office. Roe hid the small pistol in the trap of the water closet in his cell while he devised a plan to shoot Wall Kennedy. From his cell window, Roe watched the routines of various law enforcement officers as they hitched their horses outside of the court-

47. *Napa Register*, "Murderer Roe: The Date Fixed for His Execution," November 27, 1896; *San Francisco Call*, "Thank You, Said Murderer Roe," November 25, 1896; *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Moore Will Hang at San Quentin," November 23, 1896.

house. After making his escape, Roe planned to steal a horse and ride to the ferry launch in Vallejo. By the time Roe had masterminded this second escape plan, the pistol had slipped down the pipes of the water closet before he could retrieve it. His third, and most desperate plan, involved the construction of a long paper tube that he intended to use to direct gas from the burner above his cell door into his cell for asphyxiating himself. Before Roe could test the paper tube, a deathwatch was placed on him until the day of execution. Authorities were unaware of his suicidal plans; they were simply ensuring he would not escape his execution. The pistol and paper tube went undiscovered until the following year.⁴⁸

In early December, Sheriff McKenzie began preparations for Roe's execution. He ordered the construction of an enclosure within the rear courtyard of the courthouse square, inside of which the scaffold would be erected against the back wall of the county jail. Officers retrieved the dismantled scaffold from the courthouse attic. The 16 by 16 foot scaffold had been constructed in 1883 to hang convicted murderer John Murbach before his sentence was commuted to life in prison. It had also been painted a grim gray.⁴⁹

The enclosure was built of corrugated sheet-iron, measured 34 by 40 feet, and was 16-feet high to hide the scaffold from the inevitable gawking public. A canvas was spread over the top beams of the scaffold to further conceal it from the adjacent buildings on Coombs Street. A space around the scaffold was fenced in by ropes and reserved for officers and physicians. To the north and west of the enclosure were tiers of steps on which the spectators would stand. The upper step on the west tier was reserved for newspaper reporters and a small desk was placed nearby for their use. In the back of the scaffold was a small closet in which three deputy sheriffs would be stationed to cut three ropes, one of which would release the trap. The latch which held the trap was attached to a heavy iron weight by a rope which passed over a pulley. One of the three ropes that would be cut held up this weight. The cutting of the rope released the weight, which unattached the trap, and as the trap fell, the rope held it against the wall,

48. *Napa Daily Journal*, "A Reminder of Roe," March 15, 1898; *Napa Daily Journal*, "Roe's Ghost Walks," October 9, 1898.

49. *Los Angeles Times*, "Gallows Has Place in History – But No Home," August 31, 1979.

preventing it from swinging against the body.⁵⁰

Sheriff McKenzie obtained the necessary rope and a black hood from the executioner at San Quentin State Prison. A wooden coffin, provided by coroner/mortician Daniel S. Kyser, was placed directly below the trapdoor for the removal of the corpse. Four hundred invitations to the execution, personally signed by Sheriff McKenzie, were sent out to prominent male citizens of Napa County as well as law enforcement officers and newspaper reporters from other counties. Sheriff McKenzie informed the public via the *Napa Daily Journal* that admittance into the execution would not be granted without an invitation bearing the attendee's name.⁵¹

The Execution

On the morning of January 15, 1897, William Moore Roe woke at half past seven and ate a hearty breakfast while a crowd of people formed outside the courthouse to view the last public hanging of Napa County. As a reporter for the *Napa Daily Journal* later wrote, "the city has not had such a lively appearance since election day." Uninvited men and women crowded into nearby two-story buildings on Brown Street in an attempt to view the execution from a window. Others climbed fire escapes to reach higher vantage points from building rooftops. Although the Penal Code clearly stated underage persons could not view an execution, Napa law enforcement was too overwhelmed that day to pull all the young boys from the tall oak trees that dotted the landscape around the courthouse.⁵² On this day, it appeared as though the hands of time had reversed and the community of Napa was reenacting an outdated form of justice.

At exactly 11 a.m., Deputy Sheriffs Rednall and Turner opened the doors into the enclosure. Deputy Sheriff Benjamin Grauss collected the passes while Marshall Chaigneau and Constable Allen escorted the

50. *Los Angeles Daily Times*, "Roe Stretches Rope," January 16, 1897; *Napa Daily Journal*, "Expiation," January 16, 1897; *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Roe Calmly Awaits Death," January 15, 1897.

51. *Napa Daily Journal*, "Preparing for the Execution," January 12, 1897.

52. *Napa Daily Journal*, "Expiation," January 16, 1897.



Gallows used to hang William Moore Roe on January 15, 1897, remain on permanent exhibit at the Napa County Sheriff's Department. Photo courtesy of Tobi Shields.

spectators to the tiers of steps on which they would stand during the execution. Eleven physicians took their places below the scaffold. Numerous newspapermen and visiting sheriffs gathered in front of the structure to await the arrival of the prisoner.

