

The Deceptive Landscape: A Study in Ethnicity in Hornitos, California, 1860–1900

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Abstract: Studying relict landscapes has long provided geographers with clues to reconstructing past cultures; however, a focus on the landscape alone may ultimately prove deceptive. Equally vital is an examination of the social and historical conditions under which a landscape has evolved. This paper investigates ethnic landscapes and relations in Hornitos, California, a former gold-mining community located at the southern end of the “mother lode” region. While the contemporary landscape perpetuates the town’s popular historical image as a “Mexican pueblo,” a study of census and property tax assessment documents allows for a much more encompassing reconstruction of the past socio-spatial environment. This case study provides geographers further insight into the complex ethnic and race relationships that have long characterized the American West.

Introduction

THE CENTRAL PLAZA of Hornitos, California, is motionless today, bordered on three sides by buildings hinting of the gold rush past, of long-gone saloons and fandango halls once filled to capacity with Mexican dance hall girls and forty-niners (Figure 1). On higher ground—overlooking the golden Sierra Nevada foothills—stands St. Catherine’s Catholic Church amid the ailanthus-entangled graves of the church cemetery (Figure 2). The small, stone-buttressed church stands guard over the central plaza and sleepy streets of the community. The only interruption to the quiet afternoon is the creaking of a lone windmill, slowly turning in the breeze.

Observations of the material landscape, as in the above, may reveal much about a place but may also prove deceptive (DeLyser 1999). Relict landscapes often mask social relationships, especially those characterized by inequality (Holdsworth 1997; Schein

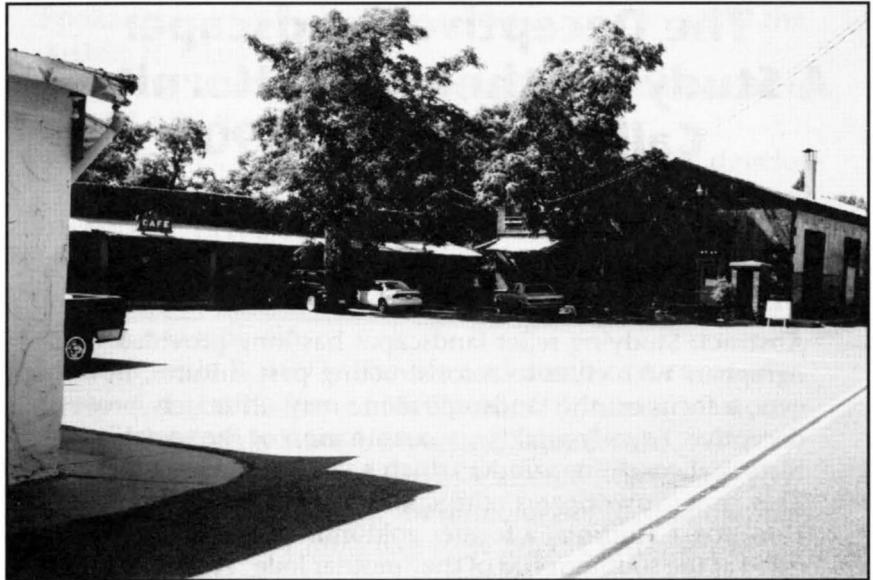


Figure 1.—The central plaza of Hornitos today.

