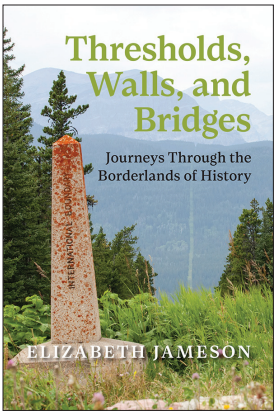
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press



THRESHOLDS, WALLS, AND BRIDGES: JOURNEYS THROUGH THE BORDERLANDS OF HISTORY

by Elizabeth Jameson

ISBN 978-1-77385-663-6

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org

1

Where Have All the Young Men Gone? The Social Legacy of the California Gold Rush

April 5, 2000

When 1960s anti-war activists sang, "Where have all the young men gone?" they answered rhetorically, "Gone to soldiers, every one."[1] In many parts of the world in the 1850s, the same question might prompt an equally automatic response: Where have all the young men gone?" "Gone to miners, every one."

The discovery of gold near Sutter's Fort drew a demographically extraordinary influx to the California streambeds—overwhelmingly young, overwhelmingly male, carrying ambitions born from the particular economic and political dislocations that pushed them to California.

Mark Twain indelibly etched the virile masculinity of these gold seekers. They were, he wrote,

> a driving, vigorous, restless population . . . a curious population . . . the only population of the kind that the world has ever seen gathered together, and it is not likely that the world will ever see its like again. For observe, it was an assemblage of two hundred thousand *young* men—not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young knaves, brimful of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood—the very pick and choice of the world's glorious ones. No women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans—none but erect, bright-eyed, quick-moving, strong-handed young giants—the strangest population,

> the finest population, the most gallant host that ever trooped down the startled solitudes of an unpeopled land.

"And," Twain concluded wistfully, "where are they now?"[2]

What legacy remains from the hundreds of thousands of otherwise ordinary men who interrupted their lives for an extraordinary trek to California's rocky streams and slopes?

The social outcome is less apparent than how clearly all those young men touched collective imaginations. Their mythic Gold Rush inspired nostalgic images of youthful adventure and reckless risk-taking—an adolescent fantasyland, free from constraint and responsibility—a place where young men worked hard, played hard, cursed, sweated, spit, whored, and gambled everything on an elusive bonanza and often equally elusive good times.

Twain's Gold Rush, like most good fantasies, bore enough resemblance to reality to fuel generations of romantic histories. It *was* a curious population. And one of its most curious attributes was its ability to reproduce itself in collective memory far beyond its capacity to reproduce itself biologically or socially.

These young men endured as leading actors in a saga of an American West so unreal that historian Susan Armitage dubbed it "Hisland." In this imagined historical terrain:

> . . . under perpetually cloudless western skies, a cast of heroic characters engages in dramatic conflict, sometimes with nature, sometimes with each other. Occupationally, these heroes are diverse; they are mountain men, cowboys, Indians, soldiers, farmers, miners, and desperadoes, but they share one distinguishing characteristic—they are all men. . . . This mythical land is America's most enduring contribution to folklore: the legendary Wild West.

"The problem with Hisland," Armitage continued, "is that many people believe it is history, and some of those people are historians."[3]

In the context of the 1849 Gold Rush, Armitage's critique might sound like so much feminist carping. The Forty-niners were, according to all available evidence, much as Twain painted them: overwhelmingly young, overwhelmingly male. In California, a year after the Gold Rush began, the U.S. census counted twelve men for each woman. The odds were even

more skewed in the mining districts—97 percent male. By 1860, three Californians in ten were women, but around the mines, the women were still outnumbered twenty to one.[4]

The early mining booms belonged to young men. But over time placer mining—sifting precious metals from streambeds—gave way to quartz mining as capitalists followed the "leads" underground to mine complex ores that must be milled and refined to yield their precious metals. Wage laborers replaced the exuberant forty-niners, the impermanent placer camps gave way to settled mining communities and supply centers, economic and social institutions became more stable, and increasing numbers of women and children invaded Twain's masculine Eden.

Like most adventurous young men, the Forty-niners grew up, or went home, or settled down. They were seldom as footloose and unattached as the fantasy West painted them. They did not, as Twain would have it, penetrate the virgin territories of their manifest destiny to startle "the solitudes of an unpeopled land." The land was quite "peopled" when they got there, its Indigenous people having already been invaded as a northern frontier of New Spain. To sift history from the mythic West, we must locate the argonauts in their own contexts. Who and what did they leave, and why? What relationships did they build, and with whom? For some youthful gold-seekers, their sojourn in the diggings would represent, as it did for Twain, a brief adventure before they returned East to adult lives very like the ones they left behind. For others, however, the Gold Rush was a step away from the familiar, toward something not yet formed.

The "curious population" of Gold Rush California was part of a much larger international mass migration of people and capital engendered by the worldwide impacts of industrialization, colonial expansion, and the development of market economies.[5] These impelled an extraordinary, but selective, migration to California. The argonauts came more often from the northern U.S. than from the South or the frontiers; from Mexico and Chile, but not from Brazil; from China, but not from India and Afghanistan; from Ireland, Cornwall, and Germany, but not from Portugal or Greece. They left droughts, depressions, crowded farms and unhappy marriages, the chaos of revolutions, and workshops where artisans' skills were being displaced by factory production, hauling their social baggage to the gold fields. Their collective experience recharted how people related to one another as women and men, workers and owners, immigrants and native-born Americans.

