

# DEATH OF AN EDITOR

Anthony M. Conklin, 1841-1880

The ruthless murder of a newspaper editor caused the formation of the "Socorro Vigilantes"

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## The "Socorro Sun"

By Paul Harden

In the 1870s, the intrigue and romance of the Wild West seemed to sweep the country. Newspapers and the popular publications of the time, such as *Harper's Weekly*, were filled with stories about the West. These stories painted the west as a wild, yet romantic place to live. While intriguing, the stories enticed few from the East to move to the Southwest during this time.

One notable exception were those in the newspaper industry — publishers, editors and reporters. Attracted by the lure of the West, many of New Mexico's early newspapers were owned and operated by journalists from "back East."

One such newspaper entrepreneur leaving his mark in New Mexico was Anthony M. Conklin. Born in 1841 in Ohio and raised in Indiana, Conklin entered the newspaper business at an early age. While still in his teens, he worked as a reporter and printer at the *Hamilton County Register* in Indiana, working his way up to publisher by the end of his nine-year employment. After serving the Union Army during the Civil War, with printer's ink still in his blood, Conklin returned to Indiana to work at the *Indianapolis Sentinel*.

It was during this time that he met and married his wife, whose name is not known. She had three children from a previous marriage, her first husband having been tragically killed.

Conklin loved every aspect of the newspaper business, from reporting and writing, to setting type and running the printing presses and folding machines.

Conklin also dreamed of the West. In 1879, he and his wife moved from Indianapolis to "out west." They left their children in Indiana with family until they could find a new home. Conklin began his New Mexico newspaper career at the *Las Vegas Gazette*.

Obviously, Las Vegas wasn't it for the Conklins, as they moved to Albuquerque the following year. Purchasing several racks of type and a printing press, Conklin established a small newspaper called *The Advance*.

For unknown reasons, Conklin ceased publication of *The Advance* after only a few months of operation. With the railroad south of Albuquerque still under construction, Conklin hired a flatbed barge to float his heavy print shop equipment down the Rio Grande. He arrived in Socorro in June 1880. Wasting little time, he rented a building on the northeast corner of the Socorro Plaza to house his print shop and newspaper office. By July, the first issue of the *Socorro Sun* hit the streets.



Courtesy Socorro Historical Society

The *Socorro Sun* newspaper was located on the northeast corner of the Socorro plaza. The building porch on the far right is about where LTJ Computer Services and Chamber of Commerce is located today.

Conklin immediately fell in love with Socorro. Within several months of their arrival, the Conklins were heavily involved in Socorro's affairs, from being a Master in the Masons, to charter members of the newly established Socorro Protestant Church. Conklin also found the boomtown of Socorro to be a good business opportunity as the *Socorro Sun* immediately thrived.

Mrs. Conklin ran the newspaper office and helped with the reporting. Mr. Conklin served as publisher and editor, and with assistant Aldolfo Chavez, set the type and printed the weekly newspaper every

Saturday. Although few copies of the *Socorro Sun* remain, those that are preserved show a neatly printed newspaper with a diversity of local and world news.

The *Socorro Sun* was well supported by the businesses of the growing boomtown, such as Blanchard and Co. Mercantile, M. Fischer General Merchandise (after which today's incorrectly spelled "Fisher" Street is named), Severo Baca Dry Goods and Groceries, the Socorro-White Oaks Stage Line, and several blacksmithing shops.

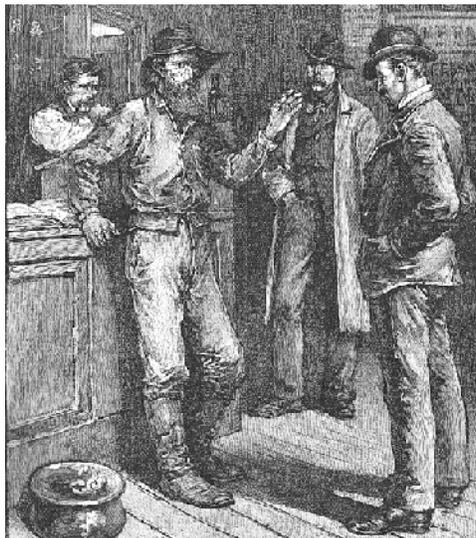
The Sun quickly established itself as Socorro's newspaper. It would be several more years before the *Socorro Bullion* would appear, in 1883, and the founding of the *Socorro Chieftain*, in 1884.

