

Roaring Camp

The Social World
of the
California Gold Rush

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Chapter 5

Dreams That Died

It was autumn 1852, and Miwok people were facing their fifth Lacorn harvest since Gold Rush immigrants had arrived in the foothills. The Mariposa War was over. The foreign miners' tax had come and gone. In the town of Sonora, a local correspondent to the *San Joaquin Republican*, a Stockton newspaper, sat down to pen a column entitled "Enterprise at Sonora." His was a booster's prose, designed to lure even more settlers to the town "at the centre of the placer diggings." He was writing about Sonora, but to speak of Sonora was to speak of the Southern Mines. And to speak of the Southern Mines in late 1852 was to speak of change—change that had occurred already, change that was now underway. From the correspondent's point of view, change was all to the good. "Since the first settlement of this country by the Americans," he wrote, "the southern mines have been filled with foreigners." No more. Now, he bragged, "We see around us in every direction the results of the indomitable energy and perseverance of an American population."

What did American energy and perseverance look like? First and foremost, they looked like huge canals that took water from rivers such as the Stanislaus and Tuolumne and diverted it to the mines, so that paydirt could be washed not just during the rainy season, but in the dry summer months as well. American energy and perseverance had an urban look as well: towns like Sonora boasting broad streets and fireproof buildings. And there were churches, printing offices, newspapers, and express companies, which the correspondent thought spoke well "for the morality, intelligence and enterprise of

our citizens." In Sonora, there was a schoolhouse and a post office, as well as a hotel with "neat and well supplied tables," "attentive and obliging servants," and "clean and well appointed rooms." Not only in Sonora but in the nearby communities of Jamestown, Columbia, Shaw's Flat, and Springfield as well, there were "neat cottages, surrounded with gardens," evidence of that which white miners had found lacking in the boom years of the Gold Rush: "domestic comfort." Finally, American energy and perseverance looked like a world in motion. With pride, the correspondent described the four daily stages that arrived in Sonora from Stockton, and the innumerable conveyances that traveled on the hour between Sonora and surrounding towns, all of which gave "our mountain city an air of bustle and activity."¹ Elaborate waterworks in the diggings; permanent buildings, community institutions, and conventional family homes in the towns; transportation to the outside world; a population becoming more "American" than "foreign"—to more than one white man's eye, these were welcome signs of change in the Southern Mines.

All observers agreed that the mining regions were changing, but different observers measured the causes, extent, and consequences of change differently. Although the identity of the Sonora correspondent is lost to the historical record, that of a writer from Amador County who published in San Francisco's *The Golden Era* is clear. Signing herself "Lenita," Lorena Hays was an unmarried white woman who had accompanied her widowed mother from Illinois to California in 1853. She was twenty-seven years old when her columns first appeared in the paper. Writing in September 1854 about change in California, Lenita was less sanguine, and a good deal more prescriptive, than the Sonora correspondent.² Of course, she was living in a mining camp called Cook's Bar, not a thriving town like Sonora. And hers was not a booster's voice, but rather a voice for reform in California. Still, some of the differences between her column and that of the Sonora writer are differences in perspective attributable to ideas about and experiences of gender that were becoming more common in the Southern Mines during the 1850s. These ideas and experiences originated among Anglo Americans who were struggling to constitute a middle class in the mines. And struggle they did. White people who identified with the project of American nationhood generally took for granted that they *should* achieve and sustain economic and cultural dominance in the diggings, but they did not necessarily agree about the process. Sometimes their disagreements followed lines of gender.

Recall that the Sonora correspondent, probably an Anglo American man, found the locus of change in the Southern Mines in such

accoutrements as flumes, fireproof buildings, and family homes. Lenita took another tack. Advances in mining and construction were important, and Lenita remarked that Cook's Bar boasted "a number of very good buildings." Nonetheless, the water ditch in her neighborhood was under repair, and so miners were idle. The kind of "American energy and perseverance" that the Sonora correspondent heralded, in her view, was not enough to bring about change in California. For just as quickly as a flume could be built or a ditch dug, it could fail. Then men, whom Lenita did not hesitate to call "children of a larger growth," had a surfeit of energy and a lack of employment, and got themselves into a world of trouble. The answer, for Lenita, was reform. Rhetorically, she asked, "Shall California be a 'lesser light' in the moral firmament?" Certainly not. Her adopted state would yet "become a light among nations": "But where are we to look for this influence—the lever that is to set the ball in motion? Towards what point are we to look for the light that is to break forth as sunlight to purify, cleanse, and irradiate our moral atmosphere? Where is the star that is to illumine our social horizon?" The lever, the point of light, she boasted, was "WOMAN." It was foolish to think that "man, all-powerful as he is," could do the work of reform alone, while woman's hands were "folded in luxury, thus tacitly giving consent to the vice and immorality in which our land abounds." Privately, in her diary, Lorena Hays wondered what caused vice and immorality in California: "Is it because of our peculiar situation—the mixed and incongruous mass of our population or the predominance of the male element in society, or is the evil attributable to inefficient Legislation[?]" But publicly and privately, she was sure that "WOMAN"—by which she meant white, middle-class, Protestant women—would be instrumental in bringing about a cure.³

Between them, Lenita and the Sonora correspondent provide a good, if interested, introduction to the transformations that characterized the Southern Mines beginning in 1852 and intensifying throughout the rest of the decade. The changes hinged on two processes already in motion. The first was the consolidation of Anglo American dominance, which had been established through such conflicts as the Chilean War, the Mariposa War, and the "French Revolution."⁴ The second was the decline of rich placer diggings, which encouraged some to develop new ways of seeking wealth. As important were the increasingly close ties between local political and economic contests, on the one hand, and national and international developments, on the other. It was by these developments that a gold rush which had been global in scope came to be seen as *the* Gold

Rush, an episode in American nation building. As a part of this process, the Southern Mines began to slip from view.

The consolidation of Anglo dominance, the decline of the placers, and the tightening bond between the Southern Mines and eastern centers of power had different but complementary effects in the smaller world of the diggings and the larger foothill world within which gold-based economic practices were embedded. Because all of these causes and effects were so deeply interrelated, it is impossible to sort into neat categories things pertaining to mining and things pertaining to the complex human communities that emerged in and around the diggings. But by 1852, class relations indigenous to the Southern Mines had begun to take shape. These were relations rooted firmly in the productive process of gold mining. They were also relations rooted in the continuing—though slowly diminishing—demographic predominance of men in immigrant communities and in the tacit agreement among those men that mining was the “work” of the Gold Rush. Here, then, I return to the diggings, which white men scrambled to preoccupy, battling Chinese miners with one hand and Anglo “monopolists” with the other.

Consider first the consolidation of Anglo American dominance, an always unfinished process that required constant vigilance and considerable solidarity on the part of white Americans. Events such as the 1849 Chilean War and the imposition of the foreign miners’ tax in 1850 drove many Spanish- and French-speaking gold seekers from California altogether. But others stayed, especially in the Southern Mines. Among those who remained, some moved far out of the reach of Anglos, as when Jean-Nicolas Perlot headed up into the Sierra Nevada in search of Miwok placers or when Mexicans and Chileans—including, it is said, Joaquín Murrieta—congregated in Spanish-speaking communities such as Hornitos, in Mariposa County. As for native peoples, after the 1851 Mariposa War, most continued to combine mining and customary subsistence strategies, here walking to immigrant settlements to trade gold dust for flour, there fanning out among the oaks to gather acorns. But now a new population of Gold Rush participants appeared on the scene: immigrants from South China. Some Chinese had arrived in California as early as 1848, but the majority came beginning in 1852. Unlike Mexican and Chilean gold seekers, Chinese immigrants did not settle disproportionately in the Southern Mines, but instead spread out over all of California’s mining districts, including the Northern Mines and the Shasta-Trinity diggings in the far northwest. Nonetheless, they came in great numbers to the south. Indeed, by the end of the decade, Chinese

immigrants made up one-fifth of the population of the four counties that constituted the Southern Mines.⁵

When they arrived in towns such as Mariposa and Mokelumne Hill or moved to remote camps in Amador and Tuolumne counties, they entered areas with a recent history of intense racial and ethnic conflict, conflict that had been resolved largely in Anglo Americans’ favor. So, like the Mexicans who built Hornitos or those Miwoks who pushed up into the mountains, many Chinese steered clear of white Americans (and sometimes of Mexicans and Miwoks as well), buying up placer claims that Anglos thought were played out or working in jobs that white people shunned. Chinese gold seekers could not, of course, avoid all conflict. They, too, would face a foreign miners’ tax, in addition to daily indignities at the hands of other Gold Rush participants. Their patterns of resistance and accommodation were predicated on the prior establishment of Anglo American dominance in the diggings; no “Chinese War” or “Chinese Revolution” ever disturbed the uneasy peace of the Southern Mines.

Consider as well the decline of the placers. Scholars who talk about change over time in western mining generally describe a steady progression from individualized, surface (placer) mining to industrialized, underground (vein or lode or quartz) mining. As an intermediate stage between placer and quartz techniques, they sometimes include the exploitation of deposits called deep gravels. Miners worked such deposits through tunnels, and they also turned to “hydraulicking”—a kind of glorified placer mining in which men shot extraordinarily powerful streams of water against hills thought to be rich in gravels. In California, the Northern Mines roughly followed this trajectory of industrialization. The Southern Mines, on the other hand, industrialized only by fits and starts. There were notable exceptions, especially in Mariposa and Amador counties. But relatively sparse deposits suitable for hydraulic or quartz mining meant that industrialization was the exception rather than the rule. That is, quartz mines financed by moneyed men and worked by hired hands did not come to characterize mining in the south nearly so much as in the north. Instead, persistent placers were the rule.

The world of surface mining, however, did change substantially after the boom years. One key transformation involved the increasing number of Chinese at work in the placers. There was another shift, too. Anglo American entrepreneurs, frustrated by declining yields and weary of backbreaking work, hit on a moneymaking scheme tailor-made for the Southern Mines, which early on had been known as the “dry diggings.” Such businessmen banded together to form water

companies, building systems of ditches and flumes and then selling use of the water they tapped to placer miners, who needed it to wash gold-bearing dirt. These water company officials became part of the first real Gold Rush elite. Company directors, along with mining town merchants and professionals, were among the first Anglo men to send for their female relatives from the East, and so gender and race relations took on new class meanings as well.⁶ All of this inaugurated a set of social relations that pit groups of white men against one another. Independent white miners, a dying breed, took to struggling against "water monopolies" and "striking" for lower water rates. But the culture of placer mining and the decline of rich diggings put limits on collective resistance. As a result, truncated class formations emerged, and miners set their sights on new bonanzas elsewhere in the North American West.