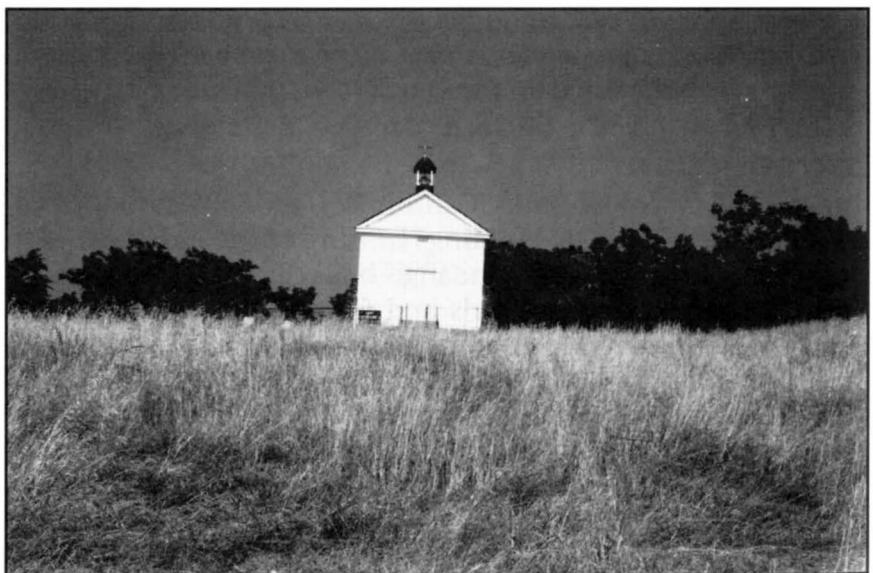


Figure 2.—St. Catherine's Catholic Church.

1997); therefore scholars must examine not only what is present and visible in the landscape but also what is absent, and must work to uncover the social circumstances—i.e., the cultural politics and hierarchies of power—behind the visible landscape.

In this paper I investigate ethnic landscapes and relations in nineteenth-century Hornitos, located at the southern end of California's "mother lode" gold-mining region (Figure 3). I show how interpretation of the relict landscape, augmented by a study of census and property assessment documents, allows for a more accurate reconstruction of past social group composition and relations than landscape study alone. Despite its long-held image as a "sleepy Mexican town" (Crosley 1959), for much of its history Hornitos was actually quite ethnically diverse. It was dominated numerically by both Mexicans and Chinese, but a look at property ownership reveals a different social hierarchy than the numbers suggest. In particular, the absence of any prop-

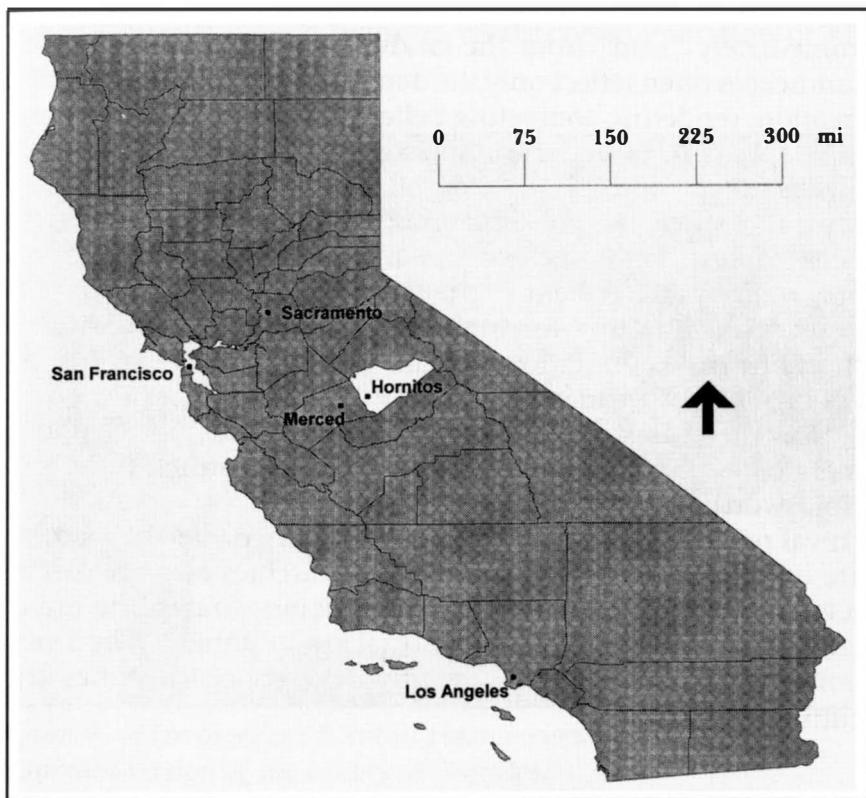


Figure 3.—Location of Hornitos, California.

erty ownership by Chinese residents reveals a power disparity that provides greater insight into the social history of nineteenth-century Hornitos than the landscape and literature suggest. By examining patterns of property and land ownership in Hornitos, this study sought to uncover the social relations of power that might be masked by the past (and present) landscape.

