

NINE: THE MARIPOSA BANK MYSTERY

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

“HALF THE WITNESSES WERE OFF WITH SHOTGUNS AS SOON AS THE COURT WAS CLEARED”: CORONER’S INQUESTS

With the Mariposa Bank Mystery, the court is “summoned in inquest on the dead robber—though they hadn’t found the body” (149). Like most things in the Mariposa court, the proceedings devolve into nonsense. When Henry Mullins testifies that he was hunting at the time of the shooting, the inquest shifts its focus from the “dead robber” to the best place for duck hunting. The inquest is then disbanded so people can head to the river to hunt.

Unlike the nonsensical situation in Mariposa, coroners serve an important role when a person dies in unexplained or unnatural circumstances. When a coroner investigates a death, they set out to confirm who died, where and when the person died, how the person died, and other circumstances of the death. The coroner has the authority to secure the scene, collect information, and inspect and seize documents or other possessions. In some cases, the coroner may order an autopsy of the deceased person. It does not determine whether someone is to blame for the death or whether criminal charges should be laid.

Sometimes a coroner will hold an inquest into a death. An inquest has a similar function to an investigation. However, an inquest is conducted more like a court hearing, and is generally open to the public. An inquest may be held if it is necessary to:

- find out the identity of the deceased and the cause of death
- inform the public about the circumstances of the death
- inform the public of dangerous practices or conditions, and recommend ways to avoid preventable deaths

The coroner calls witnesses to give testimony under oath. A jury decides the same issues that an investigation does, and makes recommendations for avoiding similar deaths in the future. Like an investigation, an inquest does not decide criminal or civil responsibility for a death.

1. Look into reports about recent coroner’s inquests in or around your community. Why is it important to hold inquests when deaths are violent or suspicious?