It would require more than a single essay to unravel all the strands of their intertwined histories. I focus here on young men from the United States, Great Britain, and China to trace some of the connected relationships of manhood, race, and labor that they forged in the Gold Rush.

Many young men whose hopes drew them to the gold fields came from the Northeastern and Midwestern United States, where factories and wage labor were replacing independent artisans and eroding their skills. The prices craftsmen could command plummeted, and with them the hopes of many Euro-American men of achieving what they called a "competency"—a secure financial future that guaranteed a respected social niche.[6] Many of our most vivid Gold Rush records were penned by men who aspired to such stable middle-class status, who hoped that California opened a route to economic security that seemed increasingly tenuous in New York, Maine, or Massachusetts. Susanna Townsend, who accompanied her husband Emery to his claim on Jackson Creek in Amador County, wrote her family in New York that ". . . if kind Providence smiles upon us Emery thinks he will be able to live the rest of his days without labor. A small capital in this country well invested brings in returns so much greater than in the older states that we could live handsomely on the interest of six thousand dollars while at home it would not be much."[7]

Men with more modest aspirations found that they could do better plying their craft skills in California than in the uncertain gamble of the diggings. New Englander Jotham Varney budgeted two years to improve his fortunes in California. Quickly "discouraged about gold digging" after a brief stint in the summer of 1850, Varney found that it was much more profitable to work in Sacramento as a cooper, making kegs used to haul molasses and liquor to the mines. "A common hand," he wrote his wife, "can make from four to six of them in a day the ten gallons sell for five dollars, and the five gallons sell for a dollar apiece. If I had come out here a little more than a year ago and set up coopering I might have made something handsome them cags they say sold for sixteen dollars apiece."[8] New Yorker James Barnes calculated the value of mining against what he could earn plying his trade as a skilled carpenter, writing from Sacramento in March 1850, that "if work is good here this summer i shall not go to the mines if they get below 12$ a day i shall go to the mines it is thought by some that Carpenter work will be from 12 to 18$ a day all summer. . . ."[9]

Eastern artisans were soon joined by men from all corners of the globe. William Ives Morgan of Bristol, Connecticut, wrote from Amador in 1850 that he: "Worked all day near the road, and saw Yankee, English,

Chinese, German, Scotch, Chileans, Mexicans, Californians, Manilla Men, Indians, Swedes, Norwegians, French men, Kanakas, and don't know how many other Nations pass us."[10] If Twain's curious population included "no women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans," it excluded such international diversity as well. The mythic argonaut was a free White man from the eastern United States, a fitting agent of American national destiny. Many of the first migrants fit that bill. But by 1860 four Californians in ten were immigrants; almost half the people in mining districts came from other lands. Immigrants, particularly people of color, clustered disproportionately in the southern mines, where placer mining continued, while the native-born and northern and western Europeans staked their fortunes to deep-shaft mining further north.[11] Everywhere, class distinctions charted a growing divide between immigrants and Euro-Americans. By 1870 only one working man in four in the industrial mining center, Grass Valley, was a native-born American, four in ten in adjacent Nevada City.[12] International migrations fueled class formation, a process that affected who stayed around the mines and who owned them; who worked underground for wages; who grew food and who sold it; who supported families and who provided the domestic needs of a largely male and increasingly immigrant workforce.

Different dislocations pushed the men who rushed in from distant ports. Irish immigrants fled poverty, the potato famine, and British rule. French argonauts fled the failed Revolution of 1848.[13] Distinct patterns of migration and settlement are suggested in the particular social and economic niches occupied by the Cornish and the Chinese in post-Gold Rush California. By 1870, four Californians in ten were immigrants. One migrant in four was Chinese; one in ten was English, one in four, Irish.[14] Migrations from both England and China were concentrated from areas where specific dislocations and histories sent men to the new gold fields.

The Chinese and English who came to California were only a portion of larger migrations from their homelands, and a tiny fragment of the international migration of labor caused by the global expansion of capitalism.[15] An estimated 2.5 million Chinese left their homeland from 1840–1900, after China lost the Opium Wars and was forced to open to European trade and political domination.[16] Almost all the Chinese who went to California came from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, close to the ports of Hong Kong and Canton, a land approximately the size of Oregon but so poor and hilly that only 16 percent was cultivated as late as 1955.[17] Much of the cultivated land in the nineteenth century grew

commercial crops: sugar cane, fruit, indigo, and tobacco, rather than rice or other staple foodstuffs. Peasants in the Pearl River delta were particularly hard-hit by increased taxes, loss of land, unemployment, and overpopulation. For common people, food was scarce and expensive. From 1787 to 1850 the population of Guangdong grew from 16 million to 28 million. During the 1850s and 1860s, the province was further rocked by the Taiping Rebellion, the Red Turban uprisings, and interethnic warfare. Extreme political, social, and economic dislocations led to reports that "[s]mall families found it difficult to make a living and often drowned their girl babies because of the impossibility of looking after them."[18] Many of the sons emigrated. At least half were married and intended to support a family back home.[19]

Some 75,000 Chinese lived in California in 1880, two years before the Chinese Exclusion Act halted the entry of all but a trickle. The overwhelming majority worked as laborers and miners. In 1868 one-fourth of the Chinese in California labored on the railroad; a third were miners.[20] The proportions remained unchanged from 1860 in Grass Valley, where one U.S. native in four still mined in 1870, and in Nevada City, where the population was still 40 percent native-born Americans. Eighty percent of the British mined in Grass Valley, 80 percent of the Chinese in Nevada City.[21] Compared with native-born Americans, both the Chinese and British were disproportionately working class.

