

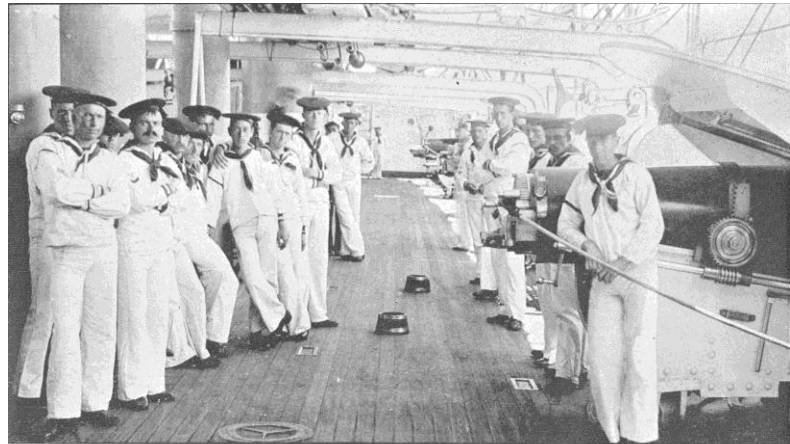
People versus Breedlove

It is not at this writing recalled that any infraction of the peace within the memory of the oldest resident of the community, ever aroused all the people to such white heat and almost explosive indignation as the inexcusable outrage perpetrated by some inflated deputy United States marshals yesterday, in clubbing to death one and beating into insensibility four others of the crew of the United States cruiser Charleston.

--Editorial, San Diego Union, July 15, 1891.

It was a crime that incensed San Diegans--the “murder” of a young sailor from a U.S. warship by a deputized marshal. For one summer and fall, San Diegans would eagerly follow the case of a “posse” gone wild and accused of brutalizing American sailors.

The Navy cruiser USS *Charleston* entered San Diego harbor on July 7, 1891. Her sailors, granted liberty after weeks at sea, eagerly headed for the Stingaree, the city’s notorious red-light district. Not surprisingly, a few of the seamen were reluctant to return to ship.



ON BOARD THE U. S. S. "CHARLESTON" IN SAN DIEGO HARBOR

It was a common problem, to be dealt with in a time-honored way. A ship’s officers would offer a reward of \$10 for the safe return

of each AWOL man. The money would be deducted from the sailor’s pay and they would be denied new shore leave for the next ninety days. Capturing deserters had become a lucrative business for eager San Diego bounty hunters.

When seven of the *Charleston*’s crew failed to return to the ship, on July 14, a deputized U.S. marshal, Charles W. Breedlove, along with a burly ex-policeman named W. W. Webb, armed themselves with “thick set clubs and a six-shooter” and headed for the Stingaree.

Breedlove and Webb found four of the sailors in a 5th Street saloon and attempted to shepherd the men back to the *Charleston*. The sailors ignored the bounty hunters and headed to the ship on their own.

The next morning the deputized marshals tried again, grabbing two sailors in another 5th Street bar. This time the blue jackets resisted and a “lively fight” erupted when a half-dozen sailors came running to defend their shipmates. Breedlove and Webb retreated uptown to look for reinforcements.

They returned with a posse of five additional men—all recruited in a local saloon for the promise of \$2.50 each for an hour’s worth of work. Ten sailors were waiting for them in the street. As

scores of bystanders looked on from the sidewalks, the deputies raised their billy clubs and charged. A newspaper reporter described the thirty minute mêlée that followed:

The air was full of clubs and it was first the officers and then the sailors and vice versa, until the combatants mutually separated from exhaustion. The sailors captured the majority of the officers' clubs, several pairs of handcuffs and, it is said, one or two revolvers. They retired to the Silver Moon saloon, at the corner of 3rd and I streets, and entrenched themselves in the second story, where they took stock of their wounds.

Holding the field of battle, the sailors claimed victory. But they were badly bruised and some were missing. One of the lost sailors was a twenty-four-year-old fireman from Vallejo named Joseph Brown. A shipmate remembered: "The last time I saw him alive he was staggering down the street. I said, 'How is it Joey?' He replied, 'Oh, they've fixed me Ned; I'm done for.'

Brown stumbled down the street and collapsed in a horse stable of the Kansas Livery at 4th and I. The manager of the stables, F. C. McGuire, assumed Brown was intoxicated and laid him down in a grain bin to sleep it off. At 2:00 a stable boy found the sailor snoring. At 2:45 the boy reported to McGuire, "he's a layin' awful still, back there."

McGuire checked on Brown and found him dead. The coroner's office was immediately notified. After a cursory examination Dr. Daniel B. Northrup decided Brown had suspicious abrasions on his scalp and directed that the body be removed for a post-mortem.

The next morning the San Diego *Union* announced in banner headlines, "CLUBBED TO DEATH, A BLOODY ENCOUNTER IN STINGAREE TOWN." In 54 column inches on the front page, the newspaper reported the story of the deputies' battle with the "unoffending members of the *Charleston's* crew."

The community was outraged. Breedlove and his posse were quickly housed in the county jail and guarded by twenty armed men. *Charleston* sailors vowed to "hang Breedlove and allow his bones to bleach in the sunlight."

A coroner's inquest jury convened at the courthouse on Front and D Streets (Broadway) and took testimony from witnesses for the next three days. Hundreds of onlookers crammed the courtroom, halls, and stairways to follow the proceedings. "The most extraordinarily dramatic inquest ever held in the county," rendered its verdict on Friday evening, July 17, deciding that Joseph R. Brown "came to his death as a result of a fracture of the skull cause by a blow from a club known as a Policeman's Billy in the hands of C. W. Breedlove."

The following day Breedlove and his fellow deputies were charged with murder and assault with a deadly weapon. All except Breedlove quickly made bail. The posse's leader languished in jail until early August when friends gathered sufficient bond money to release him. The day after his discharge a man armed with a six-shooter called at Breedlove's home, offering to give the accused a change of venue to "a warmer climate." Fortunately for Breedlove, he had decided to lay low at the home of a friend.

The trial of Charles Breedlove for the murder of Joseph Brown began in September and lingered into the fall. He was found guilty of manslaughter on Oct 9, 1891. Another indicted deputy,

Charles Wilson, was acquitted. Assault charges against the other deputies had already been dismissed.

A bizarre ending awaited Breedlove. Released on bail pending an appeal to the State Supreme Court, he made a trip to Baja California with his father and a friend. Returning to San Diego in July, the three men apparently ran out of water in the desert and all died of thirst and exposure.



San Diego courthouse.

From Richard Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2012), pp. 88-91.