Roe sat in the corridor of the jail, outside of his cell, as he awaited his time of execution. He freely chatted with fellow prisoners and jail staff as he smoked a cigar. When Undersheriff Brownlee read Roe the death warrant, he calmly stated, "That's alright", walked into his cell, put on his coat, and arranged his toilet. He then walked back into the hallway where officers began to secure the straps that would bind his wrists to his thighs. As Roe was marched to the scaffold at 11:15 a.m., he continued to smoke his cigar but a "manner of uneasiness" began to show in his demeanor.⁵³

Sheriff McKenzie, Undersheriff Brownlee, prison guard Wall Kennedy, Salvation Army Captain Kettle, and several deputy sheriffs escorted

53. Ibid.

Roe onto the scaffold. After asking the audience to be silent, Sheriff McKenzie asked Roe if he had any statement he wished to make. Roe replied he had none, except he would like to thank the officers for the kind way in which they had treated him during his incarceration. He asked Sheriff McKenzie to retrieve a letter from inside his coat pocket he wrote to prison guard Wall Kennedy. Within this letter, Roe revealed his various plans to escape and how he had intended to commit suicide until Sheriff McKenzie ordered him placed under a deathwatch. He also disclosed the whereabouts of the pistol he had procured while inside the jail and the paper tube he had concealed in the ceiling.⁵⁴

Roe continued to smoke his cigar until the time came to place the noose around his neck. At this point, his hands began to tremble as he discarded his cigar. After tightening the rope around his prisoner's neck, Sheriff McKenzie placed the black hood from San Quentin over Roe's head as Captain Kettle offered a prayer. Sheriff McKenzie lifted his right arm, and at the end of the prayer, he gave the three deputies behind the scaffold the signal to cut the rope. As Roe's body dropped through the trapdoor at lightning speed, his neck was snapped, causing a clean break between the third and fourth vertebrae. The rope did not rebound after the drop as it had been properly stretched prior to the execution. The body swayed gently underneath the trap, without a sign of struggle, as the execution staff descended the scaffold and took their places around the body for the final pronouncement of death.

After nineteen minutes, local physician and surgeon Edwin Z. Hennessey officially pronounced William Moore Roe dead at 11:50 a.m. Normally the coroner would record a death, which occurred in the county; this was the one instance when that procedure was not followed. Professional photographer H. H. Blakesly of St. Helena's Elite Studio was allowed to photograph the scene as Sheriff McKenzie held a knife to the rope (the knife had actually belonged to Roe and was confiscated by Sheriff Burr upon his arrest of Roe in Shaug's San Fernando Valley saloon). Spectators observed the officers placing the corpse in the wooden coffin that had been directly below the trapdoor. The hanging rope was then cut into small pieces and distributed to the spectators as souvenirs. Sheriff McKenzie took possession of the noose. Coroner Kyser took possession of the body and it

54. *Napa Daily Journal*, "A Reminder of Roe," March 15, 1898.

was transferred to his funeral parlor in the Williams Block on Main Street.⁵⁵

The following morning, Dr. Hennessey accompanied the crate containing Roe's coffin to the College of Physicians and Surgeons in San Francisco where it was dissected. Roe had been correct in his self-assessment. After careful analysis and measurements of Roe's entire body, it was revealed to be of abnormal development on the right side, including the internal organs. The left side of the body also showed a lack of development, but to a lesser degree. Measurements further revealed the left side of his head was developed far more than the right side. The depression above his left temple was far greater than normal, leading the physicians to speculate that it may have affected his brain. The brain was removed from the skull and weighed; the left side of his brain was found to be four ounces lighter than the right side. Due to the reduced weight of the brain, Hennessey determined Roe was indeed "mentally deficient."⁵⁶

After the dissection, Roe's corpse was returned to Napa City. On January 8, 1898, the *Napa Daily Journal* informed the community that for the past six months the bones of William Roe had been bleaching atop the roof of the Williams Block, which housed Coroner Kyser's funeral home and furniture store. Dr. Hennessey later cleaned and articulated the skeleton for his own anatomical collection. It is unclear whether this actually occurred. The skeleton was eventually given to the Napa Valley Unified School District to be used as an instructional aid in biology classes. The last reported accounting of the skeleton was in the 1960s. As of this writing, its whereabouts are unknown.⁵⁷

Remnants of History

Within a year after the execution, the Napa County Courthouse was plagued by a series of events attributed to William Roe. A year after the execution, jailer Wall Kennedy claimed to hear sounds resembling a barefooted person walking across the floor coming from the cell Roe had occupied during his last days. Kennedy adamantly professed his belief Roe haunted the jail to a reporter of the *Napa Register*. To this day, employees of the Napa County Courthouse report strange paranormal occurrences.

55. *Napa Daily Journal*, "Expiation," January 16, 1897.

56. *Napa Daily Journal*, "Roe's Body Dissected," January 20, 1897.

