

“Parties to this Jury Unknown”

Excerpt, San Luis Obispo *Tribune*, 1883:

County Correspondence
SANTA MANUELA SCHOOL

EDITOR TRIBUNE:--Following is a report of the Santa Manuela school for the month ending November 2nd, 1883. Total days attendance 299 1/2; days absence 22 1/2, whole number of pupils enrolled 19; average number belonging 15. Present during the month, Joe Branch, Julius Hemmi, Leroy Jatta, Charlie Kinney and Addie Hemmi.

CLARA GANOUNG, Teacher.
Arroyo Grande, Nov. 3, 1883.

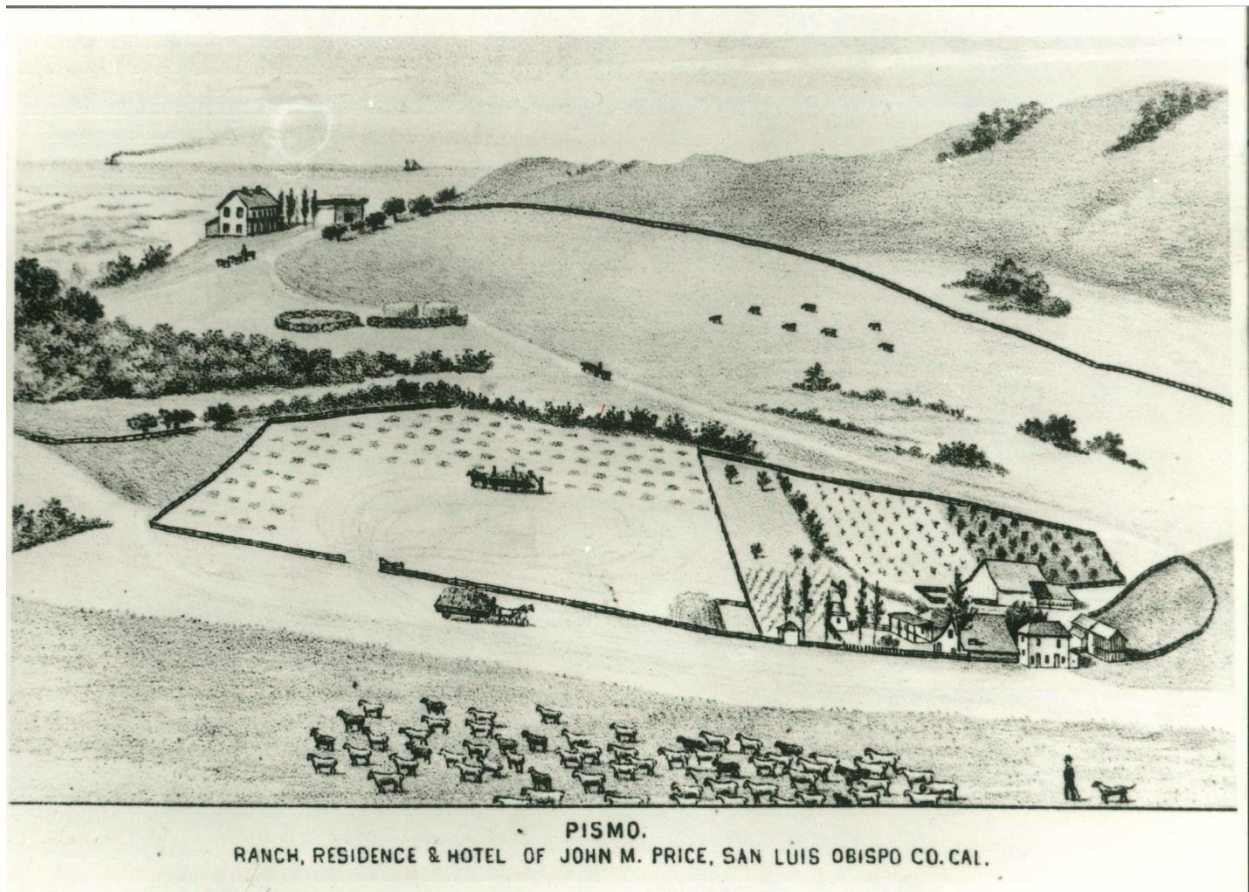


The Santa Manuela Schoolhouse. *Photo by Elizabeth Gregory.*

When the Lopez Dam was completed in the Upper Arroyo Grande Valley in 1968, San Luis Obispo County officials were hopeful that the lake intended to appear behind it might fill in five years. It filled in one. So much rain came in 1968-69—the opposite of

