THE SONORAN MINERS:  
A CASE OF HISTORICAL ACCIDENT IN  
THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH*  

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CALIFORNIA’s GREAT GOLD DISCOVERY, made in January, 1848, at Sutter’s Mill, attracted more than Americans alone. By the end of 1848, many shiploads of foreigners had already arrived from nearby lands in advance of the great horde of ‘49. From Latin America and the Hawaiian Islands they arrived very early, preceding by some months the large influx of Americans. The role of foreign miners in the Gold Rush has been acknowledged by a few scholars, but these miners’ contributions have generally been buried under the more “American” aspects.

At this, the 200th anniversary of the founding of the City of San Diego by Spanish missionaries, it is appropriate to recognize another group of Spanish-speaking people in California’s past. From the state of Sonora, Mexico came hundreds of Sonoran miners to the Southern Mines of California. Their tenure was short and their role was quickly overshadowed by the rapid process of Americanizing the state. Though little remains of their past occupancy, the Sonoran miners’ role in shaping patterns in the Southern Mines was entirely out of proportion to their number. This paper will examine the movement of the Sonoran miners into California, their influence in establishing the permanent trade and service center of the Southern Mines region, and their sudden departure and its consequences.

THE SONORAN MIGRATION  

As the first small groups of native Californios, possibly including some Sonorans, began entering the mining districts of California as early as July, 1848, word of the discovery was spreading to other parts of Latin America.¹ In Sonora, Mexico, news of the discovery reached a large number of experienced gold and silver miners.² Beginning in 1848, large masses of Sonorans and other Mexicans from the states of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango traveled overland in caravans to the Southern Mines, usually departing from Mexico early each spring.³⁴ Spending the warm summer months in the mines of California, most of them made the return trek to Mexico in the autumn before the onset of winter rains. This back-and-forth movement nearly ceased by 1854, though many Mexicans remained in the mining district for years.⁵⁶⁷

The number of persons involved in the Sonoran migration—which included women and children—is unknown, but an observer estimated that during the six months between October, 1848, and March, 1849, some five to six thousand persons left the state of Sonora, most of whom entered California by land:

Puede asegurarse sin temor de equicacion que solamente de Sonora emigraron a la California, desde Octubre del ano proxima pasade de 1848, en que salio la primera caravana de Hermosillo hasta Marzo del corriente de ’49, de 5 a 6,000 personas, la mayor parte por el camino de tierra.*

The migration of Sonorans and the route they traveled has been described by Guinn as:

... starting from Tubac, on the border of Sonora, they traveled the old Anza trail to Yuma, then across the burning sands of the Colorado desert to the Pass of San Gorgonio, down the valley to Los Angeles, and up the coast to the mines.

They traveled in squads of from fifty to one hundred, their meager belongings packed on mules or burros. They came in the early spring and returned to their native country in the autumn.*

* This study summarizes certain aspects of Mr. MacKinnon’s master’s thesis, which was supervised by Prof. James J. Parsons (The Historical Geography of Settlement in the Foothills of Tuolumne County, California (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), 203 pp.).
THE SOUTHERN MINES DISTRICT

The Mother Lode gold belt in the Sierra Nevada foothills extended from Mariposa County on the south to Sierra County on the north. One especially active area, lying between the Stanislaus and Tuolumne rivers, became known as the “Southern Mines.” Embracing the Southern Mines, Tuolumne County was organized in 1850. Into this wooded, unsettled, and unbroken environment came the Sonoran miners.

The foothill area of Tuolumne County, with its county seat the city of Sonora, was one of the earliest settled regions in California after acquisition by the United States on February 2, 1848. According to the census of 1852, it held some 7 percent of the state’s population (including the then nonexistent Stanislaus County). Much of its early growth was attributed to the many foreigners who flocked there in preference to the Northern Mines.¹⁰⁻¹¹⁻¹²

FOREIGNERS IN THE SOUTHERN MINES

From the very beginning, the Southern Mines were known for the predominance of foreigners, especially Mexicans. Early visitors to the city of Sonora were strongly impressed by the great number of Mexicans and others of Spanish blood, one claiming that “the residents are chiefly Mexicans and Chilenos, of whom there are some twelve thousand.”¹³ His estimate may have been exaggerated, though Perkins estimated some ten thousand foreigners were present in the area in May, 1850.¹⁴ Nevertheless, throughout all of 1849 and part of 1850, Mexicans constituted Sonora’s most important consumer element, being catered to by a great number of fandango houses, cafes, stores, and gambling places.