The British miners came from Wales, from the Yorkshire coal fields, and especially from Cornwall, in southwestern England, where generations of Cornish had mined tin, copper, and clay used to manufacture china. In Cornwall, by 1862 some 340 mines employed 50,000 men and women, their lives marked by endless labor and marginal poverty, usually cut short by silicosis and other occupational ailments. The skills and techniques perfected in one of the world's oldest mining regions passed from generation to generation as boys began working at age seven under their fathers' watchful eyes.[22]

Children began work by age six or seven, often working ten hours a day for pennies separating rubbish from the ore. Girls did not work underground but labored on the surface. Older women hammered rude ore with stone mallets and then passed it on to the "bal maidens," adolescent girls who "bucked" it with an iron hammer to the size of half-inch marbles for twelve to eighteen shillings a month. One observer noted that "The use of hammers in dressing ores tends, perhaps, to the production of some

fullness of breast, but the sedentary position necessary gives little or no exercise to the lower limbs."[23]

Even the meager living eked from the Cornish mines was threatened by the time of the Gold Rush. An economic depression in the 1840s hastened emigration. By the 1850s high-grade copper was running out at depths of 1,000 feet in Cornish mines. Competition from newly discovered copper deposits in Michigan and Chile led to mine closures and widespread unemployment. By the end of the century, Cornwall lost an estimated third or more of its population: 230,000 left for Australia, Mexico, and Chile, for the Wisconsin lead mining regions, the copper mines of northern Michigan, the gold mines of California, and the hardrock camps that soon dotted western North America.[24] The Cornish brought to the placers their knowledge of alluvial tin-streaming, introducing improved equipment like long toms, cradles, and sluice boxes. John Roberts, who traveled from Cornwall to Wisconsin to Sonora, Mexico to California, wrote that he planned to dig into the quartz veins which were "formed exactly like the copper lodes in Cornwall, only they lie very flat."[25]

Following placer deposits underground to develop quartz mines was a natural step for an experienced Cornish miner. Nevada City and Grass Valley became centers of Cornish settlement, where Cornish men became highly regarded miners, superintendents, managers, and foremen, working as skilled blasters and drillers, and supervising specialized operations like timbering. Cornish shift bosses and foremen would hire newly arrived Cornishmen, in a world where Cornishness, regardless of actual mining experience, came to connote skilled miners.[26]

The Cornish brought their brass bands and Methodist churches and fanned out to take their skills throughout the mining West. The Boise (Idaho) *Owyhee Avalanche* published a common estimate of these immigrants who soon became a common fixture of western hardrock regions:

> The Cornishman is probably the most skillful foreign miner that comes to our shores. For this he deserves no special credit, because it is a calling to what he has been accustomed since his childhood. . . . Generally speaking, he is satisfied to be working for others, but insists on being paid promptly for his services. . . . They are mostly stalwart, good-looking fellows, dress better than any other class of miners, and are very fond of women. They also appear more clannish than any other foreigner and a majority of them are very good singers.[27]

Although Twain did not likely picture the Cornish and Chinese among his "stalwart, muscular, dauntless young knaves," they lived in the company of other men in greater proportions and far longer than the "curious population" of native-born Americans he celebrated. The native-born population, by 1870, was 43 percent female, compared to three immigrants in ten, and only 8 percent of all Chinese.[28]

Cornishmen might be "very fond of women," but they often had to wait to marry them. More Cornish men than women came to California. The instabilities of mining and the excess of men in western mining camps meant that the Cornish, like many skilled working men, delayed marriage until they could support a family, and often until they could send for Cornish sweethearts left behind. For many years Cornishmen shared bachelor cabins, most often with other Cornish miners, or boarded with the few Cornish and American women who provided domestic services for working men in the mining camps.

Ultimately, however, many Cornish miners would marry, settle, and raise families in western mining towns. Generations of California miners traced their roots to the mines of Cornwall, or the Yorkshire coal pits, or Wisconsin lead, or Australian copper. Those who came during the Gold Rush often began a chain migration of family and friends who joined them where mining was stable and jobs available. John and Fred Nettel recalled the story of their father, who began working the mines of Redruth in Cornwall at age twelve. He emigrated to Michigan in 1881, then went to Prescott and Tuscarora before settling in Grass Valley, where his married sister lived. When he had saved enough and had been promoted to foreman at the Ledge mine, he followed the Cornish custom and wrote his sweetheart in Cornwall, asking her to marry him in Grass Valley. She agreed, and in time their sons followed their father into the mines.[29]

Class and race provide social lenses through which to examine the links between wage work and domesticity. Chinese and Cornish men both labored on the mining frontier, but their ability to form families, father children, and form permanent communities diverged sharply.

