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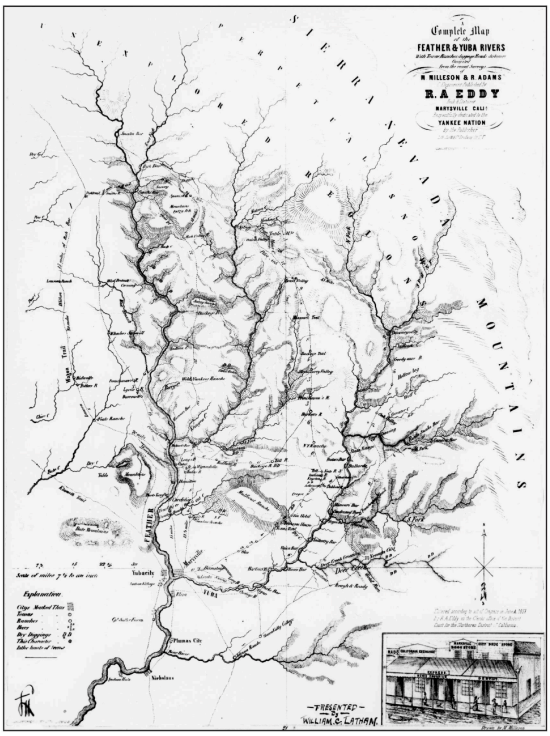
Dame Shirley

A Yankee Lady in the California Mines

Men dominated the non-Indian population of gold rush California (more than 90 percent in 1852), and the male-female ratio began to approach parity only during the late 1860s. Impressions introduced by fiction such as Bret Harte's "Outcasts of Poker Flat" and "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and perpetuated by entertainment media often stereotype a substantial proportion of the female 10 percent as prostitutes. In reality, women of all sorts traveled to California, even aboard the first steamship from Panama in 1849. Although few in number, they were influential socially, culturally, and economically. One penned perhaps the most perceptive existing account of early gold rush life. "Dame Shirley," for whom the trip to the mines was principally an adventure, did not typify female gold rush Californians, but her letters provide not only information about the lives of women in the mines and the composition of mining camp populations, but also details about the miners' work and play, attempts to civilize their environment, personal characteristics, prejudices, and much more.

Late in the summer of 1851, a Yankee lady arrived at Rich Bar on the East Branch of the North Fork of the Feather River, "at almost the highest point, . . . where gold has been discovered, and indeed, within 50 miles of the summit of the Sierra Nevada itself." In the first of 23 letters to her sister Molly at home in "the States," she anticipated inevitable questions: "How did such a shivering, frail, homeloving little thistle ever float safely to that far away spot, and take root so kindly . . . in that barbarous soil? . . . And for pity's sake, how does the poor little fool expect to amuse herself there?" During the following year, she provided answers by "taking pains to describe



A Complete Map of the Feather and Yuba Rivers . . .

Produced in 1851, the map shows both Dame Shirley's route and her destination. She and her husband departed from relatively civilized Marysville on a two-week journey over barely marked trails. After traveling for 100 miles, they reached Rich Bar, on the very edge of California's "Unexplored Regions" and not far from an area identified only as "Perpetual Snow." *Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

things exactly as I see them, hoping thus you will obtain an idea of life in the mines as it is." She succeeded—probably far better than she expected.*

Best known by her pen name, "Dame Shirley," Louisa Amelia Knapp Smith Clapp assumed that she would be the "only petticoated astonishment" in the mines; she was not, but she was a remarkable person indeed. Born in 1819 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, she was descended from prominent New England families. When her father died in 1832 and his wife followed him to the grave in 1837, they left seven orphans. Despite the loss of their parents, however, the children were well provided for, loved, and educated. Louisa, who became the ward of a prominent attorney, attended the Female Seminary in Charlestown and Amherst Academy, where she received a contemporary young woman's standard training in writing, literature, languages, and music. Subsequently, she taught school and began a lifelong friendship-by-correspondence with career diplomat Alexander Hill Everett. Although he was 20 years older than Louisa, Everett's interest in her was more than fatherly. She did not return his affection, but she did respond to his encouragement of her literary pursuits and began to publish her work. Later in the 1840s, Louisa Smith met Fayette Clapp, five years her junior but, like her, a descendant of respected New Englanders. Although Clapp began his higher education in theology, when he received his degree from Brown University in 1848, his interest had shifted to medicine. For about a year, he studied with a cousin, Dr. Sylvanus Clapp, and attended classes at Castleton Medical College in Vermont. In 1849, he contracted gold fever, married Louisa, and sailed for California with his bride.

