

“Policing a Boomtown”

What has become of the police force? The archives of the city show that there is such an organization here, yet . . . the criminal element has been holding high carnival during the last few days, “the guardians of the peace” have done nothing to indicate they are on duty.

--San Diego Union, Aug. 6, 1887

Policing a rapidly growing city like San Diego of the mid-1880s was bound to be a problem. Since the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in the city in November 1885, the population had skyrocketed from 5000 to over 30,000 in eighteen months.

“The great rush of immigration to this city is bringing with it a gang of lawless ruffians,” the *Union* warned. “Burglaries are committed in the heart of the city on bright moonlight nights [and] no arrests are made. We trust that the gang of thieves and thugs that now infest the city will soon be put behind the bars.”

Only “strict police surveillance” would keep crime in check, noted the *Union*. But the handful of constables that once kept order in town was overwhelmed. City Marshal Joe Coyne complained, “I have been a policeman for twenty years, and I never knew a place to be so over-run with men waiting a chance to turn a dishonest penny.”

With the “boom of the 80s” at its height in April 1887, the City Trustees approved some help for Coyne with the hiring of eight new policemen, bringing the total force up to about a dozen men. Eventually, over twenty men would be hired. The new officers received German silver stars engraved with the words “Police of San Diego,” and equipment that included leather billy clubs, handcuffs and whistles, but no guns. In their blue, brass-buttoned coats and silver stars, the men presented a “formidable appearance.”



City Marshal Joe Coyne SDPM

Marshal Coyne issued strict regulations for his lawmen. Personal conduct rules for men on duty prohibited profane language, smoking and intoxicating liquor. Duties included keeping a “vigilant watch for fires,” prevention of “immoderate riding or driving upon public streets,” and the reporting of any breach of health laws.

For those on the job in the notorious “Stingaree” district below H Street (Market), Coyne reminded his men never to leave their assigned posts or visit houses of ill-fame (“except in the discharge of their duty”) but cautioned them not to allow women of the town to “display themselves at their doors and windows, or solicit customers on the streets.”

The officers worked twelve-hour days for \$75 a month and paid for their own uniforms. Complaining of their “arduous duties” the policemen requested raises in September 1887. When a petition from eighty-six citizens seconded the request, the monthly pay was raised to \$100.

The policemen walked beats and made arrests for mostly petty crimes including vagrancy and drunkenness and kept the courthouse jail on D Street filled to capacity. Most offenders were quickly released on bail; \$10 paid to the clerk on duty was usually sufficient.

The crimes that alarmed the newspapers and civic leaders rarely included felonies. Homicide, rape, or grand larceny, was infrequently reported. But moral offenses were considered a dire threat to the community and the newspapers railed against apparent disinterest by the policemen in prosecuting gambling, prostitution, and intemperance.

In boomtown San Diego saloons were required to close each night at 11 p.m.—a curfew the police often ignored, or allegedly profited from. On one occasion the *Union* accused two officers of extorting money from Stingaree saloon owners with “subscription lists.” As an inducement to “subscribe,” officers “intimated that trifling infractions of the 11 o’clock law might, in case liberal donations were made, be winked at.”

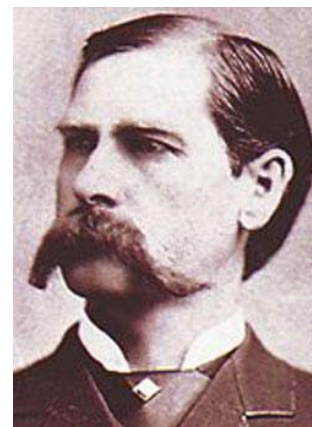
More contentious was the issue of gambling. A California statute passed in 1885 prohibited professional play of games such as faro, Monte, twenty-one or any game played for money with cards, dice, or any device. Violations were punishable by as much as \$500 and six months in jail. Of particular concern was the popular saloon game of stud-horse poker. “This pernicious game,” argued San Francisco’s chief of police in 1884, “fosters idleness, and tempts young men of weak resolution to steal from their employers.”

Distress over gambling prompted an investigation of the police by the City Council in May 1888. Witnesses from Coyne’s force offered contradictory testimony about gambling in San Diego saloons. “It was a thing of the past,” claimed one officer. But another officer testified that stud-horse poker was running in most all saloons. The witness reminded the councilmen that policemen were not permitted to enter saloons except when called upon to make arrests.

The council also considered allegations of graft among the policemen. The owner of the Hub saloon, on lower Fifth Street, claimed that deputy Larry Barton had demanded \$100 as “consideration” to prevent games from being stopped. Barton stoutly denied the charge. His boss, Joe Coyne, told the councilmen that his policemen were instructed to arrest all gamblers. But he admitted he knew of “a gambler named Earp,” that had recently defied arrest.

Wyatt Earp, the “O.K Corral” veteran, ran faro games from a Sixth Street saloon near the St. James Hotel. When confronted by an officer, Earp had threatened the lawman, saying, “if he came after his game he would get into his coffin.”

Despite testimony about hard cases like Earp, the councilmen seemed satisfied that their police were doing a professional job. The uncomfortable issue of prostitution in the Stingaree was barely addressed by the investigation though one councilman favored closing the houses of ill repute. Another suggested that a policeman be stationed “near such places” to take the names of all the men entering the business.



Wyatt Earp

The collapse of the great boom in 1888 eased the workload of San Diego's lawmen. As the economic bubble lost air, thousands of people left town. Declining finances forced the council to reduce the police force to fifteen men.

Political change came in March 1889, with voter approval of San Diego's first "modern" city charter. The new charter replaced the old marshal system with a municipal police department of twelve officers. No longer directed by city trustees or councilmen, the department began a new era under Joe Coyne as the city's first Chief of Police.



San Diego's police force in 1888. *SDPM*

Photographs courtesy of the *San Diego Police Museum*.

Published in a shorter version as "Ruffians' a challenge for police in 1880s," by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, Aug 23, 2009, p. N.1