The Deceptive Landscape

In the past century, geographers have formalized the description and analysis of ethnic communities through cultural landscape studies. Carl Sauer's (1925) morphological approach to landscape reading—assembling the visible “association of place facts” within an area to explain its evolution—constituted much of geography from the 1920s on, but was challenged by new approaches in the 1980s and 1990s. Duncan (1980; 1990), Cosgrove (1984; 1989), and Jackson (1989), among others, showed that the social relations that shape a cultural landscape may not be immediately “read” from the landscape or its representations. Landscapes often reflect only the dominant ideology behind their creation, rendering competing belief systems invisible. Cultural geographers have become interested in how physical space is used to shape and reinforce dominant belief systems. Lacking control of space, less powerful groups often fail to leave a permanent impression upon the material world; therefore their work may not be at all evident in the landscape (Mitchell 2000). The result is a culturally “deceptive” landscape; or as Don Mitchell shows in his examination of California migrant labor history (1996), landscapes may “lie.”

How then can students of landscape uncover a place’s hidden hierarchies of power and social relations? According to Deryck Holdsworth (1997), cultural geographers must delve into the archival record to get a truer picture. Property ownership records are one means by which the social hierarchies of place can be revealed.¹ As the Hornitos case study demonstrates, the use of land ownership as a measure of social group status can be a very powerful and effective tool in interpreting social histories and cultural landscapes.

Hornitos, California: Whose Heritage?

As mentioned in the introduction, Hornitos has long been depicted as reminiscent of a sleepy Mexican pueblo. Writing about nineteenth-century Hornitos, which grew out of the relocation of (Sonoran) Mexican miners exiled from a nearby community, local historian Francisco Salazar (1964, 10) asserted that "only in towns such as Hornitos could a Mexican live a normal life." Looking at mid-twentieth literature on Hornitos (e.g., California State Department of Natural Resources 1948; Gold Rush Country 1957; Crosley 1959) one is overwhelmed by representations of Mexican heritage. From such depictions as well as a visual survey of the town, a casual observer might conclude that Hornitos in the late nineteenth century was homogeneously Mexican. Even today, in attempts to capitalize on a growing tourist market, the town's Mexican heritage is romantically described in literature and signs (Figure 4). Visitor attention is directed to the aging adobe ruins, central plaza, former fandango halls, and quaint Catholic church (with its yearly commemoration of All Soul's Day).



Figure 4.—Sign on edge of central plaza commemorating the dominant version of the history of Hornitos.

But how accurate is that image? A review of the few primary resources containing impressions of nineteenth-century visitors suggest Hornitos to be far more ethnically diverse. Upon his arrival in 1851, Belgian Argonaut Jean-Nicholas Perlot (1985, 95) described the frontier mining community's cosmopolitan babble of tongues: "In business, they spoke English and Spanish; in the street, still covered with brush, we heard all possible tongues spoken." Even more revealing of its ethnic diversity is the following from an anonymous visitor in the 1860s:

Even the very signs seem to [confirm the ethnic diversity]. The stage house is the "Progresso Restaurant"; the bakery is a "panaderia"; the hotels invite in both Spanish and English; the stores in Italian as well as American and Spanish; while Sam Ting or Too Chang outrival the "lavado y planado." In the plaza Brother John, however, has it pretty much all to himself, and Manifest Destiny will, undoubtedly, prevail in the end. (Brooks 1861, 335)

An examination of federal manuscript censuses from 1860 to 1900 further discounts the tale of a primarily Mexican community. Based upon recorded nativity responses, the population of Hornitos consistently represented a wide range of ethnic origins.² The 1860 census shows that Hornitos was comprised of 2,027 individuals drawn from 30 U.S. states or territories and 29 foreign nations or foreign-controlled territories. While the 1870, 1880, and 1900 censuses³ show a steadily declining population, the tendency toward ethnic plurality remains consistent. Even at its lowest population in 1900, the town's 444 inhabitants represented 20 U.S. and 17 foreign birthplaces (Bureau of the Census 1860–1900).

Among foreign-born residents, those from China and Mexico predominated from 1860 to 1880. According to census figures, Chinese residents accounted for more than 28 percent of the Hornitos population in 1860, surpassing any other single nativity group, including those under the encompassing categories of "United States" (excluding California) and "European." Mexicans made up almost 18 percent of the population in 1860, decreasing to just under 9 percent in 1880. Despite local histories that include only brief anecdotes about the Chinese, they were a persistent presence until 1900, when there was a sharp decrease

in their numbers coinciding with a dramatic decrease in all foreign-born residents, including Mexicans. Declines in the foreign-born population, however, were offset by a significant rise in the number of residents whose birthplace was reported as "California" (over 65 percent in 1900), signaling the growing presence of second-generation ethnic residents in Hornitos (Bureau of the Census 1860–1900).