the terrible 1860s drought—that the dam spilled in April. During the winter, Arroyo Grande Creek filled to twenty feet deep where it flowed under Harris Bridge, at the intersection of Huasna Road and today’s Lopez Drive. School had to be canceled some days. With the high school built on top of hardpan in the floodplain of the Lower Valley, upperclassman joked that the standing waters were too deep for freshmen, who, luckily, attended a separate campus safely atop Crown Hill.

A wonderful example of historical foresight came before the dam’s completion, when authorities moved the historic one-room Santa Manuela school away from what is now lake bottom. Today it sits in Heritage Square, near the swinging bridge that spans the creek in downtown Arroyo Grande. It is a lovingly preserved and charming evocation of the kind of education that mattered most to 19th century farmers.



An idealized 1880s ranch—in this case, John Price's. *South County Historical Society*.

That meant, for students like Julius Hemmi, also known as P.J., the wisdom of the basics. P.J. would have been one of the bigger boys of the nineteen Santa Manuela

students and near the end of his education, because the high school was still thirteen years in the future. The youngster, if he was attentive, would have mastered, by the time the 1883 notice appeared in the *Tribune*, his times tables and percents, his state and his European capitals, would be able to recite “The Gettysburg Address” and to write, for a boy, passable longhand. That was all that this thirteen-year-old boy. would need to take up farming with his immigrant father, Peter. If P.J. was a big boy, and he probably was, there is always the chance that he got to practice the kind of tyranny over his younger classmates depicted in novels like *Tom Brown’s School Days*. But, with nineteen students, a big boy like Julius would have been on Miss Ganoung’s short leash. If she was typical of rural schoolmarms in the late 19th century, she kept that leash tight, she protected the younger children, and she kept a small circle on her blackboard against which saucy students would press their noses, without moving, for an hour at a time.

P.J., though we don’t know this, may not have needed the chalkboard circle at all, because the other names in the newspaper notice – Branch and Jatta, for example–belonged to families far more important and far more prosperous than the Hemmis were, so he might have accepted his place in the small social hierarchy of Lopez Canyon. Joseph Branch’s grandparents had been the first to settle the Arroyo Grande Valley, in 1837, and his grandfather had to contend with monstrous grizzly bears and Tulare Indian raids, and he vanquished both threats. Leroy Jatta was the son of a Canadian immigrant, Joseph Jatta. Joseph, though a more recent arrival, would establish important connections through the marriage of a daughter, Clara, to the up-and-coming Loomis family. Progressive and community-minded settlers like the Jattas and the Loomises would form the foundation of Arroyo Grande’s merchant class, and their heritage would be important to the Valley deep into the twentieth-first century. They were families known for their enterprise and, even more, for their integrity. We do know this much more about P.J.: he had a little sister, Addie, to look after at school, and he would always know that she was looking up at him. We know, too, that Mrs. Hemmi adored her son.

It was April Fool’s Day, 1886, so the teachers in town, at the two-story school that stood on the site of today’s Ford agency in Arroyo Grande, would have refused to believe the ashen-faced boys that morning, as they ran into the Arroyo Grande Grammar School, blurting out their news even before they began the morning ritual of hanging their coats and hats on two tiers of brass hooks, and placing below them their lunches, packed in tin boxes. These boys attended a school monstrously bigger than Santa Manuela. (The Arroyo Grande students would have seen Santa Manuela as a school for country hicks.) Since they were boys of the town, a little more sophisticated and a little more jaded than the children from the one- or two-room schools of the Upper Arroyo Grande Valley, Los Berros, Edna, or Nipomo, no teacher with more than

two years' experience would have believed for a moment any of them when they insisted that they'd seen two men hanged from the Pacific Coast Railway trestle at the upper end of town, just below Crown Hill. No teacher would have hesitated to rebuke a little boy with such a cruel April Fool's joke, one so tasteless that it merited a circle on the blackboard or, even better – far better—a mouthful of powdered soap.

