How Los Angeles Covered Up the Massacre of 17 Chinese

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The greatest unsolved murders in Los Angeles' history — bloodier than the Black Dahlia, more coldly vicious than the hit on Bugsy Siegel — occurred on a cool fall night in 1871. Seventeen Chinese men and boys, including a popular doctor, were hanged by an angry mob near what is now Union Station, an act so savage that it bumped the Great Chicago Fire off the front page of The New York Times.

Eight men eventually were convicted, but the verdicts were

thrown out almost immediately for a bizarre technical oversight by the prosecution. Unbelievably for a crime that occurred in full view of hundreds of people, no one was ever again prosecuted.

The truth about the Chinese Massacre remained buried for 140 years, until writer John Johnson Jr. took up the hunt. Johnson spent more than a year examining every piece of evidence, including documents long thought to have been lost to history.

Aided by newly discovered records at the Huntington Library, Johnson found that the men convicted of the killings were in fact guilty. Little surprise there.

But Johnson found something astonishing — and sinister. The bloodlust unleashed that October night was allowed to unfold (if not also set in motion) by some of the city's leading citizens, men so powerful they could arrange to have the convictions fall apart and the reasons for the massacre covered up.

What emerged from Johnson's research is a portrait of a town engaged in a death struggle against its own worst nature. Come with us on a journey into the liar's den of our Los Angeles ancestors.

P olice officer Jesus Bilderrain was settling into his drink at

Higby's saloon on the evening of Oct. 24, 1871, when he heard gunfire.

Bilderrain, one of just six cops in rowdy, fast-growing Los Angeles, jumped on his horse and galloped hard for Calle de los Negroes, or Negro Alley.

The officer didn't need great detecting skills to guess that the trouble came from the Alley, a narrow lane fronted by crumbling adobes left over from the city's earliest days. Named for the dark-skinned Spaniards who owned property there, Negro Alley for two decades had been the most dangerous piece of topography in the United States. Its gambling houses and flesh markets were home to gamblers and quick-draw artists, men like the princely Jack Powers, the bloodthirsty Cherokee Bob and the notorious man-killer Crooked Nose Smith.

Of 44 homicides that occurred in Los Angeles in one 15-month period — the highest murder rate ever recorded in the United States — a good portion took place in the Alley.

Bilderrain arrived to find a man named Ah Choy lying on the ground, blood spurting from a gunshot wound to his neck. Spotting a group of fleeing Chinese men, Bilderrain chased them into a large L-shaped adobe, the Coronel Building, a crowded warren of shops and tiny apartments that housed the core of the Chinese community.

According to the first version of the story Bilderrain told (before revising it several times in the months that followed), he courageously dashed into the building and was immediately shot. He came back through the doorway, minus his gun and with a bullet in his shoulder.

Falling to his knees, the officer blew his whistle to raise the alarm.

Responding, a man named Robert Thompson ran to the door of the Coronel Building. Thompson was not a cop. In fact, he had been the proprietor of one of the town's most notorious saloons, the Blue Wing. But in frontier Los Angeles, citizens were used to taking the law into their own hands. In the previous two decades, 35 people were lynched by Vigilance committees in Los Angeles.

As Thompson approached the door, a sometime cop named Adolfo Celis called out that the Chinese were armed.

“I'll look out after that,” Thompson replied. Sticking his weapon inside the door, he fired blindly into the darkened interior.

He then pulled open the door to go inside and took a bullet in the chest. “I am killed,” he is supposed to have muttered as he turned back toward the street and collapsed. He died an hour later.

Incensed by Thompson's mortal wounds, a mob estimated at 500 — nearly a tenth of the entire population of Los Angeles — gathered in the Alley to lay siege to the Chinese.

At first, the mob was held at bay by gunfire coming from inside the Coronel. Eventually, the mobsters hatched a new plan. Climbing onto the roof, they used axes to hack holes in the tar covering. Then they sprayed shotgun and rifle fire into the rooms below. By the time the mob had battered open a second door with a large rock, the Chinese had all but given up.

What came next was an orgy of violence shocking even by the decadent standards of the city of Los Angeles.

