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Captain Slick's Company

JACQUELYN PROCTER GRAY

The word *vigilante* is derived from the word *vigilant*, which means to be watchful. Although it certainly isn't comfortable to know that others may be watching us, that knowledge alone may keep many of us from breaking the law. The story of vigilantes is ever-popular in fiction and television, and while we may support their effort to hand out justice when the justice system itself has failed, their actions may be premature and misguided.

According to many historical sources, early settlers entering into a newly established community faced the problems associated with a lack of law and order. Solid church homes as well as competent lawmen held violence in check, but before either of those factors could be in place, women especially complained that the menfolk tended to drink more, cuss more, fight, and steal. These were ordinarily law-abiding citizens! After all, unless an equally aggressive victim took offense, there was no one to keep their activities in check. Out of these circumstances, a vigilante society is often born.

Although settlers began to pour in shortly after John Hunt's arrival in 1805, it wasn't until 1809 that a law was passed allowing for a judicial system to be established in Madison County. It was at that time that Stephen Neal came to be our first sheriff and justice of the peace. Before Sheriff Neal's arrival, law and order was enforced, maintained, and the guilty were punished by a vigilante group known as Captain Slick's Company. Their actions were swift and harsh, and the object of their lessons did not always live to commit another offense.

For a relatively minor offense, the criminal was given a warning to leave town. If a thief did not leave in the pre-determined time, he faced the probability of a whipping, having both ears cropped, and his cheeks branded. Thirty-nine lashes was the basic punishment, inflicted on men and women, and in addition they may have been required to stand at the public pillory for all to see in order that they too would remember to obey the basic laws of mankind. They would also come to recognize the community criminals and perhaps have a chance to inflict a little pain, just for good measure.

Someone who stole a horse or mule also stole one's livelihood, making this a most serious offense. An impromptu jury was summoned to assess a fine, not to exceed \$500, receive 39 lashes, branded with the letter "T" and jailed for not more than one year. In addition, they would be required to return the horse or mule or pay the value to the victim of the crime.

If a white person was found guilty of perjury, they were fined \$300 and received 39 lashes, and forced to stand in the pillory two hours. A slave or mulatto person found guilty of perjury would receive 39 lashes and have one ear nailed to the pillory, stand for one hour at which time the ear would be cut off and then they would lose the other ear in the like manner. Why such a difference in the punishment? Slaves would not have had \$300 for a fine.

Other similar punishments, including the death penalty, were meted out. In the book, "Historic Huntsville from Early History of Huntsville, Alabama, 1804 – 1870" by Edward Chambers Betts (published 1909 and reprinted in 1966 by Southern University Press), Mr. Betts tells us that the origins of Captain Slick's Company cannot be proven, and may perhaps be a legend. However, if they actually did not exist, they may have survived in rumor-form in order to intimidate potential criminals.