Finally, consider the ways in which the transformations of the 1850s tied the Southern Mines ever more tightly to the political and economic capitals of Anglo America in the East. The diggings continued to draw emigrants not just from the eastern United States but from around the world. Increasingly, however, newcomers, relative old-timers, and native peoples alike were incorporated into, and sometimes excluded from, communities on the basis of political and economic cultures that took their cues from the East. Local representatives to state and national legislatures, large water companies, county court systems, quartz mining investors, even a local landowner who ran for president: these entities and these people demonstrated that the Southern Mines—no matter who lived there—was becoming not just a more Anglo American place but a place obliged to eastern centers of power. That is to say that Gold Rush participants and observers began to map local relations of domination onto national relations of gender, race, economics, and politics—as explosive as these were in the decade before the U.S. Civil War. But social relations in the Southern Mines were crucially different from those in eastern places. This in part is why they have proven so difficult to remember in the century and a half that has passed since.

The social relations of gold seeking, always in flux, convulsed in the early 1850s. First, Chinese men burst into a world of work already fraught with contention and inequity. Second, white entrepreneurs began to channel river water through flumes and sell use of the water to struggling miners. Many expected a third shift, too: a transition from placer mining to the exploitation of quartz gold and deep gravels. This shift never took hold in the Southern Mines the way it did in

the Northern Mines, because there were fewer such deposits in the south. Unaware of this geologic disparity, however, miners to the south lived in anticipation of a boom in quartz or gravels. In a few isolated spots, their hopes (and fears) were realized. The most noted of these was the Mariposa Estate, owned by the famed explorer John C. Frémont. There the dream of unlocking subterranean wealth turned for many to a local nightmare, in which bogeymen from eastern and European capitals haunted the Southern Mines.

All of these changes, both actual and anticipated, were caught up in the steady decline of rich surface deposits, which began just as soon as gold seekers swarmed into Miwok hunting and gathering grounds in 1848. By 1852, the average daily yield for placer miners was less than a third of what it had been in 1848—just \$6, down from a high of \$20 in the year following the gold discovery. Frustrated miners were sure the decline was even steeper. In 1851, for example, A. W. Genung wrote home from Tuolumne County that he had given up on making his "pile" quickly, complaining, "It can be done only by a slow and laborious process." Genung believed that "the first digging of the river banks and beds of the creeks . . . gave from four to six ounces a day," or \$64 to \$96. Provisions ran \$5 a day, and a glass of whiskey cost \$2. "The second digging and washing," he wrote, "which I arrived in time to get a parting glance at, gave from one to 2½ ounces per day," or \$16 to \$40. Daily provisions went for \$3, and a glass of whiskey sold for 50 cents. Now, he thought, an individual miner made only \$4 or \$5 each day. Daily provisions cost him a dollar, and a glass of whiskey set him back 12 or 13 cents. Genung nonetheless predicted that the area would "all be worked over again at one or two dollars per day," adding, "I don't wish to be here then." An 1853 correspondent to the *San Joaquin Republican* put such disillusionment in similarly blunt terms: "California, is herself, no more. The mines are much too crowded for all to do well."⁷

Most Chinese gold seekers arrived in California during this season of dashed hopes, taking up placer claims others abandoned. Perhaps because they had missed the earliest days of the Gold Rush, or perhaps because most could not communicate easily with their disappointed neighbors, or perhaps because circumstances in their homeland were dire, Chinese miners did not seem to share white men's pessimism. By all reports, this lack of pessimism served them well. As late as 1858, an Amador County newspaper reported that Chinese men were digging gold not at some remote foothill stream but at the creek that ran right through the center of Jackson, the county seat. Although this was ground that had been "worked over at

least a dozen times," the paper said, the men were making "from \$2.50 to \$8 per day to the hand" and showing off specimens that weighed from an ounce to six ounces each. Similar reports appeared in newspapers from other counties in the Southern Mines. In 1854, for example, a Mariposa County paper noted that the Guadalupe mining district had "gone over to China," and that the men there were making from \$3 to \$5 per day. And in Calaveras County in 1856, a newspaper remarked that in just three months, Chinese miners had bought up over \$21,000 worth of claims along the Mokelumne River. Employing the name Anglo Americans used for all Chinese men in California, "John Chinaman," the paper noted that such purchases proved the value of area mines, since "John is a good judge of diggings, a close prospector, and a successful miner." These, of course, were reports of especially fortunate Chinese miners, but they indicate that a "slow and laborious process" could still yield plenty of gold a good half dozen years after A. W. Genung penned his complaints.⁸

Chinese men took much of that gold out of claims such as those staked out along the Mokelumne River in 1856. Over the course of the 1850s, in fact, river mining increasingly became the province of Chinese gold seekers. In the last days of 1850, for example, Timothy Osborn, mining along Little Humbug Creek in Tuolumne County, noted in his diary that a group of Chinese men had set up camp nearby. This early-arriving Chinese party mined in the same area and probably used the same methods Osborn did, shoveling bucket after bucket of gold-bearing dirt and washing it out in a rocker. As for himself, though he had been in the diggings only six months, Osborn was tired of it all: "I am sick . . . of the dog life of a miner . . . and would give all I have to be at home . . . and *forget* the word California and *never* hear it spoken again!!" He left the diggings for good just days later, settling in the supply center of Stockton. Meanwhile, Chinese men poured into the areas white men like Osborn left behind. Some continued to work at out-of-the-way spots such as the Little Humbug, but more and more, Chinese miners turned their attention to claims along the major rivers of the Southern Mines—the Cosumnes, the Mokelumne, the Calaveras, the Stanislaus, the Tuolumne, and the Merced. Indeed, by late 1853, Osborn wrote from Stockton that the Chinese had a "life lien' upon the rivers" of his old stomping grounds. And just as Chinese miners had bought up the claims along the Mokelumne River in 1856, a Mariposa newspaper noted in 1857 that Chinese men were busy working the bed of the Merced: "The whole flat along the river has been staked off by them."

Rumor had it, in fact, that these miners recently had unearthed a seven-pound piece of gold. Such a lump would have been worth almost \$1,800.⁹

True or not, reports like these must have galled white men who had given up on gold as well as those who hung fire in the mines. For those, like Timothy Osborn, who left the diggings, Chinese miners' accomplishments belied the Anglo axiom that the placers were all but played out. For those who stayed but complained about decline, Chinese success made white men seem like whiners. Anglos knew that the river claims Chinese men mined already had been worked by teams of Americans and Europeans, who diverted water by means of dams and flumes and then washed out the gold-bearing dirt in exposed riverbeds using rockers, long toms, or sluices. It must have been hard to see Chinese men come in and repeat this labor to good account, sometimes using pumps to help remove water that lingered in the riverbed.¹⁰ After all, many Anglos had struggled during the first years of the Gold Rush to circumscribe both the presence and the activities of non-Anglos so as to gain, as far as it was practicable, preemptive access to California's riches.¹¹ Once reasonably secure in that access, however, Anglo miners found that digging gold simply was not as easy as it had been in 1849. In response, many left altogether, while others adapted not only labor practices but their own expectations in order to cope with changed conditions. But just as they made this transition, a new group of gold seekers arrived on the scene. The "wars" and "revolutions" of 1850 to 1851 were fresh in Anglo men's minds—conflicts in which Miwoks, Mexicans, Chileans, French, and other Europeans in the Southern Mines tried to stand their ground against white Americans. So Anglo response to the influx of Chinese and to their enterprise in the diggings was swift indeed.

Some white men were content to deny that enterprise altogether, ridiculing Chinese mining practices as crude and inefficient. One effective way to do this was to feminize Chinese men, as the Scottish writer and artist J. D. Borthwick did when he published his account of an 1852–53 tour of the diggings. Borthwick claimed that the "individual labor" of Chinese men "was nothing compared with that of other miners." He maintained that the Chinese lacked the "force" and "vigor" of the Americans and Europeans, that they handled their mining tools "like so many women, as if they were afraid of hurting themselves." Indeed, Borthwick noted, American men called Chinese mining methods "scratching."¹² Some of this was sheer silliness, as Chinese involvement in large-scale river mining showed. But there was some truth to the contention that many Chinese men mined in

ways that differed from those of than other gold seekers. Many did, for example, limit their gold-washing tools to the smaller rocker rather than the larger long tom or sluice.¹³ They did so in large part because of discrimination. Chinese soon learned that whites would not hesitate to expel groups of Chinese men from mining claims. Smaller tools simply were easier to gather up and cart to new diggings when the need arose—hence the reputation for the “backwardness” of Chinese placer mining.¹⁴ Calling the use of such techniques womanish, of course, was deeply ironic, since these were techniques most white men had used—sometimes only months earlier. Where Chinese men only “scratched” the surface, they learned to do so chiefly from white men, who also guaranteed by their discriminatory actions that the portable rocker would become the Chinese miner’s stock-in-trade.

