

“American Vigilantism: Popular Justice and Popular Culture,”

This chapter summarizes the rich history of American vigilantism, meaning people who administer popular justice by taking the law into their own hands. It focuses particularly on the San Francisco Vigilance Committees of 1851 and 1856 when large numbers of people who were frustrated by crime and corruption took over criminal law enforcement and hanged a number of desperados. The chapter also discusses San Francisco's Chinatown Squad of 1879-1920, a group of police assigned the job of law enforcement in Chinatown by any means necessary. The chapter then turns to vigilantism in American movies. Given the centrality of vigilantism in American history and the hearty public approval it usually enjoys, it's not surprising that a vast number of films concern this subject. The chapter concentrates on police vigilantism, exemplified by *Dirty Harry* and its sequels. The *Dirty Harry* films were set in San Francisco (which connects the two halves of this chapter) which is pictured as a pit of iniquity. The *Dirty Harry* glorify police vigilantism and transmit a strong message of political conservatism.