Little is known about the couple's voyage around the Horn or their stay in San Francisco, but they soon left the foggy city for the more wholesome climate and greater opportunity of the region around Marysville. Then, in June 1851, Dr. Clapp (who had somehow obtained his medical credentials from Castleton while living in California) departed for Rich Bar on the Feather River, hoping to establish a practice, recover his health, and perhaps strike it rich. Late in the year, he felt confident enough to return for his wife, who had spent the summer on a ranch in the vicinity of Marysville. The prospect of a winter in the mountains "perfectly enchanted" her, to the dismay of her local acquaintances:

> Some said that I ought to be put in a strait jacket. . . . Some said that I would never get there alive, and if I did, would not stay a month; others simply observed . . . that even if the Indians did not kill me, I should expire of ennui or the cold before spring. One lady declared in a burst of outraged modesty, that it was absolutely indelicate, to think of living in such a large population of men; where at most there were two or three women.

Shirley decided to go, but soon after the couple began the trek to Rich Bar in September 1851, her enchantment diminished and her friends' warnings began to seem prophetic.

The 100-mile expedition over barely-marked trails commenced on muleback. On the first stage of the journey, a defective saddle dumped Shirley in the dust, "which filled eyes, nose, ears, and hair." The couple did not reach Marysville until after midnight. A few days later, the doctor and the animals set out for Bidwell's Bar, a "rag city" 30 miles upriver, and his wife followed by stagecoach. Fleas and other pests so infested Bidwell's accommodations that the Clapps decided to press on to Berry Creek House, another ten miles distant. They missed the trail, became hopelessly lost, and spent the night under the stars. When they did arrive at the way-station, after a 30-mile detour,

> every one that we met [there], congratulated us upon not having encountered any Indians for the paths which we followed were Indian trails, and it is said, that they would have killed us for our mules and our clothes. A few weeks ago, a Frenchman and his wife were murdered. . . . They generally take women captive, however, and who knows how narrowly I escaped becoming an Indian chieftainess, and feeding for the rest of my life upon roasted grasshoppers [and] flower seeds?

The experience neither extinguished Shirley's enthusiasm and sense of humor nor increased her husband's caution or skills as a pathfinder. The doctor's later errors resulted in another night in the open, this time in Indian and grizzly country. But after two weeks on the trail and more near disasters, the couple arrived safely at Rich Bar.

The journey to the diggings added several new elements to Shirley's experience, including her first encounter with "live" Indians. From the stagecoach window on the way to Bidwell's Bar, she observed Indian women collecting flower seeds to flavor their acorn bread. The sight produced an ambivalent reaction:

> Each one carried two brown baskets . . . woven with a neatness which is marvellous [*sic*], when one considers that they are the handiwork of such degraded wretches. . . . It is evident by the grace with which they handle them, that they are exceedingly light.

* The "Shirley Letters" first appeared in print in the short-lived San Francisco magazine, *The Pioneer*, in 1854 and 1855.

The gleaners, with "their regular motion, . . . dark shining skin, beautiful limbs, and lithe forms, . . . [were] by no means the least picturesque features of the landscape."

Later, at Wild Yankee's Ranch, "a *herd* of Indians . . . crowded into the room to stare at us." One, she observed, presented a remarkable contrast to the "general hideousness" of the others:

> A girl of 16, perhaps; with those large magnificently lustrous eyes . . . shyly glided, like a dark, beautiful spirit into the corner of the room. A fringe of silken jet swept heavily upward from her dusky cheek, [and from it] the richest color came and went like flashes of lightning. Her flexible lips curved slightly away from her teeth like strips of cocoa-nut meat, with a mocking grace infinitely bewitching. She wore a cotton chemise, disgustingly dirty, I must confess, girt about her slender waist with a crimson handkerchief; while over her night black hair . . . was a purple scarf of knotted silk.

Shirley was "perfectly enraptured with this wild-wood Cleopatra," but later in her letter she expressed attitudes characteristic of even the most sympathetic white nineteenth-century Americans:

> I always *did* "take" to Indians; though it must be said that those who bear that name here, have little resemblance to the glorious forest heroes that live in the Leather Stocking Tales [of James Fenimore Cooper]; and in spite of my desire to find in them something poetical and interesting, a stern regard for truth compels me to acknowledge, that the dusky beauty above described, is the only moderately *pretty* squaw that I have ever seen.