For many white gold seekers, the situation called for more than dismissing their new neighbors as men with small tools, which they handled “like so many women.” For such white men, expulsion seemed the better solution. One of the first widely reported attempts to drive Chinese miners from the Sierra Nevada foothills occurred in the Southern Mines.¹⁵ It came less than halfway into the first year of increased Chinese immigration—1852—and just two weeks after an alarmed Governor John Bigler addressed the California state legislature on the dangers such immigrants represented. Tellingly, it happened at the site of the most vociferous French, Mexican, and Chilean resistance to the foreign miners’ tax of 1850, the town of Columbia, in Tuolumne County.¹⁶ In May of 1852, San Francisco’s *Alta California* declared that the people of Columbia had proven themselves “entirely without a precedent or a parallel in their hatred and hostility for the Chinese.” Men of that town, styling themselves simply “the miners,” had passed in a mass meeting resolutions designed to assure that “no Asiatic or South Sea Islander” would work in local diggings. The resolutions included a charge to create a vigilance committee that would both enforce exclusion in Columbia and encourage white men throughout the Southern Mines to follow suit.¹⁷

“The miners,” however, singled out for verbal abuse not only Chinese men but those “shipowners, capitalists, and merchants” who supported “the importation of these burlesques on humanity.” The resolutions argued that such moneyed men loved California’s “rocks and rills” as well as “her woods and templed hills” only for the “gold they can filch from the one, and the lumber they can obtain from the other.” A man named John A. Palmer (of whom, more anon) chaired the meeting, while the secretary was Thaddeus Hildreth, widely cred-

ited among white people as the man who “discovered” gold at Columbia in 1850—though by most accounts, Mexicans mined there first.¹⁸ In choosing Hildreth as secretary, “the miners” chose one who could represent them in both senses of the word: he could stand for them literally in dealings with those outside their group—Hildreth, no doubt, reproduced and circulated the miners’ resolutions—and he could stand for them symbolically as well. In his role as “discoverer” of gold at Columbia, Hildreth embodied white miners’ own best hopes for themselves as independent producers, untrammelled from above by “shipowners, capitalists, and merchants,” unabased from below by Chinese “burlesques on humanity.” Here, then, is a moment of conception (again, in both senses of the word) for a homegrown working class in California’s Southern Mines, in which white miners figured themselves as humanity itself, over and against Chinese “burlesques,” and as husband-like lovers of California, over and against rapacious “shipowners, capitalists, and merchants.”¹⁹

As this bold characterization suggests, by 1852 the fissure that started to separate miners from merchants during the fight over the 1850 foreign miners’ tax was widening. The divide yawned wider when California’s legislature settled on a new foreign miners’ tax as a way of dealing with Chinese men in the diggings. In 1852, legislators debated a variety of measures designed to regulate Chinese immigrants, from laws that would have made labor contracts drawn up abroad enforceable in California (a favorite of the men miners called “capitalists”) to those that would have expelled Chinese from the mines altogether (a popular idea among white miners). In a sense, reviving the foreign miners’ tax was a compromise between these two extremes, though one that ultimately leaned toward merchants’ interests over those of white miners.²⁰

At first, however, merchants and their allies—notably newspaper editors—worried that a new tax would simply bring back old troubles. The *San Joaquin Republican*—which, under its first banner, the *Stockton Times*, had denounced the earlier tax—could not forget that the 1850 bill had “convulsed society in the southern mineral region.” What the Southern Mines lost in 1850, and stood to lose again in 1852, were prospectors, laborers, and customers, though now these were Chinese:

Have not this race of men . . . discovered new placers, and been . . . the hewers of wood and drawers of water for *our* citizens? In the cities are they not our attendants in our houses, and in our public rooms? Do they not wash our shirts? The Chinese, in this

city alone, must expend, and thus throw into circulation, money to the amount of \$500 a day, at the very smallest calculation. This money goes into the hands of our merchants.

The Stockton editor denounced the 1852 act as "The Dog in the Manger Bill," but in fact legislators did seem to recall the 1850 fiasco.²¹ This time around, they levied a foreign miners' tax at a substantially lower rate—three dollars per month as opposed to the earlier twenty dollars a month, a rate that had driven so many Spanish- and French-speaking gold seekers out of the mines.

The 1852 tax did not scare Chinese miners away.²² To be sure, some resisted paying the fee. In 1855, for example, groups of Chinese men attacked collectors of the foreign miners' tax at least twice, once in Tuolumne County and once in Mariposa County. In each case, the tax collectors survived, but one or more Chinese lay dead by the end of the incident.²³ More common was the kind of evasion described by a white man who had been a young boy in Mariposa County in the 1850s and 1860s. He recalled that the "tax collectors had a hard time collecting," because when Chinese men saw one coming "they would run & hide in holes & some would climb trees."²⁴ But many Chinese must have decided to pay the moderate fee and go on about their business. Indeed, by 1856, the once-worried *San Joaquin Republican* could blithely report that Tuolumne County received more revenue from the foreign miners' tax than from any other single source, including property taxes.²⁵ What had once been a bugbear was now a bullish sign of growth.

White miners generally did not see it that way. Shortly after the tax became law, the *Alta California* drew a sharp contrast between what increasingly were class-motivated points of view—one a vision of those who were coming to constitute an Anglo middle class (a vision shared by a majority of state officials), and the other belonging to Anglo miners. "The difficulty now," the editors wrote, "is to reconcile" the two perspectives—the first, which condoned "licensing foreigners to work the mines for a consideration," and the second, which refused "to let them work upon any consideration."²⁶ The *Alta California* cast its lot with those who stood to benefit from a foreign miners' tax—the emerging white middle class and the state. Anglo miners, meanwhile, continued to oppose the tax. Six months after the act's passage, for example, a constituent wrote from Tuolumne County to the state legislator James Mandeville, reminding him, "As regards the Foreign Tax Bill you are well aware of the opinions of a large portion of the American Miners That is we want no tax levied

on them except such as will amount to a prohibition."²⁷ The foreign miners' tax of 1852 never amounted to a prohibition on Chinese labor, and thus the "American Miners" lost their bid for exclusion. Instead, the tax survived through the 1860s and became a key source of revenue for the new American state of California.²⁸

Although Anglo miners railed against the "shipowners, capitalists, and merchants" who flooded the state with "degraded Asiatics" and forced a "system of peonage" on the mines, there is no evidence that a group of Americans orchestrated Chinese immigration and imposed upon Chinese miners a system of coerced labor. As historians of Asian America have shown, most Chinese men came to California having paid for their own passage or having borrowed the fare, intending to repay it out of their earnings as miners.²⁹ Contrary to white miners' beliefs, the vast majority of Chinese men were not unfree workers. A Stockton restaurateur insisted on this to newspapermen in the spring of 1852: "Chinese John . . . requests us, flatly, to contradict the statement which is going the round of the papers . . . that his countrymen come to California either as slaves or under contract."³⁰ Entrepreneurial Americans who introduced unfree Chinese labor in the mines were few and far between.

The arrival of Chinese in the diggings, however, coincided with the growth of local capitalist enterprise that threatened the autonomy of white placer miners. In the minds of white miners, then, the two phenomena must have seemed related, since anti-Chinese and anticapitalist agitation shaded into one another and drew in common from emerging languages of class.³¹ In the Northern Mines, large mining companies represented the greatest threat to individual miners. But in the south, where a relative lack of deposits suitable for hydraulic or quartz mining was matched by an abundance of persistent placers, large water companies took center stage. As a result, in the Southern Mines, antipathy toward Chinese miners and white water company managers went hand in glove.

In fact, on the very day that the *Alta California* reported Columbia's mass meeting to expel Chinese miners, the paper also ran a notice that the Tuolumne County Water Company had succeeded in bringing water to Columbia through a ditch that connected the diggings to Five Mile Creek, a tributary of the Stanislaus River: "Their race is complete at last!—and the water is actually running through it! Hundreds, we say thousands of miners are rejoicing." These men may not have rejoiced for long, since the race was small and the company's flumes were built with green timber that warped and shrank. The grand potential of the company would not be realized until a

larger race, then still under construction, reached the Stanislaus itself and tapped the waters of that formidable river for the Columbia placers.³² But when miners saw that first fledgling ditch fill with water from a distant creek, their relief must have been alloyed with unease. Water had always been scarce in the Southern Mines, but its use had been free. Now it might be more plentiful, but miners would have to pay to use it. And those they would have to pay looked a good deal like "capitalists" in the making: in the case of the Tuolumne County Water Company (TCWC), a group of men who formed a joint stock corporation capitalized at more than \$200,000.³³

White miners' unease did not erupt immediately into opposition to this or any other of the many water companies that were organized in the Southern Mines.³⁴ Indeed, the anger that erupted at this historical moment was aimed at Chinese miners and only incidentally at Anglo "capitalists." But the timing of the anti-Chinese meeting at Columbia along with its anticapitalist tenor suggests that white miners' twin anxieties about the flow of water and the influx of Chinese compounded each other. When Anglo miners finally did cry out against the TCWC, another connection between anti-Chinese and anticapitalist impulses emerged. For its first years of operation, the TCWC was the only venture of its kind in the vicinity of Columbia, though smaller ditches brought water to placer claims elsewhere in the county. Hence the company was able to command high prices. In January of 1853, just eight months after the anti-Chinese meeting, white miners gathered again in Columbia, this time to protest the exorbitant rates they paid for the use of water supplied by the TCWC. These miners likely resembled the group that voted for Chinese expulsion, since they chose as their chairman John A. Palmer—the same man who had chaired the anti-Chinese meeting. As the conflict between white miners and the TCWC unfolded over the next two years, Palmer continued to serve as a leader.³⁵ It would not be until 1855 that the miners succeeded in forcing the company's hand, but the 1853 meeting did serve to unite them against the TCWC and to broadcast their complaints far and wide.³⁶

Anti-Chinese activity in the diggings continued throughout the 1850s, but not with the same intensity as in 1852. White miners came to tolerate the foreign miners' tax as a means of policing and exacting tribute from Chinese miners. And Chinese men themselves carefully orchestrated their gold seeking in order to minimize contact and conflict with Anglo Americans, concentrating their efforts in river claims abandoned by white men and using mining tools that were easy to carry off to new diggings when Anglo hostility erupted.

Beyond the mining districts, white men committed a range of anti-Chinese acts; they attacked Chinese brothels, for example, and also turned armed struggles between rival groups of Chinese men into a spectator sport for Anglos.³⁷ In the diggings, however, an aggrieved and anxious peace emerged.

Even as anti-Chinese agitation quieted in the Southern Mines, proliferating water companies continued to worry white miners into the mid-1850s. If debates over the proper response to Chinese in the diggings revealed the outlines of emerging class divisions among Anglo American men, then arguments about water companies laid those divisions bare. No longer did white miners inveigh against nameless "shipowners, capitalists, and merchants"; now gold seekers targeted local white businessmen who had pooled resources to create large enterprises such as the TCWC and its counterpart in Calaveras County, the Mokelumne Hill Canal and Mining Company. In the end, environmental limits and cultural constraints militated against sustained consolidation of white miners' interests. Though stillborn, the white working class in counties such as Calaveras and Tuolumne had a momentous gestation.

