

Back on the chain gang (in early San Diego)

In the matter of requiring prisoners in the county jail to perform labor, a resolution ... to compel prisoners to work on the roads and streets was adopted. In the matter of the getting balls and chains for chain gang ...the Sheriff was authorized to secure six balls with the necessary chains, for a chain gang.

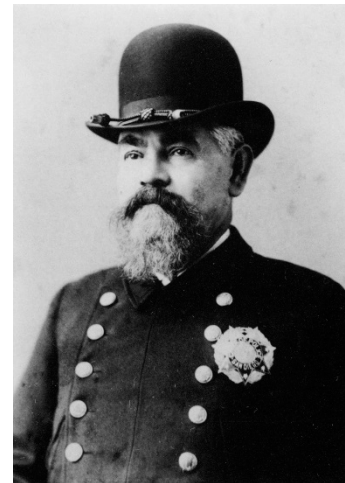
– San Diego Union, January 18, 1883

With the San Diego population booming in the mid-1880s, the town's small police force could hardly keep up with the number of lawbreakers. Many were housed temporarily in an iron “man cage” on the grounds of the courthouse at D (Broadway) and Front streets. Constables soon moved the cage closer to the city's core on Fifth Avenue so they could conveniently incarcerate “nocturnal offenders.”

But the cage had its limitations: “A breachy brace were given lodgings in the portable prison on Saturday night,” the *Union* reported. “On Sunday morning they turned up missing. The dilapidated floor of the cooler and a tunnel told the story of their exodus.”

Putting the men to work on the streets seemed a better solution than days of confinement. According to a new city ordinance, “all prisoners” would be locked up at night in the city jail, then employed each day for “the benefit of the city.” The chain gang would walk from the jail to its place of work, then labor from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a one-hour lunchbreak, Sundays excepted. For work on more distant county roads, the prisoners would be transported by wagon.

The chain gang was the typical fate of drunks, vagrants and petty thieves. “Nine worshippers at the shrine of Bacchus were given honorable positions in the city chain gang,” ran a typical newspaper report. “Nine others freely admitted they were doing nothing for self-maintenance and were given 10 days each.”



City Marshal Joseph Coyne

With work that was rarely taxing, the chain gang – never actually chained, apparently – occasionally took heat from the media for being a public service for slackers. Complimentary rides to secluded country locales, free food served three times a day, and “nominal” labor requirements made the chain gang “the envy of less fortunate transgressors,” the *Union* said.

With an eye to “discipline rather than enjoyment,” the City Council toughened the labor requirements in 1888 and declared an end to the prisoner “picnics.” Trouble came when a crew was assigned excavation duty on a new City Hall lot at Fifth and D.

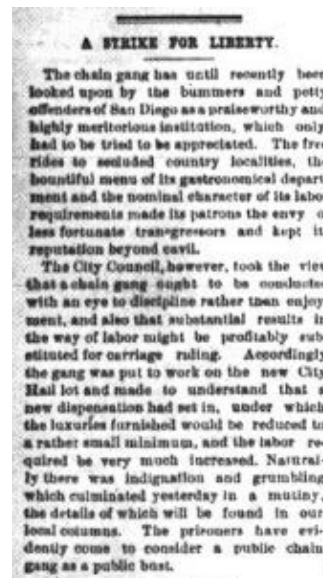
When the men went to work in the morning, they grumbled considerably. At noon, the men in some unknown manner became possessed of whiskey, and about 3 o'clock, Scorpion Mike and his companion, Tate, threw down their tools and declared they would work no more.

The mutiny evolved into a fistfight between prisoners and guards, witnessed by a growing crowd. Police arrived with clubs drawn and subdued the revolt. The “mutineers” were locked up, but not before two in custody took advantage of the excitement and escaped.

A chastened City Council bought two dozen balls and chains, and ordered that “the chain gang would be put to work upon the principal streets of the city . . . adorned with jewelry in the shape of balls and chain and shackles.”

But in the next few years, use of the chain gang declined and then stopped. The *Union* pressed for its revival as a cure for vagrancy, which the newspaper blamed for rising crime.

“The city is almost overrun with a gang of vagrants and 'hobos,' who loaf about the streets during the day soliciting alms, and at night go about the city breaking into houses,” the newspaper reported.



San Diego Union, Mar. 21, 1888

A modified chain gang returned in the mid-1890s. The Los Angeles *Times* praised San Diego's plan to spend \$2,000 per month “to solve the tramp problem.” Willing applicants would earn 75 cents a day – \$1.25 for heads of families – to labor on the streets. Unwilling vagrants, however, would be sentenced to the chain gang.

The voluntary plan never took off, and Police Chief James Russell would ask in November 1897: “If the supervisors expect the Police Department to keep the hobo element in control, why don't they furnish us a chain gang, where the men can be utilized for the good of their country? We are ready and willing to corral the Wandering Willies.”

The chain gang would come and go. Working on a rock pile at the foot of Pershing Drive would continue as late as 1908, when the city agreed to buy stones broken by the chain gang.

Making little rocks out of big ones would be the grim plight of many lawbreakers into the early 1900s.

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