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A World Transformed

Firsthand Accounts of California
Before the Gold Rush

Edited with Introduction by Joshua Paddison

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Joshua Paddison

INTRODUCTION



The recent sesquicentennial (150th) anniversary of the California gold rush has focused much popular and scholarly attention on the tumultuous years 1849 and 1850. Certainly, as many have pointed out, the influx of more than 300,000 gold seekers from every continent on earth had a dramatic effect on the region's culture, economy, and environment. Ship after ship from Boston, Shanghai, Paris, and Valparaíso sailed into San Francisco Bay filled with ambitious—often voracious—young men; metropolises sprung up seemingly overnight; rivers were rerouted and mountainsides torn apart with, in the mournful words of John Muir, “a fierce and desperate energy hard to understand.” About \$400 million in gold (worth more than \$6 billion today) was carried off by miners between 1849 and 1855, much of it spent in California at supply stores, gambling halls, saloons, and brothels built by gleeful entrepreneurs eager to make a profit from the miners' labor.¹ Half legitimate opportunity, half mass hysteria, the gold rush emphatically and irreversibly reshaped California.

However, as the title of this anthology suggests, by the time of the gold rush California was a world already transformed. Eighty years of Spanish, Russian, Mexican, and American intrusion had

changed the region as significantly and pervasively as did the subsequent gold rush. In fact, many of the attitudes historians ascribe to the forty-niners—an aggressive entrepreneurial spirit, a utilitarian view of nature, violence and racism toward indigenous peoples—had already been brought to California by the missionaries, merchants, settlers, and soldiers who trickled into the region between 1769 and 1848 and settled there. A relatively gradual but inexorable Europeanization process was quickened in the 1840s when ever-increasing numbers of trappers, homesteaders, traders, and military men from the U.S. penetrated California's borders. By the time of the gold discovery in January 1848, California was already a thoroughly American terrain. The gold rush did bring profound changes to the state, mostly due to an astounding increase in population in a few short years, but the underlying attitudes, institutions, and structure of commerce were already in place. The rush for gold merely escalated the Americanization process. In short, unlike the Roman goddess Minerva who appears on the state seal, modern California was not born full formed in 1849 but traces its roots to the Europeans, Mexicans, and Americans who had colonized, converted, and conquered it in preceding decades.

California's first settlers—the remarkably diverse group of people later known as “Indians”—came into the region in successive waves beginning more than 10,000 years ago. Moving out over the state, these explorers eventually made their homes in the disparate beaches, mountains, valleys, deserts, and forests of California. Over the course of thousands of years, they evolved into more than 500 separate tribal groups, dizzying in their variety of language, custom, dress, and religion.² Using hunting, gathering, fishing, and agriculture, they ingeniously learned to harvest California's natural resources. Most groups dried, shelled, ground, and cooked acorns into soup and bread. Some caught trout, salmon, and ocean fish

with harpoons and nets, or gathered shellfish from ocean beaches. Others hunted deer, elk, waterfowl, and rabbits with bow and obsidian-tipped arrows, a difficult endeavor that demanded cooperation, stealth, and strong nerves. Communication, trade, and intermarriage between groups was widespread, despite their speaking about 100 mutually unintelligible languages. By the time of European contact, California was the most densely populated area north of Mexico.³

Far from living in a “wilderness,” native Californians continually tended and cultivated the land through controlled burnings, weeding, pruning, tilling, irrigation, and selective replanting. They usually altered the landscape in a manner that imitated nature itself. “When the Western Mono lit hillsides on fire to encourage the growth of young redbud shrub shoots for basketry, they simulated lightning fires. When the Washoe pruned willow, they mimicked the natural pruning caused by river flooding,” note anthropologists M. Kat Anderson and co-authors. “By listening to the land's daily rhythms, scheduling activities according to its seasonal cycles, and always adjusting to California's continually changing environment, Native Americans transformed their status from newcomer to native and in doing so transformed the land and life forms as well.”⁴

California remained isolated from Europe and Asia until the early sixteenth century, when Spain, having already established a colonial system in the Caribbean, sent a war expedition into Mexico led by *conquistador* Hernán Cortés. He captured and plundered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (later called Mexico City) in 1521, and it became the hub of Spanish colonialism in the New World. Hoping to find a waterway from the Pacific to the Atlantic and spurred on by Indian legends of a golden city called El Dorado, Spain dispatched Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542 to explore the northwest coast of “New Spain.” In September Cabrillo became the first Spaniard to glimpse Alta (or upper) California. In 1579 the notorious