Dame Shirley arrived at Rich Bar a year after the first gold discovery there, when few of the original 500 miners remained in the camp. Reluctant to risk the hazards of winter or having squandered their accumulated gold on gambling, most had drifted away in pursuit of other *bonanzas* (rich strikes), real or rumored. In the summer of 1851, about 200 men lived there in rude log cabins, tents made of calico, *ramadas* constructed of brush, and a variety of even less permanent shelters. A fortunate few resided in one of the community's more substantial lodgings. The Clapps, for example, enjoyed the comforts of the Empire Hotel, "the only two-story building in town." About the Empire, Shirley wrote,

> you will find two or three glass windows, an unknown luxury in all other dwellings. It is built of planks of the roughest possible description; the roof, of course, is covered with canvas, which also forms the entire front. . . . You first enter a large apartment, level with the street, part of which is fitted up as a bar-room, with that eternal crimson calico, which flushes the whole social life of the "golden State," with its everlasting red. . . . A table covered with a green cloth—upon which lies a pack of monte cards, a backgammon board, and a sickening pile of "yallow-kivered" literature with several uncomfortable looking benches, complete the furniture of this most important portion of such a place as "The Empire."

The remainder of the room was a store where clothing, tools, and groceries were stocked, "cheek by jowl . . . in hopeless confusion." Four steps led up to the hotel's parlor, with its selection of well-worn furniture and a "quite decent looking-glass," and four more rose to the upper floor and four tiny bedrooms. The Empire was crude, with "floors so very uneven, that you were always ascending a hill or descending a valley" and interior walls consisting mainly of canvas. Shirley called it "just a piece of carpentering as a child two years old, gifted with the strength of a man, would produce." Nevertheless, this "impertinent apology for a house" cost its builders $8,000 at the time, since every item in it had to be freighted from Marysville at a rate of 40 cents a pound. Originally, the hotel was built as a brothel, but it failed, which Shirley attributed to "the everlasting honor of the *miners*." By the time the Clapps arrived, it was owned and operated by Curtis A. Bancroft, a brother of future California historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, and his wife.

Dame Shirley was surprised to learn that she was not the only female inhabitant of the camp. Four others lived at Rich Bar, but the Yankee lady was not at first particularly impressed by them. Mrs. Bancroft was "a gentle and amiable looking woman, about 25 years of age," but, Shirley continued,

> I will give you a key to her character which will exhibit it better than weeks of description. She took a nursing babe of eight months old, from her bosom, and left it with two other children—almost infants—to cross the plains [with her husband] in search of gold.

At the Empire, Shirley found the woman calmly cooking dinner for the hotel's half-dozen guests, while her youngest child, just two weeks old and born in the mines, "lay kicking furiously in his champagne basket cradle."

A second Rich Bar woman was Mary Stanfield, the "Indiana Girl," who assisted her father, the proprietor of the Indiana Hotel. During the previous winter, she had packed a 50-pound sack of flour through five feet of snow over the mountain to the mining camp. According to Dame Shirley, she was a

> gigantic piece of humanity [who] wears the thickest kind of miners' boots, and has the dainty habit

> of wiping her dishes upon her apron. . . . The far-off roll of her mighty voice, booming through two closed doors and a long entry, added greatly to my severe attack of nervous headache.

One of Shirley's few regrets was that the Indiana Girl left the settlement before the two met in person.

The Dame did meet the other two Rich Bar women. One was the diminutive "Mrs. R—" who tended bar and otherwise assisted at the "Miners' Home," which her husband owned and where miners congregated to eat and drink. The place was

> a canvas house, containing a suite of three "apartments" . . . which, considering that they are all on the ground floor, are kept surprisingly neat. There is a bar-room, blushing all over with red calico, a dining room, kitchen and a small bed-closet. The little 68-pounder woman is queen of the establishment.

Tiny "Mrs. R—" was also a favorite of the miners, one of whom explained to the Clapps that she "earnt her *old man* . . . $900 in nine weeks, clear of all expenses, by [taking in] washing! Such women ain't common; if they were, a man might marry and make money by the operation." The man's chauvinism annoyed Dame Shirley, but she had to concede that she had "known of sacrifices, requiring, it would seem, superhuman efforts, made by women in this country, who at home were nurtured in the extreme of elegance and delicacy."

The fourth Rich Bar woman was Nancy Ann Bailey, the young wife of a miner and the mother of two children; she died of peritonitis shortly after the Clapps' arrival, and Shirley described her funeral, which began at the Baileys' cabin:

> On a board, supported by two butter-tubs, was extended the body of the dead woman, covered with a sheet; by its side stood the coffin of unstained pine, lined with white cambric. The bereaved husband held in his arms a sickly ten months old, which was moaning piteously at its mother. The other child, a handsome, bold-looking girl six years of age, was running gaily around the room, perfectly unconscious of her great bereavement. . . .
>
> About 20 men, with the three women of the place, had assembled at the funeral. An *extempore* prayer was made, filled with all the peculiarities usual to that style of petition. Ah! how different from the soothing verses of the glorious burial service of the church.
>
> As the procession started for the hill-side graveyard—a dark cloth, borrowed from a neighboring monte table, was flung over the coffin. Do not think that I mention any of these circumstances in a spirit of mockery; far from it. Every observance . . . that was *procurable*, surrounded this funeral. All the gold on Rich Bar could do no more; should I die tomorrow, I should be marshaled to my mountain grave beneath the same monte-table pall, which surrounded the coffin of poor Mrs. B.

