

## Liquor, Guns, and “Russian Mike”

In San Diego’s notorious “Stingaree” district of the 1890s, liquor and violence flowed freely in dozens of saloons south of H Street (Market). One of the more disreputable dives was the Pacific Squadron Saloon on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and J streets, where a homicide involving alcohol, a cheap gun, and a character named “Russian Mike,” drew rapt attention from San Diegans in the Spring of 1899.

The Russia-born Michael Rose--known to all as “Russian Mike” --had been a Stingaree terror since his arrival in San Diego in 1884 at age 24. Mike would once claim his father had been killed when he was a child and his sister had raised him until he was nine. After that he went to sea and saw “every country in the world except Australia.”



His wandering stopped in San Diego, where he joined the local Longshoremen’s Union but usually earned his meager living as a bartender. The police came to know Mike well. While working at the Eureka saloon at the corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> and H— “the resort of dissolute characters and abandoned women of the lowest class,” according to the San Diego *Union*--Mike was arrested for the illegal sale of liquor between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m. The case was dismissed when the arresting officer admitted in court that he did know if the “liquor” in glasses was not actually “coffee, tea or sarsaparilla.”

Mike was mostly known as a bar fighter--“the hero of many a waterfront melee.” Once, on the rare losing end of a brutal battering, he was counseled by Chief of Police Jacob Brenning. “You can blame no one but yourself,” the chief said. “My advice is for you to go some place where you are not known, and begin life again in the right way.”

Less friendly “advice” came later from policeman James Harris who clubbed Mike in the head during a barroom altercation in 1897. After the clubbing, Mike would reportedly act strangely at times. One saloon owner warned police to be careful of “Russian Mike,” since “he was not in his right mind and was liable to kill somebody when he was under the influence of liquor.”

In March 27, 1899, Mike lost his job tending bar at the Weeping Willow saloon. The owner thought Mike could not be depended upon. The despondent Russian wandered down the street to Dan Cassidy’s Pacific Squadron and began drinking heavily. Later in the evening, Mike started buying drinks for friends. About 10:30 he passed a silver dollar over the counter for two whiskeys and two beers. Bartender Cassidy returned 70 cents in change.

Trouble began when the heavily inebriated Mike decided Cassidy had not returned his change. “You stole that change from me,” he charged the bartender. “I’m not in the habit of stealing change,” Cassidy replied, laughing.

When Mike rounded the bar to open the cash register, the 43-year-old Cassidy pushed him back, knocking him to the floor. Cassidy pulled Mike to his feet. Mike staggered out the back of the saloon and headed for his room above the Weeping Willow. Grabbing a handgun, he strode

purposely back to Cassidy's. "I will fix that man in there, I will blow his whole head off," he muttered as he passed a friend in the alley.

Back inside the Pacific Squadron, "Russian Mike" showed his gun to Dan Cassidy. The bartender was not impressed. "I am not afraid of that Mike. You won't shoot."

"I wouldn't?" Mike asked. He raised the gun and fired. Cassidy slumped to the floor without a sound, killed instantly by a bullet above his left eye.

Mike calmly pocketed his gun and walked out of the saloon only to run into police sergeant Jose Cota, who happened to be riding by on his horse and had just heard the shot. "What happened?" he asked. "Nothing," Mike replied. "Dan shot himself."

Cota surveyed the scene inside and then instructed policeman Harris to retrieve "Russian Mike." Harris ran back to the Weeping Willow and arrested him. Sgt. Cota would later find a gun under Mike's pillow—identified as a cheap Harrington & Richardson .38 revolver.

Sitting in a jail cell the next day, Mike claimed to remember nothing: "I had no reasons for shooting Dan; he was one of the best friends I had in this world." But Mike admitted, "I must have done the shooting while I was too drunk to know what I was doing."

A coroner's jury of eleven men was summoned to a local undertaking parlor for an inquest. The bar had been filled that night with customers and several prostitutes who all witnessed the slaying. After listening to the witnesses, the jury ruled: "death resulted from a mortal wound, caused by a pistol shot fired from a pistol by Michael Rose, otherwise known as Russian Mike."

More eyewitnesses were heard in a packed justice court hearing in April. The testimony was "straightforward" and "very damaging to Russian Mike," concluded a *Union* reporter. The district attorney urged the court to make an example of the murderer.



"Russian Mike" at San Quentin.  
*California State Archives*

At trial in Superior Court in late April, Mike's court-appointed attorney offered an insanity plea. A parade of witnesses claimed Mike had acted oddly since being cracked in the head by Officer Harris, two years earlier. The defendant's head was offered as evidence and each juror carefully felt Mike's skull for the hole he claimed remained from the policemen's blow.

But the jury wasn't buying the insanity claim. After deliberating for fifteen hours, they decided "Russian Mike" was guilty of second-degree murder. On May 5 Judge John Hughes sentenced Mike to twenty-one years in San Quentin prison. Four days later the convicted killer boarded a steamship for the trip north, accompanied by a deputy sheriff. "Russian Mike was in a happy and

contented frame of mind when he left,” the deputy reported. “He told me that when he is released he will come back to San Diego and try to lead a respectable and upright life.”

By 1910, Mike was a free man. The federal census reported him living in San Francisco and working as a street laborer. Twenty years later his name appeared again in the census, living in a San Francisco hotel and working as a salesman at age seventy.



The San Diego Police Department in 1901. Sgt. Jose Cota is on the far left. *San Diego Police Museum*

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