British pirate and “sea dog” Francis Drake anchored his ship, the *Golden Hind*, somewhere near San Francisco Bay, most likely at present-day Drake’s Bay.⁵ He and subsequent ship captains would miss the narrow entrance to San Francisco due to persistent fogs and the obscuring locations of Alcatraz and Angel islands. As a result, San Francisco Bay remained unknown to European navigators for nearly two more centuries.⁶

Early descriptions of California were favorable but unenthusiastic, and Spain was unready and unwilling to invest the money, ships, supplies, and people necessary to settle such a far-flung land already inhabited by possibly warlike Indians. In the 1580s and 1590s, only the Manila galleons—annual treasure ships laden with Asian silks, spices, and gems on their way from the Philippines to Acapulco—sailed the California coast. Their grueling voyage usually took six or seven months, and their crews had to endure starvation, scurvy, and pirate attacks. Spain considered establishing a port somewhere in California to shelter and resupply its galleons, and in 1602 commissioned a merchant-adventurer named Sebastián Vizcaíno to explore and map the coastline. Fearing that he might not receive his promised recompense from Conde de Monterrey, the viceroy of New Spain, if he did not return with a glowing report, Vizcaíno exaggerated California’s charms. Eager to “discover” a suitable harbor, he absurdly proclaimed rocky and exposed Monterey Bay to be “the best port that could be desired” and named it after the viceroy.⁷ Ironically, he too passed by magnificent San Francisco Bay without realizing it.

Despite Vizcaíno’s praise, Spain decided Alta California was too close to Mexico to warrant the establishment of a port, yet at the same time too far to colonize; in 1606 a royal order was issued prohibiting further exploration. Settlement eventually did proceed after 1697 in Baja where the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus (commonly called the Jesuits) founded twenty missions up and down the

narrow peninsula. The mission system—springing equally from political, economic, and religious motivations—was Spain’s centuries-old method of advancing and securing its colonial frontier by luring, Christianizing, and Hispanicizing native peoples. Lacking sufficient settlers, Spain needed Indians to colonize new lands and provide a labor force to sustain its colonies. In addition to outposts on the Baja Peninsula, by the mid-eighteenth century Spain had established a scattering of missions throughout the present-day states of Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

As for Alta California, Spain turned its back on it for an amazing 167 years after the Vizcaíno expedition; only competition from Great Britain and Russia in the 1760s finally prompted it to “defensively expand” up the California coast. The Jesuits had been recently expelled from the New World for plotting against the crown, so colonization was carried out by the Franciscans, who established Alta California’s first mission (Mission San Diego de Alcalá) in 1769. By 1823, the Franciscans had founded twenty-one missions that extended from San Diego to Sonoma. In the course of their sixty-five years of operation, the missions of Alta California employed 142 Catholic missionaries and baptized 53,600 Indians.

A mission was at once a church, town, military fortress, school, farm, factory, and prison, typically maintained by two missionaries and a handful of armed soldiers. They were sometimes located near a *presidio* (a frontier military fort that symbolically guarded the land against foreign attacks and protected mission padres against Indian resistance) and a *pueblo* (a secular agricultural community, such as Los Angeles, San José, or San Luis Obispo). The *padres* attracted most of their Indian converts (called neophytes) through beads (i.e. money), food, and other gifts. Once baptized, however, neophytes could be held at missions against their will while *padres* attempted to regulate nearly every aspect of their lives, including sex, work, sleep, amusement, and religious practice.

Neophytes who resisted were lashed, pilloried, or chained in stocks; those who fled were apprehended by soldiers and forcibly returned. Every mission was supposedly temporary, its land to be turned over to the now “educated” Indians after ten years of mission training, but in reality the padres retained control until forced secularization in 1834.⁸

The missionaries in California were by-and-large well-meaning, devoted men. Born mostly in Spain, they were attracted to the adventure and glory of distant mission work. Attitudes toward the Indians ranged from genuine (if paternalistic) affection to wrathful disgust. They were ill-equipped—nor did most truly desire—to understand complex and radically different Native American customs. Using European standards, they condemned the Indians for living in a “wilderness,” for worshipping false gods or no God at all, and for having no written laws, standing armies, forts, or churches.⁹ “I might inquire what sin was committed by these Indians and their ancestors that they should grow up in these remote lands of the north with such infelicity and unhappiness, in such nakedness and misery, and above all, with such blind ignorance of everything that they do not even know the transitory conveniences of the earth in order to obtain them,” wrote Father Pedro Font while traveling from Mexico to San Francisco Bay in 1776. “[Nor] do they have any knowledge of the existence of God, but live like beasts without making use of reason or discourse, and being distinguished from beasts only by possessing the bodily human form, but not from their deeds.”¹⁰ Given attitudes such as this, it was perhaps tragically inevitable that the culture clash between missionaries and Indians would be so destructive.