But the little boys weren't lying.

There *were* two men hanging from the Pacific Coast Railway trestle, and they would remain there until the coroner drove down that afternoon from the city, from San Luis Obispo, stared up at them, testily convened a work party to cut them down that then doubled as his inquest jury. One of the bodies belonged to Addie Hemmi's big brother.



The PCRR trestle, site for the Hemmi lynchings, at right in this photo from about 1890. PCRR passenger cars wait on a siding next to a lumber mill that faced Arroyo Grande's Branch Street. History Center of San Luis Obispo County.

P.J. was fifteen years old when the good citizens of Arroyo Grande lynched him from the little railroad bridge over the Arroyo Grande Creek, an incident shocking in many ways, but in part because of its timing: it was four decades after the Gold Rush, yet the

justice of what the miners had called “Judge Lynch” was very much alive, unlike Peter Julius Hemmi. He would have been as stiff as a dead mule deer by the time the awed little third-graders found him the morning of April Fool’s Day. A buck’s death was the only kind of death these little boys might ever have seen, a death dealt at the hands of their fathers. Above the empty stiffness of his body, P.J.’s face would have been the color of clay. So would the face of P.J. and Addie’s father, Peter, who was hanging next to him. For the time being, the best conclusion that the coroner’s inquest could provide was that the two had died at the hands of “parties to this jury unknown.”ⁱ The little boys who had found the bodies on their way to school could not have known that these deaths, too, had been dealt at the hands of their fathers.

* * *

If the exact identities of the lynch mob’s members remain a mystery, a little more is known about the two men that they hanged from the railroad bridge. The elder Hemmi, Peter, was born about 1836 in Switzerland. He appears in an 1884 San Luis Obispo newspaper article entitled “An Old Building,” which discusses the history of an adobe being demolished near Mission San Luis Obispo, connecting it with “a man named Hemmi” who operated it as a hotel as early as 1856. His name appears again in Internal Revenue Service tax rolls in 1863 and 1864 as either the owner or proprietor of an “eating house” in San Luis Obispo. The 1870 census places him in Arroyo Grande, married to Maria Hemmy [sic] and the father of infant P.J. In 1879, he filed a legal notice in the San Luis Obispo *Tribune* to take possession, under the Homestead Act, of a parcel in Lopez Canyon, with the endorsement of Ramon and Frank Branch and San Luis Obispo businessman J.P. Andrews.

At this point in Hemmi’s life, something seems to go wrong. A year after the newspaper’s legal notice, he is the butt of a gentle joke in a *Tribune* in a story about two local wagon accidents:

...The other capsized was engineered by our friend from the Fabled Rhine, Peter Hemmi. Before starting down a rather steep decline in the road, he took the commendable precaution [of locking both front wheels] although his good wife reminded him that it was unnecessary, and he would doubtless be successful by inverting things generally if he only locked one. The sensible lady disposed herself and two little ones [P.J. and Addie] in the most advantageous position, and prepared to meet the catastrophe. Just as the horizontal parallels of the wagon assumed an angle of forty-five degrees to the perpendicular, she gave her largest baby a fling into the sand about ten feet distant, and then lit out herself with the other. Peter was not to be heard from. His wife was about

to come to the conclusion that he had gone to Arizona—Tombstone District—when some men came up and found him covered up in the debris of his cart and its load of market sass.

A man with a good sense of humor might have enjoyed this story told on himself. The story would have humiliated other men: the warning of imminent disaster by the “sensible” wife (What might that imply about her husband?), the overturned wagon that fulfilled her warning, the comic rescue of the heedless farmer by other men, who found him buried in the market vegetables that he’d worked so hard to cultivate. A man without a sense of humor might have seethed at being the butt of this joke.