Documentation for Tuolumne County, home of the TCWC, is by far the richest.³⁸ Company records reveal the process by which managers, beginning in 1852, bought up land in the Stanislaus River drainage on which the TCWC constructed flumes, cut tunnels, and shoveled out reservoirs. The company also purchased working ditches dug previously by individual miners or smaller water or mining companies. Prices for these land transactions ranged from a low of \$25 for a tunnel near Gold Springs to a high of \$8,000 for the extensive Yankee Hill Ditch. In addition, company men took up individual 160-acre claims that were then used as TCWC reservoir sites.³⁹ These managers set their own salaries at \$7 or \$8 per day (in addition to stock dividends as they became available) and then paid laborers, such as ditch diggers and ditch tenders, at a rate of \$5 a day.⁴⁰ Wages fluctuated—and generally dropped—over the course of the 1850s, though those who managed the TCWC lost proportionately less over time than those who tended the company's growing system of flumes, tunnels, and reservoirs.⁴¹

Meanwhile, no company besides the TCWC had succeeded in bringing water to the rich placer claims of the Columbia mining district. So gold seekers there were compelled to pay the \$6 per day demanded for the use of water. By March of 1855, miners had had enough. They held a mass meeting in Columbia and drafted resolu-

tions in which they pledged themselves collectively to refuse to patronize the TCWC until the price of water was reduced to \$4 a day. Calling their action a "strike," the miners charged that they had long been "oppressed by the exorbitant exactions" of the TCWC, the managers of which had grown fat "by the sweat of the brow of the careworn working man." Now white miners declared themselves "at war" with the "controlling cormorants of this *monster monopoly*."⁴²

The war was not between miners and monopolists alone. In addition to refusing the TCWC's water, miners called on one another to withdraw any money they had in banks in Tuolumne County or elsewhere in the state. Surplus cash, the resolutions directed, was to be deposited in the safe of a "friendly merchant," where it would be beyond the reach of well-connected TCWC managers. But the bulk of miners' money was to be invested in what the resolutions called the "new water company."⁴³ Though newspaper reports of the mass meeting did not name this enterprise, local miners knew whereof the resolutions spoke. The newcomer was the Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company (CSRWC), organized less than a year earlier to compete with the TCWC. Trustees of the CSRWC had held public meetings in various camps during the preceding months to drum up support. Very little actual ditchdigging had been done, however, before the mass meeting in March. According to one CSRWC trustee, John Jolly, the miners' action against the TCWC was just what the new company needed. On the eve of the Columbia miners' meeting, Jolly noted in his diary, "A mass meeting called for tomorrow which I trust will start our new ditch." Jolly was not disappointed. Within days, he could write triumphantly that the "old [company] surrendered to the will of the miners," adding that "the new [company] has distanced [the TCWC] by getting the start we so long wished for."⁴⁴

The white miners, then, were not alone. Both local merchants and a rival water company supported their cause, and TCWC managers were forced to reduce water prices just days after the miners' mass meeting. Merchants, as they had with the initial imposition of taxes on "foreign" miners in 1850 and 1852, worried about their customers, far more of whom were miners than water company managers. In fact, the "Traders, Mechanics and business men" in and around Columbia drafted a polite petition to the TCWC to express their collective "anxiety and alarm" over the breach between miners and company men. Unlike the miners, these merchants and their allies disclaimed "all right or disposition to intermeddle or dictate" to the TCWC how it should conduct its "own concerns," acknowledging that "much of the prosperity that our town enjoys is justly attributa-

ble to [the company's] enterprise." From their ambivalent position within emerging Anglo American class relations, however, the petitioners argued that "the rates the Miners have been paying for water are higher than the diggings will justify." The merchants closed with a deferential plea: "We most earnestly express the hope that your circumstances will permit you to reduce the price of your water."⁴⁵ The circumstances that permitted such a reduction included both the backing of the merchants and the competition offered by the CSRWC.

In addition, the TCWC's decision to reduce rates for the use of water probably depended on the ambivalence of men within the company itself. Many company men had come to California initially with dreams of making their fortune in the diggings, and only recently had abandoned those dreams in favor of entrepreneurial enterprise. Even as they built the Southern Mines' grandest business venture, they remembered the backbreaking labor of mining as well as the exacting work of exclusion, whereby Anglo Americans attempted to arrogate the placers to themselves. One such man was Joseph Pownall, who collected water rents for the TCWC in the Montezuma mining district. Pownall had trained as a physician in New York and practiced medicine in the South. He went to California in 1849 at the age of thirty-one. Pownall tried his hand at mining for several years before he joined the ranks of the TCWC. Just days after the miners' mass meeting in March of 1855, he wrote to the company secretary, concerned about the "piping times" in Columbia. Pownall reported that his own policy with Montezuma miners had been to be "as conciliatory as possible." In fact, he had unilaterally lowered the price of water for his customers: "I took the responsibility to reduce and let the Board [of Trustees] raise the price again and censure me if they saw fit." Calling "the great majority" of miners "honourable and high minded men," Pownall argued that the TCWC should go so far as to reduce managers' salaries before allowing the company's reputation to be tarnished by a dispute with miners.⁴⁶

Joseph Pownall's letter to the company secretary also sheds light on how the quarrel between white miners and the TCWC was connected to an emerging Anglo American political culture in the Southern Mines. Pownall told the secretary that he thought the price of water "must necessarily come down," "however galling" it might be for the company to "succumb to such rascals as Palmer [and] Coffroth." In naming John A. Palmer and James W. Coffroth as adversaries, Pownall looked backward as well as forward. Palmer, as we have seen, was a leader among white miners early on, both when they agitated for Chinese exclusion in 1852 and when they protested

TCWC water rates starting in 1853. Coffroth, on the other hand, for many embodied the Tuolumne County of the future. Though he was only twenty-six, he was already a veteran of California's legislature, having won his first election to the state assembly in 1851; he later became a state senator. Locally, Coffroth was known as "Columbia's favorite son." He was a frequent orator at community events, and his poetry appeared in area newspapers (given his famous verbal felicity, one might attribute to Coffroth that well-turned epithet—"the controlling cormorants of this *monster monopoly*"). He was also—and this is what most galled TCWC managers—president of the rival Columbia and Stanislaus River Water Company. Not all in Columbia and the vicinity, then, were so taken with James Coffroth. In his letter to the TCWC secretary, for example, Pownall reported that a "deputation" had "waited on the miners" in Montezuma, asking for their cooperation. These deputies, no doubt, came either from the CSRWC or from the protesting Columbia miners. Pownall told the secretary that he thought the Montezuma miners would refuse to cooperate with the deputation, adding sarcastically, "they are perfectly aware that the interests of the dear people here are not much cared for by Columbias favorite son, poet [and] 'song-clad [seraph]'"—referring, perhaps, to Coffroth the legislator as much as to Coffroth the water company president.⁴⁷

What Coffroth represented was a particular kind of political actor in the Southern Mines—a Democrat who claimed the mantle of Jacksonian Democracy by championing the cause of independent white miners. In the process, he secured his own political, and perhaps economic, fortunes. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party in the diggings, as elsewhere in the United States, was in turmoil, wracked by disputes over slavery and by the growth of the American, or Know-Nothing, Party. The full extent to which the battle between the TCWC and the white miners reflected the machinations of party politics is a topic for a different—and necessary—kind of history of the Southern Mines. But there are clear indications that a local political crisis was implicated in the battle.⁴⁸ According to Joseph Pownall, the disfavor into which the TCWC had fallen by 1855 resulted from "the wire pullings of harpies who for years have been hovering about Columbia ready to pounce upon and fleece the unfortunate who may have been caught in their toils."⁴⁹ The "unfortunate," of course, were the aggrieved white miners. The "harpies," no doubt, were their grassroots leaders, such as Palmer, as well as their powerful political ally, Coffroth. What Pownall was saying was that Columbia's miners had been hoodwinked into fighting the TCWC by such men. What



A stock certificate from the Tuolumne County Water Company, 1854. Most stockholders were white men, but the owner of this share was an Elisabeth Klemm. Note the signature of the Democratic politician James W. Mandeville.

Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

Pownall was not saying was that the TCWC had its own friends in high places. Chief among them was another Tuolumne County Democratic legislator, James W. Mandeville. Mandeville was a quieter brand of Democrat than Coffroth, but one who also kept his thumb in the local pie, searching about for a golden plum. From the start, Mandeville was a stockholder in the TCWC. Indeed, his incoming correspondence from 1852 on is filled with answers to what must have been repeated queries about the company's prospects. In 1854, Mandeville was elected a trustee of the TCWC.⁵⁰ Two Democratic politicians in Tuolumne County, then, lined up squarely behind two rival water companies: James Coffroth as the highly visible president of the CSRWC, and James Mandeville as the more circumspect stockholder in and trustee of the TCWC.

The full texture of this rivalry may be lost to the historical record, but surviving pieces of the fabric hint at what it all felt like in the hands of varied participants. Just as the politics of water spilled over into the politics of state, so too did it seep into the everyday politics of sex, of race, and of gender. For example, a month after the Columbia miners called the TCWC's bluff and won lower water rates, newspapers reported that CSRWC President Coffroth had challenged TCWC President Alexander M. Dobie to a duel. Now the issue was not water

but character. "A certain lady," according to Dobie, had informed him that Coffroth had made remarks "derogatory to [Dobie's] character." Not to be outdone, Dobie told the woman that Coffroth himself was a "frequenter of houses of ill-fame in Columbia." Coffroth, in turn, demanded "gentlemanly satisfaction" of Dobie. Dobie refused, smugly reminding Coffroth the lawmaker that dueling was not only "barbarous and inhuman" but illegal.⁵¹ For some, such crossing of swords made life in Tuolumne County read like a Shakespearean drama. After the miners' strike in March of 1855, Coffroth broke loose from his Democratic moorings and drifted briefly into the Know-Nothing Party, which was making significant inroads into California politics. On the one hand, mainstream Democrats excoriated Coffroth. One partisan newspaper, for instance, racially taunted the nativist Know-Nothings by denouncing "the late political somerset of Mr. Coffroth into the embrace of the Hindoos."⁵² On the other hand, not all Know-Nothings welcomed Coffroth into the fold, particularly not those who had ties to the TCWC. One of the original stockholders in the TCWC, who had recently left the diggings, wrote to Joseph Pownall several months after the miners' uprising, anxiously inquiring about the state of his business affairs in Columbia. He also expressed glee that California had "gone K[now] N[othing]" in the late elections. "Hip Hip Huzza," he penned, adding, "I hope however that our mutual friend the Hon J W Coffroth has been consigned to the 'tomb of the Capulets.'"⁵³ It was no accident that this TCWC stockholder identified Coffroth with Juliet's family line rather than that of Romeo. When it came to white men hurling insults in the Southern Mines, manhood as well as whiteness were always on the side of the detractor.