The arrival of the railroad was only weeks away when Conklin printed his first issue of the *Socorro Sun*. Booming Socorro was also considered a wild, almost lawless, town. As citizens were establishing schools, civic organizations and churches, Socorro's saloons and casinos operated around the clock; filling the town with an almost constant ruckus, fights, drunken bouts and shootings.

### Shoot-out at the Lone Star Saloon

Conklin had been the publisher-editor of the *Socorro Sun* barely two months when he found himself in the position to report Socorro's latest murder. The incident occurred on Sept. 20, 1880. A group of well-liquored cowboys were making the rounds of Socorro's saloons. About midnight, they left one bar and went to the Lone Star Saloon on Church Street. The drunken cowboys were raising cane in the saloon and heckling a wedding reception across the street at the courthouse. In the saloon were patrons Remijio Escalante and Jose Trujillo.

Bartender Charlie Miller tried to calm down the rowdy cowboys to no avail. Finally, Miller drew his six-shooter and began firing — scattering the cowboys into the darkness. In the shootout, Trujillo took a slug from Miller's carelessly aimed gun. Escalante left the saloon and retrieved his wife from the wedding reception across the street, and took her home. Before going too far, he had a change of heart and explained to his wife that he could not let his friend die alone. On the way back to the saloon, Escalante, and another Mexican friend, were stopped by local lawmen, one likely being Marshal James C. Thomas.



Harper's Weekly illustration  
Socorro's numerous saloons were the scene of many fights and deadly confrontations.

For unexplained reasons, a skirmish began between the men, resulting in Escalante being shot "west of the newspaper office, south of the road." This would place the shooting west of the Plaza, probably on today's Fisher Street. The force of the slug slammed Escalante against an adobe wall. He was taken home, where he died without revealing who had shot him.

In the Sept. 25, 1880, *Socorro Sun*, editor Conklin wrote the article of the shootouts, but was clearly incensed with the facts. Two Mexicans were shot by two Anglos, yet five days after the incident, Miller had not yet been arrested for shooting Trujillo; and the Coroner's jury determined "Escalante died at the hands of some person unknown" — with no mention that only Socorro marshals were involved. Conklin concluded by questioning how two shootings could occur with no explanations and no arrests.

Conklin wasn't the only one seeing and reporting the injustices. All decent citizens of Socorro saw it as well. It was another instance that widened the rift between the Hispanic and Anglo communities.

### The Election of 1880

Following the Escalante killing, there was little doubt Marshal Thomas was not well liked by the natives of Socorro. Then, during a political procession, the Socorro marshal fired his shotgun (supposedly by accident) wounding five Mexicans, though none seriously hurt. This guy really knew how to make friends in an already explosive atmosphere.

As the election neared, emotions ran hot in Socorro. Political alliances were no longer between Democrats and Republicans; but between the Mexicans, as native Hispanics were called at the time, and the Anglos.

Unfortunately, issues of the *Socorro Sun* do not exist for this period, such that the endorsements offered by editor Conklin are not known. Did he endorse Mexican or Anglo candidates? However, his stance on the injustices against the Mexican people, and the lawlessness exercised by the Anglos, was well known.

On Nov. 11, 1880, the eve of the election, Marshal J.C. Thomas was playing draw poker with friends in the Monarch Saloon on Manzanares Street. In walks Tom Gordon, a notorious and dangerous desperado known throughout the Territory. Slapping a \$10 gold piece on the bar, Gordon

ordered a round of drinks for all. After swallowing his own drink, Gordon stared down the marshal at the poker table, making it obvious a showdown was about to begin.