A sobering experience for Dame Shirley, the funeral improved her attitude toward her female companions. In an early letter, she commented sarcastically, "Splendid materials for social parties this winter, are they not?" But later observations reflect a different opinion, even admiration.

In the fall of 1851, the Clapps moved to Indian Bar, a mile or so downstream, where rumors of a rich strike produced a bustling new community. The bar was littered with miners' dwellings like those at Rich Bar, and there was a hotel, the Humbolt ("without the *d*," Shirley noted, although she insisted on restoring it in her letters). At Indian Bar, she had her own log cabin, which she described to her sister:

> The room into which you have just entered is about 20 feet square. It is lined over the top with white cotton cloth, the breadths of which been sewed together only in spots, stretch apart in many places, giving one a bird's-eye view of the shingles above. The sides are hung with a gaudy chintz . . . a perfect marvel of calico printing. . . .
>
> The fireplace is built of stones and mud, the chimney finished off with alternate layers of rough sticks and this same rude mortar; contrary to the usual custom, it is built inside, . . . and you can imagine the queer appearance of this unfinished pile of stone, mud and sticks. The mantelpiece . . . is formed of a beam of wood, covered with strips of tin procured from cans, upon which still remain in black hieroglyphics, the names [of their former contents]. . . . Two smooth stones—how delightfully primitive—do duty as firedogs. I suppose that it would be no more than civil to call a hole two feet square in one side of the room, a window, although it is as yet guiltless of glass. . . . I must mention that the floor is so uneven that no article of furniture gifted with four legs pretends to stand on but three at once, so that the chairs, tables, etc., remind you constantly of a dog with a sore foot.

Comments on improvised furniture and candlesticks, Dr. Clapp's pipes and tobaccos on the mantel, and the couple's meager library arranged on a candle-box bookshelf completed the guided tour.

Dame Shirley's home was elegant by mining-camp standards, but it was not the most luxurious in the district. Honors for that—and for sheer ingenuity—

belonged to five miners who apparently spent as much energy on creature comforts as they did on prospecting. Their cabin boasted an efficient fireplace for heat and cooking and windows made by mortaring empty jars into the walls. From mounds of discarded materials that cluttered the camp, they devised an array of functional candlesticks and lanterns and built bunks and other furniture. A visit inspired Shirley to comment, "Really, everybody ought to go to the mines, just to see how little it takes to make people comfortable in the world."

Miners' cabins could be innovative and even homey; but gold, not comfort, was the principal concern at Rich Bar, and finding it was an arduous, hazardous, frequently disappointing pursuit. Shirley tried panning just once and wrote, "I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves, nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love." Her efforts were rewarded with $3.25 worth of gold dust, which miners assessed as a fine prospect for one panful. But the Dame was not impressed; she sent her treasure to her sister with a terse comment: "I am sorry I ever learned the trade."

For Shirley, searching for gold was a lark; for miners, it was backbreaking toil. By the 1850s, the gold pan and its successor, the rocker or cradle, were no longer the principal tools of extraction. As early as the Clapps' arrival on the Feather River in 1851, the individual prospector and the rudimentary methods of 1848 and 1849 were on their way to extinction:

> Here in the mountains, the labor of excavation is extremely difficult, on account of the immense rocks which form a large portion of the soil. Of course, no man can "work" a "claim" alone. For that reason . . . they congregate in companies of four or six, generally designating themselves by the name of the place from whence the majority have emigrated. . . . In many places, the surface soil, or in mining phrase, the "top-dirt,""pays" when worked in a "Long Tom." This machine, . . . is a trough, generally about 20 feet in length, and eight inches in depth, formed of wood, with the exception of six feet at one end, called the "riddle," . . . which is made of sheet iron, perforated with large holes about the size of a large marble. Underneath this cullender-like portion of the "long tom," is placed another trough, about ten feet long, the sides six inches perhaps in height, [with slats across its bottom], called the "riffle box." . . . [Several] spadesmen throw in large quantities of the precious dirt, which is washed down to the "riddle" by a stream of water leading into the "long-tom" through gutters or "sluices." When the soil reaches the "riddle," it is kept constantly in motion by the man with the hoe. Of course, by this means, all the dirt and gold escapes through the perforations into the "riffle-box" below, one compartment of which is placed just beyond the "riddle." Most of the dirt washes over the sides of the "riffle-box," but the gold being so astonishingly heavy remains safely at the bottom of it [behind the slats].

