

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE DARK SIDE OF THE GOLD RUSH

The California Gold Rush is one of those rare historical events whose extraordinary intensity at once made it a touchstone of character and brought to the surface deep-seated societal stereotypes and prejudices. Young American men who had had little or no exposure to different cultures, races, or ethnicities suddenly found themselves literally rubbing shoulders in the diggings with Mexicans, blacks, Indians, Chinese, French, Chileans, and others from all over the world. As *Girls of the Golden West* reveals, all too often they responded with a mixture of selfishness and nativism. The philosopher Josiah Royce wrote in his classic 1886 book *California: A Study of American Character*, “Nowhere else, save perhaps as conqueror in Mexico itself, did the American show so blindly and brutally as he often showed in early California his innate intolerance for whatever is stubbornly foreign.”

Actually, relations between the various national and ethnic groups in California were largely peaceful during the first year after gold was discovered in January 1848. This is because, initially, the Gold Rush was really the Gold Trickle. Only about 4,000 Yankees made it to distant California that year, joining 1,300 Californios

(Spanish-speaking residents of California), some Mexicans from the northern states, smaller numbers of Chileans and Peruvians, and a scattering of others. Surface gold was relatively plentiful, the diggings were not too crowded, and life in the mining camps was mostly peaceful. But this Rousseauian phase of the Gold Rush was soon replaced by a more Hobbesian version. In 1848, when President Polk confirmed that there really was gold in California, and the world, including 80,000 Yankees, rushed in, the situation began to take a darker turn. As gold became scarcer and the competition more cutthroat, racism and nativism became increasingly common.

Even before explicit bigotry emerged, the gold fields were hardly a melting pot. Ethnic and racial stereotypes were so commonplace they did not raise an eyebrow: Mexicans were seen as lazy and violent, Chinese clannish and mendacious, blacks intellectually inferior, Jews grasping and averse to physical labor, Irish thuggish and drunken, French sexually depraved, and so on. But these stereotypes did not necessarily run very deep. In the early days of the Gold Rush, many white American miners worked without incident next to Mexicans, blacks, and others. But when the gold got

Yankee encounters with “others” in the diggings— whether Spanish speakers, Indians, Chinese, blacks, or Europeans— all too often ended in unjust expulsions and, sometimes, violence.

scarcer, such prejudices grew stronger. And even when they were not fully believed, they served to justify self-interested actions.

The first victims were Spanish speakers. Many white American miners shared the jingoist sentiments that had become widespread after the recently concluded Mexican-American War, and they were outraged that “foreigners,” mainly Latinos but also French, Chinese and other non-citizens, were taking gold that they thought was rightfully theirs. The first official attempt to exclude Latinos from the gold fields took place in January 1849 in Panama, where 300 Americans found themselves stranded on their way to El Dorado. A rumor spread that “foreign plunderers” from South and Central America had removed \$4 million in gold from California, leaving little for “true citizens” like themselves. A mass meeting was called, after which Gen. Persifor F. Smith, who was headed to Monterey to command the army, issued an illegal declaration stating that any non-citizen who dug for gold on public land would be considered a trespasser. All 300 Americans present supported the declaration.

Anti-Latino sentiments had already begun to run high in the mines, in part because many Mexicans and Chileans had far greater mining expertise than their white counterparts. Smith’s declaration provided legal cover. That spring, vigilantes at Sutter’s Mill drove away large numbers of Mexicans, Chileans, and Peruvians. On the Fourth of July, there was another anti-Latino outburst on the Sacramento River, after which 1,000 victims, mostly Chileans, poured into San Francisco, many headed for home. In fact, Smith’s decree was not only illegal but factually wrong—non-citizens were considered guests and were legally allowed to mine on public lands. Officials disavowed it, but the damage had been done.

The travails of a Californio schoolteacher named Antonio

Coronel were typical. He and his party were successfully prospecting in the foothills, when posters appeared warning “foreigners” to leave the mines. Meanwhile, five foreigners were accused of stealing gold in a nearby camp. Two of them, a Frenchman and a Chilean who were unable to understand a word of the charges against them, were hanged by a drunken mob. The camp thereafter was called Hangtown. It was California’s first lynching. Sadly, as *Girls of the Golden West* shows, it would not be its last.

