

# Local Color: Sheriff “Sunny Jim” Monroe

*excerpts from the Memoir of James William Monroe, Sheriff of Yolo County from 1911 until 1938  
on the 100 year anniversary of his becoming sheriff for 28 years.*

## GUNFIGHTS AND MURDERS--SECOND IN A SERIES

A colorful character, my grandfather James William Monroe, referred to as “Sunny Jim” due to his jovial and accepting personality, married a “local girl,” Elvira Grey Duncan of Hungry Hollow, in 1902. Soon afterwards he followed his adventurous heart to the Yukon Territory in search of gold before returning to his ranch in Hungry Hollow. He later ran for political office, leading to a stint as sheriff for 28 years. During that time, he covered much of the greater Capay Valley, and in the memoir published by the **Daily Democrat** newspaper at the end of his career, he tells some interesting stories of those times.



According to those memoirs published by the local *Daily Democrat* in

1938, Sheriff Jim tells that his parents were “covered-wagon immigrants from Missouri in the early 1850s...lived in Eugene, Oregon, where Grandfather was a circuit judge for many years. Later the family moved to Yolo County where Grandfather raised stock...When my father was just 20 years old, he married Sarah Ellen Campbell, then a girl of 17...The house...they resided...in Buckeye district near Winters...built by my mother’s family in the early years of the 19th century...I was born in that house August 5, 1867.

“Our nearest neighbors, I remember, were Benjamin Ely, the Guthries, the Briggs family and the William Griffins. All of them migrated from Missouri in the 50s, and all of them were good Missouri democrats. Many of their descendants are well-know residents of the Winters district today.”

Jim’s father died while the family lived down in Santa Barbara, where they had gone for his health, so Jim and his mother returned to Yolo County. In and out of various school, apparently he was something of a scamp: “...the schoolmaster at the country school in Santa Barbara often spanked me. Miss Barrett, schoolmarm at the Gordon school, didn’t stop with the ‘burch’ stick. She lashed me with her tongue as well. ‘Jim Monroe, you’re a rowdy!’ she’d say, calling me before the whole class. ‘You’ll never amount to anything as long as you live!’”

But after he finished his grammar school course he enrolled at the Hesperian College in Woodland. “That sounds like quite a jump. It wasn’t, really, because high schools didn’t exist at that time.” He attended with William ‘Singing Bill’ Browning, Jimmie and Lee Briggs, James Keys, Harvey Willoughby and Jennie

Dick, all citizens he knew for a long time afterwards while in office. He also attended Pierce’s College in Colusa County for a year in 1885, before returning to his mother’s ranch and beginning ranching in earnest.

“Young and untrained, I was soon up against some tough problems. Ranchers here today will understand what I mean when I say that, as a boy right out of college, I needed a business system. Ranching the way I was doing it was too much of a gamble. So I enrolled at Stockton Business college, and studied banking and bookkeeping...” But being away from the ranch led to a lure for adventure and various jobs including one with the Fresno Sante Fe railroad...and “rather at loose ends...then half-heartedly took a job as peace officer in Firebough, Fresno County. I didn’t know then that I had just set foot to the path I was to travel for the rest of my working days.”

“Firebough started me off right. I found there a mixed, rough crowd which followed the sheep shearings...more than 75,000 head of sheep were being sheared on the Miller and Lux ranges. I took one look at the bunch and thought: ‘Jim Monroe, you’ve headed right for trouble.’”

“That guess of mine turned out to be no joke, all right enough. I’d just gotten myself a shiny badge and a speaking acquaintance with some of the townsmen, when trouble broke her tether and stampeded.”

Soon, “a cowboy was stabbed to death...every cowboy in Firebaugh swore to avenge the death, and came within an ace of doing it...”

“The constable, Joe Lambert, came to me and told me that trouble was brewing. ‘Those cowboys are a wild outfit,’ he said, ‘You’ve got to



help me, Jim, or they're going to shoot holes in our law and order.'