Branch Street, Arroyo Grande, in the 1880s. *South County Historical Society*.

There is no evidence that Peter Hemmi was the kind of man able to laugh at himself. After his death, there are multiple suggestions in newspaper accounts that he was covetous of and obsessive about a piece of farmland adjacent to his parcel in Lopez Canyon. According to the San Luis Obispo *Daily Republic*, he “annoyed a widow woman who formerly owned the land to such an extent that she was obliged to sell out” to a young couple originally from Redwood City, Eugene and Nancy Walker. Walker, said the *Republic*, “was a quiet, inoffensive man, well known in this city [Arroyo Grande] and well liked by all who knew him.” He had worked as a printer in San Mateo County before he and his wife, the parents of a little girl, moved to Lopez

Canyon. Peter Hemmi evidently picked up where he had left off with the widow: he was suspected of poisoning Walker's livestock and breaking down his fences to scare him off the land. Walker sought a restraining order to force Hemmi, who had begun to threaten his life, to leave him in peace; the order was turned down for lack of evidence. On March 31, 1886, the neighbors' dispute finally turned deadly.

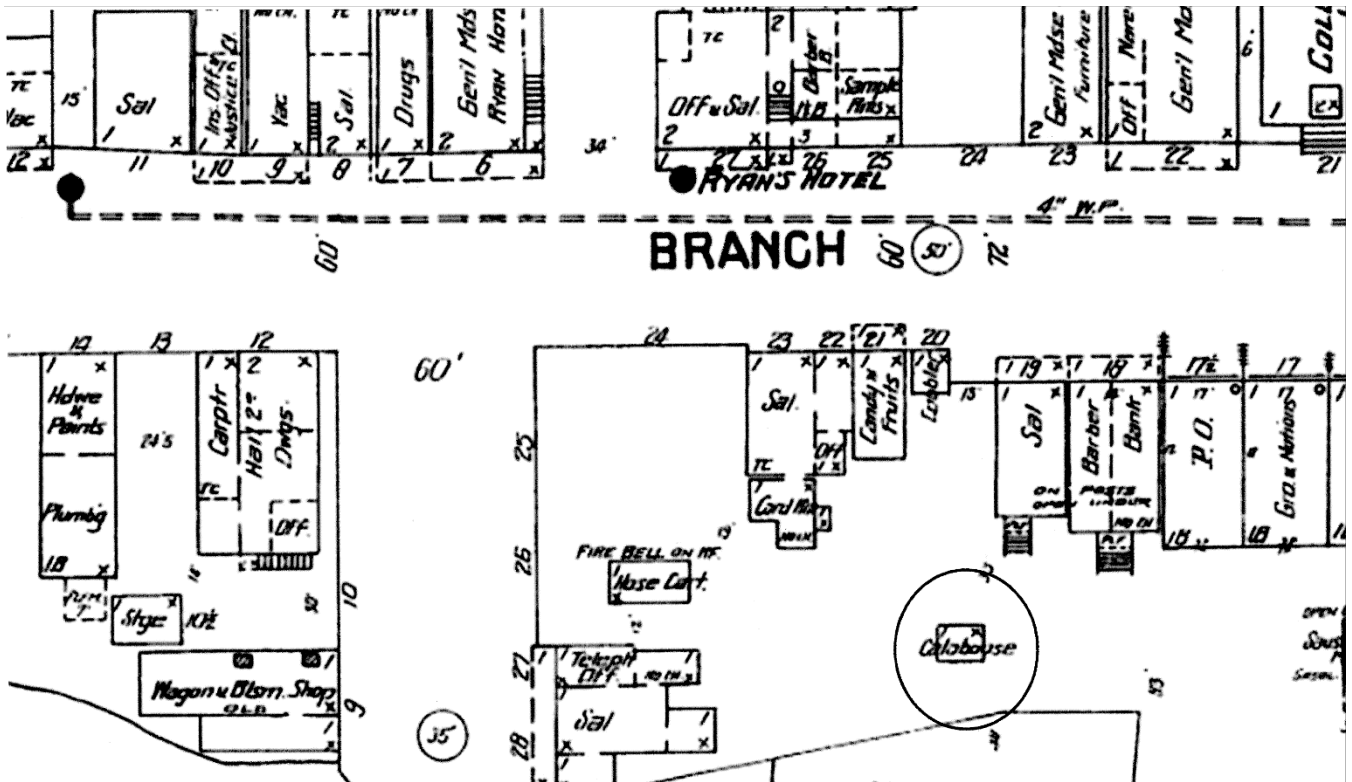
Eugene Walker was using a spade to turn over the soil in his vegetable garden when P.J.'s first rifle shot hit him in the back. He crumpled immediately, the spade across his chest. Nancy Walker heard the gunshot, came out of the house screaming, and P.J. dropped her with a shot to the chest, the bullet piercing the young woman's lung. He must have been approaching the house, because he was close to Walker, who was attempting to get up, when he finished him with the third shot. The fourth hit Mrs. Walker again, shattering her arm, and the fifth was intended for her, as well, but the family dog distracted P.J. and he killed it instead. The young man stood for several minutes over the Walkers' motionless bodies before walking away.



