

One foot in the past

Relics and reality in a legend of the American West

By Laura J. Arata

I stood in front of the museum display case and snapped a picture of the severed skeleton foot placed neatly in its glass globe. The relic belonged to a man named George Lane, better-known as “Clubfoot George.” The rest of him was still buried in a grave above town, next to four other men who died side by side along with him on January 14, 1864, at the end of ropes tossed over the beam of a then-unfinished building.

The rope burns still visible on the beam designated this space The Hangman’s Building. The accusation of being part of a vicious gang of road agents – never proved – condemned Lane and dozens of others, without legal trial or conviction, to immortality as part of the legendary Wild West. The graves, the building and Lane’s foot had been drawing tourists to Virginia City, Montana, for more than a century. All of these relics became part of my journey as a historian.

By the time I saw it for the first time in 2007, Lane’s foot had collectively spent much more time above-ground than beneath it. His initial burial had

been whole and intended for obscurity. There were few who missed George Lane in 1864, when he was one little-known resident of an isolated gold-rush camp on a far-flung frontier. His executioners probably did not count on his becoming central in their legend. He was one of many, less notorious than others, buried in an unmarked grave that no one planned to visit, and neither his executioners nor history might have remembered much of anything, if not for Lane’s one memorable characteristic.

Even contemporaries called him “Clubfoot George.” If not much else about George Lane was remarkable, his deformity certainly marked him. It was a passing reference until 1907, when Virginia City Mayor James G. Walker recruited a former vigilante and several town residents armed with shovels in an effort to definitively identify the road agents buried above town.

The general location was known, but since Lane and the men lynched beside him (Boone Helm, Haze Lyons, Frank Parish and Jack Gallagher) died accused of being outlaws, no one thought it

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 of life in the
MINING CAMPS of the FAR WEST,
 — BY —
PROF. THOMAS J. DIMSDALE.
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Montana Post advertisement for Thomas J. Dimsdale’s book *The Vigilantes of Montana*, October 6, 1866.



Grave markers of the 1864 lynching victims on display at the Virginia City Museum.



Henry Plummer
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necessary to mark their graves; however, as the dawn of a new century fostered nostalgia for the Wild West of the frontier past, tourists demanded to know at which

graves they paid curiosity, if not respects. Tales of vigilantes and road agents became not lurid and dangerous but nostalgic and exciting. Such extraordinary history could not be expected to lie peacefully in indistinguishable graves.

According to popular legend, the vigilantes wrested order from a recalcitrant wilderness that civilization might follow. In the often chaotic world of the gold camps, prosperity meant nothing without security. Bannack and Virginia City, the first boomtowns

in what became Montana Territory, exploded into existence burdened with both. In a series of revelations that seemed at once shocking and routine, some believed the only semblance of law for miles – Sheriff Henry Plummer – was the leader of a vicious band of bloodthirsty criminals.

These highly organized and openly murderous road agents threatened everything the boomtowns hoped to become: modern and civilized enough to attract business, investment, and large, stable populations of respectable residents. So to break the chokehold of the road agents on safety and security, a group of self-identified vigilantes organized, swore an oath and set about eliminating a menace to the societies they hoped to create.