Coronel and his group headed to a remote river, but even there they were chased off by 100 gringos who announced that the entire riverbed belonged exclusively to Americans who would tolerate no “foreigners.” The Yankees made no distinction between the Californios, some of whose ancestors had arrived in California in 1769, and newly-arrived Mexicans, Chileans, and Peruvians. They lumped them all together as “greasers.”

Anti-foreign and anti-Spanish sentiment culminated in what one historian called “one of the most original if benighted laws ever passed in a California legislature”—the Foreign Miners’ Tax of 1850. This statute, one of the first passed by the California legislature after California became a state, imposed a draconian \$20 a month fee on all foreign miners. Although the fee was later reduced, and the act repealed in 1851, the damage was done; it drove an estimated 10,000 Mexicans from the mines. The bill’s sponsor was a virulent Texas-born racist and state senator named Thomas Jefferson Green, who had been run off the Yuba River because he was using black slaves to mine, and who once said he could “maintain a better stomach at the killing of a Mexican” than at the crushing of a body louse.

California’s native peoples fared even worse than the Spanish-speakers. Yankee miners exploited them mercilessly as

Left: Charles Nahl’s 1856 illustration “Bogue Ejecting the Squatters” from the Old Block’s Sketch-Book.

Below: A circa 1849 image of Chinese immigrants working in the gold fields; Mexican immigrant Josefa Segovia was hanged in Downieville, California on July 5, 1851.



Clockwise from top left: Approximately one-quarter of all cowboys on the western frontier were African American, immortalized in this circa 1880 photograph; born into slavery in 1854, Nat Love became a Wild West legend before dying in Los Angeles in 1921; an 1860 clash of settlers and Native Americans in the Sierra Nevada.

workers, in some cases trading them a cup of sugar for a cup of gold. They were held in complete contempt: one relatively cosmopolitan forty-niner wrote of them, "A more filthy and disgusting class of human beings you cannot well conceive...they seem to be only a few degrees removed from brutes." From such attitudes to cold-blooded slaughter, it was only a short step. As early as 1849, whites began clearing Indians from the diggings, and organized killing expeditions soon followed. Many whites realized that the state's original inhabitants were being dealt with unjustly, but such sentiments were almost always couched in terms of resignation. In an 1851 speech to the state legislature, the first elected governor of California, Peter Burnett, said, "A war of extermination would continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct." Although Burnett said this was a source of "painful regret," he concluded, "the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power and wisdom of man to avert." The genocidal campaigns waged against California Indians over the next three decades, in which men, women, and children were often gunned down like big game in a safari, constitute one of the blackest pages in American history.

The Chinese, who began mining in large numbers relatively late, were also subject to the dominant prejudices of the time. In this case, however, it might be more accurate to speak of ignorance than of prejudice, at least at first. Most white forty-niners had never met a Chinese person, and had no idea what to make of them. But curiosity soon turned to animosity, again driven by fear of competition, and exacerbated by the huge cultural and linguistic gulf between the two groups. The Chinese tried to avoid direct confrontation with the white miners, but Yankee rage boiled over in 1852, when the people of the southern mining town Columbia held a mass meeting in which they passed resolutions forbidding "these

burlesques on humanity" from mining. Another miner's tax was passed, this time targeting Chinese. Like Latinos and Indians, Chinese were routinely harassed and driven out of the diggings.

Blacks also faced widespread bigotry. California became a free state in 1850, but there were plenty of pro-slavery southerners in the mines. Most white miners were opposed to southerners like Thomas Jefferson Green using slaves in the diggings, but more out of self-interest than moral opposition. The color line that ruled American society did not end in the diggings. Black miners were often confined to segregated boarding houses, and white miners would frequently chase them off their claims. However, the picture could be more nuanced. An English observer wrote, "In the mines the Americans seemed to exhibit more tolerance of Negro blood