The two-cell Paso Robles jail was typical of small-town jails in the late 1800s and early 1900s; one prisoner dug an escape tunnel but discovered the next morning that he'd "escaped" into the adjoining cell. San Luis Obispo *Tribune*.

Nancy Walker was still alive. Grievously wounded and, according to one newspaper account, pregnant with her second child, she crawled back to the farmhouse, collected

her two-year-old toddler, and began painfully crawling toward the Myrtle family's farmhouse, over a mile away. It was Mr. Myrtle who rode into town with the news. Sheriff A.C. McLeod and a deputy rode for the scene of the reported murders and found three neighbors who told them that Walker's body was in his kitchen, where it "was found lying on the floor, and the walls and the floor of the room were splattered with blood," probably that of Mrs. Walker, shed when she had returned for her child. They then rode to the Myrtle family's home to take Mrs. Walker's statement.



This 1903 Sanborn Fire Insurance map shows the possible location of the "calaboose" (circled) where the Hemmis were held. *Author's collection.*

In the meantime, Peter Hemmi, P.J., and P.J.'s cousin, George Glesse, had been arrested and brought back to town by Arroyo Grande Constable Thomas Whiteley, also the town's bootmaker, and his deputy, Joseph Eubanks, and brought to the "calaboose," a small wooden jail near the creek on Bridge Street. The suspects were to be held here

temporarily, until Sheriff McLeod could transport them to the jail in the basement of the county courthouse in San Luis Obispo. The three never made it. Whiteley described what happened next:

Myself and Eubanks guarded the jail during the forepart of the night. I left Eubanks in charge and I took a walk around town and all was quiet. Eubanks and I, being hungry, went to supper leaving Dan Rice [a prominent local man who supervised the building of Arroyo Grande's roads] in charge of the jail.

Whiteley and Eubanks were interrupted in mid-meal by a mob who overpowered them and locked them inside a back room in Pat Manning's restaurant. The crowd then descended on the little jail, pushed Rice aside, and pushed the Hemmis and Glesse, probably along today's Olohan Alley, toward the northern edge of town. They brought their prisoners to the Pacific Coast Railway trestle over the creek. The elder Hemmi had enough time to persuade the mob to release Glesse, his nephew, whom he said had no part in the shootings. Glesse reportedly fled with the noose still around his neck and a length of rope trailing. The Hemmis were then shoved off the bridge into the chasm below. The two men strangled at the ends of their ropes.

