

# Lynch Law at Auburn

*By Oregonian*

This editorial and accompanying letter describe the lynching of a man known as “Tom the Spaniard” in the eastern Oregon mining town of Auburn. It was published in the *Oregonian* on December 3, 1862.

Auburn was a boom town established in the Powder River Basin in the fall of 1861. Within two years the population of the new mining community had exploded to more than 5,000 residents, the majority of them miners in search of gold.

As the letter by “Crayon” describes, in late November 1862 Auburn was “the scene of a terrible excitement, produced by a double murder and dire vengeance overtaking the murderer.” A “desperado” known as Tom the Spaniard—also called Spanish Tom—got into an argument with two Americans over a card game. After an exchange of harsh words, Tom stabbed both of the Americans to death, then quickly left town. He was arrested several days later and brought back to Auburn, where he was put under the custody of the sheriff.

Although the sheriff and his supporters did their best to maintain civil order, the townspeople formed a lynch mob, calling for Tom’s death. “Crayon” describes the scene: “The Sheriff and his party held fast, so did the crowd; and for three minutes the fight appeared evenly contested; all that could be seen was a vast sea of heads. Soon the cries of ‘shoot!’ and ‘don’t shoot!’ greeted our ears, quickly followed by shots, when the crowd opened, and the prisoner was in the hands of a mob.”

The lynch mob dragged Tom by his leg iron down the hill to Main Street, then put a rope around his neck and dragged him over half a mile before finally hanging his corpse from a tree. “Crayon” notes that another Spaniard was shot dead during the fracas, and three other men were wounded. He concludes that “this was without exception the most barbarous transaction I have ever witnessed, and one the memory of which it will take Auburn years to eradicate.”

In the accompanying editorial, the *Oregonian* condemned the “cruel and barbarous” practice of “lynch law” as practiced in Auburn. Although agreeing that Tom probably deserved hanging, the paper argued that “no organization of this kind has been attended with good without also doing much harm.”

**Further Reading:** Bancroft, Hubert Howe. *Popular Tribunals*. Volume 1. San Francisco, Calif., 1887.

Meier, Gary, and Gloria Meier. *Oregon Outlaws: Tales of Old-Time Desperadoes*. Boise, Idaho, 1996.

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