To prevent a confrontation, the marshal attempted to disarm the gunman. Instead, Gordon drew his pistol, causing the marshal to dodge behind the bar. Just as the bartender dived out of the way, a blast from Gordon's pistol sent a slug into the marshal's body, which caused him to slump to the floor behind the bar. A moment later, Marshal Thomas staggered to his feet, took aim at Gordon, but only managed to shoot the ceiling. Gordon returned fire. The bullet entered the marshal's back and slammed him to the floor. As if it were a scene from a bad western movie, the Socorro marshal lay dead on the barroom floor as the killer left through the swinging doors of the saloon.

J.C. Thomas is the only Socorro marshal, (the position is now called Chief of Police), to be killed in the line of duty. And, Conklin had another Socorro murder to report.

Convinced he had done Socorro a favor, Gordon strutted around town flaunting his evil deed. Even though the Mexicans had no love for Marshal Thomas, they feared the Anglos would blame them for hiring the killer. Likewise, the Anglos were disgusted at the total lack of law and racial tensions developing in Socorro.

Almost immediately, talk emerged of organizing a vigilante committee to rid Socorro, and the Territory, of murderer Tom Gordon. Upon hearing these rumors, Gordon suddenly fled Socorro, and was not seen or heard from for several months. Before leaving, however, Gordon had bragged to a few that he had killed Thomas over a prior dispute. Although not realizing it, this "confession" exonerated the Mexicans from any assumed involvement, easing the tensions that had developed in Socorro over the past few months.

### Christmas Eve, 1880

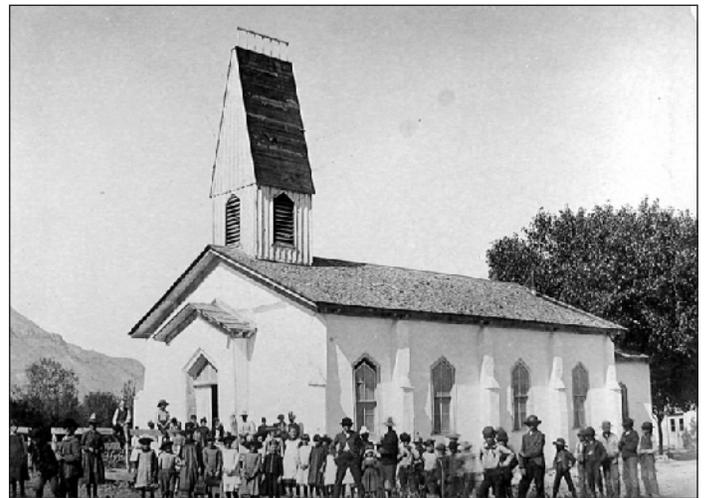
In 1880, Christmas fell on a Saturday — the same day the *Socorro Sun* was printed. Editor Conklin, and assistant Aldolfo Chavez, decided to print the newspaper on Friday so they could enjoy Christmas with their families. Both men worked all day long, hurriedly setting the last of the type for the pages. Working into Friday night, the two men finished printing and folding the papers. With ink still on their fingers, they went to the Presbyterian Church for Christmas Eve services, where Aldolfo Chavez and his family were also members.

It was a special service, conducted by Rev. S.D. Fulton, the minister of the newly formed Socorro Presbyterian Church, and special guest, the Rev.

Thomas Harwood, the Superintendent of Missions for the Methodist churches in New Mexico. During the service, parishioners were given the opportunity to decorate the tree and exchange gifts. It must have been a somber time for the Conklins, what with their three children far away in Indiana. With the success of the *Socorro Sun*, they were planning to send for their children. However, for this Christmas, their children were not with them.

Sometime during the service, Antonio Baca, Enofre Baca and Abran Baca entered the church. The three men had been drinking, and it didn't take long before they were causing a disturbance. At one point, one of the men placed their feet atop the pew, resting his dirty boots on the shoulders of a woman in front of him. Mr. Conklin politely asked the men to stop. After a refusal to do so, the Bacas were asked to leave.

About 9 p.m., the Christmas Eve services came to an end. Rev. Harwood asked Conklin what the disturbance had been about. Several of the native Socorro families informed Harwood the men were



*Courtesy Socorro Historical Society*  
The church where editor Conklin was murdered in 1880.



