

GEORGIA JEFFRIES

The Last Gun of Tiburcio Vasquez

Whose California?

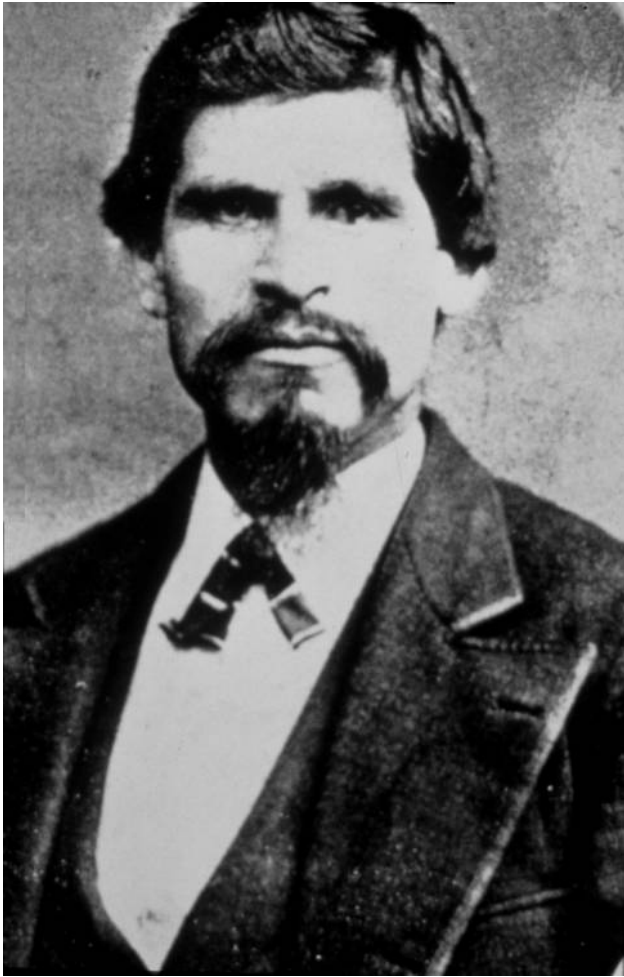
The ancient rifle of a long-dead Californian arrived without warning. Unsolicited. Uninvited. A surprise bequest from an elder cousin who earned his master's in history from Claremont College and took pride in his role as the family archivist. The weapon, empty of shells and unexpectedly elegant, is sequestered in our upstairs closet. To protect the oak stock and copper case, it came cradled in soft white bunting, which we have unwrapped only a handful of times. A shrouded ghost, it stands in a dark corner behind winter coats and a faded bridesmaid dress as one year, then another, flows by.

Five years now since it arrived. A sobering time for family and neighbors faced with the ills of our state's recession. Almost 136 years have passed since the gun killed game or human beings. No longer used for the reason it was created, the gun still serves a purpose. Like all trophies collected after armed struggle, it is a symbol. A symbol of danger contained, loss justified, greater crisis averted. And like all sacred relics saved by the generations that came before, it comes with a story.

This handsome Henry rifle, one of thousands of repeating firearms first manufactured during the Civil War, was taken from Tiburcio Vasquez after his capture by Los Angeles Sheriff William Rowland on 14 May 1874. A public servant eyeing his odds for reelection, Rowland presented the rifle as a "token of friendship" to Judge Stephen C. Hubbell, one of the leading citizens of the anglicized El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora de los Angeles who had urged authorities to put a stop to the robber's raids on new settlers' ranches. After two infamous decades robbing banks and rustling horses in the northern part of the state, Vasquez had traveled south. Many feared he would target downtown Los Angeles next.

Judge Hubbell, my husband's great-grandfather, was an Ohio native who came west to prosper, serve society, and raise a family. All historical accounts indicate he fulfilled his dream. A cofounder of the University of Southern California, he was elected the

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Tiburcio Vasquez. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA ETHNIC AND MULTICULTURAL ARCHIVES, DEPT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, DONALD DAVIDSON LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA, CA.

school's first treasurer. Also a respected philanthropist, he donated a substantial portion of his land, Westlake Park, to city fathers (who would later rename it MacArthur Park in honor of the World War II general). He was a generous man, once his property was secured and no longer under threat by a notorious, lawless "Mexican," as Vasquez was called in the press coverage of the time.¹

Along with the rifle, we received original front-page clippings from the 29 December 1889 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. Dry and amber with age, "The Robber Vasquez" headlined columns had been pasted with care on sturdy cardboard. The article profiled eyewitness

"reminiscences" of *San Francisco Chronicle* correspondent George Beers, who accompanied Rowland's posse on its historic adventure. Beers interviewed Vasquez, only thirty-nine, shortly before his death in San Jose on 14 March 1875. Convicted of murdering three unarmed men while his band robbed a general store in Tres Pinos, he had been sentenced by a jury of *norteamericanos* to hang on the gallows. (Accounts differ as to whether Vasquez or members of his gang bear responsibility for the actual killing. He admitted the robbery, but denied committing murder on that occasion or at any other time during his twenty-three-year outlaw career.)²

"I had a good opportunity to study his character," Beers reported. "A remarkable man . . . his original boyish idea was that he could incite a revolution among the Spanish-speaking population and recover Southern California from the United States. . . ."