As for Europeans, no single group dominated proportionately between 1860 and 1900, although the French, English, Irish, Germans, and Italians were more strongly represented than other groups. The relative percentage of each of these groups in the Hornitos population varies by census year, ranging from a high of more than 9 percent (the English in 1880), to a low of less than 1 percent (the Irish in 1900). Likewise, no single U.S. state dominated the mix of population.⁴ Only when consolidated into the larger geographical categories of "European" and "U.S.-born" do numbers become significant. U.S.-born residents of Hornitos accounted for more than 20 percent of the population in 1860 and approximately 15 percent from 1870 to 1900. European-born residents had an equally strong showing, ranging from just under 17 percent of the total population in 1860 to more than 9 percent in 1900, with a peak representation of over 21 percent in 1880 (Bureau of the Census 1860–1900).

This examination of the demographics of nineteenth-century Hornitos lends credence to claims by historians that ethnic diversity has always been a defining feature of the American West (Limerick 1987; Deutsch 1992). So why hasn't this diverse ethnic background been reflected in the cultural landscape of Hornitos? Much of the answer has to do with the fact that only certain groups had the power to shape the landscape. Property ownership was a critical factor in determining this relative power (White 1991), a connection that has been amply illustrated in a number of scholarly studies (Pitt 1966; Otis 1973; Weber 1973; Prucha 1984; Gjerde 1985; Meinig 1993). In fact, the most striking observation about property ownership in Hornitos between 1860 and 1900 is its obvious uneven distribution among ethnic groups. In particular, as federal censuses and county tax assessor records illustrate,⁵ there was an extreme disparity between the proportion of Chinese in the community and their level of property ownership (Tables 1 and 2). In every census from 1860 to

Table 1.—Estimated Value of Real Estate and Personal Property Owned, by Nativity, in 1860 and 1870

Value	China	Mexico	Europe	U.S.	N. Amer. ¹	S. Amer.	Calif.	Other	Unkn.
Census Year 1860									
\$0	549	353	272	339	10	12	220	16	43
\$1-999	13	5	27	24	1	1	0	2	4
\$1000-1999	0	1	10	13	1	0	0	0	1
\$2000-2999	0	0	3	7	1	1	0	0	0
\$3000-3999	0	0	2	9	0	0	0	0	1
\$4000+	0	0	3	8	0	0	0	0	0
Personal property only	11	4	23	34	0	0	0	0	3
Total	573	363	340	434	13	14	220	18	52
% of total population	28.27	17.91	16.77	21.41	0.64	0.69	10.85	0.89	2.57
% of total real estate-owning population	9.42	4.35	32.61	44.20	2.17	1.45	0.00	1.45	4.35
Census Year 1870									
\$0	356	107	192	151	9	0	379	25	3
\$1-999	3	5	16	19	0	0	1	1	1
\$1000-1999	11	17	38	48	0	0	0	2	1
\$2000-2999	0	1	1	9	0	0	0	0	1
\$3000-3999	0	0	5	6	0	0	0	0	0
\$4000+	0	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	1
Personal property only	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	370	130	259	236	9	0	380	28	7
% of total population	26.07	9.16	18.25	16.63	0.63	0.00	26.85	1.90	0.49
% of total real estate-owning population	7.29	11.98	32.81	43.75	0.00	0.00	0.52	1.56	2.08

Source: Summary statistics derived from 1860 and 1870 Decennial Federal Manuscript Censuses.

Note:

¹North American nativity refers to Canada and Central America only, since U.S. and Mexican nativity are recorded separately.

1880, the gap between the percentage of the population that was Chinese and the percentage of property that was Chinese-owned was at least 17 percent. Despite their numbers, therefore, the Chinese occupied a place at the bottom of the Hornitos social hierarchy.

Table 2.—Town Lot Owners as Percentage of Total Population and Percentage of Total Owners by Nativity in 1880, 1890, and 1900

	1880		1890 ¹		1900	
	% of Total Population	% of Total Owners	% of Total Owners	% of Total Population	% of Total Owners	
China	17.00	0.00	1.89	2.93	0.00	
Mexico	8.56	21.43	10.38	3.83	3.42	
Europe	21.56	40.82	50.00	9.46	52.14	
U.S.	15.56	23.47	24.53	15.54	17.95	
N. Amer. ²	1.56	1.02	1.89	1.80	0.00	
S. Amer.	0.22	0.00	1.89	0.68	4.27	
California	35.22	0.00	0.00	65.32	2.56	
Other/Unkn./Organization	0.33	13.26	0.94	0.45	19.65	

Source: Summary statistics derived from the Mariposa County Tax Assessor's Records, 1880–1900 and the Decennial Federal Manuscript Census, 1860–1880, 1900.