All of these circles of intrigue, interest, and meaning, then, came to swirl around an economic contest between white miners, who had fought hard for exclusive access to the placers, and white water company managers, who had created a commodity out of the one thing placer miners most needed if that access was to translate into hard cash. In their opposition to the TCWC, the Columbia miners questioned not a company's right to put a price on water but rather its right to set that price without regard for what white men reasonably could be expected to spare out of their daily earnings. Whatever the original intentions of the CSRWC managers, then, when the miners fell in behind them in 1855, the rival water company did indeed evolve into a different kind of animal. The TCWC, for example, had been incorporated with a capital stock of \$220,000, divided into 275 shares of \$800 each.⁵⁴ The CSRWC, however, was organized with a capital stock of \$300,000, divided into 1,500 shares of \$200 each,

allowing many more to become shareholders for much less.⁵⁵ What is more, when striking miners threw their support to the CSRWC, a good number left their long toms and sluices and went to work digging ditches for the new company, accepting CSRWC stock in lieu of wages.⁵⁶ This action not only forced the TCWC to accede to the miners' demands (lest the old company continue to lose ground to the new); it also gave white miners a very real stake in the fortunes of the CSRWC. Newspapermen sympathetic to the miners—and to the miners' allies—wrote in glowing terms of what became known as the "Miners' Ditch":

This ditch is one of the most magnificent achievements of enterprise which the records of California industry can produce. Conceived under . . . a pressing demand, . . . the work . . . was commenced by private enterprise and individual labor, and without the aid of a single dollar from the treasury of the organized company. In giving . . . encouragement to labor, Hon. J. W. Coffroth . . . deserves distinguished praise, as through his eloquent representations, he induced scores of laborers to shoulder their picks and shovels and march to the line of labor, with no other promise of remuneration than that which would arise from the profits of the ditch, after its completion. And yet, perhaps, the greater credit is due to the hardy sons of toil. . . .

Seldom, this editor concluded, did "individual enterprise, without the aid of capital" succeed in completing "a work as grand and extensive" as the CSRWC ditch.⁵⁷

In fact, the work was not completed for three more years. When it finally was finished, Columbia turned itself out as never before.⁵⁸ On November 29, 1858, the CSRWC faithful and their friends assembled in a grand procession that wended its way through the town, replete with brass bands, military and fire companies, carriages carrying company officials and town dignitaries, as well as hundreds and hundreds of men on foot—among them, those who had helped dig the "Miners' Ditch." Many carried banners, including one that pictured two miners sitting at a roughly hewn table, a barrel of pork and a sack of beans at their side; one man pointed to the provisions, declaring, "In these we trusted." Some men marched together under the banner of a "Miners' Union"—though sources are frustratingly opaque as to the origins and activities of this group.⁵⁹ Finally, all assembled in the center of town, where James Coffroth held forth to the teeming crowd on the history of the CSRWC. A free public dinner

followed and then, to end the day, a spectacular display of fireworks and an elaborate ball.

What must have appeared at the time as the triumph of independent white miners, however, looks in retrospect like a swan song for a dying breed. Plentiful, cheap water, the miners learned, was not enough to ensure their independence. There had to be gold in the ground. As they had since the beginning of the Gold Rush, placer yields continued to decline over the course of the 1850s. Indeed, in 1858, when the Columbia miners celebrated the completion of their ditch, California's gold production was only 57 percent of what it had been in 1852, when the TCWC stockholders signed their incorporation papers.⁶⁰ The CSRWC, then, having come of age in this climate, slipped into arrears. Columbia area miners again came to the aid of the company, staging demonstrations, threatening violence, and demanding that the "Miners' Ditch" remain "a lasting monument of the energy and perseverance of the laboring class of Tuolumne County." But in 1860, creditors forced the sale of CSRWC properties at a public auction. The purchaser of the "Miners' Ditch" was that "*monster monopoly*," the TCWC.⁶¹

By then, California was no longer the only field where aspiring white men could establish themselves as "independent miners." In British Columbia, word of gold at the Fraser River drew thousands of California miners northward in 1858. More promising still was the discovery of both gold and silver in Nevada's Carson River basin in 1859. Thousands more rushed east across the Sierra Nevada to that destination. News of gold in almost every western territory followed in subsequent years, creating a patchwork of western places where Anglo American men might escape the economic dependence that both eastern places and played-out western placers seemed to portend. Never mind the demise of the "Miners' Ditch," then; there would always be another gold rush.

Over the course of the 1850s, dramas similar to these played themselves out elsewhere in the Southern Mines, though perhaps nowhere with as much swagger and flair as in Columbia, an exceptionally rich gold district that was known as the Gem of the Southern Mines. Far less common in the south was a trajectory that came to characterize much of the Northern Mines in the 1850s, as men with capital turned their attention away from the placers and toward gold that was buried deeper beneath the earth's surface. These deposits included quartz or vein gold as well as deep gravels. Yet such deposits were relatively scarce in the Southern Mines, at least when compared

with the diggings to the north. Of course, there were crucial exceptions to the rule. Much of the gold mined in the vicinity of Columbia, in fact, came out of a rare patch of ancient gravels that had never been buried by debris. Likewise, substantial quartz gold turned up at the northern reaches of the Southern Mines, in Amador County, and far to the south as well, in Mariposa County. But these deposits paled in comparison with the spectacular veins and gravels of the Northern Mines.⁶²

Many residents of the Southern Mines and the supply town of Stockton refused to believe, or at least to admit, that the diggings to the north held this advantage. As early as 1850, the *Stockton Times* denounced as "anti-south" an *Alta California* article which implied that "the probable amount of metaliferous quartz in the southern mines" was limited. Boosters for the southern diggings shot back that the area boasted "mountains of auriferous quartz," which were "already, with eminent success, being worked by companies."⁶³ By the mid-1850s, some Mariposa County residents, in particular, insisted that "the richest quartz veins in California" were found within their county lines.⁶⁴ Later, in 1857, one writer claimed that the quartz resources of Tuolumne County alone, "if the proper appliances existed for their development," could "supply the whole world with gold . . . for a century—perhaps a dozen centuries to come." Despite the hyperbole, this last statement actually reflects a decline in confidence that characterized the Southern Mines in the later 1850s. The writer nowhere said that Tuolumne County quartz deposits were greater than those elsewhere in the state, and he was careful to add that their development would require "proper appliances." In fact, the writer's purpose was to caution residents against a "quartz mania," whereby "men rush heedlessly [into quartz mining], expecting sudden and fabulous profits without preliminary investment of capital or labor, or both."⁶⁵ By the end of the 1850s, then, if none conceded the advantage of the Northern Mines in quartz mining, at least fewer insisted that the diggings to the south had the edge.

One man who especially hoped that the Southern Mines were concealing a buried treasure in quartz was John C. Frémont, the nationally acclaimed explorer. As luck would have it, Frémont had become a major landowner in the area just before gold was discovered in 1848. His career in the Southern Mines—along with that of Jessie Benton Frémont, his wife—illustrates something of the fortunes of quartz mining there, while also illuminating a much wider set of concerns. Stories about the Frémonts invariably encompass a panoply of themes in U.S. history, generally, and the history of westward expansion, in

particular. Those set in 1850s California are no exception. In just a dozen years, the Frémonts' lives became touchstones of not only far-flung capitalization in western mining but the disposition of Mexican land claims; the administration of the U.S. public domain; the pursuit of wealth through contracts to provision dispossessed Indians; the spread of black slavery into the territories; the making of national reputations through western ventures; the transformation of U.S. political parties; the rise in white women's political participation; and the local emergence of racialized and gendered class relations that reflected both national and international economic upheavals.

It all began before the Gold Rush. John C. Frémont's third western expedition took him to California on the eve of the U.S.-Mexican War, where he participated first in the Bear Flag Rebellion against Mexico. Ultimately, U.S. Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny marched Frémont back east in the summer of 1847, after Frémont placed himself on the wrong side of a struggle between Kearny and Commodore Robert F. Stockton over whether Stockton legitimately could appoint Frémont as governor of occupied California. Frémont was court-martialed for mutiny and disobedience. Before he left California, however, he had purchased—with the assistance of Thomas O. Larkin, U.S. consul in Mexican California—a vast tract of land known as Las Mariposas from the prominent Californio Juan Bautista Alvarado and his wife, Martina Castro de Alvarado.⁶⁶ Located in what would become Mariposa County, the tract was a "floating grant" that Alvarado had received in 1844 from California's governor (because of Mexican community property law, Castro de Alvarado also gained an interest in the property). The boundaries of the grant were not specified—only that it was to cover ten leagues between the Sierra Nevada to the east and the San Joaquin River to the west, and between the Merced River to the north and the Chowchilla River to the south. Alvarado had hoped to survey this stretch of land and take possession of the ten leagues that best suited his needs, but the resistance of native peoples foiled his plans.⁶⁷

But for the gold discovery, Frémont's claim to the land might have met the same fate. Like all of what became the Southern Mines, Las Mariposas was within the hunting and gathering grounds of Sierra Miwoks, among whom had settled other Indians who were escaping the twin scourges of malaria in the Central Valley and missions on the coast. Frémont met up with these mixed bands late in 1845, after crossing the Sierra Nevada into California. The outcome was not a happy one for the explorer. The native peoples who had joined up-country Miwoks in the decade before the Gold Rush, as Frémont

knew, included many who were adept horse raiders. So when Frémont entered the land that he would later purchase and saw signs of horses, he sent out four scouts (two white men and two Delaware Indians) to track down the responsible "Horse-thief Indians," as he called them. The plan backfired. Not only did the local band surround the scouts, separating them from their horses and shouting at them in Spanish, even when Frémont's men retrieved the scouts and their mounts, the Indians circled the explorer's camp and, as Frémont remembered,

harangued us, bestowing on us liberally all the epithets they could use, telling us what they would do with us. Many of them had been Mission Indians and spoke Spanish well. "Wait," they said, "*Esperate Carrajos* [*sic*]"—wait until morning. There are two big villages up in the mountains close by; we have sent for the Chief; he'll be down before morning with all the people and you will all die. None of you shall go back; we will have all your horses."