The crimes had to be monumental in order to justify their

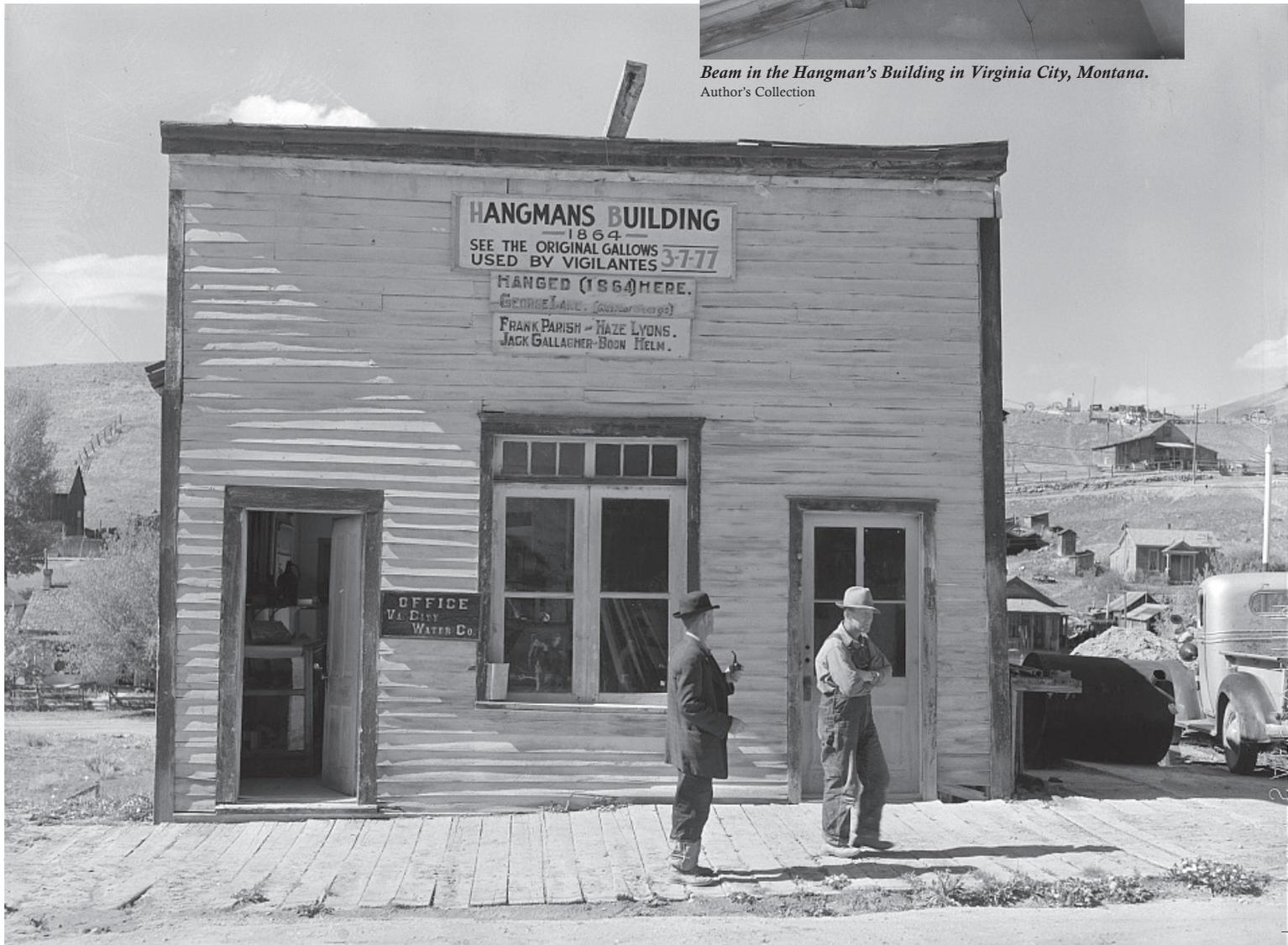
actions. On January 10, 1864, the vigilantes lynched Henry Plummer (and two deputies) on his own gallows in Bannack. Four days later, the infamous quintuple hanging in Virginia City put more deputies into the grave, alongside Clubfoot George, whom they accused merely of being a “messenger” during a previous execution which Plummer did not arrive to stop. Thirty-seven days later, at least 22 men were dead in what was, to that point, the bloodiest single episode of lynching in American history. It would not be remembered in those terms. Instead, nostalgia shaped how the vigilantes were memorialized.