57. Michael Chegwyn, "A Killing Too Many," *True West*, November 1991, 28-29; *Napa Register*, "Slayer of Eight Was Last Man Hanged at Courthouse in 1897," July 24, 1956.

Female office personnel relate stories of hearing a man behind them say, "What are you doing?" when they remain alone in the office during the evening. When they turn around, no one is there. Other strange events within the building have been attributed to the ghost of William Roe although no one wants to officially go on record due to fear of repercussions from their superiors.⁵⁸

Roe also directly contributed to the plumbing problems, which plagued the building in the year following his execution. The pistol he had secured while in jail had lodged itself in the pipes causing a series of overflows. It went undetected until March 1898 when plumbers discovered the rusted weapon in the trap. Several chambers of the small bull dog type pistol were loaded. Sheriff McKenzie was most likely aware of what was causing the plumbing problems since Roe had admitted in his letter to Wall Kennedy that he had stashed a pistol stolen from the jailhouse office in the water closet of his cell. Once the pistol was discovered, Sheriff McKenzie shared this information with the public in an article for the *Napa Register*. Whether he received any criticism from the community is unknown.⁵⁹

The hanging of Roe also left indelible scars on various citizens of Napa County. Surviving victim John Greenwood remained in the home that he once shared with his beloved wife, Lucina, until his death in 1912. As homage to his late wife, Greenwood had her buggy dismantled and reconstructed in the attic of the house where he lived out his last years. He died at the age of 82 and was interred alongside his wife in the Greenwood family plot at Tulocay Cemetery in Napa.

As the generation who witnessed the case of the *People v. William Roe* passed away so did the historical significance of the county's last execution and the remaining artifacts. In July 1979, while clearing the courthouse attic for remodeling, workers discovered the dismantled scaffold. Surprised by the finding, the county placed the gallows on exhibit at the Napa Town and Country Fair that summer. It appears as though the discovery of the scaffold sparked a renewed interest in the case as items began to resurface from various sources. The hood was later discovered in a tattered paper bag at the Napa County Historical Society. Descendants of the lawmen who brought Roe to

58. Anonymous, interview by author, Napa, CA, January 8, 2008. The name of interviewee is withheld by mutual agreement; *Napa Daily Journal*, "Roe's Ghost Walks," October 9, 1898.

59. *Napa Daily Journal*, "A Reminder of Roe," March 15, 1898.

justice contributed other items long forgotten in their attics. For the next fifteen to twenty years, these items were stored in paper bags and



carelessly passed between sheriff department personnel until Captain Gene Lyerla created a museum in the newly constructed Napa County Sheriff's Department in 2001 to house such artifacts.⁶⁰

History was further altered in 1990 when the Napa County Planning Commission allowed the Greenwood house to be relocated across the highway to accommodate the construction of a medical insurance billing company. Money trumped history as local historian Michael Chegwyn pointed out in a scathing letter he wrote to the editor of the *Napa Register*. After correcting several inaccuracies that had been perpetuated by armchair historians throughout the last thirty years, Chegwyn reminded the public of the historical significance of the case – the last public execution of the county. He also claimed it was the last for the state. In his argument against relocating the Victorian home, he wrote:

The soul of this county rests in its history and one can no more take a venerable structure such as the 110-year-old

60. *Los Angeles Times*, "Gallows Has Place in History – But No Home," August 31, 1979; *Napa Register*, "Napa's Last Gallows Found in Courthouse," July 5, 1979.

Greenwood house from its setting without diminishing it than one can rip out a tree by its roots and expect it to live. As the [n]ative Americans who once freely roamed this valley understood places, ancestors, and those now living are part of the same fabric and, if separated, they cannot stand alone.⁶¹

Although local historians occasionally publish “anniversary” articles detailing the hanging of William Roe, they consistently fail to address its historical significance. This incident is an example of how public involvement and opinion influenced the jury and judge to hand down a sentence of death and order the local sheriff to conduct the execution in defiance of state law. Because this brutal crime was committed within Napa, the populace and the authorities believed it should also be the place where justice would finally be served. Important details of the case disappeared from the collective memory as the generation who had witnessed the execution passed away. Further loss accrued as county and city commissioned historiographies omitted the execution from the public record, and local agencies destroyed documents to free up office space. Gory details of the murder and an almost folkloric depiction of Roe as another “Billy the Kid” took precedence in order to entertain the public.⁶² Articles sensationalizing the crime and execution have appeared in local publications, but all fail to place the events in a historic context or address the historical significance of the execution. Local authors resurrect the case during the Halloween season for local publications as a means of injecting the collective memory with stories of possible hauntings. While William Roe may remain in the collective memory of the Napa public as the last man hanged in the county, ongoing research shows his case is significant as it directly demonstrates the limited resources available to law enforcement and the changing enforcement of California’s death penalty.

61. *The Napa Register*, “History Murdered,” August 31, 1990.

62. *Napa Valley Register*, “The End of the Rope,” January 13, 1997.