An enraged mob batters down the door to the Santa Clara County Jail before pulling two alleged kidnappers from their cells and stringing them up in St. James Park, November 26, 1933. (*Courtesy of the* San Francisco Chronicle.)

Social Messiahs

Californians in the early 1930s were desperately searching for new leadership. It was increasingly clear that they could expect no help from the administrations of President Hoover and Governor Rolph, and the depression was growing steadily worse.

The sufferings of the elderly were especially severe. Thousands of them had come from other parts of the country to retire in Los Angeles or its suburbs. In the 1920s, when they had been able to live fairly comfortably before they lost their savings in the depression, most of them had been conservative in their economic and political ideas, and their interest in colorful leaders had been directed mainly toward religious evangelists. One of these was Sister Aimee Semple McPherson, who preached the "Four Square Gospel" with spectacular theatricality at her Angelus Temple and over her own radio station, KFSG. Sister Aimee also established a relief program for the needy, providing food and clothing for the homeless and destitute of Los Angeles. Another popular southern California evangelist was the Reverend Robert P. Shuler, who operated a rival radio station. In 1926 the Reverend Mr. Shuler had led the outcry against Sister Aimee when that somewhat tarnished angel was accused of having spent an illicit vacation in Carmel with the director of her radio station during the time when she claimed to have been kidnapped and held for ransom in Mexico. During the early 1930s, Sister Aimee's following declined, not merely because of her personal indiscretions, but because interest was shifting from religious to economic and political evangelism.

Technocracy, which advocated a new society based on scientific management, aroused so much enthusiasm in Los Angeles that chief technocrat Howard Scott moved his headquarters there from the east. In 1933 a group of unemployed businesspeople broke off from the technocratic persuasion to establish the Utopian Society. The utopians drew an overflow crowd for a pageant in the Hollywood Bowl, a spectacle that resembled some of Sister Aimee's productions at Angelus Temple except that it dramatized the triumph not of Good over Evil but of Abundance over Scarcity.

The founder of a much larger and more enduring new movement was Dr. Francis E. Townsend, an unemployed Long Beach physician. At the age of 66, having worked hard all his life, Dr. Townsend was facing destitution. In 1933 he formulated the Townsend Plan and backed it with an organization called Old Age Revolving Pensions, Ltd. All Americans over 60 were to receive pensions of $200 a month, all of which they must spend within 30 days. The money would come from a federal sales tax. This plan, according to Dr. Townsend and his followers, not only would provide a decent living for old people, but also would bring general prosperity by restoring "the proper circulation of money." Though the heart of the movement remained in southern California, Townsend Clubs sprang up all over the nation and soon had a membership of about 1.5 million senior citizens. Their delegates assembled in regional and later in national conventions, where they sang "Onward, Townsend Soldiers." The movement quickly became a powerful force in both state and national politics.

Depression and Deportation

The hard times of the 1930s also contributed to a resurgence of xenophobia and nativism. As in earlier times of crisis, California nativists eagerly sought scapegoats for the state's economic difficulties.

Filipinos were among the first to feel the brunt of antiforeign hostility. White workers complained that recent immigrants from the Philippines were incapable of assimilation and posed an economic threat. Anti-Filipino riots broke out in several rural counties as well as in San Jose and San Francisco. The worst outbreak of violence occurred in 1930, in Watsonville, where one Filipino was killed and several others were badly beaten. "In many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California," recalled farmworker and writer Carlos Bulosan.

The hostility culminated in a demand for the deportation of all Filipino workers. In 1935 Congress passed the Filipino Repatriation Act, offering to pay the transportation expenses of any Filipinos who wished to return to their homeland. The act also prohibited Filipinos thus repatriated from reentering the United States. More than 2000 persons left under the terms of the act.

Far more effective was the move to repatriate aliens from Mexico. California nativists charged that Mexican immigrants were taking much-needed jobs away from American citizens. Nativists also alleged that most Mexicans in California were illegal immigrants and should be barred not only from employment, but also from all public assistance. The solution seemed obvious: deport the undesirable aliens.