

The Ghost of the San Rafael Jail

By Brian K. Crawford

Marin County is proud of its famous Frank Lloyd Wright-designed courthouse, but the previous courthouse was also a beautiful building. It stood in downtown San Rafael, in Courthouse Square, not surprisingly.



Built in 1873, it was a towering Greek Revival edifice with an imposing columned façade and a cupola. The sheriff’s office was on the first floor and the jail was in the basement. A gallows stood in the stairwell and many public hangings had been carried out there. One dank cell was the setting for the strangest supernatural episode in Marin history.

It was Monday, November 11, 1889. A conman and petty thief named William F. Argo was waiting for a train at the Ignacio station, unaware that he was about to make the worst mistake of his life. Hoping to make a little money—or perhaps just feeling cold—he stole an overcoat and boarded the train for San Rafael. The stationmaster saw the theft and telegraphed Argo’s description to Sheriff Dan Healy in San Rafael. Not long after, a shabby man came into the Sheriff’s office, said he was broke, and asked for the fare for a ferry ticket to San Francisco. Deputy T. J. Fallon immediately recognized him from the description in the telegram: the man wore a coat like that reported to have been stolen. He was charged with burglary, taken downstairs, and locked in a cell.

As today, the wheels of justice turned slowly back then, and it was more than six weeks before he was arraigned. “At first the charges did not seem to weigh heavily on him. It was a petty offense at worst, and even if convicted he did not expect a heavy sentence. He was a light-hearted creature, full of animal spirits and buoyancy, apparently with a strong attachment for life.” He was also quite a good artist. His pencil sketches of his jailors were much admired. He asked the sheriff for some crayons and spent his free time drawing on the walls of his cell. The jail staff and visitors noted that many frescos were good. The sheriff allowed him out of his cell and he painted a large mural on the whitewashed walls of the lower corridor. “Sheriff Healy has in his

office a spirited representation of a lady on horseback in the act of being mashed by a Spanish cavalier, which has been admired by connoisseurs.”¹

Finally, on the day after Christmas, Argo was assigned James W. Cochrane as his defense attorney and he pleaded not guilty. Then, the situation became more serious. A. C. McAllister, formerly Captain of the Guard at San Quentin Prison, visited the jail and recognized Argo as an ex-convict who had served a term in that prison under the name of John Smith. This prior conviction meant a long-term if Cochrane was found guilty.

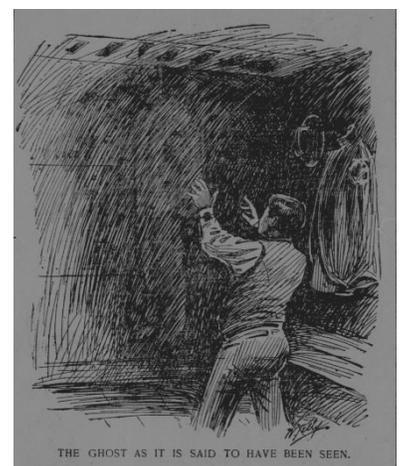


James W. Cochrane

On January 10, 1890, Deputy Sheriff Fallon heard a rasping sound from the jail and went to investigate. He found Argo standing by his window, but couldn't see anything unusual. Fallon called Sheriff Healy, who noticed that one of the iron bars had been about three-quarters sawed through. They overturned the prisoner's mattress and discovered two large table-knives, nicked so that they would cut through any thickness of iron. Argo was removed to the tanks—two metal boxes used to confine prisoners who were considered dangerous or escape risks. They were cold and dank, with metal bunks, and offered no comforts. Argo was no longer allowed to wander around the jail with his crayons and pencils, and he faced a lengthy prison term.

About seven o'clock that evening, two prisoners in the adjoining cell heard sounds of a struggle from the tank in which Argo had been confined. The prisoners shouted, but received no answer for some time as both the Sheriff and deputy were away for dinner. When they returned from dinner, the prisoners told them what they heard and the sheriff opened the tank. Argo was hanging by the neck from a ventilator at the north corner of his cell. He had cut his mattress into strips and made a rope.

It was a sad ending for a well-liked man with artistic sensibilities who had only stolen an overcoat. But, it was not the end of the story of William Argo. Some of prisoners reported hearing strange, alarming sounds, and several noted seeing his ghost hanging in the corner. The tank got a reputation, and prisoners often begged the sheriff not to put them in the haunted cell. One, accused murderer Henry “Dutchy” Baker, was a particularly hard case. The evidence against him was strong but not conclusive, and he would not confess. Sheriff Henry



THE GHOST AS IT IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN SEEN.

