

## Boothill Five

Not a great deal is known about the lives of these five men. The dates and places of birth are unknown, except for Helm who was born on Jan 28, 1827, in Lincoln County, KY. However, they are quite well known for their demise which occurred on January 14, 1864, in Virginia City, Montana.

In the 1860s, the Montana Vigilantes conducted the deadliest campaign of vigilantism in the history of America. In just a matter of days they hung 21 men in the Virginia City area, including Henry Plummer, a sheriff presumed to be the leader of a large band of murderers and highwaymen robbing gold shipments.

On Wednesday, July 13, 1864, the executive committee of the vigilantes met in secrecy in Virginia City to determine who would be the next victims of their justice system. Six names were placed on the list:

Jack Gallagher and Hayes Lyons were chosen because the previous June they had participated in the cold-blooded murder of D. H. Dillingham, a deputy of Henry Plummer, who learned that his boss and fellow deputies were, in fact, highwaymen. Frank Parish owned the Rattlesnake Ranch which the bandits used in their stagecoach robberies. "Club-foot George" Lane, as he was cruelly called because of a deformation of his right foot, worked as a shoe cobbler across the street from the stage station. He would pass on information to Plummer when it was obvious the stage was carrying gold. The vigilante by-laws stated they would not mete out punishments for crimes committed in other venues. But, they didn't always obey their own laws. They added horse stealing in Washington to further justify Lane's lynching. They knew of no Montana crimes perpetrated by Helm, but they were aware of a friend he drunkenly slew in Missouri: a man he killed in California; and he had bragged about surviving a frozen winter in the Sierra Nevada Mountains by practicing cannibalism. One historian of the period described Helm as "one of those hideous monsters of depravity whom neither precept nor example could have saved from a life of crime." There was a vague accusation against the sixth man, William Hunter, for robbing an unarmed Mormon miner. Some of the vigilantes probably disagreed with Hunter being on the list and warned him, as he disappeared the night he was sentenced to death.

By daybreak on Thursday, January 14, 1864, the hills around Virginia City were covered with an army of vigilantes to ensure that no one escaped. At ten o'clock, James Williams, the executive officer, dispatched a large, armed force around the town to arrest the condemned men. The arrests were easily performed and no one resisted. Gallagher was in his cobbler shop, Helm in the street in front of the hotel and Lyon in his cabin cooking breakfast.

They were brought in front of the executive committee and told of the charges against them. They all swore their innocence. Frederick Allen, in his book says that "Helm earned a place in Montana legend by offering to swear on the Bible that he had done nothing wrong. Fascinated by... an amazing display of apostasy, the vigilantes produced a copy of the Good Book, which Helm made a show of kissing. "I am as innocent as the babe unborn," he swore. "I never killed anyone, or robbed or defrauded any man." When told he could not escape execution, he confessed to the California and Oregon killing." Gallagher confessed to a stage holdup in which he was not even a suspect. The vigilantes were very disappointed when they were unable to get any of the five to admit to a connection with Plummer. But it didn't prevent them with going ahead with their plans.

The prisoners were marched up the street to where Clayton & Hales Drug Store was still being constructed. A large, exposed main beam was to be the gallows. Five ropes were pitched over the beams, nooses were fashioned on the ends and five barrels placed beneath the ropes. The prisoners and their guards entered the store and Williams ordered the men to be lifted onto the barrels in order— Lane first, then Lyons, Gallagher, Helm and Parish. Gallagher demanded and received a shot of whiskey as his final request. The nooses were put into place and Williams gave his famous order, "Men do your duty." Lane jumped off the barrel before it could be kicked out from under him and his bad foot was scratching the ground as he strangled to death. Gallagher, seeing Lane

struggle shouted at the executioners, "I hope forked lightning will strike ever strangling son of a bitch of you." His barrel was kicked away and he fell twisting and jerking.

Helm was the next to go and he shouted out to Gallagher, "Kick away old fellow, I'll be in hell with you in a minute." Then he shouted out to the crowd, "Every man for his principles! Hurrah for Jeff Davis! Let `er rip!" His neck snapped and he died quickly. Parish asked for, and received, a neckerchief over his head and, he too, died cleanly. Lyons had been denied a chance to see his mistress on the way to the gallows, and now he asked only that his gold watch be given to her and he joined the others.