Because much "top dirt" had already been thoroughly prospected, more complex methods became necessary:

> Many of the miners decline washing the "top dirt" at all, but try to reach as quickly as possible the "bed-rock," where are found the richest deposits of gold. The river is supposed to have formerly flowed over the "bed-rock," in the largest "crevices" of which, it left . . . the largest portions of the so eagerly sought for ore. . . .
>
> When a company wishes to reach the bed rock as quickly as possible, they "sink a shaft," . . . until they "strike" it. Then they commence "drifting coyote holes" . . . in search of "crevices," which . . . often pay immensely. These "coyote holes" often extend hundreds of feet into the side of a hill. . . . [The miners] generally proceed, until the air is so impure as to extinguish [their] lights.

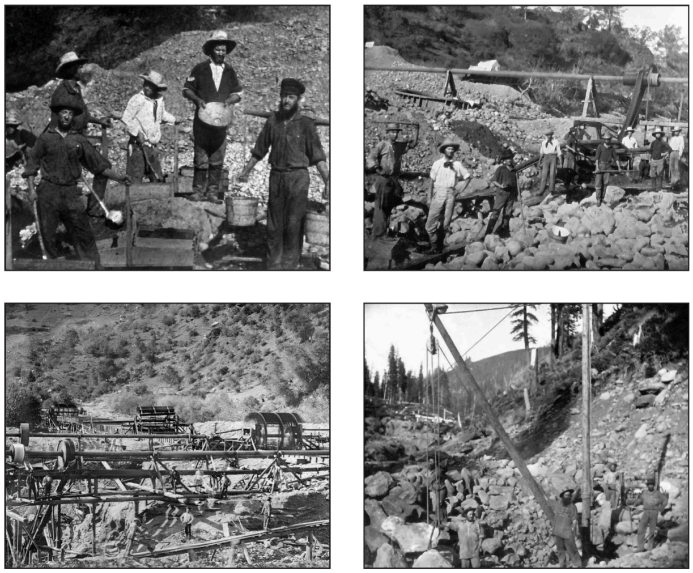
At that point, they began again, after scraping tunnel walls with knives, searching for a crevice possibly overlooked.

Such burrows could fill with water from underground springs, making them unworkable, causing them to cave in, and even drowning the miners. But water also was essential to placer mining, and it was transported over great distances to "dry diggings" by difficult and ingenious methods:

> In most cases, it is brought from ravines in the mountains. A company . . . has dug a ditch about a foot in width and depth, and more than three miles in length, which is fed in this way. . . . When it reaches the top of the hill [at Rich Bar], the sparkling thing is divided into five or six branches, each one of which supplies [several] "long-toms." . . . This "race" . . . has already cost the company more than five thousand dollars.

To recover part of their investment, builders often formed ditch companies that sold water to other miners.

On some occasions, too, miners attempted to get at bed-rock by constructing a "flume, an immense trough, which takes up a portion of the river, and, with the aid of a dam, compels it to run in another channel, leaving the vacated bed of the stream for mining purposes. . . . Sometimes these fluming companies are eminently



Miners at Work

Dame Shirley's descriptions, as well as daguerreotypes from the early years of the gold rush, document rapid changes in mining methods. At first, a few basic tools and hard work sufficed (*top left*). By 1850 and 1851, elaborate flumes (*top right*) and water wheels to drive machinery (*bottom left*) were essentials. The physical labor required of miners, however, rarely diminished (*bottom right*). *Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

successful; at others, [they] are a dead failure." Unfortunately, failure was more frequent than success.

Most of the miners the Clapps encountered remained eager participants in "Nature's great lottery scheme," despite the ever-lengthening odds against them:

> They are always looking for "big strikes." If a "claim" is paying them a steady income, by which . . . they could lay up more in a month than they could accumulate in a year at home, still, they are dissatisfied, and, in most cases, will wander off in search of better "diggings." There are hundreds now pursuing this foolish course, who, if they had stopped where they first "camped," would now have been rich men. Sometimes a company of these wanderers will find itself upon a bar, where a few pieces of precious metal lie scattered upon the surface of the ground; of course, they immediately "prospect" it, which is accomplished by "panning out" a few basinsful of the soil. If it "pays," they "claim" the spot, and build their shanties; the news spreads that wonderful "diggings" have been discovered at such and such a place. . . .