Truth? Romantic revisionism from the lips of a man about to die? A blending of both? When I look at Vasquez's rifle, preserved by Anglos he once terrified, I consider Faulkner's admonition: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."³ And I wonder what the *bandido* would think of his beloved homeland now.

A net of despair

Outsiders, outcasts, and outlaws have always been the real creators of the California dream. When there is less to lose, it is often easier to make the risky move. Like our ancestors, contemporary residents will need courage to transform a less than happy present into a better tomorrow. They will also need a bold vision, one that trades the historical glory of rugged western individualism for pragmatic commitment to the larger common good.

The despair that has always danced among the have-nots in the hills and valleys of California is expanding its dark net. Since 2005 more people have left California than have arrived from the rest of the country.⁴ And for good reason. The state of our state is foreboding.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, six million Californians, 16.3 percent of residents, already live in poverty, and many more are perilously close.⁵ Twenty percent of the population

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Typical Henry Rifle. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF COTTONE AUCTIONS.

has no health insurance, and extreme cuts to Medi-Cal are planned.⁶ Over 2.2 million are unemployed.⁷ In 2010 the state's median household income fell 4.6 percent, the largest decline in a single year since record keeping began. According to a recent poll by the Public Policy Institute of California, nearly half of California adults now consider themselves among the have-nots.⁸ These figures are even more alarming because, as the pundits often note, ours is a bellwether state. As California goes, so goes the nation.

This is not what my parents would have predicted when they left Illinois to take an intercontinental gamble on the long road west in the sixties. Everybody was making the trek and making good, according to a dreamy Technicolor cover story in the *LOOK* magazine prominently displayed on the mahogany coffee table—a table that, as it happened, did not make the cut when our small U-Haul was packed to the ceiling with heirlooms, china, and three toys from my childhood bedroom. (Only three, my mother insisted.) The rest were sold at our suburban front yard auction along with sofas, chairs, an antique rolltop desk, patio furniture, and assorted tools. Like the pioneers who had gone before, my parents thought it wise to lighten the load. Our family was moving to the Golden State to better ourselves.

Better, that was the word. So powerful it serves as both verb and adjective. Better climate, better health, better job for my father, and better educational opportunities for me at the University of California in the years to come. No one leaves ancestral foundations to fall backward. But for many

who arrived during the great California migrations of the last half-century, that “better” life has become a nightmare of diminishing returns.

Not everyone is suffering, of course. Multimillionaires formerly of Silicon Valley have reinvented themselves in the hot, new tech Valhalla of San Francisco, and bling-obsessed, reality-programmed “real housewives” are cropping up south of Beverly Hills in the McMansions of Orange County. What has gone missing in the last decades is the California middle class. Granted, there were many gradations in this vast middle—“almost” lower-middle, “about to be” middle-middle, “not quite yet” upper-middle—but there was only one acceptable direction on the ladder of prosperity: up. Hard-working, law-abiding, tax-paying folks could rely on collecting their just rewards in a rosy and very near future. Every few years, a new car, a new house and—yes!—a better job with a bigger salary and more benefits. That way of life went down the drain with five-figure entry-level first homes and tuition-free education for in-state residents at the best state college and public university systems in the country. (UC's annual undergraduate tuition is expected to rise to \$22,068 within the next four years.)⁹

Aristotle argued that true virtue lies in the median between extremes.¹⁰ Within that virtue blooms happiness. The great philosopher was no economist, but the principle holds: how can happiness exist without a certain level of balance and stability? Certainly, the California middle class loomed as the ideal for generations of immigrants from Dust Bowl Okies to post-World War II aerospace factory workers to displaced Vietnamese, Armenians, and Afghans seeking political asylum. Getting rich might be nice, but a solid middle-class niche, affordable mortgage, and college-educated children embodied the sweet smell of success. Eden has been lost. Again.

No one leaves ancestral
foundations to fall
backward.

On 17 June 2011, the *Pasadena Star-News* reported that a group of homeowners, at risk of foreclosure, appealed to Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca for help.¹¹ Representatives of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment called for Baca to place a moratorium on foreclosure evictions. Unfortunately, the sheriff was out of town, and there were no later news reports that he might mount a posse on behalf of the frightened citizenry desperate to protect their property from forces they could not fight alone.

On New Year's Day in Pasadena a few years ago, before the real estate market tanked and gave our state the dubious distinction of leading the nation in foreclosures,¹² I was walking home among a large crowd of Rose Parade revelers after the last marching band headed north on Sierra Madre Boulevard. The air was clear and crisp, the view of the San Gabriels spectacular. A glorious January morning flooded with California sunshine and the fragrance of fresh blossoms. This is what our ancestors had traveled thousands of hard miles to enjoy. That's when I overheard two women talking behind me. One was complaining to the other: "We finally get California back and then the Chinese come in and take it away from us. Who do they think they are?" As I turned the corner, I noticed the ladies were Latina. And I was pretty sure they were talking about the influx of Asian families moving into San Marino, Monterey Park, and other parts of the San Gabriel Valley.