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In the dim gaslight of recently installed street lamps, armed bands of men dragged cringing Chinese to gallows hastily erected downtown. Bodies soon were swinging from two upturned wagons on Commercial Street, as well as the crossbar of the Tomlinson Corral, a popular lynching spot that just the previous year had been used to string up a Frenchman named Miguel Lachenais.

Lynch men also used the porch roof of John Goller's wagon shop at Los Angeles and Commercial, a block from the south entrance to the Alley.

Goller was a model citizen, a former city councilman, respectful husband and dutiful father. He objected bitterly as the Chinese were hoisted outside his windows. There are small children inside, he protested.

“You dry up, you son of a bitch,” growled a teamster as he leveled a rifle at Goller.

As the Chinese were hauled up, a man on the porch roof danced a jig and gave voice to the resentment many Americans felt over the Chinese willingness to work for low wages. “Come on, boys, patronize home trade,” the man sang out.

The bloodlust was not only in the men. A woman who ran a boardinghouse across the street from Goller's shop volunteered clothesline to be cut up for nooses.

“Hang them,” she screamed.

A boy came running from a dry goods shop. “Here's a rope,” he called helpfully.

Of all the Chinese in Los Angeles, Dr. Gene Tong was probably the most eminent and beloved among both his countrymen and Americans. He could have made much more money hanging his shingle in the American part of town. But Tong stayed in the Alley, dispensing both traditional and modern cures from a small shop in the

decrepit Coronel Building.

As Tong was dragged along the street, he tried to strike a bargain with his captors. He could pay a ransom, he said. He had $3,000 in gold in his shop. He had a diamond wedding ring. They could have it all.

Instead of negotiating, one of his captors shot him in the mouth to silence him. Then they hanged him, first cutting off his finger to steal the ring.

The next morning, the citizens of Los Angeles filed past the town's jail building to view the bodies of the dead laid out in double rows. There were 17. It was the largest mass lynching in American history.

When word of the massacre reached the outside world, the reaction was universal horror. In the East, citizens asked what sorts of ghouls had taken up residence on the West Coast. Turning its gaze from heathen lands, the Methodist Conference started raising funds for missionary work in Los Angeles.

Frontier apologists blamed the massacre on the “dregs” of California society, an assortment of thugs and highwaymen who slouched into town every fall from the mines in the north and the lawless Mexican territory to the south.

“American hoodlum and Mexican greaser, Irish tramp and

French communist all joined to murder and dispatch the foe," wrote poet and historian A.J. Wilson.

The truth was different. While the looting and murder were carried out mostly by hoodlums, the deeds required the tacit approval and occasional intervention of the town's elite. What's more, the vast majority of those responsible could not have escaped punishment without a legal cover-up.

To begin with, the Massacre was not spontaneous. Events had been building toward violence among Chinese factions in Negro Alley for several days — and tensions between Chinese and Angelenos also were on the rise.

The cause of the shooting of Choy, whom Bilderrain had seen lying in the street, was the kidnapping by a Chinese company of a woman belonging to a rival Chinese company. These companies were a kind of club or gang that offered support and structure to the Chinese in America.

The kidnapped woman was a striking, moonfaced beauty named Yut Ho. Evidence only recently brought to light by historian Scott Zesch indicates she was a properly married woman who was kidnapped by a company to be sold into marriage.

That company was led by a master manipulator named Yo Hing, whose ability to curry favor with the white power

structure was second to none in L.A. One businessman who knew him better than most called him a “guttersnipe Talleyrand.”

The lovely Yut Ho belonged to a rival company, one led by a shopkeeper named Sam Yuen.

Determined to restore the young woman to her husband, Yuen imported from San Francisco several tong warriors, basically hit men.

Choy was one of the hit men, which was understandable, given that Yut Ho was his sister.

After disembarking from the steamship in San Pedro and making the kidney-jarring stagecoach ride to Los Angeles, Choy lost little time tracking down Yo Hing. Choy spotted Hing in Negro Alley on Oct. 23 and fired several shots at him.

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Hing escaped injury and he swore out a warrant against Choy, who was promptly arrested.

As testament to Hing's influence with whites, Choy's bail was set at a staggering $2,000 — an amount far more than that for men accused of murder.