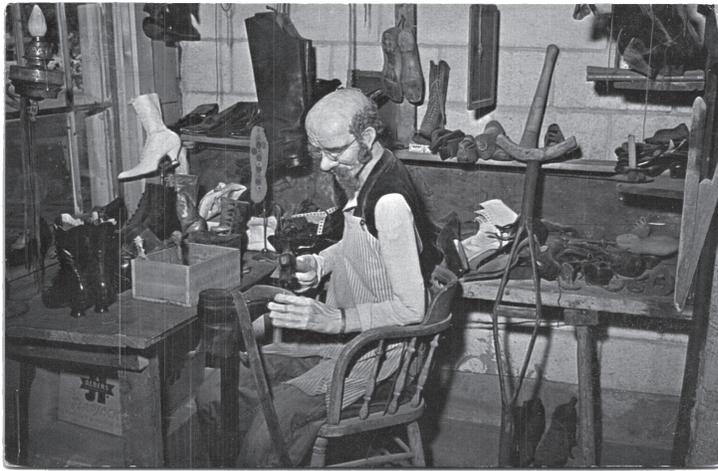
1939 photograph by Arthur Rothstein of Virginia City's Hangman's Building. Note Sarah Bickford's signage, roughly eight years after Bickford's death, while her children still owned and operated the water company. The influence on vigilante tourism is clear.

Farm Securities Administration/Library of Congress



Beam in the Hangman's Building in Virginia City, Montana.
Author's Collection





1970s Virginia City postcard depicting a likeness of "Clubfoot George." The back of the card reads: "Clubfoot George, cobbler by trade – member of the Plummer gang by choice." Editor's Collection



"Clubfoot" George's foot, May 2007. Author's Collection

In a tale as old as (Wild West) time, the railroad never arrived and the modern, progressive place that Virginia City hoped to become never materialized – what did was a reified version of history that made for good Wild West tourism. The pieces of the Wild West that were put on display added an important lure of authenticity to the story. Ironically, while the vigilantes had set out to make the

territory "safe" for settlement, it was the legendary lawlessness and the aura of authenticity created by decline that took hold in memory and imagination. Civility would have made for boring tourism.

Fortuitously, Virginia City became just the right kind of ghost town. After serving a decade as territorial capital from 1865-75, it was eclipsed in both population and investment by Helena.

By 1885 when the first comprehensive volume on the territory, Michael A. Leeson's massive *History of Montana* appeared, a contemporary insisted that "Virginia City has been spoken of as dead, and crooning over the embers of departed glory."

Just such embers held the glow of the Wild West, a still-developing rhetorical conception that crystallized around anxiety over what it meant that the

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Diorama of the 1864 lynching in Virginia City, Montana, June 2013. Laura J. Arata

frontier had “closed” in 1890. Viewed through the nostalgic lens of what the frontier was supposed to have been, and laced with the timeless fear that those who commit crimes might not be brought to “justice,” visitors to Virginia City could hope to recall the principles of self-sufficiency, strength, and bravery that created the world of the frontier and men like the vigilantes.

George Lane’s foot was a literal and metaphoric step in developing such tourism, but it was not the first road-agent relic to go on display. That honor went, in fact, to Henry Plummer’s skull, which by one account was liberated from the rest of his mortal body and stood sentinel on a shelf over a bar in Bannack until the entire establishment was tragically reduced to ashes.

In another moment, Lane might not have been remembered at all. Even his death had little bearing on the story – he was easily captured and had not even been difficult to execute. He was not one of the men the vigilantes spent days tracking through bitter cold and misinformation. He wasn’t even defiant in his final moments. Plummer hadn’t been hard to find either, but he bore the weight of being a lynchpin in the vigilante story – as far as there were limited ways of enforcing the law in the fledgling territory, Plummer *was* the law.

While the veracity of his actual complicity in subverting it has come into

question over the years (on these matters I highly recommend Frederick Allen’s *A Decent, Orderly Lynching*), at least we know he was definitely guilty of hiring bad deputies, including at least two who had openly committed multiple murders in broad daylight.

George Lane wasn’t one of those deputies. He wasn’t obviously guilty of anything and is one of those characters in the story about whom it is hard not to feel guilt. In 1864, he was working (you can’t make this up) as a cobbler in a Virginia City store. He was executed for the supposed crime of being a messenger. That even the most thorough chroniclers of the day had little to say regarding details of his involvement is probably telling that few, if any, existed. Beyond why he was lynched, the *how* of his death is brutal even in second-hand form.