Frémont and his men slipped away, out of the foothills, before the local people could make good on their threat. He did not return to the neighborhood for over three years. In the meantime, Frémont had gained title to the land, though Indians repelled four early attempts by his representatives to take possession.⁶⁸ It took the Gold Rush for him to be able to return to the scene of this particular humiliation.

And return he did, though in the long run Frémont's greeting by gold seekers who invaded Miwok lands proved only marginally warmer than his reception by Indians. It did not help that he was the largest landowner in the Southern Mines, and that his title to the land and its gold was contested. It did not help that Jessie Benton Frémont was a daughter of the powerful Thomas Hart Benton, expansionist Democrat from Missouri, and that Benton alternately championed and then shunned his peripatetic son-in-law (who had eloped with Jessie when she was but seventeen).⁶⁹ It did not help that John Frémont's loyalty to the Democrats—the majority party in the Southern Mines—proved a good deal more brittle even than that of James Coffroth, the local Democrat who only briefly abandoned his party for the Know-Nothings. Frémont, by contrast, became the first presidential candidate of the new Republican Party in 1856. All things considered, newspapers exaggerated only slightly in saying that Frémont had "no friends in the mines."⁷⁰

The enmity started early. By the end of 1849, California had ratified its constitution and elected its first officials. The new state legislature, in turn, elected Frémont as one of two U.S. senators, though he drew a short two-year term in Washington. While in office, Frémont introduced a number of bills, but none were more important to Californians than those involving mines and land claims. Frémont's land bill proposed a board of commissioners to examine land titles established under Mexican law. Frémont did not stay in the Senate long enough to shepherd the measure through Congress, but his foes suspected that the bill would have favored his own interests, as the holder of a Mexican land grant, as well as those of Californios over the interests of Anglo Americans.⁷¹

"Frémont's Gold Bill," as it was called in the press, generated even greater resistance. A Stockton newspaper took Frémont to task for trying to restrict mining privileges to U.S. citizens, reminding readers of how the late foreign miners' tax had depopulated the Southern Mines. The editor accused Frémont of "basely pander[ing] to what he supposes to be the prejudices of the miners in the San Joaquin region."⁷² A newspaper correspondent from Tuolumne County denounced the provisions of Frémont's bill that would have sent federal agents to the diggings to grant miners permits for thirty-foot-square "placer lots" (or two-hundred-plus-foot-square lots for quartz mines). The agents also would have managed local juries appointed to settle mining disputes. The Tuolumne correspondent protested, "[F]or nearly three years we have peaceably and quietly settled our own difficulties . . . and my opinion is that a jury of six practical miners will adjust any disputes . . . as efficiently as a man with a fat salary, sent out from the old states, who does not know a quartz vein from a slate lead."⁷³ Finally, Frémont's neighbors in Mariposa County drafted a memorial to the U.S. Senate, complaining that the bill's provisions would drive them "to a fugitive life, having so small a quantity of soil apportioned to each, in the placer diggings." Likewise, they argued, the lot size for quartz mines, which were worked by large companies, was insufficient: "no company can be formed limited to so small a portion of any vein yet found in California."⁷⁴ Indeed, criticisms of the bill were so varied that taken together they seem to represent resistance to any interference whatsoever in the affairs of California miners by the federal government. Frémont himself asked Californians to believe that his sole intent had been "to exclude all idea of making national revenue out of the mines—to prevent the possibility of their monopoly by moneyed capitalists—and to give to natural capital, to LABOR and INDUSTRY, a fair chance in

fields of its own choosing."⁷⁵ It was perhaps too much for Frémont to ask, since he was so deeply identified with national interests—through his government expeditions, his Senate seat, and his family connections—and, through his promotion of Las Mariposas, with moneyed capital.

Las Mariposas, in fact, was only one of Frémont's schemes for making his fortune in California. He owned or claimed interest in a number of other properties, including Alcatraz Island, three San Francisco city lots, the orchards of Mission Dolores, land along the San Joaquin River, and ranchos in present-day Kern and San Joaquin counties.⁷⁶ In addition to these properties, Frémont made money from beef contracts with the federal Indian commissioners who were sent to California in 1851. Although the U.S. Senate never ratified the treaties these agents negotiated with native peoples, the agents went ahead and made contracts to provide Indians with the beef the treaties promised, and then paid contractors with drafts drawn on the Secretary of the Interior. The contracts themselves were plagued by fraud and speculation, and California Indians were hardly the chief beneficiaries of all the meat and money that changed hands. Frémont himself took in over \$180,000 worth of the commissioners' drafts, all of which the federal government at first refused to honor. Through a special authorization by Congress, however, Frémont was able to collect on his drafts, plus interest, which amounted to \$58,000.⁷⁷ Unlike his other economic and political ventures, Frémont's beef contracts drew but little criticism. Years later, a former member of the Mariposa Battalion, the mostly white volunteer force that had fought in the Mariposa War, charged a "California Indian Ring" with profiteering off such contracts. He claimed to have warned no less an Indian trader than James Savage, who received much contracted beef, that Savage was surrounded by "sharp men" who were using him "as a tool to work their gold mine."⁷⁸ Few others seemed to care that "sharp men" such as Frémont may have fleeced Indians to finance quartz mines.

In the end, it took more than beef contracts to keep Las Mariposas up and running. The difficulties Frémont faced were deep, many, mutable, and always compounded by his inexperience in business. In 1864, he lost control of the property altogether. In the meantime, Frémont was sitting, quite literally, on a gold mine. He discovered as early as 1849 that the Mariposa Estate, as it was called by English speakers, included a gold-studded quartz vein over five miles in length—this in addition to the hundred pounds of placer gold Sonoran miners were washing out each month and dividing equally

with Frémont, who had engaged the Mexicans to work on his behalf.⁷⁹ Quickly, Frémont turned to a system whereby he leased often unlocated portions of the vein to whoever agreed to mine it and to return to him one-sixth of all gold found. He also took on partners to attract Europeans to the property, with the hope that British capitalists, in particular, would jump at the chance to finance the concentration of men and machinery required to extract gold from solid rock. His representative in England, David Hoffman, was often exasperated with Frémont. Hoffman complained that Frémont failed to keep him informed of developments in California and that he allowed other interested parties to complicate what Hoffman saw as an exclusive business arrangement. In 1851, Thomas Hart Benton himself stepped in and tried to force the sale of Las Mariposas, arguing that his son-in-law was "not adapted to such business." The sale was stopped, but not before John and Jessie Benton Frémont traveled to London to put matters aright. This 1852 trip started out pleasantly enough, with Jessie presented to Queen Victoria. But as John boarded a carriage one evening, he was arrested for drafts he had drawn on the federal government during the war with Mexico; the drafts had been sold to a British concern and had gone unpaid. Hoffman posted bail for Frémont—after the famous American spent the night in lockup. Affairs such as these made attracting and retaining European capital for Mariposa's mines no small task.⁸⁰

To make matters worse, Frémont's title to the estate was in constant jeopardy. When gold was discovered in the Sierra Nevada foothills, miners quickly fanned out over the entire area. This included Las Mariposas, virtually the only tract of land that was not, according to provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, part of U.S. public domain. But gold seekers treated it as if it was, setting up tents, staking claims, and digging paydirt on land that Frémont claimed, or would later claim, as private property. Some eventually took up leases with Frémont, but many did not. Locally, then, the stage was set for battles between an often absentee landowner and those who worked on the land in question. These local contests were overlaid with legal contests that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Following the multiple paths of these struggles is not easy. The historian who has followed them most carefully explains that the overlapping systems of mining law in California are perplexing enough: "Compound the situation with a superimposition of . . . claims and claim jumpers, leases and subleases, original companies and reorganized companies, sales of both mineral claims and surface lands, authorized agents and unauthorized," she writes, and recon-

struction becomes a herculean task.⁸¹ That the original grant to Juan B. Alvarado was a "floating grant" only complicated matters further. Without definite boundaries, for example, Frémont was able to claim one tract of land in 1852 and then a substantially different tract in 1856. The 1852 Mariposa Estate was shaped like a pan with a long handle; it included a circle of gold mines up in the foothills and then followed the Mariposa River downstream to the San Joaquin Valley. The 1856 Mariposa Estate dropped the handle, and then increased the size of the pan to include the rich quartz mines of upper Bear Creek Valley.⁸²

Frémont's claim to Las Mariposas was the first case considered under the provisions of the Land Act of 1851—though this bill is perhaps best known for the role it played in the dispossession of the Spanish Mexican elite in California. The land commissioners confirmed Frémont's title in 1852. The District Court for the Northern District of California, however, reversed the commission's decision in 1854. So Frémont took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, where, the following year, he won on appeal. In its decision, the Supreme Court ordered a new survey of Las Mariposas, which inaugurated another round of legal maneuvers. In the meantime, Frémont completed the required survey, by which he claimed important new mineral lands in Bear Valley. But with the legality of the survey in question, Frémont was still without final certification and a patent from the federal government. The case returned to the Supreme Court once more. Finally, on February 19, 1856, President Franklin Pierce signed the patent for Las Mariposas and, in a White House meeting, personally handed it to Frémont. By then, it was widely known that Frémont himself was a potential candidate for the presidency of the United States.⁸³

Observers in the Southern Mines and the supply town of Stockton kept close tabs on these proceedings. Some actually wished Frémont well, arguing that "when quartz mining companies can get title to their claims, a large amount of capital will be brought into the country."⁸⁴ More common, though, were the sentiments expressed in Stockton's Democratic newspaper, the *San Joaquin Republican*, which took Frémont to task at every turn. There was the issue of foreign capital. As early as 1852, the Stockton paper exclaimed that Frémont had "actually leased a portion [of Las Mariposas] to a French company" and that it was his intent "to move Heaven and Earth to possess himself of that immense tract of land." Six months later, the editors were more direct about what it was they thought Frémont was doing to foreign, and especially British, investors, choosing a metaphor that

had fond associations in the homosocial world of Gold Rush California: "Col. Fremont has 'diddled' John Bull . . . sliding into his 'tender affections' in the slickest manner imaginable."⁸⁵ And then there was Frémont's title to the land itself, which the *San Joaquin Republican* took as a symbol of capitalist greed. If confirmed, Frémont's claim would sound the death knell of the independent Anglo American miner:

The once independent miner is cut off . . . by the title of the capitalist; he cannot work "on his own hook" . . . ; he must either rent a tract of land, or he must go to work . . . at the wages offered; and if there should be a large increase in the labor market, his wages must necessarily [fall] until they reach the level of labor in other countries. Doubtless, all this time, the capitalist is growing richer and is making gigantic improvements: but, what boots it? Labor is his footstool; labor is the sacrifice.⁸⁶

Anglo American labor as his footstool, foreign capital as his bedfellow: Frémont's appendages were everywhere they ought not to have been.

