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William L. Lang

Montana Historical Society

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Montana's Righteous Hangmen: The Vigilantes in Action. By Lew L. Callaway. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. Photographs. appendices, index. xxii + 233 pp. \$12.95.

The image of a hastily gathered *posse comitatus* riding out of a fearfully paralyzed western town to administer swift and violent justice to a band of desperadoes is as firmly etched in the American mind as nearly any popular western scene. In one violent portrait, the remoteness of the frontier from civilization, the failure of established institutions, and the necessity of good men to protect their families and property are capsulized. The fascination with vigilantes is bred of the excitement of its violent solution and the inherent mystery behind it all. What drove men to take the law under their own jurisdiction, and how did they do it?

Lew L. Callaway, who immigrated to Montana at the age of two in 1871 and was later appointed Chief Justice of the Montana Supreme Court, became entranced with the subject of Montana's famous vigilantes. Callaway, whose father was a business associate of one of the key vigilante leaders, talked with many participants and with others who knew the inner

history of these historic extralegal activities in the period 1863 to 1865. First published as newspaper articles and later collected in the limited circulation publication *Two True Tales of the Wild West* (1973), Callaway's story of Montana's hangmen corrects errors contained in other accounts and introduces new material.

Of most importance to historians, Callaway's treatment of the Montana vigilantes establishes that membership and participation in the movement was much larger and broader than previously portrayed. Part of this misconception was the result of an understandable uneasiness on the part of the vigilantes to have their distasteful deeds fully described and themselves clearly identified. But, as Callaway's account explains, it was the general support the vigilantes received from the populace that genuinely makes the vigilante movement in Montana less conspiratorial than popular versions would have it.

Callaway's father's friendship with James Williams, the reticent but demonstrably key individual in the vigilante organization, provided the author with crucial new information. The result is the story of the vigilantes centered around the biographies of two prime actors in the drama: Captain James Williams, vigilante leader; and Joseph Alfred Slade, an outrageous character who defied the vigilantes and paid the ultimate price.

The general outline of events will be familiar to readers of Thomas Dimsdale's *Vigilantes of Montana*, N. P. Langford's *Vigilante Days and Ways*, and Hoffman Birney's *Vigilantes*. Henry Plummer's gang, the dastardly George Ives, the heroics of Wilbur Fisk Sanders, the use of the cryptic 3-7-77 warning, and more are in Callaway's story.

Lew L. Callaway, Jr., son of the author and editor of this volume, has left his father's text intact. But in this decision there is weakness as well as strength. Editorial notes could provide readers with missing information about connections between Williams and the rest of the vigilantes and important historical relationships between events described in the vigilante story and the general development of Montana. Instead, the Callaway account tells a story of the

vigilantes, stopping far short of analyzing the actions of Montana's vigilantes. This book is more than a rehash of the well-known events, but readers should not expect answers to those difficult questions of motive and ultimate result.

WILLIAM L. LANG
Montana Historical Society
Helena, Montana