



Utah's Lawless Fringe: Stories of True Crime

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It was Sunday and worship service was in progress. One of the settlers who was not attending service eyed four known outlaws passing near town. He raced to church to spread the alarm, and parishioners leaped up, grabbed their guns, and galloped off in pursuit, joined by some neighboring cattlemen. Before it was over, one of the posse was dead.

So it went on the outskirts of Utah Territory. In this case it was the little town of Bluff where the Mormon bishop served for some ten years as de facto sheriff and his congregation as deputies. As elsewhere, law and order developed organically rather than by legislation.

In this anthology several aspects of the process are considered, including one of the worst manifestations of citizen action: vigilantism. Territorial Utah witnessed more lynchings than legal executions. Another citizen trait was an unexpected indifference to vice. In 1908 Salt Lake City had 148 registered prostitutes overseen by a madam who was recruited for the position by the mayor and city council. During Prohibition one of the largest distilleries in the West operated in a Salt Lake warehouse.

What is to be learned from this? The contributors to these fourteen articles leave moral considerations to the reader's contemplation, while providing surprises along the way in an extremely engaging—dare we say arresting—read.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Stanford J. Layton, former managing editor of the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, is a visiting professor of history at Weber State University. He is the author of *To No Privileged Class: The Rationalization of Homesteading and Rural Life in the Early Twentieth Century*, a contributor to the *Utah History Encyclopedia* and *Worth Their Salt: Notable but Often Unnoted Women of Utah*, and editor of the *Favorite Readings from the Utah Historical Quarterly* series.

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Journal of the West, Joseph B. Romney

Fourteen lively articles selected from the *Utah Historical Quarterly* provide an entertaining and informative view into crime in Utah. Having seen many of the articles through their original publication, Layton is “delighted beyond words” to provide in this anthology some of these “old treasures.” Racial murder, sheepmen-cattlemen conflict, frontier justice, robberies, gunfights, trial drama (with my grandfather as the attorney!), lynching, prostitution, prohibition, and penal practice are some of the juicy topics. (Good grief! Some other relatives of mine are also in the book.) Through the insight and good will of Signature Books, we now have these stories in an attractive (including illustrations), convenient (indexed as well), and inexpensive form. They are worth a reading and rereading—in both cases enjoyable, although some might hurt a bit.

Deseret News, Dennis Lythgoe

Stan Layton, for twenty-seven years the managing editor of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and a top-notch historian, has assembled a fascinating collection of essays that previously appeared in the quarterly.

Layton gives the credit for the idea to Miriam Murphy, long-time associate editor of the quarterly and now a publishing poet. The anthology consists of fourteen articles about lawlessness in Utah history. They are written by fifteen surprisingly eclectic authors, i.e., graduate students, high school teachers, professors, archivists, attorneys, retired businessmen, elected officials, and others. Several contributors are well-established historians, including Richard and Mary Van Wagoner, Larry Gerlach, John McCormick, Helen Papanikolas, and Martha Sonntag Bradley.

The first essay, “Mountain Common Law,” focuses on two high-profile murders in 1851, in which each suspect was a respected member of the community, and each was avenging personal honor by killing the man who had seduced his wife. The defense counsel argued an age-old principle: “That the man who seduces his neighbor’s wife must die, and her nearest relative must kill him.” In fact, both defendants were acquitted on the basis of “mountain common law.”

The third essay, “Murder and Mayhem,” set in southeastern Utah, deals with the conflicts between Mormons and American Indians. Another essay focuses on the murder of a black man, Gobo Fango, during the racist years of the Gilded Age. Two essays deal with a lynching, another about prostitution in Salt Lake’s red-light district. There is an article about penal road building (“Utah’s First Convict Labor Camp”) and one on juvenile detention (“Reclamation of Young Citizens”).

There are three essays about Prohibition (including cigarettes), one on the difficulties of enforcement and another about clever bootleggers matching wits with smart law officers over the illegally distilled beverages. A third Prohibition piece is a first-person reminiscence about the human costs of the war over alcohol.

John Farnsworth Lund, a now-deceased businessman, called his piece, “The Night before Doomsday,” in which he recalls the Martin family of Salt Lake City, who were so distressed about Prohibition that they called it “doomsday.” Mrs. Martin said, “The government’s takin’ away our liberties. What’s to become of us? We laid in what supply we could, but a workin’ man can’t get far enough ahead to last him very long.”

The author had seen the family’s store of liquor in the cupboard. He tried unsuccessfully to get the son, Claybourne, to go into town with him to see “the big doings.” Lund saw the liquor auction next to the Orpheum Theatre and peddlers trying to sell leftover liquor supplies. The police seemed to be letting this last night play itself out.

“Ministers and members of the Anti-Saloon League patrolled the streets and watched what they mistakenly termed the death struggle of Demon Rum. They held soap-box meetings, and one speaker pointed out how mankind was cursed with the love of his worst enemy. Great rejoicing and congratulatory back-slapping kept spirits high in these groups.”

Three days later, Lund went to the Martins’ apartment to find it empty. Apparently they had moved to a state where they could still buy liquor—at least temporarily.

This collection is a feast of Utah’s early social history.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Price:

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Pamela Garcia:

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