



First Los Angeles County Sheriff

Killed in the Line of Duty

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When Los Angeles County was first formed in 1850, it covered a vast amount of land. Over the years, Los Angeles County was divided into the other counties including San Bernardino County, Riverside County, Orange County, and a portion of Kern County. The first Los Angeles County Sheriff killed in the line of duty fell in San Juan Capistrano which was part of Los Angeles County in 1857.

The early Sheriffs of Los Angeles County were elected for one-year terms of office. In September of 1851, after George T. Burrill's term ended, James Barton was elected as the second Sheriff of Los Angeles County. Barton served as sheriff for six years before deciding not to run again. However, after a one-year absence, he couldn't wait to once again take up the reins of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and was reelected as sheriff defeating Interim Sheriff Hale.

Sheriff Barton had no idea that his life was in danger when Juan Flores broke out of prison on October 8, 1856. The escaped

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convict assembled a group of outlaws. They called themselves “Las Manillas” meaning “The Handcuffs” gang. Andres Fuentes, who felt that Barton had unjustly sent him to prison, joined Flores with the avowed purpose of killing Sheriff Barton.

Fuentes rode to Los Angeles as a spy for the gang while the rest of them bypassed the city and continued south to San Juan Capistrano. Flores wanted to meet up with his Indian girlfriend, Martina Espinoza, who lived in the area. On January 21, 1857, some of Las Manillas outlaws entered Michael Kraszewski's store. They stole a gun and started to ride off. Kraszewski rode after the bandits and caught up to one of them. He grabbed the horse's bridle in an effort to stop him. The outlaw broke loose and headed back to their camp. Flores became enraged when told about Kraszewski's daring act. He declared that no one would challenge his gang and headed back into town to teach the residents a lesson about resisting.

When they arrived in town, Kraszewski saw

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them and ran into a saloon. He and another man hid in a nearby room and bolted the door. One of the outlaws yelled at them to come out. When they refused, he fired through the door. The bullet hit the other man in the wrist. The bandits finally left, but not before ransacking Kraszewski's store and shooting an unarmed man to death. Messengers immediately rode from San Juan Capistrano to notify the sheriff in Los Angeles. Sheriff Barton quickly assembled a posse consisting of Deputy Frank Alexander, Constables William H. Little and Charles Baker, blacksmith Charles F. Daly and teamster Alfred Hardy.

Fuentes saw the posse forming and slipped

out of town to warn Flores that the posse was coming for him.

The posse left Los Angeles on January 22 and rode to Santiago Creek. After spending the night, they continued on to Rancho Sepulveda. There they learned that Las Manillas numbered at least fifty men. The posse was told that they should call for reinforcements before engaging this sizeable gang of outlaws. Sheriff Barton dismissed this information thinking it was erroneous and exaggerated. He had never heard of such a large band of desperados. The sheriff and his posse galloped off towards San Juan Capistrano.

When the posse was 15 miles north of

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the San Juan Capistrano Mission, they saw a lone rider coming in their direction. Constables Little and Baker rode ahead to intercept him. When they reached the top of a hill, they saw the entire gang emerge from the lowlands around them. The desperados each carried shotguns and dual or triple sets of revolvers with extra barrels for quick reloading. These two lawmen quickly realized that their two guns were no match for the more than fifty guns that surrounded them. Juan Silvas gunned down Constable Little and Flores killed Constable Baker. Even though they were outnumbered and outgunned, the sheriff and his posse did not back down. They charged forward to engage in one of

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the greatest gun battles ever fought on horseback. The lawmen shot three of the renegades off of their mounts. As Sheriff Barton battled his way towards Pancho Daniel, the bandit yelled at him, "God damn you, I have got you now!" Pointing his pistol at the outlaw, Barton yelled, "I reckon I have you too!" With their pistols

now aimed at each other, the sheriff and the bandit fired simultaneously. Daniel's bullet was on the mark, striking Barton in the heart. Barton's aim was off and he missed. The sheriff toppled off his horse and, in a final act of defiance, hurled his empty revolver at Fuentes. Deputy Alexander, Blacksmith Daly and teamster



Hardy fired until their guns were empty. As a last resort, they used their pistol butts as clubs. Realizing that the situation was hopeless, they turned their horses around and raced back towards Los Angeles. The gang chased them at full speed. After traveling three miles, they caught up to Charles Daly and gunned him down. Deputy Alexander and Alfred Hardy barely escaped with their lives as they dodged bullets for over twelve miles.

Arriving at Rancho Sepulveda, the exhausted remnants of the posse obtained fresh horses and rode in separate directions to alert other lawmen. Alexander took off at full speed towards El Monte as Hardy headed to Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, citizens panicked. City Marshal Billy Getman arrested forty townspeople whom he thought might join forces with the Manillas gang. He

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then formed four companies of militia and deployed them to protect the perimeter of the town.

After the town was secured, City Marshal Getman assembled forty rangers and led them towards the scene of the gun battle. On the way, they came across the body of blacksmith Charles Daly who had valiantly joined the posse to apprehend the ruthless outlaws. Daly had bullets in his body and mouth. His face had powder burns, indicating that he was shot at close range. Traveling down to the site of the gun fight, they located the bodies of the Sheriff and two constables. City Marshal Getman peered down at Sheriff James Barton, realizing that his longtime friend and

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colleague was the first Los Angeles County Sheriff killed in the line of duty. Sheriff Barton had been shot three times in the heart and once in the right eye. Constable Little had bullet wounds in his right eye, head and body. Constable Baker had been shot three times in the head. All of the men had been shot additional times after they were already dead. Their bodies had been stripped of valuables and personal effects.

As the lifeless bodies were loaded onto the horses, these lawmen had no idea that this was the first in a long string of deputy sheriffs who would be killed in the line of duty over the history of the Los Angeles

County Sheriff's Department. A small group of men returned the bodies to Los Angeles for burial.

The Manillas gang rode through San Juan Capistrano bragging about their gun battle. Even though they gunned down the lawmen, they did give Barton's posse credit for fighting bravely to the end.

After searching for four days without finding the killers, Getman and the rangers returned to Los Angeles to attend a solemn funeral procession for the four lawmen. Citizens from all around came to pay their respects as the men were laid to rest at the Campo Santos Cemetery. Buildings were draped in black and saloons were closed. During the funeral, a somber group of pallbearers removed Barton's badge and then placed him in the ground.

One of the greatest manhunts the Wild West had ever seen began immediately after Sheriff Barton's funeral.

(Compiled from "Six Gun Sound – The Early History of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department" by Sven Crongeyer)