Notes:

¹No record of the 1890 federal manuscript census exists; therefore nativity was cross-referenced from previous and subsequent census years.

²North American nativity refers to Canada and Central America only, since U.S. and Mexican nativity are recorded separately.

Property Ownership and Occupational Status

Chinese

Hornitos was not unusual, given the larger context of a long history of institutionalized discrimination against Chinese immigrants in the U.S. It began even before the arrival of large numbers of Chinese in the mid-nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, legislation aimed at disadvantaging Chinese immigrants became common as greater numbers of Chinese arrived on U.S. shores. In 1850, the California legislature passed the Foreign Miners Tax Act, which imposed a \$20 tax on any noncitizen gold miner. Although initially intended to restrict the prospecting of gold by Mexican residents of California, its amended version in 1852 was more directly targeted at Chinese miners (McClain and Wu 1991; Takaki 1993).

The tide of Sinophobic legislation continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in measures of overt

exclusion. The ultimate blow to Chinese immigrants came in the form of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which completely restricted the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years (Chan 1991). An additional strike against the Chinese was the Alien Land Act of 1887. Like earlier acts (in 1841 and 1862), this legislation aimed to prevent Chinese from acquiring real estate. Ownership of real estate was restricted to U.S. citizens, by birth or naturalization, and residents who had declared an intent to become citizens (*Alien Land Act of 1887*, 467–68). The Act had a particular impact upon Chinese immigrants since they had no possibility of either declaring their intent to become citizens or of naturalizing.⁶ Without the possibility of acquiring property—in a country where land ownership had come to represent economic and political empowerment—Chinese in the U.S. had little hope of finding a place for themselves.⁷

These legal restrictions found their geographical expression in places such as Hornitos. In the period 1860–80, Chinese residents of Hornitos generally sustained themselves through ties to the mining industry. In relatively few cases on the 1860 census did Chinese males report holding occupations other than “miner,” which at that time meant low-paid quartz miners affiliated with one of the large-scale quartz mining companies in the surrounding area. Previously many Chinese had been placer miners, working on their own as independent prospectors on small claims or on cast-away tailings. But placer resources had been largely exhausted by 1860 and more expensive forms of mining were required for gold extraction from quartz mines. In their transition from placer to quartz miners, the Chinese had less control over the land they worked and instead merely provided a service to larger mining companies. Other typical Chinese occupations common in the 1860s and 1870s, such as “laborers,” “servants,” and “prostitutes,” were of this same type of unskilled service (Bureau of the Census 1860–80).

Occupying the lower socioeconomic class levels would have further marginalized the Chinese population in Hornitos. David Sibley (1995) explains this as a reflection of the manner in which certain groups of people were historically regarded as a potentially “polluting” component of society. To the rest of the Hornitos population, the Chinese constituted not only a different race but also the working class. Tax assessment records from 1880 indicate that among the businesses conducted by Chinese

proprietors, “houses of ill-fame” appear to be the most common (Mariposa County Tax Assessor’s Office 1880).

Also notable in 1880 was the continual assessment of Chinese business proprietors for improvements to their property without similar assessments for real estate ownership. This indicates that the Chinese were renting land and buildings, despite the fact that there was not yet a federal ban on the sale of property to Chinese (the Alien Land Act was passed in 1887). Given that the purchase of such properties would certainly make a good investment, it might be assumed that either there was a reluctance on the part of the community to sell property to the Chinese or that the Chinese were so marginalized that they had no desire to invest money in the community.

Mexican

An examination of the census real estate records and professions occupied by residents of Mexican nativity reveals that in the same period (1860–80), Mexican residents of Hornitos owned increasingly larger proportions of property relative to their population size. In 1860, Mexican-born residents comprised almost 18 percent of the total population but accounted for only about 4 percent of those owning real estate. By 1870, the disparity seems to have reversed: Mexicans made up slightly more than 9 percent of the community but represented almost 12 percent of real estate owners. However, the relative value of their declared property was quite low. All but one owner in each census enumeration declared no more than \$1,000 of real estate (Bureau of the Census 1860–80). After 1880, the percentage of Mexicans owning land within the city limits began to decline. By 1900 it was just over 3 percent, roughly the same as the proportion of Mexicans in the Hornitos population—just under 4 percent (Bureau of the Census 1880, 1900; Mariposa County Tax Assessor’s Office 1880–1900).