When Yuen showed up to post bail for his man, Hing's

attorney was stunned. The attorney sputtered that Yuen could not possibly have that much money. The Chinese were known to be thrifty, but that amount of money was supposed to be beyond their reach.

A policeman accompanied Yuen to his shop in the Coronel Building, where he verified that Yuen had the bail money, and a lot more, hidden in a trunk.

Soon, rumor of Yuen's unexpected wealth was circulating through the city's imbibing establishments, of which there was no shortage. Of 285 businesses in town, 110 dispensed liquor.

The Chinese were already the objects of both fear and revulsion in L.A.: fear because they were seen as almost superhuman in their ability to work long hours for a pittance, revulsion because their religion and culture were alien.

Popular books at the time suggested that the Chinese streaming into California by the thousands to search for gold eventually would take over California and elect a silk-clad Mandarin as governor.

Hatred was so strong that during the Civil War California's Legislature passed a law that forbade any Chinese from testifying against a white man. The law gave whites immunity — an invitation to violence that historian Paul De Falla says

the people of Los Angeles took up with “a glint and a glee” the night of the massacre.

Against that backdrop, it's easy to imagine the reaction to the revelation that a Chinese company possessed a small fortune, protected only by a locked trunk.

Indeed, several pieces of evidence strongly suggest that Bilderrain went to Negro Alley that evening not to investigate gunshots but to rob Sam Yuen.

For one thing, Bilderrain had a reputation for dishonesty and larceny. Several court cases were filed against him in the years before and after the massacre, accusing him of stealing valuable roosters for use in his cockfighting operation.

Along with his brother Ygnacio, Bilderrain was an inveterate gambler. For years, he and his brother controlled and manipulated the Latino voting bloc in Los Angeles on behalf of Democratic candidates who, ironically, opposed racial equality. On Election Day, it was a common sight to see Jesus Bilderrain in a white duster stuffing bills into voters' pockets in downtown Los Angeles.

Then there is Bilderrain's changing story. According to his own account, after he saw Choy wounded in the street, he chased Yuen's band into the Coronel Building. This made

little sense, since Choy was working for Yuen's gang.

Instead, the officer should have sought out Hing's gang.

Why didn't he? Because he likely was working for Hing.

It was well known in town that the Chinese companies paid off the local police for favors. As Hing said about L.A. law enforcement, according to newspaper accounts of a later court hearing, “Police likee money.”

The chief “favor” rendered by the police was the retrieval of escaped Chinese prostitutes. The women were little more than slaves to the companies, yet whenever a prostitute tried to escape her awful confinement, all her owner had to do was go to court and swear out a warrant accusing her of theft. Then, knowing they would earn a fat reward, the police would spring into action, tracking the woman to Santa Barbara, San Diego or elsewhere, and restore her to her tormentors. While police were off on these errands, they left the city unguarded.

This system of payoffs inevitably led to police officers being openly allied with one Chinese company or another.

The likelihood that Bilderrain was doing Hing's bidding is apparent in his comments after the riot. The officer insisted that he had seen Yuen shoot bar owner Robert Thompson, a remarkable feat given that Bilderrain was lying wounded in

the street when Thompson was shot by someone in the dark interior of the building.

Horace Bell, a lawyer and early chronicler of Los Angeles, wrote years later that he believed Bilderrain and Thompson went to Yuen's store that afternoon for no other purpose than to steal his gold.

Bell's account was dismissed by historians because he was known to stir a good deal of drink into his tales of early Los Angeles. But in this case there is plenty of independent evidence of Bilderrain's duplicity.

In the days after the massacre, Hing and Yuen, both of whom survived, gave their versions of events to the *Los Angeles Daily Star*, blaming each other for the outbreak. But Yuen provided a key piece of evidence in his account, saying his men opened fire on Bilderrain because he came for them in the company of Hing, his enemy.

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There was no way, in the highly charged aftermath of the riot, that Yuen could openly accuse a police officer of robbery or of starting the massacre. He could, however, hint at it while blaming Hing for being the instigator of both the kidnapping and the riot.

Further evidence of the Chinese view was offered later,

when Dr. Gene Tong's widow sued Hing, accusing him of starting the violence.

Finally, there was a monumental reversal by Bilderrain that casts doubt on his original explanation for the start of the massacre. He and his friends gave several accounts of what he saw that night, sometimes naming Yuen and sometimes not.