Cornish miners and their wives reproduced generations of skilled workers, a variation on the pattern whereby generations of Cornish sons followed their fathers underground. Their place in the process of class formation distinguished them from Chinese workers. Although Chinese men worked the placers and built western railroads, neither capital nor labor welcomed Chinese women, who, it was feared, would bear a stable Chinese work force that would demand higher wages and better working

conditions. The Chinese were restricted to the placers, allowed to mine underground only in the dangerous quicksilver mines, subjected to a foreign Miners' Tax, and were run out of mining camps throughout the West.[30]

Chinese women were restricted from joining Chinese men in America by patriarchal Chinese tradition, by poverty, and by racist anti-Chinese legislation. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act allowed only a few privileged women to emigrate, primarily the wives and daughters of merchants. Most of the Chinese women who were in the country when the doors closed in 1882 were prostitutes, mostly impoverished peasant women imported to serve as sexual companions for Chinese men. Since Chinese could not legally marry people of other races, these few women became virtually the only available marriage partners for single Chinese workingmen. The continued absence of women would separate the Chinese from most other immigrant groups and ensure that only the small Chinese merchant class could legally establish families in California.[31]

Chinese working men generally attended to their own domestic needs, growing vegetables, cooking, and establishing a variety of businesses, from noodle houses to laundries, that served Euro-Americans as well as Chinese. By 1880, almost 8 percent of the Chinese in the Northern Mines were cooks, 12 and 15 percent in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys respectively.[32] Some became truck farmers, raising vegetables, hogs, and poultry. By 1860, truck gardeners and laundrymen, who practiced "sedentary occupations that benefited from unpaid family labor," were some of the few Chinese men with wives in California.[33] Farmers, domestic service workers, and the small merchant class represented the very few Chinese in America who could establish families and physically reproduce their communities.

When we know that both Cornish and Chinese lived mostly with other men, the *Owyhee Avalanche*'s insistence that the Cornish were "very fond of women" takes on new meaning. It asserted the masculine and heterosexual identities of men who spent much of their time in homosocial worlds. Chinese men, by contrast, legally *prevented* from cohabiting with women, came to be portrayed as feminized, as less than men. These images had little to do with which Chinese men in fact had wives and families in California, but rather identified an ascribed racial "inferiority" with the lower status of Euro-American women, an association reinforced by images of men who did "women's work" like cooking, gardening, laundry, and domestic service.

Masculinity was thus associated with class and race in social contexts that could be seen alternately as hyper-manly or as lacking women to perform "feminine" and feminizing domestic tasks. Who, after all, were the young men to depend on for food, clothing, sexual companionship, and sociability?

If, indeed, we asked many of Twain's young compatriots about Gold Rush social life, they would have been mystified. "Society" implied women. The absence of women, by extension, defined what was missing in the tents, cabins, and settlements that mushroomed around the placers. James Barnes, who left New York for the gold fields in late 1849, wrote in December 1853 that he had "lived almost 4 years entirely excluded from society" and that "what makes society is females and a party of that kind i have not attended since i have been in the country[.]" "[T]here is very little what we might call society here females are too scarce. [W]hat are here think themselves better than the Angels in heaven." That being the case, Barnes preferred "reading some books" to "a bar room where there is always card playing drinking smoking and swearing such is about all the society there is here but i am here and i intend to make the best of it."[34]

Though there were very few women around the mines, women were never entirely absent, psychically, emotionally, and in the social perceptions of men.[35] In the absence of women, men recharted a social universe using as their compass the gender roles they had left behind. For most middle-class Euro-American men, this meant that things domestic—cooking, cleaning, sewing, doing laundry, making a space a "home" —had been done by women. Women nursed the sick, tended gardens, raised poultry and dairy cows, made butter and bread, championed moral behavior, and were essential for much civilized leisure. In the goldfields, then, men not only had to learn to care for their own domestic needs and amusements. They also had to decide what it meant that they did these things, what their new domestic and recreational arrangements meant for their personal and social identities.

They adapted in various ways, learning to provide for themselves and other men the domestic services that ideally belonged to women. As they did, they walked a fine line. In the social worlds they had left, men had greater status than women. Masculine status was a particularly precarious matter because a crisis in social status prompted many a gold seeker's journeys. They thus hastened to assure the folks back home that they were prospering and living well, while trying at the same time not to appear overly identified with the feminine domestic world. Much of their

correspondence connected domestic needs with the pursuit of prosperity: they wrote of food and the cost of provisions, and measured success in terms of health and income. Rodney Odall linked domesticity and finances as he described, for his family back in New York, the division of labor in his all-male household: "Harris makes our bread, Havens cooks in the morning, Fish at noon and I at night. ... Everything looks to me that I shall make some money yet." Food and fortune appear in concert throughout his correspondence: "Wages are 60 dollars per month in this place, eat yourself. The mines are very healthy at present. Smoked salmon 25 cts, beans 38, rice 38, sugar 50, dried apples 50, everything sells by the pound." Six months later he reported from Brown's Bar: "I have been well and healthy; never in my life was I as tough as now. I weigh about 170 pounds." He was, he reported, making $5 some days, some days a dollar.[36]

This connection of food with fortune, or more broadly of domesticity and prosperity, appeared repeatedly in Gold Rush correspondence. James Barnes wrote from San Francisco that it cost him and a group of friends $8 a week to live. "We live first rate we have one cook and baker we have good Oraing [Orange] County butter and potatoes and every thing els that is good."[37] Soon thereafter he wrote from Sacramento: "methinks i hear you say i wonder if he is not home sick far from it i did sometimes think of old daddy table when i was out to sea feeding on salt beef some of it smelt strong enough to knock a Jack ass down our board was moulgy and worms enough in it to cary it of, we have every thing that is good for breakfast something beter for dinner and tea and shortcake for supper that is beter than a seafaring life. . . ."[38] He left the mines both because they didn't pay as well as carpentry and because the food was bad. During his three months in the diggings, he averaged about $3 a day, and "lived on raw pork and sea bisket. . . ."[39]

Over time, food evoked memories of home. Jotham Varney, after almost a year away from his family, wrote his wife "I thought sometimes I should be glad to have a good drink of your buttermilk."[40] As the glamour of the Gold Rush faded, Barnes wrote: "what we live on here . . . is not buckwheat cakes for we do not get them more than once a week but the way we make them suffer even we do get them is a caution."[41] The young men tried to assure home folks they were doing well, but, for many, the homes they had left remained the measure of domestic comfort.