There were several reasons for the predominance of foreigners in the Southern Mines. First, Americans who came overland usually followed routes which led more directly to the Northern Mines. Furthermore, the early discovery of gold in the northern region had made that area much better known. Knowledge of the Southern Mines grew more slowly at first, in part due to the foreigners there—people with but limited contact with Americans. Some authorities credit the more temperate climate of the Southern Mines as another reason.¹⁵ But this is doubtful, for the Mexicans coming from the south likely stopped at simply the first profitable-looking place. And the non-American tone of the Southern Mines, particularly Sonorian Camp, must have been itself an attractive feature for many foreigners.

Besides Sonorans, who were the most important foreign element, there were miners from nearly every nation, often in substantial numbers. To these were added the Americans. Some of the other more numerous groups were Chileans, Chinese, French, Italians, Irishmen, Hawaiians, Australians, and Peruvians. Early place names in the area suggest the great variety of nationalities, languages, customs, and skin colors present.

As Sonorian Camp—soon to be known as Sonora—became a melting pot of virtually all nationalities, it gained a reputation as the champion of the rights of foreigners and minorities. True, violent strife developed between different factions in all parts of California, including Tuolumne County, but Sonora long held a special reputation for its liberal attitude toward strangers and foreigners. William Perkins, who kept a journal of life at Sonora between 1849 and 1852, was an early spokesman for the foreign minorities of Sonora. In his words:

I have a little pride in saying that I am a great favorite with the foreign population. The French call me, L’ami des Etrangers; the Spaniards, El Amigo de los Etranjeros, a title that I am proud of, as it has been acquired by continued exertions on my part to defend the rights of these people against the sometime brutality and injustice of the Yankee lord of the soil. I will do the latter the justice to say, however, that as a general rule the Americans have behaved nobly and generously with the foreigners in California. But there are many exceptions; and the character of the Americans often leads them into errors in reference to people from other countries.¹⁶

Mining camps in the Southern Mines were often dominated by persons of a single nationality or from a particular state, especially during the first year or two. Sonorian Camp was established very early by Sonorans from Mexico or others of Spanish blood; the north end of town, called Sonorita, or “Little Sonora,” was completely given over
"Horse Auction at Sonora" from Frank Marryat, *Mountains and Molehills; or Recollections of a Burnt Journal* (London: Longman, 1855). This sketch illustrates the variety of foreigners present at Sonora during the flush days of the Gold Rush. The figure second from the right is probably a Sonoran. Courtesy of Bancroft Library.
to their interests. The great number of other foreigners who came to the Southern Mines encouraged the establishment of other “nationalistic” type camps, each protecting its own best interests.

Jamestown, three miles to the west, was probably established soon after Sonora, possibly as early as August, 1848. Called American Camp for a brief period, Jamestown became a center of American interests.

CAMPS BECOME TOWNS

The Southern Mines were deluged with people during the first several years and miners were scattered into every canyon and gully, over every hillside, and along every stream. Where concentration points developed, the miners’ tents sorted out into haphazard rows with a muddy path between. The tents soon became cloth houses and rough cabins, and paths were widened to accommodate more people, horses, and wheeled vehicles. For those few camps which got beyond the tent stage, the widened paths became roadways, and rough cabins became shops and businesses, restaurants, hotels, and houses of more substantial character. Before many months a number of communities, including Sonora, Jamestown, and Columbia, had assumed a pattern which has lasted until today. For others, their names have been perpetuated on maps alone, for little or nothing remains. In this process whereby a few of the rough mining camps became permanent towns, the Sonoran miners played an active role.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SONORA AS THE TRADE CENTER OF THE SOUTHERN MINES

Sonora was recognized as the central place for trade and business long before it was incorporated on May 1, 1851. Having reached a peak population of more than five thousand persons during the fall of 1849, Sonora was a place of great activity, economic and otherwise; its reputation was established as “... nearly as large as Stockton, and far ahead of it for gold, gals, music, gambling, spreeing, etc.” Herbert Lang, in his History of Tuolumne County, records that in Sonora in 1850:

... There was invested in merchandising the sum of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars, with at least one hundred business houses of a substantial character, and a large and constantly increasing number of comfortable dwellings. Large stocks of goods were carried by the business houses ...

It was a marvel to visitors that such a variety of goods, services, and activities could be found in so remote a place. In Sonora, “... even from the earliest times it has always been possible to purchase nearly every article of comfort or luxury that the fancy could dictate ...”

There is little reason to believe, however, that Sonora occupied the best location for the functional center of the Southern Mines; in fact, it was initially somewhat less suitable. Before the discovery of gold at Columbia in March, 1850, Jamestown occupied a more centrally located position. Nearly surrounded by level to rolling terrain, Jamestown was not disadvantaged by being located in a ravine, as was Sonora.

