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Guide to the Brooke Hart Kidnapping Newspaper Collection

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Brooke Hart Kidnapping Newspaper Collection

Dates: 1933

Collection number: MSS-2011-05-05

Collection Size: 1 box,1.71 linear feet

Repository: San José State University. Library.

San José, California 95192-0028

Abstract: The Brooke Hart Kidnapping Newspaper collection provides newspaper documentation of the murder of Brooke Hart, which took place on November 9, 1933 and the subsequent lynching of the perpetrators, John Maurice Holmes and Thomas Harold Thurmond on November 26, 1933 in San Jose, California. Brooke Hart, a young man of 22 and recent graduate of Santa Carla University, was appointed by his father, Alex Hart, owner of the Hart Department Store, the vice president of the company. The Hart family was one of most respected and wealthiest families in San Jose. The kidnapping and murder became national news, and the lynching of the two accused defendants marked the first and last lynching in San Jose since 1854. After Hart's body was discovered in the San Francisco bay on November 26, 1933, mob violence broke out and an angry mob rushed the jail and the two men were dragged to Saint James Park where they were beaten, stripped of their clothes, and hung. This story made national news and a media and political circus followed. California Governor James Rolph Jr. shamefully applauded the actions of the mob, for which he was condemned by President Franklin Roosevelt and former President Herbert Hoover. In the aftermath, gruesome street hawkers sold post-cards of the event, while others sold pieces of the tree limbs as souvenirs. The trees were finally cut-down, the jail and new post-office were badly damaged, and the mob was never indicted by the Santa Clara Grand Jury. The failure of due process, the murders of the two defendants, and the lawlessness that prevailed is an important story in the larger framework of the history of lynching in the United States. This single series collection is arranged by format and date: Series I: Brooke Hart Newspapers and Scrapbook, 1933.

Physical location: For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Library's online catalog.

Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English

Access

The collection is open for research.

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Preferred Citation

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Biography / Administrative History

Brooke Hart was a wealthy, popular twenty-two year old male residing in San Jose, California. He was kidnapped on November 9, 1933. Brooke's father, Alex J. Hart, the owner of L. Hart and Son Department Stores, offered a $40,000 ransom for his son's return. When it was determined that Brooke was murdered, a $500 reward for the recovery of his son's body was offered. Thomas Harold Thurmond demanded the ransom and was arrested on November 15, where he confessed and named John Maurice Holmes as his accomplice. Holmes denied any wrong doing and his family and friends confirmed that he had attended the theater that night, but their stories were dismissed by the local sheriff.

According to Thurmond's confession, they robbed young Hart and placed a pillow-case over his head and they attached cement blocks to his chest and limbs with barbed wire, before pushing him over the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge. The entire waterfront was combed, with multiple sea liners sent out to investigate the waters. The San Jose Police, the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and the U.S. Division of Investigation were brought in to research the case, and the U.S. Marines searched the bay for his body. The cement blocks and wire were recovered from the bay, as was his wallet, and eventually his body surfaced on November 26, 1933.

The District Attorney of San Jose intended to prosecute Thurmond and Holmes under the new provisions of the California Penal Code, which made kidnapping a capital offense. Angry mobs in San Francisco and San Jose demanded they both be lynched. On November 22, they were indicted by a federal grand jury in San Francisco and returned to San Jose to face kidnapping charges. Once Hart's body was retrieved angry mobs in both cities called for swift justice. As mob violence became apparent the police barricaded the jail entrance, but were overtaken by a very angry and drunk mob of young men. According to one newspaper report, approximately 50 men, armed with clubs and rocks took over the jail. Sheriff Emig called for reinforcement from Oakland and San Francisco police departments.

Thurmond and Holmes were dragged from the jail, beaten, stripped of their clothes, and hanged in St. James Park. According to one estimate over 15,000 descended on the park to watch the macabre affair. Their bodies were torched as the crowds look on. The story made headlines news across the nation. Most of the journalists and Alex Hart expressed disapproval of the mob violence and disrespect of the rule of law. Sheriff Emig went on record stating that the lynchings were regretful and that the defendants deserved a fair trial. In contrast, Governor James Rolph Jr. applauded the actions of the mob and he promised to pardon any individual arrested for "this good job." Rolph's statements resulted in a backlash locally and at the national level. President Roosevelt and former President Hoover both sent statements condemning his actions. In the aftermath, San Jose had to rebuild the jail and post-office and they cut down the trees to prevent souvenir peddlers from selling tree bark and limbs. Referred to as the San Jose's shame, the story of the Hart kidnapping and lynching's fits into the larger narrative of and mob violence and the problem of lynching in United States during the early 20th century.

Scope and Content of Collection

The Brooke Hart Kidnapping Newspaper collection provides newspaper documentation of the murder of Brooke Hart, which took place on November 9, 1933 and the subsequent lynching of the perpetrators, John Maurice Holmes and Thomas Harold Thurmond on November 26, 1933 in San Jose, California. Brooke Hart, a young man of 22 and recent graduate of Santa Carla University, was appointed by his father, Alex Hart, owner of the Hart Department Store, the vice president of the company. The Hart family was one of most respected and wealthiest families in San Jose. The kidnapping and murder became national news, and the lynching of the two accused defendants marked the first and last lynching in San Jose since 1854. After Hart's body was discovered in the San Francisco bay on November 26, 1933, mob violence broke out and an angry mob rushed the jail and the two men were dragged to Saint James Park where they were beaten, stripped of their clothes, and hung. This story made national news and a media and political circus followed. California Governor James Rolph Jr. shamefully applauded the actions of the mob, for which he was condemned by President Franklin Roosevelt and former President Herbert Hoover. In the aftermath, gruesome street hawkers sold post-cards of the event, while others sold pieces of the tree limbs as souvenirs. The trees were finally cut-down, the jail and new post-office were badly damaged, and the mob was never indicted by the Santa Clara Grand Jury. The failure of due process, the murders of the two defendants, and the lawlessness that prevailed is an important story in the larger framework of the history of lynching in the United States.

Arrangement

This single series collection is arranged by format and date: Series I: Brooke Hart Newspapers and Scrapbook, 1933

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Brooke Hart -- History

History -- Brooke Hart Case

Santa Clara County -- Kidnapping Cases

Santa Clara County -- 1930s -- Murder case

History -- San Jose

Kidnapping cases

1933 Murder cases

Bibliography

Brian McGinty, "Shadows in St. James Park," California History 57 (4), pp. 290-307.

Series I: **Brooke Hart Newspapers and Scrapbook 1933**

Physical Description: 1 box

Series Scope and Content Summary

The materials in this series consist of newspaper articles documenting the Brooke Hart kidnapping and murder, which took place on November 9, 1933, and the subsequent lynching's of the criminal defendants, John Maurice Holmes and Thomas Harold Thurmond on November 16, 1933. This small collection includes original, microfilm and photocopies of news reports from the San Jose Mercury Herald, Evening News—San Jose, and the San Francisco Chronicle. Most of the newspaper articles and clippings lack newspaper titles or dates. Included is a newspaper scrapbook, which duplicates some of the loose articles. It is unknown who compiled the scrapbook. Most of the dates range from November 9 through December 6, 1933. National newspaper reports are not included in this collection.

Arrangement

Access to the collection is provided at the container level. The series is arranged chronologically by item.

Box: 1 **Newspapers and scrapbook 1933**

Folder 1 **Newspaper Articles Nov. 9-Dec. 3, 1933, undated**

Folder 2 **Newspaper Scrapbook Nov. 9-Dec. 3, 1933, undated**