Hordes of enthusiastic gold seekers inevitably followed the news; just as certainly, so did gamblers, "those worse than fiends, rush vulture-like upon the scene." The more industrious miners worked their claims for adequate rewards, but too many, in their quest for immediate riches, either gambled away their gains or hurried off in quest of even richer strikes.

But all was not drudgery in the diggings. At Indian Bar, Paganini Ned, the mulatto cook at the hotel, was equally skilled in culinary arts and on the violin. The meal he prepared to welcome Shirley to Indian Bar—complete with oyster soup, dessert, claret, and champagne—she called an accomplishment "the memory of which the world will not willingly let die." And she was just as impressed by Ned's musical talents when he and another man treated her to an impromptu serenade.

Isolation from creature comforts and diversions not only made most miners appreciate talents like Ned's but also forced them to organize for sociability, as well as for the task of extracting gold. In mining camps, an unwritten law forbade working claims on Sundays. On their day of rest, miners occupied themselves with such chores as washing and mending clothes and repairing shelters, tools, and equipment. They also told stories, played cards, gossiped, and hunted and fished, not only to while away time but also to vary monotonous diets. Some even captured wild animals to keep as pets.

Among residents of the mining camps, exceptional acts of kindness and solicitude often occurred. When Nancy Ann Bailey died, her husband's comrades attended the funeral, consoled the man, and helped with the care of his children. Similarly, when an accident mangled the leg of a young miner, his friends acted as nurses both before and after Dr. Clapp amputated the limb. During winter months, when supplies were scarce, miners frequently shared what they had while awaiting the first pack trains of spring.

During the same months, they were hardest pressed for amusement. Observing holidays, including those of foreigners in the mines, furnished diversion. Dame Shirley was amazed at the variety among the residents of Rich Bar:

> You will hear on the same day the lofty melody of the Spanish language, the piquant polish of the French, . . . the silver, changing clearness of the Italian, the harsh gargle of the German, the hissing precision of the English, the liquid sweetness of the Kanaka, and the sleep-inspiring languor of the East Indian.

But her own countrymen's attitude toward foreigners and their languages perplexed her. Most of them believed that when they had "learned *sabe, vamos . . . pocotiempo, si,* and *Bueno* . . . they had the whole of the glorious Castilian at their tongue's end." Others simply assumed that "by splitting the tympanum of an unhappy foreigner, in screaming forth their sentences in good, solid English," they could be understood by anyone. Yankees also joined exuberantly in foreigners' festivities. When a company of Chileans celebrated the anniversary of their country's independence, for example, Shirley observed that

> it was impossible to tell which nation was the most gloriously drunk; but I will say, even at the risk of being thought partial to my own beloved countrymen; "that though the Chilenos reeled with better grace, the Americans did it more *naturally!*"

Traditional American holidays, including the Fourth of July, provided welcome departures from routine in the mines. In 1852, Independence Day festivities at Rich Bar drew residents of camps from up and down the river. When the day's proceedings began at the Empire, politicians introduced one another and a speaker imported for the occasion "pronounced beautifully a very splendid Oration." At the dinner later, "the toasts were quite spicy and original." By nightfall, two "new ladies from the hill" appeared, "so lately arrived from the States, with everything fresh and new, they quite extinguished poor Mrs. B. and myself, trying our best to look fashionable in our antique mode of four years ago." One of the newcomers favored celebrants with "three or four beautiful songs," and substantial quantities of "the spirit" disappeared. Still, "everything passed off quite respectably at Rich Bar . . . [despite] a small fight in the bar-room . . . during which much speech and some blood were spouted."

Dame Shirley also described a rather less civilized Christmas and New Years' celebration that followed months of confinement, cold and boredom. Throughout the day, troops of miners—"an army of India-rubber coats (the rain was falling in riversful)"—descended on Indian Bar, and at night the celebration began:

> At nine o'clock in the evening, they had an oyster and champagne supper in the Humboldt, which was very gay. . . . I believe that the company danced all night; at any rate, they were dancing when I went to sleep, and they were dancing when I woke the next morning. The revel was kept up in this mad way for three days, growing wilder every hour. On the fourth day, they got past dancing, and, lying in drunken heaps about the bar-room, commenced a most unearthly howling. . . . Many were too far gone to imitate

> anything but their own animalized selves. . . . Some of these bacchanals were among the most respectable and respected men upon the river . . . [who] had never been seen intoxicated before.
>
> Toward the latter part of the week, people were compelled to be a little more quiet from sheer exhaustion; but on New Years' day, . . . at Rich Bar, the excitement broke out again, if possible, worse than ever.