*"I was young and hot-headed. The dangerous situation fanned my youthful imagination and appealed to me. 'You bet I'll help!' I said.*

*"We made our plans...I was to get a span of horses and a spring wagon and drive quietly up to the hotel, where Lambert would be waiting with the prisoner.*

*"I drove the spring wagon up to the hotel...They jumped aboard. 'Let her go, Jim!' The constable's voice throbbed with excitement...*

*"I gave those ponies the length of my whip and they tore out at a dead run. The spring wagon bucked and jolted. It surely was one wild ride.*

*"The cowboys saw us clearing out and gave chase. I can hear them yet--yelling for me to stop and shooting bullets that sang around our heads like angry hornets. You bet I didn't stop to answer. We thundered across the bridge into Madera county and on without pause to Madera City."*

Sadly, seeing that he was 'saved,' the prisoner then bragged about the crime and Jim learned a lesson about the law: doing the right thing did not always go down well. As a result of this adventure he was made deputy constable and learned much about the job before returning to Yolo County in 1903.

Having married a local girl from Hungry Hollow in 1902, he returned to ranching...but in 1904 his lust for adventure led him off to Alaska, even though it was near the tail end of the big rush of 1897.

Well, even though his new wife came from just such adventuresome pioneers and did not stand in his way, his days panning for gold eventually did not *pan out*--but more on his Yukon adventures later! Now, back to some adventures closer to the Capay Valley; how about a shoot out on the streets of Esparto?

Though he does not give the exact date, he attributes several murders between 1911 and 1938 to the combined use of alcohol and firearms. In this tragic story of JC Clark and Dick Revel, both residents of Esparto, they were "fast friends and seemed far from wanting to hurt each other.

*"No one seems to know the subject of their quarrel. They had been drinking and some slight disagreement arose. Hot words were exchanged. The orgy ended in a shattered friendship.*

*"Clark was a sensitive man, and returning home, he brooded. He got to hating his former friend. The next morning, before the fumes of liquor had worn away, he loaded his pistol and went down into Esparto's main street.*

*"A few minutes later he met Revel. There was a short pause. The two men stared at each other. I think Revel was just getting ready to suggest they forget it.*

*"Then the crack of a pistol put an end to the quarrel--and to Revel's life. His former friend had shot him to death.*

*"Clark was hanged at San Quentin. To the last he never regretted his own fate or showed any fear of his terrible death. But his repentance was very real over the murder of his friend."*

"Sunny Jim" credits his bravery to lessons he learned in life working with all sorts of people--and to his own less than sterling behavior as a youth! One case that illustrates this is when a murder took place in District 108 (near Grimes) and ended with the suspect holed up in a cabin with his victim, surrounded by officers.

*"When I came, I supposed the slayer would be arrested and helpless in handcuffs, but I found the opposite was true. The slayer was unmolested in the cabin where he had barricaded himself...the first thing i saw was [his] form sharply etched against the drawn shades...The coroner was dashing up and down, complaining he couldn't get close enough to claim the body of the victim.*

*"What's the matter here,' I asked, amazed by this unexpected scene.*

*"[he] has barricaded himself in his cabin. He'll shoot if anyone comes close!"*

*"I started forward. Someone tried to stop me. 'Don't do it, Jim!"*

*"Bosh!" I replied, exasperated. '[He] knows me. He won't refuse to listen to what I have to say.'*

*"I was pretty sure of my man. So I approached the cabin without any particular qualms.*

*"Hello in there!" I called. 'This is Jim Monroe. Heard you were in trouble...come to see what's the matter. Come out and talk to me'."*

Since the sheriff was alone the slayer came out and put down his weapon: "I know that you'll see that I'm dealt with fairly, Jim...I'll go with you'." Convicted of second degree murder, he was sentenced to 18 years.