¹ Quotes from the *Marin County Tocsin*, January 11, 1890.

Harrison, who had replaced Healy, moved Baker into the corner tank. Soon Baker reported that he was receiving nightly visits from the ghost. A deputy was assigned to spend a night in the jail. He, too, heard strange noises, but an examination of the cell revealed nothing unusual. Baker remained confined there, though he frequently begged to be moved.

On Halloween night, 1891, Baker screamed for the sheriff and said he would gladly change his plea to guilty if it would get him out of that cell. He said: "The place is haunted. Every night about 11 o'clock I have been awakened by noises of heavy weights dropping on the concrete; the rattling of chains; the slamming of iron doors, and the steady tramp, tramp of some invisible spook. This thing became unbearable to me, and had I not pleaded guilty, I would have been insane before my trial was over."

The *Marin County Tocsin*, always ready with wry and purple prose, chimed in:

Court House Spooks

SAN RAFAEL, OCT. 31, 1891-- A large addition to the literature of demonology could be compiled by taking the evidence of various gentlemen who have experienced the county's hospitality on the ground floor of the Court House. If ten per cent of the narratives they tell of the carryings on of ghosts, hobgoblins and other breeds of spooks in that neighborhood during the lonely watches of the night be true, San Rafael must enjoy a popularity among the disembodied that it has not yet attained with the living. The County Jail has had a gruesome enough history to qualify it as a favorite stamping ground for spooks. Many a man has entered its gloomy precincts, never again to see the bright sunlight until he stood gazing at a sea of upturned faces, under a cross-beam with a rope dangling from it. Many a man, worn out with the ceaseless struggles and failures of existence, overburdened by the somber solitude and grim associations of the place, has risen in wild despair against life and taken an appeal to that supreme tribunal whose petitions are not addressed to earthly courts. Not a few have gone into the confinement of the County Jail, physically sound in body and mind and languished there till reason slowly faded from their eyes and mania or imbecility took its place. Passers by the Court House block at night have often shuddered as they heard wild shrieks, blasphemies and ravings issuing apparently from cavernous depths. Not much wonder, therefore, that the

average all-around tramp or crook, who, as a rule, are more superstitious than savages, feel rather "leery," as they call it, when they hear the bolts shoot behind them and listen to the retiring footsteps of Under Sheriff Fallon. Nor is it very surprising that overwrought imaginations have conjured up a large variety of grisly visitants, whose existence is believed in with as profound a confidence as the human intelligence is capable of extending to the most unquestioned fact. To do the subject justice, to give a full description of the various well recognized and steady ghostly tenants of the County Jail would be rather more than the *Tocsin* could undertake and would consume nearly all the reading matter of this issue.

The rumors continued, with accounts of sightings appearing regularly in the papers. Lee Doon was convicted of the murder of W. M. Shenton and sentenced to hang. He seemed unaffected by his approaching doom, but after a few visits from Argo's ghost, he broke down. He told the sheriff, "the apparition seated itself on his bunk every night and worried and tormented him so with its speechless vigil, that he nearly went crazy by daybreak. When the fatal time arrived Lee Doon was perfectly ready to go. He even asked the Sheriff if he couldn't hurry things up a little."²

Five years later, Emilio Morales, charged with burglary of a store in Marshall, spent a terrifying night in the haunted cell. He said he had seen the ghost hanging in the corner and said he would do the same thing if he had to spend another night there. When questioned by reporters, Morales said he had never been in the jail before and had never heard the stories about a ghost.

The following year it was a woman who saw Argo. Annie Kehoe, accused of the theft of a woman's wrap, was put into the haunted cell. "I'll bet you a thousand dollars to a nickel that I saw a ghost, if my life is worth it," said she in reply to a taunt that she was only dreaming. "I was lying on my cot when I saw a man crouching on the floor right near the tanks. I was terribly frightened and the man was continually moaning. He was dressed in dark clothes and wore a large, black slouch hat with a big brim and seemed to have two coats on."³

County Treasurer J. T. Fallon, who was undersheriff at the time Argo killed himself, was sent for and Annie Kehoe repeated the description of the ghost to him. He said that she

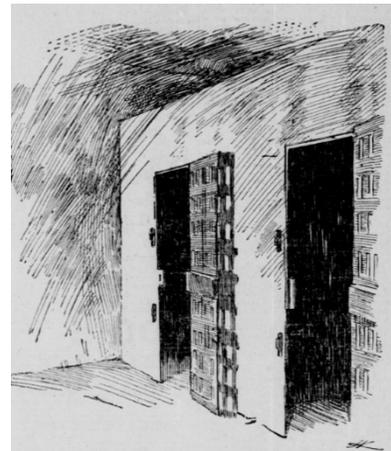
² *San Francisco Call*, January 26, 1896.