In 1856, when the title to Las Mariposas was confirmed and Frémont became the Republican presidential candidate, critics shifted gears, now tying his financial and political ambitions together into a single oppressive bundle—one that was destined to land squarely on white miners' shoulders. "It must be admitted," taunted the Stockton paper, "that John Charles Mariposa Claim Fremont . . . possesses great *claims* to the suffrages of the people of California, particularly the miners." The article went on to explain why it would be "perfect madness" for miners to support Frémont, reminding them of the legislation he proposed while senator and of the leasing he promoted on Las Mariposas. In a stunning prediction, the newspaper argued that Frémont as president would abolish "free mining" altogether and enforce the sale or leasing of mineral lands, which would "either create a civil war or cause to be instituted the worst system of white slavery ever known."⁸⁷

Critics also linked Frémont's ambitions to the aspirations of those who stood outside the customary circle of Jacksonian Democracy—particularly women and African Americans. The new Republican Party actually embraced a range of antislavery views, from abolitionism, at one end, to opposition to the westward expansion of slavery, at the other. Frémont himself was chosen as candidate in part because his views on slavery were less well known than those of other

potential nominees. Nonetheless, Democrats in the Southern Mines painted Frémont as the consummate race traitor. Taking issue with a Sacramento newspaper that supported Frémont because of his western explorations, the *San Joaquin Republican* answered in the language of antiblack race hatred. That Frémont had once "regaled himself on horse flesh," the Stockton editors retorted, did not entitle him to "his present woolly horse ride for the Presidential stakes." Other explorers were more deserving of the honor—"even," the editors mocked, "Jim Beckwith," the famous black fur trapper.⁸⁸ Democrats in California, as elsewhere, also identified Frémont with the woman movement, in part because of the active role Jessie Benton Frémont played in his campaign (a role that seemed all the more remarkable because her father, Thomas Hart Benton, campaigned against John). Indeed, back east, Republicans sported ribbons emblazoned with slogans such as "Jessie's Choice," and woman suffragists, both prominent and obscure, championed John. In all of this, Anglo American women entered into the fray of national party politics as never before, much to the horror of many.⁸⁹ Even in the Southern Mines, reform-minded women took courage from the "Frémont and Jessie" campaign. An Amador County white woman, for example, sat down to her diary and penned confidently, "I go in for Fremont and freedom." Meanwhile, local Democrats found themselves forced to reckon with Jessie, who, they complained, "declare[d] herself to be a black republican!" What was worse, according to many, was that her declaration mattered.⁹⁰

In the end, since the Republican campaign failed (though it surely succeeded in launching the new party into a national orbit), no one learned what a Frémont presidency might have meant for women, abolitionists, blacks, California miners, or other Americans. But Frémont, along with his creditors, still owned the Mariposa Estate, and so the Southern Mines had not seen the last of him. In fact, with the election over and his title to the land secured, Frémont returned to California to manage his property. In 1858, he traveled east, and then west once again, now accompanied by Jessie Benton Frémont and their children. By that time, the stage had been set in Mariposa County for a showdown between John Charles Frémont and his local detractors. His claim to the land might be secure, but claiming the minerals that land contained was another matter. This was not, after all, a land rush. It was a gold rush. And "gold" was a fighting word.

Almost as soon as Frémont received the patent to Las Mariposas, critics began to argue that his title to the land, because it was based on a grant made under Mexican law, did not include title to the

mines.⁹¹ And, in fact, in Spanish and then Mexican law, minerals did occupy a peculiar place. That is, if one person discovered and then exploited a mine on land that had been granted to another, or even if one person took up a mine that had been abandoned by another, then in either case, the person working the mine could rightfully lay claim to it. In Frémont's case, the size of the original grant to Alvarado, the abundance of gold therein, and Frémont's infrequent presence on his property before 1857 all worked together to ensure that claimants to the mines of the Mariposa Estate would be many and restive. In addition, when Mariposa County residents learned that the 1856 federal patent to the estate included rich diggings in Bear Valley that Frémont had never before claimed, the simmering pot began to boil. When Frémont began to press his claim to these mines, all hell broke loose.

Much of the controversy surrounded the quartz mines and mills of the Merced Mining Company (MMC). On the last day of 1856, for example, one of Frémont's agents sent a notice to MMC officials demanding possession of their reduction works at Mount Ophir. As many Mariposa County residents recognized, this was simply an opening salvo in Frémont's campaign to expropriate the gold of Bear Valley. They responded accordingly, forming a miners' and settlers' association in the first weeks of 1857. Those gathered resolved that

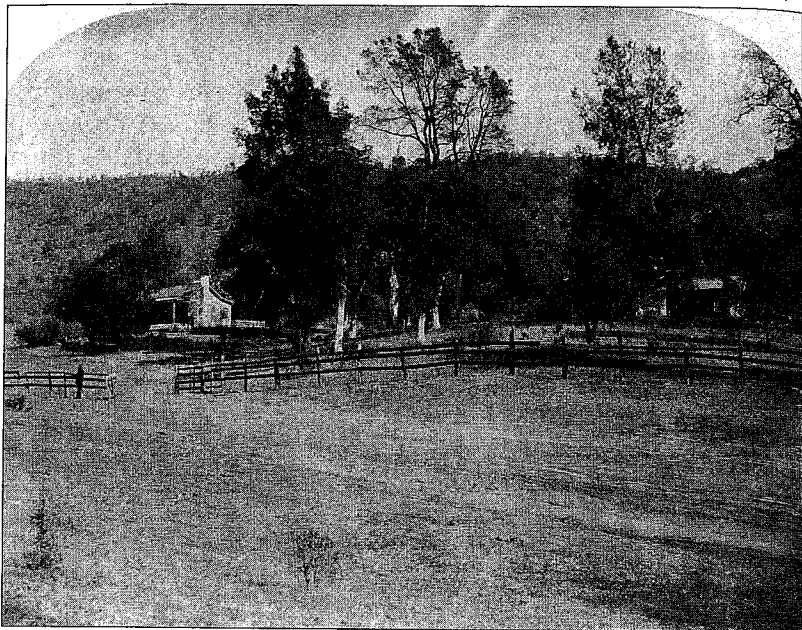
in the event of John C. Fremont [or his associates] attempting to interfere with, molest, or eject any number of, *or even one* Miner, Settler, or resident upon [land claimed as part of the Mariposa Estate], we do hereby solemnly pledge ourselves to make common cause against him, or them—for the *plundering* of one is that of all, and a blow at one is an aim at each and all, Miners and Settlers, upon said tract.⁹²

Making common cause against Frémont, however, was easier said than done. This because he rarely used force to interfere with, molest, or eject miners and settlers from Bear Valley, but rather a series of legal maneuvers. The MMC responded in kind, until, by March of 1857, as many as twenty suits between the two parties were wending their way through Mariposa County's district court—not to mention those that had gone or were going all the way to the California supreme court. Especially important were MMC injunctions to stop Frémont from seizing ore and other property, and injunctions by Frémont and his agents to prevent the MMC from pursuing their work on land that Frémont claimed.⁹³

From the complicated matrix of suit and countersuit, a ground zero emerged for the fight between Frémont and his detractors: Bear Valley's Josephine and Pine Tree mines. The MMC had worked these sites longer, but Frémont now claimed them. Despite pending lawsuits, both parties continued extracting gold from the mines, though through separate tunnels. In October of 1857, for example, the *Mariposa Gazette* reported that "men in the employ of both the Fremont and Merced Mining Companies are working in close proximity to each other at the Pine Tree vein." MMC employees had just received a writ of injunction ordering them to stop mining there, but they persisted nonetheless. "No serious disturbance has yet occurred," the *Gazette* noted, but then added that "the prospect looks squally at the 'seat of war.'"⁹⁴ Squalls came and went throughout the fall and winter. In February of 1858, the *Gazette* found both companies "still busily engaged in quarrying, hauling and crushing quartz from the celebrated vein near Bear Valley," and reported with relief that the "excitement which . . . has threatened to end in violence between the rival companies, has cooled down to a healthy temperature."⁹⁵

When summer came, tensions and temperatures rose. By now Jessie Benton Frémont had arrived in Bear Valley, bringing to the summer's events their best chronicler. She brought with her the three Frémont children—Lily, Charley, and Frank—as well as two maids, women identified in Jessie's letters only as Mémé and Rose.⁹⁶ Although many residents of the Southern Mines hated the Frémonts and all they represented, there were enough supporters in the valley to offer the family a rousing welcome. As Jessie wrote to her friend and distant cousin Elizabeth Blair Lee, "They had a great bonfire on Mount Bullion the night we got in & they fired off quicksilver flasks which sounded just like cannon echoing through the hills grandly."⁹⁷ Indeed, the mountain itself had been named for her father, who was called "Old Bullion" for his hard-currency views. (Sadly, Jessie's father, with whom she had reconciled after John's presidential bid, died in Missouri just as the Frémonts arrived in San Francisco on their way to the mines, though Jessie did not learn of his death until she was settled on the Mariposa Estate.)

At Bear Valley, the family took up residence in a modest white-washed cottage, but one that was filled nonetheless, according to Jessie, with "velvet carpets & a fine piano, bronze clocks, [and] marble-topped furniture."⁹⁸ Mémé, who probably had come to the United States after a Frémont sojourn in France, and Rose attended to the children and to the well-appointed cottage. In addition, a Spanish-speaking black woman from the West Indies came by the day



The home of John C. Frémont and Jessie Benton Frémont at Bear Valley on the disputed Mariposa Estate, or Las Mariposas.

Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

to do the Frémonts' laundry.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, two menservants long associated with John, both experienced frontiersmen, labored on the grounds and took a special interest in young Charley and Frank. One was Albert Lea, a free black man whose mother had worked for Jessie's father and who himself had served on one of John's western expeditions. The other was a man named Isaac, whom Jessie called "a spare, wiry Tennessee Indian with enough colored blood to have been a slave," but who she imagined had seized his own freedom "sharply."¹⁰⁰ Although Jessie claimed that this retinue offered her "slender working power," it actually was rare for white Americans in the mines, even those of the emerging middle class, to have so many servants; this much help was a mark of unusual affluence.¹⁰¹ Perhaps in part because she anticipated less household service than she enjoyed back east, Jessie had long resisted settling at Las Mariposas. Only seven years earlier, she had declared, "The Mariposas is no place for me—Indians, bears & miners have made it lose its good qualities as a country place."¹⁰²

Once resident on the Mariposa Estate, Jessie accustomed herself to

Indian neighbors, who lived in a large village nearby. And she encountered bears only when she set out on horseback to explore the Sierra Nevada.¹⁰³ But miners were still quite capable of destroying the "good qualities" of the Frémonts' "country place." In July of 1858, just as Jessie was coming to terms with her father's death and learning to live in her foothill home, she penned an agitated letter to the family friend and political adviser Francis Preston Blair (Elizabeth Blair Lee's father), announcing "news of our broken peace in this valley which was to have been our place of refuge against bad passions and bad climate." (She was referring to the "bad passions" of the 1856 presidential campaign and the "bad climate" of the eastern seaboard, which exacerbated the Frémonts' frequent respiratory ailments.) A week earlier, having just returned from San Francisco, Jessie found herself "waked from my first sleep after the journey by the alarm of regular border ruffian warfare." From that moment, she told Blair, all was "merged into one thought—how to save life & keep off



A Miwok *ranchería* near the Frémont house on Las Mariposas. Describing her home, Jessie Benton Frémont wrote, "Near by was a large Indian village, some hundreds settled there. The young women from it came constantly to our house and sat about on the grass chatting together of us and laughing as they watched our doings with frank curiosity. We were their *matinée*." See *Far-West Sketches* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1890), 103.

Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

the impending fight."¹⁰⁴ This was the fight that had been brewing for so long between John and his agents, on the one hand, and the Merced Mining Company, on the other. The MMC, in turn, had the support of many Mariposa County men, some of whom had organized themselves into a group called the Hornitos League.

The Hornitos League, like the earlier miners' and settlers' association, included individual placer miners and others who faced dispossession when the title to Las Mariposas was confirmed.¹⁰⁵ This organization of Anglo men shared a name—Hornitos (literally, "little ovens")—with the largest Mexican town in Mariposa County. In the years since the first foreign miners' tax, Hornitos had become a refuge for those Mexicans who refused to leave the southernmost reaches of the Southern Mines.¹⁰⁶ The members of the Hornitos League may have been from this town.¹⁰⁷ But it also seems possible that in calling themselves the Hornitos League, white miners ironically were likening themselves to those besieged Mexicans who had carved out a place for themselves in defiance of exclusionary practices. The naming, then, may have been double-edged. It may have invoked not only common anti-Mexican sentiments but a kind of grudging respect: these white men were not about to be pushed around as Mexican miners had been, and yet, if push did come to shove, the Anglos would stand their ground just as the residents of Hornitos had. The irony deepens when one remembers that these white men's mining claims were threatened by decisions made in American courts that had confirmed an Anglo man's title to a Mexican land grant. It deepens even further when one considers that Jessie Benton Frémont called her husband's opponents "border ruffians"—a capacious term with a rich historical resonance for Anglo Americans, and one that took on new meanings as U.S. borders expanded to include what so recently had been Mexico's northern frontier.¹⁰⁸

"Border warfare" erupted in this manner. According to newspapers, as MMC employees and Frémont's miners bore down on each other through separate tunnels that exploited the same quartz vein, the MMC men insisted that "the Fremont Company were taking out the golden quartz from the other end of what they considered their property, at a rate which they did not feel justified in allowing."¹⁰⁹ One day early in July, the MMC miners, who had been laboring in the Josephine tunnel, approached the entrance to the Pine Grove tunnel, where Frémont's men were at work. The MMC men demanded possession of the mine, but Frémont's men refused to leave. The next morning, members of the Hornitos League joined the MMC miners,

until some seventy men held the entrance to the Pine Tree Mine, with a handful of Frémont employees still holed up inside.¹¹⁰ Jessie Benton Frémont wrote that the usurpers at first refused to allow her husband's workers food. One of John's men, however, was married to the woman who boarded the Pine Grove miners. According to Jessie, this "little woman," Elizabeth Ketton, "took a revolver & a basket of provisions & presented herself at the mouth of the mine." The boardinghouse keeper said that if the combined forces of the MMC and the Hornitos League "offered to touch her," she would shoot. This was no small threat, since the "men in the drift had laid a train & put their tools & old iron & blasting powder near the entrance & were ready to [make] a blast at the sound of firing." In other words, with one shot, mine and miners alike would have been blown up. After this, Ketton was allowed in twice daily, "carrying food in her hands & under her clothes pistols & powder & caps."¹¹¹

Meanwhile, according to Jessie, the MMC men had threatened to burn down the Frémont cottage, and so Albert Lea and Isaac stood guard there. John moved back and forth between the cottage, the occupied mine, and his quartz mill, which he also kept under armed watch since it was filled, Jessie said, with "gold in amalgam & some coined & much machinery." Jessie minimized her own participation in all this to Francis Preston Blair, saying only, "whenever Mr. Frémont was in sight I was very brave."¹¹² According to her biographer, however, Jessie later insisted that she herself, driven by Isaac and accompanied by Mémé, had taken the note that contained the threat to her cottage and haughtily handed it back to hostile miners headquartered at a nearby saloon. Afterward, as Isaac turned the wagon toward home, Jessie recalled, "I fully expected to be shot in the back."¹¹³ Though Jessie may have exaggerated her derring-do in hindsight, such action is quite in keeping with contemporary descriptions of her behavior. Abraham Lincoln, for example, who disliked the Frémonts, called Jessie "quite a female politician." And the Reverend Thomas Starr King, who adored Jessie, depicted her as "a she-Merrimack, thoroughly sheathed, and carrying fire in the genuine Benton furnaces"—a match, and then some, for the "little ovens" tipling in a Bear Valley saloon.¹¹⁴

John, for his part, appealed to California officials for firepower. Governor John B. Weller's third wife was a cousin of Jessie's, a connection that could only have helped when the Frémonts found themselves in such a dangerous fix. At John's request for aid, Weller telegraphed military companies in Columbia, Sonora, and Stockton "to hold themselves in readiness" in case armed conflict broke out in

Mariposa County. John also appealed to men he called "friends in San Francisco" for muskets and ammunition.¹¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, the *San Joaquin Republican* reported that four cases of muskets were headed up to Bear Valley, "being forwarded by the United States Marshall."¹¹⁶ State governors and federal marshals were truly good friends to have. Despite widespread animosity toward the Frémonts in Mariposa County, men of the Hornitos League simply could not claim such powerfully situated friends or useful family connections. In the end, these individual miners and settlers, along with the Merced Mining Company, had to back down. The court battles dragged on, and local controversy continued to erupt. Now and then, newspapers printed items with inflammatory titles such as "The Fremont Outrage."¹¹⁷ But the Bear Valley War, as it is sometimes called, was more bluster than muster.

At the height of these hostilities, Jessie Benton Frémont had written a forty-four-page will and testament "in case," as she put it, "of loss of life."¹¹⁸ But what actually died in Mariposa County in the summer of 1858 was what would expire in the town of Columbia after the celebrated completion of the "Miners' Ditch." What ended as the Hornitos League gave up its siege of the Pine Tree Mine was a local dream among white men of maintaining exclusive access to a boundless resource that would ensure their continued independence. The dream would continue for half a century in other western places where placer rushes beckoned men who felt betrayed by the promise of industrialization—Nevada, Arizona, Montana, Colorado, Idaho, Dakota, and Alaska territories in the United States, and British Columbia and the Yukon in Canada. It would continue in a diminished fashion even in western mining areas that moved much more quickly, decisively, and successfully than the Southern Mines did from individualized placer mining to industrialized hardrock mining. In such places, hardrock miners, who were often staunch union men, kept placer mining tools close at hand in their cabins or in union halls, always hoping against hope that a rich strike in their off-hours might suddenly yield them the fabled independence of white men during California's golden days.¹¹⁹ Few remembered how amazingly short-lived that "independence" actually had been—and how deeply rooted in the dispossession of other Gold Rush participants, especially, in the Southern Mines, Miwoks, Mexicans, Chileans, French, and Chinese.

Chapter 6

The Last Fandango

At the turn of the twentieth century, John Robertson was growing old in New York State. But in the 1850s, he had mined in Calaveras County with his friend Wade Johnston, who went on to live near San Andreas for the rest of his life. The two white men struck up a correspondence when they were in their seventies, in which they reminisced about the Gold Rush years. Wade also filled John in on the changes that had taken place over the decades in and around their old haunts. John was struck by the transformation: "In my time," he recalled, "things were some what loose." A recent letter from Wade had convinced him that people in Calaveras County eventually tightened up: "Your letter goes to show," John wrote back to Wade, "that after I left they began to live in a more civilized way—got married, settled down, raised families, instead of keeping them selves in hot water striving to make a pile and leave; they settled down and lived like white folks."¹

Living "in a more civilized way," however, was not a simple matter of settling down. For John Robertson, civilization involved a broad range of social, cultural, and economic practices by which people of European descent became "white": women and men, clearly two separate human categories, consummated (ideally) exclusive intimate relationships that were sanctioned by the state; they conceived offspring and reared them in (ideally) cohesive social units called families; they kept one place of residence for a long period of time, perhaps even a lifetime; and there they engaged in economic activity, activity that allowed for the steady accumulation of capital and the