Recreating domestic comfort satisfied both physical and psychic appetites. The few women who joined the migration to the gold fields found their domestic skills in high demand. The domestic desires of thousands

of men created a market for domesticity. An unidentified woman wrote from San Francisco in 1850 that California was the only place "where a woman rec'd anything like a just compensation for work." She had been sewing but intended to open a boarding house for thirty to thirty-five boarders, paying a cook $150 a month. "People do not pretend to keep very clean houses here," she wrote. "But if the houses and streets are dirty the money is clean."[42]

In a world so entirely masculine, women found a narrow, if remunerative, set of opportunities. Married or single, respectable or disreputable, rewarded in cash or indirectly through spousal support, they supplied the domestic needs, the heterosexual and heterosocial desires of the overwhelmingly male population. In the paid workforce or in their own households, they cooked, cleaned, sewed, scrubbed, and provided "society" for the male majority. Well paid, at least compared to women's wages further east, their options remained restricted to domestic arenas, in the marketplace, or in the family household.

Their domestic skills could, nonetheless, hold the key to family prosperity. Luzena Stanley Wilson began her road to Gold Rush prosperity when, much to her own amazement, she sold biscuits for $10 to a miner who missed bread baked by a woman. From then on, she cooked for miners and operated hotels in Sacramento, Nevada City, and Vacaville. The day she opened her El Dorado Hotel in Nevada City, on a table she fashioned from two boards, she attracted twenty miners who paid her a dollar a meal and promised to return. "From the first day," she wrote, "it was well patronized, and I shortly after took my husband into partnership."[43]

Emery Townsend, who hoped "to live the rest of his days without labor," found that his wife's dreams led more directly to their security than his endless grubbing in the diggings. Susanna insisted on a garden.[44] The Townsends' security owed as much to Susanna's grubbing after vegetables as to Emery's grubbing for gold in his much-worked diggings. "It is astonishing," she wrote, "how the sale of a few vegetables mounts up."[45] From a half-acre garden, she "cleared twelve hundred dollars." She "felt sure" that they would do better on a small ranch "than mining and not work half so hard." She got her way. By 1853 the Townsends moved to twenty-eight acres near Sutterville.[46] In 1856 Susanna reported that they were growing grapes and had $2400 worth of cabbages in the ground.[47]

Her one lack, Susanna reported in 1857, was female company. There were twelve women in town, but, she wrote, "I have not found one congenial acquaintance. They are all course, low, illiterate women."[48] The

reference point for acceptable society remained for Susanna Townsend, as for many middle-class Euro-Americans, the women she had left back East and whose correspondence provided her primary female companionship.

The most significant women in the Gold Rush, however, were not the few exceptional ones like Susanna Townsend and Luzena Wilson who accompanied their husbands West, or the even rarer souls who sought their independent fortunes in Gold Rush California. The men who constituted the "curious" population in California left behind equally "curious" communities, where "Gold Rush widows" managed farms and businesses without male guidance.[49]

Separated couples expressed the gamut of feelings from affection to relief. Jotham Varney wrote before he ever got to California that he "felt the loss of your company more than anything else which I have to regret."[50] But John Bozeman wrote from the gold fields that he would not return to his wife Catharine and their three daughters. "I am a friend to Catharine and always will be, but the way we lived to gether my life was not pleasure to me. We never lived a week to gether without quarling and I doo not think it right for us to live to gether that way." He had been gone long enough, he wrote, for Catharine to divorce him for desertion.[51]

Dearly missed or happily abandoned, the women left behind were often invisible partners in their husbands' adventures. Men who sought to escape debt and downward mobility left women with few resources to support themselves and their children. They relied on "respectable" sources of income like teaching, selling butter and eggs, and keeping boarders. Jotham Varney, like many absent husbands, tried to advise his wife on matters of farm management, like what to do about the tenant who he feared was drinking too much and was violating his agreement to split the hay crop.[52] But he knew his family was essentially on its own. Sending advice for his children, he wrote, "Lincoln, I suppose is to work painting. I hope he will be a good boy and do the best he can. He will be the most of your dependence while I am absent. . . . As things look now," he added, "I shall not be able to send you any money at present."[53]

Women's efforts to sustain families, farms, and businesses while the men were gone remained largely invisible in a world that gauged economic value in the public marketplace. Yet their labor at home represented a very real contribution to the infrastructure of the Gold Rush, an uncalculated sum that supported the men's enterprises.[54] Economics and emotions subtly distinguished the separations of different couples. Chinese women left behind, like those left in New England, worked hard and were often

sorely missed. But they had far less independence or leverage than Gold Rush widows in the U.S. A Cantonese folk rhyme captured their dilemma:

> If you have a daughter don't marry her to a Gold
> Mountain man.
> Out of ten years, he will not be in bed for one.
> The spider will spin webs on top of the bedposts,
> While dust fully covers one side of the bed.[55]

The "grass widows" left behind when Chinese men sought their fortunes at the land they called Gold Mountain faced separations that could last ten years or a lifetime, depending on whether finances allowed a husband to visit or return. An anonymous Chinese miner wrote his "Beloved Wife" from John Day, Oregon: "Because of our destitution I went out to try to make a living. Who could know that the Fate is always opposite to man's design. Because I can get no gold, I am detained in this secluded corner of a strange land. Furthermore, my beauty, you are implicated in an endless misfortune. I wish this paper would console you a little. This is all I can do for now."[56]

The length of separations and what Gold Rush wages gave to the family economy distinguished Chinese couples from their counterparts in the United States. While Chinese men struggled to support families in Guangdong, Gold Rush widows struggled to underwrite American men's enterprises in the gold fields by managing families, farms, and businesses.

