

## **Truckee's Notorious Beginnings**

By Judy DePuy

Over a 20 year period (1867-1887) Truckee was beset by an ill-defined, ever-changing group of ruffians. Like the towns of Tombstone and Virginia City, hoodlums, vandals, pimps, gamblers and con men drifted through the area looking for a safe haven and a place to make their next buck.

The finding of gold and silver made heading to the young western territories very attractive. The demand for lumber for the Virginia City mines and Reno's exponential growth brought thousands of men to the area. Truckee seemed to be the perfect place for the undesirables with the lumber mills running at full speed, the many saloons and poker parlors, and the largest red light district in the Sierras.

There was a clear need for law and order. Truckee attempted to restore order as early as the 1860s with the hiring of Steve Venard. He was Truckee's first deputy sheriff and known as one of the West's greatest lawmen. A. Andrus, the first elected constable in Truckee (elected September 1867) served only one term before resigning in haste. By this time Truckee had 173 buildings, 25 of which were saloons. Life had become lively and Truckee needed a much tougher law-enforcement man.

To regain control of their town, some Truckee citizens decided on aggressive vigilantism to deal with the main street gunplay and uncontrolled recklessness. The main vigilante group was the "601s" whose main goal was to run anyone they deemed to be 'undesirable' out of town. The "Caucasian League", another set of vigilantes, was a secret anti-Chinese group who sought to rid the town of lower-paid Chinese workers (many who decided to make Truckee their home after helping to build the transcontinental railroad). These groups would take the law into their own hands and used their own methods of dealing with the various people they did not want in town.

Over the years, the 601 vigilantes broke into Truckee's jail, removing the prisoners for tar-and-feather parties at Hooligan Rocks (where Safeway is today on Donner Pass Road). They would then put them on the train to San Francisco telling them to "never come back".

In early 1868 Jacob Teeter took the position of constable to help maintain law and order over the vast eastern end of Nevada County. He had a strong sense of obeying the law and was against anyone taking the law into their own hands. Teeter is famously known for preferring a pick handle over a gun that was "not apt to misfire and quicker to reload". He also boasted that no one "took anyone from his jail".

### **Early Truckee Criminals**

Teeter's reputation was solidified by many prominent arrests:

- Teeter arrested a man who allegedly committed Truckee's first murder, Charles Hamilton, on Dec. 27, 1867. Seven years later Teeter solved the crime when Johnny Morton Blair, member of a gang of outlaws led by "Tarantula Bill" told Teeter - after extensive questioning - that Tarantula Bill had killed Hamilton. Tarantula Bill's gang of desperados was known to terrorize, rob, and murder citizens and establishments at will.
- December 1868, Teeter arrested a man named Breeding in the nearby settlement of Boca after Breeding murdered Luther Leachman over a \$25 carpentry work dispute, stabbing him in the chest.
- September 1887, Constable Teeter confronted 3 men suspected of robbing a town merchant of money and merchandise. Teeter surprised the robbers near the RR tracks, behind the sawmill, where they were dividing up the loot. Teeter approached with his three-foot hardwood pick

handle in hand. The largest man drew a revolver but before he could fire, Teeter struck the gunman across the forehead and then came a decisive blow from the constable's club. Teeter easily captured the other suspects and a crowd cheered at the single-handed capture of all 3 suspects. He then marched them to the stone jail on Jibboom Street.

### **Later Day Truckee Criminals**

Smaller cities and towns were important to gangsters and mobsters and were used as a refuge and safe harbor providing relaxation and entertainment. Truckee was considered a safe haven for gangsters during the Prohibition years of 1920s-1930s. Prostitution, gambling and bootlegging thrived in Truckee.

Lester "Baby Face" Nelson arrived in Reno in 1932 seeking such a haven. He was an unusual figure in the realm of auto bandits, being a family man with a wife and two kids. Nelson was nicknamed "Baby Face" due to his youthful appearance and small stature. He passed through Truckee on his way to the San Francisco Bay Area where he worked as a bootlegger. When he came through Truckee he voluntarily asked for a warm place to sleep. The sheriff accommodated him, putting him up in the Truckee jail. It is assumed that the sheriff did not know who he was at the time. During the summer of 1934, Nelson was eluding a nationwide dragnet, hiding out in Northern California, Reno and the Lake Tahoe area. Nelson was fatally shot by FBI agents on November 27, 1934.

Famous kidnaper, George Kelly Barnes, aka "Machine Gun Kelly" (whose nickname came from his favorite weapon, a Thompson submachine gun) came to Truckee. During the Prohibition era Kelly worked as a bootlegger. After several run-ins with Memphis police, Kelly headed west with his girlfriend. Rumor has it that he may have been running low on bullets and blindfolds when he was caught shoplifting at the Truckee Variety Store. Both he and his gang did a short stint at the Truckee jail.

On a cold, April night in 1940, Ma Spinelli, along with her daughter with 2 young sons and 3 men, were stranded in their car outside Truckee. Called the "The Duchess" by her associates, Ma and her gang had been on a rampage of theft and murder in California when Highway Patrolman, Art Barrett, found them. Since Truckee's hotels were full and Patrolman Barret took pity, he helped them find a hotel room and drove them to Reno. When he got back to Truckee he received a message that the folks he had helped were the infamous Ma Spinelli gang. He rushed back to Reno and convinced them to return to Truckee to clear up some car registration irregularities. Patrolman Barrett safely put them into the Truckee jail where they stayed until reinforcements could arrive. Ma Spinelli is known as the first woman executed in San Quentin's gas chamber.

For more stories please visit Truckee's Historic Old Jail built in 1875 and used until 1964 and experience what it was like to be incarcerated in the Wild West.

### **Sidebars:**

- The Old Jail is open Truckee Thursdays 5-9 pm starting in mid-June and weekends from 10-4 starting Memorial Day weekend and ending on Labor Day. Located at 10142 Jibboom Street, Old Town Truckee.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

**About the author:**

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