*Photo by Paul Harden*  
The old church building as it appears today.



The *Socorro Sun* was a neatly printed newspaper for the era. The Jan. 1, 1881 issue contained the details of the Christmas Eve murder of its editor, A.M. Conklin, under the simple headline "At The Church." The *Socorro Sun* was Socorro's main newspaper from 1880 until 1884, the year the *Socorro Chieftain* was established.

related to Juan Jose Baca, a well respected Socorro resident, and wondered why the three men, normally well mannered, disrupted the church service with such provocative behavior.

Mr. and Mrs. Conklin left the church with several friends. Once outside, one of the Bacas grabbed Mrs. Conklin and pulled her out of the way. A moment later, another Baca stepped out of the darkness. Three gunshots rang out. The third shot struck Mr. Conklin at close range, splattering blood all over the church wall. Grabbing his chest, Conklin fell to the ground. The 39-year-old editor of the *Socorro Sun* had been killed instantly — shot through the heart. The man who urged an end to the senseless violence in Socorro became a victim of the same.

There was no doubt as to the identity of the murderer. It was Enofre Baca. The killing was witnessed by Rev. Harwood, Dr. Munger, Robert and George McFarland, Judge McCutcheon and, of course, Mrs. Conklin.

### The Hunt for the Bacas

The day after Christmas, Conklin was buried at a well-attended funeral. Although Judge Blackington had issued arrest warrants for Enofre Baca and Abran Baca, by Dec. 27 the newly elected Sheriff Andres Montoya refused to arrest the men. That evening, concerned citizens met at Col. Ethan W. Eaton's house to discuss the matter. The result was the formation of the "Socorro Committee of Safety" — a nice, polite name for a vigilante committee. With word around town that the sheriff refused to arrest the Bacas, and the formation of vigilante's to take the law into their

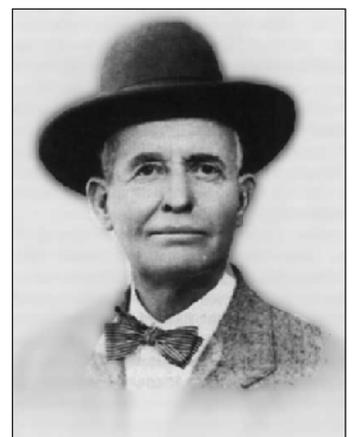
own hands, the tensions were so thick they could be cut with a knife.

The following evening, dozens surrounded the home of Antonio Baca south of Socorro along Cuba Road, threatening to dynamite his house if he didn't surrender. Women and children piled out of the house, but not Antonio. But, alas, he was found — attempting to escape dressed as a woman.

The Socorro vigilantes illegally held Antonio Baca in a room at the Park Hotel. Somehow, Antonio obtained a gun and a shootout ensued as he tried to escape. Moments later, Antonio lay dead on the hotel floor. As usual, the coroner's jury found Antonio Baca "was shot and killed by unknown persons."

Abran Baca and Enofre Baca were tracked down by bounty hunter and famed Texas Ranger Sgt. James Gillett. They were found and arrested in Ysleta, Texas, at the home of their uncle, Jose Baca. In bringing them back to Socorro to collect the \$500 reward money, Gillett discovered he had found only half of the pair. Indeed, he had captured Abran Baca, but the second man was not Enofre and was released.

Abran Baca was jailed in Socorro to await trial for the murder of Conklin, while Gillett returned to Texas with only half the reward money. Enofre Baca was still at large.



Courtesy Texas History  
Celebrated Texas Ranger  
James Gillett.



*Courtesy Socorro Historical Society*  
**The Chambon “Park Hotel,” on the west side of the Plaza, was used by the Socorro Committee of Safety for meetings and occasional confinement of “prisoners.”**



*Photo by Paul Harden*  
**A few remaining structures behind today’s Socorro Fire Department and Post Office is about all that remains of the famous Park Hotel.**

## The Hunt for Tom Gordon

In the meantime, the hunt for Tom Gordon continued. His trail went cold in November 1880 after killing Socorro Marshal J.C. Thomas in the Monarch Saloon. On March 8, 1881, Gordon rode into Socorro and was immediately recognized and pursued. The chase led to the train station, where Gordon hopped a northbound freight train as it departed the station. The people of Socorro knew a passenger train was not far behind. Explaining the situation to Passenger Agent Chester Potter, the telegrapher was authorized to send a message up the line, ordering the freight train onto a siding at La Joya.