The effects of these extended separations are hard to calculate. It would be tempting to hope that men who had done their own domestic chores valued women's work more highly when they returned, that women who had managed on their own became more independent and assertive in their husbands' absences. The men, however, seemed generally all too happy to relinquish domestic tasks to women when they finally reunited. Some women appear to have been more reluctant to relinquish their newfound authority. Abiah Warren Hiller supported her two daughters and her mother in New York by teaching during her husband William's four-year absence in the gold fields. Abiah had to act decisively when her house burned down. She wrote William that she had spent $300 to build a new home, and had finished a kitchen, bedroom, and schoolroom, but had left the rest for him to finish when he returned. "I hope what you have done to your house you have done well so it will be worth finishing when I get

home," he replied. "I suppose the roof is too steep to suit you," she wrote in return, "but it suits me."[57]

The personal politics of separation could depend on many factors, including, of course, the previous relationship between husband and wife and the women's assessments of their own work. Abiah Warren was already an independent woman when William Hiller courted her, and she remained an independent woman after he returned. Thirteen years his senior, she had supported herself by teaching for years before they met when he became her student. By contrast, Almira Fay Stearns, who quit her job in a textile factory to marry, remained less able to assert her own needs, though she bore and raised five sons during her husband Daniel's extended absences. Daniel left her and their son in New Hampshire for almost four years, while he packed and sold supplies in the California and Oregon mines. Moving his family west in 1854, he left her behind in Oregon for another eleven years during his extended ventures as packer and merchant in the Oregon and Idaho mines. Finally reunited, she felt unable to oppose his plan to move to their isolated farm, away from women friends and relatives in Roseburg. After years of coping alone, she found herself in almost unendurable isolation and suffered for years from poor health and depression.[58]

The Gold Rush legacy was linked to how race and ethnicity operated in the class system of California mining. Skilled White laborers and the White middle classes were most able to establish families. Merchants and professionals were more able to marry than were miners, and American men moved in disproportionate numbers out of the mines and into middle-class occupations. For the Cornish, marriages were postponed by distance, economic insecurity, and the paucity of single women. Few Chinese men could marry in California, and few wives could join them to raise families in America.

Cornishness nonetheless remained a positive identity in a world where Cornishmen were presumed to be skilled miners, and where Cornish shift bosses and superintendents hired a Cornish workforce. The Cornish remained, in the words of the *Owyhee Avalanche*, remarkably "clannish," though as Protestants and English speakers, they were in a better position than most immigrants to assimilate. Ethnicity became marketable; Cornishness insured the status and wages of highly-skilled working-class men.[59]

Skilled miners could command wages sufficient to support families. White miners increasingly aspired to middle-class Euro-American

family norms, which separated the public world of manly labor from female domesticity. Significantly, Cornish sons followed their fathers underground, but Cornish wives and daughters did not join the mining workforce in North America. It became a mark of achievement for western hardrock miners and for their unions, to ensure the wages that kept wives and daughters out of the paid workforce, and their sons in school for an acceptable period.[60] While downwardly-mobile American craftsmen pursued middle-class respectability, immigrant miners from Cornwall, Yorkshire, and Ireland sought wages sufficient to support a family, or at least sufficient to keep married women out of the paid workforce, and sons at school through grade eight.

One of the least-noticed social legacies of the California Gold Rush was its gendered assignment of labor. Domestic work was marked as feminine, regardless of who did it, while mining itself was masculine. Although this division was so commonly assumed it seemed somehow "natural," it was in fact a social invention. Women did perform mining labor in other times and places, and Miwok women in California adapted gold mining to their seasonal round of activities, using tightly woven baskets to pan the California streambeds as they tried to buffer the dislocations wrought by disease and dispossession.[61] Women were restricted from working underground in England only in 1842, when the Mines and Collieries Act forbade the employment of boys under ten and of all females in British mines.[62] Women and girls, as we have seen, continued to perform hard labor for little pay in the surface workings.

Euro-American men worked to establish middle-class homes, marked by wide separations between the public world of masculine commerce and the private domain of female domesticity. For the Cornish the chance to keep women and children out of the mines was a distinct improvement from the worlds of labor they left in Cornwall. The homes of middle-class Chinese immigrants became the sites of social reproduction for a Chinese American community, since only the tiny middle class *could* marry and raise children.

Who did what work, how people of different races and ethnicities stood in relation to one another, what activities were considered manly and which womanly, these were some of their social legacies. We cannot trace their stories from the partial perspectives of Twain's "erect, bright-eyed, quick-moving, strong-handed young giants." They are the stuff of myth and fantasy, but not of history.

It remains important to consider why Twain's fantasy remained for so long imprinted as history. The answer, I think, has to do with the ability of young virile White American men to act in these stories as surrogates for the nation, to represent America's destiny to fill the continent with superior strength, pluck, and energy, to claim the imaginary "unpeopled land." If we stop the action where Twain's restless young giants startle the solitudes of an unpeopled land, then we can fit the Gold Rush into a nostalgic version of the American frontier. But if we widen the focus of our lens to include all the actors, and if we widen our historical perspective to see where they came from and what they did next, Twain's picture becomes fantasy.