But by the time Yuen filed suit against the city of Los Angeles to recover his lost gold, Bilderrain had come around 180 degrees. He testified for Yuen, claiming he had never seen the gang leader on the night of the massacre.

However the riot started, one of the greatest unanswered questions is how it was allowed to continue. A review of news accounts in the days following the massacre showed that the authorities were strangely, and criminally, uninvolved.

L.A.'s top cop, Marshal Francis Baker, was new to the job. Baker testified before the coroner's inquest that he arrived at the scene just as Thompson was shot. He deputized an ad hoc collection of men to surround the Coronel Building.

His purpose, he said, was to prevent the escape of those involved in the shooting. But it goes without saying that recruiting guards from among the rabble who frequented the

Alley was a questionable decision.

Baker's next action was even stranger. With gunfire ringing out behind him, he went home to bed, leaving the mob in charge.

Police did little, as was evident by the actions of the two officers with probably the most experience, Emil Harris and George Gard. Both had proved their bravery during the Mexican bandit wars. Harris helped capture the dashing Tiburcio Vasquez, and the *Star* said he and Gard were "hard to beat on either a warm or cold trail."

But on this night, these brave officers loitered near hay scales at the corner of Los Angeles and Arcadia streets, a half-block from the trouble. Harris took custody of one fleeing Chinese man. But when he was surrounded and the victim wrenched from him by the mob, Harris simply returned to his post, later saying he was unaware that any Chinese people had been hanged.

Harris and Gard said they eventually worked their way to Yuen's store, where they stood guard for much of the night. Even this was a wasted effort, because the mob had already looted the store and Yuen's trunk.

As they stood their pointless vigil, it is likely they had one thing on their minds: reward. Both men were allied with Yuen.

Just days before the riot, one newspaper reported they had received nice presents from him.

Historians have argued that no one could expect poorly trained police to stand up to an armed mob of hundreds. It's more likely, however, that police, fatally compromised by their secret deals with Chinese companies and accustomed to letting vigilantes do their deeds, simply stood aside and let the mob do its customary work.

The argument that police were powerless that night was put to the lie by Robert Widney, a former schoolteacher who helped found the University of Southern California. His technique, he wrote years later in papers preserved at the Huntington Library, was to sidle up to a mobster, yank him by the collar, shove the barrel of his pistol into the man's throat and whisper: “Get out or I'll kill you.” Widney managed to save four or five Chinese people.

As the mob did its vile work, a crowd of observers gathered along the route of execution to watch. According to later accounts, some of the city's leading citizens were seen cheering on the killers.

Among them was H.M. Mitchell, a reporter for the *Star*. A future leader in Democratic party politics, Mitchell would serve a term as sheriff before marrying into the wealthy Glassell family and becoming a gentleman farmer and

collector of Western antiquities.

A member of the crowd heard Mitchell yelling, “Hang him.”

Harris Newmark, one of the most respected members of the business community, wrote years later that he heard a shot as he left work that night. Walking over to Los Angeles Street, he learned that Thompson had been killed.

Newmark said he went home to supper “expecting no further trouble.”

The statement strains belief. By the time the mob learned Thompson had died, its blood was up. Given L.A.'s record of vigilantism, it didn't require much imagination to foresee what would come next.

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The mood of the city, from the best to the worst, was that it was time for the Chinese to learn their lesson. As one survivor of the massacre said, according to news accounts: “When Melican man gettee mad, he damned fool. [He] killee good Chinaman allee same bad Chinaman.”

The massacre finally was brought to an end by Sheriff James Burns, a colorful figure known as “Daddy” to the gamblers and whores. He pleaded that if just 25 volunteers from the crowd of onlookers stood with him, he could stop the mob.

He soon was hoisted on the shoulders of the crowd and carried into the alley — and the murderers faded into the night.

By 11 p.m., the bars were going great guns as the mob slaked its thirst. At J.H. Weldon's, a man with blood on his hands and shirt bellied up to the bar with a boast: “Well, I am satisfied now. I have killed three Chinamen.”

In the aftermath of the massacre, expressions of horror and disgust rained down on the city from around the world.

