

# He is Hanged at Midnight from the Virginia Street Bridge “September 19, 1891”



*The Iron Bridge as it crossed the Truckee River at Virginia Street in the 1800's. To the left of the bridge is the Lake House Hotel which is now the Riverside Hotel and behind it was the Washoe County Jail holding Louis Ortiz arrested for the shooting of Reno Officer Dick Nash. The bridge would serve as the scaffold for instant vigilante justice.*

The previous evening a disturbance occurred which resulted in the shooting of Reno Police Officer Richard Nash. After the shooter, Louis Ortiz had been taken to jail, officer Nash was taken to his home and a physician called to attend him. While he rested the community at large assumed the worst. Believing Nash was going to die, a group of vigilantes made plans for instant justice.

## **OFFICER NASH'S SHOOTING AVENGED**

The events which culminated in the lynching of Louis Ortiz, the would-be assassin of Officer Nash is a one time occurrence which never reoccurred. Early in the evening following the shooting of Nash, it became apparent that there was a movement on foot which meant the meting out of justice to Louis Ortiz, the cut-throat and would be assassin.

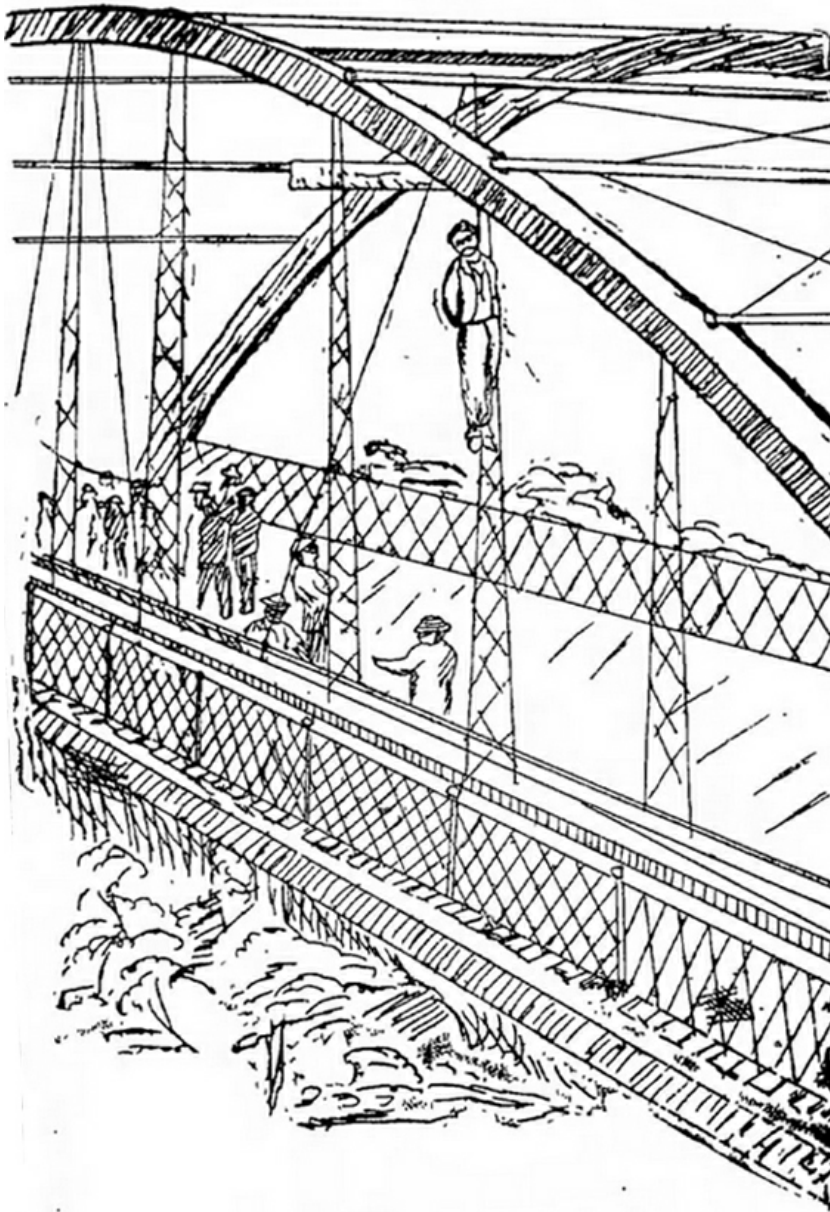
A crowd of determined citizens met at the lumber yard late in the evening, and a Gazette/Journa reporter gleaned enough to know that they meant business. The meeting finally resulted in an agreement that he should hang.