³ *San Francisco Call*, April 12, 1897.

described Argo precisely as Argo was dressed the night he committed suicide in the cell—two coats and that he looked exactly as specified by the woman.

The story had become so well known that the editor of the *San Francisco Call* arranged with the sheriff to allow a 24-year-old plucky reporter, Muriel Bailey, to spend a night in the haunted cell. Bailey was gutsy, but no fool—she invited two of her girlfriends to accompany her. They stared at the gallows just outside the cell and were oppressed at the thought of all the men who had died there. They spoke with a tramp in another cell. And, despaired at the thought of all the hopeless and unhappy people who had inhabited those cells. The women spent a frightening night, but saw and heard no ghosts. Muriel wrote a thoughtful and intelligent article on capital punishment and the reasons why people end up in jail and concluded with:

There was nothing for the visions in the unholy place; but the very air we were breathing reeked with the sighs and groans and misery of those who had been there before us— the playthings of circumstance with their unbridled and unprincipled natures. Every stone on which the friendless eyes had gazed had burned into it the thought that sprang from the heart. Thoughts of wasted life, of crime, accomplished and contemplated, of crushed hope, of great despair — oh, they lived and thrived there, these children of worse than madness, and they shrieked their little beings into our ears and made us feel their living. But this was no haunting peculiar to this cell. It is in them all, filling them, crouching in wait for the next occupant, to creep about him and instill itself into him and possess and handle him before he recognizes it.



Haunted Cell in Marin County Jail

It may not truly have visible ghosts that steal in the dead of the night from their hiding-place and crouch in corners, this strange cell, but it is haunted nevertheless, and you can feel it and know it, and if the visible spirit form does prowl about, it has invisible companionship.⁴

⁴ *San Francisco Call*, May 30, 1897.

Back at the jail, another visitation on the Fourth of July showed that Argo had musical, as well as artistic, ability. Augustine Valencia was arrested for disturbing the peace and being drunk. In the morning he reported seeing the ghost dancing a jig and singing, and the step kept in time with the song. When questioned, he pointed to the very corner where Argo had hanged himself.

The following year, Rafael Apostle, an Indian from Tomales charged with assault, smashed up the cell in his attempts to escape the ghost. The *Tocsin* seemed to take credit for inventing the whole story:

SAN RAFAEL, May 14, 1898-- The *Tocsin* has done several noteworthy things during its career, but perhaps nothing more remarkable than the creation of the Court House ghost. About eight years ago we wrote up a story told by a released prisoner who claimed to have had a spectral visitor while enjoying the county's hospitality for a few days. There wasn't much in the story and it was worked up solely as a filler, but from that day to this the Court House ghost has never ceased to walk. The article was copied and commented on from one end of the United States to the other. It crossed the Atlantic, was translated into nearly all the European languages, was made the subject of grave dissertations in Sanskrit and Coptic, and after running its course in the Orient has worked its way to California again by the back door. It has proved a priceless boon to journalism. Every inmate in the County Jail sees the ghost and whenever a sensation is needed all reporters have to do is to interview some hobo behind the bars. It did not surprise anyone that the ghost made a friendly call on Mr. Rafael Apostle recently, and that gentleman's embarrassment has been vividly depicted in the dailies. The phantom still has its old properties—a clanking chain, shuffling feet and the unpleasant sound of choking that a gentleman is supposed to make during the process of being hung.