Gambling was probably the primary reason that Sonorian Camp became the functional center of the Southern Mines. The Mexican miners’ love of amusements and sports caused a regular concentration of wealth in the form of gambling stakes at Sonorian Camp, soon making it a hub for the “exchange” of gold and other opulence. Though the Mexican miners and others of Spanish blood have been credited as early occupants of the region, their direct responsibility for the rise of Sonora as the center of the Southern Mines has never been properly recognized. Here, among all the camps and towns of the “Southern Diggings,” was where the real excitement was located.

The Mexican miners’ basic character and love of gambling had developed before they came to California. Describing the miners of Sonora, Mexico, Sylvester Mowry wrote, in his 1866 edition on Arizona and Sonora, that:

... the majority of Mexican miners ... were of the most spendthrift, gambling disposition. Their lavish, gambling mode of life, their negligence and laziness ...
And upon entering the Southern Mines, their character and habits were little changed. In October, 1848, Walter Colton recorded in his diary,

... A Sonoranian diggs out gold simply and solely that he may have the wherewithal for gambling. This is the rallying thought which wakes with him in the morning, which accompanies him through the day, and floats through his dreams at night. For this he labors, and cheerfully denies himself every comfort.23

The Sonorans set up crude gambling tables in a ravine, the present site of Sonora, California, and provided themselves with a variety of amusements. As early as October, 1848, Colton wrote of visiting “the great camp of the Sonoranians” where “hundreds were crowding around to reach the bank, and deposit their treasure on the turn of a card.”24 Thomas Butler King, in his rare edition of 1850, wrote that:

At a place called Sonoranian camp, it was believed that there were at least ten thousand Mexicans. They had quite a city of tents, booths and log cabins; hotels, restaurants, stores, and shops of all descriptions. An enclosure made of the trunks and branches of trees, and lined with cotton cloth, served as a sort of amphitheatre for bullfights; other amusements, characteristic of the Mexicans, were to be seen in all directions.25

The favorite game of the Sonorans was monte, a suspense-filled game with high stakes. Classed as a “banking game,” monte players attempted to “break the bank,” frequently for fabulously large sums of gold or other valuable commodities. The cumulative amount of gold at stake upon the monte tables must have been considerable. “On either side of the street were ranged gambling tables ... in the centre of which would be displayed a bank of perhaps a thousand ounces, in silver dollars, gold doubloons, or small bags of gold dust ...”, wrote Perkins.26

Americans and others were soon attracted to the gambling and amusements offered at Sonorian Camp, and the Sonorans’ gambling mode of life quickly caught on to all newcomers. In his journal, Perkins wrote:

The game always was Monte, the great national game of Mexico; and the Yankees soon became expert hands at it, and made such immense sums by it that it became a temptation too strong to be resisted ...27

The atmosphere in Sonorian Camp must have been similar to a fair or carnival—plenty of food and drink most of the time, games and amusements, excitement, and women—attracting men from a wide area to partake of its worldly pleasures. An atmosphere of great permissiveness prevailed during the first few years, when it was said that:

Sonora is advantageously situated in one respect, inasmuch as it is irresponsible for the morals and conduct of its floating population; if Sunday is desecrated in Sonora by five thousand pleasure-seekers, Sonora washes its hands of that.28

The continued number of Sonoran miners pouring all their personal wealth into gambling and amusements, and the attractive carnival-like atmosphere, provided further momentum to the historical accident which had initially caused Sonorion Camp to become a center for the concentration of gold in the area. Horse trading and auctions rapidly followed as early characteristics of Sonorion Camp, and were soon joined by the establishment of numerous regular business houses. In addition to its amusement and business functions—and with its name now shortened from earlier forms—Sonora became the local governmental center for the region in 1850, when it was made the county seat. The discovery of gold at Columbia, some three miles north, in March, 1850, and an eastward extension of settlement placed Sonora in a more balanced location to continue as the functional center of the Southern Mines.

The Mexican miners did a great service in discovering many of the richest diggings in the Southern Mines, and the simple but effective mining technology they brought soon rubbed off on others. Though often driven out, their contribution in making Sonora the center of the Southern Mines region has been a lasting one.