These missionaries, along with the soldiers, merchants, and settlers who emigrated to California before 1848, brought terrible changes to its Indian population. The biggest impact came inadvertently in the form of European germs and microbes unknown to

North American immune systems. Smallpox, influenza, dysentery, malaria, measles, and syphilis ravaged entire tribal groups, especially women and children. Although all twenty-one missions were located within thirty miles of the Pacific coastline, California’s Indian population, which numbered about 310,000 before Spanish intrusion, was reduced to about 100,000 by 1848 as disease spread widely. British trapper J. J. Warner, while trekking through the San Joaquin Valley in 1833, miles from the nearest mission, reported that “the decaying [Indian] bodies compelled us nightly to pitch our tents in the open prairie.”¹¹

Life was especially hard at the missions, where poor sanitation, overcrowding, malnutrition, and depression produced staggering death rates. For example, a measles epidemic from 1806 to 1810 killed more than one-third of the neophytes at the San Francisco-area missions, including almost every child. After the missions were secularized by the Mexican government in 1834, those Indians who survived were forced to either flee to remote interior valleys or try to assimilate into a society of Spanish- and English-speaking strangers who did not welcome them—except as servants.¹²

The disintegration of Indian culture went hand in hand with drastic changes wrought on California’s environment. Foreign germs, grasses, and animals—already intermittently introduced by such early European visitors as Cabrillo, Drake, and Vizcaíno—forever altered Californian flora and fauna after Spanish colonization in 1769. Hardy Mediterranean weeds and annuals replaced native grasses in California’s extensive grasslands. Enormous herds of domesticated animals (including cattle, mules, sheep, goats, and pigs) consumed millions of acres of grasses and eroded hillsides and stream banks.¹³ Horses, in particular, brought sweeping changes to Indian culture—many groups in the San Joaquin Valley and the southeast, once mounted, became more warlike; others began to rely on horse meat as a dietary staple.¹⁴ As thousands upon

thousands of Indians died from diseases, California's ecosystems spiraled out of balance. With fewer human hunters to thin their numbers, rodents, deer, antelope, and elk multiplied exponentially as they gorged on new European grasses. Grizzly bear populations also grew as they began to include domesticated animals in their diet.¹⁵

Many of California's European and American immigrants brought an exploitative attitude toward the natural world along with their livestock, axes, and guns. Fur trappers hunted sea and river otters, seals, beaver, and mink to near-extinction along the coast and in interior valleys. Settlers chopped down forests, exacerbating flooding. Mission *padres* and farmers often used destructive irrigation and plowing techniques that hastened soil erosion.¹⁶

Much of this environmental degradation came with the increased trade and commerce that rose in California, especially after Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821. Although California had no factories, mines, or much of a transportation system until the 1840s, it could produce plenty of raw materials like cattle hides, tallow, animal pelts, grain, and vegetables to trade with nearby Russian settlements and foreign ships. In their heyday, the missions used Indian labor to manufacture pottery, leather goods, blankets, rope, candles, wine, and simple furniture and clothing. These goods were not made for export but for trade with Spanish soldiers and settlers at local *presidios* and *pueblos*. After secularization of the missions came the rise of the great Californio *ranchos*, which grazed millions of head of cattle for the expanding hide-and-tallow trade. Whereas California's first non-Indian immigrants were soldiers and missionaries who came from a mix of political and religious motivations, by the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, most immigrants came for economic reasons—fur trappers from Russia, merchants from Europe and New England, farmers from the Midwest, and sailors from Boston on hide-and-tallow brigs.¹⁷

