

# “The English Storekeeper at Rincon”

In a bold headline, the *San Diego Union* of May 21, 1907, announced a shocking crime: “P.S. SPARKMAN MURDERED AT RINCON.” The English merchant from the tiny community at the foot of Palomar Mountain was a respected businessman, a well-known friend of the local Indians, and a peaceful man “never known to have a quarrel with anyone.”

Philip Stedman Sparkman was the seventh child in a farming family from Herefordshire, England. He came to America in 1875 at age 19, sailing from Liverpool to New York City on the immigrant ship SS *Idaho*. Slowly making his way west, Sparkman followed a series of odd jobs. In 1880, he opened a store in Albuquerque, New Mexico. More moves followed. After several short-lived store ventures in rough towns along the Santa Fe Trail, Sparkman decided to go to California, “resolving never to go into business in a town again.”

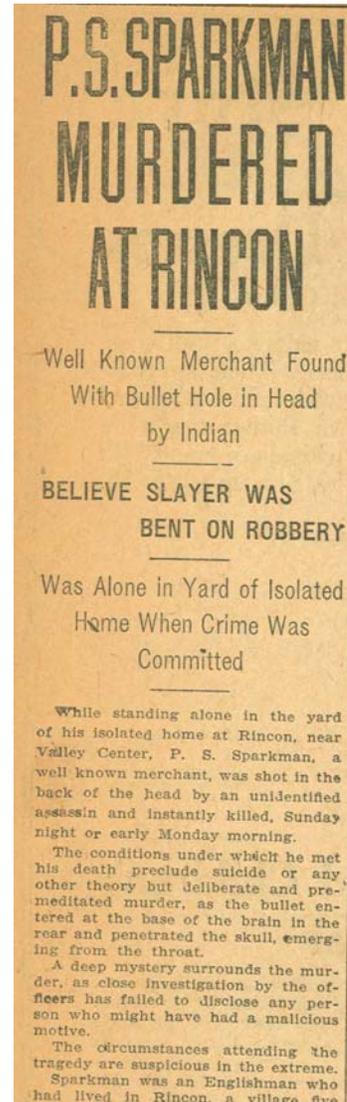
Rincon, with a small population of ranchers and Indians, was the quiet community Sparkman had waited for. With a well-stocked store and a reputation for honest business, he prospered in the peaceful village. He lived simply in an adobe house only 30 yards from his store (near today’s intersection of Highway 76 and Valley Center Road). A friend noted that Sparkman was “very neat and methodical, quiet, studious . . . temperate in his habits, not even using tobacco.”

A neighbor, rancher Louis Salmons, recalled: “This Sparkman was an Englishman. When you've said that you've said a lot. He was a very peculiar man. You'd walk in the store, and he'd stand there with his hand on the counter and wait for you to pick out something. He was a fine man. I knew him better than anyone around here.”

Sparkman was fascinated by the local Native Americans. Before coming to San Diego County, the merchant had taught himself Spanish while living in New Mexico. Now he decided to learn the Luiseño language and culture. It began as a hobby, soon it became an obsession.

He built two rooms behind his store: a spare bedroom and a study where he could retreat in leisure moments to “puzzle out the idioms and construction of the language.” He hired an Indian boy to come to the store in the evenings to teach him the tongue, word for word. The old men of the tribe provided more words and meanings, and told Sparkman of their ancient customs and rituals.

For years, Sparkman spent every spare moment recording all facets of the Luiseño culture--their folklore, religion, and, most importantly, their complex language. Eventually, he mastered the



difficult vocabulary, and recorded the previously unwritten Luiseño speech into text. A neatly typed manuscript was bound into volumes.

Early Monday morning, May 20, 1907, the self-trained linguist was found dead in the yard in front of his house. Although a light still burned brightly in the store, nothing appeared missing. At first, the authorities believed that Sparkman had been lured from his house, probably by someone he knew. There was no apparent robbery, no explanation for the murder. He was 51 years old.

A coroner's jury assembled the next day ruled that Sparkman had died from wounds inflicted by parties unknown. But an inspection of the crime scene by county sheriff Fred Jennings found several clues and a possible scenario for the murder.

Judging from blood tracks and empty shotgun shells, Jennings surmised that the killer had confronted Sparkman on Sunday night as he stood behind his store counter. The assailant fired at Sparkman once, missing him entirely. The merchant fled from the room and the killer fired again, wounding him in the back. A third blast hit Sparkman in the arm and he fell to the ground, bleeding badly. The killer then drew a knife and brutally slashed his victim's throat from ear to ear.

Sparkman had been found with his pockets rifled, but cash and gold coin was left untouched in the store. Jennings guessed that the killer had fled when he feared that his gunshots had been heard. A neighbor confirmed to the sheriff that three shots had clearly sounded late on Sunday night.

By Friday, Jennings had a suspect. Francisco Calac, the 35-year-old father of eight and the "poorest Indian in the whole reservation," had been found cashing a ten-dollar bill with a local butcher. His hob-nailed boots matched imprints in the soil of Sparkman's yard. Shotgun shells in his possession matched the empty shells found at the murder scene.

Calac was locked up in the county jail in San Diego to await a court hearing. The *Union* had no doubts about the suspect's guilt: "It has been said of him that he is a pervert, without any sense of right or wrong . . . His countenance is low-browed and bestial."

He was also "raving maniac," according to a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. Calac apparently spent his days "pacing up and down in his cell at the jail, wildly waving his arms, shrieking in horror, and laughing in an idiotic rage."

In mid-August a Superior Court jury pronounced Francisco Calac unfit for trial. He was ordered committed to the state insane asylum at Highlands in San Bernardino (today's Patton State Hospital) where he remained for the next 20 years. Never tried for the murder of Sparkman, Calac returned to San Diego after his release, and died in 1944.

The legacy of Philip Sparkman would endure. One week after the murder, Edward H. Davis, a friend of Sparkman's from Mesa Grande, revealed in the *Union* the story of the storekeeper's work recording the language and customs of the Luiseño Indians. "His monumental work on their language," wrote Davis, "is of the highest and most scientific order of any that has ever been written in this country."

The year after his death, Sparkman's *Culture of the Luiseño Indians* was published by the University of California. Publication of his *Grammar and Dictionary of the Luiseño Language* soon followed. Both classics of anthropology, the remarkable works of the modest English storekeeper are respected to this day.

---

Originally published as "RINCON SLAYING CLAIMED LIFE OF RESPECTED BUSINESSMAN," by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Dec 16, 2010. p. CZ.2