It was a public relations disaster for a town that was desperate to attract a rail link that was expected to, and did, bring thousands of Anglos to Southern California to sweep away what was left of the Spanish Californio culture.

City fathers believed nothing must discourage those passengers from coming. So they had very good reason to downplay the massacre as a spontaneous outbreak of rage against a hated minority.

They also needed to put the incident behind them as quickly as possible, no small feat for a city that had officially shrugged off vigilante lynchings in the past. Indeed, no lynchers had ever been prosecuted.

In fact, after the hanging of the Frenchman Lachenais the previous year, not only did the grand jury fail to indict

anyone, but the lynch men also boldly published a rebuke to the authorities by way of one of the most arrogant editorials ever to run in an American newspaper.

“It is to be hoped,” said the column in the *Star*, “that the 'hint' given by the people yesterday will be sufficient ammunition to cause the weak 'arm of the law' to recover its former strength, and render it unnecessary for the people, from whom all the power of the law proceeds, to ever again re-take that 'law into their own hands.'”

The fact that Los Angeles lynch men included influential citizens was shown by the access they were given to one of the city's finest and newest structures, Teutonia Hall, in which to deliberate Lachenais' fate. Afterward, they marched through downtown in the light of day before dragging the accused to his fate.

At first, it seemed the killers of the Chinese would benefit from a similar failure of civic will. At the coroner's inquest, one witness after another, including police, was somehow unable to recognize any of the mob members.

Slowly, however, a few citizens recovered their memories. Various merchants were named at the coroner's inquest as having aided the mob in one way or another, from a clothing store owner to a farmer, a silk grower, a butcher, a blacksmith, a saloon owner and a carpenter.

The erstwhile cop Celis, who had warned Thompson before he was shot dead, and a constable named Richard Kerren were fingered as men who shot at the Chinese. City Councilman George Fall was identified as having attacked Hing with a plank of wood.

The grand jury finally issued indictments accusing two dozen men of murder. But not one prominent person was on the list — not Fall, not Mitchell, not Harris or Gard. While awaiting trial, two of the accused, Louis “Fatty” Mendell and L.F. “Curly” Crenshaw, received visits in jail from Harris and Gard.

Inexplicably, the penniless rabble managed to engage one of the most distinguished and successful members of the bar to defend them. Edward J.C. Kewen's legendary oratorical gifts were almost certainly beyond the financial reach of the defendants. His ability to sway listeners was such that the Lincoln administration imprisoned him for several months during the Civil War for making secessionist speeches around the West.

The prosecution was led by District Attorney Cameron Erskine Thom, the grandson of a Scottish warrior and son of a captain in the War of 1812 who had been on friendly terms with Thomas Jefferson.

Surely Thom had the combination of character and courage to stand up to any forces in town that would excuse the

rioters.

But other factors apparently were at work. Like the vast majority of Angelenos, Thom was openly sympathetic to the Southern cause in the Civil War. (He had even given up his law practice in 1862 to volunteer for the Confederacy. He was wounded at Gettysburg.)

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This comity of feeling for the Southern cause bound the rioters and their accusers in the same way that going to the same college or belonging to the same club binds people, Doyce Nunis, former head of the history department at USC and an expert on the massacre, said in an interview with the *Weekly* before his death last month.

If good citizens like Thom and Kewen did not sanction lynching, they almost certainly shared the rioters' attitude toward the Chinese as a threat to the future of California as a homeland for transplanted WASPS.

With all this as a backdrop, Los Angeles' first Trial of the Century began in March 1872.

Showing just how deeply the vigilante movement had penetrated the city, one prospective juror after another was disqualified because he belonged to a Vigilance committee.

Presiding over the trial was Robert Widney, the hero of the massacre, who acted to save Chinese people when police would not. But according to historian De Falla, Widney wasn't even a member of the bar, and wouldn't be for some months.

If that weren't enough reason to question his fitness, he should have disqualified himself because he had personally witnessed the violence that night. How could he sit in judgment and fairly rule on motions submitted by the defense when he knew who was guilty?

The first to stand trial was Crenshaw. A drifter who had run away from home in Nevada the previous year, Curly was 22 but looked much younger. He apparently gave in to the temptations of Negro Alley with a lusty enthusiasm. “His favorite resort,” according to the *Los Angeles Daily News*, “was the rendezvous of lewd women, pickpockets and cutthroats.”