Fantasyland is a California cultural creation, and it lies, as I recall, just next door to Frontierland. Frontierland fantasies do not explain adult lives, personal or social, not in 1849, and not now.

Where, then, to return to my rhetorical title, have all those young men gone? With luck, they have forsaken the Wild West, forsaken Frontierland, and left Hisland behind. That leaves historians to trace their complex routes to home and work. In these histories, the young men will not represent the linear movement of the nation across the continent, but the complex and interdependent negotiations of family fortunes. With luck they will enter collective memories not as mythic heroes, but as social ancestors who helped forge the worlds we inherit.

Where did all the real men go? Back to Massachusetts, Maine, and Guangdong; back to a place in Cornwall called Nevada Farm. To fetch their families or rejoin their wives. Underground, to timber the mine shafts. To cook dinner for their cabin mates. They grew up. Into history, every one.

NOTES

This lecture was originally prepared for "The California Gold Rush as A World Event," a lecture series sponsored by the University of California, Sacramento to commemorate the Sesquicentennial of the California Gold Rush. Subsequent to my 2000 Chair's Lecture, it was published in Kenneth N. Owens, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) and appears here by permission. I am grateful to the late Ken Owens for the invitation to think about the California Gold Rush, and for his extraordinary hospitality, support, and patience; to the staffs of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley and the California State Historical Society, San Francisco, for their assistance and for permission to quote from their collections; and to the historians I cite for the scholarship that makes new interpretations possible.

Additional Sources: One of my sources for this essay was Susan Lee Johnson's doctoral dissertation, "'The gold she gathered': Difference, Domination, and California's Southern Mines" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1993). Shortly after my lecture, her magnificent book based on that work appeared. Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000) remains the most important social history of the California Gold Rush in the southern mines, in the Sierra Nevadas east of Stockton. The southern mines have gotten less attention than the northern diggings, in part because they did not become sites of later industrial mining and in part because of the racial conflict and violence that Johnson probed. Her analyses of race and of negotiating gender identities are unmatched.

1 "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?," words and music by Pete Seeger. Seeger wrote the song in the mid-1950s, sometime after he was indicted for contempt by the House of Representatives on July 26, 1956. David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), 186.

2 Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford, 1872; repr., New York: Signet Classic, 1980), 307.

3 Susan Armitage, "Through Women's Eyes: A New View of the West," in *The Women's West*, eds. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 9.

4 Calculated from *Bicentennial Edition, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Time to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1970), Series A, 195–209.

5 For European migrations, see for instance Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *The Age of Mass Migration: Causes and Economic Impact* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

6 For regions of origin, see for instance Ralph Mann, *After the Gold Rush: Society in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California 1849–1870* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), Table 4, 225.

7 Susanna Townsend to Sister Mary, from Jackson Creek, November 23, 1852, Susanna Roberts Townsend Correspondence, 1838–68, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereinafter called "Townsend Collection").

8 Jotham Varney to wife from Sacramento, September 8, 1850, and October 27, 1850, Jotham Varney Collection, California Historical Society, San Francisco (hereinafter called "Varney Collection").

9 James S. Barnes, letter from Sacramento, March 21, 1850, in James S. Barnes Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereinafter called "Barnes Collection").

10 William Ives Morgan, journal entry, 53; William Ives Morgan Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

11 The following counties were included in each of the mining districts; the date in parenthesis is the first census year in which each appeared. Southern Mines: Amador (1860), Calavaras (1850), El Dorado (1850), Mariposa (1850), Tuolomne (1850); Northern Mines: Butte (1850), Nevada (1852), Placer (1852), Plumas (1860), Sierra (1852), Yuba (1850); Klamath/Shasta/Trinity: Del Norte (1860); Klamath (1852); Shasta (1850); Siskiyou (1852); Trinity (1850). Figures calculated from *Seventh Census of the Unites States: 1850. An Appendix Embracing Notes Upon the Tables of Each of the States, Etc.* (Washington, DC: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853), 972 (hereinafter called "1850 Census"); "Population and Industry of California, By the State Census for the Year 1852," in 1850 Census, 984 (hereinafter called "1852 Census"). In 1860, in the mining districts, almost half (48 percent) of the residents had come from other lands: 53 percent in the Southern Mines, and 45 percent in the Northern Mines and the Klamath/Trinity/Shasta district. Calculated from *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original*

Returns of the Eighth Census (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), 33 (hereinafter called "1860 Census").

12 Mann, *After the Gold Rush*, 229.

13 See Susan Lee Johnson, "'The gold she gathered': Difference, Domination, and California's Southern Mines" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1993), 113–15.

14 Overall, some 37 percent of California immigrants were British, 23 percent Chinese. *Ninth Census of the United States: The Tables of Race, Nationality, Sex, Selected Arts and Occupations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872), 336–37 (hereinafter called "1870 Census").

15 See Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16.

16 The Opium Wars occurred in 1839–1842 and 1856–1860.

17 The immigrants were particularly concentrated from selected districts. The largest proportions of Chinese emigrants to North America and Australia came from the district of T'oishan, to which an estimated 40–50 percent of the Chinese in America traced their origins. Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 17.

18 Shih-shan Henry Tsai, "Chinese Immigration, 1848–1882," in *People of Color in the American West*, ed. Sucheng Chan, Douglas Henry Daniels, Mario T. Garcia, and Terry P. Wilson (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994), 110–16, 112; excerpt reprinted from Shih-shan H. Tsai, *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States 1868–1911* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1983).

