

Local Color: Sheriff “Sunny Jim Monroe”

excerpts from the Memoir of James William Monroe, Sheriff of Yolo County from 1911 until 1939
in honor of the 100 year anniversary of his becoming Sheriff for 28 consecutive years.

GUNFIGHTS, BANK ROBBERIES, MURDERS--FIRST IN A SERIES

A colorful character, 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 an article in the SF Chronicle, Dec. 28, 1952, “When Yoloans speak of “Sunny Jim,” they are referring to James W. Monroe, Yolo County’s Sheriff from 1911 to 1939.

“Probably no one, Yoloans say, has ever come closer to the Hollywood version of a Western Sheriff than Jim Monroe, sombrero, handle-bar mustache and all. A barrel-chested man with muscles of steel and a heart of gold, he was equally at home with bankers and bums, farmers and forgers, merchants and murderers. ‘He was never afraid, never hard, never mean,’ one Yoloan recalled, ‘He understood men. Even the most hardened offender

and the most desperate thug respected him’.”

Excerpted from the Daily Democrat’s 1938 Memoirs of James Monroe gives a good example of this:

Gruesome Murder

“A lot of people will remember W.P. Rice, city marshal of Winters in 1912...

“Late one night, the marshal was summoned to the Vaca house. Neighbors told him that ‘Joe Vaca is at it again...and he’s acting something terrible.’

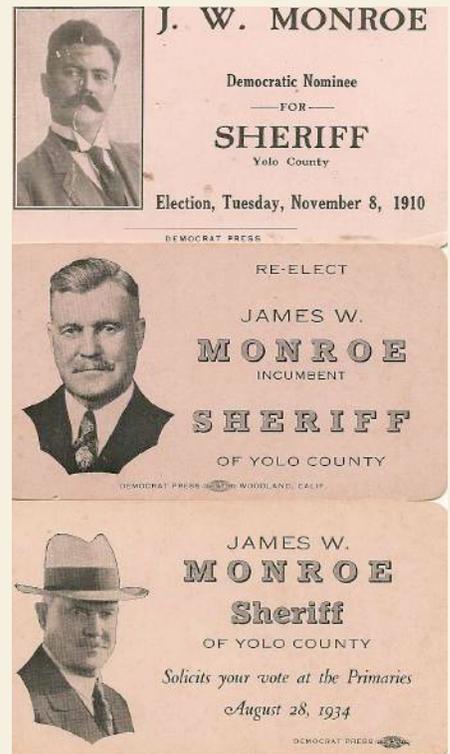
“His heart filled with anger and pity, Rice went to the door. Vaca was sitting in the room with a shotgun across his lap. His wife was sobbing in the darkness of the poorly lighted little cabin.

“‘What’s the trouble about, Vaca?’ the marshal asked quietly. ‘Don’t you think you’d better put that gun down and ...’

“Vaca snarled like an angry animal. The boom of a shotgun was his only reply.

“The charge tore great holes through the officer’s body. Marshall Rice died...

Informed, Sheriff Monroe responded: “‘The town is seething, Sheriff,’ I was told. ‘Everyone liked Rice. They’re all clamoring...you know what that means’.”



“You bet I knew. I streaked out of Davis like a Man o’War colt, and made it to Winters in what was nearly record time in those days.

“The situation had not been exaggerated. A few cool-headed citizens were holding back the mob. But their authority was weakening every minute. The mob was beginning to push and shove. A low hum arose...and angry, dangerous, menacing hum that has been the *death hymn* for many a man.

"I joined the calmer citizens, I had to talk fast...and I did. I told them that justice is the only guardian of us all, and if we violate her, we cannot expect her protection.

"Law is the only thing that protects you fellows from crime like this,' I said. 'If you make a mockery out of the law, you are defeating your own ends. Don't worry about Vaca. He'll get all that's coming to him.'

"They calmed down a bit, and I persuaded them to return to their homes.

"My promise was not unfulfilled. Vaca drew a life sentence, and died in prison."

Back to the SF Chronicle's account:

"Sheriff Monroe sped to the scene of a murder...and found the slayer had barricaded himself in a cabin, threatening to plug anyone who dared approach. Monroe, sizing up the situation, started walking alone toward the cabin.

"Don't do it, Jim,' a friend urged. 'Bosh...the fellow knows me. He won't refuse to listen to what I have to say,'

"As he came within earshot of the cabin, he called out: 'Hello in there! This is Jim Monroe. Heard you were in trouble...come to see what's the matter. Come out and talk to me.'

"That you, Jim?" said a voice from the cabin.

"Sure. Come on out.'

"Anyone with you?"

"No, I'm alone.'

"There was a moment of silence, then the door opened and the murderer stuck out his head. He saw that the crowd had remained at a comfortable distance. 'You know you have to face the music, old fellow,' Monroe told him

quietly. 'So don't make any more trouble, or make it worse for yourself.'

"The killer thought it over. 'I know that you'll see that I'm dealt with fairly, Jim...I'll go with you.' And he did.

He tells many more stories much like it, but to get a better picture of the man, I should back up and let him introduce himself as he did with his memoirs in 1938.

"My Early Days--Aiding the Law to Defeat the Noose

Telling your own story is a harder job than you'd think. Sure you know it better than anyone else. And you like to remember the wild old days, the spitting guns and angry men and violent words.

It's fun all right enough spinning yarns like that to your grandchildren.

But to tell it to a newspaper...that's a lot harder. You get a funny feeling that you're assuming more self-importance than is your due. Now I know that what I've done is just what every old-time sheriff did. And what would they think of me, if they knew I was going to put all of it in print?

The Good Old Days

The editor talks about "old-time residents of Yolo County who will be interested in reviewing the past" with me. He talks about the "younger generation who'd like to know some of the highlights of the earlier days."

That sounds all right to me.

Well, I know most of the "old-time residents" he talks about, and if my yarn reminds them of the good old days, I'd like to tell it.

The same with the youngsters. I liked to read about Washington and Jefferson and Aaron Burr when I was a kid. Just for the flavor of the times that

have gone. So if they get any pleasure out of this...

Sure I'll tell my story. For the old residents. For the kids. For anyone who might get a kick out of it.

So here goes..."

To be continued in future volumes.



James William Monroe, born in the Buckeye district near Winters in 1867 to John T. Monroe and Sarah Ellen Campbell, poses for his first portrait as Sheriff in 1911.

Earlier, he ran a butcher shop in Capay and ran cattle in the area. Meeting "Grey," a local girl, he courted her and wed her in 1902. Later he seeks gold in the Yukon Territory; serves as Supervisor in 1908; and then runs for sheriff of Yolo County, serving for 28 years. His eldest son, Forrest D. took over and served as sheriff for 32 years--making the Monroes sheriff for 60 consecutive years. The Yolo County Detention Center is named in their honor.