"Who do they think they are?"

Well, "they"—whoever "they" are—assume they are entitled to carve out as large a wedge of the California pie as they can beg, borrow, buy—or steal—for themselves. Vasquez's ancestors were immigrants too, loyal soldiers of the Spanish crown who occupied the fertile valleys that belonged to the original indigenous Californians, Tongas and Chumash, here long before European interlopers descended. Victorious conquistadores and pious mission priests made no apologies for taking what they wanted. They determined their needs came before other lesser beings, and after all, there was enough. Surely there would always be enough for the people that mattered.

The villains change. So do the innocent. The story does not. *Bandidos* or banks. Latinos or Asians. White or Black. Somebody somewhere is trying to take what we have . . . what we can no longer afford . . . what we cannot save because the forces we battle are too large and we are too small.

The villains change. So do the innocent. The story does not.

Or are we?

Anger—and the fear that fuels it—can do more than close ranks. It can also activate change and broaden the playing field. Witness the power of unified rage within the Occupy movement. Occupy Oakland. Occupy Los Angeles. Occupy the 2012 Pasadena Rose Parade? Yes, yes, and yes. To paraphrase Paddy Chayefsky's furious prophet of the airwaves in the Hollywood film *Network*, some Californians are mad as hell about the state's inequities and refusing to take it anymore. Between 1987 and 2009 more than one-third of California's income gain went to the top 1 percent wage earners. Some of those remaining 99 percent are no longer simply festering in their discontent. They are organizing, protesting, "occupying" public property, demanding equal justice, and launching Facebook campaigns to challenge the abuses of corporate power.

A young California woman living in Echo Park, indignant about Bank of America's announced plan to charge a five-dollar monthly debit card fee, spearheaded a national campaign to encourage people to move their money from large US banks to local nonprofit credit unions. Not only did thousands of depositors follow her lead, Bank of America abandoned their proposed fee hike a month later.¹³ The message? If you can't beat the 1 percent bastards, join with like-minded instigators and call a new ball game.

Novelist James Cain, the East Coast transplant who became a master of California literary noir, once predicted that the "vaulting ambitions" of the Golden State would surely generate interesting social progress. "Streams are meeting here that ought to churn up some exciting whirlpools."¹⁴ Indeed.

Riding out of the rocky hinterlands at the helm of a guerilla band of outlaws, Tiburcio Vasquez left a legacy that eclipsed his earthly crimes. A hero of resistance to his admirers, a thieving killer to his enemies, there is no question he made his mark on a land still divided today by discrimination, language, color, and class. Even the state map acknowledges his presence: Vasquez Rocks, a region in northern Los Angeles County where his gang used to hide out, is now a park named in his honor.



Vasquez Rocks. PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY TURNER.

In 1939 Judge Hubbell's daughter loaned the Vasquez rifle to her new son-in-law, Fred Runyon, a young publisher who wanted to display the historic firearm in the windows of his *Pasadena Independent* newspaper offices to impress readers. Sure enough, the bandit was still a headliner sixty-five years after his hanging. And yet, despite a notoriety that has stretched across three centuries, the man is long gone. It is the place that inspired his passion which endures. Ultimately, all of us who call ourselves Californians are merely visitors. Only the land, this vast earthquake-veined land of disastrous faults and breathtaking beauty, is eternal. The land . . .

. . . and the hope that one day there will again be enough. **B**

Notes

- ¹ George Beers, "The Robber Vasquez," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 December 1889.
- ² John Boessenecker, *Bandido: The Life and Times of Tiburcio Vasquez* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).
- ³ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, Act I, Scene III.

- ⁴ Gale Holland and Sam Quiones, "Waving California Good-bye," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 November 2011.
- ⁵ Alana Semuels and Duke Helfand, "6 Million in State Live in Poverty," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 September 2011.
- ⁶ Noam Levy, "State's Ills May Weaken Health Reform," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 2011.
- ⁷ Alana Semuels, "Jobless Rate Hits 12.1% in California," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 September 2011.
- ⁸ George Skeleton, "Lumps of Coal All Around," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 2011.
- ⁹ Larry Gordon, "UC Tuition May Rise to 16% a Year," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 2011.
- ¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nichomean Ethics*.
- ¹¹ Erick Galindo, "Group Seeks Foreclosure Justice," *Pasadena Star-News*, 17 June 2011.
- ¹² Alejandro Lazo, "Housing Defaults Up In August," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 September 2011.
- ¹³ Stuart Pfeifer and E. Scott Reckard "Interest Grows in Bank Transfer Day," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 2011.
- ¹⁴ James M. Cain, "Paradise," *American Mercury*, March 1933.