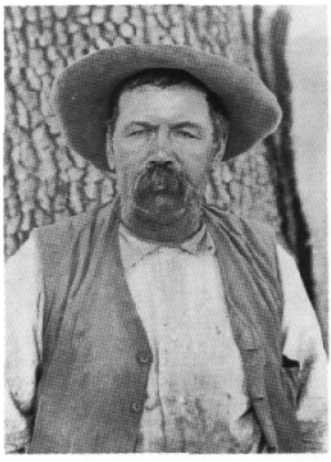
The Real "Ramona"



Sam Temple, ca.1900

In the fall of 1883, novelist Helen Hunt Jackson, writing from her home in Colorado, penned a letter to a friend in San Diego:

> I'm going to write an Indian novel, the scene laid in So. California. I would rather you did not speak of this, as I shall keep it a secret, until the book is done.

Less than a year later, Jackson's romantic novel, *Ramona,* appeared in print. It has been a perennial best-seller ever since.

Set in the backcountry of northern San Diego County, the novel was inspired by several actual incidents, particularly, the murder of an Indian by a white rancher in March, 1883.

Juan Diego, a Cahuilla Indian, lived with his wife and small child near the Cahuilla Indian Reservation in the San Jacinto Mountains. He was known as a "locoed" Indian—crazy at times though not dangerous.

One evening Juan returned home from his work as a sheepshearer riding a strange horse. When his wife asked about the horse, Juan replied, in confusion, "where is my horse then?" He realized he had left his own mount in the corral and taken a similar horse by mistake. Juan's wife, frightened by the error, said, "you must take that horse right back; they will say you stole it."

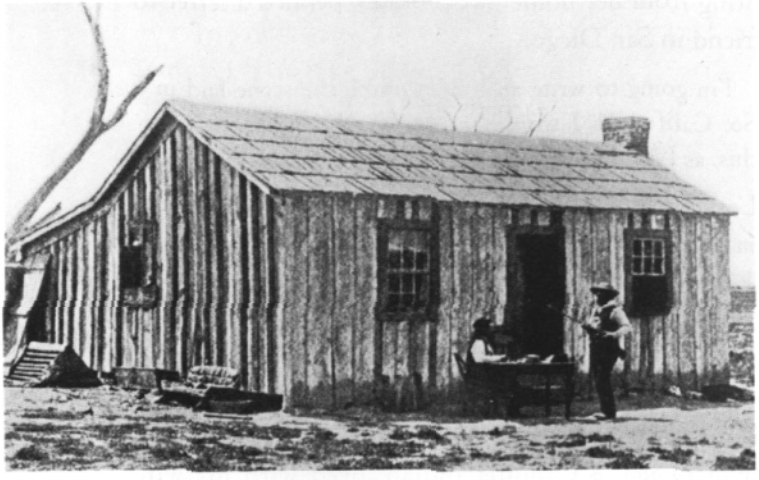
Juan never got the chance. Sam Temple, owner of the mistaken horse, rode up to the house and called out to Juan.

> [Temple] poured out a volley of oaths, leveled his gun and shot him dead. After Juan had fallen on the ground Temple rode closer and fired three more shots in the body, one in the forehead, one in the cheek, and one in the wrist...He then took his horse, which was standing tied in front of the house, and rode away.

Temple surrendered himself to the local justice of the peace—a fellow rancher named S. V. Tripp. Before a jury of twelve white men, Temple claimed that Juan Diego had attacked him with a knife. The jurors visited the site of the killing and

listened to Temple's story. Eyewitness testimony from Juan's wife and two other Native American witnesses was ignored. Ruling the action "justifiable homicide," justice Tripp ordered Temple released.

One juror summed up the popular feeling by saying, "I don't care whether the Indian had a knife or not...Any man that'd take a horse of mine and ride up that mountain trail, I'd shoot him wherever I found him." The juror did concede that "Temple was to blame for firin' into him after he was dead. That was mean, I'll allow."



Sam Temple (standing) with justice of the peace S.V. Tripp

In Helen Hunt Jackson's novel, Juan Diego served as a prototype for the tragic victim, Alessandro. The rancher Sam Temple was transformed into the evil Jim Ferrar. The wife of Juan Diego became Ramona, heroine of the romance.

Until his death Sam Temple reveled in his notoriety as "the man who killed Alessandro." He also continued to skirmish with the law. Over the years Temple fought off charges in the courts for disturbing the peace, assault with a deadly weapon, and attempted murder.

The "historical" Ramona is most often suggested to be Ramona Lubo, who lived in the San Jacinto region until her death in 1922. Renowned for her basketry, Ramona Lubo's work was exhibited at San Diego's California-Pacific International Exposition in 1935. Ramona Lubo herself was often "displayed" at county fairs where tourists came to gawk at "the original Ramona."

Since 1884, the novel *Ramona* has been reprinted more than 300 times. There have been four different film versions of the story (the best known version starred Don Ameche with Loretta Young) and, in the community of Hemet, an outdoor stage play—the Ramona Pageant—has been produced annually since 1923.

Jackson wrote *Ramona* in the hope that it would "stir people up" and awaken public sympathy toward the plight of San Diego Indians. Instead, her novel fostered the enduring myth of "the Ramona country."