After making the necessary preparations and sending out guards, they quietly waited until about 11:45 o'clock the evening of September 18th, when they began their march in the direction of the Courthouse.

Those who were watching and waiting for developments during the evening were rewarded shortly after midnight by seeing a few mysterious movements by two or three men, who stole quietly down Second and then Virginia streets, and evidently were taking a survey of the lay of the land.

## **DEMANDING THE PRISONER**

At the corner of the photograph gallery, where they had marched from their meeting place, stood seventy-five citizens, masked and armed, ready for action. At the command of their captain they moved steadily forward, and with a quiet and steady tread marched rapidly to the Courthouse where their members quickly filled the corridors leading to the Sheriff's office.



A few raps at the door brought the question of "Who is there?" from within, to which came the reply, "We want to see you." The door was reluctantly opened and in an instant a dozen revolvers covered Under Sheriff Caughlin. Access was soon gained to the jail, having demanded and obtained the keys from the Under Sheriff, and they soon had the murderer in their possession.

### **TAKEN TO THE BRIDGE**

His hands were quickly tied, and with a man on each side, one in front and several behind who held cocked revolvers at his head, they marched him to the bridge from which he was soon to be launched into eternity. Arriving at the center of the bridge a double row of citizens formed in a circle around him. Guards were placed at each end of the bridge to keep back what few people might attempt to come near the scene of action.

He was then given an opportunity to say what he wished. He was determined and cool. He asked for a priest and then for a drink of water.

His first request could not be complied with. However a flask of whisky was

obtained and a party held the flask and with up upturned face he drank the contents without a tremor.

The moon shown its full light on his bloated and distorted features, which were of a sallow, livid hue. His hands and feet were firmly tied. He was then given an opportunity to converse again. He left a few directions as to his effects and requested that certain letters be written to Mexico. He then said: "I have nothing else to say. What can I say?"

The ropes were in readiness and he was conducted to the edge of the bridge over which it had been determined that he should be dropped.

For fear that some accident might occur by which he might be precipitated into the river, it was thought better, after a hasty consultation, to let him swing from the crown on the center of the bridge.

He was placed in readiness, the rope was properly adjusted and when asked if he was ready, promptly and firmly replied "ready", At the command, the rope tightened, his body swayed, his head turned to one side and with a quick movement, he was swung clear of the bridge. He had hardly risen three feet when the rope either broke or slipped and he fell backward with a dull thud.

Not a murmur or cry escaped him, but with a sickly smile, almost satanic, he requested them to hurry. A large rope was then obtained, quickly adjusted, and within a few moments, exactly at 12:39 A. M., he was suspended between heaven and earth.

The body swung rapidly round and round, his livid face upturned to the starry firmament. With glassy eyes his gaze was fixed, as if trying to penetrate the great futurity, to which he had given so little thought during his reckless life. The body swung to and fro, with now and then a convulsive moment that sent a thrill of horror through the crowd. The sheen of his familiar greasy leather coat shone with a peculiar brilliancy.

### HOW HE DIED

He died as he lived--fearing neither God nor man. Not a drop of warm blood seemingly flowed in his veins. He was a dangerous man in any community. Suspended in midair from the bridge was left the lifeless body of the late Louis Ortiz, with the pale light of the moon on his livid and distorted countenance. He paid the penalty he so richly deserved.

The crowd was orderly and determined, and evidently believed that necessity knows no law. The life of a valued officer and honorable citizen had been all but taken while in the fearless discharge of his duty.

The slow and tardy process of justice, as administered in the courts of law, was not sufficient to meet this crisis.

However much we may deplore mob violence, yet the very nature of his despicable crime was such had it gone slowly unpunished, the doors would have been open for its repetition.

In the sight of that body swinging in midair can be read the verdict of justice. The majesty of the law had been insulted and the highest tribunal in the world—the people, revenged the wrong.

The swinging of the would-be assassin is a notice terrible in its mute and effective eloquence, which says to the horde and swarm of gamblers and cut throats, pimps and blackleg robbers and sneak thieves that will visit us the coming week "beware, the lives of our citizens and their property are sacred."

*Gazette/Journal September 19, 1891*