Dame Shirley forgave the excesses, writing to Molly that "the miners as a class, possess many truly admirable characteristics."

No real authority existed in remote mining districts, even after California's admission to the Union in 1850. The situation forced their residents to attend to legal and political affairs, especially those pertaining to mining activities:

> As there are no state laws upon the subject, each mining community is permitted to make its own. Here, they have decided that no man may "claim" an area of more than 40 feet square. This he "stakes off" and puts a notice upon it, to the effect that he "holds" it for mining purposes. If he does not choose to "work it" immediately, he is obliged to renew the notice every ten days; for without this precaution, any other person has the right to "jump it," that is, to take it from him. There are many ways of evading the above law . . . [such as hiring someone else to work a claim]. After all, the "holding of claims" by proxy is considered rather as carrying out the spirit of the law, than as an evasion of it. But there are many ways of really outwitting the rule, . . . which give rise to innumerable arbitrations, and nearly every Sunday there is a "miners' meeting" connected with this subject.

Some camps relied on general meetings to settle disputes; others elected claims officers or committees to maintain registers and resolve conflicts. Frequently, too, miners' meetings assumed authority for other matters of law, and on occasion state or county governments sent officials to the mining camps, with varied results.

On the Feather River, a man called the Squire (perhaps Thomas D. Bonner, who recorded the memoirs of black pathfinder James P. Beckwourth) was appointed justice of the peace. Shirley doubted his ability to uphold the law in the camps, and his first "opportunity to exercise (or rather to *try* to do so) his judicial power upon a criminal case" confirmed her opinion. After a Swede called "Little John" squandered unexplained money on gambling and was arrested for theft, the Squire attempted to conduct the subsequent trial:

> When the . . . mighty people had assembled at the Empire, they commenced proceedings by voting in a president and jury of their own; though they kindly consented . . . that the "Squire" might *play at judge*, by sitting at the side of *their* elected magistrate! This honor, the "Squire" seemed to take as a sort of salve to his wounded dignity, and with unprecedented meekness accepted it.

At the trial, Little John maintained that the sudden wealth that was evidence against him was a gift from his father. Nevertheless, despite a vigorous defense by an appointed counsel and the Squire's opinion of innocence,

> the jury brought in a verdict of guilty, and condemned [Little John] to receive 39 lashes at nine o'clock the following morning, and to leave the river, never to return to it, within 24 hours; a "claim" of which he owned a part, [was] to be made over to Mr. [Bancroft], to indemnify him for his loss.

More serious episodes, however, received almost no response from miners' tribunals. When, during "a drunken frolic," one man stabbed another with "not the slightest provocation," a puzzled Shirley wrote that "the people have not taken the slightest notice of this affair, although for some days the life of the wounded man was despaired of." As public disorders increased in frequency and changed in character during the spring and summer of 1852, her letters hinted at the nature of the transformation; like her compatriots, she began to refer to all miners of Hispanic origins as "Spaniards"—when fewer than 300 individuals from Spain were in all of California.

During April 1852, the miners' meeting at Rich Bar made the point more emphatically when it passed laws "to the effect that no foreigner shall work the mines." Immediate results were migration of most Spanish-speaking miners to Indian Bar, an increase in the number of establishments catering to them there, and a vigorous complaint from Shirley: "On Sundays, the swearing, drinking, gambling, and fighting which are carried on in some of these houses, are truly horrible." Clearly, too, earlier camaraderie among miners was evaporating. When an American stabbed a "Spaniard" because the latter requested payment of a debt, Shirley protested that "nothing was done, and very little was said about this atrocious affair." But there was more to come.

Following the July 4 celebration, several "of the *elite* of Rich Bar, drunk with whisky and patriotism," attacked and injured several "Spaniards." For this incident, Shirley concluded, "Sir Barley Corn was to blame, for many of the ringleaders are fine young men, who,

when sober, are . . . friendly to the Spaniards." But she also sensed a "gradually increasing state of bad feeling exhibited by our countrymen . . . toward foreigners." She rightly feared that the episode was not the last of its kind, despite efforts by "the more intelligent foreigners, as well as the judicious Americans."

Numerous "drunken fights . . . with the usual amount of broken heads, collar bones, stabs, etc." punctuated July 1852, when almost every Sunday was "enlivened by some such merry event." In one incident, a "Spaniard" stabbed an Irishman in a dispute over a Mexican woman. The Irishman (a naturalized U.S. citizen) died, his attacker escaped, rumors of conspiracies spread, and conflict seemed imminent. The "Spaniards thought the Americans had risen against them; and our countrymen fancied the same of foreigners." When armed Americans and foreigners converged on Indian Bar, Shirley and the other women in the camp retreated to the hill to observe. Two miners—an Englishman who survived and a "Spaniard" who died—were wounded when a rifle discharged accidentally; the "frightful accident recalled the people to their senses, and they began to act a little less like madmen, than they had previously done."