With respect to occupations, Mexican inhabitants had more diverse professional positions than Chinese. Although mining was the most common occupation, it was also not unusual for Mexicans to hold skilled positions as tailors, silversmiths, and blacksmiths. For Mexican-born residents in farming and ranching occupations, most had acquired some land (even small holdings) by purchase or lease.

European and U.S.-born

The European and U.S.-born populations of Hornitos were characterized by the greatest occupational diversity in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Like the Chinese and Mexicans, they too were represented by substantial numbers of miners, yet they also ascended to job titles that allowed for much greater wealth accumulation and social authority than other groups. Particularly significant were those employed as skilled laborers, including brick masons, blacksmiths, cabinet makers, and shoemakers. These positions provided a trained service sector within the local economy that was supplemented by an abundance of hotel keepers and merchants. (The community of merchants became especially dominated by Italian immigrants, including, according to local histories, Domenico Ghirardelli, who later went on to fame as a San Francisco chocolatier.)

In addition to dominating the service economy of Hornitos, Europeans and U.S.-born residents also held occupations of higher social status and political control through such positions as justice of the peace, civil engineer, express agent, school teacher, and community doctor. Given the local orientation of most of these jobs, it is not surprising that residents of European and U.S. nativity owned the greatest proportion of town lot property. Land ownership was also significant among those with rural occupations, such as ranching, farming, and stock raising, that required control of large portions of land. These occupations were common among European- and U.S.-born residents.

In 1860 approximately 33 percent of real estate owners in Hornitos were of European or U.S. nativity, despite the fact that as a group they comprised only 17 percent of the population. In 1870 these figures were 44 percent and 21 percent, respectively. At the extreme high end of value was the superintendent of mines from Maine who declared \$130,000 in real estate assets in 1870 (Bureau of the Census 1860, 1870). During the period 1880–1900, according to county assessor records, residents of European and U.S. nativity owned the greatest proportion of town lot property (Bureau of the Census 1880, 1900; Mariposa County Tax Assessor's Office 1880–1900).

The Post-mining Era

With the decline of the mining industry, communities in California's mother lode region began to seek other means to sustain themselves. Many turned to agriculture, stock raising, lumbering, and commerce (Paul 1947, 243). Tax assessment records for the area surrounding Hornitos show a rise in ranching and farming activities from approximately 1880 onward. Large numbers of livestock and farm implements were assessed as the community declined in population and evolved from a labor-intensive industry of gold mining to a regime of extensive land use by a few landowning individuals.

Denied the opportunity to own land either through social or legal restrictions, the Chinese had no option but to leave Hornitos to seek better livelihoods elsewhere. In fact, the changing economic environment in California in the late nineteenth century allowed the persecuted Chinese of the mother lode to find new employment elsewhere. In her historical study of the role of the Chinese in the development of California agriculture, Sucheng Chan (1986) describes the new economic opportunities for Chinese at this time in the developing agricultural counties of the Central Valley and the exploding urban center of San Francisco. These places found themselves home to many of the Chinese mining refugees who left the mother lode in droves. In the Central Valley, Chinese were able to find employment as farm laborers, farmers, truck gardeners, fishermen, and common laborers. In San Francisco the Chinese served as factory workers, merchants, laundrymen, cooks, servants, and prostitutes.

Although labor needs might appear to be similar in both greater Hornitos and the Central Valley, the type of land use must be considered. In the vicinity of Hornitos, one of the primary forms of production after the decline of mining was large-scale stock raising, which could be maintained with a limited number of non-Chinese ranch hands. Those Chinese who had held some sort of service position also undoubtedly found themselves unemployed as a consequence of the gold rush bust. In contrast, much of the newly developing agriculture in other parts of California was based on manual labor; and so too were urban occu-

pational opportunities. Certainly the low wages accepted by the Chinese provided an incentive to their hire by employers who wished to compete in regional and national markets.