About 30 minutes later, the passenger train from Socorro pulled into La Joya with the small posse, consisting of Deputy U.S. Marshal James O’Neill, Louis Proto, Sam Trauer and the new editor of the *Socorro Sun*, Ralph Parker. Boarding a boxcar, the posse rode the freight train north.

The posse apprehended Gordon when he stepped out of a boxcar in Albuquerque. By late afternoon, the party returned to Socorro by train and was met by a crowd of no less than 150 people to greet the captured outlaw. Gordon was delivered to the county jail to await trial for the murder of Marshal Thomas.

Shortly after midnight on March 10, 1881, members of the Socorro Committee of Safety entered the courthouse and pulled Gordon from his jail cell. The next morning, Gordon’s body was found dangling at the end of a rope on the west side of the Socorro plaza for all to see. He had been hung from a gatepost on the old horse corral north of the Park Hotel, about where the Post Office and Fire Department are located today.

Tom Gordon was the first of six men hung by the Socorro vigilantes between 1881 and 1884.

## The Hunt for Enofre Baca

Enofre Baca, the real one, was finally located south of Juarez in Zaratoga, Mexico, by the diligent Sgt. Gillett in March 1881. Totally ignoring the international border — and risking an international incident to get their man — Gillett, and another Texas Ranger named George Loyd, rode across the Rio Grande. Without authority, they literally kidnapped Enofre from inside Mexico. They placed the wanted Baca on a horse and the trio raced away until the horses splashed through the waters of the Rio Grande and onto Texas soil.

Word quickly arrived in Socorro that Enofre had been captured and would be arriving soon by train. The Baca family immediately wired Santa Fe, expressing their fears for Enofre’s safety in Socorro. After all, Gordon had been hung by the Los Calgadores (the hangmen, or vigilantes) only two weeks previous. The governor agreed, and wired Ranger Gillett to bring the prisoner to Santa Fe, and under no circumstances stop in Socorro.

In the evening hours of March 30, 1881, the train carrying Gillett and Baca pulled into Socorro. Quietly, they sat in their seats for the brief stop in Socorro. To their surprise, the train was immediately boarded by a number of the Socorro vigilantes to relieve Gillett of his prisoner. Quite a squabble ensued, Gillette explaining in vain how their actions were illegal. In the end, they assured Gillette they were simply going to transport the prisoner to the Socorro jail, where he belonged, and a receipt was issued to the Texas Ranger so he could collect the \$250 reward for Enofre. The receipt was signed, “Sheriff Andres Montoya, Sheriff, by Col. E.W. Eaton, Deputy Sheriff.”

The vigilantes carried Baca down Manazares Street

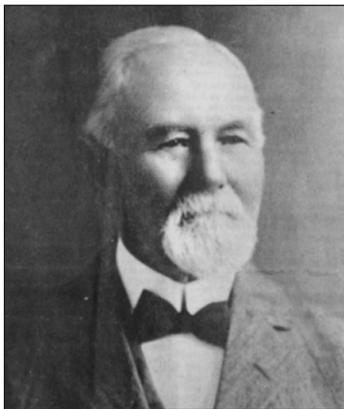
toward the jail as the northbound train pulled away from the Socorro station.

On March 31, 1881, the following morning, Baca's lifeless body was found hanging at the end of a rope from the same post Tom Gordon was hung two weeks earlier. Enofre Baca became the second man to be hung by the Socorro vigilantes.