While Eugene Walker's body lay on ice awaiting the arrival of his father from Redwood City, Maria Hemmi, the sensible woman who had warned her husband not to lock both wheels of their market wagon, drove what was probably the same wagon into town to fetch the bodies of her husband and son. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* recorded a scene filled with Victorian melodrama:

When Mrs. Hemmi came to get the bodies of her husband and son, their faces were uncovered. She gazed on the face of her husband with a set and scornful countenance, but when she looked at Julius her face softened; she burst into tears, and exclaimed "Oh, my poor innocent boy! I know you done the deed. Your father made you do it. But as for him," pointing at the body of her husband, the look of scorn returning to her features, "I care nothing; he has been a brute all his life."

Arroyo Grande thought both men brutes—they had, after all, tried to kill a young mother, just as the San Miguel Mission killers had killed Mrs. Reed, and a local newspaper account said of the lynch mob "in this they did right," a sentiment echoed from the pulpit of the town's Methodist church—so there was no place for them to be buried. It was the town's matriarch, *Doña* Manuela Branch, who offered Maria Hemmi a gravesite a few yards away from that of her husband's, the man who had founded Arroyo Grande. Father and son were buried there, in a common grave, in the hollow of a peaceful little oak-studded canyon about two miles east of town.



The Hemmis' grave marker in the Branch family's cemetery. *Author photo.*

There was another factor that might have motivated the lynch mob. They were acutely aware of their own power. Only six weeks before the citizens of Arroyo Grande did away with the Hemmis, three hundred of them had descended on the little town's Chinese residents and ordered them to leave within twenty days, an incident that paralleled anti-Chinese violence in the Far West in late 1885 and early 1886. The February threat of mob violence against local Chinese appears to have been something like a dress rehearsal for the mob that lynched the Hemmis, and there may have an element of xenophobia in that event, as well.

The *grand dame* of South County historians was a local newspaper columnist during the 1920s and 1930s, Madge Ditmas. Fifty years after the lynching, Ditmas still shows the remnants of the resentment the town had for Peter Hemmi in the collection of her

columns, *According to Madge*. She never names Hemmi, but refers to him as “The Frenchman.” Peter Hemmi was an immigrant, and his English was probably heavily accented. This factor, too, may have doomed him and his son.



Dr. Ed Paulding, shown here late in life, treated Nancy Walker's wounds. *South County Historical Society*.

Nancy Walker was doomed, as well. She was reported dead, then near death, but Sheriff McLeod found her responsive, Constable Whiteley visited and reported her improved, and when town doctor Ed Paulding treated her wounds—he was reputedly the best orthopedist in the county—he was amazed at her resilience. Dr. Paulding reported her weak but recovering her appetite, her wounds “healing nicely,” and the healing was taking place without the need for opiates. Seven months later, she died at the home of relatives in Redwood City. Despite Paulding’s optimistic report after the shootings, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that “the heroine of that awful experience lingered in great pain until her death.” She was buried in Redwood City with her husband.

The identities of the men who had belonged to the lynch mob were never established, not even after a police detective spent a week in Arroyo Grande trying to pump information from its citizens. They remained steadfastly tight-lipped. In 2004, the town remembered the lynching with a somber ceremony; Arroyo Grandians were now far more equivocal about this incident from the past. One of the men helping to organize

the observance was John Loomis, the great-grandson of Joseph Jatta, the Canadian immigrant who became one of the town's most prominent and respected citizens. Jatta had claimed in 1886 that he was shocked at the lynchings and that he was on the road from Nipomo when they happened. More than a hundred years later, Loomis contradicted that account: his great-grandfather was with the mob, their faces partly covered by kerchiefs, when they broke into the jail and took the three men away from Dan Rice and the one other witness who had been there that night: Maria Hemmi.

Fred Jones, a young man about P.J.'s age, the grandson of Manuela Branch, was part of the mob, too, and he never forgot the look on Mrs. Hemmi's face when the masked men burst in. She knew exactly what was about to happen. And she would have easily recognized an undisguised Joseph Jatta. His son, Leroy, went to the same little Santa Manuela school that P.J. and Addie had attended. The schoolhouse, saved in 1969 from the waters of Lopez Lake, nine miles away, now stands about 200 yards from the place on the creek where the lynch mob's rope ended P.J.'s life.