In short order, he was convicted. Not of murder, the obvious crime, but of manslaughter.

How could that be? Witnesses said Curly had fired down on Chinese from atop the Coronel Building.

But Curly had a powerful ally. Policeman Gard — who did little to stop the lynching — testified that he gave his rifle to

Curly to hold while he put out a fire on the roof. When he got it back, he said, the gun contained the same number of bullets.

Suddenly, Gard's and Harris' jailhouse visit made sense.

The trials of the next nine defendants were combined. This is usually a dangerous tactic, since jurors tend to blame all for the worst acts of the few. But Kewen had an ace up his sleeve.

Seven of the nine were convicted but, again, of manslaughter. Widney imposed sentences ranging from two to six years, light terms given the crime.

Kewen pulled out his ace not long after the guilty boarded ship for San Quentin. He filed papers with the Supreme Court of California, alleging that the convictions were improper because the district attorney committed a fatal legal error.

Prosecutor Thom had correctly charged the defendants with murdering the beloved Dr. Tong. But Thom had failed to introduce evidence that Tong had been killed.

The court agreed and the convictions were set aside.

Thom's mistake was the error of a rookie, not of a veteran prosecutor. What's more, Thom never attempted to retry the

defendants.

He also never brought to trial the majority of those accused by the grand jury. After a time, the indictments themselves were mislaid, so that no future trials could be held.

Just like that, L.A. had disposed of its messy public relations problem.

Local newspapers did not even mention the lynching in their year-end analysis of the major events of the previous 12 months.

Within five years, the arrival of the transcontinental railroad made the trip West fast and safe, and the great immigration of church builders, book clubbers and ladies who lunch followed. Los Angeles became a modern city, and many of the men who lived through the evil times grew rich.

The massacre did have one salutary effect, however: It brought an end to the rule of the rope in Los Angeles. The Chinese were the last to be lynched in L.A.

Historian Nunis was convinced that the whole truth about the massacre never was told. “It's very hard to prove that the best citizens were involved, although I believe it's true,” he told the *Weekly*.

“You've got to look at what motivated the killers,” he added.

“The economy was on the decline with the end of the Civil War. There was social dislocation. Blacks were moving in. The Chinese were very successful. All these things caused resentment.”

Far from being the result of passions inflamed by alcohol, “I really felt the lynchings were a put-up job,” Nunis said.

And still today, every so often, the rainbow mix of populations in Los Angeles forsake their surfboards, convertibles, Cinco de Mayo celebrations and Martin Luther King Jr. Day marches and rise in revolt against each other's accursed presence in this paradise.

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The story might end there, were it not for strange events that occurred in the following years.

In 1877, a brief appeared in one of the newspapers noting that one Yo Hing had been hacked to death by an assassin bearing, along with a hatchet, “an old grudge.” Somehow, the author failed to note Hing's connection to the massacre only six years earlier.

Celis, one of only two defendants acquitted in the massacre case, died in a bizarre accident while chasing horse thieves in the San Fernando Valley. According to the account given by Gard, who was riding in a buggy with Celis at the time, a

rifle fell out of the wagon and hit a spoke on one of the wheels. Absurd as it sounds, the rifle discharged a bullet that struck Celis square in the chest, Gard said, apparently with a straight face.

As no one else saw the incident, Gard's word was taken as gospel.

Around the same time, H.M. Mitchell, by then known as Major Mitchell, having left behind his ragged roots as a journalist, went hunting with City Attorney William E. Dunn in the foothills beyond Pasadena. Dunn mistook his friend for a deer, accidentally shooting Mitchell — twice. A single mistaken shot by a skilled hunter seems barely credible. But two shots?

Did the wily Sam Yuen, still burning with rage over never having recovered his gold, have a hand in these events?

Nunis doubted Yuen was that smart. And Yuen could hardly be blamed for another premature death, that of Gard, who after the massacre became a railroad detective and died in a fiery explosion.

If not Yuen, then, who was settling the score?

Maybe it was just bad luck, the kind that for a few decades in the 19th century seemed to find a home in the rough-and-ready town of Los Angeles.