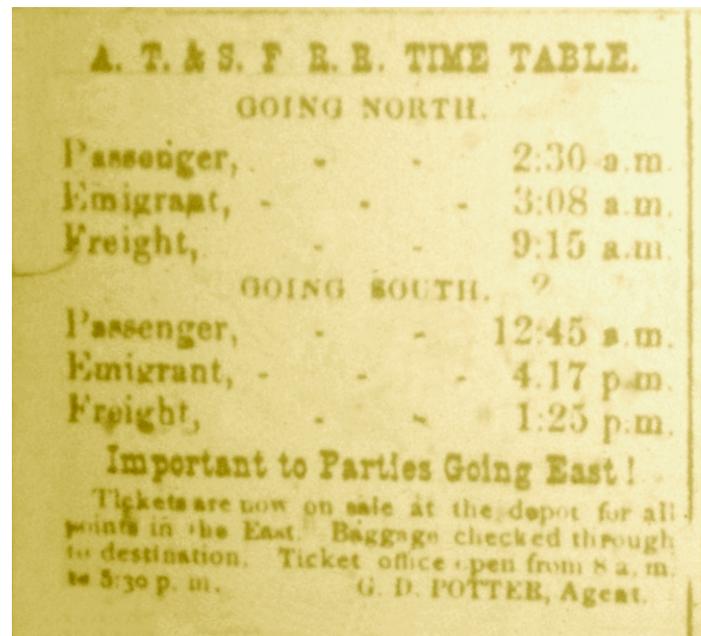
Three months after the murder of Conklin, justice had been served,

at least in the eyes of the vigilantes. The story of the hangings of Gordon and Baca were carried in nearly every newspaper in the West. Vigilante justice means only one thing: a total breakdown and disregard of the law. It was a dark hour for Socorro.

The only saving grace of these two illegal hangings was Gordon was an Anglo and Baca a Hispanic. This did tend to prove to the people of Socorro that the actions of the vigilantes were not racially motivated, but merely a misdirected attempt to restore law in Socorro. The ethnic tensions subsided, but paid for by the lives of Marshal Thomas, Tom Gordon, Jose Trujillo, Remijio Escalante, Antonio Baca, Enofre Baca, and the editor of the Socorro Sun, Anthony M. Conklin — all killed in Socorro within a six month period. How quickly racial differences, even perceived, can cause a bloody trail. Even history can be fascinating, while serving a lasting lesson.



Author's collection  
Col. Ethan Eaton, leader of the Socorro Vigilantes. Eaton died in 1913.



*El Defensor Chieftain archives*  
The AT&SF train schedule for Socorro, signed by C. D. Potter, agent, from an 1883 issue of the *Socorro Bullion*. Chester Potter was a member of the Socorro Committee of Safety. In later years, he wrote the only known firsthand account of the activities of the Socorro Vigilantes, including details of the murder of editor A. M. Conklin and the late-night hangings of Enofre Baca.

## The Rest of the Story

Abran Baca was tried by a Socorro jury and found not guilty of the murder of Conklin. Mrs. Conklin continued to run the *Socorro Sun* for a time, eventually selling the newspaper to Territorial legislator John Blake. After the sale, Mrs. Conklin disappeared from Socorro and was never heard from again. It was assumed she returned to Indiana. In 1884, the *Socorro Chieftain* was founded and the *Socorro Sun* ceased publication shortly thereafter. The *Socorro Chieftain* has been Socorro's newspaper continuously ever since.

And, remember Chester Potter, the passenger agent at the Socorro train station? Potter was a member of the Socorro Committee of Safety. Many years later, wrote his reminiscences of the actions of the Socorro vigilantes. It remains the only known primary source of information regarding the Socorro vigilantes upon which the facts in this article, and those published by other historians, are based.

### *Some of the references used in this article:*

"The Socorro Vigilantes," by Chester D. Potter, reprinted in the *New Mexico Historical Review*, January 1965; "The Incident of New Mexico's Nightriders," by Bob L'Aloge (available from Socorro Historical Society); "Robbers, Rogues and Ruffians," by Howard Bryant; *Socorro Sun*, Sept. 25, 1880, and Jan. 1, 1881.



*El Defensor Chieftain archives*  
Appearing in a 1912 issue of the *Socorro Chieftain*, this is one of the few known photographs of the old Socorro Courthouse. The single story extension on the right is the jail from which Tom Gordon and Enofre Baca were taken and hung by the Socorro Vigilantes in 1881.