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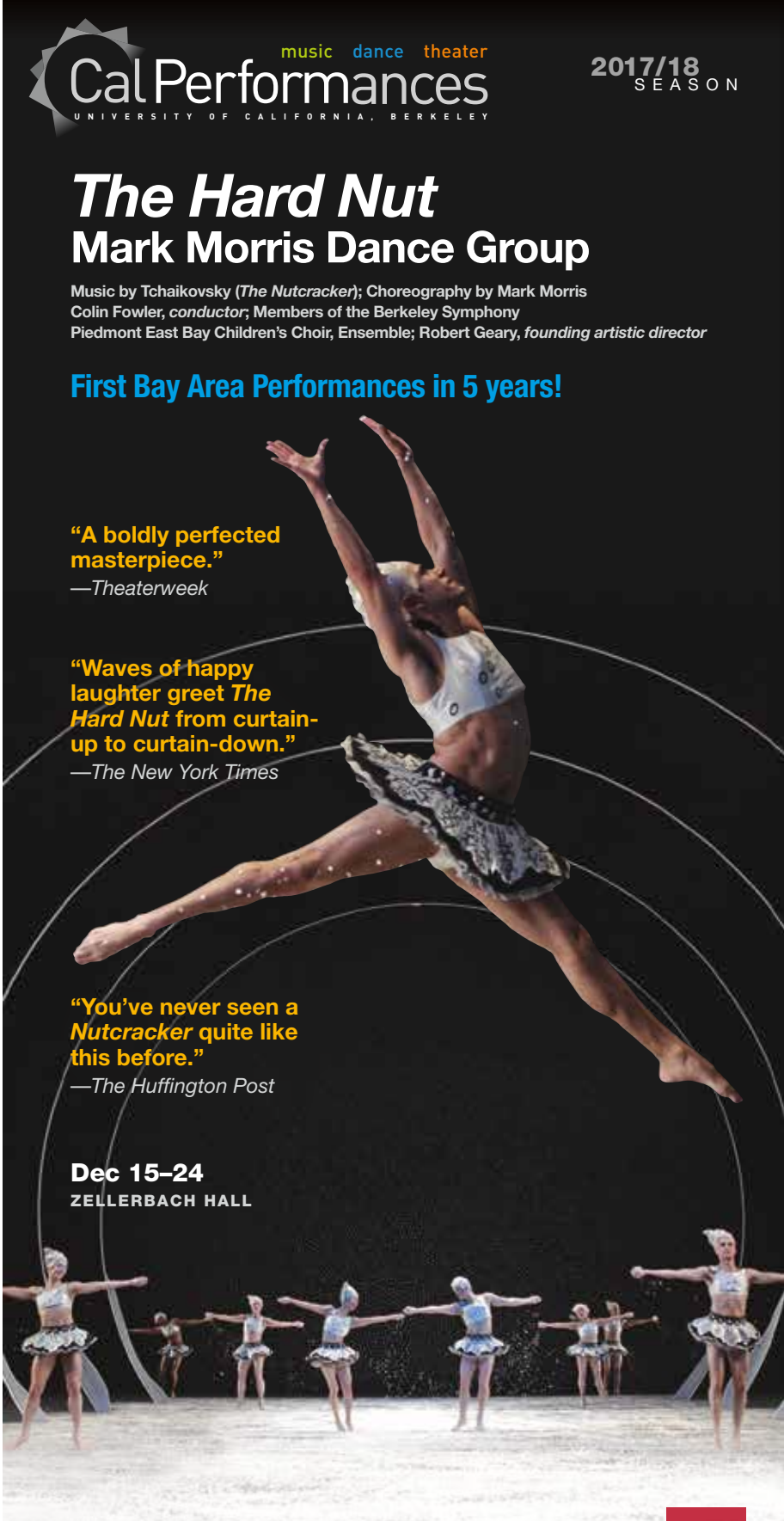
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than is usual in the states...owing partly to the exigencies of the unsettled state of society...and to the important fact that a n---r's dollars were as good as any other." Marysville's first saloon and gambling house advertised that it was open to all, "with no regard to distinction of color." Sometimes whites and blacks partnered together; one white family stood up for black miners when a drunken mob tried to drive them out.

It's far from an idyllic picture. Yet as *Girls of the Golden West* eloquently depicts, the Gold Rush was much more than a tale of unrelenting nativism and racism. The prevalence of those dark, all-too-human forces cannot be denied. But to see the Argonauts as a bunch of Ku Klux Klan members with pickaxes would be ahistorical. Like all of us, they were shaped by the attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices of their time, and the anarchic, greed-driven universe of the mining camps allowed those prejudices to blossom. The diggings were a great crucible, a test of character. Some Argonauts failed the test; others proved to be made of the highest mettle; most fell in between. The Gold Rush was a Shakespearean saga, a portrait of humanity in all of its splendor and degradation, its nobility and folly. And the lessons it holds are as important, and painful, in 2017 as they were in 1849. 🌻

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