

Joaquin de la Torre

Charles Layton

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First Hispanic cop killed in U.S. died here 160 years ago this week

By CHRIS COUNTS

MUCH HAS been made in the news lately about the increase in violence against police officers. But working in law enforcement has always been a dangerous job, as Monterey County Sheriff's deputies Joaquin de la Torre, Charles Layton and Jim Beckwith learned 160 years ago this week.

All three deputies were shot and killed after they tried to arrest a suspected murderer and cattle thief in his hideout Nov. 10, 1855. The suspect, Anastasio Garcia, was later captured and lynched.

According to a banner posted this week on the Monterey County Sheriff's Office website, de la Torre was the first Hispanic peace officer killed in the line of duty in the United States.

Historian Hubert Howe Bancroft wrote about the incident in 1888. According to Bancroft, a posse that included the three deputies found Garcia in a hut with his wife.

Bancroft said de la Torre approached the hut and demanded that Garcia come out, but was answered by the outlaw, "I have no trouble with you." The deputy persisted, and when the door was opened, shots were exchanged. A bullet fired by Garcia "entered de la Torre's chest," and "he fell dead to the ground."

According to contemporary historian John Boessenecker, Garcia's hideout was located somewhere between Salinas and present-day Marina "in a dense thicket of willows and brush along the Salinas River." The historian writes that when the suspect was found, the famous outlaw Tiburcio Vasquez was with him. Vasquez made the news in 2012 when an elementary school in Salinas was named after him.

In Boessenecker's account, de la Torre was killed by two shots in the face. The suspect also shot Layton in the stomach and Beckwith in the hand and thigh. "Garcia fought like a madman," he wrote.

Two others die from wounds

According to an article published nine days after the incident in the Daily California newspaper, Beckwith and Layton were seriously injured in the shootout with Garcia.

"Layton received a pistol ball that took off the first joint of the index finger, and a second finger at the knuckle," the report reads. "It then struck the hilt of his pistol, and from there glanced traversely to the stomach."

Layton, who once served as the keeper of the Point Pinos Lighthouse, died several days later at the Washington Hotel in Monterey. The article makes no mention of when Beckwith died.

The Daily California article makes it clear that Layton, who left behind a wife and four small children, was well-regarded by those who knew him. The deputy was "universally beloved as a citizen and a man," and was considered "model soldier" who was promoted "for meritorious conduct in the camp and in the field."

Shot down in cold blood by a man wanted for murder and stealing cattle

Worth remembering

Besides becoming the first Hispanic law enforcement officer killed in the line of duty, de la Torre played a role in at least two events that helped shape California's history. In fact, it's somewhat surprising that nothing has ever been named after him, while two schools, a health center and even a rock formation have been named after Vasquez, who was executed for murder in 1875.

Baptized in 1812 at the Carmel Mission, de la Torre was actively involved in several military conflicts that preceded the Mexican-American War of 1846-47. In 1845, he led a band of Californios against the incumbent Mexican government in Los Angeles and was wounded in the foot. In 1846, during the Bear Flag rebellion, he led a detachment of Alta Californian troops north from Monterey to Marin County, where the battle of Olompali was fought.

Rancho Arroyo Seco, a 16,000-acre Mexican land grant in Salinas Valley, was given to de la Torre by the governor of Alta California, Juan Bautista Alvarado, in 1840.

Four years after Monterey County was established, William H. Hardmount became the first peace officer killed in the line of duty here. Over the decades, a total of 10 deputies have died while on duty — the most recent was Anthony Olson, who was killed in a car accident in 1996.