*[Text below is excerpted from the Wednesday Daily section of a local newspaper at the time—typically beautiful old prose!]*

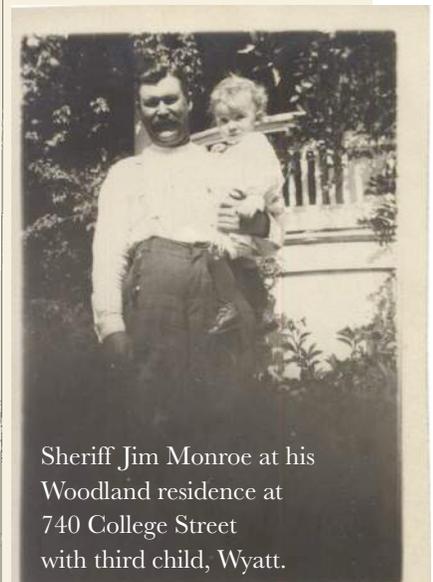
**Wedding Chimes: James William Monroe to Elvira Grey Duncan,  
April 9, 1902**

***A Union of Two Lives Near Capay on Which the Sun of Promise  
Beams Brightly***

*At 11 o'clock this morning a very pretty wedding was solemnized near Capay. The contracting parties were Mr. James William Monroe, of Madison, and Miss Elvira Grey Duncan, of Capay. The ceremony occurred at the residence of the bride's parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. G. Duncan, the rev. George Meeker of Winters, officiating. The company that witnessed the tying of the nuptial knot consisted of about 30, mostly relatives of the bride and groom. The Duncan residence was beautifully decorated for the occasion. The bride wore a handsome costume very becoming to her fine form and beautiful face.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Monroe received many elegant and useful presents. Upon the conclusion of the ceremony they were warmly and heartily congratulated. The union is regarded as a particularly happy one by relatives and friends of both parties. The wedding breakfast was an elaborate affair and the hour spent around the festal board was enjoyable as much for the feast of reason and for the flow of soul as for the excellence of the menu.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Monroe were accompanied to the Capay Depot by quite a company of relatives and friends, and they must have felt highly gratified at the expressions of good will and best wishes that followed them as the train pulled out of the station. Their honeymoon will be spent in San Francisco. In about 10 days they will return to the vicinity of Madison, which will be their future home.*



Sheriff Jim Monroe at his Woodland residence at 740 College Street with third child, Wyatt.



*“Sunny Jim” and Grey take in the sights in SF and pose for postcards with friends in 1909.*

Handwritten in pencil by Grey on the back of one addressed to her mother in Capay:

*Arrived all safe and sound. Taking in all the gaities. We are second to none in automobiling. Johnson & Kitchel not excepted.*

*Jim & Grey*

*NOTE: by 1918 the couple had 7 children, all but one of whom lived out most of their lives in Yolo County. The couple is buried in Woodland along with many relatives and offspring, but two have headstones in Duncan plots in the Capay Cemetery: James Wm, Jr., and Tom J Monroe, near many Duncan ancestors and relatives.*

*The bride is the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W.G. Duncan, of Capay. The Duncan family is an old and honorable one, and for years has been widely known and influential in Yolo County. No member of the family is held in higher esteem than the fair young woman who upon this perfect April day was led to the altar blushing like the morn. She is a native of Yolo County and is respected and admired for her beauty, intelligence, refinement and many charming traits of character. Her culture, amiable manners and sweet disposition make her society much prized. Mr. Monroe is considered a fortunate young man in having won the heart and hand of such a lovely bride.*

*James W. Monroe is the only son of Mrs. John T. Monroe [nee Sarah Campbell], and is a worthy representative of an old and highly respected name. He is a young man of splendid ability and excellent character, and his reputation for industry, integrity, and enterprise is without reproach. The horizon of his future is bright and hopeful, and he begins his new relations under fair skies. If good wishes are of any avail, the future of Mr. and Mrs. Monroe will be happy and prosperous.*