The *Sausalito News* remained unconvinced:

SAN RAFAEL, MAY 14, 1898--Tramps innumerable have seen his ghost and the Sheriff has on many occasions found prisoners exhausted and cowering through

fear in a corner of the cell when he has opened up the jail at breakfast time. All describe the apparition precisely the same way. Some may believe that the story has gained such circulation among the class of prisoners who find their way into county jails, and that they make up the yarns as a pastime. This idea can hardly be entertained when it is known that Chinamen have also seen the ghost. Only last year a woman confined in the haunted chamber saw the apparition. At the time the papers treated the subject somewhat fully and one went so far as to send two reporters to San Rafael to spend a night in the chamber of horrors. They saw nothing, and the ghost which apparently is rather particular, declined to be interviewed. Now, within the week, another prisoner has seen the dreaded apparition and the mystery of the jail is still unsolved. We have a bit of respect for ghosts, and when we see the ghost walk we are correspondingly happy, but the San Rafael apparition, we are compelled to admit, is a mystery that baffles as well as interests us.

As others had noted, the ghost story tended to keep prisoners in line and caused miscreants to avoid San Rafael entirely, so it behooved the sheriff to make use of it. Then, later that year came a report that appeared to explain the ghostly occurrences. Someone murdered the captain of a yacht anchored off Sausalito. A deckhand, Peter Nelson, was arrested and soon was visited by the ghost. But Nelson was not credulous:

“About midnight I heard stealthy steps climbing up on the cell from the rear. In a moment there was a fearful groan and iron chains were clanked on the steel roof of the cell. You bet I was scared at first, but I concluded a ghost’s steps weren’t taken according to Hoyle when they could be heard. So I waited and at the next groan I was sure I had my man. I walked to the door where my voice could be heard and shouted: ‘Sheriff, come down off there. You can’t work that old ghost chestnut on me.’ There was silence and then another groan, but I distinctly heard the ghost crawl down and he never had the nerve to brace me again.”⁵

⁵ *San Francisco Call*, October 8, 1898

So, mystery solved; it was just a hoax. Of course the stories had started long before Sheriff Harrison's tenure, but perhaps he was just using the legend to cow his prisoners. But the scientific explanation was soon called into question again.

In March 1899, Augustine Valencia was jailed for stealing chickens. He was initially cellmates with the famous stagecoach robber Victor Colwell, but after Colwell sawed through the bars in an escape attempt, Valencia was moved, at his own request, to the haunted cell. He laughed at the idea of a "spook," and spent a month there without anything untoward occurring. But on March 3rd,

Shortly after 1 o'clock this morning two ex-convicts named Smith and McCarthy were awakened by yells and groans in Valencia's cell. In a minute all was quiet, and then came more howls and shrieks and prayers. They called Jailer Atchley, who went into Valencia's cell and found him doubled up on his cot, his face pale and distorted with fright, and his chin flecked with blood trickling from the end of his tongue, which he had bitten in a paroxysm of terror. He could not speak when removed from the "ghost cell," and tried to force his way through an outer door into the corridor. He was placed in a corner cell, but paced restlessly up and down all night without sleep.

"I was smoking a cigarette," he told Sheriff Taylor to-day, "and could not possibly have suffered a nightmare. I could not see that ghost, but it came and lay full length upon me. I felt it with my hands, and every time I threw it off it got back. When I tried to get off the bed it lifted the outer edge up and threw me against the wall. Then it sat on my shoulders. I pinched myself to make sure I was not dreaming and when the pinching hurt I was so scared I couldn't have helped screaming to save my life."⁶

So, was the ghost real again? But a new, less credulous century was dawning. Within a month the jailer, Mr. Kapperman, officially laid the ghost to rest. Said the *Call*:

⁶ *San Francisco Call*, March 3, 1899.

FAMOUS GHOST OF MARIN JAIL FINALLY CAPTURED

SAN RAFAEL, Jan. 28, 1900—A week ago Antone Jason, a boy of 15, sentenced to sixty days, was found by the jailer half dead with fright and declaring he had seen a spirit. The boy, so sincere did he seem in his fear, was removed to another cell. Then an investigation was made by two newspaper men, and the watchers were rewarded by the sight of the shadow and all sounds of all the other ghostly properties. When the shadow dived into the tank one of the investigators ran round behind it and sure enough it was Kappemann's cat. The gas jets in the corridor are so placed that any object moving on the opposite wall of the one on which the shadow was seen is magnified to gigantic proportions and assumes a fantastic aspect, which to a credulous mind certainly looks uncommonly like a ghost. When the feline dived behind the tank the shadow appeared to enter the water, and a large chain which is connected with the side of the tank for some forgotten purpose accounts for the spectral clanking.

This is the last mention of the ghost in the newspapers. Perhaps the cat was to blame after all. The old courthouse burned down in 1971; therefore William Argo's "ghost cell" is gone forever. Let's hope his ghost has found rest at last.