Decades before the gold rush, California was viewed by outsiders as a land of opportunity, possessing abundant natural resources, a warm climate, and little governmental control. A series of favorable reports from early European visitors such as Jean François de La Pérouse (1786) and George Vancouver (1792–1794) and later American ones such as Richard Henry Dana, Jr. (1835–1836) and John C. Frémont (1844–1846) increased U.S. knowledge of and interest in the region. Presidents Andrew Jackson and James Polk unsuccessfully tried to buy California from Mexico in 1835 and 1845, respectively, before Polk took it through war in 1846–1848. Americans had been steadily infiltrating California for twenty years, first as trappers, sailors, and mountain men and later as merchants, farmers, and soldiers. By the time American visitor Edwin Bryant arrived in September 1846, he heard more English spoken in San Francisco than Spanish. He described a dinner party where “it was very difficult for me to realize that I was many thousand miles from home, in a strange and foreign country. All the faces about me were American, and there was nothing in scene or sentiment to remind the guests of their remoteness from their native shores. Indeed, it seems to be a settled opinion that California is henceforth to compose a part of the United States, and every American who is now here considers himself as treading upon his own soil, as much as if he were in one of the old thirteen revolutionary states.”¹⁸ California, tended by the Indians for millennia, had gone from Spanish to Mexican to American control in one human lifetime—eighty short years.

All of the accounts that appear in this anthology were written by visitors to the San Francisco Bay Area, for the changes that occurred there are typical of those that occurred throughout the state. Once home to the Patwin, Wappo, Plains Miwok, Bay Miwok, and

Ohlone Indian language groups, the San Francisco Bay Area has always been a particularly diverse and important region.¹⁹ It was home to five of California's twenty-one missions (San Francisco de Asís, Santa Clara de Asís, San José de Guadalupe, San Rafael Arcángel, and San Francisco Solano de Sonoma), one of its four *presidios* (San Francisco), and its first Spanish *pueblo* (San José). The town of Yerba Buena, eventually renamed San Francisco, was founded in 1835 and later became the state's largest city and chief port. Otter was hunted in San Francisco Bay; cattle grazed in its fields. It was a popular visiting place for sea captains exploring in the North Pacific and emigrants fresh from the Oregon or California trails. Its transformation from a mosaic of Indian territories in 1769 to the home of a booming American metropolis in 1848 is indicative of the unfolding of all of California.

Located on the furthest reaches of the western frontier, shielded behind miles of inhospitable desert and rugged mountain ranges, laborious to reach by ship or wagon train, pre-gold rush California attracted extreme personalities: zealous missionaries deep in a foreign land, grim sea captains on their way around the globe, adventurous mountain men seeking beaver furs, beleaguered Mormons eager to escape eastern discrimination, and restless settlers drawn by "manifest destiny" to the wide-open opportunities of the West. Mostly male, mostly young, a remarkable number of these men went mad, died prematurely, or both. Their accounts are rife with biases, both cultural and personal. Their understanding was usually limited to what they saw and heard with their own eyes and ears, often leading to incomplete, misleading, or incorrect notions. What they actually wrote down on paper and allowed to be published, often selective and self-serving, was another step removed from reality.

On the other hand, there is an unparalleled immediacy and excitement contained within these firsthand narratives. With a couple

of exceptions that were written later, these are the transformers of California describing their actions in their own words, more or less as events happened.

Part I of this book contains the diaries of Spanish missionaries as they first explored California in the 1770s, encountered its often bewildering animals and people, and sized up its resources. As the explorers traveled, they engaged in the first step of colonization—giving Spanish names to the rivers, mountains, and other features of California's natural world. Part II is made up of the travel accounts of Europeans and Russians who visited San Francisco Bay between 1776 and 1816. As outsiders, they offer valuable descriptions of the isolation and harshness of life (for mission Indians and Spanish residents alike) during Spanish control. Part IV shows how trade and commerce came to be more and more prevalent in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s as California fell first into Mexican and then American hands. The accounts in this section increasingly reflect the interests of merchants rather than missionaries or military leaders. Their writings make it clear that, more than any other force, it was trade and commerce that transformed California.

Each account provides a snapshot in time and space. Read together, they form a tale, epic in scope, of the triumphs and excesses that went into the making of modern California.

Joshua Paddison
San Francisco
January 1999

Notes

1. Michael Kowalewski, "Introduction," *Gold Rush: A Literary Exploration* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1997), xv. See also J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981); Malcolm Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Gary F. Kutz, *The California Gold Rush: A Descriptive Bibliography* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1997).
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