Events of the "fatal Sabbath," as residents began to call it, had important results. Perhaps in imitation of San Francisco, Indian Bar organized a Vigilance Committee. In its first official act, the committee sent a posse after "Spaniards" suspected of instigating the previous Sunday's disturbance and tried "a *Mejicana*, who had been foremost in the fray. . . . She was sentenced to leave the Bar by day-light." The vigilantes next "tried five or six Spaniards who were proven to have been ringleaders in the Sabbath-day riot. Two of them were sentenced to be whipped, the remainder to leave the Bar that evening; the property of all to be confiscated to the use of the wounded persons. Oh Mary! imagine my anguish when I heard the first blow fall upon those wretched men." Punishment could have been worse, however; most in the community clamored for a hanging.

The committee's work continued during July with the conviction of a black cook (not Paganini Ned) for murder. Sentenced to hang, he cut his throat in a suicide attempt while in custody. Then, "Their majesties the mob, with that beautiful consistency which usually distinguishes those august individuals, insisted upon shooting [the prisoner]." As the self-control of committee members deteriorated, Shirley wrote, "The state of society has never been so bad as since the appointment of [the vigilantes]." She believed that committee leaders also led a group of rowdies called the "Moguls," who

> parade the streets all night, howling, shouting, breaking into houses, taking wearied miners out of their beds and throwing them into the river, and in short, "murdering sleep," in a most remorseless manner.

Fall did not increase public peace, but during late September and early October the Clapps escaped from the disorders when they journeyed to the American Valley near present Quincy. The doctor was a delegate to a nominating convention being held there, and Shirley decided to accompany him. She said little about the convention, except that "horse-racing, and gambling, in all their detestable varieties" seemed to characterize frontier politics. But she was moved by the sight of pioneer women who were widowed on the trail and arrived in California "looking as haggard as so many Endorean witches; burnt to the color of a hazel-nut, with their hair cut short, and its gloss entirely destroyed by the alkali, whole plains of which they are compelled to cross on the way." Shirley was delighted to end her "dreadful pleasure tour of the American Valley" and return to her cabin.

It was a disappointing homecoming. Indian Bar had changed during her absence. Signs of impending harsh winter were visible everywhere, new mining operations undertaken to salvage the community's faltering economy were a disaster, and "nearly every person on the river received the same step-mother's treatment from Dame Nature, in this her mountain workshop." The miners dispersed almost as quickly as they had gathered: "It is said, that there are not 20 men remaining on Indian Bar, although two months ago, you could count them up in the hundreds." Those who stayed "amused themselves by prosecuting one another right and left," keeping the Squire's court busy for the first time.

Since the Clapps had no reason to remain at Indian Bar, they planned to leave in late November. Despite the hardships of her year on the Feather River, however, Dame Shirley regretted the decision. To her sister, she lamented that she had never learned to sketch from nature. Nevertheless, her letters sparkled with vivid descriptions of the spectacle surrounding her and revealed her love for the mountains, even in bitter winter when

> the Storm King . . . stole silently down, and garlanded us in a wreath of shining snow-flakes, and lo! the next morning you would have thought that some great white bird had shed its glittering feathers all over rock, tree, hill and bar.

And while waiting to leave the mountains, she penned her farewell:

> My heart is heavy at the thought of departing forever from this place. I like this wild and barbarous life; I leave it with regret. The solemn fir trees, "whose slender tops are close against the sky" here, the watching hills, and the calmly beautiful river, seem to gaze sorrowfully at me, as I stand in the moonlighted midnight, to bid them farewell. . . . Yes, Molly, smile if you will at my folly; but I go from the mountains with a deep heart sorrow. I took kindly to this existence, which to you seems so sordid and mean. Here, at least, I have been contented.

She probably never again experienced such contentment. After the Clapps returned to San Francisco in November 1852, the doctor left. He sailed to Hawaii, returned to New England in 1854, and then drifted to Illinois and finally to Missouri. Dame Shirley remained in California and divorced her husband *in absentia* in 1857; he remarried and served as a Union Army surgeon during the Civil War. As Louisa Clapp (sometimes Clappe), she made numerous friends in San Francisco and taught in local public schools until 1878, when failing health forced her return to the East to live with family and friends. She died in 1906, leaving in her letters an incomparable legacy: the opportunity for later generations to share with gold rush Californians the experience that they called "seeing the elephant."