**The beam from which the five men were hanged in the drug store.**

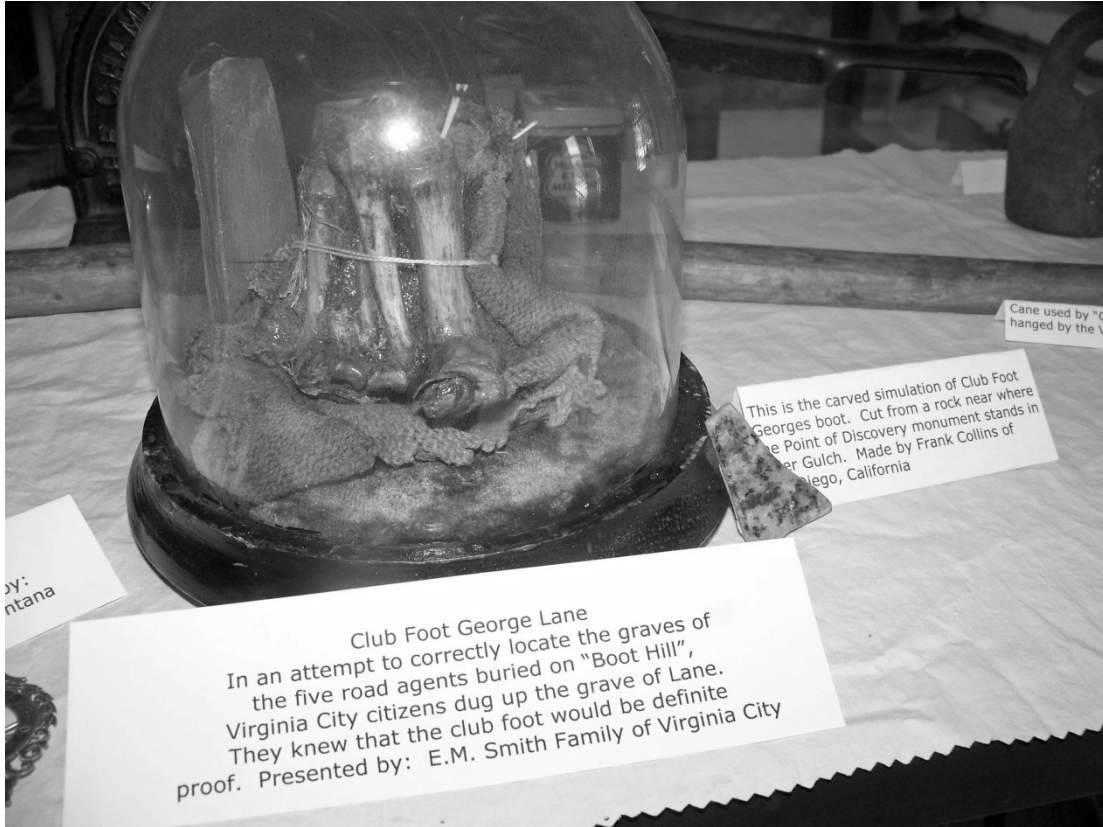


**A replica of the drugstore as it appeared at the time of the hanging and the vigilantes that carried out the deed. This is currently on display inside the drugstore.**

**(Author's Collection)**

The drug store still stands today and the beam from which they were hanged can be viewed by the public. They were buried in an unmarked grave in Boot Hill cemetery along with other executed men. In 1907, some residents of Virginia City started questioning if they were really buried there. It was decided that if they could dig up Club-foot George Lane, that would be proof enough. A former vigilante showed questioners exactly where Lane was buried. The body was exhumed and his clubfoot was found and removed. It is now on display at the Thompson Hickman Museum in Virginia City. It has since become one of the Museum's most important exhibits.

## OLD WEST STORY



**George's club foot on display in the museum**

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Markers for the "Boothill Five" (Author's Collection)

Source: *A Decent Orderly Lynching: The Montana Vigilantes* by Frederick Allen