The story of Hornitos is one of racial discrimination compounded by economic competition. Although almost all residents of Hornitos faced an uncertain economic future with the demise of the mining economy, those occupying the bottom rungs of the social hierarchy were subject to the harshest consequences. Prohibited from adapting to the changing economic trends of the community due to national and regional overtones of discrimination, the Chinese of Hornitos had no choice but to move elsewhere to survive.

In contrast, those of Mexican heritage tended to remain longer in the region, venturing into the rising ranching economy as hired labor and small landholders. During this transition they maintained some of their Mexican-Catholic traditions (e.g., All Souls Day commemorations) through organizations such as the Hornitos Mexican "Junta" Club (Salazar 1964). In the end, however, the European and U.S.-born population of Hornitos and their native Californian children went on to dominate the local ranching and merchant economy through their control of community space. The traveler to Hornitos in 1861 had predicted nearly correctly: at the close of the nineteenth century in the central plaza of power in Hornitos, Brother John (but also to a lesser extent Juan) pretty much stood alone.

Conclusion

Geographers cannot hope to reconstruct a complete social history by examining only the contemporary landscape. As a source of data, the material landscape may deceive scholars and lead to misinterpretations. The case of Hornitos serves as a prime example of the concealment of ethnic composition and social relations by a naturalized cultural landscape. Typically portrayed as an oasis of Mexican ethnicity in the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada foothills, Hornitos was in fact much more a place of ethnic diversity and contestation. Tremendous disparities in social authority are evident in patterns of property ownership. Despite the numerical dominance of the Chinese, they left no permanent impression upon the landscape. Mexicans, on the other hand, have found their culture deeply embedded in local histo-

ries of the town and their heritage has become naturalized in the landscape, reinforcing the “pueblo” imagery found in the literature. However, as interpreted from property ownership records, it was not Mexicans who possessed the greatest level of social authority, but residents of European and U.S. birth as a group. This group eventually came to dominate the social and economic atmosphere of the community if not the cultural landscape.

As this paper has shown, without the aid of the archival record a cultural reading of Hornitos may have depicted it as the Mexican pueblo that popular accounts have long portrayed it to be. It might have seemed as if the Chinese had never lived in Hornitos. Residents of Hornitos have chosen not to commemorate the presence of the Chinese in the community, opting instead to play up the community’s Mexican heritage. Only through a reconstruction of past geographic histories from numerous sources—such as archival materials, legal documents, and historical context—can scholars gain more complete insight into past and present social relations and the development of social systems of organization.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded in part by a grant from the Robert C. West Research Fund at Louisiana State University. I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers whose helpful comments assisted in shaping the final paper. Likewise, I thank Judy Walton for her never-ending patience throughout the submission process. Finally, I thank Eric Wersel for his enduring support in obtaining photos of Hornitos.

Notes

1. The author recognizes that just as landscapes may be biased, so too may archives such as the federal census and county tax assessor documents. However, with regard to property distribution, there would seem to be little benefit derived by the dominant group in underestimating the amount of property possessed by members of subordinate groups.
2. Nativity is used here as a measure of ethnicity, as foreign residents of the community would have most likely retained (or assumed) ethnic identities.

3. The 1890 federal manuscript census has been omitted as no record of it remains today.
4. Among the states most often reported as birthplaces by Hornitos residents were New York, Missouri, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia. Each state, however, accounts for only a small proportion of the population of Hornitos. The highest proportion reached was in 1860, when New York-born residents made up nearly 3 percent of the population (Bureau of the Census 1860–1900).
5. Due to changes in the information obtained in census enumerations for 1880 and 1900, I turned to an alternative source of historical land tenure information: the Mariposa County tax assessment records. By cross-referencing the property ownership information contained in these documents with that of nativity disclosures in the federal censuses, I was able to reconstruct ethnic land ownership patterns within Hornitos. Because the assessed value of all town lots is roughly the same across the entire incorporated city, the tax assessment records for these years focus on ownership of lots rather than assessed value.
6. In Mariposa County, the Clerk's Office holds a summary list of immigrants to the county who filed a "Declaration [sic] of Intention to Become a Citizen" from which Chinese names are noticeably absent.
7. The question arises as to whether the Chinese indeed desired land ownership rights. Given the limited amount of literature expressing the thoughts of nineteenth-century ethnic Chinese on this issue, my study can only examine property ownership patterns and social authority based upon accepted valuation schemes of the dominant society, namely, residents of European descent.

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