19 Tsai, *China and the Overseas*, Table 1, 114; Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil*, 43.

20 Tsai, "Chinese Immigration," 116.

21 Mann, *After the Gold Rush*, 237.

22 Arthur Cecil Todd, *The Cornish Miner in America* (Truro, Cornwall: D. Bradford Barton Ltd. and Glendale, CA: The Arthur Clark Co., 1967), 15.

23 Todd, *The Cornish Miner in America*, 18.

24 Todd, *The Cornish Miner in America*, 19, 21–22; A. L. Rowse, *The Cousin Jacks: The Cornish in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 243.

25 Rowse, *Cousin Jacks*, 245.

26 Rowse, *Cousin Jacks*, 246. On the positive manipulation of Cornish identity in hardrock mining, see Ronald M. James, "Defining the Group: Nineteenth Century Cornish on the North American Mining Frontier," in *Cornish Studies Two*, ed. Philip Payton (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1994), 32–47.

27 Quoted in Todd, *Cornish Miner*, 68–69.

28 Calculated from 1870 Census, 606–09.

29 Todd, *Cornish Miner*, 55.

30 See Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 107–27; Sucheng Chan, ed., *Entry Denied* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy–Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Roger Daniels, ed., *Anti-Chinese Violence in North America* (New York: Arno Press, 1978); Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967; paperback ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 29–34.

31 The Chinese Exclusion Act was renewed in 1892 and then renewed indefinitely in 1904, and was not repealed until 1943.

32 Chan, *Bittersweet Soil*, 73; for figures on occupations in 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900, see Tables 3–6, 54–55, 62–63, 68–69, 73–74.

33 Chan, *Bittersweet Soil*, 86, 103.

34 James Barnes to Sister Mary from Sacramento City, December 31, 1853; from Sac[ramento] July 30, 1854; from Sacramento May 26, 1854; Barnes Collection.

35 Andrew Rotter first explored argonauts' preoccupations with home and family in "'Matilda for Gods Sake Write': Women and Families on the Argonaut Mind," *California Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 128–41. See also Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

36 Letter from Rodney P. Odall, Jr., A Gold Miner in California, to his Parents, from Mariposa, November 25, 1850. Odall to Dear Parents, Brown's Bar, May 18, 1851. Rodney P. Odall, Jr., Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

37 James S. Barnes, from San Francisco, February 28, 1850; Barnes Collection.

38 James S. Barnes, from Sacramento, March 21, 1850; Barnes Collection.

39 James S. Barnes, from Sacramento, October 13, 1850; Barnes Collection.

40 Jotham Varney to his wife, from Sacramento, September 8, 1850, Varney Collection.

41 James S. Barnes from Sacramento, January 28, 1851, Barnes Collection.

42 Unsigned letter to Catharine D. Oliver of Boston from a female friend in San Francisco, MS 1596, California Historical Society, San Francisco.

43 Jo Ann Levy, *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush* (1990; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 91–92, 100–103, 107.

44 Susanna Townsend to sister Fanny, from Jackson Creek, January 19, 1852; Townsend Collection.

45 Susanna Townsend to Skotty, from Secreta Ranch, February 20, 1853; Townsend Collection.

46 Susanna Townsend to Sister Mary, from Sutterville, October 25 and November 13, 1853; Susanna Townsend to Skotty, from Sutterville, December 20, 1853; Susanna Townsend to Skotty, from Scuppernong, October 3–9, 1854; Townsend Collection.

47 Susanna Townsend to Sister Mary, April 25, 1856; Townsend Collection.

48 Susanna Townsend to Skotty, January 23, 1857; Townsend Collection.

49 See Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *The Gold Rush Widows of Little Falls* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990).

50 Jotham Varney to wife, At sea, May 1850; Varney Collection.

51 Peavy and Smith, *Women in Waiting*, 17.

52 Jotham Varney, from Sacramento City, September 18, 1850, October 27, 1850, and November 19, 1850; Varney Collection.

53 Jotham Varney, At Sea, May 1850; Varney Collection.

54 See Peavy and Smith, *Women in Waiting*, 25.

55 Quoted in Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 21.

56 Reproduced in Shannon Applegate and Terence O'Donnell, *Talking on Paper: An Anthology of Oregon Letters and Diaries* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1994), 215.

57 Peavy and Smith, *Women in Waiting*, 43–88, esp. 43.

58 Peavy and Smith, *Women in Waiting,* 89–131.

59 Peavy and Smith, *Women in Waiting*.

60 See Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), esp. chaps. 4 and 5.

61 The assumption that women should not mine underground has been breached against considerable resistance in the United States since the 1970s. In other times and places, it has not seemed so self-evident that mining was men's work. See for instance Patricia J. Hulden, "The Rhetoric and Iconography of Reform: Women Coal Miners in Belgium, 1848–1914," *The Historical Journal* 34, no. 2 (June 1991): 411–36; Zoila Hernandez, *El Coraje de las Mineras: Marginalidad Andino-Minera en Canaria* (Lima, Peru: La Asociacion, 1986); Angela V. John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers of Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Croom Helm, Ltd., 1990); Domitila Barrios de Chungara, *Let Me Speak: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); Lucy Murphy, "Economy, Race, and Gender Along the Fox-Wisconsin and Rock Riverways, 1737–1832" (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 1995); Johnson, "'The gold she gathered'," 379–80; Jaclyn J. Gier and Laurie Mercier, eds., *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to 2005* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988). In fact, for some British coal miners, the exclusion—or protection—of women from the mines was a distinct achievement they sought to extend to their children.

62 John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*.