THE FOREIGN MINERS’ TAX AND
THE DEPARTURE OF THE SONORAN MINERS

On June 1, 1850, a new law imposing a $20 monthly tax on all foreign miners in California became operative in Tuolumne County.29 A new and unusual form of
nativism—directed primarily toward the Mexican miners but extended to include all foreigners—the Foreign Miners' Tax seemed something that "neatly wrapped up all the nagging problems of labor, competition, foreign monopolies, taxation, bondage, immigration, and mob violence [in California]." But the amount of $20 per month was too high. Although gross production of gold in California increased through 1852, the foreign miners' inability to pay the tax was clear evidence that the rich, "unlimited" surface placers were beginning to show signs of depletion as early as 1850. A declining production of gold in many areas was being shared between an increasing number of miners. Instead of raising much-needed revenues, the law had a quite different effect.

Denounced by the foreigners, the Foreign Miners' Tax led to outright defiance in the Southern Mines, which had the state's greatest concentration of foreigners. Acts of violence and strife followed. Veterans armed themselves into guards and Sonora braced itself for a small-scale war. Fortunately, direct confrontation of the "forces" did not occur, but within several days throngs of foreigners were leaving the region for good. Lang provides a vivid picture of the mass exodus, as observed by Walter Murray, then editor of the Sonora Herald:

Alas, as we marched along, what a scene of confusion and terror marked our way! Mexicans, Chilenos, et id genus omne—men, women, and children—were all packed up and moving, bag and baggage. Tents were being pulled down, houses and hovels gutted of their contents; mules, horses and burros were being hastily packed, while crowds upon crowds were already in full retreat. What could have been the object of our assembly, except as a demonstration of power and determination, I know not; but if intended as an engine of terror, it certainly had its desired effect, for it could be seen painted upon every countenance and impelling every movement of the affrighted population.

The departure of the foreign miners was not without repercussions, for they carried away a deep hatred of Americans. Along the way many acts of violence and bloodshed were committed, and for years the foothills of Tuolumne County were plagued with wandering bands of terrorists. One band, led by the infamous Joaquin Murietta, was headquartered near Columbia, and was held responsible for many atrocities committed in the area. According to Herbert O. Lang:

[The fleeing miners] were scattering themselves over the country, to commence the career of bloodshed and cold-blooded atrocities which for months afterward stained the pages of California history. Even those who were bound for home often left behind them, along the way, bloody traces of their deep-set hatred to Americans.

Serious economic consequences accompanied the foreigners' departure, as the mines' biggest consumer element had been harassed into leaving. It is estimated that some four-fifths of Sonora's population departed in haste. Indeed, Lang records that only nine or ten persons remained in Columbia after the foreigners fled. The Mexicans had been especially good customers in the Southern Mines for, rather than hoarding their gold to send or take home, they took home goods or lavishly squandered whatever gold or money they had. And while the American miners saw their expulsion as a good thing, the business houses painfully felt their absence. Perkins observed the scene in Sonora:

The result of the departure of so many of these people, is that the town is dull and quiet; little gambling, which is an advantage; the mexican [sic] has always been the bonne bouche of the american [sic] Gambler. The nights are comparatively quiet, no fandangoes, music, noise nor dancing. Even Saturday nights and Sundays are becoming staid members of the week.

But most of the reputable business houses remained in operation. And still much gold remained, though future operations would require more sophisticated technology.

The summer of 1850 was a great turning point for the Southern Mines; as the "flush days" ended, there came a transition to a new era. Subsequent development of water resources and new waves of immigration from the East promoted more intensive mining operations. The region resumed its boom after only a brief lull. Thus it was
that by historical accident, the Sonorans had made their camp in a small Sierra Nevada foothill ravine rich in gold, and their gambling habits soon firmly established Sonorian Camp as the leading trade, service, and government center of the Southern Mines, and so it remained after their departure.

REFERENCES


6 Alta California, August 2, 1851.

7 Stockton Times, May 11, 1850.


9 Guinn, op. cit., p. 42.


15 Kenny, op. cit., p. 215.


18 There were several variations in the early name of Sonora. Most early accounts called it “Sonorans Camp”; “Sonoran Camp” was a rare usage. But even “Sonoranian Camp” is often encountered in the literature.

19 Alta California, June 1, 1850.

20 Herbert O. Lang, History of Tuolumne County (San Francisco: Alley, 1882), pp. 47-48.

21 Ibid.

22 Mowry, op. cit., p. 130.


24 Ibid., p. 296.

25 Thomas Butler King, California, the Wonder of the Age (New York: Gowans, 1850).

26 Perkins, op. cit., p. 105.

27 Ibid., pp. 105-106.


29 Statutes of California (1850), pp. 221-223.


31 MacKinnon, op. cit., Graph 1, p. 70.

32 Lang, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

33 Statement by Walter Murray, editor of Sonora Herald, quoted in Lang, op. cit., p. 33.

34 Perkins, op. cit., p. 181.