In 1933, a couple of losers kidnapped and killed the son of a department store owner in San Jose, California. Little did they know of the fury they would unleash. The men were captured, and then, just hours after the victim's body was found, a mob stormed the city jail and held a necktie party (lynching) in a nearby park. Harry Farrell is a superb writer who researched this case so thoroughly that he has the details to produce an unnerving degree of suspense. He provides ample maps, photos, and reproduced newspaper articles, making it all too easy to visualize the horrifying events. His interviews even include descriptions of the noise of the mob as heard from afar: a kind of keening that stirred a primeval tingling on the back of my neck. And his account of the politics involved, including the governor's praise for the lynchers, is a shocking denouement to the story. Swift Justice won the 1993 Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime.
Personal Review: Swift Justice: Murder and Vengeance in a California Town by Harry Farrell

I realize this is an odd heading for a review, but one of the very first things the author points out is that the crime was as incredibly stupid as it was brutal. I don't want to spoil the story too much, but added to a long list of very stupid mistakes made by the kidnappers was an apparent failure to understand how the telephone system in San Jose worked.

The author tries to explain this, but I suspect that in this day and age when many people haven't even used a rotary dial phone, his explanation was inadequate. In 1933 the telephone system in San Jose was completely "manual." Telephones had no dials or buttons. When someone wanted to make a call, he or she simply picked up the receiver. This action caused a small light to go on over a jack in the switchboard, which was of course marked with the number of the calling party. The operator then plugged in one of a pair of cords from the shelf in front of her and asked "number, please?" The caller then spoke the wanted number to the operator who used the other plug to connect to the jack of the wanted number. She then had to press a small lever to ring the wanted party's bell. Consequently, tracing a call was ridiculously simple; all someone had to do was read the numbers next to the jacks in question on the face of the switchboard.

Of course all operators would have been alerted to signal the Chief Operator when anyone asked for the number of the Hart residence. The operator could also delay a few seconds before starting to ring the Hart's phone, giving the Chief Operator extra time to alert the law enforcement officers at the Hart residence that there was an incoming call.

All this resulted in Thrumond being arrested while using a pay phone to call the Hart residence. While San Jose city police were not involved in the arrest, it should be noted that he was using a telephone something like 150 feet from the main police station, not the wisest choice of locations.

This evidence would have been crucial if the case had come to trial and if Thurmond and Holmes had recanted their confessions, or if the confessions had been ruled inadmissible, which was possible even in 1933.

In other areas the author paints a vivid picture of the local political scene, and how "bosses" controlled much of city and county government. It's also interesting to note that much of the area around San Jose was rural at the time.

The brutality of the crime notwithstanding, I cannot in any way approve of the lynching, and I'm of the opinion that the governor should have been impeached for first failing to provide national guard troops to help defend the jail, and secondly for his outright approval of the lynchings and treat to pardon anyone convicted of taking part in them.
Prosecutors in three, if not four different jurisdictions were preparing charges against Holmes and Thurmond. There is simply no way they could have gone free if the first case against them for any reason had failed.

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