He limped to the rope intended for him sobbing and pleading his innocence. “Your dealings with me have been right,” one acquaintance admitted when asked to speak to Lane’s character, but he declined to intervene on the grounds of not knowing what else he might have done. Lane asked for a priest; asked the crowd to pray with him on his knees. Helped onto a makeshift drop, he was so scared he jumped, then spent several agonizing minutes slowly strangling at the end of a too-long rope, flailing his “good foot” against the floor in an effort to ease the choking. He would have been relegated

to obscurity as one of the vigilantes’ most pathetic and sympathetic victims – were it not for the role his other foot came to play four decades later.

When Mayor James G. Walker set out to settle a decades-old disagreement about which road agent was buried where in Virginia City’s cemetery, he was armed only with shovels, a printed firsthand account (Thomas Dimsdale’s instant classic, *The Vigilantes of Montana*, which first appeared in 1865, remains in print, and from which many of the descriptions of Lane’s execution are drawn) and an elderly but sharp vigilante. The graves were easy enough to find, but decades-dead road agents all looked pretty much the same.

It was up to the bones to tell the story – and the most identifiable were those of George Lane’s clubfoot. Thus, more than 40 years after his death, a questionable outlaw with an at-best marginal role in the events became the most identifiable road agent relic when, with calm precision and presumably a sharp knife, Walker removed the foot for posterity and a place in his curio cabinet in the Virginia City court house. Lane’s foot remained on display at the Thompson-Hickman Museum for 110 years, until 2017. (It was not reburied with the rest of his body; family members had it

cremated and scattered the ashes at his grave. The original globe now holds a 3-D printed replica).

It is one of the deepest ironies of this history that in order to make the vigilantes tourism-friendly, it was necessary to remove much of the “terror” from these episodes – but lynching by any definition could not be free from terror. The frequency with which it occurred in the American South during the same time period was an abhorrent, visible manifestation of cruel inequalities; that it could be so easily made nostalgic in the context of the American West raises thorny questions.

The often unspoken justification that even the worst outlaws could also be cast as pioneers requires a delicate balancing act that has largely been possible because, at least in legend, race was considered absent from the vigilante story. While most of the men lynched as road agents would today be considered “white,” the whole story is of course more complicated. These events were never “race neutral.”

The day after lynching Henry Plummer, the vigilantes set out to “interrogate” José Pizantia, who had not been accused of any crimes and was not suspected of being a road agent. He did bear the distinction of being the only Mexican resident of Bannack and he made the colossal mistake of refusing to surrender and shooting two of the vigilantes as they descended on his cabin. In response, the vigilantes retrieved a mountain howitzer, shelled Pizantia’s cabin until it collapsed, dragged him outside by the neck and hauled him – still breathing – up a pole.

They stood around and fired more than a hundred shots into his body before pitching the corpse into the burning remains of his cabin. The following morning, legend has it, several town prostitutes were caught in the act of panning out the ashes in a search for gold they did not find. The fact that the vigilantes only committed one racially distinctive murder does not absolve them of it, or any others.

But race enters this story in other, more nuanced ways, such as a known

instance when a Black man voted in an early miner’s trial. According to some accounts, a Black boy was sent to retrieve the rope used to hang Henry Plummer. Then there is Sarah Bickford, who helped preserve the legend. A Black woman born in slavery in east Tennessee, she arrived in Virginia City in 1871, residing there until her death in 1931. In the course of her life she became the first Black female public utilities owner in the nation, managing the Virginia City Water Company. In 1914, she saved the deteriorating Hangman’s Building by making it her business office and opening it up for tourists.

It was Bickford who installed signage denoting that “Clubfoot George” Lane

and four others were “Hanged Here in 1864.” A Black woman promoting tourism at the site of a lynching may throw a wrench into popular notions of what the Wild West was supposed to have been – but it shouldn’t.

The West was always a complicated place defined by the possibility that improbable dreams might manifest there. Recognizing contradiction and nuance in these tales of the Wild West is more than a means of understanding the heritage of the frontier in all its complexity; it reflects the reality that the truth of the past is just as interesting and worth telling as the legends.

And the vigilantes believed, after all, that they were helping the territory take a step forward.



Sarah Bickford's desk. Author's Collection



The one confirmed photograph of Sarah Bickford. Courtesy Thompson-Hickman Madison County Library, photograph by Laura Arata

Interior of Sarah Bickford's office. Author's Collection